101 Things I Have Learned

Vernon Coleman

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Private And Confidential Thoughts On Surviving The Coming Economic, Social And Cultural Chaos

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Vernon Coleman MB ChB DSc is a registered medical practitioner and a professional author. He is the author of over 100 other books which have sold over two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK and been translated into 25 languages and sold around the world. Many of his books are available as Kindle books on Amazon. For a list of books please see Vernon Coleman's author page on Amazon or visit **www.vernoncoleman.com**

Dedication

To Donna Antoinette with all my love;
my haven amidst the turmoil;
my refuge from the storm.

Boring Bit For Lawyers

These days, most books include disclaimers in which the authors apologetically warn readers that they should not rely on any information their books contain, and nor should they follow any of the advice they may find within. The warnings invariably go on to insist that readers who rely on anything in the book they are reading do so at their own risk. These warnings are included because the world is now full of lawyers and litigants who, under the often misguided impression that there might be money to be made, will leap at every opportunity to gouge lolly out of anyone who can be blamed for fate's little tricks. And so, as author and publisher, I feel that I must follow fashion and warn readers that if they act on any of the facts in this book, or decide to follow any of the advice, they do so entirely at their own risk. I advise readers to treat facts with disdain. I recommend that advice and opinions should be disregarded or treated with great suspicion. Any reader who believes the facts in this book, or follows advice the book contains, does so entirely at their own risk. Moreover, I would also like to make it clear that books can be dangerous objects and should not be dropped, thrown or otherwise projected into areas where people or delicate objects might be damaged. In other words, dear reader, drop this book onto your toes and you're on your own.

Preface

These are difficult and challenging times and I believe that things are likely to become considerably worse before they get better. The increasing powers of bureaucrats, and the oppressive nature of the flow of new laws washing onto our shore from the European Union, mean that these are particularly difficult times for those who value their privacy, independence and security. It is no longer possible to rely on traditional sources of help because those whom we pay to protect us and serve us are now largely controlled by, and work for, the bureaucrats. The people we think of as ‘them’ are all around us. We have to rely upon ourselves.

Over the years I have written scores of books containing information and advice on medical, social and financial matters. It seemed to me a good time to produce a précis of some of the most pertinent advice in a short survival handbook. And this is that book. Of all the books I have written this is probably the most immediately practical. It is an abstract of some of the information in my other books, a brief analysis of how I believe things are likely to change in the foreseeable future and a summary of things I’ve learned about surviving in an increasingly hostile environment. (The background information behind the advice in this book appears in my original books.)

Government regulations mean that in some countries it is probably illegal for me to offer you advice in many areas of life (such as finance). If it isn’t now then it could be soon. So I’m not going to offer you any specific advice at all. What follows is a précis of what I have learned, and a short analysis of how the things I have learned can be applied to life in the future. Experiences, mistakes and insights are of little use until you learn from them and take advantage of them.

‘Of all writings I love only that which is written with blood,’ wrote Frederick Nietzsche, who wrote with nothing else. ‘Write with blood: and you will discover that blood is spirit.’

Vernon Coleman, Bilbury, Devon, October 2009

1. I have learned that if I am receiving treatment for an existing disease and I develop new symptoms then, until proved otherwise, I should assume that the new symptoms are caused by the treatment I am receiving.

This is Coleman's First Law of Medicine and knowing it, and remembering it, could save your life.

Doctors are notoriously reluctant to admit that the treatments they recommend can do harm. There are several reasons for this. First, they often simply don't know how dangerous drugs can be (doctors rarely bother to read drug company information sheets). Second, they are frightened of being sued. (Doctors fear that if they admit that their treatment made someone ill they will receive a letter from a lawyer. Like most people they don't like letters from lawyers.) And finally, born of stubbornness and pride, there is a natural human unwillingness to admit responsibility for something that has gone wrong. This brand of unwillingness is unusually well developed among doctors who are encouraged to think of themselves as godlike by many of their more passive patients. Admitting to having made someone ill reminds doctors that they are mortal and fallible.

Because doctors almost never admit that the drugs they have prescribed might have caused unpleasant or dangerous side effects very few incidences of drug-induced illness are reported to the official watchdogs and this enables doctors and drug companies to claim that prescription drugs are safe. (The word 'safe' is, of course, relative. Even though the number of reported side effects is absurdly low, doctors are now officially one of the top four causes of death and serious injury in the world. They share the top four spots with cancer, heart disease and stroke.)

The truth is that side effects are far commoner than most people (including doctors) think. Four out of every ten patients who take a prescription drug will develop side effects. Some side effects will be mild and others will be unpleasant but many will be dangerous and potentially life-threatening. And one in six patients in hospital is there because they've been made ill by a doctor.

2. I have learned that the best way to beat the financial markets is to make geopolitical predictions and to then invest accordingly.

Most investors (and most investment advisers) do not do this. This may be because they can't or because they prefer to look at the trees rather than study the woods. In my experience, it always pays to look out for new trends and big themes. For example, investors who are aware of the problem of peak oil are well placed to take advantage of the coming rise in oil prices. If there were an efficient way to invest, using computer power, the investment bankers would own all the money. But although they have more than they deserve they don't have all the money — so there is no efficient way to invest. Computers cannot yet predict movements in the financial markets. The private investor who uses his intelligence, and watches and listens, is more likely to be successful than the professional investor who is constrained by corporate requirements, bonus driven short-termism, unbridled greed and a dangerous lack of common sense. (The world's investment bankers do have a lot of money. But they acquire it through trickery, deceit and crookery rather than through skills, knowledge or intelligence.)

The most important skill for any investor is, in my view, the ability to differentiate between relevant and irrelevant news. To be successful it is essential to be able to dismiss investment or geopolitical 'noise' and to focus on crucial bits and pieces of information.

It is, of course, also essential to be able to interpret the information you have selected and to use that information to help you draw conclusions. And it isn't information that matters in the world of investing: it is knowing how other people will respond to the available information.

I have also learned to be patient with winners and impatient with losers. Remember: it is possible to be very successful by being right 30% of the time, as long as you hold your winners and sell your losers. I have learned not to expect a chosen investment to rise immediately after I've bought it. You might have to wait a while for the rest of the market to realise that you're a genius and that they want to make the same investment decision that you've made. Investing is like tennis and golf. At the top level the winners are the ones who make the fewest mistakes. (I have no qualifications as an investment adviser but in support of my comments about investing I should, perhaps, point out that according to a rough and quite unaudited assessment, I appear to have made an average annual capital gain of around 17% for each of the years from 2000 to 2009 on my personal investment portfolio (excluding dividends and interest). I have described my investment principles in detail in my book *Moneypower.)*

I have learned that it is vital to know your weaknesses as an investor. Do you tend to react too much to small items of news? Do you listen too much to what other people say? Are you afraid of losing money? Are you afraid of making money? Do you feel guilty about having money? Until you know yourself, you will not make a competent investor. If you are to be a successful investor you must know what you want from your investments. And you must know what you are prepared to risk in order to get what you want. No one knows as well as you do what risks you are prepared to take. No one else knows what makes you comfortable. This philosophy can be applied to all aspects of life. So, just as you are the best medical adviser you will ever have so, too, you are also the best financial adviser you will ever have.

I have learned that if you spot an investment bandwagon you've missed it. If other people are climbing on then you should be climbing off. If you buy an investment which everyone else agrees is worth buying then you are probably paying too much. This is true for every investment you can think of — including bonds, shares and property.

The key to successful investing is to look at geopolitical issues, to spot global trends and to understand their importance. Successful investing involves anticipating change, not reacting to it. And remember: big investment opportunities are rare. When you spot one, and you are sure, you have to seize it with both hands.

You should always be able to explain your investments to anyone in a few simple sentences. If you buy a share, or put money into an investment trust or fund, you should be able to summarise your reasons in sentences that anyone could understand. And you need to be able to explain why you are continuing to hold this investment on a regular basis — particularly if anything changes.

When my book *Oil Apocalypse* was published it and I were treated to a barrage of sceptical criticism. My critics were, presumably, happy to ignore the investment advice in the book. I took my own advice and, believing, that the oil price would rise I bought oil.

It isn't easy to purchase a barrel of oil. It's heavy and messy. And I suspect the bank wouldn't look on me kindly if I ask them to let me store a few barrels of oil in their vault. But you can, of course, buy oil company shares. Big oil companies tend to do well when the price of oil goes up. They also pay handsome dividends. I also bought shares in smaller, more risky oil companies. Independent oil producers and explorers may be 'dangerous' but if the oil price rockets and they have oil to sell then their share price will rocket too. And I bought oil service companies — the companies providing oil rigs and other equipment to oil explorers and to companies drilling for oil. Despite the economic crisis the shares have done very nicely, thank you. I believe that holding such shares will, at the very least, give me a hedge against the price rise. As the cost of heating my home, and filling my petrol tank rises, so will my investment in oil shares.

3. I have learned not to trust the experts.

When I was young I was often advised that I should never do anything new or imaginative without first consulting the experts. When I was young I thought this was good advice. I have, however, learned to be constantly sceptical about the advice I receive from professionals. Today, all professions are run by a small group of establishment figures. These are usually wealthy and ambitious individuals who have acquired power over their professions by taking on administrative and management work that no one else is much interested in. They speak for, and make decisions on behalf of, thousands of their fellow professionals. This is particularly true of medicine and the law. It isn't a new phenomenon.

When he wrote *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (a book now better known as *Wealth of Nations)* Adam Smith wrote: 'People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment or diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public.' I don't know whether Smith regarded doctors and lawyers as 'trade' in 1776. But both medicine and the law are now most certainly 'trades'. As I wrote in *The Medicine Men* in 1975, a profession which takes its instructions from an industry is no more than a trade. Lawyers now advertise their services alongside plumbers, electricians and double glazing specialists.

Patients used to hand over their health (and their lives) to their doctors — without ever questioning what was happening to them. Today, that is a dangerous way to live. Patients who take an interest in their own health (and in the investigations and treatments that are recommended for them) may sometimes feel that the doctors and nurses who are looking after them regard them as a nuisance. But all the evidence shows clearly that such patients get better quicker, suffer fewer unpleasant side effects and live longer than patients who simply he back passively and allow the professionals to take over.

If your doctor wants you to take a drug (and all pills, tablets, capsules, medicines, potions and so on are drugs) make sure you know what to expect. If your doctor wants you to have surgery then make sure that you know what the surgery entails, what the possible consequences might be and what the alternatives are. Two really good questions to ask your doctor are: 'Would you have this operation if you were me?' and 'Would you recommend this operation to someone in your close family?'

Learn as much as you can about any disorder from which you suffer. And learn about all the possible types of treatment available. Patients who know more about their condition than their doctors invariably do better than patients who know nothing and put all their trust in their medical advisers.

I am similarly sceptical about investment advisers. Traditional investment rules all rely on hindsight. In practice, it is forecasting skills which really count. Charts of the past can be useful but they are a shaky basis upon which to base plans.

I think it is important not to overestimate the intelligence of the investment professionals. For example, the so-called 'credit-crunch' which devastated the financial markets (and the share prices of banks) from 2007 onwards affected Britain because so many leading bankers behaved like idiots and bought packages of mortgage debt without, apparently, having asked fairly fundamental questions about the security of the assets they were buying. People who borrowed huge amounts of money which they had no chance of ever paying back were reckless. But it was the hubris of bankers which led directly to serious losses for investors and real problems for millions.

The collapse of Long Term Capital Management (LTCM) in 1998 proved that clever people with lots of computers are not very good at managing, or even keeping, money. LTCM was run by people who had big brains and Nobel prizes. It was supposed to be the Titanic of investment funds. But, like the Titanic, it ran into serious trouble. Hubris led LTCM onto the iceberg of the Russian Government defaulting on sovereign debt. If the American Government hadn't bailed LTCM out (or, rather, strong-armed investment banks to take over its positions) LTCM would have gone bankrupt with disastrous results.

And what an indictment it is of investment managers that they all have to put on their advertisements 'Past performance is no guarantee or indicator of future performance.' I wonder how many cars would be sold if their dealers had to put that sort of slogan on all their dashboards. How many patients would visit a doctor who warned all his patients that 'past performance was no guarantee or indicator of future performance'.

The entire financial industry exists to sell things and to make money out of you. If you don't understand — and remember this — you will be cheated, tricked and conned.

I have learned that when I am among investment professionals I am the only person interested in making money for me. Everyone else is interested in making money from me. You will look after your money better than anyone else will. Investing isn't difficult. Most of the people who do it for a living are half-wits.

If you're saving money you need to know why. And you need to know what your needs are (and are likely to become) and what you are prepared to do to satisfy those needs. You need a strategy. Amazingly few people understand money management (which, although it isn't taught in our schools, is one of the most important skills anyone can have). Most people think they can trust the experts; they think that money management is boring, too complex or beneath them. They think that you need years of training in order to understand shares, bonds and money markets. None of this is true. Most spectacularly successful investors have never had any proper or orthodox training. And if you do decide to manage your own money you will have one huge advantage over everyone else: you will always care more about your money than anyone else will.

Finally, never take investment advice from anyone who isn't a self-made millionaire and/or considerably richer than you are. What does the guy in your local bank know about investments? If he is so good why isn't he rich, rather than sitting behind a desk telling you what to do with your money?

4. I have learned that there is no point in my having medical tests done unless the results of those tests will affect my treatment.

This is Coleman's Second Law of Medicine, and since even seemingly simple tests can sometimes be far more hazardous than doctors are usually prepared to admit, this law, like the first, may prove life-saving.

If your doctor wants you to have tests done ask him how the results will affect your treatment. If the results of the tests won't affect the treatment you receive (and aren't needed as a baseline against which to compare future tests) then the tests aren't worth having.

Tests and investigations are often regarded (by both doctors and patients) as being harmless. They aren't. There is no such thing as minor surgery and even taking blood is an operation. There are dangers inherent in every test that is performed. And there is, in addition, the danger that the result will be wrong and that your doctors will treat the faulty test rather than treating you. Thousands of healthy people have died from treatments they never needed. (If a surgeon recommends surgery that won't save your life ask yourself this one question: can I live with the problem and without the surgery? And remember: no surgery is free of risks.)

5. I have learned that party politicians can only be trusted to be untrustworthy.

I have learned to expect nothing from them but allegiance to their parties and their own self-centred interests. I have learned to make no plans which depend upon their integrity or reliability.

Modern politicians are self-serving; they are professional liars whose sole interest lies in preserving their own careers and the status and wealth that they have grown accustomed to. I believe that it is invariably safe to assume that everything politicians say is a lie, that every promise they make will be broken and that all their grandiose schemes will end in failure. Occasional truths and successes will not affect the overall effectiveness of this attitude.

We must plan our lives on the basis that nothing politicians tell us can be trusted. This is not cynicism or pessimism. It is pragmatism.

And so, for example, I have learned never, never, never to invest on the basis of a politician's promise. Politicians talk a great deal about improving infrastructure, and they boast about improving spending on health care and education. But their promises are easily abandoned. (And now that we have been impoverished by incompetent politicians and thieving bankers the future will be ever bleaker.) Companies which adapt their plans to fit in with potentially profitable opportunities which might result from political changes are taking huge chances. I would never invest in a company which will supposedly benefit from any government decision.

The bottom line is that governments and bureaucrats will always make a far greater mess of things than ever seemed possible. And they will keep on making a mess for longer than seemed possible, too. Whatever problems the future holds for the world, governments everywhere will mess up everything that can be messed up and they will make everything worse.

Our public sector is bloated, self-indulgent and irredeemably corrupt. Where there is an opportunity to waste they will find it in an instant and proceed to take advantage of the opportunity for longer than is possible. (A recent Government report concluded, apparently without whimsy, that private companies can, on average, do any job performed by a Government department for two thirds of the cost. Naturally, there are no plans to do anything about this.)

It is safe to rely on the stupidity and incompetence and dishonesty of politicians. They will not do sensible things (however simple) to correct substantial threats to the economy but can be relied upon to lie, cheat and make things worse in their efforts to preserve their own miserable careers.

6. I have learned that the oil is running out.

I simply do not believe the optimistic ostriches who insist that everything is going to be fine and that oil companies will manage to find new oil fields when the old ones run out.

It was oil which took us out of the Steam Age. And nothing in history has changed our lives in the way that oil has done.

But now the oil is running out and, whether the politicians and the bureaucrats like it or not, our civilisation will have to change. (I have described some of the ways in which our world must change in my book *Oil Apocalypse.)*

Having oil has changed our world. Having oil changed the way our economy grew, it changed the way we move about the planet, it changed the way our factories operate, it changed the way we live and the food we eat. Oil revolutionised our lives.

And now the oil is running out.

Our governments will make no useful plans to deal with the changes which must come. And so we must make our own plans. We must prepare ourselves, mentally and physically, for a different world. We must learn to be more self-sufficient and we must prepare ourselves for a world in which oil becomes steadily but remorselessly increasingly expensive and difficult to get hold of.

There is much we can do. In many ways the world may well prove to be a calmer, more peaceful and more comfortable place without oil.

But first we must learn to accept that the oil is running out.

7. I have learned that when I am investing with the aim of preserving my savings, or helping them grow, I should not invest in 'state of the art' technology.

The investors who put money into the early railroads or airline companies were (to say the least) usually disappointed with their returns. Investing in 'new' things (such as dot.com companies) can be just as frustrating, disappointing and expensive now as it was then.

When global warming became 'trendy' people started looking at alternative forms of energy as an investment possibility. Sadly, many investments in alternative energy proved disappointing because although the theory was fine the companies had no realistic chance of making a profit. In some cases there was no real demand for their products. In other cases the products simply weren't terribly good.

As the oil and gas run out, and the energy crisis develops, you might think it would be wise to invest in alternatives — companies making windmills or solar panels, for example.

But I haven't invested in alternative technologies (such as wind or solar power) for two reasons.

First, my personal feeling is that companies in these areas have been overbought and are overpriced. A number of investors have already pushed up the prices of companies in this area. There simply aren't many bargains around any more.

Second, I don't think any government on the planet is taking these alternatives seriously and I think these companies will, therefore, struggle to bloom. I just don't believe that any government is going to do the sensible thing and put money and effort into encouraging alternative forms of energy. When governments finally realise that they should have encouraged these companies it will be too late — the governments won't have any money left to invest.

8. I have learned to have faith in gold and silver.

Many investment advisors, banks and others who claim to know about these things sneer at gold as an investment.

'It doesn't pay any interest and you have to pay to store it,' is the usual argument against investing in gold.

These investors claim that gold is of interest only as a historical relic. And as a metal for making jewellery.

But I believe that they are wrong.

Gold used to be the basis upon which most currencies were based. People used to pay one another in gold coins. When paper currency replaced gold coins (because it was thought to be more practical to carry around a bundle of fivers than a bag of gold sovereigns) governments only issued as much paper currency as matched the gold they held in their vaults.

That was the deal upon which citizens accepted paper money. The bank note was a piece of paper which their government issued in lieu of gold. And the value of all the bits of paper the government issued never exceeded the value of the gold the government held in its vault. A citizen could take a bank note along to the Bank and exchange it for gold. People liked that. It made them feel comfortable.

This was important because as well as being a medium for buying and selling everyday 'things', and providing a unit by which such deals could be priced, money also had to act as a store of value.

Even since the first man started buying and selling cows and baskets of wheat, society has needed a way for people to save their money safely. Savings, and wealth, provide some sort of insurance against the bad days that come. If you have some money stored then you can buy grain if a freak storm destroys your own crops.

And people have always wanted to know that the money they saved would hold its value.

Before inflation became an accepted (and expected) way of life, a gold coin or a small gold bar would be just as valuable when you took it out of its hiding place as it had been when you put it in there.

Gold is valuable because it remains in limited supply. All the gold ever mined would fit into a 20 yard cube. And despite the fact that there are numerous exploration companies in existence there just doesn't seem to be much more gold waiting to be discovered.

Gold has always been a good hedge against inflation. The Government can print money but it can't manufacture gold. And gold has always held its value. 'You have to choose (as a voter) between trusting the natural stability of gold and the honest and intelligence of members of government,' wrote George Bernard Shaw. 'And with due respect to those gentlemen, I advise you, as long as the capitalist system lasts, to vote for gold.' I think he was right.

Shares in gold mining companies usually rise faster than the price of the metal alone. When the price rises the costs of getting the metal out of the ground stays much the same so the profit goes up. (The danger, of course, is that the cost of oil will make the cost of extracting the gold much, much higher.)

Buying gold is easy. (There is no real point in buying gold jewellery as an investment. Gold jewellery prices are much higher than the cost of the gold because of the labour involved in making and selling jewellery.) Gold coins such as krugerrands and sovereigns are fairly easy to buy from dealers. Some small jewellery shops sell gold coins.

I have a suspicion that the price of gold may soar. I believe it will, at least, retain its value in increasingly difficult times. I look upon buying gold as an insurance plan. If politicians around the globe provide us with exemplary leadership and the world manages perfectly well without oil (an unlikely prospect, it seems to me) then buying gold is probably unnecessary. But whenever I buy insurance I always hope that the premium will be wasted.

I have learned that if gold goes up in value then silver will probably follow.

Silver has a long history as a currency. The French word for money is 'argent' which comes from the Latin word argentum which means silver. The currency of India is the rupee. The word comes from a Sanskrit word for silver or a silver coin. Gold was usually used for large financial transactions but most countries in the world used silver for smaller denomination coins. In America silver dimes and quarters were made of 90% silver up until 1965.

Today silver is still indispensable to many industries. It is very strong but also extremely malleable. It has the highest thermal conductivity of all metals, the highest electrical conductivity and the best optical reflectivity too. It can put up with extremes of temperature without changing its properties. It even has powerful qualities as a disinfectant. It is used to prevent bacterial infections in burn victims and many wound dressings incorporate a layer of fabric which contains silver to prevent secondary infections developing. Silver is used in mobile telephones, washing machines, television sets, toasters, mirrors, cameras, photography, many medical devices, computer keyboards and a vast variety of other gadgets. Industrial demand for silver is currently rising at around 6% a year. And, of course, most of the silver used in industry cannot be recycled.

In the year 1900 there were 12 billion ounces of silver in the world. By 1990, the amount of silver had been reduced to 2.2 billion ounces. Today there are said to be around 300 million ounces of above ground refined silver left in existence. An astonishing 95% of the silver ever mined has been consumed by the photography, medical, defence, electronic and technology industries. The silver that has gone is gone for ever.

Why hasn't the price rocketed? Simple: the gap between demand and supply has been filled from official government stockpiles. Governments have been as keen to get rid of silver as they have been to dump their gold supplies.

9. I have learned that there is a single food that causes as many deaths and as much illness as tobacco.

It is a food which has been proven time and time again to cause cancer of the breast, cancer of the prostate, cancer of the bowel, many other types of cancer and numerous other disorders including asthma, heart disease, constipation, high blood pressure, osteoporosis and rheumatoid arthritis. It is a food which most people eat at least once every day. And it is a food which governments know is potentially lethal but which they support (with subsidies) and actively promote.

The truth about this deadly food is suppressed for purely commercial reasons. Governments (and the medical profession) say nothing because the people selling the food have too much power and too much money.

The name of the food is meat.

It is, I believe, the fat in meat which is the most significant cause of cancer. The fat in meat isn't just the white stuff that is easy to cut off. The fat is spread throughout the meat and is invisible to the naked eye.

The fat in meat is particularly likely to cause cancer because the carcinogenic chemicals fed to animals accumulate in the animal's fatty tissues. When the fatty meat is eaten the carcinogenic chemicals easily accumulate in the parts of the human body with the most fat. Breast cancer is a particular risk because breast tissue contains a considerable amount of fatty tissue. The incidence of breast cancer is rocketing (as are so many other cancers) because of chemical toxins in the fatty meat we eat. Clear scientific evidence shows that women who eat lots of fat, and/or eat lots of meat, are more likely to get breast cancer. It really is that simple. The incidence of breast cancer among Japanese women was low when they ate a traditional Japanese diet (which contains very little meat). When Japanese women started eating fatty hamburgers (food which I long ago christened harmburgers) the incidence of breast cancer rocketed.

There is plenty of evidence proving that meat causes cancer (there are summaries of 26 scientific papers relating meat to cancer in my book *Food for Thought)* but, despite this, there are many doctors, dieticians and nutritionists around who still don't seem to understand the importance of this link. Despite the firm evidence showing that meat causes cancer the majority of hospitals still serve their patients (and staff) meals which are built around meat. We think it strange that just a relatively few years ago patients and staff in hospitals were allowed to smoke on the wards but in a few years time our descendants will surely regard it as just as odd that hospitals should have served meat to people entrusted to their care. In my view, any nutritionist, dietician, cookery writer or chef who advocates eating meat should be doing something else for a living. I believe it is as absurd and as indefensible for a chef, nutritionist or dietician to recommend eating meat as part of a healthy diet as it would be for a doctor to recommend smoking as part of a healthy lifestyle.

The list of diseases known to be associated with meat, or commoner among meat eaters, looks like the index of a medical textbook. Anaemia, appendicitis, arthritis, breast cancer, cancer of the colon, cancer of the prostate, constipation, diabetes, gall stones, gout, high blood pressure, indigestion, obesity, piles, strokes and varicose veins are just some of the well-known disorders which are more likely to affect meat eaters than vegetarians.

There is too, the problem of the adrenalin in meat. When animals are killed they are inevitably terrified. They have a good deal of adrenalin running through their veins. When the animal is eaten the person who eats the animal consumes that adrenalin. What are the consequences of this? No one knows.

To all these hazards must be added the fact that if you eat meat you will be consuming any hormones, drugs and other chemicals which may have been fed to the animals before they were killed.

No one knows precisely what effect eating the hormones in meat is likely to have on your health. But the risk is there and I think it's a big one.

And there are other hazards. Some farmers use tranquillisers to keep animals calm. Others routinely use antibiotics so that their animals do not develop infections — and to boost the rate at which they put on weight. In America over half of all antibiotics are fed to animals, and I don't think it is any coincidence that the percentage of staphylococci infections resistant to penicillin has risen dramatically since farmers started doing this. Animals which are lucky enough to spend some of their time out of doors eating grass will often eat grass which has been sprayed with all sorts of toxic and carcinogenic chemicals.

If you care one jot about your health then the very best thing you can do is to give up eating meat. Giving up meat and eating a vegetarian diet will have as dramatic an effect on your health as not smoking.

10. I have learned that it is vital to be a holistic patient.

A truly holistic approach to staying healthy and treating illness depends upon using a wide range of possible remedies; treating the patient's signs and symptoms (rather than his test results) and combining all types of alternative and orthodox medicine.

There are very few truly holistic practitioners around. Doctors often talk about holistic medicine. So do alternative practitioners. But most of them don't have the foggiest idea what it really means. Ford dealers tend to sell Fords; acupuncturists tend to offer acupuncture; herbalists tend to offer herbal remedies; and medical doctors tend to prescribe pills and surgery.

There is, however, nothing at all to stop you being a holistic patient. For example, if your doctor tells you that you need surgery ask him how quickly you need to make a decision — and then use that time to make sure that you assess all the alternative possible options.

When you are trying to choose between orthodox medicine, acupuncture, homeopathy, osteopathy or whatever make a list of all the advantages and disadvantages of every available type of therapy — and every available practitioner. Look at the claims and the potential side effects of each therapy and ask each practitioner to tell you where you can find out more. Use books to educate yourself about the possibilities, advantages and hazards. Never forget that you are unique — and that your condition requires a unique solution.

As a holistic patient you will have to be prepared to stand your ground against health care professionals who will regard your preference for a holistic approach as bizarre.

Many orthodox practitioners are still likely to dismiss alternative or complementary medicine out of hand. If a treatment doesn't involve drugs, surgery or radiotherapy then it's quackery, according to many doctors. (Curiously, young doctors are more likely to be sceptical about alternative medicine than older ones. It seems that the drug industry has, in recent years, improved its effectiveness at increasing scepticism about non-orthodox remedies.)

11. I have learned the importance of being able to say 'No'.

Do you often end up doing things that you don't want to do — simply because you didn't like to say 'No' when you were asked? Have you ever agreed to give a speech, attend a dinner or luncheon, chair a meeting or act as a secretary for a volunteer group? And have you ever subsequently regretted saying 'Yes'?

Life is too short to waste time in such a way.

If you spend too much of your life doing things you don't want to do then you will be losing time and the freedom to spend your life in the way you want to spend it.

We all like to be liked and saying 'Yes' is much more likely to attract approval and a smile from the person doing the asking than is saying 'No'.

We say 'Yes' because we know that the other person will probably feel disappointed or let down if we say 'No'. And we say 'Yes' (when we would really much rather say 'No') when we are not clear enough about our priorities and are, consequently, prepared to let other people decide what we do with our time. It is often easy to forget that saying 'Yes' to a simple sounding request may commit you to a time and energy sapping exercise.

Saying 'No' doesn't have to mean that you annoy people or upset them. Practice saying 'No' nicely and you will find that you can avoid wasting your life doing things you really don't want to do.

Here are some practical tips:

1. Don't be defensive. You have no reason to feel guilty for saying 'No'. Don't begin by apologising.

2. Don't give excuses. If you give excuses you are likely to end up saying 'Yes' when you really mean to say 'No'. For example, if you are invited to speak at a meeting which is being held next Tuesday evening and you say you can't manage that evening because you already have another commitment there is a danger that the person inviting you will suggest another date 'which will be more convenient to you'. At this point you are backed into a corner. And it will be difficult to get out of giving the speech without being rude.

3. Begin your reply by flattering the person who is inviting you to do something. Tell them that you are honoured and flattered by the invitation.

4. Look the person who is inviting you straight in the eye when you reply. This will help you dominate the conversation and ensure that it goes in the way you want it to go. If you look down and avoid eye contact (a natural reaction when you feel guilty or embarrassed) you will be behaving in a 'passive' way. When you behave in a 'passive' way the other person will automatically become more 'aggressive' and 'dominant'.

5. Give a solid reason for not saying 'Yes' — a reason which it will be difficult to oppose or discount. It is even better if you say something which it will be impossible for the person inviting you to try to push aside without seeming to be rude or thoughtless. If asked to give a speech you don't want to give you can, for example, say:

‘From experience I know that this is not something I am good at and so I must say ‘No’. But I am flattered that you have asked me.’

Every time you say ‘ Yes’ it should be because you are doing something you want to do, or feel that you can do well, and not because you are frightened to say ‘No’.

12. I have learned not to trust anything anyone promises about pensions.

Anyone who is relying on a promised or expected pension that they do not themselves control should beware. As our economy struggles to cope with the huge debts which have been accumulated, and as the peak oil crisis unfolds, many companies will collapse — and their pension plans will collapse with them. Governments will not be able to step into the breach. Indeed, many governments will not be able to meet their responsibilities to their own pensioners. Civil servants, like corporate employees, will find that the pensions they had expected simply aren’t available.

As the years go by an increasing number of pensioners will find that the money they thought they would receive when they retired simply isn’t there. European Union legislation, and Government intervention, will damage pension funds and result in shrinking pensions.

I believe that the wisest course is to take control of your pension yourself and, if possible, to manage your own investments. Safest of all, perhaps, will be those individuals who save their money, put it into a safe place, but do not confine it to a pension fund.

13. I have learned that if I am receiving medical treatment that doesn’t work then I should consider the possibility that the diagnosis might be wrong.

This is particularly true when several treatments have been tried without producing any improvement.

Doctors pay far too much attention to high technology equipment these days. As a result they are often frighteningly bad at making diagnoses. Numerous studies have shown that vast numbers of patients die without ever having been properly diagnosed. One study, using post-mortem examinations to check the cause of death, showed that less than 20% of patients who die have been accurately diagnosed. Even significant, common disorders — such as heart attacks — are often missed. In this survey it was clear that many of the patients would have survived if they had been accurately diagnosed.

I have learned, therefore, never be afraid to ask for a second opinion.

It may be your life that is at stake. Telling your doctor that you want a second opinion will probably take a great deal of courage. Many doctors are sensitive creatures — they may show their hurt if their all-knowingness is questioned. But just remember that the stakes are high.

And, if there is time, don’t be afraid to check out the past record of the doctor who is going to treat you. One surgeon working in a hospital may have a survival rate which is twice as good as another surgeon working in the same hospital. If you allow the less competent surgeon to operate on you then your chances of walking out of the hospital may be halved. Those are odds you cannot and should not ignore.

14. I have learned that it is always a good idea to know the ‘bottom line’.

If you are contemplating a new business venture, or making a new investment, knowing the bottom line will enable you to make an accurate judgement about whether or not to go ahead.

Always work out the worst case scenario. And give yourself an exit strategy.

Knowing the bottom line will reduce the chances of you panicking. And you must never panic in a crisis. If you panic you will make the wrong decisions. The best way to avoid panicking is to make sure that you don’t put yourself in a position where you are ever going to feel uncomfortable or under pressure.

If you are going to take risks successfully you need to be able to assess the bottom line with some degree of accuracy. Only when you know the bottom line will you be able comfortably to take chances that you might otherwise avoid.

Constantly ask yourself: ‘What is the worst that can happen?’ ‘What will/ could happen if I do/don’t do this?’

You may be surprised to discover that there are not many risks which can make the sky fall in or stop the world going round.

15. I have learned that recycling projects run by local authorities are a nonsense.

Millions of people separate their yoghurt cartons from their cereal packets and their baked bean tins from their old birthday cards and their beer bottles from their newspapers. They then spend time putting these items into separate collecting bins.

Most of them believe that by sorting and recycling their waste they are helping to save the planet. Sadly, they are not.

Much of the material sorted and prepared for recycling simply ends up in landfill sites. I have little doubt that preparing and sorting waste, and then disposing of it, uses up more energy than simply dumping the stuff in suitable landfill sites. We deal with our waste in an unproductive and expensive way because of useless and damaging legislation forced upon us by the European Union.

It would, of course, be far more helpful to force manufacturers and retailers to wrap their products in less packaging.

16. I have learned that the value of soft commodities (corn, wheat, soya, coffee and other crops grown in fields) is likely to keep rising in the medium and long-term.

(I have no idea what is likely to happen in the short-term. Investing for periods of days or weeks is not investing, it is gambling.)

The world's population is growing and people in China and India are no longer content to live on a bowl of rice and beans a day. The demand for meat is putting pressure on agricultural commodities because animals have to be fed.

Other problems mean that prices will probably continue to rise.

First, global warming (whatever the cause) is not good for agriculture. Crops get damaged by drought and damaged by storms. Second, there is a growing global water shortage. Crops need water. Less water will probably mean fewer crops. Third, the mad and indefensible enthusiasm for ethanol as an alternative fuel means that many of the crops sold are being used to enable American motorists to ignore the problems of peak oil. Crops grown and sold as food are bound to get more expensive.

17. I have learned that the best, and safest, way to pay for anything is to use cash and to use credit and debit cards as little as possible.

When I stand in a queue at the newsagents I am constantly surprised by the number of people using plastic to buy one magazine or one notebook. Don't these people have banks with hole-in-the-wall cash dispensers?

Using plastic is unwise for two reasons. First, the more you use your cards the more you are likely to end up having your identity stolen. And that's not funny. Second, if you use cards for all your purchases you will lose track of your spending. If you have to go and get the cash out of the bank then you'll know just how fast your money is disappearing. It's much easier to keep control of your spending if you use cash. Third, if you use plastic then anyone following you can easily see where you are. If someone has access to the credit card company's computers they will easily spot that you're on holiday in Brighton and not at your flat in Leeds. This sort of information is quite useful for burglars.

If you are worried about carrying enough cash just split it between two or three wallets. Make sure that the wallet you use in shops only contains a modest amount of cash. Keep the rest of your cash in inside pockets or in a money belt or money pouch of some kind.

And carry what I call a 'mugger's wallet' with you. (A mugger's wallet is simply an old wallet which contains a few notes, and a few bits of useless plastic which look like credit cards but aren't. If a mugger demands your wallet, this is the one you hand over.)

18. I have learned that identity theft is the fastest growing criminal industry in the world but that there are a number of things I can do to protect my identity.

First, if a bank or other institution demands to see your passport, driving licence, birth certificate or gas bill then you should do exactly that: let them see it. And then take it away again. Here it is. See it? Whoosh. Now it's gone. Don't let them take a copy. I have done this many times. Petty officials usually complain. But I tell them to check with their compliance officer who will, once he or she has checked the rules, tell them that I'm right. You can do this with solicitors and other professionals too. For most purposes, all these people have to do is to confirm that you are who you say you are. They do not always have the right to copy your confidential information and put it into their system for some half-wit to lose. There are rules requiring institutions and individuals to make sure that you are who you say you are. But that's all. (There are, inevitably some exceptions. For example, employment legislation may give employers a right to demand copies.)

It's up to you whether you do this or not, of course, but if you do not look after your documents then within a few years there will be dozens of copies of your valuable identity documents floating around out of your control. You may think that worrying about this is slightly paranoid but identity theft is now the fastest growing criminal activity in the country. On the rare occasions when copies are needed (as, for example, when dealing with an institution at a distance) I write on the photocopy the date and a note to say that the copy is for the use of that institution only. This makes it impossible for the copy to be used by anyone else for any other purpose.

Second, insist that any private documents which you are required to send are returned to you by private courier (or, at the very least, by special delivery). It may help if you tell the person at the other end that they will be responsible if the documents are lost. Do this, for example, if you have to send your driving licence to a police force to be endorsed. People in authority hate being told that they will be held responsible for anything. And, in general, what they hate is usually good for you.

Incidentally, I was recently told by an estate agent that they would not act for me unless I allowed them to take copies of a variety of private documents. I was told that it would be against the law for me to refuse to allow them to do this. I refused. They sold a house for me. No one has yet been arrested and the sun still comes up every morning.

I have learned to protect my privacy. Once you've lost it, it's a devil of a game to get it back. Indeed, under some circumstances it may be impossible to recover. But you do have to be aware and wary. For example, it is widely believed that by dialling 141 before the number you dial it is possible to protect your telephone identity from the person or company you are calling. Sadly, this is not always the case. All Government agencies can, of course, identify you. And so can a growing number of private companies who use equipment, which may or may not be legal, to break the code and identify your number.

There are, these days, vast numbers of bureaucrats and officials demanding personal information. Whenever I can legally avoid giving them the information they demand, I do so. It's usually easier than you might think. Neither the Government nor my bank knows where I live. And why should they?

19. I have learned that medical screening examinations and check-ups are more profitable for doctors than for patients.

I have been a stern critic of screening examinations and check-ups for several decades and have, in the distant past, pointed out that well-known (and extremely profitable) forms of testing such as the cervical smear, the breast mammogram and the prostate specific antigen test for prostate cancer may, over the years, have done more harm than good. Naturally, my criticisms have been met with a barrage of angry and very defensive comments from doctors who earn their living providing screening tests and from companies which make money out of producing screening equipment. Today, the industry promoting health checks continues to promote (and profit from) these tests though, I am pleased to say that a growing number of doctors now share my fear that such tests may, in the long run, do far more harm than good.

Here's just one of many examples I can give.

In 1988, I first warned about the danger of mammograms in a (now out of print) book called *The Health Scandal.* My criticism was, of course, greeted with howls of outrage from the medical establishment. Back then I wrote: 'There are, of course, risks in having regular X-ray examinations. No one knows yet exactly what those risks are. We will probably find out in another ten or twenty years time.'

In fact, it was in 2006 that doctors finally issued a warning about mammograms, coming to precisely the conclusion I had warned about eighteen years earlier. Mammographic screening may help prevent breast cancer. But it may also cause breast cancer. Just how many women die because of the radiation they have received through mammography isn't known but it seems that the risks for younger women (women in their 30s for example) are higher than the risks for older women. (Radiation induced cancer typically takes up to 20 years to develop so for a woman in her 80's the risks of mammography are probably somewhere between slight and negligible.) Does mammography cause more cancers than it helps to prevent? Would other forms of screening be safer and therefore more effective? I don't know. This is a decision that every woman has to make for herself. I certainly don't believe that anyone knows the answers to those questions with any certainty either. Personally, if pushed for an answer, I would have to say that I believe (as I did in 1988) that mammography should be stopped until some proper long-term testing has been done. It won't be of course. The commercial and political reasons for continuing with mammography are far too powerful.

I have a personal reason for being wary of screening tests.

Twenty five years ago an insurance company arranged for me to have a medical examination. I was perfectly healthy at the time. The examination showed a minute amount of blood in my urine. A subsequent ultrasound scan showed a deformed kidney. Surgeons were summoned. I was prepared for an operation. And then it was discovered that there was nothing wrong with my kidneys. It was the tests, not me, that needed treatment.

My suspicion of screening tests pre-dates that experience. But the experience reinforced my fears and suspicions.

20. I have learned never to send anything by e-mail that I wouldn't be happy to see painted on a wall near my home.

If you want to say something private, say it in a letter, put the letter in an envelope, put a stamp on the envelope and post it. It may be a little slower, but it is still by far the most secure way to communicate.

Always use an e-mail address with your own name so that you will always remember that whatever you write isn't even private let alone secret.

21. I have learned not to trust either the BBC or the Internet as sources of impartial news and information.

In my view the main problem with the BBC is that it is biased. For example, the BBC tends to broadcast praise of the European Union but to suppress or ignore criticism of the organisation. It is absurd and unfair that British citizens should be forced to pay for the BBC's extravagances and prejudices by being compelled to pay an annual licence fee.

The Internet is useless as a source of information because so many of the sites which provide search facilities or news are biased in favour of advertisers. It is quite impossible to search the Internet and then trust the information or advice which you find unless you are expert enough in the field to be able to assess the value of the material you are reading. I find it alarming that many students (and not a few teachers) believe that the Internet has made textbooks irrelevant.

22. I have learned that Britain, America and Europe are going to remain in an economic mess for decades.

The huge debt created by the British Government's spend, spend, spend policies will mean that taxes will have to rise, and stay high, while Government spending will have to fall. There is no alternative scenario. The consequences will be disastrous. Unemployment will rise. Interest rates will rise. Inflation will soar. House prices will fall or remain stagnant.

And the nation's infrastructure will deteriorate.

Britain is awash with highly paid bureaucrats. And in times of economic crisis the one thing bureaucrats do not do is fire themselves or reduce the size of their administrative departments. And so, inevitably, the services the Government provides will deteriorate. Health care, education, roads — every service the Government spends our money on will show a significant fall in quality. The deterioration will be exacerbated by the fact that these services will have to be shared with a growing number of immigrants pouring in from the European Union (although as the services provided in the UK fall, so the number of immigrants wanting to come to Britain, and the number wanting to stay, will fall.)

23. I have learned that hospitals are not suitable places for sick people. If you must go into one, you should get out as quickly as you can.

Before the industrial age hospitals were built like cathedrals in order to lift the soul and ease the mind. Hospitals were decorated with carvings, works of art, flowers and perfumes. Modern hospitals are built with no regard for the spirit, eye or soul. They are bare, more like prisons than temples, designed to concentrate the mind on pain, fear and death. Where there are windows they are positioned in such a way that patients can't see out of them (though even if they could they probably wouldn't be able to see anything more enthralling than the refuse bins or the air conditioning units). If there are windows with good views then those windows will be on the sides of offices occupied by bureaucrats. The most highly paid bureaucrats get the best views.

But patients aren't just in danger because hospitals are badly designed and badly run.

One of the reasons why hospitals are no longer suitable for sick people is the fact that ambitious, modern nurses want to administer rather than nurse.

In the dark old days nurses were hired and trained to nurse. Aspiring nurses (mostly but not exclusively female) were inspired by the desire to tend and to heal. Nursing was a noble profession. Caring was the key word. The most powerful jobs in the profession were occupied by ward sisters and matrons — all of whom still had close, daily contact with patients.

Sadly, today's career structure means that nurses whose desire to nurse is accompanied by even the slightest ambition must quickly move up the ladder to a point where they spend very little time with patients. Many senior nurses now spend their days closeted in their offices, staring at computer screens and filling in assessment forms. Many seem to regard themselves as above what they see as the menial tasks of nursing. They leave the hands-on work to untrained staff. The introduction of degrees for nurses has made things even worse by turning a fundamentally practical profession into one with entirely spurious academic ambitions. The modern career structure for nurses has taken the best nurses away from patients. The drive for this career structure was driven by a patronising and entirely inaccurate concept: that nursing is demeaning.

Today, many nurses go into the profession attracted not by the desire to tend the sick but by the salaries, perks, authority and career structure which will, they know, take them away from practical work. The system is designed to attract exactly the wrong people into nursing.

The actual hands-on nursing is done, very largely, by junior staff.

This is, without a doubt, one of the reasons why modern hospitals are so bad and it is the reason why serious hospital infections are now endemic; it is why nurses are too often rude and uncaring to patients and why, in so many hospitals, clusters of nurses are more likely to be found having meetings (more appropriately called coffee-breaks) than actually helping patients. It is, for example, why thousands of elderly patients are left in pain, left to starve to death, left to die of dehydration, left in soiled bedclothes and left, ignored and without dignity, while nurses complete their paperwork.

Time and time again patients report that nurses won't lift them up the bed (it has been reported that some hospitals have posters with the slogan 'Nurses are not weightlifters' on their walls), won't help feed them, won't bring bedpans, won't change beds, won't do anything for patients in pain or distress and won't respond when the call button is pressed. They will not, in short, do any of the things that nurses are traditionally supposed to do. They are not interested in soothing or healing or helping because, even at quite junior levels, they have become career administrators with ambitions.

In many hospitals it is the patients who can get out of bed who end up doing all the nursing work.

Stop a nurse in a modern hospital and ask her where such and such a patient can be found, or how he or she is progressing, and you will probably be met with a glazed, disinterested look. They don't know and they don't much care. Private hospitals, where patients pay directly for their care, are a little better.

24. I have learned that the world isn't just running out of oil but is also running out of just about all natural resources.

For decades American Governments have identified sources of materials in Third World countries and have then encouraged American companies to remove those resources for American use. For years the Chinese and the Indians were content to enjoy their fairly simply lifestyles (by Western values) and to let the Americans steal everything of value.

No more.

Today, the people of China and India want what they call an American way of life. They want smart houses, two cars, two television sets, air conditioning, a dishwasher, a refrigerator and a deep freeze filled with harmburgers and ice cream. They want computers and computer games and all the rest of the American dream.

If the rate of growth which China has exhibited for the last few years continues, then the entire Chinese nation will soon be as rich as the Americans are today. Within a couple of decades everyone in China will have an American style house and a couple of cars.

They will want to eat meat and eggs instead of rice. They will want to eat more of everything. And they will want everything nicely packaged.

This is not a wild forecast.

This is not even a prediction.

It's happening.

In a few years time the Chinese will use up more oil than is currently being produced for worldwide consumption. They will consume as much grain as is being produced for worldwide consumption. They will use more steel than the whole of Europe and America. They will be responsible for more than doubling the number of cars on the planet. To satisfy their yearning for magazines, invoices and parking tickets the production of paper will have to double.

That's just China.

Within a few years India will have a bigger population than China. The Indian economy is growing almost as fast as the Chinese economy.

And then there's the rest of Asia. And Russia. And Eastern Europe. And Africa.

It isn't difficult to see why the world is running out of everything. You think of it — wood, steel, copper, water — the world is probably running out of it.

The prices of metals such as copper and lead have risen dramatically in recent years. And I believe they are likely to continue to rise — even when oil starts to become more expensive. The Chinese are not going to suddenly stop making motor cars or television sets. However, when the peak oil crisis really hits these prices may fall (because the demand for metals will drop).

We are using up the world's resources in general, and its minerals in particular, at an alarming rate.

If the world keeps going at its present rate then almost all minerals will run out in a decade or two's time.

Uranium and the base metals will, I believe, all continue to rise in price in the near and mid-term. In the long-term, however, I believe that only the precious metals with a currency link (gold and silver) will rise ever onwards and upwards.

There are many mining companies available for investment. The safest are probably the biggest. Huge multinational miners tend to have mines in different countries and they tend to produce and sell a variety of different metals. Smaller mines often specialise in finding particular metals and although their shares are invariably riskier the rewards can be much greater. A share in a small mining company may multiply tenfold or even more. On the other hand the company may disappear entirely and the shares become worthless.

Some small mining companies will have operating mines. Others will simply have licences to look for metals. In addition to the risk that a company may fail to find any metal there are political risks. A greedy government may confiscate land or take a large chunk of a successful mine. Some of the entrepreneurs who set up small exploration companies are roguish individuals who have spotted an opportunity and who are eager to make money out of gullible investors rather than out of digging metals out of the ground.

In the past, mining has been a cyclical business. The value of mining companies went up and down almost regularly. When the price of a commodity went down miners would close down mines and not open up new ones. The commodity would, therefore, become scarcer. When the metal became scarce enough the price would rise. And, in the nature of these things, the price would rise up to a level way beyond the level it had previously attained. At that point mining companies would start digging again. And entrepreneurs would raise capital to go exploring.

Soon there would be more than enough of the metal around. And the price would fall again.

This time things may be a little different.

(That is, I admit, the most dangerous thing anyone can believe about financial markets. It's what people say all the time. When dot.com shares went to ridiculous heights at the end of the 20th century all the enthusiastic analysts and investors were chanting 'this time it's different'. It wasn't of course. Prices collapsed and investors lost their shirts, trousers, shoes and socks.)

However, I believe things may be slightly different in mining because we're talking about commodities (metals) which are known to be available only in limited quantities. There is only so much copper available. Once it's gone you can't make any more. And if demand soars then the availability and price of the metal must alter. And although metals are running out, the demand for them is soaring. The industrial revolution boom has hit China, India and a dozen other rapidly growing countries all at the same time.

In mining, probably more than any other area of investment, geopolitical circumstances and the macroeconomic situation have always been crucial. And the geopolitical and macroeconomic circumstances mean that this time the upturn in the mining cycle is likely to be sharper and longer than usual.

There is, however, a big warning attached to mining companies: when the oil shortage becomes severe building programmes will have to stop. There won't be any oil for making cars so there won't be any need to build roads. New cities won't get built because the problems created by the oil shortage will be devastating.

At that point mining shares will crash.

There won't be much of a market for steel, copper or any other non- precious metals.

25. I have learned never to do private or confidential work on a computer which I use for Internet access.

I always store valuable information on portable disks, not on computer hard drives, and I always put copies in safe places.

26. I have learned that there are fashions in medicine just as much as there are fashions in clothes.

The difference is that whereas badly conceived fashions in clothes are only likely to embarrass you, ill-conceived fashions in medicine may kill you. The fashions in medicine have, by and large, as much scientific validity as the fashions in the rag trade.

The most obvious fashions in medicine relate to treatments. For example, a couple of centuries ago, enemas, purges and bleedings were all the rage. In 17th century France Louis XIII had 212 enemas, 215 purges and 47 bleedings in a single year. The Canon of Troyes is reputed to have had a total of 2,190 enemas in a two year period; how he found time to do anything else is difficult to imagine. By the mid 19th century enemas were a little last year's style and bleeding was the in-thing. Patients would totter into their doctor's surgery, sit down, tuck up their sleeves and ask the doctor to 'draw me a pint of blood'. Bleeding was the universal cure, recommended for most symptoms and ailments. Feeling a little under the weather? A little light bleeding should soon put you to rights. Constant headaches? We'll soon have that sorted for you, sir. Just roll up your sleeve. Bit of trouble down below, madam? Not to worry. Slip off your frock and hold your arm out.

A little later, in the 19th century, doctors put their lancets away and started recommending alcohol as the new panacea. Brandy was the favoured remedy in the doctor's pharmacopoeia. People took it for almost everything. And when patients developed delirium tremens the recommended treatment was more alcohol. If things got so bad that the brandy didn't work doctors added a little opium. Those were the days to be ill. Hypochondriacs must have had a wonderful time.

In the years from the 1930's onwards, removing tonsils became the fashionable treatment. Tonsils were removed from between a half and three-quarters of all children in the 1930's. This often useless and unnecessary (and always potentially hazardous) operation is less commonly performed these days but in the 1970's over a million such operations were done every year in Britain alone. Doctors used to rip out tonsils on the kitchen table and toss them to the dog. Between 200 and 300 deaths a year were caused by the operation. One suspects that few, if any, of those unfortunate children would have died from tonsillitis.

Diseases go in cycles too. In the early 19th century the fashionable diagnosis was ‘inflammation’. Then, when patients and doctors tired of that, the new key word was ‘debility’. Doctors didn’t know terribly much and so their diagnoses, like their treatments, tended to be rather general.

These days patients expect more specific diagnoses and doctors are invariably happy to oblige.

One year everyone will be suffering from asthma. It will be the disease of the moment just as the mini skirt or ripped jeans may drift mysteriously in and out of fashion. Another year arthritis will be the fashionable disease as a drug company persuades journalists to write articles extolling the virtues (and disguising the vices) of its latest product. Depression. Irritable bowel syndrome. Osteoporosis. The cycle is a relatively simple one. The drug company with a new and profitable product to sell (usually designed for some long-term — and therefore immensely profitable — disorder) will send teams of well-trained representatives around to talk to family physicians, give them presents and take them out for expensive luncheons. The sales representatives will be equipped with information showing that the disorder in question is rapidly reaching epidemic proportions, lists of warning symptoms for the doctor to watch out for and information about the drug company’s new solution to the problem. Because the product will be new to the market there will probably be very little evidence available about side effects and the sales representative will be accurately able to describe the drug as extremely ‘safe’. There are even non-existent diseases (ADHD is perhaps the best known) which seem to me, and, I suspect, a growing number of other physicians, to have been originally invented in order to find a use for expensive medicinal compounds (and enthusiastically welcomed by parents who find the fictitious disease to be a handy and enormously useful explanation for bad behaviour).

Not surprisingly, thousands of family doctors will respond to this hard sell system by diagnosing more of the disease in question and handing out fistfuls of prescriptions for the recommended product. Older drugs, well-tried, possibly effective and probably safer than the new replacement, will be discarded as out-of-date. After all, their side effects will, over the years, have been well-documented.

As the disease subsequently seems to become more widespread so articles will appear about it in newspapers and magazines and television pundits will start to talk about it. Every patient who has the appropriate symptoms (however mildly) will be convinced that he or she is suffering from the disease in question.

And the number of prescriptions being written for the new wonder product will soon rocket — pushing up drug company profits dramatically.

Then, a year or so later, patients and doctors alike will become aware of the many side effects associated with the new alleged wonder product and prescribing levels will fall. It is then the turn of some other product and some other disease to take the limelight and some other drug company to enjoy a dramatic boost in its profits.

27. I have learned that debt can cause great pain.

The latter part of the 20th century was, without a doubt, the era of greed. Millions of people fought hard not to acquire a decent standard of living but to get everything. Humans went from needs to wants, through luxury to excess. Moral, ethical, environmental, cultural, emotional, spiritual and personal consequences were ignored in the search for more stuff.

Entrepreneurs who were enjoying their work made their businesses bigger. They borrowed money to expand. And then they found they needed accountants, lawyers and other specialists. The man who used to enjoy his work found that the more successful he became the less time he spent doing what he originally wanted to do with his life. He spent most of his time in meetings and preparing for meetings. What was left he spent talking to the banks about his debts.

Shopping became a hobby, a recreation (‘retail therapy’, ‘shop till you drop’) and, for many, an addiction. Work became a constant grind. Instead of going to work to ‘earn a living’ people were earning but no longer living. Work had become a source of money and there could never be enough (or too much) of that. Earning and spending, owing and worrying.

Money became an end rather than a means. Money was no longer a way to buy food and pay for shelter and nor was it something to use to purchase treats and delights. Acquiring money — and then spending it — had become everything. And we were encouraged in this belief by advertisers (who wanted our money themselves) and by politicians (who wanted us to keep spending so that the economy would grow and they could disguise the fact that the State itself had a huge spending problem). To them we are consumers and taxpayers. Nothing more. At times of national economic crisis people are actually encouraged to go out and shop for their country.

Millions learnt the superficial short-term joys of debt. People didn’t just borrow money to buy a home (though they did that in huge quantities). They also borrowed money to buy cars (why share one when you can have one each — besides with two jobs, necessary to bring in the money to pay all the bills, two cars became essential), kitchen equipment, huge flat-screen digital televisions and computers. They borrowed money to make sure that everyone in the house had a telephone of their own. They borrowed money so that they could talk to their neighbours on the telephone (so much more satisfying than leaning on the garden fence, which can't be as much fun because it costs nothing). They borrowed money to go on holiday. They borrowed money to buy second homes. And, of course, they borrowed money to buy smart clothes to wear for work. They borrowed money to buy the season ticket for the train to get to work. They borrowed money to pay for expensive snacks bought to eat on the train or while rushing from one appointment to the next. They borrowed money to pay the interest on the money they had borrowed.

Most alarming of all is the fact that millions of people with horrifying debts now genuinely believe that their situation is not their fault. They prefer to blame the banks which lent them the money rather than to acknowledge their own greed. Most didn't seem to realise that debt creates shackles. To pay their debts (and the debts their debts themselves accrued) people are forced to continue with work they hate. They cannot afford to quit; to walk away and do something they might enjoy. They cannot even afford to pause, rethink and replan their lives. Every small threat becomes a major stress. A temporary illness, an inability to work, becomes a huge problem. The threat of unemployment is a nightmare when credit card bills are pouring through the letterbox.

Real dreams, hopes and aspirations are forgotten; pushed aside by plastic dreams, cardboard hopes and tinsel aspirations. The essentials in life are drowned by the non-essentials. In the same way that savings can provide freedom so debt will inevitably produce slavery.

People may appear affluent but their noses are stuck to the grindstone as they work ever harder to keep the banks and loan companies off their backs.

The problem with our recommended lifestyle is that when your life is designed to accumulate then what you have is never enough. More is always better and 'enough' is always a distant, unattainable horizon. If more is better then what we have can never be enough. There is always more 'more'.

No one ever slows down long enough to realise that if they don't have two jobs they won't need two cars. Born to work. Born to shop. Whoever dies with the most toys is the winner and gets the biggest obituary. (Though those with the most toys have, paradoxically, probably worked so hard to pay for them that they have played with them very little.) Life, liberty and the pursuit of a bigger television set.

Survey after survey show that the majority of people find their work boring and stressful. People complain that they have no free time and no time for hobbies. The divorce rate rises and rises (the vast majority of divorces being caused by arguments over money not sex). Anxiety and depression are often blamed on stress caused by worrying about work and money.

Work and money.

Our identities have become our work and our shopping; our earning and our spending. We are worth what we earn. A top television performer in the USA has a clause in his contract confirming that he will always be paid $1 more than the next highest paid performer at the network. Why? What does it matter to him what anyone else gets paid?

Our self-regard is tied up with the stuff we have bought with the money we've borrowed. Our status is determined not by what we have done or learnt or contributed, nor even by what we have acquired through our hard work, but by what we have acquired through borrowing. Our success is measured by our capacity to borrow.

We think we are working to pay the bills but we end up spending more than we earn on more than we need. And when our only joy is shopping we make things worse for ourselves. We shop to cheer ourselves up (a new outfit, a bottle of wine, a visit to the hairdresser, a trip to Disneyland). We buy books about hobbies rather than actually spending time doing them ourselves. We watch television programmes about other people experiencing life because we are too busy to do it ourselves.

Debt: the most destructive of addictions.

28. I have learned never to use my passport for anything except passing through customs.

Don't tell the bank you have one and you won't have to show it. Similarly, guard your National Insurance number as carefully as you can. Use a gas bill in preference to something more personal.

When forced to provide documentation to prove that you are who you say you are, provide the least important piece of paper you can find.

29. I have learned not to sign trivial forms with the same signature I use for legal documents or cheques.

I do not use accurate information for trivial enquiries where it is not legally required. If I am asked for my mother's maiden name on an Internet website I try to be imaginative (as long as what I am doing does not break the law).

The only problem lies in remembering whether my mother's maiden name is Crippen or Borgia.

30. I have learned to be a sceptical investor.

If it sounds too good to be true — then I don't buy it. If I don't understand it — then I don't buy it. If I don't understand how the seller can make money — then I don't buy it. If it sounds too good to be true then it probably isn't true — and I don't buy it.

31. I have learned to be a contrarian investor.

Experience tells me that I won't go far wrong if I buy what most people are selling and sell what most people are buying.

Successful investment is largely about courage. If you go with the crowd (buying what everyone else is buying) you will be no more of a success than everyone else. Because of costs, expenses, fees and taxes most investors (amateur and professional) do worse than the market.

But I have also learned that as a contrarian investor I must always make sure I understand why other people think the way they do. And I always want to be sure that I can see the faults in their arguments. Listen to what other people are saying. But do so not because you want to follow their investment advice but because you want to know what they are saying (and probably doing).

If you want to beat the market you have to outthink the majority of other investors (both professionals and amateurs). That is as easy as it sounds. If you are daunted by that prospect you may succeed. If you are not daunted by the prospect you will probably not succeed.

If you're going to add value to your investments then someone else has to lose money. That's the way it works. Adding value to your investments is a zero-sum game. In order to add value you must know or understand things which most other investors do not know or understand or are not prepared to accept. And you must be able to think independently and think conceptually. You will also need the confidence to go against the crowd. Remember, that you will be competing with highly paid professionals who are equipped with hugely expensive resources.

32. I have learned to remember why I am investing.

The aim is to make money. Do not feel shy or embarrassed about this. If your aim is to make the world a better place, put your money to work in some more direct way. I will not invest in companies of whose activities I disapprove (pharmaceutical companies, arms companies and tobacco companies, for example). And I will invest in companies which may improve the world. But the bottom line is that if investments don't make money (either as dividends or capital gains) then they are failing.

33. I have learned that if I want to do well at something then I have to focus.

Top golfers don't try to win tennis championships. The more you focus the better you will do.

34. I have learned to develop my instincts and to learn to listen to them.

A decade or two ago you would have had difficulty in finding any reputable scientist prepared to admit that he believed in telepathy or extra sensory perception. These days you'd have as much difficulty in finding a reputable scientist prepared to say categorically that he did not believe in parapsychology.

As the whole subject becomes better known, so increasing numbers of people provide us with practical illustrations of the remarkable ways in which the mind often operates. There have been countless stories of individuals having dreams and then discovering that their dreams were very close to reality. The mind, it seems, can work in many remarkable ways.

One continuing problem is that it is only too easy to pick out specific instances and examples of intuition and to then exaggerate or distort their importance. But even allowing for this, there is little doubt that most of us do have skills that we use only too rarely. Nor is there any doubt that by taking greater advantage of these skills we could deal with many of our daily problems far more readily, and with far less stress and heartache.

If you tend to spend ages making relatively minor decisions — and find yourself getting into quite a state trying to decide what to wear, what to eat and so on — then give yourself a ten-second limit for making your decision. You'll find this a remarkably liberating exercise. Simply make up your mind to follow whatever thought sprang first into your mind. If your first instinct was to put on your red dress or blue suit, do just that. Don't waste mental energy thinking about it for an hour and trying on everything in your wardrobe. Similarly, if your first instinct tells you to order the mushrooms, order them. Don't spend half an hour worrying about whether to order the mushrooms or the melon. The chances are that your first, instinctive solution was probably the best. And with fairly minor decisions like these you haven't got much to lose anyway. The longer you spend worrying before coming to a conclusion, the greater the price you'll have to pay for defying your sense of intuition.

If you have a difficult problem to solve and you've spent hours worrying about it, give up and do something completely different. Take a walk or a warm, relaxing bath. Or sit down in front of the fire with an entertaining book. The chances are that the best solution will be quite clear to you after an interval of an hour or so. Your subconscious mind will have continued to work on the problem and will have produced a solution for you.

When you're looking for a solution to a major problem, try writing down a string of possible answers. Scribble them down just as fast as you possibly can. Do this for ten or fifteen minutes or so and then sit down and look at what you've produced. You'll find that many of the things you've written down look silly or downright stupid. These can be discarded straight away. But many of the others will be useful. One of your jottings will very probably be the solution you are looking for.

Learn to listen to your instincts. Don't always fight your feelings. If you always fight your instincts you will never be comfortable.

35. I have learned that just as there is never a good time for a light bulb to go 'phut' so now is always the most difficult time to make a decision.

36. I have learned not to waste my life sitting on committees or going to meetings.

I haven't been to a meeting, or sat on a committee, for nearly 40 years and my life has been the better for it.

Most people fill their lives with pointless social clutter. They go to meetings which make no difference to anything. They watch television programmes for no very good reason other than that they have been broadcast. They go to parties, dinners and power breakfasts because they have been asked or because other people expect them to attend. These things take so much time, so many hours that will never return, but offer so little real reward.

I have no doubt that I would have been far more commercially successful as a writer if I had spent more time attending meetings and sipping white wine with agents, publishers and journalists. But I very much doubt if I would have been happier.

37. I have learned that money provides freedom and independence.

Money can give you the opportunity to say 'No' when you want to say 'No'. Money can give you a voice.

38. I have learned that diversification is one of the basic watchwords for investment.

'Don't put all your eggs in one basket,' is a sensible piece of advice. But you can, as always, have too much of a good thing.

If you invest in everything available then dealing costs and management costs and taxes and so on will decimate your profits. And any profits you make from good investments will be lost among the losses you make from your not-such-good investments. The moral is a simple one: if you think you've found a good investment idea, put a decent sized chunk of your money into it so that, if you're proved right, the profits will make an appreciable difference to your life.

'As time goes on, I get more and more convinced that the right method in investment is to put fairly large sums into enterprises which one thinks one knows something about and in the management of which one thoroughly believes,' said John Maynard Keynes. 'It is a mistake to think that one limits one's risk by spreading too much between enterprises about which one knows little and has no reason for special confidence...One's knowledge and experience are definitely limited and there are seldom more than two or three enterprises at any given time in which I personally feel myself entitled to put full confidence.'

39. I have learned that we ask ourselves 'Why?' too infrequently. It's the best and simplest question in the world.

'It is not enough to be busy,' said Henry David Thoreau. 'The question is: what are you busy about?'

Why do you work so hard? Why are you trying to make money? Why do you buy the things you buy? Why do you do what you do? Why does any of it matter? Why do you seek power? Why do you want this or that experience?

Most people ask themselves 'Why?' far too infrequently.

We live in a workaholic culture where most of us take on far too many commitments — many of which have no real value — simply because we feel we should.

For example, many car owners wash their motor vehicles once a week. They devote several hours of a weekend morning to this task. I wonder how many of them ever ask themselves why they are doing this — and whether the price they are paying (in terms of time, effort and money) is worth the dividend.

I can think of several possible reasons (other than the fact that it is merely a long established habit).

a) Because if a car is washed regularly it will fetch a better price when it is sold

b) Because a clean and shiny car is more likely to impress people

c) Because it is fun

Now, if a man gets pleasure from washing his car then that is fine. It is rather sad but I wouldn't dream of discouraging him. In fact, I would be happy for him to pop round on Sunday morning and wash my car too if it would give him pleasure.

But, if he chooses either of the other two reasons then I would encourage him to think hard about the way he is spending his time.

Let's concentrate on answer a) to begin with: the hope that by washing his car regularly he will be able to get a better price for it when he comes to sell it.

If he washes the car once a week and spends three hours on the task that is approximately 150 hours a year. In three years (the average time for which a car is likely to be kept) that is 450 hours.

Now, work out how much more you think a regularly washed car is likely to fetch when it is sold and subtract the cost of washing and polishing materials. This is figure A.

Then take the total number of hours spent on cleaning the car in between purchasing it and selling it. This is figure B.

Finally, divide figure A by figure B to obtain the hourly rate you are effectively paying yourself for car cleaning.

You will, I suspect, be horrified to discover just how little it is.

Now, let's turn to answer b).

What is the point of spending hours every week washing a car simply so that people you don't know, and will probably never meet, will be impressed?

Is this really the best use of your time?

It is possible to apply this simple questioning to just about everything you do.

It is even possible to apply it to work itself.

Many men (and a growing number of women) do not seem to realise that they are caught on a treadmill which is taking them absolutely nowhere.

They could completely or partly retire and live very comfortably on what they have already made. But they don't.

If they were working because they enjoyed their work that would be understandable.

But how many men or women can honestly say that they thoroughly enjoy their work?

Many working men and women are pushing themselves for no reason; they are engaged in a race where the grave is the only goal and a headstone the only prize. They sacrifice their personal lives for work from which they obtain little or no satisfaction. The only goal is making money. The money is the prize, the glory, the passion and the purpose.

And the money making ritual continues because people don't ask themselves: 'Why?' and 'So what?'

Ask yourself 'Why?' you do everything you do.

Is it for applause and public approbation? Is it because you have an urgent need to say something? Is it because you want to make money for some specific purpose? Is it because you believe that you know what is right and what is wrong? Is it because you want to right a wrong? Is it because the incompetence and dishonesty of others has inspired you to action?

Not until you know why you do something will you be able to do it effectively. Why settle for less life and less control over your time than you could have? (And remember to ask yourself what happened to the dreams you had when you were 16-years-old.)

Remember that you are now enjoying tomorrow's good old days. You should do whatever you can to make each day the best day of your life. When you get to the end of your life you should be able to look back and say: 'I gave it my best shot!'

Make sure you are doing everything you can with your life. Ask yourself why you are doing something and you may find yourself surprised by the answer. Ask yourself 'Why?' and 'So what?' whenever you plan to do something.

The answers you get may change your life.

Why do you want a better job? Why do you want to save money? Why do you want to move house? Why do you want to buy a holiday home?

Only when you ask yourself 'Why?' will you know what you really need and what you are prepared to do for it.

Most people earn and spend without ever asking themselves 'Why?' They blindly sell their time (which is the same as selling their lives) for money which they spend on things they neither want nor need. Ask yourself 'Why?' more often and you will learn more about yourself and what you are doing.

But be warned. Asking yourself this simple question can be unnerving.

You may get answers.

And if you have been going through life for years without knowing where you were headed (or why) then you may find the answers you get rather startling.

40. I have learned to expect the unexpected.

However much you know, you will never know more than a tiny percentage of the relevant facts. The only constant in our lives is change. And the only thing that will always happen is the unexpected.

The things you are expecting hardly ever happen (and because you are expecting them they are probably already discounted). It is the things you aren't expecting which will change your life.

Always leave space in your life for the unexpected. If you fill your days then you will always be under intolerable stress because there will always be crises and you will always struggle to find time to deal with them.

It is the unexpected things that will affect your life most dramatically. The events you are expecting will probably have a relatively mild effect. Unexpected, small incidents can often produce a quite disproportionate response.

41. I have learned that anyone who works for the Government, the council or a company which has branches is one of 'them'. And should always be regarded as such.

42. I have learned not to expect the authorities to protect me.

They will not. I have learned not to expect compensation when I have been deceived. And I have learned not to waste too much of my life complaining through official complaints procedures.

Official complaints systems are designed to protect officials from complainants. Accountability is no longer a recognised concept among those employed by the State to provide services for the general public.

Don't use their complaints systems. Their complaints systems exist to protect them. In the NHS, for example, the complaints processes seem to me designed to protect NHS employees, rather than to protect the interests of patients. And within any large organisation the complaints system is 'theirs'. The employees know how the system works; they understand it; they know how to use it and they do not fear it. I honestly don't think it is worthwhile bothering to complain if you are going to use the official system. If you complain 'their' way then you will probably end up with your original unhappiness compounded by frustration and a sense of great injustice.

It is much better to use outside complaints procedures. Make a complaint to the press. Or use the Human Rights Act. It is very easy for bureaucrats and administrators to fall foul of the Human Rights Act and it is my experience that most public employees are terrified of the Act.

If you use your imagination when complaining you may find that even the most aggressive, unpleasant tyrant will become vulnerable.

43. Learn, and be aware of, the Human Rights Act.

Although it is frequently abused (usually by lawyers representing thieves, murderers and objectionable ne'er do wells from many sources) this is the only recently enacted piece of legislation which serves to protect the individual against the State.

The Human Rights Act has been used by terrorists, criminals, and illegal asylum seekers and a whole host of others. It has been used by gypsies and travellers to enable them to breach planning laws.

It is, so we are told, the Human Rights Act which is responsible for much of the politically-correct nonsense which now besieges our society. It is the Human Rights Act which explains much of the blatant injustice in our society.

There is little doubt that there are few things which have damaged the very fabric of English society more than the Human Rights Act.

But everyone — even white, middle class English folk — can use the Human Rights Act. That is the whole point of it.

I have printed below a summary of the articles of the Human Rights Act. It shouldn't take you too long to see how you too can take advantage of this probably well-meaning but impractical legislation. The best advertisement for its usefulness is the fact that you only have to mention the words 'human', 'rights', 'act', in succession to see bureaucrats and civil servants wilt and cabinet ministers shiver and pale.

At the end of the list of 'Articles' I have added a list of protocols (later additions to the Convention). If you read through these carefully I feel sure that you may find ways to take advantage of some of these 'rights' too. (Ironically, I consider that much of the EU's own legislation is in breach of the Human Rights legislation.)

Article l: (is the introduction to the Act).

Article 2: Right to Life.

> You have the absolute right to have your life protected by law. There are only certain very limited circumstances where it is acceptable for the State to take away someone's life, e.g. if a police officer acts justifiably in self-

defence.

Article 3: Prohibition of Torture

You have the absolute right not to be tortured or subjected to treatment or punishment which is inhuman or degrading.

Article 4: Prohibition of Slavery and Forced Labour

You have the absolute right not to be treated as a slave or forced to perform certain kinds of labour.

Article 5: Right To Liberty And Security

You have the right not to be deprived of your liberty — 'arrested or detained' — except in limited cases specified in the Article (e.g. where you are suspected or convicted of committing a crime) and where this is justified by a clear legal procedure.

Article 6: Right To A Fair Trial

You have the right to a fair and public hearing within a reasonable period of time. This applies to both criminal charges against you, or in sorting out cases concerning your civil rights and obligations. Hearings must be by an independent and impartial tribunal established by law. It is possible to exclude the public from the hearing (though not the judgement) if that is necessary to protect things like national security or public order. If it is a criminal charge you are presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law and have certain guaranteed rights to defend yourself.

Article 7: *No Punishment Without Law*

You normally have the right not to be found guilty of an offence arising out of actions which at the time you committed them were not criminal. You are also protected against later increases in the possible sentence for an offence.

Article 8: Right To Respect For Private And Family Life

You have the right to respect for your private and family life, your home and your correspondence. This right can only be restricted in specified circumstances (such as protecting the public health or safety, preventing crime and protecting the rights of others.)

Article 9: Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion

You are free to hold a broad range of views, beliefs and thoughts, as well as religious faith. Limitations are permitted only in specified circumstances (such as protecting the public health or safety, preventing crime and protecting the rights of others).

Article 10: Freedom of Expression

You have the right to hold opinions and express your views on your own or in a group. This applies even if they are unpopular or disturbing. This right can only be restricted in specified circumstances (such as protecting the public health or safety, preventing crime and protecting the rights of others).

Article 11: Freedom of Assembly and Association

You have the right to assemble with other people in a peaceful way. You also have the right to associate with people, which can include the right to form a trade union. These rights can only be restricted in specified circumstances (such as protecting the public health or safety, preventing crime and protecting the rights of others).

Article 12: Right To Marry

Men and women have the right to marry and start a family. The national law will still govern how and at what age this can take place.

Article 13: There is no article 13.

Article 14: Prohibition of Discrimination

In the application of the Convention rights, you have the right not to be treated differently because of your race, religion, sex, political views or any other status, unless this can be justified objectively. Everyone must have equal access to Convention rights, whatever their status.

Article 1 of Protocol 1: Protection of Property

You have the right to the peaceful enjoyment of your possessions. Public authorities cannot usually interfere with things you own or the way you use them except in specified limited circumstances.

Article 2 of Protocol 1: Right To Education

You have the right not to be denied access to the educational system.

Article 3 of Protocol 1: Right To Free Elections

Elections for members of the legislative body (e.g. Parliament) must be free and fair and take place by secret ballot. Some qualifications may be imposed on those that are eligible to vote (e.g. a minimum age).

Articles 1 and 2 of Protocol 6: Abolition of the Death Penalty

These provisions abolish the death penalty. There can be limited exceptions in times of war but only in accordance with clearly specified laws.

The Human Rights Act must be obeyed by all public authorities (Government Ministers, civil servants, your local authority, your health authority and agencies such as the police, the courts and private companies when carrying out public functions). All new laws must fit in with your rights under the Human Rights Act. (Worryingly, the police and the politicians don't always seem to understand their legal obligations. Human rights judges have called for an end to the policy of the police holding onto DNA samples from citizens arrested but never convicted of any offence. The judges said that storing such information breached privacy rights. The police have, however, been allowed by the Government to continue collecting and storing DNA samples and to resist requests to have them deleted.)

One of the specific rights given by the Human Rights Act is the fundamental right to assembly — a right to meet with others for whatever reason you like (as long as it is lawful). If the police or public authorities are thinking of banning a demonstration or restricting marches they cannot impose a blanket ban. They cannot go further than is necessary to guard against the expected risks to others.

44. I have learned that it is not wise to entrust money to companies which are dependent upon the British Government for survival.

It is my belief that in future companies which are dependent upon the Government will not do well. Financial commentators claim that in a recession it is safe to invest money in companies which rely on Government patronage. In theory this makes sense. In a well-run country the Government would endeavour to limit the depth of the recession by spending money on building roads, schools and hospitals. But Britain is not (and has not been) a well-run country. The country is darned near bankrupt. The Government may want to spend loads of money on repairing old bits of infrastructure, and building new bits. But it simply doesn't have the money to do this. The next decade is, I fear, going to be fairly gloomy (and steadily become gloomier) for companies which rely entirely on Government patronage.

45. I have learned that doctors and nurses know surprisingly little about staying healthy.

Doctors have never taken much interest in preventive medicine. This, I'm afraid, is because they have little (or, rather, no) financial interest in keeping their patients healthy. Except in China (where doctors were once paid only for as long as their patients stayed well) doctors have always earned their money out of diagnosing and curing illness. When you earn money out of making people healthy when they are ill, keeping them healthy makes no financial sense at all.

46. I have learned to back my own judgement.

No one knows better than you do what is happening to the economy or the nation or the world. Mix a little common sense (that rarest of all commodities) in with your judgement and the chances are that your guesses will be better educated, and more accurate, than anyone else's.

There is no one more interested in your financial security than you.

It is not difficult to take control of your own financial future. And when you do make losses, make sure they are light and make sure you learn from them. Cut your losses and let your profits run. If you aren't prepared to take small losses you will probably have to accept big losses.

And, remember, you can gain even when you lose. If an investment goes wrong and you lose money, study what happened. Did you do something wrong? Were you just unlucky? Be brutally honest with yourself and you will learn from your losses.

47. I have learned that the Great British Pound (aka sterling) will remain in decline for some time.

Britain is the world's weakest western economy. (Technically, America is probably more bankrupt than Britain. But America has the world's reserve currency and Britain has a currency which will increasingly be seen as something of an embarrassment.)

For this reason I believe it is wise for me to buy shares in large, international companies which make most of their money outside the UK and make most of their money in a currency other than sterling.

48. I have learned that Britain's huge debts mean that interest rates are quite likely to soar in coming years.

The consequences will be devastating for many. Even those holding Government gilts will suffer because as interest rates rise so the value of gilts will fall. Pension fund companies which have stocked up on Government gilts, thinking them to be the safest form of investment, will be devastated.

Index-linked gilts (which provide some protection against inflation) are the ones I'm buying.

49. I have learned that governments print lots of new currency notes because it is an easy way to improve their exports.

This was a trick started in earnest by the Americans in the 1990's. It works because when you print more currency you lower the value of the stuff already in existence. And when the value of your currency falls when compared with the currencies of other countries your exports become cheaper.

All the world's major powers are now increasing their money supply. The Americans are increasing theirs massively. It is hardly surprising that the American dollar has been on a downward slide for years. This is not an accident. It is the American Government's deliberate policy. The dollar has lost more than seven eighths of its purchasing power over the last 60 years.

Of course, it isn't only the American dollar which has been destroyed by governments deliberately printing more money. The British Government has for years been printing huge amounts of new money. The European Bank has done the same. The British Pound, the Euro and even the once powerful Swiss Franc have all lost value in recent years. When I wrote this there was $40 trillion worth of paper money in the world and $50 trillion worth of bonds. A trillion is a million million or a thousand billion. I have no doubt that by the time you read this the numbers will be much, much higher.

Printing more money causes inflation, a liquidity bubble and absurd overvaluations in almost every market — from paintings to shares to houses.

50. I have learned to always use a Post Office box as a mailing address.

This reduces the number of people who have access to my home address. If anyone questions this (and they sometimes do) I point out that banks and HM Revenue and Customs will accept a PO Box address. And I point out that many official bodies and large companies themselves use a PO Box address. A very snotty banker once told me that only disreputable people used PO Boxes. I said I would write to his Head Office to complain about his remark. I asked him for the address. With his voice rich with embarrassment he then gave me a PO Box address (as I knew he would).

51. I have learned that the sector in which I choose to invest is more important than the share I choose to buy.

If retail shares do well then most retail shares usually go up. If banks do badly then most banking shares tend to fall together. If I believe that investing in oil will give me good profits then I invest in several large oil companies and several small ones.

Many investors spend a lot of their time trying to time the market or trying to pick stocks. A study in 1986 by Gary Brinson and colleagues called *The Determinants of Portfolio Performance* involved an analysis of 91 pension funds. The aim was to find out what decided performance most: asset allocation, stock-picking, market timing or costs.

The results showed that asset allocation (between stocks, bonds and cash) decided 94% of performance. Stock picking and market timing had no useful effect. The busiest fund managers seemed to harm their results by too much action (partly because trading involves costs).

The skill, it seems, lies not in choosing particular companies or properties to invest in, but in picking asset classes and investment cycles. If you invest at a time when the stock market is going up then it doesn't terribly much matter which shares you pick — most of them will go up. But if you invest at a time when the market is going down then most of the shares you choose will fall.

52. I have learned not to believe anyone who tells me that stock markets are efficient or logical.

They are neither. There was never much logic to the financial markets. Today, there is none whatsoever. Markets have always been influenced by two emotions: fear and greed. This has never been the case more than it is now. Stock markets are always assumed to be efficient. And they are also assumed to be ahead of the game. But they are neither. Stock markets are ruled by emotions.

53. I have learned that governments lie about inflation.

Governments tell two lies about inflation. First, they claim that inflation is a rise in prices which is outside their control and which they are struggling to hold back. This is the first lie. Inflation is caused by governments printing more money, and devaluing the stuff that is already in existence. If the government doubles the amount of currency in circulation then it halves the value of the money that's already out there. And it is that which then pushes up prices. So governments cause inflation. The second he is the size of the problem. Inflation is much higher than they say it is.

The official figures exclude luxuries such as housing, energy and food. Education, pensions and healthcare are also routinely omitted — even though these are, for many people, the biggest costs in their budget. It is for this reason that people whose income is inflation-linked (people with inflation-linked pensions for example) find life difficult. And people whose incomes rise according to the official inflation figures also suffer. In order to retain your spending power (and your quality of life) you need to make much more than official inflation levels from your investments — otherwise your capital is shrinking. So if you don't take risks you are going to become poorer.

When the official level of inflation is 5% the real level of inflation will be at least double that. This means that if you are earning less than 10% a year on your investments you are losing money. With a lower official level of 2.5%, and an unofficial level of 5%, any increase in your capital of less than 5% means that you are losing money.

All this means that unless you are very rich, or are prepared to accept a deteriorating standard of living, you have to take some chances with your capital. Government policy means that you really don't have much choice.

Here are some things you should know about inflation:

1. Inflation was kept down at the end of the 20th century because we were importing cheap stuff from China. Cheap television sets, cheap bras and cheap shoes. This helped enormously in the 1980's and 1990's. It meant that we could buy more stuff with the money we had in our pockets and our bank accounts. But now the Chinese workers want higher wages. They want motor cars and they want television sets of their own.

2. The rate of inflation has a vital influence on the economy. Rising inflation means that interest rates have to go up. Rising inflation also means that monetary policy must be tightened. Falling inflation, on the other hand, results in lower interest rates and a booming economy. If inflation is not considered a threat, central bankers can reduce interest rates in order to stimulate a stagnant economy. But if inflation *is* considered a threat, central bankers will usually keep interest rates fairly high because they will worry that lower interest rates will over-stimulate the economy and produce more inflation. (Governments constantly claim to have found the way to conquer the 'boom and bust' economy. They are lying, of course.) The bull market of the late 1980's and 1990's followed the high inflation rates and big bear of the 1970's. Falling inflation rates helped drive the powerful bull markets of the 1980's and 1990's. As inflation fell and productivity went up (as a result of new technology and as China and India started manufacturing things) so we did better and better. Cheapish oil made everything very easy. Those were the days when investors got, and learned to expect as normal, returns of 15% a year on their equity investments. If you wanted your money to grow there was no other game in town. Just buy shares and sit back and wait. And you didn't have to wait long.

3. In the middle of the 20th century, governments undermined the value of our money (and discouraged savings) by printing too many banknotes. The more money in circulation, the less the money is worth. Today, the amount of money in circulation (in the form of real notes) is only a tiny amount of the money available. Banks are now creating money by lending it as a debt (with interest attached, of course) and it is that practice which has really pushed up inflation. The whole problem started when bankers and politicians got rid of gold as a basis for our currencies. When governments could only print as much currency as they had gold the politicians were restrained. When the link with gold was abolished governments were free to print as much money as they wanted. Then they made things even worse by using computers to create seemingly endless supplies of 'imaginary' money. I recently bought a birthday card for my wife which cost more than I paid for my first car forty years ago. That's inflation. Inflation really does eat away at savings. If you had put £1,000,000 in a box under your bed 40 years ago it would now have a purchasing power of £77,000.

4. Paradoxically, politicians and central bankers love some inflation. The reason is simple. When the value of money goes down a little bit (which is what happens in inflation — you can buy less for your unit of currency) debts get washed away. If you are a government with huge debts then inflation is a wonderful thing. It helps diminish the value of your debts as time goes by. (By the same principle, inflation helps reduce the value of debt for everyone else, too.)

5. Rising commodity prices usually result in a rise in inflation in countries which have to import commodities. Countries which produce the commodities which are rising in value usually do well. I am very long-term bullish

about the price of oil and other commodities (commodities of all sorts are running out and the demand for them is rising inexorably). I therefore believe that high inflation is likely to be a consistent problem in countries such as Britain (which rely on importing commodities such as oil). I also believe that countries such as Canada and Australia (which produce huge quantities of essential commodities) are likely to have a relatively strong future.

6. People think they are better off than they were twenty years ago because they earn more money. But, in reality, most are not better off because they can buy less with their money today than they were able to buy decades ago. When inflation soars it enables workers to have pay rises without the pay rises actually costing anything. But people aren't really better off.

7. Falsifying the inflation figures means that inflation proofed salaries and pensions paid by the Government can be increased by a much smaller figure than would be necessary if they were being increased by the real level of inflation.

8. Officially, inflation in the UK for the last 30 years has averaged 5.3% a year. That means that if you had money invested for that period and your after tax income was less than 5.3%, you were losing money. If you are a 40% taxpayer it's quite difficult to get an after tax income of 5.3% without taking considerable risks.

9. Governments use astonishing little tricks such as including hedonic adjustments and rental-equivalent home pricing and using geometric averaging when working out inflation figures. Geometric averaging means that if the basket of goodies measured to find the inflation figure contains one item which goes up 10% and another which goes down 10% the effect on the basket isn't 0% (as you might imagine) but a 1% fall. Governments produce this miracle of accounting by multiplying 110 (the figure obtained because of the 10% rise) by 90 (the figure obtained because of the 10% fall). This gives a total of 99. And, lo, a fall in inflation (and the cost of living) of 1%. Only politicians and economists can do this. Hedonic adjustments enable politicians to take advantage of progress to keep inflation low. If you bought a computer a year ago for £1,000 and you replace it with a computer which cost £1,500 but is 10 times as fast, then the computer is registered by the Government as costing less, even though in reality it cost more. And rental-equivalent home pricing? That's a trick they use to minimise the effect of rising house prices. If your home is now worth twice as much as it was a few years ago but the rent you would have to pay has only gone up by half then the inflation figure is deemed to be a half. The real rise in the cost of the home is ignored. All these utterly, deplorably dishonest inventions were designed to enable politicians to lie and cheat the voters. There are more tricks, (for example when they measure gross domestic product they tend to ignore the fact that the population has grown and that the per capita GDP — the figure that really matters — is probably going in the other direction) but I'm getting weary and I suspect you are too. Unravelling the lies they tell can be tiresome work. The people we hire to work for us have, as one, become the 'them' we have always feared.

10. Inflation is an invisible tax. Although it is a boon for borrowers (the £250,000 borrowed to buy a house shrinks as a result of inflation) it is a curse for savers (the £250,000 pension fund shrinks in value and purchasing power as a result of inflation). Pensioners and others on a fixed income lose out because their buying power is constantly being eroded. Earners whose income rise doesn't match inflation (the real figure, rather than the false 'official' figure) also lose out. They may seem to be getting richer, as their income grows, but in reality they will be getting poorer. And everyone who pays tax will lose out. Tax thresholds do not usually rise with inflation. So, for example, stamp duty on house purchases affects an increasing number of people as house prices rise and the stamp duty thresholds remain the same. And since the point at which taxpayers find themselves liable for higher rates of tax tends to stay the same (or to rise nowhere near as much as inflation) the number of people paying higher tax rates is rising rapidly.

54. I have learned that there is no such thing as a safe investment.

If anyone tells you that an investment is 'safe' they are lying. Many so-called safe investments turn out to be the very opposite of safe. People who put their pension savings into Equitable Life pension funds found that 'safe' doesn't always mean quite what they thought it meant. Similarly, investors who bought Zero Dividend Preference Shares or Building Society Permanent Interest Bearing Shares found that 'safe' can sometimes be a shortened version of 'a good way to lose your money'.

And keeping your money in cash won't protect you. I believe that inflation is, in the future, likely to reach high levels. If inflation hits 20% then you will need to receive interest payments of 20% for your money just to keep pace with inflation.

Property is often regarded as a 'safe' investment. But I believe that property prices will fall dramatically. When petrol hits £50 a gallon (on its way ever upwards) and a loaf of bread costs £5 most people will be more concerned with staying alive than in investing in a larger house, a holiday home or a buy-to-let property.

I believe that many shares will prove to be unsafe too. Retailers (including supermarkets) will be hard hit when the oil price rises. Many transport companies, airlines, travel companies, computer companies, electrical goods suppliers and builders will disappear. So will mobile telephone companies and many banks. Any large company which depends on importing or exporting its products will be at risk. Estate agents are doomed as are most building companies and property companies. Clothing and shoe companies which rely on imports will be hard hit as will cosmetic companies and jewellers. Chemical companies will be in dire trouble.

Bonds will be dangerous too. If interest rates rise then bond prices will fall (since the yield must rise to keep the bonds attractive to investors).

55. I have learned to keep a healthy wodge of cash available.

Who knows when the roof is going to start leaking, the car is going to fall apart or the taxman is going to send an unexpected demand for money? Who knows when the banks will shut for a month or when the Government will restrict the amount of money you are allowed to take out of your account. (If you don’t think that these things could happen then you haven’t been paying attention.) If you have some cash you can deal with these problems. If you don’t have any cash available you may have to sell investments at a terrible time.

56. I have learned that above average investment returns are usually a reward for taking risks.

Investors who do particularly well are usually taking big risks. They may do well for several years. But then they may have a bad year. In the long run they will be successful investors only if their good years far outweigh their bad years.

57. I have learned that investments should be for the long-term.

Unless there has been a major event causing you to rethink the reason for buying and continuing to hold you should not change your portfolio too often. Prices of shares and other investments move on a daily basis. But these movements are often irrelevant. However, it is important to understand that things move faster than they used to and although ‘buy and hold’ used to be a wise philosophy it is an approach which needs to be tempered. Consumer tastes, markets, geopolitical forces and technologies change — all these things mean that buying and holding any investment can be dangerous. But none of that alters the fact that if you buy and sell too frequently your profits will be decimated by dealing costs and by taxes.

58. I have learned that everything is going to get worse and nothing is going to be as good as it is today.

These, believe it not, are tomorrow’s good old days.

59. I have learned that unhappy memories can often cause much mental (and even physical) pain.

But you can use the power of your imagination to help you get rid of unhappy memories from the past.

Here is what you do: think of the most embarrassing experience of your life; something that still haunts you. Try to get a clear picture of the incident in your mind. And then restructure the memory the way you would like it to have happened — and the way you would like to remember it.

For example, if you remember being asked to speak in public and making a complete fool of yourself simply rearrange your memory! Try to remember as much as you can about the incident. Remember the room in which it took place. Remember the weather outside. And the people who were present. And, then, instead of ‘seeing’ yourself looking a fool try to ‘see’ yourself speaking fluently and impressively and being rewarded with an ovation. Rerun your ‘new’ version of that once embarrassing memory once or twice every day for a week. After seven days the ‘new’ version will have started to replace the old, original, embarrassing version in your head. You will have rewritten history and started to erase an unhappy memory from your mind.

You can do this as often as you like — and get rid of all your old, embarrassing memories.

60. I have learned not to expect justice from the judiciary.

Those who expect justice are frequently disappointed. Justice and the law are widely separated.

61. I have learned that businesses are becoming outdated faster than ever.

There is, for example, no future in the airline industry or the newspaper industry. If you are contemplating starting a business, joining one or investing in one then you should try to understand how well that business will thrive during the coming years.

61. I have learned how to cut my cancer risk by 80%.

Doctors don’t spend much time telling their patients how to avoid cancer — but they do spend enormous amounts of time, energy and money on treating cancer.

Astonishingly, doctors now know what causes 80% of all cancers. It is my view that you should be able to reduce your cancer risk by 80% by avoiding those 'triggers' which are known to be responsible for causing cancer.

Here is my advice:

1. Don't smoke tobacco and keep away from other people who smoke tobacco.
2. Cut your consumption of fatty food.
3. Do not eat meat.
4. Eat plenty of well-washed fresh fruit and vegetables.
5. Eat plenty of fibre and whole grain foods.
6. Do not have any unnecessary X-rays.
7. Do not spend long periods of time in the sun.
8. Try not to live underneath or close to electricity power lines or close to an electricity supply station. Do not sleep or sit too close to electrical appliances.
9. Avoid foods which contain large quantities of additives.
10. Keep your weight under control.
11. Minimise your consumption of alcohol.
12. Avoid smoked, salt cured, salt pickled or barbecued foods.

63. I have learned that governments and bureaucrats aren't interested in facts or common sense.

Their policies are largely devised by, and for the benefit of, lobbyists and vested interests.

64. I have learned that most people take too many antibiotics and that doctors prescribe them recklessly.

When antibiotics — drugs such as penicillin — were first introduced in the 1930's they gave doctors a chance to kill the bacteria causing infections and to save the lives of patients who would otherwise have died of infections such as pneumonia. Antibiotics were regarded as genuine life-savers; heralding a revolution in health care.

Although it is certainly true that the impact made by antibiotics has been exaggerated (many of the diseases which are caused by organisms which are susceptible to antibiotics were on the decline before the antibiotics were introduced) these drugs are undoubtedly of considerable value.

The problem is that although doctors are aware of the advantages of these drugs (if they are in any doubt the drug companies will frequently remind them) they seem unaware of the hazards associated with their unnecessary use.

If you have a serious or troublesome infection — bronchitis, sore throat or cystitis for example — the chances are high that your doctor will prescribe an antibiotic.

If you are innocent and naive you might imagine that the prescribing of an antibiotic will have been done scientifically and that your doctor, as a man or woman of science, will have carefully chosen a drug specifically designed to eradicate the type of bug causing your infection and prescribed for precisely the right number of days.

You would, however, be quite wrong to assume that doctors know what they are doing when they prescribe antibiotics. Antibiotics are powerful drugs.

They do save lives. But, in general, they are prescribed with neither sound logic nor scientific understanding. The prescribing of antibiotics is a virtually random exercise. The average tapioca-brained traffic warden could prescribe them with as much sense and understanding as the average doctor. Visit one doctor with cystitis and she will give you enough antibiotics to last you for five days. Visit the doctor next door, complaining of exactly the same symptoms, and he may prescribe the same antibiotic but give you enough pills to last for seven days. And visit a third doctor and she may give you pills to last for ten or even fourteen days. Where, in the name of Areolus Phillipus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, is the sense in any of this?

This bizarre situation occurs not because doctors haven't bothered to learn how to prescribe antibiotics but because no one knows how antibiotics should be prescribed. Astonishingly, no tests have ever been done to find out for precisely how long antibiotics should be given. Research scientists have been far too busy enjoying themselves doing unspeakable things to monkeys, cats and puppies to bother doing such useful or practical research.

All that is bad enough. But it isn't the end of the horror story. For although scientists know which antibiotics should be used to combat which bugs the evidence shows that the selection of a drug to prescribe is generally done with the sort of scientific judgement the average six-year-old might apply when picking a coloured sweet out of a box.

As any regular surgery goer will know, there are scores of antibiotics available. Some of these pills are simply variations on profitable themes. But there are some important differences between many of these pills. Drugs are designed to combat specific types of infection. However, most doctors don't usually bother to try to match antibiotics with bugs; instead they simply write out a prescription for any old drug. They tend to choose a drug because they like the name — or can spell it — rather than because it is appropriate.

The end result is that although you might think that the antibiotic you are prescribed has been chosen specifically for your infection you would probably be wrong. Your doctor will have probably simply picked a name at random. She is more likely to prescribe a drug because its name appears on the free disposable pen she happens to be holding than because she knows that it is the best and most suitable drug to kill the bug with which you are infected. Worse still, most doctors are so darned potty that they happily prescribe antibiotics for virus infections even though viruses are not susceptible to antibiotic therapy.

Today, one in six of the prescriptions doctors write is for an antibiotic and there are at least 100 preparations available for doctors to choose from. Sadly, there is no doubt that most of the prescriptions which are written for antibiotics are unnecessary. Many patients are suffering from viral infections which are not susceptible to antibiotics, and others would get better by themselves without any drug being prescribed. Various independent experts who have studied the use of antibiotics claim that between 50-90% of the prescriptions written for antibiotics are unnecessary.

To a certain extent doctors over-prescribe because they like to do something when faced with a patient — and prescribing a drug is virtually the only thing most of them can do. To some extent prescribing a drug is a defence against any possible future charge of negligence (on the basis that if the patient dies it is better to have done something than to have done nothing).

But the main reason for the over-prescribing of antibiotics is, without doubt, the fact that too many doctors are under the influence of the drug companies.

The over-prescribing of antibiotics would not matter too much if these drugs were harmless, and if there were no other hazards associated with their use. But antibiotics are certainly not harmless. I believe that antibiotics kill thousands of patients a year and if up to nine out of ten prescriptions for antibiotics are unnecessary then it is not unreasonable to assume that up to nine out of ten of those deaths are unnecessary too.

And antibiotics don't only kill patients. The unnecessary and excessive use of antibiotics causes allergy reactions, side effects and a huge variety of serious complications.

There is also the very real hazard that by overusing antibiotics doctors are enabling bacteria to develop immunity to these potentially life-saving drugs. There is now no doubt that many of our most useful drugs have been devalued by overuse and are no longer effective.

If your doctor prescribes an antibiotic for you don't be afraid to ask him whether you really need it. He may simply be prescribing the antibiotic because he thinks you will be disappointed if you don't get one.

The over-prescribing of antibiotics is not a new phenomenon.

In 1975, in my first book, *The Medicine Men,* I pointed out that one huge survey had shown that only one third of the patients given antibiotics had infections at all. Other surveys, I explained, had shown that even when patients do have an infection the antibiotic prescribed is usually the wrong one.

Nothing has improved since then. Today's doctors are just as criminally inept as their predecessors were. And members of the medical profession still treat me like a pariah for daring to expose these professional shortcomings.

But it is now clear that the warning about antibiotics which I gave decades ago was absolutely accurate. The careless, inaccurate and inappropriate prescribing of antibiotics by thousands of ignorant and careless doctors is one of the main reasons why a growing number of bugs are resistant to antibiotic therapy. Many once powerful drugs no longer work because doctors have handed them out like sweeties and bugs have been given the chance to grow stronger and more resistant to treatment. An ever-increasing number of patients are dying because antibiotics no longer work as well as they used to work.

During the last twenty five yean I have made scores of predictions about health matters. Most of those predictions were laughed at by the medical establishment when I first made them. Nearly all of them have already come true.

I now add another prediction: infectious diseases will soon become one of the most feared and important causes of death — just as they were before the development of antibiotics. This tragic state of affairs will be the fault of those doctors who have overprescribed these drugs.

65. I have learned not to entrust anything I value to the Royal Mail.

I certainly don't use the ordinary post for truly sensitive or valuable documents. And I don't rely on the recorded delivery service. (The special delivery service is, I believe, the only reasonably acceptable way to send valuable documents through the post.) There are, it seems, an increasing number of crooks delivering or working with mail. Some of them probably got their jobs simply so that they could steal valuable items.

If you think I'm being unfair you should know that not even the Government trusts the Royal Mail with sensitive documents.

For example, the Passport Office doesn't use the Royal Mail to send out passports but chooses to use a courier. On the back of the envelope in which passports travel are the words: 'If delivered incorrectly please call (freephone number). Do not post in the Royal Mail.' These instructions are printed in red, capital letters.

And the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency tells drivers not to send debit card details through the post.

If I have something important to post I use a private carrier or courier and pay extra for insurance. If I do use the Royal Mail to deliver something important I use the special delivery service.

66. I have learned that repeat prescriptions are dangerous, and a major cause of serious illness.

A growing number of prescriptions (over half of all those written) are provided without there being any meeting between the doctor and the patient. The patient writes or telephones for a new supply of a specific drug and then, a day or so later, either collects or receives through the post the appropriate prescription.

This system of providing prescriptions 'on request' was originally designed to help patients suffering from chronic disorders such as diabetes, high blood pressure or epilepsy. Patients suffering from disorders which tend to vary very little over the months do not need daily, weekly or even monthly medical examinations but they may need regular supplies of drugs. For them to have to visit a doctor every week or two simply to obtain a prescription is clearly a waste of everyone's time. Doctors do not usually prescribe quantities of drugs likely to last more than four weeks since some drugs deteriorate if kept too long and most practitioners feel that it is unwise to allow any patient to keep excessively large quantities of drugs at home.

Unfortunately, repeat prescribing is not always restricted to patients with long-term problems requiring continuous medication. Patients who really should see a doctor (rather than simply continue taking tablets) sometimes ask for repeat prescriptions and, to the shame of the medical profession, not infrequently obtain them.

Many patients have become psychologically dependent upon sleeping tablets and tranquillisers because of the ease with which they have been able to obtain repeat prescriptions.

Arrangements for obtaining repeat prescriptions vary a good deal from one doctor's practice to another's. In some practices patients entitled to receive prescriptions are issued with cards on which the drugs which they are allowed to receive without any consultation are listed. There may be a limit on the number of prescriptions which the patient may obtain without being reviewed. In other practices the cards detailing drugs which can be provided on repeat prescriptions are kept with the patient's notes so that the receptionists, who usually write out repeat prescriptions, can check on drugs, and dosages, and make a note of the number of prescriptions used.

Theoretically, doctors signing prescriptions should check all the details, including specific points such as the dosages and quantities of drugs to be supplied, and general points such as the suitability of continuing with the treatment. In practice, many repeat prescriptions are signed with few or no checks being made. I have, in the past, obtained evidence showing that some doctors sign piles of virgin prescription forms and leave their receptionists to fill in the blanks. I have little doubt that this practice continues.

I suggest that patients receiving drugs on repeat prescriptions should always check that the tablets they receive match the tablets previously prescribed, and that any instructions on the bottle label match previous instructions. If there is any confusion or uncertainty then a telephone call should be made to the surgery.

As a general rule, I suggest that only patients who have established long-term clinical problems should obtain drugs on repeat prescriptions and they should visit the surgery at least once every six months to check that the medication does not need changing. Patients with short-term or acute conditions who need medication should always speak to a doctor.

Repeat prescriptions can be a convenience. But they can lead to drug misuse and eventual abuse — and to addiction and dependence. They can also lead to death.

67. I have learned that patients improve their chances of benefiting from a drug — and they also minimise the risk of problems — if they know what to expect (and if they understand what side effects they should expect).

You have a right to know what you are taking — and why. Don't be shy. Here are some questions you should ask your doctor:

1. What is this medicine for?

2. How long should I take it? Should I take it until the bottle is empty or until my symptoms have gone?

3. What should I do if I miss a dose?

4. What side effects should I particularly watch out for? Will the medicine make me drowsy?

5. Am I likely to need to take more when these have gone? Should I arrange another consultation?

6. Are there any foods I should avoid? Should I avoid alcohol? Should I take the medicine before, with or after meals?

7. How long will the medicine take to work — and how will I know that it is working?

Whenever your doctor gives you a drug to take it is vitally important that you watch out for side effects. Four out of ten people who are given drugs by their doctors will suffer uncomfortable, hazardous or even lethal side effects.

Drugs which are highly promoted when they are launched, but which are eventually shown to be totally useless, often cause illnesses far worse than the complaint for which they were prescribed. Far more people are killed by prescription drugs than are killed by illegal drugs such as heroin and cocaine. And as I have pointed out on many occasions no less than one in six hospital patients are there because they have been made ill by their doctor.

Perhaps the most convincing evidence of the failure of our current drug testing systems to protect patients lies in the number of drugs which have had to be withdrawn after they have been passed as 'safe' by the authorities. I know of over 80 drugs which have had to be withdrawn or restricted because they were considered to be too dangerous for widespread use. Some of these drugs were withdrawn after months. Others were taken off the market after being sold for years.

Can you imagine the outcry if testing methods were so inadequate that 80 types of motor car or 80 varieties of food had to be withdrawn because they were found to be unsafe?

Doctors, the drug industry and the Government all claim that nothing can be done to avoid this drug scandal. I don't believe this is true. If governments really wanted to protect patients there are many things they could do.

Since the end of the 1970's, I have argued that we need an international, computerised drug monitoring service — designed to make sure that doctors in one part of the world know when doctors in other countries have spotted problems. Astonishingly, no such system exists.

You might imagine that when a drug is withdrawn in one country other countries will take similar action. But you would be wrong. One drug that was officially withdrawn from the market in the USA and France was not officially withdrawn in the UK until five years later!

I believe that one of the main reasons for the international epidemic of drug-induced illness is the greed of the big international drug companies. They make a fortune out of making and selling drugs and their ruthlessness and levels of profit make the arms industry look like a church charity.

Governments could dramatically reduce the incidence of lethal, dangerous and uncomfortable side effects by insisting that drugs be extensively tested before being prescribed for millions of people around the world. At the moment drugs can be launched onto the mass market after relatively few tests have been done. The authorities admit that they don't know what side effects will be produced until a drug has been on the market for a while.

And patients would be far, far safer if drug companies were stopped from testing drugs on animals. Pharmaceutical companies love to test drugs on animals because they can't lose. If the animal tests show that the drug doesn't produce side effects in animals the company will proclaim the drug 'safe' and put it on the market. But if the animal tests show that the drug causes side effects the company will dismiss the results as irrelevant — and put the drug on the market anyway — 'because animals are different to people'.

If you have ever suffered unpleasant side effects the chances are high that the drug you were given was tested on animals. The evidence available now shows that animal experiments are so misleading and inaccurate that they result in many human deaths.

Despite the fact that one must hold the pharmaceutical industry directly responsible for most of the side effects (and deaths) caused by drugs there is no doubt that the number of problems could be reduced if patients were more aware of how best to protect themselves from side effects.

It is a sad fact that of all the drugs prescribed only a relatively small number are taken in the way that the prescriber originally intended them to be taken. Drugs are taken at the wrong time, they are taken too frequently and they are sometimes never taken out of the bottle at all.

It is important to remember that modern prescribed drugs are not only potentially effective but also powerful and potentially dangerous.

Here are some tips to help you minimise your risk of developing a side effect if you have to take a prescription drug.

* Some drugs can be stopped when symptoms cease. Others need to be taken as a complete course. A small number of drugs need to be taken continuously and a second prescription will have to be obtained before the first supply has run out. The patient who knows what his drug is for, why he is taking it and what the effect should be, will be more likely to know when a drug is to be stopped.

* If a drug has to be taken once a day, it is usually important that it is taken at the same time each day. If a drug has

to be taken twice a day it should usually be taken at intervals of 12 hours. A drug that needs to be taken three times a day should usually be taken at eight-hourly intervals and a drug that needs to be taken four times a day should usually be taken at six-hourly intervals. The day should be divided into suitable segments.

* Some drugs which may cause stomach problems are safer when taken with meals. Other drugs may not be absorbed properly if taken with food.

* A number of patients (particularly the elderly) are expected to remember to take dozens of pills a day. When a day's medication includes tablets to be taken twice daily, three times daily, mornings only and every four hours, mistakes are inevitable. If a patient needs to take a number of drugs a day mistakes can be minimised by preparing a daily chart on which the names and times of different drugs are marked. Such a chart will reduce the risk of a patient taking one dose twice or struggling to remember whether a particular pill has been taken yet.

* To avoid the risk of overdosage sleeping tablets should not be kept by the bedside. It is too easy for a half-asleep patient to mistakenly take extra tablets. In the case of a suspected overdose medical attention must be sought.

* Always follow any specific instructions that you have been given by your doctor. Read the label on your bottle of pills and take notice of what it says!

* When you're not using them drugs should be stored in a locked cupboard out of reach of children, in a room where the temperature will be fairly stable. The bathroom is probably the worst room in the house for storing medicines. Your bedroom — which probably has a more stable temperature — is much better.

* Never take drugs which were prescribed for someone else. Return all unused supplies of drugs to your pharmacist.

* It is wise to assume that all prescribed drugs can cause drowsiness. You shouldn't drive or operate machinery after taking a drug until you are sure that you are safe.

* Drugs do not mix well with alcohol. If you want to drink while taking drugs ask your doctor whether or not it will be safe.

* Do not take non-prescribed medicines while taking prescribed drugs unless your doctor has told you that you can.

* Do not stop taking drugs suddenly if you have been advised to take a full course. Ring your doctor for advice if you need to stop for any reason. Some drugs have to be stopped gradually rather than abruptly.

* Be on the look out for side effects and remember Coleman's First Law of Medicine: if you seem to develop new symptoms while taking a prescription drug then the chances are high that the new symptoms were caused by the treatment you are taking for your original symptoms.

* Report any side effects to your doctor — and ask him if he's going to report the side effects to the authorities. The vast majority of doctors never bother to report side effects — with the result that potentially hazardous drugs remain on the market for far longer than they should.

* If you need to see a doctor while taking a drug make sure he knows what you are taking — particularly if he intends to prescribe new treatment for you. Many drugs do not mix well together and may, indeed, react together in a dangerous way.

* Do not assume that a doctor you have seen in the past will remember what he prescribed for you on a previous occasion.

* Learn the names and purposes of the drugs you take. If you are not sure when to take the drugs that you have been given ask your doctor or the pharmacist. If you think you will forget the instructions you are given ask for them to be written down. The name of the drug should always appear on the container.

* Do not remove drugs from their proper containers except when you need them or if you are transferring them to a device intended to improve compliance.

* Try to see the same doctor as often as possible. If several doctors are prescribing for you there may be an increased risk of an interaction between drugs which do not mix well.

* Use drugs with care, but do use them when they are required. Doctors sometimes divide patients into two main groups: those who are willing to take drugs for any little symptom and who feel deprived if not offered a pharmacological solution to every ailment, and those who are unwilling to take drugs under any circumstances. Try not to fall into either of these extreme groups.

68. I have learned that it is important that patients do not allow their doctors to label them.

If, a few years ago, you went to see your doctor complaining that you felt miserable he would have probably prescribed a harmless tonic, chatted to you for twenty minutes and told you to try and get out and enjoy yourself a bit more.

Today, if you go to see your doctor and complain that you feel under the weather he will probably diagnose you as suffering from depression. There is an excellent chance that he will then start you on one of the many new powerful chemicals now available.

Until recently depression was a fairly uncommon disease.

But today depression is one of the fastest growing diseases in the world. And the boom in the diagnosis of depression has coincided with the development of special, new, expensive, chemical anti-depressants.

My fear is that the diagnosis of 'depression' is now often being made when patients are simply unhappy or generally fed up with their lives. And some of the new anti-depressant drugs may, I fear, prove to produce dangerous or nasty side effects.

It may well be true that a relatively small number of depressed patients can be helped by taking drugs.

But I believe that the amount of good that is being done by these powerful drugs could be far outweighed by the possible harm.

I have absolutely no doubt that there is more unhappiness in our society than there has ever been in any previous society but I strongly suspect that many of the patients diagnosed as suffering from 'depression' may well be 'sad' (and suffering from the toxic stress disorder which I call The Twenty First Century Blues) rather than clinically 'depressed', and may need help of a different kind.

I believe that instead of automatically dosing all their unhappy patients with powerful and potentially hazardous chemicals, and attempting to tackle a vague and ill-defined disease, doctors should be encouraging more of the sad, the despairing and the unhappy to try to tackle the specific causes of their unhappiness themselves. It can be done.

Depression is not the only disease which is said to be commoner today than it used to be.

Asthma is another disorder which is often said to affect more people now than in the past.

And arthritis is a third disease which is alleged to be getting commoner.

In my view the problem is not that these (and many other) diseases are necessarily becoming commoner, but that doctors are diagnosing them more often and more readily.

Take a mild wheeze into a doctor's surgery these days and the chances are that the doctor will tell you that you have asthma and that you must use an inhaler for the rest of your life.

Complain of an aching joint and you'll be labelled 'arthritic' — and given pills to take for the rest of your life.

As a result of this wild over-prescribing policy countless thousands of people who regard themselves as asthmatics, or arthritics are nothing of the sort. They have, in truth, merely exhibited minor, temporary symptoms which do not need long-term treatment.

The driving force behind this vast over-prescribing is, in my opinion, the ubiquitous drugs industry.

The drug companies want doctors to prescribe more medicines (for the simple reason that prescribing more pills pushes up profits even higher) and it is, I believe, their subtle, ever present, overall, global influence which results in doctors deciding that every wheeze must be treated as asthma, that every ache must be diagnosed and treated as 'arthritis' and that every mild bout of unhappiness must be treated as depression.

Diseases such as asthma, arthritis and depression are perfect for making big profits because patients labelled as suffering from these conditions are often advised to take pills for years or even decades. It is by no means unusual for patients to be told that they need drug therapy for life. And with pills often costing a small fortune the profits on each new patient can be colossal.

This bizarre, ruthless but profitable philosophy works because doctors are usually far too ready to listen to the drug company salesmen. These days most doctors are actually taught about new drugs not by independent experts but by paid salesmen.

My advice is simple: if your doctor tells you that you are suffering from a long-term disorder for which you need to take long-term drug therapy — you should ask for a second opinion.

Never forget that four out of ten patients who take pills suffer side effects. If you are taking pills because you genuinely need them then the risks may be acceptable. But if you are taking pills unnecessarily then the risks are unnecessary too.

69. I have learned that in nine out of ten illnesses my body can and will heal itself. (And that this is true for your body too.)

Many of the people who are injured by doctors never needed medical treatment in the first place. The human body contains a comprehensive variety of self-healing mechanisms which mean that in nine out of ten illnesses your body will mend itself.

It is important that you learn to understand your body; learn to appreciate your own self-healing skills; learn to acknowledge your body's miraculous range of techniques for dealing with threats and diseases; and learn to know when your body can look after itself — and when you need professional help.

The big trouble with most health care professionals — and this includes acupuncturists, osteopaths, aromatherapists and all other 'alternative' practitioners, as well as orthodox doctors — is that they tend to treat their patients as battle grounds, the illness as an enemy and their own armoury of drugs or techniques as weapons with which to fight the illness.

Whether he sticks needles into you, gives you herbal tea to drink or prescribes a drug for you to swallow the therapist has to do something to you, or give you something to take, in order to justify his fee.

The evidence to show that this interventionist philosophy is wrong is incontrovertible. When you fall ill you do not necessarily need to have anything done to you. Your body is equipped with such an enormous range of subtle and sophisticated feedback mechanisms that it can look after itself very well.

Your body can heal itself, protect itself and guard itself against a thousand different types of threat.

Your body contains internal mechanisms designed to deal automatically with minor damage, improve your eyesight, keep out the cold, deal with anxiety and even help fight against diseases as threatening as cancer.

Your internal appetite control centre can ensure that you eat only the foods that your body needs — and it can help make sure that you never become overweight.

Your body's internal pain-relieving hormones are as powerful as morphine — but you have to know how to take advantage of those pain-relieving hormones.

The human brain even contains a natural drug designed to help anxiety.

Your body is marvellous. It contains a vast variety of extraordinarily effective self-healing mechanisms. Most of them you probably don't even know about. And if you don't know about them then you probably don't know how to take advantage of them.

Your body cannot always cope, of course. There will be times when even your sophisticated self-healing mechanisms will be overwhelmed and will need support.

But to dismiss these mechanisms on the grounds that they don't provide a complete answer to all health problems is like arguing that it isn't worthwhile learning to swim because occasionally you may need the help of a lifeguard.

I firmly believe that if you learn to use the power of your own body you will benefit in a number of ways.

First, of course, you will reduce the risk of being injured by a healthcare professional. Every year thousands of people suffer because of unnecessary treatments used by orthodox and alternative practitioners.

Second, you will benefit because when an interventionist treats an illness he usually tries to oppose your body's own internal responses, as well as whatever outside agent may have triggered those responses in the first place. This isn't necessarily a good idea. All symptoms are merely signs that a fight is taking place inside your body. Unless the interventionist treatment is carefully designed to support and aid your body, the treatment applied may well end up damaging and even weakening your body's internal mechanisms — eventually making you more vulnerable and more reliant on interventionists and their treatments.

It is vitally important that you learn to use your body's powers and learn to recognise precisely when you need professional support. You should retain overall control of your body and bring in the healers as advisers and technicians.

Once you've mastered the idea of using your body's own healing powers you will find yourself enjoying a freedom that you might otherwise never know.

I have described the many wonderful ways in which your body can look after itself in my book called *Bodypower*. The book explains how you can use your body's self-healing powers to help you deal with 9 out of 10 illnesses without a doctor. It has been described as the owner's manual for the human body.

70. I have learned that it is possible to use simple tricks to manipulate people in authority.

Bank managers, doctors, tax inspectors and others use their desks to establish their authority. They sit behind them and use them as barriers — to establish their superiority. I know of one doctor who used to shave the bottoms off the front legs of the chair in which his patients sat. Because they were constantly sliding forwards, patients always felt slightly uncomfortable — and never wanted to stay too long.

When you visit the surgery and your doctor waves you to a chair a couple of feet in front of his desk he is putting you in an exposed and vulnerable situation. He possesses the desk and is defended by its bulk. You sit alone with your personal space unprotected.

But, as I showed in my book *People Watching* it is very easy to reverse the situation and take control. When you enter the surgery move the chair a few inches so that it is closer to the desk. Then sit down so that you can lean forward and put your elbows on the desk. If there is a letter rack in front of you gently but firmly move it to one side. Put your hat, gloves, newspaper, shopping, handbag or notebook down on the desk. If your doctor is leaning forwards to establish his territorial rights over his desk he will almost certainly respond by leaning backwards and abandoning his control of the desk. His response will be automatic. You will then be able to start your consultation in a much stronger position. You will be in charge of the consultation — a much safer position from which to seek advice.

71. I have learned that if I make my voice heard I will feel better.

We live in a world where cruelty is honoured, where dishonesty is rewarded, where kindness is taken for weakness, where power is taken by the vicious and the brutal and where the inept, the incompetent and the uncaring prosper.

We live in a world where integrity is sneered at, where honesty is described as controversy, where passion is regarded as an embarrassment and where the truth is a dangerous commodity.

We are ruled by pompous authoritarians who cloak their petty ambitions and personal greed in stolen power and glory but accept no responsibility for justice; today, the million horsemen of the Apocalypse gallop ever onwards in malignant determination to destroy truth, honesty and compassion.

Morals and ethics have become abstract subjects for university debate, rather than guidelines for our behaviour. Our leaders no longer care about what is right. Those in authority no longer care about the poor, the meek, the gentle and the kind. They do not care about the innocent.

Our society cares only about what is regarded as proper and ‘normal’. The joy of giving is an object of scorn and derision. Nobility and honour are freely bought and sold.

We have dirtied our land and polluted our air and our water. We live in a filth of our own making; a filth that gets worse each day and which contaminates our very lives.

The establishment applauds and rewards the fat businessmen who cheat the world’s poor. We are encouraged by our leaders and the media to kneel before the representatives of evil and daily pledge our allegiance to witless, passionless mediocrity.

We are taught to treat those with whom we share this planet with idle, rough, contempt. We use them for our own ends without a thought for their comfort, happiness or dignity.

And yet we claim to be innocents in all this corruption of the spirit. We blame an unseen ‘them’ for the horrors of our world. We blame ‘them’ for the cruelty, the viciousness and the misery. We live in comfort and contentment; slumped in front of the TV screen; deaf to the injustices which mark our world.

It is a slick trick we play on ourselves.

For we have built this society. It is our responsibility. We cannot escape from blame by keeping silent. The evil that is done is done on our account and if we stay silent it is done with our blessing.

Remember, then, that it is up to us to shout ‘stop’ when we have had enough of the wickedness around us.

If we want to change things we must campaign and protest and not rest until our voices are heard. If we do nothing then we are just a silent part of the evil which is corrupting and destroying our world. And we can change things.

For example, I first started my campaign to warn doctors and patients about the dangers of overprescribing benzodiazepine tranquillisers back in 1973. For ten years the only thing the campaign produced was a fairly constant stream of personal abuse — much of it from doctors who were offended that anyone should dare question the medical establishment. Editors who supported my campaign were reminded that most doctors disagreed with me. Because of my constant campaigning about tranquillisers I was always in trouble. Numerous doctors publicly claimed that the benzodiazepines were perfectly safe — and that I was irresponsible to frighten the public with articles, books and broadcasts about these drugs.

By the early 1980’s, after ten years of campaigning, a growing number of doctors finally agreed that I was right. Gradually, as the campaign grew, many other journalists and broadcasters joined in the battle. Whereas I had originally been a lone voice — and therefore relatively easy to dismiss — those defending the widespread use of benzodiazepine tranquillisers and sleeping tablets found themselves on the defensive. In 1988, the Government in Britain finally took action — admitting that they had done so directly because of my articles. A fifteen year campaign had been vindicated. But it still took several more years before doctors really changed their prescribing habits.

Today there cannot be more than a handful of patients or doctors in the world who do not accept that these drugs can be addictive — and need to be used with extreme caution.

The benzodiazepine campaign was exhausting, expensive and time consuming — but it is clear from this battle that you and I do have power; we can change things. But we must fight together. Doctors and politicians responded to the benzodiazepine campaign when the protests could no longer be ignored. The lesson is that we must be persistent and determined.

If you care about the world in which you live and want it to be a better, safer place for humans and animals then you must make your voice heard. Don't worry if people scoff or mock. Don't allow yourself to be put off by scorn, derision, undisguised contempt or a lack of support or encouragement from others.

Just remember that imaginative, thoughtful and creative individuals have always had a hard time. Look back in history and you will find countless examples of citizens who were harassed or persecuted simply because they dared to think for themselves — and tried to share their thoughts with others.

Our world has never welcomed the original, the challenging, the inspirational or the passionate and has always preferred the characterless to the thought-provoking. Those who dare to speak out against the establishment have always been regarded as dangerous heretics. The iconoclast has never been a welcome figure in any age.

Confucius, the Chinese philosopher, was dismissed by his political masters and his books were burned. Those who didn't burn his books within 30 days were branded and condemned to forced labour. Two and a half thousand years later Confucius's influence was still considered so dangerous that Chairman Mao banned his works.

Described by the Delphic Oracle as the wisest man in the world, Greek teacher Socrates was accused of corrupting the youth of Athens, arrested for being an evildoer and 'a person showing curiosity, searching into things under the earth and above the heaven and teaching all this to others'. Socrates was condemned to death.

Dante, the Italian poet, was banished from Florence and condemned to be burnt at the stake if ever captured.

After they had failed to silence him with threats and bribes the Jewish authorities excommunicated Spinoza in Amsterdam because he refused to toe the party line, refused to think what other people told him he must think and insisted on maintaining his intellectual independence. He and his work were denounced as 'forged in Hell by a renegade Jew and the devil'.

Galileo, the seventeenth century Italian mathematician, astrologer and scientist got into terrible trouble with the all powerful Church for daring to support Copernicus, who had the temerity to claim that the planets revolved around the sun.

Aureolus Philippus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim (known to his chums as Paracelsus) made himself enemies all over Europe because he tried to revolutionise medicine in the sixteenth century. Paracelsus was the greatest influence on medical thinking since Hippocrates but the establishment regarded him as a trouble-maker.

Ignaz Semmelweiss, the Austrian obstetrician who recognised that puerperal fever was caused by doctors' dirty habits was ostracised by the medical profession for daring to criticise practical procedures.

Henry David Thoreau, surely the kindest, wisest philosopher who has ever lived, was imprisoned for sticking to his ideals.

Original thinkers and people who do not fit neatly into the scheme of things have never gone down well. And nothing has changed. Today, incompetence and mediocrity thrive and are now subsidised, supported and encouraged by our increasingly bureaucratic and intrusive society. Schoolteachers and social workers encourage mediocrity because they themselves are mediocre. Talent frightens them witless. Among bureaucrats and administrators incompetence and mediocrity are esteemed virtues; these be-suited morons revere the banal and worship the bland.

The unusual or the eccentric attract scorn and ridicule. Politicians are frightened of anything new or challenging. They reject the innovative, the creative and the imaginative in favour of the accustomed, the comfortable and the ordinary. It is hardly surprising that the sensitive, the thoughtful, the imaginative and the caring find 21st century life almost too painful to bear.

If you feel that something is wrong, and you feel passionately that something ought to be done about it, then stand up for your principles, shout and make your voice heard. There is a chance that some people will regard you as a lunatic. I have no doubt that many small-minded people will sneer and tell you that in trying to change the world and root out dishonesty, corruption and injustice you are tilting at windmills. But there is also a chance that your voice will be heard; that others will respond and that you will win your battle. And the benefits of victory surely far outweigh the insults of the insignificant. Only when you've found something you are prepared to die for will you really know what life is all about.

72. I have learned that I can provide myself with some protection against viruses.

If you think that viruses are just wishy washy bugs that cause flu, tummy upsets and other relatively minor inconveniences — think again. Viruses are now a major threat to your health — and your family's health.

Consider the Ebola virus, for example. It can kill in days. There is no cure. The illness starts with a headache and a fever. Just like flu. Within days blood starts to seep from every orifice. And the body rapidly starts to deteriorate. Every organ fails. Just a virus.

There are three main reasons why viruses are becoming increasingly dangerous.

First, international air travel means that killer bugs can be taken from one country to another within hours. There was far less danger when infected individuals travelled on slower forms of transport. Patients carrying the disease would have died long before they reached heavily populated cities.

Second, viruses are constantly changing — and getting stronger. As scientists produce new vaccines existing viruses adapt and change.

Third, vivisectors in laboratories around the world are constantly giving existing viruses to animals. They use some of the rarest and most deadly viruses in their experiments. Some of the research work is done for the military — who want ever more lethal viruses for biological warfare. Problems really start when viruses — or infected animals — escape from laboratories.

There are countless billions of viruses in the world — each is one thousandth the size of a bacterium. Everyone could be a ticking time bomb.

But here is what you can do to help protect yourself and your family from killer viruses:

1. Spend as little time as you can in crowded places. The more people there are the more likely it is that there are lots of viruses around.

2. Campaign for all animal experiments to be stopped at once. Laboratory experiments on animals are a major cause both of the development and the release into the community of deadly new viruses.

3. Wash your hands frequently and thoroughly. The world is full of viruses. They are everywhere. And quite invisible to the naked eye. You can pick up a virus by shaking hands, picking up change in a shop or touching a door handle.

4. Don’t share food or eat food from other people’s plates.

5. Practise safe sex.

6. Avoid wild animals — and keep away from animals behaving in a peculiar fashion. If you are bitten by an animal get medical help straight away.

7. Teach children not to cough or sneeze without using a handkerchief.

8. Wash all kitchen dishes and cutlery thoroughly in hot, soapy water.

9. Try not to touch your eyes with your fingers — that’s an easy way for viruses to get into your body.

Those general rules will minimise your chances of being contaminated by a virus.

73. I have learned that it is important to know what money is for.

How much money do you need? And what do you need it for? How much do you want? And what do you want it for? Most investment books I have ever seen never even ask these questions. The authors seem to assume that acquiring money is an end in itself with no purpose necessary other than the accumulation of wealth. But these are the most important questions of all. (Needs and wants are, of course, very different. We all need food and shelter. No one needs a yacht. No one needs to own a football club. No one needs to own a diamond encrusted gold watch.)

None of us actually needs very much money.

It’s the wanting that is special.

So, what do you want money for? Just for necessities? Helping others? Looking after yourself and your loved ones in the future when the State has thrown you on the scrapheap? Luxuries? Do you like travelling first class and enjoy eating expensive delicacies?

Do you want money because you know it will buy you freedom? Money doesn’t just buy foods, shelter and clothing. It doesn’t just buy electric nose hair clippers. Money also buys a certain amount of freedom. ‘If someone tells me to do something I don’t want to do I can say ‘No’ because of my money,’ one actor explained.

If you want money then first you have to know what you want it for. There has to be a purpose. Otherwise you might as well be collecting blades of grass or old newspapers. Money doesn’t have any value unless you do something with it. It can buy you a yacht. And it can buy you (or someone you love) medical treatment that might not otherwise be available. As far as I am concerned the one thing money can provide which I really value is freedom. Money gives me the freedom to write what I want to write and to make sure that it gets published and marketed without worrying too much about whether or not it is commercially successful. (In the bad old days most publishers used to operate like this. They published what they wanted to publish — regardless of whether or not it was likely to make money. If they were unlucky they went bust. If they were lucky they published enough commercially successful books to pay for the commercially unsuccessful books. So far, I’m pleased to say, I’ve managed to ensure that the commercially successful books I write make more than enough money to pay for the commercially unsuccessful books I wanted to write and publish anyway.)

And how much money do you really need?

Take a good hard look at your income and expenditure. Do you need more money for the things you want to do with your life? Or could it be that you already have enough income (and enough money saved up) to buy everything you need? Are you, perhaps, simply wasting money on things you neither want nor need. I know a fellow who lives in the country and has a job in the city. He spends six hours a day on trains (three hours each way) and an hour a day on the Underground. That is seven hours a day, five days a week. He says he has the benefit of a London salary while living in a large house in the country. But he spends seven hours a day travelling. Unless there are breakdowns, of course. When there are breakdowns he spends even more time travelling.

74. I have learned not to waste my life penny pinching.

You aren't going to get rich by buying cheap beans or cheap jam. And cheap doesn't necessarily save you money. Always figure in the value of your time. For example, if you are travelling somewhere and there's a choice of going by coach or train think about the time it's going to take you. Which journey will take longest? And will one form of transport enable you to do something useful while you are travelling? I can work on trains but I couldn't possibly work on a coach. I get travel sick on coaches and I can't get my long legs between the seats. If I travel by coach I risk getting a deep vein thrombosis and I waste the time I'm travelling. If I travel by train I can go in some comfort and I can work while I travel. The travelling time won't be wasted.

If you buy cheap, new furniture it will probably fall apart, it will never make you feel good and it will be worthless when you come to sell it. If you buy good, relatively expensive, old furniture it will not fall apart, it will make you feel good when you use it and if you ever want to sell it, it will probably be worth more than you paid for it. The same isn't quite true for clothes (you probably aren't going to be able to sell them at all) but good clothes will always look better, feel better, keep their shape better and last longer. And good clothes will make you feel good too. (There is the added bonus that when you are travelling, security guards and waiters will usually treat you better if you are well-dressed than they will if you are dressed in scruffy, cheap clothes. It's just human nature. They know that rich people are more likely to have clout and make their lives miserable if they mess them around too much.)

Buy quality, rather than quantity. And, remember: it isn't wrong to spend money on yourself occasionally. Enjoy your money. Enjoy making it. Enjoy having it. And enjoy spending it. What is it for if not to enjoy?

I have learned not to make false economies. I usually drive big cars. I keep them and drive them into the ground. There are several reasons for this. I like big cars because I'm tall and my back aches if I spend too long in a tiny car. I also like big, well-made cars because they tend to be tougher and give you a better chance of surviving a crash. I also prefer them because they tend to break down less often and usually last longer.

But I hate looking for and buying new cars. It's a tiresome, time consuming chore. One friend buys a new, small car every two years. He sniffily claims that his vehicles are much cheaper to run and better for the environment. He has to change these tinny little things after two years because by then they're not fit for anything much. The cars he buys are made out of some sort of plastic-coated reinforced cardboard and they fall apart if kept too long. His cars use less petrol than mine but I don't use my car all that much (I prefer to travel by train) so I don't spend much more on petrol than he does. His cars are cheaper to mend when they break down but they break down a lot more often. Bits are always falling off them and the dealer usually manages to find a clause in the contract which excludes the latest disaster from the guarantee.

So what's better for the environment — buying a big, expensive car which lasts or buying loads of smaller, cheaper cars which have to be replaced every couple of years? The slightly surprising truth is that the big, expensive car is much, much better for the environment.

75. I have learned that financial security is, to a certain extent, a state of mind.

Lots of people think that having a job with a big company provides more security than working for yourself. It is true that the self-employed have less immediate security. They often don't know where the next job is coming from. But in a downturn big companies often lay off employees. No one can make you redundant if you are self-employed. You may find it harder to get work, and you may have to work longer hours for the same income as before, but you aren't going to be queuing on the docks waiting for a chance to unload ships.

Financial security means knowing that whatever happens you and your family won't starve because you will be able to find a way to earn a living and put bread on the table. I know a millionaire who keeps a bicycle, a ladder and a bucket in his garage next to his Rolls Royce and his wife's Mercedes sports car. 'If I lose all my money,' he told me once, 'I'll start a window cleaning round and build it up again.' The bicycle, the bucket and the ladder are his ultimate financial security.

Having some savings will provide you with security against bad times, misfortune and mistakes.

But do not trust anyone to look after your financial security blanket for you. Do not trust banks. Do not trust brokers. Do not trust advisers. And, most of all, do not trust the Government or any official regulators. The financial world today is riddled with regulations which make life difficult for everyone. The regulations will not, I fear, protect you against thievery, dishonesty or incompetence. The bottom line is that there is no one more interested in your financial security than you are.

76. I have learned that it is easy to accumulate stuff I don't need. And I have learned that much of that stuff will cost me a great deal in terms of time and energy.

Look around your house. How much stuff have you got that you don't need? How much time and energy are you wasting looking after it and providing storage space for it? How much time are you wasting looking at and wondering if you'll ever wear it again, find the manual or find the other bit that makes it work? How much of it could you sell? How much of it could you give away to your local charity shop? How much of it should you throw away? How much cleaner — and clearer — will your life be without all this unnecessary stuff?

Few people need a new car every two years. Most people have more pairs of shoes than they really need. Millions have electrical equipment they never use. Standard of living and quality of life aren't the same thing but we confuse the two.

There have been more shopping malls than high schools in the USA for many years. Three quarters of people who go shopping are not looking for something in particular. They are simply out 'shopping'.

We all need to get into the habit of asking ourselves why we buy the things we buy. This isn't a judgemental question. But it's a question well worth asking. How many jumpers do you really need? Why do so many people insist on having an entirely new outfit if they are planning to attend someone else's wedding? The complaint 'I don't have a thing to wear' has become a joke.

I know a handyman who earns his living painting, bricklaying and doing bits of carpentry. He's a real jack-of-all-trades and he's very good at what he does. But it's difficult to get him to come and do anything because he only works two or three days a week. The rest of the time he messes around on his boat or in his garden.

A few months ago I asked him why he didn't work harder.

He explained that he didn't see any point in earning more money than he needed to satisfy his fairly simple needs. He told me that he has paid off his mortgage, that although old and rather battered his car is his own and that he has all the furniture he wants. He has, he told me, managed to put aside a few hundred pounds in the building society for emergencies.

I asked him if his wife was happy with this philosophical approach to employment. He said that she was very happy and that they spent much of the week gardening together, walking along the cliffs or, on sunny days, bobbing around in their little boat. He also told me that he and his wife don't have holidays away from home because for them home is a pretty constant holiday but that they do spend a day every month travelling to demonstrations against hunting, vivisection and other examples of cruelty to animals.

He also told me that because his earnings are low he pays hardly any income tax.

I found his attitude enormously refreshing. This local handyman is leading the life of a true revolutionary. I suspect that Henry David Thoreau, the philosopher of Walden Pond, would have been proud of him.

Before you dismiss the handyman's lifestyle as impractical ask yourself how much of your life you spend earning money to buy things you don't really need and are only buying to impress people you don't really care about.

Here's a simple little exercise you can try.

Make a list of everything other than food that you've bought in the last year. By the side of each item on your list make a note of the price you paid.

Then divide your after tax annual income by the number of hours you work to find out how much you earn an hour. Don't forget to deduct any essential business expenses from your income before you do this calculation.

Now you can easily use this figure to find out how long you had to work to buy each of the items on your first list.

I have learned that knowing how much I earn per hour is extremely useful.

Get into the habit of thinking of the things you buy in terms of hours rather than pounds.

If you buy a television set that costs £1,000 and you earn £10 an hour then the television set has cost you 100 hours.

If you buy a book for £10 and your income is £10 an hour then the book has cost you one hour.

Every time you spend money ask yourself how long you have had to work to pay for it.

How much of your life are you giving in order to buy a car with a three speed rear window wiper instead of one with a one speed rear window wiper? (That was the sole difference between two models of a car I once considered buying. The extra price was £500.)

This can be a frightening exercise for you'll quickly realise that you've given a great deal of your life in order to buy junk that you don't really need.

Add up the cost of all the unnecessary stuff you bought last year and work out how much of your life you wasted earning money to buy stuff that hasn't improved or changed your life.

The whole point of modern advertising is to persuade people to buy things they don't need; to turn shallow wants into desperate 'must haves'.

It is skilful advertising which encourages otherwise sane people to spend a fortune on double glazing which will never pay for itself and to spend thousands of pounds ripping out a perfectly serviceable kitchen and replacing it with another slightly different kitchen.

And, of course, the more money you have to earn to buy all this stuff that you don't really need the more income tax you will have had to pay.

If you are happy with the things the Government buys with your money then you won't mind giving them great chunks of it. But are you really happy with what they do with it?

I'm not suggesting that the handyman's life style is right for everyone.

But you might like to think about all this a little.

We live in a society which encourages the accumulation of goods: a smart, shiny motor car; a beautiful home; a wardrobe full of expensive, beautifully designed clothes — these are what we are encouraged to work towards.

If you are not careful the stuff you think you own could end up owning you. Our world has been taken over by a lot of materialistic, acquisitive nonsense. We buy coffee table books that no one ever reads, fancy toilet roll holders, lotions to make fat thighs thin, creams to make small breasts melon-sized and to make melon-sized breasts positively breathtaking and all sorts of other nonsenses. We buy things for the sake of buying. We buy presents that are neither beautiful nor useful.

Do not allow material possessions, belongings of any kind, to take over your life. Next time you are buying something other than an everyday item ask yourself if you are making the purchase because you want it or need it or because you have been persuaded to buy it by someone else — or, worse still, by Society. And then remember how many hours you have to work to earn that item.

And regularly take time to go through all your possessions and sort out those which you want to keep and those that you neither want nor need to keep. 'Spring-cleaning' your possessions has several advantages. It will enable you to see exactly what you have (you may be surprised to discover things you had forgotten you owned) and it will also enable you to convert unwanted items into cash. You will have more space available and you will be able to find and use the belongings which are left more easily and more effectively. Clear out the stuff you own at regular intervals and throw away everything which doesn't add value to your life. If you haven't used something or worn something for six or twelve months sell it or give it to a charity shop.

And always remember William Morris's advice: 'Have nothing in your home that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful.'

77. I have learned that during the last few hundred years we have changed our world much faster than our bodies have managed to evolve.

That's why we suffer so much from stress related diseases. We still have bodies designed to cope with the sort of threat posed by sabre toothed tigers but we live in a world where our stresses come in brown envelopes and land on our doormats every day. It isn't our fault that we suffer more from stress than anyone in history. I have learned that in order to cope we have to reduce our exposure to unnecessary stresses, we need to know how to relax and we need to make time in our lives to rest, relax and recharge our worn-out batteries.

78. I have learned to be careful not to buy too much insurance.

The extended warranties so beloved by electrical stores are a perfect example of the way fear is used to sell us expensive products we probably don't really need. The small print is usually complicated and far too daunting to read in the time available. And so we hand over another substantial sum for an over-expensive extended warranty. (The fact that many stores now make a considerable portion of their profit from selling these warranties should tell you something about their value to the customer.)

We have been brought up willing to pay to avoid risk. And some risks (the big ones) are always worth insuring against. Most of us need to take out public liability insurance because if a slate falls off our roof and lands on a passer-by the resulting claim for damages could bankrupt us. Most of us need to insure our homes against fire because if our house burns down we won't be able to afford another one. This sort of insurance doesn't usually cost a great deal (because the risks are quite small) but it is worth buying.

But much of the insurance we are sold doesn't fit into that sort of category. Most of the time we insure ourselves against losses which will not seriously embarrass us. To make things worse we take out extra insurance when the manufacturer's guarantee will protect us against the risk of buying a particularly shoddy item. And our excessive zeal for insurance cover means that we end up buying multiple cover for the same risks. The expense of these accumulated policies can be horrendous.

The variety of risks against which one can now take out insurance is apparently unending. Every time you buy one insurance policy the company from which you bought it will try to sell you another policy, covering areas that weren't included in the first policy. The small print invariably means that the insurance company can find an escape clause or a reason to charge another fee for something else.

We should really only insure against losses that we really cannot afford — huge legal costs for example. For the rest, most of us — particularly those who are careful and honest — will probably be better off if we put the premiums into a special savings account and use that to pay for plumbing costs, heating repairs and so on.

And since it is probably not worthwhile making a claim against an insurance policy unless the claim is considerable, it makes sense to agree formally not to make a claim for small sums, in return for a discount on the premium. (Remember, too, that insurance companies now tend to put up premiums when they pay out. A small claim can lead to an annual rise in premiums which matches the one-off payment.)

The careful and honest lose out twice in the current way of things. First, they must pay high premiums to include the cost of all the false claims that will be made and the cost of all the problems which will arise because of poor maintenance or bad habits. Second, they must struggle to obtain payment and then put up with small print clauses which exclude most claims and put huge excesses on the ones which are (eventually and grudgingly) paid.

Remember that insurance companies are routinely dishonest. They lie. A lot. When they tell you the cheque is in the post they are probably lying. When they tell you that the claims form is in the post they are probably lying. When they tell you that your claim is being processed they are probably lying. Insurance companies lie (and make life exceedingly difficult for anyone trying to make a claim) for one very good reason: they hope that if they make things difficult for you then you will get bored and go away without them ever having to fork out.

I have never taken out insurance against ill health. There are two reasons for this. First, I try to look after my health. This means that if I pay premiums to a medical insurance company I will be subsidising all the over-weight, meat-eating smokers who don't take any exercise but do need a lot of medical attention. Second, I long ago worked out that if I put money aside each month I could use that money if I fell ill and needed private treatment. The money I've put aside has been earning its keep for years. On the other hand, premiums paid are lost for ever. (I have, however, always had a sickness policy that pays me money for life if I am too sick to be able to work again.)

79. I have learned not to be frightened of, or bullied by, tax collectors.

'No man in the country is under the slightest obligation, moral or other, so to arrange his legal relations to his business or property as to enable the Inland Revenue to put the largest possible shovel in his stores,' said Law Lord, Lord Clyde. 'The Inland Revenue is not slow — and quite rightly — to take every advantage which is open to it under the Taxing Statutes for the purpose of depleting the taxpayer's pocket. And the taxpayer is in like manner entitled to be astute to prevent, so far as he honestly can, the depletion of his means by the Inland Revenue.'

It is our individual responsibility, as defined by law, to ensure that we pay as little tax as possible. That is our responsibility to our families and ourselves. 'Every man is entitled, if he can, to order his affairs so that the tax attaching under the appropriate Act is less than it would otherwise be,' said Lord Tomlin. An American judge, Judge Learned Hand, of the US Appeals Court, said something similar: 'There is nothing sinister in so arranging one's affairs as to keep taxes as low as possible. Everybody does so, rich or poor; all do right. Nobody owes any public duty to pay more than the law demands; taxes are enforced extractions, not voluntary contributions.'

Governments, however, don't always see things quite that way. As far as they are concerned what is ours is theirs and what is theirs is also theirs. Today, tax collectors around the world treat all taxpayers as guilty until proven innocent. Governments have bought stolen information to help their investigations; merrily ignoring the fact that if ordinary citizens did this they would be sent to prison for receiving stolen goods.

Here are some thoughts on tax and tax inspectors.

1. Don't bother trying to become a tax exile. Don't bother moving to a tax haven. And don't bother trying to avoid paying tax by becoming a PT (Permanent Traveller). Lots of people do this. But they spend time and effort and money in avoiding tax and they end up living in places that no one in his right mind would want to call home. Some years ago I seriously contemplated moving to Monaco. I found, to my astonishment, that it really isn't as straightforward as you might think. And Monaco itself is as dull and uninspiring as a council estate. It's full of tower blocks into which are crammed thousands of miserable tax exiles. The streets may be safe (Monaco has nearly as many CCTV cameras as Britain but they do at least use them to catch the guilty and protect the innocent rather than to simply pick up unfortunate folk who have parked in the wrong place or dropped litter into the wrong receptacle) but I am willing to pay not to live there.

2. Stay alert for retrospective tax legislation. The British Government has begun introducing retrospective legislation

and is also using its tax collecting agencies to criminalise many civil activities. The result must surely be that people will be sent to prison for things that weren't illegal when they did them, and will be handed huge and unexpected tax bills for earnings and profits that were acquired in the past. Things are likely to get worse rather than better. EU legislation, often gold-plated by an enthusiastically compliant UK Government, will make things ever worse.

3. Don't make an investment because of the tax break.

4. I am scrupulously honest on my tax form. The tax people spot check self-employed people quite often. They've investigated me twice so far. Both were full, year long investigations. And at the end of both I ended up getting money back from the taxman. I prefer it that way. Like most people who are self-employed I have enough crises and problems in my life without having to worry about the tax people. I like to know that if they investigate me then, at the end, I'm going to be the one getting a cheque.

5. I have learned to keep full financial records. The more bits of paper you have the more you are likely to be able to win against the taxman. On the last occasion that I was investigated I delivered the requested records crammed into a large suitcase.

6. Part of any appreciated asset belongs to the Government, so they share the loot when you're making a profit. But the Government shares the pain when you're making a loss. So, consider the taxman as a partner who puts up no money but shares your profits and losses. I regard the taxman as operating a protection racket. I give him money and in return he doesn't use violence against me.

7. Don't overestimate the intelligence of people working for the tax authorities. A few years ago I held a bond run by the bank Goldman Sachs. A payment from the bond was listed on the bank statement under the abbreviated heading 'Gold Sacs'. During one of its typically lengthy but pointless enquiries into my affairs the tax office wrote to my accountant telling him that they now knew that I was dealing in gold. Puzzled, he wrote back and asked them for more information. 'Your client is buying and selling sacks of gold,' replied the taxman, drawing attention to the reference to 'Gold Sacs' as evidence.

8. If you become even remotely rich you will attract the attention of the tax people. This is widely believed to be because tax inspectors now get bonuses for every pound they gouge out of taxpayers. It is clearly easier and more profitable to target the rich rather than the poor, and it is easier to get money out of the honest rather than the crooked.

9. Always understand your own accounts. For years and years I used an accountant who used to tell me how much I owed the taxman. I simply did what I was told and wrote out the cheques. One year, back in the mid 1990's, I followed his instructions and wrote out a cheque for £129,000 for my half yearly tax bill. Only when the taxman subsequently did a spot check on my accounts did it turn out that I'd paid several thousand pounds too much. I got a welcome refund cheque. I fired my accountant who told me that it wasn't his fault. He said it wasn't his firm's fault either. His explanation was that his assistant had 'been using out-of-date textbooks'. I'd been paying this guy and his firm thousands of pounds for years. It seemed to me that the least they could have done was buy some up-to-date textbooks. So I got rid of him and decided to fill in my tax form myself. It's a real pain and it wastes a lot of time (though if I used an accountant I would still have to spend some time pulling together bits of paper to show him) but at any one time of the year I now know what I owe and when I've got to pay it. There are no more surprises. I like it better this way.

80. I have learned that much of what other people call progress isn't really progress at all.

Progress brings complications and complications take away our freedom. 'We were the first to assert that the more complicated the forms of civilisation, the more restricted the freedom of the individual must become,' said Benito Mussolini, the inventor of fascism and the spiritual father of the European Union.

My computer printer broke down. I wanted it repaired. But the dealer told me that it was two years old and out-of-date. Is that progress? My portable telephone needed a new battery. The company from which I bought the telephone just over a year ago told me that the telephone is no longer being manufactured. And they have also stopped manufacturing the batteries. This means that the telephone is useless and will have to be thrown away. Is that progress? I wanted to listen to some old-fashioned vinyl records. I tried to buy a record player. The assistants in local shops laughed at me when I told them what I wanted. Is that progress? The glass in the wing mirror on my car cracked. A few years ago, the garage would have simply replaced the glass. It would have taken a few minutes and cost very little. But the garage couldn't obtain a replacement glass. They had to send away for a sealed unit. The whole operation took weeks and cost a small fortune. Is that progress?

When I dare to ask what the hell is so terrific about progress, and why we have to bow before it as though it were the god of our times, folk 'tut tut' and look at me as though I'm an alien from another planet.

‘You can’t stand in the way of progress!’ they say, implying that it would be improper, unpatriotic, immoral and probably illegal even to try.

Well, I’ve had enough of progress. Without progress everyone would still be in work. Without progress the workshops of the world would still be alive, men would still be making things they were proud of and it would be possible to buy things on a Wednesday and expect them still to be capable of doing whatever it was they were bought to do on Saturday.

There is a myth that progress means automatically ‘better’. It doesn’t. In reality, progress means that more and more people have to exchange a rich, varied, wholesome, healthy lifestyle for one which is hollow and filled with despair and loneliness. Progress means deprivation for people but strength for our administrative structures. Progress means that the jobs people do become more boring and less satisfying. Progress means more power to machines. Progress means that things are more likely to go wrong. Progress means more destruction, more misery and more tedium. Progress means more damage to our planet.

Those who worship at the altar of progress make two simple but vital errors. They assume that man must take full advantage of every new development and invention. And they assume that he must always search for a better way of tackling everything he does.

Neither of these two assumptions is soundly based.

Just because man invents computers, supersonic jets and atomic bombs he doesn’t have to use these things. Those who believe implicitly in progress believe that we must always endeavour to use every new nugget of information we obtain. They believe that if man invents a quicker and more effective way to kill people then we must use this quicker and more effective weapon of destruction.

Progress-lovers believe that if it is possible to make a computer-controlled machine which manufactures identical galumps at the rate of 6,000 an hour then we must have that machine. And that those galumps will be better than galumps which have been hand carved by craftsmen.

The lovers of progress are so keen to embrace the future and eradicate the past that they will introduce new laws ensuring that only the new computer-made galumps can be sold. The market for the old-fashioned galumps will disappear.

The progress-lovers don’t care about the fact that their galump making machine will put thousands of craftsmen out of work.

Progress for the sake of progress often simply means change for the sake of change. But change is not always for the better.

The problem lies largely with the definition of the word ‘better’.

What, exactly, does it mean?

Is a television set better than a radio or a good book?

Is a motor car better than a bicycle?

Is an aeroplane better than a yacht?

Are modern motor cars, equipped with electric windows and air-conditioning, better than ancient Rolls Royce motor cars equipped with neither of these facilities?

Is artificial turf better than real grass?

Is a poorly written, badly acted television situation comedy, which is in colour, better than movies such as Citizen Kane and Duck Soup which were made in black and white?

Are artificial flowers better than the real thing?

Too often progress simply means more frustration and more unhappiness.

It means that we become more dependent on one another and less capable of coping with the crises in our lives.

Progress means that when something goes wrong with the electricity supply your central heating boiler won’t work. Progress means that it has become nigh on impossible to mend anything around the home without calling in an expert with a van full of tools. Even then he will probably tell you that he’s got to send away for another part.

Progress means that when your windscreen wiper blade needs replacing you have to buy a new windscreen wiper system.

Progress means that when you want to buy a niplet you have to buy a blister pack of five which can only be opened with a kitchen knife, a screwdriver and a blowlamp.

What is going on? What are we doing to our world? Will people be wiser, happier and more contented when nuclear powered, seven speed nose hair clippers are finally available?

It would be stupid to claim that all progress is bad. Progress is neither good nor bad unless we make it so. Progress is good when we use it rather than when we allow it to rule our lives. But no longer are we allowed to choose between those aspects of progress which we think can be to our benefit and those which we suspect may be harmful. Our society wants constant progress and that is what it gets.

81. I have learned not to allow myself to drown in bad news.

In the old days our ancestors worried only about their relatives, friends and neighbours. People knew little about the outside world — and the outside world began probably twenty miles away in all directions. Now, we are told everything that happens to everyone, everywhere. There is always a tragedy somewhere in the world for us to worry about: a flood, an explosion, a tsunami, an earthquake, a shooting, an aeroplane crash, a murder. If you are a caring person, the constant barrage of disturbing news can be, well, disturbing. I have given up watching the TV news. And I only rarely buy newspapers. I no longer expose myself to a daily diet of misery. This is not because I am disinterested in the problems of the world — I fight for the things I believe in and I read enough news magazines and news agency summaries to know about the important things going on in the world. But I know that I can only cope with so much misery and sadness.

I protect myself because if I allowed myself to be subjected to a constant daily diet of misery and horror I would not be able to cope — or have the strength to fight for the things in which I believe.

I don't know whether there is any more violence or horror in the world today than there was five hundred years ago. I suspect not. But that is an academic and irrelevant question. The point is that modern communications methods make these horrors available to us all on an hourly basis. At any one time there are around forty wars going on around the world. All these wars — and the accompanying horrors — are brought into our homes through the magic of television.

Modern communications techniques mean that you and I receive more information every day than our ancestors had to cope with in years. Television gives us instant access to other people's pain.

Our brains are constantly hurrying to process information. When human beings are overexposed to information and stimulation they become anxious and, eventually, mentally ill.

When much of that information is depressing and disturbing the response is even faster.

Naturally, the more sensitive and thoughtful the individual the greater will be their potential susceptibility to this type of stress.

(The people who do cruel things do not feel bad about anything much. If they were the sort to feel bad they would not do the things they do. In our world the sensitive suffer for everyone while the ruthless simply go from strength to strength because they genuinely don't care and don't suffer.)

I believe that one of the reasons why so many people do not seem to care these days is that they are protecting themselves by deliberately staying aloof and not allowing themselves to respond to the world around them. People numb themselves and suppress their emotions in order to survive. They become unfeeling because they are overexposed to horror and they simply cannot cope. They close their eyes and their hearts to protect themselves (and because the horrors they see and hear about are endless they do not believe they can do anything that will make a difference).

Many people have become so immune to awful news that they need extremely strong stimulation to make them sit up and take notice.

The growth and popularity of documentaries and dramas based on violence, crime and miscellaneous horrors is a symptom of the new need for constant excitement and stimulation.

People who are unmoved by genuine tragedy are naturally unmoved by what they see on their TV screens — even if it includes real live human beings being arrested or being treated in hospital.

Television chat shows used to be vehicles for movie stars to tell engaging anecdotes; these days they are full of angry people talking without shame or embarrassment about their unhappy sex lives, sharing their hostility for their neighbours and blaming their parents for their misery.

And I have a suspicion that the popularity of realistic horror movies among young people these days is merely a sign of the fact that they have become immune to ordinary fears and terrors.

The horror movies that were popular a few decades ago would not frighten today's teenagers in the way that they frightened my generation.

Today's teenagers and children need new horrors to stimulate their deadened imaginations.

We feed our children a constant diet of horror, abuse and violence and then express surprise when they become violent themselves.

If you want to stay alert but sensitive to the world's problems then I suggest that you too limit your exposure to news programmes. Limiting your exposure to the daily diet of horror and injustice will enable you to retain the strength to do what you can to fight for truth and justice.

82. I have learned that it is important to buy organic food — food prepared without carcinogenic chemicals — whenever possible. (And I have learned to ignore the 'official' reports which tell me that it is a waste of money to do so.)

Nearly half of all the food sold in supermarkets and stores — including fruits, vegetables, bread and meat — contains potentially dangerous pesticide residues. Some chemicals are sprayed onto foods which are being picked or shipped to the stores but many chemicals are absorbed when foods are growing and obviously cannot be removed by washing or scraping. Some of the chemicals used by modern farmers are known to cause cancer, asthma and a wide variety of other serious disorders.

Meat is contaminated partly because of the chemicals which are given to animals (to keep them 'healthy' and to make them grow more speedily) and partly because of the chemicals which are put into or onto the food they eat.

Organic food is grown without the use of artificial fertilizers and pesticides and the extra money you have to pay for such food is extremely well spent. Organic farmers use natural fertilisers (such as animal manure and seaweed) and rely on natural biological pest controllers, though some use natural plant-based pesticides.

Moreover organic farmers also grow crops in rotation so that their soil is kept in good condition. Growing the same crop year after year in the same massive field probably makes good commercial sense but it means that the food produced will be lower in nutritional value.

Organic food is more expensive because farmers who use artificial fertilisers and chemicals to kill bugs, insects and infections can produce bigger, more reliable, more uniform, more predictable and more attractive looking crops. Organic farmers, who have to rely on growing food the way nature intended, tend to have smaller crops and they are more likely to lose their crop through disease.

When buying food and looking for organic produce you should check labels carefully and make sure that you find good, reliable local suppliers. Many organic farmers sell their produce direct to the public and in cities there are now many shops (and even some supermarkets) selling organic produce, either as an alternative to food grown with the aid of chemicals or alongside such produce.

I have learned that many of the people who so insistently tell us all that organic food isn't worth buying have a vested interest in promoting food that has been grown with the aid of chemicals.

83. I have learned that it is important to know what makes me happy — and that sometimes moments of happiness have to be planned.

Do you know what makes you happy? Do you know when you are happy? How many moments of happiness did you have last week?

You have to make time for happiness. You have to be ready for it. And you have to work at it.

When the good times come you have to make a real effort to enjoy them; to look around and take notice of the world so that you can savour and remember your happiness (and use it to keep you going when the times get rough).

Ask yourself these simple questions — you might find the answers illuminating.

What in your life gives you most fun? How much time do you spend doing it?

What in your life gives you most pain? How much time do you spend doing that?

Assess all the influences on your life and ask yourself how these things contribute to your life and potential for enjoyment and satisfaction.

Consider each influence and ask yourself: 'Should I discard it or give it more of my energy?'

84. I have learned that the most valuable commodity in the world is not gold, money or diamonds — but time.

You can't take minutes from tomorrow to replace those lost today. No one can give you back the minutes that have been wasted on petty nonsenses.

'Lost wealth may be replaced by industry, lost knowledge by study, lost health by temperance or medicine,' said Victorian author Samuel Smiles, 'but lost time is gone for ever.'

I had a telephone call from my friend J. He is a Zulu. He was on his way to Australia and called me from Bangkok. He told me that his plane had been delayed for nine hours.

'Oh, how awful!' I said, sympathetically. I always hate delays.

'What do you mean?' asked J. He sounded puzzled.

'The delay,' I explained. 'It must be awfully frustrating for you.'

'Not particularly,' replied J, sounding as ever calm, relaxed and unflustered. 'The delay is all part of the travelling. It is part of the experience. It means I have more time at the airport. I can read and talk and ring you.'

'But it's annoying to be so late,' I said.

'A few decades ago this journey would have taken me weeks,' replied J. 'What is nine hours?'

'Aren't you worried that you will be late for your meeting?' I asked him.

'The meeting cannot take place until I get there,' said J. 'How can I be late for it?'

Most people abhor waste. They squeeze the last few bits of toothpaste from the toothpaste tube, they use up scraps of soap and they scribble down thoughts and notes on the backs of old envelopes.

And yet most of us regularly waste something which is much more valuable than money: time.

Einstein may have proved that time is an illusion; malleable and fragile. But on a day to day basis time is important. And yet we waste it in a thousand different ways. We waste it gossiping. We waste it performing pointless and repetitive chores, many of which could be ignored completely. How many people in your life do you waste time with? How many of these relationships add value to your life? What do you offer to them that makes their lives better and what do they offer to you that makes your life better?

Wandering around in Paris recently I stopped in front of a complex window display involving mannequins, streamers and a hundred or so brightly coloured balloons. I haven't the faintest idea what the shop was selling. But the window display was terribly impressive. It must have taken days to design and put together.

A smartly dressed woman in her thirties was on her knees carefully dusting the balloons; meticulously wiping each tautly stretched rubber sphere with a damp cloth. The balloons weren't overtly 'dirty'. I'd walked past the shop a day or two earlier and the display hadn't been there then. But someone in authority had obviously been alarmed by the possibility that one or two of the balloons might have been defiled by a few specks of dust.

I felt deeply sorry for that woman in the shop window. It was, I felt, one of the most futile things I had ever seen anyone doing.

I found myself imagining the conversation she might have with her husband when she got home that evening.

'What have you done today, love?' I imagined I heard her husband ask. 'How did your day go?'

'I am exhausted,' I heard her reply wearily, in a husky, sexy, French tobacco stained voice. 'I have been dusting balloons all day.'

How terribly sad. What an entirely pointless activity.

It may sound rather comical but, the truth is that we all do some balloon dusting. We waste valuable energy, hard earned money and irreplaceable time on activities which do nothing whatsoever to improve our lives or anyone else's life.

Take a good hard look at the way you've spent your time, money and energy during the last week.

Which activities are you proud of?

And which were simply a waste of time?

How much of your life do you spend 'dusting balloons'?

The simple truth is that time is worth much more than money and is far too valuable to waste. For your own sake fill your life with passion and determination and leave the balloons undusted. It is extraordinary to see just what you can do with those ignored and forgotten moments. (To paraphrase a well-known saying I cannot resist the temptation to point out that in order to look after the hours it is only necessary to look after the minutes).

Many men have learnt a language while travelling to work and numerous books have been written in the period while waiting for dinner to be served. One well-known authoress wrote her first book while working as a governess. She wrote only in the time she spent waiting for her charge to turn up for lessons. Stephenson (of rocket fame) taught himself mathematics while working as an engineman during nightshifts. In his meal breaks he would work out sums. He used a piece of chalk for a pen and the side of a colliery wagon for a blackboard. Dr Darwin wrote down the thoughts which immortalised him while travelling from house to house in the country and Dr Mason Good translated Lucretius while riding in his carriage and visiting his patients around the streets of London.

I don't know whether it is still there but there used to be a message on the clock dial at a college in Oxford, England which read 'The hours perish and are laid to our charge'.

Just think for a moment what you could do if you had an extra hour every day of your life. And yet the chances are that you could easily find another hour a day — simply by cutting out waste. Do a little time and motion study on your life and see just where the minutes and the hours get frittered away. Take a cool, hard look at the way you waste your time doing things that really don't matter very much at all. The time spent (or rather wasted) on daily chores and rituals can quickly add up.

Assuming that you start at 20 and live to be 75 you will:

* Waste a total of 17 weeks if you spend 1 hour a week cleaning the car. (Why not let it stay dirty?)

* Waste a total of 34 weeks if you spend 2 hours a week cutting the lawn. (Let the grass grow and turn your garden into a wildlife reserve.)

* Waste a total of 40 days and nights if you spend 20 minutes a week ironing socks. (Why bother to iron socks?)

* Waste a total of well over 3 years if you spend 10 hours a week sitting in traffic jams. (Is your job really worth sacrificing so much of your life? Can't you find work nearer to home?)

* Waste a total of 836 days and nights of your life if you spend one hour a day Hoovering and dusting. (Hoover and dust for one hour a week instead of one hour a day and you will, effectively gain 716 days — that's equivalent to

living an extra two years.)

* Waste a total of 3,345 days and nights of your life if you spend four hours a day watching TV. Cut your TV watching in half and you'll have an extra 239 weeks in which to do other things. That's like living for more than another four years. Although 'self improvement' is today widely despised by the pseudo intellectuals, you could learn a foreign language, write a book and become skilled at a favourite sport in that time.

85. I have learned that we all have to have a purpose for living.

A strong man without direction can be defeated by a child who has purpose.

People who have no real purpose in their lives quickly become bored and weary.

The rich who choose not to work often become desperately unhappy. Some simply drink too much. Others try to convince themselves (and others) that their dilettante charitable works are giving their lives meaning.

Lottery winners who are unable to adjust their minds to the new possibilities their wealth offers them often end up going back to their humdrum pre-wealth jobs in order to escape the boredom they feel.

Passion and purpose are vital. Without them life is meaningless. Moderation is not a virtue. Remember that it matters not how you live and die, but why you live and die.

Most people go through their lives without ever finding a purpose or without ever defining a plan. They get what they settle for. They never know what they want to do — or why. Their lives are governed by a series of accidents. They choose courses at school simply because their friends are doing those courses — or because they like the teachers. They choose jobs because they are convenient. They go through their lives with no sense of direction, no realistic hopes or expectations and no sense of purpose. It is hardly surprising that they constantly feel disappointed and frustrated.

Find what you want to do — and then do it the way you want to do it. Find, know and then be constant to your purpose in life. Set your own goals and define your aims and objectives. Decide what you want out of life and then make sure that you're going in the right direction.

Look around and you will see the passionless many, chilled of hope and overflowing with superficial responsibilities.

You can do better with your life.

You must decide what you want out of life because without purpose there can be no passion or drive. And remember that only when you have found a cause (or several causes) worth dying for will you really know the joy of living.

86. I have learned not to believe everything I read, see or hear.

History is not necessarily what happened. History is, to a very large extent, simply what has been reported as having happened. History — and the 'truth' — are what people believe and remember. History — whether it be personal, national or international — is made up of memories, interpretations, feelings and prejudices rather than the original facts. We do not remember what happened so much as what we think happened and how we responded to what we think happened.

All this is important because it means that our knowledge and understanding of our personal, national and global history depends very much upon the way we appreciate and respond to the facts of our personal, national and global experiences.

Since the way we 'see' and 'hear' the news depends very much upon our knowledge and our past experiences, it is clear that if we are to form a lucid view of the world (in all its aspects) we need to be presented with reliable, trustworthy information.

This does not happen. It is now almost impossible to get hold of trustworthy news about significant events through the normal media. Most people think they get the truth by reading, listening to and watching newspapers and radio and television news programmes. Sadly, however, they don't get the truth: they get what the editors want them to read. Editors and journalists are these days increasingly likely to run corporate press releases as news stories. (It's quicker and cheaper than researching news stories and far less likely to produce lawsuits or controversy.)

Several decades ago I revealed that some medical magazines were accepting 'advertising' as editorial. Today, at least one newspaper has been found guilty of doing this. It is simply no longer possible to buy a newspaper and expect to have an honest understanding of what is going on in the world when you have read it.

If you buy all the newspapers and news magazines available on any one day you will see different stories, different emphasis, different facts and different interpretations — within the stories which are supposed to be 'news' stories. A story which hits the headlines in one paper might not appear in any other papers at all.

We are, in practice, fed a rich diet of lies, half truths and propaganda. Newspapers, radio stations and television stations are usually either government controlled or dependent upon advertisers. Many are little more than parts of show business. In order to stay in business they have to sell their product. If they don't attract readers, listeners and viewers by making sure that their presentation of the news is exciting and 'sexy' they will lose money and go out of business.

Crowds either destroy or worship the object of their attention. And they can turn on a whim. The individual who is, at one moment, a hero can easily become a villain. Newspapers are much like crowds. They can turn a villain into a hero or a hero into a villain in the printing of a page. A journalist friend once told me a story which illustrated this fact well. Late one day the newspaper for which he worked received a story about an ordinary man who had done something to attract public attention. The details of the story are irrelevant. The newspaper's first inclination was to turn the man into a hero. They planned to publish a photograph and a story drawing the attention to the wonderful thing this man had done. But as they planned their story another story came into the newsroom. And the individual who was at the centre of this story was even more of a hero than the first person. And so, because the newspaper did not want to have two heroes on its pages, the editors turned the first man into a villain. A man who had, a moment or two earlier, been a hero in waiting now became a villain in waiting. He was attacked and vilified for doing the very same things for which, a moment or two earlier, they had been planning to praise him. And a man's life was ruined simply so that the newspaper editors could 'balance' the stories on their pages. Remember this next time you read any newspaper story. Depending upon the way in which it is written virtually any individual can be described as both a hero and a villain. Today's newspapers are merely comics for grown-ups.

All around the world those who read broadsheet (as opposed to tabloid) newspapers are rather naively convinced that they are getting the real facts. Sadly, this simply isn't true. The broadsheets publish exactly the same gossip and pre-packaged public relations fodder as everyone else. Indeed, the tabloids usually offer a more honest approach to most issues. There are two reasons for this. First, the journalists working for tabloid newspapers are of an infinitely higher quality. It is quite common for broadsheet journalists, columnists and contributors to 'graduate' to writing for a tabloid — where the pay is invariably much better — but almost unheard of for a tabloid journalist, columnist or contributor to take the step down to a broadsheet. Second, because tabloid newspapers tend to sell far more copies than broadsheets — and earn a considerable part of their income from the cover price — the publishers are usually less susceptible to pressure from advertisers than are the proprietors of broadsheet newspapers. Broadsheet publishers are less likely than tabloid editors to be prepared to annoy any large, powerful, rich companies. Finally, because they have acres of space to fill, and are therefore more likely to end up reprinting news releases and information handouts, broadsheets are, like television news programmes, a lobbyists dream.

Most mass-market news reporting, whether published in tabloid newspapers, broadsheet newspapers or magazines, or broadcast on the wireless or on television, is now biased and prejudiced. That wouldn't matter so much if the bias was open and the prejudice was visible. But the bias is frequently covert and the prejudice is rarely open. Those with vested interests to support (for example, the food industry and the drug industry) construct theories to support what they do and systematically and deliberately stimulate and encourage existing fears and prejudices which are to their advantage. Journalists then obediently and politely regurgitate these prejudices as though they were fact.

Today, all mechanisms for spreading information are used almost exclusively to spread views which, true or false, will strengthen a belief in the rightness of decisions taken by those in authority. Information that could cause doubt is withheld or suppressed. Every time you read a story in a newspaper or see a news programme on television you should ask yourself 'Who did that story benefit?' 'Why did they tell me that?' Acquire and nurture a healthy suspicion about the news media.

Those who write and speak on behalf of the fascists and totalitarians ensure that language is perverted. Words are changed so that meanings are hidden. Propaganda destroys the morals of the people because it undermines the basic foundation of all moral values — the truth. And the sad end result is that people often do not feel oppressed because they are thinking as they were taught to think — they do not see anything wrong in the world around them. They do not think for themselves because they have not been taught to think for themselves and it does not occur to them that they are entitled to think for themselves.

There are many influences which determine the extent, depth and direction of bias and prejudice in the media.

Some, such as the influence from advertisers ('If you publish/broadcast that story we will pull our advertising') is often direct, simple in operation and easy to understand.

Some, such as the influence from proprietors, shareholders and owners is rather more subtle but just as dangerous and certainly just as (if not more) effective. The proprietor or company chairman who has a global operation and who is hoping to do a deal with a government in one part of the world is unlikely to be pleased if one of his newspapers or television stations elsewhere in the world publishes an attack on that same government. Wise editors and producers make it their business to know the deals their proprietors and company bosses are involved in — the hidden agendas which they must take care to respect — for they know that if they are too ‘independent’ they will simply find themselves being replaced. (In order to avoid a public outcry this is usually done by promoting the individual who has transgressed to some superior position which sounds impressive and carries a large salary but has no editorial power. Within a few months the individual concerned can be eased out into the cold.)

Television is almost certainly the weakest and most unreliable source of information — and yet it is to television that most people turn when they want the ‘facts’. People feel comfortable with the television. They trust it because they can look at the pictures and think that they are seeing what is happening. And yet television is, generally speaking, pretentious, precious, self-congratulatory and superficial. An ability to smile and banter, bouffant hair, capped teeth and a certain sexual chemistry with a colleague are infinitely more important than irrelevant old-fashioned nonsenses such as a respect for truth and justice. Like radio, television is constrained by the fact that every story must be read out aloud. This means that a fifteen minute bulletin is unlikely to contain more than around 1,000 words of text. And that means compacting and summarising world events in a way which inevitably distorts. A television or radio news programme will contain far fewer words than a page or two in a tabloid newspaper.

It is its very dependence upon pictures which is television’s main weakness. Because there are often no pictures of major news items (there clearly cannot possibly be a camera crew on hand whenever an embassy is stormed, a riot starts, an aeroplane crashes or a road accident occurs) the television team in the studio usually has two alternatives: either to use film and pictures taken from their library (often without saying that the film is stock footage taken some time earlier) or to adapt the news priorities to fit the available pictures — demoting in the running order the story of the demonstration in China or the earthquake in India and leading the news bulletin with the pre-arranged event for which there is fresh, new film.

Most of the film stories television stations show have been arranged in advance. If the TV crew is there, and filming, it is almost certainly because their editor sent them there. And he or she sent them there because the news team received an invitation. Television is the public relations officer’s dream, the lobbyist’s perfect medium. A television news programme can be played like a piano. The lobbyist or public relations officer thinks up a good film opportunity, invites the TV crews and sits back and waits for the little bit of luck which is needed to ensure that his item gets a good showing on the programme.

People who work in television do their very best to hide all the truth about their own shortcomings from the public. They will frequently run stories complaining about the way in which newspapers (particularly the tabloid newspapers) have dealt with a story when in practice their own method of dealing with the story has been every bit as intrusive, one-sided and unfair as the tabloid treatment. I have seen television programmes complaining about press intrusion which have shown a crowd of press photographers and described them as ghouls. Neither the television news teams nor the viewers seem to have identified the television cameraman, sound man and the rest of the film crew as being part of the rabble.

It is much easier to distort the truth on television than in just about any other medium. By holding the camera on an interviewee for a long period of time or by switching the camera to the interviewee in an unguarded moment it is possible to give a totally misleading impression of the interviewee. And if all else fails it is easy enough to edit out the interviewee’s wise, sound, sensible or witty responses and keep in only the dull, inarticulate or stumbling remarks. If that still doesn’t satisfy the requirements of the editor or producer, or the vanity of the presenter, it is quite easy to cut in some sharp, cutting or incisive remarks from the interviewer at a later stage. Anyone who appears on a recorded television programme must inevitably trust the integrity of the television team.

Viewers tend to forget that television is primarily an entertainment medium.

You will probably not be surprised to hear that, in my view, books, preferably published by small, thoroughly independent publishers, are now the most reliable, independent source of information and news.

But the growing number of genuinely independent newsletters which are now published and distributed throughout the world are also an excellent source of independent and reliable information about world, business and commercial affairs. The editors (often also the publishers and owners) of these newsletters usually have no paymasters other than their subscribers. They have no advertisers and no corporate responsibilities. They are frequently passionate and prejudiced but their passions and prejudices show and are not hidden. By subscribing to more than one of these newsletters it is possible to obtain a much greater insight into what is going on in the world than by reading daily newspapers or watching the television news.

87. I have learned that most people eat a terrible diet.

The first problem is that we have changed the type of food we eat faster than our bodies have been able to adapt.

We were designed (or slowly evolved) for a very different type of diet to the one most of us eat today. We were designed for a diet based on fruits and vegetables, supplemented occasionally with a small amount of lean meat. We weren’t designed to eat vast quantities of fatty meat and we weren’t designed to drink milk taken from another animal (and meant for its young).

Around 99.99% of our genetic material was formed when we were eating that sort of diet. But now most of us live on fatty meat, milky foods and cereals.

There were 100,000 generations of humans known as hunter-gatherers (living on fruits and vegetables they gathered and animals they occasionally managed to kill) and 500 generations dependent on agriculture (living on food grown on farms and animals reared in captivity).

There have been just ten generations of humans since the onset of the industrial age and just two generations have grown up with highly processed fast, junk food.

In an attempt to stay healthy most of us want to eat nutritious, healthy food that tastes good and does us good. We want to be able to pay a fair price for food that contains natural ingredients and, ideally, no chemical residues. If the food we are buying contains additives we would like to know what they are.

In order to make sure that we do our best to eat healthily we naturally put a lot of faith in the labels used to describe the food we eat.

Our faith is misplaced.

Encouraged and supported by governments, food companies lie, lie and lie again. Ordinary, everyday words such as ‘fresh’, ‘natural’, ‘wholesome’ and ‘nutritious’ are virtually meaningless.

Food companies are aware of our desire for genuinely good food and so they employ clever advertising and marketing ‘spin doctors’ to help disguise the way that the food they sell us is adulterated by behind-the-scene chemists.

If doctors told their patients the truth about food most of the world’s drug companies would virtually disappear within months. The market for heart drugs, high blood pressure drugs, anti-cancer drugs and so on would fall through the floor. Drug companies would be struggling along side by side with the buggy whip manufacturers.

And yet the advice about nutrition given to patients by doctors, nurses, nutritionists and dieticians is often appalling and frequently lethal. The food served in hospitals (where people are, it can safely be assumed, at their weakest and at their greatest need of wholesome, nutritious food) is almost universally inedible and customarily harmful to the patient. The food produced for patients is nothing more than unwholesome stodge, full of calories and fat and devoid of vitamins. You’re more likely to find salmonella or staphylococci in a plateful of hospital food than you are to find a vitamin.

Knowing all this it is hardly surprising that most of us are ill most of the time.

A healthy diet contains a good, regular supply of fruit and vegetables. Simple.

88. I have learned to take risks (but to calculate the odds first).

The saddest words in any language are: ‘If only...’, ‘It might have been...’ and ‘I wonder what would have happened if...’.

Make two lists. On the first list write down all the errors you have committed and which you now regret; the mistakes you know that you have made and which you now wish you could have avoided. On the second list write down all the errors of omission you have made; the things you haven’t done but which you now wish you had done.

Whichever list is the longer will tell you a great deal about yourself — and will, perhaps, give you a hint about how you should conduct your life in the future.

If your first list is the longest then maybe you are being a little reckless — and taking too many risks. But if the second list is the longest (and many people are surprised to find that this is the case) then you should perhaps be taking more risks.

Most of us regard risk taking as both hazardous and unnecessary. And many people would say that they try to avoid risks whenever they can. Some people probably seriously believe that they are wise in constantly doing all they can to eradicate risk from their lives.

But taking risks is a necessary and unavoidable part of life. Every decision worth making is potentially dangerous. There is a risk in every venture you undertake — personal, professional or commercial.

Every time you get out of bed or walk out of your home you are taking a risk. Every time you make an investment you are taking a risk. (Despite words such as ‘guaranteed’ there is no such thing as a safe investment. Even a government bond can be risky if the government falls.) Every time you begin a new relationship or a new business project you are taking a risk. It is impossible to live without taking risks.

But what you can do is to make an attempt to quantify the risks before beginning any new venture. Only when you have quantified the risks can you make a sound judgement about whether or not an individual risk is worth taking. You must put risks into perspective. I know of a man who takes vitamin supplements because he believes that the vitamin will help reduce his risk of developing cancer. But he smokes heavily. If he really wants to reduce his cancer risk he would be much better advised to stop smoking.

One of the great tragedies of life is that we tend to take fewer risks as we get older. We become more wary of danger and more aware of the things that can go wrong. The danger is that a preoccupation with safety may reduce the possibility of success.

We should take more — not less — risks as we get older. After all, as we age we have less to lose. Regularity, habit and commonsense tend to paralyse. But not taking risks is, paradoxically, sometimes the most dangerous option.

You should learn to take risks which have the highest possible upside and the lowest possible downside. In order to succeed you have to be able to assess risks accurately. You should learn from your own mistakes but (and this is just as important) you should also learn from other people's mistakes.

Knowing the bottom line leads to confidence which leads to success.

89. I have learned how important it is that food is prepared and cooked carefully to reduce the risk of infection and to preserve the nutritional content.

Your body's immune system needs supplies of vitamins and minerals in order to function effectively. In particular, in order to help build up your immune system and fight off infections and cancer your body needs regular, good supplies of foods which contain anti-oxidants (beta carotene, vitamin C and vitamin E) and other substances.

The modern 'meat, butter, cheese, milk' diet is death to your body's immune system not just because those foods are rich in fat but also because they don't contain much in the way of immune boosting vitamins and minerals.

The healthiest, safest, most efficient and most effective way to obtain the vitamins and minerals you need is to get them from the food you eat. If you eat a good diet you won't have to worry about Recommended Daily Allowances or which sort of supplements to buy.

Your body will get the vitamins and minerals it needs to keep your immune system healthy if you eat a diet which is rich in vegetables, fruits and grains.

However, it is vital to be aware that vitamins can easily be destroyed. Mushrooms, lettuce, broccoli, asparagus and strawberries, for example, all lose their vitamins very quickly. Food which has to be cooked should be cooked for the shortest possible time and at the lowest possible temperature. In order to ensure that the food you eat retains a high vitamin content — and to minimise the risk of acquiring an infection from your food — you should follow these simple rules:

1. Food processing tends to reduce the nutritional quality of food and so where possible you should try to buy fresh food and either eat it raw (if appropriate) or eat it after cooking for the shortest length of time. (And all food should, of course, be thoroughly washed before eating.)

2. Buy vegetables whole. Don't have the leaves removed from carrots or the stalk removed from a cabbage or cauliflower. If you buy the vegetable whole vitamin C will continue to be produced and moved into the edible parts of the plant.

3. Cook foods in the minimum amount of water or steam.

4. Avoid high cooking temperatures and long heat exposure.

5. Do not allow food to stand for long periods at room temperature. Do not store food in warm places.

6. Do not soak vegetables for long periods.

7. Do not peel fruit or vegetables unless necessary. (For example, do not peel apples or skin potatoes).

8. Try to use food the day you have bought it.

9. You can keep fresh products for longer by freezing as soon as you buy them. Deep freezing preserves vitamins and other nutrients. Vegetables should be blanched before freezing. Put them in hot water for a short time. This inactivates enzymes which might otherwise degrade vitamin C.

10. Do not allow food — particularly un-packaged fruit and vegetables, vegetable oils and milk — to stand in sunlight.

11. Make sure that your fridge is kept cold enough. The temperature inside your fridge should be below 3 degrees Centigrade.

12. Make sure that you wash your hands thoroughly before preparing food. Staphylococcus, for example, can be transmitted hand to hand.

13. Never refreeze food which has been previously frozen and then thawed. Thawing increases the number of bacteria and refreezing food increases the chances of infection.

14. If you eat meat make sure that it is completely thawed before you start to cook it. If you do not do this then the chances are that the middle of the meat will still be frozen when you start to cook it — and will not be properly cooked when the rest of the meat is ready. Meat which is raw will probably be full of bugs.

15. Keep foods apart from one another in your fridge in order to reduce the risk of cross contamination. If you eat meat (a high risk source of infection) then put it at the bottom of the fridge and keep it away from other foods.

16. Don't ever buy tins which are rusty, bulging or badly damaged.

90. I have learned that it is sometimes wisest to do nothing.

This is often difficult to do and may require some strength of will.

91. I have learned to use my imagination and my subconscious mind.

'It doesn't matter where you live,' said Henry David Thoreau, 'where you live is really in your head.'

You must develop and use your imaginative skills.

Most people are unimaginative. This is not because they do not have any imaginative skills but because they do not know how to use them. Many may be frightened of displaying any imagination.

When in prime condition you can use your imagination to rework and rearrange old ideas, to see potential where there is no apparent hope and to discover ways through when there seems to be an impasse. You can also use your imagination to create new ideas out of thin air. Newton, when he was asked how he had produced his great discoveries replied: 'I keep the subject continually before me and wait till the first dawnings open slowly little by little into a full and clear light.'

If you allow your imagination to develop you will soon realise that most of the things which most people regard as 'impossible' are not impossible at all. Eventually, you will come to regard the word 'impossible' as a challenge.

This will give you a tremendous advantage over all those people who think that the things you are planning to do are 'impossible'. Most people are far too aware of all the things which are impossible — and which they are convinced will not work. I suggest that you do not even allow the word 'impossible' to enter your mind. When deciding whether or not to do something ask yourself not: 'Is this impossible?' but 'Do I want to do this?' (And if you answer 'yes' to the second question use your imagination to help you decide how).

Your imagination has a far greater control over your life than you might realise. Put a piece of wood on the ground and try walking along it. Easy? Now, imagine that the piece of wood is suspended 1,000 feet above a swamp filled with alligators and try walking across it again. The more you can convince yourself that the piece of wood really is suspended above a swamp the more difficult you will find it to walk across.

Your imagination can work against you. But it can also work for you. You can use your imagination to help you achieve whatever you want. Create in your mind the idea of what you want. Hold the idea in your mind. Sum up what you want in a few words. Close your eyes and imagine yourself writing those words down on an imaginary blackboard.

Now think of all the relevant facts and information you have. Hold those facts in your mind. With your eyes still closed write down the facts and information on an imaginary blackboard. Then get on with something else.

When you think about your problem next you will find that your subconscious mind will have produced several possible answers.

If you have difficulty in getting your imagination to work then you should buy yourself a bundle of notebooks and a pile of pens and pencils. Use the pencils and notebooks to write down everything you think of — practical, thoughts, fears, hopes and ideas. Get into the habit of writing down everything which comes into your head. If you do this then you will free your mind and you will stimulate your imagination to work harder and more effectively.

Once you start carrying a notebook with you — and using it — you will have far more ideas than you can cope with!

Your imagination is the key to success. Your imagination is your mind's workshop. And your imagination will grow and develop the more you use it.

92. I have learned not to let people push me around.

Is there someone in your life who makes you feel inadequate? Your mother? Your boss? A sarcastic or manipulative friend? Do you know someone who always puts you down and makes you feel a loser? Such people can cause immense physical and mental distress — and even create illness.

Do you get pushed around a lot? Do you spend most of your time doing things that other people want you to do?

Are you spending your life the way you want to spend it? Are you spending your life with the people you want to be with — doing what you want to do?

To get the most out of your life you must be able to answer 'No' to the first two questions and 'Yes' to the second two questions.

Are you going in the right direction?

There are only three reasons to do anything: because it may improve the world for other people or animals; because it is fun; because it makes money.

Rate all the activities in your life for: fun, money, improving the world.

How will you spend next weekend? How much time will you spend doing things that you really want to do? And how much time will you spend doing things that you aren't looking forward to — but that other people want you to do?

Make two lists of how you're likely to spend your time.

On the first list put the things you're looking forward to — the things you'll enjoy.

On the second list put the things that you feel you ought to do, the things you think other people expect you to do and the things you're not looking forward to at all.

Put down everything: meals, TV programmes, visitors, parties, trips out, sports, chores.

Now see which list is longest.

If your second list is the longest then you need to stand up for yourself more and the chances are that you get pushed around a lot by just about everyone you know; friends, relatives and employers especially.

You probably do errands for people who could perfectly well do their own errands. You're probably the sort of person who gets lumbered with looking after the children while everyone else goes off to a party. You probably work overtime at a job you hate — without getting paid for it. You get the boring jobs when you're on a committee.

And you never dream of complaining when you get rotten service in shops and restaurants.

The chances are that you're too shy, too soft-hearted and too nice to complain or say 'no'. You don't stick up for yourself. And the chances are that your health is suffering.

I'm not suggesting that you try to turn yourself into a selfish bully.

But if you continue to allow other people to push you around — then the chances are that you'll not only end up physically and mentally worn out but you'll also become so frustrated, and acquire so much hidden anger and resentment, that you'll become physically ill.

Headaches, backache, eczema and indigestion are just four of the disorders you're most likely to suffer from.

Moreover, if you become ill then your tolerance for pain will be low and you'll take longer than you should to recover.

Learning how to assert yourself — and stick up for yourself — isn't difficult.

Here's my advice:

1. Remember that you're an individual and you have rights.

Of course you should try to help people who are less fortunate than you are. But don't let yourself be suckered into looking after people who can look after themselves. Thousands of mums spend their days acting as slaves for teenagers who could (and should) do more for themselves. You have a right to some fun in your life.

2. Stop apologising unnecessarily.

If you're always saying sorry and feeling guilty then people will for ever be taking advantage of you. Only say "sorry" when you really mean it. And remember: you're not responsible for what people think or believe. Your only responsibility is to be honest and true to yourself. You can do no more than that.

3. Build up your self-confidence.

Make a list of your assets. I don't mean cash but the really important things like knowledge, accomplishments, memories and skills.

4. Disarm your critic by agreeing with him.

When someone says: 'Your hair is a mess' just reply: 'Yes, I know.' Don't apologise. Don't try to find excuses. Just take the wind out of their sails by agreeing with them.

5. Don't let people label you.

If someone tells you that you are always unreliable or disorganised give some examples which show that you are just the opposite. If a critic tries to stick a label on you just refuse to accept it. If you are told that: 'You're always late' point out that you are late sometimes — but who isn't — but that most or much of the time you aren't late. If someone says you're clumsy, simply deny it but refuse to get into an argument.

6. Force your critic to expand and clarify their criticism.

Ask the critic to tell you exactly what they want you to do. People who moan and criticise are often not very good at offering practical advice. Chances are that you will put them on the defensive — you will certainly take the sting out of their attack. If someone says that you are inefficient ask them to tell you what their problem is so that you can deal with it. Invite them to give you more examples and keep inviting them to give you more examples.

7. Stay calm.

However angry or irate your critic gets you should stay cool. Eventually, there is a good chance that your critic will lose his or her temper. You can then (if you wish) retaliate by asking him or her why he or she is so touchy.

8. Remember that most bullies are physical cowards.

Be physically assertive. I don't mean that you should hit your critics. But stand up to them. Look them in the eye. Invade their personal space. Most bullies (and this is particularly true of emotional bullies) are cowards. Move closer to them and they'll probably feel uncomfortable, back away — and back down. Don't raise your voice but keep it firm.

9. Walk away or put the telephone down.

Refuse to get involved in a distressing argument. You don't have to put up with abuse from anyone.

10. Don't spend time with people who annoy you, constantly put you down or make you feel guilty.

I used to have a friend who was always putting me down. I liked him but I didn't like the way he seemed to feel it necessary to be constantly critical. I don't see him any more. Why waste your life on people who make your life miserable? I don't care who it is — colleague, friend or close relative — if they make you unhappy cut them out of your life.

11. Ignore gratuitous advice.

Just because someone tells you to do this, or suggests that you do that, you don't have to react. Say 'thank you' and then ignore them and do exactly what you want to do. If people offer minor criticisms, insults or sarcastic comments just ignore them. Stand up for yourself — you'll be healthier. Learn how to deal with toxic people — and how to handle people who make your life miserable or who make you feel inadequate. People can only push you around if you let them.

93. I have learned to be ready to adapt and to be always ready for change (because whether I like it or not change is coming).

Many people spend much of their energy trying to be in total control of their lives; trying to clear their desks and to get everything (relationships, belongings, work) just right.

This is a recipe for constant unhappiness and frustration because every time you think you have got your world sorted out some outside influence will come bursting in to disrupt things and you will lose control again.

The only constant upon which we can all rely is that tomorrow will be different to today and when tomorrow becomes today then tomorrow will, once again, be different.

Make yourself constantly adaptable to change and you will be in a far better position to survive. The moment you think you know the future and are in control, the moment you feel secure, that is the moment when the clock starts ticking on the unseen, unidentified, unexpected time bomb that will shatter your peace of mind. The moment you start to feel content, fate will start to smile.

You will only ever be in control of your life when you accept that you cannot have control and that change is a normal and acceptable part of life.

94. I have learned to use technology, rather than letting it use me. (And I have learned that you don't have to use it, just because it's been invented.)

Instead of giving us more freedom and greater opportunities, and instead of reducing our stress and making life easier, new equipment, such as computers, often creates more stress and greater pressure. As the pace of society increases, joy becomes increasingly elusive. We have to seek it out by taking conscious control of our lives, our time, and our priorities.

For example, the computer has made it possible for us to communicate far more speedily. Before the introduction of e-mail it would take several days to move a letter or a document from one desk to another. Today the same letter or document can be moved from one desk to another within seconds.

The result is that the recipient is under great pressure to respond speedily.

And so, in the end, everyone communicates far more frequently than they did before.

But the increase in the amount of communicating does not automatically result in an increase in the amount of profitable (in all senses of the word) endeavour. Creative (or profitable) work is constantly interrupted by trivial or meaningless e-mails. To avoid disappointing our correspondents, we feel that we have to stop what we are doing and reply to them.

Technology doesn't make life easier, it just makes life faster. Technology enables us to do more things and it enables us to do them more speedily but it doesn't enable us to do them better, easier or with more style. Because they are badly designed (by people who think they are brighter than they are) and oversold (by greedy people who are competing in a market which has traditionally put innovation above efficiency) computers will always do less than they are supposed to do. And they will always do it reluctantly and moodily.

Most of us are surrounded by labour saving gadgets which add to our daily stress rather than reducing it. Worse still, we often allow those gadgets to dominate our lives and our thinking. Telephones, fax machines and computers bring messages to us so quickly that we feel we must attend to them immediately.

But why should you always rush to answer the telephone or fax when it is inconvenient to do so, or when you really want to rest and relax? How many times in your life is it truly essential to produce an immediate response?

Many gadgets are expensive, complicated and unreliable. We fall for them because we believe they will make our lives easier. But often they do just the opposite.

Take a close look at every facet of your life. Throw out the gadgets which are more trouble than they are worth. Try not to bring equipment from work into your home area. And don't allow any sort of equipment (particularly communications equipment) to rule your life.

Don't be afraid to turn off telephones, television sets and computers. Make a real effort to use gadgets to improve your life — and reduce your workload.

And when you can feel yourself being pressurised into dealing with numerous apparently urgent and vital problems stop and ask yourself just how significant those problems will be in six months or six years time. That should help put the apparent urgency of those problems into perspective.

Just because the technology is available it doesn't necessarily follow that it is essential to use it — or, indeed, that it is or would be wise to use it.

Sometimes the simpler technologies are much better.

As I was writing this chapter I telephoned a friend who works in a very large organisation. She was out. The colleague who answered the telephone told me that he would leave a message on her computer.

'Exactly what do you mean by put a message on her computer?' I asked him.

'I'll scribble a note on a yellow sticky pad and put the note on her computer screen,' said the wise man.

95. I have learned to be always prepared to ask dumb sounding questions. You can't afford not to ask them. Asking dumb questions requires courage.

And I'm prepared to bet that when you ask the dumb sounding question other people around you will breathe a sigh of relief that you've asked the question they wanted to ask but didn't have the nerve.

96. I have learned how to bamboozle bureaucrats.

Bureaucrats are the true plague of the 21st century. Honoré de Balzac said that bureaucracy is a great machine operated by pigmies. Knowing how to deal with them effectively is vital. Here are two examples of simple ways in which you can deal with bureaucrats.

1. Use their own rules against them.

When I was a general practitioner a bureaucrat called to say that he would be collecting, and taking away, all the medical records in my possession. He said that he had to take them away to check for some inexplicable, incomprehensible but documented bureaucratic reason. (Bureaucrats always have inexplicable, incomprehensive but documented reasons for what they do). I told him that he couldn't take them away. I said I needed the medical records in order to treat my patients and that even if I didn't need the medical records I regarded them as confidential. The bureaucrat said if I looked at the bottom of each medical records envelope I would see that the medical records belonged to the Minister of Health and that he, as the Minister's representative, was therefore entitled to take the records with him. With a flash of inspiration I told him that he could take the medical records — but that he would have to leave the ink behind. 'The medical records may belong to the Minister,' I explained. 'But the ink is mine.' The bureaucrat thought about this for a while, consulted some colleagues and then went away and did not come back.

2. Remember — and use the fact — that bureaucrats are terrified of responsibility.

When patients move from one part of the country to another, and therefore from one practice to another their medical records follow them at a far more leisurely pace. It is not unknown for medical records to take several months to make a journey of just a few miles. If you allowed the medical records to make their own way they would probably get to their destination more speedily. On one occasion a new patient, a diabetic, needed treatment. I did not have her medical records. I telephoned her previous doctor. He could not remember anything useful about the patient's condition or treatment. But, he said, all the information I needed was on her medical records which he had dispatched to his layer of bureaucrats some days earlier. I telephoned his bureaucrats. They told me that the medical records had been sent to my local bureaucrats. I telephoned my local bureaucrats. They agreed that they had the medical records in question. A bureaucrat confirmed that they were, as we spoke, sitting on her desk. I pointed out, politely, that I needed them urgently. The bureaucrat said that it would be another week or so before I could have them. I explained that the situation was rather more urgent than that. I said I would drive over to the bureaucrat's office to retrieve the medical records. The bureaucrat said I could not do that. I asked if I could drive over to examine the records without taking them away. The bureaucrat said I could not do that either. I then told the bureaucrat that if the medical records were not on my desk within thirty minutes, and the patient concerned died, I would put the bureaucrat down on the death certificate as a contributory cause of death. The medical records were on my desk within thirty minutes. The bureaucrat brought them in person by taxi. I had discovered the single most important truth about bureaucrats: they do not like responsibility. A vampire will recoil at the sign of the cross. A bureaucrat will recoil at the threat of responsibility.

97. I have learned that it is important to ignore (at least some of) the rules.

In any society there will always be people who like creating their own mini laws — called rules. As our society becomes increasingly complex (in many different ways) so there are more and more excuses for small-minded people to create new rules; many of which serve only to substantiate the power and influence of the people who create them. As Thoreau said, any fool can make a rule. And every fool will mind it.

Some rules are self-imposed. People create their own rules out of routine and tradition. When you ask people why they are doing something a particular way, you will often hear the answers: 'That's the way I was taught' or 'Because that's the way we do it.' Those are little more than excuses for avoiding thought. Most people are shackled and constrained by many invisible, non-existent, self-imposed beliefs and rules which they have created for themselves, or which they have allowed others to create for them.

Most rules come from bureaucrats. Bureaucrats love rules. In particular they love rules which enable them to say 'no'. Most local and central government departments now follow the Russian way of doing things: 'If we don't say you can do it then you can't do it.'

The waves of legislation are not going to stop crashing onto our shores.

Most of the most recent, and egregiously illogical, legislation which has affected our lives has come from Brussels, on behalf of the European Union.

You should not be afraid of ignoring, breaking or sidestepping the bureaucrat's rules (as long as you can do so without breaking the law, of course). If you can think of a new, different and possibly better way to do something then don't be afraid to try it. You may astound yourself and the rest of the world. Your own conscience should be the only rule maker you always obey. The only person you really have to be responsible to is yourself.

You might find it a revealing, enlightening and ultimately liberating exercise to make a list of all the rules which run your life. Include the rules which govern your personal life as well as those which run your business life.

When you have compiled your list write the question 'Why?' by each rule. And try to decide where all those rules originated. Many of the rules which still run your personal life will have doubtless originated with your parents and schoolteachers. Some will have originated with a previous employer. Some you will have absorbed, as though by osmosis, from friends. And many you will have acquired from 'Society'.

Every time you think of, or come across, another rule ask yourself whether the rule is essential or avoidable. Ask yourself whether the rule adds quality to your life. And ask yourself whether or not there are alternatives.

Many rules are designed to stop us doing things. Others simply convince us that we cannot do things, that we aren't good enough and that we are doomed to be poor and to fail if we do not satisfy certain preconceived conditions. What nonsense rules are.

Remember that there is no such thing as impossible. The impossible is merely the limit of your imagination.

Modern scientists, invariably working for corporations and government sponsored research organisations, say that something is impossible when what they really mean is that they don't understand it and cannot explain it according to the existing rules — and that they are, therefore, more than a little frightened by it.

Don't allow yourself to be constrained by the rules — or by other people's views of what is or is not possible. You do not have to do things the way others do them. You can play the game of life by any rules you like. If you are going to get anywhere in life then ignoring at least some of the rules is almost a prerequisite.

The number of absurd rules and unhelpful regulations controlling our lives will continue to increase until or unless the European Union is disbanded.

98. I have learned that in order to banish my fears I must first know what I am afraid of.

A little fear is a good thing. Fear helps us stay alive.

I remember a skiing holiday I took a few years ago. I had only been skiing once before and was with a group of beginners but within minutes of arriving on the slopes for the first time I found myself standing at the top of an extremely steep and nasty looking slope.

Everyone in my group of novice skiers expressed alarm and fear. Our very young ski instructor laughed at us and told us that he knew no fear and that we should also have no fear. I (and the other members of my group) quickly abandoned him. I have a rule never to do anything potentially hazardous in the company of someone who does not know fear.

But not all fear is good, useful or welcome.

Fear is one of the most potent, all-pervasive and destructive forces in our society. Fear will stop you thinking and may interfere with the way you behave. Animals, who can smell fear, know that it is a sign of weakness.

Fear, worry and anxiety lead to fatigue and exhaustion and to mental, physical and spiritual illness. (The real paradox here is that a fear of illness can create illness).

It is because they fear what others will or might say that so many people make themselves ill with work in order to buy new and fashionable motor cars, clothes and gadgets they do not really need. Fear, together with indecision and doubt, is a major enemy of success.

Many people say, boldly and almost defiantly, that they fear nothing. They are either lying or deluding themselves. Everyone fears something. We fear anything which controls or handicaps us physically, spiritually or mentally.

Conquering your fears is a vital step on the road to liberating your spirit and reaching personal freedom. But before you can conquer your fears you must first know exactly what those fears are. You must examine yourself and analyse your fears. Fears which are not confronted will grow and grow and eventually destroy you.

Most modern human fears are created by the culture in which we live. Naturally, we are susceptible to the basic, commonplace fears which affect other members of the animal kingdom. We fear hunger and pain, for example. But we also fear sickness, poverty, imprisonment, lack of freedom, loneliness and unemployment. We fear cancer, financial min, secret exposure and jealousy. We fear losing love and we fear failure.

We even fear getting old.

Many who fear old age spend much of their time and money on trying to look younger than they are. Others simply apologise for their age and use it as an excuse for everything that others criticise. Those who are most conscious of the effects of age, and most worried about ageing, are, inevitably, the ones who are most likely to suffer the adverse effects of old age. The fear of old age inevitably also includes the fears of poverty, death, ill health and pain and a loss of financial and physical freedom and independence.

And yet the fear of old age can to a large extent be eliminated by accepting it as a blessing, by realising that you have understanding and wisdom that you didn't have when you were young.

We fear criticism, rejection and ridicule too. This type of fear is the basis of all kinds of modern fashions. When we buy our clothes, motor cars, jewellery and household furnishings we are conscious of the fact that if we choose the wrong items we may arouse the contempt of those around us. We are afraid that they will laugh at us if we buy the wrong things.

A fear of criticism robs a man of imagination, self-reliance and initiative. A fear of criticism is one of the main reasons why most people never move from their rut.

One of the commonest of all fears is that of poverty. Fear of poverty is a powerful and destructive state of mind which can destroy reason, self-reliance, imagination, enthusiasm, ambition and determination. We fear poverty because we know that few things bring as much suffering and humiliation. We fear poverty because we know that there are many cruel and rapacious individuals (and corporations) in the world who will take our money away from us without compunction — and others who will then take advantage of us and persecute us because of our poverty.

A fear of poverty often makes decision making difficult and deadens ambition; it creates pessimism and breeds doubts and excuses. Many people who worry about becoming poor spend a lot of their time planning what to do if a venture fails. They tend to procrastinate and be over cautious. And, not surprisingly, they are often also cautious about committing themselves to anything that might prove hazardous.

Our fear of poverty is enhanced by the fact that we are taught by our society that money is the key to all happiness.

Although it is undoubtedly true that money can buy some of the freedoms which lead to happiness, most people do not use money properly and certainly do not use it to buy freedom. On the contrary, most people do exactly the opposite — they give up their freedom to buy money and then spend the money they have acquired buying ‘things’ which imprison them in responsibilities.

Many people spend their lives afraid. They are afraid of illness, afraid of poverty, afraid of the boss, afraid of the doctor, afraid of work, afraid of their own shortcomings, afraid of mother, afraid of father, afraid of what the neighbours might think, afraid of not having any money, afraid of losing the money they do have, afraid of what strangers might say to one another about them, afraid of being unemployed and afraid of the police.

If it senses that you are afraid a dog will bark louder and be far more likely to bite. People are much the same. If you walk down the street timidly, showing fear, then the chances are much higher that you will be accosted or mugged. If you show fear then the children or youths you pass will be more likely to gather around and sneer and mock. Show fear and the hunt will be on.

Most people never do anything with their lives because they spend every day worrying and thinking and scheming about what has already happened (and about which they can do nothing) and what might happen (about which they can also do nothing).

They spend days and weeks and months and years rewriting history in their minds — or (and just as futile) trying to write a script for the future or to predict what will happen to them in one, five or ten years time. Far too much energy and effort is wasted worrying about what might go wrong and what other people will think if something does go wrong, and what the authorities might or might not do.

When you are worried about something ask yourself how much it really matters.

Does it really matter very much if your car has a scratch down the side or if you are seen in clothes which are not at the height of fashion? Does it really matter very much if you have to go out with a hole in your stocking? Is the world going to stop revolving if you make a bad speech? Will your business collapse if you go away for a few days?

In order to defeat your secret inner fears you must analyse them, find out what is behind them, bring them out into the open, confront them, look at them from every possible angle, examine them in detail, make them look silly and humiliate them.

You must always look at the bottom line to find out how much harm these hidden, secret fears can really do to you. What is the worst that can happen to you if such and such a fear comes to fruition? Facing and confronting the bottom line can be a powerful way to disembowel a fear, an anxiety or a worry.

What is the worst that can happen? Would the worst really be so bad?

Finally, find yourself a passion and a purpose that transcends ordinary life and you will find it much easier to forget the day to day problems which are otherwise likely to cause you so much distress. You will only achieve true freedom of your spirit when your life is frill and you aren’t frightened of anything or anyone.

99. I have learned that it is important to minimise the amount of fat I eat.

If I eat too much fatty food there is a risk that my body’s white cells — crucial warriors in my body’s immune system defences — may be damaged. And if I have lots of fat in my blood that will also affect my body’s ability to deal with infections.

In a normal, healthy body white cells constantly patrol the blood stream hunting out bacteria (and stray cancer cells). If the blood stream is clogged with fat the white cells simply cannot move around effectively.

Imagine how difficult it would be for a group of lifeguards to swim through an oil slick and you’ll have an idea of just how difficult it is for white cells to move through fat soaked blood.

Incidentally, all fats are bad for your immune system — but animal fats are probably worse than others and can probably do more damage to your immune system. One of the reasons for this is the fact that animal fat is often contaminated with chemical residues — toxic and possibly carcinogenic residues of drugs consumed (accidentally or deliberately) by feeding animals.

Governments often recommend that a healthy diet should contain no more than 30% fat. I think that figure is far too high (probably because a relatively high fat diet helps keep the food industry rich and happy). I believe that you should aim to have no more than 15-20% fat in your diet. If for some reason you need to follow a low fat diet you may wish to cut your consumption of fat to 10-15%. (There is more about fat — and other foodstuffs — in my book *Food for Thought.)*

To calculate the percentage of fat in foods look at the calorie list on the package label and divide the number of calories obtained from fat by the total number of calories; then multiply that total by 100 to obtain the percentage.

100. I have learned that whenever I find myself facing a problem the answer is to focus on the solution rather than the problem.

101 I have learned that I am the best investment I'll ever make.

You are the best investment you'll ever make too. Invest in your education (formal or informal). Put as much time as you can into improving your knowledge. Remember that imagination and a capacity for hard work are far more important than formal qualifications. And if you have a good business idea, and you have a little capital, doesn't it make sense to invest in yourself? Put your own money into your business and you will retain control. Allow banks or investors to put up all the money and they will take over. If your business becomes successful, they will be the ones to profit.

Never forget your roots. And never forget how you became the person you are. You never know, you might have to do it all again.

And, remember, it isn't money that matters.

Money is just money. In the end the lawyers and the taxmen get it all anyway.

The Extras

There are no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers. Only *your* answers.

Extra 1

Questions To Make You Think

Most of us go through our lives in a rush. As a result many important things happen by chance.

We spend days and weeks worrying over small problems (such as which car to buy) but never find time to ponder big questions (how do I really want to spend the rest of my life?).

We never have time to stop and think about who we are, what we do or where our lives are heading.

So take a little time today to answer these questions.

You may find that in doing so you learn a bit more about yourself — and a little more about who you are and where you’re heading.

1. Take away your family, your job, your home and your money. What is left?

2. What in your life gives you the most stress and the most grief? What makes you miserable? What can you do to have less of that in your life?

3. What in your life gives you the most pleasure? What can you do to get more of it?

4. Which individuals do you most admire? Why? How could you change your life to match their ideals?

5. How could you best improve your life?

6. What are the three most important lessons you have learned in your life? (Imagine you are dying and you want to pass on your greatest learning. What would you say?)

7. If you could give the world just one Commandment what would it be? (The Vernon Coleman special for the day is: ‘Thou shalt be kind.’)

8. If you had all the money you needed what would you do?

9. If you found out you had 10 years to live, in your present state of health, what would you do differently?

10. If you found out you had one year to live, in your present state of health, what would you do differently?

11. If you had 24 hours to live what would you regret not having done or tried?

12. Is anything too serious for jokes? If so, what?

13. You find that your best friend has stolen money to pay for medical treatment for a seriously ill relative. What would you do?

14. How much have you controlled the course your life has taken?

15. A dear friend is in agony and wants you to help him/her to die. Would you?

16. What would you do if your country started a war which you considered unjustified?

17. You see three teenagers making fun of a mentally handicapped man in the street. What would you do?

18. Has your life ever been changed by an apparently random occurrence?

19. Do you find it easy to ask for help?

20. You’re having dinner with people you respect and admire. They all criticise a close friend of yours (not knowing he/she is a friend). The criticism is unjustified. What would you do?

Extra 2

The Best Self Help Books For Inspiration And Spiritual Guidance

It is considered quite good sport these days for newspaper and television commentators to mock self-help books — suggesting that the people who write them are exploitative, and that the people who read them are rather sad. This is a pity because, over the years, books of all kinds have provided millions of stressed, fearful, lonely individuals with an enormous amount of comfort and courage.

True, it's a pity that there is a need for such books. But the need for books offering guidance and support has risen for two very simple reasons.

First, although it sounds strange to admit it, we live in possibly the most stressful period man has ever known. Most of us have enough to eat and most of us have warm, dry shelter. Our basic problems have been solved. But, the pace and confusion of our modern world means that stress related disorders (affecting the body, the mind and the soul) are commoner than ever before. Second, just when we all need all the support we can get we find we are more on our own than ever before in history. For most of us the comforting, all embracing family is now a thing of the past. It is easier to travel than ever before in history, and communication networks are faster and (theoretically at least) more effective than at any other time in history, and yet most people spend an increasing part of their lives miles away from the people who are most likely to give them the succour (and the advice) they need. Although we may communicate with one another speedily and frequently how often do we say anything really worth saying? For example, at a guess I would say that 99.99% of all e-mails are little more than electronic froth; superficial and insignificant.

Today we all need all the help and guidance we can get. And if we can pick up a tip or a trick or a thought that will help us along the stony road of life what on earth is wrong with that? We need help in finding a new path to follow; we need help in finding a purpose, a righteous passion and an aim which involves a little more and goes a little higher than double glazing and 56 channel satellite television.

Some of the books on my list may surprise you. But these are, I believe, books that are all well worth reading. Some may change the way you look at your problems. One or two may change your life. Most are beautifully written, often poetic, and also full of sincerity and wisdom. There are thousands of other books in my library which didn't make this list but which are equally deserving of a place on it. (There are, for example, no novels on this list). But a list always has to have a beginning and an end. At least, it does if it's going to fit into a book.

Incidentally, although for simplicity I have put the books in a numbered list, there is no significance to the placing of titles on the list. All these books are well worth reading.

1. Walden, or Life in the Woods and Civil Disobedience — Henry David Thoreau

All Thoreau's books are packed with simple, scorching wisdom. Thoreau was a real revolutionary.

2. Tao te Ching — Lao Tsu

Often simply known as the 'Lao Tsu' this is the main classic in Tao thinking. Although it is usually described as having been written by Lao Tsu (who was an older contemporary of Confucius) this book is probably an anthology of wise sayings edited, rather than written, by the 'author'.

3. The Penguin Book of Twentieth Century Protest — edited by Brian MacArthur

A fine, inspirational and invaluable collection of articles, speeches, extracts, essays and heaven knows what else, written by people protesting and complaining about everything under the sun — but doing it always with style, honesty, determination and passion.

4. Self-Help — Samuel Smiles

Samuel Smiles was the original, modern 'self-help' guru. His remarkably uplifting book *Self-Help* was written in 1859 and became one of the most successful non-fiction books of the late 19th century. Today the book is largely forgotten (and, when remembered, derided) but its message is as valid now as it ever was.

5. The Conquest of Happiness — Bertrand Russell

Russell describes his brand of wisdom as common sense. But whatever else it is, common sense certainly isn't common. Russell's own appetite for life is legendary and this provocative, idiosyncratic and iconoclastic book (which is surprisingly little known) reflects his own joy in taking life by the scruff of the neck.

6. The Prince — Niccolo Macchiaveli

The original treatise on statecraft contains more raw wisdom per inch than a year of television chat shows can offer their blanched and unblinking viewers.

7. Small is Beautiful — E. F. Schumacher

Once very much in fashion Schumacher's concept is now almost forgotten (and, when it is remembered often reviled) in a world where Big is Powerful. Schumacher challenged traditional doctrines, put the emphasis on people not products or profits and argued that Capital should serve Man instead of the other way round.

8. The Power Of Positive Thinking — Norman Vincent Peale

First published in 1953, now a classic that is nevertheless often overlooked and ignored. Infinitely better than thousands of the 'me-too' books which have offered pretty much the same advice.

9. How To Win Friends and Influence People — Dale Carnegie

Another book that is easily forgotten among the mass of talk show generated and publicised self-help books now pouring out of America. But this massive international best-seller is still valid and if you've never read it you will, I think, find it hugely rewarding. Carnegie was a master at using anecdotes to illustrate his themes. Simplistic in places the book is nevertheless just as readable as a good novel.

10. Wind, Sand and Stars — Antoine d'Exupery

A haunting, beautiful, brave, often sad, book written in blood by the author of the exquisite classic *The Little Prince.*

11. 'The Outsider' — Colin Wilson

When first published in 1956 this book was received with great applause and enthusiasm. Wilson was lionised. *The Outsider* is still seminal reading for anyone interested in the human mind, creativity and individuality.

12. The Road To Serfdom — F. A. Hayek

The essential modern work on liberty. Hayek's short book about freedom in our society should be compulsory reading. No one should be allowed to leave school without having read it at least once, and preferably twice. I would far rather students understood Hayek's thesis than that they grasped the principles of algebra.

13. The Autobiography of Mark Twain — Edited by Charles Neider

I deliberately haven't filled this list with biographies and autobiographies (though I could think of scores which are truly inspirational) but Mark Twain's is a true classic and reeks of Twain's unique approach to life: full of gentle humour and unbridled imagination and written with great style. Read this book and you will feel that you really know the man and his life. Twain describes the good, the bad and the ugly with the same even handed approach and the book is full of tragedy, drama, humour and great wisdom.

14. Meditations of a Solitary Walker — Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Rousseau was alienated, philosophical, isolated and sometimes more than slightly paranoid. But his meditations provide an excellent guide book through our complex and often unjust society.

15. Essays — Ralph Waldo Emerson

Civilised, gentle and constantly wise, Emerson's style isn't always easy to read, but what he has to say is invariably worth the effort. An idealist, a rationalist, a transcendentalist and a determined advocate of spiritual independence.

16. Thus Spake Zarathustra — Friedrich Nietzsche

Philosophy, writer, scholar — how does anyone define Nietzsche? Born in Germany he became Swiss and was resolutely unconventional and individual. In his book *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche predicted that the 20th century would be a century of wars such as have never happened on earth' because human beings would no longer have a god to turn to, to absolve them of their guilt. Humans would, he forecast, be racked by their unfocussed guilt and would turn the blind and reassuring faith with which they had formerly worshipped their God into an equally unblinking belief in barbaric, nationalistic brotherhoods. Nietzsche said that man would limp through the 20th century but that the 21st century would be more dreadful still for there would be a 'total eclipse of all values'.

17. Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah — Richard Bach

Best known as the author of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull,* Richard Bach is one of the very best and most imaginative inspirational writers of the 20th century.

18. The Anatomy Of An Illness — Norman Cousins

An inspirational, triumphant modern classic in which Cousins describes how he took a share in the responsibility for overcoming a crippling and supposedly irreversible disease. Cousins is famous for having proved that laughter can cure but this book offers far more than that. It should be read and re-read by anyone who has a chronic illness, by all doctors and nurses and by anyone nursing a patient with a chronic or threatening illness.

19. An Inland Voyage — Robert Louis Stevenson

Describes a canoe tour in Belgium and Northern France but is much more than just a travel book. The journey took place in the same year as the tour which led to the better known book *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes.* Written when he was 28 this book came long before *Treasure Island, Kidnapped* and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* made Stevenson famous.

20. The Art of War — Sun Tzu

The Art of War is one of the most remarkable books ever written. It was written in China 2,500 years ago and there is no doubt that if our own leaders would read the book we would all be safer and less vulnerable. At least one expert has argued that if our 20th century leaders had read (and followed) this book World Wars I and II could have been avoided, the British Empire would not have been dismembered and the wars in Vietnam and Korea would not have been the disaster they were.

Napoleon read it and used *The Art of War.* It is believed that the book (which was not translated into English until 1905 but which had been available in a French edition since 1782) was Napoleon's secret weapon and his key to success.

There is no doubt that Napoleon used Sun Tzu's principles to great advantage and it was only when he failed to follow Sun Tzu's rules of engagement that he was finally defeated.

But the advice in *The Art of War* does not only apply to warriors engaged in traditional forms of warfare. The advice applies equally well in many other forms of combat and confrontation. Look closely and you will see how some modern leaders have used the advice it contains.

Extra 3

The Author

Vernon Coleman was an angry young man for as long as it was decently possible. He then turned into an angry middle-aged man. And now, with no effort whatsoever, he has matured into being an angry old man. He is, he confesses, just as angry as he ever was. Indeed, he may be even angrier because, he says, the more he learns about life the more things he finds to be angry about.

Cruelty, prejudice and injustice are the three things most likely to arouse his well-developed sense of ire but he admits that, at a pinch, inefficiency, incompetence and greed will do almost as well. He does not cope well with bossy people, particularly when they are dressed in uniform and attempting to confiscate his Swiss Army penknife. ‘Being told I can’t do something has always seemed to me sufficient reason to do it,’ he says. ‘And being told that I must do something has always seemed to me a very good reason not to do it.’

The author has an innate dislike of taking orders, a pathological contempt for pomposity, hypocrisy and the sort of unthinking political correctness which attracts support from Guardian reading pseudo-intellectuals. He also has a passionate loathing for those in authority who do not understand that unless their authority is tempered with compassion and a sense of responsibility the end result must always be an extremely unpleasant brand of totalitarianism.

Vernon Coleman has written for *The Guardian, Daily Telegraph, Sunday Telegraph, Observer, Sunday Times, Daily Mail, Mail on Sunday, Daily Express, Sunday Express, Daily Star, The Sun, News of the World, Daily Mirror, Sunday Mirror, The People, Woman, Woman’s Own, Spectator, Punch, The Lady* and hundreds of other leading publications in Britain and around the world. His books have been published by Pan, Penguin, Corgi, Arrow and many other publishers in the UK and reproduced by scores of discerning publishers around the world.

He has never had a proper job (in the sense of working for someone else in regular, paid employment with a cheque or pay packet at the end of a week or month) but he has had freelance and temporary employment in many forms. He has, for example, had paid employment as: magician’s assistant, postman, fish delivery van driver, production line worker, chemical laboratory assistant, author, publisher, draughtsman, meals on wheels driver, feature writer, drama critic, book reviewer, columnist, surgeon, police surgeon, industrial medical officer, social worker, night club operator, property developer, magazine editor, general practitioner, private doctor, television presenter, radio presenter, agony aunt, university lecturer, casualty doctor and care home assistant.

Today, he likes books, films, cafes and writing. He has never been much of an athlete, though he once won a certificate for swimming a width of the public baths in Walsall (which was, at the time, in Staffordshire but has now, apparently, been moved elsewhere).

He doesn’t like yappy dogs, big snarly dogs with saliva dripping from their fangs or people who think that wearing a uniform automatically gives them status and rights. He likes trains, dislikes planes and used to like cars until some idiot invented speed cameras, bus lanes and car parks where the spaces are so narrow that only the slimmest of vehicles will fit in.

He is fond of cats, pens and notebooks and used to like watching cricket until the authorities sold out and allowed people to paint slogans on the grass. His interests and hobbies include animals, books, photography, drawing, chess, backgammon, cinema, philately, billiards, sitting in cafes and on benches and collecting Napoleana. He likes log fires and bonfires, motor racing and music by Mahler and dislikes politicians, bureaucrats and cauliflower cheese. He likes videos but loathes DVDs. His favourite people in history include Napoleon Bonaparte, W.G.Grace, William Cobbett, P.G.Wodehouse, Jerome K.Jerome, and Walter Raleigh all of whom had more than it takes and most of whom were English. (Napoleon would have been if he’d had the chance.)

He lives in the village of Bilbury in Devon and enjoys malt whisky, toasted muffins and old films. He is devoted to Donna Antoinette who is the kindest, sweetest, most sensitive woman a man could hope to meet and who, as an undeserved but welcome bonus, makes the very best roast parsnips on the planet.

We hope you found this book useful. If so we would be grateful if you would post a favourable review on Amazon.

Vernon Coleman is a qualified doctor and the author of over 100 books which have sold over two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK and been translated into 25 languages. There is a list of his books on his author page on Amazon. Many books by Vernon Coleman are available as kindle books on Amazon. For more information please see http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

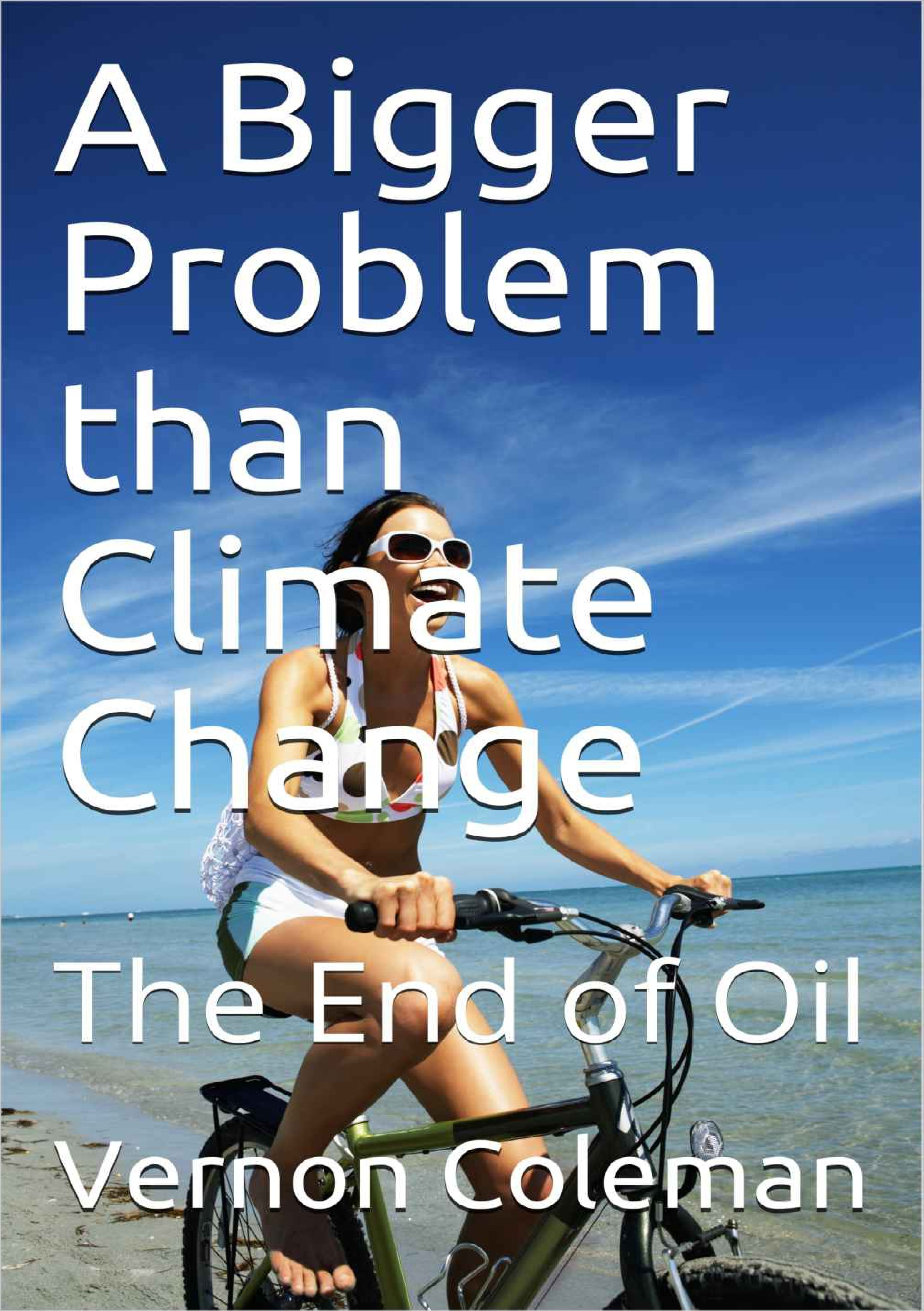

A Bigger Problem than Climate Change

The End of Oil

Vernon Coleman

A Bigger Problem than Climate Change
The End of Oil

Vernon Coleman

Dedication

When the lights goes out and the world goes cold you must reach out for the one you love most. In the dark and the chill of the coming long night I'll be holding hands with Donna Antoinette.

First published in 2007, reprinted 2007 (twice), 2008 (three times).
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Foreword to the Digital Edition

I recently re-read a book of mine which I published in 2007 under the title `Oil Apocalypse’. I was surprised and delighted to see that the book was still extraordinarily relevant.

The book explains the history of peak oil and details events which are behind current energy policies.

To my delight, `Oil Apocalypse' was extremely well received by oil company insiders, many of whom felt it offered an accurate picture of the past, the present and future. A number of executives with great experience in the oil industry sent very complimentary letters.

The book sold very well for a year or so but rather sadly (for me at any rate) it was trashed online by friends of a Green campaigner who was, coincidentally, trying to sell his own book on peak oil. The campaigner wrote a piece for the internet in which he somehow managed both to attack the book and to boast that he hadn't read it and didn't intend to it. And that pretty well finished the book. (The principle of attacking a book you haven't even read seemed to me a novel one then, but today it is relatively common.)

However, the facts in that book are enormously relevant today. They help to explain, for example, why governments are putting so much effort into controlling the use of oil and gas, why subsidies are being provided (not always wisely) for alternative energy programme and why, for example, the European Union has demonised plastics unnecessarily and inaccurately. (The real reason has nothing to do with the environment but is a simple consequence of the fact that we are running out of oil).

It seemed to me that the book was worth restoring and so here it is.

I haven't altered a word in the book which I have given a more appropriate and relevant title.

My views on what has happened more recently in the world of energy (and the way in which misinformed Greens have forced governments and agencies to adopt inappropriate policies) are contained in my Diaries (notably `Tickety Tonk') and it would seem inappropriate to include them here as well.

In brief, I do not believe that the world will be destroyed by climate change. I do, however, believe that the world as we know it will be destroyed by the oil running out.

The Greens (and the governments they control) have created unnecessary poverty and hunger, have brought forward the day when the problems start to affect us and have done nothing to prepare people for the future which awaits coming generations.

Vernon Coleman, April 2019

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`Our daily news sources, newspapers and television, are now so craven, so unvigilant on behalf of the American people, so uninformative, that only in books do we learn what's really going on.'
Kurt Vonnegut (`A Man Without A Country', 2006)

Preface

The oil is running out and, as a result, our civilisation is reaching its end.

The immediate future is not a rosy one. We will face our worst nightmares not when the oil runs out completely but as it runs out.

And the oil will run out slowly but steadily over a decade or more.

But there is hope.

There is always hope.

Maybe we can create a new world, a more restful, peaceful world salvaged out of the debris of the industrial age.

Maybe we can create a simpler, ecologically sound society.

Maybe we can create a world in which there will be less stress and more fulfilment.

This outcome will depend upon our leaders showing strength, wisdom and courage.

In the pessimistic (but, perhaps, practical) belief that our leaders will fail us I have included a blueprint to help you create a survival plan for yourself and your family.

The message in this book is undeniably a gloomy one. The truth can sometimes be alarming. And I doubt if you will ever read a book more alarming than this one. The disaster inexorably heading our way will make any natural disaster, any tsunami, seem trivial in comparison.

And so I felt I should leaven the alarm, and alleviate some of the inevitable despondency, by explaining what practical steps you can take to help give yourself, and your family, the best possible chance of survival.

This book is so utterly terrifying that as I wrote it I had to come to terms with a new vision of the world.

Researching and writing this book changed the way I see the world and made me realise that every political discussion we hear or see today is totally irrelevant. This book is based on facts but the interpretations are, inevitably, my own.

I believe that our civilisation is reaching its end.

And after that there really isn't any more to say.

If you want to know the truth, and you think you can deal with it, turn the page and read this book.

If you don't want to know the truth close the book now and pick up something else.

Vernon Coleman July 2007

Chapter One: Our Unhealthy Addiction To A Gift Of Nature

Your life is about to change beyond recognition. By the time you have finished reading this book your view of the future will have changed irrevocably. Fasten your seat belt. It's going to be a scary read.

If I told you that your house was going to burn down at some time in the next few years would you want to know more? Would you want to make sure that your insurance was up to date? What you want to know how to prepare for the coming disaster?

That's what I thought.

And it's why I've written this book.

The biggest threat to our future isn't from terrorism or global warming.

In comparison to the coming problem I'm going to describe in this book those are trivial and almost inconsequential threats.

I have never been an end-of-the-world-is-coming sort of writer. I don't make a habit of making awful predictions. I've never been in the business of scaring my readers. On the contrary, when the Government and the entire medical establishment were warning that AIDS was going to kill us all I was the lone voice trying to calm everyone down and put things in perspective. (I was widely vilified for that - as I always have been when my medical, political and financial predictions and forecasts have been proved correct.)

There have always been doomsday scenarios. The coming ice age. The global birth explosion. AIDS. Bird flu. The millennium bug. Politicians love threatening us. It is the easiest way to keep us frightened and easy to control.

But this book doesn't contain a prediction. This book is not simply my forecast for the future. This book is firmly based upon the facts we know.

And the consequences may be difficult to comprehend but they aren't difficult to see.

We like to think we are richer and more advanced than previous civilisations because we are more intelligent and work harder.

In our hubris we believe we have made progress through our talents and our wisdom.

Not true I'm afraid.

We have progressed, and become richer, because we discovered the temporary joy of fossil fuels.

`Energy is eternal delight,' wrote William Blake in `The Voice of the Devil'. As we have become richer so the earth's population has increased. In 1820 the human population hit one billion. Today it is six billion. Around five billion people alive today wouldn't be here if we hadn't discovered how to release the energy in fossil fuels.

Fossil fuels are the lottery win that have made us rich; a subsidy from nature which, instead of cherishing and using with respect, we have greedily plundered without regard for the survival of future generations.

Having discovered the joys of fossil fuel we bought them and stole them from poorer parts of the world when we had used up our own supplies. Some countries, such as the United States of America, have ruthlessly enriched themselves, and have risen to global power, at the expense of other nations.

Before we discovered how to liberate and use fossil fuels we had relied on manpower and horsepower for energy. Planting and harvesting crops could only be done as quickly as a man and a horse could move. Making things (houses, clothes, furniture etc) took one man a long time unless he found way to hire others to work with him or for him. This meant that for one man to increase his standard of living he had to find a way to exploit the labour of others. Kings and conquerors found this easy. They exploited men by threatening to kill them or imprison them if they didn't work. The end result was that for one man to increase his standard of living other men had to suffer - and their standard of living would fall.

And then, in the 19th century, along came the wonder of fossil fuels. And man discovered that the energy carried by these fuels could be exploited and turned into massively increased power, wealth and standard of living. Suddenly, everyone in the developed world could get rich. (Those in the rest of the world, where ironically much of the fuel was to be found, benefited only modestly.)

Man has always relied on natural resources.

The Romans and Greeks relied on marble. The British built their empire on ships made of oak and iron. Coal, dug out of the ground, provided a source of heat and energy.

But for the 20th century the one commodity resource that has fuelled the world more than any other has been oil.

Petroleum is the fossilised, compressed and baked remains of sea creatures and organisms which existed hundreds of millions of years ago. We use it to keep cars, lorries, buses, aeroplanes and trains moving. We use it to generate heat and to make electricity.

It was oil which took us out of the Steam Age and nothing in history has changed our lives in the way that oil has changed our lives.

Nothing.

The wheel, the plough, the spinning jenny, the steam engine, the telegraph, the internal combustion engine - all these things changed the way we live in significant ways.

But oil has changed our entire world.

It has changed the way we live our lives in every conceivable way. It has changed the way our economy can grow, it has changed we move about our planet, it has changed the way our factories operate, it has changed the way we live and the food we eat. It is no exaggeration to say that oil (and the other fossil fuels) have revolutionised our lives in every conceivable way.

It is, I suppose, possible to argue that it is the fossil fuels which have changed our world. It was, after all, the discovery that coal could be used as a fuel which led directly to the industrial revolution.

But oil is far more adaptable and far more useful than other fossil fuels. Oil has revolutionised agriculture, industry and domestic life. We speak of the Iron Age, the Stone Age and the Bronze Age and we must, therefore, also speak of the Oil Age. The difference is that to merit a description as an `Age' a civilisation usually lasts a few thousand years. The Oil Age will have lasted less than two hundred years by the time it is over. It's hardly surprising that energy and society expert Richard Heinberg describes us as living not in the Oil Age but in the Petroleum Interval or the Industrial Bubble.

You can't power motor cars with coal or uranium. No one has (as far as I know) seriously suggested putting nuclear powered or coal fired aeroplanes into the sky.

Oil has enabled us to leverage our knowledge and the power given to us by man's inventiveness. Oil has given us most of the things we cherish about our society. The construction of a single car requires at least 20 barrels of oil. Many modern drugs rely on oil. Mining and metal production rely on oil. And oil and other fossil fuels provide us with most of the energy we need to run our complex society.

And now the oil is running out. The world consumes three barrels of oil for every barrel discovered.

So, what will happen when the oil runs out? Cars, lorries, taxis, tractors, buses and trains will stop running. Planes will stop flying. Ships will stop sailing. There won't be any food (or anything else) in the supermarkets. There won't be any food because farmers won't be growing any food. Their tractors and combine harvesters will be parked, immobile, in their barns. Even if the farmers were growing food there would be no lorries to transport it to the shops.

Shops everywhere will be empty. They won't have anything to sell and they won't have any customers. No newspapers. No magazines. No new fashion handbags. No new computer games. No high definition broad screen digital television sets.

The lorry that collects your rubbish won't be running, although that won't matter much because you won’t be able to buy anything and so you won’t have any rubbish to throw away. Streetlights won't burn. Hospitals will have to close. Factories will shut their gates. Offices will close. Banks will shut. There won't be any more television programmes. You won't be able to recharge your mobile phone.

Within a generation five out of six people on the planet will be dead.

I'll repeat that.

Within a generation five out of six people on the planet will be dead.

This isn't the script for a horror movie.

It isn't fiction.

It's what is going to happen.

And it's already started.

The future I describe in this book isn't something that may happen.

It's something that will happen.

Peak oil - the point at which global oil production peaks - is, as I have already said, a more urgent, more critical and far more certain problem than global warming or terrorism.

In fact, although peak oil will exacerbate the terrorism problem (by encouraging greedy countries to start wars over the remaining oil) it will, to a large extent, solve the global warming problem. All the effort being spent at saving the planet from the effect of greenhouse gases is misspent. Global warming is not the primary threat to our present and future. When the oil runs out global warming won't get any worse.

Peak oil is enormously important to us all. It doesn't just mean that oil is going to get more expensive. It means an end to growth. It means an end to the sort of lifestyle we have become accustomed to. It means an end to industrial expansion.

The greens talk a great deal about alternatives such as wind power, solar power and wave power. But these alternatives cannot possible do any more than slow down the rate at which disaster approaches. None of these alternatives can come anywhere near replacing oil. Nor, as I will show, are biofuels an answer to anything except finding massive short term profits for special interest groups.

`There is no substitute for energy,' wrote E.F.Schumacher in 1973. `The whole edifice of modern society is built upon it…it is not just another commodity but the pre-condition of all commodities, a basic factor equal with air, water and earth.'

John Maynard Keynes, one of the greatest of all economists, pointed out that until very recently that had been no very great change in the quality of life of the average man living in a town or city.

Keynes estimated that the standard of living just about doubled between 2000 BC and the start of the 18th century. That's nearly 4,000 years of hardly any progress at all.

At the start of that time we had fire, the sail, the wheel, cooking utensils, banks, governments, religion, mathematics, ploughs, farming and language. And by the start of the 18th century that was still pretty well all we had.

And then in 1712 an Englishman called Thomas Newcomen built the first steam engine. The Industrial Revolution was started by a man from Devon.

Over the years that followed fossil fuels changed our world, giving us electricity, fertilizer, steel and plastic. The standard of living for the average man living in the average town or city doubled every few decades. And kept doubling for quite a while.

Newcomen's steam engine was originally built to pump water out of a coal mine.

The Industrial Revolution revolved entirely around fossil fuels. It was coal and oil which changed our economy from an agrarian, handicraft one to an economy dominated by industry and machine manufacture. It was the Industrial Revolution which led to the use of iron and steel, instead of wood, and, eventually, to the introduction of new energy sources such as electricity. It was the Industrial Revolution which led to the invention of new machines (such as the spinning jenny), the development of the factory system and to the development of the steam engine, the telegraph, the internal combustion engine and the jet engine. It was the factory system, a result of the Industrial Revolution, which led to the development of schools (so that there would be somewhere for children to go while their parents worked in the factories, and so that children would grow up accustomed to a day spent working) and terraced housing (so that workers could be accommodated close to the factories where they worked).

The Industrial Revolution resulted in changes in agriculture (tractors instead of horses), political changes (workers, now paying tax, wanting votes) and enormous social changes.

The Industrial Revolution was largely confined to England, and then Britain, until 1830. It then spread to France before reaching Germany and, eventually, the USA. Now England's great Revolution has spread to China, India and the rest of Asia. Everywhere that the Industrial Revolution went it was built upon a supply of fossil fuels.

Coal was the first fossil fuel to change our lives.

Before mankind discovered the benefits of coal our sources of energy were food and wood. Energy depended entirely on stuff we could grow - using our own muscles to do the digging and the sowing.

When men started digging coal out of the ground they started using energy sources that were already in existence - and had been formed generations before. Coal, oil and other fossil fuels are just what the name says: fossil fuels. They are created when ancient bits of matter are steadily crushed by billions of tons of rock. It takes millions of years for fossil fuels to form.

Coal was being burnt for heating and cooking in China 4,000 years ago. It was used in mediaeval Europe too, though it didn't overtake wood as a fuel because it had to be mined and transported - both of which required a good deal of effort and energy.

By the early 17th century English manufacturers producing iron and steel discovered that the higher temperatures possible with coal made it easy to smelt iron and work with metal.

But it was still difficult to get coal out of the ground. The biggest problem was that water tended to accumulate at the bottom of the mine shafts. And, as I've already described, in 1712 this problem was solved when Samuel Newcomen invented a simple steam engine specifically to pump water out of coal mines. And so, slowly, the industrial age was born out of the rediscovery of coal.

In 1803 an English engineer called Richard Trevithick used the improvements devised by James Watt and installed a steam engine on a carriage, intending it for use on the roads. Unfortunately, roads hadn't yet been invented and the steam carriage wasn't much use until George Stephenson (another Englishman) put the steam locomotive on rails. Not surprisingly, the rails he used were similar to those used in the tramways in coal mines.

Things moved swiftly after that. In the 1790s an English engineer lit his factory with gaslights. In 1804 gas lighting was installed on the streets of London. By 1840 steam engines were being used on ships. And in 1854 coal-tar dyes were discovered and the chemical industry was born.

In 1800 the annual world coal output was 15 million tons. By 1900 the annual world coal output was 700 million tons and coal had transformed the world. The 19th century was the Coal Age. (Or, perhaps, the Coal Interlude.)

From that point on the world's energy would be derived not from renewable resources (human and equine muscle strength) but from a source of energy that, once gone, could not be replaced.

As machines became more widespread during the 19th century so there was a need for oils to lubricate them. Whale oil, animal fats and vegetable oil were all used. Whale oil was also used as a fuel for lamps. Using so much whale oil meant that whales were hunted pretty well to extinction.

Petroleum oil had been used since the 7th century when Byzantine Emperor Constantine IV fixed flame throwers to the prows of his ships and the walls of the city when defending Constantinople. The flames were created using a mixture of naphtha, quicklime and sulphur which was known as `Greek Fire'. Ironically, two Saracen fleets were destroyed with Greek Fire. Oil had also been used as a lubricant and as a medicament.

However, the only petroleum oil available was the stuff that seeped to the surface of the earth.

The first commercial oil well was drilled in the mid 19th century in America and from then on oil was used increasingly as a lubricant and as a lamp oil.

Ruthless American oilman Rockefeller used industrial espionage, predatory pricing and a variety of other dirty tricks to take over foreign oil companies and by 1865 had very nearly obtained a worldwide monopoly on petroleum supplies.

By the early 20th century oil was being used as a fuel for factories, trains and ships and oil burning furnaces were becoming common.

Oil has enormous benefits: it is easy to transport, it's full of energy and it can be refined into a variety of different fuels (diesel, petrol, kerosene) which can be used in many different ways.

Natural gas, often found alongside oil, was also brought into use for street lighting.

And then came electricity.

The first electric generator was invented in London in 1834 though, as with trains, cars and aeroplanes (all of which were invented in Europe) it was first commercialised in America.

Electricity isn't a fossil fuel, of course. It doesn't occur naturally in great seams in the ground. Coal, oil, gas, uranium or some other source of energy have to be converted into electricity.

It is the fossil fuels which enable us to obtain electricity cheaply and easily. Without them, and other sources of renewable energy such as water (either in the form of rivers or the sea) and the wind, we would have to create electricity by using muscle power and that would prove tedious and exhausting.

The special powers of electricity have enabled us to use it to power a vast number of devices - ranging from industrial machinery to television sets. It's clean and enormously convenient.

The problem with electricity is that as a carrier of energy it is extremely inefficient all along the line - from the initial energy source right through to the final point of use.

However, as long as we are getting our energy cheaply from fossil fuels the wastefulness of electricity doesn't matter much. In his book The Party's Over, Richard Heinberg reckons that: `At current prices, an amount of electricity equivalent to the energy expended by a person who works all day, thereby burning 1,000 calories worth of food, can be bought for less than 25 cents.'

Much of our modern lifestyle is dependent upon a steady supply of electricity.

And the production of electricity is pretty much dependent upon fossil fuels. Only a tiny proportion of the electricity the world uses is derived from renewable sources.

There has, of course, been a price to pay for our reliance on fossil fuels.

Our burning of fossil fuels is now held responsible for global warming - and all the horrors that global warming may bring.

When the Industrial Revolution started, at the beginning of the 18th century, the earth's atmosphere contained 275 parts per million of carbon dioxide. It now contains over 380 parts per million. And the figure is rising fast. It is, say the experts, the highest the planet has seen for millions of years. Climatologists claim that the earth's temperature will rise by another four or five degrees (at least) before the 21st century is out. This would make the earth warmer than it has been since before primates first appeared.

As the world's atmosphere warms it will generate more frequent heat waves, longer droughts, more severe storms and more intense downpours. There will be flooding in some areas and droughts in others.

Global warming is a serious problem.

But as problems go it isn't in the same league as peak oil.

There are two reasons for this.

First, the oil is running out. So the Kyoto Protocol and other treaties are unnecessary. The Americans will have to cut down their oil consumption when the stuff runs out. The end of the oil is a primary problem. Global warming is a secondary problem.

Second, society as we know it is going to be destroyed by peak oil. How more serious than that can anything be?

The big problem is that although we have plenty of coal left we are reaching the bottom of the barrel as far as oil is concerned.

The benefits of fossil fuel are extraordinary.

Without fossil fuel it would take five people working continuously to create enough power to keep a 150 watt bulb burning. A motor car on the motorway uses up the sort of energy that might be produced by 2,000 people.

In `The Party's Over' Richard Heinberg explains: `If we were to add together the power of all the fuel-fed machines that we rely on to light and heat our homes, transport us, and otherwise keep us in the style to which we have become accustomed, and then compare that total with the amount of power that can be generated by the human body, we would find that each American has the equivalent of over 150 `energy slaves' working for us 24 hours each day. In energy terms, each middle-class American is living a lifestyle so lavish as to make nearly any sultan or potentate in history swoon with envy.'

For the last 100 years or so we have had the joy of using a virtually free energy source. All we had to do was take it out of the ground. The energy in a gallon of petrol is approximately the same as the energy expended by a man working hard for a month. In America petrol is so cheap that a man receiving a minimum wage can buy a gallon of the stuff for the price of about 20 minutes work. As a result the Americans use up petrol faster than they use water. If everyone on the planet consumed oil at the rate of the average American the world would need 450 million barrels of oil a day (compared to the 86 million barrels a day needed at the moment). We would have probably run out of oil already.

Anyone in a western nation has, for years, effectively been able to rely on having hundreds of energy slaves working for him (or her).

Before oil a man would need to expend great personal energy to travel thirty miles. With oil such a journey becomes a trivial adventure.

Finding oil - with its latent energy - has been the equivalent of a mass lottery win. Coal is a useful fuel (although it is extremely dirty and a major cause of pollution) but it isn't anywhere near as versatile as oil. There aren't many things you can do with coal that you can't do with oil but there are a lot of things you can do with oil that you can't do with coal.

How many people do you see driving around in coal fired cars? How many coal fired aeroplanes are there?

But instead of using our find to improve our world, and to eradicate poverty and hunger around the world (as we could so easily have done) we have used our find to help us build private aeroplanes, luxury yachts, space rockets, dish washers and petrol driven lawnmowers. We have invented a thousand ways to use up the energy we have. Populations have expanded and governments have grown fat on the taxes they have imposed on the new millions. We have used and abused the planets resources as though they were limitless. We have damaged and polluted the planet which has given us so much.

And we have ignored the reality of our increasing dependency on a substance that is running out.

We have learned to take the benefits of fossil fuel for granted.

But the fossil fuels won't be around for much longer.

For the last century or so we've been very lucky.

Now our luck is running out.

And when the fossil fuels (particularly oil) disappear the earth will only be able to feed and provide shelter and warmth for a much smaller global population. Farmers will no longer be able to use fertilisers and tractors. Combine harvesters and lorries will stand and rot. Farms will produce what can be cultivated and harvested by the labour of men and horses.

The end result will be that there will be six billion people living on a planet capable of sustaining one billion people.

Here's what Richard Heinberg, the author of `The Party's Over' says: `When the flow of fuels begins to diminish, everyone might actually be worse off than they would have been had those fuels never been discovered because our pre-industrial survival skills will have been lost and there will be an intense competition for food and water among members of the now unsupportable population.'

And what are we doing to prepare ourselves for the disaster ahead?

Nothing.

Our politicians believe that someone, somewhere will find another oil field and solve all our problems.

They believe that someone, somewhere will discover something else we can use to replace the disappearing oil.

But there isn't any more oil.

And there isn't anything out there with which to replace it. Our luck is fast running out.

Of course, it is possible to argue that being lucky isn't always an entirely good thing.

Great wealth can have a terrible effect on the person (or community) acquiring it.

Lottery winners, taken from poverty to multimillionaire status in a moment, frequently report that their lives have been ruined by their good fortune. Communities can be devastated for years by the arrival of unexpected wealth. (As may happen when a village which has been at the centre of a disaster is overwhelmed with financial gifts far in excess of what is needed for the repair work.)

Cataclysmic wealth can affect an individual or a community or an institution or a nation in bizarre and utterly disastrous ways. New habits and expectations are quickly formed. Previously established ideas are discarded in the belief that they no longer matter. Usefulness is no longer a factor. Waste seems to become a way of life. Excess is suddenly laudable.

Our discovery of the energy treasure trove hidden just beneath the surface of the earth has affected our society in an almost wholly reprehensible way.

Instead of using our wealth to do good things (for example, making a serious attempt to eradicate poverty and hunger in the nations from which we have helped ourselves to so many natural resources) we have used our newfound wealth to buy fast cars and faster aeroplanes and to build ourselves vast mansions, skyscrapers and absurd and ugly temples to our passing glory.

Slowly, as we begin to recognise that our wealth is disappearing, that we have spent too much and too quickly and that we have failed to provide for our future, so our desperation increases.

The desperation to `stay lucky' has triggered a good deal of violence.

American leaders have for some decades been only too aware that their nation's continued success and status as a superpower depends upon seizing the world's diminishing supplies of energy.

You can't drive tanks or fly jets and bombers without oil. You need vast amounts of fuel to force aircraft carriers through the sea. Even nuclear powered submarines need fuel. Without fuel nothing moves.

But those same leaders who recognise the need to grab whatever fuel they can are too frightened of the voters to tell the truth; too frightened of unpopularity to shout the warning about diminishing resources, the need to hold back, the desperate need to stop wasting, the too-late need to save a little for tomorrow.

It is, it seems, with nations as it is with individuals.

When the money starts to run out the lottery winner becomes desperate. He starts buy more lottery tickets in the hope that lightning will strike twice. He starts blaming other people for his impending return to poverty. He lives on hope. It doesn't occur to him that his future could still be secure if only he would stop spending, take stock and be a little more prudent. He becomes angry and resentful. He may take to gambling in a big way; putting great chunks of whatever remains on horses or numbers on the roulette wheel.

The young heir who has blown his legacy on smart cars, cocaine and nightclubs will look around in bewilderment and anger as he realises that his fortune has disappeared. He will borrow from his friends. He will become an inveterate sponger.

The one thing they have in common is their desperate desire to maintain their standard of living. They do not want things to change. They are accustomed to wealth and to them it does not seem fair that they should now be deprived of what they have come to see as their rights.

Societies are the same.

As I have explained in previous books large organisations develop lives of their own. The large corporation is not controlled by its shareholders or its directors. The corporation itself dictates what happens next according to its own needs. Similarly, nations develop lives and characters of their own.

All have one thing in common: an insane desperation to maintain things as they are. And all end in the same way: disintegration, violence, despair, sadness and collapse.

Sometimes, it seems, there isn't as much difference between good luck and bad luck as we might like to think there is.

Writing in Scientific American magazine in March 1998, Colin J. Campbell and Jean Laherrere wrote: `From an economic perspective, when the world runs completely out of oil is…not directly relevant: what matters is when production begins to taper off. Beyond that point, prices will rise unless demand declines commensurately. Using several different techniques to estimate the current reserves of conventional oil and the amount still left to be discovered, we conclude that the decline will begin before 2010.'

At least 85% of the energy consumed by the world comes from fossil fuels.

That means that when the fossil fuels run out we will lose 85% of our energy.

This means that our world is about to change beyond recognition.

Without oil we might as well start living on a different planet.

Of course, no one knows for certain how much oil is left, how difficult it will be to extract or how fast the demand for oil will grow. We will only really know when the oil started to run out some years after it started to run out. But the available evidence firmly suggests that if it hasn't already started then it will do so within before the end of this decade.

The oil isn't going to run out immediately, of course.

There is still a lot of oil left in the ground.

But the amount we will be able to get out of the ground will now diminish every year. Whatever oil reserves there are will be increasingly difficult to extract.

The shortage will be made worse by the fact that the demand for oil is rising every year.

And it is this gap between what is available and what is required which will lead to the first, early problems.

How much difference will it make when the oil shortfall reaches 10%?

Well, the price will soar much more than 10% of course.

And there will, inevitably, be a lot of people who get less oil than they need.

The world at large has no idea what is about to happen. Believe it or not, oil is cheap at the moment. But the days of cheap oil are almost over. I wonder how angry motorists and lorry drivers will be when the price per gallon hits £30 and keeps moving upwards?

That's when the problems will really begin.

This year? Next year?

I don't know.

But it will be sometime soon.

And once the problems start they will get worse day by day, week by week, month by month and year by year.

Meanwhile, every country in the world wants to capture some of the remaining fuel. America has started a war in just about every country in the world where it might conceivably hope to find some oil. But America is not the only powerful country hunting for energy supplies.

The Chinese Government understands the importance of securing energy supplies. (The west accuses China of bankrolling genocide in Darfur to obtain oil but this, of course, is grotesquely hypocritical, considering the way America and Britain have abused Middle Eastern oil producers.) China, once an oil exporter but now an importer has, of course, also done some clever deals with Iran.

And China's immediate Asian competitors are competing for the same energy supplies. Japan and South Korea have both agreed to store foreign oil (from Saudi Arabia) in exchange for preferential access in a crisis. Japanese power utilities have agreed to buy uranium from Kazakhstan and will get as much as a third of the fuel they need for Japanese power stations from Kazakhstan by 2010.

Everywhere you look countries are doing energy deals with one another.

China, now a net importer of coal for the first time in history, is also looking for coal. (Around 80% of China's electricity comes from coal fired plants - which are largely responsible for the filthy, smoky air now choking the lungs of Chinese citizens.)

As Stephen Leeb points out in `The Coming Economic Collapse': `We have built our modern civilisation on the premise of unending growth - growth that needs energy. We have built a complex civilisation that requires increasingly larger amounts of energy to maintain itself. What happens if growth is no longer possible? What if...we start to run out of the resources needed to build bigger cities? What if even maintaining the cities we have today becomes too expensive?'

But once growth stops, all sorts of really terrible things will happen.

Our entire global economy is built upon the need for growth. Our financial system is built upon fiat currencies. We rely on bits of paper to represent wealth. Currencies represent the wealth of the issuing nation. Stocks and bonds represent the values of individual companies. Options, futures and so on are simply certificates which represent something of value. None of these things are of any value in themselves. A twenty pound note has no real, intrinsic value and depends entirely upon the honesty, integrity and promises of the government which printed it and put it into circulation. A share certificate only has value because it represents part ownership of a company.

The problem is that in our modern world these bits of paper represent a debt. In all these cases the purchaser assumes that the issuer will grow. Governments and companies borrow vast amounts of money in order to keep going. The only way they can ever pay back their debts is by growing.

If growth stops then wealth doesn't grow any more.

And the bits of paper - the currencies and the share certificates - will rapidly lose their value.

Our society is more complex than any other society in history. We have become dependent on one another in a way never seen before.

(There is some irony in this because our society has also broken down in many ways. The Government has deliberately done all it can to destroy marriage and the family unit. We have been encouraged to be fearful of our neighbours and to distrust strangers. This fear and distrust begins at an early age with small children being repeatedly warned that they must not talk to strangers or take sweets from them.)

We depend upon the shops (or, more likely, the supermarkets) for our food. We depend upon the electricity, gas and water companies for our electricity, gas and water. We depend on others for all our health care and for our protection. When the television set breaks down we call a television specialist. When the washing machine breaks down we call a washing machine specialist. When the dishwasher breaks down we call a dishwasher specialist. When the car breaks down we need a mechanic. When the computer breaks down we need a computer expert (or a shop selling new computers). When the telephone breaks down we are done for.

As individuals we have become specialists and we have learned to acquire specific skills which help us fit in with the needs of our complex society.

And everywhere you look you will see that our society depends on oil.

The washing machine is built using vast amounts of oil. It won't work without electricity, probably created from oil. And when it breaks down the repairman drives to your home in a car using petrol.

Our supercomplex society is built on oil.

And now the oil is running out.

And just as the Roman Empire collapsed, and the Greek and Egyptian civilisations virtually died away, so our civilisation can die.

Joseph Tainter, author of The Collapse of Complex Societies, has concluded that complex societies tend to collapse because their strategies for energy capture are subject to the law of diminishing returns.

The Romans tried to capture energy by conquering new lands and acquiring slaves.

We have captured energy by taking fossil fuels out of the ground.

The Roman Empire collapsed because the Romans could no longer manage such a huge empire effectively. The cost of looking after all that land and all those slaves eventually grew greater than the benefits. When the Romans first invaded a new country there were immediate benefits: booty to be taken. But, over time, as the benefits of the invasion declined, so the costs increased. There were garrisons to be maintained and administrators to pay. To find the funds for all this taxes had to be raised. And so eventually the productive capacity of the population declined. There were too many people collecting taxes, making rules and administering and there weren't enough people growing food, making things and carrying spears.

If our civilisation collapses it will be because we grew to depend on a finite source of energy while at the same time our society had become so complex that we spent huge amounts of our `energy budget' on maintaining nonproductive organisations, institutions and bureaucracies.

In simpler societies there were only a few dozen different occupations. In our society there are thousands of ways for men and women to earn a living. We have become intensely specialised and dependent upon one another. But, most dangerously of all, we have built up hugely complex management structures.

`However much we like to think of ourselves as something special in world history,’ wrote Joseph Tainter, `industrial societies are subject to the same principles that caused earlier societies to collapse.'

The theory of peak oil (which I explain more fully a little later in this book) effectively states that once half the oil is removed from an oil field the amount of oil which can be removed will decline, often quite rapidly.

Britain has already passed her point of peak oil production and her own oil supplies are running out. Oil production by nations outside OPEC peaked at the end of the 20th century and is now in decline. According to the peak oil theory our consumption of oil has (or will soon) outstrip the production from existing reserves and the discovery of new reserves. Whenever that point is reached we start to deplete existing reserves.

America and Britain now depends largely on the Arab members of OPEC for their future oil supplies. These, of course, are the same Arab states that these Governments have done their very best to annoy.

The end result will, of course, be that the Arab nations will be reluctant to let these two countries have any of the increasingly rare and expensive oil when the stuff really does start to run out.

The USA passed its own peak oil point over thirty years ago and has since then been totally dependent on whatever oil it can buy from other countries.

Unfortunately for the Americans, of course, the USA is not the most popular nation on earth as far as the Arabs are concerned. (Britain's popularity is, thanks to the war against Iraq, now inextricably linked to America's.)

Nor are America and Britain doing too well in their relations with the other big oil suppliers: Russia, Venezuela and Nigeria.

Even if the oil wasn't running out the future would be bleak.

It's hardly surprising that America has been trying to grab as much oil as it can.

Meanwhile, the world's consumption of oil is rocketing. The Americans use more and more oil every day. They are still the greediest oil consumers. Their consumption has increased by just under three million barrels a day in the last decade. American Government subsidies mean that the stuff is still cheap enough for people to drive huge cars and trucks rather than smaller, more efficient vehicles.

It isn't just America which is using more oil than ever, of course.

China and India are growing. Their citizens are buying cars and learning the joys of international flight travel.

One in six people in the world live in China. They all want cars. Over a billion of them. If car ownership in China were to rise just to American levels there would be 650 million cars on Chinese roads. that's more than all the cars in the world today. People who, ten years ago, could hardly afford bicycles are now getting picky about the size of the car they buy. China, now the world's second biggest oil importer, is currently increasing its oil imports by 30% a year. How much longer will it before China catches up with America? In 2003 Shanghai banned bicycles from most of its main streets to make more room for automobiles. China already has 16 of the 20 most polluted cities in the world. In Bangkok the average motorist spends the equivalent of 40 days a year stuck in traffic. Half the new houses and apartments being built in China are equipped with air conditioning. That pushes up the electricity consumption dramatically.

In America even the poor keep their television sets on day and night, fly around in aeroplanes and believe air conditioning and central heating are a basic right.

In Europe new cut rate airlines are buying new planes and opening up new routes faster than ever. Every time a plane takes off, and flies a bunch of holiday makers to Marbella or Miami, it uses up another chunk of the world's depleting supplies.

Economists and politicians are agreed that there is nothing for us to worry about. Politicians don't want to tell us really bad news for which there are no solutions. They don't like dealing with crises before they have happened. And they certainly don't like crises and problems they can't blame on someone else. Economists claim it doesn’t matter if we run out of one fossil fuel.

They argue that if we run short of something the world will pay for someone to find something else we can use.

Politicians like this theory. It makes them feel comforted.

These heads-in-the-sand deniers of the truth are aided in their deceit by the oil-producing states which constantly produce comforting sounds, designed to reassure us.

But independent petroleum geologists (the people who know) are worried. And their fears have been well documented in the relevant scientific literature for some time.

They say that the oil is running out and that it is not going to be possible to find a substitute. The chances are that well within your lifetime (unless you've considerably over eighty years old) the world we know will change dramatically and permanently. Anyone under fifty, with a normal life expectation, will live to see a world almost unrecognisable from the one they grew up in.

We are often reassured that scientists always find solutions to our problems - especially when there is a financial incentive to do so.

We are told that scientists are constantly making new breakthroughs.

But is this really true?

I don't think so.

On the contrary, I believe that there has been very little real scientific or technological progress in recent decades.

Look around. Most of the brilliant devices we use were first put on the market many years ago. They have been improved and miniaturised. But that's all.

It is, of course, perfectly true that information technologies are doubling in power every year. Doubling every year means multiplying by 1,000 every ten years. And, on this basis, scientists talk merrily about the advances in computing power, revolutions in genetics, robotics and nanotechnology as though these inventions are going to improve our lives and solve our problems.

But the truth is that none of these things will really help with the big problem. We have more than enough information technology.

It's oil we need.

Improvements in information technology are not going to help us deal with peak oil.

The futurologists have talked about all sorts of things that they claimed would change our lives. None of them have arrived.

But look at the great inventions which changed our lives:

The first motor cars were built in the mid 19th century.

The internal combustion engine was built in 1885.

The telephone was invented in 1876.

The camera was invented in the early 19th century.

The first antibiotics were discovered in 1928.

The first open heart surgery was performed in 1896.

The atom was first split in 1919.

The first engine powered aircraft were built by English and French inventors in the 1840s.

The computer was invented in the late 1940s.

The fax machine was invented in the 19th century.

The television was invented in the first decade of the 20th century.

You could fly across the Atlantic in six hours in the 1960s. It takes the same time today. (But it's less comfortable.)

The truth is that there have been no real breakthroughs for years. And none of the minor inventions which have been patented have improved the world's food supply, offered a realistic solution to our growing energy problems, or improved the world's water supply.

The so-called breakthroughs which have been made have simply been minor improvements.

Cameras and telephones have become smaller - but little more effective than their predecessors. Computers have become faster and more portable - but the changes haven't been life altering.

We like to think we're cleverer than any other generation. But the evidence does not support that theory. We like to think we will be able to `think' our way out of all our problems. The evidence suggests otherwise.

Politicians (aided by a few friendly experts) claim that the oil will last for ever and that there is nothing to worry about.

`What is not in doubt,' wrote Andrew Alexander in the Daily Mail on 16th September 2005, `is that there is lashings of the stuff around, consume it as we may....'. Mr Alexander didn't say where this oil was to be found (though I have no doubt the oil companies would have been grateful for guidance).

In the spring of 1999 The Economist (which, in my view, has an unparalleled knack for getting big stories wrong and for misinterpreting the evidence on a wide variety of issues) produced a cover story called `Drowning in Oil' which suggested that Saudia Arabia had decided to flood the world with enough extra oil to take oil prices down to five dollars a barrel, and to keep oil at this low price for at least five years. Just a few days after the publication of this story the Saudi Arabians, together with other countries, cut their production of oil. The price of a barrel of oil went up threefold in 18 months.

Oil companies will, say the optimists, simply find some more when the existing oil fields run dry. They are not, it seems, aware that since 2001 the cost of looking for oil has exceeded the value of the oil discovered. (And, of course, the energy expended in looking for that oil has almost certainly exceeded the energy obtained.)

Writing in `The Skeptical Environmentalist' in 2001 Bjorn Lomborg argued that: `It is rather odd that anyone could have thought that known resources pretty much represented what was left, and therefore predicted dire problems when these had run out. It is like glancing in my refrigerator and saying: `Oh, you've only got food for three days. In four days you will die of starvation.' But in two days I will go to the supermarket and by more food. The point is that oil will come not only from the sources we already know, but also from many sources of which we do not yet know.'

Once again, if Mr Lomborg knows, or even suspects he knows, where oil might be found he should share the information with the world's oil companies. They would doubtless pay him well for the information.

Writing in The Prize, Daniel Yergin says: `The ultimate amount (of energy) available to us is determined both by economics and technology.' He goes on to add, with commendable optimism: `If you pay smart people enough money, they'll figure out all sorts of ways to get the oil you need.'

Sure.

From Mars maybe? Huge intergalactic tankers floating through universe?

And if the oil does happen to run out, say the optimists, hedging their bets, someone will find an alternative. Man's ingenuity will save the day.

An alternative to oil will be found, they say, and then all will be well. Things, they say, can carry on as they are for ever.

But many thousands of people have spent many years looking for real alternatives without success. And even if someone found a good, alternative source of energy political will would be needed if we were to exploit the idea to best advantage. There is clearly no such political will.

Most importantly, of all, however this argument completely fails to acknowledge the main problem: fossil fuels were nature's gift to us; they were effectively a one-time only lottery win. Fossil fuels gave us free energy - available only for the cost of extracting it. We will not match that generosity until and unless we discover either another variety of fossil fuel or the perpetual motion machine. And inventors have been struggling to create a perpetual motion machine for thousands of years.

There are those who say it doesn't matter that the oil is running out.

Nobel prize winning economist Robert Solow was quoted as saying that: `...the world can, in effect, get along without natural resources.'

Really.

A world without modern agriculture, without cars, without aeroplanes, without ships, without heating, without much of our electricity, without industry and..well, do I need to go on to demonstrate the dangerous absurdity of this overconfidence?

As unpalatable as the fact may be, there is only so much oil on our planet.

Billions of pounds have been spent looking for it everywhere. The oil exploration industry is, next to the military, the world's biggest consumer of computer technology.

And it is clear that there isn't much more oil to find.

The few new oil fields which are discovered are small and costly to use.

American oilmen have been struggling to find new oil for decades. But they have failed to prevent the decline in American oil production. As Stephen Leeb puts it in `The Coming Economic Collapse': `Money and brains cannot repeal basic geological laws'.

Moreover, we cannot invent an oil substitute any more than we invented oil. We may be able to invent new sources of power, but they will be limited by the laws of nature. Oil, as a source of energy, never had to obey the laws of nature because it was a product of nature.

Huge multinational companies have spent the last few decades desperately searching for a replacement for oil.

And they have failed.

Environmentalists claim that we can do without oil by harnessing the power of the sun, the power of the sea and the power of the wind.

Nice idea.

But it won't work.

These all collect daily energy. They sound a good idea. But they won't replace fossil fuels.

Fossil fuels offered us `free energy’. Mankind's first and only really free lunch. All we had to do was dig them up. Centuries and centuries of accumulated power.

Sunshine, wind and wave power are a nice idea. But, for reasons which I will explain later in this book, they are no replacement for oil.

It's not working out quite as the optimists would like.

There is no new wonder replacement for oil.

There are a number of reasons why our leaders are sticking their heads in the sand and refusing to do anything about the biggest problem our society has ever faced.

First, most of our leaders aren't terribly bright but are crafty and mendacious. They are concerned solely with their own survival.

We have created a society which, for various complex reasons now tends to select crooks and conmen as leaders. And we have allowed them to create a self-preserving oligarchy.

Second, although politicians love telling us about things that will frighten us (there is nothing easier to manipulate than a frightened electorate) they know that there is little political capital to be gained by telling the truth when the truth involves genuine short term pain for everyone. Our politicians think only about their survival. Why should they tell us something we don't want to hear?

Third, many of the things that need doing (such as strengthening families and small communities) are an anathema to our politicians. The Government has realised that its power is increased when the family is weak.

Fourth, modern politicians are herd animals. They don't like doing anything that doesn't fit in with their peers are doing. Modern politicians rely not on integrity or honour but on something called `group think'.`We need an energy bill that encourages consumption,’ said George W. Bush in 2002.

Some years ago a psychologist called Solomon Asch performed an experiment to find out whether people's tendency to agree with their peers was more powerful than their tendency towards rational and independent thought.

Asch collected a dozen students and told them to look at a drawing of three lines. He told them to decide which line was the longest. The right answer was obvious.

But Asch had told eleven of the twelve students to lie and say that the medium length line was the longest. The aim was to see whether the twelfth student would stick to his guns (and point to the line that really was the longest) or would capitulate and go along with his lying chums. The twelfth student was the only real object of the experiment.

Amazingly, in 70% of the tests Asch did the twelfth student gave in and said that the medium length line was the longest. Asch's conclusion was that most people will follow the crowd even when the crowd is clearly wrong.

Later, one of Asch's students, Stanley Milgram, performed another, even more famous experiment. His subjects (all ordinary people) were told by an authority figure (a man in a white coat who looked and sounded like a scientist) that they had to inflict pain on another person. And 65% of them did what they were told. Even though they thought they were inflicting serious and possibly lethal pain on a fellow human being for no good reason whatsoever they did it.

Milgram showed that most people trust and obey those in authority so much that they will abandon all their personal standards, all sense of personal responsibility, all feelings about what is right or wrong, and blindly follow orders.

This is `group think'.

A third psychologist, Milton Rokeach, subsequently argued that there are two distinct types of people.

First, there are those who like hierarchies and who are happy giving or taking orders. These people tend to have closed minds and to resist new ideas. Because of the way our society is structured these are the people who obtain positions of power. Second, there are those who are instinctively opposed to authority and who think freely and creatively.

It doesn't take much imagination to realise that most (if not all) of our leading politicians are firmly in the first group. They have a narrow view and tend to ignore problems until it's too late.

Virtually every leading politician we've had since Winston Churchill has been unimaginative and hierarchical.

Politicians make millions follow them not by courageous, strong, honest leadership but by `group think'.

Arrogance, ambition and closed mindedness (the prominent traits among modern politicians) lead to an inability to make clear, accurate moral judgements.

Hans Blix, the chief United Nations weapons inspector, accused American of relying on `faith-based intelligence' in claiming that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction.

The American leadership wanted to believe that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. It was a convenient belief. So, no one questioned it. And the CIA, and other organisations, rejected any information which didn't fit their requirements.

(In fact, as we now know, the American leadership was inspired by a desire to acquire Iraq's oil. That was their driving force. But the willingness of the intelligence community to fit in with their preconceived and pragmatic ideas was a perfect example of `groupthink'.)

`Continuing to increase our dependency on petroleum consumption is clearly a suicidal course of action,' wrote Paul Ehrlich in 1974. `The only intelligent alternative is to begin reducing energy consumption and finding alternative energy sources to substitute for petroleum.'

Our leaders aren't doing anything about the disappearing oil.

And they won't do anything until it's far too late. They will respond to the crisis when it becomes a crisis. And when their actions will be meaningless and irrelevant.

They will respond when the only thing they can do is to put troops and police on the streets to arrest and shoot rioters.

(There is, of course, a line of thought which suggests that our leaders are deliberately allowing the crisis to develop so that they can their hold on us. Maybe. It's not a theory to which I subscribe. Only because I don't think they are that clever.)

A world without oil will be a world without cars, aeroplanes, combine harvesters, ships, motorbikes, fertilisers, plastic, washing machines, television sets, computer games, pesticides and a hundred thousand other things we take for granted.

It will be a world where heating your home will become prohibitively expensive and where air conditioning will be something only the superrich can enjoy.

And a world with less oil will be almost as bad as a world with no oil because once it becomes clear that the oil is running out then governments worldwide will start to stockpile the stuff. And just a 10% cut in the oil supply will mean a dramatic change in our way of life.

Fossil fuels in general, but oil in particular, gave us a free ride throughout the twentieth century. They enabled us to do less work but produce more. They enabled us to make enormous progress and to acquire a taste for luxury and a life of waste. All we had to was find the oil, coal and gas and then take it out of the ground. We didn't have to do anything to create the energy. We've been spoilt. We have for over a century lived in luxury; enjoying the windfall the planet has given just a few select generations.

And now the party is almost over.

Our lives are about to be changed for ever. Nothing we take for granted will be the same.

Everything about our world will inevitably change. And the changes will be dramatic and irreversible.

No other threat in our history comes close to this one.

Countries with weak farming industries will be in serious trouble when the oil runs out - and will find it particularly difficult to survive. Britain will suffer more than almost any other country on the planet. If you're an island and you've destroyed your farming industry, and there is no oil for planes or ships, just where do you get your food from?

And, of course, its Government's illegal invasion of Iraq has made Britain one of the two most hated nations on earth. In addition to making Britain a terrorist target the Government has ensured that when the oil is running out the British will be not be the people getting a share of whatever is left.

Of all the developed countries in the world Britain is the least well positioned to cope with the end of oil.

The citizens of every country will have to cope with enormous change and will suffer terrible hardships. The citizens of Britain will have to cope with bigger changes than most and will suffer greater hardships.

All countries are heading for compulsory downsizing. Large seemingly invincible corporations will go bankrupt (taking with them the pensions of millions). Unemployment will hit unprecedented levels. Interest rates will almost certainly rocket. Many currencies will not survive in their present form.

The coming change is not voluntary. It's not optional. And it's not temporary. It's going to happen; whether you or I like it or not.

Every aspect of our life will be permanently changed. Even the administration of the nation will alter. The European Union will collapse, national governments will decline in importance and regional administrations will shrink dramatically. The Government's income will fall dramatically (as companies collapse and unemployment soars so the tax take will shrink dramatically). Those who thought their employment was safe will find themselves joining the millions officially listed as unemployed. There will, however, be little point in bothering to register as unemployed. All benefits and pensions paid by the Government will halt or shrink to pitiful amounts. Former civil servants and local authority employees who thought that their pensions were secure will be penniless when the Government and local authorities are unable to meet their financial obligations.

`In 1859 the human race discovered a huge treasure chest in its basement,' wrote Kenneth E.Boulding in 1978. `This was oil and gas, a fantastically cheap and easily available source of energy. We did, or at least some of us did, what anybody does who discovers a treasure in the basement - live it up, and we have been spending this treasure with great enjoyment.'

Twentieth century industrial civilisation is founded on the consumption of finite energy resources. Oil, gas and coal have given us a free ride for decades. Now they're running out. We have built a lifestyle based on consuming vast quantities of fossil fuel. Agriculture, transport, communication, industry, society - everything we rely on, everything we do is dependent upon a continuing, uninterrupted supply of cheap fuel.

But the fuels are already running out. And the clock is ticking.

As they run out the competition to grab what is left will create massive geopolitical changes. There will be more attempts to grab areas of the world where there may be oil.

In an attempt to delay the inevitable individual countries will do everything they can to grab more than their fair share of the remaining oil. America has already been doing this for most of a century.

In late June 2007 Russian President Vladimir Putin made an extraordinary bid to claim a vast chunk of the Arctic as Russian territory.

A United Nations convention says that non one can claim jurisdiction over the Arctic area but Russian geologists claim that the Arctic is linked to the Siberian continental platform. Experts claim that the area contains ten billion tons of gas and oil and significant amounts of gold, nickel, platinum, lead, tin and other metals.

And, as it becomes clear that the oil is running out, there will be oil-grabbing wars. (I'll write more about this later in this book.)

But the land grabbing and the wars won't change anything. The best they will do is to delay the inevitable for the winners.

All this free energy has enabled us to increase our agricultural output and that, in turn, has enabled the world's population to grow to breaking point.

We have become addicted to the virtually free energy we've obtained from fossil fuels. All this free energy has enabled us to increase our agricultural output and that, in turn, has enabled the world's population to grow to breaking point. Today the whole world is addicted to and totally dependent on the energy it obtains from oil, gas, coal and other natural resources. We have become dependent upon fossil fuels in general, and oil in particular, and whether we withdraw from our dependence sanely and wisely, and in peace, is up to us.

The industrial society we know is coming to an end. Whether it comes to an end quietly and peacefully, or noisily and with violence, is, to a large extent up to us. But come to an end it will.

The chances, I'm afraid, are that the end will be increasingly violent.

The search for oil has dominated the last few decades.

The search for oil has led to war after war. Time and time again America has invaded strategically important countries, either in order to grab the oil or in order to grab land for pipelines. It was hardly surprising that the citizens of some countries should fight back, defend their culture and their lands against the Americans (and since its leaders chose to accompany America on its oil grabbing adventures, against Britain too).

Oil led to the American `war on terror' and subsequently gave birth to modern terrorism. Religious hatred was originally stirred up not by zealots in Iran but by oil hungry zealots in Washington. It is hardly surprising that we now live in a world of constant war and constant fear.

There is no little irony in the fact that oil, as well as giving us the opportunity to grow more food has also given us the weapons with which to fight with ever more ferocity.

Without oil there would be no tanks, no jet fighters and no bombers. Oil has given us the bus and the tractor. It has also given us the chance to spray napalm on Vietnamese children and to drop bombs on wedding parties in

Afghanistan.

We tend to think that our society is indestructible. We forget that there have, in history, been many equally arrogant versions of civilisation, societies peopled by citizens who regarded their world as being similarly permanent and unassailable.

We forget (though given the events of recent years we really ought to remember) that nations come and go with remarkable ease. All civilisations are fragile and easily destroyed by unpredicted crises which no one predicted.

One popular modern theory is that big consequences are a result of big unforseen events such as invention of the wheel, the motor car, wireless, railways or the steam engine. Revolutions, usually unpredictable, can also have massive consequences, of course.

The discovery of fossil fuels in general and oil in particular was a big, unpredictable discovery that led to massive consequences.

But the running out of fossil fuels in general, and oil in particular, isn't unpredictable. On the contrary, it is entirely predictable.

And the consequences of the fuels running out will be just as massive as the consequences of their being discovered.

We forget what things were like before oil because no one alive can remember anything different to the way we live now. We like to think that we have a special place in history. We are the appointed ones. We like to believe that the other cultures which collapsed were primitive, pagan and technologically far inferior.

But why should our western society, our own current version of human life, be more indestructible than the mighty Roman Empire?

Science shows that civilisations are more fragile than we like to think.

In an article published in Scientific American, Michael Shermer studied the life span of sixty civilisations. He concluded that the average life span of a civilisation is just 421 years. He also discovered that modern civilisations don't last as the old ones used to last. It seems that, like everything else, civilisations just aren't built the way they used to be. The average life span of the most recent 28 civilisations is only 305 years.

Modern civilisations have, of course, been more complex than their predecessors. Labour has been well developed. People have been trained and skills have been acquired. Modern civilisations tend to have various complicated levels of government and they usually have a hierarchical leadership structure. Most important of all modern civilisations tend to demand more natural resources to sustain themselves. Modern civilisations tend to be expensive to maintain. And so, when they run out of resources, they die.

Which brings us neatly to us.

We live in the energy civilisation.

And our world has been changed enormously by, and become utterly dependent upon, a single energy source: oil.

We are far more vulnerable than we think we are. Our society is, because it is the most complex, the most vulnerable society of all time.

And when our society collapses the result will be catastrophic. The end of our complex, interdependent society will result in massive financial hardship, in rioting, in revolution, in protests, in mass starvation.

In a book entitled `The Collapse of Complex Societies', American historian Joseph Tainter, suggested that modern societies collapse because they become so complex that they suffer from diminishing returns.

Jared Diamond, in a book called `Collapse', argues that most crises are caused by declining resources. He points out that whether or not a civilisation survives depends on whether or not its leaders recognise the problems and make the right decisions.

Time and time again history shows that leaders who are fixed in their views and who are unwilling to change will lead their societies further into disaster.

The people of Easter Island are a good example of a society which collapsed.

The leaders on Easter Island built up a tradition of erecting enormous statues. The bigger the statue the greater the status of the man who had it erected.

The problem was that erecting the statues used up huge amounts of timber, rope and human effort. Over three hundred years the Easter Islanders cut down all their trees. Every one. By the time they'd finished, their forested island had become unending pasture land. No more trees meant no more nuts. It meant the death of much wildlife. It meant that the Easter islanders could no longer build canoes with which to go fishing. And it caused soil erosion which damaged crop yields.

The leaders of Easter Island were so stuck in their ways, so committed to the past, that they destroyed their own society.

They weren't the only ones.

Something similar happened to the Norse colony on Greenland. By cutting down too many trees to create pasture land for their animals the Greenland Norse found themselves without enough wood for building homes and for fuel. And without trees their topsoil eroded so their crops failed.

The Greenland Norse made other mistakes too.

Having come from Europe they insisted on maintaining their tradition of raising dairy cattle - even though that contributed to the deforestation. Worse still, the Greenland Norse failed to learn from their neighbours, the Inuit who had discovered their own ways of surviving in Greenland's cold climate. And, in an echo of the Easter Islanders folly, the Norse continued to spend huge amounts of their wealth on decorating their churches rather than on importing materials that might have helped them survive.

Throughout history there are similar examples. Even great civilisations such as the Romans failed because they refused to worry about the future and refused to change the way of life that had made them great.

And so to us.

Our global industrial system will probably collapse within the few decades.

Chapter Two: Peak Oil: The Beginning Of The End Of Civilisation

Vast quantities of crude oil come squirting out of the drill hole when oil is first discovered. That's the sight we're all accustomed to seeing in films. A black plume fired high into the sky. Gleeful oil prospectors dancing around, drenched in the black, sticky stuff.

To start with, getting the oil is easy. But suddenly the pressure starts to disappear and then the rest of the oil is harder to get out.

And then the oil starts to peter out. The point at which the oil starts to run out is the `peak' for that individual oil field.

The depletion of oil fields follows a predictable bell curve. The existence of this curve was first suggested by geophysics professor and Shell geologist, Dr Marion King Hubbert in 1956. It was Hubbert's way of predicting what would happen to petroleum production in America.

Hubbert's curve shows that production from any oil field rises rapidly, reaches a plateau and then falls quickly into decline. A graph of the rise and decline is called a `bell curve' because it looks like an upside down bell.

It was back in 1949 that geophysicist Marion King Hubbert first announced that the fossil fuel era would turn out to be very short. In 1956, based on a study of lifetime production profiles of oil reservoirs, and on reserve estimates, Hubbert announced that the peak of crude oil production in the USA would occur between 1966 and 1972. He predicted that oil production in the USA would peak in or around 1970. Everyone laughed. At the time the USA was the world's largest oil producer. And, oh how they laughed. Other geologists said it would be 1990 or even 2010 before America started to run out of oil.

American oil production didn't peak in 1970. (Although it wasn't clear until a year later that oil production in the USA had peaked.)

At that point, in 1971, oil wells throughout Texas started to dry up. American oil production turned down and never recovered. Gas and oil prices within the USA soared as American oil imports tripled.

Suddenly, and remarkably, everything had changed.

The Arab nations, through OPEC (Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries), suddenly had a hold over America. Geopolitics had changed for ever. Ever since then America has been reliant on oil imports and finding and securing the oil has dominated American foreign policy.

`It is evident that the fortunes of the world's human population, for better or for worse, are inextricably interrelated with the use that is made of energy resources,' wrote M.King Hubbert in 1969.

But Hubbert didn't just predict the end of American oil supplies. He also predicted similar peaks for other oil producing nations. And, one by one, he has been proved right. Venezuela hit its peak in 1970. Nigeria hit its peak in 1979. Many other countries have already peaked.

And, perhaps most importantly of all, the peak year for discovery was 1964. Despite spending countless millions, oil exploration companies have never again found as much oil as they did in 1964.

`We are in a crisis in the evolution of human society,' wrote Hubbert.`It's unique to both human and geologic history. It has never happened before and it can't possibly happen again. You can only use oil once. You can only use metals once. Soon all the oil is going to be burned and all the metals mined and scattered.'

Hubbert made another big prediction.

When he'd predicted what would happen in the USA and in other specific countries Hubbert looked at global oil production. He estimated that the peak would be at the end of the 20th century or early in the 21st century.

`...about 80% of the oil produced today flows from fields that were found before 1973, and the great majority of them are declining,' wrote Colin J.Campbell and Jean Laherrere, in Scientific American, in March 1998.`In the 1990s oil companies have discovered an average of seven billion barrels of oil; last year they drained three times that much. Yet official figures indicated that proved resources ...expanded by 11 billion barrels of oil. One reason is that several dozen governments opted not to report declines in their reserves, perhaps to enhance their political cachet and their ability to obtain loans. A more important cause of the expansion lies in revisions: oil companies replaced earlier estimates of the reserves left in many fields with higher numbers.'

The whole theory of peak oil is based upon Hubbert's law which effectively states that once half the oil is removed from an oil field the amount of oil which can be removed will decline, often quite rapidly.

Technology can help make sure that we get most of the remaining oil. But no amount of technology can increase the amount of oil available. And as the amount of oil (or gas or coal or whatever) remaining diminishes so it becomes harder to extract what remains. And, as it becomes harder to extract the remaining oil (or gas or coal or whatever) so it also become more expensive and it also uses more energy.

In order to get the best out of a field numerous wells have to be drilled. As more wells are drilled so more oil is obtained. Oil production peaks. Eventually, however, it gets harder to get at the remaining oil. Production falls off. Even if additional wells are drilled it is difficult to get the remaining oil out of the ground. And much of the oil will never be taken out.

During the 1970s (by no means the best decade for finding oil) 220 giant oil fields were discovered.

So far this century just 72 oil fields have been found. None of them have been large. The Centre for Global Energy Studies calculates that the average output from giant oil fiends found in the 1990s is about half that of the fields found in the 1970s.

According to the Oil and Gas Journal the average field size has been falling dramatically since the peak was reached in around 1940. Then the average field size contained nearly five billion barrels of oil. Today the average new field contains a fifth that much.

The result is that combined global oil and gas reserves have fallen dramatically from a peak in the 1960s and 1970s.

It is widely believed among people in the industry that OPEC has been deliberately inflating its estimates of its reserves to stop panic and to keep people using oil.

When will the party be over?

It is impossible to say precisely when the oil will run out and our civilisation will end. All it is possible to say with some certainty is that it will end - and much sooner than most people expect. According to the International Energy Agency (the industrialised countries' energy watchdog and not an organisation known for its pessimism as far as oil supplies are concerned) oil will start to be in real short supply by 2012. There will, says the agency, be a real `supply crunch'.

Once oil is in short supplies prices will rise dramatically. And they won't ever come down again. The coming disaster, the end of oil, will have begun.

Most of the oil which is exported to America and to Europe comes from countries with weak, developing economies and weak political structures.

Countries which are developed, or which are growing, need all the oil they can produce for themselves. So, although both the USA and the UK are oil producers, neither produce enough oil for their needs and so both countries are net importers.

Once an oil exporter becomes developed it invariably needs all the oil it can produce for its own industries and for its own transport.

So, for example, consider Iran.

Iran is one of the world's major sources of oil. It is the second largest exporter of oil in OPEC. And yet Iran claims that it needs nuclear reactors because it too will soon be an importer of oil.

If Iran needs to import oil just where will it get it from?

Writing in The Party's Over, Richard Heinberg argues that the end will come in several major steps.

1. The Peak in energy production

During the years from 1945 to 1973 world energy production per head of population increased by 3.24 % a year. From 1973 to 1979 the increase slowed to 0.64% a year. From 1979 energy production steadily declined. The conclusion is that 1979 was the peak year for energy production.

2. Peak availability of energy

For the last 20 years more energy has been produced each year. But the amount of energy consumed in obtaining that energy has increased more rapidly. It now takes far more drilling effort to obtain oil, natural gas or coal than it did a year or two ago. The peak years were, says Heinberg, probably between 1985 and 1995. (He points out that no official agency has bothered to make the necessary calculations.)

3. Peak global extraction (`peak oil')

Heinberg suggests that the peak year for taking oil out of the earth will probably be reached between 2006 and 2010.

Most politicians and so called experts continue to reassure us that soaring energy prices are a temporary problem, that oil reserves and effectively limitless and that we don't have to worry about oil running out in our lifetimes. Even if it does, they say, it won't matter. There are dozens of other new technologies available to replace the oil.

The politicians claim that when materials or commodities are in short supply people find ways to cope without them. And, they say, when prices rise adventurous companies will find ways to produce alternatives. If metals are running out, exploration companies will find more of them. If oil is in short supply and the price rockets, oil exploration companies will make sure they find some more of the stuff. They will do this because it will be in their financial interest to do so. High prices restrict demand and encourage supply.

People have, they say, been predicting the end of natural resources since the 19th century. And they are right about this. In 1865 a distinguished British economist called Stanley Jevons published a comprehensive study of the coal industry in which he predicted that Britain would need 2,500 million tons of coal a year by 1961. There wouldn't be enough of the stuff, he said.

As it happened our consumption of coal fell from a peak of 300 million tons in 1913. By 1961 it was down to 200 million tons a year. A tenth of the Jevons estimate.

What Jevons hadn't realised was that someone would find huge amounts of oil in the Arabian deserts, thereby making coal rather less important.

In 1972 the Club of Rome published a book predicting that the world would soon run out of gold, silver, zinc and other metals. Non renewable resources would run out and there would be worldwide chaos.

Wrong again.

Sometimes, even oil experts seem to agree with the optimistic politicians.

BP's Statistical Review of World Energy, published in June 2007, suggested that there is enough oil left for another 40 years of consumption at present rates. (Back in 1980 experts forecast that there was enough oil left for another 40 years of consumption. Is there always going to be another 40 years worth of oil?)

But the BP Review is a summary of estimates supplied by Governments and oil companies. These are often politically motivated.

It's worth remembering that Britain's North Sea oil reserves peaked in 1999 but the British Government wouldn't admit that this had happened for some years afterwards.

All oil producing governments lie about their oil reserves.

So, are the politicians and oil producing countries right now?

Or could they possibly be lying?

If the politicians are right then you have nothing to worry about. If you are prepared to trust their reassurances you can carry on with your life, content in the knowledge that the problems ahead of us will all be controlled if only we can learn to put our rubbish out on the right days and separate our plastic bottles from our glass ones.

On the other hand, if the independent oil experts are right and the politicians are wrong then the disaster heading our way is far bigger than anything any of us has ever envisaged.

The problem is that although the politicians are reassuring the geologists and oil experts are not. Nor, indeed, are the oil producers themselves.

By the turn of the millennium every key oil producer around the world had started to acknowledge that they were producing more or less at peak sustainable rates. Many of OPEC's key oil fields were in permanent decline and some OPEC countries had stopped exporting oil at all. In 2004, for example, Indonesia became an oil importer for the first time in its history. By the middle of 2004 there were concerns that the Russians were overproducing oil, and working their oil fields too hard, in order to maximise their current profits. (Russia has developed close links with India and China because whereas Russia has oil and no money, India and China have bucket loads of money but no oil.)

For twenty years the world has been finding less oil than it has been using. Demand has been soaring but the dribs and drabs of new oil that have been discovered have been found in out of the way, difficult to reach places. There have been no world-class oil discoveries since the finds in Alaska and the North Sea in the 1970s. Despite the huge amounts of money spent on drilling and exploration no major new oil fields have been discovered for twenty years. In not much over a century we have used up oil reserves which took millennia to form. Most of the oil we are burning was created over about 500 million years. Nothing can replace the oil we have taken out of the ground and used up.

Out of the 98 oil producing nations 60 are in decline.

Oil companies are spending more and more money in their search for oil. Between 2000 and 2005 they increased their capital expenditure by a quarter of a trillion dollars. We are, however, discovering less oil than at any time since 1945.

We have better technology than ever - including satellite mapping - but we are finding much less oil and we are, indeed, finding far less oil than we are using.

In the 1960s oil company geologists discovered around 55 billions of oil a year. Today they are lucky if they discover 9 billion barrels of oil a year.

The discovery of what oil experts now still regard as the `supergiant' fields began in the 1930s. The al-Burgan field in Kuwait (currently still the world's second largest oil field) was discovered in 1938 and has been in constant service ever since. The Saudi al-Ghawar field (still the world's largest oil field) has been slowly emptied since 1948. There are only 14 oil basins in the world which are capable of producing half a million barrels a day. All were discovered in the 1940s or earlier.

The days of sticking a well into the ground and then standing back as the oil gushes out are long gone. Today, the oil that is discovered tends to be the type of stuff that takes a good deal of (expensive) work to extract and refine.

Oil production by non OPEC nations reached its maximum in 1999 and has been in decline since then. Scientists at the Oil Depletion Analysis Centre say that global production of oil will peak by 2011 before entering on a steep decline.

They say that the peak of regular oil - the stuff that is easy to get out of the ground - went in 2005.

When you factor in the more difficult stuff - polar reserves and liquid taken from gas, peak oil will come by 2011.

Many individual oil producing countries have already reached `peak oil' production. They are now pumping out less oil than they used to. A number of these countries are, therefore, now net oil importers instead of being oil exporters.

Here are the dates when specific nations reached `peak oil'.

America 1970
Argentina 1998
Australia 2000
Congo 1999
Egypt 1993
Indonesia 1977
Iran 1974
Iraq 1979
Kuwait 1972
Libya 1970
Norway 2001
Oman 2001
Peru 1980
Saudi Arabia 1979
Soviet Union 1987
UK 1999
Venezuela 1970

Most other oil producing nations are expected to reach their individual `peak oil' year well before 2010.

Whenever there is a temporary shortage of oil, the prices skyrocket. This isn't something that only happens to oil, of course. It's a general rule of life. When there is a shortage of something the price goes up. When the stuff that is in short supply is something that a lot of people really, really want then the price will go through the roof. And there is panic and chaos. In 1970 a reduction of just 5% in the amount of oil available caused a price rise of 400%.

So, what will happen when the world's oil production starts to fall permanently?

Most, if not all, oil producers exaggerate their reserves.

In 1986 OPEC made a rule that its members could only export oil according to the amount they had in their reserves. Countries could only sell a proportion of what they had in the ground.

Guess what happened?

Within weeks of the new rule being introduced almost every OPEC country suddenly discovered that it had more oil than it had previously thought it had. Reserves were upgraded so that individual countries could sell more oil and earn more money. The upgrades came without any new oil wells being discovered.

The total reserves claimed by OPEC - the official amount of oil remaining - leapt from 353 billion barrels of oil to 643 billion barrels of oil.

The Saudis increased their estimate of their oil by 100 billion barrels. Kuwait added 50% to its reserves. Just like that. Whoomp. Venezuela doubled its reserves. Iraq and Iran doubled their reserves too.

No one had found significant new amounts of oil.

They just altered their official estimates of the oil they had left.

Countries are still exaggerating their reserves.

OPEC members have kept their reserve estimates the same year after year. They simply pretend that the oil they've sold has come out of thin air.

Every oil well in the world is apparently bottomless.

Speaking on Channel 4 news in 2004 Sadad Al Husseini, formerly vice president for exploration of the Saudi oil company Aramco, said that official American forecasts for future oil supplies are `a dangerous over-estimate'.

When he was asked if people should be worried Mr Al Husseini said they should.

Even companies exaggerate their reserves.

In 2004 one of the world's biggest companies, Royal Dutch Shell, admitted that it had overestimated its oil reserves by 4.5 billion barrels. During one remarkable short period Shell reduced its reported reserves three times, reducing the total amount of oil it said it had by a massive 20%.

Astonishingly, Shell executives had apparently assumed that they would be able to maintain and even increase extraction rates from their oil fields in Oman - despite the fact that production had been falling for four years. Their reserves were based not on oil they knew they had but on oil they expected to have. Similar revisions apparently had to be made for the oil the company had previously said it had in Nigeria.

It seems to me that it is as though you and I had included next week's expected lottery win in a statement of our resources when applying for a bank loan.

Worst of all is the fact that Shell was not, and is not, alone in overestimating its reserves. Other oil companies do the same thing.

`The ability to control energy, whether it be making wood fires of building power plants, is a prerequisite for civilisation,' wrote
Isaac Asimov in 1991.

Oil producing countries (and companies) are relying on new technologies for extracting oil to enable them to fulfil their published figures for oil production.

No one seems to realise (or, if they do, they don't seem to care) that taking oil out more efficiently doesn't increase the amount that of oil that is available.

If you take the oil of your oil fields more speedily then they will empty more speedily.

The four countries with the biggest reported reserves in the world are Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq and Kuwait.

Of these Saudi Arabia is regarded as the world's most important source of oil. The biggest oil field in Saudi Arabia is known as Ghawar. It is the largest old fashioned oil field in the world. (The oil sands in Canada are bigger but far less useful as a source of oil.)

In 1948 Ghawar was estimated to hold 87 billion barrels of oil. In 1970, experts from four top oil companies - Chevron, Exxon, Mobil and Texaco - estimated that there were 60 billions of oil left in Ghawar.

Since then 55 billion barrels of crude oil have been taken out of Ghawar.

Do the sums.

Ghawar now has no more than 5 billion barrels of crude left.

Every day the Saudis pump 7 millions of seawater into the Ghawar oil field to keep the pumping pressure high enough to get out the remaining dregs of oil.

Throughout the last half of the twentieth century the oil produced from Ghawar, made up between 55% and 65% of Saudi Arabia's total oil production.

For years the world has believed that there is so much oil underneath Saudi Arabia that it can never run out. Sadly, there has never been any reliable evidence to sustain this optimistic view.

`Twilight in the Desert' is surely one of the most important books to have been published in the last half a century. The author, banker and oil expert Matthew R.Simmons, explains the size of the threat facing the world in precise and unemotional detail. Matthew Simmons is an investment banker who manages over $50 billion in energy investments. He has been a White House adviser to both Bush and Clinton. Simmons has examined the fading of Saudi Arabia's oil supply and suggests that it is the coming failure of Saudi Arabian oil supplies which will bring about the peaking of global oil supplies - at the very time that the global demand for oil is rising faster than ever before.

Simmons points out that 90% of all the oil that Saudi Arabia has ever produced has come from just seven giant oil fields which have now all matured and grown old. The three most important oil fields in Saudi Arabia have been producing oil at very high rates for over half a century. Ghawar, the biggest single oil field, is known as the King of oil fields .

But now the end is nigh.

`Twilight at Ghawar is fast approaching,' says Simmons.

Just how quickly the oil will run out is something no one knows. Once peaking occurs, however, the decline in output tends to fall. It doesn't reach a plateau and just stay there. It is not uncommon for the output from a major oil field to halve in just a few years. Indeed, it is the norm. A survey of major oil fields showed that all of them declined by more than 50% within ten years of peaking.

The Brent oil field was producing 450,000 thousand barrels of oil a day in 1985 but, just five years later, in 1990, the production was down to 100,000 thousand barrels of oil a day. Both the Brent oil field and the Forties oil field (the UK's two largest oilfields and the mainstays of the North Sea oil field industry) were largely empty by the year 2000 - around 30 years after their discovery.

The Samotlor oilfield was producing nearly 3 million barrels of oil a day in 1986 but by 1994 the oil production was down to below half a million barrels of oil a day.

China's need to import oil stems not only from the fact that the nation's demand is rising rapidly. The huge Chinese Daqing oil field has been producing over one million barrels of oil a day for over 35 years but in early 2004 China's energy planners publicly discussed the likelihood that Daqing's output would be down by 40% by 2006 or 2007.

If Ghawar and other major oil fields fall only as quickly as the world's other oil fields (and, remember, Ghawar and others have been worked very hard for many decades and it is not unreasonable to expect that they could fall even more rapidly) the world oil supply will be devastated within less than a decade.

Remember that despite the spending of huge amounts of money on looking for oil there have been no major oil field discoveries for years.

The chances are that it will not be possible to replace dying oil fields with new ones. And so the oil age will end.

The oil produced in Saudi Arabia is crucial largely because of the quantities involved. For decades the oil produced by the Saudis has made up around half of the oil produced in the whole of the middle east. Saudi oil reserves make up nearly a quarter of the world's oil reserves. And, over the years, the willingness of the Saudis to increase their production whenever the world is short of oil has helped to even out the global supply. Today, the Saudis are paying the price for all those years of overproduction.

At a secret 1974 USA Senate hearing investigative it was reported that back in 1972 the American oil companies in Saudi Arabia had begun to realise that they were taking so much oil out of the Saudi Arabian oil fields that they were damaging the fields.

However, since the American oil companies knew that they were soon going to lose ownership of the oil fields to the Saudi Arabian Government they deliberately decided to `milk these fields for every saleable drop of oil and put back as little investment as possible'.

This allegation was repeated in 1979 when investigative reporter Seymour Hersh published an article in the New York Times questioning the capacity of Saudi Arabia's oil fields. Hersh claimed that the Saudi Arabian oil fields had been systemically over produced in the early years of the 1970s because representatives of America's major oil companies (which at that time controlled Saudi Arabia's oil fields) suspected that the Saudi Arabian Government was about to nationalise their oil fields. The American oil companies wanted to get oil out of the ground as rapidly as they could - without worrying about the fact that if you take too much oil out of an oil field you risk permanently damaging it.

In 1979 the US Senate Subcommittee on International Economic Policy of the Committee on Foreign Relations took another look at the Saudi Arabian oil fields. The Senate's advisers suggested that the 9.8 million barrel per day production rate was probably as good as it ever going to get. In other words, even if money was invested in them, the key oil fields in Saudia Arabia would all be in decline before the year 2000. This information was considered too alarming for the public and so the source documents for this conclusion were sealed from the public view for another 50 years - until long after the prediction would have been proved either right or wrong, and probably long after those who were responsible for it had gone on to worry about other things.

Predictions are only predictions, of course. Good guesses. Estimates. But this one seems to have been spot on.

By the end of the 1990s almost all OPEC producers were close to their peak production rates. Saudi Arabia had managed to increase its oil production in the 1990s in order to help the world cope with the embargo on Iraq's oil exports.

But it is likely that by doing this the Saudi Arabians damaged the long term viability of their oil fields. When you take extra oil out of an oil field you reduce the reservoir pressure and allow more unwanted water to seep into the remaining oil.

So, here's a piece of irony. The American sanctions, designed to force the Iraqis to let the Americans have access to the Iraqi oil, probably resulted in permanent damage being done to the huge Saudi oil fields.

The increasing fall in supply from most countries around the world has coincided with a sustained increase in demand and Saudia Arabia, which long ago gave itself the task of filling in when world oil supplies look insufficient, is now probably causing permanent damage to its oil fields by increasing production in order to keep up with the demand for oil.

When the valves are opened too wide (to get out extra oil) the pressure within an oil field falls. When the pressure falls it becomes increasingly difficult to get oil out in the future. More importantly, as the oil is drained out, water tends to pour into the void - further damaging the oil field.

The Saudi Arabians are not the only ones who are running out of oil. The world's second biggest oil field is the Burgan oil field in Kuwait. For almost sixty years this oil field has been pumping out vast quantities of oil. It accounts for over half of Kuwait's proven oil reserves.

But Kuwait recently revealed that the Burgan oil field is past its peak output. The oil field's planned output will drop from two million barrels a day to around 1.7 million barrels a day. And the fall will continue - probably quite steeply. In 2006 a journalist found documents suggesting that the country's real reserves were half of what had been reported.

In 2007 Iran became the first major oil producer to introduce oil rationing. And, of course, the Iranians want nuclear power to replace their diminishing oil supply.

And in Iraq the Americans have created chaos, constant war and instability.

The Americans expected to be able to take control of Iraq's remaining oil fields when they invaded in 2003 but things haven't worked out well for them. Resistance workers fighting against the occupation forces have repeatedly damaged pipelines and refineries and have been so successful that they have reduced the amount of oil being produced.

The factor which makes the crisis still worse than it might otherwise be is, of course, the rate at which the consumption of oil is rising.

Governments in Europe are desperately trying to persuade their citizens to use less energy. They're doing this not because the oil is running out (I haven't heard one Minister talk about peak oil) but because of global warming.

Unfortunately, the efforts in Europe aren't going to make much (if any) difference for two reasons.

First, the Americans aren't doing anything to cut back on their consumption of oil. According to the Energy Information Administration, America burns through 20 million barrels of oil a day. That's nearly a quarter of the oil used by the entire world.

Second, and probably even more important, parts of the world which never used to use much oil have discovered just how much joy the stuff can add to life. And they want some of the oil and some of the fun.

If China and India continue to grow (even at a much reduced rate) the world's consumption of oil will, inevitably, rise remorselessly. Even if America and Europe cut their consumption of oil (not particularly likely) the world consumption of oil will still rise. And it will keep rising.

At the moment the Chinese use, on average 1.5 barrels of oil per person per year. The average Indian uses less than one barrel per person a year. Contrast that with America where the average person uses 26 barrels of oil per person per year and the UK where the average person gets through just over 10 barrels of oil a year.

China and India need huge amounts of oil and their leaders are already doing everything they can to secure long term oil supplies. They are using diplomacy, trade, direct investment, technological assistance, military support, bilateral agreements - and all the other tricks previously used by Western countries. China has, for example, recently done deals with such vital oil producing countries as Iran, Saudi Arabia and Venezuela. Altogether, China has secured, or is in negotiations for, free-trade pacts with 25 countries. Two years ago China had no such trade agreements. China is positioning itself as a world leader in trade and investment and is beating the USA at all its own games. China has excellent relationships with North and South Korea, Pakistan and India and good relationships with the EU and with Australia and Canada.

Many countries now regard China as a better future ally than the USA and regard a relationship with China as a good defence against American hegemony.

The Chinese are in discussion with Canada about a joint effort to develop a number of energy-related projects, including developing the huge oil sands of Alberta.

Even if we had not reached `peak oil', even if the oil wasn't running out, even if the world's oil stocks somehow remained constant, the simple rules of supply and demand would ensure that the oil price would inevitably rise.

The only thing that would take the oil price downwards would be either discoveries of several massive new oil fields or the discovery of a genuine new alternative.

Since oil exploration companies have been searching for new oil for several decades without much success the former possibility seems unlikely. (I will deal with biofuels and the Canadian oil sands later.)

And to rely on someone somewhere discovering an entirely new form of energy is like putting all your money on a 1,000 to 1 outsider. It's possible but not very likely.

`According to the US Geological Survey, global discovery of large new oil fields peaked in 1962 and has been declining since,’ wrote James J.MacKenzie, in Issues in Science and Technology dated June 22 1996.`The reason is simple: most oil occurs in a very few large oil fields and these are usually discovered early on because they are so big. The largest 1% of oil fields contain 75% of all the discovered oil, and the largest 3% contain 94% of the oil. The implication of this skewed distribution is that as exploration progresses, the average size of the fields discovered decreases. In other words, exploration in the declining phase of oil development - where we find ourselves today - is a far different game than in the early phase. In the early stages, it is the large fields that are readily discovered; in the declining stages, geologists are much more likely to find small fields and oil companies must do a lot more drilling just to stay even. That's why it's so much harder to maintain production in the declining stages than in the growing phase of the industry.'

The consensus among experts seems to be that if we haven't already reached the all time peak in global oil production (global `peak oil') then we will do so within the next year or two. And once we are over the peak the downward slide will be fast and constantly getting faster.

Current oil consumption levels around the world (measured in barrels per head per annum) are:

a) India 0.6
b) China 1.5
c) Russia 9.6
d) UK 10.4
e) USA 25.8

It's crucial to remember that the demand for oil is increasing in China at 30-40% a year. An increasing number of countries are now competing for shrinking supplies.

The oil sands of Alberta, Canada are said by those who sneer at the concept of peak oil to be the answer to the world's coming oil shortage. Despite the enormous problems the Canadian oil sands now account for more than 30% of Canada's oil production.

The Athabasca Oil Sands, for example, cover 141,000 square miles (which means they are cover a larger area than the whole of England). There are huge variations in the estimates of the oil available there but it is widely agree that there is more oil in the Canadian oil sands than there is in Iraq. Theoretically, there is enough oil in Canada's oil sands to provide up to half of America's oil use. But the Americans have so annoyed the Canadians that it seems very likely that any surplus oil will go not to the USA but to China. (Serious rumours abound in North America that there are plans for America, Mexico and Canada to unite and create a single new country with a common energy policy. The aim, of course, is for America to use the merger to steal Canada's and Mexico's oil and gas resources. Both countries are, however, expected to reach their peak oil production in 2007 so if and when the Americans realise this the marriage may be off.)

Getting the oil out of these sands is difficult. The oil sands may contain the biggest known reserves of under-exploited oil in the world but the oil is trapped in a mixture of sand, water and clay. It is extremely difficult and expensive to get at the oil. And it is enormously damaging to the environment to do so. When the oil is removed it's a thick, heavy tar-like substance called bitumen.

The oil sands simply aren't as wonderful as some people think they are. Canada is sitting on a potential 315 billion barrels of oil but there are only two ways to get the oil out: either by mining it or by heating it deep underground so that it is forced up to the surface. The viscous tar that is produced then has to be processed before it can be refined.

Getting the oil out is, in short, expensive, messy and very, very bad for the environment. Getting the oil out also uses up a great deal of energy.

The sand has to be effectively `cooked' to get the oil out and it has been estimated that it takes the equivalent of two out of every three barrels of oil obtained from the sands to pay for the energy and other costs involved in getting the oil from the sands in the first place. Two tons of sands have to be mined to produce just one barrel of oil. Using natural gas to `cook' the sands is one possibility but there doesn't seem much point in using vast quantities of natural gas to release oil. Canada has some of the world's biggest deposits of uranium and it seems likely that Canada will use some of its uranium to get the oil out. Early in 2007 Canada's Natural Resources Minister agreed that Canada would probably use nuclear power to help get the oil out of the oil sands.

There are absolutely devastating environmental consequences. Huge, permanent lakes of toxic waste are created during this process. The world will undoubtedly continue to try to extract oil from the sands but the price will be a heavy one and the reward a rather light one.

Incidentally, Canada can't extra oil from the sand and stick to the Kyoto Protocol which it has signed. Canada is committed to reducing its greenhouse-gas emissions to 6% below its 1990 level of 560 million metric tons by 2012 but things are not looking too good. In 2003 Canada's emissions rose to 740 million metric tons. And the oil-from-the-sand industry is going to add around 82 million metric tons a year to that total.

`How do we stick to 1990 emissions levels when our population is greater and our opportunity is many times greater?' asks the Alberta energy minister Greg Melchin, who has obviously learned a thing or two about global responsibility from his neighbours to the south. Oil sands producers are already the largest and fastest rising source of greenhouse gases in Canada if not the world. By the year 2015 the oil sands will be emitting 156 million tonnes of greenhouse gases a year.

`All this energy expended in thousands of ways used to finally discover oil and produce it has to be added up and compared with the amount of energy in the oil which these efforts produce,' wrote Walter Youngquist in `Geodestinies: The Inevitable Control of Earth Resources over Nations and Individuals' in 1997.

So, is ethanol from corn the answer to our disappearing oil supplies?

It's been known for many years that you can run an engine on oil made from all sorts of things other than the black sticky stuff that comes out of the desert. At the 1898 Paris Exhibition an inventor demonstrated an engine which ran on 100% peanut oil. Vegetable oils were abandoned not because they don't work but because they are more expensive than the oil that comes out of the ground.

Now, with the oil running out, some people claim that we can solve global warming, and avoid the problems caused by peak oil, by burning ethanol made from corn (and other crops).

Ethanol has suddenly (and bizarrely) become everyone's favourite short cut to reducing emissions of greenhouse gases. To the Americans it is an easy way for them to remain addicted to oil without being hooked on imported oil.

The drive to replace oil with biofuels is strongest in America where George Bush has discovered new friends among the farmers who grow stuff which can be turned into biofuel.

Disguising this greed as a `cleaner energy initiative' America is aiming to increase the use of what they describe as `renewable fuels' fivefold by 2020.

George W. Bush and other American politicians love biofuel because it justifies spending billions on farm subsidies (and, thereby, pleases farm backers and lobbyists who will take over from the oilmen).

Drivers love biofuels because, thanks to subsidies, they are cheaper at the pump.

The biofuel of the moment is ethanol - despite the fact that it is fuel and land intensive to produce. (It actually costs more to produce than petrol (about twice as much).)

Ethanol is fashionable because those who promote it claim that its use will save the planet from global warming.

Car makers in Detroit have agreed that half of their vehicles will run on a petrol-ethanol mix in the ratio of 85:15 by the year 2012.

The type of ethanol they prefer is the one made from corn. Naturally, this is the most costly and inefficient way to produce a biofuel. It is also the way that does most harm to the environment. Brazilian ethanol produced from Brazilian sugar cane is far more efficient but corn is grown in America by large corporations with lots of expensive lobbyists and Brazilian sugar cane is grown in Brazil.

And, as everyone knows, some powerful Americans don't give a fig about the environment. If it’s a choice between making a buck and screwing the environment the Americans will screw the environment every time. The result is that a fifth of the American corn crop is already used to make ethanol.

There are 76 ethanol refineries under construction in the USA. In 2006 20% of America's corn crop went towards making ethanol and yet ethanol is still only 4.3% of the volume of petrol sold. So to replace gasoline will need 500% of the corn crop.

The corn producing states love ethanol and their lobbyists are replacing the oil company lobbyists in Washington. The American Government is happily throwing money at ethanol production because it makes them look as if they care about the fate of the planet. The American Government encourages the use of ethanol by giving a tax subsidy of 51 cents a gallon. Bush gave $2.5 billion to the oil companies to mix ethanol in with their petrol (which they would have happily done anyway). The Bush target is that by 2017 the entire current American crop of corn will be turned into fuel.

In fact the Americans would have to turn 100% of their soybean and corn crops into fuel to replace 11% of on road fuel consumption in America.

Just what people will eat is something the Americans haven't thought about yet.

The EU is as barmy as America.

The European Commission, father and mother of the straight banana and the perfect cucumber, and a safe but wildly overpaid working environment for many of the world's most blindingly stupid people, has called for biofuels to replace 10% of all petrol by the year 2020.

Can the European Commission have really matched George W.Bush for stupidity?

Oh yes.

To reach its target 25% of all European arable land will be turned over to ethanol production.

The consequences of this madness are seemingly unending.

Farmers who used to grow soybeans are now growing corn because they can either sell it as food or sell it to the oil companies to mix in with their petrol. Rapeseed crops are now seen everywhere in Europe as farmers abandon growing barley and wheat. (The disappearance of barley is, of course, a reason why beer prices are rising. And will continue to rise.)

I wonder how many farmers know (or care) that rapeseed oil produces lots of nitrous oxide gas - which creates even more global warming than carbon dioxide?

Those who believe that ethanol offers answers to all our problems are magnificently, technicolour stupid.

Those who believe that ethanol offers any answers to some of our problems are just plain stupid.

The lunatic belief in ethanol has increased the price of food around the world and is boosting the price of farmland. The makers of Italian pasta, Mexican tortillas, American corned beef and German beer have all warned that the price of their products will have to rocket. Food conglomerates have issued a series of profit warnings. The ethanol promoters don't seem to care but their bright new idea will result in a massive increase in worldwide starvation.

The pro-ethanol strategy (as they like to think of it) is eye wateringly wasteful. It's so stupid that it's difficult to say how stupid it is. But I will try.

It's like trying to replace the world's shrinking glaciers by making ice cubes in a series of refrigerators, carting the ice cubes by lorry to the site of the shrunken glaciers, and then hoping that the ice cubes will repair the damage.

Here are several good reasons why biofuels won't work.

First, Creating ethanol from corn will use up vast amounts of our corn supply. The corn needed for one tankful of ethanol could feed one person for a year. In Iowa in the USA, 25 ethanol plants are now operating, and 30 being built or planned. Once built these plants will consume half the state's crop of corn. The prices for sugar, corn and wheat are rising because we are using these foodstuffs for fuel. A huge chunk of world grain consumption is now going into American petrol tanks. (At a time, it should be noted, when America has already become a net importer of food.) This will result in greater starvation in a world where there is a continuing and (because of global warming) developing food shortage. The global lack of fresh water (caused by the increase in the number of bathrooms being built, the increase in the number of people on the planet, the increasing demands of providing water for increasing numbers of cattle, the increasing pollution of our water supplies and global warming) will make growing crops even more difficult. And will also result in higher prices for basic food stuffs.

Using rape-seed and sugar beet instead of corn doesn't help because (and this will doubtless come as something of a surprise to politicians and bureaucrats) you still need land to grow rape-seed and sugar beet.

And when you've grown the stuff you still need to use lots of energy to harvest it, transport it and turn it into ethanol. (The dullards at the European Commission probably imagine that you plant some sugar beet seeds and wait for a nice neat row of petrol pumps to pop up a few weeks later.)

Second, it costs more in terms of energy to get the fuel than it delivers. There are energy costs in building and running tractors, and moving the corn around. You have to include the energy needed to plant the corn, water it, harvest and turn into alcohol. Oil is needed to make the fertilisers and pesticides the farmers use.

Numerous experts have shown that producing ethanol actually costs energy.

According to David Pimentel, a professor of ecology and agricultural science at Cornell University in the USA, 129,600 British thermal units of energy are used to produce 1 gallon of ethanol. And one gallon of ethanol provides just 76,000 Btu of energy.

Another expert has worked out that around 131,000 BTUs are needed to make a gallon of ethanol but that gallon will only produce 77,000 BTU.

These figures means a loss of over 50,000 BTU for every gallon of ethanol produced.

Oil, in contrast, is just dug out of the ground. The most important thing to remember about fuels is the energy output to energy input ratio. This measures the amount of work you have to do in order to obtain the fuel. The energy output to input ratio for oil is magnificent. It varies between 30 to 1 and 200 to 1 depending on where the oil is. If it's easy to get at then the ratio is probably closer to 200 to 1. Ethanol is very different. It depends on plants which have to be grown afresh every year. To grow plants to turn into ethanol you have plant seeds, harvest the crop, take the crop to the refinery and then start work on it. You need a tractor to plant the seed, a tractor to harvest the crop and a lorry to take the crop to the refinery. It takes fuel to create the fuel. Oh, and then there's the fertiliser, the herbicide and the pesticide the farmer uses. Where do those come from? Oil. I repeat: to obtain ethanol we have to use up energy to make energy. We get less out that we put in.

Third, burning plant based ethanol still contributes to global warming.

Fourth, pollution from ethanol could create worse health hazards than gasoline - especially for sufferers from respiratory diseases such as asthma. Ethanol burning cars increase the level of toxic ozone gas in environment. This will mean that the atmosphere will become much more dangerous. Pollution from ethanol is more dangerous than petrol because when it breaks down in atmosphere it produces considerably far more ozone than petrol does. Ozone is corrosive and damages the lungs. (Ozone is so corrosive it can crack rubber and destroy stone statues). Other substances released from use of ethanol as fuel include benzene, butadene, formaldehyde and acetaldehyde. All these are carcinogens.

Fifth, the search for so called green fuels, with which we can all prevent climate change and save the environment, is resulting in some strangely destructive behaviour. So, for example, the rising demand for palm oil (an ingredient in biodiesel) has led to tropical forests being cleared in vast areas of South East Asia. People are now chopping down hardwood forests in Asia in order to grow palm oil to take to the USA for the biodiesel industry. This is being done in order to keep petrol prices down so that Americans don't have to change their way of life.

Encouragement (and subsidies) from the USA and the European Union means that farmers all around the world are now creating more farmland on which to grow sugar beet and rape seed and corn. Higher prices for their produce means that there is an incentive to clear land and plant crops.

That surely cannot be a bad thing, say the empty skulled bureaucrats in Brussels.

Oh dear.

It is.

Because in order to obtain fresh farmland the farmers of Brazil and Asia are chopping down vast tracts of rainforest.This, surprisingly enough, means less rain forest.

And, in turn, means that there are fewer trees to get rid of all the carbon dioxide being produced by the tractors and lorries used by the farmers planting the corn, the sugar beet and the rape-seed.

Clearing rainforests to increase the land available for the cultivation of palm oil is bringing ecological disaster for countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia. And it is adding to the global warming problem. Indonesia, a key palm oil producer, now has the worst carbon emissions level per head of population thanks to the fact that forests have been cut down to make room for palm oil production.

The United Nations has predicted that the natural rain forest of Indonesia will have disappeared in just 15 years time, because of the planting of palm oil to turn into biodiesel so that Europeans (and Americans) can keep on driving their motor cars and taking long flights. Plantations of oil palms for biodiesel have been held responsible for 87% of deforestation in Malaysia. The oh so bloody goody goody fuel planters are ploughing up the planet. As I write, their bulldozers are busy in Africa and South America as well as Asia. The environmental damage seems endless. Sugar cane being grown in huge amounts degrades soils, causes pollution when fields are burnt to get rid of stubble and destroys wildlife.

The United Nations has also reported that biofuels use up vast amounts of water (a commodity that is becoming increasingly scarce). And monocropping (growing the same crop year after year) increases pests and has a negative impact on soil quality.

The bottom line is that bioethanol and biodiesel are a huge scam which will increase not reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Indeed, biofuels may well be the final nail in the planet's coffin.

It's about time the self-righteous nonsense preached about ethanol was put to rest. There is nothing remotely green about biofuels such as ethanol. It is a grotesque myth that biofuels are carbon neutral and will help with the oil shortage.

Biofuels are promoted as planet friendly. But ethanol (from corn or sugar cane) and biodiesel (made from soybean or palm oil) are no answer to any of our problems. The only people benefiting are the motorists who are able to keep driving their cars, the governments who are able to keep collecting the taxes raised on those fuels and the corporations growing and selling the crops which are being used to make biofuels.

The only good thing to come out of all this is that OPEC has threatened to cut oil production if the West continues to use more ethanol. This will increase oil prices but it may help ensure that the oil lasts a year or two longer.

Anyone who thinks that biofuels are an answer to our problems is certifiable. The American Government and the EU are spending billions of taxpayers' dollars and euros subsidising the biofuel industry. And yet the OECD has calculated that it would take 70% of all Europe's farmland to supply enough biofuels to save 10% of the oil currently used in transport.

Will anyone take any notice of all these truths? Will the Americans stop their mad race to replace oil with biofuel?

Of course not.

That's just another reason why I believe the world is heading for the Oil Apocalypse.

`This much is certain,' wrote Kenneth S.Deffeys in `Hubbert's Peak: The Impending World Oil Shortage' in 2001, `no initiative put in place starting today can have a substantial effect on the peak production year. No Caspian Sea exploration, no drilling in the South China Sea, no SUV replacements, no renewable energy projects can be brought on a sufficient rate to avoid a bidding war for the remaining oil. At least, let's hope that the war is waged with cash instead of with nuclear warheads.'

The all time high for world oil production was 85 million barrels a day and it was reached in December 2005. Demand has exceeded that almost ever since but production has never again risen to that level.

America now imports 70% of the oil it consumes and the American Government, aware of what is happening, has stored around a four year supply of conventional crude oil in huge holes in the ground. Other countries - such as China - are now building up huge stockpiles of their own. This stockpiling will, inevitably, accelerate the rate at which the shortfall increases.

In 2004 Matthew Simmons said: `Oil is far too cheap at the moment...the figure I would use is around $182 a barrel.'

Since 2004 things have got steadily worse.

Ghawar isn't the only big field that is running dry. Many of the world's biggest oil fields are between 30 and 100 years old.

In the end we won't know that the world has reached `peak oil' until after it has happened. Oil prices will rise rather rapidly, and they won't go back. A study of production figures will show a decline. Any economic recession which produces a lowered energy demand will mask the fact that the oil is disappearing.

Every year after `peak oil' it will be impossible to pump out as much oil as was taken out of the ground the previous year. Oil will become scarcer year by year. And because it is becoming scarcer it will, inevitably, also become more expensive.

Energy obtained from oil and other fossil fuels is, at the moment, essential for just about every human endeavour. Cars, street lights, computers, lorries, aeroplanes, food, toys - everything we do, everything we make is reliant on fossil fuels.

So, what do we give up first?

How much more will you pay for your petrol so that you can continue driving? How much will you be prepared to pay to heat your home? How much more will you pay for your food? How will your employer cope with rising costs?

For the first few years after the decline starts there will be only be a little less oil (though increasing demand from China and India will exacerbate this natural phenomenon). But after a few years the fall off will become much more dramatic.

We have for over a century been accustomed to living in a world where the amount of free (or `cheap') energy increased every year. No more. Those days are over for ever.

In our modern, complex world, energy means oil. Without oil we can't drive our cars. Delivery men cannot drive their trucks and lorries. Farmers can't operate their tractors or their combine harvesters. Without oil the factories won't run and there will be a desperate shortage of electricity. Without electricity the lights will go out and the computers won't work.

It is, therefore, hardly surprising that for decades the oil price has been the most significant factor in deciding how well the economy does.

Generally speaking, when the oil price goes up the economy does badly.

And when the oil price goes down the economy does well.

Simple.

For example, in 1973 when, in retaliation for American support of Israel, the OPEC nations imposed restrictions on oil exports, there was an immediate 70% rise in global oil prices. Shortly after this, in a protest about America's support for Israel in the Yom Kippur War, OPEC pushed oil prices even higher by imposing a total embargo on oil exports. The price of oil went from $3 a barrel to $12 a barrel. (The Israelis had received massive military aid from the USA - including aircraft to replace the ones which the Egyptians had shot down - and the Arabs, not unreasonably, believed this had affected the war's outcome.) Oil prices rose fourfold and the result was economic chaos. Growth stopped. The stock market collapsed. In 1974 the world went into economic shock. It was the biggest economic shock since the 1930s.

American President Jimmy Carter subsequently made a speech proposing a campaign to reduce America's dependency on foreign oil. He promised that from that time forward America would never increase its foreign imports and that plans would made to reduce energy consumption and to develop alternative fuels.

Naturally, since this was a politician's promise, none of this happened. Oil consumption doubled between 1985 and 2000 and the use of renewable energy hardly changed. Cars were made which were less fuel efficient than they were in the 1980s. And since 1994 the USA has been a major net importer of oil.

In 1979 things got even worse for the West. The Iranian people overthrew the Shah of Iran (who had been put on the throne by the Central Intelligence Agency in 1953) and then fought a war with Iraq. (The Americans encouraged the overthrow of the Shah because he'd wanted to negotiate a better deal with the oil companies. The Americans also encouraged the subsequent Iran-Iraq war because they wanted to see both countries weakened.) The Americans hadn't realised the effect this would have on the oil price which went from $12 a barrel to $30 a barrel.

Since the rise in the oil price had been produced by artificial and temporary problems the oil price went back down again in the 1980s.

There is a widely held theory (popular among politicians and bankers) that oil price will not, in future, behave like other substances (which go up when they are in short supply and go down when there is a glut) but will merely oscillate around a mean point.

The theory says that commodities like oil have a `normalised' price which will always stay within a trading range. The general view is that although the oil price might occasionally rise up as high as $105 a barrel it will soon come back down again to its trading range of around $40 to $50 a barrel.

This theory is put forward even by experts who acknowledge that the world demand for oil is rocketing (as China and India and other countries become more westernised in their approach to the use of oil burning products such as motor cars and aeroplanes) at the same time as the oil producers are finding it impossible to increase their production levels.

I find this belief touching but rather naive. I suspect that those who subscribe to it are also devotees of the tooth fairy and believers in Father Christmas.

As citizens and taxpayers we pay our politicians to look ahead, warn us about impending crises and, where possible, to find solutions.

But our politicians won't even admit that there might be a problem.

Instead of showing any concern for our long term security and prosperity governments everywhere prefer to ignore this problem. At the very best we get patronising reassurances.

The Department of Energy in the USA has responded to fears about the future supply of oil by predicting that the USA will be able to produce more oil in the future. They have claimed that American oil production will rise by 7% over the next few years. This is a heroic assumption, given that American oil production has been in decline for the last 35 years and there are no signs of any impressive new oil fields on the horizon. America's Department of energy has also stated (without any evidence for the claim) that the Saudis will be able to raise their production of oil in the future.

It's difficult to avoid the conclusion that wishful thinking is being preferred to scientific assessment.

The reality is that the oil price is never going back below $50 a barrel for any sustained period.

On the contrary it will continue to edge upwards. First, it will break through the $100 a barrel barrier. Then the $200 barrel barrier will be hit.

Even when the price hits $260 a barrel the price will still only be equivalent to the highs of the early 1980s.

Between 1970 and 1982 the price of oil went from $1.35 a barrel to nearly £35 a barrel. That's a twenty six fold increase. If the oil price went up twenty six times today (at the time of writing) it would be $2,000 a barrel.

During the early part of 2007 the price of oil was kept low artificially.

The Saudis wanted oil prices kept down to discourage the development of alternative sources of energy and to avoid conservation of supplies. The Saudi ruling family wanted to turn their oil into money as quickly as possible.

When oil is really in short supply the price will rocket.

What will the world's billionaires be prepared to pay for the oil to fuel their private aeroplanes and their Ferraris?

How about £20 a gallon? £50 a gallon? £100 a gallon?

And, remember, when the price goes up it will not be a spike or a blip.

The oil shortage will be permanent.

And so the oil price will never come down again.

The oil isn't going to run out overnight.

But once it becomes clear that oil is in permanent short supply, several things will happen to push up the price.

First, governments all around the world will start accumulating and storing oil.

Second, the military in every country will demand its own stockpiles. No country is going to want to have aeroplanes which can't take off because there is no fuel.

Third, speculators will start buying oil.

At that point a chart showing the price of oil will consist of a line going virtually straight upwards.

At what point will petrol become too expensive for the average motorist? When it costs £200 to fill the petrol tank? £500? £1000? And at what point will the central heating be turned off? When the bill reaches £200 a week? Or only when it gets really expensive?

Under normal circumstances governments use various methods to control the economy.

Interest rates can be lowered. This tends to encourage people to borrow money and, therefore, to spend it. This is usually done if the economy is stagnating or faltering.

Interest rates can be raised. This tends to discourage borrowing, slow down spending and take the heat out of an overheating economy.

The government can increase its own spending. It can build more roads, more hospitals and more schools. It can hire more employees. It can start a war. (Wars stimulate the economy by putting more money into arms production. And, of course, when weapons are fired the bullets and rockets have to be constantly replaced.) All these things tend to stimulate the economy by putting more money into the hands of the people.

The government can reduce its own spending. It can cut back on spending programmes and stop hiring new employees. This tends to put a damper on the economy.

The government can reduce taxes. This means that people have more money in their own pockets. More money means more spending. And that boosts the economy.

The government can increase taxes. Making people hand over more of their earnings means that there is less to spend and so the economy will slow down.

Those are the theories.

In practice a lot of things can go wrong. And there are a lot of possible complications.

So, for example, one problem is that if a country has little or no manufacturing industry of its own then allowing people to spend more money will mean more imports. And that will have an effect on the balance of payments. If a country spends more on imports than it makes by exporting then it will have a balance of payments problem.

Another problem is that if a country puts up interest rates this encourages foreigners to invest their money in the banks of that country. If Britain has higher interest rates than, say, Australia, then Australians who want a higher rate of interest on their savings will put their money into sterling. This will strengthen the British currency. For holiday makers going abroad that it's a good thing. It means that they will get more euros or dollars for their pounds. But for exporters, trying to sell in foreign markets, its a bad thing. It means that British made items become more expensive.

Rising energy costs are a particular problem because they do two things at once.

The first thing they do is add to inflation.

When the oil price goes up the cost of a gallon of petrol goes up too. Each time the price of oil goes up it has a bigger and bigger effect on the price of petrol or heating oil. This is because the other costs (such as the retailer's profit, advertising and taxation) will probably remain fairly stable. And so as the price of oil goes up and up so the cost of a gallon of petrol (or heating oil) increases much more rapidly.

Eventually, when the price of oil gets high enough all the other costs (retailer's profit, advertising and taxation) will be so small as to be irrelevant. (In practice, of course, these may change. Governments may attempt to take advantage of the rising oil price by hiding a tax increase in the price.)

The rise in the price of petrol and heating oil aren't the only things that will happen, of course. Oil is used for making plastic, fertilizer, asphalt and a million other things. It's also used to operate delivery lorries. Ships use it. So do aeroplanes. And tractors need it too.

And so many other prices will rise. And will add to the real rate of inflation.

In the past resource shortages have invariably led to double digit levels of inflation. So, as the oil price goes up we can expect to see inflation going up to 15%, 20% or even higher.

Normally, when there is inflation there is also growth. Prices rise because everything in the economy is going well.

But when inflation is going up because of rising oil prices workers will want more money in order to be able to buy the same things that they could buy before. And rising wages will discourage employers from hiring because they are already having a hard time coping with the higher fuel and material costs. And so unemployment will rise.

A temporary rise in the oil price can do an enormous amount of damage to the economy. In the 1970s rising energy costs (caused by OPEC cutting back production) resulted in inflation, unemployment and recession. The word `stagflation' was invented to describe this strange mixture of inflation and deflation.

A permanent rise in the oil price can do much more harm than a temporary spike. A permanent rise in the oil price will destroy an economy - permanently.

Governments will be faced with the choice of either trying to fight inflation by pushing up interest rates and cutting Government spending or of stimulating growth in order to try and boost employment.

If a government chooses the first of these the problems will be exacerbated by any national debt. In Britain, for example, where huge debts were built up during the late 1990s and the early part of the 21st century, the result will be that if interest rates are pushed up (say to 15% - a level they reached just a couple of decades ago) then house prices will go through the floor and millions of people will see their homes repossessed. There will, quite literally, be millions of people living on the streets. As house prices collapse so the stockmarket will follow suit. And unemployment levels will rocket. The Government will be unable to raise enough money to pay its wage and pension bills and millions of Government employees will find themselves joining private sector workers and pensioners on the streets.

If a Government chooses instead to stimulate growth they will send inflation soaring to unprecedented levels. The million pound postage stamp will be a real possibility. And I'm talking about the stamp you put on a letter, not the stamp you buy at auction. If this happens then savings will be worthless.

Some people will benefit (in the short term, at least).

Home owners will see the value of their properties rocketing. And governments will see their own debts disappearing. A debt of billions will be of little consequence when it costs £10,000,000 to buy a newspaper or a loaf of bread.

The consequences of this sort of inflation can be devastating. It was, remember, the inflation that destroyed the middle classes in Germany in the 1920s which gave Hitler the chance to take power.

(There are rumours that the Americans are already planning to dump the American dollar and create a new currency when all this happens to them. It is perfectly possible that the British Government would take the same option - either revaluing the currency or simply getting rid of the old `pound' and creating a new one.)

In the end nothing a government does will make any difference, of course, because when there isn't any more oil there won't be any more oil.

Each economy will be an unmendable mess and our civilisations, the ones we know and are accustomed to, will not survive.

Chapter Three: Oil Wars: Past, Present and Future

Peak oil has already been directly responsible for our loss of freedom.

Securing oil supplies was an important element in many of the wars of the twentieth century. It was certainly the major factor in America's recent illegal wars. The war against terrorism was merely a convenient and publicly acceptable excuse for unacceptable behaviour.

`The life contest is primarily a competition for available energy,' wrote Ludwig Boltzman in 1886.

Fighting for oil isn't new, of course.

America only entered World War I (on the side of Britain and France) after both its new allies and new enemies were pretty much exhausted by the fighting. Once it agreed to join in the war America imposed conditions which included the demand that America's economic and political objectives be taken into account when the war was over. One of those objectives was access to new sources of raw materials, particularly oil. In February 1919, Sir Arthur Hirtzel, a leading British official warned: `It should be borne in mind that the Standard Oil Company is very anxious to take over Iraq.'

That was 1919.

America demanded that its oil companies be allowed to negotiate freely with the new puppet monarchy of King Faisal (the monarch whom the British had put on the throne in Iraq). And so Iraq's oil was divided up between the allies. Five per cent of the oil went to an oil magnate called Gulbenkian (known as `Mr Five Per Cent') who had helped negotiate the agreement. The other 95% was split four ways between Britain, France, Holland and the United States of America. Companies now known as British Petroleum, Shell, Mobil and Exxon pretty much had a monopoly of the oil available. Iraqi oil was split this way until 1958 when there was a revolution in Iraq.

`Oil has literally made (American) foreign and security policy for decades,’ said Bill Richardson, American Secretary of Energy in 1999. `Just since the turn of this century, it has provoked the division of the Middle East after world War I; aroused Germany and Japan to extend their tentacles beyond their borders; the Arab Oil Embargo; Iran versus Iraq; the Gulf War. This is all clear.'

American influence in the region was sealed when the al-Saud family and the United States of America created Saudi Arabia in the 1930s, pretty much as an American colony. It was no coincidence that the American Embassy in Riyadh, the capital city, was situated in the local oil company building.

The Americans were not, however, satisfied with their share of Middle East oil. They wanted control. They had to get rid of the British. And their chance came with the Second World War.

The Americans unceasingly portray themselves as Britain's saviour. This is a wicked misrepresentation. As it had been in the Great War, America was ruthlessly opportunistic.

Britain was greatly weakened by the Second World War but America grew tremendously in power as a result of what happened in the early 1940s. The Roosevelt and Truman administrations (which were dominated by banking and oil interests) decided to restructure the world to ensure that the USA would be on top. They wanted control of the world's oil. They wanted USA dominated globalisation (to which end they created the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in 1944). They wanted the dollar to be the only significant world currency. And they wanted the USA to have military superiority in all types of weapons.

Winston Churchill was so worried by what he could see happening that on March 4th 1944 (three months before the D Day invasion of Normandy) he sought assurance from the USA that she would not try to take over British oil interests.

He wrote to USA president Roosevelt saying: `Thank you very much for your assurances about no sheep's eyes on our oilfields in Iran and Iraq. Let me reciprocate by giving you the fullest assurance that we have no thought of trying to horn in upon your interests or property in Saudi Arabia. My position in this, as in all matters, is that Great Britain seeks no advantage, territorial or otherwise, as a result of this war. On the other hand, she will not be deprived of anything which rightly belongs to her after having given her best services to the good cause, at least not so long as your humble servant is entrusted with the conduct of affairs.'

Sadly, there was nothing that even Churchill could do to save Britain from its new `enemy'.

The Americans had already acquired a new `special relationship' with Saudi Arabia. They arranged this in 1945. Since then the Saudis have helped the Americans by controlling world oil prices to the advantage of the Americans (by releasing or withholding oil supplies) and by continuing to sell oil in dollars (when other oil producing countries wanted to change the currency so as to weaken America). The Americans have helped the Saudis by providing arms and by helping to keep the ruling Saudi royals on the throne (against the wishes of the Saudi people).

In 1953, a CIA coup which put the Shah in power gave Iran to the United States of America. (The Americans also helped the Shah form his much hated secret police.) And within a couple of years after that Iraq was jointly controlled by America and Britain.

In 1955 America set up the Baghdad Pact, which was designed, at least in part, to oppose the rise of Arab liberation movements in the Middle East. Britain and Iraq were signatories, although Iraq was independent only in name. The British still had military airfields in Iraq, which was ruled by a corrupt monarchy. The people of Iraq, despite having a huge quantity of the world's oil under their feet, were still starving and living in abject poverty.

Things changed in Iraq in 1958. A military rebellion launched a revolution which was to have dramatic consequences for the world. The day after the revolution started the Americans put 20,000 marines into Lebanon and over 6,000 British paratroopers dropped into Jordan. Under Eisenhower's leadership the USA and the UK had made it clear that they would go to war to protect their interests in Lebanon and Jordan.

The British, rather naively, thought that they were simply protecting their interests outside Iraq. The Americans had bigger thoughts. They wanted to go into Iraq, overturn the revolution and put a new puppet government (friendly to the USA, of course) in charge in Baghdad.

But the Americans were stopped. The Iraq revolution was too big. And it had too much support from other Arab countries, from the People's Republic of China and from the USSR. The Americans glumly gave up their imperialist plans.

But they didn't give up permanently.

The Americans added Iraq to their growing list of terrorist nations and gave great support to right wing Kurdish elements who were fighting the Iraqi Government. Then, in the late 1970s the Americans supported the government of Saddam Hussein in its fight against communism. In the 1980s the Americans supported (with money and arms) Saddam Hussein's Iraq in its eight year war against Iran, a country over which America had lost control during Iran's Islamic Revolution of 1979. The Americans openly admitted that they were intervening in order to safeguard their access to the region's oil and they slightly less openly hoped that Iraq and Iran would weaken one another and enable the USA to take over. `I hope they kill each other,' former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger is said to have remarked. The Americans provided Iraq's air force with satellite photographs of Iranian targets and sent anti-aircraft missiles to Iran so that the Iranians could shoot down the aircraft which the Iraqis sent over. America was fighting on both sides in this war and was well aware that Saddam Hussein was using chemical weapons. Over a million people died and both countries were left much weaker. (Bizarrely, and hypocritically, in 2003 George W.Bush, claimed that Saddam Hussein's use of chemical weapons in this war was one of the main reasons for attacking Iraq.) The money America made from selling missiles to Iran was used to finance the Contras who were fighting the socialist government in Nicaragua. Reagan, USA President at the time, disapproved of socialist regimes and wanted to get rid of this one in particular. (It is perhaps unfair to ascribe such depth of feeling to Reagan himself, rather than to his advisors.)

The war between Iraq and Iran didn't finish until 1988, by which time Iraq had become friendly with the USSR.

But then the USSR was taken over by Gorbachev, who wanted an end to the cold war and a permanent detente with America. Gorbachev withdrew Soviet support from Iraq (as he had withdrawn it from countries in Eastern Europe) and the world suddenly changed yet again.

After the war with Iran, Saddam Hussein had accumulated massive debts. The low price of oil meant that his income didn't match his national outgoings. The Iraqi president accused Kuwait of drilling for oil in Iraqi territory and then announced that Kuwait wasn't a separate nation at all but was a province of Iraq. Iraq troops invaded Kuwait in 1990. America (with an international force) attacked, the resultant war was over in weeks and in 1991 the Americans got back into Iraq.

In the decade that followed they used sanctions, bombings and blockades to weaken the Iraqi people and to destroy their spirit. American sanctions against Iraq did not target Saddam Hussein, they targeted the Iraqi people.

When the Americans attacked Iraq in the Gulf War they deliberately bombed the country's water supplies. Then, after the `end' of the war the USA helped ensure that new water purification systems could not be imported into Iraq.

The result was that thousands of innocent Iraqis (including young children) died. The United Nations estimates that more than over a million citizens died as a direct result of the sanctions against Iraq and that unclean water was a major contributor to these deaths. A UNICEF study done in 1999 showed that USA led sanctions on Iraq had resulted in the deaths of 500,000 children under the age of five.

The American Pentagon knew of, and monitored, the destruction of Iraq's water supplies, despite the fact that the destruction of civilian infrastructures which are essential for health and welfare is in direct violation of the Geneva Convention.

The American Government knew that bacteria develop in unpurified water, that epidemics would occur, that the manufacture of safe medicine would be compromised, that food supplies would be affected and that, as a result, there would be thousands of civilian deaths.

When an interviewer questioned the American Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, about the fact that her

Government's sanctions had resulted in the deaths of half a million children, Albright responded: `We think the price is worth it.'

`We have 50% of the world's wealth but only 6.3% of its population,' said George F.Kennan, American Ambassador to Moscow, author of an American State Department Policy Planning Study after World War II. `In this situation, our real job in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which permit us to maintain this disparity. To do so, we have to dispense with all sentimentality...we should cease thinking about human rights, the raising of living standards and democratisation.'

Kennan's paper has been the blueprint for American foreign policy for the last half a century.

Since the disaster of the first invasion of Iraq in 1991 the Americans have been trying to get control of the Iraqi oil. They decided they had to invade when the Chinese and the French did oil deals that would have clicked into place when the sanctions ended.

The Americans knew that Saddam Hussein was no threat to America and that he has no weapons of mass destruction. They also knew that Saddam Hussein has nothing in common with Osama bin Laden.

In 2003 America invaded Iraq for the same, good old reason: oil. By early 2007 the allies had spent half a trillion dollars destroying Iraq's infrastructure and hundreds of thousands had died in the war.

As an aside it is worth noting that the Pentagon is the biggest single user of oil in the world. Tanks, aeroplanes and aircraft carriers are not designed to be fuel efficient and with so many wars going on the American military are burning up oil as if they were trying to get rid of a surplus. As the oil crisis develops (and becomes more obvious) so the military in the USA (and, indeed, everywhere) will stake a very firm claim on what is left. The result must be that the commercial price (the price you and I will have to pay) will rocket ever higher.

Iraq possesses around 11% of the world's oil reserves. I don't think there is anyone left who doesn't now believe that America and the United Kingdom started a war against Iraq in order to snatch control of the oil.

There have, of course, never been any signs that Britain, despite sharing the world's opprobrium for taking part in an entirely unjustified attack on another country, would ever receive any of the oil.

But will America ever actually manage to control the oil it has fought so hard to obtain?

It doesn't look very likely. There have been literally thousands of attacks on pipelines and refineries in Iraq. It seems very likely that the Iraqi resistance fighters will continue to make it difficult for America to steal their country's oil.

(There have, of course, also been many attacks on oil installations in other countries including Nigeria, Iran, Russia, Pakistan, Chechnya and Azerbaijan. These attacks have been designed to disrupt the easy flow of oil to America in particular and the West in general.)

It was always clear (even before the invasion) that America was going to struggle to control Iraq and its oil.

`(USA Policy) is clearly...motivated by George W Bush's desire to please the arms and oil industries,'said Nelson Mandela.

America has successfully demonised any country which has oil and which it does not control. Demonising such countries makes it much easier to invade them without incurring too much displeasure from the American people.

The USA spends vast amounts of money on its army, navy and air force. The American budget gives its greatest priority to the military and under George W.Bush the annual increase in spending on bombs, jets, tanks and guns has been greater than the entire military budget of any other country in the world except Russia.In 2007, America was spending around $1,000 per person on arms. Only Israel spent more.

America claims to be the world's policeman, cracking down on terrorism and totalitarianism, fascism and dictators everywhere. Their aim, say American leaders, is to defend freedom.

This is, of course, a cynical lie. America has shown no interest in countries such as Zimbabwe where millions have died under cruel dictatorships but where there is no oil to be had. America only cares about countries which have oil and its late twentieth and early twenty first century military excursions have been designed with the aim of grabbing whatever resources may be available.

Today, the average American uses five times as much energy as the average citizen elsewhere. Without American greed the fossil fuel crisis would not have hit us for generations to come.

Since the end of the Second World War (which America joined belatedly and only then because it saw huge opportunities for financial and political gain) America has bombed or invaded at least 19 countries and has engaged in direct or indirect military action in many more.

Back in 1980 the Carter Doctrine stated that attempts to disrupt the flow of Persian Gulf oil would be regarded as an `assault on the vital interests of the United States' and would be `repelled by any means necessary, including military force'. Since then America has taken a close interest in Middle Eastern affairs. (What possible other reason could the USA have for taking so much interest in the Arab countries, other than the fact that 60% of proven global oil reserves are there?)

Stealing natural resources in this way may provide America with a fix but it won't change what will happen in the long run. The world is running out of fossil fuels and although stealing what's left from poor countries is clearly wrong and unfair to the citizens of those countries America is merely delaying the inevitable and increasing its dependence on a `drug' that is disappearing.

The danger, of course, is that other countries will follow America's example. (In one way they already have. Countries such as China point to America when they refuse to cut back their consumption of oil.)

America claims to have invaded Iraq in order to impose American democracy on the people there. How curious then that America seems extremely happy with the state of affairs in Saudi Arabia, where a massive 25% of the Saudi GDP goes towards the support of the royal family and where a secret poll showed that half of the population supports Osama Bin Laden.

Saudi Arabia is one of the most repressive states on earth, with no freedom of expression and discrimination against women. And yet America and Britain, who claimed to be horrified by discrimination against women in Afghanistan and Iraq, were perfectly happy to support and defend the despotic rulers in Saudi Arabia.

Justice in Saudi Arabia consists of limbs being amputated and public executions. Defendants have very little right to defend themselves. But the American and British Governments fall over backwards to avoid upsetting the people who are in control because Saudi Arabia is a major source of oil and in the past its rulers have invariably opened up the taps whenever supplies seem to be running a little low.

It's difficult to avoid the conclusion that America imposes its own rather bizarre version of democracy only where it sees that there is a financial or political advantage to be won.

In the 1980s USA President Reagan and UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher persuaded the Saudis to increase their oil production in order to bring the oil price down from $30 a barrel to $10 a barrel.

(This was rather stupid of Thatcher and didn't do Britain any favours. As a net exporter of oil it meant that Britain lost huge amounts of money by selling oil at a third of the price.)

The aim was to destroy the Soviet Union, which was dependent on oil exports, and it worked - resulting in the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The collapse of the Soviet Union was something of a shock for the Americans who then realised that without an obvious enemy they no longer had a bogeyman against whom to protect the American people and the world at large. (And, therefore, didn't have much of an excuse to keep stockpiling weapons and invading smaller countries.)

When Reagan was replaced by George H.W.Bush (Bush the elder) the Americans decided they wanted the price to go up again because American oil companies were suffering. (The Americans never actually think these things through.)

And so the oil price was allowed to rise again.

In the 1990s the Americans eventually realised how vulnerable they were to foreign oil producing countries. The Americans decided not only to increase their presence and influence in the Middle East but also to import oil from as many non Arab states as they could. They used the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and other organisations to pay for oil explorations and pipelines in Africa, Asia and South America, and to obtain non OPEC oil suppliers.

This complex web of international oil supplies enabled a new company called Enron to thrive. (Enron gave money to politicians inside and outside America in order to seal their supply sources.)

It seems that the formerly massive but now defunct Enron (at one point allegedly the world's largest company - though very few people had ever heard of it until it collapsed and very few people seemed able to describe exactly what it did) gave vast amounts of boodle to 71 out of America's 100 senators. The company also threw money at George W. Bush during his election campaign.

It has been alleged that Enron's extensive interests in the oil industry meant that the company wasn't terribly keen on America sticking to the Kyoto Treaty. It is common knowledge that one of the first actions of George W Bush, when becoming president of the USA, was to reject the Kyoto Treaty. Could there possibly be any link between these facts?

Enron bought Bush (and America) quite cheaply but the company got the British Government for a much smaller price.

`Oil is too important to be left to the Arabs,' said
Henry Kissinger. And you know he meant it.

American military action in the Balkans in the 1990s was undoubtedly motivated not by any desire to liberate the local population but by a search for energy.

The Balkans aren't resource rich but the region is important for moving energy from Central Asia to Europe and thence to America.

The American base in Kosovo, on farmland seized by America, is the largest American military base built since the Vietnam War. Coincidentally, the base is built right next to the Trans-Balkan oil pipeline.

Despite being financially and politically committed to the EU, Britain turned its back on its European allies, severing many of its ties with France, Germany and Italy and allied itself with the USA.

The USA and Britain wanted to ensure the dominance of their defence contractors and oil companies and to establish control over strategic pipelines through and from the Balkans, Eastern Europe and the former USSR.

At one point the American Government is claimed to have deliberately destabilised Macedonia in order to allow easier access for an oil pipeline jointly owned by the USA and the UK.

In Yugoslavia the Americans (with New Labour support from the UK) managed to renew violence between ethnic groups, to provoke a humanitarian catastrophe and to destabilise the Balkans.

The 11/9 attack on America was blamed on a Saudia Arabian called Osama bin Laden. (Osama bin Laden is a member of a family which had long-standing ties to the Bush family - the bin Ladens had indirectly helped George W Bush with his first business venture). Much to the embarrassment of the Americans it turned out that bin Laden had been sponsored by the Americans throughout much of the 1980s. Osama bin Ladens secret bases in Afghanistan were planned or built for him by the Central Intelligence Agency during the 1980s.

It is widely believe that the American and British war on Afghanistan was a result of the 11/9 attack on America. But a French book called `Bin Laden: La Verite Interdite', written by French intelligence analysts Jean-Charles Brisard and Guillaume Dasquie, claims that the Bush Administration in the USA halted investigations into terrorist activities related to the bin Laden family and began planning for a war against Afghanistan before the events of 11.9.2001.

The two authors allege that, under the influence of American oil companies, George W Bush and friends stopped investigations into terrorism while bargaining with the Taliban in Afghanistan to give them Osama bin Laden in return for political recognition and economic aid. It is claimed that the USA Government wanted to deal with the Taliban (rather than overthrow it) so that it could gain access to the oil and gas reserves in Central Asia and build an oil pipeline.

It seems clear that the American inspired attack on Afghanistan was planned for months before the 11/9 attack. Threats of an American military attack were allegedly made to Taliban representatives when the Americans were negotiating the building of a gas pipeline through Afghanistan to ports in Pakistan. The Taliban Ambassador to Pakistan was allegedly told by an American Government representative that `either you accept our offer of a carpet of gold, or we bury you under a carpet of bombs'. This was in August 2001.

Afghanistan is situated close to significant oil and gas reserves in the Caspian Sea.

Shortly after America started its war against Afghanistan, agreements were signed for the pipeline through that country.

It has also been alleged that the USA had been planning to invade Afghanistan for as long as three years before the 11/9 attack. It has been reported that the USA Government told the Indian Government, in June 2001, that there would be an invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001. Defence analysts had reported the planned invasion as early as March 2001.

After the infamous 11/9 attack on America George W Bush announced that its war on Afghanistan was just the beginning of its `war on terrorism'. Bush made his infamous `you are either with us or against us' speech and a list of nearly 50 target nations was published. Most of the nations on the list had important oil resources but had no links with bin Laden or Al Qaeda.

After studying details of the 11/9 attack on America many independent observers believed that the attack was inspired, orchestrated and possibly even carried out by the American government itself as an excuse for grabbing control of the world's oil reserves. There is no doubt that the so called `war on terror' could be more accurately entitled the `war for oil'.

George W.Bush's backers, the American neoconservative zionists, saw what was happening some years ago. They have, therefore, tried to create a world in which they will control what oil exists, benefit from the shortage of oil and be free to introduce an endless variety of legislation designed to limit our freedom and expand their power.

The legislation which has changed the world since 11th September 2001 was clearly brought in to enable a relatively small number of money and power hungry men (and women) to control the world and to control potential rioters.

Today, wherever there are significant oil or gas pipelines or fields there will be an American base nearby. The only two significant exceptions are Russia and Iran. American troops are stationed in 120 countries.

American oil companies pay the Islamic Government in Northern Sudan so that they can gain access to untapped oilfields there. And American Christian groups finance the non-Islamic Southerners because they believe that in doing this they are helping to fight the war against Islam. The result: civil war, paid for pretty much entirely by Americans.

The Americans would have loved to invade Iran (and it was widely rumoured that they were planning to do so in Spring of 2007). They had certainly been looking for excuses for an invasion.

In the end they didn't invade for purely practical reasons: they didn't have enough men left (the wars against Iraq and Afghanistan had both proved more troublesome than expected), they didn't have enough money left (America is effectively bankrupt and wars are very expensive) and they were frightened of China (which had formed a close alliance with Iran).

It is important to understand that the modern American version of Christianity seems to allow politicians to pick and choose the dictators they attack. They go for the ones who have oil or who won't do business with us but remain on good terms with the ones (in countries such as China, Zimbabwe) with whom profitable relationships have been established. The Chinese Government is no better than Saddam Hussein's Government but the

Americans would never dream of invading China. For one thing their currency depends on Chinese support. And for another they know that they would lose a war with China. America, like all bullies, only tackles weaker targets.

The war on Iraq has been an unmitigated disaster. Thousands of American and British servicemen and women have been killed. It is difficult to know how many Iraqi civilians have been killed (neither the Americans or the British bother to keep count of Iraqis who are killed) but independent observers put the figure at around a million. After three years of the war The Lancet has reported that the death toll in Iraq exceeded 650,000. This puts George W.Bush and Tony Blair high up on any list of the worst war criminals of all time.

During the run up to the 2003 Iraq War the Americans, desperate to get the Russian vote for the United Nations security council resolution that would give them the green light to bomb Iraq and grab its oil, promised the Russians that Iraq's outstanding $8 billion debts to Moscow and the Russian oil industry would be honoured in a post-Saddam Hussein Iraq.

In principle the Americans did not, of course, have any right to make decisions for a post Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq. In practice the Russians presumably knew that America would, as conquerors, have control of Iraq's oil and its money. It was, perhaps, a sign of the Americans' desperation that they were prepared to make this deal and, thereby, be rather more obvious about their intentions than they had previously been.

China and the USA are at a standoff over Iranian oil. China, which now has most of the money in the world, has for years been wooing the Arabs. They have offered to support Iran if the Americans should invade.

Iran has the second biggest oil reserves in the world and recently agreed a $70 billion 25 year deal to supply oil to China.

As the oil runs out there are bound to be more wars over the diminishing quantities of fossil fuels left on the planet

There have always been wars over resources.

Men have fought over everything of value, but resources such as land, horses, cattle, ports and waterways have always been top of the list. As the oil runs out so the wars are likely to be more violent, more common and more desperate.

America is in decline. Its place as the world's controlling nation has been a short and violent one.

Since the Second World War, American foreign policy has been dictated by its yearning for oil. America's best move was persuading the Arabs to sell oil in dollars. This has meant that every oil importing country in the world has had to pay for oil in America's currency. It is to a large extent through this piece of financial trickery that America has built up huge debts and has nevertheless apparently remained rich.

When will the remaining oil producing nations insist on selling oil in euros instead of dollars?

Despite its yearning for Arab oil America has continued to defend Israel unquestioningly. Powerful Zionists in American politics are doubtless partly responsible for this. But America has also used Israel as a local staging post; enabling them to keep an eye on what is happening in the rest of the Middle East.

America now regards anything the Palestinians do as terrorism. In contrast, anything Israel does is regarded as self defence. The media has helped create and defend this myth.

Israel also helps to act as a focal point for Arab resentment - taking a little of the heat off America.

These policies are now falling apart, of course.

America's violence against Arab countries has resulted in so much hatred against the USA that it doubtful if the rulers in Saudi Arabia can remain in power much longer. There are some who feel that America invaded Iraq so as to be close to Saudi Arabia when the bin Laden supporters there eventually overthrow the Saudi royal family. Losing access to the Saudi oil would damage the USA enormously.

Around the rest of the world America has made enemies almost everywhere. Although there may be fragile economic links between America and China the reality is that there are huge divisions between the two and neither country trusts the other. The same goes for Russia. Much to America's horror both China and Russia have both developed close links to Iran.

`Twenty years on from the oil shock of the 1970s, most economists would agree that oil is no longer the most important commodity in the world economy,'said Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister, in January 2000. I have found no evidence that Mr Blair ever explained what he thought the most important commodity might be.

It is difficult to know just why the British Government allied Britain so closely with America. Tony Blair, the Prime Minister at the time, put forward several reasons for taking Britain to war against Afghanistan and Iraq but none of them have much of a ring of truth. And Blair's credibility was of course so damaged that for almost the whole of his premiership it was difficult to believe anything he said.

The most generous thought is that Blair realised that with the oil and coal running out Britain would have to find new sources of energy. (Though this thought seems unlikely since Blair famously - and rather stupidly - claimed that the new information economy had replaced the oil economy.) If he did think this then his policy was a total failure since there are absolutely no signs that Britain will receive any of the oil that the Americans have now managed to steal.

My own suspicion, I fear, is that Blair was simply behaving as Bush's poodle so that he could rely on Bush and America for lucrative employment once his stint as Prime Minister was over.

Is there any doubt that America will eventually turn against Europe and use whatever military might it has left to grab whatever resources might be available?

Of course not.

America, a nation founded on slavery and genocide, has always looked after America first and recent administrations have proved themselves to be corrupt and untrustworthy in the extreme.

Chapter Four: What will happen when the oil runs out

The oil won't run out overnight.

The oil isn't going to be there on Tuesday and gone on Wednesday.

But it will become scarcer.

And every time there is a calamity of some kind the price will go up significantly.

When a hurricane destroys an oil rig off the American coast the global price will go up. Noticeably. When Hurricanes Rita and Katrina hit in 2005 oil production was reduced by a relatively small amount - just 1.5 million barrels per day (bpd). But that was enough to push oil prices up. Afterwards, oil prices went back down again. In the future oil prices will hardly ever go back down again.

When there is a cold spell in the USA, and Americans turn up their heating for a week the price of oil will go up. Noticeably.

When there is a problem affecting oil exports from Iran or Venezuela the price will go up. When there is a problem with a production in Saudi Arabia or Kuwait the price will go up. If terrorists manage to blow up a pipeline then prices will go up.

And the price will stay up.

It will slowly become clear that the world has no spare oil capacity. Every disruption will emphasise the truth.

`Sooner or later, we sit down to a banquet of consequences,' wrote Robert Louis Stevenson in 1885.

Remember, while the oil runs out, America, the UK and other oil importing nations will still be vulnerable to terrorism, an Islamist revolution in large oil producing nations, or the whims of Russia.

And it isn't just oil that is at risk. At least 60% of the world's gas is concentrated in Russia, Iran and Qatar. These are hardly the most stable nations on the planet.

And remember, too, that while our relations with the Arab world can hardly be said to be `friendly' the Russian energy business is under the ruthless control of crooks and former KGB men.

The oil importing nations depend for their future supplies entirely on continuing to have good relations with (and there being stability in) Nigeria, Iran, Russia and Venezuela.

Nations which have oil will gradually become increasingly aware of their power. And increasing possessive about their supplies.

When oil prices rocket (and they will rocket because as soon as it becomes clear that the oil supply is threatened - and long before it runs out - the world's military will grab what they can and politicians will start stockpiling what they can store) there will be chaos.

Unlike America (which has several years supply of oil in huge caverns) Britain has no more than a few days supply of oil stored. And without oil everything will be in short supply.

What will make the oil crash more damaging and more destructive is the fact that the global economy is already overheated, overstretched and therefore weak and unhealthy.

Thanks to the European Union and the compliant feebleness of successive governments, many countries (particularly Britain) have farming industries which are in tatters.

Governments have allowed their farming industries to be destroyed by the import of cheap crops from abroad. There will, therefore, be a shortage of home grown food.

Add to this the fact that for every calorie of food we eat about ten calories of fossil energy are used to bring it to our plates.

So when the cost of petrol rockets so will the price of food.

The rising price, and increasing shortage, of fuel means that our whole future will have to change.

Bicycles and, for the rich, horse drawn traps, are the future. City taxis will be replaced by rickshaws. Towns with a good connection to the rail network will survive. Others will die.

A post oil world will be one of rampant inflation, recession and wars wherever there is oil.

Many Western countries already have fascist governments. Governments will respond to these new dangers and threats by announcing that they need to take even more power.

For the protection of the public, of course.

`It has been a fabulous party,’ wrote Richard Heinberg, `The Party's Over' in 2005. `But from those to whom much has been given, much should be expected. Once we are aware of the choice, it is up to us to decide: shall we vainly continue revelling until the bitter end, and take most of the rest of the world down with us? Or shall we acknowledge that the party is over, clean up after ourselves, and make way for those who will come after us?'

High inflation rates mean that savings are eroded.

If inflation rates exceed interest rates (as can, and will happen) cash in the bank or building society loses its purchasing power. Investments in shares will be a disaster too. As companies struggle to survive so dividends will dry up and share prices will collapse. Anyone who tries to survive by buying an index fund, and trusting that the market as a whole will survive, will lose money. Investors who have grown accustomed to the idea of buying a diversified portfolio and sitting back to wait for profits to come will suffer great pain as they see their savings melt away.

As the oil price goes up the problems of our world will, for a while, resemble the temporary problems of the 1970s. High inflation, high interest rates, high unemployment and falling house prices will, I believe, combine to create great misery among those who are not properly prepared.

Investment policies which worked well in the 1990s or the early part of the twenty first century will fail miserably. Savings, nest eggs and pension plans will evaporate.

In the past government employees have always been pretty well immune to the horrors of a collapsing economy. They have considered that their jobs and salaries are safe, as are their pensions.

But this will change.

As the oil price rises, rises and rises again and as the economy falters, falters and starts to collapse the Government's income will no longer be sufficient to pay its bills.

Governments will, of course, raise taxes. Even though services will continue to decline income taxes, corporation taxes, capital gains taxes, national insurance, VAT and stealth taxes will all go up.

But there will come a point when taxes cannot rise any more.

And then the unthinkable will happen.

The Government will have to start laying off vast numbers of civil servants. And then it will find itself unable to continue to pay absurdly over-generous pensions to the civil servants who are already retired.

For a while the Government will try to borrow enough money to fulfil its obligations. But this won't work. Where can a bankrupt Government borrow money? If a government tries to print its way out of trouble the currency will collapse. Countries everywhere will resemble Germany in the 1920s.

Russia has, for many years, been one of the world's most significant sources of oil. At the start of the 20th century Russia was for a while the world's largest oil producer. Only the discovery of huge oil fields in the USA pushed Russia into second place. But will Russia continue to supply the west with its oil?

Possibly not.

For one thing Russia needs its oil supplies for itself.

And for another, the Russians know that during the 1980s the Reagan Administration in the USA persuaded the Saudis to flood the world with cheap oil in order to undercut Russian oil and to bankrupt the former Soviet Union.

Does anyone in America really believe that when the tables are turned (as they will be soon) the Russian Government will fall over backwards to rescue America or its allies?

Nations which don't have enough oil will fight to get what they want. At a time when nations should be running down their military machines (all those tanks and aeroplanes use vast amounts of fuel) the very opposite will happen. Valuable oil supplies will be grabbed by the military.

Will China and America fight for the planet's remaining oil? If it does then I wouldn't put your money on America. The Chinese have the manpower and the will to win.

Will there be a nuclear war?

There are those who believe that the chaos which followed the American invasion of Iraq was deliberate American policy. The chaos and lawlessness enabled America to create a government and gave Bush an excuse to keep his troops in the country. The rioting and civil disobedience also enabled the USA to draw Iran and Syria into the conflict.

Was this deliberate regional destabilisation?

`What keeps us awake at night is the threat of the growing energy crisis that, if our civilisation does not deal with it in time, will affect every community on earth and last forever,' wrote Stephen Leeb in `The Coming Economic Collapse'.

In his book `The Long Emergency', James Howard Kunstler explains what will happen when oil supplies decline. `We will be compelled by the circumstances of the Long Emergency,' he writes, `to conduct the activities of daily life on a smaller scale, whether we like it or not...'

The title of Kunstler's book says it all.

`The Long Emergency'.

This is one emergency that isn't going to go away.

And slowly we will have to become accustomed to the idea that our world is changing.

Rising petrol prices will mean that using motor cars will become a luxury. Private vehicles are an absurd self indulgence. Just think of it: all those vehicles on the motorway. Most of them containing one or two passengers. That will have to stop. Bicycles and the horse and cart will be widely used.

On the railways, diesel engines will be replaced by old fashioned steam trains. The railway museums will be emptied of legendary steam locomotives.

Horse drawn carriages will make a come back and people will start experimenting with land yachts.

Goods will be transported around the world on old fashioned clippers.

At the moment 90% of all goods are moved around the world by 50,000 diesel powered container ships.

How else are we going to move things around the world without oil?

In fact, it's already happening. In the summer of 2007 the Germany shipping firm, Beluga, announced that it was launching a container ship with a giant kite flying 1,000 feet above the bow. The 1,100 square foot kite was connected to an automated telescoping mast. The wind power produced was estimated to cut fuel consumption by as much as 30%.

(This isn't the first time a modern shipping company has considered wind power. In the 1980s, after a spike in oil prices, Japanese shippers experimented with wind assisted vessels.)

Container ships, passenger cruise ships, fishing trawlers, oil tankers, big yachts - are all likely to be wind powered. Ships and boats which rely exclusively on oil to move around will be scrapped.

`We are all addicts of fossil fuels in a state of denial, about to face cold turkey,' wrote Kurt Vonnegut.`And like so many addicts about to face cold turkey, our leaders are now committing violent crimes to get what little is left of what we're hooked on.'

No one will want big houses because the heating costs will be too high.

The increasing cost of using tractors and other farm machinery will add to the cost of food prices.

The shortage of oil will mean that fertilisers and pesticides become more expensive too.

Transporting food around the world will become impossible. Local markets, selling produce grown locally, will boom but food will become increasingly scarce and, therefore, increasingly expensive.

(If governments around the world continue with the madness of encouraging the use of ethanol then food will become prohibitively expensive for millions.)

Supermarket shelves will not be restocked quite so quickly as they used to be. Within a year or two of the oil crisis hitting supermarkets will close.

All shops which rely on selling products imported from other countries will struggle. Thieves will be stealing tins of beans in preference to television sets.

The cost of raw materials other than oil will also soar. Digging metals out of the ground uses up a great deal of energy. And so zinc, copper and other metals will rise in price. The cost of steel will go up. Wood will continue to be scarce and expensive. Wood from old buildings will be salvaged not burnt. Building a house will cost more but as unemployment rises so house prices will fall. The result will be that builders will go out of business and there will be a shortage of homes.

Car manufacturing will become prohibitively expensive (particularly since very few people will be able to afford petrol). People who continue to drive will have to mend their old cars instead of buying new ones. Car show rooms will, like other retailers, close down.

Airlines will no longer be able to offer cheap flights. Holidays abroad will be a thing of the past for most people. Travel agents will close down. Whole industries have no long term future at all. The advertising industry, in all its forms, will die and few will mourn it.

Globalisation, in all its forms and all its meanings, will become a footnote in history books. Those who hoped for a world government will have to abandon their dreams. It won't happen.

Some countries will survive better than others. France, which obtains three quarters of its electricity from nuclear power and which has (thanks to the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy) a huge, relatively old fashioned but still successful farming industry, will survive quite well - though it will have to get rid of most of its civil servants. France will be one of the favourite targets for emigrants leaving Britain and America.

Britain will be among the countries most likely to flounder. The Labour Government has created an untrusting, unworkable form of socialism which will not survive. The debt ridden nation they have built will suffer more than any other developed nation on the planet - except America.

For financial and political reasons, America has been doomed for a decade or more, but the peak oil crisis will cause turmoil and will leave America impoverished and in chaos.

The American way of life depends on a constant supply of cheap oil.

France, Germany, Spain and most countries in Europe have extensive railway services. And, despite the egregiously stupid and short-sighted activities of the ludicrous Beeching Plan, most decent sized towns in Britain still have a railway station of their own. It is possible to travel around Europe by train without too much inconvenience. (Homes within walking or cycling distance of railway stations will be the few to go up in price.)

America doesn't have a nationwide railway network. The success of road transport did enormous damage to rail transport in many countries but particularly in America. As a result, America is in a terrible position as far as public transport is concerned. The International Railway Journal puts America between Bolivia and Turkey for the amount spent per head of population on mainline railway expenditure. And yet good railways are relatively cheap.

Switzerland, which probably has the best railway system in the world, spends a little over £100 per person per year on maintaining its railway.

Roads everywhere are built by governments. Rail tracks have to be built and maintained by the railway companies so, unless governments helped the rail companies, the trains never stood a chance.

In America today people either fly or drive.

And flying and driving are going to be increasingly expensive and eventually impossible for ordinary people. The number of private jet owners in the USA has doubled in the last ten years to more than 50,000. Celebrities now use their private planes to fly around the world in oil-guzzling luxury. (Many, with no sense of irony, and unconscious of their hypocrisy, preach about the dangers of global warming and exhort their fans to eschew their annual holiday in Spain in order to reduce their carbon footprints.)

America is also vulnerable because it has relatively little energy from nuclear power. It relies far too heavily on oil and coal for its power supplies.

America faces another problem which will make things worse. The country is deeply in debt. Even without the oil running out America would be heading for extremely serious economic problems - an economic depression that would make the 1930s look like a long holiday.

There will be a meltdown of the American dollar that will be reminiscent of the collapse of the German mark during the Weimar Republic in the 1920s.

Things are not helped by the fact that other countries (particularly China) are now huge holders of American debt. Foreign holdings of American securities have doubled since 2002, mainly because China (which now owns trillions of dollars) wants to keep the dollar high so as to support its own exports. Around 80% of USA Government bonds due to be redeemed in next 3 to 10 years are held by foreigners.

This can, and will, change in days.

The Coming Great Depression will lead to the end of Medicare and Social Security in the USA. America simply will not be able to afford these programmes.

The disintegration of American society will lead to civil unrest, to rioting and to enormous amounts of violence. Thanks to the powerful pro-gun lobby in the USA a lot of the unhappy citizens will be armed. (There are enough guns in America for every man, woman and child to have one each.)

Everyone will be looking for someone to blame. The liberals will want to blame the Bush family and the zionist neocons. The republicans will look abroad and will want to blame bin Laden. Extreme left wing groups and environmentalists will blame big business. Everyone will be too busy blaming someone else to do anything. The rioting will lead to lynching. America will break up into separate states.

The end of cheap oil will lead directly to the end of America as it exists today.

It is worth repeating (and remembering) that the collapse of the German economy in the 1920s and 1930s led to the rise of Hitler and the Third Reich. It is impossible to predict just what will arise out of the ashes of America. But it probably won't be very pleasant.

The USA was successful and strong throughout the early and middle decades of the twentieth century because of its huge natural resources - especially oil. (It was successful throughout the later decades of that century through greed and aggression.)

Access to its own supplies of natural resources allowed America to take advantage of European inventions such as the train, the aeroplane and the motor car.

Now those valuable home grown resources are running out. The oil has pretty much gone. And America is on the slide.

The American transport system is 97% dependent on oil and more than 90% of the oil supply is controlled by foreign governments.

Things will get so bad in America that it won't be long before the Americans are smuggling themselves across the border into Mexico in search of jobs. They certainly won't be able to buy any oil unless the Iranians suddenly start accepting buttons as currency.

`Most likely the end of the Petroleum Interval will be gradual wherein no crisis point is reached, just slow change. But, especially with continually rising populations, and no sufficient substitutes for oil at hand, there is the possibility of a chaotic breakdown of society,' wrote Walter Youngquist in `Geodestinies: The Inevitable Control of Earth Resources over Nations and Individuals'.

So, since we are now almost certainly on the downward slope why haven't currencies started to unwind already?

Why isn't the American dollar in an even steeper decline than it is?

There are several reasons.

First, not many people realise the truth that you now know. The truth about peak oil is something that governments have done their best to hide. And the significance of peak oil is something that they have hidden very well. We have been persuaded to worry about global warming rather than peak oil. We have been told that we must cut our use of oil because of global warming - not because the stuff is running out.

Most people still hope and believe that the oil will continue to flow. Even sophisticated investors believe that the oil companies will simply find more oil fields to replace the ones which are dying. Many investors who are aware of the reality of peak oil simply find the prospect too frightening to accept. They prefer to stick their heads in the empty oil wells and ignore what is happening.

And since people believe that there is no real oil problem they also believe that there is no threat to growth.

And because they believe that there is no threat to growth they also believe that the bits of paper they are holding (share certificates and bank deposits) will continue to hold their value.

The second crucial reason why the American dollar has not yet collapsed is that many of the countries to which America owes money are reluctant to allow the dollar the fall. They need to keep the dollar as high as they can because their own wealth is now dependent on America's wealth and financial standing. If America collapses then they too will collapse.

At best, our society will go back to the way it was over a hundred years ago. At worse we will go back to an existence much closer to the Stone Age. Whatever happens, our lives will have to become simpler. Things will never again be as good as they were in the 1960s.

Because it will be more difficult to move around, communities will become more important. Local farms will have to feed local people and will have to employ more farm labourers to replace the equipment they can no longer afford to use. Suburbs will have to become self-reliant. Those which cannot will not survive. The sort of suburban lifestyle many people live today will become impossible. (Kunstler describes the suburban lifestyle as `the great misallocation of resources in the history of the world'). Only the very rich will be able to afford to heat large homes or to own and run a car. Most people who work for a living will have to live within walking or cycling distance of their place of employment. There will be no more imported television sets, Play Station games or out of season foods from the other side of the world. Small, local market gardens will do well.

The collapse of the electricity grids will be the final trigger for our civilisation's decline.

Our lives will, in many ways, become simpler and, perhaps even less stressful. Our needs will be quite obvious, practical and basic.

People will stop eating meat. Farms will start growing crops instead of breeding livestock. The world will turn vegetarian. Only the very rich will still eat meat of any kind.

It will be increasingly difficult to obtain clean water supplies. The collapse of local services will result in sewage disposal problems. Infections will become commoner. Global warming will affect the type of infections to which we are susceptible. Hospitals use an enormous amount of energy and only the wealthy can expect to have access to the most sophisticated hospitals. The development and distribution of drugs will become increasingly difficult. Public health problems will abound unless governments can be persuaded to move money from the military to health care.

The information age will come to an end almost as soon as it has started. The internet will not last long once the oil starts to run out; it will be a hardly mourned memory.

The shortage of oil won't have an immediate effect on information processing but the manufacture of computers, servers and so on will be affected. Once sophisticated systems break down it will not be possible to replace them.

Electricity grids will be subject to frequent interruptions as the supply of energy sources becomes increasingly difficult to sustain. Demand will go up as populations continue to grow, but supply will deteriorate. There will inevitably be shortages. There will be periodic blackouts. Electricity prices will inevitably rise and non-essential usage will halt. The storage and exchange of information electronically will end. The internet will be no more.

As energy supplies become increasingly scarce and expensive so we will become more and more dependent on our neighbours and less and less interested in what is being decided by national or international politicians. National parliaments will lose much of its relevance. The European Parliament will become totally irrelevant and the EU will collapse completely. Regional parliaments, those enormously expensive and secret layers of administration, will wither and die. Vastly reduced incomes will force local councils to slim down.

Schools will close. Gardens and parks will look unkempt unless the areas of grass are small enough to be cut with a hand mower, or large enough to be controlled by grazing sheep. There will be no more ornamental flower beds.

Every home with a garden will plant vegetables. The streets will be full of the homeless, the disabled, the mentally ill and the deranged.

Trees everywhere will be chopped down for fuel. Those cutting them down will start with trees in the countryside. Then they'll cut down trees in parks and gardens. And eventually trees lining suburban roads will disappear too. Soon a tree will be a rarity.

Office blocks will fall into disuse. No one will want to buy them - or have any use for them. Roads will go unrepaired. Not that it will matter much. There won't be many cars around. Just the bullet proofed limousines of the rich and a few beaten up old jalopies held together with string and sealing wax. Nothing will be as good as it was.

Most universities will disappear. Many jobs, for which people have been extensively trained, simply won't exist. Former computer technicians will find themselves working on the land as farm labourers. Fertilisers, pesticides, herbicides and machinery will be replaced by men, horses and manure.

No one will throw things away when they stop working. Washing machines and cookers will have to be repaired until they fail completely. Older devices, which contain less complications, will be popular because they will be easier to mend. When the washing machines and cookers go the washing will be done by hand and the cooking done on a stove powered by coal or wood. Clothes will be mended when they wear out. Very few shops will be selling new clothes and very few people will be buying them. The fashion industry will be a footnote in social history books.

There will be a small boom industry in making and selling hand tools. Private colleges will offer courses in practical woodwork, plumbing and household repairs. No one will bother with certificates. Skills not qualifications will be what count. Television sets will not be replaced when they break down. Programmes will mostly be repeats. Computer games will have long since disappeared. (The kids who used to play `end of the world' games will now find themselves living their game lives for real.) And the cult of the celebrity will end. Most people will be too concerned with staying alive to worry about the activities of celebrities - whether minor or major. For most people life will be a question of finding adequate food, clothing and shelter. The sick and the elderly will suffer most.

The Government will no longer be able to afford the vast array of benefits introduced during the last few decades. Taxes will rise higher and higher and services will deteriorate. The absence of any sort of oil (let alone cheap oil) will led to the collapse of what little industry is left in the West.

The British economy, weakened by a decade of fiscal incompetence will collapse.

There will be rioting and revolution as millions of hungry, unemployed people move about the country looking for money and food. For a while, armed police will control the rioting. And then, when the police are no longer paid, there will be no controls and no law.

No government will be able to find enough money to pay all its obligations when things get really tough. Benefits and pensions paid out by the government will either be suspended or slashed dramatically. (Though, I suspect that the architects of our coming disaster, politicians and the more senior civil servants, will find a way to ensure that their pensions are secure.)

Politicians will be too busy looking for someone to blame to take useful action. And, judging by past experience, they will in any case be too aware of the wishes of lobbyists and corporate donors to take much interest in the genuine needs of those in their care. Central government will completely lose touch with the voters. Democracy, already a long distant memory in most countries, will be forgotten. Politicians will attempt to deceive the electorate and will lie about the causes of the problems people are experiencing. Those who do not know the truth will probably be convinced by the lies they are told.

The two countries which will suffer most will be Britain and America.

In Britain, everything that will happen will be made infinitely more difficult by the actions of the Government in the last few years. The closing down of rural post offices, the destroying of small farms, the closing down of rail links to villages and small towns, will all make life infinitely more difficult for everyone.

While all this is happening we will be struggling to cope with the changes produced by global warming. Freak storms and long droughts will destroy crops and make farming much more difficult and much more unreliable.

And that takes us to the biggest problem of all: food.

The cost of food is already going up. Food inflation is now at its highest for years. Wheat, corn and soya prices are all soaring. The price of rice went up 50% between 2005 and 2007. The price of wheat went up 33% in the same period. And the price of cattle went up by more than 40%. The price of vegetables went up 10.2% between 2006 and 2007. The price of fish went up 12.6% in the same period. The price of onions has rocketed. The price of bananas went up 500%.

And, because food is now a global commodity, these food price changes are a global problem. Early in 2007 a 60% rise in tortilla prices provoked rioting in Mexico where thousands were starving because they could no longer afford to eat their normal diet.

There are several explanations for what has already happened.

First, there has been recent massive rising demand from emerging economies. The people of China and India can now afford to buy food and so they that's exactly what they are doing. Twenty years ago most people in the world subsisted on 1,600 calories a day. Now they want to get fat like the Americans and the British. India produces 70 million tons of wheat a year and is the second largest wheat producer on the planet. But India is now a net importer. Local prices have rose by 12% between 2006 and 2007.

Second, the people of China and India want to eat western foods. They want to eat meat. No longer satisfied with a bowl of rice they want to dine on burgers. The consumption of meat in China will probably double in the next few years. The most protein efficient meat is poultry. A bushel of corn produces 19.6 pounds of retail chicken, 13 pounds of pork and 5 pounds of beef. Sadly, the demand for chicken has been hit hard by the bird flu scares. And so people in China and India want red meat and the consumption of beef in China is growing by 20% a year.

But there are problems. One is that with so much land being used to grow biofuels there is very little land led for growing food for animals. In June 2007 farmers in California were complaining that the cost of a truckload of hay had gone up from $2,000 to $5,000. And turning vegetation into meat is grossly inefficient and costly; it takes 8.3 grams of grain to produce 1 gram of beef.

Third, the world's population is exploding. The world's population is currently around 6 billion. At the rate things are going it will be 9 billion by the year 2020. Many of the extra 3 billion will be in China and India. They won't want to starve. Just to cope with the population growth the world's food production will need to increase by 50%.

Fourth, as populations grow and people want to live in nice suburban houses with neat little lawns. As this happens, so the amount of land available for arable use falls. Every year for the past decade China has lost fertile land equivalent in size to the area of Scotland. To feed its growing population it needs to be increasing its land area by the equivalent of Scotland. Whoops. Things are the same in India.

Fifth, encouraged by politicians, vast quantities of the world's crops of corn, soy bean and so on, are being used to make biofuels so that American motorists can continue to buy cheap petrol for their huge motor cars. Time magazine recently published a list of 51 things you and I can do to prevent global warming. Number 1 on their list was headed `Turn food into fuel'. This, they claimed, would have a `high impact' on the global warming problem. Time magazine claims that ethanol is the alternative fuel that `could finally wean the US from its expensive oil habit and in turn prevent the millions of tons of carbon emissions that go with it.' As I have shown elsewhere in this book this is dangerous nonsense. The International Energy Agency estimates that demands for crops for biofuels will soar from 41.5 million tons of oil equivalent in 2010 to 92.4 million in 2030. (These relatively modest predictions seem to assume that oil will continue to flow and that massive new oil fields will continue to be discovered.) The increased use of biofuel is a major force behind the rise of food prices. Last year 5 billion gallons of ethanol were produced in the USA. Encouraged by George W. Bush this is set to increase to 45 billion gallons by 2009. That, just for the record, is 136% of American corn production. So, either the Americans are going to have stop growing other foods or else they are going to have to import a great deal of corn from around the world. Either way, there is going to be a global shortage of food and millions are going to die. Just how many people will die as a result of the biofuel policy isn't clear and certainly isn't likely to affect American policies. (Iowa, the place where most American corn is grown also happens to be a state which has a big role to play in choosing the next American President. Farmers in Iowa are gloriously happy about the biofuel phenomenon.)

Sixth, there is global warming. Whether you agree with the widely accepted theory that global warming is caused by carbon emissions or not there is little doubt that there have recently been some pretty freakish conditions around the world. The governor of the Bank of England in the UK recently blamed the rise in inflation in Britain on: `a rise in food prices caused by weather-induced global reduction in supply'. The Prime Minister of Australia recently described the drought in his country as `an unprecedentedly dangerous situation'. If things don't change rapidly in Australia then water supplies will dry up and food prices will rocket skywards. The production of rice has already fallen from 1.6 million tons to 106,000 tons. The reality we have to face is that at the same time as our world runs out of oil (making farming an infinitely more difficult business) we will also have to deal with weather conditions - droughts and storms - which also make farming even more difficult.

Seventh, big American seed companies have been busy patenting the rights to many individual seeds. They have done this so that they can force farmers around the world to buy their products. One result has been that small farmers in India are no longer allowed to grow seeds from crops that their families have been planting for generations. (If they do, then lawyers for American multinationals will smother them with writs, injunctions and a typhoon of typical American legobabble.)

Eighth, large modern farms are remarkably (and surprisingly) inefficient. When the fuel used to build tractors, make fertilisers and pesticides and so on is taken into account it turns out that the energy cost of a kilogram of corn has actually risen in the last few decades. Soil erosion, the loss of pollinators (such as bees) who have been killed by chemicals, evolving chemical resistance by pests and numerous other environmental problems have also reduced farm crops.

The result of all this is that food is becoming scarce and prices are rising. This is not a cyclical change (with prices falling next year due to better weather and better crops). It is a structural change. It is, in other words, permanent.

As far as food prices are concerned the conditions are optimum for a `perfect storm'. Things really couldn't get much worse.

(Actually, they could. There is a joker. American genetic engineers have been `modifying' food for years to make it more profitable. No one knows what effect their modifications will have on the safety of food for human consumption. No one knows what other horrendous side effects there might be. The risks are unbelievably dangerous.)

For those in Europe and America all this is no more than a nuisance at the moment.

But for those in many parts of the world this is already an outright disaster. In Guatemala, for example, nearly half of all children are malnourished. And things are getting worse and will continue to get worse. Rising prices and falling quantities of food available for eating (as opposed to filling petrol tanks) will result in massive starvation around the world.

Increasing agricultural production enabled the world to grow from 1.7 billion people to over 6 billion people in just a century. But when the oil runs out the world will not be able to feed that many people.

How many people will the planet feed?

Well, it's a safe guess that it will support around as many people as there were before oil changed farming. So we've got four billion people too many.

Except that during the last century we've done a lot of damage to our soil and our environment.

So the planet probably won't support even one billion people.

If we don't voluntarily reduce the size of the planet (and there are no signs that any nation will choose this route) the answer will be famine, plagues and war.

Five billion people have to die very quickly.

Welcome to your future.

And yet the media continues to ignore this threat.

In the spring of 2007 Fortune magazine carried a feature listing the world's seven biggest problems (and how companies can make money out of them). Their seven problems were (presumably in order of importance):

1. Global warming
2. Hunger and malnutrition
3. Waste disposal
4. Dirty water
5. Dirty air
6. Epidemics
7. Overfishing

The seven problems are all valid.

But Fortune magazine didn't even include Peak Oil on its list.

Maybe because there is no way to deal profitably with the problem.

When the oil is running out and there is no more to find then there cannot be any more to sell.

How will people behave when the oil runs out and the world changes? Will people help one another? Or will there be disorganised chaos, with rioting in the streets and talk of revolution?

It isn't hard to guess.

There has already been a breakdown in law and order all over the Western world. Our security is threatened by Islamist radicals. Our streets are so dangerous than in many cities law-abiding citizens no longer go out after dark. The streets belong to drug gangs and roaming teenagers, drunk and bored. Looting and rioting are the usual response to any sort of short term crisis. Even though many people no longer bother to report criminal attacks (either on their person or their property) crime rates are rocketing. There is a widespread belief that the police are too busy chasing motorists (an easy source of extra finance) to pay much attention to criminals.

When the oil crisis hits our society will fragment. Small but hostile groups will develop, each looking after themselves with no concern for others. The weak will be left to look after themselves.

In a traditional society the family unit would have been the saviour of civilisation. But in many countries the family unit no longer exists.

The family unit is and always has been the basic building block out of which a society is built. For its own political reasons Britain's Labour Government has done its best to destroy the family unit. And it has been enormously successful. Britain's tax and welfare policies provide financial incentives for lone parenthood. Marriage is penalised. Under the Labour party's influence there has been a dramatic growth in the incidence of teenage pregnancy and a rise in the number of single parent families. Young men father children they have no intention of looking after. Young women deliberately try to get pregnant so that they can be given a home of their own and a weekly fistful of cash to spend. Half of all children are now born outside marriage. The Government has even introduced and promoted homosexual marriages. A government funded group produces a leaflet aimed at 13 year olds which includes advice on `how to be good at sex'. Sex lessons in schools include advice on anal, oral and digital sex for twelve year olds. It is hardly surprising that one in ten women between 16 and 25 is now affected with chlamydia - a sexually transmitted disease which can cause infertility. The deliberate destruction of the family will mean that the elderly, the disabled and the weak will be left to die.

Extended drinking hours (brought in courtesy of the European Union) is one of the reasons why most urban areas are now unsafe after dark. Drunken hooligans destroy property and threaten innocent passers by. Hospital emergency departments are full of people who have been injured deliberately rather than by accident. Departments which used to be called Accident and Emergency should be renamed Thuggery and Emergency.

It is any wonder that no one seems to have any respect for anyone else? (Let alone for authority). Can there be any surprise that many people now suspect that their government has deliberately allowed chaos to develop so that it will have an excuse to embellish and strengthen the fascist state with new laws?

In Britain, the state now provides everything for over a quarter of the population. There are millions of people who grew up in a household where the only source of finance was the state.

The End of the Interlude of Oil will mean the end for bloated, selfish societies.

Our modern civilisation is built on oil.

Oil gave us cheap energy. And cheap energy gave us our wealth, our progress and the complexity of the world we live in.

The absence of oil will take away our wealth and the complexity.

If, even when the oil is clearly running out, our leaders continue to take no practical steps to prepare for the end of oil then our world will become even more uncomfortable than I have described.

Instead of drifting back to a 19th century life, where fields are ploughed by horses and local communities make their own decisions, we could find ourselves living in a real nightmare: a complete collapse of society.

If this happens, gangs will patrol our cities mugging, killing and stealing. Disease will be widespread. Rotting bodies will litter the streets. We will enter the New Dark Age. There won't be any more oil, any more free energy, for another 500 million years.

Just as previous civilisations have completely collapsed, throwing their world into barbarism, so the same will happen to us. And our children will live in their history.

Chapter Five: A New Energy Blueprint

Threatened societies can survive, of course. Japan, in the 17th century, avoided collapse by limiting its use of natural resources. But, for that to happen we desperately need energy reform; we need a new energy blueprint.

`What can be predicted, with absolute certainty, is that the decline is coming, and our oil-consuming world is grossly unprepared for it. Somebody needs to get busy writing the script for Act II,' wrote Matthew Simmons in his book Twilight in the Desert.

We can't `magic' more oil out of the ground. But there are several crucial ways in which our elected leaders can protect us from the coming disaster. We can't avoid the peak oil crisis. But we can prepare.

Politicians could encourage conservation, they could make serious (instead of dilettante) attempts to develop new sources of energy and they could change the way our society is structured. They could, and should, lead by example. That's what leaders should do. That's why we have leaders.

In a properly managed world our leaders would make an effort to find out exactly how much oil is left so that we can make best use of our resources - and so that we do not suddenly find ourselves looking at the last drop and wondering what happened.

We need to find out how much it is going to cost to extract the oil that does remain. At what price will it be viable to extract that oil? We need to be prepared for a world in which oil is going to become increasingly expensive. A barrel of oil will never again be sold for a few dollars. Barrels of oil will soon cost $100, $200 or more.

We need to decide on our priorities - which should not automatically include the military. How can we best make use of our diminishing oil supplies? Whose needs are greatest? There will have to be priorities and, to avoid profit taking arbitrageurs, individual countries will need to cooperate. Do the requirements of airlines and racing cars come above or below the needs of hospital generators?

No Government has yet made an effort to find the answers to any of these questions.

When it comes (as it will) the oil crisis will be made worse by incompetence, lack of vision, dishonesty, bias, commercial inspired prejudices, and a lack of leadership and direction.

`Energy conservation may be a sign of personal virtue, but it is not a sufficient basis for a sound, comprehensive energy policy,' said Dick Cheney, Vice President of the United States.

Your government probably hasn't told you this, but the International Energy Agency has already published the draft version of a report telling countries to prepare contingency plans to use when the oil shortfalls start.

The policies recommended by the report include:

1. Encouraging people to work from home and to use telephone, fax and computer.
2. A 50% reduction in the cost of public transport.
3. Reducing speed limits. (Though speed limits should not be reduced too much. Petrol consumption is increased at very high and at low speeds.)
4. Building more carpool lanes and making existing ones permanent.

5. Introducing driving bans on alternate days. (So that if your license plate ends with an even number you can drive on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays while if it ends with an odd number you can drive on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.)

`We must face the prospect of changing our basic ways of living. This change will either be made on our own initiative in a planned way, or forced on us with chaos and suffering by the inexorable laws of nature,' said US President Jimmy Carter in 1976.

Our leaders should make our society less complex. They should encourage us to strengthen our family and community bonds so that we can become more locally dependent. In a world without oil we will not be able to buy fruit imported from half way across the world. We will need to buy food grown locally. Small individual communities will need to become more self sufficient. In a way this is what happened when the Soviet Union broke up in the early 1990s. Unable to continue competing in the arms race with the USA, and broken economically by the way the Americans had manipulated the oil price, the Soviet Union split itself into its former states. This helped by reducing the cost of government and administration. The change has been uncomfortable but it might have been much worse if the USSR had imploded and collapsed entirely.

Our leaders can easily reduce the amount of fuel we use moving ourselves around the country. They could improve public transport so that we will still be able to move about without our motor cars. We need a good, reliable national railway network. Countries which have reliable, public transport - buses, subway trains, trams and trains - will survive with much less trauma than countries which don't. Mass transportation systems need to be cheaper and more efficient.Train services need to be improved and prices should be subsidised. All internal flights should be banned. It is, for example, absurd that anyone should fly within Britain. The island is not big enough for people to need to fly from one city to another. It is, for example, absurd that travellers actually choose to fly from London to Birmingham. There are 37 flights a day from London to Manchester and hundreds more from London to Leeds, Newcastle and Paris. All these flights are unnecessary because there are excellent rail links available. The British Government has allowed air travel to grow at a rate of 13% a year and has allowed airports to expand. More runways will mean more flights. Improving (even subsidising) the railways would help prevent the use of oil (and protect us against global warming). So far the British Government has deliberately created dependence on unsustainable, irresponsible, short haul flights by doing nothing to improve other forms of transport. Moreover, politicians have done nothing to cut down their own flying and, because they are worried about the short term political unpopularity, they refuse to discourage flying. Pop singers who fly around the world preaching about global warming are another irritant.

The biggest waste of oil is through traffic congestion. When thousands and thousands of motorists sit in their cars, inching forwards at a few miles an hour, the amount of oil that is consumed is phenomenal. Much oil is wasted not by drivers going too quickly but by drivers going too slowly.

In China roads which need repair are worked on at night, under floodlights, to cut down the number of traffic jams. The Government realises that the cost of paying overtime and setting up lights is far less than the cost to the economy of thousands of motorists sitting in traffic jams burning up petrol.

In other countries, however, motorways with lanes closed and no sign of activity have become a common sight. These unnecessary closures cost millions in terms of fuel wasted and hours lost. Arbitrary speed limits, often introduced on motorways solely as a way for governments and police forces to make money from speed cameras rather than in a serious attempt to reduce accidents, must be abandoned. Unnecessary traffic queues are also caused when lazy or incompetent officers fail to remove restriction signs after accidents and genuine repair works.

The following strategies would also help save energy:

Governments should introduce clear tax incentives encouraging people to work from home as often as they can.

Millions of gallons of fuel could be saved if governments subsidised school bus fares (and provided a better door-to-door service) so that parents no longer needed to waste time and energy transporting their children to school by car.

Every effort should be made to ensure that rural shops and post offices are kept open. Because of closures caused by predatory pricing by huge supermarkets, and by massive tax increases, millions of people now have to drive miles to buy a stamp or a loaf of bread. Village shops are the backbone of social life in rural areas. Closures will inevitably result in a massive waste of energy, an increase in congestion, an increase in pollution, and an increase in global warming. Governments should offer village and suburban shops preferential tax treatment in order to help their survival.

Governments must take steps to reduce their populations. Most countries are becoming larger and more complex. They consume more energy every year. Societies have, in the past, controlled their population growth successfully. Islanders on the tiny South Pacific island of Tikopia lived in near isolation for three thousand years. Their future was threatened by the fact that though they could only grow so much food on their small island their population kept growing. They dealt with this problem in two practical ways. They devised systems which maximised food production in a sustainable way and they introduced population control methods which kept the island's total population at around 1,300 people. A bigger example is provided by Japan. In 1650 Japan was in dire straits. Deforestation was causing soil erosion and lower crop yields. But Japan introduced an effective forestry management system and controlled its population.

Since energy is (and always has been) the driving force in our society governments should introduce fuel rationing. Undoubtedly unpopular, this will help delay the moment when the oil runs out. The world must do more to develop new energy supplies. Britain did this in the 16th century - when the nation (and the world) had its first energy crisis. In the 16th century the main energy source was wood. People used it for building houses, for building ships and for heating. Unfortunately, the forests started to run out and between 1500 and 1650 the price of wood rose eightfold. Britain had to rely on imported wood. The nation was saved by coal - a new energy source. From 1550 onwards the British used coal as a heating source in homes and workshops. Using coal enabled them to create new manufacturing processes. And by 1700 Britain had become the most productive economy in the world, ready to give the world the Industrial Revolution.

Governments must now make a real effort to develop alternative sources of energy to replace the disappearing oil. Alternatives won't replace oil (or the other fossil fuels) but they might help the withdrawal period less painful.

`When trouble is sensed well in advance it can easily be remedied,’ wrote Niccolo Machiavelli. `If you wait for it to show itself any medicine will be too late because the disease will have become incurable. As the doctors say of a wasting disease, to start with it is easy to cure but difficult to diagnose; after a time, unless it has been diagnosed and treated at the outset, it becomes easy to diagnose but difficult to cure.'

Some people argue that we should make more use of the fossil fuel of which we have the most: coal. Coal is the dirtiest of all the fossil fuels. It's environmental enemy No 1.Electricity power stations fuelled by coal are the world's prime source of carbon emissions and, therefore, a major cause of global warming. In three years of operation a 1,500 MW coal plant will pump out three million tons of carbon dioxide. The biggest single producer of carbon dioxide gas in Western Europe is the Drax Power Station in North Yorkshire in Britain. The Drax Power Station burns coal and produces 21 million tons of carbon dioxide every year. That is the best part of a ton of carbon dioxide every second. And the power station works every second of every minute of every hour of every day of the year.

People who worry a lot about global warming want Drax to be shut down. If you don't think about things too deeply the protestors and campaigners have got a point. Shutting Drax down would reduce Britain's production of carbon dioxide by almost 4%. But it would reduce Britain's total electricity output by 7%. And that would mean that vast amounts of Britain would have to manage without electricity. In practice, Government policies have ensured that we will remain dependent on coal fired power stations such as Drax for a decade or more to come. It does, however, seem unfair that the coal industry pays nothing towards protecting the planet. Electricity generated by burning fossil fuels accounts for one third of entire human contribution to greenhouse gasses worldwide. There should be extra taxes on the use of coal.

The environment problems are not the only disadvantages with using coal. Coal is messy to dig out of the ground and the health care costs of digging it up are phenomenal. Coal kills far more people than nuclear power and it has been estimated that the health care costs of digging the stuff out of the ground are at least £50 billion a year. Another problem is that coal, like oil, is running out. It won't run out just yet but `peak coal' won't be reached all that much later than `peak oil' or `peak gas'. Another problem is that digging coal out of the ground and moving it around take a lot of energy. Most of the easily accessible surface coal has already taken. In the future coal will have to be dug out of deep mines. This will be expensive in terms of effort, money and human life. And the energy benefits (obtained by comparing the energy expended in digging out the coal with the energy obtained by burning it) will be modest.

Finally, coal's usefulness is limited. Steam trains may well come back as railway companies realise that using coal as a fuel is a real alternative. But we aren't likely to see coal powered cars or coal powered aeroplanes.

Coal may help us produce some electricity for a few years yet. But it isn't going to provide a long term solution to the disappearing oil.

Natural gas burns cleanly - though it still pollutes the atmosphere with carbon dioxide. Motor vehicles can be converted to run on it and it can be used to create the nitrogen fertilisers much loved by industrial farmers.

Natural gas fields in Middle East, Siberia and Alaska should last a little longer than the oil reserves.

But natural gas has to be liquefied and it is difficult and expensive to extract and transport. Moreover, natural gas is, like oil and coal, a diminishing natural resource; a disappearing fossil fuel. The number of drilling rigs looking for natural gas deposits is soaring but production remains virtually flat. When fields are discovered they tend to be small and used up very quickly.

As the oil runs out and gas is in greater demand so the cost will rise. Liquefied natural gas may provide a small answer to the problem of what to do when the oil runs out but natural gas won't replace oil. And, most importantly of all, it too is running out. If we convert vehicles to run on natural gas there will be less of the stuff left for heating. And the problems which we face will be delayed by a very small period of time.

Those who recommend that European countries should make more use of natural gas should remember that in the winter of 2005 Russia switched off the gas pipeline to the Ukraine because the pro-western government there refused to pay the extortionate prices Putin and the Russian Government demanded. The Russians just cut off the gas pipeline. It was mid winter. Temperatures outside were minus 32 degrees in some places. Temperatures inside were soon close to that. Children and old people died in freezing conditions. Belarus, Georgia and Poland have all also had their gas supplies cut by Russia.

That's the same pipeline that brings gas to much of Europe.

Half of the gas imported by the European Union countries comes from Russia. New EU members such as Hungary and the Czech Republic are virtually entirely dependent on Russian gas. Russia has power over Europe through its provision of gas supplies. But Russia is itself short of gas and is buying Central Asian gas to supply its customers. This means, of course, that the EU's supply of natural gas depends on whoever controls the pipelines. And that, of course, is Russia. Control of the pipeline inherited from Soviet Union also gives Russia control over the gas imported from Central Asia.

Politicians in Europe seem perfectly happy about this - and happy to separate their dependence on Russia for energy from their increasingly distant position politically.

However, rows of one sort or another seem to break out almost daily between Russia and the rest of Europe and Russia has made it perfectly clear that it is willing to use energy as a political weapon. In other words, if European countries don't do what Russia wants then Russia will cut off the gas supplies. Never, in the long history of the cold war, have European countries been as much at the mercy of the Soviet Union. Britain seems the most vulnerable of all. Decommissioning coal and nuclear power plants will mean that Britain's generating capacity will be cut by a third by 2015. Without oil as an option Britain will have to rely on Russia.

President Putin has already tightened his grip on the energy industry in his country. Russia has banned foreign owned companies from bidding to develop large oil fiends in Russia because the deposits are deemed to be strategic. And Russia has made it clear that it regards business relationships with foreign companies as acceptable only when they are acceptable. And always available for renegotiation.

Russia has bullied Royal Dutch Shell into ceding control of the Sakhalin-2 gas field project in far east of Russia to Gazprom, the Russian state energy giant, and has blocked BP's plan to develop a gas field in Eastern Siberia and kept foreign companies out of giant Shtokman field in Barents Sea. Russia has developed a magnificent way of dealing with western firms. It allows them to find oil and build the infrastructure and then it simply takes what as much of the oil and the infrastructure as it deems appropriate. Gazprom, the Russian company, has 60% of Russia's gas reserves and 17% of the world's proven gas reserves.

Gazprom has been buying up Europe's gas infrastructure and buying into electricity, oil and liquefied natural gas projects. Gazprom wants to be the biggest energy company in the world `Its not enough for us to meet 25% of global gas competition. We want to be the biggest energy company in the world,' said a Gazprom spokesman.

One British magazine found this rather ungentlemanly. Under the heading The Oil Thieves they wrote: `Russia and China are pursuing overtly nationalist policies in their grabbing of oil and mineral assets. And...Western firms - and shareholders - are losing out.'

But the Russians are not, of course, doing anything that the Americans haven't been doing for the best part of a century.

(Russia isn't the only country which is taking back control of its remaining oil. The President of Venezuela has taken back control of all the formerly private oil companies in his country.)

Wind is a clean, long established and renewable technology and the energy it produces doesn't require sending men underground to do dangerous jobs in difficult circumstances. There is no pollution (unless you count the alarmingly annoying noise pollution made by windmills). The energy produced by wind is relatively cheap and competitive with other sources of energy.

Unfortunately, you do need rather a lot of windmills to provide even a relatively small amount of electricity.

In his book `The Coming Economic Collapse' Stephen Leeb reports that in order to replace 10% of America's coal consumption (around 5% of America's electricity supply) with wind, would require between 36,000 and 40,000 windmills. To meet all America's electricity needs would require twenty times that number and take a decade to construct.

Inevitably, there are snags with obtaining energy from wind. First, we would need vast numbers of windmills. There is no sign of anyone wanting to build them in sufficient quantities.

Second, building windmills uses up large amounts of fossil fuel. If we're going to build as many windmills as we need then we need to build them quickly before the oil runs out. But would the world's motorists, airline travellers and military agree to much of the remaining oil being used to make windmills? Somehow, I doubt it.

Third, to build enough wind turbines to fill our fuel needs would cost billions. One estimate suggests that building enough windmills in America would cost £2,500 per man, woman and child in America. Will citizens be prepared to spend £2,500 each today to provide themselves with fuel tomorrow? And will they put up with the environmental cost? Who will want the windmills in their backyard?

Fourth, most countries are not windy enough for windmills to work effectively. For example, even the UK is not as windy as some people think and the idea that wind turbines could generate even a fifth of the UK's energy needs by 2020 is nonsense. There are, quite simply, too many calm days when the windmills would stand idle.

When the wind doesn't blow you don't get any electricity. The problems with wind reliability are vast. Germany has a lot of wind farms but these can generate only produce a sixth of their potential capacity. There is no way to store wind generated electricity when the wind blows very hard and there is no way that any developed country could obtain its power from wind farms unless the demand for power was dramatically reduced (to about a tenth of current levels.)

Fifth, wind turbines affect the environment too. They don't just look horrid and make an awful noise.(Try building one near to a country cottage owned by a politician to find out how unpopular wind farms really are.) If you erect enough to windmills to produce useful amounts of electricity they will change the climate and change the surface drag of the earth.

It is clear that even politicians don't have much faith in wind energy. In some parts of Europe, home owners who spend money on eco friendly wind turbines (or, indeed, on solar panels or other energy saving measures) will be liable to pay higher taxes.

The most practical use of wind and windmills may be to grind corn in small communities.

Solar power has been around a long time. The ancient Chinese used glass and mirrors to harness the sun's rays and make fire.

Solar energy sounds wonderful. It's clean and quiet and sunshine is abundant in some parts of the world. But solar cells aren't very efficient (converting only about a tenth of the light they receive into electricity) and they are expensive. Solar power is, at best, a niche energy source. It cannot be used to provide chemicals for farmers and it cannot easily be used to power the world's fleet of cars, lorries and aeroplanes.

It is perfectly possible to obtain electricity from moving water. Mill owners have been using rivers to power their water mills for centuries. Today, almost 10% of American electricity is obtained through hydroelectric projects.

Rivers and reservoirs aren't the only source of water power. The sea is another relatively untapped source and some people claim that we can harness wave power. The first problem is that waves vary constantly. Sometimes they are high. Sometimes they are almost invisible. The result is that the electricity obtained from the sea tends to be intermittent. And you can't run cars or jets on wave power. Nor can you make fertiliser from the sea. The second problem is that the energy required to obtain energy from the sea is enormous. Building and maintaining the infrastructure would require a tremendous amount of oil.

Hydrogen is a favourite among those who claim will be able to replace oil with something else. And, superficially, it looks good. Hydrogen fuel cells provide a renewable, clean energy source. They combine hydrogen and oxygen chemically to produce electricity, water and heat. But the main problem is that there isn't enough hydrogen to go around. In addition, hydrogen is neither cheap nor environmentally friendly. It costs a hydrogen fuel cell 100 times as much as an internal combustion energy to produce the same amount of energy. So, if you run your car on hydrogen fuel cells it will cost 100 times as much as it costs to run your car on petrol or diesel.

And although it's true that the by-product of using hydrogen as a source of energy is clean water (so the process is environmentally friendly), the other big problem is that collecting the hydrogen requires vast amounts of oil, natural gas or coal. There are no wonderful underground reservoirs of hydrogen waiting to be exploited. Hydrogen has to be manufactured from hydrocarbon sources such as coal or natural gas or extracted from water. So we're back where we started - needing a fossil fuel supply.

It is possible to generate small amounts of hydrogen using electricity generated by windmills and hydrogen fuel cells can be used to power cars so it might be possible to provide fuel for a few cars in this way. We would, however, need to build an entirely new infrastructure to support and fuel hydrogen powered cars.

Finally, the big, insurmountable problem is that producing hydrogen always uses more energy than is obtained. Hydrogen, like biofuels, is a negative source of energy. And it just doesn't make sense to turn oil, or anything else, into hydrogen.

Some `greens' and self-styled `environmentalists' believe that it is possible to replace oil and to control the amount of carbon in the atmosphere by using solar and wind power and being more efficient and careful in our use of coal and gas. But to reduce the use of gas and coal by, for example, putting up prices enough to force energy conservation, will mean massive unemployment and mass starvation. These are no worse than the problems we are going to have to face when the oil runs out but these are not things that politicians will ever do voluntarily.

A growing number of thinking greens now recognise that nuclear power really has to incorporated into our energy sources. James Lovelock, is probably the world's best known and most respected environmental scientist. He is the inventor of the Gaia theory (that the earth behaves like a living organism and actively sustains its climate and chemistry to keep itself habitable). He argues that he believes the Earth to have reached a dangerous condition. `Green lobbies,' he says, `are well-intentioned, but they understand people better than they do the Earth. Consequently, they recommend inappropriate remedies and action. Wind turbines and bio-fuels alone will not cure the Earth's sickness.'

Lovelock recommends that nuclear energy, as part of a portfolio of energy sources, would make good medicine for the Earth's ills. He points out that by the time Greenland's icy mountains have melted the sea will have risen seven metres, making low lying cities such as London, New York, Tokyo, Calcutta and Venice uninhabitable. A four degree rise in temperature will eliminate the vast Amazon forests which are a great global air conditioner. Extra heat from greenhouse gases, the disappearance of arctic ice, the changing structure of the ocean's surface and the destruction of tropical forests will be amplified.

Lovelock says that green concepts of sustainable development and renewable energy are beguiling dreams that can lead only to failure. `I cannot see the USA or the emerging economies of China and India cutting back,' he says. `There is no sensible alternative to nuclear energy. We need something much more effective than the green ideology of the Kyoto agreement.'

The simple unavoidable truth is that wind and solar energy are temporary sources of energy. They work when you have wind or sun. So, only those people who are happy to read, use their computer or watch television only when the wind is blowing or the sun is shining will be happy to rely on wind and solar energy for their electricity. Nuclear power provides a reliable energy source.

Other countries have for some time been increasing the amount of electricity they obtain from nuclear power. In France 79% of electricity is now generated by nuclear plants. In Japan its 30%. In Germany its 31%.

China's leaders are well aware that oil is running out fast and so China is now working hard to acquire enough uranium to run the thousands of nuclear plants it knows it will have to build (and has already started building). China, where the uranium demand will rise by up to 6 times by 2020, currently has nine one million KW nuclear power generators and is planning to build three of the same size each year for the next 15 years. The Chinese have also said that they will build strategic reserves of uranium. In 2006 China obtained less than 2% of its energy needs from nuclear plants. By building three large nuclear power generators a year they will double this percentage.

That means, of course, that they will still have to find the vast majority of their energy supplies from coal, oil and other sources.

Even the Arabs are keen to use nuclear energy, though the Americans are opposed to their building nuclear power stations. The Arabs say that nuclear power is the energy of the future and (not unreasonably) that no one has the right to stop them using it. They recognise that their oil and gas supplies are fast running out and they want to sell what they've got left, rather than use it up themselves. Iran, still one of the world's main sources of oil, is one of the countries which wants to convert to nuclear power internally and to sell the oil it producers to outside countries. This, they say, will enable them to continue making money and to have the cleanest fuel themselves. No wonder the American Government cannot understand: it's a policy that makes good sense.

(If the Arabs, who hold most of the world's remaining oil, want to use nuclear power what does that tell us about the remaining oil stocks?)

Britain, in contrast, has been woefully slow to build nuclear power stations. According to one study demand for energy in Britain could outstrip supply by 23% at peak times by 2015 - even without a global oil shortage. As ageing coal and nuclear power stations have to be closed down Britain's generating power will be cut by a third. Declining North Sea oil and gas production will make things even worse. Britain will become increasingly reliant on imports of oil and gas from countries which don't much like the British Government and which have ready markets for their products elsewhere.

The British Government has produced a white paper confirming its commitment to nuclear energy but, even though time is running out rather rapidly, they have neither built any nuclear power stations nor encouraged (or even allowed) any commercial companies to do so. The white paper does, however, state that when the Government finally makes up its mind to take the plunge and allow nuclear power stations to be built: `it would be for the private sector to fund, develop and build new nuclear power stations'. The private sector will have to meet the full costs of decommissioning any power stations and the cost of dealing with the waste. This means that only very, very large companies will be able to consider such a risk. And it means that even though the British Government may agree that without nuclear power the lights will go out it is going to rely entirely on private companies to build and run the power stations it says the country needs. It is not easy to see just why Britain has a Government at all when the nation's energy future would be just as secure without one. It takes years to build a nuclear power station. Even if the British Government authorised the building of nuclear power stations today it would be ten years before they were operational. Britain is, without a doubt, one of the countries least well prepared for peak oil. The 12 nuclear power plants in existence in Britain currently provide 20% of the nation's electricity. Sadly, they are all old and beginning to break down. They have already outlived their 20-25 year life expectancy. Much of Britain's energy supply involves oil - the stuff that is running out. Now that Britain's own North Sea oil supplies are running out the country is a net importer of oil and gas and is totally dependent on its ability to import oil from other countries and, therefore, on the goodwill of countries such as Iran, Nigeria, Russia and Venezuela.

Nuclear power is clean, effective and relatively safe. France, which gets most of its electricity from nuclear power, has the cleanest air in the industrialised world and the cheapest electricity in Europe. The French do not store their nuclear waste. Instead they reprocess it. Instead of burying spent fuel rods deep in the sea or underground they have built a massive plant on the coast of Normandy to recycle the used fuel and so reuse it.

Those who complain that nuclear power isn't safe should know that every year the deaths caused by coal mining exceed the number of deaths associated with the entire history of nuclear reactors. In April 2007 there were 103 nuclear plants operating in the USA. These have produced 20% of the nation's electricity without any major incident since the problem at Three Mile Island. The infamous Three Mile Island accident killed no one.

Lighting a candle is dangerous. Having a bonfire is dangerous. But if you're measuring safety then nuclear power is to coal mining what passenger flight is to bungee jumping. In the last 28 years there have not been any serious incidents at any of the nuclear plants operating in the USA (plants which provide 18% of America's electricity). Since the nuclear submarine Nautilus was launched in 1954 American nuclear ships have travelled more than 150 million miles and gone round the globe 40,000 times without a single nuclear incident. The WHO estimates that 50 people died as direct result of the infamous Chernobyl disaster, which involved an obsolete, badly maintained reactor. It is estimated that another 4,000 deaths can be blamed on the 1986 accident. Since that time around 200,000 coal miners have died as a result of coal mining. (And the WHO says that 150,000 deaths a year (and the figure is rising fast) are a result of global warming.)

Both China and South Africa are building advanced power plants - to protect themselves from rising coal and natural gas prices and to meet new restrictions on carbon dioxide emissions - and the plants they are building seem extraordinarily safe. During a safety test at a Chinese reactor engineers did their best to create a diaster. They cut off the flow of the coolant that removes heat from the nuclear reactor and then withdrew the control rods - usually a recipe for meltdown. The reactor simply shut down with no damage or threat.

Nuclear power produces virtually no carbon dioxide and is very climate friendly; it is, it seems, the only cost effective and environmentally acceptable way of creating electricity.

Nuclear power doesn't provide all the answers. It certainly doesn't provide an alternative fuel for motor vehicles, aeroplanes and ships. But it's a start and those countries which have nuclear power stations will at least be able to provide their citizens with heat and light.

Those who oppose nuclear power point out that uranium is a finite resource. This is obviously true. However, it is usually fairly easy to mine, and can be reused, and there is much dispute about how much uranium there is left. Some experts say there is enough to last for centuries. Others, more pessimistic, suggest that the supply of uranium will completely run out within twenty years. Who do you believe? I have no idea. There are so many hidden agendas, lobbyists and lying politicians around that it is quite impossible to know the truth.

At the moment America relies heavily on Russia for half its uranium. The USA has a deal with the Russians whereby 20,000 Russian nuclear weapons are being converted into fuel for American nuclear reactors. But the deal ends in 2013 and China, India and Russia are all building nuclear reactors as quickly as they can. At the moment uranium production worldwide meets about 65% of reactor requirements. That's a considerable shortfall. Most worryingly, there has been little investment in new uranium mines for 20 years because the price has been so low and nuclear energy so unpopular. Recent rises in uranium prices have boosted exploration and mining activity. But it takes time to find uranium and to start digging it out of the ground.

Breeder reactors reprocess spent fuel but these are extremely expensive to build.

It has been estimated that the 10,000 nuclear reactors America needs to build would use up all the known uranium supplies within the next decade or two. And then the Americans would be left with 10,000 very expensive but entirely useless nuclear reactors. The only hope is that miners will be able to find more uranium. There are a number of hopeful sites around the world.

The waste from nuclear power stations is tricky to deal with. The direct waste is around 1,000 metric tons per plant per year but uranium tailings (residues from the mining process) are also radioactive and can be as much as 100,000 metric tons per nuclear power plant per year. These are, however, problems we have to deal with unless we want to live without electricity. Scientists are working to find better ways to get rid of it. For example, the waste can be vitrified - converted into a glass like solid - and research is continuing into making synthetic rock, with immobilised radio active elements. Another possible solution is to remix the high level waste with lower level waste to create a product that is below the original radioactivity of the uranium dug out of the ground. This can then be dumped into the empty uranium mines where the radiation produced by the stuff placed in the hole will be no more than the radiation produced by the original uranium ore before it was dug out.

Critics also point out nuclear reactors use a lot of water. They do indeed. But the water that has been used isn't `used', it's just borrowed to cool the reactor and then recycled. It is warmed. Clever scientists could, no doubt, find a way to harness the heat from the water.

And critics say that nuclear reactors are expensive to build. Again, this is true. But the cost of building them can be reclaimed by selling the electricity they produce. So, what's the problem?

I used to be oppose nuclear power.

But unless we are all prepared to go to bed when it gets dark and to stay in bed when the weather gets cold there really isn't another sensible option. How many of those who oppose nuclear power will be happy to turn off their television sets, radios, computers and dish washers?

Or maybe those who oppose nuclear power prefer biofuels and are prepared to put up with mass starvation in poorer nations so that they can continue to use their computers?.

Nuclear power is inevitable. Gas prices are going through the roof, oil is running out and everyone is scared stiff of greenhouse gas emissions.

Governments around the world should provide tax incentives to encourage people and companies to make and use products which last longer and can be repaired. This would enable us all to use our limited and disappearing resources more wisely.

Our just-out-of-warranty video recorder broke the other day. The cheapest call out fee for a man to repair it was £50. On top of that there would, of course, be a fee for a fee for any work required and additional costs for replacement parts. A brand new, middle of the range replacement cost £59.99. So the sensible option was to toss a large piece of electrical equipment out with the garbage and to buy a replacement.

If governments were serious about recycling, and protecting the environment and the world's disappearing resources, they would subsidise the repair of electrical equipment by providing grants and tax breaks to encourage more repair workers. If governments really wanted to help global warming they would slap a huge tax on tumble driers and hand out free clothes lines and clothes pegs. (The clothes line is the best and most efficient solar and wind gadget known to man.)

Governments should also be making a real effort to encourage small, local manufacturing companies. When the oil runs out we won't be able to import shoes, trousers, skirts and bras from China. Communities which don't make these items themselves will have to do without them.

We should prepare children and teenagers for the future we will bequeath them. It will be nothing like the future they might have imagined.

We are all constantly told that we must learn to adapt to change. The young take great delight in taunting their elders as previous generations struggle to cope with video recorders, DVD players, digital cameras, computers, fax machines, e-mail and so on.

`Change,' say the techno-addicts, `is here to stay. You just have to get used to it.'

But the truth is that the young don't know what change really means.

To them `change' is a new variety of Play Station or a new search engine.

They're going to have a big surprise because the `change' that is coming will be like nothing they've ever known or imagined.

They will find themselves living in a science fiction fantasy land - the sort of world depicted as `life after nuclear war'.

The best thing we can do the next generation is to encourage them to acquire simple, practical skills.

The kings of the future will not be bond traders or software engineers. The kings of the future will be carpenters and farmers. There will be no need for airline pilots or industrial chemists. Road menders and bureaucrats will be unemployable. Anyone who can mend a wood burning stove or grow potatoes in a small patch of garden will be much in demand.

Local farmers must be encouraged. And if hundreds of millions are not going to starve to death, the world has to turn vegetarian.

The world's population is growing constantly - particularly in Asia. As the world gets wealthier (particularly in China and India) more and more people will start eating meat (because they want to do what is considered fashionable in the West).

And so much of the world's supply of grains will be used to fatten up animals.

But, at the same time, the global shortage of oil will also mean that a good deal of corn will be used to create ethanol as an oil substitute.

This will mean that the cost of grains will go up.

In addition, of course, global warming will mean that growing crops will become more difficult. This will also add to the price of corn.

The surge towards meat eating will exacerbate the world's problems. Most of the world's population will eventually be forced to become vegetarian.

Growing grains to feed to animals to eat the animals is very inefficient.

Here are some facts you should know:

a) One hundred acres of land will produce enough beef for 20 people but enough wheat to feed 240 people.

b) If we ate the plants we grow -instead of feeding them to animals - the world's food shortage would disappear virtually overnight.

c) Half the rainforests in the world have already been destroyed to clear ground to graze cattle to make beef burgers. (The remaining rainforests are now being destroyed to make room for growing biofuel crops.) The burning of the forests contributes 20% of all greenhouse gases. Roughly 1,000 species a year become extinct because of the destruction of the rain forests. Approximately 260 million acres of US forest have been cleared to grow crops to feed cattle so that people can eat meat.

d) Every year 440 million tons of grain are fed to livestock - so that the world's rich can eat meat. At the same time 500 million people in poor countries are starving to death. Every six seconds someone in the world starves to death because people in the west are eating meat.

e) Approximately 60 million people a year die of starvation. All those lives could be saved (because those people could eat the grain used to fatten cattle and other farm animals) if Americans ate 10% less meat.

f) African countries - where millions are starving to death - frequently export grain to the developed world so that animals can be fattened for the dining tables of the affluent nations. If all those people who support concerts to raise money to draw attention to the starving millions in Africa chose instead to turn vegetarian there would be no starving millions.

g) The world's fresh water shortage is being made worse by animal farming. Meat producers are the biggest polluters of water. It takes 2,500 gallons of water to produce one pound of meat. If the meat industry in America wasn't supported by the taxpayer paying a large proportion of its water costs then hamburger meat would cost $35 a pound.

h) Cows produce methane which also increases global warming.

To survive we will have to get rid of big farms (the American way of farming) and replace them with small farms (the French way of farming).

In America (and to a large extent in most other countries too) farming is done by employees sitting on large tractors. They receive a monthly pay cheque from the conglomerate which employs them. They have no time to understand what they are doing. And no incentive to care.

At the other extreme the smallholder who looks after a small farm of ten acres of so will know everything there is to know about his land. He will care. He will understand the importance of getting the best out of his land. He will be prepared to intercrop plants whose roots go to different depths. He will alternate crops to keep the soil in tip top condition and to reduce the risk of pests. He will encourage those species of wildlife which are necessary to the success of his farming. He will select crops which make the best use of the particular strengths of his land. He will know and understand the land. He will notice when things happen. And if he doesn't know what to do he will find out.

It is surprising, but small farms invariably produce far more food per acre than large farms. Whether you measure the output in terms of tons of food produced or money earned, large farms are inefficient when compared to small ones.

And, most importantly, small farms use all their vital resources far more effectively. They use land, water and oil more efficiently. They understand that animal manure is a free gift, far more useful than any bag of chemical fertiliser, not a health hazard which must be disposed of.

Agronomist Jules Pretty has, over the last decade, studied sustainable agriculture projects in 57 countries. He has found that sustainable agriculture increases food production by an astonishing 79% per acre. Pretty found that yields rose 73% for 4.5 million small grain farmers in Asia. A study of 14 projects, involving 146,000 farmers in the developing world, showed that using practises such as fighting pests with natural adversaries rather than chemicals increased production by 150%. When rice farmers in Indonesia got rid of pesticides completely their yields stayed the same but their costs fell dramatically.

In farming, small really is beautiful.

Our land has been turned into large farms for all the wrong reasons.

Big corporations can get access to money far more easily than small farmers. Big corporations can cope with the paperwork more readily (they can hire a team of bureaucrats to fill in the forms) and are, therefore, at a huge advantage when it comes to claiming grants and farm subsidies. Big corporations can deal with all the regulations more easily for the very good reason that in many cases the regulations were devised for, or on behalf of, the large corporations.

We have, in the past, allowed oil, large tractors and big corporations to take over farming. We have replaced people and passion with synthetic fertilisers and regulations.

If we are continue to eat then we have to change.

Much of what I have suggested would result in long term zero economic growth. But my simple proposals would help allow our society to wind down and to become more sustainable and less wasteful. As a side effect, most people would probably be happier.

A simpler society does not mean an unhappy society.

There are snags.

First, our political leaders will not accept zero economic growth. Our politicians have created a political and economic environment which can only survive if there is growth. Without growth there will be no increase in the government's tax revenue. And without a steady and considerable increase in tax revenue governments will be unable to meet their financial commitments or pay their considerable debts.

And none of my proposals will work if one group of leaders take unilateral action. For my plan to work every leader in the world will have to work together, and agree to make the necessary changes.

And that won't happen.

The Americans, for example, have steadfastly refused to make even small changes that might help cut down their use of fossil fuels. They claim that to do so would damage American industry. Despite being an oil importer the Americans still subsidise the cost of petrol (a gallon of petrol would cost five times as much in America if Americans paid the real price of the oil).

It's easy to put all the blame on the George W.Bush administration but the Clinton Administration, with Al Gore as vice president, was just as guilty. Clinton, too, subsidised oil so that Americans could buy cheap petrol. When Clinton and Gore took office in 1993 environmentalists hoped that their administration would continue the work of energy conservation and renewable energy programmes begun under President Jimmy Carter. But very little happened and few significant energy policy changes were made between 1993 and 2001. Coincidentally, Enron had, of course, made donations to Democrats as well as Republicans.

The bizarre American attitude towards oil and energy isn't confined to Presidents and Vice Presidents. Not long ago, Spencer Abraham, an American Secretary of Energy suggested that the energy crisis could be solved by removing regulations and building more pipelines and refineries so that Americans could consume more oil and gas.

Lists of potential global crises, devised by politicians or journalists, rarely even include energy or peak oil.

Governments don't want to talk about the coming oil crisis. That will be unpopular. They don't want to introduce taxes on oil use. That will be very unpopular. And it seems to me extremely unlikely that politicians will agree to do any of the things they need to do.

Is there any serious hope that Americans will stop using oil hungry cars and learn to survive without air conditioning? Is there a chance that China will decide to halt progress and stay where it is? Is there a chance that airlines will voluntarily ground their aircraft - or that governments will force them to?

Of course there isn't.

On the contrary, everything our leaders have done so far seems to have been designed to make things worse.

Preparing the planet for the coming crisis would require politicians with intelligence, honesty, creativity and initiative. We desperately need thoughtful, courageous, creative politicians to ask the right questions and find some good answers.

But we don't have thoughtful, courageous, responsible politicians. And our politicians certainly do not care for our welfare.

No politicians have publicly acknowledged the problems of peak oil. No politicians have discussed the questions that I've raised in this book (let alone tried to provide any answers).

Around the world I cannot see any major political leaders who understand the size of the problem and who might be prepared to try to force through the oil usage cuts which would be required to give us a sensible chance to `kick' our oil habit at a respectable rate.

Attempts have been made to make it easy for politicians to take the steps that are needed. Richard Heinberg's book `The Oil Depletion Protocol' describes a simple way to ease the pain. `The protocol itself is so simple,' he writes, `that its essence can be stated in a single sentence: signatory nations would agree to reduce their oil consumption gradually and uniformly according to a simple formula that works out to being a little less than three per cent per year.'

It is a good and noble proposal and one that deserves to be taken seriously. It could help us avoid much pain. It could help prevent the wars, the terrorism and the economic disasters that lay ahead.

But do you believe that America would willingly promise to cut its oil consumption by three per cent per year? Do you believe that China would abandon growth and accept a cut in its oil usage?

Sadly, nor do I.

I cannot think of any major country where the leaders have the necessary qualities. No government has made a real effort to prepare its people (either as a nation or individually) for the coming energy crisis; the greatest crisis our civilisation has ever faced.

On the contrary many countries (particularly America and Britain) have accumulated such enormous national debts that they cannot survive without economic growth.

And for real economic growth nations need to continue to use, and rely on, vast amounts of oil.

If you and I are to survive the coming disaster then we need to prepare ourselves, our families and our friends for the future. We cannot and should not rely on politicians taking the correct decisions for us.

The final two sections of this book contain practical advice which will, I hope, prove of help.

Chapter Six: Your Personal Survival Plan

Having read this book you now know far more than 99.99% of the population know about the future we face together.

The first question you will probably want to ask yourself is: is this really true? If, despite all the evidence I have quoted, you doubt the truth about peak oil (and suspect that the politicians are right and the experts have got it wrong) then you must look at the odds.

Is there a 50% chance that the politicians could be right? Or do you think the chances that the politicians are telling the truth might be as high as 90%? Do you think someone might, after all, invent a perpetual motion machine and provide us all with everlasting supplies of free energy?

Now, change the problem.

If you knew that there was a 10% chance that your home would burn down in the next five years would you be alarmed? Would you take whatever action you could to prepare yourself and your loved ones?

The second question, which follows on from the first, is what are you going to do with the information you've acquired?

There will, of course, be many people who will choose to ignore the truths in this book in the same way, I suppose, that many people deliberately ignore the truths about the relationship between smoking and cancer and eating meat and cancer. In a world where people buy cigarettes, light them and put them in their mouths when the packets in which the cigarettes are distributed contain large, clearly printed health warnings we should not, I suppose, be surprised by anything.

When faced with an unpleasant truth most people prefer to draw the curtains and turn on the television set, hoping that when they draw the curtains back the truth will have gone away.

But the truth isn't going to go away.

And one day, when the electricity goes off the people who don't want to face the truth will be forced to draw back the curtains.

And then they will have a very nasty surprise.

You, I hope, will be prepared.

This part of the book is designed to help you prepare yourself for the unavoidable crisis that is heading our way.

If you are not prepared, you will not survive.

For the first time in a long time, life will be about the survival of the fittest.

There are two things of which we can be certain.

First, that the Government will make no real effort to prepare the country, or us, for the coming chaos.

Second, when the problem arrives they will make a mess of handling it, limiting themselves to filling the streets with policemen and soldiers to bludgeon those involved in the inevitable angry protests.

So, you must make your own preparations.

Here is what you must do

1. Prepare yourself mentally for a different world. A world in which the rich ride horses, the middle classes use bicycles and the poor walk everywhere they want to go. Think carefully about your current lifestyle. And try to imagine how difficult (and different) things will be when there is no oil.
2. Energy prices are going to rise inexorably. Take time now to reduce the amount of energy you use. Cut out all non-essential energy usage. Within the home the greatest expenditure is usually heating. See how low you can turn down your thermostat and still survive comfortably. Wear a sweater indoors and you may be able to cope with a lower temperature.
3. If possible you should acquire alternative forms of heating and cooking. Do not rely on one energy source. If you have gas central heating then you should have one or two electric heaters available. If you have to replace your oven consider purchasing one which will enable you to cook with either gas or electricity.
4. If you can become at least partly independent by installing an alternative personal energy source then now is the time to do it. Maybe a small windmill will supply at least part of your electricity needs. If you have a working but unused fireplace in your home then have the chimney swept and cleared so you can have log or coal fires to keep warm. Start laying down stocks of logs and coal. These things won't rot and I don't think there's much chance that they are going to go down in price.
5. Look around your home and make a list of all the gadgetry and equipment upon which you are dependent. How will cope without each item? Can you accumulate spares? Can you learn how to repair any of these items?
6. Prepare yourself for electricity blackouts by buying lamps and candles. Don't forget that you will need candle holders and matches. (And make sure that everyone in the family knows how to use them safely.)
7. If you are considering changing your motor car you might consider choosing a car which uses less fuel. Look also for a vehicle which has a decent tank capacity so that you can continue to make small journeys when there are fuel shortages. Reconsider all your travel needs. How much do you need a car of your own? Would you be able to cope more economically (and with less hassle) if you simply relied on taxis and hire cars occasionally? How big a car do you really need? Must you buy a new car? An older car may need more maintenance but the maintenance will almost certainly be easier to manage than a car which is controlled by a series of complicated computers. If you don't have a bicycle this would be a good time to purchase one. If you can't ride one then now is the time to learn. Folding bicycles are easy to fit into a car and it should be possible to carry them onto public transport. Equip your bicycle with panniers and a basket so that you can carry shopping on it.
8. If you are choosing a new home consider your likely future needs. Houses within walking or cycling distance of a railway station will sell at a premium in the future. A home that has its own water supply will be particularly attractive as public water supplies come under threat. But look for a spring or gravity fed supply rather than a bore hole. In order to get water out of a bore hole you will need an electric pump - and when the electricity goes off you will get no water.

9. If you have land consider establishing a vegetable garden where you can grow at least some of your own food. Try to grow as much food as you can. If you have little or no experience of gardening it will probably take you a year or two to learn some basic gardening skills. Acquire a small library of relevant gardening books. Try to manage your garden without using artificial fertilisers, pesticides, herbicides or other chemicals. Even if you don't want to start your own vegetable garden straight away you should, perhaps, start thinking of living in a home where a vegetable patch would be possible. (And, ideally, you should have a vegetable patch which is not open to the world. Thieves of the future will not be stealing television sets and mobile phones. They will be stealing potatoes and runner beans. If you grow your own vegetables you will have to be prepared to protect them from thieves. You should prepare now by making your house formidable, impenetrable and uninviting. If you need to dig up your front lawn in order to grow more food, you will need to think about ways to protect your crops from thieves?)

10. Do not take on any additional debt. Try to pay off any existing debts as soon as you can. Credit card debts are particularly expensive and can be a huge drain on your personal resources. If interest rates soar your repayments could be crippling. Water and food are, like fuel, going to become extremely expensive. And the coming price rises in oil and food will be structural not cyclical. Oil and food will never again be as plentiful or as cheap as they are now. Your savings could help you survive.

11. This could be a good time to examine your life. How many of the things you spend money on are essential to your health and happiness? How many of the things you buy turn out to be a burden rather than an asset? Every time you make a big purchase consider not just the cash price but also the time price. How many hours did you have to work to earn the money to pay for it? If you are contemplating buying an electrical item that costs £500 and you earn £5 an hour net of taxes then the item you're thinking of buy will cost 100 hours of your life. Step off the consumer treadmill and you may feel physical and mental benefits.

12. Try to replace some of the more complex tools in your house with simpler tools that don't need electricity. For example, a small hand drill may be slower and harder to use than an electric drill but you will still be able to use it when there is no electricity. Accumulate simple well-made hand tools to use around the house and garden.

13. This might be a time to start learning simple, practical skills so that you will be able to look after your home and your belongings without always being reliant on outside `experts'. Learning basic carpentry and basic plumbing will provide you with considerable freedom.

14. In recent years it has become increasingly difficult to obtain the services of a general practitioner out of hours. This is likely to continue (if not to get worse). Hospitals are likely to deteriorate still further as they struggle to cope with a top heavy bureaucracy, an increasingly incompetent and unhappy workforce and an ongoing energy crisis. You should, therefore, make sure that you acquire some simple medical skills. Put together a simple first aid kit and a small library of easy to understand medical books.

15. Try to do as much shopping as you can at local stores and local markets. When buying food try to buy locally grown food. Big supermarkets may sometimes (but not always) be cheaper and it is certainly more convenient (if rather soul destroying) to do all your shopping in one store but when oil becomes increasingly expensive the big stores will not survive. (Transporting food and other supplies to their stores will be costly and many of their customers will no longer have the transport available for them to visit out of town stores.) If you and your neighbours do not keep small shops and markets alive where will you shop when the supermarkets close down?

16. Try to limit the amount of rubbish you accumulate. As oil become increasingly expensive and local councils struggle to cope with their dramatically increasing pension obligations so local services will deteriorate considerably. Rubbish collections, already threatened, will be non-existent. Try to free your home of as much rubbish as you can now. And be cautious about taking home new rubbish and clutter. You will need to find new ways to get rid of your rubbish in the future - either by burying it or burning it.

17. You need to prepare yourself to cope with the effects of global warming. Learn to dress for the weather not for the season. Be prepared for sudden and apparently inexplicable changes in the weather. Prepare your home to cope in high winds and be prepared to survive through long periods of drought. If you live in an area which is likely to flood then think about permanently moving your most valuable possessions upstairs.

18. In the medium and long term our lives will be much more concerned with local issues than with national or international issues. Wherever you live it is important that your community should be designed for a world in which fossil fuels play a smaller and smaller part. This means that communities will inevitably become smaller and more self-contained. It must be possible for people to walk or cycle from home to work and from home to the shops. Communities must be built with pedestrians rather than motor vehicles in mind. Public transport must be improved dramatically. There is no point in spending vast amounts of money on huge road building programmes. Large administrative buildings are also a waste of money because within a relatively short period of time political and administrative control will become increasingly local. Local and national politicians must be persuaded to think of, and plan for, a future without oil.

Epilogue

When the oil runs out (which it will do soon) I believe that the world will change for ever.

Is there a chance that none of this will happen?

Yes, of course there is.

Someone may discover another entirely `free' form of energy: a form of energy we can use to drive motorcars and aeroplanes and from which we can obtain electricity.

Or maybe explorers will discover a huge oil field four miles underneath Milton Keynes.

Perhaps a young scientist in Latvia will perfect a perpetual motion machine.

Who knows, perhaps someone will find a way to turn sea water into oil.

Anything is possible.

If you think any of these scenarios are likely (and you're happy to put your trust in chance and good fortune) then you have no need to worry.

Otherwise, I think you should take this danger very seriously.

As I wrote at the beginning of this book, the problem of the disappearing oil is a threat to our civilisation much greater than global warming or terrorism. It is a threat which everyone in power knows about but everyone in power steadfastly ignores. It's a danger no one talks about.

Appendix

Here's a summary of the ways that oil has changed our lives.

1. Transport

a) Building cars takes up a great deal of oil. Running cars depends on oil. (The average American motorist consumes his or her body weight in crude oil each week.) And the roads which society has had to build so that motorists can use their cars are built with fossil fuel products. Asphalt contains vast quantities of oil and, of course, road building machinery runs on oil. The success of road transport did enormous damage to rail transport in many countries (particularly America and Britain). Roads are built by governments. Rail tracks have to be built and maintained by the railway companies so trains never stood a chance. `Globally,' writes Richard Heinberg, `cars outweigh humans four to one and consume about the same ratio more energy each day in the form of fuel than people do in food. A visitor from Mars might conclude that automobiles, not humans, are the dominant life form on planet Earth.'

b) Aeroplanes need oil. There are, as yet, no commercial aeroplanes flying which use coal, nuclear power, hydroelectricity, solar power or natural gas. Only gliders, hot air balloons and kites are exceptions. Americans are almost as dependent upon aeroplanes as they are upon cars. In an average year the average American (were there such a creature) would take an astonishing 2.85 trips by aeroplane.

2. In Agriculture

a) Simple, traditional agriculture works in a modestly energy efficient way. A man, helped perhaps by one or two animals, plants seeds. He then relies upon nature to water them, the soil to provide nutrients and the sun to provide energy. Later he harvests what he and God have grown together. There is a small energy gain. The free energy provided by the sun ensures that the man gets back more than he put in. At the start of the 20th Century two German chemists called Bosch and Haber invented a way to combine atmospheric nitrogen with hydrogen to make ammonia. Some argue that their discovery was the most important single invention of the 20th century. The synthesis of ammonia provides almost all the inorganic nitrogen used on farms. The amount of inorganic nitrogen produced is approximately equal to the natural nitrogen tonnage produced annually. That means, of course, that the Haber-Bosch process has doubled the available nitrogen on the planet. It's this that has enabled farmers dramatically to increase food production during the 20th century. Naturally, the extra food which has been produced has enabled the world's population to grow. Populations have frequently grown faster than local food production and so rich nations, such as the USA and the European countries, have used force and bribery to force underdeveloped nations to grow food for them. It was this that led to the introduction of the phrase `banana republic' to describe a country using all or most of its land to produce a single crop. Native farmers have been persuaded or forced to use artificial fertilisers, and even genetically engineered crops, in order to boost production and reduce prices. Except in the European Union (where the Common Agricultural Policy has subsidised and therefore sustained small farmers - particularly in France) the result has been the death of the small farm. Food, today, travels an average of 1,300 miles from farm to diner. That's a lot of energy being wasted just to transport food. (One downside to all this is that all that the extra nitrogen has produced massive pollution of streams and rivers. Another downside is that people in poor, developing countries often starve to death while the food their nation grows is taken to feed cattle so that rich Americans can eat hamburgers.)

b) Tractors, combine harvesters, trucks and lorries have altered the way farm produce is harvested and distributed. Before tractors were widespread around a quarter of all agricultural land was used to produce the feed needed for horses and bullocks pulling carts and ploughs. Tractors enable one man to cover vast areas of farmland and have, therefore, greatly increased farm production on large farms. Today, cheap fossil fuels ensure that by using petrol driven machinery the farmer can dramatically enhance the energy he puts into his farming. Farming has been turned into an industrial process, favouring large scale operations. (It's easier and more cost effective to use large pieces of machinery when you're farming vast, open areas.)

c) Petrochemical based herbicides and pesticides have been widely used for half a century and have altered farm yields. There have also been dramatic reductions in the safety of food produced.

All these changes have had massive effects on society (fewer people now work on the land) and on the environment (pollutants have done great damage). Power provided by fossil fuels has enabled us to refrigerate and transport food (and to refrigerate again when it is stored in our homes). These advantages will all disappear when the oil runs out.

3. Warfare

When the 20th century began wars were fought by foot soldiers and cavalry. Ships were powered by coal. Gradually the military have discovered the joys of oil power. Oil has enabled soldiers, sailors and airmen to kill far more people (especially civilians) with much greater efficiency. Oil is so important to the various branches of the military that during World War II the Allies tried to stop the Germans and the Allies both tried to stop one another obtaining oil supplies.

Without oil warfare would go back a century. There is no doubt that when the oil really starts to run out the military in every major country will grab as much of the stuff as they can and start stockpiling supplies. Not even doctors and hospitals will take precedence.

4. Heating (and cooling)

Fossil fuels help keep us warm when it is cold and help keep us cool when the weather is too hot. But the amount of energy used in heating and cooling our homes, shops and offices is vast.

When fossil fuels become too expensive to use in this way we will have huge problems (particularly with global warming making things worse). Modern homes are often built of much thinner material than pre 20th century homes and so those inside them are, despite the advantages of insulation and double glazing, still likely to suffer more than their ancestors. There isn't likely to be enough wood around for both cooking and heating.

Already, thousands of people die every year as a result of extreme heat and extreme cold. The figures are likely to rise dramatically.

The Author

Vernon Coleman is the iconoclastic author of well over a hundred books which have sold over two million copies in the UK, been translated into 23 languages and now sell in over 50 countries. His bestselling non fiction book `Bodypower' was voted one of the 100 most popular books of the 1980s/90s and was turned into two television series in the UK. The film of his novel Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War was released early in 2003.

Vernon Coleman has written columns for numerous newspapers and magazines and has contributed over 5,000 articles, columns and reviews to hundreds of leading publications around the world. Many millions have consulted his advice lines and his website. Vernon Coleman has a medical degree, and an honorary science doctorate. He has worked for the Open University in the UK and is an honorary Professor of Holistic Medical Sciences at the Open International University based in Sri Lanka. Vernon Coleman has received lots of rather jolly awards from people he likes and respects. He is, for example, a Knight Commander of The Ecumenical Royal Medical Humanitarian Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, of the Knights of Malta and a member of the Ancient Royal Order of Physicians dedicated to His Majesty King Buddhadasa. In 2000 he was awarded the Yellow Emperor's Certificate of Excellence as Physician of the Millennium by the Medical Alternativa Institute. He worked as a GP for ten years and is still a registered medical practitioner. He has organised numerous campaigns both for people and for animals. He is a member of the MCC and can ride a bicycle and swim, though not at the same time. He loves cats, cricket (before they started painting slogans on the grass), cycling, cafes and, most of all, the Welsh Princess. He hates cruelty.

Vernon Coleman is balding rapidly and is widely disliked by members of the Establishment. He doesn't give a toss about either of these facts. Many attempts have been made to ban his books (many national publications ban all mention of them and UKIP, the political party, has, bizarrely banned his books attacking the European Union) but he insists he will keep writing them even if he has to write them out in longhand and sell them on street corners (though he hopes it doesn't come to this because he still has a doctor's handwriting). He is married to Donna Antoinette, the totally adorable Welsh Princess, and is very pleased about this.

If you found this book informative, the author would be grateful if you would post a suitable review in the usual places. Thank you.

For a list of books by Vernon Coleman please see his biography on amazon. Or visit www.vernoncoleman.com

Alice's Adventures

The Further Memoirs of a Cat

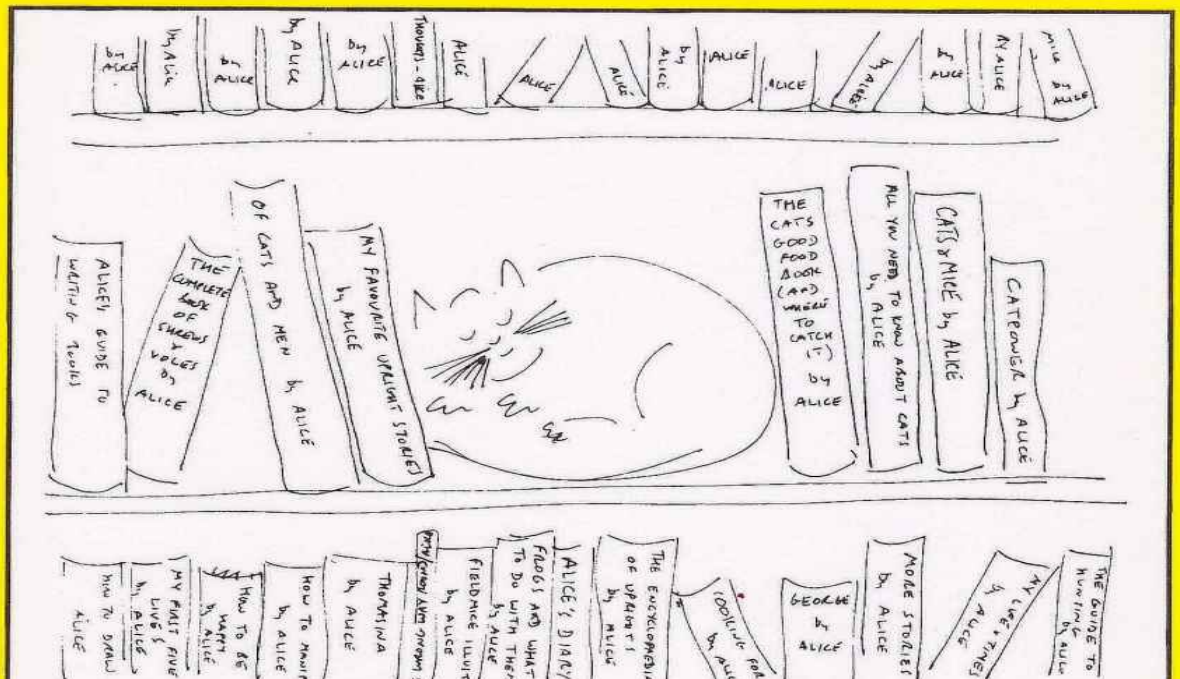
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Alice's Adventures

The Further Adventures of a Cat

Vernon Coleman

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The author Vernon Coleman MB ChB DSc is a registered medical practitioner. He is the author of over 100 other books, many of which are available as Kindle books on Amazon. For a list of books please see Vernon Coleman's author page on Amazon or visit ***http://www.vernoncoleman.com/***

Dedicated in sorrow to the memory of the thousands of cats and kittens who have died alone, in pain, in fear and without purpose in vivisection laboratories; in hope for the thousands more who wait, frightened and alone in cages; and in thanks to the many Uprights who are fighting to stop this cruel, pointless and inexcusably barbaric practice.

Alice

About the author

Alice is a 9-year-old mixed tabby. She lives in Devon and shares her home with her half sister Thomasina and two Uprights. This is her second book. Her first book – *Alice's Diary* – has been hugely successful but Alice remains unchanged and her hobbies still include sleeping, eating and sitting in the sun.

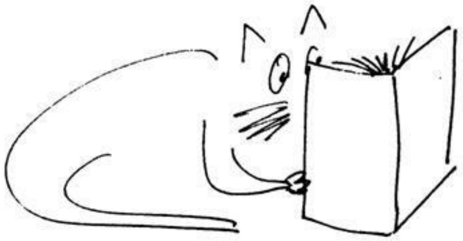

January 1st

Thomasina and I are convinced that something odd is going on.

It all began before dawn when I was woken by the alarm clock. I was, as usual, lying on the bottom of the Uprights' bed, and right from the moment the alarm started to ring I knew that it was going to be an unusual day.

Normally, the Uprights treat the alarm clock with undiluted disdain, but that didn't happen this morning. Instead of lying there and pretending to be asleep the Upright in Trousers leapt out of bed the moment the alarm started to ring.

Within minutes he and the Upright who wears a Skirt were washed and dressed and all four of us were downstairs eating our breakfasts. Normally, I like to approach breakfast in a leisurely fashion, having a stalk in the garden before I settle down to any serious eating, but the sense of urgency which had been steadily building since the alarm clock had rung was impossible to ignore and I knew instinctively that it was going to be a day I would want to forget as soon as possible.

As soon as the Uprights had finished their breakfast the Upright who wears a Skirt started washing up, and the moment Thomasina and I stopped eating our dish was picked up and taken over to the sink. Silently and anxiously Thomasina and I sat and watched the Uprights hurrying about.

While the Upright who wears a Skirt dried our dish the Upright in Trousers went outside and came back moments later clutching a huge pile of empty cardboard boxes. Without pausing he and the Upright who wears a Skirt immediately started to take things out of the kitchen cupboards and put them into the boxes. Pots and pans were merely stacked one on top of the other, but anything that looked potentially breakable was wrapped in sheets of newspaper first.

Neither Thomasina nor I had any idea what was going on but our sense of alarm was heightened an hour or so later by a loud banging on the back door. Thomasina darted out into the hall and I disappeared upstairs and watched through the rails on the landing.

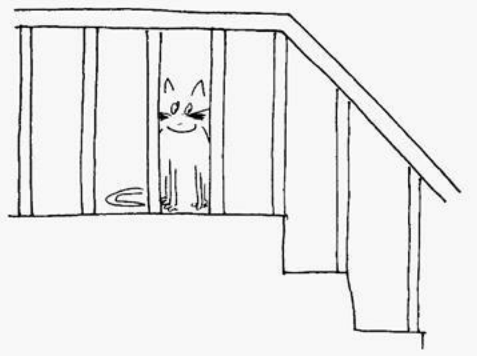

"I disappeared upstairs and watched through the rails on the upstairs landing."

There were three of them and the odd thing was that although they were complete strangers our Uprights seemed to be pleased to see them.

The oldest of the three strangers, a small Upright who wore a green boiler suit, took charge. His first act was to take the kettle out of one of the boxes and to hand it to the Upright who wears a Skirt. While she held it under the tap to fill it with water the Upright in Trousers plucked three newspaper wrapped parcels out of another cardboard box, unwrapped them and placed three mugs on the kitchen table.

To say that I was puzzled by all this would be an understatement of heroic proportions. Our Uprights do occasionally have groups of visitors in the house but it is usually at the end of the day not the beginning. Besides, these strangers were not laughing or telling one another stories in the way that Uprights normally do when they are visiting. Everything seemed very serious and business-like.

I was so puzzled by what was going on that I very nearly didn't notice the Upright in Trousers moving towards me. As it was, I was far too slow and seconds later I found myself being picked up, carried along the landing and shut in the bathroom. A few moments later the bathroom door was opened a few inches and Thomasina was thrust unceremoniously in through the gap. Five minutes after that the Upright in Trousers returned with a litter tray which he placed on the floor by the side of the bath.

Although we were no longer able to see what was happening we could hear a lot of banging and bumping and scraping going on downstairs, and both Thomasina and I became increasingly alarmed as the day went on.

For a while Thomasina tried scratching at the bathroom door to attract attention but I warned her that I didn't think it would do any good.

In order to try to find somewhere warm and cosy for us both to settle down to sleep I knocked the top off the laundry basket, expecting to find the usual soft pile of clothes inside it. To my astonishment, the laundry basket was quite empty. With nowhere else to go Thomasina and I settled down together in the corner of the bathroom furthest from the door, and although we both tried hard to relax we found sleep quite elusive. I was only grateful that I had Thomasina for company. Being held prisoner in the bathroom was bad enough. To have been held prisoner alone would have been even worse.

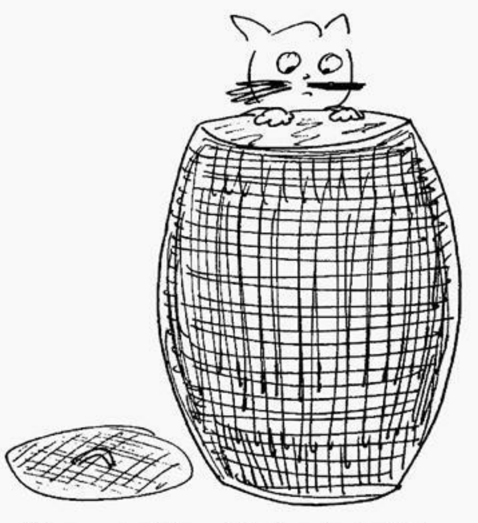

"To my astonishment the laundry basket was empty."

When the Upright in Trousers and the Upright who wears a Skirt entered the bathroom several hours later both Thomasina and I were emotionally exhausted.

The Uprights had brought with them a bowlful of food, but although we were hungry Thomasina and I were both far too anxious to find food attractive so we didn't even move when they put the bowl down. After failing to encourage us to eat, the Uprights both bent down. The Upright in Trousers picked me up and the Upright who wears a Skirt picked Thomasina up.

They cuddled us and then they carried us out of the bathroom.

The three strangers had disappeared but so had virtually everything else in the house. All the furniture had gone and the floorboards were bare. As we passed the bedroom door on our way to the staircase I noticed that even the bed and the wardrobe had vanished.

The house was empty!

Before I knew what was happening the Upright in Trousers had put me into a wicker basket and closed the lid. There was a metal grille at one end of the basket and through it I could see that the Upright who wears a Skirt had put Thomasina into another, similar basket. Moments later our baskets were picked up, carried outside and put on top of a pile of boxes and suitcases in the back of the Uprights' motor car. I could hear Thomasina but I couldn't see her, and I felt as frightened as she sounded.

After a few minutes our Uprights climbed into the car and slammed the doors behind them. It was a small comfort to know that wherever we were going, they were going with us.

After we had been travelling for a while I began to feel sick. Outside it was going dark but the car showed no signs of stopping. I had never been so frightened in my life. I lay down in the basket and tried to sleep.

January 2nd

I have no idea what time I fell asleep yesterday, or how far we eventually travelled, but I woke up sometime during the night to find that my basket was being lifted out of the back of the car and was being carried into a house I knew I had never visited before.

The night air was cold but was filled with a hundred new and pungent smells and the house, which seemed to be somewhere in the country, was surrounded by fields and trees.

When my basket was eventually lowered to the ground and the metal grille lifted I peered out cautiously before leaving it. The first thing I saw was Thomasina gingerly stepping out of her basket and looking anxiously in my direction.

'Where are we?' asked Thomasina. 'What's happening?'

I looked around. 'I've no idea,' I told her. We were in a large, well lit room that contained no furniture and had no carpets on the floor. 'Are you all right?'

'I'm hungry!' Thomasina admitted. 'I wish I had eaten last night.'

Suddenly, I found myself being picked up and before I knew what was happening I felt the Upright in Trousers smearing something sticky onto my front paws. As I struggled to break free I started to cry out to warn Thomasina. But it was too late. She, I noticed, had already been picked up by the Upright who wears a Skirt.

A moment or two later we sat, side by side, on bare floorboards licking our paws clean.

'Why on earth did they do that?' asked Thomasina, when she had finally managed to remove the last blob of grease.

'It was butter,' I explained. 'They do it because they think it will help stop us getting lost.'

Thomasina looked at me as if I had gone stark, raving mad. 'Why on earth should they think that?'

'I think the idea is that by licking the butter off our paws we will pick up the local scent so that when we go out exploring we will be able to find our way back home.'

'But we haven't been anywhere yet!' exclaimed Thomasina. 'If that's the aim then there is no point in putting butter on our paws until we have been outside.'

'I agree!' I said. 'But I suppose they're frightened to let us go outside *before* they put the butter on in case we get lost.'

Thomasina sighed and shook her head, and I must say that I sympathised with her. Sometimes, even though their intentions might be sensible, Uprights behave as though they really are stupid. The truth is that we cats are much better at finding our way around than Uprights give us credit for. We are not likely to get lost – even if the surroundings are entirely new and unfamiliar.

I was feeling irritated and tired, as well as hungry, and I started to make some untypically abrasive remark about Uprights (for whom I generally have an almost inexhaustible supply of affection) when I heard a lorry arriving outside. I started to move behind my now empty basket, the only object in the room big enough to hide behind, but before I could move more than a couple of feet I found myself being lifted up into the air by the Upright in Trousers. Out of the corner of my eye I saw that the Upright who wears a Skirt had lifted Thomasina up too.

We were carried along a lengthy, bare corridor, up an uncarpeted staircase and unceremoniously dumped in a large room which was dominated by a massive white bath. The bath stood on a plinth in the centre of the room. The house was much larger than the one we had left and there were a hundred fascinating smells to be explored, but Thomasina and I seemed to be doomed to spend all our time in bathrooms.

Ten minutes later, when the Upright who wears a Skirt returned with a large plateful of food, a bowl full of water and the litter tray, we both knew that we were going to be there for some time.

January 3rd

Neither Thomasina nor I slept very well last night. To begin with, we were both kept awake by banging and scraping and bumping and lots of shouting. Then, when the noises finally died away, we were kept awake by our own insatiable sense of curiosity.

I don't think either of us was really *worried* - though we didn't like being shut up in the bathroom one little bit. We were, however, extremely confused, totally bewildered and desperate to know what was happening. We were not really frightened because we trusted our Uprights and knew that they would not let any harm come to us. But we didn't know what was going on, and for a cat there is nothing worse than that. Had we moved home? If so what was our new home like? Would there be good hunting grounds? Was there a garden?

I know a lot of cats are very happy to live indoors and use a litter tray, but I've always had a garden and I think I would miss the opportunity to run around and catch things if I didn't have one.

These questions, and a hundred others, all remained unanswered. But they kept both of us awake for most of the night.

January 4th
The house is wonderful!

It has two staircases and twice as many rooms as our previous home. It is old and dusty, and the skirting boards are full of holes. I have already found two places where it is possible to get right underneath the floorboards. It is full of exciting smells and cupboards and window seats and glorious hiding places.

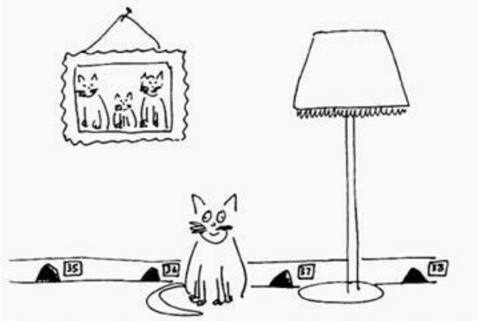

"The house is old and dusty and the skirting boards are full of holes."

Outside, the garden stretches for ever and there is a barn, a chicken run and a fine collection of tumbledown sheds and the biggest lavatory you ever saw in your life. The barn has a loft that is absolutely teeming with strange smells and lively mice, and there is a wood and a stream at the bottom of the garden.

The kitchen is warm and comfortable and cosy and full of nooks and crannies, and there are two trees within fifty yards of the back door. There is a stable and a tack room that have more exciting smells in them than I ever knew existed, and there are huge spaces on both sides of the refrigerator so that Thomasina and I can catch anything that tries to hide behind it. There is a log shed and a coal shed and a pond and three garden seats and a sundial and goodness knows how many spiders and voles and moles and shrews and lots of things I have never seen before and I am so happy that I think I am about to burst.

January 5th
Today I caught four mice, a vole and two shrews! Thomasina caught three mice and two voles.

January 7th
I woke up feeling very ill and spent the day asleep on the bed. I think I ate too much yesterday.

January 16th
We have been living in our new home for several days now but Thomasina and I are still very excited. We have both spent hours and hours exploring. Judging by the amount of wildlife running about in the house and the outbuildings I don't think there have been any cats living around here for some time. Heaven knows what it's going to be like when spring comes and the animals that have been asleep for the winter start waking up. I doubt if there will be room for us all!

Thomasina says that our new home used to be a farm, and judging by the amount of rusty old machinery lying around in the barn, and the bales of straw still lying in the stable and the tack room, I am sure that she is right.

There are no other houses or even buildings visible from the house, but Thomasina says that she heard a dog barking one morning and since there are no dogs around the house (thank heavens!) that means that there must be another building somewhere in the area.

We have been so busy exploring and hunting that I haven't yet had time to write much in my diary. But I will try to get back into the habit of filling it in properly soon.

January 21st
Today Thomasina caught two mice and very nearly caught a huge black and white bird that looked big enough to know better. I caught a mouse and two shrews.

January 29th
For three days now the house has been swarming with strange Uprights wearing white overalls and carrying ladders and brushes and tins of paint.

I know our Uprights must have invited the strangers into the house, but even they don't seem to enjoy their company very much, and the Upright in Trousers has been in a terrible mood since they arrived.

February 3rd
The Uprights in Overalls are still here.

This morning I thought I had found a quiet place to sleep when I padded into the spare bedroom and found it totally deserted. For a short while I even managed to escape from the terrible smell which has taken over most of the house and ruined any chances Thomasina and I have of doing any serious indoor hunting.

However, I was just enjoying a beautiful dream in which I outwitted the plumpest mouse I had ever dreamt about, when two men burst noisily into the room. One was carrying a ladder and the other had an armful of large, white sheets which he carelessly threw over the bed and the other furniture. For a moment or two I was confused, thinking that perhaps they had come to rescue the mouse, but as soon as I realised what was really happening I darted out between their legs and raced downstairs.

Whenever things seem worrying I always try to get up as high off the ground as I can. No one ever taught me to do this – it's just something that has come naturally.

When I saw a small stepladder near to the back door I instinctively ran to the top of it. From there it was an easy leap onto the top of the oil tank, and from the top of the oil tank I leapt up onto the roof over the back porch.

On reflection I know that I should have been satisfied to be on the roof, but not even *I* always react entirely sensibly and rationally, and I'm afraid that in my desperate panic to escape from the two men who had so rudely interrupted my dream I continued to head upwards.

From the lobby roof I managed to jump up onto the lower reaches of the main roof and I then just carried on heading upwards as far as I could climb.

Eventually, I found myself at the base of a small brick chimney stack. I jumped up onto the top of it without hesitating. It was very sooty and rather smelly, but there was just enough room for me to lie down and make myself fairly comfortable so that is exactly what I did.

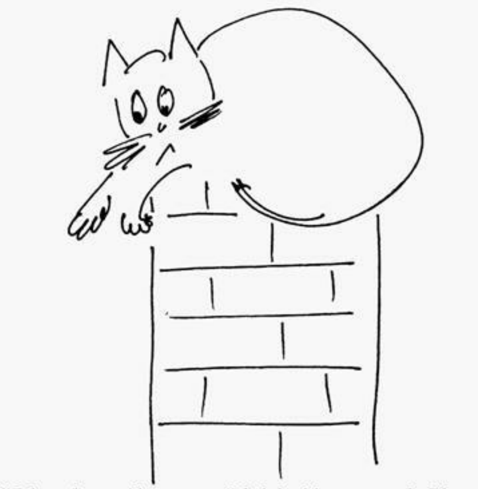

"I found myself on a small brick chimney stack. There was just enough room for me to lie down."

That was when I first looked down and realised with some horror just how high up I had climbed.

Everything seemed a long, long, way away, and I suddenly felt very lonely and just a little bit afraid. When I saw that there were birds flying around underneath me I very nearly fainted.

I don't know how long I was up there before anyone noticed that I was missing, but by the time I eventually heard the Uprights whistling and shouting my name I was stiff with fear and didn't dare move so much as a whisker in case I fell. I tried to miaow to let them know where I was but all I could produce was a rather feeble, faint little sound that would have embarrassed a kitten with laryngitis.

Fortunately, Thomasina, who was looking for me in the shrubbery, heard my feeble cries and looked up straight away. Pausing only to let me know that she had seen me she rushed off round to the back of the house, rubbed herself against the legs of the Upright in Trousers and then, when she had got his attention, jumped up on the stepladder and up onto the oil tank. Having made sure that the Upright was watching she looked up at me and miaowed loudly.

The Upright in Trousers was very brave and he scrambled up onto the lobby roof to try to help me down, but he couldn't climb any higher and I couldn't move at all. Eventually I had to submit to the indignity of being rescued by one of the Uprights in Overalls. When he climbed up beside me and put his hands round me my first instinct was to scratch him and run away but there was nowhere to run to, and my fear of falling was far greater than my fear of being picked up. So I did absolutely nothing and allowed him to carry me back down a ladder to the lobby roof. I recovered a final shred of dignity by leaping out of his arms just as he was about to step down onto the top of the oil tank.

I was still shaking twenty minutes later as I lapped at a dish of custard that the Upright who wears a Skirt had given me.

'It was a good job the painters were here!' I heard the Upright in Trousers say. 'Without them I don't know how we would have got Alice down.'

Sometimes, Uprights say the silliest things. If the Upright in Overalls had not been around I wouldn't have gone up onto the roof in the first place, I would not have got stuck and I would not have needed to be rescued.

What a humiliating day.

Still, there was a golden lining: the custard was lovely.

February 6th

Thomasina and I were in the garden this evening when we heard the Upright in Trousers whistling.

We both knew that he was whistling to tell us that our supper was ready but we decided not to take any notice of him.

'I'm fed up of being expected to respond to a whistle,' complained Thomasina. 'It's rude!'

I agreed with Thomasina, and we decided that in future we would only respond if the Upright called us by our names.

February 8th

There is a door in the downstairs hall which is normally kept closed.

But this morning one of the Uprights failed to shut it properly and so Thomasina and I poked our heads through the gap to see what there was on the other side.

It was very dark, and at first we couldn't see anything. But slowly our eyes got accustomed to the lack of light and, to our absolute astonishment, we discovered that the house has another staircase!

Tentatively, we edged forwards. Then, slowly, we walked down two short flights of wooden stairs.

At first we thought that the stairs were just 'spares' – kept there in case either of the house's other two staircases needed replacing. (The Uprights are very keen on having plenty of 'spares' – they have far more clothes and cups and saucers than they could possibly ever need).

But then we discovered that at the bottom of the stairs, underneath the rest of the house, there are several brick walled, stone floored, secret rooms.

I do not think I have ever seen anything quite so exciting.

The underground rooms were piled high with stout cardboard boxes, large wooden chests, dusty suitcases and old bits of forgotten and abandoned furniture.

There was a cupboard with one door missing, two chairs with only six legs between them and a standard lamp with no shade. There were boxes full of books, toys, crockery and saucepans. There were old kettles, old electric fires and, in one corner, a huge pile of coal!

But it was, inevitably, the wildlife which Thomasina and I found most exciting.

We could smell mice galore and Thomasina said she was sure that there had been a rat or two down there in the not too distant past. Spiders scuttled off into the shadows as we explored, and dozens of huge, silken, motionless webs, studded with the decaying corpses of dead flies, decorated the walls and the ceilings.

I don’t know how long Thomasina and I spent down there, but our hunting attempts were not as successful as we had hoped they would be and eventually, tired, dusty and hungry we decided to climb back up the stairs to see if it was time to get something to eat from the Uprights.

When we got back to the top of the staircase we found, to our horror, that the door out into the hall had been closed and bolted on the other side. We were locked in!

For several hours we took it in turns to scratch at the door and to miaow for help. By the time the Upright who wears a Skirt heard us and let us out we were both exhausted and very hungry.

I do not think we will be going through that door and down those stairs again in a hurry.

It may have been exciting in those secret, hidden rooms but neither Thomasina nor I fancy the idea of getting locked in again.

February 14th

An hour or so after the Uprights had gone out this evening I heard a terrible noise coming from the bathroom. When I went upstairs to see what was happening I discovered that the noise was coming from inside the bath itself.

I jumped up onto the wooden stool that the Uprights keep at the bottom of the bath and found that it was Thomasina who was making all the noise. She was racing round and round in circles, apparently intent on catching her own tail.

‘What on earth are you doing?’

Thomasina stopped the moment she heard me and looked up. I could see that she was extremely embarrassed.

‘How long have you been there?’ she demanded.

‘Oh, just a few moments. You shouldn’t spy. It isn’t very nice.’

‘I wasn’t spying!’ I protested. ‘I heard the noise and came to see what it was.’ I paused. ‘Anyway, what were you doing?’

‘I was chasing my tail,’ said Thomasina defiantly. She stared up at me for a moment. ‘Why shouldn’t I?’

I was genuinely puzzled. ‘But *why*’ I asked.

I have never been tempted to chase my tail. I know exactly where it is and I’m very happy to leave it there, unmolested.

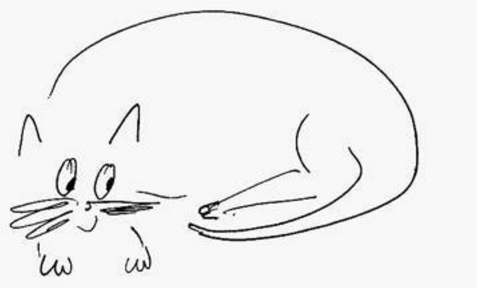

"I've never been tempted to chase my tail. I know exactly where it is and I'm happy to leave it there unmolested."

Thomasina shrugged and then jumped up onto the rim of the bath. ‘Because it’s there!’

‘Do you ever catch it?’

‘No!’ admitted Thomasina, jumping down onto the floor. ‘That’s half the fun.’ And with that she stalked off out of the bathroom, with both her tail and her head held high.

February 17th

‘It’s good practice, you know!’

I opened an eye and looked up. Thomasina was sitting on the arm of the sofa staring down at me. ‘What is?’

‘Chasing my tail.’

For a moment or two I didn’t know what she was talking about. Then I remembered. Thomasina was clearly still embarrassed about my catching her in the bath a few nights ago.

‘Oh, good,’ I said.

‘It helps to keep me in shape.’

‘That’s nice.’

‘It does!’

‘I believe you!’ I insisted, closing my eye again. ‘Now, do you mind if I go back to sleep?’

I didn’t say anything else because I would not hurt Thomasina for the world, but I can’t see how chasing your tail in the bath can possibly be good practice for anything apart from chasing your tail in the bath.

Frankly, I am surprised that Thomasina cannot see that.

February 19th

The door that leads to the secret staircase was left open again this morning.

Thomasina and I took it in turns to go down and explore.

While she hunted I stayed at the top of the stairs in case one of the Uprights decided to shut the door. And then she did the same while I did a little hunting.

But although we both saw plenty of mice neither of us caught anything.

February 20th

I do love our Uprights. They are loyal, faithful and affectionate; kindly, generous and always there when we need them.

This morning I woke up feeling miserable. I don’t know why. There wasn’t any reason for it. But I felt perfectly gloomy and very depressed. It was as though a huge black cloud was hovering overhead and had blocked out all the sunshine.

After breakfast I meandered over to the living room sofa, curled up into a ball and lay there feeling sorry for myself.

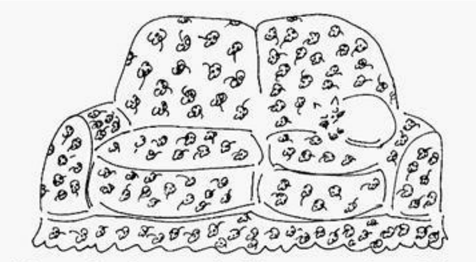

"I meandered over to the living room sofa, curled up into a ball and lay there feeling sorry for myself."

Somehow, the Upright who wears a Skirt must have known that I was feeling miserable for she stopped what she was doing in the kitchen and came over to sit beside me. She didn’t say anything, but for the best part of half an hour she just stroked my back in that gentle, soothing, rhythmic way she has. When she finally stopped she lowered her head and gave me a kiss before getting up and going back to her chores in the kitchen.

I don’t know whether the Upright who wears a Skirt has magic in her fingertips but she certainly has plenty of love in them, and when she left me I felt a million times better. The black cloud had blown away and the sun was shining through again.

I have often argued that Uprights are more intelligent and loving than we give them credit for and I think that this incident justifies my argument.

February 22nd

Today, I caught four mice, two voles and two shrews.

It would have been even more but a third shrew, which I had cornered behind the potting shed, escaped when I lost concentration for a moment and fell asleep.

When I told Thomasina of my hunting successes she was quite offhand. She said it was not polite to boast of one’s achievements.

But I was not boasting! I was merely reporting the facts. And what on earth is wrong with that? Are we only supposed to tell others of our mistakes and failures?

Thomasina’s attitude quite spoilt the day for me.

February 23rd

I have been thinking a lot about what Thomasina said yesterday. And the more I think about it the more I am convinced that she was quite wrong to criticise me in the way she did.

I agree with her that *boasting* can be unpleasant and embarrassing. But I think that simple pride can be more of a virtue than a sin.

We should, I think, all have pride in our skills and achievements. Pride gives us courage and determination and enables us to achieve more. Pride is only a sin when it leads to arrogance, vanity and a contempt for others.

February 28th

The Uprights had visitors today and they brought a small, noisy dog with them. Halfway through the afternoon one of the Visiting Uprights pulled a paper bag out of his pocket and took out a handful of small, bone shaped biscuits. What followed was probably one of the most embarrassing and humiliating things I have ever seen in my life.

The Visiting Upright held one of the biscuits up in the air a foot or so above the dog's nose. And the dog sat back on his haunches and *begged* for it!

All the Uprights seemed to think that this was very clever – as though begging was a special trick that had to be learned.

But Thomasina and I were so disgusted that we left the room and refused to go back into the house until the dog had left.

I would, I think, rather starve to death than beg for food. Whatever happened to dignity and self-respect?

March 2nd

For several minutes I could not work out where I was or what had happened to me.

Wherever I was it was pitch black and although I was curled up on a long roll of comfortable carpet everything around me seemed to be rattling and shaking. I could smell paint and petrol, and a few inches from my nose a couple of cans filled with tin tacks were sliding and shuffling and scraping about on a metal floor.

Above my head a metal ladder was hanging from two protruding metal brackets and every few seconds it swung closer and closer to the edge of the brackets; occasionally it banged noisily against a metal wall.

Gingerly, I clambered to my feet. It was not easy to stay upright because the floor on which I was standing kept moving about. Three of the metal walls which surrounded me were solid; the fourth, which was divided into two halves, had what looked like a handle in the middle of it and two panes of glass set into the upper parts of each half. Through these two windows I could see a constantly changing pattern of bright lights.

At long last I remembered what had happened.

It had been a beautiful spring day; sunny but quite cool, and I had decided to spend it asleep on the window seat in the Uprights' bedroom. After half an hour or so my peace had been rudely shattered by the sound of banging.

A moment or two later I discovered that two strange Uprights were hammering a new carpet into position on the front staircase.

Without waiting for them to find me I ran out along the top landing, down the back stairs, through the kitchen and out through the cat flap in the back door to safety. I do so hate it when our Uprights allow strangers to come into the house.

Outside, although it was beautifully sunny, it was noticeably cooler than it had looked from the comfort of the bedroom window seat and I decided to look around for somewhere warm where I could curl up and continue my sleep. I had been enjoying a particularly pleasant dream in which Thomasina and I had been chasing a whole family of succulent field mice and I was eager to resume my imaginary adventures.

It was, I suspect, this urge to return to my dream which led me to leap up into the back of a van parked outside the back door and to curl up in a dark, but cosy, hollow between two rolls of carpet. The van doors had been left wide open and it never occurred to me that I would ever find myself trapped inside the vehicle when it was driven away.

But that is exactly what happened.

When I eventually realised that as each minute went by I was being driven further and further away from my home I began to feel very lonely, very frightened and very unhappy. I paced about unsteadily inside the back of the van, occasionally looking out of the rear windows and all the time struggling to keep my footing. I wondered if I would ever again see Thomasina, my Uprights or the beautiful new house I was growing to love so much.

I don't know how far the van travelled after I had woken up but the journey seemed to take a lifetime. By the time the driver eventually stopped I felt physically exhausted and mentally drained. Shaking with fear, and terrified about what I would find waiting for me outside the van, I waited for the back door to open. When, at last, it did I leapt down past the outstretched hand of a startled Upright who attempted to stop me, and out into a world about which I knew absolutely nothing.

The Carpet Fitting Uprights had parked their van in a small yard alongside several other similar vehicles, and my dash for freedom took me through a gate, over a brick wall and across a dimly lit street which was far busier with traffic than any thoroughfare I had ever seen before.

After I had run as fast as I could for five minutes or so I crawled behind a row of metal dustbins to get my breath back. I could feel my heart beating furiously inside my chest and my whole body felt uncomfortably alive with fear and expectation.

I had no idea how far the van had come or where I was.

I had not intended to stay where I was for more than a few moments but when I did try to move I found that my legs just didn't want to work.

Feeling unhappier than I had ever felt before I made myself as comfortable as I could and tried to go to sleep.

March 3rd

I was woken up by a deafening noise.

When I looked up I saw that one of the nearby dustbins had been tipped right over onto its side. Three cats were speedily picking their way through the rubbish and pouncing eagerly on anything that looked edible.

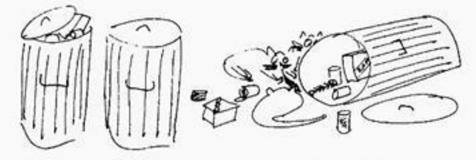

"A nearby dustbin had been tipped onto its side and three cats were picking their way through the rubbish."

At first I thought that they would be too busy to notice me, but all cats can sense the presence of other animals and these were alert, street wise, city cats.

'Hello, Splodge!' said one of them, pulling the remains of a beefburger out of a discarded bun. He was jet black, but even so I could tell that his fur was horribly dirty. He was looking directly at me as he spoke but I looked around to make sure that there was no one behind me.

'I'm talking to you!' said the black cat. 'Splodge!' He laughed. 'I've never seen so many colours on one cat.' He turned towards his two companions and grinned.

'My name is Alice,' I said, quietly but firmly.

The other two cats, who had been fighting over a small piece of fish, broke off to stare at me. One of them was light grey and had a white patch around his left eye which gave him a distinctly piratical air. The other, a mackerel tabby, had very similar markings to Thomasina.

'My name is Alice,' mimicked the light grey cat cruelly.

'What are you doing here?' demanded the mackerel tabby.

I started to explain, but the black cat didn't want an explanation. 'This is our territory!' he snapped. 'Go away and find your own dustbins.'

I tried to tell him that all I wanted to do was to go home to Thomasina and my Uprights but he was not interested. Without any warning he leapt forwards and, with astonishing speed, clawed the left hand side of my face. He was so fast, and the attack was so completely unprovoked and unexpected, that I failed to get out of the way. A moment or two later I felt something warm and sticky trickling into the corner of my left eye. Blood.

If the black cat had been alone I might have been tempted to stay and fight, but I knew that with three of them I had no chance of winning so I turned and ran away as quickly as I could. As I ran I could hear the three alley cats behind me laughing and making rude remarks. Although I pretended to myself that I didn't care I felt lonelier and more afraid than at any time since I had arrived in the city.

I was still running at full speed when I turned a corner and almost collided head on with the largest cat I have ever seen in my life. He was ginger, and from the scars he bore it was clear that he was an experienced street fighter.

'Whoa! Not so fast!' said the ginger cat, holding out a paw to stop me. 'What's the hurry?'

'I'm sorry,' I apologised, slightly breathless from all the running I had done. I've always been proud of my good health and fitness but nothing I had ever experienced had prepared me for city life. 'I came here in a carpet van by mistake and now I want to go home. Three cats I met thought I was trying to steal food from their dustbins but I wasn't.' The words came tumbling out in a great rush.

The ginger cat laughed. 'Have you had any breakfast?'

I shook my head, suddenly realising how hungry I was.

'Would you like some?'

After a moment's hesitation I nodded furiously.

'Then you'd better tell me all about it over breakfast,' said the ginger cat kindly. Even when he wasn't laughing the ginger cat had a friendly twinkle in his eyes. ‘My name is Ginger,’ he told me. ‘What’s yours?’

I told him.

‘That’s a nice name,’ he said, and I think he meant it.

Fifteen minutes later, after we had finished a breakfast of raw fish heads (which I enjoyed far more than I thought I would, though to be honest I was so hungry that I would have probably enjoyed a meal of cardboard plates) I told Ginger my story.

He sat still for a few moments after I had finished, then licked a small piece of fish from the corner of his mouth. ‘What a silly young cat you are!’ He shook his head and then leant forwards. ‘You should never, ever get into a strange vehicle – however great the temptation.’

‘I realise that now,’ I said, rather tearfully. ‘I’ve learned my lesson. All I want to do now is to go home.’

‘Do you know where Thomasina and your Uprights live?’

I nodded. ‘Over there!’ I said, indicating a distant spot somewhere over his left shoulder.

Ginger half turned to stare in the direction of the derelict building towards which I had nodded. ‘I’m sure you know which direction to take,’ he sighed. ‘All cats have a perfect sense of direction. But do you know how far you’ve got to travel? And do you know how you’re going to get there?’

Feeling downcast I lowered my eyes. ‘I’m going to walk,’ I muttered defiantly. ‘I don’t care how far it is.’

‘Good!’ said Ginger. ‘You’re going to need all the determination you can muster.’ He paused and looked carefully at me. ‘Have you ever lived in a city before?’

I hesitated for a moment but then shook my head firmly. I wanted to tell Ginger the truth.

Ginger sighed loudly. ‘You don’t know how to scrounge without annoying other cats? You don’t know how to survive the traffic, the dogs, the kids and the catnappers?’

‘No,’ I said in a tiny little voice that seemed to come from a long way away. I had no idea that there were so many hazards in the city. I felt further from home than ever before. All I had left were my memories of the past and my hopes for the future.

I felt tears streaming down my cheeks and hurriedly wiped them away with a grubby paw. For the first time I wondered if I would ever find my way home again.

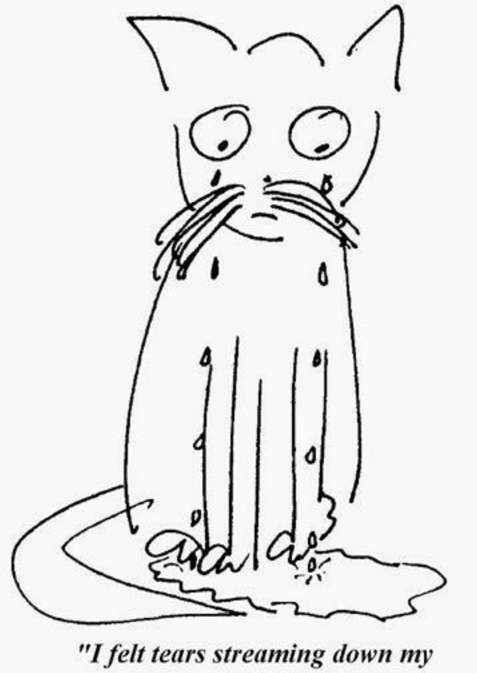

"I felt tears streaming down my face."

‘Don’t worry!’ said Ginger. ‘I’ll teach you – but it’ll take a few days. If you try to leave now you’ll never get out of here alive.’

March 6th

‘I’ll never be able to fight like you,’ I told Ginger, after I had watched him scare off two alley cats who had tried to steal our evening meal from us.

‘You don’t have to be able to fight,’ said Ginger. ‘Just be prepared to run at the first sight of trouble.’

‘But isn’t running away cowardly?’

‘No!’ said Ginger emphatically. ‘Running away is sensible.’ He stopped for a moment and thought. ‘There's only one thing more sensible than running,’ he added. ‘And that is not being there at all when there is trouble around.’

‘But how...?’

‘Learn to judge potentially difficult or dangerous situations well in advance,’ Ginger told me. ‘Keep away from groups of dustbins where there are bound to be lots of cats, avoid school playgrounds and always cross over the road when you see a dog or hear one barking.’

Not for the first time Ginger reminded me of another wise cat I once knew called George. I wished that they could have met for I think they would have enjoyed each other’s company.

March 9th

Something that happened today made me realise just how dangerous life in the city can be.

For several days now Ginger has been teaching me a basic survival course and the single most important thing I have learned is that whenever possible, sensible cats keep away from ground level.

‘You will probably have to come down to eat,’ Ginger explained. ‘But try to spend as much time as you can on rooftops. Always travel across rooftops and always, always sleep on rooftops.’

I must have looked doubtful. I have never been very good on roofs, and I couldn’t help remembering that just a short while ago I had been stuck on the roof of our own house.

‘There are no dogs or children up here,’ explained Ginger as we sat together on a flat roof above a garage. ‘And there’s no chance...’. Suddenly, he stopped talking and pointed down to the street below us. I followed his extended paw with my eyes and watched as two Uprights jumped out of a small, dark, blue van.

‘What is it?’

‘Sssshhhh!’ hissed Ginger. ‘Just watch!’

The two Uprights opened the back of their van and took out a large net. They put on thick leather gloves and then they advanced stealthily towards a large pile of rubbish that lay blocking a nearby alleyway. Moving quickly and silently, the two Uprights leapt onto the top of the plastic bags and cardboard boxes and threw their net over two cats who tried, too late, to make a run for it. One of the cats was, I realised, the grey cat with the piratical eye patch who had helped to chase me away from my first hiding place.

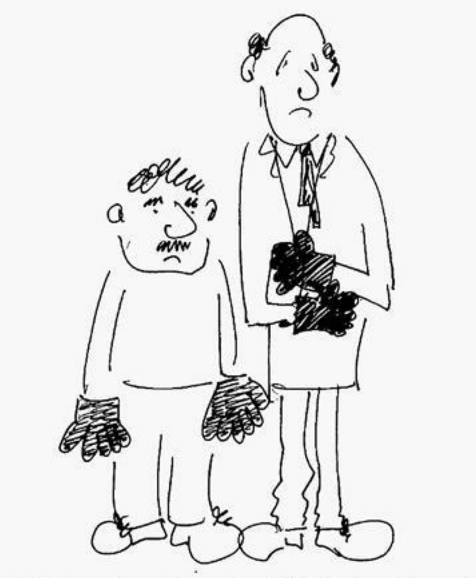

"The two Uprights put on thick leather gloves."

With the two cats struggling in their net the Uprights, now laughing and joking together, walked back across the street to their van. They removed the cats from the netting and put them into small wire cages. Then they put the cages into the van, tossed the net on top of them, slammed the doors and drove off.

‘Why did they do that?’ I asked, horrified.

‘They’re catnappers,’ explained Ginger simply.

I was puzzled. ‘But why? What are they going to do with those two cats?’

‘Sell them to Uprights in White Coats,’ explained Ginger.

I didn’t understand. I know that many Uprights enjoy the company of cats but I found Ginger’s claim difficult to believe. My doubts must have showed.

‘They use the cats for experiments,’ said Ginger quietly. ‘They do the experiments while the cats are still alive.’

‘What sort of experiments?’

Ginger shrugged. ‘All sorts of things. I’ve heard that they blind them and poison them. Sometimes they just chop bits out of them.’

‘And the cats are alive when these terrible things are done to them?’

‘Oh yes.’

‘But why do the Uprights in White Coats do it? What’s the point of it?’

‘Some say they experiment on cats so that they can find out what will happen if the same things happen to Uprights,’ said Ginger.

I must have looked as puzzled as I felt.

‘They try out new drugs and new operations on cats before trying them on Uprights,’ explained Ginger.

‘But that’s crazy! How could Uprights learn anything useful by doing experiments on *us*? I wouldn’t want to take a drug that had been tried out on Uprights! They are completely different to us.’

‘I agree with you,’ sighed Ginger, with a shrug. ‘Deep down I think they just do the experiments because they like doing them.’

I shuddered. I had never realised that any Uprights could be so cruel. But I had learned an important lesson. As long as I remained in the city I would follow Ginger’s advice and stay on the rooftops as much as possible. I didn’t want the catnappers to get me.

March 11th

Ginger has taught me how to survive, how to find food, how to find good, safe sleeping places and how to avoid some of the worst dangers of city life.

Today, when I woke up, I knew that it was time for me to leave his care and start making my way home.

‘Are you sure that you’re ready?’ asked Ginger. ‘This is a big city. I’ve never been out to the edge of it myself.’

‘I don’t think I’ll ever *really* be ready,’ I confessed. ‘But I have to get home. I know that Thomasina and my Uprights will be worried about me.’ I paused and could feel my throat constricting. ‘And I miss them all terribly,’ I added quietly. ‘I miss them all so very much.’

Ginger nodded wisely. ‘Just remember what I told you. Travel across the roofs as much as you can, and if you see anything that looks like potential trouble steer well clear of it.’

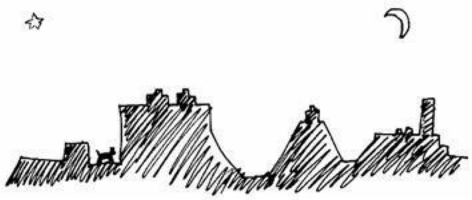

"Travel across the roofs as much as you can."

‘I will!’ I promised him.

I knew that I had to say ‘goodbye’ and I knew that I was going to miss Ginger. He had taught me how to stay alive, but more than that, he had given me strength and companionship and he had helped restore my faith in myself and in the world. When I had first met him I had felt more alone, more desperate and more unhappy than at any previous moment in my life.

How could I ever thank him for everything he had done for me?

‘Goodbye!’ I said. ‘And, thank you.’ It sounded bald and nowhere near enough.

‘Goodbye!’ said Ginger. ‘And good luck!’ Somehow, in a strange way that I couldn’t easily explain, I felt that he would probably miss me as much as I knew I would miss him.

March 14th

Today was, I think, one of the saddest and most depressing days of my life.

My route back home took me south, and this morning I found myself passing the carpet warehouse where I had jumped out of the Uprights’ van not so very long ago.

My heart was beating twice as fast as usual as I kept low and tried to pass by unnoticed when I suddenly heard a voice that I instantly recognised.

It was the Upright in Trousers!

I looked through the wire mesh fencing that surrounded the warehouse and the parking area and I could see him standing about a hundred yards away, talking to another Upright who wore dark blue overalls. The stranger, whom I had never seen before, was shaking his head. The two of them were standing in what was clearly a parking area for vans and cars.

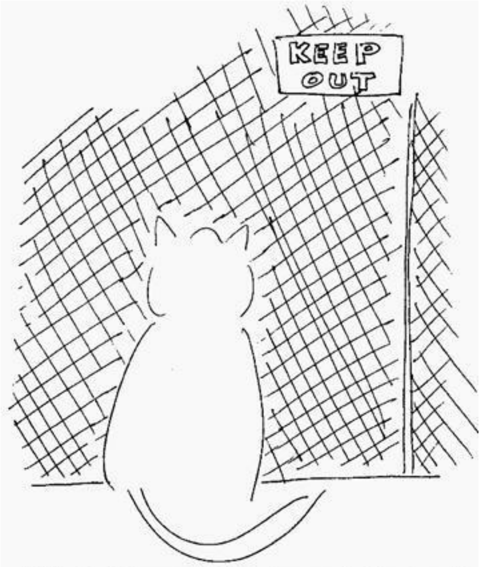

"I looked through the wire-mesh fencing."

Desperate, I cried out as loudly as I could and tried to climb up the fence which separated us. But the sound of car engines drowned my cries and the fence was impossible to climb. Frustrated, I tried to will him to look in my direction. But that didn't work either.

Moments later the Upright in Trousers, who looked ravaged by sadness and dispirited and depressed, climbed back into his motor car and drove away. He had, I knew, been looking for me.

But I didn't give up!

I ran alongside the fence until I found the entrance to the warehouse and then I ran through the gate, hoping that the Upright in Trousers would have left a description of me with the Upright in Blue Overalls.

But I never found out if he had.

Before I could find the Upright in Blue Overalls, two younger Uprights spotted me and started to throw small stones at me. I tried to dodge them but they were good shots and they hit me several times. In despair and pain, and with my eyes filled with tears, I turned round and ran out of the warehouse car park.

I was, I realised, going to have to find my own way home.

March 16th

Last night I dreamt that I was back home.

I dreamt that I ate a plateful of chicken and a bowl of custard and then went to sleep in front of a blazing log fire with Thomasina beside me.

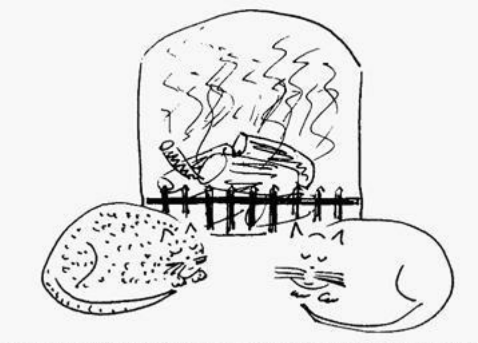

"I dreamt that I went to sleep in front of a blazing log fire with Thomasina beside me."

The Upright in Trousers and the Upright who wears a Skirt were sitting with us watching the television.

But when I woke up I was cold and hungry and suffering from cramp. Thomasina wasn't there and nor were the Uprights. I felt very sad.

March 18th

A bag of chips saved my life this evening.

I had not eaten for two days and I was beginning to feel weak with hunger when suddenly my nose began to twitch: I could smell something hot and tasty.

The chips had been dropped on the pavement and the bag had burst. Greedily, I ate them up as fast as I could before the smell attracted any other cats.

March 19th

I slept badly and was woken up several times by terrible indigestion.

March 22nd

If I had been able to walk home in a straight line and without having to stop to find food or to sleep I would have probably been there by now.

But every day my journey is complicated and lengthened by the need to find something to eat and somewhere safe to sleep.

In addition, remembering Ginger's advice, I often make lengthy detours in order to avoid potentially dangerous areas.

For example, I always keep well away when I hear the sounds of children playing in a school-yard, and if I can't avoid crossing busy roads I try to cross them at night.

My searches for food take up much of my time. I have always been used to being able to catch plenty of fresh meat but here in the city there are more rats than mice and far more dogs than shrews or voles. In the time when I should be finding food to eat I seem to waste hours avoiding being eaten!

Today, for example, all I've eaten is a puddle of oil I found underneath an old car. It tasted horrible and very nearly made me sick but I ate it because I remember my dear old friend George telling me that, as a last resort, oil can help to keep a cat alive.

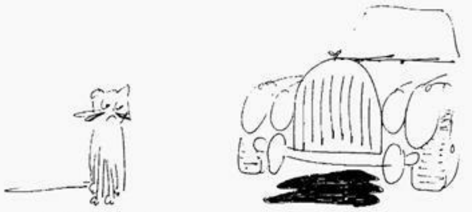

"All I'd eaten was a puddle of oil I found underneath an old car."

He told me about a cat called Emily who was accidentally nailed into a crate in Detroit in America along with a diesel engine which was being shipped to Cairo. The journey lasted for 41 days and Emily had no food or water but, when the crate was opened she, and the four kittens she had given birth to on the journey, were all alive. They had survived by licking the oil from the engine.

After I had finished licking up the oil I felt so tired and sick that I just wanted to lie down and go to sleep. I had covered a considerable distance and thought I had earned a rest. It was already getting dark and the night was starless, cold and miserable.

Mindful of Ginger's advice always to find somewhere safe to sleep, and conscious of the need to find somewhere high up (away from dogs, motor cars and catnappers), I jumped up onto a low wall, slithered across a sloping roof and climbed up and up until I could go no further. As I went I couldn't help thinking how much better I had become at dealing with heights.

Suddenly, to my absolute astonishment, I smelt soft damp earth, fresh grass and sweetly scented flowers. At first I thought that my senses must have deceived me but they had not. Right up high, where normally I would have expected to find nothing but chimney pots and roof tiles, I had found a secret piece of hidden countryside.

Delighted by my discovery I dug a proper earth lavatory for the first time in days, ate a few blades of grass to help settle my stomach and snuggled down for the night underneath a small, exquisitely perfumed lavender bush.

March 23rd

I woke with a start this morning, distinctly conscious that someone was staring at me. Cautiously, I raised an eyelid and looked around without moving my head.

A young, nervous looking Siamese cat was standing about six feet away. For a few moments neither of us said anything.

'Am I trespassing?' I asked at last.

One of the important things I have learned in the city is that cats who live here are very jealous of their territories – in my admittedly limited experience, far more so than cats who live in suburban or country areas. I am also aware that the peculiar and sometimes disgusting smells which fill city streets often make it difficult to tell where one cat's territory starts and another ends.

The Siamese just looked rather startled but did not reply. I looked around. I seemed to be in a garden. But I knew I was on a rooftop. I was puzzled and said so.

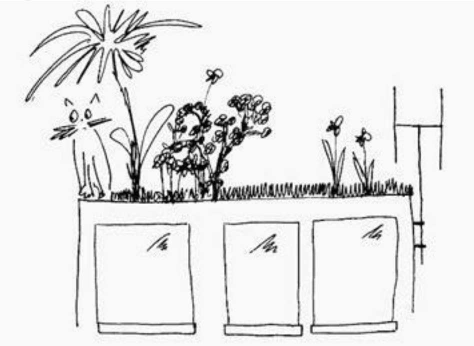

"I seemed to be in a garden. But I knew I was on a rooftop."

'It's a roof garden,' explained the Siamese cat.

'Who does it belong to?'

'My Uprights,' explained the Siamese cat. 'They own the penthouse flat and the garden comes with it.'

'Is this real earth?'

She nodded.

'Real grass?'

'Yes.'

'Real flowers?'

Another nod.

'How did they get it all up here?'

The Siamese cat looked puzzled at this last question, as though it indicated a train of thought that had never troubled her before.

'I don't know,' she admitted.

Mentally I shrugged. I know enough about Uprights to realise that not everything they do is explicable.

'Are you hungry?' asked the Siamese cat.

I was. I said so.

The Siamese disappeared for a few moments and came back a little later dragging a large piece of chicken breast with her. It was so large that she had to walk with her forelegs either side of it. She dropped it a few inches in front of me and then backed away. 'Don't you want any?'

She shook her head. 'I've eaten.'

Without any further hesitation I started to tear into the chicken. It was, I thought, one of the tastiest meals I had ever eaten. It was marvellous. I didn't stop until I had finished.

'You *were* hungry!' exclaimed the Siamese cat. She was not being rude, just honest. I don't think she had ever before seen a cat so hungry.

'That was lovely!' I told her. 'Thank you!' 'What's your name?'

'Alice. What's yours?'

'Princess Samantha. But my Uprights call me Smokey.'

'That's nice.'

'Are you lost?'

'Not really.' I explained that although I had found her Uprights' garden by mistake I was not really properly lost but was on my way back home. I told her what had happened to me.

'How terrible!' said Smokey, genuinely sympathetic. Slowly, a frown appeared on her face. 'But how on earth do you know which way to go? I'm sure I would get completely and utterly lost if I found myself outside the garden.'

'You wouldn't!' I assured her. 'You've got a compass in your head that would help you to find your way home wherever you were.'

'I have?' She sounded sceptical.

'All cats have,' I insisted.

Smokey still didn't seem very convinced so I told her about Toby who walked 300 miles in four months to get from Cornwall to Kent; Marshall who covered 120 miles in six weeks to get from London to Lowestoft and a cat called, like her, Smokey who covered 285 miles to travel from Newquay in Cornwall to Bexhill in Sussex and did it in just three months.

'That's extraordinary!' said Smokey, sounding genuinely impressed and more than a little excited. 'And you think I could do it if I had to?'

'Of course you could!' I assured her. And I told her about a cat called Libby who, when she was just two-years-old was sent by her Uprights, who lived in Chichester, to stay with an elderly Upright, who lived in Brighton.

'Libby was very happy there,' I said. 'But after a year her new Upright died. So what do you think she did?'

Smokey looked at me with eyes wide open. 'I don't know,' she murmured breathlessly. 'What did she do?'

'She walked back to Chichester!' I told her triumphantly. 'Twenty five miles in just over one week.'

Smokey seemed impressed, but her thirst for knowledge was still not quenched. 'If I was doing this would I just travel in a straight line?'

'More or less. But you'd have to find bridges over rivers and canals. And crossing busy roads can be dangerous so you wouldn't want to do that too often.'

'How wonderful!' purred Smokey. She put her head on one side and smiled. 'We cats are marvellous, aren't we?'

I had to smile as I nodded.

I stayed with Smokey for the whole of the day, resting and getting my strength back. From a corner of her Uprights' roof garden I could see green fields, but although I knew that my journey through the city was almost over I knew that I still had a long way to go before I arrived back home.

In the evening Smokey brought me a large piece of fresh fish that she said was called salmon. Normally, I hate fish and I certainly didn't like it as much as the chicken, but it tasted much better than engine oil and I was very grateful to her.

'You have some!' I begged, stopping for a moment, and feeling guilty at the haste with which I had been eating.

'No! Really!' insisted Smokey. 'My Uprights are very good to me. I'll go and get them to give me something else a little later.'

Those were by far the two best meals I had eaten since I had been away from home.

As I settled down to go to sleep I felt very homesick. I couldn't help thinking about Thomasina and my own Uprights. In a way I felt that they were probably worse off than I am. They will, I know, be terribly worried about me. At least I know that I am still alive and well. And I know that I am on my way home. They can only hope and pray.

March 26th
Early this morning I cut my right front paw. I didn't realise I had done it until I felt my paw sticking uncomfortably to the pavement as I plodded on towards home. I stopped straight away and licked it clean but the wound looked quite deep. I suspect that I must have trodden on a piece of glass. I do hope that it doesn't become infected.

March 29th
My right front paw is very sore and swollen today. I know that I should probably stop and rest until it gets better but I want to get home as quickly as possible so I am going to carry on.

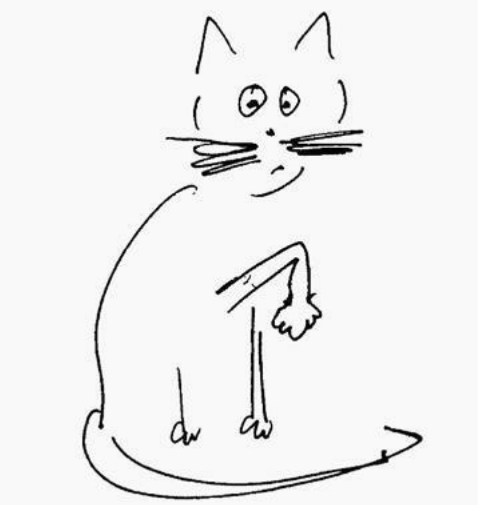

"My right front paw is very sore and swollen."

April 2nd
I have found that by half hopping and half skipping I can make quite good progress and can move a little faster than by merely limping along.

April 5th
There are now quite large gaps between the houses and although the traffic is faster than it was in the middle of the city there is much less of it. The air smells sweeter, and instead of having to rely on finding food in dustbins I have been able to catch fresh food twice in the last forty eight hours.

My paw is still very sore and it slows me down a lot but fortunately the mice around here seem rather fat and lazy.

April 8th
When I woke this morning I wasted three hours walking in completely the wrong direction. I don't know what came over me - I must have been half asleep.

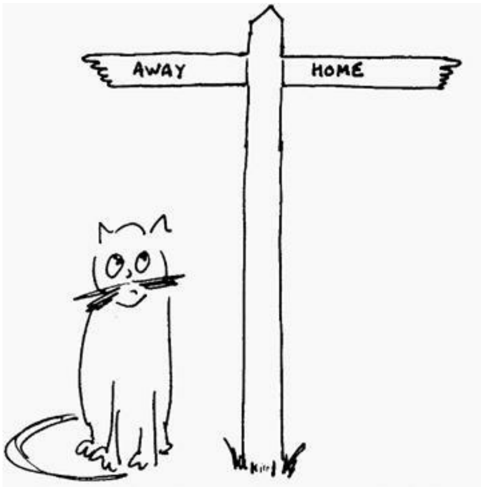

"I wasted three hours walking in completely the wrong direction."

Instead of walking towards our new home I headed for the house where the Uprights, Thomasina and I all used to live.

April 11th
I have been making much better progress since I left the city behind. Yesterday, I left the road completely and set off across the fields. It is now over twenty four hours since I saw a house or an Upright.

The only scary moment came late last night when, while hobbling through a small area of woodland, I came face to face with a fox. I don't know which one of us was most startled but I reacted first and scrambled high up into an old oak tree. I spent the night up the tree and felt very safe.

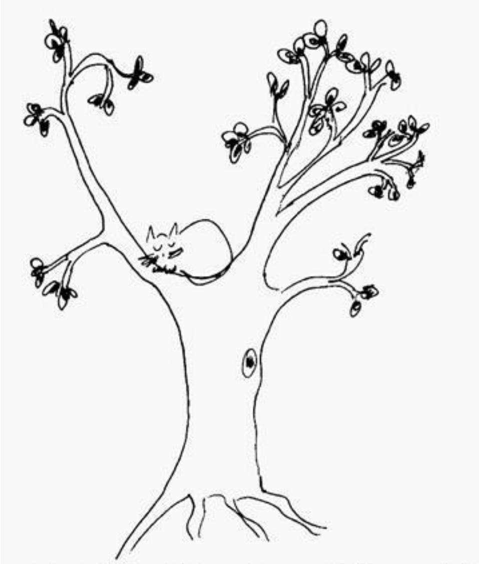

"I spent the night up a tree and felt very safe."

April 14th
My paw is now very swollen and so tender that I have to hold it out of the way while I am trying to walk. If I knock it on anything it hurts a lot.

Nevertheless, I managed to catch a mouse and a shrew today. I am so glad that I spent some time learning to hunt. If I had not been able to catch my own food I hate to think what would have happened to me by now. I suspect that I would have been unable to leave the city at all!

April 15th
The countryside is beautiful. I love the fields, the trees, the flowers and the fresh country air. Why do so many

Uprights live in towns and cities? Are they all being punished for something they have done wrong?

April 18th

Ever since I found myself in the back of the carpet van, miles from home, I have frequently dreamt of the moment when I would arrive back with Thomasina and my Uprights.

In my dream I arrived home on a warm, sunny day. I saw myself gazing down at our house from the top of a nearby hill and breathing a deep sigh of relief as I realised that I had got back safely.

In my dream I always had time to savour the sweet moment of my home coming.

But it didn't happen quite like that.

When I woke up this morning I set off through a meadow of tall grass thinking that I had a journey of several days length ahead of me. My inbuilt compass told me that I was travelling in the right direction but it didn't tell me how far I had to travel.

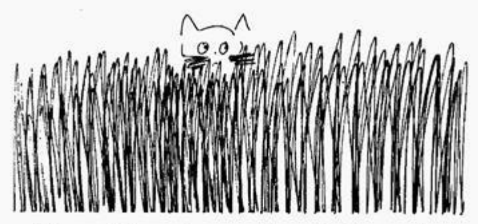

"I set off through a meadow of tall grass."

And I kept walking all day. Even after the sun had gone down I still kept limping on. I was physically exhausted, but my desperation to be home gave me reserves of strength I did not know I had.

Suddenly, quite without warning, I found myself standing looking through a simple wooden fence at our new home and garden. There was only half a moon to light the scene but it was a view I will never, ever forget.

The house and the garden were exactly as I remembered them and there, sitting on the front doorstep was Thomasina. She looked thinner than I remembered her and there was a sad, faraway look in her eyes that I had never seen before.

Finding one last burst of energy I leapt up onto the top of the wooden fence and then jumped down into the garden.

The sound of my landing attracted Thomasina's attention and, suddenly alert, she looked across in my direction. For a moment I don't think she recognised me but then, when she realised who it was, she gave out a squeal of delight and hurled herself across the lawn towards me. Moments later she was licking my face and purring louder than I have ever heard a cat purr before. I felt so happy that I thought I would burst.

I was home!

If I live to be 100-years-old I doubt if I will ever experience a more complete moment of happiness.

After Thomasina and I had greeted each other and had licked the sadness and the tears from each other's faces we both instinctively made our way towards the cat flap in the back door so that I could go and say 'hello' to the Uprights.

As I limped along behind Thomasina I remembered every room, every doorway and every piece of furniture with tenderness and affection. As we climbed the darkened stairs to the Uprights' bedroom I remembered the long, frightening days and nights when only the thought of being home again had kept me alive. Each freshly remembered smell and each creak from the floorboards reminded me how much I had missed my home. I vowed that I would never again take any of it for granted.

As we walked together along the landing I could hear the gentle snoring sound the Upright in Trousers makes when he sleeps and, strangely enough, it was that which brought the biggest lump to my throat.

Thomasina was so excited that she couldn't wait. She sprang forward ahead of me, shot through the door into the Uprights' bedroom and leapt up onto the bed, miaowing loudly as she did so. I heard one of the Uprights sit up and switch on the light.

As I followed through the doorway I could see the Upright in Trousers sitting up in bed and rubbing his eyes. I thought for a brief moment that he might have been cross at being awakened so rudely but he was not. He leant forward, rubbed his fingers through Thomasina's coat and asked her what the matter was. Then the Upright who wears a Skirt sat up too.

When Thomasina jumped down off the bed and came and sat beside me in the doorway the Upright in

Trousers threw back the bed clothes, jumped out of bed, crossed the bedroom floor in an instant and knelt down beside me.

'It's Alice!' he cried, with tears already forming in his eyes. 'She's back!'

He picked me up and held me to him, stroking me and saying my name over and over again. As he held me, he accidently and inadvertently pressed on my poorly paw. I tried hard not to show the pain I felt but he noticed immediately that something was wrong and gently laid me down on the bed so that both he and the Upright who wears a Skirt could examine me.

'You poor thing,' said the Upright who wears a Skirt, stroking me and kissing my head. I felt something wet fall onto my fur, looked up and saw that tears were pouring down her cheeks.

The next few minutes were a confusing mixture of emotions. The Uprights made me a large bowl of custard which Thomasina insisted I eat all by myself, and then filled a huge plate with pieces of cold chicken which Thomasina did agree to share.

Half an hour or so later the Upright who smells of Antiseptic arrived. He examined my paw gently, and bathed it in some nasty smelling fluid. Then he gave me an injection in my neck. I don't know why he did that because there was nothing wrong with my neck but he was very gentle and kind and I was so glad to be home that I would have let him do almost anything.

When he had gone the Uprights took us both back upstairs and we all went to sleep together; the two Uprights snuggled up to each other underneath the bedclothes and Thomasina and I snuggled together at the foot of the bed.

April 19

I am normally a light sleeper but when I awoke this morning I was alone. A bright shaft of sunlight was cutting like a blade through a tiny gap in the still drawn curtains and faint whispers from a far corner of the house told me that both the Uprights were downstairs. From the distant rattles I guessed that they were having breakfast. I had no idea where Thomasina was.

For a moment or two I completely forgot the horrors I had been through during my adventure in the city. Then, slowly, I became aware of the throbbing pain in my right paw and a series of savage, unpleasant memories flooded back.

Gingerly, I climbed down off the bed and limped along the landing. I felt totally exhausted, as though now that I was home my body had allowed itself to recognise the extent of the tiredness it had for so long been denying. I was so tired that it seemed to take me a lifetime to reach the top of the stairs.

When I finally reached the kitchen I had to sit down in the doorway and rest. The two Uprights saw me at the same moment and both got up from the table and hurried over towards me. They were very kind. The Upright in Trousers stroked my back and tickled me underneath my chin while the Upright who wears a Skirt filled a bowl with creamy milk and put it down right in front of me.

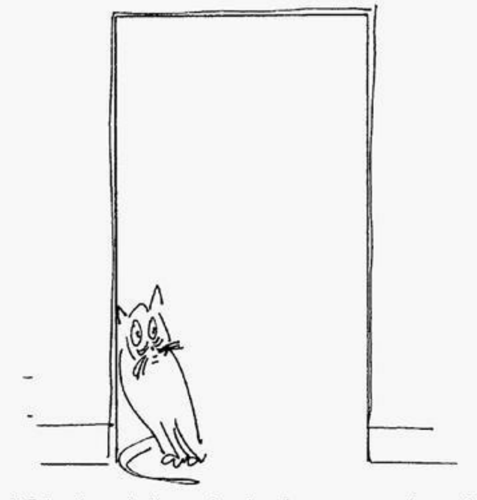

"I had to sit down in the doorway and rest."

When I had drunk a little milk and rested for a while I continued on my way towards the back door.

On my way I noticed that the thoughtful Uprights had put a seed tray filled with earth inside the porch.

For a moment I was tempted but pride won out over exhaustion. Wearily, I hobbled straight for the nearest patch of garden where I found Thomasina waiting for me beside a hole she had obviously just dug.

‘I thought you might need a little help,’ she said, nodding towards the hole to indicate that she had dug it for me. She put her head on one side and smiled at me. I felt full of love for her. What more thoughtful thing could any cat do? Then she turned away and walked off to give me privacy.

A few moments later, as I limped back towards the house Thomasina came up to me with a plump, freshly caught field mouse in her mouth. She dropped the mouse at my feet, stunned it with one blow of her paw and then backed away. I was very touched and although I was not really all that hungry I ate it all up.

It is wonderful to be back home surrounded by so much warmth and love.

April 20th
I spent the whole of the day resting on the window seat in the bedroom.

April 21st
I feel a little stronger today. My paw does not hurt quite so much.

April 24th
I nearly caught a rabbit today. But it got away. I hate rabbits anyway.

April 27th
For two days now the weather has been so hot that neither Thomasina nor I have ventured outside except when absolutely necessary. The paving slabs on the terrace have been too hot for comfort, and even the earth is baking in the heat. Most of our energy has been spent on trying to find cool places in which to rest. Having a fur coat is very useful in the winter but it can be quite a problem in a hot summer.

May 1st
It was raining. It was dark. I was alone. I was frightened. And I was back in the city. I was crouched low behind a collection of dustbins. I could feel my heart beating, and my senses were so heightened that when I heard a slight noise a few yards away to my right I almost jumped out of my skin.

I was back in the city and I was lost and all I wanted was to be back home. I tried to crouch even lower, to melt into the pavement, to become invisible.

I heard the noise again. But now it was getting closer. Slowly, I raised my head a little and peered around one of the dustbins.

Standing no more than six feet away from me was the largest, cruellest looking cat I had ever seen. He had bitter, cruel, wicked eyes and the sort of grin that always means sorrow to someone else. His fur was matted with dirt and oil and as we stared at each other I felt myself shiver involuntarily. I had never before seen any creature who reeked so vividly of evil.

Slowly, I stood up and started to back away. But for every inch I moved back, the cat with the wicked eyes moved forwards an inch.

Suddenly, I saw him brace himself ready to pounce. His tail flicked menacingly and the muscles in his hind legs tensed. His eyes were half closed as he concentrated all his evil energies on me.

Terrified, I looked around for an escape route.

My only chance was to slip through a narrow space between the two dustbins on my right and to hope that in the darkness I could put enough distance between the two of us to give myself a chance to find somewhere to hide. I stood up and tensed my muscles ready for my escape.

And then, just as the cat with the cruel eyes started on his leap, I jumped sideways.

At least, I *tried* to jump sideways.

But nothing happened!

My muscles were frozen and I stayed exactly where I was, as solid and as unmoving as if I had been turned into a statue or as if, like Lot’s cat, I had been turned into a pillar of salt.

The cat with the cruel eyes pounced and I screamed and woke up.

‘Everything is all right!’ purred Thomasina for the tenth time. She licked the side of my head reassuringly and nuzzled closer to me so that I was comforted by the warmth of her body. I shivered and then murmured a short prayer of thanks to St Gertrude, the patron saint of cats in distress.

It is the fifth or sixth time that my sleep has been disturbed by the same terrible dream. Each time the dream has ended in the same way: with my muscles frozen stiff with fear. And on each frightening occasion

Thomasina has comforted me and helped me overcome the terrors of the night.

I wonder if these nightmares will ever stop. Or if they are a mental scar I will carry for the rest of my life.

May 4th

I caught my very first rabbit this morning. It tasted very good.

I like rabbits.

May 7th

Thomasina and I were feeling rather adventurous today and so instead of staying in the garden to hunt we ventured out into the field.

We don't often do this, partly because there is plenty of wildlife waiting to be caught within our own private hunting territory but mainly because we both once had an exceedingly unpleasant experience in a field.

We had been hunting and we were both having a light snooze in a field of corn when suddenly a huge monster of a machine came whirring and beating and snarling through the field. It nearly ate us both up!

Ever since then we have both been very wary of fields.

But today's expedition was well worthwhile and we had an extremely successful time. Thomasina caught two voles and a shrew and I gorged myself on two extremely plump and succulent field mice.

Then, suddenly, before either of us had time to cry out to the other, we both found ourselves rolling over and over in the long grass with a well-built cat sprawling on top of us.

Our attacker turned out to be a fourteen-year-old tom cat called Blackie, who lives on a nearby farm.

'What are you doing in my field?' he demanded, gruffly, as Thomasina and I struggled to regain our feet and our composure a few moments later.

We explained who we were, where we had come from and what we were doing in the field.

'This is *my* field!' said Blackie firmly. 'You keep out of my field and I'll keep out of your garden.'

Thomasina and I agreed that this sounded an amicable and extremely acceptable arrangement and speedily promised to honour it. Blackie the farm cat was huge but didn't seem to have an ounce of unnecessary fat anywhere on his body. He was, as Thomasina so aptly put it later, a furry feline fighting machine. Neither of us wanted to annoy or upset him.

'I used to catch all the food I needed on the farm,' said Blackie, rather ruefully. 'But it's months since I've smelt or seen a rat there, and a week since I caught a mouse without coming into the field.' He seemed a little guilty about his rather brusque behaviour and clearly wanted to explain.

'Don't your Uprights feed you?' Thomasina asked him.

Blackie looked at her and then at me with a puzzled look on his face. 'Feed me? Why would they do that?'

'Do you mean that you only eat what you catch?' I asked him, astonished.

Blackie looked very confused. 'Of course!' he said, clearly mystified. 'Why should my Uprights feed *me?* I don't feed *them!'*

Thomasina and I were astonished to discover that Blackie has been catching all his own meals since he was weaned. To our surprise he finds our way of life as strange and as unreal as we find his.

May 10th

I almost hate it when the Upright in Trousers cuts the grass.

Long grass is far more comfortable to lie on than the short, spiky stuff, and it's far easier to find a mouse or a shrew or a vole hiding in long grass than it is to catch one unawares on grass that has been cut. When the grass is long, small meals cannot see very far, but when the grass is short they have a clear view for yards and yards and yards!

The noise made by the machine used to cut the grass is another annoyance. I wish I could find someone to explain to me how it is that such a small machine can make so much noise. It makes far more noise than a motor car, which must be at least ten times as big.

Where does all that noise come from?

But I don't *quite* hate it when the Upright in Trousers cuts the grass because when he has finished there is always a huge, soft pile of grass cuttings to sleep on. (There are two mysteries about these piles of grass cuttings. First, why do they disappear? Within a week a huge pile of grass cuttings will have shrunk to half the size. Where do all the missing cuttings go? Does someone eat them? And second, why do the grass cuttings gradually get warmer and warmer? I once went to sleep on a pile of grass cuttings in the autumn and woke up with a very hot bottom).

May 12th

Thomasina and I were both snoozing on the landing early this hot morning (it is one of the coolest places in the house) when the peace and quiet of the early morning was shattered by a scream from the Uprights' bedroom.

We were up in an instant and both raced to see what had happened. My first thought was that the mouse which I had lost behind the wardrobe last week had at last emerged. Knowing what butterfingers the Uprights are I didn't want to leave them to catch it.

But there was no sign of the mouse.

Instead, the Upright in Trousers was standing at the bedroom window and the Upright who wears a Skirt was clambering slowly and sleepily out of bed to join him. Clearly full of excitement the Upright in Trousers was pointing out of the window and shouting incoherently.

Desperate to find out what had happened Thomasina and I scrambled between the two Uprights and jumped up onto the window-sill.

We were not surprised that he was excited.

An energetic family of moles had moved into the garden.

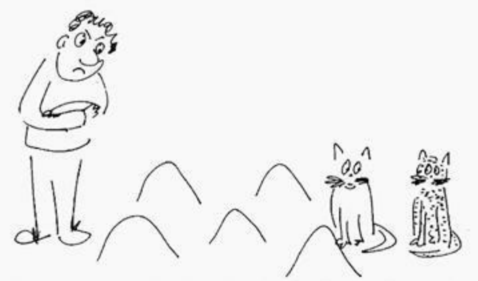

"An energetic family of moles had moved into the garden."

Yesterday the lawn behind the house had been as smooth and as smart and as boring as a neatly laid carpet. This morning it had acquired about a dozen very neat and quite regularly arranged mounds of fresh earth – all of which had quite clearly been made by moles.

Like the Upright in Trousers, Thomasina and I were very excited. We both *love* moles. They taste horrible but they do provide excellent sport. We ran downstairs as fast as we could, amazed as ever at the way the Uprights overreact to these things.

We spent a wonderful couple of hours trying to catch a mole before the sun came out and it got too hot for hunting, and although Thomasina almost caught one we were sadly unsuccessful.

When the heat got too much for us we went back into the house for a little light breakfast and then we went for a snooze on the cool earth underneath the mulberry bush.

A few minutes later Thomasina nudged me. I opened my eyes and watched in amazement as the Upright in Trousers appeared carrying a spade and a bucket.

He spent the next hour and a half trying to catch the moles by scooping up the piles of soft earth and putting them into his bucket.

Thomasina and I both looked at each other and smiled, knowing that the moles would be hidden safely underground.

May 14th

I was sitting on the window-ledge of the coach house early this evening when a mouse flew past me.

I think I must have eaten something funny.

May 15th

At twenty past ten this morning I caught my first lizard. It was not a very large one but it was indisputably a lizard.

I had never caught one before and for a few moments I was very proud of myself. My initial plan had been to eat it but I quickly discovered that the lizard had a very thick, leathery skin which made it about as edible as an Upright's shoe. The smell of it was not very attractive either and I strongly suspected that even if I had been able to eat it, the lizard would have been about as tasty as a shrew (and as every cat knows they are even more disgusting than white fish).

So, I decided to take the lizard into the house for a little sport. I was, I confess, also hoping to show it off to Thomasina.

Once inside the house I dropped the lizard and put a paw on it to stop it scuttling away. Lizards don't look very speedy but I had already discovered that they can move extraordinarily quickly.

'Its tail is coming off' said Thomasina, who had rushed to meet me when she had heard me coming in through the cat flap. She knew from the noise I made pushing the small plastic door aside that I was carrying something in my mouth. It's very easy to drop a catch when struggling through the cat flap, so both Thomasina and I tend to go through as quickly as we can.

I will never forget what happened next.

The tail-less lizard ran off towards the fridge and its abandoned tail tried to wriggle off in the direction of the pantry.

I was so stunned that for a second I didn't move, even though I knew that I would have to act quickly before the two parts of the lizard disappeared completely. (There is more wildlife living underneath that refrigerator than there is in the garden and it must be desperately overcrowded there. I bet it's like a miniature wildlife park).

Just then the Upright who wears a Skirt came in. When she saw Thomasina and the wriggling lizard and its independently mobile tail she screamed and ran out again. A few moments later she returned accompanied by the Upright in Trousers who was carrying a cardboard shoe box.

My heart always sinks when I see the Upright in Trousers carrying a cardboard shoe box because I know that he is about to try his hand at hunting. I winced inwardly and looked at Thomasina who wearily raised an eyebrow an almost imperceptible amount. We have both learned from experience that there is no point at all in trying to help the Uprights when they are attempting to hunt, so we sat where we were and watched. Nothing is as stubborn as an Upright when he has got a cardboard shoe box in his hands.

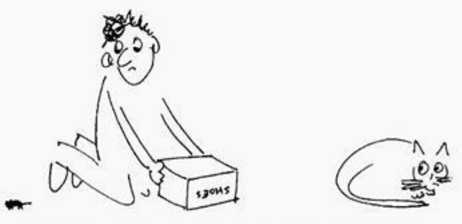

"My heart always sinks when the Upright in Trousers tries his hand at hunting."

First, the Upright in Trousers took a paper handkerchief out of his pocket and picked up the lizard's tail. Then, with quite astonishing speed, the front half of the lizard started to make a run for the door.

Everything happened very quickly. While the Upright who wears a Skirt squealed loudly and pulled her skirt very tightly around her knees, the Upright in Trousers lunged at the lizard with his shoe box and, much to everyone's surprise (including, I think, his own) he caught it.

Finally, while the Upright who wears a Skirt wilfully stopped Thomasina and me from going out through the cat flap, the Upright in Trousers carried the box and the two pieces of lizard outside into the garden.

May 18th

I don't think the Upright in Trousers is feeling very well today.

He went out onto the lawn first thing this morning carrying half a dozen empty milk bottles and a similar number of short canes. He then stuck the canes into the ground and put the upside down milk bottles on top of them.

When he had finished he came back into the house, looking very pleased with himself.

Thomasina and I suspect that this strange behaviour may have something to do with the fact that the moles are still digging up the lawn.

May 20th

Thomasina behaved very strangely all day today. Eventually, I could stand it no longer. I asked her what was worrying her.

'I don't want to tell you,' she said. 'You'll laugh.'

'I won't!' I promised.

She looked straight at me, defying me to laugh, and then told me what was on her mind. 'I was sitting outside last night when a mouse flew past me.'

I did not laugh. In fact I did not say or do anything. I was remembering the mouse which had flown past me a few nights ago.

'You don't believe me, do you?'

'I do.' I said, firmly. And then I told her that I had seen one too.

May 23rd

Although Thomasina and I have been careful not to break our pact with Blackie the farm cat by wandering into the field where he hunts we have both been hoping that we would meet him again. On several occasions we have wandered down to our garden fence in the hope that we might see him.

It was, however, some little time after our first chance encounter before we met him again.

'Hello!' he said, peering through the fence at us. 'Don't you two come into the field any more?' Thomasina and I looked at each other. 'You told us not to,' replied Thomasina very timidly.

'Don't be silly!' said Blackie. 'I don't want you *hunting* in the field but I don't mind you coming in here when you fancy a bit of a wander.'

Thomasina and I were delighted and we immediately jumped up onto the top of the fence and down into the field.

'Are there any more cats down at the farm?' I asked, as the three of us strode off across the field. Thomasina and I had to trot to keep up with him.

'Two kittens and an old Queen called Snowy,' answered Blackie. 'I take them what I can: mice, rabbits in the season, that sort of thing.'

'Are there any dogs?' Thomasina wanted to know.

'Of course there are dogs!' snorted Blackie. 'How else do you think the Uprights keep the sheep under control? They would be running around all day without a couple of dogs to help them.'

'Do you get on with them all right?' asked Thomasina, as we tiptoed through a bunch of swaying poppies.

Blackie looked puzzled. 'Of course!' he said, without hesitation. 'Whenever there are a cat and a dog living together the cat is always the boss. It's understood.'

Blackie told us that he had never met a dog he would not be happy to fight, and because dogs always instinctively knew this he had never met a dog he *needed* to fight. 'They're all noise!' he said. 'They're good at barking but that's about it. Back a cat into a corner and he'll fight to the death, but back a dog into a corner and he'll usually end up whimpering and running off with his tail between his legs.'

We both got the feeling that Blackie did not have a high opinion of dogs.

May 27th

Isn't it strange how most of the barriers to success exist within our own minds?

Up until this month I had never really got down to catching a rabbit. And to be honest I had given up. I didn't think that I would ever be able to catch a rabbit.

But my success a few weeks ago seems to have changed my luck or my confidence or both. During the last four days alone I have caught three more rabbits!

When I told Blackie about this he said that our faith in our ability to succeed is influenced not only by our own successes but also by the achievements of others.

He told me that a few years ago the record for the number of mice caught locally in one year had stayed at 199 for as long as any cat could remember.

'The number 200 had become an invisible barrier,' he explained. 'No one thought it could ever be bettered.'

And then, Blackie explained, a young tom who had come into the area with some new Uprights caught 242 mice in a single year.

'I don't think he knew about the previous record,' said Blackie. 'He just set about catching as many mice as he could without any limits on his imagination or his expectations.'

According to Blackie the only significant thing about this was that it removed the invisible barrier which had been holding back other cats – some of which were much better hunters than the newcomer.

‘During the following twelve months,’ Blackie told us, ‘four cats caught over 200 mice. And the year after that seven more broke the ‘impossible’ barrier.’

Blackie said that the more we think something is impossible the more impossible it becomes.

June 2nd

I was sunning myself on a large, flat, steel grey rock that stands at the back of the garden rockery when I heard a clumsy rustling noise in the primulas on my left.

Without having any idea what was there I pounced blindly and a moment later found myself clutching a small, stumpy little lizard that had no tail.

It was, I realised immediately, the same lizard that I had caught a short while ago. The Upright in Trousers, who had carried it outside in his shoe box, must have lost it again.

Most of the time I find it difficult to think of ways to repay the kindness of our Uprights. They are always there when we need them. They open doors and windows when we want them to and never forget to feed us. They are loving and generous friends.

So, I welcomed this opportunity to help repay a little of their kindness by recapturing the lizard and taking it back into the house for them. The Uprights were out, so when I got indoors I jumped up onto the shelf in the lobby and dropped the lizard into one of the Upright in Trousers’ rubber boots where I knew it would be safe.

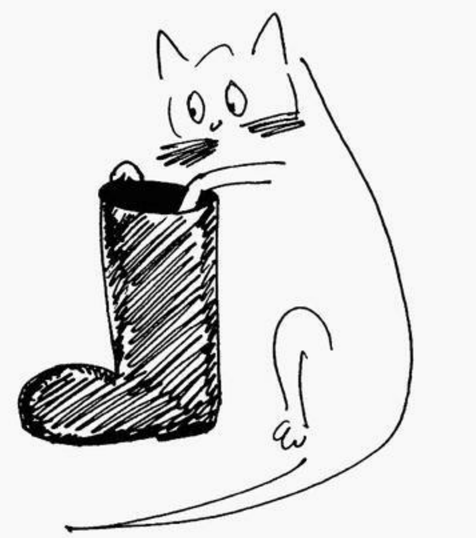

"I dropped the lizard into one of the Upright in Trousers' rubber boots."

June 7th

Thomasina and I caught a mole each today and I can’t remember ever seeing the Upright in Trousers look so pleased.

We left the bodies on the back doorstep, and when the Upright in Trousers saw them he gave a strange little whoop of joy before coming over and stroking us and tickling us under our chins.

He then went over to the fridge and took out a large piece of chicken which he gave us to eat. We were very grateful because pulling moles out of the ground is hard and tiring work.

But Thomasina, in between mouthfuls of chicken, did admit that she will never, ever understand Uprights.

June 12th

I saw a vole on the other side of the stream this morning and tiptoed through the water to get to it. Unfortunately, the vole got away but I was surprised to find that the water was not anywhere near as unpleasant as I had thought it would be. In fact it was delightfully cool and surprisingly refreshing. I could quite get to like it.

June 14th

I am mortified! I was caught paddling in the stream!

It was boiling hot, and I was beginning to envy the sheep who have all their fur shaved off for the summer months when I remembered how cool and refreshing the stream had been the other day. I wandered over and after a few moments hesitation jumped straight in.

I had intended to stay in the water for no more than a minute or so but I found it so pleasant that I quite forgot myself and splashed about for positively ages.

Suddenly, to my absolute horror, I looked up and saw that both the Upright in Trousers and the Upright who wears a Skirt were standing on the bank staring down at me with incredulous looks on their faces. I hurriedly clambered out onto the bank and concentrated hard on licking my tail in the rather forlorn hope that the two Uprights would be convinced that they had been imagining things.

I'm afraid I don't think my ploy worked.

June 17th

I was lying, half asleep, in the bedroom this morning when Thomasina wandered in looking very sorry for herself.

'I met Blackie,' she explained, when I asked her what had upset her.

I was surprised. 'I thought you liked Blackie.'

'I did,' replied Thomasina, rather sulkily, making it perfectly clear that whatever good feelings she had about Blackie were now of purely historical interest.

I moved a few inches to one side so that Thomasina could lie down on the bed beside me. 'What happened?'

'I was sitting on the gate when I saw him coming along the lane,' explained Thomasina, who was clearly quite upset. 'I said 'hello' but he just spat at me.'

'Why on earth did he do that?' I asked, surprised. It didn't sound like a thing that Blackie would do.

Thomasina just shrugged.

'You must have annoyed him!'

'I haven't done *anything* to annoy him,' insisted Thomasina. 'In fact yesterday I helped him find his way back down that huge oak tree behind the shippen.' She sniffed. 'A fine thanks I got for my trouble.'

I couldn't help smiling. 'Blackie was stuck up an oak tree?'

Thomasina nodded. 'You know how tricky that tree is. It's easy to get up into the branches, but getting back down can be very difficult.'

'And you had to help him down?'

'I showed him that route we worked out when we got stuck.'

'You mean the route I worked out when we got stuck?'

Thomasina did have the good grace to look just the slightest bit embarrassed. She nodded.

I couldn't help laughing. Thomasina just doesn't understand tom cats at all. 'I'm not surprised that he spat at you!'

Thomasina looked puzzled. '1 thought he would have been grateful,' she said. 'I don't see why anyone should be annoyed at someone who has helped to rescue them.'

I reached out a paw and gently touched Thomasina on the back of her neck. I do love her very much but sometimes I marvel at her innocence. Occasionally, I think it is her most endearing quality.

'You must *never* expect male cats to be grateful when you have helped them,' I explained to her. 'The more you do for them the more resentful they are likely to be – particularly if, like Blackie, they are rather independent and desperately proud of their self-sufficiency.'

Thomasina frowned. 'But that's silly!' she protested. 'Why should Blackie be resentful because I helped him?'

'Because the fact that you had to help him showed up a weakness and affected his own self-image,' I explained patiently. 'When Blackie saw you this morning he was reminded not of your kindness in helping him down from the tree, but of his own incompetence and stupidity in getting stuck in the first place.'

'Hmmmm!' said Thomasina, thoughtfully. 'When you put it like that I suppose I was lucky only to be spat at. The next time I see a tom cat stuck up a tree I'll make sure that I leave him there.'

June 19th

The Upright in Trousers cut the grass again today.

I wonder why he does it.

He always moans and gets terribly upset when the noisy machine he uses fails to start (as it invariably does).

And the moment he has finished, the grass starts to grow again! Within a week, or two at the most, it will be the length it was before it was cut.

It isn't as if he does anything useful with the grass he has harvested. He just puts it all in a pile at the bottom of the garden and forgets about it.

Cutting the grass is one of those strange rituals which Uprights seem to take very seriously but for which I can see absolutely no purpose.

June 20th

I caught one of the flying mice this evening.

I was sitting on the coach house window-ledge when it flew past a couple of inches away from the end of my nose. Without even stopping to think about it I leapt off the ledge and caught the mouse in mid flight.

I took it into the house to show Thomasina, but when I put it down for a moment while I called to her the thing flew away!

June 21st

I caught Stumpy the lizard again today, though heaven knows how he escaped from the rubber boot and got back out into the garden. I have a growing respect for him. He seems to be a real survivor.

June 22nd

There was quite a commotion in the house today.

The Uprights saw my flying mouse and were clearly as confused and startled by it as Thomasina and I had been.

I do not think I have ever heard the Upright who wears a Skirt scream quite so loudly. She ran out of the house clutching her hair when she saw the flying mouse.

June 26th

Blackie says that flying mice are quite common around here. He says they are called bats and that no one bothers to catch them because they are quite inedible.

June 27th

I caught a field mouse very early this morning and took it upstairs for a little quiet hunting practice. I'm rather embarrassed to admit this but it has been rather a long time since I caught a mouse and I suspect this is because my hunting skills badly need sharpening.

But, while chasing the mouse around the bathroom, I collided with a small table holding an impressive array of bottles and jars. The table didn't fall over but quite a lot of the bottles fell off and crashed onto the floor.

The noise they made must have woken up the Upright in Trousers because a few moments later he burst into the bathroom looking very dishevelled. His hair was standing on end, he had a dark, stubbly growth on his chin and his pyjamas were badly crumpled. How do Uprights do it? When Thomasina and I wake up in the morning we look just as elegant as when we went to bed. But when the Uprights get up they always look a real mess.

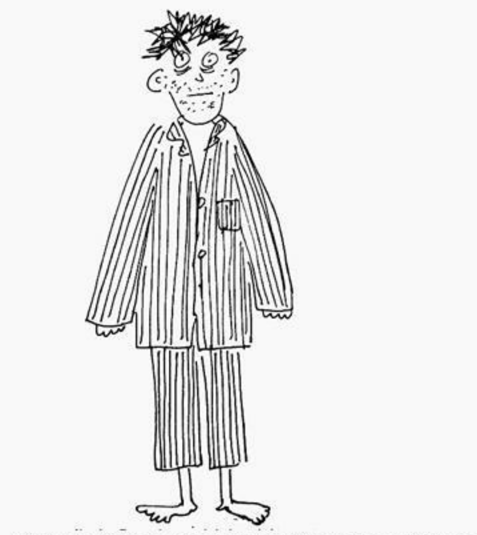

"The Upright in Trousers burst into the bathroom looking very dishevelled."

I feel distinctly embarrassed about what happened next.

While I stood still and did nothing the Upright in Trousers emptied out the metal waste-basket which stands in a corner by the sink and trapped the mouse underneath it. My mouse! Without a word of apology or explanation!

I stood around for a while, ready to recapture my prey, but I was wasting my time. The Upright in Trousers slid a magazine underneath the waste bin and then took the bin, the magazine and the trapped mouse out of the bathroom and down the stairs. It was the last I saw of it.

June 28th

I was too depressed to eat breakfast this morning.

'What's the matter?' demanded Thomasina, as she licked her whiskers after finishing off all the food that the Uprights had put out for us both. 'Are you off your food?'

I explained what had happened. I told her about the mouse the Upright in Trousers had taken from me. And I explained that I really didn't have an ounce of self-confidence left.

Sometimes I complain about Thomasina.

I have been known to go on about her faults and, among other things, to accuse her of being greedy.

But no one could ask for a better friend. When things are difficult Thomasina is a real pal.

She told me about some of her own most embarrassing experiences and she cheered me up no end by making me laugh. By the time she had finished I felt a good deal better.

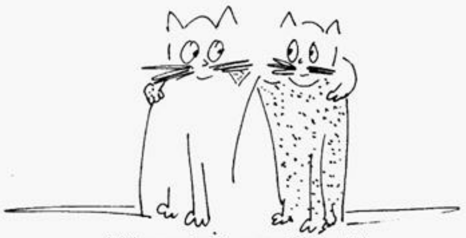

"Thomasina is a real friend."

'There's no point in crying over a lost mouse,' she insisted. 'There are plenty more mice in the skirting boards!'

And she was right, of course.

On occasions like this I always realise just how important friendships are. As the years go by we all meet many, many cats. Some are no more than vague acquaintances. A few we will think of as friends.

But none of us makes more than a few *real* friends. And none of us makes *real* friends quickly or easily. Such relationships take many months, even years, to develop fully. But, once developed, real friendships last a lifetime and provide us with support, succour and encouragement at the times when we are most lonely and vulnerable, and at the times when we most need support, succour and encouragement.

In my view real wealth is measured not in expensive collars or beautifully made wicker baskets, nor in plaid rugs or expensive toys, but in friendships.

Thomasina is my very best, very dearest, very closest friend.

June 30th

Today I spent an hour watching a thrush trying to break open a snail's shell in order to get at the meat hidden inside it.

Time and time again the thrush picked up the snail and dropped it onto a stone. And each time the snail's shell remained unbroken.

But the thrush did not give up. It must have repeated the procedure forty nine times.

On the fiftieth attempt the snail's shell broke and the thrush was able to get at its lunch.

The fiftieth drop was no different to the forty nine drops that preceded it. The snail dropped no further. And yet the shell broke.

Life is sometimes very curious.

July 2nd

Thomasina and I were out in the garden when we both had the fright of our lives. A huge noisy bird as big as a house and noisier even than the machine the Upright in Trousers uses to cut the grass flew over and only just missed the chimney pots.

Thomasina was so alarmed that she squeezed right underneath the oil tank. I ran indoors intending to hide in the cellar but collided with the Upright who wears a Skirt who was hurrying out of doors to see what had made the noise. She tripped and fell over dropping the bundle of clean washing that she was carrying. It all landed right on top of me.

It took me an age to disentangle myself from a confusion of bewilderingly complicated clothes, and it then took the two of us nearly an hour to entice Thomasina out from underneath the oil tank. When she did finally emerge she was covered in dust and cobwebs and she reeked of oil. It took her most of the rest of the day to lick herself clean.

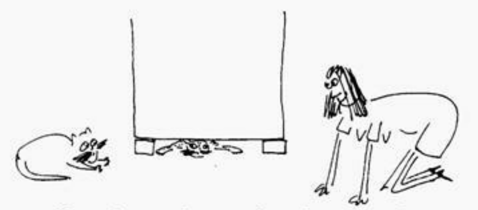

"It took two of us nearly an hour to entice Thomasina out from underneath the oil tank."

I feel sure that if these big birds knew just how much chaos they cause they would fly a little higher or, at the very least, make an effort to avoid flying directly over houses.

July 6th

The two Uprights, Thomasina and I, went for a walk today.

We went diagonally across the field that lies at the bottom of the garden and all the way down to the stream. The grass in the field is now very high and the scent of wild flowers was so strong that poor Thomasina started sneezing and had to be carried. That was a pity because it meant that she missed the wonderful smell of mice, shrews, voles and other food with which the field was liberally laced.

When we got to the stream the Upright in Trousers took off his shoes and socks, rolled up his trouser legs and went paddling in the clear water in his bare feet. The Upright who wears a Skirt laughed a lot but after a while she slipped off her sandals and sat on the grassy bank dangling her feet in the clear, sparkling water.

"The Upright in Trousers took off his shoes and socks, rolled up his trouser legs and went paddling."

To begin with, Thomasina and I sat on the bank with her and just watched the Upright in Trousers but after a few minutes my attention was caught by a rustling in the grass on the other side of the stream. (Why, I wonder, do all the most exciting rustlings take place on the *other* side of the stream?) Desperate to see what it was, I jumped down into the stream without really thinking about what I was doing.

It was not, of course, the first time I have been ‘paddling’, but the Uprights seemed very surprised and both clapped their hands in delight.

Sadly, when I got to the other side of the stream I discovered that the rustling I had heard had been caused by a grasshopper. I have eaten them before and they have always made me sick so I left it alone. I sat in the sun on the other bank for a few minutes to let my fur dry and then, when I was ready, got the Upright in Rolled-Up-Trousers to carry me back across to where Thomasina and the Upright who wears a Skirt were sitting.

Thomasina said that she had wanted to cross the stream with me but that she had got cold feet. I told her that if she had crossed the stream then she really would have had cold feet.

July 9th

Another beautiful, sunny day.

Thomasina and I had planned to go into the wood to look for voles. But it was too hot to do any hunting so we stayed in the garden and slept.

July 12th

When I woke up this morning it was so hot that I could hardly breathe. Having a fur coat is all very well in the winter but it can be something of a disadvantage in the summer. I like the sunshine but the heat is beginning to get me down and I would give a bowlful of custard for a fresh, cool autumn morning.

July 15th

It rained all day.

What a pity.

I hate it when it rains.

July 20th

Last night I think I exorcised the evil spirit of the Cat with the Cruel Eyes.

I had my horrible nightmare again.

But this time I didn’t freeze.

When the time came for me to escape I ran like the wind and when I looked behind me the Cat with the Cruel Eyes was nowhere to be seen.

I really do think that I have put this nightmare behind me now.

July 27th

Our Uprights had visitors today.

Unfortunately the visitors brought with them two Little Uprights who seemed determined to derive pleasure out of chasing Thomasina and me around the house and garden.

When, after about an hour or so, I thought I had managed to find a quiet spot behind the potting shed I was rudely awakened by a noise behind me. I turned and found that one of the Little Uprights was trying to tie a tin can to my tail. I got away just before he finished the knot.

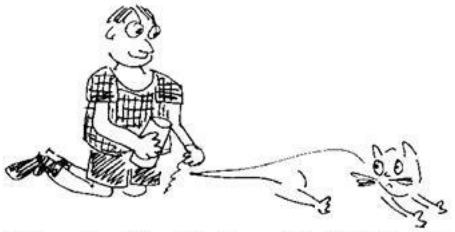

"I turned and found that one of the little Uprights was trying to tie a tin can to my tail."

I escaped by climbing up to the top of a gnarled and rather elderly ash tree which stands on the edge of the vegetable garden. The ash tree looks easy to climb, but the lower branches are very brittle and I felt secure in the knowledge that if the Little Uprights tried to follow me their weight would prove too much.

I was right.

The first Little Upright to try to climb the tree soon ended up flat on his back, clutching a piece of broken branch and bawling pitifully. I stayed up in the tree and was, I confess, slightly disappointed to see him get up and limp away towards the house. I couldn't help noticing that when he got near to the house his limp became far more noticeable.

Moments later I looked down from my vantage point and saw the second Little Upright creeping up on Thomasina who was lying asleep in a sunny spot on the lawn. The Little Upright was carrying a pair of scissors.

I miaowed a loud warning and Thomasina turned just in time.

I have an awful feeling that the Little Upright had intended to cut off the tip of Thomasina's tail!

Thomasina was so angry that she lashed out with her claws open and managed to scratch the Little Upright on the hand.

Predictably, the Little Upright ran off into the house screaming.

A couple of minutes later the Upright in Trousers came out. Although he started to tell Thomasina off very sternly I noticed that when he saw the scissors lying on the grass where the Little Upright had dropped them most of his anger seemed to evaporate.

The Little Uprights didn't come out of the house after that, and at tea-time the Upright who wears a Skirt brought our meal out to us so that we could eat in the garden.

After I had eaten I peered in through the living room window and saw that both Little Uprights were sitting, quiet and apparently transfixed, in front of the television set. The television is still something of a mystery to me but its ability to silence Little Uprights means that I have great affection and respect for it. Nevertheless, Thomasina and I decided to take no chances. We stayed outside in the garden.

Later, when the visitors had gone, both our Uprights came and found us and brought with them a plateful of meat. I may be wrong but I got the feeling that they were rather ashamed of the way the Little Uprights had behaved and were, in their own way, trying to make up for it.

July 29th

Looking back in my diary I am embarrassed to see that I moaned about the sunshine and that I said I would like some cool, autumnal weather.

It serves me right, I suppose, but when I woke up this morning I was rather depressed to find that the sky was uniformly grey and that there was absolutely no sign of the sun.

Thomasina said that we should enjoy grey days. She said that without grey days we would not appreciate the sunshine and we would not realise just how special and delightful sunny days can be.

She is probably right, but it does not alter the fact that I prefer sunny days.

August 1st

Every evening the Uprights give us little round crunchy things for our supper.

I like the taste of them but am quite fed up of the shape.

I do sometimes wish that the Uprights would show a little more imagination when buying food for us.

August 4th

I was lying in the garden, basking in the sunshine, when I suddenly and inexplicably found myself thinking about Ginger.

It seems strange and sad to realise that I will almost certainly never see him again. I wish that I could show him round my house and garden. I am very proud of my home, and few things would give me greater pleasure than to try to repay some of his kindness and hospitality.

As I lay there daydreaming Thomasina came up to me and wanted to know what I was thinking.

I don't know why I did it but I told her that I was not thinking about anything in particular.

August 6th

The Uprights gave us little diamond shaped crunchy things for supper tonight. I wonder why?

We usually have round ones which I like very much. I am not at all sure about the diamond shaped ones. I do wish the Uprights would stop experimenting with our food.

What do they think we are? Guinea pigs?

August 7th

I caught Stumpy the lizard again today. He seemed very well.

August 14th

At last!

The Uprights have bought Thomasina and me two dishes so that we no longer have to choose between cramming our heads into the same bowl or taking it in turns to eat.

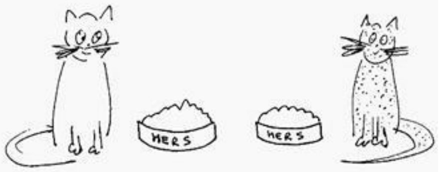

"The Uprights have bought Thomasina and me two dishes so that we no longer have to take it in turn to eat."

When the Upright who wears a Skirt put down the two new dishes she seemed to have already made up her mind which dish she wanted Thomasina to use and which one she wanted me to use.

'The red one is for you, Thomasina,' she announced, gently nudging Thomasina towards one of the dishes. 'And the blue one is for Alice.'

I can see that in future this is going to lead to great confusion, because although the Upright who wears a Skirt can apparently differentiate between the two dishes they seem identical to me. She can see colours but I can't.

The two dishes both smell the same. They are both the same size. They are both the same shape. And they both look exactly the same.

Thomasina was clearly very puzzled. 'Can you see any difference?' she asked me.

I shook my head.

'Neither can I,' replied Thomasina.

Thomasina said she doesn't care what dish she eats from as long as it is filled regularly with fresh food (and preferably none of that nasty cheap stuff that the Uprights sometimes try to get us to eat).

I caught two mice and a vole. The smallest mouse was sweet and tender. The largest mouse was tough and chewy. The vole was, of course, inedible.

August 24th

The four of us (the Upright in Trousers, the Upright who wears a Skirt, Thomasina and myself) had all settled down for a quiet evening in front of the fire (it had been another cold, grey, unsummery summer's day) when the doorbell rang.

For a few moments I thought that the two Uprights were going to have the courage to ignore it. But they didn't. Uprights seem to have difficulty in ignoring bells. They must be programmed to respond to them at some very early age. Whenever they hear a bell they always respond. It does not matter what they are doing or how inconvenient the interruption may be.

It is not unknown for the Upright who wears a Skirt to get out of the bath to answer the telephone and I have lost count of the number of times I have seen the Upright in Trousers drag himself away from the dinner table simply in order to speak to someone at the other end of the telephone.

The visitor was a stranger and he carried a cheap, black plastic briefcase.

At least, he was a stranger to Thomasina and me, and I am sure that he was a stranger to the Uprights too.

They pretended to be pleased to see him. But I could tell that they weren't.

The Strange Upright with a Cheap Briefcase looked very smart in his grey suit, red tie and white shirt. He had two pens clipped to his breast pocket.

The Upright in Trousers brought him into the living room with a marked lack of enthusiasm and the Upright who wears a Skirt welcomed him with a very thin smile. She did, however, offer him a cup of coffee.

That's another funny thing I have noticed about Uprights. Whatever the circumstances, and however unpopular the visitor, the first thing they do is put on the kettle. It is something of a ritual with them.

They are servants of the bell and slaves to the kettle!

I don't know why the Strange Upright with a Cheap Briefcase had called but within minutes he had spread a variety of brochures and leaflets all around the living room and both the Upright in Trousers and the Upright who wears a Skirt were concentrating hard studying them. I am sure I must be wrong, but from where I was sitting most of the brochures seemed to contain nothing but photographs of window frames! The brief snatches of conversation which I bothered to listen to seemed to be about something dull called 'double glazing'.

The Strange Upright with a Cheap Briefcase stayed for hours and hours and hours, and long before he had gone I could tell that both the Upright in Trousers and the Upright who wears a Skirt were bored stiff. They were struggling hard to suppress yawns and they both looked very miserable.

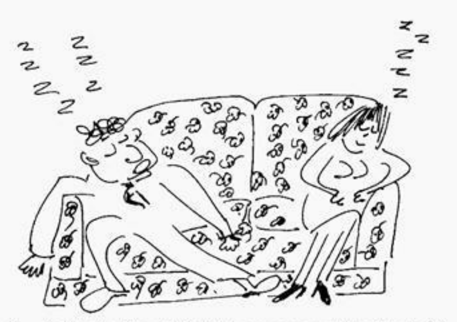

". . .both the Upright in Trousers and the Upright who wears a Skirt were bored stiff."

The unwanted visitor went in the end, of course.

But by then the fire was nearly out and the mood was ruined. An unexpected and unwanted visitor had spoiled what could have been a perfect evening.

My Uprights are strange. They will hardly ever admit to being bored by other Uprights. They will certainly never tell someone they don't like that they find his company less than enchanting. My Uprights would rather put up with six hours of tedium than have to face thirty seconds of mild embarrassment. But I love them very much.

August 27th

I very nearly caught the mouse who lives behind the greenhouse this afternoon. He is a plump, cheeky little fellow who has the luck of the devil. I had been crouched behind a towering pile of earthenware flower pots for so long that I had cramp in my right hind leg, when I suddenly saw him slip out from a small hole in the brickwork and start to nibble at a packet of seeds that had been dropped on the floor. He picked up the packet, bit off the end and then tipped out the seeds.

Carefully and slowly I crept forwards until he was within leaping distance. He was so engrossed in what he was doing that he had no idea I was there.

Suddenly, the peace and quiet of the greenhouse was shattered by a loud crash. The towering pile of flower pots had fallen over.

"The peace and quiet of the greenhouse was shattered. The towering pile of flower pots had fallen over."

I turned for a moment to see what had caused the crash and when I turned back the mouse had gone! Only a few scattered seeds showed where he had been. Life is full of disappointments.

September 3rd

I was dreaming about the plump mouse who lives behind the greenhouse when I suddenly woke with a start.

Thomasina was in trouble.

Like all cats, both Thomasina and I have a well developed sense of telepathy, though we only ever use it when we really need to. Every cat in the world can use the telepathy wavelength in an emergency, but we all know that if we use it for trivial messages we will not be able to get through when we really need to.

The system would quickly get blocked if thousands of cats were sending out messages like ‘I’ve found a nice plump mouse behind the garden shed – hurry over and help me and I’ll share it with you’

So we don’t use it unless we really have to.

I didn’t use telepathy when I was lost in the city partly because I knew that Thomasina couldn’t possibly help me and partly because I knew that nothing I could tell her could possibly stop her worrying. Moreover, I was also conscious of the fact that sending out random ‘help’ messages on the telepathy wavelength can be dangerous. I have heard that there are some unscrupulous cats who will take advantage of a cat in trouble.

But there was no mistake about this: Thomasina was in deep trouble and she was not very far away.

I miaowed loudly enough to wake the Upright in Trousers (it’s almost impossible to wake the Upright who wears a Skirt), and without waiting for him to respond I leapt off the bed, ran down the stairs at full speed and shot outside as though my life depended upon it. I knew instinctively that Thomasina was in the nearby woodland and I knew that she was in terrible distress.

I found her lying stretched out in a dark, moss covered hollow. Her right hind leg was caught in a metal trap. It was a terrible, terrible sight. When she saw me she raised her head and cried out so pitifully that my heart almost broke in two with the pain. I wished it had been me who had been caught in the trap. I would, I think, have found it easier to cope with the physical pain than I found it to cope with the sight of my dearest friend in such distress.

I moved forwards and kissed her lightly on the forehead, then I edged round to examine her leg. The trap, a rusty old metal thing, had bitten through the fur and flesh of her leg and I could see the white of her bone through the wound. I wanted to look away and had to steel myself to examine the wound to see how bad it was.

It was bad enough, but things could have been worse.

When the trap had been sprung it had, in addition to Thomasina’s leg, caught a piece of broken branch in its jaws. The branch had stopped the trap from shutting as tightly as it might otherwise have done. Thomasina’s leg was badly cut but it didn’t look to me as though it had been broken.

As I gently licked the fur around Thomasina’s injury, to clear away some of the dirt and to allow a little fresh blood to wash the wound clean, I heard the Upright in Trousers calling to me. I stopped what I was doing, told Thomasina that I would be gone only for a few moments, and raced back towards the house.

The Upright in Trousers was standing on the small slabbed area outside the back door. He was wearing an oiled jacket and a pair of mud splattered green Wellington boots and he held a large rubber cased torch in his right hand. He was waving the torch about as though searching for something. He had not stopped to change out of his nightwear and in the gap between the bottom of his coat and the top of his boots I could see the blue and white stripes of his pyjama trousers. He looked puzzled and slightly alarmed, and was peering anxiously out into the darkness.

I stood on the edge of the lawn a dozen yards away and miaowed loudly to attract his attention. When I was sure that he was looking in my direction I turned and started back towards Thomasina. Every few steps I turned to make sure that the Upright in Trousers was still following me.

When we reached Thomasina the Upright in Trousers gave out a yell of anguish and leapt forwards in horror. Pausing only to jam his torch in between two branches in a nearby tree, so that the beam shone directly onto Thomasina, he knelt down beside her. He touched her face very gently and stroked her head for a moment. I could see that there were tears in his eyes. When he saw exactly what had happened he tried to prise open the jaws of the trap with his fingers but he clearly did not know how to release the trap and the springs were too strong for him to open it by brute force. After struggling for a few moments he suddenly stood up.

He had blood on his fingers and I don't think all of it was Thomasina's.

He told me to stay where I was and to look after Thomasina and then he ran off back towards the house. He left the torch in the tree and long after I had lost sight of him I could hear him crashing blindly through the trees and bushes and occasionally shouting out in anger as a branch caught him on the face or as he half tripped over a superficial root.

He came back just a few minutes later carrying an armful of metal tools and another huge torch. This time he put the torch down on the ground beside Thomasina so that the beam shone directly onto her trapped leg. Then he used a thick metal bar to force open the trap.

Once he had freed Thomasina he allowed the trap to slam shut again on the metal bar. He was about to hurl the whole thing far off into the woodland when he suddenly stopped and put the bar and trap down next to his other tools. Then he very carefully picked Thomasina up and cradled her in his arms. Using the torch to light his way he walked back to the house as quickly as he could. I hurried back alongside him.

When we got there lights were blazing everywhere and the Upright who wears a Skirt was waiting for us with a bowl full of hot water that smelt of antiseptic. Carefully and tenderly she bathed Thomasina's leg, stroking her and talking to her while she worked. I sat nearby and watched. The Upright who wears a Skirt had hardly finished what she was doing when the doorbell rang. Before anyone could go and answer it the Upright who smells of Antiseptic came striding into the kitchen carrying his huge black bag. He looked very purposeful and businesslike, and I am slightly startled to have to admit that I was very pleased to see him. He stitched and sprayed Thomasina's wound, gave her an injection and told her how lucky she was that nothing was broken. He said that she didn't have to go into hospital but that she had to take things easy for a few days. Then he wrapped a bandage around her leg and told the Upright who wears a Skirt and the Upright in Trousers that he would be back the next day to give Thomasina another injection and to change her bandage.

The Upright in Trousers gave the trap, with the metal bar still in it, to the Upright who smells of Antiseptic who tutted and shook his head. He pressed something and released the spring, took out the bar and promised to get rid of the trap. And then he left, and our two Uprights gave us both a bowlful of cream and Thomasina and I curled up together on the kitchen rug. We were too tired to talk but we both felt very grateful that Thomasina's injury was not worse, and we felt full of love for our Uprights.

September 4th

Thomasina spent the day resting. I stayed with her, partly to keep her company, and partly because I didn't much feel like going anywhere or doing anything.

The Upright in Trousers spent most of the day searching through the undergrowth in the wood. He came back to the house with an armful of dangerous looking rubbish, though I don't think he found any more traps.

September 6th

Thomasina is making a splendid recovery. Today she and I went for a short walk around the garden and then slept for several hours on a patch of soft, cool earth underneath the garden bench.

September 9th

Thomasina's bandage has been removed. She spent the day licking her wound. By evening time her tongue was so sore that she could hardly eat.

September 12th
Thomasina and I went hunting in the wood today. It was Thomasina's idea. She said that if she didn't go there soon she would never go back. When I showed some reluctance she reminded me that the Upright in Trousers had been in there picking up everything that could be dangerous.

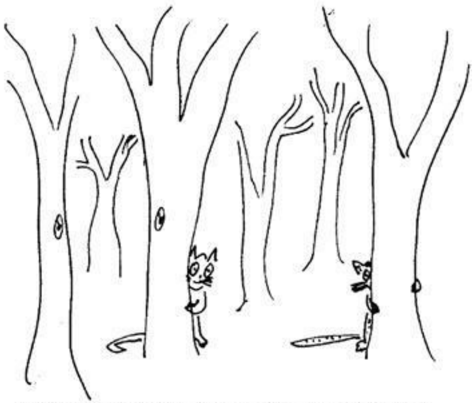

"Thomasina and I went hunting in the woods today."

I'm glad we went back. I do like the woodland. It is full of meals on legs.

Thomasina caught a shrew and I caught two field mice.

September 17th
The strangest thing has happened!

A large glass bowl full of water has appeared on the dining room table. And swimming around in the water there is a gold coloured fish!

Thomasina and I have decided that the Uprights have bought the fish as a present for us, and that they are keeping it in the bowl so that it remains fresh.

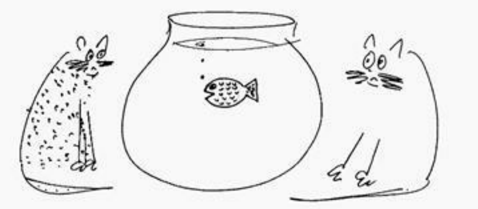

"A large glass bowl of water has appeared on the dining room table. And swimming around in the water there is a gold coloured fish."

September 18th
The Uprights are feeding the fish tiny crumbs which they pour out of a little cardboard container. They are presumably trying to fatten it up but it already looks quite plump. Although I'm not usually keen on fish this one looks exceptionally tasty.

September 19th
The fish is still being allowed to swim around its bowl and the Uprights are still feeding it crumbs. Thomasina and I have decided that the Uprights just want us to help ourselves whenever we feel like it.

We have decided to have the gold fish for lunch tomorrow.

September 20th
Catching the gold fish is not going to be as easy as either of us thought. The glass bowl in which it swims is quite deep and whenever it sees us coming the fish dives to the bottom and stays there.

Thomasina and I spent much of this morning trying to catch the fish but neither of us could reach it.

We are going to have to think of something else.

September 21st

Thomasina has come up with a splendid idea for catching the fish.

She says that if we push the bowl to the edge of the table and then nudge it over onto the floor the chances are that the water – and the fish – will spill out onto the carpet.

Once the fish is out of water it will be as easy to catch as a mouse in a coal scuttle.

September 22nd

We decided to put Thomasina's plan into operation today.

We both climbed up onto the dining table and leant against the glass bowl to push it towards the edge of the table. Although we discovered that the bowl was much heavier and harder to move than either of us had imagined, we eventually managed to start it moving in the right direction.

However, with the bowl no more than three or four inches away from the table edge, the door opened and the Upright who wears a Skirt came into the room.

I have never seen her so angry!

She rushed across the room, swept both Thomasina and me off onto the floor and pulled the bowl back into the middle of the table. Then she proceeded to shout at us so much that we both ran out into the garden and hid. She seemed almost hysterical.

Sometimes Uprights puzzle me.

Why did she get so upset? Why did she care about a fish – and a small one at that?

And why on earth did they put a plump looking fish in a glass bowl on the dining room table if they didn't want us to eat it?

September 23rd

The Upright who wears a Skirt obviously feels guilty about her behaviour yesterday because today she has been quite attentive. But Thomasina and I are still hurt and puzzled.

The dining room door has been shut all day. I wonder if the Upright who wears a Skirt is keeping the fish as some sort of surprise.

September 24th

The gold fish and its bowl have gone!

Shortly after mid-day today the Upright who smells of Jasmine arrived. She brought straw hats, sticks of rock and lots of photographs with her. And when she left, half an hour or so later, she was carrying the glass bowl and the gold fish with her.

When she had gone Thomasina said that she thought that our Uprights might have been looking after the glass bowl and the gold fish while the Upright who smells of Jasmine was on holiday!

What a silly idea!

Why would anyone go to so much trouble for one small fish?

September 29th

Thomasina ate a mole. I told her she would be sick tomorrow.

September 30th

Thomasina was sick.

October 3rd

As winter approaches and the trees start to lose their leaves, every warm day is a bonus.

Today the weather was beautiful.

Thomasina and I spent most of the day dozing underneath one of the apple trees in the orchard. The warmth of the sun really does give me enormous pleasure.

I wonder where the sun goes to in the winter.

October 4th

And how does the sun know that it is time to come back again for next year's summer?

October 7th

I saw Stumpy the lizard today. He said he was getting ready to hibernate for the winter. I asked him what he meant and he said he was going to go to sleep until March. I told him I thought that sounded a very sensible idea and that I might try it too.

October 11th
Thomasina has been having a little trouble with the leg she injured. It aches on cold days and is sometimes so stiff that she limps. After she almost fell over for the fourth time she burst into tears with frustration and said how much she hated the Uprights who had left that trap in the woodland.

I told her not to waste her energy hating them, and she soon said I was right and cheered up when I suggested going for a walk in the field to try to find Blackie.

Hate is a damaging and destructive emotion which always seems to do far more damage to the person doing the hating than to the object of the hatred who probably doesn't even know that he is hated anyway!

October 14th
The strangest thing happened today.

I was sitting on the window seat in the bedroom when I saw a huge four legged animal arrive at the back door. The animal had a very large head and a long tail. Sitting on its back there was an elderly Upright with a Big Bottom in Tight Trousers.

As I watched the Upright climbed down off the animal, knocked on the back door and was admitted to the house.

When I went downstairs a few moments later I saw the visitor sitting in front of the fire drinking tea with the Upright who wears a Skirt. They were chatting together very cosily.

An hour later, through a crack in the barn wall across the courtyard, I watched as the Upright with a Big Bottom in Tight Trousers climbed back onto the large beast and trotted away as calmly as if nothing untoward had happened.

I have not told Thomasina any of this.

October 21st
Thomasina and I have started storing dead mice behind the boiler. We got the idea from watching squirrels who store nuts for the winter.

'It will be nice to be able to have a mouse in the winter without having to go out into the cold and catch one,' said Thomasina, with her usual seductive logic. 'Once they have dried out they will be quite tasty.'

I told her that I prefer my mice to be fresh, but she said that it is not always possible to have exactly what we want and I had to agree with her. If I had my way I would have less white patches on my fur. The white patches get dirty very easily and take a lot of cleaning. Thomasina, being a mackerel tabby is quite fortunate. She can go for several hours without washing and no one would notice.

We caught three mice today and stored them in a neat pile. Thomasina says she thinks we ought to be able to get a hundred mice behind the boiler if we pack them in neat rows.

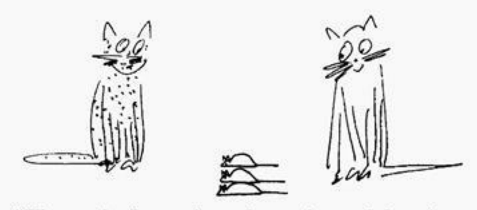

"We caught three mice today and stored them in a neat pile."

October 23rd
We now have eight mice, three shrews and two voles in our winter storage area. Thomasina wanted to put a mole in there too but I put my paw down firmly. Moles always make me feel queasy and they always make Thomasina sick.

I was not keen on the voles or the shrews if the truth be known (they are never edible – even when fresh). When the mouse collection gets a little larger I may persuade Thomasina to throw them out.

October 26th
Our collection of mice is looking very impressive, though to be honest I'm not so sure that they are going to be edible in a few months time. We have nineteen of them lined up in fairly neat rows behind the boiler. It has been quite hard work and I do hope that it is all going to be worthwhile. They smell a little but Thomasina says she has heard that mouse meat gets more tender if it is kept a while before being eaten.

November 1st

Disaster!

When Thomasina and I came downstairs this morning we were hit by the most awful smell imaginable. The nearer we got to the back door the worse the smell got and it soon became clear that it was coming from the boiler room.

When we peered round the door we had a terrible shock!

Sometime during the night the boiler had been switched on and had turned our collection of dead mice into a stinking mess of rotten meat. The Upright in Trousers, who was crouching down beside our hoard with a scarf tied over his mouth and nose, was using a small shovel to scrape our roasted mice out from behind the boiler and to put them into a bucket.

Stealthily Thomasina and I crept outside. We stayed outside until darkness fell.

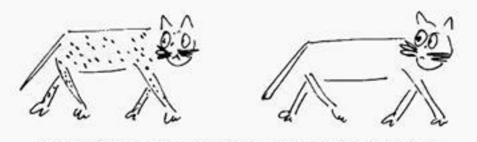

"Stealthily, Thomasina and I crept outside"

November 5th

When I tried to go out this evening I found that the cat flap in the back door had been barricaded with a tea tray, a large cardboard box and a piece of plywood. I spent a very uncomfortable evening lying on the kitchen floor with my legs crossed.

It was very late and pitch black when the Uprights finally removed the obstacles and I was in such a hurry when I finally got outside that I trod on a slug while looking for a nice soft patch of earth.

I hate slugs.

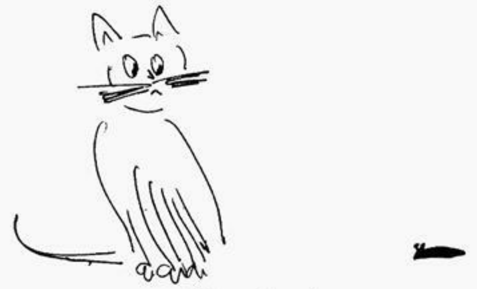

"I hate slugs."

November 8th

Thomasina and I were both tired this evening and so we went upstairs much earlier than the Uprights.

Although they did not make a lot of noise when they came to bed they woke me up. And the moment I awoke knew that there was another cat in the house.

I don’t know *how* I knew. But I did.

I lay there for some time trying to decide what to do. Meanwhile, the Upright in Trousers and the Upright who wears a Skirt both fell fast asleep.

Eventually I decided that I was not mistaken and that I would have to do something. Very cautiously, I woke Thomasina.

As soon as she was awake she knew too.

We looked at each other, carefully jumped down off the bed, and made our way out of the bedroom and along the landing.

We had not gone more than half a dozen paces when I heard the intruder purring in the spare bedroom. I could hardly believe my ears – and nor could Thomasina. Gingerly, we both poked our heads round the door and looked in: sure enough, there, lying on top of the bed was a fat, long-haired cat wearing a red leather collar and purring loudly. Underneath the bed clothes there were two large Upright shaped mounds.

Strangers!

Thomasina and I looked at each other, looked back at the strange Uprights and the strange cat, and then very quietly tiptoed back to our bedroom to wake up the Upright in Trousers. We felt confident that he would know what to do.

Thomasina sat on his chest and I licked his ear and when he woke up we jumped down off the bed and looked up at him expectantly. The Upright in Trousers is quite bright and he knows what this means. He yawned, rubbed his eyes, threw back the bedclothes and slid out of bed. Then he followed us along the landing until we stopped outside the spare bedroom. The three of us then peered in through the gap left by the not quite closed door.

But, to our astonishment, the Upright in Trousers just smiled at us, stroked both our heads in that awfully patronising way Uprights adopt when they think they know something we don't, and padded back to bed.

Thomasina and I couldn't believe it. And we certainly were not going to go to sleep with a strange cat in the house. We went downstairs together, ate a few left over crunchy things and then went outside and spent the night sleeping on a pile of old sacking in the potting shed.

What a thing! Forced out of our own home by a stranger.

November 9th

Thomasina and I were cold and stiff when we woke up this morning. The sacking had looked comfortable enough but it made a very poor substitute for soft, warm bedclothes. To make things worse, it was covered in all sorts of insects, many of which burrowed into my fur. It will take hours to get them all out.

As we walked back towards the house I was not sure what to expect. Had we dreamt it? Was there really a strange cat – and a couple of strange Uprights – in the spare bedroom?

We had not dreamt it.

A strange looking little red motor car that I hadn't noticed before was parked outside the back door, and sitting in the kitchen there were FOUR Uprights: the Upright in Trousers, the Upright who wears a Skirt and the two Strange Uprights.

And right in the middle of the kitchen, sitting on the mat in front of the stove, the fat, long-haired cat that we had seen the night before was noisily enjoying a plateful of *our* food!

For a moment neither Thomasina nor I knew what to do. We just sat there and stared in amazement.

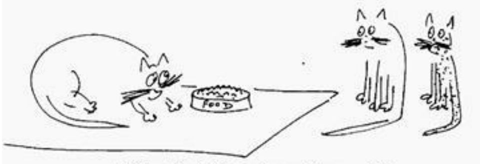

"The Fat Cat sat on the mat."

The four Uprights all stopped eating and looked at us. The Upright in Trousers called to me and the Upright who wears a Skirt held out a small piece of toast. It was covered in that nice thick orange marmalade that I like very much, but I resisted the temptation to be seduced by it.

The Fat Cat on the mat looked across at Thomasina and me, stared at us for a moment as though *we* were the intruders, and then ignored us and carried on eating!

Thomasina and I turned on our heels and marched out of the room with our heads and tails held high.

November 10th

We stayed outside all day yesterday and steadfastly refused to respond when the Upright in Trousers and the Upright who wears a Skirt came out to call us. They shouted and whistled and made all sorts of promises but we were both quite determined that we were not going back into the house while the Fat Cat was there.

I don't know whether it was just rotten luck, or because we were both so cross that we couldn't hunt properly, but all we caught yesterday were two small shrews and an elderly field mouse.

That just must made things worse, of course.

The shrews were so bitter that we couldn't eat them and the mouse had thin stringy muscles and no fat at all on him. He tasted very rubbery, and if the circumstances had been different I would have given him to the Uprights as a present. To make things worse, it rained all night and the roof of the potting shed (where we had chosen to spend the night) leaks like a sieve. Neither Thomasina nor I slept much, and by the time the sun tried to get up this morning we were both damp, cold, aching, hungry and very bad tempered.

"We were both damp, cold, hungry and very bad tempered."

We desperately wanted to go indoors to warm up and get some food, but the little red motor car was still parked outside the back door so we knew that the Fat Cat and his Uprights were still in residence. We were determined not to give in so we stayed outside in the cold and felt truly miserable.

Early on in the day the Upright in Trousers came outside looking for us. He was carrying two bowls full of very enticing looking food and we could tell that he was upset and worried. But he had not had to sleep outside in the potting shed, and so we stayed where we were underneath the rhododendron bush. I secretly hoped that he might hear our tummies rumbling and come and find us and make us eat but he didn't.

We stayed where we were for an hour or two but the rain got heavier and heavier and started to come through the rhododendron bush leaves so we went back to the potting shed. We must have fallen asleep for a few moments while we were under the bush because someone had been into the potting shed and the two bowls of food were in the middle of the floor. Thomasina said we didn't know for certain that the food had been brought by the Upright in Trousers, and that we could safely eat it without feeling that we had given in.

But who else could it possibly have been brought by?

Besides, the Upright in Trousers knows we always go there when we won't go into the house for any reason.

We ate it anyway because we were both starving and Thomasina said that principles are all very well but you have to eat sometime because if you didn't you would not be strong enough to have principles, and I thought that made sound sense.

After we had eaten we both felt better. We felt stronger and warmer and more determined than ever. And so we curled up on some dry blankets that had mysteriously appeared underneath the wooden bench where the Upright who wears a Skirt does her messing about with plants. And we went to sleep.

When we woke up the little red car had gone.

And when we tentatively peered round the kitchen door we saw that there was no sign of the strange Uprights or the Fat Cat. Slowly and with dignity we went indoors. But before we would even let the Uprights touch us we insisted on checking out the whole house, particularly the spare bedroom.

Only when we were sure that there was absolutely no sign of the Fat Cat or the strange Uprights would we stay indoors. It was good to know that our stand had worked.

Sometimes a cat has to put her paw down firmly.

November 12th

We had chicken for tea. I think this was the Uprights' way of saying 'sorry' for having the Fat Cat in the house.

November 14th

Thomasina caught a vole. I told her not to try eating it but she took no notice of me and she was sick all over the hall carpet twenty minutes later.

She insisted that the being sick had absolutely nothing to do with the vole.

November 16th

I nearly caught a mouse. It has been several days since I have had any hunting success.

November 17th

The Upright in Trousers spent the whole day cutting bits off the hedge. Thomasina and I sat on the bedroom window seat and watched him, wondering what he was going to do with so many bits of hedge.

When he had finished, the Upright in Trousers carefully collected all the cuttings together and put them into a wheelbarrow.

Then he wheeled the barrow down to the bottom of the garden.

I watched with increasing interest, desperate to see what on earth he was going to do with all the twigs he had collected.

But I could hardly believe my eyes when he tipped up the wheelbarrow and tried to set fire to all the cuttings he had so carefully collected.

Sometimes I think the Upright in Trousers must be a few hairs short of a fur coat.

But I love him dearly nevertheless.

November 21st

There is a mouse living in the garage. I heard it twice this morning and then caught a glimpse of it this afternoon.

November 23rd

The Uprights were both late getting up this morning. Thomasina and I were very hungry and it was raining outside so we jumped up onto their bed and pretended to fight.

The Uprights soon woke up and it didn't take long to persuade them to get us some food.

November 25th

I caught the mouse that has been living in the garage this afternoon.

It was a cunning little creature and it took a lot of ingenuity to trap it, but in the end I cornered it in between an old oil can and a spare tyre. Then I knocked it out with a clean blow to the top of its head.

Once I was certain that it was unconscious I took it into the house.

I prefer hunting in the house for several reasons.

First, it is warmer.

Second, there are far fewer impossible-to-reach corners for a mouse to hide in. (Apart from the kitchen, which I never use if I can help it because there are far too many tricky impossible-to-reach hiding places).

Third, I don't get as dirty indoors as I do scrabbling about on the floor in the garage or the potting shed.

I hate it when I have spent a tiring afternoon hunting and I then have to spend two hours licking myself clean.

I decided to take this mouse into the bathroom because that really is the safest room in the house for hunting. It is a small room and there are very few nooks or crannies into which a cunning mouse can escape.

But when, with the mouse held firmly between my teeth, I pushed open the door and trotted into the bathroom I had the fright of my life.

One moment the room appeared empty and the next the Upright who normally wears a Skirt was standing up in the bath, stark naked and dripping water everywhere. She looked very pink and strangely bald. She was screaming very loudly and desperately reaching for a large white towel that was neatly folded over the nearby wooden towel-rack.

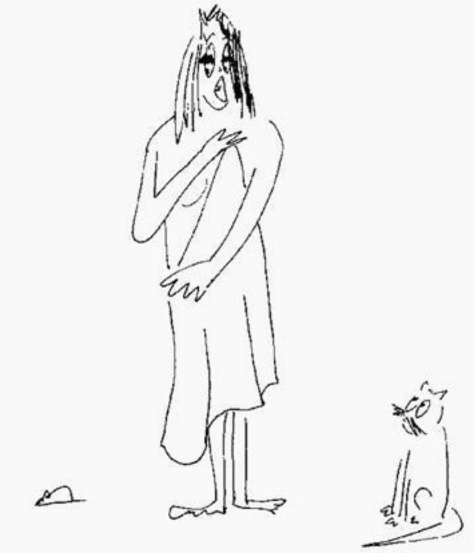

"The Upright who normally wears a Skirt was screaming."

I had not even known that she was there.

I have long been aware of this strange habit the Uprights have of submerging themselves in water and scrubbing themselves with soap and water. I have talked it over with Thomasina and we have decided that they do it because they cannot lick themselves clean. They have very stiff backs and short tongues and could not possibly give themselves a proper wash the decent, hygienic, feline way.

Anyway, the noise she made startled me so much that I opened my mouth and let go of the mouse.

In retrospect I am prepared to admit that this was a mistake.

The mouse was so relieved at being let go that it instantly started to run up and down the bathroom in a desperate search for a non-existent hiding place.

And this just made the Upright who normally wears a Skirt scream even more.

I could not stand it. As much as I wanted the mouse I really could not cope with the noise she was making.

I slipped out through the still open bathroom door, leaving the Upright who normally wears a Skirt screaming, and my mouse running up and down the bathroom in a frenzy of pointless activity.

November 30th

I nearly caught another mouse. That makes two (or possibly three) that I have missed in the last two weeks. Despite my success with the mouse in the garage I seem to be losing my touch.

November 31st

It was cold and wet today. Thomasina and I spent the day in front of the stove. I would have slept but the noise of Thomasina purring kept me awake. I wonder why some cats purr so loudly?

I am quite sure that my purring is quiet and does not disturb anyone.

December 1st

I was shocked yesterday when Thomasina complained about my purring.

We were both lying down in front of the fire when she suddenly told me that my purring was keeping her awake!

December 2nd

I very nearly caught a huge mouse today. I cannot possibly have missed it by more than a whisker. What is wrong with me?

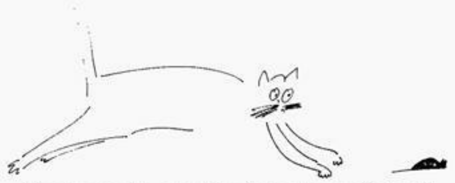

"I very nearly caught a huge mouse today."

December 3rd

I have never had a more embarrassing day.

I caught a small shrew in the shrubbery this morning and brought it into the hall for some hunting practice. But I only had the shrew with me for five minutes or so when I lost it.

Keeping low and not moving I looked everywhere. But I just could not see it.

My first thought was that the shrew was just keeping very still. Like most cats I have great difficulty in focusing on stationary objects and can see best when something is moving.

Most small animals seem to know this instinctively and so when they are being hunted they always keep as still as they possibly can. This, I have always suspected, is a consequence of their having a poorly developed sense of fair play.

So, when I saw Thomasina walking towards me, I used a little subtle body language to let her know that I was looking for a prey that I had temporarily lost.

To my astonishment Thomasina paused in mid stride, grinned very broadly and then stopped where she was.

I raised an eyebrow and glared at her. It is normal courtesy for any cat to help a hunter who is having trouble. (The rules of behaviour are actually quite strict. If the hunt is completed successfully the cat who has done the helping will move quietly to one side and wait. The cat who initiated and completed the hunt will then invite the cat who has done the helping to share in the spoils.)

But Thomasina was not helping at all!

I put both my ears back to let her know that I was pretty upset about her behaviour. But not even that seemed to affect her. She just grinned even more broadly.

I was about to tell Thomasina exactly what I thought of her when, out of the corner of my eye, I detected a small movement. I immediately looked down and, just in time, saw the shrew getting ready to make its escape. It had been sheltering underneath my chin!

What humiliation.

I was so horrified that when the shrew did make a run for it I missed it completely. And Thomasina was laughing so much she missed it too.

December 5th

Thomasina keeps telling me not to be upset but how can I possibly not be upset?

I feel totally humiliated. I may never hunt again.

I spent the whole of today sitting underneath the skimmia bush, trying hard to be invisible.

Just to add to the gloom it rained very heavily all day.

December 6th

I saw a plump mouse beneath the oil tank this afternoon. I waited for it to come out, but when it came within catching distance I pounced and missed it.

I am very depressed.

December 7th

Despite the weather I woke in the night feeling hot and clammy.

My sleep was disturbed by a nightmare in which I was surrounded by a crowd of gigantic shrews. There were scores of them, all as big as rats, and they were gradually creeping closer and closer to me. I wanted to run away but I couldn't move.

Eventually, when the shrews were all close enough for me to be able to smell their breath (it was awful, as anyone who has ever smelt a shrew's breath at close quarters will know) they all burst out laughing.

After I had been awake for a few moments I felt myself going quite cold as another terrible thought hit me.

What if the shrew that had escaped from my clutches chose to boast about its good fortune to other shrews?

This awful thought kept me awake for the rest of the night.

I spent my second day hiding underneath the skimmia bush, hoping that no one would see me.

December 8th

While hiding this morning I felt, rather than saw or heard, something moving behind me. Cautiously, I turned my head and, to my surprise, I saw a shrew wrestling with a berry it had pulled off one of the lower branches of the bush.

It was *the* shrew! The shrew which had hidden underneath my chin. The shrew which had given me nightmares.

For a moment or two I was too frightened of it hearing me to move even my eyes. But slowly it became clear that the wretched little creature was so busy with the berry it had acquired that it had not even seen me.

Moving so slowly that at times even I was not entirely sure that I was moving, I turned first my head and then the rest of my body. Eventually, after what seemed like a long lifetime, I was in a position to pounce. By now the shrew had finished eating its berry and was greedily reaching up to try to pull down a second.

I braced myself. I pushed my paws deep into the soft earth to get the maximum amount of leverage. I crouched as low as I could. I tightened every muscle I could find. And then I pounced. And I completely forgot that I had been crouching underneath the low growing bush.

As my head and back crashed into the lowest branches of the bush everything around me seemed to shake and shudder. Berries rained down upon me and a broken piece of twig scratched the side of my nose.

Not even the greedy shrew could fail to notice all this noise and movement happening above and around him. He looked up, saw me and grinned.

The accursed creature actually had the cheek to *grin* at me!

But I was not finished yet. With pieces of twig and branch still clinging to my fur I pounced again. I put every ounce of energy that I had left into that pounce. I strained every muscle.

And again I missed him.

With what I can only describe as a sneer the shrew picked up another berry between his teeth and started to waddle off towards the lawn. He did not even do me the courtesy of running. Half way across the lawn he stopped, turned and gave me a second chance to see his best sneer.

Stopping in the middle of the lawn was his final mistake.

The buzzard which caught him dropped out of the sky like a stone. The shrew never had a chance. One moment he was sitting on the lawn with a berry in his mouth and a sneer on his face and the next moment he was just another light lunch for a hungry bird.

Under different circumstances I might have been put out at having my prey taken by a bird. But on this occasion I felt nothing but gratitude for the victor, and I was perfectly happy for him to take the spoils.

December 9th

I have spent many hours trying to work out why I failed so miserably in my attempts to catch that shrew.

Am I just getting old? Are my reflexes gone? Are my muscles too weak? Have I become too soft?

Or was it just fate?

Maybe the shrew was predestined to be eaten by a buzzard not a cat.

December 10th

I caught a vole this morning.

Everyone knows that voles are much more difficult to catch than shrews or mice. Indeed, I seem to remember hearing someone say that they are the most difficult of all creatures to catch.

The vole had only got three good legs but it was remarkably mobile.

And I do not think it was quite as old as it looked.

December 11th

When we got up this morning Thomasina and I were both delighted to see that the rain had finally stopped. From inside the house it looked a wonderful day. The air looked especially crisp and wintry.

So, we decided to go for a walk in the field.

We had walked for no more than twenty or thirty minutes when we saw Blackie, the cat from the nearby farm, stalking something that we could not see.

We could see him clearly enough, he looked quite stately and magnificent as he strode delicately and cautiously along in pursuit of some invisible prey. But even though it was winter, the grass was long enough to ensure that we could not see what he was stalking.

We watched in awe as he slowly lowered himself into the crouch position, adjusted his weight distribution, wiggled his bottom from side to side and then leapt forward as though he had been fired from a gun.

At that moment I realised why I had been unable to catch the shrew that had so tormented me. And why those mice had got away.

I had not been wiggling my bottom properly before I leapt!

There has always been much controversy within cat circles about the importance of the wiggle. Some expert hunters claim that it helps ensure a proper distribution of weight, and some say that it gives more accuracy to the pounce. I have even heard some argue that the effect, although measurable, is largely psychological.

Our dear old friend George was very sceptical about the value of the wiggle, but then he was such a good hunter that he could have probably caught his prey if he had leapt backwards. I still miss George and often think of him with great tenderness.

But, whatever the explanation, I felt convinced that this was what I was doing wrong. And I could hardly wait to get back into the garden to try out my theory.

Meanwhile, Blackie had completed his task and we could hear him enjoying his kill. He ate with tremendous gusto and the meal sounded exceptionally juicy.

Thomasina and I kept well out of the way while he ate since we have both always regarded it as bad manners to turn up just after an acquaintance has started eating a kill. We did not want to make Blackie feel under any obligation to offer to share his meal with us.

When the crunching and chewing noises finally stopped Thomasina and I edged forwards tentatively.

And there was Blackie, licking his lips. He raised his head a couple of degrees and smiled at us.

‘Why didn’t you come and join me?’ Blackie asked us. ‘There was plenty for all of us.’ He was not in the slightest bit surprised to see us.

‘How long have you known that we were there?’ asked Thomasina timidly.

‘Since just before I caught the rabbit,’ answered Blackie to our astonishment. He licked his lips and sighed contentedly. ‘That was very tasty. There’s nothing like a nice rabbit!’

He then told us about life on the farm, talked to us about his family and friends and described in close detail several of his recent kills.

I have to confess that both Thomasina and I thought him rather self-centred since at no point did he ask us how we were. In addition, although neither Thomasina nor I said anything at the time, when we got back home we both admitted to each other that we were a little surprised at Blackie’s admission that he had known we were nearby when he was eating but had not invited us to join him.

Still, as Thomasina pointed out, not all cats have our breeding and good manners.

December 12th

By the time we got back home yesterday it was raining hard again, and neither Thomasina nor I had found the idea of going hunting ourselves at all attractive. Instead, we spent the rest of the day and the whole of the evening curled up in front of the stove. I wonder why Uprights do not do this more often.

But by this morning I could no longer resist the temptation to try out my theory about the pre-pounce wiggle and so, although it was drizzling, I set off into the orchard where Thomasina said there were plenty of mice.

I am absolutely delighted to be able to report that putting the wiggle back into my pounce has revolutionised my hunting skills.

I caught two mice this afternoon!

I ate one and hid the other in the bedroom as a surprise present for the Upright who wears a Skirt.

December 14th

The Upright in Trousers has a new box shaped machine which he is very proud of. It has a mouth at the front and when he pushes a small plastic gadget into it the air all around the box is suddenly filled with music.

He played with the box continuously all day long and it was so loud that the whole house seemed to vibrate.

The sound and the vibrations were so painful that Thomasina and I had to spend the day outside, even though it was bitterly cold.

I do not think the Upright in Trousers is aware just how sensitive we are to sound. Our hearing is very acute, especially for high pitched sounds. George once told me that we can hear a much wider range of sounds than any other creatures – including dogs. When sounds are very loud, the vibrations they make can make them doubly irritating and twice as painful.

I quite like music as long as it is played quietly.

December 16th

I am convinced that Uprights are much more intelligent than many cats suspect, but their one great weakness is their inability to communicate with one another.

Thomasina and I communicate vocally, of course. (And we have tried to train the Uprights to recognise different vocal patterns when we speak to them, though their hearing is so poor that they are not very good at it. After years of training our Uprights can just about differentiate between a miaow which means ‘Would you please open the door’ and a miaow which means ‘I would like a little more breakfast, please’).

When we are upset or worried we growl, hiss, scream or spit.

But most of the time Thomasina and I communicate with each other in more subtle, more accurate, more sensitive and speedier ways.

We use body language to speed things up and to enable us to express emotions which are difficult to put into sounds.

If I swish my tail Thomasina knows that I’m cross. If her tail is upright with the tip curled over I know that she’s pleased about something. If she arches her back a little I know that she is quite angry; if she arches her back a lot I know that she is very angry.

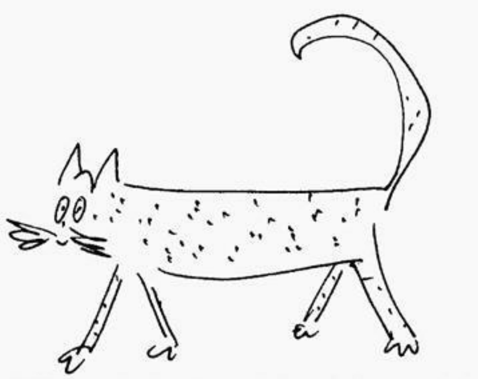

"If Thomasina's tail is upright with the tip curled over I know she's pleased about something."

We use our ears, eyes, tails, whiskers and fur to express subtle warnings and share our feelings with one another.

Body language is honest and simple and speedy. It is sad that Uprights do not seem able to communicate in this simple but most effective way.

December 17th

An Upright who does not like cats came to visit today.

Thomasina and I always know instinctively when a visitor does not like cats. However much he or she may pretend that they like us they give away their true feelings in a thousand subtle ways.

Thomasina says that Uprights Who Do Not Like Cats find us too independent for comfort. She says that they feel uncomfortable because we cannot be dominated, ordered about and 'owned' in the way that many other creatures can be dominated, ordered about and 'owned'. She says we remind them of their own lack of independence.

I think this may be too subtle. My own suspicion is that those Uprights Who Do Not Like Cats have some simple but indefinable psychological problem.

When we were younger, Thomasina and I were very naughty. We used to tease Uprights Who Do Not Like Cats by leaping up onto their laps, brushing against their legs and generally making a terrible fuss of them. We knew that they would not dare express their discomfort for fear of offending the Upright in Trousers or the Upright who wears a Skirt.

We have grown out of that now.

Most of the time.

December 19th

Thomasina caught two voles today. But I am pleased to say that she did not eat them.

December 22nd

The birds are using the skimmia bush in front of the house as a fast food restaurant. It is most infuriating. When they land on the bush to eat the berries they are often no more than six or seven feet away from us.

Thomasina got very frustrated this morning. And I am afraid that she made a complete and utter fool of herself.

Enticed by a blackbird which kept singing in between courses, Thomasina launched herself up into the air. She managed to get a paw on the blackbird's back, but the bush would not hold her weight and Thomasina fell through the branches onto the ground.

The blackbird, quite unharmed, flew a few feet up into the air, squawked a little to let everyone know how clever he was, and then resumed his meal.

Thomasina and I could stand it no longer. We went back indoors and went to sleep in front of the stove.

There are times in every cat's life when there is no alternative but to accept the inevitable.

December 24th

The Uprights have been very busy all day and seem to be preparing for some sort of feast.

The Upright who wears a Skirt has prepared a large turkey, a chicken, a leg of pork and a piece of ham. She has also prepared enough vegetables to feed a small army and has made two very large puddings.

Thomasina and I are very worried. We suspect that the house will be over-run by strange Uprights tomorrow. We have, therefore, made our own plans.

There are two mice living in the potting shed. We had been keeping them for what I believe the Uprights call a ‘rainy day’.

Whatever the weather is like tomorrow we will be eating mouse for lunch.

December 25th

Thomasina and I awoke early and were surprised to find that the Uprights were already up and had placed small, neatly wrapped packages by our food bowls.

As soon as they saw us the Uprights rushed over and started to unwrap the two packages without even waiting for us to do or say anything. They then opened the two small tins that were in the packages and spooned out a very strange meal which consisted entirely of very small black eggs. The little eggs did not look very appetising but they were, I have to confess, extremely tasty. The only problem was that when we had eaten them both Thomasina and I felt very thirsty.

Once they had watched us clean our plates, the Upright in Trousers and the Upright who wears a Skirt went back to work cooking and preparing food for all their visitors. Neither Thomasina nor I had ever seen so much food. Indeed, we decided that there probably was not going to be enough room in the house for all the Uprights, and we began to get a little bit worried about the sanctity of the potting shed.

Deciding to wait a little while before we set off in pursuit of the potting shed mice, Thomasina and I sat on a shelf in the garage and watched the house to see just how many Uprights did turn up.

Sadly, however, after several hours of waiting only four Uprights had arrived. Thomasina and I felt very sorry for our Uprights. Judging from the amount of food they had prepared they must have been expecting many, many more than four visitors.

We were about to go and hunt down the potting shed mice when the Upright who wears a Skirt came to the back door with a huge plateful of meat. We both ate so much that we did not have the energy to go hunting, and since there were only four strange Uprights – and no Fat Cat – in the house we went indoors and fell asleep in front of the stove.

December 26th

Thomasina and I ate so much today that by tea-time we were almost unable to walk.

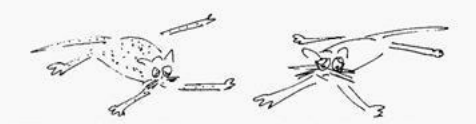

"Thomasina and I ate so much that by tea-time we were almost unable to walk."

But the kitchen table, the larder and the fridge are all still full of left-over food.

December 28th

Today is the anniversary of George’s death.

George was the wisest, kindest, bravest cat who ever lived.

Thomasina and I still miss him. And we will never forget him.

George taught me a great deal.

It was George who taught me that no cat is indispensable.

‘Some cats go through life believing that they must always be busy,’ he said. ‘They make themselves ill because they believe that they are quite irreplaceable’.

‘If you ever feel that,’ he told me, ‘leave the room in which you are standing, sitting or lying, go outside and look in through the window. You will see that there is absolutely no sign of you. When you were there you were there. But once you’ve gone you’re gone.’

George was, as always, absolutely right.

And his message helps me put things into perspective and remember how unimportant I am.

But some cats are close to irreplaceable. And some cats do leave a void when they leave a room. You may not be able to see where they were, but you can certainly see where they are not.

George was one of those cats.

I would like to think that one day some cats (and, who knows, maybe some Uprights) will think of me that way.

December 30th

Thomasina and I caught the two mice in the potting shed today. They were both disappointingly stringy.

December 31st

Another year is over.

I do hope that next year is not quite so adventurous. Some cats like excitement.

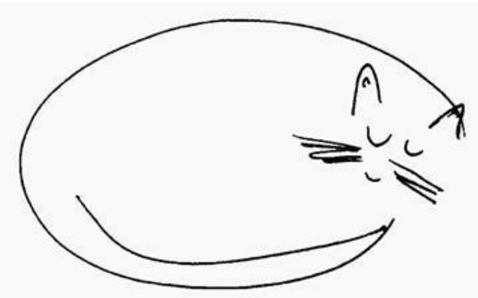

"I prefer a quiet life."

Myself, I prefer a quiet life.

We hope you enjoyed this book. If so we would be grateful if you would post a favourable review on Amazon. Vernon Coleman's other cat books (available as e-books) include: *Alice's Diary, Cat Tales* and *Cat Fables.*

Dr Vernon Coleman is a qualified doctor and professional author who has written over 100 books; these have sold more than two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK alone. His books have been translated into 25 languages and sold around the world. Many books by Vernon Coleman are available as Kindle books on Amazon. For more details about available books please see his author page on Amazon and for more about Vernon Coleman please visit http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

Alice's Diary

The Memoirs of a Cat

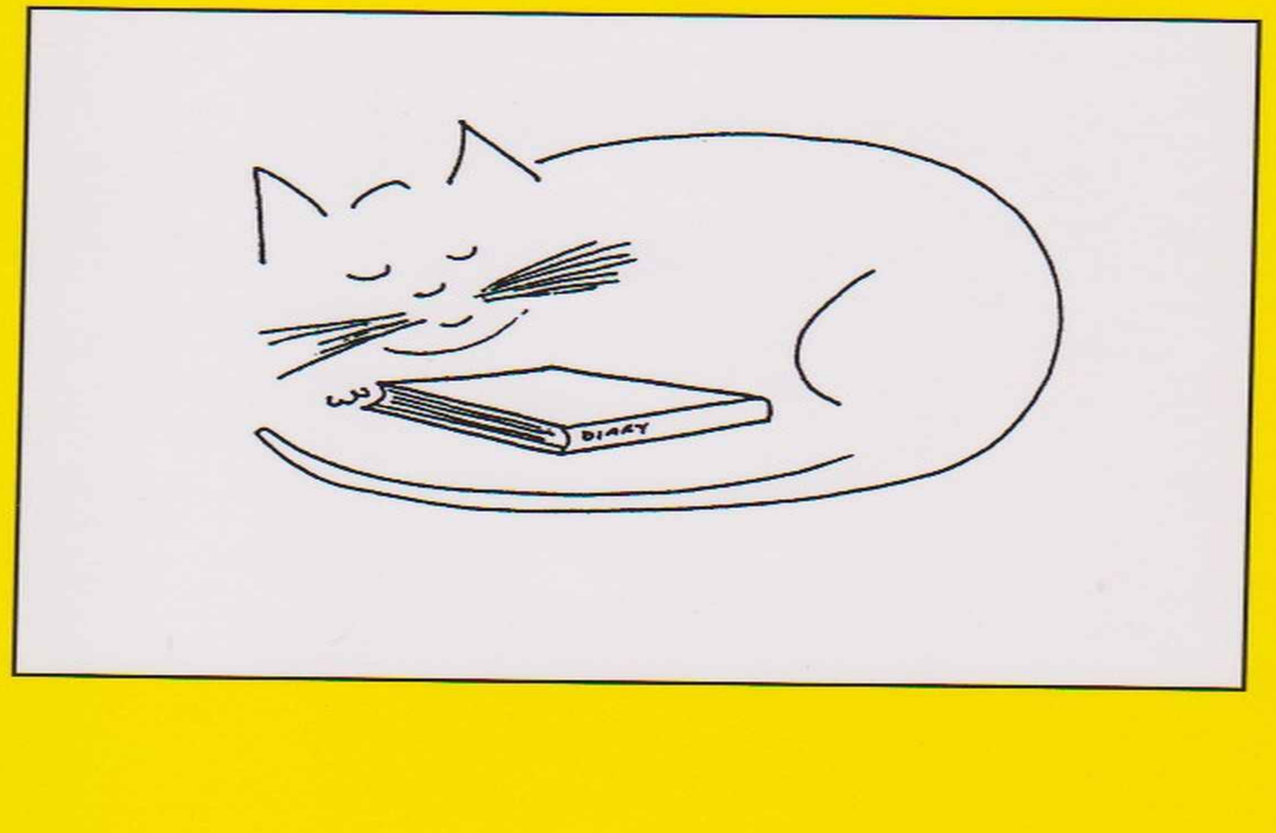

ALICE’S DIARY

The Memoirs of a Cat

Vernon Coleman

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Vernon Coleman is the author of over 100 other books, including 11 books about cats. For details please see his author page on Amazon.
For more about the author please visit http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

Dedicated to all cat lovers with grateful thanks from a cat who loves humans

About the author

Alice is a 6-year-old mixed tabby. She lives in Devon and shares her home with her half sister Thomasina and two humans. This is her first book. Her hobbies include sleeping, eating and sitting in the sun.

January 1st

Thomasina and I got into terrible trouble last night. We wandered into the kitchen early in the evening and found a huge plateful of delicious sandwiches on the table. We ate the middles out of half a dozen and then the Upright in Trousers came into the room. He shouted and threw a towel at us.

To avoid further trouble Thomasina and I left and went outside.

From underneath the lilac tree we then watched an apparently endless stream of visitors arrive. They were all elegantly dressed, they parked their cars all over the lawn and they carried gifts with them. Our Uprights were clearly having a party of some kind.

Thomasina suggested that in order to make our peace with the Upright in Trousers we should take in a small gift of our own. So I caught a plump and rather succulent looking fieldmouse and Thomasina picked up a bedraggled looking vole with a limp.

I don't think one should ever expect too much enthusiasm when arriving with a gift but I have to admit that we were both rather startled by the reception we got. The Upright who wears a Skirt started to scream and jumped up onto a chair. Someone else knocked over a tray full of glasses and a strange Upright whom I'd never seen before fainted. The Upright in Trousers then completely spoiled the mood of what promised to be a spectacular party by chasing the pair of us round the living room and threatening Thomasina with a large ladle.

In the end Thomasina and I decided that it was all far too exciting for us. We left our presents and went outside to spend the rest of the night in the garage.

When we woke up this morning all the cars had gone and it was raining. I hate rain. Rain means mud.

I hate mess too and the inside of the house was in a terrible state. There were at least a dozen empty bottles lying on the floor in the living room and piles of dirty cups, plates and glasses in the kitchen. The sink was absolutely overflowing with them. Worst of all our food dish was quite empty.

Showing a remarkable level of patience, both Thomasina and I sat and waited.

After two hours of hunger we crept upstairs to where the Uprights sleep. Normally I can wake them easily. A purr in the ear will usually do the trick. But they were both sleeping far too soundly to be woken so easily.

Full of despair, but absolutely empty of food, Thomasina and I went back downstairs and made our way through into the kitchen. The plate of sandwiches that we'd started the night before was still sitting on the kitchen table. The pile was by no means as high as it had been the previous evening but there were still a dozen or so sandwiches waiting to be eaten. Desperate with hunger we jumped up onto the table and started to help ourselves.

Unfortunately, the plate was rather close to the edge and in our haste and excitement we knocked it off onto the floor. The crash was terrifyingly loud. Thomasina and I froze. At first I thought we might have got away with it but after a couple of minutes the Upright in Trousers came staggering downstairs in his pyjamas. I expected him to be furious but he looked at the plateful of scattered sandwiches and the broken plate, bent down and rubbed the side of my neck, murmured something affectionate and then went back upstairs leaving us to help ourselves to the sandwiches!

Thomasina and I looked at each other and shrugged. I've never understood Uprights and I don't think I ever will.

January 2nd

The Uprights who live next door have acquired a dog. For the first few days the creature paid us remarkably little attention but slowly he has become bolder. Yesterday he barked persistently every time we went out into the garden. He terrified my half sister Thomasina who has always been rather frightened by dogs.

Today I decided that the dog must be taught a lesson. So while Thomasina stayed indoors well out of the way I went down to the bottom of the garden and sat on a fence post where it could see me.

Inevitably the dog's response was to try to jump up and catch me. But since the fence post was five feet up in the air I was perfectly safe.

I stayed up there for twenty minutes or so to get the dog in quite a rage and then I jumped down onto the flower border on our side of the fence. Just at this point there is a small hole in the fence, nowhere near large enough for a dog to get through but plenty large enough for him to use as a peep hole.

Naturally the dog got even more excited when he saw that I was down at ground level. He barked, scratched and whined and did a considerable amount of damage to the flower border on his side of the fence.

Eventually one of the neighbouring Uprights came down the garden path to see what was the matter. When he saw the mess that the dog had made he was absolutely furious. Through the fence I heard the dog whimpering pitifully.

Thomasina has been well avenged.

January 3rd

The dog next door has now been tethered to a large stake in the centre of the lawn. I spent a pleasant half an hour running up and down the top of the fence between our gardens. The stupid animal tried to follow me but ended up winding his lead round and round the stake. After thirty minutes the dog's lead was no more than a yard long and the wretched animal had become a prisoner of his own stupidity. Eventually I just sat while he barked and whimpered.

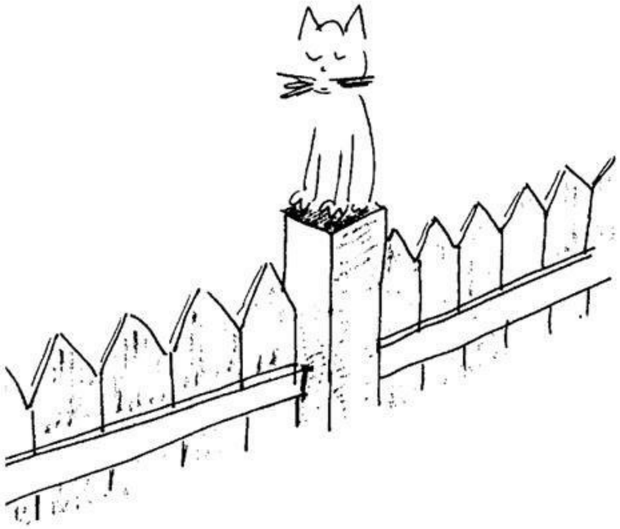

"I sat while the dog barked and whimpered."

I am glad that I am not a dog. They are such unintelligent animals.

January 4th

A good day today. I caught two mice, a shrew and a vole with a squint.

January 6th

George is by far the wisest cat I know. He doesn't have a home but lives by his wits. He is jet black, very handsome and extremely athletic. I've seen him leap straight up onto the top of a six foot high fence. Thomasina and I have learnt a great deal from George.

After I'd told George about the fun we'd had with the dog next door he told me about an experience he once had with a vicious Alsatian.

'At the time I was living with some Uprights who didn't feed me very well,' he began. 'There wasn't much wildlife around and so I used to have to do a lot of dustbin scavenging. When you've got your head in a dustbin it's difficult to see what's happening behind you and on several occasions I very nearly got caught by a local Alsatian. Once I had to drop half a fillet of plaice that I'd found in order to escape. I hadn't had anything to eat for days and I was absolutely starving. By the time I got back to the dustbin the fish had gone.

'Eventually I decided that I had to teach the Alsatian a lesson,' George continued. 'I watched him carefully and quickly realised that there was one part of his regular routine that offered me an excellent opportunity to get my revenge. Every Sunday morning the dog used to trot to the local newsagents and pick up the Sunday papers. He would then bring them back home gripped firmly between his teeth.'

George paused for a moment to lick the hair on his chest. I waited patiently for him to continue.

'I waited for him to come back home carrying the newspapers,' George went on when he was satisfied with his chest hairs. 'I picked a spot where there were several huge puddles and jumped right out in front of him. It went exactly according to plan. The Alsatian opened his mouth to bark at me and dropped the newspapers into a huge, murky puddle.'

George purred with satisfaction at the memory of it.

'I bet he got into terrible trouble when he got home,' he said. 'Dogs are noisy but they are wonderfully stupid.'

January 9th

One thing in particular annoys me about our Uprights. They will insist on giving Thomasina and me our meals in the same bowl.

I don't know why they do it.

They don't eat off the same dish. Why do they expect us to share a dish?

It is terribly annoying.

It's not that I find it unhygienic. I'm quite happy to eat whatever Thomasina is eating and her tongue is just as clean as mine. And it's not that she eats more than her fair share (which, if I'm honest, I have to say she does) because there is usually enough for me.

It's just that the bowl isn't quite big enough for two heads and one of these days we're going to end up getting our heads jammed together. And that will be embarrassing for everyone.

To avoid this awful possibility I have decided that in future I will take my meals after Thomasina has finished eating.

January 12th

When I woke up this morning the whole house was shaking. I thought something terrible was about to happen and so I immediately woke Thomasina and we darted outside.

But from outside everything seemed perfectly normal. There was no sign of anything terrible happening. Since it was raining we both went back inside again quite quickly.

The house was still shaking. And the noise seemed to be coming from upstairs.

So, stealthily and courageously, Thomasina and I made our way up the stairs. From the landing it was clear that the noise and the vibrations were coming from the Upright's bedroom. So with Thomasina following, I pushed open the bedroom door and slipped inside.

I had a tremendous shock. And so, I think, did Thomasina.

Sitting on a bicycle, wearing only his pyjamas, was the Upright in Trousers. It was an extraordinary sight. His face was red and flushed, his legs were pounding up and down and the bedroom floor was shaking and shuddering.

All that was remarkable enough. But the really strange thing was that the bicycle didn't have wheels.

And the Upright in Trousers was getting absolutely nowhere.

It made a very strange sight. Indeed it was too much for Thomasina and myself. We turned and left the bedroom as quietly as we had entered.

I asked Thomasina if she had any idea what the Upright was doing.

She shook her head and said that she didn't have the faintest idea. So we went downstairs, got outside and set off in search of George.

George, when we finally found him, seemed not in the least surprised.

'Oh, Uprights are always doing crazy things like that,' he told us. 'He was probably exercising.'

Thomasina looked at me and I looked at Thomasina.

'What do you mean?' asked Thomasina. 'And why didn't the bicycle have any wheels?'

'Uprights sometimes think that they aren't getting enough exercise,' said George. 'So the Upright wasn't cycling to get anywhere, he was cycling to get fit.'

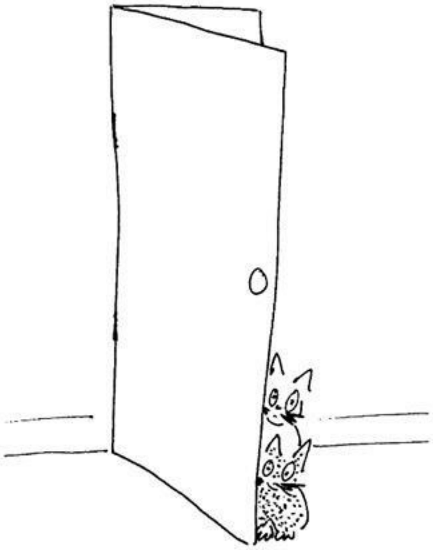

"I had a tremendous shock. It was an extraordinary sight."

‘I don’t understand,’ said Thomasina.

‘It’s because they worry about their health a lot,’ explained George.

‘Oh,’ said Thomasina. ‘I think I can understand that. But I don’t understand why our Upright has started using a bicycle without any wheels. Up until about a month ago he used to ride to work on a bicycle. But then he bought a car. And now he drives to work.’

‘But don’t you see?’ said George. ‘When he was cycling to work he didn’t need the extra exercise. But now that he isn’t cycling to work he does!’

‘I think I must be very stupid,’ said Thomasina. ‘But I still don’t really understand.’

I didn’t say anything. But to be honest I don’t understand either.

January 14th

I was washing myself this morning when I discovered a tick. I spent ages trying to get it off but it just wouldn’t budge. In the end I decided that I’d have to get help from the Uprights. They’re sure to know how to get rid of it.

January 17th

For over an hour and a half I’d been patiently waiting for a mouse to come from underneath the garden shed. I hadn’t moved at all and although I was stiff with cramp and desperate to scratch my ear I was determined not to give in. I’d seen the mouse dive for cover and I knew that it couldn’t see me. Before long it was bound to try to run for it. When it did I’d be ready for it.

And then suddenly ‘wham’!

One minute I was concentrating on the spot where I knew the mouse should reappear and the next minute I was rolling over and over on the soft earth.

At first I thought that I had been attacked. I had my claws out and was ready to defend myself from my unknown assailant when I suddenly realised who it was.

It was none other than dear old Penelope, one of our nearest neighbours. I quickly drew in my claws so that I wouldn’t hurt her, then I tapped her on the side of her head with my right paw before baring my teeth and taking a big soft bite at the skin underneath her chin.

Penelope squealed a little, struggled for a brief moment and then lay quite still. Penelope is no fighter.

‘What on earth did you do that for?’ I demanded angrily. ‘I could have got that mouse.’ I looked back towards the garden shed. I had no doubt that the mouse would have escaped while my attention had been diverted.

‘It was just a bit of fun,’ said Penelope, rather hurt. ‘What are you getting so upset about?’

‘I was about to catch my first mouse for two days,’ I told her. ‘That’s what’s the matter.’

‘You?’ said Penelope, genuinely surprised. ‘Catch a mouse? I didn’t know you were a hunter.’

‘Of course I’m a hunter!’ I told her. ‘I could earn my keep if I really had to.’

‘I thought it was only toms who hunted,’ said Penelope, still puzzled.

‘They may make the best hunters,’ I admitted. ‘But that doesn’t mean that we can’t hunt. I once caught four mice in one night.’

Penelope looked terribly impressed. ‘Could I learn to hunt?’ she asked me.

‘I expect so,’ I said. ‘Anyone can hunt,’ I added rashly and probably inaccurately.

‘Will you teach me,’ she asked, eagerly.

‘Of course,’ I agreed, with thoughtless generosity.

And so I find that I am committed to teaching dear Penelope how to catch mice.

January 20th

After a considerable amount of effort I finally managed to get the Uprights to find my tick. As luck would have it the Upright who wears a Skirt was the one to make the discovery. Predictably she overreacted and ran off screaming for the Upright in Trousers. You’d have thought she’d found a crocodile in the bath.

There was much discussion about just what to do to get the tick off. Eventually the Upright in Trousers said that he’d heard someone say that a lighted cigarette end was the best way to remove the tick. Neither of them smokes but they managed to find half a packet of cigarettes left behind after last year’s Christmas party, and after a considerable amount of coughing and wheezing the Upright in Trousers managed to get one lit.

To say that it didn’t work is probably the understatement of the year. I ended up with a second degree burn. The Upright in Trousers ended up with an asthmatic attack. And the tick remained unmoved.

Next, the Upright who wears a Skirt suggested pulling the tick out with a pair of tweezers. I tried to let them know that just pulling it wouldn’t work but, of course, they had to try. The tick still didn’t move.

By this time we were all quite distraught. I don’t know what they were getting so upset about. It was me that was getting all the pain. The Upright who wears a Skirt decided to get advice and telephone another Upright. I could hear them talking about me.

Heaven knows what she was told but a few moments later I nearly fainted as the Upright in Trousers started splashing gin onto me. I'm not sure whether this was designed to get me unconscious so that I wouldn't feel the pain or to get the tick drunk so that it didn't hold on quite so tight. Whatever the rationale behind the procedure it worked. And the tick was removed.

At the end of it all I was absolutely exhausted. It isn't as if a tick is worth all that much bother. They always fall off after two or three weeks when they've had their fill. And apart from being a bit of a nuisance they don't really do much harm.

If I get another tick I shall do my best to see that the Uprights don't find it.

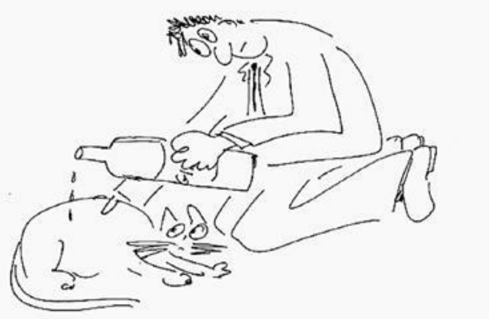

"I nearly fainted as the Upright in Trousers started splashing gin onto me."

January 24th

Penelope had her first hunting lesson today. I do hope that it was not an omen for the future.

I don't wish to be unkind but I think that Penelope is going to have real difficulty catching anything that can still move. If I spend two hours a day for the next year instilling her with the fundamentals then it is just possible, *just* possible mark you, that she will be able to catch a stuffed mouse by next summer. But I wouldn't bet on it. She seems genetically incapable of stalking. She forgets to put her claws out when she pounces. She makes a noise like a lawnmower when she's moving through the grass and she has absolutely no patience at all. Nor does she have any 'killer' instinct. When I showed her the carcase of a mouse I'd caught a couple of days ago she was quite upset.

January 27th

For months I've wondered what lies behind the door at the top of the stairs. Several times I've seen the Upright who wears a Skirt open it and go inside for a few moments. On each occasion she has either taken towels or linen into the room or else she has brought towels and linen out of the room. Once or twice I tried to slip in between her legs but each time she succeeded in keeping me out.

But today the door was left open and I managed to get inside.

It was a magnificent experience. And despite what happened later it was one that I wouldn't want to have missed.

Most of the room, which was extremely small, was taken up with a huge cushion covered metal tank. The tank was boiling hot and the cushions that surrounded it were uncomfortably warm to the touch.

I couldn't help thinking how silly it was to put so much effort into heating such a tiny room that is hardly ever used. But then, as George has pointed out on many occasions, Uprights aren't the most logical creatures on this earth.

Directly above the metal tank there was a slatted wooden shelf upon which were piled several dozen neatly folded towels, pillow cases and sheets.

At first I couldn't work out how to climb up onto the shelf. But eventually I discovered that if I wriggled round to the back of the metal tank I could just manage to scramble up between the shelf and the wall. It was a tight fit but I was determined to see what it was like up there. And eventually I managed it.

It was wonderful.

Sleeping on a bed is pleasant enough. But this was something very special. The pile of towels and sheets must have been at least two feet thick and the heat escaping from the large metal tank meant that even the towels on top of the pile were very cosy.

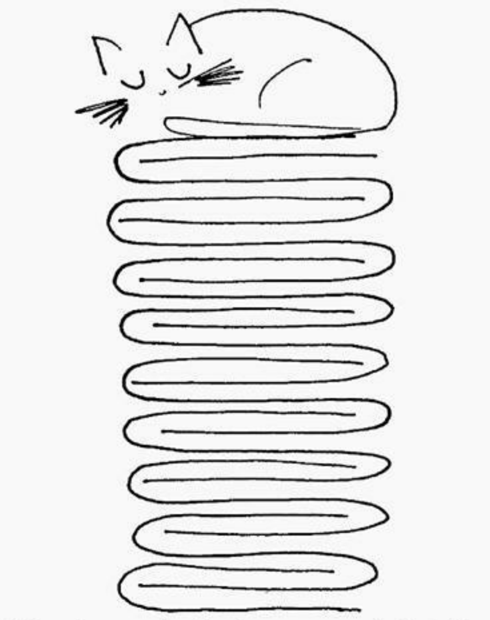

"Sleeping on a bed is pleasant enough. But this was very special."

I curled up into my favourite position with my nose tucked under my tail and went to sleep.

And what wonderful dreams I had.

I don't know whether it was the fact that I was so comfortable and warm, or the fact that I was safe from prying eyes and Thomasina, but I had some of the best dreams I've ever had. I dreamt that I had a wonderful chase after a young rabbit in a beautiful meadow where the grass was soft and green and the sky plain bright blue. I dreamt that I caught the juiciest and crunchiest mouse in the world. And I dreamt that I was sitting in a garden where the air was thick with butterflies that couldn't fly more than two feet above the ground.

And then suddenly I started to dream that I was being chased by a crowd of angry Uprights all wearing hobnail boots and carrying huge sticks.

I ran and I ran and I ran as fast as I could but the Uprights with the Boots kept getting closer and closer. I wriggled and dodged and turned and scratched and clawed. But they caught me and held me down and started to kick me and stamp on my stomach. The pain from their heavy kicking was excruciating and unbearable.

And then I woke up.

My bladder was absolutely bursting and I was desperate to empty it.

I stretched and cautiously peered over the edge of the pile of towels upon which I was perched. It was pitch black in there which was strange because when I'd gone into the room I'd been able to see around me quite well.

Then I realised what had happened. While I'd been asleep someone had gone past and had pushed the door to. I was shut in.

Filled with pain and panic I leapt down from the shelf and landed clumsily on the floor below. That made the pain in my stomach a hundred times worse. I pushed and scratched at the door but I couldn't move it. It was shut firmly. So I scratched at the carpet and the paintwork hoping desperately that someone would hear me.

I was about to come to terms with the fact that disgrace and embarrassment was the only course of action available to me when the door opened. The Upright who wears a Skirt had heard the noise I'd been making and had opened the door for me.

Making suitably soothing and apologetic noises she bent down to pick me up. But I didn't have time for graceful greetings and nice apologies. I had to get outside as quickly as I possibly could. I sped between her legs and raced down the stairs at top speed.

February 1st

It has now been raining more or less non-stop for three days. Apart from essential excursions, Thomasina and I haven't been out of the house in that time. And to be perfectly honest I wouldn't be offended if our Uprights brought back the tray Thomasina and I used when we were small. The garden is a sea of mud and every time I have to go outside it takes me three quarters of an hour to get my paws clean again.

February 3rd

When I was small I used to find it difficult to differentiate between Uprights. But over the years I've found that one of the most reliable ways to tell them apart is by their smell.

Today the Upright who smells like a musk deer came round for tea.

I hate her.

Whenever she sees me she always insists on picking me up and holding me on her lap. She turns me over onto my back and scratches my tummy with her nails. I don't dislike any of this but all the time she makes incredibly silly noises that I suspect she thinks make her sound like a cat. In fact she just sounds like a musk deer pretending to be an Upright pretending to be a cat. It really is embarrassing.

Over the months I've tried all sorts of ploys to get away from her.

First, I tried darting out through the cat flap and hiding in the garden just as soon as I smelt her coming. But that didn't work. She just chased me round and round the garden. Not only do I hate being chased round the garden almost as much as I hate the noises she makes, but once she trod on a mouse run that I'd been keeping an eye on for a week. Spoiled my sport entirely.

When that didn't work I tried being sick on her lap. I really gave her the works. I dug my claws in deep to stop her throwing me off and brought up a disgusting mess of half digested hair balls and rabbit meaty lumps. You'd have thought she'd have got the message. Not a bit of it. These days she always brings an old towel to spread out on her lap. But she still makes her silly noises. And I still hate it. And her.

February 5th

I was teaching Penelope some basic hunting moves, with a large mouse as a target, when the Upright who wears a Skirt came by.

She was furious when she saw what I was doing and ran off to fetch the Upright in Trousers.

'Alice is playing with a mouse,' I heard her say 'Can't you take it off her?'

He couldn't, of course. We disappeared behind the greenhouse with it. But the comment did annoy me. And it hurt a little too.

And even Penelope seemed a little confused.

'It does seem a bit cruel,' she said as I clouted the mouse twice in rapid succession. 'Especially when we get fed so well by our Uprights.'

'Penelope, you must never forget that this isn't playing,' I said to her. 'This is hunting. And it is extremely important that you acquire and never lose good hunting skills.'

'I don't understand,' said Penelope.

I explained to her that cats don't hunt for fun or sport in the way that Uprights do. 'Our hunting skills are vital,' I told her. 'As long as we can catch and kill our prey then we will always know that we can be independent.'

'But we don't have to hunt,' protested Penelope. 'There are meals put out for us twice a day.'

'That's exactly why it is so important that we carry on hunting and polishing our skills,' I told her. 'It's all very nice being provided with regular meals of tinned food. And like most cats if I'm honest I have to admit that I prefer a meal of tinned food to having to crunch up a live mouse. But if we couldn't catch our own food then we would be totally dependent on the Uprights.'

Slowly the light seemed to dawn on Penelope. 'I see what you mean,' she said at last. 'If we can catch our own food then we can choose whether or not we allow the Uprights to feed us. When we can't catch our own food then we are totally reliant on the Uprights feeding us. It changes everything doesn't it?'

'Exactly,' I said. Pleased that she understood at last.

'But why do we have to practise killing the same mouse time and time again?' asked Penelope.

'We don't need to eat mice very often,' I explained. 'And yet we need to keep our hunting skills finely honed. We have a straight choice. Either we kill lots of mice every day. Or we kill one and take our time over it to get all the practise we need from that one animal.'

'So really,' said Penelope, 'when the Uprights think we're playing with a mouse we're really trying to be kind to other mice.'

'Exactly, 'I said. 'I just wish that the Uprights would understand that.'

February 7th

I do wish I could find out who keeps spreading myths about what cats can and can't do, and about what they do and don't like. Tonight it was the fish routine.

'We've got something really special for you,' said the Upright who wears a Skirt.

'You'll love this,' said the Upright in Trousers.

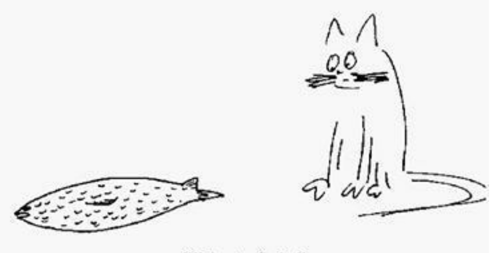

"I hate fish."

And so on and so on in much the same sort of vein for five minutes or more. I should have guessed of course.

But I always fall for it. I thought they'd got me something really special: a jar of meat paste or a bowl of cold custard, for example.

But no, it was a great white chunk of nasty, smelly cod.

I hate fish.

February 9th

Thomasina and I ran into the living room this evening feeling a little frisky. It was pouring down outside, and had been all day. So we thought we'd play tag around the furniture. It's one of our favourite indoor games.

But the Uprights weren't at all enthusiastic. In fact they both told us off. We got the strong impression that if we didn't keep still and quiet we'd be thrown outside. Since it was raining we were both happy to allow discretion to overcome valour.

The reason for all this was the fact that the Uprights were both busy watching and listening to the television.

The television has been a mystery to both Thomasina and myself ever since we've been living with our Uprights. It sits in one corner of the living room and never, ever moves. But it is very much alive. And it is very important. The Uprights always listen to it very respectfully and talk back to it only occasionally. And then, when they do talk back, they always look embarrassed, as though they feel foolish.

There are two things that are particularly odd about the television.

First, it talks in many different voices. Normally Thomasina and I can identify an Upright quickly by the sound it makes when talking. But the television seems able to speak in a thousand different tongues. Perhaps it is this skill which inspires so much respect from the Uprights.

Secondly, although the television is always warm when it is talking, it goes quite cold when it goes to sleep.

Neither Thomasina nor I understand this.

February 10th

Penelope's hunting lessons continue.

Today we nearly caught a shrew but Penelope got so excited that she started to purr loudly when the shrew was still a foot and a half away. What made things worse was the fact that the shrew seemed amused by this. I'll swear that he laughed at us before scampering away.

February 14th

Uprights fascinate me. I can sit and watch them for hours. And I often do.

But although I must have spent a good part of my life watching the things that Uprights do there are still many aspects of their lives that puzzle me.

Today the Upright in Trousers came into the house carrying a huge bunch of flowers and a box of chocolates. The Upright who wears a Skirt then proceeded to give him a big hug and smother him in kisses.

What on earth was all this about, I wonder.

What had inspired this sudden show of affection?

Uprights are, it seems to me, very social creatures and they seem unable to live without these outbursts of unbridled affection. Thomasina and I are close, of course. But I'm sure we could both survive perfectly happily on our own.

We certainly don't need to bring each other dead mice or bundles of cat nip!

February 19th

What an absolutely terrible day.

I knew it was going to be a bad day when I woke up and found that it had rained during the night and soaked the window seat in the Upright's bedroom. It hadn't rained on top of me but the damp patch had spread right across underneath where I had been lying. It is bound to have affected my joints. I expect I'll get all sorts of aches and pains.

Then, after breakfast, I went outside and found that the Upright in Trousers was tidying the garage.

I really hate it when he does that.

For the last few months I've been carefully tracking a whole range of possible targets. There were two mice living behind the old half-filled cans of paint that he had been storing just inside the door. And there were dozens of really large, meaty spiders hanging around by the window.

I don't know what inspires these sudden flashes of tidiness. But they occur at irregular and unpredictable intervals. And they are a fearful nuisance. The tidying disturbs all the wildlife that is living in the garage. And that isn't fair to the wildlife and it isn't fair to Thomasina and I who want to catch it all.

The last time the Uprights tidied up the garage every single mouse left and for six months afterwards you'd have had a job to find so much as a spider in there! Thomasina and I prefer hunting outdoors. But occasionally if it is raining or particularly cold we like to go in there for an hour's practice.

Not that it was only the hunting potential of the garage that was ruined by the tidying up process.

My sacking bed and Thomasina's old gardening trousers were both moved. I was really upset about the sacking and I suspect that Thomasina will be furious when she discovers that her trousers have gone. For over a year now I've frequently dozed on that piece of sacking. Tucked away on a high shelf it gave me an excellent view of the whole garage and it was well away from all the draughts that are usually such a problem in any sort of outhouse. Over the months that piece of sacking had acquired a comfortable and extremely pleasant feel to it. It had been moulded to my body and had become thick with loose hairs.

But the worst thing that has happened is that the Upright in Trousers has mended the broken window! It was that Window which gave Thomasina and me our entry into the garage. All we had to do to get into the garage was to climb up onto the window sill (a very easy leap from the ground) and then scramble up and through the broken window. The exit from the garage was a little more difficult but quite manageable.

And now the Upright has replaced the broken window with a brand new window.

That effectively means that neither Thomasina nor I will ever be able to hunt in the garage again.

What a terrible blow this is.

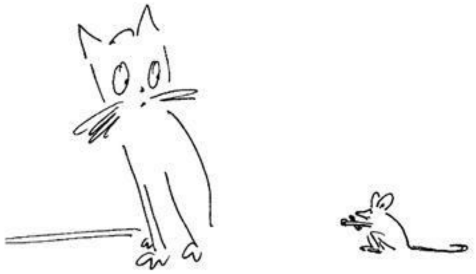

Penelope looked aghast. "Kill it?" she said. "How?"

February 23rd

This afternoon I continued with Penelope's hunting lessons. I caught a small fieldmouse behind the greenhouse, picked it up carefully and carried it back to the centre of the lawn where Penelope was waiting.

'There you are,' I said. 'Pretend you've caught the mouse. And now kill it.'

Penelope looked at me aghast. 'Kill it?' she said. 'How?'

I just stared at her.

So, plucking up all her courage, she gently extended her neck, opened her jaws and started to bite the mouse on its flank. Not surprisingly the mouse turned and attacked Penelope's nose with its mouth and claws.

Penelope retreated quickly, tears mingling with a few specks of blood. She looked more surprised than hurt.

'That's your first lesson,' I said 'Never try to bite your prey until you've stunned it.' I reached out a paw and hit the mouse on its head. It lay still, dazed by the blow.

'How did you do that?' Penelope wanted to know.

'Like this,' I said, repeating the movement. 'Just hit it on the side of the head as hard as you can.'

'Now do I bite it?' asked Penelope, a trifle uncertainly.

'No,' I said, quite firmly. 'Now you wait.'

She looked puzzled.

'It may just be pretending to be knocked out,' I explained. 'If you move too close it might bite you again.'

'Oh,' said Penelope, backing away sharply.

'We wait a minute or two to see if it moves.' I said 'And then we hit it again.'

We waited a while and then I reached forward and smacked the mouse firmly on the side of its head. It didn't move.

'Shall I bite it now?' asked Penelope.

'Yes,' I said. 'But on its neck. And firmly. Just remember this is only a mouse, but one day you could be trying to kill a rat. You need to be decisive if you don't want to get hurt.'

Looking apprehensive but strangely determined Penelope extended her neck, opened her jaws and bit.

She missed the mouse altogether and the crashing of her jaws would have wakened Sleeping Beauty.

After a momentary pause she tried again. This time she succeeded in biting a chunk out of the mouse's neck.

I half expected her to spit out the piece she'd bitten off. But she didn't. She chewed at it, cautiously at first, and then with slowly growing enthusiasm.

After she'd finished her eyes lit up and her whiskers twitched appreciatively.

'I'd never realised that there was meat inside,' she said. 'Fresh meat too. I thought meat only came in tins.'

February 27th

I've found another tick. I can't see it properly but this one is on my back. I spent ages trying to think where I could have caught it. All I can think is that it got its jaws into me when I was romping around in the long grass down by the blackcurrants. I shan't go down there again in a hurry. They say you can't get ticks simply from a roll in the long grass but now I know that to be untrue.

Anyway, the main problem now is to hide the tick from the Uprights until it falls off by itself. I really don't fancy them trying their removal procedures again.

March 7th

I've been reading back through my diary. And I've just found the entry for February 14th.

When I wrote that day's entry I said that Uprights seem to be very sociable creatures and that I couldn't understand why they showered each other with gifts and affection.

Well, I think I understand now though it took Thomasina's illness to really bring it home to me.

Over the many months that we have lived together Thomasina and I have argued many, many times.

She sometimes annoys me a great deal. For example, when I'm having a snooze in a sunny spot she'll often come over and want to play. She'll jump on me and playfully bite my ear. It drives me crazy but I know that she doesn't mean any harm. She's got a very playful personality and she finds it difficult to lie down and do nothing.

But although we do argue a lot we have grown very close. And I know that if I'm ever in trouble Thomasina will come and help me.

I remember once, a little over a year ago, when I was a young and foolish cat, hardly more than a kitten really, and I got stuck up a tree.

It was entirely my own fault. I'd been chasing a bird (in those days I was always chasing birds) with excessive enthusiasm. I'd gone up far higher than I should have gone. I really was stuck. I don't mind admitting it now but I was terrified. I don't really like heights all that much but as long as I'm moving I'm usually all right. But I couldn't go up and I couldn't get down. I could see myself being stuck there for ever.

And then Thomasina came along. She could see straight away that I was stuck and she knew exactly what to do. I was panicking, but she didn't panic for one minute. She ran straight indoors and found the Upright in Trousers. And then she miaowed loudly at him. She miaowed so loudly that I could hear her even though I was half way up a tree down at the bottom of the garden. She wouldn't stop until he abandoned what he was doing and followed her out of the house and down the garden.

The Upright in Trousers got me down with a ladder and I've been grateful to him ever since. But it was Thomasina who went and fetched him for me. Without her the chances are that no one would have ever found me. I'd have died up that tree. My sisterly affection for Thomasina really began to flourish on that day.

But it took her recent illness to make me realise just how much Thomasina really means to me.

It started suddenly. One day she was absolutely fine. Indeed, she caught two shrews and a mouse that day. And then the next day she could hardly move. I came downstairs one morning and found her lying flat out on the sofa coughing her heart out. It was a terrible sight and I felt guilty because I had not heard her coughing during the night. Her head was stretched forward and her body was wracked by a series of terrible, heaving spasms.

I had only been downstairs for a moment or two when the Upright in Trousers appeared. He was as concerned as I was. He knelt down and gently stroked her head. Valiant as ever she tried to respond. But the effort was too much for her. It simply started another coughing attack.

After calling up to the Upright who wears a Skirt the Upright in Trousers went straight to the telephone. I could hear him explaining that Thomasina was ill and needed help.

It was over an hour before the Upright who smells of Antiseptic arrived and it was the longest hour of my life. I stayed close to her but Thomasina seemed to be drifting away from me. And I didn't want her to go. I licked her face to let her know that I was there. She tried to nuzzle against me but she was so weak that her head hardly moved, despite the apparent effort she made.

Four days it took for her to recover. Four days during which I hardly left her side. The Uprights wanted to keep me in another room. But I wouldn't let them. I scratched and miaowed so much that they had to let me back in again.

The nights were the worst. I thought that Thomasina was going to die. But our Uprights were wonderful. They went upstairs to sleep as usual but came down every hour or so to see how she was.

I shall never forget the joy I felt when I began to realise that she was going to live. The Upright who wears a Skirt had prepared a dish of sardines and milk and that was the first food Thomasina ate.

Now I understand why the Uprights show each other affection and give each other presents. There is a joy in true love and real friendship that cannot be overvalued.

March 9th

At last Penelope has caught something more or less by herself. We were hunting near the dustbins at the back of the fish and chip shop when a vole popped its head out of the ground no more than two inches in front of her. She quickly dazed it with a remarkably effective sideways blow. But she was far too enthusiastic and instead of enjoying a good hunting game we found ourselves with a freshly killed corpse on our hands.

Penelope was thrilled by her first real kill. Even though I warned her that voles do not usually taste very nice she insisted on eating it. She said that it was the first meal she'd ever prepared with her own paws and she wasn't going to miss it, whatever it tasted like.

She was sick three times on the way home.

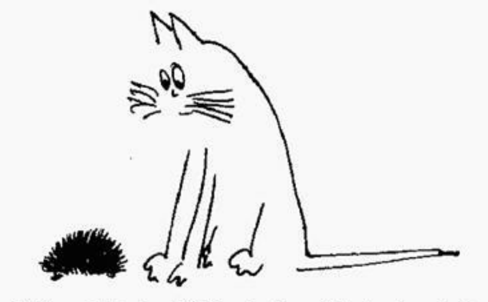

"Where is its head?" I asked her. "And where is its tail?"

March 10th

Thomasina ran into the house today in a terrible state. She said that she'd just seen a rat which had teeth all over its body. I thought she was exaggerating but was intensely curious to see just what she had found so I cautiously led the way back outside into the garden again. Thomasina kept several yards behind me and checked constantly that her route back to the cat flap was not impeded.

'It looks harmless enough to me,' I told her.

'Just try hitting it on the head,' suggested Thomasina.

'Where is its head?' I asked her. 'And where is its tail?'

'I haven't the foggiest,' said Thomasina. 'But if you don't believe me that it's got teeth all over its body just try giving it a pat.'

Cautiously I extended a paw and tapped it gently.

It bit me.

I retreated a yard or two, licked my paw and watched it carefully. It didn't move. It didn't attack and it didn't try to run away.

'I'm going to try again,' I told Thomasina.

'Be careful!' she implored.

Stealthily I crept back and tapped it on its back again.

It bit me again.

Neither Thomasina nor I had ever seen a headless rat that could bite before.

We both decided that we were feeling desperately hungry so we turned and sped for the cat flap and the kitchen.

March 11th

The fattest Upright in the world came to tea today. I sometimes wonder how Uprights manage to get so fat. I've always found it remarkably simple to keep my figure. I eat when I am hungry and I stop when I am not. What more is there to it?

Still, although I don't know why Uprights get so fat, I'm glad they do. I doubt if there is anything in the world quite so comfortable as a large, fat, spacious lap. On a thinner lap you have to put up with bony protruberances. A fat lap is wonderfully comfortable.

March 14th

Penelope has had kittens!

March 17th

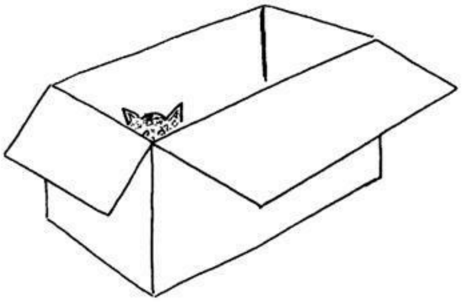

"I knew when I saw it that Thomasina wouldn't be able to resist it."

The Uprights had left a large empty cardboard box in the middle of the living room this afternoon. It didn't smell of anything particularly interesting but I knew when I saw it that Thomasina wouldn't be able to resist it.

Sure enough, when she came in an hour or so later she went straight for it and jumped inside without even a cautious sniff.

She is the most curious and incautious cat I have ever known and one of these days she is going to jump straight into trouble.

That box could have been full of any number of dangers.

'But it wasn't,' she said, when I remonstrated with her a little later.

'Why do you like cardboard boxes so much?' I asked her. 'You can never resist a cardboard box, can you?'

Thomasina just shrugged. 'I don't know,' she said.

'Why do you like cold custard so much?'

Isn't that a silly thing to say?

There is no comparison.

March 18th

'It was a hedgehog,' said George with a laugh when we'd explained what we'd seen the other day. 'They're covered in hundreds and hundreds of needle sharp spines.'

'What are they for?' asked Thomasina.

'I don't know what they're for,' replied George. 'But I shouldn't worry. Even if you could kill a hedgehog you'd never find a way to eat it.'

March 20th

For twelve months now I have sharpened and cleaned my claws on the trunk of a large lilac tree. The bark had just the right texture to it. But this morning I went out into the garden and found that the Upright in Trousers had chopped the tree down. What a tragedy.

March 23rd

I hate making small decisions.

The big decisions - like where to sleep at night and whether to go out hunting or sit by the fire - are easy to make. I just let instinct take over.

But the small decisions are more difficult.

Today I spent ten minutes staring at a sycamore tree and an oak tree trying to decide which to use as a replacement for my lilac tree. In the end I couldn't decide so I gave up and went hunting. But I didn't catch anything. Probably because I was still worrying about which tree to use to sharpen my claws.

March 26th

I worry about the Uprights. I do wish they would learn to relax properly. This evening, for example, the Upright in Trousers sat down for what he said was going to be a relaxing evening in front of the television.

For the first ten minutes he sat quite still. I was so impressed that I jumped onto his lap.

Then he started to fidget. He wanted to read his newspaper. Then he wanted to write a letter to someone. Then he wanted a cup of tea. Then he wanted a biscuit.

After half an hour of this I gave up and went to sit by the fire.

The Upright who wears a Skirt isn't a lot better.

March 27th

Lapsong II came by today to show us the latest new collar that her Upright had bought her. Personally, I thought it rather cheap and gaudy. It is made out of blue shiny leatherette and is studded with small stones of indeterminate origin. It looks the sort of thing that might be acceptable around the dustbins behind the local cinema.

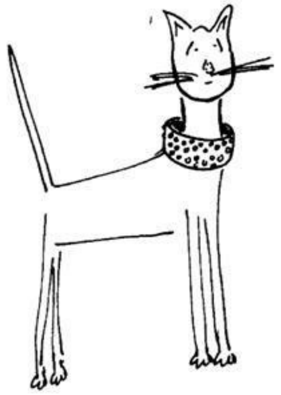

"Lapsong II came by to show us her latest collar. Personally, I thought it rather cheap and gaudy."

I told her that I thought it suited her perfectly. She, poor sweet innocent thing, seemed pleased by my comment.

I've only known Lapsong II for about two weeks. I met her more or less by accident.

About half an hour's gentle stroll away from our home there is a huge estate protected by a high brick wall. The grounds stretch for miles in all directions and the house is magnificent. Surprisingly, perhaps, Lapsong II is the only feline occupant of this remarkable house.

When I first met her I was in the stable hunting a member of a particularly speedy family of mice. I thought it had managed to wriggle underneath an old loose floorboard and following the noise it was making (there isn't much chance of following anything by its smell in a stable) I had, so I thought, got it cornered behind a bale of straw.

But when I leapt over the straw bale I suddenly found myself on top of a neatly combed and manicured Siamese cat. I was, to say the least, startled.

That was my first meeting with Lapsong II.

It seemed that Lapsong II's other reason for calling today was to tell us that her Uprights have just had their home double-glazed. I pointed out that I could not possibly understand what advantage such a development could offer, but Lapsong II saw the alterations merely as a sign of enviable wealth and status. It seems that the extra panes of glass are designed not so much to keep the cold winds out but to keep other Uprights envious.

It became quite clear during our conversation that Lapsong II not only has tremendous respect for her Uprights, but also considers them to be vastly superior to her in evolutionary terms.

'I do so admire their inherited skills and acquired judgements,' she told us. 'Uprights have such powers and such a wealth of abilities.'

I was puzzled by this, for although I have affection for Uprights I have never been unduly impressed by any powers they possess. I asked Lapsong II to explain more fully what she meant.

'Just think about it for a moment or two,' she insisted 'Uprights can do all sorts of things that you and I cannot even attempt.'

I asked her to be a little more specific.

'Well,' said Lapsong II after a moment or two's thought, 'they can open tins.'

I fear I failed to disguise the fact that I was not impressed by this.

'They can ride bicycles,' she went on. 'They have a well developed sense of balance.'

'But I can balance on a window ledge,' I pointed out. 'I can jump out of windows, I can jump up onto the top of the bathroom cabinet and I can lick my bottom.'

For a moment Lapsong II seemed nonplussed by this. She had to admit that she had never seen an Upright do any of these things.

'But their lives are filled with so much *meaning*,' she said forcefully. 'Often when they come home at night they are so exhausted that they can hardly move. They set off every morning without exception. Even though they may sometimes moan a little they are so dedicated to their work that they subjugate their personal preferences to what they undoubtedly see as their greater responsibilities.'

'But what is it all for?' I demanded.

'It is all part of their superior lifestyle,' explained Lapsong II. 'They are, in evolutionary terms, far more advanced than any cat can ever hope to be.'

I think I have slowly come to understand some of what Lapsong II was saying.

We have no real responsibilities in our lives. We sit around all day. We sleep. We lie in the sun. We eat. We play. We sleep a little more. Even though we are perfectly capable of looking after ourselves we allow the Uprights to look after us. If the Uprights had not evolved then we would have to find our own shelter, we would have to hunt for all our own food every day and we would have no one to care for us, clean up after us or nurse us.

I am indeed convinced that evolution is an excellent thing. Though I confess that I am glad that I myself have not had to evolve.

March 30th

I'd been outside for most of the day when it suddenly started to rain.

When I ran indoors I had the shock of my life.

The whole living room had been changed around.

I thought at first that I had run into the wrong house.

But all the smells were right. There was the sofa that Thomasina sleeps on. And the chair that I like.

And I could smell both our Uprights.

I went back into the kitchen just to make sure that I was in the right house. And sure enough everything was there in the right place. The kitchen table was still in the middle of the floor. And our food bowls and water bowl were still by the side of the Cold Cupboard.

I went back into the living room and looked around slowly.

Everything had moved.

The sofa and the chairs and the tables were all in different positions. And the carpet smelt very strange. It smelt a bit like the Upright who wears a Skirt when she has been in the bathroom for hours.

When the Upright in Trousers came in a little later he had a shock too. I could tell that he didn't know what to make of it. But he recovered well and put a brave face on it. When the Upright who wears a Skirt came into the room he went over to her and said how nice it all looked.

I'm still not sure why everything has been moved. But if he doesn't mind then I don't really see why I should. After all, it isn't as if anything important has actually disappeared.

"Within the space of no more than five minutes George had successfully hooked three fish out of the water."

March 31st

George invited Thomasina and me to accompany him on a hunting trip this evening. He told us that he had found a garden about a quarter of a mile away where the Uprights have built a pond and stocked it with dozens of goldfish.

It was the first time either Thomasina or I have been fishing.

George said that the best way to catch fish is to lie down close to the pond's edge and to put one paw just below the surface of the water. Then, when a goldfish swims by, it is possible to reach out and 'strike' without splashing and alarming the fish unduly.

It was amazing to watch him at work. Within the space of no more than five minutes he successfully hooked three good sized fish out of the water. Thomasina and I were both very impressed.

But it was only when Thomasina and I tried that we realised just how skilled George really was. When Thomasina tried to catch her first fish she made the mistake of holding her paw just above the surface of the water rather than just below it. I suspect that she did this because she hates getting her fur wet and she wanted to delay the dreadful moment for as long as possible.

The result was that when she struck down at her chosen fish the splash that her paw made startled the fish so much that it swam away. To make matters worse Thomasina had put so much effort behind her strike that when her paw failed to collide with the fish she overbalanced. She didn't fall completely into the pool but the whole of her right front leg and right shoulder got absolutely soaked. So too did her face and head from the splash that she made.

I tried next.

And I am afraid that I was no more successful than Thomasina. I did manage to scratch the side of the fish but all I obtained for my trouble were a few scales underneath my claws.

George was very kind. He said that fishing was an acquired skill and that we shouldn't feel too bad about it. He said he'd give us one more demonstration before we tried again.

'Then,' he said, 'we'll have a splendid fish supper.'

But before George could move back into position by the pond there was a strange noise behind us.

Both Thomasina and I looked round but could see nothing.

But George knew exactly what it was.

'Follow me,' he hissed. 'As fast as you can.'

Thomasina and I hesitated for just a moment but the tone of George's voice told us that we should obey him without question. So we ran, jumped the garden fence and disappeared among the long grasses in the next door neighbour's garden.

As we lay there in the long grass Thomasina and I looked at George with some surprise. George is one of the bravest cats I know. He isn't the sort of fellow to run away without just cause. We both wanted to know what the danger was.

'The Upright who lives there has an airgun,' explained George. 'I've been hit once or twice and it stings.' He explained that the Upright shoots from one of his bedroom windows and never gives any warning. 'When he misses, you can hear the pellets hissing through the air and then plopping into the earth,' explained George. He sighed and shook his head. 'What a shame,' he said sadly, 'I left three fish on the grass all ready for eating.'

Thomasina and I expressed our disappointment but told him that we had at least enjoyed the lesson and were grateful for the opportunity to watch him in action.

I didn't mention the fact that I don't like fish. Somehow I suspect that George would not have understood.

April 2nd

Penelope's kittens have acquired many of her mannerisms and watching her kittens follow her across the lawn today I was reminded of a lovely story about a cat called Lavinia who lived not far from here five or six years ago. I was told this story by George and so I'm sure it's true.

When she was young, Lavinia was involved in a rather nasty car accident on the busy road outside the house where she lived. She was run over and badly crushed and as a result lost her left front paw and part of her left front foreleg. Consequently she walked on her three good legs. As she walked (or half walked and half hopped) she kept the stump of her left foreleg held in front of her, partly to keep it out of the way and partly to use it to help her retain her balance.

By the time she got pregnant for the first time Lavinia had grown perfectly accustomed to her own rather unusual gait. Neither she nor any of her friends nor the Uprights who lived with her thought there was anything in the slightest bit unusual about the way she moved.

But Lavinia's friends and Uprights were surprised when they saw the way that Lavinia's kittens walked.

For every single one of them walked in exactly the same way that Lavinia walked. Even though they all had four perfect limbs they all walked with their left front forelegs and paws held high in front of them. They had learned to mimic Lavinia's strange, half walking, half hopping gait.

And according to George they all continued to walk like that even when they had grown up. And what's more, exactly the same thing happened to the subsequent kittens that Lavinia gave birth to.

'It was wonderful,' said George. 'You could always tell one of Lavinia's kittens when you saw it.'

'I've often wondered,' he mused, 'whether or not when her kittens had kittens they too walked in that rather unusual way.'

April 3rd

There were visiting Uprights here today. The Upright in Trousers was obviously keen to impress them. He scurried around making them drinks and giving them snacks and generally being attentive.

I felt so sorry for him that when he wanted to impress them by calling me over to sit on his lap I responded. He seemed really pleased and I felt good about it. He stroked my back, tickled me under the chin and told everyone there what a splendid cat I was.

But then one of the visiting Uprights wanted another drink and the Upright in Trousers picked me up and put me down on the floor simply so that he could attend to this insignificant request. I was not well pleased.

So when he sat down again and called me over to him I deliberately ignored him. Indeed, to rub in my displeasure, and to make sure that he realised exactly how I felt, I went and sat on the lap of a very elderly Upright with a shiny head.

I didn't stay long. He smelt of burning vegetation.

April 4th

Our Upright in Trousers spent the day at home today. Thomasina and I dread him having a day around the house. He seems quite incapable of having a pleasant, relaxed day without trying to rebuild the house or redesign the garden.

When I first realised that he was going to hang around I went outside to try to find a little peace and quiet down at the bottom of the garden. But I'd not been there more than twenty minutes when he appeared with a pile of old newspapers, a piece of old carpet and a box of matches. The stench from the resultant bonfire would have been enough to scare away anyone.

Retreating from the bottom of the garden I made my way into the garden shed. There is a huge family of mice living in the garden shed and it is an excellent hunting ground. I'd just got myself settled on an old jumper when the Upright in Trousers came rushing in to escape a short, sharp shower. He decided to have a clear out. If there is anything I hate it is spring cleans and clear outs. All the best trails were destroyed, three out of seven mouse runs were destroyed, four mouse nesting sites were disturbed and my favourite jumper was thrown out.

First the garage and now the shed. Is nothing sacred?

From the garden shed I went indoors and settled down on the sofa. I swear that I hadn't been there for more than ten minutes when he came in and switched on the television. Normally I don't mind the television at all. It keeps the Uprights amused for hours. But in the middle of the afternoon? I found it very annoying.

And so it went on. I have noticed before that the Uprights are at their most troublesome when they haven't got enough to do. The truth is that they get bored far too easily and just aren't very good at idling.

By late afternoon I'd been back outside twice and had still failed to find any peace. I decided to go upstairs and lie down on the bed, thinking that I'd be safe there. Surely, I thought, the Uprights won't come into the bedroom in the daytime, however bored they get.

I couldn't have been more wrong. Within half an hour the two Uprights had come into the bedroom and climbed into bed. In broad daylight! At first I was determined to sit it out but it was like trying to get to sleep in a rowing boat in a hurricane. I gave up and went back outside to the rhododendron bush at the bottom of the garden.

I do hope that he doesn't decide to have many more unexpected days at home.

April 6th

The Uprights bought us a large tin of pilchards today. At first I thought they were fish.

They look like fish. And they smell like fish.

But they can't be fish. Because I like them.

April 8th

Oscar really isn't the most popular of cats. He's the sort of tom who will eat a shrew (even though he absolutely hates the taste) rather than leave it lying around where another cat might have a little fun playing with it. He's not too particular about his personal hygiene either, and when it comes to a fight he's an out and out coward.

But despite all those faults he is a cat. And none of us likes to see a cat having a hard time. And poor old Oscar certainly has a hard time of it.

He lives with one of the most unpleasant Uprights I've ever met: an elderly, bad-tempered former policeman. Apparently he only agreed to share his home with Oscar (that's the way *he* sees it!) because he was having trouble with mice. He treats poor Oscar abominably. He never allows him into the house at night. He never gives him any food or water. He never shows him any sign of affection or respect.

Poor old Oscar. It's perhaps hardly surprising that he has hardly any of the usual social graces.

For months now Oscar has been talking of running away. But he's never really had the courage to do it.

But suddenly, two days ago, Oscar finally made the final decision. None of us knows exactly what happened. Some say that his Upright found mouse droppings in the kitchen and beat poor Oscar with an old shoe.

Anyway, whatever the truth of it might be, Oscar made his final decision. He was determined to leave.

‘I don’t know why it’s taken me so long to make my mind up,’ he said. ‘But now that I’ve finally made the decision I feel free.’

It was George who suggested that he wait for a while.

‘He sounds a really unpleasant person, your Upright,’ said George to Oscar.

Oscar nodded sadly.

‘And he really hates mice?’

‘He certainly does,’ agreed Oscar. ‘Mice, rats, shrews, voles, moles – he can’t stand any of them. That’s the only reason he didn’t throw me out.’

‘Then we should teach him a lesson,’ said George.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Oscar, puzzled.

And George outlined his plan. It was brilliantly conceived, on that we all agreed. And I’ll swear that poor old Oscar had tears in his eyes when he heard us all agree to take part in George’s scheme.

Oscar told us that his Upright is going away for a few weeks. When he gets back we will put George’s plan into operation.

April 10th

This afternoon I went round to see how Penelope is getting on with her kittens. I fear that she is not proving to be much of a mother.

All the time I was there her three kittens behaved in a most irresponsible and disrespectful manner, but not once did Penelope admonish them. One expects kittens to do a certain amount of playful romping but even though they may need some freedom in their formative years, young kittens do, I believe, also need boundaries. They need restrictions. After all, without boundaries what joys are there in freedom? The kitten who does not know what it is *not* allowed to do will get no pleasure from doing what it *is* allowed to do. Boundaries provide security, comfort and strength and yet at the same time they also provide kittens with the sweet pleasures that come from disobedience.

Penelope allows her kittens to do very much as they please. They are allowed to scratch and claw at the furniture and at one another. They are allowed to run up and down the curtains and try out their teeth and claws on the brocade upholstery of the best dining room suite that Penelope’s Uprights are so fond of. Penelope’s kittens will, I fear, grow up without any of the security that is provided by firm boundaries.

Just before we left, one of the kittens got lost while exploring in the garden. It took Penelope, Thomasina and I nearly three quarters of an hour to find it. I told Penelope that she really does have to give her kittens boundaries. If she insists on bringing up her family in this lackadaisical way then she is asking for trouble.

April 14th

I was terribly worried last night. I thought something dreadful had happened. The Uprights went off early in the day and by late evening still hadn’t come back.

Normally when they go out and know they aren’t going to get back until late they leave plenty of food out for Thomasina and me.

But there was nothing!

Thomasina was in a dreadful state and I had to pretend that I wasn’t worried. To try to keep her calm I said that I thought they’d probably stayed chatting with some other Uprights and I suggested that we go out and catch ourselves a couple of plump mice for our evening meal.

Thomasina couldn’t concentrate but I found a pair of young fieldmice (my favourite kind) and killed them both quickly because I thought she was hungry. But Thomasina wouldn’t touch hers. She was convinced that something terrible had happened.

So we both prowled around in the driveway listening for the sound of the Uprights returning.

‘If they come back safely I promise that I’ll always be loving and show them how much I care for them,’ said Thomasina. ‘I won’t ever be sick on their bed again. And I won’t use the bookcase to sharpen my claws.’

By the time it was really dark we were both in quite a state. Thomasina was absolutely convinced that we would never ever see either of them again. ‘They’ve had a crash,’ she insisted. ‘And I will miss them so much. They were the kindest and sweetest Uprights any cat ever lived with. We should have shown them more affection.’ By this time I’d given up pretending not to be worried. I was very upset too. In my heart I thought she was right and that we would never ever see either of them again.

They got back after midnight. We heard them when they were still half a mile away. When we saw that they were both all right we were very relieved.

As soon as he got out of the car the Upright in Trousers started whistling for us. He always whistles though I don’t know why he bothers. We can both recognise his footsteps a mile away. Then the Upright who wears a Skirt joined in.

Thomasina and I sat quite still in the darkness.

'I'm so glad they are safe,' Thomasina said. 'Come on, let's go and say 'hello'.

'I'm not going to make a fuss of them,' I said.

Thomasina looked at me in amazement. She knew that moments earlier I had been distraught with worry.

'Coming in at this time of night,' I said. 'It's not right. They ought to have known that we'd be worried. Not to mention hungry. It's thoughtless of them.' Reluctantly, Thomasina agreed with me.

'Let's go and catch some mice,' I said. 'I don't want them to know that I've been hanging around here all evening waiting for them to come back home.'

'OK,' said Thomasina. And we both crept quietly off into the darkness leaving the two Uprights whistling and calling mournfully into the darkness.

April 17th

Today Thomasina told me that she had heard that in an average sort of year an average sort of cat will kill 50 small animals – mice, voles, shrews and suchlike. Even allowing for the number of cats who never catch anything that seems a very low estimate to me. I'm sure that Thomasina and I catch that many in a month.

Still, I've never had much faith in statistics. Ever since I was told that the average cat has 3.996 legs.

April 20th

The Upright in Trousers was sitting out in the garden today. He stayed in a deckchair for well over an hour. He pretended to be asleep but he wasn't. His eyes were half open most of the time. I wonder if Uprights are thinking about anything when they sit like that. If so, I wonder *what* they are thinking? I don't suppose I shall ever know.

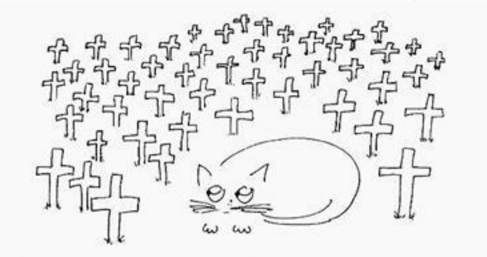

". . . in an average sort of year an average sort of cat will kill 50 small animals."

April 21st

Although Penelope has become an enthusiastic hunter she realises that she will never be a great hunter. She has no real natural skill and although she has practised hard she remains too clumsy, too noisy and to undisciplined to catch anything but the slowest of small rodents. Aware of all this, Penelope has started to train her kittens to hunt. Today I found her and her offspring waiting outside a shrew's hole at the bottom of their garden.

'I want my kittens to have opportunities that I never had,' she explained. 'I want them to be great mousers. Wouldn't it be wonderful if one of them ended up on a farm with real mousing responsibilities. Or in a hotel or restaurant kitchen.'

I told her that would be nice if that was what her kittens really wanted for themselves. But I pointed out to her that she shouldn't try to make her kittens live the sort of life she might have enjoyed.

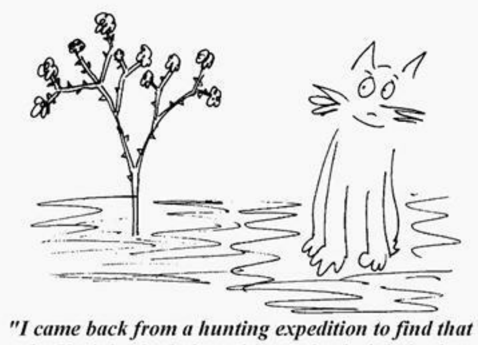

"I came back from a hunting expedition to find that the Uprights had planted a rose bush right in the middle of my main lavatory area."

May 1st

I came back from a hunting expedition down by the river to find that the Uprights had planted a rose bush right in the middle of my main lavatory area! It is a good job that I saw it during daylight hours. At night that rose bush could have given me a very nasty surprise. I wonder how the Uprights would like it if they came home one day and found a rose bush growing out of *their* lavatory?

May 3rd

Thomasina and I were playing with a large mouse today when suddenly a huge bird swooped down out of the sky and plucked the mouse up from where it lay between us.

A bird stole our mouse!

We couldn't believe it.

'What a cheek,' said Thomasina indignantly.

'I just hope it comes back again,' I said.

'I just can't get over it,' said Thomasina. 'A bird stealing food from us. And food that we'd caught too.'

'It won't do that again,' I promised. 'If it comes anywhere near me again I'll show it a thing or two.'

Just then there was a great fluttering sound above our heads. We both looked up and saw that the bird had indeed returned. Its huge talons were hovering just a few inches above Thomasina's head and it had the most vicious, hooked beak I have ever seen on a bird.

'It's back again,' hissed Thomasina. 'It's a hawk! What do you think it wants?'

'Us,' I muttered under my breath.

And we scampered back through the cat flap just as fast as our legs would carry us.

'I wasn't ready for it that time,' said Thomasina.

'It wasn't fair the way it just appeared out of nowhere like that,' I said.

'I could see that it was worried,' said Thomasina.

'It certainly didn't dare attack us,' I said.

'I think it was probably terrified of us,' said Thomasina.

'You're absolutely right,' I said. 'We showed it who's the boss.'

'Serves it right for stealing our mouse,' said Thomasina.

May 5th

I was in the bedroom today when I saw the Upright in Trousers at the window. He was standing on a ladder and seemed to be doing something to the window frame. Since the window was wide open I thought I'd pop out and say 'hello' to him.

I jumped up onto the window seat, onto the inside ledge and then stepped out onto the window sill.

As soon as I did I knew I'd made a mistake.

The Upright in Trousers screamed at me as loudly as he could and terrified the life out of me. He clearly didn't want my company. But worse than that was the fact that my feet felt all sticky. The window sill was covered in something horribly tacky and it covered my front paws completely. Because I never like going backwards I had to turn round before I could get back into the bedroom and to turn round I had to take my hind legs out of the window too. That meant that by the time I'd finished all four paws were covered in this horrible, white, sticky material.

Startled by all this I leapt back into the bedroom only to find that the Upright who wears a Skirt had come into the room while I'd been out on the window sill. She seemed horrified by something and chased me round and round the bedroom several times. It was terrible. Everywhere I went I could feel my paws sticking to things. They stuck to the dressing table, they stuck to the bedclothes, they stuck to the armchair in the corner of the room and they stuck to the top of the wardrobe too.

And it was there that I had to stay because the Upright who wears a Skirt had shut the bedroom door. And I certainly wasn't going to try going out through the window again.

It took me nearly two hours to clean all the sticky stuff off my paws. And it tasted absolutely awful. I don't know what it was but I'm glad I'm not a window sill. I'd hate to be completely covered in the stuff.

May 6th

I consider myself a well balanced cat, able to deal with most pressure and problems. Few things really worry me. But there is one thing that really makes my back arch and my tail bristle: and that is the way that the Uprights always turn the lights off when they leave the room, even if I'm still in there.

Last night, for example, I came in rather late for supper (I'd been trying in vain to catch a vole that I felt sure I'd got cornered) and toddled into the kitchen just at the moment when the Uprights were going to bed. They both stopped for a moment to tickle me under the chin and stroke the back of my head and then they were off, leaving me in the pitch dark to try to eat my evening meal.

I know exactly why they do it, of course. It's because they think that I can see in the dark. It's true, I can see in the dark. But I can't see all *that* well, and I really do prefer to have a good, clear view of what I'm eating.

May 7th

I watched Thomasina trying to catch her first mole today. She made the mistake that we all make: she tried to pull it out of its hole by its back legs. She failed, of course, because the mole's front spade-like paws are so good at digging that it pulls itself out of reach. The only way to catch moles is to take hold of them by their front legs and pull them out that way.

One day I think I'll write a book and include all these little tips and hints.

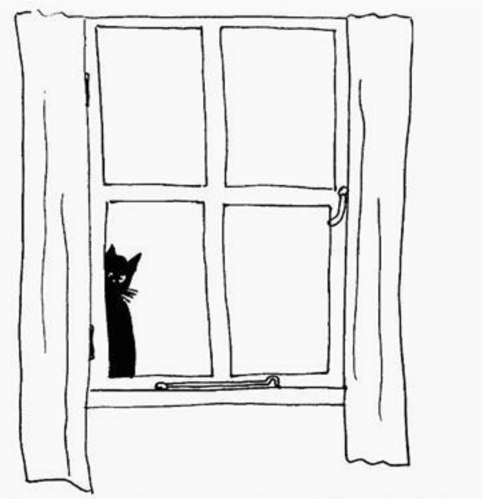

"I could get her to open the window simply by looking through the glass," said George.

May 10th

'Don't you ever wish that you lived with an Upright?' I asked George today.

'I have,' said George. 'Over the years I've lived with several Uprights.'

'Don't you like them?' I asked him.

'In many ways I'm very fond of them,' said George. 'But I just don't seem to be able to live comfortably with Uprights.'

'But they can be very useful if you train them properly,' I said. 'Don't you think so?'

George nodded wisely. 'If you can find the time and patience to train them properly they can be a wonderful boon to any cat,' he agreed. 'I remember living with an Upright whom I thought I'd really got very well trained. She put food down for me regularly twice a day. All I had to do was go and sit by the empty bowl and she'd follow, open a tin and fork out a good helping. I managed to train her to open the door whenever I wanted to go out. I could get her to open it and let me back in again by jumping onto the living room window sill and looking through the glass. That's all I had to do: just look into the room. And she'd be up to open the door within seconds.'

'It sounds as if you were very good with Uprights,' I told him.

'Oh, training them isn't really the problem,' said George. 'It's getting them to know when to stop. *That's* the problem. This Upright I've just been telling you about was easy enough to train, but she was always fussing over me. Whenever I was eating she would bend down and stroke me. I hate being stroked when I'm eating. I don't know why but it just drives me mad. I'm sure she was just being loving and showing that she cared for me. But I couldn't stand it. And she was just as bad when I was trying to sleep. She couldn't leave me alone. I'd curl up on her lap for a snooze and she would just keep on stroking and tickling, stroking and tickling and tickling and stroking. There wasn't even a pattern to it, anything you could get used to. And however comfortable I am I just can't get to sleep when someone is doing all that to me.'

'Mine do that sometimes,' I said. 'But it's just the way Uprights are, isn't it?'

'Absolutely,' agreed George. 'I'm not suggesting that there was anything wrong with the Uprights I lived with. I'm quite prepared to admit that it was my fault. But the fact remains that I just can't live comfortably with an Upright.'

'Don't you miss having Uprights around all the time?' I asked.

'Not really,' said George. 'But then in some ways I've got the best of both worlds haven't I? There are lots of Uprights round here who put food out for me and give me titbits when I call by. But I don't owe them anything. I don't feel that I have to let them stroke me while I'm eating, or tickle me while I'm sleeping.'

I can understand George's point of view. But I don't think I would like his lifestyle. I rather like having one set of

Uprights to look after me. All things considered we get on very well together. They get on my nerves a little sometimes. And I'm sure I'm a disappointment to them occasionally. But when you have a long-term relationship with a pair of Uprights there is something special that enables you to overlook these little problems.

May 11th

Penelope came racing round this morning in a terrible state.

'Jerry Junior has disappeared,' she cried, in great distress. 'I woke up this morning and he'd gone.'

I asked her how she knew he hadn't just wandered off and got lost in the garden.

'He's too bright to just go and get lost,' she insisted. 'Oh, Alice,' she said. 'I think he's run away.'

I told her not to be so silly and promised that Thomasina and I would help her find young Jerry Junior before anything happened to him.

In order to increase our chances of success the three of us set off in different directions. Penelope headed North, Thomasina went East and I went West. We decided that it was unlikely that Jerry Junior would have gone South because that route would take him right onto the main road.

We spent the best part of the day searching for him. And in the end I found him hiding in an old garden shed at the bottom of the Cottage Hotel. He was tired, hungry and frightened.

'I don't want to come back,' said Jerry Junior defiantly, when I asked him to follow me home.

I sat down beside him and asked him to tell me what was troubling him.

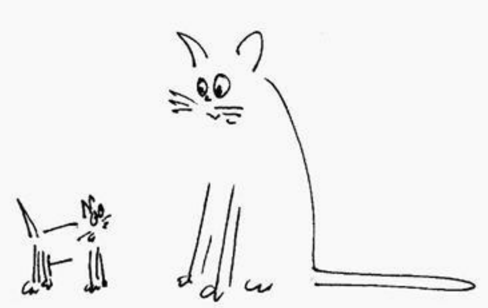

"I sat down beside Jerry Junior and asked him to tell me what was troubling him."

'It's the hunting,' said Jerry Junior. 'I'm no good at it. And I don't think I ever will be. But Mum is so keen for me to become a great hunter. I just feel that I'm letting her down all the time. And I can't stand it any more. I think it would be better if I didn't go back.'

'Don't be silly,' I told him. 'Your mother loves you and misses you dreadfully. She's out searching for you now.'

'I know she loves me,' said Jerry Junior. 'But that just makes it worse. I just feel that I'm letting her down even more.'

'A few months ago your mother knew nothing about hunting,' I told him. 'It's only in the last few weeks that she's really learned the skills of hunting herself. I think she's very conscious of what she has missed and of the opportunities that have been lost to her. She wants to make sure that you don't miss out. She wants you to have the chances that she never had. She wants your life to be as exciting and as rewarding as possible.'

'I appreciate that,' said Jerry Junior. 'And in a way I appreciate what she's doing for me. I know she's doing it for my sake. But she expects too much. She's pushing me too hard. I realise that it will be useful if I can hunt, but there are other things I want to do. I like watching the Uprights, I like going for walks, I like smelling the flowers.'

'You also have to understand that your mother desperately wants you to be independent,' I explained. 'If you learn how to hunt then you can look after yourself. You won't ever need to rely on Uprights for food. Your mother has had a bit of a hard time in the last few years. Her Uprights haven't always been kind to her and I know that on several occasions she's been close to leaving them. But she's never been able to leave because she hasn't been able to hunt. She knows how frustrating that has been for her and she doesn't ever want you to be in that position. She wants you to have enough independence to be able to live your own life.'

'But she's not letting me live my own life,' insisted Jerry Junior. 'She makes us all get up early in the morning and go on training runs. Then we're at it all day long and way into the night. It's all too much for me, really it is.'

'Come back with me and I promise that I'll talk to your mother,' I told him. 'I'll try to talk some sense into her. I'll try to persuade her to let up on you.'

'Would you?' asked Jerry Junior hopefully. 'That would be wonderful.'

'You'll still have to do some hunting practice,' I told him. 'I doubt if I'll be able to persuade your mother to let you give up hunting lessons completely. And even if I could I don't think I would. I also think it is important that you learn your basic hunting skills.'

'If she'd just take the pressure off a little,' said Jerry Junior, standing up unsteadily and moving towards me.

'I'm sure she will,' I said. 'It's getting late now. Let's get you back home and tomorrow morning I promise I'll have a long chat with your mother.'

Twenty five minutes later an exhausted young Jerry Junior and a tearful Penelope were cuddling and licking each other enthusiastically.

'I'm so grateful,' said Penelope, lifting her head for a moment. 'Really I am.'

'Then you owe me a favour,' I said to her.

'Anything,' agreed Penelope.

'Meet me down by our greenhouse first thing tomorrow morning,' I said to her. 'You and I have got to have a long chat about things.'

Penelope looked a little surprised, but promised to meet me as I'd asked.

May 12th

True to her promise Penelope met me by the greenhouse this morning. She was already there when I arrived just as the sun was rising.

'Thank you for finding Jerry Junior,' said Penelope. 'I don't know what I'd have done if you hadn't found him.'

'Have you talked to Jerry yet?' I asked her.

Penelope shook her head. 'We went straight to sleep last night. Besides, I thought you might have something you wanted to say to me before I talked to him.'

'Do you know why he ran away from home?' I asked her.

Penelope shook her head.

'Are you sure you don't know?' I asked.

There was silence for a moment. 'Well, I have one or two ideas,' she admitted.

'Such as?'

'I've been pushing him too hard haven't I?' she said. 'I was so keen for him to become a good hunter. So keen for him to become truly independent.'

'He's a conscientious and loving kitten,' I told her. 'He desperately wants to please you. But he feels he is a failure.'

'Of course he isn't a failure,' interrupted Penelope.

'You know that. And I know that,' I said to her. 'But Jerry Junior doesn't know that. Whatever you may think about him he feels a failure. He feels that he has let you down.'

'Oh dear,' said Penelope, starting to cry. 'I was never any good as a hunter. And now I'm no good as a mother either.'

'You're a rotten hunter, but you are an absolutely smashing mother,' I told her. 'It's just that you've been trying a bit too hard recently. You have to give your kittens a little breathing space. You've been putting too much pressure on young Jerry Junior.'

I explained to her that when cats put too much pressure on their kittens everyone feels disappointed. The kitten will be bound to rebel and the parent will be bound to feel aggrieved.

'Jerry Junior loves you a lot,' I told her. 'Try to pull back a little. And try to be more patient.'

By now Penelope was sobbing her heart out. 'Oh, I will Alice. Oh, I will,' she insisted.

And then I came home for breakfast.

May 15th

The Uprights were in a terrible state today. All morning they rushed around the house as though they had only a few minutes in which to avert some dreadful tragedy. Although we are naturally calm and phlegmatic, even Thomasina and I began to feel the tension. The air was thick with it.

In the end it turned out that they were rushing simply to get things ready for a visit from other Uprights.

How silly Uprights sometimes are. I really can't see what difference all that rushing made.

May 17th

Today I broke a vase. It was a complete accident. I jumped onto the mantelpiece and the vase just fell off. I don't think I touched it at all.

But the last time I broke a vase the Upright who wears a Skirt was furious. So this time I thought I'd stay out of the way for a while. Although it rained steadily all day I didn't go back into the house until it was absolutely pitch dark and the Uprights had been calling me for several hours.

Sure enough, when I finally got back they were so pleased to see me that nothing at all was said about the vase.

Not that it was really my fault anyway.

May 18th

Tonight is the night that Oscar leaves his Upright. And we all put George's plan into action.

There were nine of us. And we started preparing for it during the afternoon. By just after midnight we were all ready, waiting in the shrubbery just outside Oscar's front door.

Thomasina had caught a fieldmouse and a shrew. Both in excellent condition. She kept the shrew in her mouth and the fieldmouse under control by repeated taps on the side of its head.

George had brought a large brown rat that was only partly subdued. Twice it tried to escape and George had to chase after it and bring it back.

Oscar himself had a large brown mouse.

Penelope had a vole that she took care not to let out of her grasp. And her kitten Jerry Junior had the tiniest of tiny shrews.

Jeremy, a ferocious tom cat that everyone except George feared, had brought a huge rabbit. But when George told him that a rat would be better he let the rabbit go, disappeared and came back less than half an hour later with the biggest brown rat I've ever seen.

Sooty and Lapsong II had both brought mice and I had a mouse too. It was quite an impressive collection of rodent wildlife.

We must have looked a strange sight as we followed Oscar around to the back of the house. There we followed silently as Oscar climbed first onto a dustbin, then onto a window ledge and finally into the kitchen through a tiny window that had been left slightly open.

'He doesn't usually leave any windows open at all at night,' said Oscar. 'But I was sick all over the floor this afternoon and I knew he'd leave a window open to let the place air a little.'

Less than five minutes later we were all standing in the kitchen.

And then, after a nod from George, we all released our prey. For a moment or two the mice, the rats, the shrews and the vole all stood quite still, getting their bearings. It must have been quite a puzzle for them. And then one of the rats made a dash for the door which led out of the kitchen and into the hallway. Within seconds he'd disappeared. And within another twenty seconds so had all the rest of the menagerie. All in hiding.

Moving as quietly as we could we all trooped back out through the kitchen window. Poor young Jerry Junior couldn't make the jump down from the window sill to the dustbin and had to be helped by George.

Moving in single file we paraded down the garden path, over the garden gate and out into the street beyond. And there, after bidding Oscar farewell and good luck, we headed for home.

May 21st

There was nothing but those crunchy things for breakfast this morning. It seems that the Uprights forgot to buy any cans of food. Those crunchy things are all right in an emergency. But for breakfast?

In despair Thomasina and I went out hunting. She caught a mouse and I caught a shrew.

I hate shrew even more than I hate those crunchy things.

May 23rd

Sometimes I wonder what it is all about. Why are we here? What are we doing? Who put us here? And why? I wonder if other cats dwell on these things. Several times today I almost broached the subject with Thomasina. But although she is my dearest friend I didn't. I was, I supposed, worried that she might think me foolish.

May 27th

I was daydreaming on the bedroom window seat this evening when the Upright in Trousers came into the room carrying a step-ladder. He put the ladder into position, climbed up it, pushed open part of the ceiling and disappeared.

At first I thought I was still dreaming. It seemed such an unlikely eventuality.

But when I jumped down from the window seat and strolled across the room I could see that there really was a step-ladder standing there. And there really was a hole in the ceiling.

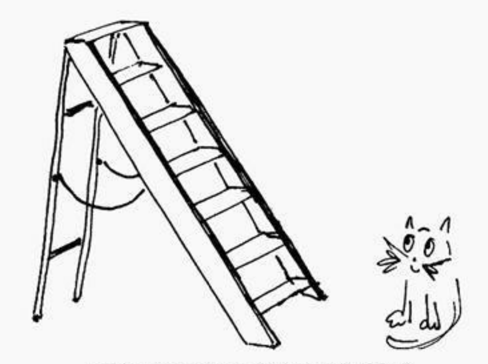

"The temptation was irresistible."

The temptation was irresistible. I climbed up the steps until I was on top of the step-ladder and looked up through the ceiling. It was very dark and I couldn't see anything at all. Bravely, I leapt up onto the ledge that surrounded the hole.

About ten or twelve feet away I could see the Upright in Trousers moving about with a torch in his hand so I wandered over towards him. There were all sorts of interesting looking boxes strewn around.

I saw a huge cardboard box that the television set had come in and that Thomasina had played in for hours. And I spotted the two wicker baskets that the Uprights bought for us to sleep in when we were small.

I've gone over what happened next many times in my mind. But I can't think of an explanation. I had picked my way carefully across the floor between the boxes and I suddenly found myself no more than an inch or two away from the Upright in Trousers. He was sitting on his haunches holding the torch with one hand and rummaging through a small cardboard box with the other. Not wanting to disturb him, but anxious to let him know that I was there, I reached out and rubbed my head against his thigh.

That's all I did. I just rubbed my head against his thigh.

His response was, to say the least, dramatic. He dropped the torch, screamed out loud and jumped up into the air.

Unfortunately, the ceiling just there wasn't high enough and he cracked his head against a beam. That made him scream even louder. The torch had gone out when it had fallen and so the whole area was in total darkness.

I was still wondering what had happened when the Upright in Trousers, who had been staggering about after the blow to his head, suddenly lurched to one side and disappeared up to his waist.

He screamed again, and this time I decided that it would probably be best if I got out of his way. So I trotted over to the hole I'd jumped up through, stepped down onto the ladder and wandered back down to the bedroom.

Up above me I could still hear the Upright in Trousers screaming and shouting. And as I left the bedroom I happened to glance up and saw his slippered feet and trousered legs poking through the ceiling above me.

It was all too exciting, and since there clearly wasn't going to be any peace in the bedroom for some time I wandered out for a snooze under the willow tree.

June 3rd

I wonder why it is that Uprights always want to pick cats up.

How would they like it if huge hands came down from the sky and scooped them into the air?

They'd probably feel uncomfortable, even frightened.

Well, that's exactly how I feel.

All Uprights do it. Some, it seems to me, can hardly walk past a cat without wanting to bend down and pick it up.

Our Upright in Trousers does it all the time.

If they stopped and thought about it they would realise that if a cat really wanted to be up in their arms it would jump up there. It wouldn't wait to be picked up.

But Uprights don't always think before they act.

P.S. I've just re-read the above entry. I should perhaps explain that I am feeling rather edgy and bad-tempered today. I had a thorn in my paw yesterday and it took ages to lick it out. The site still hurts a little. And then this morning an Upright came to visit and the first thing he did was pick me up. My paw landed on his shoulder with a terrible thump and the pain was still pretty terrible when I wrote that last entry.

June 10th

The Upright who smells of Jasmine came to our house today. I was delighted.

It is a long time since I last saw her. But I could remember her smell the instant she walked in through the door.

I rubbed myself round her legs to let her know that I was pleased to see her and then, as soon as she sat down, jumped onto her lap.

The one thing I have never forgotten about the Upright who smells of Jasmine is her lap. I think she has one of the most comfortable laps it has ever been my pleasure to sit upon.

I have talked at length about laps to both Thomasina and George and they both agree with me that a good lap is something very special. All Uprights have laps, of course. But it is relatively rare to find a really good, comfortable lap to sit on.

By and large we all prefer to sit on laps belonging to Uprights who wear Skirts.

It is never very fair to generalise, but on the whole I have discovered (and both Thomasina and George agree with me on this) that an Upright in Trousers tends to fidget far more than an Upright who wears a Skirt. And if there is one thing that I can't stand it is a fidgety lap. There's nothing worse than settling down for a quiet, warm, comfortable snooze and then finding yourself being shaken from side to side like a tambourine.

Of course, it's not just the fidgeting that is annoying. Uprights in Trousers are also far more likely to suddenly start reading the newspaper or magazine than are Uprights who wear Skirts.

The ordinary Upright who wears a Skirt may knit or crochet a little. But she will do nothing more than give a cursory glance at a newspaper. On the other hand, an Upright in Trousers will fiddle and fidget and open and shut his newspaper with very little concern for the cat who is trying to get to sleep on his lap.

Not that fidgeting is the only difference. The lap belonging to an Upright who wears a Skirt will, generally speaking, be much softer and warmer than a lap belonging to an Upright in Trousers.

I do have to confess that my feelings about laps are coloured by the fact that a couple of years ago, when I was nothing but a kitten, I sat down on the lap of an Upright who was smoking. At the time I didn't think anything of it.

But this was destined to be a special occasion. For unbeknown to me, the smoker had let some hot ash fall onto my fur and after I had been sitting on his lap for a few moments I suddenly heard the cry 'Fire!'. Out of the corner of my eye I could see smoke arising from somewhere behind me. Only a few seconds later did I suddenly start to smell burning fur.

If I had been alone I wouldn't have panicked. I would have gone quietly outside, found some damp grass and rolled over and over a few times until the fire had been put out.

But the Uprights who were with me panicked.

And before I knew what was happening I was doused with a whole bucket full of water. It was a terrible experience. At the time I think I would have been happier if they'd let me burn to death. I hate water. And to have a bucket full of it thrown over you is not a pleasant feeling.

But all that was in the past.

Today I spent a very pleasant couple of hours sitting on the wonderfully soft and comfortable lap of the Upright who smells of Jasmine.

June 12th

Two strange Uprights have been staying with us for a few days. I always hate visitors. They cause so much disruption and destroy our routine. Normally the Upright in Trousers gets up at 7.30 in the morning and puts out our food before he does anything else. When there are visiting Uprights in the house he always makes them a cup of tea first. Inevitably that means that it is 8 o'clock before we're fed. And I hate having to wait for breakfast. The same thing applies in the afternoon too. The Upright who wears a Skirt normally feeds us at 5.30. But when there are strangers in the house she's always busy looking after them and Thomasina and I have to hang around the kitchen and wait until she can find a moment or two in which to open a can and fork out a plateful of nourishment.

It's not only mealtimes which get disrupted. There are a host of other annoying things too. Visiting Uprights invariably want to sit on my favourite chair. They shut doors that should be left open. And some of them have very peculiar ideas about how cats should be treated.

So, for example, one of the Uprights who has been staying this time spent hours this morning trying to teach me tricks. He had found a marble and he kept throwing it across the living room floor. It was perfectly clear that he expected me to rush after it and take it back to him, so I did it just once to make him feel good. Even though I don't like visitors very much I do feel that one has a responsibility to be sociable and welcoming.

But once wasn't enough. He kept trying the same trick time and time again, and I certainly wasn't going to waste the morning running round the living room just so that he could feel good. Once is fair enough, but what is the point of doing something time and time again?

What really made me angry was the comment he made afterwards. Our Upright in Trousers came into the room after he'd thrown the marble about a thousand times and the visitor grinned at him and said: 'I've been trying to teach your cat a little trick. I thought she'd got it because she did it once, but it must have been a lucky break.'

I was annoyed because the Upright clearly believed that I wasn't intelligent enough to learn his little trick! I couldn't believe his cheek!

Uprights like that really do annoy me. They are the sort of Uprights who assume that because dogs can do tricks they are intelligent. It really is the most nonsensical argument. Dogs aren't intelligent. They are obedient. And there is a vast difference between the two. I could learn any number of tricks if I wanted to learn tricks and show off. But that's not my nature. And it's not the nature of any self-respecting cat. We don't not learn tricks because we're dumber than dogs but because we're brighter than them.

Why on earth would anyone want to spend the morning racing around picking up a marble time and time again?

June 14th
It was very sunny today. I slept behind the hydrangeas.

June 16th
I wonder if I was perhaps born with less zeal than I should have. If I had to say what my favourite occupation is I would have to say sleeping. Today I woke up twice. Once for breakfast. And once for supper.

June 18th
The warmest day of the year. I spent it sitting underneath the willow tree. In the evening I discovered that an army of ants had swarmed all over me. It is going to take me days to get them all out of my fur.

June 19th
Thomasina has been helping me get rid of the ants. She says that she quite likes the taste of them. I think it must be an acquired taste.

June 20th
Twice this week the Uprights have taken mice that I have brought into the house. I don't mind this too much. We are, after all, members of the same family. But today I decided that it was about time that they learned how to catch their own mice.

To start with I needed a mouse for teaching purposes. And as always when you want one there isn't one to be seen anywhere. It took me hours to find one and when I finally did manage to corner one and bring it inside, the Uprights had both gone upstairs to sleep. But some things are more important than sleep – and mouse catching is one of them.

Holding it lightly in my mouth so as not to damage it too much I took the mouse upstairs into the bedroom. There I put it down on the carpet, held it still with one paw and miaowed loudly to wake them up.

It took what seemed like a lifetime and my paw was beginning to get tired, but eventually the Upright in Trousers sat up, rubbed his eyes and switched on the bedside lamp.

I don't know why, but I hadn't expected that, and the sudden burst of light startled me so much that I lifted my paw and released the mouse.

However, I did have enough presence of mind to realise that this gave me an excellent opportunity to offer a little realistic hunting practice. So I miaowed loudly to alert the Upright and attract his attention and then I dived under the bed after the mouse.

As soon as I got under the bed I realised that I had an enormous task in front of me. Not thinking of the difficulties they would create, the Uprights had pushed all sorts of rubbish underneath the bed. There were old cardboard boxes, blankets, shoes, a camp bed and an electric blanket. It all goes to show just how little Uprights know about mice! I couldn't see or hear the mouse anywhere. I couldn't even smell him very well because someone had kicked a tin of talcum powder under the bed and the whole area reeked of a sickly sweet perfume. I lay very still and tried to keep as quiet as possible so that I would be able to hear him moving.

But up above me the Uprights were behaving terribly. The Upright in Trousers had seen the mouse I'd brought and had woken the Upright who wears a Skirt. Both of them were so excited that they were making enough noise to make tracking an elephant impossible. The Upright in Trousers was shouting, the Upright who wears a Skirt was screaming and the bedsprings were twinging and twanging mercilessly.

I miaowed to tell them to be quiet but it didn't have any useful effect at all. Indeed, if anything, it made matters worse. So I wriggled out backwards from underneath the bed, jumped up onto the bedclothes and miaowed even more loudly at them, begging them to stop the noise they were making. Any six-week-old kitten would have known what I was saying.

Not my Uprights though. The Upright who wears a Skirt scrambled up out of the bed and stood on tip toes, holding her nightdress around her body. The Upright in Trousers is usually a mite more courageous but even he seemed alarmed.

Meanwhile I had no idea where the mouse had got to and because I didn't want to lose it after having spent so long catching it in the first place I jumped off the bed and wriggled back underneath.

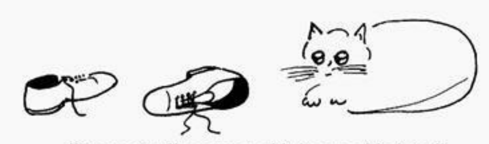

"I eventually cornered it in an old shoe."

It took me the best part of an hour to find it. But I eventually cornered it in an old shoe. It was hiding down in the toe but I managed to hook it out with a claw without too much difficulty. Feeling quite pleased with myself I picked the mouse up in my mouth and wriggled back out from underneath the bed. Now, I thought, I'll be able to start their mouse catching lessons.

But both the Uprights had disappeared. There wasn't a sign of them in the bedroom and what was worse, the bedroom door was firmly shut. Through the thin partition wall I could hear them settling down on the spare bed.

At first I thought they had probably just got bored and given up. But on thinking about it I realised that this was almost certainly their way of letting me have the mouse for myself. They probably felt guilty for taking two mice off me already this week. Sometimes Uprights really can be thoughtful. I was quite touched and made a mental note to get them another mouse very soon.

June 23rd

Because Thomasina has worms the Uprights decided that we both must have the treatment. I don't know why they insist on treating both of us when only one of us is ill. It really doesn't make much sense to me. I have watched carefully to see if the Uprights do this to one another. And I am convinced that they do not.

As it happens it didn't matter too much because as usual I managed to avoid the medicine. I can always tell when they're going to try to give me something that will be good for me! They start by putting a large wooden tray across the cat flap. It's always the same large wooden tray and the Upright in Trousers always looks terribly pleased with himself when he's got it in position and has assured himself that I'm safely trapped in the house.

Then the Upright who wears a Skirt starts to make a tremendous fuss of me. She picks me up, cuddles me, strokes my head, tickles me under the chin and makes those awful noises that Uprights often use when they are talking to cats, dogs and very little Uprights. While she's making a fuss of me the Upright in Trousers is busy opening a tin of my favourite food. After putting the food into a dish he then tries to break up the tablet he wants me to take and sprinkle it onto the food. This, I might point out, is the only time I get to eat by myself without having to share a dish with Thomasina!

Then, when he's finished, he'll take me from the Upright who wears a Skirt and put me down right in front of the food.

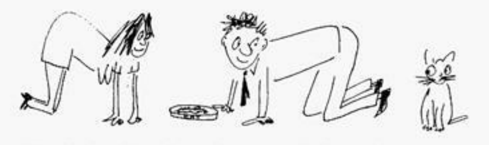

"Both the Uprights began to behave in a most alarming and unusual way."

At that point both the Uprights will begin to behave in a most alarming and unusual way. The Upright who wears a Skirt will usually kneel down on the floor and sniff at the food. She'll turn, smile at me and lick her lips. She seems to be telling me how tasty the food is. But I know how tasty the food is. It's the medicine I'm worried about. The Upright in Trousers will stoop or kneel and try exactly the same thing.

To please them I'll nibble away at those lumps of food that haven't got chunks of tablet half buried in them. And to be honest it isn't at all difficult to avoid most, if not all, of the tablet. By this time the Uprights are usually so exhausted that they're happy to leave it all until tomorrow. And tomorrow is always another day.

"The vole didn't move. So I reached out and patted it on the head."

June 28th

This morning I decided it was time I tried once again to teach the Uprights how to hunt. The last time I tried things did not go well. But it worries me sometimes that they are so incapable of catching their own food.

I spent some time looking for a suitable practice victim and eventually settled on a rather lethargic little vole. It was one of those sad little creatures that one finds from time to time. Born with no fire or purpose or ambition it made only a half-hearted attempt to escape when I had it cornered. To be honest I could have caught it with my eyes shut.

When I took the vole into the living room both the Uprights were sitting down listening to the television.

The Upright who wears a Skirt was the first to see what I had in my mouth. Straight away she got overexcited. I don't know what it is about her but she gets into a terrible state whenever she sees a mouse, a shrew or a vole. I suspect that she just can't control herself when she knows that there is going to be a hunt.

She started to run around the living room making a terrible noise. The Upright in Trousers responded instantly. He jumped up and moved quickly towards me with his arms outstretched.

I have to confess that I was disappointed in both of them. The Upright who wears a Skirt is undoubtedly enthusiastic, indeed I don't think I've ever seen anyone get quite so excited by the prospect of a hunt, but she doesn't stop to think. The noise she was making would have warned every creature within a mile radius that there was something about to happen.

And the Upright in Trousers wasn't much better. You have to plan a hunt carefully and thoughtfully. Just rushing at something never works.

Actually, they could have learned a thing or two from the television. It carried on talking and ignored me completely.

I decided that if I didn't allow them to get on with it they would never learn anything, so I let the vole go and backed away from it.

What a mistake that was.

The Upright in Trousers jumped back and the Upright who wears a Skirt leapt onto the sofa. I could hardly believe my eyes. They seemed to be frightened of it. Frightened of a vole. Can you imagine that?

The vole didn't move. It stayed exactly where it was. So I patted it gently on the top of its head to remind it that even though it might have nothing to worry about from the Uprights I was still there.

That did the trick.

The vole suddenly dashed forwards, turned at a right angle and disappeared under the sofa.

The Upright who wears a Skirt didn't like that one little bit. She leapt down from the sofa, ran across the room and climbed up into one of the straight backed chairs. And the Upright in Trousers reached down into the magazine rack and picked out a newspaper which he proceeded to roll into a tight tube.

Then, while the Upright who wears a Skirt moaned and whimpered on her chair, the Upright in Trousers knelt down and poked his rolled up newspaper underneath the sofa. I wish he could have seen himself. What a silly fellow he is sometimes.

There was absolutely nothing to be done until the vole decided to pop its head out again. Hunting requires patience and cunning, thought and planning. Clumsiness and rolled up newspapers aren't likely to get you anywhere.

Attempting to calm them down a little and show them just how they should do it, I strolled over to the sofa and sat down patiently to wait for the vole to emerge from its hiding place. It had to come out sometime. I knew that. And the vole knew that.

But then the Upright in Trousers did the most astonishing and ungrateful thing. He picked me up, carried me across the room and threw me into the kitchen.

I couldn't believe it!

I'd taken the vole into the living room purely and simply to help teach them how to hunt. And here they were refusing my help and insisting on doing it all themselves.

As the noise from the living room grew I waited with rising impatience for them to let me back into the living room again. But the door remained firmly closed.

Eventually I gave up and went back outside again. Even outside I could hear the crashing and banging of furniture as they raced around trying to catch the vole.

Sometimes I despair about Uprights.

July 4th

'If you had to choose,' said Thomasina this morning, 'which would you prefer: living here without the Uprights or living somewhere else with the Uprights?'

The question sent a cold chill down my spine and made my tail fur stand on end.

'What a strange question,' I replied. 'Why would I have to choose.'

'Because,' explained Thomasina, 'the Uprights have been packing their belongings for three days now. I think we might be about to move.'

I was so shocked that I didn't say anything.

All sorts of strange feelings and thoughts raced through my mind.

I love our home. It is full of warm spots and contains dozens of exciting nooks and crannies. And I love our garden too. Over the months I have learnt where the best mice can be found, which trees I can climb without getting stuck, where to hide to catch the juiciest spiders and where best to catch the sun.

But I am fond of our Uprights too. I know that they are only Uprights but I've grown very attached to them. Sometimes they can be a little annoying but they are kindly creatures. They mean well and I know that they always have our best interests at heart.

'I'd go with the Uprights,' I said at last.

'Me too,' said Thomasina. 'But I hope they take the bed with them. It's very comfortable. And I'd miss the greenhouse. And I hope we don't move before I've caught that shrew I spotted in the rockery the other day!'

July 5th

Since Thomasina mentioned it to me it has become increasingly clear that the date of our move cannot be far away. The Uprights spent nearly all day filling suitcases. And there were clothes strewn all over the bedroom for hours.

I can't understand why the Uprights have so many belongings. The Upright who wears a Skirt must have dozens of different outfits and the Upright in Trousers is just as bad. Not that it's just clothes that they seem to collect. There are thousands of books scattered around the house and in the kitchen there are cupboards full of cups and plates and knives and forks. They hardly ever have more than two or perhaps four visitors and yet they have enough crockery to cope with an invading army of thousands.

Why do they need all these things? What are they for, I wonder.

July 6th

The Little Upright who lives next door had a birthday party today. There were games out on the lawn and huge quantities of sandwiches, jellies and fizzy drinks were consumed.

If I had to be an Upright I would choose to be one of the Little variety, I think.

The Bigger Uprights seem to have far less fun. They are always busy doing chores and are for ever conscious of their responsibilities.

Thomasina says that the Little Uprights eventually grow up into Large Uprights. I find that difficult to believe. All other creatures become wiser and more independent as they grow older. Why should Uprights be so very different?

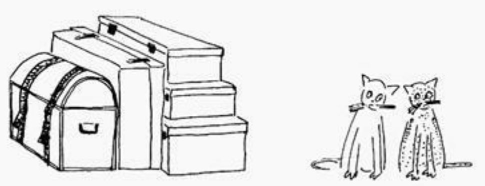

"I slowly realised what was happening. They were going to leave us."

July 7th

Thomasina woke me this morning by hitting me sharply on the side of my face.

'What's the matter?' I demanded sleepily.

'They're leaving,' said Thomasina, with a touch of desperation in her voice. 'The Uprights. They're going.'

I still didn't understand what she meant.

'The Uprights are moving house,' said Thomasina, licking my face to help me wake up faster.

Hardly believing what I was hearing I followed her out of the bedroom and down the stairs.

She was absolutely right. The Uprights were standing outside putting their suitcases into the back of their motor car.

My first thought was that it was a good job that Thomasina had woken me, because if she hadn't we would almost certainly have missed the move completely and been left behind by ourselves.

I ran up to the Upright in Trousers and brushed against his legs to remind him that I was there. Thomasina rubbed against the legs of the Upright who wears a Skirt.

She bent down and stroked Thomasina's head. And then with a sad look in her eyes she climbed into the motor car. The Upright in Trousers tickled me under the chin and then he too disappeared into the motor car.

It was only then that I slowly realised what was happening. They were going to leave us.

Thomasina and I had decided that we wanted to move with them. We'd never imagined that the Uprights would decide to move without us.

July 8th

The Uprights Thomasina and I had grown accustomed to think of as *our* Uprights had only been gone for a few hours when the new Uprights arrived.

We recognised them immediately. Both of them have been frequent visitors before but we'd always thought that it was because they were friends of our Uprights. We never thought they were planning to move in.

Since they arrived they have been very good to us, giving us fresh cream and all sorts of other delicacies. But Thomasina and I still find it difficult to believe that our Uprights should leave us with the house, passing us on to the next occupants like the curtains and the carpets.

July 10th

I caught a shrew. Thomasina caught a vole.

July 16th

I caught a vole. Thomasina caught nothing.

July 19th

Neither Thomasina nor I caught anything today. It rained a lot in the afternoon.

July 21st

I was sitting underneath the willow tree this afternoon when I heard something I thought I'd never hear again.

First, I heard a motor car arriving and then I heard footsteps that I recognised instantly. The Upright in Trousers and the Upright who wears a Skirt were back!

I raced up the garden, across the patio and into the front drive. And there they were! They looked a little browner than they had been when they'd left us. But they had all their bags with them.

I couldn't believe my ears or my eyes. And nor could Thomasina when she turned up on the scene a few moments later.

It was a joyful reunion. Thomasina and I both forgot the feelings of disappointment that we'd endured. Our Uprights were back. That was all that mattered.

I feel very happy tonight. I shall sleep well.

July 23rd

Penelope came round today in quite a state. She has suddenly decided that she doesn't like her shape.

'I'm far too fat,' she moaned. 'I put on a lot of weight when I was expecting the kittens. And I've never got my old figure back again.'

I told her that I thought she had a wonderful figure and that she should stop torturing herself.

I honestly don't think I've ever met a cat who has been entirely satisfied with her body. There is, it seems, always something that isn't quite right, something that spoils the overall effect and something that needs a little attention.

Cats who are long-haired always seem to want to have shorter hair. They talk enviously of the advantages of having short hair. And they moan endlessly about the problems of hair balls and staying cool in summer.

On the other hand, cats who are short-haired admire their long-haired friends. They talk about them with ill-disguised envy.

Cats with small snub noses always seem to want longer, sharper featured noses. Cats with sharp featured noses always want snub noses. Cats who are petite always want to be larger while cats who look like rolled up hearth rugs always want to be slight and slender. And all cats worry about their markings. A ginger cat would really prefer to be a mackerel tabby. A Siamese would prefer to be a jet black alley cat. And so on. Dissatisfaction, envy and jealousy are, it sometimes seem to me, normal feline occupations.

What we all tend to forget is that although the grass may seem greener in another field there are *always* weeds and cowpats and rabbit holes to contend with. The cat with a coat that would look skimpy on a peach sees only the obvious advantages of having a thick fur coat. She doesn't see the discomfort that can accompany such a wealth of fur.

The truth is that fur deep beauty is fragile. You could have the most perfect bone structure, the most luxuriant fur, the most captivating eyes and the most even whiskers and yet wander through life without causing more than a temporary ripple of envy and natural curiosity. For it is not appearance that makes a cat attractive, exciting, devastating and irresistible. It is the sparkle in her eyes, the softness and affection in her purr and the feeling that she cares and is interested that makes the most lasting and significant impression on everyone around.

Minor physical imperfections really do not matter. Truly magical beauty has nothing to do with a perfect nose or intriguing markings. Beauty is there inside each and every one of us. You only have to believe it for it to be visible.

I tried to explain all this to Penelope. But I do not think that she was convinced.

July 25th

Thomasina and I had a little fun with a visiting Upright this afternoon.

As soon as she arrived it was fairly clear that she didn't like us. So when she sat down we both made a tremendous fuss of her. Thomasina jumped up onto her lap and I lay down between her feet. She didn't even dare touch Thomasina who had a wonderfully peaceful time on her lap. (Which she later said was quite as warm and comfortable as any lap she's ever lain on.)

Eventually the Upright in Trousers took pity on the visitor and moved both Thomasina and me away from her.

But from the twinkle that was in his eye I can tell that even he thought it rather an amusing incident.

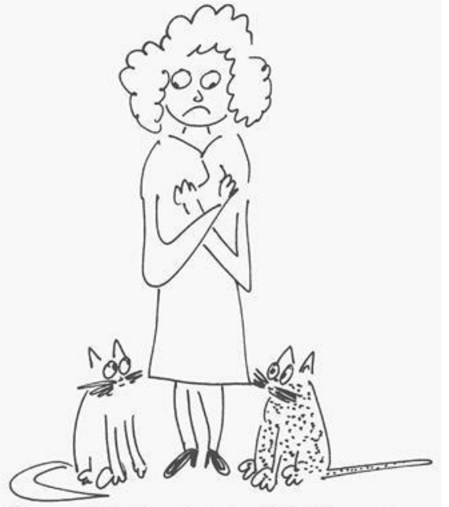

"It was fairly clear that she didn't like us. So we made a tremendous fuss of her."

July 29th

A huge ginger tom that I've never seen before wandered into our garden today. He spent some time lying underneath the hydrangeas and using our trees to sharpen his claws. But neither Thomasina nor I dared say anything to him. He looked most ferocious.

As the ginger tom left the garden Thomasina made a number of rather rude remarks about his colouring.

I told her that was unfair and that her behaviour was racist.

August 3rd

I spent most of today sitting on a wall watching dogs. I made four observations.

First, dogs are totally dependent on Uprights. The dog at the house next door cannot even go for a walk by itself! When it goes for a walk it has to be connected to its Upright by a lead!

Second, they have absolutely no pride. The dog at the house next door has learnt all sorts of pitiful tricks. To earn a biscuit he will roll over on his back, put all four paws into the air and pretend to die. To get a pat of encouragement he will sit up on his hind legs and beg. It is sad to see a grown animal debase itself so.

Third, they have no sense of hygiene. Dogs have to be washed and their toilet habits leave a lot to be desired.

Fourth, they are stupid. Today I watched a dog burying a bone in a nearby garden. What possible purpose can there be to this bizarre act? If the bone is worth eating then it should be enjoyed, not buried.

After considerable thought I have come to the conclusion that dogs are the dumbest of animals.

August 5th

I really do hate making decisions. Life is so full of them. This evening I was fed up, and I told Thomasina how I felt.

'There are always choices to be made,' I complained. 'Whether to eat the meat that has been put out or to try the new crunchy things they've bought. Whether to go out mouse hunting or shrew hunting. Whether to sharpen my claws on the oak tree or the sycamore tree. And so on. Decisions. Decisions. Decisions.'

'You need to rest and relax,' said Thomasina.

'How?' I demanded.

'Go and lie down somewhere,' said Thomasina.

'Where?' I asked.

'Underneath the willow tree,' she replied. 'Or on the window seat. On the sofa. Or underneath the garden bench.'

Dear old Thomasina. She means well.

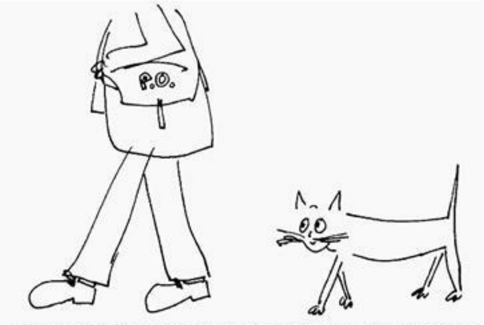

"Normally I can tell who is coming to the house by listening to their footsteps."

August 9th

A most embarrassing incident occurred this morning. Normally I can tell who is coming down the path to the house by listening to their footsteps.

My Upright in Trousers has a long stride and a thumping footfall. My Upright who wears a Skirt has a much shorter stride and a clicking footfall. He walks slowly. She walks slightly faster if she is alone and much faster if she is with him.

The Little Upright who delivers the morning newspaper has a half skipping, half scampering gait and always wears rubber-soled training shoes. The Upright who comes once every three months to look at the electricity meter has a very slow, very leisured tread, huge solid boots and an inability to lift his left heel completely off the ground. And the Upright who brings the morning mail walks evenly on boots with nails in them and moves very quickly indeed.

Of all the Uprights who visit our home regularly the one I like best is the one who delivers the mail. He always stops to say 'hello' and to show a little affection. So many Uprights are for ever in a hurry. But even though his walking pace is hurried he manages to find the time to stroke my back and tickle me under the chin. I usually make sure that I'm around when he calls so that we can pay our respects to each other.

This morning I was in the garden sunning myself when I heard the garden gate swing open. It was the time when the Upright delivering the mail usually arrives and it sounded just like his footsteps.

So, naturally, I stood up, stretched and wandered over to greet him.

It was only when I was already twining in between his legs and rubbing my chin against his ankle that I suddenly realised that it wasn't the same Upright.

It was an entirely different Upright. This one smelt quite differently and made a different noise when he sorted through the letters in his bag. I had approached and shown affection to a complete stranger.

I was mortified. I ran off quickly, of course. But I was deeply embarrassed. I'm glad no one else was around to see me make such a fool of myself.

August 12th

Thomasina's favourite game is to leap on my back when I am least expecting an attack. She seems to think this is terribly funny. This morning she leapt on me no less than six times. Twice she ambushed me while I was walking down the garden path and on the other occasions she managed to ambush me inside the house.

But I got my own back this afternoon.

I waited until she'd dug herself a nice large, round hole in the garden, and then I jumped.

I wish I could have recorded the look on her face.

"I very nearly caught my first starling."

August 15th

I very nearly caught my first starling today.

It was sitting on a branch no more than ten or twelve feet above me. Keeping my eye on it as well as I could I stalked around the back of the tree and stealthily climbed up the bark until I reached a lower branch. There I sat for a moment watching it. I felt sure that it hadn't seen me. Instead of watching out for possible predators it was making a terrible noise.

I then carefully and slowly crept upwards until I was on a higher branch. I was now level with the starling. I had to move very carefully because birds can swivel their eyes round and see through a full circle if they want to.

The starling didn't seem to have seen me and so I cautiously crept around the trunk of the tree and onto the branch where it was sitting. Keeping low and crawling as slowly as I possibly could I gradually got closer and closer until eventually I was no more than two feet from it. Gingerly I stood up and prepared to launch myself at the bird. I knew that I'd probably fall to the ground but I thought that with a little luck I could probably keep hold of the starling.

I got myself comfortable, tensed my back legs and prepared to pounce. I could almost feel the bird in my grasp.

And then it flew away.

I do think that it is unfair when birds do that. How are cats expected to catch them when they can suddenly fly away? It's cheating.

Actually I wasn't all that disappointed. Birds are all bone and feather. They have hardly any meat on them and they don't taste all that good. That's what I've heard anyway.

August 17th

'Look at all these loose hairs on this chair,' I heard the Upright who wears a Skirt say this afternoon. 'Alice must be moulting.'

I brushed every single one of those hairs out of my coat with my tongue. I really do object to the implication that they have fallen out.

August 20th

I have five favourite sleeping spots and three of them were out of action today.

My fifth favourite sleeping place is outside, down at the bottom of the garden underneath the willow tree. It is an excellent place to curl up when the sun is shining and the weather is particularly hot. The ground underneath the willow tree is always soft and the grass around the base of the trunk is long and exceptionally cool.

My fourth favourite spot is in the spare bedroom on top of the wardrobe. It's a difficult place to get to and Thomasina can't manage it. That's really why I like it. If she's being a nuisance or if we've had a row I always go up there for a nice, quiet, peaceful snooze.

My third favourite place is on the window seat in the Upright's bedroom. I used to like sleeping on their bed but Thomasina took over that position so now I usually sleep on the window seat during the night and, indeed, during the daytime if it is raining or particularly cold. There is a radiator not far away and the window seat is always really cosy. (We do sleep together very occasionally but Thomasina dreams an awful lot and twitches a good deal. I prefer to sleep by myself.)

My second favourite sleeping place is outside underneath the garden bench. The lawnmower doesn't get under there and so the grass is always fairly long. Over the months I have managed to flatten it down quite a lot. Long grass that has been flattened makes a wonderfully soft cushion. I usually sleep there if it is really hot or if it is warm but drizzling. It is cosy and very sheltered.

My very favourite sleeping spot is on top of the low wall that surrounds the herb garden. The wall is about three feet high and gives me a wonderful view of most of the garden. It means that I can watch mice, birds and butterflies all from the same position. But the real advantage of it is that it gets the sun for most of the day. And because it is sheltered rather well, there is hardly ever any wind. It's a perfect size for sleeping too - there is plenty of room to stretch out and really relax.

Three out of those five sleeping places were completely out of action for the whole day.

I discovered the first problem just after breakfast when I went upstairs to escape Thomasina who was behaving abominably. Someone had put a suitcase on top of the wardrobe and there was no room left for me. The suitcase was right in the middle, leaving only a thin border of space around it. There certainly wasn't enough room for me to lie down and relax. And I couldn't lie down on top of the suitcase because there was only about three inches between it and the ceiling.

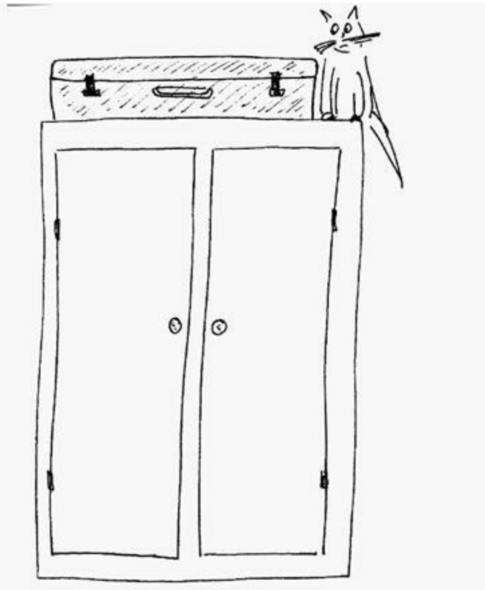

"Someone had put a suitcase on top of the wardrobe and there was no room left for me."

So, unable to sleep on top of the wardrobe, I went down to the garden to sleep under the willow tree. That too was impossible. The whole area was crawling with ants. Thousands of them. I hate ants. They itch and they itch and they itch and it takes hours to find them all once they've got into your fur. I certainly wasn't going to lie down there while they were crawling all over the place.

Because it was rather overcast and certainly not warm enough for gentle sunbathing, my next stop was the garden bench. But that was out of action too. The Upright in Trousers was on his hands and knees cutting the long grass with a pair of big scissors. It took me months to flatten that grass and turn it into a really comfortable cushion.

In the end I gave up and went indoors and settled down on the window seat. But I have to say that I sometimes wonder what is happening to the world.

August 25th

Late this afternoon I saw a squirrel sitting on the lawn looking as if it owned the place. I was furious. Squirrels are among the most possessive of all rodents and they know very well that they are supposed to keep to their own territories. If Thomasina and I had dared to venture onto his favourite tree he would have gone berserk. But the trouble with squirrels is that they tend to forget that they are nothing more than rats with bushy tails. They get so much attention from Uprights that they think they're something very special. It goes to their heads and they think they can do whatever they like.

Full of anger I decided to chase the squirrel away. I chased it across the lawn, through the rhododendron bushes, round the base of the sycamore tree, up the laburnum tree and across into the large oak tree that stands at the far corner of the garden.

Normally I take great care with that particular tree. I've been up it many times in the past and from bitter experience I know that it is easier to climb up it than it is to climb down again. There is a particularly tricky stretch about twelve feet up in the air where coming down can be a real nightmare.

But chasing after that squirrel I completely forgot about the problem of coming back down again. I just raced up the tree and then watched, half satisfied but half frustrated as it leapt from the oak tree across to a nearby silver birch.

After staying where I was for a few moments to make sure that the cheeky creature didn't come back again I started to make my way back down.

And that was the point at which it all became rather tricky. And I found myself temporarily marooned up in the tree. Naturally, I miaowed a little to let Thomasina and the Uprights know where I was. I didn't want them to start worrying if I was late getting back for supper.

Then, before I knew what was happening, the Upright in Trousers appeared with a ladder. He obviously thought I was stuck and needed help. I was mortified. Me, stuck up a tree! I tried to make it clear that I didn't need his help but he wouldn't listen. Before I could do anything about it he'd climbed up the ladder, scooped me into his arms and carried me back down to earth. I struggled as much as I could just to let anyone who was watching see that I really didn't want to be carried down, and about four feet from the bottom of the ladder I leapt out of his arms onto the grass.

Thomasina teased me mercilessly, of course. I tried to explain to her that I hadn't been stuck at all, but I honestly don't think that she believed me.

Finally, just to round off the day, when I followed them all back into the kitchen I couldn't help notice that the squirrel was sitting on the lawn again.

August 28th

A terrible thing happened to Thomasina this morning. I was sitting in the living room having a snooze when she came in and jumped up onto the top of the record player.

Unfortunately for Thomasina, the record player was switched on and the lid had been left up. The result was that Thomasina landed on a long playing record that was going round and round at 33 revolutions a minute.

I wish I could have captured the look on her face as she whirled round and round. The noise was awesome. The needle got pulled across the record and Thomasina herself miaowed loud and long in surprise and distress.

She was so startled by this strange event that it took her some time to realise exactly what had happened. And when she tried to jump off she found that she couldn't. Every time she pressed down with her back legs to leap down onto the floor the record whirled round a little faster and she stayed exactly where she was.

Poor Thomasina. It gave her quite a fright.

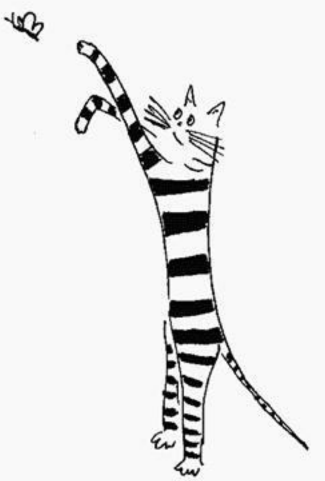

"*Marmalade launched himself into the air and caught the butterfly.*"

August 30th

I met Marmalade this morning. I quickly discovered that Marmalade is probably the most stupid cat in the whole world

'Anything exciting happening?' I asked him as we both watched a cabbage white butterfly dancing just above our heads.

'My Uprights are a bit miserable so I came out for a stroll,' said Marmalade.

I asked him why.

'I think I'll have that butterfly,' said Marmalade. 'Do you mind?'

'No. You go ahead,' I said generously.

'They're burying the guinea pig,' said Marmalade. 'That's why they're all so miserable. Though I can't understand why any of them should get upset over a guinea pig.'

'What was wrong with him?' I asked.

Marmalade looked at me with puzzlement in his eyes. 'He was dead,' he explained. 'They were burying him because he was dead.'

And as he spoke he launched himself into the air, caught the cabbage white butterfly in his jaws, crunched it and then swallowed it.

I sometimes wonder how it is that a cat who is so stupid is able to catch butterflies with such graceful ease. It is perhaps God's way of sharing out his gifts to us.

September 1st

I went up the stairs last night and had a terrible shock. The Upright who wears a Skirt was in bed by herself. There was no sign at all of the Upright in Trousers.

I've never known him to be out alone at night before. And it worried me.

All sorts of things went through my mind.

Had he been injured by a car?

Had he been attacked and killed by other Uprights? Had he lost the scent and been unable to find his way back home?

Or had he decided that he didn't want to live with the three of us any more?

I was very frightened.

I jumped up onto the bed where Thomasina was already curled up on top of the bedclothes, tucked in beside the Upright who wears a Skirt. I stepped round her and went right up close to the sleeping Upright. Her face seemed calm and unworried.

Tentatively, I reached forward and nudged her face. She opened one eye, smiled at me and pulled a hand out from underneath the bedclothes. Then she reached out and stroked my head.

I knew then that everything was all right.

And so I curled up beside her face and tried to get to sleep.

But I have to confess that I slept only fitfully.

September 2nd

I spent all morning waiting by the front gate, hoping every minute to hear the Upright in Trousers' footsteps on the path.

He finally arrived back in the early afternoon. He was carrying a large bag and he looked very tired. But when I rushed up to him and gave a short greeting miaow he bent down and picked me up.

I was so delighted to see him that I didn't mind at all.

"I discovered that the Uprights had filled our food dish with a completely new type of food."

September 4th

I went out early this morning for a stroll round the garden and when I got back for breakfast I discovered that the Uprights had filled our food dish with a completely new type of food.

Thomasina was sniffing at it and tasting it in a most suspicious manner. I was surprised by this because Thomasina will normally eat anything that keeps still.

'It's horrid,' she told me as I settled down beside her. 'It's not the sort we usually have.'

Cautiously I poked out my tongue and took a taste. It was appalling. I wouldn't have given it to a dog. And you know how I feel about dogs.

Just then the Upright who wears a Skirt bent down over us and started to caress our necks. She never normally does that. Not while we're eating. So I guessed that something was wrong.

'It's cheap stuff,' I said to Thomasina, jerking my head away from the food bowl. 'Don't eat it.'

Thomasina looked across at me, clearly puzzled.

'It's a tin of cheap food,' I explained. 'They're trying it out on us. To see if we'll eat it.'

'I don't like it,' said Thomasina. 'I prefer the stuff we always used to have.'

'Come on,' I said to Thomasina. 'Let's go.'

And with that we both turned away from our breakfast and went outside.

'What are we going to do now,' asked Thomasina. 'I'm absolutely starving.'

'We're going to catch our own breakfast,' I said.

Thomasina looked surprised. 'Hunting for food is all right when you've had a good meal,' she said. 'But I'm too hungry to go hunting.'

'Do you want to eat that rubbish for the rest of your life?' I asked her.

She grimaced and shook her head. ‘Of course I don’t,’ she said emphatically.

‘Then follow me,’ I told her.

It took us the best part of an hour and a half to catch anything. And then it was a tiny shrew with hardly any meat on it at all.

‘I hate shrews,’ Thomasina complained. ‘They taste all bitter. I never eat shrews.’

But she ate her half when I pointed out that it was that or nothing.

‘Can’t we go back and wait for them to put something else down?’ asked Thomasina.

Sometimes she is so naive. She just doesn’t understand Uprights very well at all.

‘They must have bought that food cheap,’ I reminded her. ‘And for all we know they might have bought a whole case. Persuading them that we aren’t going to eat it isn’t going to be easy.’

‘So what do we do?’ asked Thomasina.

‘We stay out all day,’ I said to her. ‘And we don’t go back until very late tonight.’

‘Oh, I can’t,’ said Thomasina.

But she did.

We had a bit of luck a couple of hours later and caught two large really fleshy mice at the back of a greenhouse belonging to a neighbouring Upright. With full stomachs we carried on hunting with renewed enthusiasm.

It’s a funny thing about hunting. When you’re really hungry you don’t have the energy to catch anything. But when you’re feeling comfortably full you have all the energy you need.

During the day we managed to catch and eat quite an assortment of wildlife. In addition to the mice and the shrew we found quite a lot of spiders and flies and Thomasina even managed to catch a couple of butterflies. Butterflies aren’t very filling but I’m told that they taste wonderful.

We stayed out of the house until it was dark.

Twice when it rained I was very tempted to give in and go back. I kept thinking of my comfortable window seat. But in situations like this one has to be strong. And I knew that Thomasina wouldn’t have the strength of mind to fight temptation. So I said nothing.

And then we heard the Uprights calling for us.

Thomasina turned towards the house immediately.

‘Where are you going?’ I demanded.

‘Back home,’ said Thomasina. ‘They’re calling. They’ll be worried. Besides, they’ve probably put some new food out for us.’

‘Stay here,’ I ordered.

She looked puzzled.

‘We’re going to stay out for another hour at least,’ I told her. ‘We want to be absolutely sure that when we go back that cheap food has disappeared for good. And while we’re at it we might as well take the opportunity to teach them a lesson. I don’t want to have to go through this again, do you?’

Thomasina saw the sense of what I was saying.

And so we crouched in the dark at the bottom of the garden for well over an hour. Several times we heard both the Uprights come out into the garden and call for us. The Upright in Trousers walked right past us a couple of times as he searched for us among the undergrowth. And we could hear the Upright who wears a Skirt calling for us with desperation in her voice. It was very difficult to ignore their calls. But for their sake as well as our own we knew that we had to wait until the message had been well and truly rubbed in. If there was one thing that I’ve learned over the years it is that Uprights tend to have very short memories.

When we finally did go back to the house the Uprights were sitting down in the kitchen having a cup of tea. They were silent and glum but as we climbed slowly and weakly through the cat flap they rushed towards us with arms outstretched.

I had warned Thomasina that she had to look tired and hungry and she did a wonderful job. Even I felt sorry for her.

Within seconds we were carried across the kitchen to our bowls. There was a dish full of corned beef and another filled with creamy milk. Better than I’d hoped for. And there was absolutely no sign at all of the horrid, cheap food that had been there at breakfast time.

The Uprights made such a fuss of us and treated us so well that I decided that we’d have to disappear for a day rather more often.

September 7th

Lapsong II came round this morning to show us her latest collar. She claims that it is studded with diamonds and plated with 9 carat gold.

Thomasina was quite envious.

But later I explained to her that collars can be very dangerous for cats. 'I once heard about a cat who strangled herself when her collar got caught in a tree branch,' I told her. I also pointed out that gold plating is very unsatisfactory. It can irritate the skin quite dreadfully.

September 12th

Lapsong II has a habit of 'labelling' every cat she meets or talks about. Today, for example, she was talking to me about Marmalade (with whom she had struck up a most unlikely friendship) and every time she referred to him she insisted on calling him 'Marmalade the TV cat'.

(I happen to know that Marmalade isn't a TV cat at all. He went for a cat food audition but never got the job.)

And during the space of fifteen minutes she also talked to me about Blackie the Mouser (a friend of hers whom I have never met but who is renowned for his skills in catching mice) and Harriet the Tail (a rather unfortunate mixed tabby who lost half her tail in a clash with a bicycle).

After she'd gone I thought about this strange habit of hers. And eventually I realised that there is, in fact, nothing particularly unusual in what she does. It is true that Lapsong II seems to have taken the whole thing to new heights of perfection, but this trick of labelling one another is something that we all tend to do quite frequently.

We don't just base our labels on skills or achievements, of course. We tend to pick out anything that seems unusual or dramatic and use that as a label. So, for example, we think of Konig III as the Millionaire's Cat, and Carla as the Stray, even though she's been with the Uprights in Tennyson Avenue for two years now.

If we only used these labels as signposts or pointers to help us identify particular individuals in our minds all would be fine. But we don't. Too often we label each other according to some personal whim or passing fancy and then assume that everyone will behave according to the labels we've chosen.

We have our own built-in theories about what Pedigree Cats are like, and so when we meet someone labelled 'Pedigree Cat' we think we know what he is going to be like. We know what Strays are supposed to be like, and so when we meet someone labelled 'Stray' we think we know all we need to know about them.

Our attempts to label cats lead us into all sorts of deadly traps. We make assumptions about other cats which lead to misunderstandings and unhappiness. And other cats make assumptions about us which lead to all sorts of agonies and despair. Labels make us shy away from other cats who might have fascinated us and we allow our prejudices to imbue each label with significance it does not merit.

The world in which we live is endlessly confusing. But by labelling one another we do not detract from that confusion. We add to it. Each one of us is different at each moment. And each one of us is different in each other's eyes. It is those differences which make us so fascinating. It seems an awful pity to try to erase those variations by searching for small, neat labels with which to typecast one another.

I think that it is important to remember that one cat's niece could be another cat's aunty.

September 15th

Thomasina had a hairball today and vomited all over the sofa. The Uprights were surprisingly sympathetic. The Upright in Trousers cleaned up the mess with a cloth and some foul smelling fluid while the Upright who wears a Skirt cuddled and comforted Thomasina and told her that she wasn't to worry about it in the slightest.

Aren't Uprights wonderfully kind?

September 16th

Thomasina and I were sitting in the sun today when she turned to me and asked me a question that had clearly been weighing heavily on her mind for some time.

'Alice,' she said, 'what is the purpose of those Uprights who don't live with cats?'

I thought about it for a quarter of an hour before replying. I examined every explanation I could think of. I tried to be logical, fair and objective.

'I don't know,' I said eventually.

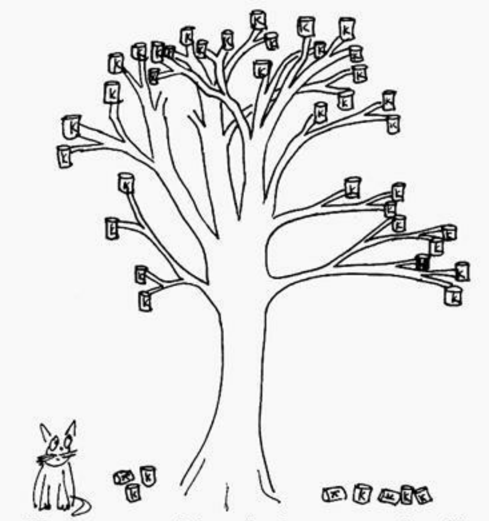

"Is there a special cat food tree somewhere?"

September 19th

A strange thing occurred to me today.

How do they get cat food into cat food tins?

The tins are sealed and have to be opened with a special cutting device.

I can't believe that Uprights are clever enough to get cat food inside one of those sealed tins. And wrapping a can around a block of food is also clearly impossible.

So how do they do it?

Do they perhaps grow the tins somewhere with the cat food inside them? Is there a special catfood tree somewhere? And are the tins just thick skins? Like orange peel or banana skins?

There are so many imponderables. And so many questions to which even I do not know the answers.

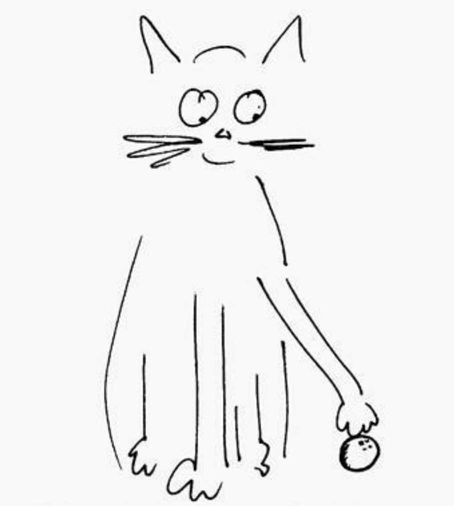

"Without thinking I knocked the ball straight back to him once more."

September 20th

The Upright in Trousers caught me out today.

My excuse is that there were several Uprights visiting the house and I was feeling very stressed. As I've explained before I really do hate having lots of visitors.

Anyway, I was sitting underneath the dining room table well out of range, when suddenly the Upright in Trousers came over and dropped a table tennis ball right in front of me.

Naturally, I knocked it back towards him. It was a reflex action. It just seemed a perfectly natural thing to do.

Then he dropped the ball again.

And without thinking I knocked the ball straight back to him once more.

I know it is difficult to believe this but at the time I just honestly thought that he was being clumsy.

Then I heard him tell the visiting Uprights how clever I was. He turned to me with a big grin on his face and tickled me under the chin.

I was absolutely furious. I suddenly realised that he had used me and tricked me. I desperately hoped that he would drop the ball a third time. I was all prepared to ignore him. But he wasn't going to push his luck. He just put the ball back into his pocket and disappeared into the kitchen.

I was seething.

About a minute later he returned from the kitchen clutching a bowl of cold custard.

Instantly I knew what was going on. This was his way of saying 'sorry' for having used me in such a despicable manner and for having made me look such a fool.

Well, I wasn't going to let him get away with it. Very slowly I stood up, arched my back and stretched my legs. Then I walked very slowly over to the dish he was holding, lowered my nose and sniffed. Then, summoning up every ounce of determination I could find, I walked straight past the bowl and through the cat flap out into the garden.

I hated doing it, but he had to be taught a lesson. I wasn't going to forgive him that easily.

I do have to confess that I had thought that after a few hours I'd be able to creep back into the house and enjoy my cold custard anyway. But it didn't work out quite that well. While I was out Thomasina cleaned the bowl completely.

All things considered today was not a good day.

September 24th

Lapsong II graced us with another visit this afternoon. She wanted to tell us that her Upright has bought her a new basket to sleep in. Neither Thomasina nor I could share her enthusiasm. Our Uprights bought us wicker baskets once when we were small. We slept in them for a couple of nights, but only because we didn't want to hurt the Uprights' feelings. After that we hardly ever went into them. Even with a rug in it a wicker basket can never be as comfortable as an interior sprung mattress or a sofa cushion.

'Mine has my name on it,' Lapsong II told us with undisguised pride. 'And it was made by an artist working in the Cotswolds.'

'Very nice,' said Thomasina.

'It's painted with a high gloss varnish.'

'Splendid,' I nodded approvingly.

'There's a new plaid rug in the bottom of it,' Lapsong II went on.

'Lovely,' murmured Thomasina. She yawned politely.

'And it has handles on each side of it.'

We both said how convenient that was.

Lapsong II looked disappointed. She had clearly expected us to be more impressed.

'Well, I have to be going,' she said, lifting her head so that we had a good view of her jewel encrusted genuine leather collar. 'My Upright will worry about where I've got to.' She waited a moment. 'It's the collar you know,' she said. 'It's rather valuable.'

'Of course,' yawned Thomasina. Sometimes I think she over does it to the point of being downright rude.

'And besides,' said Lapsong II, turning to leave, 'the Upright has got me a salmon steak for tea.'

And with that final thrust she put her tail into the air and flounced away.

'Poor old Lapsong II,' said Thomasina when she was out of earshot. 'She does try so hard.'

And then we both burst into a fit of the giggles.

Actually, both Thomasina and I feel dreadfully sorry for poor Lapsong II. She is so anxious to gather new possessions and enhance her status with belongings that she has very little free time in which to enjoy herself.

And she is always under so much self imposed pressure. When Penelope was given a collection of felt mice for Christmas Lapsong II sulked for nearly a fortnight. Her Upright had bought her a pot of cat nip, a new travelling basket, antique porcelain food bowls and a piece of salmon. But she hadn't got a family of felt mice. And she was consumed with jealousy.

Thomasina and I have talked about this at some length and have come to the conclusion that Lapsong II gets her wants and needs mixed up. She puts herself under a tremendous amount of pressure to acquire things. She is constantly aggrieved and rarely enjoys herself even though her Upright adores her and spoils her dreadfully.

It really does all come down to wants and needs. She wants something, thinks she needs it and then gets upset if she doesn't have it.

I do think it's sad.

September 29th

I've got another tick. This one is round the back of my ear and it is desperately annoying.

Why, I wonder, do ticks always manage to end up in the most uncomfortable places?

October 1st

When I woke up this morning the tick behind my ear had gone.

Good riddance.

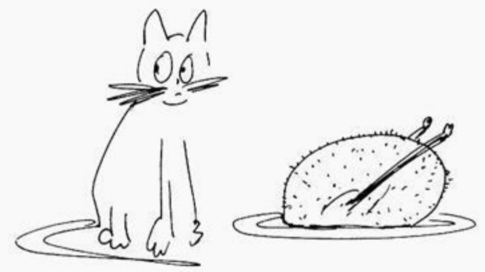

"I found a whole raw chicken. It smelt and looked marvellous."

October 4th

I'm going to leave. The Uprights really have gone too far and I am going to leave them to cope by themselves.

This afternoon I came into the kitchen feeling really hungry and found that they'd forgotten to put any fresh crunchy things down for me. There was absolutely nothing at all to eat.

I was about to give up and go out and catch the mouse that lives down by the garden bench (it's a really stupid mouse that I've been keeping for a day when I really want to boost my confidence by catching a 'dead cert') when I suddenly realised that there was something up on the kitchen table that smelt very good.

Now I know that they don't really like me jumping up onto the kitchen table but there was no one around and I didn't think it could possibly do any harm just to have a look and see what was smelling so good.

So up I leapt.

And there on a dish I found a whole raw chicken. It smelt and looked absolutely marvellous. It was perfectly clear that there was more than enough meat for all of us. And so I succumbed to temptation and tasted it. Nothing more than a taste. A mouthful from one wing, and perhaps two delicious mouthfuls from the breast.

I was having trouble with the skin which was unusually tough and so I didn't hear the Upright who wears a Skirt come into the room.

She hit me.

She actually hit me.

I've never known either of them do that before and I was staggered. It wasn't so much the blow that I received (to be perfectly honest it was a glancing blow and didn't hurt me at all) as the fact that she actually wanted to hit me.

I must have stood for a moment quite bewildered. And then when I saw the look of genuine anger on her face I ran off outside.

I was devastated. And very confused.

All I'd done had been to take a couple of bites out of a huge chicken. And there was plenty for all of us and I'm always prepared to share my food with Uprights. I can't count the number of shrews, voles, moles and mice I've left out for them as presents. She ought to know that I wouldn't dream of eating any of it if I hadn't been hungry. And it wasn't as if I'd eaten it all. Just a couple of mouthfuls. That's all I'd had.

I was really hurt by it all. Deeply offended. And I really am thinking of leaving.

October 5th

I am very puzzled today.

Yesterday I took a couple of bites out of a chicken that was sitting on a plate on the kitchen table. The Upright who wears a Skirt was furious and hit me.

And this morning I found that the whole chicken had been thrown into the dustbin. Not just the carcase. But the whole uncooked chicken. Thomasina and I had some of it but there was far too much for us and so we fetched George and Marmalade who took it away with them. It was so heavy that they had to take it in turns to drag it off. George said that he thought it would last them for days.

What puzzles me is, why was the Upright who wears a Skirt so cross with me if she didn't want the chicken herself?

Sometimes Uprights are beyond comprehension.

October 9th

After stalking it for well over an hour I caught a sparrow today. I was very, very pleased with myself. I've never managed to catch a bird before. I was so delighted that I rushed back to the house with the sparrow still in my mouth. I wanted Thomasina and the Uprights to see what I'd caught.

Thomasina's response was deeply gratifying. I know that deep in her heart she must have been more than slightly jealous. She has always considered herself the best hunter. But she was decent enough to hide whatever feelings of envy she might have had. She was very complimentary and I was deeply touched by some of her comments.

However, the Uprights responded in a very strange way. The Upright who wears a Skirt was in the kitchen and when she saw me struggling to get in through the cat flap with the sparrow in my mouth she burst into tears.

I confess that at first I thought they were tears of pride. But it quickly became clear that she wasn't pleased with me at all. On the contrary, she was angry. At first she tried to get the sparrow away from me. And then she started waving the kitchen broom at me.

I ran out of the kitchen feeling quite confused. It quite spoilt the occasion for me.

Desperate for an explanation I left the bird lying on the lawn and set off to find George. I knew that he would have the answer. George understands Uprights far better than any cat I know.

'Uprights have a soft spot for birds,' George told me. 'Don't ask me to explain it because I can't. There isn't any logical explanation for it.'

'But they don't like mice or rats, do they?' I asked him.

George shook his head. 'They hate them. And some Uprights are frightened of them.'

'It doesn't seem logical to me,' I said.

'You'll just have to learn to accept that Uprights often aren't logical,' said George. 'They adore hedgehogs and they quite like moles. But they have absolutely no real feelings for shrews and voles.'

'Is it just sparrows that they like then?' I asked George.

He shook his head. 'They like sparrows least of all,' he told me. 'Apart from starlings perhaps.'

'So which birds do they like?'

'I believe that robins are their favourites,' said George.

I asked him why Uprights like robins but he said he didn't know.

Finally, there was one other question that I had to ask. 'What about squirrels?' I said. 'Uprights like squirrels don't they?'

George nodded wisely. 'They do.'

'But they're only rats with bushy tails,' I said. 'And I thought Uprights hated rats.'

George reached out patted the side of my head with his paw. 'Uprights can be quite a puzzle,' he said.

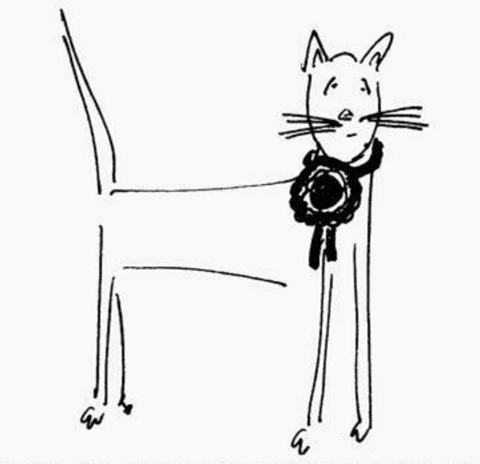

"Lapsong II arrived with a huge rosette around her neck. She looked very silly."

October 11th

Lapsong II arrived in the garden today with a huge rosette hanging around her neck. She looked very silly indeed.

'I won it at a cat show,' she replied when Thomasina asked her where she'd got it.

She explained that every few months her Upright takes her to an arena where hundreds of cats are put on display.

'What for?' asked Thomasina innocently.

'To be judged, of course,' answered Lapsong II.

Both Thomasina and I looked at her in astonishment. ‘What have they all done wrong?’ I asked her.

Lapsong II threw back her head and sniffed disdainfully. ‘You really are very ignorant,’ she said. ‘It’s not that sort of judging at all.’

She explained that the idea is for Uprights who do the judging to wander around among the displayed cats and choose the best looking.

‘But what’s the point of it all?’ I asked, genuinely confused.

‘To win a cup and a rosette,’ explained Lapsong II.

‘I think it’s dreadfully degrading,’ said Thomasina.

‘I think it’s silly,’ I said.

‘I think you’re both just jealous,’ said Lapsong II. But she was wrong. We weren’t.

"I remember losing the feeling in most of my body and then I remember everything going rather fuzzy."

October 14th

Thomasina and I had to go to see the Upright who smells of Antiseptic to have our annual injections. I quite like him. He’s firm but gentle and although I can’t pretend that I like the injections he doesn’t hurt me too much.

When I was a kitten I remember going to see an Upright who smells of Antiseptic who never explained anything. I don’t know what he was like with other cats but he always treated me in a very cavalier manner. To be honest I always felt that I was just a piece of meat. Even when he did try to be friendly (usually only when one of my Uprights was around) I never got the impression that it was from the heart. He didn’t really *care.*

In truth, I have to confess that my view of Uprights who smell of Antiseptic is slightly coloured by an experience I once had when I was a kitten. I was quite small at the time and I wasn’t really aware of what was going on, but for some reason or other I had to have an operation. I remember having an injection. I remember losing the feeling in most of my body and then I remember everything going rather fuzzy. I could still see vague outlines and I could still hear. But it was a bit like looking and listening through a great, fluffy cotton wool cloud.

Then, and I can remember this as clearly as anything, I heard the Upright who smells of Antiseptic say: ‘Don’t worry now young kitty. Everything is going to be all right.’

I might have been sleepy and dozy at the time, but I knew very well that I wasn’t Kitty. I was Alice. But there wasn’t a thing I could do to warn the Upright who smells of Antiseptic that he was about to make a mistake and operate on the wrong cat. I couldn’t move, I couldn’t run away and I couldn’t miaow. It was an awful experience which I relive in my nightmares.

As it happens, I suppose he must have found out that I wasn’t Kitty before the operation went much further. I certainly don’t think he did anything to me that he shouldn’t have done!

"George was hungry, damp and cold. He followed us back to the kitchen."

October 16th

George was hanging around in the garden today looking very bedraggled and sorry for himself. It has been raining non-stop for four days and nights and the cellar where he normally sleeps is flooded out. He told us that he hadn’t eaten for a day and a half.

‘Come back with us and have something to eat,’ said Thomasina. ‘Alice and I didn’t finish our breakfast this morning. Come and help yourself.’

George looked uncertain. He is probably the proudest cat I’ve ever met.

‘You’d be doing us a favour,’ said Thomasina. ‘If you don’t eat it then the Uprights will leave it there for hours. It’ll go all crusty and horrid but they still won’t give us anything fresh until it’s gone.’

Thomasina was exaggerating and I was about to intervene and contradict her. And then I realised that she was trying to make George feel better about accepting what he would see as charity.

‘Please George,’ I said. ‘We’d be very grateful.’

Normally I doubt if George would have been so easily persuaded. But he was hungry and damp and cold. And he followed us back to the house and into the kitchen.

Thomasina and I were watching him enjoy the remains of our breakfast when the Upright who wears a Skirt came into the kitchen. What ensued was the most embarrassing and humiliating moment of my life.

The Upright who wears a Skirt took one look at George with his head buried in our food bowl and leapt forwards angrily. I’ve never seen her looking so fearless. I found it difficult to believe that this was the same Upright who had shown herself to be terrified of mice, voles, shrews and all other small creatures.

It took George a moment or two to realise that something was wrong. And when he did finally see the Upright who wears a Skirt bearing down on him he was very startled. He bared his teeth and arched his back but he didn’t stand a chance. The Upright who wears a Skirt had picked up the kitchen broom and within seconds George was being unceremoniously pushed out through the back door.

Thomasina and I just stared after him in disbelief. George was our friend. We had invited him into our home. And the Upright who wears a Skirt had ejected him.

The word ‘humiliating’ doesn’t even begin to describe the emotions we felt.

But to crown it all, as George scurried off down the garden, the Upright who wears a Skirt turned round to Thomasina and me and tried to stroke us both.

‘Never mind,’ she said. ‘The nasty cat has gone now.’

Thomasina and I just looked at her in dismay.

I don’t think I’ll ever really understand Uprights, however long I live.

October 18th

I spent this afternoon sitting on the bedroom window seat thinking of things to be grateful for.

Here is my list.

I am grateful that I am a cat and not an Upright. I know that Uprights are supposed to be cleverer than cats, but being an Upright seems often to be an unrewarding experience.

I am grateful that we do not live near to a road.

I am grateful that I have a funny white splodge under my chin. If it wasn’t for that I might have been exhibited at Shows. I can think of nothing more tedious than having to sit still all day while strangers stare.

I am grateful that I am not a mouse. If I were a mouse, life would be miserable.

I am grateful that it is not Friday. On Fridays we usually have fish for supper and I hate fish.

I am grateful that I am not a dog. I would not like to be a dog.

I am grateful that I do not live with the Upright in Bickersleigh Gardens. She has 16 cats. I would not like to have to share a home with 16 other cats.

October 29th

I brought a mouse into the kitchen this evening and was so startled to find the Upright in Trousers helping with the washing up that I let it go. The Upright who wears a Skirt spends a lot of time in the kitchen, but the Upright in Trousers hardly ever enters that room.

Inevitably, the Upright who wears a Skirt squealed and screamed and tried to climb up onto the sink. The Upright in Trousers opened the back door and unceremoniously threw me outside.

The whole incident was over in twenty seconds.

Standing outside, I could hear the Upright in Trousers chasing the mouse round and round the kitchen.

And eventually I heard him swearing and poking about under the refrigerator with a long broom handle.

I can’t imagine what made them think that they could catch the mouse without my help. They really are the worst hunters I’ve ever come across. I think it is nice that they should want to try. But they really do have to be prepared to spend a little time learning how to hunt before they try out their skills.

I have little doubt that there is now a third mouse living behind or underneath the refrigerator.

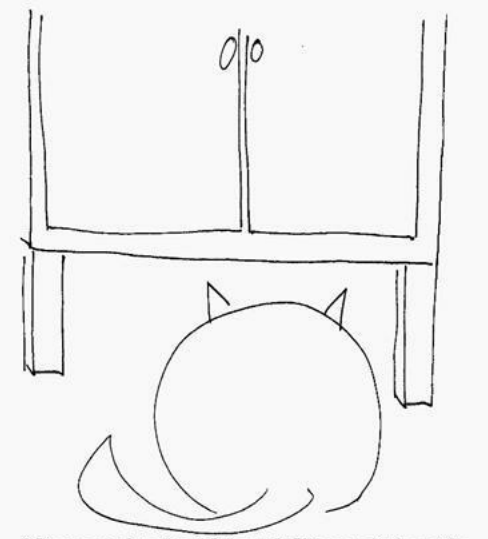

"It was under the sideboard. I'd seen it there the minute I'd entered the room."

October 30th

The Uprights so enjoyed the sport last night that I brought another mouse in while they were having tea. I know I complain about them occasionally but they're not all that bad and I think they deserve a treat from time to time. But somehow it didn't seem to go down quite so well. Perhaps they were only pretending to enjoy themselves yesterday so as not to hurt my feelings.

The Upright who wears a Skirt leapt up onto her chair and wrapped her skirt around her legs. The Upright in Trousers got so excited that he started throwing things. The table mat and the salt cellar only just missed me and a soup spoon brushed my back. If I hadn't known better I might have thought he was throwing them at me.

And then he picked me up and threw me out into the kitchen!

Yet another display of unacceptable bad manners. It was my mouse after all. One that I'd been keeping an eye on for three whole days. And a good runner too. I scratched and miaowed at the door to let them know that I thought they were behaving badly, but they didn't take any notice.

For about twenty minutes the Upright in Trousers chased the mouse round and round the dining room. Judging by the noise he made he must have knocked over just about everything in the room. When I'm chasing a mouse I take great care not to knock anything over. I always feel so guilty if I smash anything. But when they're hunting it's a different story, of course.

The end was predictable.

After creating havoc, The Upright in Trousers opened the kitchen door and let me in again. I pretended I didn't know what he wanted. I just sat there and looked up at him, holding my head ever so slightly on one side. Eventually after he'd stroked me and tickled me under the chin for two or three minutes I let him pick me up and put me down where he thought he'd last seen the mouse.

It wasn't there, of course. It was hiding under the sideboard. I'd seen it the minute I entered the room.

He wouldn't believe me. I kept clawing at the sideboard and looking up at him and he kept picking me up and dumping me down by the fire tongs. Eventually the message got through and he gently lifted the sideboard at one corner.

I caught it easily.

The Upright who wears a Skirt screamed and pulled her skirt even tighter around her legs. The Upright in Trousers clearly didn't know what to do. So I took the mouse outside and ate it behind the azaleas.

November 4th

Thomasina had a terrible accident this evening. She rushed in through the cat flap far too quickly and two of the longest whiskers on her left side snapped off.

It wasn't as if she'd been running away from danger. She had simply heard the Upright who wears a Skirt open the cupboard where our food is kept. And, as ever, she had wanted to get to the dish first. There is always plenty for both of us, but Thomasina always wants to be the first to get her head into the bowl.

I sometimes think that she must have had a very deprived kittenhood.

Anyway, she now has two whiskers missing on her left side. She still has enough whiskers there to help her decide whether gaps are too narrow for her to get through so there won't be any grave practical problems arising as a result of this accident. But it just doesn't look quite right and Thomasina, like most of us, is very particular about her appearance.

She asked me if they would ever grow back again.

I lied and told her that I thought they would eventually. But that it would take a long time.

I know it was probably wrong to lie to her but I feel that if she thinks they will grow back again then she will worry far less. And if she thinks it will take a long time then she won't be forever checking to see whether they have shown any improvement.

November 7th

For nearly a week I've had my eye on a field mouse that lives in the rockery. It's an odd place for a field mouse to live but he seems happy enough there. Like many field mice he probably doesn't know that he is supposed to live in a field of swaying corn.

To be honest, I rather suspect that it is a field mouse that Thomasina caught once before. It walks with a slight limp and is probably the mouse that she caught before she was attacked by a hawk. Well, Thomasina says that she was attacked by a hawk. Personally, I rather suspect that the hawk saw the mouse and thought it might have a chance at an easy snack. Whatever the truth of the matter is, Thomasina panicked and dropped the mouse which, in all the confusion, dragged itself into the undergrowth.

I've noticed that the mouse always emerges from his hideaway very cautiously. He pops his nose out first of all. Then, when he's convinced that he can't smell danger, he pops his head out. Then he looks from side to side, cautiously checking the immediate neighbourhood for any threats. Only when he is absolutely convinced that it is safe to come out does he emerge.

All this makes it very difficult to catch him. He is probably the most cautious and careful mouse I've ever come across. Catching him became quite a challenge for me.

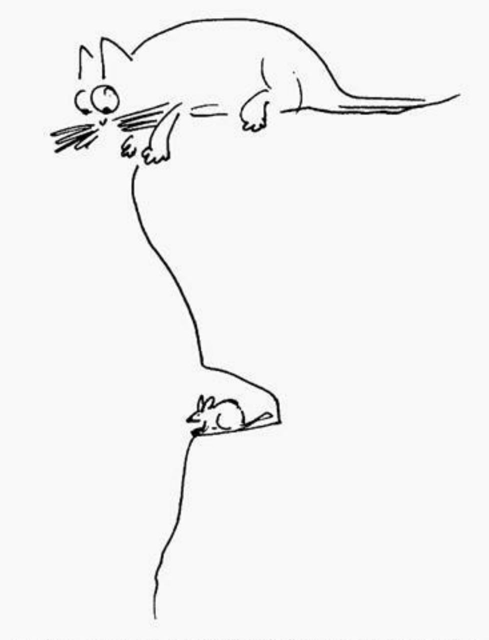

"The mouse couldn't see what was above him."

But I had noticed that there was one weakness in all these preparations. The mouse couldn't see what was above him on the rockery. His exit and entrance hole was about half way up the rockery face and he had an excellent view of everything that was happening in the garden below him. And he could see what was happening to the right or left. But he couldn't tell what was right over his head.

And with the scent of the rockery plants making it unusually difficult for him to pick up the scent of a cat, I thought that I might have a very good chance if I waited just above the entrance hole for him to emerge.

And it worked too.

He came out just as cautiously as ever. He sniffed and then he looked all around him. And only then did he emerge from his hiding place.

Sometimes when you catch a mouse the skill all lies in the actual pounce. You have to time things perfectly and move very quickly. This time the skill all lay in the planning and preparation. It was the easiest actual catch I've ever made.

As the mouse came out of his hole I just reached down with my paw and gave him a blow on the top of his head. For a moment or two I thought I'd killed him with my enthusiasm. But then I saw that I'd just stunned him.

Although all the action was over in a matter of seconds I had, in fact, been waiting for the mouse for the best part of three hours and I was cold and very wet by this time. It had rained twice while I'd been crouched in the rockery. Uprights sometimes don't realise how much effort goes into the catching of a mouse.

So I decided to take him indoors. I suspected that when he came round he'd provide some excellent killing practice.

The house was deserted so I took him straight through the kitchen and the living room and into the study. I used to enjoy killing practice in the kitchen but during the last month alone I've lost two mice under the refrigerator and I'm getting more than a little fed up of it. I can't get down the side of the refrigerator and I can't get my paw more than a couple of inches underneath it. Once a mouse has disappeared under there I don't have a chance of catching him again. (I wonder what ever happened to those two mice. Presumably they're still living under the refrigerator along with the one that the Uprights lost. If they start to breed Thomasina and I could have a source of endless indoor sport. That would be wonderful.)

The living room is quite good for killing practice, but I prefer the study. It's quieter at night and there aren't so many ornaments around. I tend to get rather excited when I'm chasing a mouse and the crash of a couple of ornaments soon brings the Uprights downstairs to see what is going on. I like to enjoy my killing practice without interruption.

I laid the mouse down on the rug underneath the desk and I waited to see what it would do. I waited and I waited and I waited. I even gave him a couple of slight taps on the side of the head just to remind him that he was supposed to be trying to escape. But he didn't move.

I had just decided that he must have been brain damaged by my initial blow when he made a move for it. He was fast. I have to admit that. I'd been waiting for so long that I was a bit off my guard and I missed him by inches. To be honest I'm not sure that I would have caught him even if I hadn't been off my guard. I've never seen a mouse move quite so quickly. And remember, this was a mouse with only three good legs.

While he'd been lying there on the rug he must have been planning his escape for he didn't falter for a second. He shot straight past me, underneath the armchair and straight round the back of the night storage heater.

Within no more than five seconds of his first move he had completely disappeared again.

Of course, I waited for him to make another move, but it was like waiting for a butterfly to fly in a straight line. There wasn't a chance that he would come out. He was too clever. He was perfectly safe where he was and he knew it.

So in the end I gave up and went upstairs to sleep on the window seat. My main hope was that Thomasina would never find out what had happened.

November 8th

I was sitting in front of the fire today when a spark flew out and landed on my back. I now have a nasty singe mark there. When I told George about it he said that I should feign illness for a few days. He said that in most homes a singe mark is worth two jars of meat paste and a tin of condensed milk.

November 9th

I went downstairs this morning and popped into the study on the offchance that there might be some sign of the limping fieldmouse.

The Upright in Trousers almost trod on me as he marched out of the room clutching an old cardboard shoe box. I followed him into the kitchen and saw him go outside, still holding on to the box. As I sat on the doorstep I was horrified to see a twitching nose emerge as he lifted the top off the box. The limping fieldmouse!

I was rather proud of the fact that the Upright in Trousers had, at long last, managed to catch something. But he clearly needs more lessons.

November 17th

Ishmael is quite a good friend of ours. She lives about a mile and a half away in a small cottage down near the river. She is a thoughtful and kind cat and both Thomasina and I are very fond of her. But today we had a tremendous argument with her and I fear that it will be some time before we are invited to her cottage again. Ishmael takes herself very seriously and doesn't forgive and forget very easily.

Our argument started when Ishmael said that she was going to spend the night out hunting rabbits. She said that she knew where the local rabbits played and that she was certain that she could catch one.

Thomasina and I immediately told her that we thought she was being silly.

'All night hunting is for tom cats,' said Thomasina. 'Alice and I both like late evening hunting, but we always make sure we don't stray too far from home. And we're always back in the house soon after midnight.'

Ishmael scoffed at this. 'I've never heard such rubbish,' she said crossly. 'We can do anything that toms can do. We're just as good as they are.'

'But rabbits...' said Thomasina. 'I wouldn't like to try to catch a rabbit.'

I told Ishmael that I didn't dispute that queens were just as good as toms. 'It's just that our skills and strengths are different,' I said.

But Ishmael said that I was betraying my sex and that she didn't want to listen any more. And with that she left us.

I thought about it quite a lot after she'd gone. I can understand the way she feels, of course. It is the fashion these days to try to pretend that there are no differences between the sexes. But it's all wrong. Pretending that there are no fundamental differences between a tom and a queen is as silly as pretending that there is no difference between day and night, between hot and cold or between wet and dry.

I've heard it claimed that the differences between toms and queens are fairly minor physical ones. Well, even though I would dispute the word 'minor' I would still happily accept that toms and queens could reverse roles if the differences were purely physical.

But they aren't.

I think that there are other, very important differences between the sexes.

By and large queens have soft, protective, maternal instincts. Toms have more powerful, aggressive instincts. A queen's hormones prepare her for motherhood, feeding and home building. A tom's hormones prepare him for hunting and exploring.

Just imagine for a moment that there is a kitten lying in a corner miaowing its head off. And a perfectly normal, healthy pair of cats walk past. A tom and a queen. Now just stop and ask yourself how they will react.

The queen will stop, make comforting noises, lick the kitten, pick it up and take it somewhere soft and comfortable. The tom will look bewildered and rather worried.

He would clearly rather be somewhere else and he'll wander off as quickly as he can. A tom wouldn't dream of stopping to comfort a kitten.

Why do male and female cats respond in these different ways? Because of basic genetic and hormonal differences, that's why.

Cats like Ishmael find it easy to pretend that these differences don't exist. And, like Ishmael, they accuse anyone who disagrees with them of being 'sexist'.

Well, I think they're being silly. I would heartily disapprove if I thought that queens were regarded any less highly than toms. But I don't really think that happens at all. It infuriates me when I hear cats like Ishmael claiming that queens should be allowed to do all the things that toms can do, and that the differences between the sexes can be eradicated.

I pray that those differences will always exist.

Toms are better at some things than queens. And queens are better at some things than toms.

I, for one, like things the way they are.

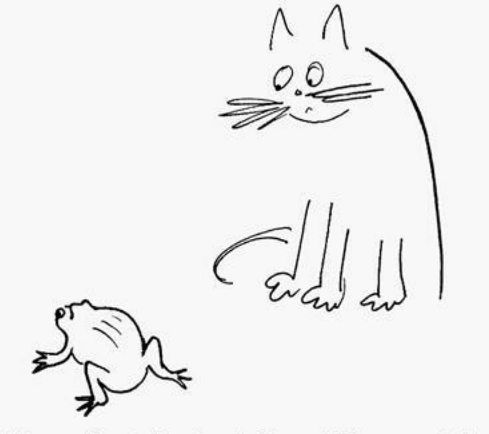

"I saw a frog today. I probably could have caught it. But it kept hopping away out of reach."

November 23rd

I saw a frog today. I probably could have caught it if I'd really wanted to. But it kept hopping away out of reach.

November 25th

The Uprights came by this evening just as I was dragging a large meat bone out of the dustbin. They both seemed surprised, even startled, and stopped to watch me for a while. At first I thought they were going to take the bone away from me. But they changed their minds.

‘When I offered her that this afternoon she turned it down,’ I heard the Upright who wears a Skirt say as they walked away. ‘Sometimes I don’t think I’ll ever understand that cat.’

If I hadn’t been enjoying the bone so much I’d have run after her and tried to make her understand. She was absolutely right of course. She *had* offered me the bone that afternoon. And I *had* turned it down. I hadn’t been the slightest bit hungry then. But this evening as I passed the bin I’d been feeling slightly peckish so I’d looked in, spotted the bone and taken a fancy to it straight away. There really was quite a lot of good, fresh meat still on it.

The impression I got from the Upright who wears a Skirt was that she was surprised that I would deign to eat something that had been in the dustbin at all.

And that I really don’t understand.

Surely even the Uprights must realise that the circumstances and surroundings in which food is presented plays an important part in its attractiveness. Personally, I don’t think there is anything quite so tasty as something that has been lying in a dustbin for a few hours. There are always so many other added flavours and tastes coming through.

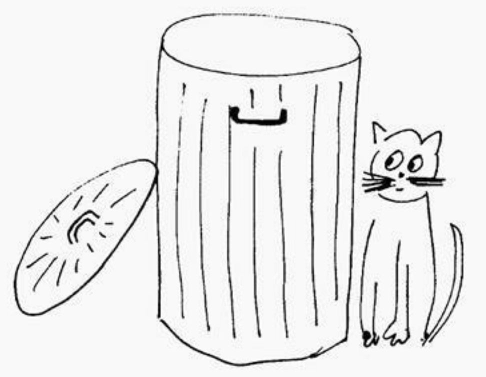

"I don't think that there is anything quite so tasty as something that has been lying in a dustbin for a few hours."

And even Uprights do similar things. I’ve seen the Upright who wears a Skirt pick food off a plate that has been ready to go into the washing up bowl. And I’ve seen both of them eating fish and chips out of old newspaper. Where’s the logic in that? They have cupboards full of expensive china and cutlery and yet they still eat with their fingers out of old newspapers.

The thing that really puzzles me about Uprights is their inconsistency.

December 1st

Thomasina mentioned today that it is some time since we saw George. I hope that he is well.

December 6th

The Uprights have noticed that I haven’t taken them any more mice to play with. And they’re trying to get round me. Today both of them made quite a fuss of me. The Upright bought me some fresh liver from the butchers.

But I’m not going to be ‘bought’ with a plateful of fresh liver (which I can’t help saying wasn’t all that fresh and, if the truth be known, had probably been sold off cheap). I’ll make them wait a few days yet before I bring them another mouse of mine to play with.

December 9th

After weeks of trying I caught a bat today. But once I’d caught it I wasn’t sure what to do with it. I had to kill it quickly to stop it flying away again. I tried biting through its skin but an old shoe would have been more palatable. I don’t think I’ll bother catching any more.

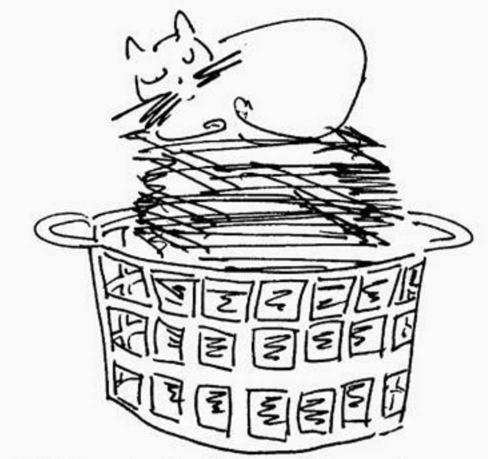

"I left the vole where it was and went to sleep on a pile of clean washing."

December 12th

I spent three hours hunting a vole this afternoon. As soon as I had caught it the rain started. Since I do not like getting wet for no good reason I took the vole into the kitchen for a little indoor sport. The vole, however, was not prepared to behave in a very sporting way. Within moments of my letting it go it had scurried underneath the cooker. Since I can't get underneath the cooker and the vole didn't dare come out we had to be satisfied with a stalemate.

So I left the vole where it was and went to sleep on top of a pile of clean washing. I knew that I would hear if the vole tried to escape. I am a light sleeper.

Of all small creatures I think I like voles least of all. They have a strange, unpleasant peculiarly bitter taste.

December 15th

We went in search of George today. But couldn't find him anywhere. Penelope says that if she sees Oscar she will ask him if he knows anything about George.

December 18th

Thomasina and I had a terrible shock this morning.

Thomasina was the first to make the discovery. She had her breakfast and then sleepily pushed her way through the cat flap.

She was back in the kitchen within seconds.

'Raining?' I asked her. I know how much she hates the rain.

She shook her head.

'What is it then?' I asked puzzled, 'A dog?'

Another shake of the head.

She was clearly too startled to say anything so I cautiously pushed my head through the cat flap, keeping all four paws firmly rooted on the kitchen floor.

I could hardly believe what I saw.

The whole garden had turned white.

I turned back and looked at Thomasina. She was examining her paws. They too were covered in white. But even as we stared at them the white substance seemed to disappear. Very cautiously she touched her left forepaw with her tongue.

'What does it taste like?' I whispered.

Thomasina paused for a moment and then licked at her paw again. 'Water,' she replied after a moment's thought. 'It tastes just like water.'

By now the white that had been on her paws had all vanished.

Slowly I opened the cat flap again. But this time as well as poking my head out I tentatively put my right front paw outside on the step. The white stuff felt cold but not unpleasant. It was soft and yet rather crunchy.

Bravely I pushed through the flap and stepped outside completely. I could hear Thomasina coming through the flap behind me. As we walked around we lifted our paws up into the air and shook them free of the white stuff before we took another step. It was a most peculiar experience. And then I suddenly realised that the white stuff was getting deeper and deeper. Instead of just covering my paws it was so deep that I was sinking in right up to my body.

I didn't like it at all. And to be perfectly honest I began to panic a little. I backed out as fast as I possibly could and, followed by Thomasina, made a rush back for the cat flap.

By the time we got back into the kitchen we were both shivering with excitement, cold and, I confess, fear.

We decided to spend the rest of the day indoors.

December 19th

I woke up this morning dreaming that a rough barked tree was rubbing itself against my head. I quickly discovered that Thomasina was licking my face.

'It's gone,' she whispered.

'What's gone,' I asked her. I didn't have the faintest idea what she was talking about.

'The white stuff,' she answered. 'I've had a look outside.'

Suddenly I remembered what she was talking about. I stood up, stretched and padded downstairs behind her.

She was absolutely right, too. The white stuff had completely disappeared. The whole garden was very wet and it had clearly rained during the night and washed it all away.

I don't suppose we will ever know just what it was. I bet it gave the Uprights quite a surprise too.

December 23rd

I killed an enormous shrew last night and deposited it in the kitchen so that the Uprights could see it. I thought they'd be pleased. I even thought they might be tempted to taste it. I don't like shrew. I think they taste horrid. But an Upright might like the taste. Or so I thought.

But when the Upright in Trousers came into the kitchen and saw the shrew he obviously didn't want it. He opened the back door, picked up the shrew by its tail and hurled it as far as he could.

And then he looked at me.

I think he wanted me to run and get it so that he could throw it again. I've seen Uprights doing that with dogs in the park.

Well, I'm not a dog and I'm not that stupid. I had no intention of playing his silly game.

But I did think I'd have a little fun with him. I ran off in the direction the shrew had taken and then hid among the bushes. A good ten minutes afterwards I could see the Upright still standing in the doorway waiting to see if I would take the shrew back to him.

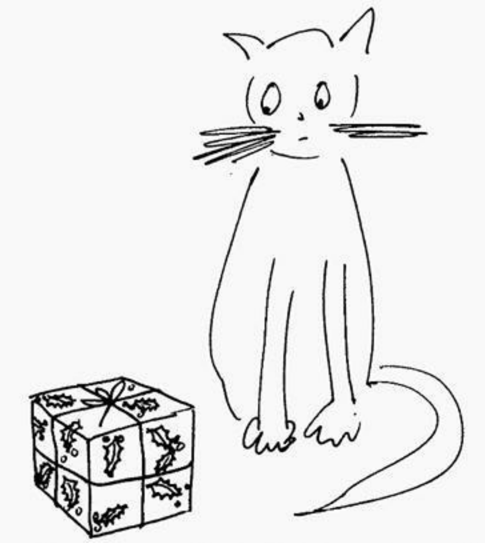

"I was presented by the Uprights with a small package wrapped in brightly coloured paper."

December 25th

I got up this morning and was presented by the Uprights with a small packet wrapped in brightly coloured paper.

I looked across the room and saw that Thomasina, who'd got up a few moments before me, had also received a gift of similar shape and size. Neither of us knew what to do. I sniffed at mine but it didn't really smell of anything. Thomasina patted hers with a paw but although the paper rustled it didn't move.

With obvious excitement our two Uprights picked up the packets and unwrapped them. The Upright in Trousers unwrapped mine and the Upright who wears a Skirt unwrapped Thomasina's.

We had both been given rubber mice.

It was one of those occasions when I was glad that the Uprights don't speak our language. At least I didn't have to try to think of something to say. I looked across at Thomasina. She looked equally puzzled.

Desperate to assure the Uprights that their gift was received in the right spirit I reached forward and gave the rubber mouse a pat. It fell over sideways. I gave it another pat and it moved another inch or two. Thomasina just watched. And then I gave it a harder tap. This time it made a strange sound. A bit like a door that needed oiling.

I don't pretend to understand why, but it seems that the Uprights have bought us both rubber mice that need oiling.

December 28th

Dreadful, dreadful news.

George is dead.

He was run over by a motor car over a fortnight ago. According to Oscar he managed to crawl into the gutter and died there quite alone. What a dreadful way to go. Poor George. It really is about time something was done about the way that motor cars race around on the roads. George is by no means the first cat to die this way. And I very much doubt if he will be the last.

George was one of the kindest, most thoughtful and most intelligent cats I have ever met. He was generous, wise, compassionate and never slow to help a stranger.

I was always honoured to count George among my friends. He taught me a great deal. And he was always patient with Thomasina and myself.

We will miss him terribly.

What a sad end to the year.

I don't know what else to write.

December 30th

I sincerely hope that no one ever reads this diary. But since I am writing my memoirs I have to be honest.

Last night I caught a shrew which I thought I would take into the house for a little pleasant hunting practice. It seemed a game, sporty sort of shrew. I thought it would help take my mind off George's tragic death.

I don't think I have ever underestimated a creature more than I underestimated that shrew.

I took it into the hall because although there are plenty of hiding places there, none of them is completely out of reach. And then I dropped the shrew right in the middle of the floor and lay down to wait and see what it did next.

To my astonishment it didn't run away, as I'd expected it to do, but just sat there up on its hind legs and made the most extraordinary noise. I could hardly believe that such a small shrew was making such a lot of noise.

Naturally, I moved closer to quieten it down. It was making enough noise to wake up the Uprights and I'd had enough of their hunting attempts for the time being.

I thought that a gentle tap on the head would persuade it to keep quiet and run and hide.

That was when I got my second surprise.

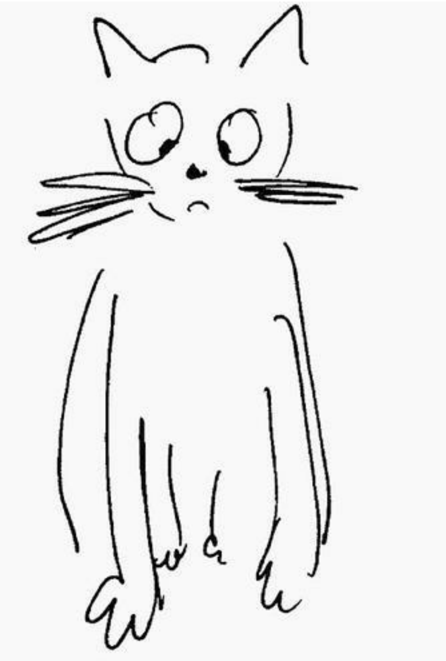

"The shrew bit me on the nose!"

Instead of running away, the shrew leapt up at my face and bit me on the nose.

I feel almost too embarrassed to write this down. How could I ever hold my head up again if anyone knew that I'd been bitten on the nose by a shrew! Thomasina would never let me forget it. Even dear old Penelope would be shocked.

But my shame doesn't stop there. I was so startled by this that instead of reaching forward and killing the shrew instantly I backed away a little. It was a reflex move.

And while I was smarting and rubbing my bleeding nose the shrew disappeared.

When I realised what had happened I spent ages looking for it. But I couldn't find it anywhere. There is a tiny gap at the side of the front door and I can only conclude that it somehow managed to squeeze through there and get outside.

So there it is. My most shameful night. If anyone ever reads this I shall deny that it ever happened and claim that I was practising my skills as a storyteller.

December 31st

So, another year has gone. It seems only yesterday that I started keeping this diary. There have been a lot of happy days and some very sad days. At least I will have my diary to remind me of it all.

I wonder what next year will bring.

I already have my new diary ready. It is in front of me as I write. At the moment it is nothing but a year of blank pages.

I look forward to filling them.

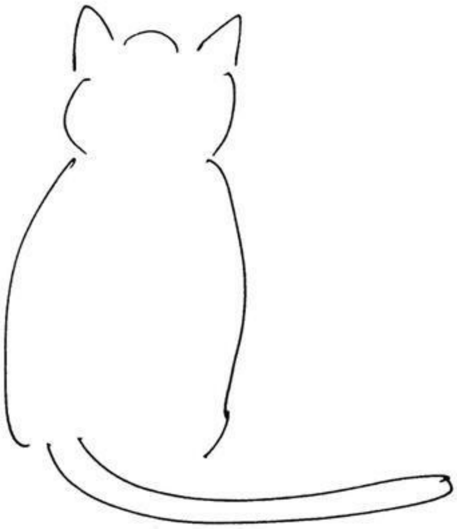

We hope you enjoyed this book. If so we would be grateful if you would post a favourable review on Amazon. Vernon Coleman's other books on cats include: *Alice's Adventures, Cat Tales* and *Cat Fables.*

Dr Vernon Coleman is a qualified doctor and professional author who has written over 100 books; these have sold more than two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK alone. His books have been translated into 25 languages and sold around the world. Many books by Vernon Coleman are available as kindle books on Amazon. For more details about available books please see his author page on Amazon and for more about Vernon Coleman please visit www.vernoncoleman.com

Are You Living With a Psychopath?

Dr Vernon Coleman

Are You Living With A Psychopath?

The 39 simple ways you can diagnose a psychopath.

Dr Vernon Coleman MB ChB DSc FRSA

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Dedication

To Donna Antoinette: the gentlest, kindest person I know; a beautiful and delicate flower in a world of drought, storm and pestilence.

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Foreword

The terms ‘psychopath’ and ‘sociopath’ are, for all practical purposes, interchangeable. Journalists and commentators sometimes prefer to use the term ‘sociopath’ to describe people who have not committed violent acts, and to reserve the term ‘psychopath’ for those individuals who have committed serious crimes such as assault or murder. And academics will argue about the two words in ways which are of absolutely no practical relevance. In reality, however, there is no practical difference between the two: a sociopath is a psychopath and a psychopath is a sociopath.

However, even the term ‘sociopath’ has been deemed too insulting and it is now politically correct to describe psychopaths as ‘individuals with antisocial personalities’.

This new term was introduced because it was felt (largely by people who had never encountered psychopaths in their daily lives and who, therefore, had no idea of the amount of harm that they can do) that there was too much stigma associated with the word ‘psychopath’.

However, this rather mealy mouthed attempt to avoid the stigma associated to the word ‘psychopath’ does not change the reality, and whatever we call them (and in this book, I will continue to use the word psychopath), these individuals show an always callous and often dangerous disregard for the feelings and rights of others.

Relationships with psychopaths are built on deceit and dishonesty and these individuals, who are always selfish, irresponsible, impulsive, aggressive and sometimes physically dangerous, manipulate and exploit those whom they meet; sometimes they do this for material gain and sometimes they do it simply because they enjoy manipulating others and turning their lives into painful chaos.

I believe that instead of worrying about hurting the feelings of psychopaths, the medical profession should concentrate on trying to help those who come into contact with psychopaths and whose lives are, as a result, often devastated.

Indeed, since psychopaths do not have feelings to be hurt, it seems rather absurd to worry about offending them.

I also feel that the term ‘antisocial personality’ is actually misleading since it rather suggests that it is society which suffers from the behaviour of psychopaths whereas in reality, although psychopaths do cause enormous harm to society as a whole, it is the individuals who come into contact with them who suffer most.

This short book is designed to help people recognise psychopaths when they meet them and it is my hope that the book will help readers protect themselves from hurt and injury.

It isn’t difficult to identify psychopaths.

Psychopaths are exceptionally selfish, constant liars, manipulative, callous, grandiose and parasitic. They bully, they are never anxious, and they are invariably likeable. They seem strong, calm and confident but they lack personal insight. They never learn from experience and they never show remorse. In the past, there were thought to be more male than female psychopaths but this is probably now changing.

The problem today is that our society is well suited to psychopaths – who can, and often do, easily rise to the top in politics and business. Much of your life will inevitably be controlled by psychopaths – some of whom you don’t know personally and some of whom you do. You can’t do anything to affect the way the psychopaths you don’t know affect your life but it will help if you know which of the people you do know are psychopaths. And that’s the purpose of this short book.

Psychopaths are ruthless, manipulative and permanently dishonest; they show significant personality traits and markedly deviant social behaviour; they show no lack of restraint and are remorseless in their dealings with others; they never learn from experience and will do things which normal folk would regard as terribly simple to satisfy fairly insignificant desires. They will, without a qualm, ruin someone who has offended or inconvenienced them. Indeed, if the fancy takes them, they will ruin someone just for fun. Much of the most severe road rage is the work of psychopaths who feel that they have been (often mildly) inconvenienced by other motorists.

It is crucial that we all learn to recognise the psychopaths in our midst. They are increasing in number, power and influence. And today, more than ever, it is vital that we recognise them.

Identifying the psychopaths in your life can, quite literally, be a matter of life or death.

Vernon Coleman
England, Autumn 2015

Introduction: Who are the psychopaths?

We tend to think of psychopaths as being crazy, axe-swinging murderers. We imagine them to be hard eyed and easy to recognise as mad, bad and truly dangerous. Books and television programmes about psychopaths invariably concentrate on the mad, sadistic killers who have slaughtered and sometimes eaten their victims.

As a result, we assume that psychopaths are few and far between, and that most of them are probably safely locked up in penal institutions.

Unhappily, all that is absolute nonsense.

The fact is that most psychopaths are not murderers, they are not in prison and they are not recognised as posing a threat to the rest of us. They are a clear and present danger in our midst and there is no doubt that they do far more harm than terrorists, drunk drivers or ordinary common or garden criminals. Their actions cause untold pain and distress and the people who live with them, and work with them, frequently die prematurely from diseases caused or exacerbated by the stresses they create.

It is vitally important to understand that psychopaths don't all become serial killers, rapists, swindlers and confidence tricksters. They aren't all child abusers, gang leaders, cult organisers, mercenaries, drug barons, unscrupulous crooks or war criminals.

Many psychopaths become doctors, lawyers and politicians (especially politicians) and there are many psychopaths in charge of big companies and banks.

It is, indeed, the fact that there are many psychopaths in the boardrooms of banks and other major, international companies which explains why so many bankers and chief executives leave their companies in disarray, taking with them huge bonuses and pensions, but show absolutely no regret, no remorse and no sympathy for the people whose lives they have ruined.

We may have been encouraged, by popular culture, to think of psychopaths as being rare and easily identifiable individuals who spend their days rushing around cutting people up and eating their human livers, but this misconception has done enormous damage to us all because it has allowed the vast majority of psychopaths to operate unnoticed in our society.

Psychopaths are surprisingly numerous and the fact is that in some areas today as much as a fifth of the population are psychopaths.

This means that if you know just five people then the odds are that one of them will be a psychopath.

If you know 20 people then you may know, and have regular daily contact with, four psychopaths.

Moreover, the incidence of psychopathic traits in our society is increasing rapidly.

Just a few years ago, it was estimated that just one in every 100 people was a psychopath. Today that figure is much higher and it is believed that between 3% and 5% of people are psychopaths. The number of psychopaths living in fragmented families or slum areas of inner cities is likely to be even higher than this.

All this means that in any decent sized town or city there are likely to be 100,000 psychopaths. A large town of five million citizens is likely to contain one million psychopaths.

The average school or college or small business will have a number of psychopaths in the building.

In schools and colleges, many of the psychopaths will be teachers, lecturers, professors and deans.

And in businesses, the psychopaths won't be filing bits of paper or sweeping the floors. They will be sitting in the big offices; either in charge of everyone else, or planning on how best to get the big corner office for themselves.

It is important to remember too that psychopaths never change. They don't learn, they don't mature and they don't suddenly develop consciences as they grow older. The fact is that their brains are different to 'normal' brains.

Psychopaths may show signs of maturing as the years go by but this is not due to any inherent change in their physical or psychological constitution but is a result of the fact that they have learned to fake appropriate emotional responses more effectively.

Psychopaths, as they age, seem to be less of a threat but they are, in reality, more of a threat than ever because they have become more successful at doing all the things which help them to assimilate themselves into our world and to hide their true selves; the older psychopath is better at lying, better at convincing people that his intentions are good and that he is a trustworthy fellow, better at all the things which enable him to cheat, to defraud and to manipulate.

It is vital to remember that the vast majority of psychopaths appear entirely normal. Most of us know and work with psychopaths on a daily basis. We may not recognise them as psychopaths (and, since the vast majority of psychopaths have never been formally diagnosed, and one of the basic principles of the disease is an absence of insight, they themselves may not realise that they are truly different to the rest of us) but the chances are that if their lives and ours coincide in any way then the impact they have on us will be considerable.

Since the incidence of psychopathy is extraordinarily common, there is no doubt that many tens of millions of people are married to psychopaths or live with them in one way or another. Those people don’t know it, of course, but their lives are undoubtedly being affected in many different ways.

To the psychopath, kindness, humanity and sentimentality are all signs of weakness, there to be exploited. Psychopaths do not have consciences, in the way that the rest of us do and so they never suffer from the restraining influence of guilt. Psychopaths do not experience real emotional ups and downs.

Occasionally, the impact of living with a psychopath can be dramatic. Some partners who live with psychopaths may notice something notably different about them (perhaps without quite realising what it is) but for most people, living with a psychopath may simply be an unpleasant, unhappy and increasingly uncomfortable experience.

In the early days, weeks and months the psychopathic partner will make a real effort, and will probably seem to be kind, attentive, thoughtful and courteous. Most psychopaths can play ‘charming’ very effectively.

But, as the weeks and months pass by, it will gradually become clear that things aren’t quite as ‘comfortable’ as they may appear to be.

Psychopaths are cruel, self-serving and never take responsibility for the things they do. They never experience guilt and never show signs of remorse.

One way or another, relationships with psychopaths invariably end in pain.

How to tell if you are living with a psychopath

Go through the following list of the traits associated with psychopaths and you will, I fear, probably be surprised to realise just how many people you know, and who may be close to you, match these signs and symptoms and can probably be identified as psychopaths.

Chapter One

Psychopaths are exceptionally selfish and egocentric. Because they are not encumbered with consciences, and never worry about how their activities will affect others, psychopaths are extraordinarily selfish individuals. To a large extent, they are rather like lower animals who see the world only as it affects them. A rabbit will munch seedlings because it doesn't, for a second, worry that it is destroying growing plants. A fox will kill and eat the rabbit without a qualm. And, similarly, if a psychopath wants something he will take it. He will not for one second worry that the owner might feel sad at its loss. A psychopath doesn't worry about other people's feelings. He doesn't think twice about cheating other people if it is to his own advantage. (For the sake of simplicity and clarity I have used the words 'he', 'him' and 'his' throughout this book but it is important to remember that there are also many female psychopaths.)

Psychopaths are not mad in the same way that the average serial killer is mad.

They aren't driven by God to kill fallen women, like so many deranged killers. They don't hear voices telling them what to do.

When psychopaths kill, it is not because they are deranged; it is because they do not treat other human beings as thinking, feeling individuals, for they themselves are cold, calculating and selfishly rational. Psychopaths understand when they are behaving badly, and know when they are breaking the rules, but they don't see why they should stop themselves. They continue to behave badly because their behaviour is of enormous advantage to them personally.

Chapter Two

Psychopaths lie constantly (and are extremely good at it).

Psychopaths lie far more than any normal person could believe possible and they do it very, very well. Most of us lie very little, and are not very good at it, and so if we are caught out in a lie we tend to admit our guilt if we are pressed. The psychopath, on the other hand, just keeps lying. And lying. And lying. Politicians in particular tell big, deliberate, determined, self-serving lies. They lie and we believe them because, as Hitler pointed out, we cannot truly believe that anyone would tell lies that big. And they know that if they just keep lying they will manage to fool most of the people most of the time. Especially if they do it with a smile and a few disarming words.

'I'm a trustworthy sort of guy,' always works well, when murmured softly with a smile and an air of surprise and disappointment that anyone could contemplate otherwise.

The odd thing is that all this lying means that psychopaths have excellent social skills. Because they lie far more than most people would think possible, and because they do it so well, they can be very convincing.

Of course, psychopaths will occasionally tell the truth if it is convenient for them to do so. But because of a fault in their brains they cannot distinguish between the truth and the lie, and cannot see any point in making the effort to do so. To them the only important thing is that their interests are well served. If telling the truth serves their interests then they will tell the truth. But if telling a lie serves their interests then they will tell a lie without any compunction, regret or shame.

Whereas most folk will feel shame, embarrassment or guilt about lying, the psychopath will feel none of those things.

There are lots of tell tale signs which ordinary people make when lying. They cover their mouths, they look away, they touch their noses or eyes, they blush, they play with their collars or with something around their necks, they will put a finger or a pencil into their mouths, they will look at the ceiling or the floor and they will often put far more emphasis on the veracity of their lie than it really needs.

But the psychopath does none of these things.

The psychopath can lie without a blink or a blush. There is no way to tell that a psychopath is lying. And he will keep on lying even when it is clear that he is lying. He will keep on lying for so long, with such persistence and with such protestations of honesty and innocence, that his listeners will begin to doubt their own interpretation of the truth.

'It would never come into average people's heads to fabricate colossal untruths,' wrote Adolf Hitler. 'And they would not believe that others could have the impudence to distort the truth so infamously.'

In the end, the chances are good that the psychopath's lies will be accepted as the truth for the psychopath knows from experience that if you lie often enough, and with enough persistence and determination, then the lie will eventually become the truth.

And for the psychopath, no lie is too big to contemplate or to stick with.

Individuals who are prepared to tell the big lie (in the knowledge that no one will suspect that it is a lie because it is simply too outrageous) always have a tremendous advantage over sensitive, caring, honest folk.

Most of us aren't used to dealing with people who lie consistently and shamelessly, we don't believe that anyone could possibly lie consistently and shamelessly and so we are easily conned.

Most of us have an unshakeable confidence in the goodness of man and so we are extremely gullible.

Incidentally, psychopaths have another advantage over the rest of us: if they are caught out in a lie or a fraud or some other sin, they are likely to get away with their crime simply by continuing to lie.

The politician who has started a war on a lie will simply keep lying. He (or she) knows that if you keep lying then the public will probably believe you. If you tell a lie often enough, and shout it loudly and with vigour (and a sense of 'hurt' that people don't automatically believe you), most people will accept what you are saying and will eventually believe that the lie is the truth.

Most people simply don't feel that comfortable about lying; and so they find it difficult to believe that anyone could lie consistently with such aplomb. Psychopaths are incredibly good liars. Just think of some of the politicians who have lied about significant issues – and remember the way they sustained their lies and expressed dismay at any suggestion that they might not be telling the truth.

Remember too, that lie detector machines don't usually catch psychopaths. Psychopaths are too unemotional, and just too good at lying, to be caught out by a relatively crude machine which depends for its accuracy upon heart rate, sweating and other simple physical signs of distress.

A fairly ordinary, common or garden, psychopath will be able to sail through a police grilling without a moment of discomfort.

Chapter Three

Psychopaths are manipulative and skilled at persuading other people to do things for them.

Psychopaths get a great kick out of manipulating people – whether they are friends, colleagues or family members. They begin by manipulating people through charm and persuasion but if those methods fail then they will manipulate through fear. If they find themselves in a difficult position, they will rationalise and explain away their situation by claiming that they had no choice, but that they had to behave in the way they did. If that doesn't work, they will resort to violence. And, of course, they will always manipulate people in such a way as to ensure that any blame will fall on the person they have manipulated. The psychopath never takes responsibility for something bad that has happened; nothing is ever their fault.

Chapter Four

Psychopaths are grandiose and full of self-importance.

The psychopath sees himself as the centre of the universe. No one else is as important. The psychopath never puts himself second. The psychopath may pretend to love others (and may indeed make a great fuss when faking protestations of love) but this will be done solely to further his own ends. The psychopath only ever loves himself. The psychopath will, over the years, learn that it is possible to get what he wants by pretending to be a good and loyal lover or friend. And so he will do everything he can to build up that image. He will tell anyone who will listen that he has been a good and loyal friend. He will do all the dutiful, expected things. When he sends cards to close family members or to a lover, he will put on lots of kisses and many proclamations of love. He does these things because he knows that they are the quickest and most effective way to get what he wants out of the other person. But however much he might pretend to be a loving spouse, parent or friend the psychopath's primary loyalty will never waiver. His first and only loyalty will be to himself. He thinks himself genuinely superior to everyone around him. In his mind, he is the only person who truly matters.

Chapter Five

Psychopaths have a sense of entitlement and are often parasitic (willingly living off others).

Psychopaths will take everything they can, without ever feeling the need to return the favours they have grasped with such enthusiasm. In addition to leeching off friends and relatives, psychopaths will frequently take full advantage of the range of benefits provided by the State. Psychopaths will frequently choose to settle in a country which offers exceptionally generous support for the sick and needy and they will then make sure that they take full benefit of every piece of available support.

Chapter Six

Psychopaths are callous and indifferent to suffering.

Psychopaths do not feel or show any empathy or genuine sympathy when others around them are suffering, though they will, of course, shed fake tears and show fake sympathy when these seem appropriate. As the years go by, psychopaths learn that they will benefit enormously if they are seen by those around them to be caring, thoughtful and considerate. And so they will do everything they can to appear to be caring, thoughtful and considerate.

Chapter Seven

Psychopaths lack personal insight and never learn from experience. Psychopaths repeatedly make the same mistakes (or do the same bad things) because they never see themselves as having done wrong. Psychopaths (like others with personality disorders) are never aware that there is anything wrong with their thinking or their behaviour.

Most of us learn that we will be rewarded emotionally if we do something good. We will feel good about ourselves and, quite possibly and understandably, rather pleased with what we have done.

We also know, of course, that we will probably be punished in some way if we do something bad. We will feel guilty if we do something that we should not do. If we are unlucky and commit a motoring offence (or commit a burglary or a mugging and the police are unusually alert and the CCTV cameras are working) then we may even end up in court.

Psychopaths, however, never learn because they don't have the necessary parts in their brains to learn from their mistakes. They never feel guilty and they are never controlled by feelings of shame. If they have been punished by society in some way, then they will simply look for a way to avoid getting into trouble in the future. If they find themselves confronted by an outraged citizen, or a suspicious member of the constabulary, and there is no alternative way of avoiding an unpleasant encounter or, worse still, some form of unpleasant punishment, they will simply deal with the problem by disposing of their accuser in some permanent way that is unlikely to be traced back to them.

We all make mistakes. We all do foolish things. But most of us regret those mistakes. We try to change. We try to learn from our foolish behaviour. However, psychopaths aren't like normal people. Psychopaths never think they are wrong and they can never put themselves into the other person's shoes; they can never see a situation from someone else's perspective. Psychopaths always see every situation only from their own point of view. When their behaviour results in a serious argument, a confrontation or a disappointment, they blame the other person (or other people). If they have a disagreement at work then the problem is, in their mind, always due to someone else's behaviour. If they have an argument at home then the fault is always their partner's. In the end this sort of behavioural pattern leads, inevitably, to rancour and resentment.

All this means that attempts to punish psychopaths, or to persuade them to change their ways, are invariably a failure. Psychopaths do not modify their behaviour, or improve the way they treat others, when they are punished. Instead, they usually become increasingly bitter, angry and unsentimental about the world.

Chapter Eight

Psychopaths are bullying and abusive.

Psychopaths bully and are abusive for two reasons. First, because they can be abusive without feeling guilty. Second, because they don’t see any reason why they shouldn’t be, especially since they know from experience that bullying is a very effective way to get their own way. If a psychopath doesn’t think he is being treated with sufficient respect (if, in other words, he is not getting entirely his own way) then he is quite likely to become aggressive and physically threatening. If words don’t get him what he wants then he will use his fists or a weapon.

Psychopaths occasionally get into trouble with the law because of their behaviour when they feel thwarted. But they often escape without punishment because they learn how to manipulate other people. They pretend to be apologetic, they promise ‘not to do it again’, they cry crocodile tears, they may talk of suicide (something they never do in reality) and they convince the court, the police and everyone around them that they are innocents who merely got caught up in an unfortunate situation.

Chapter Nine

Psychopaths are good at tricking people.

Psychopaths trick the people they know and the people who trust them but they also make excellent confidence tricksters.

Most of us are constrained by our consciences. We feel guilty if we take advantage of other people's honesty and trust. We feel ashamed of ourselves if we take advantage of the weak, the gullible or the vulnerable. Psychopaths suffer none of these constraints. Psychopaths will take bread from starving children without a qualm. A psychopath will cheat an old couple out of their savings without any sense of shame. He will regard the vulnerable and the slow-witted as easy marks. It is for this reason that psychopaths often become very successful (and make a lot of money) out of financial schemes which depend for their success on the ignorance and trust of others. A few decades ago, the most ambitious confidence tricksters were busy enrolling victims into pyramid selling schemes. Today, however, the most ambitious psychopaths have learned that there is much more money to be made out of working for investment banks or hedge funds where they can make huge fortunes by fiddling interest rates or commodity prices and stealing from millions of people at a time. The big advantage with frauds of this nature is that they invariably go unpunished. The fraud comes with an almost unlimited upside and almost no downside.

Of course, not all psychopaths use their peculiar psychological talents to enable them to make money through trickery or fraud.

But all will use their natural skills to enable them to manipulate those whom they meet in various walks of life. So, for example, parents who are psychopaths will manipulate school teachers (charming them, threatening them and bullying them) and all psychopaths will manipulate doctors and other health professionals.

I once met a woman who was a psychopath and a mother.

All three children had been diagnosed as being mentally ill because they had complained about their mother and the treatment they had received at her hands. She had beaten her children and treated them contemptibly; bringing them up in an atmosphere of undiluted fear.

In reality, there was nothing intrinsically wrong with the children. They were all close to nervous breakdowns but they were not mentally ill. It was the mother who was sick; she was a psychopath who had regularly dismissed the children's fears and anxieties as nonsense and who had persuaded the authorities to treat her as the unfortunate victim. She convinced the authorities that her husband was a dangerous madman and that her children were deluded and suffering from paranoia. She was so convincing that her children were the ones who ended up receiving drug therapy.

In fact, of course, there was nothing wrong with her husband. He was a rather insipid fellow but he wasn't dangerous. And there was nothing wrong with any of her children except that they had been brought up in an atmosphere of fear. They were so terrified of their mother that they would do whatever she told them to do.

The only person in this bizarre household who was ill was the mother; and she was a full-blooded psychopath. She had manipulated her husband, terrified her children and charmed a number of doctors, psychiatrists and social workers so successfully that she lived in considerable luxury. All her children received weekly disability benefits and she controlled every penny that went into the house. She paid each child a small amount of weekly pocket money and kept the rest for herself. The end result was that she had total control of her household and a not inconsiderable income from the State. Her standard trick with health workers was to play the martyr. She deliberately wore scruffy and dowdy clothing. She walked with a stoop and made it abundantly clear that she was nothing but a loving mother, struggling to care for her sick brood and to deal with the poor hand of cards which she had been dealt.

It was only after I had talked at some length with her children, and had gained their confidence, that I was able to begin to see through the act the mother was putting on. She ruled the house with fear. On several occasions, the children showed me bruises that had resulted when their mother had attacked them. The children had often been admitted to a local hospital with broken bones. (The psychopathic mother always had a good explanation for these 'accidents', of course.) When I eventually confronted the woman with the truth, she forgot her downtrodden act and suddenly became aggressive, menacing and threatening. She would never admit that she was the one at fault.

Psychopaths are quick to take advantage of the vulnerable and the lonely and always do so without any sense of remorse. They are, however, also skilled at making themselves look like victims. A psychopath will smile and take your pride, your money, your innocence, your love and your hopes and dreams and they will then flagrantly and casually violate all the social norms without being troubled by the slightest twinge of conscience.

Chapter Ten

Psychopaths can be superficially charming.

Psychopaths are charming because they have learned to be attentive and to fake interest in others; but their interest is purely superficial and their eyes quickly glaze over when someone else is talking about themselves, and they change the subject as quickly as they can.

To the untrained eye and ear (and the individual who has not read this book), psychopaths usually seem likeable and very sane and will, indeed, usually show far fewer signs of mental illness than others around them. Psychopaths don't usually suffer from anxiety or depression and they don't have any difficulty in sleeping when things aren't going well for them.

I have met (and diagnosed) quite a few psychopaths in my professional career. A few I met when I was a general practitioner. And I met quite a number when I worked as a police surgeon. The one characteristic they all had was their charm. They could turn it on and off like a tap and they tended to turn it full on whenever they thought it might prove useful. I remember interviewing one murderer who had been arrested almost in flagrante. He was still covered in his victim's blood when the police caught him. The victim, an older man, was his lover. Realising that it was impossible for him to deny any involvement in the man's death he burst into tears and claimed that he had been merely defending himself. He claimed that he had been attacked and it was the murdered man who had been the instigator of the violence. It soon became clear that this story was absurd. The murdered man was frail, had a weak heart and suffered from terrible osteoarthritis. He needed a walking stick to move about and was nowhere near fit enough to have attacked the much younger, stronger man. The murdered man's body, when I examined it, was covered in bruises and scratches and it was clear that he had been the object of a good deal of physical abuse. It also became apparent that the older man had signed over much of his wealth and had recently arranged for his solicitor to put his home in the younger man's name. The solicitor reported that he had been concerned that the older man, his client, had been coerced into making the transfers. Even when confronted with all this evidence, however, the killer had steadfastly stuck to his story. He stuck to in in court and he stuck to it when he was found guilty.

Chapter Eleven

Psychopaths invariably seem strong and confident; unless they are annoyed they usually remain calm when others around them are consumed with anxiety. Psychopaths hardly ever panic or lose their nerve. The complete absence of a conscience, or any sense of guilt, means that psychopaths are free of all normal constraints.

Chapter Twelve

Psychopaths may appear sincere, and may be extremely convincing, but events usually show their sincerity to be false. They may say things like `trust me’ or ‘I want to help you’ or ‘I’m a straightforward sort of person’.

Chapter Thirteen

Psychopaths commonly become frustrated and angry, usually when they don't get their own way. Their anger and frustration will often turn to rage. It is crucial to remember that psychopaths think only of themselves and of what they want. And if their plans, hopes and aspirations appear to be thwarted, they will become enraged. For example, a psychopath will often become enraged if he is thwarted in traffic. Ordinary motorists who are offended by the behaviour of someone else on the road will probably do no more than wave two fingers, but the psychopath will chase after the offender (for miles if necessary) then attack him or her quite violently. The attack will often be quite out of proportion to the perceived offence.

Chapter Fourteen

Psychopaths are never irrational (not, at least, in their own minds).

Psychopaths are unimaginative but they are logical. They are driven by very simple yearnings: they see themselves as individuals isolated in a curious, alien world. The psychopath's life does not leave room for irrational or pointless behaviour but is, generally speaking, directed quite rationally. He has clear and simple ambitions, and his life is organised in such a way as to best enable him to meet his targets. He does not see any point in behaviour designed solely for fun or entertainment. How could that possibly move him forward towards his goals?

There are, however, some basic exceptions to this rule. If the psychopath sees some potential benefit in behaving in a way which he finds irrational but which will, nevertheless, take him forwards in his quest then he will behave irrationally. So, if a psychopath wants to further a business relationship he will put up with the sort of social activity he loathes if he thinks it is likely to move his plan forward.

Chapter Fifteen

Psychopaths tend to have poor imaginations and so make poor artists, writers or film makers. You might imagine that having little or no imagination would be a disadvantage for a criminal. If caught in a tricky spot, a criminal would probably find it useful to be able to think creatively, and to devise a way through or around their problem. But psychopaths don't need to do this. They can avoid or escape from their problems by lying, by using their charm, by persuading other people to help them or, in extremis, by simply battering their way out of difficulty (and, like Patricia Highsmith's character Tom Ripley, by killing whichever individuals have become inconvenient, troublesome or threatening.)

Surprisingly, perhaps, although they have poor imaginations, their vanity and sense of self-importance mean that psychopaths are often found in positions of power in the media (where they may become newspaper or magazine editors, television producers or executives and film producers and directors).

Chapter Sixteen

Psychopaths don’t worry in the way that most people worry; they don’t suffer from anxiety in the normal way.

Most of us worry because we have imaginations. When something goes wrong, or something might go wrong, or we suspect that something might go wrong, or we simply begin to fear that we ought to be worrying about something going wrong, our minds create all sorts of unpleasant scenarios. We can see ourselves in court, vilified, ostracised, abandoned and bankrupt. Our error might be a small one. But we worry about the possible repercussions and our minds play strange games with us. The fears and the resultant anxieties will develop in direct proportion to our sensitivity and our ability to imagine the worst. If we are introspective individuals, with vivid imaginations, we will be able to create nightmare futures for ourselves.

And, of course, we worry if we do something wrong. We become consumed with guilt. We worry about the people we might have wronged. We worry about the consequences. Will people hate us? Will they take us to court? Will they tell everyone how awful we have been? Will they report us to the authorities? Will we lose our licence to do whatever it is we need a licence to do? Will we end up humiliated in the local newspaper? It is for all these reasons that many people who have done wrong end up confessing to their crimes. In the end the punishment they will receive will, they know, be nothing compared to the punishment they are meting out to themselves.

Psychopaths have none of these problems. They don’t have consciences. They know no guilt. They genuinely know no fear. (And, incidentally, if anyone tells you that they know no fear and they mean it then they are almost certainly psychopaths.) And they believe they can lie and cheat their way out of any trouble they find themselves in.

Chapter Seventeen

Psychopaths are often hostile, aggressive and violent. Because they are quick to become frustrated, psychopaths often become hostile, extremely aggressive and violent. They are sometimes guilty of what may appear to the rest of us to be random and senseless violence; they will hit out (and even kill people) without showing any remorse. But to the psychopath, the violence is never irrational or pointless. There is always a simple reason for what they do. The psychopath will attack, crush and even kill people who stand in their way, who threaten them in some way or who are merely proving to be inconvenient or embarrassing.

Until they learn how society works, psychopaths may not even realise that their behaviour will lead to trouble for themselves, and they certainly won't feel any remorse for what they have done. Older psychopaths, who have learned that society as a whole doesn't approve of violence, may be more cautious, or may take more care to ensure that they aren't caught. As they become older, the majority of psychopaths will learn to suppress their violent tendencies so that they do not attract attention to themselves and damage the lifestyle they are enjoying. But the threat of violence is always there. And, of course, even if the psychopath is caught red-handed he will always allege, with great conviction, that the victim was in some way the cause of the violence.

Finally, psychopaths are difficult to catch because they never shown any signs of guilt.

Chapter Eighteen

Psychopaths are unable to experience love or show true compassion.

Psychopaths don’t know what love is but, with experience, they do learn to fake these emotions very effectively. They will make declarations of love if they think they will benefit and they will weep what appear to be real tears if the occasion demands them. The older and more experienced a psychopath becomes the better able he will be at faking emotional responses.

Chapter Nineteen

Psychopaths are uninterested in anyone else’s tragedy or joy.

Psychopaths may fake interest in other people. But they have no genuine interest in someone else’s good fortune or bad fortune.

Chapter Twenty

Psychopaths will never take responsibility; they will always blame others when things go wrong.

Psychopaths are completely selfish; they never think of anyone but themselves. If they make a mistake, they will always point a finger at someone else – and blame them.

Chapter Twenty One

Psychopaths never show remorse or guilt and do not ever care about the feelings of others; they never feel bad when they do bad things and they never feel ashamed. Their primary concern is that they do not get caught and find themselves forced to take responsibility for what they have done. And so, inevitably, the psychopath's first reaction will always be to blame someone else. If that fails then the psychopath will fake an emotional response; they will pretend to be deeply upset by what they have done. They will, of course, still blame the victim. Incidentally, most psychopaths do not think that they are in any way different to other people, and they certainly don't think of themselves as ill.

Chapter Twenty Two

Psychopaths are exceptionally likely to become alcoholics or drug addicts. (And so, as a result, may have a shorter life expectancy than the general population). They are also likely to be promiscuous. And if they are unable to talk their way out of trouble they may end up in prison.

Chapter Twenty Three

Psychopaths are indifferent to literature or art. They are unmoved, except in a very superficial way, by beauty, love, evil or horror. Psychopaths find it difficult to understand why other people become emotional when watching a six-tissue movie. But psychopaths will fake interest, and fake emotional responses, when they are older and more experienced.

Chapter Twenty Four

Psychopaths have little or no genuine sense of humour (although they can, of course, fake a sense of humour just as they can fake other emotions). When psychopaths do find something funny it is usually something that may seem cruel or very simple to other observers. They will laugh at the misfortunes of strangers. They will not, however, laugh at subtle things. They do not have a 'sophisticated' sense of humour. And they won't make original and witty remarks themselves.

Despite the absence of a genuine sense of humour, psychopaths can sometimes appear witty and charming because they will remember jokes they've been told and repeat them at appropriate moments.

Chapter Twenty Five

Psychopaths are chameleons. They will recreate themselves if they think it will be advantageous. And so they will, for example, create a new personality whenever they consider it necessary. In prison, psychopaths are incredibly good at convincing parole boards (and psychiatrists and prison visitors) that they feel truly sorry for any crimes they have committed, that they have changed and that all they need is a good hug and everything will be fine. Moors murderer Myra Hindley, for example, was exceedingly skilful at persuading prison visitors that she was a changed woman.

Chapter Twenty Six

Psychopaths often behave in a way that leaves normal people feeling helpless, betrayed and bewildered.

The psychopath's behaviour is morally incomprehensible to the rest of us. A psychopath will kill a passer-by simply to steal their wallet. They will do this without a second thought, and without remorse, because to them the deed seems to be logical and justified. They needed money. There was money in a wallet. They took the wallet. And in taking the wallet they had to kill the owner. If they had not murdered then the owner of the wallet might have called the police. And that would doubtless have been inconvenient.

Most psychopaths don't go around killing strangers, of course. They don't behave violently because they don't need to. The more intelligent psychopaths manipulate and lie and use people in order to further their own ends, and they do this in far more subtle ways than by hitting them on the head with a brick or stabbing them in the back with a knife.

It is much easier (and safer) to trick people by being a charming liar than by hitting them on the head. Psychopaths can convince and deceive with a charm that can convince even the most experienced sceptic. And, of course, psychopaths are often manipulative enough to realise that it is sometimes best to tell the truth – simply because by salting the mine with a few nuggets of truth they can disarm those who are suspicious.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Psychopaths, particularly young and inexperienced ones, tend to make too much effort to appear genuinely interested in other people. When meeting strangers they may use their hands a good deal more than other folk would. They are likely to be effusive and to overdo things in the manner of not terribly good thespians taking part in amateur dramatics for the first time.

Chapter Twenty Eight

Psychopaths sometimes appear to have rather ‘dead’ eyes, and their stare may seem uncomfortably intense to others. Psychopaths look people in the eye because they believe that this makes them seem honest but also because they know it is a good way to obtain power over others.

Chapter Twenty Nine

Psychopaths are good at pretending to be victims. Onlookers and observers often sympathise with the psychopath because they are taken in by the smile, the presence and, quite often, the psychopath’s fake sense of grievance. It is not unusual for the psychopath’s victim to end up feeling that they have done something wrong.

Chapter Thirty

Psychopaths often make promises they know they cannot keep, and have no intention of keeping. They make the promises because they are convenient and useful and they enable them to get what they want, when they want it. Obligations and commitments mean nothing to psychopaths, and they feel no need to honour promises or principles unless there is some obvious benefit to themselves in doing so. They will remain unmoved by the knowledge that their actions are causing hardship and unhappiness for others. Psychopaths tend to leave everyone they meet sad but not much wiser.

Chapter Thirty One

Psychopaths are good at self- promotion. They have enormous self- belief and confidence and sometimes appear exceptionally ‘pushy’. Psychopaths can manipulate others calmly, coolly (and without any qualms) and they frequently do this in order to further their own careers. Since they never feel guilt or shame, psychopaths can frequently rise right to the top in their chosen field.

Chapter Thirty Two

Psychopaths learn to fake their emotions by studying other people. As a result, it is sometimes clear that an individual appears to act and react in a way that is spookily reminiscent of the way someone else acts and reacts.

Chapter Thirty Three

Psychopaths are often extremely ambitious. And they rise to the top because they can deal with problems, setbacks and disappointments far more effectively than ordinary folk. Bad things break the sensitive. (Nietzsche was quite wrong when he said that things that don’t kill you will make you stronger. The things which hurt but don’t kill still cause permanent damage.)

Psychopaths ignore or brush aside the sort of genuine worries that destroy ordinary people. It is the mental strength of psychopaths which helps them to rise to the top, and it is that strength, that unswerving, uncaring, committed determination to achieve their own ambitions, whatever the cost might be, that is such a danger both to vulnerable individuals and to society as a whole.

Chapter Thirty Four

Psychopaths neglect their families in every conceivable way. The psychopath’s only real concern is himself (or herself) and he or she has no real love or even affection for their spouse or children.

Chapter Thirty Five

Psychopaths are constantly searching for excitement and may, therefore, engage in an unending series of casual sexual relationships. They do this not because they are looking for love or romance, or even physical excitement, but because they enjoy the thrill of the chase and the thrill of cheating on their partners without being found out.

Chapter Thirty Six

Psychopaths never apologise. When ordinary folk make serious mistakes they apologise, try to put things right and, quite probably, feel full of guilt. Sensitive, caring individuals bend over backwards to make amends. But when psychopaths make mistakes they lie and lie and lie again. And they do it convincingly and without a blush. It never occurs to them to apologise. They don't make any effort to put things right. And, unless it is completely unavoidable, they do not resign. (When psychopaths do apologise it is because they are faking normal behaviour and because they think that an apology will prove beneficial; they see that there will be some personal advantage to be gained if they express regret.)

The psychopath's default position is to lie, and to blame someone else when things go wrong. Psychopaths are well suited to our world; in simplistic terms they are the 'fittest' and the toughest and so they survive. Psychopaths are manipulative and superficial and they lie and cheat with impunity; they are not held back by consciences. They never feel guilty. Why should they apologise?

The trait of guilt-free dishonesty, and the ability to move on without ever feeling any genuine need to apologise, is helpful in a number of trades and professions. It should be no surprise that psychopaths are commonly found leading political parties and large, international businesses. I've studied political parties around the world (I have written several political books on British, American and European politics) and have come to the conclusion that every major political leader on the planet (and every significant opposition leader) is a fully fledged, completely paid up psychopath.

And so the world, which is now run by psychopaths, according to their own lack of principles, becomes nastier and nastier, and the sensitive, the meek and the mild are trodden on and crushed.

Chapter Thirty Seven

Psychopaths are quick thinking; they are capable of thinking on their feet and, if cornered, will quickly make up effective and often believable lies in order to explain their behaviour. It is their ability to lie quickly and easily that enable psychopaths to think quickly.

Chapter Thirty Eight

Psychopaths are sometimes very intelligent, though there is a wide variety of intelligence among psychopaths, just as there is in the general population.

The more intelligent psychopaths are the ones who become successful (in areas such as politics, business, the arts and the professions) whereas the less intelligent psychopaths tend to have difficulty in holding onto jobs.

(Less intelligent psychopaths are not able to cope with their frustration and their anger and they often struggle to survive. They may find it difficult to understand why behaviour which seems natural to them seems to attract so much criticism. They will probably find it difficult to work with other people and their impatience and bad temper may affect their personal relationships adversely. Their aggressive and sometimes violent behaviour may result in their having to change jobs frequently and in their moving about the country a good deal.)

Chapter Thirty Nine

Psychopaths may become extremely successful. If you don't have a conscience, and can lie easily and convincingly then you don't need talent to become rich, famous and powerful. The truth is that many psychopaths rise to the top in whatever field they choose to work. If an intelligent and ambitious psychopath works in a large organisation, the chances are good that he will eventually rise right to the top (unless, of course, there is another psychopath settled comfortably on the ladder above him). The top jobs in politics, and indeed in many other types of employment, are frequently held by people with overpowering, dominating, psychopathic traits. In our modern world, it is frequently psychopaths who rule the roost (wherever the particular roost may be).

In his book *Our Own Worst Enemy*, Norman F. Dixon wrote that: 'It would be nice to have a world devoid of psychopathic leaders. This is unlikely ever to come about. Throughout history, the possession of psychopathic traits has proved a useful passport to high office. Men and women who are unfettered by moral scruples, who are prepared to lie or cheat their way to the top, who will make promises they know they cannot keep and may, in extreme cases, think nothing of assassinating their rivals, have a huge advantage over those held back by notions of fair play. The possession of psychopathic traits is advantageous to a leader. They give him more degrees of freedom in his control and manipulating of those under him and most particularly in his dealings with potential enemies.'

And it is perfectly true that psychopaths (who are by nature selfish, uncaring and insensitive) frequently become leaders in our world; effortlessly rising to the top. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that most of the world's leaders are psychopaths.

Psychopaths are designed for success because of their superficial charm, their ruthlessness, their overriding sense of ambition, their vanity and their selfishness. The psychopath's ruthlessness is his strength and, in a world which psychopaths dominate, it is our weakness. Psychopaths are insensitive and are often overachievers. They suffer very little, if at all, from stress related disorders and are, therefore, at an enormous advantage in our stress-laden society.

Look around at modern television celebrities and sports stars and you will see that many of them are psychopaths. This is not because those who want to be really successful in sport or on television have learnt to be ruthless, ungrateful, uncaring, dishonest and graceless. Those are surprisingly difficult traits to learn. Psychopaths rise to the top, and become successful in their chosen fields, because they have an inbuilt advantage. They do not have to learn to be ruthless. They are ruthless because they never suffer from guilt. Psychopaths, remember, do not have consciences.

Neurotics tend to be sensitive, gentle individuals who find modern living difficult. Psychopaths, on the other hand, are thick-skinned, pushy, ruthless, insensitive and tough; and intelligent psychopaths often find modern living very easy. If the world seems as though it has been designed for psychopaths, with their success in mind, this is because it, in many ways, it has been. And there is no doubt that leaders who possess psychopathic traits are at an enormous advantage. They have more freedom in their dealings with the public, with those with whom they work and with their potential enemies. They are able to control and manipulate people without any qualms. Psychopaths fake their emotions (something which they learn to do by studying other people) and so suffer very little, if at all, in circumstances which healthy people would find emotionally challenging or impossibly difficult. They can, and do, make themselves admired and likeable. It is not surprising, therefore, that many people in positions of power are psychopaths. And we should not be surprised at the fact that our society is controlled by psychopaths for, as I have already explained, psychopaths are surprisingly numerous.

Throughout history, psychopaths have always had an advantage when it comes to seeking high office, and today's political party system, with its emphasis on superficial likeability and an endless capacity for lying and deceit, actually makes it easier for psychopaths to reach the top. Our world is run by psychopaths; individuals with a dominant trait frequently associated with criminality. A remarkably high proportion of Presidents and Prime Ministers end up in prison (and many of those who escape confinement only do so because they have arranged for their country's laws to be changed or because they have bribed, bulled or killed their opponents). If the percentage of convicted criminals among solicitors or doctors was a fraction of the percentage of criminals among State leaders, there would be serious questions asked about the way in which solicitors and doctors were trained and selected.

It is not, of course, just political leaders who are psychopaths.

Many successful company directors are psychopaths. The well-known individuals who run big banking institutions, large international companies and important international organisations are frequently psychopaths. It also seems clear that most corporate bosses are psychopaths. How else is it possible to explain the fact that food company bosses allow their corporations to deliberately market and sell products which they know cause cancer and will dramatically increase the incidence of heart disease? They don't just market these products but they make a real effort to lie about the damage their products do to the health of those who consume them. You have to be a psychopath to run a company selling fat soaked burgers to children, when you know that the item you are manipulating children to demand will kill quite a number of them at an early age. How do you describe the activities of bankers who deliberately drove thousands of investors (and customers) to the brink of financial ruin (and sometimes over the edge) in order to increase their bank's profits and their own bonuses? How do you explain the fact that bankers have deliberately manipulated interest rates and the prices of commodities despite knowing that their actions must bring inevitable, lasting hardship to millions and, indeed, threaten the stability of the financial world? Could normal, sensitive individuals do such things? I doubt it. Finally, consider drug company bosses. They deliberately promote drugs which they know are lethal and useless. They sell cancer treatment drugs which they know will do more harm than good.

No decent human being with a functioning conscience could do these things. The only explanation is that the ruthless bosses, the scum that rise to the top of the corporate world, are psychopaths.

The simple truth is that people in positions of power reach the top because they don't care about people in the way that sensitive folk care. And that, inevitably, gives them an enormous advantage – a killer edge.

Politics and industry are dominated by psychopaths but so too are the professions. There are, for example, many psychopaths working in medicine and the law, and the medical and legal establishments are packed with self-serving doctors and lawyers who have lied and clawed and deceived their way to the top of their professions, and who never show remorse or regret. It can be no shock, therefore, to see how the professions have failed us; sneering at the weak and vulnerable, laughing at the kind-hearted and regarding the honest and the genuine and the good as simply stepping stones to be used and abused.

In our world, the acquisition of power depends on what you are prepared to do to get it. And psychopaths, who are unencumbered by conscience or guilt, will do whatever it takes. So the world is full of callous liars and cheats who seem to be doing very well indeed, thank you very much, and who seem to care not one jot for the opprobrium which used to be reserved for such individuals. Remember, that although they may be extremely rich, famous and successful, these people aren't just a little bit psychopathic. On the contrary, they are full blooded, dangerous, 'lock the doors and bolt the windows' psychopaths.

As I have already pointed out, you undoubtedly know several psychopaths. You might be living with one. But there is also an excellent chance that you are working for at least one.

How to Decide If You’re Living With a Psychopath

Go through the items in this checklist of 39 psychopathic characteristics and behavioural patterns and count how many items on this list fit the person you know and whom you suspect of being a psychopath. The higher the number of positive associations, the greater the chances are that the person you are assessing is a psychopath.

Afterword

There are no drugs available for the treatment of psychopaths.

Nor is psychotherapy, or any other form of treatment, likely to be helpful.

Because there is absolutely no treatment available, the diagnosis of 'psychopath' is rarely made by doctors. There's not much point in making a diagnosis if there is no treatment available. And when someone is diagnosed as a psychopath it is usually only when the individual has been found guilty of a crime of violence.

The fact that most diagnosed psychopaths are in prison is one of the reasons we so easily delude ourselves into thinking that most of the psychopaths in our world are safely locked away.

Sadly, nothing could be further from the truth.

Most psychopaths have never been diagnosed. And they are certainly not in prison.

So how do ordinary, sensitive individuals protect themselves?

There's no easy answer.

There is, I'm afraid, little point in asking your doctor, or any other authority, for help.

Any half-decent psychopath will easily laugh off any accusations and suspicions and the chances are that you (the person asking for help) will be the one who is labelled as being mentally ill – suffering from paranoia or some other psychosis.

Clearly, if you think that someone close to you could be a psychopath then you need to defend yourself – mentally, emotionally and possibly physically.

You should learn to be more suspicious and less trusting and should, perhaps, consider restarting your life away from their malign influence.

Psychopaths obtain power, and use it, because they are utterly selfish. They succeed in their toxic endeavours because the rest of us are sensitive, and we try to do more good than harm. Most of us find it difficult to believe that anyone we know could lie all the time.

But psychopaths do lie all the time.

And that's why they have the power.

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Dr Vernon Coleman MB ChB DSc FRSA is a registered medical practitioner and bestselling author. He was the first doctor to draw attention to the relationship between stress and illness and the first doctor to draw attention to the widespread problem of tranquilliser addiction. He has written widely on mental illness and about the side effects of prescription drugs. His books include *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You, Doctors Kill More People Than Cancer* and *Bodypower*. He has written over 100 books which have sold more than two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK and been translated into 25 languages. Many of his books are available as eBooks. For a list of books available, please see his author page on Amazon.

Around the Wicket

Vernon Coleman

Around The Wicket

Edward Pettigrew's Diary Of A Year At Little Lampton Cricket Club

Vernon Coleman

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Note

All characters, organisations, businesses and places in this publication are fictitious, and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. Little Lampton Cricket Club does not exist. Even the existence of the author is in some doubt.

Bestselling author Vernon Coleman has written over 100 books which have been translated into 24 languages and have sold over two million copies in hardback and paperback in the UK alone. His novel Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War was turned into an award winning movie. His other books include the Bilbury books and The Village Cricket Tour. For a list of available books please see Vernon Coleman's author page on Amazon or visit http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

Foreword

When my friend Edward Pettigrew sent me a copy of his manuscript he flattered me enormously by asking for my advice.

‘If you have any suggestions that you think would improve my book I would love to hear them,’ he wrote in the self-effacing way which is so much a part of his engaging personality.

Having read Edward’s manuscript I instantly wrote back assuring the author that I could add nothing to his remarkable first book and urging him not to allow anyone to persuade him to change a single word. ‘You may find yourself pilloried or, worse still, ignored by the critics,’ I warned him. ‘But you have produced a book which will stand the test of time. A classic which will be enjoyed by cricket lovers for as long as the game is remembered. I cannot give you stronger praise than to say that I fervently wish I had written it myself.’

I am delighted to recommend Edward Pettigrew’s book *Around The Wicket* to you without reservation. I hope and believe you will thoroughly enjoy it.

Vernon Coleman

Devon

Preface

This is the true story of a year in the life of the Little Lampton Cricket Club.

When I first announced my intention of writing this book my publisher told me that it is customary for people who write diaries of this type to spice up their work with anecdotes and tales from other years, or even from other places. He confessed, after three glasses of the sort of rather indifferent claret with which publishers are wont to court their authors, that it is not unknown for writers of alleged volumes of autobiography to enhance the value of their offering to the public by (as he put it) ‘making some of it up’.

‘Some of the stories you read in such books are entirely true,’ he said. ‘Some are partly true. And some aren’t true at all. By and large the best stories are the fictitious ones and the tedious, self-serving ones are the true ones.’

Without in any way intending to be sanctimonious or self-righteous I assured him that these devious techniques would not be necessary in my book.

When I had delivered my completed manuscript and my publisher had read it and pronounced himself well satisfied he took me out to lunch again. As we drank our coffee he smiled knowingly. ‘I see you followed my advice!’ he said, illustrating the comment with a knowing wink.

‘What do you mean?’ I asked him, genuinely puzzled by the remark.

‘You spiced it up!’ he said. ‘It’s hilarious. I loved it. But no cricket club could possibly contain as many unfortunate misfits as yours.’

He was wrong on both counts.

Although you may at times find it difficult to believe the book you are about to read is an honest account of a single year in the life of the Little Lampton Cricket Club. And the book is dedicated to the misfits, the ne’er-do-wells and the disaster prone members and supporters of a team which is proud to have been in existence back when the current captain of England was still in his pram.

Edward Pettigrew,

Hon. Secretary, Little Lampton Cricket Club

Introduction

All cricket lovers will know that these days it is almost compulsory for anyone who plays professional cricket to write a diary detailing their adventures.

I have, over the years, received a good number of these diaries as gifts (memo to Aunt Esme: could you go back to the socks, please?) and most of them are, it seems to me little more than self-congratulatory advertisements designed, on the one hand, to describe in nauseating and extensive detail the cricketer's talent and natural abilities and, on the other, his misfortune at having to play his professional cricket at a time when his county and national side were managed by ruthless, brain dead incompetents whose sole purpose in life was to find excuses to leave him out of their sides.

Just over a year ago it occurred to me that it would make a pleasant change for an enthusiastic club cricketer to write an account of what the game is really like at club level where a big sponsorship deal is likely to mean 10% off bats, pads and balls in return for a mention on the loudspeaker during the tea interval at every home match.

I have been secretary of the Little Lampton Cricket Club for the past three years and a member of the club since 1975. Like most of the members of the club for which I play I follow the fortunes of our county side and the national side. I usually get to the county ground a couple of times during a season and I try to spend a day at a Test Match once a year.

As a grass roots member it seems to me that those who manage cricket at the top end of the game seem to have rather lost their way in recent years.

When I was younger I was a member of two county clubs. I used to attend matches several times during a season – often taking three days of my annual holiday so that I could watch an entire county match. I once took five days' holiday so that I could watch the whole of a Test Match. (When I added up the costs of the tickets, the travel and the outrageously overpriced refreshments I discovered that it would have been cheaper to take the good lady wife to Spain for a fortnight. The weather would have undoubtedly been better, the beer would have been colder and I would have probably had more fun.)

In those far off distant days, when there were often people in the crowd who could still remember what it was like when England won a Test Match, the spectator might not have been king but he was at least treated like a customer. County clubs were, to a certain extent, designed to make life agreeable for fellows who wanted to spend a pleasant day watching cricket.

These days cricket seems to have been taken over by marketing men in smart suits. The whole purpose of the professional game seems to have changed. The ultimate aim seems to be make money and in that pursuit the subsidiary (but crucial) aim is to keep the corporate sponsors purring. The people running cricket these days probably think W.G. Grace was a gate manufacturer.

Ghastly looking logos are painted on the grass, the sight screens double up as advertising hoardings, the seats have been crammed together so that anyone with a waist size 38 or larger feels like a misshape and all the available car parking space is taken up with tents full of pasty-faced insurance salesmen and bank managers. Sour-faced, glum and threatening, white coated men stand at the entrance gates confiscating bottles of wine from honest citizens who are subsequently forced to slake their thirst by standing in endless queues and buying overpriced chemically brewed ale from sulky male bar staff. (These days the spectators are even denied the chance of a peep down a few inches of cleavage.)

Back in the old days I used to potter along to my local professional cricket ground to watch a little cricket. These days, if I go, I am made to feel as though I am simply part of someone's marketing plan. They need me there to make the television viewers feel that the whole thing is really happening but I suspect that as soon as they have worked out a way to replace spectators with suitably obedient holographic images matches will be played behind closed gates.

If I sound slightly bitter and slightly sad that is probably because I am slightly bitter and slightly sad.

Around The Wicket was written partly to celebrate real cricket – the sort which people play because they enjoy it rather than because they are trying to make money – and partly to remind the men (and women) in their expensive suits that long after they have finished ruining the professional game the amateur game – real cricket – will continue to thrive.

E.P.

JANUARY 2nd

The committee held a meeting today to decide whether or not to have a satellite dish fitted to the pavilion roof. Numerous members thought that this would be a good idea – giving us all a chance to watch overseas Test Matches this winter.

However, some members were opposed to the suggestion, claiming that it is every Englishman’s divine right to watch Test Matches without paying money to some American billionaire. The chief opponent of the proposed step into the twentyfirst century was Henry Henderson.

I have great respect for Henry, whose support when I was pilloried during the infamous and entirely unwarranted ball tampering charges was the rock upon which I built my defence and the cement with which I reconstituted my sense of self-regard. Henry, our oldest playing member and a former captain, can be accurately described as a cautious man who does not like change very much at all. (When once asked what he would do if he won the lottery jackpot Henry, after a good deal of thought, replied that he would move to a slightly larger house in the same avenue where he lives at the moment, and buy a deluxe version of the car that he currently drives.)

Largely as a result of Henry’s efforts the club has decided not to watch the Test Matches at all.

JANUARY 15th

Every now and again it is the committee's task to interview new applicants for membership of the club.

Those who wish to join as social members (roughly translated this means those who want to be able to drink cheap beer in the pavilion during the winter months and consume cheese and chutney sandwiches and lukewarm tea on Saturday and Wednesday afternoons during the summer) are invariably admitted if they can prove that they are financially solvent. This involves nothing more complicated than handing over a small sum to cover the first year's membership fee.

But those who wish to be accepted as playing members are usually required to submit to a grilling by the committee so that their value to the club can be judged in advance.

If the committee sometimes seems a little suspicious, and occasionally even appears unwilling to accept an applicant's claims of cricketing prowess at face value, this is because it has, in the past, not been unknown for a prospective player to gild the lily a little when presenting his playing credentials.

We had one of our occasional interview sessions last night.

There were four applications for social membership (all of which were passed through on the nod since the applications were accompanied by cheques for the appropriate amount) and one applicant for playing membership.

The would-be player told us that he had been a first team player for his club in the West Midlands for eleven years and that he had been vice captain for the last four years. He brought a letter of introduction from his former club captain, a letter of recommendation from his former club secretary and a folder packed with cuttings from his local newspaper.

'You look like just the sort of fellow we're looking for,' said Henry, who is vaguely related to a man who used to be a youth coach for a club in the north of England and so usually chairs the meetings on occasions like this. Henry used to be a cheery sort of fellow in his younger days. But when his wife died last year he opened the locket she had worn around her neck throughout their marriage and discovered that it contained a photograph not of him but of an earlier lover. Since then he has, understandably, been a trifle gruff and easily put out. Distrust has set in. The rest of us try to humour him.

Today he was, for reasons which were his own, wearing a hairnet. It gave him a distinctive and unusual look.

The newcomer beamed contentedly.

'What was your batting average last season?'

'28.'

'Not bad, not bad,' said Henry, nodding wisely and not bothering to tell the newcomer that our own best batsman topped the club batting averages with an average of 16.00.

'Do you bowl?'

'Oh yes,' confirmed the newcomer.

'Good,' said Henry, nodding wisely. He managed to sound surprised, as though bowling was not something he would have expected a cricketer to admit to. 'What sort of stuff?'

'Fast medium,' replied the newcomer. 'I used to describe myself as fast but I've lost a yard or so in pace during the last year or two.'

'Ah,' nodded Henry, understandingly. 'Age catches up with us all in time.'

The newcomer, who was in his twenties and getting on for half a century younger than Henry, was tactful enough to respond to this comment with a simple and respectful nod.

‘How many wickets did you take last season?’

‘53,’ answered the newcomer.

Henry, impressed, looked at him and raised an eyebrow. ‘Average?’

‘21,’ replied the newcomer.

‘21 runs per wicket?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Hmmm.’

We all looked at one another with a common thought in our minds. With this fellow in our side we would have a chance of finishing outside the bottom three in our league. We play in the lowest league in the county. The only good thing about our league is that there isn’t a relegation zone because there isn’t a lower league. We haven’t been out of the bottom three for four years and although none of us mentioned it we were all pretty sure we would get good odds from our local bookie that we would be in the bottom three again at the end of the coming season.

‘Can you walk on your hands?’ asked Henry.

The rest of us closed our eyes and sighed. We had hoped that Henry might have forgotten to ask this question. He hadn’t. Sometimes we regret giving Henry so much authority at these interview sessions. But once you have given someone authority – or allowed him to take it – it is difficult to remove the authority from him.

The newcomer looked at Henry and frowned. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said, smiling rather nervously. ‘I didn’t quite catch. . .’

Henry repeated his question. The rest of us sighed again. Our dreams of cleaning up with the local bookie were beginning to fade.

‘I thought that was what you said,’ said the newcomer, clearly rather taken aback by the question.

‘Well?’ demanded Henry. He looked over his half moon spectacles. He knows very well that this tends to intimidate those he is addressing- particularly if they have never seen him fielding. Henry looks so ungainly when he fields that I don’t think he could ever do anything to intimidate someone who had watched him do it.

‘l’m...er...not sure,’ said the newcomer. He looked around the table for help.

* * *

At this point I should, perhaps explain that however strange it may appear to be to newcomers to the village Henry’s question – one that is put to all prospective players – does have an explanation.

Eighteen years ago, when in his prime, Henry was batting and was one short of his maiden half century (he still hasn’t got there) when a fluky top spinner sent down by the visiting side’s slow bowler hit the face of his bat, span up the handle and completely disappeared.

Henry, after looking around and failing to see the ball, dropped his bat and started to run off towards square leg. ‘I thought the ball had somehow managed to roll up inside my jumper,’ he explained afterwards. ‘I was worried that if a fielder managed to pick the ball out from where I thought it had lodged I would be given out ‘caught’.’

Naturally, Henry knew that he couldn’t pick the ball out himself. If he did so he would have been given out for touching the ball while it was in play.

Guessing what had happened the bowler, the wicket keeper and two other close fielders started to chase after Henry in the hope of catching him before he could get rid of the ball. As they all ran towards him so Henry ran faster than ever. Even wearing pads Henry was something of a gazelle in those days.

Spotting the trouble his team mate was in the other batsman, George Lakeham (long since a permanent resident in the big pavilion in the sky), joined in the chase in the hope that he could help distract the fielding side and keep them out of the way until the ball had fallen onto the ground.

‘Get back!’ shouted Henry, now worried that if the ball did fall onto the ground (as a history teacher he was not unfamiliar with the work of Isaac Newton and correctly surmised that the ball was unlikely to remain aloft indefinitely) one of the fielders would be able to run his batting partner out.

George, thinking his batting partner’s shout was directed at the opposing team’s fielders, started whirling his bat around his head in an attempt to help convince the fielders that they would be better occupied picking daisies or lying on their backs watching little white fluffy clouds shimmy across the sky.

However, the fielders were undeterred. They gathered around Henry on the by no means unreasonable grounds that if there were enough of them present then one of them might be in a position to catch the ball when it finally fell.

Naturally, the two umpires also become involved. They could see that this was going to be one of those tricky decisions for which the umpire needs to be pretty much on the spot.

Consequently, the half a dozen spectators present were treated to a most curious procession.

At the head of the procession ran Henry, furiously jerking his sweater up and down in an entirely unsuccessful attempt to dislodge the ball from where he thought it was hiding. Behind him ran the bowler, the wicket keeper and three or four fielders, behind them ran George, whirling his bat, then came the first of the two umpires, closely followed by the remainder of the fielding side. The other umpire brought up the rear.

After running around the batting end stumps four or five times Henry, who had by now realised that the ball could not possibly be trapped within his jumper, gingerly started to pat the rest of his body, searching for the missing ball.

Eventually, he found it. It had, quite remarkably, landed in his left hand trouser pocket.

Henry was a quick thinker. His first thought was to make sure that his batting partner got back behind his own crease. He knew that even if he managed to dislodge the ball without it being caught by one of the opposing fielders, there would still be a chance that one of them could be run out.

‘Get back to your crease!’ he shouted to George.

George was not always as quick witted as others might have liked him to be but after some years as a school teacher Henry was used to being obeyed. And so George obeyed.

The fielding side, correctly suspecting that something significant was about to happen started to run a little faster in order to get closer to Henry who, now that he was satisfied that his batting partner was secure, had begun to confine his running round in circles to an area directly behind the end of the pitch at which he had been batting. He knew he was safe there: if the fielding side got hold of the ball they would not be able to do anything useful with it.

And then, without warning, Henry started to walk about on his hands.

Within seconds the ball did a passable imitation of Isaac Newton’s famous apple. A collective groan went up from the fielding side as they saw the ball bounce once on the grass and then settle harmlessly against a small clump of clover.

That was why Henry always asked prospective new players if they could walk on their hands.

* * *

‘Are you prepared to learn?’ asked Henry.

The newcomer looked at him as if he had gone mad. I had some sympathy with him but we all try to be loyal to our colleagues at all times so I said nothing.

‘To walk on my hands?’

‘It’s a very useful trick!’ insisted Henry. ‘All batsmen should be able to walk on their hands. You never know when it might be useful.’

The newcomer looked at him and then at the rest of us. ‘I don’t see how,’ he said.

Henry explained.

When he had finished there was a long silence and then the newcomer pushed back his chair and stood up. ‘Thank you for considering my application,’ he said. ‘I think I’ll take up golf.’

It was quite a blow. But as Henry argued in the bar for the rest of evening a cricket club has to be faithful to its own high standards, even if those standards do ensure that it turns away all the best players and rarely wins any matches.

JANUARY 18th

The club held its annual Athletic Championships this evening at our local public house, the Mott and Bailey.

Jerome won the 17 yard dash up and down the pub’s back yard. Jerome, who is 22, short, skinny and always enthusiastic is our fast bowling hope for the future. He now holds the official record for this distance. Barnaby, dark, surly, overweight and a former fast bowling hope of the future, won the darts record (we play our own game called 302). Jasper, our 26 year old all rounder, won the 438 yard dash (the distance around the outside of the Mott and Bailey and Mrs Pershore’s adjoining cottage). In the process he broke the existing record for this distance.

At the end of the evening every single member of the club had succeeded in breaking an official record. Leopold Lewinsky, the club treasurer, won the six times round the pool table dash. Leopold is 47, tall, thin, cadaverous looking and completely bald. He wears spectacles with lenses like the bottoms of bottles and looks like a short sighted stick insect. Felix Chartier won the competition for flicking beer mats onto a small, round, highly polished table from a distance of 10 feet. Felix is 29, indecently good-looking, blond, tall and muscular. He has worked as a petrol station attendant, jobbing gardener, stationery store assistant, lifeguard, taxi driver and plumber’s mate. He is currently resting.

There was much happiness around. The atmosphere was only slightly tainted when the landlord of the Mott and Bailey told me that we owed him £78 for the damage we had caused. He says that until we pay we will not be allowed back into his pub.

Personally, I think this is probably a rather hollow threat since he has no other customers.

JANUARY 21st

I played golf today with Nathan Ormerod, one of the club’s most faithful members. Nathan is 52 and suffers from high blood pressure, asthma, arthritis and deafness. He has fallen arches, male pattern baldness and dry skin and is what our captain rather cruelly describes as a village cricket all rounder. By this he means that Nathan isn’t much of a batsman or much of a bowler but always turns up and has his own bat and pads. One of the advantages of being an all rounder is, of course, the fact that you have twice the chance of having a half decent day and I have decided to make an effort to improve my own bowling this year. As the years totter by I feel that being able to describe myself as an all rounder will, in due course, increase my chances of retaining a place in the side.

I had an awful day on the golf course. I lost seven balls and my eight iron. I don’t know what happened to the eight iron but Nathan says he remembers me using it on the 15th hole. I am particularly annoyed about this because the eight iron was, together with my three, five and six irons, the remains of a partly matched set which I bought about ten years ago.

Despite the fact that we were playing for money I stopped keeping score at the tenth hole when I put two balls into a stream and had to chip backwards out of a bunker. With my score on that hole well into double figures I gave up and handed over the 20 pence wager to Nathan: I have always believed that a true sportsman should be a good loser. (I was a little hurt when I mentioned this thought to the good lady wife and she commented that I had probably had more practice at losing than any other sportsman in the country.)

FEBRUARY 2nd

Anthony Kingsley, our team captain has decided that he wants us all to get fit for the forthcoming season. He has therefore announced that we are going to start jogging with him three times a week.

I have never jogged before. Some years ago I was tempted to break into a trot when the last train was chugging out of Euston station but I abandoned the pursuit after three or four paces on the grounds that I would rather preserve my dignity than catch my train.

Now, it looks as if there will be no escape. The captain has made it clear that he will accept no excuses. Anyone wanting to be in the team has no choice: the jogging is compulsory.

The only comfort is that we will be jogging around the village lanes and it will be dark. I shouldn’t think there will be too many spectators.

FEBRUARY 3rd

I had an alarming telephone conversation today with an anonymous caller.

My caller told me that he had heard that some of the members were planning to campaign for membership of the club to be opened to women. He said he didn't want to give me his name and added that he hoped I would respect his privacy.

At first I thought that I was being made the subject of some sort of practical joke. I know that women enjoy some aspects of cricket. For example, I know quite a few who enjoy preparing the teas and making sure that their husband's shirt and trousers are whiter than anyone else's. But why would any woman want to join a cricket club?

My anonymous caller told me that he had heard that revolutionary feminists were behind the plan. However, neither my anonymous caller nor I could think of any revolutionary feminists in the village. Although it is well known that the vicar's wife sometimes leaves off her stockings when the weather is warm I don't think anyone could really describe her as a revolutionary or a feminist let alone a combination of the two.

The caller said he wished to remain anonymous in order to protect himself against possible reprisals from militant activists. (I can't imagine what he thought they might do – break into his house in the dead of night and force him to wear a bra perhaps.)

Finally, my anonymous caller asked if I had finished with his lawnmower.

I felt guilty about this. My own machine broke down ten days ago and I had borrowed his. Feeling rather embarrassed at not having returned the machine before now I told him that I would take it round just as I soon as I put the telephone down. And this, of course, I did.

As I handed over the lawnmower I told my anonymous caller that I would take his warning seriously.

Later I realised that we don't actually have any rules forbidding women members. We don't have any women members, it is perfectly true, but that isn't the result of prejudice so much as the fact that no women have ever applied to join the club.

FEBRUARY 4th

When I popped round to Martin Mason’s cottage this morning the living room curtains were drawn and the whole place seemed utterly deserted. However, when I stood very still and listened carefully with my ear pressed against the front door I was sure I could hear voices coming from within so I gave the door a firm knuckling. I was rewarded after a few minutes by the sound of cursing and shuffling.

‘What do you want?’ demanded Martin, pulling the front door open a few inches. Despite his peculiar attempt to protect his privacy I could see that he was wearing a rather garish pair of Bermuda shorts, a pair of dark glasses, a rather battered Panama hat and a pair of very well worn brown leather sandals. In his left hand, which he was unsuccessfully attempting to hold behind his back, he clutched a long glass which contained a yellow fluid and a small coloured umbrella.

I found all this rather surprising, partly because Martin is not the sort of man who would normally be seen drinking from any glass which contained an umbrella and partly because it has now been snowing for two days and it is so cold that the wicket keeper’s children were skating on the village pond yesterday evening.

I told Martin that I had called round in my capacity as club secretary to let him know that he hadn’t paid his membership dues. (The club treasurer really should be the one to worry about subscriptions but Leopold Lewinsky, our treasurer, is not the sort of man to go traipsing around the village twisting arms.) Martin, who seemed to have acquired a rather large number of goose pimples and appeared to be making a considerable effort not to shiver, did not seem impressed, excited or surprised by this news. Like most members of the club he seems to regard his membership dues as a voluntary contribution.

‘Why are you wearing Bermuda shorts?’ I asked.

‘Mind your own business,’ replied Martin.

I got the distinct impression from this that he didn’t want to tell me the reason for his choice of attire and so naturally I pursued the same line of questioning. I did not do this out of any personal sense of curiosity but merely because as club secretary I feel it is my responsibility to keep myself well informed about the club members.

‘Why are you wearing dark glasses and a Panama hat?’ I asked him.

‘I’m practising in case summer comes early,’ said Martin in a rather clumsy attempt at sarcasm. With that response he closed the door and left me standing on the step feeling rather unwanted.

Walking round to the side of the house I managed to find a small crack at one window where the living room curtains had not been properly drawn.

Looking through the gap I could see Martin sitting in a metal and canvas folding chair enthusiastically clapping something that was happening in the room. His glass, still complete with umbrella, was placed on the carpet by his right foot. I could hear voices but could not make out what was being said. The voices sounded excited and Martin was smiling and nodding as he clapped with undisguised enthusiasm. There was something else that seemed odd: the room was filled with light and it seemed as though Martin had taken every available lamp into the room, put in the biggest bulbs he could find, and switched them all on.

Try as I might I could not see what Martin was looking at. And so, utterly frustrated, I left and returned home.

I cannot avoid the feeling that one of our members may be involved in something distasteful. I try to read the Sunday tabloids as often as I can so that I can keep up with the sort of sexual peccadilloes which are most popular among leading politicians and sportsmen but I am not yet aware of anything which requires one of the participants to dress up in dark glasses, Panama hat, Bermuda shorts and brown leather sandals.

I fear I must investigate further for it now seems clear to me that we may find ourselves with an unexpected team vacancy for the forthcoming season.

FEBRUARY 5th

I spoke to Henry Henderson today and told him what I had seen at Martin’s cottage yesterday. Henry quickly realised exactly what was going on. When he told me I felt very slow – dim-witted even.

‘It is absolutely clear,’ said Henry, ‘that Martin is directing a pornographic movie in his living room. That explains the voices, his enthusiasm and the bright lights. He may be wearing the Bermuda shorts because of the heat produced by the lights but there is another more terrible possibility.’

‘What on earth is that?’ I asked.

‘Martin may be taking part in the film himself,’ said Henry.

‘Maybe it is a bathing costume drama.’

It all seems so obvious now.

Henry has encouraged me to investigate further. We are both extremely concerned about the effect all this could have on the Cricket Club. If the newspapers get hold of the fact that one of our players is making blue movies in his living room then we will be laughed out of the league

FEBRUARY 6th

I returned to Martin’s cottage today. I decided to tell him that I was considering introducing a scheme to enable members to pay their subscriptions in quarterly instalments, and to ask if he would like to pay in this way. I do not, of course, want to introduce anything so stupid. But I needed a good excuse to call upon him again so soon since we have not been the best of friends since that unfortunate incident in the showers four years ago. (I still maintain that the shampoo was mine. But Martin has never accepted that. I cannot imagine why a grown man cannot forget such a trivial incident. The value of the shampoo involved cannot amount to more than a few pence.)

Once again the curtains were drawn when I arrived and Martin opened the door wearing only Bermuda shorts and a pair of brown leather sandals. (Knowing about the film Martin was making I was surprised at the sandals. I had never thought of brown leather sandals as being erotic. I have made a note to ask my good lady wife to donate my pair to Oxfam though I will not, of course, tell her why. I don’t want the police calling around to my home, finding the sandals and assuming that I am part of Martin’s pornographic ring. Fortunately, I do not own any Bermuda shorts.)

Martin seemed very preoccupied and anxious to be rid of me. He didn’t ask me into the house but merely told me (with rather more enthusiasm than I thought seemly) to sign him up for the new instalment plan.

The same gap in the curtains was there when I crept around to the side of the house. I could see Martin but no one else. ‘Yes!’ I clearly heard him say. ‘Fantastic. Unbelievable! Keep it up lads!’

I wrote down the exact words he used in a notebook which I had taken with me for that purpose.

At one point Martin was so excited that I thought he was going to have a heart attack.

I went straight round to Henry’s to tell him that the film Martin was making included at least two male actors. (I had made this deduction after hearing Martin’s exhortation to ‘Keep it up lads!’).

Henry told me that pornographic movies often contain several male actors and just one actress. He said that this is because the actresses are more expensive to hire than the actors. Apparently it is fairly easy to find men to take part in these hideous productions. I cannot imagine why. And I cannot imagine how Henry knows all this. I didn’t ask him and I don’t think I want to know.

FEBRUARY 7th

We held an emergency meeting of the committee at lunchtime today and decided that we owe it to Martin to attempt to make him see the error of his ways. At such short notice it was not possible to organise a full committee meeting but according to the club rules a committee meeting which is attended by three members is recognised as having the full authority of the club committee. (This rule had to be introduced to enable routine administrative work to be done during the winter months.)

And so at 2.27 pm today Henry, Toby Babbage and I stood on Martin's doorstep and Henry banged on the door.

'What the hell do you lot want?' demanded Martin. He was, I was curiously relieved to see, wearing the Bermuda shorts, the dark glasses and the brown leather sandals.

'We've come to talk some sense into you,' said Toby firmly. Toby is a short but powerfully built fellow and he pushed open the front door and walked into Martin's hallway as though Martin hadn't been there at all.

'Hey!' protested Martin. 'Whatever happened to an Englishman's home being his castle? Have you lot joined the Customs and Excise?'

'This is for your own good, Martin,' said Henry.

'We're all men of the world,' said Toby, 'but there are some things that gentlemen and cricketers just don't do.'

Suddenly, the atmosphere changed. Martin's belligerence faded and he looked contrite. 'I know,' he said. He took off his dark glasses and looked deeply embarrassed. 'I'm sorry. I really am.'

'Let's get in there and put an end to it all straight away,' said Henry. He squeezed past Martin (the hallway in Martin's home is rather narrow) opened the door to the living room and marched in. I was, I confess, impressed by the courageous and nerveless way he did this. Toby and I followed and Martin brought up the rear.

None of us (except for Martin, of course) were prepared for what we saw. We had expected to see naked bodies engaged in all sorts of bizarre and possibly unnatural practices. But what we saw was a television set showing pictures of a cricket match being played in bright sunshine on the other side of the world.

'You've been watching the cricket!' said Toby, accusingly.

'Yes,' admitted Martin, head bowed.

'You've got a satellite dish!' said Henry.

'I had one put up at the back of the house,' admitted Martin in a conspiratorial whisper. 'After the club decided not to have one installed in the pavilion'

'Why the Bermuda shorts?' asked Henry, puzzled.

'I thought I'd well, sort of get into the swing of things,' said Martin. He picked a glass up off the floor. 'I make myself these coconut and rum drinks, turn on all the lights and sort of, well, imagine that I'm, sort of, well, there.' He paused and looked around. None of us said anything. 'It's cheaper than flying out there,' he explained. 'And there aren't any queues or flies.'

'What's the score?' asked Toby.

'We've just lost another wicket,' said Martin. 'We're 76 for 6.'

'It looks very warm out there,' said Henry.

There was a shout from the television set.

‘Ssshhh!’ said Toby. ‘I think it’s 76 for 7.’

‘I’ve been listening to some of it on the radio,’ said Henry.

‘It’s not as good as watching it on the TV though,’ said Toby.

‘Do you mind if I sit down for a few minutes?’ asked Henry.

‘Not at all,’ said Martin. ‘I would have invited you chaps round but in view of the committee’s decision I thought I’d perhaps better keep it a bit quiet...’

‘Have you got another one of those drinks?’ Toby asked.

‘Sure!’ said Martin.

‘With one of those little umbrellas?’

Martin hurried off towards the kitchen.

Henry turned to me. ‘I don’t think we need mention our little worry,’ he said.

I agreed with him.

FEBRUARY 12th

I feel stiff in places that no man should feel stiff. I spent an hour jogging around the village lanes yesterday evening and my body is still protesting.

To make matters worse it was raining and I think I may have caught a cold.

I do not sympathise with this new fashion for fitness. I cannot understand how an ability to run around the village for an hour is going to improve my ability to score runs or take wickets.

Martin pointed out that in an hour we jog approximately four miles. That is four times one thousand seven hundred and twenty six yards – a total of 6,904 yards.

A cricket pitch is a mere 22 yards long.

Does the captain really think that we are all going to be running up and down the pitch 313 times without taking a break?

FEBRUARY 15th

I now have a terrible cold. I intend to send the bill for throat and head remedies to the captain. The good lady wife has suggested that I also bill him for several bottles of whisky.

MARCH 5th

Nathan Ormerod has a smallholding: a few acres of land where he grows beetroot and swedes.

Neither of these crops are very profitable (the advantage, Nathan says, is that he finds them relatively easy to grow) and in order to make a living Nathan does a number of other odd jobs around the village.

One of his extra jobs is to collect rubbish for the local council. Once a week he attaches a trailer to the back of his tractor and picks up all the black plastic bags which villagers have left outside their homes. He then drives to the nearby dump (situated, of course, in the middle of a local beauty spot) where he empties his trailer. Once a month he receives a small cheque from the council for providing this service.

Nathan was not in a good mood when I saw him in the bar of the Mott and Bailey this evening. Willoughby Pilbeam had apparently left an old fridge outside his front gate for Nathan to take away. When Nathan took Willoughby's black bags and left the fridge Willoughby came rushing out of his cottage threatening to complain to the council. And when Nathan got back home he found that Willoughby had done just that.

'How does he expect me to lift a fridge up onto my trailer?' demanded Nathan. 'The bugger wouldn't help me.'

'What did the council say?' asked Toby.

'Apparently Willoughby has got a chum in the refuse department,' said Nathan. 'I got a bollocking and they told me that if I didn't move the fridge by tonight I'd lose my contract.'

'So what did you do?'

'I can't afford to lose the contract,' said Nathan. 'I got Giles to give me a hand. But I had to give him £2.'

We all sympathised with Nathan and decided that Willoughby needs to be taught a lesson.

MARCH 7th

When I drove past Willoughby’s cottage this afternoon I was amused to see Willoughby staring in disbelief at the two fridges which now stand outside his cottage.

Nathan and Giles had collected the unwanted fridges from Leopold’s garage where they had been quietly rotting for several years.

Willoughby telephoned Nathan, reported the mysterious appearance of two more fridges and demanded that Nathan collect them immediately. But Nathan had taken the precaution of ringing the council refuse department. They had told him that he didn’t have to move anything else that won’t fit into a black plastic bag.

Apparently Willoughby’s friend is now worried that he might lose his job if he pulls any more strings.

MARCH 9th

Willoughby came into the Mott and Bailey this evening demanding to know what was going on. Apparently there are now three fridges standing outside his front gate. We all claimed that we knew nothing about this bizarre happening.

‘I saw them this morning,’ said Barnaby Wimble. ‘I thought perhaps you were collecting them. Much more original than stamps, I thought!’

MARCH 11th

There are now four fridges, an old freezer and two disused cookers lined up outside Willoughby’s cottage. Giles says that a friend of his has offered him an old Aga, a cast iron bath and an unwanted 800 gallon oil tank (which has rusted away and leaks rather badly). Giles says he plans to collect these items tonight and deposit them outside Willoughby’s cottage at three in the morning. Three of us, including P.C. Dylan Thomas, have offered to help.

MARCH 13th

A good day's golf today. I won twenty pence off Anthony Kingsley, who at 45 is three years younger than me. Anthony is the cricket club captain and jogging aficionado..

I played two shots that Arnold Palmer would have been proud of. Of course, I also played about 120 shots that he wouldn't have been too proud of. But then he doesn't have to run a one-man accountancy practice or try to run a village cricket club!

My view is that if every golf shot was perfect then the game would be boring. It is the very unpredictability of golf that makes it so enchanting.

Besides, a player who regularly takes 120 or more shots gets far more out of a round of golf- and far better value from the club membership fees- than a chap who goes round in 65.

If the purpose in golf is to hit the ball then duffers are surely meeting the purpose of the game far more effectively than the professionals and those chaps whose sideboards at home are groaning under the weight of miscellaneous club silverware.

MARCH 14th

I was testing beer in the Mott and Bailey with Nathan today when Willoughby came in.

‘Do you know anything about all this stuff outside my cottage?’ asked Willoughby. He looks to be a beaten man. ‘I had to climb over an oil tank and an old Aga cooker to get out of my cottage this morning. The oil tank is leaking oil all over my path.’

‘If you’re starting a scrap yard you’ll need to get in touch with the council,’ said Nathan. ‘They can be a bit funny about these things. You need to speak to someone in the planning department.’

‘Do you know anyone who’ll take them away?’ pleaded Willoughby.

Nathan thought for a moment and shook his head.

‘I’m willing to pay,’ said Willoughby. ‘How much do you think it would cost?’

‘What have you got?’ asked Nathan.

‘Four fridges, two old freezers, five cookers, an Aga, a cast iron bath with no taps, a length of sewer pipe, a fireplace, an old white sink and the leaking oil tank,’ answered Willoughby immediately.

‘I couldn’t get that lot on my trailer,’ said Nathan without hesitation. ‘It would take me at least two journeys to the dump.’

‘How much would it cost to have it all taken away?’ pleaded Willoughby.

Nathan thought for a moment. ‘I could do it for £50.’

‘£50?’ cried Willoughby. ‘That’s extortion! This isn’t even my stuff.’

Nathan shrugged and turned back to his beer.

There was a long pause. ‘OK!’ sighed Willoughby. ‘£50.’

‘In advance,’ said Nathan, quickly.

‘I’ll have it for you by late tomorrow morning,’ said Willoughby. If he has guessed where all these things came from he gave no sign of it.

MARCH 31st

Martin telephoned today to tell me he is willing to accept my offer and pay his £5 annual subscription in quarterly instalments.

I told him not to be so silly and pointed out that if I started accepting subscriptions in quarterly instalments it would quadruple the amount of work I have to do.

Martin then reminded me that during a visit to his home earlier this year I told him that I was introducing a scheme to enable members to pay their subscriptions by instalment.

I could not think of any answer to this so I seem to be stuck with allowing Martin to pay his subscription in quarterly instalments.

I just hope he doesn’t tell anyone else about this arrangement. My hope is that he will be too embarrassed about it to share the news with any other members of the team.

APRIL 1st

Today, Anthony Kingsley, our captain (I wonder if he will still be captain at the end of the season) forced us all to take part in what was utterly inaccurately described as a ‘fun run’.

He claimed that this would make us fitter and, therefore, in some strange way which he did not thoroughly explain, turn us into better cricketers.

I bet WG. Grace didn’t go on many fun runs.

For reasons which I neither understand nor care about a local charity run by someone with a sadistic streak had decided to raise money by encouraging local masochists to pay £10 each to take part in a sponsored run.

The theory behind the venture (if such a venture can be said to have anything behind it other than sheer stupidity) was that runners would find friends and neighbours prepared to give money to the charity should they, the runners, complete the course.

My own feeling is that fund raising ventures of this kind are likely to be counter productive and result in a much greater cost than the amount raised. Sponsored parachute jumping is a case in point. Those intellectually deprived idiots who deliberately leap out of aeroplanes in a bizarre attempt to raise money for their favourite charity are so often injured that the cost to local hospitals is ten times as much as the money raised for the charities concerned. Local hospitals would be better off paying people not to jump out of aeroplanes, especially if they are wearing parachutes.

I suspect that running is probably going to be just as dangerous. How many of us will have heart attacks or strokes? Will there be eleven men in the club fit enough to play cricket when the season starts? To say that I was sceptical and doubtful about the sense of taking part in this race would be like saying that Anne Boleyn had a sense of foreboding when the man in the mask started measuring her neck.

One big problem is that my previous athletic achievements are limited. I seem to remember doing something embarrassing with a hard boiled egg and a spoon at the age of seven and I vaguely remember having my leg tied to that of another child at an even earlier age, but those are hazy memories. I can remember but two other attempts at organised athleticism. In the first, a slow bicycle race on grass, I fell, found the only stone in the field and badly cut my elbow. And in the second, the one mile walk event at the school sports day, I set off at a blistering pace only to be overtaken by just about everyone else before the first corner. Neither of these adventures could be described as successful. Generally speaking my athletic experience has been on the low side of non-existent and it is not unreasonable to say that there are those who would find it blasphemous to find my name mentioned in the same sentence as the word ‘athlete’.

My adult running experience has generally been limited to the sort of distance one can measure out on a railway platform. I once claimed that joggers only go out in pairs so that one of them will be able to go and fetch the ambulance. And I have argued that tracksuits should be stamped with a government health warning.

Don’t get me wrong.

It’s not that I dislike sport.

Apart from cricket I have played billiards and snooker and even a little darts and have enjoyed these sports enormously. Moreover, I have been an occasional member of the pub skittles team for some time now.

But getting breathless and sweaty have never been my strong points. After all it is now well known that too much exercise can damage your body – often permanently.

So, at the age of 48, it came as something of a surprise to find myself, dressed only in a pair of shorts, a T-shirt and a pair of quite unreasonably expensive plimsolls, taking part in a relatively serious athletic event: a 10 kilometre run.

Ten kilometres may not sound far but it is 100 times as far as some athletes have to run in order to get a medal in the Olympic games. (And whatever happened to proper measurements? When I asked why the distance was being measured in kilometres and not miles a nasty little europhilic bureaucrat holding a large clipboard rudely told me that I could run ten miles if I wanted to but that only the first 10 kilometres would count. I intend to report him to the appropriate authorities if I can find out who they are.)

I have, of course, travelled similar distances before but usually in a car. This was the first time my body had travelled so far entirely under its own steam. And it was the only time I have ever played a part in a sporting event when the St. John’s Ambulance men were there for me.

As I trundled around the designated course I was surprised by the fact that the organisers had managed to defy common sense, gravity and logic and find a route which started and finished in the same place and yet managed to consist entirely of uphill stretches.

I very nearly strangled the race official who, when I asked him how far I’d travelled, replied with a motorist’s carelessness, ‘Oh, four or five miles’ (the difference between four miles and five miles is three blisters and half a pint of sweat); and I discovered for the first time just how difficult it is to drink water out of a plastic cup when you’re running. Try it sometime.

My spirits were momentarily raised at just one point in the day when I appeared to be getting a considerable amount of support from spectators who lined the route of our ‘fun run’.

I confess that I thought I was going along quite well at the time – hurtling past trees and beginning to think that I might, eventually, get used to the pain and the boredom.

But my joy was dashed when it became clear that the wave of enthusiasm and applause which appeared to coincide with my progress was in fact directed towards an octogenarian woman competitor who had started at the back of the field and was running along behind me.

I was delighted when she finally overtook me (an incident which gathered even more applause from those who had nothing better to do than stand and watch) because then I was allowed to continue on my way unnoticed. Indeed, I was so unnoticed that I managed to get a lift for quite a distance on a passing milk float. Since I was an unwilling participant in the event and not interested in obtaining any of the trophies on offer I did not regard this as cheating.

Despite the lift from the milk float I still managed to come in somewhere near the end. The one thing that the aficionados of this ‘sport’ do not realise, of course, is that the uncomplaining amateurs who take twice as long as everyone else, have to work twice as hard as the winner (he gets to the finish line in thirty minutes whereas they have to run for an hour or more). In my view it is the people who come in at the end of the race who really deserve the medals.

APRIL 4th

P.C. Dylan Thomas, fast bowler, long off specialist fieldsman and the village's official representative of the forces of law and order, arrived on my doorstep in early afternoon in what could perhaps be described as quite a state.

Dylan, tall, broad and not as tough as he looks (or tries to pretend he is) is in his late twenties and has gone through life having to put up with strangers asking him if he is the Welsh poet who drinks a lot. Dylan does drink a lot but he isn't a dead Welsh poet and the joke, inspired by his mother's enthusiasm for 'Under Milk Wood' is now threadbare. Dylan's friends usually call him Bob.

I sat the constable down in the parlour and the good lady wife, always a tower of strength on occasions like this, immediately fetched our visitor a glass of a home made preparation which she describes as non-alcoholic beetroot cordial. (She insists that this description is an accurate one and claims that the fact that many people find speech and movement uncommonly difficult after consuming even modest quantities of the beverage can only be a result of some sort of allergic reaction.)

Having taken a long and calming sip from the glass, and without bothering to wipe the froth from his upper lip (the cordial is unusual in that when poured from bottle to glass it acquires what can only be described as a significant head) Dylan unbuttoned the top pocket of his uniform tunic and removed the small, black notebook with which her majesty has supplied him, so that he can keep her and her judges well informed by supplying them with a written record of his experiences.

Using his notebook as an *aide memoire* he told me that while cycling home he had seen a member of the Little Lampton Cricket Club behaving suspiciously in the car park behind the Mott and Bailey.

Upon observing the incident I dismounted from my machine,' Dylan read from his notebook, 'and approached the vicinity on foot. I watched the accused taking batting practice for several minutes. When I made my presence known to him he made good his escape over the field that leads down to Blueberry Bottom. I made a decision not to give chase on the grounds firstly that a positive identification had been made by myself, secondly that the doctor has advised me to avoid unnecessary exercise until my weight loss programme has proved successful, and thirdly that Blueberry Bottom is always very soggy at this time of the year and I was wearing my best boots.'

As he read I realised that although still a young man (he is 28) Dylan has acquired the habit of making everything he says or writes sound like a statement being read out in court. When he had finished reading out a short tribute at Walter Kerridge's cremation service several members of the congregation wanted to form a posse and had to be quietly reminded that they had just watched the scoundrel they were suddenly so keen to pursue slide, face up in a cheap coffin, through the crematorium curtains.

If Dylan has a fault it is that he does take his position rather seriously. Words such as 'pompous', 'humourless' and 'a pain in the butt' have been frequently used about him although we are all conscious that the 27 he scored in difficult conditions seven years ago played a significant part in helping us grab an unprecedented (and still unequalled) sixth place in the local league.

These days most villagers tend to switch off when Dylan starts talking, though strangers to the area can still find his tone peculiarly convincing. A speech on the subject of responsibility, given at Emily Ramsbottom's christening last September, resulted in two relatives from the north of England giving themselves up in tears. They confessed to driving while under the influence of drink but couldn't work out how many cases they wanted to be taken into consideration.

Anyway, it turned out that Dylan had seen one of the club's members, Giles Harris, (44, single and the only man I know who goes train spotting) having a little quiet and private batting practice. Giles had craftily got round the absence of a bowler by bowling himself very slow, well pitched up, full tosses, running down his makeshift pitch, overtaking the ball, picking up his bat and dealing with his own delivery with whatever stroke seemed most appropriate.

Having explained all this Dylan then reminded me that it is a long established club rule that practise is not allowed. I did not need to be reminded. We banned practise some years ago on the grounds that it is underhand, ungentlemanly, unpleasantly akin to cheating.

‘It’s not fair!’ said Dylan. A large tear fell into his third glass of non-alcoholic beetroot cordial with a loud plop. (When it was pointed out by the vicar’s wife that the cordial’s ability to render the most stoic individual emotionally labile might be considered to be evidence supporting the allegation that its nonalcoholic label is not entirely accurate my wife responded by arguing that the cordial contains several natural herbs which are acknowledged by some authorities to have a relaxant effect.)

The underlying philosophy which makes this rule so important is the fact that although playing members of the club all consider themselves to be part of a team there is no doubt that members of the team regard their most serious opponents to be not the team we may be playing next but their own team-mates. I believe this to be the same everywhere. If there are two fast bowlers in a team the rivalry between the two of them will be far greater than the rivalry between the bowlers and opposing batsmen. What bowler can honestly say that he is thrilled when his bowling partner takes nine wickets for 14 runs while he, bowling on the same pitch, with the same ball, to the same batsmen, takes nought for 13? An unkind observer might put this down to jealousy but, we like to think of it as a result of pride: a strength not a weakness, and a benefit rather than a liability to the side.

‘We’ll have to discuss this at the next meeting,’ I assured Dylan and a few minutes later he wobbled off down the lane, looking surprisingly insecure on his bicycle. Another strange side effect of my wife’s non-alcoholic beetroot cordial is its ability to interfere with the body’s senses of balance and coordination.

As secretary of the club I feel I have responsibility to remain impartial when one member brings me a serious allegation against another but I have no doubt that Giles will, when the time comes, be severely reprimanded by the committee for what can surely only be described as a serious and deliberate breach of one of the club’s most important rules.

APRIL 5th

So far nine members of the team have asked to be allowed to pay their subscriptions in quarterly instalments. This is terrible news. I have made a disastrous mistake but can see no way out. I am just grateful that I did not tell Martin he could pay his subscription in monthly instalments.

APRIL 6th

As a cricketer Toby Babbage is over the hill. There is no doubt about that. Moreover, he has been well over the hill for a long time – since his teens, in fact.

But, as Toby always admits, the good thing is that when he went over the hill he did so honestly and with no regard for his own safety – or for what might or might not have been on the other side. Moreover, he claims that he has had far more fun coming down the hill than he ever had going up it.

At the age of 15 Toby was regarded by many who claim to know about these things to be a cricketer of great promise. A sports teacher was the first to spot Toby's natural talent. After he had had a word with a friend who knew someone who worked at the local county ground a professional cricket scout turned up at one of the school's mid-week matches. A few days later Toby, who had scored a sparkling half century in just over half an hour and taken four wickets for hardly any runs, was offered a trial for the local county side. The trial went well and Toby was given a contract to play for the Colts.

Within weeks people who were said to be experts were predicting that Toby would play for England before his twentieth birthday. His classic batting stance was widely praised and photographs taken of him were used in a coaching manual. He could bowl off spin (managing to turn the ball considerably further than most boys of his own age) and he could bowl fast enough to be considered such a physical danger to his contemporaries that he was banned from bowling fast in school matches.

A week before his sixteenth birthday he was playing for the County Second XI side, alongside two men who had between them gathered three dozen England caps. Two days later the local newspaper ran a full page profile of him with the headline 'Local Boy Tipped To Be England Star'. The local television station picked up the story and ran a five minute feature on the new star in their evening news bulletin. To say that things were going well for the youthful Toby Babbage would be an understatement rather akin to describing Napoleon's visit to Russia as something of a disappointment.

Toby played his first full county match at the age of seventeen. He was one of the youngest players ever to play professional cricket and once again people who were said to know about these things predicted that he would soon be playing for his country.

Toby's father and his sports teacher worked hard with him. They arranged for him to have coaching lessons at the nearest indoor cricket school. And Toby's game continued to improve.

And then, just as it seemed that all those who had predicted that Toby would play for England were going to be proved right, things went wrong.

His batting slump came first. In six innings he scored just nine runs. And then his bowling fell apart. The tearaway fast bowler who had been the first boy from his school ever to take 100 wickets in a season found himself bowling little but wides and no balls. The only wickets he took were flukes.

'I got bored,' says Toby now, some twenty years later. 'And I discovered girls.'

Today Toby is on the plump side of what used to be called stout. He is our wicket keeper and he is one of the happiest men I know. He earns his living as a baker and part time chiropodist and plays his cricket for fun.

APRIL 17th

Martin and I were playing pool in the Mott and Bailey last night when Jane the buxom barmaid announced that she wanted to play the winner of our match.

Despite the fact that she was wearing a low cut blouse and an extremely short skirt (possibly not the most suitable clothes for bending over a pool table) we gallantly agreed to her suggestion.

She turned out to be a very aggressive player with an unusually powerful cue action. Her third shot sent the white ball crashing into the panelling underneath the bar. Her fifth shot sent the white ball and the yellow ball flying across the floor. And her sixth shot sent the white ball through the glass of a very elderly grandfather clock.

Aware that Jane was turning a peaceful pub game into a dangerous sport most of the other customers backed away a little and, purely for their own protection of course, kept their eyes on her when she was hitching up her skirt and getting down to action.

Unfortunately, as Jane attempted to clear the table on her final visit Barnaby Wimble had his back to the action (he was busy ordering another pint at the time) and was hit on the ankle by a flying cue ball. The doctors at the hospital say he has a broken bone and will be unable to play cricket for several weeks. This is a disaster. Barnaby, 35, is rather overweight and asthmatic and has a bad back but he is undeniably one of our best players. Without him the word ‘attack’ does not go well with the word ‘bowling’ when Little Lampton is in the field. He does not take many wickets but, as Henry Henderson says, there is more to bowling than simply taking wickets.

APRIL 25th

I received an urgent telephone call this morning. I was trying to put up a shelf in the bathroom at the time so I was enormously grateful for the interruption. Putting up shelves has never been my forte.

'It's the groundsman,' said the good lady wife. 'From that cricket club of yours,' she added as if my life was awash with groundsmen all clamouring for my attention. I may be wrong (and probably am for I readily admit that my understanding of the fair sex is pretty minimal) but I got the impression that we were about to go through one of her 'cool about the club' phases.

Our groundsman is Albert Hedges, a wizened, heavily suntanned man of indeterminate years whose passion is growing grass, flattening it and cutting it as short as possible.

'Come quickly!' was all that Albert said before putting down the telephone. He has never been a man of many words. I think it is fair to say that his big skill, if indeed he has one, is with grass rather than with people.

When I arrived at the ground Albert was standing next to the pavilion staring out at the pitch and looking like a 'before' photograph for an advertisement for Prozac.

'What's up?' I asked him, knowing that he appreciates brevity.

'They've painted the grass,' said the groundsman gloomily

'Who has?' I asked him.

He thought about this, and chewed on his pipe stem for a while before producing an answer. 'Dunno!' was the best he could manage after a good deal of thought.

I looked around but could not see any evidence of someone having tampered with nature. As far as the eye could see the grass seemed to be green.

'It seems to be OK to me,' I said tentatively, stepping away a yard or two and wondering if the poor fellow had finally gone mad. The groundsman handles a lot of fertiliser and a good many rather powerful and possibly toxic chemical substances. I made a mental note to check the club's liability insurance.

'There!' said Albert, pointing to the grassy area directly in front of the pavilion.

I looked hard and this time I could see what he meant. It did look as though someone had painted something on the grass.

'Go up the steps,' suggested the groundsman. 'You'll see it better.'

I went up the steps and he was right: I could see it better. Someone had painted 'PARKINSON'S PIES – CHEAP AND T' in large white letters on our pitch. A paintbrush lay on the ground alongside an empty can which had clearly once contained white paint.

'Who on earth has done that?' I asked him.

'Dunno,' said Albert. 'That bloke Parkinson I expect.'

'I've heard of Parkinson's Pies,' I said. 'The first part of the advertisement seems accurate enough. I wonder what the T stands for.'

'Bastards,' said Albert.

I thought this seemed unlikely. There was no evidence of illiteracy in the rest of the slogan. 'Can we get it off?' I asked him. I used the word ‘we’ in a theoretical sort of way.

‘Dare say so,’ said the groundsman. He paused and thought for a few minutes.

I wouldn’t have liked to have been in an accident with Albert. He wasn’t the sort of man who ever thought quickly. I suppose he didn’t need to. Grass never does anything fast. ‘I’ve got some turps in the mower shed,’ he added.

He didn’t move.

I waited a little longer. He still didn’t move.

‘If you get the turps we can try and get the paint off,’ I pointed out to him.

‘That’s true,’ he agreed. He still didn’t move.

I waited.

He still didn’t move.

‘I’d get the turps but I don’t know where it is,’ I said. ‘And I know you don’t like people going into your shed.’

There was a long, long pause; long enough for Mozart to have knocked off an opera and a couple of symphonies. ‘I’ll get the turps then,’ said Albert.

‘That’s a good idea,’ I agreed, trying hard to sound surprised.

The groundsman went off to fetch the turpentine.

While he was away Anthony Kingsley, the club captain, suddenly arrived, leapt out of his car, raced around to the boot and pulled out a large can of white paint.

‘Looks good, doesn’t it?’ he shouted as he raced onto the pitch. He put the can of paint down and came racing back.

‘Did you do that?’

‘Yes. I ran out of paint. I just want to finish off my TASTY’ This explained the mysterious ‘T’.

‘OK. While you’re finishing off your TASTY you don’t mind if Albert starts removing the PARKINSON’S do you?’

The captain stopped and turned round. ‘What?’

‘We don’t want that on the pitch! It looks horrible. It makes us look cheap and nasty.’

‘They have slogans painted on the grass at Lord’s.’

I had to think about this for a moment. It did rather de value the moral argument. ‘They’re not slogans. They’re just words.’

‘What’s the difference? A slogan is words isn’t it?’

The groundsman came back clutching a bottle of turps.

‘What’s he doing?’ he asked, nodding in the direction of the captain who was now busy finishing his advertising slogan.

‘He’s finishing his advertisement so that we can see what it says before we remove it.’

‘Oh. Right ho,’ said Albert.

‘The sponsor will be here in a minute,’ shouted the captain. ‘I’m sorry I didn’t have time to tell you about the arrangement. I met this bloke called Parkinson in a pub last night. He runs this pie company and loves cricket. He thought it would be a great idea to have his slogan painted on our grass. It’s just for today. It’s a sort of test. If his pie sales go up during the next seven days then he’ll consider giving us a fee for the whole season.’

‘What fee?’ I said.

‘We get a hundred quid for the test,’ said the captain.

I thought about this for a while. ‘Did you say a hundred quid? A hundred pounds?’

‘Yes.’ The captain stood back. ‘How does that look?’

‘Fine. But there’s no E in TASTY’

‘Oh dear. Isn’t there? Have you got some turps?’

‘The groundsman has got some.’

‘Can I borrow a drop?’ He rushed back to us, borrowed the bottle of turps from the groundsman and went back onto the grass to correct his spelling error.

‘Is that better?’ he asked a few minutes later.

‘It’s fine.’ I paused. ‘At least, it’s spelt right.’

As I spoke a brand new BMW sped into the ground and skidded to a halt a few feet away from the pavilion. A short, bald, fat man got out. ‘Is that my slogan?’ he demanded.

‘It looks great, doesn’t it?’ said the captain, walking across to his new friend. ‘You have to view it from the pavilion to get the best effect.’

The pie maker climbed up the pavilion steps. ‘Looks fine,’ he said. He put his hand into his trouser pocket, pulled out a wad of notes, peeled off two fifty pound notes and handed them to the club captain. ‘I’ll do a deal with you for a year’s sponsorship if our sales go up enough this week,’ he said. He then got back into his BMW and disappeared, leaving behind him a cloud of dust.

‘That was the pie chap I met in the pub,’ said the captain.

I held my hand out. He gave me the two fifty pound notes.

‘You feel better about it now, don’t you?’ said the captain.

‘I do,’ I agreed.

‘You didn’t like it before you knew there was money involved?’

‘No.’ I put the two notes into my wallet. ‘But I think this will probably be the last money we get out of him.’

The captain frowned. ‘Why? How can you be so sure? Everyone who sees his advertisement will probably rush out and buy armfuls of his pies.’

‘Are you going to?’

‘Me? No.’

‘Nor am I. And I don’t suppose you are either are you?’ I said to the groundsman. Albert looked at me, thought for a week or two and then shook his head.

‘You’re just a pessimist,’ said the captain.

‘I’m a realist,’ I said. ‘We’re the only three who are going to see the advertisement.’

The captain frowned and looked confused. ‘Why? You can’t remove it now we’ve taken his money.’

‘I’m not going to remove it,’ I said. I turned to Albert. ‘Will the paint disappear when you cut the grass next week?’ He thought for a moment and then nodded.

‘I don’t understand,’ said the captain.

‘We’re playing away this afternoon,’ I reminded him.

‘There isn’t going to be anyone here to see the advertisement.’

APRIL 26th

Anthony, captain of the Little Lampton Cricket Club, and I were in the Mott and Bailey bemoaning the fact that Barnaby, still recovering from the damage he sustained when he was hit by a pool ball the other day, will be unable to play in next Saturday's big match against our local rivals.

'Why don't you ask Mick Needless to play for you?' asked the landlord, who was busily polishing glasses with a small towel which looked as if it had been used for polishing shoes.

'We thought of doing that,' said Anthony, rather sarcastically. 'But we decided to ask Ian Botham instead.'

'Oh fine,' said the landlord, holding a glass up to the light. 'Did he say 'yes'?'

I sighed. The landlord of the Mott and Bailey is a nice fellow but he was near the end of the queue when God was handing out the brain box fillings.

'We haven't really asked him,' I admitted. 'Why would Ian Botham or Mick Needless want to come to Little Lampton to play cricket?'

'I don't know about Ian Botham but Mick Needless is staying here,' said the landlord. 'That's why I mentioned his name.'

'What do you mean he's here?' I asked.

The landlord looked at me for a moment. 'He's staying in the pub,' he said, speaking very slowly. 'He's on his honeymoon,' he added with a grin and a wink. 'He'd probably be glad of a chance to get out for a bit of fresh air.'

Anthony leant on the bar and looked to his left and then to his right. 'Mick Needless is staying here?'

The landlord nodded.

'In the Mott and Bailey?'

Another nod. 'He's upstairs right now.'

'How long has he been here?'

'Since last Saturday evening.'

'Five days?'

The landlord consulted the calendar on the wall. 'Yes.'

'How come none of us have seen him in the bar?'

'I told you. He's on his honeymoon. He doesn't come down for meals or drinks.' He leant across the bar. 'If you'd seen Mrs Needless you wouldn't be surprised.'

'I didn't know Mick Needless had got married,' said Giles.

'Nor me,' said Toby.

'I think it was all a bit low key,' said the landlord.

'How can we get a message to him?' asked Anthony. 'I don't suppose he'd be too pleased if we just burst into the room and asked him if he wanted to come out and play cricket.'

‘Send a note up on his tray tonight,’ suggested the landlord. ‘He’ll be having his eggs, chips and sausages twice in about twenty minutes time.’

And so Anthony and I wrote out a note asking the former England cricket star if he would honour us by playing in Saturday’s match. We then gave the note to the landlord to pop on the tray when it was sent up to Mr Needless’s room. And we settled down to wait.

An hour or so later the tray came down. With it came a note from Mr Needless confirming that he would be delighted to play for our team and asking us to let him know what time he should be expected to turn up.

APRIL 28th

Word that we had got a ringer playing for us in our first big match of the season quickly spread.

‘He’s one of my great cricketing heroes!’ said Theobald. ‘I’ll never be able to bowl if I’m playing alongside him.’

‘No difference there then,’ said Giles.

Theobald threw a beer mat at him but Giles had already ducked in anticipation and the beer mat flew harmlessly into the back of Henry Henderson’s head.

‘Aren’t we going to have to disguise him a bit?’ asked Cyril Darlington, our umpire. Cyril is fifty per cent of the umpiring complement at all our home and away matches.

We all looked at him.

‘Mick Needless is pretty recognisable,’ explained Cyril.

‘Particularly to other cricketers.’ He paused to pour half a pint of best draught bitter down his throat. ‘And, correct me if I am wrong, but I seem to remember that there is a rule that says that players must be resident in the village for which they are playing’

No one corrected him.

‘So, how do we disguise him?’ asked Felix.

‘We could get him to grow a beard,’ suggested Martin.

We all looked at him.

‘The match is tomorrow,’ said Felix. ‘It’s not going to be much of a beard is it?’

‘It was just a thought,’ said Martin, defensively.

‘Why don’t we dress him up as a woman,’ suggested Barnaby. ‘That would be a good disguise.’

We ignored this suggestion. We ignore most of Barnaby’s suggestions.

‘Maybe we could get him to wear a wig and a false beard?’ suggested Jasper. ‘And, perhaps, a pair of spectacles with plain glass in them?’

‘That’s a good idea,’ said Martin. ‘Have you got a wig?’

‘No,’ admitted Jasper. ‘But someone must have.’

‘Have you got a false beard?’

‘Not exactly.’

‘Spectacles with plain glass in them?’

‘No.’

‘I still don’t see what’s wrong with dressing him up as a woman,’ said Barnaby. ‘It would be a brilliant disguise.’

‘How many women have you seen playing in our village league?’ Cyril asked him.

Barnaby thought about this for a moment. ‘Not many,’ he admitted.

‘Not many?’

‘Well, not any actually,’ admitted Barnaby.

‘My wife has got a wig,’ said Leopold. We all looked at him.

‘What sort of wig?’

Leopold thought about this. ‘A long hairy sort of wig,’ he said, describing the wig in the air with his hands.

‘What colour is it?’

Leopold thought again. ‘Blonde,’ he said. ‘I think.’ He thought again. ‘Or possibly brunette.’

‘Would she let us borrow it?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Leopold. ‘I’m sure she wouldn’t mind. ‘Anyway she’s staying with her sister this weekend.’

‘That’s it then,’ said Anthony, our captain. ‘We’ll get him to wear your wife’s wig.’

We all thought this was very clever.

‘Do you think it’ll work?’ I asked Toby later.

‘I think so,’ said Toby rather confidently. ‘After all the opposition isn’t going to expect to see Mick Needless playing for us. They’ll just see some bloke with long hair.’

APRIL 29th

Leopold borrowed his wife’s wig (which turned out to be blonde) and the landlord of the Mott and Bailey sent it up to Mick Needless’s room with a note from me asking him if he would be kind enough to wear it for the big match.

‘It might be a good idea if you wore this,’ I put on the note. ‘It will help to disguise you a little.’

We hoped he wouldn’t mind the wig. It was shoulder length and consisted of vast amounts of very blonde, very curly hair.

APRIL 30th

I called round at the Mott and Bailey this morning to pick up Mick Needless for this afternoon’s big match.

I was in the empty bar, doing my pre-match elbow bending exercises, when someone behind me spoke.

‘Are you sure this looks all right?’

I turned round and stared at the person who had spoken. It was difficult, at first glance, to see what sex he or she was. But then I realised that this had to be Mr Needless.

‘It’s a very nice wig,’ said Mr Needless. ‘But I’m not sure it’s really my style.’ He seemed a trifle embarrassed, but keen to please. Unexpectedly, he giggled.

‘You look, er, great,’ I said. ‘I hope you don’t mind wearing it. It’s just that our league has rather strict rules about bringing in outsiders.’

‘No, that’s fine,’ he said.

It occurred to me that his voice was softer and more educated than I had expected. And I had never thought of Mick Needless as a giggler. Mick Needless had, over the years, acquired something of a reputation as a bit of a tearaway. At one point he had been banned for a year for drug taking. On tour in Australia he had head butted an umpire who had given a dubious decision. In India he had been given police protection after throwing missiles back at an angry crowd. He had thrown them with far more accuracy than they had been thrown at him. Two members of the crowd had been taken to hospital after that escapade.

‘Would you like a drink?’ I asked him.

‘That’s very decent of you,’ he said. ‘A large vodka would be a help. Might settle the nerves a bit.’

I thought it was sweet that one of the century’s greatest cricket stars should be nervous before playing in a village cricket match.

‘I haven’t played for a while,’ he murmured confidentially.

I asked Jane the barmaid to pour a large vodka for Mr Needless and a whisky for myself. I thought I’d celebrate a little early. It isn’t often one gets to play cricket alongside a man who was voted fourth in the Top Ten of all time cricketing greats.

‘I haven’t got any kit, by the way,’ said Mr Needless.

‘Oh don’t worry about that,’ I said. ‘We’ll find something suitable for you when we get to .the pavilion.’

MAY 1st

What a disaster yesterday was!

We were all very confident that our new ‘blonde’ temporary team member would help us to a memorable win over our local rivals.

But it would be something of an understatement to say that things did not quite turn out according to plan.

‘He’s a little podgier than I thought he would be,’ whispered Felix, as our hero changed into the cricket clothes we had found for him. Nathan had donated his best shirt (it was, in fact, the only clean and freshly ironed cricket shirt to be found), Martin had donated his boots (a perfect fit, it turned out) and Toby had lent his best pair of cricket trousers (this meant that he himself had to wear his second best pair-several sizes too small for him and having a rather embarrassing tear in the seat).

‘He’s probably let himself go a bit since he retired,’ said Leopold.

‘How long is it since he’s played for England?’ asked Anthony.

‘Two, possibly three years,’ replied Toby, who keeps up with these things. ‘He’s probably been to too many cricket club dinners!’

‘I hear he always did like his beer,’ said Anthony.

‘It’s funny,’ said Leopold. ‘But I always thought he would be taller in real life.’

‘They always say that about celebrities,’ said Felix.

‘What?’

‘People think they are taller than they are.’

‘That can’t be true for everyone.’

‘Oh it is. It’s a well known fact.’

‘What about basket ball players? I bet people don’t think they’re taller than they really are. I bet that when you meet them in real life they seem to be even bigger than everyone expects them to be.’

‘’Well, basket ball players are different,’ said Toby. ‘They’re very tall to start with.’

Although we couldn’t see his face properly he also seemed to be much younger than I had expected.

Our captain lost the toss (this was no surprise – despite practising for several hours a week he hasn’t won a toss for three years) and our opponents elected to bat.

There was some giggling when our team took the field.

‘I fancy the one with the long blonde hair,’ muttered one of their waiting batsmen.

‘Can’t see her face,’ said another.

‘Who cares,’ said the first batsman.

Mick didn’t seem to mind too much and we didn’t mind at all. We knew that we would have the last laugh.

We had had a team meeting beforehand and had decided that rather than show our hand too soon we would allow our usual opening bowlers to bowl a couple of overs each before introducing our secret weapon into the attack.

To everyone’s surprise Dylan took a wicket in his second over and so after four overs the visitors had scored 23 runs for the loss of just one wicket.

And then the captain threw the ball to Mick Needless. We all knew it was coming, of course, and you could almost feel the excitement as we waited for things to happen.

‘Do you remember that spell in the West Indies?’ whispered Leopold.

‘He took five wickets in two overs for two runs,’ I replied. ‘Including a hat trick!’

‘They won’t know what’s hit them!’ giggled Toby.

‘You want me to bowl?’ said Mick, apparently rather surprised.

:Just a few overs!’ said the captain. He winked, lowered his voice and leant a little closer to our secret weapon. ‘That’ll probably be all you’ll need!’

‘It’s quite a while since I bowled,’ said Mick, rather apologetically.

‘Don’t you worry about that,’ said the captain. ‘Bowl a few loose ones to get the feel of things. And then...well..Just enjoy yourself, eh?’

‘Right ho!’ said our secret weapon. He took the ball and started to mark out a run up. Then he stopped and walked back to the captain. ‘What would you like me to bowl?’ he asked.

The captain, puzzled, looked at him. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Do you want me to bowl fast or slow?’

‘Oh anything you like!’ laughed the captain. He leant closer to his strike bowler. ‘As long as it’s horribly fast!’ Mick Needless had the reputation of being the fastest white bowler in the world for four years.

‘Fast?’ said Mick.

‘Fast will be fine,’ said the captain.

Mick measured out a run of ten or twelve yards. Shorter than I had remembered but plenty long enough for him to bowl a few looseners.

I knew there was something seriously wrong as soon as he began to run in to bowl.

‘There’s something funny about the way he’s running,’ whispered Toby, who was standing next to me in the slips. Our captain had set a very aggressive field. We had four slips, a leg slip and two gulleys. (And much to the wicket keeper’s chagrin we had two long stops though the captain called them a very fine leg and a very fine third man.)

I felt quite cold. Something was wrong.

A moment later Mick bowled his first ball. It bounced three times and was taken by fourth slip. It didn’t even sting his hands.

‘Whoops!’ said our secret weapon, apologetically. ‘I’ll try and do better with the next one.’ Even though he got both hands to it he dropped the ball when it was thrown back to him.

The next ball bounced four times and was taken by leg slip with one hand. Once again Mick dropped the ball when it was thrown back to him.

‘He’s just fooling around,’ said Toby. ‘Teasing the opposition.’

But he wasn’t.

After three overs our secret weapon had cost us 53 runs (including 7 wides and 4 no balls) and hadn’t taken a wicket.

‘Sorry about that,’ said Mick apologetically, when the captain finally took him off. ‘I did tell you that it had been a while...’

‘Never mind,’ said the captain, trying to hide his disappointment.

Mick didn’t do any better when it was his turn to bat. He was out second ball to a slow full toss. He hadn’t scored a run.

‘Sorry about that,’ he said, when he arrived back in the dressing room. ‘I couldn’t see properly because of this damned wig.’

‘You can take it off now, if you like,’ I said.

He took off the wig, shook his head and rubbed at his scalp.

And we all stared.

‘Where are you from, Mick?’ I asked, trying to keep my voice calm.

‘Well, I live in Wolverhampton now,’ he replied. ‘I’ve just finished university and I’ve got a new job teaching geography.’ He paused and looked around. ‘Pretty exciting.’

‘Yes,’ said Leopold. ‘It must be.’

‘Have you played much cricket?’ I asked him.

‘I played a few matches when I was at primary school,’ said Mick. ‘But my father played for England and I didn’t want to try and follow in his footsteps.’

‘Your father is Mick Needless? The cricketer?’

‘Yes,’ said Mick, looking pleased. ‘You’ve heard of him?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Leopold. ‘We’ve heard of him.’

‘He was a great hero of mine,’ said Toby.

‘Really,’ said Mick. ‘That’s nice.’ He seemed really pleased. ‘I’ll tell you something really funny,’ he said, lowering his voice.

‘When I got your note Angie, my wife, said she wondered if you’d got me confused with my father!’ he laughed at this silly thought.

We all laughed too.

‘How silly!’ said Leopold

‘Yes! That would have been really daft!’ said Mick, grinning. ‘How could anyone confuse me with my father?’

We all laughed again. How could anyone confuse Mick Needless with his father. The son was in his early twenties and had a full head of brown, wavy hair. The father was in his early forties and nearly bald. The son was short and fairly podgy. The father was lean and tall. The son giggled and smiled a lot. The father didn’t even smile when he was happy.

But the landlord at the Mott and Bailey had confused the two of them.

We may eventually let him forget his mistake. But it won’t be for a long, long time.

MAY 2nd

Barnaby’s dog, Ralph, acted as substitute fielder in today’s match. He saved more runs than any of our regular fielders and took three spectacular running catches. Our opponents objected to Ralph being used as a fielder but neither they nor the umpires could find anything in the rules of cricket which stops a fielding side playing a dog as a substitute.

MAY 3rd

Giles Harris has been severely reprimanded for practising by the club committee.

Giles was tearful and admitted the charge against him so there was no need for a trial.

We have told him that he will not be considered for selection for three matches.

MAY 4th

I was woken up early this morning by Albert Hedges, the club groundsman. He had called around to tell me that our beautiful pavilion was badly damaged by last night’s storm. I don’t think there can be a club in England which is prouder of its pavilion than we are and I was appalled by this tragic news.

Built in the late 1960s after a five year fund raising exercise our pavilion may lack some of the splendour of the pavilion at Lord’s Cricket Ground in London but it was that grand edifice which the committee had in mind when we commissioned an architect to design our pavilion.

We were, to a man, disappointed when the architect informed us (in what I personally feel was an unnecessarily terse letter) that our funds would not stretch to a replica of Thomas Lord’s magnificent erection. His suggestion that we would be well advised to continue our fund raising for another two years and then purchase a small, ready-to-erect wooden building from a supplier of garden sheds and garages was not well received.

In the end William Ratcliffe, who had been a committee member for more years than he or anyone else could remember, offered to design and build a pavilion himself Using materials which he had found lying around behind his garage William erected a superb building. Unfortunately, when he had paid himself for his labour and for the materials he had used (as he pointed out when Oliver Jenkins questioned the size of the bill, they may have been lying around but that didn’t mean they didn’t have a value) there was hardly anything left to pay for a roof.

This apparent crisis was averted when another committee member, Kenneth Biddlecombe, offered to let the club have a supply of roofing materials at very little more than cost price.

Albert stood on my doorstep as the wind howled and the rain poured down and looked as if he was about to burst into tears. I would have invited him in out of the storm, even though his clothes and shoes were soaking, but it was a Friday and the good lady wife always shampoos the hall carpet on a Thursday. Since our house is not equipped with a porch I toyed for a moment with the idea of holding an umbrella over Albert as he stood on the doorstep. I decided against this when I remembered that I had left my only umbrella on a train in 1979.

‘It’s the roof,’ said Albert glumly.

‘What’s up with it?’ I asked him.

‘Part of it isn’t there.’

He explained that two sheets of corrugated iron had been ripped from their positions and whisked away by the wind.

‘Do you know where they are?’ I asked.

‘Can’t see them: anywhere,’ was Albert’s riposte.

We looked at one another sadly. We both knew that there was now little chance of our ever finding the corrugated iron sheets again. Things may well be organised rather differently in the city but in the country there is a constant exchange of corrugated iron sheeting between farms and the ‘finders keepers’ law is always given precedence over other types of legislation. Our corrugated iron was probably filling a gap in a farmer’s fence long before Albert had noticed that we had lost it.

I said goodbye to Albert, went back into the house and had poured an inch of milk over my cornflakes before I realised that the milk had curdled.

There are some mornings when it is clear that the fates are not on your side. I was tempted to go back to bed but the good lady wife might have misread my actions and at my age I need plenty of advance notice when that sort of activity is expected of me.

MAY 5th

I am finding it difficult to remain enthusiastic about professional cricket. The twin evils of rampant sponsorship (I very nearly required a spell in hospital when they first started painting slogans on the turf at the Test grounds) and a seeming lack of interest from so called professional players have deadened my interest somewhat.

The purpose of a cricket club should surely be to provide its members with a place where they can enjoy their game (either as players or spectators) – not to make as much money as possible. At some large cricket grounds it now seems as though the sponsors are regarded as far more important than the members or paying spectators.

The Little Lampton Village Club will remain true to its ideals as long as I am secretary.

MAY 6th

Marmaduke Walters is a highly regarded member of our team and I do not deny that he is almost certainly the only one of our spin bowlers capable of knowing which way the ball is likely to turn when it has bounced. Critics might claim that he does not always deliver the ball on a good length and would probably point out that he bowls more no balls than would be considered appropriate for a bowler of his pace but these are not criticisms upon which I wish to comment.

He went to a minor public school and now has some sort of job in the city where he is apparently paid vast amounts of money to do remarkably little work. I feel safe in drawing this conclusion about him since he drives some sort of expensive German sports car and is always available for midweek matches.

He is a bachelor and although I have nothing against bachelors (I was one myself once) I do not think I am entirely alone in finding his habit of turning up at every match with yet another long legged, large-breasted blonde in tow as little more than a calculated insult to the institution of marriage.

I do not, of course, wish to say anything critical about a valued member of the club but Marmaduke comes from a slightly different background to the rest of us and there are times when I feel that he does not fit into the team quite as well as I would like. His tendency to flash £50 notes around whenever there is a raffle or a sweepstake is impressive and welcome and when we needed a new tea urn Marmaduke was the first to open his wallet (although since he wanted £45 change and we only had £1.43 in the kitty he did not actually make a contribution on that occasion). I know there are some members of the club who feel slightly intimidated by the size of his wallet.

Naturally, I hold nothing against Marmaduke. I am not the sort of person to hold a grudge or to allow feelings of personal animosity, however justified they might be, to interfere with the sense of comradeship which is such an important part of the game of cricket.

However, I do not think I was the only member of the club to have had difficulty in concealing surprise at something which happened at tonight’s emergency committee meeting.

In order to raise funds to help pay for essential repairs to the pavilion roof (our building advisers agreed that it would cost between £40 and £50 to purchase and fit two replacement sheets of corrugated iron) we decided to hold an auction. Naturally, our next and most urgent task was to find items which could be auctioned in order to raise the necessary funds.

Toby Babbage, who when not keeping wicket runs the local bakery and does a little part time chiropody, immediately offered free scones for a week; the butcher Martin Mason offered a string of his highly regarded herbal sausages, and other committee members made similarly generous contributions. Barnaby Wimble, who has a small farm, offered a bale of hay and a bale of straw and when the vicar offered 10% off the cost of a christening, our local undertaker, not to be outdone, offered an equally generous 10% discount off the cost of a funeral. As secretary of the club I felt it was my duty to set a good example and so I myself offered no less than two bottles of my good lady wife’s non-alcoholic beetroot cordial. I naturally added the proviso that this offer was made subject to her approval though I made it clear that I did not expect the requisite approval to be withheld.

When Marmaduke was the only member of the commit tee not to have offered something for the auction we all looked in his direction. His offer, when it came, was utterly unexpected.

‘I’ll offer myself up for auction,’ said Marmaduke. I have nothing against the man but he has a smooth, almost smug, self confidence which suggests to me that there may be some foreign blood somewhere in his ancestry.

Confused, we all looked at him and waited.

‘The ladies can bid for an evening out with me,’ he continued. ‘I’ll take the lucky winner up to London in the Porsche and we’ll have dinner and take in a show.’ He paused and winked. And who knows what else will be on the menu...’

No one spoke. We weren’t sure whether he was joking.

‘No, really,’ said Leopold. ‘Be serious...’

‘I’m being serious,’ said Marmaduke. ‘Deadly serious.’ He beamed at us all. ‘These sort of things happen all the time in London.’

‘They have muggings and bank robberies in London,’ muttered Jasper Onions. ‘It doesn’t mean we have to have ‘em down here.’

‘You just wait and see,’ said Marmaduke. ‘I bet I raise more money than the rest of you put together!’

As I have already said I don’t like to be critical of fellow team members. Nevertheless, there are times when I do feel that a certain member of the team, however good a bowler he might be (and I have no intention of naming names here), might possibly feel happier playing his cricket somewhere else.

MAY 8th

The good lady wife has gone to her mother’s for the day and so I decided to cook myself a couple of boiled eggs for my tea. The wife always makes fun of my abilities in the kitchen and I wanted to show her that I can look after myself perfectly well thank you very much.

I found a saucepan easily enough, filled it with an inch or two of water, and put it on the stove to heat it up. But I couldn’t find any eggs. I looked in all the cupboards and I even looked in the garage. But not one egg could I find.

Eventually, I decided to potter down to the village shop to buy half a dozen. I made a mental note to have a word with the wife about the shopping. On the way back from the shop I had to pass the pub so I popped in for a quick half. While there I had one of Doris’s excellent home made pasties and washed it down with another couple of halves.

When I got back home the whole place was filled with black, acrid smoke. I traced the problem to the pan I’d left on the stove. It didn’t look worth trying to clean up so I tossed it into the dustbin outside the back door. A few minutes later the smoke started up again. This time it came from the dustbin. The hot saucepan had set fire to the waste paper in the bin. In the good old days the dustbin would have survived an accidental conflagration without a protest. But these new plastic ones are useless. When I got outside ours had already started to melt.

When the good lady wife gets back tomorrow I will have a firm word with her. If she had kept the kitchen properly supplied with eggs none of this would have happened.

MAY 9th

The good lady wife arrived back from her mother's this morning and the first thing she noticed was the missing saucepan. I swear she noticed it was missing before she even got into the house. How does a woman know that one saucepan is missing? Our kitchen is stuffed with saucepans. The second thing she noticed was the dustbin had turned into a molten, misshapen mass. I would have thrown it away but where do you put an unwanted dustbin?

'If there had been some eggs in the house none of this would have happened,' I protested as planned.

She opened the fridge door and pointed to two neat rows of eggs.

How was I supposed to know that she keeps the eggs in the fridge?

I suppose she'll start keeping the milk in the washing machine next.

MAY 14th

There was a little trouble during today’s league match against Todcaster Third X.

Henry was bowling his slow swirlers (so called because he tosses them up so high that if there is any wind the ball will invariably be moved about by it) and he was having rather a torrid time. The opposition’s opening batsmen had managed to score 50 runs off his first four overs and they seemed to be enjoying themselves to a rather unacceptable degree. I have always thought there is something ungentlemanly about a batsman making it clear that he is having fun when he is scoring rather quickly but today’s visiting batsmen seemed to obtain a great deal of pleasure from making it clear to poor old Henry that they regarded his bowling as little more than gentle net practice.

At the end of Henry’s fifth over one of the opening batsmen took two paces down the pitch, swung his bat back over his shoulder and took an almighty swipe at a ball that had travelled even slower than any of its predecessors.

The ball disappeared skywards as though aiming to be the first ball to land on the moon. Up and up it rose, losing more and more contact with the earth’s gravity with every foot it travelled.

Of course, every good thing must come to an end and eventually the ball decided it had had enough. It hung for a while in the sky, seemingly uncertain as to what was expected of it. And then, slowly at first but accelerating rapidly, it began its journey back to earth.

Down below, we were all watching the ball with a considerable amount of trepidation. I was praying that if and when the ball eventually did decide to return to earth it would choose to do so some distance away from where I was standing. I strongly suspect that the other members of the team were muttering similar prayers.

Felix was the unfortunate member of the team who was nearest to the ball when it finally fell to earth. For a brief moment it looked as if he might astonish us all by taking the catch. But the ball had gone too high and it was travelling too fast when it landed in his cupped hands. He yelped, tossed the ball away from him as though it was red hot, and shook his hands. I very much doubt if any of us would have done any better.

‘Owzat?’ screamed the bowler optimistically.

‘Not out!’ replied the umpire.

‘Why not?’ demanded Henry, seemingly surprised at the umpire’s decision. His face was furious red and his eyes were burning.

‘Because the fielder didn’t have control over the ball,’ said the umpire.

‘Yes he did!’ insisted Henry. ‘He interrupted the ball in its journey to the ground.’

‘That doesn’t mean he had control over it!’ protested the umpire.

‘Of course he did!’ argued Henry. ‘How could he have interrupted the ball without controlling it?’

The umpire, a fair man, thought about this for a moment before shaking his head. ‘It wasn’t out!’ he repeated. ‘Look in the score book if you don’t believe me.’

This decision did not please Henry greatly. Wickets have never come easily to him (despite bowling every week he hasn’t taken a wicket yet this season) and at the end of today’s match his career average stood at a modest twenty three wickets for 12,578 runs. Having the cup dashed from your lips is always a painful and frustrating business but the pain and the frustration are inevitably enhanced when the thirst is greater.

In the pavilion bar that evening Henry became increasingly morose. To a certain extent this was understandable. He had ended the day with figures of nought for 96 runs and the more he had to drink the more he came to think that one for 96 would have sounded considerably better. It is true that not all bowlers would have been excited at the prospect of figures of one for 96 but for Henry those figures had the attraction of being a career best.

At first Henry was content to blame the umpire. But when the umpire eventually got bored with Henry’s constant moaning and went home Henry switched targets and decided that the real culprit was the fielder who had dropped the ball.

‘If only you’d held onto that catch,’ he said to Felix.

‘Did you see how high it went?’ demanded Felix. ‘No one could have held onto the catch. No one. I did well to slow it down.’

‘You’re a butterfingers,’ said Henry, belligerently. It is not uncommon for people who are upset to say silly, damaging or downright wicked things that deep down they mean, and which may even be justified. The truth is that Felix does drop rather a lot of catches. In fact I can’t remember him ever holding onto one.

‘If I hadn’t slowed it down the ball would have buried itself three feet deep in the turf,’ insisted Felix. ‘We’d have had to dig it out with an excavator.’

‘You shouldn’t be playing cricket if you can’t take a simple catch,’ said Henry. ‘My nephew could have taken that catch.’ He paused and prodded Felix in the chest with his forefinger. ‘And he’s still in his pram!’ he added cruelly.

‘You didn’t deserve to take a wicket with that ball anyway,’ said Felix defiantly.

Up until that moment most of us had taken little notice of the discussion. But we all looked around when we heard this. Several of us winced. I helped the barmaid put away as many glasses as we could reach. For what seemed an eternity Henry didn’t speak. It wasn’t that he didn’t try. But although he opened his mouth several times no words came out.

‘It was a terrible ball,’ said Felix, going in for the kill. ‘It deserved to go for six.’

Once again Henry opened his mouth several times. Once again nothing came out. He looked as though he was auditioning for the part of a goldfish in an aquarium drama.

‘I think it was a pretty good ball, Henry,’ said Leopold, attempting to offer some reassurance and lower the temperature.

‘You were unlucky not to get a wicket with that one,’ said the captain, who always likes to keep his players happy. He reached out in an attempt to put his arm around Henry’s shoulder but, having drunk rather too many pints of Old Faithful, missed by a foot and a half.

‘It was the worst ball I’ve seen bowled for years!’ said Felix with a sneer.

‘Well, I’m not saying that you don’t have a point there, of course,’ said the captain to Felix. ‘It perhaps wasn’t the best ball I’ve ever seen bowled.’

‘What?’ demanded Henry, half sliding and half falling off his bar stool. He made a fist with his right hand.

The captain responded by sliding off his bar stool. He held up a hand. ‘But then again,’ he said quickly, backing away physically and metaphorically, ‘perhaps it was.’

Henry was now thoroughly confused. Not wanting to waste the fist he had just created he bopped the captain on the nose. Henry is not a young man but arthritis has swollen his joints and given his fist extra oomph.

The hit was rather unfair for it would have been difficult to support an argument that it was the captain’s fault that the catch had been dropped. The captain, blood spurting from his wounded proboscis, fell backwards, tripped over his own feet and landed flat, with quite a thud, on the pavilion floor.

Leopold, coming to the captain’s defence, made a lunge for Henry in order to stop him doing any more damage.

Nathan, who is probably Henry’s best (and possibly only) friend in the village, spat on his palms and raised his fists but then thought better of this gesture and retreated to a corner where he contented himself with looking menacing.

(I have, incidentally, often wondered why men spit on their hands when they are preparing to hit someone. It is one of life’s many mysteries.)

In the movies fights usually last for several minutes. Each participant may hit everyone else several times and the air is usually pretty thick with bits and pieces of furniture.

In contrast the fight in the pavilion lasted for about twenty seconds and although one bar stool was kicked over there was, as far as I can remember, no throwing of furniture. At the end of the twenty seconds the captain was sitting up holding his bleeding nose, Felix was leaning against the wall holding his eye and whimpering, Giles was sitting on the floor holding a handkerchief to his nose, Toby was bent double and clearly in some pain, Martin was crying and Barnaby, who had hit someone but wasn’t entirely sure whom, was examining his fingers and trying to decide which, if any, of them were broken. No one was speaking

Henry, who was unmarked, had not been hit by anyone and had not hit anyone other than the club captain.

The light bulb chose that moment to expire, plunging the whole room into darkness. It was fifteen minutes before I could find the club candle and a box of matches. With the light from the candle we found a fresh light bulb but couldn’t fit it because we couldn’t remove the old one. It simply wouldn’t budge. We all had another drink and when the candle went out we went home.

‘Did you have a good match, dear?’ asked the good lady wife when I got home that evening.

‘Very nice, my dear,’ I replied.

‘Did your team win, dear?’ she asked, as she always does.

‘Not quite, dear,’ I replied.

Our opponents had scored 312 for 2 declared. We had been dismissed for 46.

‘Never mind,’ she said. ‘Maybe next time.’

‘Maybe, dear,’ I replied

MAY 15th

P.C.Thomas called at my home this morning. It appears that someone has made a formal complaint about the misunderstanding at the club last night. When P.C. Thomas asked me to make a statement I told him that I hadn't been able to see anything because the light had gone out.

MAY 17th

When I popped into the village post office this morning I met dear old Mrs Wainwright, the 85 year old widow of Bertie Wainwright. Bertie was for several decades the scourge of batsmen for miles around. At his funeral nine years ago Bertie was described as the fastest fast bowler ever to play for the club.

Mrs Wainwright is confined to a wheelchair because of her rather severe arthritis but apart from her swollen and painful joints, her cardiac condition, her deafness, her blindness and her bronchitis she enjoys quite good health. She was accompanied by her grand-daughter Elizabeth who had taken on the responsibility of pushing her grandmother around the village for the morning.

Elizabeth, who is in her mid twenties and exceptionally beautiful, works for an advertising agency in London and is as bright and witty as she is beautiful.

‘It’s nice to see you in the village, Elizabeth,’ I said, after shouting a short greeting to her great-grandmother.

‘Oh, I’m just here for a few days rest,’ replied Elizabeth. ‘Life has been a bit hectic recently. I felt the need for a bit of unwinding.’

We talked for a few minutes about her father (Dr Wainwright is the village doctor and an enthusiastic non-playing member of the cricket club) and then Elizabeth mentioned the auction we are holding to try to raise funds to repair the pavilion roof.

‘Father’s told me about some of the items that are available,’ said Elizabeth. ‘It sounds rather fun.’

‘Oh, really?’ I said, surprised. ‘What has taken your fancy? The string of sausages or the week’s supply of scones?’

‘Neither,’ laughed Elizabeth. ‘I’m planning to bid for the evening out with Marmaduke Walters.’

I really was rather surprised to hear this. Marmaduke has for years been trying, with no success whatsoever, to persuade Elizabeth to go out with him.

‘I didn’t think he was your type!’ I said.

‘He isn’t,’ said Elizabeth with a smile.

MAY 18th

Last night the club held its fund raising auction and at the end of the evening I was able to announce to the assembled throng that we had enough money both to pay for the two sheets of corrugated iron we need and to hire a skilled artisan to nail the corrugated iron into position on the exposed timbers. Since the auction was held in the wind damaged edifice and it was raining heavily at the time this news was greeted with a certain ironic enthusiasm by those members of the club who were standing at what had become known as the damp end of the pavilion.

Dr Wainwright, conducted the auction and everyone agreed that he made a splendid job of it.

One of the strange things about these events is the fact that some of the items which are auctioned fetch a noticeably lower price than the value the donors would have put on them under more normal circumstances. On the other hand some items fetch considerably more than their normal market value.

Our butcher Martin Mason paid just half the price Toby Babbage, the local baker, would have normally charged for a week's supply of scones and, in turn, the baker paid considerably less for a string of sausages than the butcher would have normally charged his customers. My good lady wife's non-alcoholic beetroot cordial attracted a modest degree of enthusiasm and eventually the first bottle was sold for the excellent price of £5.60. Sadly, this sale rather took the urgency out of the market and the second bottle went for a far less impressive £1.25. This was, however, rather more than the best price offered for Barnaby Wimble's bales of hay and straw. Eventually the farmer, distinctly unhappy, bought back both bales for £2 the pair.

The vicar's offer of a cut price christening received no takers at all (hardly surprising in view of the fact that there are no unchristened babies in the village) but when the doctor introduced the local undertaker's offer of a 10% discount off the cost of a funeral the bidding became brisk. Michael Johnson, a former club captain, who is 87 and not in the best of health, was the successful bidder for that lot. The doctor had to halt the proceedings twice in view of the fact that several of those participating in the bidding seemed to be getting rather too excited.

The highpoint of the evening was undoubtedly the auction of an evening out with Marmaduke Walters. The doctor, wisely in my view, kept this item on his list for the end of the auction.

'Ladies and gentlemen – particularly ladies,' began the doctor with a wink, 'I am now delighted to be able to offer you all the chance to purchase an evening on the town with Mr Marmaduke Walters. Mr Walters has undertaken to escort the lucky lady who wins this auction to London in his Porsche motor car. Once there he will take her to dinner and to a show of her choice. All expenses will be paid.'

The doctor's introduction was met with a considerable amount of giggling from women who, naturally, knew of Mr Walters' reputation as what used to be referred to, I believe, as a ladies man. There were, in addition, not a few looks of disapproval from an assortment of fathers, husbands and boyfriends who also knew of Mr Walters' reputation in that direction.

Having gained inside information during our conversation yesterday I was possibly the only person in the room who wasn't surprised when Elizabeth Wainwright joined the bidding and very quickly made it clear to everyone in the room that she intended to dominate the proceedings. I do not know whether her father knew of her plans but he did not seem in the slightest bit surprised.

Most people in the village are extremely fond of Elizabeth but tend to think of Marmaduke as being rather brash and considerably too sure of himself. There was, therefore, some disappointment that Elizabeth should declare her hand in such an open manner.

Naturally, Marmaduke seemed delighted with the fact that the prettiest girl in the county – and one whom he had been trying to get to go out with him for several years, was leading the bidding.

I was on the other side of the room from him but I fancied that I could hear him purring from where I was sitting. There are few things more distasteful or irritating than a cocky man being put in a position where he can do his strutting from a position of confidence.

At long last the bidding ended, in Elizabeth's favour, with a bid of £25. This may not sound a great deal but when I point out that the bidding had started at £5 and had gone up in 50 pence instalments you will realise that this was quite an achievement for all concerned.

The doctor, in his role as auctioneer, called his daughter and her prize up to the stage so that they could shake hands and make arrangements for their evening out on the town together.

'I'm really thrilled that you're the winner,' drooled Marmaduke. He ran his fingers through his immaculately trimmed hair and gave Elizabeth the benefit of his best 150 watt smile. 'I guarantee you that it will be a night to remember.'

'I'm sure it will,' agreed Elizabeth.

'Is there any particular show you'd like me to get tickets for?' asked Marmaduke.

'I don't think it matters very much,' said Elizabeth. Marmaduke, taking this to mean that her mind would be on her companion rather than the show, looked so pleased with himself that I thought he might implode.

'But just make sure that the theatre has wheelchair access,' added Elizabeth.

Simon looked at her, clearly puzzled. 'But...but...why?' he asked.

'Because my grandmother can't get about without her wheelchair,' explained Elizabeth, as though talking to an idiot.

'I know that,' said Marmaduke, impatiently. He frowned, clearly confused. 'But...,' he swallowed and thought about this. 'Is she coming with us?'

'Good heavens!' said Elizabeth. She laughed rather nervously and put a hand to her mouth, as though suddenly realising that a terrible mistake had been made.

Marmaduke waited. So did everyone else in the room.

'You didn't think I bid because I wanted to go out with you myself did you?' asked Elizabeth, incredulously.

'Well...,' began Marmaduke, clearly flustered.

Elizabeth laughed out loud. 'You couldn't have!' She put her hand over her mouth. Her eyes were wide open.

'W...w...w...well...,' stuttered Marmaduke, waving an arm and hand around as though hoping that they might pick up some suitable words which he could use.

'I want you to take my great-grandmother out for the evening,' Elizabeth explained. 'Do you think her wheelchair will fit into your car?'

Marmaduke, by now a deep shade of red, tried to think of something to say that would limit his embarrassment. But the task would have defied a greater brain than he possessed.

The audience of cricket club members were by now close to hysterics. I felt fonder of Elizabeth than I had ever felt before.

And I almost felt sorry for Marmaduke Walters. Almost – but not quite.

MAY 20th

The pavilion roof has now been repaired and I took the good lady wife around to see it. I thought she would be impressed but to be honest I was disappointed with her response.

‘Why couldn’t you get nice brown corrugated iron to blend in with the old stuff?’ she asked.

‘The new stuff is brown in parts,’ I pointed out.

‘But the old stuff is brown all over,’ she said.

‘That’s because it’s older and rustier,’ I said. ‘The new stuff will soon be rusty all over like the old stuff.’

‘But by then the old stuff will have rusted through and you’ll have to replace it,’ said the good lady wife. ‘Then the stuff that’s on there now will be all brown and the new stuff will be all, well, probably just a bit brown.’

I didn’t say anything else. A moment which I had expected to enjoy suddenly seemed rather hollow and disappointing.

MAY 22nd

Jerome Fairfax got married today. I have no idea why he had to choose to get married on a Saturday but it caused an enormous amount of inconvenience to a great deal of people. At the end of the day I told several committee members that I intended to introduce a new club rule making it mandatory for players who intend to get married to do so on non match days. The immediate feedback I received suggested that this new rule will be widely welcomed.

The wedding was due to take place at 3.00 pm and it was generally agreed by the committee that it could not possibly have been arranged for a more inconvenient time. We held the bride's mother responsible for this. She has never been a supporter of the cricket club and for several years now she has been one of the few people in the village who has refused to buy tickets for the annual cricket club prize draw. I think it is fair to say that she is not well liked by cricket club members.

As a loyal member of the club (and possibly our most promising and talented all rounder) Jerome had promised to play in today's match and to take off the minimum amount of time necessary for the actual wedding ceremony.

After talking to the vicar (fortunately, himself a keen cricket fan, a life vice president of the club and a former player whose leg spin bowling dazzled and confused opponents throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s) it was agreed that Jerome need not turn up at the church before five minutes to three. The vicar promised to speed through the proceedings as much as he could, and to have a quiet word with the organist to ensure that he played the selected hymns in abbreviated versions and at a slightly faster than normal tempo. He assured Jerome that if all went well he should be back on the cricket field by 3.40 pm at the latest.

Alas, things did not go smoothly.

The problems began when twenty five heifers escaped from their field at 2.35 pm and decided to settle down and munch their way through the hedgerows on either side of Thistledown Lane – thereby effectively blocking the lane to traffic.

Since the only way the bride could travel from her home to the church was down the sadly impassable Thistledown Lane there was a considerable amount of panicking in the bridal vehicle (a vintage white Rolls Royce rented for the occasion). The bride, looking at her watch every two or three seconds, quickly became convinced that her husband to be and the father of her unborn (and it should be said unconceived) children, would mistakenly decide that she had changed her mind and would cancel the wedding. Her father's attempts to soothe and reassure her were quite ineffective. The two bridesmaids, who might have been expected to offer solace, began to cry. One of them became hysterical and had to be sedated with a gentle slap across the cheek. The heifers, the cause of the problem, simply did not understand the situation. They stood, they stared, they wondered and they chewed but they would not get out of the way.

With his daughter seemingly just seconds away from a nervous breakdown the bride's father had what at the time undoubtedly seemed like a good idea. (I should perhaps mention that he is an enthusiastic supporter of the cricket club and was considerably embarrassed by his wife's insistence that the wedding be held on a Saturday afternoon during the cricket season.) He commandeered a nearby tractor to transport the bridal party to the church across the fields.

In theory this was undoubtedly an excellent idea. It was a perfect example of lateral thinking. It seemed to offer a practical, realistic and sensible solution to a seemingly insoluble problem.

The major snag was that the tractor which the bride's father commandeered was, at the time, towing a muck spreader and although muck spreaders are designed to spread the muck behind the tractor they are, like all pieces of machinery, prone to occasional mishaps. And this muck spreader, being elderly and poorly maintained, was perhaps more prone to occasional mishaps and lapses than most pieces of machinery. The most obvious result of this was that the tractor which was doing the towing and which should, therefore, have been safely out of the line of fire, was pretty well covered with the brown stuff which should have been spread on the green grass.

The initial enthusiasm which the bride and her brides maids had shown for this new and alternative mode of transport quickly dissipated when they realised that they would have to wrap themselves around bits of metal which were not brown because they had been painted that colour. The bridesmaid who had already exhibited symptoms of hysteria quickly weakened and started to sob. They were the sobs of a serious young woman who has glanced into the future and seen it devoid of hope.

'We can't get on that!' said the bride, pointing to the tractor. 'It's disgusting!'

'It's that or nothing,' said her father pragmatically. He nodded towards the blocked lane. 'They're not moving and so we can't go that way.'

'Stupid, stupid animals!' cried the bride, overwhelmed with frustration. It did not occur to her that this comment was not, strictly speaking, entirely fair. The heifers were having quite a good time eating all sorts of tasty flowers and weeds and would not have considered themselves to be stupid at all. When your diet is normally pretty much confined to grass an opportunity to add a little variety can be hard to resist.

'Why don't you take your dresses off?' suggested the tractor driver who was by no means as stupid as he looked. He licked his lips in anticipation, pulled a plastic bag out from underneath his seat and offered it to the bride to be. 'Put your dresses in there.'

Reluctantly, the bride accepted the bag, held it at arms' length and peered into it. It had originally contained fertiliser and there were still some residues of the original contents clinging to the inside of the bag.

'Jerome will probably wait for you,' said the bride's father, attempting to reassure his daughter.

It was the stimulus she needed. This was one bride who did not want to reach the altar to find that her husband to be had disappeared and was padding up half a mile away. She reached around, unzipped herself and wriggled out of her dress. The tractor driver looked down at her, smiled and wished he had put his teeth in. He was an enthusiastic lover of life in the country but even he would have had to admit that it wasn't every day that he saw a beautiful young woman standing next to his tractor wearing nothing but skimpy white lingerie (the bride, he was delighted to see, was wearing a white suspender belt, a pair of white stockings she had bought three months earlier as a treat intended for her husband's eyes only), a white headdress and a pair of white shoes.

Ten minutes later the tractor had four strangely attired passengers: a middle aged man wearing a rented top hat (hiding rapidly greying hair), a smart white shirt, a rented morning suit waistcoat, a pair of striped undershorts, a pair of long grey socks and a pair of well polished black shoes; and three beautiful young women dressed only in their underwear, their head-dresses (removing them would have meant messing with their hair and that was something none of them was prepared to do) and their shoes. It is possible that an outsider might have found it difficult to understand what was going on.

Still towing the muck spreader (the tractor driver, after some discussion with the bride's father, had decided that it would take far too long to disconnect it) the tractor turned right across the field which it had been in the process of covering with muck and headed for the village church – some seven fields away.

The end result of all this delay was that the bridal party arrived at the church twenty five minutes late. By the time they had dressed themselves, checked each other's hair and made an effort to clean up their shoes it was twenty to four.

The groom, who should have been heading back for the cricket ground, was beside himself with anxiety. He and the rest of the congregation had stopped turning round to see if the bride was coming (there had been too many disappointments and necks were beginning to ache) but when the church door clanked open and the church was filled with a powerful countryside smell which everyone in the village instantly recognised heads turned out of curiosity. The curiosity quickly turned to surprise when the congregation realised that the smell was accompanying the bridal party. 'Well, I suppose it makes a change from apple blossom,' whispered the groom's mother to her husband.

The organist's assistant, hired to turn over the sheet music, nudged the organist and the organist, who had been playing a medley of his favourite show tunes to fill in time, switched without a dropped note into what the kindly would describe as an enthusiastic and the unkindly as a heavy handed rendition of the predictable perennial ‘Here Comes The Bride’.

All this delay caused chaos at the cricket ground.

After our captain had lost the toss (no surprise, there) the visitors decided to bat first. Jerome had managed to bowl ten overs of his very best before he had to leave the field, change into his morning suit, rescue his button hole carnation from the jam jar in which it had been resting, and leave the cricket ground with a merry mixture of best wishes and ribald comments ringing in his ears. Barnaby’s dog, Ralph, acted as substitute fielder. (He took two catches and saved an enormous number of runs. If we could train him to throw the ball back in to the wicket keeper he would be the sharpest fielder in the league.)

We would have all liked to have been there, providing moral support from the back of the church, and possibly. an archway of cricket bats for the happy couple to walk under as they left the church. But the bride’s mother had put paid to that, of course.

The bride’s delay naturally meant that Jerome’s return to the match was also delayed. And as the clock ticked on and on I began to worry. I was frightened that something serious might have happened which would interfere with our chance of making a decent score.

Jerome normally holds our middle order together but when we were down to 33 for 7 and he still hadn’t arrived I began to feel distinctly uncomfortable. Our opponents had scored a modest 44 and I felt that with Jerome’s help we would stand a real chance of a win. After discussions with the rest of the committee the captain sent a message out to the batsmen (with a glass of water which came back untouched) instructing them to defend and concentrate on making sure that they didn’t lose any more wickets. Within two minutes one of our batsmen was out, having completely failed to play a shot at a slowish, straight ball. We had now lost eight wickets. Effectively, our last pair was batting.

‘What on earth happened?’ I asked a miserable looking Toby, the batsman who was out.

‘I wasn’t concentrating,’ confessed Toby miserably. ‘I was trying to work out why the captain had bothered to send out a message telling us not to lose any more wickets.’

This time the captain sent out a message telling the batsmen to find ways to slow down the match. They did well. Dylan insisted that he needed the sight screen moving and when the umpire pointed out to him that there was no sight screen he said he wasn’t prepared to carry on without one since it wasn’t safe. Eventually a temporary sight screen was prepared with the aid of one of the umpire’s white coats, a broom, a piece of spare drainpipe and two folding chairs. The result wasn’t particularly effective as a sight screen but Dylan professed himself satisfied and the match was resumed after a delay of seven minutes. Barnaby then complained that his boot lace had broken. When a replacement shoe lace was sent out to the wicket it turned out to be brown. Naturally, Barnaby refused to accept it. It took another four minutes to find a spare white lace. The opposition bowler was about to begin his run up when Dylan complained that he had a touch of indigestion and wanted to see our team physiotherapist. Since we don’t have a physiotherapist Felix was sent out with a glass of milk.

At that moment a breathless Jerome, newly married, and with his rented morning suit covered in confetti, arrived at the ground. He was closely followed by his new bride, his father in law, the two bridesmaids, the rest of the relatives, assorted friends, the vicar and a tractor driver who came complete with tractor and muck spreader. The excitement was so considerable that Barnaby, facing his first ball for some time, stepped back onto his stumps and was given out ‘hit wicket’.

It would be nice to be able to report that there was a fairy tale ending to the afternoon, that Jerome scored the winning runs and gave us our first victory of the season.

The truth, however, is rather more prosaic and disappointing. Jerome was bowled first ball for nought. And we lost the match by eleven runs. We still haven’t won a match this season.

MAY 23rd

I had to attend a court hearing in Greater Lampton today. I was called as a prosecution witness to give evidence about the alleged rumpus at the Little Lampton Cricket Club pavilion.

I told the magistrate that I did not see anything because the light bulb had just gone out. I added that I sincerely hoped that the court case will not be held against us when we ask for our licence to be renewed next week.

MAY 24th

Today’s visiting team came from a large city in the midlands. They were clearly enchanted with our ground.

‘What’s that bird up there?’ asked one, as we sat working our way through the sandwiches.

‘It’s a buzzard,’ I explained.

‘There’s something wonderfully serene about it don’t you think?’ said the visitor.

I looked at him. ‘Did you know that a pair of buzzards with three young will kill 600 rabbits and 8,000 voles a year?’

The visitor looked shocked. ‘I hadn’t...quite...hadn’t thought of it in those terms,’ he admitted.

‘Of course those figures aren’t absolutely accurate,’ I said. ‘I don’t suppose the buzzards suddenly stop hunting in October if they’ve met their quota!’

The visitor seemed upset and moved away, making some excuse about needing another cheese and tomato sandwich.

Much talk about countryside matters is dishonest, hypocritical and self serving.

Town dwellers always say they love the countryside. But they want neatly scrubbed lambs and calves and ponies – with special care being taken to make sure that their bottoms are particularly clean – all living in immaculate green pastures. They want lots of trees and sparkling babbling brooks too. Of course, they don’t actually want to live in the country because it is so darned inconvenient. They just want to know that it is there and available and they want to be able to visit it occasionally for an hour or two, preferably when there is lots of sunshine and blue skies and absolutely no mud.

On the other hand, one has to be honest and admit that although farmers say they love the countryside most of them would give up their milking sheds and combine harvesters in an instant if they were offered a reasonable comfortable life in a flat in London or the South of France. Farmers love the countryside because it gives them a good living without too much interference. And, of course, when they make a mess of things, which they do quite frequently, they can rely on the Government to bail them out.

No one really wants nature in the raw. No one wants thistles, nettles, brambles and mud.

MAY 25th

Our highly popular and much esteemed local newspaper, The Bugle & Echo, carried a story this week about the alleged fight in the pavilion at Little Lampton Cricket Club.

Here is the story as it appeared on page 11.

‘Eight members of the Little Lampton Cricket Club appeared before magistrates in Greater Lampton last Friday charged with affray and being involved in a public disturbance.

‘The court was told that the fight started when one of the players Henry Henderson (63, slow bowler) took umbrage at the fact that another player Felix Chartier (29, all rounder) had failed to take a catch during their opponents’ innings earlier that day. The catch would have given Henderson (63, slow bowler) his first wicket for some considerable time.

‘When Anthony Kingsley (45, captain and batsman) attempted to smooth over troubled waters Henderson (63, slow bowler) struck Kingsley (45, captain and batsman) and caused actual bodily damage to his nose.

‘In response to this Leopold Lewinsky (47, batsman and club treasurer) struck out at Giles Harris (44, batsman) and hit him in what the court was told was ‘a painful part of his person’. Barnaby Wimble (35, bowler) hit Martin Mason (40, batsman) and Chartier (29, all rounder) retaliated by accidentally hitting Lewinsky (47, batsman and club treasurer).

‘After some confusion and a good deal of deliberation the court dismissed the case on the grounds that there was simply far too much evidence and it was impossible to work out what to believe and what not to believe.’

MAY 28th

There is a crisis at the club. When we woke this morning we discovered that mole hills have appeared on the outfield. There must have been forty or fifty mole hills altogether – all at long on.

The groundsman has bought a huge pile of tiny windmills – those colourful little ones that are bought for children at fair grounds and at the seaside – and stuck them all into the ground. He told the rest of us that he had read somewhere that the vibration caused by the windmills going round would annoy the moles and that they would go somewhere else.

MAY 29th

None of us has been able to remove the dead light bulb from the ceiling in the pavilion. And so, with great embarrassment, I had to telephone our local electrician Harry Porter today. I met him at the cricket ground at 3.00 pm and explained to him what the problem was.

‘It’s stuck?’ he said.

I agreed that this was the problem.

Harry looked at me over his spectacles and made me feel about twelve. I swear I could feel myself blushing. I was praying that he wouldn’t just reach up and remove the bulb with a single twist.

‘Is it one of those screw in ones or one of those with the two little sticky out things on the side?’ he asked.

‘It’s one of those with the two little sticky out things,’ I replied, glad that he wasn’t being too technical.

Harry stood on a chair, reached up and, despite a good deal of twisting and tugging and cursing could not remove the light bulb.

‘It’s stuck,’ he told me at last. He climbed down off the chair. ‘I’ll need some tools,’ Harry said.

A minute or so later he returned clutching a screwdriver, a pair of pliers and a hammer.

‘Is the light switched off?’ he asked.

‘I’m not sure,’ I admitted. ‘I can never remember whether this one is on when it’s up or up when it’s off.’

‘Could you turn off the mains then, please?’

I squeezed into the tiny kitchen, opened the cupboard under the sink, went down onto my knees, climbed half inside the cupboard and turned off the electricity.

‘It’s off!’ I called, crawling back out of the cupboard, standing up and returning to the main room in the pavilion. ‘It’s off!’ I repeated.

‘Watch out!’ said Harry, averting his own eyes and giving the light bulb a hearty clout with the hammer. Nothing happened. He hit the bulb again. This time it broke, showering the floor with tiny pieces of glass.

‘Ah, the technical approach!’ I said, nodding wisely. ‘I wish I’d thought of that.’

Harry looked at me over his spectacles and waved the hammer towards the floor. ‘Mind the glass,’ he said, quite unnecessarily. He then tried to remove the base of the broken bulb with the aid of his pliers, a lot of tugging and a good deal of swearing. I was pleased to hear Harry accompany his efforts with epithets and appeals to the deities for I myself have always found that swearing seems to be an integral part of work around the home.

‘It’s stuck,’ he said eventually. ‘I’ll have to cut the wire.’

He unscrewed the light fitting attached to the ceiling and pulled out the wire. He then whistled.

I hate it when workmen whistle for it is always a sign that the bill is going to be much higher than expected.

‘What’s the matter?’ I asked him.

‘It’s your flex,’ he replied.

‘What about it?’

‘It’s two ply fabric weave.’

‘Is that bad?’

Harry sucked in a lot of air and shook his head a great deal.

‘What does it mean?’

‘You need rewiring. This stuff isn’t safe.’

‘But it’s new!’ I protested. ‘It wasn’t done all that long .ago!’

‘Who did it?’ asked Harry.

I was trying to answer his question when Harry answered it himself ‘It wasn’t Old Tommy Jackson was it?’

‘That’s it!’ I said. ‘Old Tommy Jackson.’ Everyone always called Tommy Jackson old. He was called old because he was old.

‘Ah!’ said Harry.

‘What do you mean ‘Ah!’?’

Harry shook his head and sighed again.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I don’t wish to speak ill of the dead,’ said Harry.

‘Go on,’ I said. ‘Speak ill. He’s dead he won’t find out.’

‘He always used two ply fabric weave,’ said Harry. ‘He bought a lot of it when it went out of fashion back in the 40s or 50s.’

‘And it isn’t any good?’

‘This stuff is rotten,’ said Harry. He pulled out a piece of flex and crumbled it between his fingers. It fell slowly down to the ground like dust.

‘So what do we do?’

‘You need rewiring.’

‘How much will that cost?’

‘I’ll give you a quote later,’ said Harry. ‘I’ll just have a look around at the rest of your electrics. Do you have a hatchway into your loft?’

I showed him where the loft hatch was and watched as he squeezed through it. ‘We’ve only just had the roof done!’ I moaned, as his feet disappeared, wondering where on earth we were going to find the money for a rewiring job.

Ten minutes later he reappeared. ‘Oh dearie me,’ he said, shaking his head. He looked very glum. ‘Oh dear.’

‘What?’ I asked him.

‘You won’t like this one little bit,’ he said.

‘What?’

‘It’s not good news I’m afraid.’

‘What have you found?’ I screamed at him.

‘You’ve got woodworm,’ said Harry. ‘There’s a piece of wood up there that’s riddled with it.’

I looked at him. ‘We only wanted the bloody light bulb changed!’ I said miserably.

MAY 30th

The groundsman’s windmills have worked. The moles have all moved to long off.

MAY 31st

Our umpire Cyril Darlington had one of his funny turns just before today’s match was due to start and I asked our grounds man Albert Hedges to stand in for him.

I assumed, quite wrongly as it turned out, that Albert would know something about the game of cricket. It had never occurred to me that his enthusiasm for preparing a perfect pitch was inspired solely by his love of nicely rolled lawns rather than a love of cricket.

Today’s visiting team came from near London. They were an unhappy lot and did not seem to enjoy their cricket very much. The younger of the visiting side’s opening batsman was a fellow called Hugo Bassett, a young, tall, rather dapper looking player who wore brand new, sparkling cricket whites and an impressive bouffant hair style. He carried a very new and expensive looking bat.

The other batsman, the captain, had been ensconced at the far end of ‘middle age’ for some years. His name was Newton Ruggles, he was six inches shorter and several stones heavier than the svelte Wimpole-Bassett and he had walked out to the middle with one of his pads only half fastened.

The visiting players were all employees of the same London bank. Hugo Wimpole-Bassett was a junior assistant counter manager. Newton Ruggles (apparently known to everyone, including his friends, wife and mistress as ‘Mr Ruggles’) was the manager of the same branch of the same bank and the senior bank employee in the team. This fact turned out to be of some considerable significance.

The first thing the rather more mature batsman did when he arrived in the middle was to remove his batting gloves, bend down and finish fastening the straps on his pads. When he had finished this essential chore he put his hand into the middle of his back, stood up straight and stretched. Newton Ruggles moved like a man for whom arthritis was no stranger.

While his colleague was fastening his pads and stretching his creaky joints, the taller, younger, more lithe and agile player had taken his guard from the umpire, played an impressive series of practise off drives and practised gazing into the distance in quiet admiration. After each imaginary shot he froze for a moment, as though he was posing for a camera and anxious to give the photographer every opportunity to obtain a memorable snapshot.

I was fielding at mid on to keep an eye on things when Albert first stood behind the stumps. Dylan Thomas, who was due to open the bowling for us, casually tossed the ball from one hand to the other and walked back to his mark. When, a minute or so later, Dylan had still not reappeared and no ball had been bowled Albert rather cautiously and tentatively turned his head to look behind him to see what was happening. I followed his gaze. Together we saw that Dylan had walked right to the boundary and was only now beginning his run up.

Half a minute or so later our main strike bowler, and Little Lampton’s representative of the forces of law and order, came tearing up towards the stumps. A moment later the ball went scorching down the pitch at terrifying speed. The ball, which had pitched several feet outside the line of the off stump and swung still wider, shot in between the second and third slips and raced away to the boundary. With the ball already forty or fifty yards behind him the batsman played a careful forward defensive shot and then looked at his bat in disgust when the action was not accompanied by the crisp, clean sound of willow on leather.

‘Golly,’ said Albert, speaking to Newton Ruggles, the batsman who was not on strike and who was the only person close to him. ‘That was a bit quick, wasn’t it?’

‘Are you going to give four wides or four byes?’ demanded Mr Ruggles.

‘I beg your pardon?’

The batsman repeated his question.

Albert frowned. ‘Why should I give either?’

‘Well it had to be one or the other,’ insisted the batsman.

‘Oh,’ said Albert.

Dylan, now looking rather red faced and breathless, strode back up the pitch. His follow through had taken him almost as far as Toby the wicket keeper.

‘I’m afraid I think I’m going to have to give four wides or four byes,’ Albert said to Dylan. ‘Do you have a preference?’

Dylan stared at Albert and Albert repeated the question.

‘Byes,’ said Dylan, puzzled. ‘If I’ve got a choice.’

‘Ah,’ said Albert. ‘In that case, maybe you can help me. I know how to signal wides but what do I do to signal byes?’

‘Stand on one leg, and then tap the leg you’re not standing on with your hand,’ said Dylan.

Albert smiled, to show that he appreciated the joke. ‘Don’t be daft!’ whispered Albert, looking around. ‘That’s Morris dancing. I’ll look a complete fool if I do that.’

Dylan stared at him for a moment and then walked wearily back towards his bowling mark.

Albert looked at me. I nodded to confirm that what Dylan had said was true. Albert, still looking slightly disbelieving, shrugged and signalled four wides.

The second ball of Dylan’s over (and the first to count as a proper ball) was considerably slower than the first and so although both the batsman and the wicket keeper missed it the very deep, very fine, fine leg (not to be confused with a long stop which Toby has made it quite clear he is not prepared to accept) managed to stop it and threw the ball in unerringly and with great force. Unfortunately, he threw the ball in completely the wrong direction and it had to be redirected several times in order to find its way back home. The batsman had taken three runs by the time the ball had finished bouncing and trickling its way back to the wicket keeper. The visitor’s total was moving along nicely, even though neither of the two opening batsmen had yet scored much in the way of runs.

The third and fourth (or from Dylan’s point of view the fourth and fifth) balls of the over were slower still and it was now becoming clear that Dylan, who was lobster red and soaked with sweat, was rapidly tiring. Dylan was not taking anywhere near as long between deliveries; this was explained by the fact that he was taking a considerably shorter run.

One of the batsmen managed to get his bat in the way of the fourth ball and the ball bounced out into the covers, narrowly missing the sharp eyed and quick witted cover point fielder who had turned his back and put his hands over his head when he had spotted the ball coming in his direction. Once the ball had safely passed him Theobald chased after it with, as is usual with him, rather more enthusiasm than speed.

‘Howazzzzaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?’ screamed Giles, who was primarily in the team for his appealing skills and who routinely appealed whenever he saw the ball touch bat or pad. His appealing has been described as erratic and indiscriminatory but it is undoubtedly loud. Giles was fielding at third man but he has a powerful voice and even Toby, behind the stumps, winced and put his hands over his ears.

‘Three!’ called the young, lithe and optimistic batsman, as he raced down the pitch and passed his older and far more arthritic batting partner, who was by this time little more than a quarter of the way towards the other crease.

‘Was that an appeal?’ Albert asked Dylan.

‘Yes,’ confirmed Dylan instantly.

‘Was he out?’ asked Albert, confused.

‘No,’ replied Dylan, taken by surprise at the question.

Mr Ruggles, who had been wobbling and swaying down the pitch like a small sailing boat being buffeted in a gale, stopped in mid flow, and stared and watched the youngster dash past him. ‘What did you say?’ he demanded, turning and watching the other batsman reach the crease he himself had just left.

‘Three!’ repeated the young optimist, beginning his second run and quickly catching up with his partner, who was, of course, still on his first run. ‘We can get three from this.’

‘You may be able to run three,’ wheezed the older batsman. ‘But my arthritis is playing up – this is a sharp single for me.’ And with that he carried on lumbering towards the batting crease at the far end of the pitch.

The young batsman, seeing himself robbed of two runs which he had, in his mind, already tucked away in his freshly opened batting account, returned to the crease he had just left and seethed with undisguised indignation.

The next ball went down the leg side and although the older, arthritic batsman, Mr Ruggles, tried to flick it out of the wicket keeper’s reach he missed it entirely. But he hit the following ball back over the bowler’s head and, to just about everyone’s surprise, came tearing down the wicket like a medal winning Olympic sprinter.

‘Come on, run!’ he yelled.

They ran two, with the older batsman getting home before the younger one and looking, for a moment, as though he was seriously contemplating a third run.

This rather noticeably uneven running between the wickets continued for some while.

When the ball was hit by the younger, more agile batsman, Mr Ruggles would limp and struggle from one end of the pitch to the other; bravely battling through the pain he clearly felt. But when the ball had been hit by his own bat, and the runs they were accumulating were due to be credited to his account, Mr Ruggles seemed far more capable of moving freely and invariably managed to turn singles into twos, twos into threes and even, on occasion, threes into fours. The score was mounting steadily.

‘Did you see that?’ demanded Dylan, after Mr Ruggles had snicked a ball past Toby’s diving right hand. He did not seem pleased.

‘See what?’ asked Albert.

‘That last shot!’ said Dylan, now in his third over. ‘Shot! Ha!’ He snorted derisively. ‘What a terrible stroke. Lucky bastard,’ he muttered. ‘Ought to have been out.’ Dylan was so full of indignation that he did not really want a reply to any of these comments; he was more than a little miffed and as he walked back up the wicket, words and phrases along the lines of ‘bother’ and ‘oh, what a pity’ dripped effortlessly from his lips.

The next ball was, to everyone’s surprise, safely collected by the wicket keeper after it had missed both bat and stumps.

‘How many...puff puff... balls...puff puff... left in the over?’ asked Dylan, stopping for a moment as he staggered past Albert on his way back to the beginning of his now far shorter run. Dylan always began each over at full pace. But by the end of each over he was bowling off a run of no more than two yards.

‘How many more can you manage?’ asked Albert.

‘I can...puff puff…just about...puff puff... manage one more,’ said Dylan who has put on quite a lot of weight recently and isn’t perhaps quite as fit as he was when he was younger.

‘Then we’ll make this the last,’ said Albert, kindly.

After Dylan had finished his over I noticed that Albert was looking at me pleadingly. I went over to him. ‘What do I do now?’ he asked. ‘Is there a signal to mark the end of the over? Do I remove my shoes, stand on one leg and wave my socks about?’

‘Just shout ‘over’,’ I told him.

‘Over?’ whispered Albert. ‘Is that all?’

‘Over will do very nicely!’ I replied.

‘Over!’ said Albert, speaking in a very firm voice. He watched as, all around him, cricketers hurried around the field, moving from one position to another. It was clear that the knowledge that he, and he alone, had been responsible for this sudden flurry of activity gave him a warm glow inside.

After the match had been underway for twenty minutes or so Mr Ruggles suddenly decided that he needed a runner. A young, healthy and enthusiastic counter assistant was summoned. Naturally, our captain, being a gentleman, did not object.

The next ball was a long hop. And Mr Ruggles pounced upon it with glee, rather as a cat might pounce on a bird with a broken wing or a traffic warden might pounce on a motorist who has overstayed his legal welcome. He had clearly intended to hit the ball back over the bowler’s head but although the contact with the ball was good the ball, instead of travelling forwards and upwards simply travelled upwards.

Launched from the bat like a rocket from a jam jar it soared high up above the wicket so fast that it seemed certain that it would successfully escape from the earth’s gravity and become the first cricket ball in orbit. Watching the ball rise I couldn’t help wondering what we should do if the ball did not ever return to earth. At what point would Arthur be expected, or even allowed, to call ‘lost ball’? How long would the batsmen be allowed to continue running? And since the ball had not, strictly speaking, been lost would the laws of cricket mean that it would ever be possible to replace it?

As the ball soared higher and higher into the sky, and stretched its links with the earth’s gravity close to breaking point, there was a considerable amount of activity down below, on earth.

Mr Ruggles, forgetting that he had acquired a runner, set off down the pitch as though racing in the Olympics. Within moments he was just one of three batsmen who were all running up or down the pitch. The batsman who was acting as a runner, and who had been standing at square leg, had set off as though he was an exposed Don Juan being chased by a cuckolded husband. However, he did not run down a line parallel to the pitch (as might have been expected) but, instead, headed off at a roughly forty five degree angle, heading for the stumps at the bowler’s end of the wicket. And, of course, Hugo Wimpole-Bassett was running towards the striker’s end.

However, the two batsmen and the injured batsman’s runner were not the only cricketers in motion. Toby Babbage, our wicket keeper, seeing the ball soar high above the pitch, and realising that he had an excellent opportunity to increase the modest number of dismissals for which he had been responsible while fielding behind the stumps, ran forwards to try and get into a suitable position to take the catch. He looked down just once, to enable him to shimmy daintily round the stumps behind which he had been crouching, but otherwise kept his eyes firmly fixed on the soaring ball. He held his gloved hands out in front of him as though in supplication.

As the wicket keeper ran up the pitch the bowler, whose follow through had already taken him several yards past the stumps at his end of the wicket, continued to run forward. He too had his head held back for he, like the wicket keeper, was keeping his eyes fixed firmly on the ball.

So, within a very small area there were now five bodies, of assorted sizes, shapes and weights, all in motion and none of them thoroughly alert to the possibility of a collision occurring.

There are, I have no doubt, mathematicians working in university departments who could produce complex formulae designed to give the odds for or against the chances of a collision occurring under these circumstances.

‘If cricketers a,b,c and d are moving between A and B and e is a cricketer moving between C and A then the chances of a collision between two or more cricketers can be obtained by use of the formula: R (collision risk)= 22 (ax b x c x d x e) X 6.2 I (A+ B +C) X 46.57.'

However, whatever theoretical formula they might have produced would be of little or no value for, as every cricketer with experience of these matters could confirm, when there are any more than three white-clad bodies in motion within the area of a cricket pitch the chances of a collision occurring are roughly the same as rain falling at some stage during an English summer. Only a complete and utter fool would bet against it.

The odds in favour of a collision were, of course, considerably enhanced by the fact that none of the cricketers involved were looking where they were going or aware of what all the other mobile cricketers were doing (or where they were heading).

Our wicket keeper, who was looking straight up into the sky, ran straight into the batsman with arthritis, and after struggling for a moment or two to keep their feet they both overbalanced and fell over backwards onto the pitch. This meant that two objects which had previously posed relatively slender hazards to the navigation of other cricketing pedestrians immediately become much larger hazards (a man lying down is much easier to trip over than a man who is standing up). It was, therefore, not particularly surprising that Hugo Wimpole-Bassett fell over the heap of bodies on the floor.

A fraction of a second later the bowler, who like the wicket keeper had been watching the ball, fell over various assorted legs and crashed to the ground.

And another fraction of a second later the last remaining upright player in this drama within a drama, the third batsman, fell over the prone bowler.

Moments later the ball, having decided that its affection for the Little Lampton cricket ground, and its loyalty to Mr Newton's theory of gravity, were together far greater than its desire to go into orbit, returned to earth.

Back within the jurisdiction of the earth's gravity the ball weighed 5.75 ounces and since it had, during its journey back to earth, been accelerating at a speed of thirty two feet per second per second it would have undoubtedly brought tears to the eyes of anyone upon whom it had landed.

It landed (and this could probably have been predicted by anyone with a thorough working knowledge of Murphy's Law) on the most delicate part of the body of the unfortunate Mr Ruggles, who should not have been there at all since he should have been standing comfortably (or, at least, as comfortably as it was possible for him to stand) in his crease. The ball then trickled from his body onto the grass and lay there temporarily unobserved amidst the human wreckage.

Cricketers are probably not, as a group, any more malicious than golfers, footballers or tennis players but they do have a tendency to laugh whenever one of their number encounters personal misfortune. If an umpire is hit by a swiftly struck straight drive all the players (with the possible exception of any bowlers who are anxious not to put their chances of winning borderline LBW appeals at risk) will enjoy a good laugh at the umpire's expense. If a batsman is hit in that tender area just below his belt and above the top of his pads the fielding side will 'ooh' and 'aarh' in sympathy but as soon as the sympathy wears off (usually within a couple of seconds or so) they will laugh so much that many of them will burst their braces.

And so the mass pile up in the middle of the wicket attracted broad smiles and much loud laughter. And the landing of the ball inspired still more merriment. It was not until the five pairs of legs and five pairs of arms gradually began to disentangle themselves from one another, and the ball became visible, that those looking on realised that there could be an opportunity here for the fielding side to advance its cause.

It was Henry, our most experienced player, who was the first to realise that with all three batsmen stranded in the middle of the wicket there was a good chance of running someone out.

Sometimes there is a rather large gulf between observing an opportunity and turning that opportunity into reality. This did not turn out to be the case on this occasion.

Henry simply walked forwards, picked up the ball and walked down the wicket to the stumps at the bowler's end where he ran someone out.

‘Owzat?’ he demanded.

It was clear that Albert had very little idea what was going on but he obviously felt under some obligation to respond in a manner which he suspected would prove satisfactory to the Little Lampton team. Accordingly, in the very best umpiring tradition, he raised a forefinger. ‘Out!’ he said clearly, pronouncing the word firmly and with vigour.

When a batsman is given out it is not uncommon for the occasion to give rise to some degree of doubt and dispute. Naturally enough, the questioning does not usually come from the fielding side. They are quite happy to know that the batsman is out. They don’t much care ‘why’ he is out. The questioning almost exclusively comes from the batsman concerned who will commonly begin with such simple queries as: ‘Why?’ and ‘What for?’ and then, when unsatisfied or unconvinced by the answers (as they are almost sure to be), move on to more personal and more sophisticated enquiries such as: ‘Why don’t you get your eyes tested?’ ‘Where is your white stick?’ and ‘Will you please let me know when your parents get married because I’d like to attend the wedding?’

On this occasion, however, the raising of the umpire’s finger gave birth not to a wide selection of questions posed by a single source but to one question asked over and over again by a wide variety of puzzled and curious individuals.

The question being asked was not ‘Why?’ or ‘What for?’ but ‘Who?’ and the question was being asked by all three batsmen and by all those fielders who were close enough to see what was happening. The popularity of the question was so great that it was even being asked by both umpires.

The fact that Albert, the only person on the field with the authority to satisfy the questioners, was included among those who were keen to find the answer meant that all the other remaining questioners were, for a while at least, destined to be deprived of the answer they sought.

‘Well, someone is out!’ said Leopold, defiantly.

‘He was out!’ insisted Mr Ruggles, pointing with his heavily gloved forefinger at his opening partner.

Hugo Wimpole-Bassett started to protest but thought better of it. He wanted to keep his job.

‘You’re out,’ said Albert suddenly. He spoke with a certainty and an incisiveness which surprised us all. Albert is more accustomed to appeasement and arbitration. He isn’t known as a man who likes making decisions. He likes being liked and he knows, of course, that the easiest way to be liked is to avoid taking decisions.

‘Who is?’ demanded both batsmen at once.

‘You!’ said Arthur, pointing to Mr Ruggles.

‘Why?’ demanded the truculent bank manager.

‘Because the umpire says so,’ said Leopold, coming to Arthur’s aid.

‘Stop arguing and sod off,’ said Dylan, who is sometimes rather blunt. ‘The rest of us want to play cricket.’

‘I’m not going!’ said Mr Ruggles. He pointed to Hugo Wimpole-Bassett. ‘You’re out!’ he said firmly.

The junior employee started to head for the pavilion.

‘Wait a minute!’ said Arthur. ‘He’s not out. You are.’

‘I’m not out,’ said Mr Ruggles. ‘He’s out.’ He pointed to the disappearing batsman. ‘There he goes!’

‘You’re out!’ insisted Arthur. ‘Come back!’ he shouted to Hugo Wimpole-Bassett who turned and started to retrace his steps.

‘No, I’m not,’ said Mr Ruggles who looked as though he was about to stamp his foot. ‘You, you, you...’ stuttered the angry batsman. He glowered at Albert and tried to think of something suitably critical and threatening. ‘You, you, you, you...,’ he shook his head in frustration and anger.

‘Absolutely sound decision!’ said Leopold. There was a murmur of approval among the other fielders.

‘You’ve not heard the last of this!’ said the batsman who had been given out.

‘What are you going to do?’ asked Albert. ‘Sue me for wrongful dismissal?’

This *bon mot* was received with a spontaneous round of applause from those who heard it. Albert, who did not at first realise that he had been witty was confused. It took him a good thirty seconds to realise the wisdom of what he had said. Albert was not a man whose life had been littered with *bon mots.* Like most of us he usually thought of the clever thing to say a day or two too late.

In the end the umpire’s view prevailed and Mr Ruggles had to leave the field. He was not a happy man. But I have to admit that we were all delighted to see him go.

‘What made you decide he was out?’ I asked Arthur in a whisper, as we waited for the next batsman.

‘Natural justice,’ said Albert. ‘I didn’t like him.’ Normally, there is little or no connection between justice and the law. But in this instance Albert had managed to make an exception and combine the two.

JUNE 6th

The good lady wife has gone off to see her mother again. Since she is likely to be away for several days I decided to take the opportunity to get to know my way around the kitchen. My accident with the saucepan has left me feeling a trifle under informed on domestic matters.

It seemed a good idea to start by checking out the equipment so I wandered into that part of the house where large, white, pieces of electrical equipment seem to congregate and set about making an inventory. I know enough about machinery to know that ignorance can often lead to disaster.

The central heating boiler and the refrigerator were fairly easy to identify (though I do feel that manufacturers could save members of the public some embarrassment if they were, in future, to mark their appliances with some appropriate label).

In case this information may help others in the same situation I can tell you that the boiler is quite painfully hot, has pipes connected to it supplying gas, electricity, oil, water and possibly other substances, and has a large black flue rising out of the back. The fridge, in contrast, is full of cold, bottled alcohol and is connected to the rest of the house by nothing more substantial than a thin cable.

That left me with two white boxes to identify. Both had small round, porthole shaped doors in the front and both were decorated with an impressive array of dials. Neither of them were cold or full of food. I was pretty confident that one of them was the washing machine.

I was quite proud of myself when I succeeded in identifying the washing machine with the aid of a line drawing on the front of a manual which I found in the cutlery drawer. Telephone calls to several friends and several telephone calls to a puzzled dealer identified the other white box as being a tumble drier. I did not know we had one of these and was quite pleased with the discovery. To be frank, my first thought was that I did not even know that we had any tumbles that needed drying. My ignorance was quickly dissipated, however, when I found that in addition to having enough switches and dials to operate a jumbo jet the front of the tumble drier was equipped with a large label full of instructions. Among other things the label contained details of the length of time for which the drier should be operated according to the amount (in weight) of clothing with which it was loaded.

I found this rather disconcerting for I had never before thought of clothing in terms of weight. I have always purchased clothing as individual items and had no idea at all what 1kg of socks or 2kg of shirts looked like.

I dare say that anyone with an experienced eye for these matters may well be able to look at a pile of unsorted, washing and say, at a glance:. That’s 1.35 kg of underwear.’ Or: ‘That jumper and those trousers are definitely in the 2 kg class.’

Sadly, I do not possess these skills. And, to my dismay, my new friend at the local appliance dealership found herself equally unable to assist. Indeed, she seemed surprised that I needed to ask.

Deciding that a little basic research was needed I attempted to weigh a pair of socks on the bathroom scales. This proved to be an unsatisfactory exercise since the scales were not sensitive enough to measure this sort of quantity of laundry. Attempts to measure a larger quantity proved equally frustrating since I found it quite impossible to pile enough laundry onto the scales to obtain a decent reading.

In the end I weighed myself with and without an armful of mixed laundry and found that with both arms outstretched I could hold somewhere between two and three and a half stones of laundry, depending on whether I looked at the scales from the left or the right hand side of the laundry pile.

I have never been able to master the art of converting proper weights into metric ones but by creating my own formula (in which one shirt equalled eight socks or one hand towel or half a bath towel or three pairs of unmentionables) I came to the pretty certain conclusion that my tumble drier would, give or take a sock, regard a short-sleeved summer shirt as constituting a full load.

I am pleased to say that I am now pretty confident that I will be able to look after myself.

Tomorrow I intend to search the house and find the vacuum cleaner. I know we have one for I have seen the good lady wife with it. My new friend at the local appliance dealership is sending around a fistful of brochures so that I will be able to identify the device when I find it.

JUNE 11th

After today’s match Giles complained that he had damaged something and could not raise his right arm above his head. He said he thought it was probably a recurrence of an old injury.

Oozing sympathy, Dr Wainwright, present at the match purely as a spectator, asked Giles to show us exactly what he meant. ‘What can’t you do?’ he demanded.

Without any sign of pain or distress Giles lifted his right arm above his head. ‘This,’ he said.

He looked quite put out when we all laughed.

JUNE 13th

We had a special committee meeting this evening to try to decide what to do about our dodgy wiring and the woodworm in the roof.

‘I don’t understand what Harry was doing up in the roof in the first place,’ said Toby.

‘We called him round to put in a new light bulb,’ I explained.

Toby scratched his head and looked puzzled. ‘Let me get this straight,’ he said, speaking very slowly. ‘You called in an electrician to change a light bulb?’

‘I know it sounds silly,’ I agreed. ‘But the bulb was stuck. We couldn’t get it out.’

‘But why did he have to go up into the loft to change the bulb?

‘He didn’t go into the loft to change the bulb,’ I said, rather wearily. ‘He went into the loft to look at the wiring.’

‘I hate lofts,’ said Henry, with a shudder.

‘All this reminds me of that chap...dash it...what’s his damned name,’ said Leopold. He flicked his fingers together noisily in a futile attempt to dick-start his brain into action.

‘Why do they always have those tiny little hatches?’ asked Henry. He thought carefully about his own question.

‘Our hatch is quite big,’ I pointed out.

‘It begins with B,’ said Leopold. He looked around. ‘Something beginning with B.’

‘Beats me,’ said Henry, ignoring me. He often had to answer his own questions since it was rare for anyone else to bother and when someone did he usually ignored them anyway.

‘Benson?’ suggested Theobold.

‘They always remind me of submarine hatches,’ said Henry. ‘A friend of mine was on a submarine in the war.’

‘Brown, Brooks, Blofeld, Butterworth, Blenkinsop...’ said Leopold. ‘Or maybe it was a V...’ He thought long and hard.

‘Stationed up in Scotland, I seem to remember,’ said Henry. No one was listening to him but this didn’t worry him.

‘We once had an evening out in Gateshead,’ he said. He smiled to himself. ‘That was a night I’ll never forget.’

‘What happened?’ asked Giles.

‘What do you mean ‘what happened?’?’ asked Henry.

‘On the night you’ll never forget.’

Henry thought for a while and frowned. ‘I’m not sure,’ he confessed. ‘It’s escaped me for the moment.’ He shrugged, paused and thought for a moment. ‘It will come back,’ he said contentedly.

‘No it was definitely a B...Black, Budge, Baker, Brooks...,’ said Leopold.

‘I remember going on holiday to Scotland once,’ he continued. ‘After the war.’

‘You’ve already said Brooks.’

‘Have I?’

‘Inverness I think it was.’

‘Yes.’

‘Or maybe Oban.’

Leopold thought for a moment. ‘No. It definitely wasn’t Brooks.’

‘We stayed in a little boarding house run by a woman called McDonald. Or perhaps it was Fisher. She had a very small husband and some children.’

‘He came to repair a broken window and ended up telling us we had dry rot,’ said Leopold. He looked around. ‘You must remember him. Turned out he was a crook. He stole fifteen telegraph poles and ran off with the postmaster’s wife.’

‘Mrs McDonald gave us kippers every morning for breakfast.’

‘Why the hell did he steal fifteen telegraph poles?’

‘How should I know?’ asked Leopold. ‘He was a loony. Two bottles of beer short of a good evening. He ran off with the postmaster’s wife. Why on earth did he run off with the postmaster’s wife? She had a face like a bad tempered bulldog and weighed 22 stones in her undies.’

Giles shuddered visibly. ‘There’s a frightening thought.’

‘What is?’ asked Leopold.

‘The postmaster’s wife in her undies.’

‘I’d have kippers now if you could get them,’ said Henry.

‘But I think they’ve been banned by the European Union.’

‘We didn’t have dry rot,’ said Anthony. ‘It was a touch of wet rot. World of difference between the two.’

‘He was a crook,’ said Leopold. ‘He wanted us to have new window frames. It was going to cost us a fortune. In the end Bert Lethbridge dug out the bit of wet rot, grafted in a new bit of oak and charged us £5.75.’

‘And kedgeree.’

‘Whatever happened to him?’ asked Giles.

‘Bert Lethbridge?’

‘No. Bert died six years ago. The chap who ran off with the postmaster’s wife.’

‘Have you ever tried kedgeree?’

‘I don’t even know what it is,’ said Giles. ‘What is it?’

‘Very tasty,’ said Henry avoiding the question.

‘I heard they got married and opened a whelk stall in Brighton,’ said Barnaby. ‘Personally, I thought she was a lovely woman. Reliable sort. Salt of the earth.’

‘Bert Lethbridge?’ said Dylan, waking up suddenly. ‘I knew him. He died didn’t he?’ He looked around. ‘Must have been six years ago.’

‘She wasn’t all that reliable – she ran off with wotsisname,’ Leopold pointed out. ‘I wish I could remember his name.’

‘That and haggis are the two best things to come out of Scotland,’ said Henry. He leant back, puffed on his pipe and sighed contentedly. ‘Do you chaps like haggis?’ he asked looking round.

‘I remember the postmaster had a party the day he found out his wife had gone,’ said Felix. ‘He didn’t sober up for six weeks.’

‘I hate haggis,’ said Giles.

‘Oh I remember that party,’ said Theobald.

‘We should have a Burns Night party,’ said Henry. ‘We could serve haggis and drink lots of whisky.’

‘Wasn’t his name Garner?’ said Jerome.

‘Who?’ said Leopold.

He held his glass up to his mouth, tilted back his head and emptied it. ‘Down the hatch!’ he said.

‘The bloke who said we had dry rot and ran off with the postmaster’s wife?’

‘That’s it!’ said Leopold, relieved at last.

‘You said his name began with a B,’ protested Albert.

‘B, G, they both sound the same,’ said Leopold, with a dismissive wave of the hand. ‘I was near enough.’

‘Down the hatch...that reminds me...I hate those little hatches that go up into the roof, don’t you?’ said Henry. ‘Wasn’t someone talking about them?’

‘Garner!’ said Giles. ‘I remember him! What was his first name?’

‘James?’ said Toby.

‘No,’ said Felix. ‘That’s the actor.’

‘It began with K,’ said Leopold. ‘Keith, Kevin, Kelvin...’

‘They’re always so damned small,’ he continued. ‘They always remind me of submarines. I had a pal who served on submarines during the war.’

‘Geoffrey,’ said Anthony. ‘It was Geoffrey. Geoffrey Garner.’

‘How long is this meeting going on for?’ asked Barnaby. ‘Some of us have got homes to go to!’

‘I knew it was something like that,’ said Leopold.

‘We haven’t decided anything yet!’ said Theobold.

‘We haven’t discussed anything yet!’ I pointed out.

‘Why don’t we just have a couple of oil lamps?’ suggested Dylan. ‘That would solve the problem, wouldn’t it?’

‘How are we going to boil the kettle?’ I asked.

‘We don’t use the light to boil a kettle!’ protested Barnaby.

‘It’s the electricity we need,’ I pointed out.

‘Are you absolutely sure his name was Geoffrey?’ asked Leopold.

‘Yes,’ agreed Anthony. ‘How much will it cost?’ Anthony asked me.

‘Having the rewiring done will cost us around £200,’ I said. ‘Harry said there isn’t much to do.’

‘Phew!’ said Jasper. ‘That’s a hell of lot of money to replace a light bulb. I think I’ll go into the electrical business myself.’

‘Sounds fair enough to me,’ said Nathan. There was a silence.

‘I suppose it seems OK,’ said Jasper.

‘What are we going to do about the woodworm?’ I asked.

‘We should get a second opinion,’ said Toby. ‘It might not be woodworm at all.’

I thought this was pretty hopeful of Toby. But I agreed to find someone to give us a second opinion. And then declared the meeting closed.

JUNE 14th

Albert Hedges, our groundsman has announced that he is getting married in two weeks – on a Saturday! Worse still he has chosen to get married two hundred miles away.

I can’t believe it.

How can a man be so unbelievably selfish? Not even he can be in two places at once. Who is going to give the grass a pre-match cut? Who is going to mark out the creases?

Albert had his 45th birthday recently. I think he is old enough to know better.

JUNE 15th

I arrived at the ground a little early today. Mrs Ketteridge was laying out the cheese and chutney sandwiches and I could instantly tell that she wasn't feeling her normal self. Some men are utterly incapable of judging a woman's mood but I have always been proud of the fact that I have the ability to under stand women pretty well.

'What's the matter?' I asked her in my most soothing voice.

'Nothing,' Mrs Ketteridge said, as women invariably do when you ask them what is troubling them. She took out her handkerchief, wiped the tears from her cheeks and blew her nose.

'Come on now,' I said sternly. 'Get it off your chest. You'll feel better.'

I could have phrased my encouragement a little better but I did not know that at the time and I was rather taken aback when, in response to this cheery query, Mrs Ketteridge let out the sort of cry one normally hears uttered by a wounded animal in one of those wildlife television programmes which young Richard Attenborough does so well. (What a man Mr Attenborough is! One of Britain's leading actors and film directors and yet still he finds the time to make so many of those lovely little documentaries. The good lady wife is a great fan of his. She says he looks very good in shorts for a man of his age.)

'What's up, dear?' I asked, putting an arm around Mrs Ketteridge's shoulder in a purely avuncular way.

'It doesn't matter,' said Mrs Ketteridge in that voice women always use when you know very well that it does matter very much indeed.

I waited patiently but kept my arm around her shoulder, taking the precaution of checking to make sure that no one was around. Our village is not without its gossips. Mrs Ketteridge is a well proportioned woman and the good lady wife, despite all her virtues, can be a trifle strict in her thinking when it comes to this sort of thing. And rightly so, of course.

'I was given the pinafore part last night,' explained Mrs Ketteridge at last. She dabbed at her cheeks. 'Has my make up run?'

'No,' I lied. I hesitated and then leapt back into the conversation. 'What is a pinafore part?'

'I'm in the Amateur Dramatic Society,' Mrs Ketteridge reminded me, though the reminder was quite unnecessary. I can still remember the occasion when her part required her to spend fifteen minutes on stage dressed only in a bra, panties, suspender belt and stockings. I was so impressed with the quality of that production that I saw all five performances. Sadly the good lady wife was away visiting her mother and missed the production. 'Last night we were given our parts for the autumn production.'

I thought for a moment but eventually gave in. 'What exactly is a pinafore part?' I asked again.

'I get to play the housekeeper,' explained Mrs Ketteridge. 'It's known as the pinafore part.'

'Ah,' I said. 'But doubtless the role of the housekeeper is pivotal to the production?'

Mrs Ketteridge thought about this for a moment and then, with some reluctance, agreed with my appraisal. 'But I used to get the cleavage parts,' she told me.

'The cleavage parts?'

'The young woman who runs around showing lots of cleavage and getting caught in the wrong bedroom or with the wrong man,' explained Mrs Ketteridge. (You will, from this, know the sort of play it is customary for our Amateur Dramatic Society to put on.) She blew her nose again and then rather disconcertingly lay her head on my chest. I looked around again to check that no one was looking. I did not in the slightest bit object to providing Mrs

Ketteridge with comfort but misunderstandings start so easily and rumours once started can be so difficult to banish.

‘Ah,’I said. ‘You used to get the cleavage parts...’

‘...and this year I’ve been given the pinafore part.’

‘I understand,’ I nodded wisely, as indeed I did. I remembered that just a couple of years earlier the Dramatic Society’s Christmas production had been of a play called *The Memoirs of Casanova*. The highlight of the production was a scene in which Mrs Ketteridge appeared wearing an off the shoulder dress which appeared to have been designed with the word cleavage in mind. For the first four nights of the production Mrs Ketteridge wore her usual white Marks and Spencer bra underneath the dress but the straps showed and looked rather incongruous and so for the last night’s performance she succumbed to the costume designer’s entreaties and went on stage with no bra under her dress. Thinking, quite erroneously, that she was wearing some sort of quasi/renaissance under-garment in keeping with the times of the drama the leading man decided to enliven the last night with a little improvisation of his own and tore off her dress during their most emotive scene together. Her surprise was so complete that for several long seconds she simply stood where she was with her hands by her side. With no dress and no bra she was, not surprisingly, naked from the waist up. The actor responsible for the disrobing simply stood and stared in horror. The audience was riveted and when Mrs Ketteridge eventually pulled herself together and replaced her missing dress with her hands there was a spontaneous burst of applause the like of which the dramatic society had never known before.

‘Coming so soon after Mr Ketteridge went off with the girl from the bailiff’s office it was a bit of a shock,’ said Mrs Ketteridge. (I am pleased to say that Mr Ketteridge was never a member of the cricket club.)

From where I stood I felt that the director of the play had made a serious misjudgement. Mrs Ketteridge seemed to me entirely qualified to continue to play cleavage parts.

‘It’s their loss, Mrs Ketteridge,’ I told her. ‘I think you look wonderful. You don’t look a day over forty.’

‘Oh thank you, Mr Pettigrew,’ said Mrs Ketteridge, looking up at me and blinking her badly smudged eyes. She looked slightly embarrassed for a moment. ‘Actually, I’m only thirty seven,’ she told me.

‘There you are then,’ I said. ‘If ever you need a shoulder to cry on you can always rely on me.’

‘Thank you, Mr Pettigrew,’ said Mrs Ketteridge, giving her nose another powerful blow and then wiping her eyes with her handkerchief.

I gave her a squeeze and a brotherly kiss on the forehead to make it clear to her that she could count on me. A moment later I heard studded boots on the steps outside the pavilion.‘There’s someone coming,’ I said, thrusting Mrs Ketteridge away from me to protect her reputation.

‘Would you like a cup of tea Mr Pettigrew?’ asked Mrs Ketteridge, showing commendable presence of mind.

JUNE 17th

Kelvin came round today to look at our woodworm. He has a small building business and does quite a lot of work in the village. A few years ago he used to play regularly for the club. But then he got married. His wife didn't like him going out. Since she is his seventh wife I suppose it isn't difficult to understand why.

'Where did you say this woodworm was supposed to be?' asked Kelvin, peering down through the hatch.

'Harry didn't say,' I told him. 'He just said that we had woodworm somewhere in the loft.'

Kelvin wandered around in the loft, cursing occasional as people often do when they are in confined spaces. He had a torch with him and occasionally I could see the beam flashing around in the darkness up above.

'There's no woodworm up here,' said Kelvin eventually, poking his head down through the hatch. He had cobwebs in his hair. He disappeared again. 'But I found something,' he added. A moment later he reappeared holding a large, square piece of wood.

'What's that?' I asked.

'It's a large, square piece of wood,' he replied.

'I can see that,' I said. 'But what's it doing up there? Shouldn't it be attached to something?'

'There's all sorts of junk up here,' said Kelvin. 'Half a dozen empty cardboard boxes, a pile of rusty metal biscuit tins, some old pads with broken straps and this!'

'But what the hell is it?' I said. I climbed up onto the chair which Kelvin had used to get up into the loft. 'It's full of tiny holes!' I said examining, it closely.

'Looks like woodworm doesn't it?' said Kelvin. He handed the board down to me.

Yes,' I said.

'That's what Harry found,' said Kelvin.

'But isn't it woodworm?'

'No.'

'What are all those holes then?'

'That was the board we used to have behind the dart board,' explained Kelvin. 'I remember we took it down when we redecorated years ago. We put up a new piece of wood be cause this one was full of holes and it was too difficult to paint.'

'You mean...those woodworm holes are dart holes?'

'Yes,' grinned Kelvin. 'You wait until I see Harry! He's never going to live this one down.' He turned round and lowered himself down through the hatch feet first.

JUNE 18th

I was walking my dog through the fields behind Mrs Ketteridge's house early this morning when she waved to me from her back door, called out and asked if I would like a cup of tea. It seemed churlish to refuse, particularly since I was aware that she had been feeling a little low recently. I assumed that she was eager to thank me for providing her with solace in the cricket club pavilion a few days ago.

From a distance she appeared to be wearing what looked like a housecoat but this turned out, upon closer examination, to be a much flimsier garment than I had expected. In order to avoid unjustified gossip I put my dog in her garage and chose a chair well away from the kitchen window.

'Would you like anything with your tea?' Mrs Ketteridge asked.

I assured her that I had breakfasted adequately and accepted the proffered cup of tea with a hand which I was surprised to see was shaking a little.

'Are you all right, Mr Pettigrew?' asked Mrs Ketteridge.

'I feel a little hot, Mrs Ketteridge,' I told her, wiping a few beads of sweat from my brow.

'Would you like to lie down for a moment?' Mrs Ketteridge asked.

Feeling rather flushed and shaky and not wanting to embarrass her by collapsing in her kitchen I accepted her kind invitation and followed her upstairs into what was clearly her bedroom. I removed my shoes and lay down. The bed, clearly vacated very recently, was still warm.

'Can I do anything for you?' asked Mrs Ketteridge, bending over me and dabbing at my brow with a lace edged handkerchief.

'You are very kind,' I said.

'One good turn deserves another,' replied Mrs Ketteridge.

JUNE 19th

We have another big match next Saturday. One of the committee members wants to break with tradition by charging an ad mission fee to the ground.

I am enthusiastic about this plan. If we charge £5 a head and twenty people turn up to watch we could end up with an unexpected £100 in the kitty. If we double the admission charge we could double the take. It is very tempting.

I intend to suggest that we charge a modest but profitable

£15. This is less than half the sum charged for tickets to Test Matches and seems to me to represent excellent value. I aim to try and raise £300 on the day.

JUNE 20th

Mrs Ketteridge invited me in for a cup of coffee this evening as I took the dog for a walk.

She is a very kind and generous hearted woman, and I believe that the rumours about her are utterly unjustified.

Today, while I was sitting at her kitchen table waiting for the kettle to boil, she noticed that I had a loose shirt button. She was kind enough to offer to tighten up the button so that it did not fall off as I walked back home. As she pointed out it can often be difficult to find matching buttons for favourite garments.

Having sewn the button back into position (very skilfully I thought) she could not find her scissors and was biting through the thread when Mrs Harris walked into the kitchen.

I yelped and tried to stand up and Mrs Ketteridge, thinking that she had perhaps been a little careless with her teeth, was full of apologies and concern.

Mrs Harris mumbled some very confused apologies and backed out of the kitchen looking extremely embarrassed. Mrs Ketteridge tried to offer her a cup of tea and I tried to explain about the button and the missing scissors but Mrs Harris didn't seem to want to wait either for the tea or the explanation. I watched her scuttle off down the garden path with deep fore boding.

I may be wrong but I got the distinct impression that she couldn't wait to start spreading her juicy new item of gossip around the village.

When I related this bizarre story to Leopold he told me that things could have been worse if the situation had been reversed. Apparently a friend of his once went down on his knees in front of a woman he knew vaguely in order to try to remove a stain from the front of her coat. He was spotted and within hours all their friends and relatives believed that he had been asking her to marry him.

The general view was that he would only do this if he had to and so it was also widely believed that she was pregnant. In the end the rumour proved impossible to demolish and the more Leopold's friend tried to explain that it was all a big mistake the more his friends thought he was trying to wriggle out of his obligations. Leopold said that the man was virtually ostracised at his golf club, largely it has to be said by members who were frightened of what their wives would say if they were caught talking to him.

In the end Leopold's friend married the woman in order to salvage what was left of his reputation and his social life.

JUNE 22nd

Henry, who is our specialist deep extra cover fielder, has worn batting pads while fielding since 1956 when he received a sharp blow on the shins from a well struck ball. Today a visiting batsman made a formal protest to the umpires about this. Fortunately, Henry always carries a sick note (provided by Dr Wainwright) explaining that he has delicate shins which need constant protection.

JUNE 23rd

Our plan to charge visitors to enter the ground did not work out quite as well as expected.

The captain's wife generously volunteered to stand at the entrance to the field and collect the admission monies but after play had been underway for an hour she walked around the ground (fortuitously I was fielding at third man) to tell me that all our potential spectators had gone away grumbling when they had heard that we were planning to charge a modest admission fee. I told her that I was already aware of the situation. When she expressed some surprise at this I pointed out that the two wooden benches in front of the pavilion, and the row of deck chairs which we always put out for home matches, were quite empty.

There was worse to come. Mrs Kingsley told me that when she tried to charge our senior tea lady to come into the ground Mrs Ormerod had come out with some unexpectedly unladylike language and had taken 84 cheese and chutney sandwiches and two Victoria sponge cakes back home. I took an instant decision (those who accept high office must always be prepared to take decisions swiftly when in a crisis) and told Mrs Kingsley to rush after Mrs Ormerod and offer her and her helpers free admission to the ground and pavilion.

'What shall I do about the admission charge for spectators?' asked Mrs Kingsley before she left.

I told her that I did not have the authority to waive the charge. I thought about things for a few moments, pointed out that our income from the gate was way below the figure we had expected, and advised her to double the admission charge but to soften the blow by telling spectators that they would receive a free piece of home made cake.

One of the big problems with our leaders these days is that they just don't know how to make decisions. Anyone in a position of responsibility must be able to make decisions swiftly and with conviction. If British industry was run by men who were more decisive the country would be in a much healthier state.

Mrs Kingsley seemed surprised at my decision. She asked me if I thought it wise to increase the charge when no one had yet bought a ticket.

Rather crossly (while dealing with this crisis I had missed a possible catch and was not well pleased with her) I pointed out that doubling the admission charge was our only chance of reaching our financial target for the match.

It isn't difficult to see why most large corporations are still headed by men.

JUNE 25th

Once a year Lord Bideford, the club's president, comes to watch a match. For the last seven years he has always brought Lady Bideford with him. They usually arrive at about 3.00 pm and stay until half an hour or so after the tea interval.

Lord Bideford and his wife had first met when he had been a patient in the Prince Albert Memorial Hospital. She had, at the time, been a junior probationer nurse. He had been in the hospital so that surgeons could prod, probe and pick at a noticeably enlarged prostate gland – an enlargement which had been causing the peer not a little embarrassment.

The Lord, perhaps too long a lonely widower, had been enchanted by Nurse Gladys Rowbotham's gentleness, her pale beauty and, despite the fact that it was constantly concealed behind an unflattering green and white striped uniform buttoned tightly up to the neck, an unusually prominent chest. Since puberty his Lordship has had a well-known weakness for unusually prominent chests.

She, in turn, had noticed his unusually hairy nostrils and his title and had decided, after a little thought, that the benefits of the latter far outweighed the horrors of the former.

It had been a dry, warm, blue skied spring morning when they had first walked out together in the hospital grounds; he with his arm around her waist and she, still Nurse Rowbotham to him for their relationship had not then progressed beyond the professional stage, with his half full catheter bag tucked, for convenience, in the pocket of her uniform. (The catheter bag was, of course, still attached to the peer.)

They were, perhaps, not what the ordinary, run of the mill novelist might describe as thoroughly romantic moments in the traditional sense, but no one has ever been able to deny that there was something between these two lonely people right from the start.

Their first walk together ended rather painfully, and although, in the fullness of time, the memory of the true agony of the incident which had nearly marred their blossoming courtship began to fade, it would be foolish to deny that it had not been an entirely faultless moment.

Nurse Rowbotham's shift had come to an end and she had been keen to get back to her room in the nurses' hostel so that she could wash out her smalls before the hot water ran out. (Hot water was a commodity in notorious short supply in the nurses' hostel).

The couple had chosen to part in the area, at the back of the hospital car park, where Nurse Rowbotham had parked, and sensibly left locked, her Raleigh three speed bicycle. (Nurses had a year or two earlier been rehoused in a hostel which was a mile and a half away from the hospital. The original nurses' home had been knocked down to make space for a new addition to the administrators' building – an ugly, concrete and glass monstrosity which had, even prior to that little piece of social vandalism, been approximately twice as large as the hospital itself.)

Lord Bideford, his surgically offended parts by now freshly and painfully aflame with yearning, stood to one side, soulful and heartbroken at the prospect of having to wave a temporary goodbye to the luscious young nurse who had stolen his heart.

He had, after some considerable thought, decided that it would not be inappropriate to toss her a meaningful kiss as she had climbed aboard her bicycle.

Sadly, when she climbed aboard her bicycle and started to pedal away, neither of them noticed that she still had his catheter bag tucked into her uniform pocket.

There are those, now laden with the marks of seniority which are customarily awarded to loyal employees who serve a hospital at length and unstintingly (a named car parking space being the most useful and notable of these), who claim that Lord Bideford's cries of anguish could be heard in Dr Quilp's monthly Acne and Wart clinic in the skin department. Others say that the good Lord fainted before he could cry out. Either way there is no denying that this moment was something of a downward blip in the development of their relationship. For a while Lord Bideford felt nervous in Gladys Rowbotham's presence and it was several weeks before the previously expressed yearning returned in as substantial a manner.

But all that is history.

Gladys Rowbotham was elevated to the peerage (albeit by marriage) on a sun kissed summer's day just ten weeks after she and Lord Bideford had first met. They were married in the Little Lampton parish church and the reception was held in the Bideford family seat.

Some of those in the village said it wouldn't last. They said, in that unkindly way that some people adopt when they are overtaken by jealousy, that she had married him for his title and that he (well known for his enthusiasm for bathukolpian women) had married her for her well rounded and well developed figure. They had probably been right on both counts but she had never tired of being Lady Bideford and he had never tired of admiring her figure and so, as neither of these attractions had faded as the years had gone by, their marriage had remained just as strong as it had ever been.

'You could have knocked me down with a double-decker bus when I heard they'd just celebrated their fifth wedding anniversary,' said Mrs Kingsley to the other sandwich makers one Saturday afternoon.

The truth was that the Bidefords had a simple relationship but its very simplicity was undoubtedly its strength.

For the duration of their stay at the match today Lord and Lady Bideford sat, side by side, in brightly striped canvas deck chairs which had been placed directly in front of the pavilion. Even though it was a warm day Lord Bideford, who felt the cold, wore a thick tweed suit (with waistcoat) and a woollen shirt. He nodded and smiled at everyone who passed by, whether he knew them or not. His pince-nez were balanced precariously, right on the very edge of his nose. (Surprisingly, they never fall off. There are children in the village who believe he glues them into position every morning.) Lady Bideford, wearing white stiletto heels, a short white skirt and a tight white V-necked jumper, which showed a good deal of white bosom and the first few inches of an apparently bottomless cleavage, responded to greetings with a regal wave of her hand. She modelled her wave on the method she had seen employed by Her Majesty the Queen and in order to perfect her hand movements regularly watched videos of the royal wave in glorious technicolour action. Since it was a public occasion she would have liked to have worn her best tiara and had, indeed, turned up at the breakfast table wearing it, but Lord Bideford had made her take it off. She had, nevertheless, brought it with her and it rested, unseen, inside the large, plastic white handbag which lay at her feet.

I stood nearby for a while when our side was batting. (I was dismissed for a very disappointing score. I blame the visiting umpire who did not seem to be aware that the fundamental theory behind the lbw decision is that the batsman should be given out if it is clear that the ball would have hit the stumps if it hadn't hit his pads.)

Lady Bideford was doing a quiz in a women's magazine. She looked up. 'Do you think I'm assertive enough?' she asked her husband.

'Of course, dear,' replied the good Lord.

Lady Bideford ticked an appropriate box in her magazine.

'Would you say I have difficulty in making decisions?'

'No, dear.'

Lady Bideford made another mark in her magazine.

Just then Toby, our wicket keeper, wandered by on his way back from the patch of nettles behind the shed where Albert keeps the mower. The patch of nettles is used to keep the strain on our septic tank to a minimum.

'Good afternoon Toby!' cried Lord Bideford cheerfully.

Toby returned the greeting, wiped his hands on the side of his trousers, and carefully nudged his dentures back into position. They haven't fitted very well for a long time but Toby doesn't like throwing things out. He has a brand new, unworn set of dentures in his bathroom cupboard but he is keeping them for when he is older.

Lady Bideford waved and smiled at him. Despite carefully studying a book on elocution she had never got rid of her accent and so she didn't like to say more than she felt she had to.

'This is Toby Babbage!' Lord Bideford said to his wife.

Lady Bideford had been introduced to all the team members on many occasions but she had difficulty in remembering who they were. She had once confessed that she would have found us easier to identify if we had not all dressed in identical clothing.

Lady Bideford waved, smiled and arched her back. She then sat up and shifted her bottom in the deckchair to make sure that her bust was more clearly defined. She was a woman who knew her strengths as well as her weaknesses.

'Good afternoon, my lady,' said Toby, who was struggling, to keep his dentures in place. He was as always captivated by her Ladyship's astonishing bosom. 'I'm the wicket keeper,' he added

Lady Bideford giggled. 'Oh I'm sure you're not!' she said.

Toby, genuine puzzlement replacing the vague feeling of lust which had rather taken him by surprise, stared at her for a moment before daring to correct her.

'Yes, my lady, I'm the wicket keeper,' he repeated. He smiled as much as he dared to make it clear that he had taken no offence. 'Have been for years.' He put his hand over his mouth as a precaution as he spoke. He didn't want his dentures flying out and disappearing down Lady Bideford's vast cleavage.

'Don't be silly!' said Lady Bideford.

'I am!' insisted Toby, backing away a little further, just to be safe. He was now becoming a trifle agitated. It was one of the few things in this world that he was sure of. (If he started having doubts about whether or not he was the wicket keeper his whole life would fall apart. He tried to tear his eyes away from Lady Bideford's bosom, though he felt himself being drawn towards it as an iron filing would be drawn towards a magnet. His mind was still filled with the horrifying image of his dentures disappearing deep down into Lady Bideford's cleavage. He wondered whether it was socially acceptable to dive in and pull your own dentures out of a lady's cleavage. Or was it more socially acceptable to let her pull them out herself. Or should he rush off and procure a couple of spoons. Looking again at the cleavage in question he realised that they would have to be serving spoons. He felt sure that either way it would be something of a social faux pas. He clamped his left hand firmly over his mouth.

'But you seem like such a nice chap,' said Lady Bideford, fluttering her eyelashes and squeezing her bosoms between her arms so that they seemed bigger than ever.

Toby, now feeling rather faint, stepped back a pace or two. He was terrified that if he fainted he might fall forwards and be swallowed up by the ever growing cleavage. He saluted Lord and Lady Bideford with his right hand and staggered off in search of less excitement.

'What a nice man,' said Lady Bideford to her husband.

'He didn't seem at all wicked to me.'

'He isn't,' said Lord Bideford, looking puzzled.

'He said he was,' responded Lady Bideford instantly.

Lord Bideford rubbed his chin and shook his head thoughtfully. 'I didn't hear him say that,' he said.

'He said he was the wicked keeper,' said Lady Bideford.

‘No, no, no,’ said Lord Bideford, shaking his head but no longer rubbing his chin. Trying to do both at once had worn him out. He could feel a headache coming on. ‘He said he was the wicket keeper.’ He paused. ‘He is the wicket keeper. Wicket keeper not wicked keeper.’

‘Oh,’ said Lady Bideford, pouting. ‘What does that mean?’

‘He’s the, er, well, he’s the wicket keeper,’ said Lord Bideford, as puzzled as if he had been asked to explain the meaning of life. He thought about the question for some time.

‘He keeps wicket,’ he explained rather lamely.

‘The wickets are those bits of wood out there on the grass aren’t they?’ said Lady Bideford.

‘That’s right,’ agreed Lord Bideford. ‘The stumps.’

Lady Bideford was silent for a moment. ‘I thought they kept the wickets in the pavilion,’ she said. ‘Where does he keep them?’ She paused and thought for a moment. ‘And why does the team make that poor man look after the wickets?’

Lord Bideford, now looking confused, did not try to reply. Lady Bideford picked up her magazine and returned to her quiz. ‘Would you say I’m too easily swayed by other people’s views?’ she asked.

‘Not at all, dear,’ said Lord Bideford.

JUNE 27th

During the last few weeks or so we have all noticed that one of our all rounders, Felix Chartier, seems to have lost all his enthusiasm for the game and, indeed, for life itself.

The committee has given me the unenviable task of approaching Felix in an attempt to sort out his difficulties and get him operating effectively again. This is not something to which I look forward since it appears likely that I will have to delve into aspects of Felix’s private life in order to find the source of his problem.

Normally we have a firm policy not to interfere with, or take any notice of, a player’s personal or domestic troubles. However, when personal troubles – whatever they might be – begin to impinge upon a player’s ability to perform successfully for the club it is, of course, our responsibility to take whatever action may be necessary.

I have arranged to meet Felix tomorrow in the bar at the Mott and Bailey.

JUNE 28th

I met Felix Chartier early this evening and his tale of woe has got me stumped. My feeling is that the committee is going to have its work cut out to solve this particular problem.

Felix began by telling me that he recently had what he describes as a ‘Damascan Experience’.

When I asked him to give me more details of this he was shy but when I pointed out that it would not be possible for me to help him deal with his problem unless he told me what it was he agreed to share his worries with me.

Felix, who recently celebrated his 29th birthday, told me that his problem began when he was away for the weekend in Brighton. In theory he was there to attend some sort of meeting at the head office of the firm for which he works but Felix has, over the years he has spent travelling around the country, acquired what can perhaps most accurately be described as a number of close personal relationships with members of a sex other than his own. Felix had, therefore, arranged to spend the weekend with a young lady with whom he has for some years had a loose but significant relationship.

‘Daisy – that’s the name of the girl I know – lives with a chum called Enid and they are both fairly broad-minded girls,’ explained Felix. ‘If Enid isn’t doing anything when I’m down there we usually all spend the night together.’

I looked at him but said nothing. I’d heard about three in a bed romps before but never imagined that I’d ever actually meet someone who had been involved in one. I knew I would never be able to think of Felix in quite the same way.

‘While we were lying there on Sunday night having a cigarette Enid asked me how many girls I’d been to bed with,’ continued Felix. ‘I thought about it, going through the names of all the girls I could remember having slept with, and eventually told her it was probably thirty or so altogether. She laughed and said she didn’t believe it was that few but I insisted it wasn’t any more than that.’

‘The next morning I caught the train up to London. It’s a service I’ve used quite often in the past and I always see people I recognise getting on and off.’ Felix sighed. ‘It was on that train that I had what I call my Damascan Experience.’

I said nothing but waited for him to continue.

‘The train left the station,’ said Felix a few moments later, ‘I realised that there was a girl sitting in the same compartment that I’d been to bed with but hadn’t counted in my list of thirty. Then a few minutes later, when the train stopped, another girl got on the train and I realised that I’d been to bed with her too – but had forgotten about that relationship as well.’

Felix sighed. It was the deep, heartfelt sigh of a man in considerable pain. I wanted to reach out and pat him on the shoulder but I was beginning to realise that Felix was rather highly sexually charged and I didn’t want to do anything that might trigger off any inappropriate response. As far as I know he isn’t gay but my feeling is that you can never be too careful where these things are concerned.

‘By the time the train got to London I’d counted seven girls I’d been to bed with and who were not counted on my original list of thirty. So now the list was up nearer to forty than thirty. I was so shattered by this that when the train arrived in London I went straight to the nearest pub – a place I’ve used quite often over the years. The first person I saw when I went in through the door was a woman I had an affair with about four years ago. She hadn’t been on the list either.’

‘At that point,’ said Felix, ‘I realised that I’ve led what I can only describe as a pretty lecherous life.’ He paused for a moment. ‘I felt deeply ashamed,’ he said. ‘All my self respect has gone.’

And it was this Felix told me that explained his inability to function effectively on the cricket field. ‘I’ve lost all my self respect and I don’t see how I’ll ever get it back now.’

I told him that I’d think about what he had told me and asked if he minded if I talked his problem over with one or two other committee members. Felix said he didn’t mind in the slightest and that if we could help him get his self respect back he would be eternally grateful.

JUNE 29th

The groundsman disappeared yesterday to attend his damned wedding. I've spent much of the last two weeks trying to persuade him to see reason but to no avail. He seems to be terrified of his fiancée and says that none of the arrangements can be changed. I told him that I am getting pretty fed up of people getting married during the cricket season. When I pointed out how inconvenient it was for us he just prattled on and on about guests, relatives, photographers, cakes and dresses all being booked. What sort of a married life he thinks he is going to have I can't imagine. If he is frightened of his wife-to-be now – before she's got a ring on her finger – then the chances are that he's going to have a pinafore wrapped around his waist twenty four hours a day when they are married.

I spent two hours this morning trying to get the club's ride on mower to start so that I could give the grass a last cut before tomorrow's big match. I don't know what the groundsman has done to it but the damned thing simply wouldn't start at all. I intend to ask the committee to make a formal protest to the agricultural machinery suppliers from which we bought it. I checked in the records and it appears that when we bought the mower twenty two years ago it was described on the invoice as a 'reconditioned mower'. It certainly doesn't look reconditioned today. Moreover it apparently came with a twelve month guarantee. Since there is no record of our ever having taken advantage of the guarantee before I think we should use it now. When you pay £55 for a reconditioned ride-on lawn mower I think it is reasonable to expect the damned thing to start.

In the end I had to borrow Martin's little push along mower to give the pitch a final cut. The grass all around the pitch is now a good half an inch longer than the grass on the wicket itself.

My bad day got worse when I arrived home to find that the good lady wife wanted me to repair a kitchen cupboard which has a loose door. I started to tell her I was tired but she gave me her withering look so I did as she asked.

JUNE 30th

Our local weekly newspaper published a profile today of Martin Mason. The profile was accompanied by a photograph of him in his cricket whites posing in front of the pavilion. He is wearing pads and gloves and playing a forward defensive shot. Several members have mentioned to me that they think the angle of his leading elbow could be a little more acute. I will mention to Martin that I hope that school children reading the newspaper won’t pick up bad habits as a result of this photograph. I will suggest that he ask the newspaper to print a small apology in their next edition. I do not intend to mention the fact that his pads look distinctly grey in the photograph. One can only hope that the readers will assume that the newspaper doesn’t have particularly good printing equipment.

None of us can think why Martin was chosen for such an extensive profile. Some members have asked if I am sure that it has nothing to do with the fact that his brother in law is the sports editor of the newspaper. I always decline to comment on this kind of speculation. When one holds a position in public life (and being secretary of a village cricket club is certainly that) one has a responsibility and a duty to bite one’s tongue occasionally.

JULY 1st

Today was the day when we gave Felix Chartier back his self-respect. And it wasn’t a day too soon. Felix’s bowling has been well below his best for some time now.

As soon as I saw Felix arrive at the ground, just before today’s match was due to start, I arranged for a couple of the players to be involved in what looked like a pretty convincing argument.

‘I should think maybe six, possibly seven,’ said Jasper.

Felix was not taking any notice. He was slumped in a corner with his head in his hands. ‘Oh I can’t match that,’ replied Martin. ‘I’ve only been to bed with four.’ He turned to Toby. ‘What about you?’

‘Fifteen or twenty I should think,’ said Toby. He paused for a moment and used his fingers to keep count. ‘Eighteen,’ he replied in the end.

‘Wow!’ cried the others. ‘What a guy!’ They surrounded him, clapped him on the back and vied with one another to shake his hand.

‘Congratulate Toby!’ said Martin to the morose looking Felix.

Felix looked puzzled. ‘What for?’

‘Toby’s been to bed with eighteen women!’ said Paul. ‘Impressive, eh? That’s some guy!’

‘Really!’ said Felix, suddenly taking an active interest in the conversation. He looked across at me and caught my eye. He smiled. I smiled back.

‘Ask Felix how many women he’s been to bed with,’ I told them.

They asked him.

‘Sixty six,’ said Felix, who had clearly been doing some deep thinking since we had spoken.

The other players all looked at him with renewed respect. One or two whistled quietly between their teeth. Everyone wanted to shake him by the hand.

To my delight Felix smiled and bathed in their admiration.

‘How do you feel today?’ I asked him a few minutes later, when he had changed into his cricket whites.

‘Great!’ he replied.

‘No lack of self respect?’

‘No. I don’t know why but I feel fine,’ said Felix.

And he bowled as well as I’ve ever seen him bowl.

JULY 2nd

We have another fixture today and once again I had to cut the grass so that the match could take place.

I don't wish to carp but I sometimes think that our club is rather too full of people who are prepared to take all the glory but not too keen on doing the sort of hard work which helps to keep the club alive. It would, for example, be nice if some of those who have their photographs published on the sports pages of the local newspaper would help to prepare the pitch occasionally.

Unfortunately, the good lady wife had arranged for me to paint the bathroom today and had shut me in with two cans of paint, a brush and a rather potent warning not to ask to be let out until I had completed the given task.

I would not change my good lady wife for the world but she can occasionally be just a trifle over-bearing – though of course, that is not to say that I am henpecked. There is no doubt that I wear the trousers in our house. I would protest more often when she makes what I feel are unreasonable demands but she doesn't like being thwarted. Besides, I am still under something of a black cloud after the unfortunate and entirely misunderstood incident with Mrs Ketteridge. As I had feared the wretched Mrs Harris has spread a vile and utterly unfounded rumour around the entire village. I am sometimes surprised that either the postal services or the telephone companies succeed in making any money at all in rural communities. News (or, rather, gossip) speeds around our village far faster than it could be transmitted with the aid of the telephone, the fax machine or the internet. The good news is that I overheard the good lady wife telling a friend that she didn't take the rumour too seriously since in her experience I have the sex drive of a pigeon and would much rather oil my bat with linseed oil than get up to anything untoward with Mrs Ketteridge or anyone else for that matter. There are times when it is good not to stand too highly in one's wife's esteem.

Since I was shut in the bathroom and had a cricket pitch to mow I had to climb out of the bathroom window, creep across the flat roof over the kitchen, climb down a drainpipe (not an easy task for a man of my years and girth), sidle down the edge of the garden (hoping that the good lady wife wouldn't spot me) and hop over the fence into the lane which leads directly to the cricket ground.

And when I had cut the grass I had to repeat this tricky little journey in order to get back into the house and finish painting the bathroom.

Fortunately, my wife does not have a high opinion of my skills as a handyman and so she was not surprised at the length of time it took me to complete the task.

One day I intend to write a book packed with advice for husbands. My first piece of advice will be to tell all prospective husbands that they must make sure that their spouses do not begin marriage with great expectations. Whether it be in the bedroom or with a paintbrush in one hand the wise husband does not try too hard to please in those early weeks.

If a woman begins married life with great expectations she will inevitably be destined to a life of disappointment. But if she begins life with low expectations she will be constantly delighted.

JULY 3rd

I discovered today that there is a switch on the side of the ride on mower which controls the flow of petrol to the engine. The groundsman, fool that he is, had left the mower with this switch in the ‘off’ position. It is hardly surprising that I have not been able to get the mower to start.

I have pushed a torrid, hand written love letter through his letterbox and signed it ‘Daphne’.

When he and his bride return from their honeymoon in five days time the letter should give them both something to talk about.

JULY 4th

I have dealt with the rumour that Mrs Ketteridge and I are having an affair by starting a rumour that Mrs Harris is a secret drinker who has hallucinations. I have suggested to Mrs Ketteridge that we avoid one another for a while.

JULY 5th

The groundsman and his new bride arrived back today. They have apparently already had a huge row and it looks as if their wedding may be one of the shortest on record.

The new rumour around the village is that the groundsman has been having a secret affair with a mystery woman called Daphne. The barmaid told me that the new bride had found a very incriminating love letter signed ‘Daphne’ on the hall carpet when they returned from their honeymoon. Apparently the groundsman denied all knowledge of the woman but the bride was not convinced by his protestations of innocence and has taken her large trousseau and her small collection of premium bonds back up to the north of England. The word is that Albert is talking of going abroad and joining the French Foreign Legion.

I feel deeply ashamed and embarrassed and hope that no one finds out that I am Daphne.

JULY 6th

The groundsman is apparently deeply depressed and Dr Wainwright told us in the Mott and Bailey last night that he is concerned that he may do something silly. (This, I gather, is medical jargon for doing himself in.)

I wonder if I ought to confess that I wrote the note from ‘Daphne’. I could, perhaps, claim that it was a practical joke – rather along the lines of tying tin cans to the back of the car.

JULY 8th

I have obtained an address for the groundsman’s bride and have sent her a note confessing that I wrote the note which was signed ‘Daphne’. I have asked her forgiveness.

JULY 9th

The groundsman came round to see me today. He and his bride had apparently been speaking on the telephone, and are close to a reconciliation. Unfortunately, there is still one small problem to be overcome. It appears that I could have expressed myself a little better in my letter. The bride now suspects that her husband is a practising homosexual having an affair with someone who calls himself ‘Daphne’ and is the secretary of the local cricket club.

The groundsman says he is going to kill me but that in the hope that I will suffer as much as possible he will not tell me when or how he is going to do this.

I have decided not to mention the difficulty I had in starting the ride on mower.

JULY 11th

The rumours which I started about Mrs Harris seem to have worked well.

Today Mrs Ormerod stopped me outside the Post Office and told me how sorry she was to hear that Mrs Harris was so ill that she had been spreading unwarranted rumours about Mrs Ketteridge and myself.

‘I knew they were lies the moment I heard them,’ said Mrs Ormerod. ‘You’re not that sort of man.’

It sometimes helps to have a reputation as something of a stick in the mud.

JULY 12th

Mrs Potter, one of the cricket club tea ladies, teaches domestic science at a nearby evening college. She and Mrs Dashwood, another one of the cricket club tea ladies, had a tremendous row during a particularly vicious freak hailstorm which interrupted today’s match.

Mrs Potter claimed that all the best chefs are women and that men are congenitally incapable of learning how to cook. She insisted that male chefs become better known than women chefs partly because they are better at showing off and partly because most cookery programmes are watched by women who, not unnaturally, prefer to watch attractive male cooks in preference to female cooks.

Mrs Dashwood disagreed vehemently with this, claiming that the greatest chefs have all been men and that male chefs have a certain something that even the most hard working and talented female chefs can never match.

Mrs Potter brought the argument to an end by describing an incident which, she claimed, happened when she was teaching cookery to a group of young men at the college where she is employed.

She says that after she gave the young men a recipe which included the instruction to ‘separate the eggs’ with which they had been supplied she watched in dumb horror as one of the young men (allegedly something of a genius in the realm of car maintenance) stared at the two eggs before him for what seemed like an eternity before carefully lifting one of the eggs from the table top and then putting it down again five inches to the right of its companion.

Having duly separated the eggs he then resumed his study of the recipe he had been given.

This, suggested Mrs Potter, was conclusive proof that men should be kept out of the kitchen. No woman, she insisted, could have ever made such a foolish error.

The tale amused the ladies present but the young man’s error had to be explained to many of the male members of the audience. Even after a thorough explanation several members of the club still found it difficult to understand what the student had done wrong.

Today’s match was resumed after fifteen minutes of heavy hail but had to be abandoned because the size of the hailstones on the ground made it quite impossible for any of the players to keep their footing.

‘It was like playing on several thousand marbles,’ complained one of the visiting batsmen, after he had fallen over for the fifth time.

JULY 16th

My cricket boots have given good service but today they finally gave up the ghost.

Turning to take a second run after a beautifully executed flick to fine leg I suddenly slipped and felt something give way. At first I had a terrible feeling that my foot had somehow come away from my leg but when I looked down I realised that it was, in fact, my left boot which had ruptured. The stitching which had kept the sole of the boot connected to the upper had given way and the sole was flapping around loosely.

I successfully completed the run and batted on for the rest of the over wearing just one boot but when, an over later, one of our opponents' fast bowlers decided to terrorise me by aiming at my toes I retired. There are undoubtedly those who would have batted on and risked having their toes turned into raspberry jam. I like my toes the way they are.

'What shall I put that down as?' asked Norman, our scorer as I limped off the field, holding my bat in my left hand and the remnants of my boot in my right.

'Retired bootless,' I suggested.

'I've never seen that put down before,' said the scorer. He thought for a moment. 'Would you be happy with retired hurt? You would still be not out, of course.'

'But I'm not hurt,' I protested.

'Are you sure?' pleaded Norman. 'Isn't your foot sore?'

'Well, I suppose I am a little bit hurt,' I said. I thought for a moment. 'You're quite right – my foot is sore.'

'So I can put you down as 'retired hurt'?'

'If it makes you happy...'

'Oh it does, it does!'

It doesn't take much to make Norman happy.

Hardly had I got into the pavilion when Peter Saunders approached me. Peter runs a sports shop in the next town and supplies club members with bats, pads, boots and so on at a special discount. To be honest I'm not sure what the discount is. I did once ask but Peter skilfully avoided answering the question. I have always had a rather sneaking suspicion that we probably pay slightly more than other customers. 'Sorry to see that your boots have packed up,' he said. 'The good news for you is that I've got a special offer on boots this week.'

'I don't need boots plural,' I told him. 'I just need one.' I lifted up the foot still contained within my good boot. 'Look at this!' I told him. 'Good as new!' I took the boot off and handed it to him.

Peter looked at my boot, examined it carefully and then shook his head. 'If that boot was a car it would fail its MOT,' he told me. 'It's in a terrible condition. The leather has perished and the stitching has gone. It's dangerous. How can you play cricket with a boot like that?'

'I scored 15 runs wearing this boot last week!'

'Well, you can't just buy one,' said Peter, with a shrug. 'Boots come in pairs.'

'So what do one legged cricketers do?' I asked him. 'Do you make them buy two boots when they only need one?'

'I hadn't thought about that,' Peter said. He scratched his head and frowned. 'I've been in business for thirty four years and I’ve never come across a one legged cricketer,’ he confessed. He squinted at me. ‘What size do you take?’

‘Nine,’ I told him.

‘It’s your lucky day,’ said Peter. ‘It just so happens that I’ve got a lovely pair of size nines in the car boot. They’re brand new WG. Grace specials.’

‘What on earth are W.G. Grace specials?’

‘Endorsed by the great man himself,’ insisted Peter.

‘But he’s dead,’ I pointed out. ‘He’s been dead for decades. How can he have endorsed a new boot?’

‘He endorsed them before he died,’ said Peter. ‘It was the very last thing he did.’

‘He put his name on a new line of boots and then just snuffed it?’

‘That’s it,’ said Peter. ‘You stay there. I’ll pop to the car and get you the boots. You’ll love them.’

I sat down and took a cucumber sandwich from the trestle table in the middle of the pavilion. Someone smacked the back of my hand. ‘Ouch!’ I cried, almost dropping the sandwich.

‘You’re not supposed to eat those until tea time,’ said Mrs Kingsley scowling at me.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, genuinely apologetic. The captain’s wife is not a woman I would choose to upset. ‘I was comfort eating. My boots have just fallen apart.’

‘That’s no excuse,’ said the captain’s wife. She looked around. ‘But as long as you don’t tell anyone else, or regard it as a precedent, I’ll say no more about it. Just eat it up quickly.’

I put the sandwich into my mouth and chewed as fast as I could.

‘Here you are!’ said Peter, climbing back up the pavilion steps and holding out a pair of cricket boots. ‘You can have these for half price,’ he said. He grinned at me. ‘That means you get one boot free!’

‘They look very small!’ I protested after swallowing the remains of the masticated sandwich.

‘They’re nines!’ said Peter, thrusting the boots into my hands. ‘They make them look small these days. It’s to make them more aerodynamic.’

I looked at him suspiciously and tried to slide a foot into one of the boots.

‘They are very tight,’ I said. ‘Are you sure they are nines?’

‘It’s those socks,’ said Peter. ‘They’re far too thick.’

‘You sold the damned socks to me!’ I reminded him. ‘You said they were the latest in sock technology. You promised me that with these socks on I would never be run out and never miss a catch.’

‘Well, have you?’

‘Have I what?’

‘Been run out or missed a catch?’

I thought for a moment. ‘I don’t think so,’ I said.

‘There you are then,’ said Peter. ‘But you don’t need those socks with these boots. Those socks are made for the old fashioned boots. These new WG. Grace boots have got inbuilt sock technology together with special three speed insoles and deep ranging non-slip spikes. It’s all part of a co-ordinated footwear system. If you start wearing old technology socks with these new boots you’ll mess everything up and do more harm than good. It would be like putting a Ford Popular gearbox into a brand new Ferrari.’

I took the boot off (with some difficulty), removed my sock and put the boot back on. It felt extremely cold and uncomfortable but it wasn’t quite so tight.

‘It’s not terribly comfortable,’ I told him. I tried to put my finger down the back of my heel and failed. ‘And it’s still a bit tight,’ I said.

‘These new WG. Grace boots are made for a close fit,’ said Peter. ‘They work better if they’re snug.’ He bent down and felt the toe of the boot. ‘Perfect!’ he said. ‘Absolutely perfect.’

‘But it isn’t terribly comfortable,’ I insisted. ‘It still feels tight. Even without a sock.’

‘It’s not supposed to be comfortable,’ said Peter. ‘These aren’t carpet slippers. You need a boot that provides you with support.’

‘How much are they?’ I asked.

‘£110 but you can have them for £70,’ said Peter.

‘You said I could have them at half price!’ I protested. ‘That isn’t half price.’

‘It’s half the official retail price,’ said Peter. ‘Shall I put them on your account or do you want to give me cash?’

‘I haven’t got £70 on me,’ I said. ‘Put them on my account, will you, please?’

I put the other boot on, stood up and hobbled around the pavilion. The boots felt very uncomfortable. But they were white, and they did look extremely smart, so I decided I would just have to get used to the discomfort.

JULY 17th

One of the advantages of living in a small community is that it’s easy to find someone to share your good news. One of the disadvantages is that it is inevitable that any bad news which comes your way will be shared.

When I first moved into Little Lampton, more years ago than I care to remember, a friendly neighbour told me that I would save everyone a lot of trouble if I put a notice on my front gate explaining my name, occupation, income, sexual preferences and so on. At the time I laughed, thinking it was just a joke. Now, I’m not so sure that it was a joke.

There was a good illustration of just what it is like to live in a village when Giles Harris went up to Manchester to watch two days of the Test Match.

Giles, who is 44 and divorced, lives alone with just a cat for company. Not wanting to put his cat into a cattery and not thinking it necessary to make any formal arrangements for it to be fed he simply left a note pinned to his front door saying: ‘Gone away for two days. Please feed Tibbles (the cat).’ He left his front door open (most of us do) and relied upon the fact that he would be bound to have at least two visitors a day banging on his front door.

Just to make sure that all went well he mentioned the fact that he would be away for a couple of days when he was in the bar the previous evening. ‘If any of you guys are passing my cottage would you just pop in and feed Tibbles?’

What Giles hadn’t allowed for was the fact that during the first day of his absence he would have six different callers. Nor did he realise that each caller, upon seeing the notice on his front door, and being unaware of the other callers, would return at least once more to make sure that Tibbles had enough to eat.

To begin with Tibbles relished all the attention he was getting – not to mention the food he was being fed. But by six o’clock on the first afternoon he was full and simply couldn’t eat anymore.

‘I’ve just been round to feed Giles’ cat Tibbles,’ said Martin, when we met in the snug bar of the Mott and Bailey that evening. ‘The poor thing is pining away and won’t eat a thing.’ Martin seemed very worried.

After a few pints we decided to pop round to Giles’ cottage to see if we could tempt Tibbles to take a little nourishment. We persuaded the landlord to let us have a paper bag containing several juicy pieces of chicken breast.

Tibbles wasn’t interested... She just sat there staring at us and not eating. Now both of us were worried sick. We knew how much Giles doted on his cat. Martin and I stayed in Giles’ cottage all night, taking it in turns to doze on the sofa and to try to persuade the anorexic feline to eat. Our attempts were singularly unsuccessful.

Early the following morning we were both dozing (I was on the floor) when Norman, our scorer, called round to see if Tibbles wanted feeding. He brought with him a can of very expensive cat food. Twenty minutes later Leopold called in, bringing a couple of nice pieces of fish. Tibbles wasn’t interested in the cat food or the fish.

We sat around in Giles’ tiny living room trying to decide what to do.

‘The cat is obviously pining,’ we all agreed.

‘Does Giles have a mobile telephone?’ asked Theobald. We all looked at him. Giles doesn’t even have an ordinary telephone.

‘Maybe if we just sit with her she’ll be OK until he gets back,’ suggested Theobald.

‘I think we should ring the cricket ground and ask them to broadcast an emergency message telling Giles to get home as soon as possible,’ I said.

‘They won’t do that for a cat,’ said Theobald.

‘We won’t tell them it’s for a cat,’ I said. ‘We’ll just say it’s a close relative.’

‘Giles hasn’t got any close relatives.’

‘They won’t know that.’

And so, after spending a small fortune buying tickets and travelling up to Manchester Giles came home early and missed the second day’s cricket.

‘As soon as he arrived home Tibbles decided to start eating again.

Of course, it could have just been that Giles’ arrival back in Little Lampton coincided with the cat feeling hungry again.

But Giles likes to think that the cat was pleased to see him. And, for his sake, we all like to think that too.

JULY 20th

Making the cricket club teas may, on the surface, seem to be an aspect of village life which is entirely free of any potential for dispute or controversy. But it can lead to trouble which can be just as serious, and just as divisive as the careless positioning of a boundary fence, or the underestimated sin of allowing an overhanging branch to drop its leaves onto a neighbour's neatly mown lawn.

Occasionally, a dispute may simmer for months before coming to the boil. Often disputes are a result of some slight misunderstanding, born, as such things so often are, of a mixture of an over generous nature and good intentions on one side and sensitivity and touchiness on the other.

We were sitting outside the pavilion eating tea today when Henry Henderson reminded me of a dispute which would have challenged the diplomatic skills of an Ambassador.

The trouble started when a young doctor arrived in the village to work as a locum while Dr Wainwright took his annual six week summer holiday.

(For more years than any of us can remember Dr Wainwright spent the summer hiking in the Tyrolean mountains. He enjoyed showing off a fine pair of hirsute but well combined legs in a pair of Austrian lederhosen. These days Dr Wainwright stays at home. He insists that old doctors, like old wine, do not travel well.)

The locum doctor, who had, so he told us, played hockey for his university, volunteered to join the cricket club as a temporary member. (There were, Henry reminded me, some doubts among the members who felt that hockey was a game more suitable for a girl's school than a man's university, but those fears were eventually over-ruled.)

Since it was not unnatural for his young wife to want to be with him on Saturday afternoons it was considered perfectly reasonable and proper that she should wish to make a contribution to the making of the afternoon teas. (Mrs Wainwright always accompanied her husband on his Tyrolean adventure, though she usually stayed in the hotel with her knitting while he aired his limbs.) The senior tea lady (Mrs Ormerod) acknowledged that the young doctor's wife would make an entirely appropriate locum for Mrs Wainwright.

For a fortnight or so everything went well. The young doctor's wife quickly got the hang of buttering slices of bread, chopping up thick chunks of cheese and smearing on generous dollops of Mrs Ormerod's home made chutney. (Mrs Ormerod's home made chutney was made from a secret recipe, passed down through three generations, but the ingredients were widely believed to include enough red wine to make driving hazardous after eating no more than two cheese and chutney sandwiches.)

But there was an early sign of trouble on the third occasion when Elspeth, the young doctor's wife, helped with the home match teas.

The trouble started when Anthony Kingsley, the club captain took Mrs Ormerod aside, opened the cheese sandwich into which he had bitten and, without saying anything, showed her the contents.

Mrs Ormerod stared in horror at the exposed innards of the sandwich, lying flat on the captain's outstretched left palm, and for a moment it looked as though she was going to faint. Mrs Ormerod is not, and probably never has been, a small woman and the captain, knowing that he would not be able to hold her, had the presence of mind to grab hold of her right shoulder and twist her round through forty five degrees so that if she did fall she would crash harmlessly down onto the floor, rather than crash into the table in the centre of the pavilion (which was, of course, stacked high with cakes, pies, sandwiches and the other essential elements of a Little Lampton Cricket Club afternoon tea).

But Mrs Ormerod was made of stern stuff. She did not faint, though she did go extremely pale.

'It's got watercress in it!' she said. Her voice was quiet for she was shocked and embarrassed. She did not want this piece of startling news to spread too widely. If ladies in pavilions else where were to discover that someone had put watercress into a Little Lampton sandwich Little Lampton teas would become the laughing stock of the league.

‘And no chutney!’ said Anthony. In deference to Mrs Ormerod he also spoke quietly. She was not a woman whom many men in the village of Little Lampton would have willingly and deliberately chosen to antagonise.

As though she found the evidence presented by her eyes difficult to believe Mrs Ormerod reached out and took a watercress leaf between the thumb and forefinger of her right hand. She then lifted it up to her nose and sniffed at it. While it was hanging at close range she took the opportunity to examine it carefully from all possible angles. (Before lifting it aloft she looked around to make sure that this operation would not attract too much attention.) And before she replaced it on top of the routine slice of cheddar cheese upon which it had lain she carefully checked the underlying slab of cheese (a good, chunky slab she was relieved to see) for any signs of chutney. There were none. The chutney, her chutney, was missing.

‘There is no chutney!’ murmured Mrs Ormerod.

‘But it’s got watercress on,’ said the captain.

‘Cheese and watercress,’ said Mrs Ormerod quietly to herself, as though trying out the words to see if they could be forced to go well together. ‘Cheese and watercress. Watercress and cheese. Cheese and watercress.’ She shivered and flushed a deep red.

‘I’ve never had cheese and watercress before,’ said the captain. ‘I like your chutney, Mrs Ormerod. I play best when I’ve had some of your chutney for my tea. Your chutney is renowned.’

‘It’s gratifying to hear you say so, Mr Kingsley,’ said Mrs Ormerod. ‘Very gratifying.’ Lifting her head high, and recovering every shred of her temporarily lost dignity she handed the sandwich back to its owner and retreated back into the kitchen.

It was generally believed that if Mrs Ormerod had said something there and then things would not have deteriorated in the way that they did. But Mrs Ormerod did not like to air her grievances in public – or it is perhaps more accurate to say that she preferred not to share them directly with the source or object of her discontent. She much preferred to bury her fears, her wrath and her bitterness in some dark and secret place where they could grow and flourish and develop into something far more substantial. Then, at the right moment (and this might be a year, a month, a week or even just a day or two later), when the suppressed and hidden fears, wrath and bitterness had finally developed a life of their own, she would take them out and display them to all and sundry.

The following week the team had a midweek match against a touring side from the North of England and the young locum doctor’s wife, who was by now especially eager to impress because her husband had told her that he believed there was a chance that he might be offered a junior partnership if all went well, took with her to the pavilion several large metal biscuit tins full of ready made refreshments.

By the time Mrs Ormerod arrived in the pavilion ready for action, a freshly ironed apron laid neatly upon top of several fresh, unopened jars of chutney in her shopping bag and her butter knife holding fingers itching and ready to spread, the table in the pavilion was already covered from end to end with matching and slightly dampened tea towels draped over carefully prepared food. Underneath the tea towels the food was neatly arranged on a dozen large cake and sandwich plates.

‘My, my,’ said Mrs Ormerod, oozing unsubstantial charm, and putting her bag down on a nearby chair. ‘You have been a busy girl, haven’t you?’

The doctor’s wife, hovering nearby and mistakenly assuming that this remark was intended as a compliment, blushed prettily and carefully examined her neatly manicured finger nails. She had, perhaps innocently, assumed that Mrs Ormerod and the other members of the Refreshments Committee would be delighted to find that they could have an afternoon off. Oh, the innocence of youth!

‘What have we got here?’ asked Mrs Ormerod, cautiously lifting a corner of one of the tea towels and lowering her head to peep underneath. She uttered this comment in a tone of voice which someone who had lived in the village for longer might have recognised as a sign of trouble to come.

‘That’s one of the plates of sandwiches,’ said the doctor’s wife, naively assuming that because the comment was delivered in the form of a question a reply would be appropriate. Bursting with pride, and moving swiftly around the table, she threw back matching tea towels in order to reveal the extent of her preparations. ‘I’ve done smoked salmon and cucumber on tomato bread; chicken liver pate and sun dried tomatoes on olive bread; bratwurst and Dijon mustard on wholemeal bread; Roquefort cheese with mustard and cress on walnut bread; crisp Danish bacon, iceberg lettuce and cherry tomatoes on granary bread and beef with horseradish on stone ground wholemeal.’ She stood back, trembling slightly, when she had finished her description of the delicacies on offer.

Mrs Ormerod listened to this recital without displaying any of the emotions she was feeling. Considering the depth and breadth of emotions involved this was an impressive feat; one which would have impressed a championship class poker player. But the doctor’s wife had not finished.

Having given Mrs Ormerod a tour of the sandwiches she had prepared she carefully replaced all the tea towels before showing Mrs Ormerod an equally impressive display of meringues (all filled with fresh cream and each one topped with a cherry), brandy snaps (each one filled with yet more fresh cream), glazed strawberry jam tarts and, her pièce de résistance, a huge, rich, chocolate cake on top of which white icing sugar figures played cricket with a red icing sugar ball on a green icing sugar pitch.

The young doctor’s wife had blown her housekeeping budget for a month on this feast for a bunch of strangers but she preferred to think of it as an investment. It was, it seemed to her, an investment well made. She felt full of pride and, sweet innocent thing that she assuredly was, remained even then convinced that she had played a part that would help her husband obtain the job he so dearly wanted.

‘I’ve always wanted to be a country GP,’ he had told her. ‘To be a respected and substantial member of the community. I’ll play cricket for the village on Saturdays and read the second lesson in church on Sundays. You’ll become President of the Women’s Institute, organise the Harvest Festival, open the annual produce show and pick out the best baby in the village at the summer fete. Eventually, perhaps, you’ll be come a Justice of the Peace and sit on the bench in the nearby town.’

The poor, sweet girl was already dreaming of long hot summers, baskets of fresh vegetables left on the front door step of their substantial home by an endless stream of contented and grateful patients, delighted villagers naming their baby daughters after her, tennis parties, croquet parties and dispensing wisdom and advice in the privacy of her drawing room to less fortunate village wives whose husbands had temporarily strayed from the straight and narrow path of monogamous bliss.

‘You’ve cut off all the crusts,’ said Mrs Ormerod.

Elspeth, her reverie rudely interrupted, was aware that Mrs Ormerod had spoken but she was not aware of the precise nature of the comment. ‘I beg your pardon?’ she said, blushing still deeper for in her ignorance she assumed that Mrs Ormerod must have complimented her in some way.

‘You’ve cut off all the crusts,’ said Mrs Ormerod.

Since this observation was entirely accurate and could clearly not be contradicted Elspeth could not think of a more appropriate response than a simple: ‘Yes.’

‘Hrmph!’ snorted Mrs Ormerod, endowing the sound with more meaning than one might have thought possible. Disdain, condemnation, contempt, amusement, pity – they were all there in that single Hrmph. And although no words had been uttered Elspeth knew instantly that she had erred.

‘Does it matter?’ she asked, in a quiet, lost voice. She wondered what she had done with the crusts she had removed. Maybe, she thought in one wild moment of madness, she could find them, retrieve them and somehow succeed in fastening them back onto the crustless sandwiches.

Mrs Ormerod just looked at Elspeth. She didn’t even bother to waste another ‘Hrmph’. The look said everything she wanted to say. If a picture can be worth a thousand words then that look was worth a dictionary of derision.

She walked to the pavilion door and looked out. Young Jimmy Tattersall, Herbie Middlemass and Willie Nutall, were playing cricket on the outfield with an old bat and a tennis ball. They were inevitably commandeered to fetch the supplies for the cricket teas (they didn't mind in the slightest for Mrs Ormerod always allowed them to get rid of any leftovers when the cricketers had finished- and since Mrs Ormerod always made sure that there were plenty of leftovers this was no small incentive). They were sent post haste to the village shop to buy twenty large white loaves, several pounds of butter and the largest block of strong cheddar cheese they could carry.

Mrs Ormerod was waiting for them, flowery pinafore on and neatly tied at the back, and a large jar of chutney conveniently to hand, when they returned with the necessary makings for cheese sandwiches.

By the time the players came off the field she and her eager helpers had prepared a mountain of what she unsubtly described as 'proper' sandwiches.

Because Elspeth's sandwiches and cakes took up all the available space on the table in the pavilion Mrs Ormerod took an old folding, baize topped card table from a cupboard and set it up by the door. She then piled her sandwiches several feet high upon this small table.

When the players trooped back out onto the field after the tea interval Mrs Ormerod's pile of cheese sandwiches had disappeared. Elspeth's display remained virtually untouched.

The doctor's wife left the cricket ground in tears. 'You should have left the crusts on, dear,' said a merciless Mrs Ormerod as Elspeth hurried away.

Elspeth was not seen again in the village and her husband was not offered a partnership. He took a job as a medical administrator at a hospital in Dubai. I believe his wife replaced dreams of rural glory with the more prosaic delights of multiple motherhood.

I was much younger when all this happened. (The Mrs Ormerod of whom I write was Nathan Ormerod's mother – not his wife). I was, I confess, desperate to get tucked into the young doctor's wife's sandwiches but I was terrified of the old Mrs Ormerod. She always was a powerful woman. She had bigger biceps than Constable Thomas has.

JULY 24th

My feet are giving me a lot of trouble. My new boots have attracted many compliments from other members of the team. But since I started wearing them I have found it increasingly difficult to walk.

JULY 29th

As I was walking my dog today Mrs Ketteridge rushed out and invited me in for a cup of coffee. I explained that I had to attend a committee meeting and hurried away.

I must find a different route when walking the dog.

AUGUST 4th

We nearly lost our umpire today.

Cyril Darlington has been painting his wife’s kitchen for five weeks (not an unreasonable length of time it seems to me – kitchens can be exceedingly fiddly to paint) and today she told him that he was going to keep painting until he finished. She has apparently become rather tired of having her stove cluttered up with paint pots.

She knew that Cyril was supposed to be umpiring today’s match and so in order to make sure that he didn’t get out she made him take off all his clothes and then locked him, naked, in the kitchen. Much to my embarrassment I found out later that she got this idea from my good lady wife who told her about the time she shut me in the bathroom. Removing all her husband’s clothes was apparently a refinement devised by Mrs Darlington herself.

Cricket umpires, like cricket club secretaries, don’t give up easily.

Cyril, who is neither as young nor as agile as he was when he was younger and more agile, climbed out through the kitchen window and arrived at the pavilion with only a tea towel wrapped around his waist. (Since Cyril has a rather generous waist and the tea towel was rather small this was a hazardous business.) Fortunately, he keeps his white coat, with hat and six pebbles in the pockets, hanging on a peg in the changing room.

And so today’s match was umpired by a man who was entirely naked underneath his white coat. Fortunately, the weather was warm and our visitors thought that he had bare legs because he was wearing shorts underneath his white coat.

AUGUST 9th

We don’t often play away matches. Our ground is considered so attractive that most of the teams against whom we have fixtures want to play us at home. Most of our non-league opponents are regulars who come back year after year.

We had something of a festival match today with a team of cricketers against whom we have been playing cricket for more years than I can remember. The visitors, a side from the midlands, always visit us in August whilst on their summer tour. And we always try to make the occasion a little special.

To the left of the pavilion a small impromptu bandstand had been built out of empty wooden beer crates and through out the match the village brass band thumped out traditional brass band music with all the spare breath they could muster.

The Little Lampton Brass Band doesn’t normally get much chance to play together, or even to practise properly, because the other villagers complain about the noise they make. As a result most of the band’s practice sessions end up with the musicians having to pretend to play their instruments. No self respecting trombone player likes to have to blow tight lipped raspberries for two and a half hours and so for the band the prospect of being allowed to play for a whole afternoon without having to put up with any complaints was heaven sent. They made the most of the opportunity.

We also had the Little Lampton Majorettes to give the occasion colour and excitement. They waved their flags and twirled their batons with enormous enthusiasm. They should have been jiggling their pom poms too but unfortunately the pom poms had been eaten by mice. It was because of the shortage of pom poms that the leading majorette had borrowed all the available flags from the station master at the nearby Greater Lampton railway station.

There were two drawbacks with this arrangement. The first was that the flags had to be back in time for the station master to welcome the 3.14 from Paddington. The second was that the majorettes had had no real opportunity to practise their flag waving.

One enthusiastic rehearsal on the station at Greater Lampton had so confused the driver of the 6.35 from Aberdeen (unexpectedly and unprecedentedly seven minutes ahead of schedule) that he had failed to stop at the station and had roared through at top speed coming to a halt fifty miles further up the line. The driver reported his location to the appropriate authorities. They had not been as amused as one might have expected when they found a team of well built majorettes performing in front of the chocolate vending machine on platform two. More crucially, a small number of angry and frustrated travellers had made indignant protests to the railway board and small compensation payments had to be made in order to silence the protestors.

After that debacle the majorettes had to practise without flags. They had found this distinctly unsatisfactory.

‘It’s like the cricket team having to practise without bats and balls,’ one of the majorettes had complained, ignoring for the purpose of making her point the fact that it was not normal for the Little Lampton cricket team to practise at all.

For some time the majorettes had, as an organisation, been rather badly underwomanned.

Formed after Marjory Putnam had attended a six week evening course in ‘pom pom manipulation, baton twirling and associated skills’ at the Greater Lampton technical college the Little Lampton majorettes had, from the very beginning, struggled to be taken seriously.

One problem was that Marjory’s knowledge of these popular and fundamental American skills had been largely gleaned from books. The pom pom manipulating and baton twirling course had been abandoned after the first week through lack of interest and Marjory had been transferred, quite involuntarily it has to be said, to a Turkish belly dancing course. The result of this administrative merger was that when Marjory had completed her course, accepted her diploma and persuaded three of her friends (the lightest of whom weighed in at eleven stones twelve pounds) to join her as Founder Members of the Little Lampton majorettes she had combined all these skills into a new regime of her own design.

Some believe it may be possible that the Little Lampton majorettes are the only troupe in the world who have fake rubies glued into their belly buttons. (Their well rounded forms mean that when they jump about their pom poms (or flags) and batons are not the only items which jiggle and twirl.)

The Little Lampton majorettes (known locally, in tribute to their founder, as the Marjorettes) are, on average, four and a half stones overweight and they wear thick pink tights to disguise the varicosities which festoon their lower limbs.

But the afternoon was an enormous success and our visitors expressed themselves delighted with their visit.

It might have been nice if they could have shown their pleasure by being a little more generous on the field. We were allowed to score just 56 runs before we were dismissed attempting to match their 303 for 4 declared.

AUGUST 11th

My feet have been giving me so much trouble that during the tea interval today I hobbled across to where Dr Wainwright was sitting and asked him to have a look at them. I had always thought that WG. Grace walked in a funny way because the film of him was all very old. I am beginning to suspect that he may have walked that way because of his boots.

‘Where on earth did you get these damned boots?’ asked the doctor, after examining my feet. ‘They’re far too small. They’re crushing your feet.’

‘They’re my normal size,’ I told him. ‘Look – it says here that they’re size nine.’

‘They’re size six!’ said Dr Wainwright. ‘You’re looking at them the wrong way up you idiot.’

Peter Saunders, who sold me the boots, has gone away to the Canary Islands for a month. I intend to have a firm word with him when he gets back. Meanwhile, I am playing cricket in the pair of plimsolls I bought for that wretched running race we all took part in last April. They feel much more comfortable than the W.G. Grace boots ever did.

AUGUST 12th

Norman Dunhill called at my home early this evening. He is (and has been for over a quarter of a century) the club scorer and is one of the club’s most loyal members.

Norman hasn’t missed a match for as long as anyone can remember, although he did disappear for forty five minutes during the luncheon interval of a home match against Royal Knutsford Old Colonials to attend his mother’s funeral. The funeral had been arranged to fit neatly into the luncheon interval but due to congestion in the churchyard the proceedings over-ran by five minutes. I seem to remember that the umpires held up play for a short while to give Norman time to return.

Norman came to see me to ask if the club would buy him a fresh scorebook, a box of pencils and a rubber. I told him we would entertain a written request for funds to purchase a scorebook, which will in due course become part of the club’s historical archive, but that I didn’t think I could authorise funding for the purchase of pencils and a rubber. As far as the pencils are concerned my feeling is that these should be Norman’s responsibility.

‘The batsmen don’t expect the club to buy their bats,’ I explained to him. ‘So it clearly would not be fair for the club to buy your pencils.’

‘But the club buys balls for the bowlers to use,’ replied Norman.

I had never thought of Norman as a trouble-maker before but I was beginning to harbour suspicions.

‘And I really don’t think you can expect the club to fork out good money to pay for your mistakes!’ I told him firmly.

Norman looked puzzled for a moment.

‘The rubber!’ I explained, feeling rather pleased with myself. ‘If you didn’t make mistakes you wouldn’t need one of those at all, would you?"

From the look on his face it was pretty clear that he knew l’d got him there.

AUGUST 13th

Norman called round to see me this evening. Norman is meticulous and honest but he is also boring. He worked for thirty five years as a quality controller and has, over the years, become extremely critical of everyone and everything. ‘The unexpected happens so often it ought to be expected’ is one of his favourite sayings.

Norman is so desperate to get full value from his life that he once told me that he wished he was older just so that he would know that he hadn’t died young. When writing an address on an envelope he will use a ruler to make sure that he starts exactly the right distance in from the left hand edge. He also uses the ruler to draw in thin pencil lines so that his hand writing looks perfectly level. When he has finished the envelope he will rub out the pencil lines.

Apart from cricket his favourite relaxation is to listen to music on the wireless. He listens to the music and follows each note on a copy of the score. If any notes are missed out he writes in to the wireless station to complain.

Norman called round to let me know that he will not be scoring at tomorrow’s match. He seemed a trifle cool and when I expressed surprise at the news he told me that he was going to be on strike.

I confess that I very nearly laughed out loud.

When I asked him why he was going on strike he told me that it was in protest at the club’s refusal to pay for his pencils and rubber.

I am pleased to say that I had the presence of mind to ask him if he would be picketing the match and, if so, if he would be expecting the club to pay for the materials for him to make the placard he would undoubtedly be carrying.

His response was to tell me how disappointed he was that a club which he had served so loyally for so long should cast him aside like an unwanted pencil stub. He reminded me that he had served queen and country proudly during the war and had a cigar box full of medals to show how grateful the nation had been.

In the middle of our discussion Norman suddenly closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

‘Are you all right?’ I asked him, concerned for his health. Norman said nothing but kept his eyes closed and continued to take deep breaths.

I repeated my question.

Norman continued to ignore me.

‘Shall I lie you down and pummel your chest?’ I asked. ‘Do you need mouth to mouth resuscitation? Are you having a heart attack?’

‘I’m averting a funny turn,’ said Norman, opening his eyes at last. ‘Dr Wainwright told me to do this if I feel stressed.’ He paused to take another deep breath but this time did not close his eyes. ‘If he knew how stressed I was getting he would be very cross with both of us.’

‘Cross with both of us?’ I said. ‘Why?’

‘Cross with both of us,’ insisted Norman.

‘Both of us? You mean you and me?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why on earth should he be cross with me?’

‘You’re getting me into a state.’

‘No I’m not!’

‘Yes you are.’

‘No I’m not.’

‘Yes you are. You’re arguing with me.’

‘Do you mean to say that I can’t ever argue with you? Are you telling me that the doctor has said that I have to agree with everything you say?’

At this point Norman left. I fear that my relationship with the club scorer has reached an all time low.

AUGUST 14th

I had completely forgotten about Norman's call to warn me that he would be on strike during today's match and the visitors were four (or possibly five) overs into their first innings when Martin Mason, who was fielding next to me in the slips, asked me if I'd noticed something funny about the little patch of grass just to the left of the pavilion.

I said I hadn't noticed anything funny about it at all and left it at that.

Then two overs later Martin again commented that he felt sure that there was something not quite right about the patch of grass he had pointed out.

It was then that I realised that he was absolutely right, there was something wrong: Norman was missing.

'It's Norman,' I said. 'Norman the scorer. He's not there.'

'You're right,' said Martin, and then he frowned. 'But he must be,' he said. He looked around. 'Where is he?'

'No, I remember now,' I said. 'He isn't here. He telephoned me yesterday to tell me that he wouldn't be scoring today.'

'Why on earth not?' asked Martin. 'Is he ill?'

There was then a little bit of confusion as the batsman edged a ball between the two of us. It bounced about a yard and a half in front of us and was travelling very slowly but when Martin grabbed at it he missed it. The ball shot up into the air off his wrist. Luckily I caught it after it had bounced a few times and tossed it to our wicket keeper before the batsmen had started to run the second.

'He's sort of on strike,' I told Martin, who was rubbing his wrist.

'Who is?'

'Norman.'

'Norman the scorer?'

'Yes.'

Martin looked at me incredulously. 'Norman the scorer is on strike?' He was so surprised that he stopped rubbing his wrist.

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'He wants the club to pay for his pencils and a new rubber.'

'So why don't we?'

'Because no one ever pays their subscriptions and we don't have any money.'

'Ah,' said Martin, who paid the first of his four quarterly subscription payments at the beginning of the season but hasn't paid any more. He had the good grace to blush.

The visiting umpire called 'over' and we changed ends.

'So who's scoring?' asked Martin.

I looked at him and suddenly felt rather cold. ‘Who’s scoring?’

‘Who’s scoring?’ he repeated. ‘I asked you first.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘What do you mean you don’t know. You must know who you asked to do the scoring instead of Norman.’ Although some visiting teams bring their own scorer with them it is, of course, the home team’s responsibility to arrange for a scorer. Our visitors for this match had had difficulty finding enough men to make up a team.

‘Well I would do if I had wouldn’t I!’ I said, rather crossly.

‘Did the visitors bring a scorer with them?’

I shook my head. ‘I think their captain thought they were lucky to have eleven men. They have a nucleus of very keen players but apparently they often turn up with just nine or ten and their umpire, who is 78, has played in most of their games this year. Their captain told me that they played an eight a side match last Wednesday. The other side’s eight man team included two passing motorists and a postman. The postman was supposed to be delivering letters but apparently he turned out to be a pretty good medium pace bowler.’

‘Do you think we should tell someone?’ said Martin.

I found this confusing. ‘Why would anyone else be interested in the fact that there is a postman somewhere out there who is a pretty good medium pace bowler?’

Martin sighed wearily, ‘Maybe we should tell someone that we’ve been playing this match for about twenty minutes and no one has been scoring.’

‘It can’t have been that long!’

‘However long it is it’s getting longer every minute,’ Martin pointed out.

Realising that he was absolutely right I called out to the umpire and asked him to stop play for a moment.

‘I’m afraid we don’t seem to have a scorer,’ I pointed out, trying to make it appear as though I was rescuing the game from potential anarchy rather than pointing out that I had forgotten to find a locum for Norman.

My remark, though designed to cause as little distress as possible, caused something of an uproar. I could hardly have created more anxiety or more confusion if I had announced that for the rest of the match all the players would have to wear blindfolds.

‘Does anyone know how many overs have been bowled?’ I asked, thinking that this would be a good way to start trying to work out what the score was.

‘Why don’t we just forget what’s happened so far and start again?’ suggested Dylan Thomas, whose opening spell had not gone well but who now felt more or less warmed up.

‘No, no!’ cried one of the visiting batsmen; a tall, sandyhaired fellow who was pretty confident that he had beaten his previous highest score by a substantial margin.

‘I think we must have bowled three overs altogether,’ said Dylan, who had had so much difficulty in landing the ball within a bat’s length of the target that both umpires had become hoarse from shouting ‘wide’.

‘Rubbish! It’s got to be ten or eleven,’ said the sandy haired opening batsman. ‘I must have scored at least thirty – probably quite a few more than that.’ He turned to his partner, who seemed to be wearing several sweaters despite the fact that it was a gloriously hot day. ‘What do you think?’

‘At least ten or eleven overs,’ said the well-sweatered batsman. ‘Possibly more. Maybe fifteen.’

The only thing both sides agreed on was that no wickets had fallen. In the end the two captains and the umpires agreed on a compromise figure of eight overs bowled and forty runs scored. Each batsman was given twenty runs. Much to Dylan's delight it was arbitrarily decided that there had been no extras. Neither captain had been keen to demand a high extras count.

After another short delay we appointed Carl Inchcape as the temporary scorer, largely on the grounds that he was the only spectator present and therefore the only person able to take on the job. The alternative had been to persuade one of the tea ladies to abandon her sandwich making but no one wanted to do this.

When it was explained to him what he was being asked to do Carl protested that he had never done any scoring before. We brushed aside his protests and insisted that he would find it remarkably easy. In view of the problem he has with his eyes the umpires were asked to make sure that their signals were as clear as possible.

At the tea interval, while the others went into the pavilion to refresh themselves, I tottered over to Carl to see how he was getting on.

'It's a tricky business,' he confessed, still scribbling in. the scorebook with which he had been supplied. (Norman, our usual scorer had our current score book at home with him but we had found an old scorebook which still contained a couple of blank pages.)

'But you've managed OK?' I said, hoping that a leading question would produce a calming answer.

'I think so,' said Carl.

'What's the score then?' I asked him.

Carl studied the scorebook in front of him. 'I make it fifty eight for seventeen he said.' He checked his figures. 'That's right. Fifty eight wickets for seventeen runs.'

I went cold and closed my eyes in the hope that when I opened them again I would find myself lying in bed having a nightmare.

But when I opened my eyes Carl was still sitting where he had been and the score was still fifty eight for seventeen.

'It can't be!' I whispered. 'There are only eleven players in a side. They can't have lost fifty eight wickets.'

'Oh but they have,' insisted Carl. 'I've been watching the umpires and every time they signalled I put down another wicket.'

'Every time they signalled?' I asked him. 'What sort of signal?'

'When they waved at me,' he said.

I stared at him, frowning with disbelief. 'Do you mean if one of the umpires stretched his arms out you counted that as a wicket?'

Carl thought about this for a while. 'Yes, I think so,' he said. 'That's right isn't it?' He looked at the scorebook and then up at me. 'And I put down wickets when the fielders appealed,' he said. 'That's right, isn't it?'

'Not really,' I told him.

Carl had been watching cricket for decades. Heaven knows why or what pleasure he got out of it. Sweat was now dripping off my nose and my shirt was stuck to my back. I took the score book from him and looked at it. Most of the batsmen had been out several times. One unfortunate fellow had been dismissed seven times. I ripped Carl's scoresheet out of the scorebook and stuffed it into my pocket. I then started to write out a scoresheet from memory.

'Did I get something wrong?' asked Carl.

‘Don’t worry about it!’ I assured him. ‘Everything will be fine. Why don’t you pop into the pavilion and get yourself a cucumber sandwich and a cup of tea?’

‘Oh thank you!’ said Carl.

As he disappeared into the pavilion I finished off the replacement score sheet and shot off to Norman’s cottage. He was sitting in his garden reading an old copy of Wisden. ‘Norman,’ I said. ‘We need you. How much do you want for pencils and a rubber?’

He thought about my question for a while. ‘Two pounds forty pence should be enough,’ he said.

‘Call it three pounds,’ I said, taking the coins from my pocket and putting them on the table in front of him. ‘Can you come and score the second half of the match for us?’

‘Are you having difficulty?’ he asked, not moving.

‘Yes,’ I confessed. ‘I’m sorry about the misunderstanding.’

‘Say ‘please’.

‘Please.’

Norman stood up, put the coins into the pocket and went into his cottage to pick up the scorebook, his pencil stubs and his worn out rubber.

AUGUST 15th

Most cricketers call the box in which they store bats, pads and other cricket equipment a ‘coffin’ because, although considerably smaller, there is a slight resemblance in terms of shape and lack of aerodynamic styling.

But our visiting team today really did use a coffin for storing their equipment.

They had acquired a pine coffin, complete with brass handles, from the local undertaker when they had discovered that it was cheaper to buy a real coffin than it would have been to purchase a purpose built box for storing cricket equipment.

AUGUST 17th

A surprise thunderstorm almost ruined today’s match against a touring side from Walsall, a town which is apparently situated somewhere in the midlands.

We had scored 67 (our best total of the season so far) and they were struggling at 44 for 7 when the sun went in, the sky went black and the rain started. It was one of those rainstorms which starts suddenly but makes it clear within a very short space of time that it means business.

Sometimes, it can rain for half an hour without one feeling really wet. But this was one of those rainstorms which can turn a dry person into a wet person within two or three minutes.

As the storm built up and the rain came down the two umpires huddled together for a moment and then approached the batsmen.

‘Do you want to go in?’

The older of the two batsmen, a short, florid faced fellow who had scored two edged boundaries and was on the verge of breaking into double figures for the first time in 26 years of club cricket, looked at them as if they had both suddenly turned into Martians.

‘Why would we want to go in?’ he demanded. The rain was bouncing off his bald head. His spectacles were covered in raindrops.

‘It’s raining,’ explained the visiting umpire.

The batsman looked up. ‘It’s just a shower.’ he said.

The sky was black and getting blacker by the second.

‘Do you mind if I pop into the pavilion for a second?’ asked the visiting umpire. He pointed to his trousers. ‘These are my only clothes,’ he said. ‘You lot can get changed afterwards – I can’t.’ And with that he raced off towards the pavilion, closely followed by his colleague.

‘Shall we carry on?’ asked the bowler.

‘I think we ought to wait until they get back,’ said the younger of the two batsmen, a nervous, skinny fellow who bowled very slow but deadly accurate medium pace seamers and had taken five wickets – all bowled – when we had batted.

We all stood around in the rain for two or three minutes before the two umpires reappeared. They had both removed their clothes – including their shoes and socks- and it wasn’t difficult to guess that they were completely naked underneath their white coats. This was, of course, the second time our own umpire had done his umpiring dressed in nothing but a white coat. I couldn’t help wondering if he might have naturist tendencies.

‘Play!’ said one of the umpires, resuming his position behind the stumps at the bowler’s end.

‘I can’t see anything!’ complained the batsman on strike, the short, florid faced fellow. He peered down the wicket. It was quite clear from his demeanour that he couldn’t see his partner, the umpire or the bowler. Part of his problem was undoubtedly the fact that it was now raining very heavily and he didn’t have windscreen wipers fitted to his spectacles. But the situation was clearly not helped by the fact that the sky was now as black as I had ever seen it during the daytime. With no sun and no moon to relieve the darkness visibility was down to about five yards.

Suddenly, the sky was lit up by a huge dramatic flash of sheet lightning.

‘Bowl!’ cried the short batsman. ‘I can almost see!’

We played much of that over, and a good part of the next one, with the aid of occasional lighting provided by God. The only snag was that the thunder, which inevitably followed the lightning, made it impossible to hear what anyone was saying. At one point the two batsmen got themselves into quite a mix up and there was very nearly a run out. They couldn't see one another and the thunder meant that they couldn't hear one another either. They were saved by the fact that Jasper, who was fielding at third man, couldn't see what was happening in the middle of the pitch and couldn't hear the wicket keeper screaming for whoever had the ball to throw it in to him as quickly as possible. It was this incident which led to the stout batsman reaching a magnificent double figure score. He was as full of joy as any batsman who has ever scored a century at Lord's.

When the thunder and lightning passed by and the blackness of the sky was no longer relieved by those useful flashes of dramatic light Cyril our umpire had a brainwave.

All the batsmen and fielders who had arrived at the ground by car parked their vehicles around the boundary so that they were all facing the middle of the ground. Each driver then switched on his headlights.

And it was with that bizarre lighting that we played the final few overs of the match. Everything was fine as long as you didn't have to chase a ball towards the boundary – or try, as Martin did, to take a catch while running towards the boundary edge. No one saw what happened but Martin told the umpires (and the rest of us) that he very nearly had the catch but was blinded by the light of a pair of halogen headlamps on full beam at the very last moment. His honesty in admitting that he had not taken the catch cleanly impressed our visitors. We were more surprised than impressed.

In the end our visitors reached our total and we lost the match by just one wicket. It was, however, the closest match we had played all season and as we trooped off the field, soaked to the skin, we all felt we could be extremely proud of ourselves.

AUGUST 19th

Today I made my first visit of the year to a county ground. What a complete disappointment it was. From the moment I entered the ground I felt unwelcome and unwanted. The ground was full of surly, arrogant, rude men in white coats who seemed to take delight in telling me what I could not do and where I could not go. Give a man a white coat, (or put him on a golf club committee,) and he will instantly become pompous, humourless and anxious to find someone to hang.

At one point I trod on a piece of concrete that turned out to be reserved for members. I was pounced upon by two men in white coats and told that if I did it again I would be thrown out of the ground. The whole place seemed to be dedicated to serving the needs of the sponsors – even though most of their guests sat in a large tent all day, eating, drinking and watching horse racing on television. Everywhere I looked there were advertisements – even on the grass and on the players themselves. When I first joined a professional cricket club many years ago I did so because I wanted to watch cricket. I assumed that the other members wanted the same thing. And I assumed that the staff of the club were employed to enable us to enjoy our membership. The club needed to earn money, of course. But the members' subscriptions were, together with the profits from the bar and the restaurant, enough to pay for the running of the club.

These days professional cricket clubs seem to exist solely to make money. The needs and interests of the members are secondary. Car parking space which was once available for members is now made available for sponsors. Members and genuine cricket loving spectators are crushed into smaller and smaller areas so that sponsors can be given plenty of space for their boxes and their luncheon parties.

In the old days (and I realise that in writing this I may seem like one of those old fogeys I used to detest when I was young) professional cricket clubs were special places; sanctuaries from the world of commerce. Today they are no more special than supermarkets. Their aim no longer seems to be to satisfy their members. Today the aim seems to be to make as big a profit as possible. The whole ethos has changed. And it has not, I fear, changed for the better.

AUGUST 22nd

‘I’m pleased to see that your wicket keeper friend Toby has stopped gambling,’ said my good lady wife this morning at breakfast.

I lowered my copy of the Daily Telegraph and looked hard at her. ‘How do you know Toby has stopped gambling?’

‘Because Mrs Babbage is wearing her wedding ring.’

I thought about this for a moment. ‘Why does that mean that Toby has stopped gambling?’

‘Because when he gambles he always loses and poor Mrs Babbage has to pawn her wedding ring to buy food.’

Women are sometimes far cleverer than they are generally believed to be.

AUGUST 24th

I changed the habit of a lifetime today and checked the weather forecast before this afternoon’s match. The professional forecasters, who are presumably paid good money for what they do, warned us to batten down the hatches and prepare for storms. They told us that we could expect to have hailstones that weighed as much as golf balls and that at least two inches of water would fall.

‘Have you heard the weather forecast for your part of the world?’ asked the captain of the visiting side, telephoning just after breakfast.

‘Sounds pretty gloomy, doesn’t it?’

‘I think we ought to abandon the match,’ said the captain. He sounded worried. ‘Some of our chaps are a bit worried about getting back home tonight.’

‘Do you think they’ve got it right this time?’ I asked, rather sceptically.

‘Oh I always take notice of what the weather people say,’ said my caller. ‘Always listen to the experts, that’s my motto.’

‘OK’, I sighed. When I had put the telephone down I started ringing the rest of the team to let them know that the match was cancelled.

It was, of course, the sunniest, warmest day we have had for months and there wasn’t a single cloud in the sky.

I am constantly surprised at the way that seemingly rational people will allow their lives to be ordered by the people who claim to be able to tell us what our weather is going to be like.

I have for years been convinced that the weather forecasters get the weather wrong more often than they get it right. When I am planning a holiday I always get a professional weather forecast for the area I am visiting. Then I pack for the exact opposite. If the official forecast is for constant sunshine I make sure that I pack lots of sweaters and waterproofs. If the forecast is for rain and snow I pack shorts, T-shirts and a straw hat.

It is my honest view that years of study and experience have enabled weather forecasters to devise a system which usually allows them to be entirely wrong.

AUGUST 25th

Today was quite a milestone for the club. Martin Mason finally completed his fifth century!

The century began towards the end of last season and Martin has added to it very slowly. Last week he scored 17 and needed just three more to complete his century. Sadly, he was given out caught behind. It was a very dubious decision.

Today Martin scored the three runs he needed with a single shot. He then went on to make a career best 24.

Occasionally, visiting teams are surprised that we celebrate centuries which have been accumulated over a number of matches. But if we didn’t do this none of our players would ever score centuries.

AUGUST 27th

I have been informed by Leopold Lewinsky, the club treasurer, that we may be eligible for lottery money if we alter our rules and allow women to become members of the club.

Leopold explained to me that he had heard that the Fondling-Under-Water cricket club treasurer contacted the lottery people – who apparently have vast amounts of cash to dispose of every year – and told them that they desperately wanted to allow women to become members but that they couldn't possibly afford to install special lavatories for women in the pavilion.

Leopold told me that almost by return post they received an enormous cheque. They used a tiny amount of the money to put a notice saying 'Women' on a small tent equipped with a bucket and spent the rest on refurbishing and restocking the bar.

Having thought carefully about the whole subject of female membership I have come to the conclusion that I may have been wrong in the past not to encourage women to be members of the club. I rather suspect that women will be able to offer us a whole new way of looking at the game and they will certainly be able to help out a lot in the pavilion.

I believe that if we allow women to be members and then give them a rota for cleaning the pavilion, serving behind the bar and making new curtains we should all benefit enormously from the relationship. Of course, it will be best if we arrange for only the prettiest and most buxom women to work behind the bar. But that shouldn't be too difficult to organise.

So that women members don't feel used (and there are bound to be one or two feminist types who worry about women's rights and so on) I think we should give them the chance to take an active part in the club's cricket activities too. My feeling is that women members would undoubtedly be thrilled if we gave them the chance to organise their own rota for dealing with the team's dirty laundry. This would solve a number of problems at once. First, it would mean that married men (such as myself) would no longer have to expect their wives to deal with their grass stained trousers. Second, it would mean that bachelors would have no excuse for turning up in trousers and shirts that are, by the end of the season, marked with grass and sweat stains accumulated over several months.

SEPTEMBER 1st

Most of the visiting teams who come to play at Little Lampton leave the same day that they arrive. Occasionally, a team which is touring the area will stay for a night at the Mott and Bailey.

And very, very occasionally those of us on the committee find ourselves having to put up visiting team members who have travelled too far to get home the same day, or who have drunk too much alcohol to find their way home without an intermediary visit to a police cell.

The good lady wife likes having visitors – even strangers are welcome – and says this is because she enjoys making people feel welcome. She fusses over cricketers she's never seen before as though she were running a small hotel and they were inspectors for one of those books which print reviews of hotels for tourists.

I don't like staying in other people's homes and I hate having visitors. I hate the way everyone pretends that they're comfortable when they aren't. I'm not talking about being physically comfortable, by the way. I'm talking about feeling comfortable, which is an entirely different thing.

Last night's visitor, an all rounder called Peter who couldn't bat much and was an even poorer bowler, was something of a one man disaster area.

We have, of course, got a lavatory on the same floor as the guest bedroom but either Peter didn't know this or else he forgot because when he was awoken by a full bladder at six minutes past one in the morning (I know the time to the minute because I looked at the clock both then and on numerous occasions afterwards) he began a long and noisy journey downstairs to the lavatory by the front door – the one which clearly had registered in his mind the evening before.

For reasons which I did not understand he chose to complete this hazardous journey without taking advantage of the visual assistance so ably and easily provided by the wonder of electricity. Have you noticed how often we all do that when staying in other people's homes? In our efforts to be unobtrusive we make ourselves a thousand times more obtrusive.

Awoken by the crash of a table which stood outside the visitors bedroom and upon which there had resided a silver framed photograph of the good lady wife's mother and a small porcelain figure of a pink shepherdess (a wedding gift from a distant aunt with poor eyesight and worse taste) we lay in bed and listened in silent horror to Peter's clumsy and noisy progress down the stairs, along the hallway and into the cloakroom.

'I hadn't realised our house contained so many things to knock over,' I whispered as Peter achieved the high point of the evening in decibel terms by sending a table which normally stood at the top of the stairs to the bottom of the stairs.

At the bottom of the stairs the table which normally lives at the top of the stairs collided with the table which lives at the bottom of the stairs. A telephone, two telephone directories, an address book, a green onyx pen and pencil set and three framed photographs were sent flying across the parquet floor in the hall. Several items got as far as the kitchen door.

The moments of comparative quiet which followed this intense few seconds of clattering were interrupted by some half suppressed cursing as Peter, working in the dark and hindered by the awareness of the painfully distended bladder which had awoken him in the first place, attempted to put the downstairs table back together again and then replace upon it the telephone, the telephone directories, the address book, the green onyx pen and pencil set and one or two of the picture frames. He had to try and do all this without stepping on the broken glass which had fallen out of the picture frames.

In the dead of night, when all else is still and calm and the loudest sounds in the world are the tick of the alarm clock and the sound of the owl at the bottom of the garden, even the most modest alien sound seems to acquire stature beyond all reasonable explanation and to the good lady wife and I, lying awake upstairs, it sounded more as though a clumsy squad of sappers were erecting a temporary bridge in the hallway, than as though a single solitary visitor was making a nocturnal visit to the lavatory.

A couple of minutes later we listened as Peter, having now concluded the business which had originally taken him to the downstairs cloakroom, finally persuaded the downstairs cistern to do the job it was there to do (with, inevitably, some more curses from Peter and a lot of gurgling from assorted pieces of piping) walked into the hall table and with a loud crash sent it, the telephone, the onyx pen and pencil set, the address book, the telephone directories and the picture frames crashing onto the floor once more.

There was, of course, a lengthy silence after the crash. During the silence Peter stood motionless (though unseen by us, of course) listening hard to his own breathing and trying to decide whether or not we had heard the crash. Since we were in the same county we had to have heard the crash but visitors in other people's homes always assume that the residents are pretty much deaf.

Eventually, the lengthy silence was broken by Peter's scrabblings and suppressed cursings as he struggled to put everything back where he thought it ought to be. Since he still hadn't turned the light on and didn't have the faintest idea exactly where he was, what he had knocked over or where it had originally been situated his chances of successfully completing this task were approximately nil.

The creaking of the stairs told us that Peter was, at last, making his way back up to bed and it was with some relief that we listened as he knocked over the bedside table, stumbled and fell into bed.

Both the good lady wife and I had nearly managed to get back to sleep when Peter's refilled bladder ensured that the whole 'son sans lumière' ritual was repeated. This time the whole bizarre ritual was, if anything, even more annoying than it had been the first time. Both my wife and I knew exactly what to expect next and so after each bump, each crash and each clatter we lay there, in the dark, waiting for the next bump, crash and clatter. Our agony was extended almost beyond endurance by the fact that Peter, now acutely aware that his route downstairs was well booby trapped was making a genuine but entirely unsuccessful attempt to avoid making, any noise. There is nothing in the world noisier than someone trying hard not to make any noise.

The third visit was probably the noisiest and most annoying of all. Neither the good lady wife nor I slept again that night.

'I hope you didn't have any difficulty in finding the loo in the night,' I said, bleary eyed, when I met Peter at breakfast the following morning. (Naturally, not wanting to wake us by getting up and wandering around the house too early he waited until he heard noises downstairs and then came down at about ten. He was dressed in one of my wife's old dressing gowns – an item which he had found in the wardrobe in the guest room.)

'Oh no!' insisted Peter, hung over but gallant. He paused, thought for a moment and frowned. 'I bumped into the hall table,' he confessed. 'I hope I didn't wake you.'

'We heard something,' I said, with a dismissive wave of a hand. 'As long as you didn't hurt yourself.'

'Oh no,' said Peter.

We studiously ignored the blood stained handkerchief wrapped around his naked foot.

`Just a bruise,' said Peter, breaking the silence at last. He took a sip at the mug of coffee the good lady wife had put be fore him. 'I didn't put the light on,' he said, 'because I didn't want to disturb you.'

'Thank you,' I said, trying hard to sound grateful.

'What would you like for breakfast?' the good lady wife asked him.

'Oh, whatever you're having,' replied Peter.

'We're just having our usual toast and coffee,' said the good lady wife, taking two slices of bread out of the bread bin and starting to move them towards the toaster. 'But I can always do you bacon, egg and so on,' she added, unable to resist being the good hostess. .

‘Oh go on then,’ said Peter. ‘If you insist. Could you fry the eggs sunny side up? And do you have any mushrooms? Tomatoes? Oh and lots of brown sauce if you’ve got it.’

‘Fine,’ said the wife.

‘No problem,’ said I, standing up and preparing to walk down to the village shop to buy the mushrooms, the tomatoes and the bacon.

Later the good lady wife found one of the broken picture frames – complete with broken glass and photograph – behind the hall bookcase.

We had wondered where it had gone.

‘There you are,’ I said. ‘I told you no one would want to steal a photograph of your mother.’

SEPTEMBER 3rd

Cyril Darlington, our usual umpire, was away ill today. And so we persuaded Hector Robinson to stand in his place. When he heard that Cyril was poorly Albert Hedges, our groundsman, offered to take his place again. I thanked him and told him we wanted him on stand-by in case the grass needed an emergency cut in the middle of the match. (Albert spent the whole afternoon sitting on his ride-on lawn mower with the engine running.)

Unfortunately, Cyril is a thin, slight fellow and Hector is not. This seemingly incidental difference produced a major problem.

As we prepared to start the match it became increasingly clear that Hector was having a great deal of difficulty in getting his breath. I was about to step forward to ask if he was all right when he collapsed and slumped to the ground.

‘What happened?’ asked Hector, when he had regained consciousness.

When he was told that he seemed to have fainted Hector was deeply embarrassed (so embarrassed, indeed, that he very nearly fainted again) and insisted on ignoring the advice of all those present (most of the fielding side, two batsmen and the other umpire) and struggling to his feet.

‘Oh dear,’ he said, wheezing, standing up but looking very wobbly. ‘My chest feels very...tight...I can’t breathe.’

‘It’s a heart attack,’ said one of the visiting batsmen. He spoke with certainty, as if he knew what he was talking about.

‘It doesn’t feel...like a...heart attack,’ said Hector timidly.

‘Have you ever had one before?’ asked the batsmen.

‘No,’ admitted Hector.

‘Then how can you possibly know what a heart attack feels like?’ asked the batsman, triumphantly.

‘Well, I haven’t...got any pain,’ wheezed Hector. ‘It’s just that...I ...can’t...breathe.’

‘Lie him down,’ said Anthony, firmly. Our captain is a good man to have in a crisis.

‘No. That’s the worst thing you can do with someone who is having a heart attack,’ said the seemingly knowledgeable batsman, equally firmly. ‘If we lie him down all the blood will flow out of his heart and he’ll die.’

None of us knew which of this advice was accurate and so we did nothing.

‘My brother-in-law’s neighbour had a heart attack,’ said Leopold. ‘My sister told me all about it afterwards. I think this man is having a heart attack. We should get him into a coronary care unit straight away.’

‘Get him a drink of water,’ said Toby, with authority.

‘Brandy,’ said Henry, equally firmly. ‘He needs brandy if he’s having a heart attack.’ Henry was a firm believer in the efficacy of alcohol in the treatment of ill health. He self prescribed brandy for every symptom he had.

‘Oh dear,’ said Martin, wringing his hands. ‘I do so hate illness. Is he going to be all right?’

‘Has anyone got any aspirin?’ asked Leopold. ‘I read somewhere that you should give people aspirin if they have heart attacks.’

‘Aspirin!’ said Martin, scornfully. ‘What good will aspirin do?’

‘It stops the clotting,’ said Leopold. ‘The aspirin tablet rolls along in the arteries and clears out any blood clots.’

‘Shouldn’t we get him off the field?’ asked the other umpire. ‘Play is being held up.’

‘We haven’t started playing yet,’ Anthony pointed out.

‘That’s because your umpire fainted,’ pointed out the visiting umpire. ‘So he’s interfering with play starting which is the same as interfering with play.’

Hector fumbled with the button at the front of his white coat. ‘I...can’t...breathe...,’ he said.

‘Undo his coat,’ said Dr Wainwright, our village doctor, who had pottered up from his seat beside the pavilion and was in truth standing quite close enough to perform this task himself. The doctor, alone among those present, seemed perfectly calm and unflustered. Several hands reached out but the coat was so tight that it was quite impossible to unfasten the button. Eventually, Dr Wainwright reached out and wrenched the button from the front of Hector’s coat. As soon as the button was off Hector took in, and in turn let out, several huge breaths.

‘How do you feel?’ asked Anthony, anxiously.

‘Much better!’ said Hector, greatly relieved.

`Are you sure?’

‘I feel fine!’ insisted Hector. He shook his head. He seemed surprised at how well he felt. ‘It was the coat,’ he said, immensely relieved. ‘It was too tight!’

SEPTEMBER 5th

Leopold, the club treasurer, and I called a special meeting of the committee this evening to discuss the disastrous state of the club’s finances.

‘We have 216 members but only 11 of them have paid their subscriptions!’ Leopold announced at the start of the meeting. I flicked through a register of club members which I was holding and decided, on the spur of the moment, to make an example of someone who hadn’t paid his dues. ‘Look at Alfred Bishop,’ I said. ‘He hasn’t paid his membership dues for five years!’

‘But...’ said Henry, protesting.

‘No, no!’ I said firmly. ‘It’s no good finding excuses for people. We can all find good reasons why we can’t afford to pay our cricket club bill. But we pay gas bills and electricity bills and telephone bills. We pay those bills which we regard as important.’ I waved a finger at my audience. ‘That’s the key!’ I said. ‘The cricket club bill must be regarded as having priority.’

‘But...’ said Henry again, seemingly desperate to say something.

‘No!’ I said again, denying him the chance to speak. ‘If you’re going to say that Alfred Bishop can’t afford to pay his bills because he’s old or disabled I’m just not going to listen to you I’m afraid. There are a lot of other elderly and disabled members of this club and some of them – well two of them to be accurate – do pay their bills. We don’t charge a lot and if Alfred Bishop wants to continue enjoying the benefits of being a member then he’ll damned well have to start paying his way.’

‘But...’ began Henry again, stopping automatically in the expectation that I would refuse to allow him to continue. But this time I allowed him to continue. ‘Go on,’ I said, ‘what is Alfred Bishop’s excuse?’

‘He’s dead,’ said Henry. ‘He’s been dead for five years.’

‘Oh,’ I said, the wind rather taken out of my sails. ‘I didn’t think I’d seen him around for a while,’ I added. I thought about it a little more. ‘He should have written and let us know,’ I said.

There was some scattered tittering.

‘Written and let you know he was dead?’ said Henry.

‘Well, someone could have,’ I said, rather meekly.

‘He didn’t have any relatives. He lived alone. His wife died over twenty years ago,’ said Henry.

‘Oh.’ I said.

‘And when he died you didn’t even notice!’ said Henry. He glowered at me over his spectacles. ‘Maybe the club should be less concerned with money and more concerned with looking after its members.’

This sentiment was greeted with much approval and on that note I decided to declare the meeting closed.

‘How did your meeting go, dear?’ asked my good lady wife when I got home.

‘Not quite as planned,’ was all I would admit.

SEPTEMBER 6th

We buried Oliver Underwood today. He was 93 when he died, and the oldest member of the club. He was groundsman for over thirty years (the three wives he had during that time all described themselves as grass widows) but was also one of the club's most enthusiastic members.

He got so excited towards the end of a league match last Sunday that he had a heart attack and died.

No one sitting nearby wanted to disturb the game – they knew Oliver wouldn't have wanted to get in the way of things for he was a very self-effacing man – so they used his umbrella to prop him up against the scorer's table and there he stayed until the end of the match.

Unfortunately, it was a little chilly that day and at the end of the match we all rushed into the pavilion to warm ourselves up. We completely forgot to do anything about Oliver until considerably later. By the time the ambulance arrived rigor mortis had set in. The undertakers had to have an extra large coffin made and bury Oliver sitting up.

At the wake which we held in the pavilion after the funeral we sat around telling one another stories about Oliver's life. Oliver was a pessimist all his life. When he had a car he always used to leave it parked at least a mile away from his house. He did this because he had read that most accidents occur within a mile of the house.

'Do you remember the time when we organised a coach trip to the Oval for the Test Match?' asked Giles. 'On the coach Oliver sat next to the emergency window. There was a little notice that said 'In Emergency Break Glass With Hammer'. The problem was that there wasn't a hammer. It was an old coach and someone must have nicked the hammer. Oliver insisted that we drive around, find an ironmongers and buy a hammer. Of course when you want an ironmongers you can never find one. When we eventually did track one down he sat there clutching the hammer for the entire journey.'

'Just waiting for an emergency,' said Toby.

'We got to the Oval an hour and twenty minutes late and missed the entire England innings,' said Leopold, laughing.

'There had been a batting collapse,' said Toby.

'Exactly what England does best,' said Leopold. 'Some countries are famous for their wonderful batting pitches and their free flowing batsmen. Others are famous for their fast bowlers or for pitches which give a little extra help to spin bowlers. England is famous for collapsing more often, more dramatically than anyone else.' He sighed and shook his head sadly.

Oliver earned his living as a carpenter – though in later life he only carpented within cycling range of where he lived. The story of how he lost his car is worth telling.

Oliver and Elsie, his wife, decided to go for a walk one warm Sunday. After a couple of miles Elsie developed sore feet. She sat down on a bank by the side of the road and said that she simply couldn't walk another inch. So Oliver, being the gentleman he was at heart said he'd take a short cut across the fields and fetch their car to save her the walk back home.

After walking through the fields and scrambling through a couple of hedges Oliver eventually got back home. He was exhausted. He had ripped his trousers and his shirt on barbed wire, his feet were sore, and he was dying for a drink. It was still early and Elsie was sitting comfortably on a nice, comfortable grassy bank so he popped into the Mott and Bailey, and ordered himself a pint of best ale to quench his thirst.

Naturally, one pint wasn't quite enough to slake his thirst and Oliver was feeling a bit peckish so he had a second and a third and with the second he had a packet of salt and vinegar crisps and with the third he had a packet of very best pork scratchings. And eventually, after about an hour and a half, he decided to toddle back home, have a bath and soak his feet.

So, off he went. He filled the bath with steaming hot water, climbed in and had a nice, long soak. By the time he clambered out three quarters of an hour later he felt much better. He put on his dressing gown, pottered down the stairs, made himself a nice cup of tea, tottered into the living room and settled down in his favourite armchair in front of the TV to watch an old Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn movie.

When the movie ended he realised he was feeling quite hungry, the salt and vinegar crisps and the pork scratchings having long been digested, so he got up and wandered into the kitchen to tell Elsie that he was ready for his dinner.

Of course, there was no Elsie in the kitchen. There was no one in the kitchen apart from the cat who also hadn't been fed and who was in a pretty bad mood and miaowed at him rather loudly. The kitchen was dark and empty and the stove was cold and bare. By now it was pitch dark outside.

So, Oliver fed the cat and not being much of a cook he opened a packet of biscuits, took a can of beer out of the fridge and toddled back into the living room to watch a football match on the television.

It was a good match and it went into extra time and by the time the referee blew the final whistle Oliver had begun to wonder where Elsie had got to. He wasn't really worried, but the biscuits had all gone and he wanted something to eat and he was beginning to get worried about who was going to make his breakfast the next morning because he does like a cooked breakfast and so he rang Elsie's sister to see if Elsie had popped round there. But she hadn't, of course, because Elsie was still sitting on a grassy bank in the middle of nowhere, freezing cold and wondering what on earth had happened to her brave knight errant in size elevens. So Oliver, having no luck with the sister, rang Elsie's mum. And she didn't know where her daughter was but when she heard that Elsie wasn't at home with Oliver she got worried and she said that she thought that perhaps Oliver should ring the police.

But Oliver didn't really want to ring the police because he didn't have what you could call a normal working relationship with them on account of his not exactly having had an unblemished youth, so he put the phone down on Elsie's mother and went round every room of his house just to check that Elsie wasn't sitting somewhere quietly doing her knitting. This didn't take a long time because they only had two up and two down.

When he still couldn't find her he sat down and thought of that old trick of trying to remember where you last saw something you've lost in order to find it again. And suddenly he remembered that he had left Elsie sitting on a grassy bank and he guessed that Elsie, not being over-endowed with initiative, was probably still sitting on the grassy bank waiting for him.

So he got dressed, got into the car and drove back down the lane where they'd been walking and sure enough there was Elsie still sitting on the grassy bank patiently waiting for him. She was really delighted to see him and extremely relieved at having been rescued because she'd begun to think that she was going to have to spend the night out in the cold with only the stars for a blanket.

But by this time Elsie's mum, who was a keen reader of tabloid newspapers and who was worried sick that her daughter had been kidnapped by aliens or carted off to suffer unimaginable agonies working as 43rd wife in a harem in some Arabian country – though why anyone would want to cart off Elsie I can't imagine and even if they did I would have thought that she would have been better off with aliens or working as 43rd wife in a harem than living with Oliver – had telephoned the police and reported her daughter missing. But she couldn't get the village bobby, because he was a staunch member of the Mott and Bailey Skittles Team and he was playing an away league game seven miles away and although they had a telephone there no one ever answered it on the night of a league match, partly because no one wanted to be disturbed and partly because there was always so much noise that no one could hear it anyway.

So when Oliver and Elsie got back home they found a police car parked outside their house but the police car contained two bobbies from the big city and they were in a foul mood because they would have much rather been catching motorists on the by-pass because generally speaking that's a much easier way to fill up the charge sheet.

Naturally, neither Oliver nor Elsie realised that the police were only there because they'd had a call from Elsie's mother and so they panicked.

Or, to be more accurate, Oliver panicked because Elsie was fast asleep and anyway you really need a little bit of imagination in order to panic and no one ever accused Elsie – who was a very nice lady and had some very impressive attributes not least of these being her ability to make a really tasty cheesecake – of being over endowed with imagination.

When Oliver saw the police car he slammed on the brakes, changed gear and tried to do a 180 degree turn.

Unfortunately, the lane wasn't quite as wide as the car and Oliver ended up with both the back end and the front end of his car firmly embedded in the grass banks which run along the two sides of the lane where they live. And Elsie, who had suddenly woken up, was screaming loud enough to wake the neighbourhood, if there had been a neighbourhood.

The two officers in the police car, got out of their vehicle and walked over to see what was going on. Naturally, being city boys, they'd never seen anything like it before.

They asked Elsie if she was Elsie and since she was and she's an honest woman she said she was. And so they arrested Oliver for kidnapping her.

Naturally, Oliver insisted that they were married and that a man can't be arrested for kidnapping his wife and that puzzled the policemen for a moment. They checked him out and found out that he was who he said he was. But when they found out that he was who he said he was they also found out that his memory was so bad that he had seventeen unpaid parking tickets, two unsettled fines for moving traffic violations and two county court judgements against him – one for forgetting to pay his rates and one for forgetting to pay the hire purchase payments on the car he was driving.

And so Oliver ended up spending seven nights in the local lock up and losing his licence and his car.

We'll miss him. He was quite a character.

SEPTEMBER 12th

Mrs Norton has for many years been something of a pain in the neck as far as the cricket club is concerned. She has a cottage which overlooks the cricket ground and she has always refused to allow us to have back balls which have been hit into her garden.

Today, at the age of 88, Mrs Norton finally passed away. She was very keen to reach her century so that the queen would have to send her a telegram (as a republican it was, I gather, her intention to return the telegram to the sender) so I was pleased by the news that she has been deprived of this small joy.

When I told other committee members of Mrs Norton’s demise the general feeling was one of great relief.

‘She had it coming,’ said Terry Shaw, one of the club’s most enthusiastic supporters

SEPTEMBER 15th.

Mrs Norton’s cottage is being sold tomorrow and there is apparently going to be an auction of her furniture and belongings. The estate agent handling the sale tipped me off that it might be worthwhile my attending the auction as a representative of the cricket club. I am intrigued.

SEPTEMBER 16th

I attended the auction at Mrs Norton’s cottage today. Lot 67 was a large cardboard box full of cricket balls. These were, undoubtedly, the balls which the late Mrs Norton had refused to return to the club after they had been hit into her garden.

There was no interest at all among the other bidders and I managed to purchase the box full of balls for 50 pence.

This is quite a windfall. There were 36 balls in the box enough to keep us going for several seasons, particularly since Mrs Norton has gone and there is every chance that the new owner of her cottage may be prepared to return our balls to us.

SEPTEMBER 17th

I called round to see Leopold today, taking with me a copy of the draft accounts for next month's Annual General Meeting.

As treasurer of the club Leopold had given me the draft accounts to look at a few days earlier.

When I got there the house and garden stank of fish. It was so bad that I nearly turned round and went home. Instead I put my handkerchief across my face and tapped on the door; half hoping that no one would answer so that I could creep away.

'Come in!' called Leopold's wife, Eileen. 'The door's open.'

Stumbling into the house with the handkerchief across my face I very nearly fell over a huge basket of fish heads which was standing right inside the front door.

'Oh it's you,' said Eileen. 'Sorry about the smell. He's not in by the way.'

'What on earth are you doing?' I asked. 'Opening a cat food factory?' I tripped, steadied myself and looked down. I had stumbled over a toy car. The carpet was littered with children's toys, roller skates, books and bits and pieces of dirty laundry – much of it surprisingly intimate. The kitchen seemed to be full of children.

Just then the telephone rang. 'Excuse me,' said Eileen. She picked up the receiver said: 'oh' 'fine' 'right' and 'tomorrow at the same time then' in that order and put the telephone down. She walked to the front door, picked up the basket of fish heads and took it outside. Then she walked back towards the kitchen. 'Helen!' she cried, above the din of screaming children. 'Tell your friends to go home, please. I've got a headache now.' There were squeals of protest and doors banged as children left.

'Did you say Leopold is out?' I asked.

'Yes,' said Eileen. 'He's gone to the golf club.'

'Would you give him this please when he gets back?' I asked, handing her the draft accounts. 'I can't see any problems – other than the fact that we don't seem to have any money.'

'Nothing changes there then,' said Eileen. She looked at me and smiled. 'I suppose you're wondering what's going on?'

I shrugged and smiled back.

'You know Leopold wants to sell the house and buy one of those modern places in town?'

I nodded.

'I don't,' said Eileen. 'So I keep making sure that every one who comes to see this place comes when Leopold is out.

I began to understand. 'So the fishy smell...'

'...and the screaming children, the mess on the floor and all the rest of it are to put people off,' said Eileen. 'I get the fish heads from a girl I know who works in the local fish and chip restaurant.'

A noise like an aircraft landing suddenly forced both of us to put our hands over our ears. 'What on earth was that?' I asked.

'Oh, that's Geoff and Maureen next door,' said Eileen.

‘They don’t want us to leave. Geoff has souped up his petrol strimmer and he gets it going every few minutes whenever he thinks there’s someone here looking round the house. He obviously saw you come in and didn’t recognise you. I was expecting some people to view the house when you arrived – the estate agent just rang to postpone them until tomorrow.’

‘How’s your plan going?’ I asked.

‘Brilliantly,’ said Eileen. ‘Leopold had a phone call from the estate agents yesterday evening. The feedback they’ve had from prospective buyers has been so bad that they suggested knocking another £10,000 off the price. I think I’ve nearly persuaded him into staying.’ She moved towards the kettle. ‘Do you want a coffee?’

‘No thanks,’ I said.

‘Don’t blame you,’ she replied. ‘The fish smell is pretty terrible isn’t it?’

SEPTEMBER 18th

It is strange how our lives are determined by fate. Today, while having my feet attended to, I asked Toby Babbage, our local baker, how he became a part-time chiropodist.

‘I really wanted to be a dentist,’ he said, concentrating hard on doing whatever it was he was doing to my foot. I never look. I have a suspicion that whatever it is that he is doing would be considerably more painful if I could see it.

‘But you’re not a dentist,’ I pointed out, without too much fear of being contradicted.

‘No,’ agreed Toby, who is not one of life’s greatest conversationalists.

‘Why didn’t you become a dentist?’ I asked.

‘I didn’t have the right qualifications to go to dental school.’

‘Ah.’

There was then another long pause during which I read a magazine article about house prices.

‘So how did you become a chiropodist?’ I asked, returning to my original question.

Toby put down a fearsome metal instrument, looked up at me and did a good deal of thinking. ‘The chap at the job centre went through all the possible jobs starting with those beginning with A – accountancy, advertising and so on. When he got to ‘chiropodist’ he told me it was a bit like being a dentist in that it involved specialising in a part of the human body. So I wrote off to a man at a learn-through-the-post chiropody school and he thought I was applying for a place and he sent back a letter saying I could start in September if I sent a cheque for the course fees so I did.’

This was, I suspect, the longest single speech Toby had ever given. He seemed exhausted.

‘That’s fascinating, Toby,’ I told him.

He looked at me. ‘I expect you think that’s pretty sad, don’t you?’

‘Not in the slightest,’ I assured him.

I didn’t tell him that I myself had chosen to study mathematics because I had a crush on the mathematics teacher; a sweet bespectacled spinster in her thirties who managed to turn the teaching of algebra into an erotic experience.

SEPTEMBER 20th

During today’s match one of the visiting batsmen hit the ball well over long off’s head and twenty yards or so into the middle of Bluebell Wood. Since the undergrowth in Bluebell Wood is several feet high and there was obviously no point at all in wasting time looking for the ball I went into the pavilion and brought out our box of spare balls, now well replenished after my recent success at the auction at Mrs Norton’s cottage.

‘Good heavens!’ said the visiting captain, as we rummaged through the box of balls together. (Not looking, as the professionals might, for a ball that we thought matched the ball that had been lost, but simply looking for the best ball in the box). He held up an extremely elderly looking ball.

‘Oh, we’ll just use that for friendly games!’ I said, laughing in an attempt to hide my embarrassment. The ball looked as if it had been hand made by a blind, ham-fisted peasant at some time during the late Middle Ages.

‘You don’t want to use this at all!’ said the visiting captain.

‘Don’t we?’ I said, assuming he meant that the ball was so misshapen that using it would teach us bad habits. I took the ball from him and examined it. It didn’t look all that bad to me. We have certainly played with worse. A ball would have to be shaped like a sugar cube for most of us to notice anything wrong with it.

‘That would fetch a small fortune at auction,’ said the visitor, nodding at the ball in my hand.

I looked at him and then looked back at the ball I was holding. It suddenly felt remarkably fragile. I held onto it a little tighter, anxious lest I drop it and damage it.

‘Collectors love all that old stuff now,’ said the visitor.

‘One of our players found an old bat in his attic and sold it for thousands. The Americans and the Japanese seem to be buying old cricket equipment now. They’ve apparently bought up all the old golf stuff.’

‘Er...how much...er...do you think it’s worth?’ I asked.

‘Haven’t the foggiest,’ replied the visitor. ‘But certainly enough to keep you supplied with brand new balls for quite a while.’

‘Crumbs...’ I rummaged around in the box. ‘Do you...er...think any of these other balls might be valuable?’

The visitor played with the balls for a few moments and eventually picked out one other. ‘This one is old,’ he said. ‘The rest are just knackered.’

We picked out one of the knackered balls to play with and I gave the two old balls to one of the tea ladies and told her to put them somewhere very safe.

SEPTEMBER 27th

The cricket season ended a couple of weeks ago. And now the house martins are emigrating. This is a sad time of the year for those of us who love cricket. Until next April we will have to make do with reports of the England cricket team's latest adventures in foreign parts. Given their failures in recent history it might perhaps be better if the authorities arranged for our team to visit countries where cricket is not normally played. Maybe we could win a Test Match or two if we played in Poland or Brazil.

Early in the year a neighbour's cat caught and killed two house martins who had been living in a neat nest which had been built under the eaves of our house. The two birds built the nest three years ago and came back to it this year for the third time. Those hooligans who remove house martins nests on the grounds that the inevitable droppings are a nuisance have no soul.

When the neighbourhood's house martins were ready to leave, and risk life and wing by flying south, they came by the nest under our eaves to remind their two friends that it was time to join the flock and leave.

And although the two birds were not there the flock returned time and time again. They seemed to be crying out

'Come on, come on! It's time to go. Hurry or you'll miss the flight!'

It was one of the saddest sights of the year.

OCTOBER 5th

The cricket club held its annual golf championships today. The turnout wasn’t particularly impressive – only two of us turned up – but the weather was good for the time of the year and it was a most enjoyable day. I was well pleased with my second place.

OCTOBER 6th

When I arrived in the pub this evening Anthony was the only person there. He looked morose.

‘What’s up?’ I asked.

‘I’m getting old,’ he said.

I asked him what had brought on this thought.

Anthony told me that he realised he was getting old when he was travelling on the train to London with his wife and teen age daughter.

‘When my wife walked down the train to the buffet no one looked. But when my daughter walked down to the buffet I saw all the men’s heads tilting to one side to watch her bottom. It was at that moment that I realised that she had become a woman and that I had become a member of the last generation instead of the next generation and that I wasn’t part of the nation’s hope for the future after all.’

I didn’t know what to say to comfort him. So I bought him another drink. To my delight that seemed to do the trick.

OCTOBER 7th

I have sent out cards to all my friends telling them of my success in the cricket club’s annual golf championship. They will all be very impressed with my excellent result. (I didn’t bother to mention that the championship was poorly attended.)

OCTOBER 19th

Restaurants everywhere seem to have the same names these days. Within a ten mile radius of Little Lampton we have two restaurants called ‘The Lobster Pot, four called ‘The Captain’s Table’ and three called ‘The Hole in the Wall’. Martin Mason told me today that he is planning to open a new restaurant. He says he intends to call it ‘The Captain’s Lobster Pot In The Wall’.

OCTOBER 31st

I played golf with Henry today. When I handed him his 20 pence in winnings Henry told me that he wanted to increase the size of our bet in future. I am not keen on this. I think that if money is allowed to play too large a part in a sport then there is a danger that the participants will lose their affection for the game.

Actually, I am not sure that I have much affection left for golf. I lost nine balls and my left golf shoe today. The mud around the edge of the lake between the 16th and 17th holes is much thicker than I had imagined. I have reported the loss of my shoe to the club secretary though I am afraid he did not seem to be quite as interested as I would have liked him to be.

‘Would you like me to send out a search party, sir?’ he enquired, in what I regarded as a rather sarcastic tone.

‘That would be very useful,’ I replied, ignoring the sarcasm.

‘I’ll also alert the authorities and the media, sir,’ he said, drifting off towards his office.

The man is, like all golf club employees, a supercilious buffoon who needs taking down a peg or two. Next time he sends me a begging letter asking for my annual cheque I will make him wait a month or two. That should teach him not to mess with a Pettigrew.

NOVEMBER 6th

Toby and I went to London on the train today to show our two oldest balls to a dealer.

I confess that when we set off I thought it was all going to be a bit of a waste of time. I thought the expert at the auction house would turn up his nose at what looked like little more than a pair of clapped out old cricket balls.

But he didn't.

'These are splendid!' he said, with genuine enthusiasm. He was tall with a fine abundance of red hair and wore half moon spectacles. 'We can certainly sell these for you if you would like us to'.

'How much?' asked Toby, who was less intimidated than I.

The expert pursed his lips and sucked in air, as experts are wont to do. 'Difficult to say,' he said. 'But I think we would recommend putting a reserve price of £500 against this ball and perhaps a little more against that one.' He pointed at each of the two balls in turn as he spoke.

'Around £1000 for the two?' said Toby.

'That's our minimum expectation, of course,' said the auction house expert, who seemed surprised. I suspect he thought he had detected an air of disappointment in Toby's voice. There wasn't any disappointment, it was just that Toby was trying not to sound hysterical. 'The selling price could be considerably higher than that.'

We thanked the expert, left the balls with him for safe keeping and took a taxi back to the railway station. We decided to celebrate by having dinner on the train. There was no dining car so we bought two packets of sandwiches (filled with something described as cheese but tasting more like rubber) and two packets of over-priced crisps.

Twenty minutes into our journey Toby put a handful of crisps into his mouth and started to choke.

We were sitting just a few yards away from the buffet car and the steward, seeing and hearing one of his passengers coughing and spluttering, came hurrying up to offer help.

'Would you like a drink of water, sir?' he asked Toby, who was going a rather unhealthy colour.

Toby, unable to talk, nodded to show that he would, indeed, like a drink of water.

'I'll fetch you one, sir,' said the kindly steward, hurrying back towards the buffet car.

Toby continued to cough and splutter. He had gone the colour of a rather over-ripe plum.

The steward reappeared. He coughed politely. We both looked at him. 'Excuse me, sir,' he said, addressing Toby. 'But would you like sparkling or still water?'

Toby, desperate for water, indicated that he had no preference.

'Still water will do nicely, thank you,' I said to the steward, not wanting him to waste any more time agonising over the decision.

When the steward brought the water he charged us 60 pence for it.

NOVEMBER 9th

With the promised but unexpected windfall from the sale of our balls we now feel able to continue with the rewiring of the cricket club pavilion.

Giles Harris said he would be sorry not to drink by candle light throughout the winter. I pointed out that when the wiring has been repaired we will have the option of using the electricity or not.

NOVEMBER 11th

‘I once knew a mist like this which lasted for three days,’ said Henry yesterday evening. The mist was so thick that we were stuck in the pavilion, unable to see anything at all outside. ‘I was stranded in the Mott and Bailey for five days.’ There was a long pause. ‘We couldn’t go home,’ Henry said. There was another pause. ‘We had to stay there for five days and five nights. It was terrible,’ he added, unconvincingly. ‘After two and a half days the pub ran out of beer. Fortunately the landlord had a good supply of whisky.’

Giles frowned, ‘I’m a bit puzzled,’ he said. ‘You said that the mist lasted for three days?’

‘That’s right,’ said Henry.

‘But you said you were all stuck in the pub for five days?’

‘That’s right,’ agreed Henry.

‘So did the mist last for three days or five days?’

‘Oh the mist lasted for three days. But after two days we drew the curtains so that we didn’t have to keep looking out at the damned stuff. And we forgot to look out of the windows to see if it had cleared.’

‘So you stayed in the pub for two days after the mist had cleared?’

‘We’d have probably still been there now if Leopold’s wife hadn’t come looking for him,’ admitted Henry, nodding in Leopold Lewinsky’s direction. ‘Her washing line had broken you see and she wanted another one putting up.’ He sighed. ‘Women always want things doing.’

‘Is all that true?’ Giles asked Leopold.

‘I’m afraid so,’ said Leopold, looking rather embarrassed.

‘It’s all quite true.’

NOVEMBER 17th

Miss Edwards was buried today. She was one of our oldest serving tea ladies and will be sorely missed. Over the years she must have made tens of thousands of sandwiches. I would not like to guess at the number of cups of teas she has poured.

After the funeral we returned to the pavilion to celebrate her memory with a drop or two of the hard stuff – her favourite beverage.

‘Do you remember when she and Miss Arrowsmith took a fancy to the old vicar?’ asked Henry.

Anthony laughed. ‘Oh I remember that!’ he said. ‘It wasn’t just the two of them, though. Who was the third old dear who had her claws in the poor old sod?’

‘Began with a B,’ said Leopold. ‘Beatrice, Bridget, Bertha, Brenda,’ he tried, testing each name in turn; rolling the vowels and consonants over his tongue and then stopping and thinking for a moment, much in the same sort of way that an oenophilist will pause while tasting a new wine, rolling the liquid around and around in his mouth.

‘Beryl?’ suggested Toby.

‘No, it wasn’t Beryl,’ said Leopold immediately.

‘I remember a girl called Beryl,’ said Henry. ‘I met her at Oxford.’

‘Were you at Oxford?’ asked Leopold.

‘Oh yes,’ agreed Henry. ‘And Cambridge.’

‘Really?’ said Leopold. He sounded as impressed as he clearly was.

‘Ask him what he was doing there?’ suggested Anthony, with a light laugh.

‘What were you reading?’ asked Leopold.

‘Only the sports pages,’ admitted Henry. ‘I was an academic textbook salesman for a while. I used to visit all the university bookshops. But I couldn’t understand a word in any of those books. Beryl was working as an assistant in a bookshop. She took me down by the river and we drank bubbly wine and ate marshmallows.’

‘Marshmallows?’ said Leopold and Anthony simultaneously.

‘She liked marshmallows,’ explained Henry. ‘She insisted on taking off all her clothes and jumping naked into the river.

She had a good figure. She was a well built girl. She had absolutely enormous...’

‘Norah,’ said Leopold suddenly.

‘Norah?’ said Henry, puzzled. He thought for a moment. ‘Well, I probably nuzzled and nibbled her a bit...’

‘No, you fool!’ said Leopold. ‘Norah was the third woman,’ he explained.

‘Are you sure?’ said Henry, screwing up his eyes.

‘Absolutely,’ said Leopold.

‘I think you’re right,’ agreed Henry. ‘But I felt sure that you were right and that her name began with a B. Maybe her second name began with B.'

'Her second name was Wallis,' said Leopold, firmly.

'Norah Wallis.

'I remember her now,' said Henry, nodding. 'Norah Wallis.' He paused, frowned and thought for a moment. 'Are you sure it was Wallis?' He spelt out the name. 'w...a...l...l...i...s?' He paused again, clearly thinking once more. 'I have a feeling it was Wallace. w...a...l...l...a...c...e.'

'Norah Wallis. w...a...l...l...i...s.' said Leopold

'Ah well,' sighed Henry. 'Sometimes I think I'm doing well if I can remember my own name.'

'So what happened?' asked Toby, who was losing the plot.

'They all got the hots for the vicar we had at the time,' said Henry.

'A little crudely put but it sums up the situation quite nicely,' agreed Leopold. 'He was a bachelor and they were all desperate to persuade him to put out the bans, ring up the bishop and turn himself into fifty per cent of a happily married couple. He was in his mid sixties but he was a good looking chap. Tall, beautiful white hair and very well educated.'

'He really had been to Oxford,' said Henry.

'I can't remember why but they all decided that the best way to win his affection was to keep him well supplied with good food,' said Leopold.

'Wealthy too, wasn't he?' said Henry. 'Didn't his father own a car factory in Birmingham?'

'His father owned a chemist's shop in Rochdale,' said Leopold patiently. 'But his uncle spent his life working in America. He was a mining engineer. He was the one who made all the money.'

'I knew he was rich,' said Henry, prodding Toby in the ribs with a rather stout forefinger. 'See! My brain's not entirely gone soft,' he announced, as though he suspected that there had been some public debate about this.

Leopold frowned. 'Where was I?'

'You were telling us that these three women all decided that the best way to get the vicar to the altar was to feed him well,' Toby reminded him.

'Oh yes!' said Leopold. 'So I was!' He drank some whisky. 'Well, one Saturday evening Miss Edwards turned up with a huge pot of beef and dumpling stew, Miss Arrowsmith took round a roasted chicken and NorahWallis arrived on his doorstep clutching a cooked ham only slightly smaller than Norfolk. The vicar was a really sweet fellow who hated waste. He felt he had to eat everything put before him and ended up spending two days in hospital with what the doctors thought was an ulcer. It turned out to be nothing more substantial than a nigh on terminal bout of indigestion. After that he insisted that the three women work out some sort of rota system. They did as they were told and before long he didn't have to get himself any meals except breakfast.'

'Sounds a pretty good arrangement, to me!' said Toby.

'Well in a way I suppose it was,' agreed Leopold. 'But then Miss Arrowsmith and Norah Wallis realised that the vicar played cricket with us on a Saturday afternoon and that Miss Edwards had him all to herself then because she was the only one of the three of them who was involved in making our cricket teas.'

Leopold sighed. 'You can imagine the trouble that caused. Miss Arrowsmith and Norah Wallis both announced that they were going to join the Refreshments Committee and before you could say 'sausage roll' the table in the pavilion was laden every week with so much food that we could have fed just about every amateur cricket side in the county.’

‘Do you remember those fish paste sandwiches the Wallis woman used to bring?’ asked Henry.

‘Very good, weren’t they?’ agreed Leopold.

‘She used to bring these little glass pots full of fish paste,’ said Henry. He sighed, wistfully. ‘I haven’t seen one of those for years. Do they still make them, do you know?’

‘Haven’t got the foggiest,’ said Leopold. He looked at Toby, who has a baker’s shop and is, therefore, our expert on food.

‘I don’t know,’ said Toby, with a shrug. ‘They’ve probably been banned by the European Union.’

‘Every week they used to compete with one another to see who could make the most sandwiches,’ continued Leopold. ‘They seemed to be convinced that sheer quantity was all it would take to impress the vicar.’

‘He didn’t like fancy food, did he? The old vicar.’ said Henry.

‘You’re right there,’ agreed Leopold. ‘A cheese sandwich, a ham sandwich and occasionally a turkey sandwich and he was as happy as could be.’

‘He did used to like those fish paste ones,’ said Henry.

‘I believe you’re right,’ agreed Leopold. ‘Well, for a while this was all very good but after about eight or nine weeks it really got rather silly. The chaps in the team didn’t like to leave too much food on the plates – they felt guilty if they didn’t finish up three quarters of everything they were offered – and so we had to extend the tea interval by ten, fifteen and finally thirty minutes just so that we could eat some of the food these three women had prepared. Don’t forget the original tea ladies were still making their sandwiches too! It got so bad that none of the players could move about much after the tea interval. Even our opponents suffered. They used to help us try and get rid of some of the sandwiches, of course. Eventually it became pretty much accepted that the team fielding first at Little Lampton would always win. The team fielding after tea just couldn’t bowl or move about much in the field.’

There was a long silence while those of us who could remember those days remembered them.

‘It was a pity about the vicar, wasn’t it?’ said Leopold, breaking the silence at last.

‘It was,’ agreed Anthony.

There was then a long and rather embarrassed silence.

‘What happened to him?’ asked Toby, eventually. Leopold and Anthony looked at one another.

‘We don’t like to talk about it,’ said Henry.

‘Personal,’ said Leopold.

‘Go on, tell me!’ said Toby.

‘He ran off with the choirmaster,’ said Henry.

‘Is that true?’ asked Toby. ‘The choirmaster?’

Leopold shuffled from one foot to the other. ‘Sort of,’ he admitted at last. ‘They took over a whelk stall in Blackpool that used to be run by the choirmaster’s uncle.’

The three women had been wasting their time. The vicar was homosexual.

DECEMBER 4th

I’m really not much of a party goer. I went to one in 1963 and another in 1976 but missed out parties in the 1980s altogether. I have always found all that enforced bonhomie a little rich for my simple tastes. Besides, I seem to have an unnatural knack for getting into trouble on public occasions.

Nevertheless, the other day I allowed myself to be dragged to London for what can only be described as a ‘bit of a do’. The aim of the ‘do’ was to celebrate the wedding anniversary of a fellow (and his wife) who used to play for the Little Lampton Cricket Club. I was invited to attend, in my official capacity, as a representative of the club.

The event was being held in a large hall in one of those London suburbs which require such a lengthy, slow and complicated taxi or tube ride that by the time you get there you could easily have made the journey to Northampton, Bristol or Great Yarmouth.

I have sound experience of the problems of getting to and from the bits of London in which people live, as compared to the bits of London in which the action can be found. Many years ago, when I was living in the English midlands, in a place called Leamington Spa, I decided to go to London to watch a Test Match at Lords. When a London friend found out about my plans he insisted that I stay with him for the night before the match.

Since the journey from my Leamington Spa home to Lord’s took around two hours it seemed a good idea. However, although his postal address had the word ‘London’ in it my chum’s house was an adventure and a half away from the centre of the city. He lived in one of those distant suburbs (Hampstead, Islington, Neasden or whatever) which describe them selves as London but are linked to the useful bits of the city by a seemingly endless series of suburban shopping centres, grimy and rather depressing rows of cramped houses and inexhaustible opportunities for queuing.

The following morning I rose at eight and ate a leisurely breakfast. It then took me two and a quarter hours to get from his home to Lord’s. I would have got there quicker from Leamington Spa.

The hall in which the ‘do’ was being held had been rather over warmed by an old fashioned, extremely effective and apparently out of control central heating system which seemed to be having an identity crisis and confusing itself with an oven. Matters had been made even worse by the fact that a considerable number of human bodies had been leaping about on the dance floor, furiously converting chicken legs and black forest gateaux into kinetic energy.

What I did not realise when I decided to pop outside for a breath of fresh air (and a respite from all the excitement, to which I was not accustomed) was that the front door was equipped with one of those clever automatic devices which can turn an open door into a closed door before anyone has time to mutter ‘Oh crumbs!’.

Standing outside the hall, just after midnight on a moonless night, I realised that it was not only very, very cold but that it was also starting to snow quite heavily.

I hammered on the door and shouted. But the party was going with a swing and everyone inside was having a good time. No one heard me. I looked for a window. The only windows were eight feet off the ground, made of thick, impenetrable reinforced glass and wire and covered with thick iron bars.

I pulled up my collar and huddled up against the wall to try to find some shelter from the snow.

It was then that I remembered that I had a portable telephone in my jacket pocket. I am not much of a fan of these devices but Felix Chartier had insisted on lending me his. ‘London can be a pretty frightening place,’ he said. ‘You may need to call for help.’

As I pulled out the telephone the snow started to come down really heavily. It was the sort of storm that only usually happens in England a few minutes before a cricket match is due to start.

Looking around for somewhere to shelter I spotted a telephone box no more than fifty yards away from the hall from which I had so rudely been excluded. And so I sprinted along the pavement and popped inside.

Using my portable phone I then dialled the operator to ask for the telephone number of the hall.

I had just got through when there was a loud banging on the telephone box door. An angry looking woman in a mackintosh was standing outside. She was holding an umbrella. I told the operator what I wanted and then opened the door.

‘What are you doing in that telephone kiosk?’ demanded the woman. With her free hand she pointed to the portable telephone I was holding.

I explained that I was sheltering from the snow and told her the name of the hall for which I was trying to obtain the telephone number.

‘You don’t need to telephone them,’ said the woman curtly.

She pointed behind her. ‘The hall isn’t fifty yards away from where you’re standing.’

I was about to point out that I was trying to ring because the door was shut when the telephone operator carne on the line to tell me that the hall didn’t have a telephone number.

‘Besides,’ added the woman, unaware that she was now broadcasting stale news, ‘they don’t have a phone.’

I gloomily stepped out of the telephone box into the snow. The woman pointed to my legs. ‘And where are your trousers?’ she demanded, not unreasonably.

I looked down. Her observation and question were both well founded. I dimly remembered some sort of game in which the removal of my trousers had played an integral part.

The woman pushed past me into the telephone box and urgently dialled three digits.

Standing outside, wet and trouserless, I waited for the police to arrive. Fortunately, they were understanding and helped me get back into the hall wherein lay my trousers.

As a result of this solitary experience I have decided that my madcap party lifestyle has to stop. I shall not be attending any more parties in the foreseeable future.

DECEMBER 11th

We had our annual skittles match against Bilbury today.

We very nearly won. Indeed, I think we might well have been victorious if the match had not been abandoned after just fifteen minutes.

It was all Barnaby’s fault. He insisted on throwing the ball overarm and as a result broke four skittles. Several brave souls tried to tell him that it is perfectly proper to bowl underarm at skittles. But Barnaby scowled, reminded them politely that he had never bowled underarm in his life and explained that he wasn’t about to start now.

As we left the landlord of the Mott and Bailey told me that unless we pay for the broken skittles we won’t be allowed back.

DECEMBER 12th

Last week I decided to convert our spare bedroom into an office. The amount of administrative work involved in looking after the interests of a small village cricket club seems to be utterly disproportionate to the importance and size of the club, but the paperwork has to be done and so I have decided to improve my efficiency.

I began by deciding to buy a new desk.

For more years than I care to remember I have been using a desk which has been home to generations of woodworm. The top is uneven and the legs which hold it up are of such differing lengths that if the whole thing could walk it would limp. This old desk has, since its arrival, been crammed into a tiny space under the stairs.

Shopping for furniture is not an activity which puts pep into my soul or a spring into my step and so when I saw a desk which seemed to satisfy my basic criteria (one large, flat top supported by four symmetrically positioned legs) I pulled out my wallet and did the deal.

The desk on display in the shop looked good. It did everything that a desk should do. It stood quietly, without fuss, and provided a perfect surface for all those activities one normally performs on top of a desk. It had clearly never entertained a hungry woodworm. And it had four legs which were all the same length.

But, two days later, when my new desk arrived my heart sank. It came in a large, cardboard box which rattled and had warnings in an unfamiliar language stencilled on the side in red letters. Apart from large rabid dogs and women with blue hair there are few things in this life which I find more frightening than large cardboard boxes which rattle and have foreign warnings stencilled on the side in large red letters.

‘This isn’t a desk!’ I protested to the delivery driver.

The driver looked at the piece of paper he was holding and then checked some numbers on the side of the box.

‘It’s a desk, mate,’ he said firmly.

‘But where are the legs?’ I asked him.

‘In the box,’ he replied, tearing the piece of paper in two and giving me half, grinning and walking back down the path to his van.

I dragged the box indoors, sat down on the stairs and looked at it, gloomily.

I hate buying things which I have to build myself. Why do so many manufacturers think they can palm their customers off with half built products? Why, with so much unemployment in the world, cannot they find people prepared to put all these bits together?

When you go to the dentist you don’t get given a pair of pliers, a mirror on a stick and a small leaflet in twelve languages, do you?

When you visit a restaurant you don’t get handed an armful of fresh vegetables, a knife and a pan of water, do you?

So why do the manufacturers of household items think they can get away with selling unfinished products?

My garage is full of half built stuff and large cardboard boxes full of the spare bits which came with them.

There is a trolley I once bought, thinking it would make shopping easier. I never did manage to find out how or where the wheels fitted onto the frame. I have a large bag of left over washers, bolts and screws from that one. The parts came with an ‘exploded’ diagram which seemed to have been drawn by an artist with a malignant sense of mischief

Next to that there lies the remains ‘of what I firmly believe was intended to be an exercise bicycle, although, sadly, the remaining parts make this diagnosis impossible to confirm. This piece of equipment came with comprehensive instructions in several languages. Unfortunately, my ability to put the bicycle together was hampered by the fact that the languages in which the instructions appeared were not any of those with which I am familiar.

There is a small television table that turned out to be a three dimensional jigsaw puzzle. The scrap of paper I found in the box (with instructions written in twelve incomprehensible languages and illustrated by a poorly educated spider) told me that I would need only a small screwdriver to turn the boxful of bits into a table. I still dispute the accuracy of this statement. I couldn’t manage to put it together even with the aid of a ten pound lump hammer and a pair of industrial strength pliers. I have a small scar on my left forearm as a permanent memory of the unhappy evening I spent trying to put that small table together. The physical wound has healed well but I doubt if I will ever truly recover from the mental trauma I experienced.

I tried. Honestly, I tried. I spent hours trying to convert several pieces of plywood, numerous bits of metal and several plastic bags full of little metal gadgets into a desk. But I now have bruised shins and broken fingernails to support my argument that such work is best left to those who are fluent in reading Swedish and exploded diagrams.

I have sent back the new desk. I intend to leave the old desk where it is, under the stairs, and the spare bedroom can remain a spare bedroom. On reflection I have decided that the cubby-hole under the stairs, complete with old desk, has served me well enough all these years.

DECEMBER 18th

We had the annual club Christmas dinner this evening. The food was terrible and the speeches were awful. But everyone seemed to have a good time.

DECEMBER 19th

I cannot remember anything about yesterday's dinner. But I had a telephone call from the landlord of the Mott and Bailey which proved that we must have had a very good time.

He was very cross and said that we owe him £278 for the damage we caused. He says we will not be allowed back into the pub until he has our money.

We have £280 left in the bank (largely as a result of the money raised from the sale of our old balls) so despite this set back the club will end the year in a stronger financial position that at any other time in history.

This is the first time I can remember going forward to wards a New Year with a bank balance that isn't in the red. A positive balance of £2 may not be particularly impressive but I feel confident that Mr Micawber would be proud of us.

We hope you enjoyed *Around The Wicket* by Vernon Coleman and that if you did you will feel able to publish a review on Amazon. It would be much appreciated.

For details of more books by Vernon Coleman please visit either his author page on Amazon or http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

UPDATED AND EXPANDED EDITION

BABYLON RISING

AND THE FIRST SHALL BE LAST

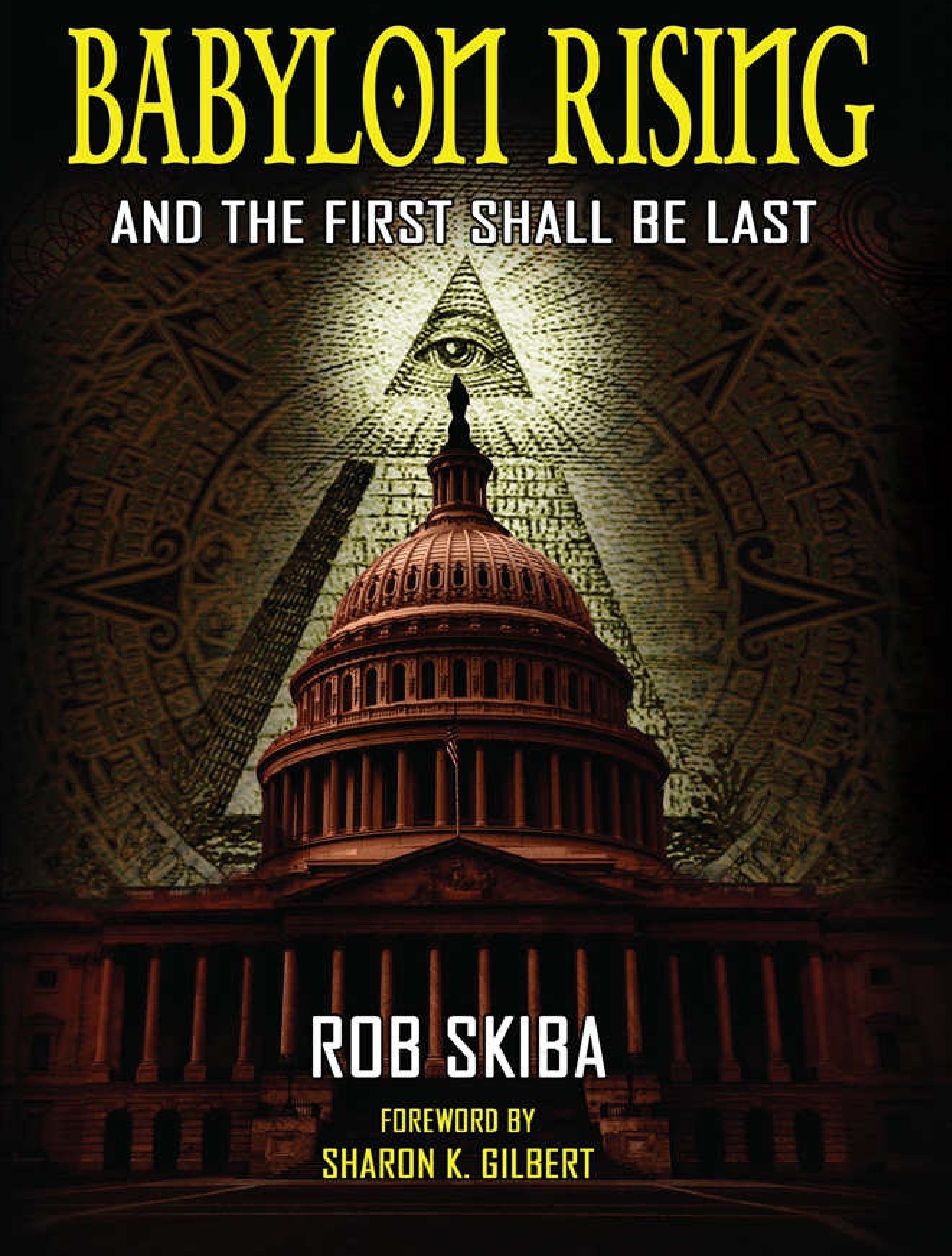

ROB SKIBA

FOREWORD BY
SHARON K. GILBERT

Simply amazing! After researching the historical connections between the occult, secret societies, and Biblical prophecy with intensity for five years, I must say there is hardly a need to study further. Rob Skiba's *Babylon Rising: And The First Shall Be Last* weaves together an outstanding tapestry from so many tangled, hidden threads in clear and accessible terms. If you have ever been curious about the spiritual foundations of our current place in history, economics, politics, science, and prophecy, you have found the right book. It will renew your faith in spite of all the evil that it uncovers, which is the highest compliment that can be given.

— Leonard Ulrich
Filmmaker, New World Order: Secret Societies and Biblical Prophecy (Youtube)

Rob Skiba has hit a home run for the LORD and for His Church with *Babylon Rising: And The First Shall Be Last*. Skiba has masterfully connected a compendium of conspiracy dots from disparate places and across centuries of time, and he's gathered them into a highly readable prophecy primer, fit for beginning students and seasoned scholars alike. If the world of symbols and signs confuses you, make this your starting place, dear friend. *Babylon Rising* is a must-read and belongs on every Bible student's shelf.

— Sharon K. Gilbert
Author/researcher and co-host of PID Radio

Rob Skiba has answered questions historians, theologians and scientists never thought to ask. From the first chapter onward, this book is written as a researchable text designed thoughtfully as a study guide for the intellectual explorer. Be prepared to have your understanding of the ancient world shaken and to be immersed in scriptural and historical facts that until now have been absent from any discussion.

— David K. Randall
Author, The Gatekeeper's Daughter

Blown Away! The information in Rob Skiba's book, *Babylon Rising: And The First Shall Be Last* should be MANDATORY READING for this generation! The insights he provides concerning possible future events are nothing short of prophetic and if true, are of extreme significance and importance to Americans, who very well could be the agents through which those events unfold. He has given me much to think (and pray) about. I am thankful for this great work and I hope it touches millions.

— Patrick Dougher
TV talk show host and professional keynote speaker

Rob Skiba opens your eyes about Bible prophecy and America's association with occult symbolism like few others. I believe God has given him a unique view of our future, revealing some plausible events that very well could play out in these Last Days. With an in-depth look at ancient history, the Bible, current events and Hebrew word meanings, Rob brings a tremendous amount of insight from the Scriptures that could prove to be very relevant in the days ahead. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, he reveals how the ancient gods —from what we thought was just mythology — are still being worshiped right before our very eyes, and poses the fascinating suggestion that they may be coming back... soon.

— Barry Meyer
Host of End Time Talk Radio

***Rob Skiba has done his homework** and presents an easy-to-read scripturally based alternative to the mainstream line of thinking. Babylon Rising: And The First Shall Be Last* is a must own for any Christian looking for a fresh take on Bible prophecy. Very well done.

— Minister Dante Fortson

Author/researcher and host of The Omega Hour Radio

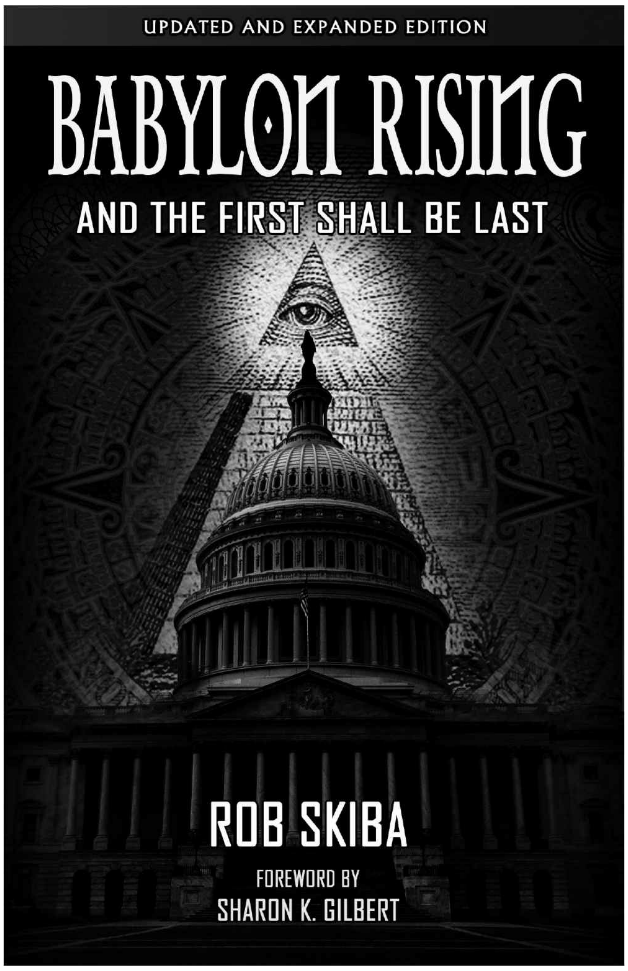

UPDATED AND EXPANDED EDITION

BABYLON RISING

AND THE FIRST SHALL BE LAST

ROB SKIBA

FOREWORD BY
SHARON K. GILBERT

***Babylon Rising** And The First Shall Be The Last*

Updated and Expanded Edition

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My wife and I dedicate this book to the countless men and women who gave up their lives, sacrificing for the cause of freedom.

For those still stuck in "the matrix," we pray that in some way this book will show you the way out!

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Acknowledgements

I have a lot of people to thank for helping to make this book possible. In fact, I almost wanted to avoid this section altogether for fear of leaving anyone out. If by chance I did, I apologize in advance for doing so. I've tried my best to recall all who have contributed in some way to the creation of this book series.

First and foremost, I must thank my Lord and Savior, Yeshua (Jesus) for saving me and providing for my every need. Without Him, I am nothing.

I wish to thank my mom and dad for loving, respecting and raising me to be the man I am today. It wasn't until much later in life that I realized how few grow up in the kind of home that I did. I now know how fortunate I was and I will never take that for granted.

A special thanks goes out to my family and all of my friends who pitched in to review the early versions of this book and who provided helpful feedback during the editing process. Thank you so much for your input and insights.

Among those friends, is a professional editor named, Mary Weeks. At just the right moment, when I was actually praying for someone to help me finish this book, she messaged me on Facebook offering her services. So, Mary, you were/are literally an answer to prayer. Thank you for being so generous in offering your talents and services to this project — especially on such short notice. It is greatly appreciated!

Please note: any grammatical errors or misspelled words that may appear in the first edition of this book, were likely because as Mary kept sending me edits, I kept adding more content, which she never got to see due to the deadline we set for going to print. At any rate, there are far less errors than there were and this is a much cleaner work due to Mary's keen attention to detail.

I have an extensive library of books, CD box sets and DVDs on the shelves that surround my desk, as well as on top of my desk and on the couch beside me. I am extremely thankful for each and every author, researcher and lecturer who poured their heart and soul into the various works that provided the inspiration for me to write this book.

First and foremost, on the list of such researchers I must thank, are Tom Horn and Peter Goodgame. I have studied many of the topics in this book for a long time, but it was not until I read Tom Horn's book, *Nephilim Stargates: The Year 2012 and the Return of the Watchers* and Peter Goodgame's online masterpiece, *The Giza Discovery,* that all of the pieces finally came together for me. Those two books provided a spring-board that literally launched me into a whole new world of research and possibilities I had never considered before.

Both Tom and Peter have always been very open to dialogue on these subjects as well; eager to share and to help. Tom, thank you for all the excellent research that you do and that you share so freely with the world. You have opened my eyes to a great many things and have been very gracious in helping us with our research and promoting our projects. We are grateful for your friendship and have always enjoyed any time we've been able to spend with you and your family. And Peter, I admire both your mind as well as the heart you have for advancing and walking in the power of the Kingdom. You have been a tremendous role model and an inspiration to me. I am blessed to have met both of you and am most grateful for your work. Keep it up!

In time, I later discovered the works of Steve Quayle, Dr. I.D.E Thomas, L.A. Marzulli, Patrick Heron, Dr. Ken Johnson, Douglas Hamp, S. Douglas Woodward, Chuck Missler, David Flynn, Jim Wilhelmsen, Russ Dizdar, Derek and Sharon Gilbert, Gary Stearman, Joseph B. Lumpkin, Dr. A. Nyland, Stan Deyo, King and Keith Wells, Daniel Duval, Minister Dante Fortson, Spencer Bennett, Brian Ingram, Russ Houck, Andrew Gabriel Roth, and pastor/teachers: Mike Hoggard, Mark Biltz, Jim Staley, Richard Rives and Michael Rood... just to name a few. Those are the names that are on the books, CD box sets and DVDs sitting right beside me as I write this now. To each of you, I give you my thanks and appreciation for your contributions to my understanding of the various subjects that will be covered both in this book as well as in the other three that I hope will soon follow it. Please know that your work is having a tremendous impact on my life and I am sure the lives of countless others as well!

As I began to write and post my blogs[1] and videos to the Internet, one day, a pastor by the name of Doug Riggs contacted me as a result of seeing one of my posts on Facebook. He was quite impressed with a video I produced concerning Mt. Hermon and the Nephilim.[2] He passed my information along to many of the names I just mentioned in the previous two paragraphs. One thing led to another and the next thing you know, my wife and I were meeting some of those fine researchers face to face at a conference in Ohio. That led to a number of other incredible opportunities this past year that I will mention in the following paragraphs. Doug is a "super-connector," who loves to share information and connect people and resources together for the purpose of advancing the Kingdom and setting people free from the bondage of Satan. Thank you Doug for all you do and for being the one God used to connect us with so many wonderful, gifted and amazing researchers. You are and have been a blessing to us and to many others I'm sure.

At the conference in Ohio, not only did we get to meet Tom Horn, but also Russ Dizdar as well as Derek and Sharon Gilbert.

I wish to thank Russ for inviting us into his home after the conference and for his dedication in going head-to-head with the forces of evil. He is a champion of truth and a spiritual warrior, willing to go where few others dare to even consider. Thank you for inspiring me to do the same.

Derek and Sharon Gilbert are both authors as well as the hosts of the Internet radio programs *Peering Into Darkness* (PID Radio) and *A View From the Bunker*. Derek had me as a guest on his radio program four times in 2011. It is with great appreciation that I thank him for providing a platform for us to share what we've been learning with a larger audience. I owe his wife, Sharon Gilbert, a huge thank you as well. I originally had someone else planned to write the Foreword to this book, but ultimately, that person was not able to do it. I was only a few days away from going to print, when Sharon swooped in like a superhero to save the day! She read the book, wrote an endorsement and then agreed to do the Foreword for me — all in one day! I thought she would get it to me in a day or two, but I was amazed to find that she had it done and sent within the hour. Looking back at the way we all met, I would have to say, it was a "God thing" that was meant to be. Thank you so much, Derek and Sharon, for all you do and for your steadfast support and belief in our mission. You are greatly appreciated.

I'd also like to thank the following Internet radio talk show hosts for believing in me and having me on their shows as well: Tom, Nita and Joe Horn of *RNN Radio*, Shannon Davis of *Omega Man Radio*, Richard Grund of *The Porch*, Stacy and Randall Harp of *Active Christian Media*, L.A. Marzulli of *Acceleration Radio*, Matthew Miller of *End Time Tribune*, Dori Etheridge of *Doors of Deception*, Rozz from *Preparing for Battle*, Jim Wilhelmsen and Dave Ruffino of *Opposing the Matrix* and Barry Meyer of *End Time Talk Radio*. Thank you all for providing added exposure for our work and for all that you do for the Kingdom.

My wife and I also wish to thank the many men and women who have supported us financially as well as those intercessors who have kept us covered in prayer since we stepped out in faith to start our ministry. There are too many people to list here, and most would not want public recognition anyway. Without mentioning names, please know that you are all loved and your support has been *greatly* appreciated! We could not have accomplished as much as we have without you.

There are a few people we must mention however. These have gone above and beyond to love, support, encourage and carry us through the difficult times. Thus, a very heartfelt thanks goes out to: Bob and Carolyn Skiba, Tom and Chrissy Kinman, Mack and Rose Hoskins, Celeste Miller, Wendi Yokum, Walter Weber, Pat and Kelli Dougher, Larry and Maria Buchmann, Jonnathan Peter Kaye, Faith Dowden, Kevin and Amanda Roberts, Duane and Elaine Fish, Craig and Amanda Korth, Dallas and Rebecca Morris, Bob and Joanie Higley, Erik and Timea Hunter, John and Jennifer Petty, Lauri Ann and L.E. Hewie, Don and Kim Snell, Tiffany Weber, Suhaila Nichol and family, the Finn family, the Mouskondis family and the Rosales family. Your love, prayers and generous support has enabled us to get where we are today.

Additionally, I'd like to thank *The Road Adventure*. It is by far the most amazing organization I have ever had the privilege to be a part of. God used it and the amazing men and women who volunteer there every month to literally save my life and show me my purpose. Thank you for all you do to bring help, hope and healing to so many. Gary Stearman and Bob Ulrich of *Prophecy in the News* literally catapulted our ministry to a whole new level, and we cannot thank them enough for their support. Their ministry does a fantastic job of helping other ministries, authors and researchers get their message out to the masses. Gary and Bob, thank you for your television and print media services and for your encouragement and valuable input. We are extremely grateful for all you've done for us, and we look forward to a long and profitable relationship with *Prophecy in the News*.

We'd also like to thank the good folks at *Cutting Edge Ministries*. We appreciate your support and look forward to a continued and profitable relationship with you as well.

I must thank both Tom Horn and David Hitt for asking me to be a speaker at the *First Annual Future Congress on Emerging Threats and Challenges* in Branson, MO. That event opened up a lot of doors for us, not the least of which included introducing us to *Prophecy in the News*. Thank you both for believing in me and allowing us to have as much time as we did to share our vision and materials at the *Future Congress*. It has made a huge difference in the growth of our ministry! And David, I thank you for your friendship and for the times we've been able to sit and talk together over lunch. I have thoroughly enjoyed our "deep" conversations, and I truly appreciate all of your help anytime I've asked for it.

When it came to completing this book, I owe an extra special thanks to S. Douglas (Doug) Woodward. We met Doug at the *Future Congress,* where he very graciously allowed us to share some prime space on his product table in front of the main auditorium. Since then, he has gone above and beyond in helping me to complete this book by offering helpful suggestions and even contrary and opposing viewpoints, which enabled me to identify areas that needed further elaboration and documentation. While we didn't always see eye-to-eye, I thank you, Doug, for your kindness, generosity, wisdom and insights, all of which helped to make this a better book.

And finally, I owe a *great deal* of thanks, gratitude and appreciation to my amazingly wonderful, beautiful and loving wife, Sheila. I so appreciate the time she has given me to focus on this work and for taking care of all of the other things that needed to be done in the meantime. Sheila, thank you for believing in me and for being so incredibly supportive as I sat for twelve and fifteen hours a day working on this book series. I'm sure you would have preferred that we spent more time together, doing things outside of the house, but you never once complained. Instead, you kept me going, supporting me every step of the way — in every way. It is so amazing to be married to someone who "gets it" and who shares all the same passions, dreams and visions. You always know what to look for and were of great assistance in doing this research (fully capable of finding *anything* on *YouTube*). You worked with me to design and produce books, flyers, brochures, labels, websites, videos and just about anything else we could think of doing. You stood with me through thick and thin and always believed in the dream. Your faith knows no limits and you kept me well fed with nutritious food and drink during the countless hours of work that went into writing this series. You are my soulmate, and I thank God for bringing you into my life when He did. I love you more than words can say.

Rob Skiba II

The Colony, Texas
January, 2012

Foreword

How well I recall the first time Derek and I met Rob and Sheila Skiba. It was in October of 2010, and we had joined many other fellow prophecy scholars, writers, and researchers in Canton, Ohio. The meeting, called the *Supernatural Science and Prophecy Conference* (you can access the website at http://www.shatterthedarkness.net/page3.html) featured Russ Dizdar, Tom Horn, Jeffery K. Radt, Derek, and myself, and we had the honor and privilege to mingle with many devoted Christians during the off-hours. It was on the morning of the second day that we met the Skibas.

Taking advantage of the hotel's morning hot breakfast bar, we joined our compatriots and conferees in a crowded lobby, queuing up at the Belgian waffle maker. A friend tapped us on the shoulders and asked if we'd met Rob Skiba yet. Shaking our collective heads, Derek and I finished loading up our plates and headed to a small table near the window where we had the distinct pleasure of meeting a couple who would soon be setting the internet world on fire.

Rob Skiba is disarmingly handsome: raven hair, bright eyes, and a chiseled, leading-man jawline punctuated by a crisply trimmed goatee. His wife Sheila is the perfect match: trim, quick to smile, and beauty pageant pretty. Now, it's been my experience (sadly) that more often than not, generosity in looks does not correlate directly with an equally generous gift in mind-power, but be careful not to judge this striking couple too swiftly, for their combined wit, wisdom, and spiritual discernment would, if valued in gold, outweigh that of Fort Knox (that is assuming the gold still really is in that famous fort, but that's another tale). For now, let us return to that small table in Canton.

As we devoured our waffles and guzzled our orange juice, Rob and Sheila shared their vision of a television series that would unveil the truth behind millennia of secretive and very dark plans by the enemy of all who trust in Christ as Savior: Lucifer. This series, to be called ***SEED***, may one day yet reach production stage, but for now, Rob has taken his years of intense study and research and transferred it into a planned four-book series called *Babylon Rising.* I've been honored with the opportunity to have a 'first peek.'

The book you now hold in your hands is but the first installment of the series, but it is a whopper of an introduction! Connecting conspiracy dots is not an easy task, for it involves taking the reader along a convoluted journey into disciplines and devotees that — at first glance — appears completely unconnected. Walking this path of discovery can be taxing, but Rob manages to keep his readers alert and attentive as he shepherds us along this treacherous route and unveils the darkest corners of the shadowy people and places that populate the world of the enemy.

Babylon is indeed rising, dear friends, both figuratively and literally — but also prophetically. Read this book through, cover to cover, at least twice, and then pass it along to others, for this and the companions to come will help arm all of us who stand upon the wall, watching for signs and listening for signals. But be warned: there are no neutral positions in the coming, final battle between Christ and His enemies. You are either for Him or against Him. This book decodes the enemy's plans and empowers the Church.

Welcome to the battlefield.

Sharon K. Gilbert
January 26, 2012

Preface

Writing this book has been a very exciting process for me. It all started with writing my first blog back in January of 2011. That one blog grew into a lengthy series of blogs (see babylonrisingblog.com) until one day I looked and saw that I had written over 1,000 pages of content — and there was much more yet to come! It was at that time that I decided to reorganize those blogs into chapters and divide the content up into four books, which I called the *Babylon Rising* series. This is Book 1 in that series.

- **Book 1** deals with the Antichrist; who he was and will be in the Last Days.
- **Book 2** deals exclusively with the subject of creatures the Bible refers to as the Nephilim; who they were, where they came from and whether or not they will be back.
- **Book 3** traces the history and numerous mythologies associated with the rebel god-king known in the Bible as Nimrod.
- **Book 4** wraps up the series with an in-depth look at the Last Days, keeping the content of Books 1, 2 and 3 in mind as we explore Biblical prophecy.

I recorded myself reading the blogs on my Internet radio show[1] and found that people were very interested in being able to listen to the content. Therefore, in addition to the books, I will be producing all new audio recordings (in MP3 format) of each of them and making them available through my websites[2] as purchasable downloads and data CDs.

HOW TO GET THE MOST FROM THIS BOOK

Since this is my first time writing a book, I am sure it will prove to be a learning experience for me in just as many ways as it will be for you. This material came out of my online blogs, therefore, it is written in first person, very much the way I talk. I have tried to clean it up a bit and reformat it for the book, but for the most part I wanted this content to come across as if I were sitting in front of you, telling you what I have learned and believe to be true. As such, I may not always follow all of the formal, standard “rules” for writing a book and I know I may take some heat from my critics for doing so. I am prepared to deal with that. Ultimately, I have tried to provide you with something that is easy to read and full of useful information. In the end, my hope is that this work will be judged more by the merit of its well researched content rather than its delivery.

Nearly everything I do is meant to work synergistically together. You will get a lot out of this book by itself, but if you combine it with the online blogs and the videos I’ve produced on DVD,[3] you will get even more out of it.

I have included a large number of footnotes throughout the book to help you find more information; thus enabling you to dig deeper into the various subjects I’ll be covering here. In this day and age, that means using the print medium along with the digital, therefore a lot of the footnotes will be URLs to online sources of information. Each URL provided was valid at the time of this writing. I cannot guarantee they will always remain valid though. While they are, I would encourage you to look up those websites so that you can get a better understanding about the many topics I've covered in this book.

Additionally, because I do believe "a picture is worth a thousand words," I've tried to include as many as possible to aid in the telling of this story. I have included references and links to videos throughout this book as well, because as I like to say in my line of work, *"If a picture is worth a thousand words, how much more can you say at 24-30 frames per second?"* To make it even easier, I have organized and embedded most of the videos related to this study on my website for you to view (organized by chapter) at:

www.babylonrisingbooks.com/videos.html

At the end of this book, I have also included *Appendix B* for your benefit. There, you will find books, videos and a selection of online radio programs and audio CD box sets that have all contributed to my understanding of the content I am presenting here. For those of you familiar with using Quick Response (QR) codes, I have also placed a few of them at the back of the book in *Appendix B*, *C* and *D*. Please be sure to take full advantage of all of these resources in order to get the maximum benefit of this material.

MY METHOD OF RESEARCH

I will be using the *King James Version* of the Bible for the majority of my Scripture references, primarily because I was raised on that version of the Bible and I do consider it to be one of the more accurate translations available to us in English. However, there are times when other versions of the English Bible do provide a clearer rendition of the text in support of what I am trying to say. In those cases, I will use other translations simply to help you better understand a point and/or as a comparison to the KJV or other extra-biblical text.

When using the Bible, I always approach it with the belief that we should take it literally wherever possible. There are times when the Bible uses metaphor and symbolic language, but I believe in those cases, the Bible usually tells you that it is doing so and shows you what the symbols, allegories, metaphors and parables mean in the text itself. Thus, for the most part, unless the Bible tells me to take it any other way but literally, I will be using a literal interpretation of the text. I believe when we do that, all the pieces fall right into place and everything makes a whole lot more sense.

Regarding extra-biblical texts, I do read and often quote from such books; primarily the books of *1 Enoch*, *Jubilees* and *Jasher*. I do not consider these books to be canon, but I do consider them to be valuable sources of information, which can serve as ancient commentaries that both elaborate on the canonized Scriptures as well as provide added insight into the beliefs of those who wrote the books we now consider canon. I look at those and other similar books much the same way I view any commentary on the Scriptures. I believe there is added value in using these ancient texts in that way because they were written around the same time as the canonized Scriptures were written. Thus, it shows the mind-set and beliefs the Biblical writers had as well as the audiences to whom they were writing. As such, many of the extra-biblical texts that are now available to us provide a window into both the beliefs and the cultures of the ancient world, and serve to provide added insights and perspectives we may lack today in our modern world.

This book will focus primarily on a topic few teachers of eschatology talk about: the Nephilim. The reason for this is because Jesus said that the Last Days would be like one very specific time in history:

> *"But as the days of Noah were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be."* (Matthew 24:37)

The one thing that differentiates the days of Noah from any other time in history is the mixing of angel seed with that of the human race. According to Genesis 6, this created a race of creatures known as the "Nephilim." The Bible speaks of giants (the Nephilim) in the land both before and after the Flood who "were of old, great men of renown." I believe that last statement refers to the many characters of Greek mythology and the mythologies of other cultures that all speak of demigod heroes and giants. This work will focus on the one who I believe is the most famous of them all.

There are a few scholars and researchers, however, who have come before me, and have done extensive work in the subject matter we'll be tackling here. Much of what I know, I learned from them. That is why I call myself a researcher. By that I mean, I *re*-search that which has already been searched by those who have gone before me. Indeed, I freely admit that I have gleaned much insight, wisdom and knowledge from many sources over the years, and I believe I should give credit where credit is due. Therefore, wherever and whenever I can recall the sources of my information, I will endeavor to make those sources known, either in the body of the text itself or with footnotes.

Over the nearly two decades that I have been studying the various topics in this work, the Holy Spirit has given me revelation and new insights as well. Some of those insights build upon the works of others, and some (as far as I know) are insights that originate with me — given, I believe by God. Wherever I am giving my own opinion and/or interpretation of information, I will try to make that obvious and give my reasoning for it.

It is not my intent nor my desire to plagiarize anyone else's material. If anything, it is my desire to compliment and weave stories and ideas together in an effort to discover and relay truth. As mentioned in the *Acknowledgements* section of this work, I have been greatly influenced by a number of people who I consider to be experts in the various topics at hand. My desire is to take what I've learned from them and thread it together with what I have learned on my own in order to "connect the dots" as best I can for you the reader.

UPDATED AND EXPANDED EDITION

You are reading an updated and expanded edition of this book. The primary differences are:

1. It has a slightly modified cover, with a bar at the top showing that this is an updated (post 2012) expanded edition.
2. The previous editions/revisions of this book were originally published at various times during the year 2012. Thus, there were many speculative references related to December 21, 2012. For this edition, all references to that date have either been modified, removed or updated in some fashion to reflect my findings post 2012.
3. New paragraphs on 666 have been added, thus modifying the layout to Chapter Three (with new sub-headings).
4. An entire section on NASA has been added to Chapter Four.
5. A few new paragraphs concerning the number 72 as it relates to 9/11 and the Pentagon have been added to Chapter Five.
6. In Chapters Five, Six and Eight, a few paragraphs have been modified/added in order to explain my theory concerning what I believe may have happened to our calendar, which had a direct influence on how we reckon the date 12/21/12.
7. I added a new section right before the Appendix section called, **Prayers of Deliverance**. After doing a lot of research into Nimrod, Babylon, Egypt and the various mystery schools associated with them, I realized many may need to be delivered from the spirits that come attached to these subjects.
8. Some of our new products have been added to Appendix C.

SEARCH AND SEE WHETHER THESE THINGS BE TRUE

I am not a theologian, historian, scientist or scholar. I am simply a filmmaker who is a Christian that has a passion for research. I do not claim to have the corner on truth. I do, however, confess that I have strong, and what I consider to be well-informed opinions. But that's all it is. I am also not a prophet. Therefore, when talking about things to come, I will be writing speculatively. So, please take what I've written here for whatever you feel it is worth. I encourage you to be a "good Berean" and search these things out for yourself.

When it's all said and done, my hope is that you will have found this book fun, interesting, exciting, thought-provoking and maybe even a little challenging. I want to stimulate your mind and create in you a desire to know more and to search the Scriptures, history and even current events, checking them out for yourself in order to find answers to the many questions this work is sure to raise. If in that way, I can cause even one person to find the Truth that sets men free, I will consider that a victory.

CONTACT ME

Please feel free to visit my two related websites:

www.babylonrisingblog.com

www.babylonrisingbooks.com

There you can leave comments and/or e-mail me.

I am also available to come and present this material to anyone you think might be interested. I have extensive public speaking experience and always enjoy sharing information with anyone who will listen. If you can assemble a minimum of 25 to 30 people, we'll be happy to come and do a ***free*** seminar in the venue of your choice. All my wife and I ask is that you pay for our transportation and lodging while we're there. For more information, please go to:

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Introduction

The year was 1977. That’s when I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. I was 7 years old. That same year, I saw *Star Wars* for the first time. After seeing it 12 more times (all in the first year that it came out), I knew exactly what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.

I figured I would either be an astronaut, a movie star, a filmmaker or dead by the time I was 30. It wasn’t that I had a death wish. It’s just that I’ve always had big dreams, and I’m a very driven person when I have a goal set in my mind. Thus, I figured if I hadn’t achieved any of those things by the time I was 30, it would be *because* I was dead. So, I had to get busy right away!

I did well in school and within a week of graduating from High School, I joined the Army. There were two reasons why I did that:

1. My dad was a helicopter pilot and as my childhood hero, I wanted to follow in his footsteps.
2. I had read somewhere that the astronauts had to learn how to fly helicopters in order to pilot the lunar landers. Thus, if I was going to one day land on another planet (within the next 12 years), I probably should start learning how to do that as soon as possible!

By the time I was 21, I was flying OH-6 scout helicopters as an *Enlisted Aeroscout Observer* (enlisted pilot) and loving every minute of it. But my ultimate goal was the space program, and I knew I needed to become an officer and work my way up to eventually flying jets.

I intended to do my officer training in the Army and then transition to the Air Force, but every time I tried to go to the next level, something would happen to knock me out of my slot for the next class. In every case, it was always something outside of my control (not because I didn’t more than qualify). After four unsuccessful attempts, I realized that was apparently not the path I was supposed to be traveling. I left the military in 1993.

From there, I set my sights on the second goal of being a movie star. I did a lot of theater throughout the 1990s, and did some minor television work as well as a couple of years worth of professional modeling; where I would win a number of industry awards including the title of *Mr. Massachusetts 1992* and *U.S. Male Model of the Year 1993*. Both of those titles led to other opportunities for me, but I soon realized I really wanted to write and direct my own material. I began writing scripts in 1994 and haven’t stopped since.

In 1997, I started developing a movie screenplay called, *The Omega Conspiracy*.[1] It was during the process of writing that script that I became an avid researcher. I dove into a lot of conspiracy theory and read a lot of stuff about characters like John Dee, Edward Kelly, Francis Bacon, Aleister Crowley and others.

I became obsessed with trying to understand the Illuminati and learning what the Freemasons were really all about. It was also right about that time that chemtrails[2] first started to streak across the sky and people were all abuzz about the New World Order, depopulation agendas, Project Blue Beam, MK-Ultra mind-control experiments and all sorts of other topics related to the evil plans of “the Elite.”

Anyone who starts down any of those paths quickly finds himself hopping down many, many rabbit trails leading to everything from Nikola Tesla’s experiments to crop circles, the face on mars, the pyramids of Giza, Atlantis, 19.5 degree angles, the Bermuda Triangle, UFOs, aliens, ghosts, the ‘Shadow People,’ the Knights Templar, the Black Pope, the occult symbols on our money and all over Washington, D.C.... and just about everything else you can think of that might get lodged in between the trans-dimensional spaces of a tinfoil-hat-wearing, Kool-Aid drinking, conspiracy nut job (of which I was fast becoming), freak’s brain!

Yes, many people made fun of me and the theories I was coming up with in those days, but that never stopped me. In fact, any debate that would arise amongst my peers only drove me deeper into the research. Thus, I became a research-aholic. These and other topics consumed every available moment of free time that I had. At one point, I had accumulated over 2,000 pages of printed material and an insane amount of “Favorite Places” marked in my Internet browser on top of that... all before I even began writing my grand conspiracy script. When I finally started to write my outline, I realized one thing was leading to another and the research *never* ends!

Nevertheless, there comes a time, when you just have to stop the research and begin writing the story. That time came in the summer of 1999 while visiting a friend out in Los Angeles. I was sitting in Mel’s Diner on Sunset Boulevard in West Hollywood. The walls were papered with black and white behind-the-scenes images of George Lucas’ break out, nostalgic film, *American Graffiti*.[3] I was in creative heaven! The juices began to flow and my pen started to fill up the pages of my notebook in no time.

The Omega Conspiracy script dealt primarily with the idea of cloning Jesus from blood taken from various holy relics (specifically the Shroud of Turin) believed to be associated with Him. So, I spent a fair amount of time studying cloning[4] and learned as much as I could about DNA. Eventually, my research led me to world renowned Shroud expert, Ian Wilson. He and I had a number of lengthy conversations about his research on that magnificent relic. He was absolutely convinced that it was the authentic burial shroud of Christ, and he convinced me of the same.[5] Now, with all of that research accumulated, categorized and outlined, as well as a great deal of the script already scribbled on my notepad, one thing still remained.

I wanted that story to be both historically and scientifically accurate, as well as biblically *plausible*. By that I mean, could I see room for such a thing to actually play a part in a Last Days scenario involving the origin of the Antichrist and/or False Prophet?

I dove into the Scriptures. Having accepted Christ at a young age, I had been a student of the Bible my whole life. 2 Timothy 2:15 was my life verse growing up, and I had a *Thompson Chain Reference, King James Bible* in Grade School! I certainly was no stranger to the Book. When it came to writing the script however, the trick was writing something with secular appeal, but from a biblical world-view, that was exciting, educational, and yet, *non*-preachy.[6]

With a solid foundation, I locked myself in the basement of my home in Massachusetts and wrote non-stop until I had something I felt I could pitch to the studios out in LA. Finally, I finished the first draft, got on a plane and flew back out there. I pitched it to a number of studios and then one bit! They were interested in optioning my story. I just needed to do some rewrites.

I got back home and did a complete reworking of the story such that it became part one of a trilogy of stories (what’s up, George Lucas?), but could stand alone if need be. I was excited about delivering this new version, but the day I finished the rewrite, my wife of seven years told me she wanted out of the marriage, and was filing for divorce.

That was at the tail end of an already very difficult period of time in my life. As a result, my world completely blew up, and I went through a three-year crucible I would never wish upon my worst enemy, nor would I ever want to repeat. That said, I am extremely thankful for all of it today, because I’ve discovered that some of the most valuable lessons can be learned from the most painful tests.

I had chased the dream to the point of losing everything. By 2003, I was broke, bankrupt, divorced and homeless, living in a Dodge Stratus with everything I owned in it ready to put a bullet in my head. Thankfully, God had other plans.

The Lord led me down to Dallas, Texas. There, He healed and restored me and radically turned my life around. During and as a result of that process, in August of 2003, I laid all of my dreams down at His feet and said, *"I tried it my way, and it didn't work out too good. I give it all to You, Lord. I want what you want."*

In January of 2004, I got hired at an international missions organization and God turned me into a traveling, multimedia missionary. I went to 15 countries in six and a half years and got to see and do things I never in a million years imagined I would. I also met my new bride and soulmate there in the ministry and have been blessed beyond measure ever since.

All of that — everything I've just written — was only preparation for what I am doing now. Thus, as I sit here preparing to finalize this book, I am struck with the realization that my entire life has literally led to this very moment in time.

The research I did back in the late 90s was a primer for all of the intense research I've done over the past two years that led to the writing of this book and to the forthcoming TV series that I'll tell you about at the end of it.

Looking back, I would say the previous research and resulting conclusions I had come to were *almost* on target. At that time, I was fully convinced that the Antichrist would be a clone of Jesus Christ. While I do believe cloning (perhaps even of Him) will indeed play a part in the Last Days, I now believe I know beyond a shadow of a doubt (from the Scriptures) who/what the Antichrist was, is not and yet will be.

I wrote this book to share with you what I believe the Scriptures and current events are revealing to be true. Below is a brief outline of the subjects we will be covering:

CHAPTER OUTLINE

- In Chapter One, we will examine Genesis 6, which is the foundation Scripture for this whole series. This particular chapter tells us what was going on in the days of Noah and sets the stage for helping us to understand what may happen in the not too distant future.
- Chapter Two describes a man who rose to power shortly after the Flood and literally became the god of this world.
- Chapter Three takes a look at history, examining the spirit of anti-Christ in order to reveal the identity of *the* Antichrist who will lead the world into a war with God in the Last Days.
- Chapter Four challenges the belief that the United States government and her Founding Fathers had the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in mind when they laid the foundation of this nation. Is there a reason why our motto "IN GOD WE TRUST" is all in capital letters? Could it be that this was done in order to conceal the identity of the one in whom our leaders are really putting their trust? What does the iconography on the back of our U.S. one dollar bill really represent? We will take a tour of Washington, D.C. to find the answer to these and many other questions.
- Chapter Five explores the significance of the number 72 and how it relates to a very specific "plan" that was set in motion thousands of years ago. It also examines the significance of the blood-red lunar eclipse that appeared over the shoulders of Orion on December 21, 2010, for 72 minutes and reveals some very interesting things concerning our presidents and their associations with that "plan" as well.
- Chapter Six lays out what I believe has been and will be "the plan" for America and Iraq in the Last Days. Why did America go to war in Iraq? Why did J.P. Morgan Chase Bank lead a 13-bank consortium to establish the Central Bank of Iraq, and what is the significance of their new currency, the Dinar? We will examine some possible answers in this chapter, while trying to determine if this is all part of *The Omega Plan*.
- Chapter Seven explores the many reasons why I believe we need to "come out of Babylon" and takes a look at how the media lies to us in order to keep us all stuck in fear, waging a perpetual "War on Terror."
- Chapter Eight picks up where Chapter Seven left off, issuing the same urgent call to "come out of Babylon" to the Church. Is the Christian Church really practicing paganism? Is there a better way? What did God leave for us in His Holy Scriptures that shows us His entire plan? We will look at the

answers to those questions and more, while taking a closer look at ourselves in the process.

DECEMBER 21, 2012

Many people of all faiths around the world believe we are living in the Last Days or at least at a time when substantial “change” may be on the horizon. The first edition of this book was released in February of 2012, as a lot of people were anxious and searching for answers concerning the many prophecies and “signs” that appeared to be pointing toward December 21st of that year. There were countless TV shows, movies, radio talk shows, as well as non-fiction books and novels all talking about that date. Shows like the History Channel’s *Ancient Aliens* series were promoting the idea that our “ancient alien ancestors” may return on that day. Many were speculating that the earth’s poles may shift or that the sun may send out massive solar flares that could consume the planet. New Agers believed we were headed for a great awakening of spirit, mind and body. Everyone had a theory, and they were all talking about it. I decided to throw my theory[7] into the pile for your consideration as well. Turns out, we were all wrong. Or... were we?

If what I have found and have written about in this book is true, I believe some of the “prophecies” were right, but our calendar may be off by two years. I will explain why as we move forward in this book. Regardless, I believe we are still in for a wild ride in the days ahead. Now more than ever we are going to need to know the Truth, so that we do not fall for the Great Deception that is coming. My sincere hope and desire is that the things I write in this book will, at the very least, challenge you to dive deeper into the Scriptures, history and current events in order that you may find the Truth for yourself. Indeed, “something wicked this way comes,” and it all started thousands of years ago with what I call

The Genesis Six Experiment...

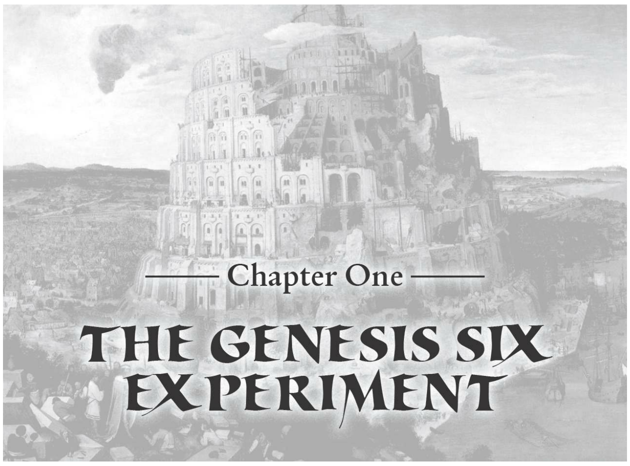

"But as the days of Noah were,
so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.
— Jesus Christ, 33 AD

> *And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, That the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose. And the LORD said, My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh: yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years. There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown.* (Genesis 6:1-4)

This passage of Scripture describes what I call, *"The Genesis Six Experiment."* The beginning of that chapter tells the reason why God decided to destroy the world with the Great Flood.

One of the things I find extraordinary about the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) is that, unlike other books of the Bible that were inspired by the Holy Spirit,[1] the Torah was dictated. God personally spoke with Moses face-to-face as one speaks with a friend.[2] I don't mean to diminish the power and authority of the other books of the Bible, but I believe that fact makes the Torah stand head and shoulders above all other Scripture. I mean, think about it; God literally *talked* with Moses and told him what to write!

In Genesis, Moses wrote that some of the angels of God left their prior estate[3] and came down to earth and mated with women, which produced a race of super-human hybrids known as the Nephilim. Moses went on to write that these creatures corrupted the whole earth, and in verses 11-13, we learn that this was the reason why God decided to destroy the earth with the Flood.

At the beginning of this chapter, I began with a quote from Jesus regarding the Last Days.[4] In it, He says that the days before His return will be *"as it was in the days of Noah."* What differentiates the days of Noah from any other time in human history? There have always been wars and rumors of war. There have always been famines, pestilences and earthquakes, and men have been sinning since the Garden of Eden. So, what was different?

The one thing that stands out as being significantly different in the days of Noah is the unnatural offspring that came from the union of angels and humans.

With that in mind, is it necessary to correct some common misconceptions often associated with Genesis 6:1-4 and address the following question.

How do we know that Genesis 6:1-4 is talking about angels?

I've run into this "debate" on more than a few occasions. The debate comes from a line of thought (taught in many seminaries) that the term, "sons of God" is a reference to the children of Adam's (good) son, Seth, and that the "daughters of men" is a reference to the children of Adam's (bad) son, Cain. This line of reasoning is flawed on so many levels that I can hardly believe it is still taught. Minister Dante Fortson shares my frustration and makes an interesting observation in his book, *As The Days of Noah Were:*

> *Seth's line is the one that seems to be acting against the will of God if we actually read the story. They initiate the disobedience by taking wives of their own choosing. It seems as though the "daughters of Cain" had no say in the matter, and the sons of Cain did not participate in this event. Everyone in Cain's line seems to be completely innocent as far as the text of Genesis 6:1-4 is concerned. The facts seem to support the exact opposite of what the Lines of Seth Theory teaches. According to scripture, Cain's line seems to be neutral in these events and Seth's sons seem to initiate the defiance of God.*
>
> — Minister Dante Fortson[5]

"The Sethite Theory," or the *"Lines of Seth Theory"* as Minister Fortson calls it, is a relatively new idea. Few, if any believed in it prior to the 3rd century AD.[6] But today, it is the prevailing view amongst seminary professors, students, graduates and pastors. Unfortunately, that's what they were taught, and so it is what they teach others — even though it is a flawed theory on many levels.

A proper understanding of Genesis 6:1-4 reveals much in the Bible, including what Jesus meant when He said that our days would be *"as days of Noah were."* Whereas, an improper understanding of this passage of Scripture, creates much confusion in determining what was *really* going on in many places throughout the Bible. It also causes a skewed view of God's character to emerge (especially in the Old Testament, where He often calls for the complete genocide of numerous villages and cities in the land of Canaan).

Let's start with some really basic reasoning. How are "Nephilim" (the KJV uses the word "giants") born to normal human beings? If we are simply talking about the inbreeding of the offspring of two brothers, how does one explain the giants — both before and after the Flood?

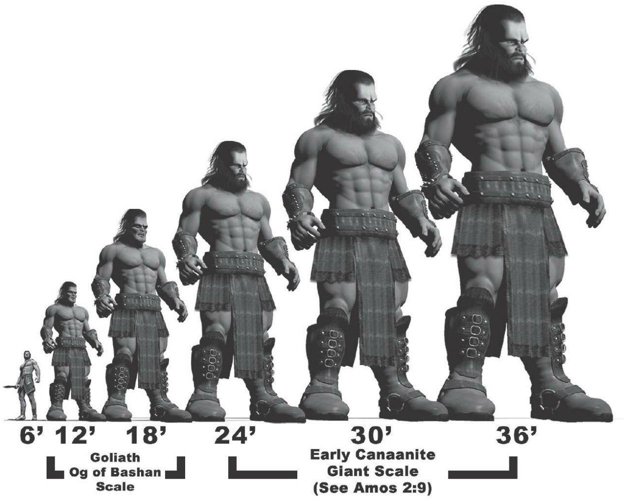

Figure 1

And these weren't "short" giants either. The biblical giants were huge!

> *Yet destroyed I the Amorite before them,* ***whose height was like the height of the cedars****, and he was strong as the oaks; yet I destroyed his fruit from above, and his roots from beneath.* (Amos 2:9)

Yes, there were real, literal giants that walked this earth. In fact, the further back in the biblical record you go, the taller they were.

The cedars of Lebanon are said to grow from 30 feet to in excess of 120 feet in height![7] To give you an idea of what a "short," 30-foot giant would look like when compared to a 6-foot tall man, I have prepared a graphic (**Figure 1**) that shows it to scale.

> *And there we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, which come of the giants: and we* ***were in our own sight as grasshoppers****, and so we were in their sight.* (Numbers 13:33)

Looking at **Figure 1**, it is easy to understand why the Hebrew spies saw themselves as grasshoppers in comparison to the sons of Anak.[8] The same scholars who teach the *Sethite Theory* don't seem to have a problem with the biblical account of the giants that the Israelites had to drive out of Canaan. So, how can they accept that characters like the sons of Anak, Og of Bashan and Goliath of Gath were indeed giants and yet somehow trivialize their genetic traits?

Short of a literal reading of Genesis 6:1-4, how are giants produced? I don't care how much spinach you feed a normal human being, kissing cousins do not give birth to 12- and 30-foot giants! The only explanation that makes any sense is that something *supernatural* must have caused those creatures to exist.

Those who would call themselves "scholars," should recognize that the words translated in Genesis 6 as "sons of God" come from the Hebrew words, *benei* (Strong's # 1121) and *haelohim* (Strong's # 430).

Strong's defines "benei" as:

> *afflicted, age, anointed one, appointed to, arrow*
>
> *From banah; a son (as a builder of the family name)*

and it describes "elohim" as:

> *angels, exceeding, God, very great, mighty*
>
> *Plural of 'elowahh; gods in the ordinary sense; but specifically used (in the plural thus, especially with the article) of the supreme God*

This is the same combination of words used in Job 1:6, Job 2:1 and Job 38:7 — each of which are commonly accepted by these same "Sethite" scholars to be in reference to angels. The Job passages describe events taking place in Heaven. They are not talking about Seth's children hanging out with Satan and the angels for a little meeting. Therefore, why should we accept the angel view in Job, but disregard that same view in Genesis, when the text clearly indicates that it is referring to the same thing: Angels?

The answer is simple: We shouldn't. Thus, it is my strong belief that the *Sethite Theory* that is taught in seminary and perpetuated from pulpits all around the world is inaccurate, flawed and should be completely disregarded!

Genesis tells us that, as a result of angels breeding with women, all of God's creation had been corrupted, distorted, manipulated and changed from its previous state, which God had pronounced, "very good." There was only one family of humans that had apparently not been affected by these "bad genes" and that of course was Noah and his family.

> *These are the generations of Noah: Noah was a just man and* ***perfect in his generations****, and Noah walked with God.* (Genesis 6:9)

Scripture says that Noah was "perfect in his generations," which literally meant *genetically pure*. We know this because the word used there is "tamim" (Strong's # 8549). It is the same word used when the Lord referred to a red heifer that had to be physically pure, without spot or blemish:

> *This is the ordinance of the law which the LORD hath commanded, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, that they bring thee a red heifer* ***without spot,*** *wherein is no blemish, and upon which never came yoke:* (Numbers 19:2)

According to the ancient and authoritative Hebrew historical record known as the Book of Jasher, Noah married one of Enoch's daughters.[9] The Bible tells us that Enoch was so righteous in God's eyes that He took the man to Heaven without ever having to die.[10] Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that his daughter certainly would have known the truth and had been a great candidate for Noah to marry. Going with the assumption that Noah and his wife were physically/genetically pure, that would naturally have to mean that their three sons, Japheth, Shem and Ham must also have been genetically pure. But that does not necessarily mean that their wives were.

The Book of Jasher says that Methuselah had a son named Eliakim who had three daughters. According to the text, Noah didn't pick them as wives for his three sons until just *seven days* before the Flood.[11] The text also says that all but Noah, his immediate family and Methuselah had strayed from God (including Noah's father Lamech).[12] This being the case, it is reasonable to assume that Eliakim falls into the category of those who had gone the way of evil since he didn't make it onto the ark. The problem is, the language of Genesis 6 seems to imply that Eliakim's daughters may have also become corrupted.

Nevertheless, Noah had to pick three wives for his three sons. All things considered, and given the limited choices he had to work with, I'd say he did a pretty good job. But if it is true that tainted DNA entered the ark, it really helps to explain a lot of things both in the post-Flood world as well as in these Last Days. I will elaborate a lot more on that last statement in Book 2 of this series, *Babylon Rising: The Return of the Nephilim*.[13] In that book, I will also reveal why I do not believe that there were "multiple incursions" of angels mating with women again and again after the Flood, and why I believe the corruption that Moses refers to in Genesis 6:12, is the corruption that took place in the latter days of Methuselah.[14]

For now, let's just take a quick look at the chronological progression of events given in Genesis 6:

> [4]***There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that***, *when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown.*
> [5]*And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.*
> [6]*And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart.*
> [7] *And the LORD said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them.*
> [8]*But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD.*
> [9]*These are the generations of Noah:* ***Noah was a just man and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God.***
> [10]*And Noah begat three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth.*
> [11]***The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence***.
> [12]*And God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt; for* ***all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth***.
> [13]*And God said unto Noah, The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth.*
> [14]***Make thee an ark*** *of gopher wood; rooms shalt thou make in the ark, and shalt pitch it within and without with pitch.*
> [15]*And this is the fashion which thou shalt make it of: The length of the ark shall be three hundred cubits, the breadth of it fifty cubits, and the height of it thirty cubits.*
> [16]*A window shalt thou make to the ark, and in a cubit shalt thou finish it above; and the door of the ark shalt thou set in the side thereof; with lower, second, and third stories shalt thou make it.*
> [17]*And, behold, I, even I, do bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh, wherein is the breath of life, from under heaven; and every thing that is in the earth shall die.*
> [18]*But with thee will I establish my covenant; and thou shalt come into the ark, thou, and thy sons, and thy wife,* ***and thy sons' wives with thee***. (Genesis 6:4-18)

In the first four verses, we see angels mating with women, thus producing giants known as the Nephilim. In verses 5-7, we see how God feels about the violence that came about as a result of these Nephilim hybrids. In verses 8-10, we see that Noah was found *genetically pure* and thus he produced three equally pure sons. Then, in verses 11 and 12, we see that the earth became corrupt and filled with violence and that *"**all** flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth."* Verses 13-17 give further indications of God's intense displeasure with the inhabitants of earth and lay out both the command to build the ark and the instructions on how to do it. Finally, in verse 18, we see for the first time any mention of the wives of Noah's sons. They are not mentioned until the very end because they were not even chosen until after the ark was finished, just seven days before the floodwaters came!

THE LATTER DAY CORRUPTION

While Genesis 6:4 can indeed be used as a proof text for the appearance of giants after the Flood, I will show you from both Genesis and other ancient Hebrew texts that Genesis 6 is to be understood *entirely* within the context of the ***pre***-Flood world.

The Bible as well as the books of Enoch and Jubilees all indicate that there was an initial "incursion" of angels known as Watchers who landed on Mount Hermon in the days of Jared. They are the ones who participated in *The Genesis Six Experiment.* But Enoch says that the first-generation Nephilim offspring were to kill each other off within 500 years.[15] After the children of the Watchers were all killed off, these disobedient angels were judged, bound and buried under the sands of the earth.

> *When their sons have slain one another, and they have seen the destruction of their beloved ones, bind them fast for seventy generations under the hills of the earth, until the day of judgment is accomplished.* (Enoch 10:12)

Thus, the first-generation Nephilim were completely destroyed and the Watchers were severely judged and sentenced. This was the penalty imposed by God upon any who would commit this sin.

Considering the abject terror expressed by the Watchers concerning their judgment,[16] I do not believe that any other angel would risk doing what the Watchers did in Genesis 6 ever again. Since we find no other direct statements in Scripture regarding any "second incursion," I reject that notion altogether. Yet, we do find references to Nephilim giants again, after the first generation were killed off, both *before* and *after* the Flood. But if they didn't return as a result of angels again mating with humans, how did they return? I believe the books of Jasher and Jubilees hold the key to answering this question:

> *But **in the latter days of Methuselah**, the sons of men turned from the Lord; **they corrupted the earth**, they robbed and plundered each other, and they rebelled against God; they went contrary to, **they corrupted their ways**, and would not listen to the voice of Methuselah, but rebelled against him.* (Jasher 4:4)
>
> *And **their judges and rulers went to the daughters of men and took their wives by force from their husbands according to their choice, and the sons of men in those days took from the cattle of the earth, the beasts of the field and the fowls of the air, and taught the mixture of animals of one species with the other,** in order therewith to provoke the Lord; and God saw the whole earth and it was corrupt, for **all flesh had corrupted its ways on the earth, all men and all animals.*** (Jasher 4:18)

The account given above in Jasher is a direct parallel to the following account given in Jubilees:

> ***And after this they sinned against the beasts and birds, and all that moveth and walketh on the earth: and much blood was shed on the earth, and every imagination and desire of men imagined vanity and evil continually.** And the Lord destroyed everything from off the face of the earth; because of the wickedness of their deeds, and because of the blood which they had shed in the midst of the earth He destroyed everything.*
>
> (Jubilees 7:24,25)

Both of the above extra-biblical texts perfectly confirm and fit within the same chronology given in Genesis 6 (*before* the Flood):

> *And God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt; for **all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth**. And God said unto Noah, The end of all flesh is come before me; **for the earth is filled with violence through them**; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth.* (Genesis 6:12)

I believe this latter day corruption of DNA better explains how the Nephilim hybrids (re)appeared “after that” — meaning ***before*** the Flood, as well as after it.[17]

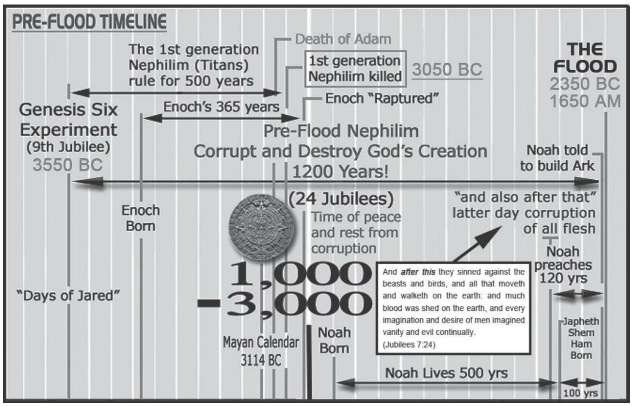
PRE-FLOOD TIMELINE
Death of Adam
The 1st generation Nephilim (Titans) rule for 500 years
1st generation Nephilim killed
3050 BC
THE FLOOD
2350 BC
1650 AM
Enoch "Raptured"
Genesis Six Experiment
(9th Jubilee)
3550 BC
Enoch's 365 years
Pre-Flood Nephilim
Corrupt and Destroy God's Creation
1200 Years!
Noah told to build Ark
(24 Jubilees)
Time of peace and rest from corruption
"and also after that" latter day corruption of all flesh
Enoch Born
Noah preaches 120 yrs
1,000
-3,000
"Days of Jared"
Mayan Calendar 3114 BC
Noah Born
Japheth Shem Ham Born
Noah Lives 500 yrs
100 yrs

And *after this* they sinned against the beasts and birds, and all that moveth and walketh on the earth: and much blood was shed on the earth, and every imagination and desire of men imagined vanity and evil continually. (Jubilees 7:24)

Figure 2

Figure 2 illustrates the timeline of events. First, you have the initial incursion (circa 3550 BC) followed by the death of the first-generation Nephilim 500 years later (circa 3050 BC). Then, Enoch gets “raptured,” and Noah is born during a time of peace.[18] But in the latter days of Methuselah, men began to mix species, and a new breed of hybrid creatures began to emerge with corrupted DNA. This appears to have happened during the last 120 years of Methuselah’s life.[19] If so, all of that happened just prior to and after the birth of Noah’s three sons. Thus, I believe the biblical account proves that at least one of the wives of Noah’s sons had Nephilim blood (or corrupted DNA) running through her veins.[20] That one was Ham’s wife. I say that because Ham’s lineage is literally loaded with giants.

Through years of researching, I have found no evidence of giants or corrupt DNA in Shem’s lineage, which makes sense because the Messiah was to come through this line.[21] Although there may be some evidence of giants in Japeth’s lineage,[22] Ham’s lineage has by far the most. Of the four sons of Ham, at least three appeared to have produced giants — and lots of them!

In Genesis 10, we read that Ham begat Cush, Mizriam, Phut and Canaan. Since the Bible mentions Canaan first (in Genesis 9), let’s start with him and work our way backward.

OH BOY, HERE WE GO AGAIN!

I have a theory about Canaan based on the strange situation described in Genesis 9:20-25. In that passage of Scripture, Ham finds his father naked, and Noah curses his grandson, Canaan. Why? Scripture is silent, but I suspect it was because there was something obviously wrong with him.

First of all, the narrative implies that Canaan had to have been present for Noah to have cursed him. That means he was either born on the ark or shortly thereafter. My belief is that he may have been born with six fingers and six toes, which is a notable characteristic of the Nephilim giants.[23] If this is true, then when Canaan was born, Noah must have looked at his grandson and said, “*Oh boy, here we go again!*”

Canaan’s lineage settled the land that was named after him, and we know from Scripture that Canaan was full of giants. Remember Numbers 13:33? After the Exodus, the spies went into the land and saw themselves as grasshoppers by comparison. These giants were all the “ites” (as in the Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, etc.) that Joshua and his men and later David and his men had to wipe out in the Old Testament.

As we saw in **Figure 1**, those giants were quite massive! The Israelites even bragged about the size of one of them: a man named Og of Bashan. Although Og was short compared to the earlier sons of Anak, according to

Patrick Heron, if we are to assume that the Hebrew cubit is 25.025 inches, he makes note that the guy's bed was still over 18 feet long, implying that the man himself was nearly as tall.[24] Douglas Hamp goes even further in describing what someone like Og of Bashan would have been able to do. Stating that Og would have weighed about 3,125 pounds, in his book, *Corrupting the Image*, Hamp paints a wonderful word-picture for us:

> *Considering that King Og was a warrior, we can presume that he could at least lift the equivalent of his own body weight...* [he] *would have been able to lift two war horses (1,500 pounds each) at once with its rider and throw it! In modern terms he could lift a midsize car!*[25]

Mr. Hamp then proceeds to explain why the Hebrew spies came back with the report that the *"land devours its inhabitants"* by revealing what it would take to maintain a body like Og's:

> *If we use the more conservative weight calculation then he would have needed to consume at least 22,657 calories per day just to stay alive as per the Basel Metabolic Rate which calculates, based on a person's height and weight, how many calories they need to live if they are not doing any significant work per day.*[26]

In modern terms, Hamp speculates that Og probably would have had to eat more than 30 pizzas or about 150 cheeseburgers per day in order to get the needed calories to maintain the lifestyle of a warrior! That should certainly put some things into perspective for us.

From cedar-tree size Amorites to 18-footers like Og of Bashan, it is clear that Canaan definitely had some serious Nephilim genes! But what about Ham's other sons? The Bible doesn't give us much to go on concerning any giants within Phut's lineage. But in Mizraim's lineage, we can find something pretty amazing, with enormous implications. One of his sons was a guy named Caphtor.

> *Mizraim was the ancestor of the Ludites, Anamites, Lehabites, Naphtuhites, Pathrusites, Casluhites, and the Caphtorites, from whom the Philistines came.* (Genesis 10:14 NLT)

I chose the New Living Translation for that particular verse because it gives a much clearer account of where the Philistines originated than does the King James Version.[27]

We know of at least five giants that came from the Philistines: Goliath and his four brothers. From the description of Goliath, he was a "runt" as far as giants go — standing at a mere 9 to 12 feet in height according to some scholars. He and his brothers were the last of the giants (in the land of Canaan anyway) by the time of David.

Notice, however, that the Caphtorites are said to have fathered the Philistines. According to Jeremiah 47:4 and Amos 9:7, the Philistines came from Crete; a place described in some translations as "the country of Caphtor" because that's where he settled at some point following the Flood. Why is this so significant? Because Crete is the island from which all of Greek mythology originates![28]

The mythology of the infamous Greek gods can literally be traced back to sometime just after the Great Flood of Noah. These gods came from Crete. Furthermore, if you study the history of Crete, you will find that most of what we now call "Europe" used to have to pay tribute to this tiny island in the Aegean Sea. They had to send young virgin men and women to the Minotaur of the Labyrinth as tribute to King Minos.[29] How so much of Europe could have been held in subjugation to such a tiny island doesn't really make sense, unless you realize that the gods of antiquity likely really did exist. These gods were always described as giants with "superpowers." Thus, they were definitely something more than merely famous humans.

The Bible tells us exactly who/what they really were and where they came from. These are the post-Flood Nephilim who sprung up through the lineage of Ham.

Finally, let's look at Ham's son, Cush. Scripture says that Cush begat Nimrod.

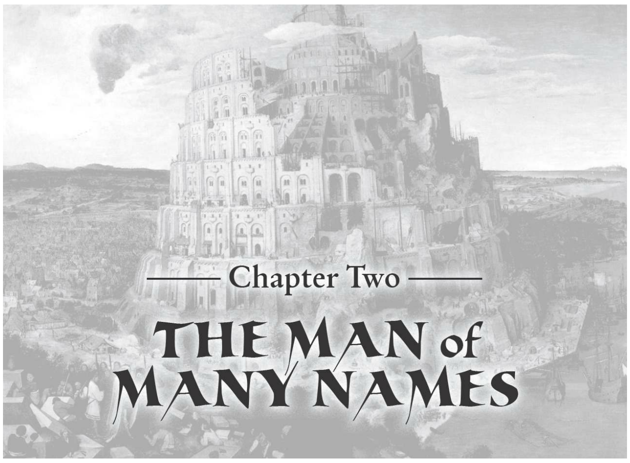

Chapter Two

THE MAN of MANY NAMES

And Cush begat Nimrod: he began to be a mighty one in the earth. He was a mighty hunter before the LORD: wherefore it is said, Even as Nimrod the mighty hunter before the LORD.
(Genesis 10:8,9)

Without a doubt, the first blatantly anti-Christ-like figure that we read about in Scripture is someone the Bible refers to as Nimrod. This individual is very significant for a lot of reasons, which will become apparent by the end of this book. For starters, I believe Nimrod was a giant just like many of his cousins. Let's look at the Hebrew for Genesis 10:8:

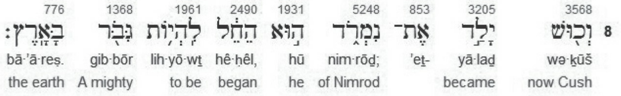

8	3568	3205	853	5248	1931	2490	1961	1368	776
	וְכ֗וּשׁ	יָלַ֣ד	אֶת־	נִמְרֹ֑ד	ה֣וּא	הֵחֵ֔ל	לִֽהְי֥וֹת	גִבֹּ֖ר	בָּאָֽרֶץ׃
	wə·ḵūš	yā·laḏ	'eṯ-	nim·rōḏ;	hū	hê·ḥêl,	lih·yō·wṯ	gib·bōr	bā·'ā·reṣ.
	now Cush	became		of Nimrod	he	began	to be	A mighty	the earth

The name 'Nimrod' (Strong's # 5248) is a word that both the *Strong's* and the *NAS Exhaustive Concordance* say is "from foreign origin." In his Genesis 1-15, *Word Biblical Commentary,* Wenham notes that the name means "we shall rebel," though he admits that the etymology is uncertain. That said, most scholars seem to agree that the name essentially means, "the rebellious one." Regardless, I believe he has gone by many other proper names, described by many cultures of antiquity. Before I get into that, I want to first address the phrase, "began to be a mighty one."

The word "began" used here is the word "he-hel"(transliterated as "chalal") in Hebrew. Strong's (# 2490) defines it as:

> *begin, men began, defile, break, defile, eat as common things A primitive root (compare chalah); properly, to bore, i. e. (by implication) to wound, to dissolve; figuratively, to profane (a person, place or thing), to break (one's word), to begin (as if by an "opening wedge"); denom. (from chaliyl) to play (the flute) -- begin (X men began), defile, X break, defile, X eat (as common things), X first, X gather the grape thereof, X take inheritance, pipe, player on instruments, pollute, (cast as) profane (self), prostitute, slay (slain), sorrow, stain, wound.*

This is extremely interesting. Now let's look at the word translated as "mighty one" to see just how interesting it really is. The word translated as "mighty one" is "gibbor" in Hebrew. There has been some debate regarding this word as it can be used in a variety of ways. Here are a few mentioned in Strong's (# 1368):

> *champion, chief, excel, giant, man, mighty man, one, strong man,*

Notice one of the ways that it can be used includes the word "giant," though this word is not as popular in that regard as other Hebrew words such as Nephilim or Raphaim. This word "gibbor" seems to be more of a description of a man who is indeed mighty in the sense of a warrior. But when you look at Genesis 6:4, there appears to be an interesting connection.

> *"There were giants* [Nephilim] *in the earth in those days and also after that when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men and they bare children to them the same became mighty men* [gibborim] *which were of old men of renown."* (Genesis 6:4)

This seems to be saying that the "gibborim" can be considered the offspring of the Nephilim, which we know were giants. This is not always the case though. Take David's "mighty men [gibborim] of valor" in 2 Samuel 23:8 for instance. I don't believe these were Nephilim offspring — especially since one of the things these guys did was hunt down giants! Therefore, I don't think we can get overly dogmatic about the word itself. I believe its meaning must be taken in context with its usage in the sentence.[1] So, based on its usage in Genesis 10:8,9 what are we to think concerning Nimrod?

Given what we know concerning the other sons of Ham and their offspring, I think it is reasonable to assume that through profaning/defiling himself, Nimrod became a "mighty one"— in the sense of becoming an offspring of the Nephilim.[2] Therefore, I believe there are at least three ways we can look at Genesis 10:8,9:

1. Nimrod simply became a strong and powerful man.
2. Nimrod began to become a giant himself.
3. Nimrod began to become a hunter of giants.

> *And Cush begat Nimrod: he* ***began*** *to be a mighty one in the earth.* (Genesis 10:8)

The Hebrew word "chalal" (translated as "began") is found 143 times in the Old Testament,[3] and it is very interesting in terms of its usage as: profaning, defiling and prostituting.

> *And thou shalt not let any of thy seed pass through the fire to Molech, neither shalt thou* ***profane*** *the name of thy God: I am the LORD.* (Leviticus 18:21)
>
> *Uncontrolled as water, you shall not have preeminence, Because you went up to your father's bed; Then you* ***defiled*** *it — he went up to my couch.* (Genesis 49:4 NASB)
>
> *Do not* ***prostitute*** *thy daughter, to cause her to be a whore; lest the land fall to whoredom, and the land become full of wickedness.* (Leviticus 19:29)

With these definitions in mind, I suspect all three of the above possibilities concerning Nimrod are true. At any rate, as if to take all the guesswork out of the equation, the Septuagint just comes right out and says that he was indeed a giant:

> *And Chus begot Nebrod:* ***he began to be a giant*** *upon the earth.* ***He was a giant hunter*** *before the Lord God; therefore they say, As* ***Nebrod the giant hunter*** *before the Lord.* (Genesis 10:8,9 LXX)

If he is indeed the inspiration for so many other mythological characters throughout ancient cultures (as I hope to prove in this series), then Nimrod most certainly was a mighty warrior, giant and possibly a hunter and subduer of giants as well.

In fact, giants are said to have helped Nimrod build the Tower of Babel. Ancient Arabic legends speak about the giant races being dispersed across the lands, along with the people whose languages were confounded.[4] According to an Arabic manuscript found at Baalbek and quoted by Michael Alouf in his work, *History of Baalbek,* we see that prior to their dispersal, they may indeed have been directly involved with some of the various building campaigns under Nimrod's leadership.

> *After the flood, when Nimrod reigned over Lebanon,* ***he sent giants*** *to rebuild the fortress of Baalbek, which was so named in honour of Baal, the god of the Moabites and worshippers*

> *of the Sun.*[5] [emphasis mine]

Apparently (though I don’t personally believe this to be true), local tradition asserts that the Tower of Babel was actually located at Baalbek.[6] Regardless, there does appear to be a “Nimrod connection” to that area that can still be seen even to this day.

My wife and I went to Israel in 2005. As part of that trip, we got to visit Caesarea Philippi and stand where Jesus stood when He asked His disciples the question, *“Who do men say that I am?”*[7] If you were standing at that location, facing the altar of Pan, you could look up to your right (to the southeast of the base of Mount Hermon), and see the ruins of a place known as the “Fortress of Nimrod.”

Figure 3

In his book, *The Giza Discovery,*[8] author Peter Goodgame did a masterful job of laying the foundation for who this guy was in the ancient world — and who he will be in the days ahead. The Bible calls him Nimrod, but to the ancients he was known as:

Gilgamesh
Baal
Melqart
Adonis
Dumuzi
Dionysus
Bacchus
Mithra
Orion
Apollo
Tammuz
Osiris

There are others, but I primarily want to focus on the first and the last names given in that list. But before I do that, I’d like to explain why he is known by so many different names.

The Bible tells us that he was the one who orchestrated the building of the Tower of Babel. According to the Book of Jasher,[9] Nimrod led a team of three camps, each with a special mission to accomplish upon completion of the Tower.

> *And all these people and all the families divided themselves in three parts; the first said, “We will ascend into Heaven and fight against Him;” the second said, “We will ascend into Heaven and place our own gods there and serve them;” and the third part said, “We will ascend to Heaven and strike Him with bows and spears.” And God knew all their works and evil thoughts, and He saw the city and the tower which they were building.* (Jasher 9:26)

Here we see the attributes of the first Antichrist: Nimrod was the leader of a group of people that wanted to set up a one-world-system without God. In fact, his goal was to make war with and kill God, thus proclaiming himself to be God.[10] But when God saw all that they intended to do, He decided to do something about it.

The first thing we must realize is that God did not have a problem with them constructing a tall building. God didn’t freak out when we built the Twin Towers at the World Trade Center. Actually, I’m not convinced that the Tower of Babel was really all that tall anyway — at least not as compared to our modern skyscrapers. In fact, if the people were really concerned with height, they would not have built it in a valley![11] No, it was not about height. I believe Nimrod was building what today we might call a “stargate.” Thus, the Tower of Babel may have literally been a portal through which Nimrod intended to “reach” into Heaven — and apparently, this was possible.

> *And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, **whose top may reach unto heaven**; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth. And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded. And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: **and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.** Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not*

> *understand one another's speech.* (Genesis 11:4-7)

From that text it would seem that Nimrod's plan was possible, at least in the sense of "reaching into Heaven." We know that we can not build a building that is high enough to literally enter into the "Third Heaven" where God dwells, therefore something else must be meant by this.

Researchers like Dr. Thomas Horn, Steve Quayle, Doug Woodward, and others share the same speculative conclusions I do concerning the idea of a "stargate." In fact, in his book, *Nephilim Stargates: The Year 2012 and the Return of the Nephilim,* in a section called "The Amalantrah Working" Dr. Horn writes:

> *In 1918, famed occultist Aleister Crowley attempted to create a dimensional vortex that would bridge the gap between the world of the seen and the unseen. The ritual was called the Amalantrah Working and according to Crowley became successful when a presence manifested itself through the rift. He called the being "Lam" and drew a portrait of it. The startling image, detailed almost ninety years ago, bears powerful similarity with "Alien Greys" of later pop culture.*
>
> *Nearly three decades after the Amalantrah Working, rocket scientist and cofounder of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory Jack Parsons and his pal L. Ron Hubbard (Church of Scientology founder) conducted a second ritual, the "Babylon Working," in an attempt to reopen the gateway created by Crowley. The two men were not seeking audience with Lam. Instead they wanted the spirit of Babylon, the archetype divine feminine, to pass through the portal and to incarnate itself within a human being. Many adepts of Enochian magic and Ordo Templi Orientis believe they succeeded and that she — the whore of Babylon — walks the earth today. It would come as no surprise, as Babylonian and earlier "gods" have been depicted as coming through "gates" for some time.*
>
> — Dr. Thomas Horn[12]

Dr. Horn goes on to describe the many temples, monuments and megalithic structures around the world that may in fact be portals, or stargates through which beings can travel between dimensions. Thus, he believes Nimrod and his people may have somehow created something that could "bridge" our world with that of the Heavenly realm. But God put a stop to it. He confounded their speech and separated the people of the earth.

When God confounded their language, He split the one language everyone previously spoke into *seventy* new and different languages. The New Living Translation, gives us the details:

> *When the Most High assigned lands to the nations, when he divided up the human race, he established the boundaries of the peoples according to the number in his heavenly court.* (Deuteronomy 32:8 NLT)

I chose to use the *New Living Translation* here, because it seems to be more accurate than most other translations that render the last part as, "according to the children of Israel" (who had not yet even been born). The NLT appears to draw its translation of this verse from the Septuagint which says, "according to the angels of God."

Commenting on this particular passage of Scripture in *Barne's Notes on the Bible,* the author writes,

> *Some texts of the Greek version have "according to the number of the Angels of God;" following apparently not a different reading, but the Jewish notion that the nations of the earth are seventy in number (compare Genesis 10:1 note), and that each has its own guardian Angel (compare Ecclesiasticus 17:17). This was possibly suggested by an apprehension that the literal rendering might prove invidious to the many Gentiles who would read the Greek version.*

King Wells, the author of *Ancient Myths and the Bible* reinforces this belief on pages 12 and 13 of his book:

> *Remember, we must prove a thesis from more than one source, so let's look at Deut. 4:19:*
>
>> *And lest thou lift up thine eyes unto heaven, and when thou seest the sun, and the moon, and the stars, even all the host of heaven, shouldest be driven to worship them, and serve them, which the LORD thy God hath divided unto all nations under the whole heaven.*
>
> *Once again, we see that God divided the nations according to the host of heaven, and throughout the scriptures the host of heaven has referred to the angels...*

The Book of Jasher confirms this idea as well. In chapter 48:43, it describes the throne of Pharaoh as follows.

> *And the throne on which the king sat was covered with gold and silver and onyx stones, and it had seventy steps.*

The narrative goes on to describe the reasons for the seventy steps, stating that they represented the 70 languages of man.

> *Also any man who understood to speak in all the seventy languages, he ascended the seventy steps, and went up and spoke till he reached the king. And any man who could not complete the seventy, he ascended as many steps as the languages which he knew to speak in. It was customary in those days in Egypt that no one should reign over them, but one who understood to speak in the seventy languages.* (Jasher 48:45b-47)

In the next chapter of Jasher, we see in the account of Joseph being made second in charge of Egypt, that Pharaoh's officers protested the idea of someone ruling over them who did not know all 70 languages. This would have presented a problem for Joseph if it were not for an angel of the Lord coming to him that night and teaching him all 70 languages.[13]

What's the point? The point is simply this: After the confusion of the tongues at the Tower of Babel, men went away talking about the same guy (Nimrod), only now in their new language. Thus Nimrod, the great and mighty warrior-hunter-god-king, became known by many different names throughout the world. With 70 different nations/languages coming out of that one event, it is now easy to understand how this one man could be known by *at least* 70 different names! In fact, I would submit that this may be the *true esoteric* meaning behind our national motto, *E Pluribus Unum* (I will address that idea further in Chapter Four).

Earlier, I said I wanted to focus on two names in particular; Gilgamesh and Osiris. Let's start with Gilgamesh. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is one of the oldest stories ever written. Many people have made the connection that Gilgamesh is just one of many names for Nimrod. David Livingston, for example, does a great job of making the Nimrod-Gilgamesh connection,[14] and the Internet is literally loaded with information and resources testifying that the two names represent the same individual.

Gilgamesh is often depicted as a six-fingered giant. We can see in **Figure 4** that he is holding a lion under his arm! The ancient texts[15] also make the statement that he was *"2/3 god and 1/3 man."* This certainly seems to support my "Nephilim genetics" case regarding the children of Ham. There is much more that I could write about concerning Gilgamesh, but that's all I will focus on for now. Let's turn our attention to Osiris.

Osiris is a *very* well known character in both history and mythology. He plays a prominent role in secret societies and even within our own government. But more than that, I believe he is the central character we need to look at when it comes to understanding the times we live in and what is to come in the near future.

For instance, did you know that Osiris is the only other god of antiquity apart from Jesus who was known as, "The King of kings and Lord of lords?"

> *"...he is exceedingly mighty and most terrible in his name 'Osiris'; he endureth for ever and*

Figure 4

> *for ever in his name of 'Un-nefer.' Homage be to thee,* ***O King of kings, Lord of lords****, Ruler of princes, who from the womb of Nut hast ruled the world and the Underworld..."*
>
> *"Hail, my Lord, who dost hasten through eternity, whose existence is for ever,* ***Lord of Lords, King of Kings, Sovereign, King of the gods****, who live in their shrine."*

— Excerpts from a *Hymn to Osiris* in the ***Book of the Dead*** [emphasis mine]

As stated earlier, Peter Goodgame has done an amazing job of connecting the dots and explaining the Osiris myth, so I won't go over it all here. Please take the time to read Part 2 of his book, *The Giza Discovery* to learn more.[16] There are, however, a few things that I would like to point out here in order to set the stage for some of the conclusions I will draw later.

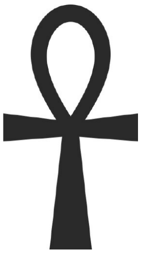

Figure 5

Osiris' symbol is the ankh, which looks remarkably like a cross.[17] One dominant theory is that the "loop" at the top of the ankh represents resurrection — as in the rebirth of the sun. This would seem to go along with the *numerous* dying and resurrecting sun gods born on December 25th that are found in the ancient world. And suffice it to say, it is not by chance, coincidence or accident that the Son of God was crucified on the symbol of the sun god.

With that in mind, it is important to note that in Nimrod's incarnation as Osiris, you can truly see a mirror (reversed) image of Jesus. Where Jesus is the Son of God, the Christ, the Messiah, Osiris is the exact antithesis. He is the sun god, the false messiah, the ***anti***-Christ! This is one of the primary reasons why I believe Christians should absolutely not associate Jesus' birth with the date, December 25th. It was *not* His birthday. It was the birthday of Nimrod/Osiris/Baal/Mithra.[18]

It is not my intent to build a comprehensive case against Christmas and Easter in this chapter.[19] The bottom line is, in Deuteronomy 18:9, God told the Israelites not to have ***anything*** to do with the traditions of other (false) gods. He considers it an abomination.

If our Lord is *"the same yesterday, today and forever"* as the Bible claims He is,[20] then I suspect the Word that became flesh on our behalf would give us the same warning.[21] It has been my experience that few Christians want to hear this message and will fight tooth and nail over it, but because I believe I have been shown this truth, I have a responsibility to herald it.

> *Again the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, Son of man, speak to the children of thy people, and say unto them, When I bring the sword upon a land, if the people of the land take a man of their coasts, and set him for their watchman: If when he seeth the sword come upon the land, he blow the trumpet, and warn the people; Then whosoever heareth the sound of the trumpet, and taketh not warning; if the sword come, and take him away, his blood shall be upon his own head. He heard the sound of the trumpet, and took not warning; his blood shall be upon him. But he that taketh warning shall deliver his soul. But if the watchman see the sword come, and blow not the trumpet, and the people be not warned; if the sword come, and take any person from among them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at the watchman's hand.* (Ezekiel 33:1-6)

I've sounded the alarm. It is up to you to heed it or ignore it. Needless to say, "Christmas Day" (as defined by December 25th) is not Jesus Christ's birthday, but rather the birthday of the Antichrist; the dying and resurrecting sun god of antiquity... who hasn't resurrected yet. Hasn't resurrected yet? What's that about??

In the Book of Revelation, Jesus is repeatedly referred to as *"the One who was and is and is to come."* That theme carries through the early part of the book, but once you get to chapter 13, you start to read about a "beast" who is later described (in chapter 17:8-11) as the one who *"was and **is not** and **yet shall be**."*

Could it be that the Antichrist will be resurrected from the dead just like our Savior was? Hold that thought.

Something else I want to point out regarding the Osiris-Nimrod connection, is their association with one of the most prominent and easily identifiable constellations in the sky: Orion. Like Gilgamesh and Nimrod, Orion is also known as "the mighty hunter."

In *The Two Babylons* by Alexander Hislop, the author writes the following:[22]

> *Though we do not find any account of Mysteries observed in Greece in memory of Orion, the giant and mighty hunter celebrated by Homer, under that name, yet he was represented symbolically as having died in a similar way to that in which Osiris died, and as having then been translated to heaven. **
>
> > **See OVID'S Fasti. Ovid represents Orion as so puffed up with pride on account of his great strength, as vain-gloriously to boast that no creature on earth could cope with him, whereupon a scorpion appeared, "and," says the poet, "he was added to the stars." The name of a scorpion in Chaldee is Akrab; but Ak-rab, thus divided, signifies "THE GREAT OPPRESSOR," and this is the hidden meaning of the Scorpion as represented in the Zodiac. That sign typifies him who cut off the Babylonian god, and suppressed the system he set up. It was while the sun was in Scorpio that Osiris in Egypt "disappeared" (WILKINSON), and great lamentations were made for his disappearance. Another subject was mixed up with the death of the Egyptian god; but it is specially to be noticed that, as it was in consequence of a conflict with a scorpion that Orion was "added to the stars," so it was when the scorpion was in the ascendant that Osiris "disappeared."*
>
> ***From Persian records we are expressly assured that it was Nimrod who was deified after his death by the name of Orion, and placed among the stars...***[23] [emphasis mine]

Now that we have connected Nimrod with Gilgamesh, Osiris and Orion, I will begin to pull it all together and paint a picture that I believe perfectly illustrates what is to come.

Many scholars have observed that the pyramids on the Giza plateau appear to be aligned to the "belt" of the Orion Constellation.[24] I suspect this is for a very important reason that is directly related to Nimrod and potentially to the Last Days prophecies concerning the coming Antichrist.

In 1945, the Egyptian archaeologist Abdel Moneim Abu Bakr discovered a water-filled shaft inside a small tunnel that runs north-south under the causeway of Khafre on the Giza plateau. He explored it to some degree, but never published his findings. For many years following, the shaft simply became a swimming hole and was a source of drinking water for local workmen. This interesting shaft eventually caught the attention of world renowned Egyptologist, Zahi Hawass, and in 1999, he decided to undertake the challenge of excavating it. Pumping out the water proved quite problematic, but eventually, they were able to get it all out and see what was really down the shaft. This is what he found:

> *"I have found a shaft, going twenty-nine meters vertically down into the ground, exactly halfway between the Chefren Pyramid and the Sphinx. At the bottom, which was filled with water, we have found a burial chamber with four pillars. In the middle is a large granite sarcophagus, which I expect to be the grave of Osiris, the god… I have been digging in Egypt's sand for more than 30 years, and up to date this is the most exciting discovery I have made…. We found the shaft in November and began pumping up the water recently. So several years will pass before we have finished investigating the find."* [25]

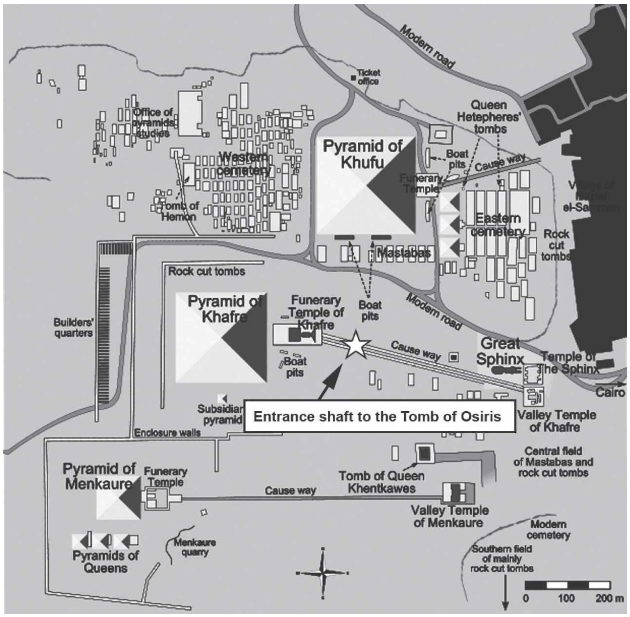
Modern road
Ticket office
Queen Hetepheres' tombs
Office of pyramids studies
Western cemetery
Pyramid of Khufu
Boat pits
Cause way
Funerary Temple
Tomb of Hemon
Eastern cemetery
Rock cut tombs
Mastabas
Rock cut tombs
Builders' quarters
Pyramid of Khafre
Funerary Temple of Khafre
Boat pits
Modern road
Cause way
Great Sphinx
Temple of The Sphinx
Boat pits
Cairo
Subsidiary pyramid
Entrance shaft to the Tomb of Osiris
Valley Temple of Khafre
Enclosure walls
Central field of Mastabas and rock cut tombs
Pyramid of Menkaure
Funerary Temple
Cause way
Tomb of Queen Khentkawes
Valley Temple of Menkaure
Modern cemetery
Pyramids of Queens
Menkaure quarry
Southern field of mainly rock cut tombs
0
100
200 m

Figure 6

On Mr. Hawass' personal, Internet blog,[26] he describes what they found inside the large, granite sarcophagus:

> *"In the center of the emplacement, there is a large sarcophagus made of black basalt. The sarcophagus contained the remains of a skeleton, along with several amulets dating to the Late Period. We were surprised to find that there was also some red polished pottery with traces of white paint, which probably dates to the 6th Dynasty.*
>
> *There is no evidence that the shaft was ever used for a royal burial.* ***It is my belief that it was intended as a symbolic tomb for Osiris, the god of the underworld.****"* [emphasis mine]

The 6th Dynasty dates back to roughly between 2345 BC and 2181 BC[27] or in other words, immediately after the Flood of Noah (circa 2348 BC),[28] during the time of Nimrod and the building/dispersal of the Tower of Babel.

Mr. Hawass goes on to state that *"the burials dating to the Late Period probably reflect the desire of the Egyptians to be close to the god of the underworld in death."*

The obvious question becomes: was it Osiris-Nimrod's skeleton that was found? No. I do not believe it was — and neither does Mr. Hawass. But there's something else that's interesting about this discovery. Once the water was all pumped out and they first saw the inside of the chamber, the sarcophagus was found open!

> *During his excavations of the Osiris Shaft in 1999, Dr. Hawass found the remains of four pillars surrounded by a wall. Inside the pillared area was part of a large, granite sarcophagus with the lid thrown off.*[29]

Apparently, someone's body was put there, but everyone seems to agree that it wasn't Osiris-Nimrod's.

A few years later, another astonishing (and related) discovery was made, but this time, it was in the desert of Iraq. On Tuesday, April 29th, 2003, a BBC news report came out announcing that archeologists had discovered the tomb of Gilgamesh![30]

I have copied the entire article to my *Babylon Rising* blog site (because it would not surprise me if it disappears from the original BBC

Who can compare with him in kingliness? Who can say, *like Gilgamesh, I am king?*

The Epic Of Gilgamesh

website soon).[31] In the article, it is stated that they found an “amazing discovery” under the desert sands of Iraq.

That was in April of 2003. When did the U.S. military occupation phase begin in Iraq? It began the following month, in May.[32] If you remember, we went to war under the pretense of finding “weapons of mass destruction.” We all know those reports were later proven to be false. But I submit that they may have indeed found ***the*** weapon of mass destruction. It would certainly appear that the body of Gilgamesh (Nimrod) was found!

In an interview on Omega Man Radio, Tom Horn and Steve Quayle talked about the discovery of that carcass. At about 1 hour and 27 minutes into the interview they discussed how Nimrod “began to be a giant.” They then began talking about the discovery of Gilgamesh’s remains and in confirmation of that, Steve Quayle said:

> *“I talked to a Special Operations general who validated that, verified that, and absolutely was there when Gilgamesh’s remains — and his words were, ‘**He was in a state of remarkable preservation.’** OK?*
>
> *And by the way, that was in the literal vicinity of where the United States built its largest military complex, I believe it’s one of the largest military complexes in the world.... The advance team — Special Operations went in there to grab all of that stuff... **What I’m telling you is based on a multi-starred general’s eye-witness report to me who was there. He said, ‘They have Gilgamesh’s remains.’ So if they have Gilgamesh and he is Nimrod, they got it. And the whole point was to extract the DNA.**”*
>
> — Steve Quayle[33] [emphasis mine]

If this account is true, I believe these two incredible discoveries: the mysterious tomb of Osiris and the body of Gilgamesh, proclaim the beginning of the End.

Chapter Three
THE FIRST SHALL BE LAST

“The Dying God shall rise again! The secret room in the House of the Hidden Places shall be rediscovered. The Pyramid again shall stand as the ideal emblem of solidarity, inspiration, aspiration, resurrection, and regeneration.”

— Manly P. Hall[1]

Someone once asked me, *“What is the purpose of prophecy?”* I responded, *“To prepare us for things to come.”* If that answer is correct, do you really think God would leave us hanging concerning the details of major events in what we call the End Times?[2]

In Mark 13:19, Jesus said that there has never been a time like those coming days and there never will be again after they have finished. That’s pretty serious! Therefore, when looking at the key players who have been written about concerning the Last Days, shouldn’t we be able to find some major clues to help us determine who they are?

Should we not be able to look at Scripture and determine *exactly* who the coming Antichrist is going to be, so that we are not deceived? Obviously, I believe the answer is a resounding *Yes!*

So far we have seen that prior to the Flood, Lucifer and his angels did most of the “dirty work” themselves. They had direct interaction with humans, leading them into sin, death and destruction. But after the Flood, we saw that a *man* rose up, empowered by the devil to oppose God and His children. He did this at the Tower of Babel. Thus, the first anti-Christ figure arose. His name was Nimrod. There, he tried to kill God and set up a New Order with himself serving as the god of this world. So it was that the work of evil began to take place through a human being, apparently of Nephilim descent.

After God foiled Nimrod’s plans, the population of the world was divided into 70 nations, each ruled by an angelic principality and each people group telling stories of the god-man who was their leader. He went by many names. Each of those names carried with it a legend, story or myth that involved the concept of resurrection.

I ended the last chapter by drawing attention to some of the various names Nimrod has been known by — focusing specifically on the names Gilgamesh, Osiris and Orion.

What I find interesting about the usual depiction of Orion is that he has a lion in one hand and a club in the other. He is also facing Taurus the bull. Bull worship was very popular in the days leading up to and during the time of Moses. Bull worship was also strongly associated with Baal (who is yet another name for Nimrod). So, here you have a mighty hunter, facing a bull, about to smash a lion... or so he thinks.

We know that one of the titles for Jesus is, *“The Lion of the Tribe of Judah.”*[3] As we look at **Figure 7** and contemplate the Last Days, it may be tempting to think that the Antichrist is going to win the battle. He has his hand raised to strike the Savior. It looks pretty bleak doesn’t it?

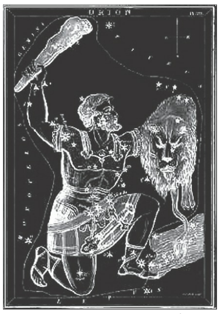

Figure 7

But recently, the Lord brought me to another passage of Scripture that fits this analogy perfectly. Now when I look at the arrogance of Nimrod/Orion, I cannot help but think of Revelation 5:5:

> *And one of the elders saith unto me, Weep not: behold,* ***the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, hath prevailed...*** (Revelation 5:5a)

When we keep reading through the Book of Revelation, we are reminded that we are the ones who win in the end! The club of Nimrod will never strike the head of the Lion. In fact, just the opposite is going to happen. The seed of the woman will finally crush the head of the serpent, just as the first prophecy in the Bible says.[4] But I'm getting ahead of myself.

In the Old Testament, one phrase stands out above all others as a description for the Antichrist. That phrase is, "the Assyrian." Look again at the picture of Orion and consider this passage from Isaiah:

> ***Woe to the Assyrian****, the rod of my anger,* ***in whose hand is the club of my wrath****!* (Isaiah 10:5)
>
> *That* ***I will break the Assyrian in my land****, and upon my mountains tread him under foot: then shall his yoke depart from off them, and his burden depart from off their shoulders.* (Isaiah 14:25)

Many speculate that "the Assyrian" must be a Muslim and therefore Islam must be the religion of Antichrist. I don't buy that argument. I believe this term is a specific reference to Nimrod and not to Muslims, nor a designation that we should be looking for in a future (or current) leader of the Middle East. Much more could be written here concerning the Assyrian in Scripture, but for the sake of brevity, this is enough to make my point.[5]

Nimrod was known as a mighty hunter. Orion was known as the mighty hunter, and so was Gilgamesh.

> *Who can compare with him in kingliness?*
> *Who can say like Gilgamesh: "I am King!"?*
> *Whose name, from the day of his birth, was called "Gilgamesh"?*
> *Two-thirds of him is god, one-third of him is human.*
>
> — Excerpt from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Tablet 1

Compare that with what the apostle John wrote concerning the 'beast' in the Book of Revelation:

> *And I saw one of his heads as it were wounded to death; and his deadly wound was healed: and all the world wondered after the beast.* (Revelation 13:3)

Note: According to the Book of Jasher, Esau cut off the head of Nimrod-Gilgamesh-Osiris-Orion.[6]

> *And they worshipped the dragon which gave power unto the beast: and they worshipped the beast, saying,* ***"Who is like unto the beast? Who is able to make war with him?"*** (Revelation 13:4)

Why would the whole world call a man *"the beast"* and follow him?

I believe this will happen because:

- So many cultures already have some sort of connection to him (through myth, legend and/or religion);

- Something seriously freaky happened, like a mortal "head wound" being healed; and
- The man was a giant — a beast by today's standards!

If a 4,000-year-old 'beast' rises up from under the Giza plateau (out of the water),[7] it would truly be an astonishing, miraculous sight. A modern-day, giant Frankenstein-like, god-man may very well rise from the dead. If so, cue the freaky music and the thunder storm sound effects as the people shout, *"It's aliiiiiiiiive!"*

Beyond those more obvious reasons, if we look at the Greek word that was translated into English as "beast," and used throughout the Book of Revelation as a description for the Antichrist, we see it is essentially defined as a wild *animal*. The word is, (transliterated) "thérion" and Strong's Concordance (#2342) defines it as:

> ***Definition:*** *properly: a wild beast, hence: any animal; met: a brute.*

That is not the word one would use for a "normal" human being — no matter how evil they may be. There are plenty of other words John could have used to describe the Antichrist as being evil, mean, cruel, etc., but under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he chose to use this one. Why?

Could it be that Nimrod was part animal? I believe this is very likely possible and I would suggest you keep that thought in mind the next time you read about or see news reports dealing with the subject of scientists creating and cloning animal-human chimeras.[8] There is a real danger in that science, as it very well could play a major role in the coming days as a means through which both the Nephilim could return as well as being the method used to resurrect Nimrod, the Antichrist.

While examining Genesis 6:4 in his book, *Black Sun, Blood Moon,* S. Douglas Woodward makes a similar observation. Just as I did in the previous chapters, Woodward notes the connection of 'gibborim' with 'Nephilim' and writes:

> *This association leads Tom Horn to speculate that Nimrod was not only 'mighty' but may in fact have become a demigod, equivalent to the Nephilim. Perhaps in Faustian manner, Nimrod became 'more than mere man.' His new found power, supplied by the fallen angels described in the Book of Enoch enabled him to emerge as the dominant leader of humankind after the flood. We are thus left wondering, "Was this 'becoming' a result of genetic engineering? Was he 'made into a mighty man' as a result of what the fallen angels accomplished on his behalf?" Was he a mighty hunter because of superhuman strength or stature? This association between Nephilim, gibborim, and Nimrod has many authors today considering whether the Antichrist may be more than a human entity. Is it possible that the Antichrist will have 'god-like' capacities through an alteration of his DNA? Perhaps, the premise of Rosemary's Baby and The Omen, that the Antichrist is the 'seed' of Satan possessing Satanic DNA, isn't so far fetched.*
>
> *The Book of Revelation indicates it is this destroyer spirit, Apollyon, who reigns over the 'bottomless pit' and who is resurrected possessing the 'Man of Sin.' From the spiritual perspective, there is no doubt that the Devil controls the Antichrist. But could the human possessed by this most evil of spirits also have demonic DNA as well? Horn takes the possibility even further, considering whether a genetic 'splice,' perhaps first applied to the Antichrist, becomes the Mark of the Beast.*[9]

IDENTIFYING THE BEAST

Proceeding with the premise that the Scriptures provide the answers to our questions concerning the Last Days, I believe there are four chapters that absolutely reveal the identity of the Antichrist. Those four are: Revelation chapters 17, 13 and 9 and Matthew 24. We'll work backward through Revalation first, then in the Matthew passage, I will show you what I believe to be absolute proof, straight from the lips of Jesus that seems to confirm this theory.

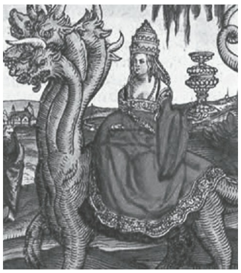

Figure 8

In Revelation 17, John sees the vision of the beast with seven heads. He is confused as to the meaning of this vision, so the angel explains it to him.

> ***The beast that thou sawest was, and is not; and shall ascend out of the bottomless pit,*** *and go into perdition: and they that dwell on the earth shall wonder, whose names were not written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, when they behold* ***the beast that was, and is not, and yet is.*** *And here is the mind which hath wisdom. The seven heads are seven mountains, on which the woman sitteth.*
>
> ***And there are seven kings: five are fallen, and one is, and the other is not yet come; and when he cometh, he must continue a short space.*** *And the beast that was, and is not, even he is the eighth, and is of the seven, and goeth into perdition.* (Revelation 17:8-11)

The beast that was previously introduced in Revelation 13 is described here in Revelation 17 in greater detail. Here we have the "guardrails" or boundaries within which we must stay when considering who the Antichrist was, is (not) and yet will be.

Note that the angel describes the seven-headed beast by saying first that we must have wisdom when looking at it. In other words, we are challenged to think this through. The angel then says that there are seven ***kings*** to whom we need to pay attention.

Many scholars and teachers of eschatology say that John is writing about *kingdoms* not kings. In fact, while we were editing this book, Doug Woodward pointed out to me that this is the "standard interpretation" of that passage of Scripture. Indeed, he is right. As I looked through a number of Bible commentaries and books that others have written concerning prophecy and the Last Days, I saw this to be true.

However, just looking at the Scripture itself, I'm going to go with what it *actually says*, rather than read something into it that it does not say. The text says, *"And there are seven kings...";* Thus, with all due respect to the many scholars who have gone before me, I am going to go with that literal understanding and interpretation of Revelation 17:8-11, because that's how the angel interpreted the vision to John. Furthermore, if I am to define the Antichrist as a man (as opposed to a system or a kingdom), I believe it is bad scholarship to ascribe a personal attribute to one and not to all.

The Greek word translated into English as 'kings' is 'basileus.' Strong's Concordance (#935) defines that word as:

> ***Part of Speech:*** *Noun, Masculine*
> **Transliteration:** *basileus*
> ***Phonetic Spelling:*** *(bas-il-yooce')*
>
> ***Short Definition:*** *a king, ruler, emperor*
>
> ***Definition:*** *a king, ruler, but in some passages clearly to be translated: emperor.*

Note that John did not use the closely related Greek word, 'basileia' (Strong's Concordance #932), which means:

> *kingship, sovereignty, authority, rule, especially of God, both in the world, and in the hearts of men; hence: kingdom, in the concrete sense.*

Thus, while kings certainly rule over kingdoms and 'beasts' are often used in Scripture to describe kingdoms, I think it best to look at Revelation 17:8-11 in terms of individuals rather than the domains they may have reigned over, because *the text actually tells you to view it that way* (both in English and in Greek).

Therefore, in context, "the beast" described here is one with seven heads; meaning there have been seven individuals in history that were all of one 'body' — that of Antichrist. The angel tells John that five have fallen, one currently is (at the time of John) and another will come, but reign only for a short time.

Peter Goodgame believes the following individuals represent the seven ‘heads’ of the beast (and I tend to agree):

1. **Nimrod:** Without a doubt, he is the first anti-Christ figure described in the Bible.
2. **The Pharaoh of Egypt** (at the time of the Exodus): Again a man arose, thinking himself to be a god, whose motives were to enslave and wipe out the children of YHVH.
3. **Sennacherib:** This king of Assyria also thought himself to be a god and sought to rise up against the Holy One of Israel... only to be humbled by the Lord instead and sent home — where he was murdered by his own sons.
4. **The King of Tyre:** He was another king who was first described as a man, thinking himself to be a god, but then later described (in the Bible) as Lucifer himself.
5. **Antiochus Epiphenes:** He set up an altar to Zeus in the Holy of Holies and offered up a pig as sacrifice, creating an abomination in God’s Holy Temple. This of course foreshadows what the last Antichrist will do in the third Temple.

Those are arguably the most likely candidates for the “five (who) have fallen.” Now let’s see if we can identify the other two.

6. **Nero or Domitian?** There is some debate about the one who “now is.” The identity of this person depends on when John actually wrote the Book of Revelation. It must have been a Caesar, but which Caesar was it, Nero or Domitian? Nero most definitely fits the description of a demon-possessed madman, hellbent on destroying God’s people. But then, Domitian wasn’t much better. So, either one works.
7. **Hitler?** The one who “has not yet come” and shall reign for a short period of time, I believe may be a prophetic reference to Adolf Hitler. Again, he definitely fits the description of a demon-possessed, vicious world leader who blatantly stood in the face of God. Hitler murdered millions of the Holy One of Israel’s people, and he did so in the manner of Luciferian, occult, ritualistic-like fashion — including massive human sacrifice. If he is just a foretaste of what’s to come, the last Antichrist will truly be a monster, a “weapon of mass destruction” unlike anything ever seen before!

Here we have what I would consider the most likely candidates from history. Yet, there could be at least one other interesting candidate to consider for that list: Alexander the Great. He conquered the world by age 32 and his description in the Book of Daniel recently caught my attention.

> *And as I was considering,* ***behold, an he goat came from the west on the face of the whole earth, and touched not the ground: and the goat had a notable horn between his eyes.*** *And he came to the ram that had two horns, which I had seen standing before the river, and ran unto him in the fury of his power. And I saw him come close unto the ram, and he was moved with choler against him, and smote the ram, and brake his two horns: and there was no power in the ram to stand before him, but he cast him down to the ground, and stamped upon him: and there was none that could deliver the ram out of his hand. Therefore* ***the he goat waxed very great: and when he was strong, the great horn was broken; and for it came up four notable ones toward the four winds of heaven. And out of one of them came forth a little horn, which waxed exceeding great, toward the south, and toward the east, and toward the pleasant land. And it waxed great, even to the host of heaven; and it cast down some of the host and of the stars to the ground, and stamped upon them. Yea, he magnified himself even to the prince of the host, and by him the daily sacrifice was taken away, and the place of the sanctuary was cast down. And an host was given him against the daily sacrifice by reason of transgression, and it cast down the truth to the ground; and it practised, and prospered.***
>
> *Then I heard one saint speaking, and another saint said unto that certain saint which spake, How long shall be the vision concerning the daily sacrifice, and the transgression of desolation, to give both the sanctuary and the host to be trodden under foot? And he said unto me, Unto two thousand and three hundred days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed. And it came to pass, when I, even I Daniel, had seen the vision, and sought for the meaning,*

> *then, behold, there stood before me as the appearance of a man. And I heard a man's voice between the banks of Ulai, which called, and said, Gabriel, make this man to understand the vision.*
>
> *So he came near where I stood: and when he came, I was afraid, and fell upon my face: but he said unto me, Understand, O son of man: for at the time of the end shall be the vision. Now as he was speaking with me, I was in a deep sleep on my face toward the ground: but he touched me, and set me upright. And he said, Behold, I will make thee know what shall be in the last end of the indignation: for at the time appointed the end shall be. The ram which thou sawest having two horns are the kings of Media and Persia.*
>
> *And the rough goat is the king of Grecia: and the great horn that is between his eyes is the* ***first king.***
> (Daniel 8:5-21)

Daniel was told that the vision of the "he goat" was a representation of the *king* of Greece. Again we have a beast (in this case a goat) that is specifically referred to as king. That goat had a great horn between his eyes, which represented "the *first* king." Virtually every scholar agrees that this he goat is Alexander the Great. But he was not the first king — neither of Greece nor of the Scriptures. The first king recorded in the Bible is Nimrod. Therefore, I suspect that Alexander the Great did what he did by the power of the spirit of anti-Christ that has been at work for thousands of years.[10]

It should be noted that Alexander's mother, Olympias was a devout member of the orgiastic, snake-worshipping cult of Dionysus and both she and her husband, King Phlip II, were heavily involved with the worship of pagan gods. Plutarch describes the night before the consummation of their marriage, revealing how Olympias dreamed that a thunderbolt (from Zeus?) fell upon her womb and a great fire was kindled. Its flames were then dispersed all about and then finally extinguished.[11] That could be why some people concludethat Alexander was the product of an "immaculate conception" from Zeus. Or, it could simply be an indication that his parents' mutual occult worship had taken them — in a spiritual sense — to this end. If that is the case, then the child very well could have been demon-possessed from birth.

Pastor Douglas Riggs works with victims of Satanic Ritual Abuse (SRA). Many of the women he has counseled have stated that the Antichrist's name is Alexander and that he is alive and active today, producing Nephilim offspring through SRA. In a conversation we had about this subject late in 2010, Doug was trying to reconcile what he was hearing from these women with what researchers like Dr. Thomas Horn, Peter Goodgame and now myself were saying about Nimrod. I told him that I believed Alexander operated in the spirit of anti-Christ, and that the coming Antichrist of the Last Days will likely have attributes of all the previous 'heads' of the beast.

Whether Alexander is one of the seven or not is really not important for this thesis. I believe the names listed (with the possibility of Alexander substituting for one of them) are the seven heads of the beast. But notice the next verse, that very few Bible scholars ever seem to pay much attention to (at least not in terms of thinking about an *individual* as opposed to a kingdom):

> *And* ***the beast that was, and is not, even he is the eighth, and is of the seven****, and goeth into perdition.* (Revelation 17:11)

It says that the beast that was, and is not (and yet shall be) is the *eighth* who is *of the seven*. Actually, the terminology of *"was, and* **is not,** *and yet shall be"* is mentioned a few times in Revelation 17. I believe this is there for those who "have wisdom" to take notice. First of all, it is the antithesis of the description for Jesus in the first few chapters as the One who *"was, and* **is,** *and is to come."* Second, it fits the numerous beliefs of the ancient world concerning their dying and resurrecting sun god. But the fact that Revelation 17:11 says that he is "of the seven" means the last and most (in)famous anti-Christ has to be one of the seven we've listed, and as I said to Doug Riggs, will probably embody the traits of all of them combined!

Now, if we look at the description of Revelation 13, we find that this individual had a mortal head wound that was miraculously healed. So, looking at the list, we need to ask, which of them had a mortal head wound?

1. Nimrod - Yes!
2. Pharaoh of Egypt - No!
3. Sennacherib (king of Assyria) - No!
4. King of Tyre - No!
5. Antiochus Epiphenes - No!
6. Nero - Yes! (sort of) It is said that he stabbed himself in the throat. Domitian - No!
7. Hitler - Yes! (sort of) History says that he shot himself in the head, but recent DNA and forensic evidence seems to suggest otherwise.[12]

If we are considering Alexander the Great as one of the seven, the answer is still - No! Thus, by process of elimination, we have three out of seven who fit the description of having a mortal head wound:

1. Nimrod
2. Nero
3. Hitler

Which of those three is an Assyrian who has any connection to Babylon? Only one: Nimrod.

Note: While Sennacherib was indeed an Assyrian, he never had a mortal wound to the head. And while Alexander the Great conquered Assyria (the Medes and Persians), he never had a mortal head wound either.

Even if the above list of “candidates” is not 100% accurate, the bottom line is, no matter what list you put together for the seven, no person in the recorded history of this planet fits *all* descriptions for the Antichrist better than Nimrod. And if we were to apply Occam’s Razor to this analysis (the simplest explanation most likely being the correct one), I believe the results would speak for themselves. Therefore, we can forget any and all notions, theories and/or ideas regarding any current political figure walking this earth. President Obama is not the Antichrist. Neither is Ahmadinejad, Osama bin Laden, Putin, Prince William or anyone else. No other actor on the world stage fits the part better than Nimrod.

666 - CALCULATING THE NUMBER OF THE BEAST

What discussion concerning the Antichrist would be complete, without some reckoning of his number? Perhaps the most intriguing revelation I have had concerning Nimrod as the Antichrist is the “coincidence(?)” concerning his “percentages” as a god-man. In discussing something with my wife one morning, she kept talking about the ratio of two-thirds. All of a sudden, another piece of the puzzle fell into place.

> *“Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for the number is that of a man; and* ***his number is six hundred and sixty-six****.* (Revelation 13:18 NASB)

In Tablet 1 of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the text says that he was 2/3 god and 1/3 man. Right there, you have two extremely important number percentages. One third is (approximately) 33.3%. In the Illuminati and in secret societies in general, 33 is a significant number. The 1/3 is his percentage of man. Man is a carbon-based creature. Carbon consists of 6 protons, 6 neutrons and 6 electrons. In general, one could argue that the “number of man” is 666 just by default. Thus, at least in that sense, we’d all qualify.

Consider now Nimrod/Gilgamesh’s other percentage, and you probably know where I’m going with it. Yes, two-thirds. If we *“calculate the number of the beast”* with that *“understanding”* in mind, we end up with approximately 66.6% or 666! This guy literally has 666 all over him.

In fact, when you move over to the Egyptian mythology and understand that the obelisk represents the phallus of Osiris, we must take note that the Washington Monument is the largest phallic symbol on the planet. It stands at 6,666 inches (555.5 feet) tall and 666 inches (55.5 feet) wide on each of its four sides at the base.[13] Again, we have all of those numbers attached to one individual in history.

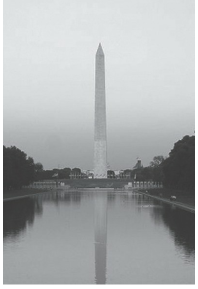
Figure 9

Indeed, if we *"have wisdom,"* it is very easy to *"calculate the number"* and arrive at Nimrod! In fact, there are even those who believe that the very name/title of the Beast itself should, in the Hebrew gematria,[14] add up to 666.

> *In this passage [Rev 13:16-18] whatever the personal name of the Antichrist will be, if his name is spelled out in Hebrew characters, the numerical value of his name is 666. So this is the name that will be put on the worshippers of the Antichrist.* — Dr. Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum[15]

The phrase "Nimrod son of Cush" in English, would in Hebrew be rendered as *Nimrod ben Cush*. Every Hebrew letter has a numerical value.[16] Thus, some[17] suggest this phrase adds up to 666 as follows.

Nimrod has a numerical value of 294 and is spelled:

- **Nun** = 50
- **Mem** = 40
- **Resh** = 200
- **Dalet** = 4

Ben means "son." It has a numerical value of 52 and is spelled:

- **Bet** = 2
- **Nun** = 50

Cush[18] has a numerical value of and 320 is spelled:

- **Kaf** = 20
- **Shin** = 300

Let's bring it all together now. We've already built a case for worldwide worship of this man by many other names. He was considered a "god-man" by many cultures. Part god, part man? Hmm. Where have we heard that before?

Jesus Christ is both God and man. He and Nimrod were both known as the *"King of kings and Lord of lords."* Both have a cross as their symbol. Both are known as a dying and resurrecting figure (though Nimrod has yet to do so). One is the Christ. One is the Antichrist, whose "god-number" just so happens to calculate out to 66.6% or 666 (in more ways than one). Jesus said He is the Alpha and Omega — the beginning and the end. Could it be that Nimrod was the first (anti-Christ) and that he will also be the last? I believe he will be.

WHAT DID JESUS HAVE TO SAY ABOUT ALL OF THIS?

Earlier, I promised to show you something directly from the lips of Jesus that I believe proves all of what I am saying here is true. Consider what the Master says in the Gospel of Matthew concerning the Last Days:

> *"For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect. Behold, I have told you before.*
>
> *Wherefore if they shall say unto you,* ***Behold, he is in the desert; go not forth: behold, he is in the secret chambers; believe it not.***
>
> *For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.*
>
> *For* ***wheresoever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together.****"* (Matthew 24:24-28)

Notice Jesus says, *"Behold, I have told you before."* I like the way the New Living Translation renders that first part. Backing up to verse 23 it says,

> *"Then if anyone tells you, 'Look, here is the Messiah,' or 'There he is,' don't believe it. For false messiahs and false prophets will rise up and perform great signs and wonders so as to deceive, if possible, even God's chosen ones.* ***See, I have warned you about this ahead of time.****"*
>
> (Matthew 24:23-25 NLT)

In other words, I believe Jesus is saying, *"Pay attention! This is serious, guys. Even you could be deceived by what is going to happen."* He then mentions the desert. Gilgamesh was found in the desert. He mentions "the secret chambers." The secret chamber of the Tomb of Osiris was found.[19] But the last statement Jesus says makes no sense at all in any other context. He says,

> *"For wheresoever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together."* (Matthew 24:28)

The correct translation is "eagles." But some translators of modern versions of the Bible changed the word to "vultures" due to the apparent assumption that eagles don't go after dead things (i.e. a carcass). As a bird of prey, they are known for hunting living things — though I have been informed by a number of bird watchers, that eagles are also scavengers and they do indeed go after dead things as well. Regardless, at least on the surface, it would appear that modern translators changed the Scripture to match their flawed understanding concerning the bird and the carcass. The truth is, Jesus knew exactly what He was saying (imagine that)! And I believe the Master prophetically looked forward in time and saw "eagles" gathered around a very specific corpse.

The eagle has been the emblem of choice for nearly every major world empire on this planet, past and present.[20] The eagle is of course the national symbol for America, and we proudly display it all over the place: from our currency to the Great Seal; from our government buildings to its monuments, flags and flag poles. It is especially displayed on our military uniforms, in various places. For instance, colonels wear the eagle on their shoulders, as the symbol for that rank. And for the average soldier, the eagle is prominently displayed on the hat, collar, chest, shoulders, buttons and on some unit patches of our military's dress and combat uniforms. You simply cannot escape the American Eagle imagery. It's everywhere! Therefore, is it any wonder that Jesus described "eagles" when He looked forward in time and described what He saw concerning the revealing of the one who would claim to be the savior of the world in the Last Days?

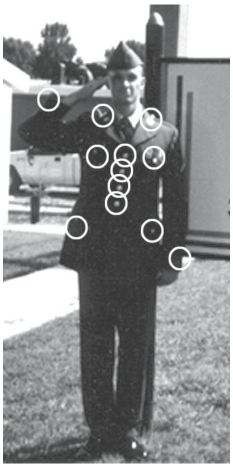

Figure 10

Where have America's (eagle wearing) soldiers been since 2003? They were/are in Iraq — Babylon. And the military occupation began one month after archeologists supposedly found the tomb of Gilgamesh!

WHERE IS AMERICA IN PROPHECY?

At prophecy meetings, people always like to ask, *"Where is America in prophecy?"* After all, we are (at least at the time of this writing) the world's 'superpower' nation. Should we not imagine that America would therefore be mentioned in prophecies concerning the Last Days? Especially if we are to believe we are now in those Last Days (or rapidly approaching them)?

The usual assumption is that something knocks America out of that "superpower" status, and henceforth we are not a relevant player in the End Times scenario. While I would not entirely rule out that possibility, I believe a stronger case can be made for America's role in the Last Days being depicted in that passage of Matthew 24:24-28. Unfortunately, if this is true, that means we are not playing on the right team. The implication then is that

America is busy resurrecting the Antichrist and setting up his future empire![21]

This conclusion sounds harsh, I know. But considering the Masonic (occult) roots of our nation's founding, the layout of our government's capital city, the *numerous* monuments and statues that glorify Babylonian, Egyptian, Greek and Roman deities, and all that has happened since 9/11 to set up a New World Order, it's hard not to come to that conclusion.

Let me pause here for a moment and encourage you not to question my patriotism. Just because I am pointing out facts that are hard to accept concerning our nation, that does not mean I am anti-America. On the contrary, I love my country! I am a third-generation Army veteran who proudly served this country for eight years of my life. Though I never had to see combat (thank God), I was willing to lay my life down to protect this country (and still am) if need be. In fact, at one point in my military career, I volunteered to serve in Desert Storm three times. So, again I say, I love this country and please do not question my patriotism.

COMPANY C
3d BATTALION 48th INFANTRY
ARMY OH-6
LOACH

Figure 11

But just because I love this country, that does not mean I agree with everything our government does or has done in the past. The Constitution that I swore to uphold, defend and protect, affords me the right to express these views — at least, for now it does anyway.

For a better understanding of where I am coming from regarding America's founding and her ongoing involvement with all things concerning Osiris/Nimrod, I highly recommend that you watch the following two documentaries by filmmaker Chris Pinto: *The New Atlantis* and *Riddles in Stone.*[22] Through these two videos, I believe Mr. Pinto has done a magnificent job of exposing America's role in the "End Game."

In addition, you may also want to check out S. Douglas Woodward's new book, *Power Quest: America's Obsession with the Paranormal,* which attempts to make a similar case, but from the standpoint of America's strong inclination toward the occult, mysticism, and Egyptian paganism (as seen in the Freemason's role in the founding and leadership of America). The "Power Quest," as Woodward defines it, is humankind's desire to become as gods. Nothing has changed since the promises of Lucifer in the Garden of Eden: *"You shall be as gods..."* is indeed the quest of those who seek to attain power apart from the finished work of Jesus Christ.

Through their videos, audio series, books and lectures, many scholars and researchers have laid the foundation, describing the occult roots of our nation.[23] Like many of them, I do believe Nimrod was the first anti-Christ, and that he will be the last. Therefore, in the remaining chapters of this book, I too will endeavor to show you just how steeped this nation has been in the occult and how our leaders appear to be quite obsessed with the notion of raising Gilgamesh-Osiris-Apollo-Orion-Nimrod from the dead.

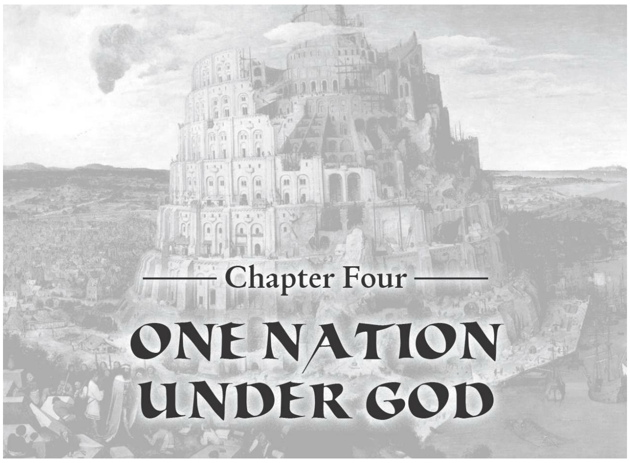

Chapter Four

ONE NATION UNDER GOD

Of course now that the U.S. Military controls Iraq we can be sure that if a rebuilt Babylon does emerge it will happen only through the support of the U.S. Government!
—Peter Goodgame[1]

Did you ever notice how our motto, “IN GOD WE TRUST” is all in capital letters? I believe it is to conceal the fact that our nation’s leaders are indeed trusting in *a* god, but it isn’t the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

During the week of Thanksgiving (2011), my wife and I went to visit my parents in New England. As part of the trip, we went down to Washington D.C., in order to do some on-the-ground research there. Unfortunately, we only had about five hours, so we had to be very selective in choosing where we would go.

As we walked out of the train station, I looked up and saw a bunch of statues lining the rooftop of the building.

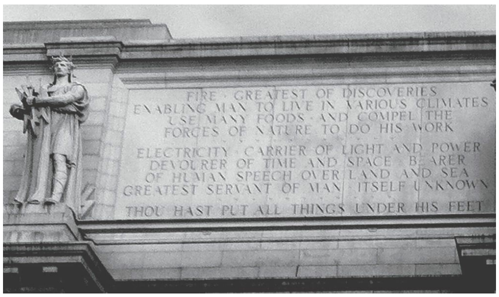
FIRE · GREATEST OF DISCOVERIES
ENABLING MAN TO LIVE IN VARIOUS CLIMATES
USE MANY FOODS · AND COMPEL THE
FORCES OF NATURE TO DO HIS WORK
ELECTRICITY · CARRIER OF LIGHT AND POWER
DEVOURER OF TIME AND SPACE · BEARER
OF HUMAN SPEECH OVER LAND AND SEA
GREATEST SERVANT OF MAN · ITSELF UNKNOWN
THOU HAST PUT ALL THINGS UNDER HIS FEET

Figure 12

The statue in **Figure 12** was the first one on the left. While it appears that the last line of text (to the right) is a quote from Scripture, look at the context. That’s ***Zeus*** standing there with his fire and lightning bolts! The entire roof was lined with pagan gods and similar quotes. This was the first thing I noticed — *with eyes that see*.

We walked from there to the Capitol Building. When we entered through the visitor center doors, we were greeted by the original sculpture that was the basis for the bronze Statue of Freedom (aka Columbia/Liberty/Isis/Ishtar/Semiramis... the Queen of Heaven) which is perched on top of the Capitol dome.

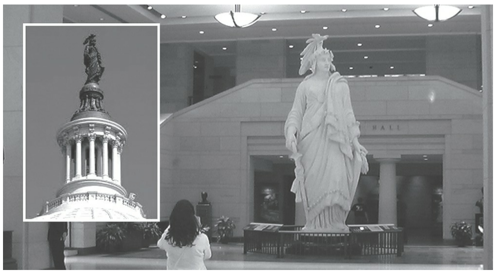
Figure 13

We signed up for the standard tour and watched the introductory video documentary on how and when the Capitol Building was built. It started out by calling it the *"Temple of Liberty."* Uh... last time I checked, temples are for gods. Are they telling us right up front that this building is a temple? Well, the first thing we saw upon entering, was the Queen of Heaven. Hmm.

Keep in mind that "D.C." stands for "District of Columbia," which essentially means our capital is the domain of Isis/Ishtar/Semiramis — the mother, half-sister and wife of Nimrod. She was the driving force behind deifying Nimrod to establish the mystery religions of the world, as well as corrupting the true faith of YHVH. After having incestuous relations with her father (Cush), she

produced a son (Nimrod) whom she later married and gave birth to Tammuz — thus forming the original unholy trinity upon which both Christmas and Easter are really based! She truly is the *"Whore of Babylon"* spoken of in the Book of Revelation. And we named our capital city after her? Nice. But it gets worse.

I first read about the *Apotheosis of George Washington* painting that adorns the inside of the Capitol dome in Dr. Thomas Horn's book, *Apollyon Rising 2012.* I had also seen that painting in person a number of times before — but when I was much younger and didn't understand what I was seeing. This time, I would get to see it again, but with my eyes wide open.

Upon entering the Rotunda, you see a bunch of statues of presidents and other folk all around the room. The floor-level paintings are the ones people like David Barton[2] like to show off depicting various patriotic and "Christian"(?) scenes. That's all nice and wonderful, but the further up you look, the more sinister it gets.

There is a ring around the base of the dome depicting the *Frieze of American History*. Going all the way around the Rotunda, we see various scenes of American history from Columbus to the Wright Brothers' first flight in chronological order. Constantino Brumidi, the painter who did the Capitol dome's fresco of deified George, was the original designer of the frieze as well. Of course, he did not paint the whole thing, as he died in 1880. The remaining scenes were painted by Filippo Costaggini and Allyn Cox.[3] Thus, what began in 1878 was finished in 1953. It is quite impressive. But if you pay attention, shortly after and to the right of the Columbus scene, you will see the following image.

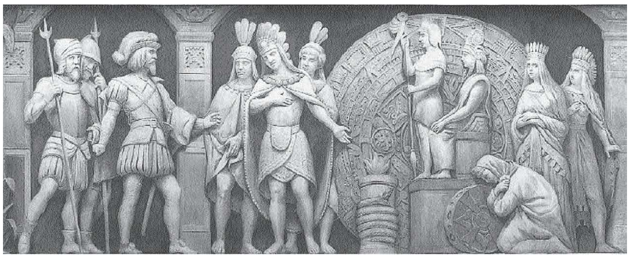
Figure 14

The scene depicts Cortez and Montezuma at the Aztec temple. Note the Aztec Calendar Stone (upon which the Mayan prophecies are based) in the background. Why is this scene depicted as an integral part of American history? Aside from the calendar stone, the other iconography is very interesting. Take the serpent wrapped around the pole with flames on top, for instance. That image shows up quite a bit in our capital city actually. More on that shortly.

I made a mental note of the imagery, then my eyes continued to gaze upward past the ring of 72 pentagrams (which are used in the occult as "binding utilities"), and on into "the womb of Isis" as Tom Horn would say. Sure enough, there was George Washington seated as a god in Heaven!

The tour guide said the painting of the *Apotheosis* was finished in 1865. That date jumped out at me, so I asked, *"Isn't that the year Abraham Lincoln was killed?"*

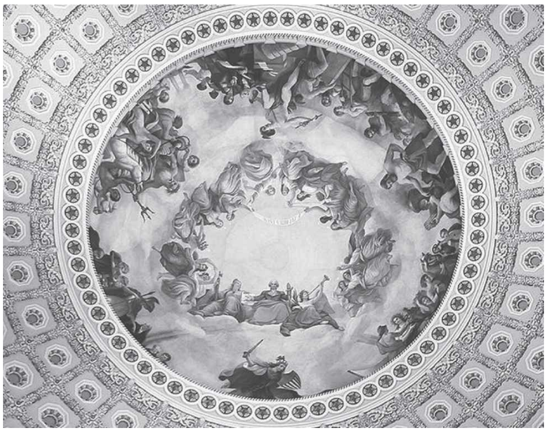

Figure 15

She said, *"Yes, in fact he was the first president to undergo the 'lying in state' ceremony in this very room. And every other deceased president since Lincoln has had their coffin placed here in the center of the room for public viewing and mourning as well."* [4]

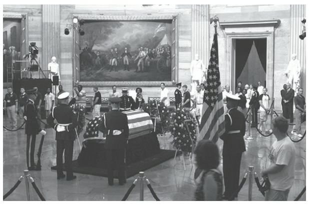

Figure 16

Remember, *apotheosis* means "ascension into godlikeness" or to "exalt one to a divine level." In short, the word refers to a man becoming a god! This philosophy originated with the promises of the serpent in the Garden of Eden, continued in Babylon, was perfected in Egypt and lives on to this day, apparently in our own Capitol Building.

> *"For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and* ***ye shall be as gods****, knowing good and evil."* (Genesis 3:5)

Through what amounts to an occult ceremony, we send our dead presidents through the portal of Isis' womb to join George Washington in apotheosis.

CHRISTIAN NATION?

Most of you were probably taught that America was founded as a Christian nation. I know I was. People like David Barton travel around the country trying to convince us that our Founding Fathers were Christians and/or upheld strong Christian values. But what he shows in his Wall Builders' presentation is only partially true.

There is a much darker side to our nation's founders and heritage that he does not show. Since most of you have probably already seen and read the sorts of things that he promotes concerning our Founding Fathers, I won't go over it here. But for a more balanced view, I would encourage you to watch Chris Pinto's documentary, *The Hidden Faith of the Founding Fathers.*[5] The last 57 minutes of that documentary contains Mr. Pinto's commentary on David Barton and his message.

Let's go back to the beginning and talk about our first president.

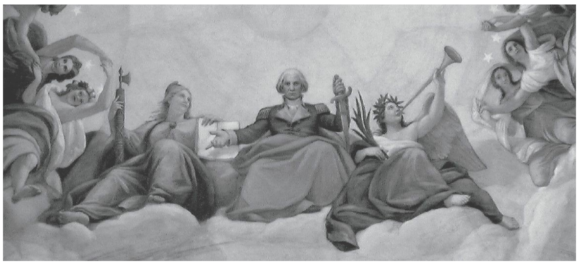

Figure 17

Remember, the term "apotheosis" refers to the idea that an individual has been raised to godlike stature. George Washington has become a god? What!? I don't remember reading about that in history class!

I understand honoring presidents, leaders and heroes, but turning them into gods? No. I don't think so. But there it is. And yet, if that is supposed to be a depiction of Heaven and this was indeed a Christian nation (as most of us were taught to believe) should we not expect to see biblical figures surrounding George? People like, oh I don't know, say, Jesus, Abraham, Moses, the apostles, or angels like Gabriel and Michael maybe?

No. That's not what we see. Instead, we see characters like Neptune, Vulcan, Ceres, Minerva, and Mercury, the messenger of the gods — and our Founding Fathers seated at his feet taking notes!

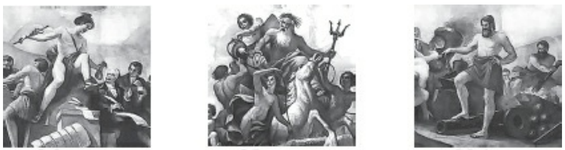

Mercury Neptune Vulcan

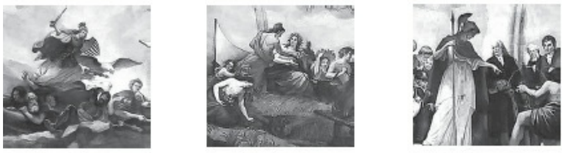

Freedom (Columbia) Ceres Minerva

Figure 18

What in the world is going on with all of this? We know that the ancient pharaohs, Caesars and emperors thought of themselves as gods, ruling over their nations, but our U.S. presidents too? Come on! Haven't we outgrown that kind of nonsense? That's what I thought, until I started researching all of this for myself.

Figure 19 is of Horatio Greenough's 1840, ***government commissioned*** statue of George Washington enthroned as a god. Which god? Zeus! This statue was specifically made to look similar to one of the *Seven Wonders of the ancient world* — the statue in the Temple of Zeus.

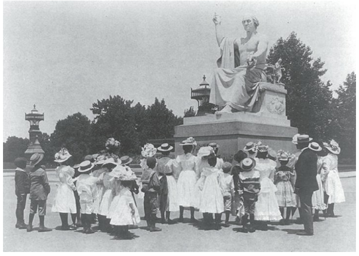

Figure 19

Here's something else that needs to be pointed out concerning George Washington's statue. Why is our first president, one of our "Founding Fathers," posed as the goat-god Baphomet?

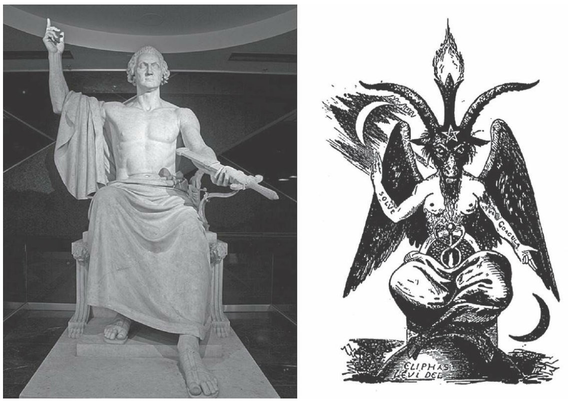

Figure 20

In his work, *Magick (Book 4)*, the famed occultist and the self-proclaimed “Father of Satanism,” Aleister Crowley, had the following to say concerning Baphomet.

> *“The Devil does not exist. It is a false name invented by the Black Brothers to imply a Unity in their ignorant muddle of dispersions. A devil who had unity would be a God... ‘The Devil’ is, historically, the God of any people that one personally dislikes... This serpent, SATAN, is not the enemy of Man, but He who made Gods of our race, knowing Good and Evil; He bade ‘Know Thyself!’ and taught Initiation. He is ‘The Devil’ of the Book of Thoth, and His emblem is BAPHOMET, the Androgyne who is the hieroglyph of arcane perfection... He is therefore Life, and Love. But moreover his letter is ‘ayin,’ the Eye, so that he is Light; and his Zodiacal image is Capricornus, that leaping goat whose attribute is Liberty.”* [6]

For Crowley and others, Baphomet is Satan himself. So, ***here we have our first president “deified” as Lucifer!*** Lovely. Nothing like starting our nation off on the wrong foot.

If the so-called “Father of our Nation” is depicted this way, what should that tell us about his children? Does not a father reproduce after his own kind? Do not children follow after the traits of their fathers? Could it therefore stand to reason that all other presidents since Washington might have been following his lead? Indeed, this sort of thing wasn’t just limited to President George Washington.

In 1865, images like this one started to show up depicting Lincoln as a Christlike figure in the heavens (note the cap of Mithra/Nimrod hanging from the pole in the foreground). Later, a massive statue was made of him seated on a throne and placed in what we now call the *Lincoln Memorial* in Washington, D.C..

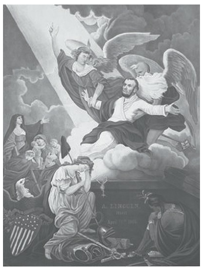

Figure 21

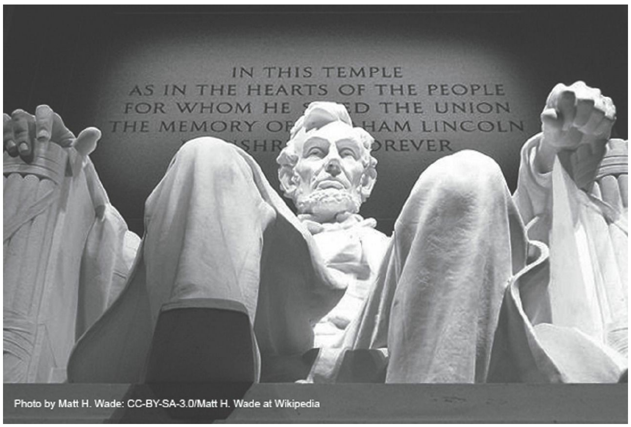
IN THIS TEMPLE
AS IN THE HEARTS OF THE PEOPLE
FOR WHOM HE S D THE UNION
THE MEMORY OF HAM LINCOLN
SHR OREVER

Photo by Matt H. Wade: CC-BY-SA-3.0/Matt H. Wade at Wikipedia

Figure 22

Something I find noteworthy about that memorial is the quote above Lincoln's head. *"IN THIS TEMPLE?"* Again, what are temples for? They are for gods! So, just like George Washington, here we have the deification of Abraham Lincoln too. There are other examples I could give, but I think you get the idea.

I do not believe it is just a coincidence that nearly all of our presidents have either been Freemasons, associated with Freemasons, members of other secret societies (such as *Skull and Bones)*, or *related* to each other. Yes. Forty-three out of our forty-four presidents are all related!

A 12-year-old girl named BridgeAnne d'Avignon actually took the time to do the research for herself and compile it into a picture format.[7] She connects all of our presidents (except Martin van Buren) to King John "Lackland" of the House of Plantagenet.

The House of Plantagenet is a branch of the Angevins.

> ***Popular legends surrounding the Angevins suggested that they had corrupt or demonic origins.*** *While the chronicler Gerald of Wales is the key contemporaneous source for these stories, they often borrowed elements of the wider Melusine legend. For example, Gerald wrote in his* De instructione principis *of "a certain countess of Anjou" who rarely attended mass, and one day flew away, never to be seen again. A similar story was attached to Eleanor of Aquitaine in the thirteenth century romance* Richard Coeur-de-lion*. Gerald also presents a list of sins committed by Geoffrey V and Henry II as further evidence of their "corrupt" origins.*
>
> *According to Gerald, these legends were not always discouraged by the Angevins. Richard the Lionheart was said to have often remarked of his family that they "**come of the devil, and to the devil they would go.**"*
>
> *A similar statement is attributed to St. Bernard regarding Henry II. Henry II's sons reportedly defended their frequent infighting by saying **"Do not deprive us of our heritage; we cannot help acting like devils."** The legends surrounding the Angevins grew into English folklore and led some historians to give them the epithet **"The Devil's Brood."***
>
> — Wikipedia[8] [emphasis mine]

Not long ago, CBS News even picked up on similar clues and reported the many people related to presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama.[9] In that report, they discovered that George W. Bush is Dick Cheney's ninth cousin, once removed. Dick Cheney is also related to Barack Obama who is Bush's eleventh cousin. Speaking of Abraham Lincoln, he was Bush's seventh cousin, five times removed. Do you remember the Bush-Kerry election? Well, they are also related; ninth cousins, twice removed. And of course, there had to be royalty in the bloodline too. Princess Diana was Bush's eleventh cousin, twice removed.

If it is indeed true that all of our presidents are related and are descendents of these Angevin-Plantagenet characters, is it any wonder why this country has turned out the way it has?

I don't believe that President John F. Kennedy was a saint by any stretch of the imagination, however the following excerpts from his speech given on April 27, 1961, at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City are rather interesting:

Figure 23

> *The very word "secrecy" is repugnant in a free and open society; and **we are as a people inherently and historically opposed to secret societies, to secret oaths and to secret proceedings.***
>
> *We decided long ago that the dangers of excessive and unwarranted concealment of pertinent facts far outweighed the dangers which are cited to justify it.*

* * *

> *And there is very grave danger that an announced need for increased security will be seized upon by those anxious to expand its meaning to the very limits of official censorship and concealment. That I do not intend to permit to the extent that it is in my control.*
>
> *And no official of my Administration, whether his rank is high or low, civilian or military, should interpret my words here tonight as an excuse to censor the news, to stifle dissent, to cover up our mistakes or to withhold from the press and the public* ***the facts they deserve to know****.*

* * *

> ***For we are opposed around the world by a monolithic and ruthless conspiracy that relies primarily on covert means for expanding its sphere of influence — on infiltration instead of invasion, on subversion instead of elections, on intimidation instead of free choice, on guerrillas by night instead of armies by day. It is a system which has conscripted vast human and material resources into the building of a tightly knit, highly efficient machine that combines military, diplomatic, intelligence, economic, scientific and political operations.***
>
> ***Its preparations are concealed, not published. Its mistakes are buried, not headlined. Its dissenters are silenced, not praised. No expenditure is questioned, no rumor is printed, no secret is revealed. It conducts the Cold War, in short, with a war-time discipline no democracy would ever hope or wish to match.***

* * *

> *It is the unprecedented nature of this challenge that also gives rise to your second obligation — an obligation which I share. And that is* **our obligation to inform and alert the American people — to make certain that they possess all the facts that they need, and understand them as well** *— the perils, the prospects, the purposes of our program and the choices that we face.*
>
> *No President should fear public scrutiny of his program. For from that scrutiny comes understanding; and from that understanding comes support or opposition. And both are necessary. I am not asking your newspapers to support the Administration, but I am asking your help in the tremendous task of informing and alerting the American people. For I have complete confidence in the response and dedication of our citizens* ***whenever they are fully informed.***

* * *

> *This means greater coverage and analysis of international news — or it is no longer far away and foreign but close at hand and local. It means greater attention to improved understanding of the news as well as improved transmission. And it means, finally, that* ***government at all levels, must meet its obligation to provide you with the fullest possible information outside the narrowest limits of national security*** *— and we intend to do it.*

* * *

> *And so it is to the printing press — to the recorder of man's deeds, the keeper of his conscience, the courier of his news — that we look for strength and assistance, confident that with your help man will be what he was born to be: free and independent.*
>
> — President John F. Kennedy, 1961[10] [emphasis mine]

In that speech, President Kennedy let us know that there is a *"monolithic and ruthless conspiracy"* that has *"conscripted vast human and material resources into the building of a tightly knit, highly efficient machine that combines military, diplomatic, intelligence, economic, scientific and political operations."* Was he actually telling us the truth about what is really is going on? I believe he was. I also believe this "ruthless conspiracy" has grown larger and even more powerful since 1961.

Personally, I have come to the conclusion that there really is no difference between Republican and Democrat anymore — if indeed there ever was. As Judge Napolitano recently put it: *What if Democrats and Republicans were two wings of the same bird of prey?*[11] Furthermore, I now believe that Americans don't really elect their leaders either. The more I research this sort of thing, the more I have become absolutely convinced that our presidents have been handpicked for us by a Luciferian Elite, whose "bloodlines" probably go all the way back to Nimrod. And I am not alone in this belief. Dr. Thomas Horn, Douglas Woodward, Leonard Ulrich and other researchers have also come to similar conclusions and/or have indicated the same suspicions in their writings, lectures, audio recordings and videos. Like them, I do not believe we have had a truly representative form of government for a long time (again, if indeed we ever did).

In my opinion, the old phrase *"of the people, by the people, for the people"* appears to have been replaced with *"of the Secret Societies, by the Illuminati, for the Elite."* We simply choose which one we want to rule over us, and of the two choices we are finally given to pick from, we are essentially given a choice between a Phoenix and a Pyramid (as in Babylon or Egypt). Both accomplish the same end just by different means, as both are essentially playing for the same Luciferian system.

To further illustrate why I believe that to be true, I'd like to draw your attention to the Great Seal of the United States, which was placed on the U.S. one dollar bill in 1935 by the high-ranking Freemasons, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and V.P. Henry Wallace (after Wallace met with occultist, Nicholas Roerich).[12]

Consider what the highly regarded Freemason writer, Manly P. Hall had to say about the front of our nation's Great Seal:

> *"Careful analysis of the seal discloses a mass of occult and Masonic symbols, chief among them the so-called American eagle — a bird which Benjamin Franklin declared unworthy to be chosen as the emblem of a great, powerful, and progressive people. Here again only the student of symbolism can see through the subterfuge and realize that* ***the American eagle upon the Great Seal is but a conventionalized phoenix****, a fact plainly discernible from an examination of the original seal."*
>
> — Manly P. Hall, *The Secret Teachings of All Ages* [emphasis mine]

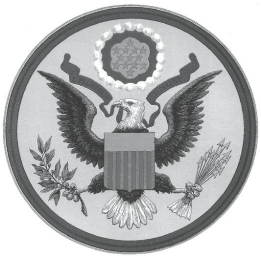

Figure 24

Hall says the "eagle," that America is so well known for, is actually a symbol of a "conventionalized phoenix." Therefore, it is important to note here that the phoenix is also directly related to Osiris. For according to Egyptian mythology, the phoenix is associated with the sun god. She is called the *Bennu*,[13] which means *"the Ascending One,"* and essentially represents the soul of Osiris. Thus, the phoenix is yet another symbol for the rebirth of Osiris, rising up out of the ashes of death.

It is becoming more and more clear to me that this country was not founded as a "Christian nation" so much as it was a "Masonic nation" whose sole purpose (as the "New Atlantis") is to bring about the New World Order — the order of Osiris and the return of the ancient gods. Virtually everything in our nation's iconography reveals this to be true.

Did genuine Christian men and women also play a role in America's founding? Yes, of course they did. My point is, most of us were taught all about the Puritans, Protestants, Pilgrims and Quakers in American History class. What we were not taught is that in addition to the Christians who "came over on the boat," there were also Rosicrucians, Masons, Illuminists and other adepts of the occult that came over as well. Unfortunately, *they* were the ones who established our government, not the Puritans, Protestants, Pilgrims and Quakers.

> *"In essence, before declaring its independence and then afterward and ever since, America remains a symbol of freedom — from tyrants and despots — be they monarchs or ecclesiastics. However, at its inception not only was it a safe haven for puritan Protestants (exemplified by the pilgrims of Plymouth), it became a sanctuary for spiritualists wishing to practice esoteric rituals based on mystical belief systems. We are not just the home of the free and the brave — we are home to mystics and to paranormal practitioners. Such is our*

> *melting pot — not quite a witches cauldron — but a concoction of spiritual recipes that are as much a part of our national composition as… well, apple pie. And judging by the sentiments expressed directly by our Founders, their ideology aligns closely with Freemasonry and much less with Christianity — despite what our rosy tradition has taught.”*
>
> — S. Douglas Woodward[14]

To drive the point a little deeper, when examining our nation’s Great Seal and the so-called eagle in particular, consider this intriguing observation by the Roman poet Ovid concerning the phoenix:

> *“Most beings spring from other individuals; but there is a certain kind which reproduces itself.* ***The Assyrians call it the Phoenix.*** *It does not live on fruit or flowers, but on frankincense and odoriferous gums. When it has lived* ***five hundred years****, it builds itself a nest in the branches of an oak, or on the top of a palm tree. In this it collects cinnamon, and spikenard, and myrrh, and of these materials builds a pile on which it deposits itself, and dying, breathes out its last breath amidst odors. From the body of the parent bird, a young Phoenix issues forth, destined to live as long a life as its predecessor.*
>
> *When this has grown up and gained sufficient strength, it lifts its nest from the tree (its own cradle and its parent’s sepulchre), and carries it to the city of Heliopolis in Egypt, and deposits it in the temple of the Sun.”* [15] [emphasis mine]

I find it extremely interesting that the life span of Osiris’ “soul-bird” is five hundred years. According to the Book of Enoch, five hundred years is the allotted life span of the Nephilim (the offspring of the Watchers)![16] This is significant, because as we saw in Chapter 2, I broke down the Hebrew in Genesis 10:8 to make the connection that Nimrod was indeed a Nephilim hybrid. Thus, we may find even more meaning to the prophetic words of Jesus in Matthew 24:37 concerning the sobering implications of America’s role in the Last Days.

> *But as the days of Noah were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.* (Matthew 24:37)

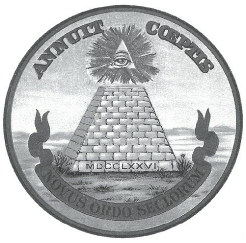

Figure 25

The backside of the Great Seal of the United States of America is also very interesting and loaded with symbolism. Notice that there are 72 stones arranged in 13 rows, forming the unfinished pyramid.

Everything in occult symbolism is deliberate and has meaning. So, what does this mean? Dr. Thomas Horn has an online series of articles that preempted the release of his book, *Apollyon Rising 2012*, which goes into great depths on this subject. In one of those online articles he wrote the following:

> *It is no coincidence that the start and ending dates of the final thirteen katuns of the Mesoamerican Mayan Long Count calendar are reflected in the thirteen steps of the pyramid on the United States’ Great Seal. That the steps of the pyramid were intended to convey units of time has been an open secret for many years. Though he was not sure what to make of it himself, Paul Foster Case wrote many years ago that:*
>
>> *“Since the date, 1776, is placed on the bottom course of the pyramid, and since the number thirteen has been so important in the symbolism of the seal, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the thirteen courses of the pyramid may represent thirteen time periods.”*
>
> *John Kehne made an even more intriguing observation, directly coupling the Great Seal’s trestleboard date, 1776, and the Mayan ending date 2012:*
>
>> *This Seal shows a thirteen-step pyramid with 1776 in Roman numerals.… [The year] 1776 was not only the year that the Declaration of Independence was signed, but was also a special year in the Mayan calendar. Just as the*

> *last katun in the Great Cycle is “katun 2012,” the first katun in the cycle of thirteen was “katun 1776.”*
>
> *In fact, the katun ended thirty-three days before the signing. So 1776 is the bottom level of the pyramid, where the date is actually inscribed—the top of the pyramid is therefore 2012.*

—Thomas Horn, *Apollyon Rising 2012*[17]

Again, everything in Freemasonic imagery is deliberate and pregnant with meaning.[18] If Dr. Horn is right, then our Great Seal points directly to the year 2012 — and it does so from the starting date of our nation’s founding. To me, this seemed to indicate that it very well may have been the *destiny* of America to bring about “whatever” was supposed to happen on December 21, 2012.

The Seal not only ties this nation directly to the year 2012, but it is also loaded with symbols tied directly to Osiris-Nimrod. So, what are we to derive from this?

Considering the topics we have covered so far, I think it is more than reasonable to assume that just as Israel was the country through which God brought His Messiah, the United States appears to have been specifically designed to be the agency through which the Antichrist will be brought (back) to life. However, I don’t believe it will happen here. I believe through our intervention and input, Osiris-Nimrod will “rise” out of Egypt, just like Jesus did.[19] He will then become established as the king of the world (once again) in his hometown of Babylon, from whence he will ultimately attack Israel.[20]

RAISING THE DEAD

As an American, I hate the thought that we could be the primary catalyst for bringing about the rise of Antichrist and the culmination of the Last Days, but the facts are hard to ignore. The deeper you investigate the meanings of our nation’s icons, symbols and monuments, the more you come to realize just how much this nation is steeped in the occult.

Let me take you back to where we left off on our tour of Washington, D.C. and the Capitol Building. After we left the Rotunda, we went down below it. Directly under the “dome room” of our nation’s Capitol Building is an area known as “The Crypt.” *The Crypt?* That certainly took me by surprise, so I asked our tour guide about it, *“The Crypt? Who’s buried here?”* She smiled and said, *“No one. I guess they just liked the name.”* Yeah, right.

As you can see (looking at **Figure 26**), the room is laid out in a rather interesting fashion. My mind immediately began to envision what it would look like with the lights turned off and people standing in a circle dressed in robes, holding candles and chanting some Satanic ritual babble — the hypnotic sounds echoing off the stone floor, pillars and walls. I guess that’s what happens when you have an active imagination and spend the better part of two years researching stuff like this. But what else would you expect with a name like, *The Crypt* ?

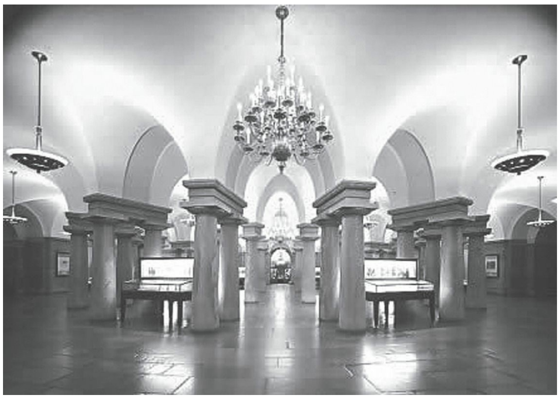

Figure 26

The small room contains 40 Doric columns, which support the Rotunda above. On the floor in the middle of the room, directly below the center of the Capitol dome, is a rose-cross-compass. This is apparently the center of Washington, D.C.. Supposedly, below that is Washington's empty tomb (he's buried at Mount Vernon). One can't help but wonder — if this is true — that perhaps the "empty tomb" has other esoteric meaning.

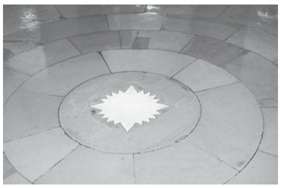
Figure 27

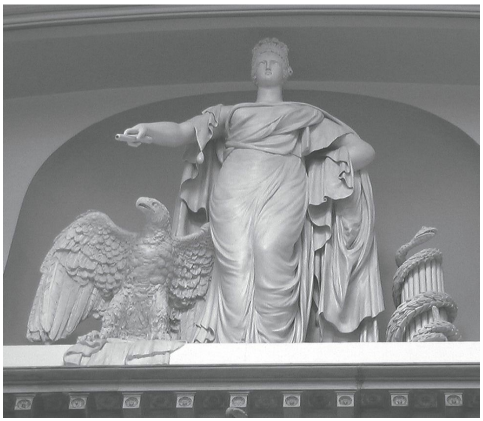
Figure 28

We moved on from there to the room that was the original meeting place for the House of Representatives. Once again we were greeted by the Queen of Heaven extending her hand with a scroll in it. Check out the picture above and notice what is positioned on both sides of her: an eagle and a snake (two creatures that don't usually play well together).

Remember the snake around the column I mentioned earlier? Well, this one is a feathered snake! The Aztecs predicted that their feathered snake god, Quetzalcoatl (aka Kukulcan and Gukumatz) would return in 2012. Here we have a feathered snake in the original meeting place of the House of Representatives, and in the other room we have that painting of the famous Aztec Calendar Stone, that ends in 2012. What's going on here? I asked the tour guide what the snake represented. She said, *"Wisdom."*

Wasn't it the Serpent in the Garden who promised wisdom to Adam and Eve if they only disobeyed God? I find it interesting that both Thoth of the Egyptians and Hermes/Mercury of the Greeks/Romans were also known as the wise messenger of the gods, who practiced and taught writing, astrology, magic and alchemy. Thus, some think that Quetzalcoatl, Thoth and Hermes/Mercury are all one and the same — and we just saw Hermes/Mercury hanging out next door in the Capitol dome.

When you consider that the biblical Greek word for 'angel' is simply a messenger,[21] this all starts to come together and make sense. It's Lucifer: the 'angel (messenger) of the gods' that we're talking about here. He is the chief of all false gods, and he and his cronies are all over our Capitol Building!

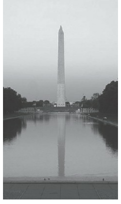
Figure 29

Not far away, you have the massive 6,666-inch tall phallic symbol of Osiris (the Washington Monument) sticking up like a middle finger directed at the One True God of Heaven and Earth. Not far from that, we have the Temple of Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson's Pantheon — all of which stand within view of the All-Seeing-Eye of the 333-foot tall Masonic Temple.

America, we need to wake up! There is an evil agenda at work, and our country is leading the way in making it happen. As I said before, I now strongly believe that America's sole purpose has been to bring about the rise of Babylon and the return of the Antichrist! My trip to Washington, D.C. only reinforced that belief.

Remember the Scripture I focused on toward the end of the previous chapter?

For wheresoever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together. (Matthew 24:28)

As I've already noted, the eagle has always been a symbol for world empires, and it is of course the primary symbol here in the United States. It is all over our government buildings, on top of our flags, and on our military uniforms (top to bottom). Eagles are everywhere!

As our day trip was coming to an end, I was determined to find one more site. Almost by accident, we found it. I saw two pillars, each with a large metal eagle perched on top. Those two eagles stand high above a very peculiar statue known as *The Awakening*. It depicts a giant, bearded god rising up out of the sands of our National Harbor. "The Awakening?" Just who or what are we awakening? I think you know the answer to that by now.

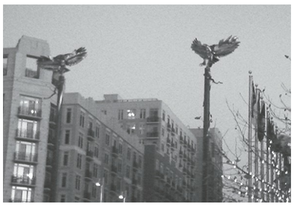

Figure 30

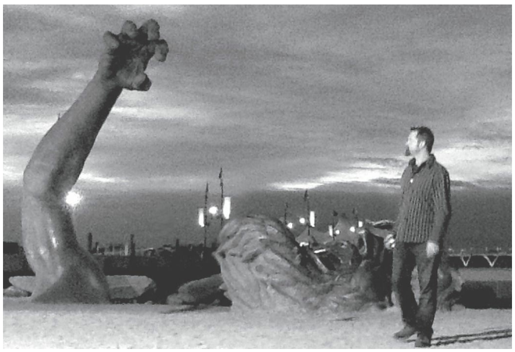

Figure 31

It should be noted, that according to ancient Egyptian texts, Osiris is (and always has been) destined to "awaken." Consider these quotes:

> *"…lead those who are in the Abyss, and command the gods… raise yourself up; hasten to your spirit."* – Pyramid Text Utterance 512
>
> *"Raise yourself, O Osiris… You live, you live, raise yourself up!"* – Pyramid Text Utterance 532
>
> *"'Come my child,' says Atum, 'come to us.' say they, say the gods to you Osiris... he lives because the gods have ordained that he live."* – Pyramid Text Utterance 577
>
> *"I am yesterday and I am today; and I have the power to be born a second time!"* – Egyptian Book of the Dead[22]

Indeed, considering this nation's obsession with all things related to Osiris/Nimrod, I believe the United States is destined to be the driving force behind his resurrection (and they appear to be advertising it with this statue). I also believe that this was the primary reason we went to "occupy" Iraq[23] in the first place — one month after archeologists digging in her desert sands claimed to have found the tomb (and body) of Gilgamesh — and just four years after the secret chambers of Osiris' tomb were found in Egypt.

> *Wherefore if they shall say unto you, Behold,* ***he is in the desert****; go not forth: behold,* ***he is in the secret chambers****; believe it not. For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.* ***For wheresoever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together.***
>
> (Matthew 24:26-28)

IN GOD WE TRUST?

When someone tries to tell us that our Founding Fathers had the "God of the Bible" in their hearts and minds when they laid the foundation of our government, built its buildings, framed our Constitution, and produced our nation's iconography and currency, I think we need to start asking, *"Which god of the Bible?"* Because as you can see, our government is not now, nor was it ever, following after or trusting in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob!

Let's look at our nation's Great Seal once again, considering the following ancient Roman text as we do:

> *Muses of Sicily, let me sing a little more grandly...****Now the last age of the Cumaean prophecy*** [24] ***begins: the great roll-call of the centuries is born anew: now Virgin Justice returns, returns old Saturn's reign, With a new breed of men sent down from heaven.*** *Only favour the child who's born, pure Lucina,*[25] *under whom* ***the first race of iron***[26] ***shall end, and a golden race***[27] ***rise up throughout the world: now your Apollo reigns.***
>
> * * *
>
> ***He will take on divine life, and he will see gods mingled with heroes,***[28] ***and be seen by them, and rule a peaceful world with his father's powers.***[29]
>
> * * *
>
> ***O dear child of the gods, take up your high honours (the time is near), great son of Jupiter!*** *See the world, with its weighty dome, bowing,*[30] *earth and wide sea and deep heavens: see how everything delights in the future age!*
>
> — Excerpts from Virgil's *Eclogue IV: The Golden Age* [emphasis mine]

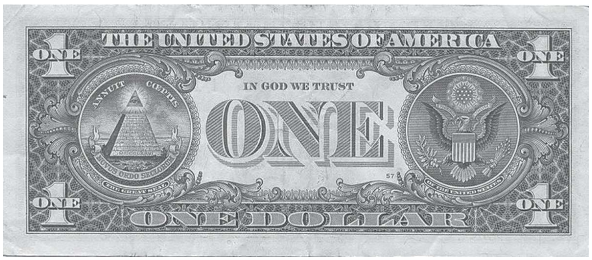

Figure 32

Now flip over a one dollar bill and read the motto, *Novus Ordo Seclorum.* That Latin phrase was taken from a line in the above poem by Virgil. The original Latin phrase is: *"Magnus ab integro seclorum nascitur ordo"* and is the line translated into English as, *"The great roll-call of the centuries is born* [or begins] *anew."*

A man by the name of Charles Thomson placed that phrase on the Great Seal in 1782. He was both a Latin teacher and a fan of Virgil's writings, so he shortened the phrase to *Novus Ordo Seclorum,* which means, *"A New Order of the Ages,"* and placed it below the Great Pyramid.

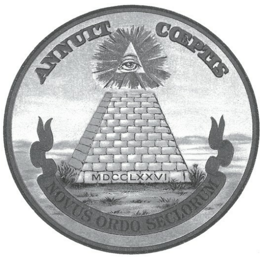

Figure 33

The phrase, *Annuit Coeptus* above the pyramid means "favors undertakings." It is an incomplete statement, thus the subject must be supplied.

Who is the one favoring and what undertakings are being favored? The iconography must be taken as a whole. Therefore, the meaning and answer to those questions is in the Great Seal itself. The *"Eye of Providence"* that sits hovering over the pyramid and between *Annuit* and *Coeptus* is better known as the "All-Seeing-Eye" of Horus-Osiris-Nimrod, and it serves as the best candidate for answering the question of "who" we are talking about here.

However, if we were to take it a step further and consider what (or who) "inspired" Charles Thomson to use this phrase, we must again look to his favorite poet, Virgil.

In Book IX of Virgil's *Aeneid,* we find the Latin phrase, *"Audacibus annue coeptis."* Essentially, it means, *"Grant me success in this brave venture."* It is a prayer. To whom is the subject (in this case, Ascanius) praying? He is praying to his god, Jupiter/Zeus, asking him for victory in his battle against Remulus.

> *"**All-powerful Jupiter, assent to my bold attempt.** I myself will bring gifts each year to your temple, and I'll place before your altar a snow-white bullock with gilded forehead, carrying his head as high as his mother, already butting with his horns, and scattering sand with his hooves."*
>
> — Excerpt from Virgil's *Aeneid, Book IX* [emphasis mine]

Note how we have Roman, Greek, Egyptian and Babylonian themes all on one "cypher" on the back of our currency. We must acknowledge that there is a great deal of information encoded in the symbols of our nation's Great Seal — all of which is hidden in plain sight. Thus, we must be made aware that the "IN GOD WE TRUST" is not the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but rather the god(s) of the ancient, pagan world!

NASA: AMERICA'S PAGAN SPACE PROGRAM

I cannot help but wonder if the Illumined ones were not also giving us some pretty substantial signs through NASA's various space programs. First, we must recognize that NASA was founded with a number of Nazis who were brought over to America from Germany via Project Paper Clip, and other occultists (like Jack Parsons) playing key roles in the development of manned space travel.

> *We allowed felons to immigrate into our country illegally. We turned a blind eye to their reprehensible crimes in Europe. We excused their murders in the name of our national security. We sought Nazi technologies to gain advantage over our enemies, thereby allowing these scientists and intelligence agents to stain our mental health systems, certain aspects of our intelligence services, our genetic science, and even sanction the indiscriminate use of mind-controlling drugs. Prior to World War II, we encouraged Nazi science to advance eugenic policies. Afterwards, we recruited Nazi scientists to energize our 'race into space', and even enlisted Nazi criminals to play a part in the assassination of a president.*
>
> — S. Douglas Woodward[31]

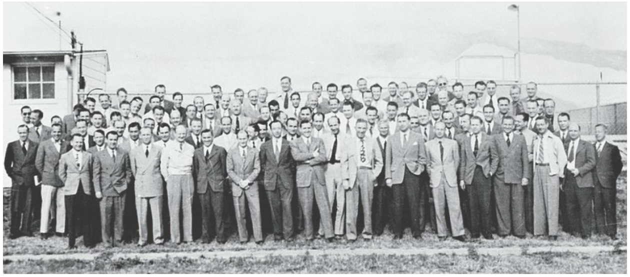

Figure 34

More than 1,600 Nazis escaped the judgment they deserved and found refuge in America.[32] A group of 104 German rocket scientists, including Wernher von Braun, Ludwig Roth and Arthur Rudolph are pictured here (**Figure 34**) at Fort Bliss, Texas in 1946. The group had been subdivided into two sections: a smaller one at White Sands Proving Grounds for test launches and the larger at Fort Bliss for research. Many had worked to develop the V-2 Rocket at Peenemünde Germany and came to the U.S. after World War II, subsequently working on various rockets including the Explorer 1 Space rocket and the Saturn V rocket at NASA.[33] Volumes of books have been written about all of this, so I'm not going focus on it here. Instead, I want to take a closer look at the early programs.

True to occult form, NASA named their projects after pagan deities: Mercury, Gemini and Apollo, with the latter being the title for the ultimate mission of landing a man on the moon.

I don't know who was in charge of naming the various space programs, but I'd like to suggest that they were named on purpose, with each having significant meaning. The people at NASA clearly had an understanding of the pagan pantheon, when they named their various missions, rockets and space modules.

S. Douglas Woodward agrees. In his second Power Quest book, he notes that the numbers 33 and 19.5 repeatedly pop up in NASA's chosen extra-terrestrial landing sites as well as relative to NASA's various locations on the Earth.

> *Ominously, it isn't just location, but it is the place in the heavens where select stars reside at the exact moment of a landing or 'take off'. Oftentimes, it is the rising of Sirius, the star of Isis, which may be at this angle relative to a spacecraft or a NASA location (specifically, shining above or below the equator of that remote moon or planet — or even above Mission Control in Houston), at the moment when the spacecraft lands on these distant bodies. The consistency of this phenomenon (which [Richard C.] Hoagland notes throughout his story every time it occurs — and that is frequent) argues persuasively that these choices are conscious and not chance. Hoagland calls this 'the Ritual Alignment Model' and he explains how the key elements relate to Egyptian cosmology: "Only five stellar objects in the entire sky have any significance in our version of the ancient Egyptian cosmology; the three belt stars of Orion, representing Osiris [also Apollo in Greek and Roman cosmology]; Sirius, representing Isis; and Regulus in Leo, representing Horus [the son of Isis]. And only five narrow bands of stellar altitude (19.5° above and below the horizon, 33° above and below the horizon, and the horizon itself) have any significance."*
>
> — S. Douglas Woodward[34]

In other words, both Woodward and Richard C. Hoagland are saying that NASA's decision makers are intentionally ritualistic in their planning. Woodward goes on to point out that the *"only gods of interest are Osiris, Isis and Horus, who are indeed the primary characters in the Egyptian story of 'resurrection'."*

Who else is obsessed with the number 33 and the rituals of Osiris that pertain to resurrection? Of course, the Freemasons — and NASA certainly has employed/recruited many of them into their programs. Almost with tongue in cheek, Woodward gives some "random factoids" concerning the use of the number 33, noting that Werner Von Braun conducted his first V2 rocket tests in America at "Launch Complex 33" in White Sands, New Mexico (it is the only launch complex there). The landing strip at Kennedy Space Center is labeled "33." During the Apollo 11 mission, at 33 minutes post touchdown, Freemason Buzz Aldrin performed a Masonic ritual as Regulus was at 19.5° below the horizon as viewed from the moon's perspective.[35] And then there's this interesting observation courtesy of Jay Weidner: [36]

> **N**ephtys - Sister of Isis
> **A**usir - One of the Egyptian forms of the name Osiris
> **S**et - Osiris' brother
> **A**set - One of the Egyptian forms of the name Isis

What intrigued Woodward in his research concerning NASA also intrigues me, and that is this odd marriage of Freemasonry with Nazi beliefs within the organization. Generally speaking, the Nazis were quite opposed to the Freemasons. As Woodward points out, Hitler and his occultists were adherents to the Norse mythology, which dealt with Thule, Hyberborea, Odin, Thor, the Valkyries and so on and not on the mythology of Egypt, Babylon, Greece and Rome, which, for the most part, shared gods of a common origin. The gods of Freemasonry stem from Semitic cultures and many of their rituals deal with the Jewish Temple of Solomon. Thus, there is also a rather solid connection between Freemasonry and Zionism, so it's not much of a stretch to understand why Hitler and company would stand opposed to it. While I am very interested in the Nazi side of NASA, I think it best to keep our attention on the Freemason side of our space program, for it is the most obvious, and has the most bearing on our thesis here.

> *We learn [from Richard C. Hoagland] that John F. Kennedy, at the request of Lyndon Johnson his Vice-President, appointed James E. Webb as the administrator of NASA. Webb, a 33° Freemason, appointed Kenneth S. Kleinknecht director of Project Mercury. Ken Kleinknecht was brother of C. Fred Kleinknecht, the Sovereign Grand Commander of the Supreme Council, 33° Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite Freemasons, Southern*

> *Jurisdiction for the United States of America, from 1985 to 2003. Their father, C. Fred Sr., was yet another 33° Mason of the Scottish Rite as well as a member of its Supreme Council.*

— S. Douglas Woodward[37]

Right away, we see top down leadership of high-level Freemasonry. From there, we learn that a number of the astronauts were also Freemasons. Now let's look at the three major programs in the early space race, namely: Mercury, Gemini and Apollo.

In the Roman mythology, Mercury (Hermes to the Greeks) was the messenger of the gods. He was the son of Maia,(daughter of the Titan, Atlas and one of the seven sisters, known as the Pleiades) and Jupiter (Zeus to the Greeks). As Hermes, he was the god of transitions and boundaries, moving freely between worlds of the mortal and divine. He was also the psychopomp conductor of souls to the underworld (where Osiris rules). Hermes/Mercury has a strong connection to Apollo, in the sense that he was a half-brother and also that he carried the caduceus (the double-serpent entwined staff), which was given to him by Apollo. The caduceus is a recognized symbol of commerce and negotiation, two realms in which balanced exchange and reciprocity are usually recognized as ideals.[38] So what was going to be exchanged in space?

On February 20, 1962, the Atlas rocket carried John Glenn into orbit aboard the *Friendship 7*. This was the flight that ushered in the new era of space travel, but think of the symbolism employed here. Atlas was the father of Mercury. The Atlas rocket, which looks like a big penis, shot up into space with one passenger (seed) on board. Thus, Glenn (one of the 7 Mercury astronauts) was the ambassador of earth sent up in 'Friendship' with the number 7, which is generally accepted as the number of God. Was he to play the role of messenger of the gods? Glenn is a Freemason[39] and was a member of DeMolay International (the Masonic youth organization), so nothing would surprise me.

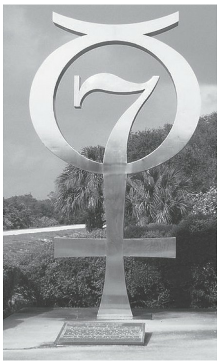
Figure 35

Again, these organizations actively practice rituals that go all the way back to the Babylonian and Egyptian mystery schools. Within these schools is the constant obsession with the phallus and the womb. The Mercury program 'sowed the seeds.' The next step in the process of getting to the moon was called, Gemini: the "bridge to the moon." NASA's official website describes it:

> *On May 25, 1961, three weeks after Mercury astronaut Alan Shepard became the first American in space, President John F. Kennedy announced the goal of sending astronauts to the moon before the end of the decade.*
>
> *To facilitate this goal, NASA expanded the existing manned space flight program in December 1961 to include the development of a two-man spacecraft. The program was officially designated Gemini on January 3, 1962.*[40]

The Gemini Program was the intermediate program between the Mercury and the Apollo programs. In mythology, the Gemini were the twin brothers Castor and Pollux. Their mother was Leda, and once again, their father was Zeus. In some accounts however, Pollux was regarded as the son of Zeus while Castor was the son of the mortal Tyndareus. One immortal, the other mortal. When Castor was killed, Pollux asked Zeus to let him share his own immortality with his twin to keep them together. Thus, they were transformed by the king of the Olympian gods into the constellation Gemini.

It was also a common belief that one would live among the gods, while the other was among the dead. Again, we see a duality, dealing with pagan deities and the Underworld.

The Dioscuri (as they are sometimes called) were regarded as helpers of mankind and patrons of travellers. Sailers often invoked them to seek favorable winds.[41] It seems therefore rather fitting that as NASA pushed forward, with the goal of going to the moon, that they would need 'favorable winds' from yet more children of Zeus, the god not only of the Greeks, but clearly of the United States of America as well.

The Gemini astronauts flew into space atop the Titan II rocket. Here again, we see a direct tie to the first generation Nephilim (the Titans of mythology), who were the product of the union of angels mating with humans. Perhaps it was a fitting name for this stage of the program as one of the mission objects was to practice and perfect the docking (mating) of the Gemini spaceship with the Agena target vehicle.[42]

While these procedures/maneuvers were natural and should certainly be expected when planning something as monumental as what would follow with the Apollo Program, we also see Freemasonic influence in not only the mission objectives, but also in the symbolism such activity represents (once again, the phallus and the womb). Is this why the astronauts who were Freemasons always seemed to have a need to commemorate such activity with items particular to their craft?

> *Astronaut Gordon Cooper, during his epochal Gemini V spaceflight in August of 1965, carried with him an official Thirty-third Degree Jewel and a Scottish Rite flag.*
>
> — Kenneth S. Kleinknecht [43]

As crazy as it may sound, considering all we have been learning so far, I have to wonder if these guys weren't actually performing Masonic rituals out there in space on a regular basis. Of the sixteen astronauts who were part of the Gemini phase, six were either Masons or the sons of Masons.[44]

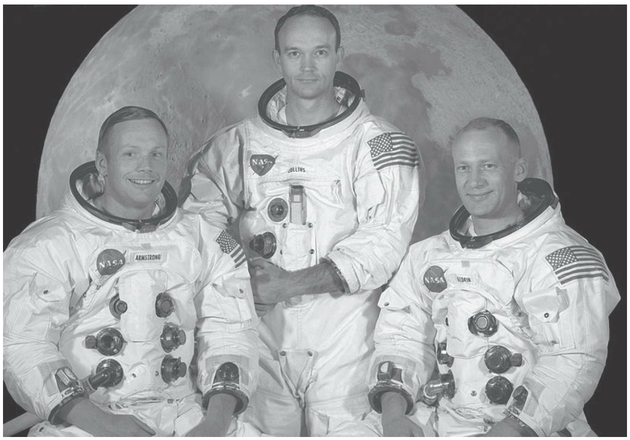

Figure 36

Finally, we come to the Apollo Program. The Apollo astronauts traveled atop the Saturn V rocket. Saturn (known to the Greeks as Cronus) was the first Titan god of the Capitol, the original king of the gods during the Golden Age before his son Zeus overthrew him and took over. Zeus as we know, was the father of Apollo according to the Greek myths.

Apollo 11 is probably the most famous of all the Apollo missions. It was the one that (supposedly) landed men on the moon for the first time. The men (**Figure 36**) who flew that mission were, Neil Armstrong commanding, Michael Collins as the Command Module pilot and Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin as the Lunar Module pilot. Buzz Aldrin was a Scottish Rite Mason, and though hard to vet, some say Armstrong was too. Many doubt this claim, but at the very least, there seems to be a strong consensus that he was the son of one.[45]

What intrigues me most about the fact that Apollo 11 was the one that (supposedly) accomplished the lofty goal of landing a man on the moon is all of the symbolism of this particular mission. In Revelation 9:11, we see the name of the Beast, who is the Antichrist: Apollyon. Eleven is the verse number. Eleven is the mission number. Is there also a connection to the chapter number?

As I pondered that question, I was reminded of something I had read long ago concerning *The Nine*. Essentially, the story goes something like this: In the 1950's - 1970's there was a group of people who were into channeling spirits. Apparently, nine different 'entities' showed up, eventually pretending to be aliens from other worlds. As I understand it, the first manifestation of a representative of *The Nine*, was on December 31, 1952, when an individual named Dr. Andrija Puharich (who was a U.S. Army doctor involved with the C.I.A.'s notorious MKULTRA mind-control project) invited an Indian mystic named Dr. D. G. Vinod to his lab. The mystic went into a trance at 9PM and supposedly said, *“We are nine principles and forces.”* These entities would later proclaim, *“God is nobody else than we together, the Nine Principles of God... We are nine principles of the Universe, yet together we are one ...*” There is a lot more that could be said about this group, but (as interesting as this story is)[46] I don’t want to go down that rabbit trail here. Instead, I’d like to redirect to a couple of ancient ‘Council of Nine’ myths that may be more in line with our subject.

Some have linked *The Nine* to the *Ennead* of Egypt. The Ennead were the nine great gods: Atum, Shu, Tefnut, Geb, Nut, **N**ephtys (Sister of Isis), **A**usir (Osiris), **S**et (Osiris’ brother) and **A**set (Isis) — the latter four of course forming the acronym, NASA. If this link is indeed a solid one, there are ancient legends that speak of the Tep Zepi (the First Time). It was an age the Egyptians referred to as the time when the ‘sky gods’ came down to earth, raising the land from the water. They came in ‘flying boats’ and brought wisdom to mankind through the bloodlines of the Pharaohs. Gods in flying boats? NASA, Apollo spaceship? Maybe it’s just a coincidence.

In the Greek mythology, it was said that the god Prometheus had sympathy for mankind. He saw humans shivering at night as they ate raw meat, so he gave fire (which he stole from the gods) to mankind. This infuriated Zeus, so to punish Prometheus, the king of the gods had him chained to a rock and every day an ***eagle*** came down and ate his liver. The liver grew back and the eagle returned to do the same thing to him the next day.

To punish mankind, Zeus formed the ***Council of Nine***. Its exact function is not entirely clear to this author, however its members were Aphrodite, **Apollo**, Athena, Demeter, Hephaestus, Hera, Hermes, Poseidon and Zeus. Together, according to the myth, the council created Pandora, a woman made from clay, who possessed great beauty, charm, eloquence, deceit, skill and curiosity. She was given a box, but was commanded never to open it. As we might expect, her curiosity got the best of her, so she opened it, and out flew hate, anger, sickness, poverty and all sorts of bad things, which are now found in the world. The only thing that did not escape the box was hopelessness. Thus, even with all the evil in the world, humans still have hope.

In 1969, the hopes of people all around the world were directed toward 3 men as they approached the moon. Then on July 20 (which in gematria is 7+20=27-2+7=**9**) Apollo **11**’s eagle landed.

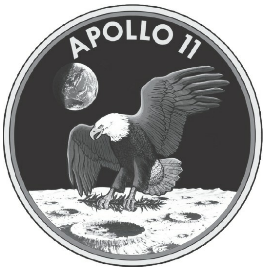

Figure 37

If Apollo is in fact synonymous with Osiris-Nimrod, then it cannot be just a coincidence that the Command Module was named Columbia, which as we’ve learned is just another name for Isis/Semiramis, the half-sister/mother/wife of Nimrod! And as if to put the icing on the cake, the Lunar (Lander) Module was called the “Eagle.” Considering the Masonic use of the eagle as a stylized phoenix (which was the soul-bird of Osiris), there is just way too much synchronicity here for me to take it any other way, but deliberate. In fact, I believe it was all *very deliberate*, as evidenced by the fact that a Masonic ritual was apparently performed on the moon.

The ‘History’ page of the official website for the Tranquility Lodge No. 2000 of Texas[47] states:

> ***The Story of Tranquility Lodge No. 2000***
>
> *On July 20, 1969, two American Astronauts landed on the moon of the planet Earth, in an area known as Mare Tranquilitatis , or “Sea of Tranquility”. One of those brave men was Brother Edwin Eugene (Buzz) Aldrin, Jr., a member of Clear Lake Lodge No. 1417, AF&AM, Seabrook, Texas.* ***Brother Aldrin carried with him SPECIAL DEPUTATION of then Grand Master J. Guy Smith, constituting and appointing Brother Aldrin as Special Deputy of the Grand Master, granting unto him full power in the premises to represent the Grand Master as such and authorize him to claim Masonic Territorial Jurisdiction for The Most Worshipful Grand Lodge of Texas, Ancient Free and Accepted Masons, on The Moon, and directed that he make due return of his acts.*** *Brother Aldrin certified that the SPECIAL DEPUTATION was carried by him to the Moon on July 20, 1969.*
>
> *To commemorate this historic event, and to further solidify and establish Texas Freemasonry on the Moon, it is proposed that a charter be issued to a new Lodge, to be*

> *known as Tranquility Lodge No. 2000...*
>
> [bold emphasis mine - CAPS in the original]

Texe Marrs published an on-line article[48] that provides us with a bit more detail concerning this “special deputation” of Aldrin:

> *Next, brother Edwin “Buzz” Aldrin, at the time a 32° Masonic initiate, planted on the moon’s surface the real flag intended for honor, the flag that Apollo 11 had carried in its storage compartment, the flag with the Scottish Rite’s emblem of deep and mysterious spirituality, the double-headed eagle.*
>
> ***The Phoenix Bird—The Double-headed Eagle***
>
> *This, then, was the esoteric, but hidden and encoded meaning of the name “Eagle” for the lander. The cabalistic ritual script called for elevated man, initiated god-man, to “ride” the black phoenix bird, the “Eagle,” to glory, upward toward the sun. God-man was to make his nest among the stars which decorate the black-garbed night, amidst the day-time canopy of the blue sky (the blue lodge).*
>
> *And so, following their occultly prescribed pagan psychodrama ritual to the letter, the astronauts claimed the moon for their Sovereign, whom they, the Masons, majestically address as The Great Architect of the Universe, known more simply as The Builder.*
>
> *Just as Christopher Columbus, Hernando DeSoto, Ferdinand Magellan and all the great explorers had planted their flag and had claimed the land and territory they had discovered to be the legal possession of their respective monarch and country, the astronauts declared the celestial body of the moon to be the property of their own Noble and of his fiefdom. In their warped minds, the moon belongs to Lucifer, with title held by his high servant and potentate, the Sovereign Grand Commander, Supreme Mother Council, 33°.*
>
> — Texe Marrs[49]

In 1969, *The New Age Magazine* reported:

> *The history of Masonry in the space age took another step forward on September 16, 1969, when Astronaut Brother Edwin E. Aldrin, Jr., 32°, visited the House of the Temple in Washington. Accompanied by his father, Edwin E. Aldrin, Sr., also a Scottish Rite Mason, Astronaut Aldrin paused in his busy schedule to greet Grand Commander Smith and to present to him the handmade Scottish Rite flag he had taken to the moon.*
>
> *The flag is made of white silk, measures 22 x 30 centimeters, and is edged by a band of gold. It is embroidered with the words “The Supreme Council, 33°, Southern Jurisdiction, USA” and the motto “Deus Meumque Jus.” It is also decorated with the double-headed eagle, the crown of the Thirty-third Degree, the insignia of the Sovereign Grand Commander, and the insignia of a Master Mason. On that historic lunar flight from July 16 to 24, 1969, the presence of this flag symbolized Masonry’s universal importance. When man reaches new worlds, Masonry will be there.*
>
> — The New Age Magazine, December 1969, page 34

Another researcher/whistle-blower, the late William Cooper wrote an article back in 1997 called, *Majesty Twelve*. In that article he said:

> *All names, missions, landing sites, and events in the Apollo Space Program echo the occult metaphors, rituals, and symbology of the Illuminati’s secret religion. The most transparent was the faked explosion on the spacecraft Apollo 13, named “Aquarius” (new age) at 1:13 (13:13 military time) on April 13, 1970 which was the metaphor for the initiation ceremony*

> *involving the death (explosion), placement in the coffin (period of uncertainty of their survival), communion with the spiritual world and the imparting of esoteric knowledge to the candidate (orbit and observation of the moon without physical contact), rebirth of the initiate (solution of problem and repairs), and the raising up (of the Phoenix, the new age of Aquarius) by the grip of the lions paw (reentry and recovery of Apollo 13). 13 is the number of death and rebirth, death and reincarnation, sacrifice, the Phoenix, the Christ (perfected soul imprisoned in matter), and the transition from the old to the new. Another revelation to those who understand the symbolic language of the Illuminati is the hidden meaning of the names of the Space Shuttles, "A Colombian Enterprise to Endeavor for the Discovery of Atlantis... and all Challengers shall be destroyed."*
>
> — William Cooper[50]

NASA's space shuttle era began with its first flight on April 12, 1981 and lasted 30 years. The final mission, STS-135 (which equals 9 in gematria) ended on July 21, 2011 with the last flight of Atlantis. Guess what the new space program is called. Orion! With a planned first flight into low Earth orbit (in 2014), NASA claims:

> *Orion will be able to travel to the moon, Mars or an asteroid. Orion also could carry crews or supplies to the space station.*
>
> *Orion will launch on top of a huge rocket. NASA is building this rocket. It is called a heavy-lift launch vehicle. It will take Orion farther into space than people have been before.*
>
> *Orion will use energy from the sun, which is called solar energy. Orion has solar panels that look like round wings. They will get power from the sun when Orion is in space.*[51]

Then in 2016, NASA intends to launch the OSIRIS-REx (king Osiris), a space probe designed to explore and take samples from the "Bennu" asteroid. Yeah, I'm sure the names are all coincidental. OSIRIS REx supposedly stands for "Origins, Spectral Interpretation, Resource Identification, Security and Regolith Explorer". Do you get the sense that they are trying to *force* an acronym just for the sake of honoring their god(s)?

OSIRIS-REx is scheduled to arrive at the Bennu (remember, the Bennu is the 'soul bird' of Osiris, that is the Phoenix, which represents resurrection) in 2018. The plan is to analyze the asteroid and in 2019, to take samples from it to bring back to earth. In the on-line promo video,[52] they reveal hopes of recovering DNA, which will be returned to Earth by 2023! At time, while hovering above the earth, the space probe will eject the 'space seed' in a tiny return vehicle, sending it here for further study.

Most working NASA probably don't realize it, but I think it is clear, this organization is occult to the core and right from the start, it was and is all about the worship of pagan deities under the guise of science. I now *thank (YHVH) God* that I never made it into the space program!

THE ORIGINAL AMERICAN FLAG

Considering all that has been said already, I have to wonder if there is another reason why we originally had 13 stripes and 13 stars on the flag. We were told that the stars and stripes represented the 13 original colonies. However, I can no longer write that number off as "coincidental" when considering the subjects I've been writing about in this book. As we will soon see, the numerical value of God's holy name, יהוה, is 26. If the 13 stars and 13 stripes (totalling 26) really have more to do with all of the pagan-occult mythology associated with secret societies and Francis Bacon's dream of a *New Atlantis*, then literally everything about our nation's iconography is directly related to the *false* god, Osiris-Nimrod! In every way he is the counterfeit of God the Father and of His Son, Jesus Christ.

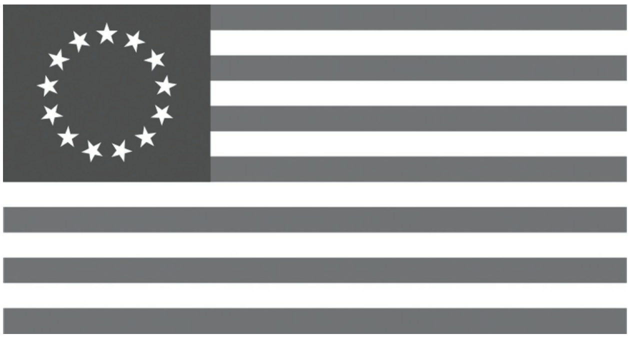

Figure 38

The Flag Resolution of 1777

On June 14, 1777, the Marine Committee of the Second Continental Congress passed the Flag Resolution which stated:

> *“Resolved, that the flag of the United States be thirteen stripes, alternate red and white; that the union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new Constellation.”* [53]

A new Constellation? Could that be Orion (Nimrod) by any chance? Consider this: The numbers 777 are typically associated with God. Thus, in terms of numerological symbolism, with the 1 in front (of 1777), we might think, “one God.” But as we have seen so far, “they” aren’t thinking about the same God you and I are thinking about. They worship Nimrod, in all of his various incarnations. How appropriate then, that they should adopt a flag in his honor in the year 1777, complete with a whole bunch of interesting numerical values. Then again, maybe that’s all just a coincidence, right?

We were told that Betsy Ross was the one who designed the flag depicted in **Figure 38**. But the true origin of the stars and stripes design is very poorly documented. Supposedly, according to the popular tale, a woman named Betsy Ross sewed the first flag from a pencil sketch that was handed to her by George Washington. Knowing what we now know about George, that should be suspect in and of itself, but it should also be noted that no real evidence for this story even exists! We get this whole story from Ross’s grandson, William Canby, who first publicly suggested it nearly a full century later.

> *She made a prototype flag. The committee liked it. Congress approved it. And the Philadelphia seamstress became a flag maker for the fledgling nation. Colonel Ross fronted the operation, supplying a £100 advance for materials. Canby’s tale struck a responsive chord among Americans. They loved Washington’s role in the story as well as Ross’s character—an engaging mix of can-do spirit, common sense, and homespun ability.*
>
> *By 1873, the Betsy Ross story was appearing in national journals. In 1909, Canby’s brother and nephew published a book,* The Evolution of the American Flag. *That volume cemented widow Ross’s place in the public mind.*
>
> — History.org[54]

The History.org article get’s even more intriguing as you read on...

> *Canby relied on family oral accounts. None of Canby’s sources had witnessed Washington’s visit or his grandmother making the flag. Instead, all said they had heard her tell the story many times.*
>
> *Today, historians almost uniformly agree that family oral history is not particularly reliable. Though evidence shows that Betsy Ross made flags for the Pennsylvania navy,* ***nothing else in Canby’s story can be verified****. Specifically, a few points trouble researchers:* ***No evidence shows that a congressional flag committee existed in 1776. If one had, Washington probably would not have been on it because he was not a member***

> ***of Congress. No record shows Congress addressing the flag issue in any way until it passed the 1777 resolution. Nothing suggests that Washington ever dealt with Betsy Ross for any reason. No written material of any sort supports the story. We probably will never know who made the first flag.***
>
> ***We do, however, have a good idea about who originated its design. Credit for that achievement may go to Francis Hopkinson, a New Jersey representative to the Continental Congress and signer of the Declaration of Independence. Hopkinson was a talented man with a strong interest in designing symbols. He played a role in creating the Great Seal of the United States, the Continental Board of Admiralty seal, treasury seal, and American currency. Documents also show that he worked on the first official United States flag.***
>
> — History.org[55] [emphasis mine]

Considering all we've learned, those last two sentences say a lot! If I had not done all of this research, I never would have made this connection. But now, whenever I see the numbers adding up like this, I cannot help but be skeptical of the things we were taught to believe in school. Therefore, when I stumble across a "coincidence," like the same guy working on the flag design that worked on the Great Seal, I tend to think it is not at all coincidental, but rather an indication that something *else* may be at play here... and it is likely going to be somehow related to Nimrod! If so, this should certainly give us reason to pause and think before we *"pledge allegiance,* ***to the flag*** *of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under '****God****,' indivisible, with* ***liberty*** *and* ***justice*** *for all."*

It grieves me to make this statement. As I have already indicated, I am about as patriotic as they come and I love my country. However, given what we have learned so far, I question the idea that our country was founded with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in mind. "God" is too generic and given the fact that nearly all of this nation's iconography appears to be pointing toward Osiris/Nimrod, I can't say with confidence that the phrase in our *Pledge of Allegiance* is indeed directed toward YHVH.

Futhermore, "Liberty" and "Justice" are not just ideas, they are names of known pagan dieties (both of which are associated with Nimrod's wife, Semiramis/Ishtar/Isis).[56] I am not saying that you should not show your patriotism. I'm saying we must all do what we feel convicted by the Holy Spirit to do, and that we should make our choices based on informed decisions, as opposed to the traditions that were passed down to us.

ROOM 219

We've all seen the paintings of George Washington taking a knee in prayer. The question is, to whom or what was he praying? As you should be able to tell by now, 'GOD' is an inadequate term in telling us exactly *which* god we are talking about here. The *'Great Architect of the Universe,'* while sounding noble, poetic and grand, is not the name of YHVH. It is the title of the god of Freemasonry.

In the Capitol Building, there is a room called the Congressional Prayer Room. Knowing that this room is often simply referred to as *'Room 219,'* and realizing that Hebrew words have numerical value,[57] I decided to look up what words had that value. A simple Internet search[58] brought up the following most notable results:

אחימעצ	pr.n. "Brother of Anger".
בקבקיה	pr.n. "Emptying by Yah", or "Skin bottle of Yah"
הרוח	temper, anger, prophetic spirit, spirit (of the living, breathing being in man and animals), God's spirit, departing at death, ***disembodied being...*** spirit of God 1g1) as inspiring ecstatic state of prophecy 1g2) as impelling prophet to utter instruction or warning 1g3) ***imparting warlike energy and executive and administrative power*** 1g4) as endowing men with various gifts 1g5) as energy of life 1g6) ***ancient angel and later Shekinah***

Obviously, I'm most interested in הרוח: the "ruwach" or "the spirit" that Strongs (# H7307) defines as: *the* *disembodied spirit; the ancient angel that imparts warlike energy and executive, administrative power*, that may be being invoked in that room.

People like David Barton would have us believe the fact that Congress has a "prayer room" is proof of our nation's Christian values. I beg to differ. Reverend Patrick J. Conroy, Chaplain of the U.S. House of Representatives describes the room:

> *In the design and decoration of the room,* ***it was important that no part of the furnishings and no symbol used would give offense to members of any church****.* ***At the same time they wished to incorporate in the fabric and decoration of the room the basic unity of belief in God and His Providence that has characterized our history.*** *The accent is on simplicity. An interfaith advisory committee, comprised of the House/Senate chaplains and a Catholic and Jewish representative, approved what was put in the room.*
>
> *The room's inspirational lift comes from the stained glass window with George Washington kneeling in prayer as the focal point. Surrounding him are the words from Psalm 16:1,* ***"Preserve me, O God, for in thee do I put my trust."*** *Above him are the words from Lincoln's Gettysburg address:* ***"This Nation Under God."***
>
> ***Also incorporated into the window are the two sides from the Great Seal of the United States. The pyramid and eye contain the Latin phrases Annuit Coeptus (God has favored our undertakings) and Novus Ordo Seclorum (A new order of the ages is born). The Eagle, with the phrase E Pluribus Unum (from many, one). (In religion, it signifies America's faith in tolerance and mutual respect. In statecraft it signifies one nation out of thirteen colonies.)***[59] [emphasis mine]

On the surface, all of that sounds wonderful and even somewhat acceptable from a Judeo-Christian, patriotic perspective. That is until, you consider everything else I've been writing about in this book.

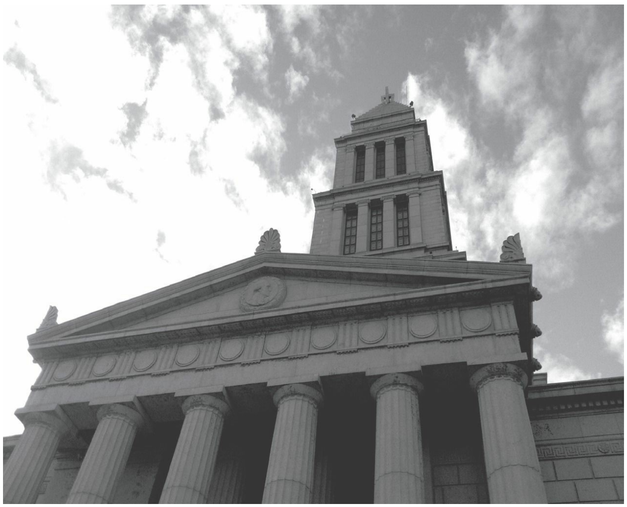

Figure 39

One of the last stops we made during our trip to Washington, D.C., was to the Masonic Temple of George Washington (**Figure 39**). During the tour, the guide said that at the time of the signing of the *Declaration of Independence*, 1 in 5 Americans was a Mason (assuming that number is including women and children, that basically means nearly every adult male was a Mason).

Whether that statistic is accurate or not, it is undeniable that their fingerprints are literally all over our nation's capital city — including inside Room 219, where there is a large stained glass window (**Figure 40**) depicting George praying (as usual). But I believe this window gives us a "window" through which we can clearly see who he was praying to (and who the many Masons in Congress are likely praying to as well).

> ***The stained glass window was donated by craftsmen from California.*** *It is dedicated "to*

> *those who have in the past sought God's guidance and to those who presently determine the destiny of this Nation by the inspiration of their decisions."* ***Illuminated from behind, the window provides an appropriate back drop for prayer.***
>
> — The Reverend Patrick J. Conroy[60] [emphasis mine]

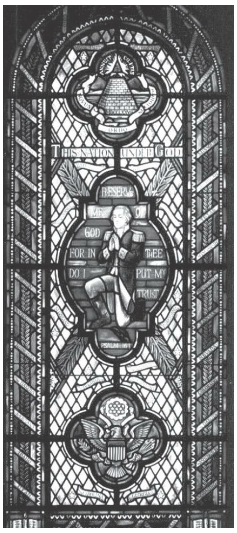

Figure 40

That quote says it all as far as I am concerned. Masons donated the window, through which the proper Illuminati (illumination) sets the "appropriate backdrop" for what is really going on in that room.

Of particular interest to me is the layout of this window. Notice that the Great Seal is seemingly reversed. You would think that the front of the Seal would be at the top and the back at the bottom, but that's not how it is depicted. George is kneeling beneath the "All-Seeing Eye" of Horus-Osiris-Nimrod showing who we are to be praying to in Room 219. David Barton and others conveniently leave this kind of detail out when talking about the *six chair* Congressional Prayer Room.[61]

In an interview with Matthew and Laurie Crouch,[62] Barton says that the Capitol Building is filled with religious symbolism, activities, paintings, sculptures, and so forth. Indeed it is. Unfortunately, as we've seen here, those are not in honor of the true religion of YHVH. In that interview, he says, the members of Congress *"take their faith very seriously."* I have no doubt about that. I just question in whom/what *some of them* have put their faith.

I say, "*some of them"* because I do not doubt that there probably are good, **G**odly (in the sense of worshippers of the One True God, YHVH) men and women in Congress. I do believe there are such people in our government, and would never make the mistake of painting a broad stroke over the whole entire establishment; lumping *everyone* into the Illuminati picture I'm painting here. But for those who are Christians, I also seriously doubt that they know what's really going on in regards to things I am writing about in this book. In fact, I'd say probably most (if not all) of them have absolutely no clue.

In his video, *A Spiritual Heritage Tour of the United States Capitol,* David Barton says, *"There is a room here at the Capitol that honors the faith of George Washington."* The problem is, Barton fails to identify what *"the faith of George Washington"* really means. He should include a tour of the Masonic Temple of George Washington to get a better idea, and to be more accurate in his writings, teachings, seminars and videos. I don't know if he leaves those details out on purpose or if he may in fact be very sincere in his steadfast (albeit extremely naive) belief that this country was founded on Christian principles, by men who truly worshipped the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

What's also interesting to me, is the story Barton tells Matthew and Laurie Crouch[63] about a time when an important vote was coming up and ***60*** Congressmen were crammed into a room that only has ***6*** chairs, seeking 'GOD' for help in how to cast their votes. That could be a good thing — or a very bad thing, depending on what was really going on in this Masonic prayer room (that is not open to the public).

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

The current one dollar bill (i.e. the #1 denomination) also has the Great Seal's imagery reversed. It was designed by the ***32nd*** president of the United States Franklin D. Roosevelt and the ***33rd*** vice-president of the United States, Henry Wallace (who were both 32 nd degree Masons) in the mid-1930s. Interestingly enough, the original design had the eagle on the left and the pyramid on the right. Roosevelt approved the design with the condition that they be reversed.[64]

With the pyramid now on the left, the eagle on the right and the phrase *E Pluribus Unum* (translation:*"Out of many, one"*) hanging from its beak, the message of the dollar becomes extremely interesting indeed.

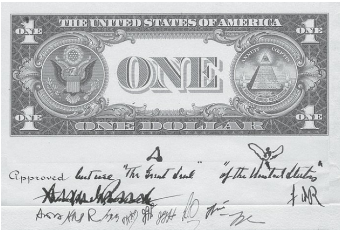
THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
ONE
ONE DOLLAR
Approved but use "The Great Seal" "of the United States"

Figure 41

We have been told that the phrase *"Out of many, one"* refers to the many states and various ethnicity that make up our one united country, often referred to as a "melting pot." However, we must take all of the symbols on the Great Seal as a whole, meaning the messages encoded in its symbols must harmonize with each other. Therefore, I believe the true meaning is seen in the many gods that are all really representations of just one; the god-man the Bible calls Nimrod.

Production of the one dollar Federal Reserve Note was undertaken and went into "circulation" the same year John F. Kennedy was killed. Ever since then, our Founder's encrypted plan has been *set in motion*, and through ignorance, we continue to both endorse and "circulate" (keep in motion) that plan both in our own country as well as throughout the world by our continued use of this occult talisman[65] we call the U.S. one dollar bill.

What does it all mean? If we were to look at the back of the one dollar bill and begin reading left to right across the center imagery, the symbols appear to be telling us:

> *Zeus/Satan*[66] *favors our undertaking; that which we do under Osiris' watchful eye — an undertaking that started in 1776 and will be completed in 2012. At that time, we will usher in the New Order of the Ages. It is in you, oh Zeus, that we put our trust to help us raise your son. Like a phoenix rising out of the ashes of death, under the sign of Saturn,*[67] *Apollo-Nimrod will rise again. And thus, the one (false) god represented by many names, shall come claiming peace in one hand, but waging war with the other.*

Admittedly, that is my own interpretation, but the symbols do seem to support it — or at least something to that effect. As much as I truly hate to admit it, our Founding Fathers and the presidents who followed after them all seem to have been looking forward to the "awakening" of Gilgamesh-Osiris-Apollo-Nimrod! They put a plan in motion with that goal in mind. Despite what people like David Barton would have us believe, everything about our nation's iconography appears to support the idea that this *"One Nation Under God"* is really one nation whose government was dedicated to a false god, right from the beginning.

It's time we get to know the One True God and His Messiah!

POKING OUT THE EYE

The "All-Seeing Eye" on the back of our dollar bill comes from Egyptian mythology. It is directly related to Osiris and his son

Horus (who is supposed to be the reincarnation of Osiris). In the Egyptian picture language, the name Osiris is represented by the imagery of a throne, an eye and the profile of a man as seen in **Figure 42**.

His name essentially translates to mean, *"He who has his eye on the throne."*

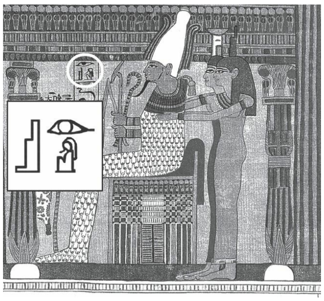

Figure 42

> *The name "Osiris" is the Greek corruption of the Egyptian name "Asar" (or Usar.) There are several possibilities as to what this name means, "the Strength of the Eye," is one. Another is "He Sees the Throne."*
>
> *— EgyptianMyths.net*[68]

Also of interest is the Hebrew meaning of the word 'pharaoh.' My wife and I began taking Hebrew lessons early in 2011. As we learned the Hebrew letters, we were taught that they have both a numerical value as well as a number of meanings (see *Appendix A* to learn what each of the letters mean). With this idea in mind, there is a Hebrew idiom that says, *“If every letter has seven meanings, then every word has seventy.”* Therefore, using the chart in *Appendix A*, we began to look up meanings for various Hebrew words and names. Of course, we started with the name of YHVH, the true name of God, but before I show you that meaning, I want to show you the spelling and subsequent interpretation of the word “pharaoh,” as defined by the letters that make up that word.

In Hebrew, “pharaoh” is spelled, פרעה[*Pey, Resh, Ayin, Hey*].[69] Using the chart in *Appendix A* to define each letter, we can thus derive the following word-letter meaning:

- **Pey:** has a numerical value of 80 and its meanings include: *the mouth, to speak, to open*
- **Resh:** has a numerical value of 200 and its meanings include: *person, the head, the highest, the most important*
- **Ayin:** has a numerical value of 70 and its meanings include: *the eye, to see, understand, reveal*
- **Hey:** has a numerical value of 5 and its meanings include: *reveal, show, mercy, grace* or when used at the end of a word means: *“who/what/that comes from.”*

Therefore, in Hebrew, the title of “pharaoh” has a numerical value (or “weight”) of 355 and essentially means:

> *[The one who] comes from and speaks for the most important (or highest) eye.*

Of course, there are other ways you could translate those letters (hence the concept of deriving 70 meanings from one word), but when you consider the idea that ancient pharaohs thought of themselves as being a host for Horus/Osiris,[70] this definition certainly fits quite well.

It should also be noted that every Hebrew word has what is known as a “shoresh,” which is the two or three letter root of a word.[71] These two or three letter root consonants form the basic support structure of a family of related words. Adding vowels, prefixes and suffixes to that root creates variations in meaning, tense and parts of speech. Thus, when learning Hebrew, we’ve found that if you can identify a shoresh, you can easily then figure out what a word means, because all words that have the same shoresh are in some way related to every other word that contains that root as well.
Looking at the Hebrew spelling of pharaoh (פרעה), we might then find פרע as its root, which is a word that means ‘leader or prince.’ That fits perfectly, but consider its two letter root of רע, which would be pronounced “Ra” and means ‘bad, evil, wicked’ in Hebrew (see Strong’s # 7451). So, the Egyptian god, Ra (at least phonetically) is by definition, *evil* in the Hebrew language. Thus, פרעה (pharaoh) could also be understood to mean:

> *Revealing the mouth of the prince of evil.*

This concept becomes even more interesting when you realize that our modern presidents may be regarded as pharaohs as well, especially when you consider all of the Egyptian practices and beliefs that are incorporated into Freemasonry and the iconography on our national symbols. As you will see in the next chapter, there are indeed people who consider President Obama to be a pharaoh, and have openly stated as much. Perhaps all that is not so much by coincidence, but rather design?

Now that we’ve looked at the meaning of a false god, let’s look at the meanings of the One True God and His Son, Jesus Christ.

In Hebrew, the name of God is spelled with the letters, יהוה[*Yod, Hey, Vav, Hey*]. Therefore, again reading right to left, using the chart in *Appendix A*, we can derive the following meanings from those letters.

- **Yod:** has a numerical value of 10 and its meanings include: *Work, Hand/Arm, Activity, Deed.*
- **Hey:** has a numerical value of 5 and its meanings include: *reveal, show, mercy, grace* or when used at the end of a word means: *“who/what/that comes from.”*
- **Vav:** has a numerical value of 6 and its meanings include: *join, nail, establish, secure, attach, man, man’s number (created on the sixth day)*

- **Hey:** has a numerical value of 5 and its meanings include: *reveal, show, mercy, grace* or when used at the end of a word means: *"who/what/that comes from."*

The four-letter name of God, therefore, has a numerical 'weight' of 26 and can mean something like:

> *What comes from the activity/work or deed revealed in the nailed/man (of Mercy/Grace).*

Or more simply, it could mean something to the effect of:

> *The work of Mercy that comes from the nailed man of Grace.*

The doubling of the meaning of the letter *Hey* in this word shows me that the two are of each other, or in other words, they are one and the same: Grace and Mercy revealed/what comes from or through Father and Son, who are both one; a concept Jesus Himself said was true.[72]

If you think that's cool, wait until you learn what Jesus' Hebrew name means! The name "Jesus" is not Hebrew, it is a late addition to the human language as it is a transliterated English word that comes from the Greek word 'Iesous,' which itself was transliterated from the Hebrew name He was given: 'Yeshua.' In Hebrew, His name would be spelled, ישׁוע [*Yod, Shin, Vav, Ayin*]. Using the same method, let's break down the name of Yeshua:

- **Yod:** has a numerical value of 10 and its meanings include: *Work, Hand/Arm, Activity, Deed*.
- **Shin:** has a numerical value of 300 and its meanings include: *Destroy, Consume, Devour*
- **Vav:** has a numerical value of 6 and its meanings include: *Join, Nail, Establish, Secure, Attach, Man's number (created on the sixth day)*
- **Ayin:** has a numerical value of 70 and its meanings include: *Eye, See, Understand*

The four-letter name of Yeshua therefore, has a numerical 'weight' of 386 and can meaning something like:

> *The hand/activity/work or deed that destroys/consumes or devours the established/security/man's eye/understanding.*

Or more simply, it could mean something to the effect of:

> *The work that destroys the establishment of the eye!*

I prefer to look at it this way: Yeshua is...

> ***The hand that destroys the establishment of the eye!***

I like that description because Yeshua (Jesus) is the one who will poke out the eye on the back of your dollar bill. He has and will destroy all the work of the devil!

> *He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning.* ***For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil.*** (1 John 3:8)

Osiris-Nimrod and all who follow him will only be acting out in the likeness of Lucifer, who has had his eye on God's throne since the beginning.

> *How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For* ***thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High.***

> (Isaiah 14:12-14)

Unfortunately for Lucifer and his prized son Gilgamesh-Osiris-Apollo-Nimrod (and all who follow and worship him), that will never happen!

Yeshua (Jesus), is the name that is above all names, even outweighing them in terms of the Hebrew lettering! Consider what the Psalmist wrote:

> *I will worship toward thy holy temple, and praise thy name for thy lovingkindness and for thy truth: for* ***thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name.*** (Psalm 138:2)

The Apostle John told us that the “Word” is Yeshua (Jesus).[73] He is indeed the Highest, the one who will soon crush all who stand against Him. I don’t know about you, but I want to be on the winning team. Osiris, like his father Lucifer, may have his eye on the throne, but he’ll never sit on it. The true Son of God, Yeshua (Jesus), is the only One worthy to sit on the throne... and *He* wins in the end!

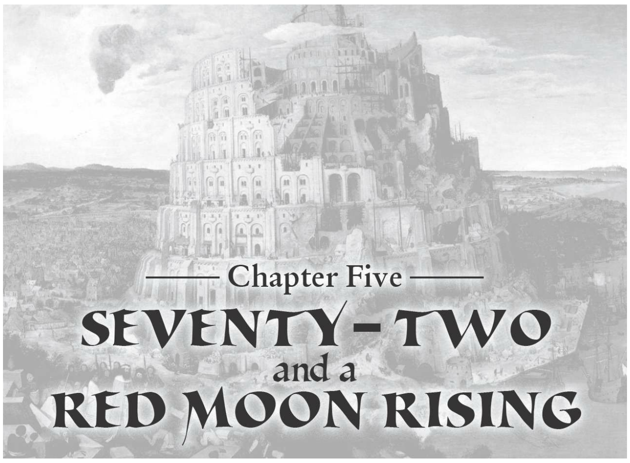

Chapter Five

SEVENTY-TWO and a RED MOON RISING

Then God said, "Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs and seasons, and for days and years; and let them be for lights in the firmament of the heavens to give light on the earth"; and it was so. Then God made two great lights: the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night. He made the stars also.
(Genesis 1:14-16)

Members of the occult love to play with numbers just as much as they do symbols. In fact, numerology is usually associated with the paranormal, astrology and other divining arts.[1] It can be used to encode and decode secrets and mysteries. Adepts of the mystery schools are often highly skilled in that particular discipline. Therefore, they look for ways to incorporate numbers into their schemes and to divine meaning in what they see in the numerical values found in nature and the universe as a whole. They do this in many ways, using the numbers as a language. In fact, it was St. Augustine of Hippo (AD 340-430) who even referred to the usage of numbers as the "Universal Language." Thus, when it comes to occult numerology, we must ask, what are *they* saying? You see, it really doesn't matter what it means to us. The question is, what do the numbers mean to *them*? This is important, because they act on those beliefs.

I am by no means an expert in that area, but I have noticed some things worthy of addressing here in this chapter. As I begin, I want to clearly state that I am not into numerology, meaning I do not live my life by the usage of numbers, nor do I put my trust in them for my future.

That said, anytime I see things like numerology, astrology and the like, I know those are counterfeits. But you can't have a counterfeit of something that is not real. I do believe that YHVH is a God of order and of numbers. I also believe there is significance to the Bible Code[2] and that there is substantial evidence supporting the idea that God does indeed "encode" truths in the Bible and even in creation itself in many ways. But He doesn't hide them *from* us, He hides them *for* us!

> ***It is the glory of God to conceal a thing****: but the honour of kings is to search out a matter.* (Proverbs 25:2)
>
> *And I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you;* ***seek, and ye shall find;*** *knock, and it shall be opened unto you.* (Luke 11:9)

I showed you some examples of hidden truths that can be found in the Hebrew letters in the last chapter. That's just one example. There are *many* more. God's Word is indeed rich with constant revelation and truth, such that it does not matter how many times you read the Scriptures; there is always more to find, discover and learn! It should not surprise us then, that the devil would counterfeit that same concept in the writings and activities of his followers too.

In my research, I have found the number 72 to be a particularly interesting and significant number. Here are just a few entries mentioned on Wikipedia:

- In a plane, the exterior angles of a regular pentagon measure 72 degrees each.
- The atomic number of hafnium
- In degrees Fahrenheit, it’s considered to be room temperature.
- The average number of heartbeats per minute for a resting adult.
- Percentage of water of which the human body is composed.
- The life duration of the ovule is 72 hours.
- The mass of the Moon is 1/72 nd that of the Earth.
- The volume of Saturn is 72 times that of the Earth.
- The axis of the earth moves off one degree every 72 years when compared to the stars.
- There are 72 Paranatellons: The extra-zodiacal constellations that rise and set simultaneously with zodiacal constellations.
- Messier object M72 is a magnitude 10.0 globular cluster in the constellation Aquarius.
- The Saros number of the solar eclipse series which began on -727 August 16 and ended on 752 January. The duration of Saros series 72 was 1,478.1 years, and it contained 83 solar eclipses.
- The Saros number of the lunar eclipse series which began on -407 June 5 and ended on 891 July. The duration of Saros series 72 was 1,298.1 years, and it contained 73 lunar eclipses.
- The conventional number of scholars translating the Septuagint, according to the legendary account in the *Letter of Aristeas.*
- The conventional number of disciples sent forth by Jesus in Luke 10 in some manuscripts (70 in others).
- The number of names of God, according to Kabbalah.
- The Shemhamphorasch related to the number of the names of God.
- The total number of books in the Catholic version of the Holy Bible if the book of Lamentations is considered part of the book of Jeremiah.
- The current distribution of the Book of Revelation is 22 chapters, adopted since the 13th century. But such was not always the case. The oldest known division of the text is that of the Greek commentator Andrew of Cesary (6th century) into 72 chapters.
- The number of warriors on the Muslim side at the Battle of Badr.
- The number of people martyred along with Imam Hussain at the Battle of Karbala.
- The number of devils according to *The Lesser Key of Solomon.*
- The 72 old men of the synagogue, according to the Zohar.
- The degrees of the Jacob’s ladder were to the number 72, according to the Zohar.
- The 72 disciples of Confucius.
- The god Osiris was enclosed in a coffin by 72 evil disciples and accomplices of Set.
- The number of the Immortals in Taoism.
- The number of virgins a Muslim might get as a reward in Heaven.
- The number of hours in 3 days.
- A loud tone of 72Hz makes light objects vibrate.
- The height of the HAARP radio antennas is 72 feet tall.
- There are 72 goetic demons.
- Thoth, of Egyptian mythology, wins a 72nd of each day of the year from the Moon in a game of Draughts, as a favor to Nut, the Sky Goddess. He uses these portions to make the 5 intercalary days on which the remaining gods and goddesses were born.

— Wikipedia[3] [emphasis mine]

Another website called, *Look Up Fellowship*,[4] by Jeffery Radt has the following to say about the number 72:

> *It is said that Psalm 72 is a prophecy of the Second Coming of Christ and the Millennium! Furthermore, many scholars point to Psalm 72 as a proof text to support the position that the Land of Israel has expanded to include the whole Earth (the true Israel of God in the New Covenant has expanded to include all Jews and Gentiles who accept Christ as their “David”).*

* * *

> *“...We have 70 elders chosen in Numbers 11:14-17 to assist Moses. These 70, plus Aaron and Moses, equal 72 — the 72 who spoke on God’s behalf to the people. Also, there were 72 ornaments on the Menorah in the Tabernacle — a symbol of Light — and the oil in it, the Holy Spirit. Also, there were said to be 72 separate pieces of the veil in the Temple which separated the Holy place from the Most Holy Place. All these speak of the*

> *transmission of God's message. Additionally, the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint, was said to have been translated by 72 Hebrew Scholars (6 from each tribe) in 72 days — again a transmission of God's message! Something else, pertinent in our time is that the priestly garments are being remade for Temple service. The garment of the High Priest has brass bells and pomegranates woven into its hem. Interestingly, they have decided that 72 of each, alternating around the hem, will be used! Inspired? I think so!"*

And this is just the beginning! The more you look, the more you will find that there is no shortage of interesting things to "look up" concerning the number 72. But for the purpose of this book, I want to draw your attention to just a few of the previously listed bullet points:

- The mass of the Moon is 1/72nd that of the Earth.
- The axis of the earth moves off one degree every 72 years compared to stars.
- The number of devils according to *The Lesser Key of Solomon.*
- The god Osiris was enclosed in a coffin by 72 evil disciples and accomplices of Set.
- Thoth, of Egyptian mythology, wins a 72nd of each day of the year from the Moon in a game of Draughts, as a favor to Nut, the Sky Goddess. He uses these portions to make the 5 intercalary days on which the remaining gods and goddesses were born.

Each of these deal with Osiris, demons, the earth, the moon and the stars (constellations). Let's start with the stars. Remember what Moses wrote in the opening chapter of Genesis?

> *Then God said, "Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to divide the day from the night; and* ***let them be for signs and seasons, and for days and years****; and let them be for lights in the firmament of the heavens to give light on the earth"; and it was so. Then God made two great lights: the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night. He made the stars also.*
>
> (Genesis 1:14-16)

Scientists today and ancient astronomers of the past have observed that every 72 years, the stars in the sky appear to move one degree from their previous position on the horizon.

Originally, the Ancient Egyptian year was 360 days long. That number of course is identical to the number of degrees in a circle.

In Egyptian mythology, Thoth was the "keeper of records." He was associated with the arts, science, astronomy and writing in the form of hieroglyphs. In one legend, Thoth won a game of draughts with the moon and thus was able to gain 5 extra days for the year.[5] So, he encoded his knowledge of the precession of the stars (constellations) by multiplying 72 by the extra 5 days arriving at 360 (the number of degrees in a circle). Then, when the 72 years are multiplied by the 360 degrees of a complete, circular (star) cycle, we discover that it takes 25,920 years for each heavenly precession to be completed — at which time the whole thing starts all over again.

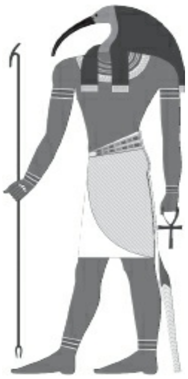

Figure 43

The subject of the "resetting" of the precession has become a hot topic these days, especially as we approached the year 2012, with all the "prophecies" supposedly written about it by the Aztecs, Mayans and other ancient cultures. Did they arrive at their numbers the same way as the Egyptians? I don't know. However, the concept does lead us to investigate December 21, 2012, a date intimately connected to the number 72, the founding of the United States of America, and (potentially) the emergence of the coming Antichrist.

Remember what John Kehne wrote concerning the Great Seal's trestleboard date of 1776 and the Mayan ending date of 2012? He said that the 13 steps (of 72 stones) represent the cycle of thirteen, 19.7 year katuns, which began in 1776 and will end in 2012. Thus, it would appear that our country has always had a predestined rendezvous with 2012.

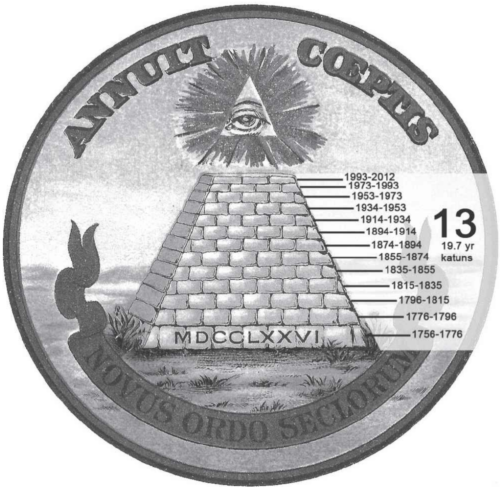

Figure 44

I believe now more than ever that we as Americans (and especially if you are a believer in Jesus Christ) need to understand this. If it is true that our country is going to be responsible for placing the Antichrist in power, I personally don't want to have anything to do with supporting that agenda. We are responsible for the things and people we put our trust in and support. This is one of the reasons why I simply cannot "cast my vote" anymore (at least not for presidents). I can no longer put my stamp of approval, my allegiance, nor my financial support behind anyone who is part of a system that is deeply entrenched in occult ritual and practice. That sounds harsh, I know — even un-patriotic — and I'm sure many will strongly disagree with me in this regard. I get that, but please allow me to further explain why I feel this way.

Even mainstream pundits like Judge Andrew Napolitano are questioning the entire process. While he doesn't appear to be coming at the subject from the same angle as I am, he still certainly appears to be quite jaded and fed up with the whole system.

> *What if elections were actually useful tools of social control? **What if they just provided the populace with meaningless participation in a process that validates an establishment that never meaningfully changes?** What if that establishment doesn't want and doesn't have the consent of the governed? **What if the two-party system was actually a mechanism used to limit so-called public opinion?** What if there were more than two sides to every issue, but the two parties wanted to box you in to one of their corners?*
>
> * * *
>
> ***What if the whole purpose of the Democratic and Republican parties was not to expand voters' choices, but to limit them?*** *What if the widely perceived differences between the two parties was just an illusion?* [6]

My research has led me to believe that all modern secret societies are either descended from or connected to the Illuminati, with many of them operating under the umbrella of the Scottish and York Rites of Freemasonry.[7] Their rituals and practices can be traced straight back to the mystery schools started by Nimrod and Semiramis. As such, they inherently carry the "spirit of Antichrist," which is what truly ends up running (and ruining) this country, through the kind of leadership that always seems to be associated with or a part of these secret societies. Thus, I'm of the opinion that if a candidate for public office (especially that of the presidency) has any affiliation with such organizations, we need to turn, run the other way and have nothing to do with them!

This leads me to another point: Just because candidates say they are Christians, it does not mean they are. I believe a lot of politicians like to play that card just to capture our support. Therefore, believers in Jesus Christ really need to do their research before *believing* these people. Jesus said, *"By their fruits you shall know them."* He did not say, *"By their eloquent words, promises and campaign slogans,"* but rather that we would be able to identify people by their actions.[8]

I don't know what better proof I could ask for, to confirm both the statement Judge Napolitano made as well as what I said in the previous chapter about Republicans and Democrats playing for the same team (as in, two wings of the same "bird of prey"), than the 2004 run for president.

Both George W. Bush and John Kerry catered to the conservative and Christian voter base, trying to earn their trust (votes). Both also openly admitted to being members of the *Skull and Bones* secret society, but were also quite evasive in discussing their (continued?) affiliations with it.

Consider what this *Cutting Edge Ministries* article[9] has to say about *Skull and Bones* and President George H. W. Bush:

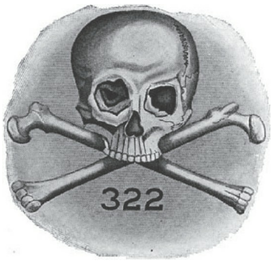

Figure 45

> *The Skull and Bones also incorporates sexual activities into their practices.*
>
> > *"The [ritualistic] death of the initiate will be as frightful as the use of human skeletons and ritual psychology can make it..."* (Esquire Magazine, "*The Last Secrets of Skull and Bones,"* Ron Rosenbaum, p. 89).
>
> *Sexual perversion is part of ritual psychology. Ron Rosenbaum, author of the* Esquire Magazine *article, stated that on initiation night, called tap night,*
>
> > *"...if one could climb to the tower of Weir Hall, the odd castle that overlooks the Bones courtyard, one could hear strange cries and moans coming from the bowels of the tomb as the 15 newly tapped members were put through what sounded like a harrowing ordeal..."* (Esquire, September, 1976, p. 86).
>
> *Further, [initiates] "lay naked in coffins and tell their deepest and darkest sexual secrets as part of their initiation."* (Esquire, p. 85). *These experiences in the coffins incorporated sexual pain and resulted in* ***being born-again****, into the Order, as we mentioned above.* (Cooper, Behold A Pale Horse, p.95) *A powerful spiritual force charges through the participants of these ceremonies, transforming their lives dramatically.*
>
> *This type ritual is classic Satanism. Anton LaVey states, in his book* The Satanic Rituals: Companion to the Satanic Bible, (p. 57),
>
> > *"The ceremony of rebirth takes place in a large coffin...This is similar to the coffin symbolism that... is found in most lodge rituals."*
>
> **Make no mistake about it: Any organization which utilizes this coffin ritual to simulate rebirth is practicing Satanism, including Skull and Bones.** *The Skull and Bones believes that on the night of initiation, the initiate "dies to the world and is* ***born again*** *into the Order..."* (Esquire Magazine, September, 1977, p. 89).
>
> * * *
>
> ***During the 1988 Presidential Campaign, a TV reporter asked Vice-President Bush if he were a Christian. Bush initially stammered, but then said, "If you mean born again, then, yes, I am a Christian." Vice-President Bush answered this question in a very expert manner, simultaneously being true to his own occult foundation while misleading innocent, trusting Christians.***
>
> 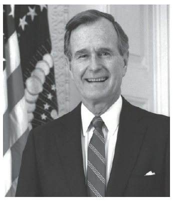
>
> **Figure 46**
>
> *As born-again Christians carry out the ritual of water baptism by immersion to demonstrate that they have died to the old way of life and have been reborn into a new life, Satanists have their ritual to demonstrate the same life transformation. Rosenbaum continues his expose' of the born-again experience, "then it's into the coffin and off on a symbolic journey through the underworld to rebirth, which takes place in* ***Room Number 322****. There,*

> *the Order clothes the newborn knight in its own special garments, implying that, henceforth, he will tailor himself to the Order's mission."* (Ibid., p. 89, 148). *This ritual description is as occultic as any I have read, and truly reveals the Skull and Bones as Satanic.*
>
> *One of the most sobering facets of this counterfeit born again initiation ritual is that the initiate swears to an allegiance to the Secret Order t**hat transcends any allegiance later in life**. New Age Christian author Bill Cooper captures this disturbing fact most succinctly,*
>
> > *"...Members of the Order (Skull and Bones) take an oath that absolves them from any allegiance to any nation or king or government or constitution, and that includes the negating of any subsequent oath which they may be required to take. They swear allegiance only to the Order and its goal of a New World Order...* ***according to the oath Bush took when he was initiated into Skull and Bones, his oath of office as President of the United States means nothing."***
> >
> > (Cooper, ***Behold A Pale Horse,*** p. 81-82).
>
> ***Since the oath as President occurred after the Oath to Skull and Bones, it is not worth the paper on which it is printed.*** *That kind of hold is powerful. Indeed, as Ron Rosenbaum began the research necessary to write his article for* Esquire, *he was warned about the power of Skull and Bones.*
>
> > *"The power of Bones is incredible. They have their hands on every lever of power in the country."*
>
> * * *
>
> *The only thing which is important to the Skull and Bones is their goal of a New World Order. In conjunction with this understanding, remember one other secret society belief, i. e., the ends justify the means.*
>
> — *Cutting Edge Ministries*[10] [emphasis mine]

Lies, deceit, manipulation, satanic, sexual rituals... do any of those sound like the "fruits" we should identify as "Christian?" No. Those are all the fruits of the devil, and one major characteristic of the spirit of anti-Christ is the tendency to "exalt oneself above all that is God."

Now (as of the time of this writing), we have a president who thinks he is some sort of god and a press that is all too happy to picture him as such.[11] The man has literally been hailed as some sort of a messiah by both Christians and non-Christians alike — especially amongst Muslims.

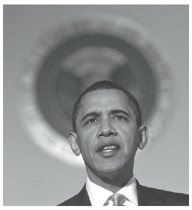

Figure 47

On February 24, 2008, addressing the Nation of Islam Savior's Day, even the Islamic leader, Louis Farrakhan said:

> *"When Obama talks, the Messiah is absolutely speaking."* [12]

The world has certainly embraced this man. Therefore, we must pause here for a moment and discuss President Barack Hussein Obama — for he also has an interesting connection to the number 72 worth investigating. Consider the strange, cryptic comment he made after his first 100 days in office:

> *"Finally, I believe that my next hundred days will be so successful, I will be able to complete them in 72 days.* [audience laughter] *And on the 73rd day, I will rest."* [13]
>
> — President Obama

What's that all about? Sure he said those words at his first White House Correspondence Dinner as a "joke" — or was it? We will look more into that statement shortly after we take notice of a previous statement he made at that same dinner.

Earlier in his speech,[14] he referred to his first hundred days as a *"whirlwind of activity."* Did you know that George W. Bush used that same term , "*whirlwind,"* in his acceptance speech? So what? Remember: symbols and codes are how the "Illumined ones" love to communicate.

In Dr. Thomas Horn's online article titled, *"Summoning the Angel from the Whirlwind,"*[15] he writes:

> ***On January 20, 2001****, President George W. Bush during his first inaugural address faced the obelisk known as the Washington Monument and twice referred to an angel that "rides in the whirlwind and directs this storm."* [keep in mind this was **before** 9/11] *His reference was credited to Virginia statesman John Page who wrote to Thomas Jefferson after the Declaration of Independence was signed, saying, "We know the race is not to the swift nor the battle to the strong. Do you not think an angel rides in the whirlwind and directs this storm?''*
>
> 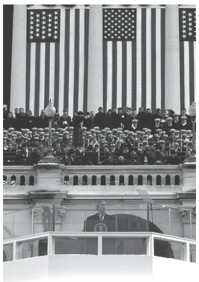
>
> **Figure 48**
>
> *Five weeks after the inaugural,* ***on Wednesday, February 28, Congressman Major R. Owens of New York stood before the House of Representatives and prayed to the "Angel in the Whirlwind."*** *He asked the spiritual force to guide the future and fate of the United States. Twenty-eight weeks later (for a total of* ***33 weeks*** *from the inaugural — a number invaluable to mysticism and occult fraternities), nineteen Islamic terrorists (according to the official story) attacked the United States, hijacking four commercial airliners and crashing two of them into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, a third into the Pentagon, and a fourth, which had been directed toward Washington, D. C. crashed near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. What happened that day resulted in nearly 3,000 immediate deaths, at least two-dozen missing persons, and* ***the stage being set for changes to the existing world order****.*
>
>
>
> **Figure 49**
>
> *When Bush was giving his second inaugural speech four years later, he again offered cryptic commentary, saying, "For a half century, America defended our own freedom by standing watch on distant borders. After the shipwreck of Communism came years of relative quiet, years of repose, years of sabbatical — and then there came a day of fire...." A few paragraphs following, Bush added, "By our efforts,* ***we have lit a fire as well — a fire in the minds of men.*** *It warms those who feel its power, it burns those who fight its progress, and one day this untamed fire of freedom will reach the darkest corners of our world."*
>
> *The phrase, "a fire in the minds of men," is from Fyodor Dostoyevsky's nineteenth century book,* The Possessed *(The Devils), a novel set in pre-revolutionary Russia where civil resistance is seen championed by nihilist Sergei Nechaev who tries to ignite a revolution of such destructive power that society will be completely destroyed. The fact that a United States president would quote this phrase in an official speech of record was astonishing to many analysts, given that* The Possessed *is about violent government crackdown on dissent that sparks civil unrest and revolution marked by public violence.* Fire in the Minds of Men *is also the title that historian James H. Billington chose for his famous book on the history of revolutions, including the origin of occult Freemasonry and its influence in the American Revolution.*
>
> *In his closing comments, Bush himself tied the inaugural crypticisms to the Masonic*

> *involvement in the American Revolution, saying,* ***"When our Founders declared a new order of the ages… they were acting on an ancient hope that is meant to be fulfilled."*** *The phrase "a new order of the ages" is taken from the Masonically designed Great Seal ("Novus Ordo Seclorum") and Bush further acknowledged that the secret society members were acting on an "ancient" hope that is "meant to be fulfilled."*
>
> — Dr. Thomas Horn, *Summoning the Angel from the Whirlwind* [16] [emphasis and pictures mine]

Secret societies and the presidents who love them have cryptic ways in which they communicate with each other — often right in front of us! So, what are they communicating? Dr. Horn continues:

> *Invitation to angels by elected officials combined with passive civilian conformity is key to opening doorways for supernatural agents to engage social governance. This is a classic tenant of demonology.* ***Spirits go where they are invited****, whether to possess an individual or to take dominion over a region. One could contend therefore that starting in 2001, the United States became so disposed in following and not challenging unprecedented changes to longstanding U.S. policies including the Christian rules for just war, that a powerful force known to the Illuminati as the "Moriah Conquering Wind," a. k.a. "the Angel in the Whirlwind" accepted the administration's invitation and enthroned itself in the nation's capital.* ***Immediately after, it cast its eyes on the ancient home of the Bab-Illi, Babylon, where the coveted 'Gate of the Illi' had opened once before.***
>
> *Despite a series of ever-changing explanations as to why* ***George W. Bush was stubbornly resolved in taking the U.S. into Iraq/Babylon****, the home of the 'Etemenanki' (House of the Foundation of Heaven and Earth, the 'Tower of Babel') even though Iraq was not connected to the events of September 11, 2001, years later if you asked a room of 20 analysts to define what was the true nature behind the U.S. entering that war, you would probably receive 20 different answers.*
>
> — Dr. Thomas Horn[17] [emphasis mine]

Tom Horn, Steve Quayle, L.A. Marzulli and a lot of others have publicly spoken out against the Luciferian system[18] for years — and have been attacked for doing so. And now, I am speaking out as well. People are listening and beginning to wake up. The Elite don't like that, but we are living in urgent times. What is coming is very serious. The watchmen are needed to sound the alarm so that the people do wake up. Therefore, I ask you to please pray for all of the "watchmen on the wall" in these Last Days.

> *For we wrestle not against flesh and blood* [although that happens sometimes too], *but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.* (Ephesians 6:12)

PRESIDENT BARACK HUSSEIN OBAMA

I think we need to look deeper into President Obama's cryptic "joke" about completing his second 100 days in 72 days and then resting on his 73rd day. What was really being said there? If he was just "joking," of all the numbers he could have chosen , why did he pick 72? Why not complete them in 68 days? Or 81? There has to be significance to his very specific choice of the number 72 — and there certainly is!

During his first 100 days, he sure didn't waste much time "remaking America." In less than a month in office, he signed *The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009* (the $787 billion economic stimulus package enacted by the 111th Congress). What's also very interesting about this, is that he signed that $787 billion bailout-bill in Denver, Colorado rather than in the oval office of the White House. Why did he push so urgently for this bill, only to delay its signing

Figure 50

just so that he could do it in Denver, on February 17 (which is an important date to the New World Order)?

One online blogger suggests:

> *February 17, 2009, falls upon one of the most important Illuminati astrological ‘signs of great changes’ with the conjunction of Mars and Jupiter, and which in its most simplistic sense means,*
>
> > *“With the conjunction of Mars and Jupiter, you have an abundance of energy and enthusiasm to take on tasks that would frighten all but the most courageous.”*
>
> — Sorcha Faal, *Obama Turns US Over To ‘New World Order’ On February 17th*[19]

Whether there is some astrological reason he chose that date (as this person suggests) or not, I do not know. But the fact that he chose to do it in Denver is very interesting to me. I’ll explain why shortly. In the meantime, let’s dig a little deeper.

On his 72nd day in office, President Obama met with the leaders of China, Russia, and Britain while in London for the G20 summit. It was one of his busiest days thus far, one that included everything from reopening talks on nuclear disarmament with Russia to giving the Queen of England an iPod.

By April 2nd (day 73 of his first 100 days), President Obama was “resting” at the G20 Summit, apparently endorsing the commitment of another $1.1 *trillion* in additional loans and guarantees to finance trade and bail out troubled countries.[20] Meanwhile, in public opinion polls, people were asking *“Should Obama Control the Internet?”* [21] The Brits were also freaking out because Michelle Obama embraced the Queen of England[22] and the president’s bowing to the Saudi King raised a lot of eyebrows.[23]

The 100th day of Obama’s presidency was April 29, 2009. Seventy-two days added to that brings us to July 10, 2009. Obama said that he intended to rest (from his creative labors) on that following Saturday. Of course, Saturday is the seventh day of the week — the day Scripture calls the Sabbath. So, the biblical inference of Obama comparing himself to God is (I think) much more than a coincidence. As stated in the previous chapter, this is not a foreign concept concerning our presidents, but Obama does not even appear to be concerned with concealing this idea. In fact, he seems to embrace it.

The date July 11, 2009, is the date of Obama’s 73rd “day of rest.” It is a significant date for the reasons stated above, but more importantly because it is the first of 1,260 days (or 42 months — an amount of time that should be familiar to most students of prophecy) from July 10, 2009 to December 21, 2012! Was Obama consciously aware of that? I don’t know, but such synchronicities are hard to ignore, and I would have a very hard time writing it off as merely a “coincidence.”

Just what exactly did Obama finally accomplish on the 172nd day of his presidency that he should “rest” on the 173rd — the day that would set up the next 42 months for the “big date” that everyone was talking about (December 21, 2012)?

The closer we got to July 11, 2009, the stranger things became. In fact, I suppose a 1,000-page book could easily be written exploring all of the strangeness surrounding this unique god-president named, Barack Hussein Obama. Seriously, the more you look into this man and the world’s response to him, the weirder things get. Take the response in Cairo for instance.

THE NEW KING TUT OF THE WORLD

In preparation for our president’s visit to Egypt, vendors had plaques made up declaring, *“Obama: New Tutankhamon Of The World.”* The “New Tutankhamon of the World?” *What in the world* is that all about?

When has such a thing ever happened to a head of state? Our president was called a *pharaoh* — someone who is considered to be Horus, the reincarnation of Osiris.[24] An online source gives us the details:

> *A souvenir shop-owner displays a recently-made metal plaque for sale to tourists reading "Obama, New Tutankhamon of the World," in the Khan el-Khalili market area of Cairo, Egypt Thursday, May 28, 2009, ahead of President Barack Obama's planned June 4 speech in Cairo on U.S. relations with the Muslim world. The sign refers to Tutankhamon who was one of the last Pharaohs of Egypt's 18th Dynasty and ruled during a crucial, turmoil-filled period in Egyptian history. Hieroglyphics at base of plaque were claimed by the vendor to spell the name "Obama."* [25]

Notice, of all the pharaohs Obama could have been compared to, he was referred to as the "New Tutankhamon!" Commonly known today as "King Tut," he was an Egyptian pharaoh of the 18th Dynasty. He ruled from 1333 BC to 1323 BC during a time known as the New Kingdom. He was one of the few pharaohs to have actually been worshipped as a god, enjoying a cult-like following during his own lifetime.[26] He had temples dedicated to his cult as far away as Kawa and Faras in Nubia. There are even references in these remote places of him as being a deified king. A stela discovered at Karnak and dedicated to Amun-Re and Tutankhamon describes a situation where he could be appealed to for forgiveness. Apparently, a petitioner could also be freed from any ailment caused by wrongdoing.

King Tut was also the son of Akhenaten, who was most known for turning Egypt to a monotheistic form of worship. Keep this concept in mind: Prior to Tutankhamun, Egypt worshipped *one* god.

Obama: the New King Tut of the world?

Never have I seen a U.S. president who came out of nowhere, with next to no public record of note, yet the man is essentially worshipped all around the world! And don't forget, this was just within the guy's first two hundred days in office. But the thing I really want to point out concerning the comparison of Obama to that particular pharaoh, is the fact that King Tut brought back the worship of the "old gods" and ushered in the "New Kingdom" era in Egypt.

Could that be Obama's purpose at this point in history as well? To usher in the New World Order — and its worship of the "old gods" of antiquity?

Remember that the "apostasy" spoken of by the apostle Paul in the New Testament, refers to a "falling away" from the (true) faith before the Antichrist is "revealed."

> *Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come,* ***except there come a falling away first****, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God.* (2 Thessalonians 2:3,4)

Will Obama be the one who ushers in the apostasy by bringing back (or endorsing) the worship of the old gods? Will he be the one who sets the stage, thus preparing the way for the Antichrist just as John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus Christ?

In the first three chapters of this book, I made the case for why I believe a resurrected Nimrod will be the Antichrist. So, **I certainly do not believe Barack Hussein Obama is the tyrant of the Last Days.** Nevertheless, there is no shortage of commentary online where lots of people are making all sorts of connections to President Obama as being a very good candidate for the Antichrist. I do have to admit, I think a lot of the information out there is very compelling and quite interesting — freaky even! But I don't buy it.

THE SEAT OF SATAN

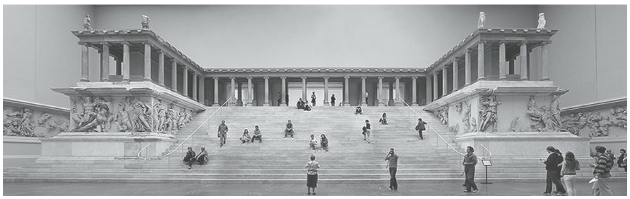

Figure 51

The picture above is of the “Seat of Satan” spoken of in Revelation 2:12,13. This *Altar of Zeus* has since been relocated from the Pergamum of the Bible to Berlin (big surprise). It now stands beside the *Ishtar Gate* (which used to be part of the city of ancient Babylon) as the most famous and popular item in the *Berlin Collection of Classic Antiquities*.

> *With around one million visitors each year, the Pergamon museum is one of most popular of all the National Museums. Its main attraction is the Pergamon Altar (2nd century BCE).* ***The frieze depicting the battle between the gods and Titans*** *is regarded a masterpiece of Hellenistic art. The next room to the south contains the market gate of Miletus, an exquisite piece of Roman architecture. From there visitors can proceed to the Museum of t he Ancient Near East.*
>
> — Staatliche Museen zu Berlin[27] [emphasis mine]

In researching this, I found it quite interesting that the *Seat of Satan* was moved to Berlin, Germany just prior to World War I, then it was relocated to a better facility prior to World War II and placed right alongside the *Ishtar Gate of Babylon!* Is it any wonder that two world wars were started in Germany? Could it be the place where the final World War is launched as well? Time will tell, but it certainly appeared to be the place where Obama was launched.

In July of 2008, Obama gave yet another “change” speech under Germany’s famous *Victory Column.* This was Hitler’s favorite place for the Berlin Nazi rallies. The sight of Obama standing, arm outstretched, in that all-too-familiar gesture below the pagan goddess Victoria (aka Nike), is certainly chilling enough.[28] But not nearly as scary as what happened at his acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention held in — where else? — Denver, Colorado. There, Obama gave his acceptance speech in front of a replica of the *Seat of Satan* (Altar of Zeus)! [29]

Like Hitler (who certainly was a true son of Satan), Obama chose to have a copy of the *Altar of Zeus* as the backdrop for his acceptance speech. Thus, he knowingly chose the *Seat* (or throne) *of Satan* to be the platform for accepting his role in the days ahead.

THE EVENT

If we look at the movies and TV shows of the past 10 years or so, we have to acknowledge that there certainly does appear to have been a concerted effort on the part of the Illuminati’s propaganda machine (known as Hollywood) to precondition the masses to the idea that a black U.S. president will be the one *to keep us safe* in these Last Days. Nimrod was the son of Cush, who’s name means, ‘black terror.’ Thus, it is quite likely that Nimrod was/will be black.

Now before I go any further, let me clearly state here that **I am in no way, shape or form a prejudice man**. I could not care less what color a person’s skin is. We all have red blood, and I believe all men are created equal. So, I am not being racist here. I am merely pointing out (as many others have done as well) that there have been numerous Apocalyptic-type shows and movies that have featured a black president. Here are just a few:

Movies:

- ***Deep Impact*** (Morgan Freeman)
- ***Idiocracy*** (Terry Alan Crews)
- ***The Fifth Element*** (Tom Lister, Jr.)

- ***The Left Behind series*** (Louis Gossett, Jr.)
- ***2012*** (Danny Glover)

TV Shows:

- ***24*** (Dennis Haysbert)
- ***The Event*** (Blair Underwood)

In the short-lived TV series, *The Event,* a black president has to deal with the existence of aliens living among us, who are planning to take over the world. Interestingly enough, the second episode was called, "*To Keep Us Safe*."

Is this all just a "coincidence" or is there something more going on here? I personally don't believe in coincidences. All of that "entertainment" seems to have prepped (or brainwashed) the people of this country (and indeed the world) to embrace President Obama as some sort of savior — or at the very least, the one (new King Tut) who may welcome (or bring back) the old gods.

Then there was the strange "event" that happened in Norway when President Obama got his "Nobel Peace Prize."[30] I have spent a lot of time looking into that strange spiral that appeared in the Norwegian sky on December 9, 2009,[31] and the one thing I can say is that it most certainly was not a failed missile. This wasn't the only spiral to be seen either. Another showed up over the skies of Australia about six months later, and there have been others sighted around the world since then as well.

Nearly every one of these sightings was followed by news reports attributing the phenomena to "failed missiles." First of all, if missiles are failing over major cities all over the world, *that's* a major problem! But I don't believe that explanation anyway. Missiles don't do what these things did. Simple as that. When you combine that fact with the notion that ancient people were carving depictions of this exact same shape into the rocks and caves of the world,[32] you have to acknowledge that this could well be a significant "sign in the heavens," to which we probably should be paying attention.

> *Then He continued by saying to them, "Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be great earthquakes, and in various places plagues and famines; and* ***there will be terrors and great signs from heaven.*** (Luke 21:10,11 NASB)

On her *Welcome to the Mind of a Writer* website,[33] author Sharon K. Gilbert had some interesting insights into this particular passage of Scripture:

> *The Greek word translated 'terrors' is a curious word indeed. In fact, it quite surprised me when I looked it up. It is phobetron (pronounced FOE-bay-tron). According to Strong's (G5400), phobetron implies 'that which causes terror or fright'. It comes from the root word 'phobeo' (from which we derive our English word 'phobia'). Phobeo is that which causes fear, or it can be something that instills great respect or reverence. It can instill awe or amazement, or simply compel us to flee for our lives.*
>
> * * *
>
> *Phobetron only appears in the Bible once. Just once. Luke is the only one whom the Holy Spirit inspired to use this curious word. One small word that may imply many, horrendous events yet to come. The rise of machines. A 'singularity' of sorts... Think of it the next time you watch the movie, Terminator.*
>
> *Phobetron. You know, if I wanted to be very speculative, then I might also mention flying machines as a source of terror and I would connect this 'sight' with the phrase that follows it, 'great signs from heaven.'*
>
> — Sharon K. Gilbert (excerpts from her blog, *Sheer Speculation on the Greek Word:*

Phobetron)[34]

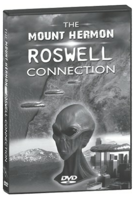

Figure 52

What a great catch! I have never seen that before, but I think Sharon is really on to something. There certainly has been an incredible number of UFO sightings in the last few years. In my DVD, ***The Mount Hermon-Roswell Connection,***[35] I include an eight-minute montage showing UFO sightings as reported just in the last few years on mainstream news. I made that video in the summer of 2011. There have been almost as many reported sightings since then. The "phopetron" may indeed be coming! While there have been UFO sightings reported for centuries, in recent years, they have become more and more frequent. But that's not really anything new. The spirals, on the other hand, are.

I find it rather interesting that most of these strange heavenly signs started after Obama became president. That said, and while I can agree that all of this is worth thinking about and carefully considering, as I've already pointed out, he cannot be the Antichrist. I don't believe he is the False Prophet either. So, what are we to make of the man? I will pursue this matter further in *Book 4, Babylon Rising: Countdown to Armageddon*, in the chapter titled, *Riders on the Storm*. There, I will tell you exactly who I think Barack Hussein Obama is in the End Times list of characters — and what I believe his role is as one of several forerunners sent to prepare the way,[36] much like John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus.

Back to President Obama's 72nd day of his second hundred in office — the day before he "rested from his labors." On the evening of that "last day," the president met with Pope Benedict for about 40 minutes to have "private talks." The Vatican said that "bioethics and life issues" were a central part of the discussion.[37] Considering the Pope had just (three days earlier) made some interesting statements that seem to advocate the New World Order,[38] one can't help but wonder and speculate about what all *really* may have been said in those "private talks."

I also find it very interesting that this "messianic-pharaoh-god" met with the Pope (to discuss genetics no less) at the start of the 1,260 day countdown to December 21, 2012 — especially when you consider which pope Benedict is. According to Saint Malachy's prophecy, *The Prophecy of the Popes,*[39] Pope Benedict could be the one who immediately precedes the last pope (False Prophet?) and ushers in the End of Days. Could it be that the forerunner to the Antichrist met with the forerunner of the False Prophet? These are just some of the things that make you go, *"Hmm."*

THE NEW GOLDEN PAGAN AGE

On page 298 of *Apollyon Rising 2012,* Tom Horn ties all of this together and makes a startling observation:

> *"These beings* [the fallen angels or " kosmokrators"] *became worshipped on earth as gods following Babel, led by Nimrod/Gilgamesh/Osiris/Apollo. Consistent with this tradition, the designers of the Capital Dome, the Great Seal of the United States, and the Obelisk Washington Monument circled the Apotheosis of Washington with seventy-two stars, dedicated the Obelisk seventy-two years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, and placed the seventy-two stones of the Great Seal's uncapped pyramid, above which the eye of Horus/Osiris/Apollo stares. These three sets of seventy-two (72), combined with the imagery and occult numerology of the Osiris/Obelisk* [penis], *the Isis/Dome* [womb], *and the oracular Great Seal, are richly symbolic of the influence of Satan and his angels over the world (see Luke 4:5-6, 2 Corinthians 4:4, and Ephesians 6:12) with a prophecy toward Satan's final earthly empire — the coming novus ordo seclorum, or new golden pagan age."*
>
> — Dr. Thomas Horn, *Apollyon Rising 2012* [added descriptions mine]

New golden pagan age? Yes. I believe a big part of the "Great Deception" is going to be a "falling away" from faith in the One True God, back to a belief in the old world pantheon of pagan deities — most of which all represented one false god, named Osiris — or, as we have seen, the god-man the Bible calls Nimrod.

Something else that I think is noteworthy, involves the month of October, 2008. Just one month before Barack Obama was placed — oh, I mean, selected or uh — elected as our president, the jackal-headed Egyptian god Anubis (who was believed to be the guide and protector of the dead) arrived in Atlanta, Georgia, to pave the way across the country for *King Tut's* treasures! In the context of all that I have been writing here, doesn't that seem quite odd and rather peculiar? Probably just a coincidence, right? I don't think so.

This is how TourEgypt.net[40] describes Anubis:

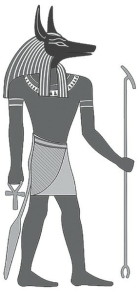

Figure 53

> ***Anubis is an incredibly ancient god, and was the original god of the dead before Osiris "took over" the position.*** *After that point, Anubis was changed to be one of the many sons of Osiris and* ***the psychopomp (conductor of souls) of the underworld.*** *His totem of the jackal is probably due to the fact that jackals would hunt at the edges of the desert, near the necropolis and cemeteries throughout Egypt. Prayers to Anubis are found carved on the most ancient tombs in Egypt, and his duties apparently are many.* ***He watches over the mummification process to ensure that all is done properly. He conducts the souls through the underworld, testing their knowledge of the gods and their faith.*** *He places their heart on the Scales of Justice during the Judging of the Heart, and he feeds the souls of wicked people to Ammit.*
>
> — TourEgypt.net [emphasis and picture mine]

And so, this "son of Osiris," the "mummy overseer" and "conductor of the Underworld" made his rounds across the country. In March of 2010, he even moved to Manhattan for some very telling photo ops in front of the equally pagan *Statue of Liberty*. By June of 2010, Anubis found his way to — wait for it — *Denver International Airport!* Wow. What do you know? There, the exhibit was to run from June 29, 2010, through January 9, 2011 (which incidentally is the day I wrote this chapter). It was said that *"Anubis will be standing guard during that time."*[41]

Standing guard? Standing guard for what — or maybe I should say, for whom? Could it be that the plan to raise Osiris is taking place and Anubis is being brought in to ensure that it is all "done properly" and that everyone is brushed up on their knowledge of the old gods?

Meanwhile, almost as if to be sure *everyone* is familiar with this character, "they" slated for young American audiences in 2011, a new Nickelodeon TV series called, *House of Anubis.* Gotta make sure the kiddos are exposed too!

Is Pharaoh-King Tut-Obama preparing the theater for his future king? Now, imagine Osiris/Nimrod stepping back onto the world stage, backed by supernatural manifestations in the air and on the ground of the old gods of mythology. Think that's crazy? Keep reading.

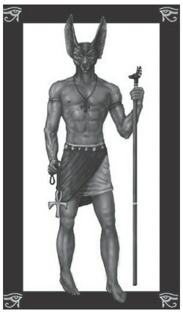

Figure 54

A RED MOON RISING

On December 21, 20**10** an amazing thing happened — that also involves the number 72. This is the event that actually caused me to really take a hard look at all of the subjects I am writing about here. In fact, it is what prompted me to write this book in the first place. I'm talking about the total lunar eclipse that occurred on the winter solstice of 2010.

The Book of Jasher states that Nimrod was decapitated by Esau.

> *And Nimrod and two of his men that were with him came to the place where they were, when Esau started suddenly from his lurking place, and drew his sword, and hastened and*

> *ran to Nimrod and cut off his head.*
>
> *And Esau fought a desperate fight with the two men that were with Nimrod, and when they called out to him, Esau turned to them and smote them to death with his sword.*
>
> *And all the mighty men of Nimrod, who had left him to go to the wilderness, heard the cry at a distance, and they knew the voices of those two men, and they ran to know the cause of it, when they found their king and the two men that were with him lying dead in the wilderness.* (Jasher 27:7-9)

This ancient Hebrew text says that Esau killed Nimrod and the two men who were with him, but there were no witnesses to this event. By the time Nimrod's other "mighty men" (giants?) got to the scene, Esau was gone. With no witnesses to testify as to what really happened to the king of the world, you can imagine the stories that might have been told. Imagine the conspiracy theories that probably developed around this tyrannical king's death. Imagine those who may have tried to take credit for killing Nimrod for their own benefit. When you look at it like that, it is very easy to see how numerous stories could have developed in the ancient world to explain Nimrod's death.

Nearly every legend of the other incarnations of this individual depicts him meeting a horrible end as well. Whether you are talking about Osiris, Dionysus, Bacchus or Mithra you will find that decapitation, castration, mutilation, and the hacking into pieces of his body are all common descriptions of this man's death. He truly is the first Frankenstein monster — a mutilated dead man destined to rise again!

In fact, even the constellation of Orion (as seen in filtered HD through a high-powered telescope) looks like a massacred body sitting out there in space. Red, nebulous clouds completely surround the constellation like a pool of blood, and the area where his head *should be* looks like a bloody mess instead! Orion literally looks like some sort of "cosmic roadkill" hanging out there in space!

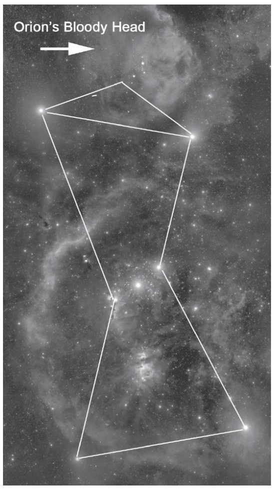

Figure 55

On December 21, 2010 during the winter solstice (the time when the Sun symbolically dies, and we have the darkest days of the year), there was a total lunar eclipse. This happened *exactly* two years away from the infamous date of December 21, 2012. Keep that fact in mind.

What I found to be even more extraordinary was the time, the *timing* and the location of the moon that night. The moon turned blood red while in full eclipse at 2:22 a.m. (CST) as viewed from the 33rd Parallel here in Dallas, Texas for a total of 72 minutes — and it did so right above the shoulders of Orion, in front of Taurus, between Orion's club and the horns of the bull (see **Figure 51**). In other words, the moon literally appeared as a blood-red, decapitated head floating above the shoulders of Orion/Osiris/Gilgamesh/Mithra/Apollo -- Nimrod! Was that a sign of the times? Is this what the ancients were all pointing toward regarding 2012? Could it be that our calendar was/is off by two years? I suggest that it was and I think you will see why as we continue.

Note that this particular eclipse was really only viewable over the United States — the place many scholars like to refer to as "spiritual (or Mystery) Babylon." It should also be noted that 2:22 a.m. Central Standard Time, was 3:22 a.m. Eastern Standard Time, which of course is the time zone for the East Coast where Washington, D.C. is located. Remember what we learned about concerning secret societies earlier? Is it just a "coincidence" that this very specific sign in the heavens, that just so happens to have numerous meanings directly related to Osiris-Orion-Gilgamesh-Nimrod, also happened at a time (3:22) directly related to a number that is prominently displayed on the *Skull and Bones* iconography?

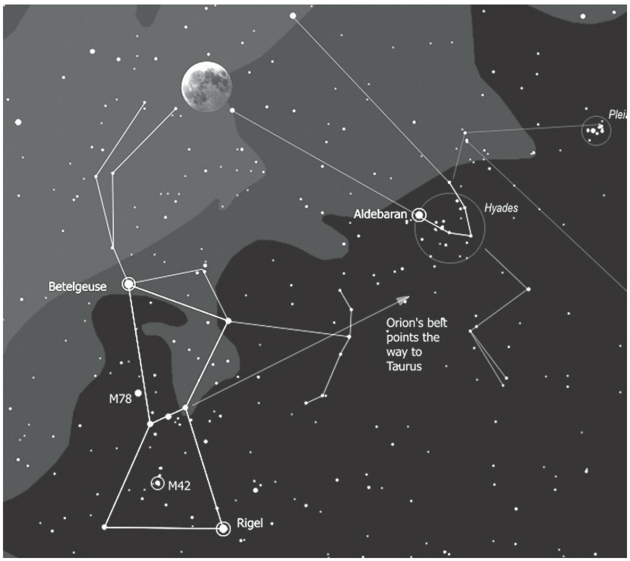

Figure 56

Again, let me remind you about several of the significant bullet points I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter concerning the number 72:

- The mass of the Moon is 1/72nd that of the Earth.
- The axis of the earth moves off one degree every 72 years compared to stars.
- The number of devils according to *The Lesser Key of Solomon.*
- The god Osiris was enclosed in a coffin by 72 evil disciples and accomplices of Set.
- Thoth, of Egyptian mythology wins a 72nd of each day of the year from the Moon in a game of Draughts and uses these portions to make the 5 intercalary days on which the remaining gods and goddesses were born.

Our moon, which is 1/72nd the mass of the earth, appeared over Osiris-Orion-Nimrod's shoulders like a decapitated head for 72 minutes. Osiris is intimately related to both the number 72 and the year 2012. Egyptian mythology spells out the precession of the stars that lead to December 21, 2012. President Obama, was referred to as an Egyptian pharaoh and was heralded by Anubis (no less) before giving an acceptance speech in front of a replica of the Seat of Satan, which is also intimately connected to both the number 72 as well as the date December 21, 2012.

Considering all of the demonic symbolism and meanings that are found in all of this, I think it is also pertinent to note that the time, 3:33 a.m. (which was only a few minutes later) is known as the witching hour — the time of demons — the time when a lot of so-called "alien abductions" are said to take place. The moon was deep red by this time, and I believe all of this is very significant and should be taken into consideration. Remember, God Himself said that the stars, sun and moon are to be for "signs and for seasons."

> *"And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and* ***let them be for signs, and for season,*** *and for days, and years..."* (Genesis 1:14)

In the Bible, the Zodiac was referred to as "Mazzaroth."[42] God uses the "signs in the heavens" to show us things. Throughout history, blood-red moons have typically been a sign of (usually bad) things to come. Thus, this "sign" cannot be a good thing, and I do not believe that it is merely by chance that God placed it above America at this specific time in history.

Actually, I think all of this makes perfect sense, especially when you consider what "Bonesmen" Daddy and Junior Bush did in Iraq and what Pharoah-Obama is doing now to bring about some major prophetic events. We would do well to heed the sign and all of the warnings contained within it.

The last time we had a similar blood moon eclipse was on February 20, 2008 at about 9:30 p.m. (CST). It took place in the constellation Leo right between Regulus and Saturn.

This is what Wikipedia has to say about Saturn (keep in mind also that Regulus is considered the “King Star” and Leo, the King Constellation):

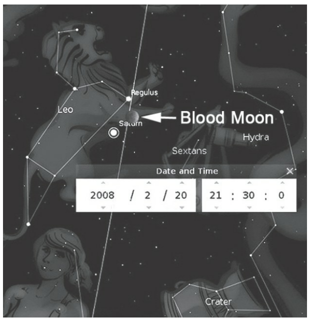

Date and Time
2008 / 2 / 20 21 : 30 : 0

Figure 57

> *“In Babylon he was called Ninib and was an agricultural deity.* ***Saturn, called Cronus by the Greeks, was, at the dawn of the Ages of the Gods, the Protector and Sower of the Seed*** *and his wife, Ops, (called Rhea by the Greeks) was a Harvest Helper...”*
>
> — Wikipedia[43] [emphasis mine]

Not long after the February 2008 red-moon eclipse, the economy began to collapse,[44] and the “seeds” for a coming New World Order were sown, paving the way for “the dawn of the ages of the gods” to be ushered in by the new, soon-to-be-appointed pharaoh-president who would take us the rest of the way.

The aftermath of the 2008 eclipse wasn’t so good for America. So what are we to make of the “signs” given on the night of December 21, 2010? Without making any direct conclusions here, I will just throw these other interesting observations into the mix for your consideration:

- Jupiter and Uranus were in conjunction with each other that night as well. Jupiter (or Zeus) representing the king of the gods (Lucifer) and Uranus representing the heavens.
- The Sun was in Sagittarius, the animal-human hybrid with a bow and arrow — also accompanied by Mars (the god of war) and Mercury (the messenger of the gods).
- Saturn (the Titan father of the Olympian gods) was in the belly of Virgo.

God said that these stars and planets were placed there to show us things. I could read an awful lot into these “signs” but I’ll leave that to the experts. Meanwhile, elsewhere on the earth:

- Earthquakes rocked the *entire* planet[45] killing many people as an appropriate response to...
- North and South Korea continuing to make rumblings of war.[46]
- A missile was fired from the Gaza Strip into southern Israel causing Israel to answer back.[47]
- Iraq announced that it had finally formed its new government (just in time for the floating “head” of Orion-Nimrod to begin making its descent onto their former leader’s shoulders):

> *“The government, headed by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, a Shiite, was approved unanimously in Baghdad on Tuesday, ending nine months of political gridlock that had Washington fearing fresh political turmoil as U.S. forces continue their Iraq pullout.”*
>
> — National Journal[48]

Needless to say, I believe the event of December 21, 2010’s blood-red moon eclipse rising for 72 minutes over Orion-Osiris-Gilgamesh-Nimrod (as the whole planet was shaking) on the day of Iraq’s “rebirth” (Nimrod’s new Babylon) is *very* significant. So significant in fact, that it has me wondering, if December 21, 2010 was not the actual date that the ancients were pointing toward. Again, I’ll ask, could it be that our calendar is off by two years?

OPENING THE GATES OF HADES

Another extremely significant “sign” appeared shortly after that event. A bunch of news articles[49] came out stating things like:

> *The tilt of the Earth’s axis has gradually shifted since the ancient times when the Babylonians determined the dates of the Zodiac. The calendrical rejiggering also supposedly re-introduced a sign discarded by the Babylonians: Ophiuchus**,** alternatively*

> *called the much cooler sounding Serpentarius.*

* * *

> *Those [Zodiac] signs you were born into are different now because the Earth's wobble on its axis has created a one month bump in the alignment of the stars, according to [astronomer] Parke Kunkle.*
>
>> *"Because of this change of tilt, the Earth is really over here in effect and the Sun is in a different constellation than it was 3,000 years ago."*

How interesting that right after this "red moon rising" event, there was all sorts of talk about the earth's new "pole shift,"[50] and then hundreds of thousands of birds started to fall from the sky[51] and millions of dead fish started to wash up on beaches.[52] Now, we have a 13th sign of the Zodiac. What is most interesting to me is which sign they added. They added Ophiuchus!

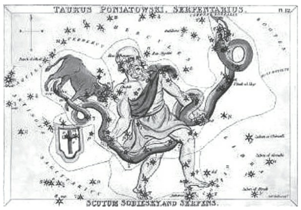

Figure 58

Ophiuchus is also known as the *"Serpent Handler"* and Asclepius, the god of healing. Also of extreme interest, he was the son of Apollo (yet another name for Nimrod). But wait! There's more!

According to the mythology, Asclepius was given the power to restore the dead back to life. Of particular interest, is the fact that one of the individuals he is said to have restored to life was the great hunter ***Orion*** (Nimrod)! In fact, according to the story, Asclepius was restoring so many people back to life that the *Realm of the Dead* was becoming depopulated.

> *Hades, the God of the Underworld, whom the Romans knew as Pluto, complained to Zeus about the loss of the dead. Everyday Hades had fewer and fewer subjects over whom to rule.*
>
> *So in response to the pleas of Hades, Zeus struck down Asclepius with a thunderbolt. Apollo was infuriated by the slaying of his son, and took his revenge by slaying the three one-eyed beings called Cyclopes who forged Zeus' thunderbolts.*
>
> *So to appease the anger of Apollo, Zeus revived Asclepius and set him in the sky as the constellation of Ophiuchus.*
>
> *The Serpent Wrestler is a symbol of health and healing because of the connection with the serpent, which was a symbol of rebirth in the classical culture. It was thought that the serpent was reborn when it shed its skin each spring.* [53]

How incredibly appropriate! Our new Zodiac sign is that of the one who uses the power of the serpent to heal and raise both Orion-Nimrod and release those who were dead in Hades! Is that what John the revelator was trying to tell us when he wrote about the fourth horsemen?

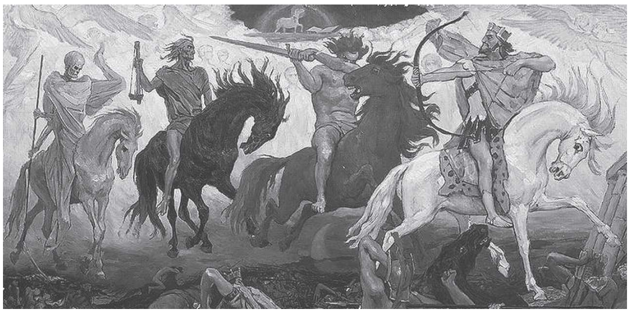

Figure 59

> *When the Lamb broke the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying, "Come."* ***I looked, and behold, an ashen horse; and he who sat on it had the name Death; and Hades was following with him.*** *Authority was given to them over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by the wild beasts of the earth.* (Revelation 6:7,8 NASB)

Is John describing the literal release of Hades? If so, this sure puts Jesus' little discussion with Peter in Caesarea Philippi into a whole new light. You know, the part where Peter replied to the Lord's question of, *"Who do you say that I am?"*

> *Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."*
>
> *And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church;* ***and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.*** *I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven."* (Matthew 16:16-19 NASB)

I'm thinking we're going to have to truly understand what is being said here — and this whole *"binding and loosing"* deal? Yeah. I believe we're going to need to know how to do that too! Because...

> *"There shall be signs in the sun and in the moon and in the stars; and upon the earth distress among nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring. Men's hearts will fail them for fear and for looking upon those things which are coming on the earth; for the powers of heaven shall be shaken.*
>
> ***And then shall they see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up and lift up your heads, for your redemption draweth nigh."*** (Luke 21:25-28)

Notice, Jesus said *"and then,"* meaning *after* these things *"begin to come to pass"* we should start looking up because our redemption *"draweth nigh."*[54] That says to me that we may be here for a fair amount of this strange and scary stuff — which means, those of us who have our *Rapture Shoes* all laced up and ready to go, may have to hang on for a bit and actually take a stand against some of this scary stuff before *"flying away ol' glory."*

Please note, I'm not trying to offer an opinion on when the Rapture takes place here, and I'm not trying to be rude. Believe me, I hope we're getting out of here sooner than later too. But how can we be considered as the *"Overcomers"* mentioned in the Book of Revelation unless we actually overcome something? Again, I'm not interested in debating whether or not there is a pre-, mid- or post-Tribulation Rapture, I'm simply saying we should "occupy until He comes"[55] — whenever that may be. The way I look at it, I would rather be prepared and not need to be, then not be prepared when I do need to be.

In the meantime, I cannot help but wonder if we may see the loosing of the bands of Orion before joining the Lord in the air.

> *Canst thou bind the sweet influences of Pleiades, or loose the bands of Orion?* (Job 38:31)
>
> *Now we beseech you, brethren, by* ***the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him****, That ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand. Let no man deceive you by any means:* ***for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God,*** *or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God.* (2 Thessalonians 2:1-4)

AMERICA BY THE NUMBERS

The Washington Monument is an obelisk. In Egyptian mythology, the obelisk represents the “missing piece” (the reproductive organ) of Osiris. According to the myth, ***72*** conspirators killed him. His evil brother Set then cut the body into 14 pieces, only 13 of which were found by Osiris’ wife Isis. She fashioned the obelisk as a representation of that missing piece in order to impregnate herself with Osiris’ seed, which produced Horus; who she said was the reincarnation of Osiris.

The Washington Monument’s foundation was excavated and laid ***72*** years after the signing of the *Declaration of Independence*.[56] It has the number “666” all over it and it represents the phallus of Osiris. ***The phallus is that which delivers the seed!***

The Capitol Building’s dome is a representation of the womb of Isis (Osiris’ wife). It lies in waiting just ahead of the Washington Monument. Inside the dome, there are ***72*** binding pentagrams surrounding a mural of George Washington, who has essentially been deified.

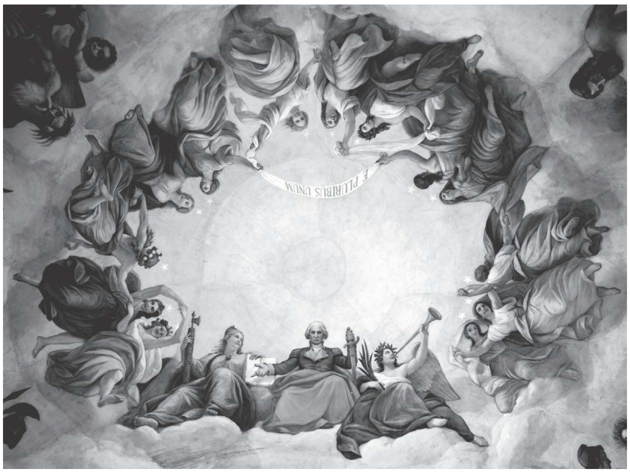

Figure 60

In the painting (**Figure 60**), George is seated as a god with a woman on either side of him. Surrounding this trio are 13 more women (remember 13 pieces of Osiris were found by Isis) who each have a star over their heads. They form the shape of a pyramid, with the center of the dome forming the pupil of an all seeing eye. The two women at the top of the pyramid shape are holding a banner that says, *“E Pluribus Unum”* (which I would maintain *really* means, *one god represented by many*).

Remember, as we have already learned, the Great Seal of the United States (a supposedly Christian nation) is loaded with ancient mythological symbolism and *nothing* from the Bible. The Egyptian phoenix/Bennu adorns the front, holding 13 arrows and 13 olives/leaves, and the uncapped pyramid on the backside of the Seal contains 13 steps comprised of ***72*** stones. Above it, hovers the eye of Horus/Osiris.

The Capitol Building is not the only structure in Washington, D.C. that has a connection to the number 72 as well as the phoenix. The Pentagon does too! Remember the first bullet-point in the list at the beginning of this chapter?

- In a plane, the exterior angles of a regular pentagon measure 72 degrees each.

Curiously enough, there is also a connection to a different type of “plane” — as in the one that (supposedly) hit the Pentagon on 9/11.[57] Construction of the Pentagon began on September 11, 1941. Sixty years to the day later, it was hit on September 11, 2001 by (so we were told), American Airlines Flight 77, and thus the (coincidentally) most heavily reinforced portion of the recently renovated and partially emptied[58] 7 floored[59] building collapsed.

> *It was the only area of the Pentagon with a sprinkler system, and it had been reconstructed with a web of steel columns and bars to withstand bomb blasts. The steel reinforcement,*

> *bolted together to form a continuous structure through all of the Pentagon's five [upper] floors, kept that section of the building from collapsing for 30 minutes—enough time for hundreds of people to crawl out to safety. The area struck by the plane also had blast-resistant windows—2 inches thick and 2,500 pounds each—that stayed intact during the crash and fire. It had fire doors that opened automatically and newly built exits that allowed people to get out.* — Esther Schrader, LA Times[60]

So, here we have Flight 77, hitting a 7 floored building (777 is of course the number of YHVH), in the place where the least amount of damage and casualties would occur. Guess what they named that "wing" of the building after it was repaired? The Phoenix![61]

Remember, Manly P. Hall says that the "eagle" on the front-side of the Seal represents a "conventionalized phoenix." In Egyptian mythology, the phoenix is associated with the sun god. She is called the *Bennu*,[62] which means "*the Ascending One*" and essentially represents the soul of Osiris. Thus, the phoenix is yet another symbol for the rebirth of Osiris, rising up out of the ashes of death. At some point, we must simply acknowledge the facts, the numbers and symbols that are all around us. When we do, it is hard to deny that ***America's primary role appears to be all about the resurrection of Osiris, who is Nimrod, the Antichrist!***

We are definitely living in the days when truth is indeed stranger than fiction! If I'm reading the "signs" and the Scriptures correctly, the time is short, and we need to be ready and prepared for what very well could be... The Omega Plan.

Chapter Six

THE OMEGA PLAN?

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The content of this chapter is for informational purposes only. I am not a qualified broker, investor, accountant, tax lawyer, financial planner or professional adviser of any kind. Nor am I in any way affiliated with any sort of product, service, selling or marketing group. I am nothing more than a person who wishes to share some information with you. So, as with anything of this nature, please do your own research and consult a qualified professional before making any financial investment decisions.

I could be wrong, but...

This chapter includes my personal opinions and interpretations of historic and recent events as well some of my own speculation about the future. That is the reason for the question mark at the end of the chapter title. Do your own research and take the following for whatever you feel this information is worth. Back in the early '90's the U.S. went to war with Iraq. We called it, "Desert Storm." Prior to that war, Iraq was a world superpower — at least in the sense of its wealth and natural resources.

Their currency is called the "Dinar." From 1982 until about 1993, 1 Dinar was worth about $3.22 USD. Their only competitor was Kuwait as the highest valued currency on the planet. After Desert Storm, the U.N. imposed sanctions on Iraq, causing the value of their currency to begin to plummet. By the time we went back into Iraq in 2003 (under pretense of finding weapons of mass destruction), the value of their currency had plummeted to about 3,000 Dinar to one U.S. dollar. It became completely worthless. [1] But what happened after that is nothing short of *extraorDinary*.

Before I go any further, I feel it is necessary to point out that the Rothschild family has played a key role in the banking history of this planet, going back at least as far as the 1700s. I recently came across a couple of videos online that I believe perfectly lay out the Illuminati's game plan concerning the manipulation of money through central banks. The first one is Leonard Ulrich's fantastic documentary, *NWO: Secret Societies and Biblical Prophecy Vol. 1*.[2] The second one is called, *The Secret of Oz*.[3] If you decide to watch these two videos, your time will be extremely well spent. If you only have time to watch one, watch the first one. I firmly believe that Leonard Ulrich's video needs to be watched and widely distributed by people who care about life; who long for liberty; who desire freedom from tyranny; and who want to break the chains that enslave the entire human race.

Many have speculated that the war in Iraq is really about oil or water and/or all sorts of other natural resources. My personal opinion is that it is not so much about any of that. It's about building the completed New World Order.

CONTROL OF CURRENCY IS THE KEY TO THE GAME

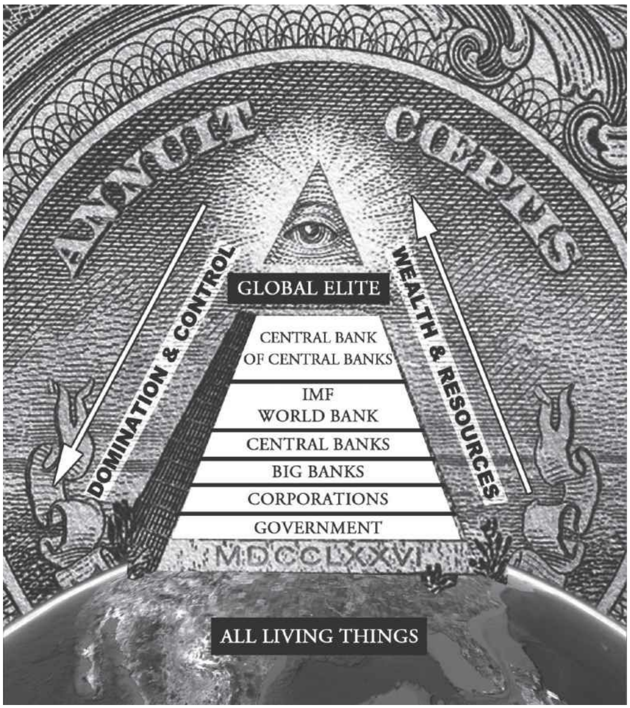

Figure 61

"Give me control over a nation's currency and I care not who makes its laws."

— Baron Mayor Amschel Rothschild

In 2003, when the U.S. invaded Iraq for the second time, I believe the global elite immediately went to work on a "plan" that would eventually change the world.

> *The ruins in Baghdad of the Central Bank of Iraq, its marble-clad walls collapsed, are symbolic of the condition of the entire Iraqi banking sector. A majority of the country's banks were bombed, torched and looted during the war. Six months after the United States declared an end to major combat operations, only a few banks are open for business.*
>
> *Late in 2002, even **before war in Iraq was certain**, **high-level US treasury officials began drawing up plans for financial reconstruction.** They knew that reopening the banks after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime would be essential to get the country running again.*
>
> *They were right. And **the widespread devastation left economic planners with a clean slate on which to design a new banking and financial system.** What has emerged is a radical proposal to transform a centrally planned economy based on Eastern European communism into a free-market model for the Arab world.*
>
> ***The occupation government of Iraq has decreed a sweeping liberalization that would privatize most state run industries except oil and gas, roll out the red carpet for foreign investors and put much of the banking system in foreign hands.** It is a plan that many analysts and economists say is bound to fail in a country that lacks basic institutions and laws vital to the functioning of a free-market economy.*
>
> — Gordon Platt[4] [emphasis mine]

While at that time, Gordon Platt stated that *"many analysts and economists say* [the plan] *is bound to fail..."* you have to take into account who it was that was getting involved. The following is from a November 2003 CBS *MoneyWatch.com* news report:

> *Meanwhile, the CPA* [US-led Coalition Provisional Authority] *named a 13-bank consortium led by JP Morgan Chase to operate the newly created Trade Bank of Iraq, which will support Iraqi imports of equipment and commodities funded through the Development Fund for Iraq. The CPA-administered fund receives most of the proceeds from Iraqi oil exports. JP Morgan Chase was selected over five competitors, including groups led by Bank of America, Bank One, Citigroup and Wachovia, as well as UK-based HSBC, which applied as a single bank.*

J.P. Morgan Chase Bank went in and headed up a 13-bank consortium to establish the new "Trade Bank of Iraq," but really it was the new Central Bank of Iraq (CBI).[5] They immediately got rid of the old Saddam Dinars and created brand new currency using De La Rue.[6] The new (completely worthless) currency was printed with the *most* high-tech, anti-counterfeit measures of any currency on the planet!

You have to ask yourself, *"Why is the most worthless currency in the world also one of the most anti-counterfeit protected in the world?"*

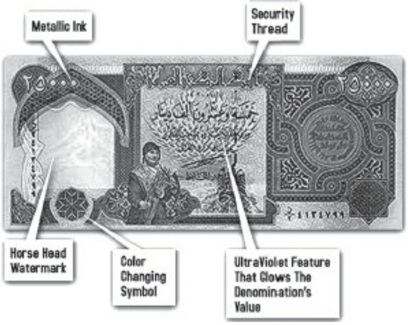
Metallic Ink
Security Thread
Horse Head Watermark
Color Changing Symbol
UltraViolet Feature That Glows The Denomination's Value

Figure 62

Up until December of 2008, you could actually buy the New Iraqi Dinar (NID) from Chase banks as a normal currency exchange. You could literally walk in and exchange USD for Iraqi Dinar (aka IQD or NID) just like you would any other world currency. This was a bit unusual because Iraq, for all intents and purposes, was no longer a player on the world market due to the still imposed U.N. sanctions (and the fact that their currency was worthless). Incidentally, Chase got the IQD from Bank of America (which is another story altogether).

As I stated earlier, before the first Iraq war, the Iraqi Dinar was one of the highest valued currencies on the planet; at one time worth about $4.86 to 1 Dinar.[7] After the second Iraq war started, their currency plummeted to about 3,000 Dinar to 1 U.S. dollar (USD). But watch this! Enter JP Morgan Chase and associates and the value of the Dinar steadily began to increase in value from about 3,000 to 1 to about 1,170 to 1 where it has sat for over a year now. Below is a screen capture of a chart from *Yahoo Finance* that shows how the Dinar has appreciated in value over the past five years:

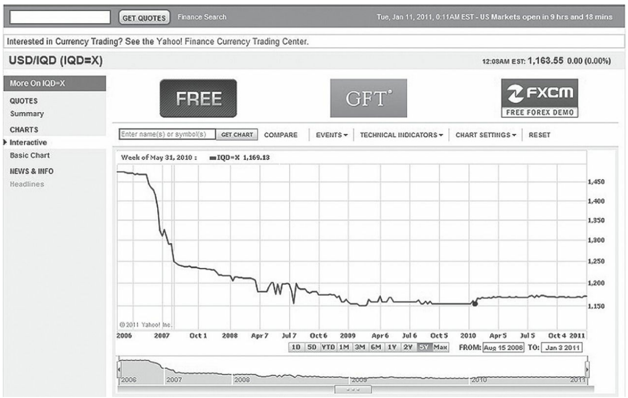
Tue, Jan 11, 2011, 0:11AM EST - US Markets open in 9 hrs and 18 mins

Interested in Currency Trading? See the Yahoo! Finance Currency Trading Center.

USD/IQD (IQD=X)

12:08AM EST: 1,163.55 0.00 (0.00%)

Week of May 31, 2010 : IQD=X 1,169.13

FROM: Aug 15 2006 TO: Jan 3 2011
GET QUOTES
Finance Search
More On IQD=X
QUOTES
Summary
CHARTS
Interactive
Basic Chart
NEWS & INFO
Headlines
FREE
GFT
FXCM
FREE FOREX DEMO
Enter name(s) or symbol(s)
GET CHART
COMPARE
EVENTS
TECHNICAL INDICATORS
CHART SETTINGS
RESET
1,450
1,400
1,350
1,300
1,250
1,200
1,150
© 2011 Yahoo! Inc.
2006
2007
Oct 1
2008
Apr 7
Jul 7
Oct 6
2009
Apr 6
Jul 6
Oct 5
2010
Apr 5
Jul 5
Oct 4
2011
1D
5D
YTD
1M
3M
6M
1Y
2Y
5Y
Max

Figure 63

It is a little confusing when you first look at this chart because I used the word "appreciated" and yet you see the graph falling. What you are looking at is the value of the Dinar as compared to the U.S. Dollar. The *Yahoo Finance* website only allows you to go back 5 years. But still, you can see that in August of 2006, the Dinar was worth about 1,500 to 1 USD. In 2009, it leveled off at roughly 1,170 to 1. As of this writing, you can see that it has crept down (up in value) to 1,163 to 1. So, even when left to grow on its own, it has appreciated steadily in value since 2003. This has been largely due to our efforts in helping to stabilize the country of Iraq. And it is *still* appreciating in value.

Pay attention to what this means. While the rest of the world's currencies are plummeting, Iraq's is just quietly growing in value — in the background, completely unnoticed by the public at large (primarily due to mainstream media skewing our view of what is really happening over there). But every now and then the mainstream press will do a piece of news like in those depicted in the *YouTube* video playlist viewable at:

www.babylonrisingbooks.com/videosC603.html

According to those video news reports, there are some "in the know" and every now and then the average Joe might catch a glimpse for himself. Sure, there are a lot of websites out there calling this whole thing a scam and telling people to stay away.[8] You can do your own research and decide for yourself. I've done mine, and I am fully convinced this is a "good deal."

I do find it funny though that some of the guys in the above listed *YouTube* videos kept saying they didn't know where to get the Dinar and that *"it's very hard to buy this stuff"* and such. That is quite ridiculous. It is very easy to buy Dinar online. Here are two sites that I am familiar with:

- **www.dinarbanker.com**
- **www.dinartrade.com**

While I know of others who have used *DinarBanker.com*, I have not, so I cannot personally vouch for them. I have however done business with *DinarTrade.com*. I trust them and have referred many people to them as well.

NOTE: At the time I initially wrote this chapter, you could still purchase Dinar on both of those sites. However, something appears to have happened that leads me to believe we may be closer to a breakthrough! As of the end of 2011, this is what I saw on *DinarTrade.com's* website:

> *Dinar Trade Inc. is currently undergoing some major changes never before seen in the market. Soon we will be offering new options for your current and future Iraqi Dinar holdings, along with other investment opportunities in Iraq. We would like to thank all of our loyal customers for their blessings and support during this major transition. We look forward to doing business with you in the near future.*
>
> — *DinarTrade.com*

I don't know what that means exactly, but it seems unusual for a business that makes a ***lot*** of money selling Dinars to stop doing so all of a sudden, while at the same time *"offering new options for your current and future Iraqi Dinar holdings, along with other investment opportunities in Iraq."* That certainly sounds promising to me!

Again, as stated in the disclaimer at the beginning of this chapter, ***I am not licensed, nor am I in any way qualified to give financial advice.*** So, please be wise about this sort of thing and do not do anything rash. If you are interested in learning more, you can sign up for my *Babylon Rising Updates*, by filling out the online e-mail submission form at:

www.babylonrisingbooks.com

Is it a risk? Of course it is! The Middle East is constantly in turmoil. But as my dad says, *"Never invest more than you're willing to lose."* In my opinion, that's just good advice for any investment.

I didn't get involved with any of this because of all the information I read on financial websites. I didn't even get involved because of what I saw in the current political news. I got involved because of what I saw in prophecy concerning the rise of Babylon. Check out the following video interview between Glenn Beck and Joel Rosenberg and consider what the Bible has to say about Iraq in the Last Days: **www.babylonrisingbooks.com/videosC604.html**.

I do not agree with Mr. Rosenberg's take on America in the Last Days (because of my theories concerning our role in actually bringing about the Antichrist's rise to power), but I do agree with what he has to say about Iraq's emergence as an economic super-center. And I don't think it is just a coincidence that after the Third Horse of the Apocalypse rides, the statement is made:

> *And I heard something like a voice in the center of the four living creatures saying, "A quart of wheat for a* ***denarius****, and three quarts of barley for a* ***denarius****; and do not damage the oil and the wine."* (Revelation 6:6 NASB)

Wikipedia has this to say about Dinars:

> *The Dinar is the name of the official currency in several countries. The Gold Dinar was a coin dating back to the early days of Islam, issued by many rulers, and the Islamic gold Dinar is to this day still used as a coin or unit of account, separate from the currencies listed below. Many claim that the name of the Gold Dinar was derived from denarius, a Roman currency whose name meant "ten times" (as it was originally worth 10 asses), but it is unknown whether this is the true derivation.*

Also of interest (considering all that we learned in the previous chapter) is the fact that in 211 BC, Rome introduced a standardized denarius alongside a short-lived denomination called the *victoriatus*, which contained 4.5 grams or about ***1/72 nd*** of a Roman pound of silver. According to HJ Haskell and Alfred Knoff, this *"was the backbone of Roman currency through the Roman Republic with fair consistency at this weight."* [9]

Was that the currency available at the time John wrote the Book of Revelation? Could be. I don't really know. Regardless of whether or not the Iraqi Dinar truly is derived from the Roman currency known as a "denarius," I do find the similarity a little too hard to ignore, especially when I consider Babylon's role in the Last Days. I will elaborate more on this shortly.

Iraq's current situation is similar to that of Japan and Germany after World War II. Countries have had their currencies devalued because of war before. Then, once everything gets back on track and the country rebuilds and rejoins the Global Community, their currency "revalues" (RV) or in some cases it may be "re-instated" (RI) to its pre-war value. So, what does that mean with regard to the Iraqi Dinar?

Remember in the previous chapter, I told you that Iraq had finally announced its new government. What I didn't tell you was that the U.N. also released the sanctions that were imposed on them.[10]

> *The council lifted sanctions that have been in place since Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait. Iraq will now be able to pursue a civilian nuclear program and take control of its oil and natural gas revenue on June 30, 2011. The council also terminated all remaining activities of the controversial oil-for-food program which ran from 1996- 2003 and helped ordinary Iraqis cope with sanctions.*
>
> — Fox News[11]

Curiously, this happened exactly two years to the day from the date Chase stopped selling Dinar over the counter (Dec. 15, 2008).

What this means is, they will soon be able to join the global community once again. But you can't play in the world market unless you have a viable, tradeable currency! That (at least in my opinion) means Iraq has to RV or RI its currency to a level that is comparable to those in the world market. As a result, now all the speculators are freaking out, expecting Iraq to either RV or RI in the very near future.

Figure 64

What does that mean for the investor? The idea here is that the value of the Iraqi Dinar could quickly RV to at least a 1 to 1 ratio — although many believe it could go as high as it was before the invasion of Kuwait, which would mean it could RI at a 3 to 1 ratio (or even higher). Essentially, you buy it now while it's still cheap, then when it raises in value, you go to the bank and exchange it for U.S. currency. Once it is on the world market as a tradeable currency, you *should* be able to exchange it anywhere currency is normally exchanged, which includes most major banks.

THE OMEGA PLAN?

The information in the remainder of this chapter is just a theory, so please keep an open mind and work with me on this.

We've already seen how the U.S. went into Iraq under false pretenses. As previously stated, I believe there is a totally different reason why we are there. At any rate, the fact is JP Morgan Chase went in and helped set up a central bank. That means, the

Illuminati now has a vested interest in making sure Iraq succeeds. And so far it has. Their country is being rebuilt and their currency is growing stronger.

In the news, "smart" investors are highly encouraged to invest and speculators have been going crazy because Iraq is now poised to become a world superpower again — almost overnight.

Meanwhile, as all of that was going on, the U.S. economy had a (planned?) crash. Our economy continues to crash, and I believe it will ultimately tank in the very near future. The same could be said for most major world economies. So, what's going on?

Back in July of 2010, President Obama talked about downsizing our military forces in Iraq. By the time 2010 drew to a close, in early December, the U.N. had finally released Iraq from the sanctions that had been put on them. That effectively put them back on the world market as a viable player once again. All that was left was for the newly formed government to be announced. That happened on December 21, 2010, on the same day the moon turned blood red and floated over the shoulders of Orion, or shall we say, Babylon's founder, King Nimrod! Is that a coincidence? I don't think so. Then Iraq announced their 2011 Budget:

> *"Iraq Central Bank said that the current budget for year 2011* ***is the biggest in Iraq history****..."*
>
> — The Currency Newshound[12] [emphasis mine]

Suffice it to say, in order for all that they have planned to occur, the nation must have a tradable currency. Therefore, speculation revolves around the idea that they will revalue (RV) and some even suggest a reinstatement (RI) back to its former value before the sanctions. That is not at all unreasonable, considering the country certainly can sustain that value with its natural resources — just as it did back before the sanctions were imposed. Iraq does after all have one of the largest oil reserves on the planet just sitting there under its soil waiting for global consumption.

Should an RV/RI occur, such an incredible event literally has the potential to *reset* the global economy! Think about the implications of that. If speculators stand to reap a good return from investing in Iraqi Dinars, just imagine how rich the Rothschilds and Rockefellers are going to be — especially when you consider they likely own billions (if not trillions) of dollars worth of Dinars, and the U.S. Treasury and the treasuries of other countries may as well. If in fact they do, they would have “bought” them when the ratio was over 2,000 to 1. If that’s true, and Iraq RVs at a 1 to 1, that’s a staggering amount of money! But remember, Iraq’s currency used to be worth more than $3.22 to 1 Dinar. If they RI at a pre-1990 rate, forget it. They’ve just made the biggest ROI of all time! They will absolutely ***own*** the world — and I would submit that has been their goal all along.[13]

Since World War II, the USD has been the world’s (dominant) Reserve Currency.[14] I believe that was planned, and so was the downward spiral of currency values that started here in America. When America fell, the whole world fell. But wait! We helped to both crush Iraq and then rebuild her — or should I say the bankers did on the backs and blood of American soldiers and Iraqi citizens. But consider this: when the Iraqi currency “bails out” the world economy, do you think the world will want to stay on the USD as its Reserve Currency? No way! China, Russia and others have already made moves to get off of it.[15]

The U.S. put the world in the economic state it’s in right now. Therefore, I believe there’s no way the world is going to trust America in the future. If this theory is correct, and the Iraqi Dinar helps to save the world economy, it will be in the perfect position to be raised up as the new Reserve Currency. This makes sense to me, not just for economic reasons, but also for prophetic reasons as well.

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
IN GOD WE TRUST
ONE
ONE DOLLAR

Figure 65

How far away are we from finding out if any of this is true? Not far at all in my opinion. Speculation concerning the Iraqi Dinar has been rising to a fever pitch, especially now that Iraq’s government is in place and our troops are coming home. Now, those who have purchased Iraqi Dinar’s (IQD) at a substantial discount, wait patiently to see how wealthy they are going to become virtually overnight.

In war, when an army drops a bomb and civilians get hurt, they call it “collateral damage.” As stated above, I believe the Elite are *well stocked* in IQD. Thus, the rich will become substantially richer. Those of us who have a few hundred (or even thousand) dollars worth of Dinar stashed away will be nothing more than “collateral beneficiaries” of the greatest economic super-plan in history. But I believe, said beneficiaries will only have a short window of time to benefit from this financial miracle. Why? Because the Elite don’t want rich people. They want poor people who are easier to herd and control. If the Georgian Guidestones[16] have anything to say about it, they also want *billions of dead people,* so they certainly don’t have our best interest in mind.

Consider the message of the Georgia Guidestones:

LET THESE BE GUIDESTONES TO AN AGE OF REASON

What exactly is the message? Well, we don’t have to go much further than the first “commandment” to know that we probably need to be paying attention!

> *Maintain humanity under 500,000,000 in perpetual balance with nature.*[17]

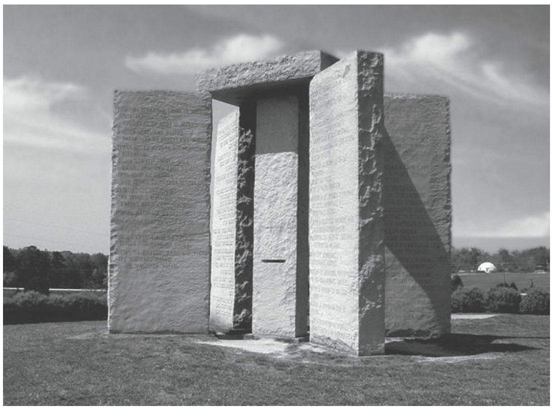

Figure 66

That is the first "new commandment" etched in stone. In order to *maintain* humanity under 500 million, that means *more than 6.5 billion people* have to die!

Having that in mind, I believe wisdom and discernment is needed, especially for those in the Body of Christ who may benefit from a revalue of the Dinar.

Scripture says that *"the wealth of the wicked is stored up for the righteous."*[18] Many people have interpreted that in many different ways, but consider this: The Scriptures testify that the parents of Jesus were poor. We know this because they could only afford the poor man's offering of two pigeons for sacrifice.[19] But Jesus was destined to do great things. So, what happened? You have to go back in time over 500 years to see what God had in mind to solve that problem.

The prophet Daniel served under the leadership of three kings in Babylon. In that time he amassed tremendous wealth and became a great teacher of 'sacred astronomy.' [20] Many believe that the magi who came from the east, were in fact Jews who came out of Daniel's school of astronomy. This would seem to make sense.

First, they knew the stars well and thus were able to discern the signs they were seeing around the time of Jesus' birth. Second, why else would the wealthy elite of a foreign country want to travel such a great distance to pay tribute and honor to the baby king of another nation that already had a reigning king? It makes perfect sense that the magi were well-educated, well-trained and wealthy men of Jewish descent. They knew both astronomy and the prophecies of Hebrew scripture. So what happened? Tremendous wealth was brought out of Babylon and delivered to Jesus. Those riches helped to finance His future ministry, just as the herbs and spices were prepared for His future death.

There was a similar situation with the Hebrew slaves leaving Egypt during the Exodus. They had a mission to go and inhabit the land that would eventually become known as Israel. They brought the wealth of Egypt with them when they did.[21]

Could it be that we will soon see a repeat of history? Most of the people that I know who own Dinar are believers in Jesus Christ — and there are a *lot* of them. Will the wealth of the (wicked) east (Babylon) be brought to the Body of Christ (again) to enable us to accomplish our work in these Last Days? I believe so.

Babylon was where the first "World Order" without God was attempted under Nimrod. Will the first be the last? The Bible talks about it rising again. President George H. W. Bush was obsessed with the idea, especially after the first Iraq war was "over." After Desert Storm, it seems like everyone was talking about a New World Order and the need to embrace it. A lot has happened since then and there is still much more that is yet to happen.[22] Ultimately, it is my strong belief that the NWO's headquarters will be located in Babylon, Iraq.

THE OMEGA TIMELINE?

I think we are seeing the "Omega Plan" falling into place. In summary, the following is a timeline for what I believe has happened and what will happen to usher in Babylon's rise to power once again.

- On September 11, 1990, President George H. W. Bush announced his plan for a New World Order.
- In 1999, Zahi Hawass discovered the Tomb of Osiris.
- On September 11, 2001, eleven years (to the day) from the time daddy Bush announced his plans for a New World Order (that he said, *"will succeed"*), a terrible event rocked the United States. And what do you know? Junior Bush just so happened to be in office to push the NWO plan through! I will not get into the details here, but I do believe those horrible attacks were completely planned and orchestrated from within. Why? Because the only ones who benefitted from it were the Military Industrial Complex, the neo-cons, globalists, international bankers and power hungry elite of *this* government. When in doubt, follow the money! (Here's a little hint: The trail does not lead to caves in Afghanistan.)

Figure 67

- Soon after the events of 9/11, the *Patriot Act* was passed and our *Bill of Rights* began to be completely stripped away from us. Little by little the *Constitution* was shredded and tossed out the window. Cameras started popping up on every street corner. Our phones, e-mails and pretty much every area of our life became monitored. We gave away more and more of our freedoms all in the name of "security." Today, *Big Brother* is all around you, and we have more to fear from our own government than we ever did from box-cutter-toting, turban-headed "terrorists" living in caves.
- With the declared "War on Terror," peace has effectively been stripped away from this planet forever! For it is not a war against a people or a nation, but rather against an *idea* that was conjured up in the minds of a few Luciferian elite. Thus, it would seem that the rider on the Red Horse[23] has been given his big sword, and I believe the name written on it is *"The War on Terror."* With both real and imagined *constant* "threats," it is a war that will never, ever end! The only way it could end is if the people who caused it were to stop it. In classic *Hegelian Dialectic* [24] fashion, I suspect that is exactly what will happen. Thus, the stage has been set for a New World Order, and things are falling nicely into place for a one-world government to be formed, with the Antichrist at its head.
- In April of 2003, archeologists digging in Iraq claimed to have found the Tomb of Gilgamesh. A month later, the U.S. invasion ended and the military occupation phase began. Supposedly, we moved against Iraq under the pretense of finding "weapons of mass destruction." As everyone now knows, we did not find weapon***s***, but I do think that we found ***a*** weapon of mass destruction; I believe we found Nimrod!

In case there are any doubts, consider the fact that one of the first things our troops did when they entered Iraq was raid the museum of Baghdad. What? That's right. We plundered a *museum!*

> *The museum was the victim of a carefully planned assault. The thieves who took the most valuable material came prepared with equipment to lift the heaviest objects, which the staff could not move from the galleries, and had keys to the vaults where the most valuable items were stored.* ***Not since the Nazis systematically stripped the museums of Europe has such a crime been committed.***[25] [emphasis mine]

Interesting that we were compared to the Nazis (who were also quite obsessed with finding ancient artifacts related to pagan gods). What did our troops take? That is up for speculation at this point because it is classified, but one website brings up this juicy tidbit of information:

> *On June 7, 2003,U.S. authorities announced that world famous* ***treasures of Nimrud were recovered from a secret vault in Iraq's Central Bank.*** [remember who was in charge of the whole central bank?] *The artifacts included necklaces, plates, gold earrings, finger and toe rings, bowls and flasks. Officials said that of the* **170,000** *items initially believed missing, just* ***3,000 remained unaccounted for.*** *And, of those, 47 were main exhibition artifacts.*[26] [emphasis mine]

Notice how the trivial things like plates and earrings were "recovered" and returned. Oh, aren't the Americans great!? How nice and noble of them to seek out and return those "national treasures" to Iraq. But what about the

3,000 unaccounted for items? All we know is cuneiform tablets were a hot commodity.

My personal belief is that they were looking for anything and everything to do with the "portal technology" that was the Tower of Babel — especially considering that some of the items stolen were from the "world famous treasures of Nimrud." Were blueprints and instructions included in those treasures? If so, they could certainly prove to be incredibly useful — especially if we have the guy who built it!

The Septuagint version of the Old Testament gives us something very interesting to consider in Isaiah 13:

> *The Vision Which Esaias Son of Amos Saw Against Babylon*
>
> *Lift up a standard on the mountain of the plain, exalt the voice to them, beckon with the hand,* ***open [the gates], ye rulers. I give command, and I bring them: giants are coming to fulfil my wrath****, rejoicing at the same time and insulting. A voice of many nations on the mountains, [even] like [to that] of many nations; a voice of kings and nations gathered together: the Lord of hosts has given command to a war-like nation, to come from a land afar off, from the utmost foundation of heaven; the Lord and his warriors [are coming] to destroy all the world. Howl ye, for the day of the Lord is near, and destruction from God shall arrive. Therefore every hand shall become powerless, and every soul of man shall be dismayed. The elders shall be troubled, and pangs shall seize them, as of a woman in travail: and they shall mourn one to another, and shall be amazed, and shall change their countenance as a flame. For behold! the day of the Lord is coming which cannot be escaped, [a day] of wrath and anger, to make the world desolate, and to destroy sinners out of it. For* ***the stars of heaven, and Orion, and all the host of heaven, shall not give their light;*** *and it shall be dark at sunrise, and the moon shall not give her light.* (Isaiah 13:1-10 LXX)

Orion darkened... and *giants* coming through a "gate" in Babylon? On one of his online blogs, Tom Horn adds some further intrigue to this whole scenario:

> *Isaiah... says, "open the gates, ye ruler," ...whoever this ruler is, he opens "gates" in Iraq/Babylon through which end-times giants (gibborim) return to the surface of earth as agents of God's wrath. Noting that Isaiah ties the destruction of Iraq/Babylon with the reappearance of gibborim in this way, we recall how* ***thousands of U.S. troops, on invading Iraq during the Bush administration, admittedly filled U.S. containers with archaeological materials, including what some have speculated to be cuneiform tablets pointing to the location of pure-blooded Nephilim buried in underground caves.***[27]*This is exactly where Enoch said the dead antediluvian Nephilim are, and raises fascinating questions: Would agencies like Darpa have interest in studying or cloning the extinct beings if they were, or have been, found? Could man in his arrogance revive ancient DNA, revitalizing or blending it with other living organisms in a way similar to what the Watchers did in making the first Nephilim? Is the factual reappearance on earth of such legendary beings verified by Isaiah, who also foresaw transhuman creatures such as satyrs (transgenic half-men, half-goats) accompanying the return of giants in the end times, or why other apocryphal books like 2 Esdras 5:8 prophesy the birth of "monsters" for the same period of time?*
>
> ***Some may be shocked to learn that in addition to the citations above, the Bible actually describes an ultimate end-times spiritual warfare between the "mythological gods" and Christ.*** *"The Lord will be terrible unto them: for* ***he will famish all the gods of the earth****" says Zephaniah 2:11. "The Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, saith; 'Behold,* ***I will punish the…gods'****" (Jeremiah 46:25).*
>
> — Dr. Thomas Horn, *Forbidden Gates Part 18* [28] [emphasis mine]

That certainly should give us pause to think about what was/is *really* going on in Iraq! Let's continue the timeline...

- Also in 2003, J.P. Morgan Chase Bank went into Iraq and set up their new Central Bank (CBI). They created a new currency that was completely worthless, yet had some of the most high-tech, anti-counterfeit measures of any other currency on the planet. The governments and elite of the world purchased billions of dollars worth of Dinar at a 2,000 (or 3,000?) to 1 U.S. dollar (USD) ratio. Then, they began the process of appreciating the value to its current rate of 1,163 to 1 USD. Already, they are in a position for a healthy return, but with a revalue (RV) they will make trillions. With a reinstatement (RI), they will have made trillions and trillions more!
- In 2008, plans were set in motion to collapse the current World Reserve Currency (the USD).
- The U.S. economy finally collapsed in 2010 and with it so did the economies of the world. This perfectly set the stage for a New World Currency that will ultimately serve the New World Order.
- On December 21, 2010, Nimrod's nation was "born again" out of the ashes like a Phoenix. A blood-red moon floated above Orion's shoulders like a decapitated head above his heavenly body as if to herald this event at 3:22 in the morning EST (Remember, one Iraqi Dinar used to be valued at $3.22. These are either just a bunch of wild coincidences, or they are all significant signs.).
- As the above was taking place, the entire earth literally shook in response![29]
- We've been at war for more than eight years. In that time, our troops were trained to put down terrorists and revolutionaries in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Many of our soldiers were required to do multiple tours of duty, actively engaged in what is called, "urban suppression" style warfare. They were ordered home (and to Israel[30]) at the end of 2011 and the beginning of 2012.
- On December 31, 2011, President Obama signed the *National Defense Authorization Act* into law. This act allows "indefinite detention" of anyone *suspected* of being a terrorist. Warrants are no longer required for soldiers, police, paramilitary and/or government officials to enter your home. There is no more *"innocent until proven guilty"* in a court of law. That has become a thing of the past. You can now be found guilty of nothing except being on someone's "watch list" for doing pretty much *anything* they desire to use against you. Sections 1021 and 1032 are particularly disturbing. Section 1021 affirms the president's authority to detain people via the Armed Forces (you know the ones who spent eight years in on-the-job training for urban suppression of "terrorism"), any person the government deems to be a "terrorist" and that such a person may be indefinitely detained without trial. An amendment that would have explicitly forbidden the indefinite detention without trial of American citizens was rejected by the Senate.[31] Section 1032 lays out the *requirement* for military custody. All persons arrested and detained according to the provisions of section 1031, including those detained on U.S. soil, whether detained indefinitely or not, are therefore required to be held by the United States Armed Forces. That essentially means Americans can be arrested on home soil and taken to Guantánamo Bay under a provision inserted into the bill that funds the U.S. military. Once there, you are basically gone. No attorney is going to fight for you, and you will have no further contact with friends or family. At that point, you are fair game and subject to the whims of your jailors and the Luciferians who give them their orders. So much for *"with liberty and justice for all."*

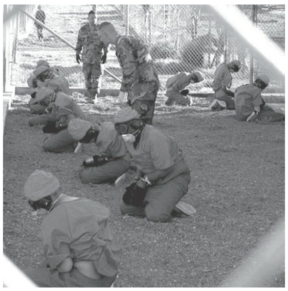

Figure 68

Many of our soldiers who have come home over the years had trouble adjusting to civilian life again. Thus, they either stayed in the military and continued to be deployed into more combat operations, or they started signing up with privatized defense contract organizations. This effectively creates a civilian army that enables the government to get around *Posse Comitatus*.[32]

It would appear that Obama's dream has been realized!

> *We cannot continue to rely on our military in order to achieve the national security objectives that we've set.* ***We've got to have a civilian national security force, that's just as powerful, just a strong, just as well funded****."*
>
> — Senator Barack Obama, 2008[33] [emphasis mine]

Is it just me, or is that the sound of Nazi boots coming down the street?

We can no longer continue to ignore the signs! Hitler started his war by having his own Reichstag burned down. It was the *False Flag Operation* [34] that enabled him to establish a new Nazi-controlled Germany under his leadership. If our "Reichstag" was 9/11, the results are and will be exactly the same.

Figure 69

> *"The maxim is 'Qui tacet consentire': the maxim of the law is 'Silence gives consent'. If therefore you wish to construe what my silence betokened, you must construe that I consented."*
>
> —Thomas More, in *A Man For All Seasons* *

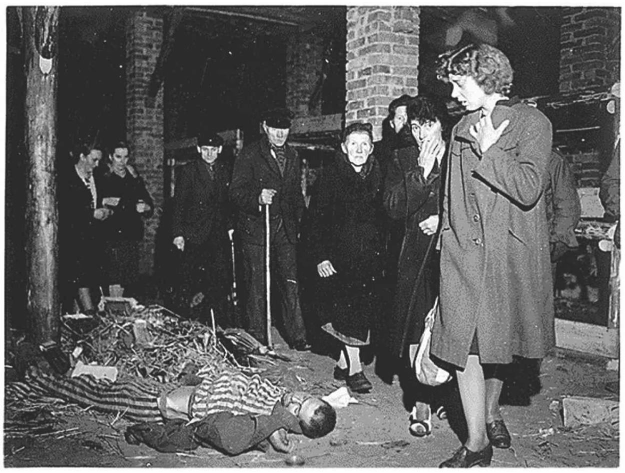

Figure 70

At the end of World War II, allied troops marched German civilians through the concentration camps to show them the horrors they were either directly or indirectly responsible for. Directly, in the sense that some were in favor of Hitler's leadership, ideals and methods. Indirectly, in that many chose to remain silent and/or oblivious to what was really going on in their own country.

I pray we will be guilty of neither in the United States of America.

322

The global economy could literally reset in one day, thus setting the stage for the New World Order to rule and reign — and interestingly enough, it all appears to be tied to the numbers 322.

- March 22, 1980 (3/22) is the date that the Georgia Guidestones were erected.[35]
- The early morning of March 22, 2003 was the date that the U.S. unleashed the full measure of its "Shock and Awe" campaign against Iraq.[36]
- As noted in the previous chapter, the numbers 322 appear prominently on the logo for the *Skull and Bones* secret society of which both Presidents George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush were members. These two presidents were both responsible for Iraq's downfall and rebuilding, as well as for ushering in the New World Order. When you consider that George H. W. Bush's father, Prescott Bush was (allegedly) an active financial supporter of the Nazis,[37] one can't help but wonder if the similarity in the logos is not more than just "coincidental." This is especially true when you consider the fact that the *Skull and Bones Society* is closely related to the German *Brotherhood of Death* (a.k.a. the *Thule Society*) both of which have direct ties back to the Bavarian Illuminati, founded in the 1700s.[38]

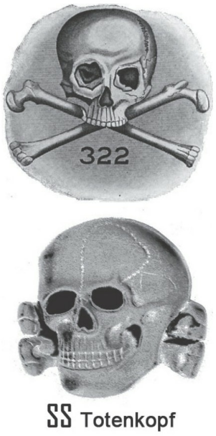

Figure 71

- Even if George W. Bush didn't get re-elected, *The Omega Plan* certainly would have continued via fellow Bonesman, John Kerry. We can assume this because (as we saw in Chapter Five), the oaths they took in the *Skull and Bones* secret society supersede the presidential oath of office.
- The previous value of the Iraqi Dinar was $3.22 to 1 USD. This is a value many speculators believe will be what the Dinar will RI (reinstate) back to when Iraq is finally a player in the world market once again.
- The blood-red lunar eclipse of December 21, 2010 happened at 3:22 a.m. EST as Iraq (Babylon) was announcing its new, fully formed government and the entire planet shook.
- Read Executive Order 13603 (which just so happens to add up to 13), the "National Defense Resources Preparedness" order that was written on 3/16/12, but posted to the Federal Register on 3/22. It basically gives the government the right to literally seize ***everything*** (food, water, drugs, health facilities, services and supplies, transportation, energy, etc.) in the event of a "national emergency."[39]
- See also: *322 - Secret Societies, Depopulation And The Health Care Plan* by Jay Weidner[40] for some other interesting things to check out regarding the date 3/22.
- Perhaps most interesting of all, is the date March 22, 2013. As you will learn in the last chapter of this book, I believe we need to be paying attention to the seven Feasts of God (NOTE: According to Leviticus 23:2, these are not the Feasts of the *Jews*, but rather of YHVH Himself). In Hebrew, they are called *moedim*, which means "appointed times." Essentially, they represent the "script" God is following.

  At His first coming, Jesus fulfilled the Spring Feasts to the letter. He was crucified on Passover, buried on Unleavened Bread and rose again on First Fruits. The Holy Spirit later descended on Pentecost. If the first coming of Christ *absolutely* followed this script, it only stands to reason that the events surrounding His Second Coming will as well, thus fulfilling the remaining three Fall Feasts of Trumpets, Atonement and Tabernacles. To learn more, I would suggest you go to the ***119 Ministries*** website and watch Part 1 of their *End of Days* video series titled, "Yahweh's Prophetic Calendar"[41] then watch Part 4, "Daniel Unsealed (Urgent Update)."[42]

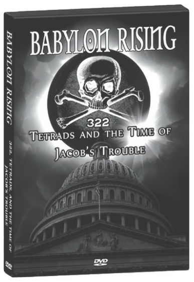

Figure 72

In the latter video, they make a very strong case for us to be watching for the Feast of Trumpets on September 1, 2016. They also talk a lot about the blood-moon tetrads coming up in 2014 and 2015, which land on Feast days.[43] While I disagree with their conclusions concerning the timing of the Day of the Lord,[44] I did find something *very* interesting about the dates they are highlighting. Specifically, if you back off 1,260 days from the Feast of Trumpets, September 1, 2016, you land on March 22, 2013 (3/22). They suggested that could be (or could have been) the date of the Abomination of Desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel; taking note of what Jesus said concerning the resulting flight into the wilderness:

> *But pray ye that your flight be **__not in the winter__, neither on the __sabbath day__**:* (Matthew 24:20)

Find a calendar, and you'll see that 3/22/13 is right smack in-between the last day of winter and a Saturday (Sabbath)! Now, personally, I do not believe it marks the date of the Abomination of Desolation, however it does just so happen to mark the 33rd anniversary of the Georgia Guidestones. Perhaps also of interest, on that particular day, President Obama just so happened to be in Israel (for the first time), which caused a lot of people to take notice — especially those who believe he is the Antichrist. Again, I do not believe that to be the case, but it may be something worth noting just the same.

Is all of this just a coincidence? I don't think so. I don't know what the odds are that everything should sync up so perfectly with numerous Scriptures, the stated goals, objectives and iconography of the occult as well as the

Feasts of God, but I will certainly be paying attention to these dates. I do not believe the Abomination of Desolation took place on 3/22/13, however, I do believe that date *may* have kicked off the ***twenty year*** time-frame known as the time of Jacob's Trouble.[45] At any rate, considering all of this, all I can say is I am thankful for ***Deuteronomy 3:22***:

> ***Ye shall not fear them: for the LORD your God he shall fight for you.*** (Deuteronomy 3:22)

DECEMBER 21, 2012

A new world economy for the New World Order is primed and ready for a new world leader to emerge. Could that leader be Nimrod? I believe it will be. I also believe a lot will happen in the coming years, which will rapidly put all things into motion to bring about the rebirth/resurrection of Nimrod as the king of the world, otherwise known as the Antichrist.

The Illuminati's philosophy, rituals and practices all started with Nimrod and Semiramis in Babylon. It has all come full circle for that same nation to rise to global superpower status, nearly overnight. My prediction is that the IMF will set the Dinar up to be the NWO's One World Reserve Currency[46] replacing the dollar in the very near future — probably after all the dust settles. Clearly, the stage is being set.[47]

Remember what Jesus said in Matthew 24:24-28?

> *"For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect. Behold, I have told you before.* [In other words, PAY ATTENTION!] *Wherefore if they shall say unto you, Behold,* ***he is in the desert****; go not forth: behold,* ***he is in the secret chambers****; believe it not. For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.* ***For wheresoever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together****."*

The "carcass" of Gilgamesh has apparently been found in the "desert." The "secret chamber" known as the Tomb of Osiris has been found. The United States "eagles" have been and continue to be heavily entrenched and invested in the hometown of Nimrod. Iraq/Babylon is rising to power again in these last days. Obviously, I do believe it is *quite possible*[48] that Gilgamesh-Osiris-Apollo-Nimrod will also one day rise (resurrect), but at this point, I can only speculate as to *how* and *when* that will happen.

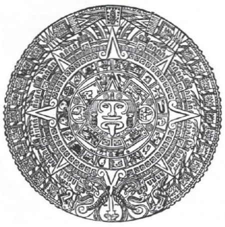

Figure 73

Going into 2012, a lot of "signs" *appeared* to be pointing to December 21st as the date of some "significant event." Ancient people from cultures all around the world seemed to have been pointing to that day for a reason. As a result, it caused me to wonder, could that be the day the angel opens the "shaft to the bottomless pit" and releases the spirit of Apollyon (a.k.a. Apollo/Nimrod) to re-inhabit its former host body? Would that be the beginning of the "revealing" of the man of sin?

Like many people, I had lots questions and all sorts of wild speculation going into the year 2012, but there were problems: Although we see in Revelation 17:8, that the Beast comes up out of the **Bottomless Pit** (as opposed to Kenya, Hawaii, the Vatican, the E.U., and/or the Arab League as many teach), Revelation 9:1-11 tells us *when* that happens. It happens at the Fifth Trumpet. We are not there yet, so the obvious conclusion is that December 21, 2012 was not to be the day of Nimrod's resurrection. Still, it *may* have been the day of some significant prerequisite activities that the public at large is not privy to and will likely never know anything about. Why would I maintain such ideas? Because, in my opinion, there is just way too much evidence (including a great deal of our own nation's iconography) pointing directly to that date for it to be considered a non-issue .

Perhaps that was the day scientists were able to extract viable DNA from the carcass of Gilgamesh? Maybe that's the day some sort of cloning experiment took place in order to prepare a host body for the spirit of Apollyon to inhabit. Perhaps through some sort of genetic tampering, some individual living today underwent procedures that will eventually cause him to "begin to become a gibborim" just as Nimrod did thousands of years ago. Could that be how he physically returns? I don't know. I suppose anything is possible. Truly, these days, truth is stranger than fiction. In the end however, all we have is **pure speculation**.

Along similar lines, allow me to offer up one last bit of *speculation* concerning December 21, 2012: Considering all we learned in the previous chapter regarding the bizarre events, which took place on December 21, 20**10** and in the days immediately following, I cannot but help wonder if *that* was really the date to which the ancients were pointing. In Chapter Eight, I will show you when I believe Jesus Christ was born, based on the stellar alignments given in Revelation 12:1-5. In short, the free software called *Stellarium*[49] indicates the birth of Christ as having occurred on September 11, 3 B.C. (-2 according to the software). If that was indeed His birthdate, then our calendars are off by two years. Thus, the 72 minute, blood-moon eclipse, which took place over the shoulders of Orion, as the entire planet shook and Nimrod's hometown announced its fully formed government, just before the 13th sign was added to the Zodiac and fish and birds started dying off by the millions... may have been the signs the ancients were pointing toward. I suppose if all of that had happened in 2012, everyone would be talking about it! But it happened two years early, and virtually no one talked about it because it went completely under the radar.

Still, as pointed out in the previous chapter, there were a lot of strange things that did indeed line up with the end of 2012. Therefore, right now, my working theory is that December 21, 2010 was the actual date that the ancients were concerned with, whereas December 21, 2012 on our current calendar may have been a follow up date for the Elite. One way or another, both appeared to have had *major* significance.

As I said at the very beginning of this chapter, I could be wrong about *all* of this. Do your own research. I've done mine and these are the conclusions I have come to as a result. My advice would be to watch, pray, be ready and look up — so much the more as you see the Day approaching!

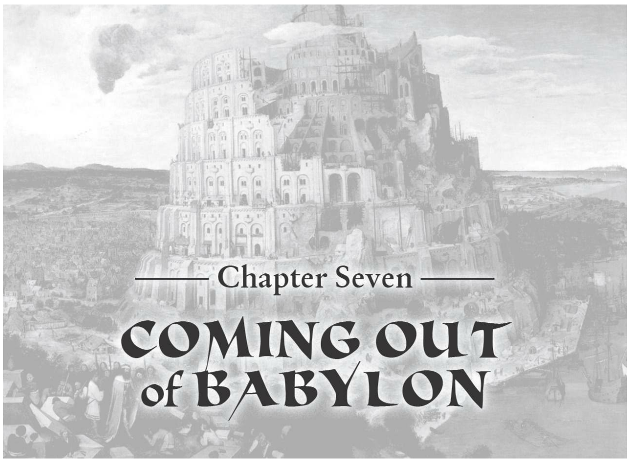

I heard another voice from heaven saying, "Come out of Babylon, my people, so that you do not participate in her sins and suffer from any of her plagues."
(Revelation 18:4 GOD'S WORD Translation)

One year ago this week, I began working on what started out to be just a single blog called, *72 and a Red Moon Rising*. That single blog led to a full year of intensive research and writing, which eventually grew so voluminous that it morphed into a series of four books (each currently in various stages of completion). This is the first one in that series, and I think it is appropriate that I am writing this chapter now because a lot has happened in this past year and indeed even this past month.

Undoubtedly, some of what I am going to write about in this and the next chapter may offend you. Please understand that it is not my intent to offend or condemn anyone. My desire is simply to share information that I believe will be vital to our understanding of and possibly our survival in these Last Days.

As the old saying goes, "Truth hurts." Indeed, sometimes it does, and we don't always want to hear it. In fact, at first, I myself did not want to hear it and found it offensive when I did. Often when a paradigm shift in belief patterns happens there is a grieving process. Part of that process can involve anger, depression, and even anxiety, until finally we reach acceptance. I have reached acceptance, and now I desire to pass what I have learned on to you. Understandably, your first reaction may be to become angry at me for doing so. But I believe when God reveals truth to us, we are responsible to share it. For if we do not, who will? Therefore, I ask that you please not shoot the messenger, as I am going to issue a call to...

Come Out of Babylon!

The word *Babylon* comes up 265 times in a keyword search of the King James Bible, or 273 times in the New American Standard Bible.[1] Even just a cursory glance over the various references reveals that it is not good to be in Babylon. It is a place associated with captivity and evil. It is the city that was first founded by Nimrod. There he built a tower with the goal of "reaching" into Heaven. After crossing over from this world into the Heavenly realm, his plan was to make war with the angels, overtake the Throne Room, kill God and set up false gods to take His place.[2] And at least in theory, according to the text — apart from killing God — it would appear some of that may actually have been possible.

> *And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and* ***now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do****.* (Genesis 11:6)

Babylon was situated on the Euphrates River, the original foundation of which is described under the word Babel. Many ancient traditions, credit Nimrod as the builder of both the Tower of Babel and the city. Some say that it was his mother/sister/wife[3] Semiramis who was the founder of the city. Others attribute the fame and splendor of it to Nebuchadnezzar. These accounts may all be reconciled by considering that Nimrod may have founded it. Semiramis possibly rebuilt it after the incident at the Tower of Babel, and then much later, Nebuchadnezzar greatly restored, enlarged and adorned it.

> *Babylon was the Greek name of the city written in the cuneiform script of the Babylonians, bab-ili, which means in Semitic, "the gate of god." The Hebrews called the country, as well as the city, Babhel. This name they considered came from the' root, balal, "to confound" (Genesis 11:9).*
>
> — *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*

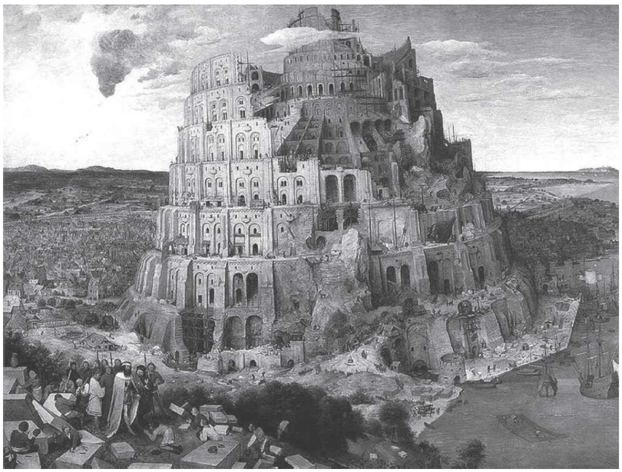

Figure 74

Thus, Babylon is both "the gate of god" and the place of "confounding." And it has lived up to the meaning of its name throughout the Scriptures. But Babylon is not so much the "gate of YHVH," as it is rather the "gate(way) of the gods" — the place from which all pagan gods originated in ancient Mesopotamia/Sumeria.[4]

Many have referred to America as "spiritual Babylon, economic Babylon, and Mystery Babylon" and all sorts of other such descriptives, likening our country to that ancient city. I remember hearing pastors preaching in the wake of 9/11, using Scriptures like Zephaniah 1:15-17 and 3:6 and Revelation 18:10 to say that the Twin Towers fell as a result of God's judgement.

> *That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of wasteness and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness, A day of the trumpet and alarm against the fenced cities, **and against the high towers**. And I will bring distress upon men, that they shall walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the LORD: and their blood shall be poured out as dust, and their flesh as the dung.* (Zephaniah 1:15-17)
>
> ---
>
> *I have cut off the nations: **their towers are desolate**; I made their streets waste, that none passeth by: their cities are destroyed, so that there is no man, that there is none inhabitant.* (Zephaniah 3:6)
>
> ---
>
> *Standing afar off for the fear of her torment, saying, **Alas, alas that great city Babylon, that mighty city! for in one hour is thy judgment come.*** (Revelation 18:10)

There were a lot of people trying to twist those Scriptures, taking the opportunity to preach some good ol' apocalyptic, hellfire and brimstone messages that America better repent! Some were saying that those Scriptures were prophecies being fulfilled as we watched the towers fall again and again all day long on every TV channel.

I think we need to be very careful about such things. On the surface, and to the typical biblically illiterate layperson, those Scriptures did seem to fit what we were seeing. But Scriptures must always be taken in context. You can't just pick and choose some good "catch phrases" to go along with the evening news. I was raised to take the Bible literally whenever possible and to always read and study it in context. There is no reason for me to not think that whenever Babylon is being referred to in the Scriptures, the writers are talking about the literal place, located in the country we now call Iraq.

That said, if what I have written about thus far is true, I do believe America will have much to answer for in these Last Days. As an American, that deeply concerns me. So far we've seen that our leaders have had Luciferian agendas planned from day one of our nation's founding, and clearly, not much has changed since then. Thus, I believe we as American citizens may be held accountable.

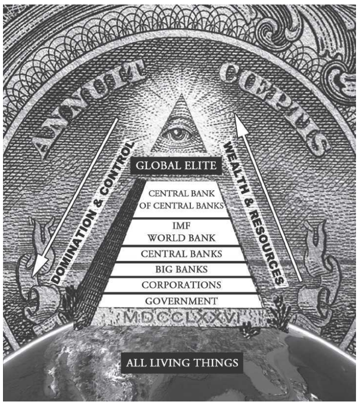

Figure 75

We both allow and perpetuate our own slavery by continuing to play along with their game. **Figure 75** shows how the game works. Ultimately, I believe we are enslaved because we *want* to be! I say that because there are 300 *million* of us against only a few thousand (at best) of 'them.' The vast majority has willingly and ignorantly allowed the small minority to rule over them. We also willingly allow our tax dollars and other resources to advance some truly evil agendas at the same time. I don't know about you, but I really don't want to be responsible for *"participating in her sins"* as the opening Scripture for this chapter states. I want to come out of Babylon! For me, that means unplugging myself from their 'matrix' and refusing to be manipulated any longer. This is not an easy task to be sure, but I believe it can be done.

What am I talking about? Among other things, I'm talking about the whole facade of supposedly electing presidents who are *"of the people, by the people, for the people."* I believe that simply is not true. If it were, let me ask you (once again) what are the statistical odds that 43 out of 44 of our presidents would all be related to each other; many of them tracing directly back to the same man (King John Lackland of the House of Plantagenet)?[5] Further, why is it that nearly all (if not all) of them have been members of secret societies — all of which have practices that trace directly back to Nimrod and ancient Babylon? All of our presidents have been either Freemasons, Bonesmen, members of the CFR, the Trilateral Commission, the Bohemian Grove, the Bilderbergers, or any number of other Round Table[6] secret societies, fraternities and/or special interest groups that don't allow the general public to know what they are truly about. It gets to the point where "coincidence" just doesn't cut it anymore. Sooner or later we must face the facts. The Elite don't like to share power. Once they have it, they keep it in the family. No outsiders are allowed to crash their power party. That's the way it has always been, and that's the way it is today.

It appears to me we have presidents who are *"of the Masons (and other secret societies), by the Illuminati, for the Elite."* As such, I truly believe our votes are nothing more than meaningless exercises in futility that only serve to keep us all stuck in the matrix. We allowed ourselves to become enslaved by this system through our own ignorance and the fact that we continue to unwittingly play their games. I am not trying to be insulting. Ignorance doesn't mean stupid, it just means uninformed and unaware of what's really going on. But we can no longer afford to be uninformed, lacking understanding of how we are being used by this matrix.

> ***My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.*** *Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being My priest. Since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.* (Hosea 4:6 NASB)

Please allow me a moment to address the issue of our Presidential elections. What I'm about to write here is relatively new to me and is the result of all the intense research that I've been doing for this book series over the past few years. In the past, I was quite politically active, but the last few elections caused me to start questioning a lot of things concerning our so-called election system.

RON PAUL AND THE 2012 ELECTION

I used to go to Tea Party rallies and was a huge supporter of Ron Paul during the 2008 run for president. He spoke my language and said a lot of things I believe in. But after what happened to him last time around (like the media completely pushing him out in spite of a very large support base), I began to realize that we live in a corporate-controlled, media-manipulated, two-party dictatorship. Every election, 'they' simply boil our ‘choices’ down to only two individuals that appear to be handpicked by ‘someone’ other than the American people.

Take the 2008 ‘election’ for instance. On the one hand (forgetting about the other GOP drones and cloned yes-men), you had Ron Paul, a well-established, long-time Congressman with an easily verifiable track record of active politics since 1976. Next to no one in the mainstream media paid any (positive) attention to him. I attribute this largely to the fact that more than 90% of all mainstream media in this country is owned by six corporations.[7] Those six corporations are owned by a select few, extremely wealthy and powerful elite, who I believe have been and are the ones *placing* our presidents into office.

On the other hand, you have Obama, a guy who literally came out of nowhere, posing as the Democrats’ messiah. No one even knew who he was less than a decade ago, and all of a sudden he swoops in and takes the stage? And I won’t even go into the *real and very legitimate issues* concerning his birth certificate![8]

Prior to that election, you had the Bush-Kerry run for office in 2004. Both were Bonesmen! So, it really didn’t matter who got elected. Either one of them would have “gotten the job done” for the Elite.

Indeed, the last few elections left me very cynical and quite jaded about the whole system. So I began to search for answers. My conclusion was that in spite of what the mainstream media would have us believe, Democrats and Republicans are really playing for the same team, just with different logos on their shirts. Either one will get the job done for those who placed them in front of us as a ‘candidate.’ What team are they playing for? Take a look at the stars on the Republican Party (elephant) logo, and you tell me.[9]

Ron Paul knows that running on a Libertarian or any other third-party ticket is never going to work. So, he opts for the Republican side of the fence. But if he is as legit as his supporters hope he is, he will never have a chance. First of all, he claims to want to do away with the IRS and advocates auditing and/or getting out from under the Federal Reserve. He talks a big game about getting us out of our national debt by stopping the use of fiat money and becoming more fiscally responsible. On top of all that, he wants us to stop fighting unjust and undeclared wars all over the planet. Frankly, *he just makes way too much sense!* If he weren’t toting the company line concerning 9/11, I’d be tempted to think he truly was *“the one prophesied to bring balance to The Force!”*

That kind of talk simply will never fly with those who are printing the money and pulling all of the strings in our government and the Military Industrial Complex.[10] You know, that group of fantastically wealthy, psychopathic ‘Sith lords’ who got off on financing the bullets, bombs and bandages for both sides of every war for the last 100+ years? Yeah, those guys.

Now let’s play the other side of the coin. If by some astronomically improbable chance Ron Paul did get elected in the inconceivable off-chance that our votes actually are counted in a foolproof system where dead people and dogs can’t check a box or punch a card and hanging chads or computerized voting fraud won’t be an issue, he’d likely end up finding himself lying beside Lincoln and Kennedy when the Emperor executes ‘Order 66.’ [11]

You can’t solve a spiritual problem with a political solution.

No matter how you look at it, at least in my opinion, Ron Paul doesn’t have a chance... unless he is ‘part of the family’— in which case, he certainly won’t be our savior. He’ll be doing the bidding of the same people who pulled every other president’s strings. Nothing will change. All we will be doing is wasting our time and money trying to solve a spiritual problem with a political solution. It will never work.

The recent Iowa Caucuses only reinforced my distrust of the entire system. Thankfully, more and more people are waking up as a result of such things. An online journalist named Jeffrey Phelps expressed his frustration with the whole affair by noting that for the first time, the Iowa GOP decided to move the final vote counting to an undisclosed location that would conveniently be hidden away from public scrutiny. He writes:

> *What played out as a result was a mockery of democracy as Iowa election officials permanently skewed the results of the caucus, illegally miscounting and completely*

> *dismissing votes for Ron Paul, many of which were ironically from precincts that Romney lost in '08.*
>
> *Other missing or "uncounted" votes were expected to be heavy Ron Paul supporting, major populated areas and college town precincts, now leaving the true winner forever in question.*
>
> * * *
>
> *After all this, what's extremely frightening about the situation is that fact that neither the establishment and its media, nor is anyone in any policing agency doing anything about it, as if it's no big deal that the official election results in the Iowa caucus was tampered with, rendering the results of the election forever compromised, potentially putting the future of the caucus and elections processes, this nation, and Ron Paul's call for liberty, freedom, and the rule of law in serious jeopardy.*
>
> — Jeffrey Phelps, *Denver Conspiracy Examiner*[12]

Phelps goes on to say some of the same things I've already stated about how solid Ron Paul's voting record is, having held to the same values, principles and ideals for 40 years, something he says the other candidates couldn't even fathom given their careers full of *"criminal activity and flip-flopping on issues."* He also reminds us that the precincts around the country that don't use paper ballots, but rather electronic voting machines, are even more susceptible to fraud,[13] and concludes his article by quoting Judge Napolitano as stating, that the whole thing is a hoax that exists, *"to merely perpetuate the fake, corporate-controlled, 'two-party' system of political slavery."* Indeed, we have been enslaved by a system that appears to be corrupt to the core. David Richards calls Congressmen out as *"running a criminal enterprise in all but name,"* going so far as to call the United States *"the Illuminati's military enforcer."*

> *To make sure American politicians play their role, Congressmen are allowed to own stocks in defense contractors, and make millions of dollars buying and selling them using insider knowledge.*
>
> *According to reports from* OpenSecrets.org*, in 2006, 151 members of Congress had $195.5 million invested in defense corporations.*[14] *Their average net worth was $910,000 compared to $100,000 for American families in general.*[15] *Over 50 range between $5 million and $190 million.*[16] *John Kerry is at the top end of the scale.*
>
> *For the psychopaths on Capitol Hill, each new military escapade is a lottery windfall.*
>
> — David Richards[17]

Richards describes war as a racket that is very profitable for Congress, and he suggests that congressmen should have to wear NASCAR-like outfits with patches that show the American public who their corporate sponsors are. I know it would never happen, but still, I agree with that notion completely.

Ron Paul appears to be legit and from what I can tell, he seems to be largely funded by grass-roots efforts, with a large percentage of that funding actually coming from the American soldier (who is probably sick of dying in foreign countries, paying the price for the greed of those in Congress who are heavily invested in the Military Industrial Complex). If there is any hope for this country to get out of that, someone like Ron Paul might be the best choice. The problem is, he is so far out of the norm and too many have too much to lose with someone like him at the helm. Thus, the "matrix" will always spit him out of the running. The only one who will get a seat in the Oval Office is someone who is a player with the same corporate sponsorships on his NASCAR outfit as all the rest. Folks the system is rigged![18] The sooner we accept that, the sooner we can start looking for a better solution.

To borrow an analogy: We could submit a vote of 'No Confidence' in the entire system, but if memory serves, that's what ushered Senator Palpatine[19] into the chair of Chancellor of the Republic,[20] which later morphed into becoming the Supreme Emperor of the first Galactic Empire.[21] Not good. Was George Lucas just telling us a fun story or was he giving us a taste of things to come?

Here’s the bottom line for me: I don’t believe you can fix Babylonian America with a Babylonian system. ***We must come out of Babylon*** if we truly want to be free. At least for me and my house, I believe our time and money is far better spent working on the spiritual problem. By that I am referring to the *“principalities and powers and spiritual wickedness in high places”* that seem to be all too welcome in our nation’s capital.

> *If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and* ***turn from their wicked ways****; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.*
>
> (2 Chronicles 7:14)

WITHDRAWING OUR TROOPS

In Chapter Two, I mentioned a recent interview on Omega Man Radio, in which Tom Horn and Steve Quayle talked about the discovery of the carcass of Gilgamesh. At about 1 hour and 27 minutes into the interview they begin talking about how Nimrod began to be a giant. They then discussed the discovery of Gilgamesh’s remains. Regarding confirmation of that, Steve Quayle said:

> *“I talked to a Special Operations general who validated that, verified that and absolutely was there when Gilgamesh’s remains — and his words were, ‘He was in a state of remarkable preservation.’ OK? And by the way, that was in the literal vicinity of where the United States built its largest military complex, I believe it’s one of the largest military complexes in the world. In that whole area. The advance team — Special Operations went in there to grab all of that stuff... What I’m telling you is based on a multi-starred general’s eye-witness report to me who was there. He said, ‘They have Gilgamesh’s remains.’ So if they have Gilgamesh and he is Nimrod, they got it. And the whole point was to extract the DNA. And I’ve also been told that the whole point... of the human genome project... is to locate specific genetic markers for the disembodied spirits to reanimate their host body that’s brought back.”*

I will write a lot more about the DNA issue in the next book in this series, *Babylon Rising: The Return of the Nephilim*. Needless to say, I believe that is indeed the *real* reason we have been in Iraq for the better part of the last decade. The fact that our troops are now coming out of Babylon tells me that they have accomplished whatever it was they needed to do, which makes me wonder what (or who) else may be coming out of Babylon with them.

In any case, make no mistake, in the grander scheme of things — the big picture, if you will — I am certain our work in Babylon is not yet done. Let’s look now at the current withdrawal of our military presence from Iraq to see if we can determine what might happen next.

On December 17, 2011, CNN ran an article stating:

> ***“Last of U.S. Troops Leave Iraq”***
>
> *In a final tactical road march, the last U.S. troops in Iraq crossed the border into Kuwait on Sunday morning, ending almost nine years of a deadly and divisive war. They were the last soldiers in what amounted to the largest U.S. troop drawdown since the war in Vietnam.*
>
> — *CNN.com*[22]

Back in September of 2011, as the drawdown moved forward, the ***Huffington Post*** wrote an article telling us that the U.S. is leaving behind **over 250 million dollars worth of equipment, vehicles and even entire military bases** (505 to be exact)!

> *There were 505 U.S. military bases and outposts in Iraq at the height of operations, said Col. Barry Johnson, a spokesman for U.S. forces in Iraq. Only 39 are still in U.S. hands —*

> *but that includes each of the largest bases, meaning* ***the most significant handovers are yet to come.***
>
> *Those bases didn't come cheap. Construction costs exceeded $2.4 billion, according to an analysis of Pentagon annual reports by the Congressional Research Service. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers alone was responsible for $1.9 billion in base construction contracts between 2004 and 2010, a spokesman told HuffPost.*
>
> *Rather than strip those bases clean and ship everything home,* ***Defense Department officials tell The Huffington Post that over 2.4 million pieces of equipment worth a total of at least $250 million — everything from tanks and trucks to office furniture and latrines — have been given away to the Iraqi government in the past year, with the pace of transfers expected to increase dramatically in the coming months****.*
>
> — *Huffington Post*[23] [emphasis mine]

Are they telling us that it is more expensive to *ship* our equipment home than it is to *replace* it? I think not. What that really tells me is we essentially armed both our former enemies, as well as the coming forces of the Antichrist, with all sorts of nice toys ready to go for when Nimrod settles back into his hometown. And if Iraq decides to team up with the Arab League[24] and/or Iran under the banner of Islam in the near future, Israel could be in a lot of trouble! Note what Iraq's *Ministry of Foreign Affairs* website [25] has to say:

- *We are reaching out to our neighbors and the Arab countries through participation in multilateral forums, including the Arab League, and by encouraging regional cooperation based on our historical cultural ties and geographical proximity. Iraq can be a positive factor for regional stability and a friendly, peaceful country that respects national interests and understands the security concerns of our neighbors, with whom we are in dialogue to resolve pending issues including prisoners of war, refugees, compensation claims and water and border issues.*
- *Iraq remains committed to its Islamic identity and, as the home of some of Islam's holiest sites, we are establishing procedures for religious tourism and promoting cultural exchange.*

All of that sounds very sweet, but I wonder how they can remain peaceful toward Israel and loyal to Islam at the same time? That seems like an oxymoron to me. Especially since Islam's stated objective through cleric after cleric and dictator after dictator has been to wipe Israel off the map.[26] I also don't think for one minute that any of that would come as a shock or surprise to our current leaders in Washington, D.C. if such an attempt were made. In fact, I would go so far as to suggest that this was the plan all along.

> *An Iraqi journalist asks about U.S. military help for Iraq in the years ahead.*
>
> ***Al-Maliki says he spoke with Obama about "the need for weapons."***
>
> *Obama says he seeks to help "a sovereign Iraq" protect its people and its borders; says military cooperation will be similar to that given to other nations.*
>
> *Obama also notes that* ***the U.S. Embassy in Iraq will be bigger than others, but only because the security demands are so different.***
>
> — *USATODAY.com*[27] [emphasis mine]

We didn't do all that we did in Iraq for the last nine years only to leave everything behind and hand over all control to the Iraqis. No. Our troops may be leaving, but the United States will always have a strong handle on whatever happens there.

> *"Our goal simply is to make sure Iraq succeeds," Obama says.*
>
> — *USATODAY.com*[28]

I'll bet it is! America's plan has always been to be sure Babylon succeeds. But how and why? In the following excerpt from the (previously quoted) recent White House Press Conference, Obama introduced Prime Minister

Maliki as *"the elected leader of a sovereign, self-reliant and democratic Iraq."*

> *Obama speaks about how the U.S. military mission in Iraq is ending, and the two nations are now turning the page to "a new chapter" in their relationship.* ***He predicts a bright economic future for Iraq, with American assistance****; he also offered the kind of security assistance that the U.S. provides to other allies.*
>
> *"I pledged to end this war responsibly," Obama says. "After nearly nine years, our war in Iraq ends this month."*
>
> *Now, Obama pledges "an equal partnership" and "a broad relationship" with the new Iraq.*
>
> — *USATODAY.com*[29] [emphasis mine]

This brings us back to a discussion about the Iraqi Dinar. How is it that Obama can predict a *"bright economic future for Iraq"* when they have a completely worthless currency?

Answer: They need to revalue (RV) that currency to something that has value and can be traded on the open market. Why? Because you can't have a *"bright economic future"* when all you have is pretty, Monopoly money to play with! If you remember, the Dinar once was $3.22 to 1 Dinar in value, so the prospects of a revaluation are very exciting indeed.

Obama went on to say:

> *Economically, Iraqis continue to invest in their infrastructure and development.* ***And I think it's worth considering some remarkable statistics.***
>
> ***In the coming years, it's estimated that Iraq's economy will grow even faster than China's or India's. With oil production rising, Iraq is on track to once again be one of the region's leading oil producers.***
>
> *With respect to security, Iraqi forces have been in the lead for the better part of three years — patrolling the streets, dismantling militias, conducting counterterrorism operations. Today, despite continued attacks by those who seek to derail Iraq's progress, violence remains at record lows.*
>
> *And, Mr. Prime Minister, that's a tribute to your leadership and to the skill and the sacrifices of Iraqi forces.*
>
> ***Across the region, Iraq is forging new ties of trade and commerce with its neighbors, and Iraq is assuming its rightful place among the community of nations.*** *For the first time in two decades, Iraq is scheduled to host the next Arab League Summit, and what a powerful message that will send throughout the Arab world. People throughout the region will see a new Iraq that's determining its own destiny — a country in which people from different religious sects and ethnicities can resolve their differences peacefully through the democratic process.*
>
> *Mr. Prime Minister, as we end this war, and as Iraq faces its future, the Iraqi people must know that you will not stand alone. You have a strong and enduring partner in The United States of America.*
>
> * * *
>
> *And finally, we're partnering for regional security. For just as Iraq has pledged not to interfere in other nations,* ***other nations must not interfere in Iraq. Iraq's sovereignty must be respected.***

— President Obama, excerpt from the Dec. 12, 2011, Press Conference [emphasis mine]

In the previous chapter, I wrote about what I think may be *The Omega Plan*. In it, I revealed the various dealings the United States has had with Iraq and the founding of both its Central Bank as well as its new government. As noted, it was JP Morgan Chase Bank that led the ***13-bank*** consortium that established the new Central Bank of Iraq (CBI). Given the fact that the same players who established our own central banking system and Federal Reserve are also involved in the formation of Iraq's, tells me that our interests there will be well taken care of. Thus, I feel it is safe to say that the true Babylon will rise again, thanks to the help of psuedo-Babylon (the United States of America).

Make no mistake, the two are one — at least until America (as we know it) is no longer needed. At that point, I believe we will be discarded. I think we still have some more time left before that happens though. Perhaps that's why the writing on the Dinar is in both English and Arabic. Note how it is the English (America) backing the Arabic (Babylon) front of the currency pictured below.

FRONT

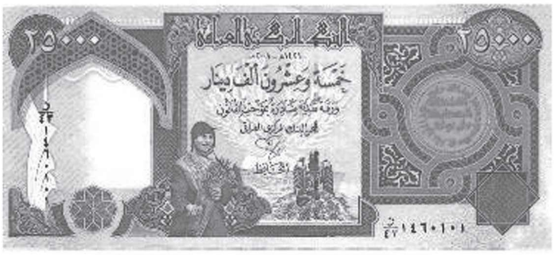

BACK

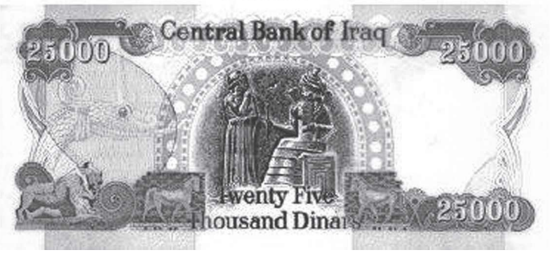

Figure 76

Figure 76 depicts their highest value currency note, but it is the same for their other denominations as well. Remember too that this worthless money also has some of the most anti-counterfeit measures of any other currency incorporated into its design.

For now, we will just have to patiently wait and see what happens. I can't imagine it will be too much longer before something pops though. Too many things are lining up.

In the meantime, of course, all of this looks great on Obama's resume. I mean, the guy starts out with a Nobel Peace Prize (for what?) and ends with the [supposed] death of Osama bin Laden as well as the completion of military action in Iraq. To the typical, brainwashed American, this shows that Obama is the man who gets things done. Now just imagine what will happen if the Iraqi Dinar revalues and the entire world's economy magically resets. I can hear the chants in the streets just in time for the next election polls, *"Our messiah does it again!"*

Perhaps that's the real reason for the RV's delay? Maybe "they" are just waiting for the perfect time before the next election to spring the news? If so, don't believe the Obama camp's hype for a second. It's all just an elaborate stage show, and one president after the other has done his part in this grand charade to make it happen.

Speaking of hype...

OSAMA BIN LADEN IS DEAD!

When the news reports first came out that Osama bin Laden had been killed, I knew it was a scam. The reports were so filled with Illuminati memes it wasn’t even funny. In fact, it was rather pathetic — they put so much in plain sight and so few even took notice. Now, I say that fully acknowledging that prior to researching this stuff for myself, I probably would have been duped as well, so please don’t be offended by what I am saying here. I believe we have all been lied to!

I will go into much more detail about the various incarnations and representations of Nimrod that have appeared throughout ancient history in Book 3, *Babylon Rising: Mythology and the Coming Great Deception*.[30] In the chapter titled, *Nimrod, Niburu and the Anunnaki*,[31] I show how some scholars have connected Sargon (whose one-eyed bust is pictured right) with the person of Nimrod. At first glance, does that image remind you of anyone? Is that just a coincidence?

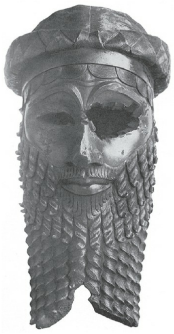
Figure 77

The official story was that SEAL Team 6 on May 1st (which was both on the 66th anniversary of Hitler’s [supposed] death and also the day the Illuminati was founded) at 3:30 in the afternoon (EST) shot Osama bin Laden through the left eye, then later dumped his body into the ocean (thus, leaving the world with absolutely no solid proof whatsoever to substantiate anything that was told to us).

Remember the news reports?

> *Obama gave the final order to pursue the operation on **April 29**, officials said.*
>
> *The house was **100 yards** from the gate of the Kakul Military Academy, an army-run institution where top officers train. A Pakistan intelligence official said **the property where bin Laden was staying was 3,000 square feet.***
>
> *At **3:30 p.m. EST,** a 40-man Navy Seals squadron raided a compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, killing the Al Qaeda leader with a bullet to the head.*
>
> — *FoxNews.com*[32] [emphasis mine]
>
> *“He did resist the assault force, and he was killed in a firefight,” an official said.* NBC News *reported that **he was shot in the left eye**.*
>
> — *Today News: MSNBC.msn.com*[33] [emphasis mine]

Right off the bat, the text I have in bold (above) stands out. First, April 29th is a very interesting date in the occult and a significant date for the conclusion of Obama’s first 100 days in office (as seen in Chapter Five) as well. Right there in the Fox report, you have Obama giving the order on ***April 29 th*** paired up with a description of the house being ***100 yards*** away. I’m sure that’s just a coincidence.

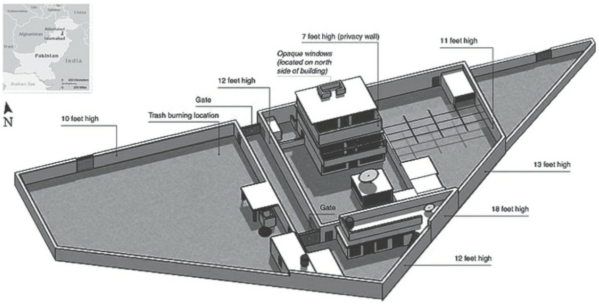

Figure 78

Then we’ve got the 3,000-square-foot property. Remember the official death toll on 9/11 and the same amount of “missing artifacts” from the Baghdad museum? And let’s not forget the time, 3:30 EST (33 being a high occult/Masonic number). Oh, and of course, the compound just *had* to be shaped like a pyramid too. Come on! Seriously? How much more in plain sight do they have to be with this stuff? And Osama had his left eye put out in a pyramid?! Please.

Not too long after that "victory," soldiers belonging to the same elite fighting force, SEAL Team 6, were all loaded onto a National Guard helicopter that was later shot down. Convenient. Since when do Special Forces soldiers all travel together? Worse than that, since when do they travel on any equipment not piloted by their own highly skilled, Special Forces personnel?

> *Insurgents shot down a U.S. military helicopter during fighting in eastern Afghanistan, killing 30 Americans, most of them belonging to the same elite unit as the Navy SEALs who killed former Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, U.S. officials said Saturday. It was the deadliest single loss for American forces in the decade-old war against the Taliban. — FoxNews.com*[34] [emphasis mine]

When I was a helicopter pilot in the 1/110th Air Cav., one of my friends was an instructor pilot that I used to fly with often. He later moved to Texas and joined a National Guard unit — the same unit that flew the above mission. After this event happened, my friend told me that he knew the pilots of the Chinook helicopter that was shot down in Afghanistan. Now, I've flown with plenty of Guard pilots. Some are veterans from active duty service, others are newbies. So I mean no disrespect to my brothers in the Guard when I say this, but what in the world is going on here!?

It wasn't long before veterans started asking questions like this:

> *"Why were some of the most elite of America's military, in such large numbers, tooling around on a National Guard aircraft? Also, those around me are wondering why such a large number (extremely unconventional for Seals, Green Berets, etc) of them riding in a single aircraft instead of being spread out into numerous aircraft."*
>
> *Without question, I mean no disrespect to the pilots and crew of the National Guard aircraft, but the fact is that it's very "strange" that Seals would be conducting an actual mission, with such large numbers, in such a basic aircraft.…Especially, given the fact that there were special operation Chinooks easily available and sitting idle when this tragedy took place." — VeteransToday.com*[35]

Active duty, Special Forces troops should not be traveling in National Guard helicopters, especially that many of them, all in one place in a hostile environment. That just doesn't (normally) happen!

The only thing that makes any sense to me is that those good men were *sacrificed* so that the truth would not get out. This would certainly also serve as a deterrent to keep quiet anyone else who might want to talk. To be honest, this absolutely breaks my heart. Please pray for our service men and women. Generally speaking, they are good, American citizens who have *volunteered* for service in order to do their duty for God, country, family and friends. They signed up to protect and serve you and me. They believe in what they are doing, and do it to the best of their ability, no matter the personal cost. For those reasons and more, I say they deserve our respect, honor and much needed prayers.

That said, they are also victims of pure evil who are routinely used to create more victims around the world. Evil men take advantage of their patriotism, youth and zeal, and send them straight into hell-on-earth scenarios. Thus, the soldier becomes nothing more than cannon fodder for the sadistic plans of a small elite. Today, soldiers are little more than pawns that our evil overlords have no problem experimenting on, using, and discarding in order to advance their Luciferian agendas.

> *In Haig's presence,* [Henry] *Kissinger referred pointedly to military men as "dumb, stupid animals to be used" as pawns for foreign policy.*
>
> — Henry Kissinger, as quoted in *The Final Days*[36]

For those reasons and more — as much as I absolutely love this country — I would *never again* recommend that any young person join the military. Things have become really bad, and I suspect it's only going to get worse.

If you really want to know why I feel this way, please consider watching the following documentaries:

- ***Why We Fight*** [37]
- ***In Lies We Trust: CIA, Holywood and Bioterrorism*** [38]
- ***The Secret of Oz*** [39]
- ***Invisible Empire: A New World Order Defined*** [40]
- ***The Ultimate Con***[41]

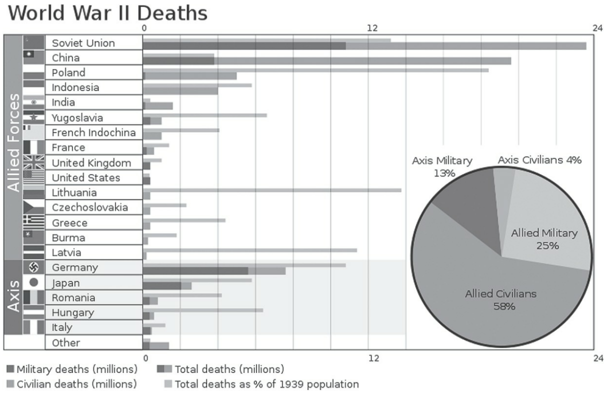

Figure 79

THE HIGH COST OF WAR

> ***TOTAL DEAD FROM WORLD WAR II***
>
> *World War II was the deadliest military conflict in history. Over 60 million people were killed, which was over 2.5% of the world population.*
>
> * * *
>
> *World War II fatality statistics vary, estimates of total dead ranging from* ***50 million to over 70 million****.*[42] *The sources cited in this article document an estimated death toll in World War II of 62 to 78 million, making it the deadliest war in world history in absolute terms of total dead but not in terms of deaths relative to the world population.*
>
> *When scholarly sources differ on the number of deaths in a country, a range of war losses is given, in order to inform readers that the death toll is disputed. Civilians killed totaled from 40 to 52 million, including 13 to 20 million from war-related disease and famine.* ***Total military dead: from 22 to 25 million, including deaths in captivity of about 5 million prisoners of war.***
>
> — *Wikipedia*[43] [emphasis mine]

Just let those numbers sink in for a minute. War is big business! It costs us trillions of dollars, not to mention our lives, limbs, loved ones and sanity — but it costs 'them' nothing. 'They' profit from both sides of any conflict by supplying the bullets, bombs and bandages at a premium cost to you and me, the average taxpaying sheeple of the world. Who are they? Elite bankers. If you haven't already watched the documentary, *NWO: Secret Societies and Biblical Prophecy Vol. 1* [44] by Leonard Ulrich, please do so at your earliest convenience. I believe *everyone* in America needs to see that film.

THE GOD OF WAR

As I have already shown you, our nation's capital is literally loaded with idolatry. Statues of the pagan gods are everywhere. For instance, do you want to know who greets you when you enter the Capitol Building? ***None other than the Roman god, Mars, who was the GOD OF WAR!***

And we wonder why our nation seems to have been at war in some form or another ever since its founding (which of course came about as a result of the Revolutionary War).

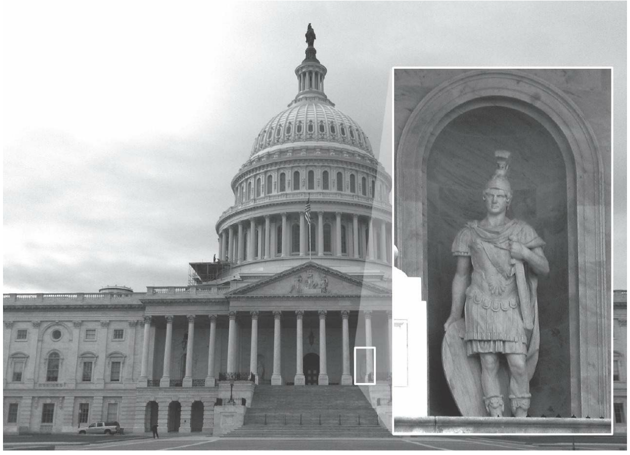

Figure 80

The Romans called him Mars. To the Greek, he was known as Ares. They were known as gods of war. Who else had that title? The more ancient Sumerian god, Ninurta, did too. In Sumer and Akkad, Ninurta (derived from Ningursu) was the god of the constellation that became known as Orion. Could it be that all of these are just various incarnations or titles for Nimrod — the mighty hunter? We've already looked at the various "mighty hunters" that Nimrod has appeared as throughout the centuries and different cultures. Regardless of whether or not there is a direct tie between Mars and Nimrod, they are both of the same warring spirit. Nimrod was the first god-king-warrior to rule the world after the Flood. All other legends and myths concerning gods, depicting the same attributes, can be traced back to him — and his iconography can be seen all over our nation's capital city.

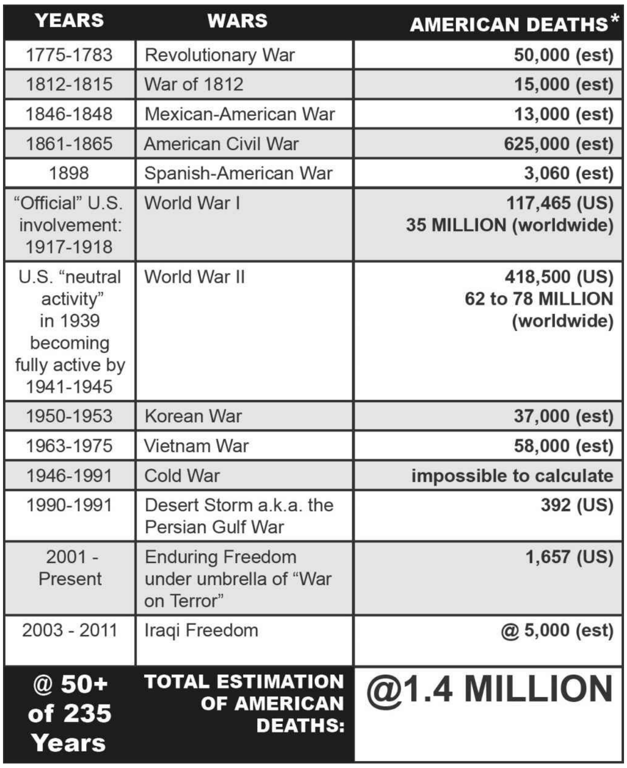

YEARS	WARS	AMERICAN DEATHS*
1775-1783	Revolutionary War	**50,000 (est)**
1812-1815	War of 1812	**15,000 (est)**
1846-1848	Mexican-American War	**13,000 (est)**
1861-1865	American Civil War	**625,000 (est)**
1898	Spanish-American War	**3,060 (est)**
"Official" U.S. involvement: 1917-1918	World War I	**117,465 (US)** **35 MILLION (worldwide)**
U.S. "neutral activity" in 1939 becoming fully active by 1941-1945	World War II	**418,500 (US)** **62 to 78 MILLION (worldwide)**
1950-1953	Korean War	**37,000 (est)**
1963-1975	Vietnam War	**58,000 (est)**
1946-1991	Cold War	**impossible to calculate**
1990-1991	Desert Storm a.k.a. the Persian Gulf War	**392 (US)**
2001 - Present	Enduring Freedom under umbrella of "War on Terror"	**1,657 (US)**
2003 - 2011	Iraqi Freedom	**@ 5,000 (est)**
@ 50+ of 235 Years	**TOTAL ESTIMATION OF AMERICAN DEATHS:**	**@1.4 MILLION**

* These numbers were taken from Wikipedia sources and do not include the countless numbers of people who lost their limbs, mobility, sanity and loved ones to the horror and carnage represented by the table above.

AMERICA HAS ALWAYS BEEN A NATION AT WAR

For nearly 25% of her short history, America has been engaged in active war. Furthermore, in addition to the major wars listed in the above table, we have also engaged in numerous ‘police actions,’ skirmishes and covert operations, during and between those wars. In the process, we’ve been setting up both military bases and embassies in all of these countries, acting as ‘champions of liberty’ and the ‘world’s policemen.’ We are everywhere, and with President Bush’s declared *War on Terror* we will always be at war. Why? Because, as I’ve already said, that is a war not against a people or nation, but rather, against an idea — and it will never end. Indeed, the god of war rules this country!

In mythology, Mars was said to have been the father of Romulus and Remus; the first of the two being credited with forming the early Roman Empire, with Rome being named after himself. That empire has never died. It lives on in nearly every way through the United States of America. So, if you want to look for a “Revived Roman Empire” in biblical prophecy, look no further. If you live in the good ol’ U.S. of A., you are standing in it. Again, the proof is all over Washington, D.C..

THE WAR ON TERROR

Our current *War on Terror* was the direct result of the events of 9/11. I freely confess, I am one of those tinfoil-hat-wearing ‘conspiracy theorists’ who unashamedly and whole-heartedly believes that “9/11 was an inside job.” I didn’t always feel that way though. In fact, for a long time, I would have been highly insulted by the mere *insinuation* that our government would do such a thing to its own people. I simply could not believe that and blasted anyone who did. It was much easier to put the blame on people with funny turbans around their heads living in caves on the other side of the planet. But when you remove the passion that comes with national pride and look at the facts objectively, there are just way too many holes in the ‘Official Story’ of 9/11 for me to buy it anymore.

Why do we believe the things we are told by mainstream media?

The secret societies that orchestrate these wars love to use Nimrod’s mystical iconography on everything because they know how powerful such tools are for manipulation and control. Just turn over your dollar bill, and there you’ll see his all seeing-eye watching you. There is power in such imagery because they are symbols. Symbols conceal for those who don’t have eyes to see and reveal for those who do have eyes to see. We carry them around in our pockets all the time. They are flashed on screen and in print everywhere we look. We simply cannot get away from it. But once your eyes are opened to the truth, you will indeed be able to see through the lies. If we do not learn to truly see, the Elite will continue to play us all for fools — civilian and military service personnel alike.

Figure 81

For instance, in order to keep us all fighting and killing, there must be a ‘face of evil’ for us to go after. For the past two decades or so, one of those faces was that of Osama bin Laden. That face has been the primary, motivating force behind the whole *War on Terror* — as if this *one* man could orchestrate all the terror in the world. Indeed, his image has been a powerful tool in the hands of the Elite for keeping America at war. Thus, when the reports came in that he had been killed, the whole country stood and cheered in victory, posting all over their Facebook pages statements like, *“Ding, dong, the witch is dead!”* To which I screamed as loud as I could (mostly in CAPS),

“FORGET ABOUT THE WITCH! THE WIZARDS ARE STILL BEHIND THE CURTAIN!!!”

Still, not too many heard what I was saying. I think most probably thought I was just being an unpatriotic jerk.

***This administration, just like the previous one, is capitalizing on the fear and trauma of the public*.**

For a fantastic summary of the many absurdities given in the “Official Story,” be sure to watch *9/11: A Conspiracy Theory*.[45] When I was able to step away from the noise of corporate-controlled media and think for myself, I had many of the same questions and realizations depicted in that short, but very well done, satirical video. So I began to search for answers myself — and boy, did I find them! Ladies and gentlemen, I can say with complete confidence, we have been lied to about a great many things. If you don’t believe me and have trouble with the so-called “9/11 truth movement” (imagine that: people having trouble with the truth), ***please*** watch all of the videos listed in this chapter. I have provided the ability to do so, all on one page, on the *Babylon Rising: And The First Shall Be Last* website (see the links in the footnotes below).

If this sort of information is new to you, I suggest you spend some time watching non-mainstream news videos and documentaries concerning the numerous events of 9/11 that do not line up with the ‘Official Story.’ Here are a couple to get you started:

- ***Loose Change*** [46](this is the one that started it all for me)
- ***9/11 Mysteries*** [47] (note the totally bogus ‘eye-witness’ at 3:17)

There was the constant reinforcement of the ‘Official Story’ concerning 9/11 in all of the videos that followed the (supposed) death of Osama bin Laden.[48] The Elite apparently believed that the American people needed a refresher course in brainwashing. So, they orchestrated the ‘killing’ of Osama bin Laden and then immediately went on the air and proceeded to feed the lie to us once more.

Thanks to mainstream media’s *constant* reinforcement of the lies, here it is more than 10 years later, and most of American *still* believe that box-cutter-toting, inexperienced, Muslim, terrorist pilots brought down 3 buildings at *free-fall* speed (violating all laws of physics), and managed to slam into the most secure, monitored and reinforced building on the planet: the Pentagon, with no resistance from anyone or video footage to verify that this indeed happened the way we were told it did. Now those same Americans are overjoyed that we supposedly killed the so-called mastermind behind it all: Osama bin Laden. But did you know that there have been a number of reports stating that Osama bin Laden had either died or been killed — in mainstream news — since 2001? Here are just a few:

> ***Bin Laden Already Dead***
> *December 26, 2001*
>
> *Usama bin Laden has died a peaceful death due to an untreated lung complication, the* Pakistan Observer *reported, citing a Taliban leader who allegedly attended the funeral of the Al Qaeda leader.*
>
> — *Fox News*[49]

> ***The Death of bin Ladenism***
> *July 11, 2002*
>
> *Osama bin Laden is dead. The news first came from sources in Afghanistan and Pakistan almost six months ago: the fugitive died in December and was buried in the mountains of southeast Afghanistan.*
>
> — *New York Times*[50]

> ***Is Bin Laden Dead?***
> *September 23, 2006*
>
> *Earlier on Saturday, the French newspaper L’Est Republicain cited a report by the French intelligence service, Direction Generale des Services Exteriors (DGSE), saying that Saudi intelligence officials “seem to have become convinced that Osama bin Laden is dead.” The report quoted by the newspaper said the Saudis believe bin Laden “might have succumbed to a very serious case of typhoid fever resulting in partial paralysis of his lower limbs while in Pakistan on August 23, 2006.” Echoing that report, a Saudi source, speaking on condition of anonymity, told* TIME *that Saudi officials have received multiple reports over the last several weeks that Bin Laden has been suffering from a water-borne illness. “This*

> *is not a rumor," said the source.*
>
> — *Time Magazine*[51]

> ***FBI Official Thinks Bin Laden Is Dead***
> *February 11, 2009*
>
> *(CBS) FBI counterterrorism chief Dale Watson said Wednesday he believes Osama bin Laden is dead — the first time a senior U.S. law enforcement official has publicly given an opinion on the al Qaeda leader's status.*
>
> — *CBS News*[52]

> ***WEINER: Osama bin Laden is dead***
> *December 23, 2010*
>
> *CIA reports, doctors and biographers have asserted that bin Laden had (has) a range of diseases from typhoid to renal disease, Addison's disease, secondary osteoporosis and Marfan syndrome. Intelligence agencies think that in 2000, he had kidney-dialysis devices shipped to him in Afghanistan. His 1987 biography states that bin Laden was being treated with insulin for diabetes and suffered serious low blood pressure. Is it likely that the most wanted man in the world has been regularly receiving medical attention without detection for the past 10 years?*
>
> *In 2008, former CIA case officer Robert Baer asserted, "Of course he's dead." In 2002 and 2009, Pakistani Presidents Pervez Musharraf and Asif Ali Zardari separately stated that bin Laden was dead. In 2002, FBI counterterrorism chief Dale Watson stated that bin Laden "probably" was dead.*
>
> *Since 2004, we have seen no new bin Laden videos; we've only heard audios. One video released in 2007 could be a compilation of older videos. So why does the intelligence community continue to support the impression that he's alive?*
>
> — *Washington Times*[53]

Some of these articles may eventually be taken offline as a result of people going there to read and confirm these things. In the meantime, just start Googling:

- Osama bin Laden dead 2001
- Osama bin Laden dead 2002
- Osama bin Laden dead 2006
- Osama bin Laden dead 2009

Figure 82

It seems like nearly every time someone needed a boost in the polls, the press reported some progress in the hunt for bin Laden. Or if they needed a boost in American support for the *War on Terror* they released some new footage of [a poser pretending to be] Osama issuing new threats. This most recent death report, appears to be the final one — and it was a good one too!

American Special Forces led by President Obama strike hard and fast! Wow! And our troops get withdrawn from Iraq, just in time for Christmas — and so the minds of the masses can be put more at ease going into the holidays, and the next election year. That's awfully convenient, don't you think?

Considering George H. W. Bush was once a director of the CIA and the fact that the Bush family has very close ties to the bin Laden family,[54] shouldn't we at least be suspicious of the whole story we've been told about Osama bin Laden? An article by Rick Wiles of *American Freedom News* reveals some interesting things concerning the Bush-bin Laden connections.

> *President Bush recently signed an executive order to freeze the US financial assets of corporations doing business with Osama bin Laden. He described the order as a "strike on the financial foundation of the global terror network."*
>
> *"If you do business with terrorists, if you support or succor them, you will not do business with the United States," said President Bush.*
>
> *He didn't say anything about doing business with a terrorist's brother - or his wealthy financier.*
>
> *When President George W. Bush froze assets connected to Osama bin Laden, he didn't tell the American people that the terrorist mastermind's late brother was an investor in the president's former oil business in Texas. He also hasn't leveled with the American public about his financial connections to a host of shady Saudi characters involved in drug cartels, gun smuggling, and terrorist networks.*
>
> *Doing business with the enemy is nothing new to the Bush family. Much of the Bush family wealth came from supplying needed raw materials and credit to Adolf Hitler's Third Reich. Several business operations managed by Prescott Bush - the president's grandfather - were seized by the US government during World War II under the Trading with the Enemy Act.*
>
> *On October 20, 1942, the federal government seized the Union Banking Corporation in New York City as a front operation for the Nazis. Prescott Bush was a director. Bush, E. Roland Harriman, two Bush associates, and three Nazi executives owned the bank's shares. Eight days later, the Roosevelt administration seized two other corporations managed by Prescott Bush. The Holland-American Trading Corporation and the Seamless Steel Equipment Corporation, both managed by the Bush-Harriman bank, were accused by the US federal government of being front organizations for Hitler's Third Reich. Again, on November 8, 1942, the federal government seized Nazi-controlled assets of Silesian-American Corporation, another Bush-Harriman company doing business with Hitler.*
>
> *Doing business with the bin Laden empire, therefore, is only the latest extension of the Bush family's financial ties to unsavory individuals and organizations. Now that thousands of American citizens have died in terrorist attacks and the nation is going to war, the American people should know about George W. Bush's relationship with the family of Osama bin Laden.*[55]

A friend of mine told me that one of his clients was on the plane that escorted the bin Laden family out of the country in the days immediately following 9/11. Why were the bin Laden's and other Saudis spirited around and given a free ride out of this country if Saudi money and a member of their family were supposedly directly responsible for the events of that awful day?

> *After the airspace reopened, six chartered flights with 142 people, mostly Saudi Arabian nationals, departed from the United States between September 14 and 24. One flight, the so-*

> *called Bin Ladin flight, departed the United States on September 20 with 26 passengers, most of them relatives of Usama Bin Ladin.* [56]

Although I am not at all a Michael Moore fan, I must admit that his documentary film, *Fahrenheit 9/11* brings up some good points concerning this issue. On his website, under bullet point number 3, the question is asked, ***"Did these individuals get special treatment by law enforcement?"*** Moore answers:

> *Yes, according to Jack Cloonan, a former senior agent on the joint FBI-CIA Al-Qaeda task force, who is interviewed in Fahrenheit 9/11. Cloonan raises questions about the type of investigation to which these individuals were subjected, finding it highly unusual that in light of the seriousness of the attack on 9/11, bin Laden family members were allowed to leave the country and escape without anyone getting their statements on record in any kind of formal proceeding, and with little more than a brief interview.*
>
> *Most Saudis who left were not interviewed at all by the FBI. In fact, of the 142 Saudis on these flights, only 30 were interviewed.*[57]
>
> *The film puts this in perspective. Imagine President Clinton facilitating the exit of members of the McVeigh family out of the country following the Oklahoma City bombing. Or compare this treatment to the hundreds of people detained following the 9/11 attacks who were held without charges for months on end, who had no relationship to Osama bin Laden.*
>
> — Michael Moore[58]

I believe it is well past the time for realizing that the whole Osama bin Laden deal was a facade. Was he a terrorist and an "evil" man? Yes. There can be no doubt that he presented a very real threat to the United States and the world because of his beliefs, activities and associations. But it must be noted that the CIA practically created Osama bin Laden.

Robin Cook, Foreign Secretary in the UK from 1997–2001, and Leader of the House of Commons and Lord President of the Council from 2001–2003, believed the CIA had provided arms to the Arab Mujahideen, including Osama bin Laden.

> *"Bin Laden was, though, a product of a monumental miscalculation by western security agencies. Throughout the 80s he was armed by the CIA and funded by the Saudis to wage jihad against the Russian occupation of Afghanistan."*
>
> — Robin Cook[59]

In his book, *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA*, author Tim Weiner writes:

> *The Sudan was an international clearing house for stateless terrorists in those days. Among them was Osama bin Laden. The agency first knew him in the late 1980s as a rich Saudi who supported the same Afghan rebels that the agency armed in their fight against their Soviet oppressors. He was known as a financier of people who had grand visions of attacking the enemies of Islam.*[60]

From a BBC news article:

> *...Bin Laden left Saudi Arabia in 1979 to fight against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The Afghan jihad was backed with American dollars and had the blessing of the governments of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. He received security training from the CIA itself.*[61]

From a Forbes business information service article:

> *...[Osama bin Laden] received military and financial assistance from the intelligence services of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the United States.*[62]

From a ABC News article:

> *In the 1980s, bin Laden left his comfortable Saudi home for Afghanistan to participate in the Afghan jihad, or holy war, against the invading forces of the Soviet Union - a cause that, ironically, the United States funded, pouring **$3 billion** into the Afghan resistance via the CIA.*[63]

During the Reagan administration, U.S. funding of the Mujahideen increased significantly and CIA Paramilitary Officers played a big role in training, arming and sometimes even leading Mujahideen forces. They actually taught the Mujahideen many of the terrorist tactics Al Qaeda is known for today.

A typical rebuttal to these claims usually involves some CIA or government official basically saying they only supported the indigenous Afghan Mujahideen, and they deny that the CIA or other American officials had any actual contact with Osama bin Laden, let alone armed, trained, coached or indoctrinated him.

The phrase "Al Qaeda" essentially means "the base" (some say database). It is an organization that was founded by Osama bin Laden at some point between August 1988 and late 1989.[64] If it is true that the U.S. funded and trained the Mujahideen and Osama bin Laden (whether directly or indirectly), then we must take responsibility for creating this monster.

This all reeks of a convenient setup to me. Bin Laden and his Al Qaeda make perfect "patsies" in what has got to be the greatest conspiracy of all time. The whole idea that it was Muslim terrorists that flew those planes into buildings came as a result of *miraculously* finding a **paper** passport that — what do you know? — just so happened to not only somehow survive the "intense jet fuel fires" that supposedly caused the Twin Towers to collapse at nearly free-fall speed, but also just so happened to belong of one of the terrorists who supposedly did it! Wow. What are the odds of that? Of all the papers to find in the ash and rubble, we happened to find the impervious passport of a Muslim terrorist hijacker. Incredible. Who writes this stuff? If we saw such an obvious plant in a movie plot, we'd say that it was too "on the nose" and too much of a stretch to be believable. Yet, that's the story we all believed regarding 9/11. And that's the story that led us into the *War on Terror*.

This bogus *War on Terror* has literally robbed peace from the earth forever. It has to make you wonder if this is not an indicator that the Second Horse of the Apocalypse has already left the stable.

> *And there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given unto him a great sword.*
>
> (Revelation 6:4)

It is my personal belief that "War on Terror" may be the name of this "great sword" that takes peace from the earth. It is an oxymoron. War *is* terror! How do you wage terror on terror and hope to eliminate terror? That makes no sense at all. This is not a war against a nation or a people group either. It's a war against an idea... that will never end. Thus, peace has effectively been stripped away from this world by a lie.

ABEL DANGER

Able Danger was the rather peculiar name of a classified military planning effort led by the U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) and the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). It was meant to develop an information operations campaign plan against transnational terrorism.

In December 2006, a sixteen-month investigation by the U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee concluded that, *"Able Danger did not identify Mohamed Atta or any other 9/11 hijacker at any time prior to September 11, 2001."*

Supposedly, according to the "Official Story," Mohamad Atta was one of the ringleaders in the September 11th attacks. He was allegedly the hijacker pilot of American Airlines Flight 11, which crashed into the North Tower.

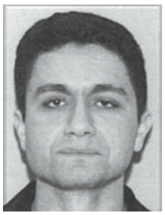
Figure 83

Orion Scientific Systems had created charts that included pictures of then-known Al Qaeda operatives, but ***none*** including Mohamed Atta. Then, a follow-up chart was made after the 9/11 attacks that *did* show Atta.

The Wikipedia overview on Able Danger reveals:

> *Attorney Mark Zaid, representing Lt. Colonel Anthony Shaffer and the other four Able Danger employees at the Senate Judiciary Committee hearing in September 2005, pointed out to the Committee that his clients had been forbidden by the Pentagon to testify to the Committee. He also discussed the Defense Intelligence Agency's decision to suspend Lt. Colonel Shaffer's security clearance shortly after it became known that he had provided information to the 9/11 Commission on Able Danger. "Based on years of experience I can say categorically that the basis for the revocation was questionable at best."* [65]
>
> *An investigation by the Defense Department Inspector General's office (IG) in September 2006 concluded that "the evidence did not support assertions that Able Danger identified the September 11, 2001, terrorists nearly a year before the attack, that Able Danger team members were prohibited from sharing information with law enforcement authorities, or that DOD officials acted against LTC Shaffer for his disclosures regarding Able Danger." However, some of the people questioned by the IG claimed their statements to the IG were distorted by investigators in the final IG's report, and the report omitted essential information that they had provided. Lt. Col Tony Shaffer has claimed that the DOD retaliated against him for speaking out publicly about the IG report's distortions.*[66]
>
> * * *
>
> *Some people have alleged regarding the events of 9/11 that the Pentagon obstructed the Senate Judiciary Committee's investigation and that there was a cover up.*[67]

Why would the Pentagon want to silence people who might have real evidence regarding the attacks of September 11, 2001? What are they trying to hide? Why the need for a "cover up" of information?

In the ground-breaking documentary film *Loose Change*, there is a very interesting segment dea ling with Abel Danger and the alleged hijackers. The following is a transcript from the film which shows news footage of each of the following individuals discussing these issues.

> *DYLAN AVERY's VO: The company responsible for the chart, Orion Scientific Systems, would claim that only two charts were produced and that Atta was not present on either one.*
>
> *CURT WELDON (identified on screen by LCFC titles as "Congressman (R), Pennsylvania): Show them all out, John. These are all the charts, spread them out. These are all Orion-produced charts. These charts were all done by the data mining efforts. So* ***the Orion Corporation lied to the Senate Judiciary Committee staff.*** *All data mining efforts and yet the company said to the Senate Judiciary staff, "We don't have any of those charts, they're not ours". Well, there they are. And their logos are on each one of them.*

Imagine that! The *Orion* Corporation lied! Is it just a coincidence that the corporation responsible for the charts that detailed Abel Danger (as in the "danger to Abel") has the same name as the Mighty Hunter, who was and will be the Antichrist and the head of the New World Order? Is it surprising that this deception would play a part in all of this?

> *CURT WELDON (LCFC titles identify this as "Senate Judiciary Hearing on Able Danger –*

September 21st, 2005"): Well, Mr Chairma n, ***at least two of the five people that were going to appear today were threatened with removal of their security clearances if they continue to talk about this****.*

VOICE (not shown): Are you at liberty to identify who those two are?

WELDON: I will to you, I'd rather do it privately, since the ***Defense Department has chosen not to allow anyone to testify****, but I will provide that information to the Committee.*

JOSEPH BIDEN (identified by LCFC titles as "Chairman, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations – Member, Senate Committee on the Judiciary"): For the life of me, I don't understand why, as I understand it, and I stand corrected if I'm wrong, but I understand the witnesses we assumed we were going to get to hear from, from the Defense Department, have been pulled. They may be or may not be in the room but ***have been instructed that they cannot testify****. I think that's a big mistake.*

WELDON: This is actually a chart of Al Qaeda and the various cells around the world. Much of this data, most of it was obtained prior to 9/11 by the work of Able Danger. As you see, there is an actual photograph of Mohammed Atta.

VOICE: What does that... what does that depict generally?

WELDON: It depicts the, uh, organizational and activity associations of Al Qaeda operatives that were involved in 9/11 and late events.

MARK ZAID (identified by LCFC titles as "Attorney, Krieger and Zaid PLLC – Founder, James Madison Projects"): And at the time, if the Commission had looked into this in early 2004, the chart that had Mohammed Atta on it still existed. There was a chart in Mr Smith's office. There was the chart that still should have been in the Defense Intelligence Agency because it wasn't destroyed within Lt Col Shaffer's files until the spring of 2004. The same with the chart that Mr Smith had.

ERIC KLEINSMITH (identified by LCFC titles as "Chief of Intelligence, LIWA – Former Army Major"): ***Our support to Able Danger became severely restricted and ultimately shut down due to intelligence oversight concerns.*** *I was supported vigorously by both the LIWA and the INSCOM [?] chain of commands, and we actively worked to overcome this shutdown for the next several months. In the midst of this shutdown,* ***I, along with one of my analysts, Chief Warrant Officer 3 Terri Stephens, were forced to destroy all data, charts, and other analytical products that we had not already passed on to SOCOM related to Able Danger.***

WELDON: ***Another former DOD official will testify today that he was ordered to destroy up to 2.5 terabytes of data.*** *Now I don't know what a terabyte of data is, so we contacted the Library of Congress. It's equal to one fourth of all the entire written collection that the Library of Congress maintains.*

ARLEN SPECTER: Are you in a position to evaluate the credibility of Captain Phillpott, Colonel Shaffer, Mr. Westphal, Ms. Preisser, or Mr. J.D. Smith, as to their credibility when they say they saw Mohammed Atta on the chart?

KLEINSMITH: Yes, sir. I believe them ex... implicitly.

NEWSCASTER: Lieutenant Colonel Tony Shaffer, who was the first member of Able Danger to go public, has now been told in writing by the Defense Intelligence Agency that ***he can't speak to members of Congress or their staff without prior approval, and now his security clearance, which allowed him to deal with classified information, has been pulled.*** *The*

> *congressman says Shaffer has been gagged, punished for speaking up.*
>
> *DYLAN AVERY's VO: The official response to Able Danger began in September 2005 with a letter from 9/11 commissioner Slade Gorton* [spelling not verified] *to Senator Arlen Specter. Gorton concludes by saying that since Condoleezza Rice, President Bush and the White House deny that Able Danger identified the 9/11 hijackers, it never happened. A six-month investigation by the Senate Intelligence Committee concluded in December 2006 that Able Danger did not identify Mohammed Atta or any other 9/11 hijacker. Can we be certain that the hijackers were radical Muslims on a suicide mission, or is there a possibility that they were trained, funded and protected in our own country?*

Film-maker Dylan Avery asks some very important questions in his documentary. I believe every American needs to watch *Loose Change* and do their own research into the events and alleged perpetrators of 9/11. That film and others like it can be viewed at:

http://www.babylonrisingbooks.com/videosC706.html

DID WE REALLY GET OSAMA BIN LADEN?

Just in time for the 11th anniversary of 9/11, a new book came out called, *No Easy Day* by former U.S. Navy SEAL Matt Bissonnette, (who wrote under the name Mark Owe). The book attempts to give a firsthand account of how he and other members of SEAL Team Six (allegedly) killed Osama bin Laden. I found the following dialogue (reported by CNN) on how they initially confirmed that they had just killed Osama bin Laden to be rather interesting.

> *Bissonnette: So he moved out to where the women and kids were, grabs one of the younger kids. Says, "Hey, who is that inside?" She says, "Osama." "Osama who?" "Osama bin Laden."*
>
> *Pelley: The child?*
>
> *Bissonnette: The child.*
>
> *Pelley: Identified him?*
>
> *Bissonnette: Yep. Grabbed one of the females, again asked her, "Hey, who is that?" She said, "Osama bin Laden."*
>
> *Pelley: Does a cheer go up among the SEALs? You start shaking hands? Patting each other on the back?*
>
> *Bissonnette: Not – nothing. It's all business. We're on the clock here. So, we call up the commanding officer. He comes upstairs. Looks at the body. We give him what we have so far of – hey, here's what he looks like, take a look. He's tall. Woman and kid confirm it. He took one look. He said, "OK, I think that's him." — CNN*[68]

Seriously? The most identifiable man on the planet could only be ID'd by a kid and a woman? And because he was "tall" that SEALed the deal? *"OK, I think that's him."* Really? Give me a break. If Osama bin Laden was really the threat we were all led to believe he was, our intelligence agencies would practically have the hairs on his head and face named, numbered and memorized. They'd know every detail about him and these SEALS would have been thoroughly briefed before going after him. There would be no question as to his identity.

But at this point, all *we the people* are left with are questions. After all, they supposedly dumped the body into the ocean leaving us with no real proof whatsoever to substantiate any of the stories we were fed by the mainstream media. If they truly wanted to avoid the rapid development of conspiracy theories, that definitely was not the right thing to do.

If we don't want to partake of Babylon's sins, I believe we're really going to have to get good at discerning what is true and what is false, because here’s the harsh reality if we don’t: More innocent men and women are going to pay a very high price for the god of war.

Again, let me say, I do not believe this is something that can get fixed with a political solution. **Coming out of Babylon does not require votes, picket signs, guns, nor a violent revolution, it requires repentance.**

> *If my people, which are called by my name, shall* ***humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways;*** *then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.* (2 Chronicles 7:14)

On that note, I feel it is appropriate to close this book with one final chapter concerning the need for the Church to also repent and “come out of Babylon” in these Last Days...

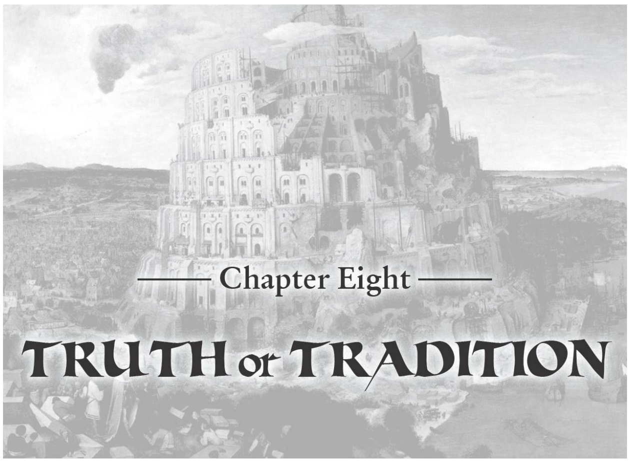

O LORD, my strength, and my fortress, and my refuge in the day of affliction, the Gentiles shall come unto thee from the ends of the earth, and shall say, Surely our fathers have inherited lies, vanity, and things wherein there is no profit.
(Jeremiah 16:19)

God has used Babylon largely as His place of judgment for the Hebrew nation. ***When they refused to honor God the way He told them He is to be honored, obeyed and worshiped,*** He gave them over to the gods they chose over Him. So it was that they went into exile and captivity.

> *Behold, the days come, that all that is in thine house, and that which thy fathers have laid up in store unto this day, shall be carried into Babylon: nothing shall be left, saith the LORD.* (2 Kings 20:17)

> *But because our fathers had provoked the God of heaven to wrath, He gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this temple and deported the people to Babylon.* (Ezra 5:12 NASB)

The Jews spent 70 years there in captivity.[1] Psalm 90:10 defines a generation as 70 years (80 if by strength). Thus, it would appear that an entire generation went into bondage. Then, finally after a full generation's time, the Jews came out of Babylon. Unfortunately, they carried Babylon with them when they left. They brought back many pagan customs, beliefs and practices from their time there, just as they did when they left Egypt (during a previous time of bondage). Those customs, ideas and practices became intermingled with the true faith of YHVH, and it always got them into trouble.

The traditions brought forth from Babylon were the primary cause of many of the issues that Jesus had to deal with when confronting the Pharisees and Sadducees of His day. Today, His Church has basically gone and done the same thing. Many of the traditions and practices of Christian churches today are rooted in pagan Babylon.[2]

As we have already seen, the United States was founded on things that originated not with the one true God of the Bible, but rather with the gods that (originally) came out of Babylon. In the previous chapters, I spent a lot of time talking about our government. My goal with this final chapter is to show you some of the things I believe we need to take a serious look at within our churches and ultimately within ourselves.

As I am writing this chapter, I'd like to point out that today is Christmas Day, 2011. Therefore, I want to pause for a moment and address a comment I made in the *Man of Many Names* chapter concerning why I believe Christians should have nothing to do with the celebrations of December 25th. The origins of Christmas are directly related to the thesis of this entire book series — and it all traces directly back to Nimrod and Babylon. Before I go any further though, I feel it is necessary to lay a little bit of a foundation for this portion of the chapter:

The dictionary defines the word:

> **rebuke** as: *to express sharp disapproval or criticism of (someone) because of their behavior or actions.*
>
> **condemn** as: *to pronounce to be guilty; sentence to punishment: to condemn a murderer to life imprisonment.*

As I point out some things, please keep the above definitions in mind. Although, rebuke to the one being rebuked often feels like condemnation, it is neither my desire nor intent to condemn anyone. Look at it this way: If I were stepping off into some sin like fornication, adultery, alcohol, drugs or whatever, would you not tell me that it is wrong? Or would you just let me continue on to my own destruction? I would hope you would seek to correct me and show me that the path I am on is not good.

Having said that, how well do alcoholics typically receive the message that what they are doing is wrong? How well does the fornicating adulterer take it when you tell them that they need to break off the affair? How well does the drug addict take it when you tell them they can't have anymore?

Usually, the response is not good and is often followed by, *"Stop judging me!"* or *"What gives you the right to condemn me?"* and other similar responses along those lines. I pray neither of those are the responses you will feel toward me. My hope is that you take what I write in the spirit in which it is intended, rather than becoming defensive. My sincere hope and desire is that this chapter will cause you to think about some things perhaps you have never considered before. Please do your own research and see if the Holy Spirit bears witness to what I am saying.

PAGANISM AND CHRISTIANITY

> *I heard another voice from heaven saying, "Come out of Babylon, my people, so that you do not participate in her sins and suffer from any of her plagues."* (Revelation 18:4 GOD'S WORD Translation)

Even as our troops have come out of Babylon (Iraq) in a physical sense, I believe the Church needs to begin its exodus from Babylon in a spiritual sense. The concept of a son of god being born on December 25th, goes all the way back to Nimrod, progressing into Tammuz, then Osiris, later Zeus, Mithra and a host of other sun gods who were all celebrated on the day we now call Christmas.

> *The actual observance of the day of Jesus' birth was long in coming. In particular, during the first two centuries of Christianity there was strong opposition to recognizing birthdays of martyrs or, for that matter, of Jesus. Numerous church fathers offered sarcastic comments about the pagan custom of celebrating birthdays…*
>
> — *Encyclopedia Britannica*
>
> *Christmas was not among the earliest festivals of the Church. Irenaeus and Tertullian omit it from their lists of feasts...*
>
> — *The Catholic Encyclopedia*

Writing about this very issue, Tertullian (155-220 AD) reports that the early Christians did not join the pagans in their holiday customs and celebrations.

> *On your* [pagans] *day of gladness, we* [Christians] ***neither cover our doorposts with wreaths,*** *nor intrude upon the day with lamps…We are accused of lower sacrilege because we do not celebrate along with you the holidays…*
>
> — Tertullian (c. 197, W), 3.44.
>
> ***Christians have no acquaintance with the festivals of the Gentiles.***

> — Tertullian (c. 198, W), 4.24.
>
> *You Christians have your own registers, your own calendar.* ***You have nothing to do with the festivities of the world. In fact, you are called to the very opposite…***
>
> — Tertullian (c. 2122, W), 3.101.
>
> *We must now address the subject of holidays and other extraordinary festivities. We sometimes excuse these to our wantonness, sometimes to our timidity – in opposition to the common faith and discipline. The first point, indeed, on which I will join is this: whether a servant of God should share with the very nations themselves in matters of this kind – either in dress, food, or in any other kind of festivity.… "There is no communion between light and darkness," between life and death. Or else we should rescind what has been written, "The world will rejoice, but you will grieve"…When the world rejoices, let us grieve. And when the world afterward grieves, we will rejoice….* ***There are certain gift days, by which some adjust the claim of honor; or with others, the debt of wages….If men have consecrated for themselves this custom from superstition, why do you…participate in festivities consecrated to idols?***
>
> — Tertullian (c. 200, W), 3.68, 69.
>
> *"**The pagan Romans clad their door posts with green and branching laurels**... **In the Saturnalia... presents come and go**... There are... gifts... and banquets... yet **Christians should have no acquaintance with the festivals of the pagans.**"*
>
> — Tertullian quoted by David Bercot, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs,* 1998, p. 342
>
> *To the pagans, the Saturnalia was fun. To the Christians, the Saturnalia was an abomination in homage to a disreputable god who had no existence anyway.*
>
> — Earl Count, *4,000 Years of Christmas: A Gift from the Ages* (1997)
>
> *Faithful men of God who knew and loved the Scriptures of truth* ***fought against the mingling of paganism with the name of Christ. They were valiant in opposing the entry of Christmas and its festivals among the believers.***
>
> — R. F. Becker, *The Truth about Christmas: Flee from Idolatry*
>
> *The early Christians discouraged the use of evergreen decorations in Christian homes and assemblies, because their display had long been associated with heathen festivals.*
>
> — Campbell, *The Story of Christmas*

Historically speaking, Tertullian and many others strongly expressed the disapproval by early Christians of those who participated in pagan holiday festivities on December 25th and at other times as well. Clearly, the Christian Church of today however, is *much* different than it was in the first two centuries after Christ.

> *If you spend time searching God's Word for most of the common practices in conventional churches, you will rarely find them. If you go further and spend time tracing the history of these practices, you will soon discover that most of our religious habits are man-made choices. In fact, you're likely to discern a pattern about the way that we "do church" these days: If we do it, it's probably not in the Bible as one of the practices of the early church! Does it surprise you that most of what we do in religious circles has no precedent in scripture? This includes many of the activities within church services, the education and ordination of clergy, the routines commonly used in youth ministry, the methods of raising funds for ministry, the ways in which music is used in churches, even the presence and nature of church buildings…new perspectives and practices that churches have held on to for many years…*
>
> — George Barna, *Pagan Christianity,* p. xxvii-xxix

Christians today are showing that they are no different than the Israelites of the Bible, who were prone to straying in the direction of pagan practices.

> *And they rejected his statutes, and his covenant that he made with their fathers, and his testimonies which he testified against them; and* ***they followed vanity, and became vain,***

> ***and went after the heathen that were round about them, concerning whom the LORD had charged them, that they should not do like them.***
>
> (2 Kings 17:15)

> *And* ***he did that which was evil in the sight of the LORD, after the abominations of the heathen,*** *whom the LORD cast out before the children of Israel.*
>
> (2 Kings 21:2)

> *Thus saith the LORD,* ***Learn not the way of the heathen,*** *and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven; for the heathen are dismayed at them.* (Jeremiah 10:2)

What is the *"way of the heathen"* that the Lord was constantly warning His people to avoid? Pretty much anything that was not of Him! It's quite simple really. If God warned against it, the people of God were not to do it. Nothing has changed. God's laws and commands remain in full effect. The first one being:

> ***"Thou shalt have no other gods before me!"***

The Hebrew phrase translated to *"before me"* in English literally means, "before my face." In other words, God is saying, *"I don't even want to see any hint of a false god among you! Get it out of my face!"*

Barne's Notes on the Bible says:

> *Before me — Literally, "before my face." The meaning is that no god should be worshipped in addition to Yahweh. Compare Exodus 20:23. The polytheism which was the besetting sin of the Israelites did not in later times exclude Yahweh,* ***but associated Him with false deities****.*
>
> — *Barne's Notes on the Bible* , commentary on Exodus 20:3 [emphasis mine]

I've already shown you how many gods are "in His face" all over our nation's capital. But the Church compounds the problem by participating in things like Christmas and Easter — especially while doing so in His name.

One of the responses I hear most often when making comments like that is, *"But that's not what it means to me..."* followed by some excuse about not thinking about other gods, but rather focusing on Christ while doing what they do during those holidays.

It really doesn't matter what it means to us.
It matters what it means to God!

While Christians argue that they are not worshipping or even thinking about any other gods on Christmas and Easter; claiming that their hearts and minds are solely on Christ, I have to ask how are those justifications any different from the rationale of the Israelites in the wilderness when they set up the altar with the golden calf?

> *Now when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people assembled about Aaron and said to him, "Come, make us a god who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." Aaron said to them, "Tear off the gold rings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." Then all the people tore off the gold rings which were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. He took this from their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool and made it into a molten calf; and they said,* ***"This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt."***
>
> *Now when Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and* ***Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD."*** *So the next day they rose early and offered*

> *burnt offerings, and* ***brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play.*** (Exodus 32:1-6 NASB)

Notice what they did. They set something up and declared that the works of their hands was God — the One who brought them up from their slavery in Egypt. They worshiped a representation of a pagan deity, proclaiming that it *"shall be a feast to the LORD!"* The word "LORD" there in English is translated from the Hebrew word YHVH, which is the true name of God. Thus, they were doing as the heathen do — and doing it in the name of YHVH while claiming that He was the one they were thinking about as they brought gifts, ate, drank and made merry.

That is *exactly* what Christians all over the world are doing with Christmas. They are associating the Son of God with traditions that have always been attributed to the false sun gods of antiquity and participating in rituals that have nothing to do with the one true God of the Bible or His Son, Jesus Christ. If you keep reading that story in Exodus, you will see that God was extremely unhappy about that sort of thing. It didn't matter what the people thought. Clearly it mattered more what He thought about it all.

The next usual response I hear from Christians is, *"But God knows my heart..."* Thinking about that response, I posted the following question on my Facebook page on December 13, 2011:

> ***If your spouse cheated on you with someone else, but you were gracious enough to woo him/her back (and did so at great personal cost) and then after coming back to you, they started to celebrate your birthday on the day the person they committed adultery with was born — while doing so in your name — how would that make you feel? Even if they said, "But I'm thinking of you. Honest. Oh come on, honey, you know my heart." Would you be OK with that? Seriously?***

I received over 150 responses! Before people realized what I was really asking, these were some of the responses and my interaction with them:

> ***Male Friend A:*** *This situation actually hurts to think of!*
>
> **Me:** I think so too.
>
> ***Male Friend B:*** *Where did you hear about this situation? Is this something you read, or based upon some folks you know ?*
>
> **Me:** It was a disturbing situation I discovered that was happening to someone I love dearly.
>
> ***Male Friend A:*** *Oh gosh! I'm sorry to know that.*
>
> ***Male Friend C:*** *I know that Person as well. I agree, very disturbing.* [this person got it!]
>
> **Me:** Me too. Yeah [Friend C], quite a few have heard about it. Most just don't care. I appreciate your concern guys. Pray that the wayward spouse realizes what they are doing and has a change of heart. The other one doesn't deserve this.
>
> ***Female Friend A:*** *That is just so wrong*
>
> **Me:** I agree. How can someone do that? Especially to a spouse willing to love them so much!
>
> ***Female Friend A:*** *They only get away with what one lets them get away with.*
>
> ***Male Friend D:*** *Do you think the spouse knows the correct day to celebrate and just*

chooses not to? Or do you think it’s unintentional? [this person got it!]

Male Friend E: *It’s like your spouse knowing your day off but, takes her day off on her ex-lover’s day off. Hmm, Probably just a “bad habit.” What’s another word for habit? Oh yeah .... “tradition”...* [this person got it!]

Female Friend B: *Betrayal once is hard enough; betrayal twice is unacceptable; betrayal thrice(?), hmmm...Forgive and forget which would mean to forget the one who betrayed you, end the relationship, and move on...*

Me: Well, when you’re married to someone, I would think you’d at least do them the courtesy of remembering their birthday. I mean, that’s almost as bad as saying someone else’s name while being intimate. Can’t be good.

Thing is, this girl should know better. Her husband is truly an amazing guy. I know him. He’s crazy in love with her even though she constantly does things that hurt him. I asked him why he puts up with it. He said, “I just love her so much. More than my own life!” I was reading a story once that showed how far he went to woo her back. Wow. I mean it was insane how much he did to get her back. And she does this? It’s criminal. Yet he still wants to stay with her.

Some people just don’t know what they’ve got.

Female Friend A: *Sounds like a addiction, he needs to go cold turkey. Once a cheat always a cheat. They just get better at hiding it. Not to mention he is now making her a idol. And we know the commandment about idols.*

Me: Yeah... I hear ya. How in love can someone be to take that kind of continual abuse? I know I couldn’t deal with it. My previous wife slept with someone else. Short of crucifixion, or a terminal illness, I don’t know if I can imagine anything more painful than that was. We ended up divorced. But if I took her back and she did that... wow. Game over. But he keeps pursuing her — to the ends of the universe if need be.

I don’t think it’s idolatry though. It’s the best example of unconditional love I’ve ever seen — because he knows that she has a lot of damage from the physical and emotional abuse of her previous relationships. He’s willing to love her through it though.

Female Friend C: *This is an awesome perspective... I wish more would see it this way.* [this person got it!]

Female Friend A: *But even God punished Israel for adultery!*

Me: Yeah [Female Friend C], he tells me all the time that I have a lot to learn. In many ways I wish I could love like he does. What an amazing role model! I am so blessed to know him.

Yes, He did [Female Friend A]... but He also pursues her even to this day. And one day Israel will turn back to Him because of it. My friend reminds me of that all the time.

Male Friend F: *That’s an interesting scenario. Call it quits, but that’s my personal opinion. Adultery is biblical ground for divorce. The most disrespectful part is celebrating your birthday on the day they committed adultery. Maybe I misunderstood, but the day they chose to celebrate is not the spouse’s actual birthday right? Anyone that will commit adultery, then rub it in your face by making a celebration of it has not been “wooed” back. Cut your losses and move on. Sometimes people get in God’s way, and again, just my*

> *opinion, but it seems 100% clear that the cheating spouse was in a RELATIONSHIP with another person. There is a huge difference between a random sexual encounter and having two relationships going on in which special dates are remembered. If it was just cheating, I'd say, to each their own, but that scenario is way out of line. Cheating is forgivable, starting another relationship is not.*
>
> ***Female Friend A:*** *Sorry, but your friend is a fool! As long as he takes it, she will do it.*
>
> **Me:** Maybe so. But the Bible gives a great illustration of this whole scenario in the book of Hosea. God pursues and pursues His bride!
>
> ***Female Friend A****: But he also wants repentance!*
>
> **Me:** Indeed, He does.

Those were just a few highlights of the passionate responses that thread generated and my interaction with those Facebook friends. Similar responses continued for awhile until someone exposed what I was really saying.

A little over 3,000 years ago, the prophet Nathan used a similar parable to get King David's attention.[3] The results were the same in that Facebook thread as they were in that Old Testament story. People got emotional and drew from personal experiences (pain) to give their opinions — and then they realized that *they* were the ones being rebuked as the unfaithful spouse.

> *And God said, Let us make man in our image,* ***after our likeness****: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So* ***God created man in his own image****, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.* (Genesis 1:26,27)

Man was created in the physical appearance of God as well as in His *likeness*. At the realization that we are the bride who has confused our Groom's birthday with that of His arch-enemy, this should give us pause to think about our usual defense of Christmas. If we feel this way as humans made in the image and *likeness* of God, why should we think that God does not feel the same way?

In that light, *"Oh, but you know my heart"* just doesn't seem to cut it, does it? If your spouse said that to you, would it work? No, and I don't think it flies too well with our Heavenly Spouse either.

Is this a salvation issue?

No, I do not believe this is a salvation issue. Nor do I believe that a Christian who celebrates Christmas or Easter is going to go to hell for doing so. That said, I still do not believe God is pleased with a heart/mind that knows to do good and does it not.

> *Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.* (James 4:17)

Is celebrating Christ's birth the right thing to do? I see no one in the Bible doing so, but I would not go so far as to say that it is wrong. Angels, shepherds and wise men celebrated it. Indeed, the birth of Christ is an amazing and wonderful thing to celebrate. But what about doing so on December 25th? Ah, now there is where I see a problem.

Here are a few books I highly recommend on the subject:

- ***Too Long in the Sun***, by Richard Rives

- ***Time is the Ally of Deceit***, by Richard Rives
- ***The Pagan-Christian Connection Exposed***, by Michael Rood

"Well that's just the day I choose to celebrate His birth!"

Since when do we choose what day to celebrate someone else's birthday? Should it not be on the day they were actually born?

"But no one knows when Christ was born! So, why not celebrate it on December 25th?"

First of all, I believe that is a lie. I do not believe that "no one knows when Christ was born." I believe the Bible tells us *exactly* when He was born, and it most certainly was not on December 25th!

The Bible gives us all we need to know concerning God's redemptive plan for mankind. In it, God Himself tells us which holidays He wants us to celebrate and specifically when we are to do so. They are called the *Seven Feasts of God*. See Leviticus 23 for a full description, but in a nutshell, they are:

1. **Passover**
2. **Unleavened Bread**
3. **First Fruits**
4. **Pentecost**
5. **Trumpets**
6. **Atonement**
7. **Tabernacles**

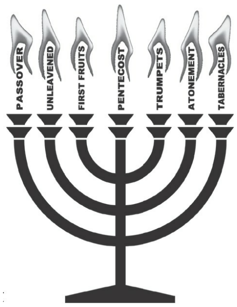

Figure 84

The first thing I want you to know is that these are not the Feasts of the Jews. ***They are the Feasts of YHVH!***

> *These are the feasts of the LORD, even holy convocations, which ye shall proclaim in their seasons.* (Leviticus 23:4)

On Mt. Sinai, God essentially gave Moses the "Script" for His "Divine Drama" and commanded His people to learn and practice it. If they did, they would know the timing and exact nature of each of God's Divine Acts, and most notably the works of His only begotten Son, Jesus. If we do the same, so will we.

Everything God did in the Bible, lines up with these Feasts. Thus, everything Jesus did also had to line up. And you know what? They did! Thus, if we want to start looking for the time of Christ's real birthday, we should start there — not during the time of pagan Winter Festivals that were always associated with false gods, and originated with Nimrod in Babylon. Therefore, I believe part of coming out of Babylon means coming into an understanding of our Hebrew roots. After all, the Bible was written by Hebrews, for Hebrews, in a Hebrew mindset. So why not look at the Scriptures through the lens of the Hebrews instead of the historically pagan Gentiles? When we do, everything becomes *much* clearer.

Jewish tradition says that Adam was created on Yom Teruah (aka the Feast of Trumpets and Rosh haShanah). I cannot confirm that from the Scriptures, but based on what I can confirm, that notion seems plausible. For I believe that the "Second Adam" was born on that day, and Stellarium[4] appears to confirm that notion. But Americans (especially) will perhaps find the exact date a little bit disturbing.

The Fall Feasts happen... well, in the Fall. And the beginning of the Fall Feasts is usually in the September/October time frame. Keep that in mind. Now let's look at a New Testament Scripture. I believe Revelation 12 gives us the best clue as to when Jesus was born.

> ***And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars****: And she being with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered. And there appeared another wonder in heaven; and behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven*

> *crowns upon his heads. And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth: and the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born. And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her child was caught up unto God, and to his throne.* (Revelation 12:1-5)

I've read a lot of commentaries on this passage and most (if not all) of them try to say that the "man child" is the Church. I strongly disagree. The Church is always referred to as a *female* and as the "*bride* of Christ." John is not all of a sudden advocating homosexuality. No. The Church is not the "man child" to whom he is referring. Furthermore, the Church is not to rule all nations with a rod of iron, nor has she yet been caught up unto God and to His throne. The only One who fits the above description is Jesus, the Son of God who was born of a virgin.

In the heavens, there is a constellation known as Virgo (the virgin). God has placed His divine plan both in the Scriptures as well as in the stars above.

> *The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork.* (Psalm 19:1)

Yes, they do. The above passage in Revelation is describing a stellar alignment, which is indeed showing His marvelous handiwork. That stellar alignment happened exactly as described on only one day in human history: ***September 11, 3 BC*** (imagine that)!

Using the free software available at *stellarium.org*, you can go back in time to September 11, 3 BC (note: the software reckons 3 BC as **-2**) and see it for yourself. This is how you do it:

- First, set the *Time Zone Settings* on your computer to Jerusalem time (UTC+02:20).
- Open the software and select F6 on your keyboard to access the *Location* window. Set your viewing location for Baghdâd, Iraq, then close that window.
- Select F5 on your keyboard to access the *Date and Time* window. In the year window option, highlight whatever is there and replace it with "0," then use the down arrow to back the year date off to -2. Set the month window to "9" and the day window to "11." Set the software clock to 5 a.m. and then close that window.
- Select F4 on your keyboard to access the *View* window. In the *Sky* menu, check off the "Show planets" and "Scale Moon" boxes. Then, select the *Markings* tab and check off the "Show lines," the "Show boundaries" and the "Show art" boxes. Back off the "Art brightness" value to ".25," then lose that window.
- Hit the letter "A" on your keyboard to get rid of the atmosphere.
- Using your mouse, click on the sky and spin the view around by dragging left or right until you see the "E" on the horizon. This indicates that you are now facing the eastern sky. You should see Virgo's head and shoulders, with Venus and Mercury within them.
- Hit the letter "G" on your keyboard to get rid of the ground.

I believe this is what the Magi saw from their location in ancient Babylon. It was the exact fulfillment of what the apostle John would later write in Revelation 12. If the atmosphere and ground-plain views were turned on, you would just barely see the sun about to come up over the eastern horizon. Let's see how this alignment gives us a better idea of what may have so impressed those ancient sky-watchers.

- Hit F5 again to bring the *Date and Time* window back up. Drag it off to the right side of your screen.
- Move your cursor back over the sky, and using the scroll wheel on your mouse, scroll back to zoom out a bit more in order to reveal Jupiter and the constellation of Leo.
- Back the date off to 8/6/-2 (August 6, 3 BC).
- Advance the day window, one day at a time and watch the dance that takes place with the moon, planets and constellations.

Depending on how far out you have zoomed your view, you should see the moon at the top of your screen. Venus and Jupiter should be right in front of Leo's face.

Jupiter is known as the “king planet.” Venus is known as the “queen planet.” Beginning around August 6 of 3 BC, Venus chases her king. As you advance the days forward, you will see that the waning moon crosses over the two planets around the 9th of August. On the 12th of August, Venus sits on top of Jupiter. This would have been a very bright alignment!

As you advance forward in time, Venus leaves her king and is joined by Mercury (who was known as the “messenger of the gods” in mythology). This would have also been a bright alignment. These two head straight for the constellation Virgo (the virgin).

Meanwhile, by September 11th, Jupiter, the “king planet” literally parks and sits over Regulus, the “king star,” which is in the paw of Leo, the “king constellation.” Again, this would have been a very bright alignment and a significant sign to the ancient astronomers. If there truly were “three kings” that witnessed the birth of Christ, these were the three![5]

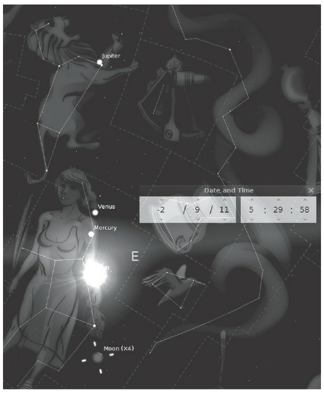

Date and Time
-2 / 9 / 11 5 : 29 : 58

Figure 85

On September 11, 3 BC (-2), we see the waxing sliver of a New Moon (which signals the beginning of the Fall Feasts) under the feet of Virgo, who is now “clothed with the sun” shining brightly in her belly, with Mercury and Venus at her head. If we consider the nine bright stars of Leo plus the planets Jupiter, Venus and Mercury at and above her head, we have an exact match to the description John gives in Revelation 12:1-5!

Thus, I believe the heavens declare the glory of God, and as such, they reveal that the true birth date of Jesus was September 11, 3 BC (-2) and not December 25th. Dr. Michael Heiser agrees and has a good presentation on it that you can watch here: **www.michaelsheiser.com/Videos/Rev12/Rev12.html**

NOTE: *Be sure to reset your computer’s Time Zone back to your original settings after you close the software.*

Jewish scholar, Mark Biltz on the other hand gives a very compelling argument for Christ being born later in the Fall Feasts, during Sukkot (Feast of Tabernacles). You can watch his video presentation at: **www.babylonrisingbooks.com/videosC803.html**

Here’s the thing: I am not an expert on this stuff by any stretch of the imagination, but as I understand it, the Fall Feasts last 23 days total: from Tishri 1 to Tishri 23. They are broken down as follows:

1. **Feast of Trumpets** (aka Yom Teruah and/or Rosh haShanna): Tishri 1
2. **Day of Atonement**: Tishri 10
3. **Feast of Tabernacles**: Tishri 15-21 with the 8th day of assembly on the 22nd and the giving of the Torah on the 23rd.

The Hebrew month “Tishri” would roughly land around the time we call September, but the date varies due to our reckoning of time by the sun versus the moon and the Gregorian Calendar versus the Hebrew calendar.

As much as Mark Biltz’s descriptions make a lot of sense (and may even be absolutely true), I still lean toward the birth being on the Feast of Trumpets, primarily because of Revelation 12:1-5. That Scripture (at least for me) takes all the guesswork, assumptions, and “coincidences” (as interesting as they may be) out of the equation.

Regardless, either way, many scholars agree that Jesus was born sometime during the Fall Feasts. These feasts last for three weeks! So, why settle for a one-day pagan holiday that has more to do with the Antichrist than Jesus Christ, when we can have a wonderful three-week party with God, celebrating His Son, His way, on the days He set aside for our benefit and His divine plan!? There may be other, more sobering reasons to observe this season too.

September (Tishri) is the seventh month of the Hebrew calendar, and judging by the sliver of a New Moon, September 11, 3 BC certainly appears to have been the date for Yom Teruah (Trumpets/Rosh haShanah), which begins with *two witnesses* confirming the sighting of the New Moon.

Figure 86

Two witnesses? Does that sound familiar to anyone? There are Two Witnesses described in the Book of Revelation! Could the time of Jesus' birth be related to the timing of His return as well?

Many do in fact believe that Christ will return on Yom Teruah during the blowing of the trumpets — specifically the "last trump." Could it be that Jesus will return on His birthday? If so, and you are one of those Christians who celebrates His birthday on the day that the Antichrist was born (December 25th) you'll probably miss the party.

Take note of the *Parable of the Ten Virgins* in Matthew 25:1-13. The statement in verse 13, *"Watch therefore, for ye know not the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh."* is a direct reference to the Feast of Yom Teruah (Trumpets), which has always been known as *"the day no man knows the day or the hour."* The reason for this is that the new moon had to be verified by the two witnesses as appearing at a very specific point on the horizon as viewed from the Temple mount. If it didn't appear on one day (which begins at sunset), it began on the next. Thus, the phrase *"the day no man knows the day or the hour"* was a Hebrew idiom for that particular time of the Feast of Trumpets.

If that is true, it only serves as yet another reason (among many) that I believe proves Christians need to not have anything to do with Christmas. It is a day of deception, and it has nothing to do with our Savior or His real birthday. It is a day that will keep you in darkness and lead you astray concerning the days to come. Worst of all, it is a day that has roots going back to Babylon and as the title of the previous chapter suggests, we need to come out of Babylon! This is yet one more way for the church to do so.

A friend of mine on Facebook posted the following:

> *When the Da Vinci Code came out a few years ago, pastors were incensed about the movie promoting a fictional idea that our Messiah had children by one of His followers. Books were passed out in churches condemning this movie and exposing the lies. Sermons were preached everywhere attacking the lies in the movie. Meanwhile, each year hundreds of thousands of churches institutionally promote the lie that Christmas is about our Messiah among other vacant theologies.*
>
> *Where is the same indignation about those lies?*
>
> *In this case, why are those of us who expose these lies for the purpose of helping people to see the truth, the ones subject to condemnation while the promoters of the lies are defended?*

I can certainly identify with the lamentation of his last question. I have come under a great deal of attack for taking a stand against Christmas. Sadly, the most resistance came from clergy and seminary-trained individuals who should know better. On one hand, they will say, *"We know Jesus was not born on December 25th."* On the other, all of their songs, banners, cards and signage will indicate otherwise. That is both hypocrisy and lying wrapped up in one! How does that bring honor and glory to God?

WHY LUCIFER LOVES CHRISTMAS AND EASTER

My personal opinion is that Lucifer loves Christmas. Why? Because I think the Adversary is rather pleased with the overall effects of that particular holiday.

TEN REASONS:

1. More suicides than any other time of the year.
2. Pastors believing in and perpetuating a lie from their pulpits.
3. Parents lying to their children about both Santa Clause and the birth of Christ.
4. Entire generations of gluttonous, spoiled brats who are never satisfied with what they have and demand more every year.
5. People going into debt, thus enslaving themselves to a system created by Lucifer himself.
6. People (including Christians) *totally* unaware of the true holidays that YHVH Himself told us to celebrate.
7. Churches spending money on Christmas lights, trees (that are really ancient representations of Osiris' phallus) and other decorations steeped in ancient occult rituals; putting them all over the house of God (church) just like the Jews did to the Temple.
8. Churches putting on huge plays, spending money on costumes, props and lights instead of widows and orphans, thus corrupting pure religion as defined by Scripture: *"Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world."* (James 1:27)
9. The world laughs at and mocks us as being ignorant Christians, because they know the truth (that Dec. 25th is a pagan day of sun-god worship).
10. Christians blasting those who try to share the truth.

I could go on and on, but I think you get the picture.

Do people get saved on December 25th and on Easter as a result of church "outreach" activities on those days? Sure. I've participated in, wrote and directed many Christmas and Easter plays. I even played the part of Christ in a number of Passion Plays that drew crowds who don't normally go to church. Over the years, I would say several dozen people got saved as a result of attending those plays too. But the reality is we should be doing that all year long; that is, we should be doing things that draw people to Christ. I just maintain (now) that we should never have to do it through lies!

Many will try to tell me, that Christmas and Easter are the two times of the year that people who normally would never go to church, will. My question is where do you see that model in the Scriptures? The world is not *supposed* to come to the Church, the Church is supposed to go to the world!

> *And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.* ***Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you****: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.* (Matthew 28:18-20)

Jesus didn't give a Great Commission, commanding us to do things that would draw the world to come through the doors of a building. He commanded us to ***go out to all the world*** and to teach the nations all that He commanded us to do. Since Jesus was the Word that was with God, and was God made flesh and dwelt among us,[6] that means the commands given in the Old Testament are just as much His commands as those given in the New Testament.

God, through His Word, commanded us to have nothing to do with the practices of the pagan heathens. Christmas and Easter are both celebrations that are totally and completely related to Nimrod and his mother-sister-wife Semiramis. Christmas celebrates his birth, not Jesus' birth. Easter is based completely on the fertility goddess myths that were started by and centered on the worship of Semiramis/Isis/Ishtar (from which we get the word Easter) and has nothing to do with the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, if you only knew how many more people could be reached around the world with the kind of money most churches spend on Christmas and Easter celebrations, you would be absolutely shocked! I know one local mega-church that literally spends *millions of dollars* on a massive Christmas show every year (that also depicts Santa Clause). Others do the same for Easter. The problem is, ***most*** of the people in those audiences are *already* saved. Do you know how far that kind of money would go in third-world countries and on both the foreign and domestic mission fields? I was a missionary for nearly seven years, so I know how far that much money could go. The key word in that last sentence is “go,” which is what we should be doing and where our money should be spent in support of missionaries who are doing just that.

Having been a missionary and having worked with missionaries in nearly a dozen countries around the world, I know firsthand that pretty much all of them struggle to get by with the barest minimum of financial support. I have seen hundreds of thousands of dollars go toward building gyms and basketball courts, while missionaries struggle to get a church to give them $100 a month to help them actually do what Jesus commanded us to do. That is truly sad, and I believe it both grieves and angers our Lord’s heart.

All said and done, I’d say the devil actually has far more to gain from Christmas and Easter than do the lost and needy. And when it comes to the Great Deception that’s on the horizon, those two pagan holidays have only been preparation for a payoff later.[7]

THE WHOLE WORLD WORSHIPS THE BEAST

> *And I saw one of his heads as it were wounded to death; and his deadly wound was healed: and* ***all the world wondered after the beast****. And they worshipped the dragon which gave power unto the beast:* ***and they worshipped the beast****, saying, Who is like unto the beast? who is able to make war with him?* (Revelation 13:3,4)

Have you ever wondered why the Scriptures say that the *whole world* will worship the Beast? I believe they will because they already have! Maybe they did so in ignorance, but if you can get someone to ignorantly follow you, it is that much easier to convince them to do more later. This is why I think the pagan traditions that have crept into the true faith of Jesus Christ are so very dangerous.

Does God honor the heart of the Believer who loves Christ, who sings to Him and celebrates His birthday on December 25th and His resurrection on Easter in ignorance? I believe He does. After all, they don’t know any better. However, we live in a day when people no longer need to do things or live in ignorance. All the truth we need is here and readily available. But now, people *refuse* to hear it and blast people like me who seek to share it. Being willfully ignorant is different from simply not knowing something. As a traveling evangelist I once heard put it, *“Willful ignorance is like being dumb on purpose.”*

Yes, I think Lucifer, the Father of Lies, Satan, that old Serpent the Devil loves Christmas and Easter! More Christians celebrate on the days that *he* created to be a holiday than they do the seven Holy Feasts that *God* created to be observed and celebrated. Thus, the whole world has already been worshipping the beast — and that right there must be the ultimate snub to God.

I think Lucifer is probably the biggest egomaniac in the universe. He will do everything he can to get people to worship him, even if it means slapping the name of Jesus over the former names of Zeus, Osiris, Mithra, Baal, Tammuz, Nimrod, etc. to do it. I can almost see him laughing at us and mocking God. I believe he looks at all of this and says,

“Ha, ha, ha YHVH! Look at that! They know nothing about YOUR holidays, but they love mine! And he, he, he, Ho, Ho, Ho... they actually think they are celebrating YOUR Son’s birthday! Wow! Gotta love it. Your people are so easily deceived!”;

Meanwhile Jesus is all alone on Yom Teruah (His real birthday), with only a few people gathered to honor that and all of the other days His Father set aside for us to worship Him in Spirit and in Truth.

Speaking of *Ho-Ho-Ho,* I won’t even bother to go into all of the Satanic links there are to Santa Clause, but consider this: In Hebrew, *Ho-Ho-Ho* would be spelled with the letters *Hey Vav-Hey Vav-Hey Vav.* The letter *Hey* at the beginning of a word means “the” and the letter *Vav* has a numerical value of 6. Hmm... Does that mean, *“Ho-Ho-Ho”* really means, *“The 6 -The 6 -The 6,”* which is of course the number of the beast? Maybe it’s just a coincidence. Then again, maybe not. All of this comes from Nimrod. And as we’ve already learned, Nimrod is the Antichrist. So, apparently it all fits together quite well.

Church, it's time we come out of Babylon!

If you cannot receive any of the things I've been saying about Christmas and Easter, please at least take the time to do your own research into the various topics I've raised in this book. A good place to start might be to watch the video, *Truth or Tradition*[8] by Jim Staley. Please do so before being tempted to criticize me or post negative comments about this material on reviews, blogs and/or Facebook pages. Pastor Jim Staley does a fantastic job of tracing the origins of our traditions, where they came from (Babylon) and why we started doing them, as well as why we should stop.

THE COMING GREAT DECEPTION

What does all of this boil down to? I believe that as both Americans as well as believers in Jesus Christ, we must wake up and speak up! We can no longer stay silent. We have been lied to about a great many things, and if we don't wake up soon and begin learning and teaching others about the truth, it will be that much easier for billions to be deceived in the coming Great Deception that Jesus spoke of, which will spread like a cancer in the Last Days.

> *For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.* (Matthew 24:24)

Some have argued that *"if it were possible"* means that it is not going to be possible. However, both Jesus and the apostle Paul seem to indicate just the opposite is true:

> *And he said,* ***Take heed that ye be not deceived****: for many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and the time draweth near: go ye not therefore after them.* (Luke 21:8)

> ***Be not deceived****; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.* (Galations 6:7)

> ***Let no man deceive you by any means****: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition;* (2 Thessalonians 2:3)

These are admonitions to not let or to not be deceived. That implies that it is indeed possible. It is up to us to not let that happen. But if it has been so easy to deceive us so far, I feel confident in saying, *"You ain't seen nothin' yet!"* It is going to get worse, much worse. Whether I am 100% correct in all that I have written here or not is irrelevant. If even some of what I've said in this book is true, we are going to need to be as close to our Savior as possible to avoid the dangers that lie ahead.

We *must* come out of Babylon! Her ways are evil. She brings plague, sickness and disease of mind, spirit and body, and the call of the Last Days grows louder and louder:

> *I heard another voice from heaven saying,* ***"Come out of Babylon, my people, so that you do not participate in her sins and suffer from any of her plagues."***
>
> (Revelation 18:4 GOD'S WORD Translation)

I don't believe it is just a coincidence that Christ was really born on September the 11th, and that this day just so happens to be the worst date in American history. Can you imagine singing, *"It's the most wonderful time of the year..."* on that day? Lucifer has done everything he can to steer us away from the things of God and to set the stage for *his* son, the Antichrist, Nimrod to rule and reign.

> *Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him, That ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand.*

> *Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God.*
>
> (2 Thessalonians 2:1-4)

I believe the "falling away" Paul is referring to is a departure from the true faith (as opposed to a physical depart as some Pre-Tribulation Rapture adherents like to propose). I believe the coming Great Deception will indeed be very great, and I also believe it will be possible for many Christians to be deceived right alongside everyone else. That is the primary motivation behind all that I am writing: I don't want to be among the deceived, and I don't want you to be either.

Babylon has indeed been rising. The first anti-Christ will indeed be the last. He is the direct mirror opposite of Jesus. Jesus is the Son of God. Nimrod is a son of Satan. Jesus came to give us eternal life. The Antichrist will present a false means of gaining immortality.[9] Jesus was known as the *King of kings and Lord of lords*. So was Nimrod. Jesus is known by the symbol of the cross. Nimrod/Osiris is known by the symbol of the ankh. Jesus set up a kingdom for his people with Himself at its head. Nimrod will set up a New World Order with himself at its head. Jesus came from Heaven, died, rose again and went back to Heaven. Nimrod died, went to hell and will rise again — and rule until he is cast alive into the Lake of Fire. Jesus is the One who "was, and is, and is to come." Nimrod is the beast that "was, and is not, and yet shall be."

Church, be not deceived! This individual will be very convincing. Everything I have written about here came from Babylon. It's time we came out of Babylon. It actually makes me sick when I consider the depths of the deception that impacts our lives on every level, from the foods we eat to the days we celebrate as holidays and from the truth behind our country's foundation to the millions dying around the world in unjust wars based on lies. It literally touches everything.

I am not judging anyone except myself at this point. It truly saddens me, because I was guilty of playing the game for 41 of the 44 years of my life. By that, I mean that I didn't take the time to truly search out the truth behind these things for myself. I believed what I was told by good people who were only teaching what they were taught.

"Traditions are passed down to us in innocence and accepted in ignorance." [10]

In years past, I accepted much in ignorance and as a result I participated in a lot of things that only contributed to the problem, and unknowingly drew me farther away from Christ and closer to the Antichrist (whether I knew that was happening or not). Never again!

I would encourage you not to believe the things that I have written either. You are not going to be held accountable to me. You will be held accountable to God. I could be wrong about some or all of this. Or I could be right about some or all of it. I don't know. I've simply done my best to share what I believe I have learned. So please ask the Holy Spirit to lead you to all truth. Check out the things I have said for yourself. Try the spirits to see whether they be of God or man or devil. Finally, I will leave you with this prayer, that I have sincerely prayed for myself as well:

> *Father in Heaven, please forgive me. I know I am a sinner. I believe You sent your Son, Jesus, to die a horrible death on the cross to pay the price for my sin and to draw me out of Lucifer's grasp in order that I may spend eternity with You. I accept Jesus' sacrifice and ask Him to come and live in my heart right now. Cleanse me of my sins and save me, Lord. Father, send Your Holy Spirit to help me know and do right. Please help me to get on Your calendar and to no longer give the devil any form of worship — even in ignorance! Help me to know and to share the truths You reveal to me in love so that others can come out of Babylon before it's too late. In Jesus' holy name I pray, Amen.*

If you prayed that prayer and this is the first time you've asked Jesus Christ to be your Lord and Savior, please send us an e-mail[11] and let us know. We'd love to celebrate and pray with you!

COMING SOON

In the next book in this series, *Babylon Rising: The Return of the Nephilim*, we will explore the origins of the Nephilim, and their return both *before* and after the Flood, thus revealing what may soon be "coming upon the earth," which will be so terrifying that men's hearts will fail them at the sight of it. I will also show you what I think is going on with the recent and massive increase in UFO sightings all around the world and how I believe it all relates to Genesis 6 and the resurrection of the Antichrist.[12]

In Book 3, *Babylon Rising: Mythology and the Coming Great Deception*, I will show you how deep the deception goes and how far back in history it can be traced. I will reveal how Nimrod went from a man to a "mighty hunter" to a god and how his fame quickly spread throughout various ancient cultures, spinning off entire world religions and cults. I will trace the origins of mythology and show you how I believe it may all come together to form the coming Great Deception.

Finally, in Book 4, *Babylon Rising: Countdown to Armageddon*, I will summarize it all with an in-depth look at prophecy and how I believe all of these things will play out in these Last Days, from the rise of Babylon and her Antichrist to their bitter end in fiery judgment. Few teachers of eschatology ever include the Nephilim and Nimrod into their calculations. You will see how these two variables change everything!

PRAYERS OF DELIVERANCE FROM BABYLON, EGYPT AND SECRET SOCIETIES

After a year had passed since the publication of the first edition of this book, I began to notice some negative things happening to me; primarily with my health. I think I took for granted that I could just dive deep into all of this subject matter without being completely armored to do so. The fact is, we are in a *very* spiritual battle. I took on the spirit of antichrist, and wrote eight chapters about Nimrod. The final chapter was a call for myself and the Body of Christ in general to "come out of Babylon." What I neglected to address is that Babylon/Nimrod may also need to come out of us!

Many who read this book may either personally have been involved in organizations such as Freemasonry, or have relatives that were. If so, there may be a spirit there that needs to be cast out. I don't want to be an additional part of the problem. There are many things in this book that may unknowingly open up doorways in the spirit realm. After doing a conference on this material, someone came up to me and made me aware of this truth, then shared a prayer of deliverance for renouncing Nimrod, Babylon, Egypt and all false gods that came out of them. I feel it is my duty to pass those prayers along to you as well.

The following was taken from a website called, *Aslan's Place, A Ministry of Paul and Donna Cox.*[1] It is presented here with their permission. Please take the time to prayerfully read through every line, asking our Heavenly Father for complete deliverance.

DELIVERANCE FROM BABYLON

"Heavenly Father, I ask you to forgive me and all members of my ancestral line for the spirit of rebellion that was in Nimrod who set himself to oppose You and revolted against You.

On behalf of myself and my ancestors, I repent for and renounce the tyranny and despotism that Nimrod practiced and the evil of the empire that he established. I repent for the lust for power that the empire was founded on and for Nimrod's hunting of the souls of men.

I repent for the trading of the souls of men in Babylon. Forgive me and my family line for the spirit of rebellion in which the city of Babel or Babylon was founded.

Heavenly Father, I ask you to forgive me and all members of my ancestral line for all the beliefs and attitudes that caused the building of the religious ziggurat which was the Tower of Babel and was the motivation behind other ungodly buildings and structures. We repent for the arrogance and presumption that holds that men could by themselves build the gateway to God.

We repent for the astral worship and astrology practiced at the Tower of Babel. We repent for the fear that the people lived in, the fear that they would be scattered abroad to live in isolated communities — exposed to danger, unknown, and without honor and standing.

We repent for the fear behind building a religious tower to 'make a name for ourselves.' We repent for misusing the power of religion to share the glory of God, to make a name for ourselves, and to try to control our lives and our future. We repent for all agreement with the spirit of Babylon, which uses religious

authority to gain earthly power and prestige. We repent for our rebellion, pride, and self-will — the arrogance that makes us want to make a name for ourselves and to believe that we can accomplish anything we want on our own without You.

Lord, help us not to avoid the risks of establishing new frontiers but to embrace them; help us to be fruitful and replenish the earth, to bring Your dominion to bear in places where Your kingdom has not been established, and to partner with You to fulfill the birthrights and callings that You have for our lives.

Lord we repent for being aligned with Babylon, the City of Man. Please help us to be citizens of and aligned with the City of God, the New Jerusalem. Lord, help us to enter into Your inheritance for us by faith, looking for a city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is You.

Lord, we repent for the state religion Nimrod established to deify and worship himself as emperor. We repent for the worship of Satan and his demons, and for star-worship.

We repent for the worship of Nimrod that is connected to the planet Jupiter, and for worshiping Nimrod as Zeus in Greece, as Jupiter in Rome and as Marduk or "Bull Calf of the Sun," god of magic and incantations, god of the agricultural people.

We repent for the worship of this entity as the god associated with the planet Mars, as the patron deity of the city of Babylon, also known as Bel or 'lord,' and as the 'bull of Utu.'

We repent for the worship of this entity as the 'Bull of Heaven' and for worshipping the crescent moon as a symbol of the horns of the bull. We repent for the worship of the bull in Egypt as Apis, embodiment of Ptah and later of Osiris. We repent for the worship of the bull in Greece as the 'Bull of Crete,' the Minotaur.

We repent for the worship of Nimrod as Ninus in Babylon, Kronos, 'Bull-Horned One' or Saturn in Rome, Zeus in Greece, Osiris in Egypt, Zoroaster in Chaldea. We repent for his worship as Hercules or Atlas in Greece.

We repent for the worship of Semiramis, wife of Nimrod, queen of Babylon. We repent for the worship of the Queen of Heaven, also known as Ammas or Mother of the gods and Ge or Gaia the Earth goddess, as the Madonna in Italy, as Juno, Cybele or Rhea in Rome, as Athena, Minerva or Hera in Greece, as Shing Moo or Ma Tsoopo in China, as Astarte or Ashtoreth in Phoenicia. We repent for the worship of Semiramis as Aphrodite of Greece, Venus of Rome, and Vesta or Terra of Rome.

We repent for the worship of the unholy trinity in the Babylonian mysteries — Nimrod, his consort Semiramis and their posthumous son, Tammuz, who was proclaimed as the reincarnation of Nimrod. We repent for all the paganism and idol worship that had their roots in the legends having to do with Nimrod, Semiramis, and Tammuz.

We repent for the worship of Semiramis and Tammuz as Ashtoreth and Tammuz of Phoenicia, Isis and Horus of Egypt, Aphrodite and Eros of Greece, Venus and Cupid of Rome, Cybele and Deoius of Asia, and Parvati and Iswara of India.

We repent for the system of Mysteries of Babylon that was set up when this false worship went underground in Babylon at the time Nimrod was killed. We repent for the intended purpose–glorifying the dead Nimrod. We repent for the sacrifices to the dead that this worship involved. We repent for the ritual of lamenting his early death at the summer solstice.

We repent for the use of seals of secrecies, oaths, initiation ceremonies, and magic used to continue this idolatry in secret. We repent for spreading this secret mystery religion through the earth.

We repent for Freemasonry, which promulgates the Mysteries of the Egyptian Isis, the goddess-mother, wife of Osiris. We repent for practice of other mystery and false religions, such as Satanism, Luciferianism, Illuminati, Gnosticism, the Knights Templar, Rosicrucianism, the Theosophical Society, the New World

Order, New Age and Lucid Trust. Lord, please disconnect us from all these false cults.

Lord, on behalf of ourselves and our ancestors, we repent for the worship of Tammuz, posthumous son of Semiramis, who was claimed to be Nimrod resurrected. We repent for the false legend that he was the promised 'seed of the woman' who would deliver mankind.

We repent for the association of the worship of Tammuz with the winter solstice when the days are the shortest and for the legend that the winter solstice is the sun dying and being reborn. We repent for burning the Yule log on the winter solstice, and replacing it with a trimmed tree the next morning to represent his resurrection. We repent for continuing this pagan tradition during Christmas celebrations. We repent for the worship of Tammuz as the Sun God and as the Assyrian fertility deity. We repent for the worship of Tammuz as Horus in Egypt, Bacchus in Rome, Adonis in Greece, Baal-berith or Lord of the Covenant, and as Vishnu in India.

Lord, we repent for the worship of all heavenly bodies — the sun, the moon, and the planets and for the association of false gods with planets. We repent for the development of astrology, which focuses on a study of the zodiac that originated in Babylon. We repent for trying to find and manipulate our birthrights and callings by locating the section of the sky that we were born under. We repent for the association of astrology with demonism or Satanism where Satan and his hosts have been worshipped in the guise of signs or planets.

Forgive us for the worship of the Moon God of the Chaldeans, the god of nomadic people. Forgive us for using the Crescent Moon as the symbol of the Moon God and for establishing the lunar calendar around this ungodly worship. Forgive us for worshipping the black meteorite stone as the Ka'aba, for calling the moon god the Lord of the Ka'aba and for its worship and the worship of 360 other idols. Forgive us for the worship of the Moon God as Sin in Syria and as Al-Ilah in Arabia.

Forgive us for the establishment of Islam as a religion built around the worship of the Moon God Al-lah. Forgive us for the establishment of cities such as Jericho or Beth-Yerah (House of the Moon God) around this false worship of the Moon God. Forgive us for the establishment of centers of worship of the Moon God at Ur and Harran and building temples to this god throughout Babylonia and Assyria. Lord, please disconnect us from the principalities of the land of Babylon, including all astral worship and worship of the moon.

Lord, please deliver us from all curses of insanity that have come upon us as a result of the worship of the moon. Forgive us for all rituals and practices associated with the different cycles of the moon, including rituals done at new moon, full moon, and all shape-shifting.

We repent for all worship of the sun and sun deities as Helios or Titan and Apollo in Greece, Shamash or Tammuz in Mesopotamia at Sippar and Larsa, the Germanic Sol, the Vedantic Surya and Adityas, the Incan Inti and Aztec Huitzilopochtli, the Egyptian Ra, Amaterasu in Japan, and the Slavic Dazhbog.

We repent for the use of the symbol of the snake, serpent, or dragon that is associated with Nimrod/Marduk. We repent for all worship of snakes, use of snakes in rituals, and worship of deities associated with snakes.

We repent for the use of the caduceus or Rod of Asclepius, that is, the winged staff with two snakes wrapped around it, the ancient astrological symbol of commerce associated with the Greek god Hermes, as the symbol of medicine based upon the astrological principles of using the planets and stars to heal the sick. We repent for all worship of Asclepius, Chiron, Hermes and all association of these false deities with the practice of medicine. We repent for the use of magic and hermetic arts in the practice of medicine.

We repent for the worship of other false deities associated with the snake such as Pos eidon, Hydra and Triton, Gorgons and Medusa, Shiva, Naga, Auslavis in Lithuania, the Rainbow Serpent of the Aboriginal People of Australia, the Minoan Snake Goddess, Zombi in West Africa and Haiti, Degei in Fiji. Lord, please disconnect us from all these snake deities. Lord, please disconnect us from Leviathan, the sea monster. Lord please disconnect us from the ancient serpent, the dragon.

We repent for the worship of An, the god of heaven at the E'anna temple at Uruk.

We repent for the worship of Enlil, the god of the air and storms associated with the planet Jupiter at the E'kur temple in Nippur.

We repent for the worship of Enki the god of water and fertile earth associated with the planet Mercury at the E'abzu temple.

We repent for the worship of Eridu or Ea, the god of magic, wisdom, and intelligence.

We repent for the worship of Ki or Nirhursag, the mother-goddess representing the earth at the E'saggila temple at Kish.

We repent for the worship of Ashur, the sky god, the main god of Assyria at Assur.

We repent for the worship of Ninlil or Nillina, the goddess of the air, the south wind, and wife of Enlil at the E'kur Temple in Nippur. We repent for the worship of Nergal, god of death, associated with the planet Mars, son of Enlil and Ninlil.

We repent for the worship of Inanna, the goddess of love and war associated with the planet Venus, at the E'anna temple at Uruk.

We repent for the worship of Marduk, son of Ea, the god of light, the main god of Babylon (Babylonian) at the E'saggila temple in Babylon.

We repent for the worship of Nanna or Suen or Sin god of the moon at the E'hursag temple of Ur and Harran.

We repent for the worship of Utu Tutu or Shamash God of the sun at the E'barbara temple of Sipparand in Babylonia.

We repent for the worship of Ninurta at the E'Girsu temple at Lagash.

Lord, please disconnect us from all these ungodly entities.

Heavenly Father, on behalf of my ancestors and myself, I repent for coveting the things of Babylon or the world system and being seduced by the things of the world into disobeying Your commandments and going against Your ways. On behalf of myself and my ancestors who were part of the Babylonian system, I repent for agreeing with the seductive spirit of Babylon and for anything we did in this spirit to seduce Your people away from You.

We repent for trying to find our legitimacy by displaying to the world the power, wealth, influence, gifts, talents, and treasures that You gave us and for using them in the world when they were meant to be dedicated to You and be used in Your service. We repent that we found our legitimacy in looking for admiration and favor from the world instead of deriving our legitimacy from our relationship with You. Lord, we repent for being found wanting when you tried us to know what was in our hearts. We pray that You may align our hearts with Your heart.

On behalf of our ancestors, we repent for allowing curses into our generational lines so that generational blessings and treasures were stolen from our families and our generational lines and sold to the Babylonian system. Lord, please restore to us these generational treasures.

Lord, we pray for our own deliverance from Babylon and the deliverance of many people from this system. On behalf of ourselves and our ancestors from Babylon, we humble ourselves before You, pray, seek Your face and repent of our wicked ways, our evil, our iniquity, our pride, arrogance, and haughtiness.

Forgive us for not listening to or obeying the Words of Your servants, the true prophets, for not turning from

our evil ways and living in the land and inheritance that You have given to us. Forgive us for going after other gods to serve them and worship them and for provoking You to anger with the works of our hands.

Lord, please set Your eyes upon us for good, bring us into our land and into our inheritance, build us up and plant us. Give us a heart to know You—to know that You are the Lord and that we are Your people. We return unto You with our whole hearts.

Please remove the destruction, the desolation, the scorn and shame that have come upon us. Please restore to us the sounds of joy, singing, laughter, the sounds of marriage festivities, and the sound of the workmen; please give us light for our activities. Please remove the barrenness of our land. Please take away the sword and the wine cup of Your fury. Please deliver us from our oppression, for we put our trust in You alone.

Amen.

DELIVERANCE FROM EGYPT

I spent a lot of time, and many paragraphs in this book describing Osiris and our nation's obsession with him. I even quoted from the ancient Pyramid Texts and the Book of the Dead. You read the various hymns to Osiris included in this work. Now, I want to encourage you to renounce all of those things, just to be certain any doors that may have been opened are permanently closed and any spirits that may have entered through are cast out. Please take the time now to read/pray through these prayers of renunciation for Egypt and the false gods associated with its various mystery schools, sayings and practices. I will start it off by addressing the quotes found in this book.

Dear Heavenly Father,

YHVH, Lord, on behalf of myself and all who read this book, I repent for saying, whether aloud or in my head any and all hymns, incantations and unholy writings pertaining to Osiris, and the mystery school texts that intend to bring him back from the dead. On behalf of my ancestors, friends and relatives, I repent for all branches of my family line who may have recited those words as initiations into the various levels of Freemasonry and/or other secret societies. Please sever all ties to Osiris, Isis and Horus and any other Egyptian god and break any and all curses that may be associated with allegiance to them.

YHVH on behalf of myself and all ancestors in all branches of my family line, I repent for the worship of and prayers, incantations and homage presented to and for specifically the gods of Osiris, Isis and Horus, but also for all of the other false gods of Egypt.

Heavenly Father, please release me from any and all ties, blessings, curses and invocations connected to these pagan gods of Egypt. Release me from any generational curses that may be upon me due to the sins of my ancestors. I renounce any and all loyalty to these gods. I renounce any and all prayers, hymns and/or incantations offered to or derived from the worship of the many false gods of Egypt.

I repent of any and all affiliations with the gods of Egypt and I renounce them here and now. By the blood of Yeshua (Jesus), please cleanse me and my family line from these things and anything else that may be connected in any way to the gods of Egypt.

* * *

The following is from the last part of the Prayers of Deliverance for Egypt as listed on the Aslan's Place website.

Lord, I repent for all worship of the gods whom you judged by sending the plagues against Egypt—Anuket, goddess of the Nile, Khnum, the guardian of the Nile, Hapi, the spirit of the Nile, Osiris, who had the Nile as his bloodstream, Heqt, the frog-goddess of fertility, Geb, god of the earth, Hathor, a cow-like mother goddess, Qadshu, goddess of sexuality, Imhotep, the god of medicine, Serapis, protector from locusts, Shu, god of the

air, Nut, the sky goddess, and Set, god of the desert, storms, darkness and Chaos.

Please disconnect me from these gods.

Amen.

If you'd like to recite the full prayer, please visit the Aslan website: **http://aslansplace.com/renunciations-for-egypt/**

PRAYER OF DELIVERANCE FROM FREEMASONRY (as found on the Aslan's Place website):

If you or someone you love is a descendant of a Mason, I recommend that you pray through the following prayer from your heart. Don't be like the Masons who are given their obligations and oaths one line at a time and without prior knowledge of the requirements. First, bind spirits of deception, antichrist, witchcraft, and death in the name of Jesus Christ. Then read it through so you know what is involved. It is best to pray this aloud with a Christian witness or counselor present. We suggest a brief pause following each paragraph to allow the Holy Spirit to show any additional issues that may require attention.

Father God, creator of heaven and earth, I come to You in the name of Jesus Christ Your Son. I come as a sinner seeking forgiveness and cleansing from all sins committed against You, and others made in your image. I honor my earthly father and mother and all of my ancestors of flesh and blood and by adoption, but I utterly turn away from and renounce all their sins. I forgive all my ancestors for the effects of their sins on my children and me. I confess and renounce all of my own sins. I renounce Satan and all of his works in my family and me.

I renounce and forsake all involvement in Freemasonry or any other lodge or craft by my ancestors and myself. I renounce witchcraft, the principal spirit behind Freemasonry, and I renounce Baphomet, the Spirit of Antichrist and the curse of the Luciferian doctrine. I renounce the idolatry, blasphemy, secrecy, and deception of Masonry at every level. I specifically renounce the insecurity, the love of position and power, the love of money, covetousness, and greed, and the pride that would have led my ancestors into Masonry. I renounce all the fears that held them in Masonry, especially the fears of death, fears of men, and fears of trusting, in the name of Jesus Christ.

I renounce every position held in the lodge by any of my ancestors, including Tyier, Master, Worshipful Master, or any other. I renounce the calling of any man Master, for Jesus Christ is my only Master and Lord, and He forbids anyone else having that title. I renounce the entrapping of others into Masonry, and observing the helplessness of others during the rituals. I renounce the effects of Masonry passed on to me through any female ancestor who felt distrusted and rejected by her husband as he entered and attended any lodge and refused to tell her of his secret activities.

THE BLUE LODGE

First Degree: I renounce the oaths taken by any of my ancestors or me and the curses involved in the First or Entered Apprentice Degree, especially their effects on the throat and tongue. I renounce the Hoodwink, the blindfold, and its effects on emotions and eyes, including all confusion, fear of the dark, fear of the light, and fear of sudden noises. I renounce the secret word, BOAZ, and all it means. I renounce the mixing and mingling of truth and error, and the blasphemy of this degree of Masonry. I renounce the noose around the neck, the fear of choking and also every spirit causing asthma, hayfever, emphysema or any other breathing difficulty. I renounce the compass point, sword or spear held against the breast, the fear of death by stabbing pain and the fear of heart attack from this degree. In the name of Jesus Christ, I now pray for the healing of the throat, vocal cords, nasal passages, sinuses, bronchial tubes, allergies and asthma, for healing of the speech area, and the release of the word of God to me and through my family and me.

Second Degree: I renounce the oaths taken by any of my ancestors or me and the curses involved in the Second or Fellow Craft Degree of Masonry, especially the curses on the heart and chest. I renounce the secret words JACHIN and SHIBBOLETH and all that these mean. I cut off emotional hardness, apathy,

indifference, unbelief, and deep anger from my family and me. In the name of Jesus Christ I pray for the healing of the chest/lung/heart area and for the healing of my emotions and ask to be made sensitive to the Holy Spirit of God.

Third Degree: I renounce the oaths taken by any of my ancestors or me and the curses involved in the Third or Master Mason Degree, especially the curses on the stomach and womb area. I renounce the secret words MAH-HAH-BONE, MACHABEN, MACHBINNA and TUBAL CAIN, and all that they mean. I renounce the spirit of death from the blows to the head enacted as ritual murder, the fear of death, false martyrdom, fear of violent gang attack, assault, or rape, and the helplessness of this degree. I renounce the falling into the coffin or stretcher involved in the ritual murder. I renounce the false resurrection of this degree, because only Jesus Christ is the Resurrection and the Life! I also renounce the blasphemous kissing of the Bible on a witchcraft oath. I cut off all spirits of death, witchcraft, and deception and in the name of Jesus Christ I pray for the healing of the stomach, gall bladder, womb, liver, and any other organs of my body affected by Masonry, and I ask for a release of compassion and understanding for my family and me.

YORK RITE

I renounce the oaths taken by any of my ancestors or me and the penalties and the curses involved in the York Rite of Freemasonry, including these degrees:

Fourth Degree: Mark Master, the secret word JOPPA, the keystone/mark, and the penalty of having the right ear smote off causing permanent deafness and the right hand chopped off for being an imposter.

Fifth Degree: Past Master, with the penalty of having my tongue split from tip to root.

Sixth Degree: Most Excellent Master, with the penalty of having my breast torn open and vital organs removed and exposed to rot on the dung hill.

Seventh Degree: Holy Royal Arch, its secret words JAH-BU-LON and the penalty of having my brain exposed to the scorching rays of the meridian sun. I renounce false communions or Eucharists, all mockery, skepticism, and unbelief about the redemptive work of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary.

Eighth Degree: Royal Master, the oaths, secret words and curses.

Ninth Degree: Select Master, and the penalties of having my hands chopped off to the stumps, my eyes plucked out from their sockets, my body quartered and thrown among the rubbish of the temple.

Tenth Degree: Super Excellent Master and the penalties of having my thumbs cut off, my eyes put out, my body bound in fetters and brass and conveyed captive to a strange land.

Eleventh Degree: Knights Order of the Red Cross and the penalties of having my house torn down, the timbers thereof set up and I being hanged thereon.

Twelfth Degree: Knights Templar, the secret word KEB RAIOTH, and penalty of having my head struck off and placed on the highest spire of Christendom.

Thirteenth Degree: Knights of Malta, the secret word MAHER-SHALAL-HASH-BAZ.

ANCIENT & ACCEPTED SCOTTISH RITE

I renounce the oaths taken by any of my ancestors or me and the curses involved in the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite including:

Fourth Degree: Secret Master, the secret word ADONAI, and the penalties of all former degrees.

Fifth Degree: Perfect Master, the secret word MAH-HAH-BONE, and the penalty of being smitten to the earth with a setting maul.

Sixth Degree: Intimate Secretary, the secret word JEHOVAH, and the penalty of having my body dissected, and my vital organs cut into pieces and thrown to the beasts of the field.

Seventh Degree: Provost and Judge, the secret words HIRUM-TITO-CIVI-KY, and the penalty of having my nose cut off.

Eighth Degree: hitendant of the Building, the secret word AKAR-JAI-JAH, and the penalties of having my eyes put out, my body cut in two and my bowels exposed.

Ninth Degree: Elected Knights of the Nine, the secret words NEKAM and NEKAH, and the penalty of having my head cut off and stuck on the highest pole in the East as a monument of my villainy.

Tenth Degree: Illustrious Elect of Fifteen, the secret word of Elignam, and the penalties of having my body opened perpendicularly and horizontally, exposed to the air for eight hours so that flies may prey on it, and for my head to be cut off and placed on the highest pinnacle in the world.

Eleventh Degree: Sublime Knights Elect of the Twelve, the secret word STOLKIN-ADONAI, and the penalty of having my hand cut in twain.

Twelfth Degree: Grand Master Architect, the secret word RAB-BANAIM, and penalties.

Thirteenth Degree: Knight of the Ninth Arch of Solomon, the secret word JEHOVAH, and the penalty my body being given to the beasts of the forest as prey.

Fourteenth Degree: Grand Elect, Perfect and Sublime Mason and the penalty of having my body cut open and my bowels given to vultures for food.

COUNCIL OF PRINCES OF JERUSALEM

I renounce the oaths taken by any of my ancestors or me and the curses involved in the Council of Princes of Jerusalem degrees of Freemasonry.

Fifteenth Degree: Knights of the East and the secret word RAPH-O-DOM.

Sixteenth Degree: Prince of Jerusalem, the secret word TEBET-ADAR, and the penalty of being stripped naked and having my heart pierced with a poininiard.

CHAPTER OF THE ROSE CROIX

I renounce the oaths taken by any of my ancestors or me and the curses involved in the Chapter of the Rose Croix degrees of Freemasonry.

Seventeenth Degree: Knights of the East and West, the secret word, ABADDON, and the penalty of incurring the severe wrath of the Almighty Creator of Heaven and Earth.

Eighteenth Degree: Knight of the Pelican and the Eagle & Sovereign Prince Rose Croix of Heredom, the secret words IGNE NATURA RENOVATUR INTEGRA, and the penalties of being forever deprived of the word, to be perpetually in darkness, my blood continually running from my body, to suffer without intermission the most cruel remorse for the soul, that the bitterest gall mixed with vinegar be my constant drink and the sharpest thorns be my pillow and death on the cross complete my punishment. I renounce and

reject the Pelican witchcraft spirit, as well as the occultic influence of the Rosicrucians and the Kabbala in this degree. I renounce the claim that the death of Jesus Christ was a “dire calamity,” and also the deliberate mockery and twisting of the Christian doctrine of the atonement. I renounce the blasphemy and rejection of the deity of Jesus Christ, and the mockery of the communion taken in this degree, including a biscuit, salt, and white wine.

COUNCIL OF KADOSH

I renounce the oaths taken by any of my ancestors or me and the curses involved in the Council of Kadosh degrees of Freemasonry:

Nineteenth Degree: Grand Pontiff and the secret word EMMANUEL.

Twentieth Degree: Grand Master of Symbolic Lodges, the secret words JEKSON/STOLKIN and the penalties of all former obligations.

Twenty-first Degree: Noachite of Prussian Knight and the secret word PELEG.

Twenty-second Degree: Knight of the Royal Axe and the secret words NOAH-BEZALEEI-SODONIAS.

Twenty-third Degree: Chief of the Tabernacle, the secret words URIEL-JEHOVAH and the penalty that the earth should open up and engulf me up to my neck so I perish.

Twenty-fourth Degree: Prince of the Tabernacle and the penalty that I should be stoned to death and my body left above ground to rot.

Twenty-Fifth Degree: Knight of the Brazen Serpent, the secret words MOSES-JOHANNES and the penalty that I have my heart eaten by venomous serpents.

Twenty-sixth Degree: Prince of Mercy, the secret words GOMEL and JEHOVAH-JACHIN, and the penalty of condemnation and spite by the entire universe.

Twenty-seventh Degree: Knight Commander of the Temple, the secret word SOLOMON and the penalty of receiving the severest wrath of God inflicted upon me.

Twenty-eighth Degree: Knight Commander of the Sun, or Prince Adept, the secret word STIBIUM and the penalties of having my tongue thrust through with a red-hot iron, my eyes plucked out, my senses of smelling and hearing removed, my hands cut off and in that condition to be left for voracious animals to devour me, or executed by lightening from heaven. Twenty-ninth Degree: Grand Scottish Knight of Saint Andrew and the secret words NEKAMAH-FURLAC.

Thirtieth Degree: Council ofKadosh, Grand Pontiff, and Knight of the Black and White Eagle, the secret words EMMANUEL, STIBIUM ALKABAR, PHARASH-KOH and all they mean, with all the former penalties applied.

CONSISTORY OF SUBLIME PRINCES OF THE ROYAL SECRET

I renounce the oaths taken by any of my ancestors or me and the curses involved in the Consistory of Sublime Princes of the Royal Secret degrees of Freemasonry, including:

Thirty-first Degree: Grand Inspector Inquisitor Commander. I renounce all the gods and goddesses of Egypt which are honored in this degree, including Anubis with the ram’s head, all sun gods, including Ra, Re, Aten and Osiris; and Isis the sister and wife of Osiris and also the moon goddess. I renounce the mother goddess Diana or Artemas. I renounce the Soul of Cheres, the false symbol of immortality, the Chamber of the Dead, *and the false teaching of reincarnation.*

Thirty-second Degree: Sublime Prince of the Royal Secret and its secret words PHAAL and PHARASH-KOL. I renounce Masonry's false trinitarian deity, AUM, and its parts: Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver and Shiva the destroyer. I renounce the deity of AHURA-MAZDA, the claimed spirit or source of all light, and worship with fire, which is an abomination to God, and the drinking from a human skull in some rites.

Thirty-third Degree: Grand Sovereign Inspector General, the secret words DEMOLAY-HIRAM ABIFF, FREDERICK OF PRUSSIA, MICHA, MACHA, BEALIM, and ADONAI; and its penalties being all the former ones, including having my tongue torn out by its roots. I renounce and forsake the declaration that Lucifer is God. I renounce the cable-tow around the neck. I renounce the death wish that the wine drunk from a human skull should turn to poison and the skeleton whose cold arms are invited if the oath of this degree is violated. I renounce the three infamous assassins of their grand master, which are law, property and religion, and the greed and witchcraft involved in the attempt to manipulate and control the rest of mankind.

SHRINERS (This exists in America only)

I renounce the oaths taken by my ancestors or me and the curses and penalties involved in the Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine.

I renounce the piercing of the eyeballs with a three-edged blade, the flaying of the feet and being forced to walk the hot sands upon the sterile shores of the Red Sea until the flaming sun shall strike me with a livid plague. I renounce the madness, the hoodwink, the mock hanging, the mock beheading, the mock drinking of the blood of the victim, the mock dog urinating on the initiate, and the offering of urine as a commemoration. I renounce the worship of the false god Allah as the god of our fathers.

ALL OTHER DEGREES, SECRET LODGES AND SOCIETIES

I renounce any other secret words, attributing false gods' names to God, and idolatrous symbols, such as

- *the Horus, or All-Seeing Eye, which was the emblem of Osiris (the sun god), the creator worshipped by the ancient Egyptians and passed off on current day Masons as the eye of the one true God;*
- *the G, which the lower degree Masons are told represents geometry or the Great Architect of the Universe (who upper degree Masons learn is Lucifer) but actually can stand for whatever god one chooses, and in books for the upper degrees means "Generating Principal" (phallus);*
- *the Blazing Star, actually symbolizes various pagan gods and witchcraft;*
- *the obelisk, which symbolizes a phallus or penis as an emblem of resurrection (but not Christian resurrection);*
- *the mark in the form of squares and angles which marks the person for life;*
- *the point within a circle, which the first three degrees of Masons are taught represents the individual Mason inside the bounds of Masonic duty, but which is revealed to the upper levels Mason to represent the sexual union of Osiris and Isis, signifying the prolific powers of nature;*
- *the Masonic square and compass which likewise represents the sex act;*
- *the Apron, a symbol of the Masonic belief that salvation must be earned which is a direct violation of Scripture;*
- *the jewel or talisman that may have been made from this mark sign and worn at lodge meetings;*
- *the Shriner's fez, which celebrates the Muslim massacre of 50,000 Christians in the Moroccan city of Fez;*
- *and all others.*

I renounce all allegiances to individuals or organizations that are in conflict with the primary allegiance of my life, Jesus Christ, as revealed in God's word, the Bible. I ask God to cut off all these curses and their effects on my family and me. In the name of Jesus Christ, I pray for the healing of the any area where

healing is needed by any of us.

I renounce all the other oaths taken by any of my ancestors or me, the rituals and the curses of every other lodge, degree and order involved in Freemasonry anywhere in the world. These include, in part. Prince Hall Masonry (the lodge structure for American Blacks), the Allied Degrees, the Grand Orient Lodges of France, Italy, Central and South America, the Red Cross of Constantine, the Order of the Secret Monitor, the Masonic Royal Order of Scotland, the Order of Amaranth, and the women's Orders of the Eastern Star, of the Ladies Oriental Shrine, and of the White Shrine of Jerusalem; the girls' Orders of the Daughters of the Eastern Star, the International Orders of Job's Daughters and of the Rainbow; and the boys' Order of De Molay.

I renounce involvement by any of my ancestors or me in all other secret societies with ties to Masonry, such as, Mormonism, the Royal Order of Jesters, the Manchester Unity Order of Oddfellows, the Independent Order of Oddfellows and its women's auxilli-ary called the International Association of Rebekah Assemblies, Buffalos, Druids, Foresters, Orange, Elks, Moose and Eagles Lodges, the Ku Klux Klan, the White Supremacy Movement, the Grange, the Woodmen of the World, Riders of the Red Robe, the Knights of Pythias, the Mystic order of the Veiled Prophets of the Enchanted Realm, and their effects on me and all my family. I renounce the New World Order, the One World Government, the Uluminati, the Theosophical Society, Cabala, and any other organizations involved with the Masons in the satanic conspiracy to rule the world.

I renounce the ancient pagan teaching of the First Tracing Board, the Second Tracing Board and the Third Tracing Board used in the ritual of the Blue Lodge. I renounce the pagan ritual of the "Point within a Circle" with all its bondages and phallus worship. I renounce the occultic mysticism of the black and white mosaic checkered floor with the tessellated border and the five-pointed blazing star. I renounce the symbol "G" and its veiled pagan symbolism and bondages. I renounce and utterly forsake the Great Architect Of The Universe, who is revealed in the higher degrees as Lucifer, and his false claim to be the universal fatherhood of God. I also renounce the false claim that Lucifer is the Morning Star and Shining One and I declare that Jesus Christ is the Bright and Morning Star of Revelation 22:16.

I renounce the All-Seeing Third Eye of Freemasonry, or Horus, in the forehead and the obelisk and their pagan and occult symbolism. I renounce all false communions taken, all mockery of the redemptive work of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary, all unbelief, confusion and depression, and all worship of Lucifer as God. I renounce and forsake the lie of Freemasonry that man is not sinful, but just imperfect, and so can redeem himself through good works. I rejoice that the Bible states that I cannot do a single thing to earn my salvation, but that I can only be saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and what He accomplished on the cross of Calvary.

Father God, I repent of and seek forgiveness for the sins committed by my ancestors and me

- ***of walking on unholy ground, including Freemasonry, Mormon, occultic and pagan property dedicated to the worship of false gods;***
- ***for the sin of idolatry committed by my ancestors and me of looking to anyone or anything other than the one true Savior, Jesus Christ, for salvation, rescue, protection, or provision;***
- ***for all subversion of justice practiced by the Freemasons or any other organization to which my ancestors or I belonged;***
- ***for the collaboration of the Freemasons in the satanic conspiracy to rule the world.***

Father God, I confess to You that when my ancestors and I complained against You we gave Satan a legal right to put the Destroyer in our bloodlines. And when we rebelled against You and rejected Your rightful place as our God, we gave Satan a legal right to deceive us with all the gods of the gentiles. Some of us committed the sin of idolatry by joining Freemasonry. Even if they (we) joined Freemasonry ignorant of its true nature, we are nevertheless guilty of all of its sins. I acknowledge your justice in putting a curse on our bloodlines for this sin and the many sins that followed either by commission or by allegiance to the organization committing the sins. These sins include, in addition to those already confessed, all of the atrocities of satanic ritual abuse practiced at secret levels of Freemasonry: blasphemous rituals, blood sacrifices, animal and human sacrifices, sexual sacrifices, rape, bestiality, sexual immorality, illegitimate births, breeding babies for the purpose of sacrificing them, torture, murder, violence, and mind control (by

ElectroVoltOverLoad, withholding normal love, soul shattering, torture, programming and demonization) of infants and children, plus any others. Thank You for Your mercy toward me when You called me to Yourself and gave me faith to believe in Your Son Jesus' atonement for me on the cross. He was made a curse for me so that I no longer have to live under any curse. I ask You, Father God, in the name of Jesus, to forgive all of this generational iniquity in my bloodlines and cleanse it away so the curses do not come down to me or to my children to a thousand generations. I ask You, Jesus, to cleanse my body, soul, and spirit and to deliver me of all the effects of this generational iniquity.

Now dear Father God, I ask humbly for the blood of Jesus Christ, Your Son, to cleanse me from all these sins I have confessed and renounced, to cleanse my spirit, soul and every part of my body which has been effected by these sins, in Jesus name! Lord Jesus, I ask You to destroy the spiritual equivalents of the physical objects used in Masonry that I now symbolically remove and give to You

- ***the hoodwink (a blindfold)***
- ***the veil of mourning • the mail around the neck***
- ***the noose, which I cut from around the neck and gather together with the cable-tow running down the body***
- ***the ring of the false Freemasonry marriage covenant, which I renounce, from the ring finger of the right hand***
- ***the chains and bondages of Freemasonry on the body***
- ***the ball and chains from the ankles***
- ***all Freemasonry effects, regalia and armor, especially the apron***
- ***all KKK or other secret organization regalia***

I renounce every evil spirit associated with Masonry and witchcraft and all other sins and, in the name of Jesus Christ, I command Satan's evil spirits to be bound up into one, leaving nothing of evil remaining, and to leave me now, touching or banning no one, and to go to the place appointed for you by the Lord Jesus, never to return to me or my family. I claim the promise of God's word that whosoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be delivered. Jesus, I ask to be delivered of every spirit of sickness, infirmity, curse, affliction, addiction, disease or allergy associated with these sins that I have confessed and renounced and I ask You to heal me and my family of all effects they have had.

I surrender to God's Holy Spirit and to no other spirit all the places in my life where these sins have effected me. I ask You, Lord, to fill me with (and baptize me in) Your Holy Spirit now according to the promises in Your word. I take to myself the whole armor of God promised in Ephesians 6 and rejoice in its protection as Jesus surrounds me with His Holy Spirit. I enthrone You in my heart. Lord Jesus, for You are my Lord and Savior, and my source of eternal life. Thank You, Father God, for Your mercy, Your forgiveness and Your love, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

A FINAL NOTE FROM ASLAN'S PLACE:

This material was adapted by Karen Sackett, of Shield of Faith Ministies, Minneapolis, MN, and further modified by lay counselors at Christ Church Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Anderson, SC. The original "Prayer of Release for Masons and Their Descendants" is contained in the book Unmasking Freemasonry, Removing the Hoodwink, by Seiwyn Stevens, ISBN 0-9583417-3-7, and combined with information from Greg Lambert's book. Masonic Symbolism Explained. ISBN 1-877203-04-1, both of which can be obtained through Jubilee Publishers, P.O. Box 36-044, Wellington 6330, New Zealand, or by visiting their Internet site, www.jubilee.org.nz, where additions are made to the prayer periodically. See more at:

http://aslansplace.com/prayer-of-release-for-masons-and-their-descendants/

The prayers provided here have been developed during Bible studies, prayer sessions and through revelation. We have faith that they have been provided by God and we test them all against God's Holy Word. These prayers are not a quick fix. Instead, they are starting points as you work out your freedom in Christ. Be ready to adjust these prayers as you and those you pray with listen to the Holy Spirit.

Appendix A

THE HEBREW ALPHABET

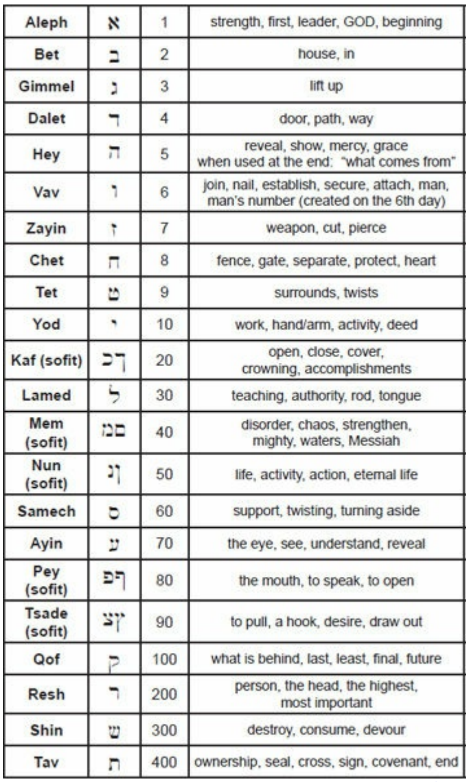

Aleph	א	1	strength, first, leader, GOD, beginning
Bet	ב	2	house, in
Gimmel	ג	3	lift up
Dalet	ד	4	door, path, way
Hey	ה	5	reveal, show, mercy, grace when used at the end: "what comes from"
Vav	ו	6	join, nail, establish, secure, attach, man, man's number (created on the 6th day)
Zayin	ז	7	weapon, cut, pierce
Chet	ח	8	fence, gate, separate, protect, heart
Tet	ט	9	surrounds, twists
Yod	י	10	work, hand/arm, activity, deed
Kaf (sofit)	ךכ	20	open, close, cover, crowning, accomplishments
Lamed	ל	30	teaching, authority, rod, tongue
Mem (sofit)	מם	40	disorder, chaos, strengthen, mighty, waters, Messiah
Nun (sofit)	ןנ	50	life, activity, action, eternal life
Samech	ס	60	support, twisting, turning aside
Ayin	ע	70	the eye, see, understand, reveal
Pey (sofit)	ףפ	80	the mouth, to speak, to open
Tsade (sofit)	ץצ	90	to pull, a hook, desire, draw out
Qof	ק	100	what is behind, last, least, final, future
Resh	ר	200	person, the head, the highest, most important
Shin	ש	300	destroy, consume, devour
Tav	ת	400	ownership, seal, cross, sign, covenant, end

Adapted from Dr. Joel Young - For His Glory Ministries: www.forhisglory.org

Appendix B

I have often been asked what books I’ve read that have inspired me in my work. Therefore, I wanted to provide the following resources for you to check out for yourself. This list represents a selection of books either directly from my own research library or from authors I respect. Most of the books on this list were of tremendous value to me in the writing of this book series. They are not necessarily listed here in any particular order, but are categorized by author.

Recommended Reading:

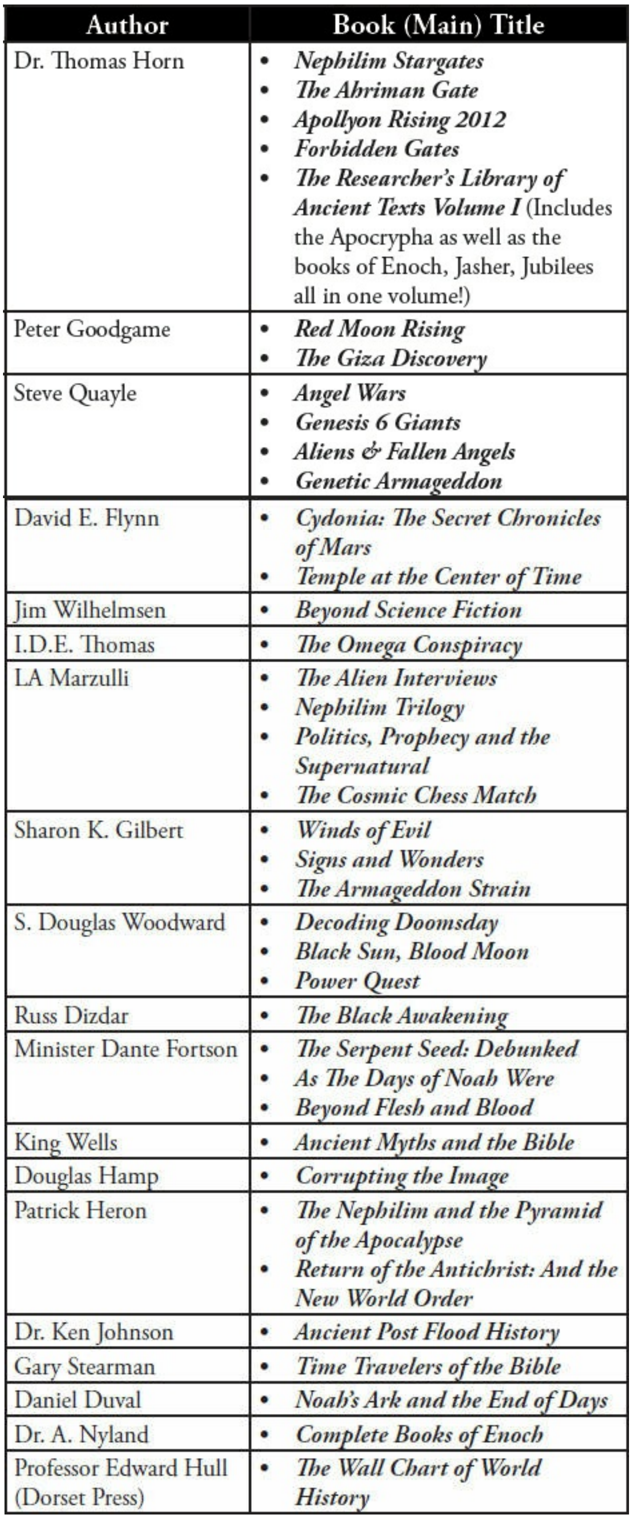

Author	Book (Main) Title
Dr. Thomas Horn	• ***Nephilim Stargates*** • ***The Ahriman Gate*** • ***Apollyon Rising 2012*** • ***Forbidden Gates*** • ***The Researcher's Library of Ancient Texts Volume I*** (Includes the Apocrypha as well as the books of Enoch, Jasher, Jubilees all in one volume!)
Peter Goodgame	• ***Red Moon Rising*** • ***The Giza Discovery***
Steve Quayle	• ***Angel Wars*** • ***Genesis 6 Giants*** • ***Aliens & Fallen Angels*** • ***Genetic Armageddon***
David E. Flynn	• ***Cydonia: The Secret Chronicles of Mars*** • ***Temple at the Center of Time***
Jim Wilhelmsen	• ***Beyond Science Fiction***
I.D.E. Thomas	• ***The Omega Conspiracy***
LA Marzulli	• ***The Alien Interviews*** • ***Nephilim Trilogy*** • ***Politics, Prophecy and the Supernatural*** • ***The Cosmic Chess Match***
Sharon K. Gilbert	• ***Winds of Evil*** • ***Signs and Wonders*** • ***The Armageddon Strain***
S. Douglas Woodward	• ***Decoding Doomsday*** • ***Black Sun, Blood Moon*** • ***Power Quest***
Russ Dizdar	• ***The Black Awakening***
Minister Dante Fortson	• ***The Serpent Seed: Debunked*** • ***As The Days of Noah Were*** • ***Beyond Flesh and Blood***
King Wells	• ***Ancient Myths and the Bible***
Douglas Hamp	• ***Corrupting the Image***
Patrick Heron	• ***The Nephilim and the Pyramid of the Apocalypse*** • ***Return of the Antichrist: And the New World Order***
Dr. Ken Johnson	• ***Ancient Post Flood History***
Gary Stearman	• ***Time Travelers of the Bible***
Daniel Duval	• ***Noah's Ark and the End of Days***
Dr. A. Nyland	• ***Complete Books of Enoch***
Professor Edward Hull (Dorset Press)	• ***The Wall Chart of World History***

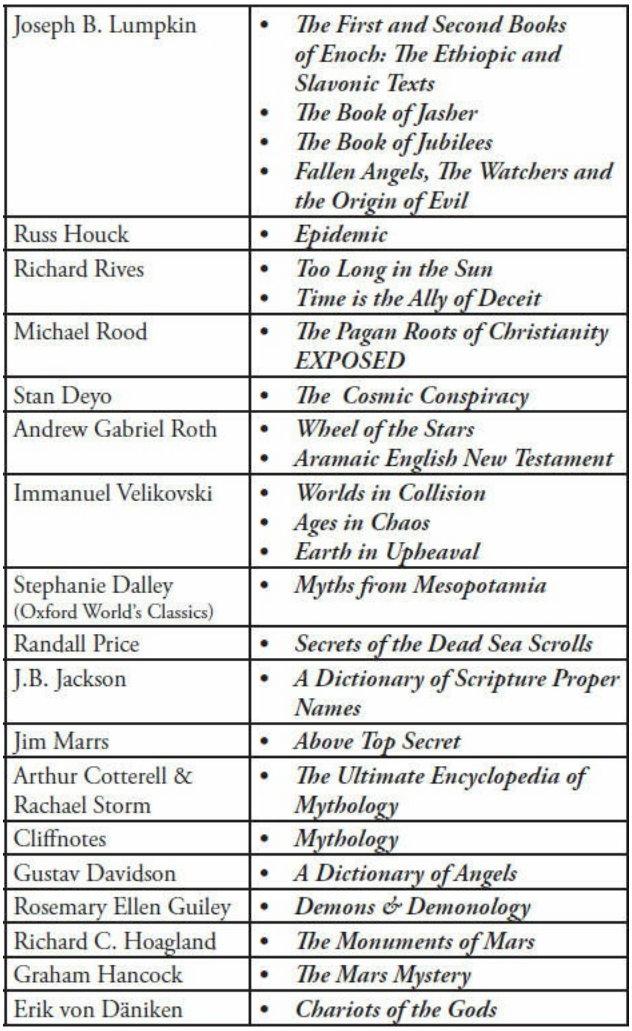

Joseph B. Lumpkin	• *The First and Second Books of Enoch: The Ethiopic and Slavonic Texts* • *The Book of Jasher* • *The Book of Jubilees* • *Fallen Angels, The Watchers and the Origin of Evil*
Russ Houck	• *Epidemic*
Richard Rives	• *Too Long in the Sun* • *Time is the Ally of Deceit*
Michael Rood	• *The Pagan Roots of Christianity EXPOSED*
Stan Deyo	• *The Cosmic Conspiracy*
Andrew Gabriel Roth	• *Wheel of the Stars* • *Aramaic English New Testament*
Immanuel Velikovski	• *Worlds in Collision* • *Ages in Chaos* • *Earth in Upheaval*
Stephanie Dalley (Oxford World's Classics)	• *Myths from Mesopotamia*
Randall Price	• *Secrets of the Dead Sea Scrolls*
J.B. Jackson	• *A Dictionary of Scripture Proper Names*
Jim Marrs	• *Above Top Secret*
Arthur Cotterell & Rachael Storm	• *The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Mythology*
Cliffnotes	• *Mythology*
Gustav Davidson	• *A Dictionary of Angels*
Rosemary Ellen Guiley	• *Demons & Demonology*
Richard C. Hoagland	• *The Monuments of Mars*
Graham Hancock	• *The Mars Mystery*
Erik von Däniken	• *Chariots of the Gods*

For additional resource material that goes along with this book series, please be sure to visit the Babylon Rising blog site:

www.babylonrisingblog.com

To order more copies of this book, visit:

www.babylonrisingbooks.com

Recommended Viewing:

The following is a list of videos I highly recommend watching in order to get a better understanding of some of the positions I take in this book and why. For those of you who are familiar with and know how to use the QR Code system, you can use the code provided (on the next page) to go directly to the videos online.

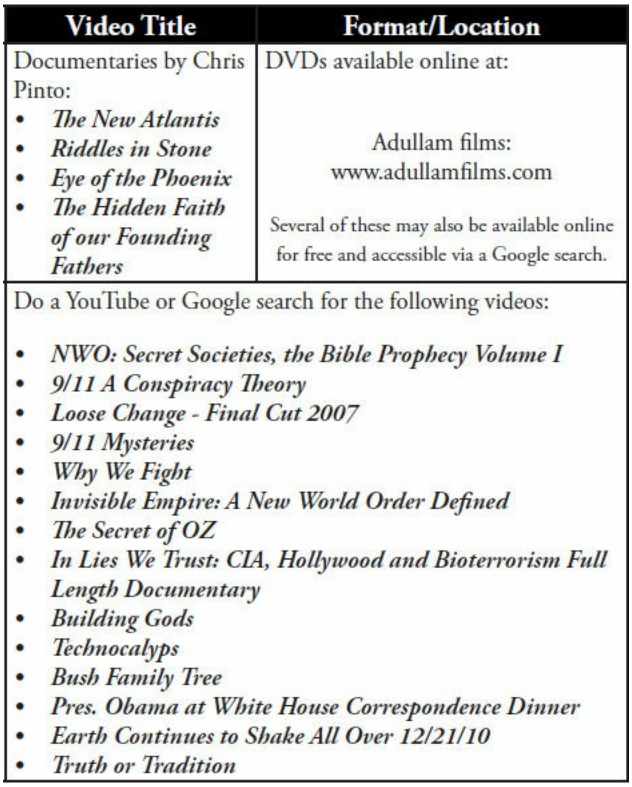

Video Title	Format/Location
Documentaries by Chris Pinto: • *The New Atlantis* • *Riddles in Stone* • *Eye of the Phoenix* • *The Hidden Faith of our Founding Fathers*	DVDs available online at: Adullam films: www.adullamfilms.com Several of these may also be available online for free and accessible via a Google search.
Do a YouTube or Google search for the following videos: • *NWO: Secret Societies, the Bible Prophecy Volume I* • *9/11 A Conspiracy Theory* • *Loose Change - Final Cut 2007* • *9/11 Mysteries* • *Why We Fight* • *Invisible Empire: A New World Order Defined* • *The Secret of OZ* • *In Lies We Trust: CIA, Hollywood and Bioterrorism Full Length Documentary* • *Building Gods* • *Technocalyps* • *Bush Family Tree* • *Pres. Obama at White House Correspondence Dinner* • *Earth Continues to Shake All Over 12/21/10* • *Truth or Tradition*	

You can also access all of the videos I just listed and more at:

www.babylonrisingbooks.com/videos.html

In addition, I would also like to recommend that you watch the many thought provoking videos available through 119 Ministries at:

www.119ministries.com/our-teachings

Recommended Listening:

The following is a list of CD box sets and online radio shows I highly recommend you listen to in order to get a better understanding of some of the positions I take in this book and why.

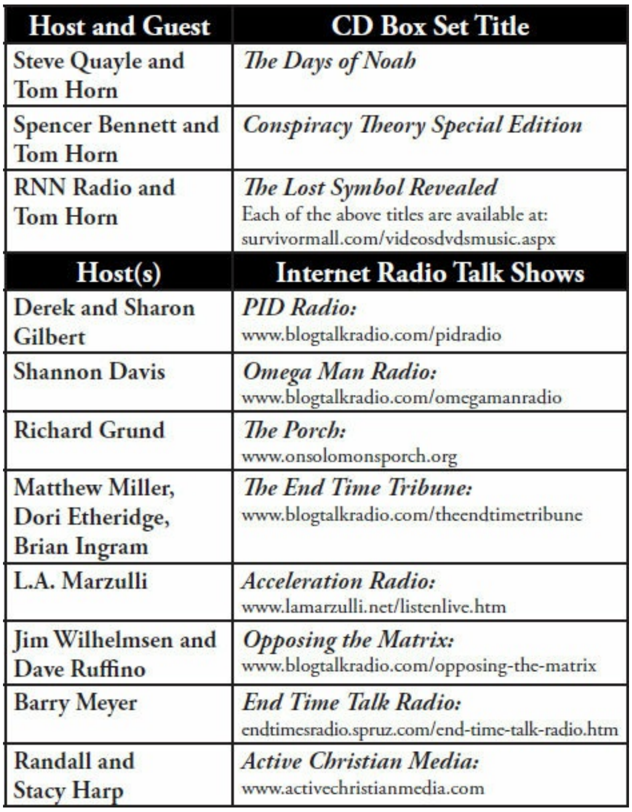

Host and Guest	CD Box Set Title
Steve Quayle and Tom Horn	*The Days of Noah*
Spencer Bennett and Tom Horn	*Conspiracy Theory Special Edition*
RNN Radio and Tom Horn	*The Lost Symbol Revealed* Each of the above titles are available at: survivormall.com/videosdvdsmusic.aspx
Host(s)	**Internet Radio Talk Shows**
Derek and Sharon Gilbert	*PID Radio:* www.blogtalkradio.com/pidradio
Shannon Davis	*Omega Man Radio:* www.blogtalkradio.com/omegamanradio
Richard Grund	*The Porch:* www.onsolomonsporch.org
Matthew Miller, Dori Etheridge, Brian Ingram	*The End Time Tribune:* www.blogtalkradio.com/theendtimetribune
L.A. Marzulli	*Acceleration Radio:* www.lamarzulli.net/listenlive.htm
Jim Wilhelmsen and Dave Ruffino	*Opposing the Matrix:* www.blogtalkradio.com/opposing-the-matrix
Barry Meyer	*End Time Talk Radio:* endtimesradio.spruz.com/end-time-talk-radio.htm
Randall and Stacy Harp	*Active Christian Media:* www.activechristianmedia.com

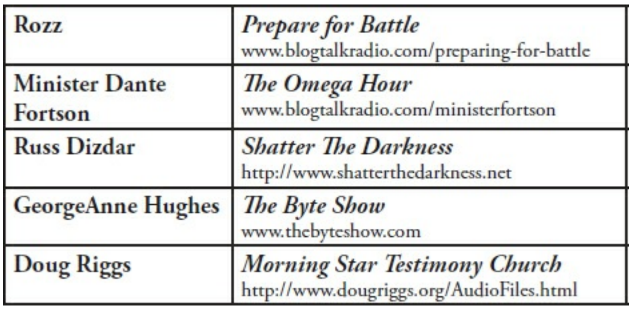

Rozz	*Prepare for Battle* www.blogtalkradio.com/preparing-for-battle
Minister Dante Fortson	*The Omega Hour* www.blogtalkradio.com/ministerfortson
Russ Dizdar	*Shatter The Darkness* http://www.shatterthedarkness.net
GeorgeAnne Hughes	*The Byte Show* www.thebyteshow.com
Doug Riggs	*Morning Star Testimony Church* http://www.dougriggs.org/AudioFiles.html

Listen to my Blog Talk Radio show,
The Revolutionary Radio Project

www.blogtalkradio.com/revolutionaryradio

The
REVOLUTIONARY
radio project

Hosted by Rob Skiba
Wednesdays, 10pm (CST) to midnight
blogtalkradio.com/revolutionaryradio

Appendix C

OTHER PRODUCTS AVAILABLE FROM ROB SKIBA

DVDs:

MYTHOLOGY and the COMING GREAT DECEPTION
THE MOUNT HERMON ROSWELL CONNECTION
BABYLON RISING AND THE FIRST SHALL BE LAST
PRESENTED BY ROB SKIBA
BABYLON RISING
322
TETRADS AND THE TIME OF JACOB'S TROUBLE
ARCHON-INVASION AND THE RETURN OF THE NEPHILIM PART 1
presented by ROB SKIBA
ARCHON INVASION AND THE RETURN OF THE NEPHILIM PART 2
presented by ROB SKIBA
ARCHON INVASION 2045 AND THE QUEST FOR IMMORTALITY
presented by ROB SKIBA

- ***Mythology and the Coming Great Deception /The Mount Hermon-Roswell Connection Double-Feature*** ($35)
- ***Babylon Rising: And The First Shall Be Last*** ($25)
- ***322, Tetrads and the Time of Jacob's Trouble*** ($22)
- ***Archon Invasion And The Return of the Nephilim 1*** ($25)
- ***Archon Invasion And The Return of the Nephilim 2*** ($22)
- ***Archon Invasion: 2045 and the Quest for Immortality*** ($25)

OTHER PRODUCTS AVAILABLE FROM ROB SKIBA

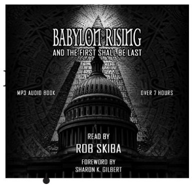
BABYLON RISING
AND THE FIRST SHALL BE LAST
MP3 AUDIO BOOK
OVER 7 HOURS
READ BY
ROB SKIBA
FOREWORD BY
SHARON K. GILBERT

($25)

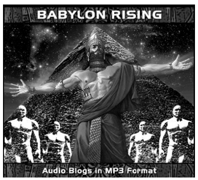
BABYLON RISING
Audio Blogs in MP3 Format

($20)

The Revolutionary Radio Project
THE SUPERNATURAL COLLECTION
ANNUIT COEPTIS

($20)

MP3 Sets:

- ***Babylon Rising: And The First Shall Be Last Audio Book***
- ***The Babylon Rising Blog Series***
- ***The Revolutionary Radio Project: Supernatural Collection***

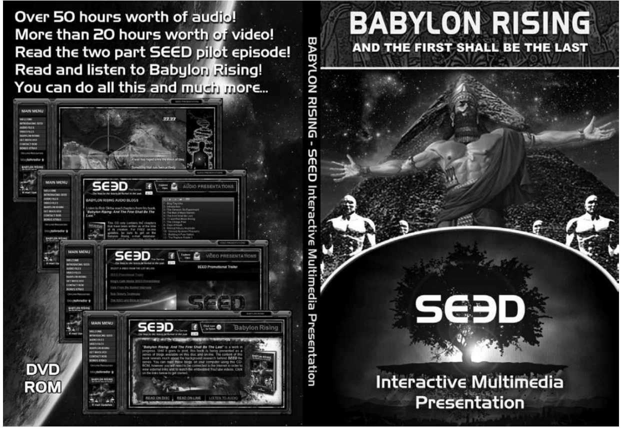
Over 50 hours worth of audio!
More than 20 hours worth of video!
Read the two part SEED pilot episode!
Read and listen to Babylon Rising!
You can do all this and much more...
DVD ROM
BABYLON RISING - SEED Interactive Multimedia Presentation
BABYLON RISING
AND THE FIRST SHALL BE THE LAST
SEED
Interactive Multimedia Presentation

Get the Babylon Rising SEED Interactive DVD-Rom Super Collection For Just $50!

!!SPECIAL OFFER FOR A LIMITED TIME ONLY!!
The $100 Babylon Rising/Nephilim Combo-Pak
All separate= $144
BUY ALL TOGETHER AND SAVE $44!
BABYLON RISING
ARCHON INVASION
NEPHILIM
MYTHOLOGY
MOUNT HERMON ROSWELL CONNECTION
SEED
~~$18~~
~~$25~~
~~$35~~
~~$19~~
~~$25~~
~~$22~~
FREE!

You get Book 1, *Babylon Rising: And The First Shall Be Last*, as well as the 2hr. DVD that goes with it, plus the Mythology and the Coming Great Deception & The Mt. Hermon-Roswell Connection Double Feature, Book 2, *Archon Invasion: The Rise, Fall and Return of the Nephilim*, and the 2 DVDs that go with it, along with the SEED: Why We Need To Be Culturally Relevant DVD as a bonus! Get them all together in this bundle and you will save $44.

To order any of these products and to take advantage of any special sales we may be running go to:

www.babylonrisingbooks.com/specials.html

COMING SOON: SEED THE GRAPHIC NOVEL SERIES!
DALLAS, TEXAS JANUARY 25, 2003
BLAM!
MY NAME IS ZAK RANDALL.
EVERYONE THINKS I'M DEAD...
BUT I'M NOT!
RANDALL

Appendix D

INTRODUCING SEED THE SERIES

The content of this book (and the others that will follow) provides the non-fiction foundation upon which the forthcoming science-fiction TV show we are currently developing called, ***SEED** the series* will be built. ***SEED*** really is *Lost* meets *Battlestar Galactica*, wrapped up in *The X-Files*. It will have the mystery and intrigue that made *Lost* so successful, combined with the sci-fi appeal of shows like *Battlestar Galactica* and *Star Trek*, mixed with the conspiracy and alien agenda themes of *The X-Files*.

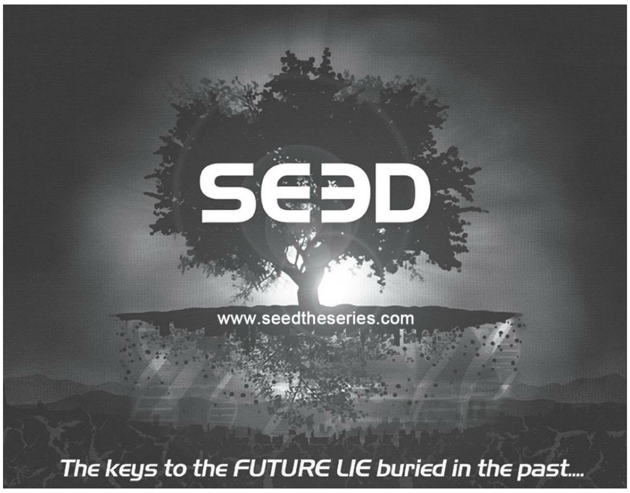
SEƎD
www.seedtheseries.com
The keys to the FUTURE LIE buried in the past....

The reason we are creating this series is to get the message of books like this one (as well as those of the other authors mentioned in it) out to the masses. In my opinion, nothing has a greater impact on our culture than movies, television, music, the arts and entertainment. Statistics show that the average American watches 4 to 5 hours of TV per day and as a whole, we spend over $9 billion a year going to the movies.

In fact, that was the primary reason why filmmaker, Alex Kendrick started making movies like *Facing the Giants*, *Fireproof* and *Courageous*. He said:

> *"I found a (Barna Group) survey that basically said the top three most influential factors in our culture were movies, television, and the Internet. The church wasn't even in the top ten."*
>
> — Alex Kendrick[1]

When you realize how much time the average American spends going to church or reading their Bibles verses watching TV and going to the movies, it's not hard to understand why George Lucas once said:

> *"For better or worse, the influence of the church, which used to be all powerful, has been usurped by film. Films and television tell us the way we conduct our lives, what is right and wrong."*
>
> — George Lucas[2]

George Lucas captured my young imagination at age 7, and as I said in the Introduction to this book, *Star Wars* had a profound impact on my life growing up. Imagine if the stories of the Bible could capture an entire generation the way that one film did!

One advantage of the science-fiction genre is that people go into it suspending their disbelief. Thus, if they have turned their disbelief filter off, that means they are open to believing whatever is being said. The devil has taken full advantage of this truth for too long! We believe it's time for the Church to become as good at telling the truth as the devil is at telling lies, and that is why we have developed this series called, ***SEED***.

The time has never been better for a series like ***SEED***. It seems as though nearly everyone is searching for answers concerning December 21, 2012 (and beyond). Unfortunately, the Church is largely silent on the subject and/or has no answers to provide. The world on the other hand, is offering up lots and lots of answers based on the ancient prophecies of people who were anything but godly (in the sense of worshippers of YHVH anyway).

The History Channel has run three seasons worth of their *Ancient Aliens* series, promoting the idea that we were the product of "seeding" and genetic tampering by beings known to some as the "Anunnaki," who were the gods of the ancient world. This concept is gaining more and more acceptance and the speculation is that our ancient, alien parents may be returning soon — possibly on December 21, 2012.

After watching two seasons worth of the *Ancient Aliens* series, a good friend of mine called me. He had recently finished going to a Bible college and had ambitions of starting his own Bible school when I got the call. To say he was shaken in his faith would be a little bit too strong of a statement, but he was quite disturbed by what he had seen nonetheless. Knowing that I was "into this stuff," he asked me what I thought about it. He is not alone. Many have asked:

> *"What do you do with this kind of evidence? I mean, it's real and we can't just ignore it, but how do all of these crop circles, megalithic structures, UFOs and 'ancient aliens' fit into what we believe to be true from the Scriptures?"*

It was at that moment, while talking with my seminary trained friend, that I knew there was a real need to educate the Body of Christ. Why? Because Jesus said that there was a deception coming that would be so great that even His elect could be deceived by it. The deception is already here dear friend, and I believe it is going to get much worse in the days ahead. Therefore, I began to think about that old saying, *"Find a need and fill it."*

I started going to lectures, seminars and conferences to learn from people like Tom Horn, LA Marzulli, Derek and Sharon Gilbert, Doug Woodward, Russ Dizdar and others who were already teaching on the subjects you never hear about in church. Soon, I was doing lectures of my own and producing CDs and DVDs that would later be sold through organizations like *Prophecy in the News* and *Cutting Edge Ministries*. However, in all of that, I kept noticing something that I found to be rather disturbing: there were always only a handful of people at those conferences and lectures and only a few thousand books, DVDs, and CDs were being sold.

There are over 300 million people in America and more than 7 billion on the planet! I began to wonder how in the world are we ever going to reach that many people if only a few hundred were going to these lectures and a few thousand were buying the books, CDs and DVDs? Then it hit me: the best way to reach the masses is through the media — specifically through the medium of science fiction television. Thus, ***SEED*** *the series* was born.

SEED will deal with the subjects from a Biblical worldview, but will be served on a secular palette. By that I mean, it will not be the next *Left Behind* series or a program that will only run on networks like *TBN* or *CBN*. ***SEED*** is designed to play to the same audiences that watch *V, The Event, Fringe, The X-Files, Heroes, Lost, Battlestar Galactica* and *Star Trek*. It will be just as "cool" and have the same production value, while providing another way to look at comparable subject matter, in a *non*-preachy format.

In my opinion, there are at least three major problems with most Christian movies and television shows:

1. They are usually severely underfunded, which leads to cheesy acting, poor lighting and sound and insufficient production value. Children of the King of the universe should surely be able to do better

than that!

2. They attempt to preach in a venue that people go to be entertained. That will never work (and the financial statistics prove it doesn't). People do not go to the movies or watch episodic television to be preached to (they can surf to TBN and CBN if they want preaching), their desire is to be entertained.
3. Because Christian productions are so concerned with "closing the deal," they become overzealous with a "message" that they feel *must* be conveyed, to the point where they actually end up producing something that the world will never go see. As a result, they merely "preach to the choir," and completely miss the opportunity to reach the very audience they set out to give the message to in the first place.

The apostle Paul understood that the natural (or carnal, secular) man cannot receive the things of the Spirit, nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned:

> *But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.* (1 Corinthians 2:14)

I believe this is why Jesus spoke in parables. **He taught culturally relevant stories that illustrated Kingdom principles.** He taught about fishing and farming... things the people could easily relate to in order to show them what the Kingdom is really like.

Jesus did not walk around with scrolls under His arms saying, *"Obadiah says... and Nahum says..."* like the characters in most Christian films do.

Come on, admit it: how many times have you seen a Christian film or show that was full of someone (usually with a bad southern accent) saying, *"The Bible says..."* every ten minutes? That does not compute in the average moviegoer's mind. They don't speak "Christianese" and neither should we — if we actually want to reach them.

Your friends and family are much more likely to come to faith in Jesus Christ as a result of conversations born out of a relationship with you than they ever will from a 60 minute television show or a 2 hour movie that is loaded with Scripture references.

I appreciate something Mel Gibson said while promoting his film, *The Passion of the Christ*. It was a very powerful film and many of the top evangelicals in the country got behind it. At one point, Gibson was basically asked to put an "invitation" at the end of the film. This is a paraphrase, but he basically said,

> *"No guys. That's not my job, that's your job. My job is to put compelling images up on the screen. Your job is to do the follow up."*

Following that same philosophy, our goal with ***SEED*** is to put compelling images on the screen, such that the secular world will become intrigued and want to continue watching it. Your job will then be to water the "seeds" we plant in ***SEED*** and use them as talking points — or a bridge — to lead others to the Truth.

There are a total of 72 episodes planned for ***SEED***, divided up over 6 seasons, with 12 episodes per season. The first two scripts have been written and a third one will be finished soon. If you want to read what has been done so far, you can download the two-part pilot episode by going to:

www.babylonrisingbooks.com/SEED.html

We cannot do this alone. If we go to any major studio or network, they will control our content, censor us, and have the power to cancel the series prematurely and own the rights, thus killing the project forever. The only way this can work is with your help. We are putting the control into the hands of our audience. This gives us total freedom and gives you the assurance that your favorite show will remain on the air, without being compromised.

Do you want the content that you've read in this book to get out to the masses? Do you want the messages of Tom Horn, Steve Quayle, LA Marzulli, Jim Wilhelmsen, S. Douglas Woodward, Russ Dizdar, Doug Hamp and others to get out to a much larger audience in a cool, science-fiction format? Well, ***SEED*** *the series* is how we intend to do it!

Please visit, **www.seedtheseries.com** and click the *"SEE"* link in order to learn more about this project. Click the *"SOW"* link to get involved and help make this show a reality.

> *"Christianity is not a religion. It is a revolution against the forces of darkness."*
>
> — Peter C. Spencer[3] Filmmaker,
> *Return to the Hiding Place*

About The Author

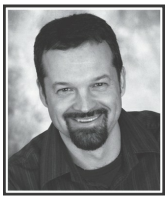

Rob Skiba is the co-founder of King’s Gate Media, LLC, the creator/writer of the forthcoming, science-fiction, Internet TV series ***SEED***, and the author the non-fiction book, *Babylon Rising: And The First Shall Be Last*.

Rob is an award-winning documentary filmmaker, entrepreneur, published author, artist, keynote speaker, motivational coach, trainer, teacher, Army veteran, former missionary and an active member of three charitable organizations, serving on several boards of directors.

He has written and directed numerous theatrical plays, including performances in New York, Connecticut and throughout western Massachusetts. He has been an actor ever since the founding of his High School Drama Club in 1986. Since then, he has helped to start several Community Theater groups as well as the Drama Ministry at his home church and has toured the country with a traveling acting troop.

A graduate of the Hollywood Film Institute, Rob Skiba’s life-long dream has been to produce powerful television and motion picture productions. He is currently in pre-production on ***SEED*** the series and has numerous projects in various stages of development.

Rob is happily married, has a teenage son and lives in The Colony, Texas.

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1. See: http://www.babylonrisingblog.com
2. See: ***The Mt. Hermon-Roswell Connection*** DVD in *Appendix C.*
1. The Revolutionary Radio Project: http://www.blogtalkradio.com/revolutionaryradio
2. http://www.babylonrisingblog.com and http://www.babylonrisingbooks.com
3. See *Appendix C* for a list of DVDs available for purchase.
1. That was more than ten years before I knew there was a book by the same title written by Dr. I.D.E. Thomas
2. Having been in aviation for 6 years, I knew the difference between a chemtrail and a contrail. Contrails streak behind a plane as vapor clouds that dissipate quickly and disappear a short distance behind the plane. Chemtrails on the other hand, do not dissipate and hang in the air all day; often in a "checker board" formation after multiple planes have left them behind.
3. The movie was set in the 1950s and became the inspiration for the TV shows like, *Happy Day*s and *Lavern and Shirley*.
4. This was also around the time that Dolly the sheep was cloned.
5. Read: *The Shroud: The 2000-Year-Old Mystery Solved* by Ian Wilson
6. People don't go to the movies to be preached to, they go to be entertained. Read more about this in *Appendix D.*
7. A theory that is largely based on the research of people like Peter Goodgame, Tom Horn, Steve Quayle and others.
1. 2 Peter 1:21
2. Exodus 33:11
3. See also Jude 6
4. Matthew 24:37
5. *As the Days of Noah Were,* by Minister Dante Fortson, page 36
6. Prior to the 3rd century, going all the way back to the days of Noah, the belief was that the "sons of God" were angels. Dr. Chuck Missler notes in an article titled, *Mischievous Angels or Sethites?* that the *Sethite Theory* really originated with Julius Africanus. From there it was embraced by Cyril of Alexandria and Augustine. Today, it is the prevailing view taught in seminaries and churches. See: http://www.khouse.org/articles/1997/110/print/For more history on the origins of the *Sethite Theory*, see also chapters seven and eight of Douglas Hamp's book, *Corrupting the Image.*
7. See: http://www.habeeb.com/cedar.of.lebanon/cedar.of.lebanon.info.html and http://factoidz.com/cedar-trees-lifespan-average-height-scientific-classification-and-wood-uses/says cedars can grow from 30 meters up to 70 meters tall.
8. I will discuss the sons of Anak and the Nephilim giants of the Bible in greater detail in *Book 2, Babylon Rising: The Return of the Nephilim*
9. Jasher 5:15
10. Genesis 5:24
11. Jasher 5:35-36
12. Jasher 5:19 and Jasher 5:24
13. You can read what has been written so far online at: http://www.babylonrisingblog.com/Nephilim.html
14. See Jasher 4:4 and Jubilees 7:24,25
15. Enoch 10:10
16. Enoch 13:3-5
17. For more on this idea, see: http://www.babylonrisingblog.com/Nephilim2.html. Also, be sure to watch the documentaries, *Building Gods* and *Technocalyps* to see what may bring them back again: http://www.babylonrisingbooks.com/videos.html
18. Noah's name means "rest"
19. Refer to God's statement in Genesis 6:3
20. There is also evidence of giants in the lineage of Japheth. This will be dealt with in greater detail in *Book 2, Babylon Rising: The Return of the Nephilim*
21. See, *Building a Pure Nation*: http://www.babylonrisingblog.com/Godvsgod4.html
22. Ancient and current indications are that Gog and Magog were giants. Again, I will deal with that more in *Book 2, Babylon Rising: The Return of the Nephilim*
23. See 2 Samuel 21:20 and 1 Chronicles 20:6
24. Chapter 4 of *The Nephilim and the Pyramid of the Apocalypse,* by Patrick Heron
25. Excerpts from *Corrupting the Image,* by Douglas Hamp, pages 152 & 153
26. Ibid
27. KJV reads: "And Pathrusim, and Casluhim, (out of whom came Philistim,) and Caphtorim." (Genesis 10:14) Compare with Jeremiah 47:4 and Amos 9:7.
28. See: http://www.alpha-omegaonline.com/road/cretan_mythology.htm
29. See: http://www.in2greece.com/english/historymyth/mythology/names/minos.htm and http://www.mythweb.com/encyc/entries/crete.html
1. Note: The Hebrew translators of the Septuagint translated the Hebrew word "gibborim" as *gigas* (which is the root for the word *gigantes* or *giant* in English) in Gen. 10:8,9. However, these same scholars translated the same word (gibborim) in 2 Sam. 23:8 (for instance) as *ton dynaton*, which simply means mighty/courageous/strong warrior.
2. See also this person's explanation: http://www.arlev.co.uk/nimrod.htm
3. http://concordances.org/hebrew/strongs_2490.htm
4. See for instance, the works of Berossus, Eupolemus, Alexander Polyhistor and the Sibylline Oracles, as quoted by Cory.
5. *History of Baalbek,* page 29, by Michael Alouf,

6 Ibid, page 28 quoting a traveller named D'Arvieux' from his Memoires, Part II - Ch. 26

7. See: Matthew 16:13-20
8. Available for free online at: http://www.redmoonrising.com/Giza/
9. Jasher 9:23-39
10. Note 2 Thessalonians 2:4 and Revelation 19:19
11. Genesis 11 says they built their city and tower in the *plains* of Shinar
12. *Nephilim Stargates: The Year 2012 and the Return of the Watchers,* by Thomas R. Horn, chapter 2, pages 21 &22,
13. See: Jasher 49:9-18
14. http://davelivingston.com/nimrod.htm
15. *Epic of Gilgamesh*
16. Available for free online at: http://www.redmoonrising.com/Giza/index2.htm
17. The "cross" was actually a symbol that goes way back in time, representing numerous gods whose names were spelled with a "T" such as Tammuz, Themis, Theos, Thor, Tyr, Tantalus, Tet and others. Tammuz is the Babylonian Dumuzi, "The son who rises."
18. For an excellent resource concerning the pagan origins of many Christian traditions, I would recommend reading, *Too Long in the Sun* and *Time is the Ally of Deceit* by Richard Rives
19. I will write more about it in Chapter Eight, *Truth or Tradition*
20. See: Malachi 3:6a and Hebrews 13:8
21. See: Leviticus 18:3 and Jeremiah 10:2,3
22. *The Two Babylons,* by Alexander Hislop, Chapter II, Section II, Sub-Section IV, *Death of the Child*
23. Sourced from http://www.piney.com/His224.html

24. This is especially true, since books like Robert Bauval's, *The Orion Mystery* have come out. Author/researcher, S. Douglas Woodward also observes that this arrangement is mirrored in other megalithic structures such as England's first "Stonehenge," the Thornborough Circle in Yorkshire, England, which as he points out in his book, *Decoding Doomsday* may be 800 to 1,000 years older than the pyramids of Giza (see chapter 7, page 133). He also makes note of similar arrangements amongst the city designs of North American Indians and elsewhere, thus stating to me in an e-mail, *"This was common knowledge among the ancients, even if it isn't common to us."*
25. *Sandpit of Royalty*, from the newspaper *Extra Bladet* (Copenhagen, Jan. 31, 1999)
26. Read his personal account of this excavation: http://www.drhawass.com/blog/mysterious-osiris-shaft-giza
27. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sixth_dynasty_of_Egypt
28. According to Bishop Ussher's timeline. Other ancient history scholars like Dr. Ken Johnson place the Flood at 2269 BC (see: http://biblefacts.org/creation/time.html).Josephus, Ussher, and other scholars disagree slightly on some of their dates, but most agree that a straightforward reading of the Bible indicates the Flood of Noah having taken place some time between 2500 BC and 2300 BC.
29. See: http://www.drhawass.com/photoblog/dr-hawass-inside-osiris-shaft
30. BBC NEWS article: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/2982891.stm
31. Visit: http://www.babylonrisingblog.com/ManyNames.html
32. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iraq_under_U.S._Military_Occupation#2003
33. You can listen to the entire show online here: http://www.blogtalkradio.com/omegamanradio/2011/12/10/steve-quayle-tom-horn-transhumanism-fallen-angels-666

1. *The Secret Teaching of All Ages,* by Manly P. Hall, page 44
2. The Scripture says, *"Surely the Lord GOD does nothing unless He reveals His secret counsel to His servants the prophets."* (Amos 3:7 NASB)
3. Revelation 5:5
4. Genesis 3:15
5. For more amazing insights on the Assyrian, read the article Peter Goodgame wrote for Raiders News Network: http://www.redmoonrising.com/Giza/raiders1.htm
6. See Jasher 27:1-12 Note also the awesome connection here to Genesis 25:29-34. Hebrew *tradition* states that Shem killed Nimrod, though I have yet to find any ancient text that supports that notion. Whereas, Jasher explicitly states it was Esau. Something that could be considered, however, is the idea that Shem may have killed Nimrod, and Esau may have killed Tammuz (who was believed to be Nimrod reincarnated).
7. See: Revelation 13:1 and Revelation 9:11
8. I will write much more about that subject in *Book 2, Babylon Rising: The Return of the Nephilim.* See also the book *Forbidden Gates,* by Tom and Nita Horn
9. *Black Sun, Blood Moon,* by S. Douglas Woodward, chapter 12, pages 142 & 143.
10. 1 John 4:3
11. For more, see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olympias
12. See: http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/sep/27/adolf-hitler-suicide-skull-fragment and Google: Hitler DNA did not commit suicide
13. Dr. Thomas Horn, David Ovason and others have pointed out these facts. See: http://www.raidersnewsupdate.com/leadstory70.htm
14. The practice of adding up the numerical values of words.
15. *The Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events*, Revised Edition, Arnold Fruchtenbaum, 2003, page 251.
16. See the chart in *Appendix A*.
17. Such as Professor Bruston, Professor of Theology at Montauban, and researchers/Bible scholars like Peter Goodgame and Mariano Franco of Buenos Aires, Argentina.
18. Apparently, there are two ways to spell Cush. The one above and another more common way: Kaf-Vav-Shin. If the latter spelling is used, the phrase adds up to 672, Everyone who suggests the 666 connection uses the spelling without the Vav. In support of the latter spelling, we do find the gentilic form of Cush (i.e. Cushite/Ethiopian) spelled without the Vav in several places: Numbers 12:1, Amos 9:7 and Daniel 11:43, all of which have interesting prophetic importance when considered in a Last Days context.
19. Watch the *Chapter 2: The Osiris Shaft at Gaza and its Mysteries* video here: http://www.egyptiandawn.info/multimedia.html
20. S. Douglas Woodward adds, *"Ironically (but importantly) as Chuck Missler points out, it was the standard (ensign) of the Tribe of Dan… who refused to take the snake of its ensign (for obvious reasons even to the members of the Tribe of Dan at the time of the Exodus). They choose, instead, the eagle! Hence it is not surprising that you also frequently see a symbol of an eagle with a snake in its talons! Of course, as J.R. Church well documents, the Tribe of Dan is also the tribe associated with the Antichrist (see Daniel Reveals the Bloodline of Antichrist, by J. R. Church)."*
21. Interesting trivia: The word *America* appears to derive from the word "Amaru," which is the name for the serpent god, Quetzalcoatl in Perru. Amaruca is literally translated, *"Land of the Plumed Serpents."* According to Mesoamerican lore, Quetzalcoatl (called Amaru in Peru) was a strange visitor who claimed to be a "priest" from a far away land. He apparently had the ability to transform himself into a feathered serpent. References: http://www.amaruca.com/symbolism.html and http://www.plim.org/2Luciferian.htm
22. Both are viewable for free online with a simple Google search or to watch them on DVD, you can purchase them through Chris Pinto's *Adullum Films* website: http://www.adullamfilms.com/SecretMysteries.html
23. I have made a number of those resources available to you in *Appendix B*

1. Excerpt from *Prophecies of 'The Assyrian': Will the Antichrist Come from Iraq?* by Peter Goodgame, for Raiders News Network. To read the full article, visit: http://www.redmoonrising.com/Giza/raiders1.htm
2. David Barton is the founder of a Christian organization, called *Wall Builders.* See: http://www.wallbuilders.com/
3. http://www.aoc.gov/cc/art/rotunda/frieze/index.cfm
4. **Figure 16** is of President Ronald Reagan's lying in state ceremony
5. Viewable for free online with a simple Google search or, to watch it on DVD, you can purchase it through Chris Pinto's *Adullum Films* website: http://www.adullamfilms.com/HiddenFaith.html
6. Crowley, Aleister; Mary. Desti, Leila. Waddell (2004). *Magick* : Liber ABA, Book Four, Parts I-IV. Hymenaeus. Beta (ed.). York Beach, Me.: S. Weiser.
7. Visit http://weareallrelated.com to learn more and see her chart.
8. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plantagenet citing various sources: Meade 1991, p. viii, Gerald of Wales, *Instructione Principis,* Fordham University, Warren 1978, p. 2 and http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/share/currentstudents/history/undergradmodulesyear2/module-HS1713.html
9. See: http://www.babylonrisingbooks.com/videosC402.html
10. Full transcript available through the JFK online library: http://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Ready-Reference/JFK-Speeches/The-President-and-the-Press-Address-before-the-American-Newspaper-Publishers-Association.aspx
11. See Judge Andrew Napolitano's article, *What If Elections Don't Matter?* at: http://www.corson.org/columnists/past_articles/napolitano/2012/011212.htm
12. For an excellent video presentation on this subject, be sure to check out Chris Pinto's documentary, *Eye of the Phoenix***.** See also Dr. Thomas Horn's book, *Apollyon Rising 2012.*
13. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bennu
14. *Power Quest: America's Obsession With The Paranorma*l, pg. 157 by S. Douglas Woodward
15. Thomas Bulfinch, *Age of Fable:* Vols. I & II: *Stories of Gods and Heroes.* 1913
16. Enoch 10:10
17. For the whole article go to: http://www.newswithviews.com/Horn/thomas127.htm
18. For more information concerning the symbols and meanings contained in the imagery on the back of our U.S. one dollar bill and our nation' s Great Seal, see also *The Occult Nature of the Seals Explained*: http://www.caterpillar.org.uk/warning/fseals2.htm

19. Matthew 2:14,15 and Hosea 11:1
20. Note the interrelationship of Egypt, Assyria (Babylon), and Israel in Isaiah 7:17-20 and Isaiah 19:23-25
21. Strong's #32: angel, messenger
22. Please see the *Prayers of Deliverance* section at the back of this book.
23. U.S. military occupation of Iraq began on May 1, 2003 after the successful invasion.
24. A reference to the prophecies of the Cumaen Sybil.
25. In Roman myth, Lucina was the goddess of childbirth.
26. Could this be what Daniel 2:43 is referring to?
27. Hesiod wrote about the 5 Ages of Man. The age of Cronus/Saturn (Satan) was known as the Golden Age of Greek mytholoy.
28. Again, is this a parallel reference to what Daniel saw in Daniel 2:43?
29. As the son of Satan
30. Is this a parallel (counterfeit) reference to Psalm 18:8-10?
31. From the Prologue to *Power Quest Book Two: The Ascendancy of Antichrist in America,* by S. Douglas Woodward, page xxxviii
32. Hunt, Linda (1991). *Secret Agenda: The United States Government, Nazi Scientists, and Project Paperclip, 1945 to 1990*. New York: St.Martin's Press. pages 6,21,31,176,204,259.
33. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Project_Paperclip_Team_at_Fort_Bliss.jpg
34. *Power Quest Book Two: The Ascendancy of Antichrist in America,* by S. Douglas Woodward, Chapter Five, page 171.
35. Ibid, page 172.
36. Ibid, page 173
37. Ibid, page 190
38. As one specialized study of symbolism notes, "In modern times the caduceus figures as a symbol of commerce, since Mercury is the god of commerce. M. Oldfield Howey, The Encircled Serpent: A Study of Serpent Symbolism in All Countries And Ages, New York, 1955, p77
39. Member of Concord Lodge No.688 Concord, Ohio
40. Source: http://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/gemini/index.html
41. The twins are actually mentioned in the Bible as being the name for a ship that carried Paul to Rome: Acts 28:11 (KJV)—"And after three months we departed in a ship of Alexandria, which had wintered in the isle, whose sign was Castor and Pollux."
42. The Agena Target Vehicle (ATV) was an unmanned spacecraft used by NASA during its Gemini program to develop and practice orbital space rendezvous and docking techniques and to perform large orbital changes, in preparation for the Apollo program lunar missions.
43. From a November 1969 edition of *New Age Magazine* article written by Kenneth S. Kleinknecht, 33°, the Manager of the Apollo Program Command and Service Modules; Deputy Manager, Gemini Program; Manager, Project Mercury.
44. See http://www.dunnsrockmasoniclodge.org/masonic_astronauts.htm and compare with: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Gemini_astronauts
45. See http://freemasonry.bcy.ca/biography/spacemason/ and http://www.dunnsrockmasoniclodge.org/masonic_astronauts.htm
46. For more see: http://rense.com/ufo4/plan9.htm and http://www.bibliotecapleyades.net/sociopolitica/esp_sociopol_council9_01.htm#The Council of Nine
47. http://tl2k.org/history.htm
48. http://texemarrs.com/032003/eagle_has_landed.htm
49. *Magic, Alchemy, and the Illuminati Conquest of Outer Space: The Eagle Has Landed!* Source: http://texemarrs.com/032003/eagle_has_landed.htm
50. See the full article here: http://www.hourofthetime.com/majestyt.htm
51. http://www.nasa.gov/audience/forstudents/k-4/stories/what-is-orion-k4.html
52. http://youtu.be/U-VR6pNi70k
53. Federal Citizen Information Center: *The History of the Stars and Stripes*.
54. http://www.history.org/Foundation/journal/Summer08/betsy.cfm
55. Ibid
56. Here are some other resources for you to look into: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberty_(goddess)
    http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goddess_of_Justice
    http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pledge_of_Allegiance
    http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sons_of_the_American_Revolution
57. See *Appendix A*
58. See: http://billheidrick.com/works/hgm2/hg0210.htm and The Bible Wheel value for 219 at http://www.biblewheel.com/GR/GR_Database.asp?Gem_Num=219
59. http://chaplain.house.gov/religion/prayer_room.html
60. Ibid
61. Interestingly enough, there are only six chairs in the room.
62. Watch the video clip on the *Dakota Voice* website: http://www.dakotavoice.com/2010/11/the-congressionalprayer-chapel/
63. Ibid
64. **Figure 36** shows FDR's handwritten notes suggesting the modification.
65. A talisman (from Greek *telesma* or from the Greek word *"telein"* which means "to initiate into the mysteries") is an amulet or other object considered to possess supernatural or magical powers. Thus, to the occult practitioner, an object loaded with mystery symbols (like the one dollar bill has all over its back) can be used to initiate supernatural activity.
66. Revelation 2:12,13 says that the "Satan's seat" was in Pergamum. The seat of Satan was the Altar of Zeus. He was the *"god of this world"* often referred to in the New Testament.
67. The stars above the eagle form the shape of the so-called Star of David. That symbol has nothing to do with David or the true nation of Israel. It is the "star of Remphan" (Saturn) that Stephen spoke about in the book of Acts 7:42,43.
68. http://www.egyptianmyths.net/osiris.htm
69. Note: Hebrew words are read from right to left.
70. The pharaoh was considered to be Horus in life and Osiris in death. New incarnations of Horus succeeded the deceased pharaoh on earth in the form of new Pharaohs. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horus#Horus_and_the_Pharaoh
71. http://www.ancient-hebrew.org/26_edenics.html and http://www.jewfaq.org/root.htm
72. John 10:30
73. John 1:1-14

1. Lynne Kelly (2004). *The Skeptic's Guide To The Paranormal,* Allen & Unwin
2. Also known as the *Torah Code,* it is a supposedly a set of secret messages encoded within the Hebrew Bible that describes prophesies and provides other guidance regarding the future. It involves the idea of Equidistant Letter Spacing (ELS) as the primary method by which purported hidden messages can be extracted. Though Bible codes have been postulated and studied for centuries, the subject has been popularized in modern times by Michael Drosnin's book *The Bible Code*. See also: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bible_code
3. The Wiki Source contains even more bullet points. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/72_(number)
4. http://www.lookupfellowship.com/2010/12/real-life-da-vinci-code.html
5. See Audrey Fletcher http://ancientegypt.hypermart.net/greatconjunction/
6. Excerpts from the Judge Napolitano article, *What If Elections Don't Matter?* See: http://www.corson.org/columnists/past_articles/napolitano/2012/011212.htm

7. See: http://www.mastermason.com/duvall6/structure.htm
8. Matthew 7:15-20
9. http://www.cuttingedge.org/News/n1314.cfm
10. The article I read ends with Steve Van Nattan's name. For more information, see: http://www.cephasministry.com/nwothule.html as well as his apparent source: http://www.cuttingedge.org/News/n1314.cfm and http://www.cuttingedge.org/News/n1398.cfm
11. See: http://obamamessiah.blogspot.com/
12. See: http://www.wnd.com/2008/10/77539/
13. Watch highlights of the speach here: http://youtu.be/qv7kd4_WOHI
14. See :43 - :48 in the video referenced in footnote #7
15. Read the full article here: http://defenderpublishing.blogspot.com/2009/04/read-it-before-it-is-banned-by-us.html
16. Editor's Note [from the website]: This information is free to share with anybody and to repost but is COPYRIGHTED by Defender Publishing and the author (Tom Horn). If you wish to post elsewhere, please include this copyright statement.
17. Ibid See also: http://www.babylonrisingbooks.com/videosC502.html
18. I define Luciferian systems as those systems put in place by people who follow Lucifer. These are different from and should not be confused with Satanic systems. Satanists like Aleister Crowley and Anton LaVey and others like them are open about evil and their pursuit of it. Luciferians on the other hand — at least as I understand them — do not believe they are doing evil. They are followers of Lucifer, not Satan (whom they consider to be evil). We know they are one and the same, but they do not see it that way. They view Lucifer as the bearer of light (illumination), wisdom, knowledge and are more akin to the New Age Movement than they are Satanists. In essence, they view Lucifer much the same way the ancient Sumerians viewed their god Enki. I will write more about that in *Book 3: Babylon Rising: Mythology and the Coming Great Deception*.
19. http://spktruth2power.wordpress.com/2009/02/16/obama-turns-us-over-to-%E2%80%98new-world-order%E2%80%99-on-february-17th/
20. http://www.obamanewsdigest.com/2009/04/april-2-2009-day-73-the-g20-summit.html
21. http://motherjones.com/politics/2009/04/should-obama-control-internet
22. http://nymag.com/daily/intel/2009/04/michelle_obama_partially_embra.html
23. http://wizbangblog.com/content/2009/04/02/did-obama-bow-down-to-saudi-king.php
24. See Chapter Four: *ONE NATION UNDER GOD*, pages 93-95
25. http://www.democraticunderground.com/discuss/duboard.php?az=view_all&address=132x8437099
26. Oxford Guide: *Essential Guide to Egyptian Mythology*, Editor Donald B. Redford, p. 85, Berkley, ISBN 0-425-19096-X
27. http://www.smb.museum/smb/sammlungen/details.php?objID=3&n=0&r=0&p=9
28. See the pics on the blog version of this chapter: http://www.babylonrisingblog.com/72.html
29. Ibid
30. Do a Google image search for "Norway spiral"
31. See videos on: http://www.babylonrisingbooks.com/videosC504.html
32. See: http://rabbithole2.com/presentation/news/cosmic_news/norway_spiral_and_ancient_petroglyphs.htm
33. http://sharonkgilbert.com
34. http://sharonkgilbert.com/?p=1609
35. Available on my blog site: http://www.babylonrisingblog.com See also *Appendix C*.
36. See: http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=104805321
37. See: http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?id=30914
38. See: http://www.foxnews.com/world/2011/10/24/vatican-calls-for-new-world-economic-order/
39. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prophecy_of_the_Popes
40. See: http://www.touregypt.net/godsofegypt/anubis.htm
41. See: http://www.redicecreations.com/article.php?id=11178
42. Job 38:32
43. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saturn_(mythology)
44. The U.S. economy lost 63,000 jobs. See: http://www.bloggingstocks.com/2008/03/07/u-s-economy-lost-63k-jobs-in-february-worse-than-expected/
45. See: http://www.babylonrisingbooks.com/videosC505.html
46. See: http://chuiko.com/index.php?newsid=1986
47. See: http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Foreign+Relations/Israel+and+the+UN/Issues/Israel_submits_complaint_UN_attacks_Gaza_21-Dec-2010.htm
48. See: http://nationaljournal.com/nationalsecurity/obama-calls-iraq-government-significant-moment--20101221
49. See: http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/zodiac-signs-2011zodiac-astrological-controversy/story?id=12623103#.TwY_ktRDt2A
50. See: http://www.foxnews.com/scitech/2011/01/06/magnetic-north-pole-shifts-forces-closure-florida-airport/
51. Google: "dead birds fall from the sky"
52. Google: "millions of dead fish"
53. See: http://domeofthesky.com/clicks/oph.html
54. See also Matthew 24:3-31
55. See Luke 19:13
56. Excavation for the foundation of the Monument began in early 1848. The cornerstone was then laid as part of an elaborate Fourth of July ceremony hosted by the Freemasons.
57. I recommend that you watch the documentary, *9/11: In Plane Site*, which "coincidentally" just so happens to have a total running time of 72 miuntes.
58. How amazing that the "terrorists" just so happened to have aimed for the most heavily reinforced portion of the building, when only about 800 of the usually 4,500 people were there due to the rennovations!
59. See the dimensions and layout: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Pentagon
60. (September 16, 2001). "Pentagon, a Vulnerable Building, Was Hit in Least Vulnerable Spot". Los Angeles Times. See: http://911research.wtc7.net/cache/pentagon/analysis/latimes_leastvulnerable.html
61. "Project Phoenix" was the name given to the project to repair the damage caused on 9/11/01.
62. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bennu
1. See: http://www.edinarfinancial.net/history.php
2. See: http://www.babylonrisingbooks.com/videosC601.html
3. See: http://www.babylonrisingbooks.com/videosC602.html
4. Read *Total Rebuild: Reconstructing Iraq's Banking System Starts From Scratch* by Gordon Platt here: http://www.allbusiness.com/public-administration/national-security-international/1119517-1.html
5. CBI website: http://www.cbi.iq/index.php?pid=History
6. See: http://www.delarue.com/ProductsSolutions/BanknoteProduction/
7. In 1932. See: http://www.edinarfinancial.net/history.php
8. Like this one for instance: http://www.mint.com/blog/investing/iraqi-dinar-scam/
9. *The New Deal in Old Rome*, HJ Haskell, Alfred K Knoff New York 1939
10. Google: "December 2010 UN sanctions lifted on Iraq"
11. See: http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2010/12/15/end-iraq-sanctions-reflects-progress-saddam-era-analysts-say/

12. See: http://thecurrencynewshound.com/2010/12/08/central-bank-consultant-budget-2011-will-raise-economic-growth-to-a-ten-percent/
13. For more information, be sure to listen to the 16 part YouTube video presentation of Myron Fagan's 1960 lecture on the Illuminati and CFR: http://www.babylonrisingbooks.com/videosC605.html
14. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reserve_currency
15. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reserve_currency#Call_for_new_major_reserve_currency
16. See: http://thegeorgiaguidestones.com
17. Read the *Wired Magazine* article to learn more about the Georgia Guidestones: http://www.wired.com/science/discoveries/magazine/17-05/ff_guidestones?currentPage=all
18. Proverbs 13:22
19. Luke 2:24 - compare to Leviticus 12:6-8. Some dispute this, but if they were wealthy, that would make Mary and Joseph quite dishonest in their offering.
20. Watch Michael Rood's teaching, *Truth and Tradition:* http://youtu.be/5GF5iRgYWpo
21. Exodus 12:35,36
22. Be sure to watch *Invisible Empire: A New World Order Defined* here: http://www.babylonrisingbooks.com/videosC606.html
23. See Revelation 6:4
24. A thesis that gives rise to its reaction, an antithesis, which contradicts or negates the thesis, and the tension between the two being resolved by means of a synthesis. In other words, cause the problem that creates a reaction to which you have the solution.
25. See: http://www.wsws.org/articles/2003/apr2003/loot-a19.shtml
26. See: http://www.wordiq.com/definition/National_Museum_of_Iraq
27. Enoch 10:11,12
28. Read the full article here: http://www.newswithviews.com/Horn/thomas154.htm
29. See: *Earth Continues to Shake All Over, USGS Live Seismic Server, Pole Shift?* at: http://www.babylonrisingbooks.com/videosC505.html
30. http://rt.com/usa/news/us-troops-israel-iran-257/
31. http://www.aclu.org/national-security/senate-poised-pass-indefinite-detention-without-charge-or-trial
32. *Posse Comitatus Act* - Federal law that prevents the government and law enforcement agencies from using federal military personnel to enforce the laws of the land.
33. Obama, July 2, 2008, in Colorado Springs, CO
34. False flag operations are covert operations conducted by governments or other organizations, which are designed to deceive the public in such a way that makes them believe they are being carried out by other entities. See also: http://www.wanttoknow.info/falseflag

* From the 1966 movie, *A Man For All Seasons* (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0060665/quotes)

35. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georgia_Guidestones#Explanatory_tablet
36. See: http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,81791,00.html
37. See: http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2004/sep/25/usa.secondworldwar
38. See: http://www.cuttingedge.org/news/n1314.cfm and http://oddx.com/2012/01/the-thule-society
39. http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2012-03-22/pdf/2012-7019.pdf
40. See: http://www.rense.com/general90/weid.htm
41. http://119ministries.com/yahwehs-prophetic-calendar
42. http://119ministries.com/daniel-unsealed
43. These tetrads were first discovered by Pastor Mark Biltz back in 2008.
44. See my DVD, *322, Tetrads and the Time of Jacob's Trouble* (depicted in **Figure 68**)
45. Note: If Isaiah 46:10 is true, then the end (Revelation) is declared from the beginning (Genesis). Genesis 31:38-41 tells us Jacob's Trouble lasted ***20*** years.
46. Note Revelation 6:6 says the currency of the Last Days is the "denarius."
47. On June 27, 2013, the U.N. released Iraq from all remaining Chapter VII sanctions, thus making the nation a legitimate player on the world market once again. A currency RV/RI appears to be next on the horizon.
48. See also Tom Horn's 2009 online article, *Opening Pandora's Box?* here: http://www.newswithviews.com/Horn/thomas122.htm
49. Stellarium is a free software that enables you to view stellar alignments throughout history. You can download it at: http://www.stellarium.org

1. Using the search function on BibleGateway.com
2. Genesis 11 and Jasher 9
3. It would appear from my research that Semiramis may have been a daughter of Cush. Through incest with her father, she produced Nimrod. Thus, she became both his half-sister, mother and wife. Google: *Semiramis mother sister Nimrod*
4. More on that in *Book 3, Babylon Rising: Mythology and the Coming Great Deception*.
5. Visit http://weareallrelated.com for more
6. A U.S. and British-based group of secret societies and government think tanks that consists of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), the United Nations, the Bilderberg Group, the Club of Rome, the Royal Institute of International Affairs and the Trilateral Commission. David Icke calls this network *"the most powerful expression of the Illuminati"* and says that these are dominated by the Rothschilds and Rockefellers, with major manipulators in play like Henry Kissinger. To read more from Mr. Icke go to: http://www.bibliotecapleyades.net/sociopolitica/esp_sociopol_roundtable_5.htm
7. See: http://www.freepress.net/ownership/chart/main?gclid=CKql6vqUy60CFYhgTAod9gGxKQ
8. See: http://www.babylonrisingbooks.com/videosC702.html
9. The stars are up-side-down in the shape of pentagrams. See: http://www.babylonrisingblog.com/images/RepublicanLogo.jpg. See also: http://you-tu.be/BWRh0Ew6Qx0 As for the Democrats, at an event for Hillary Clinton, she was standing in front of a huge American flag that had the stars inverted the same way: http://www.babylonrisingblog.com/images/HillStars.gif
10. Put it simply, the Military-Industrial Complex is described as an all-too friendly relationship that may develop between defense contractors and government forces, where both sides receive what they are perceivably looking for: a successful military engagement for warplanners and financial profit for those manning the corporate boardrooms. It can be viewed as a "war for profit" theory. See: http://www.militaryindustrialcomplex.com/what-is-the-military-industrial-complex.asp
11. ”Order 66" was the executive order given by the Emperor in *Episode III, Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith*. Upon execution of that order, the cloned army turned against and killed all of the good Jedi warriors.
12. Excerpts of the full article, *Iowa Vote Fraud Official*, by Jeffrey Phelps from:
http://www.examiner.com/conspiracy-in-denver/iowa-vote-fraud-official
13. See the testimony of a computer software developer who testified under oath that he rigged election results: http://www.babylonrisingbooks.com/videosC701.html
14. Source: http://www.opensecrets.org/news/2008/04/strategic-assets.html
15. Source: http://www.christianpost.com/news/members-of-congress-net-worth-rose-25-percent-despite-economy-65862/
16. Source: http://www.rollcall.com/features/Guide-to-Congress_2010/guide/-49892-1.html
17. Excerpt from the full article, *Congressmen are Paid to Vote for War* by David Richards from: http://www.henrymakow.com/congressmen_personally_profit.html
18. Obama is related to both Bush and Cheney and Mitt Romney is related to 6 former presidents, so in 2012, it would not have mattered at all which one "won." http://newsfeed.time.com/2011/12/20/family-ties-ancestry-com-finds-that-romney-and-george-w-are-cousins/
19. Senator Palpatine was a character in the Star Wars saga created by George Lucas
20. In *Episode I, Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*

21. In *Episode III, Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith*
22. Read more: http://articles.cnn.com/2011-12-17/middleeast/world_meast_iraq-troops-leave_1_1st-cavalry-division-camp-adder-troop-movements?_s=PM:MIDDLEEAST
23. Read more: http://www.nsnetwork.org/node/2163
24. See: http://www.mofa.gov.iq/eng/ForeignPolicy/default.aspx?sm=21
25. http://www.mofa.gov.iq/eng/ForeignPolicy/default.aspx?sm=18)
26. See also: *Iran Preparing Now For Armageddon*, by Reza Kahlili on WND.com:http://www.wnd.com/2012/01/iran-preparing-now-for-armageddon/
27. Read more: http://content.usatoday.com/communities/theoval/post/2011/12/obama-iraq-pm-discuss-us-withdrawal/1
28. Ibid
29. Ibid
30. To read what I have written so far, go to: http://www.babylonrisingblog.com/Godvsgod1.html
31. http://www.babylonrisingblog.com/Godvsgod2.html
32. Read more: http://www.foxnews.com/us/2011/05/01/usama-bin-laden-dead-say-sources/
33. Read more: http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/42853221/ns/today-today_news/t/how-us-tracked-couriers-elaborate-bin-laden-compound/
34. Read more: http://www.foxnews.com/world/2011/08/06/afghan-president-31-ameri-cans-killed-in-helicopter-crash/#ixzz1hPj37yPe
35. Read more: http://www.veteranstoday.com/2011/08/07/seal-team-six-story-unfolding/
36. *The Final Days* by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, chapter 14, page 194 in the paperback version (1995)
37. See: http://www.babylonrisingbooks.com/videosC703.html
38. See: http://www.babylonrisingbooks.com/videosC704.html
39. See: http://www.babylonrisingbooks.com/videosC602.html
40. See: http://www.babylonrisingbooks.com/videosC606.html
41. See: http://www.babylonrisingbooks.com/videosC709.html
42. See: http://necrometrics.com/20c5m.htm
43. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_II_casualties
44. See: http://www.babylonrisingbooks.com/videosC601.html
45. See: http://www.babylonrisingbooks.com/videosC705.html
46. See: http://www.babylonrisingbooks.com/videosC706.html
47. See: http://www.babylonrisingbooks.com/videosC707.html
48. See: http://www.babylonrisingbooks.com/videosC708.html
49. Read more: http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,41576,00.html#ixzz1hb4xTs21
50. Read more: http://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/11/opinion/the-death-of-bin-ladenism.html
51. Read more: http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1538569,00.html#ixzz1hbCDH2kU
52. Read more: http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/07/17/attack/main515468.shtml
53. Read more: http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2010/dec/23/osama-bin-laden-is-dead/
54. See: http://noliesradio.org/archives/4810
55. Read the entire article here: http://rense.com/general14/bushsformer.htm
56. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, Threats and Responses in 2001, Staff Statement No. 10, The Saudi Flights, p. 12
57. Ibid
58. http://www.michaelmoore.com/words/fahrenheit-911-facts/what-fahrenheit-911-says-about-the-saudi-flights-out-of-the-country-after-september-11
59. Cook, Robin (2005-07-08). "The struggle against terrorism cannot be won by military means". London: Guardian Unlimited. Retrieved 2005-07-08 See also: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CIA_%E2%80%93_Osama_bin_Laden_controversy
60. *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA* by Tim Weiner, pg. 533 (© 2007-2008 Anchor Books)
61. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/155236.stm
62. http://www.forbes.com/charitable/2001/09/14/0914whoisobl.html
63. http://abcnews.go.com/sections/world/DailyNews/binladen_profile.html
64. See: *The Osama bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of al Qaeda's Leader* (2nd Ed.) pg. 75 by Peter Bergen (2006 New York: Free Press. ISBN 0-7432-7892-5).
65. http://web.archive.org/web/20100411222821/http://judiciary.senate.gov/hearings/testimony.cfm?id=1606&wit_id=4668
66. http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2010/10/04/exclusive-witnesses-defense-department-report-suggest-cover-findings/
67. http://ngc.dukejournals.org/content/35/1_103/165.full.pdf
68. http://news.blogs.cnn.com/2012/09/10/i-didnt-recognize-bin-laden-seal-who-wrote-no-easy-day-says/?hpt=hp_c3

1. Jeremiah 25:9-12 & Jeremiah 29:10
2. For more on this, read *Too Long in the Sun* and *Time is the Ally of Deceit* by Richard Rives and *The Pagan-Christian Connection EXPOSED* by Michael Rood.
3. See 2 Samuel 12
4. Stellarium is a free software that enables you to view stellar alignments throughout history. You can download it at: http://www.stellarium.org
5. There were likely many more than just three magi (wise men) who came to see Jesus. Note also, they did not arrive for His birth in the manger. They arrived when He was approximately two years old and living in a house. See Matthew 2:11.
6. John 1:1-14
7. See also *The Beast and the Anti-Messiah (New-Age "Maitreya")* for more interesting reading about Christian traditions associated with and/or derived from Nimrod worship at: http://www.fossilizedcustoms.com/beast.html
8. Watch *Truth or Tradition*, by Jim Staley of *Passion for Truth Ministries* at: http://www.babylonrisingbooks.com/videosC801.html
9. And in those days shall men seek death, and shall not find it; and shall desire to die, and death shall flee from them. (Revelation 9:6)
10. Michael Rood is fond of making this statement in his teachings.
11. E-mail: RobSkiba@seedtheseries.com
12. Part one of this book has been released under the title: *Archon Invasion: The Rise, Fall and Return of the Nephilim.*

1. http://resources.ap-archives.com/renunciations-for-babylon/

1. Read *War on the Airwaves* at: http://biblestudynow.webs.com/warontheairwaves.htm
2. *George Lucas: Interviews* by George Lucas and Sally Kline, page 143
3. Please support this incredible film: *Return to the Hiding Place:* http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1691153/

Vernon Coleman

BLOODLESS REVOLUTION

How We Can Change The World In One Day

BLOODLESS REVOLUTION

How we can change the world in one day

Bloodless Revolution contains the answer to the eternal question:
'What can I do to change things?'
And includes two dozen life changing things we can do
when we've got rid of the political parties

Vernon Coleman

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Vernon Coleman is the author of over 100 other books which have sold over two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK and been translated into 25 languages. Many of his books are available as Kindle books on Amazon. For a list of available books please see Vernon Coleman's author page on Amazon. For free articles and features please visit www.vernoncoleman.com

Dedication:

To Donna Antoinette
When you fear I fear with you.
When you are sad I am sad with you.
When you rejoice I rejoice for you.
When there is sunshine we will share it together.
When there is tempest we will endure it together.
We have a thousand adventures ahead of us.
We will greet them all together and so enjoy our triumphs and overcome our tribulations.

CONTENTS LIST

Revolutions are only impossible before they take place. Afterwards they were inevitable

PART ONE
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PART ONE

Why We Need A Revolution (We're In A Terrible State)

1

Although this may come as an unpleasant surprise to those who believe that the fundamental aim of a government is to provide chauffeur driven limousines and huge expense accounts for the faithful supporters of the controlling party, the primary purpose of a proper democratic government is to protect the lives, liberty and property of its citizens. We don't so much need leaders (heaven knows, they are in short enough supply) as effective managers.

Nineteenth century American writer William Leggett believed that a government's legislative activities should be restricted to the making of general laws, uniform and universal in their operation, for the sole purpose of protecting people and their property. Politicians should provide a simple, comprehensible code of laws telling citizens what they cannot do. Everything that is not illegal should be legal.

I would add to that only that it is also the government's job to provide armed forces, to ensure that we cannot easily be overwhelmed by invading force, and to provide a judicial system capable of ensuring that the nation's laws are upheld and that the freedom of the citizens is protected.

Other than providing the armed forces (and embassies to represent the country abroad) it is difficult to see why the Government should stick its nose into any other area of public or private life.

2

In a real democracy, the voters elect the legislature which makes the rules. The executive runs things according to the rules. And the judiciary decides if rules have been broken. It's a simple system. But ours has broken down. Today's MPs are an irrelevance, ignored by the party leadership and forced to become voting lobby fodder; they are emasculated ghosts who know that in order to be rewarded with a ministerial car and chauffeur they must do what they are told. Mavericks are as rare as mare's nests. Career politicians leave university, work as 'advisers' in Westminster and then move directly into Parliament, and on into the cabinet, with little or no experience of the real world in which their constituents live. Moreover, most new English legislation is made not by elected representatives but by unelected bureaucrats in Brussels.

The sad truth is that the modern MP has as much influence over modern legislation as has the dog next door.

3

The point of a social structure (a country, a city, a town or a village), and the purpose of electing people to take decisions (a government or a council and the bureaucratic paraphernalia of government), is to make our lives easier and safer.

The purpose of electing leaders (or nation managers) is to remove hazards, threats and burdens; to make it possible for citizens to walk, meet, play, shop, travel and go to work in the firm and honest belief that they will be able to do so safely and securely and with the minimum of fuss and inconvenience.

That's what Governments and councils are supposed to do.

It is not the job of those in Government (or sitting on a council) to acquire a huge self-serving infrastructure of their own, to accumulate power and authority for its own sake or to line their pockets at the expense of the electorate.

4

Not all that long ago, when Britain ruled the world, she did so with a total complement of civil servants that would today be considered inadequate to administer a medium sized hospital or a small rural town. In the days of Queen Victoria, England's Home Office and Foreign Office ran the nation and the Empire for decades with no more than a handful of employees. Those employees worked for the benefit of the nation and the people.

Today, the Government, its many departments, and an ever growing number of councils and public bodies, employ millions of people and are run largely for the convenience of those employees. The National Health Service, for example, is one of the largest employers in the world and the problems created within it are largely a result of the fact that the organisation is run not for the benefit of patients but for the benefit of the staff.

Modest sized local authorities throughout England now employ 20,000 to 30,000 people each. That's enough people to run an Empire. And all these people, working for the Government, for councils and for quangos, demand expensive services, pensions and perks.

5

We need to ask some fundamental questions. And we need to find some real answers.

We need to decide precisely what we want the State to do. Do we want a multicultural nation? Do we approve of means testing? Do we approve of political correctness? Do we want to be members of the European Union? How important is it that we retain our cultural and historical identity? Do we care about England and being English? Do we want our country to be run by politicians who start wars without our approval?

What do we want our politicians to do? Is there any role for political parties in managing the way our country is run? How much do we expect our elected representatives to control our day to day lives? How much power do we want to give away to the police and to foreign bureaucrats? How accountable should public servants be? Should those who do not work, and do not contribute to the state in any clear way, be allowed to continue controlling the way the state is managed (with the result that it is, in reality, managed and run for their benefit)? What aspects of our basic infrastructure should be run by the state? How should we choose our political representatives and who should vote for them?

These are fundamental questions.

No one ever asks them.

But now is the time.

And now is the time for us to find the answers.

You may be surprised to discover that, if we want change, if we want less government, lower taxes and more freedom, there is one incredibly simple way for us to change our world and obtain what we want.

I call it the bloodless revolution.

And this book explains how you can make a difference and take part in a bloodless revolution which will change England and restore our freedom and liberty. In order to take part in this revolution, you don't have to leave your home, spend any money or take any risks. Moreover, if enough of us take part the revolution is guaranteed to succeed. In one day. Individually it is difficult for any of us to make a difference. Together we can change the world.

That's the beauty of people power.

6

Our politicians claim that they want change and progress. But they don't really want major changes. They don't want innovative, imaginative structural changes of the kind I'm offering in this book.

We need to question everything which is regarded as 'normal', 'fixed' or necessary.

Politicians merely want changes and progress which suit them.

7

The first purpose of this book is to liberate some ideas which are never aired; some options and some possibilities which rarely, if ever, see the light of day. We have to protect preserve and defend the things are important. But what is important? What do we mean by civilisation and a free society? What are our priorities? When society is too structured (and becomes, as ours has, statist and fascist) we have to fight for a more open society. I deal with these issues in the second part of the book.

And the second purpose of this book (which I deal with first) is to explain how we can create a society in which those options can, if we wish, become reality.

With the political system we have at the moment, nothing will ever again be as good as it is today; we will never again have as much (or, as little) freedom as we have now.

If that doesn't terrify you, nothing will.

If we do nothing then things will get steadily worse and never better.

8

Our real enemies are not Muslim extremists (who hate us because of the actions of our governments but whose hatred is defined and particular) but our police, our bureaucrats, our politicians and, behind this pustulant pile, the fascist EU: the greatest threat to our freedom, and the mountainous obstacle in the path of our rescuing our lost and forgotten democracy.

The simple, basic, underlying reason for the problems we have is that we have given too much power to the political parties.

9

No government has a right to eavesdrop on its innocent citizens. And yet our government does this. We have no privacy. It has been taken from us in the name of protecting us.

In a free society every citizen has a fundamental right to say, write and publish whatever he or she wants to say, write or publish. But, despite the existence of the Human Rights Act (and why do we need legislation to affirm our basic rights?) English citizens no longer enjoy this basic right. You and I can be arrested and imprisoned for saying, writing, publishing or even just reading material of which the government does not approve.

10

Politics, like just about everything else in life, has been trivialised.

We are encouraged (by the media, and the politicians themselves) to concentrate on the minutiae. The big questions are never asked.

So, the fundamental political question: 'What is the purpose of the State?' is a question we have been encouraged to ignore.

And yet the answer to the question is remarkably simple.

The State's purpose is to provide services which could not properly be provided by individuals within communities. These requirements are more limited than they might now appear to be and the proper role of the state is considerably smaller than the role which politicians have adopted.

Any time a government does anything that isn't protecting the lives, liberty and property of its citizens it is failing in its duty or exceeding its authority.

The aim of all rulers, leaders and governments should be to secure and defend the fullest life possible for every citizen.

Nearly all rebellions in history are a result of rulers, leaders and governments failing to do this.

11

Our politicians live in a vacuum; isolated from honour, integrity and ideas; they are a product of circumstances rather than creators of circumstances; they are without dignity, imagination, honour or respect for themselves or anyone else. They are people with such a poorly developed sense of irony or decency that they will see nothing hypocritical in meeting to discussing world poverty and hunger and then enjoying a sumptuous twelve course dinner.

12

In our politicians' hands England has become a barbarous nation, run by intellectual terrorists, philistines and thieves.

Our politicians have created a world in which those who are well-intentioned, honest or sensitive are seen as weak. Our politicians simply want us to obey, conform and consume.

In their hands, England has become a dirty country run by third rate administrators and uniformed bullies.

The politicians are running our lives with no regard for our rights and freedoms and no thought of what we, the people who pay for it all, might want.

13

There is, I believe, a simple reason for the mess our country is in, and the dramatic deterioration in the quality of our politicians.

That reason is the growth in the power of the major political parties.

Party politicians have damned nearly destroyed England. Politicians forget that they are elected not to govern us but to serve us. It is the party system which enables them to ignore their basic responsibilities.

14

England is now grubby, shabby, down at heel. Our streets and motorways are littered with rubbish. Our railway stations and airports are packed with people being bullied by rude petty, bureaucrats (many of whom don't even speak English very well). The mass of people are depressed and have given up hope. Small and medium sized businesses, the backbone of the nation and its future too, are being strangled by red tape. Entrepreneurs struggling to build new businesses, the lifeblood of any society, are oppressed by absurd and unhelpful legislation and by a vast variety of taxes.

Never before have the mass of men led lives of such quiet desperation.

We have to move quickly.

The only way to get our country back, and to stop the politicians destroying it completely, is to get rid of the party political system which now serves us so badly, and to replace our system of government by a free, truly independent parliamentary democracy.

15

Party politicians are determined to control every aspect of our lives. They need to do this in order to ensure that their party stays in power for as long as possible.

16

The party system which dominates our political processes gives complete authority over parliament to the party which wins an election (or to any collection of parties which can cobble together a self-serving coalition which enables them to obtain power even if they have no electoral mandate). And authority is the veneer under which lies the constant, ever-increasing threat of violence.

The leader of the winning party runs the country, and hands out appointments and honours to his or her supporters. He or she has enormous, almost limitless, power.

Since campaigning is largely done by national parties rather than by individuals with a genuine interest in representing a particular constituency, parliamentary seats are handed out to party supporters.

The result is that parliamentary elections are effectively conducted in secret, in party committee rooms, rather than via the ballot box.

In recent years this system has failed the nation for several reasons.

First, the traditional system of government by a cabinet of politicians has been replaced by a system more suitable to a totalitarian state or a dictatorship. A single politician pushes through his own plans with little or no regard for the wishes of the cabinet he has appointed. Parliament is virtually ignored. Since MPs are all members of a party (and must, if they want to retain their seats, follow the party line on important issues) the leader of the biggest party controls parliament.

Second, the needs of the party are given priority over the needs of the nation. Policies are adopted and pursued because they help satisfy the short, medium and long term needs of the party. The leader of the party knows that his authority depends upon his protecting and strengthening the party he represents.

17

The consequences of the financial crash of 2007 and 2008 (and onwards) may be England's biggest problem for the second decade of the 21st century. But the four things which have destroyed the very fabric of our country (and which will make it more difficult for us to recover) are multiculturalism, politically correctness, means-testing and the insistence on public bodies meeting artificial targets.

The sole real purpose of a government is to provide an infrastructure designed to enable citizens to go about their business safely and freely.

Instead, for nearly a generation, we have had governments committed to social engineering. And for several generations we have had governments which have (for a variety of largely secret reasons) been subservient to a foreign power — the European Union.

18

The Labour Party's decisions to ignore their promise to have a referendum before signing the Lisbon Treaty signalled the end of democracy in England, and confirmed that England had become a fascist region within a fascist state.

Constitutional experts concluded that it was against the law for the Government not to provide a referendum (whether one had been promised or not) but our politicians don't much care about the law, the people or democracy.

19

Despite the rapid growth in the number of civil servants employed in England, the people who really run England now are bureaucrats in Brussels, bankers in the USA and businessmen in countries as far apart as France, India and China.

Thanks to our political parties, big decisions are made not by local people but by nameless, faceless bureaucrats and by distant politicians and businessmen.

20

Even small decisions are no longer made locally.

For example, council planners have been told that: 'the sheer scale of public protest or opposition to a planning proposal should not be regarded as a factor when considering a planning application'.

And so, local planning officers now ignore protests from local people and make decisions pretty much as they please. Power has been transferred from the people to the bureaucrats.

Local people can protest and hold meetings and even decide unanimously that they are opposed to a development of some kind, but their wishes will be ignored. The development will be approved by a politician or a bureaucrat who has never been within a hundred miles of the area and who know nothing of the locality's needs.

Central Government politicians and bureaucrats make decisions and overrule local councils whenever they want to.

21

Our politicians are carefully and deliberately taking away every last vestige of our privacy. They are, they claim, doing this so that they can protect us. (Only those who believe in the tooth fairy believe this.)

On the other hand, the Government is quick enough to worry about its own privacy.

When the Government refused to release the minutes from the Cabinet's meetings about whether or not to invade Iraq, a former Home Secretary, Jack Straw vetoed their release on the grounds that releasing this information would do serious damage to the Cabinet. (No mention was made of the need to publish the truth, or of the public's right to know or of the fact that the decision to go to war had been taken in our name and had exposed citizens to great danger.)

When a photographer took a picture of Scotland Yard's assistant commissioner carrying top-secret counter-terrorism documents which could easily be read by onlookers, politicians called not for policemen to carry their confidential documents in briefcases but for tighter restrictions on photographers. (There are already pretty strict restrictions in existence. According to the counter-Terrorism Act 2008, it is against the law to publish information about the intelligence services that is likely to be useful to a person committing or preparing an act of terrorism. And so, it is against the law to take photographs of policemen beating up innocent members of the public. The police are, of course, allowed to film and photograph innocent protestors.)

There are closed circuit television (CCTV) cameras absolutely everywhere in England (more than anywhere else in the world) but, oddly enough, whenever footage might embarrass the authorities there is a problem; the relevant footage is accidentally erased, or the camera was facing the wrong way or the film wasn't clear enough or there was marmalade in the equipment.

22

'Why should government agents spy on us?' asked Judge Andrew Napolitano, in the USA. 'They work for us. How about we spy on them. On cops when they arrest and interrogate people or contemplate suspending freedom; on prosecutors when they decide whom to prosecute and what evidence to use; on judges when they rationalise away our guaranteed rights; and on members of Congress whenever they meet with a lobbyist, mark up a piece of legislation, or conspire to assault our liberties or our pocket books.'

Bravo.

23

At least a quarter of all Government databases are illegal. These intrusive collections of private information cost billions of pounds of taxpayers' money and are in clear breach of human rights law. The Government simply ignores the law when it seems convenient or profitable to do so.

24

We have more public servants than ever before. And yet our public services are worse than they were a hundred years ago. This is no curious coincidence. I take a close interest in politics but I have to confess that I am constantly finding Government departments I've never heard of, and Ministerial posts I didn't know existed.

We are learning (as if we needed to) that huge bureaucracies, with centralised power, reduce individual freedom. Democracy only survives when there is a small national bureaucracy and small local bureaucracies.

25

The majority of these civil servants are, as the old joke has it, neither civil nor servile. On the contrary our public sector workers are, as a breed, lazy, greedy smug, humourless (try cracking a joke to one), arrogant, heavy-handed and overpaid.

They work very few hours, take more holidays than private sector workers, are paid better than private sector workers and have massive pensions (paid by taxpayers). They have job security and virtually unlimited days off work when they are feeling a little under the weather.

They are treated in ways that private sector workers could only dream of. For example, I know of one who became ill. Her local authority employer converted the office entrance (at huge public expense) so that she could continue to attend for work. After a couple of weeks she announced that she would in future prefer to work from home. The local authority then spent a fortune converting her home so that she could work from home. She then decided that she would retire.

26

Civil servants are hardly ever disciplined (whatever terrible mistakes they make) and hardly ever fired (if they are, or if they choose to resign, they are often given a huge tax-free pay-off to smooth their way into the real world). They are given massive holidays (more than six weeks a year is quite normal).

And they are given the sort of bonuses which were, in the very early years of the 21st century, given to the greediest, most overpaid and most incompetent bankers.

Indeed, bonuses have become as fashionable as scented candles. There isn't even any pretence that bonuses are given for success or for hard work above and beyond the requirements of the job. Among bankers and civil servants and politicians there is an exaggerated sense of entitlement. Too many of these people seem to believe that they deserve to get rich solely because of the position they occupy, rather than because they have talent or because they work hard.

Civil servants above the rank of lollipop manipulator used to be content with a knighthood at the age of 55. Now they expect a knighthood and a quarter of a million quid in hard cash as an annual reward for being kind enough to their jobs.

Civil servants are frequently given bonuses just for turning up and deigning to do what they are paid to do. If you think I'm exaggerating, read on.

After snow fell in London, public employees working at the Crown Prosecution Service were given £250 bonuses for actually taking the trouble to turn up for work.

How many private companies could afford to give bonuses to employees who bothered to turn up for work?

Bonuses are often given as a reward for abject failure. After the credit crunch, employees at the Financial Services Authority (one of Gordon Brown's mad inventions and widely regarded as one of the main reasons for the country being in a mess) were smothered in bonuses.

'You did an appalling job so here's a wheelbarrow full of taxpayers' money to cheer you up!'

27

The civil service has been politicised. Civil servants no longer provide independent protection for public. Instead, they work to preserve the power of the politicians and, thereby, of the State and the party which is in power.

The code for civil servants states that they should act with integrity and honesty, and that they should do their work objectively and impartiality.

There are, almost certainly, some civil servants who take these criteria seriously and who still struggle to satisfy them.

But, sadly, in today's huge sprawling bureaucracies there are many who don't, and who give their loyalty and allegiance to politicians or to commercial contacts rather than to electors.

And you only need a few bad eggs in a department for the work of that department to be defiled. The integrity of a department is as good as the integrity of the most dishonest person working there. Today there isn't a single Ministry which obeys these strictures en masse and is, in modern parlance, fit for purpose.

Today the inglorious State is run by self-glorying, self-serving, morally delinquent politicians who were hired to protect individual citizens but have adopted policies designed to exploit the citizens and to take advantage of them.

28

Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, the two politicians who took England to the end of the 20th century, led it into the beginning of the 21st century and in my view, did more damage to the nation than any other pair of villains in history. Both claimed to have religious beliefs but both appear to me to have steadfastly ignored the basic moral guidelines.

In my book *Rogue Nation* I argued that Tony Blair had led Britain to war against Iraq not because he believed that the Iraqis had weapons of mass destruction hidden in the sand, not to save the Iraqi people from a tyrant (he didn't bother to invade Zimbabwe) and not to help the Americans grab the oil in Iraq, but so that he would be enriched by American businessmen when he left politics. The events of the last few years seem to me to support that theory and it seems that Blair is now a very rich man. Remarkably, he even accepted a $1 million prize from a foundation in Tel Aviv for his 'determination to forge lasting solutions in conflict areas'. (Since Blair was, at the time, also being paid as a 'peacekeeping envoy' supposedly to broker peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians, accepting this generous prize seemed slightly tactless to say the least).

Brown, forever boasting of his pride in being the son of the manse, said nothing in opposition to Blair's wars, presumably lest he damage his own self-serving ambitions. Brown, like Sir Thomas More, seemed capable of promoting great ideals in principle but capable of doing or endorsing terrible things in practice.

Even well into the second decade of the 21st century, the Labour Party seems to feel no shame, for politicians such as party leader Ed Miliband were at the heart of warmongering governments.

29

Honest leaders create an environment, and circumstances, in which justice thrives and then lead by example. (Why do so many people sneer at the idea of people setting a good example?)

We have, time and time again, been betrayed.

We expect our leaders to show self-restraint and to show us respect.

We have, time and time again, been disappointed.

It is a love of justice, rather than riches, that stirs the average Englishman to action. And nothing arouses an Englishman more than injustice.

30

The aim of politicians today is to keep their party in power for as long as possible. The longer the party is kept in power, and the stronger it becomes, the longer they will stay in power and the richer they will become.

If there were no political parties, independent MPs would be able to remain in parliament merely by representing their constituents honestly and honourably. Without a political party to defend and to protect, individual MPs would be rewarded for showing their independence and their honesty because their loyalty and allegiance would be to their local electorate and not to a political party.

31

Today the Government is the biggest source of terrorism in our lives. We are overwhelmed by the terrorism of state control. Our traditional values have been replaced with oppressive laws allegedly designed to protect us from violence but in practice designed to impose a reign of terror similar to that which followed the French Revolution. We have become a police state.

32

The threat of terrorist attacks is constantly used as an excuse for increasing oppressive legislation. The Government has made Britain the world's number two target for militant Muslims (and much easier to hit than the USA because of Britain's open door immigration policies).

33

It is sometimes argued by politicians who want to defend England's oppressive regime that those who attack us are inspired by a hatred of anything western and that they will bomb us whatever we do.

This is, to put it politely, a bare-faced lie.

Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini tried for a decade to instigate an anti-Western jihad. It failed miserably. Muslims do not become suicide bombers because they dislike our lifestyle or religious beliefs. And they do not become suicide bombers because they are attracted by the prospect of instant entry into paradise. They do, however, become suicide bombers when we attack Muslim countries (or support those who do). Robert Pape, of the University of Chicago collected details of 462 suicide terrorist attacks which took place in the years after 1980 for his book *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*. He found that the strongest motivation is not religion but a desire 'to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from the territory the terrorists view as their homeland'.

There were 41 suicide terrorist attacks in Lebanon between 1982 and 1986. When the USA, France and Israel withdrew their forces from Lebanon the suicide bomber attacks stopped completely.

Before Bush and Blair invaded Iraq in 2003, Iraq had never had a suicide terrorist attack in its entire history. Those who supported the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan have made Britain a long-term target for terror attacks that will continue until our army permanently leaves those countries.

It wasn't difficult to see this coming. When Blair first took us into the Iraq war I warned that his self-serving actions would result in Britons becoming a terrorist target.

The Blairs of this world don't seem to have the sensitivity or intelligence to realise this but when you bomb people who haven't done anything to hurt you, impose sanctions, support police states and steal their nation's natural resources there is a chance that they will be upset and want to strike back.

Speaking on American television Bill Clinton's secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, said that the half a million Iraqi children who had died as a result of the sanctions on Iraq during the 1990s were 'worth it'.

How would Americans like it if a foreign leader said that killing half a million American children in order to steal American oil was 'worth it'?

34

Our governments' uncritical support for America's policies has put us in great danger and made us far more vulnerable than we might otherwise have been. (The intelligence agencies even have a word for what has happened. They use the word 'blowback' which is defined as 'the unintended consequences of military intervention'.)I have no doubt that if the House of Commons had consisted of independent members of parliament the Government would not have been able to start its illegal wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

35

Party politicians need to keep control of the electorate in order to keep control of the power.

The political party which is in office has all the power and all the money. Other MPs, representing the other parties are virtually pointless; the people they represent are effectively disenfranchised for the period of the parliament.

And because the best way to control a population is through fear the Government has deliberately created fear among the people. Life has become a continuing, never ending, series of threats.

In addition, the Government has used its anti-terror legislation to control dissent of any kind. Today, any demonstration or protest will be subject to anti-terrorism legislation. Even if a group of mothers protest about a dangerous roadway near to a school the fact that they are protesting will ensure that they can be treated as terrorists.

The party system gives the leaders of political parties enormous power, and effectively turns them into dictators for the duration of their parliament.

Many of the new laws are deliberately ambiguous. New laws are added to old ones (laws are very rarely repealed). We assume that things have to be this way because, well, that's the way they are. Much of the anti-terrorism legislation introduced within the last two decades leaves much to the judgement of individual police officers. As a result it has become impossible for protestors to know what they can and cannot do. No properly democratic parliament, full of independent MPs, would have ever given the police such wide-ranging and oppressive powers.

36

When a man who was accused of assaulting a policeman was arrested he was refused access to the CCTV cameras which showed the assault. He was shown the pictures only when he appeared in court. The defendant told the court that a passer-by had also filmed the incident on a mobile telephone. But those pictures no longer existed. The police had demanded the telephone and had deleted the pictures.

According to one Justice of the Peace 'it seems it is normal Metropolitan police practice to seize mobile phones in order to delete pictures involving them' (the police).

So, it seems that the police are now deliberately destroying evidence and withholding evidence from accused citizens.

37

Every time there is a demonstration the police are widely, and justifiably, criticised for their heavy handedness and brutality. In other countries it has been shown that it is safer and more effective to manage large crowds using officers in ordinary uniform. (This has, for example, been done effectively in Northern Ireland.) But in England the police who attend public demonstrations are dressed in full riot gear and frequently take advantage of their absurdly wide powers.

38

The police seem to see it as their role to disrupt protests (and encourage future protesters to stay at home) rather than to make sure that neither people nor property are damaged.

When there is violence it is invariably the police who start the trouble. Policemen, protected by helmets, flak jackets and shields seem to be enjoying themselves as they wield their official issue weapons.

The Labour Government has introduced a whole armoury of legislation designed to give the police new powers to ban or control demonstrations.

39

Police brutality at demonstrations has become commonplace. Policemen who cover up their faces and numbers when attending demonstrations are clearly planning to break the law.

But it isn't just ordinary policemen who are at fault. Police bosses lie, lie and lie again. Evidence disappears. Time and time again, the police beat people up, shoot them, run them over and then lie about what they have done.

The police are out of control and have, quite rightly, lost our trust. No honest parliament of independent men and women would have allowed this to happen. The police could only acquire such outrageous power (and behave so badly) in a nation run by and (more importantly) for a political party (or, in the case of a coalition, a small cabal of political parties).

40

The party politicians have filled our lives with meaningless detail and (literally) hundreds of thousands of new rules and regulations. If you want to do this then you must first do this and this and this and then pay this and then we will perhaps think about letting you do what you want to do. Maybe. We used to have lists of things we couldn't do. But now there are lists of things we can only do if we pay the requisite fee, fill in the proper form, produce the appropriate paperwork and grovel to the right low-level bureaucrats.

41

Under Labour the rich have got richer and the poor have got poorer. The incidence of iatrogenesis (doctor-induced disease) has soared (and is now endemic in the National Health Service). The incidence of illiteracy has become so widespread as to be unworthy of note.

Hard work, thrift and prudence have been denigrated while theft and cheating have been rewarded at every level.

Having introduced and strengthened a system which encourages laziness and fraud, politicians have tried to deal with the sickness they have created by encouraging citizens to spy on one another (knowing that this creates distrust and fear).

If Blair, Brown and Cameron et al had planned to destroy England they could not have made a better job of it.

Makes you wonder, doesn't it?

42

Rules and regulations (as many and as complicated as possible) are a good way to oppress a population. Today, millions are so worn out by regulations and pettiness that their vision, hope, ambition, aspirations, intuition, inspiration and ability to see the bigger picture (or think outside the box) have all disappeared.

If England was ruled by a parliament of independent MPs most of these rules and regulations would not exist.

43

We go through life hoping that if we do this or that then everything will eventually be all right and our path through life will be smoothed.

But our Government, instead of doing everything it can to make life easier for us, does the opposite. By making life more difficult, more full of fear and uncertainty, and more unnerving, politicians know that they can prevent our finding the energy, or even the time, to rise up and protest, to defend ourselves and our country and to fight to retain our disappearing freedom and dignity.

Party politicians have to keep their party in power. They oppress us in order to control us.

Trusting and gullible, we believe them when they tell us 'something' is necessary and in our interests. We believe them because we have to trust someone, because we don't believe anyone can lie that much and because we are frightened and don't believe we can make a difference anyway.

44

Professor Milton Friedman, the celebrated economist, once defined a liberal (defined elsewhere as someone who is happy to see governments liberally spend other people's money) as an individual who believes that all past laws were bad, but is convinced that all future laws will be good.

This is a triumph of hope over reality.

But party politicians and regulators believe that we need lots of new regulations because although all past regulations are bad (which is why we need the new stuff) all new regulations they are planning will be good.

Another triumph of hope over reality.

Party politicians love laws and regulations. They can never make enough of them. Laws and regulations give them and their party control.

45

During the last two decades our governments have introduced, on average, one new criminal offence for every day they have been in power. Not even Hitler or Stalin managed so much oppressive legislation. There are twice as many things for which you can be put in prison as there were in 1997 when Tony Blair entered Downing Street on a carefully stage managed wave of glory. Our governments have given themselves the same powers which Hitler gave himself. (Many of these modern powers originated with the European Union — Hitler's dream.)

Hitler and our governments have used the same excuse for introducing new laws: the threat of terrorism.

It is now known that Hitler faked the threat of terrorism in order to persuade the German people to accept his new laws.

46

Publicly expressed opinions can now be against the law. Saying (or writing) the wrong thing can result in a trial and imprisonment.

That's fascism.

Trying to decide what might or might not be illegal can itself be illegal.

People can be, and are, arrested and put in prison for things they think of doing. Or are foolish enough to talk about.

As a result the law itself has been dragged into disrepute and downright contempt.

47

Lenin wrote that 'The purpose of terrorism is to terrorise'.

My dictionary defines terrorism as the 'unauthorised use of violence and intimidation in the pursuit of political aims'.

There is no doubt whatever that everything done by the Government and the European Union is done in the pursuit of political aims.

Did you authorise them to use violence and intimidation in the pursuit of their political aims?

If you did not, then they are, by definition, terrorists.

48

Successive governments have destroyed the economy by introducing complicated new taxes and miles of red tape and by doing far too little to control public sector expenditure. They have all ignored their promises and handed over power to the European Union. They have deliberately made us targets by involving us in immoral and illegal wars.

The party politicians did all this in order to protect the interests of their parties.

England is now not a democracy. It has become a fascist state, run by unelected, foreign bureaucrats.

With our nation's wealth and history it would have been so easy to have created a wonderful society: fair, just, healthy and well educated, with well-planned towns and little crime.

But everything has been done with the aim of self-glorification, self-enrichment and, most of all, the survival of the party.

Bad motives inevitably lead to bad government.

49

Today the state controls almost everything but politicians are not satisfied. They want to control everything.

We live in a world dominated and controlled by greedy, dishonest, ruthless, selfish, immoral people who care nothing for the public good but care only for using the system to their own financial advantage. Those who 'lead' us have sold out our past, present and future, and our peace, for party political advantage and for personal gain.

Our country has been run (and ruined) by a seemingly endless parade of greedy, incompetent, dishonest and sometimes criminal people.

All markets are a conspiracy of insiders against outsiders but our Government, and the civil service we hire to do the paperwork, have become a conspiracy of insiders.

A greedy few have always enriched themselves at the cost of the innocent many. In the past the greedy few were confidence tricksters who sometimes ended up in prison. Today the greedy few are politicians and bankers who end up on yachts and in the House of Lords.

50

'Efficient production will have little ultimate value, even in promoting human happiness, if it be accompanied by inefficient and vulgar consumption. In a true scale of values, liberty, security and reasonable leisure stand far higher than mere luxury.'

Harry Roberts

51

Government ministers have repeatedly said that we must all share the responsibility for the mess the country is in. 'It is,' they say, 'our overspending and our greed which has put us all into this mess.'

This is unfair.

It was the greed of a minority which has caused the problem.

Most people were not greedy and did not overspend.

Politicians and journalists talk as though we were all to blame for the credit crunch. 'We were to blame,' they say, 'because we were borrowed too much, bought things we couldn't afford and enjoyed a lifestyle which was (or should have been) beyond our reach.'

This is not a fair accusation.

Many people (particularly politicians) were greedy.

But many people were not greedy, and did not live beyond their means.

And yet the Government has devised policies which were designed to help the greedy by punishing the cautious and the prudent.

Why did they do this?

They did it because it was the expedient, self-serving thing to do. And because the prudent, being also self-effacing, let them get away with it.

They did it to help preserve the power of their parties.

52

We think we live in a free, capitalist society. We don't. It is now clear that we live in state directed version of capitalism. And what's that?

It's fascism.

Benito Mussolini (who knew of what he spoke because he invented practical fascism) said that 'fascism should more properly be called corporatism because it is the merger of state and corporate power'.

Fascism means putting society's needs above the individual's needs. Fascism means giving society rights which are greater than the rights of the individual. A State can be described as fascist when the needs and well-being of the State are put above the needs and well-being of the individual.

Our country has become fascist gradually and without most people noticing. But it has happened. As with totalitarianism we have a form of government in which all aspects of citizens' lives are subordinated to the authority of the State. All political institutions, and all old legal and social traditions, are being gradually replaced with new ones designed to meet the State's needs. The police increasingly operate without the constraint of laws and regulations.

53

Academics could debate for months about whether we live in a fascist state or a totalitarian one. Does it really matter? We certainly don't live in a democracy.

We live, let us not forget, in a regime which represses its own citizens and allows (even encourages) those in authority to abuse their power. Authority has been separated from responsibility and those who wield power seem to regard their posts primarily as routes to personal enrichment.

54

Here's a quick 'fascism' test, designed to help decide whether a nation is fascist. I've left the answers blank, so that you can fill them in yourself.

Question 1: Are honest, innocent law abiding citizens who attend demonstrations likely to be filmed and arrested?
Answer:

Question 2: Does the Government have the right to throw people into prison for weeks at a time without taking them to court?
Answer:

Question 3: Does the Government allow its citizens and/or its prisoners to be tortured in order to obtain information?
Answer:

Question 4: Does the Government routinely tap the telephones of innocent citizens?

Answer:

Question 5: Does the Government have (or plan to have) some form of Identity Card system? And will citizens be subject to arrest if they leave their homes without their ID cards with them? Will Government departments be entitled to access the ‘confidential’ information on the cards?
Answer:

Question 6: Has the Government installed CCTV cameras and satellite tracking equipment so that it can keep track of citizens’ movements?
Answer:

Question 7: Is the Government collecting a national DNA database?
Answer:

Question 8: Does the Government take every opportunity to frighten its citizens by exaggerating threats?
Answer:

Question 9: Does the Government routinely ignore the will of the people but put the needs of the State above everything else?
Answer:

Question 10: Does the Government control a large, publicly funded media organisation which provides the public with so-called ‘news’? (And have independent observers shown that the media organisation is biased in favour of the State?)
Answer:

Question 11: Does the Government routinely distort statistics in order to hide the truth?
Answer:

Question 12: Does the Government plan to take fingerprints from all its citizens?
Answer:

Question 13: Does the Government control all serious opposition to the State philosophy (on whatever subject) by describing those who oppose its views or actions as terrorists — even though they may be entirely peaceful.
Answer:

Question 15: Does the Government do everything it can to prevent citizens expressing their right to free speech? (Remembering that freedom of speech means protecting the individual’s right to say offensive or disturbing things. The right to say nice things needs no protection.)
Answer:

Question 16: Does the government try to suppress political parties which have views of which it does not approve?
Answer:

The more times you answered ‘yes’ the more likely it is that you are living in a fascist country.

55

So, we’re living in a fascist country.

No argument.

The Government and the EU disagree, of course. They say that anyone who opposes them is a fascist.

That’s what fascists always do.

56

Fascism can creep up on you slowly, like old age. Most people in England are unaware that it has happened for several reasons.

First, they don’t really know what fascism is and so, not surprisingly, they have difficulty in recognising it.

Second, the fascists call everyone who opposes them a fascist. This is a double edged weapon. It draws attention to the alleged fascist and takes attention away from the real fascist. It’s an old trick but it still works. For example, supporters of the EU (without a doubt the most fascist organisation in the world today and, quite possibly the most successful fascist organisation ever to have existed) always demonise their critics by calling them fascists. If you aren't a europhile, they argue, then you must be a fascist.

57

It's vital to remember that although some of our fascism is home grown, most of it comes as a direct result of EU policies. England, Scotland and Wales have become statist subunits of the EU (though the plan is to break England into regions). All three major, traditional political parties in England are dedicated to supporting and promoting the European Union. All three traditional political parties in England are, therefore, fascist parties.

58

England now has over 100,000 laws which have come from the EU. All these have been added to the thousands of laws we had before.

Three quarters of our new legislation is made by unelected bureaucrats in Brussels and rubber stamped by overpaid, self-indulgent MPs in London.

59

Today, it is impossible even for lawyers and judges to know all the laws and so we are all at risk of inadvertently breaking one (or more) every law day of our lives. Just getting through the day without being caught is, for many, quite a task.

Even specialist lawyers have confirmed to me that they cannot keep up with the new laws being introduced in their own specialist area of the law.

60

The EU, the world's most fascist organisation, is riddled with corruption and manned (and womanned) by thousands of overpaid incompetents. The EU, like the Nazis, believe in exhortations, threats, commands, demands and proclamations. What's the difference between Germany under the Nazis and Europe under the European Union?

Simple.

People voted for the Nazis. No one voted for the EU. The EU thrust itself upon us, stripped us, raped us and now holds us prisoner.

61

Our educational system, and the State broadcasting system (the Biased Broadcasting Corporation) are used to indoctrinate children into believing that the EU is a good, wholesome organisation with our best interests at heart.

The evidence proves that it is none of these things.

62

The existence of the EU makes border controls utterly pointless since millions of people from Eastern Europe can now enter England legally, stay here legally and claim benefits legally.

63

Most Britons with functioning brain cells now recognise that staying in the EU means handing over all our power to a vast army of extraordinarily overpaid faceless, nameless grey suited bureaucrats living and working in a foreign country.

Staying in the EU also means giving most of our money to the same small army of bureaucrats so that they can give chunks of it to greedy and incompetent French farmers while lining their own nests with the rest.

British voters have had enough. Even the ones who were ill informed enough to vote to join the Common Market in the first place now recognise that they made a mistake and want to put things right before any more harm is done.

But all three main British political parties are committed to keeping England in the EU. Political parties which are out of power may make noises about cutting the EU's power. But as soon as they get into power they quickly forget their promises and toe the EU line.

64

'The European Union . . . is a German racket designed to take over the whole of Europe. It has to be thwarted . . . You might as well give it (sovereignty) to Adolf Hitler, frankly.'

Nicholas Ridley MP

65

All around the world countries are getting smaller. Ethnic groups are fighting for their independence. Look at a map of Europe five years ago and you'll hardly recognise it.

Even within the United Kingdom there are those who are fighting for Home Rule for their part of the island.

Huge international conglomerates are shrinking, splitting up, demerging and 'downsizing' their global operations as it becomes increasingly clear that there are no advantages to being big — but that there are lots of advantages to being small.

But English electors now face the sort of situation which used to be the prerogative of Soviet voters in the old one party communist days. We all have a vote. But there isn't a lot of choice involved.

The big issue for the future concerns the EU. Do we stay or do we go.

Voters can either choose to vote for a party that wants us to stay in Europe or they can choose to vote for UKIP (which no one believes will be in a position to form a government) or choose not to vote at all. All the big political parties (the only ones likely to be in a position to form a government) want to keep us in the EU.

That's the only choice.

And they call it freedom of choice.

66

So why are British politicians ignoring the wishes of the electors when they must surely know that if their party announced that it was planning to take us out of the European Union it would win by a landslide?

There's a simple answer.

First, the European Union is planning a one party State.

And that's a politicians' dream.

Elections without the possibility of losing.

Second, politicians who support the European Union have a tendency to become rich and well-rewarded.

Politicians are keen on a united Europe because they are driven by personal ambition. They don't want a bigger, stronger Europe because a bigger, stronger Europe will be good for the voters. They want a bigger, stronger Europe because it will be good for them.

67

Why do the three main parties in Britain all support the EU? Why do politicians refuse to criticise the EU or, even, to blame it when they are forced to implement unpopular legislation? (Most of the laws we hate originated in Brussels. But politicians still take the blame for the unpopular laws.)

Not since 1983 has a major political party in the UK talked openly about leaving the EU. Why do politicians ignore the will of the people so openly?

I am always unwilling to accept conspiracy theories. But, as Sherlock Holmes pointed out, when you have excluded all other possibilities then whatever you have left, however impossible it may appear to be, must be the only realistic solution.

The only possible explanation is that the three main political parties in Britain are controlled by, and in thrall to, the European Union.

How could that be?

The answers aren't difficult to find.

First, politicians don't blame the EU for anything because they aren't allowed to. In 1971 the Foreign Office published a document entitled FCO 30/1048. In paragraph 24 the Foreign Office states: 'there would be a major responsibility on HMG and on all political parties not to exacerbate public concern by attributing unpopular measures or unfavourable economic developments to the remote and unmanageable workings of the Community.'

The Community is, of course, now known as the European Union. Whenever you see politicians struggling to defend a blatantly absurd policy or new piece of legislation you can rely on the fact that although the new policy or legislation is introduced and defended by British politicians it is the work of bureaucrats working in Brussels.

And second, our dishonest politicians are bribed to support the EU. There aren't many influential British politicians alive who have not at some stage in their careers received money from the European Union.

Money has always explained the link between politicians and the EU. Edward Heath received a substantial financial reward for taking Britain into the EU when he was Prime Minister. The reward of £35,000, paid personally to Heath, in the guise of The Charlemagne Prize, was handed over to him after he had signed the Treaty of Rome. Heath later confirmed that he had lied to the British people about the implications of the Treaty. He told the electorate that signing the Treaty of Rome would lead to no essential loss of National Sovereignty but later admitted that this was a lie. He said he lied because he knew that the British would not approve of him signing the Treaty if they knew the truth.

Was Heath any worse than any other MP of modern times? I don't think so.

How much bribery currently goes on within the EU? That, of course, is impossible to say with precision. Bribery is, by its very nature, a secretive business. Neither those doing the bribing nor those being bribed are likely to talk much about what they are doing.

68

Politicians who have worked for the EU are not allowed to criticise the European Union if they wants to keep hold of their EU pensions.

69

On behalf of the European Union, the Government is doing its best to remove England (and English history) from our minds.

English history isn't taught in much detail in schools these days. Indeed, when students are taught about English history at all (and, in particular, taught about English political history) they are given a bowdlerised, sanitised, politically correct version.

Modern students are taught that Big Government protects citizens from the wickedness of the free market. Students are taught to be ashamed of England's history; they are taught about cruelty and slavery and imperial looting, rather than about the many, many ways in which England, and the English, have made the world a better, more equitable, more attractive place.

How often are students told that there are more Englishmen on any list of the world's greatest individuals than there are representatives of any other nation? Isaac Newton. Charles Dickens. William Shakespeare. Isambard Kingdom Brunel. John Milton. Florence Nightingale. Walter Raleigh. Thomas More. Queen Victoria. Chaucer. Charles Darwin. The list goes on and on.

For century after century England led the world in almost every conceivable branch of exploration, science and literature. England gave the world the Industrial Revolution. And it was England that did the leading, not Britain or the UK.

But for some time now everything good has been described as British and everything bad has been dismissed as English. Today's Britain is tolerant of everyone except the English. Under the influence of an EU desperate to see the end to the world's most successful nation, the English have been encouraged to apologise for their past, to deny their present and to accept that England has no future.

The simple (forgotten) truth is that in science, politics, industry and sport England has given the world more than any other country in the world.

Would an independent English parliament, composed of independent-minded English born men and women, allow their history to be forgotten so easily?

Of course not.

70

'It was England that invented the forms of liberty that free people now call freedom.'

The Financial Times

71

The Church of England, which has failed England and the English almost as much as the nation's politicians have done, has announced that it is considering demoting St George (England's national saint) and replacing him with someone called St Albans.

The reason?

The church is concerned that St George might be offensive to Muslims.

There has also been talk of removing St George's cross from the Union Jack.

And the Church of England has suggested that England should 'constructively accommodate' certain aspects of sharia law.

If the Church of England spent a little more time worrying about the interests of Christians, and a little less time worrying about the putative concerns of Muslims, it might find itself with a few more followers.

72

There is no doubt at all that the English would be much better off if the United Kingdom left the European Union. Leaving the EU would save England more than £60 billion a year (that is what our membership costs). That's £1,000 a year for every man, woman and child in the country. In addition, the red tape produced by Brussels costs at least another £60 billion a year.

But there's a big problem with the UK leaving the EU: the Scots and the Welsh think that the EU is wonderful.

They think it's wonderful for two reasons.

First, because they have over the last few years received a good deal of money from Brussels. (The money was, of course, merely a tiny percentage of the membership fee paid to the EU by England.)

Second, with pitiably childlike naivety, the Scots and the Welsh are convinced that the EU is helping them fight the English, and will enable them to achieve their dream of acquiring independence. Many Scottish and Welsh politicians still seem unaware of the fact that the new parliaments which have been set up in their countries are not a prologue to independence but are, rather, merely an essential part of the creating of a European superstate within which their countries will be no more than regions.

Party politicians are committed to the European Union. They will, therefore, never approve of an independent England.

Only a parliament of independent MPs would vote for such a change.

73

All modern governments are cynical conspiracies but the most recent incumbents have taken cynicism and conspiracy to new depths. Critics are either dismissed as paranoid, anarchic, nihilistic and (greatest irony of all) fascist or are marginalised, arrested, tortured and imprisoned according to taste.

74

Whenever the Government feels itself threatened by yet another scandal the police miraculously find a nice new terrorist plot with which to terrify us all. A few suitable suspects are rounded up and thrown into prison. A few weeks later they are quietly released.

The French would riot at the slightest infringement of their liberties or their history. The English, as a race, say and do nothing. A frightening number of people now actually want a state-sponsored economy.

How many people would actually protest if the Government suggested branding numbers on our foreheads, or putting surveillance cameras into our homes (all in the cause of protecting us against terrorism, money-laundering or television licence fee avoidance)?

75

In the aftermath of the attack on America which took place on the 11th September 2001 the British Government (like the American Government) gave itself far-reaching powers over ordinary citizens. The powers were taken (and sold to the electorate) as essential to defend both nations against a cruel, unseen enemy.

The truth, of course, is that the new dangers to Britain would never have occurred if Britain hadn't taken part in an illegal war against Iraq.

Even so, the new powers never had anything to do with terrorism. The so-called 'war on terrorism' was merely an excuse, by an increasingly fascist government, to introduce new laws oppressing the ordinary people and suppressing any dissent.

Freedom, and free speech, are uncomfortable concepts for fascist governments run by politicians who are beholden to political parties.

It's far easier to control a nation when individual rights and freedom are kept to a minimum and collectivist slavery regarded as acceptable.

Collectivist slavery gives power to the few who choose to take it.

76

The English don't have, and never had, a constitution. But we used to have the Magna Carta. It was all we needed.

Today we have nothing: no bill of rights, no constitution and no Magna Carta.

Millions of people (politicians, civil servants and hangers-on) enthusiastically use the machinery of the state to benefit themselves: taking to themselves more and more power (and, also, more and more money) while our freedom to act and speak as we wish is rapidly diminished.

Can any politician in England be truly proud of the nation they have helped create? Of course they can't. They are, to a man and woman, greedy, self-serving traitors. Modern governments exist to protect the party rather than to protect the interests of the electorate.

Almost everything the Government now does is fascist — designed to support and strengthen the rights and powers of the State and to damage and weaken the rights and powers of individuals. We don't notice or appreciate what is happening because we have been misled, our attention has been diverted (as by a clever magician), our perceptions have been managed, and journalists have failed to enlighten us.

77

If you're going to support a political party it has to be the 'right' political party. Not long ago a policeman was sacked for being a member of a legal and officially accepted political party. There is much talk of making some political parties illegal.

78

The Archbishop of York, Ugandan born Dr John Sentamu, has claimed that Britain is becoming a police state worthy of comparison with Uganda under Idi Amin.

Even a former director general of MI5 (Dame Stella Rimington) has warned that Britain is being pushed towards a police state. She won widespread support for her comment, though government ministers predictably dismissed the comment as 'abject nonsense' and, inevitably, accused the former MI5 chief of playing into the hands of terrorists with 'misguided talk'.

'If you're not with us, you're against us.'

79

The people didn't want to go to war with Iraq. Iraq hadn't threatened us. We aren't used to having to think of ourselves as bullies.

It was always clear that going to war with Iraq would dramatically increase — not reduce — the danger to individual citizens. (Decent countries don't start wars unless they are necessary for the defence of the realm.)

I believe that we went to war with Iraq because it suited Tony Blair's personal agenda. Blair had the power to take us to war because the party political system gave him that power.

If we had a parliament full of independent MPs history would have been quite different.

We would not have invaded Iraq or Afghanistan.

A poll of 2246 adults showed that 77% believed that the world had become a more frightening place after Labour came to power in 1997.

80

Governments used to exist (and ought to exist) to protect the population and to provide a basic infrastructure.

Modern politicians have encouraged people to expect their Governments to look after their every need.

Party politicians know that their chances of retaining power (and making money) are dependent on their maintaining control over as many aspects of our lives as possible.

In order to win elections political parties vie with one another to offer voters the most attractive package.

No one dares speak of individual responsibility or self-reliance. These are old fashioned virtues which are widely regarded as being politically incorrect and, somehow, rather 'nasty'.

Our political leaders want to create an environment in which their multiculturalism and political correctness will grow. They want to make people terrified of a free market and of a horrible world in which people can make decisions for themselves and take responsibility for their own lives.

We are encouraged to believe that any improvements which have taken place in our lives are a result of big government and more regulations. This, of course, is not true. It's a case of the post hoc, ergo propter hoc fallacy. (Because B happened after A then B was caused by A. It is the same argument made by europhiles. They claim that it is because we're members of the European Union that there has not been a Third World war.)

81

In a healthy society people work to earn a living. Buying goods and services spreads the money around. Individuals decide how much they want to save and how much they want to spend. They also decide how they want to spend their money.

In our modern, unhealthy society the Government controls all the money and hands it out to people it likes. 'Vote for us and we'll see you all right.' All the political parties now have to make similar promises to stand a chance of succeeding at the next election.

82

Everything is falling apart. Our basic infrastructure is overstretched and underfunded. It isn't that we don't spend enough. The problem is that public money is wasted on the wrong things.

A recent survey conducted by the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts, showed that 55% of 500 managers from across the public services believed that they would no longer be able to deliver an acceptable level of service within five years. A third believed that they would no longer be able to deliver an acceptable level of service within three years. In many areas of the country services are already severely substandard. Hundreds of thousands of children leave primary school without basic numeracy and literacy skills. Scores of hospitals are so filthy dirty and so badly run that the unfortunate patients who enter them are more at risk than if they'd stayed at home (or out in the street) and taken their chances.

The country has a failing infrastructure but it also has a debt that will take generations to pay back. The debt will only be paid back through massive tax increases for years to come.

83

When we think party politicians are behaving stupidly we tend to say things like 'They can't be THAT stupid!'

But they can be. And they are.

Never underestimate the stupidity and greed of a professional party politician.

84

Governments should not run businesses or micromanage the economy. Governments have proved they are quite incapable of providing decent services of any kind. And yet the Government insists on controlling services such as health and education and on finding ways to punish those who prefer to obtain private services.

The micro-management fascist, statist style of government favoured by party politicians has led to another dramatic change in the way people behave. The Government's programme of welfare support, and its blind enthusiasm for means-testing, mean that increasing numbers of people are now content to lie back and let their nation look after them. They demand and expect free care.

85

If you save money or invest in a pension then you will be punished when you are older by the Government's means testing system. Means testing helps redistribute wealth and creates an equal society. This is good for the State because it gives the State more power but bad for individuals because it eradicates freedom and ambition. Instead of encouraging and rewarding self-sufficiency the Government is encouraging dependence. This is not going to be easy to cure and is almost certain to get considerably worse before it gets better.

There are millions of citizens today who genuinely believe that the State owes them a living. They seem to assume that the State has a duty to provide them with money and services and they never seem to question the origin of either. Their dependence on the State is the reason for their loyalty to the State — and the controlling political party.

The State has taken responsibility for everything and has removed the survival instinct with which we should all protect ourselves.

Paradoxically, Big Government increases our liabilities (financial, legal and emotional) and exposes all our vulnerabilities.

The very basis of freedom is taking responsibility for your own life, but in England today millions seem prepared, even eager, to hand over all responsibility for themselves to the State. That's a waste of a life. Actually, it isn't living at all.

86

Local politics was always about favours. Now national politics is the same. Men and women don't join a political party to do things for the community; they join a political party to do things for themselves. Scroungers and cheats follow their example and also help themselves to money from the State's coffers. It is far easier than earning an honest living, and the State's coffers are seemingly never emptiable. Moreover, politicians who were elected to look after the voters now expose the people they are paid to look after to increased danger (by starting wars).

Man's basic rights have been forgotten, buried under mounds of red tape and administration. The rights of the individual have been forgotten as the power of the party and the rights of the state have been expanded. Respect is but a memory.

It doesn't really matter whether you call it communism, statism, socialism or fascism: the names vary but the end result is absolutely the same.

87

What can one say about a Government which deliberately makes life more difficult for the potentially successful, while deliberately making life easier for the proven failures?

England has been destroyed by a potent and toxic mixture of statism, multiculturalism, political correctness, political self-interest, positive discrimination and an electoral system which has been hijacked by the political party system. The Government (and our local councils) have become too intrusive and too expensive in order to defend the interests of the party system.

Today, our Governments ignore the things they should do while they interfere with the things they should leave alone. ('We can't stand by and do nothing,' is a constant cry from interfering politicians who would serve the people and the country better if they did stand by and do nothing.)

Politicians soothe us with slick but hollow promises and grand plans for the future but they are neither interested in, nor competent to deal with, the only thing we really want from them: solutions to the practical problems of nation management.

88

In their attempts to extend their control, party politicians take decisions in many areas where their interference really isn't needed. So, for example, they make decisions on moral issues, such as euthanasia and abortion, where they have no knowledge, experience or electoral jurisdiction.

It is almost obscene that a bunch of lying, cheating, amoral war criminals should dare even to consider talking publicly about moral issues — let alone passing laws designed to control our behaviour or our attitudes.

In the end they inevitably favour the views of whichever group shouts loudest, pushes hardest or has the deepest pockets. Ethical issues are decided for the nation in such an intrinsically corrupt way. It is the role and responsibility of families and communities to improve moral standards. The idea that politicians (most of whom are scheming, thieving hypocrites) should dare offer guidance on moral matters is both contemptible and laughable.

89

Politicians now also interfere in our relationships and our everyday activities.

Work, for example, is a partnership between employees and employers. But in recent years the EU and the Labour Government (staffed largely by people who have never done a day of real work in their lives) have, inspired by their fascist dogma, made huge efforts to reduce the responsibilities of employees to virtually nothing and, at the same, to enhance their rights. The results have been disastrous. No one — especially not employees — has benefited.

Politicians and civil servants are neither wise nor morally responsible. Their authority and reach have been allowed to grow unfettered when we would all be much better off if they were restricted.

90

When the Tories were in disarray over their promise to raise the inheritance tax threshold a spokesman said: 'This is a promise we intend to keep', thereby formally dividing political promises into those which are intended to be kept and those which are offered simply for display.

91

The Government terrifies us with an endless diet of manufactured fear. Politicians warn us that terrorists want to kill us. Politicians have belatedly (and suspiciously) embraced the threat of global warming and now they warn us that this threatens our very existence. And, as we shiver in fear, they soothe us by making a constant series of aspirational (and entirely meaningless) statements. We are going to cut carbon emissions by such and such a percentage by 2060. (The figure, which changes constantly, doesn't matter. No one takes it seriously.) All Britons will have access to an NHS dentist within three years. Fears and promises. Stick and carrot. Fears and promises. The end to boom and bust. A house for every family. Universal peace. New laws to protect us from money launderers. Bogeymen hiding behind the curtains. The electors are now harassed and blackjacked under a preposterous system of unintelligible laws which are contradictory and which exist only to give authority to small-minded men and women.

The Government is forever declaring things illegal and attempting to stop people doing them. There is no discussion, no debate, no consideration of the options and the alternatives. The Government assumes that we are all witless children in need of an extensive, smothering of rules and regulations. What started out as a framework of laws, designed to protect us, quickly became a prison — confining and restricting.

92

The Government exists to administer (it is not by chance that the American Government is known as an Administration) but our politicians are incapable of administering. They are skilled at finding new ways to take money from us. And they are skilled, oh so very skilled, at finding ways to spend it in ways that will benefit them. But they have no interest in public service.

We have acquired, through their greed and our apathy, a Government which exists for its own benefit, rather than ours. 93

In the bad old days most of us had access to a GP and a bank manager we could trust and rely on. Our schools were full of teachers who understood the meaning of the word 'vocation'. Our streets were patrolled by policemen who cared about the communities they protected. We could go out without locking our doors. We had neighbours we could trust. We had neighbours who spoke the same language.

Today, we have an increasingly rigid society with increasing inequalities and a seemingly never ending supply of rules and regulations.

The Government has, for some time, been considering introducing legislation requiring anyone travelling abroad to provide an exact itinerary in advance. Passport holding citizens will have to apply in advance for permission to go abroad. (And, presumably, if the trip is considered inappropriate or unnecessary then permission may be refused.) And Ministers are planning to use their computerised passport checking system to enable them to prevent people travelling if they have unpaid parking and speeding fines. Naturally, foreigners who wish to travel in or out of England will be able to do without let or hindrance.

(It seems that Ministers have failed to read their passports recently. Inside each passport the wording still reads: 'Her Britannic Majesty's Secretary of State requests and requires...all those whom it may concern to allow the bearer to pass freely without let or hindrance'.)

94

I have no doubt that the credit crunch will be used as an excuse (opportunity might be a more appropriate word) to introduce a mass of new regulations and legislation.

Every threatening incident is used as an excuse to turn the screw and oppress us still further. There are many who believe it possible that the whole credit crunch crisis just might have been allowed to happen in order to give the politicians an excuse to introduce more regulations controlling our financial affairs.

The financial problems which have destroyed pensions and savings were caused by greedy bankers, incompetent regulators and reckless, stupid politicians who spent, spent spent and encouraged the electors to borrow, borrow, borrow in order to create a convincing mirage of wealth. And yet it was clear from the beginning that the regulations, the incoming legislation, would punish savers and workers rather than the bankers, the regulators or the politicians.

95

The fundamental ideal standing behind Plato's Republic and More's Utopia was equality. Both men believed that all citizens should have equal opportunities, and that a society should be governed solely with regard for the moral and material welfare of its citizens. How far we now are from that principle.

Through their allegiance to a toxic mixture of means testing, political correctness and multiculturalism our politicians have created a deeply unjust society.

Today it is the scroungers, the feckless, the lazy, the greedy and the crooked who are the chosen ones and the hard working and the decent who are down-trodden and oppressed.

96

A citizen who wrote to the Home Secretary, criticising the Government for creating a police state, was called for an interview with his GP. The GP had received a letter from the Fixated Threat Assessment Centre (FTAC) following instructions from the Home Office. The GP was required to interview the citizen who had dared to complain in order to establish his 'state of mind'.

It seems that in future anyone who dares to criticise the Government may be regarded as mentally ill.

The FTAC is a joint initiative by the Home Office, the Metropolitan Police and the Department of Health and consists of nine police officers (one chief inspector, one inspector, one sergeant and six police constables), three psychiatric nurses, a part time psychiatrist and a part time pathologist. The NHS component of this merry little quango costs over £500,000 a year.

The purpose of the FTAC is: 'to assess and manage the risks posed by those who engage in inappropriate or threatening forms of contact towards people in public life and in doing so, to direct severely mentally ill people, who are identified through such contacts, to the care that they so desperately need.'

FTAC may make use of police powers under section 136 of the Mental Health Act 1983 to 'take a person who appears to be suffering from a mental disorder, and in immediate need of care or control, to a place of safety'.

Officially, FTAC is described as 'a new form of diversion initiative in which the interests of patient care overlap with those of crime prevention'.

If you haven't gone cold inside by the time you have read this far then you may not be aware of the way that the Soviet Union and the East Germans used mental hospitals and psychiatric clinics to silence protestors and dissidents.

Naturally, the FTAC does not define what is considered 'inappropriate' or 'threatening' forms of contact. It is inappropriate or threatening because 'they' say it is.

The technique of branding outspoken individuals as 'mad' isn't new. But it's truly terrifying to see it being used in England, with the idea of troublesome individuals being sectioned as mentally ill and locked up where they can be controlled and silenced.

The FTAC has been given sweeping powers to check the files of thousands of suspects. And the team has the power to order that suspects undergo involuntary 'treatment' in secure psychiatric units. Troublesome citizens can be locked up for an indefinite period without trial, without criminal charges being laid and without any evidence of any crime being committed.

Our protectors have become our brutalisers and our leaders have led us into a barren wilderness where only the weeds of deceit and corruption flourish.

97

Hope and respect and loyalty have been replaced with fear, regrets, disappointments and missed opportunities. We have acquired an unmanageable burden of cares, responsibilities, commitments, resentments and debts: a smorgasbord of deliberately constructed nightmares. If we protest or complain or question then our protests, complaints and questions are dismissed as racist or sexist or otherwise unacceptable. The protestor is dismissed as an ungrateful troublemaker.

Anyone who dares to stand up and ask a question is a criminal; to be watched very carefully.

98

There are terrorists everywhere. We must watch out for them. They seem normal, you see, but they ask questions. The Government has encouraged snitches and tittle tattle and gossip. If you want to say something nasty about someone, get them into endless trouble, all you have to do is ring one of the Government's many free helplines.

'You don't have to be sure,' says one Government advertisement. 'If you suspect it, report it.'

They promise us a better future but in truth they are only concerned about a better future for them, not us.

(As an aside it is worth mentioning that the Government spends £400 million of our money each year on advertising. Much of the advertising is designed to promote the interests of the ruling party.)

99

When the economy does well, and house prices rise on a sea of debt, national politicians take the credit. Beaming smiles, modest nods, much talk of the rewards of prudence. When the economy does badly the same politicians blame global problems over which they have no control.

100

Gordon Brown, when he was Prime Minister, gave billions of pounds of English taxpayers' money to save two Scottish banks which should have been allowed to go bust. Would he have spent so much to save two English banks?

101

The Scottish Claim of Right states: 'We...do hereby declare and pledge that in all our actions and deliberations (the) interests (of the Scottish people) shall be paramount.'

The Scottish Claim of Rights was been signed and approved by (among others) Gordon Brown and Alistair

Darling.

102

Confession. I don't like modern party politicians. They are offensive, crooked, egocentric, narcissistic and hypocritical. They are composed of gristle and tripe. They have no hearts or brains let alone souls or spirits. And I despise people who work for the government because they are the people who would operate the gas chambers partly for the fun of it and partly for a guaranteed index-linked non-contributory pension. Just thought I'd mention it. So that you know where I stand. I don't want there to be any doubt.

103

Theoretically, the Government and its agents are there to protect our freedom and to enable us to go about our daily business safely and without restraint. That's it. But that is now exactly the opposite to what they do. Time and time again they act out of personal interest and greed. Taxes are rising inexorably and the quality of public services is in a deep, long-term decline. Taxes have risen far faster than earnings. Governments merrily ignore the evidence which shows clearly that once the state sector spends more than 40% of a nation's income then the nation's economic performance deteriorates dramatically.

104

If you work for an hour, and are paid above minimum wage, then for between fifteen and thirty minutes of the hour you are working for the Government.

What do we get for this?

We get armies which fight wars we don't want fighting and which expose us to great danger. We get a National Health Service which is so poorly run that it kills more people than it saves. We get schools that are so poorly managed that huge numbers of young people leave school unable to read or write, while parents who can scrape together the wherewithal pay to send their children to private schools. We get roads but we must pay more if we want to use them. We get a public transport network which is the most inefficient and expensive in the world. We get politicians and civil servants who pay themselves extraordinarily well, and do very little work. We get expensive membership of the European Union — a membership that brings us absolutely nothing but trouble and costs. We get a corrupt and incompetent police force which is concerned more with making money, filling in forms and obeying the strictures of the politically correct than in protecting people or property. We pay for a vast army of busy bodies who never tire of telling us what we can and cannot do.

105

It is our individual responsibility, as defined by law, by history and by common sense, to ensure that we pay as little tax as legally possible. That is our responsibility to our families and ourselves. The Government doesn't see it that way. As far as they are concerned what is ours is theirs and what is theirs is also theirs. Nice.

What the politicians don't realise (never having worked for a living) is if taxes go up too much people will put most of their creative effort into avoiding taxes, rather than doing what they do. An increasing no of people are now so fed up with taxes that they are working part time — cutting living expenses and cutting tax bills.

106

If you win money on the lottery there is no tax to pay. If you work hard and save hard you pay tax on your earnings and your savings. The unmistakeable message is that the Government disapproves of work and saving and encourages gambling.

107

The principle of taxing heavily and giving money back to people in allowances is favoured because it gives the State more control over our lives.

108

Everything we do needs a licence. And every time we need a licence we must pay the Government more money. Today you even need a licence if you want to sing Happy Birthday to a friend in your local pub.

109

The State is selling our roads to private companies so that the companies can rent them back to us when we want to use them. They're our roads. We paid for them to be built. Now someone else owns them and we pay to use them.

Did anyone ask you if this would be OK?

They didn't ask me, either.

110

Politicians everywhere are corrupt and self-serving. And England, a once proud nation with a vast history, is about to disappear.

Most English people don't know what is happening to their country. England is full of sleeping princes and princesses. Anyone who relies upon the Biased Broadcasting Corporation (the BBC), or the national press, for information will not understand that successive Governments have deliberately signed treaties which allow England to be torn apart and recreated as anonymous administrative regions.

Modern governments deliberately hide the truth from us as much as they possibly can. And, because we have a poor media, we rarely find out things we are really entitled to know.

The mainstream media generally only report demonstrations and reports which fit their agenda. Any suggestion that we enjoy a free press and live in a free country is laughable.

111

The real task of journalists is constantly to embarrass and frequently to terrify the comfortable, complacent members of the establishment. This does not happen. I have, over the years, worked for most national newspapers and broadcast media in the UK and the one thing that has always worried me is the way that journalists invariably become part of the establishment; supporting, protecting and defending the party political system.

Editors and journalists forget that news is the stuff that people don't want printed.

112

Governments have repeatedly promised to be free and open. They have been neither. We've been given a Freedom of Information Act but the result has been that obtaining vital information is now even more difficult than ever. Orwell must be smiling and nodding.

113

Everything civil servants and politicians do should be out in the open. We pay salaries (and fat pensions) to our civil servants and politicians. That makes them our employees. Why, therefore, should they have secrets from us? Aren't we entitled to know what they are doing in our name and with our money?

114

Philosophy, purpose and passion are sadly lacking from today's miserable posse of MPs. Look around Parliament and you will see rows of incompetent hypocrites, smugness deceivers and malignant conspirators. These people may be stupid, but they are not harmless. They pose a very real, continuing and ever increasing threat to our freedom.

115

We are entitled to politicians who inspire us, who respect the truth and who exhibit dignity and integrity. But, under the party system, these qualities are unavailable luxuries: caviare and vintage champagne. Instead, we must make do with get stale bread and dirty water.

There is no room for integrity in public life today. It's been squeezed out by avarice. The party system has destroyed political honesty and it has destroyed impartiality and the concept of public service among civil servants.

In the face of widespread corruption we are powerless and disenfranchised.

116

'A democracy cannot survive as a permanent form of government. It can last only until its citizens discover that they can vote themselves largesse from the public treasury. From that moment on, the majority (who vote) will vote for those candidates promising the greatest benefits from the public purse, with the result that a democracy will always collapse from loose fiscal policies, always followed by a dictatorship.'

Lord Thomas Macauley (1800-1859)

117

True liberty means having the right to have our own thoughts and to share them with others, freely and openly. Liberty means having the right to spend our days in the way that we want to spend them, as long as what we do does not impinge on the rights of others. Liberty means that a man should be able to run his life, and his business, in the way that he thinks it should be run, as long as it does not interfere with the rights of others to do the same thing. Liberty means that communities can choose their own leaders and decide how they want their children to be educated, their hospitals to be organised and so on.

Today, liberty is something we read about in history books.

Together the professional party politicians have created an angry, mean, resentful, rude, ungrateful, violent world.

A plague on all their parties!

The party politicians have terrified us into submission.

According to a report called 'Perspectives on a changing society' an overwhelming majority of the public are willing to give up freedom to combat the threat of terrorism. Eight in ten citizens think that it is acceptable for the police to tap telephones and to open the mail. It is, they believe, 'a price worth paying'. Though I'm not sure they know just what they think they are getting for the price they are paying.

A quarter of the population think that torturing terror suspects is justified. Nearly half think it's fine to deny suspects the right to a jury trial.

Eight out of ten citizens now think that compulsory identity cards are a price worth paying. (The word compulsory has become one of the most commonly used in our language. Am I the only person who always finds it irritating?) A third think it is acceptable to ban peaceful protests and demonstrations. Henry David Thoreau once wrote that the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. Nothing but desperation could lead men and women to believe that freedom is a disposable asset. The Government wants to bully, exhaust and frighten us so that we don't believe that there is any hope that we can change things.

'What's the use, nothing is going to change?' is for most people, the only way to survive. After all, we are all suspects now.

118

I've fought for years for things I believe in. It has been exhausting and, I admit with sadness, largely pointless.

Today, fighting injustice has become harder than ever. The red tape has become virtually impenetrable. Most people don't care or have any fight left (or they have been brainwashed into believing that the system is right, that the politicians are doing their best and the bureaucrats are just doing their jobs).

But, I do believe that we can succeed through the bloodless revolution described in this book.

119

All forms of hierarchical authority are intrinsically corrupt. Those with authority need to be given as little power as possible, and need to be watched constantly by those on whose behalf their authority is exercised.

120

It was the clerks and bureaucrats who gave Hitler his power. It is the clerks and bureaucrats who give the EU fascists their power. And it is the clerks and bureaucrats who give England's fascists their power.

121

Instead of protecting us our Government has become our greatest enemy; establishing slavery instead of protecting our freedom; endangering us instead of safeguarding us; and creating uncertainty (through reams of legislation, some of it retrospective and much of it so vague that it can be interpreted at will by bureaucrats).

Free speech is stifled and peaceful demonstrators who dare to tell the truth are arrested. Even heckling at political meetings has been outlawed.

Every public meeting should have someone at the back shouting out 'balls' to everything the speakers say. But these days you'd get arrested if you did. Complaints and protests are ignored.

Our totalitarian leaders are systematically destroying our liberties.

Today's politicians don't stand for anything but themselves. Scratch a politician and you'll find a large expense account and a yearning for self-aggrandisement. The mechanics of our electoral system means that we have all been disenfranchised by shifty, blood sucking political pygmies on the rampage. A quarter of MPs have never had a proper job. They start out as bag carriers and gofers and creep their way up the ladder. As a result the House of Commons is populated by a mass of thieving, hypocritical, self-serving psychopaths.

122

The Government has created two societies: those who work for, and are paid by, the Government and the rest — those who only give money to the Government.

It is a two tier society; two worlds, the givers and the takers.

Things reached the pinnacle of absurdity when the staff of the Financial Services Authority, the FSA, (the regulatory body which failed to do anything to stop the financial meltdown) gave themselves huge bonuses for failing so successfully, and a former Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith, accidentally claimed the cost of two pornographic movies on her Parliamentary expenses.

Politicians seem more interested in gouging as much money as they can out of the public purse than they are in protecting what is left of our democracy. 'Don't forget to claim for the bath plug when you're filling in the expenses form, dear!'

123

The only crimes now regarded as truly serious are crimes against the Government or its officers; crimes which threaten the establishment (or its officers) in any way.

Burglars are allowed to stay out of prison. Muggers and murderers receive only the lightest of sentences; sometimes let off with a few, mild words of criticism, a token for some free CDs and a holiday.

But elderly citizens who refuse to pay their council tax (on the not unreasonable grounds that if they pay it they won't be able to afford to eat) are sent straight to prison. On the face of it this seems mad. And in a logical, caring, democratic world it would be. The burglar is clearly a much greater threat than the pensioner. But we live in a fascist world and in a fascist world it is the State, not the individual, whose interests must be protected.

This is practical fascism: the deadly marriage of capitalism and statism in which the fascists always come first. The burglar is no threat to the state but the person who doesn't pay a tax is.

Hit an old man with a brick so that you can steal his pension and you may end up with a sentence involving community service. Attack a policeman, now regarded as a servant of the State not the public, and you will go to prison for a long, long time.

You think I'm exaggerating? I'm not. A man who left a 96 year old war veteran blind in one eye after attacking him on a packed train was given a three year supervision order. The man, who launched an unprovoked attack on the 96 year old in Croydon, South London, was found guilty of grievous bodily harm after the attack was caught on closed circuit television.

124

Citizens who have retired are considered a nuisance and a drain on the State's resources. They contribute nothing and are, as far as the State is concerned, a waste of time and money. They are routinely denied the protection of the courts. Elderly patients in nursing homes can legally be drugged without their knowledge or approval. And the over 60's are denied medical attention because they are of little value to the State. Under the auspices of the Orwellian Liverpool Care Pathway, the Government now encourages doctors and nurses to kill elderly patients.

125

Governments controlled by party politicians have created a world in which those who run the country (and who work for the electorate) can do whatever they please while citizens can now only do what they are permitted to do. And that, of course, is the reverse of traditional English law, and the precise opposite of the type of freedom guaranteed by the Magna Carta and a whole host of subsequent legislation.

We have adopted EU law which says that private citizens can do what the bureaucrats say they can do and no more.

126

It is not the place of the Government to tell us that we must stop smoking or eat less. But these are responsibilities which the Government (inspired by the EU) has taken unto itself.

It is not the place of the Government to run banks or control water companies or trains or anything else that requires maintenance or a timetable.

The State should not run businesses. It is very bad at it. It should, at most, enact legislation designed to regulate (mildly) those businesses which are essential and laws to punish (severely) managers who are dishonest or seriously incompetent.

Nor, incidentally, should the State become involved in broadcasting or publishing. The BBC has done more damage to our democracy and our freedom than any other broadcasting institution. There is not a single journalist working for the BBC whom I would trust to edit a parish magazine. To a BBC journalist a scoop is something you use for ice cream. Because it has a vast, guaranteed income, a special tax which is not dependent on market forces, the BBC can pay huge amounts of money to celebrities and for the coverage of sports it wants to dominate. It can afford to throw money around quite recklessly. (The BBC responded to suggestions that, in view of the nation's economic state, the annual tax on viewing should not be raised, with all the shock and horror of a maiden aunt being propositioned. The very notion that they should cut the nearly £25 million they spend on hotels sent BBC managers into a swoon. Unemployment figures may soar but BBC staff must have their bonuses, their taxis and their unthreatened lifestyle.) Commercial broadcasters, unable to match the BBC's spending power, must resort to making ever more desperate programmes in an attempt to grab ratings: the result is an inevitable lowering of broadcasting standards. The BBC spends £145 million a year of licence-fee payers money on its website where material is available free to anyone who wants to use it (whether they are licence fee payers or not). The result is that commercial websites cannot charge for material and so cannot survive.

Similarly, local councils which publish free newspapers do enormous damage to the freedom of speech and the democratic process by putting private publications out of business.

127

Meritocracy once drove progress and social justice by allowing poor youngsters to rise through grammar schools and challenge the traditional upper class. But this was considered to be a bad thing and so comprehensive schools were founded so that the school system could be dumbed down to the lowest common denominator.

So that all children could be the same and no one would fail, exams were made easier.

Teachers were told not to correct mistakes made in the classroom lest this make some children feel less adequate.

School sports were abandoned for the same reason (giving local councils an opportunity to make a good profit by selling off the playing fields as building land).

128

Small day to day decisions are taken from us by bureaucrats applying endless rafts of legislation which no one ever understands. It is no wonder that when it comes to the big decisions we are happy to leave those to others too. We are like unfortunate children; oppressed by fear and violence.

Governments should provide comfort, support and reassurance; instead they concentrate on frightening people half to death in order to keep them cowed and in their place.

The politicians have stolen our freedom and our rights against our wishes, without ever bothering to ask our approval.

129

The truth is that today, the Government is the biggest source of terrorism in our lives; the terrorism of state control, the erosion of all our traditional values and the replacement with oppressive laws allegedly designed to protect us from violence but in practice designed to introduce a reign of terror similar to that which followed the French Revolution.

The annual cost of new Government regulations is more than £50 billion. The annual cost. We are so overladen with laws that the law itself has become meaningless. Publicly expressed opinions can now be against the law. Thinking of what is or might be illegal can itself be illegal. People are arrested and put in prison for their contemplations.

130

The Government proudly advertises the fact that it now crushes cars owned by citizens who don't pay their road tax. This is, of course, quite mad. It is a terrible waste of energy and an insult to the environment. But the State crushes cars because it can and because it serves to frighten other citizens and to remind them that not paying taxes has terrifying consequences.

131

The political parties have given us a world in which a passer-by dare not push a child on a swing, in which a householder dare not admonish yobs who are throwing rubbish onto his garden or urinating in his doorway, in which travellers are treated like criminals and where making a joke can put you into prison.

They have given us a world in which criminals who are let out of our overcrowded prisons early are given cash to compensate them for the loss of free food and lodging. So far the Labour Government has freed 50,000 criminals and paid them £5 million in compensation. I kid you not.

They have given us a world in which most new jobs created since 1997 have been filled by workers born outside Europe. They have given us a world in which a woman can earn more by having a child and signing on for benefits than she could earn as a cook or a hairdresser or a waitress.

They have given us a world in which many people on welfare receive more money than hard working citizens on minimum wages.

They have given us a world in which England has more people on welfare than Ireland has citizens and a world in which the Welfare State specialises in keeping people on benefits for ever.

They have given us a world in which every time we commit a crime we give them a chance to take, and store, our DNA. And since they have criminalised almost everything ('everything which is not specifically allowed is against the law') they have many opportunities to criminalise us.

132

I gave a pound to a beggar the other day. As I walked on I heard a shout. I turned round and saw him sneering and waving two fingers. Society is like that now. We give. But it's never enough.

133

Have you ever wondered why so many beggars on the streets have dogs?

There are two reasons (if we put aside the thought that maybe they just love animals).

The first is that having a dog attracts sympathy and money from passers-by. But the second, and possibly most significant, is that individuals claiming benefits receive around £10 a week extra for each dog they own (or claim they own).

Do hard working citizens receive money from the State to enable them to buy dog food?

Apparently not.

134

They tell us that to safeguard our freedom we must sacrifice it. We cannot enjoy it unless we give it away. We have become slaves.

You think that my use of the word 'slave' sounds a little over-stated?

Think about it for a moment.

We work for them. We do what we are told. We have no control over our lives.

My dictionary definition of a slave is 'a person who is forced to obey another; a person who is controlled'.

135

To describe the UK today as a democracy is as absurd as it would be to describe it as a free country. We have lost our freedom. The people who run the country no longer do what we want.

Did you want them to give untold billions to save the bonuses of the rich and stupid bankers? Do you know anyone who did?

Did you want Gordon Brown to sign the Lisbon Treaty without the referendum we had been promised? Do you know anyone who did?

Did you want our country to start wars against two countries which had never threatened us? Do you know anyone who did?

They run the country for them not us. They ignore what we want. And they treat us like slaves.

136

Politicians have corrupted endlessly and destroyed morality in public life. It is not the bankers or the regulators or the civil servants who have ruined Britain (though they have all played their parts with great enthusiasm) but the politicians. And anything other than a complete overhaul of our political system will prove inadequate and disappointing.

137

Here's a curious fact: of the seven men who gave more than £1,000,000 to the Labour Party during Tony Blair's decade in power, six ended up in the House of Lords. Now, there's a coincidence for you.

138

It is hardly surprising that millions of educated and intelligent people now waste their lives watching terrible television programmes as a nightly relief from the daily struggles with bureaucracy and corporate inefficiency.

Television is the opiate of the people.

139

'Economic freedom is based on a simple moral rule: everyone has a right to his or her life and property, and no one has the right to deprive anyone of these things,' wrote Ron Paul, former USA Presidential candidate.

If you burst into a neighbour's home and demanded money you would be regarded as a bad person. Even if you insisted that you were going to use the money to help feed starving children you would still be thought of as a bad person. Robin Hood is really only acceptable when he's dressed in green tights and camping in the woods.

There's only one time when theft is legal. And that's when governments do it.

Because they back up their demands with threats ('If you don't give us your money we will kidnap you and lock you up') and physical intimidation (men in uniforms, carrying weapons, can be pretty intimidating) we allow our Government to demand money from us without ever thinking deeply about the legality or morality of what they are doing.

Statists believe the State has the right to initiate force against its own citizens to make them do what it wants them to do.

When our Government demands money from us it has a lot of back up: tax inspectors, policemen, courts and bailiffs. Behind them stand the army, the navy, the airforce and nuclear weapons. In other words: force.

Taxes are, at their simplest, protection money. We pay taxes not necessarily because we believe they are worthwhile, or because we believe that the money will be spent on improving society, but because we know that we will be punished if we don't pay up.

Everything the Government does depends on thuggery. It's a bit like the mob. The mob threatens to harm you or take your property if you don't give them protection money. The Government threatens to harm you or take your property if you don't pay your taxes.

The basic principle of income tax is that the Government owns us; we work for it and it is entitled to take what it wants from what we earn. The fact that we are allowed to keep a percentage of our earnings is a favour more than a right. Income tax is the basic weapon of the statist. Those who pay income tax are being used as forced labour for several months of every year. Income tax may well be an obligation but it is not a responsibility.

If I were to send you letters demanding that you give me a big chunk of your earnings you would consider me a dangerous criminal. If I persisted with my demands, and started threatening that if you didn't give me a big chunk of your money I would come into your home and take what I wanted and then also take you from your home and lock you in a small room, you would consider me even more dangerous and even more of a criminal. You would probably think I was mad.

But that's precisely what the civil servants working for the Government do all the time. In their eyes we are all criminals by default; guilty of tax fraud until proven innocent. They demand money with menaces. If they did it as private citizens they would be locked up. But because they do it on behalf of the State what they do is perfectly legal.

Recent governments have turned one of the world's fairest and simplest tax systems into one of the least fair and certainly into the most complicated. (And complicated tax systems create more problems, produce more unfairness, result in more loopholes and waste more productive time on filling in forms than simple tax systems.)

Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) can demand information, raise assessments, enter premises and enforce payment on grounds that would not be allowed in any criminal prosecution. Moreover, since HMRC are pretty lax when it comes to dealing with confidential data, information given to HMRC can no longer be regarded as private.

Those who take (the politicians and the scroungers) forget that the State produces nothing and that every penny that is distributed must first be taken from a man or woman who has worked, produced and saved.

The hard working citizen has become the forgotten man, doomed for ever to pay for the excesses of governments and scroungers.

140

'The Government is set to borrow more in the next two years than the total borrowing Labour inherited in 1997, dating back to 1691.'

Financial Times March 26th 2009

141

The Government is now making legislation retrospective. The result will be that people will be sent to prison for things that weren't illegal when they did them.

142

According to one whistle-blower, post to HMRC often just 'gets binned'. Why am I not surprised, let alone shocked? Complaints to the Independent Adjudicator's Office have doubled since 2005. When Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HRMC) wants money it thinks it is owed (and tax collectors smell a bonus in the air) then the letters come thick and fast (with deadlines attached). But when HMRC has made a mistake, owes money or is being asked for a clarification it often appears that no one is interested. After my father's death the solicitor handling the closure of what should have been a simple and straightforward estate told me that there was a delay because the tax office had told her that they had a backlog of three months' worth of mail. In practice this meant that it was taking them three months to open and read a letter. (They managed to speed things up considerably when I threatened to make a formal complaint.)

143

Just about everything you or I do these days is taxed. In order to convince the more simple minded electors that he wasn't putting up taxes Gordon Brown introduced a vast armoury of stealth taxes. We need to pay the Government special taxes if we want to get married, drive a car, own a car, travel abroad, buy a house, invest our savings, leave our savings uninvested in the bank, watch television or die. And, of course, every charge that a Government introduces is steadily increased, year after year. Governments start with small charges and say that it just going to be a nominal charge, but that's just a lie, of course. For example, when prescription charges were introduced in 1968 they were 2/6 (12.5p). In April 07 they went up to £6.85. At the end of 2014 they were £8.05. If prescription charges had followed the retail price index they would now be around £1.50. (Only the English pay prescription charges, of course. The Welsh and the Scots receive their medicines free of charge — paid for, of course, by English taxpayers.)

144

In the private sector failure usually leads to a diminution in power and wealth. Companies or individuals who are bad at their jobs, and fail to satisfy public demands and needs, get paid less. Profits and authority fall.

In the public sector the exact opposite happens. Public institutions which are failing receive more money. They are rewarded for incompetence.

145

Very little of the money raised in taxes is used to improve the quality of life in Britain, or to help people who are genuinely in need. Instead, much of it is given to civil servants, politicians and quango sitters as salaries, pensions, expenses and bonuses.

Tax payers no longer control how their money is spent, and the way politicians spend tax money is now utterly divorced from the wishes of the taxpayers, who provide the money in the first place.

The Government has attracted a mass of camp followers and the nation's wealth is being wasted on supporting an ever growing network of gravy trains, carrying hundreds of thousands of highly paid and well pensioned incompetents and unemployables. Party politicians have created a vast number of quangos which provide well paid employment, and a considerable amount of power, for those who support, protect and defend the party. To add insult to injury these are invariably not only receiving huge salaries and fees and expenses but are also paid massive bonuses for failing to do what they were hired to do.

It is absurd that the bonus culture has permeated the civil service. In 2009 staff at the Treasury, all on large salaries and hugely satisfactory pensions, received bonuses worth £27 million. What on earth for? Their job was running the economy and the economy was in tatters.

Policemen get bonuses. So do Olympics organisers, post office employees and BBC managers. Greed, as originated in the banks, has now become government-approved.

It has become too easy for public sector workers to become rich without effort or risk.

In addition, much of our money is given to scroungers who choose not to work. And a great deal of it is given to the European Union as our annual membership fee. Huge amounts are spent on waging war against countries which have never threatened us. Very, very little of it is spent on defending us, protecting us or feeding starving children.

146

Treasury officials and quango bosses spend billions without any reference to our elected representatives as though the money they are spending is somehow different to the money they themselves earn, spend and save.

In 2009, State spending as a proportion of Britain's Gross Domestic Product (GDP reached 49%. That meant that the Government controlled half our economy — so much for the idea that we live in a capitalist or entrepreneurial society. In the north east of England state spending accounted for 66.4% of GDP. In wales it was 71.6% and in Northern Ireland it was a staggering 77.6%. Not even the Soviet Republic managed to achieve that amount of State dominance.

Politicians and civil servants waste our money in all sorts of ways. They spent £750 million on the Dome. We pay £21 million a mile to build motorways. How can you spend that much on a piece of road?

The police are so inefficient that the cost of holding a prisoner in a police cell is greater than the cost of a night in a superior suite at the Ritz hotel in London.

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the police put so much effort into raising money from taxpayers — rather than remaining content with 'serving and protecting'. In addition to the millions raised by speed cameras (proven to cause more accidents than they prevent and, therefore, clearly simply a money raising exercise) the police have even used premium rate lines to enable them to charge the public money for telephone calls. Citizens who dialled an 0845 number to report a non-emergency crime to the police are likely to have ended up paying for the privilege. Bizarrely, inexplicably and utterly indefensibly, police forces in England have actually made money out of people reporting crime. This is utter madness.

In Edinburgh the new Scottish Regional Parliament building, build to house the European Union's regional parliament, was originally estimated to cost £10 to £14 million but it ended up costing English taxpayers a staggering £414 million.

An astonishing £400,000 was spent on designing a logo for the London Olympics. The Ministry of Defence spent £900,000 on 3,150 office chairs so that flat bottomed clerks could sit around in luxury while soldiers in Afghanistan were reduced to lending one another combat gear — or buying it themselves.

Billions (literally) are wasted on doomed computer schemes.

Everything the Government plans ends up costing ten, twenty, a hundred times as much as the official estimate. It is our money and so it doesn't count. Politicians spend other people's money as though it were, well, other people's money. And politicians (and journalists) dismiss potential savings of £50 million or £500 million as 'insignificant'.

In the strange world occupied by party politicians and civil servants, a pound of 'other people's money' isn't worth anywhere near as much as a pound of your own money. People who would spend a day looking for a lost fiver will happily sneer at £100 million of public money and dismiss it as 'small change'.

147

In our hearts we know that the Government is wasting our money and that the bureaucracy it has built up is doing far more harm than good, but how do we set about changing things?

The politicians and the bureaucrats control things and they aren't ever likely to change the system they have created. Why would they? Modern bureaucracies have a vested interest in maintaining themselves. Their effort is put into protecting themselves and their budget. They know that the best way to get a bigger budget and more power is to employ more people. And so it goes on.

That is exactly what is wrong with the National Health Service today; it exists not to care for patients but to provide secure employment for the employees.

148

Those who insist on meddling in our lives have proved time and time again that they aren't very good at it and that, in the long run, their priorities are selfish rather than altruistic. They spend a fortune hiring armies of Labour voters to teach people how to eat less, how to wash their hands, how to fold disposable nappies or how to eat five portions of fruit a day. They pay huge salaries for this sort of nonsense; £50,000 a year with an index linked pension, expenses (and quite probably a good bonus for turning up if the weather is inclement) is by no means exceptional in the hand-washing-training business.

149

During the global economic crisis of 2007 and 2008, while other countries were cutting back and trying to reduce their State payroll obligations, our Government was steadily increasing Britain's State payroll. It isn't difficult to see why: every new employee is another loyal voter. We pay the bills. The party politicians reap the benefits.

150

Greedy bankers and incompetent regulators can be blamed in part for the financial crisis which hit Britain in 2007 and 2008 but the politicians must take the greater share of the blame. (Although they don't and won't, of course. We live in a blame society unless you work for the Government).

Party politicians have drained money from the economy to run massive, untested, unproductive programmes of social engineering and they have donated billions of pounds of our money to the European Union.

We have been destroyed by statism, multiculturalism, political correctness, the self-interest of our politicians and public servants, institutional racism (with the white citizens as the victims) and a corrupt and unrepresentative electoral system.

151

One basic principle politicians invariably ignore is that when the Government (or a council) spends our money it should do so for our benefit and not for their benefit. If a hospital is short of money then the money there is should be spent on patients and not on staff (and especially not on administrators). But too many hospitals build new office blocks and spend a fortune on furnishings when patients are dying for need of another X ray machine. This happens because hospitals (like governments) are run for the benefit of the staff rather than the people paying the bills. It's what happens when you separate payment and service.

152

Another often ignored basic principle is that the Government and councils should always endeavour to look at the big picture when taking decisions.

When snow falls, many councils say that they cannot afford to put grit on the roads. This is short sighted and stupid and exhibits nothing more than simple incompetence. Not gritting the roads leads to accidents. And, in addition to the personal consequences, this leads to health costs and business losses.

If they don't want to buy grit and keep it for snowy days (and the stuff is hardly likely to go past its sell by date is it?) councils should keep a contingency fund for emergencies so that they can buy grit to put on the roads when it is likely to be needed (during the winter, for example).

Instead of hiring vast numbers of unnecessary and unwanted new members of staff (to aid their empire building ambitions) council bosses should simply put some money aside to help them deal with emergency problems.

Similarly, it may cost more to do motorway repairs at night (because the workmen have to be paid extra and lights have to be provided) but the saving to the community is enormous when road delays are minimised.

None of this requires much more than basic common sense, and an understanding that central and local governments exist to serve the greater and smaller communities and not to pander to the personal whims of their employees.

153

We should rage at our oppression, our disappearing freedoms and the way we and our country are being abused. We should stand up and protest at the way we are treated without respect by the people whom we pay to serve us.

Lying politicians and government employees have created a problem which is not going to go away. People don't believe anything the government says, whether it's about terrorism, expenses or childhood vaccinations. Trust has gone; it will not be easily restored.

The basic problem is that the people who go into politics, and the civil service, are intrinsically self-serving and corrupt. They enter public service not out of a sense of duty, or a desire to improve the world, but because they believe (not without good reason) that public service is the best way to achieve wealth and power.

In order to defend ourselves, we need to cut down on the power of Government and the amount of our money it has to spend.

We have to reassess the whole nature of politics, the purpose of government and the power we should vest in the people we elect to govern on our behalf.

Hell will freeze over before our current batch of politicians do the 'right' thing (even if they ever know what the 'right' thing is). And so we have to stand up for ourselves and take back the power which is rightly ours. We need a revolution.

A traditional revolution is, of course, impossible in a country where innocent visitors can be shot in the head without so much as a warning, where a woman can be arrested for reading out the names of British soldiers killed in the illegal invasion of Iraq and where frail octogenarians are forced to remove their shoes and surrender their nail clippers before being allowed to board their holiday flight.

There isn't much chance of battalions of aggrieved citizens being allowed onto the streets to overthrow the government. Violence is not an option which is open to us (even if we wanted to take it).

A government which sends tanks to Heathrow airport to make a point, and which allows policemen to beat up innocent, peaceful protestors will not hesitate to use force to defend its position.

We need another type of revolution: a bloodless revolution.

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The revolution won't involve the scrounging classes. The scrounging classes will only protest about the price of petrol or taxes (such as the poll tax) which are likely to affect them. (The poll tax, the most sensible piece of new tax legislation in generations, was thrown out because a small section of scroungers didn't like the idea of having to pay something towards the services they enjoy.) The scroungers won't protest about things which threaten our past, our culture, our freedom, our present and our future.

The scrounging classes won't rebel against the State because they receive their money from the State. They are quite comfortable, thank you very much, and unwilling to bite the hand that is feeding them so generously.

155

We need honest men and women to go to Parliament, on our behalf, and to discuss issues relating to our lives. We need local, county and national representatives. We don't need leagues or treaties with foreign powers (Thomas More saw the danger of these — he excluded all treaties with foreign powers from his Utopia). We need a few simple laws and a system for ensuring they are obeyed.

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We need sanitation services and fresh water supplies. We need wide, tree lined streets. Every home should have a garden. Hospitals and schools should be organised and run locally. Children should be educated and given skills and crafts (men and women who do work which requires skill obtain much more satisfaction, pride and happiness from their lives).

We want to live in a Christian country celebrating Christian values, which include tolerance. We want a country where people speak one language (English).

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The revolution will come, as revolutions always do, from the middle classes.

It is the honest, hard-working middle classes who have suffered most in recent years. It seemed as though the Government was determined to destroy this particular group.

Today, the frustration among the middle classes is almost palpable and definitely unbearable. Thousands feel angry, curiously alone and inexplicably afraid. Between a quarter and a third are talking, quite seriously, of emigrating.

Most of the middle classes are too sensible, too well educated and too 'nice' to go out into the streets with placards. They won't throw stones at policemen or smash shop windows.

But it is from the middle classes that the revolution will come.

Throughout history, major protests, revolts, rebellions and revolutions have always come when the middle classes have been fed up with a rich, corrupt minority, with interests opposed to their own, making unreasonable demands and taking too much money.

Even Napoleon realised that the middle classes were the real revolutionaries. France has always been designed by its middle class revolutions.

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'Nearly all the great popular revolts in England have taken place when the majority of working people, or at least a big section of them, were, or lately had been, doing fairly well. Then, suddenly, they have felt that attempts were being unjustly made to lower their standard of living or that of their class.'

Harry Roberts

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Throughout history the radical middle classes have been the only consistently reliable agents of social change.

It's worth a small detour into English history to prove that the middle classes can and do change things; a flashback into the history of reform and revolution the English way.

The Peasants' Revolt of 1381 was the first (and probably only spontaneous) English rebellion. At the time most people earned their living on the land.

In the middle of the 14th century, the Black Death halved the population and the result was a labour shortage. Realising that they were in a good bargaining position labourers demanded, and were able to get, higher wages. And so, in 1349, the King and Parliament (consisting of the barons) brought in the first Statute of Labourers which decreed that every person under the age of 60, who didn't have a trade, a craft or a master, had to work for whoever required him, at the wages which were 'customary before the visitation of the great plague'.

Any worker who refused to do this, or who threatened to go on strike, was liable to imprisonment. Any labourer refusing to work for pre-plague wages could be sent to prison for 15 days. Anyone taking a wage higher than the old wages was fined twice the sum taken.

Labourers were forbidden to change their employment without permission from their masters. And if a labourer left his parish, a writ for his recovery would be sent to every sheriff in England. If the labourer was caught he had the letter F burnt into his forehead. To make matter worse (and to maintain their income from a smaller population) the King and the barons introduced an unpopular tax.

This all caused some considerable upset and ill feeling but it didn't work. Wages were not kept down.

At the same time as honest working men were being stomped on by the 14th century equivalent of the chattering classes, a man called John Wycliffe started to fight against the material prosperity of the church.

Monasteries had absorbed about a third of the land in England. Wycliffe protested and founded a new order of ‘poor priests’ who wore coarse brown wool clothes and moved around the country spreading Wycliffe’s teaching that ‘all men are equal’ and that posh clergymen weren’t entitled to live extravagantly while ordinary folk struggled to make ends meet. Wycliffe’s followers were called Lollards.

The murmuring of protest grew louder. Rebels became cross that the King and his counsellors (or councillors) had grown rich at their expense. People complained, angrily, that public money was being wasted. Taxes were constantly being raised to pay for the court’s extravagances. Services were deteriorating. The Magna Carta, though it had given rights to the people, and was a well-intentioned document, wasn’t enough. These were the days of the original English superhero, Robin Hood.

Those involved in the Peasants’ Revolt of the 14th century were often illiterate and incapable of putting their feelings into words, but they were, nevertheless, conscious that they and their class were being treated unfairly.

The English rebels formed the Commons in Parliament, an assembly of outraged citizens which had no formal authority but which met simply to discuss taxes and other issues. The rebels allowed none of the King’s counsellors into their Parliament. They elected a speaker and a Council of State. (There has been an office of speaker at the House of Commons since 1376. It has, until recently, been a position generally honoured by the holder and respected by all. The forced resignation of the speaker in 2009 was the first in over 300 years.)

This was the first stirring of English democracy. But the members of this early Parliament, although determined and searching for recognition, were not truly representative of the people and they had neither real power nor status. They sat for 74 days but when they finally dispersed and went home they left behind them no permanent organisation, no expectation of reassembling and no laws or statues. Their views and wishes were quickly overturned by the expensively clad upper classes who had moats to clean and duck houses to pay for.

(It wasn’t until several centuries later that a bloody civil war, a revolt of the middle classes against the twin powers of monarchy and church led by men such as Oliver Cromwell and John Lilburne, resulted in Parliament becoming the seat of power in England.)

The fact that their efforts had been pretty much in vain incensed the Lollards. One of Wycliffe’s preachers was a chap called John Ball, also known as the ‘crazy priest of Kent’ (even then people who opposed the establishment were dismissed as lunatics).

Ball had three quarters of all the working men of eastern, middle and southern England behind him and despite being locked up three times he kept preaching.

Wyclifffe and Ball found support among tradesmen, craftsmen and artisans — the middle classes. New taxes lit the flames and led to a march on London. The leaders included Wat Tyler.

The demonstration in London was peaceful, though a few wild elements attacked rich man’s homes and killed some lawyers and government employees. No one much minded about the lawyers or the government employees. The demonstrators even got away with destroying the palace of John of Gaunt, the hated uncle of the King and a principle minister.

Young King Richard II came to meet the protestors, agreed to their demands for freedom and promised to seal documents confirming this. But the next day Wat Tyler and the King got into a conversation and Tyler ended up quarrelling with the King’s attendants who promptly killed him. Naturally, Tyler was falsely said to have attacked the King. This was early ‘perception management’ (now known as ‘spin’).

The mob got angry and the next day John Ball and another rebel called Jack Straw were caught and beheaded. Subsequently over 1,500 rebels were hung or beheaded. And so, technically the Peasants’ Revolt was a failure. (It’s known as the Peasants’ Revolt but in those days the peasants were the equivalent of today’s middle classes.)

However, within the next few decades everything the peasants had demanded was given to them. (This is nearly always what happens in rebellions).

In 1450 the men of Kent rose up under a chap called Jack Cade who used the nom de guerre John Mortimer. They were miffed about high taxes and rising prices and generally rotten conditions. Cade, or Mortimer, led 146,000 men, including many county gentlemen, squires and church ministers and his army was able to defeat King Henry VI’s army. After the battle Cade’s men went to London, where they were welcomed and given the keys to the city.

Cade had regularly told his men that they should not steal — on pain of death — and though numerous oppressive ministers were beheaded (this was sensibly considered fair and reasonable) there was no stealing or looting.

Cade’s rebellion led to the breakdown of royal authority in England.

‘Be of good cheer, Master Ridley, for we have this day lit such a candle in England as shall, with God’s grace, never be put out.’

Bishop Hugh Latimer about to be burnt at the stake, comforting an old, weak man called Ridley as the faggots underneath them were lit. Latimer, another middle class revolutionary who is largely forgotten these days, was burnt in 1555 for treason. Despite his ecclesiastical connections he was a good egg and had opposed rent rises and unreasonable taxes.

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In the early part of the 19th century, as a result of the industrial revolution and the Napoleonic wars, the rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer. Many felt it was necessary to force Parliament to amend the country's laws. Englishmen had seen how the French people had overthrown an unpopular government during the French revolution.

This was the time of William Cobbett, author and publisher. Cobbett was one of the greatest Englishmen of all time. He believed that England had a personality and that it needed and deserved a genuine 'England' policy. He believed it was important to preserve the personal peculiar characteristics of England and to respect the special individual liberties enshrined in the nation's history and culture. He believed that a popularly elected Parliament, representing an informed democracy, would end the borough mongering and the sinecures which still disgraced public life. Naturally, Cobbett wasn't popular with the boys with the moats and the duck houses. He was imprisoned for defending freedom and the rights of ordinary working men.

162

'By God's grace we will recover the liberties of our country — not by violence, anarchy or brute force, but by the peaceful, organised and magnificent display of the will of the people. When the barons of Runnymede recovered the liberties of England from the tyrant John, they took up the bow, and the spear, and the battle-axe, and the sword, and they were justified in so doing. Thank God, we have no occasion now to take up murderous and destructive weapons like these; the progress of education and knowledge has changed this state of things; our weapons are truth, justice and reason; our sword is the 'sword of the spirit' which is the will of the people, and let no one doubt that this great moral sword is efficient for every just and useful purpose.'

Thomas Attwood, a banker, a middle class revolutionary and a supporter of parliamentary reform, speaking at the Birmingham Union in 1830.

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Two weeks after Attwood's speech, on the opening day of Parliament, the Prime Minister, the Duke of Wellington, sniffily stated that he was not prepared to introduce any reforms.

Thirteen days after that Wellington's Government was defeated and the Iron Duke resigned. So, yah boo sucks to Wellington. He might have defeated Napoleon but the English middle classes were too much for him.

The new prime minister was Earl Grey, a member of 'The Friends of the People', a society which wanted reform of parliamentary representation. Meetings had been held all over the country and many messages of support and encouragement had been sent to Lord Grey. (Rather sadly, Earl Grey is now largely remembered for the tea which bears his name. He's worth more than a pot of tea.)

Grey didn't find it easy but eventually he won. The Reform Bill was introduced into the House of Commons in March 1831 and finally passed in June 1832.

Sadly, although this bill enfranchised the well-to-do commercial classes, the lower middle class and working class wage earners still had no vote. In that respect the bill turned out to be a disappointment. Social conditions were subsequently allowed to deteriorate so much that the workhouses and debtors' prisons immortalised by Charles Dickens became a part of English society. Not surprisingly, the lower middle classes felt disappointed and let down.

In 1836 William Lovett founded a society called the London Working Men's Association. The society, aimed at artisans who had been ignored in the Reform Bill, drew up the People's Charter (which was actually written by a tailor called Francis Place). Because of the word 'Charter' its members were known as Chartists. Their campaigning eventually gave them the parliamentary representation they wanted.

164

'You must become your own social and political regenerators, or you will never enjoy freedom. For true liberty cannot be conferred by Acts of Parliament or decrees of princes, but must spring up from the knowledge, morality and public virtue of our population...Though revolution were to follow revolution, and changes were to be continually effected in our constitution, laws and government, unless the social and political superstructure were based upon the intelligence and morality of the people, they would only have exchanged despotism for despotism, and one set of oppressors for another.'

William Lovett, cabinet maker and revolutionary.

165

The Fabian Society (named after Roman general Fabius Cunctator whose tactics the society decided to adopt) was founded in 1884 and early members included Sidney Webb, Annie Besant and the Irish playwright George Bernard

Shaw. Their basic aim was to persuade the English people to make their political constitution thoroughly democratic. They produced pamphlets, gave lectures and influenced social legislation in England for the remains of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century.

166

It is interesting to note that most of the rebellions and nearly all the reforms which occurred in English history were backed by individuals who were not themselves suffering from the grievances they worked to remove. This is true philanthropy (not the modern kind, which involves a tax dodge, a publicity stunt and a cheque which never actually arrives).

So, among England's greatest reformers were William Wilberforce, John Howard, Elizabeth Fry and Florence Nightingale. Their reforms changed the world, not just England, and they all relied upon changing public opinion to produce change.

Other revolutionaries worth remembering include philosopher John Stuart Mill, who campaigned for women's rights long before the bra was invented let alone burnt, and Mary Wollstonecraft, who was campaigning for votes for women long before Mrs Pankhurst started chaining herself to things. Mary Wollstonecraft published 'A Vindication of the Rights of Women' in 1792.

Revolutionary social ideas were popularised by great artists such as Milton in the 17th century, Blake and Shelley in the early part of the 19th century and, in the later part of the century, John Ruskin and William Morris.

167

Nearly all the victories won by rebels in England have been achieved without a blow being struck (if you ignore the occasional beheading of some snotty Sheriff of Nottingham type). Change occurred because those in power (the ruling minority) realised that they were in a weak and ultimately indefensible position.

We can learn three things about reform and revolution from our history:

1. Reform always begins with dissent among the middle classes. Revolution never comes from high above. The aristocracy and the ruling classes have no need to revolt and nothing to revolt against. And revolution never comes from the bottom tiers of society. Revolt, and subsequently reform, always begins with the people who are, and always have been, the backbone of English society: the hard-working middle classes. And revolt starts when the middle classes feel aggrieved because they are being used and abused and taken advantage of by self-indulgent leaders.
2. When the middle classes revolt there may be violence — resulting either from the actions of a small group of hot-headed demonstrators or, more likely, the actions of those employed to protect and defend the oppressive ruling class. But it is not the violence which produces change. It is the meetings and the independent publication of books and pamphlets which really produces long-term, substantial change. The change occurs because the meetings are attended by large numbers of protestors and the books and pamphlets are read by large numbers of people. Change occurs when dissent spreads.
3. There is always a delay between the substantial call for change and the change itself. The ruling classes always struggle to resist the inevitable but eventually they bow to it because it is inevitable. The longer reform is delayed the bloodier the consequences for the establishment. Refusals to act lead to extended periods of chaos.

168

The problem today is simpler and easier to solve than at any time in our history. As I have been arguing for more than a decade our problem is caused by the power of the political parties. It is time to get rid of them. And let us not make the mistake of replacing the big three parties with smaller political parties.

We need to take this opportunity to rid ourselves of all political parties. We never needed them. We do not need them now. And we will never benefit from their presence.

169

In the last two decades the hard working middle classes have handed over around two trillion pounds in income tax. They've handed over container loads more in VAT, business taxes, death duties, stamp duties, fuel surcharges and so on. The English middle classes have been robbed blind, deaf and dumb.

Taxes have soared and services have deteriorated daily. Family life has been debased by a system that gives generous handouts to asylum seekers and encourages pregnancy among teenage girls.

Successive Governments have shown that they care only about the scroungers (who provide the votes to keep them in power) and the greedy MPs (who act as lobby fodder and a substitute for democracy).

169

All our recent Prime Ministers rose to power entirely through the political party system. They got there partly through their own absurdly inflated self-belief and partly because we put up with them because we are all too polite and well-mannered and, well, too damned nice to people who act as though they are our betters.

Well, bugger niceness. We've been silent for far too long. It is politeness, and not liking to speak up for fear of offending someone, that has got us into this mess.

170
It used to be said that if you were polite to people in authority (policemen, customs officers and officials from the council) and had nothing to hide or to worry about then they would talk to your politely, listen to you, tip their hats and go on their way.

That may have been true a few decades ago. It is certainly not true now.

172
Politicians used to dismiss anyone who questioned the sanctity of our Government as nutters. These days they are more likely to dismiss critics as terrorists or terrorist supporters. Anyone who dares to question what is happening is marginalised. Anyone who dares to question the three main, traditional political parties is regarded as a dangerous heretic. The three main parties are, of course, now so indistinguishable from one another that if you criticise one you criticise them all.

The Government has even done its best to ban political parties whose views it doesn't like. And you can't get much more fascist than that.

173
Ministers who want to ban political parties, either don't realise or didn't care that banning membership of a political party would be a clear breach of the Human Rights Act.

Article 10 (entitled Freedom of Expression) states quite clearly: 'You have the right to hold opinions and express your views on your own or in a group. This applies even if they are unpopular or disturbing. This right can only be restricted in specified circumstances (such as protecting the public health or safety, preventing crime and protecting the rights of others).')

174
Writing and reading are regarded as subversive acts because the very actions of writing and reading question the idea that things have to be the way they are. Moreover, they destroy the idea that you are alone in thinking the way you do.

175
Millions think the same because no one really thinks. Anyone who questions the accepted 'truths', and dares to think outside the box, is immediately branded a dangerous heretic, a traitor, a terrorist.

176
Everything is forbidden unless it is expressly allowed.

177
The establishment (the Westminster village of MPs, lobbyists, political correspondents and commentators) closes ranks to exclude any danger to its cosy, self-satisfied sense of security.

Politicians from different parties pretend to shout at one another, but when the curtain goes down they all repair to the bar and have a heavily subsidised snifter together.

178
The Government, supported and egged on by some pretty rancid journalists and commentators, has been fighting a war on thrift, prudence, marriage, hard work, honesty, loyalty, respect, responsibility and integrity — just about everything once described as 'middle class values'.

Politicians regularly sneer at the middle classes and the very values which made England great.

In their place the sneerers have given us multiculturalism, political correctness, targets and means testing: the four horsemen of our Apocalypse.

179
Under the auspices of the party system, we have become a nation of special interests, all represented by skilful lobbyists and all demanding a bigger and bigger slice of the communal tax cake.

The people who do all the work, and who are the engine room of our nation, the working middle class (the people who provide the wealth which the special interest groups enjoy) are derided and scorned and ignored.

It cannot continue.

180
It is hardly surprising that several hundred thousand hard working people leave England every year, in search of a fairer society where, ideally, their virtues and hard work may stand a chance of being acknowledged and where, at the very least, they can escape from the sneering, the grasping and the oppression.

The Sun newspaper has encouraged young families to desert Britain and head for Australia or New Zealand and a new life.

Survey after survey has shown that between a quarter and a third of hard-working, tax-paying Englishmen and women are seriously planning to emigrate.

Politicians say they do not care.

They should. Oh, how they should.

181

We need to find a way to say: 'Here I am. This is what I stand for. This is the sort of country I believe we need. I've taken enough abuse, manipulation and deceit. I'm fed up with greedy, incompetent people running the country for their own benefit rather than for the benefit of the nation and our communities.'

We need to find a new way to say it because the politicians have consistently failed to listen to us.

182

As a nation we have lost our way. But there is a way forward; there is a way in which we can survive the damage done by our politicians.

We need to think outside the box. We need to use our minds and our imaginations to find a simple solution that will work.

There is a way; but there is only one way.

Politicians and bureaucrats will never downsize Government, any more than they will repeal laws or hand back power.

Today, the three parties, and the bureaucratic machinery they control, are our enemy.

They, and the EU, are a far, far greater and more consistent threat to our future than any terrorist group on earth.

To paraphrase George W. Bush, the politicians are either with us (the people) or they are against us. They are with us or they are the enemy.

They are certainly not with us. And so they are the enemy.

The party system has failed miserably to provide leadership or good management.

183

Great things happen only through the work of unreasonable men. Only when enough unreasonable men come together to work for the public good is society changed for the better.

184

Many people have pretty well given up. They no longer believe that it is, or ever will be, possible to change anything.

It looks like communal apathy and lethargy but in fact it's worse than that: its communal depression.

Instead of protesting ('What's the point?') the millions who do the work which pays for the politicians, the bureaucrats, the regulators, the airport gestapo and all the rest of it just put their heads down and work ever harder in order to pay their ever increasing taxes.

They try not to notice that most of the money they contribute is wasted. They try not to notice that, despite the ever-rising taxes, the nation's infrastructure is crumbling and that if they want half way decent health care, or half way decent education for their children, they must pay extra for it.

They live, as Thoreau wrote, lives of quiet desperation. And they escape into alcohol and television.

Many people have had their spirit broken by unjust laws, overzealous regulations and a vast army of bureaucrats.

185

'Good men must not obey the laws too well.'

Ralph Waldo Emerson

186

All our liberties are due to men who, when their conscience has compelled them, have broken the laws of the land.

187

The green shoots of a revolution are appearing.

I don't mean a guns and barricades sort of revolution. Even if that was our way, which it is not, that sort of revolution would be squashed within hours by Government hired thugs using guns and chemical weapons. (All paid for by the people protesting, of course.)

I mean a bloodless revolution.

All over England, thousands of angry citizens are reading, talking, listening and spreading the word. The number who realise that our current system is indefensible and unsustainable is growing rapidly.

A few years ago, in my first bestselling political book, titled 'England Our England', I wrote: 'we want our country back'. And that's exactly what thousands are now saying.

We want our country back. We want an end to injustice. We want to be respected and treated as citizens, not slaves. We want our taxes to be spent wisely and discriminately. We want an end to open door immigration policies. We want to leave the European Union. We want an end to political correctness, an end to means testing, an end to pointless targets, an end to multiculturalism, an end to positive discrimination (punishing the white middle classes for the sins of another age) and an end to the loss of our rights in some misguided, misplaced, manipulated 'war on terror'.

We want an efficient, lean Government that provides a basic infrastructure that works and a simple, system of nation management that is fair and just.

We want an end to waste and arms profiteering. We want our leaders to offer us moral guidance not petty, niggling rules and regulations designed to keep us in our place.

188

Our society is not working.

We do not need such a complex society. Smaller and simpler really would be better and beautiful. We need to go back to basics; we need to understand what we need from our government. And then we have to decide how best we can achieve that.

The State has failed its employers (us) and would have been fired in disgrace if it had been a normal employee.

We don't want tinkering with the system. We want big changes — big changes that none of the three main, traditional political parties are offering or are ever going to offer.

189

People who dare to protest about what is happening are always told that if they feel strongly about something they should write letters to their Parliamentary representative.

Fat lot of good that will do. (It's more likely to earn you a visit from the police.)

We are told that we have the power of the ballot box.

But which party do you vote for it you want to leave the EU, stop starting wars or get rid of laws restricting our freedom?

There is no choice.

None of the three main parties are of any use to us. Supporters of the 'party' system, say that there is no need for people to go on the streets or to write letters of protest.

'We live in a parliamentary democracy,' they claim sniffily. 'If you are dissatisfied with some aspect of our society then you should use the ballot box to make your views known.'

Oh yeah?

And just how will that help?

Who do we vote for to get what we really need?

There is no democracy. There is no democratic process.

The political parties are all the same. There are no real political choices. Unless we completely change the way we vote one or two of the three traditional parties will end up in power. And nothing will change.

190

But the ballot box can be our weapon if we use it properly and wisely: and it is a weapon that we must use now before they remove it.

We can use the ballot box to get precisely what we want: quickly, easily and without bloodshed.

We can use the ballot box to win the bloodless revolution.

A bloodless revolution that will succeed in just one day.

191

There are many arguments for doing nothing and we have been listening to them for years.

We should not have been so patient or so complacent or so compliant.

Some have argued that there is no point in doing anything because we cannot change things. Others have suggested that the Government, and the system, will collapse under its own weight of immorality.

Many more have pointed out, justifiably, that anyone who sticks his or her head above the parapet is likely to have it shot off.

We wonder still how the German people allowed Hitler and the strutting Nazis to get so much power, stay in power and do so much harm. But the bald truth is that we have allowed successive Prime Ministers to do far more long-term harm to England than Hitler did to England or Germany.

Politicians will lead us into despair, through stubbornness and into revolution.

The bottom line, however, is that if we don't respect ourselves, and defend our honour, we can hardly expect anyone else to respect us.

192

One thing, and only one thing, is certain beyond dispute. England is in for a terrible future. The debt created by Prime Minister Gordon Brown (and which he was allowed to accumulate by the other two leading parties) has ruined England for generations to come. It will take generations to recover from the economic and social chaos created by a decade of appalling mismanagement. Taxes will rise, rise and rise again. And services will deteriorate beyond the gloomiest fears of those providing and those receiving. The on-going crisis created by Brown's incompetence will merge with other crises: the long term soaring oil price,(which results from the consequences of peak oil and which will continue despite the excitement over fracking); the increasing dependency of an ageing and disabled population, (a problem which has been accelerated by the dramatic increase in emigration resulting from official policies); and the widening of the definition of ‘disabled’ and ‘incapable’ (the European Union has ruled that people who are fat must be treated as disabled).

We need sound, honest, good men and women at the nation’s head. And we must neither expect too much of them nor expect them to take on more responsibility than they can handle comfortably.

It has long been assumed that great emergencies produce men competent to deal with them. The Second World War gave us Churchill. But the failure of the Crash of 2007 to produce anyone closely resembling a leader gives the lie to that age-old assumption.

We must adapt our political processes, rather than await the arrival of a saviour.

193

The party system has grown to be so powerful that no strong-minded, honest, independent individual can thrive in politics. In order to succeed in party politics (and to reach a position of authority and power within a political party) an individual must be able to suppress his own passions, and to replace honestly held views with convenient compromises. To succeed within a modern political party a politician must be prepared to compromise, to deceive and to lie.

Party politics is the art of compromise and is therefore an anathema to anyone with real convictions or any sense of responsibility or commitment. You can’t compromise if you have ethical standards so by definition party politicians don’t have ethical standards.

Parties require politicians to lie and to support ideas and policies of which they do not approve. Even Margaret Thatcher, perhaps the last politician driven by ideals, admitted that she spent much of her career espousing policies with which she did not agree.

Those are the skills which lead to success within a party system. But are they really the skills we want in our politicians?

I believe not.

194

As I have already mentioned, millions of people have decided that the only answer is to leave the country. Millions of hard working, middle class English families have left England to seek new lives abroad. Millions more are planning to follow them. Scroungers don’t emigrate. They’re happy to stay.

The Government doesn’t care. It is happy to see free-thinking, independent minded citizens leave the country. (It will care when it realises that the people who have been paying for the party have left, and that there is no one left to pay the bills.)

But is emigration really the only answer for those of us who care?

I don’t believe so.

There is one thing (a very simple thing) that we can do that will make a difference and that will enable us to reclaim our nation. It won’t cost us a penny. It won’t take more than a few minutes of our time. And it is guaranteed to work.

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‘Another hindrance to civilisation today is the over-organisation of our public life. While it is certain that a properly ordered environment is the condition and, at the same time, the result of civilisation, it is also undeniable that, after a certain point has been reached, external organisation is developed at the expense of spiritual life. Personality and ideas are often subordinated to institutions, when it is really these which ought to influence the latter and keep them inwardly alive.’

Dr Albert Schweizer

196

Politicians do not own the country, or control us, any more than the police are our masters. And once in every century or so there comes an opportunity to remind them of that, and to seek a real change in the way we run our country, an opportunity to show that it is our country and that it is up to us to decide how we want it run.

In the 20th century two attempts were made to change the nature of the State. The first was crucial and ultimately destructive. The second involved tinkering at the edges rather than fundamental change.

The first change took place in the late 1940s, after decades of poverty and war, when the Labour Party decided to build a welfare state with free health care and state benefits for all. It was England’s first experiment in statism. It sounded wonderful. It proved to be a disaster.

After thirty years, when it became clear that Labour’s ambitious experiment was failing miserably, and that the State was taking over too much of our lives, Margaret Thatcher’s Government, tried to limit the extent of the State. That was the second attempt to change the State.

Thatcher failed, of course.

She talked about ‘rolling back the frontiers of the State’ and made real efforts to take the Government out of the management of steel, coal, car production and the utilities. The problem was that she was restrained by two things:

the bureaucrats and the power of the voters who relied upon the State for their income.

Making cuts in any large bureaucracy is difficult because the bureaucrats who work for it are committed first and foremost to keeping their jobs, their power and their status. They do not want to relinquish any of these delights. If costs have to be cut then they will be made on the front line. People doing the real work will be laid off. Services will be cut. But administrators remain in their jobs.

And so England now has a pathetic infrastructure, but a massive bureaucracy.

Thatcher didn't just have to contend with the bureaucrats. She also had to deal with the fact that millions of people had become addicted to the welfare state and did not want it dismantling. If anything they wanted it to be made bigger. By the 1970s the welfare state was soaking up about two thirds of all government spending. And the people benefiting from all that money (the state bureaucrats and those receiving state benefits) didn't want things to change. Between them they had enough votes to make sure that nothing did change.

Worse still Thatcher took us deeper into the European Union, and gave us another layer of bureaucracy.

Sadly, her well-intentioned tinkering made things worse. She was not brave enough, or imaginative enough, to bring about the real changes that were needed.

197

All politicians who want to change things are constrained by the party system, whereby the only parliamentary candidates who are likely to be successful are the ones sponsored by, and controlled by, political parties.

This means that there is no room for independent, original thinking — either in the leadership or within the body of the party.

The only politicians who are successful are the ones who are prepared to put the party first and the electorate and the nation joint second. (Actually, the electorate and the nation come a distant joint third for the politicians put themselves joint first.)

The three political parties long ago moved away from representing the people and into the business of looking after their own interests.

They have become corporate beasts with agendas of their own. Political parties exist to look after themselves, and to further their own power, and not to protect or serve the country. Their interests, and the country's interests are permanently, diametrically opposed.

We are innocent victims of the three party trick.

198

The disastrous years of Blair and Brown have weakened England so much that we now need real, imaginative changes. The power must be put back into the hands of the people to whom the country belongs.

The Labour Governments which ran the country from 1997 to 2010 were racist (in that money was taken from England and given to Scotland in order to sustain the Labour Party there) and fascist (in that they gave increasing amounts of power to the most fascist organisation ever invented, the European Union).

It's now too late for tinkering.

If we don't do something to redesign our future then whichever party (or coalition of parties) manages the country, the economic disaster created by Brown and others will eventually result in severe social unrest, massively higher taxes, dramatically reduced public services, an ever more crumbling infrastructure, more social interventions, worsening race relations, more control for institutions such as the European Union and the International Monetary Fund, more statism, civil war and the rapid end of England as an independent nation.

You may think I'm exaggerating.

But I should warn you that everything else I've predicted in my previous books has come true.

We need change; real change, not tinkering.

199

The institutions, the politicians and the civil servants we have trusted with the management of our world are, in that modern jargon, 'not fit for purpose'. They have failed miserably. Worse, they have cheated us and taken advantage of our trust.

We must take back the power which is rightfully ours.

200

'Dull apathy and smug complacency seemed to be about to bring the British Empire tottering to its knees, if it didn't knock it out altogether.'

Wing Commander Guy Gibson VC DSO DFC
Leader of the Dam Busters raid

201

All over the world the party system has enabled corrupt politicians to obtain power and to hold onto it. Today's politicians can be bought for a two week holiday in a nice villa, the chance to mix with celebrities and the promise of a well-paid company directorship. No corrupt independent politician could ever win or retain power in the way that corrupt party politicians can do. Think of a corrupt politician anywhere in the world and there will, behind him or her, be a corrupt party.

Modern party politicians are utterly lacking in responsibility or any sense of respect or decency. They are driven by arrogance and self-regard.

The party system gives authority and power to the sycophantic in preference to the independent and creative. Politicians who have never done anything more expensive than buy a house (a purchase requiring a few hundred thousand pounds) suddenly find themselves playing with vast amounts of public money and having the authority to approve purchases costing hundreds of millions.

202

The Labour Years which started in 1997 will go down in history as the most corrupt in English history.

The party created a culture of excess during which the greedy few, working in financial institutions and large companies and for the Government and the public sector, enriched themselves at the expense of the poor and the middle classes.

In a fair world, a dozen ministers and several hundred back bench MPs would be in prison, serving sentences for war crimes, fraud or theft. Politicians have had things their own way for long enough.

203

Today, there are no significant differences between the three main parties. You couldn't slide a sheet of notepaper between their policies and so, effectively, we live in a one party state. The big three parties have given us consensus politics — stuff no one believes in and no one opposes. The people who would make the best politicians, honest people who really care about the world they live in and who are honest and passionate — are excluded from the political process because they do not, and never would, fit into the all-powerful but utterly discredited party system.

204

The big three political parties don't exist to protect England or, indeed, to defend or protect the voters. The three political parties in England exist to defend themselves. It is the parties which set the agendas and dictate the terms of engagement.

The politicians who are members of those parties, who are naive enough to think that they are in Parliament to promote themselves and their own interests, are, in reality, in Parliament to promote and preserve the interests of their party.

205

We have moved seamlessly from a parliament of parties representing royalists and cavaliers to a parliament representing conservative, labour and liberal parties. Political parties are served by power-hungry people who are always scheming to deceive the public and to maintain their party's position. Individual party MPs are bought and paid for with appointments, money and status; their loyalty remains always to the party machine rather than to their constituents.

206

The party system has given us unending government by liars, cheats, hypocrites, incompetents and self-serving buffoons. Party politicians are driven solely by a desire for instant popularity because it is that which leads to electoral success for their party. They have no care for the long-term good of the nation.

Political parties are essentially all about compromise. Those who represent them can never be men or women of firm convictions; they are inevitably weak creatures who will change their views to fit in with the party's needs.

It is hardly surprising that, for all practical purposes, our nation has become a one party state.

207

Many people would like to stop subsidising the arms industry, and to stop selling arms to countries which are (or may become) our enemies.

But our Government gives around a billion pounds of taxpayers' money a year to the British arms industry. As a result of this generosity Britain is the world's biggest arms seller and our arms industry accounts for a third of global arms exports.

The Government actually has an organisation (the Defence Export Service Organisation) which exists solely to market and sell UK arms. Through this organisation British taxpayers promote arms fairs organised to drum up interest in new ways of killing and wounding people. It is, of course, impossible to prove this but I have been told by a military source that the British army was kept active in Northern Ireland for longer than necessary so that the Government could sell arms as tested in an urban context.

Why does the Government do this? Simple. It's a vote winner.

Political parties need to win several hundred parliamentary seats in order to win an election and form a Government. And giving money to the arms industry helps political parties win seats, win elections and gain power.

The result of the subsidy is that each job in the arms industry costs UK taxpayers well over £13,000 a year. Taxpayers are subsidising the manufacture and sale of bombs, landmines and other weapons of mass destruction.

With an arms industry to maintain it is, perhaps, not surprising that politicians from all sides have, in recent years, been extremely slow to criticise foreign countries which have policies which the people of Britain find repugnant.

On the contrary, our Governments have sold arms to regimes which most people in Britain would describe as cruel and oppressive.

208

According to Parliament's own website the seven principles of public office are: selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership. Can you name a single holder of public office who represents any of those virtues — let alone all of them? And which of them do our current leaders display?

If we get the leaders we deserve then we have to believe that we deserve our current batch of politicians. And that simply isn't believable. We don't deserve such people. And so there must be something seriously and intrinsically wrong with the system. And the something is the way that the three main political parties have taken over Parliament.

The party system encourages betrayal and attracts self-serving individuals. We need to get rid of our existing party political system and start again — from scratch.

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'I believe there will ultimately be a clash between the oppressed and those who do the oppressing. I believe there will be a clash between those who want freedom, justice and equality for everyone, and those who want to continue the system of exploitation. I believe there will be that kind of clash, but I don't think it will be based on the colour of the skin.'

Malcolm X (1925-1965)

210

The members of our modern political parties never question accepted or acknowledged truths. No one thinks outside the box. They are prejudiced, selfish and blind to injustice. They regard some elements of political life, such as the existence of the National Health Service and our membership of the European Union, as beyond debate.

It is widely agreed by those working for it that the NHS has failed. But politicians never dream of contemplating alternatives.

The majority of citizens in England want to quit the European Union but none of the three main political parties offer that option at elections.

The big issues are always ignored and the voters' attention distracted with insignificant side-issues or manufactured crises and threats.

Think of half a dozen recent politicians. Pick any half dozen you like. Write down their names.

Any voting system which gives power to people like those is clearly not working. Any country which persists with such a system is doomed and deserves to be.

We want and need politicians with wisdom, sincerity and passion. We want and need politicians who care about others as much as they care about themselves. We want and need politicians for whom the word 'community' has real meaning.

211

Because the party system has to provide secure employment for as many of its supporters as possible we have far too many MPs. Much larger countries (America, for example) manage with far fewer political representatives. Even though most of its legislation comes from Brussels and is created by unelected bureaucrats in Brussels, the House of Commons has 650 MPs for a population of 60 million or so. India has a population of 1.1 billion and 545 members of its Parliament. The USA, with a population of 300 million has 435 members in its House of Representatives.

212

Today's party system means that MPs are given 'safe' parliamentary seats in reward for services rendered to the party. They then return the favour by voting according to the requirements of the party leaders who put them there, rather than in the interests of the people who voted for them. Their primary loyalties are always to the party and never to the country or the constituents.

Today, many MPs have never done any other work and know nothing of the real world outside one of the three political parties. Many are given their seats as a reward for sucking up to a sitting, powerful politician. These ladder-climbing nonentities, an army of dedicated liars and thieves, will do whatever they are told to do. If they are told to vote for war, they will vote for war. If they are told to hand over our country to the European Union they will do that too. In the House of Commons, members of parliament stream into the voting lobbies asking one another 'Which way am I supposed to be voting on this?' They have little or no real interest in the legislation being passed. Our modern political structures have become barriers to democracy.

The country is run by a consortium of thieves and liars. (By which I do not mean two groups of people, some of whom are thieves and some of whom are liars, but one group of people who are both thieves and liars.)

213

People vote for political parties regardless of the skills, qualities or honesty of their local candidates. It is this that has led to the election of so many petty crooks. We need to get back to a world wherein voters choose the candidate not the party.

214

Ministers used to take responsibility for their actions and for the actions of those working in their departments. No more. Modern ministers have no sense of honour or shame. Modern politicians lie and steal and fiddle their expenses but never dream of resigning. There is no dignity. No one in public service (either as a politician or a civil servant) ever admits to making a mistake or doing something wrong. England has become like a banana republic in many senses but especially in the fact that the population now always assumes that they are being lied to whenever a government minister speaks. No one who wasn't dropped on their head at birth believes the 'official' version of anything anymore. Everything is spun (which is the modern word for self-preserving lying). Politicians lie so much that no one knows, or takes any notice, when they do tell the truth. They have cried 'wolf' so many times that they are no longer believed. Modern governments are packed with slick confidence tricksters. No one trusts them; no one believes what they say; their reassurances and exhortations fall on stony ground.

215

Politicians are out of touch with the will of the electorate who put them in power. They are out of touch with the people's will because they are out of touch with the people. After a few months in office ministers begin to believe that they are in power because they are superior; they are bowed to by civil servants because they are 'special'; they are driven around in chauffeur driven limousines because they are 'special'; they are protected by armed policemen because they are 'special'.

They believe they are in politics not to improve the lot of the electorate but to indulge themselves because they are 'special' people.

The country is run on a mixture of prejudice, expediency and self-interest and the party system (which provides 99% of our MPs) is built on compromise born of greed.

Men and women who are willing to toe the party line and creep and crawl their way through the election process (being careful never to express any personal opinions or upset any of the colourless characters whose votes they need) are the only ones to succeed. The whole electoral process is controlled by the subhuman riff-raff who choose the local party candidates. And the only skill that takes a candidate through that process is deceit: the ability to mask whatever they might be thinking and to deceive the committee, their colleagues, the voters and the party hierarchy.

The greater your capacity for deceit the greater your future in British politics.

What have we done?

216

'A nation can survive its fools, and even the ambitious. But it cannot survive treason from within. An enemy at the gates is less formidable, for he is known and he carries his banners openly. But the traitor moves among those within the gate freely, his sly whispers rustling through all the alleys, heard in the very halls of government itself. For the traitor appears no traitor; he speaks in the accents familiar to his victims, and he wears their face and their garments, and he appeals to the baseness that lies deep in the hearts of all men. He rots the soul of a nation; he works secretly and unknown in the night to undermine the pillars of a city; he infects the body politic so that it can no longer resist. A murderer is less to be feared.'

Marcus Tullius Cicero

217

In the 19th century, Parliament was devalued by the existence of 'rotten boroughs'. Ambitious but pliant young sycophants were given a seat in parliament in exchange for promising to vote according to the wishes of their sponsor — the owner of the 'rotten borough'. The owner of the 'rotten borrow' controlled the votes and who made sure (by bribery or violence or a mixture of both) that there was no serious competition. What is the difference between a rotten borough of the 19th century and a parliamentary constituency of the 21st century, where an ambitious but pliant young sycophant is given a safe state by a parliamentary party which has, through bullying, guile and trickery acquired virtual ownership of the seat?

The big three political parties have given themselves huge advantages over independent candidates (free television advertising is the most obvious) and they do their best to make things expensive and difficult for the honest, principled candidate.

What's the difference between the rotten boroughs of the 19th century and the way that Scottish politicians are allowed to vote on issues that affect only English citizens? They do so under instruction from their party leaders, just as the holders of ‘rotten borough’ seats voted as instructed by the local land owner who owned their seat and their vote?

The truth, of course, is that there is no difference. The wishes and needs of the ordinary citizen are ignored. The sponsor or benefactor who, through inheritance, owned a rotten borough was no more or less democratic than the representatives of the modern parliamentary parties. In each case the MP votes as he is told to vote, ignoring his obligations to the electorate.

218

Charging huge fees from those who want to stand for Parliament as independent candidates helps to protect the party system. The party system helps to preserve the State and so the State helps to preserve the party system.

Anyone not in one of the main parties is dismissed by the various strands of the establishment as a ‘nutter’ whose views (whatever they might be) are not to be taken seriously.

Ensuring that publicity is given only to the big political parties which support the system (and the State) ensures that individual candidates have little or no chance of success.

219

The tragedy today, and the reason for many of our problems, is that too many of our politicians have never done anything else for a living — and cannot and could not do anything to earn their daily bread. They are, almost by definition, vain and ambitious. Their reliance on politics as a means of earning a living means that they will do anything — including lie and deceive — to hang onto office. Only when the lies run out do they resign. Honour is, to them, an unaffordable luxury. Modern politicians don’t resign on principle, partly because they have no principles but also because there is nothing else they can do.

This is the fault of the party system.

Political parties need to attract and then appoint parliamentary candidates who will do as they will told and who will vote the way they are told to vote. The last thing political parties want is a parliament filled with independent, passionate, ethical MPs.

220

Modern politicians never stand up for unpopular causes — even if they believe in them. Their policies are ruled by political correctness rather than passion. Every penny they’ve ever earned has usually come from taxpayers via the Government. They enjoy an entirely misplaced sense of moral and intellectual superiority.

Wherever nations are ruled by party politics the same is true.

It’s hardly surprising that professional party politicians all over the world are in prison, in court or on the run. There’s a barely a country on the planet which doesn’t have (or hasn’t recently had) an unpleasant rash of crooked politicians.

221

Most of our politicians have no real life experience. Most have never had to deal with the real problems which face entrepreneurs and businessmen and so they have no idea how much energy is wasted in wading through the red tape they have helped create.

Modern MPs have no understanding of, or concern for, the unreasonable challenges they have placed in the way of creative working people — the people upon whose shoulders a nation’s present and future always depends.

Our world is run by people who may be formally educated but who have never learned to question what they have been told and have no valid life experience with which to create judgements. It is not surprising that they believe they can solve all problems if they pass enough laws, create enough red tape and devise enough crude social engineering programmes.

Inevitably, the average citizen has less respect for politicians than any other professional group other than lawyers.

Is it merely a coincidence that most politicians were trained as lawyers?

222

Up until 1911 MPs were paid nothing. Serving as an MP was seen as a privilege and a duty. MPs often had other jobs (running farms and businesses or working as barristers, doctors, journalists or union officials) and sat the House of Commons as true representatives of the people they knew and worked alongside. Gladstone, Disraeli, Churchill and company had no need of expenses or research assistants. MPs would have been insulted if they had been offered a salary.

223

In order to ensure a better quality of politicians we should elect only older MPs. It is utterly absurd that there should be men and women sitting in the House of Commons who are not out of their twenties. No one under the age of 40 should be eligible to be elected to Parliament.

Parliament is stuffed with young and inexperienced MPs because it’s a lot easy to push around a 25 year old with no experience and no money than it is to push around a 65 year old who has a lifetime's experience and enough money to live on.

224

'The State' may come to mean no more than a self-elected political party; and oligarchy and privilege can return, based on power rather than on money.'

George Orwell

225

Throughout the scandal over MPs expenses in 2009, the Government talked much and often about finding a solution. Committees were set up. Experts were consulted.

It would have taken a fairly ordinary corporate accountant less than one hour to replace the nonsensical system in place with a system designed to be fair to MPs and to taxpayers and to enable politicians to claim a fair sum in expenses.

The failure of the government to take such simple action showed that there was no political will to replace a system that had caused massive public distrust and dissatisfaction. Dissent and dissatisfaction rumbled on until, in June 2009, a poll showed that over half the country thought that all MPs were corrupt. Since then very little has changed. Many MPs are still fiddling their expenses on a massive scale. You can't run a country with a government which is regarded with such contempt and loathing.

226

Are our MPs inherently bad people?

Some undoubtedly are, and some are simply misguided; too vain and greedy to resist temptation when it appears. But to be honest it really doesn't matter a damn because the problem lies in the party system.

The party system encourages corruption, injustice and a self-serving attitude which pervades everything.

Remember: political parties have no interest in people or countries. They exist solely to sustain and strengthen themselves.

227

In return for their obedience to the party modern politicians are paid fat salaries. And expenses. Lots and lots of expenses.

Half a century ago MPs took no expenses at all except a pittance for the cost of postage. But in 1957 MPs voted to allow themselves a parliamentary allowance of £750 to cover basic costs. That was the opening of the flood gates.

228

Today, almost a third of MPs (including some Ministers) employ at least one family member in their offices. The bill for family members employed by MPs has soared by 50% since the general election in 2010. MPs today are, it seems, even more corrupt than they were when the expenses scandal hit the nation's newspapers. After the MPs' expenses scandal, Parliament's standards watchdog called for a ban on politicians hiring relatives to work in the Commons or in their constituency offices. But MPs refused to take any notice.

The practice of employing family members is outlawed in many other countries. It is even banned in the USA, where corruption is as much a part of politics as bread is a part of a sandwich.

In 1967 the US Congress passed anti-nepotism laws stopping the hiring of family members.

But in the UK the practice continues. It doesn't seem to matter much whether the relatives hired can do the work or, indeed, whether there is any work for them to do.

229

Fiddling expenses seems to be a full time job for some MPs. It is perhaps not surprising that they don't get any time for politics.

Expenses are supposed to be claimed only when they are essential to the business of being an MP but MPs have claimed tax free payments for biscuits, a trouser press, a kitchen sink (and plug), dog food, repairing heating pipes under a tennis court, preparing a helipad, cleaning out a moat, buying over 500 bags of manure, building a floating duck house and purchasing miscellaneous toiletries. One MP claimed £87,000 for gardening expenses. Another claimed more than £4,000 'to cover the basic costs of grass cutting'. Former Home Secretary Jacqui Smith claimed for pornographic movies watched by her husband. (We were told it was an accident.) The former Chancellor of the Exchequer, Alistair Darling, said he was very sorry for claiming expenses for a flat he wasn't living in while at the same time claiming expenses for the flat he was living in. It was, apparently, just another one of those oversights MPs with too many homes seem to make. (Presumably, every taxpayer who makes a mistake on their tax form can now get away with apologising for an oversight.)

Nick Clegg, much-loathed Deputy Prime Minister, claimed £84,000 in expenses for running his second home. He billed the taxpayer for a new kitchen, redecoration, gardening, food, telephone calls and soft furnishings. Records suggest that Clegg pushed his expenses claims to the absolute limit. Ironically, Clegg has called for the reform of

MPs’ expenses.

Labour leader Ed Miliband is reported to have claimed nearly £8,000 a year in expenses, including the cost of his television licence. The Prime Minister, David Cameron, claimed £21,000 a year to pay his mortgage and repaid £218 for having claimed too much through the standard ‘administrative error’. Cameron apparently keeps a close eye on what he spends for he has recently claimed 38 pence for a staple remover and seven pence for a bulldog clip. It cost taxpayers 28 pence to process the claim for the Prime Minister’s bulldog clip.

Numerous MPs learned the hard way that not all publicity is good publicity. Just as Richard Nixon is remembered only for Watergate so many MPs will be remembered not for whatever good they did but for their fiddled expenses. Smith will be remembered for accidentally allowing taxpayers to pay for pornographic movies and Darling will be remembered for being a little confused about where he lived.

An apparently endless stream of ministers have made claims that millions of self-respecting citizens regard as a horrifying abuse of the system. Ministers who had made solemn pronouncements about the evils of tax avoidance were found to have spent a considerable amount of their own time working out tricky little ways to keep their money out of the hands of the taxman.

Afterwards the excuses were invariably the same; either ‘everything I did was within the rules’ or ‘I made a mistake and didn’t mean to claim for the dog-grooming/pornographic movies/moat cleaning/two houses at a time’.

It’s difficult to believe that several hundred MPs have all made serious mistakes with their expenses claims. And it is surprising that all of them seem to have made mistakes in their own favour.

‘I may have claimed for X,’ said one MP self-righteously, ‘but I didn’t claim for Y.’

‘The people don’t understand how it works,’ said another, patronisingly.

‘People who complain are jealous,’ said a third.

Others complained that their privacy was being invaded and that they were being made depressed by the all the attention their finances were receiving.

Occasionally, scared of losing voters perhaps, MPs offered to repay some of the money they had falsely claimed as ‘an administrative oversight’. (Burglars should not try this. It is not usually regarded as acceptable solution to a crime.)

230

One MP, misjudging the public mood and, presumably, hoping to arouse some sympathy, said that she was worried that one of her colleagues might commit suicide because of the publicity surrounding expenses claims.

‘Will he or she be able to claim for the funeral expenses if they do?’ asked a reader of one national newspaper, confirming that voters were considerably angrier than MPs suspected. Millions who had taken little or no interest in politics, felt let down and betrayed.

231

The expenses scandal showed just how petty and tawdry party politics had become.

Men and women who had been elected to lead the country had sold their honour, the respect of their fellow citizens and their dignity for a flat screen television set, a terrace full of pot plants and an armful of cushions.

How terribly, terribly sad. How pathetic.

It is now clear to everyone that the House of Commons is packed with second-rate jobsworths; expense account fiddlers. It was salutary to realise that while the country was heading into economic chaos MPs were studiously working out new ways to cheat taxpayers.

The idea that politicians act rationally, and with our interests at heart, has been banished as false and idealistic. But there is a silver lining: the exposure of MPs as corrupt and petty gives us a once in a lifetime — once in several centuries — opportunity to make a real change in our society.

232

It may be difficult to imagine, but there were days when MPs were men of reputation and great renown. Sir Isaac Newton, Sir Christopher Wren and John Stuart Mill all once sat in the House of Commons as members of parliament.

Few, if any, of today’s MPs have achieved anything outside winning the support of a parliamentary party. Few of them could. Their only noticeable talents are obsequiousness, the ability to lie (without shame or embarrassment) and the ability to defend themselves without care or thought for their responsibilities, or for the dignity of their position.

233

Maybe MPs think nothing of stealing from taxpayers because it is what governments do. Maybe MPs have simply been corrupted by the system in which they operate.

234

The Global Corruption Barometer survey conducted by Transparency International (a not-for-profit organisation) showed that, when asked to rate people for corruption, the British responded by putting politicians right at the top of the list — above all other groups (but only slightly above the British legislature, whose representatives are also widely regarded as corrupt).

235

When the extent of their abuse of their expenses became public the first response at Westminster was to call in the police — not to arrest thieving MPs and Ministers but to find out how the information had been leaked.

This reminded me of how the Government responded in the 1980s when I published information showing that although the NHS bought supplies by the ton it paid more for toilet rolls, envelopes and soap powder than if it had bought them from a local branch of Tesco.

The official response was to launch an enquiry not into the waste of money, but into how I'd found out about it.

236

Here are some simple rules which would give us better MPs.

1. It should not be possible for anyone to become an MP under the age of 40.
2. All prospective MPs should have had a real job (i.e. one in the outside world; a job which has nothing to do with politics) for at least 20 years.
3. Politicians should be paid only an honorarium to cover their direct, personal expenses. We need MPs who have enough money not to be seduced by wealth or the chance of fiddling their expenses.

237

We need to deal more harshly with crooked public officials (including civil servants as well as politicians). At the moment, hardly anyone in public life ever resigns. Most cling to their jobs, whatever their failures might be and whatever dishonesties might have been exposed.

The political survival of the oleaginous Peter Mandelson is testimony to our absurd tolerance of inadequate standards in public life. Twice Mandelson was forced to resign from government amid allegations of 'financial impropriety'. After mortgage shenanigans a normal person in his circumstances might possibly have been rewarded with a visit from the fraud squad and maybe even an invitation to accept a stay at one of Her Majesty's less luxurious establishments. Mandelson, however, was rewarded with a peerage, a job as a European Union Commissioner, (together with a huge salary, loads of lovely expenses and a massive pension) and then a position as head of ethical banking at Lazard International. He now seems to be extremely wealthy.

It isn't difficult to find many other similar stories of well-rewarded politicians and civil servants.

We're too damned soft on people who should maintain the highest standards.

When a chief food and drug regulator in China was found guilty of taking bribes to approve medicines, he was executed. If similar standards were upheld in England the commonest sounds in London would be that of guillotine blades and severed heads dropping into baskets.

I don't believe in the death penalty (too many mistakes are always made) but even if we don't execute them, politicians who misbehave should be fired. They should not receive fat pay offs or great pensions. We can no longer wait for politicians who steal or fiddle or lie to resign.

How do we decide whether or not politicians are guilty of unacceptable behaviour? Simple. We are their employers and so we should decide. Politicians accused of unacceptable behaviour should be tried before a jury — not a specially appointed judge or some Government appointed one man quango.

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No Minister or MP should attend private, secret meetings. There's a lot of this goes on these days but I am thinking, in particular, of the Bilderberg Group.

It was allegedly at Bilderberg Group meetings that the Treaty of Rome (which created the Common Market) was born. And both Iraq wars were possibly born at Bilderberg meetings too.

Those who attend always claim that nothing secretive or conspiratorial goes on. These are, they say, simply private meetings where Prime Ministers, Presidents and bankers can get together. Most of our Prime Ministers for the last forty years have been members. It's the sort of meeting Peter Mandelson goes to.

If Bilderberg meetings are private why do we pay for them? And why is there is so much security (which we pay for) and so much secrecy?

Those who attend Bilderberg meetings claim that these private meetings are nothing for the rest of us to bother with or be concerned about.

If world leaders (whose salaries are paid by us) hold meetings with global bankers and we pay the hotel bills, the food bills, the booze bills, the transport bills and the security bills then we are entitled to know what is discussed and what is decided.

And if they refuse to tell us what we've bought with our money then we are entitled to believe that something dodgy and conspiratorial is going on behind closed doors.

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Members of Parliament should pass some sort of examination to show that they have an IQ of at least 100. I can give a thousand examples illustrating the need for this.

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Politicians who commit treason should be sent to the Tower of London and exhibited there for life, so that small children can look at them and learn what happens to dishonest politicians.

Edward Heath, the biggest traitor England has ever seen, should be dug up and his undoubtedly still fat skeleton displayed there permanently.

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All votes should be cast through the ballot box. The political parties introduced postal voting because it gave them a chance to fiddle the results. (It's much easier to fiddle the results when you don't have hordes of people insisting on pushing their ballot paper into a box.)

The political parties are also keen to introduce computerised voting machines (even though the evidence shows clearly that these are easy to rig and are a boon for dishonest politicians). Machines must never be allowed replace the ballot, the ballot box and a band of unpaid, independent scrutineers.

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There should be no public funding of political parties or parliamentary candidates.

If we ever give money to political parties there will be no hope at all for what remains of our tattered parliamentary democracy.

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Political parties and politicians are interchangeable.

Think of any leading politician. Now imagine him transplanted into another political party. It isn't difficult is it?

There is nothing much to help us distinguish between the three main parties; they have much the same policies and the same arrogance; they display the same indifference to the voters and they make the same mistakes; they share the same taste for power (for its own sake rather than for what it can be used to achieve) and the same denial of reality. All support the power of the State rather than the integrity and freedom of the individual.

The party system is now irredeemably corrupt. The system has been honed by several generations of politicians to reward the corrupt and to punish the incorruptible. I believe it is inconceivable that the system can, or will, produce an honest leader.

Governments act not in the interests of the country but in the interests of the controlling party. So, for example, if a Government looks like losing a forthcoming election it will take reckless risks with the economy. If it loses the election some other party will be left to clear up the fiscal mess. If they win they will have another few years of power and money making opportunities.

(Because of the political party system modern politicians are like the bankers who caused the credit crunch crisis. They are encouraged to take risks because they gain if they win but someone else pays if they lose.)

The aims of political parties and individual electors are diametrically opposed. All political parties want more government (because that will give them more power) when what the people want and need is less government (and more freedom).

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When party politicians talk about change they confine themselves to tinkering. They don't want the system to change very much at all because it suits them very nicely the way things are.

The party politicians, and the media, concentrate their attention on trivialities. Political debates are phoney because they deal with minutiae.

This attitude (concentrate on minutiae and ignore the big issues) has pervaded all areas of public life.

Speaking at the House of Commons some years ago, I provided published scientific evidence showing conclusively that animal experiments are so misleading that not even drug companies (their main official advocates) take them seriously.

In the audience, which comprised of interested members of the public as well as MPs, there was an employed representative of an organisation which exists to oppose vivisection.

When I had finished my presentation the professional anti-vivisectionist stood up and immediately started to talk about the wonderful work his organisation was doing in improving the size of the cages used to transport animals being to flown to Britain for use in experiments.

He ignored the facts I had given and the MPs, delighted by the opportunity to avoid embarrassing reality, welcomed his trivial revelations.

And thus it is in all areas of public life these days. The big issues are ignored and suppressed and those who raise them are dismissed as lunatics, heretics or fanatics. Anyone who dares to spread the truth, or raise questions about perceived truths, will be subjected to smear campaigns. Our liberty and our freedom of speech have been strangled by cross party consensus and an obedient media. Politicians and commentators concentrate their efforts on narrow, specific questions. The big questions, the important questions, are never asked. And so, not surprisingly, no answers are forthcoming either.

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'Truth is treason in the empire of lies'.

Texan congressman and former USA Presidential Candidate Ron Paul

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Politics today is primarily about politicians rather than voters. The only people who get anything out of elections are the politicians.

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It is hardly surprising that voting turnouts are forever falling. These days barely half the electorate bother to turn out to use their vote. Why? Simple. People don't vote because the politicians aren't worth voting for. And the party system means that people know that unless they live in a marginal constituency, and the election is likely to be a close one, their vote will be worthless. If political parties were banned and electors were invited to vote for independent candidates the turnout would rocket.

Voters know that elections are a sham. There are no real choices. All our major political parties are fundamentally fascist; they want to tyrannise us and impose their beliefs on us. Instead of wanting to create a free and liberated society where we can all get on with our lives they want to expand their control over our lives and they want to interfere in every aspect of everything we do.

All today's political parties want to violate our individual rights and to increase the rights of government. Those views are fundamentally fascist.

The three parties control what happens. And yet the three party system is a confidence trick. MPs who are members of the three parties represent (and vote for the interests of) their parties rather than the electors or the country.

Most people don't vote in European, parliamentary or local government elections because there doesn't seem much point. There isn't any significant difference between the parties. Politicians don't take any notice of what the voters want. And they don't keep their promises. Politicians are so focused on the next election that they never think of the next generation.

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We must take back the political power which is rightfully ours. We have to take back power from the crooks and the crooked institutions which now rule our lives. We have to take back power from the weak, spineless and unthinking politicians who serve those institutions with such uncritical faithfulness.

The people are now the only force of opposition; the only voice for freedom and justice is the voice on the streets.

England needs a House of Commons made up of independent men and women who will keep their promises, who will stick to their manifestos and who will vote honestly and decently according to their consciences.

Until that happens, our destiny, welfare and history will be in the hands of political parties which have their own vested interests to pursue.

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All organisations (and this is particularly true of political organisations) develop their own (well hidden) agenda: their own reason for being.

For the first time in history we have succeeded in creating a world, a society, which now exists solely to defend, protect and develop itself.

We have created a society whose institutions have acquired power of their own. These institutions — governments, multinational corporations, multinational bureaucracies and so on — now exist solely to maintain, improve and strengthen themselves.

These institutions have their own hidden agendas and the human beings who work for them may think that they are in control — but they aren't.

Political parties exist to provide comfortable employment for the paid employees, social support groups for voluntary workers (who usually spend most of their time concerned with constitutional minutiae and fighting one another for power within the organisation) and power, money and status for the party's political representatives: the MPs and the councillors.

Political parties exist to win seats and to win elections. That is all they exist for.

The interests of the modern political party no longer match the original aims of the founders; they are far removed from the original concerns and passions which led to their development.

Political parties are organisations and organisations don't have feelings, passions or purposes. Organisations exist only to exist. And, as with so many organisations, the political parties are run by salaried employees and voluntary workers whose primary aim must be to sustain and strengthen the organisation. These institutions have agendas of their own and those who appear to run them are, in truth, simply institutional servants; their role is to ensure the survival of the institution they serve.

(This is also true of companies, charities and all other modern, large institutions. The people who run them may think they are in charge but they aren't; the institution has its own needs (such as good quarterly results in the case of a company) and the directors and managers are there to serve the institution's needs. If they do well then the institution will reward them generously.)

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Our first step to freedom must be to free ourselves of the 'party system' and return to the days when our Parliament consisted of honest, caring individuals whose only concern is the future safety and welfare of the people they represent — and the country of which they are citizens.

And that will be a real (and bloodless) revolution.

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It is not the duty of a government to micro-manage peoples' lives. It is the duty of a government to provide a safe, effective, unobtrusive infrastructure which allows citizens the freedom to do their own thing.

Ayn Rand, the author of Atlas Shrugged and the founder of the philosophy of objectivism, declared that the only true purpose of politics is to protect individual rights. And she was right.

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It will take some time to get rid of the party system. But once there are a few genuinely independent MPs in Parliament the present dishonest system will start to crumble. How will the party whips respond when a growing number of MPs cannot be bullied or bribed into acting in a particular way?

As the number of independent MPs grows so the power of the parties will collapse. Eventually, the independent MPs in the House of Commons will have the majority. They will be able to form a Government themselves. And the parties will be finished. We will have a House of Commons populated by rational, individual MPs who are not driven by absurdities such as political correctness and multiculturalism and who are responsible, as individuals, for representing a relatively small part of the country.

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If we had a House of Commons consisting entirely of independent members of parliament we would not have sent troops to Iraq or Afghanistan.

We started two wars because they suited the leaders of the ruling political party. And because the ruling political party could tell individual members of parliament how to vote. The party system has betrayed us and it's time we changed it. The Government should be the servant of the Commons and the Commons should be the servant of the people. That's not the way it is as the moment.

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Because of our party system politicians think no more than four years or so ahead and constantly advocate harmful short term policies designed to benefit not the nation but their own party interests.

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At election time individual candidates should announce what they stand for (rather than what they think the public want to hear, or what they are told to say because it is what someone in London has been hired to believe). The voters can then select their candidate, instead of having their choice made for them by a bunch of local party hacks who have chosen a candidate to be promoted.

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'Those who are unafraid to say they do not know become wise. Those who insist they know never learn. Those who pay attention to their weaknesses gain strength. Wisdom and strength come from the courage to see things as they are.'

Taoist philosophy

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The house of commons is hideous melange of corruption, depravity and vulgarity; an oozing mass of pustulant excrescences. Favouritism is rife. We are ruled by battalions of mediocrities.

The Government interferes in every aspect of our lives, and pokes its nose into every detail of our affairs. Groups of people whom the establishment favours benefit according to prejudices and favouritism.

Millions now rely entirely upon the state for their prosperity. Those who rely upon their own wits and hard labour are at a huge disadvantage. The Government has taken up itself the right to dispense good and evil according to personal whims. As William Leggett predicted the state has assumed 'the functions which belong to an overruling Providence'. The public are fleeced and the fortunate benefit.

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What have we done to deserve MPs who signed us up to the Lisbon Treaty — giving away a thousand years of history and freedom — without even bothering to read the cursed document? Most of our MPs and ministers would be better suited to employment requiring manual rather than intellectual effort (though you'd have to count the tools at the end of the day). Modern party politicians are constantly reaching for mediocrity; stretching every sinew in their bloated bodies as they grapple with simple competence. Always failing. And in politics, as in stagnant ponds, the scum always rises to the top.

Is it really impossible to find a few hundred honest and honourable men and women in England?

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What sort of world have we created when MPs and peers cheat so much they don't even know when they are doing it. Time and time again politicians and their chums get away with stuff that would result in you or I being locked up for long periods of time.

Lord Ahmed, a Muslim peer who is said to be a leader of the Muslim community and who took his oath on the Koran rather than the Bible, was jailed for 12 weeks after texting on a motorway and killing a 28 year old man. Now, you and I might imagine that 12 weeks was a pretty light sentence. He broke the law. Someone died. But Ahmed, a Justice of the Peace, was released from prison after serving just 16 days. Was I really the only person in the country who found this shocking almost beyond belief? What would the court have done if that had been Vernon Coleman? I can't help thinking that they wouldn't just have thrown away the key but they would have melted it down and turned it into a commemorative medal.

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Most people believe that most people are telling the truth most of the time. So professional party politicians, who lie most of the time, get away with it.

Modern party politicians lie as effortlessly and as naturally as they breathe. It is an involuntary reflex. Put in modern computer terminology, it is their default position.

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Politicians are far too cosy and self-regarding. The party system has become conspiratorial rather than confrontational.

Consider what happened after the death of the son of conservative party leader David Cameron.

This was a personal tragedy.

But, in an orgy of fake concern, Parliamentary business was suspended so that all MPs could mourn with Mr Cameron. His family loss had disrupted the nation's democratic process.

Do you think I am being heartless?

OK, look at this another way.

Imagine that a bus driver in London has lost his son. It is just as tragic and as personal a loss as the Cameron loss.

Do all the bus drivers in London stop work to mourn?

Of course they don't.

Imagine that a doctor loses his son.

Do all the doctors in the country stop work so that they can mourn?

Of course they don't.

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And here's another thing.

Have you noticed that politicians always claim that their families are 'private'. Their children must not be photographed. Questions about whether or not they have been vaccinated are dismissed as intrusive.

And yet, the moment a politician is in trouble, the first thing he does is drag out his wife, his children, his parents, his in-laws and his dog for the cameras. If the children are ailing that's even better.

If party politicians can't win your vote any other way they will do it with sympathy.

'Look at me. You've got to vote for me. My budgie is sick.'

Ruthless and uncaring.

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The standard modern political solution when faced with having said something or done something stupid, wrong and embarrassing is to do the political two step. They all do it. The first step is to stick by your original story. You defend your actions unreservedly.

The second step is to change your original story. You repeatedly requote yourself saying something slightly different, but to your advantage.

Your critics will become confused and will spend time arguing about precisely what you said rather than what you did.

Crisis averted.

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Most MPs are merely bit part actors, fit to open fetes, kiss babies and write patronising, self-glorifying rubbish for the local newspaper.

A vote for a back bencher in any party is a wasted vote because he or she will creep to their party leaders and will do nothing to help the local community that might upset the all-important relationship with the party.

A vote for a party leader may give a constituency some dubious infamy but such politicians will rarely have the time or the inclination to bother themselves overmuch with constituents' problems.

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'In all affairs, it's a healthy thing now and then to hang a question mark on the things you have long taken for granted.'

Bertrand Russell

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The vast majority of rebels and dissenters are decent, honest, honourable people who care about their country and what happens to it and to it.

The Government however, controlled by whichever party happens to be in power, fears dissent and argument because such things threaten their power and their very existence and so, in the false name of suppressing terrorism, they suppress all dissent; doing everything they can to punish and silence anyone who dares to speak out.

The media, which ought to be on the side of the dissenters (every journalist worth his salt should be a natural anarchist) has become beholden to the controlling party for two reasons.

First, the controlling party can make commercial life easier or harder for the company behind the publisher or broadcaster and high level corporate employees prefer 'easier' because it translates readily into profitable.

Second, journalists have been flattered into silence on important issues by being given neatly packaged stories, carefully rehearsed and sanitised scoops, invitations to dinner and gongs in the biannual honours lists. The majority of journalists spend their days rewriting corporate press releases and then either reading them out or printing them. It doesn't much matter if the press release comes from an arms manufacturer or a government department.

If you think I am exaggerating ask yourself one simple question: when did you last read or hear a journalist or commentator criticising the party system of government we now regard as fundamental and inevitable?

And things are set to get worse. The BBC has a proven pro-EU bias, and yet soon, for many people, the BBC may be the only source of news. Commercial television stations talk of their inability to continue with local news programmes.

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You have three choices: you can put up with the party system and allow anger and resentment to burn holes in your soul; you can go abroad to live; or you can stay and fight and change the system by getting rid of political parties.

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Time is running out and we must act fast.

Our existing political parties are giving away more and more power to the EU. We must act before the Government has given away everything.

If you want to join the bloodless revolution the requirements are very simple.

Make sure that whenever possible you always vote for the independent candidate. If there is no completely independent candidate vote for the candidate representing the smallest party. Do not, under any circumstances, vote for a candidate representing one of the main three parties.

That's it.

If we do this then we can break the three-in-one party system which has for so long held a stranglehold over British politics and we can fill Parliament with people who care about nothing but the voters and the country.

Our representatives will know that if they fail to represent the wishes of the voters, or at least satisfy the voters that they have voted honestly and honourably, then they won't be elected at the next election. Their political future will be in the hands of the voters, not the party.

Getting rid of political parties will also get rid of the absurdity whereby the country may be governed by a political party which has received a minority of the overall vote. (An absurdity which will not be removed by fiddling with the system and introducing schemes such as proportional representation.)

Joining the bloodless revolution really is that simple: vote not for the party but for the individual. Always vote for the independent candidate. Never vote for a party candidate.

Pick the candidate you think will best represent your interests.

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And tell all your friends why they should avoid voting for a party candidate.

If, between us, we can reach enough people then the bloodless revolution is guaranteed to work.

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Even if your independent candidate turns out to be an incompetent crook we will all be better off. One incompetent and crooked MP can do far less damage than an incompetent and crooked political party.

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Independent MPs have an enormous amount of power in the House of Commons. They can do a great deal of good for their local constituents. The vote of an independent MP cannot be relied upon by a big party machine. An independent MP cannot be told to vote one way or the other. He cannot be threatened with expulsion from the party or bribed with a promise of minor office or a peerage. The independent MP is far better placed to represent the interests of the people who sent him to Parliament. If he doesn't vote with their interests in mind they won't vote for him again. The independent MP can demand things for his constituency and have a reasonable hope that his demands will be met. He will, at the very least, have a much greater hope of success than the MP who represents a party — whether that party be in or out of power.

Voting for independent candidates will give us back our parliament and our country. Our votes will count for the first time in our lives.

At the beginning of each new parliament, independent MPs must vote and choose from among their number a group of leaders. But the leaders of Parliament will truly be democratically elected.

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When, many years ago, I first recommended that we should stop voting for the big three political parties I recommended that electors should, instead, vote for smaller political parties which offered a manifesto with which they felt comfortable.

I now think that this was a serious mistake. (In words never uttered by politicians: 'I was wrong.')

This sort of voting will merely perpetuate the party system. The problem is that small political parties, like big ones, have an agenda of their own. The small political party wants to become a big political party so that it can acquire power and authority. Its most forceful members are likely to be motivated by personal ambition rather than a desire to improve the world.

The only long term solution is to avoid voting for any candidates standing on behalf of any political party — however small that party might be.

The bloodless revolution will come only if we vote only for truly independent candidates; men and women who are driven by passion and who are so bloody-minded that they would never fit comfortably into any political party.

Voting for individuals rather than parties gives us a chance to change the country in one day.

An instant, polling day, revolution.

We only need to win once and the party system will be finished. The bloodless revolution will be the most peaceful revolution in world history.

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When we have got rid of the parties there will be many things we can do which we were never be able do while our country was ruled by, and for the benefit of, one or other of the political parties.

Without political parties controlling the country everything will change. Parliament, made up of hundreds of independent MPs, will do what those MPs (and, therefore, their constituents) really want to happen.

Nothing will be impossible.

In the final section of this book I've explained some of the things we could do if we had a parliament full of, and controlled by, individual MPs who were responsible not to the requirements of a political party but to the electors who had voted for them.

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'...for on his choice depends
The safety and the health of the whole State.'

Shakespeare (*Hamlet*)

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The parties will, of course, stick together and claim that all this is impossible. They are, of course, lying.

The *Financial Times* claims that independent candidates have no hope of office and could only make an impact by joining with other independent candidates to form a new party.

This is unimaginative nonsense.

A parliament of independent MPs, and a ban on political parties, will lead to a fairer, more honest, more respectful democracy. It will mean defeat for the fascists who have controlled our lives for too long.

And it will enable us to contemplate some of the political changes I have listed on the pages which follow.

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Please help spread the word.

Your part in the revolution began when you started to read this book. You now know what has to be done. It is very simple. It is perfectly legal. You can't get into trouble. And it's bloodless.

If you agree with the basic premise of this book (that we need a bloodless revolution) then please tell everyone you know how they can change things and really make a difference. Share the great adventure with as many people as possible.

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Revolutions are only impossible before they take place. Afterwards they were inevitable.

PART TWO

Two Dozen Life Changing Things We Can Do (If We Want To) When We've Got Rid of Political Parties

We all have different goals, needs and rights and we are all entitled to put forward our views. In a properly run democracy, discussions, even about contentious issues, should be conducted openly, with respect and with an understanding that we all have varying aims, beliefs and aspirations.

1. We should have regular referenda on big issues.

Every major decision can and should be challenged by a referendum. Party politicians are terrified of them because they put power into the hands of the people. But that, surely, is as good a reason as any to have them. Switzerland, probably the only truly democratic country in the world, holds regular referenda so that its people can vote whenever important issues are being debated. This system works perfectly well there and Switzerland is now widely acknowledged to be the most democratic country in the world.

Political parties do not like referenda and will do everything they can to avoid offering them to the electorate. When the people are allowed to vote on important issues they have a nasty habit of providing conclusions which do not suit political parties.

So, for example, Gordon Brown and the Labour Party refused to allow a promised referendum on the Lisbon Treaty (handing control of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to the unelected bureaucrats of the European Union) because he and they knew that the public would vote against it. And so the Lisbon Treaty was signed against the wishes of the majority of the British people.

2. We need to overhaul our voting system.

We need to reconsider the principle of 'one man one vote'. Voting in England has become something of a joke in recent years. Shareholders who vote against company directors pay are likely to have their vote ignored. Television viewers who pay to vote for selected contestants in reality show competitions may find that their votes have not been counted — even though they have been charged. And electors who vote in parliamentary elections are wasting their time. Political manifestos, controlled by parties which have no interest in the welfare of the electors or the country, are an irrelevance. No one takes them seriously. Politicians know that they will ignore them. And so do the voters.

Politicians now know that they can safely ignore the wishes of the electorate as long as they cater for the whims and wishes of a small, controlling group of voters. This small controlling group consists of those who rely upon the State for their income — either as employees or as dependants.

The politicians who run the country are self-serving and the people who put them in power are self-serving too.

The time has come to reconsider the validity and fairness of the sacred principle of 'one man one vote'.

It is generally accepted that the principle of one man (or woman) one vote is a fair and just one but the truth is that this method of voting has created a society in which those who work, pay tax and (literally) support society are ruled by an unholy alliance of those who either fail to work at all (because they are unemployed, unemployable, sick or lazy) and those who work for the State.

The original concept of giving every man and woman a vote was based on the unarguably fair notion that everyone who contributes to society should have a say in how it is run.

But when the vote was given to all, it was never envisaged that a dominant part of the voting would end up in the hands of the unemployed, the long term sick, the non-taxpayers, the professional users and the parasites; takers not givers.

But things have changed.

Today, it is perfectly possible for a government to win power — and to hold onto it — simply through winning the votes of people who make no contribution to society.

It is because they know that this where their votes come from that politicians have made no serious attempt to stop the epidemic of benefit fraud which is destroying the welfare state. Political parties don't care too hoots that those who are genuinely in need are being pushed aside and abandoned. All the politicians care about is staying in power and enjoying the perks and the money that come with the power. If this means pandering to those who prefer not to work then this is what they will do.

So many millions now receive state benefits, and are wholly dependent upon the government for their income, that all political parties now pander to them, in order to win their votes, while at the same time ignoring the needs and rights of those who work and pay tax.

Today, a political party can win an election with 20% of the national vote. And a party can reach this vote by pandering to and attracting the votes of the unemployed, those receiving incapacity benefits, public sector workers and scroungers. The result is that tax payers are disenfranchised. The country is run on behalf of people who are 'takers', who contribute nothing but who take a great deal.

Things have gone too far. Today, the inmates are running the asylum for their own benefit.

Votes should now be limited to those who contribute.

It is a long standing part of our electoral tradition that prisoners do not receive a vote. Why, after all, should people who do not make a positive contribution to society have a say in how society is run? (It is worth noting, however, that the European Union is changing this and giving votes to prisoners.)

It would make just as much sense to withdraw the right to vote from those who are long-term benefit claimants or who never work. Voting rights could, perhaps, be given only to those who have worked and paid tax for, say, twenty years. Those rights, once given, would be for life. State employees would not be on the voting register unless they had worked outside the state system for twenty years.

Our present system is ludicrous and quite unfair. It's like allowing those who receive donations from a charity to decide how the charitable contributions should be distributed and how much those who contribute to the charity should give. Why should people who choose to never pay tax have any say at all over how taxes are raised or spent?

In a fair world only private sector taxpayers would be entitled to a vote.

In our current system taxpayers pay for everything, are constantly persecuted and abused by the authorities and receive very little in return.

No political party would contemplate even discussing the change I have suggested. The big three political parties know that their power depends upon their being able to buy votes from those electors who are dependent upon the Government and who will, therefore, vote for whichever political party offers them the biggest bribes.

3. Central and local governments should relinquish all control over transport.

Governments of all sizes have proved themselves incapable of managing complex transport services efficiently or economically. Allowing central and local governments to have any sort of control over the provision of transport facilities has been disastrous.

Since a previous government listened to the illogical arguments of Dr Beeching and closed numerous railway lines (and railway stations) the quality of transport in England has deteriorated year by year. Train services are now among the dirtiest and least reliable in the world. Public transport is poor and expensive and as a result roads are overcrowded. Because they are overcrowded roads constantly need extensive, expensive and disruptive repairs.

Whenever they are given the authority to run, or to regulate, transport services politicians create chaos.

Road repairs (constantly required because of the over-use resulting from the closure of much of the nation's railway network) mean that delays on English roads are the norm rather than the exception. It is difficult to drive for an hour in England without being held up at least two or three times by roadworks.

Why aren't roads mended at night? In China, road repairs at done at night so that motorists and lorry drivers are inconvenienced as little possible — and to reduce the cost to the economy. (In Japan, all repairs to the rail network are done between the hours of midnight and six am too. The Japanese did try doing track repairs in the daytime once during the 1980s but there was so much protest that they've never done it again.) The small extra costs involved (paying overtime to workmen and putting up lights to illuminate the site) are minute compared to the money saved by allowing people to move around without long delays.

But our councils and governments do not operate for the benefit of the community — they operate for their own convenience and profit.

The answer is simple: all transport should be provided by private companies and roads should be paid for by tolls. If all roads were toll roads then the people who owned and ran them would want to keep them open to keep the traffic moving, in order to maximise profits. They would have an incentive to do repairs at night. (The incentive could easily be formalised with a contract requiring all toll road owners to do repairs outside peak hours.)

A system of tolls would be fairer than car taxes or fuel taxes.

There is absolutely no need for government (local or central) to have any direct involvement in the provision of transport facilities.

4. All small post offices, schools, railway lines and hospitals which have been closed will be reopened.

In a world where oil is going to become increasingly expensive it makes good sense to minimise the amount of travelling people have to do — and to improve public transport by reopening train stations and train lines. The closure of small post offices means that queues at the remaining post offices cost the country several billion pounds a year in wasted time.

5. We need to get rid of at least 90% of all the red tape governing our lives.

The British Chambers of Commerce has estimated that red tape and regulations cost us £77 billion a year. That's £77 billion wasted every year on largely pointless, always intrusive bureaucratic nonsense. And the sum wasted is rocketing by 10-20% a year. We need to get rid of at least 90% of the red tape. It probably doesn't matter which 90% we get rid of.

Bureaucrats (especially those from the EU) and modern party politicians love regulations for it is regulations (invariably given the full force of the law, even though they are devised without troubling the usual democratic processes) which expand their power and increase their control.

The drive for more regulations is endless. Those wishing to open bank accounts will doubtless soon need to give blood samples and attend a lengthy interview in Sunderland before being considered suitable applicants.

Regulatory bodies invariably attract employees who are self-important, aggressive, inconsistent, intolerant, hubristic, evangelistic, hypocritical and sanctimonious. Ordinary citizens, the people who are supposed to be protected by regulations and regulators, are the people who suffer most from their very existence. Regulatory burdens which restrict and inhibit need to be removed and replaced with incentives. (The carrot works better than the stick).

We will all benefit enormously if we get rid of all regulatory bodies and all government quangos. None of them is worth a light. Regulation is expensive and intrusive and has proved itself entirely useless. Worse, it often encourages a feeling of complacency. Banks, for example, assume that if they satisfy the regulators they are doing everything they need to do. And customers assume that because there are regulators they are protected. Both are wrong. Everyone would be better served if our regulators were disbanded and the billions wasted on their upkeep made available as compensation to those who have been cheated.

If there were no Government regulators, businesses would have to build up a reputation for honesty and integrity. This takes some years. There are huge incentives to building up a reputation for honesty and decent dealing. Regulators, however, simply replace these natural driving forces with fear. Behind every piece of regulation issued by a Government regulated quango is a prison cell or a gun. That's how governments always enforce their laws and regulations. Threats replace the natural incentive of developing a decent reputation.

Regulations are bad for everyone for many reasons.

First, all a regulated business has to do is to please the regulators. They don't need to develop a decent reputation. All they need is a bit of paper showing that they know how to jump through the right hoops with the requisite enthusiasm. Regulatory systems reward the creeps and punish the imaginative and the hard working.

Second, a government regulated system suggests that all companies (however long established) are the same; are all crooked and must all be controlled. The implication is that all companies with the proper 'certificate' on the wall are equal. This is clearly nonsense.

Third, official government standards are regarded as minimum standards. And so that's all that customers get. No company can afford to offer a better service because there is no value to integrity. All companies have to do is obey the regulators who have replaced the customers as the arbiters of success and satisfaction. Builders, for example, cannot offer more than the basic building code observance because to do so will cost them money and push up their prices. Quality goes down to the lowest common denominator.

Fourth, government regulators exist to prevent things happening. They get no prizes (or bonuses) if something good comes through the system but they might get their knuckles rapped (though not lose their bonuses) if something bad happens. So they become increasingly officious and repressive. New ideas and improvements tend to be squashed. The regulatory system acts against genuine improvement because no one cannot introduce anything innovative which doesn't fit into the existing rules. This guarantees stagnation.

Fifth, when things go wrong the regulators are concerned solely with protecting themselves and making sure that they get no blame.

Sixth, the enormous costs of regulation mean that the quality of services and goods has to be dragged down. It is because money is spent on satisfying the regulators that when you ring your bank or utility company you wait for an hour (at a premium rate) and end up speaking to someone on another continent.

Seventh, excessive regulation destroys the quality of life by making day to day transactions far more complicated than they need to be.

Eighth, the regulatory system has made life easier for the dishonest people. Their crookery is easier to hide and more difficult to find. Sophisticated crooks use the system to steal from everyone (including taxpayers). The only people who have benefited from the regulatory system are the regulators themselves; the highly paid armies of bureaucrats.

Ninth, who regulates the regulators? Who will judge the judges? The system assumes that the regulators are intrinsically more honest than business people. This is patently not true.

Tenth, many of the regulations which exist today have been created at the request of large international businesses which encourage the introduction of new rules because they know that these make it difficult for small competitors to grow. Special interest lobbyists, acting on behalf of pressure groups, help introduce many of the most senseless regulations. Any benefits these regulations might bring are far outweighed by the costs. But since the costs are borne only by the people who are suffering from the regulations the instigators and the advocates of the rules lose nothing.

Ron Paul, USA congressman and former Presidential candidate, tells a revealing story in his book 'The Revolution'. He describes how when Senator George McGovern retired from public life he became the proprietor of a small hotel. After two and a half years the hotel was forced to close and Senator McGovern was honest enough to question the regulations which he himself had helped to implement. 'Legislators and government regulators must more carefully consider the economic and management burdens we have been imposing on US business,' he said.

McGovern described how fire regulations meant that he was told that his two storey building had to install a costly automatic sprinkler system and new exit doors, even though every guest room had large sliding doors which opened out onto concrete patios. And he added that his manager was forced to spend days at a time on needlessly complicated tax forms.

Anyone who has tried to run a business in modern Britain will share those feelings.

The statists distrust freedom and the free market. They have replaced the idea of businessmen being rewarded for their honesty by a system in which the only incentives are fear and force. Small minded gestapo-style bureaucrats, given the power to snoop on everyone, have replaced morality and inventiveness. The regulatory system offers a perverse incentive to people to behave badly and find ways to get round the rules.

It was the regulators who allowed bankers to take huge risks with our money. If the bankers won their bets, they got to keep the profits. If they lost we lost money. And all was fine and dandy as long as the bank obtained copies of passports and driving licences from would be customers in order to keep the regulators happy. Not only did the regulators not prevent the credit crunch, they actually contributed to it.

The bottom line is that we need far fewer regulations. We are encouraged to believe that rules and regulations are essential and always 'a good thing'. Anyone who suggests that we should have fewer regulations is regarded as a reckless idiot who would be willing to sacrifice safety and good health and fairness for economy, simplicity and freedom. We are encouraged to believe that every new law that is introduced (whether originating in Brussels or London) is vital.

But if we repeal all the regulations that exist, and stick with a few simple basic laws requiring people to behave decently and honourably to one another, we would be far, better off.

Leaving the European Union will enable us to get rid of most of the regulations which now stifle entrepreneurs and will give us an opportunity to spring-clean our absurd collection of new laws.

6. The police should not be run by local or central government.

Trust between the police and the public has broken down completely. Too many innocent, law-abiding citizens now regard the police as a greater threat to their safety than the villains against whom the police are paid to provide protection.

A major factor in the breakdown of trust has been the increasing politicisation of the police; the use of the police as a revenue gathering entity, and the use of the police to suppress entirely lawful dissent that the authorities find embarrassing or inconvenient.

The function of a police force is very simple: it is the job of the police to patrol our streets and to protect the safety and security of citizens and their property.

In order to do this efficiently, economically and fairly it is now clear that we need a police force which is neither paid for nor regulated in any way by central government but which is recruited and paid locally. The Home Office has repeatedly proved itself incapable of managing anything more complicated than a children's party.

Our police forces should be hired and managed locally for the protection of the community. Local communities can provide better, fairer, more effective police forces at much lower cost. (There should, nevertheless, be a small, well-trained, national team of police officers who can be called in by local forces to deal with particularly challenging crimes. Something along the lines of the old-fashioned Scotland Yard would serve perfectly satisfactorily.)

The current police force is lazy and wasteful and chooses its priorities according to the requirements of politicians (speed cameras producing money from easy to target motorists) rather than the requirements of the public (safe streets and low crime rates).

Crime rates everywhere in England are soaring. Everyone with functioning brain tissue agrees that nothing prevents crime more effectively than putting policemen on the beat. Even senior policemen admit that this is true. So, why doesn't it happen? First, thanks to the Government and the EU, the police now spend most of their time filling in forms. Second, the police are too busy doing stuff that will earn money (such as sitting on motorway bridges with speed cameras) to worry about tackling crime.

The police spend millions studying ways to improve the service they offer. They don't need to spend a penny. The village idiot could tell them the answer: put more bobbies on the beat.

Only by putting control back into the hands of local communities (and distancing policing from party politicians) will this happen.

7. Planning should be entirely left to local communities.

The four worst things about town planning offices are the unpredictability and inconsistency of their decisions, the costs, the delays and the corruption.

Applicants, whether they are individuals wanting to build a modest extension or builders wanting to build a housing estate, are entitled to a speedy reply (whether it is yes or no) and a simple appeals process. Central Government should not have any role in local planning issues. All decisions are better made when they are taken as close as possible to the area concerned.

8. Immigration needs to be controlled.

Visiting London these days is like visiting a city in a foreign country. When my wife and I visited the city recently we did not hear an English voice, other than that of a cab driver, for hours after arriving in the capital. Every shop assistant, every waiter and every waitress spoke at best only broken English. The English will soon be able to claim that they are a minority group in what was once their own country.

The people of England know that the history, their culture, their present and their future have been badly damaged by badly managed immigration policies. And it is England that suffers most. A staggering 92% of immigrants stay in England, with the result that although England's population is only five times larger than that of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, England takes in 11 times as many immigrants as the other three parts of the United Kingdom put together.

'You cannot simultaneously have free immigration and a welfare state,' said Milton Friedman, the economist. What you do get, when you have a welfare state and free immigration, is a huge budget deficit and growing resentment. And when you have free immigration and a National Health Service which is free to all users you end up with a health care system which is doomed to fail.

It is no wonder that the infrastructure in England (which receives less money than that elsewhere in the UK) has crumbled.

Countless thousands of students come to England every year. Why? We have plenty of students. And we don't educate them properly. Our children are leaving school unable to read or write properly and we're importing students? (Many of whom, thanks to our governments' wars, hate us and want to blow us up.)

Current policies are creating massive resentment (and future race problems). English families should always take preference over asylum seekers and immigrants when housing is being provided. I have been a taxpayer for nearly 50 years but cannot claim benefits because I have always been self-employed. However, Poles and Romanians and other EU immigrants can claim a full range of benefits without ever having worked here or paid taxes.

If you are white and were born in England then in some parts of your native country you are now (officially) a member of an ethnic minority. (For that reason, if for no other, it should now be clear that immigration needs to be controlled.)

An independent parliament, free of party control, would quickly introduce new immigration policies which would dramatically limit the number of foreigners moving to live in England.

It is an uncomfortable but nevertheless inescapable and undeniable fact of life that some cultures regard tolerance as a sign of weakness. 'We all laugh at the English,' said one Polish immigrant. 'You are all so weak. We come here because you give us money. That is all.'

Bullied and blackmailed by those who preach political correctness and multiculturalism, the English have been far too tolerant.

It's time we stood up for ourselves a little more.

9. We want our privacy back

The Government should stay out of our personal affairs. Governments should respect our privacy instead of pointing cameras at us wherever we go, listening to our private telephone conversations and reading our private e-mails. (CCTV cameras have been proven to do nothing to prevent crime. But they do provide the State with enormous power. Citizens would be much better off if the money spent on cameras — and people to watch the screens — was spent on more policemen patrolling the streets.)

The idea that politicians should spy on innocent citizens as a right is indefensible in any free nation. That the Government should do these things and pretend that they are protecting us from terrorists and money launderers is absurd. The Government must stop spying on us. This intrusive and rude behaviour doesn't stop terrorism, money laundering or tax evasion.

The Government should also abandon all its computer databases. Government departments and local councils have proved that they cannot be trusted with confidential information; they will either lose it or sell it.

10. We need to re-evaluate our foreign policies.

Our current relations with foreign countries sometimes seem to fall into two categories: there are the countries we are bombing to bits and the countries where we give fairly huge amounts of money to tyrants and dictators who then funnel the money into offshore bank accounts. (The two categories are not always mutually exclusive.)

Our foreign aid policy currently fits into the category of 'poor people in a poor country giving money to rich people in poor countries'. For years we've been giving hundreds of millions in aid to China and India. These are the richest, most successful new nations on the planet; the world's fastest growing economies. And we are giving them money! If money is changing hands it should be travelling in the other direction.

We need to stop all this nonsense.

Firstly, we can't afford it.

Second, it doesn't help us as a nation. It is time to recognise that our foreign aid policies have done far more harm than good. Vast amounts of money have been spent. Much of the money has been used to facilitate dictatorships and genocide. The rest has ended up in secret offshore bank accounts. Even where money has filtered through to poor people it has invariably merely acted as a short term aid and has done nothing to encourage self-sufficiency. (In the same way that welfare benefits in Britain have ensured that the poor do nothing to become independent.)

Britain, the EU and America could have done far more to help poor countries if they had ensured that surplus food had not been dumped, thereby ruining the chances of indigenous farmers of developing their businesses. The European Union's Common Agricultural Policy is the main cause of starvation in Africa and is directly responsible for millions of deaths and vast amounts of sickness and starvation.

And we should stop selling arms to foreign countries too.

Politicians argue that selling arms helps keep jobs and make money for the nation's companies. But are we really so desperate that we will do anything for money? We could undoubtedly make lots of money by selling off all blonde haired women to Middle Eastern citizens. We could undoubtedly make lots of money by bringing back slavery.

I would rather live in a moderately wealthy country that had morals than in a rich country that had no morals.

I do not suggest for a minute that we declare war on every country whose moral standards are low — we would soon find ourselves at war with a good part of the globe if we did. But we should not allow commerce and profit to interfere with our national moral standards any more than we allow commerce and profit to interfere with our personal moral standards.

I would not personally sell arms for money or gain (or, indeed, for any other reason). I do not buy shares in arms companies. So why should I live in a country which sells arms for gain? It is fair enough that we should manufacture arms to protect ourselves. But, since it is impossible to make judgements about whether other governments will use arms well or cruelly, we should not sell arms to other countries.

As a nation we should hold (and uphold) moral principles above commercial gain.

11. We should abandon the extradition treaties politicians have signed with the USA and the EU.

The Labour Party gave the Americans the unilateral right to extradite Englishmen and women without providing any evidence that a crime had been committed (or, indeed, having any such evidence). Various Prime Ministers have given the same right to the European Union.

These arrangements should be cancelled. No English citizen should be extradited without having first had an opportunity to hear the evidence against him or her in an English court.

12. No more money will be spent on translation services.

England is an English speaking country. Providing translators costs taxpayers hundreds of millions of pounds a year. In future, foreigners who live in England but who do not speak English and who require help must find their own translator (through their own embassy or consulate), just as English citizens must do when living or travelling abroad.

People who choose to live in England should speak the native language — just as we are expected to do in other countries.

A post office employee left his job after he apparently embarrassed his employers by saying that he didn't want to serve customers who lived in England but couldn't be bothered to learn to speak English.

Embarrassed?

His employers should have given him a bonus.

13. Neither governments nor companies should provide pensions.

We need to change our attitude towards pensions.

Pensions in England fall into two categories.

First, there are the generous, index linked pensions paid to former Government and council employees. These pensions are paid by tax payers and council tax payers.

Second, there are the far less generous pensions paid to private sector employees. These are paid out of contributions made by employees and employers and have been made distinctly unattractive in recent years (particularly by specific legislation brought in by former Chancellor Gordon Brown). Private sector pensions are expensive, highly regulated (usually to the detriment of the pension holders) and often woefully inadequate as a result of high charges and incompetent management. There is also, the risk that private sector pensions may at some point be confiscated by a cash hungry Government in search of funds with which to pay public sector pensioners.

There is trouble ahead.

Public sector pensions are a ticking time bomb. They are, quite simply, unaffordable. At what point are we going to abandon them? When the basic rate of income tax reaches 80% and every penny raised is used to provide pensions for former public sector employees? Or are we going to wait until it reaches 100% before we realise that the system is unsustainable?

I've been warning about this problem for nearly three decades and the crisis is now approaching very fast. We do not have, and never will have, the resources to pay public sector pensions to the people who think they are going to get them. Civil servants under 50, who think that when they retire they are going to be guaranteed a fat, index-linked pension are in for a huge disappointment.

Now, here's a question no one ever asks: why should companies, or the State, provide pensions for employees? Why shouldn't people who want a pension be expected to organise (and pay for) their own?

Interesting question.

But here's a better one.

Why do we have pensions at all?

The whole pension industry should die. Without pensions there will be no pensions industry and vast numbers of grasping, greedy bankers, investment advisers etc will be out of business. The nation will benefit enormously.

How will people survive when they stop working if they have no pensions? There's a simple answer which I will go into further on in this book. I will explain exactly why pensions will be quite unnecessary.

(As an aside, why do the elderly have to retire if they are healthy, willing and able to carry on working?)

None of this will ever change as long as a political party controls our Parliament. Only an independent parliament would find the courage to make the changes which must be made.

14. We don't torture our prisoners.

In future we do not torture our prisoners, or cooperate with other countries which torture their prisoners.

15. We can, and should, dramatically reduce the number of public sector workers.

There are, currently, around six million public sector workers on the public payroll. (One in fourteen of these is a foreigner.)

That's at least five million civil servants too many. Civil servants work short hours for high pay and have become extremely greedy. During the darkest days of the recent recession, when many private sector workers were on reduced wages or in fear of losing their jobs, public sector workers were striking because they were dissatisfied with the pay rises they had been offered.

No government controlled by a political party would dare take the important step of reducing the nation's payroll.

16. We should get rid of income tax.

England's tax code is by far the most complex and confusing in the world. And our tax rates are now among the highest in the world too. Party politicians will make no fundamental changes to this state of affairs because to do so would be to reduce the extent of their power over the nation's citizens.

There is one simple thing we could do that would revolutionise life for everyone: abolish income tax.

Getting rid of income tax may sound absurd. But it isn’t. It is entirely practical. And perfectly possible.

In 2008, the Adam Smith Institute, drawing attention to the consequences of Gordon Brown’s decade long reckless spending spree, pointed out that if public spending had only grown in line with inflation since 1997, we could have abolished income tax, corporation tax, capital-gains tax and inheritance tax. And the taxpayer would have been £200 billion better off.

Is there anyone in England who honestly believes that public services are better now than they were in 1997? If there is then they are deluded, for the evidence clearly shows that all this expenditure has resulted in a deterioration, not an improvement, in public services. More children are leaving school unable to read. The NHS is in a far worse condition than it was in 1997. There is more crime. Our roads are in a terrible state. And so on and on. Our infrastructure is crumbling and public services are a disgrace. The money governments have spent was wasted on introducing miles of red tape and hiring armies of pointless, bonus grabbing bureaucrats.

If we abolished income tax, the saving to the nation would be phenomenal. There would be no more time wasted on keeping infernally complex accounts to satisfy the absurd inquisitors working for Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs (HRMC). And Englishmen and women who had left to live in tax exile might well be tempted home again.

Direct taxes — taken out of income — are a massive disincentive. Why bother to work harder if you know that your extra pay is going to be taxed heavily — and that between 25% and 50% of your earnings are going to be commandeered by the government?

The present system is grotesquely unfair. HMRC seems to put little effort into chasing those who pay no tax; it is easier to concentrate on the honest citizens who do pay tax. Like the police (who prefer to harass honest motorists rather than catch dangerous criminals who might well be carrying knives) HMRC prefer to take the easy route.

Getting rid of income tax completely will, of course, allow the hordes currently working for HMRC to find gainful and productive employment, adding value to the nation and to their local community.

We should also abolish tax on investment income. This would encourage savings and thrift. Why should people be punished for saving money that they have earned?

Spending may well be the oil that keeps society moving, but saving is the foundation upon which financial security is built. Why bother to save money if the government is going to take a cut of whatever modest interest you receive? (Naturally, the really rich rarely pay income tax at all. They hire lawyers and accountants to ensure that they pay little or nothing in tax on their earnings or profits.)

Instead of taxing hard work and prudence we should tax only consumption so that people only pay taxes when they spend money. This would encourage savings and discourage inflation. There should be three tax bands. Essentials such as food and heating would be zero rated. Non essentials should be taxed at a medium rate. And luxuries should be highly taxed.

When I first started to write this book I began by thinking that without income tax it would be necessary to raise indirect taxes to quite high levels. It wouldn’t. Government spending has grown so rapidly, and to such absurd levels, that indirect taxes do not need to rise at all. Cutting expenditure will, inevitably, mean that lower taxes will suffice.

Finally, when councils raise money they should do so through a local poll tax. The last attempt to introduce a poll tax was booted out by demonstrating scroungers who didn’t like the idea of having to contribute to the cost of their communities. The fact is, however, a poll tax is the fairest way to raise money and should be used instead of local property taxes. The present system is invidious. Why should people be punished for improving their homes?

Without taxes on capital or labour, and with modest taxes on consumption, investment and productivity will soar and the nation will be increasingly prosperous.

17. We should introduce personal accountability for public employees.

The phrase ‘moral hazard’ describes the incentive to behave badly because someone is insulated from the consequences of his actions. It happens everywhere in the public sector (and in banks, of course).

Public sector employees have for years taken decisions in the comfortable knowledge that they will not suffer if they make mistakes.

If a doctor, a lawyer or an architect makes a serious mistake, and is sued, then he must take personal responsibility. Most professionals have insurance to cover themselves for such eventualities.

But when civil servants make serious mistakes they are immune to civil or criminal prosecution. Civil servants are virtually never punished for their misdeeds. If a policeman does something wrong, and is sued, it is the taxpayers who pay whatever damages and costs are awarded against him. If a BBC employee makes a serious mistake, it is licence fee payers who are left with the bill. This is patently unfair. And it is particularly nonsensical in that today a great many civil servants receive the carrot of large bonuses (in an attempt to emulate the attractions of private sector employment). It is simply unfair that civil servants should enjoy the carrot but avoid the stick.

All public sector workers should be personally accountable (and legally liable) in exactly the way that doctors and other professionals are liable.

If a doctor screws up (under far more pressure than any other public servant) she will get into serious trouble. Why are hospital executives, policemen and others personally immune? Why should the taxpayer pay the fine?

In future all public employees should be personally responsible for any fines, damages and costs they incur through carelessness, bloody-mindedness, wickedness or plain, old-fashioned common or garden stupidity. So, if a policeman is sued for damages, and loses, then he and he alone should be responsible for the bill. If he wants to limit his personal liability then he (like a doctor) should pay for personal liability insurance. It is absurd that taxpayers should pay the bill for crimes committed by public servants.

Similarly, when large companies are fined because executives or directors have done something wrong it is invariably the company, and therefore the shareholders, who pay, and the government (through the fining agency) which benefits. The culprits pay nothing while the truly innocent, the shareholders, are the ones who suffer. This is absurd. Directors and executives receive bonuses when things go well; they should suffer the pain when their incompetence or dishonesty leads to expensive problems. It should be managers and not shareholders who pay when a company is fined for breaking the law.

18. We Need To Go Back Onto the Gold Standard

The Great British pound sterling has lost about 95% of its purchasing power since 1956. This means that if you put a pound under the bed in 1956 you can now buy 5% of what you could buy in 1956.

‘Paper money eventually returns to its intrinsic value — zero,’ wrote Voltaire, and he was clearly right. Currencies which aren’t linked to something tangible (such as gold) aren’t worth the paper on which they’re printed.

The reason for this fall in the value of our currency is inflation. Politicians usually try to pretend that inflation is caused by prices going up. This isn’t true. Inflation is a result of the amount of available money going up. When the Government prints more money the value of the existing stuff goes down. In that respect money is like everything else — the more there is of it the lower the value.

During inflationary periods, the price of petrol, bread or shoes go up because the value of the currency has gone down. And the value of our currency has gone down because the Government has been printing so much of the stuff.

Why have successive Governments printed so much money? Well, the simple answer is that politicians love inflation. They pretend to hate it but really they love it. And they love it because it helps eradicate debt. Getting rid of debt is popular with people who have borrowed loads of money — such as house buyers — but it is particularly popular with the Government which has borrowed more than anyone else.

If you owe £1,000,000 and the value of money falls by half then the amount you owe will also fall by half. (Conversely, Governments everywhere hate deflation because it increases the value of money and therefore increases debts.)

The people who suffer most from inflation are prudent, careful folk who work hard, save some of their money and rarely go into debt. Their savings are destroyed by inflation. The world would be a better and fairer place if we (and other countries around the world) went back onto the gold standard — in other words, if Governments were only allowed to issue money for which they had gold or silver backing.

The Gold Standard was the basis of world finance in the 19th century but began breaking down during the First World War as governments (specifically Britain) spent huge amounts of money and needed to print more currency than they could back with gold. In the 1930’s, Britain, the British Empire, France and the USA all abandoned the fixed relationship between their currencies and gold. The gold standard was revived when the dollar became the world’s reserve currency and then American inflation (inflamed by the Vietnam War and American spending) forced President Nixon to abandon the relationship between the dollar and gold in 1971. Since then the world’s fiat currencies (printed paper currencies) have lacked any solid basis. The explosion of debt and spending and the financial excesses of the late 20th century and early 21st century would have been impossible if currencies had all been disciplined by a link to gold.

Going back onto the gold standard would get rid of inflation and eradicate many of the world’s most pressing economic problems.

The supply of gold is pretty well fixed; it grows only very slowly and so if we went back onto the gold standard, the value of our money would remain stable. Those who saved would not see their wealth disappear as Governments deliberately printed more money to create inflation.

Why don’t governments see the sense in this?

Governments don’t like gold because it puts power into the hands of ordinary people who can hold onto it and maintain their wealth despite the Government. And they don’t like fixing the currency to a gold standard because it stops them deliberately creating inflation. Indeed, fixing a currency to the gold standard usually creates deflation because as productivity increases so things become cheaper and as things become cheaper so the value of gold rises. Governments hate the idea of that; it means that the debts they acquire by printing more money (in order to acquire more power and to pay for more bureaucrats) will grow instead of shrinking (as they do during inflation).

The truth is that gold is a hedge against bad government. And that's the one thing we aren't short of.

A gold based currency would be in the interests of all citizens of England (and, indeed, of all other countries). But no political party would dare introduce a gold-based currency.

19. Schools and colleges should be controlled locally.

If local communities were free to create and run their own schools and colleges, skills, such as literacy and numeracy, would increase and costs would shrink dramatically.

Too many administrators and too many regulations have made education unnecessarily complicated, and have replaced passion with bureaucracy. Today, teaching is less effective at combating illiteracy and innumeracy than it was a century and a half ago.

We do not need a Department of Education. Local communities are perfectly capable of organising and running their own schools without bureaucrats in London telling them what to do. Whenever evidence is published showing that school children are leaving school without being able to read or write the Government responds by hiring more administrators and giving the Department of Education more money. All of this makes things worse.

We need smaller classes and that means that schools need more teachers. And schools need more books. (Forget the computers). As long as schools teach children the basic subjects there won't be any need for a national curriculum.

Thanks to modern educational methods, there are hundreds of primary schools in England where the majority of 11 year olds can neither read nor write properly. It's hardly surprising. Under the State's official guidance education has been adapted to ensure that the maximum number of children pass their examinations. In an attempt to hide the fact that British children are now way behind their contemporaries in other countries examination taking has been turned into a lottery everyone wins. The result is that taking exams these days is like pulling a cheap cracker: everyone gets a worthless prize.

Pass rates are improved without a commensurate improvement in skills or employability. The State benefits by being able to compare itself favourably with other States. The political party that has been in charge can pat itself on the backs at election time. It was the State, and the political parties, which decided that competition was unhealthy and that everyone should have a prize.

It was the State which decided, in order to appease the politically correct manipulators, that children with special needs should be educated alongside other children and that special schools should, therefore, be closed down. Children of average or above average skills lost out because they were held back while teachers concentrated on the children with special needs. And the children with special needs lost out because they weren't getting the attention they really needed. The State won because it saved money. And the politically correct won a small and pointless battle in the continuing war on common sense.

It was the State that decided that real skills should be abandoned and that nebulous subject such as hairdressing and media studies should be given equal weighting to reading and writing. It was through the auspices of the State that pseudo-academic verbiage was created.

We would all save money — and children would be better educated — if local schools were run by local communities. Local people, who have a vested interest in the success of local schools, can be trusted to ensure that standards are kept high. Parents and employers will do everything necessary to ensure that local children succeed.

Schools (like hospitals) should be entirely independent of political interference. They should be funded and run by and for local parents. The only bureaucrat required is a secretary to assist the Head Teacher in ordering stationery supplies.

Political parties exist to maintain their power and to expand it whenever possible. No political party would even consider handing back power over schools to local communities — even though it is the right thing to do and would undoubtedly result in much better schools and much better levels of education.

Only when we get rid of political parties will we have a good educational system.

20. Hospitals and health care are better run privately.

Nothing the Government runs ever works. This is because politicians make useless managers, while the people they employ don't care enough about what they do to make any effort to do it half decently. The best (or worst) example of the failure of politicians and public employees to run anything effectively is the National Health Service (the NHS).

The NHS is a bureaucratic monster which kills more people than it saves. It is absurdly expensive, wasteful and inefficient. There are more administrators than nurses or beds. The annual cost of NHS management is outrageous and indefensible: it's double the amount the NHS spends on accident and emergency services, dental services and maternity care. To describe the NHS as an expensive and dangerous disaster is to understate the situation. If you are taken ill the chances are that it will not be the illness that will kill you but the treatment you receive afterwards. We would, as a nation, be better off with nothing. If that sounds overstated, it isn't.

Some people are saved, of course. Road accident victims and patients requiring emergency surgery may have reason to thank the NHS for their lives. But thousands more are damaged or killed by poor prescribing, inaccurate diagnoses, dangerous vaccines, incompetent nursing and so on.

Anyone who enters an NHS hospital as a patient is putting their life at risk. If cigarette packets deserve to carry a health warning then so do hospitals.

Bevan's idea for a National Health Service was absurd. Why should the State provide a free health care service? The notion that health care should be 'free' because it is essential is rubbish. It would make more sense to say that food and water should be free.

The idea that hospitals and doctors should be part of some national system is equally nonsensical. Bigger simply means employing more bureaucrats. The existence of a central authority, and the employment of layer upon layer of administration, makes the NHS expensive and inefficient.

Britain's National Health Service is beyond repair. We need to close it down, fire all the staff (no exceptions) and start again from scratch. The NHS gives everyone an equal right to die at the hands of an uncaring and cumbersome bureaucracy. The NHS spirit died years ago. But no one has yet had the guts to bury the body — which is steadily decomposing. Most people working in the NHS admit that if they (or a member of their family) falls ill they would not want to be treated in the hospital where they work. I will repeat that. Most people working in the NHS admit that if they (or a member of their family) falls ill they would not want to be treated in the hospital where they work. There really isn't any need to say anything else, is there? It's a fact that merits screaming rather than comment. (The NHS used to ask staff members if they'd be happy to be treated in their hospital. It was part of their public relations propaganda. After they found that just one in four members of staff would recommend the hospital where they worked to relatives or friends, or be happy to use it themselves, the question was quietly dropped. Would you take your car to a garage knowing that three out of four mechanics who worked there wouldn't trust the garage with their own car?)

A huge rift has opened up between doctors and patients. Doctors regard patients as the enemy. And patients regard doctors with distrust.

In order to protect themselves from lawsuits doctors order batteries of investigations before daring to consider making a diagnosis. In the bad old days doctors would make diagnoses based on the patients' symptoms and their own experience and instincts. Today, diagnoses are made using tests which are far more fallible than instinct and experience.

Endless laws and regulations have separated doctors from patients. Doctors are encouraged (pressured would be a better word) to introduce appointment systems even though both patients and doctors are better off without them.

Our health care system is a failure because it is distorted by regulations, targets and legislation. Anyone who does not regard the NHS a failure should ask themselves why so many people are now flying out to India and Thailand to obtain medical care which, it is widely acknowledged, will be better and safer and much, much cheaper.

Responsibilities have been replaced by rights. And, paradoxically, the result is that in modern England many people, particularly the elderly, are denied treatment. Powerful and organisations campaigning for particular groups of patients can put pressure on the controlling political party and force the government to provide treatment for their group. But this is done at the expense of other patients. And so politically correct groups (such as those requiring infertility treatment or sex change operations) are treated while the elderly (not at all politically correct) are allowed to go blind and to die when they could be treated quite cheaply.

Things have undoubtedly also been made much worse by the European Union. It is, for example, because of the EU that general practitioners in England no longer provide 24 hour cover for their patients.

I repeat: our health care system is a failure because it is distorted by regulations, targets and legislation — some of it originating in London and much of it coming from Brussels. Replacing the NHS with a system of private medical care would employ far fewer bureaucrats but it would be infinitely fairer and better and considerably cheaper.

Don't believe me? Look at the figures.

We spend around £120 billion a year on the NHS.

There are around 60,000,000 people in the UK.

Divide 60,000,000 into £100 billion.

And you have £2,000 per head.

I could buy damned good private health cover for £2,000 year. And so could you. And the service would be better and safer.

No political party would ever dare suggest closing the NHS and replacing it with a private health care system.

21. England needs an English Parliament.

Today, the United Kingdom may still (just about) be a kingdom. But it is no longer very united.

The Scots have become increasingly racist and isolationist in recent years. They have repeatedly made it clear that they hate the English. For years calls for the break-up of the United Kingdom have come mainly from Scotland. The result is that the United Kingdom is finished.

The European Union, which wants to break up the UK and turn England into a series of colourless, administrative regions, and which has been aided in this ambition by the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish nationalists, is winning.

The Scottish and Welsh nationalists think that their countries are heading towards independence. The Scots don't seem to realise that the Scottish parliament is, in reality, merely a regional parliament of the EU. The same is true of the Welsh parliament. The Scots and the Welsh enthusiastically support membership of the European Union because they foolishly and naively believe that staying in the EU will enable them to reach full independence.

When the European plan reaches its final stages, England will become nine anonymous regions. English history and culture will be forgotten. (The Scots and the Welsh will be allowed to retain their history and their culture as their prize for supporting the break-up of England and the UK.)

It isn't difficult to see why the authorities want to suppress England and all things English. As far as the EU is concerned the very existence of England is an embarrassment. Unlike Scotland and Wales, England is too large (and too powerful) to be a single region within the EU. Anything which promotes or defends England and Englishness is a threat and an obstacle to this aim.

The Scots and the Welsh are brought up to be patriotic. So are those born in Northern Ireland. But the modern English are denied the joy of patriotism and hence often grow up with no real sense of identity. When asked their nationality English people often find that 'English' is not accepted. For example, an English reader wrote to tell me that she had applied for an NHS service recently. When asked for her nationality she answered 'English'. She was told that this was not allowed. She could be Scottish, Welsh or Irish but if she was English she had to put down 'British'. Officially, England is no longer regarded as a nation and English is no longer an officially acceptable nationality. The English have been stripped of their identity, and subjected to the most ruthless variety of ethnic cleansing.

Until 2009 the post of Poet Laureate had, for over 300 years, been filled by eminent Englishmen. In 2009, it was announced that the new Poet Laureate would be a Scottish woman. You can't get much further from an Englishman than that. I shudder to think of the outrage that would develop if an eminent, traditionally Scottish position was awarded to an Englishman.

As a result of the constant erosion of their history and culture an increasing number of English citizens are calling for the UK to be split into its component nations.

The English are becoming increasingly aware that they subsidise Scotland but that they have less power over their own lives than their Scots. Many are fed up of having no parliament of their own when the Welsh, the Scots and the Northern Irish have their own parliaments. They are unhappy that the House of Commons which (on behalf of the EU) rules their lives is stuffed with, and controlled by Scots, whereas the Scottish parliament is run by the Scots for the Scots. Many Englishmen and women are angered that whereas Scottish (and Welsh) nationalists tend to be regarded as proud patriots, English nationalists are dismissed as racists and bigots.

There is great resentment in England at the way that English taxpayers are increasingly being expected to subsidise the Scots. How fast will resentment build among English students as they struggle to pay off the huge debts they have incurred as a result of the Government's student loan scheme? And how much is that resentment going to be fuelled by the knowledge that students from Scotland, who have studied alongside them at English universities, can start life with no debts whatsoever because their bills have been paid by English taxpayers? How fast will resentment build when the English realise just how free the Scottish 'government' has been with English money. Lowly State functionaries in Scotland are paid more than responsible professionals in the rest of the UK. State spending in Scotland is the highest in the world and much higher per capita than in England, which is funding the Scottish 'government's generosity.

The English are conscious, too, that greedy Scottish financial institutions are largely to blame for the financial crisis in England. Much resentment built up in England when two large Scottish banks (RBS and HBOS) failed and were bailed out by English taxpayers. English investors and employees paid the price yet again for Scottish incompetence.

Moreover, many English folk are aware that although the now inevitable break-up of the United Kingdom will be disastrous for Scotland and Wales it will be excellent news for England and the English.

In recent years there has been a clear rise in English nationalism. There is a widespread belief that England would be stronger, richer and happier as a separate nation.

England's only hope is to create an English Parliament, escape from the European Union and declare independence. Those who represent England in the English Parliament must have been born in England. England must be administered by Englishmen and Englishwomen.

As long as governments are formed by political parties there will be no real English Parliament. England will only survive with a parliament of independents.

22. We need a Ministry of Defence, not a Ministry of War.

England clearly needs an army, a navy and an airforce with which to defend herself against aggressors. And these must be supplied, and paid for, by the nation.

But we should only give politicians the authority to fight wars when we have been attacked. The Ministry of Defence is, after all, the Ministry of Defence and not the Ministry of War or the Ministry of Attack.

Those who oppose foreign interventions are likely to be dismissed as isolationists. This is nonsense, of course. The real isolationists are the ones who bomb and kill innocent people, and who impose sanctions and embargoes on countries (which result in the deaths of innocent babies and children) because they disagree with the nation's policies, but who nevertheless fund tyrants and dictators whose views happen to fit with the views of our leaders. They will result in our eventual isolation.

Nineteenth century statesman Richard Cobden opposed all foreign interventions by the English Government. He wasn't regarded as an isolationist. He was known as the International Man.

And, for the record, the phrase 'Little Englander' originally referred to English citizens who did not want England to poke its nose into the affairs of other countries.

23. We should abandon the welfare state, and the benefits system.

The welfare state, whereby vast amounts of money are doled out to virtually anyone who asks for it, has damaged everyone. It has damaged those who receive the money because it has taken away their sense of independence and, very often, their willingness to work and look after themselves. And it has damaged the rest of our community because it has taken away our sense of community as well as our sense of responsibility. Instead of giving money to help the genuinely poor we feel resentful about being forced to help people whose needs may not be genuine.

We have been brainwashed into thinking that the State must take responsibility for everything. But this has happened simply because those who work for the State want to control everything; they want to extend their power into every aspect of our lives.

Thousands of people are on benefits simply because they are, they claim, too fat to work. Thousands more walked away from jobs (or offers of employment) because the after-tax salary they were offered would result in them being poorer than if they stayed on benefits. The concept of responsibility has been replaced by the idea of rights. Every time the Government offers more money to people who live on benefits it increases the incentive for millions to avoid work.

Much of the money devoted to welfare is spent on bureaucracy, and government welfare programmes are easily abused by the givers and the receivers. The end result is that the money handed out does more harm than good; the people handing the stuff out become hardened, the people receiving it resent the way they are treated and the whole process encourages universal despair, endemic laziness and long-term dependence on the State. (The people handing out the money become just as dependent on the State as the people receiving it. And their value to the State is no greater.)

In the 1970s I suggested that placing dustbins full of money on street corners would be cheaper and just as fair as the system of welfare payments to which so many had become accustomed. Today the dustbins would need to be replaced by skips, but the principle remains the same.

I am a fiscal conservative but a social liberal. I believe in looking after people and providing services but making sure that the money is well spent.

And there is a much simpler, easier, fairer and cheaper way of eradicating poverty and ridding out streets of beggars. Here it is.

Everyone over 16 should get a basic living allowance of £10,000 a year (rising each year according to inflation). And that's it. Nothing else. The allowance should last for life. In or out of work you get the basic living allowance. If you want more than that you have to earn it.

The cost of this annual allowance would be more than covered by the cost of cutting out the cost of the benefits payments and the bureaucrats who are employed to service the system. Providing a basic fixed income will mean that there will be no need for unemployment benefit or sickness benefit. Nor will there be any need for the nation to pay old age pensions. The nation will save a fortune in administration.

So, in the new England, the State will pay us all a citizen's basic income. The State will pay us instead of us paying income tax. This would free everyone from exploitation, eradicate the need for unemployment or welfare benefits, ensure a much fairer tax system, eradicate poverty, end involuntary prostitution, do much to reduce crime levels and encourage people to work (in order to increase their income). The citizen's basic income would stop people feeling resentment about their neighbours who don't work. And it would allow the Government to find more productive employment for the vast army of bureaucrats involved in administrating the huge variety of State benefits. The saving to the nation would be phenomenal. Millions of man-hours would be freed for more creative enterprises.

Social security payments currently cost the nation well over £200 billion a year. Paying the bureaucrats and administering the payments costs half as much again. With ten million pensioners, the state pension scheme costs at least another £60 billion (and the numbers are rising fast). Administering the pension scheme costs billions more. Pensions and other payments to former civil servants and public sector workers cost billions.

My idea of giving every man and woman in the country a lifetime income of £10,000 a year would be cheaper than our current state pension and benefits programme. And it would be simpler and fairer and better both for individuals and for the State. But no political party would ever have the courage, or the imagination, to introduce such a scheme.

24. Interest rates should be allowed to fluctuate according to the market place.

Why should a bunch of half-witted civil servants or bankers be allowed to decide what interest rates will be? Bankers, bureaucrats and politicians have proved that they are incapable of looking after the economy. Let the economy look after itself. The price of capital in a capitalist society is too important to be left to politicians and bureaucrats. Interest rates should be free floating.

Finally...

There are many things we could and should do to improve our world; many things we could do if we had a Parliament of independent MPs, freed from the constraints of a political party.

During the banking crisis of 2008 we might have been able to get through the depression more speedily if, instead of giving billions to the bankers (to spend on parties and bonuses) the Government had given £1,000,000 tax free to everyone over the age of 50.

The two sole stipulations would be, first, that they retired from work and did not reapply for employment and, second, that they should buy two things with their windfall: a new house worth less than £250,000 (to live in or to let) and a new, English made car worth at least £10,000.

This would have solved the pension problems of everyone over 50. It would have sorted the car industry. And it would have got the housing market moving. It would have also freed up several million jobs and, therefore, solved the unemployment problem. It would have meant more income (and therefore more spending money) for all the 30-somethings and 40-somethings who were promoted.

And it would have cost far less than bailing out the bankrupt banks and greedy bankers who had created the financial crisis in the first place.

Outlandish? Certainly. Would it have worked? Possibly. Would the political parties, with their own agendas, have even considered such a plan? Of course not.

Without a political party running our lives (and other political parties trying to snatch power from them) we would be free to consider all sorts of solutions, and to look critically at other aspects of our lives — aspects which the political parties never even question.

So, for example, we rear animals for food in barbaric, unnatural conditions. We fill the animals with antibiotics, growth hormones and countless other chemicals and then we kill them in circumstances which would shame anyone with a conscience. The animals die in a burst of adrenalin. The meat we eat contains carcinogens and far too much fat to be healthy. It's hardly surprising that meat eaters suffer far more from cancer than vegetarians.

We allow farmers to spray known carcinogens onto our fields. We allow our water supplies to be polluted. We allow large international companies to sell genetically modified plants and we allow scientists to play around with genetically engineered animals. We even allow them to mix human and animal genes in experiments to create hybrid creatures which we can use as slaves, organ donors or food.

None of this is sensible, safe or morally acceptable.

There are so many other things we accept as 'normal' which should be looked at critically.

Why do we use money raised from taxes to support sportsmen and artists? These aren't things the State should be funding.

Why are we forced (by law) to pay an annual fee to the BBC? Why must we support a profligate and biased organisation which is steadily destroying freedom of speech in England? If the BBC can persuade people to pay subscriptions for its services then let it survive. If it cannot, then let it die.

Despite the fact that we have, for years, been fighting a 'war on drugs' Britain has a booming drug addiction problem. The number of addicts grows constantly. The reason is easy to see. Spending vast amounts of money on addicts has 'victimised' and popularised addiction and turned it into a profitable activity. In reality, heroin and cocaine are not particularly addictive drugs (it is far harder to get off benzodiazepine tranquillisers, for example) and the nation's expensive drug addiction problem could have been dealt with far more effectively if politicians had put more effort into arresting and imprisoning those selling drugs. (And a little more effort should have been put into helping the real victims of drug addiction — those innocent members of the public who are robbed by addicts looking for money with which to buy drugs.)

By giving money and homes to single, young girls who get pregnant politicians have encouraged the increase in the incidence of teenage pregnancies. They may have ensured a core of voting support for their party, but they have also ensured that the problem continues to grow.

Our political parties say and do nothing about these things because it is in their interests to keep quiet. Political parties don't care about people. Like large, international corporations they care only about their own survival.

There are some huge problems ahead. And the world is going to change in many, many fundamental ways.

The Arabs will not be so rich when the oil runs out. China is on the rise. The Chinese are busy buying up gold so that they can turn their currency into the world's new reserve currency. When they're ready for that then the American dollar will go into a rapid and terminal decline and the Chinese will rule the world. China and India are the future of capitalism. America, a nation with which our politicians routinely claim to have a 'special relationship' has no money, few other friends and not much of a future. (Back in 2009, when this book was first published, I pointed out that Obama will prove to be the biggest disappointment in politics for generations.)

We will need powerful and far thinking leaders to cope with these changes. We will need leaders with intelligence, vision, insight, intuition, imagination and integrity to lead us into and through the dark days, weeks, months, years and decades ahead.

And with a parliament consisting of independent men and women there is a much greater chance that those who manage our country will be capable of a little lateral thinking.

Only an independent parliament, controlled by strong, independent individuals would even discuss the ideas I've suggested in this book.

Political parties deal with crises with their own interests at heart, and always manipulate situations to suit their own political advantage. Political parties are a useless luxury we can no longer afford.

Without a Parliament controlled by political parties the future is invigorating, exciting and full of hope.

The message is clear and unavoidable.

The Author

Vernon Coleman was an angry young man for as long as it was decently possible. He then turned into an angry middle-aged man. And now, with no effort whatsoever, he has matured into being an angry old man. He is, he confesses, just as angry as he ever was. Indeed, he may be even angrier because, he says, the more he learns about life the more things he finds to be angry about.

Cruelty, prejudice and injustice are the three things most likely to arouse his well-developed sense of ire but he admits that, at a pinch, inefficiency, incompetence and greed will do almost as well. He does not cope well with bossy people, particularly when they are dressed in uniform and attempting to confiscate his Swiss Army penknife. ‘Being told I can’t do something has always seemed to me sufficient reason to do it,’ he says. ‘And being told that I must do something has always seemed to me a very good reason not to do it.’

The author has a pathological contempt for pomposity, hypocrisy and the sort of unthinking political correctness which attracts support from Guardian reading pseudo-intellectuals. He also has a passionate loathing for those in authority who do not understand that unless their authority is tempered with compassion and a sense of responsibility the end result must always be an extremely unpleasant brand of totalitarianism.

Vernon Coleman has written for *The Guardian, Daily Telegraph, Sunday Telegraph, Observer, Sunday Times, Daily Mail, Mail on Sunday, Daily Express, Sunday Express, Daily Star, The Sun, News of the World, Daily Mirror, Sunday Mirror, The People, Woman, Woman’s Own, Spectator, Punch, The Lady* and hundreds of other leading publications in Britain and around the world. His books have been published by Pan, Penguin, Corgi, Arrow and many other publishers in the UK and reproduced by scores of discerning publishers around the world.

He has never had a proper job (in the sense of working for someone else in regular, paid employment with a cheque or pay packet at end of week or month) but he has had freelance and temporary employment in many forms. He has, for example, had paid employment as: magician’s assistant, postman, fish delivery van driver, production line worker, chemical laboratory assistant, author, publisher, draughtsman, meals on wheels driver, feature writer, drama critic, book reviewer, columnist, surgeon, police surgeon, industrial medical officer, social worker, night club operator, property developer, magazine editor, general practitioner, private doctor, television presenter, radio presenter, agony aunt, university lecturer, casualty doctor and care home assistant. He is still a fully registered medical practitioner and licensed GP.

Today, he likes books, films, cafes and writing. He has never been much of an athlete, though he once won a certificate for swimming a width of the public baths in Walsall (which was, at the time, in Staffordshire but has now, apparently, been moved elsewhere).

He doesn’t like yappy dogs, big snarly dogs with saliva dripping from their fangs or people who think that wearing a uniform automatically gives them status and rights. He likes trains, dislikes planes and used to like cars until some idiot invented speed cameras, bus lanes and car parks where the spaces are so narrow that only the slimmest, and tinniest of vehicles will fit in.

He is fond of cats, pens and notebooks and used to like watching cricket until the authorities sold out and allowed people to paint slogans on the grass. His interests and hobbies include animals, books, photography, drawing, chess, backgammon, cinema, philately, billiards, sitting in cafes and on benches and collecting Napoleana. He likes log fires and bonfires, motor racing and music by Mahler and dislikes politicians, bureaucrats and cauliflower cheese. His favourite people in history include Napoleon Bonaparte, W.G.Grace, William Cobbett, P.G.Wodehouse, Jerome K.Jerome, and Walter Raleigh all of whom had more than it takes and most of whom were English. (Napoleon would have been if he’d had the chance.)

He lives in Paris and the village of Bilbury in Devon and enjoys malt whisky, toasted muffins and old films. He is married to and devoted to Donna Antoinette who is the kindest, sweetest, most sensitive woman a man could hope to meet and who, as an undeserved but welcome bonus, makes the very best roast parsnips on the planet.

We hope you enjoyed this book and found it useful. If you did then we would be grateful if you would post a favourable review on Amazon.

Dr Vernon Coleman is a qualified doctor and professional author who has written over 100 book which have sold more than two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK alone. His books have been translated into 25 languages and sold around the world. His novel ‘Mrs Caldicot’s Cabbage War’ was turned into a film with the same title. Many of his books are available as Kindle books on Amazon. For more details about available books please see his author page on Amazon. For free articles etc please visit http://www.vernoncoleman.com

BODYPOWER

Vernon Coleman

BODYPOWER

The secret of self-healing

VERNON COLEMAN

The classic international bestseller. Chosen by readers of The Good Book Guide as one of the Top 100 books.

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Reviews of the original edition of *Bodypower*:

‘Don’t miss it! Dr Coleman’s theories could change your life...the revolutionary way to look better and feel younger.’ *Sunday Mirror*

‘If you’ve got *Bodypower* you may never need to visit your doctor again, or take another pill!’ *Slimmer*

‘...a marvellously succinct and simple account of how often the body can heal itself without resort to drugs. It is also refreshingly sensible.’ *Spectator*

‘Stimulating, outspoken and easy to understand.’ *Oxford Mail*

‘Arm yourself with a copy of *Bodypower* – it could make stress a thing of the past.’ *Woman’s World*

‘This is an excellent book. Very informative and encouraging. Recommended.’ *New Humanity*

‘This is probably one of the most sensible treatises on personal survival that has ever been published...It sets out, in the simplest language, an enormous amount of knowledge about the human mind and body, and it is assimilable in the easiest possible way.’ *Yorkshire Evening Post*

‘Despite my own medical training and knowledge of nature’s devices, Dr Coleman made me think again...’ *Book Choice, BBC World Service*

‘If *Bodypower* really caught on, it could help to save the National Health Service from slow strangulation.’ *The Scotsman*

‘A fascinating read that could change your life.’ *What Diet*

‘There are plenty of good books on health care in the shops and for starters I’d recommend *Bodypower* by Dr Vernon Coleman which shows you how to listen to your body and understand its signals.’ Angela Willans, *Womans Own*

‘Dr Coleman is one of the most prolific and energetic of literary medical men. He churns out his books with admirable regularity. Every one a gem!’ *Liverpool Echo*

For a list of other books by Vernon Coleman please see either the Amazon Author page or visit http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

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NOTE

This book is not intended as an alternative to personal, professional medical advice. The reader should consult a physician in all matters relating to health, and particularly in respect of any symptoms which may require diagnosis or medical attention.

While the advice and information are believed to be accurate at the time of going to press, neither the author nor the publisher can accept any legal responsibility or liability for any errors or omissions that may be made.

FOREWORD

It began in the autumn of 1980

I was in Vienna and the weather was freezing cold. Outside in the street the wind cut through my thin raincoat as if it wasn't there. I walked with my shoulders hunched and my hands stuffed deep inside my coat pockets. My fingers felt numb. I was so cold that I could hardly think; even my brain felt frozen. I was shivering involuntarily and uncontrollably.

It was dusk. The skies were dark with rain to come and in the early evening gloom the bright lights of the cafe seemed especially warm and promising. I love the cafes of Vienna and Paris. They remind me of the sort of places where Dr Johnson might have talked with friends in London a couple of centuries ago. Through the open curtains I could see the dark wooden tables and chairs, the racks of newspapers neatly folded around wooden sticks and the plump, bosomy Austrian waitress hurrying about with vast cups of cream-topped coffee.

I went in, found a table near to the window and sat down. Inside the cafe it was cosy and comfortable. Old-fashioned radiators and a log stove gurgled pleasantly and the air smelt of ground coffee beans and rich chocolate cake. The waitress approached and smiled at me. I gave her my order, took my hands out of my pockets and tried to rub them together. They were white with cold and I could hardly move my fingers.

I cupped my hands, held them up to my face and blew on them. Slowly the feeling came back into them. Slowly the colour returned. Gingerly I flexed and extended my fingers; gradually I regained the movement I had lost. As I watched my frozen fingers changing colour I suddenly became aware of something that was to change my life. I suddenly became conscious of the remarkable powers of the human body to adapt itself to cope with its environment. Outside in the bitterly cold autumn air the blood had left my fingers to reduce the amount of heat lost in order to try to maintain my internal body temperature. My body had been prepared to sacrifice my fingers to save itself. Inside, in the warmth of the cafe, the blood had rushed back into my hands. Once my body's internal thermometer had recognised that the temperature inside the cafe was warm my body no longer had to fight to keep me alive.

I felt the shivering stop and slipped off my coat. I picked up the coffee which the waitress had brought me and held my head in the steam rising from it.

I'd been qualified as a doctor for ten years and for most of that time I'd been working as a General Practitioner in a small town in central England. To begin with I'd enjoyed the work I did, but for several years I'd been growing more and more worried by the fact that too often I was finding myself interfering with illnesses when it seemed to me that my patients would probably get better by themselves if only I and they were prepared to wait.

Sitting in that cafe in Vienna, with my thawing hands wrapped around a steaming cup of coffee, I realized that the human body has far more extensive, protective and self-healing powers than we give it credit for. I realized that all of us, doctors and patients, tend to be too quick to rush for the medicine cabinet when things go wrong. I remembered a book I'd read when I was at medical school. Called *The Wisdom of the Body*, it was written in 1932 by a physiologist called W. B. Cannon, who believed that the body's abilities to protect itself from change and threat are comprehensive and far-reaching. And I remembered conversations I'd had with a friend, Tony Sharrock, who was convinced that too often doctors ignore the fact that in illness the body knows best.

I took out my notebook and pencil (for years I have never gone anywhere without both) and immediately wrote down the outline for a book I knew I wanted to write. I called it 'Listen to Your Body'. I wanted to try to teach doctors as well as patients that the human body has far-reaching powers that we ignore far too often. I wanted to try to persuade patients to learn to listen to their own bodies and to avoid interfering with their bodies unless absolutely necessary. I wanted to teach doctors that they should not always assume that whenever illness strikes intervention is essential. I wanted to show both patients and doctors that we all underestimate the remarkable healing powers of the human body.

A few days later I got back home full of excitement. I wanted to resign from my practice, write the book and change the world. I knew that I could not remain in General Practice, handing out endless prescriptions. I knew that if I continued to work as a doctor I would not have the time to teach doctors and patients how wrong they were to continue to put all their faith in drugs and surgery.

It wasn't quite that easy.

I sent the outline to my then literary agent with a letter that was bursting with enthusiasm. She was far less impressed than I had hoped she would be. She wrote back to me arguing that 'the serious illnesses people have nowadays simply wouldn't heal themselves, so there's a limit to how useful this process can be'. I was frustrated almost beyond belief. That was exactly the attitude I was so desperate to change. The truth is that most illnesses are not serious but are *treated as if they are*. I insisted that the idea was relevant and valid and that the only way to put forward the idea was to write a book about it, explaining the remarkable self-healing powers of the human body and showing exactly how those powers could be harnessed.

With, I suspect, some reluctance my agent sent the outline out to one or two publishers. They returned it without any enthusiasm. Throughout the early part of 1981 the outline was rejected as irrelevant, impossible or impractical by half the publishers in London.

But the book had already changed my life irrevocably. In the summer of 1981 I resigned from the National Health Service and decided to become a full-time professional writer. The more time I spent researching material for the book I now called *Bodypower* the more convinced I was that I could not justify the work I was doing as a GP. As a practising doctor I just did not have the time to explain to my patients why I didn't always want to give them prescriptions. I needed to stand outside everyday practice in order to spread the philosophy that seemed to me to be so important.

Leaving the NHS wasn't the wrench I'd thought it might be. I missed my patients desperately but I didn't miss the NHS bureaucrats. My last few months of existence as a GP were a constant battle.

It wasn't until 1982 that I found a publisher prepared to commission the book. I was having dinner with Jamie Camplin of Thames and Hudson to celebrate the launch of my book *The Good Medicine Guide* when I managed to persuade him that the principles behind *Bodypower* were not only sound but that they also merited a wider audience. Camplin agreed to publish the book.

The dream I'd had in that cafe in Vienna two and a half years earlier had been fulfilled. The philosophy I described in *Bodypower* changed my life, and has influenced everything I've written about medicine since 1980. It has also influenced hundreds of medical writers, thousands of doctors and millions of patients. The *Bodypower* philosophy is now widely acknowledged and accepted.

Every week since 1983 I have collected new evidence showing the remarkable powers of the human body. There has been evidence from scientists around the world showing that the power of the body and the mind is greater than anyone could have dreamt a mere decade ago. For example, researchers have shown that crying helps the body get rid of harmful waste material. It has been shown that tears shed because of emotional feelings contain more protein than tears shed because of irritation. When you are upset and you cry your body is getting rid of unwanted and dangerous wastes. Researchers have also shown that during the last three months of pregnancy, and for the twelve months after a pregnancy has ended, a mother's lips produce sexually attractive chemicals designed to make her lips more kissable. Sebaceous glands along the borders of the newborn baby's lips produce similar chemicals and help ensure that the baby responds to its mother's kisses in an appropriate way.

Newspaper stories have supported the *Bodypower* theory too. Soon after *Bodypower* was published I read about a farm worker who had been involved in a horrific accident. He carried his severed arm for a mile in order to get help. His arm was then sewn back on by a surgeon at a nearby hospital. More recently I read of an 87-year-old widow who knotted sheets together and climbed out of her first floor window in order to escape from a fire. In both these cases the human body found resources that no one would have thought could exist.

Most exciting of all, perhaps, has been the response from the medical profession. When *Bodypower* was first published the response from some parts of the medical establishment was cool. Doctors have for decades been taught that in order to beat disease they have to interfere with nature. The medical profession has grown in strength alongside the drugs industry; thousands of doctors have been taught that a doctor's first response to any illness must always be to reach for his prescription pad. But that too has changed. More and more often the medical journals now contain articles written by doctors explaining how they have discovered that it isn't always necessary to interfere when a patient falls ill; that the body can often look after itself; that the body's defence mechanisms and self-healing mechanisms are far more sophisticated than they had been taught and that the power of the human mind is far greater than anyone would have dared suggest just ten years ago.

In 1983 the philosophy behind *Bodypower* seemed new and slightly frightening to many people. Some thought it threatening, a few even suggested that it was heresy to suggest that in 90 per cent of all illnesses there was no need for a professional healer, that the body could look after itself perfectly well.

Today the philosophy described in *Bodypower* is widely accepted. It has not halted the march of modern interventionism but it has, perhaps, caused some of those who lead the march to break step. From the letters I have received I know that it has encouraged many to be prepared to take advantage of their bodies' own healing processes and to regard illness as something to be conquered in partnership with the help of healers (whether orthodox or alternative) rather than as something to be handed over completely to the professionals.

If this is the first time you've read *Bodypower* I hope you find it as exhilarating as I still do. I hope it changes your life too!

Vernon Coleman Devon, England

PREFACE

Bodypower is above all a practical book. The aim is to help you use your body's own inbuilt powers in order to deal safely and effectively with the many, varied hazards which are an inevitable part of modern life.

The book is divided into four parts. In Part One I have described many of the body's remarkable mechanisms and explained how those mechanisms operate.

In Part Two I have produced an account of the ways in which most of us normally attempt to deal with signs and symptoms of disease. I have explained why I think that the traditional 'interventionist' approach is often inappropriate.

In many ways these first two parts are 'introductory' sections. They are, nevertheless, essential in providing the background for the more important practical guidance that follows.

In Part Three I have outlined the fundamental principles of the *Bodypower* philosophy. And in Part Four I have described some of the practical ways in which it can be sued to advantage. *Bodypower* can be used to help provide you with protection against disease, to help speed recovery, to help improve your physical and mental capacities in the face of the many different threats to health. *Bodypower* is not a gimmick. and it does not consist of any trickery. *Bodypower* is a new approach to life based on sound, physiological principles.

Vernon Coleman

PART 1: THE WORLD WITHIN

Our bodies are sensitive, delicate and remarkably frail. The fact that we manage to prosper in a world which is often hostile and unsympathetic to our needs is a tribute to a vast number of automatic mechanisms – mechanisms specifically designed to enable us to survive an infinite variety of environmental hazards, to repair and restore ourselves to good health when disease and disability threaten and to learn from our experiences so that we can improve our capacity to survive.

Many of these mechanisms are complex, sophisticated and difficult to understand. It is perhaps because of this that we usually see the human body in terms of the mechanical world with which we are familiar. So, some centuries ago, when physiologists were first struggling to explain precisely how the brain manages to send messages around the body and exactly how the heart succeeds in keeping blood flowing through the vessels, it was perhaps natural that they should choose to offer their explanations in mechanical terms, using as analogies the only physical concepts they understood.

In the seventeenth century, for example, Rene Descartes argued that the nerves which connect our brains to our muscles are filled with fluid and work on a simple hydraulic system. That theory was accepted for many years but then, when Alexander Graham Bell gave us the telephone and the telephone companies gave us switchboards, it became fashionable to describe the central nervous system as some extraordinarily complicated network of telephone lines connecting thousands of separate callers with one another. More recently, when computers became commonplace and it was found that some nerve endings had electrical connections, indicating that nerve messages may sometimes be transmitted with the aid of electrical impulses, it became common to compare the human brain to the computer.

This recurrent tendency to see the human body in simplistic terms and to explain the mechanisms which exist in terms of devices which we ourselves have created has the dangerous and restricting effect of ensuring that the observer must inevitably fail to comprehend the full range of human capabilities. Indeed, it seems that too many modern scientists deny or ignore new evidence because it does not fit in with what they want to believe, or because it suggests that the manmade systems which are regarded with such awe and respect are by no means as sophisticated or as advanced as they might like to think them to be.

Today we are only beginning to understand the extent of our ignorance about the human body. Slowly it is becoming clear that if a scientist claims that there is a simple explanation for a complex phenomenon, then he is probably wrong. Our knowledge about the human body is expanding so quickly that it is almost certainly true to say that anything a student learns about the physiology of the human body will be out of date by the time he leaves his school, college or university.

We now find that the traditional dividing line between the conscious and the unconscious mind can no longer be drawn with any accuracy. We know today that messages are transmitted within the brain by five different types of electrical activity and by a complex network of chemical messengers which are far more bewildering than our predecessors ever imagined.

We know that the brain contains pain-relieving hormones and, although we do not understand why, we know that it can be affected by magnetic storms. We understand some of the driving forces which control our lives but, although the desire to enjoy sex and the desire to win may be forces which we can explain, we still do not know enough about the mind to be able to define such intangible concepts as pleasure, jealousy or love. We may be able to explain why a man should find a woman attractive but how do we obtain pleasure from the sight of a beautiful sunset or an exquisite painting? What physiological purpose or evolutional value can there be in such abstract pleasures?

Amidst all the confusion and ignorance, the one thing that we can say with certainty is that the capacity of the human body to heal itself, to benefit from experience, to improve itself, to protect itself and to guard itself against threats of all kinds is far greater than we have ever imagined it to be.

On the pages which follow you'll find descriptions of some of the many physiological properties and mechanisms which have been reported. Many of these mechanisms pose questions which we cannot begin to answer and the existence of some of them must result in the serious questioning of established theories about how the body works. My aim is to show the extraordinary capacity of the human body to look after itself, and to provide a scientific background for the later sections of this book, in which I shall describe how and why an understanding of your body can help you look after yourself more effectively. My intention is to show the extent of only some of the body's resources – resources which are often unsuspected and frequently unused, resources which we do not thoroughly understand but which are nevertheless of inestimable value.

Your body has internal mechanisms which regulate the way you act and react

Anyone for tennis?

If you reach out your hand to pick up a pencil your brain will control all the necessary muscles by using your body's inbuilt information-collecting system. If your hand looks like overshooting the pencil, appropriate messages will be sent to your brain. And the muscles which are promoting that particular movement will quickly go into reverse. If your hand is aiming to the left of the pencil, the muscles which are taking your hand that way will be relaxed and the muscles which will move your hand to the right will be contracted. Your brain is using what the engineers call 'feedback mechanisms' to enable it to control your hand with precision and to ensure that it is successful in picking up the pencil. Small sensory cells deep inside the muscles provide the brain with vital information about the positions of individual muscles and the position of the whole arm, which is matched with the information provided by the eyes.

Picking up a pencil is a fairly trivial task, of course. If you are playing tennis, thousands and thousands of feedback mechanisms have to be brought into play. Your brain has to judge the speed and curve of the ball and must use information from a vast number of sensory cells in order to ensure that the right muscles contract at the right moment and for precisely the correct length of time. Your feet have to be in the right place and your hand has to move in the right way. All these movements have to be carried out very quickly and, if you have played tennis before, your body will have acquired muscle experiences which will enable it to make them that much quicker. In effect, your muscles will have been programmed to enable you to play tennis.

Guided missiles, equipped both with propulsion systems and sensory systems, do very much the same sort of thing in a much cruder way. Your body has a number of advantages and subtleties that the most sophisticated manmade guidance systems do not have. You, for example, can produce an infinite variety of different shots, and you can use your experiences to create new solutions to old problems. You can even repair yourself if you fall and graze an arm or sprain an ankle.

But there are even more important differences: however skilful technicians may be when they are preparing guidance systems they cannot ensure that their missiles are programmed with a burning will to succeed. Nor can they add any extra circuits to make sure that a computer-controlled missile system enjoys its work or gains pleasure from winning. When you are playing tennis you can be driven and motivated by an almost unending series of driving forces that cannot be explained in purely mechanical terms. What does a machine know about anger, jealousy, resentment, pride, indignation, humour, love, conscience or guilt? What can it know of the hundred and one other preferences, values and feelings which together enable us to balance facts against ambitions, experiences and aspirations and come up with decisions which may be irrational and inexplicable but none the less right?

The choice is yours

Your brain contains about 1000 billion cells. Each one of those cells has something like 5,000 connections with neighbouring cells. And every minute of every hour of every day those cells and those connections are buzzing with information. Message carrying impulses are continually reaching your brain from your sensory cells, from the special receptors in your muscles which carry information about limb positions, from the chemically sensitive receptors in your blood vessels which continually provide up-dated information about the levels of various constituents in your blood, from your special sense organs – and from a thousand and one other independent sources. The information never stops coming. Even when you are asleep there is still a very heavy traffic of news coming into your brain.

Theoretically, all this data is significant. And yet since it would obviously be impossible from your brain to respond to every single piece of information it receives, many of the impulses must be ignored. A small amount of the information that gets through will eventually produce a voluntary response; some of it will produce an automatic response from one of the many mechanisms which ensure that the internal environment is maintained in tiptop condition. But most will be ignored. If it were not, your brain would be continually confused by an unending series of conflicting reports and opposing instructions. Your brain's inbuilt ability to select the information that needs action is therefore of vital importance.

In order to ensure that the right information is ignored and that the right information produces a response, the human brain has developed a delightfully simple way of solving what could be a difficult problem. At the same time, it has managed to solve this potential problem in such a way that it can also keep all sensory receptors tuned to respond to very slight changes. Those sensory receptors are, in fact, adjusted to such a delicate level that every minute thousands will fire off false alarms.

Your brain deals with this deluge of information by looking for patterns among the news messages it is getting and by responding only when something like a hundred more or less identical impulses are received. This very simple arrangement ensures that your billions of brain cells are able to pick the relevant from the irrelevant with considerable ease. Isolated bits of unsubstantiated news are ignored. News trends produce action.

The unconscious mind

It is sometimes thought that there is a firm dividing line between what goes on in the conscious mind and what goes on in the unconscious mind. In practice, however, there seems to be no division at all. There is plentiful evidence to suggest that our unconscious minds are, indeed, capable of responding to external stimuli as well as our conscious minds. We can, it seems, switch ourselves onto automatic pilot with amazing ease.

There is, for example, evidence that epileptics have successfully ridden bicycles while they were technically not conscious. There is a well-authenticated anecdote which describes how an epileptic doctor managed to see a clinic full of patients without being in the slightest bit aware of what was going on. You yourself have probably experienced something similar if you drive a car. Most drivers have at one time or another 'woken up' with a start to find that they have been driving the car quite safely without being in any way aware of their actions. Operating the controls according to the instructions of the unconscious mind means that the requirements of the conscious mind are ignored – I once set off to drive from London to Coventry and found myself on the outskirts of Bristol without much idea of how I got there.

Sometimes this unconscious awareness can be extremely useful. When windmills were used for grinding flour it was well known that the millers would be woken up if the mill stopped turning and needed attention. The rumbling of the stones and the rush of the wind in the sails didn't stop the millers sleeping – the absence of those noises did.

I had a similar experience during a recent bad winter when I woke in the middle of the night with a jump. I sat upright in bed, convinced that I must have been woken by the sound of a burglar. In fact, like the millers, I'd been woken not by a noise but by an absence of noise. Because the weather was so bad, I'd decided to leave the central heating switched on for the night in order to ensure that the pipes didn't freeze. The boiler makes a noise as it pumps hot water round the house and when the noise had suddenly stopped I had been woken by the silence. My sleeping mind had immediately recognised that the absence of that particular noise might be a threat and I'd woken up before the house had had time to start going cold.

Central eating control

Hidden deep inside your brain there is an impressive device known as an appetite control centre. The power of this unique control centre is astonishing. It can make sure that you never get overweight or underweight. And it can make sure that you never become short of essential vitamins or minerals.

The importance and remarkably wide-reaching authority of this part of the brain was identified in research done by Dr Clara M Davis of Chicago in the 1920s. Writing in the *American Journal of Diseases of Children* in October 1928 she described experiments she'd done with newly weaned infants.

Her aim was to find out whether these young children could:

1. Choose their own food and eat enough to stay alive.
2. Select a good balance of meat and vegetables
3. Pick foods designed to keep them healthy.

The results were staggering. Dr Davis found that without any prompting the infants chose good, varied diets. Their growth rates, development, vigour and appearance were just as satisfactory as those of babies who had been eating foods carefully chosen by experts. They ate the right types of food and they ate the correct quantities. And they stayed perfectly healthy.

Five years later, in a paper read at the 75th Annual Session of the American Dental Association, in conjunction with the Chicago Centennial Dental Congress, Dr Davis gave details of more research that she had done.

Having studied 15 infants for between 6 months and 4 1/2 years she had come to the conclusion that all were able to select a good variety of satisfying foods and to ensure that they ate neither too much nor too little. Despite the fact that hardly any of the children had had more than a taste of spinach or cabbage they all remained healthy. Their eating habits seemed to be unplanned, even chaotic, but none ever had stomach ache or became constipated. The only bouts of diarrhoea that occurred were the result of infections. None of the children who were allowed to choose their own food became chubby or fat.

Some years later, during the Second World War, research showed that when soldiers were allowed access to unlimited supplies of food the troops ate just what their bodies needed according to their environment. Without any professional prompting, they automatically chose a mixture of protein, fat and carbohydrate that nutrition experts would describe as ideal.

Listen to your body when it tells you what – and how much – you need to eat and you'll stay slim and well fed for life. There would be no need for dieting books, professional nutritionists or slimming clubs if we'd only learn to let our appetite control centres take over.

Breast is best

The female breasts were originally designed for use as feeding aids rather than devices to titillate the male of the species. They are particularly well designed for their purpose. Milk production begins at the right moment and will usually continue for as long as it is needed. And as far as the baby is concerned, mother's milk really is best. Not only does is contain a perfect balance of essential constituents, but it also gives the baby a useful mixture of mother's antibodies which will provide the consumer with temporary protection against a wide range of diseases.

There is another advantage too. Some years ago doctors noticed that breastfed children are much less likely to get fat than bottle fed children. It was found that the contents of breast milk change when the baby has had enough to drink and that this change in the constituents triggers off the end of the baby's feeding response.

The rhythm and the blues

The spinning of the earth round its central axis structures our lives. It is this spinning which gives us our days and our nights and which provides us with a pattern for living. We sleep and work, rest and play, eat and drink according to the daily rhythm which results from the earth's movement.

Nevertheless, important as this daily rhythm is, there are known to be many other physiological, psychological and biomedical rhythms which also have an effect on the way we live. Of these, the best known is the one which ensures that a woman's hormone levels will rise and fall in such a way that she will alternately ovulate and menstruate, allowing each fresh egg to have its day, then seeing that it is discarded before fresh pastures are prepared in the womb. Surprisingly, we know little or nothing about this twenty-eight day clock inside each woman which is capable of operating relatively smoothly for some twenty or thirty years.

There are other body rhythms about which we know no more. There is, for example, an internal clock which controls body temperature from day to day. The fact that this clock seems to match the clock which regulates the menstrual cycle means that women can judge the best time to conceive by taking their temperature each day. Yet we know little or nothing about the clock mechanism involved.

Nor do we know why more people die at 4.00 a.m. than at any other time of day. Or why suicide is more common in the spring and the autumn when duodenal ulcers are also especially likely to perforate. Or why the best time to learn anything is just before you go to sleep. Or why the best time for making important decisions is round the middle of the day. Or why most men are sexually at their best early in the morning. Or why most of us are most alert during the early evening.

What we do know is that there seems to be a relationship between body rhythms and health. There is evidence, for example, that there is a link between depression and some sort of body rhythm. In an article published in the *British Medical Journal* in 1976, Nikitopoulou and Crammer showed that there is a change in the daily temperature rhythm in patients suffering from a particular type of depression. Other researchers have found the same thing. But as yet no one seems to know whether these patients are depressed because their body clocks are disordered or whether their body clocks are disordered because they are depressed. However, there is one clue which suggests that it is when the body rhythm goes wrong that depression strikes. It seems that a drug called lithium can be used to help some depressed patients. And when it works, lithium seems to slow the body rhythm down to normal. There may, therefore, be a link between lithium, a body clock and the mental state of an individual.

There is another clue too. Back in 1938 G.M. Griffiths and J.T. Fox published a paper in *The Lancet* in which they reviewed 110 male epileptics who lived in an English city called Lichfield. The men had a total of 39,920 fits during the period in which they were under observation. By making a careful note of the time of day when these fits occurred, Griffiths and Fox discovered that many of the epileptics had their fits at a regular time of day. It may well be, therefore, that epilepsy can sometimes be a result of a disordered body clock.

We know also that there are several different clocks which govern what takes place when we are asleep. These produce massive changes in hormone levels, a fall in the body temperature and a change in the rate of body hair growth. Electroencephalographic recordings taken in special sleep laboratories have even shown that there are two different types of sleep which alternate throughout the night. Rapid Eye Movement sleep is characterised by the fact that the muscles of the head and neck become floppy, the eyes jerk and the tone of the muscles round the rest of the body varies a good deal. Men often develop erections during REM sleep and dreams are frequently very active. Non Rapid Eye Movement sleep, on the other hand, is characterised by the absence of eye movements, a lowering of the pulse rate and blood pressure and a generalised lowering of muscle tone.

We understand little enough about these changes. We know no more about many others. Why, for example, should the amount of iron in the blood be greater in the morning than in the evening? Why should the amount of serum zinc in the blood fall in the morning? Why should the frequency of sexual intercourse be considerably greater during the months of April to June than during the latter part of the year? And how do we explain the fact that a study done in the Netherlands showed that people born in the winter months had a greater chance of eventually developing carcinoma of the bronchus than those born during the summer?

There are, of course, many individuals who strongly believe that these rhythms govern all aspects of human life. For some years now some people have believed that their health and fortune is ordained not by the position of the stars but by three different body cycles. In a book called The Periods of Human Life, published in 1904, Hermann Swoboda, Professor of Psychology at Vienna University, announced that our physical vitality and strength is governed by a 23-day cycle and that our emotional strength and stability is governed by a 28-day cycle. A few years later, Professor Alfred Teltscher of Innsbruck declared that there is a third, 33-day cycle, which governs intellectual activity.

All three of these cycles are said to begin on the individual's birthday and to follow a wave pattern after that, with the waves repeating themselves after 23,28 and 33 days. The theory is that the peaks and troughs of the cycle are the most critical times and that on these days an individual is particularly likely to be at his best or his worst.

By a careful study of the way the three waves relate to one another it is said to be possible to select the most suitable time of the month for particular types of action. It is alleged, for example, that if the date of a surgical operation is picked with care then the patient's recovery will be speedy and smooth. One published survey decided that over 30 per cent of all deaths from surgical misadventure could be prevented by avoiding dates when the patients' biorhythms were unfavourable.

The information we have is tantalising. Some body clocks seem to be controlled by hormones released by the pituitary gland or the hypothalamus. Others seem to be controlled without the use of any circulating hormones. There seem to be some clocks which can be controlled voluntarily, for there are individuals who claim that they can make themselves wake up simply by switching on an internal alarm clock.

However many separate clocks there are, however they may be controlled and whatever their role may be, there is no denying the fact each one of us has inside us a complex series of timing mechanisms which have a powerful effect on the way we tick.

The sex drive

Doctors treating Parkinson's Disease have on many occasions reported that their patients have been sexually stimulated by a drug called L Dopa, which is commonly used to help control the symptoms of the disease. In several surveys nearly all the patients reported that while taking the drug they noticed an increase in their sexual interest. One eighty-year-old man began having erotic dreams and nocturnal emissions. Another man, aged seventy-six, became so lustful that his nurses complained about his behaviour. A female patient given the drug tore off all her clothes and tried to seduce the male patients and staff. A thirty-seven-year-old patient had unexpected and embarrassing erections when he was playing ping pong with a nurse.

The reason for this unexpected sexual activity seems to be that L Dopa has an effect on the levels of dopamine and serotonin, two chemicals which occur naturally in the brain. Puzzled researchers have shown that dopamine increases sexual activity while serotonin inhibits it; the balance between the two chemicals controls an individual's sexual activities.

Although we still don't know precisely how it works, it seems that the body has an inbuilt mechanism designed to ensure that the survival of the species is not threatened by any lack of sexual desire.

There are mechanisms which enable you to adapt to changing demands

Adaptability

In 1936 the Hungarian pistol-shooting champion represented his country in the Olympic Games as a right-handed shot. In 1939, having lost his right arm in an accident in 1938, he became World Champion as a left-handed marksman.

That individual achievement is just one rather dramatic example of the many ways in which the human body can reallocate resources and skills and adapt itself for survival and success. Something similar, although obviously less spectacular, happens almost every day to each one of us. If you go into a room in which there is no light and you cannot see, your other senses will become much sharper than usual. You may stumble a bit, but you'll be able to find your way around by using your hearing, your sense of touch and your sense of smell. The loss of one sense automatically encourages your brain to make extra use of your other senses.

This simple process of adaptation is even more noticeable among individuals who are permanently blind and deaf. The blind, for example, can often manage to make progress in an unfamiliar environment with relatively little blundering. Hearing, smell and touch will be replacing the missing vital images.

This ability to adapt to new circumstances is perhaps one of the most remarkable human skills. It explains why people with paralysed legs often develop strong arms and why individuals who are so crippled that they can hardly walk can often swim well. You can prove to yourself just how adaptable your body is by walking round the house with a slipper on one foot and a heavy boot on the other. You'll soon find that your body adapts to the different weights. Indeed, if you take off the heavy boot and replace it with the other slipper, you'll find that to begin with you have some difficulty in walking. Your body will have adapted so well that you will be temporarily overcompensating for the weight of the non-existent boot.

Incidentally, if you have ever been impressed by stories of American Indian trackers who are able to follow prey for miles by using their senses, you may be interested to hear that in some modern prisons, where the law of the jungle tends to operate with a vengeance, prisoners are reported to have acquired considerable hunting skills. One prisoner, for example, has claimed that he can identify individual warders by their breathing patterns, their scent and the creaking of their arthritic joints. He's also shown that he can smell a packet of cigarettes in a coat pocket several yards away.

Your variable pump

Without a good, steady flow of blood no part of your body can do its job properly. Blood carries oxygen and food supplies and also removes the waste products. Neither your brain nor your kidneys, your liver nor your lungs, can work effectively or efficiently without an adequate supply of fresh blood. Even your heart, the powerful muscular pump which is responsible for ensuring that between 10 and 50 pints of blood are sent through your arteries every minute of every day of your life, needs a supply of its own.

Naturally the precise amounts of blood that the various parts of your body need will vary from minute to minute according to the work that has to be done. If you are sitting in a chair reading a book, your muscles are not going to need very much oxygen or food. The blood will be able to wander round at a relatively gentle pace. On the other hand, if you are racing for a bus or running away from a couple of muggers, your muscles will need a considerable amount of oxygen and food in order to cope with the sudden extra workload.

A number of very delicately balanced mechanisms exist to ensure that the amount of blood circulating matches your body's requirements. If some sudden emergency means that you have to leap out of your chair, your heart will not only beat faster, it will also increase its output every time it beats. This will mean that the amount of blood (and therefore the amount of oxygen and food) that will reach your muscles will be automatically increased.

Feeling on top of the world

When mountain climbers have taken on the world's highest peaks they have invariably allowed themselves time to acclimatise. When the Olympic Games were held in Mexico City some years ago many athletes arrived in Mexico months before the games were due to start.

Neither climbers nor athletes worried about getting used to the food. Their concern was to make sure they allowed their bodies time to get used to the low level of oxygen that is present in the atmosphere at high altitudes. The Himalayas and Mexico City have one important thing in common: both are many thousands of feet above sea level.

Since the efficiency of a human body depends very much on oxygen, living and working at high altitudes may appear to pose tremendous problems. The red blood cells which normally pick up oxygen in the lungs and then carry it round the rest of the body cannot collect enough oxygen from the air to which they have access. And that can mean that the whole organism performs poorly.

This only happens, however, to people who have recently moved into high altitude areas. Anyone who spends a month or two at a high altitude will slowly begin to adapt to lower levels of oxygen. The most important part of that adaptation is the formation of many new red blood cells. Faced with thinner air and less oxygen, the human body simply increases the number of red blood cells which are available to carry oxygen round in the blood. A healthy male who can manage very well with a mere 5,000,000 red blood cells per cubic millimetre of blood at sea level will have up to 8,000,000 red blood cells per cubic millimetre of blood when he has spent a little time living at 12,000 feet.

What a nerve!

The human nervous system is often compared to the computer. The analogy is false in many respects, but it perhaps looks weakest when you consider the ways in which the nervous system can repair itself when it is damaged. When a patient has a stroke he may be temporarily paralysed down one side of his body and may completely lose the ability to speak. Within months, however, the paralysis may disappear and the ability to speak may return. Damage that may have looked horrifyingly permanent often turns out not to be.

These self-healing improvements take place because the many individual cells which make up the nervous system are not only capable of making new connections and of rebuilding shattered circuits but can even vary their responses according to special demands and local conditions. Some nerve cells can regenerate and grow back into position when they have been cut, crushed or damaged. And when nerves are beyond self-repair, neighbouring cells can sometimes take over the contacts that would otherwise have been lost. You can lose quite large chunks of your brain without ever noticing that anything has happened.

Scientists still do not understand how all this happens. Some say that chemicals are released in order to attract new fibres along appropriate pathways. Others argue that electrical gradients control the nerve cell movements. And a third group of scientists believe that the path of a regenerating nerve cell may be guided by some unseen mechanical map.

The explanation may still be a mystery. The facts, however, are undeniable.

Pink, brown and black

When white or pink skin is exposed to the sun a number of things happen. The most dramatic consequence is that cells deep inside the skin start to release a substance called melanin which slowly migrates towards the surface. Melanin is the pigment which turns the skin brown. Its purpose is to provide some protection against further damage.

Dark-skinned people, originating from the hotter countries of the world, are born with a protective layer of melanin on the outer skin surface: the hotter the county, the blacker the skin.

Thus it is just possible that – since they are now sharing an identical climate – eventually all the inhabitants of South Africa will have skin of exactly the same colour. By the same token those people of African origin who now live in Northern, temperate climates could have white descendants in a few hundred thousand years. They no longer need melanin-enriched skin.

Muscle bound

If you do a lot of heavy lifting you'll develop muscles in all the right places. Those Mr Universe types who acquire muscles on their muscles on their muscles have merely taken advantage of the body's ability to build additional muscle tissue wherever it seems to be needed. If you need particular muscles to be well developed in order to do your job properly, those muscles will slowly develop as you do the job. Your body can build itself and shape itself to suit your requirements. And if the requirements change, so can your body's distribution of muscle tissue.

Them bones, them bones

If you fall down and fracture a bone your body will be perfectly capable of repairing the damage so effectively that you will soon be able to forget that the fracture ever took place. If two parts of the broken bone have been moved a long way from one another, outside help may be needed to re-position the bone fragments in such a way that healing can take place. In the majority of cases, however, that is the only outside interference that is needed. The body's ability to repair itself will deal with the rest of the problem.

An elaborate system of hormone controls will ensure that the mended bone is neither too thick nor too frail, that it has the proper shape and that it is organised internally so as to be capable of withstanding the most severe types of stress. Most amazing, perhaps is the fact that the decisions which will govern the way that the bone is rebuilt are not simply made according to some arbitrary, unbendable rules, but can be altered according to both environmental influences at the injury site and information which has been picked up as a result of previous experiences of a similar nature.

Break a bone and your body will repair the damage to make the new bone stronger than the bone you broke.

Feet made for walking

Should you use your hands a great deal to perform heavy manual work you'll eventually develop callosities on the skin. These thickened, rather unsightly patches of coarse, hard, yellowish skin develop in response to unusual amounts of pressure. The cells in the horny layer of the skin proliferate so as to make the skin tougher just where it needs to be toughest.

The same sort of thing can happen on other parts of your body. If you do a lot of walking you'll develop callosities on your feet. These thickened patches of skin may not look very attractive, but they do ensure that the skin is hard wearing in places where it needs to be hard wearing. Wouldn't it be useful if shoes could automatically strengthen themselves in the places where they usually wear out?

The housemaid's knee and the student's elbow

If you do a lot of kneeling on hard surfaces you'll acquire a soft, squashy swelling over your knee cap. You'll have what is known technically as a 'pre-patella bursitis' but popularly as housemaid's knee. A slightly different type of swelling, which occurs when the kneeling is done in a rather more upright position, is known as 'tibial tubercule bursitis', or parson's knee.

If you spend your time sitting with your head held in your hands and your elbow pressed hard on your desk you'll acquire a soft squashy swelling over your elbow. That's known as an 'olecranon bursitis', or student's elbow.

Bursae can, in fact, develop wherever the skin is stretched tight across a prominent bone and then subjected to pressure. The fluid that fills a bursa is deliberately put there by your body in order to provide a natural cushion. You may find the swelling rather unsightly and it may be uncomfortable. But it does protect the skin and the bone from more serious damage.

Old blue eyes

Have you ever stopped to ask yourself why some people should have blue eyes while others have brown eyes? Even if you have found the question worth considering, I expect you have concluded that the answer is not much more than a simple quirk of nature. Some people just happen to have irises which are coloured blue. Others have irises that are coloured brown.

Naturally, however, things are not as simple as that. In 1975 Michel Millodot of the Department of Ophthalmic Optics at the University of Wales Institute of Science and Technology published a paper in Nature showing that blue-eyed people have more sensitive corneas than brown-eyed people. He showed that there is a steady grading between people who have bright blue eyes and whose eyes are very sensitive, and people who have dark brown eyes and whose eyes are much less sensitive to the light. Similarly, individuals with hazel eyes are slightly less sensitive than those with blue eyes, while those with green eyes are less sensitive than those with hazel eyes. If your eyes are dark brown, they'll be less sensitive than the lighter brown eyes of someone else.

The clue to the explanation of all this lies in the fact that dark-skinned people who originated from the sunnier parts of the world invariably have dark brown eyes. Light blue eyes, on the other hand, are commonest among people born and bred in Northern Europe, where the sun is a less frequent visitor.

Since eyes which are dark brown are only one quarter as sensitive as eyes which are bright blue, it is clear that blacks are effectively born with built-in shades.

The eyes have it

In 1928 experiments started by Theodore Erismann at the University of Innsbruck set out to show how adaptable the human eyes can be.

To begin with, Erismann's subjects were given special goggles, which put a prism directly in front of each eye, but in addition the Austrian worked with goggles which transposed the visual field from top to bottom or from left to right. He even had a pair of spectacles which enabled the wearer to see only to the rear – as though he had eyes in the back of his head.

The subjects who bravely wore these extraordinary goggles found that within a week or two their eyes adapted very well. For example, after several weeks of wearing goggles that transposed left and right, one of the subjects working with Erismann found that he had adapted so successfully that he was able to drive his motorcycle through Innsbruck while still wearing them.

More recently, Ivo Kohler of the University of Innsbruck has described what happened when he designed special goggles which created a blue-tinted world as the wearer looked to the left and a yellow-tinted world as he looked to the right. Kohler found that his subjects even managed to adapt to these spectacles and that the colour distortions disappeared. Somehow the eyes and the visual system as a whole managed to introduce a corrective factor which ensured that the confusing effect of the goggles was overcome.

Kohler has also managed to show that the eyes can adapt to variable as well as constant distortions. Consider, for example, an experiment he did with a pair of spectacles in which the lenses had been fitted with prisms which had their bases pointing to the right. At the start of the experiment with these spectacles the subject found that if he turned his head to the left and then glanced to the right he would see an image that steadily contracted. Conversely, if he turned his head to the right and then glanced to the left he would see an expanding image. The prism had distorted his whole sense of vision.

After no more than a few weeks, this distortion disappeared and the eyes somehow managed to adapt to their new world, learning to expand contracting images and to contract expanding images according to the position of the head and the eyes. When, after wearing the spectacles for this period, the subject removed them, he found that the adaptation continued to operate. The result was that he found himself seeing a world which was a mirror image of the world he had first seen when he had put on the special prism spectacles. This effect slowly disappeared over a few more days as the eyes learned that the adaptation processes they had developed were no longer necessary.

Such research may seem bizarre, but it does show very clearly that the eyes are not rigid structures capable only of passing image to the brain like twin film cameras. On the contrary, they are extremely adaptable and sensitive organs which can change their mode of adaptation to cope with almost any demands.

Your body can defend itself against serious threats

A bleeding wonder

Whatever else it can manage without, your body needs a good, steady and consistent supply of blood in order to survive and function properly. As we have already seen, it is the blood circulating round your body that provides your muscles with necessary supplies of food and oxygen. It is the blood that takes away the waste materials. It is the blood that ensures that such essential organs as your brain and kidneys are kept well fed. And it is the blood that ensures that chemicals and hormones travel round the body quickly, efficiently and reliably. If for any reason the pump that circulates your blood stops working, or the supply of blood fails, then you will survive no more than a matter of minutes.

Naturally, the fact that the blood itself is a fluid and can easily be lost if the vessels which carry it are damaged means that the body has to have an effective and efficient system of ensuring that damage to the circulatory system does not result in a heavy leakage. There needs to be some sort of self-healing system.

And that is exactly what your body has!

Circulating in your blood, alongside the oxygen, the sugar, the vitamins, the hormones and the waste materials are some special proteins which, should they pass into damaged blood vessels, will automatically form a protective net. This net will catch blood cells and quickly form a clot which will seal the wound.

Not, of course, that the clotting mechanism which protects the blood supply is as simple as that. There are a whole host of fail-safe mechanisms which are designed to ensure that the system isn't accidentally triggered in to action when there is no leak and which ensure that the clotting system doesn't begin to operate until enough blood has flown through an injury site to wash away any dirt and bacteria which might be present.

Before a clot can form more than a dozen separate criteria must be satisfied!

Injury time

If you cut or injure yourself in any way, once the clotting mechanism has ensured that the amount of blood lost is kept to a minimum, another series of complex mechanisms will begin to ensure that any potential risk of infection is also kept to an absolute minimum.

As soon as a blood clot has formed and the loss of blood has been stopped, the damaged cells will release substances into the tissues resulting in the expansion of the local blood vessels and the flow of extra quantities of blood into the injury site. This additional blood will make the area red, swollen and hot. The heat will help damage any infective organisms and the swelling will ensure that the injured part is not used too much. By immobilising the area, the pain and stiffness will act as a natural splint.

White blood cells brought to the injury will help by swallowing up any debris or bacteria which might be there. These scavenging cells, bloated with rubbish, will allow themselves to be discharged from the body as pus once they have done their job. Once the debris has been cleared from the site and the scavenging cells have ensured that no infection remains, the injury will begin to heal.

It is at this point that the body shows an additional refinement, for the scar tissue it builds will be much tougher than the original area of skin that was damaged. Unsightly though it may be, the scar tissue ensures that the injured site is stronger than ever and better able to withstand any future injury.

Dying for a drink

Even if the blood-clotting mechanisms are not quick enough or powerful enough to cope with the damage done by a wound without there being an appreciable loss of fluid, all will not be lost. Your body still has a number of other mechanisms which will enable you to cope. Arteries supplying the injured area will constrict so as to limit further blood losses. Peripheral blood vessels supplying the skin will shut down so as to ensure that the supply of blood to the more essential organs can be preserved. The kidneys will cut the production of urine so that fluid levels within the body can be kept as high as possible. Fluids will be withdrawn from the tissue to dilate and increase the volume of the blood which remains. The red-blood-cell producing site within the body will step up production in order to replace the cells which have been lost. Finally, as an added refinement which any engineer would be proud of, the loss of blood will trigger off a thirst intended to ensure that the missing fluids are replaced as quickly as possible.

Fainting with purpose

If you lose quantities of blood or if your blood pressure suddenly falls, you will faint. When you faint you'll probably fall down flat.

This doesn't happen purely by chance. It is a deliberate trick employed by the body to ensure that your brain gets a good supply of blood. When you're standing, the blood has to travel upwards in order to reach the brain: if your blood volume is reduced, or if your blood pressure is low, the amount of blood getting to your brain is likely to be small. And since the brain is the nerve centre of the whole body, it doesn't like that. Blood brings oxygen and food and your brain needs a plentiful supply of both. The hormones that govern many activities within the body are produced by small glands within the skull. They too need blood if they are to reach the rest of the body.

So you faint. Once you've fainted and you're lying flat the blood will be able to reach your brain far more easily. If the blood loss was relatively slight or the lowering of the blood pressure was temporary, you'll soon be able to sit up again.

Bedevilled kidneys

If you go out for the evening and drink several pints of fluid, your urine will become diluted. Instead of being its normal yellow colour it will be very pale. On the other hand, if you spend a hot day hiking across country and you drink very little fluid, your urine will be much darker.

As your consumption of fluid increases beyond your normal requirements your kidneys make the adjustments necessary in order to excrete the unwanted fluid. Similarly, after a long, dry hike your kidneys produce far more concentrated urine in order to compensate for the fact that your intake of fluid has been lower.

Your kidneys do not only have the job of maintaining your fluid balance at the right level. They are also responsible for ensuring that the salts, electrolytes and other essential chemicals in your body are kept balanced. Eat too much table salt and your kidneys will excrete the excess in your urine. Eat too little table salt and your kidneys will excrete no salt at all.

Battle stations

Although your body has a large number of automatic mechanisms which enable you to deal quickly and effectively with problems of all kinds, there are still some hazards which cannot be dealt with so readily. If, for example, you are lying half asleep in bed and you hear the sounds of an intruder wandering around downstairs, it is clear that you are going to have to take some sort of voluntary action. If you are walking along the street and a car mounts the pavement and heads straight for you, you are going to have to do something about the threat quickly.

In such situations you have to make a very fast decision and your body has to be ready to respond instantly. There may not ne any automatic reflex mechanisms to cope with these diverse threats, but what your body can do is prepare you for action.

To begin with, your body's sense organs suddenly become far more sensitive. It is obviously important that you should have as much information as possible about the threat. The pupils in your eyes dilate and your retinae become more sensitive to light. These twin actions mean that your vision will become more acute. At the same time your hearing will become sharper. Animals actually prick up their ears, though in humans this action has now been lost.

If you are in the dark, your head will turn so that your best ear gets the maximum amount of information. If you are outside in the light or in a room that is lit, your head will turn so that your eyes get the best possible view. Your muscles will tense and your whole body will be prepared to attempt to obtain the fullest data about the danger. Your breathing will stop for a moment or two and your heartbeat will temporarily slow down as you concentrate on looking and listening for vital clues.

While all this is going on, the pituitary gland, deep, inside your skull, will also be setting in motion a chain of events which will enable you to cope with the threat as efficiently as possible. The pituitary gland produces a hormone – the adrenocorticotrophic hormone – which stimulates the adrenal glands to produce steroids and adrenalin. Unless your sense organs recognise very quickly that the alarm was a false one, your whole body will soon be affected by the hormones produced by the adrenals.

The steroids and the adrenalin have a number of dramatic effects throughout your body. The flow of blood to your brain will increase so that you can make the best possible use of whatever brain tissue you have. The flow of blood to your skin will be drastically reduced. This latter effect has two uses: first it ensures that if you are injured the amount of blood lost will be kept to a minimum; second, it means that more blood will be available for supplying your brain and your muscles. When you turn pale with fright there are very good reasons for your pallor!

Acid will flow into your stomach to ensure that any food there is turned in to sugar as soon as possible. Your muscles will be tensed ready for action. Your heart rate will be increased so that the supply of blood to your essential organs is kept at a peak. Your respiratory rate will also be increased so that your lungs bring in plenty of oxygen. Your basal metabolic rate will also go up as your body starts to prepare itself for action.

No fleet at sea can reach battle stations as quickly as your body. All these defence mechanisms will enable you to defend yourself more effectively. If necessary you'll be able to fight for your life with a vigour you would never have thought possible. If running away is the best solution to your problems, then you'll be able to run faster than you've ever run before.

Untapped potential

Very few of us know the extent of our own strength. Only if we are pushed to our limits do we find out precisely what we can do.

Consider, for example, the case of the young mother whose daughter was trapped under the back wheel of a motor car. There were no strong men available to help rescue the child and the woman knew that by the time any lifting equipment arrived on the scene it would be too late. So she solved the problem herself. She lifted up the car and freed her daughter. Afterwards she was quite unable to believe what she'd managed to do. And she could no longer budge the car.

A more exotic tale reinforces the point. A zoologist working in Africa was alarmed to discover hyenas on his track: he realised that his only hope lay in trying to get off the ground and out of reach of the animals. So when he got close to a suitable tree he leapt upwards, clung to a branch and swung to safety. It was only when he came to climb down again a few hours later that he discovered he had jumped twelve feet into the air. When he finally did manage to get back down to earth he tried to jump into the tree again to see if he could do it. He couldn't get anywhere near the branch on which he had spent the night.

Such stories are relatively common. A 70-year-old Irish farmer woke to find his farmhouse on fire. Unable to escape in any other way, he climbed onto his roof and walked along a telegraph wire nine yards long. Then he climbed down the telegraph pole to the ground. He had never walked a tightrope in his life.

Finally, there is the account of a special agent who, during the Second World War, was travelling on a freighter when the ship was attacked by a German submarine. Having locked some important papers in the ship's safe, the agent single-handedly dragged the safe onto the deck so that it could be thrown overboard if the ship looked like being captured. The freighter survived, however, and when the attack was over the agent decided to return the safe to the captain's quarters. Without the fire in his arms and legs he couldn't budge the heavy object. It took four men to carry it back down again.

Few of us fulfil our physical or mental potential or succeed in harnessing the powers we have available within us.

Blowing hot and cold

Your body can only operate within a fairly narrow temperature range. If the temperature of your internal organs rises or falls more than a few degrees your ability to function and even to survive will be threatened. Although there are records of individuals having survived with exceptional body temperatures, it seems that most of us can only hope to remain alive if we succeed in keeping our internal body temperature above 30 degrees and below 45 degrees centigrade.

Since human beings are perfectly capable of existing in environments where the outside temperatures are well outside this range it is clear that there must be some sort of thermostat inside the body which operates independently and which uses internal mechanisms to preserve a suitable internal temperature. These internal mechanisms are very adaptable. They work as effectively for the Eskimo living in his igloo as they do for the Arab wandering through the blistering heat of the desert. In both situations the body maintains its stable, internal temperature by modifying its physical structure to suit the demands of the external environment.

If, for example, you are suddenly snatched out of your armchair and deposited in a deckchair on a sunny beach a number of mechanisms will switch on automatically and produce clearly recordable changes in your body structure.

The first thing you'll notice will be the dilation of your surface blood vessels. Your skin will go pink because a greater quantity of blood will be flowing near the surface. This increase in superficial blood flow will enable your body to get rid of heat simply through the fact that the blood will lose the heat to the surrounding air.

Even more heat will be lost by your body's cunning use of the fact that when water evaporates heat is lost. People who live in very hot climates but who do not have refrigerators have for centuries kept their butter cool by storing it in water-filled porous pots which allow water to evaporate. Your body uses the same technique. When sweat evaporates from your skin, heat is lost into the surrounding air.

Clearly, this sudden and sometimes dramatic increase in the amount of fluid being lost by the body could lead to a dangerous amount of dehydration. Consequently, when you sweat automatically operated mechanisms ensure that you produce less urine. In addition, as the sweat pours out so the amount of saliva you produce will fall, thus making your mouth dry. And so you'll get thirsty and drink more fluids.

Other mechanisms come into play too. Since human bodies generate far less heat when they do little exercise, you'll probably find yourself feeling lethargic when you're hot. Your lethargy will stop you running round so that your own heat production will be kept to a minimum. Finally, you may also notice that your rate of breathing will increase. Since you lose heat when you breathe out, this is another way of keeping your body temperature down.

All these mechanisms will be brought in to action if you find yourself sitting on a hot beach. But consider what will happen if you are whisked from there to a snowy ski slope in Austria.

You'll stop sweating, of course, and your breathing rate will go down, too. You'll also turn rather pale as those superficial blood vessels shut down in order to ensure that the amount of heat lost through the skin is kept to an absolute minimum. Because muscle activity actually produces more heat, you may also find yourself shivering. You may stamp your feet in an automatic attempt to produce some internal warmth. Finally, you'll probably notice that some of the small hairs on your body will stand on end, producing what are commonly known as goose pimples. This mechanism is a leftover from the days when we were all covered in a thick hairy coat; by standing on end the hairs could keep a layer of warm air trapped next to the skin.

Safety margins

Your body is well prepared for disaster. You may lose nearly three quarters of your lung, liver or kidney tissue without noticing any substantive loss of function. You've got a similar amount of heart muscle in reserve too. And you can afford to lose yards of intestine without any appreciable effect on your digestion.

All this spare tissue allows your body to cope with exceptional demands. Your heart may beat at a rate of something around 60-70 times a minute during normal circumstances, but in a crisis it will be well able to beat over 150 times a minute. Your body can get by with just a few litres of air going into your lungs every minute. In a crisis your body and your lungs can bring in and deal with over one hundred litres of air a minute.

Tears with feeling

A few years ago, when some car manufacturers started fitting their car headlights with washer and wiper blades, many people applauded the daring and originality of the concept.

In fact, of course, those manufacturers were merely imitating something that your body does far more efficiently. Without you even being aware of it, your body pumps a steady flow of tears over the surface of your eyes in order to wash away impurities. At the same time, your eyelids blink unceasingly in order to wipe the eyes clean.

If the eyes are threatened by a foreign object of any kind the system goes into overdrive. If a speck of grit or a small fly finds its way into one of your eyes, for example, a sophisticated defence system will immediately swing into action. Tears will flood across the eye in an attempt to wash the irritant away and your eyelids will temporarily go into spasm in an attempt to protect the eye from any further damage.

We only become fully aware of the importance and efficiency of this system when anything goes wrong. Thus, if for any reason your eyelids are paralysed and cannot function normally, there will be a real risk that your eye surfaces will become damaged and ulcerated.

There are mechanisms to protect you against disease and infection

Hot but not bothered

When a patient has a high temperature, the doctor will probably prescribe a drug intended to bring the temperature down. However, there is now evidence which strongly suggests that there is a good explanation for the fact that people who are ill often have a fever. When we have an infection our bodies deliberately raise our tissue temperature in order to help us cope more effectively with the threat. The increase in temperature seems to improve the capacity of the body's defence mechanisms, while at the same time it threatens the invading organisms. It is known that bacteria are more likely to die when the temperature changes and that they are particularly susceptible when the temperature goes up.

The mechanism can go wrong, of course. Occasionally, body temperature rises far too rapidly and goes far too high. Nevertheless, it seems that a fever isn't necessarily a bad thing.

Starve a fever

Patients who have high temperatures as a result of internal infections usually lose their appetites. And according to Dr George Mann of Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, there is good reason for this. Dr Mann argues that when someone with an infection and a fever loses his appetite he is unconsciously but deliberately starving the organisms which have caused the infection.

Dr Mann claims that, whereas the human body can survive quite well on its own stored supplies, the bacteria which cause infections need ingested food in order to survive. There is certainly evidence to support this theory. It is known, for example, that during periods of famine people normally susceptible to malaria seem to acquire an inexplicable immunity to the disease.

Some physicians with more faith in high-level technology than in old wives' tales may find this slightly disturbing. It does, after all, give credence to the saying which suggests that 'it is wise to starve a fever'. Incidentally, it seems possible that the loss of appetite which occurs in other diseases may merit the same explanation. It is, for example, commonly known that cancer sufferers lose their appetite, and this loss of appetite may be designed to weaken the multiplying cancer cells.

Spit and polish

If you have ever had a bad infection of your chest, you'll have noticed that you produce large quantities of phlegm. Your doctor will have encouraged you to cough up the sputum and to spit it out.

You may have thought that the stuff you produced under these circumstances was rather unpleasant and you may have found yourself reluctant to take his advice. What you probably haven't realised is that the phlegm is a very important part of your body's defence mechanism.

When the respiratory tract is infected, some of the cells which line it step up their production of a special type of sticky mucus. Other cells, which have tiny bristles, then move the mucus up the tubes of your lungs towards your mouth. As the sticky mucus travels, it picks up bacteria and pollutants of all kinds. That's why it sometimes comes out looking green, yellow, brown or black.

When you cough up the mucus and spit it out you're doing just what your body wants you to do.

If the tiny mucus-producing cells and the small bristle-bearing cells become very irritated (as they do by continued exposure to cigarette smoke, for example) they can be paralysed. It is because these cells get paralysed that smokers are so prone to infections of the chest.

A life-saving nuisance

When we develop a cough most of us do our best to get rid of it with the aid of sweets and linctuses. Although that is understandable, since coughs are something of a nuisance, it is worth remembering that the cough reflex is one of the most important reflexes in the whole of your body. If the reflex wasn't there, you would choke to death if you ever accidentally got a piece of food stuck in your windpipe. And if you ever got a minor infection of your chest heavy enough to increase the output from the mucus-producing cells in your lungs, you'd risk being drowned by your secretions. Any doctor will confirm that far more people have died from not being able to cough than have done so from coughing

The coughing mechanism is delightfully simple. The larynx narrows so that the air coming out of the lungs is put under pressure. When the pressure is great enough the larynx suddenly relaxes and there is an explosion of air out of the lungs. Anything stuck in or above the larynx will be blown out and the danger will be over.

That, at least, is what happens when you have a real cough. The annoying little half-hearted cough that hangs on after a cold is often more of a habit than a genuine, full-blooded laryngeal explosion.

Still, now you know why the cough is there, you might perhaps be a little less upset next time you have an explosion or two of your own!

Up, up and away

If you eat something that is badly infected and likely to prove a threat to your body, messages will very quickly be sent to a special centre in your brain. From there more messages will go to nerves which supply your diaphragm and to nerves which supply the muscles of your abdomen. Muscles which are normally used exclusively for breathing will temporarily be borrowed too. The result of all this activity will be that – very shortly after the offending material has been swallowed – your diaphragm will press down and your abdominal muscles will press in. Your stomach, caught in between these two powerful sets of muscles, will be under a tremendous amount of pressure. And any food still left in your stomach will be forcibly ejected at great speed.

In short, you will vomit.

As an added precaution, there is another mechanism designed to deal with any infected material which has found its way into the rest of your gastro-intestinal tract. Should the infected matter manage to get past the stomach and travel further, into the large bowel, a fresh set of mechanisms will ensure that the material is moved out of the other end of the tract as quickly as possible.

You'll develop diarrhoea.

Either way, your body is well equipped to deal with infections that get in through your mouth!

Secret allies

It is very well known that men are men and women are women because of the distribution of sex hormones within their bodies. When a teenage girl's production of progesterone and oestrogen rises, she will start to develop all the outward signs of womanhood. Her breasts will swell and her hips flare; she will start to ovulate and she'll start to menstruate. When a boy's production of testosterone begins to build up, he will acquire broader shoulders, hair on his face and chest and a deeper voice.

What is perhaps less well known, however, is the fact that these very basic hormonally induced changes are not as simple as they might appear to be. There are, in fact, a number of subtleties, designed to ensure not only that men find women attractive and that women find men attractive, but also that the survival of the species is guaranteed.

As a single example, consider the vaginal secretions which are produced when a young girl begins to show sign of sexual maturity and which will continue in varying degrees of abundance until she ceases to be fertile. These secretions will, of course, increase when the woman is aroused in order to make penetration easier and more comfortable, but there is an additional, delightfully sophisticated touch which ensures that during a woman's fertile years her vagina has some protection against infection.

At and after puberty the vaginal walls secrete glycogen, which is broken down by local bacteria to produce an acid. This acid ensures that foreign bacteria (most of which cannot survive in an acid environment) find the vagina inhospitable. Consequently, when the woman becomes pregnant the foetus she carries is unlikely to be exposed to any maternal infection.

Glycogen production continues throughout a woman's fertile years and stops automatically when she is no longer likely to conceive.

Sex hormones do not merely ensure that men and women enjoy each other. They also help ensure that their pleasure is fruitful.

Your body can develop self-protective symptoms

The importance of pain

A few years ago a doctor working in a leper colony was trying to open a door which had stuck. A twelve year old boy saw him struggling. To the doctor's surprise, the young boy – a leper – succeeded in opening the door without any effort. The key, which had been too stiff for the healthy doctor to turn, proved no barrier to the boy.

It was only when the door was standing open that the doctor noticed the boy's hand. It was cut and bleeding where the key had dug into the flesh. Because leprosy attacks and kills the nerve endings, the boy had not felt any pain when he had turned the key. And without the presence of pain to restrict his movement, he had been able to exert pressure in a way that no healthy individual would have been able to endure.

This small incident was important, for the doctor realised that lepers lose parts of their bodies not because the disease eats away at the flesh (as had been suspected) but because, with the sensation of pain gone, the tissues can easily be damaged. Lepers commonly lose fingers and toes and, before the incident with the key, it had been thought that the digits disappear simply through some direct action of the bacillus leprae. In fact, the damage indirectly resulted from the absence of any pain defence mechanisms. The doctor even found that some lepers lost their fingers during the night simply because they didn't feel the rats nibbling away at their flesh.

It isn't only those suffering from leprosy who have to endure life without pain. Some people are unlucky enough to be born without the necessary parts of their nervous systems. They, too, quickly discover that pain has many uses. For example, one young woman born without any pain receptors suffered terribly from badly damaged bones and joints. Because she didn't feel any pain or discomfort, she never moved when she was sitting uncomfortably or when she was lying in a position which put an unnatural strain on her skeleton. She became a cripple simply because her body couldn't use pain to help it stay healthy.

You and I might find the idea of life without pain attractive. But it can be truly unbearable. If you or I pick up something hot by mistake the pain we feel will ensure that we drop it again quickly. Someone without any pain sensation who picks up something hot will keep on holding it until their flesh begins to sizzle. If you or I get into a bath filled with water that is too hot, we'll quickly jump out again. If an individual who has no pain nerve endings makes the same mistake, he'll suffer severe burns. If you or I shut a finger in the door we'll speedily open the door again. The painless individual will push on the door to shut it. If you or I walk into a sandstorm our eyelids will protect our eyes. The man or woman who feels no pain will end up with badly damaged eyes. If you or I cut through a piece of wood and start to slice into a limb by mistake we'll soon stop. The man who doesn't feel pain will lose his limb.

Pain may be something of a nuisance and it may be something that most of us feel we would gladly do without, but those unhappy individuals who have no capacity to feel it would cheerfully exchange places with us. Without the defences afforded by the sensation of pain, most of those whom we would envy spend much of their lives in hospital. Few live very long.

There are even mechanisms to help you overrule inappropriate mechanisms

The automatic aspirin

Pain plays an important part in the defence of our bodies. And yet there are, of course, many times when the pain we experience is of little value. When a pain tells us that something is damaging our bodies we can use it as a warning sign. We can pull away from whatever it is that is doing the damage. But the pain will sometimes continue even when we've done everything we can to ensure that no further damage is done. And that type of pain can be both uncomfortable and useless. Indeed, it may even damage us further by weakening our will to live.

However, do not imagine that your body is unaware of the fact that the pain sensations it produces are sometimes debilitating. On the contrary, your body has another system designed specifically to help cope with pain. A separate system is used since the body is thereby provided both with additional flexibility and with an opportunity to maintain the pain sensory endings in a very sensitive state.

The existence of this additional mechanism was first suspected when an army physician noticed that men who had been severely injured often needed only very small doses of pain-relieving drugs. It was also discovered that in many instances quite severe pain could be relieved by tablets and injections with no active pharmacological ingredients.

Now, the existence of something called the placebo effect had been well known since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Traditionally, many doctors had used tablets containing nothing more than starch or lactose in an attempt to obtain some psychological healing effect. The experiences of the Second World War, however, inspired researchers to begin to investigate the whole subject of placebos more closely. Some intriguing results quickly began to appear in the medical journals.

In 1946 Jellineck found that, out of 199 patients who complained of having a headache, no less than 120 got relief from using a placebo. No less than 15 other studies, on a total of 1082 patients, showed that placebos have an effectiveness of something like 35 per cent when given to patients with pains. It was also found that the appearance of the placebo has an effect – in The *Journal of Mental Science* in 1957 Trouton wrote that, for medical purposes, placebos work best if they are red, yellow or brown in colour, bitter in flavour and either very large or very small. Surgeons discovered that if they opened up patients who had been suffering from angina (chest pain caused by heart disease) and then simply sewed up the wounds again, their patients would make marvellous progress if they were told that they had had bypass surgery. Researchers even found that many patients who take placebos and benefit from them also suffer from the sort of side-effects that are normally associated with active drugs. In the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 1955 Beecher reported no less than 35 different toxic effects suffered by patients taking placebos. In Medical Times in 1963 Pogge noted 38 different types of side-effect. Patients were reported to have become addicted to placebo tablets which contained no active constituents at all.

Many scientists struggled hard to explain all this. Some physicians, puzzled but impressed by the placebo response, seemed convinced that these dummy tablets were working simply because they had a psychological effect on the people who took them. Psychiatrists and psychologists tried to analyse the type of individual likely to respond best to placebos, but they were unable to find any pattern. The only certain factor that could be identified was faith, which seemed to be a vital ingredient. If the patient believed that the placebo would help, then it probably would. If he didn't believe, then there would probably be no useful effect. A placebo offered by an unenthusiastic nurse had only a 25 per cent response rate. The same placebo offered by an enthusiastic doctor gave success in 70 per cent of cases.

It has been discovered that the placebo response can be explained by physiological activity within the body, rather than by some mysterious and unexplained psychological status. Researchers working in laboratories around the world have become interested in opiate-like chemicals found in the brain. Called endorphins, these chemicals have extraordinary properties. In an article in *The Lancet* in 1978, Jon D. Levine, Newton C. Gordon and Howard L. Fields of the Departments of Neurology, Physiology and Oral Surgery, respectively, at the University of California in San Francisco not only suggested that the pain-relieving response produced by placebos is generated by the release of endorphins but pointed out that the pain-relieving mechanisms through which morphine and placebos work seem to be similar. They made three observations which supported this association:

1. With repeated use over long periods the pain relief produced by placebos tends to become less effective.
2. Patients using placebos tend to use larger amounts as time goes by.
3. When the placebo is withdrawn patients often show signs of distress.

All these problems are also associated with the use of opiates such as morphine.

Levine, Gordon and Fields argued that, if the type of pain relief that patients obtain with placebos is controlled with endorphins, then an opiate antagonist, normally used to block morphine, should block the placebo effect. The three researchers studies 51 patients, all of whom had impacted wisdom teeth. The results confirmed their hypothesis. As they had suspected, the patients who received the placebo obtained pain relief until they were given the morphine antagonist.

The precise pathways through which this pain-relieving system works are still a mystery. It seems likely that the release of the endorphin, the internal pain reliever, can be triggered by faith and belief. But is seems that there is also an overriding device of outstanding ingenuity which is set to operate when the production of pain, normally a protective mechanism, is likely to put the organism at greater risk than might otherwise be the case.

As I have already explained, feeling pain is often vital to our safety. Normally if you sprain or break your ankle the pain that is produced will stop you walking on it. If you walked on the damaged limb and used the damaged bones and ligaments, you would run the risk of doing permanent harm. The pain protects those structures. However, there are certain circumstances when you would be better off using the damaged limb and risking further damage to it. If, for example, you had twisted your ankle running away from a mugger, you would be in greater danger if you sat down and rested your leg than if you continued to run.

It seems that if the whole organism is threatened, the brain can trigger the release of specific types of endorphin which will dull and override the effect of the pain and enable the individual to use the wounded part of his body. It seems very likely that this release of a pain-suppressing endorphin is triggered when stress levels within the body reach a peak. If so, this phenomenon explains why sportsmen who are injured in important games can often manage to carry on playing with injuries which might normally have crippled them.

A labour-saving device

According to Dr Alan Gintzler of the Department of Anatomy at Columbia University, it seems possible that endorphins help women to endure pain during labour. Gintzler has shown that pain threshold and pain tolerance levels are increased during the final days of pregnancy by an automatic increase in the production of endorphins. The survival of the individual organism may not be threatened by the pains of labour, but the survival of the species could be at risk if pregnancy were too uncomfortable an experience. And so nature intervenes with a painkiller.

Or perhaps that is too cynical an explanation. Could it simply be that Mother Nature has decided to show her sense of sympathy for the pregnant woman in a practical way?

Cold comfort

A few years ago a Dutch professor described with some astonishment and a little pride hoe he had begun to suffer the early signs of a cold just before he was to give an important lecture but had succeeded in suppressing those symptoms until the lecture was over. He readily admitted that once he had completed his engagement the sore throat, stuffy nose and headache returned.

I myself had a very similar experience recently when I found myself suffering from the early symptoms of a heavy cold a short while before I was due to spend two weeks touring the country to promote a book. The plans included several dozen television and radio appearances during that time and I was very conscious of the fact that I would not be able to do the book justice if I was sitting in the studios blowing my nose, coughing and spluttering all the time. Without any conscious effort on my part the cold symptoms disappeared and stayed away for the while fortnight. They returned the day after I finished the tour. As soon as my defence mechanisms relaxed, the virus, which had obviously been lying vanquished but undefeated, came out of hiding.

We all have within us defence mechanisms if this kind which can be mobilised in emergencies.

Mind over matter

It has long been suspected that the human brain can influence the body in ways that we do not understand. Research has shown that genuine physical responses within the body can be controlled by the brain. There is evidence that automatic reflexes which were previously regarded as being quite outside voluntary control can be stopped or started by conscious effort.

For example, it seems that the digestive process can be specifically controlled. If you eat a very fatty meal your body will normally produce special enzymes which will break down the fat and turn it into products which can be transported in the blood. It is now know, however, that the production of these special fat-dissolving enzymes can be consciously controlled. Concentrate hard enough and you can force your body to produce fat-dissolving enzymes even if you haven’t eaten any fat.

Even more startling, perhaps, the body’s immune system, previously regarded as an entirely automatic phenomenon, can also be voluntarily controlled under some circumstances. It has been shown, for example, that the body’s response to the type of intradermal tuberculin injection used in the Mantoux test for T.B. immunity can be influenced by hypnosis. Normally such an injection will produce a response from the body’s own defences. A swelling and a small red mark will develop at the site of the injection if the body has been previously exposed to tuberculosis and has been able to prepare defences. Such a response can, however, be overruled if a subject under hypnosis, who would have reacted to the injection, is told that he will not respond. Surprisingly, it seems that even a cell-mediated immunity reaction may be controlled by the mind.

We still don’t understand the extent of the mind’s power over the body and nor do we understand why there should be such power. All we can say for certain is that the mind does have power over the body in very many different ways.

If a man is told that he is at the North Pole and he believes what he is told, he'll show physical signs which suggest that his body is reacting as though he were at the North Pole. He'll go pale and shiver. If a hay fever sufferer is shown a photograph of the sort of plant to which he is allergic, he'll sneeze. When the film Lawrence of Arabia was shown, cinema managers around the world reported that the sales of ice cream rocketed. The endless desert scenes had made the patrons feel uncomfortably hot.

Hypnotists use the power of the mind over the body in order to exert their influence. The operator must only convince the patient that something is true and the patient will act accordingly. If he convinces the patient that his arms are as heavy as lead, then the patient will be unable to lift his arms. If he convinces the patient that a piece of ice is a red hot poker and he then touched the patient's skin with the ice a blister will develop. The body will react to the suggestion, and not to the reality, and signs of a genuine burn will appear.

The final dignity

When life is artificially prolonged, pain and distress are only too common. People who die natural deaths, however, do not usually suffer any considerable pain or discomfort as death approaches. When medical intervention is kept to a minimum the body usually ensures that the final hours and days are as peaceful as possible. Pain-relieving endorphins are secreted automatically and the individual drifts slowly, almost contentedly, into an unconscious state.

And there are mechanisms which lie half forgotten and unused...

Show me the way to go home

Every year thousands of birds who are only a few months old manage to fly hundreds of miles in order to spend the winter in a warmer country. They fly without maps and without any artificial navigational aids. They fly across the oceans where there are no landmarks. And yet they invariably reach their destinations safely. Then, as the seasons change once more, they fly all the way back again. Similarly, newspapers often contain stories about family pets which have got lost but which have, nevertheless, managed to travel long distances in order to find their way back home.

No one seems to know precisely how birds and animals manage to navigate so accurately, but most scientists now argue that birds use some sort of inbuilt compass to help them follow the earth's magnetic fields.

Since creatures which most of us regard as less intelligent than ourselves seem to be able to navigate very well without instruments, might we assume that, although most of us have lost the knack, we too have some sort of inbuilt system which is designed to help us find our way around the world?

The evidence suggests so. Most dramatic of all was the work done by a British researcher. Working with students whom he blindfolded, Dr Robin Baker of Manchester showed not only that they were able to point their way back to their starting point, even when they had been taken on a confusing and deliberately circuitous route, but that they were unable to do this with magnetic-field-inducing coils on their heads.

Not that this startling experiment would have been much of a surprise for one of the world's greatest explorers. Captain Cook, the famous British sea captain and explorer, took a Polynesian with him on at least one of his journeys: according to Cook the man could always point accurately towards his own home island without any obvious external aids.

Thanks for the memory

Human memory is a very strange thing. In some ways it is very efficient. Numerous psychologists have tried to assess the power of the human brain to retain information and innumerable mnemonists have been studied by experts who have tried to find out why some memories are better than others. Consequently, we do at least know a little about the human memory and about how it can be improved.

Some of the most illuminating research was done by Professor A.R. Luria, a Russian psychologist who spent years working with Solomon Veniaminoff, one of the most remarkable memory men of all time.

Luria has described how Veniaminoff used to put things that he wanted to remember in an imaginary street, giving each a special place that he would construct specifically. So, for example, one object would be in a doorway, another would be in the gutter, a third would be leaning against a fire hydrant. To remember the object, Veniaminoff would simply take an imaginary walk down his imaginary street.

To remember numbers or to perform calculations, Veniaminoff used to draw a blackboard in his mind. And to forget things he would rub them off the blackboard. Since he was an exception, however, other researchers have tried to find out more about how the average memory works. In the process, they've observed all sorts of remarkable phenomena which we are sometimes prone to take for granted.

They have found, for example, that different people seem able to remember things in different ways. Wine tasters store the memory of the taste of scores of wines. Art historians store images. Musicians retain scores and arrangements in their minds. Tailors retain the 'feel' of types of cloth. Some people remember types of smell. We can all retain muscle movement memories (if you learned how to ride a bicycle when you were a child, you'll still be able to ride a bicycle). In addition to verbal, visual and motor memories, we store emotions too. Certain things bring tears to our eyes because they bring back sad memories. And some things make us smile.

The research indicates that you'll probably remember better if you don't try too hard. You may be able to store a visual memory more effectively if you close your eyes as soon as the picture you want to retain begins to fade. By doing so you'll keep the image on your retina and your imagination will then help. You're also more likely to remember things if you return to the place where you learnt them.

It has been shown that when divers are debriefed much better information is obtained if they are debriefed under water. Could that explain why sports teams often do better when playing at home, where they have been trained? Could it be that schoolchildren who take examinations in rooms where they have studied have an inbuilt advantage?

There is evidence, too, to show that a slight amount of stress will improve the memory. A severe shock can produce total amnesia. A little pressure can help an individual retain a memory.

And, finally, sometimes it appears that our memories absorb information without our being aware of it. Patients who have been under total anaesthesia have been able to recall words and snatches of conversation between the surgeons.

Second sight

Much of what we see is never consciously registered by our brains. If subliminal messages are flashed onto TV or cinema screens the messages will register with our subconscious minds only. Researchers have shown that aircrew members taught to press buttons when they have spotted enemy aircraft will sometimes press them when the aircraft have been there but they have not knowingly seen them. The unconscious ability to see is, it seems, sometimes stronger than its conscious counterpart.

To illustrate this point an experiment was organised in which individuals watching nonsense words being projected onto a cinema screen were given shocks when certain words were shown. Predictably, the experiment showed that the volunteers exhibited the same sort of responses as Pavlov's dogs. They began to show physical signs of fear every time they saw a word which would by accompanied by a shock.

What these researchers also revealed, however, was that when words which should have been associated with electrical shocks by the volunteers were falsely identified by their conscious minds their bodies nevertheless responded accurately, unconsciously making correct identifications.

And if that doesn't impress you, consider this: a boy who was taught to blink when he someone say the number ten also began to blink when he heard people say sums, the answers to which were ten. Thus he would automatically blink when he heard the numbers 92-82, 65-55 and so on. Somehow the automatic reflex he had acquired had linked into a part of his brain that was capable of doing small sums.

Whatever else we may suspect about our eyesight we do know now that we have a lot to learn. Could it be, for example, that when we act on impulse, or have a hunch about something, we are using information that has been fed into our brains without our knowledge?

Things aren't what they seem

Appearances can often be very deceptive. If you've put a straight stick into a pond and watched it suddenly appear to bend you'll be interested to hear about some experiments first tried in the early 1930s and long since forgotten.

Reporting his work in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology* in 1933, J.J. Gibson described how he conducted some investigations with prism spectacles which were designed to make vertical straight lines appear curved. He noticed early on that after a while the lines seemed less and less curved and he decided to investigate this process of adaptation to find out how the eyes could overcome the effect of the prism.

In the course of finding out about the phenomenon he discovered that if a straight stick looked curved to someone wearing prism spectacles then it would also feel curved. He found that people who wore the distorting spectacles and then ran their hands down a solid door frame would be convinced that the door frame had a bend in it. He decided that this implied that visual perception must be matched by an accommodating sense of kinesthetic perception. Or, to translate, that the person wearing the prism spectacles imagines that his arm has moved in the way that his eyes have told him it should move.

In a *Journal of Experimental Psychology* monograph published in 1967 by the American Psychological Association, Leon Festinger, Hirosho Ono, Clarke A. Burnham and Donald Bamber described experimental work which confirmed this theory. It seems that the feedback we get from our muscles can indeed be overpowered by the imaginary feedback we think we ought to be getting according to the visual input our eyes are providing.

Like so many other surprising discoveries it is difficult to judge the precise significance of this conclusion. Its immediate value lies in its vivid illustration of the extent of the power of the mind over the body.

The sixth sense

Scientists tend to greet all new ideas and partly substantiated theories with a mixture of scepticism and fear. If the ideas put forward have been tainted with the smell of commercial exploitation, then the scepticism and fear will be even stronger. To a certain extent that is a healthy response, but if new ideas also conflict with what are considered solid scientific facts, there is a danger that unavoidable and incontrovertible truths will be denied simply because they do not fit in with well-established theories. When this happens, prejudice replaces scientific judgement and superstitions retain precedence over evidence.

Such a pattern I am afraid, is exactly what has been revealed whenever the question of the existence of a sixth sense has been raised. Scientists argue that since the concept of a sixth sense is something of a musical-hall joke and since the theoretical support for the reality of any such phenomenon would undermine a number of carefully structured manmade scientific truths, the theory must be invalid.

In my view, there is now an overpowering amount of evidence to support the theory that a sixth sense does exist and that such things as extrasensory perception, telepathy, and premonitions are as real as vision and hearing. The capacities of the sense organs we know about are far greater than we might have suspected a few years ago. The capacities of the sense organs we have not yet identified are so vast that it is probably unwise at this stage even to make an attempt to define any boundaries.

One of the reasons why scientists have been so suspicious of claims which apparently show the paranormal capacities of the mind has undoubtedly been the fact that there has for many years been a certain eccentricity about many of the individuals working in this field. The uncritical work which has been published has often been subjective and presented in a style more appropriate for romantic fiction that straightforward scientific reporting. It is perhaps not surprising that scientists reared on a diet of double-bind trials and carefully planned laboratory experiments should remain unconvinced when evidence offered during television talk shows undeniable proof of the existence of a paranormal force.

Recently, however, much more solid scientific work has shown beyond any reasonable doubt that the human brain does have abilities which physiologists cannot yet properly explain. Laboratory experiments around the world indicate that some people can project and receive information. Researchers are even beginning to find possible explanations. Dr Peter Fenwick and his colleagues at The Maudsley Hospital in London have found significant numbers of head injuries, episodes of being knocked unconscious, blackouts and serious illnesses in the medical histories of the mediums they have studied. From their work it seems that there is a link between an individual being knocked unconscious and that individual later showing such skills as telepathy or clairvoyance.

Unless there is a major international conspiracy to mislead and confuse us all, we can no longer ignore the strength of this evidence. Whether orthodox physicians like it or not, it seems that human beings have the capacity to affect matter by the power of the mind alone. The fact that we do not understand precisely how these mechanisms operate can no longer be used as evidence that they do not exist.

Sound sense

Have you ever noticed that if you are at a party where dozens of people are talking loudly and someone mentions your name, your ears will automatically prick up? You will have isolated the sounds of your name from the general hubbub even though you hadn't been consciously listening to the conversation concerned.

Well, it seems that our hearing acuity is indeed very much more powerful than any of us might have imagined. In one fascinating piece of research, volunteers listened to various numbers being read out on a piece of recording tape. Every time the number five was mentioned, a puff of air was blown onto the eyelids of the volunteers. Eventually, the individuals all acquired reflexes which meant that they blinked whenever they heard the number five on the tape.

That was straightforward enough. But the next part of the research was really remarkable. For the people who had organised the experiment discovered that when they turned down the tape recorder and played it so that the voice on it was inaudible, the volunteers still blinked every time the number five was mentioned.

Somehow they had managed to hear unconsciously what they had been unable to detect consciously.

The sweet smell of success

Most of us have learned to be ashamed of our bodily odours. And yet there is considerable evidence to show that our individual smells have a power and purpose of their own. Many different creatures use specific pheromones to help them mark the extent of their own personal territory, to warn others of impending dangers and to establish pecking orders. Man is no different.

Anthropologist Louis Leakey has been reported as having suggested that body odour was an important human defence mechanism in the days when man was likely to be eaten on the way back from hunting trips. The smell put off most predators. A psychologist at the University of Chicago has shown that women who live together tend to acquire menstrual patterns which match. A researcher at San Francisco State University has produced evidence which suggests that the pattern of a woman's menstrual cycle is influenced by the odours of the women around her. I described this last phenomenon in a recent book and when touring to promote the paperback edition I was told by women producers, presenters, researchers and secretaries everywhere that they had noticed it. It isn't always easy to know why certain physiological mechanisms exist, but the actual evidence for their existence is sometimes readily available.

Perhaps most remarkable (and easily explained) of all is the evidence we now have which shows that some human smells have a genuine sexual value. It has been known since the 1940s that animals produce substances which have a strong stimulating effect on members of the opposite sex. Women can be attracted to seats which have been sprayed with sexually stimulating pheromones and men can be artificially induced to find photographs of women sexually appealing. Researchers have even been able to show that while secretions from the vagina of a non-ovulating woman are rated as bland or mildly unpleasant by men, secretions taken from the vagina of an ovulating woman are rated as definitely pleasant.

The food of love

If you're the sort of person who is always falling in an out of love and who tends to get very depressed when a love affair comes to an end, the chances are that your problems are linked to the amount of phenylethylamine in your brain.

This naturally occurring substance, structurally rather similar to amphetamines, is thought to be the chemical responsible for the highs and lows of being in love. According to Dr David Schwartz, Dr Michael Liebowitz and Dr Donald Klein of the New York State Psychiatric Institute, people whose production of phenylethylamine is disordered fall in love very quickly and then, if they are rejected, tend to go into a deeper decline.

When they are in love they experience a high which is similar to the sort of intense pleasure that people experience when they're taking amphetamines. When they are in a low mood they have symptoms which are said to be similar to those exhibited by people when they have suddenly stopped using such stimulants. They sleep too much, eat too much and are unable to get on with the normal business of living.

What makes the whole subject even more fascinating is the fact that the only food which contains phenylethylamine in high quantities is chocolate. And very emotional people will often admit that they tend to gorge themselves on chocolate when they're feeling low.

Could it be that this craving for something sweet is simply a sign that the brain is looking for an answer to its own problems?

A natural Valium

Benzodiazepines, such as Librium and Valium, were first introduced into medical practice in the 1960s. Since then these drugs have become more and more popular in many countries of the world. Thousands of tons of benzodiazepines are consumed annually. Many researchers produced evidence to show that the drugs in this group have a sedating and calming effect on human beings, but no one really knew how they worked until the late 1970s.

Then, through research by Richard Squires (of the pharmaceutical company Ferrosan) and Claus Braestrup (of the St Hans Mental Hospital in Roskilde, Denmark), it became clear that the benzodiazepines work because they have an effect on specific receptors which exist within the brain. These receptors seem to be formulated in such a way that they can respond only to drugs like Valium. And if a benzodiazepine receptor occurs within the brain, there must also be some sort of natural benzodiazepine to use that receptor.

So far scientists have been unable to identify with any certainty the natural chemical which has an effect like Valium. But it seems reasonable to assume that individuals who suffer unduly from anxiety do so because their natural production of this automatic Valium is inadequate. Or, perhaps, because their exposure to stress and pressure is so great that their internal production of 'Valium' cannot keep up.

PART 2: INTERVENTION

It should be clear by now that our bodies are remarkably capable of looking after themselves.

And yet few of us take advantage of these self-healing mechanisms and protective capabilities. In this section I'm going to look at some of the ways in which we deal with our bodies when things go wrong and investigate the strengths and weaknesses of the interventionist techniques we favour.

The Interventionist Approach

Interventionist medicine can be divided into three parts:

* orthodox medical care
* alternative medical remedies
* home treatments

In the pages which follow I want to explain why intervention can be dangerous.

Blinkers can impede your vision

Doctors have always been suspicious of anything new and often reluctant to listen to theories and ideas which contradict traditional attitudes. From Paracelsus to Lind and from Semmelweiss to Freud, medical history is littered with doctors who have learned that the medical establishment does not take kindly to original ideas or to new concepts which threaten the status quo. Medical students are taught that they should avoid asking uncomfortable questions and young doctors who wish to succeed must eschew the unconventional and remain unquestioningly faithful to the established truths. Any physician who rocks the boat, makes waves or swim against the tide will soon find himself floundering in deep water – and struggling to survive! To be successful a physician must respect the prejudices of his elders, adhere to the dogma of his teachers and shut his mind to theories which do not fit in with orthodox medical doctrines. Medicine is an unstructured discipline in which uncertainty, confusion and ignorance are too often disguised with conceit, arrogance and bigotry.

At a time when the half-life of medical information is shrinking and the limits of traditional, interventionist medicine are daily becoming more and more apparent, this ostrich-type behaviour is difficult to understand and impossible to justify. Unless doctors are prepared to consider the unexpected, the unlikely and even the apparently impossible, patients will do well to regard rigidly orthodox interventionists with a certain amount of suspicion and cynicism.

Doctors under the influence

Orthodox medical practice is big business. There are thousands of companies which have a vested interest in your ill-health. There are instrument makers, drug companies, private hospitals and insurance brokers. For every nurse and every doctor offering practical health and advice, there are countless administrators and clerks helping to ensure that the medical machine continues to whirr away profitably.

The fact that there is such a heavy business interest in the provision of health care means that commercial factors influence the type and quality of treatment that is provided.

The relationship between doctors and drug companies illustrates this point vividly. So, for example, when a doctor wants to choose a drug for a particular patient he will make his decision after referring to information supplied to him by the manufacturers of the available product. Even if he uses apparently independent journals to help him make his drug selection he still cannot be sure that the information he is using is offered without any subjective interest. There are some medical journals which allow drug companies to buy space in which to have their own articles printed. There are many medical journals which are wholly dependent for their very existence on drug company advertising. The result is that when a doctor prescribes a drug he will probably do so largely via information supplied by the drug manufacturer.

Another important consequence of this close relationship between doctors and the drug industry is that forms of therapy which cannot be packaged, marketed and turned into a profitable product are likely to be ignored, both by the medical journals and by the doctors who obtain their information from those journals. Although there is now a growing amount of independent evidence to show, for example, that individuals with high blood pressure can obtain a permanent reduction in their pressure by learning how to relax, most doctors in practice still believe that drugs are the only answer. Only those doctors prepared to look outside the drug-company sponsored literature and journals for their information are likely to hear about such non-commercial remedies.

Preventative programmes are unimaginative and ineffective

When orthodox medical practitioners do offer their patients anything in the way of preventative medicine, they do so without imagination and without any real understanding of what patients need and what will be effective. Too often, for example, doctors run health-education campaigns which are discouragingly negative and which depend upon the patient being told not to do this and not to do that. This mass of negative advice is often confusing and contradictory – and it is usually ignored.

The one type of preventative-medicine technique which doctors seem to favour is the one which includes a medical check-up or a 'screening'. Although it would perhaps be unduly cynical to suggest that doctors favour check-ups because they can charge a fee for them, it is nevertheless true that they fit in very well with the traditional type of doctor-patient relationship, in which the patient provides his body and the doctor provides all the expertise, makes all the decisions and takes all the responsibility.

Ironically, the evidence suggests that although check-ups are popular they are of dubious value. In an officially financed British study it was found that there was no significant difference in the health of individuals who had been regularly screened for seven years and those who had not. A study of 7,000 patients showed that people who had had health checks were no more or less likely to lose time from work, to need admission to hospital, to have to visit their family doctor or to die any sooner than patients who had not had them.

In Canada a Task Force on the Periodic Health Examination studied the question for three years before coming to the conclusion that the annual check-up should be abandoned. The conclusion of this official survey was that annual check-ups are not only inefficient but that they are at times potentially harmful.

This last suggestion may seem surprising, but there is good sense in it. By definition annual health checks can only provide an assessment of an individual's clinical condition at the moment. There can be no guarantee that a man pronounced fit on a Monday will not have developed early signs of a life-threatening disease by Friday. Because he has been declared 'fit', however, there is a risk that he may ignore the subsequent warning sign. The truth is that a medical screening examination gives no more idea of health than a random bank statement gives any useful idea about financial status. And just as a random bank statement can give a customer false confidence, so a random health check can give a patient false confidence.

To give specific example, I think it is far more useful to teach a woman how to examine her own breasts for lumps or how to be aware of potential danger signs than it is to suggest that she attends a screening once a year.

I do believe that by persuading patients to have annual health checks doctors are encouraging them to abandon their own responsibilities and to rely too heavily on the medical profession. There is an old Chinese proverb that says: 'Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.'

It isn't too difficult to see that proverb in medical terms. I wonder if it is too cynical of me to point out, moreover, that if you teach a man to fish you're not likely to be able to sell him many more fish in the future?

The hazards of interventionist medicine

There is a horrifying amount of evidence to show that hospitals are breeding grounds for infective organisms. Even before doctors knew how infections were transmitted, it was recognised that if you were brave enough to put a foot in a hospital you'd be lucky not to end up with both feet in the grave. You might think that things are different in modern hospitals, but you'd be wrong. Today there is evidence indicating that if you are an in-patient in hospital and you have an infection of any kind, then the odds are that you picked it up in the hospital. If you have a wound infection or a urinary tract infection, it is almost certain that you acquired your infection in the hospital.

There is even evidence that hospital canteens and dining rooms can do damage. Gross malnutrition, energy malnutrition and specific deficiency diseases are far too common. Patients can actually waste away in hospital because they have not been fed properly. Scurvy, beri beri and pellagra have all been found among hospital patients, and you're probably more at risk of getting an infection from hospital food than you are if you eat out in a restaurant.

Hospital investigations and treatments can be dangerous as well. The risks are so great that doctors use such words as 'idiopathic', 'cryptogenic', 'iatrogenic' and 'nosocomial' to disguise the truth about how diseases have developed.

Potentially dangerous investigations are still performed when there is little or no chance of the patient benefitting from the experience. Too few doctors ask themselves whether such an investigation is justified. Similarly, too few ask themselves whether a particular form of treatment is justified. Today, something like one in ten hospital beds is occupied by people suffering from the treatment they have received. If a patient has two sets of symptoms, the chances are that the second set of symptoms was caused by the treatment for the first.

The most telling evidence to support my contention that hospitals and doctors can damage your health is simply this: when patients are denied medical help they often live longer. In 1973 when there was a month long doctors' strike in Israel the mortality rate fell by 40 per cent. In 1976 there were doctors' strikes in Colombia and Los Angeles County. In both places the mortality rate fell appreciably. I know of no evidence that mortality rates have ever risen during or immediately after a doctors' strike.

Modern medicine is less effective than you may think

When asked to provide evidence to show that modern medicinal practices are effective, doctors will sometimes point to the way that morbidity and mortality rates have improved since the middle of the 19th century. It is usually claimed that these changes followed improvements in the worlds of medicine and surgery. In fact, however, a closer study of the statistics will show that the most significant improvements took place well before most of the major medical developments took place. It was social changes and not advances in medical technology that helped to cut mortality rates.

The technological advances of which doctors are so proud have, in contrast, made relatively little difference to sickness and death rates. Indeed, recent figures show that in some of the most developed parts of the world life expectancy is little changed today from a half a century ago.

Patients easily become overdependent

A woman in England was once told by her doctor to stay in bed until he returned. He forgot to go back. She stayed in bed for twenty years.

Recently I heard about a man in his fifties who had spent his life avoiding stresses and strains because he had been told that he had a weak heart. The advice had been given when he was a child. A second examination, half a century after the first, showed that the initial diagnosis had been wrong. The man had lived as an invalid for no good reason.

These two sad anecdotes illustrate vividly how patients put too much faith in what their doctors tell them. There are, around the world, many millions of people who have handed over all responsibility for their health to their physicians. These patients suffer because their overdependence limits their lives in many different ways.

The hazards of drug therapy

Three out of every four patients who go and see a doctor come away either with a prescription or a bottle of pills. The majority of doctors believe that patients will be dissatisfied if they leave the consulting room without some sort of therapy.

Consequently, millions of patients take drugs they don't need. And since modern drugs are often dangerous, this in turn means that patients who should never have been given drugs will suffer unnecessarily. Modern drugs can be lifesaving; but they should be used sparingly and with caution.

Your internal defences can be damaged

Interventionists treat the patient as a battleground, the illness as an enemy or target and the armoury of drugs and other treatment aids as weapons with which to fight the illness. Whether the interventionists offer tablets, herbs or the knife, they will be struggling to oppose the body's own internal responses as well as the outside agent which triggered these responses. Indeed, in many cases they may well be fighting only the body's own internal responses. Very many disorders are nothing more than misapplied internal physiological responses, triggered by unseen external threats or imagined threats. Often the result is a continuing struggle – if the initial discontent remains unidentified, the interventionist will have to oppose a continuing physiological response.

Because they must be powerful if they are successfully to oppose powerful physiological responses inside the body, modern treatment forms are likely to create considerable side-effects. So, for example, if a patient with stress-induced high blood pressure takes a drug to control that blood pressure, the drug will have an effect on the whole circulatory system. The drug must continually oppose normal healthy responses to an outside threat which is being ignored and not treated. There is a cruel irony here: for the physiological response is, of course, logical and, as far as the body is concerned, healthy.

In many cases there is an additional hazard associated with this type of interventionist therapy, in that the outside treatment may well have a significant effect on the body's capacity to deal with other threats. If steroids are used as a therapeutic aid, for example, the body will stop producing its own supply of steroids. As far as the body is concerned, there is no need to maintain resources capable of providing immediate supplies in an emergency if there is an apparently endless supply coming from outside the body. Similarly, if pain relievers are used, then the body's production of its own pain-relieving endorphins will not only be reduced but will also be less efficient.

With the body's internal defences damaged and weakened, the individual will have become even more reliant on interventionists and their treatments.

An overemphasis on treatment

Traditionally, individual doctors earn their living by providing patients with medical care when they are ill. Even in those parts of the world where there is no direct link between illness and money, there is still a very powerful feeling that it is the doctor's role to offer advice only when the patient has symptoms. In countries such as Britain, where doctors are paid by the State, there are still very few practitioners prepared to offer their patients advice on how to stay healthy. The emphasis is on healing. Thus diseases are often allowed to progress before treatment is offered.

Normal – an interventionist's myth?

Many interventionists believe that one of their prime roles is to help restore their patients to normal. Whether the abnormality is a symptom such as a pain, a loss of function, or a sign such as an allegedly 'abnormal' laboratory result, the aim of the practitioner will be to get things back to normal.

And that can be difficult. For contrary to popular opinion there is no such thing as a 'normal' or 'average' human being. Doctors used to think that they could measure the properties and functions of the human body in very precise terms, but it is now widely accepted that the range of so-called 'normal' values can be vast. What might be normal for you might be an indication of ill health for me.

An interventionist therapy designed to restore you to 'normal' may well do directly the opposite.

Alternative medicine – a real alternative or a variation on a theme?

Disillusioned with the medical care offered by orthodox medical practitioners, growing numbers of people are looking for help and satisfaction among the many different types of alternative medicine which are available today. Anxious to boost the speed at which their businesses are growing, many professionals in the 'alternative' sector have implied that their solutions offer great advantages over traditional medicine, that side-effects are non existent, that solutions are more reliable and that risks are much reduced.

There are dangers here for some so-called alternatives are merely variations on the same traditional interventionist theme -and there can be no doubt that side effects do exist but are often overlooked. Alternative medicines may appear to offer new and exciting solutions, but in practice the consumer still has to put himself in the hands of someone else and must exchange his allopathic adviser for an acupuncturist, a hypnotist, a herbalist or whatever. The risks remain and we should all be aware of them.

Alternative remedies offered by professional healers are part of the interventionist process – and not an 'alternative' to *Bodypower*. I firmly believe that when conditions do need interventionist therapy then a truly holistic approach (incorporating the most appropriate and most effective allopathic and alternative remedies) is wise. Remember that the REAL alternative form of medical care is *Bodypower*.

Home treatments

Home treatments are merely a very simple form of interventionist medicine. If you have a headache, a skin rash or an attack of diarrhoea and you use a drug you have bought over the pharmacist's counter to help ease them, you will be interfering with your body's own response without necessarily understanding the cause of the symptoms. You'll be interfering, or intervening, in just the same way that an orthodox or alternative practitioner will intervene.

When symptoms are inconvenient or uncomfortable, however, home remedies may offer a useful, albeit temporary, solution. They may enable you to disguise or delay those symptoms. Home remedies may have a part to play even when you have mastered the principle of *Bodypower*. For example, if you develop diarrhoea shortly before you are due to attend an important dinner or catch an aeroplane, it won't be much comfort to know that your diarrhoea is caused by your body's efficient attempts to get rid of invading bacteria. A remedy may help provide temporary – but much needed – relief by opposing your body's actions.

The important thing to remember, nevertheless, is that when you are using a home remedy you are suppressing symptoms which suggest an underlying problem. Home remedies must therefore be mild in action and they should never be used for more than five days at a time.

I suggest that if you want to keep a home medicine chest you stock it with the following treatments. These are all simple, safe items if used with care.

1. A pain reliever, such as soluble aspirin or paracetamol tablets. Aspirin is probably slightly better than paracetamol, since it has a stronger anti-inflammatory action. The correct dosages should be marked on he bottles or packaging. A hot-water bottle is also an excellent pain reliever. When wrapped in a pillowcase or thin towel, it can be held against a painful abdomen, joint or ear. Pain relievers should only be used to supplement *Bodypower* pain-relieving techniques. Remember that pain is merely a symptom. Thus, if you have a painful ankle joint and you relieve the pain with a hot-water bottle, you should still be careful not to put too much pressure on the joint. With the pain gone there is often a temptation to treat the joint as normal, often leading to further damage.
2. An indigestion remedy. You don't need to buy an expensive branded product. There are many suitable preparations on the market, but ordinary aluminium hydroxide mixture or tablets will probably be suitable for most occasional attacks of indigestion. Do remember that indigestion is often caused by stress or poor eating habits.
3. A laxative. If you are constipated, the answer is usually to make some adjustment to your diet. Strong, chemical products simply contradict and struggle to overcome a natural response to poor eating habits. Bran is one of the simplest and quickest diet additives, but fresh oranges also work well. If neither bran nor oranges are effective and your constipation persists, you should seek an interventionist practitioner for advice.
4. An anti-diarrhoeal mixture. If you suddenly develop an attack of diarrhoea, you have probably eaten something that was infected. Your body is simply trying to get rid of the infection as quickly as possible. The best solution is to eat nothing for 36 hours and to drink plenty of fluids. The diarrhoea will then usually stop automatically. If you must stop the diarrhoea while you attend to an important engagement, kaolin and morphine mixture or tablets are as good as anything you can buy.
5. An inhalant. Catarrh and sinus troubles often develop because an irritant has led to the excessive production of fluids within your sinuses. If the symptoms persist and you want relief, inhale the steam rising from a bowl of hot water. Add a menthol crystal to the water for greater effect.
6. A bottle of calamine lotion will help relieve the discomfort associated with itchy spots and rashes.

Interventionist medicine – conclusions

1. Nine times out of ten your body will be able to deal with problems itself. Interventionist medicine will not improve the speed with which you get better.
2. The best forms of interventionist medicine are the ones which support the body's natural healing processes rather than fight them. If you have lost a lot of blood and you are taken to hospital, the doctors will help your body's defence mechanisms by adding fluids to your blood stream. If you have grazed your knee and you clean the wound with fresh water, you'll be helping nature.
3. None of the alternative forms of medicine offers a direct and plain advantage over orthodox medicine. When alternative remedies are as potent and as powerful as orthodox remedies, they are often as potentially dangerous – particularly if used carelessly or improperly. Some alternative remedies which seem to offer less potent remedies are simply relying on your body's recuperative powers. If you need sophisticated help (diagnostic service or surgical support) you will need orthodox medicine anyway. When you have a condition which needs interventionist therapy then you should aim for a truly holistic approach – using the best of orthodox medicine and the best of alternative medicine.
4. You should be aware of the early warning danger signs so that you can take advantage of interventionist medicine when it is needed.

Bodypower in perspective

The human body has an enormous range of mechanisms designed to help provide you with protection and to accelerate the healing processes. These internal mechanisms are so effective that in at least 90 per cent of all illnesses you will be able to recover perfectly well by yourself – without any form of medical treatment. If you are aware of the existence of these mechanisms, prepared to allow your body to repair itself and if you understand how to take advantage of the systems that exist within the body, you will often be able to survive potentially damaging diseases without any need for interventionist therapy.

I must make it clear that I am not advocating that you ignore your doctor altogether. On some occasions, interventionists can provide an essential, life-saving service. They can offer surgical remedies for problems which are not self-limiting and they can offer nursing care and facilities for the disabled and the weak. They can provide diagnostic services and skills, too.

What I am suggesting is that you should become aware of your body's recuperative powers, you should learn to use those powers and you should learn to recognise when you are likely to need professional help, ensuring when you do so that you retain control of your body, bringing in your doctor as an adviser and technical expert rather than as someone in sole charge.

Bodypower is not a replacement for interventionist medicine, but a system designed to ensure that you get the best of both worlds: benefitting from your body's ability to heal itself but also being prepared to use powerful and potentially hazardous professional, interventionist remedies when your body's capabilities reach their limits.

If you ask a lifeguard to hold your head above water every time you go swimming, you will never learn true independence in the water. Learning to use *Bodypower* is like learning to swim. Once you've mastered the idea and gained a little confidence you will soon find yourself enjoying a freedom that you might not otherwise have known. The important point is that – just as the swimmer can call in the lifeguard if he finds himself in trouble – so you can call in the doctor if you need him.

If you have a headache and you visit the doctor, you'll probably get pills. That is what the doctor has been trained to provide. If you learn to use the principles of *Bodypower*, you may well be able to treat your headache yourself. Should you fail, you can still visit the doctor. That's the beauty of *Bodypower*. You've got everything to gain. And nothing to lose.

PART 3: THE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF *BODYPOWER*

You will, by now, be fully aware that your body has powerful inner healing mechanisms – and that interventionist techniques usually favoured by health advisers of all kinds often oppose those in-built mechanisms. In this section I’m going to tell you how you can get the best out of your body’s own resources.

You must understand that your body isn't designed for modern living

Stone Age man was well equipped to cope with life. He was provided with automatic mechanisms which enabled him to keep his internal body environment stable and which helped to ensure that he ate the right foods at the right time and in the right quantities. He was fitted with automatic mechanisms which allowed his body to prepare itself for a whole host of different dangers.

Today we all live in a world for which we are sadly ill suited. And there are a number of reasons why our bodies are no longer well designed for our environment.

Here are some of them:

1. The world in which we live has changed so comprehensively that we can no longer deal with our problems simply by using our bodies' physical powers. We have to catch buses to the shops, wait in queues to be served and earn money to buy our food. We can no longer escape our predators by running away either. They come after us with lawyers, telephone calls and mail!
2. The human body is designed for immediate action, but many of today's problems cannot be dealt with so quickly. If one of your ancestors was being chased by a sabre-toothed tiger, he would either survive or die in a matter of minutes. If you yourself are unemployed, your problem may persist for months or even years, and your body's responses will continue for the same period. Your body cannot differentiate between short-term problems and long-term problems. The society in which we live has changed very rapidly, but the human body takes thousands of years to evolve. It will be far into the future before man's automatic defence mechanisms have been able to adapt to the demands of twentieth-century life.
3. Many of the problems which cause the greatest amount of pressure are outside our control. If you live in a city, for example, you will be dependent on many people you'll never meet. You'll rely on others to provide you with heat and light and transport. If you had to provide your own facilities, you might be able to do something about them in times of crisis; but in a modern complex society we are all somewhat impotent.
4. Many of the machines and pieces of equipment which were originally designed to work on our behalf are now so complicated and sophisticated that they are the principals and we, the human beings, are the assistants. Consequently, our work may be boring, unsatisfying and sometimes degrading. Workers may find it necessary to go on strike in order to establish their sense of personal identity; and when they do, they create additional problems for others.
5. Life is changing at an unprecedented rate. Children have to accept that many of the things they are learning at school will be out of date by the time they leave. In the world of science, a graduate may be full of worthless knowledge by the time he collects his graduation papers. Economic changes, social changes and political changes occur at a pace that most of us find heady and unnerving.
6. Our social structure has become so complicated and our capacity for thought and imagination so well developed that we can see problems even where there aren't any. Our body's powers can easily be misapplied if our brains interpret social problems as physical threats. We are manipulated by political, religious and commercial leaders. And we manipulate one another. When these manipulations make us feel frustrated, incompetent or guilty, they lead directly to stress. And that stress leads to a physiological reaction which will invariably be inappropriate.

All-in-all the character of everyday existence has altered so rapidly in the last few decades that the survival mechanisms which were of inestimable value a few hundred or thousand years ago are today more of a handicap than a help. The human body has not had time to adapt to the demands of the new world and nor has it had time to learn to differentiate between situations which are genuinely threatening and which require a physical response and situations which are simply worrying and for which a physical response would probably be harmful.

Appreciate how your body's responses to pressure can produce illness

Many of the diseases which cause trouble today are produced by the fact that the human body has misinterpreted pressures and has overreacted. In many instances heart disease, ulcers, or high blood pressure develop because powerful physiological responses have been brought into action.

It is important to realise, however, that your body's automatic defence mechanisms shouldn't be blamed for the problems that develop. Your body has merely been responding in the way that it was designed to respond. It is the changes in the types of environmental pressure to which you are exposed and the changes in the demands which are implicit in the society in which you live, that have made your physiological responses inappropriate.

If you develop symptoms which are a result of your body's defence mechanisms overreacting, you should endeavour to change your exposure to stress or to change your mental response to it. Treating symptoms produced by your body's defences without treating the basic problems can at best, offer only a temporary solution.

Learn how you respond to pressure by being aware of your personality

Put under the same sort of pressure one man will develop a peptic ulcer while another will acquire an elevated blood pressure. Faced with almost identical problems one woman will acquire asthma, another will develop a skin condition.

It is now known that the reason for these variations lies within the individual personalities of the patients concerned. The personality of an individual will have a significant effect on the type of disorder from which he will be most likely to suffer.

The importance of this particular relationship lies in the fact that by understanding a little about your own personality you will be able to tell what sort of problems you are most likely to face. And by knowing what sort of problems you have to face, you can be better aware of the early warning signs. If you've ever built a sandcastle on the beach and then struggled to find the weak spots and spot the cracks in the walls as they appear, you'll know that an understanding of your own psychological weak points will be invaluable when it comes to fighting off stresses and strains and the signs and symptoms of the illness which ensues.

I don't suggest that the notes which follow are exhaustive. But the pen portraits I've drawn are based on solid clinical work which has been done around the world.

THE ASTHMA PERSONALITY

Asthma sufferers often have domineering mothers and rather ineffectual fathers. Their mothers are frequently overprotective and usually rather indulgent. It is more common for children without brothers or sisters to start the wheezing which is an early sign of asthma, perhaps because only children are more likely to be susceptible to the pressures exerted by this type of parental combination. The tendency is for helpless, dependent and fatalistic asthma sufferers to believe that it is wrong to express their emotions. They don't allow themselves to show their anger, their fears, their tears or their joy. They are usually lonely, somewhat oversensitive souls.

THE ULCER PERSONALITY

People susceptible to ulcers tend to be very dependent on their mothers. They usually need a lot of love. They're sometimes not quite sure whether they want to remain dependent or become independent. They tend to be ambitious and hard-working.

THE DEPRESSIVE PERSONALITY

Patients who suffer from depression tend to feel helpless, inadequate and ineffectual. They usually think little of themselves, are often intolerant and overconscientious and don't usually have much of a sense of humour. Because of their rigid approach to life, they find it especially difficult to adapt to fresh circumstances and new pressures. They're particularly likely to become ill at times of crisis.

THE HEART ATTACK PERSONALITY

If you are aggressive, impatient, intensely competitive and anxious to succeed, you may end up in a coronary care unit attached to an electrocardiograph.

Way back in 1910 William Osler wrote in *The Lancet* that it is the ambitious, hard-working man who is most likely to have heart pain. In 1945 a doctor concluded that people who have heart attacks do so because they are forever competing with their fathers. Since then, growing numbers of researchers have managed to amplify both these statements. In her book Biotypes Jean Arehart-Treichel recounts that in the early 1950s an upholsterer repairing chairs in a reception room shared by two doctors noticed that only the front edges of the chairs were worn – as though the patients who had been sitting there had been literally 'on edge'. The two doctors were called Rosenman and Friedman and they spent a large part of the next two decades trying to find out more about the type of patient likely to have heart attacks.

They discovered that the people who were getting heart attacks were usually male and commonly under great pressure. They managed to show that these men usually had a strong drive to compete and to achieve. The heart attack patient works long hours, sets out to succeed, finds it difficult to sit still, is unable to relax and is a perfectionist. No matter how successful he is, he will rarely be able to fulfil his ambitions.

And, of course, it's not how successful you are that determines your sense of satisfaction – but how successful you think you are.

THE ECZEMA PERSONALITY

Individuals who suffer from chronic skin conditions tend to be rather sensitive. Like asthma sufferers, they tend to repress their emotions. When they get angry they keep it to themselves and when they want to cry they bottle up their emotions. These are common symptoms among people who tend to be allergy victims.

THE ARTHRITIS PERSONALITY

Arthritis sufferers tend to be rather timid, shy and dissatisfied with their own work. They are hard taskmasters. They often come from unhappy homes and there is frequently a history of one parent in particular being hard, domineering and even cruel.

Although they frequently build up a false front, arthritis sufferers are often obsessed with a sense of their own inferiority. They like to conform and they feel helpless in some ways. Arthritis sufferers also have difficulty in expressing their feelings.

THE COLITIS PERSONALITY

The sort of person most likely to develop colitis will be shy, dependent, passive and anxious to please. He'll be indecisive, rather immature and always extremely anxious to avoid conflicts with others. He'll be bright, touchy and emotionally rather labile – bursting into tears quite easily.

THE CANCER PERSONALITY

Back in the 2nd century Galen noticed that women who were depressed were far more likely to develop cancer than women who were happy. In recent years we've acquired considerable evidence to support that early observation. Today it is known that people who are cancer-prone tend to try too hard to please the world. When they fail, as they inevitably must, they get cancer.

Cancer sufferers often have unhappy childhoods and frequently grow up suffering from a lack of love, a sense of loneliness and a feeling that they have been deserted by those closest to them. Cancer victims tend to give more than they take; they tend to repress their own desires and their own emotional feelings. Unselfishly, they do their best to please those around them. When anything goes wrong with the world they've created for themselves, they develop cancer.

Incidentally, it has in the past been suggested that women who breastfeed are less likely to get cancer of the breast because of some aspect of the feeding process. Could it be, I wonder, that the sort of generous, open, loving women who choose to breastfeed are not the sort of women who are particularly likely to develop cancer anyway?

THE MIGRAINE PERSONALITY

Migraine victims are driven by guilt. They feel that they must always strive to do what is right and to satisfy their own over-demanding consciences. The average migraine sufferer is a perfectionist, very ambitious, anxious to please and hard-working. He'll be very neat, very orderly, very efficient and he'll invariably respect achievement and success.

These would all be very valuable traits if they weren't taken that little bit too far. The migraine personality can't meet his own high standards. He'll often fly into a rage when things go wrong. And it is that sort of frustration (produced either by his own failure or by some outside force) that leads to the migraine symptoms.

THE HAY FEVER PERSONALITY

Hay fever sufferers often seem to be timid, nervous people who lack confidence and who are rather obsessive. They are particularly badly affected by crises and traumas and their hay fever may get worse when things are going badly for them.

This list is by no means complete. And there will be people who do not fit neatly into these categories. But if you are aware of your own personality, you will be able to look for some of the appropriate early warning signs. Thus, if you are over-demanding and excessively ambitious, you should beware of those chest pains which suggest that you are putting your heart under pressure. If you are convinced that you have an arthritic personality, you would be wise to be very careful if you have any joint pains.

You must create your own philosophy of *Bodypower*

The *Bodypower* philosophy must be a very personal thing. I cannot give you a fixed set of rules and tell you to go away and follow them. Your body is unique. So are the stresses and strains in your life. And so are the powers within you.

To use *Bodypower* you must be prepared to create your own *Bodypower* campaign, to employ your skills and abilities as best you can, to learn to listen to your body and to learn to take advantage of your own strengths.

On the pages which follow I have detailed the ways in which you can best achieve these objectives.

Learn to listen to your body

If you will learn to listen to it, your body will be able to tell you a great deal. Many minor symptoms which we regard as a nuisance and which we hurry to treat are early signs that something is wrong. Other signs are simply ignored because we are not aware of their importance or because we aren't aware even of their existence.

For example:

1. If you are lifting or moving something and you feel a twinge of pain, consider that a warning. If you persist you're probably going to end up with a strained muscle or a damaged joint. If you're digging in the garden and your back begins to ache, that's an early sign. If you're lifting heavy boxes and your back begins to hurt, treat that as a warning. Most episodes of pain should be regarded as early warning signs – the longer you ignore a pain, the more likely you are to end up with a serious problem.
2. Vomiting and diarrhoea may be extremely inconvenient, but they are important defence mechanisms employed by your body for specific purposes. If you develop either of these symptoms without any other signs, the chances are that you have acquired some form of gastro-intestinal infection. Remember that any treatment you choose to employ to control your symptoms may also ensure that the infection stays in your body for longer.
3. The cough reflex is a sophisticated defence system designed to eject unwelcome foreign matter from the respiratory tract. You should help your body, therefore, by spitting out anything that you cough up. If you have a persistent or recurrent cough then you must have a persistent or recurrent infection or irritation in your lungs. Or there must be an irritant of some kind in the air you breathe.
4. If you develop an unusual or unexpected skin rash the chances are high that you have been in contact with an irritant. The reaction of the skin is a result of the fact that the skin tissues, recognising the irritant as a threat, have produced chemicals designed to counteract it. You can probably ease the resultant rash by using powerful drug therapy to oppose the body's reaction. But it is far more sensible to identify the irritant and avoid it.
5. If you develop cramp in your legs it is usually because your circulation has been impeded. The cramp pains develop because the waste products from the metabolic processes which occur during muscle use have accumulated. The slowing down of the circulation has meant that the blood has not been able to clear the wastes away. The cramp pains tell you to change position. Once you have acted the blood will flow more easily. The waste products can then be washed away, and the pain will disappear.
6. Eat the wrong sort of food or eat too quickly and you'll develop indigestion. Your stomach is telling you that you're doing something wrong. You can solve the problem temporarily by using antacids or by taking tablets. Do that, however, and the pains will probably come back. Te get rid of the symptoms permanently you must listen to your symptoms and take notice.
7. If you are for ever having accidents, it may be that you are constantly under too much pressure. There is a strong correlation between accident proneness and stress.
8. A woman who has irregular menstrual periods may well be worried about something. Girls who are taking examinations often have delayed periods – and so do girls who think they may be pregnant.
9. When a pregnant woman is under stress her baby may suffer. There is a strong correlation between maternal stress and babies born with low birth weights or congenital abnormalities. Pregnant women should be on the look-out for signs of stress.
10. Blood pressure often rises when an individual is under pressure. Taxi drivers, schoolteachers and casualty surgeons are far more likely to develop high blood pressure than accountants, church ministers or farmers. It is perhaps a sad reflection on the way most Western people live that a third of the entire American nation is said to suffer from hypertension, while two of the diseases most commonly associated with high blood pressure, strokes and heart disease, are common among men in their twenties and thirties.

   The reason for this is simple. When an individual is under pressure his heart will beat faster in order to ensure that his tissues get a better supply of blood. As far as the heart is concerned, it is doing the tissues a favour. Unfortunately, of course, few modern stresses can be resolved with the aid of a faster heart rate and better oxygenated muscles. The man who is under pressure because he is unemployed, worried about his bank loan or threatened with eviction will not benefit from his body's reaction – but he will be warned.

Your early warning systems

Your body has a whole range of special early warning systems. These are designed to give you advance notice of any problems which seem likely to arise and to ensure that potential damage is kept to a minimum.

For example, if your heart is under too much strain and the small vessels which supply it with blood are not able to pump in fluid at a fast enough rate, you will start to suffer chest pains. These pains, usually known as angina, are not in themselves life-threatening. Nor do they suggest that there is any desperately serious life-threatening disorder present. You are being told that your heart has reached its limits and that if you want to avoid any further damage you must make some adjustments to your way of life. You must either change your eating and exercise habits so that your heart can enjoy a better blood supply or you must reduce its workload.

Angina is probably one of the best-known early warning signs of physical distress, but there are many others. Indigestion, for example, is nothing more than an indication that your stomach is finding it difficult to cope with the quality and quantity of food that you're putting into it. Muscle cramps that come on during exercise are an early sign intended to show you that your muscles are using up oxygen and food faster than fresh supplies are being provided.

Although many of the most obvious early warning signs relate to specific physical illnesses, there are also those which are intended to tell you when your body is run down and when you are in genuine need of a rest. When the problem is a general one, the signs will usually appear as a whole series of apparently trivial ailments. You may suddenly find that you are getting lots of coughs and colds, or that you are suffering from spots and boils.

Just as the body can get tired and may show early signs of physical distress, so the mind can become world weary and may need a break from the daily pressures. For example, you may feel lethargic, off-colour or generally out-of-sorts – all these vague symptoms may suggest that you have been pushing yourself too hard. If you are unusually irritable or impulsive, if your memory begins to fail you, if you can't get to sleep, if you become intolerant of noise, if your ability to concentrate seems to have gone or if your willpower seems to have disappeared, if you find yourself crying, overreacting and unable to deal with trivial tasks, the chances are high that you have been doing too much. Your mind needs a rest.

Many people do recognise that these are all signs of overwork and excess pressure, but find themselves unable to do anything constructive to help themselves because they feel guilty if they stop working. Those of us who refuse to listen to these simple warning signs and to take notice of our bodies when they tell us to take things easy for a while, should perhaps remember that some of the greatest men and women the world has ever known happily cut themselves off from all outside contacts whenever they felt themselves to be under too much pressure. Charles Darwin used to pretend to be physically ill in order to give himself a chance to rest in bed whenever he felt himself to be under too much strain. So did Florence Nightingale, Marcel Proust, Sigmund Freud and many others.

Carried to excess, this type of behaviour may well be described as malingering. Employed with care and thought, it is more accurately described as common sense.

Learn to know your weak points

Most of us have a weak point. When we are under too much stress or too much pressure we develop symptoms of a particular type. Learn to know your weak point – as the symptoms begin to develop, you'll know that you are pushing yourself too hard.

Here are some of the commonest 'weak point' signs:

* Headache
* Skin rash
* Indigestion
* Wheezing
* Diarrhoea
* Chest pains
* Palpitations
* Insomnia
* Irritability

All of them show that you are beginning to suffer actual physical damage as a result of the stress to which you have exposed yourself. Your stress threshold has been reached.

Spot your own weak point and act on the warning it provides.

Danger signs

If you are to get the best out of *Bodypower* you must know when to ask for interventionist help. *Bodypower* is not an alternative to orthodox medicine; it is a philosophy designed to enable you to know how to use your body's powers in conjunction with orthodox medical techniques.

You should see a doctor without delay if:

1. You have any unexplained pain which recurs or which is present for more than five days (obviously,

severe, uncontrollable pain needs to be investigated without delay).

2. You have any unexplained bleeding – from anywhere.
3. You need to take any home medicine regularly or for five days or more.
4. You notice any persistent change in your body (e.g., a loss or gain in weight, a paralysis of any kind, or the development of any lump or swelling).
5. Any existing lump, wart or other skin blemish changes size or colour, or bleeds.
6. You notice new symptoms when you have already received medical treatment.
7. There are mental symptoms present such as confusion, paranoia, disorientation or severe depression.

Learn to relax your body

Fear, anxiety and stress make your muscle tight. And tight, tense muscles are difficult to control. You'll find it impossible to take advantage of your body's healing powers until you can get rid of the tension. In addition, you'll find it difficult to listen to your body if your tissues are tense.

It is vital that you learn how to relax your body.

This isn't difficult to master. Clench your left fist and you'll be able to see the muscles looking tight and firm. Now let your fist unfold and you'll feel and see the muscles relax. To relax your body all you have to do is stiffen all your muscles and then relax them group by group. That's all there is to it.

To begin with, learn to relax in a quiet place where you won't be disturbed. Lie down if you like. Eventually you'll be able to relax your muscles wherever you are. At first you'll need to pay attention to what you're doing. Allow a quarter of an hour a day for practice until you've mastered the art of relaxation. In time, you'll be able to relax your body in seconds – at the start you'll need longer.

And do be prepared to practise. You wouldn't expect to be able to play golf in one fifteen-minute session, would you?

Relax your body

1. Clench your left hand as tightly as you can, making a fist with the fingers. Do it well and you will see the knuckles go white. If you now let your fist unfold you will feel the muscles relax. When your hand was clenched the muscles were tensed; unfolded the same muscles are relaxed. This is what you must do with the other muscle groups of your body.
2. Bend your left arm and try to make your left biceps muscle stand out as much as you can. Then relax and let the muscle ease. Let your arm lie loosely by your side and ignore it.
3. Relax your right hand in the same way.
4. Relax your right biceps muscles in the same way.
5. Tighten the muscles in your left foot. Curl your toes. when the foot feels as tense as you can make it, let it relax.
6. Tense the muscles of your left calf. If you reach down you can feel the muscles at the back of your leg firm up as you tense them. Bend your foot back at the ankle to help tighten up the muscles. Then let the muscles relax.
7. Straighten your leg and push your foot away from you. You will feel the muscles on the front of your thigh tighten up; they should be firm right up to the top of your leg.
8. Relax your right foot
9. Relax your right lower leg
10. Relax your right thigh.
11. Lift yourself up by tightening up your buttock muscles. You will be able to lift your body upwards by an inch or so. Then let the muscles fall loose again.
12. Tense and contract your abdominal muscles. Try to pull your abdominal wall as far in as possible. Then let go and allow your waist to reach its maximum circumference.
13. Tighten the muscles of your chest. Take a big deep breath and strain to hold it for as long as possible. Then let it go.
14. Push your shoulders back as far as they will go, then turn them forwards and inwards. Finally, shrug them as high as you can. Keep your head perfectly still and try to touch your ears with your shoulders. It will probably be impossible but try anyway. Then let our shoulders relax and ease.
15. Next tighten up the muscles of your back. Try to make yourself as tall as you can. Then let the muscles relax.
16. The muscles of your neck are next. Lift your head forwards and pull at the muscles at the back of your neck. Turn your head first one way and then the other. Push your head backwards with as much force as you can. Then let the muscles of your neck relax. Move it about to make sure that it really is completely loose and easy.
17. Move your eyebrows upwards and then pull them down as far as they will go. Do this several times making sure that you can feel the muscle tightening both when you move the eyebrows up and when you pull them down. Then let them relax.
18. Screw up your eyes as tightly as you can. Pretend that someone is trying to force your eyes open. Keep them shut tight. Then, keeping your eyelids closed, let them relax.
19. Move your lower jaw around. Grit your teeth. Wrinkle your nose. Smile as wide as you can, showing as many teeth as you have got. Now, let all these facial muscles relax.
20. Push your tongue out as far as it will go. Push it firmly against the bottom of your mouth and the top of your mouth and then let it lie relaxed and easy inside your mouth.

While you do all these simple relaxation exercises take deep, slow, regular breaths. Breathe as slowly as you comfortably can.

Relax your mind

You can counteract the effect of stress and pressure on your body by learning to relax your mind. Under normal circumstances an almost unceasing flood of information and impressions pour into your brain. These pieces of information produce an almost endless number of interpretations and mental assessments. And those mental reactions, in turn, have a noticeable effect on many of the body's physiological processes.

If you can effectively cut the amount of information your mind is receiving, logically you will cut the number of mental responses. Temporarily isolate your brain, and therefore your body, from stimulating inputs and you'll be temporarily isolated from the need for unnecessary physical responses.

Research showing the way that mental relaxation can help the human body has nearly all involved meditation of one form or another. And for several reasons that has discouraged many people from trying to relax their minds.

In the first place, those who teach meditation claim that it is necessary to empty the mind of all inputs and all thoughts in order to benefit from the respite. And that isn't easy. Many people find the prospect of emptying their minds so daunting that they never even try.

Secondly, the religious and semi-religious features which seem to be an essential part of many forms of meditation are frightening and forbidding to a variety of people. They don't want to have to take part in any organised rituals and they would feel self-conscious if they had to sing or chant any magic incantations.

In fact you can enjoy the benefits of mental relaxation without meditating, without joining any religious organisation, without paying any fees, without going into a trance, without adopting any strange habits, without having your hair shaved off, without wearing any odd clothes and without adopting any uncomfortable postures.

All you have to do in order to cut the flood of potentially harmful sensory data which normally streams into your brain is to learn how to daydream.

Or, to be more accurate, to revise your views on daydreaming. For most of us acquire the habit of daydreaming when we are small and are then taught by our teachers and our parents that it is an undesirable habit.

It isn't a bad habit. It is a natural process and a natural method of escape and relaxation which most of us find without training as we grow up in a world full of pressures. Daydreaming is a natural 'cut out' process which our brains have created for our own protection. All you have to do is remove socially imposed restrictions, get rid of your guilt and learn to enjoy your daydreaming again.

And if your childhood was so strictly structured that you were never allowed to daydream at all – be assured that nothing could be simpler. Allow yourself to escape into a happy memory. It doesn't matter what the recollection is, as long as it is one which you find pleasantly relaxing without being too stimulating.

The only vital advice I can give you is that you should do everything you can to ensure that the daydream is believable. You must convince yourself (and your body) that the daydream is real. To start with, you'll probably have to lie down somewhere quiet. Later you'll be able to daydream wherever you are – and whatever you're supposed to be doing.

Suppose, for example, that you choose a beach scene from a happy holiday as your first memory. Try to:

* feel the warmth of the sun on your face
* allow a gentle breeze to ruffle your hair slightly
* feel the warm, soft sand underneath you
* hear the sound of the waves breaking and the cries of the seagulls above
* smell the salty air and the light perfume of your favourite sun oil.

If you like, you can add someone of whom you are very fond to your daydream. But keep the action quiet and peaceful. Concentrate only on flooding your mind with images of happy memory. Once your mind believes that you are there, your body will be convinced.

The accumulated pressures and stresses that have been battering away at your defences for so long will disappear as your body takes it easy. You can gain just as much from your daydream as you could ever hope to gain from a genuine holiday break. Probably more. You can keep the rain, the flies, the deckchair attendants and the boring travelling out of your daydream.

Of course, you don't have to restrict yourself to one daydream. You can build up a library of your very own, very private daydreams. Store up a whole collection of comforting memories which enable you to escape from the harsh realities of the world. Keep them in some secret room in your head. Then, to daydream effectively, all you have to do will be to wander into your secret room, select a suitable daydream and lie back to enjoy it. The more practice you get, the better skilled you'll become. Before long you'll be able to daydream without anyone being aware of what you're doing.

Daydreaming has an advantage over meditation. Instead of emptying your mind and replacing anxieties and fears with a clinically clean empty space, you will be replacing your fears with loving, comfortable memories which will themselves have a good and positive effect.

When you empty your head of damaging thoughts and fill it with joy and love you don't just halt the damage – you do more. You can build up your inner strength. Negative emotions, such as fear, can do much harm. But positive emotions, such as love and happiness, can contribute greatly to your all-round health.

Let your emotions show

Do you remember when Nikita Kruschev took off his shoe at the United Nations? He was annoyed by something that had been said and revealed his feelings by using his shoe to pound on the conference table. It might not have been the sort of thing a well-trained gentleman would do, but it was probably the right reaction as far as his health was concerned

Far too many of us prefer to hide our emotions. If we feel angry we try to keep our anger hidden deep inside us. If we feel sad we refuse to allow anyone to see our tears. If we feel proud we don't like to let our pride show. We hide our emotions because we have been taught that it is wrong to do otherwise.

And yet nothing could be more damaging. When we feel that we want to express an emotion and we hide that emotion we are denying a very natural process. We're fighting against a normal human response which should be allowed to influence our actions. Our natural reactions are, after all, designed to help us. When we feel sad and can feel the tears welling up in our eyes, our bodies are trying to help us by making it clear to those who are nearest and dearest to us that we need support and comfort. By refusing to allow our tears to flow – and thus refusing to allow our sorrow to show – we are denying ourselves the comfort that our bodies have decided we need.

Take time out

If you have been pushing yourself particularly hard you may find that you suddenly start to feel tired or lethargic. Or maybe you'll start to suffer all sorts of minor symptoms.

Either way, you've been given a hint to take things a little easier. Your body has been pushed to its limits and it wants a respite.

Many people find it difficult to do just that. They feel that they must keep pushing themselves all the time – and they end up suffering from something far more serious. Having ignored the early warning signs of exhaustion, they find themselves suffering from something much worse.

However tough you are, you can't keep punishing yourself indefinitely. Everyone needs a rest from time to time. If, after an especially difficult patch or a tough stretch of work, you feel shattered or exhausted, you mustn't be afraid to take it easy for a while.

Rocking chair therapy

A child who is very upset and troubled will often sit hunched up and rock backwards and forwards very gently. He'll do this naturally, without any teaching or prompting, because the rocking motion helps to relax the body and drain away accumulated tensions. We don't really know how this works, but what seems to happen is that the rhythmic motion aids in counteracting the urgent messages which are being sent from the muscles to the brain. The feedback somehow opposes the messages which originally inspired the tautness and tightness.

This type of simple, rhythmic exercise is an excellent way to ease and relax the whole body, as anyone who has a rocking chair will confirm. And it is no coincidence, of course, that nursing mothers will often rock their babies backwards and forwards when they are crying.

Aggressive exercise

Your body is designed for action. When things go wrong or you are threatened in any way your body will automatically prepare itself for action. Your muscles will tighten, your blood pressure will go up and your whole body will be made ready for battle.

Sometimes, of course, this type of preparation is entirely appropriate. If you are threatened with a physical crisis of any kind, your body's preparations will be what you need. If you're trying to get out of a burning house or you're trying to escape from a mugger, you'll need every ounce of muscle you've got.

Usually, however, those physical preparations will be totally inappropriate. The problem will be an imaginary one and no amount of physical preparation will improve your capacity to cope. Indeed, physical preparations can often be an embarrassment and may cause damage. Your body will be prepared for action that doesn't come and unnecessary and unsuitable changes will have taken place within your muscles, cardiovascular system and elsewhere.

In those circumstances you may well be wise to adapt your behaviour to fit in with your body's preparations. Like a massive tree that isn't too proud to bend a little with the wind, you should perhaps be prepared to adapt. And consider getting rid of your physical energy.

You can do this in all sorts of ways.

I remember reading about an eminent international banker who walked out of a particularly stressful meeting, wandering straight from the meeting into a nearby fair. There he went directly to one of the stalls, bought an armful of wooden balls and proceeded to destroy large quantities of old china!

The Greeks sometimes do much the same, of course. After a hard day's work they spend a pleasant evening smashing plates on a local tavern floor.

Others prefer to get rid of their pent-up excess energy by taking part in energetic, even violent, sports.

Hitting a tennis ball or a squash ball and racing around a court can quickly get rid of the accumulated physical preparations which might otherwise have a damaging effect on your body.

It is important to remember not to become anxious about your sporting prowess when you're getting rid of muscle activity in this way. It is far too easy to exchange one form of stress for another by being too determined to win when taking part in a sport theoretically designed to help you relax.

It’s all in the mind

You may not think of yourself as having a powerful, ‘creative’ imagination. But you do have an imagination powerful enough to control your physical destiny. Everyone has.

If you believe that you are going to fail at something, the chances are that you will fail.

If you believe that you are ugly, you will live in a world structured by your ugliness.

If you are walking a tightrope and you believe that you are going to fall, you will probably fall.

In all these circumstances reality is irrelevant. The governing factor is what your imagination tells you. And what you believe.

Take walking a tightrope, for example. If your imagination tells you that you are going to fall and you believe it, your body will begin to react as though you are already falling. You’ll see yourself toppling and your muscles will automatically make futile and unnecessary attempts to correct your fall. You’ll unbalance as you struggle to maintain your balance. You’ll fall.

If you imagine that you are inadequate, you will deal with life as though your inadequacy were a fact and not a thought. You will work without confidence and you will inevitably fail to inspire confidence in others. You may push yourself harder to try to cope with your imagined inadequacy; but – however hard you push – you will never succeed because you will be struggling to overcome something that exists only in your mind. You’ll never be able to win. You’ll push yourself until you develop genuine signs of illness. And then you’ll have ‘proof’ that you will never be able to succeed.

Imagination can have a damaging effect on you and your life.

But, it can also have a positive effect.

Indeed, imagination can be used as a positive, constructive force as simply as it can be used negatively. Your imagination can lead to unhappiness, illness and failure, but it can also lead to happiness, health and success.

With the aid of your imagination you can achieve great things.

If you believe that you are going to succeed at something, the chance are that you will succeed.

If you believe that you are good-looking, you will live in a world structured to good looks.

If you are walking a tightrope and you believe that you are going to cross the rope safely, you probably will cross it.

Wherever you are, whatever you are doing, use your imagination positively.

Learn to appreciate the power of positive emotions

Similarly, if you are overwhelmed with negative emotions, you will be far less capable of coping with stress. If you feel sad, you’ll be particularly likely to react badly if things go wrong. If you feel nervous or anxious, you’ll be far more likely to suffer when you’re under pressure.

Just as negative emotions can have an adverse effect on the mind and body, however, so positive emotions can have a useful, constructive effect. There isn’t any conclusive evidence in favour of such a theory, but it does seem very likely that you’ll be far less likely to suffer from stress, and far less likely to become ill, if you’re feeling bright and cheerful. Children who are deprived of maternal love are more likely not only to become socially aggressive but also to spend much of their time in later years suffering from ill-health. Love doesn’t just make the world go round; it also helps to make it go round more smoothly.

There isn’t much indisputable clinical evidence to show that laughter does you good either, but the experiences of Norman Cousins, which are described so vividly in his marvellous book Anatomy of an Illness, strongly suggest that there may well be a relationship between laughter and good health. Cousins, assured by his doctors that there was no cure for an inflammatory disease which threatened to leave him crippled and incapable, left his dreary hospital room, moved into a hotel and spent his days reading witty books and watching funny films.

Not only did he make a remarkable recovery and insist that he obtained genuine relief from pain by laughing, but he – with his doctors – also managed also managed to produce solid laboratory evidence to show that his laughter had a useful, positive effect on his physical condition. There is still some confusion about why this should be, but it seems that laughter may help by improving respiration, by lowering blood pressure and possibly also by increasing the supply of specific types of endorphin in the blood. Certainly it seems more than possible that laughter isn’t merely a pleasant experience, but is also a positive, natural phenomenon which helps ensure that the body benefits from pleasant experiences. The researchers are still working in this field, but they have already shown that laughing gas makes us laugh because it stimulates the production of a special endorphin.

Perhaps laughter is the best medicine after all. And if laughter can help, what about hope, confidence, delight and all other pleasures?

Whatever the physiological explanations may be, the implications are far-reaching. A carefree, positive approach to life may bring much more than passing joy.

The advantages of staying active

One of the saddest sights I know is to see someone retiring, accepting his gold watch and inscribed scroll, and going home to television set, golf clubs and potting shed.

There is now an overwhelming amount of evidence to show that retirement is dangerous to health! If you give up your daily responsibilities, you stand a greater than average chance of becoming mentally or physically ill. You will be more prone to depression, and more prone to stomach, heart and chest troubles, too.

Not that this is surprising when you stop to think about it. After all, when you retire, you may be left with no real purpose to your life. You don't have to get up and go anywhere. You don't have to do anything. You have no responsibilities, no duties and no authority. You are living outside the only society that you know.

And your body will reflect this by failing to function properly. Just as too many demands cause damage, so too few demands can cause damage. You can ruin a car by pushing it too hard, but you can also ruin it by leaving it in the garage for far too long. When there are no demands, the muscles atrophy, the heart slows down and the joints begin to creak and groan. Small problems are allowed to persist because they do not threaten any vital activity. The body's defence mechanisms also begin to slow down.

Consequently, if you then have to face a crisis, you will be ill equipped to cope. Once retired and settled into a lazy rut, you will find that your ability to defeat pressure through your body's powers will be diminished.

After all, if your leg muscles aren't fit and you try running a mile, you'll soon have to stop. The other organs of your body, some of which you cannot see, are affected in exactly the same way when they are allowed slowly to atrophy. If your heart is never put under any sort of pressure, you're more likely to have a heart attack if anything goes wrong. If your lungs aren't used to the full, you're more likely to get chest troubles. And so on.

The secret of a long, healthy life is to try to keep active. By and large, the more you use your mind and body the fitter they will stay.

PART 4: *BODYPOWER* IN PRACTICE

So much for the general principles of *Bodypower*. In this final section I want to give some specific examples of how *Bodypower* works in practice.

You can use *Bodypower* to help improve your shape and maintain your health

The fat of the land

People get fat for many different reasons. Some people eat because they are depressed. Others eat too much because they are anxious. Babies who are bottle-fed seem more likely to put on too much weight than babies who are breast-fed. Fat babies often grow into fat children who often grow into fat adults. Obesity seems to run in families, too, although whether it does so because of inherited factors or simply because the family members all sit down and overeat together is a difficult question to answer.

Despite this confusion, we know one thing for certain. Most overweight people need not have got fat if they had listened to their bodies telling them what to eat and when to eat it.

Your appetite control centre, which I have already described and which is directly controlled by the amount of sugar circulating in the blood, is designed to ensure that you eat just what your body needs, exactly when your body needs it. Unfortunately, of course, most of us ignore our appetite control centre completely and adjust our eating habits to fit in with the behavioural patterns imposed on us by the society in which we live.

Our eating habits are usually established when we are children. Inevitably, therefore, it is our mothers who usually set the pattern. If you think back to when you were small, you'll probably remember that you were always encouraged to eat at organised meal times. Your mother doubtless got upset if you didn't want anything to eat and doubtless got even more upset if you didn't clear your plate every time you sat down at the table.

Indeed, if you were bottle-fed your 'training' probably started before you could sit down to the table. One reason that bottle-fed babies tend to get fatter than their breast-fed counterparts is that, while it is impossible to see how much has been taken from the breast, it is all to easy to see just how much is left in the bottle! Anxious mothers tend to encourage their babies to empty the bottle even when their babies don't seem hungry.

These distorted behavioural patterns all help to ensure that your appetite control centre is consistently overruled. Your eating habits will eventually be controlled not by your body's genuine need for food but by a totally artificial conception of its requirements. You can be trained to eat badly and unwisely as easily and efficiently as Pavlov's dogs were trained to salivate at the sound of a bell. By the time most of us reach adulthood we're accustomed to eating according to the clock on the wall rather than the clock in our brains. We eat when our parents taught us to eat or when it seems that we ought to eat. We eat what the advertising copywriters tell us we should be eating and we eat it when those around us think we should eat it.

That's the bad news.

The good news is that these damaging eating habits can be reversed as simply as they can be established. By learning to listen for your body's internal signs of hunger, by abandoning habits which overrule your appetite control centre and by eating when you need to eat, you'll find it possible to lose weight or to maintain a steady weight without any external aid or support.

Try this regime:

1. Only eat when you are hungry. Most people eat at pre-ordained times which may or may not bear any relationship to their need for food. It may sound disruptive to suggest that you abandon fixed meal times and in a large family it can certainly cause some confusion. But the disruption will probably be far less severe than you might have imagined. Besides, if you are trying to lose weight, you must not break this rule. Every time you put anything in your mouth (that you intend to eat) you must ask yourself whether you need it; whether you are hungry.
2. Concentrate on what you are doing when you are eating. If you chat, read a magazine, stare at the newspaper, watch television or do the crossword while you're eating, the chances are that you'll miss the signs from your appetite control centre. You have to concentrate on your eating if you are to be aware of the messages telling you that you are full.
3. Don't be afraid to leave on your plate when you are full. It's a waste to throw food away, but isn't the dustbin a more suitable receptacle for waste than your stomach? Many people feel so guilty if they see food being wasted that they eat others' leftovers. This is eating lunacy.
4. Get in to the habit of serving small portions. That way you'll be less inclined to eat too much. And you'll be less likely to have to face the problem of plucking up courage to throw food away. If you consistently find that there is too much food on your plate, try putting less on it to start with. The aim is to stop eating as soon as you're full.
5. Try to build up an awareness of your body's needs. If you eat something very salty, you'll feel thirsty afterwards because your body will try to balance the high salt intake with a higher fluid intake. If you listen to your body when you're hungry, you'll find that it is telling you what you need. Those strange fancies that pregnant women get are often very sensible! If you feel like eating something sweet, eat something sweet. If you feel like an orange, eat an orange – your body probably thinks that you are short of something that an orange can provide.
6. Most of us eat fairly large meals at fairly infrequent intervals because that is the way our society encourages us to eat. This doesn't help your appetite control centre at all. If you eat a meal and then don't eat

for several hours, your body will react accordingly. It will expect to receive supplies irregularly. Consequently, it will encourage you to eat as much as possible when you are eating; and it will store what isn't needed. The food is, of course, stored as fat. If you eat smaller meals, but more frequently, the food you take in will be burned up straight away. None of it will be stored. And you'll take in just what your body needs. Eat small meals and eat often!

7. Don't use food as a crutch. If you eat because you are sad or happy or in or out of love, your appetite control centre will become confused. Only eat when you are genuinely hungry.
8. Don't use food as a weapon. Don't force children to eat foods they don't like. Don't deprive them of food if they are naughty. Don't link food and punishment or food and reward. This sort of behaviour disrupts the appetite control mechanism.
9. Don't think it rude to leave food on the side of your plate when you are out dining. And don't feel bad about turning down courses. Be a gourmet by all means – but not a gourmand!
10. Be patient while you are re-educating your body to listen to the dictates of your appetite control centre. If you've been ignoring it for years, it will take a little while for you to learn to listen to it again.

For matchstick men and women

Most people who have a weight problem worry because they are too fat. That isn't always the case. A number of men and women complain that whatever they eat they can't put weight on. Being grossly underweight can be just as embarrassing as being overweight.

Sometimes the problem is caused by a hormonal disorder. The man or woman with an overactive thyroid will burn up food so quickly that he or she will remain skinny however much food is eaten. Often, however, there is no cause that can be treated.

When there isn't a medical reason behind an individual's failure to put on weight, the solution to the problem usually involves a deliberate attempt to overrule the appetite control centre. Unlike the overweight person, the skinny individual will usually eat within very strictly defined limits. An efficient control centre will ensure that he stops eating just before he gets full.

To defeat the body's own appetite control centre, it is necessary to take up some of the bad habits that slimmers usually need to avoid! So, for example:

1. If you think you're too thin and you want to get fatter, trick your body by eating when you're doing something else. That way your appetite control centre won't be able to switch off your desire to eat quite so easily.
2. Gobble up your food faster than usual. When you eat slowly you know when you're full. If you push your food in quickly you'll overfill your stomach before it can pass the message on to your brain.
3. Eat late at night when your body doesn't need much food. A midnight feast is probably the best way of putting on weight.
4. Use a bigger plate than usual, eat bigger meals than you normally manage and don't miss fixed meal times. All these tricks help ensure that your body's appetite control centre is ignored.

More of a good thing

According to clinical research published in very reputable journals, women can use *Bodypower* to help improve the shape and size of their breasts.

One of the most startling and comprehensive research projects on this subject was undertaken by Dr Richard D Willard of the Institute of Behavioural and Mind Sciences in Indiana, who asked 22 female volunteers, ranging in age from 19 to 54, to use self-hypnosis and visual imagery in an attempt to enlarge their breasts. At the start of the study, which was eventually described in full in the *American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis*, five individual breast measurements were taken for each woman – circumference, height, width and other measurements were recorded by a doctor who was not involved in the experiments. The volunteers then attended Dr Willard's clinic once a week for six weeks and once every two weeks for an additional six weeks.

At the first session the women were taught how to relax their muscles by using the same sort of technique as the one I have already described in this book. Subsequently, they were asked to do this and then to imagine that they had a wet, warm towel draped over their breasts. They were asked to imagine that the towel was making their breasts feel warm, or – if they found this difficult – to imagine that a heat lamp was shining directly onto their breasts.

Once the women were satisfied that their breasts were getting warmer, they were asked to develop an awareness of a pulsation within their breast tissue. It was suggested to them that they should become conscious of their heartbeats and feel each new beat pushing blood into their breasts. They were told to practise this exercise every day at home.

At the end of the 12-week experiment, 28 per cent of the women had achieved the growth in breast size that they wanted, 85 per cent had confirmed that a significant increase in their breast size had been achieved and 46 per cent had reported that they had had to buy bigger bras. The average increase in breast circumference was 1.37 inches; in breast height, 0.67 inches; and in breast width, 1.01 inches. Most women reported that by the end of the experiment they could feel warm blood flowing into their breasts simply by thinking about their breasts.

There were other advantages, too! Those women who had – at the start of the experiment – complained of having breasts of unequal size, reported that their breasts had become equal in size. All the women reported that their breasts were now firmer. And some 63 per cent of the women, who had complained of having pendulous breasts when the experiment had started, reported that the fullness and the contours of their breasts had returned. Incidentally, to make sure that the extra breast size hadn't just been achieved by an increase in weight, the women were also weighed at the start of the experiment. At the end of the 12-week period 42 per cent of the women had actually had a weight loss of greater than 4 pounds, but had all nevertheless noticed an improvement in their breast size.

When he studied the changes Dr Willard found that there was no correlation between the increase in size and the size of the breasts at the start of the experiment. He did, however, find that there was a correlation between the ease with which the women were able to visualise blood flowing into their breasts and the increase in size which they obtained. The only two women who subjectively felt that their breasts had not increased in size (but who did, in fact, have a measurable increase in bosom dimensions) had both had difficulty in feeling the effect of the warmth on their breasts.

In another, similar experiment Allan R. Staib and D. R. Logan of the University of Houston encouraged three women under hypnosis to imagine themselves going back in time to when they were ten or twelve years old. The women were told to imagine that they could feel their breasts pushing outwards and that they could then feel the skin getting tighter as the tissues grew. Then they were asked to imagine themselves standing nude in front of the bathroom mirror some two or three years after the completion of the experiment. They were told to notice that in the intervening time their breasts had become larger.

Staib and Logan managed to show that their volunteers also enjoyed an appreciable improvement in breast size. Moreover, they also revealed that even after three months the greater part of the gain remained.

It is not easy to explain these startling results, but it seems likely that the results obtained by Staib and Logan were, like those obtained by Willard, produced by an increase in the amount of blood flowing through the breasts. Masters and Johnson had indicated in 1966 that the swelling of the female breasts during sexual arousal is produced by an increase in the amount of blood in the tissue.

Biofeedback practitioners have proved many times that the general circulatory system can be controlled voluntarily and these specific research projects provide analogous evidence. But the breast-enlarging programmes do, in addition, show that the increase in circulation may be followed by a consequent tissue growth. And that is most remarkable, for it suggests that there may well be other, even more startling uses for this particular type of self-hypnosis.

Keep young and beautiful

We inherit our basic physical characteristics and all our physical features from our parents. Your body build, for example, is inherited. If you're now too tall, too short, too muscular or too weedy, you only have your parents to blame. And, I would have to add, their parents. And their parents' parents. And their parents' parents' parents. Your most salient physical features are inherited from your parents too. If you have a huge nose, you'll almost certainly find that – even if your parents don't have oversize noses – there is someone up there in your family tree who is equipped with an oversize piece of olfactory equipment.

Sometimes basic characteristics miss a generation or two, with the result that blond parents may suddenly produce a raven-haired child. Occasionally, basic characteristics rarely miss a generation at all. Any Hapsburg mother who produced a child without the famous harelip would probably have found herself being fitted for a new and improved chastity belt. In any event, somewhere in your past there will have been ancestors possessing the features you now possess.

By the time you've reached your mid-twenties you'll be beginning to put your personal stamp on the characteristics you've inherited. Whatever sort of body you were born with, the sort of body you end up with will depend more on the way you have lived than on purely inherited characteristics.

Like any piece of machinery the human body shows signs of ageing according to the way it is treated. Look after your body with care and thought and it will serve you well. If, on the other hand, you treat your body without respect, it will age rapidly. Whatever physical characteristics you inherited, your life style will have a powerful effect on the ageing process.

Clearly, therefore, it is important to know just how to look after your body properly. If you are aware of, and able to take advantage of, your body's natural physiological mechanisms, you will be far better equipped to deal with the numerous pressures which can accelerate the ageing process. If you want to keep young and beautiful, you need to know how to oppose those threats likely to be a problem.

The following list is intended to offer you advice on how best to defy old age.

1. Wrinkles are commonly considered to be inevitable in old age. To a very limited extent that may be true. As we age, our skin does lose some of its elasticity, appearing stretched and loose as a result. At the same time the skin's glands produce less oil and the surface cells become gradually drier. Together these two changes result in the skin becoming wrinkled – in much the same way that a dried-out river bed will

gradually become cracked and wrinkled too.

There isn't much you can do to prevent your skin losing its natural elasticity, I'm afraid, but you can help prevent it becoming dry. If you regularly use a moisturising cream to replace the missing natural oils, you will keep the tissues just underneath the surface layer of skin plump and full. You'll be far less likely to develop any wrinkles. Moisturising creams do not add water to the skin, as some experts occasionally suggest, but they do help your body preserve moisture that is already there.

You should also keep out of the sun as much as possible – unless you're using an effective sunscreen agent. Too much sunshine will dry and damage your skin and will increase the rate at which wrinkles develop. A sunscreen cream, applied regularly and liberally, will protect the tissues from the potentially damaging short-wavelength ultraviolet rays while letting through the longer wavelength ultraviolet rays which produce tanning of the skin.

2. It is widely assumed that we are all bound to put on weight as we get older. This just isn't true. Unless your family is blighted with some rare metabolic disorder, your overall size in twenty years time will be more a reflection of your eating habits than any inherited characteristic. Eat with sense, discretion and caution and remember that as you get older and take less exercise so you need fewer calories. You will then stay slim and trim into your retirement years.

3. Joint and muscle disorders, such as the various types of rheumatism and arthritis, are often thought of as diseases of old age. It is true that as they get older joints become worn and muscles become less efficient. It is, however, also true that the disorders which fall into this general category are far more likely to develop when joints and muscles are used irregularly and carelessly than when they are used regularly and wisely. Gentle exercise, carried out to a routine, will help keep muscles supple and joints mobile.

You can also help to minimise your susceptibility to such disorders by resting when you have any pain or deformity affecting a joint and by keeping your weight under control. If you are carrying excess weight your bones and muscles will be under unnecessary extra strain.

4. After their size and their skin the thing most women seem to worry about as they grow older is their shape. Men are often accused of being obsessed with women's breasts and that may well be true, but it is also a fact that women notice the contours of their chests. I'd like a week's holiday in the South of France for every women I know who worries that one day her pert, well-shaped breasts will end up looking like sacks of rice pudding!

There is no mystery about the changes which affect the female breasts as they age. Breasts, like apples, respond to the urgings of gravity and any woman who is particularly well endowed will sag sooner rather than later. Her less well-endowed sister may not notice any comparable change for some years.

There is no simple, magic solution to the problem of 'breast droop', but any woman who wants to delay the onset of the 'droop' can do so by wearing a well-supporting bra and by keeping the muscles of her chest wall adequately exercised. A good bra will enable the shoulders to take some of the weight and strain of the breast tissue, while strong chest muscles will be far better able to counteract the effects of gravity.

5. Thinning hair is a problem which worries many older men and women. Baldness in men is, of course, very often inherited. There is nothing that can be done about this type of hair loss. When the loss of hair is not genetically controlled it is frequently the result of carelessness with chemicals of one sort or another; preventative measures can, therefore, be taken.

Hair can be damaged by bleaching, tinting, stripping, straightening or perming. None of these operations should be done very often and as a general rule no more than one should be done within the same seven-day period.

Sun, heat, salt water and chlorinated water may also damage hair. You should wear a sun hat with a broad rim when sunbathing; you should avoid using rollers that are too hot, and you should rinse your hair thoroughly after bathing.

Finally, you should be aware that mechanical damage can result in hair loss. Don't brush or comb your hair too much and don't use too hard a brush or comb. The bristles shouldn't be too sharp or too close together, either. Your hair is particularly likely to be damaged by fierce brushing when it is wet.

6. Older women tend to complain that their hands and fingernails are ugly and badly marked. Human hands and nails are not prepared for frequent immersion in strong chemical solutions. Detergents and bleaches can damage both the skin of the hands and the nails themselves. To avoid problems of this type you should ensure that your hands are well rinsed, dried carefully and covered with a moisturising cream every time they have been dipped in water. The cream will replace the natural oils which have been lost.

7. Decayed or missing teeth are common signs of old age. Dental decay is, indeed, one of the commonest diseases in the Western world and dentists remove tons of teeth every year. This level of decay is not only responsible for much distress and embarrassment, but also causes poor eating habits. People with missing teeth and bleeding gums find chewing painful, if not impossible.

It is now well established that dietary habits are largely responsible for this epidemic of dental decay. It was in the seventeenth century that people in Britain first began to eat sugar in relatively large quantities and it was then that they first began to suffer from rotting teeth. Medical historians and statisticians have traced and related the increase in dental decay to the increase in the consumption of sugar. More recently, it has been shown that tooth decay among the Eskimos has risen as they have adopted the Western junk diet, with its heavy sugar component.

Clearly, one simple way to reduce the rate of dental decay is to reduce the consumption of sugar-rich foods. Since the worst foods are those which are sipped and sucked, so bathing the teeth in a destructive solution, it is sweets and sugar-rich drinks which are best avoided. It has been estimated that most of us eat approximately two pounds of sugar a week; cutting back should be easy.

There are foods which help maintain the teeth in good condition. Sugar-free foods that need a good deal of chewing help to clean the teeth in a purely mechanical fashion and, by aiding the production of large quantities of saliva, aid in keeping the teeth clean. Obviously, it also helps to develop good tooth-cleaning habits.

8. Many of us treat our bodies with far too little thought. A recent report from America's National Institute for Medicine stated that it is our lifestyle which is killing most of us. The report points out that three-quarters of Americans die from heart diseases, strokes, cancer and accidents or violence. In all those disorders, behaviour, or life style, plays an important part. Cigarette smoking, excessive drinking, reckless driving and poor eating habits are all listed as factors contributing to death or poor health.

These bad habits commonly cause problems when they get out of control. The message is: If you must sin, do so in moderation.

9. I've lost count of the number of people I've known who have led busy, healthy lives, then retired, deteriorated and died soon afterwards. The human body is designed for action and activity. Long before you retire you should make plans which will ensure that you will keep your mind and your body fully occupied.

10. As we get older, our body's defences become weaker and less efficient. Catch a minor infection as a young man and your body will survive with little difficulty. Catch an infection of similar severity half a century later and your body may well succumb. In order to ensure that you stay healthy, despite your body's diminishing powers of self-protection, you should learn to become conscious even of minor symptoms. As soon as you notice an infection starting, for example, allow yourself to rest. Your body will be far better able to survive if it can concentrate all its powers on defeating the threat.

You can use *Bodypower* to help you deal with specific symptoms and threats

Anxiety and depression

Anxiety and depression occasionally develop as a result of genuine difficulties. Commonly, however, they result from imagined failures. The man or woman who feel that he or she has let someone down, has failed someone or has failed to live up to his or her own expectations will suffer enormously as a result.

In these circumstances you may develop a vulnerability to irritations and stresses of varying kinds; problems which might otherwise have seemed relatively insignificant will often cause further emotional turmoil and the subsequent feelings of inadequacy will be self-reinforcing and self-perpetuating.

There are a number of things that you can do to strengthen your ability to resist the threats of imagined failure.

1. Recognise your own personality traits and where necessary make the changes which will strengthen your resistance.
2. Don't be afraid of making mistakes. Many people feel that if they have made a mistake they must inevitably feel guilty. In fact, we learn only by making mistakes. The more successful a man is, the more mistakes he will have made.
3. Don't be afraid to change your mind. It takes strength not weakness to alter a decision or an opinion.
4. Learn to differentiate between the realistic expectations of those around you and the purely selfish expectations that they may harbour. Some of the people closest to you will be only too happy to take advantage of your kindness and goodwill. When you fail to satisfy their demands, they will make you feel guilty. And that can easily lead to anxiety and depression.
5. In Charles Dickens' Martin Chuzzlewit, Mark Tapley takes great pride in being cheerful in adversity. Tapley considers it a challenge to remain jolly in the midst of gloom. He repeatedly points out that anyone can be happy when things are going well, but that it takes strength of mind to remain cheerful when things are going badly. If you follow the Tapley philosophy you stand to gain a good deal. If you think about cheerful things, you'll work better and you'll feel better. There is even evidence that you will see and hear better when you're thinking pleasant thoughts!
6. Most of us use our imaginations against ourselves by always fearing the worst. Try to learn to use your imagination as a force for good. For example, if you are irritated by the telephone ringing and you find yourself rushing to answer it whatever you are doing, you probably also find yourself worrying that it is going to bring bad news. If you ever do pluck up courage to let it ring and ring until it stops, you'll probably spend hours afterwards worrying about who was calling! And how urgent it was!
   You suffer because your imagination tells you the worst. But you can change that. Sit down somewhere that you cannot hear the telephone if it should ring and relax your body and mind. Use the standard muscle and mind-relaxing techniques. When you've done this, imagine that you can hear a telephone ringing. And imagine that the person making the call has dialled a wrong number. Now imagine yourself sitting and letting the phone ring. Eventually the caller hangs up and cancels the call. Try this exercise a few times and you will slowly lose your fear of the telephone. You'll have recruited your imagination to work for you and not against you.
7. If you feel that you are inferior and you always see yourself failing, you will find that people will treat you as though you are inferior. And you will spend much of your life failing. Your body will eventually begin to prepare for failure as soon as you start anything. If, for example, you pick up a tray of crockery, you'll probably be able to see the shattered fragments! Your muscles will become tense and tight and your body will make adjustments that aren't needed in order to try to stop the accident you've foreseen. In all likelihood the tray will fall. Next time you carry a tray your imagination will be reinforced by your past unhappy experience. You'll go through life anxious and depressed.

Remember that neither the brain nor your body can tell real failure from imagined failure, nor real success from imagined success. If you look on the bright side, you'll acquire confidence and you'll be able to avoid anxiety and depression. There is, you see, a genuine physiological basis for positive thinking.

Waves of nausea

Motion sickness, or travel sickness , is one of those underestimated disorders. It's something that comedians often laugh at, but which sufferers find embarrassing as well as physically exhausting.

Since Hippocrates first described the problem a couple of thousand years ago many people have looked for ways to prevent and treat this most incapacitating disorder. Car sickness is one of the commonest types of motion sickness (perhaps only because more people travel by car than by any other type of vehicle) and dozens of possible solutions have been proposed. When I was a boy I used to suffer from car sickness and I remember my parents being inundated with advice from kindly relatives and friends. One aunt suggested that I eat a small mouthful of raw ginger before every journey. Another claimed that if I had a piece of stiff brown paper stuffed down the back of my shirt I would suffer no more. A third said if my father fixed a small length of chain to the back of the car I would have no more problems. None of these remedies worked.

More recently, researchers managed to produce some solid facts about motion sickness!

The first real progress was made by Army scientists, who were instructed to find ways in which soldiers being landed on enemy beaches could be protected against seasickness. The most important breakthroughs, however, were made by doctors involved in the American space programme.

Inspired by a need to find some way to protect astronauts from motion sickness, these researchers discovered that when the brain is receiving data about what is going on, it balances that flow of information against the motion and stops nausea developing. That's why car drivers, aeroplane pilots and bicycle riders don't usually suffer from motion sickness. It seems that sickness is far more likely to develop when the semi-circular canals which record movement are telling the brain that the body is in motion but the senses are providing no supporting information.

In other words, if you sit in a car and read a book your sense of balance will be providing information which is not backed up by sensory information.

To avoid motion sickness, therefore, you should ensure that you take an active interest in what is going on around you. If you're sitting in a car as a passenger you should look out for specific landmarks, road signs and so on.

By providing your brain with information, you'll be providing it with an explanation for the movement your body is recording. And you'll be less likely to suffer from motion sickness.

Eyes right

Orthodox medical practitioners are invariably sceptical. It seems almost a tradition that the profession should regard all new ideas as heretical and should dismiss original concepts as worthless or, at best, of dubious value.

When arguing in favour of their reactionary attitude, doctors will often explain that healing is a profession which attracts far more than its fair share of charlatans and quacks and that patients who are sick and desperate are easy game for individuals out to make a quick killing. However, you don't have to look very far when reading through a medical history book to see that a great many of the so-called charlatans have eventually been shown to have put forward sound, constructive ideas which have contributed much to the quality of practical medical care. It is wise, therefore, to keep an open mind about medical theories and to remember that Bacon, Galileo, Jenner and Darwin were all considered slightly odd by many of their colleagues.

One doctor who suffered rejection at the hands of the medical establishment was a New York eye specialist, Dr W. D. Bates. In the first years of this century, he did research and work on eye diseases which led him to the conclusion that defective vision is not due to permanent changes in the shape of the eye but to functional derangements.

Dr Bates argued that when the eye is used to look at an object, the external muscles which surround the eyeball are used to change the shape of the eye itself. He claimed that when a distant object is being examined, the external muscles move the back of the eye towards the lens, and that when a close object is being examined the opposite happens. He suggested that these muscular changes alter the shape of the eyeball and argued that individuals who are myopic (short sighted) or hypermetropic (long sighted) have eyeballs which have been misshapen by faulty action of the external muscles.

According to Bates, when a patient is myopic his eyeball is kept in a position which makes the viewing of distant objects difficult. On the other hand, when a patient suffers from hypermetropia the eyeball is kept in such a shape that the viewing of near objects is difficult.

Thus, if people with defective vision are really suffering because the external muscles of their eyeballs have been strained, the logical next step for the Bates theory was to suggest that they should learn to relieve the strain and tension on their eye muscles in order to improve their vision. When he put his theory in to practice Bates found that it worked. Not surprisingly, however, it was vehemently opposed by opticians, ophthalmologists and doctors.

Writing some years before the Austrian endocrinologist Hans Selye and his acolytes started to write about stress, Bates suggested that many people with strained eye muscles suffer from mental tension which has set up a corresponding physical strain on the eyes and, in particular, on the muscles which control them. Bates believed that tense, nervous people are more likely to develop defective vision than others and he stated that overwork, worry, fear and anxiety can all help damage the eyesight.

The Bates answer was to encourage his patients to learn how to relax themselves properly. He advocated both general exercises, designed to relax the whole body, and specific exercises, designed to relax the muscles around the eyeball. The following regime is based on the Bates philosophies and on Harry Benjamin's book *Better Sight Without Glasses*.

1. First you must learn how to relax your body and your mind. (See my previous advice on relaxation).
2. If you've ever stared at something very hard you'll know that the muscles of your eyes can get so tired that you eventually have to turn away and relax a little. Dr Bates had a technique called 'palming', which he recommended to patients who wanted to know how to relax their eyes effectively. To do this you should sit in a very comfortable position, as loose and relaxed as you can get. Then close your eyes and cover them with your hands. Don't press on your eyes and leave your hands slightly cupped: there should be no direct

pressure on your eyes at all.

Now you can either let the blackness gently fill your mind or, if you find it easier, allow images from your store of daydream scenes to fill your mind. Do this for ten minutes at a time, three times a day, if you have defective vision. Otherwise, do it whenever your eyes feel tired.

3. You should exercise the muscles of your neck and shoulders; if these are tight, they'll have a bad effect on the small muscles round your eyes. First raise your shoulders high. Then lower them. Do this a few times, after which you should try pushing your shoulders back as far as possible. When you've done that a few times, move your head as far forward as you can – try to touch your chest with your chin. Then move your head back so that your chin is as far away from your chest as possible. Finally, try turning your head to the right as far as it will go and then to the left as far as it will go. These are exercises that you should try if you get tension headaches or aching eyes.
4. You can also do some specific exercises to help relax the muscles round your eyes. Allow your eyes to go up into your head as far as possible. Keep your head still and don't strain the muscles at all – just take your eyes as far as they will go naturally. Next do a similar exercise taking your eyes as far left as they will go and then as far right as they will go. Again, keep your head as still as you can and don't strain your eyes. Finally, try holding up your index finger (either hand will do) a few inches in front of your eyes. Look at the finger and then look at any object in the distance. Look backwards and forwards between your finger and the distant object ten times. Rest for a moment or two and then repeat the exercise. If you have defective vision you should practise these exercises several times a day.
5. You can use your imagination to improve your vision. Look at any line of print in this book. Concentrate hard on one word in the middle of the line and then close your eyes and imagine that you can see the one word far more clearly defined than the other words in the line. Open your eyes and look at the line again. Close your eyes and repeat the exercise. Keep doing this and when the whole word looks more clearly defined than the other words concentrate on smaller and smaller words – finally picking out individual letters for the exercise.

One of the reasons why Bates was so unpopular was undoubtedly the fact that he argued that by wearing spectacles people with bad eyes were merely making their sight worse and perpetuating their need for artificial aids. He pointed out that spectacles do nothing to help the existing problem, but are offered merely as an interventionist aid. They are intended to help the individual with a problem cope with that problem – not to help him overcome it. And there are several dangers.

The main danger, of course, is that by helping the patient who has defective vision to see with artificial aids the optician is ensuring that any muscle imbalance is maintained. The eyes are being prevented from recovering. Like those volunteers walking around with prism spectacles, whose eyes adapted, the individual wearing corrective spectacles will find that his eyesight adapts to fit his lenses. Spectacles can only aggravate and intensify a problem.

There isn't much chance of making a living out of teaching people how to cope with their visual problems by re-educating their muscles. And if all the people who wear spectacles were encouraged to give them up, many businesses would disappear overnight.

Nevertheless, there does seem to be evidence that some people who are prescribed spectacles can learn to manage without them. Naturally, people who already wear spectacles cannot simply give up their aids overnight. Their eyes will have grown accustomed to artificial support. What they can do is to try to give up their spectacles in easy stages – simply by not wearing them when they aren't doing anything demanding. Do the exercises I've described. Gradually, as the weeks go by, spectacles may have to be discarded and replaced with older, weaker lenses. That's a sign that progress is being made!

The dark enemy

Few disorders cause as much damage as cancer. The variety of illnesses which fall under this umbrella description cause many hundreds of thousands of deaths each year and produce much misery. And yet, despite the fact that few diseases have attracted so much attention from doctors and scientists, and despite the fact that much money and effort has been put into finding a cure for cancer, very little progress has been made.

We know that cancers usually develop when a group of cells within the body begin to divide and multiply too quickly and we know that this over-enthusiastic multiplication can be triggered by chemicals of various kinds. But we still do not know exactly how cancers develop and the orthodox remedies are often not only ineffective but so crude that they do as much damage to the host as to the cancer. Occasional, well-publicised breakthroughs have invariably promised much but delivered less.

What has become clear in recent years, however, is that there are simple, natural ways to treat cancer. Since they use the body's own healing powers, rather than drugs or pieces of expensive machinery, these techniques have been dismissed by orthodox practitioners as quack remedies and have been bracketed with such controversial therapies as apricot pit extract. Nevertheless, there is a growing amount of evidence to suggest that the best hope for the control of cancer may well come not from the laboratories of the world but from within the human body.

While traditional doctors round the world continue to concentrate exclusively on using remedies designed to attack the body and the cancers with knives, poisons, electricity and radiation, increasing numbers of practitioners are beginning to experiment with techniques designed to utilise some of the body's own defence mechanisms and to enhance the body's capacity for self-protection. These non-interventionist techniques are sometimes used as a genuine alternative to surgical and chemical remedies and sometimes as an adjunct. Either way the results are impressive.

A team with one of the greatest success rates in this very specialised area of treatment is that of Dr O. Carl Simonton and Stepanie Matthews-Simonton. Ms Matthews-Simonton is a psychotherapist and Carl Simonton is a medically qualified cancer specialist. Their work is described in *Getting Well Again,* which they wrote with James L. Creighton.

The basic principle upon which the Simontons have established their work is that negative emotions can contribute towards the development of cancer. It has been shown that something like three-quarters of all cancer patients become ill within a relatively short time of a major crisis in their lives. Psychologists claim that potential cancer patients often have difficulty in establishing close relationships, frequently tend to feel isolated and alone and may cover their internal feelings of inadequacy with an outward show of being comfortable, strong and stable.

The potential cancer patient is most at risk after some disruptive event. It seems that the pessimism and sense of doom invading the individual opens the way for the development of a life-threatening disorder.

The basis of the Simontons' work is that – just as negative emotions can contribute towards the development of cancer – so positive, cheerful emotions can help lead to a remission, if not a cure. They believe that by giving their cancer patients hope, a sense of cheerfulness and a feeling of pugnacious determination, they can help them fight apparently unstoppable disorders. Standard, interventionist anti-cancer techniques usually involve the use of weapons intended to help fight the cancer itself. There is not usually any room for the individual patient to play a part in his own recovery. And that, say the Simontons and those who do similar work, is wrong. Their success rate shows that the power of the body in the treatment of cancer can be immense. Used alongside traditional, interventionist techniques their approach produces dramatic effects.

Cancer sufferers can help themselves by enjoying themselves, by relaxing, by taking moderate exercise, by laughing, by having fun and by adding zest to their lives. They can also help themselves specifically by using their imagination to help overcome the threat posed by the cancer.

Here are some of the mental techniques that can be tried:

1. Imagine that the cancer cells are being thrown out of your body like rubbish that you're clearing out of your house. Imagine that the workmen are coming round every day to pick up fresh piles of unwanted cancer cells.
2. If you are being treated with drugs, imagine the drugs surging through your blood in search of cancer cells to destroy. Think of the drugs as your private cavalry.
3. Think of the white blood cells fighting off the cancer cells. Think of the white cells working alongside whatever drug you are taking.
4. Think of your cancer as being composed of individual, uncertain, homeless cells. The cancer is more frightened of you and your white cells than you are of it. Cancer doesn't always win and the cancer cells know that. Make sure you keep it on the defensive.

Happy birth day

One of the most controversial medical topics in recent years has been the question of whether pregnant women should have their babies in hospital or at home. The evidence is still inconclusive; for every survey showing that the risks to mother and baby are lower in hospital than at home, there is another equally reputable survey showing exactly the opposite.

Whatever the statistical truth may be, there is certainly powerful evidence to show that women who have their babies at home may well enjoy the experience more and may even have happier babies as a result.

Women who give birth in hospital are, I'm afraid, quite likely to find themselves given drugs they don't really need, artificially induced so that they will deliver at a convenient time and forced to adopt positions they find degrading and uncomfortable. And it is this last point which is perhaps the most significant of all, for a growing number of midwives and doctors agree that the position favoured by many obstetricians for childbirth is not comfortable, logical or physiologically sound. If a woman feels comfortable giving birth on all fours or on her side, she should be allowed to do so – such claims are now being made frequently.

One of the leading exponents of 'natural childbirth' is Dr Michel Odent, who practices in Northern France and who argues that women should decide for themselves how they wish to give birth. He says that they should be allowed to respond to their own deepest instincts.

According to the Odent theory, if a woman wants to give birth to her baby while standing up. that is fine. If she wants to deliver her baby while squatting, then that is fine, too. Dr Odent even has women who deliver their babies while reclining under water.

Studies conducted in many countries confirm that in most cultures where women are allowed to choose their own position when giving birth, few choose to do so lying down. An impressive 82 per cent of women in 76 different cultures around the world give birth sitting, standing or squatting. From these surveys it seems that when gravity is allowed to assist and the woman is allowed to choose a position that she finds comfortable, the need for pain-relieving drugs, instruments and other aids is greatly reduced.

It seems possible that those obstetricians who insist that they decide what positions their patients adopt may be perpetuating the need for drugs and artificial aids to help what is essentially an entirely natural process. Women who listen to their own bodies and who have their babies without interference invariably seem to go through childbirth with far less distress.

It is, incidentally, interesting to note that many of the midwives and doctors who favour natural childbirth on the grounds that it is better for the mother also claim that it is better for the baby too. They argue that the baby who enters a world full of harsh lights, stainless steel equipment, cold weighing scales and frightening noises will be subjected to a remarkable 'culture' shock that can have lasting effects. And, if you stop to think about it, it may well be true that there is a shock to the system when a comfortable, warm, fluid-filled womb is suddenly exchanged for an artificial environment which most experienced adults themselves find slightly unnerving.

If you can't stand the heat

Your body is equipped with a number of magnificent temperature control mechanisms. Theoretically, these are designed to ensure that your internal body temperature is kept at the right level notwithstanding the temperature outside. In practice, however, most of us refuse to allow our internal temperature control mechanisms to operate. When it is warm we switch on the air conditioning and when it is cold we add a couple of extra sweaters and turn up the central heating.

By replacing our inbuilt mechanisms this way we are damaging our ability to respond to temperature changes. Those marvellous inner mechanisms are being encouraged to atrophy because we are consciously taking over the work they are supposed to do. By denying our in built mechanisms the chance to work and by becoming more and more reliant on artificial aids, we are steadily making ourselves more and more vulnerable to changes in our environmental conditions. Because we are accustomed to air conditioning and central heating we suffer more than we need when we are caught unexpectedly in an unheated railway carriage or when we have to make our way between two fully heated buildings.

Now, I recognise that no one is going to want to switch off the central heating or the air conditioning altogether. But if you want to make sure that your body's temperature control mechanisms aren't destroyed and that you can still respond to temperature changes, I suggest that you follow the notes I've compiled:

1. Try not to alter the temperature within your building too much from the temperature outside. If the temperature difference is too great, your body's control mechanism will not be able to cope.
2. When the weather outside is very cold and you are working or living in a heated building put on plenty of clothes before you go outside to ensure that the shock to your body is kept to a minimum. Your temperature control mechanisms are designed to cope with gradual changes in the environmental temperature, rather than sudden swings from boiling hot to freezing cold. When the manufacturer prepared the specifications for your body he wasn't aware that you were going to be able to move from arctic conditions to equatorial conditions in five seconds.
3. There is probably some truth in the old-fashioned theory that you shouldn't go outside in to the cold immediately after taking a hot bath or shower. When you're in a hot bath your superficial circulatory system will be well dilated to help you lose body heat. If you go outside with your blood vessels in that condition your body temperature may fall dangerously low – and your temperature control mechanisms may not be able to cope.
4. Finally, if your body's temperature control mechanisms seem to have atrophied and you find it difficult to deal with temperature changes, take heart; for there are ways in which you can exercise your body's ability to respond to the temperature of the environment. There are, indeed, ways in which you can force your body to respond appropriately!

A few years ago, Christina Maslach of the Department of Psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, and Garry Marshall and Phillip G. Zimbardo of the Department of Psychology at Stanford University, showed that individuals can control their own body temperature voluntarily. Inspired, perhaps, by the work of the Russian Professor Luria (whom we met earlier in this book), who described how a subject he observed could make one hand get hotter by imagining that it was resting on a hot stove while at the same time he made the other colder by imagining that it was holding a piece of ice, these researchers provided some amazing results, succeeding in demonstrating that it is perfectly possible to change skin temperature voluntarily.

That original research has now been taken one step further. In the *Journal of the American Medical Association* recently a report from the American National Institute of Health suggested that patients who suffer from a disorder called Raynaud's Phenomenon may be able to benefit from this type of technique.

Patients who suffer from Raynaud's Phenomenon get painfully cold hands when the external temperature falls because for some reason the arteries supplying their fingers overreact. The vessels become very tightly constricted and the supply of blood to the fingers is reduced to a mere trickle. Normally, patients with this disorder are encouraged to keep their bodies warm – by keeping the internal body temperature as high as possible it is not too difficult to limit the extent to which the arteries shut down.

However, the report that was published in JAMA suggests that patients with this disease can control their body temperature themselves and can therefore control the rate at which their arteries constrict. The patients in the study were taught to relax and to imagine that they were lying on a beach underneath the warm sun. Their imaginary sunshine proved strong enough to convince their bodies that they were warm even when they were cold.

If you are not a sufferer from Raynaud's Phenomenon you may none the less like to try this simple trick next time you feel particularly cold and can't get near a fire. Conversely, if you're suffering from too much heat you might like to try imagining that you're on an ice floe somewhere!

A vein thought

Blood that has deposited its oxygen and food to the tissues travels back to the heart and lungs through the veins. These thin-walled vessels are filled with valves and blood moves inside them only when the muscles through which they travel constrict. The tightening muscles squeeze the veins, and push the blood along. The valves stop the blood flowing back again.

If for some reason the blood doesn't move along the veins fast enough the veins may become gorged with fluid. Swollen veins, which are often sore, are usually described as 'varicose'. the veins in the legs are most commonly affected because there the blood has to fight its way upwards against the pull of gravity.

Varicose veins are particularly common among people who have to spend a lot of their time standing relatively still. Dentists and shop assistants, for example, regularly suffer. Their blood is allowed to collect in the veins because there isn't enough muscle movement to keep it moving upwards.

If you are at high risk, you may be able to help yourself by deliberately contracting the muscles in your calves every few minutes. Do this and the muscle movement will keep the blood travelling upwards even when you seem to be standing still.

The human body is not designed for standing. It's designed for moving. Varicose veins only develop when a natural *Bodypower* isn't given a proper chance to work.

Indigestion

Indigestion, wind, dyspepsia, peptic ulcers, gastritis, nausea and heartburn are all common problems. Millions of people are regularly afflicted by these uncomfortable symptoms, any of which can be a sign that the body is protesting. Although stress is frequently a basic cause of stomach problems, the specific symptoms can often be induced by eating the wrong things at the wrong time. If you try to identify exactly how you feel, then you may be able to come to a conclusion about the cause – and produce some answers that will help.

For example, if you find yourself feeling uncomfortably full and if you suffer from a bloated feeling when you've eaten, your problem may have been caused by eating too much or eating too quickly. When you push large quantities of food in to your stomach very rapidly you run the risk of overloading the system within. Your stomach is not huge and it can only produce a limited amount of gastric juice to help digest the food it receives. If you overload it, you'll distend its walls and acquire an unpleasant feeling inside.

If you deliberately try to taste the food you eat, you'll probably find yourself automatically limiting the rate at which you swallow food. Put down your knife and fork between mouthfuls if you can't manage to slow yourself down any other way.

If you feel as though there is a lump of undigested food in your stomach, that may in fact be the case. And it may be that you're not chewing properly. Food has to be well chewed if it is going to be properly digested, for the saliva that is produced in your mouth contains special enzymes which help to prepare the food for the secretions it will meet in your stomach. The answer is obvious – spend a little more time chewing!

Finally, do try to be aware of any specific foodstuffs that upset your stomach. If you experience nausea every time you eat fatty foods, you should avoid them. If cucumber 'doesn't like you', keep off the cucumber. If you get dyspepsia or wind every time you eat sprouts, avoid sprouts. Your stomach isn't a dustbin and although the acid it contains is powerful there are still some foods which can upset it. If your symptoms disappear entirely when you have avoided one particular food, you can try reintroducing that item a few weeks later. If the symptoms reappear, you will probably be wise to keep off that type of food indefinitely. Although not all sufferers will obtain complete relief from this simple approach, most will obtain some.

Moving experiences

Many people treat their bowels like unruly pets or naughty children – punishing them with powerful drugs when they don't behave properly. Men and women who suffer from constipation regularly use laxatives in order to establish an acceptable pattern of bowel behaviour.

The use of laxative drugs is illogical because many bowel disorders, and in particular constipation, are caused because the wrong sort of foods have been eaten. Using a drug to deal with a problem caused by bad eating habits is about as logical as using buckets to collect water entering through places where there should be roof tiles. They are both suitable short-term solutions, but there are much better ways to deal with the underlying causes.

Bowel disorders develop commonly these days because our diet often consists largely of highly refined foods. Our bowels haven't evolved to deal with these new types of food. The muscles of the bowel wall like to have something to squeeze and the quantity and quality of waste material passing through the bowels plays an important and very basic part in a number of fundamental physiological processes.

If you want to avoid bowel problems you should eat a roughage-rich diet. Give your intestines the sort of food they were designed to cope with and they will work far more efficiently.

A joint approach

In the last few decades millions of pounds have been spent on the search for a cure for arthritis. Hundreds of drug companies and thousands of researchers have struggled to find an explanation for a disease that has crippled millions of sufferers. And despite the fact that very many 'breakthroughs' have been made and journals have published articles describing wonderful new theories, none of the scientists working on the subject has yet managed to come up with any real answers. They have, of course, produced many new drugs. All these have some use as painkillers and anti-inflammatory aids, but none of them helps to prevent symptoms developing or makes them disappear permanently once they have arrived.

One of the best explanations for the way that arthritis affects the human body has come from a doctor who wasn't funded by a rich organisation and who hasn't received praise from other members of his own profession. His account of the way that arthritis affects the human body is nevertheless logical.

Dr William W. Fox is a London practitioner who has specialised in the treatment of patients with various forms of arthritis for many years. He believes that both rheumatoid and osteoarthritis develop in the same way and that both are caused by the body's reaction to a virus. In *Arthritis: Is your suffering really necessary?,* he explains that if the disease develops quickly the patient will acquire symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis, whereas if its onset is slow the patient will acquire the symptoms of osteoarthritis. In both cases, the arthritis is a consequence of the body reacting to an infection.

Most important of all is Dr Fox's claim that he can recognise the existence of this most damaging of diseases in the very early stages, before obvious signs develop. Consequently, he is able to help people stop arthritis developing. He claims that in the early phases the patient will complain of aches and pains in his joints and of a general feeling of being unwell. These vague symptoms are, he suggests, too often ignored. He adds that when they are ignored, trouble begins. His most important suggestion is that anyone who notices a generalised ache or a localised pain should listen to what is effectively a warning sign – and rest!

Although Dr Fox doesn't mention any of the other principles of *Bodypower* in his book, what he is describing is, in fact, nothing more than a specific variation on the theme I've used as the basis for *Bodypower*. Dr Fox thinks that arthritis develops when we ignore the signs telling us that our bodies are affected by a potentially damaging virus. And he suggests that if we only listen and rest when we have other odd aches and pains that we cannot explain, we won't develop arthritis. Dr Fox believes that rest is not only the best answer to the virus, and the best way to prevent symptoms developing, but that it is also the best way to help reduce the pain and stiffness of an acute attack.

Migraine

Migraine headaches can be cruelly incapacitating. Sufferers have to put up with headaches, nausea, mood changes, sensitivity to noise and light, itchy eyes, stuffed-up noses and a host of other annoying symptoms. The headaches can be particularly severe and very difficult to treat.

Although there are still some mysteries about precisely what happens during a migraine attack, it seems that the problems are largely a result of the body's response to stress. Misled into thinking that it can cope with the stress by preparing the muscles for immediate action, the body increases the blood supply to the muscles and closes down the supply to the brain. Then, when the threat seems to be lifting, the vessels open up again and the blood surges back through. It is this renewed flow of blood which seems to cause the pain of a migraine attack.

Many sufferers find that they can ease the severity of their attacks. Methods include avoiding stress; learning to cope with pressures more effectively; limiting exposure to specific foods or types of problems which make symptoms worse; and using drugs which interfere with the constriction of the blood vessels.

But these techniques are often far from satisfactory and so it's very good news for migraine sufferers that it is sometimes possible to use *Bodypower* to overcome a response that has been triggered in turn by an inappropriate *Bodypower* response.

Since the symptoms of migraine are caused by a constriction of the blood vessels supplying the brain, it is clear that any effective *Bodypower* treatment must help reverse that process. If you're going to stop the migraine developing, you've got to stop the blood vessels constricting.

Until fairly recently no one could see how it could be possible to do this. After all, you can't see or feel the arteries supplying your brain and so how can you possibly tell whether your efforts are working?

And then someone noticed that migraine sufferers often have cold hands and cold feet and someone else pointed out that when the vessels to the brain are constricted by the body's response to stress the vessels to the skin and to the hands and feet are also constricted.

And that provided the clue!

For although it isn't possible to tell whether or not you are succeeding in opening up, and keeping open, the arteries which supply your brain, it is possible to tell whether or not your attempts to open up the vessels supplying your hands are successful. The *Bodypower* answer to migraine consists, therefore, of conscious attempts to divert blood into the peripheral system which supplies your hands. If you can do this, and get your hands warmer, then you'll also be diverting blood into the vessels supplying your brain – and thereby avoiding a migraine.

If you are a migraine sufferer who has been under a lot of pressure, or if you've just had an aura suggesting that a migraine attack might be coming try this technique:

1. Relax yourself physically and mentally. Use the techniques already described.
2. Try to see the blood vessels which supply your hands and try to see them getting wider and wider. See more and more blood flowing into the tissues. If you find that difficult, try to imagine that you've got your hands held up in front of a fire. Or imagine that you're lying on a warm beach.
3. You should slowly become aware of your hands getting warmer and warmer. As this happens the blood supply to your brain will also be increased and your migraine attack will be aborted.

Pain control

Frightening and uncomfortable as it may be, pain is nevertheless a vital protective mechanism. The presence or absence of pain provides our brain with vital information and acts as an essential, automatic feedback device.

Although there is much that we don't understand about how it develops, we know that pain can be affected dramatically by the psychological state of the individual concerned. Someone who is under tremendous pressure or stress will be unlikely to notice physical pain. An individual who is under a moderate amount of pressure may, on the other hand, suffer far more than an individual who is under no stress. Negative feelings, such as fear and anxiety, can enhance pain. And positive feelings, such as joy and happiness, can greatly reduce the amount of perceived pain.

From the bewildering array of (often confusing) facts that are available about pain, we know that much can be done to minimise the effect it has, to bring it under control. I've collected together some signposts to pain control.

1. Remember that pain is a device used by your body to tell you that something is wrong. If you are in pain the first thing you should do is look for a cause. And then search for a way to deal with the cause. Pain is a symptom of an underlying problem and the only long-term solution is to treat the cause.
2. In a crisis your body will be able to overcome the limitations imposed by pain. If you're injured while fighting for your life, you'll probably remain almost unaware of the extent of your injuries. If you're playing in an important sporting fixture, you'll probably be able to disregard pain which might have been totally incapacitating in a less important contest. It is the body's own painkilling hormones which enable you to ignore pain in this way. Useful as these hormones are, however, it is vital to remember that the pain you are ignoring was originally intended to help protect the injured part of your body. If you injure your leg, for example, and then continue to use it, you are bound to run the risk of exacerbating the injury.
3. Painkilling sprays and injections are popular among sportsmen. It is important to remember that these aids deaden a symptom which was originally designed for your protection. By deadening the pain and enabling you to continue as if there had been no injury at all, they make you run a real risk of permanently damaging the tissues that the pain was intended to protect.
4. If you are feeling tense, you will be more susceptible to pain than if you are calm and comfortable. When you are under stress your whole body will be prepared for emergency action. A small threat will be likely to produce an unexpectedly large response – and an unjustified amount of pain. To reduce your pain threshold, learn how to relax your body and your mind.
5. Fear magnifies pain. If you find a strange lump somewhere on your body and you are worried about it, you will suddenly find yourself extraordinarily aware of everything going on in your body. Every minor ache, every tiny twinge will be magnified. For most of us our greatest fear is of the unknown. If your imagination is allowed to rule, you will fear the worst and suffer accordingly. It follows, therefore, that if you are worried about your health you should seek advice, identify and face your fears.
6. Pain is something that we all use to our advantage from time to time. As children we learn that if we are in pain we will receive sympathy and attention, kindness and love. The rewards of pain can often be great. You must understand this, because if you are obtaining great rewards from your pain, your body will see to it that the pain continues.
7. Very few pains are consistently bad. Most pains come and go. If you can find out when your pain is getting worse, you should also be able to decide why it is getting worse. There are sometimes simple, straightforward explanations. For example, if your pain is only bad in the evenings, there is a chance that for some reason the amount of stress you endure goes up in the evenings. Perhaps you find it difficult to get on with some evening caller? Or perhaps you have special responsibilities at that time of day which you find

daunting?

8. A number of experts have developed specific ways in which you can use your body's resources to help you cope with pain. Among those prominent in this field are Dr C. Norman Shealy of the Pain and Health Rehabilitation Center in La Crosse, Wisconsin, Dr David Bresler of the Pain Clinic at the UCLA School of Medicine and Dr O. Carl Simonton of the Cancer Counselling and Research Center in Fort Worth, Texas. Four pain control techniques are described below; but before you try them you must relax your body and your mind as described earlier.

(a)To ensure that you get the best out of your body you should try to visualise your own healing resources at work. Try to see white cells in your blood heading towards the site of your pain and taking with them valuable pain-relieving endorphins. If the white cells find any infection, cancer or damaged tissue, envisage them reorganising the tissues, tearing away damaged material and repairing what can be salvaged. If there is no obvious damage there, try to see the white cells encouraging the muscle fibres to relax. As all this happens, you'll slowly notice the pain disappearing.

(b)Try to think of the pain as an invader of some sort that has managed to find its way into your body. See it as clearly as you can. Then try to ask the invader why it is there. You may find this difficult to begin with, but if you persevere you should be able to establish some sort of dialogue. What you are doing, of course, is analysing your responses to the world around you.

The invader may surprise you with its answers. You may find that you are in pain because you are worried about something, because you are feeling miserable about something, because you have got to do something that is worrying you – or for some other unexpected reason. Once you have isolated the reason for the presence of the pain you can try to decide precisely what you need to do to make it disappear. Continue your conversation by asking the invader under what circumstances it would be prepared to leave you alone. You may find that there is some specific piece of advice that you can follow.

(c)Try taking yourself outside your own body and looking at your body as though it belonged to a stranger. Now try soothing that stranger's body and try offering comfort and support. Stroke his brow gently. Gradually you'll see the pain begin to disappear. When the body is pain-free you can re-enter it.

(d)Imagine that the sensation of pain is being transmitted round your body with the aid of telephone wires. Now make yourself a pair of imaginary wire cutters and systematically take them round your body cutting each of the wires in turn.

9. Many people who are in pain seem to deny themselves pleasure and those around them often fail to offer fun as a remedy. It sometimes seems that to talk about pain and pleasure in the same breath would be wrong. But sadness makes pain worse – why shouldn't happiness make it easier?

10. When a small boy falls and cuts himself, his mother will often kiss him and his wound. The phrase 'kiss it better' is a part of the English language. It isn't the kiss that does the job, of course, but the affection and love behind it. Anyone in pain will benefit from either or both.

11. If you've ever had a bad bump and have tried rubbing the spot to help clear away the pain you'll know that this unorthodox form of treatment often seems to work. Until fairly recently this mechanism was something of a mystery, but it seems that rubbing, pressing and stroking a painful spot all help eradicate pain, both by inhibiting the passage of nerve impulses and by triggering the production of pain-relieving hormones. There is also evidence that vibrators will help relieve pain in much the same sort of way.

I do not, of course, promise that these various pain-relieving techniques will work all the time or that they will always make pain disappear entirely. But such natural techniques will help you cope with pain. You need to practise them, because as your body needs practice if it is to acquire a sporting skill, so it needs practice if you are to acquire a pain-control skill. If you do practice, however, these techniques will enable you to use *Bodypower* to help control your pains.

You can use *Bodypower* to help improve your life style

Breaking bad habits

Bad habits, such as stuttering, nail-biting and smoking, are nothing more than simple physical signs that you are reaching your stress threshold. You may be able to help yourself cope with these unwelcome traits by reducing your exposure to stress, but if it is imagined pressure which is causing your problems the attempt is likely to produce stresses of its own.

You'll be more successful if you enlist the help of your imagination, especially because it was probably your imagination which helped push you past your stress threshold in the first place.

As always, the principle of *Bodypower* is to use your body's strengths rather than to fight against them.

To give up nail-biting, for example, follow this simple regime:

1. Think of the sort of situation in which you are most likely to bite your nails. You may, for instance, find yourself most under pressure when meeting strangers.
2. Think back and remember everything you felt on a specific occasion when you felt the need to bite your nails. Re-create the fears, anxieties and apprehensions which went through your mind. Try to 'feel' the atmosphere again. Try to 'see' your surroundings.
3. And now see yourself coping perfectly well. Your nails have grown and you look smart and presentable. Keep up the fantasy, wave your hands about.
4. Repeat this exercise several times a day. Every day. See yourself in a variety of stressful situations. And see yourself conquering the problem without biting your nails. The power of the imagination is great. You will slowly replace a bad memory with a good memory. and nail-biting will eventually become a thing of the past.

Do not be discouraged if your new pattern of behaviour doesn't take over immediately. If you still find yourself biting your nails when under pressure, keep practising the regime I've outlined. Bad habits don't suddenly appear overnight and they don't usually disappear in a few hours either.

Enhanced serendipity

Have you noticed how the solutions to difficulties tend to come when you least expect them? After struggling unsuccessfully to find the answer to a specific problem you'll probably find that the solution unexpectedly pops into your mind when you're walking down the garden, watching television, or like Archimedes, lying in the bath.

And have you noticed how often you get hunches, flashes of inspiration and your best and brightest ideas when you're on holiday or relaxing and doing nothing in particular?

Many of the world's greatest thinkers have described their moments of glory and have provided the background evidence for the theory that the brain is often much better able to sort out problems when it is left to think things through by itself. Feed in all the necessary and available information and your brain will continue to sift through all the possibilities while you get on with something else.

Don't be afraid to take advantage of this unusual human facility. You can't deliberately use your brain's automatic capabilities but you can enhance the chances of your benefitting from them by learning how to relax properly. Pile in the information, throw in a few possible solutions and wait and see what happens!

Sense and sensibility

Under normal circumstances the brain is continually being flooded with messages from all the sensory organs. Only if one message is unusually powerful will it break through and produce a response. That's why blind people so often have such exceptionally acute hearing. Because their brains don't receive any visual impulses, there is far more chance of auditory impulses getting a good hearing.

You can improve your susceptibility to particular types of sensory message by reducing the input from other sensory organs. If you're listening to something and you want to get the best out of your ears, you'll do so if you close your eyes. Similarly, if you're looking at something and you want to use your eyes to best advantage you can try cutting out all auditory impulses. If you want to get the best out of your taste buds, you should close your eyes in a quiet room.

The sporting life

If you are a keen follower of any sport, you will undoubtedly have heard your favourite stars admitting that one of the most important secrets for success is to have the right mental approach. However good a golfer may be on the practice grounds he won't win any big tournaments if he can't relax properly when he's playing. Those $20,000 putts will never go in for the golfer who is tense, anxious and desperate to win. The same is true for all sports stars. The urge to win must be there, of course, but the tennis player who suffers too much from nerves will never walk away with the big trophy. The racing driver who gets the jitters before a race may well have the fastest practice lap, but when it matters he'll either be left behind or he'll be sitting in a heap of crumpled metal.

In this respect you and I are not different. Having the correct approach is just as important for the learner as it is for anyone else. If you allow stress and tension to interfere with your skills, you will never be able to play as well as you could play. On the other hand if you use your *Bodypower* to the full when you're playing your favourite sport, you'll be able to do yourself justice every time. *Bodypower* cannot turn a 24 handicap golfer into a successful tournament pro, but it can ensure that he (or she) plays as well as he is physically capable.

To become more successful at your chosen sport you have to acquire an automatic system which can take over for you. Use the following notes:

1. Once in every game most players will play one shot of which they are really proud. A golfer will flight an iron shot onto the green. A tennis player will serve an ace. Every time you do this it is important to remember the feel of the shot. Remember how your body felt and keep a clear picture of your surroundings. Recall the weather, the temperature, what you were wearing... and so on. If you can play that shot once, you can play it again. But to do so you have to be certain that your body remembers how you played the shot the first time.
2. Practice done under no pressure at all is invaluable. If you're going to acquire a sporting skill you must develop a number of muscle memories and reflex actions. You must develop certain muscle rhythms so that when you're playing under pressure you can play by memory. Every time you play a particular shot when you're practising, remember how you felt – that is, if it's a good shot! When you play a bad shot, ignore it – forget it ever happened.
3. Next time you're playing an important match and you want to do your best, try to switch onto automatic pilot as much as you can. Top international tennis players (and for that matter top international concert pianists) don't think before they move their fingers and hands. They act according to carefully developed reflexes. You must do the same, and allow your imagination, memory and *Bodypower* to play the shots for you.
4. Remember those super shots you've played in the past? The ones that you were proud of and that you stored up in memories? Those are the ones that can help you play your best. Each time you're about to play a shot try to recall the last time you played such a shot well. Feel the wind and the sun and imagine how you felt and what happened. The bigger the library of your memories the easier it will be. Your imagination has to convince your body that it is taking over again and it has to set your muscles in exactly the right way....When your play your memory shot your imagination and your muscles will themselves take over, thereby removing the risk of your fears, pessimism and anxieties interfering with your abilities. Before you play your shot, remember what happened last time – when you played your winner! And leave your body to do the rest.

Smile and the world smiles with you

You can use other people's *Bodypower* facilities to help you with your personal relationships.

For example, if you smile at someone every time he uses a certain word you will soon discover that he will unconsciously use that particular word more and more often. He'll be getting an appreciative response from you and he'll respond accordingly. He won't know he's doing it but – however much we like to think of ourselves as aggressive – most of us are very anxious to please those around us. Our *Bodypower* principles tell us that it is good if others like us. And so that man or woman you're smiling at will unconsciously know that he is pleasing you.

Similarly, if you smile at someone every time he does something you want him to keep on doing, you'll find that he'll repeat the action. He may not know that he is repeating it and he certainly won't know why. But he'll be happy and so will you.

Mothers, lovers and salesmen round the world have for years relied on this automatic response. They probably never knew what they were doing or why. But you do – and you can benefit, too!

And finally...

The end of the line

In some parts of the world voodoo is no joke. It is a deadly serious matter. If an individual is told that he is going to die, he will die. If he is told that he is going to develop a paralysis, he will develop a paralysis. The power of the man operating the voodoo curse is absolute and he can literally kill with a word or two.

Most of us in the Western world find all this mildly amusing. We feel comfortably able to ignore such threats in the knowledge that they could never be used on us. We'd never take any notice of them, we tell ourselves. And yet in our own way we are just as vulnerable to the curse and to magic as any individual suffering under the power of a malevolent witch doctor. The difference is merely this: instead of listening to and believing curses pronounced by men wearing wild costumes we tend to listen and believe prognoses announced by men wearing white coats.

If a doctor in a white coat tells a man that he is going to die, that man will probably die. The suggestion is not an extreme one – the evidence bears it out. People who have been told wrongly that they have cancer will suddenly fade away and die. I myself know someone who was told that he had lung cancer, following which he lost weight, looked deathly and began to fade fast, Assured later that a mistake had been made and that he had a treatable infection, he quickly put the weight back on and made a marvellous recovery.

The simple truth is that whether the information comes from a man dressed in feathers with a string of beads round his neck or from a man in a white coat with a stethoscope round his neck, it is faith that does the damage. If the individual on the receiving end of the spell or bad news believes what he is told, his imagination will do the rest. Indeed, some patients can sink into a steady decline through their own attitude, without input from anyone else. They can convince themselves that they are going to die. And then they will turn their heads to the wall and prepare themselves for death. Occasionally, the curse may even come from someone bringing good news. For example, I remember a staunchly religious patient who was seriously ill, but not dying, and who was visited by a priest. The patient thought that the priest had arrived to give him the last rites and he died within minutes. The patient had responded to his own faith and his own imagination and condemned himself.

All this is frightening and disturbing, but there is, of course, another way of looking at the power of the imagination. For just as patients have died because they have had no faith that they will live, so patients have survived and bloomed because they have refused to accept the bad news that they have been given. Just as fear and anxiety can kill, so hope, determination and delight can delay death. By harnessing *Bodypower*, individuals who have been told that they are soon to die have succeeded in cheating death. We have powers of which too few of us are aware. We should use them.

For details of other books by Vernon Coleman please see his Amazon Author's page or visit
http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

BUGGER OFF AND LEAVE ME ALONE

Vernon Coleman

Bugger off and Leave Me Alone

Vernon Coleman's Diaries
(Book 3)

Vernon Coleman

Published by Blue Books

The previous books in this series are ‘Diary of a Disgruntled Man’ and ‘Just Another Bloody Year’.

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Vernon Coleman is the author of over 100 other books which have sold over two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK and been translated into 25 languages. Many of his books are available as Kindle books on Amazon. For a list of available books please see Vernon Coleman’s author page on Amazon.

Dedication

Dedicated to Donna Antoinette: my Princess, my butterfly, my love, my friend, my guide and my saviour in an increasingly stormy, hostile and confusing world. I will be with you until forever is just a distant memory and eternity is long forgotten. If they took everything from me but I still had you then I would still have everything, for you are my life and the rest is just decoration.

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Preface

Everything in this book is true except for any bits which might get me into very special trouble and they were made up, your Honour, and may I say that the wig you are wearing really suits you. I should point out, however, that the events that take place in this book did not necessarily take place on the dates mentioned. This is solely because I hardly ever know what date it is or, indeed, what day of the week it is when I'm making notes about things that have happened. I realise that I could buy a diary but that really wouldn't solve my problem. One of the small, pocket diaries wouldn't have enough space. And one of the big, desk diaries wouldn't fit in my pocket. So I write things down in little notebooks, on envelopes, on receipts or on my shirt. The basic problem is that I have earned my living as a full-time professional author for over 30 years and I long ago realised that it makes no difference to me whether it is Tuesday or Sunday, June or August. I am adept at identifying the seasons (in spring the leaves are appearing, in summer they are there, in autumn they are falling off and in winter they are gone) but that is about all. If I'm in a shop and need to sign a cheque (assuming that the shop will take a cheque) I have to ask the date. The assistant will tell me it's the 14th or the 19th but they won't tell me the month. I then have to ask the month. And the year. I am no longer embarrassed by this.

January

1

Antoinette has decided that she isn’t going to read newspapers or watch the television news this year. She says, quite reasonably, that she’s fed up of all the scary, depressing news and is, in future, only going to read and watch bright and jolly things. I told her that I understand her feelings but that I will still have to keep an eye on what is happening just in case the end of the world is announced and we don’t know about it.

‘I don’t know want to know about wars and bombs or Nick Clegg,’ said Antoinette. ‘But you must tell me if anything happens to any of the Royal family. The main ones anyway. The Queen, Prince Philip, Charles, Camilla, William, Kate, George and Harry. Just those.’

I told her I’d let her know.

‘And I want to know if any major celebrities die. Film stars, singers, authors – proper celebrities, not manufactured ones.’

I nodded.

‘And I want to know if it turns out that Elvis is still alive.’

‘And Michael Jackson?’ I asked.

‘Oh yes. Elvis or Michael Jackson. And you must tell me if they find a way to grow teeth. I’ve got that wonky tooth at the back. If they can find a way to help me grow a new one I want to know about that.’

I said I would.

‘And if anyone invents a no calorie chocolate I want to know about that. Or if they invent something safe and permanent that stops hair going grey.’ She paused and thought. ‘And I want to know if they make a decent, vegetarian pork pie.’

I said I’d let her know if I heard about any of these items of news.

‘Oh, and I want to know if they manage to find life on Mars.’

‘I think you’d better make me a list,’ I told her, having rather lost my way.

2

I am not paranoid, I’m really not. And I am not anti-social in a hermit sort of way. But I constantly feel as though I am under siege; forever being attacked by forces I don’t understand and whose aims I find incomprehensible. Nothing makes much sense any more. Nothing is predictable. I find it difficult, nay impossible, to tell the difference between art, graffiti and vandalism. The world seems to become un-friendlier by the hour. Is this just me? A good deal of what I find alarming is blamed on progress but is it really progress when it takes the television longer to warm up than it did 40 years ago? Is it really progress when I have to fish out the manual to find out how to turn on my car’s fog lights?

‘We can’t stand still!’ people say.

‘Why not?’ I think to myself. Standing still is rather satisfying; even though I confess I do rather like to do my standing still while leaning on a five barred gate, watching sheep prong and frolic, rather than standing in a queue while a security guard with an IQ the wrong side of 100 checks to see if I have a rocket launcher tucked into my socks or an economy sized pack of hand grenades hidden among the books in my suitcase. Incidentally, watching farm animals is a very under-rated activity. Sheep, cows and pigs have fascinating social lives and television natural history programmes would do well to spend a little time and money filming their habits and relationships. The meteorological office (which specialises in predicting that it will shortly be wet and dry, not necessarily in that order and not necessarily today) could, for example, dump all their computers and all those smarmy forecasters with neat hair if they would invest instead in a ten acre field and a few sheep. Sheep are the best weather forecasters there are. Long before rain starts they find whatever cover they can and sit down on a nice piece of dry grass. Pigs are very bright animals too; brighter than dogs. I would say they are at about the level of a Parliamentary Under-Secretary. You could train pigs to work in banks but they would get bored and anyway this is never likely to happen because the powerful meat industry would not like us to know just how intelligent these animals really are. It’s difficult to sit down and eat a slice of an animal which is far more intelligent than the average estate agent.

The trouble with progress, of course, is that most of it isn’t progress at all; it is change for the sake of change, or it is change that benefits someone else (usually a government department or a large company such as a bank or a utility company) but buggers up my life completely. Every day seems to bring more demands, more instructions, more threats and more warnings and I have to say that I am absolutely full up with worry. Change can be exciting but it can also be destructive, unnerving and frightening – especially if there is a good deal of it. Change saps energy and focus and when the change is unnecessary and senseless the damage it does is even greater.

The problem is, of course, that the endless torrent of change from which we now suffer, and which affects every aspect of our lives, produces great fear, instability, misdirected anger and whole swathes of superficiality and all that, of course, means power to those politicians and eurocrats producing the changes. Personally, I have no room left for fresh anxieties, however exotic they may be, and threats really don’t work anymore because just what are they going to do to me? Telling me in capital letters (which is shouting by another name) that I must not under any circumstances throw away the tag on my new quilt has no more effect on me than telling me that HMRC is now entitled to demand that I produce all my bank statements and receipts for the last 60 years. It has all gone beyond absurd and I can no longer take any of it seriously. They may call it progress but I’ve had enough of it.

I wish all these people who keep writing to tell me what I must or must not do would just bugger off and leave me alone.

3

I had an email today from a company offering to look after my social media. For a fee they will write eight tweets a day for me and manage my Facebook and LinkedIn pages, and heaven knows what else besides. Having a presence on the social media is considered essential for writers these days and I'm told that book sales depend heavily on constant twittering and such like. Publishers doubtless do the twittering for some of their big name authors but many celebrity authors of the Stephen Fry variety love it so much that they never stop twittering, some even do it when they're in the bath, on the loo or making love. However, I am far too much of a recluse and far too independent to be keen on social media of any hue. I've never even visited anyone's Facebook page and although there is, I am told one of these things in my name I have never visited it. I regard Facebook as one of the world's most evil companies. It is entirely worthless and has done infinitely more harm than good.

The idea of having someone writing and publishing comments in my name eight times a day terrifies me. They might make me say: 'Vince Cable is a wonderful human being and I'm a great fan.' Or the idiot in charge of my daily outpourings might report that I'm travelling everywhere by roller skates in order to reduce my carbon footprint. But this is, presumably, how the world operates these days. Press relations officers have always put words into the mouths of their employers (through speeches and press releases) but this is far, far worse than that. The company which emailed me is offering to create a persona and a life for me. They are offering to take over my world. The deal is that I give them money and some unknown teenager, probably sitting in his bedroom, creates a new me to replace the old, original me that I thought I was and had just about got used to.

I was shivering at the prospect of this when I suddenly realised that it reminded me of the way the studios used to manage the lives of their big stars back in the 1930s and 1940s. Whole lives were created out of nothing. Big stars were given new names, new backgrounds, new friends, new hobbies, new relationships and, in every other respect, new lives. So, perhaps, nothing much is new. The company which wants to write tweets in my name is, presumably, now offering this service to everyone who wants a 'vibrant and exciting online presence' but can't find the energy or the time to constantly serve up irrelevant daily trivia for mass consumption. Every reality television 'star', every would-be singer, every television actor, everyone who has written, or would like to write a book, will have a manufactured life. How will any of us know who anyone really is?

I'm glad my writing career is in its autumn days.

4

A little while ago I wrote a novel called *Revolt.* Most newspapers and magazines won't review any of my books. This isn't personal in that I have a load of enemies, but is a result of the fact that my books are known to be self-published. Literary editors hate and fear self-publishers just as much as they hate authors whose books sell more than 10 copies a year and which cannot, therefore, be officially described as 'literary fiction'. Reviewers, like agents, live on the fringes of publishing and are totally opposed to anything which threatens their status. I published *Revolt* under the pen name Robina Hood.

I described the tale as a 'true story that hasn't happened yet' and, on the flap of the book, described Robina Hood as the pseudonym of one of Britain's best known and best loved television presenters. I don't know why I did this. It just seemed rather fun.

(I was going to say that Robina was a disabled, black, teenage lesbian with two children to support, since that seemed the most likely way to attract sympathetic reviews, but when I thought about it I realised that this was likely to get me into too much trouble. I'd actually written quite a nice biography for her in which I explained that Robina, born in Nigeria, was a paraplegic as a result of the car accident which killed both her parents when she was eleven. She had, I wrote, written short stories for hospital radio stations in her home country and had won the prestigious Keith Messenger award while still a student. She had returned to Nigeria to work with people less fortunate than herself. Agents would have fought to represent her and *The Guardian* and *The Independent* would have published huge features about her.)

I sent copies of the book to the usual reviewers and on the dedication page of many of the books wrote a personal note. 'Wonderful to meet you the other day. Hope you like my book. Love Robina x.' was pretty typical. The ploy worked reasonably well. Nigel Farage, leader of UKIP, sent me a really lovely postcard with a highly quotable handwritten note. Quite a few reviewers wrote pieces about the book. Most notably an unpleasant sounding fellow called Rod Liddle wrote a full page piece in *The Spectator* in which he tried to work out which television presenter had written the book.

(Actually, I'm not entirely sure that 'Rod Liddle' is a real person, either. Perhaps it is one of those cod names which are used when no one wants to take responsibility for something they've done; a rubbish bin name for second rate articles no one wants to admit to having written. Film directors who don't want to take the credit, or blame, for a film they've worked on but which hasn't quite worked out, will list the director as 'Alan Smithee'. Maybe journalists who feel embarrassed about something they've written put it down as by 'Rod Liddle'.)

Sadly, however, since *Revolt* was a first novel by an unknown author (and a pseudonymous one at that, who couldn't do any promotional interviews) the sales weren't too exciting. I've just published *Revolt* by Vernon Coleman as a kindle book on Amazon and, oddly enough, it's now doing quite nicely thank you.

5

It has been officially confirmed by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development that the UK has fewer hospital beds per person than almost any country in the Western world. So much of the available money is being spent on administration that there is very little money available for the stuff that matters. I've been warning about this for years but no one takes any notice because to improve things would mean spending less on administration and administrators decide how the money is spent and turkeys don't vote for Christmas. Despite the fact that the population is soaring, the number of hospital beds in the UK has been steadily falling for decades. France and Germany now have two or three times as many beds per head as Britain. Hospitals in Estonia, Slovenia and Poland all have far more beds than the UK. Japan and South Korea have four or five times as many beds per citizen.

Some NHS spokespersons have tried to excuse this inexcusable state of affairs by pointing out, quite accurately, that many patients are better off at home, because hospitals are such dangerous places. This convenient truth ignores the inconvenient truth that if hospitals were not so overcrowded they would not be such dangerous places. It is the overcrowding in our hospitals which has led to the risk of superbugs (a problem which is almost exclusive to the National Health Service) and to the enthusiasm of politicians and doctors for mass slaughter of elderly patients under the auspices of the Liverpool Care Pathway (whereby elderly patients who are occupying valuable beds and who think their doctors and nurses are looking after them are secretly killed off by being denied food and water).

Operations are cancelled because there are no beds available and many patients, particularly elderly patients, are forced to spend hours lying on trolleys. Only India and Chile and one or two other countries are in a worse state than Britain. The problem, I fear, is the National Health Service itself. It was never a good idea and it should now be put to sleep. The bare fact is that the NHS, a bureaucratic giant, kills more people than it saves. There is far too much administration and far too few doctors, nurses and beds. The NHS encourages waste, misdirected resources and patronising and nannying behaviour by its state trained, state employed staff who see themselves as primarily servants of the State, behold to the State rather than the patients they care for and who, too often, offer their services with all the supercilious graciousness of Victorian soup kitchen operators 'serving' the needy poor. The end result is that Britain has one of the worst health care services in the world. Britain's infant mortality rate is horrifyingly high and Britain is second worst in the world (to the USA) for avoidable deaths and a healthy life expectancy at the age of 60. In Britain, 60-year-olds may survive for a while but, in general, they do so in a poor state of health, stumbling from one health crisis to the next. The NHS patches people up but it doesn't cure them; it is the medical equivalent of a dodgy backstreet garage which seals radiator leaks with chewing gum and replaces broken fan belts with nylon stockings.

Doctors used to be brave and the vast majority used to speak honestly and honourably. And then two bad things happened. First, the medical establishment was bought by the drug industry. It didn't cost much. A few ridiculously high speaking fees for leading members of the establishment, some posh meals and an endless supply of cheap pens did the job. Second, doctors became civil servants. Working for the government changed everything. In the old, old days doctors would not have allowed things to get so bad. Today, I'd trust the average British doctor about as much as I'd trust Nick Clegg or an estate agent. No other country in the world has waiting times or waiting lists for patients with cancer. No other country in the world has hospitals which are as dirty and as chronically infected with killer bugs. No other country in the world gives priority to women wanting breast enhancement surgery over women needing treatment for breast cancer. No other country in the world forces male and female patients to share a ward. No other country in the world has hospitals where so many members of staff seem to go to work each day with the aim of making life difficult, embarrassing, uncomfortable and challenging for their 'customers'. (I suspect some NHS employees are trained by the same people who train Post Office employees.) And, worst of all, survival rates for almost all common cancers are worse in Britain than just about anywhere else in Europe. If you live in Britain and develop cancer of the stomach, colon, rectum, lung, breast, ovary, prostate, kidney or blood then your survival chances are worse than the European average. It is no wonder that I get depressed when I hear people saying how wonderful the NHS is. The NHS isn't wonderful. It is a deadly, murderous organisation which should be put to sleep – permanently.

6

Doctors are now pushing for everyone over the age of 50 to take cholesterol lowering drugs every day. There are already eight million Britons taking the damned things and now the medical establishment (much of which receives big chunks of cash from the drug industry) wants that doubling to sixteen million. How long before taking these drugs becomes compulsory? Doctors are keen on prescribing these drugs because, for reasons which are quite beyond me, they now receive a hefty cash bonus if they manage to persuade enough of their patients to take them.

(Doctors working in the NHS have contracts which give them bonuses for identifying patients with a number of specific diseases. It is no coincidence that the incidence of these diseases has been soaring since the payment bonuses were introduced. Similarly, of course, doctors are given bonuses if they vaccinate enough of their patients – despite the absence of evidence showing that vaccination is safe and effective and the existence of much evidence suggesting that it is dangerous and ineffective.)

Many of the patients taking these drugs have absolutely nothing wrong with them. The drugs are being handed out as a preventative. It is, I suppose, much easier for doctors to write out prescriptions than it is to sit people down and explain that heart disease and other killer diseases are often caused by eating the wrong sort of foods (hamburgers and chips for example) and by being obese.

Several things about all this worry me. First, no one really knows for certain whether or not lowering blood cholesterol does any good at all. It's perfectly possible that it does more harm than good. Second, the side effects from the pills which are most commonly prescribed are horrendous. At least one in five patients taking these drugs develops side effects. And the side effects aren't trivial. They include diabetes, cataracts and memory disturbances. I first wrote about the danger of these drugs in my book *How to Stop Your Doctor Killing You*, the first edition of which came out nearly 20 years ago. At the time doctors were just beginning to hand out cholesterol lowering drugs to healthy patients. The questions which I asked in that book have still not been answered and I still have the same doubts.

It was once said that doctors prescribe medicines of which they know little to treat illnesses of which they know less while treating people of whom they know nothing at all. These days, doctors do the same but they're not treating sick people, they're giving the medicines about which they know little to perfectly healthy individuals. It's crazy and wicked. Is that really what all those doctors dreamt of doing when they were young?

7

It always used to be said that crooks would not be allowed to profit from their crimes. And yet I see that war criminals Blair and Brown are making vast amounts of money by explaining how they screwed Britain and the British. Hopefully, all the loot these two make will be confiscated and used to help pay off the nation’s debts. At the rate at which war criminal Blair is raking it in he should be able to make Britain solvent by 2018. I feel no satisfaction from the fact that early on in his premiership I predicted in one of my books that (the not yet a war criminal but soon to be one) Blair was sucking up to the Americans so that he could make truckloads of cash when he’d finished with politics. It was, I said, the main reason he took Britain into illegal wars. I wonder if anyone still thinks I was wrong about that.

8

From time to time Antoinette buys me a magazine dealing with a subject about which I know absolutely nothing. It’s a wonderful way to venture into other people’s worlds for an hour or two. For example, in the last few months she’s bought me magazines about carriage driving, caravanning, horse racing, model railways and whisky. She bought me a magazine called *Practical Pigs* and one called, simply, *Parrots*. Each magazine gave me an insight into the way other people live their lives; with small groups of dedicated, and sometimes obsessed, individuals often creating remarkable worlds within worlds; worlds about which I previously knew nothing; worlds I hardly knew existed. Today, Antoinette gave me a magazine entitled *Carving*. I found absolutely fascinating to see what amazing things people can do with nifty fingers, sharp tools and pieces of wood.

Inevitably, perhaps, the magazine contains this warning: ‘Woodcarving is an inherently dangerous pursuit. Readers should not attempt the procedures described herein without seeking training and information on the safe use of tools and machines, and all readers should observe current safety legislation.’

I was going to whittle a stick but I’ve put my penknife away until I can check on the regulations. I hope, however, that my good lady continues to hunt down curious magazines. There are endless new worlds to explore and reading a magazine is an excellent way to do this. I find the advertisements (particularly the classified ads) are often just as revealing as the articles, editorials and news stories. My only rule is that I really don’t want to see any of those magazines dealing with celebrities who are famous simply for being famous or who are exposing their private worlds purely for propaganda purposes. If those magazines had existed in the 1930s they would have doubtless featured photographs of Adolf and Eva in their lovely home in the mountains.

9

I read today that internet giant Yahoo is now creating Web magazines which contain advertisements embedded in among the articles written by journalists. The advertisements are written as though they were news stories or features. I very much doubt if they will carry the words ‘advertisement’ or ‘advertorial’ to warn readers that what they’re perusing has been placed on the site by a company with a product to sell. There’s a lot of this on the internet these days, and since it is impossible to tell which items are genuine and which are plugs or promotions I find it is safest to assume that everything I read on the Web is an advertisement. Even if the stuff I’m reading isn’t a paid for advertisement (masquerading as a piece of journalism) the chances are high that it is nothing more than a rewritten press release or a piece put in place in response to the efforts of professional lobbyists.

The internet, better known as the valley of the trolls, has destroyed journalism; and journalists, editors and proprietors have, to their eternal shame, allowed it to happen. Internet journalists are, as a breed, so shallow that if they were puddles you could paddle in them without getting your socks wet. Every day around 1,500 people in Britain stop buying a daily newspaper. Most of them will never buy a paper again. I fear that as more and more newspapers abandon their printed selves and go online so honest, independent journalism will disappear. And the truth will become increasingly difficult to find. Whatever their faults (and there were many) it was newspaper journalists who investigated and exposed much wrong doing in our world. Some newspapers are biased and prejudiced (few worse than the *Financial Times* which rivals even the BBC for bias towards the fascist European Union and which can now be best regarded as a share price sheet with a few bent articles tacked on to make it look like a newspaper) but crooked politicians and business folk would have got away with a hell of a lot more without journalists poking their noses into their lives. What will replace investigative journalists? It certainly won’t be the internet, though many newspaper groups clearly hope it will. The newspaper industry is hoping that what they call ‘millennial readers’ (those born between 1980 and 2000) will subscribe to their online newspapers and save their industry from the most potent and widely disruptive technology ever invented. They claim that the millennial readers will do this because they don’t have the print habit and will, therefore, feel comfortable with a newspaper that comes on a screen. They may be right about that but they’re wrong about the millennial readers saving their industry because the readers they’re aiming at don’t have the paying habit either. They’re accustomed to getting their news and their gossip and their sports without paying for it. Why should they subscribe to an internet newspaper when they can get all the news they want without paying a cent for it? Not even Rupert Murdoch has been able to make a digital newspaper work. In 2011 he launched a paper called *The Daily*, designed for tablet users, and although his company spent $30 million a year on it the paper folded within two years. The taxpayer-funded BBC website alone will ensure that paid for versions of digital newspapers will never succeed. The BBC, using licence fee payers’ money, has eradicated free choice, destroyed competition, made ‘free’ the default position and created a world in which it can pretty well control political debate in the United Kingdom.

A reader recently told me that she measures the world as either being B.I. or A.I. The letters stand for Before Internet and After Internet. She argues that the internet has changed the world far more than anything else for a century or so. She should know. She is 94-years-old. Sadly, however, most people seem curiously uncritical of the internet. The young constantly praise it, extolling its virtues without any idea of the damage it has done to the world. Only those who can remember what life was like B.I. really understand just how much damage Sir Tim Berners-Lee has done to our world. Why couldn’t he content himself with inventing a new bagless, cordless vacuum cleaner or, better still, a genuinely squirrel proof bird feeder? Nothing, no war, no bomb, has changed life in such crucial and invasive and damaging ways as the World-Wide Web. The internet has encouraged hypochondriasis (forums for those suffering from specific illnesses invariably do far more harm than good, by spreading rumour, terror and confusion and creating panic and fear), it has made life unbelievably easy and profitable for thieves and confidence tricksters (so far today I have received three fake emails telling me that my Pay Pal account will be closed if I do not immediately send along my bank and personal details) and it has enabled lobbyists and public relations experts to control the spread of information. I’m afraid that anyone who claims that the internet helps broaden our knowledge or power simply doesn’t understand how the internet works and how much harm it is doing. The only people who can truly claim to have gained from the internet are pornographers and thieves. And, boy, are they having a good time.

10

I’m not much of a DIY man so when the radiator and towel rail in our downstairs shower room started to lean forward, and was about to fall off, I could see that the support brackets holding it up had sheared but I didn’t really know what to do about them. When I looked closely I could see that the brackets, which appeared to be chromium plated metal, had sheared because they were made of plastic and the heat of the radiator they were holding up had proved too much of a strain. I found some thick fencing wire, tied the radiator to a nearby sturdy downpipe and telephoned the central heating people who look after our boiler and central heating system. The engineer came today and to my astonishment told me that instead of being able to replace the brackets he would have to replace the whole radiator. The health and safety experts who cause so much confusion, distress and waste in our lives have apparently ruled that if a radiator support bracket breaks it must be replaced with exactly the same bracket that had been used originally. Since the radiator is a few years old finding the old original brackets would be impossible. So the whole radiator (which is working perfectly well and has absolutely nothing wrong with it) has to be taken out, thrown onto a radiator mountain somewhere and replaced. Useless plastic brackets would be acceptable if they were the brackets that had been originally sold with the towel rail but sturdy, steel brackets that might do a decent job would not be acceptable. Once again the European Union does serious harm to our planet. And yet, oddly enough, no one in authority seems to give a damn about the fact that radiator brackets are being made out of plastic which isn’t heat resistant.

That was all a couple of weeks ago.

Today, the engineer returned to fit the new radiator and towel rail. He removed the broken brackets and the perfectly serviceable radiator and towel rail, drilled new holes (because, of course, the new brackets don’t fit the holes the old brackets used), made a huge hole in the plaster (which will now need to be redecorated) and fitted the new brackets and the new radiator and towel rail.

‘It looks fine,’ I said. Then I leant forward and examined one of the brand new supporting brackets holding up the radiator and towel rail. ‘What are these made of?’

The engineer muttered something I didn’t quite catch. I asked him to repeat what he’d said. ‘Plastic,’ he told me. ‘They’re plastic.’

It seems that the radiator manufacturer, with the EU’s blessing, is still making support brackets out of plastic which can’t cope with heat.

So, in a couple of years’ time the engineer will be back to replace the radiator and Europe’s used and worthless radiator mountain will be even bigger.

11

Every town in England used to have a wonderful variety of small, specialist shops which were invariably owned and staffed by experts who knew their subject inside out, back to front and upside down as well. There were music shops, art shops, model shops, shops for people with dolls houses, craft shops, needlework shops, ironmongers and stationers where even if you didn’t know what you were looking for it was possible to find someone who could tell you exactly what you needed and where it was kept in the shop. If you wanted a piano tuner, someone to teach you how to play the violin or an artist to paint your dog a local shopkeeper would know who to contact. Today, most of those shops have gone. The ones which survive do so because they are owned by individuals who don’t have to pay rent and are of an age when they don’t know what else they would do if they retired. When those folk do eventually call it a day their shops will close and a good deal of knowledge will be lost forever. The shops have gone for two reasons. First, the soulless internet, a boon for mail order businesses, has enabled large American corporations to sell violin strings, cat litter and staples at rock bottom prices. Small shops, doomed to buy from wholesalers, simply cannot compete. So now we all buy things which probably won’t fit, or which will break down because they are shoddily made for price rather than for quality. And if we want a piano tuner or a violin teacher we have to rely on the internet rather than the recommendation of someone who knows someone. Second, greedy local councils, desperate to feed their ever-growing pension deficits, have put up business rates to the point where it is nigh on impossible for any small business to make a profit. All this has been done in the name of progress: making our lives richer. And so our town centres are now full of charity shops (which don’t pay rent, rates or salaries and which are, therefore, of no value to the communities in which they sit) and nail parlours which last for a year, until the hopeful owners give up because their grants have run out.

12

I read today that when the earthquake and tsunami hit Japan in 2011, and damaged the nuclear power station at Fukushima, the disaster was worse than it might have been because the safety systems relied on electricity. The plan seems to have been that in the case of an emergency the nuclear plant would be dowsed with water provided by electrically driven water pumps. Sadly, the designers of the system hadn’t allowed for the fact that in the case of a major emergency there probably wouldn’t be any electricity available.

Chinese reactor designers are much smarter. In the nuclear power plants now being built in China, cooling water will be stored in huge tanks on the roof. In the event of a problem water will automatically pour down onto the hot reactor for 72 hours without the need for any electricity or human action. And that is, surely, as brilliantly simple as the Japanese method was staggeringly stupid.

13

The EU has devised a brilliant way to get rid of economic deficits in European countries. Eurocrats, the new European aristocracy, constantly exercising their droit de seigneur over every aspect of our lives, have decided that in future countries can include illegal and black market figures when working out their Gross Domestic Product figures. By making GDPs bigger, countries can make themselves look much better off – even though the income they are now including isn't legal or taxable. So, from now on, economists will guess the money raised by illegal drug sales, smuggling and prostitution and include the totals in their budget figures. If a country's citizens sell more cocaine, smuggle more cigarettes or run more brothels their country will become richer and more successful. It can't be long before the EU produces helpful films and booklets explaining how Europeans can get involved in these enormously profitable activities. Who can fail to be proud of the European Union?

14

Unemployed workers in France are demanding higher benefits payments and are threatening to go on strike though just what they’re not going to do if they don’t get their way isn’t yet clear. Presumably, they will threaten to refuse to stop doing nothing if they don’t get their own way.

15

We will never find out what the unemployed workers of France would have done (or not done) had their demands not been met. The French Government always backs down in the face of any sort of threat and it has followed tradition and bowed to superior forces yet again. The unemployed of France will doubtless be celebrating tonight. I hope they are tactful enough to keep the popping of champagne corks to a minimum.

16

We desperately need a roofer to glue back bits of our roof. But, sadly, the days when it was possible to find workmen living in our village have long gone. City dwellers probably imagine that the Cotswolds are stuffed with wheelwrights, basket weavers, shepherds and blacksmiths. Hah. Sadly, nothing could be further from the truth. The seven nearest cottages to us are occupied by an IT specialist, a software developer, a mobile telephone sales person, someone who catches the train to London every day and does things in a bank, a director of a company which does something no one understands, a man who owns a car dealership and someone who does unspeakable things with currencies and comes to the country two or three times a year to hold noisy gin and tonic parties on his patio. None of these people is of any practical use to us or, probably, anyone else. After spending the morning on the telephone I eventually managed to find a roofing company in Wolverhampton which is prepared to send us two men and some ladders. Heaven knows how much this is going to cost us. The round trip journey will be around 175 miles.

It used to be said that people who lived in towns were generally unhappy unless something specific made them happy whereas people who lived in the country were generally happy unless something specific made them sad but I don’t think this is true anymore. Life in the country is infinitely more difficult than it used to be a generation or two ago.

Since our neighbours are far more trouble than they are worth, Antoinette says that we should have bought a house at least 100 miles away from the nearest house in any direction and I am beginning to think that she is right. A lighthouse maybe?

17

We’ve decided to sell the old Publishing House, a property which is proving to be tiring and time consuming. Inevitably, the estate agent demands copies of passports, driving licences and utility bills so that they can reassure the authorities that we are not laundering money. Since the estate agents will not handle any money it is difficult to see the sense in this. You can’t launder money unless you handle money, any more than you can launder dirty socks without handling dirty socks. As usual we declined to provide the estate agent with any of our private documents and as usual the estate agent decided that he could, after all, manage perfectly well without them since we were, very kindly, offering to pay him several thousand pounds for doing very little indeed.

I suspect that we are unusual in refusing to hand over our sensitive documents to people who really don’t need to see them. Most people happily allow their passports and driving licences to be photocopied and the copies stuffed in a drawer. Then, in a year’s time, they wonder why and how their identity has been stolen and how it has come to pass that a stranger in Morocco has invested their hard earned money in fast cars and even faster Columbian sneezing powder.

(I recently had to convert my old driving licence, which I’d had had since Boadicea was a road hog. At the advice of the Post Office I sent my old driving licence to DVLA by special delivery. I put in a note asking them to send the new EU photo-card licence the same way. They ignored my note, however, and sent the new licence in an ordinary brown envelope with the DVLA return address on the back. I’m amazed that the licence arrived. I had foolishly thought that the idea of the little plastic card was that I could carry it in my wallet. I was wrong. There is a notice on the top of the paper part of the licence, just under the pointless words ‘Keep this safe’, which states ‘the photo-card and paper counterpart should be kept together’. Together the two documents are far more cumbersome than my old, frayed, paper licence.)

Banks, estate agencies and others talk incessantly about being ‘forced’ to collect and store confidential information. Most of them are, most of the time, talking cobblers. The most recent, relevant advice I know of came from the Financial Conduct Authority in April 2014 which stated: ‘Firms must identify their customers and, where applicable, their beneficial owners, and then verify their identities. Firms must also understand the purpose and intended nature of the customer’s relationship with the firm and collect information about the customer and, where relevant, beneficial owner.’ There is nothing there about taking photocopies and storing them. The FCA has also said: ‘We expect firms to apply the guidance proportionately based on the riskiness of their clients.’ And they have said that it is only if a customer is a ‘politically exposed’ person, identified as a ‘higher risk’ that a company needs to establish the source of wealth or funds. Finally, the FCA says that any clients who do not wish to give certain information to a financial company can complain to the company in question. ‘If they are unhappy with the response, they should take their complaint to the Financial Ombudsman Service.’

No bank, finance company or other organisation, should ever require more than a national insurance number and a physical address. Those two pieces of information are perfectly adequate evidence of identity and address. The problem is that at banks and so on we tend to come face to face with low grade clerks who handle the paperwork and who simply do what their ill-informed managers tell them to do.

Curiously, anyone trying to purchase £40,000 worth of premium bonds, or any number of government gilts, can do so without providing any evidence of identity or address. It seems that the Government, at least, knows that all this data collecting is indeed nothing more than pointless nonsense.

18

A survey of 19,000 people in 10 countries shows that only one in ten internet users is willing to pay for digital news. An hour's hard work with a calculator, and some specially prepared software, tells me that this means that nine out ten internet users prefer to read news they haven't paid for. Here is solid proof that newspapers which are planning to move online, and to charge readers subscription fees, are doomed. It's difficult to blame the reluctant subscribers. Whenever you go hunting for news on the internet, and whether you pay for it or not, you are probably going to be fed material that was written by a public relations company or a lobbyist, promoting a specific product or attitude. Whether you pay for news or not it is now impossible to trust anything you read on the internet so what's the point of paying so that you can read public relations bullshit? There is no longer any such thing as 'a journal of record'. If an online newspaper contains 50 articles and just 10 of them are bent – but you don't know which 10 are bent – then you have to assume that all 50 are untrustworthy.

In the old days, when councils used to fill potholes and politicians resigned when caught lying, newspapers used to make it clear which bits were editorial and which were paid for by advertisers. Editors beat journalists with a cat'o'nine tails if they caught them copying out chunks of promotional prose. But progress has changed all that and these days it's as hard to find a piece of hard news on a Web based publication as it is to find a ready-made sandwich without more than its fair share of escherichia.coli.

19

The Government says it is thinking of forcing local councils to go back to collecting rubbish once a week instead of once a fortnight. Apparently someone in authority has noticed that when rubbish is left lying around in gardens (or in the street) it attracts rats and flies and becomes a health hazard. Maybe a politician or civil servant has found his or her wine cellar crawling with rats. I am impressed to see that to accompany this piece of pleasant and over-ambitious nonsense the Government has published a guidebook (known as the *Bins Bible*) which offers tips to local authorities ‘on how to replace fortnightly collections with weekly bin emptying’. I have long suspected that the people working for local councils are not the brightest in the land but even I am surprised that they need written advice on how to replace a fortnightly bin emptying service with a weekly bin emptying service. Send the bin men round every seven days instead of every fourteen days would have been my advice and I hardly think that merits a guidebook. Still, the authorities already publish booklets on how to eat vegetables and how to blow your nose so I suppose a guidebook on how to change from a fortnightly collection to a weekly collection isn’t all that much of a surprise. All this is a complete waste of time and effort, of course, and is merely a piece of electioneering. The EU won’t let councils collect the rubbish once a week (or will punish them severely if they do) and since the eurocrats rule our world we must restrain our cheers and cram our hopes and expectations in at the back of the sock drawer.

Meanwhile, our streets and lanes will continue to be awash with discarded litter.

Just this morning I watched in horror as a large, black Audi cruised to a halt in the narrow lane a few yards from our front door. The only passengers were an elderly couple. I could hardly believe what happened next. The driver, a man in his sixties or thereabouts, lowered his window and then proceeded to throw all the rubbish he could find in his car into the hedgerow. Before I could rush out and beat on his car roof with a stick he raised his window and drove off sedately; ostensibly the very picture of middle class probity.

20

A stupid woman ran out in front of the car today. She was, of course, busy texting and far too involved in her imaginary world to take any notice of the real world. I just managed to avoid her. ‘What a crazy woman!’ cried Antoinette. ‘She could have been killed.’

‘She would have been the lucky one,’ I replied. ‘She’d have been dead. I’d have been filling in insurance forms for a year.’

I wonder what the daft woman was texting? ‘Am running across busy road and about to be run…’

21

I suspect that the people at Amazon have a tendency to treat books in exactly the same way that they treat dishwasher tablets and soap dish holders. And why should they care? They’re all commodities; items for sale. Books were, I suspect, merely the first step in what is clearly going to be a long journey. The company’s ill-disguised aim seems to me to be to take over the retail world and within the world of books this means convincing all book readers to buy Kindle devices so that readers will read e-Books and thus Amazon will eventually control the e-Books books business – and by extension, the book business. And so, for now, Amazon puts all its effort into making consumers feel important and very little into making authors feel loved. So, customers can write inaccurate and libellous ‘reviews’ of books which they haven’t even read (or wish to destroy in order to help the sales of another book written by themselves or a friend) and Amazon will not only publish these reviews but will put the worst of them in pride of place so that every potential buyer will see them. Naturally, this means that a single one star review will destroy a book’s sales immediately. Amazon doesn’t give a fig about this because if the book buyer doesn’t buy that book they will probably buy another. And the reviewer who wrote the nasty review will feel (and, indeed, be) powerful and important. The living author whose book sales have crashed, and whose income has declined, will suffer agonies of doubt, anger and misery that dead authors are spared.

Big publishers (who have about as big a future as the blotting paper manufacturers but who are hanging on to their rapidly disappearing power, status and wealth) counter this author unfriendly policy by arranging for all their new books to be greeted with a dozen five star reviews written by tame reviewers. If a bad review appears the sting can be removed by arranging for a friendly reviewer to produce a one star review that praises the book, and to arrange for that review to be the most popular ‘bad’ review by telling staff members to mark it as ‘helpful’.

Small publishers and self-publishers (ostensibly the beneficiaries of the e-Book revolution) are the ones who are most likely to be destroyed by the mean, the ignorant and the self-important individuals who are now the world’s most important book reviewers.

In the days of yore a big name reviewer, commonly a successful author in his own right, could, if he wrote a critical review for a large circulation newspaper, put a big hole in the sales of an author’s new book. However, whatever he wrote he would not be able to destroy a book completely simply because not every reader would see his review. These days an unemployed and illiterate half-wit with access to an internet enhanced mobile telephone can completely destroy a book’s sales in thirty seconds. All it takes is a one star review and a few brutish and dismissive words of contempt.

In principle, the idea of allowing readers to ‘mark’ books in the same way that teachers mark exams is fair enough but in practice the system fails because so many reviewers give books bad marks for the wrong reasons. To dismiss a book as worthless because it arrived late or because it is the book the author wrote and not the book you hoped it might be is unfair. To attack an author without bothering to read a book (because you disapprove of the book’s content or because you don’t like the author) is grossly unreasonable. To skip through a few pages of a book you’ve downloaded free of charge and then give it one star because you’ve realised it is not your ‘cup of tea’ is terribly unjust. A book will often have taken a year to write, and taken up much of an author’s life. I suspect that many sensitive authors (the ones who invariably write the best books) will be frightened away from writing because they simply cannot face the prospect of their first book being unfairly demolished within seconds of it being published.

22

There was a time when athletes did what they did for the fun of it, and for the honour of representing their country. They ran around, jumped and threw big lumps of metal because it was what they wanted to do and what they were good at. The carried their kit around with them in a rucksack and if they were lucky they had their expenses paid. These days, athletics is a business, like football and cricket, and none the better for it. Athletes earn huge amounts by being sponsored by companies who have absolutely no interest in them or their sport, and most of them stand there mute and puzzled when their national anthem is being played. Bizarre rules mean that many of those who represent a country have never even visited the place until a few months before they are chosen to represent it.

Still, representing a country other than your own isn't entirely new. Consider, for example, the amazing Major D. G. Astley, who was surely one of the most remarkable sportsmen of all time. He was a member of the British gold medal winning curling team at the 1924 Olympics and, for reasons which are lost in the murk of time, he was also allowed to play for Sweden against France in the play off for the silver medal. Sweden won the match and so our Major Astley won gold and silver medals in the same event at the same Olympics. I bet none of today's overpaid, over-sponsored, over-honoured superstars ever beats that record.

23

Television pundits (most of them not old enough to have read a book, let alone written one), politicians and economists are puzzled by the fact that productivity in the UK keeps falling. They are particularly confused because they believe that the internet has (or should have) made business more efficient – and productive. Enormously expensive think tanks are struggling to find the answer to this conundrum. They keep coming up with ever more complex and unbelievable explanations. The truth is that if any of these people had any common sense at all they would realise instantly what is happening. The trouble is that politicians, senior civil servants and eurocrats are where they are because they are greedy, self-serving and concerned only with their own advancement and glorification. They, therefore, make a complete hash of everything they do.

There are, in reality, two reasons why productivity is falling.

First, employees spend several hours a day updating their social media entries. When staff members are fiddling with the ghastly Twitter and the equally absurd Facebook, and adding to the already existing mountains of incomprehensibly un-navigable ego based trivia and irrelevance, they aren’t producing whatever they are being paid to produce. I discovered today that even the police in Scotland, who have such a huge chip on their collective shoulders that they now actually call themselves Police Scotland, have a twitter account so that they can entertain Web users with the force’s official bleatings. (There is, of course, no Police England.) The average 22-year-old Briton has over 1,000 Facebook friends. Apart from the absurdity of any human being having over 1,000 friends (a number which reminds me of one of those Z list celebrity weddings where, in desperation, the bride and groom accept as guests a random assortment of other Z list celebrities who are notorious not for their achievements but because they are prepared to expose themselves in any way required, in the hope that their photographs will appear in a magazine) this figure suggests that most Facebook users must spend a huge part of their lives simply keeping up with what is going on with all their ‘friends’, and keeping them updated with information about what they had for breakfast and just how they felt when the number 69 bus was seven minutes late again.

Second, red tape from the European Union, ensures that when people are working they spend most of their time filling in forms or providing information for other people filling in forms.

I offer these conclusions free of charge to the pundits, politicians and economists. Sadly, I suspect that none of them will take any notice.

24

We drove to Ebbsfleet to catch the Eurostar train to Paris. We always used to catch the train from St Pancras (and, before that, from Waterloo) but the train journey to London from the countryside has become more like a lottery than a train service. In order to make sure that we arrived in London in time to join the taxi queue at Paddington Station we had to catch earlier and earlier trains.

The only snag with travelling from Ebbsfleet is that it seems to me that the staff who man the machines X-raying luggage don't really know what they are looking for and so I invariably end up having my bits and pieces pored over by one of the guards protecting Europe from elderly, white terrorists. There is, I have no doubt, a much higher bag-search rate at Ebbsfleet than there is at St Pancras. A bag which will sail through the X-ray examination at St Pancras will, when filled with pretty much the same contents, have to be opened and searched at Ebbsfleet. I made this point to a supervisor once and he became very defensive, looked as though he were ready to ride off into the sunset on his high horse, and announced ponderously that he took umbrage at my remarks. I think he felt that anyone who doesn't believe that leafing through assorted lingerie is going to save the civilised world must be a dangerous anarchist. He wanted my name for his report and insisted that if the people at his station did more searches it was because they could be more thorough because they weren't as busy. Neither argument seemed to me to offer much in the way of reassurance or explanation. And do the border guards really think that it might be possible to hijack a train with a small penknife? Where would I take the train? 'Drive this train to South America' just doesn't make much sense. And why does no one bother to search the cars and lorries which use the Channel Tunnel? Would it not be possible to hide more explosives in a ten ton lorry than in my suitcase? Just asking. Far too few people make the effort to complain about all the nonsense that goes on. At the Gare du Nord recently a bag fell off a trolley being pushed by a woman ahead of Antoinette in the queue to go through the customs check. Antoinette moved forward to pick up the bag and put it back into place. 'Don't touch it!' screeched the woman, who was clearly terrified that Antoinette might stuff her bag with drugs. Most people have spent so much of their lives being thugged by bullying civil servants and rule hugging bureaucrats that they live on the defensive. As I went through the barrier a female guard told me to remove the train tickets from my shirt pocket. Ye gods, are train tickets now a threat to the security of our weak and feeble nation?

After having my stuff pored over (as now seems usual) I put my bits and pieces back into my suitcase and wondered if anyone had ever thought that terrorists might actually pack their invisible Semtex into the frame of their suitcase. They never really examine suitcases properly and often miss one of the zipped compartments completely. (Here's an odd thought: the people doing the searching will sometimes claim that they're looking for drugs. What do we care if people are smuggling drugs out of England?)

I then joined Antoinette at the customs desk. 'Where are you going?' demanded the man in the uniform. Since there was only one train we could be catching and since it was going straight to Paris, without a stop, I was reminded that the people hired for this work are not the brightest in the world.

The whole customs/border/search/security farce is now an industry, doubtless with its own lobbyists, so it will now never end. Has there ever been a Government department as incompetent and as replete with self-important bullies as the UK Border Agency? Why hasn't the entire staff been fired for gross incompetence?

No one in authority seems capable of rational thought when it comes to questions of security. I remember the idiot Blunkett, who was Home Secretary at the time, sending tanks to Heathrow airport to prevent planes being hijacked. And during the Olympics a gunboat was moored on the river Thames and missile launchers were erected on top of East End tower blocks. Were the army really planning to shoot down planes over London?

The truth is that at airports and railway stations, the whole intimidating ordeal helps to keep us all frightened and compliant, and though I expect that some who have not yet worked out what is going on in our society will regard that as a sign of paranoia I would point out that paranoia is only one step up from suspicious and that suspicious is one step away from having men in uniforms kick down your front door at four in the morning.

Next time we travel I think I'll put a disarticulated skeleton in my case. That should cause some entertainment. Or maybe a blow-up doll, folded to fit into the case and filled with helium would be more fun.

25

We’re in Paris.

I ran a bath this evening, while sorting through some of the mail which had been awaiting us and stepped into the water without checking the temperature. This was a mistake. I yelped with surprise and I pulled my foot out so quickly that I nearly fell over backwards. The water was stone cold. I told Antoinette the bad news. ‘The boiler has gone on strike.’

Boilers, like most things, invariably break down within seconds of the warranty running out and the problem is nearly always something exceptional and mysteriously expensive. It really is very clever the way manufacturers do this. I think they fit a tiny clock somewhere inside and when this has ticked its way to a day or two after the end of the warranty period it triggers a small explosion which does something damaging and expensive. In the last decade or so we seem to have done very little but buy new boilers. In one twelve month period we bought four new boilers for four different properties. None of the machines which was replaced was old enough to go to playschool but all ended up making a one way journey to the knacker’s yard.

We don’t have a boiler service contract in France because the last company we paid was always unwilling to satisfy their end of the bargain. They were excellent at reminding us that we owed them money but far less enthusiastic about sending a man out whenever we had a boiler or plumbing problem. I wasn’t too worried about not having a contract because every time I empty our mailbox it seems packed to the brim with little cards promoting the services of electricians, plumbers, central heating engineers, carpenters and experts who will open your front door if you’ve lost your key (and who, presumably, turn up carrying their tools in bags marked ‘butin’ which a French burglar friend tells us is the French for swag).

I picked out one of the recent cards and dialled the appropriate number. The man who answered the telephone was very helpful and promised to send an engineer around within the hour.

When they arrived there were two of them and the minute I saw them standing in the hallway I knew we were in trouble. Generally speaking I am probably the most naïve person I know. I believe people when they tell me things. When the garage told me that we needed a new petrol tank for our old BMW 7 series saloon I believed what they said. When they told me that they were having great difficulty in finding a replacement tank I believed them. And when they rang me, two hours later, and told me that they’d found one in Germany but that having it flown in would be very expensive I believed them and agreed to pay up. An acquaintance who works in a garage laughed himself silly when I told him how lucky I’d been. Apparently the ‘we’ve managed to locate one in Germany/Japan/America/Swaziland’ is the oldest trick in the garage trickster’s book.

But this time I knew I was in trouble. First, there were two of them. No reputable central heating company sends two engineers to an evening call. And second, the one who talked, a black guy with a small, neatly clipped moustache, smiled when he saw me and greeted me with a warm handshake. He carried a smart leather briefcase in the other hand. This is not the way things are normally done in France. Heating engineers carry tons of stuff with them but it’s packed in metal tool boxes or black nylon holdalls. They don’t arrive clutching a banker-style briefcase. On the other hand, the other man, white, smaller, considerably older and dressed appropriately in a boiler suit, did look and behave like a central heating engineer. He carried a small tool box and neither smiled nor shook hands. The one with the little moustache looked as though he had done his apprenticeship selling cheap models of the Eiffel Tower from a blanket spread out on the pavement. His father and his father’s father probably worked the ‘find the lady trick’ from an upturned cardboard box. He didn’t need a peg leg, a hook instead of a hand and a parrot for me to spot him as a pirate.

I showed them into the kitchen and pointed out the cold boiler. What else could I do? The small one, the one wearing overalls, messed with the controls as though trying to work out what they did. He then tried to pull the front cover from the boiler. Since it is screwed in place this didn’t prove effective and nor did it soothe any of my doubts. I was beginning to wonder if he knew anything at all about boilers. The one with the moustache, who had been busy smiling and shaking hands with Antoinette, asked to see our circuit breakers. I showed him. He looked at them and turned one or two of the switches on and off as if he knew what he was doing.

Eventually, the man in the boiler suit managed to remove the front of the boiler. He stared at the innards as though rather shocked at what he’d found. I’d seen them before and they always look pretty much like the inside of any other boiler to me. He looked confused, as though he had been expecting to find something else. A couple of chickens, a cupboard full of crockery or a well-disguised television set, perhaps. He fiddled around for a couple of minutes and then removed the circuit board. He handed it to his moustachioed colleague, who did that sucking in air and head shaking thing that workmen of all varieties do when they’re about to rip you off mercilessly and want you to know that the bill is going to be astronomical.

‘Your circuit board is finished, ended,’ he told me, in French, with all the gravitas of a doctor dishing out the bad news to a concerned patient. In case I hadn't understood he shook his head and pulled a face.

'Can you repair it?' I asked. I don't know why I asked. I knew the answer.

He shook his head.

'It is impossible to repair and very expensive to replace,' he told me. 'It will be 890 euros for a new circuit board and then we have to charge you more for the fitting. But we can fit you an entirely new boiler for 1790 euros. Plus the labour charges, of course. This is a much better idea. If we replace the circuit board something else on your boiler could break.'

I stared at him, unable to hide the disbelief.

'And it is very difficult to obtain the circuit boards,' he said. 'But we can fit a new boiler for you this evening.'

I stared at him. The boiler was no more than three-years-old. Just old enough to be out of warranty.

'You need to make a decision now,' said the man with the moustache. The chap who had the screwdriver and who had managed to remove the front from the boiler folded his arms and stood staring at me.

'I think we'll leave it,' I told him. 'We can't possibly afford so much money. ' I tried hard to look aged, frail and impoverished and I think I managed this quite well.

The man with the moustache stared at me for a while, frowning. Then he repeated the spiel about the circuit board being beyond repair and virtually irreplaceable. He offered again to fit a new boiler that very evening. Once more I declined. Eventually, he shrugged and took out an invoice pad. 'I have to give you a bill for the call out,' he said. I nodded. He put the invoice pad down on our kitchen table and took a calculator out of his briefcase. Two minutes later he gave me the bill. It was for 392 euros. They had been in the flat for less than half an hour. I stared at him and very nearly laughed out loud. He showed me a price list which was quite different to the price list that had been printed on the small card which had been put into our mailbox. 'It is after eight o'clock in the evening,' he explained. 'The hourly rate goes up after eight o'clock.' I looked at the price list I already had and pointed out that although it was stated that there was an extra, extra charge for work done after midnight or on bank holidays there was nothing about an extra, extra charge for calls after eight. The price on the card was 29 euros per hour. The man with the moustache looked at my price list and examined it very carefully. He handed it to the engineer. They both examined it as though it were something I might have printed myself. I asked for it back and put it into my pocket.

'I will pay you 100 euros,' I told them. 'That's it. Not one euro more.' It was a hefty price for nothing but I just wanted to get rid of them. Just then my mobile telephone rang. I answered it. A Scottish woman with an almost impenetrable accent asked if I could spare a few minutes to take part in a marketing survey. It was the third time she'd telephoned that day and on each previous occasion I had told her, quite politely, that since it was almost certain that she was ringing on behalf of an energy supplier I wasn't interested in taking part. 'Bugger off and leave me alone,' I snarled this time, completely out of patience and goodwill to all men. I turned off the telephone. Out of the corner of my eye I could see that Antoinette had picked up a walking stick and had opened one of our windows. I thought I knew why. The man with the moustache shook his head and demanded the 390 euros. I picked up the telephone and rang the police. Neither he nor the man dressed as a plumber looked at all concerned by this. We waited, the four of us, and nothing was said or done for a few moments. I was still waiting for someone to answer the telephone which was still ringing. And then the man with the moustache and the briefcase shrugged, ripped up the bill he'd written out and wrote out a new one for 100 euros. I handed him the cash. He took it. And, after shaking hands, they left. The engineer winked at me. The man with the moustache gave me a number to ring the following morning if I changed my mind. He insisted on shaking hands.

'What were you doing with the stick and the open window?' I asked Antoinette.

'I was going to hit them with the stick if they became violent,' she replied. 'And if that didn't work I was going to climb out of the window, scramble along the ledge and knock on the window to the apartment next door.'

I closed the window and gave her a hug. I told her that there had been no need to worry because I had been preparing to feign a heart attack or, possibly, a fit.

I then checked out the boiler manufacturer's website. The circuit board which the two men had wanted to replace was readily available at a retail price of 130 euros.

26

I woke early, went through the French Yellow Pages and found another central heating company. I picked the one with the least impressive advertisement. They made no promises. I checked them out on the internet. They had been in business for a few decades and their office was only five minutes away. I rang. They said they would send round a man that morning.

Their engineer arrived, alone, by mid-morning. He carried his tools in two plastic bags and, despite this, looked like a man who mended boilers for a living. It took him five minutes to discover that a fuse had gone in the circuit board. He showed me the faulty fuse, replaced it with a new one, worth about 50 centimes, and the boiler started purring again. He told me that I could either pay for the repair or pay for a one year service contract that would include the cost of the repair and guarantee that a man would visit any time we called, including on Saturday up until lunchtime. I asked him how much the service contract would cost. He told me it would be 136.17 euros for the year. I wrote out a cheque. He left.

Ten minutes after he'd gone the con man with the moustache telephoned. He wanted to know if we'd changed our minds and would like him to come round to fit the new boiler. You have to give some people top marks for trying. I told him that we couldn't afford a replacement circuit board or a new boiler because we were impoverished and English. I said we would just have to bathe in cold water and wrap ourselves in blankets. He did not seem in the slightest bit concerned at this, of course, and simply told me to ring him if and when we found the money. I didn't bother telling him that we'd had the fuse replaced and that the boiler was now working happily. I have absolutely no doubt that if we had allowed him to take away our 'useless' boiler he would have repaired it, put it into a box and sold it to some other poor sucker at a premium price. And the replacement boiler we would have received would, of course, have been someone else's 'useless' boiler.

27

I was delighted to see that the authorities in Paris have decided to let the grass grow in public spaces, and to encourage wild flowers to grow too. The aim is to encourage wildlife – particularly birds and butterflies. What an absolutely brilliant idea. Why should all grass be cut short enough for bowls? Not many cities have as much grass, or as many parks, as Paris but it would heartening to see one or two mayors in Britain following this excellent example. They do so many things with aplomb and style in France. I see today that Christine Lagarde, the French boss of the International Monetary Fund has been in court over a little delicate and embarrassing naughtiness involving 403 million euros. I couldn't help comparing this to Britain where politicians find themselves in trouble for claiming expenses for a packet of biscuits and collection plate donations. The French do these things so much better than we do.

We wandered down to the river Seine in the afternoon, intending to catch the Batobus service along to St Germain. But there was a massive queue for the river bus, which has, I regret to say, become much more popular since I mentioned it in my book '*Secrets of Paris*'. So we changed our plans and headed across to the Trocadero. As we did so we passed a queue of rickshaws waiting for customers. The rickshaws, now commonplace in Paris, are a real sign of a future without oil. Maybe we will soon have pedal driven trains. The passengers in second class will have to pedal faster than the passengers in first.

In the park just below the Trocadero we noticed the Aquarium Paris. It looks rather run down and at first glance seemed closed. We've passed by several times but never before felt the urge to go inside. Today, however, we decided to see what was inside. It was, quite truly, a revelation. Neither of us has ever seen a more impressive display of fish. There are sharks, moray eels and a whole host of unusual creatures I'd never seen before: a blue spine unicorn fish, a lemon peel angel fish and a foxface rabbit fish! To defend the reputation of the unfortunate shark, the Aquarium has published a list of the creatures which kill most human beings every year. (I rather suspect that dogs really ought to appear on the list. And I'm surprised that crocodiles aren't on it. But it's their list, and here it is.)

1. Mosquito – two million deaths
2. Snake – 100,000 deaths
3. Scorpion – 5,000 deaths
4. Elephant – 600 deaths
5. Bees – 400 deaths
6. Lions – 200 deaths
7. Jellyfish – 100 deaths
8. Shark – 10 deaths

28

Today we decided to visit the mayor's office so that we could arrange to pay our annual property taxes by direct debit. Each arrondissement in Paris considers itself to be a village and has its own mayor. You might think that this would be an easy task but the French, bless their cholesterol clogged hearts, like to make a ceremony out of everything they do and it is simply not possible to be properly ceremonial if you do things over the phone or through the post. After registering at the entrance desk we were given a ticket and showed where to wait. Sitting in official places always tries my patience, which is never strong at the best of times. It has long been a theory of mine that time is the most important currency in the world; the only currency that really matters. I hate wasting a moment of it. At 2.59 p.m. I looked at my watch. After about six hours I looked at it again and it read 3.02 p.m. I suspected that we would be there for days. To my surprise, however, we waited no more than 15 minutes before we found ourselves in a booth sitting opposite a bureaucrat straight out of central casting. If Jacques Tati had still been alive he would have put this guy under long-term contract. He could have played any number of standard French council officials, railway employees and postal clerks with consummate ease. I explained that I wanted to pay both our taxes automatically. The first tax is the Taxe d'Habitation. This is an annual residence tax which is charged on the occupier of every property in France. The idea is that you pay the tax on whatever property you are living in on January 1st of each year. But, since this is a French tax, it is still payable on any property you own and could be living in even if you're not actually resident there on January 1st. This doesn't make a good deal of sense but in France very little does. The second tax is the Taxe Foncière. This is an annual tax which must be paid by the owner of a property, whether or not they are resident in the property on January 1st or, indeed, any other date. You and I may not be able to spot much difference between the two taxes but to the French the Taxe Foncière is completely different to, and entirely separate from, the Taxe d'Habitation which is paid by the occupier of a property on January 1st each year, whether or not they are actually occupying it on January 1st. Naturally, these two taxes are paid separately and involve different forms and bills and, almost certainly, different departments and different bureaucrats. Our bureaucrat of the day was, however, prepared to overlook the regulations and to deal with both taxes all at once and pretty well at the same time, though naturally there were a good many forms to fill in and a good deal of rubber stamping and stapling and photocopying to do and it all had to be done twice. Filing cabinets had to be opened, colleagues needed to be consulted and boxes had to be ticked and signed. If you've ever seen the film *Avanti!*, starring Jack Lemon, you'll know just how much rubber stamping an enthusiastic continental bureaucrat can get through when he puts his mind to it.

In the end we were finished and on our way in just under the hour, which I thought was pretty good going for such a complicated and hazardous procedure as setting up a direct debit. We now live in hope that come the autumn, when the taxes are due, the Mayor's office will succeed in taking the money we owe straight from our bank account (in two separate transactions, of course). If they don't succeed they will doubtless send us two separate bills and we will send them two separate cheques. We will then go back to the Mayor's office and try again. Maybe next time we should go twice.

When we got back to the apartment I found a note from one of the many busy body organisations set up under the auspices of the EU. This one wants to send someone round to check that we know how to turn our gas on and off. I gather there is to be a 15 minute tutorial on the subject. These people write to us every few months and I usually ignore them. This time, however, I have sent them a jolly fax reminding them that English is now the official language of the EU and that if they write to me again they should, therefore, do so in English. I will, of course, also expect my tutorial to be conducted in English though if my hearing deteriorates any further I will need it to be in 'signed' English.

29

In Paris the elderly do not spend their days slumped in plastic armchairs watching awful quiz shows on the television. Instead of heading off to the local nursing home at the first sign of maturity, they remain in their apartments, surrounded by their treasures and memories, and continue to look after themselves. They value their independence, do the Parisians, and even though it might take them a couple of hours to walk two hundred yards to the shops, buy their baguette, cheese and bottle of wine and then totter back home, they do it with dignity and pride. The daily walk to the shops is an important part of their lives. They look after their appearance, too. The residents in British nursing homes always look as though they've just clambered out of bed. Hair is never brushed and women don't wear any make-up. It's a habit, a state of mind and a result of the fact that no one around them gives a damn or encourages them to give a damn. In Paris, there are hairdressers and shops selling cosmetics every few yards and I would guess that many of their best customers are in their seventies and eighties. There are at least half a dozen 'coiffeurs' and 'magasins vendant des produits cosmétiques within a ten minute stroll of our apartment. The elderly dress smartly (women never wear trousers and would rather be in a coffin than wear anything beige or elasticated) and they aren't too proud to use those colourful shopping bags on wheels so that they don't have to carry heavy bags back from the shops. Both our local ironmongery shops reckon that shopping bags on wheels are among their best selling items.

I am completely convinced that it is this independence which keeps the elderly fit in mind and body. Folk who live in British nursing homes are encouraged to live like children. They get up, have breakfast which has been prepared for them, and then slump into an armchair where they spend the day staring at a dozen other sorry souls sitting in armchairs. Occasionally, they are wheeled into the dining room or handed a cup of milky tea. Twice a week an excessively cheerful young woman turns up to conduct an exercise class which consists of a little half-hearted arm waving. And once a week a volunteer conducts a bingo session. Onward and downward. That's no life for anyone; it's barely even living. I much prefer the Parisian way.

In Paris, on my daily trip to the supermarket and the boulangerie I frequently see the same totter of elderly citizens doing their shopping. Most are alone. I suspect that many live alone and shop by themselves because their loved one has gone on ahead to better things; gone to find a nice apartment to rent on a quiet cloud. Or maybe one half of a couple goes to the shops and the other, less agile, stays home and lays the table.

There are, of course, a few old married couples who do their shopping together; hand in hand or arm in arm. And two elderly ladies who live (in separate apartments) in our building go to the shops together every morning simply because they are so frail that they literally need the support. One is in her late eighties and the other is in her early nineties. They walk very slowly, more of a shuffle than a walk, looking around them, chatting, enjoying their daily journey, and they hold tightly on to each other. Two legs are better than one but four legs are better than two. The assistants in the shops always have time for them. No one hurries them if they struggle to pull their purses out of their bags. The assistants help them pack their purchases. Other Parisians smile, say 'good morning' and give them the space they need.

As I walked to the supermarket this morning the two elderly ladies had finished their shopping and were heading back home. Each carried an old leather shopping bag that had done many years' service. Each one had a baguette poking out of the top of her bag. They were holding onto each other. Behind them strolled three British women in their thirties. They were enormously fat, dressed as if for a disco, and pointing at the two old ladies and laughing as if they'd never seen anything so funny in their lives. I suppose it was the fact that the two old women were obviously holding up each other that they found so funny. Or maybe it was the fact that they were shuffling along, creaking knees hardly able to lift their feet up from the pavement. The three British women tried imitating the old ladies. They shuffled their feet and they held on to one another. They thought this was all terrifically funny. Even though they were touching one another they shouted as though they were a street apart. Their nastiness, their malice, appalled me and not for the first time I found myself ashamed to be British. Why, I wonder, do we now lead the world in our ability to mock and to sneer, and in our contempt for the elderly? These are not skills in which we should take pride.

In referring to the elderly I should declare an interest. When I look in the mirror in the morning I often wonder why I am forever shaving the face of an old man I do not recognise. And if I bang a toe my nerve pathways are so worn out and decrepit that it takes ages for the pain message to reach my brain. Long enough for me to have time to choose a suitable expletive for the moment when the pain finally arrives, and time too to put two soluble aspirin tablets into a glass of water. I suspect that if things deteriorate at the present rate there will be soon be time for the aspirin to start working before the pain arrives. A pre-emptive strike I think they call it in the military.'

30

It was an unusually warm and sunny day so we went to the Luxembourg Gardens. The gardens are formal and elegant but we go not for the flowers but for the people. The Luxembourg Gardens seem to be a magnet for really odd folk and every time we go there we are entertained by the passing show. There's usually a couple practising their tai chi, a man going through his aikido moves and a man pretending to be a tree. The last time we were there we watched a man practising his rumba steps with an imaginary, entirely invisible, partner. He seemed to be enjoying himself enormously and as far as we could tell his partner was having a good time too. Today, we sat on a bench beside the tennis courts, had a picnic luncheon which we had brought with us, and watched a couple of blokes playing tennis. This was nothing like the tennis you'd expect to see at Roland Garros or Wimbledon but it was far, far more entertaining. The professional stuff I can take or leave. The ball travels so fast that half the time I can't tell where it is or who is doing what to it. Amateur tennis, particularly low level amateur tennis, is all about the people rather than the ball.

The two men, who both looked to be in their late twenties or early thirties, weren't good at tennis. In fact, they were so bad, so mouth gapingly terrible, that I have a suspicion they may not have played before. The one on our left was wearing a pair of knee length Bermuda shorts that looked as if they were made with material a manufacturer of Hawaiian shirts had discarded as being too loud, and a T-shirt with the message 'Ne regardez pas a lui – me regarder!' On his feet he wore brown brogues with white socks. The player on our right was wearing a pair of luminescent heliotrope swimming trunks that had either shrunk in the wash (which seems unlikely since one might reasonably assume that bathing trunks are made of material which isn't likely to shrink when it has been in contact with water) or were not large enough when they were bought, and one of those tennis shirts which has, for reasons which I have never understood, a reptile on the wearer's left breast. The shirt was mainly white but had blue and yellow stripes. This one wore those plastic clogs that are, for some peculiar reason, popular with those environmentalists who haven't yet realised that plastic comes from oil and the oil is running out. I have described the two players as the 'one on our left' and the 'one on our right' since these two were not sufficiently aware of the niceties of the game to realise that it is customary, every now and then, for the two players to change ends.

For a while the two men played by themselves rather than together. One would hit the ball but it would either go into the net or soar way over the head of the other. After a while the other would then hit the ball but that too would either go into the net or be too high or too wide for the other player to reach. They tried serving but both gave that up when it seemed clear that the chances of their actually hitting the ball were close to non-existent. They then both reverted to bouncing the ball and then hitting it as it came up off the ground. All this took some time since they only had one ball and consequently the player on the other side of the net had to wait until the ball had somehow made its way over or around the obstacle and into his half of the court. Finally, after about a dozen shots each, our two heroes succeeded in having what might perhaps be described as a primitive sort of rally. The player on our left managed to hit the ball over the net and the player on our right succeeded, certainly more by luck than judgement since he had both eyes closed at the time, in hitting the ball back over the net. It actually landed in the doubles tramlines but it did made its way over the net and the opponent, the player on our left, then managed to knock it back again. Was this a rally? The official definition of a rally in tennis is 'an extended exchange of strokes' but in these circumstances I think we could describe three shots as constituting a rally. It wasn't, perhaps, the sort of stuff that would have had a Wimbledon crowd on its feet but Antoinette and I were mightily impressed. We put down our sandwiches and clapped heartily.

At this point the two players started to take themselves seriously. They had, I think, mistaken this serendipitous rally as a sign that they were getting the hang of things.

The player on our left fingered the strings of his racquet and examined them very closely, as though he had found some fault in the tension of the catgut or whatever else it is that they used to string racquets half a century ago (which was, I suspect, about the time when his racquet was made). He called to his opponent, waved his racquet, shouted something we didn't hear, and then disappeared from the court.

While he was gone the other player took off his plastic clogs and examined them closely. I have no idea what he was looking for. When he had done this he took them off and then hobbled, in his socks, to the bag he'd left on one of the chairs within the confines of the court. He put the shoes down on the floor and took a pair of plimsolls out of the bag. The plimsolls were black and reminded me of the sort of footwear which was compulsory when we had gym lessons at school. He then sat down on another chair and slipped the plimsolls onto his feet. I don't think they were his plimsolls because judging by the trouble he had squeezing his feet into them there were at least two sizes too small. He stood up and walked about it, like a customer in a shoe shop trying on a new pair of shoes. He then sat down and waited for his partner to return.

After a delay of five minutes or so, the player who had been on our left returned to the court. He was still carrying the racquet with which he had left with but now he had an additional two racquets in the other hand. He examined all three racquets very carefully, checking to see that there weren’t any unexpected holes and testing the tension in the strings, before putting the two new racquets down beside his bag and returning to the court carrying the racquet he’d been using when he’d been playing before.

The two men then played another rally. This time the rally only consisted of two shots but when both players have difficulty in hitting the ball over the net, and even more difficulty in hitting it back again, it seems fair to describe an exchange of shots as a rally.

Exhausted, and perhaps excited, by this repeated success the player on our right decided that it was now his turn to leave the court. With a wave of apology to his companion he hurried off, and disappeared. I have no idea where he went but he reappeared a few minutes later carrying a pair of wrist bands. He made a great show of putting these onto his wrists, adjusting them and making sure that they were satisfactorily positioned for best aesthetic and sporting effect.

And so, properly and comfortably equipped, they continued with what they probably regarded as a game of tennis. Sadly, things did not go terribly well and there were no more rallies. The ball made its way over the net a couple of times but on neither of these occasions did it make its way back again.

All too soon our two players had run out of time. Another pair of players was standing at the entrance of the court, looking at their watches, shaking them ostentatiously, and making it clear that they were in a hurry to get on with things. Our two picked up their bags, their rackets, their spare shoes and their ball and they left.

The two replacements weren’t any fun at all. They were both dressed in Wimbledon white. They carried proper tennis bags, replete with racquets and wrist bands and towels and tubes of brand new balls. They knocked the ball around for a while and then started in earnest. They served properly and clearly knew how to play. Watching them was boring and since we had by now finished our picnic we put our rubbish in a nearby bin, put what was left into our shoulder bags, and left.

31

The Eurostar service between Paris and London is excellent. It is far, far easier to travel between the two countries by train than it is to fly. Indeed, I cannot understand why airlines continue to have customers for their flights between the two capitals. There is, inevitably, une mouche dans la soupe. And in this case the mouche is quite definitely the UK Border Force, which has a presence at the Gare du Nord as well as at the English end of the line.

The French have their own border control staff, of course, but for reasons which absolutely no one can understand, the British Government insists on double checking all travellers. The British staff are far more trouble than the French ones and infinitely more offensive and troublesome than the Roma beggars who hang around outside the station hassling travellers. There are never enough passport inspectors (most of the available booths are invariably empty and shut), the ones who are there are usually rude, slow-witted and bored out of their skulls and as a result there are invariably lengthy queues to get through the UK Border Control. The hiring policy at the UK Border Force seems to be to employ the sort of sad, dumb bastards who would be working night time security for a tyre storage depot if they hadn't lucked into civil service jobs. Their prize: a uniform, a pension and a chance to ooze insolence and arrogance. Things aren't helped by the fact that the border clerks always seem to be working to rule and examining passports as though expecting every single one to be a forgery and every traveller to be a high ranking member of Al Queda en route to blow up the Houses of Parliament and throw sticky toffees at the Queen. (In contrast, the French clerks who examine the passports of travellers who are leaving the UK are remarkably lackadaisical. Just for fun, Antoinette and I frequently go through customs using each other's passports. If anyone ever notices we simply laugh and say it was a mistake. But they rarely do spot the difference.)

The authorities claim, of course, that their rudeness, their authoritarian notices and their high handed approach are all a necessary part of the war on terrorism. The plan, presumably, is that terrorists will be put off by the rude reception and will turn round and go back home in a sulk. This is, of course, utter bollocks. Terrorists are stronger and far tougher than the authorities seem to believe. Any hope that the uniformed fools examining passports might spot terrorists and send them back home is also wishful thinking. The idiots manning the UK Border Force booths wouldn't spot a terrorist if a man in a mask wandered through carrying a rocket launcher. ('It is a present for my niece's birthday party. She likes fireworks. This one will make a lovely big bang and send down sparkly stars.') The truth is that Britain's absurd duplication of the passport checks conducted by French officials a few feet away is clearly political rather than practical. No stranger would ever guess that both countries are enthusiastic members of the European Union.

At the increasingly unpleasant and unfriendly Gare du Nord today, we found ourselves facing the usual lengthy queue at the passport desk. (The station has been recently redesigned and I suspect that the 'improvements' were made by bin-men using stuff they'd salvaged from council tips. The new furniture they've installed in place of the old seating may have a function but it isn't providing something for people to sit on.)

Today's problem was largely caused by a bad-tempered looking woman customs officer who was examining every passport offered to her as though it carried a secret blueprint for an invasion. When it was eventually our turn to be officially ignored I asked the woman her name. 'What do you want it for?' she demanded, rather startled. I said nothing but just stared at her and took out a pen and notebook. I then repeated the question. Nervously, she told me. I nodded at her, wrote down her name, showed it to her so that she could confirm I'd spelt it correctly and then put my notebook and pen away. 'What do you want it for?' she asked, looking very uncomfortable and handing me my passport with hardly a glance. I took the passport, gave her the 'dead eye thousand yard' stare, picked up my bag and walked away. My dead eye stare is pretty good. Even goldfish have been known to quail before it.

I find that this simple technique is the best way to alarm officious, pompous servants of the people. Nothing worries an official more than the thought that they might be investigated by their own system. It is, of course, perfectly true that the pen is only mightier than the sword when the other guy doesn't actually have a sword but much in life is dependent upon belief rather than reality. People who work in a bureaucracy know only too well just how unfair and unjust their system really is. Most would rather face a poke in the eye with a dirty loo brush than an internal investigation. I wish more travellers would face up these authoritarians with dignity. I have an awful feeling that most people would strip naked and walk through customs on their hands and knees if told to do so by an idiot in a uniform.

Surprisingly, it wasn't the border guards whose inefficiency and incompetence caused our train to be late. That was the fault of a pair of elderly Americans who turned up with two trolleys piled high with luggage. I lost count of the number of bags they had with them but it took the train staff many minutes to cram the suitcases into the available racks. Only when they had checked the way their bags had been stowed, and had ordered some adjustments, did the two travellers wander along the carriage and take their seats. 'Are you moving over here?' I asked. The man, who was still trying to ease his eighteen month pregnancy into his seat, stared at me as if I were madder than I undoubtedly am. ‘We’re on our vacation,’ he told me, gasping and wheezing with the effort. ‘We’re seeing Europe.’ I nodded and asked him how long their vacation would last. ‘We’ve been here a week and we’ve got another week to go!’ he wheezed.

February

1

Our boiler in the UK has stopped working. It is presumably jealous of all the attention the French boiler has recently received. I telephoned British Gas and they sent round an engineer who discovered that the engineer who had fitted our new towel rail and radiator had not sealed the thing properly. The result has been that water has been leaking, the system has lost pressure and the boiler has shut itself off. The new engineer explained that our brand new radiator doesn’t seem to have a valve that is waterproof but is, instead, fitted with a smart looking but leaky chromium plated end piece. ‘You can have a nice looking cap or a waterproof one,’ he said. We chose the one that didn’t leak. What a pity that the people who make these things don’t make valve caps which are both waterproof and handsome. Still, I suppose that would be a lot to ask. William Morris will be rotating.

2

I found a little card which had been pushed through our letterbox. It came from a delivery driver for one of the many courier companies which are taking over now that hardly anyone trusts Royal Mail any more (even if they can afford its outrageous prices).

We have a note permanently fixed to our front door asking delivery drivers to leave packets and parcels in a large box, tucked safely into a nearby stone nook. But the driver had refused to do this because the company which had sent the parcel had demanded a signature. This is happening more and more often (presumably because so much stuff is being stolen en route) and is extremely annoying because it means that we always have to remain alert for someone knocking on the front door. And if we are in the garden it is quite impossible to hear a caller, however hard they knock. If the delivery was something valuable I could understand the need for a signature but the parcel contains nothing more valuable than a 10 kilogram bag of sunflower hearts for our bird feeders. Since we live in the middle of nowhere, the sunflower hearts will be at risk only from the squirrels and the birds themselves. And if there is a squirrel or bird alive that can carry away a 10 kilogram bag then we are all in deep, deep trouble.

3

A former Goldman Sachs trader is suing the bank for $16.5 million. His complaint is that his bonus for the year 2010 was smaller than he had expected. The trader, a 35-year-old called Deed Amin Salem, apparently told his mother that he was due a $13 million bonus but was aggrieved when he received a paltry $8.5 million. It seems that Salem, who had previously boasted about how he had successfully ‘played’ the 2007 mortgage crisis in America, is peeved not so much about the money he hasn’t had but about the fact that he’d told his mum that he was getting $13 million and then he had to confess to her that he’d only got $8.5 million.

It’s clear from this and from other recent news stories that bankers still don’t understand why they are now hated more than estate agents and traffic wardens. The Goldman Sachs philosophy, for example, doesn’t appear to have changed at all. The plan is simple. First, you do an outrageously profitable deal that scrapes the barrel of morality but makes $10 billion profit. Second, after five years of legal battles and a wide variety of complaints and accusations you pay $100 million in damages to settle the whatever it is, being careful to make sure that the authorities allow you to continue to deny any wrong doing even though you’ve settled. This gives you a nice $9.9 billion profit. In a sane, civilised world the entire staff of Goldman Sachs (excluding, of course, the poor souls who sweep the floors and clean out the lavatories) would be hung, drawn and quartered. Bankers have damaged every aspect of our society. So, for example, it is bankers who encourage company executives to buy other companies (‘you have to expand, develop a global presence’) and then, when things go wrong, to sell them (‘slim down and focus’). It’s all done for the fees; with no regard for the employees who are, inevitably, made redundant.

4

I read yet another article promoting vaccination. The writer, a journalist, claimed that vaccination has saved millions of lives and that parents who don't have their children vaccinated are unfit to be parents. If you say something is true often enough people will believe you. And so, thanks to articles like this one, it is widely believed that vaccination, vivisection and medical screening are all 'good things'. In reality there isn't a shred of evidence to show that any of these are useful or effective. Indeed, there is loads of evidence proving the exact opposite. Sadly, any doctor who dares to breathe a whisper about this in public is likely to find herself being pilloried by the General Medical Council. As a result medical journalists are able to continue to help propagate these dangerous myths. I'm a little surprised that the GMC hasn't tried to censure me for writing my book *Anyone Who Tells You Vaccines Are Safe and Effective is Lying. Here's the Proof*. I suspect that they've kept quiet because they know that everything in the book is true. The medical establishment would score an own goal if it tried to punish me for writing it. But it isn't like the GMC or the medical establishment to show such good sense.

5

Astonishingly, eight per cent of recent university graduates had at least one parent accompanying them when they went to their first job interview. Nearly half of those had one or both parents sit with them during the interview itself. I wonder how many of them took their parents with them on their honeymoons. I wonder if the parents accompanied their children on their first day at the office? And I wonder if it is politically incorrect to suggest that we have bred a generation of wimps.

6

We opened a joint account with Barclays. I know they’re a bunch of crooks but there isn’t much choice these days. The words ‘banker’ and ‘crook’ are synonymous. And so are the words ‘banker’ and ‘incompetent’. Barclays posted us two plastic cards and two PIN numbers so that we could operate the account. All four items arrived in the same post on the same day together with a note warning us: ‘Do not keep your card and PIN number together’. I wrote to Mr Barclay suggesting that it might be a good idea to consider posting the PIN numbers a couple of days apart from the plastic cards. I very much doubt if they will take any notice.

7

WHO research has shown that up to 25% of the $4.1 trillion of public money spent on health care is lost to corruption. I am surprised that they seem surprised by this. I proved long ago that an even greater percentage of NHS money is lost, wasted or stolen by scoundrels and thieves. The WHO has also predicted that the incidence of cancer will double over the next twenty years. They seem surprised by this too, though it has for years been patently clear to anyone with functioning cerebral tissue that since the number and potency of carcinogenic chemicals in our air, water and food is rising, the incidence of cancer must inevitably continue to rise.

8

Japan has eight million people over the age of 80 and nursing and rest home beds for just 300,000 people. The other 7,700,000 must live at home, wander the streets or get themselves arrested and put in prison. The problem is that the modern Japanese don't seem to like old people very much. This is probably the only thing that we as a nation have in common with the Japanese. I read this morning that Japanese girls who are still single are now renting boyfriends to take home to show their mums. They are apparently doing this so that their mothers do not think they have been left on the shelf. The average rental fee for a boyfriend is 300 yen a day. Most rented boyfriends will hold hands and hug without any extra charge and will kiss for a small extra fee but there is, apparently, a standard charge of 30 yen for talking to old people. I have decided that in future I will charge 300 yen to speak to anyone from Japan, or to attempt any sort of conversation with anyone under the age of 25.

9

I have reached an age when I spend much of my life spring cleaning. This morning I spent a couple of hours sorting through my book shelves and DVD collection and putting the ones I won’t ever read or watch again into plastic bags to take to a charity shop. ‘You’re getting rid of stuff but I’m still collecting,’ said Antoinette, who is much younger than I am. But, inspired by my clear out, she spent this afternoon doing her own spring cleaning. ‘I’ve changed my mind,’ she said. ‘I too have reached the throwing out stage.’

10

I called into Lloyds Bank in Cheltenham, took out my cheque book and asked the teller to give me £1,000 worth of euros. He leant across the counter, so that no one would hear him. ‘Our rate is 1.15,’ he said. ‘You can get 1.18 at Moneyshop just down the road.’ So I went there, where I saved myself the cost of a few glasses of vin chaud and a couple of expressos. Not bad for a three minute detour. Plus, there is the added bonus that it makes a pleasant change to stuff a bank rather than be stuffed by one. It is hardly surprising that Lloyds Bank staff are no longer loyal to their bank. I feel sorry for counter staff at banks. They are frequently berated for the sins of their absurdly dishonest and overpaid bosses and to be honest it isn’t difficult to see why. I discovered a couple of days ago that, on top of all its other sins, Lloyds Bank has now been fined £218 million for manipulating interest rates. The vastly overpaid traders at the bank even fiddled the special rate that the bank was paying to the Bank of England when Lloyds was toying with bankruptcy. (I found this particularly astonishing. Crooks at the bank were deliberately cheating the authorities who were helping it survive!)

While I was in the bank I tried to change some commemorative £5 coins I had found at the back of a drawer. (I am always amazed at the stuff which finds its way to the back of my drawers.) The coins are supposed to be legal tender but the bank wouldn’t touch them. Later on I tried the Post Office. They wouldn’t change them either. So I dropped them off at a branch of the Blue Cross charity in the hope that someone there would know of a way to turn them into real money. Or maybe they could just sell them as curios. I find it appalling that the Government flogs us commemorative coins which have a face value printed on them but then turn out to be absolutely worthless.

Antoinette and I had parted to do some shopping and when we met she looked embarrassed. She was carrying a large inflatable cat. She started to explain, though no explanation was needed. It looked to be a very smart, inflatable cat. ‘Don’t worry,’ I told her. ‘I’ve bought you a talking rabbit.’

11

We are told that it will take 14 years to build HS2, an upgrade to the main railway line which connects the north of England to the south. Any project which takes that long will cause enormous disruption and will, inevitably, cost ten times as much as the original estimate. I'm not surprised by this news. It took contractors years to put up a few speed camera gantries on the motorways near Bristol. While they were doing this the Government must have made a fortune in fines because the whole area was littered with speed cameras. Now that they've finished it has become clear that the whole idea of a 'managed motorway' is to create as many long queues as possible. Whenever the traffic is running smoothly the computer, programmed by the Russians, the Chinese or quite possibly a bunch of malicious Martians, clicks into action and puts up a sign telling motorists that the speed limit is now 60mph. Or maybe the software was written by a 12-year-old who simply wants to create the world's largest traffic jams. What happens is that the 60 mph limit inevitably, and predictably, produces the beginnings of a traffic jam the computer clicks in again and puts up a sign reducing the speed limit to 40mph. Brilliant! This produces huge queues, totally screws up the motorway and costs the country billions in wasted fuel and lost working hours. (Occasionally, when this happens, it will be possible to spot a vehicle safely parked on the hard shoulder. The authorities responsible for reducing the speed limits don't seem to have worked out that the hard shoulder is there for precisely this purpose.) The silver lining is, of course, that the associated speed cameras produce vast quantities of ever welcome moolah for the constabulary and so in future all Policemen's Balls will be bigger and brighter than ever.

The HS2 upgrade will take forever because there must be many meetings where dull people in suits can sit around considering every possible eventuality. There will be planning considerations to examine, and health and safety considerations galore. Whole forests will have to be cut down so that reports and memoranda can be written and circulated widely. The Chinese, of course, would have done the motorway work in a weekend and the railway upgrade would have taken about the same length of time.

We used to be able to complete huge engineering works as quickly as the Chinese, of course. In May 1892 the Great Western Railway converted the entire London to Penzance railway line (a distance of 300 miles) from seven foot wide broad gauge to standard four foot ten inch gauge in 31 hours. They did it quickly in order to avoid disrupting travellers. Workmen had to lift the rails, move them and reattach them to railway sleepers and they had to do all this without the aid of cranes or health and safety experts in smart suits.

The railway company was, of course, left with a good deal of rolling stock which no longer fitted the rails. They held an auction in Gloucester and tried to sell seven first class carriages, six second class carriages, six third class carriages, three horse boxes, one passenger engine, one goods engine, twenty nine high sided wagons, eight low sided timber wagons and a number of carriages and wagons. Sadly, there were absolutely no bidders at the sale.

12

A local man who wanders the streets with a placard forecasting the end of the world has changed the date of Armageddon. Previously, his poster and leaflets suggested that all would end last December 31st. He is now predicting that the end will come in five years' time. I told him that I was pleased to see we are now safe for a while longer. He told me that the delay was entirely a result of his prayers and shook a tin at me for a contribution. I believe that all eccentrics need to be encouraged (before the EU has them all locked up) and so I popped a couple of quid into his collecting box. I can't remember when or where but I am certain this isn't the first pundit who has been forced to change his end-of-the-world-forecast.

13

A few weeks ago Antoinette went into a charity shop in Barnstaple, bought a skirt she liked and, because she wasn't in a hurry and the shop was quiet, spent some time chatting to the volunteer shop assistant, a woman in her 80s. It turned out that the assistant had read a few of my books and enjoyed them and so the next time Antoinette visited the shop she took her a bag of my books as a gift. The two then started to exchange emails.

While this was going on Antoinette was still trying to persuade me to allow my books to be turned into e-Books. Massive Royal Mail price increases for parcels finished off our mail order business, though massively increased prices for advertisements (and many bans) didn't help, and it has for many months looked as if our publishing business is over. At the height of my self-publishing business I employed 17 people and had a turnover approaching £1 million a year. Now Antoinette and I were putting the books in jiffy bags ourselves; and making a loss. With no other hard or paperback publisher in the UK it also looked as if my books would only be available to British readers who managed to find second-hand copies in bookshops or on the internet. I am still selling foreign rights to publishers abroad but I refuse to offer my books to British publishers or agents who are, generally speaking, arrogant, patronising and decidedly snooty about anything which has been self-published. (Actually, some years ago I started to describe myself as 'an independent publisher' in the same way that people who make their own films call themselves 'independent film-makers' and I am pleased to see that this smarter sounding nomenclature has now been fairly widely accepted.) I have a fine collection of dismissive letters from 19-year-old editorial assistants working for agents and publishers. 'If you ever want to have your book published you should buy a copy of *Writers and Artists Yearbook*, wrote one neophyte publisher, ignoring the fact that the book I'd sent for consideration for their paperback list had sold nearly 70,000 hardback copies in the UK alone. 'We see no market at all for these old-fashioned books,' said another sniffily, returning one of my Bilbury books after a long delay. Publishers deserve to go bust. And I have no doubt that they, along with literary agents, will soon disappear from our world. Much real estate in the environs of Bloomsbury will suddenly become available. It has for some time been clear that no author needs an agent or a publisher to help them produce an e-Book. What will all those utterly talentless and pointless Fionas, Deborahs and Felicitys do for a living? In the last year, 98 British publishers have gone bust – that's a 42% rise on the year before. The industry leaders usually blame the recession for this and hardly ever mention the true cause: e-Books. The truth is that e-Books have liberated self-publishers and will destroy publishers, agents, bookshops, wholesalers and libraries. Today no one knows, or cares, if a book is self-published. All they care about is whether they want to read it and what it's going to cost. There is no conceivable reason for authors to continue to use publishers – except for the fact that publishers do help to ensure that new books are instantly greeted with a raft of five star reviews from staff and 'friendly' reviewers.

I had a choice. Sit and sulk and do nothing or abandon myself to e-Books.

I contacted a large company which specialised in producing e-Books but the experience was deeply dispiriting. I sent them a total of 29 emails but we were still no closer to seeing any books being converted. They seemed more interested in creating emails than in creating e-Books. I was also worried about the fact that in addition to wanting big upfront fees they also wanted substantial royalty payments on the books they were converting. I could see the process dragging on for years and ending up with me earning little or nothing from my books. In the end I abandoned the whole thing and, with great sadness, told Antoinette that my books would have to die.

And then it turned out that R, the octogenarian Antoinette had met in Barnstaple, was a world-class computer wizard. Antoinette asked her if she knew anything about e-Books. She said that she didn't but kindly offered to find out what was required.

That was a few weeks ago. And now the first electronic versions of my books are beginning to appear on Amazon. Since Amazon now sells around 90% of all the e-Books sold, and since their Kindle device is the clear market leader around the world, it made sense to start by publishing our e-Books exclusively on Amazon. And, although I don't specialise in doing things that make sense, that is what we're doing. I have opened a publishing account with Amazon, and Antoinette and her octogenarian friend are learning fast about how to convert traditional books into e-Books, how to create covers and so on. I have no idea what is going to happen but I have to admit that it's exciting.

14

A Japanese company is now making a doll which ages. Over a period of twelve months the doll slowly acquires wrinkles and skin blemishes which can be removed with special creams and injections. The company is apparently also planning to produce a doll which can be enhanced with ‘cosmetic surgery operations’. I’m sure it will be very successful.

15

A bloke I know who produces e-Books has shown me some research which proves pretty conclusively that most of the really bad reviews which are given to e-Books come from readers who obtained their books free of charge. (The bad news for authors and publishers is that the vast majority of readers never pay for the books they read. They only download books which are being made available free of charge – usually as a promotion for the author.) This really isn’t much of a surprise, of course, since most people tend not to value highly anything which they obtained free of charge. There is, I suspect, an optimum price for appreciating a book. If you pay too much then your expectations will be too high and you will be easily disappointed. If you pay too little you will have little or no respect for the author or the book. What is perhaps surprising is the vehemence with which many of the one star reviews are written. Readers, who often admit that they haven’t finished the book they are reviewing, and who frequently boast about the fact that they didn’t pay a penny for it will, in addition to damning a book with a one star rating, attack both the author and the book in the most vitriolic of terms. My pal has also discovered that the majority of really nasty reviews (the ones which can kill a book’s sales dead overnight) are written by a very small number of women who will apparently stick in the knife, the stiletto heel and whatever else comes to hand, with enormous enthusiasm. In a way this isn’t particularly surprising. My chum points out that it has been known for years that most of the really horrid newspaper profiles are written by female journalists.

16

I planned to sit in the bower in the garden today and to do a little quiet reading but all the neighbours for miles around seem to have set up a rota for mowing, strimming and cutting hedges. As soon as one whiny piece of machinery stopped another started and so on, hour after hour. Wouldn’t it be nice if everyone agreed to mow their lawn and do their strimming and hedge trimming on the same half day or the same evening. I’d be quite happy to put up with a cacophony for a few hours if I knew that it wouldn’t happen again for another week.

17

Most people tend to think of psychopaths as being exceptional individuals – slobbering at the mouth and rushing around cutting people up and eating their livers. In fact a fifth of the population are psychopaths. If you know five people then the chances are good that one will be a psychopath. If you know 20 people then you will know four psychos. It isn’t difficult to identify them and I have listed the salient signs and symptoms several times in other books (such as ‘2020’). Psychopaths are exceptionally selfish, constant liars, manipulative, callous, grandiose and parasitic. They bully, they are never anxious, and they are invariably likeable. They seem strong, calm and confident but they lack personal insight. They never learn from experience and they never show remorse. The problem today is that our society is well suited to psychopaths – who can, and often do, easily rise to the top in politics and business. Most of our Ministers and company directors are psychopaths. They get to the top because they don’t care about people in the way that sensitive folk care. And that, inevitably, gives them an enormous advantage – a killer edge. It’s interesting too that lie detector machines don’t usually catch psychopaths – they are just too good at lying to be caught by a machine.

18

I went into a small shop today and stopped dead in my tracks. A huge and nasty looking Doberman was sprawled just inside the doorway and I really didn’t like the look of him. In order to get into the shop I would have had to step over him. He could have easily posed for pictures as the Beast of Bodmin Moor. Or he could have definitely taken the lead in the Hound of the Baskervilles. He was drooling and when he eyed me up I definitely got the feeling that the saliva was there so that he could digest a couple of my limbs more readily. ‘Is that your dog?’ I asked the man behind the counter. He grunted something which sounded like an affirmation in Neanderthal.

‘He looks pretty fierce,’ I said.

‘Guard dog,’ said the shopkeeper.

‘He looks as if he might bite.’ I said.

‘Wouldn’t be much good as a guard dog if he didn’t would he?’

This seemed logical but it wasn’t much comfort, so I left.

I wonder how long it will be before the shop goes bust.

19

We were sitting in a café and Antoinette had a form to fill in. In our wonderful paperless world it is, of course, almost impossible to get through a day without filling in a form or two. She asked if she could borrow a pen. I handed her one of mine (I rarely leave the house without at least half a dozen assorted pens and pencils though I am relieved to say that these are never arrayed in my breast pocket) and asked her idly if she needed a new refill for the pen she'd been using earlier. (I'm afraid I usually carry a few spare, assorted refills too.) She said something which I didn't quite catch. I asked her to repeat it. She looked a little embarrassed and then told me that earlier in the day she'd gone into a church to pray for a friend. The church has a table on which there is always a pile of small cards and a pen so that visitors can write out a prayer and leave it in the church. There was no pen. Someone had taken the pen that should have been there. And so when she had written out her message, Antoinette had left her own pen on the table. It wasn't just any old pen; it was a favourite pen, favoured not because it was expensive but because of the pictures of cats which were painted on the side of it. I'd given it to her a few months earlier.

'I had to leave it,' she explained. I nodded. I understood. And then I rummaged around in my shoulder bag, took out an identical pen and handed it to her.

'It was like this?' I asked.

'Exactly like this!' she said, holding the pen and beaming with delight. 'Where did you get it from?'

'I bought a spare,' I told her.

20

Every week the landlords in 31 British public houses cry ‘Time, gentlemen please!’ for the very last time. Sometimes, it happens more than 31 times and sometimes rather less. But it’s 31 on average. There are now fewer pubs in Britain than at any time in the last century – around 57,000 at the last count. Some of those who worry about the incidence of alcoholism will doubtless be cheering at this news, but they’re making a huge mistake. Britons aren’t drinking less alcohol than before – they’re just buying it from supermarkets and drinking it at home or in the street. And when booze is bought in a shop it is invariably cheaper than when it is bought in a pub. As a result people drink more of the stuff. And so the incidence of alcoholism (and the huge range of physical and mental disorders associated with heavy drinking) is soaring. When we lived in Weston-super-Mare the number of empty beer and lager cans thrown into our front garden steadily rose. When a new supermarket opened nearby the number of empty cans rocketed.

21

For a couple of decades now my toenails have been infected with the athletes' foot fungus. I suspect I picked it up at a public swimming pool. I've tried everything to cure the problem but I've refused to take anti-fungal tablets because I don't like the side effects. They really are nasty. If I'm going to wreck my liver I'd much rather do it with a good malt whisky. The creams and varnishes I've tried have been utterly useless and my toenails have gradually become increasingly discoloured and disfigured. They have become so bad that for some time I have felt confident that if I found myself threatened by muggers I would only need to take off my shoes and socks to scare them away. And then a few weeks ago Antoinette had a brainwave.

'The athletes' foot fungus doesn't like sunlight, does it?'

I agreed that most fungi don't like sunshine. They grow best in dark, moist places.

'That's probably why the fungus affects toe nails, and hardly ever affects fingernails?'

'Yes.'

'So why not give your toes some sunlight?'

I agreed that the idea sounded worth a try.

And then Antoinette, who is a creative genius, had another brainwave. She dug around on the internet and discovered the details of an ultraviolet light device designed for drying painted fingernails. I bought one. And for a week or two I've been putting my toes into the machine. It seems to be working. The fungus really seems to be retreating and my toes no longer look as if they belong in a horror museum. Moreover, my toes now have a nice sun tan too. Incidentally, I don't suggest that anyone else try this at home (or in the car or anywhere else for that matter). It is undoubtedly dangerous, illegal, politically incorrect, unreasonably harmful to fungi and likely to lead to an increase in money laundering and tax avoidance.

22

I telephoned Lloyds bank hoping to be able to move some money from one account to another. This is never easy to do and I often wonder just whose money it is. Today was no exception. ‘Why do you want to move the money?’ asked the woman to whom I spoke. ‘What are you going to use it for?’ I thought for a moment. ‘What size bra do you wear?’ I asked. I could hear her bristle. There was the sound of breath being drawn in sharply. ‘That’s a very impertinent question!’ she said. ‘And has nothing to do with you!’ I could sense her already preparing her official complaint. ‘Absolutely,’ I agreed. ‘One impertinent, irrelevant question deserves another.’

23

Our DVD player has developed a fault which means that every thirty minutes or so it stops working. The only way to make it start again is to hit it quite hard. (I have found over the years that much electrical equipment responds well to a good thump.) I went into the living room this evening to find that Antoinette had moved her chair forwards and had equipped herself with a broom handle.

‘What on earth is that for?’ I asked her, pointing to the broom handle.

‘It’s the new remote control for the DVD player,’ she explained. ‘It means I can give it a bang without having to get up out of my chair.’

I have always said that my wife is a genius and here is yet more proof. I was going to buy a replacement DVD player but now there is no need.

24

I am pleased to see that the argument for either the decriminalisation or the legalisation of drugs such as heroin is gathering support. It’s about time. It has been clear for decades that the law does nothing to prevent drug use but merely turns drug users into criminals, helps keep the price of illegal drugs unreasonably high and supports the gangs who import and sell drugs. Thirty odd years ago I wrote a series of articles and leaflets (and even a couple of books) explaining precisely why criminalising drug use was harmful. I was, inevitably and predictably, widely attacked by many of the same people who are now advocating a change in the law.

25

I’m not an envious person. Up until now I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything and said or thought ‘I want that!’ But all that has changed. I’ve seen the most amazing miniature silver railway. There is a vast expanse of track, a train and a number of wagons. The train was made by Armstrong Whitworth and Co for the Jai Vilas at Gwalior and it was built to carry port and cigars around the dining table. If a guest reached out for a refill or a fresh cigar the train would stop automatically. How utterly, totally brilliant. Far, far better even than the silver-encrusted bed designed for the Nawab of Bawalphur. The bed had full sized naked female statues at the four corners. And the statues were designed to fan the Nawab while he lay in bed. The bed might appeal to some but I don’t think it is a patch on the silver train set which may well be gloriously indulgent (OK, it obviously is) but it would have satisfied William Morris’s demands in that it is both beautiful and useful. I want it. Though since the track is about the length of a cricket pitch we might need an extension to the dining table and, indeed, to the house.

26

Sorting out some old papers I’ve just found this sad letter which my Dad wrote. It was sent to the charity, the NSPCC, which had written to him asking for money. This is what it said: ‘Please forgive me not responding to your appeal for support. My wife died earlier this year after a long illness ending for 18 months in a nursing home. The total cost of care which the great, British NHS could not afford to pay, amounted to £50,000. Please remove my name and address from your files. I am 87 years of age and unlikely to accumulate enough funds to be able to contribute to yours.’

27

This morning, I found another piece of paper from my Dad’s old files. This one shows that his car failed its MOT test at Pollits Devon Diahatsu Centre in Exeter. The garage failed the car (causing massive inconvenience to my father) because: ‘Offside lower windscreen has a sticker or other obstruction encroaching into the swept area by more than 40mm outside zone A.’ The refusal form was signed by someone called P.J.Spencer. The ‘sticker or other obstruction’ was actually my Dad’s cardboard disability parking badge, which he had left visible, propped up against the windscreen. Unfortunately, I didn’t know about this until my father had died. But it still makes me angrier than I can put into words.

28

I found this wonderful Author’s Note at the end of *The Last Juror* by John Grisham.

‘I took great liberty with a few of the laws that existed in Mississippi in the 1970s. The ones I mistreated in this book have now been amended and improved. I misused them to move my story along. I do this all the time and never feel guilty about it, since I can always disclaim things on this page. If you spot these mistakes, please don’t write me a letter. I acknowledge my mistakes. They were intentional.’

Wonderful. Love it.

March

1

We were had to go to London for the day and I’m afraid I now find it a depressing, dirty, tawdry and rather frightening place. I used to enjoy visiting the capital but I suspect that today even Dr Johnson would find himself eager to be somewhere else. Buildings everywhere look shabby and run down and cafés are dirty inside and outside. I knew and loved London in the fading years of its glory, when it was still a proud city, steeped in culture and history. Today it looks like a scruffy transit camp for indigents. Successive mayors and governments have simply destroyed it as a city. One of the saddest aspects of London today is the absence of trees and birds. There are lots of trees in the big parks, of course, but few in the streets, where leaves might fall onto the ground and make a mess. Only a few hardy pigeons and sparrows have managed to survive the war against birds which has been fought by successive mayors. (The end of civilisation began when an old lady was arrested for feeding the pigeons in Trafalgar Square. The end was completed when the authorities at Lord’s Cricket Ground allowed advertising people to paint slogans on the grass. Nothing has been the same since then.) Today, only the Chinese and Japanese tourists now feed the few remaining birds for the British know that throwing a scrap of food to a sparrow is likely to result in an arrest, a fine and, quite possibly, a term of imprisonment. The city stinks, the air is filthy and clogged with fumes and the noise is infinitely worse than in any other city I can think of. The city’s emergency service vehicles don’t seem to go anywhere without using sirens. The drivers probably put their sirens on when going home for tea. And the noise of these sirens, considerably greater today than it used to be, is so intense and urgent that it seems designed not as a warning to move aside but to cause the maximum amount of stress and panic. I wonder how many people die because of these constantly screaming sirens. I wonder how many lives are shortened. And I wonder how many accidents occur because motorists and pedestrians simply don’t know which way to move or whether to move at all. Whatever the answers to those questions might be, the end result is that the city vibrates with the noise and everyone is in a constant state of fear.

As an elderly, white Englishman I confess that I felt out of place and unwelcome in a city I used to love. Multiculturalism has not added to our culture but has detracted from it. We went into a shop to buy drinks and I overheard an Asian shelf filler talking to two colleagues about a forthcoming England football match. ‘I hope England lose!’ he cried with a laugh. His two colleagues immediately agreed with his blatantly racist sentiment. (It is, of course, perfectly acceptable for visitors and immigrants to say derogatory things about the English without any fear of being officially accused of racism. It was long ago decided that England no longer officially exists and so the English have absolutely no rights.)

On the way back to the railway station we listened in mounting horror as our taxi driver conducted an increasingly emotional telephone conversation with someone at Nat West bank. The bank had apparently made an error which had resulted in his credit rating being adversely affected and the driver, who was trying to get a mortgage to buy a new house, was explaining that unless the bank corrected the error, and removed the stain from his credit rating, he would either be unable to continue with the purchase or would have to pay a much higher rate of interest resulting, as he pointed out, in an eventual cost running into many thousands of pounds. He was told that it would take three weeks to correct the error on the computer. (A task which, I suspect, would require no more than one or two key strokes.) This conversation, clearly enormously distressing to the driver, continued as he drove through busy London traffic with tears in his eyes. As the call ended the driver, half turned and spoke to Antoinette and myself in the back of his cab. ‘I’m sorry about all that,’ he said. We told him we understood and sympathised and I suggested that he telephone the chairman of the infamous Royal Bank of Scotland (which owns Nat West) and make a complaint to the top of the organisation. I explained that complaints which filter down always seem to be resolved more speedily than complaints which have to work their way, slowly, up through a reluctant bureaucracy. We both felt so sorry for this poor cab driver. I wonder how many thousands of people have similar conversations every day. Banks, utility companies and other giant organisations care little or nothing for the welfare of their customers and when they make mistakes, which they do with astonishing frequency, they often cause unending misery, stress and, in the end, ill health by refusing to take responsibility for, and to correct, their errors. The arrogance and incompetence of the people who run these organisations never fail to astonish me and I am frequently appalled at the indifference of call centre staff who are clearly devoid of humanity and empathy. The irony, of course, is that in their own lives these individuals are, of course, as vulnerable as everyone else. The uncaring gas company employee suffers at the hands of the indifferent hospital employee who suffers at the hands of the indifferent telephone company employee. Are these people, I wonder, all taking revenge when they use their own power to ignore mayhem in their customers’ lives? As we left the cab, sorry for the driver’s plight, I couldn’t help thinking that allowing drivers to use hands free telephones is crazy. The unfortunate sod driving our vehicle had been so distracted by his conversation that it was a miracle we hadn't hit anything. Maybe the cab, after a few hundred thousand miles of experience had, looked after itself.

Our rail journey home was delayed and our guard explained that the problem was sudden and unexpected congestion at Reading. How do the lines at a railway station become congested? Did trains suddenly converge on Reading and get in the way of one another? I understand only how too well how congestion can develop on the roads. But I thought trains always followed well-thought out time tables. One train has to be in Manchester at 7.16 p.m. and another needs to chug into Bristol at 7.17 p.m. It is rather alarming to think that trains can wander about willy nilly, converging unexpectedly on the hapless Reading, and creating congestion for weary travellers. Is it only Reading which suffers in this way, or are all stations similarly affected by marauding trains?

When we eventually arrived back in Stroud we discovered that in order to reach our car, which had been parked in a small car park outside the front of the railway station, we had to cross a footbridge. We could find no alternative. No lift. No escalator. Just a steep flight of steps going up, a bridge across and a steep flight of steps going down to ground level on the other side of the tracks. A frail and elderly couple struggled to cross with their heavy suitcases. A young woman dragged her pram up the steps. Travellers helped one another as much as they could. I've had a faulty knee for a month now, and it had been improving slowly, but clambering up and down the steep stairs of that bridge brought back all the pain. I suspect my knee (long past its sell-by-date and undoubtedly well out of warranty) will, as a result, be bad for another month or more. I've had tennis elbow, golfer's shoulder and swimmer's ear and now I've got runner's knee. I'm going to use a walking stick. If I carry a stick I can hit people with it when they annoy me, which many doubtless will. Who is going to complain? 'A pensioner hit me with his stick' always sounds so pathetic. They'll get laughed at and I'll get all the sympathy. It is only when we are temporarily disabled in some way that we really understand the plight of those who are permanently disabled. We always say we do understand, of course, and in our hearts we undoubtedly think we do. But there's nothing like a real chance to share the inconvenience or distress that others suffer on a long-term basis to arouse our natural feelings of outrage. How do people in wheelchairs cross from one side of the Stroud station to the other? Well, it appears that in the absence of a handy helicopter and hoist they must wheel themselves the best part of a mile around the town, crossing over a road bridge and then wheeling themselves up the hill to the other side of the station. Those who merely have bad arthritis or other disabilities can choose between this long trek and dragging themselves up and over the footbridge steps. How can this be allowed? If the railway station at Stroud was a sweet shop or a hairdressing salon the council would have forced them to provide access for disabled customers or to close their premises and stop taking any customers at all. Councils frequently close their own public lavatories on the grounds that they are not accessible to disabled users and, therefore, should not be available to able bodied ones. I wish someone would start a campaign to persuade the council to close Stroud railway station until the responsible railway companies do the decent thing and install a pair of passenger lifts or a pair of escalators. Faced with a massive loss of income and screams from hordes of angry commuters the problem would doubtless be solved in days. The Chinese would sort it in a day and have time for a firework celebration in the afternoon.

I sent an email of complaint to Stroud Council and received a reply from Ashley Nicholson, the Senior Community Safety Officer who wrote: 'Stroud District Council have no responsibility for the railway station and therefore are unable to comment on the provision provided relating to access for disabled users'. I wrote back expressing surprise at this abdication of responsibilities and asking if the council would take such a laid back attitude if a cafe, shop or theatre failed to provide any access for the disabled. 'I realise you don't own the station,' I wrote. 'But surely the Council has a responsibility to protect the welfare of citizens. If not then what is the Council for?' I received no reply.

2

The empty headed lunatics who are constantly screaming about the hazards of man-made climate change are now claiming that the planet is short of water because of climate change. This is arrant nonsense and there is no evidence whatsoever for this politically and economically convenient assertion. There is a global water shortage and there are two very good reasons for it.

First, the number of people eating meat has rocketed in recent years. What’s that got to do with it, I can hear people crying. Well, it takes 924 gallons of water to produce one burger. All that water is needed to grow the feed to give to the cow who will become the burgers. Most of the planet’s water is used by farmers who pay very little for it. And most of the water is used by farmers producing meat.

Second, more and more of the planet’s rivers, streams, springs and lakes have been so polluted that the water in them is unusable. Water bills for household consumers are soaring in developed countries, and in many parts of the world water is a scarce commodity and unaffordable by ordinary folk.

The answer is awfully simple (as these things often are): every person on the planet should have access to cheap or free water for drinking, cooking and washing but should pay through the nose if they want to wash their cars or fill their swimming pools. And farmers and industries have to pay more for the water they use – then, maybe, they will stop wasting it and stop polluting it. The main trouble with the world is that someone put the grown-ups in charge. And most of them don’t have the common sense of a six-year-old.

3

I rang our car insurers, to tell them that our address had changed. They charged £12.72 to change the registered address for our truck and £11.66 to change the address for our BMW. I am beyond complaining about these absurdities. There just isn't enough life to protest about all the bad stuff. No other company with which we do business has ever charged us to change an address. It would, of course, have to be an insurance company which found another way to gouge money out of its long suffering customers.

4

We’ve now distributed all the printed copies of my new book on the EU. Reviewers won’t look at any of my books (partly because I am known to be a self-publisher and partly because my other books attacking the EU sold a lot of copies, proved extremely popular and so annoyed the EU’s supporters) and so I published this one under a pseudonym. Actually, I used two names, just to confuse reviewers. How many people would imagine that one author would use two pseudonyms for the same book?

I called the book *The EU: The Truth About The Fourth Reich* and subtitled it *How Adolf Hitler Won The Second World War*. The authors on the cover are listed as Daniel J Beddowes and Flavio Cipollini.

Believing that the EU is by far the greatest enemy we have, we sent copies to MPs, to every public figure we could think of and every publication in the land. In view of the fact that the book shows the direct link between Hitler and the EU I took care to send it to every Jewish publication I could find, too. (To my enormous surprise none of them seemed much interested in the fact that the book shows conclusively that the modern EU was created by Hitler and other 1940s Nazis.) I don’t think anyone actually bought a copy of the book but we have distributed the entire print run and the book has been given a considerable amount of coverage – especially on the internet where it has aroused interest in quite a variety of different languages. Nothing has happened though. And nothing will. The EU simply has too much power and too much money.

The basic theme of the book is that the EU has systematically and purposefully suppressed democracy and accountability, vigorously and ruthlessly separated authority from responsibility, authorised official bullying and introduced a seemingly endless variety of blatantly fascist policies. The amount of power any organisation has depends entirely upon what the leaders of the organisation are prepared to do to expand and protect that power. And the leaders of the EU are, like all good Nazis, prepared to do whatever it takes.

Hitler was the man who gave bones to the dreams first expressed by Charlemagne and Napoleon, but he finishing touches to the EU as we know it were put in place during World War II by a man called Walther Funk, who was President of the Reichsbank and a director of the Bank for International Settlements (BIS). It was Funk who predicted the coming of European economic unity. Funk was also Adolf Hitler’s economics minister and his key economics advisor. The European Union was designed by Nazis and it has been carefully created according to the original design. It is not a ‘group’ or an ‘association’. It was always a union. And in a union the members are not affiliated, they are joined. ‘What good fortune for governments that the people do not think,’ Adolf Hitler once said.

The EU’s fans like to pretend that the fine points of the organisation were planned in the 1980s and 1990s. But that’s not true; it was Hitler and Funk who designed the EU precisely as it exists today. The Nazis wanted to get rid of the clutter of small nations which made up Europe and their plan was quite simple. The EU was Hitler’s dream but it was Funk who outlined the practical work which needed to be done. In my book (or, rather, in the book by Beddowes and Cipollini) I described, in detail, precisely how Hitler and Funk et al planned the EU and the euro.

In 1940, Funk prepared a lengthy memo called *Economic Reorganisation of Europe* which was passed to the President of the BIS (who was an American called Thomas McKittrick) on July 26th 1940. ‘The new European economy will result from close economic collaboration between German and European countries,’ wrote Funk. It is important to note that even then the EU was seen as a union between Germany, on the one hand, and the rest of Europe, on the other. There was never any doubt which nation would be in charge of the new United States of Europe. (The phrase United States of Europe was devised by Adolf Hitler himself). There are commentators and economists today who note Germany’s control of today’s EU with surprise, and who seem puzzled by the fact that Germany is booming and has by far the largest and most dominant economy in the EU. No one should be surprised because the EU was always planned that way. Germany is benefitting enormously from the euro crisis but Funk knew that would be the case. Back in 1940, Funk had the idea for the euro but warned that even after monetary union it would be impossible to have one standard of living throughout Europe. He knew that the euro would be flawed but he also knew that Germany would come out on top. He would not be in the slightest bit surprised by the fact that modern Germany is by far the largest and most dominant economy in the European Union. That was always the Plan.

In reality the euro was bound to cause chaos and massive unemployment throughout many parts of the European Union because of policies which German politicians set in process after the unification of West and East Germany and before the foundation of the euro. The policies, which were designed to enable a unified Germany to control the EU, involved Germany entering the euro at an advantageously low exchange rate, thereby giving it a huge competitive advantage over other euro countries. The aim was that Germany would get richer while other countries got poorer and that is exactly what is happening. (The French chose to join the euro with a strong franc because they felt it made them look ‘big’ and because it meant that they could enjoy cheap holidays in the rest of Europe.) The result is that because the euro is undervalued relative to the German economy, Germany exports far more than it imports and grows ever richer and stronger at the expense of its other euro 'partners'. Germany currently runs the world's biggest trade surplus – and has been running big surpluses for a decade. German politicians have refused to spend the money they have been accumulating and so other countries in Europe, struggling to cope with a euro artificially strengthened by a rich Germany, have slumped further and further into depression and their unemployment rates have soared.

The Germans are fighting hard to protect and preserve the euro, and will continue to pay money to preserve the status quo, because if the European currency breaks up two things will happen. First, Hitler's plan for a German dominated United States of Europe will be in tatters and second, the Germany mark will be as strong as the Swiss franc and cars and refrigerators made in Germany will be priced out of many markets. If the Germans can keep the euro alive then in due course, the inevitable will happen: Germany will have complete control of the European Union and Hitler will have a posthumous victory.

Economists, who tend to have a limited understanding of the world, are constantly producing articles expressing surprise at the fact that the euro was created at all and dismay that, despite all the evidence showing that it has caused enormous damage to countries and individuals, it is being kept alive. If they understood how and why the European Union was created (and who created it) they would, perhaps, have a better understanding of why it exists and why those who support it will fight to the death to preserve it.

Today, the EU spends billions every year on keeping its supporters happy. The BBC, a renowned supporter of the European Union, and an organisation which has confessed to being biased in the EU's favour, has received millions of pounds from the EU. The money is invariably described as being given as a 'grant' but the word 'bribe' might be more appropriate. The BBC repays this financial support by defending unpopular EU policies (such as those on immigration), by insisting that all measurements referred to in its programmes are in EU friendly metric units rather than proper British imperial measurements and by taking every opportunity to disparage England and the English. Joseph Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda in the Third Reich, would have been proud of the BBC which is now an essential part of the Fourth Reich. Goebbels would have probably also been proud of the fact that scores of British universities have professors funded by the EU. The professors are paid to teach students the value of European integration. And, naturally, the EU has, over the years, spent many large fortunes producing literature and teaching aids for teachers to use in European schools. On the rare occasions when voters in European countries have been invited to vote on EU issues the EU has been the main contributor to 'Vote Yes' campaigns. In 1975, when Britons were last given the opportunity to air their views on the EU, the EU helped fund the 'Vote Yes' campaign.

It was back in 1941, when he was still planning the new European Union, that Walther Funk launched the Europaische Wirtschafts Gemeinschaft (the European Economic Community) to integrate the European economy into a single market and to establish his idea for a single European currency. It was almost entirely Funk who helped plan the European Union Community although when it was finally established he was still labelled a war criminal and still a resident of Spandau Prison in Berlin. It wasn't considered a terribly good idea to give him medals or to organise a thank you 'roast'. All subsequent suggestions that Funk be recognised as the founding father of the European Union have been rejected on the grounds that it is too soon to put up a statue to the man to whom Hitler handed the responsibility of ensuring the good health of the Fourth Reich.

Funk planned the EU in precise detail. It was even Funk who proposed a Europe free of trade and currency restrictions. In June 1942, German officials produced a document entitled *Basic Elements of a Plan for the New Europe* which called, among other things, for a European clearing centre to stabilise currency rates. The aim was to secure European monetary union and 'the harmonisation of labour conditions and social welfare'.

Hitler and the rest of the Nazi leadership welcomed Funk's plans and in 1942 the German Foreign Ministry made detailed plans for a European confederation to be dominated by Germany. In the same year a group of German businessmen held a conference in Berlin entitled *European Economic Community*. (The phrase 'European Economic Community had been first used by Hermann Goering in 1940.) In 1942, Reinhard Heydrich, who was head of the Reich Security Central Office and renowned for his ruthlessness against enemies of the State, published *The Reich Plan for the Domination of Europe* – a document which is notable for its remarkable similarity to the EU's Treaty of Rome. In March 1943, 13 countries (including France and Italy) were invited to join a new European federation which would be under German military control.

When the Nazis realised that they were losing the war they knew that they had to make a deal in order to preserve German domination in Europe. Thomas McKittrick, the president of the BIS, acted as go between and helped set up the negotiations. The underlying plan was to ensure that Germany dominated post-war Europe. Funk and his colleagues decided to talk about European spirit, liberty, equality, fraternity and worldwide cooperation as the basis for their planned European Union. They decided to agree to share power, and even to allow other countries to take charge for a while. The Nazis knew that all they needed to do was retain men in power in crucial posts. And this they succeeded in doing. In 1944 a secret conference was held in Berlin entitled *How Will Germany Dominate The*

Peace When It Loses The War. Rich and powerful Germans decided to move a huge amount of money out of Germany and to take it to America. (The money stayed there until after the Nuremberg Trials when it came back to Europe.) In August 1944, the heads of the Nazi Government and a group of leading German industrialists, met at a hotel in Strasbourg and decided to hide more large sums of money in order to pay for the fight for a German dominated Europe to continue if their country lost the war. The Nazis realised that their back-up plan for European domination would take years to reach fruition but they believed that if their military tactics failed then their subtle economic and political tactics would prove successful.

In 1961, President Kennedy told British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan that the White House would only support Britain's application to join the Common Market if Britain accepted that the true goal of the Common Market was political integration – Hitler's famous United States of Europe. In 1966, American President Johnson encouraged Britain's membership of the developing European Economic Community and Foreign Office civil servants in London decided that the 'special relationship' with the USA would be enhanced if Britain joined the Common Market. In 1968, the Foreign Office warned that 'if we fail to become part of a more united Europe, Britain's links with the USA will not be enough to prevent us becoming increasingly peripheral to USA concerns'.

It is also important to remember that the European Central Bank (ECB), (which today has so much power over European citizens) was designed and set up by the German Bundesbank, which was Germany's post war central bank. And the Bundesbank was the son of the Reichsbank which was the name of Germany's central bank before and during World War II. The President of the Reichsbank before and during World War II was, of course, Walther Funk. The ECB would probably have a Walther Funk Founder's Day if they thought they could get away with it and the only surprise is that Funk hasn't yet found himself portrayed on euro coins and notes. He has more of a right to appear on them than anyone else because they were his idea.

Today, thanks to the Maastricht Treaty, each EU member's gold reserves belong to the EU and are effectively controlled by the ECB. As planned, the ECB (grandson of Hitler's Reichsbank) is not democratically accountable to anyone. It is actually prohibited from taking advice from Eurozone Governments and the European Parliament has no authority over it. No one knows how the ECB makes decisions because everything is done in great secrecy.

There are some supporters of the EU who claim that the absence of democracy within the organisation was never the original attention. They are wrong. The EU was always designed to be an undemocratic organisation. It is the Anti-Democracy. Way back in 1950, Clement Attlee, Britain's Labour Prime Minister recognised the problems associated with the planned European unity. He said, when responding to the Schuman plan for the European Coal and Steel Community (the initial version of the EU): 'It (is) impossible for Britain to accept the principle that the economic forces of this country should be handed over to an authority that is utterly undemocratic and is responsible to nobody.' Churchill, too, was vehemently opposed to the plans for a united Europe.

The unwritten, unspoken aims of the European Union are to regulate every activity and to ensure that everything which every citizen does will be controlled by the State. The plan is to eliminate small businesses, small hospitals and small everything else. As far as the EU is concerned 'small is bad'. It is much easier for the State to control production and tax gathering if it only has to deal with large international companies. (It is hardly surprising that the executives of large companies are among the most vocal of the EU's supporters. In the UK, for example, they will often threaten to close down factories if citizens vote to leave the EU.) By licensing every occupation, and insisting that individuals pay annual licensing fees, the EU can control citizens and take in more taxes. Individuals who speak out or protest can be controlled by having their licenses withdrawn.

Back in 1945, Hitler's Masterplan was captured by the Allies. The Plan included details of his scheme to create an economic integration of Europe and to found a European Union on a federal basis. The Nazi plan for a federal Europe was based on Lenin's belief that 'federation is a transitional form towards complete union of all nations'. It is impossible to find any difference between Hitler's plan for a new United States of Europe, dominated by Germany, and the European Union we have.

Today, the tragedy is that we are being oppressed not by an evil Great Dictator (a Hitler) or even an obsessive revolutionary (a Lenin) but by a relatively small army of nonentities sitting in offices in Brussels; nonentities who are led into battle by a cluster of professional bureaucrats who are (irony of ironies) paid by us to take away every ounce of freedom.

The eurocrats, who believe that procedures are everything and outcomes are nothing, have won and things will stay the way they are until the people of Europe find their voice, discover a real leader, and crush the most fascist, anti-democratic organisation ever created.

The EU has made us all poorer in every way.

I'm proud of the little book which we have published. But I doubt if many people will ever read it. Still, it's now available as an e-Book. (Still under the names Beddowes and Cipollini.)

5

Newspapers, television and radio are full of a story claiming that vegetarians are less likely to die early because the vegetables they eat make them healthier. There is some truth in this but, as usual, the nation's medical correspondents have missed the main truth. Vegetarians are less likely to develop cancer or have heart attacks not because they eat lots of vegetables but because they don't eat meat. The evidence proving that meat causes cancer, for example, is so exhaustive that in my book *Food for Thought* I was able to publish summaries of 26 relevant scientific papers which showed a direct link between meat and cancer. Sadly, this truth is only rarely aired in public. Advertisements for *Food for Thought* were 'banned' by the Advertising Standards Authority after complaints from the meat industry (which didn't like the truth being made available) and when I wrote a newspaper column drawing attention to the link, the Press Complaints Commission responded to a complaint from the meat industry by censoring me and the newspaper which had published the column. Neither body seemed interested in the facts or in the public's right to the truth. The incidence of cancer will continue to soar as more and more people around the world start eating meat. The incidence of cancer in Japan has already gone up for this reason and the same thing will happen in China.

6

A local police station reports that it now has a new ‘custody suite’. And I read, separately, that the council scrapyard for unwanted motor cars is officially known as the *End of Life Vehicle Centre*. George Orwell would not have dared make up such nonsense. This bizarre news reminds me that it’s about time we bought a new car. There’s nothing wrong with the ones we have (and I love the Ford truck) but something new and exotic might be fun. The trouble is that just about all the cars on sale these days look the same. When I was a kid I could identify scores of different motor cars. These days they all look as if they’ve been designed according to some wretched EU template; which, of course, they have. I’m tempted to buy an old classic but there are one or two problems with this. The first is that I know absolutely nothing about cars. Whenever the AA man has to come I fail miserably at the first hurdle, feeling a complete fool when he asks me to open the bonnet and I have to dig out the instruction manual to find out how to do it. The only two technical words I know are radiator and carburettor and although I could probably answer rudimentary questions on radiators I don’t have the foggiest idea what the second of these does or looks like. My last classic car was a 1956 Bentley S1 and that was fun but it would be a pointless purchase these days. I used to take it into a local garage and have a cup of tea in a nearby café while I left it connected to a hose through which heavily leaded petrol poured into the tank. A tankful of fuel would just about take me to the next garage. These days a motorway trip would be impossible because there are frequently gaps of over 50 miles between filling stations and a beautiful Bentley S1 would never make that sort of distance without refuelling. There must be something out there with a bit of pazazz.

7

I have been putting off calling the sweep because I have to ring him and he will doubtless be out, sweeping chimneys, and I will have to leave a message and he will ring back and we will fix a date and I will have to remember to be in and to listen for the knock on the door because the previous owners of our home took the doorbell with them and we haven't got round to getting a man in to fix a new one, and the sweep will get lost on the way here and I will have to spend ten minutes reassuring him that although there is a sign at the top of our lane saying 'unsuitable for motor vehicles' it doesn't really mean what it says and then he will ring again thirty seconds later and tell me that he's come across a sign repeating the warning and he will want to know if there is anywhere to turn around I will tell him there isn't and that there are 3,700 delivery vans dumped in a huge pit opposite our home because there is nowhere to turn round and he will laugh nervously and then he will be cut off because mobile telephones don't work very well down here and a minute later he will ring back because he's managed to climb a tree and get a signal and he will tell me that he is lost even though he is only a minute away from where we live and eventually I will talk him down the hill and then he will want to know where to park his van and I know that wherever he puts it a tractor will want to get past in five minutes time and when he's eventually parked he will come in and we will chat of this and that, including the weather, and Antoinette will make him a nice mug of tea and put some chocolate biscuits on a tray and he will want the loo and then he will go back out to his van to fetch his brushes and stuff (though why he didn't bring them in with him in the first place I will never know because sweeping the chimney is what he came for, after all) and then he will come back in and ask me to show him where the chimneys are and then he'll put a small dust sheet down in front of the fireplace and I will worry about whether I should wait and watch or go into my study and pretend to work but really just fret about what he's doing and how long he will take and how I will know that he has finished and whether he likes to be paid cash or by cheque because some workmen are offended if you offer cash because they think you are suggesting that they fiddle their taxes and some dislike cheques because the bank charges a fortune to cash them and then eventually he will finish and we will work out a way for me to pay him and we will chat a bit more and then he will go and I will discover that he has left his mobile phone behind and I won't be able to ring him to tell him this because he won't have a phone with him and I don't have a landline number for him and so I will have to wait for him for him to find a telephone box and ring and see if he left his mobile phone with us and then he will have to drive back to pick it up and all things considered that's why I've been putting off ringing the sweep.

That is the longest sentence I've ever written. It is probably the longest sentence anyone has ever written. But by cutting out full stops I have saved electricity and done my little bit to save the planet. Praise, in the form of a five star review, will be gladly accepted.

8

I have no idea why but I picked up a book by John Locke this afternoon. Locke said that the law is a contract between the people and the government. It occurred to me that the trouble these days is that the contract isn't worth the vast amount of paper it's written on because it's written to benefit one side only and so it isn't a contract, it's a command. If you or I break the contract we will be thrown into prison. But if the government breaks the contract they will simply change the contract so that they haven't broken it. That's not a healthy, sane or rational basis for society.

9

In London today the air was so thick that enterprising traders were chopping it into little cubes, sticking a flag on top of the cubes and flogging the resulting souvenirs to tourists. Air pollution is one of the many great unmentioned scandals of our time and Oxford Street has recently been shown to be the most polluted place on the planet – worse, far worse, than anything Beijing has to offer. Nitrogen dioxide levels, from vehicle pollution, are ten times the limit recommended by the European Union. We, wrongly, assume that legislation, notably the Clean Air Act of 1956, has banished forever the sort of smog that would from time to time blanket London and make it impossible to see your hand in front of your face. Politicians never discuss air pollution and the Government never does anything about it but today air pollution kills ten times as many people as die in road traffic accidents. Nitrogen oxide and the fine dust particles thrown out by exhaust pipes and boilers have been linked to cancer and circulatory disease. I wonder how many people realise that more people die as a result of breathing in our polluted air than die from alcoholism and obesity combined. How many know that the health costs of air pollution are considerably greater than the health costs of smoking. Most of the pollution comes from cars and lorries, of course, though a good chunk of it is industrial and aeroplanes play their part too. Winds ensure that pollution that started out on mainland Europe ends up damaging lungs in the English countryside. It could all be sorted out fairly easily, of course. We need to ensure that owners and drivers of vehicles which pollute are punished. The EU, ever eager to produce new legislation, could insist that the existing rules are obeyed and that instead of worrying about motorists travelling at 31mph, or parking outside the pharmacy for three minutes, the police are encouraged to do something about lorries belching out killer fumes. Sadly, my bet is that the EU will do nothing. Lobbyists for the transport trade are far too powerful and effective to allow anyone to interfere with their profits.

10

A motor racing spokesman said today that Formula I is helping car manufacturers move forward with new developments which will enable motor manufacturers to make great improvements to the family motor car. So we will soon all have tyres that wear out after 50 miles and engines which have to be thrown away when they’ve done 500 miles. The good news, I guess, is that the man from the AA will be able to change a flat tyre in 2.3 seconds.

11

I was standing next to some plants in a local garden centre when an elderly woman approached me. ‘How high do those grow?’ she asked, pointing to something I was not able to identify. ‘I’m afraid I don’t have the foggiest idea,’ I replied. She looked disappointed. ‘You look like a man who would know!’ she insisted firmly, reluctant to admit to having chosen an unsuitable adviser. ‘They grow to six foot four inches,’ I told her confidently. ‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘That’s better. Why couldn’t you tell me that in the first place?’ She stalked off muttering something about needing a plant that would not grow so high. After she’d gone a few yards she turned back and spoke to me again. ‘I’m 93,’ she said. ‘I’m rather frail for my age.’

12

It seems that our bankers are still stealing and cheating. Barclays Bank has been fined a modest £26 million after an employee fixed the gold price so that the bank would make more money. The same bank was recently fined £290 million for fixing interest rates so the fines seem to be coming down, and Barclays probably paid this one out of the loose change they keep in the top drawer. Heaven only knows how many individuals lost money as a result of this piece of brazen chicanery. What surprises me is that whenever a bank is found to have stolen or cheated it is fined (meaning that the shareholders lose money) but no one goes to prison. The bank pays a fine of a tiny part of the profit they've made and the thieves get to keep the loot they've stolen. On the other hand, if a little old lady feeds the pigeons in the park she'll go to prison. And if an old man can't afford to pay his television licence he'll go to prison too. Bankers, modern shylocks and shysters, are it seems, immune to all the usual laws of the land as well as the laws of morality. And in a way I'm not surprised, for the one group of people who are making money out of the thieving and cheating bankers are the lawyers. Firms of solicitors in London are making millions of pounds defending crooked bankers, and making sure that instead of the guilty individuals being punished it is bank shareholders who pay the price when the banks themselves are fined. The shareholders, of course, are largely pension funds looking after the savings of ordinary working folk. No one seems too bothered about the fact that the enormous fines being levied on banks – particularly by the American Government – will almost certainly result in at least one major bank going bust in the near future.

As an aside, we received two communications from Barclays this week. One tells us that they are reducing the interest they pay, and will now hand over just 0.25% on sums of £10,000. The other offers Antoinette a Barclaycard and tells her that she will have to pay just 34.9% interest on the cost of her purchases or on any cash she takes out.

13

My new Acer laptop broke. A message appeared on the screen telling me that it was on strike and would not be accepting any more words from me. I did everything I could to persuade it to cooperate but nothing worked. In the end I fetched a hammer and hit it very hard. I then put the wreckage onto the bonfire. I hate computers and wish fervently that Babbage, the damned idiot who invented them, had invented something useful instead. Everything computers do is complicated, time consuming and clunky. I cannot be the only person to have noticed, for example, that library book catalogues were far easier and quicker to use than modern, computerised systems. And the old-fashioned card catalogues never broke down either.

There is something rather strangely satisfying about watching a laptop disintegrate, melt and slowly disappear in the middle of a good bonfire. Afterwards, when I raked over the ashes, there was very little left of the damned thing.

14

One of the problems in Europe is that there are now powerful social, cultural, economic and political forces generating and sustaining mediocrity and suppressing originality and creativity. It is, inevitably, the European Union which must be blamed for this sad state of affairs. The result will be the continuing decline of Europe in contrast to the rest of the world. Thanks to computers, the collecting and sorting of information is vastly faster now than it was just a decade ago and bureaucrats, who can now quickly spot bizarre and possibly exceptional incidents, are quick to cover their backs by introducing regulations designed to prevent such incidents occurring again. The trouble is, of course, that the new laws suppress all sorts of honest, innocent activity. Everything is made considerably worse by the mass of lawyers ready, willing and able to encourage complainants and to represent individuals who believe that their rights have been infringed in some way. We live in a world designed by eurocrats for the profit of bankers and lawyers.

15

I dug out the lawn mower today to see if it would start. It never does, of course. No lawn mower I have ever owned has worked after the winter respite. While staring at it and wondering just how big a hole I would need to dig in order to bury it out of sight I remembered the instruction manual. I'm no great fan of manuals which seem, on the whole, to have been written by semi-literate Japanese octogenarians with long memories and hearts filled with hatred for English speakers, but sometimes there is no alternative. My Briggs and Stratton operator's manual frightened the life out of me. Here are some extracts from the first few pages:

* Fuel and its vapours are extremely flammable and explosive. Fire or explosion can cause severe burns or death.

* The engine exhaust from this product contains chemicals known to the State of California to cause cancer, birth defects or other reproductive harm.

* Starting engine creates sparking. Sparking can ignite nearby flammable gases. Explosion and fire could result.

* Engines give off carbon monoxide, an odourless, colourless poison gas. Breathing carbon monoxide can cause nausea, fainting or death.

* Rapid retraction of starter cord (kickback) will pull hand and arm towards engine faster than you can let go. Broken bones, fractures, bruises or sprains could result.

* Rotating parts can contact or entangle hands, feet, hair, clothing or accessories. Traumatic amputation or severe laceration can result.

* Running engines produce heat. Engine parts, especially muffler, become extremely hot. Severe thermal burns can occur on contact. Combustible debris, such as leaves, grass, brush etc can catch fire.

By this time I had reached page 5 of 88 and to be honest I was relieved that I hadn't been able to start the damned thing. I very gingerly wheeled the killer mower back into the shed and went indoors to make a cup of tea, being careful not to burn myself with the kettle. Antoinette and I have decided that the 'wild garden' look is definitely 'in' this year. The Ministry of Defence should stop buying jet planes and tanks and, instead, spend its entire budget on lawn mowers. The enemy wouldn't stand a chance.

16

I now have a new Toshiba laptop to replace my broken Acer. It’s only been on my desk for half an hour and already I hate it. The keyboard is, of course, absolutely terrible. This, however, doesn’t matter very much because I always plug in a proper keyboard so that I can have my laptop sitting on a pile of books and perched at eyelevel. The keyboard I’m using cost me £5 and is a million times better than the really crappy keyboard fitted to the Toshiba. I also hate the fact that pop-ups appear all over the screen every time I try to do something. Promotional rectangles for the blasted McAfee (which I loathe with a vengeance and which I swear I will never use) pop up with annoying regularity. I want a laptop to be as simple to use as a toaster, or even a dishwasher, but there doesn’t seem much chance of that. I bought a copy of Microsoft Office to go with the new Toshiba (because otherwise the Toshiba is about as useful to me as a buggy whip) but the machine won’t accept it. Either the laptop is the wrong model or the software is the wrong model. One will have to go back. So for now it’s out with the notebook and pencil.

17

I am old enough to remember when cricket was played on graffiti free green grass; when sightscreens were made of wood and painted white, and when umpires wore coats without advertising slogans. The only cricketer to have a sponsor was Denis Compton, the Brylcream boy, and even county championship matches attracted vast crowds of enthusiastic spectators (largely male) who wore hats which they could throw into the air when things went well enough. I can remember when cricketers could play all season without whingeing, when teams could play for a whole hour without needing a tea break and when bowlers could bowl for two days in succession without complaining of exhaustion. I am well aware that we all tend to look back through the rose tinted retrospectoscope but in cricket it seems to me that everything has changed for the worse. Cricket played a massive part in my life until about 20 years ago. As a boy I used to follow cricket avidly. My birthday present each year was a day at one of that year's Test Matches. When I became a professional author I used to go to Edgbaston, Worcester, Lord's or Taunton whenever there was a game. I would take a notebook and write bits of my latest book during the luncheon and tea intervals; or while Bob Willis was trudging back to start his run up. I used to go to the cricket with my sandwiches in a bag, a book or two to read at dull moments and a notebook and a few pens. I carried a golf umbrella for protection during the inevitable showers. I never much minded when it rained. There are few more relaxing things in life than sitting on a wooden bench, eating sandwiches and reading a good book while sheltering under a decent umbrella.

But a few years ago I lost interest in the modern game. The last match I attended was at Taunton where Somerset was playing. I could put up with the fact that none of the players seemed desperately interested in what they were doing, to me they seemed to be as enthusiastic about their work as motorway road workmen, but I could not cope with the fact that two youths sitting in the seats in front of me spent the day blowing their air horns every time a run was scored, a wicket was taken, a ball was fielded or the pavilion clock ticked. I could put up with an occasional cry of 'Well played, sir!' or a jolly piece of barracking but where's the fun in sitting a couple of feet away from a couple of air horns? When they're blasting out the decibels they're deafening and when they're not you're waiting for them to do so. I did manage to hit the operator of one air horn on the back of the head with the cork from a champagne bottle, but I fear that this might prove to be a hazardous habit. Instead of going to cricket matches I started to buy old copies of *The Cricketer* magazine to feed my enthusiasm. I enjoyed reading about promising newcomers such as Laker and Lock. I doubt if I'm the only cricket fan who is still in love with cricket but who has fallen out of love with the modern game. It's not nostalgia. My enthusiasm for the cricket of Tyson, Trueman and Wardle is inspired simply by the unarguable fact that the game then was, in almost every imaginable way, far superior to the game as it is played today.

I can remember when players were selected for England because they already knew how to play. It was acknowledged that some players might not do things according to the coaching manual, but that since they had proved successful enough to be picked it would be wise to leave them alone. No one told Denis Compton that he was doing everything wrong. When cricket was run from a cupboard at Lord's (instead of smart offices in Dubai) the idea of anyone telling Brian Statham that he had to spend his mornings running around St John's Wood would have seemed bizarre. Can you imagine someone introducing Ted Dexter to his new batting coach? I've got a photo of the Reverend David Shepherd taking batting practice with a bunch of scruffy schoolboys. The wickets were chalked on a nearby wall. Players who were selected improved their skills by watching and talking to their contemporaries. They were not above learning from watching and talking to their opponents too. These days players are, it seems, regarded as little more than raw material. Squads of highly paid coaches fall over themselves to explain precisely how eggs should be sucked. When the English cricket team goes on tour they take with them an army of advisors. The bloke in charge of the baggage has reported that the team now travels with between 120 and 180 suitcases and bags. With so many people offering instructions it's hardly surprising that players become confused and forget how to do what they used to find quite natural.

Cricket is, today, all about the money. There are battalions of administrators and interfering busy bodies with fingers stuck into the pie; all constantly pulling out plums. That's why there is so much need to make gazillions out of the game. The gate at an average sort of Test Match would more than cover the costs of paying the players and umpires. Add on the profits that can be made from selling TV rights, scorecards, sponsored pies and sponsored fizzy drinks and you're talking banker bonus money. Why, then, do they have to sell advertising on the grass, the sightscreen, the players, the umpires and the stumps? It's to pay for the vast army of support staff who are, it seems, now essential for any international side. The money isn't the means to an end, it is the end.

In the bad old days, when spectators often had good reason to throw their hats into the air, a touring side would consist of 16 players, a manager, a scorer and, possibly, a bloke to look after the baggage. These days the England team takes a bigger force than the Eighth Army. There are facilitators, advisors, psychologists, video analysts and coaches to give instruction on how best to tie shoe laces. It is the cost of all these hangers-on which explains why spectators must have their sandwiches confiscated if the ingredients aren’t on the approved list of sponsors, why the grass at the average Test Ground carries so much painted advertising that it looks like a Jackson Pollock groundsheet and why there is so much unbridled enthusiasm for 20-20, a new version of the game which seems to me to be a bastard child of biff-bat and French cricket designed for those who like their films and books without plots or characters and their music without rhyme or melody.

Modern cricketers are molly coddled and have started taking themselves far too seriously. During preparations for a recent disastrous tour of Australia it was revealed that the team had given the Australians an 82 page dietary document, prepared by the team’s official nutritionist, listing the team’s requirements. This bore a remarkable resemblance to the sort of diva driven nonsense issued by rock bands to prospective promoters. The Australians were given a list of 194 approved dishes including such traditional English delights as piri-piri breaded tofu, mung bean curry with spinach and quinoa, cranberry and feta salad. The fact that two players came home mid-tour rather suggests to me that fish, chips and cucumber sandwiches might have proved more efficacious. And since the remaining players did worse than terrible the experiment seems to have proved that a diet which consists largely of cheese sandwiches, ice cream and pints of beer is more likely to produce impressive performances on the field. Sadly, I suspect that the authorities will respond to failure by ensuring that the team hires another two nutritionists and issue a list of dietary demands which will take up more space than Britain’s tax regulations. I seem to remember Lord Boycott once reporting that he’d survived a tour of India on a diet of boiled eggs and bananas.

Nor am I impressed by all the rubbish talked about England players suffering from stress. Young folk these days are so cocooned by our health and safety world, and our politically correct busy bodies, that they are protected from real world anxieties. Coaches and administrators talk about the stresses cricketers have to endure as though no one else knows what stress means. Bollocks. Today’s international cricketers haven’t been battle hardened by life. There are no medals to be won at the school sports day because when there are winners there must be losers and we can’t have that. Everyone must pass all the exams they take so that no one feels like a failure.

All sports professionals constantly claim that they are under stress. Even snooker players witter on about the enormous stress they suffer earning a living banging balls about when they could be having far more fun shelf stacking at Tesco. None of these molly coddled prima donnas knows anything at all about stress. A doctor working in a casualty department or doing night calls knows what stress tastes like. A soldier defending himself and his colleagues can certainly claim to be acquainted with stress. But a cricketer? A snooker player? Please.

And if I hear again the excuse ‘they’re just boys’ I will scream. Hannibal was crossing the Alps at 25 and the average house surgeon, making life and death decisions, is younger than that. Our molly coddled cricketers don’t know what stress feels like. Back in the 1950s, Yorkshire players who came out of the pits knew they’d chosen the easy path through life. Modern players need two years of psychotherapy if someone criticises them (and four years if the criticism came from Shane Warne).

I think I will continue to live in the past, thank you. Cricket was always important because we could pretend it mattered but know, deep, deep down, that it really didn’t matter a damn. It seems to me that to today’s players and support staff, cricket matters a great deal because it’s the best paid job any of them could possibly hope for. Today, it’s all about the money. And that’s what has spoilt it.

18

Our UK boiler maintenance man came yesterday. There was nothing wrong with the boiler but we have a service contract and the company with which we have the contract had sent us three reminders and although I suspected that their eagerness to service the boiler was probably allied to a desire to sell us a new sludge cleaner, an iPhone app or a new boiler I succumbed and made an appointment.

An hour after the engineer had gone we discovered that we had no hot water. We had plenty of lukewarm water (the sort you might be prepared to bathe in on a sunny day) and endless supplies of cold water, but absolutely no hot water at all. Since I had spent much of the afternoon in the garden and had been looking forward to a hot, relaxing bath I was not well pleased. This isn't the first time this has happened and I am now certain that boiler servicing is as likely to produce problems as car servicing. (I long ago discovered that I am always more likely to have problems with a car if I have it serviced than I am if I leave everything alone. Men with spanners have an innate tendency to bugger things up and when they check the oil they somehow manage to stop the windscreen wipers working properly.)

This morning another engineer turned up to find out what had gone wrong. He discovered that his colleague, the guy who had done the maintenance work, had turned down the hot water thermostat. None of us had the faintest idea why he had done this. Maybe it was as part of a test – and he'd forgotten to turn the thermostat back up again – or maybe it was part of a plan to save energy and preserve the planet by forcing us to take lukewarm baths. Or maybe he didn't like the biscuits we provided. Anyway, we now have hot water again. What peeved me more than anything was that the second visit wasted another half a day of my time and I really don't feel that I have half days I can squander in this way. It isn't the ringing up that wastes time, or the actually visit itself, it's the waiting. Antoinette and I are alike in this. Neither of us feels that we can do anything much when we're waiting for a workman to arrive. It's worse than waiting for a train. I can't work because I fear that there will be a bang on the door when I'm half way through a tricky sentence. I can't go out into the garden because if I do I won't hear the knock on the door at all. I can't make telephone calls in case the workman who is coming gets lost (as he almost certainly will) and needs to telephone us for directions. Still, I have made another, rather belated New Year's resolution. In future I will not allow the maintenance company to service our boiler. We'll wait until the boiler has broken down before we let them into the house.

When the boiler man had gone, I decided to a little tidying up and found an old Manfred Mann album. It had fallen down the back of a bookcase. (I always find far more interesting things behind bookcases than underneath sofa cushions.) Sight of the album reminded me that when I was a teenager I attended a live television show at the Cavern in Liverpool. I was in Liverpool working as a Community Service Volunteer for a year and since my income from CSV was, I think, just thirty bob a week, I was trying to earn a little extra money working as a freelance writer. I'd somehow managed to persuade the *Daily Mirror* to commission me to write about the show and, even more miraculously, I'd managed to persuade the doorman at The Cavern to let me in without a press pass of any kind. The bill for the show was pretty impressive and included Gene Vincent and the Redcaps, Sandie Shaw, Gerry and the Pacemakers, Petula Clarke and Manfred Mann. After the show I wandered into Manfred's dressing room (as you do when you're 18 and it's the 1960s) and talked to him, lead singer Paul Jones and the rest of the band. None of this is of any significance except for the fact that I remember Manfred talking about the fact that he was going to stop making single records because he could not cope with the stress of waiting to see whether his latest record was going to get into the charts, how high it would go and how long it would stay there. I seem to remember him telling me that the chart positions were released on Tuesdays and that his whole life seemed to revolve around that day of the week. He was one of the biggest stars of the 1960s and I had never before realised just how stressful it must be to stay at the top of a profession. When I filed my story for the *Daily Mirror* I didn't mention any of this. I remember thinking that what he'd told me was too personal to be used in an article. I did, however, remember what he told me and I was pleased for him when he stopped making singles and started a successful second career making albums rather than singles.

19

I have for years written about the dangers of chemotherapy, which is often prescribed without logic or common sense. My book *How to Stop Your Doctor Killing You* contains a good deal on the subject and was, inevitably, widely attacked by drug industry hacks when the first edition appeared in the 1990s. Neither doctors nor drug companies like to be reminded of the faults and frailties of chemotherapy; a vastly overrated but enormously profitable form of treatment. I read today that 27% of people who die within a month of receiving chemotherapy are killed not by the disease but by the treatment they have received. And 19% of the people who died shouldn't have been given chemotherapy at all. It really is time for a proper, independent evaluation of chemotherapy and radiotherapy. But big industries are involved so it will never happen, of course. The medical profession was bought many years ago, lock, stock and syringe, by the ruthless pharmaceutical industry which now makes billions out of drugs which, as a breed, do far more harm than good.

20

Politicians are again claiming that we have to encourage immigration because we are all living longer and will need immigrant children to look after us when we are old. (Amazingly, one in ten children under four in Britain is Muslim.) This is, apparently, official policy for Britain’s main political parties and for the Liberal Democrats too. It seems to me a rather devious reason for encouraging people to come and join us on our overcrowded and soon to start sinking island, but it’s also wrong because it is based on one of the most popular myths of our times. The myth is that life expectancy is far greater now than it was a century ago. As I have explained in several of my medical books this is a nonsense. Not for nothing did the Bible talk of three score years and ten. The truth is that our apparent increase in life expectancy is due almost entirely to the fall in infant mortality rates. In the early 1900s the infant mortality rate was 127.6 per 1000. In other words over 12% of babies never grew old enough to walk, say Mama or blow out birthday candles. Today, thanks to better living conditions and clean drinking water (and nothing to do with better medicine and better medical care), the infant mortality rate in the UK is 4.5 per 1000 (this isn’t anything to gloat about, by the way, it just gets us into the top 40 countries in the world) and clearly this means that the vast majority of babies now live long enough to go to school, drive cars, have their obligatory tattoos inked into place and claim their benefits.

(Tattooing is especially fashionable now, of course, but even when I was a GP, during the years immediately following the Boer War, I remember seeing a number of patients who had tattoos. One male homosexual had ‘This way up’ tattooed at the base of his spine and several women had stuff tattooed on their breasts. One particularly well-endowed woman, I remember, had a pair of eyes tattooed onto her breasts. She explained that during the summer months, when she wore low cut frocks, men always looked at her breasts before they looked at her face and so she’d had the eyes tattooed there to stare back at them. It did occur to me that she could have simply worn a more modest dress but I was young and embarrassed and didn’t like to say anything. Another woman had the names Diana and Barbara tattooed on her breasts. When I asked why this was so she told me that these were the names her husband had given to her breasts. She did not know why. She told me that a friend of hers had been so impressed that she had asked her own husband if he wanted her to have her breasts labelled. He had rather spoilt the moment, however, by suggesting that she had them tattooed with the words ‘left’ and ‘right’. I knew him, for he too was a patient of mine, and I had always thought him a very prosaic individual. He didn’t have an ounce of romance in his soul.)

When the infant mortality rate was high the average life expectancy was low. Now that the infant mortality rate is low the average life expectancy is, inevitably, considerably higher. It isn’t difficult to work this out. If the average adult lives to be 80 and one child in ten dies before their first birthday then the average life expectancy is 72 but if the average adult lives to be 80 and virtually none dies before their first birthday the average life expectancy is just under 80.

If our politicians were honest (an unlikely event I grant you) they would admit that there are more old people in Britain because our population has grown rapidly and our population has, of course, grown rapidly because of massive immigration. So the official solution to our problem is, in reality, the cause of it.

I have a strong suspicion that the only people who are really enthusiastic about our sticking to the EU’s immigration policies are the bosses of large international companies (who delight in the availability of cheap foreign labour) and cabinet ministers and newspaper editors who enjoy having a constant supply of cheap nannies, gardeners, chauffeurs and housekeepers.

21

Around six months ago, I laughed while eating and some food found its way up into my nasal cavity (as happens to most of us from time to time). I have for some time felt that there was still something in there and a few days ago I surprised myself by coughing up a piece of beetroot which had slid down into my throat. It had, without any doubt, been hiding in my nasal cavity for all that time. I felt concerned enough about this to visit our GP and to ask for an appointment with an Ear Nose Throat surgeon so that he could check and make sure that there wasn't any more food hiding in there. The kindly GP arranged this but I could tell that the young ENT surgeon who put a camera up my nose thought he was wasting his time. I really don't think he believed that a piece of food could stay hidden for so long. To my relief his searches with the camera proved that there was nothing else uninvited in my nasal cavity but I found that scepticism and disbelief disturbing. I've been a qualified doctor for nearly half a century and I long ago learned that, in medicine, virtually nothing is impossible and that just because something isn't listed in the textbooks, that doesn't mean that it can't happen. The problem with the truth is that it is often stranger than fiction, and therefore, far less believable. Fiction has to make sense; life and the truth do not.

22

We drove to Cheltenham today and, as usual, our route took us through Painswick. We both like Painswick, which is a rather beautiful village, though it always manages to seem terribly posh even if you're just driving through. In the old days people from nearby Stroud would never eat in Painswick because they believed that the people who lived there ate 'bow wow' pie – a local delicacy made from stray dogs. These days the locals are all dressed by Christian, Alexander, Stella, Tommy and Ralph. The man who signs his shirts with a crocodile is nowhere to be seen. Nor is the man who signs his shoes with the ticky swoosh thing. We passed St Mary's church which has an amazing collection of shaped yew trees in the graveyard. There are 99 of these trees and they are all cut and shaped by skilful topiarists. Most of the clipped trees were planted in the year 1800 and attempts to take the total up to around 100 have always failed. Every time a new one is planted, one of the old ones will die and have to be dug out. Local superstition has it that this is the work of the devil but Laurie Lee, the author of *Cider with Rosie*, who lived in the nearby village of Slad, claimed that it was because whenever the Painswick folk planted a 100th tree the locals from Slad, who regarded Painswick folk as terribly stuck up and quite above themselves, would always kill one of the old ones just to piss them off.

We were delighted to find that since there was no Festival in progress we could park the car and potter around the shops fairly easily. Cheltenham has more festivals than anywhere else I know. There is the horse racing festival, of course, which has been a feature of the town for longer than anyone can remember. In the second half of the 19th century, Dean Francis Close wrote a review which seems rather savage even by today's Amazon standards. 'Every species of profligacy – adultery, fornication, uncleanliness, lasciviousness, hatred, violence , emulations, wrath, strife, envying, drunkenness, revellings and such like are promoted by race week. If you wish your child to plunge into the world's vain pleasures, to acquire the taste for dissipation, send him to Cheltenham races.' Come to think of it, the Dean's bad review probably did the races a good deal of good and was undoubtedly regarded by many as a reason to make the journey there.

Inevitably, Cheltenham also has a literature festival. Literature festivals are probably the fastest growing industry in Britain today and it is, it seems, compulsory for all towns and villages which want to be taken seriously to have at least one every year. They don't have anything to do with literature or books, of course. Most of the speakers are politicians, cooks, gardeners, topless models and newsreaders who have appeared on the television and had (usually heavily illustrated) books written for them who are, therefore, regarded in the 'literary festival' business as 'literary figures'. Their appearances usually involve a good deal of posing for photographs and a great deal of book signing.

Cheltenham does not content itself with horse racing and 'literature', however. The town has a jazz festival, a music festival, a science festival, a folk festival, a poetry festival, a festival of performing arts, a cricket festival, a food festival, a food and wine festival, a beer festival, a beer and food festival, a beer and cider festival and a beer and wine festival. There is probably a Cheltenham Cleaning Your Teeth Festival and if there isn't a Cheltenham Composting Festival I have no doubt that there soon will be. I suspect that these endless festivals are, like quangos, simply a good excuse for people to have a damned good time at someone else's expense. It occurs to me that if my books stop selling and times get hard I could probably make a few bob by founding the Cheltenham Festival for Festival Organisers.

In the town I called in to one of my favourite bookshops. The old man who runs it had put up a huge notice advertising the fact that he is selling all his books at half price. I picked out an armful of old Penguin paperbacks and half a dozen old books on animals and gardening that I thought Antoinette would like. I always buy as many books as I can from him. I have long suspected that he struggles to make a living. We get on well now, though our first meeting was something of a trial. As he walked around the shop I couldn't help noticing that he rolled from side to side.

'Were you at sea before you opened the bookshop?' I asked him.

He looked at me quizzically.

'The roll,' I said, mimicking the way he walked. 'The way you walk.'

'I've got bad feet,' he snapped. 'If you had my feet you'd walk funny.'

I apologised and tried to explain that I hadn't meant to be rude. Eventually, I managed to smooth things over by buying £40 worth of books.

'You're my first customer of the day,' he told me, sadly. I looked at my watch. It was three o'clock in the afternoon; nearer the end of the day than the beginning. He told me that he was going to close the shop in three months' time. I told him how sorry I was and asked him whether he thought he'd been finished off by the internet, the council's car parking policy or the charity shops. He told me, without hesitation, that it was the charity shops. 'There are three or four charity run bookshops in the town,' he told me. 'Plus all the ordinary charity shops with their unending shelves full of cheap books.'

I used to be a fan of charity shops and I still visit some of them. Antoinette and I donate an enormous amount of stuff to them too. But I do worry that they've got out of control. It is charity shops which have forced many of our small, independently run shops to close. How can someone trying to make a living possibly compete with shops which pay nothing for their stock, nothing in wages and little or nothing in rates and rent? It seems wrong that charity shops are now forcing honest, hard-working shop keepers out of business. And I wonder if I am the only person to have noticed that as charity shops have taken a stronger hold in the High Street, and got rid of much of the competition, so they have put up their prices? Charity shops are no longer a source of cheap clothing and in some I suspect that the best stuff is cherry picked by staff or by outside 'experts' brought in to value the donated stock. It is now difficult to argue that charity shops are of any value to the communities in which they are situated. I am told that it is perfectly possible to buy new clothing from chain stores such as Primark at a lower price than the charity shops charge for their stock. Oxfam book shops are certainly not cheap; often charging the best part of £3 for a tattered old paperback. Charities have turned their shops into ruthless businesses, leeching on local communities and taking more than they give. They are extremely professional and run by highly paid executives who cream off much of the takings in salaries, pensions, expenses and bonuses. How much longer, I wonder, are councils going to subsidise these charities which, it is possible to argue, may now be doing more harm than good? (Many of these charities, we should not forget, already receive huge amounts of taxpayers' money through massive Government grants.)

However, I realise that not many people share this point of view. The other day I received a rather sanctimonious letter from a reader telling me that he was supporting authors and 'proper' publishers by buying books from charity shops. He suggested that I should encourage people to do likewise. What he clearly doesn't understand is that the people who buy books from charity shops are in reality doing irreparable harm not just to local bookshops but also to authors and to publishers. The charity shops, which between them sell vast quantities of books, have helped the internet destroy 'back list' sales – the sales of an author's earlier books. It has always been back list sales which have kept authors and publishers alive. Neither authors nor publishers receive any royalties when books are sold in charity shops but every time a book is sold in a charity shop the reader doesn't buy that book from a proper shop, and so the author loses out. To my own surprise I realised that e-Books are the author's only way to fight back against this problem. (The income of the average professional author is in steep decline. It was £15,540 in 2005 but is now around £11,000 a year.)

I deposited the books I'd bought in the car boot and carried on into the town. Cheltenham has a slightly upmarket reputation but that, I fear, is largely false. The truth is that Cheltenham has always been a rather seedy town. Cudgel matches used to be staged in the High Street on long summer evenings. The matches had much in common with the Irish sport of hurling. Men with heavy clubs would knock each other senseless for no very good reason. The man who broke the most heads would receive a good hat and a guinea. New hats were popular prizes in those days. Bull baiting and cock fighting were also enormously popular in the town.

Today, things are probably worse and there are as many tattoos, overhanging naked bellies and drunken youths as there are in Birmingham. The city centre was, as it always seems to be, full of beggars. Some have dogs, some sit waiting for their wax cups to be filled up, some lie on the pavement or in a doorway. Antoinette always gives them money; not infrequently emptying her purse and then going to one of the hole in the wall cash machines for more money. She's not alone in her kindness, of course.

An organisation based in Cheltenham, has published a thin book about a beggar called Alan who lives and 'works' in Cheltenham. The author wrote: 'Alan is an entrepreneur. He works the street seven days a week and earns £50-£70 a day. He knows where to find the money, the most profitable places to go and what days he will earn more. On Saturdays he can earn over £100. Alan can spot a good customer a mile off. He's shrewd. He's on the ball.'

I object strenuously to this language. Alan, who looks like a man trying to look like a tramp and who has long, matted hair, a long dirty beard, filthy clothes and nails which look as if they were last clipped and cleaned in 1972, is in my view a confidence trickster not an entrepreneur. He doesn't 'work' and he doesn't 'earn'. And he doesn't have 'customers'. He scams kind, sensitive, hard-working people and takes money from them because he plays on their good nature. I saw him take £15 from one kind-hearted passer-by and it was 'taking' just as much as if he'd pointed a knife at her throat. No tax, no national insurance. All cash, of course. No cheques or credit cards. You'd have to earn well above the national average wage to make that sort of money. What a bizarre world it is when a lazy bastard can sit on his bum on the pavement all week and end up with more cash in his pocket than some poor, honest sod working a gruelling 40 hours for minimum wage in a burger bar. It seems to me that Adamson has glorified this self-pitying beggar and his selected life-style; he has made him into both a victim and an anti-hero. The rarely spoken truth is that begging has become a career and life-style choice for the lazy who prefer to sit on their bums in the sunshine rather than labour for their daily bread. Many of those who choose to live like Alan, working the street and conning and scamming the innocent, also claim benefits so taxpayers pay twice. The ones who are drug addicts find themselves swamped with support from social workers who probably believe they are all behaving like Florence Nightingale but who are, in reality, all more a part of the problem than the solution. I don't think Florence would have had much time for heroin addicts or their social workers. She'd have told them all to grow up a bit and take responsibility for their own lives.

At night the young addicts go back to their hostels, invariably subsidised, where they can plan the next day's begging. The plain medical fact is that cocaine and heroin addiction are easier to kick than tobacco, alcohol or benzodiazepine addiction. Illegal drugs such as heroin and cocaine are far less addictive than tobacco and far, far less addictive than prescription drugs such as the benzodiazepine tranquillisers. Every drug addiction expert in the world will confirm that it is relatively easy to 'kick' cocaine and heroin. In Vietnam, tens of thousands of American soldiers became addicted to heroin. But within two years of returning home their rate of addiction was no greater than that of soldiers who'd never been to Vietnam because the war had ended. Huge numbers of addicts give up without any help whatsoever. And it takes quite a lot of effort to become addicted in the first place. For example, heroin addicts take the drug for about 18 months before they are hooked on it. Thomas de Quincey, probably the most famous literary addict, took laudanum for a decade before he became addicted. The bald truth is that people take heroin for social reasons (the people around them take it) and people deal in it for money. In the end heroin users become beggars or criminals in order to obtain the money to buy their drug of choice.

Addiction to street drugs is not an illness; it is a lifestyle choice. And it is an increasingly popular and fashionable one. (Alarmingly, an independent survey recently found that over a third of young, well-educated middle class Britons said that they had taken cocaine in the previous twelve months.)

I have, and always have had, enormous respect for real tramps. I have written, many times, about how such individuals find themselves on the street. The older ones are often there because they have, through ill-fortune of some kind, lost their homes, their families and their jobs. No one will employ them because they are too old.

But I have nothing but contempt for the young breed of professional beggars like Alan. He's 40-years-old and has been a leech for much of that time.

Many of these young beggars are, in my view, manipulative, indolent, self-pitying parasites. Alan says he's a drug addict and the naïve probably assume that his addiction has been his downfall. But if he wanted to stop using drugs, and become a decent, productive member of society he could probably do so without much difficulty. The problem is that those who pity him, and encourage his self-indulgent lifestyle, are simply making the problem worse. Alan, and those like him, needs a kick up the bum – not sympathy, and certainly not money.

I watched in horror as an old lady in her eighties, shabby coat, down at heel shoes, stopped beside another young beggar, and took money from her purse to give to him. He took it from her, of course. I felt an almost uncontrollable urge to snatch the money out of his greedy, grasping hands, run after the old lady and give it back to her.

23

We bought our home in the country because it promised to be quiet and private – the two most luxurious commodities in the world these days. But our normally quiet lane was full of walkers yesterday. Most wore hiking boots and shorts and had rucksacks on their backs. They looked very professional and were, I was told, taking part in a charity walk. I couldn’t help noticing that none of them seemed the slightest bit interested in the world around them. They were far too busy talking (very loudly) and playing music on their leaky digital players to see or hear anything very much. What a pity. Most will, I suspect, regard themselves as country lovers but they might just as well have been marching along a motorway hard shoulder.

A day before the main party started plodding past our front gate an advance group painted large white arrows on the road and on our wall. No one asked us if we minded. Today, after the walkers had passed by, I spent the best part of an hour collecting beer cans, cola bottles and crisp packets which had been thrown into the hedge or simply dropped on the lane. Our peaceful piece of England looked as though we’d hosted an outdoor rock concert. Those amateur country-folk were clearly professional townies; unable to shake off the strange comfort of noise and litter.

24

I received an angry letter from a reader who complained that although my book *Diary of a Disgruntled Man* frequently made him laugh out loud it contained a good many angry entries. I confess that I had thought that the word ‘Disgruntled’ in the title might have given a clue as to the direction of the contents.

25

I have long thought that the best way to get to know somewhere is to get lost there. In Paris I have spent long, glorious days wandering around trying to get lost. The map in my pocket was to be used only in extremis. I used to wander wherever my fancy took me; always taking the most interesting looking street, wherever it was heading.

But we got lost trying to drive through Gloucester the other day and it wasn't much fun at all. There seemed to be very few signs and the ones which we saw didn't seem relevant to our requirements. We got fairly close to the cathedral on three separate occasions. As we drove close to it for the third time, Antoinette told me that a man called John Stafford Smith was christened in Gloucester cathedral in around 1750. It was Mr Smith who composed the tune to the 'Stars and Stripes', which was later adopted by the United States of America as the country's national anthem. Antoinette, who knows just about as many odd things as anyone I've ever met, told me that Smith died in 1836 when a grape pip got lodged in his throat. Just why anyone should die because they had a grape pip in their throat is beyond me but I believe her because she is undoubtedly absolutely right.

After our unhappy experience in Gloucester, I gave in and bought a satellite navigation system. I purchased one made by Garmin who sponsor a cycling team in the Tour de France. The team never seems to do terribly well and so I thought the company deserved all the support I can give. Antoinette, it should be said, has been encouraging me to buy one of these things for years but my powerful distrust of devices which rely on electricity has prevented me from doing so until now. Up to the time when councils stopped putting up decent road signs I always seemed to manage quite well with a pair of eyes and an old AA atlas (so elderly that the M25 was still a dotted line marking a road under construction) but our experiences in Gloucester have cured me of that delusion.

Now that we've got our new toy I am delighted with it. It's an endless source of amusement. It sometimes (but not always) says 'go left' when it obviously means 'go right' and the computer's attempts to pronounce ordinary British names are hysterical. It beeps and shouts and tells us that we're in a 50 mph zone when we clearly aren't and it often tries to take us down lanes that would be a bit of a close fit for a thin person riding a bicycle. The gadget came with a little lead which should have enabled us to update the information it contains but we tried that and failed miserably. I really don't mind at all. I'm frightened that if we update the software it might stop pronouncing Swindon as 'Swinedon'.

26

I’m sure it is ageist, and therefore illegal, to say this but I am convinced that each new generation is more stupid and more ignorant than the last one. The appallingly low standard of modern teaching is partly to be blamed, of course, but the reliance on gadgets of one sort of another must also be responsible. Children who grew up using calculators to perform simple, basic arithmetical tasks are quite unable to add two to two without scratching their heads and ringing mum for advice. Today’s generation, reliant entirely on mobile telephones and the internet are vulnerable because the little knowledge they have has been culled almost exclusively from ‘bent’ websites, which serve up conveniently correct news in conveniently palatable chunks, and their reliance on others to provide them with opinions mean that they are largely unable to think for themselves. Give them a real, old-fashioned book and they spend thirty minutes looking for somewhere to fit the batteries before tossing it aside in disgust. Moreover, most seem to spend much of their waking day updating their Facebook profiles and twittering about their unexceptional achievements. The real thinkers and leaders of the future will come from the small band of treasured young people who eschew social media sites and recognise that digital living is no substitute for real life.

27

We visited Weston-super-Mare today. What a sad, depressing place it has become; it must surely be the worst run town in the country. A romantic pier and an outdoor pool have been derelict for so many years that local inhabitants no longer even hope for their restoration. It used to be widely accepted that every village in the country would have an idiot. For one reason or another, the God who doles out idiots has been extraordinarily generous to Weston which now has far more than its fair share – with many of them serving on the local council. Weston, once a pleasant and welcoming seaside resort, seems to have gone downhill faster than anywhere I can think of. The place is now full of hostels for former criminals and drug addicts and the streets are full of people who are clearly drunk or unemployed or both. Not surprisingly, property prices have defied national averages and now seem to have more in common with those of Northern Ireland than the rest of the West Country. Only the amusement arcades seem to be thriving. I suspect that the unemployed happily spend their days and their benefit money in these places and so some business owners are undoubtedly doing good trade.

Weston-super-Mare reminds me of Blackpool but without quite so much glamour. And it would come high up in the top ten towns in the country for its potholes, some of which are so deep that cavers have probably been lost in them. The Chinese could build a power station in the time the local council takes to mend a pothole.

I sometimes wonder if councils are now using potholes instead of speed bumps. They save money twice. The traffic calming nonsenses now defacing our roads (the pointless and dangerous chicanes; the sleeping policemen which wreck cars, cause agony for back sufferers and force ambulances to drive miles round (endangering lives) and the roundabouts which have no apparent purpose other than to increase fuel consumption) can all be abandoned when the potholes have become big enough.

(As a postscript I saw a sign today which said: ‘Uneven road surface’. It made me smile. Councils throughout the country would save money by putting one of these signs at Land’s End, facing north, and another at John o’Groats, facing south.)

28

We had our bird splattered BMW cleaned today by a posse of a dozen men armed with hoses, sponges and soap dispensers. They worked as a team. The first guys squirted on the soap, the second set of men operated the pressure hoses and the final group did the polishing. Only one of the army seemed to speak English but the rest made do very effectively with signs ('move forward', 'lift the bonnet' and so on). They charged £9 which was close enough to the £7 on their notice and the £10 note I handed over. But it was well worth it. They worked hard and quickly. I can't think of anywhere in Britain where it would be possible to find such hard working individuals able and willing to work as a team except, perhaps, in an army barracks.

While we sat in the car Antoinette and I tried to think up silly book titles – the sort likely to end up on the shelves of a shop specialising in remaindered books.

These were our favourites:

1. Collecting Used Sticking Plasters
2. How to Photograph Deckchairs
3. My Many Interesting Experiences on Buses in Northamptonshire
4. How I Reconciled My Beliefs as a Jehovah's Witness with my Work as a Long Haul Stewardess
5. Drawer Liners Through the Ages
6. The Boy's History of Mothballs

29

I’m still waiting to read research proving that mobile telephones cause brain cancer. I first realised that mobile phones could be dangerous in the 1980s when I noticed that after using mine for more than a few minutes my ear felt very hot. The telephone itself wasn’t particularly hot. But my ear felt as if it were boiling. I cut down my mobile phone usage and wrote articles suggesting that some research be done to find out whether or not there was a link. Naturally, my suggestions were dismissed as absurd scaremongering by lobbyists for the joint forces of the medical establishment and the mobile phone industry. Today every child over the age of two has at least one mobile phone and most of them spend longer talking on the phone than they spend talking to real, live people. (I read today that the average Briton spends between eight and nine hours a day on their mobile phones, tablets and laptops: texting, emailing, surfing, blogging, reviewing, shopping and twittering.) How many will get brain cancer? I have no idea. I can’t prove that mobile phones can be dangerous. But no one else can prove they are safe. Thanks to lobbyists, the general rule these days is that new devices should be rolled out and used by millions before the snags are discovered and the goose stops laying golden eggs.

It is lobbyists (supported by dishonest academics who allow themselves to be bought for thirty pieces of silver) who are responsible for the propagation of many of today’s most outrageous myths (such as those concerning climate change and vaccination) and I have no doubt whatsoever that it would be perfectly possible to put together a panel of convincing academics ready, willing and able to argue that the earth is flat and that if we sail too close to the edge we will fall off and disappear into oblivion.

30

A friend’s mother has been told that she has just twelve months to live. This is complete nonsense, of course. Unless you are lying in a pool of your own blood, with your blood pressure 60 over 40, your heart in ventricular fibrillation and the nearest hospital six hours away the only honest answer to ‘How long will I live?’ is ‘I haven’t got the foggiest idea.’

Doctors who try to give themselves professional airs and graces by making specific predictions, and apparently accurate prognoses, are setting themselves up to look the fools they undoubtedly are and they are not doing their patients any favours. General predictions about life are usually fairly reliable (things will get worse and cost more) but specific predictions about human life are invariably faulty. The human body is an eternally variable organism and human beings vary enormously in the way they react to illness – whatever that illness may be. I have known patients who have been warned to prepare for the end to survive for years and I have known patients to die suddenly when doctors had told them that they had been cured. I have known patients who have been abandoned by their doctors to survive and I have known patients who have been ‘cured’ to die days later. And, of course, I have known patients who have been thoroughly examined and given a clean bill of health to drop down dead the next day. Predicting human longevity is an even more inexact science than predicting the weather. (Despite their alleged reliance on ‘science’, today’s weather forecasters are so incompetent that they are really only any good when offering retrospective advice. ‘It was showery yesterday so you should have taken a mac or an umbrella with you.’) A doctor who tells a patient that he or she has a year to live is as daft as a weather forecaster who tries to forecast the weather in a year’s time. Insurance companies which demand prognoses when patients want to travel abroad are showing a surprising level of ignorance.

My main objection to the enthusiasm for making firm and precise forecasts of this nature is not, however, the fact that such forecasts are impossible to make with any accuracy but the fact that there is a chance that a forecast will come true simply because the patient believes the doctor. Witch doctors can kill people simply by telling them that they are going to die. The power of the mind is so great that when a stern and powerful looking individual tells a susceptible individual that he is going to die then there is a good chance that he will die. The same is true for us. We may not be quite so susceptible to the ravings of wild men wearing chicken feathers and grass skirts but we are susceptible to the ravings of men and women wearing white coats and having stethoscopes hanging around their necks.

There are times, of course, when the wise man or woman will want to make some plans for their demise. A patient who is about to undergo serious surgery, for example, may want to tidy up loose ends and ‘put their affairs in order’.

But patients and relatives would be wise to ignore the pontificating doctor (or nurse) who claims to have the power to foretell the date when someone will die.

31

I had to telephone the piano tuner today.

‘When can you come?’ I asked.

I could hear pages being turned in what sounded like a large, old-fashioned notebook. ‘I just need to check my diary,’ he said.

‘OK,’ I said. I waited. It was clearly going to be a few weeks before he tottered round.

The pages were flicked back and forth. I continued to wait. It sounded as if we would be lucky if we got fitted in within the next twelve months.

‘I could come tomorrow,’ he said at last.

‘Fine. What time?’

‘What time would suit you?’

‘In the afternoon? About three?’

‘Three o’clock tomorrow then,’ he said.

April

1

Antoinette asked me this morning if I knew that the EU had introduced the new ‘Fair Right of Purchase Legislation’ to cover the sale of residential property. She explained that under the new legislation, sellers of houses would have to undertake to give a refund to house buyers if the value of the house they had purchased fell below its selling price during the first five years after completion. I told her that I had been waiting for such a law to be brought in and that I wasn’t in the slightest bit surprised. I then asked her if she knew that the manufacturers of flat pack furniture had, for years been fitting cameras and microphones into the fasteners which purchasers use when putting their furniture together. I told her that the cameras and microphones feed images and sound to GCHQ in Cheltenham via the broadband system and that, in their never-ending search for signs of insurgency and terrorism, the Americans use keyword and image recognition software to sort through the mass of information obtained in this way. We then both agreed that it is now almost impossible to create April Fool jokes which are not believable.

2

Every communication we receive these days seems to be either threatening or frightening or both. Utility companies and government departments all send letters full of capital letters, exclamation marks and printing in bold. There is much underlining and red ink. These are the sort of letters lunatics write, except that they use copious amounts of green ink too. This morning we had a letter with the word URGENT on the envelope, together with a message telling us that it had to be opened immediately and dealt with post haste. I tore open the envelope to find a letter instructing us to arrange an annual, routine service appointment for a household appliance which seems to be working perfectly well without having an engineer’s grubby and expensive fingers rummaging around inside it.

Around 20 years ago I wrote a book called *Toxic Stress* in which I argued that much of the stress which makes us ill is inescapable because it is part of modern life. I suspect that I am not the only individual who constantly feels bullied, abused, threatened as well as treated without respect. It sometimes seems to me that the only emotion people in power understand is fear. (Most of the time they use it to bully us but, of course, even the bully has hidden fears of his own.) Today there are no moral certainties in our lives and no honourable leaders. It is not surprising that most people go through their lives bewildered and confused; lost in a jungle of uncertainties and cruelties. Just about everyone working for the EU, the Government and the local council is a fully paid up bully. Even most NHS employees are bullies. (Even if you are not a bully at heart, you are a bully if you behave like one.)

Whatever happened to compassion, integrity and old-fashioned good-manners? Well, I suspect that the milk of human kindness has curdled and it will be a hell of a job to uncurdle it.

3

Royal Mail has sent us a leaflet telling us that we can no longer send nuclear waste or human remains through the mail. Since they are now bothering to tell us that we cannot do this I can only assume that it was, until recently, perfectly possible to pop nuclear waste and bits of Aunt Edna into an envelope, drop them into a red post box and expect them to travel comfortably through the mail. Another missed opportunity.

4

While sorting through some old paperwork I discovered an insurance policy for a laptop I bought in 1998. It was a fairly standard laptop at the time (and today would be considered slow, clunky and primitive in every respect) but what amazes me is the price. I paid £2,616.33 for it. Price deflation in electronic goods is as startling as performance inflation.

My first website was put up when men had tails, lived in trees and carved software with chisels on solid lumps of granite. My first fax machine cost about £3,000 (back in the 1980s) and apart from publishers I knew only one other person who had one. My pal Tony Sharrock, now sitting on a cloud with a bottle of gin that never empties, had a fax machine and we used to fax each other just because we could. My first fax machine used rolls of paper and long faxes would come out of the machine looking like a piece of wallpaper. It was, I remember, quite fun cutting the paper up into pages – like slitting open the pages of an uncut book.

5

HMRC, like the NHS, is now considering selling taxpayers' financial information to any companies which want to buy it. I don't suppose this will make much difference. They have, after all, been losing confidential information with such regularity that I cannot see that this will change anything. These days privacy is regarded as a sin and it is popularly acknowledged that only those who are guilty of something can possibly want to protect their lives from public intrusion. (My position on privacy is a simple one: individuals are entitled to it, institutions are not.)

And so we must now all assume that everyone tells everybody everything. Anyone who works for the government or local council can already access your medical records and, probably, your tax return. There is no privacy these days. If you contract a sexually transmitted disease, become depressed or develop dementia any of your neighbours who have jobs as civil service employees (even quite low grade ones) will probably know about it.

All those who have chanted the mantra 'If you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to worry about' will presumably be happy about this state of affairs.

6

At Ebbsfleet railway station today, waiting for the train to Paris, I amused myself by spotting and counting the surveillance cameras. I counted ten in the relatively small waiting room alone. There are probably more. But, curiously, there are no waste bins. The whole place would have given Jacques Tati nightmares. Why so many cameras? Why do the British have such enthusiasm for watching one another? The French, who are supposed to be voyeuristic perverts, have put only 326 CCTV cameras in Paris but the English, who are supposed to be straight laced, have 7,431 CCTV cameras in London. I wonder what the authorities expect to happen here in this miserable, unfriendly station? The place is hardly likely to be a magnet for terrorists. Why would anyone want to blow up Ebbsfleet railway station? Maybe the absence of litter bins is a clue. Maybe they are hoping that they'll spot someone dropping a piece of litter and will be able to call in tanks, helicopters and the SAS. We were, of course, stopped on our way through customs and subjected to the usual pointless search. I am always stopped at customs posts and I suspect that the guards have been told that the standard modern terrorist is an elderly gentlemen wearing an embroidered waistcoat, pince nez and an MCC tie. The last time my bags were emptied the half-wit doing the searching completely missed two large zip pockets. Since the profiling of travellers is not allowed (it would be politically incorrect to stop and examine all suspicious looking dusky skinned men and so the customs idiots stop examining all swarthy men with sticks of dynamite strapped around their chests, and with ticking rucksacks on their backs, when they've reached their annual quota) an old lady with a Zimmer frame was also lucky enough to win a ticket in the lottery of the absurd and to be subjected to a search. She was about ninety and very patient and brave during the deliberate and pointless humiliation that is what travel means these days. Naturally, no one thought to look inside the tubes of the Zimmer frame to see whether they were stuffed with Semtex. The whole pointless process of security at railway stations is designed by the stupid and put into practice by the rude and brainless. Security rules designed by the politically correct mean that the guards pick out as many little old ladies as they do swarthy, bearded men with rucksacks and alarm clocks strapped to their waists. There was one sweet moment during the whole pointless process. I had a rag doll in my suitcase and when the young woman examining my belongings reached the doll she saw that its skirt had accidentally been pulled upwards. With great and surprising tenderness she smoothed down the skirt and gently placed the rag doll to one side. She didn't check it to see what had been stuffed inside it head and body. Everyone in the world except the people working at these border controls knows damned well that the examinations are utterly pointless and never, ever catch any real terrorists. The absurd, time wasting and impertinent measures introduced since September 2001 would not, of course, have stopped what happened in September 2001. There's irony for you. The checks are done to keep us all in our place and remind us of our impertinence in believing that we are entitled to travel freely around the world. Travel used to be leisurely, full of anticipation; today it's an angry business full of anticipated disappointment. Arrival is also, generally, a disappointment: offering the sort of feeling which follow the pulling of a Christmas cracker and finding inside it a shoe horn, metal egg cup or nail clipper. Angst is the new zeitgeist.

Eurostar has stopped serving champagne these days and they serve diet cola in tiny little tins which would make suitable props for a child's toy shop. For reasons best known to themselves they hand out squarish drinking glasses. People have been using drinking glasses for centuries and they have always been round. I wonder why Eurostar's designer of plastic crockery decided to break new ground by making square glasses. When you try to drink from them some of the liquid always trickles down onto your chin and shirt.

When we got to our apartment we found that the boiler had been leaking. I really don't think boilers like us very much. It wasn't much of a leak. Just a steady drip drip. But over a period of weeks a steady drip can produce a hell of a mess. The water had dissolved a fresh packet of ground Arabica coffee so the whole kitchen was covered in wet, cold coffee. Still, if we hadn't spent an hour or so clearing up the mess I expect we'd have just wasted the time sitting down listening to music, reading good books and sipping fresh coffee. The Griswolds never had as much fun.

When we'd finished I rang the boiler service company and left a message for someone to call round and fix the leak.

I realised today that my French vocabulary has changed a good deal over the years. I used to know how to order things in restaurants. But here are the seven phrases I now seem to use most frequently:

1. Nous avons une fuite
2. Notre chaudière ne fonctionne pas
3. Il est trop cher
4. Vous etes fou
5. Je suis un pauve Anglais
6. Nous n'avons pas de gaz a nouveau
7. Il y a une discotheque dans l'appartement ci-dessous

7

We had only been in Paris for a few hours when Antoinette developed the symptoms of a nasty bout of influenza. I’m sure she caught it in a café last week. A member of the serving staff was sneezing and coughing all the time we were in there and although we fled as soon as we had gulped down our drinks we should have left sooner. Now that there are millions of people taking immunosuppressive drugs there will, I have no doubt, be many people who are killed by bugs they catch in this way. We had huge plans for the week but I think that the wise move would be for us to stay in the apartment and take things easy. This is not a bad thing. We are both exhausted and a few days rest will do us both good. We have several thousand music CDs and books here so we will not be unable to amuse ourselves.

When I eventually got round to opening the mail I discovered one from the gas company telling me that in future we must keep all our gas bills, and the mass of associated paperwork, for at least five years. I threw the letter away.

8

We were both woken at about four in the morning by a terrible noise. At first I forgot where we were and assumed that I was hearing a vixen protecting her cubs. When I remembered that we were in the centre of Paris I decided that someone was being murdered. Or maybe a woman was in labour. I opened the window and looked out. All up and down the street tousled heads were visible. We weren’t the only ones who had been woken up. Lights were on in dozens of apartments and in the Embassy across the road. The noise continued for about thirty minutes and then, eventually, reached an unmistakeable finale. The quiet which followed was greeted with rapturous applause. And then a rather proud looking man and a sheepish looking woman appeared in a window a few buildings away from ours. The man waved and beamed. The woman blushed and waved rather apologetically. It had been a very impressive performance. They both looked to be in their seventies.

9

I discovered today that it is now possible to obtain prescriptions online with remarkably little fuss. Since GPs have largely abandoned their responsibilities this can only be regarded as a ‘good thing’.

10

I lost my reading spectacles this morning. It took me twenty minutes to find that they were in the toothbrush holder in the bathroom. I still haven’t found my toothbrush but I’ve no doubt I put it somewhere safe. Antoinette is worried that I am showing early signs of Alzheimer’s Disease. I told her that if I start becoming noticeably potty I will join the Liberal Democrats so that no one will notice.

11

In French cafés the eating and the drinking are largely incidental activities; they are an excuse; the price of admission. People go to cafés to be seen, to see, to start a romance or have an assignation, to read a book, to have a business meeting, to sketch or to snooze.

The English invented coffee houses but somewhere along the way we lost sight of the point and for decades cafes became places where tired shoppers went for a cup of weak tea, a slice of dry fruit cake and a chance to rest their feet. Patrons were expected to sit down, eat and drink and then get up and go. Loitering was strictly against the rules. Once the tea had been drunk and the cake crumbled on the plate so that it looked as if it had been eaten, they were expected to leave.

Now, I'm delighted to say, things are changing a little in England. There are now plenty of cafés which serve excellent coffee and edible cakes and no one seems to mind how long you sit there. It's not uncommon to see two or three patrons pecking away at laptops as they write their books and inch their way towards fame and wealth a la Rowling.

12

Something called the UK Biobank is carrying out a large study of over half a million people. The theory is that by searching through masses of information they will be able to find clues about disease patterns. Oh dear. They're wasting their time. As I pointed out in my second book, *Paper Doctors*, in 1977, we already have enough quality information to help us improve lives dramatically. The problem is that lobbyists ensure that no one takes any notice. So, for example, the evidence proving that meat causes cancer is indisputable. But most people still eat meat because the meat industry's powerful lobby helps to suppress the truth and ensure that people keep eating their carcinogenic products.

13

Why aren’t mobile phone makers told to standardise their chargers? Today I threw out a dozen old chargers which no longer fit any of the telephones we have. If I keep them, in the vain hope that one of them will be useful in the future, I will doubtless mix them up with the leads which are relevant and then spend hours sorting them all out again. Standardising phone chargers would save time, money and vast amounts of our rapidly decreasing oil supplies. Sadly, however, all those goody-goody politicians who talk endless drivel about global warming and climate change do not really give a fig about the way we are trashing our planet and using up our valuable natural resources in this way. Politicians do endless bad things for the greater good only of themselves. When politicians talk about the need to do things for a better planet, a more secure economy or a happier society you can be damned sure that they thinking either of the next election and their majority or the lucrative jobs they will be given once their political career is over.

14

Coutts Bank has admitted that it has been giving bad advice to customers since 1957. They say that they will offer compensation. How can any organisation not notice that it has been behaving badly for decades? I used to have an account with Coutts. A man in a frock coat gave me a very handsome leather cheque book holder and an equally handsome leather wallet with the bank's logo stamped on it in gold. But the bank proved so incompetent that I closed the account and moved the money elsewhere. Since Coutts is owned by the Royal Bank of Scotland (the world's worst bank) which is largely owned by British taxpayers it will be taxpayers who will have to pick up the bill for Coutts' serial incompetence. We would all be so much better off if Gordon the Moron had simply closed RBS and fired all the staff. Incidentally, it does not seem to be widely known that Alex Salmond, the deeply unpleasant and dangerously rabid Scottish nationalist whose personal definition of the word 'truth' seems to be rather different from mine and whose grasp of history might, I suggest, be described by some Englishmen as prejudiced if not challenged, worked for the world's worst bank, the Royal Bank of Scotland, as an economist. I suspect that the end result of his political career will be much the same as that of the bank: humiliation and disaster. Assumption and complacency are always the mother and father of disaster.

15

We put up a new squirrel proof feeder today. Within fifteen minutes a squirrel had unscrewed the bottom of the feeder so that all the sunflower seeds which were inside fell to the ground. But that wasn’t all. He carried the bottom piece of the feeder away so that I couldn’t screw it back on. I suspect that our squirrels are considerably more intelligent than the people who make what they claim to be squirrel proof feeders. We are quite proud of them, really.

16

For several months now I have been attempting to persuade Royal Mail to stop stuffing unaddressed junk mail through our letterbox. Today, I’ve given up. I have filled in forms, sent emails, written letters and made telephone calls. I’ve spoken to the local postman. I’ve communicated endlessly with two personal assistants in the Moya Greene’s office. Ms Greene is the Chief Executive and you might imagine that an instruction from her office might produce results. ‘Would you please stop stuffing our letter box with advertisements for pizza houses and local politicians,’ I begged. But although I have received many assurances the junk mail still keeps coming.

‘How do you know that we’re responsible?’ demanded one Royal Mail employee.

‘Because I’ve seen the postman get out of his van and push the junk through our letterbox,’ I replied.

‘Ah, but how do you define junk mail?’ the employee demanded.

‘It’s mail I didn’t ask for and which doesn’t have my name or address on it.’

‘But some of it might have important information for you.’

‘I don’t want it.’

At this point the person with whom I’m communicating always tells me to contact someone else. The bloke at the head office tells me that I need to tell the local office to stop delivering the stuff. The bloke at the local office tells me that they can’t do anything unless an instruction comes from the head office. The problem, of course, is that everyone at Royal Mail makes money out of delivering unwanted, unaddressed junk mail. I discovered today that even the postman on his rounds receive a bonus for delivering the stuff.

So now I’ve given up. And the junk the Royal Mail insists on stuffing through my letterbox goes straight onto the bonfire. I suppose it must help the environment in some strange way.

17

We changed our address some time ago and we have been trying to persuade Lloyds Bank to send statements and other correspondence to the new address for several months. I've written four times and telephoned three times without success. I have long had a suspicion that Lloyds is largely managed by people who have something better to do. The only full-time employee seems to be the compliance officer, who is always thinking up new and exciting ways to prevent customers doing anything with their own money. (Actually, there are probably more than one. The American bank J.P.Morgan reckons it needs 13,000 new compliance officers by the end of 2014.) The only good thing about all these cock ups is that we usually receive a chunk of compensation. Indeed, for the last year or so I suspect that the compensation from Lloyds Bank has been coming in so regularly that it is my main source of reliable income and I really ought to regard myself as employed in the banking sector. Maybe I can apply for a bonus or one of those splendid pensions they hand out to executives. After my last telephone call complaining about our mail still going to our old address we were offered £150 in compensation and £21 in costs (to cover the telephone calls I've made). They couldn't even get this right, however. They paid us the £150 compensation twice and had to take one of them back.

Lloyds now has a television advertising campaign in which people whom I do not recognise but assume must be celebrities moan about the fact that they want more time to do things they want to do. My first thought on seeing the advertisement was that the mini celebrities would have the time they craved if they didn't waste their lives making stupid advertisements for an incompetent bank. My second thought was that if Lloyds has money to spare I wish they would use it on making their service more efficient. Their general incompetence results in my wasting huge chunks of my life.

18

Our extended family now includes one deer, three badgers, a fox, five squirrels (there may well be more but we have only seen five at a time), a very aristocratic cock pheasant, a nervous hen pheasant and an enormous variety and number of wild birds. Feeding all these creatures requires a constant supply of hazelnuts, peanuts, sunflower seeds and so on and our supplies now arrive in large hernia-ready sacks rather than the neat little packets sold in garden centres and pet food shops. It really is a joy and a privilege to have all these visitors dining at our home though I realised this morning that it now takes me half an hour every morning just to fill up the feeders. Our squirrels seem particularly insatiable and they seem to believe that hazelnuts grow on trees. We take care not to encourage any of these creatures to be too friendly lest they are shot or otherwise attacked by any of the many folk living in Gloucestershire who seem to regard all other members of the animal kingdom as unwelcome interlopers. It is, incidentally, worth noting that most mass murderers started off their evil careers by killing birds and small animals.

19

Now that English has become the unofficial language of Europe (just as it is the unofficial language of the rest of the world), the French and the Germans frequently boast about their skills in speaking the language of ‘les rosbifs’. We, being polite, tend to congratulate them on their language skills even though they invariably sneer whenever we try to get our tongues around their languages. What we don’t usually tell foreigners is that their English is awful. We don’t like to disappoint them and so we tell them they speak English like a native when what we mean is that they speak English like a native carrying a spear in one hand and a shield in the other. Their grammar is appalling, and often comical, and their accents are straight out of 1950s black and white movies starring Maurice Chevalier. Over 90% of EU staff draft new legislation in English rather than French (which was originally the EU’s official language) but the trouble is that their English is rarely as good as they think it is and great confusion often ensues as a result. Those who work for the EU are, inevitably, particularly arrogant and particularly incompetent and likely to be foreign (in the way that anyone such as Boris Johnson who was not born in England must inevitably be foreign) and the main problem is that these semi-literate foreigners frequently use words in a way that would not have been approved by Dr Johnson or any of his lexicological descendants. Many probably think that David Copperfield was a magician and Shakespeare was a sister. And so, as a result of their ignorance of our language, EU law writers frequently use words without any regard for their proper meaning. They use the word ‘control’ as if it means ‘check’ or ‘verify’ instead of ‘exercise power over’ and they use the word ‘assist’ as though it means ‘be present’ rather than ‘help’. The word ‘guideline’ means one thing to the English (to whose language it properly belongs) and another to the eurocrats (who have hi-jacked it) who use it to mean ‘directive’. The result of this tower of Babel problem is that when eurocrats speak to the English they speak in a language we do not recognise and when they speak to those of other countries their resulting words, translated by EU translators and mixed up with a few idioms and figures of speech, are even more jumbled. It was long ago obvious that the fact that the EU has 24 official languages would lead to chaos, confusion and disaster and that is exactly what is happening. The worst part of the problem is, of course, that all this confusion ends up in legislation and we end up having to obey laws which sound as if they came straight out of a Marx Brothers script. The courts which have to interpret the laws then get into an unenviable tangle, with dire consequences for everyone. The EU is creating laws which make even less sense than most of us thought possible. It all rather reminds me of Lewis Carroll. ‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.’ ‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean so many different things.’ ‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master – that’s all.’ And we all know who our masters are. Still, it can all be rather fun. A pompous Frenchman told us today that he spoke perfect English and when I congratulated him on this he told us that he was ‘beside his shoes with pleasure’. I have no idea whether this was derived from a French idiom or one borrowed from one of euroland’s other 24 languages but it is certainly one which I shall be introducing into my own personal repertoire of favourite English idioms. I can’t wait to try it out on people when we get back to England. ‘I am beside my shoes with pleasure!’ I shall announce as often as I possibly can.

20

I doubt if there has been a worse company than Npower in the history of the planet. We recently gave up with them and moved to another supplier. (It says something that we moved to British Gas to get better service.) I read today that in the last year 1.4 million customers complained about Npower, making it top of the most loathed companies list. Even leaving the damned company proved difficult, time consuming and expensive. And getting back the money they owed us was so difficult that I almost gave up. Almost. Npower has earned its place on the world’s most ‘evil companies list’, alongside Goldman Sachs, Monsanto, Google and Microsoft. Why is such an appalling company allowed to sell gas and electricity? Why aren’t the executives all spending their days sitting in the stocks so that customers can hurl rotten vegetables at them? The people who work on the shop floor aren’t any better. I can just imagine the job interviews. ‘Do you find it easy to be rude to people? Can you ignore what people tell you? Do you find it easy to ignore customers who cry on the telephone?’ The people who run Npower aren’t fit to live in a civilised society; they are the sort of folk who would be bewildered by the idea of indoor plumbing and they should be banished to live on a shrinking ice floe. We’ll send the loathsome Nick Clegg with them as their leader. (It really is about time someone put Clegg out of our misery. He’s a perfect example of why politicians are different to all other human beings. They have no backbone. He should become a verb. ‘To clegg’ meaning ‘to betray and disappoint’. Just how he became Britain’s Deputy Prime Minister will always be a mystery to me.)

I wonder how many people in this modern world are proud of what they do for a living and, the corollary, I wonder how many are ashamed of how they earn their daily bread. I would hazard a guess that there aren’t many Npower employees who go home at night feeling a glow of satisfaction. Most, I would imagine, sneak home in the shadows and, if they are asked what they do for a living, probably prefer to say that they are estate agents or, perhaps, that they work for Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs.

21

Antoinette bought a memory card game to help delay the onset of my Alzheimer’s. Today she suggested that we play it. We would have done so but, unfortunately, we couldn’t find the game anywhere. We had both forgotten where we put it. Another good intention mislaid.

22

An acquaintance from London arrived to discuss something or other. (I really couldn’t work out what he wanted but I really don’t think it was anything of any benefit to us in particular or to mankind in general.) He runs a bookstore which specialises in unpopular political tracts, lives in a house which looks as if it receives daily deliveries from the local garbage man and once boasted to us that he gets most of his food out of dumpsters. We couldn’t bear the thought of inviting him to a meal at the house (he would probably never leave) so we took him to a café near to the railway station so that we could get rid of him as soon as we had fed him.

‘Have you got green meat?’ he demanded of the waitress, who looked at him as if he were as barking as he undoubtedly is.

‘Green meat?’ she asked. ‘You mean rancid meat?’

‘No, no,’ he explained. ‘I mean organic meat. Grown locally.’

‘I don’t know,’ she said.

He insisted that she fetch the manager.

‘Our meat is local,’ the manager told him. ‘We buy it from the butcher just up the road. You could walk there, but we fetch it in the van.’

‘But where are the animals reared?’

‘I don’t have the foggiest. I suppose the butcher would know.’

‘Would you ask them, please?’

Antoinette and I were cringing and trying to disappear into the woodwork.

The manager went away and came back seven or eight minutes later. ‘I spoke to someone,’ he said, though if he had any sense he was probably lying. ‘Their pork comes from a farm in Wiltshire. And the lamb is from somewhere here in Gloucestershire.’

‘You don’t know precisely how far? Is it more than 20 miles?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘What about the eggs?’

‘They’re from free range chickens.’

‘Proper free range birds? Happy chickens?’

‘I would think so.’

Our acquaintance thought for a while. ‘I’ll have a fried egg and a double helping of chips.’

Antoinette ordered a peppermint tea and I had a coffee. We couldn’t wait to get rid of him. Fortunately, there was a fast train due in thirty minutes. We managed to stuff him on that.

23

People in every trade like to play jokes on neophytes. Every new engineering apprentice will be sent to the stores to fetch a bubble for a spirit level. Apprentice bankers in Switzerland are sent down to the vaults to polish the gold bars. And farmers in the Cotswolds deliver two buckets of food to new restaurateurs. One bucket is filled with ram’s balls and the other is filled with their tails. It is, I think, supposed to be a joke but the joke backfired when a food writer and restaurateur called Prue Leith received her two buckets. She cooked the testicles, which she claimed were ‘unbelievably delicious’ and after boiling off the wool she marinated and griddled the tails which were, she said, ‘the most wonderful crunchy little things, rather like pork scratchings, which the children adored’. Score one to Ms Leith and nil to the farmer.

24

I spent an hour talking to an old man who delivered some logs. He is, it seems, quite an authority on the area. He told me that five hundred years ago a couple who ended up in court accused of cohabiting ended up having to spend the night on their hands and knees. They had to wear hair shirts and pray all night. Then the local bishop ordered that as an additional punishment they be stripped naked, strapped to a cart and paraded through their village on a Saturday so that as many people as possible could see them. I said I thought it sounded a bit like one of the things they make contestants do on one of those reality television programmes. He also told me that in the late 18th century it was the custom in a village near to Stroud for newly elected mayors to be placed in an armchair and then dumped unceremoniously in the middle of the village pond. Everyone would then gather round and sing a very sombre song. I said I thought that this was a custom which should be revived. What fun it would be if all elected politicians were to be treated in this way. It might remind one or two of them who is in charge.

25

There is much excitement in the village and the villages around. A nearby smallholding, consisting of a modest and rather ugly little farmhouse and nine acres of scrubland, has been sold and there is much talk about the identity of the new owner. Some say that the owner of this small estate, who bought it for the proverbial song from a bank which had foolishly lent the previous owners far too much money, is a well-known pop singer looking for a Cotswold retreat. Others say that this story is rubbish and that the house has been bought by a London gangster who plans to hide his stolen loot in the barn and bury his gangland killing victims in one of the fields. Naturally, Antoinette and I are determined to remain aloof from all this idle speculation. We have started a rumour that the new owner is an alien and that his people (from an unnamed planet) are planning to settle on earth because their own planet has been overrun by an uncontrollable infestation of estate agents. The house has been purchased, we are telling anyone who will listen, as a first step towards colonisation of the entire Cotswolds. Within weeks the land will be covered with strange plastic cocoons inhabited by small purple men with very long ears and no feet. You wouldn’t think anyone would believe this rubbish but I only started the rumour a day ago and today it was repeated to me by a woman in a shop in Stroud. Even allowing for the fact that there are a lot of New Age hippies living in that town this does seem rather remarkable and I hope the locals don’t start arming themselves with flaming torches and marching on the aliens’ headquarters, determined to repel the invasion before it becomes too well established.

26

We were all wrong. The new owner of what was previously, and unimaginatively, known simply as The Barn turns out to be a peer and a mighty industrialist whose first action has been to be rename his purchase ‘The Manor House’ and to erect a smartly painted and suitably lettered sign at the gated entrance to his driveway. This seems to be a rather ambitious name for a modest dwelling which has two bedrooms and a toilet which was glued onto the side of the house in the 1950s, and not enough land to merit being described as a small holding. (More of a tiny holding.) The new owner of The Manor House, whom I saw clambering out of a gold coloured Rolls Royce, is a diminutive fellow with a head full of jet black hair, some of it, notably the stuff in his ears, probably his own. His people have set up a special website and he has announced that he is holding a special meeting in the church hall. He intends to introduce himself and his family and to describe his development plans for the area. Even at some distance it seemed clear that it wasn’t just the hair which was bought. His teeth were wobbling about in a rather unnatural way, suggesting that they too had been provided by man rather than God, and I couldn’t help hoping that whatever else might have been tacked on had been fastened rather more securely. Naturally, his impending news, and the word ‘development’, have caused considerable anxiety and I have no doubt at all that if it now turned out that my rumoured aliens had arrived they would be welcomed warmly. If there is one thing that country folk hate more than taxes, caravans and planning people it is change. Sadly, I never go to meetings of any kind on the sensible grounds that they are a waste of time and serve only to allow egos to be taken out, given a thoroughly good airing, displayed for admiration and polished before being put away. Still, there is no doubt that we will be regaled with extensive accounts of the meeting. We have already heard that our new neighbour has been boasting on what is, I believe, called ‘social media’ that he is enjoying being Lord of all he surveys. Since his new house has a relatively modest acreage attached to it (of which approximately three acres is a small lake known locally as Meg’s Mere in memory of a local witch who is reputed to have been drowned there in the days when ducking was an inexact science) one assumes that he has one eye closed and is squinting through the other when he does his surveying. In the Cotswolds an estate of nine acres is usually regarded as being something between a large garden and ‘somewhere for the kids to play’.

27

It turns out that his Lordship, our new and imperious neighbour is not quite as grand as had previously been thought. It seems that he made most of his money through dealing in second hand vans, for which there is, apparently, an insatiable demand in the area of England enclosed by the M25, and that he added to the fortune thus obtained through an investment in a company which manufactures brand new antiques. This is, apparently, quite a lucrative trade which is welcomed by antique dealers since it helps to ensure that supply matches the ever growing demand. He is also a director of two additional companies. One makes special grenades which are attractive to small children. When a child picks up the grenade the device explodes but with only enough force to maim – usually blowing off a limb or two. The principle behind this brilliant idea is, apparently, that these grenades cause great distress and result in the enemy having to spend more time and money dealing with the injured children than would be taken up with simply burying them. The other company he is involved with manufactures a variety of remarkably profitable but carcinogenic chemicals which are, apparently, especially popular on the export market.

It also appears that his Lordship's title is not quite what it had originally seemed. It was, so we were reliably informed by a friend who works in what is left of the Street of Shame, purchased in conjunction with a small property in the Home Counties. Our neighbour is therefore the Lord of the Manor in a village somewhere south of the M4. He has, nevertheless, arbitrarily decided that this entitles him to be addressed as though he were a true peer of the realm, and had purchased his title in the more traditional modern way (by bunging one of the political parties a few hundred thousand quid for 'election expenses'). Antoinette and I have decided that we are deeply impressed by his enthusiasm and that if we meet him or discuss him with other local inhabitants we will refer to him as the Duke of Gloucestershire (never to be confused with the Duke of Gloucester, an aristocrat of an entirely different hue).

28

Our new, titled farming neighbour has wasted no time in publicising his plans. He has announced that a former assistant manager of one of his second-hand van establishments has been appointed estate manager and general farm manager. There is no mention of this man having had any experience of anything other than selling white vans but I have no doubt that all concerned are confident that this will be of absolutely no hindrance. I have met him and I confess it did occur to me that if a thought popped into his head while he was out walking he would probably have to sit down since coping with the two things at once would probably be one thing too many. The new estate manager (my, how grand that sounds) will be helped by a full-time staff of six who will be supplemented, as and when the need arises, with extra staff hired in from neighbouring villages. The estate manager's first job will be, he announces on the farm's constantly updated website, to get rid of all the wooden trees and scruffy hedges and to replace them with a good deal of fresh and shiny barbed wire which will blend in well with the neat, metal posts they intend to erect.

'We can get £40 a truck load for the logs,' the new manager told me proudly. 'I reckon we can fill ten trucks – so that's, what, er, quite a lot of money!'

I wondered if he'd worked out that they could use the same truck ten times or if he would buy ten separate trucks.

He pulled out his mobile phone, turned on the calculator facility and pressed a few keys. '£4,000!' he announced.

'£400, I think,' I suggested politely.

All this felling and clearing will, so he tells us all, open up the area, allow the light to get in and enable everyone in the vicinity to see much more. And what he says is, of course, perfectly true, though these days more and more farmers are actually planting trees and hedgerows, because they understand that they provide shelter and shade for their animals, and very few seem to be cutting them down indiscriminately. By chopping down the trees which are closest we will all have a much better view of the trees which are some distance away. These trees will, of course, be smaller, because they will be further away, but we will be able to see more of them and I have no doubt at all that there is a piece of EU legislation somewhere which makes it clear that lots of small trees in the distance are better for the soul than a smaller number of big ones closer up.

The estate manager, having created an area of suburbanised countryside, has also published on the Web a list of the equipment he is buying. The collection will apparently include a selection of bulldozers, diggers, dumper trucks, four wheel drive vehicles, trailers, trucks of several assorted sizes and, of course, an assortment of white vans in different shapes and sizes. There has been some talk locally that parking this huge number and variety of vehicles and machinery will not leave much room left for any actual farming. I reckon the expenditure on vehicles and machines must be somewhere in the region of £250,000 to £300,000. Still, they have £400 coming in from the sale of the chopped up trees. Or £4,000, if only they can manage to persuade the man writing the cheque to use the calculator on the estate manager's phone. And in another 25 years' time there will be another £400 (or £4,000) worth of logs to harvest. Still, even to my untrained mind, this did not look like a business plan destined for success.

29

I returned my useless Windows Office software to Amazon but I will not receive a refund because it didn’t arrive. It was stolen en route. (I’m fed up with describing postal items as ‘lost’ when it’s as clear as day that they have been stolen.) And that serves me right for entrusting it to Royal Mail. I should have hired Securicor and a van full of heavily armed guards. As an aside, I hate Windows almost as much as I hate Royal Mail. The damned software appears to me to have been designed by people desperately keen to show how clever they are. It seems to me that they make the stuff absurdly complicated simply because they can – and with no thought whatsoever of the practical needs of the people who will use it. And why, I wonder, do they put the ‘send to’ instruction right next to the ‘shredder’ instruction? I suppose it was some 16-year-old software writer’s idea of a little joke.

30

The NHS is a gloomy mess. Thousands of people are now dying every week so that a socialist dream of state-run medicine can survive – even though the dream is a proven failure. (My definition of a socialist is someone who wants to spend more money than they earn.) Patients wait two weeks for X-ray results, two weeks for basic blood test results and a month to find out whether or not their lump is cancerous. All these tests should be available within hours but NHS bureaucracy means dangerous delays. Vets provide a far better service for animal patients. Small hospitals and single-handed GP surgeries are closed because they are considered old-fashioned (even though patients like them and they provide an excellent and important service). There are fewer available beds in Britain than anywhere else in the so-called developed world – largely because most of the money spent on the NHS is given to administrators who think only of themselves. The NHS is like every large organisation in that bureaucracies exist to prevent things happening and to support and protect the people employed within the bureaucracy. The interests of patients are of no significance since in the NHS they don't pay overtly for what they consume. The NHS bureaucracy would only be really satisfied if patients were banished from the system.

Moreover, the science went out of medicine decades ago. Today, medicine is a lethal mixture of bad habits and black magic built on a rickety platform of poor logic, bad science and poor ethics. Research papers are written to please drug companies rather than to tell the truth. The basic principles of good medicine have been forgotten or ignored. Hardly anyone working in the NHS has any idea of the basic principles of good hygiene. The other day I watched in horror as a surgeon on a real life TV documentary operated without a mask so that he could talk to the interviewer and be better seen by the cameras. (I have long believed that doctors and nurses who take part in television programmes are endangering the lives of those they are paid to look after. Incidents such as this confirm my belief.)

And if anyone complains about anything in the NHS, the first thing that happens is that all the relevant paperwork mysteriously disappears.

The worst thing of all is the officially sanctioned end of life experience known as the Liverpool Care Pathway, an Orwellian style policy which means that old people who look as if they will live too long, and block hospital beds, are killed off by being starved to death. If the Chinese or the Koreans allowed their old people to die of thirst or starvation thousands would demonstrate in Trafalgar Square and there would be much wringing of hands by left wing commentators. If private hospitals systemically killed patients to save money, questions would be asked in the Commons. But starving old people to death (or denying them water) is a Government approved standard NHS policy which doesn't seem to have bothered anyone at the British Medical Association, the Royal College of Nursing or the General Medical Council. It would be kinder to hit old people over the head with a brick and I daresay that will be the next kind-hearted proposal the enthusiastic supporters of State-run health care will dream up.

To be honest it would not surprise me in the slightest if the Liberal Democrats, those self-proclaimed saviours of the planet, concluded that it would be best if we ate our old people instead of simply burning or burying them. The BBC would immediately invite our favourite television cooks to show us ways to prepare tasty octogenarians for Sunday lunch.

May

1

I spent much of the day working on my annual accounts. Every year I wonder why the manufacturers of calculators always make them with a built-in fault. Give me a calculator, any calculator, and a row of figures and if I add them up six times I will get six different answers. If I added them up twelve times I would doubtless get twelve different answers. As usual, however, I get around the calculator fault by adding everything up three times, adding the three sums together and dividing by three. That is then the figure I put on the form. If the taxman wants to do it all again he’s welcome to my box of accounts. And he can borrow my calculator if he wants.

2

According to the *Financial Times*, which takes these things very seriously, a fellow called Christopher Bailey, who is chief executive of Burberry, the store which sells trench coats to gentlemen and scarves and silly hats to minor television celebrities and footballers’ wives, has a £440,000 annual clothes allowance. He also receives a huge discount on whatever clothes he buys from Burberry. Just how does a man spend that much on clothes? A fellow can buy a damned decent suit and accessories for £2,000. And hats from Jermyn Street don’t cost more than £200 to £300. A really good tie will set him back £150. So, even if Mr Bailey doesn’t much like his own company’s products (and qualify for the massive discount), it is difficult to see how he gets through £440,000 unless, of course, he buys himself a lot of expensive frocks and gowns in which case he’d probably have to scrimp and save to make that £440,000 last a month. However, in addition to this extraordinary frock allowance Mr Bailey receives £20 million a year in what is sweetly called ‘compensation’. The shareholders found this as obscenely greedy as I do and most of them voted against his pay deal when they had a chance to do so. I cannot imagine who thought that £20 million a year was a reasonable wage for someone running a company flogging macs, hats, scarves and so on. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the owners of the company had voted against Mr Bailey’s absurd wages the directors decided to give the £20 million to him anyway. I really find that a puzzle. Who on earth gave directors the right to chuck away money belonging to other people?

3

The General Medical Council is a curious organisation which is half charity, half quango, half government department and half protection racket. It used to consist of a little more than a file clerk, who kept the register of doctors who were qualified to practice medicine, and a committee of rather pompous individuals who sat in judgement when erring doctors were accused of bonking their patients on the consulting room couch. The filing clerk kept a mailing list of doctors and presumably stored the list in a couple of filing tablets. No one at the old-style GMC gave a damn whether or not doctors knew anything at all about medicine. The GMC ignored the damage done by doctors who hadn't heard of penicillin and who thought that purging patients was a pretty damned good example of high tech medicine. Today, in contrast, the GMC is a vast organisation with a huge budget and a seemingly insatiable yearning for power. It employs a host of pontificating file clerks with ideas well above their station, though I suspect that most have little or no experience of medicine in practice. And so, for example, the GMC (which is headed by a former journalist and staffed by about a million and a half of the most arrogant and aggressive people outside the HMRC offices) has decided that it no longer approves of the Hippocratic Oath, which it considers rather old-fashioned, and it has happily overseen the disappearance of the principle of medical confidentiality.

Today, the new GMC does a lot of huffing and puffing and a good deal of collecting of money but I fear that it still takes no real interest in patient welfare and I suspect that it now probably kills more people than influenza. In my view it is no stretch to say that the GMC is such a threat to the nation that it should be classified as a terrorist organisation. The GMC does nothing about dirty hospitals, about the overprescribing of antibiotics, about the unavailability of doctors at night and at weekends and about the fact that hospital doctors now routinely murder elderly patients who are blocking beds. The GMC does nothing about the overprescribing of tranquillisers and antidepressants and takes no interest in the fact that doctor-induced disease is, alongside cancer and circulatory disease, now one of the three main causes of death in Britain. The GMC does nothing about the fact that the medical establishment (which is pretty well owned by the pharmaceutical industry) suppresses discussion about controversial issues such as vaccination and seems to find it perfectly acceptable that great chunks of medical education are paid for by drug companies. It is thanks to the GMC (and also the European Union) that patients now often have to wait two weeks to see their GP (or, quite likely, a stand-in practice nurse). It is the GMC's fault that their doctor will be too busy filling forms (to keep his licence) to have time to waste on people. Today, the average patient must be satisfied with just enough time to describe one brief symptom and accept a prescription. It is also thanks to the GMC (and the EU) that patients are unable to call a doctor at night, at weekends or on bank holidays and must, instead, spend eight or nine hours queuing in the casualty department of a hospital 30 miles from their home. (Written down this seems absurd but it is, if anything, an understatement and not an exaggeration. In Northern Ireland, for example, the waiting time target is for patients to be seen within 12 hours but even this appalling target is regularly breached. I wonder how many senior politicians have to sit and wait, bleeding and in pain, for more than 12 hours before they are seen by a nurse or a doctor. In practice, things are often worse even than that, with patients forced to lie in an ambulance, parked outside the hospital, for up to eight hours before room can be found for them in the accident and emergency department. There can be no doubt that patients who might otherwise have been saved have died waiting for treatment.)

The reason for the GMC's new power is simple. After the Dr Harold Shipman scandal it was decided in high places that 'something' had to be done to protect the public from dangerous doctors. Shipman, a general practitioner, had spent years methodically slaughtering his patients and Ministers were embarrassed. When a doctor murders over 200 of his patients, as Shipman did, it does rather stand out and there were calls for 'something to be done'. It was decreed, presumably by people who had no idea what they were doing, that some form of regular testing should be introduced so that doctors in practice could be assessed. The plans for doctors to have competence tests every five years, with annual appraisals in between, were drawn up in 2008 by Professor Sir Liam Donaldson, the Government's chief medical officer at the time. Donaldson was instructed to do something by Ministers who wanted to weed out rogue practitioners and make sure that there would not be another Shipman embarrassment. (Donaldson is famous for having recommended that if patients requested that their personal medical data not be uploaded to the ill-fated, centralised NHS database then the GPs receiving the requests should forward the letters to the Health Secretary. He did not say whether patients who wanted to protect their privacy should be denied treatment, summarily executed or merely placed on a list of troublesome patients.)

The idea behind the 'competence tests' was to weed out the dangerous doctors, to take them off the front line and, presumably to keep them out of the way by giving them jobs at the Department of Health or in the medical school department one of the redbrick universities. Everyone forgets, conveniently, that Shipman had been reported to the authorities many times. Other local doctors had noticed that an unusually large number of his patients seemed to be dying before their time. However, the people with the power to do something (namely the GMC) did bugger all.

Today, of course, everyone in authority claims that the Shipman fiasco had nothing to do with the GMC's brand new revalidation programme. This is silly. The record shows that the revalidation programme is a direct result of the Shipman affair. Politicians were jumping up and down as Shipman's kill total soared above 200 and the General Medical Council, the official body in charge of protecting patients and getting rid of dangerous doctors, was given the job of finding a new way of assessing medical practitioners.

What the GMC did, of course, was to design a system which would vastly increase its own power and its own income – apparently ignoring the fact (or ignorant of it) that if Shipman were still alive and practising he would sail through the new system with flying colours. The GMC's revalidation programme would suit him down to the ground and he would have had absolutely no difficulty in finding patients or colleagues to vouch for him. On the other hand the GMC's power and money grab has been enormously successful. Back in 1973 the GMC's total income from all sources was £662,579. In 2013 the GMC had an income of £95,400,000. (Just to put this in perspective the average annual salary in 1973 was £2,126 and in 2013 the average annual salary was £26,500. The average salary is just over ten times the 1973 level but the GMC's income is well over 100 times what it was 40 years ago. The GMC must be one of the most financially successful organisations on the planet.)

There were two odd things about the Government suddenly asking the GMC to 'do' something.

First, the GMC was the body which was in charge when Shipman killed roughly 10% of his patients. In any sensible run society the GMC would have been roundly bollocked and disbanded, with the responsible officials sent off to cold climates to count penguins. But Britain doesn't work like that. Official bodies which screw up are routinely given extra power and more money. And so the GMC was given the task of stopping another Shipman disaster, even though it is arguable that it was the GMC which was partly responsible for him getting away with it.

The second odd thing was that no one had previously thought of setting up a scheme to re-licence doctors in the same way that airline pilots are assessed every few years to make sure that they still know what all the knobs do. Shortly after I qualified (in 1971) I remember writing articles suggesting that doctors should be required to take an examination of some kind every ten years or so. Even to a neophyte it seemed absurd that doctors were allowed to practice for fifty years or more on the basis of knowledge gained when penicillin was still unheard of.

But no Government ever abandons an idea just because it's a bad one. Once given the go ahead the pen pushers at the GMC set about designing a scheme which everyone with half a brain should have known would never have a hope in hell of preventing another Shipman from killing taxpayers but was, worse still, designed in such a way that it was guaranteed to result in far more deaths than Shipman had managed in several years of medical mayhem. In medical terms the ineptly designed 'treatment' (known as revalidation) was destined to kill the patient.

The bozos at the GMC did, however, make sure that they designed a scheme which brought them in more money; loads of money. Doctors now have to pay the GMC a hefty fee to be registered and another hefty fee for a licence. Any doctor who wants to practice has to pay the GMC both fees. (Selling people licences to do what they're trained to do is a splendid new scam. Everyone seems to be getting in on the act. Today everyone gets marked, rated, tested, reviewed, regulated and assessed. Everyone, that is, except the people with the real power over our lives: the eurocrats, MEPS and civil servants. They can be as lazy and as incompetent as they like, as venal and as criminal as they fancy, and no one ever marks, reviews or assesses them.)

The GMC's revalidation system is an absolute nightmare for anyone who doesn't have six ballpoint pens tucked neatly in their breast pocket. Doctors are expected to collect endless pieces of paper from patients and colleagues confirming that they are 'good eggs'. It is not surprising that doctors are now as unhappy about their work as teachers and dentists.

(I've met about two dozen teachers in my life. They all wanted to be and do something else for a living. A good half of them wanted to be rock stars or famous painters but couldn't since they were not blessed with any talent or, indeed, any enthusiasm for work or for doing anything except lounge around all day dreaming about what might have been if they had been blessed with talent and enthusiasm. It's always been the same with dentists. I've met a number of them and never yet met one who ever really wanted to be a dentist. Most of them drifted into dentistry because the entry requirements for dental school were, at the time, lower than the entry requirements for medical school. They were inspired not by vocation but by the knowledge that no one has ever met a poor dentist. But as soon as they got over the excitement of buying their first new car, the thrill of peering into an endless parade of mouths soon wore off. And they decided that they would have more fun, and probably make even more money, if they took advantage of their natural talent for playing golf or racing motor cars. Over the years this feeling grew, probably helped along by the fact that older dentists tend to earn less than young ones because they simply don't have the mental and physical strength to yank teeth at the same blistering speed. I have known at least four dentists who believed they could quite definitely have won the Open golf championship and three who knew for a certain fact that they could have been world champion Grand Prix drivers. Doctors used to be different. The ones I knew when I was young were enthusiastic about their work. But, sadly, tragically, things have changed. The doctors I meet these days all want to be something else. Their only joy is in the money and their only dream is of the day when they can stop being doctors and be someone else. And that's not just sad, it's bloody dangerous.)

The GMC's new method of assessing medical practitioners will make more doctors hate their professional lives and it will do absolutely nothing to protect patients. It won't stop doctors with murder in their hearts. And it will do absolutely nothing to weed out corrupt or incompetent doctors. The scheme is, indeed, designed to protect the establishment. Doctors who have sold their souls (and their patients) to drug companies will do fine, thank you very much. Most of the Government's medical advisers are, or have been, paid advisers to the drug industry and the GMC is very comfortable with that. None of the overpaid file clerks working there seem to feel that there is anything dodgy about allowing doctors who have taken money from drug companies to decide which drugs the NHS is allowed to buy or what the rules about vaccination should be. The revalidation programme requires doctors to be approved by other doctors and so original, creative and controversial doctors will probably find themselves forced out of the profession. I doubt if Dr John Snow, Dr Ignaz Semmelweiss or Dr Joseph Lister would have managed to get through the GMC's revalidation process. They, and their vital breakthroughs, would have been lost to medicine if the current revalidation programme had been in situ a century ago. Most great medical discoveries come as a result of research or observations made by dedicated but often eccentric individuals. There isn't one truly great advance in medicine that didn't cause a furore when it was first offered to the profession. If something is new it will upset vested interests and establishment lobbyists will soon start sharpening their spears. Medicine is already governed and dominated by tradition. The GMC's revalidation programme seems specifically designed to eradicate original thinking and to suppress creative individuals. And, almost by the by, it will actually help ensure that future Shipmans are not spotted early on. Harold Shipman would have sailed through the revalidation process without a blink. The revalidation scheme is perfectly suited to the dishonest, the cheat, the silver tongued and the rogue. Revalidation will result in a massive deterioration in the quality of medical care and a dramatic increase in the number of patients killed by the actions or unavailability of doctors.

I am not alone in wondering why doctors have allowed the GMC to introduce an absurd, unhelpful and excessively bureaucratic system which makes life unbelievably difficult for practising doctors and almost impossible for locum doctors, ships' doctors and the many physicians who don't fit neatly into the sort of world inhabited by GMC administrators.

A survey of GPs for a medical magazine showed that 78% of GPs thought that the GMC's revalidation programme was a waste of money. (I suspect that the other 22% of doctors were either making a few quid out of it as advisers, consultants and so on or else didn't speak enough English to know what was going on). A doctor from Kent remarked that 'the costs are high and the benefits pure speculation'. He went on to say: 'Yet again, the focus on the measurable encourages the bean-counters, will create a false sense of reassurance and will devalue aspects of being a doctor that are difficult to measure. Those at the coalface have to put up with ever-increasing tasks to conform to the norm and prove their competence. As quality falls, perhaps it will dawn on those in authority that quality is a degree of excellence, not a set of laboriously measured events.'

A doctor from Glasgow, who described revalidation as 'a farce' and 'a joke', wrote: 'GPs should refuse revalidation until there is proper funding for education. I'm fed up with collecting my thank–you cards, reviewing random articles and doing pointless audits to show to some random part-time GP who comes to appraise me. '

4

A lot of very poor or very stupid people live in the Cotswolds because it is customary to build walls without going to the expense of slipping mortar in between the stones. Instead of gluing the walls together, as sensible people do, the people making walls in the Cotswolds (and indeed in Derbyshire) do so by cleverly resting one stone on top of another until the wall has reached the desired height. This is exceedingly clever and takes an inordinately long time to do, but it means that if anything leans on a wall (a walker, a sheep or a well-fed butterfly for example) the wall will fall down and have to be rebuilt. For the people who make these dry stone walls this is excellent news. There is always more than enough work for them and if business does start to slacken they can always pop out with a pea shooter in hand and knock down a few dozen miles of wall while driving along in their limousines.

5

The Duke of Gloucestershire and his talented team have wasted no time in laying waste to their new estate. They are doing this with such enthusiasm that I am convinced there must be an EU grant available for the chopping down of trees and bushes and the general despoiling of the land. For several days now the air has been thick with black smoke as they have burnt the trees and bushes they’ve been cutting down. There has been much coughing and wheezing as locals have been forced to breathe in air that would have been rejected as unfit for purpose if it had been found floating around in central London. The local vicar, whose church stands next to the burnt area, has had to cancel a christening and a midweek service. The Duke’s staff have all been equipped with chainsaws (but not with safety equipment such as goggles or ear defenders) and though they have clearly not been trained in their use (several were seen using them as though they were scythes) they have been extremely effective in clearing away unwanted trees and untidy bushes. The whole area, with burnt ground and smoke filled air would have made a splendid set for a remake of *Apocalypse Now*, though there is probably far too much barbed wire on display. Vandalism is not confined to young people in towns and cities. Our village vandals, armed with chainsaws and matches, have done more damage than a dozen youths armed with cans of spray paint. Moreover, whereas the youths would be arrested, charged, convicted and shamed the Duke of Gloucestershire will doubtless be rewarded with a large EU grant and some sort of medal from the National Farmers Union. There was some distress in the village when one of the more enthusiastic digger drivers succeeded in making a large hole in a main sewer pipe (he was apparently looking for the CD player when he inadvertently found the lever which operated the digger bucket at the front of the vehicle) but we have been reassured, via the social media, that this will be repaired very shortly or at least not long after very shortly. In addition to looking like a site for a disaster movie the area now smells worse than the London Underground.

Once upon a time, long, long ago, the local footpaths were rarely empty of walkers but today, very few people bother to come this way. Thousands of birds and small animals have disappeared or died. There are already far fewer butterflies and bees. Bigger animals, such as deer, have disappeared completely. There is no food for them and the wickedly high and unsightly barbed wire fences which have been erected make life too dangerous for them. The Duke’s personal public relations officer, still based in London, is busier than ever publishing bits and pieces of news about the Duke’s ventures. Apparently the anti-personnel landmine industry is doing well these days and the Duke is doubtless celebrating an increase in the number of limbless children around the world. ‘His Lordship,’ says the PR representative, ‘remains keen to be regarded as ‘just one of the locals’.’ He is, she says, very approachable and willing and available to open fetes, galas and gymkhanas as and when required. She adds that Her Ladyship will be available to judge babies and cakes at fetes and other public events. Antoinette and I are thinking of inviting the Duke to open our greenhouse door which warped during the winter and has been giving us some difficulty recently.

6

There is news today that His Great Righteousness, the Duke of Gloucestershire (aka the Duke of All He Surveys), is planning to go into sheep farming. The word is that he has placed an order for no less than 30 lambs and may buy another half a dozen later if all goes well. It is to be hoped that they find enough grass to eat on the post-apocalyptic landscape which is all that now remains of what used to be a pleasant looking smallholding. Antoinette and I have done some rough back of the envelope sums and we reckon that the farm's costs on equipment and labour mean that each sheep will have to fetch something in the region of £12,500 when it is sold. This is, unfortunately, a little more than usual market prices at the moment. Never mind, no businessman expects all his ventures to be profitable. The public relations officer has published photographs of the Duke and Duchess in their new garden. The Duke is wearing something with a collar made out of ermine and the Duchess, reclining on a plastic sun lounger, is wearing a bikini which appears to have been made out of a couple of pieces of thin parcel string and a yard and a half of pink cotton thread. Antoinette and I are disappointed that neither of them appears to be wearing appropriately regal headgear.

7

It has been reported that the average bra size increased from 34B to 36C during the last decade. If things continue at this rate then by the year 2054 the average bra size will be 48F and car windscreens will have to be moved further forward.

8

According to *Fortune* magazine the universal language of business comes from America. Ah, er, um, I don't know how to tell you this, boys and girls of *Fortune* magazine, but have you not noticed that the language is, er, called English? We English folk don't have much to be proud about these days. If you take all the credit for our language we will have nothing left. Even the most rabid Scottish nationalists speak English (though, it has to be admitted, some of them don't do it terribly well).

9

A 93-year-old woman who refused to be bathed by a male care worker has been told that she may need a psychiatric examination to see if she has a problem with men. She was told that it would be an infringement of the male carer’s human rights if he was not allowed to bathe her. It isn’t difficult to see why people are leaving Britain by the million.

10

Mickey Spillane was one of the best-selling authors of all time. He wrote the immensely successful Mike Hammer stories, which delighted millions of readers and annoyed lots of snotty critics. I’ve just found an old cutting about Spillane which reminds me of the time a literary figure approached him at a party and said: ‘I think it’s disgraceful that of the ten best-selling books of all time, seven were written by you.’ Spillane responded instantly with: ‘You’re lucky I’ve only written seven books.’

It’s not widely known that Spillane, who wrote very hard-boiled stories, was a Jehovah’s Witness who was fond of animals and refused to allow hunting on his land.

11

I’ve been having awful trouble with the GMC. Although I don’t practice medicine (in that I don’t hang a stethoscope around my neck every morning) I still need to be registered and licensed. A few years ago I took my name off the register because I didn’t want my address publishing in the medical directory. Inevitably, critics who didn’t like my books started claiming that I wasn’t a proper doctor. On television and radio and in newspapers and on the internet people accused me of being a fake, a quack and a fraud. Because they couldn’t find my name on the register they assumed that I didn’t have a medical degree. And so, to avoid this steady stream of libellous abuse, I arranged to put my name back onto the register.

And now things have got tricky because I don’t fit neatly into the GMC’s revalidation programme. I don’t have masses of patients or colleagues to vouch for me because I work alone at home, sitting behind a keyboard. I did write to the GMC right at the beginning of their venture into this brave new world of licensing, explaining my situation. But they have, inevitably, ignored my requests, warnings and protests. And now they don’t know what to do with me. But they have sent me a huge sheaf of paperwork to fill in.

They have, for example, asked for details of all my motoring offences. They have asked for details of a 1984 speeding offence. And they have demanded an explanation for a £5 fine I received in 1977 when an officious policeman spotted me hurrying to a suspected heart attack patient who had serious chest pains and a history of heart disease. I had switched on the car’s hazard flashers to help me get through rush hour traffic and this, of course, is a traffic offence – the sort of thing likely to bring down western civilisation. The policeman (who was not related to the patient with the chest pains) insisted on taking me to court and the magistrates (who were also not related to the patient with the chest pains) fined me £5 but did not endorse my licence. The form collectors at the GMC clearly regard this 37-year-old motoring offence as having a bearing on my fitness to practice medicine though intelligent people might find this difficult to understand.

I have spent several hours today searching through old boxes of files to try to find the information they so desperately need. I am sure this will make the world a safer place for patients everywhere.

12

I complained of feeling tired this morning and Antoinette took me to the shelves where the books I’ve written are collected. ‘That’s why you’re tired,’ she said. And I suppose she’s right. But if I’m feeling tired, John Creasey must have been exhausted when he died. He wrote 564 novels in 40 years. He once finished two books in six days and during his life he used 25 pseudonyms. I feel shattered just thinking about it all. Some self-styled literary folk (mainly those who’ve never actually written a book) might sneer at his output but the sheer physical and mental effort involved must have been incredible.

13

Children are to be banned from building sand castles on the beaches of Europe this summer. This daft new law comes straight from the office of an EU bureaucrat who has presumably been heavily lobbied by representatives of the Sand and Mud Castle Building Union (Dusseldorf branch). Or maybe it was lobbyists from the Association of Beach Buggy Drivers (Malaga branch), fed up with having to drive their buggies around sand castle ruins. It will have been the result of lobbying from someone. The EU never does anything without being pushed into it (or out of it) by a bunch of highly paid lobbyists. If the EU is banning something they will invariably claim that it’s for ‘health and safety’ reasons. But it isn’t really. It’s because a group of rich bastards have hired some lobbyists. If anyone at the EU cared a damn about health and safety they’d ban dogs from all parks and beaches, or at least enforce laws requiring owners to pick up after their dogs have defecated. Every year countless children are bitten, disfigured and maimed by uncontrolled dogs and scores go blind because they’ve contracted toxicariasis from canine faeces. No one does anything about these very real and very serious health problems because there isn’t a lobby group representing the interests of children at risk but there are lobbyists representing dogs and dog owners.

14

The quasi-tragic news is that the Duke of Gloucestershire appears to have gone bust. Too much equipment and not enough logs, perchance. A number of men arrived today and drove away a wide variety of vehicles. Two low loaders were involved and there was much cursing as the drivers struggled to squeeze their vehicles down the lane. Padlocks have now been put on gates, lambs have disappeared and there is talk that someone will be along to roll up the barbed wire and take it back to the barbed wire shop. Even the Duke's website has been closed and the public relations lady has been summarily silenced. I am told that even the social media outlets are no longer buzzing with news. Alas, the Duke has, like the birds, stopped twittering. How many decades will it take, I wonder, for the hedgerows to recover and for some more trees to grow? I'll give the squirrels extra nuts to hasten the process. They always 'plant' far more than they remember to dig up.

15

Google, the evil search engine company which has done infinitely more harm than good but managed nevertheless to make its irresponsible, witless employees rich beyond all sense and understanding, has been told that it must remove stories which are inaccurate, or which people find unreasonably distressing. Google (whose employees generally seem to think they are far brighter than they are) and its sycophantic defenders do not approve, of course. Many people who have doubtless never been exposed to public criticism claim that this is censorship. Google has waved two fingers at the new law by ensuring that extra publicity is given to news items which are pulled from the search engine. I'm totally in agreement with those who want news stories about them to be removed from the search engine. I no longer do any interviews and if I could wipe my name from the internet I would happily do so.

In my youth I was encouraged by my publishers and agents to insist that newspapers which printed wildly inaccurate pieces about me publish corrections. There have been a good many of those over the years – largely because many of the articles about me were written by, for or at the behest of drug company lobbyists anxious to discredit me. Over the years a surprising number of stories have been followed, a week or two later, with apologies and retractions. I never asked for libel damages but I did demand that false accusations were withdrawn.

But these days there is no point in bothering to insist that an apology is published. The problem is that while search engines will pick up an original news story or feature article they do not pick up any corrections which might have appeared subsequently. And there is absolutely nothing that the libelled individual can do about this. The difficulty and cost of suing a search engine would be ruinous.

So I never key my name into Google or any other search engine. And I never look up other people either. I know just how inaccurate and misleading these search engine results can be. (The general value of search engines was destroyed when it became possible for companies, lobbyists and pressure groups to influence their positions on the list of sites which appear when a particular enquiry is made.)

16

Many, many years ago, when I was still wearing short trousers and believed in Father Christmas, the tooth fairy and the integrity of our judiciary, I wrote an article pointing out that a number of foreign trained doctors working in the National Health Service did not quite match up the standards required of British trained doctors. I pointed out that a high proportion of the doctors getting into trouble for incompetence or naughtiness were, to put it bluntly, foreign. To say that this article did not go down terribly well with the medical establishment and the forces of political correctness would be an understatement of heroic proportions. So I was interested to see that a study by University College in London has found that the majority of the 88,000 foreign doctors working in the health service would fail exams if they were held to the same standard as British doctors. Over 1,000 doctors a year are licensed by the General Medical Council after passing an examination which assesses their clinical and language skills. (The language skills test produces some odd results. I once met a foreign doctor who thought that quinsy was a consequence of over-enthusiastic infertility treatment.) But the new study showed that around half of the doctors who were given licences would fail to reach the standards expected of British doctors. It is, therefore, perhaps not surprising that although foreign doctors make up only a third of NHS doctors they account for two thirds of the doctors struck off each year. The study was commissioned by the GMC itself after the charity/quango had been criticised by the British Association of Physicians of Indian Origin which claimed that the GMC failed too many doctors from overseas.

17

We have been in Paris for two days and we were woken this morning by the pigeons flapping at the window and doing a good deal of cooing. We haven’t been here for a while and when I put out the bird food yesterday morning it was several hours before the pigeons and the sparrows turned up. The pigeons, however, are bright enough to realise that when they get fed once it means that we are in residence and they will be fed again – every morning and every afternoon. We buy them bird food from the pet supplies section of the local supermarket and they very much approve. So, if they haven’t been fed by 9.00 a.m. they land on our sixth floor windowsill and wake us up. The sparrows dance around between the slow and steady pigeons, darting here and there with the speed of lightning. Feeding the birds may be illegal but it is a human right and a joy to the soul. The last time the police arrived we kept quiet and didn’t open the door. The French plod had, I suspect, been called by one of the other residents who disapproves of the birds being fed. (As the French found in the 1940s there’s always one miserable informer in any building.) The Paris police are hardly likely to break down the door to deal with a suspected case of bird feeding are they?

18

We did bugger all today. And absolutely nothing happened. We sat in the apartment, listening to music, reading books and playing games. It is, from time to time, quite wonderful to squander a day in such a luxurious way. Both of us felt surprisingly refreshed and invigorated by the rest. Everything happens at such a pace these days that it is occasionally necessary to turn off the telephones (even the mobile ones), ignore the internet and leave the mail uncollected. The important thing is not to be suckered into just checking the emails ‘to see if there’s anything urgent’. There almost certainly won’t be anything urgent but there will almost certainly be something annoying that someone else regards as important. It can wait a day.

19

We wandered up to Les Invalides and walked around the cloisters. We then sat in the small park near to the church where Napoleon is buried. It is only a few yards off the beaten track but hardly anyone ever goes there. We sat for an hour watching the sparrows and the firebugs. I’m sure that both Antoinette and I had more important things to do, but I am equally sure that neither of us had better things to do.

20

We caught the train back to England. We sat in our usual seats, at a table for two, and across the aisle the table for four was occupied by a bunch of rock musicians. I didn’t know who they were but Antoinette recognised them. They are, apparently, hugely successful and renowned for being exceptionally noisy and raucous on stage. This is, by coincidence, the second time this has happened and they were once again the quietest, politest travellers I’ve shared a carriage with for a long time. One worked on a laptop computer. The other three read books and magazines and drank water and fruit juice. I don’t wish to embarrass them so I will not mention their names, or the name of their group. A quartet of salesmen or a family with a couple of squabbling children would have made far more noise and been far more of a nuisance. This incident confirmed our experience that if you want to travel quietly, in dignity and in style then you should choose rock musicians as your travelling companions. On our last train journey, a week ago, four old age pensioners sat opposite us. They were disgraceful and embarrassing and screeched and shouted endlessly and generally behaved like hooligans. By the time we reached our destination they were all as pissed as newts.

21

We visited an acquaintance in a nursing home. It was an awful place. The residents were sitting in rows of plastic chairs staring at one another. Apart from some coughing and wheezing and a little occasional moaning the place was silent. It was awful. It reminded me of residential homes I visited when I was a young GP. I remember once suggesting to the matron in one of them that it might be a good idea to dig up the huge expanse of lawn at the front of the property and to allow the residents to grow vegetables and flowers. It would, I suggested innocently, be good exercise and a great hobby – as well as providing the nursing home with supplies of fresh vegetables and flowers. The response was immediate. The matron could not have been more appalled if I had suggested organising weekly ecstasy raves. The residents might injure themselves. There would be serious health and safety issues. There would be massive insurance problems. It could not possibly be done. I was startled and disappointed. (This was in the 1970s when ‘health’ and ‘safety’ were just beginning to rear their ugly heads.) I did, however, go back to the idea in the second of my books about Mrs Caldicot. In *Mrs Caldicot’s Knickerbocker Glory* the residents of her nursing home dig up the lawn so that they can grow whatever takes their fancy. Fiction is sometimes far more fun than real life.

22

I’ve just seen my favourite ever newspaper apology. This appeared in the *Financial Times* under the heading *Apology to His Excellency Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed al Khalifa*. Here is the text of the apology:

‘*An article about detainees at Guantanamo Bay in FT Weekend…was mistakenly accompanied by a photograph of Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed al Khalifa, foreign minister of the Kingdom of Bahrain, with a caption that incorrectly described him as* ‘*Khaled Sheik Mohammed: among five detainees on trial*’. *We apologise unreservedly to His Excellency Sheikh Khalid for the error and any distress caused.*’

I’m surprised Sheikh Khalid doesn’t now own the *Financial Times*. Maybe he does.

23

If I bit someone in the street I would be arrested. Why don’t footballers get arrested when they bite, kick, gouge one another on the pitch? It is hardly surprising that football fans behave like lunatics if they see their heroes behaving badly – and getting away with it. Bad behaviour on the pitch was virtually unheard of when professional footballers were paid £14 a week and had to have additional jobs in order to buy food for their ferrets.

24

Back in England we have weeds in our grass which are waist high. I thought I could stick it out longer than this but the weeds have called my bluff and I have reluctantly arranged for our lawn mower to be serviced.

25

A reviewer claims that my medical books are unfair and that Britain’s National Health Service is a wonderful organisation whose staff provide the best medical care in the world. This sort of complacent nonsense enrages me. The NHS is a bureaucratic monster which does far more harm than good. Here, taken from my mail bag, are just a few of the reasons why I believe the NHS is well past its sell-by-date and should be put out of our misery.

1. A woman of 93 was dumped at the wrong address by an ambulance crew. She fell and broke both hips while trying to walk the five miles to her house. She had told the ambulance crew that they were dropping her at the wrong house but they ignored her.
2. A 51-year-old woman was forced to sleep in a wheelchair for 15 months because bureaucrats working for a hospital trust decided that it was too dangerous for nurses to lift her into bed. The woman the nurses couldn’t or wouldn’t lift weighed just eight stone.
3. Administrators told a consultant surgeon to operate on non-urgent patients (including one wanting breast augmentation) before dealing with patients with cancer. The order came so that the hospital would meet Government waiting list targets.
4. A schoolboy who lived two miles from a major hospital was taken on a 100 mile round trip to have his broken wrist set. He was turned away by three hospitals and spent nine hours in agony.
5. A woman of 92 lay on a pavement for more than an hour with a broken leg. The hospital to which she was eventually taken was just a few hundred yards away.
6. A 75-year-old woman who was found dead in her home had been waiting five hours for an ambulance.
7. A black woman had a foot amputated in an NHS hospital. She was told that if she wanted a black artificial foot she would have to pay extra because black artificial feet cost more than white ones.
8. Two surgeons removed a patient’s one remaining healthy kidney. Neither of the surgeons had checked the patient’s notes or records or consent form. The surgeons were suspended for just twelve months.
9. When five bureaucrats visited a woman at home to assess her care requirements she fell down on the floor while trying to show them round. Although she begged them to help her to her feet none of them offered her a hand. Bureaucrats aren’t actually in the helping-people business.
10. Asylum seekers now routinely choose to go back home if they fall ill – because it is widely recognised that medical care is better almost anywhere outside the UK. The asylum seekers return after medical treatment because the benefits system in the UK is second to none.

26

I’ve received a rather snotty letter from someone at the GMC called Lindsey Westwood who is in charge of the Revalidation programme for all doctors and who tells me that if I wish to be registered and licensed as a doctor then I must follow the GMC’s procedure, even though it is patently clear to anyone over the age of two that it is quite impossible for me to follow their procedure. She has the gall to question whether or not I need to be licensed since I no longer stick my fingers into strangers’ orifices. (I have already explained exactly why I need to be licensed.) After wandering around on the internet for two minutes I was dumbfounded to find that just two years ago Ms Westwood (who is now pontificating about how doctors should be licensed and who is, it seems, in charge of the whole revalidation programme) was working for the Traffic Penalty Tribunal as an appeals manager. Before that she worked for AIG (an insurance company). I find it absolutely staggering that the person the GMC have put in charge of checking the fitness to practice of every doctor in Britain was previously checking parking tickets.

I’ve sent this reply:

‘*Thank you for your letter which, I’m afraid, I found rather pompous, patronising and just plain rude.*

There are two basic and crucial problems with your revalidation scheme in general. First, you are wasting doctors’ time on frivolous, pointless box ticking. The forms are endless and require the collecting of vast amounts of paperwork. This means that doctors have far less time for patients. Any honest GP or hospital doctor will confirm this in private. Less time for patients means a poorer service. I’m not surprised that the GMC distrusts the NHS and provides private health care cover for its employees. Second, older doctors are now forced to retire completely instead of working part time. This removes a vast number of experienced doctors from the available pool and is the reason foreign doctors are being flown in (at enormous expense) to provide locum cover. I know a lot of people like to be treated by bright young doctors who have been trained in the latest ways but I would always prefer an older doctor who has had the time to acquire intuition, instinct and wisdom. All that skill has now been lost; tossed aside as unwanted. (Older doctors are also far more likely to know, at first hand, a little about pain. Young doctors, who’ve maybe never been ill, are too likely to be blasé about pain.)

At a time when the EU’s Working Time Directive limits the number of hours doctors can work (NHS hospitals employ highly paid bureaucrats to make sure that doctors don’t work more hours than allowed) those older doctors, flexible and prepared to work part-time, are needed more than ever. It’s difficult to avoid the feeling that the whole revalidation procedure was designed to give the GMC more power and more money rather than to protect patients. If you don’t understand all this then I suspect you have very little idea of exactly how health care works in practice and I fear you don’t recognise the harm the GMC’s absurd revalidation policy is doing to the nation’s health. (I realise that your previous job was dealing with parking tickets). It is well known (though I realise the GMC may deny this truth) that revalidation was set up in an attempt to prevent another Shipman. It’s less well known that instead of preventing another Shipman (which it patently will not do) revalidation will be a far greater killer than Shipman himself. Shipman killed retail. The GMC is now killing wholesale. The whole revalidation scheme is arrogant, disorganised, unprincipled and out of touch and is designed to remove creative, thoughtful doctors rather than ‘bad’ doctors who might harm their patients. It will do nothing whatsoever to stop doctors with murder in their hearts. And it will do absolutely nothing to weed out corrupt, incompetent or ignorant doctors.

As far as my specific situation is concerned, I fear that you have misunderstood your role and assumed a sense of authority to which you are not entitled. The GMC’s job is solely to protect the public from incompetent and dishonest doctors. I’m a qualified doctor and how I choose to practise medicine is up to me. Your job is simply to make sure that I do my job honestly and honourably. You can easily do that by assessing my published work. I simply want to be treated fairly and in the same way as other doctors. I found your comment that you ‘will not be producing a bespoke solution which will allow you to keep a licence essentially on your own terms’ extraordinarily rude and, moreover, it seems to me to illustrate just how completely you have failed to understand our respective roles. I have never asked to have a licence on my own terms. All I ask is that I am treated fairly; in the same way as any other doctor. It is not my fault if you have designed such a rigid revalidation procedure that I do not fit into your scheme. As you have confirmed I gave you plenty of warning of my situation. I cannot produce forms filled in by colleagues and patients but I do think it is reasonable to expect you to judge my competence according to my work. I’ve never heard of the Independent Doctors Federation or any commercial providers and I have no intention of joining a Federation so that I can satisfy the GMC. I just want to be treated as fairly as psychiatrists, GPs and dermatologists. A refusal to allow me a licence would, I believe, be contrary to Human Rights legislation and employment law and would suggest that the GMC is officious and highhanded and determined to exclude originality and creativity from the profession. It is not your place even to consider whether I should or should not be licensed for my work. It is your job to administer the rules which decide whether or not I am safe to be licensed for the type of medicine I practise – writing books. The GMC added licensing to registration and I need both. It is now your job *to devise a form of appraisal that fits my work and not my job to change the way I practise medicine so that I can fit your form of appraisal.*

My own revalidation will be a good opportunity for us all to assess the relevance, validity, suitability and effectiveness of the GMC and to debate the GMC's revalidation programme in Parliament and in the press. I look forward to this and I hope you do too. '

27

A new study has suggested that men may suffer more when they have the flu because higher levels of testosterone weaken the body’s immune response. A study by Stanford University School of Medicine found that women tend to have a stronger antibody response to the bug which causes influenza than men do and that this response gives them better protection against the virus. It seems likely, therefore, that men are more susceptible to bacterial, viral, fungal and parasitic infections than women are. It’s curious that nature gave men stronger muscles and bigger bones and yet equipped them with a weaker immune system.

28

All our utility suppliers want us to go entirely online. They want to stop sending us bits of paper showing how much we owe and how much we have paid. Instead, they will send us an email occasionally. Some companies insist on our accepting email invoices. There is no alternative. I have resisted the pressure to have all our utility bills online because I know that if the HMRC's countless myrmidons want to see my expenses receipts they will expect bits of paper. Today, Antoinette pointed out another problem with having our utility bills sent on the internet. She points out that if we want to open a new bank account (or prove our identity for any other purpose) we will need utility bills. And since many banks and other places won't accept photocopies it is unlikely that they will accept invoices we've printed ourselves.

29

Our mower has come back. A man in a van brought it back and it arrived together with an invoice. Checking with the website of a well-known purveyor of lawn cutting machinery, I see that it cost £37 more to service the mower than it would have cost to buy a new one. If the mower doesn’t start next year the sensible thing will be to order a new one and dump the old one in the long grass at the top of the garden. I reckon we can ‘lose’ a couple of dozen mowers before they become too obvious. Or maybe I could fasten the dysfunctional mowers together with brown parcel tape and send them off to the Tate Gallery as a piece of Modern Art.

30

I’m delighted to see that my warnings about antibiotics seem to have filtered through to the medical establishment. Whenever I write about anything new I find that I am ignored, ridiculed and attacked and then, a few years later, people are falling over themselves to claim credit for the idea. I have for decades been warning that the growth in the number of antibiotic-resistant organisms will result in the return of infectious diseases that we had thought conquered. Sadly, as usual, my fears have been ignored, ridiculed and attacked. But it seems that things are changing at last. Speaking at the World Health Assembly, the UK’s Chief Medical Officer, Professor Sally Davies, said: ‘If we don’t take action, in 20 years’ time we could be back in the 19th century where infections kill us as a result of routine operations. In the last five years we’ve seen a steep change in the level of resistance…and in some cases a doubling of the death rate.’ The World Health Organisation itself agrees with my 30-year-old assertion and claims that the crisis with antibiotics is ‘bigger and more urgent than the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s’. They point out that ‘a child’s scratched knee from falling off their bike, common bladder infections among the elderly in care homes and routine surgery to replace broken hips could all become fatal as antibiotics are becoming increasingly useless’. I can’t imagine why it’s taken the WHO and Professor Davies so long to realise this but I hope they will have more luck than I have in persuading people to take this threat seriously. There are two simple reasons for this problem. First, doctors overprescribe antibiotics and dish them out like sweets. And the average prescribing doctor has no idea whether to use antibiotics for five days, seven days, ten days or a fortnight. Second, vets dish out antibiotics by the truckload because farmers give them routinely to their animals. The drugs aren’t used to treat infection but because animals which are given antibiotics tend to produce more meat and, therefore, fetch a higher price at market. Only yesterday I received a letter from a reader telling me that in the farmer’s field behind his house the cows stand shin deep in their own faeces. The farmer keeps his cows ‘healthy’ by having them treated constantly with antibiotics – provided by a compliant and wicked veterinary surgeon. The problem, of course, is that the widespread use of antibiotics in this way means that more bacteria become resistant. In addition, the problem is exacerbated by the fact that antibiotics then get into the food and water supply. The abuse of antibiotics by people who should know better is one of a number of problems which are far more important than the politically popular but scientifically unsustainable climate change theory. We may laugh and sneer at the strange things doctors did a century or so ago, when leeches and arsenic powders for stomach problems were common remedies, but the truth is that many of our modern practices are just as daft. Today’s doctors, who have sold their souls to the pharmaceutical industry and the government (in return for not too much work and oodles of cash) do a lot of crazy things. Surgeons now sew up the stomachs of greedy people (to stop them getting fat) and they remove perfectly healthy breasts from perfectly healthy women (so that they won’t develop breast cancer which could be avoided by dietary change). And doctors everywhere prescribe far too many antibiotics.

31

Cricket is in a bigger mess than I thought it was. Startling new evidence confirms that the game is moribund and has about as much of a future as the Liberal Democrats. At great risk to myself I ventured into a large newsagent to investigate the state of our true national game. I was looking for a now endangered species: the cricket magazine. I decided that the best way to measure the popularity of the game would be to count the number of cricket magazine titles available. There weren't any. There were 23 different magazine titles dealing with cycling, 16 magazines dealing with boxing and wrestling and six specialising in carp fishing. But no magazines dealing with cricket. There were, to my astonishment, 10 different magazines dealing with tattooing which seems now to be more popular than television or gardening. But there was nothing about cricket.

I found an assistant and asked if the cricket magazines had, perhaps, all sold out. 'Cricket?' he said, looking bewildered. 'Magazines on cricket,' I repeated. He shook his head and called over a more senior colleague. She looked thoughtful for a moment and then rummaged around among the football publications and the yachting magazines. 'I think we used to stock one or two,' she said. 'But I haven't seen any for a long while.' She pulled a magazine on walking out of a well stuffed rack. 'We've got quite a few magazines on walking.'

'No thank you,' I said, wondering why someone would want to buy a magazine on walking. I've been doing it since I was one but I've never wanted to read about it.

'We've got magazines on bowls,' she said. 'And curling.' She pulled out a magazine on curling and showed it to me.

'But nothing on cricket?'

She shook her head. 'We've got darts, snooker and ice hockey magazines. And quite a few on triathlons.'

'Anything on synchronised swimming?'

She moved across to a group of magazines dealing with swimming. She picked one out and handed it to me. A bunch of grinning synchronised swimmers smiled at me from the cover. It occurred to me that if there isn't one already then there will soon probably be a magazine on drowning.

The game that once ruled the hearts of all Y chromosome owners has become a sporting anachronism; a minority sport, competing with tiddlywinks for a corner of the nation's weakly beating heart. Morris dancing is more popular and has taken over as the quintessential English activity. I left, quite depressed, and outside the store, handed the swimming magazine I felt I had to buy to a scowling East European selling the 'Big Issue'. She looked at it and then at me. 'Now you can offer customers a choice,' I told her 'And anything's better than the '*Big Issue*'.'

It is clear from this scientific study that the people running cricket these days are as lost as if they were facing Deadly Underwood on a drying, sticky wicket. There are many possible reasons for this sad state of affairs but, as a working hypothesis, and I don't mean this to sound rude, I think it is probably fair to assume that the massed administrators of our sport have a collective IQ rather smaller than the late and lamented Harry Pilling's shoe size. They sold the television rights to our national game to a station controlled by a naturalised American and now seem surprised that schoolboys are more likely to study baseball statistics than cricket averages. Counties wanting to stage Ashes Test Matches need to bid so much for the rights that some now have the same sort of financial health as Grand Prix circuit owners. Cricket's administrators have, generally speaking, managed cricket with the sort of business acumen usually, and probably unfairly, associated with the whelk stall industry.

I fear that the majority of cricket clubs may go bust within the next five years. Already, many seem, like race courses, to be dependent on mid-season pop concerts to pay the bills. The members are leaving; tired of paying through the nose for a handful of matches and the chance to be abused by snotty gatemen. That rather woeful invention, 20/20 cricket, will soon die an unnatural death and the county secretaries will be sticking their fingers down the backs of the sofas in the executive boxes as they search for funds with which to pay their club's massive debts.

The big media managers haven't helped much either. Which idiot decided that the majority of cricket commentators and correspondents had to be retired cricketers? When the BBC hired Trueman and Bailey to whinge between overs on Test Match Special it was an inspired move. Fred puffed and huffed (sometimes at the same time) and Trevor pontificated. They operated singly but were the best double act since Lindwall and Miller or Hobbs and Sutcliffe. But Fred and Trevor were there as cherries on top of the ever present fruit cake. The real stars of the show were, of course, Arlott and Johnston; professional wordsmiths and erudite entertainers. Writing and commentating well require special skills and they both had them in abundance. The producers who cram old cricketers into commentary boxes seem unaware that with the solitary exception of Jack Fingleton, none of the great cricket writers or commentators ever played international cricket. I know that Henry Blofeld nearly did but there's a vast gulf between nearly and did. Neville Cardus played league cricket as a medium paced off break bowler but his speciality was apparently 'a quick one aimed straight at the batsman's penis'. La Swanton had his own side, of course, but I doubt if he ever lay awake waiting for the selectors to call. His average for his three county matches (13.4 against university sides) hardly gives him professional status.

It is true that most of the great cricketers of the past had newspaper columns, but everyone reading them knew damned well that the newspapers relied on proper journalists to glue the words together and turn them into sentences. And I suspect there were quite a few cricket playing authors who never quite got round to reading the books their ghosts had written for them. Today, however, it seems that the primary qualification for a cricket broadcaster is to have played a few games for England. And since the selectors have, in recent years, tried to scatter caps with random generosity there are a good many former players lying around waiting for the call. Heavens above, former captains are hardly thin on the ground either. Most of these retired cricketers would be better suited to coaching public school boys or running sports shops in the East Midlands. The result is that the quality of cricket writing has diminished at an alarming rate. And the quality of cricket broadcasting has deteriorated even more rapidly.

The basic problem is that retired sportsmen tend to be self-obsessed and to love nothing more than to talk about their greatest moments on the pitch. ‘Ah, that shot reminds me of the time I hit Lillian Thomson through the covers in 1974. Let me tell you about that…’.Test Match Special has become a parody of a once great programme. The listeners who switch on do so more out of habit than anything else. The original TMS succeeded because the broadcasters managed to persuade us that we were invited guests, sharing their day out at the cricket. It worked because the men at the other end of the airwaves were professionals who could paint pictures with words. Today, there is a lot of a ho ho hoing about the sticky cakes and too many tedious interviews with bankers and celebrities passing through. I live in hope that a commercial radio station will buy the rights. Anyone will do it so much better than the BBC, the EU’s official broadcasting unit.

I really don’t understand why there is this enthusiasm for stacking studios and press boxes with former players. Drama critics aren’t all retired actors. Political correspondents aren’t all retired politicians. So, why should the cricket media be dominated by former cricketers? Maybe they’re cheaper than proper writers and broadcasters. Hire one, get one free. The result is that the only time cricket gets newspaper coverage is when the universally acclaimed Kelvin Patterson has his nails manicured or reports an exceptionally successful bowel movement. (I wouldn’t have picked him for England if he’d averaged 200 in Tests and been able to bowl all day at 100 mph. I may be wrong, of course, but he seemed to me to be the sort of fellow who ought to be playing football rather than cricket.) But the selectors fired him and now they’re going to have to find another way to keep Lord Piers Morgan interested in cricket.

Other than Kelvin’s antics, cricket today has a terrible image. It is, of course, dull, po-faced, pretentious and self-important but there are also too many bad aspects to it that cannot be avoided. Players and officials seem to have forgotten that amateur cricketers play to amuse themselves but that professionals play to entertain the paying spectators. Cricket is a branch of show business when played for money and the aim should be to send the punters home with songs in their hearts, smiles on their faces and memories tucked away in their souls.

Another mistake has been to give in to the armies of the politically correct and to try to give equal status to women’s cricket. The patronising assumption that women should be allowed to do everything that men do is, of course, an utter nonsense and rests on the matching assumption that women get a raw deal in modern society. (Look at the facts: the Brussels Broadcasting Corporation’s outrageously sexist radio programme Woman’s Hour is all about women. And yet there is no matching programme for men. Can you imagine the BBC broadcasting a programme called Man’s Hour? The magazine *Men Only* is all about women too. But if anyone ever produces a magazine called *Women Only* it will, I suspect, be full of recipes, knitting patterns and sound advice on feminine matters. I rest my case.)

Women’s cricket undoubtedly has a place somewhere. But not on this planet, thank you. It’s even more of a freak show than synchronised swimming. It certainly isn’t cricket as we know it. I honestly doubt if a world XI of test playing women cricketers could give a decent school side a match worth playing. I know we aren’t even supposed to think things like this but cricket is, by nature, a man’s game in the same way that floor gymnastics and show jumping are sports best enjoyed by women. The breast stroke is a women’s event because it was invented so that women could swim without getting their hair wet. Fast bowling is best done by men simply because they do it so much better.

The final problem is that the public now know that cricket is fixed and run by the bookies. No one knows how many matches are fixed but we all know that many are. If you know that some matches are fixed but you don’t know which ones, then all matches become suspect. And that changes everything.

So, what is to be done? Well, we have to accept that cricket has changed. We have to move with the times. Let no one accuse me of having my feet in the mud or my mind stuck in the past. If cricket is to succeed we have to be bold and imaginative. The forthcoming demise of 20/20 cricket shows that the fickle public must be drawn in with newer and greater attractions. Falling gate figures show that dancing girls and caterwauling popsters no longer pull in the paying punters. But the answer isn’t difficult to find. The awful 20/20 cricket was never really cricket or sport. It was circus time. And so we must offer a more entertaining circus. We must learn from the Romans and allow the spectators to play a bigger part in the game. At the end of each match let them vote (by text or email) for the worst player on each side. And then (and this is the touch of genius) those two players will be put on spits, roasted and served to the crowd. A giant pig roast without the expense of buying the pigs.

Cricket clubs can do a deal with the phone companies and get half the call revenue, and then make even more money by selling off bits of their worst player, wrapped in a bun and covered in ketchup. What a thrill for everyone. And what an incentive for the players to do their very best on the field of play.

Two players won’t keep a big crowd fed, of course. And most county sides probably won’t want to lose more than one player per match. So I have another suggestion, perfectly in keeping with the mood of the modern game. I got the idea from North Korea, where Jang Song Thaek was executed by his nephew for ‘failing to applaud with sufficient enthusiasm’. Cricket clubs with financial aspirations set up some CCTV cameras and spectators who applaud without vigour are then selected for roasting.

The spectators, having paid to get in, then pay extra to eat one another!

If that’s not commercially viable, I don’t know what is. Maybe cricket has a future, after all.

June

1

EU supporters claim that patriotism is for scoundrels (and, because they don’t understand the phrase, Little Englanders). Since whatever the EU’s fascist supporters believe in, is bad then it is clear that if we are going to do the right thing we must all become more patriotic. I suspect, indeed, that patriotism is the only political leaning now worth having.

2

I wish grapefruit growers would give up producing fruit with tiny seeds (they usually promote them, erroneously, as ‘seedless’) and go back to producing the ones with proper, decent sized pips. The growers started producing grapefruit with smaller seeds because they believed that people hated having to fish the pips out of a grapefruit they were eating and would happily swallow the smaller seeds in the mistaken belief that they were harmless. The problem for me is that I’m a doctor and I know damned well that the smaller size seeds are perfectly proportioned to catch in my appendix. Because of this risk I have to fish them all out and put them on the side of my plate when eating a grapefruit. This takes forever and is a very messy business. Bring back grapefruit with pips big enough to use as pellets with rubber band catapults!

3

A friend of mine has been miserable for days. He used to run one of those small seaside hotels where the windows won’t close properly in the winter and won’t open at all in the summer. He retired some years ago, selling the hotel to a developer who converted it into small flats for social security beneficiaries. Today, at last, I persuaded my friend to tell me what was worrying him.

‘I got onto the bus and a young woman stood up and offered me her seat,’ he said softly. There was a long, long pause. ‘I suddenly realised that I must look old,’ he confessed.

He told me that until this incident on the bus he had assumed that when young women smiled at him it was because they fancied him. Now he realises that it’s because they feel sorry for him.

My friend is 87-years-old and, like most octogenarians, comes equipped with a fair few wrinkles.

4

Broadcasters used to regard cricket as an art. These days they like to pretend it’s a science. Computer graphics are supposed to tell the viewer what the ball would have done (or would not have done) and a whole range of modern visual aids (such as Hot Spot and Hawk-Eye) second guess the umpires and give any viewer the chance to be a critic. I know I am old-fashioned but I miss the old days of John Arlott and Jim Laker who, when commentating, would talk only when they had something useful to say. When sport is televised there often isn’t much need for any commentary. The picture tells the story. Sadly, today’s commentators think they’re failing in their duty if they don’t fill every second with some pointless tittle tattle. They read out their own tweets and talk incessantly about themselves and their achievements. They may well have degrees in gym and umpiring and coaching tiny tots but they have no love for the language or mastery of their newly chosen art. Oh, for the bad old days when the silence would occasionally be broken only by the quiet snoring of John Arlott sleeping off a second bottle of claret.

Am I the only person to be fed up of the incessant wittering of celebrities? These days no luncheon or tea interval is allowed to pass without an actor or politician sharing with us their pointless, humourless anecdotes. In the bad old days television producers would fill in the tea interval with a pre-recorded reading of some piece of literature or poetry. One week there would be a reading of a cricket match from Dickens. Another week someone would read a little A.A.Thompson. And occasionally John Arlott would read out one of his own cricket poems. You don’t hear all that much literature on Test Match Special or Sky television these days. Actually, I don’t hear much of anything. I neither listen nor watch.

5

I’m now the proud owner of a pair of pince nez which have been fitted with prescription lenses. I bought several pairs of pince nez at a couple of auctions and took the best frames along when I had to have my eyes tested. The optician seemed delighted to be faced with an unusual challenge and today I collected the results of his work. My new pince nez are spring loaded and extremely comfortable to wear. They are very light, come with a neat and very old case and fit easily into a waistcoat pocket. I can’t imagine why more people don’t choose to wear them. They will, I fancy, be quite a potent weapon. I look forward to peering over them at tax inspectors, customs officers and other assorted bureaucratic riff raff. Considering that the lenses had to be specially tailored to fit the tiny frames the cost wasn’t prohibitive. (Why is it, I wonder, that opticians are allowed to charge so much for an ordinary pair of spectacle frames. The spectacles which can be bought for a pound or two at supermarkets are often better designed and better made than the spectacles which opticians sell for a hundred times as much money.)

Best of all, however, the optician told me that I do not have macular degeneration. I was surprised, delighted and puzzled at this news but the optician showed me the scans which proved beyond doubt that this is one disease I do not have to worry about. So, why was I told that I did have early macular degeneration just a few years ago? Was it just incompetence? Or did the optician who told me this, and who encouraged me to take special (expensive) tablets to slow down the condition, simply have a product to sell? If so then her behaviour was criminal and she should be disbarred and put behind bars. I’ve had several years of completely unnecessary worry. I do have a cataract developing but compared to macular degeneration that’s a walk in the park.

6

Obama’s tenure as President of the United States of America will be remembered for wars, lies, assassinations of innocent Americans and Olympic class hypocrisy. He produced widespread disappointment and disillusionment among the naïve and trusting folk who thought they’d found an honest politician, and who must by now have realised that politics is all about campaigning and has nothing to do with governing. He has now announced that Britain must remain a member of the European Union. The sentiment is not surprising. It was, of course, largely to please the Americans that Britain entered the damned Common Market in the first place. I wonder how Obama would like it if we had a leader who told him what policies America should follow.

7

I saw a picture of the audience at a Google developer conference. (I have no idea what one of these is, and no interest whatsoever in finding out.) Every one of the audience members was a nerd straight out of Central Casting. All were male, all under 40, all wearing black T-shirts and all the sort of sad folk that hale and hearty grown-ups try to avoid whenever humanly possible. Just looking at the picture I knew, just knew, that all of the Google developers play video games all night long, spend all their money on computer magazines, speak in incomprehensible jargon and are infinitely more stupid than they think they are. Around 75% of them will, in due course, be arrested for peeping, exposing themselves or serial killing. The picture reinforced everything I already knew about Google and its fans.

8

A national report (called, tellingly, *Poverty and Social Exclusion*) has concluded that people should be officially classified as poor if they ‘don’t have what they think they need and what people around them have’. If the report had been published on the 1st of April I would have assumed it was a not very good practical joke. But it’s real. People already think that they are poor if they don’t have at least one late model motor car for every adult in the family, a widescreen television set in the living room and subsidiary sets in the kitchen and all bedrooms, a subscription to Sky television (according to many self-appointed experts a subscription to satellite television is now one of life’s essentials, along with daily bread and a roof), trainers with flashing laces, a tablet, a laptop and at least one fancy mobile phone per person. The tragedy is that social policy is devised according to these damned reports. When everyone feels poor there is bound to be dissatisfaction, unrest, envy and misery.

9

It has been known for years that men and women who are married are likely to enjoy better health, and live longer, than people who are single. Now, researchers at Harvard Medical School have shown that the blood pressure of people who are married falls slightly at night. A night-time drop in the systolic pressure is, apparently, associated with a lower incidence of heart disease. Single folk do not have this night-time fall and are, therefore, more likely to die early. Curiously, the researchers do not seem to have conducted any research into whether or not it matters if the marriage is a happy one.

10

An independent bookshop sent an email ordering copies of all my Bilbury books for a customer. We've received a number of such orders recently and I have no doubt that these are coming because of the success of the e-Book sales on Amazon. Some of the orders are probably coming from public libraries which have had requests for the books from their patrons. I sent an email back to the bookshop telling them that the books are now out of print. I could not help also pointing out that over the years I had done everything I could to persuade bookshops to stock my self-published books but that virtually all of them had refused to take any shelf stock at all – even though they could return any books which they didn't sell. As a self-publisher I sold a fairly huge number of books (with quite a few individual titles selling more than 50,000 copies each in hardback in the UK alone) but hardly any of these were sold through bookshops. The few that were sold through bookshops were sold only as a result of customers wandering in and ordering the books directly. The problem, of course, was that small bookshops were just as reluctant as the large chains to take books from a small publisher – even though they could easily order the books from any one of the major wholesalers. I told the assistant from the bookshop which had wanted to order the seven books in the Bilbury series that the books are now only available as kindle books on Amazon (where, I'm delighted to say, all seven have been in the Amazon bestseller lists.) I find it difficult to have any affection for bookshops these days and I confess I hardly ever go into one (though I am an enthusiastic customer of second-hand book shops – especially those which are privately run). Shops selling new books are closing faster than pubs and in my experience most of these shops deserve to close. They have been exclusively loyal to the big publishers selling cookery books and gardening books and television tie-in books and now those markets are shrinking rapidly. The big publishers are giving up and struggling to make a living selling e-Books. Bookshops will also die. The wholesalers will go too, for they have huge warehouses with nothing to store. (A man working at one major wholesaler told me, quite seriously, that they planned to start wholesaling e-Books.) The whole traditional publishing industry will die. Still, it occurs to me that there are some advantages for authors. In the good old days an author had to sell his book to an agent who had to sell it to a publisher who had to persuade a wholesaler to stock it and bookshops to take copies on a sale or return basis and the bookshop then had to sell the book to book buyers. As I have discovered over the last quarter of a century, self-publishing is quite different. The author sells straight to the reader – cutting out all the parasitic middlemen. And e-Book publishing is particularly well suited to self-publishers. Indeed, any author who allows a traditional publisher to handle his e-Books is barking mad.

11

The headlines this morning mostly read *Statins Could Reduce the Risk of Breast Cancer*. Oh dear. I really do despair. It appears that the drug companies which have managed to persuade the Government to give British doctors bonus payments in order to persuade them to prescribe these damned things for eight million healthy individuals (in order to prevent heart attacks) are planning to improve their profits still further by telling doctors to give the pills to all women with breasts. (Drug companies tried to do this with a drug called tamoxifen. The plan was that all women would take it to prevent breast cancer. I put a spanner in the works by revealing that the drug actually caused cancer and that it seemed perfectly possible, therefore, that it might well kill far more women than it saved.) It appears that scientists have noticed that there is a link between high cholesterol levels and breast cancer and so they want women to take the drug in order to reduce their cholesterol levels. It's a brilliant argument except for the fact that it has more holes in it than a fishing net. Apart from the fact that statins cause horrendous side effects, and that the jury is still out on whether or not reducing cholesterol is a good idea, the plain fact is that the incidence of breast cancer would plummet if women ate less fatty food and, in particular, gave up, or cut down on, eating meat. Today's farmers fatten up their animals because they've noticed that when you get paid by the pound an animal which weighs more fetches more cash at the abattoir. They haven't noticed, or don't care, that fatty meat means a dramatic increase in the incidence of cancer among their consumers. So, the bottom line is that statins are potentially dangerous and there is a much easier, far safer way to reduce the risk of breast cancer. Nevertheless, I have absolutely no doubt that before long the drug companies will have persuaded the Government to pay doctors extra to prescribe statins for all breast bearing citizens. The next step will be for the medical profession (and its drug company paymasters, the people pulling the strings) to increase the number of diseases for which statins are essential and the age at which people should be taking these drugs. The plan, already, is for statins to be given to 40% of the entire population – most of whom are healthy. This is utterly appalling. How can any doctor in his right mind recommend giving such dangerous drugs to so many people in the hope that they might, just might, prevent an illness? Whatever happened to the old principle of 'First do no harm'? Why do doctors do this when those with functioning brain tissue must know that patients could improve their health, and dramatically reduce the risk of illness, by changing their diet? The answer, I am afraid, is that most doctors have been bought by drug companies. And drug companies will make billions out of this dangerous nonsense. I've exposed this appalling practice for many decades and now realise that no one in the profession or the media seems to give a damn. I would write a book specifically outlining the hazards associated with statins but, sadly, I know damned well that no one would buy it. The final step will be for the profession (backed by its drug company paymasters) to persuade the Government that patients should be 'encouraged' to take the drugs, by being told that if they refuse them they will not be allowed to claim benefits, to leave the country, to renew their driving licences or to use the NHS. And then, the final, final step will be for the drugs to become compulsory, with the police arresting anyone who refuses a prescription or cannot prove that they have dutifully taken the pills they have been prescribed. We are well on the way to that scary endpoint. George Orwell must be standing up and shouting: 'I told you so!'

12

Those readers who were for some reason offended by my book *Oil Apocalypse* (which described the peak oil crisis in detail) and who still delight in writing to me every time a new bucket of oil is discovered, might like to know that last year all the oil exploration companies in the world discovered just 13 billion barrels of oil. That may sound a lot but it was the lowest rate of discovery for 62 years. And between us we all managed to use up 33.5 billion barrels of oil in the same period. You don't need to be terribly good at sums to work out that we are using up oil faster than we're finding it. Moreover, the real key in this whole issue is the EROEI – the Energy Return on Energy Invested – which measures the amount of usable energy acquired from a resource compared to the amount of energy required to extract that usable energy. A falling EROEI means that prices of energy, and everything which relies on energy for its production or transport, will rise. Whenever we buy anything these days we are effectively buying oil and prices are going to rise remorselessly. When Saudi Arabia first extracted oil their returns were 100:1 (they produced 100 times as much energy as they used up) but today the average is 14:1. The strange thing is that few of my books caused as much anger as *Oil Apocalypse*. Several people who hadn't even bothered to read the book wrote Web blogs condemning it. One or two didn't like my prediction that we are heading for a pre-industrial age because as the cheap fuel runs out so our world which has been built on the availability of cheap energy obtained from oil, must change dramatically. The standard objection is that when the oil runs out we will be able to drive around just as well in electric cars, hydrogen cars or hybrid cars. None of the proponents of these transport modes ever seems to be concerned about the fact that they all rely on the existence of an energy source. We would none of us be moving around much if we drove cars which relied upon the electricity provided by sunshine or the wind. Some critics were angry because they simply didn't want to have to face the truth but at least one outspoken critic got red-faced and apoplectic because he felt that my book on the peak oil crisis was selling more copies than his. His answer to this distressing situation was to write a piece on his website explaining why he wasn't going to read my book and telling his readers why they shouldn't buy it either.

It's sad but these days the internet has made it increasingly difficult to sell original books on disturbing or controversial subjects. This is partly because the internet makes it easy for the prejudiced and the bigoted to come out of the woodwork and do their best to suppress whatever they do not like, find inconvenient, consider threatening or simply disagree with. A nasty review can finish a book's prospects within hours. And, of course, it is far too easy for the envious, the bitter and the twisted to do their best to suppress other people's work.

13

The Financial Conduct Authority (entirely useless and expensive Quango no 2827637 in an endless number of similar taxpayer funded organisations) has investigated the poor returns savers receive on their money and has concluded that it is the fault of savers for not shopping around for better deals. The employees of the FCA clearly live on an entirely different planet to the one the rest of us inhabit. Has anyone working there ever tried to move money from one bank to another? Thanks to the absurd anti-money laundering and anti-terrorism rules it would be easier for a pub football club to qualify for the World Cup finals than it is for an ordinary punter to open a new bank account.

Indeed, I have no doubt that the banks, knowing that their customers no longer feel any loyalty to the bank which holds their money, use the anti-money laundering and anti-terrorism regulations to make it as difficult as possible for customers to close or open accounts.

And have the decerebrate buffoons at the FCA not noticed that if you find a bank offering a better rate of interest it will, within minutes of you producing your passport, gas bill and inside leg measurement, cut the rate of interest to the lowest of any lender on the planet?

14

We were getting into bed. Antoinette was clearly worried about something and eventually I managed to persuade her to tell me what was troubling her.

‘How long can the brain go without oxygen?’ she wanted to know.

‘No more than three minutes.’

‘I thought as much,’ she sighed, unhappily. She plumped up two pillows, put them behind her and sat up in bed.

‘So why is that worrying you?’ I asked.

‘I always lie on one side and I’m worried that I’m compressing the arteries taking blood to my brain,’ she said. ‘If I do that my brain won’t be getting enough oxygen. And I’ll develop dementia.’

I looked at her and tried to think of something reassuring to say.

‘When you lie on your leg or your arm it goes white doesn’t it? And that’s because the blood isn’t getting through.’

I nodded.

‘So if it happens to a limb why shouldn’t it happen to your head?’

I started to say something.

‘When your leg isn’t getting enough blood it feels funny and so you so move it, don’t you?’

I nodded.

‘But how would I know if I was asleep and my brain wasn’t getting enough oxygen? I’d be asleep so I wouldn’t know would I?’

‘But…’ I started to say.

‘I’m going to stay awake all night,’ she said. ‘That way even if I am lying on my head I’ll know if it doesn’t get enough blood.’

15

Antoinette has bought a new digital watch which, if you press the right buttons in the correct order, also tells you how fast your heart is beating. Antoinette is very good at understanding electronic devices and I am not. I suspect this may be because I am considerably older than she is and, as I once explained, spent my formative years at infant school scratching my alphabet and sums on a piece of slate, which I wiped clean not with a touch of a button or an India rubber but with a damp rag. It is a long walk from such primitive tools to mastering a watch which can tell you what time it is or if you are dead. I am not, however, the only person who finds these devices something of a challenge. While we were both in another room an American visitor who has been staying with us for a few days, and who is something of a known hypochondriac, decided to try out Antoinette's new watch for himself. He strapped it onto his wrist and pressed the buttons he thought he'd seen Antoinette press. Moments later, I heard him call out in dismay. We hurried into the room to see what was wrong with him.

'You'd better ring for an ambulance', he said.

'What's the matter?' I asked. He looked well enough to me. He was just as pink as ever and he wasn't sweating.

'I think I'm having some sort of ventricular tachycardia attack,' he told us. He pointed to the watch. I looked at it and then looked at him. 'My pulse is never that fast,' he said. He was now hyperventilating and there was panic in his eyes. 'Do you have ambulances over here?' he asked. 'Yes, we have ambulances,' I told him. 'But you don't need one.'

He looked at me, puzzled and clearly alarmed. 'My pulse is 156!' he cried, pointing to the watch. 'It's never been that fast.' I unfastened the watch and removed it. 'That's the time,' I told him. 'It's four minutes to two.'

16

I rang the stockbrokers at Lloyds Bank. Before I could deal I had to give my account number, numbers from a ‘secret’ code number they had given me, a password, my date of birth, my bank account number, my bank sort code, my nationality, details of where I was born, details of where the money I wanted to invest had come from, the country where I pay tax, whether or not I pay tax in other countries and numerous other things which I have now forgotten. By the time I’d finished I couldn’t remember why I had telephoned in the first place and all these nonsensical questions had taken so long that the price of the share I wanted to buy had probably changed quite dramatically. I intend to close this account. In the past I have often thought that there is no such thing as a dumb question – just dumb answers. I am now convinced that I was wrong. Lloyds Bank has mastered the art of asking dumb questions. If anyone on the Board of Directors of this disgraced bank is paid more than £2.50 a year then they are being egregiously overpaid.

17

In 1985, in Cork, a man called Bernard Murphy, who was an independent candidate standing for his council elections, advised electors to back him at the bookies and then vote for him. Mr Murphy won his seat and the local bookie had to pay out £20,000. What an absolutely brilliant idea. Mr Murphy’s manifesto seems to me to have been far more honest and profitable for the electors than the manifestoes published by any of the established political parties.

18

We are in Paris and the EU Commissioner for Burgling and Mugging has had his wicked way with the City of Light. At night the street lights now go out and so Paris, which acquired its soubriquet when it became the first city in the world to have gas lit streets, has become the City of Darkness. The Parisians are not impressed and since the French have a history of starting good, productive revolutions I do hope this will trigger an uprising against the fascist EU.

Still, the EU has not yet succeeded in stopping birds singing to one another. This evening we heard two nightingales exchanging tunes. What a joy.

19

Five shops in our small street have become offices since we were last in Paris. It is clearly cheaper to rent a shop, and use it as an office, than it is to take space in a purpose-built office building. Now, sadly, those buildings have plastic blinds hanging down behind the windows and all the passer-by can see is a clump of people crouched over computer screens. Happily, however, one small shop (wherein used to sit a man making mattresses by hand) has been taken over by a man who polishes shoes for a living. There are samples of his work in the window. I think he must glaze shoes with sugar because even a pair of gentleman’s brown brogues is as shiny as a pair of patent leather dancing pumps.

We caught the bus down to St Germain. Antoinette, who has taught herself to play, took some music with her and played ‘Bright Eyes’ and ‘Let it Be’ on the piano upstairs in Shakespeare and Company (the bookshop in sight of Notre Dame Cathedral). She played beautifully and I have never been prouder of anyone or anything.

20

I read in one of the French newspapers that lace underwear has officially been banned in Russia and Kazhestan. Fancy lingerie is, it seems, regarded as a threat to the State. This, I think, tells us everything we need to know about those two countries. How does the state benefit if women and eonists are all forced to wear bras and knickers made out of itchy, brown canvas? And what sort of State is so flimsy that its very security can be threatened by the sort of underwear women choose to wear?

21

Rousseau (the French philosopher not the fat singer who used to sing while dressed in a tent made out of picnic rug material) said that men are good and that it is too much government and too many laws that make them bad. I think he was probably right. You can see it happening before your eyes. The EU has created so many absurd laws that everyone is now a lawbreaker. I very much doubt if I know anyone who isn't a criminal. The trouble is, of course, that when the law cannot sensibly be obeyed the citizens lose all respect for it. The same thing happened in America during Prohibition. People ignored the one law and lost respect for the other laws. We can rely on just one thing these days: if the morons in Brussels, Westminster and our local council offices can find a way to mess things up and make life more complicated and more unpleasant they will find it and then make it a law. Today, thanks to the idiots in charge, everything in the UK is more expensive and of poorer quality than elsewhere. Our utilities, our transport, our rabbit hutch housing (thrown up to satisfy government targets and satisfying absolutely no standards of any value), our clothing and our food are all of poorer quality than are the products sold in France, for example. Government in Britain today means privilege (for them), waste, hypocrisy, exploitation, suppression and manipulation. Our infrastructure is crumbling and only the skills and integrity of Victorian architects and builders are keeping it standing. The public have been forced through scepticism and into cynicism and through pessimism and defeatism to a fearful surrender to authority. We can't change anything anymore because no one in authority listens and so we have no voice. Anyone in Britain who seeks truth and justice is likely die young of a broken heart; disillusioned and destroyed by a daily torment of disappointment.

I confess that I have a slight problem with authority (and although I am at heart a complete softy I do my best not to let them know that) and there's a lot of it about these days. The basic problem is that our politicians are not very bright but are very corrupt. Most are also rich and privileged and don't believe in democracy because the idea of politicians having to do what the people want them to do scares the hell out of them. The average modern politician leaves university at 21 knowing absolutely nothing about real life or the real world. Thanks to Daddy's chums at the bank he or she gets a job as a 'special adviser' to a Government politician (though heaven knows what use a 21-year-old university graduate is as a special adviser) and five years later he or she is adopted as a parliamentary candidate and becomes an MP.

I have seen a good many politicians over the years the present batch are, without a doubt, the worst. This morning I tried to describe Nick Clegg, former professional eurocrat, former MEP, enthusiastic Europhile and currently (as I write) leader of the Liberal Democrats.

(People vote Tory because they want things to stay the same. People vote Labour because they want the Government to keep giving them money. But who the hell votes Liberal Democrat? And why?)

I thought about it for a few minutes and then realised that Clegg is the sort of smug, hypocritical, sanctimonious, two-faced kid who was teacher's pet and a sneak. People can't stand Clegg not because they don't like his policies but because they don't like him as a person. He's whining, self-pitying, sanctimonious and as smug as a Salmond – and those are just his good points. Traitorous lies disguised as sanctimonious piety.

We've all known a Clegg in our lives but I feel I can sum him up quite accurately in three words: lying little shit. Most countries have detestable politicians but only Britain has a Clegg. (Plus, we also have a back-up in the form of Vince Cable – the man whose rank incompetence with regard to the Royal Mail privatisation has so far cost every man, woman and child in the country £20 each in real money.)

Our misfortune is that we are far too polite to enjoy the concept of schadenfreude and so when Clegg and Cable are finally ejected from office (as all politicians are) we will wave them goodbye with crocodile tears in our eyes. There is no word in the English language to explain the concept of schadenfreude (the cruel delight Germans feel when their foes are brought down with woes) and we are in any case too easily embarrassed to enjoy it. And then, of course, there would be the guilt.

22

Antoinette and I were sitting in a park near to the Eiffel Tower, watching the birds, and feeding them. We watched a crow dip bits of hard baguette into a small puddle, in order to soften them before eating them. A dunking crow! We watched another crow pick up an abandoned crisp packet, hold it by the closed end and empty out the remaining bits and pieces of food. I doubt if there are any members of the Liberal Democrats who could manage that. Crows are remarkable birds. They hang around in groups (or ‘parliaments’) but recognise and respect one another’s ownership of scraps of food. If a crow has food in its beak, no other crow will try to take it away. This is firmly in contrast to the behaviour of pigeons who squabble and fight over food. If a pigeon can take a piece of bread from another pigeon’s beak it will do so.

Suddenly, a sour looking man came over and shouted at us. I don’t like being shouted at, or told what to do, and so I pretended not to understand him, smiled and held up the box of cage bird food I was holding as offering him some. The man scowled and did not seem impressed. He said a lot of things I did not understand but which did not sound complimentary. The world is full of busy bodies these days. I took out my wallet and offered him a five euro note to go away. He became very cross at this so I offered him ten euros in the hope that this would make him so cross that he would explode. Unfortunately, it made him crosser but he did not explode. He hurried away.

‘Where’s he gone?’ I asked Antoinette.

‘He said something about fetching a policeman,’ she replied. ‘There’s one just over there.’ She pointed to a gendarme a couple of hundred yards away.

‘Shall we go?’ I said, distributing the remainder of the bird food. ‘The sun has gone behind a cloud and I’d like a cup of tea.’ I put the empty box (the evidence) into a bin and we went home.

We are now wanted criminals again. I will wear a different hat next time we go out and I very much doubt if we will be recognised.

‘What is the worst they could do, if they catch us?’ I asked Antoinette. ‘They could, I suppose, tear out my fingernails, shoot off my knee caps, nail my tongue to the table, stick hot needles in my eyes and cut out my liver, but that’s about it.’

Antoinette looked at me and raised an eyebrow. ‘They could go through last year’s expenses receipts and ask you questions,’ she pointed out.

I shuddered.

23

The total number of medical practices in England has fallen again. In the last ten years it has dropped from 8,830 to 7,960. The reason is simple: there are huge financial incentives for doctors to group together in large practices. And so doctors in single-handed practices are closing their doors and joining in with bigger practices so that they can share their costs and set up expensive telephone systems which require patients to press one (if you require a repeat prescription), press two (if you have an insurance claim), press three (if you wish to speak to the dispensary), press four (if you are bleeding to death) and so on. Many people living in the country now have to travel miles to their nearest doctor – and they are exceedingly unlikely to be able to persuade a doctor to visit them at home. The Government, the medical establishment, the bureaucrats and the drug companies all like bigger practices, which they regard as more efficient and easier to control. Drug companies like to have doctors all grouped together in one place because it makes it easier and cheaper for their reps to visit them. The GMC’s revalidation scheme, which requires doctors to obtain gold stars of approval from medical colleagues as well as patients, makes life almost impossibly difficult for doctors working by themselves. And, of course, the EU, being an overtly fascist organisation, is constantly trying to get rid of everything small. The eurocrats don’t approve of small hospitals, small schools, small businesses or small medical practices.

24

The French believe that life begins when work ends but the British have come to dread retirement because they know that Society (with a very definite capital S) will regard them as worthless; a burden to be ignored, pushed around and got rid of as soon as possible.

The French, however, look forward to retirement very much. A neighbour in our apartment building has joined a local drama group. She speaks her very own brand of English, looks a little like Dame Maggie Smith and must be 75-years-old if she’s a day.

‘Jessica Tandy was 80 when she got her Oscar,’ she told us with a knowing smile and something of a wink. We both told her we hoped she didn’t have to wait that long. She was very pleased by this. We wonder, however, if she may not be a little innocent for thespianism. She once admitted that until she was in her late sixties she thought that a bisexual was someone who got their sexual kicks from riding a two wheeled conveyance, that a condom was a small apartment and that a denture was a small amount of damage to the bodywork of a motorcar. Until we put her right she also thought that the phrase ‘the pen is mightier than the sword’ referred to the might of the male organ, as in ‘the penis is mightier than the sword’.

25

Immigration is continuing to soar. One in ten people living in Britain doesn’t speak English as their main language and there are now 800,000 permanent residents of England who don’t speak a word of English. Most of them work for call centres. The countries queuing up to join the EU (and, therefore, have free access to our benefits system) include Turkey, Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia. They have a combined population of just under 100 million and income levels just under a third of ours. That should be fun. The Migration Advisory Committee has, incidentally, admitted that the concentration of low-skilled migrants has already put great pressure on health, education, transport and housing services. Well, I never. What a surprise that is. How and why, I wonder, does it take politicians and quangos years or decades to see what even quarter-witted citizens could see aeons ago? And while immigration soars, emigration is growing too. There are now five million Britons living abroad. That’s the largest diaspora of any developed country. Many of those are young, hard-working professionals who have left Britain because it no longer feels like home – or a good place to bring up their children.

26

Increasing numbers of school children are allowed to wear their own clothes (instead of school uniform) when sitting examinations. The idea, so I'm told, is that children will relax more when wearing their own clothes. This is, however, a daft idea for two reasons. First, the last thing anyone should be when taking an examination is relaxed. Adrenalin is an essential ingredient for those trying to perform well. Second, we remember things far more easily when we are in precisely the environment where we learnt them. So, for example, we remember what we've been taught far more effectively if we take an examination in the classroom where we studied. And we remember more effectively if we are wearing the clothes we wore when we learned. So, school teachers who allow children to take examinations while wearing jeans and T-shirts are making a huge mistake.

Talking of children, I also learned today that the basic cost of bringing up a child in Britain is now estimated to be £227,000 a year. That's after tax and it is for one child. Two children will cost the best part of half a million pounds over a 20 year period. That is assuming that the child doesn't go to a private school, require expensive orthodontic treatment or have piano lessons. This now means that the only people who can afford to have more than one child are the very rich and those couples who live on benefits.

27

Farmers and politicians are still arguing that badgers cause tuberculosis in cows and must, therefore, be killed. When, I wonder, will these people look at the scientific evidence before opening their mouths? The fact is that tuberculosis has always been a slum disease, caused by overcrowding and poor diet. It is a slum disease when it affects humans and it is a slum disease when it affects cattle. Cows develop tuberculosis when they are kept in overcrowded conditions and not fed properly. But no farmer is going to admit this. It’s much easier (and more profitable) to blame badgers and claim compensation from the Government.

28

Am I the only person on the planet who finds it odd the way tennis players’ families seem to have nothing else to do but to turn up and watch match after match after match? Don’t these people have lives of their own? Don’t they have jobs to do and homes to run? Professional tennis players (and this applies to other sports but particularly to tennis) are working when they’re on court. Do mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters and aunts and girlfriends go to the Old Bailey every day in order to watch Nigel their barrister hero strutting his funky stuff in front of judge and jury? How many parents spend their lives sitting in the bank watching Albert accepting paying-in slips and counting out money? Would Judy be sitting in a corner if Andy worked in an estate agency?

29

A man tried to sell us some insurance but he wore a clip-on bowtie. I would never do any sort of business with a man who wore a clip-on bow tie or, for that matter, one of those awful ready tied concoctions which go round the neck on a piece of elastic.

30

The Government has spent over £4 million trying to wipe out the ruddy duck, which is apparently its proper name and not merely a mild form of abuse. The official plan is to exterminate the creature and hunters are being paid £1,256 by taxpayers for every duck they kill. Amazingly, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds is supporting this bizarre extermination. Apparently, the Government wants to kill all the ruddy ducks because they breed with an endangered Spanish white headed duck. It seemed slightly odd to me that we were getting rid of one type of duck to save another, and that British taxpayers were having to foot the bill to please the Spanish, and then I realised that the whole thing stinks of the European Union. I have no doubt that this is yet another bizarre example of the EU in action. We would all be much better off if the Government paid hunters £1,256 a head to exterminate eurocrats. If my money was being spent on exterminating bureaucrats in Brussels I would be a very contented taxpayer.

I don’t understand what the RSPB is doing supporting this bizarre slaughter of the ruddy duck, but I am pleased to see that a recent edition of their magazine includes an article criticising the Maltese who kill gazillions of birds every year for no reason whatsoever except that they can. About twenty years ago I wrote a couple of columns criticising the Maltese habit of killing migrating birds which use their island as a picnic spot. I ended up receiving such serious death threats that policemen came to see me and Interpol became involved. The Maltese did everything they could to shut me up. I was formally accused of racism and the newspapers which printed the articles were, inevitably, reported to the Press Complaints Commission. If it is true that you can judge a man not by his friends but by his enemies then I am well positioned.

I do wish, however, that the RSPB would do more than acknowledge the problem of what is happening on Malta. One of the reasons migrating birds are endangered is the fact that when the birds stop off in Malta for a rest they are slaughtered quite pointlessly.

British charities (and the RSPCA is probably the worst example of this) have a bad habit of closing their eyes and sticking their collective fingers in their ears when it is politically or commercially convenient for them to do so. I find it shameful, for example, that the RSPCA will not even question the value of vivisection.

July

1

Our garden is full of bushes and flowers planted to attract butterflies and bees but we have seen very few of either so far this summer. We had masses of apple blossom earlier in the year but very little of it was pollinated and, as an inevitable result, we are going to have a very poor apple crop in the autumn. There are several explanations. Farmers haven’t helped by cutting down hedgerows and using vast quantities of pesticide. Gardeners have done their fair share of damage by choosing to grow showy flowers with very little pollen and by spraying everything that moves with the horticultural equivalent of Agent Orange. But I wonder how much damage genetically engineered crops are doing – and how much more damage they will do in the future. Farmers, politicians and Monsanto lobbyists all keep telling us that there is no evidence to prove that genetically engineered crops will do us any harm. This is true, of course. No one has done any research to find out what damage these crops might do and so there is, inevitably, no evidence to show that they are dangerous. But what no one admits is that there is also no evidence to show that these damned seeds of the devil are safe. Our starving descendants will, I fear, be horrified at the way we played death poker with their future without having the foggiest idea how much damage we might be doing.

American fruit farmers have for decades had to rent bees to pollinate their crops. The bee owners cart their hives around from state to state because there aren’t enough local bees any more. It’s impossible to know just how fast things are going to deteriorate in the UK because no one knows how widespread genetically engineered crops are in Europe now that the EU has bowed to pressure from the USA. (In contrast, I was pleased to see that the Chinese recently rejected shipments of genetically modified corn.)

Meanwhile, it looks as if Antoinette and I might have to start bee keeping if we want to have apples in our small orchard.

2

A chartered accountant called Run Chai Pan is reported to have threatened HMRC staff members with violence and suggested that inspectors could be killed. He apparently told a female tax inspector that he intended ‘hammering’ one of her colleagues and would give her ‘a good punching’. Another HMRC employee was warned that he would be killed if he entered Pan’s premises. The accountant said that he would be within his rights to kill the tax official. Inspectors were told that they would be stabbed to death. As a result of all this the accountant was fined and warned that if he continued to behave in this way he would lose his membership of his professional body the ICAEW (the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales).

No one locked him up. No one stopped him being an accountant. They simply told him that if he didn’t stop threatening to murder tax inspectors they would throw him out of his accountancy organisation.

3

The evidence that most of us are getting poorer, while scoundrels such as bankers get richer, is overwhelming. I spent the morning digging through some old statistics and produced some startling results. In 1950 the average wage was £364 a year, the average house price was £1,900 and a small, new car cost £80. Today the average wage is £25,000 a year but the average house price is £250,000 and a small, new car costs £10,000. In 1950 the cost of a house was just over five times the average wage and the cost of a new car was equivalent to less than three months work (before tax). Today, the cost of a house is ten times the average wage and a new car needs five months of work (before tax). We may all think that we are richer but that's just a trick of inflation. In reality, we are poorer than we were more than half a century ago. We may have more money but it won't buy as much as it did. Even over a shorter time interval things have got considerably worse. In 1993, a house cost around 22% of a good salary and a first time buyer could obtain a decent house for just three times his or her salary. Students had no debt (because university education was free) and the average savings rate was just under 5% before tax. Today, a house costs 35% of a good salary and a first time buyer will need to find over six times his or her salary to buy a property. Students have average debts of £17,000 to start them off in life and savers are lucky to get 0.5% on their savings. The same thing is happening in America. In 1968 the minimum wage was $11 an hour (allowing for inflation). Today it is $7.25 an hour

4

A rather odd friend of mine who collects porcelain thimbles and follows Australian rules football with an enthusiasm which borders on fervour, tells me that when he is feeling angry or upset and needs to lower his stress levels he telephones a Tourette sufferers helpline and swears at length at whoever answers the telephone. Once he feels better he simply puts the phone down and ends the connection. ‘What can they do?’ he asked, not unreasonably.

5

Sorting through some old boxes this morning I found an old black and white photograph of my Uncle Charlie. He was my favourite Uncle, not least because he was something of an eccentric. I never knew what he did for a living (it was, I suspect, something far too ordinary) but he told me that his ancestors were pirates and he made false teeth in his spare time and if that doesn't qualify him as an eccentric I don't know what does. I remember he drove an old black Citroen, the sort that Maigret favoured in the old black and white movies. He took me to my one and only football match (Walsall versus Port Vale) and I remember the outing for the fact that when he parked the car he didn't bother to lock it. 'Aren't you worried that someone might steal it?' I asked. 'Insurance!' he said, with a wink. I'd never met anyone else who thought that way. He smelt of cigars and frequented pubs and always seemed terribly raffish to a young grammar school boy. He and my Aunt never had children and often when we visited he would have small unusual presents for me.

I still have a Victorian compass which my Uncle Charlie gave me when I was a boy. It's a splendid little thing, the size of a pocket watch and fitted, indeed, with a brass watch chain loop. The compass itself is made of brass and it sits in a velvet lined leather case. There is a small button on the top which enables the user to fix the needle. It was scuffed and battered when my Uncle Charlie gave it to me and I doubt if he paid more than a shilling or two for it but it has, since childhood, been one of my most treasured possessions. It has always sat on my bookshelves where I can see it. Alongside it sits a small, red horseshoe shaped magnet in a blue and black paper mache box. Uncle Charlie gave me that, too. Real toys for small boys. Toys that fitted into a pocket. It was my Uncle Charlie who taught me that if you rubbed a balloon on your jumper (they were jumpers then, and not sweaters) it would stick to the ceiling and stay there for hours. No school teacher ever taught me anything as useful.

6

The NHS pension scheme has a deficit of £250 billion. That is twice the annual expenditure on the NHS. What’s even more worrying is that this deficit is rising rapidly. Last year the pension scheme deficit went up by another £37 billion. None of this debt is officially part of the UK’s national debt. Public sector pension debts are going to be a huge drag on the future and a burden for generations to come. As I pointed out some time ago, between a third and a half of all council tax payments go towards paying absurdly generous pensions for former council employees.

While public sector employees receive huge pensions, the state pension in the UK is one of the worst in the world. Just over 10% of our government spending goes on the state pension. Most countries spend two or three times as much but we cannot afford to spend any more because we give former civil servants so much loot when they retire. The real problem is that all the people who decide public sector pension policy enjoy generous public sector pensions. So nothing will change until the country goes bankrupt and no retired public sector workers receive any pension at all. My guess is that any public sector worker currently under the age of 50 should not expect to receive a pension – whatever he or she may have been led to expect.

As the bosses of the public sector unions realise what the future holds for their members there will, of course, be uproar, and a good many strikes. There are only about six million union members now in Britain but most of them are public sector workers. (Less than 15% of private sector workers are union members but nearly 60% of public sector workers are paid up union members.) Although most public sector employees earn more than private sector workers, have a much smaller workload, and work fewer hours they also believe that they are, for some reason, entitled to better pensions – paid for by taxpayers. And they will doubtless complain bitterly when they, and their leaders, eventually realise that their pensions are unaffordable.

7

I read today that there are 565,000 estate agents in Britain. That’s what is wrong with the country: far too many bloody estate agents. The Government should organise a cull. Leave the badgers alone and get rid of the estate agents.

8

A friend of ours died recently at the age of 89. It was quite a shock because he was very lively and full of beans – both mentally and physically. ‘He had a good innings,’ said a man I know when I told him the sad news. Why do people always dismiss the deaths of old people? The fact is that most of us miss old people a great deal. The older they are, and the longer we have known them, the more we will miss them because they were a part of our lives for longer.

9

I read an article today in which a heavyweight writer (by which I do not mean a ‘great’ writer, but one who has consumed too many steak and kidney pies and who regards a three seater sofa as a suitable armchair) claimed that the Pankhurst clan liberated women. I disagree. Women were liberated by the English men who invented the washing machine. (Some American writers claim that an American invented the washing machine but they are wrong.) The first patent for a ‘washing and wringing machine’ was issued in England in 1691 and a drawing of an early washing machine appeared in an English magazine called *The Gentlemen*’*s Magazine* in 1752. In 1782 a man called Henry Sidgier obtained a British patent for the first rotating drum washing machine and within a decade a man called Edward Beetham was selling ‘patent washing machines’ in England. The very first American patent for a washing machine wasn’t taken out until 1797 by a man called Nathaniel Briggs though whether he re-invented Sidgier’s machine all by himself or just copied out his idea in his best writing isn’t clear since a fire at the American Patent Office destroyed all the records.

Feminists should remember that long before the Pankhursts and their chums started throwing themselves in front of horses and fastening themselves to railings, English inventors were making real strides forward in the emancipation of women, freeing them from the drudgery of the washtub.

Talking of feminists and horses, I am reminded that I discovered the other day that Carlisle race track has an annual women-riders-only meeting. How on earth can this be? Can anyone imagine the fuss if a race course organised a male-riders-only meeting?

10

It is said by people who claim to know these things that between us we now move more than eight zettabytes of data around the world every year. That is, apparently, equivalent to moving 80, three hundred page books per second for every person on earth. I feel slightly guilty about the fact that I don't think I'm doing my fair share in the 'moving information around' department. I've moved a few books in my time but I've never once managed to move 80 books in a second (unless moving books around in the back of the truck counts). This movement of information has been increasing for decades and the rate at which it is increasing is itself increasing. It's not surprising that we all feel dazed and slightly confused and bad about the fact that we can't keep up, or sort the wheat from the vast amounts of chaff which appears on sites such as Wikipedia, surely the only encyclopaedia in history to have been written almost exclusively by spotty 15-year-olds. (Wikipedia can't even define words accurately. Look up 'pandemic'.)

History has always been a product of a potent mixture of imagination, prejudice and wishful thinking. And it has always been what society considers acceptable. So, for example, if the Germans had won World War II, the holocaust would now be regarded as a great human achievement, up there with the pyramids and the hanging gardens of Babylon. It's all about attitude, interpretation and the position from which you start. But in the past whatever the interpretation might have been the facts usually bore some slight resemblance to what happened. However, things have changed dramatically and thanks to the internet in general the egregious Wikipedia in particular our descendants won't have any idea what really happened in years gone by.

It's not surprising that companies which cannot adapt fast enough go bust or that more people than ever are having nervous breakdowns. Personally, I think it has all got more than a bit silly. Most websites, most phone applications and most pieces of software are absurdly over-complicated and, as a result, are fiddly and clunky. The people who devise new software seem to be lost in their own tiny little worlds; they don't understand what real people want. Microsoft Word is the worst example of this and is an absurdly overcomplicated piece of software. I am lucky to get through an hour without my words turning red or completely disappearing because a stray finger has hit the wrong key. In the old days I would merely untangle my typewriter keys and carry on regardless. Now I pull out hair, beat my desk and cry for help. I have to fetch Antoinette so that she can get me back to where I was before the software screwed up. I strongly suspect that the problem is that the software designers just want to show how clever they are so that they can charge more and more for the junk they're selling. They are, I suspect, so arrogant that they see their products as an end rather than as a means to an end (which is what they should be). If a washing machine, cooker, car or television set were as badly designed and counter intuitive as Microsoft's product the world would come to a grinding halt. No one would eat, go anywhere or watch anything. Any why is the 'send' button right next to the 'delete' button? Isn't that really stupid? My old Word Perfect 5.1 programme was infinitely better than the overpriced rubbish Microsoft turns out. They don't even give you a measly CD these days. You have to go online to download their product. And if I see Bill Gates described as a philanthropist one more time I will scream. His company has carved itself a monopoly out of an overpriced, diabolical product which would not survive for five minutes in a fair and decent world. If Gates wants to be loved (which he clearly does) then he should stop fleecing his customers and start providing a better, more sensibly priced product. He would also do well to stop pushing deathly vaccines onto innocent people in Third World countries.

11

I recently wrote a medical novel which I called ‘*Sharp Practice*’. I published it in hardback under the name Curtis Brown. This is the third novel I’ve published pseudonymously in the last year or so (the first was called ‘*Revolt*’ and was written under the name Robina Hood and the second was called *My Secret Years with Elvis Presley* which I wrote as Tim Wood) and, like the other two, it hasn’t been a rip roaring success. I published 500 copies of each book in hardback and the aim, knowing that books with my name on them tend to be tossed aside by snooty literary editors who think that self-published books are too awful even to touch, was simply to try to get some decent reviews. I was hoping that if the books got good enough notices I might be able to sell them to a paperbacker. Sadly, I proved yet again that first novels under pen names have very little chance of being reviewed widely enough to attract any attention. Most of the books I sent out ended up on Ebay or being sold on Amazon by literary editors and reviewers who supplement their meagre incomes by flogging off the books they are sent. I have, therefore, abandoned these hopeful but non-existent authors and republished all these novels as kindle books on Amazon. I’ve given them new titles and put my own name on them. (*Sharp Practice* has become *The Truth Kills* and *My Secret Years With Elvis Presley* has become *Is This What Really Happened?*). No sooner had I done this than, rather belatedly I saw an excellent review of *Sharp Practice* which had appeared in *Country Life*.

‘This is a first novel by a pseudonymous GP and probably self-published – which might put you off,’ writes Leslie Geddes Brown who, bless her little prejudices, probably realised it was self-published because it didn’t come with a posh review slip or an invitation to take luncheon at the Ritz with a PR lady called Lucinda, Fiona or Phillipa. ‘But in 228 pages, it rants hilariously at every organisation within sight. The author…takes a pop at the police ‘and their ungodly spawn’, the BBC, which ‘never allows a balanced debate’, *The Guardian* – ‘if they gave out awards for sanctimoniousness, *The Guardian* would undoubtedly sweep the board’ – and, of course, bureaucrats who are ‘all soulless do-gooders, earnest box tickers… neat hypocrisy running through their veins’.

She generously goes on to say that ‘it is very funny indeed’ and ‘If you want a GP’s uncensored views about the NHS today, consultants, social workers and politicians this is your book’. All very nice of her but I’m puzzled by the bit about readers being put off by self-published books. Here, just off the top of my head, is a list of some authors who have published their own books: Beatrix Potter, Walter Scott, J. M. Barrie, Lewis Carroll, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Wolf, D. H. Lawrence, Honore de Balzac and Mark Twain. Recent bestselling authors who started out self-publishing include Vince Flynn and John Grisham. (Flynn’s first book, which eventually became a huge bestseller, was rejected by 60 publishers before Flynn published it himself.) It would not take long to produce a list ten times that long.

Publishers and agents are a relatively recent innovation and are best regarded as parasites rather than as essential parts of the publishing process. Incidentally, self-publishing should not be confused with vanity publishing. *The Guardian* and *The Independent* newspapers, both of which make huge losses and require subsidies to stay alive, are excellent examples of modern, vanity publishing.

12

In the year 2010 Britain’s national debt was £790 billion. By the year 2016 it will be at least £1.5 trillion. The annual deficit is huge and still rising. So much for austerity. I enjoy being in France (or, indeed, anywhere outside Britain) because Britain seems some way away and I can remember and rejoice in our cultural heritage without being sneered at as a Little Englander. England has no present and no future; the past is all we have.

13

I recently abandoned my VAT registration and no longer have to visit HMRC's incomprehensible website to fill in their wretched forms. I doubt if anyone, anywhere in the world, has ever designed a worse website than the one the tax people have created. It is as badly thought out and as impenetrable as their book of rules and regulations. Everything about the site is bad. Before I could even start I had to key in a 12 letter and number preliminary password and then a 12 letter and number second password. Some of it was in lower case and some of it was in upper case. And then, before I could finish, I had to put in more numbers. Who can possibly remember two passwords when each consists of a random jumble of a dozen mixed figures and letters? No one, I suspect. So, everyone has to write them down. And once you write down a password it stops being confidential and becomes entirely pointless. (It is, of course, something of a joke that HMRC should insist on taxpayers using such incomprehensible passwords for 'security' reasons since once they have got hold of confidential financial information they will probably lose it or sell it or pop it in the post or give it to a man on a bus in a scruffy raincoat.)

I really do loathe the tax people, not because I don't like paying taxes but because I don't like the way they collect it. They are now renowned for treating everyone as crooked; except, of course, for their good friends at Goldman Sachs (a prominent member of any decent citizen's list of 'worst companies in the world'). I'm not alone in regarding HMRC as contemptible. The whole organisation is run in just the same sort of way as one of those protection rackets that are so popular with Italian thugs and Hollywood screenwriters. 'If you give us your money we just might not break your windows/kick down your door.' And the people who work for the HMRC are taken from the same pool of dim thugs as provides the mindless idiots who work in security at airports and railway stations.

A friend of ours recently closed his business and made several people redundant because he simply couldn't cope with the incomparably bad HMRC website and couldn't afford an accountant. He asked HMRC if he could fill in their forms on paper but they said he couldn't. A recent survey of leading Chief Executive Officers concluded that the UK tax system is not fit for purpose and needs a complete overhaul. The UK has now overtaken India as the country passing the most tax legislation in the world every year. No one, not even the experts or the tax inspectors themselves, can keep up with what is allowed and what isn't allowed and the HMRC makes so many mistakes that if it were a taxpayer it would be serving 30 years in a maximum security prison for tax fraud. The HMRC's automatic VAT penalty system is so bad that nearly half of all the 17,200 fines it issued in 2013 were found to be wrong. Complaints about the HMRC go to an adjudicator's office which reported that for 2013 a total of 2,311 complaints were made – and 90% of them were upheld. The CEOs say that the Government would actually receive more money if they simplified the system but also concluded, however, that any attempt to reform it would be entirely futile because accountants, the Treasury and HMRC themselves like to keep things complicated so that only they know what is going on. If the tax system were replaced by something sensible the nation would save billions of man hours but thousands of accountants, civil servants and tax inspectors would have to find something useful to do with their lives.

Incidentally, I was interested to see that it has been confirmed that HMRC now pays performance bonuses to members of staff who turn up for work instead of staying at home or tottering along to watch the football. In addition, I see that HMRC, which had previously denied my report that they pay bonuses, now admits that members of staff who exceed their Soviet style target will receive a pay increase and a higher grade in their branch of the civil service (doubtless entitling them to a large hat rack and better quality carpet).

To all this must now be added the alarming fact that the arrogant HMRC has demanded the right to take money from taxpayers' bank accounts without the nuisance of having to go to court to obtain legal justification for taking the money. Giving these bozos the right to act as prosecution, judge, jury and debt collector is frightening; not least because the HMRC would do better if it were staffed entirely with dyslexic baboons.

Just the other day I read that the HMRC had added up the tax it had collected from Britons in a year and had made a small mistake with its sums. None of HMRC's hugely well-paid civil servants noticed the error until the Government organised an audit. How big was the error? Just £1.9 billion. If you or I make a mistake of one penny on our accounts we are likely to be threatened with everything just short of a nuclear attack. But when the hooligans at HMRC add up their accounts and make a mistake of £1.9 billion no one gets fired, fined or even told off.

And finally, the last bit of damning evidence suggesting that HMRC has lost the plot came in guidance notes they published recently. The notes state that 'taxpayers are not free to reduce their tax bills by lawful means'.

That should convince the few hold outs who were convinced that they were still living in a quasi-democratic country. Not so, I fear. The country is now being run by the stagnant pool dwelling creatures who work at HMRC and who have clearly decided that, until the revolution, they stand above the law. It certainly seems clear that HMRC staff regard both the law and taxpayers as beneath them in the food chain.

14

I took a pile of books and CDs to the counter at Oxfam in Cheltenham. I still have qualms about shopping at any of Oxfam's bookshops because I suspect they are putting a lot of old-fashioned private bookshops out of business. But today I succumbed to temptation and found a number of items I could not live without.

'Were you at the recording of *Gardeners Question Time* in Gloucester?' asked the volunteer at the till. I shook my head and admitted that it had not been my pleasure to be present at this important event. The volunteer, a tiny lady in her later years, was not deterred. 'A former neighbour of mine asked a question,' she told me with great pride. 'She was on the radio.' It is sometimes astonishing to see how pervasive the cult of the celebrity has become. This woman was genuinely preening herself because a former neighbour of hers had asked a question on a BBC quiz programme. I expressed my delight, showed that I was duly impressed, and left.

A few yards away, outside an empty store, a man was playing the saxophone. He was perfectly good enough to play in a band. I suppose he probably does. Many professional musicians add to their income with a little quiet busking. I always give money to any busker who is good and who has added a little something to the day, and although the town's central shopping area does tend to be littered with an unusually generous supply of beggars Cheltenham does have particularly good buskers. (Some towns seem to specialise in attracting awful buskers. Barnstaple in North Devon has some of the worst musicians in the country. I don't know if he still appears but there used to be an organist operating in the town centre who would wheel his organ around and sit and play very loudly. He was so bad that shoppers walked around with their hands over their ears and shop assistants within a quarter of a mile of where he played would stand mute and weeping, utterly exhausted and quite ready to slit their wrists if someone would only be kind enough to supply them with a razor.)

15

For the second time this year, we took our BMW into one of the many car washes run by Eastern Europeans. It was as always an impressive exercise. Two men squirted detergent onto the car and several more then used high pressure hoses to wash the car. Once the men doing the squirting and the hose operators doing the hosing had finished their work another pair cleaned inside the bonnet and around the doors. Finally, a bunch of blokes used sponges and cloths to polish the car. I couldn’t help thinking that they looked like the sort of baddies who die wholesale in Steven Segal movies. It was a remarkably efficient operation, involving over a dozen men and probably at least matching the efficiency of the Germans who built the car.

16

The prostate gland was, I sometimes fear, designed to remind old men of their age, and to take away their dignity. Today, I received a letter inviting me to have a prostate screening test. I'm not surprised. I'm in the right age group to be targeted and prostate screening is big business today – promoted both by those who make money out of it and by well-meaning but woefully misguided campaigners. When the prostate screening test was first introduced in 1994 I was immediately sceptical. I was never convinced by the dramatic claims made for its efficacy. Much of the rest of the medical profession was, however, extremely enthusiastic and since then millions of men have had a PSA blood test to screen them for prostate cancer. (The explanation of my scepticism appears in a book I wrote with my wife called *How To Conquer Health Problems Between Ages 50 and 120*.)

The validity of this whole screening endeavour was officially and publicly demolished back in 2010 when the scientist who discovered the test wrote an article in the *New York Times* pointing out that he had for many years been trying to make it clear that the PSA test could not detect prostate cancer and could not distinguish between the two types of prostate cancer – the type that is likely to kill and the type that is relatively harmless. The PSA test merely measures how much PSA (prostate specific antigen) is in the blood. Those who sell prostate screening say that detecting high levels of PSA is significant and that a man who has a high PSA needs treating for prostate cancer. But that's not true. A man with a high PSA may well be perfectly healthy and, conversely, a man with a low PSA may well have lethal prostate cancer. And since many of the treatments for prostate cancer cause serious and permanent damage (including death) this is an important error. The scientist responsible for the PSA test, Richard J. Albin says that he never dreamt that his discovery would 'lead to such a profit driven public health disaster'. It is tragic that there are now studies which show that PSA testing can actually increase the risks of mortality.

I tossed the letter inviting me to have a PSA test into the rubbish. It is a great pity that the enthusiastic volunteers who put so much effort into promoting prostate testing don't spend their time and money trying to persuade surgeons to use new, better forms of treatment instead of sticking with the old, dangerous ones. For example, it is now well-established that removing a cancerous prostate gland by surgery has awful side effects. Most patients who have had the surgery can no longer have an erection and a good chunk of them lose control of their bowels. In contrast, high intensity focused ultrasound treatment seems to work incredibly well. But most cancerous prostate glands are still removed the dangerous, old-fashioned way. It would also be a good idea for campaigners to spend a little effort explaining to people that men who eat a lot of fat, especially animal fat, are more likely to develop prostate cancer. And that's not theory: it's proven fact.

17

There are two main disadvantages to being married to an author.

The first is that novelists are, on the whole, misfits. That’s not surprising since they are adults with imaginary friends. I live in a world peopled by fictional characters who have personalities, homes and all the fears, ambitions and expectations of real folk. Mrs Caldicot, Henry Mulligan and Thumper Robinson are just as real to me as any of our neighbours. To be honest, I’d happily swap all our toxic and rancid neighbours for any bunch of characters from one of my books. I have nothing other than a heart, a spleen, a liver, two kidneys and another couple of pounds of assorted offal in common with any of the real people who share our neighbourhood.

I still haven’t forgotten that one of our neighbours, a miserable looking old boot who used to clean our home when it belonged to our predecessors, was so miffed when we told her (most gently) that we would not need her skills with a mop and duster that she turned off the four stop cocks which allow water to reach our house. She then refused to tell us where the stop cocks were hidden; no doubt watching from her broomstick and cackling with glee as she watched us wander around the grounds looking for the missing taps. If they ever make strangulation legal she will be the first to go. She rolls her eyes into her head a good deal when discussing other people and I’ve always thought this to be the first resort of the verbally inept.

Most of the folk who live in our part of Gloucestershire are about as friendly as hijackers. The one thing they do have in common is that most of them shout rather than talk. I suspect they do this to compensate for the fact that so very little of what they say is worth listening to. They shout even if you’re standing two feet away from them and always seem to own at least two dogs which never stop barking. I strongly suspect that there are more supercilious, condescending, smug, pretentious bores to the acre in the Cotswolds than there are anywhere else in the world.

The second disadvantage to being married to an author (to get back to my original point) is the ubiquity of ink. I never go anywhere without a number of notepads and several pens and so, inevitably, I always have ink on my clothes. I can pretty well guarantee that a new pair of light, summer trousers will have at least one noticeable ink stain within an hour of first being worn. The problem, however, lies in the fact that I don’t just get ink on my clothes, I also manage to get it on Antoinette’s clothes. Since I almost always have a pen in my hand (and, probably, a spare in my shirt pocket and a second spare in a trouser pocket) even a gentle embrace can usually result in the transfer of a noticeable quantity of ink. Today, I managed to get ink onto Antoinette’s new white jumper within seven minutes of her putting it on for the first time. After offering the appropriate apologies, and offering to buy a replacement, I did point out that buying anything coloured white could be construed as rather reckless. Antoinette pointed out that she didn’t really want to start dressing entirely in black until I’d taken my pens and notebooks with me to the great stationery shop in the sky.

18

The sweep came and looked exhausted. He told me that he was sweeping 60 chimneys a day and working until 9.0 o’clock at night.

‘I thought this was supposed to be your quiet time of the year!’ I said.

‘It is,’ he told me. ‘I hate to think what it’s going to be like in the autumn when most people decide they want their chimneys swept.’

He told me that he had got home one evening recently and found that he had over 100 calls on his telephone answering machine. All had come in that day.

‘What on earth did you do?’ I asked him.

He shrugged. ‘I just deleted them all,’ he answered. ‘I couldn’t possibly listen to over 100 calls and then ring them all back.’ He told me that whereas a year or two ago he was busy in the autumn and quiet in the spring he is, these days, busy all year round but busier than ever in the autumn and winter. Last year a woman rang him at 10.00 p.m. on Christmas Eve demanding that he call and sweep her chimney because she had unexpected guests coming the following day. She also told him that £40 was too much to sweep a chimney. I don’t think he went.

I suspect that more people than ever want their chimneys sweeping because many have decided that an open fire, particularly a log fire using wood culled from your own garden or sawn up from old scrap wood, is a cheap way to supplement expensive gas, oil or electricity central heating. (The health and safety bastards who’ve stopped pubs having open log fires have not yet managed to stop the rest of us having log fires at home.)

All good news for the sweep, I guess. Even I can multiply £40 by sixty. And then by five. And then by forty eight. (Allowing for a five day week and four weeks annual holiday.)

19

The fetes, pageants, carnivals and revels are coming thick and fast and the local marquee company (known as the ‘Marquee de Sade’) is doing a roaring trade.

One of the nearby villages held its annual fete today. It was opened by a local radio disc jockey who looked as though he thought he was famous. He never stopped bouncing around and Antoinette wondered if he had taken something invigorating. I told him I didn’t think so and suggested that he was simply drunk on his own personality. Sadly, he seemed to be the only person present who knew who he was and so Antoinette and I felt sorry for him, pretended to be star struck and asked him for autographs. I am told that local radio disc jockeys will open anything (including cupboards and envelopes) in return for a cup of free tea and a biscuit if a small crowd can be promised. There were two local bands. One was called *The Crows’ Feet*. Every five minutes or so they announced that they had a record out called *You’re Looking Old Now, Babe*. (‘It’s on *Clenched Buttocks Records*’, said the lead singer, as though this was of significance.) The other band, called *The Bouncing Boobs*, was an entirely female group. Not to be outdone they told us that their record was called *Two Black Eyes*. I may have got that the wrong way round. The band may have been called *Two Black Eyes* and the record called *The Bouncing Boobs*. I don’t think it matters much either way because it didn’t sound very good and I doubt if anyone will ever buy a copy.

There was a bottle stall (twelve bottles of vinegar, sixteen bottles of tomato ketchup, eleven bottles of the vicar’s homemade wine and a single bottle of Tesco champagne); a guess-the-weight-of-the-cake stall (those in the know were only too aware that Mrs Dunwoody, who always makes the cake for this competition, makes exceedingly damp cakes which are invariably far more solid, and far heavier, than might be suspected); a stall where you could win a goldfish by throwing a rubber ring around a peg on a board (the goldfish on offer race round and round their bowls but they are clockwork because there is now, it seems, an EU law forbidding the use of goldfish as prizes at fetes and fairs) and a stall where, for a £1, angry or stressed visitors could rent three wooden balls to throw at a pile of old crockery (but they had to wear a hard hat and a pair of industrial safety goggles in case a piece of broken tea cup defied the laws of physics and flew backwards towards their heads).

And there was a ‘stroke the cat’ stall. A large, very fluffy Persian cat lay on a red velvet cushion and anyone prepared to pay 50 pence could stroke the cat for a minute. (Antoinette and I both had several pounds worth of delight at this stall.)

Far more fun than even the fluffy cat, however, were the sports events which had been organised. There were, in the very best tradition of such affairs, a sack race, an egg and spoon race and a three legged race. I was press-ganged into taking part in the sack race and smelt of fertiliser for the rest of the afternoon. For the record I came seventh out of a field of nine. The only contestants I beat were a fat lady, who collapsed after ten yards and howled with unseemly laughter, and a red-faced man in a heavy three piece tweed suit who was soaked with sweat after three yards and who finished nearly five minutes after the winner. The egg and spoon race ended in controversy when one competitor complained that another had used glue to enhance his chances and that he himself had been given a smaller spoon than anyone else.

And, unusual only in that neither Antoinette nor I had ever seen it before, there was a ‘horse and jockey 60 yard steeplechase for married couples’. The rules were simple. Four rows of straw bales had been laid out on the course and the one half of each married couple (the horse) had to carry their other half (the jockey) over the bales as quickly as they could. Seven couples had signed up for this event which looked rather more suitable for children than adults. It was definitely one of those events which I would define as offering more fun to spectators than contestants.

Antoinette and I took up our positions half way down the course where we had a good view of both the start and the finish. Where else in the world could one watch such bizarre sporting events? The English founded just about every known sport there is, including football, rugby, cricket, tennis and tobogganing, and I couldn’t help wondering if we might eventually see a version of the Married Couples Steeplechase in the Olympics.

It seemed clear from the start that one couple had a huge advantage over the others. He was over six feet tall and probably weighed in at 15 stone. He looked a little like a young Arnold Schwarzenegger might have looked after he had discovered the joys of pumping iron. She was a smidgeon over five feet tall and looked as if she weighed about as much as a half used bag of sugar. I suspected that if she removed the rather fashionable looking straw hat she was wearing her overall weight would halve. Both seemed to be in their early twenties and both looked as if they spent their evenings at the gym rather than the pub. He looked as if he could throw her over his shoulder and run a marathon in two hours. The other couples were all older. Four pairs were in their later twenties or thirties and one pair was in their forties. It was this older pair which looked least likely to reach the finish line, let alone to offer any serious competition for the winners. He was small, certainly no more than five feet four inches and probably no more than nine stones with his pockets full of change. He wore spectacles and looked a bit like the comedian Ronnie Corbett. His wife, who reminded me of a larger version of Hattie Jacques, the actress of Carry on Matron fame, was nearer to six feet tall and so solidly made that she gave the impression that she had been designed and built by a firm of shipbuilders. I didn’t fancy his chances of carrying his wife as far as the first obstacle, let alone over it. I couldn’t help thinking that there must be a better than evens chance that once his wife attempted to mount him he would simply sink into the ground and, like a tent peg under a couple of hefty blows from a mallet, disappear from view.

‘They’d be 100 to 1 outsiders if there was a bookie around,’ whispered Antoinette.

I thought for a moment. ‘I think they’d probably be 200 to 1,’ I whispered back. ‘And that would be rather mean!’

As we spoke, the Arnold Schwarzenegger lookalike bent down so that his wife could climb up onto his shoulders. She was wearing a long, summer skirt which didn’t make it easy for her to manage this gracefully but eventually she managed to clamber aboard. She looked very secure and smiled and waved to a group of friends who were shouting encouragement, as well as comments on her choice of underwear. The other contestants, all except our 200 to 1 runners, followed suit. They all managed it eventually though one or two riders did look rather unstable. One enthusiastic young rider had equipped herself with a proper riding whip and, with a few preliminary whacks, she made it clear she intended to use it to offer encouragement and not just as a prop.

I was watching to see if a very wobbly woman in a white trouser suit could manage to stay aboard her husband’s rather scrawny shoulders when Antoinette nudged me. I turned my head and saw that the final couple were about to take their positions. To our astonishment, however, it was her not him who bent down and it was he not her who clambered up onto his partner’s shoulders. This changed things enormously and I couldn’t help wishing that there had been a bookie present, that he’d offered the sort of odds Antoinette and I had talked about and that I’d put on a fiver each way.

A moment later the vicar’s wife blew a loud blast on an old-fashioned referees’ whistle (the sort with a pea inside) and the race started.

The first ten yards went according to expectations. Young Arnold and his jockey set off at a tremendous pace and had cleared the first straw bale while the others were still making themselves comfortable. But, within a couple of yards, everything changed. The leading jockey suddenly realised that she was losing her straw hat and made the mistake of putting up not one but both her hands in an attempt to save it. As she did this she fell backwards slightly and, since her husband was still moving forwards as fast as his chunky legs would carry him, she completely lost her balance. A few seconds later she was lying flat on her back on the grass, her legs up in the air and her troublesome hat several yards away. The favourites were out of the race.

From that point on it was really a rerun of the tortoise versus the hare classic. Hattie Jacques, with an enthusiastic Ronnie Corbett urging her on, started last but gradually caught up and overtook the other contestants. And the unlikely couple duly finished as the winners. From our safe vantage point on the side lines, Antoinette and I both gave them a round of applause.

20

We have an injured jackdaw living with us. It has a badly injured leg and hops rather than walks. And although it can fly it can’t fly very far. (Those who still argue that birds cannot feel pain might like to ask themselves why birds limp, or favour their good leg, when they are injured.) I did try to catch it so that I could take it to the vet but it quickly became apparent that my attempts were merely distressing the bird. So, now we simply try to make sure that it has plenty of food to eat. If it hangs around underneath the bird feeders, waiting for seeds that are knocked to the ground, it is quickly pushed out of the way by our family of five magpies, so we throw seeds down in the quiet corner of the garden where the jackdaw seems to have settled.

Sadly, I suspect that it will soon end up as supper for one of the foxes who visit every evening. I know this is all parts of nature’s pattern but although the logical part of my brain finds it easy to understand the emotional part of my brain finds it enormously difficult to accept.

21

I have long wondered why laboratories take so long to produce test results. Patients can end up waiting weeks to find out whether or not they have cancer. Apart from the massive stress this causes the delay in obtaining the answers must inevitably mean a delay in starting treatment. Much of the time the delay is caused by simple incompetence. The results are available but they are sitting on someone's desk or waiting to be posted. There is absolutely no excuse for this sort of delay and the people responsible for it (doctors as well as clerks and receptionists) should be put in stocks on the village green and have rotten vegetables thrown at them.

Most people with pets will know that it is customary for vets to have blood test and X-ray results within minutes rather than days and hours rather than weeks and it seems to me quite absurd that human patients should be treated so much worse than animal patients. I have, in the past, sometimes managed to find a way past the system by the simple expedient of ringing the laboratory, introducing myself as a doctor and asking for the results for which a friend or relative has been waiting. I'm sure this is against some law or other and I have no doubt that the pen pushers at the General Medical Council would disapprove but I really don't give a fig.

Today's good news is that the whole business of testing blood samples is, at last, being given a good shake up by an American firm which can do valuable tests on just a few drops of blood, and produce the results within hours. If this new testing system isn't available in all NHS hospitals within a year then the responsible people at the head of the NHS should be taken out and shot.

22

The absence of bees in the spring means that we have the poorest apple crop we’ve seen for years. But it is now clear that we also have the biggest crop of nuts in human history. Our numerous beech and hazel trees are already laden with fruit. If our small army of squirrels tries to bury this lot they will be utterly exhausted by the beginning of October. And our big horse chestnut tree is going to produce a massive crop of conkers.

23

I’ve been a fan of the Macmillan Cancer Support organisation for many years and, generally speaking, I believe it is the only cancer charity that does any good. Actually, I strongly believe that the other cancer charities, which are very much part of the hideously cruel cancer industry, do far more harm than good. For reasons which I have described at length in my medical books the big cancer charity in Britain, called simply Cancer Research UK, should be closed down immediately. If it were closed, and its money used to buy simple television advertisements warning people that ‘meat causes cancer’ there would be fewer people dying from cancer than there are at present.

So, I was sad to see an advertisement on television for the Macmillan organisation’s proposed World’s Biggest Coffee Morning. In the advertisement a number of women (some of whom appear to be on the plump side of normal (I’m trying to be polite)) are seen enjoying a variety of scrummy looking cakes. Sadly, I fear that the people who organised the coffee morning, and who authorised the television advertisement, don’t seem to know much about cancer. There is, I fear, plenty of evidence to show that people who eat tons of fatty and sugary foods (such as cakes) are far more likely to develop cancer. As, indeed, are individuals who are overweight.

The end result will, I suspect, be that the World’s Biggest Coffee Morning campaign will make some money for the charity but will result in a noticeable increase in the incidence of breast cancer and bowel cancer among the women taking part. Probably not quite what was intended by a basically well-intentioned but perhaps misguided organisation.

24

My literary agent in Japan wrote today to ask me to send a photograph for the Japanese publisher who is printing my book *How to Stop Your Doctor Killing You*. This is the second time the book has been published in Japan. The previous Japanese publisher of this book let it go out of print some years ago and so now a new publisher is going to reissue it. My agent tells me that the publisher would like a picture of me in a white coat. Sadly, I don't think I have ever had my picture taken wearing a white coat. I certainly never wore one when I was a GP. I always thought that a white coat would act as a barrier between me and my patients and since suits always reminded me of bank managers and accountants I usually wore a sports jacket and flannels which I thought seemed fairly unthreatening. So, lacking a picture in a white coat I sent a couple of snaps which I have used before on book jackets. (To be honest I was tempted to ask them to just use a picture of anyone. A Danish publisher once used a picture of a very smart looking man as my author picture. He wore a tuxedo and black tie and had white hair and spectacles. Another publisher, obviously confused about my sex, used a photograph of a woman in a blue dress as my author picture. I really didn't mind in the slightest.).

Almost immediately the agent emailed back to thank me for the pictures and to tell me that he had scanned them and would return them to me straight away. This confused me enormously. Why would you bother returning an emailed photograph? Neither Antoinette nor I could work this out. It's good, nevertheless, to know that *How to Stop Your Doctor Killing You* is still alive and doing well around the world.

When I self-published the first edition around 20 years ago I went to Lisbon and my Portuguese agent took me to see a publisher whom he thought might like to publish my books. I put a collection of book jacket proofs down on his desk.

'I want that one now!' he said, immediately pointing a finger to the cover of *How to Stop Your Doctor Killing You*.

I started to tell him what the book contained.

'I don't care what it contains or what it's about!' he said, laughing. 'I just want to publish it.'

And so began a beautiful professional relationship. Before the company expired that same editorial director published nearly 20 of my books in Portuguese. Alas, like so many other publishing houses, they are no more; probably yet another casualty of the internet age.

25

Taunton in Somerset used to be one of our favourite market towns. But, like so much of England, it is going downhill at a frightening rate. Now that the main council car park has been sold to developers, there are very few places to park a car. I am constantly surprised by the way councils fail to understand that without decent car parking, town centres will die. When it is hard for people to park their cars they go elsewhere – either to special out of town shopping malls or to the internet which they can access while sitting on the sofa and watching the television.

In Paris, drivers tend to stop their car precisely where they want to be when they have arrived at where they want to go. They then leave their car wherever it is and go and do whatever it is they want to do. Cars are left parked on the pavement, on zebra crossings and, probably, on top of one another. But do this in Britain, where the pavements must be kept free for truck sized prams and mobility scooters, and your car will be towed away and turned into tin cans before you can say ‘Hang on a minute, I’m just posting a letter!’.

In Taunton, visitors can park at the railway station (if they can find a space), at the cricket ground in the town centre (if there isn’t a match on) or at the riverside supermarket (if they buy something and recognise that if they stay more than a couple of hours there is the danger of a chunky fine).

In the streets around the town centre the neat rows of red brick terraced houses, once a tribute to good architecture and solid building, are now ruined by ranks of wheelie bins and racks of plastic recycling boxes permanently stored in tiny front gardens. And the lower part of the main shopping street is now filled with little but charity shops. We hadn’t been to Taunton for a while and whereas it was once colourful and lively it now seems drab and depressing.

Like most towns these days the council seem to have knocked down all the public loos – undoubtedly on the basis that they have to be cleaned occasionally and are, therefore, a drain on the coffers. This is yet another sign that life is deteriorating rapidly these days. Most towns have had public lavatories since the Middle Ages. In Gloucester, for example, it was way back in around 1300 that the local authority first erected latrines at the city gates. They put them there for travellers who were too tired to dig a hole or too refined to pee in the gutter.

In an attempt to save money, control money laundering and eliminate terrorism most towns have closed their public lavatories and these days travellers with bursting bladders must go into a café and buy a cup of tea before they can use a loo. And, in the long run, that merely perpetuates the problem.

26

‘Is your husband all right?’ a neighbour asked Antoinette. ‘I saw him behaving very strangely in the garden the other day.’

These neighbours, who are enormously self-important, only talk to us when they want to complain about something, or think they might have some bad news with which to spoil our day. I’ve never really been able to work out precisely what he does for a living but I believe that his official job description is ‘management consultant’. In olden times it used to be said, rather cruelly I sometimes thought, that those who can do and those who can’t, teach. These days it could with great accuracy be said that those who can’t run a business become management consultants and tell other people, who are running businesses, how they should do what they themselves cannot do. He is also a neatness fetishist. He spends 30 minutes a day cleaning his shoes, 30 minutes a day snipping the hair out of his ears and on Sundays he spends the whole day washing and polishing their vehicles. They both drive Audi motor cars with what look as if they are supposed to be personalised number plates (they have, however, bought cheap personalised plates and, I confess, we have been unable to work out what the letters stand for) and are awful gossips who delight in spreading nasty rumours. Whenever I am in their presence I always feel that I really should have a sharpened stake handy. They have three small yappy, growly dogs and a son who goes to an expensive boarding school. When he comes home for the holidays the son causes mayhem by riding around on a very noisy 50cc trials motorbike. The only time I ever spoke to him (to ask him not to ride his motorbike across an area of land I had planted with shrubs) he told me to ‘fuck off’ but since he goes to a posh school it came out as ‘ferk orf’. This is the second time I have heard these words from a local child so I can only assume it is some sort of local dialect, or maybe a traditional Cotswold greeting. His mother has boasted to us that she enjoys writing nasty reviews about hotels, pubs, tourist attractions, films and books. She laughed when she told us this and admitted that she never says anything complimentary. She seems to regard writing bad reviews as some sort of sport, like shooting grouse or hunting foxes. The only thing of note about them is that they have very neat hedges. When they die they will be remembered for having had neat hedges.

In addition to his work as a management consultant he does a little wheeler dealing in land and once told me that he buys fields and trees from farmers and sells meadows and woodlands to dreamers. I have no idea what she does with her time but I’m thinking of starting a rumour that she works as a stripper in a pub in Gloucester. She’s shaped like a barn and I would imagine that if she took her clothes off the customers would pay her extra to put them back on again, but I’ll say she performs a novelty act as a speciality ecdysiast and does something spectacular with ping pong balls, indoor fireworks and a St Bernard dog. Actually, to add verisimilitude I think I will also start a rumour that her husband has served time for pandering. No one local will know what pandering is and they will all have to rush home and look it up in a dictionary. Or, more probably, search for it on the internet. Maybe I will also set up a website for her, offering her personal services ‘at home or away’. Better still I will tell everyone that she has morning sickness and that this is something of a miracle since her husband had a vasectomy many years ago. I will then point out how curious it is that she is the only person in the area to have fresh bread delivered every day. ‘The man who brings it must slice and butter it for her,’ I will say. ‘He always stays at least an hour.’

‘In what way was he behaving ‘strangely’?’ asked Antoinette, unconcernedly. She knows that I have a vast ‘behaving strangely’ repertoire.

‘He was waving his arms around and running from place to place as though he were having some sort of fit,’ said our scary neighbour. She really is quite a frightening woman. Hammer films would have had her on long-term contract if they’d known about her. She could have played Frankenstein’s monster without any make-up. When she walks into a room the temperature drops by ten degrees. If she dies she will need to be hung, drawn and quartered; just to make sure.

‘Oh, I expect he was trying to get rid of a horse fly,’ said Antoinette.

The neighbour, clearly disappointed by this mundane explanation, muttered something disparaging about the scruffy nature of our hedges and departed to annoy someone else.

When Antoinette told me about this I was reminded of the wonderful scene in Jacques Tati’s first film *Jour de Fête*. Monsieur Tati, playing the village postman, is cycling along a country lane when a bee takes a fancy to him. The resultant un-choreographed dance, seen from afar, is an example of Tati, the maestro, at his very best.

But it also reminded me of something else.

A friend of mine called Dickson, who lived in a rather smart suburban area, was fed up with his neighbours, who would have all won gold medals for combined fascism and snootiness. Dickson reckoned most of them spend their evenings working out how many people you could cram into a railway wagon. He persuaded a pal of his called Norman to go round to all the neighbours with a clipboard. Norman is a psychiatrist and so has a rather strange of way of looking at, and talking to, everyone he meets. He could even make a traffic warden feel uncomfortable.

‘I’m from the health and safety unit of your local council,’ Norman told the people on whom he called. ‘I just want to have a word with you about your neighbour Mr Dickson.’

The neighbours were, of course, all eager to hear more. Here was a great chance to get some gossip free of charge – and, from the sound of it, damned good gossip too.

‘Mr Dickson suffers from a mental condition and has been a resident in several institutions over the years,’ said Norman. ‘We’ve been asked to keep an eye on him by the local police in view of his sometimes erratic and dangerous behaviour in the past. The psychiatrists are all happy that he is probably not dangerous now and it is a long time since he hurt anyone or did any serious damage. But we like to err on the side of caution.’

The neighbours, now alarmed rather than just curious, were all desperate to hear more.

‘There really isn’t any need for you to be alarmed,’ continued Norman. ‘But if I could give you just a word or two of advice?’

They all wanted the advice.

‘Always be polite to him and don’t do anything to anger him. If he behaves strangely then just ignore him. If he asks you for something then, if at all possible, I would suggest that you agree and do what he asks. And don’t, please don’t, mention my visit to him – or to anyone else for that matter.’

Dickson told me that after this he never had any trouble with any of his neighbours. They all smiled at him, waved when they saw him, wished him good morning or good afternoon as appropriate, and kept well out of his way.

There are many ways to get respect, but fear is certainly one of the quickest and most permanently effective. It is, after all, fear that stops people saying that they disapprove of gay marriage, that they don’t like being frisked by foreigners when passing through British customs posts, that they hate having to speak in baby English when speaking to a bank clerk and never being able to get through to speak to a real person when ringing HMRC or a utility company. We are cowed and downtrodden by rules, laws and fascist officials. It is, I suspect, this general fear of being found politically correct which helps push people into attacking authors, hotels, restaurants and shops with such venom when they can do so anonymously, online.

I told Antoinette about Dickson and Norman.

‘Do you know Norman?’

‘I was at medical school with him.’

‘Do you think you could get in touch with him?’

I said I thought I could.

Antoinette grinned broadly.

27

A bloke I know who is a specialist in prehistoric monsters (and calls himself a dinacologist) buys his reading glasses from a chain store and never pays more than £2 for a pair. He claims, not unreasonably, that since he only needs reading spectacles, and doesn’t have anything much wrong with his eyesight, he really doesn’t need to spend a fortune buying expensive frames and tailor made lenses. The last time we visited his home Antoinette and I had a little fun with him. We bought three pairs of spectacles from the shop where he buys his spectacles, making sure we picked the same frames that he buys but buying spectacles of three different strengths – none of them the same as the ones he currently uses. During the course of the afternoon we then substituted our reading spectacles for the ones he usually buys.

‘These damned spectacles aren’t strong enough,’ he complained at first, trying but failing to read his paper.

‘Oh, the lenses in those cheap spectacles warp if you leave them in the sun,’ I told him. When he next left the room we changed the spectacles for a much stronger pair.’

He then naturally complained that the spectacles were too strong.

‘Maybe your eyes are changing,’ I told him. ‘At your age eyes can sometimes change almost overnight.’

We confessed in the end, of course, and he was so relieved that he opened a bottle of bubbly to celebrate.

This reminded me of the time when Antoinette and I played a similar trick on a neighbour (at a previous house of ours) who was very proud of a new apple tree he had planted in his front garden. He was a pleasant fellow who did something for the council and looked like Bob Hoskins. His wife, I remember, was rather imposing and looked like Hillary Clinton. She managed a charity shop. It was a very small tree but the Mr Hoskins lookalike had high hopes for it.

Late one night Antoinette and I carefully dug up the tree and replaced it with a similar apple tree that was twice as high. When we saw the neighbour the next day he was so excited that I thought he would burst. He told us with great glee that his new tree was growing at a rate of three feet a day and he had worked out that within a month it would be as high as his house. We did not tell him the truth until a week or so later when we gave him back the small, original tree which we had been looking after in our own garden. Although he now had two trees he was very disappointed and we felt really bad about our practical joke for ages.

28

We went to Cirencester for the day. I was standing in front of the ticket machine in the car park, looking through the coins in my pocket in the hope that they added up to £3, when a man rushed up to me.

‘Are you buying a car park ticket?’ he asked, rather unnecessarily. I told him I was.

‘How long are you staying?’ he asked.

I didn’t answer this straight away. I am allergic to strangers asking me questions because they bring me out in a rash of suspicions.

‘Are you staying more than an hour?’ he asked. ‘Because I’ve got a ticket here with 45 minutes left on it.’ He held out a car park ticket.

Just then a uniformed attendant wandered past. ‘That’s exceedingly kind of you,’ I replied loudly. ‘It would delight me enormously to be able to cheat the council out of a couple of quid. But unfortunately I need a ticket for three hours.’ The man laughed out loud, probably because he didn’t know that a council employee was standing behind him looking very peeved. He then tottered back to his car, at least sixty yards away. Kind gestures like this always make me feel warm inside.

It would have been a particular delight to take his ticket because the Cirencester car park is one of the worst in the entire world. One problem is that the spaces seem narrower than the spaces elsewhere, as are the aisles. Parking anything more than a pedal car is a nightmare. The other problem is that the ticket machines seem designed to cheat patrons out of their money. If you don’t feed in the coins very slowly the machine accepts them but doesn’t recognise them. The customer thinks he’s paid for three hours but the machine prints out a ticket for one hour. I’ve been caught out by this twice already.

For no very good reason at all, this happy incident reminded me of the days when I used to drive a Volvo estate car. I used to stick the car park tickets on the rear passenger windows and then the rear windows right at the back of the car, but instead of removing them when they had served their purpose I just left them where they were. After a year or so there were around 150 car park tickets stuck to the windows. They weren’t dangerous or impeding my view when I was driving but they gave parking attendants quite a job. I sat on a wall and watched one once: he spent fifteen or twenty minutes examining all the tickets, looking for the most recent and valid one. The ticket was there and the man from the Gestapo went away terribly disappointed that he could not give me a penalty ticket. I don’t know why I suddenly remembered this. I find that as I get older, all sorts of odd old memories suddenly leap into the forefront of my mind and do a little jig to attract my attention.

After I left the car park I spent a pleasant hour or two in Cirencester queuing behind people who were buying incredibly small items with their credit cards.

In W.H.Smith’s a man bought a newspaper with a credit card and from the way he examined it I got the distinct impression that he’d never seen a credit card before – let alone used it for anything more exacting than cutting a neat white pile of film star snorting powder. (I queue because I don’t much care for the automated tills even when there are some, which there aren’t in Cirencester unless they’re hiding somewhere behind the mixed birthday cards. My original objection was that they were taking jobs but I also confess that I just can’t stand the damned things. The last time I used one I found myself shouting at the automated voice which was telling me off in the sort of voice mental health nurses use when dealing with demented patients. A woman in the queue behind me looked very unamused and for a few moments I thought she was going to call the police. I would not be surprised to discover that it is illegal to shout abuse at computerised voices in shops.) In Mr Marks and Mr Spencers excellent emporium I queued behind a woman who paid for two bananas with a credit card. And when I gave up shopping and went to Caffè Nero for an Americano the woman in front of me there paid for a small expresso with a credit card.

My hope for a pleasant sit in the café was rather spoilt by the presence of an elderly gentleman in a panama hat and a striped blazer who was reading a book but, instead of reading it quietly to himself, was reading it out loud in the way that one might do to an invalid or a classroom full of primary school children. He was reading it not quite loud enough for me to hear what he was reading but just loud enough to be annoying and stop me concentrating on my own book. I suppose he must have practised to get the volume just right. I’ve seen him there quite often but I have no idea who he is or why he needs to read out loud. It did occur to me that he might be placed there as part of one of those televised pranks. It also occurred to me that it might be fun to be there if, one day, he reads this book out loud and finds himself describing himself.

After ten minutes of this auditory torture I left and walked round the corner to the upmarket store known as Poundland where I searched for and found a really cheap aerosol can of deodorant. Having tested a small squirt and convinced myself that the spray really was pretty pungent and foul smelling I bought two cans – though this was, I confess, only because Poundland was offering two for a pound and I was too embarrassed to try to buy one can for fifty pence. The store is, after all, called Poundland and not Fiftypenceland.

‘We don’t have any more free bags,’ says the assistant at the till. ‘Would you like a useful bag for 10 pence?’ I told her I would like a useful bag for 10 pence and spent the next five minutes wondering what a not-useful bag looks like. Actually, my 10 pence bag turned out to be fairly sturdy and much better than those flimsy bags the supermarkets use, which would collapse under the strain if you tried to use them to carry a single empty match box.

As I left I was approached by a chugger. Cirencester has more chuggers than London has rats. ‘I like your tie,’ said this one, doubtless attempting to flatter me into signing up to pay vast sums of money to a charity which spends half its income on salaries and the other half on expenses. ‘Thank you,’ I said, walking on without even the slightest break in my step. One of the advantages of being old is that one can be superficially rude and get away with it.

29

It has been reported that the BBC has decided not to give equal air time to those who do not believe in climate change. In future it will give the majority of its air time to the lunatics and lobbyists who are convinced (for no very good scientific reason at all) that the earth is getting hotter because of man’s activities. It may seem extraordinary that the BBC, which is paid for by taxpayers, should take a position on a subject about which neither it nor anyone else knows the truth but the organisation’s vastly overpaid staff do this sort of thing all the time. The organisation seems to have arbitrarily decided that the EU is a ‘good thing’ (not surprising, since it accepts EU money with eagerness) and that genetic engineering, vivisection, vaccination and the eating of meat are all ‘good things’. It would be no surprise to see the BBC broadcast a programme entitled *The Earth is Flat, Vaccination is Safe and Other Scientific Facts*.

A decent broadcaster would be far more interested in encouraging debate than in simply propagating well subsidised myths, but the BBC is not a decent or unbiased broadcaster and no one there seems to have the intelligence to work out that those who oppose public debate on these issues disapprove of free speech and open debate not because their arguments are strong but because their standpoints are indefensible.

The BBC staff seem not the slightest bit interested in the fact that those scientists who argue in favour of the official climate change position have falsified evidence, suppressed inconvenient truths, censored conclusions which do not fit their conclusions, withheld data which didn’t fit the climate change theory and even threatened sceptical opponents with violence. Facts are rarely displayed objectively in the media these days but they are invariably distorted beyond recognition on the BBC which is, surely, the most hypocritical, sanctimonious media operation in the world. The BBC has established positions on just about anything you or I can think of and those positions are invariably taken not because of facts or logic, or even because of public opinion, but because of the views of a few prejudiced and bigoted journalists who, in turn, adopt their views after listening to the nonsensical outpourings of lobbyists and political thugs most of whom represent the establishment position and, therefore, the State.

(BBC news staff describe themselves as journalists because they cannot spell propagandists. Most of them are ethnically acceptable media graduates who have, I suspect, failed to find work on a newspaper but who have expressed the right mixture of sanctimoniousness and political correctness at their interviews.)

It is as though the people who work at the BBC believe that only the State is entitled to have its opinions heard.

The bottom line is that it is absolutely no use at all tuning in to any BBC programme hoping to hear the truth about the European Union (the BBC is aggressively for it), vaccination (the BBC is very much a supporter), vivisection (the BBC thinks it’s wonderful), genetic engineering (the BBC thinks we should have much more of it), cutting the size of the State (the BBC, as a part of the State, is vehemently opposed to this) or, indeed, any other contentious subject.

The BBC has been bought lock, stock and valve and its opinions and editorial views will always reflect those of the most successful lobbyists and richest pressure groups. I suspect that the BBC promotes more myths, more misconceptions and more downright lies than any other news organisation in history. It is a tragedy that so many people around the world do not understand just how biased the BBC has become. Most understand that when they watch a news programme on a station owned by Rupert Murdoch they are getting a Murdoch view of the world. Very few, I suspect, realise that in comparison to the BBC the Murdoch empire is the very bastion of truth.

I very much doubt if I am the only person to have been effectively banned from BBC programmes for telling inconvenient truths.

I will be so delighted when non-payment of the BBC’s licence fee is finally made a civil rather than a criminal offence. Once that has happened, as it surely must, I sincerely hope that no one will be stupid enough to pay the BBC any more money.

Not for nothing is the BBC now known by many as Betray Britain Comprehensively; it is a truly fascist organisation.

30

This is the day of the week when our rubbish is collected today and so today I used one of my new, foul smelling deodorant sprays. (I’ve decided that the contents are made from, or designed to smell of, canned French farts. Anyone wanting to establish a French Metro Theme Park should buy this stuff by the tanker load. I cannot, however, imagine why anyone would want to squirt it on or around their person.) I sprayed the stuff inside the black bags and on the outside of them too. As I was doing this, two women wandered past with an ugly pair of dogs. They did not look to be the sort of women who, when not walking their dogs, would spend their days worrying about hair, shoes and handbags. They were, I guessed, more the sort of women who would be into weight lifting and welding. They had probably spent nearly a minute getting ready to take the dogs for a walk. Actually, like most of the people we see, the dogs are taking them for a walk. I love animals but dogs are pack animals and the majority of dogs I see are uncontrolled; they, not the owners, are leader of the pack. Whenever you see a dog pulling at the lead, or running on ahead, you know you’re seeing a dog which thinks it is the leader. And dogs can and do bite, maim and kill.

‘What are you doing?’ snapped one of them, in a surprisingly hoity toity manner.

I explained that I was merely spraying our rubbish so that the black bags would not be torn open, and the contents distributed far and wide, by badgers, foxes or magpies.

‘You should put your black bags into proper bins,’ she told me. She spoke as though she were telling a servant how to fold a napkin properly.

I explained that we had not been issued with bins because there was nowhere to put them. Our lane is so narrow that if we put out a bin the vehicle sent to collect the rubbish would not be able to pass by. Nor, indeed, would anything else.

‘If that stuff you’re spraying makes my dogs ill I will sue you!’ screeched the woman, who had clearly not listened to anything I’d said. I doubt if she had listened to anything anyone said for at least a decade.

I started to explain again that I was simply spraying deodorant onto the bags and that as far as I know deodorant, however foul it smells, isn’t toxic to dogs, but the woman wouldn’t listen. Her dogs were running wild and, very politely, I asked her if she would put them on leads. This did not go down well. I doubt if I would have caused a bigger explosion if I’d asked her if she was a communist. She screamed at me that if I lived in the country I should expect to see dogs running round and barking and biting and generally doing stuff that dogs do when they aren’t properly controlled. She then threatened to sue me for veterinary bills, distress and, quite probably, a sore throat. She then waddled away; her out of control dogs bounding ahead and doubtless looking for walkers to eat.

‘It’s good stuff!’ I called, holding up the can. ‘I bought it at Poundland.’

31

There is now a new disorder called ‘Paris Syndrome’ which strikes Japanese tourists visiting the French capital for the first time. The Japanese arrive with high hopes and great expectations and find it difficult to cope with the fact that the Parisians are often rude, over-bearing and insulting. Several tourists have had to be repatriated as emergency cases – broken by their experiences in cafes and souvenir shops.

I’m surprised only that the Japanese aren’t prepared for the rudeness of the Parisians. It is not, after all, a new phenomenon.

During the Second World War, French President Charles de Gaulle met US President Roosevelt to try to persuade the Americans to join the conflict. But when Roosevelt, who spoke French fluently, tried to talk to the General, the tall and snooty Frenchman pretended not to understand him because Roosevelt spoke French with an American accent.

August

1

Someone I don’t know well enough to call a friend but know too well to describe as a stranger and whom I would describe as an acquaintance if that didn’t sound as though I were trying to distance myself from him (which, if I am honest I suppose I am but that doesn’t mean that I am necessarily prepared to admit it) has bought himself a pair of these ridiculous Google glasses which enable him to take photographs and film everything he does wherever he is when he is doing it. They apparently even allow him to check his emails simply by glancing upwards. I really don’t understand why anyone would want to buy or wear one of these absurd devices.

I always used to think of Google as simply one of the world’s most evil companies (up there on the podium with Monsanto and Goldman Sachs) but I am now beginning to think of it as just plain stupid.

I have two main concerns.

First, when on earth is he going to find time to look back at the stuff he’s been filming if he spends all his time filming everything he does? And when he does, will he film himself watching the films he’s made of himself filming what the world looks like when he’s cleaning his teeth? Where will this end? Where will all this digital dross be stored and how will anyone ever find time to organise a proper filing system for it?

Second, why on earth does he want to be able to look at his emails every two seconds. Does it really matter if the Vodafone statement has to sit there and wait for ten minutes? It’s not going to go away. Millions of people now seem to spend vast portions of their lives texting and emailing one another but what do they have to say that is worth reading and what do they spend their time reading that is worth reading?

Third, how does Mr Google know that his damned silly glasses won’t cause eye cancer? I bet they will and I’m a doctor and Mr Google isn’t.

I really do despise the whole idea of Google glasses. If I see someone wearing a pair I have decided that I will accidentally bump into them, accidentally knock their glasses onto the floor and then accidentally stand on them. I didn’t fight at the Battle of Curmudgeon to be filmed by some internet yahoo while I’m walking down the street and minding my own business.

2

A friend who is trying to sell a house rang me today. He was confused because his estate agent, who had been trying for some time to persuade him to accept an offer exactly £60,000 below his home's asking price of £299,950 (a discount of approximately 20%), had telephoned him to report that another buyer had offered £80,000 below the house's asking price. 'The house has only been on the market for ten days,' said my friend, who is the sort of person who believes the caller who tells him that they're doing a survey about energy prices and may be able to help him find a cheaper supplier. 'And I simply cannot believe that the offer the agent wants me to accept is the best offer I'm going to get.'

I told him that I suspected that his estate agent was trying the old 'low offer' trick to persuade him to accept the first offer that had been made. He sounded puzzled. 'It's quite a simple ploy,' I explained. 'The estate agent rings you with an absurdly low price in order to make you panic and agree to take the other bidder's offer. The very low bid isn't made by a real person. They know you won't even consider it so they don't have to worry about that. The bid is entirely fictional.'

'But why would they do that?' he asked. 'They're getting a percentage of the price I receive so the higher the price the more the commission.'

'The kind explanation is that they just want to persuade you to sell now so that they receive their commission sooner rather than later,' I told him. 'If you get a really low offer you will worry that your house is worth less than you thought it was and so you'll accept the better offer you've already been given.'

'That's the kind explanation?'

'Yes.'

'And the unkind explanation?'

'They're selling your house to a mate or a relative and they want them to be able to buy it cheap. If you think that you're only going to get £220,000 for your house then you'll be inclined to jump at the chance to get £240,000.'

My friend was shocked. 'But isn't that illegal?'

'Yes. But they are hardly ever caught. And estate agents aren't the most loathed people in the country for no reason.'

It is cheering to think that estate agents will soon go the way of lift operators and lamp lighters. It seems clear that the internet will before long do unto estate agencies exactly what it has done to bookshops and record shops and what it now seems to be doing to black cabs and hotels.

I have met many estate agents over the years and although most were superficially charming, in an Arthur Daley sort of way, and greasy enough to slide through a keyhole, I have never met one whom I felt I could trust to tell me the truth about whether or not it was raining. The business model for estate agents is truly absurd. They have no training and no qualifications and anyone with enough money to rent an empty shop can put up a sign and proclaim themselves to be an estate agent. If you want to set up shop as a hairdresser you probably need to spend years at a college and acquire a diploma. If you want to paint nails for a living you need to be trained and acquire a diploma. I have no doubt that if you want to empty dustbins for a living you will need to be trained. But if you want to become an estate agent you just need a cheap suit and a car. Estate agents have little or no specialist knowledge and often very little local knowledge either. You don't have to do O level estate agency before you're allowed to describe yourself as an estate agent. And yet estate agents charge 2% plus VAT for taking a few photos and, if you're lucky, agreeing to show viewers around the property you're trying to unload.

Estate agents have for years attempted to create a mystique about what they do (in the same way that solicitors like us to think that conveyancing is something complicated) but the bottom line is that although the amounts of money are greater, flogging a house is no more complicated than selling carrots, glasses of lemonade or second-hand books.

3

While sitting on a park bench today I read that it is now possible to build a pair of do it yourself Google glasses using a specially designed cardboard framework into which an ordinary mobile phone is fitted. I’ve seen a picture of the cardboard frame and it looks like something that Blue Peter would recommend making, using two toilet roll centres and an old cornflake packet, and getting Mummy or Daddy to help with the work requiring scissors. I do hope I see someone wearing one of these. What a hoot. I will photograph them and put the picture online. (I am kidding. I have absolutely no idea how one can put a photograph online. Photographs belong in albums, where they can be examined at leisure and in private.)

4

A kind reader has sent me a cutting from her local newspaper. A centurion, being interviewed and asked the secret of his longevity, replied: ‘The secret is moderation in all things. I’ve never smoked more than 20 cigarettes a day or drunk more than half a bottle of whisky a day.’ He does not mention good genes and good fortune. I celebrated this glorious piece of politically correct honesty with a glass of Laphroaig. I always let Antoinette put the water into my whisky because she invariably puts in too much. I then have to add a little more whisky. And then she adds a little too much water. And I have to put in a little more whisky. And before long I have a drink anyone could be proud to sip. As I sniffed and sipped, it occurred to me that life would be easier if someone would produce a weekly newsletter summarising the latest views on political correctness. It would be nice to know which views, words and jokes are likely to result in my being arrested or greeted with a hail of tutting and frowning.

5

Waitrose, the supermarket chain, has delivered our groceries each week for a few years now but every time Antoinette goes onto their website to place an order, the website keeps promoting offers that include meat products. I am astonished that any large company should have such terrible software. Surely, any decent programmer would have written software which could work out that those customers who never buy meat are probably vegetarian.

6

I bought a newspaper and a loaf of bread at one of the nation's few remaining corner stores.

'Would you like a woman for 22 pence?' asked the man behind the counter in an accent which suggested that when Pakistan play England at cricket he will probably not be cheering on the English side.

'No thank you!' I replied rather sharply. 'I'm a happily married man,' I added, rather pompously. I couldn't help wondering what sort of woman you can possibly buy for 22 pence. Even in Cirencester, where farmers' daughters abound, this seemed extraordinarily cheap. And I'm no prude, but it seemed alarming to know that pimping had become so open. And why 22 pence? It seemed a curious sort of price. Was it what is, I believe, called a 'loss leader' designed to hook me as a future customer? I am constantly confused by the world in which we live but this seemed to take both the cake and the biscuit.

'The magazine!' explained the shop assistant, looking cross rather than embarrassed. '*Woman* magazine. We have a special offer.' He picked up a copy of the magazine and held it up to show me. Now I was definitely embarrassed. I used to write for the damned thing when it contained long, serious articles rather than just lots of pictures but to be honest I'd forgotten it existed. 'Or you can have a *Hello* if you prefer,' he said. I told him a goodbye would do me nicely and left.

As I walked away from the shop I was very nearly run over by a huge mobility scooter being driven by a pavement hogging maniac. Why do they make these things the size of tractors? They don't need to be three feet wide and to weigh half a ton. It wouldn't surprise me to discover that they have four wheel drive and can tow a caravan. The small ones, which are far easier to manoeuvre on pavements and in shops, make far more sense. The driver of this one did not look to me to be in the slightest bit disabled though he was carrying about ten stone in excess personal baggage. I strongly suspect that 90% of the people who use mobility scooters really do not need them; most simply need to lose some weight. Similarly, I suspect that a similar number of people in nursing homes don't need to be there. Most, I would guess, end up in care homes because they have given up trying to cope with the administration of managing their utility bills. They may also give up independent living in order to escape from their council tax bills and pressure from relatives who want to release the money tied up in their property. (An eccentric American millionairess called Huguette Clark spent the last 25 years of her life living in a private hospital in Manhattan. She was in good health but insisted on having doctors and nurses constantly on call. In addition to the fortune this cost she tipped heavily, giving her favourite nurse more than $30 million.)

7

I am tired of hearing famous individuals in sport and show business ascribe their success to hard work and determination. It happens time and time again and must be intensely irritating for the thousands who work hard and who are determined but who still fail to scale the peaks of their chosen profession. The truth is that the people who make it to the top often owe their success to luck more than anything else. Of course, they have worked hard and of course they have been determined but those are not the only factors which have led them to success. Singers, comedians and actors often hit the big time through serendipity more than talent or skill. They happen to be in the right time at the right place to be spotted. Racing drivers may get into Formula 1 because they are lucky enough to find a sponsor prepared to buy them a seat in a car. Athletes who get into the Olympics may do so because they are lucky enough to find a coach who will help them move in the most profitable direction. Hard work and determination are essential for success but they are by no means the only, or even the most important, factors. It’s strange that people are always quick to blame bad luck when things go wrong but never eager to credit good luck when things go well.

8

‘Is this the Roman city of Corinium?’ asked a tall gentleman in a flowery shirt and beige slacks. We were standing in the car park in the centre of Cirencester. He was clearly foreign and even though he wasn’t wearing lederhosen, I would, if I had to guess, have said that he came from Germany. Although it was quite a cool day he was sweating like a fat jogger in a heatwave.

‘It is,’ I confirmed. Cirencester used to be a Roman settlement and back in those days it was known as Corinium.

‘Where is the city?’ he asked, looking around at the public toilets, the selection of recycling skips and the police station. None of them looked terribly Roman or, it has to be said, terribly interesting, unless you needed a toilet in which case one of them would probably look very terribly interesting. ‘How do we get to it?’

I pointed to a gap in the low wall at the far side of the car park. ‘Go through the gap and then past the shop selling Roman mobility aids, past the Roman hairdressers and turn left when you come to the Roman estate agency. Wander up in that direction and within a couple of hundred yards you’ll be in the middle of the Roman city of Corinium.’

‘Thank you,’ said the foreigner. He seemed pleased. ‘And where do I pay for the car park?’

I pointed to the Roman Pay Here sign.

At that moment a flock of seagulls on holiday from Ilfracombe or Weston super Mare or somewhere wet and salty flew overhead. One of them deposited a large portion of guano on the man’s head and he, muttering what I suspect was a mixture of foreign oaths and apologies, ran back to his car to fetch tissues.

I wonder if seagulls have competitions to see how many people they can hit on the head. When you stop and think about it, the number of times that guano lands directly on head or shoulders is way out of proportion to what one would expect. The birds must be taking aim and doing it deliberately. I once watched as a seagull’s deposit landed slap bang in the middle of a creamy Cornish ice cream. The woman who was eating it was chatting to a friend at the time and absent-mindedly turned back to lick her icecream without looking at what she was doing. It was only my timely warning which prevented her acquiring a lifelong dislike of eating out of doors.

9

The son of a couple who live nearby was arrested (with a group of friends) for stealing a car. The youths were all drunk at the time and succeeded in crashing the stolen car and destroying both it and two other vehicles. The son was taken to court, fined and given community service. ‘It wasn’t fair,’ the young man whinged, when I saw him today. ‘The police and the people in the court made me feel like a criminal.’ I’m absolutely delighted that he feels like a criminal. The country has been going to the dogs since they outlawed horse-whipping for dastardly young men who do bad things and then whinge when they are threatened with punishment. This isn’t the first time I’ve heard a youth moaning about his well-deserved punishment.

10

What idiot at the Ministry of Transport decided that gradients on British roads should be measured in percentages? Today, I saw a sign on a hill telling me that the gradient was 20%. This meaningless nonsense, brought to us courtesy of the European Union, is now apparently replacing the traditional method of defining road gradients as, for example, 1 in 5 or 1 in 12. Everyone knew where they were with the old gradient signs. The new-fangled EU versions are a tribute to the memory of Adolf Hitler and Herr Funk and simply yet another sign that Britain will do anything to please the unelected, fascist eurocrats of Brussels. We didn’t have to abandon our imperial measurements but we have and I suspect that it won’t be long before mile posts become kilometre posts. The rood, the perch and the chain will soon be lost even to history.

11

I now spend so much of my life dealing with crap that if anyone asks what I do for a living I tell them that I am deeply involved in sewage. I sat in the garden, musing on this sad fact, and slowly my mood was lifted. Our bower seat is surrounded by trees and bushes which are still in blossom and the few bees who have belatedly turned up were working incredibly hard. I never feel worried by them, even though they may be working no more than a foot from my face. They do what they do, and I do what I do.

12

According to the Government’s own website, it is, I am delighted to say, now against the law to let any dog (even tiny yappy ones) be dangerously out of control anywhere. The ‘anywhere’ includes public places and private gardens (including the dog owner’s own home). According to the law a dog is considered to be dangerously out of control if it injures someone or makes someone worry that it might injure them. I believe that in general we have far too many laws (some of them downright silly and many virtually unenforceable) but this is one law that really deserves to be on the statute books. In recent years I have noticed that some dog owners seem to regard it as their right to march through towns, along country lanes and on footpaths with their dog off the lead and barking and growling at everyone in sight. They sneer at anyone who suggests that their dog should be on a lead and laugh at those who confess that they are afraid of dogs. These dog owners have made life difficult for millions and I am not ashamed to admit that I am one of the millions. I gave up cycling after I was attacked by two loose Alsations. The owner stood by and laughed as his dogs went for me. ‘They don’t like cyclists,’ he sneered. ‘You shouldn’t be here.’ Since we were all on a dedicated cycle track at the time it didn’t seem to me that this was entirely fair. At least the baggy trousered bastard didn’t tell me that his dogs didn’t bite. (‘My dog doesn’t bite’ has taken over from ‘the cheque is in the post’ and ‘I’ll pull it out before I come’ as the biggest and most popular lie in Britain.) Still, those of who like to wander around without being sniffed and having your legs bitten can take comfort in the fact that the law is now very firmly on our side. Dog owners who break the law can be fined up to £5,000 and sent to prison for up to six months and may be banned from owning a dog in the future. If a dog actually injures someone the owner can be sent to prison for up to five years. And if a dog kills someone the prison sentence goes up to 14 years and the fine becomes unlimited. It is now against the law to allow a dog to run free on a public road. It is against the law to allow a dog to make a good deal of noise. It is against the law to allow a dog to foul a public space (or a neighbour’s garden). Dog owners who let their dogs roam free in their own gardens will have to make sure that they have proper fences. I will not be slow to take advantage of this new law. If I see a dog which I consider to be out of control, and I am worried that it might injure me, I will report the owner. It will be a delight to see some of our arrogant and malignant neighbours locked up for six months.

13

The police in Northern Ireland have so little to do these days that they have apparently taken to patrolling the beaches in search of things to do. A reader has just sent me a newspaper photograph of two armed and uniformed policeman standing on a deserted beach waiting for a naked man to come out of the water. A police spokesman warns skinny dippers that they could end up with a criminal record and be placed on the sex offender register. The policemen not looking for naked bathers are busy arresting bottles of beer. The police in Holywood, Northern Ireland announced recently that they had seized ‘approximately 1,000 bottles or cans of alcohol’ in a single day. They didn’t say what they’d done with it all but I’m prepared to make a guess.

14

Our friendliest neighbour, who is a lingerie designer (famous, apparently within the industry for the Asset Booster Cup), has a diploma in fashion history and probably knows as much about 19th century German lingerie as anyone in the entire South Gloucestershire area, saw me spraying our black rubbish bags with my toxic deodorant from Poundland. (Having looked at the can I am not entirely sure whether it is supposed to be a deodorant or an aftershave spray. Indeed, having used it I'm not entirely sure that it wasn't intended to be used as a fly spray. Or, perhaps, an oven cleaner. The odour still reminds me of the sort of smell that emanates from French public lavatories: all second-hand garlic and Gauloise.) He stopped and asked me what I was doing. I was tempted to tell him that the bags were going to a dance and that I was trying to improve their chances of picking up a couple of nice recycling trays but the folk who live in our village are not, generally speaking, well-endowed with humour so instead, in a moment of imaginative genius, I told him the truth.

'That's a brilliant idea,' he said, thoughtfully. 'I wish I could use that idea somehow.'

'Well, you can,' I told him. 'It's not copyright. Just buy some noxious aftershave and spray it on your bags.'

'It's a really good idea,' said the neighbour rubbing his chin. He looked terribly disappointed. 'Unfortunately we have room for bins at our house so we put our black bags inside the bins and we don't have any trouble with badgers or foxes.'

'Oh that's a pity,' I said, sympathetically.

'But it's a really good idea,' said the neighbour. 'I wish I could think of a way to use it.' He wandered off thoughtfully. He looked terribly disappointed.

15

An American laboratory has invented a wearable patch which can administer a drug and monitor variables in the patient’s blood to see if the dosage is having the required effect. If the drug isn’t working properly, or side effects are developing, the dosage can be adjusted automatically. There is talk, too, of fitting a cell-phone chip to the patch so that results can be sent automatically to the patient’s doctor. Now this, surely, is what technology is for!

16

We assume, these days, that people are mentally ill when their thoughts or behaviour do not fit the patterns exhibited by those we know, or when they deviate from the thoughts and behavioural patterns widely regarded as acceptable. Anyone regarded as ‘different’ must receive treatment. This is a dangerous concept because it means that the exceptional individuals in our society are now being diagnosed as ‘ill’ and given medication which may seriously damage them and destroy their ability to create. The fact is that all great people are (almost by definition) sensitive and neurotic and (sometimes) paranoid too (in that sensitivity and fears lead to paranoia); they are like orchids in that they need warmth and lots of attention.

But doctors have a nasty habit of labelling such patients as ‘officially’ neurotic.

And no medical label sticks more firmly than ‘neurotic’. Few labels do more damage. Get yourself labelled ‘neurotic’ and no one will ever take you seriously again. Nor will they treat you with respect. The best you can hope for is a brand of patronising sympathy, designed to make you feel about six inches tall. Most neurotics respond to this by adding extra shame and guilt to the burdens they are already carrying. The neurotic is the 21st century leper, constantly encouraged to feel ‘unclean’ or even incomplete.

The neurotic suffers twice. First there are the pains inherent in the neurosis and then, on top of those, there are the pains produced by the very real sense of self-doubt and self-criticism the neuroticism has inspired. The neurotic staggers from one crisis to another, perpetually hiding in the shadows of despair.

None of this is fair or reasonable.

Far from being a label to inspire contempt the word ‘neurotic’ should inspire love, affection, respect and admiration. For although our society does not trust neurotics, they are the very people who make up the heart and soul of the human community. It is true that neurotics are ridden with guilt and anxiety but they also tend to be exceptionally kind, gentle, thoughtful and courteous. Shyness is, in our society regarded as a fault and an illness (there is, you will not be surprised to hear, a special pill for it). But the unusually shy are often particularly aware of the needs of others. They try harder and often turn out to be exceptionally caring individuals. Neurotics are often obsessional too. Again, this is now an illness and there are drugs for it. But unless it reaches exceptional heights, obsessional behaviour doesn’t usually do that much harm. And, on the contrary, the obsessional neurotic will pay great attention to detail and will be observant and watchful. Those are virtues not faults. What else? Well, neurotics are often described as being too imaginative. Imaginations may cause anxieties and tears but imagination means creativity and the production of music and literature and great art and architecture. The people we describe as neurotic are often the individuals whose creative genius we admire. Every great thinker, artist, writer was almost certainly also a neurotic. Without them the world would be a far less pleasant place.

It is, perhaps, about time we treated neurotics with affection and gratitude and understanding. Then, maybe, they would suffer just once and not twice for being neurotic.

It is not difficult to argue that neurotics are more evolved than anyone else. We gain enormously from the agony, the pain and the intense vulnerability endured by neurotics and yet, egged on by the professionals, we repay them with disdain, contempt and suspicion; we regard them as misfits.

How long do you think Mozart (the archetypal misfit if ever there was one) would survive in our society? He would be destroyed by the media and drugged into submission by the doctors.

It is worth remembering that at the other end of the spectrum to neuroticism lies psychopathy. And the odd thing is that we don’t tend to regard psychopaths as needing treatment in our society. On the contrary, the psychopaths (the selfish, the uncaring, the insensitive) become the leaders in our world. In politics, industry and the professions it is the psychopaths who rise to the top. It is hardly surprising that the professions have all failed us.

Teachers control education, doctors control medicine and lawyers control the law and you would have to have your head stuck well into the sand not to agree that the leaders representing all these three professions have betrayed the public. Politicians simply dare not oppose them and, from their point of view, it’s easy to see why not. There are nearly a million teachers and teaching assistants in the UK. Add in their families and that’s a lot of votes. So education policies are determined by the teaching unions.

As an aside this means, of course, that it is the teachers’ leaders who should take the blame for the high levels of illiteracy and innumeracy in the country. The latter is now so bad that I fear that anaesthetists are going to have huge problems with the present and future generations when they need putting to sleep. At the moment anaesthetists usually tell patients to count up to ten but most teenagers would hit a brick wall when they got to six or seven. ‘Er… what comes after six?’ Innumeracy is already a huge problem in shops. I am always being given the wrong change. Just the other day, in Cirencester, I was given £10 too much change. The two items I’d bought added up to £51 but the assistant had added them up in his head and come up with £41. I handed him back the £10. He looked at me as if I were bonkers (I may well be but for the purpose of this anecdote that is neither here nor there). ‘You’ve given me

£10 too much,’ I insisted. With a great sigh he pulled out a calculator and added up the cost of the two items. He then turned the calculator round so that I could see my mistake. Sadly for him it showed that I was right and he was wrong. He took the £10, went very red and murmured a modest ‘thank you’. If I had £10 for every time this has happened I would, well, have a lot of £10s.

Of course, we have to remember that neurotics and original thinkers have always been despised and oppressed in fascist countries.

The Nazis didn’t think much of neurotics. And today the EU, the new proponent of raw, unfeeling fascism, doesn’t have much time for the neurotic or the original thinker either.

17

It has been reported that British women do not exercise because they are worried that their breasts will bounce up and down if they do. And so they stay at home and watch television. The curious thing is that no other women, anywhere in the world, use the ‘bouncing bosoms’ excuse as a reason for not exercising. Maybe British women are better endowed. Or maybe they are more self-conscious. I’m sure that as I write a team of scientists will be negotiating a grant to conduct a thorough investigation and find the answer.

18

‘When I was in my 20s,’ said our friend D.J., ‘I drank five or six pints of beer every evening, I smoked 40 cheap fags a day and I ate nothing except curries, chips and pies.’ He looked thoughtful for a moment; remembering these halcyon days. ‘I never had any health problems at all: no indigestion, no chest troubles, nothing. I was as fit as a fiddle.’ He pointed an accusing finger at me, as though holding me responsible for what had happened to him. ‘And now look at me!’ he said. ‘I live on salads and health foods. I eat yoghurt and cottage cheese and thin slices of wholemeal bread. And I suffer from indigestion and wind and I get out of breath if I cross the road.’ He glowered at me. ‘I haven’t had a chip for a year,’ he complained. ‘I think you doctors are all talking rubbish. I should go back to the beer, the fags and the curry. I was healthy on that diet.’

19

In Cirencester I met a fellow who used to be a Punch and Judy man. He was playing the violin and had a hat on the ground beside him. He wasn’t a very good violinist but he played with great gusto. I’ve stopped giving money to beggars, particularly young, healthy looking ones, but I happily give money to buskers. Unless they are really, really bad they make life better for us all. I put some money into his hat and, since I was going for a coffee, I asked him if he wanted a drink and something to eat. We walked to a nearby café and as he ate he told me and his wife had for thirty seven years toured English seaside towns with Punch, Judy, the policeman, the dog and a string of sausages. He had been the ‘professor’ and his wife had worked as the ‘bottler’, calling in the audience, introducing the act and collecting the money afterwards. They lived in a camper van and towed the Punch and Judy tent and paraphernalia in an elderly trailer with a canvas cover. ‘We didn’t get rich,’ said the man. ‘But it wasn’t a bad life. We made a lot of kids happy and had some adventures.’

He told me that they now lived in a small, rented flat within walking distance of the town centre. I’d expected him to tell me that they had to retire because of opposition from the politically correct gestapo, the self-appointed forces of law and order who disapprove of old-fashioned entertainments such as Punch and Judy because they don’t like people having fun. (I have heard them say that they disapprove of Punch and Judy because it glorifies wife beating violence. This only goes to show how little they know. In most Punch and Judy scenarios the wife gives just as much as she gets. Judy can look after herself. It is largely the policeman who gets the worst end of the stick.) But, to my surprise, it wasn’t this that finished them, but the fact that they simply couldn’t make ends meet. ‘Councils started to demand huge fees to let us operate on the beach,’ the professor told me. ‘And the audience would pay us in pennies. My wife would go round with the box and when we emptied it after a show we’d have earned a pound in copper, with a few five pence coins from the more generous patrons.’

I said I was sad to hear this and he added that he earned more busking than he’d earned from the Punch and Judy show. I asked him what had happened to the puppets and the tent they’d worked in. He told me that they’d sold the whole lot for £500 to a young couple who intended to hire themselves out for children’s birthday parties. He said he’d heard that they were doing very well. He told me that they set up on someone’s lawn, or even in the living room if it was raining, and got paid £100 for an hour’s work. ‘They do two or three shows most Saturdays and a few during the week and make a decent living at it.’

I bought him a large piece of fruit pie and another coffee and bought myself a second cup of coffee. ‘It’s the councils who are killing off all the things people associate with the seaside,’ he told me sadly. ‘They charge so much for the donkey concession and the deckchair concession that no one can make any money. The council staff who do the negotiating seem to assume that the council is entitled to all the takings – leaving no wages for the people doing the actual work.’

I gave him £10 so that he could buy his wife a bunch of flowers from one of the market stalls. He told me that he’d wait until the end of the day because the flower seller always sold off flowers at half price when he was packing up ready to go home.

20

Another local village held its fete a couple of days ago and one of the contests was a scything competition. A local farmer, with a field next to the church in the grounds of which the fete was being held, had roughly marked out areas of a field where grass needed to be cut. Each contestant paid £1 for the right to rent a scythe for half an hour. The winner, the contestant who cut the most grass, received a bottle of Tesco's own brand champagne. This very much reminded me of Mark Twain, whose hero Tom Sawyer allowed his chums to pay (in such currency as unfinished apple cores) to paint the fence he was supposed to be painting. Sawyer sat in the sunshine and watched and supervised after cleverly 'allowing' the other boys to pay for the privilege of painting a stretch of fence.

If we had a better crop of apples this year I would be tempted to organise something similar for our orchard this coming autumn. Sadly, however, the un-pollinated blossom failed to turn into apples and we will be lucky to have enough fruit to make a pie and to keep the birds, badgers and squirrels happy. The one bright spot is that a particularly productive bramble has grown up into one of our trees and now we have apples and blackberries growing on the same branch. 'We just need a custard bush nearby,' said Antoinette, dreaming of apple and blackberry pie.

Sam, the clever and unusually well-read farmer with the well scythed field is exceptional in almost every way. He is friendly and sensible and although his family seems to own a large portion of the county he is remarkably down to earth.

Sam, who is a widower, is 72-years-old and technically he is properly known as young Sam. He lives with his father who is 95 and known as old Sam. His own son, who is 50, is known as the younger Sam. (There is another son, not as old as the younger Sam, who lives and works in London and who is known as Gerald because his name isn't Sam.)

Young Sam's father, old Sam, buys young Sam a train set every Christmas (and has done so for 66 years). Old Sam's own father, also called Sam, died at the age of 102 and when that happened it made life easier for everyone. Before that there were four generations of Sams and the youngest of them was known as the boy Sam. When one of the Sams dies the others all move up the pecking order. So, when old Sam finally moves on to better things, young Sam will become old Sam and younger Sam will become young Sam. It took me months to sort all this out in my mind and I feel quite proud of myself for having done so.

The only other person I've ever known who was called Sam was a teacher of mine when I was 13 or 14. His name was Sam Treadwell and he was paid to teach us Latin but we found the subject tedious and none of us ever paid much attention to him. He had a foul temper and used to keep one of those wooden blackboard rubbers in his hand at all times. If anyone annoyed him he would hurl the rubber at them. He did this as if he were throwing a baseball and had, over the years, become quite accurate. At the end of one of his lessons, we smeared tomato ketchup on the wall at the back of the classroom and hid one of the boys in the stationery cupboard. When the next master came into the classroom to teach us English he noticed the red smear on the wall and demanded to know what had happened. 'Mr Treadwell threw the blackboard rubber at Soames and killed him,' said a boy called Stourbridge, who in due course became a captain of industry. 'He made us bury him in the playing fields.' The English master went very red and ran from the room in a panic. He returned five minutes later with the headmaster in tow. By then, of course, all signs of the red smear had been removed and we all denied any knowledge of the story Stourbridge had told.

21

‘I’ve had five wives,’ said an old man I met in a pub. He looked to be at least eighty-years-old. ‘And they’ve all been infertile. Not one could give me a child.’ He grinned at me, strangely proud of this apparent perversity of nature. ‘What do you think the chances are of that happening, doctor?’

I smiled, nodded and said nothing.

22

Every day I fill up at least half a dozen bird feeders and two squirrel feeders. (To help them through the summer months, we give the squirrels hazelnuts, which we put into two specially made wooden boxes. The squirrels have to lift the lids to retrieve the nuts – some of which are shelled and some of which are still in their shells.) I always wear plastic gloves when handling the feeders and I have just discovered a new supplier. A company in China will post me 100 plastic gloves for £1. More and more of the stuff sold on Amazon now comes direct from China. I don’t know what Chinese postage rates are like but my guess is that they are considerably lower than Royal Mail charges. The irony is that the Chinese company just dumps all its packets on a plane which carries them to England. Royal Mail, which receives nothing for its efforts, then has to do all the hard work. I am afraid I have absolutely no sympathy for Royal Mail which I believe to be an incompetent company run by buffoons.

The gloves which arrived today are huge. Most of the people who had reviewed the product on Amazon complained bitterly about this fact but since they were women and presumably had small hands I regarded their criticisms as encouraging rather than discouraging. (Generally speaking, I take absolutely no notice of reviews on the internet. We know of an excellent hotel whose owners have been destroyed by cruel and wildly inaccurate internet reviews which, they suspect, were written by local competitors.)

The gloves are so huge that each one would probably make a sleeping bag for a family of five Orientals. The ordinary Chinese worker must be puzzled when they contemplate the clothing they make for sale to Westerners. Shoes are constructed the size of canoes, panties are built to fit unbelievably rotund bottoms and bras are made for breasts so big that to the Chinese they must seem as though they deserve their own post codes.

23

A chap with whom I studied, and who is now a hospital consultant, told me today that he, and a number of his colleagues, are genuinely worried about their job security. Apparently, quite a few NHS hospitals are sacking older consultants and replacing them with younger, cheaper models. My friend tells me that he knows several consultants who are so concerned and angry about this that they are reluctant to train junior doctors and are concentrating on building up their private practices. I find this genuinely alarming. Young doctors have always acquired much of their learning, and most of their practical skills, from the older doctors with whom they work.

There are, of course, many precedents for older doctors keeping their skills secret. The Chamberlen family, who were the first doctors to use forceps to deliver babies, kept their secret for two centuries. It was Peter Chamberlen who invented the obstetric forceps, a device which revolutionised the way a doctor could help a pregnant woman with a difficult delivery, and he and his descendants refused to share details of how the forceps were made and how they worked. I find it sad and rather alarming that today’s doctors are now apparently keeping their skills and knowledge to themselves in order to protect their wealth and status.

24

A fellow I know who is a vet told me two odd stories today. They both concern dogs and both revolve around simple misunderstandings. The vet swears that they are both true stories. The first concerned a man who took his Labrador to the surgery. The vet picked the dog up to carry him into the examination room but almost immediately said: ‘I will have to put him down’.

‘Why?’ demanded the panicking owner. ‘What’s wrong with him? Why do you have to put him down? Can’t you save him?’

The vet quickly explained that as far as he knew there was nothing seriously wrong with the dog. ‘I had to put him down because he’s heavy,’ he explained.

The second story is just as silly but much sadder.

A man took his dog in to see the vet and complained that the animal had been barking all night. ‘Can you put him to sleep, please?’ asked the man. ‘I’m exhausted.’ He then went home to try to get some sleep.

The vet wasn’t happy about the man’s request but being old-fashioned, and believing that the customer is always right, he put the dog to sleep. He was, therefore, shocked when the man returned a few hours later and asked to have his dog back.

25

I see that the police have been told by the Government that in future they must be polite to members of the public. Indeed, policemen (and policewomen) who are not polite will risk being fired.

What a sad state of affairs it is when public employees have to be told that they must be polite to their employers.

26

The honours system in the United Kingdom is truly incomprehensible and indefensible. Knighthoods and peerages are handed out to some of the most undeserving rogues in the country. Most of the people who are given these gongs have done nothing more than they would have done anyway – they certainly didn't do anything special or dedicate their lives in the service of others. People don't become millionaires or film stars so that they can be remembered in the honours list – they become millionaires or film stars because that's what they want for themselves.

Many of the corporate bastards who are 'honoured' in this way have done nothing more honourable than give a chunk of their shareholders' money to a political party or a politician's slush fund.

In practice, nothing has changed since the days when a country nonentity, a poor local squire with a modest home and pride for sale, would receive a peerage and 20,000 acres for allowing his wife or daughter to be shtupped by the King. If the wife or daughter were particularly luscious, and the shtupping especially enjoyable and memorable, the squire might be made a Duke. Nell Gwyn famously threatened to drop her baby out of an upstairs window unless the father, Charles II, made the baby a duke. The baby was duly made Duke of St Albans.

The tragedy is that the people who really deserve to be honoured, the people who have worked for their community without reward, or given their lives for people or animals, are invariably ignored.

But recently I did hear a lovely story today about one such individual. Cyril had spent his life in the village where he was born and he had worked tirelessly to protect the village and the area around it. He had single-handedly emptied the village pond of sludge, supermarket trolleys and bedsteads. He had restored the war memorial. And he had given a portion of his garden to be used as a children's playground. He had even paid for the installation of swings and a roundabout. I doubt if anyone in the country has ever done more for their community than Cyril has done. People had tried repeatedly to have his name put on the honours list. But all attempts had failed.

Three month ago Cyril, who was already blind with macular degenerative disease, was diagnosed with a pancreatic cancer. He was told that he had only a few months to live. It looked as though he would die without the honour and recognition everyone thought he deserved. And then a local celebrity, a rock group member who had been given an M.B.E. some years earlier, for some undefined services and for reasons which even he didn't quite understand, heard about Cyril and decided that he would do something about it. He paid for a fake letter and envelope to be printed (ostensibly from the Palace) and he arranged for the local postman to deliver it to Cyril's home.

And since Cyril was too ill to go to London to collect his 'fake' M.B.E. he helped arrange for a presentation party, which included the Parish Council chairman and the vicar, to present him with the medal. Cyril was plainly delighted. He was overcome with pride and cried real tears of joy. Two days later he died a happy man.

After his death, but before the funeral, one of Cyril's neighbours took the medal round to the rock star's home. She said she thought he would want it back since Cyril no longer had any need of it. But the rock star thanked her and said to her that the medal was now Cyril's and would remain Cyril's for ever. He told her that the medal was to be pinned onto the lapel of Cyril's suit and buried with him. And so it was done. And justice was duly served.

27

I read today of a bra designer who resigned from her position at the company where she works. ‘I wanted more than just a supporting role,’ she is quoted as having said.

28

A reader of mine wrote to tell me a strange but true story. Purely to get out of the rain one day a few months ago, while on a walk near his home, he joined a party of people he didn’t know and wandered into a chapel of rest. He stayed for the funeral, sang a couple of hymns and listened to a few kind words spoken about the deceased. When leaving he signed his name and address in the book of condolences simply because it would have looked rather odd if he hadn’t done so. He then forgot all about the incident until he received a letter from a firm of solicitors handling the deceased’s estate. The person who had died had apparently left a will instructing his solicitor to share out his estate among all those who had attended his funeral. And so my reader found himself £17,857 better off.

‘It was,’ he wrote, ‘the most profitable hour I ever spent in my life.’

He is now planning to share the money among half a dozen charities.

29

We went to Gloucester, though I can’t remember why. It’s a strange city. We always get lost there, even with our wonderful new satellite navigation device, and we got lost when we’re out of the car too. We even have difficulty finding where we’ve parked the damned thing.

Gloucester does, however, have a good supply of unusual shops. Apparently, it has always been the same. Back in 1936, the poshest store in town was called Bon Marche and you could buy everything there – you could even walk out with an aeroplane. The shop sold odd little planes called ‘Flying Fleas’ which were designed by a Frenchman who claimed that his machine had a range of 200 miles and could land in a field or a garden anywhere. It sounded wonderful but unfortunately there was a snag and the darned thing had a tendency to crash. This didn’t stop people buying it, of course, for there were no online reviewers in those days. Eventually early health and safety busy bodies had it banned.

It had rained all morning and the streets of Gloucester were awash. This reminded Antoinette of the old rhyme: ‘Doctor Foster went to Gloucester in a shower of rain. He stepped in a puddle, right up to his middle and never went there again.’ I read somewhere that the Dr Foster in the tale was actually King Edward I who, in 1278, was visiting the city to set up some sort of new taxation system. It was so wet and muddy in the city centre that the king’s horse got stuck. The locals had a great time laughing at the hapless monarch but Edward was peeved and sensibly vowed never to visit Gloucester again.

Mind you, if he didn’t have a satellite navigation system it probably took him weeks to get out of the darned place.

On our way back from Gloucester we stopped to watch a village cricket match. I’m not sure whereabouts it was, but it was definitely somewhere in Gloucestershire. It was dusk and the light was poor but village cricketers will always play on in the darkness. I once watched a match which was illuminated by the headlights of two dozen cars parked around the boundary’s edge. As the match continued the lights dimmed as batteries died and I couldn’t help wondering who was going to take the owners home. I also once sat and watched a village cricket match in a thunderstorm. I stayed in the car with the windscreen wipers going full blast. The players, drenched to the skin, refused to leave the field though I suspect they could hardly see where they were or what they were doing. The ball must have been almost impossible to hold.

Today, we sat on the grass, a few yards away from the pavilion, and enjoyed some wonderfully entertaining sport. These were clearly men who played the game for fun rather than in the hope that they might attract the attention of the England selectors. The wicket keeper of the fielding side was the oldest man I’ve ever seen take to the field in any sort of cricket. He was very small and had two short legs. His legs were so short that he had to walk very quickly in order to get where he wanted to be and I suspect that if he wanted to cross a room he would have to set off five or six minutes before he wanted to be where he wanted to be. He seemed slightly blind and very deaf. The captain of his side had such little faith in his abilities behind the stumps that he stationed a permanent long stop behind him, close to the boundary. The wicket keeper, I was told, suffered from arthritis, angina, diabetes and such a terrible case of athlete’s foot that he was not allowed to use the dressing room showers.

When the captain of the batting side declared, one of the batsmen who had been called in was furious.

‘You might have let me go on,’ he shouted. ‘I could have got my first hundred!’

‘You’d only scored 24!’ the captain pointed out.

‘But I was batting so well,’ complained the unhappy player, with feeling.

He meant it too.

30

We were in the household department of a store in Cirencester. ‘I’d like a couple of those big jugs!’ said a woman to a friend, pointing to a selection of oversized milk containers which were displayed on a shelf. Just then another woman, previously unseen, came out from behind the display racks. She was blushing bright red and trying to cover her enormous bosom with her handbag. It was clear that she had a cleavage so deep that anyone who had the temerity to yodel into it would have to wait four or five seconds before the echo came out.

31

An American friend (a genial fellow who is a master of the single entendre and who mixes metaphors like barman mix cocktails) told us that he, like most of his fellow countrymen, receives only ten days of paid leave a year. He was reporting, rather than complaining, and his comment was inspired by surprise at the amount of holidays normally taken in Britain. Moreover, he told us that nearly half of all Americans don't take all the holiday to which they are entitled. I checked on this and he's absolutely right. Astonishingly, nearly half of all Americans take only two of the ten days holiday to which they are entitled. Friends of other nationalities have told us similar things. No other country in the world gives employees as much holiday as the UK does. It is no wonder that productivity is so low that we are in a never ending decline.

Even when they are at work a frighteningly high proportion of the workforce spend their days twittering, reading their emails, posing for selfies and messing around with their Facebook pages. Amazingly, the average Briton now sends around 12,000 private texts and emails every year. This is the TTF generation (Twitter, tattoo and Facebook). Today's generation can't take a photograph of a monument, a wild animal or a sunset without putting themselves into the picture.

September

1

Antoinette and I both love the nearby village of Bourton-on-the-Water.

Cotswold villages do have the most wonderful names and many (Stow-on-the-Wold, Upper and Lower Slaughter and the three Sodburys – Chipping Sodbury, Old Sodbury and Little Sodbury – to name but a sample) sound as if they were invented by P. G. Wodehouse in a particularly fanciful moment. There really ought to be a village called Loose Chippings.

Bourton-on-the-Water, however, was named by someone with no time for flights of fancy. The village has the river Windrush running through the centre of it and that's the end of it. Apart from the river, which features on most picture postcards and all tourist photographs and is the site of what is, I believe, the world's only annual football match played in water, Bourton has two wonderful tourist attractions: the model village and Birdland. The former is a magnificent creation which is a great place to take friends and visitors coming to the Cotswolds for the first time. The model village, which is quite rightly Grade II listed, is a one ninth scale replica of the centre of Bourton-on-the-Water and all the tiny houses, shops and churches are built in local Cotswold stone. The river is there, complete with miniature bridges, and there are flowers and trees in the gardens. Stand close to the churches and you can hear the choirs singing. And there is even a model of the model village itself.

It is, however, Birdland which drags us back to Bourton time and time again. There are herons nesting on the river and there is sometimes a stork standing guard by the gate. Inside there are many wonderful birds to see – including my personal favourite, the wonderfully named White-Bellied-Go-Away-Bird. There are crowned cranes, elegant waders, owls and, of course, a plentiful supply of penguins. And behind the main part of Birdland there is the magnificently wild Marshmouth Nature Reserve.

Every time we visit Bourton-on-the-Water we think seriously about buying a cottage there but after a walk through the village, and a quiet cup of tea in one of the many splendid cafés, we always abandon the idea. Even out of season the village is full of tourists and, inevitably and quite naturally, the local tradesfolk cater almost exclusively for them. As a result the majority of shops now sell souvenirs and little else and if your shopping ambitions stop at toy models of London buses, solar operated models of a waving Queen and holographic posters of friendly polar bears you will be well pleased. Similarly, if you are looking for a card, pen or mug to give to a much loved teacher or hugely adored teaching assistant you will have no difficulty in finding an ample selection from which to choose. But locals wanting a decent selection of shoes, socks or a good book to read probably have to travel some distance to find what they need.

A generation or two ago Cotswold villages used to be pretty well self-sufficient. And no Cotswold village would dare show its face unless it had at least one decent second-hand bookshop. These days too many local shops cater mainly for the Japanese tourists who arrive by the coachload to take photographs and, of course, to buy those model London buses and delightful, solar operated models of the Queen forever waving, which were probably manufactured no more than a few miles away from their homes. Sadly, the second-hand bookshops have pretty well all gone; sacrificed on the altar which is the internet. I don't blame the shopkeepers at all. They have to make a living. But I suspect they're sad too.

The residents of Bourton-on-the-Water are renowned throughout the Cotswolds for believing that putting a live pigeon underneath the bed of someone who is dying will keep them alive. I suspect that this belief may now be a thing of the past but who can tell.

2

My distrust of the NHS grows ever stronger. The thousands of bureaucrats who control the nation's health care provider seem to me to specialise in two things: lies and waste. I have long believed that the NHS is run by and for the drug industry. Doctors' postgraduate education is designed, managed and administered by drug companies and drug company serfs. Orders which come down from the Department of Health, the British Medical Association and the General Medical Council are effectively designed to expand the profits of the drug companies. Vast amounts of money are spent on providing drugs which do more harm than good (but which are enormously profitable) and when costs need to be cut the patients who are targeted are the ones who have little power – such as the elderly and the mentally ill.

Vast amounts of taxpayers' money is spent on providing cosmetic surgery, fertility treatment and other optional extras but there is never enough cash to pay for care for cancer patients or to provide vital services for pensioners or those with serious mental disorders. Vast amounts of money are spent on ineffective (and potentially hazardous) screening programmes and on treating non-existent diseases. Today, I read that even more money is now going to be spent on ADHD which seems to affect at least 100% of all the nation's children. The truth, unpopular though it might be, is that ADHD is an imaginary disease, devised by drug companies to find a commercial use for large quantities of otherwise toxic defoliant. It is not a medical disorder; it is a disorder of disappointment resulting from the thwarted ambitions of parents who feel more comfortable if their child's failure to read or write, or to behave like a small, civilised human being, can be blamed on a disease rather than poor parenting or poor teaching. Like so many other disorders it was invented by psychiatrists working for drug companies searching for 'diseases' to cure with otherwise useless drugs. (If you think I'm exaggerating, just check out how new diseases are 'invented'. The American Psychiatric Association simply publishes new diseases in its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Every year the list of diseases gets longer and in the words of a former chairman of the task force which puts the Manual together: 'pretty soon all of us may be labelled mad'.)

Gordon Brown (the star of my book *Gordon is a Moron*) has argued that Britain's greatest historical achievement is the NHS. I believe he says this partly because he has never worked in it and partly because when he uses it he does so with the protected status that helps him avoid nine hour queues in casualty, six month waits for an appointment with a hospital consultant and waits of a month or more for blood test results.

3

There is, it seems, much talk in the USA about the lack of free speech in the West. The unstinting efforts of the Homeland Security bullies to stamp on anyone daring to open his mouth and question America’s absurdly misdirected security operations mean that very few journalists, politicians or ordinary citizens are prepared to stand up and make themselves heard when the latest piece of nonsense is unveiled. The truth, of course, is that free speech in America has always been in rather short supply. We should, perhaps, all remember that the Sedition Act of 1918 made it a crime to say anything critical about the war effort of President Wilson’s administration.

The only difference today is that ‘security’ is now regarded as a catchall excuse for any totalitarian, oppressive action the State, or any State employee, may choose to take. It’s the same in the UK, of course. If the rubbish isn’t collected on time it’s for security reasons. If a train doesn’t run or a road is closed it is for ‘security’ reasons. If all the rubbish bins disappear from London’s streets (with the result that the pavements and gutters are strewn with discarded wrappers, newspapers and drinks containers) it is for ‘security’ reasons. If travellers must be strip searched, fondled and humiliated it is for ‘security’ reasons.

4

Curiously, it seems that we all have many rights we didn’t know we had. I’m accustomed to being told that we all have the right to free education, free water, free legal representation, free books and so on but I was surprised to see a political advertisement today telling me that we all have the right to play.

Oddly enough, no one ever talks about our having a right to free food.

5

Our groceries were delivered by a new driver today. He moaned at some length about the fact that we live at the bottom of a steep and narrow lane. Worried that he might return to the store, complain to the manager and have us expelled from the Waitrose delivery list, I told him that the store’s other drivers, including several young women, had no difficulty whatsoever in driving up and down the lane. The moaning driver was taken aback at this and seemed extremely upset that he should find it difficult to do something that young women had found easy and had managed without a murmur of protest.

‘Well, if they can do it, I can do it without any problems!’ he stated rather indignantly.

I don’t think he will be complaining to the manager and so I suspect our deliveries will be safe for a while yet.

6

I was riding my bicycle along our lane when a woman who lives nearby imperiously called me in to help her gardener pull out a tree stump. It took us half an hour and by the time we'd finished I was exhausted and unpleasantly hot and sticky.

'Do you do much in the garden yourself?' I asked her.

'I do the pointing,' she said.

I was impressed and looked around, expecting to see some neat mortar work. 'Which walls have you done?' I asked.

'Oh not that sort of pointing,' she replied, haughtily. 'I point like Beverley Nichols.' She extended an arm and a finger and pointed imperiously. 'Plant that here and put that there.'

The miserable old bat may well be good at pointing but she didn't thank me for my efforts. And nor did she offer me a drink.

7

We’re still working our way through the sale of a property we no longer need. It still amazes me, after all these years, that it takes so long to complete a property purchase or sale. The procedure really doesn’t have to take as long as it does. When I bought Publishing House (the office building where I ran my publishing business for two and a half decades) I completed the purchase in a single day. I saw the building in the morning and by close of play I owned it.

These days most solicitors and estate agents would have a fit if you asked them to move that quickly. But, in reality, there is really no reason that buying property should take so long. The truth, of course, is that solicitors, estate agents, surveyors, the local council and the mortgage brokers all want to drag out the whole sorry exercise so that they can justify their absurdly inflated fees. How can an estate agent justify his 2% fee if a property sale is completed in a week? How can the local council justify the vast fee they charge for a ‘search’ if it doesn’t take them 16 weeks to press a button and send an email? How can a surveyor justify his massive fee if he doesn’t spend hours reporting on the weather, the outlook and the quality of the decorations?

And so it takes weeks of painful stress to complete a sale or a purchase.

(Why, incidentally, are the websites run by estate agents so ineptly put together? Why are there so rarely any decent key word search engines? If an estate agent allowed folk to put in seven key words, and provided the requisite software, potential buyers would be able to find the house of their dreams very speedily and efficiently. If we must have the internet in our lives let’s at least make it do what it can do best.)

8

I discovered today that up until recently it was illegal for French employers to prevent their staff from drinking wine while at work. Anyone with a job was entitled to have a bottle of red close at hand, just in case he or she felt their blood alcohol level drifting down towards sober. Spoil sports have now got rid of this law and, I have no doubt, replaced it with a dozen far more boring ones.

9

An American government study has found that a significant number of people who have undergone treatment for cancer during the last few decades may not have actually had the disease at all. The report, commissioned by the U.S. National Cancer Institute, and published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, says that many patients were just plain old-fashioned misdiagnosed. It is estimated that millions have been falsely treated for cancer and have been killed with chemotherapy, surgery and radiation. Many women have been treated for breast cancer when they didn't have anything seriously wrong with them. And many men have been treated for prostate cancer when, in fact, they had a condition that would not have killed them. The bottom line is that millions of people have been killed not by cancer but by treatment they never needed.

I have written about this problem in a number of my medical books (most recently in *Do Doctors and Nurses Kill More People than Cancer?*) but, sadly, an embarrassed and infuriated medical profession has suppressed my arguments. I very much doubt if the profession will take any more notice of the U.S. National Cancer Institute than they have of me. And so doctors will continue to be one of the three big killers – up there alongside circulatory disease (heart attacks and strokes) and cancer.

The cancer industry, led by hugely rich charities, is a deadly disgrace. The bottom line is that half of all Britons will be treated for cancer during their lifetimes but half of those treated for cancer won't actually have it at all.

Over the last century or so it has become increasingly clear that the key to defeating cancer lies in understanding the human body's immune system, but when, just 20 years ago or so, I founded a website devoted to explaining the intricacies of the immune system, the site was immediately attacked by the cancer industry.

10

‘Revenons à nos moutons!’ said the Frenchman.

We had been discussing the planned painting of the hallway in our apartment building and had strayed a little and ended up talking about the city’s decision to turn off street lamps during the night.

Puzzled, I stared at him. Let us get back to our sheep? What the hell was he talking about. Together we worked it out in the end.

‘Revenons à nos moutons’ is the way the French say: ‘Let us get back to the point’.

It’s funny how different languages have different ways to create idioms.

We talked of one or two others. ‘Il ne faut pas réveiller le chat qui dort’ (literally ‘Don’t wake the cat who sleeps’) is the equivalent of our ‘Let sleeping dogs lie’. ‘Il croque la vie a pleines dents’ (literally he munches life with full teeth) is the equivalent of ‘He lives life to the fullest’. The phrase ‘avoir du monde au balcon’ literally means ‘to have people at the balcony’ but the practical translation is ‘to have big breasts’.

Foreigners are all odd, of course, but surely the French are the oddest of all.

‘Revenons à a nos moutons!’ said the Frenchman again. I looked at him and smiled. We resumed our discussion about the painting of the hallway.

11

Madame Rolande, a woman living in our apartment building in Paris, is in her fifties and works at the Mayor’s Office as an important administrator. She has six Christian names. Her full name is: Domenica Irma Nathalie Philippine Clarisse Aurelie Rolande. All these names appear in full on her mail box. She explained to us that her father had five sisters and one brother (called Philippe, of course) and that he had hoped that if she was named after them all, a few might remember her in their wills.

‘And did they?’ asked Antoinette.

Madame Rolande smiled and shook her head. ‘They are all still alive and in good health,’ she replied. ‘They show no signs of leaving the world.’ She shrugged. ‘I do not like any of them but I have spent a fortune buying them presents at Christmas and for their birthdays.’

‘But there is one thing you have must have already inherited,’ said Antoinette.

Madame Rolande looked puzzled.

‘Good genes!’ explained Antoinette. ‘If they have all lived long lives then you too will probably live a long time.’

Madame Rolande nodded and smiled at us. ‘That is possibly true!’ she agreed. ‘But if they all live until they are in their 90s then I will be in my late 60s when, and if, I inherit anything. It will be a little late to have fun.’

‘But a useful pension fund?’ I suggested.

She pulled a face and, rather reluctantly, nodded. ‘I suppose that is so.’ She didn’t seem terribly thrilled.

Madame Rolande then also told us about something that had happened in the building since we had last been in Paris.

It appears that a couple who had rented an apartment on the fourth floor had fallen out with just about everyone. They had, in particular, fallen out with their landlord and with the people who lived in the apartment below them. They had exacted their revenge by disconnecting the waste pipe underneath the bath just before they left the building for the last time. The inevitable result was that when the new tenants took their first bath all the water poured into the flat below, drenching the unfortunate residents and their belongings.

‘This was too much,’ said Madame Rolande. She told us that it is accepted practice for residents to go on holiday and leave their radio or television switched on, with the volume turned up high, if they are upset with their neighbours. ‘But this thing with the water was not acceptable,’ she said, shaking her head with clear disapproval.

Not for the first time we are pleased that our apartment is on the top floor. If anyone is going to be drenched by dirty bath water it is not going to be us.

12

We sat in a café today doing a little idle people watching. It occurred to me that whereas the English put food onto the backs of their forks, where it is bound to fall off (especially if the food involved happens to be peas) foreigners use their forks like slightly leaky spoons. And Americans, of course, whose left hands are of no use at all when dining, use their forks as a combination knife and spoon. Why do they bother with a knife at all? I'm not criticising. But I am bewildered. Why not simply have a spoon and be done with it? A spoon with a cutting edge would be perfect. I seem to remember that camping shops sell suitable multipurpose cutlery for those hardy folk who like to spend their holidays shivering or sweltering under canvas.

The bottom line is that there are doubtless many other countries which produce better food and better meals than we do. But there is no doubt at all that the English have by far the very best table manners.

13

The Germans are so worried that England might leave the EU (and leave Germany with even bigger bills to pay) that they are now claiming that Winston Churchill would have wanted us to remain members of the new United States of Europe. Apart from being damned cheeky this is, to use a technical term, ‘a complete load of bollocks’. It was well known that Churchill loathed the idea of the European Union. In 1962 Field Marshall Montgomery found Sir Winston Churchill sitting up in bed smoking a cigar, shouting for more brandy and protesting against our proposed entry into the Common Market. It would be nice if the EU’s supporters would occasionally get their facts straight. But when lying has been so effective I suppose it’s difficult to see why you should stop.

14

One of the many things I enjoy about Paris is the fact that I can understand what most people are saying to me in shops and cafes. My French isn’t good but theirs is usually excellent and at least we are both speaking the same language. In London, and indeed many towns and cities in England, I frequently find myself talking to people whose command of English lies somewhere between poor and non-existent. And since my command of Polish, Romanian and other East European languages is completely non-existent we simply have no language in common.

As a result of the high levels of immigration it is possible these days to obtain most of the joys of travelling in a foreign country without leaving home. I like foreign countries, and many of the people who live in them, but when I go abroad I never try to impose my culture on them and I always try hard to speak their language. It would be nice if a few more of our imported residents made a small effort to learn a few words of our language.

Critics will, doubtless, accuse me of being a Little Englander but that will probably be because they don’t have the foggiest idea what a Little Englander really was. And I cannot see why I should be ashamed of my patriotism.

Talking of which I couldn’t help noticing that the Embassy opposite our apartment building has another brand new EU flag flying. There are two flags outside the Embassy. One is the national flag of the country concerned (and it is a rather sad, sorry looking thing in traditional flag material). The other flag, which seems to be replaced at very regular intervals, is the EU flag. It is silk and shiny and always looks very smart.

15

Wandering around the Champs de Mars we spotted a crowd. This was not the sort of ghoulish crowd which gathers at an accident but the sort of curious crowd which gathers around a street entertainer. We wandered closer. The police in Paris are forever moving on most of the traditional street artists (the statues, the jugglers, the clowns, the musicians and the tumblers) so it was good to find one who'd managed to evade the heavy hand of the French P.C. Plods.

But it wasn't a street entertainer (at least, not in the true and proper sense). It was a scam artist practising the oldest street scam in the book: the shell game (in which the mechanic moves a pea around between three shells), also known as the find the lady card trick (in which a Queen card and two other cards are moved around, usually on an upturned cardboard box). I've been fascinated by this scam since I watched men working it in Oxford Street over half a century ago. I was, I think, 14 when I first worked out that the bloke in the crowd who seems to keep winning is a stooge, working as part of the scam.

This, however, was no ordinary scam. Within five minutes I had spotted six stooges – the individuals in the crowd who appear to be ordinary members of the public, merrily winning and losing their money, but who are there merely pour encourager les autres. Most, like the mechanic looked Romanian, but although a couple of them were pretty easy to spot, several were well disguised. One female stooge had dressed herself up in a huge straw hat and a Bolero jacket and she carried an expensive looking handbag. A white male wore a typical outfit for a lager drinking English tourist and carried a small rucksack with him. Every time he won money he high fived everyone he'd been standing near to in the crowd. The stooges weren't difficult to spot: they were too quick to lose money they'd won, they didn't worry enough when they did badly and they didn't look particularly pleased when they won. And the stakes were high. The minimum stake per play was 100 euros, often boosted by rapid doubling of the bet to 200, 400 or 800 euros. The mechanic was using three metal cups and a strange, fluffy looking ball which would be easy to hold inside a cup or to move about.

Every time a stranger won, the six stooges would crowd in; ostensibly to check out the result of the game but in reality to intimidate, to confuse and to give the mechanic time to disguise the position of the ball if it should be necessary. Most of the losers were young tourists, clearly gambling with money they could ill afford to lose but pulled along by the prospect of making easy money. The majority were female.

By my reckoning the mechanic had won around 1500 euros in the 10 minutes we'd been watching when he suddenly stopped, stood up and walked swiftly away. Another individual, a ferret faced little chap, leapt forward and picked up the three cups, the ball and the mat on which the mechanic had been playing. While the mechanic shot off one way, the ferret faced chap fled in another direction and five of the six stooges disappeared in other directions. The sixth stooge, the woman in the posh looking hat, stayed for a while to comfort one of the teenage girls who'd lost 100 euros from her travel money. There was, it seemed, a risk that the girl might go to the police. The older woman, the stooge, talked her out of it and then she too left.

Antoinette and I followed her, guessing that the entire group would meet up somewhere not too far away. Sure enough, after a walk of about a quarter of a mile, the woman in the hat joined up with the mechanic, the ferret and the rest of the stooges.

Our curious small adventure didn't end there, however.

Within a few minutes we spotted another crowd. A second mechanic was working the same scam and he too was accompanied by half a dozen stooges. We watched as one of the stooges, a white-haired fellow, a heavy winner, suddenly walked away and moved across to a fat Romanian who was standing nearby, talking on a mobile phone (presumably to a spotter posted to give advance warning of the approach of any police). The white-haired winner handed a thick wodge of notes over to the fat Romanian who slid the money into his pocket. The stooge then rejoined the game.

Two or three minutes later one of the stooges from the first game turned up and reported to the fat man who took the money he was given and directed the stooge to the second game. Clearly, the fat man was operating quite a sizeable business, and moving his players around to keep the customers confused.

What a pity that the police spend all the time harassing genuine street entertainers (who provide an excellent service for tourists and locals) and too little of it watching out for crooks and conmen. I reckon that this small gang were probably taking 30,000 to 50,000 euros a day out of the Parisian economy. The money they conned out of tourists was money that would have otherwise been spent in restaurants, cafés and shops.

16

I learned three things today.

First, someone who knows nothing at all about chess can win one match, or at the very least get two draws, if he plays against two grand masters at the same time. How? It’s surprisingly easy. The novice arranges that one of the masters starts the first match (using the white pieces) and he himself starts the second match (again using the white pieces and making the same first move as the first grand master). From then on the novice merely mimics all the moves the two masters make. This effectively means that the second master will be playing the first master and vice versa. The result is bound to be that the novice either gets two draws or one win.

Second, if you have two locks on your front door you should always leave one of them unlocked. If someone tries to break in he will assume that both locks are locked and when he tries to unlock them both he will be forever unlocking one and locking the other.

Third, a person with a good, solid, regular heartbeat may sometimes be able to help an individual with an irregular heartbeat – simply by taking their pulse. Undeniable but inexplicable, serendipitous cardiac synchronicity.

17

When shop assistants demand my name and address, I usually give them their own address. The shop assistant never notices. And now, when websites demand my telephone number I give them a number belonging to Google or Yahoo or one of the other large American computer companies. I hate giving out my telephone number to people. They might ring me. Worse still, they might get one of their machines to ring my number.

Talking of telephones, I hate it when people promise to ring me back straight away but fail to do so. When they do this I sit by the telephone for hours waiting for the call. Ten days later they ring when I am in the bath. The telephone always goes when I’m in the bath. I think it’s connected to the water supply in some weird and wonderful way.

18

I had an email from Debretts reminding me to fill in a form confirming my details for their annual book *Debrett’s People of Today*. I suppose they want to be sure that I have not yet snuffed it. I tried to fill in the form online but failed miserably to pass the first hurdle. I sent them this email: ‘I’m afraid I have forgotten my user name and password. I’ve also forgotten whether I filled in and posted the form you sent me. But I know it’s Sunday and the Prime Minister is called Churchill so things aren’t too bad. Can you help?’

They were kind enough to send me the details I required and to assure me that since I clearly seemed pretty well on top of things they would be happy to keep my name in the directory.

19

A reader who works at the reception desk in a large provincial hospital wrote to tell me of a curious experience she had recently. A couple approached the desk. He looked very stern and rather cross and she looked worried. He was holding a baby which looked no more than a few days old.

‘There is no one at the baby changing room,’ complained the man. He spoke quite good English but was obviously East European.

‘I’m afraid there isn’t usually anyone there,’ my reader told him.

‘But we want to change the baby,’ he said.

‘If you need help I could find a nurse,’ suggested my reader.

‘We want to change the baby,’ insisted the man. ‘This one is not good.’

I went cold,’ said my reader, ‘when I realised that they didn’t want the baby changing, they actually wanted to exchange it!’ She asked why they wanted to change the baby.

‘It does not sleep well. It does not eat well. It is not a strong baby. We want to change it.’

‘That is your baby?’

‘It is the one we were given. But we want to change it.’

‘I’m afraid we don’t change babies,’ said my reader.

The man looked very unhappy and muttered something. The woman looked relieved. They left.

Life is far more curious than fiction. I would never dare make up anything which sounded so unbelievable.

20

I was walking along the main shopping street in Cheltenham when my telephone rang. It was Antoinette. We had separated in order to do our shopping separately.

‘Can you come and get me, please?’ she asked.

‘What’s the matter?’ I asked, anxiously.

‘I don’t feel well. I nearly fainted.’

‘Where are you?’

‘In that shop called The Works.’

I knew where she meant. It’s a shop that always has a big sign outside saying ‘Everything Must Go’. I always think this is a silly sign because of course everything must go. It’s a shop. They don’t want to keep all their stock, do they?

I was less than two hundred yards and ran there as fast as I could go. I don’t do much running these days but I can still hurry when I need to and nothing stands higher on my list of ‘need to’ than a cry for help from Antoinette.

My wife did not look well. She was leaning against a table piled high with cheap paperbacks and looked very pale. I reached for her wrist and took her pulse. It was fast but regular.

‘Have you got any pains?’

She shook her head.

I asked her a few more questions. There were no signs or symptoms of anything serious. ‘Have you eaten anything since breakfast?’

‘No,’ she replied. ‘And I didn’t have any breakfast. I didn’t feel hungry.’

‘It’s probably a hypoglyaemic attack,’ I explained. ‘Low blood sugar. You need something to eat.’

‘Can you help me out of here?’ she asked.

‘Of course,’ I said. I put my arm around her and helped her walk slowly to the door.

‘Thank heavens we’re out of there,’ she murmured, when we got outside.

I looked at her.

‘I was terrified I’d need an ambulance. I really wouldn’t want to be known as the woman who fell ill in The Works.’ She paused, and shuddered. ‘Suppose I’d died in there?’ She smiled at me. ‘Marks and Spencer would be OK I suppose,’ she joked. ‘House of Fraser would be better. But not The Works.’

I spotted an empty bench a few yards away and led her gently towards it. When she’d sat down I took a bar of chocolate out of my pocket, unwrapped it and gave it to her. ‘Eat this,’ I told her.

Within ten minutes she was looking and feeling better.

‘I’ll be fine now,’ she said. ‘Would you say that was a funny turn?’

‘Sort of,’ I replied. ‘You could call it a swoon, if you like. One of those things Victorian ladies were always having.’

‘Oh that sounds rather good,’ she said. ‘But I wish I’d had it somewhere a bit more up-market than The Works.’ She stood up. ‘Maybe I should carry smelling salts with me?’

‘A bar of chocolate might be more sensible if you’re going to miss breakfast.’

‘You won’t write about this, will you? I don’t want any of this in one of your books.’

‘Of course not,’ I assured her, with as straight and stern a face as I could muster.

We drove back home via the part of Cheltenham known as Montpellier. There is a large and very grand lamp there which was erected in 1885 to commemorate the death of General Gordon in Khartoum. I don’t know why folk are always so keen to commemorate the deaths of famous people but they are and so they do.

An organising committee of Montpellier residents appealed to the public for funds but the men and women of Cheltenham weren’t as keen on remembering the departed General as had been hoped and the public donated only £20 which was a tenth of the cost of the lamp. The organising committee had to find the other £180 which must have been a bit of a shock. Once the lamp had been erected there was a row about who would pay to light it. The gas company said it would cost £22 a year and the council said they wouldn’t go higher than £15 a year so they compromised and lit just two of the three bulbs which must have resulted in a lot of people complaining to the council that one of the lamps wasn’t working.

Everything went wrong with that damned lamp.

The granite base didn’t arrive until later and the ironwork wasn’t strong enough to hold the three lamps and had to be reinforced. Then someone invented electricity and the damned thing had to be converted from gas. With all these problems it is hardly surprising, perhaps, that no one remembered to add a plaque commemorating General Gordon and it wasn’t until 1933 that the council got round to having one made and fixed.

There isn’t much else to say about Montpellier.

Actually, there isn’t much else worth saying about General Gordon, either.

21

People complain about taxes in Britain but I don't think we've seen anything yet. As I explained in my book *Stuffed!* Britain's national debt is so vast (and is continuing to rise) that at some point services are going to have to be cut heavily and taxes are going to have to rise even higher.

The problem is: who is going to pay the higher taxes?

It has been shown many times that when governments raise taxes beyond a certain point the amount of money the Treasury receives actually diminishes. People either find ways to reduce their tax bills or they simply stop working.

I suspect that the extra money is going to be raised by a mass of stealth taxes. The Government will hope that we won't notice 2% here and 3% there in the same way that we might notice a plain and simple 10% rise in income tax.

There will be fees for getting up late in the morning, licences for wearing shoes and all sorts of weird and wonderful new taxes. There will be masses of new regulations and directives and we will have to pay to obey them and pay a fine if we don't.

No one will notice or care that none of these fees or licences or expensive regulations will make life better or safer.

(Nursing homes are a perfect example of the disparity between regulations and quality. Nursing homes are licensed, judged, and given ratings, according to a whole range of mechanical regulations. There must be so many fire alarms, the doors must be so wide, the staff must have knowledge of the latest regulations concerning chair height and tap water temperature and so on, but no one ever attempts to measure the amount of respect or kindness shown to the residents because these are intangibles and are therefore impossible to assess with forms and computers.)

The big problem, of course, is that in our new world of benefits and entitlements all these new taxes and fees will fall on a relatively small number of people.

I was staggered when I discovered that nearly two thirds of all households in Britain now receive more in the way of public services and benefits than they pay in tax. That is, of course, unsustainable. And so the result is that for workers and savers the financial future is a bleak one.

These days, too many people think only of what they can get out of life without working, and so those who do work will have to pay taxes and fees and licences to cover the rising cost of their benefits – as well as to try to settle the nation's enormous debts.

T. S. Raffles, the founder of Singapore, once wrote: 'I have chalked out for myself a very varied and diversified course; but what is life without variety? And what is existence without occupation?'

Raffles was right: work is an essential part of a healthy life. But he would be shocked to know that today far too many people seem content to exist without occupation or, indeed, much in the way of variety.

22

I saw two nurses walking in the street today. I knew that they were nurses because they were both wearing their uniforms. They were, however, some distance from the nearest hospital or medical centre.

I am constantly surprised and dismayed by just how ignorant medical professionals are about infection.

It is by no means uncommon to see nurses wandering through the streets like this. I suspect some of them expect to be treated deferentially because they are shopping in their uniform. But wandering around in work clothes is a very dangerous habit for nurses and those who do this should be put in prison for attempted manslaughter.

Nurses are not expected to wear uniform because they look pretty in them, or because the uniform saves them getting blood and gore on their own clothes. They are expected to wear clean, freshly laundered uniforms to minimise the risk of their taking infection into the hospital or clinic where they work. And, equally, they are expected to take off their uniforms before they leave the hospital so that they don't take hospital infections out into the world.

Killer bugs are now commonplace in NHS hospitals (which are, without a doubt, the dirtiest hospitals in the world, and are the only ones where antibiotic-resistant bugs are commonplace) and it is because nurses don't understand the first principles of hygiene that these killer infections are becoming increasingly commonplace outside hospitals.

My knee has been playing up badly again. If it were a toaster I'd send it back and demand a refund, though to be fair I doubt if much kitchen equipment would be around at the age my knee has reached. I really should take it along to a hospital but I'll stay away for as long as I possibly can. It got bad when we were last in Paris. We had a taxi ordered to take us from our apartment to the Gare du Nord but the driver couldn't get through because much of Paris was blocked and closed so that women runners could jiggle and joggle around the streets. Why they couldn't do their jiggling and joggling in the Bois de Boulogne I cannot imagine. I can only assume that they wanted an audience. Like many folk these days they probably didn't think that they would actually be doing something if there is no one to watch them. Anyway, the result of the blockage was that we had to walk a mile to the nearest Metro and then struggle up and down a vast number of steps. Worse still, the metro itself was crowded with thousands of exhibitionistic, hairy-legged lesbians who'd finished their running and wanted to go home for a dry biscuit and a yoghurt. It was a nightmare and my knee, which suffered badly, has still not recovered from the enforced yomping up and down all those Metro steps.

23

The EU has decreed that fat people must now be officially treated as disabled. The obese, the plump and the rotund must, in law, be treated in exactly the same way as paraplegics or amputees. They must be entitled to disability benefits and they must be given consideration in exactly the same way that society looks after the genuinely disabled. This is patently wrong. Why should people who have indulged themselves and allowed themselves to become overweight be put in the same category as people who have lost limbs or been seriously injured? I can only assume that the foreign eurocrat who made this decision (and many EU laws are made, quite undemocratically, by individual eurocrats) is a fat, greedy, lazy bastard who wants a disabled parking badge for his car.

If the general population knew how much harm the EU has done to our world, armies would be forming in the shires and the heads of eurocrats would soon be decorating park railings throughout the English counties.

24

The average company director now earns £4.3 million a year. Board room salaries have gone up by 73% over the last decade and are now completely out of all proportion to the wages of the people who do the real work. The way to become rich these days is not to become a film star or a singer, or to have a brilliant idea, mortgage your home, soul and family and start your own company, but to join a large international conglomerate, say and do absolutely nothing original, or of interest to anyone, and rise inexorably to the top by mouthing corporate platitudes. In order to do this you need few brains, no talent and little enthusiasm for work. You can become enormously, obscenely rich by robbing widows and orphans and, by meeting the right people at your club. Once you have risen to the top you simply ooze yourself into seats on other company boards so that you can increase your income into the yacht and private jet buying bracket.

One of these professional directors lives near to us in Gloucestershire. As far as I can see he has achieved absolutely nothing in his life except smile benignly, utter endless platitudes and acquire untold wealth. He has a huge, old manor house and a rather tacky modern Rolls Royce and he and his wife are waited on by a housekeeper, a chauffeur, a maid and two gardeners. He was awarded a knighthood as a thank you for giving large chunks of shareholder money to one of the big political parties. These are the rewards the professional nonentity can expect. He is revered by the other villagers, many of whom have trod the same corporate path but with far less success. He wears a three piece tweed suit and a silly hat with a feather in it and looks as if he’s been dressed by a wardrobe mistress using props designed for a period drama. His wife carries her stately bosom before her as though it were a fashion accessory, which is honest of her because I suspect she bought her prow in just the same way that she bought her Jimmy Choo shoes and Christian Dior handbag. She’s so absurdly posh that if she went blackberry picking (an unlikely possibility, I admit) she’d insist on putting the fruit in a handbag made by Dior or Mulberry. (She’d be bound to pick Mulberry, wouldn’t she?)

The local Audi and Mercedes drivers treat him as an old-fashioned Lord of the Manor and probably offer up their virgin daughters on their sixteenth birthdays. ‘He’s very approachable,’ said one local. ‘Just like one of us.’

I bloody well hope he isn’t like me. I’m waiting quietly for the revolution to start. Such vast and utterly undeserved wealth inequality as exists today must eventually lead to the picking up of pitchforks and the start of a revolution. It will be known in future history books as the 21st Century Pedants Uprising.

I know which side of the barrier I’ll be on.

25

A friend of Antoinette's is a well-known author who writes romantic novels. She started writing late in her life and her publishers told her rather bluntly that they were worried that she looked too old to be writing such stories. They solved this problem by hiring a young, out of work actress and putting her photograph on the back of the books. She was quite a voluptuous looking thing, all bosom, hair and legs, and after a couple of years the publishers suggested that Antoinette's friend allow the actress to do some television interviews on her behalf. And so the young actress, using the real author's name, appeared on quite a few television chat shows and became quite a regular on the radio. She looked good, had a pleasant enough voice and always took care to read the books before she talked about them.

Sadly, there has apparently been an unpleasant turn in this seemingly happy story.

'The publishers used to pay the actress a fee for the use of her photograph and another fee to do promotional work for the books,' explained Antoinette's friend. 'In addition, she was allowed to keep all the fees she earned doing interviews. She became quite famous, pretending to be me, and I didn't mind in the slightest. I would have hated having to do all those interviews. I was happy staying at home and writing the books.'

'So, what's gone wrong?' asked Antoinette.

'The young actress told my publishers that since she is now my 'official face and voice' she should receive a royalty. She wants an equal share of everything I earn from writing my books. She threatened to go public with the truth if I didn't agree to her demand.'

Naturally, the author was not happy. It didn't seem fair to us, either.

'What have you done about it?' asked Antoinette.

'I told the bloody woman to go public,' said her friend. 'She will look a fool and lose all her lucrative television and radio work and the publicity will doubtless boost the sales of my books. I also told her that if the unexpected should happen, and the revelation should damage my sales, I will simply announce that I have died and write books under another name.'

'What did she say?'

'I think she was rather alarmed at the prospect of being officially 'dead'. She has apparently told the publishers that she would very much like to carry on with things the way they are. All talk of royalties has been abandoned.'

This curious tale reminded me of a time when I once pretended to be an eminent author of gardening books.

In the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s I used to tour the country whenever I had a new book out. On each tour I would regularly visit 30 to 40 radio stations and a dozen or so television stations. In between the broadcast interviews I would talk to feature writers working for local newspapers or magazines. Quite often I would sit down in a radio studio and find that the disc jockey or presenter who was about to interview me didn't have the foggiest idea who I was, or what my book was about. He would have a copy of my book on his desk but he would proudly announce that he hadn't had time to read it – or even open it. Despite this rather arrogant attitude, radio stations used to love touring authors. We were, by and large, the most readily available free source of interview fodder. Local politicians and businessmen had not yet discovered the importance of local radio as a promotional medium.

These days, local radio stations have a queue of politicians, lawyers, doctors, accountants and shop keepers all desperate to broadcast and to plug themselves or their business. I suspect that every radio station in the land now has its own earnest young medical practitioner eagerly practising 'radio therapy'. But that's now. Back in the early days of local radio things were very different. Authors on tour were as essential to radio stations as transmitters and coffee machines.

Occasionally, a particularly ambitious presenter would have two author interviewees in the studio at once. The idea behind this rather extravagant and exciting format was that the presenter would talk to both authors and that two visitors would, occasionally, be allowed to talk to each other. Even with this more adventurous type of programme the presenter would frequently not bother to look at the books which were being promoted. He might look at the press releases accompanying the books. But he wouldn't bother to read the books themselves.

It was in these circumstances that I found myself in a radio studio with a well-known writer of gardening books. I was promoting one of my medical books and he was there to talk about his latest book on vegetables, plants and shrubs. You'd know his name but I haven't spoken to him and it would be unfair to name him without getting his permission.

The problem was that right from the start the presenter was mixed up about which one of us was which. He thought I was the writer of gardening books and that the other guest was the writer of medical books. Just before we went on air we both corrected him. But by the time the programme had started he had again forgotten which one of us was which.

'So tell us about your new book,' said the presenter, having introduced me as one of the nation's leading gardening experts. I looked across at the other guest and hesitated for an instant. He smiled at me and nodded, making it clear that he was happy for me to pretend to be him. He quickly passed me a copy of his book. And so, reading from the blurb on the back cover of the book, I rapidly summed up the contents of ‘my’ book. I then passed my own book to the gardening expert, so that he could pretend to be me and talk about my book as though he were the author.

It worked surprisingly well.

Once we’d started we had to continue, of course. My voice was now that of the gardener and his voice was that of the doctor. Any listeners who knew our real identities would have been mightily confused but the presenter was quite happy. He asked the usual banal questions and we cheerfully fed him the usually banal answers. When you’ve done a few dozen radio interviews it is remarkably easy to talk about something of which you know absolutely nothing without making this clear to the listeners.

The gardening writer and I had a quick coffee afterwards and then we caught trains travelling in opposite directions. I bumped into him once or twice on subsequent promotional tours but we never repeated that bizarre experience.

26

Lloyds Bank has sent me a new debit card. This one, they tell me, will enable me to pay for stuff without the trouble of entering my PIN number. All I have to do is to touch the card against a shop’s little machine. Or, maybe, just wave it about in the general vicinity of the machine. Or, perhaps, just think about waving it about. The cost of whatever I am buying will then be automatically taken from my account. It is, I suppose, all part of the desire to do away with cash. Governments and banks hate cash. It’s expensive to move around and handle and, worst of all, it doesn’t leave any trace. If I use cash I can buy a penknife or a copy of the ‘Morning Star’ without anyone in MI5 being aware of it. ‘Shop faster, but stay just as safe’ claims a leaflet that came with the card. ‘You won’t be exposed to any greater risk of fraud as your contactless card uses the same high level technology that’s behind chip and PIN’.

Huh? Are the people at Lloyds Bank completely clueless? Of course, I will be exposed to a greater risk of fraud. If someone steals my card (or I lose it) the thief will be able to use it to buy stuff without having the inconvenience of having to beat me over the head until I tell him my PIN number. I really do despair. I think that perhaps the well-known Scottish buffoon Fred Godwin is now running Lloyds Bank.

I see, by the way, that Lloyds, like most big companies, are now sending mail in C5 envelopes. I think this is wise. I’ve been using these bigger envelopes for some time. I am convinced that mail is less likely to get lost when it’s sent in a large envelope. It’s a terrible waste, of course, but having to send a letter twice is even more wasteful.

27

George Orwell is often given all the credit for forecasting the world in which we now live. But Charles Dickens deserves credit too. Here, for example, is a quote from *Little Dorrit:* ‘The Circumlocution Office was (as everybody knows without being told) the most important Department under Government. No public business of any kind could possibly be done at any time without the acquiescence of the Circumlocution Office. Its finger was in the largest public pie, and in the smallest public tart. It was equally impossible to do the plainest right and to undo the plainest wrong without the express authority of the Circumlocution Office. If another Gunpowder Plot had been discovered half an hour before the lighting of the match, nobody would have been justified in saving the parliament until there had been half a score of boards, half a bushel of minutes, several sacks of official memoranda, and a family vault full of ungrammatical correspondence, on the part of the Circumlocution Office.’

Every government department now has its own Circumlocution Office, of course, (HMRC is little more than a large Circumlocution Office) but these days I am reminded of Dickens, and the Circumlocution Office, whenever I am forced to communicate with a utility company or a bank.

28

In Waterstones’s book shop I noticed that they are still selling Kindle machines so that people can log on to Amazon and purchase e-Books instead of buying paperback or hardback editions of books. This is one step more destructive than Gerald Ratner describing his company’s products as ‘crap’. At least Ratner didn’t tell prospective customers what to buy instead of the unfortunate product which he had denigrated so thoroughly.

The bookshop staff still insist that they are merely ‘keeping up with the times’ but I give Waterstones’s five years at best and then all their stores will become charity shops selling cheap books and unfashionable clothing. For a bookshop to promote e-Books is as daft as stagecoach makers giving away free leaflets promoting motor cars.

I am constantly amazed at the way that the book business has destroyed itself. Even publishers seem determined to commit commercial suicide. When Sir Allan Lane invented the modern paperback he did so because he realised that there was a market among travellers for small, light, portable paperbacks. He made Penguin books pocket sized so that they would fit into pockets and handbags. But today, paperbacks are huge and if you want to take more than one with you on holiday you’ll need an extra suitcase. The cost of posting the books is much higher, too. Modern, heavy paperbacks could have been designed to help boost the sales of e-Book readers. With a kindle device a traveller can get on a train with a library in his pocket.

29

I have recently collected these three wonderful quotations about medicine. I don’t expect many of them can be found in dictionaries of quotations.

1. ‘Doctors are always working to preserve our health and cooks to destroy it, but the latter are the more often successful.’ – Denis Diderot (1713-1784)
2. ‘To preserve one’s health by too strict a regime is in itself a tedious malady.’ – Duc François de la Rochefoucauld (1613-1680)
3. ‘Strive to preserve your health; and in this you will the better succeed in proportion as you keep clear of the physicians, for their drugs are a kind of alchemy concerning which there are no fewer books than there are medicines.’ – Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519)

30

Antoinette and I were walking through a quiet Cotswold village when a young boy approached us. He was accompanied by a scruffy, muddy and definitely damp spaniel.

'I bet you a pound that if you throw a stone in the pond my dog will find it and bring it out,' said the boy. He said this defiantly, as though expecting us not to believe him. He held out his hand and showed us a small, flattish stone. We looked around. Sure enough there was a small pond nearby. It was a fairly typical village pond, except that it didn't seem to contain any old bedsteads or supermarket trolleys. Neither of us had spotted it before. Actually, it was so small that I don't think it could have taken offence if you'd called it a large puddle.

I looked at the stone. It was a very ordinary looking stone, which had no distinguishing marks whatsoever.

'But your dog could bring out any stone,' I said, quickly spotting what seemed to me to be the obvious flaw.

'I'll mark it,' said the boy. He took a penknife out of his pocket, opened it and used the blade to scratch a single short line on the stone. He then showed me the marked stone.

'OK,' I said. 'Throw it into the pond. If your dog brings it out I'll give you a pound.'

The boy threw the stone into the pond. It did what stones do in ponds. It sank to the bottom. The dog, not waiting for instructions, dived into the pond, splashed around for a moment in the shallow water at the edge and then disappeared. A few moments later it emerged with a stone in its mouth. The boy bent down, took the stone from the dog's mouth and showed it to me. He pointed to the scratch mark. I gave him a pound.

'How on earth did he train the dog to do that?' Antoinette asked me.

'I don't have the foggiest idea,' I replied.

Half an hour later we were sitting in a café when the boy came in, followed by his muddy, wet dog. He bought a packet of crisps and a can of cola from the girl behind the counter and then left. She was obviously pleased to see him disappear before the dog made too much of a mess.

'Brilliant dog,' I said to our waitress.

She grinned. 'He got you with the scratched stone, did he?'

'He did,' I answered. 'Why are you grinning?'

'He gets loads of people with that trick,' she said. 'The dog makes him a small fortune.'

'But it's an impressive trick,' I responded.

The woman shook her head. 'It isn't a trick,' she told us. 'The bottom of that pond is strewn with stones which have a little scratch on them. He spent hours scratching stones and throwing them in. I doubt if you'd find a stone in that pond that doesn't have a scratch on it.'

She hurried off to attend to another pair of customers.

'He'll go far, that boy,' said Antoinette.

October

1

Driving out of Weston-super-Mare onto the M5 we discovered that the motorway was blocked solid. There were thousands of cars, parked bumper to bumper on all three lanes, all going nowhere. Even the hard shoulder and the approach road were blocked. It seemed crazy to drive on and to add to the mass of vehicles going nowhere and doing nothing except waste fuel and pollute the atmosphere. And so, as a socially responsible citizen, I slowly tried to reverse back up the approach road to find another route out of the town. I'd only driven a couple of dozen yards down the slip road so it wasn't far to go and it did seem the sensible thing to do. Inevitably, however, a car overtook me, and drew alongside with the passenger side window down. The face of an angry woman glowered at me, holding up what looked vaguely like a warrant card but since I wasn't wearing my reading glasses could well have been a membership card for the now sadly defunct Desperate Dan Pie Eaters' Club.

'Police!' she shouted, in the way that most women of her age, class and mental agility might shout Bingo!

She wasn't wearing a uniform but I could tell by her face that she really was a policewoman and hadn't bought her warrant card on the internet. Not even a traffic warden could have pulled a face like that.

'Reversing up a motorway slip road is an offence,' she snapped. 'Join the queue and damn the planet. We're talking traffic law here – much more important than common sense or saving the planet.'

She didn't say the last couple of sentences, of course, but she might as well have done. Rules are rules and even the really stupid ones must be obeyed.

I have a strong suspicion that common sense will soon be a criminal offence, punishable with a long prison sentence and, quite possibly, a good beating too.

And so I took the truck out of reverse, put it into first, tucked in behind the unmarked police car, joined the queue and did my bit towards melting glaciers and drowning polar bears.

No one on the planet can be quite as dim-witted and aggressively stupid as a Government employee with a nice shiny rule to enforce.

For the umpteenth time, I found myself wondering why road designers don't build motorway approach roads in such a way that it is possible to see the motorway before you join it. (I assume someone designs the damned things but maybe I am being naïve. Maybe, a bunch of navvies make roads simply by dumping tarmacadam down wherever they think a road would look nice. It honestly wouldn't surprise me.)

Afterwards Antoinette wondered if some interfering busybody might have filmed my small adventure and put it on YouTube. It would not surprise me in the slightest. The world is, it seems, crammed to the gunwales with people who love to sneak and tell tales and do what they see as their duty to the jack-booted functionaries of the Great State.

Well, rot them all I'm too old and tired and I don't give a damn. If it is my destiny to become a YouTube star then so be it. Bring it on, as I think someone once said.

2

I saw a book on sale today which claims to tell me how to use my iPhone properly. The book had 683 pages. That says it all, doesn’t it? You buy a damned phone and to find out how to use it you have to buy, and read, a 683 page book. How long before kids are taking O level mobile phone? (Please don’t anyone write and tell me if they already are. I don’t want to know.)

3

A local newspaper contains a large advertisement promoting literacy classes for people who cannot read. It’s a wonderful idea. But there is, of course, a flaw the size of Mount Everest in promoting literacy classes this way.

I was reminded of a story I was recently told about a racecourse near here. The public address announcer told racegoers that a hearing aid had been found and that the person who had lost it should go to the secretary’s office to collect it. Sadly, no one turned up because the only person in the crowd who didn’t hear the announcement was the person for whom it was intended.

4

A local policeman is reported to have been running a strippergram service. For a modest fee he would go to parties, hen nights and so on and strip off his uniform. There are plenty of other gentlemen providing this service but this one really was a policeman – and the uniform he removed was also real. His stage name was apparently ‘The Copper with the Whopper’ and I understand that the Chief Constable, who apparently took a dim view of this piece of imaginative moonlighting, has put his foot down. In future the women of the area can hire a stripping policeman in the doubtless comforting knowledge that he will be a fake.

5

Last spring we planted several dozen ornamental trees in some of the land behind our boule court (only the very best homes, you understand, have a properly built boule court). The trees have done incredibly well. They are all now about ten to twelve feet tall. They all flowered and the plum trees had plums while the cherry trees had cherries. The birds ate all the fruit, of course, but that is by the by.

The problem is that although the trees have done well the grasses and weeds around them have done well too and today I decided that I really needed to strim around them to give them a little space to, well, breathe. So I filled the strimmer tank with the strange mixture of petrol and oil which it prefers, followed the manufacturer's starting instructions and did my best to avoid the doubtless scary warnings. After pulling the darned starter cord about 15,000 times (give or take two or three) I gave up, kicked it and sat down on the ground to do a little quiet cursing. The nearest garden machinery workshop is about 20 miles away so this meant two 40 mile round trips and two half days lost.

(I would have to take the strimmer in to be repaired and since they would almost certainly not be able to fit me in there and then I would have to go back another day to collect the damned thing. I could have asked them to collect and return it but since the strimmer is relatively light and we have a damned great truck available I would have found this too embarrassing.)

While working my way through my regular litany of curses, specially designed for garden machinery which won't start, it suddenly occurred to me that I could, perhaps, try to mend it. I fished out the manufacturer's manual and leafed through it. Sadly, I couldn't find a troubleshooting page but I did discover that the machine contained a plug thing. Now I've seen plug things when I've been watching the man from the AA trying to repair the car so I know what they look like.

I looked around to see a) if I could find it and b) if it was accessible for a man with large hands, a collection of hammers and a screwdriver. I'd like to be able to report that I came across it straight away but that would be a downright lie. I only found it when I had given up and kicked the machine so hard that a little rubber cover thing came off the plug thing.

My next step was clearly to take out the plug thing and wipe it on my overalls. I've seen oil stained mechanics do that in films. At this point I had a brainwave: I remembered that I had removed a good selection of useful looking tools before I had given away our elderly BMW seven series. I rummaged around, found the tools and discovered a spanner thing which looked as if it might fit the plug thing. It did. And minutes later I had the plug thing in my hand.

I know that the professionals wipe these things on their overalls, or on an oily rag, but I had neither so I wiped it on a paper handkerchief and my jacket sleeve. I then put it back into position and used the spanner thing to make sure it was fastened tightly. I then replaced the rubber cover thing and gave the machine another kick for luck.

(I don't know why this is but I have discovered that all equipment, whether mechanical or electrical, is masochistic in nature and responds well when given a good thump. It has sometimes occurred to me that the human body might also respond similarly. How many mysterious symptoms would disappear if the doctor simply gave the patient a good bang with a hammer?)

I then tried the starter handle again.

You could have knocked me down with quite a small stick when it started. What an amazing sound. I had mended the strimmer! Unfortunately, it was almost dark and too late to do any actual strimming. But I did feel rather pleased with myself.

I told Antoinette that from now on she could call me 'Sparky' and gave instructions that in future she should preface as many conversations as possible with the line: 'When Vernon was cleaning the plug thingy on the strimmer…'.

6

For several years an old man called Leonard Pilbeam managed to persuade people in the village to do all his chores for him without any charge. One man cut his grass and his hedges, a woman did his shopping, another did his washing and ironing and so on and on. They did these things not because they liked him (Leonard, a former accountant, was a very unlikeable character) but because he led them to believe that he was rich and that they would figure prominently in his will. Occasionally, he would offer them a little money for their services but they always refused, not because they didn’t want any financial reward but because they preferred to wait for the big pay out which they believed would come when he died. He actually told one woman that she could choose between having cash in her hand each week or a prominent place in his will. She, like the others, knew that he had no relatives and told him that she preferred to be ‘remembered’ in his will. The word was that Leonard was probably worth a million or more and so even a fifth share would be quite a tidy tax-free sum. His house alone, five good bedrooms and just over an acre of good land, had to be worth the best part of a million. Maybe more if the right buyer could be found.

Today, the owner of our village shop told me that Leonard Pilbeam had died and that his will had been read. There was much disappointment and bitterness among those who had nurtured hopes. Their names were all in the will, and so, as promised, they were all remembered, but there was little material consolation for their years of labour. They shared a line of thanks in appreciation of their efforts.

It turned out that Leonard had sold his house ten years earlier, through one of those equity release schemes which allow the former owner to remain in the property until his death. All the money which had been released had gone. And the small pension Leonard had received from the accountancy firm where he had been a partner had died with him. It is apparently expected that the sale of Leonard’s furniture and personal belongings will, with a little luck and a following wind, produce just enough money to pay the undertakers and the solicitor. The villagers who had worked so hard for him had to be content with having their names in the will.

7

Leonard Pilbeam’s death reminded me that a friend of mine who is a GP recently told me about a dilemma he had faced. He was called, late at night, to the home of an elderly patient who had been seriously ill for several months. The patient, who had cancer, eventually stopped breathing at around 11.30 p.m. It was at this point that the dilemma became apparent. The man’s son took my friend aside and asked him if it would be possible to put the following day’s date on the death certificate. He was very honest about the situation and explained that just under seven years earlier his father had given him all the shares in the business the family owned and ran. Under the tax laws the gift would be free of inheritance tax once the seven years was up. If the death certificate was dated on the day that the man had died then the business would have to be sold, and a lot of local people would probably lose their jobs. But if the death certificate was given the following day’s date, the full seven years would have passed and there would be no inheritance tax due. The business would remain in the family’s hands and no employees would lose their jobs. My friend said that this was one of the most unusual, and difficult, dilemmas he had ever had to face. There was absolutely no legal risk because no one would ever know, or be able to prove, exactly when the old man had died. It was a purely moral quandary.

‘What did you do?’ I asked my friend.

‘I said I needed a drink,’ he told me. ‘The son and I each had a malt whisky. It was a very good malt and I always treat such whiskies with great respect. They’re to be sipped, not gulped. We sat there for half an hour or so, I suppose. When I’d emptied my glass I took the death certificate book out of my bag. I always carry the book with me so that if a patient dies at home I can give the relatives the certificate there and then, and make the process as easy as possible for them. I then filled in the patient’s details and when I was about to complete the form I turned to the son and asked him if he could tell me the date. He looked at his watch and told me. I then filled in the date and handed him the form.’

‘He was happy?’

‘I think so. He shook my hand and gave me the rest of the bottle to finish at home. He said he thought his father would have wanted me to have it.’

8

Hackers have stolen the details of over 600,000 French and Belgian customers of Domino’s Pizza. The details stolen included names, addresses and favourite pizza toppings. The thieves could have got the names and addresses from the telephone book so it must have been the details of the pizza toppings that they were after. This is yet more evidence that computer hackers are not like the rest of us.

9

I have an awful suspicion that Amazon has decided to employ only low-grade zombies to deliver their orders. We are now having so much trouble with deliveries that I have all but stopped buying through the Amazon website. Software on the site tells me that during the last six months I purchased 231 books, DVDs and bits and pieces of office equipment through the website. Well, they will be lucky if we get to 31 orders during the next six months because at the moment my first port of call will, in future, be eBay. Three times in the last week we have been told that orders have been delivered when they haven't. And parcels clearly addressed to us are being left at locations throughout Gloucestershire; abandoned in an apparently random manner. The couriers don't seem able to follow simple instructions. Why is it so damned difficult to find people who are willing to do jobs with care and thought? I suspect that I'll be back to Amazon before long but for the moment they're standing in the corporate corner wearing a dunce's cap.

10

Friends of ours who live next to a school tell us that nearly all the children attending the school arrive by car. Every morning the streets around the school are clogged with vehicles as parents fight to drop their children as close to the gates as possible. Many of the children live no more than half a mile away. What on earth is happening to our world? It is much safer, in every possible way, for children to walk to school than it was a generation ago. And it is safer than it was for the generation before that. Children are far less likely to be molested or attacked now than they were even a decade ago. What parents don’t seem to realise is that children who are taken everywhere by car will, inevitably, be fatter and unhealthier than they would be if they were encouraged to take a daily walk.

These same friends both wear colourful bracelets made out of tiny rubber bands. The bracelets have been made by their daughter. The couple even wear the bracelets when they go to work. The coloured bands are now sold in just about every shop in the country and the rubber band industry must be making a good deal of money out of a product which might have been considered to be on wobbly legs. The joke, however, seems to be on parents. I asked one of their children why there was such a craze for these things.

‘There isn’t,’ replied the little girl. Who is seven in body but at least 18 in mind.

‘But shops sell them everywhere and kids love them!’ I protested.

‘No,’ she countered. ‘Parents think that kids ought to love them. But I wouldn’t be seen dead wearing a bracelet made out of rubber bands. Nor would any of my friends.’

‘But you make bracelets out of them!’ I pointed out.

‘Only to keep my parents happy,’ she answered. ‘They like to think I like playing with them because they’re sort of arty crafty. They think it’s healthier to make rubber band bracelets than to go on Facebook or mess with my phone.’ She grinned. ‘I make tons of bracelets,’ she said. ‘I can turn them out in no time. Then I give them to my parents and they wear them so that I’m not disappointed.’

11

An industrialist who has been awarded a knighthood is known to be a peeping tom. People who know this are surprised that he wasn’t given a peerage.

12

We visited friends. They have had their kitchen completely re-fitted with some astonishing looking equipment. ‘What’s this cool looking thing?’ I asked, pointing to a large grey machine.

‘It’s a fridge,’ replied the friend, drily.

13

An old man who lives near to us is in a hospice. He is dying but he has come to terms with this. He is nearly 90-years-old and content that he has lived his life to the full. We asked if we could bring him anything. He smiled and shook his head. 'I've got more books than I can read and more DVDs than I can watch.'

'No special foods?' asked Antoinette.

'I don't have much of an appetite,' he told us. 'But they feed me very well here.'

We sat and talked for a while. Antoinette talked to him about what was happening in our garden. She told him about the antics of the squirrels and the activities of the badgers. He nodded and murmured. He was interested, enjoying what she told him. Suddenly, he looked up.

'Did you have a good conker crop?' He asked. He knew that our big horse chestnut tree had nearly died but that I had managed to nurse it back to good health.

Antoinette looked across at me.

'Marvellous,' I told him. 'We have enough conkers to keep a whole school full of small boys extremely happy.'

'In my day,' he said, sadly. 'And in your day, I have no doubt.' He sighed. 'The boys these days don't seem interested. They don't play conkers do they?'

'Not much,' I agreed.

'Too busy with their computer games.'

I nodded.

'I used to love the feel of a horse chestnut,' he said. 'The shiny nut, straight out of the prickly casing.' He smiled, remembering.

We talked a little more and when he was tired we left him.

'Are there any conkers left on the tree?' asked Antoinette as we got into the car.

'I think so,' I told her. 'I'll look as soon as I get back home.'

I managed to find half a dozen fruits, still in their casings, still on the tree. I picked them and put them into a brown paper bag Antoinette found. Then we drove back to the hospice. Our friend was asleep but I gave the bag to one of the nurses and asked her to give it to him with our love. She promised to put the bag in his room, so that he would see it when he woke up.

He died a day later and on the table beside his bed were the carefully opened fruit casings. The matron told us that he had one of the shiny conkers in his hand when he died.

14

Our BMW X3 has developed a crack in the windscreen. It just appeared. One day the windscreen was clear (apart from the evidence that it is stored out in the open, underneath a large sycamore tree which is home to a family of magpies with loose bowels) and the next morning there was a two inch crack. The crack wasn't caused by a stone flying up and there were no chips in the windscreen to suggest that the cause was anything other than a fault in the glass.

Gradually, the crack has lengthened and worked its way across the screen. A few days ago I decided that it was time to have the faulty windscreen replaced. I telephoned the dealer from which we'd bought the car, and booked it in for a service and windscreen replacement. This morning, one of the mechanics picked up the car and drove it over to the garage. This afternoon a man from the garage telephoned and asked if I wanted to know the cost of a new windscreen or if I just wanted them to go ahead and replace it and then send me the bill. I said I didn't think I ought to have to pay anything since the crack was clearly a result of a fault, rather than a result of an accident, or a stone being thrown up. The man from the garage then told me that he had found two small stone chips in the glass and that since he believed these to be the cause of the crack, the windscreen would not be replaced under the car's warranty. I was astonished at our bad luck. Clearly what had happened was that while being driven from our home to the garage two small stones had landed on the windscreen and marked the glass. One had landed very close to the crack and the other had landed right on it. How unlucky can you get?

I told the man from the garage to leave the windscreen as it is and to send the car back to us. With that sort of luck we might as well put up with the cracked windscreen.

When the car was delivered back to us, serviced and cleaned, the driver who had brought it hurried away before I could talk to him about this astonishing incident. There were indeed two marks on the windscreen – one close to the crack and one right on it.

15

It took me fifteen minutes to reset my driving position in the BMW. Why, I wonder, do drivers from the garage always have to change every possible position? I can understand that they might have to move the seat forwards so that their little legs can help their tiny feet reach the pedals, but do they really have to change the inclination and the lumbar support?

Once I'd managed to get myself into a moderately comfortable position (I seriously doubt if I will ever be able to get it back to the pleasant, comfy position I had before) it took me another five minutes to turn off the radio. The mechanic who brought the car back had obviously been a deaf and enthusiastic aficionado of Radio One.

The idiots who designed our car were, like the designers of Windows software, overcome by their own cleverness and unaware that making things more complicated just because you can isn't always a good idea. Sometimes, less is more.

The BMW engineers have equipped the car with 7,000 functions which I will never want to use but if I want to turn on the fog lamps or use the rear window wipers I have to stop, park and fish out the manual. The radio and CD player are a total mystery. And so now I am sadly aware that for as long as we own it our car will start to play Radio One whenever I press the starter button.

16

A reader has written to admonish me for the fact that in my first diary (*Diary of a Disgruntled Man*) I moan about the British and American Governments. I should, he says, settle back and enjoy life, instead of criticising the people who run the country. He says my book made him laugh out loud but contains far too many moans. He also complains about the criticisms in my book *Stuffed!*.

Sadly, I'm afraid I suspect that this reader is one of the reasons that people like me spend our lives writhing around in spiritual pain. Is there anyone over 50, with a decent quantity of functioning brain tissue, who genuinely believes that the world is now better run, and more agreeable, than it was two or three decades ago? Is there one leading politician, anywhere in the world, who can justly be described as a Statesman? Is there one leader of anything who isn't a screaming psychopath doing whatever he does simply to boost his own standing and fill his own pockets?

It is, I'm afraid, cryptorchid folk like my whingeing reader who are the problem.

If more people were prepared to stand up and tell the truth – that the world is being badly run by psychopaths advised by crooks and charlatans – then the world would be a much better place.

My reader is right in that I would doubtless have a more relaxing time if I just sat back and enjoyed my life with Antoinette; basking in the joy I get from our garden, and our collection of books and films.

But someone has to stand up on the parapet and scream abuse at the people who are making such a damned awful mess of running the world.

And I've appointed myself.

17

A man died recently of a heart attack. As far as his family, friends and colleagues were concerned he had been in excellent health. But when his wife examined the To-Do list on his mobile phone she found the following entry: ‘See doctor about pains in chest’.

The entry had been written four weeks before the man’s death.

18

About 25 years ago I constructed an original list of collective nouns (ones I had made up) for a book I wrote called *The Complete Guide to Life* (under the pen name Edward Vernon). Everyone knows that a collection of fish is a shoal and that a group of birds a flock. Most people know that groups of geese, dogs, horses and cattle are collectively known as a gaggle, a pack, a string and a herd. But no one had previously created collective nouns for specific, groups of people. I rediscovered my list this week and I've been adding to it. Here is the new, improved and expanded list:

A hamper of assistants
A congregation of clergymen
A galaxy of actresses
A pride of expectant fathers
A knot of scouts
A shower of weather forecasters
A swarm of heating engineers
A congestion of children
A clump of labourers
A drove of chauffeurs
A clutch of car mechanics
A collection of philatelists
A ring of proctologists
A batch of cooks
A press of laundrymen
A girdle of corsetieres
A quantity of surveyors
A parcel of postmen
A cast of sculptors
A band of rubber workers
A tuft of trichologists
A wealth of publishers
A stream of urologists
An embarrassment of parents
A flourish of magicians
A cluster of diamond cutters
A ring of jewellers
A posse of vets
A flounce of divas
A bunch of florists
A nest of mothers
A stack of booksellers/librarians
A corps of pathologists
A cup of bra makers
A congress of prostitutes
A concentration of students
A body of undertakers
A chest of transvestites
A company of representatives
A set of osteopaths
A dossier of policemen
A sheaf of administrators
A pile of gastroenterologists
An aggregation of biochemists
An association of psychologists
A drift of skiers
A clutch of physiotherapists
A school of nurses

A meeting of social workers
A herd of audiologists
A convergence of opticians
An issue of journalists
A brood of midwives
A community of public health officials
A cell of cytologists
A branch of foresters
A line of geneticists
A chain of chemists
A growth of endocrinologists
A cloud of spiritualists
A catch of obstetricians
A mass of oncologists
A smear of laboratory technicians
A promenade of chiropodists
A gathering of dress makers
A camaraderie of photographers
A host of bacteriologists
An order of waiters
A pyramid of archaeologists
A giggle of teenage girls
A gawp of teenage boys
A hold of sailors
A grip of luggage handlers
A slump of economists
A grievance of defendants
A whinge of consumers
A bore of mining engineers
A nerd of IT workers
A bosom of typists

19

I bought a pile of books today from my favourite second-hand bookshop in Cheltenham. Among them was a local history book which contained a section dealing with a lawyer called William Prynne who was a Protestant extremist with strong views on women’s hairstyles. He wrote that ‘our English gentlewomen are now grown so far past shame as to clip their hair like men and make this whorish cut the fashion of the times’. When he’d finished getting into trouble for that bit of fun Prynne published a book called *Histriomastrix* which was lucky enough to be declared both subversive and blasphemous. These days that would have got him a TV contract, a column in *The Guardian* and valuable serialisation rights in one of the Sunday tabloids. He would have had to put up with some pretty scathing one star Amazon reviews, but by golly he’d have been rich beyond his dreams.

But things were different back then, and the unfortunate Prynne was debarred, fined £5,000, put in the pillory twice (once in Cheapside and once, for an encore, in Westminster) and then imprisoned in the Tower of London. As if that wasn’t punishment enough he also had both his ears cut off. But Mr Prynne didn’t allow such petty inconveniences to silence him. Once people had stopped throwing rotten vegetables at him, and his ears had stopped bleeding, he wrote another book on the same theme. The result was that the authorities (still several laughs short of a good sense of humour) fined him another £5,000, put him into the pillory again, branded him and stuffed him into the dungeon at Carnarvon castle. They also ordered that his ears be cut off for a second time. (Perhaps they’d grown back. Perhaps he’d had plastic surgery. Perhaps they didn’t do a proper job the first time.)

When the Restoration came in 1649 the adventurous Prynne was released and happier times lay ahead. He moved to Cheltenham, married a Cotswold girl, and lived for another 31 years saying ‘I beg your pardon, would you repeat that?’ a good deal and having nowhere to rest the arms of his spectacles. I don’t believe there is any record of the type of hairstyle his new wife favoured.

20

I cut myself shaving this morning. It was a minute cut but by the time I had bathed the wound and covered it with a suitable old-fashioned fabric sticking plaster (if a sticking plaster doesn’t make you say ‘ouch’ when you remove it then there is really no point in putting it on in the first place) the blood that had seeped out had gone everywhere. I doubt if I had lost more than a quarter of a teaspoonful but even that was enough to soak a tie, a shirt, a pair of trousers, a jacket, an overcoat, a hat that was hanging up in the front porch, a carpet, a packet of paper tissues, an oil painting that was hanging on the wall, a blanket, the lawn mower, a pair of socks, a rug in the boot of the car, a clock and two apple trees. I hate to think how much mess would have been made if I’d lost a whole teaspoonful.

21

I’ve wasted another hour of my life dealing with a bunch of bureaucrats. The damned creatures are everywhere these days – as ubiquitous as cockroaches in an NHS hospital kitchen. But at least it is not yet illegal to annoy them with a little light bureaucrat baiting. Worrying bureaucrats (in the same way that a dog worries sheep) is an essential pleasure and a natural instinct and it should not be repressed. There are lots of variations but here are some of my favourite:

1. Ask for a copy of the official complaints procedure. All bureaucrats (except those working for the NHS) are terrified of formal complaints. NHS bureaucrats don’t give a damn about complaints because no one ever takes any notice of them. If the complaint is serious the patient will be dead and so that’s that.
2. Send one page of what is obviously a two page letter. Make sure you send it by recorded or special delivery.
3. Enclose a cheque for a small amount of money when no one has asked you for any. (This is a good way to elicit a response. They will have to return your cheque.)
4. Write two letters saying precisely opposite things and post them on the same day.
5. Add an extra letter or figure to the reference you are asked to quote on your replies.
6. Make constant references to a previous letter that you never wrote.
7. Make constant references to a previous letter that they never wrote.
8. Make constant references to a named but imaginary individual. I like to give my imaginary individuals good solid names like Ditchfield and Woodhead.
9. Add a postscript to your letter saying that you have sent a copy to the chairman of the board and to Mr Hoskins. There doesn’t have to be a Mr Hoskins and you don’t actually have to bother sending a copy to the chairman.
10. Enclose an invoice with your letter and request payment within seven days. The invoice should be for the inconvenience you have been caused. I usually make mine out for £1,500,000 since this is a nice round sum and likely to attract attention.

22

For some years now I have been unable to fit all the junk I feel I must carry into my pockets. I have, therefore, invariably carried a shoulder bag when leaving the house. Today, I decided that the bag had become too heavy and so I emptied it out onto the carpet so that I could try and decide what was essential and what could be safely discarded.

Here are the contents: seven pencils, three notebooks, a copy of a paperback by George Mikes, a French dictionary, a make-up bag containing a collection of essential medicines, an Epipen for use if Antoinette, I or anyone else suffers an anaphylactic shock reaction, a handful of AA and AAA batteries, two pen refills, three dice, a portable electronic chess game, an emergency sewing kit, a folding umbrella, two packets of paper handkerchiefs, a packet of wet wipes, a digital camera, a spare disk for the camera, a small book to help me identify trees, a recipe for shortbread, a packet of mints, a penknife, a spare pair of reading spectacles, a spare pair of shoelaces, a cigarette lighter, a street map of Monte Carlo, another spare pair of reading spectacles (in case I lose my usual pair in which case there would be no spare pair), a disintegrating packet of cough sweets, some eye drops for use during the hayfever season, a button from a jacket I no longer own, six paperclips, a small stapler, a packet of spare staples, a pair of sunglasses, a map of London, a train time table for Eurostar, a brochure advertising a taxi service in Paris, a USB storage device, a jeweller’s loupe, a comb with very few teeth, a spare bunch of keys for a building I sold several years ago, some bird food in a small plastic bag, a hand held fan for use on really hot days, a small telescope for looking at birds, a handful of euros, an MCC membership card, a small metal model of a Bugatti T50 motor car, a Filofax, a packet of extra paper for the Filofax, a Leatherman, a small wind up torch and two plastic shopping bags in case I buy anything I haven’t already got. I threw out the comb, the cough sweets and the street map of Monte Carlo and put everything else back into the bag. To my dismay the bag does not seem a good deal lighter.

23

Every town in the Cotswolds seems to have at least one festival. Nowhere has as many as Cheltenham, which is the Queen of Festival Towns, but most self-respecting places have more than one. Even tiny villages have them. They seem to have taken over from fetes, revels and carnivals and they are nowhere near as much fun. Good old-fashioned fetes, carnivals and revels were all designed as celebrations; with stalls, side shows, Morris dancers, maypole dancing, proper old-fashioned skittles and a good many other traditional events. These are now considered unacceptable because they celebrate English tradition and now that England is no longer a country it is politically incorrect to remember, let alone celebrate, anything English. In contrast, modern festivals all seem to be terribly serious affairs. The people who organise them do so to make money, of course, and so they tend to be earnest and quite devoid of any real sense of fun. By far the worst are the literary festivals which are invariably so po-faced and dull that they would put most sensible people off books for life. I used to get invited to speak at them quite often but always made my excuses and did not go. These days I receive no invitations at all and this is a Good Thing because it means I don’t have to waste time and energy thinking up excuses.

24

A good friend of mine, a successful author, has taken his e-Books off Amazon after discovering that the American site will not remove reviews which are factually inaccurate or just plain libellous. He insists that at Amazon the whole business of dealing with authors has been delegated to a 16-year-old assistant deputy intern on a work training scheme, complains that the emails he receives from Amazon are usually incomprehensible but invariably contaminated with a strong whiff of patronising superiority and says that if there was some way to rank Amazon he’d give them one star. And, probably, the bullet.

25

A young friend of Antoinette’s told us that she has passed another GCSE examination. She takes one a year just for fun. She now has passes in Greek, Maths and Religious Studies. She says she’s looking for a job as a bookkeeper to a Greek priest. She has diabetes mellitus and told us that her favourite flower is the sweet pea. When I asked her why, she just smiled. It was minutes before the penny dropped. Antoinette got it straight away.

26

An Australian came into a local pub where Antoinette and I were having a drink. There wasn’t any doubt about his nationality. The size, the tan, the blond hair and the accent were enough; he didn’t need a bush hat with corks dangling from the brim. He ordered a pint of lager.

‘You should have a word with Sebastien,’ the barman said, putting a glass under the appropriate tap. He struggled to get his tongue around the name. ‘You two have a lot in common.’

The Australian looked at him and raised a blond eyebrow. ‘Why’s that?’ he asked.

‘He’s from France,’ exclaimed the barman, turning on the tap and starting to fill the glass.

‘I’m from Australia,’ said the Australian, unnecessarily.

‘Of course you are,’ said the barman, concentrating on his work.

‘So what have we got in common?’

‘You’re both foreign, aren’t you?’ said the barman.

The Australian looked at me. I looked at him.

‘So, what’s wrong?’ demanded the barman, looking at each of us in turn. ‘What’s wrong?’

27

There are now 260,000 people in the UK who suffer so badly from anxiety or depression or both that they are unable to attend work and are, therefore, claiming benefits every week. Very few of them are receiving medical treatment for their alleged condition. Mental health problems are now the commonest, and fastest rising, type of disability and have overtaken old, traditional excuses such as backache. Most of the 260,000 are malingerers but there is an easy way to sort them out from the genuinely ill. Anyone claiming unemployment benefits because of a mental disorder should be required to spend one day a week as a day patient in a mental hospital, where they could spend their time with people who have genuine mental illness – and see how they are treated. (Not much worse than the days of *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, I admit, but no better either.) One or two might actually feel guilty and realise that their malingering helps ensure that there isn't enough money available to provide decent health care for the mentally ill. Most of the rest would be shocked into accepting that they are, after all, fit for work and would rather go to the office or the factory than spend any more time in a mental hospital.

28

In Brazil, in March 2009, Prince Charles warned us all that the world had ‘only 100 months to avert irretrievable climate and ecosystem collapse’. He is now, I fear, in real danger of looking a right royal plonker. The really embarrassing thing, however, is that Charles hasn’t done anything at all to help deal with the problem except to fly hither and thither in an oil guzzling private plane, repeating the nonsense he has been told by pseudoscientists who wouldn’t know a fact if it stood up and bit them on the nose. I’m sure he means well.

29

A woman in our village is called Ms Jacqui Dick. She is an accountant but very snobbish and is engaged to a man called Nigel Head. He is the second son of a not very wealthy farmer and he has a job in a bank so all is lost. Ms Dick has apparently always wanted to have a double barrelled name. She thinks that any children of their prospective union will travel further and higher in life if they have two surnames connected by a hyphen. She is a young woman of limited experience but great determination and the rumour in the village is that she is insisting that her name come first when their new surname is minted. Good luck to them, say I. I’m rooting for her and I hope she wins the argument. The world is a sad and dark place and we are all in need of light entertainment.

30

A friend of Antoinette’s has a husband who is much older than her and she is forever worried that her husband will one day develop Alzheimer’s disease. Her father suffered from this most cruel of disorders and she lives in dread of the day when her husband might wake up in the middle of the night and demand to know what she is doing in his bed. And so, having read that it is possible to delay the onset of dementia by keeping the brain busy, Antoinette’s friend decided that they would spend a few minutes each day learning to memorise cards. ‘I’ll do it with him,’ she told Antoinette, ‘so that we can share the experience. We can turn it into a bit of a fun.’

Today, in Cirencester, Antoinette saw her friend and asked her how the card memorising was going. The friend blushed deep red and looked very embarrassed. ‘Oh, we gave that up,’ she said, rather dismissively.

‘Was there a problem?’ asked Antoinette, solicitously.

‘Not really,’ replied her friend. ‘Well, sort of. In a way. But not quite what I’d expected.’

Antoinette took her into the café above the antique arcade and bought her a cup of tea and a toasted teacake.

‘I got an old pack of cards and two pieces of paper and two pencils and we sat down at the dining room table and I counted out seven cards,’ she said. ‘I laid them down in front of us and told Jeff (Jeff is her husband) that he had to try to remember the values and suits of the seven cards. He looked at them for about two seconds and then said he was ready and what did we do next. I told him that we had to memorise the cards and that when we’d done that I would turn them over and we both had to write down the values and suits of the seven cards. He said he knew what the cards were and that he was going to put the kettle on while I memorised them too.’

‘Oh dear,’ said Antoinette. ‘And I suppose that when it came to it he couldn’t remember any of the cards?’

‘No, not at all,’ said Antoinette’s friend. ‘I spent another three or four minutes memorising them and then…’ She paused and hesitated.

‘What happened?’ asked Antoinette.

‘I could only remember three of them.’

‘And Jeff? How did he do?’

‘Oh, he remembered all seven of them. He’d only looked at them for a couple of seconds but he knew them backwards and forwards. He didn’t get any of them wrong.’

‘Oh well,’ said Antoinette. ‘At least you know he hasn’t got Alzheimer’s.’

‘No,’ said her friend. ‘But now I’m a bit worried about whether I’ve got it…’

31

The Royal Mail has such a bad reputation for ‘losing’ packets and parcels that almost everything worth more than ninepence now has to be signed for by the recipient (When referring to the Royal Mail, of course, the word ‘lost’ is a synonym for ‘stolen’. The thieves have become blatant. Last week we received an envelope which had one end torn open so that the contents could be extracted. The thief, having stolen the valuable part of the missive, had then put the torn envelope back into the system and it had been duly delivered.) Postmen must spend half their lives standing on doorsteps while house owners who are tardy risers must struggle downstairs in nightwear and dressing gown. Those who go out to work must spend hours queuing at the local sorting office to pick up their parcels. Life would be so much easier for everyone if the Royal Mail could be persuaded to restore the simple, reasonably priced and reliable service which once made it the envy of the world.

November

1

We drove to Longleat and had an absolutely splendid day as paying guests of Lord Bath. Whenever we go there I am always impressed by the number of wonderful things there are to enjoy. I love driving through the parkland and watching the lions, the giraffes, the tigers, the rhinos and the wolves. They all have far more space here than animals could possibly have in a zoo and I really think that even the most virulent animal rights campaigners would be hard pushed to complain about the way the creatures are treated.

As we drove through the monkey enclosure I kept moving at 20 mph so that the monkeys wouldn't jump onto the car and tear off the windscreen wipers but, inevitably perhaps, the monkeys proved themselves to be far cleverer than I had anticipated. When they realised that we were travelling too fast for them to jump onto the car they took a short cut across the grass and then sat down on the road in front of us. Naturally, we had to stop. And then they had their fun tearing at the windscreen wipers. The score was clearly monkeys 1, Vernon 0.

What is the attraction of windscreen wipers, I wonder? Maybe the monkeys just enjoy being mischievous. Or maybe they are paid a retainer and banana bonuses by the windscreen wiper industry. Nothing in this world, or any other, would surprise me.

We spent the rest of the day wandering around and visiting all our favourite spots. In the butterfly house we spent ages watching the leafcutter ants. One was carrying his leaf in the wrong direction and only realised his mistake when he was stopped and told to turn round and go the other way. In the walled garden we examined the gravestones of dozens of family pets and admired a statue to the family's favourite dwarf entertainer. We admired the human sundial (if you stand in the correct spot your shadow will tell you the time) and enjoyed the hidden, tucked away exhibition of family bygones. I really do think that this is probably my favourite part of Longleat. A dozen huge glass display cases contain the family's Victorian and Edwardian gadgets, toys, sporting equipment, medicine boxes and heaven knows what else. Everything passes the William Morris test: it is beautifully made and eminently functional. I suspect that most visitors miss this part of the estate but in its unique way it is one of the most revealing and entertaining museum exhibitions I've ever seen.

2

I am no Luddite. I had a mobile telephone when they looked like house bricks and I had a computer when the language was Basic and the printer was a noisy dot matrix creation. I have, however, resisted e-Books for a long while; not because I disapproved of the technology or because I really enjoy the sight, feel and smell of real books (which I do) but because, as an author and a publisher, I was convinced that e-Books would mark the end for professional authorship. (I was also convinced that they would kill off publishers, agents and booksellers but since I consider that all three are parasitic trades which we can well do without I wasn't too bothered by that.)

The main problem with e-Books is that they are distributed via the internet and internet users have, from the very beginning of time, been accustomed to getting everything for free; often regarding copyright as something 'evil', to be resisted. I worried about authors losing control of their copyright (or, to be more precise, I worried about me losing control of my copyright) because although musicians can make a living doing live gigs and selling T-shirts those really aren't options which are open to the average professional author. (Most musicians have little choice but to make their money by going on the road. The royalties paid by music providers on the internet are truly pathetic. A company called Spotify announced that it paid artists as little as $0.006 per song and Bette Midler revealed that nearly 4.2 million plays on the Pandora site earned her just $114.11 in royalties. Antoinette and I wouldn't eat very well if we had to rely on my flogging tickets to public readings or selling clothing with my picture emblazoned on the front.

But I have given in and, as I have already noted, I am having all my existing books converted to e-Books. Since Amazon pretty well has a monopoly on e-Books we're starting with them. I really cannot see any sort of future for traditional publishers and small publishers, who relied on selling most of their books through the mail, are doomed. If Royal Mail had set out to destroy small publishers they could not possibly have made a better job of it. I realised that we were in serious trouble when I took a sackful of book parcels to my local sorting office only to be told that because all the parcels were headed overseas they would have to be taken to a post office. And so we had to stand in line and, eventually, answer questions about the contents for every single parcel. Fifty times we were asked the same questions and fifty times we gave the same answers. The people in the queue behind were understandably cross and I think we were lucky to escape with our lives. After that Royal Mail put up its prices for books posted to addresses in the UK and the price rise, which was far above the rate of inflation, finally did us.

3

American readers are beginning to discover my seven Bilbury novels and one or two have written kind reviews and already given the first book the full five stars. Unfortunately, however, the first review which appeared is headlined 'Why are the other books in this series not available on Kindle!!!???' The review is unfortunate because all seven books are available and the reviewer clearly just couldn't find them. I wrote to Amazon asking if it might be possible to change the heading or, at least, to ask the reviewer to amend the heading. But they wrote back to tell me that the review does not break any or their guidelines (inaccuracy clearly doesn't matter) and so they cannot change it and will not inform the reader about his error. So, although all seven books are available the first in the series, *Bilbury Chronicles* now carries a permanent stigma: an inaccurate notice suggesting to readers that the other six books aren't available. Not surprisingly this review has brought sales to a halt. I'm not sure how this helps anyone. Maybe someone at Amazon needs to take a good, hard look at their policy about reviews. Worse still this policy makes life very easy for internet trolls – who have, I suspect, already done irreparable harm to the reputation of the internet as a whole.

4

Staff in NHS hospitals will no longer feed patients who are too frail or weak to feed themselves. The auxiliary staff aren't allowed to touch patients because that would upset the nurses and the nurses won't feed patients because they regard it as a demeaning activity. Just how or why it is demeaning to give food to a sick person who cannot feed themselves I cannot imagine but too many modern nurses seem to have been trained according to new principles of caring which seem to me to have more in common with Reinhard Heydrich than Florence Nightingale. Most spend their days filling in forms, messing around with computers and pretending to be terribly important. (Unison, a terrible trade union which seems to have completely lost the plot as far as hospitals and patient care are concerned recently complained that 45% of nursing staff have to look after eight or more patients during their shift! Writing in the 'Spectator', Jane Kelly pointed out that Florence Nightingale and 38 volunteers looked after 18,000 seriously injured men in the Crimea.)

Friends of ours who have a relative in an NHS hospital are so worried about the fact that nurses will no longer do any caring that they visit at every mealtime and feed their relative themselves. They take in their own food because the hospital food is patently unfit for human consumption. Even starving rats would probably turn their noses up at the unhealthy slop served in NHS hospitals these days.

When these relatives knew they would be unable to visit for a few days they dragged one of the official harridans away from her office and asked if it would be acceptable for them to send in a paid nurse three times a day. The hospital harridan was most indignant and stated categorically that this would not be allowed and that if a hired nurse arrived she would be sent away with rather more than a flea in her ear.

I understand the dilemma. When my mother was terminally ill in hospital she desperately needed regular physiotherapy treatment. The hospital physiotherapists could not or would not provide any more than a vague and rudimentary service and I asked if they would allow us to send in a private physiotherapist. The hospital staff were appalled and said that they definitely would not allow such a thing. They could have hardly been more shocked if I had suggested sending in a troupe of Black and White minstrels to give a matinee concert.

Our friends have solved their dilemma by hiring a nurse and telling her that when she visits the hospital she must do so in her own clothes and that if anyone asks who she is then she must tell them that she is a friend of the family.

5

The supermarket chain Tesco hasn’t been doing well lately and so the boss has been sacked. His reward for not doing a terribly good job is a payoff package totalling just £21 million. The company could have hired 1,500 check-out assistants for a full year for that amount of money. When are companies going to stop handing out lorry loads of shareholders’ cash to executives who didn’t earn (or deserve) the mountains of money they’ve already received? Since everyone with a private pension or savings in an investment trust or unit trust probably owns shares in Tesco this sort of indecent and indefensible generosity hurts us all. The FTSE 100 index is now almost precisely where it was 15 years ago (meaning that shareholders have made no money at all) but during that time executives have awarded themselves huge pay rises. Fifteen years ago the average chief executive received 47 times as much as his or her average employee. Today, the average chief executive (and most of them are very average) receives 143 times as much as the average worker in the same business.

6

I boycott all companies which use pop up adverts to advertise their products. If everyone else did the same there wouldn’t be any pop up ads. No company is going to continue with an advertising technique which doesn’t work.

7

A dear friend of mine has just published his first book. He spent eighteen months writing it. The very first review he received on Amazon gave his book one star. ‘This is not my cup of tea,’ was the reviewer’s only comment. The book will now die unless other readers give the book a fairer review. I wonder if reviewers who destroy a book so lightly realise just how much harm they are doing. And why do so many reviewers give a book a bad rating not because it is a ‘bad’ book but because it is ‘not their cup of tea’? I have seen books and films destroyed by reviewers because the packaging wasn’t considered satisfactory or because there was some problem with the delivery. And reviewers often criticise books because the book doesn’t ‘look right’ on their phone, kindle or computer. Few realise that the whole process of converting a book into an e-Book is fraught with difficulty and that a book which appears perfect on one device will look distorted on another device.

8

I made the silly mistake of looking at my wikipaedia entry today. (I know that’s not how it is spelt but it is how it would be spelt were it spelt properly). It’s a nice piece of fiction but bears little resemblance to my life as I know it. One of the oddities of this wretched site is that living people (other than the person who set the whole thing up who is called Jimmy Wales and who has edited his owns wikipaedia entry) are not allowed to make any corrections and must wait until they are dead to correct inaccuracies. The spotty 14-year-olds who write and edit this stuff apparently believe they know my life better than I do. I never asked to have a damned wikipaedia entry and I wish to heaven I could remove the damned thing. Why do the teenage idiots who write and edit this appalling site tend to put in only the unpleasant or libellous references? One article to which they refer, and which appeared in the appalling *Independent on Sunday* newspaper, contained so much rubbish that the editor of the paper printed a letter of correction from me. The article, possibly written, in my opinion, at the behest of drug company lobbyists, caused so much embarrassment to the publisher at the time that it helped lead to the editor being fired. I noticed that the last person who corrected my entry on wikipaedia did it last Christmas Day. What sort of sad bastard spends his Christmas Day messing about with wikipaedia entries? The sort of sad, geeky bastard who doesn’t have a life of his own so must mess with the lives of other people, that’s who.

And who gave these cowardly, sad bastards (most of them male and most of them too young to go out of doors without their mums) the right to remain anonymous? Every time they write a word they should give their name, age, experience and reason for thinking they have the right to fuck with someone’s life. It’s the same with the sites which invite people to write reviews. Most allow reviewers to hide behind daft fake names. How many brain cells does it take to think up the name ‘Buyer’ and ‘Book reader’? If I did reviews and wanted a fake name I’d at least have the imagination to call myself Adolf Hitler or Karl Marx.

The miserable, humourless, self-important little twats who review anonymously should have the courage to put their names on what they write. Then, on wikipaedia, we’d get things like this: ‘My name is Christofer Moody and I am nine but nearly ten. I will be your judge and jury for today. I will mess with your life early today because I have to do sports at school today and I need to find my gym bag or Mummy will be cross. I hate sports because all the other boys and girls laugh at me and call me weedy so when they grow up I will mess with their lives too and then they’ll see.’

Obnoxious little kids who’ve never even heard of *Lord of the Flies* rule the internet these days and, therefore, rule our bloody lives. This is no hyperbole. Astonishingly, 80% of five-year-olds own or have regular access to an internet device. They are growing up tweeting, blogging, posting embarrassing pictures of themselves – and writing reviews. They already assume that they are important people and that the world is interested in their eating habits, their bowel movements and their opinions on things about which they remain woefully ill-informed. They expect everything to be free and are perfectly happy to steal anything that isn’t offered free.

Oh how I wish I could remove my name from all search engines and all websites – especially google and wikipaedia, two of the most evil and irresponsible and harmful companies on the planet.

Meanwhile, I’ve decided that I’m going to start suing some of these bastards. Get them and their mummys and daddys into court and watch the little toe rags squirm.

I feel better now.

The Princess put a reference to the letter of correction on my Wikipedia page. She didn’t change anything else at all. Within hours the reference to the letter of correction had been removed. But the reference to the egregiously inaccurate ‘hatchet job’ article remained.

9

I’m thinking of writing a guide book for beggars. Indeed, I have high hopes that I might be able to persuade one of the newly formed universities to create a degree course based on my work. And, inevitably, there will be a massive opportunity to claim EU grants which will make us incomparably rich. The book and course will have to be called something other than ‘begging’ and I’m rather keen on the idea of labelling it *Spare Change Reclamation Processing* because this sounds very official and important. In Chapter One I will explain that since very few people in Britain speak English these days there really isn’t any point in learning the local language. Indeed, I will recommend that beggars learn a more useful language – Polish or Romanian for example. In Chapter Two I will teach students that they must never say ‘thank you’ when given money since this suggests to the donor that the recipient is satisfied with what he has received. As a result the donor might give less the next time round. In Chapter Three I will explain that it is possible for a beggar to increase his or her income by the judicious use of a dog, baby or small child. Research has shown that a beggar can increase his income by 68% by having a dog by his side and by 92% if there is a baby or sad looking child in the vicinity. I will also explore and explain the advantages of dog or baby sharing.

10

I watched a *Big Issue* salesman retrieving copies of the magazine from a nearby waste bin. He is clearly going to recycle these unwanted magazines. This isn’t the first time I’ve seen this happen. I suspect that many of these salespeople sell each magazine several times. I have for some years been convinced that the magazine’s editors make sure that the publication contains absolutely nothing anyone would want to read with the intention of making it easier for salespeople to make extra money this way.

11

I discovered today that at one point in history Idi Amin and Carlos the Jackal were both in exile and were living in the same apartment building. Can you imagine that? ‘What are your neighbours like?’ ‘Oh they’re very nice. We’ve got Idi Amin just down the hall and Carlos lives in the flat above.’ You wouldn’t want to say anything if Carlos was making a lot of noise, would you?

We watched a film the other day about mad Ugandan President Idi Amin and the young, gauche, cocky Scottish doctor who became his personal physician and then his special adviser and then the lover of one of one of his wives. It was promoted as a sort of true story though we subsequently discovered that Amin didn’t have a young white Scottish doctor at all – let alone one who became a special adviser. The writer made him up. Still, Idi Amin was real so that bit of the film was true. And Uganda exists, so that bit of the film was true too.

12

I bought two paperback books by American author Nelson DeMille today. One was printed in the year 2000 and the cover price is £9.99. The other was printed in 2010 and the cover price is £6.99. That’s deflation in action. (For the record the two books are about the same length.) Things are going to get much, much worse for publishers. Many are now facing a massive pricing dilemma. The cost of actually making a book (printing, binding, etc.,) has soared in the last few years. But pricing a book has become a real dilemma. If you charge enough for a ‘proper’ book to make a profit then what do you charge for the e-Book? If you charge a pound or two less for the e-Book then everyone will complain that you’re being greedy. There are no printing, binding or transporting costs with e-Books. And booksellers can’t return unsold copies for pulping. But if you charge considerably less for the e-Book then the sales of ‘proper’ books will collapse at an even faster rate. It’s a problem that is going to end in tears. I predict that within five years there will be very few old-fashioned publishers left. The commercial model just doesn’t work anymore. And there will be very little demand for literary agents either. Most authors now realise that they can self-publish their own e-Books just as well as big publishers can do it – and they can keep all the money instead of having to make do with a tiny percentage. And if you’re publishing your own books what on earth do you need an agent for? I suppose a few agents who specialise in selling foreign language and film rights will survive. But most literary agents will very soon have to start looking for proper jobs – and they’re going to have to start working for a living. What a shame.

13

We drove to Tetbury for the day. It’s only a few miles away for us and even closer for Prince Charles and his sister Princess Anne who both have splendid estates near to the village.

Tetbury originally made its money out of wool and although I can hardly remember it I know that an early commodity market was held under the Market Hall back as far as the 12th century. I wonder if there was any rigging or price fixing?

Tetbury has been well preserved and remains pretty well unspoilt. Many of the local shopkeepers have tales to tell of members of the Royal Family popping in for a bit of this or some of that. The lady who used to work in the local newsagent delighted in telling us about the times Princess Diana visited with young William and younger Harry.

Sadly, like most towns these days, the best shops are those run by charities although the Prince of Wales does have a splendid and appropriately up-market shop in the town. It’s odd to think of the heir to the throne being a shopkeeper, though neither he nor Camilla seems to spend much time behind the counter.

We pottered around for a while, picking up old books and stuff we really didn’t need and then had coffee in the Snooty Fox, an ancient Cotswold coaching inn opposite the Market Hall.

14

An 18-year-old entrepreneur has launched a ‘hen hotel’. For a mere £1 per chicken per night he will look after pet chickens while their owners are away on holiday. So if you’ve got a dozen chickens and you go away for a fortnight the whole deal will cost just £168. I wonder who gets the eggs? Or do they just count as a perk.

15

I overheard a child talking to her mother about the death of a much loved pet. ‘Well, at least no one can hurt him now,’ said the child. ‘But no one was trying to hurt him,’ said the mother, puzzled. She did not understand that what had been the child’s fear had now become her consolation.

16

A man is reported to have lent his wife to two friends who did not have sexual partners of their own. Greater love hath no man than he lay down his wife for his friends. I don’t know whether much of this goes on in the Cotswolds but I do remember reading that in 1835 a local farmer called Joe Thompson sold his wife at Gloucester market. He sold her and a large dog as a job lot. The two had been married (the farmer and his wife, not the farmer and the dog) just three years earlier but things had not gone entirely according to hopes and expectations. ‘She’s been a born serpent,’ said the farmer, who doesn’t seem to have been a naturally skilled salesman, when talking to a small crowed of potential buyers. ‘I took her for the good of my home, but she has become my tormentor. A domestic curse. A nightly invasion and a daily devil.’ After these preliminaries the farmer really got going. ‘Avoid troublesome women as you would a mad dog, a roaring lion, a loaded pistol, cholera, Mount Etna and any other pestilent thing in nature,’ he warned what was by now a considerable crowd.

Rather surprisingly, considering this rather negative advertising, a city gent called Henry Mears paid 28 shillings for the wife and the dog and the deal was done. Maybe Mr Mears was swayed by the fact that Mr Thompson did say that his wife could both read and milk cows. I don’t know whether she could do both these things at the same time but I rather doubt it since in those days milking was usually done in dingy barns and at times of day when the natural light was often very poor.

17

I’ve been involved in a correspondence with the BBC’s Natural History Unit about a programme they broadcast about the Red Squirrels Trust Wales. The programme praised the Trust for their efforts in trying to promote and expand the population of red squirrels but, as usual, the BBC failed to tell the whole story. The Red Squirrels Trust Wales, which is funded by the lottery, boasts that it boosts tourism to Wales by promoting the red squirrel. ‘Red Squirrels Boost Tourism’ they claim.

And it is the touristy attraction of the red ones that is probably the only significant difference between red squirrels and grey squirrels. The bottom line is that although the red probably looks cuddlier, and employs excellent public relations people, both colours of squirrel damage trees. Indeed, in the past the red squirrel was slaughtered in vast numbers by people (mainly in Scotland) who believed it damaged forests. It was this slaughtering which led to the downturn in the number of red squirrels. Today, ironically, there are six red squirrel charities in the UK and it’s not difficult to argue that six is at least five more than are necessary. I very much doubt if the Government (which controls the Charities Commission) would allow anyone to found a grey squirrel charity (although I intend to try).

What the BBC forgot to tell its viewers was that as part of its plan to promote the red squirrel (and help local businesses) the Red Squirrels Trust Wales is busy killing grey squirrels. The ‘wrong’ coloured squirrels are caught in traps and ‘allowed to venture out from the wire trap into sacking’.

What happens then?

‘The squirrel is then moved into a corner of the sack and with the head positioned carefully within the corner, killed humanely by a single blow to the back of the head.’

This is conservation as practised by the Red Squirrels Trust Wales, supported by the Lottery and promoted by the BBC Natural History Unit.

It’s superficial and, in a squirrelly sort of way, definitely racist.

When I wrote to the BBC to complain about their promotion of such a thuggish organisation someone called James Smith, the series producer for Springwatch, replied.

‘We did mention in the film that the grey squirrels had been removed from Anglesey to enable the reintroduction of the reds to take place, although we did not go into the specifics about how this was achieved.’

I wrote back suggesting that the BBC owed its viewers an apology. ‘I doubt if many of your viewers will think kindly of an organisation which puts squirrels into a sack and then kills them by bashing in their heads,’ I wrote. I also pointed out that the fact is that red squirrels do just as much damage as grey squirrels and are not a threatened species.

But the BBC refuses to acknowledge a huge blunder. Three loud boos for the once respected (and once respectable) BBC Natural History Unit.

18

One of the local villages always holds its carnival later in the year than all the others. They are, I suspect, hoping that their unseasonal timing will help them stand out from the crowd. Antoinette and I attended and were very impressed. For a tiny village the locals always put on a good show and make a great effort. There were only six floats in the carnival procession (all consisting of very heavily decorated tractors and trailers) so the organisers carefully ensured that there were large gaps between the floats. They also sent the whole procession round the village three times guessing, quite rightly, that this would confuse those watching, and convince at least some of them that the procession was longer than it was. As they passed the field where they had gathered before the procession started, each float made some changes to its appearance to ensure that the spectators were confused still further. The five mermaids who had been on the Disneyland float changed places with the six Jack the Rippers who had been on the float dedicated to crime and criminals and the local beauty queen, who had been sitting on a magnificent throne on the Father Christmas float, moved over to a less impressive dining chair on the Glorious England float which she shared with the local band of Morris dancers.

The local squad of majorettes and flag twirlers (average age a hopeful 39 and average weight an equally hopeful 12 stones) marched at the front of the procession and impressed everyone with their skill, daring and courage. They wore red fishnet tights bought from a sex shop in Gloucester. It is one of the problems of life that the hourglass figure is difficult to attain. To reach and maintain the essence of female loveliness a woman must eat. Indeed, she needs a hearty appetite since the curves of the breasts and buttocks are comprised of fat not muscle. But there remains always the problem of the bit in the middle, to which the only honest answer is corsetry, and so the majorettes all wore costumes made primarily out of discarded corselettes which had been dyed red.

The majorettes were followed by four trumpeters, two trombonists and three drummers who described themselves as the district’s leading brass band (it is, in truth, the only brass band for quite a way in any direction but at times like this one should be generous and not picky). They played a medley of tunes which would have doubtless been recognisable if they had been identifiable. However, the band made up in volume for what they perhaps lacked in skill.

After the carnival had finished there were donkey rides and a pig roast (fortunately, they got this the right way round and didn’t end up with pig rides and a donkey roast) and three farmers organised a display of their farm equipment.

Antoinette and I contented ourselves with several large glasses of the vicar’s traditional, and justly famous, mulled wine.

It was a chilly evening and, not for the first time, there were some who felt that organising a carnival at this time of the year might not be the wisest way to attract visitors.

19

We’re in Paris and I’ve been reading *Who the Devil Made It?* by Peter Bogdanovitch. Antoinette bought it for me because she knows how much I enjoy Bogdanovitch’s books. This one, which is over 800 pages long and weighs about as much as Alfred Hitchcock after a large meal, contains interviews with 16 legendary film directors – including some of the very earliest filmmakers.

In one of Bogdanovitch’s books I read a wonderful story about Clint Eastwood. I can’t remember the book, the film, or the director, but at one point, early in a film he is making, Eastwood is expected to shoot one of the bad guys. And he is supposed to do so effortlessly and quickly.

Just before they shot the scene, Eastwood asked the director if they shouldn’t include a scene to establish that his character was fast with a gun. The director said that this wasn’t necessary. ‘They know you’re fast, Clint,’ he apparently responded. I thought this wonderfully telling. When making movies with big stars, directors always have to remember the star’s film reputation. Cary Grant never died and always had to get the girl. John Wayne was often gruff and bad-tempered but invariably a good guy at heart; decent and honourable. Dean Martin was always a drinker. Eastwood was always quick with a gun.

The irony is that in reality, Eastwood was not, apparently, all that quick a draw. When Eastwood and the magnificent Lee van Cleef were making the classic film *A Few Dollars More*, the crew organised a quick draw contest between the two. And Lee van Cleef won the competition.

Film buffs who have studied movies frame by frame reckon, however, that Lee van Cleef wasn’t the fastest of them all. That honour apparently (and rather surprisingly) goes to Glenn Ford.

I don’t think big John Wayne came anywhere on the list. But then his characters often used a rifle rather than a handgun.

20

I had to ring Lloyds Bank today to check on something in my account. Naturally, before anyone was prepared to tell me anything I had to take a special Lloyds Bank examination on my account. The first question was: ‘How much was paid into your account three days ago?’ I explained that I could not possibly answer that question since I now only receive statements when the moon is green and is in one of its rare Sage Derby phases. I also pointed out that a couple of dozen foreign publishers and various odd organisations are kind enough to put small sums of money into my account at all sorts of strange and unpredictable times. The woman at the other end of the phone line told me sternly that Lloyds Bank expects its customers to know how much has gone into or out of their account on any given day. I asked her how they are supposed to know this but she couldn’t answer that.

She then said that she would ask me two more questions.

She wanted to know how much had recently been withdrawn from the hole in the wall machine and the size of the overdraft on the account. I got the first question correct but failed the second question when I told her that I did not have an overdraft facility. Having told me that I had failed she refused to tell me anything about my account, so once again I could not do anything with my own money. I didn’t know whether to cry or scream so I screamed. I have no doubt I will be disciplined for this.

I discovered later that someone at Lloyds has, for reasons best known to him or herself given me a £100 overdraft facility. I don’t remember anyone asking me whether I wanted this or telling me that it been done.

21

Every time the police raid a celebrity’s home they somehow manage to leak it to the press before they leap into their cars. When one recent raid took place the police admitted afterwards that they had ‘worked with the BBC’ in advance of the raid and that as a result the BBC had a news crew at the property and an expensive licence payer funded helicopter hovering overhead.

The result is that reputations are ruined even if no evidence turns up, no one is charged and there is no trial.

It has been proved beyond doubt that people believe headlines and rarely bother with the small print. If people see a headline which says ‘Nick Clegg is an Alien’ they will believe that Nick Clegg is an alien even if there is absolutely no evidence. Moreover, if the headline is ‘Nick Clegg denies that he is an Alien’ those who see the headline will still believe that he is an alien. (I am not, of course, suggesting that Nick Clegg is or is not an alien. I have not been made privy to such knowledge.)

When the police announce that someone is being investigated they destroy that individual’s reputation – whether the individual is guilty or innocent. Is that really what is meant these days by British justice?

I look forward to the day when a rich celebrity sues the police for leaking information to the press. I seem to remember that a number of journalists were arrested for associating too closely with police officers. Doesn’t the law work the other way round?

22

I am getting increasingly annoyed by film companies who cram advert after advert onto their DVDs, and then make it difficult or impossible to skim through them to reach the feature. It is bad enough being treated as a thief and hectored by advertisements warning me of the terrible things which will befall me if I purchase a counterfeit tape or feel the urge to show what I have purchased to a bunch of lonely men on an oil rig or a group of sick children in a hospital ward. But the advertisements for the film maker’s other products have been a real nuisance. Some DVDs even contain advertisements for stuff such as chocolate, anti-personnel hand grenades and gambling holidays in Las Vegas. Three times this week we have sat down to watch a film and then spent fifteen to twenty minutes trying to get to the point where we can press ‘play’. Last night we took so long to find our way through the mass of warnings, threats, promotions and advertisements that we decided we needed to put on the kettle and make a cup of tea. So by the time we finally did sit down to watch the film we’d planned to watch it was too late. Oh, how I miss the good old days of video tape. Life was so much easier then.

23

The internet has damaged critical writing permanently. The non-fiction books I have written have always been intended to challenge assumptions and expose inaccuracies and lies. Thirty years ago it was possible to write books like this because those whose vested interests were being damaged could not easily destroy a book's sales. A drug company might be able to arrange for a bad review in one newspaper, or bribe an interviewer to write a dishonest and unflattering profile in another (both these things have happened to me) but not even a large, powerful multinational newspaper could control everything. A bad review in one newspaper might dent the sales of a book but it wouldn't kill the book completely. Things are very different now. One troll can kill a book stone dead in five minutes. All he or she has to do is to write bad, one star reviews on all the major outlets – but especially Amazon. I very much doubt if my books *The Medicine Men, Paper Doctors, The Health Scandal* and *Betrayal of Trust* would find a publisher today. Drug companies, and the medical establishment will, of course, find that a cheering thought. These days, reviewers don't even have to read the books they destroy. One troll, who did his best to destroy my book *Oil Apocalypse*, seemed proud of the fact that he hadn't read a word of the book, though he had seen an advertisement for it. (It is, I suppose, possible that his determination to destroy my book might have been linked to the fact that he'd written a book on the same subject and was perhaps upset that his book wasn't selling as well.) And so authors and publishers are no longer writing or publishing books which offer strong, original views or which challenge popular assumptions. My book on vaccines and vaccination (*Anyone Who Tells Vaccines Are Safe and Effective is Lying*) was hammered in the UK and the USA the moment it appeared on Amazon. I had spent years researching the book and many months writing it. The anonymous critics didn't bother to try to explain why they disapproved of the book – they just gave it one star and made sure it would never have a chance. I suspect that they were drug company employees – hired to protect industry profits. It is commercially far too dangerous to spend years researching and writing a complex book, and finding a way through libel laws and other legislation, if you know that the day the book appears a lobbyist for the industry or cause you have attacked will hire someone to write scurrilous or spiteful remarks on half a dozen websites and so wreck the book before its life begins. It's so much easier to add another diet book to the mass already available.

24

Amazon has been taking 30% tax from my earnings in America and I had to obtain a special code number from that country's Internal Revenue Service so that I could apply for exemption from this taxation. A very helpful lady helped me with the form and when I thanked her and told her that it had been much easier than I had expected she burst into peals of laughter. I then used my new special number on a tax form issued on the Amazon site for e-Book authors. I managed to fill in the form but I confess that I didn't understand most of it. I'm now not sure whether I have managed to make myself exempt from American taxes, joined the French Foreign Legion or bought a pandamonium. No doubt time will tell. (A pandamonium, by the way, is a little known musical instrument, usually played by a black and white bear.)

25

A reader has written to me asking how often I ‘trade’ shares. The answer is that I never trade shares. I buy investments that I hope I can hold for years. I buy and sell quite infrequently and I am probably one of the least popular customers of the brokers I use. I always think an investor is probably in trouble if he gets a Christmas card from his broker. Buying and selling shares costs a good deal of money for, in addition to the trading costs, and the spread between the buy and sell prices, there are taxes to be paid. A man I know who lives in Monaco is constantly buying and selling shares. Indeed, he writes a successful newsletter in which he encourages his readers to buy and sell shares on a daily basis. He does OK (though I am pretty certain he doesn’t do anywhere near as well as he likes to pretend) but he only gets away with constant trading because he doesn’t pay any taxes when he buys or sells. The people who run Personal Assets, one of the most successful investment trusts in Britain, change the trust’s portfolio so infrequently that I suspect they have to look up the phone number for the company’s broker whenever they want to do a deal.

26

A few weeks ago Antoinette and I signed up as executive producers for the village drama group's latest extravaganza. We don't have to do any 'producing', of course. Our titles are purely honorary and, as with the movies, we 'bought' them; acquiring them in return for donations of £50 each towards the cost of costumes and scenery. I suspect you have to stump up a little more than £50 to be named as an executive producer on the latest Tom Cruise epic but the principle is the same. We get our names on the programme and as long as we don't offer too much advice we are entitled to attend all cast meetings, rehearsals and post-production parties. A grand outlay of £100 between us is a small price to pay for the privilege of being allowed to sit at the back of the village hall during rehearsals. And, of course, we had tickets for tonight's grand opening.

The play the group chose to perform is *Macbeth*. Only the prompter and assistant wardrobe mistress (the same person) wanted to do *Macbeth*. The director and cast were split. Half wanted to do *Charley's Aunt* and half wanted to do *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Because the half wanting *Charley's Aunt* wouldn't agree to do *The Importance of Being Earnest* and the half wanting to do *The Importance of Being Earnest* wouldn't agree to do *Charley's Aunt* and some idiot had introduced a voting system based on a version of preferential voting devised by the prompter's husband they ended up with *Macbeth*.

Here's a list of our top ten favourite things to have happened so far.

1. The actress playing Lady Macbeth (an assistant in a branch of Boots who is also a keen first aider and a perfect example of the over-confident amateur who can turn a live patient into a corpse faster than a doctor can say 'For God's sake don't…') refused to go on stage for her dress rehearsal because she didn't like the dress she was expected to wear. She complained that it was black, shapeless and unfashionable and refused to go on until the wardrobe mistress had pinned up the dress to just above her knees and lowered the neckline to show an indecent amount of cleavage.
2. On dress rehearsal night no one could find any fake blood for the scene where Macbeth murders King Duncan and so the actor playing Macbeth, who thinks he looks like the late Bob Hoskins but doesn't because he is fatter, taller and always looks puzzled, as though not quite sure where he is or why he is there, hit the actor playing Duncan on the nose thus producing a seemingly unstoppable supply of real blood. The fun really started when one of the three witches (a Health and Safety officer at the local council, and if ever anyone suited the part she was playing then she clearly does) demanded that the hall be cleared because of the possible AIDS risk associated with the presence of blood on scenery and costumes. The actor playing Duncan (who is, in real life, an estate agent) objected strongly to this and said something about not being a 'bleeding poofter'. This upset the stage manager, who does something with computers. He is a homosexual and he lives with the actor who is playing the ghost of Banquo, who works in tree preservation and who is, of course, also a homosexual. The rehearsal ended early with everyone going home, most of them sulking.
3. One of the three witches, a woman who has been a committed and enthusiastic vegetarian for nearly two months, insisted that the script be changed to accommodate her views. It took an hour and three quarters for the cast to agree on the necessary changes. I was struggling so hard to stifle my laughter that I missed most of the changes but I do remember that 'tongue of dog' became 'ear of corn', 'eye of newt' became 'eye of black pea' and 'sow's blood' was changed to 'milk of soya bean'. No one offered to consult the playwright about any of these changes.
4. During one of the early rehearsals, we were sitting in the auditorium together with the actor who is playing Malcolm (Malcolm is a taxi driver when he isn't a thespian) when he leant across and whispered to us: 'You'll like this bit. This is where I come in. I'm really good.' He then sat back and waited for his own entrance. It wasn't until Antoinette quietly explained to him that the show was live and that he wasn't watching a DVD that he got up, leapt up onto the stage and made his entrance from an unusual direction. The taxi driver, who has a sharp and savage wit, was a constant source of entertainment. During rehearsals one evening he had a row with one of the witches. He complained that she had left the village hall's solitary lavatory seat down. 'It was,' he said, 'a deliberate act of typically aggressive matriarchal behaviour.' I can't possibly write down her reply.
5. When the curtain went up this evening there was quite a commotion at the back of the hall when a local quantity surveyor noticed that his living room curtains (which his wife had told him had been taken to the dry cleaners) were being used as a backdrop. The actresses playing two noblemen called Ross and Lennox (the play contains very few parts for women) had to go outside through the fire door, run round to the back of the hall and drag the surveyor outside. They then had to threaten him with a breach of the peace charge (they are both policewomen in real life) before they could persuade him to go home.
6. During the dress rehearsal the director (who is a vet who specialises in treating large animals because he can't stand the sort of people who own dogs and cats) had a meltdown. I can't remember everything he said but I did

manage to write down this gem: ‘I don’t care who says the lines, or even in what order, but it would be nice if someone said most of them before the curtain fell.’ His wife, a GP who was there to provide moral support, had to take him home and sedate him. He would, I suspect, have been distraught to know that the rest of the dress rehearsal went smoothly without him.

7. At some point between the dress rehearsal and tonight’s first night someone decided that it would be a good idea if the witches could sit around a real fire. Whoever had this bright idea lit the fire in a large iron wok and obviously assumed that the risk of the fire spreading would be minimal. Unfortunately, the second witch leant a little too close to the fire when dropping in the liquorice allsorts which had somehow become part of the recipe though to be honest I don’t remember Shakespeare saying anything about liquorice allsorts. It was one of the other witches, the third witch, who noticed that the second witch’s wig had caught fire and it was generally agreed that the problem could have been dealt with if the second witch had simply been told to rip the wig off her head. The three witches complained that the deputy assistant stage manager (the 18-year-old son of the prompter, who is, coincidentally of course, studying ‘Macbeth’ at school) was a little over zealous in throwing a bucket of water over them all.

8. Five minutes before the start of tonight’s performance the actor playing Macbeth (the man who thinks he looks like Bob Hoskins but doesn’t, who is a school master who teachers maths and religious knowledge to young hooligans who probably don’t have any interest in either) decided that he needed to wear his spectacles while on stage. Everyone pleaded with him not to do this but he was adamant, claiming that he was worried that if he didn’t he might bump into the props or knock down some scenery. The director said he’d rather he bumped into the props and knocked down the scenery but his words fell on stony ground. The spectacles are horn rimmed.

9. The actor playing Macduff, (a man who owns a shop selling cushions and who wears wide, flowered kipper ties, the ones that were made by Mr Fish of Carnaby Street and were popular in the 1960s) had three pints of beer before the performance in order to give him courage. He looks like Russell Brand, the self-important drug addict who thinks he is an entertainer but who is about as funny as diarrhoea on a long train journey. Unfortunately, the three pints of beer meant that he had to leave the stage twice in order to visit the loo at the back of the hall. During his lengthy absences the three witches, still soaked, came on stage and filled in by singing an impromptu version of *Where Did Our Love Go?*, the song made famous by the Supremes. The fact that all three of them knew the words suggested that this was not, perhaps, quite the impromptu performance it appeared to be.

10. The actress who played Lady Macbeth dived into her death scene with great relish. She collapsed right at the front of the stage and draped herself over a chair. Unfortunately, because she had by this time shortened her dress another foot or so, it was immediately clear to the entire audience that she was not wearing any underwear. Several parents immediately stood up and dragged their children out of the hall. They made no attempt to do this quietly. The actress has something of a reputation for exhibitionism, and has twice before suffered serious costume malfunctions (once while playing a nun in the *Sound of Music*).

All things considered, Antoinette and I consider our first experience as producers to have been highly successful. We will certainly be prepared to cough up our £50’s for the next production. We were particularly pleased to discover that, like most of the people who describe themselves as ‘producers’, we didn’t actually have to do anything at all. Local drama society productions are, I believe, the only place where it is possible to see genuinely impromptu performances these days. Even on the last night of a run the actors will still be making stuff up as they go along.

In the old days it used to be possible to hear proper repartee when politicians were on the stump, dealing with hecklers. These days any member of a political audience who dares to open his mouth will be leapt on by a bunch of ugly bouncers and dragged outside. He will probably be beaten up and almost certainly be arrested for speaking without a licence. And there is no such thing as an ad lib on television. I was not surprised to discover recently that the bon mots uttered by the three men in cars on Top Gear are carefully scripted beforehand. Even when they’re driving through the jungle there is, so I’m told, a script girl standing somewhere out of shot, making sure that the ‘boys’ say just what they’re supposed to say.

Our actors and actresses are keeping the art of the ad lib alive and very well.

27

We passed by Dr Jenner’s house in Berkeley (it’s not far from Berkeley Castle which has a marvellous butterfly house) but it was (like the Castle and its magnificent butterfly house) closed. Much of Gloucestershire closes during the lengthy off season.

Dear old Dr Jenner is widely and rightly considered to be a medical hero for the experiments he conducted on vaccination, though these days any doctor who did what he did would be locked up, struck off the medical register and viciously attacked in *The Guardian* and *The Sun.*

The proponents of vaccination regard Dr Jenner as a hero but, as usual, they overlook the salient facts. The truth is that things did not go quite as smoothly as the vaccine supporters would have us believe.

Jenner tried out the first smallpox vaccine on his own 10-month-old son but tragically the boy remained mentally retarded until his death at the age of 21. Jenner wisely refused to have his second son vaccinated.

Oddly enough the doctors, health visitors and other vaccine industry pimps who talk so knowledgeably and admiringly about Jenner and his work never seem to know any of this.

England’s last court jester, Dicky Pearce, is buried in Berkeley churchyard. He died while halfway through a performance and Jonathan Swift, of Gulliver’s Travels fame, wrote this rather miserable inscription for the poor little devil’s tomb:

Here lies the Earl of Suffolk’s fool,
Men called him Dicky Pearce,
His folly served to make folks laugh
When wit and mirth were scarce.
Poor Dick alas is dead and gone
What signifies to cry?
Dickys enough are still to come
To laugh at by and by.

28

An Irish reader tells me that plans for Country and Western singer Garth Brooks to hold a series of five concerts at Croke Park in Dublin have been abandoned. Dublin City Council decreed that they would only allow concerts on three days so two of the concerts would have to be held as matinees. Brooks rightly and sensibly cancelled the whole lot rather than do two daytime gigs. A staggering 400,000 people had bought tickets and were planning to travel to Dublin for the concerts but the council refused to give permission because locals had reportedly complained about the possible noise and disruption. The fiasco is reported to have cost the teetering Irish economy around £12 million. (There was actually some confusion about how many people had complained. Indeed, there were suggestions that fake objections had been made, or that one person had complained more than once, or that absolutely no one had complained but that someone in a cheap suit was worried that there might be complaints.)

The point surely is that if you buy a house close to an absolutely enormous stadium it might be reasonable to expect that there will be shows and performances and occasional noise and disruption. The people living close enough to be disrupted will have paid less for their homes because of that risk of disruption.

The same thing happens all the time and it is becoming a nightmare for the owners of sporting and entertainment venues. Motor racing circuits which have held races for decades are being told by local councils that they can only allow racing on a few days a year lest residents, who have just moved into the area, be annoyed. It seems to me that if you buy a house within sound of Silverstone or Brands Hatch or Goodwood or any other racing circuit then you know what you’re buying into and if you don’t like the noise of racing cars you should buy an undoubtedly more expensive house somewhere else.

I wrote some time ago about a vicar who received a warning visit from a council officer after a woman who had just moved into her home moaned about the noise of the church bells. The church had been ringing bells for 400 years.

29

I made two cups of coffee today. I was quite pleased with this example of domestication and handed Antoinette a cup with a certain amount of pride. She took a sip, grimaced and looked at me.

‘What did you make this with?’ she asked gently, clearly puzzled.

I picked up the jar and showed her.

‘That’s a powder for making gravy,’ she told me with some sadness. She pointed to the label which said Bisto. ‘I like gravy,’ she said quickly, reassuringly. She paused. ‘But I was sort of hoping for coffee. Expecting coffee.’

I examined the jar and peered through the glass at the contents. ‘The jar looks like the coffee jar,’ I explained. I apologised.

‘I suppose, if I’m honest, a cup of Bisto was just rather a surprise,’ said Antoinette, kindly.

30

A reader sent me a link to an internet program on which, it is claimed, three experts discuss whether it is safe to eat genetically modified food. My reader asked for my views. Simple. There are no experts because no-one has done any research on whether genetically modified food is safe or not. So anyone with an opinion on the subject is merely guessing.

December

1

According to *Fortune* magazine a chemotherapy drug called Yervoy costs $120,000 for four injections. The company which makes the drug, Bristol, defends this extraordinary price by claiming that it ‘reflects the survival benefit’. Can we assume from this that drug companies are now going to price their drugs according to whether or not they work? If the drug works well then it will cost a good deal of money and only very rich people will be able to afford it. If the drug is no bloody use at all then it will be very cheap and everyone, even poor people who don’t deserve to be kept alive, will be able to afford it.

2

‘There’s a drink in it for you,’ one of our neighbours told a workman who had been asked to do some extra work. The workman stayed for three hours, completed the task and then reported to our neighbour to collect his reward. He was not well pleased when he was handed a two pound coin. ‘That’ll buy you a pint at the supermarket or half a pint at the pub,’ he was told.

The neighbour concerned, who does something unspeakable in London and travels there every day by train, is notable for having a very small, snub nose and every time I see him I wonder if he knows that the French author François Rabelais once claimed that the length of a man’s nose depends upon the softness of the nurse’s breast. He claimed that if a child’s nurse has breasts like a feather pillow then the child’s nose will grow and keep growing whereas a child fed by a small-breasted, hard-bodied woman will have a snub nose. I must mention this to our neighbour sometime and ask if he was breast fed and if so whether he can remember the size of the feeder’s bosom.

The neighbour’s wife, is a callipygian humbug with such an extensive supply of varicose veins that if she wanted to cover them up she would need 50 square yards of aluminium siding. She collects tasteless and worthless knickknacks which she stores in glass cabinets and dresses in clothes made out of a synthetic material which would probably be untouched by a nuclear blast and would doubtless remain uncreased if left crunched up in a ball for a century. She is the spitting image of a British politician called Vince Cable. I sometimes think that they might perhaps be the same person. I’ve certainly never seen them standing side by side. She paints terrible water colours and boasts of having had an exhibition in Paris though I have been told that the exhibition consisted of her hanging a few daubs from the railings around the Luxembourg Gardens.

I do hope she doesn’t ever read this diary. Not that there’s much risk. I don’t think reading is her strong suit.

3

A rather nasty looking thug who threw a pensioner over a fence has been fined. No prison. No need for an economy sized tube of KY jelly, or a year’s supply of soap on a rope. This is, I fear, typical of the way old people are treated in our society. Doctors and nurses working in the NHS are given carte blanche to kill old people (through a form of legalised murder known as the Liverpool Care Pathway) and it seems that bullies of all descriptions are now allowed to throw old folk over fences just as if they were black sacks full of unsorted rubbish.

The truth is that you can now do pretty much what you like with an old person and the State will quietly look the other way. The NHS has become a National Homicide Service; keeping down the State’s pension liabilities by killing off pensioners.

At least we oldies know where we stand.

We are the new second class citizens.

But there is an upside.

I am making a list of people over the age of 65 whom I dislike, and I will be throwing them over fences quite soon. I will be allowed to throw Gordon Brown over a fence in just two years when he is 65. Come to think of it we could all throw Gordon Brown over fences. But let’s not stick at ordinary garden fences. Let’s take him to Aintree and throw him over the Grand National fences. Hundreds or maybe thousands of people whose lives were ruined by Brown’s absurd economic policies could line up at all the big famous fences, Becher’s Brook, the Foinavon fence, the Chair and all the rest of them, ready to toss Gordon the Moron over the spruce. Oh boy this is going to be fun. And Tony Blair will be 65 in 2018. I can hardly wait.

Sometimes the only way to deal with bad news is to look at it from a slightly unexpected angle.

4

Whenever we leave our home in the Cotswolds (which, I confess, we do with increasing reluctance unless we are heading for Paris) we pass a modern pink bungalow with a dry stone wall outside it. This is not, of course, intrinsically unusual. Just about every house in the Cotswolds has at least one dry stone wall. We have at least a mile of the stuff ourselves. What makes this particular wall different is that the owner of the house, a retired NHS administrator, has, for a year or so, been steadily rebuilding his wall himself. In heat, rain, sleet and snow he has been out there picking out stones for size and colour, and then fitting and adjusting them with all the care and deliberation of a Savile Row tailor measuring a bad-tempered, gun-toting client from the Levant for a silk suit.

The stone wall man is a miserable, difficult bastard who has, over the years, annoyed us a good deal. He has, for example, often taken delight in telling delivery drivers not to try driving their van down the lane to our house. He has wrongly told them that the lane is too narrow and that they will get stuck.

He is a very pedantic, literal minded man. A few years ago he was wrongly told that he was dying and the doctor advised him that he should put his affairs in order. I am reliably informed that he took this literally and spent an entire weekend writing down the names of all his past girlfriends and trying to make sure that he put them all in the correct order. He apparently caused considerable annoyance by telephoning former mistresses and asking them if they could remember the precise dates during which their relationships existed. I have no idea why he thought anyone would be interested in such a record of his amatory experiences but it is my experience that people will often do precisely what the doctor tells them to do, however daft it may later appear to be. The diagnosis was wrong, of course but by the time it was clear that he wasn’t going to die the full list had been handed to the doctor’s receptionist without benefit of an envelope. A district nurse, a clerk at a local bank and the vicar’s wife had all appeared on the list though many of those named afterwards insisted that the man’s memory had been faulty.

The wall was eventually finished about two weeks ago and Antoinette and I had mixed feelings about this. We were pleased that the objectionable fellow would not be standing in the lane telling delivery drivers to reverse back up the lane, but we were disappointed that we would not see him out there in the rain weighing up the pros and cons of two pieces of dry stone walling material. On balance it was disappointment that was the greater and so we were not ill-pleased to see today that a vehicle of some kind had collided with the carefully reconstructed wall and had demolished most of it. We now look forward to being able to watch the retired administrator rebuilding his wall yet again. With any luck at all we will have a cold and wet winter. Maybe there will be a flurry or two of snow. It is the small delights which make life such fun.

5

I was sitting in the conservatory today, trying to decide whether to go out and do some tidying up in the garden or to work on my new book, when I realised that I had been sitting there so long that it was too dark to go out and too late to start work. Cats do this all the time. They sit and think through their options and then decide that they have spent so much time contemplating the options that the best plan is to do nothing. I call this ‘sophisticated prevarication’ and I suspect that it is more popular than anyone imagines.

W.H. Davies, the author of *Supertramp* and a one time resident in nearby Nailsworth, once wrote: ‘What is this life if, full of care, we have no time to stand and stare?’ and I think that I would like to amend the thought.

Sitting and staring is far better than standing and staring.

I would do some research into the whole business of doing nothing if I could be bothered.

6

A lovely couple we know, Charles and Hermione Wilberforce, had a bizarre misunderstanding this week.

He fetches the newspaper every morning, and although the newsagent is less than half a mile away from their home it invariably takes him half an hour or so.

‘Why does it take so long?’ Hermione asked him one day.

‘The old guy who runs the shop likes to chat,’ explained Charles.

And it was left at that until one day Charles had a rather bad cold and Hermione told him to stay in the house. ‘I’ll go and fetch the paper,’ she told him. ‘I don’t want that cold getting worse. And if you go into the shop and cough over that old man he’ll probably get it too.’

When she came back from the shop Hermione was in a very bad mood. It took Charles an hour to find out what had annoyed her.

‘I thought you said you chatted to an old man in the shop!’ she protested.

‘I do!’ he insisted.

‘Well, the assistant who served me this morning wasn’t old and he wasn’t a man. He was about 19, blonde and very busty.’

For several days the atmosphere in the house was, to say the least, rather frosty. Hermione wouldn’t even go back to the shop again to fetch a paper.

However, when Charles was feeling better he decided that he missed his morning walk and his daily paper and he announced that he felt fit enough to walk to the shop again. But he insisted that his wife accompany him.

‘I’m going to get to the bottom of this business,’ he told her.

Reluctantly Hermione agreed to go along.

And she was genuinely and pleasantly surprised when they found that the person behind the counter was, as Charles had described, an elderly gentleman. A few moments of gentle conversation confirmed that the old man, who owned the shop, had been ill (he too had had a bad cold) and that his granddaughter had been standing in for him for a few days.

‘She was very good for business,’ he told them, surprised.

‘So I expect she’ll be working here again,’ said Hermione, setting out on a fishing expedition.

‘Oh no, I’m afraid not,’ said the old man. He seemed rather sad but very proud. ‘She’s in a rock band with three other girls. They call themselves ‘Rockers with Knockers’ and they’re just starting a tour of the pubs and clubs up north.

‘Oh, that’s nice,’ said Hermione, genuinely delighted. ‘I am pleased for her.’

She didn’t apologise but she made Charles a huge plateful of cauliflower cheese that evening.

She knows it’s his favourite meal.

7

One of our squirrels was sitting on the shed roof when a stream of liquid suddenly appeared from beneath him.

‘Oh look,’ said Antoinette. ‘Piddler on the roof!’

8

Antoinette and I were trying to remember the name of someone we met when we were last in Paris.

‘His Christian name begins with C,’ I said. ‘That’s the only thing I can really remember.’

‘Christopher? Christophe?’

‘No.’

‘Clive?’

‘No.’

‘Cuthbert.’

‘What?’

‘Cuthbert.’

‘I’ve never met anyone called Cuthbert. No one is called Cuthbert.’

‘There was a saint called Cuthbert.’

‘I’ve never met any saints either.’

‘Christian?’

‘No.’

‘Claude?’

‘No.’

It went on like this for quite a while.

‘Phillipe.’

‘That doesn’t begin with C.’

‘No. But that’s his name.’ Antoinette seemed certain.

I thought about it and nodded. ‘You’re right. It’s Phillipe. That’s more or less what I said.’

‘You said it began with a C.’

‘Well P rhymes with C.’

I don’t know why we bothered trying to remember his name anyway. Phillipe is a male model and as far as I’m concerned men who model are in the same bracket as women who box. He is French and enormously immodest. He once told me that he speaks English like a native and that when we spoke together we should always do so in English because my French is so poor that it distresses him. I agreed with him that he spoke English like a native but told him that he spoke it like a native of France rather than England. I softened the blow, however, by assuring him, in the most patronising manner I could manage, that he spoke quite passable English for a foreigner.

9

The euthanasia argument is in the news again. Some doctors and general purpose campaigners want to be able to kill people off when they are dying, decrepit, expensive, unable to complete an Iron Man Triathalon or in a great deal of pain. Others worry about making killing legal. I'm one of the worriers. I can see all sorts of problems.

As I've become older I've realised that when things can go wrong they often do.

I worry more than I did when I was young because I have more experience of the frequency with which serious problems can occur, and the consequences which can result from unexpected misinterpretations and confusions.

The Government has already given doctors the legal right to kill old people (by starving them to death, or depriving them of fluids) if they are filling a hospital bed that the administrators want to use for a patient requiring cosmetic surgery or infertility treatment.

The killing is called 'adhering to the Liverpool Care Pathway' and that is a phrase Orwell would have been proud to call his own if ever there was one. I can see the government taking advantage of a euthanasia law to get rid of all sorts of patients with chronic or potentially expensive illnesses; assisted dying will metamorphose into something quite different to the gentle and kindly easing the proponents envisage.

Is there anyone in the land who would trust David Cameron or Ed Miliband (or, indeed, any of our dastardly politicians) to decide when they should be 'put to sleep'?

I fear that if a euthanasia law is introduced it will mark the return of the death penalty. But this time we won't be killing the probably guilty; we will be killing the definitely innocent.

One additional problem is that it is utterly impossible to predict when a dying patient will die. Anyone who says they can do so is a fraud, a crook, a cheat and a liar.

The world is full of people who are still breathing and living full lives despite having been diagnosed as being terminally ill.

I heard this week about a doctor in County Antrim, Northern Ireland who was wrongly diagnosed with terminal cancer and told to prepare for death. She was told that she had three months to live. Fortunately, being a doctor, the patient discharged herself, went to a London hospital and was diagnosed as having gallstones. Twenty five years ago I myself was diagnosed as having kidney cancer. I requested a second opinion. The diagnosis was changed.

It wouldn't be difficult to fill a large book with such stories. When I was a GP I saw a number of patients who lived far longer than seemed possible – often because they had a very good reason not to die. One patient, a young prostitute with three small children, was dying of bowel cancer. She survived far beyond anyone's expectations, and simply would not die until she was happy that a good home had been found for her children.

(I remember the night I diagnosed her condition and sent her into hospital for the first time. I had no idea what to do with her three small children. I was on call for the night and living in a bachelor flat so I could hardly take them home with me. There were no neighbours, friends or relatives to care for them. I rang the emergency telephone number for the social services department and the social worker on call told me that he couldn't possibly help. When I asked why he could not come out, collect the children and take them to a children's home for the night he told me that he couldn't leave his telephone in case someone rang with an emergency. I ended up taking the children to a nearby nunnery where I was the nunnery's medical officer.)

The other patient was the wife of an alcoholic playwright and the mother of two teenage children. She had breast cancer but refused to die until her children had grown up. She had secondaries in just about every organ in her body but still she wouldn't die. I remember sending a sample of her blood to the laboratory to be tested. They rang me up and asked me what I was playing at. They said that no one could be alive with the blood readings they'd taken. But she was alive. And she lived for several more years. I just stopped taking blood samples because there wasn't any point.

10

Around £122 billion worth of property in England and Wales (most of it in London, of course) is now held through companies based in offshore tax havens. Why? The only conceivable answer is that the UK is still one of the world's favourite havens for dirty money. Next time my bank tells me that I cannot touch my own money without producing my passport, and filling in a surfeit of forms, because of money laundering regulations I will remind them that we actually live in one of the world's two most notorious and successful tax havens for crooks, thieves and tax evaders. (The other is, of course, the United States of America.)

11

These days there are signs everywhere offering ‘free wifi’. With the possible exception of prison food there is, of course, no such thing as ‘free’ anything. I’ve just been sent evidence showing that when local authorities offer free wifi they aren’t just making their money out of pushing advertisements to those using the service. The local authorities are also extracting all sorts of valuable personal data from mobile telephones, by using technology that targets and tracks phone users in a variety of ways. All this is being done without the knowledge of the people whose privacy is being invaded.

Councils are recording the names, telephone numbers and email addresses of people using the free wifi services. They’re also collecting and recording details of the websites individuals are visiting and the apps they are using. The information, which can be used to monitor the behaviour of shoppers (including where they go, who they speak to and what they spend their money on) is of enormous value to a wide variety of companies. And, of course, the councils who spy in this way can also easily collect passwords, bank account information and other sensitive information. Once they’ve got the information it will be theirs forever.

‘We don’t give this information to anyone,’ said one council spokesman.

I bet they don’t. It’s far too valuable to give away. Councils need money to cover their vast pension liabilities and this is an excellent way to make huge amounts of money out of unsuspecting residents and visitors.

(And if they’re not giving it away and they’re not selling it why the hell are they collecting it? What can the council do with a list of the websites you visit or a print-out detailing the contents of your private emails?)

The scary thing is, of course, that most people won’t think any of this matters a damn.

12

I had a letter from a reader who wants a copy of our latest catalogue. ‘There are one or two of your books I want to buy,’ he wrote. ‘Obviously I’ll purchase them on the internet because I can probably pick them up for 1p each plus postage but a copy of your catalogue would help me decide which I want to buy.’

Our last catalogue cost 70p a copy to produce. And to post a catalogue costs another 60p. And, naturally, I receive nothing when second-hand copies of my books are sold on the internet.

My affection for e-Books grows stronger by the day, though I confess I was concerned today to read that new research shows that people who read e-Books are far less likely to recall the content of the book than are people who read printed books.

13

Antoinette and I have discovered the joy of horse racing on the television. We pick horses and put imaginary bets on them and it's just as much fun for us (though not as profitable for the bookies) as placing real bets. We've learned a little about horses (the most successful ones tend to come from stables where the trainer has been in trouble for doping) and about jockeys (they're all absolutely minute but wrinkled like prunes and the best ones are driven with ambition and as cunning as foxes).

We've decided that the most successful horse trainers are the ones who are smooth enough to persuade very rich people to give them oodles of money to feed and water their expensive horses. We don't believe that a horse can be trained to go faster any more than a washing machine can be trained to wash whiter and horse training is, we suspect, one the most successful sleight of mind tricks ever created and sustained.

And we've discovered that the only owners to make money out of horses are probably the ones who also breed them and can therefore sell the young animals to rich people who want to find an excuse to wear posh clothes and be seen in the winners' enclosures.

Finally, we have discovered that horse racing is, above all, a business where cronyism and nepotism fight for supremacy. Everyone is, it seems, related to everyone else. The jockeys are the children of trainers and the trainers are related to the breeders who are related to the commentators who would like to own horses but aren't Arabs or ex-bankers and so don't have enough money. The tipsters are really confidence tricksters because everyone with more than a teaspoonful of brain knows that if they were any damned good at it they would be living in luxury in the Bahamas or Gstaad instead of writing newspaper columns or tipping on the telly.

Everyone in racing is obsequious to everyone else (except the bookies who merely scoop up the contents of people's wallets) but especially obsequious to the people who have the money because horse racing is, above all else, about the money. It is often described as a sport but it isn't, of course. It's a business and the aim is to take as much money as possible out of the wallets and purses of the dreaming punters and status conscious owners and hand it over to the enormously greedy people who run and control the sport.

But Antoinette and I just watch. And pretend to bet. (I did try to set up an account with one of the big bookies but I eventually gave up. I couldn't work my way through their application forms and gave up when they wanted my inside leg measurement.) And although the programmes on Channel 4 appear to have been made as home movies for those involved in racing (and are, in my view, very poorly produced) they are quite surprisingly entertaining.

14

The end of copyright is near.

There has, for some time, been a growing movement on the Internet which has been led by philistines who regard copyright as something as dirty and unpleasant as a cup of hotel coffee.

Many websites, and web users, simply help themselves to whatever they fancy, reproducing articles and whole books without any concern for the rights of the author. Now, I read that the Quebec Université Laval in Canada has taken this one step further and has decided, all by itself and without any assistance from grown-ups, that members of the university are entitled to help themselves to any newspaper or periodical articles they fancy, and to 10% of all books (including whole chapters), without seeking permission from the copyright holder. They argue that this is ‘fair dealing’ and that if the copyright holders want payment for their work they can go whistle in the wind because they won’t be getting any payment from the Quebec Université Laval. I don’t think this is fair dealing at all. On the contrary I think it’s plain and simple theft and that the folk who made this decision are rogues, bandits and Philistines. How would the Chancellor of the Université Laval feel about me wandering into his library and tearing out whole chapters from the books on the shelves? How would the university ruffians feel about my helping myself to 10% of their furniture? The argument that copyright holders should be prepared to give their work free of charge to anyone who wants to take it (without the thief bothering to say please or thank you) is one of the most dangerous ones to have ever emerged and it is maintained and spread by individuals who have absolutely no understanding of the creative process or the importance of creativity in the community. Why should the writer or musician be less entitled to a reward for his labour than the chimney sweep or the carpenter, the traffic warden or the tax inspector? If institutions and individuals are in future going to regard copyright as irrelevant, and to simply help themselves to any material they fancy, then there will, inevitably, be no more professional authors. All the books and articles which are written will be written by amateurs who earn their living in other ways. And although I have no doubt that much great material has been written by artists who did not get paid for their work I am equally in no doubt that far more of the good stuff has been produced by people who had absolutely no other source of income. (I find it quite scary that around two thirds of all the e-Books downloaded are free. And this figure is rising rapidly. The majority of e-Book readers do not now expect to pay anything for the books they want to read. Readers’ expectations are such that many now take advantage of the facility on Amazon which enables them to read a book and then return it and claim back any payment they have made.)

15

A fellow I know called David is a playwright who specialises in writing dramas about obscure events in history. Several of his plays have been performed outside London but he struggles to make a living and depends largely on his wife’s salary as a schoolteacher.

‘My agent says I should do something dramatic and contemporary,’ he told me. ‘He wants me to do something domestic: a drama about real, modern people. But I don’t have any ideas. I don’t know anything about real people or modern problems. I’ve spent my life researching stuff from history.’

For a while I really didn’t know what to say to him.

He lives in a tiny terraced house with a wife who smokes dope, four teenage children and two huge St Bernard dogs. His two daughters are 16-year-old twins who, although still at school, go clubbing three times a week. They both have boyfriends who are much older than them. Twice in recent months they’ve held rave parties in a house that creaks at the seams when all the family members are in residence. The older son, who is 19, works in a betting shop and is gay. The younger son is 15 and wants to be a professional footballer.

‘I can’t write modern drama sort of stuff,’ David complained. ‘I live in the past. I just don’t have any contact with real people so how can I possibly write about the problems they face or how they deal with them?’

When I’d heard all this I knew for certain that I didn’t know what to say to him.

16

It has been known for some time that amateurs win tennis and golf matches not by playing wonderful shots but by avoiding playing awful shots. The same thing is, I suspect, true of investing. The private investor is more likely to make money (and to beat the market) by avoiding really bad investments than by discovering marvellous investments which double, triple or quadruple his money.

Success in sport usually means doing the things you are good at, and doing them repeatedly. And that is true of investing too.

It is perfectly true that wise investors will diversify. But really wise investors don’t diversify too much; they stick to the sort of investments they understand and when things turn sour, and an investment appears to have been a mistake, they sell as quickly as they can in order to minimise their losses.

17

When I was very young I went to bed the same day I got up. In my middle years I went to bed the day after I got up. These days I get up the same day I went to bed.

18

Today, for the fourth time in a week, a packet which I had ordered from Amazon failed to arrive. The first missing parcel was apparently left at the wrong house. The same fate befell the second missing parcel. The third parcel was, I was told, left at yet another address. And the fourth parcel was left at an unnamed post office somewhere in Gloucestershire. I wasn't overly worried about the loss of the first three parcels (two contained books and one contained new USB storage sticks) but I am angry and annoyed about the loss of the fourth parcel which contained food for the birds and squirrels.

The basic reason for this unhappy sequence of events is, of course, the greed and incompetence of the folk at Royal Mail.

When it became clear that people were going to send far fewer letters, and use email instead, the Royal Mail bosses decided that in order to deal with the fall in income they would put up their prices.

As anyone who has ever run a proper business will confirm this is the single most stupid thing you can do. If a product or a service isn't selling then you have to reduce the price in order to make it more attractive. But the people at Royal Mail appear to have no experience of business and so don't think like that.

The Royal Mail bosses thought that they were going to get rich delivering the parcels sent out by internet companies supplying customers who have bought books, DVDs, clothes, television sets, lawn mowers and caravans by clicking buttons on their mobile phones.

Sadly for Royal Mail things didn't quite work out as planned.

I wasn't the only person to notice that Royal Mail is a lousy organisation, and that the service it provides is both shoddy and expensive. And so a whole host of parcel delivery companies have been set up to provide a service which is still shoddy but is at least cheap. Amazon, which used to provide Royal Mail with a staggering 6% of all its parcel business, has set up its own delivery company (known, for reasons quite beyond me, as a logistics company).

The new delivery companies will collect as well as deliver and they will collect and deliver seven days a week.

And now that the internet companies have discovered the joys of shoddy and cheap they are, not surprisingly, reluctant to go back to shoddy and expensive. They won't send stuff by Royal Mail for love nor money.

Now, Royal Mail may have its faults but its delivery folk do have a pretty good idea of where houses are. They can cope with flats in a high rise building and they can cope with cottages in the country. Postman Pat doesn't have an attack of the vapours if he is asked to drive his little red van down a lane with hedges on both sides.

But the folk employed by some of the delivery companies are ordinary, untrained people trying to earn a little extra money by delivering parcels in their own cars. They pick up a boot load of packets from a depot not far from their home (probably a warehouse called a Logistics Inventory Repository) and they drive around trying to deliver the parcels they've collected. They can cope perfectly well with parcels to no 8 Acacia Avenue, no 10 Acacia Avenue and no 12 Acacia Avenue but Honeysuckle Cottage is something else entirely. And since they are probably paid by the number of parcels they deliver they don't have much interest in making the effort to deliver the 'difficult' stuff.

We live down a narrow country lane with hedges and trees on both sides but the lane isn't too narrow for cars or lorries. Supermarket delivery vehicles manage it perfectly happily, once the drivers have learned to ignore the road signs. I've seen an oil tanker and a bulldozer pass by our front gate and although it is perfectly possible that the drivers were lost they had at least managed to drive along the lane without getting stuck.

But the staff of the delivery companies now taking over from Royal Mail can't be bothered to make the effort to find us and so they dump whatever they're supposed to be delivering at any old cottage. They probably think that a cottage is a cottage is a cottage and that if you have a parcel which is supposed to be delivered to a cottage somewhere it really doesn't matter if you deliver it to a cottage somewhere else. 'It's a cottage, innit?'

All this is, of course, another manifestation of that wonderful thing called progress. We have to buy stuff over the internet because the stuff we want to buy isn't available in shops (or, at least, not in any shops within a 100 mile round trip of where we are) but once we've bought it no one will bring it to us.

19

I’m surprised to see that British taxpayers are forking out around £1,000,000 a year to hire bodyguards for the nation’s most famous living war criminal.

In a book I wrote early in Blair’s career, just when he was planning to become a war criminal, I predicted that he was sucking up to the Bush administration and planning to take us into a war against Iraq so that he could fix himself up with some well-paying jobs when he had retired from mainstream politics. Well, surprise, surprise, Blair reportedly earns £2,000,000 a year from JP Morgan and millions more from assorted (largely American) corporations. He charges up to £250,000 a time to tell audiences how best to become war criminals and has advised Kazakhstan and Colombia on whatever they felt he could best advise them on. Blair claims, of course, that much of his work is ‘unpaid’ and that his highly paid work supports his charitable projects. Anyone who believes that baloney is probably not fit to pour milk on their own cornflakes. Since being pushed out of politics Blair has managed to scrape enough cash together to buy a country estate for £4,000,000, a London townhouse for £3,650,000 and three other London homes. So why isn’t the blood-soaked Blair told to pay for his own damned bodyguards?

Mind you, if they lock the bastard up (a la Rudolf Hess) I’d be happy to pay for the guards and the gruel.

20

Two keen chess players were sitting in front of a roaring log fire, hunched over the board. The fire was giving out an enormous amount of heat and the players must have been very hot. ‘Look,’ said ‘Antoinette. ‘Two chess nuts roasting by an open fire.’

21

It always amuses me when I find books which have been placed in the wrong category – not by accident but deliberately. Hunting around in an old bookshop in Cirencester today I found a copy of Ernest Hemingway’s novel *Across the River and into the Trees* which had been carefully placed in the Natural History section. A pal of mine swears he once found an Austen in the classic car section in a bookshop in Manchester. I doubt if this is true, however. I don’t think there are any bookshops in Manchester. Actually, come to think of it, the classic car section wouldn’t be a bad place to hide her damned books. Jane Austen wrote unreadable tosh and if she had been male she would have been long ago forgotten.

22

Companies in Silicon Valley in the USA are organising ‘Digital Detox Camps’ where participants surrender their cell phones and laptops and agree to give up social media for a while. The aim is to enable them to ‘experience life off the grid’. Honest! Why don’t the silly beggars just turn their damned phones off? Or put them in a drawer? Turning mobile phone usage and ‘social media’ into an addiction problem is truly pathetic. (And why, just out of idle curiosity, do so many dumb celebrities take nude pictures of themselves with their phones and then seem surprised when the pictures go viral? Do these people still not realise that nothing done with a mobile phone or a computer is private? Taking nude pictures or embarrassing pictures on a mobile phone is the same as putting them on Facebook or offering them online. And it is as daft as managing your bank account online.)

23

A friend confessed to me today that he always gets confused about the meanings of the words ‘tautology’ and ‘oxymoron’. I suggested that he remember the phrase ‘whingeing Scot’ as a synonym for ‘tautology’ and the phrase ‘generous Scot’ as a synonym for the word ‘oxymoron’. He pointed out that this is probably politically incorrect and even illegal and warned me that I should not repeat the remarks. I told him I was joking. He said that these days that is no excuse. I suspect that he is right.

24

We were watching a DVD of Poirot’s *Christmas* (a regular Christmas Eve routine for us) and I’d put the film on pause while I put another log on the fire and Antoinette went into the kitchen to switch on the kettle.

‘It’s chilly in here,’ called Antoinette from the other room. ‘Would you turn the central heating up a couple of clicks?’

When I was satisfied that the log I’d put on the fire was settling in nicely I walked across to the thermostat which controls the central heating boiler providing heating for the rest of the house. I was surprised to see that it was turned up quite high. I instinctively reached for the nearest radiator. It was cold. Stone cold. I went upstairs to the small room where our boiler lives, alongside the hot water tank, our collection of step ladders and a huge cardboard box full of candles, lamps and torches. The boiler, which normally makes a satisfying hum when it’s working, was silent. It was also cold. I peered at the display panel. It didn’t look good. I pressed the start button to try to kick the boiler back into life. Nothing happened. I turned off the electricity supply and then turned it on again in the hope that this might trigger some response. Nothing at all. Our boiler wasn’t working.

The irony of this did not escape me. In the film we had been watching Poirot discovers, one Christmas Eve, that the central heating system in his flat has failed and cannot be repaired until after the holidays. In order to escape from his cold flat he accepts an assignment at a country house where they do have heating. We were now in exactly the same position except for two things. First, we didn’t have a job in a country house to go to and second, we did have a boiler insurance policy which provided us with cover even over bank holidays. I rang the service number and was told that someone would call round the following morning.

We then went back into the living room, piled more logs onto the fire, and settled down to watch the remainder of Poirot’s Christmas adventure. The log fire and the gas fired AGA cooker in the kitchen kept the whole house surprisingly warm.

‘Why do all these odd things happen to us?’ I asked Antoinette, when I’d poured us both a glass of supplementary warmth.

‘You should be grateful that they do,’ she pointed out. ‘If they didn’t what else would you find to write about?’

25

A kindly British Gas boiler repair man came, found the fault and used his laptop computer to order a spare part. These days all repairmen seem to come equipped with computers, mobile telephones and heaven knows what else. They lug around huge numbers of bags containing all their equipment. He told us that the parts supplier would put the replacement whatever it was in a taxi and have it delivered to the reception desk of a nearby hotel so that he could pick it up later. I was impressed by this rather crafty way round the fact that all the usual offices and depots were closed for Christmas.

Antoinette made the repair man a cup of tea and gave him a plateful of chocolate biscuits to keep him going. Half a century ago, before breathalysers, I’d have offered him a glass of something more exciting and he would have left us happier and rosier if not safer.

He saw the row of medical textbooks on the shelves next to the boiler room and asked if I was a doctor. (I suppose it was either that or a hypochondriac.) I confessed that I was. In the old days people who knew I was a doctor used to tell me their medical problems; these days people who know I am a doctor tell me about their terrible experiences with the medical profession. Everyone seems to have a horror story to tell.

The engineer told me that he had recently visited his doctor and that after he had been in the surgery for exactly three minutes, and had detailed just one of his three symptoms, the doctor had looked at his watch and said: ‘Your time is up!’

I was appalled at this. Every doctor should know that the second and third problems a patient reports (known in the trade as the ‘while I’m here, doctor’ symptoms) are often the most important ones.

In addition, every doctor should know that symptoms are invariably linked and it is always wise to try to find one diagnosis to cover all of a patient’s symptoms.

‘So what are you going to do?’ I asked him.

He told me that he had made three separate medical appointments for the following week: one appointment for each symptom.

26

When I was so young that I could watch television without the subtitles switched on I remember being given a new digital watch. I didn't have the foggiest idea how to start it, how to change the time or how to do anything with it other than strap it on my wrist. I was working as an assistant to a GP at the time and he told me to wander into the waiting room and find a six-year-old.

'They always know how to make these things work,' he told me.

I tried this and he was absolutely right. The kid I picked might have been seven and he could have been five but he was round about six and he knew instantly what to do to make my watch work. He fiddled with the little buttons on the side and I had a working watch. He tried to explain that there was a stop watch but he lost me there. I was so thrilled I gave him a prescription for some medicine to cure his worms and asked his mum to bring him back twice a year when the clocks changed. You couldn't do that these days, of course. You'd end up being vilified as some sort of horological paedophile.

I was reminded of all this when I read in the news that six-year-olds understand modern technology as well as all adults but that by the time they reach the age of 15 it's all downhill. Apparently, most people hit their peak at that age and after that they're in trouble when faced with new gadgets and new devices. I've thought this was probably the case for some time and I was delighted to see that it's true. It's remarkably cheering to know that the snotty little bastards in shorts, who know so much about mobile phones and laptops, will be as lost as I am by the time they're 16 or so.

I enjoyed my time working with that old GP. He was barking mad but rather fun. He used to stay interested in his work by setting himself unusual challenges. For example, he would sit down at the start of a Monday morning surgery and announce that he was only going to prescribe red medicines. I remember he spent an hour ringing local chemists and trying, unsuccessfully, to find a red antibiotic.

He had a bit of a breakdown later in life (long after I'd left his practice) and got into a little trouble with the authorities. He went off to play golf one Friday and left a huge bowl of medical samples on the table in the centre of the waiting room. He'd put a handwritten sign by the side of it saying 'Help Yourself'. The authorities got to hear about this from an aggrieved councillor who happened to be a patient. They weren't sure what to do because no one could find anything suitable in the regulations but my erstwhile employer was quietly encouraged to retire shortly afterwards.

27

A bull escaped today and somehow found itself running around a local shopping centre. Heaven knows how this happened. I expect a hoodie had bought one as a status symbol, probably to outdo his mates who had nothing scarier than bull terriers on their leads. The authorities failed miserably in their attempts to catch the beast but eventually the animal caught sight of himself in the window of a shop selling ladies unmentionables. He charged at his own reflection, smashed through the glass, collected two horns full of bits of and pieces of silk and lace and knocked himself out when he crashed into the shop’s back wall. It took hours for a large team of men in yellow fluorescent jackets to get him out of the shop and take him away. The good news is that he was apparently unhurt by the experience. I cannot, however, help wondering if he might not develop psychological problems as a result of his experience. There will be much chuckling if the cows get to hear about his lingerie festooned horns.

28

My wife, Antoinette, is a coke addict. We neither of us feel the need to be ashamed of this. These are modern times and the world has become accepting of these little foibles. Antoinette confessed today that she has tried to break the habit but she simply cannot get through a day without drinking one, or possibly two, cans of the damned stuff.

29

A friend of ours went to a party and won a prize for having the best 1960s outfit. We congratulated him but he was not in the mood for congratulations. ‘I didn’t realise it was a fancy dress party,’ he told us, glumly.

30

The dramatic society of which Antoinette and I are producers is doing a pantomime this year. They are going to present a version of Dick Whittington. There has been much discussion about whether or not there should be a cat. The actor who played Macbeth in the play of that name, and who is a school teacher, insists that Mr Whittington never had a cat. He says that when he was Lord Mayor, Mr Whittington had his portrait painted in his posh ceremonial robes (as mayors are wont to do) and the artist put in a skull for the mayor to hold. The skull, a symbol of mortality, was very much the thing at the time. Everyone who had their picture painted ended up holding a skull, or having a skull at their feet or in the background. Later on skulls went out of fashion and so an art dealer who couldn't sell the damned picture painted out the bony, fleshless cranium and painted in a cat. Hence the story of Dick Whittington and his cat. There were many boos when the teacher related this story and it was agreed by a majority vote that Dick would have a damned cat now whether or not he had one then. Bugger history. A local spinster known to all and sundry as Miss Haversham has offered the society the loan of her mackerel tabby and this offer has been accepted.

31

And so another year bites the dust and very soon God will have a fresh one ready, waiting and ripe for consumption. This evening, as is our tradition, we will watch Jeremy Brett as Sherlock Holmes plunge to his death over the Reichenbach Falls in Switzerland. Tomorrow evening we will watch the indestructible Holmes return to life and a new beginning. Our personal traditions provide us with much comfort and soothing continuity in a world where tradition has become a dirty word and too many of those in power insist that change is the same thing as progress.

We hope you enjoyed this book. If you did then we would be grateful if you would post a favourable review on Amazon.
Dr Vernon Coleman is a qualified doctor and professional author who has written over 100 books which have sold more than two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK alone. His books have been translated into 25 languages and sold around the world. Many of his books are available as Kindle books on Amazon. For more details about available books please see his author page on Amazon. For free articles etc please visit http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

A few reference articles referring to Vernon Coleman

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Note 1: Professor Vernon Coleman gave evidence to the House of Lords Select Committee on animals in Scientific Procedures (2001-2) on Tuesday 12.2.02

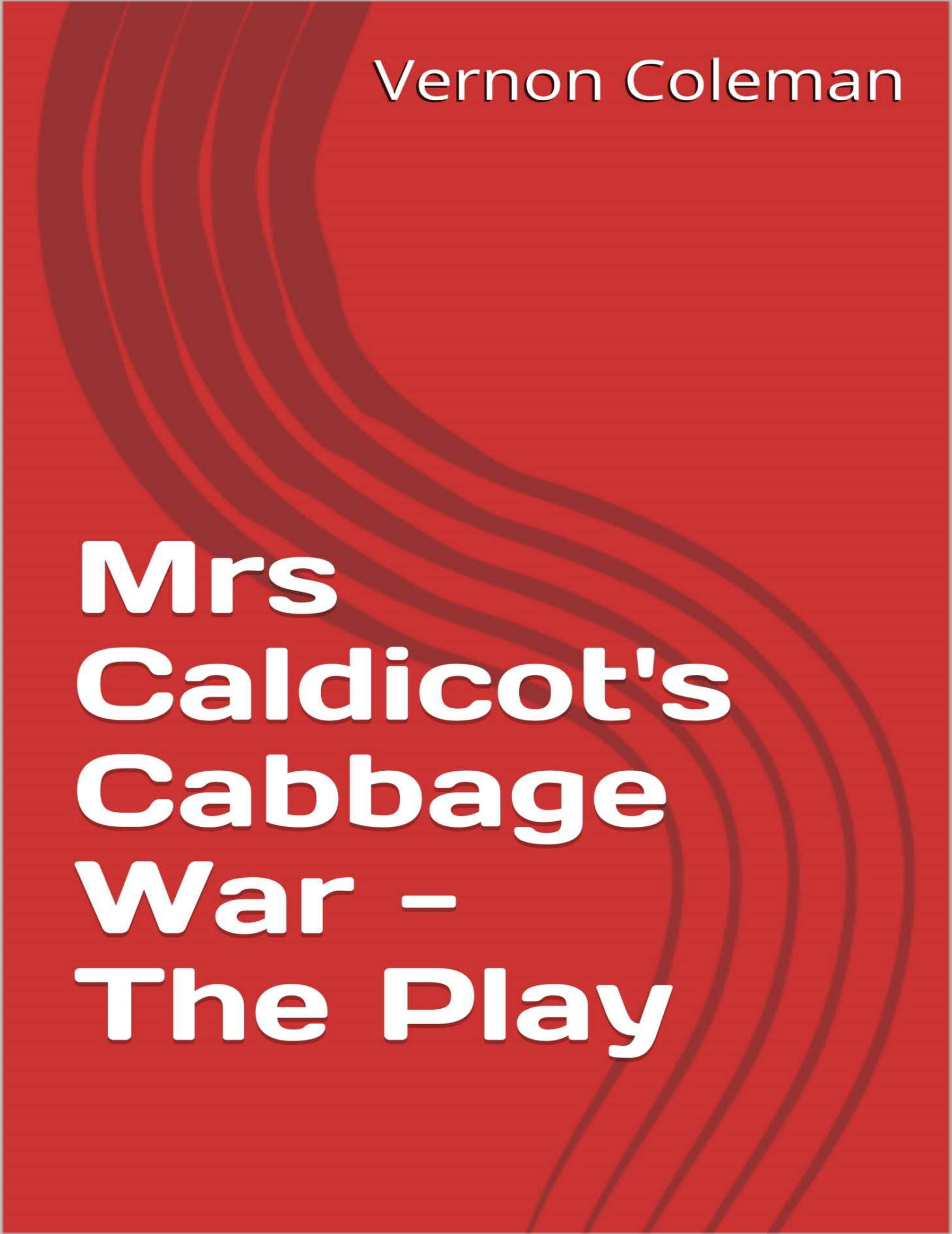

Vernon Coleman

Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War - The Play

MRS CALDICOT’S CABBAGE WAR

The Play

Vernon Coleman

This play may be performed by amateur dramatic societies without charge.
For permission to perform ‘Mrs Caldicot’s Cabbage War’ please write to: plays@vernoncoleman.com giving details of your proposed date and venue, together with your name and email address.

Printed scripts are available on Amazon.

Note
Mrs Caldicot’s Cabbage War is available in a movie version, starring Pauline Collins as Mrs Caldicot. John Alderton plays the nursing home owner and Peter Capaldi plays Mrs Caldicot’s son.
Other books about Mrs Caldicot, all written by Vernon Coleman, are: Mrs Caldicot’s Knickerbocker Glory, Mrs Caldicot’s Oyster Parade and Mrs Caldicot’s Turkish Delight.

For more information about the author please visit: www.vernoncoleman.com or see his author page on Amazon.

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Cast (in order of appearance)
MRS THELMA CALDICOT (a woman in her later years)
MR GEORGE CALDICOT (Thelma’s husband)
POLICEMAN
POLICEWOMAN
MR DEREK CALDICOT (Thelma’s son)
MRS DORIS WARBURTON (Mrs Caldicot’s Neighbour)
MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR (nursing home manager)
MR LIVINGSTONE (nursing home resident, ex RAF)
MRS PETERBOROUGH (nursing home resident)
MISS NIGHTINGALE (nursing home resident)
HOTEL MANAGER
MS JACORANDA PETTIGREW (reporter)
MIKE TRICKLE (television chat show host)
TV CAMERAMAN (no dialogue)
STAGEHAND WITH ‘CLAP’ BOARD (no dialogue)
ESTATE AGENT

Sets

1. Mrs Caldicot’s kitchen – a table with two chairs, cooker, fridge and work surface. There is a hat stand and a door.
2. Nursing home – split stage with lobby on the right and bedroom on the left divided by a wall. The lobby contains hooks with half a dozen coats and anoraks. The bedroom contains two pairs of bunk beds and a few bits of scruffy furniture.
3. Hotel lobby – scattered chairs and tables, with a reception desk/bar. There is a board with room keys behind the reception desk.
4. Television studio – a platform with two chairs, one or two TV cameras.

Act I Scene 1: Mrs Caldicot’s Kitchen
Act I Scene 2: Mrs Caldicot’s Kitchen
Act I Scene 3: Mrs Caldicot’s Kitchen
Act II Scene 1: Nursing Home (lobby)
Act II Scene 2: Nursing Home (bedroom)
Act III Scene 1: Hotel Lobby
Act IV Scene 1: Television Studio
Act V Scene 1: Nursing Home

Act I Scene 1

(Mrs Caldicot's kitchen in early morning. Mrs Caldicot is making a cup of tea for her husband who is sitting at the table. He is reading a newspaper. A yellow backed Wisden is on the table in front of him. There is a pan on the stove. Mrs Caldicot pours the tea, adds milk and sugar and then stirs the tea. The spoon bangs against the side of the cup. Mrs Caldicot is wearing a pinafore and her hair has not been done. Mr Caldicot is reading a newspaper. He is wearing a crisply ironed shirt and an MCC tie. A blue blazer is on a hanger nearby, hanging on the hat stand. There is also a panama hat on the hat stand.)

MR CALDICOT: Do you have to make so much noise? Can't you stir a cup of tea without making a noise like a brass band? *(He temporarily lowers his newspaper.)*

MRS CALDICOT: I'm sorry, dear. *(She lowers her voice)* It seems to be a very noisy spoon.

MR CALDICOT: What was that?

MRS CALDICOT: Nothing dear. Just saying your toast will be ready soon.

MR CALDICOT: Is my egg ready?

MRS CALDICOT *(looking at the clock)*: It'll only be another thirty five seconds.

MR CALDICOT: Please try not to burn the toast again. It surely can't be difficult to make toast without burning it.

(MRS CALDICOT looks in the pan, lifts out an egg and puts it into an egg cup. She then puts two slices of toast onto a plate, butters it and cuts it up into soldiers. She takes the egg cup and toast to Mr Caldicot who sits waiting. He looks at the soldiers, picks one up and examines it.)

MR CALDICOT: These soldiers are too wide. *(He holds up the soldier.)* This one won't fit into my egg properly. I hate having soldiers that won't fit into my egg. *(He pushes the toast and egg to one side.)*

MRS CALDICOT: I'm sorry, dear. *(Lowers voice, speaking to herself)*. I lost my ruler.

MR CALDICOT: What was that? You seem to be mumbling a lot these days.

MRS CALDICOT: I was just apologising.

MR CALDICOT *(looking at his watch)*: Have you at least got my sandwiches ready?

MRS CALDICOT: They're in the fridge. I'll get them out. I've filled your flask.

MR CALDICOT: Ham?

MRS CALDICOT: Yes, dear. *(She takes foil wrapped sandwiches out of the fridge and puts them on the table.)*

MR CALDICOT: I can't stand cucumber. It gives me terrible indigestion. *(He stands)*.

MRS CALDICOT: I never give you cucumber, pickles, tuna, cheese, sandwich spread, tomatoes or anything with cyanide in it.

MR CALDICOT *(who has not been listening)*: I like thinly cut ham on well-buttered white bread.

MRS CALDICOT: Yes, dear.

MR CALDICOT: I can't eat brown bread. It gives me indigestion.

MRS CALDICOT: *(quietly)* Although I have heard that Tesco now make a very good arsenic and cyanide spread that tastes like French mustard.

MR CALDICOT *(picking up and holding open his briefcase)*: It's a big match today. We're playing the championship leaders. *(Mrs Caldicot puts the wrapped sandwiches and the flask into the briefcase which Mr Caldicot then closes and locks. Mr Caldicot then puts on his blazer which he takes from its hanger. The hanger falls to the floor. Mrs Caldicot picks it up since Mr Caldicot makes no attempt to do so. Mr Caldicot takes his panama hat from the hat stand and puts it on. Mr Caldicot looks down at the front of his blazer)* I've got fluff on my lapel. It needs brushing off. *(Mrs Caldicot finds a clothes brush and brushes the front of his blazer. Mr Caldicot turns round.)* Back! *(Mrs Caldicot goes round him and brushes the back of his blazer. Mr Caldicot looks down as she does so.)* Shoes need a polish. *(Mrs Caldicot goes to a cupboard, produces a shoe brush and polishes the shoes.)* Don't get the damned polish all over my socks!

MRS CALDICOT: No, dear.

MR CALDICOT: Do I look all right?

MRS CALDICOT: Aren't you putting a jumper on? It'll be windy sitting out in the open.

MR CALDICOT: The chairman of the club’s sanitation committee has invited me to sit in the pavilion today. I don’t want to look like a nancy boy. I’ve put my jumper under my shirt so that no one can see it. *(He leaves the kitchen. Wearily, Mrs Caldicot tidies up.)*

Act I: Scene 2: Mrs Caldicot's kitchen

(Mrs Caldicot is now dressed in a dowdy skirt and a dowdy cardigan. Her hair is still not done. She is mumbling to herself and scrubbing the floor. She looks exhausted. The doorbell goes. Mrs Caldicot ignores it. The bell goes again. This time Mrs Caldicot puts down her brush, holds her back and stands up. She goes to the door and opens it. A policeman and a policewoman stand there.)

POLICEMAN: Mrs Caldicot? *(He looks down at the notebook he is holding).* Mrs Thelma Caldicot?

MRS CALDICOT: Yes? What can I do for you? If it's about the bonfire we had last Wednesday, I've got a very good explanation. It will have been the woman at no 14 who complained, won't it?

POLICEMAN: May we come in?

MRS CALDICOT *(standing aside)*: Yes, of course.

POLICEWOMAN: It isn't about the bonfire. It's rather more serious than that, I'm afraid.

MRS CALDICOT: More serious than the bonfire? Is it about Aunt Ethel? We've been expecting that. She's been dying since I was eleven. She has a weak liver and varicose veins. She's allergic to cats and takes pills.

POLICEMAN: It's not about your Aunt Ethel. I'm afraid it's about your husband. *(There is a pause, he looks at his notebook.)* Mr Caldicot.

MRS CALDICOT *(startled)*: Oh! What's wrong? Has something happened to him? I didn't put any mustard on the ham, did I? I know he doesn't like mustard.

POLICEWOMAN: I'm afraid there's been a bit of an accident.

POLICEMAN: Would you like to sit down?

MRS CALDICOT. No thank you, I'm all right standing up. I've been doing the floor. What sort of accident?

POLICEWOMAN: He was at a cricket match.

MRS CALDICOT: Yes, I know. I made his sandwiches. Ham on white bread. He won't eat cheese, pickles, tomato or tuna, you know. Well, you probably wouldn't know that, would you? Or maybe you would. You can't tell what you people know these days, can you? There aren't any secrets anymore, are there?

POLICEMAN: It was actually quite a serious accident. Are you sure you wouldn't like to sit down?

MRS CALDICOT: How can you have a serious accident at a cricket match? I've been to one. It was a long time ago but I don't think things have changed much. Nothing ever happens at a cricket match.

POLICEWOMAN: I'm afraid your husband was hit on the head by the ball they use. I'm told it's very hard.

POLICEMAN: Very hard. I had one hit me on the knee when I was at school.

POLICEWOMAN: I didn't know you played cricket at school.

POLICEMAN: I didn't. I was walking past the cricket field and this ball came out of nowhere. It still hurts when the weather's damp. *(He rubs his knee.)*

POLICEWOMAN: Mr Caldicot was apparently trying to catch it. The ball.

POLICEMAN *(looking at his notebook)*: He ran out of the pavilion, yelled 'mine' and elbowed the fielder out of the way.

POLICEWOMAN: I don't expect he felt a thing.

POLICEMAN: Except the cricket ball hitting him on the head, of course. He'd have felt that. I expect.

POLICEWOMAN: But it would have been very quick.

POLICEMAN: Oh yes. He'd have gone out like a light.

MRS CALDICOT *(who is confused)*: So what happened? Has he had to go to hospital?

POLICEMAN: He's dead.

POLICEWOMAN: He passed away immediately.

MRS CALDICOT *(disbelievingly)*: Dead?

POLICEWOMAN: One of the other spectators caught the rebound off his head.

POLICEMAN: That would have been the chair of the sanitation committee. *(He looks at his notebook.)* A Mrs Tracy Bartholomew.

MRS CALDICOT *(after a pause)*: He'd have been very proud of that. Having helped as it were.

POLICEMAN: I doubt if they would have allowed the catch. It having been taken by a spectator.

MRS CALDICOT. No, I can see that it probably wouldn't have counted. *(She pauses.)* Did you say the chair of the sanitation committee was a woman? Tracy something?

POLICEWOMAN: Yes, that would be Mrs Bartholomew. She was sitting with your husband at the time.

POLICEMAN *(reading from his notebook)*: Mrs Tracy Bartholomew, aged 46, divorcee of The Cedars, Bedlington Road.

POLICEWOMAN: She gave a statement. She was apparently very upset about Mr Caldicot's demise; said they'd been very close.

POLICEMAN: Is there anyone you'd like us to call for you? A close relative, perhaps? A father, mother, husband?

POLICEWOMAN *(quietly, to policeman)*: It's her husband who's dead.

MRS CALDICOT *(who is rather confused)*: No, no there isn't anyone to call. Oh, yes. No. Only my son Derek. You could ring him, I suppose. But he's always very busy. He's in property. *(She picks up her handbag, rummages in it, finds her diary, finds the appropriate page and hands it to the policeman who picks up the telephone and dials.)* MRS CALDICOT *(cont)*: My husband was in sewage, you know. He spent nearly all his life in sewage. He always said he was a senior sanitation engineer but I always just thought of him as being something big in sewage.

POLICEMAN: Mr Caldicot? Mr Derek Caldicot? My name is Police Constable Hobbling. I'm afraid I've got some bad news, sir. No, it's nothing to do with the tree. Yes, sir, if you say that the branch was hanging over your garden then it was your right to chop it off as long as you returned the branch to the owner. No, sir, it wasn't about that. I'm ringing about your father. Hello? Hello?' *(Turns to the policewoman.)* He's put me on hold.

POLICEWOMAN: Do you have a neighbour we could fetch while you wait for your son?

MRS CALDICOT: I suppose you could fetch the woman at no 13. She'll have seen you come to the door and she'll be desperate to know why you're here.

POLICEMAN *(now speaking on the phone again)*: Your father has been taken ill, sir. Very ill. Well, actually very, very ill. *(pause)*. Well, dead actually. Yes, dead as in not being alive. *(He pauses, listening.)* Yes, sir. *(He puts down the phone and turns to Mrs Caldicot and his colleague who have been listening.)* Your son says he's very busy but since it's a bit of an emergency he'll pop round shortly.

POLICEWOMAN: We'll go and fetch your neighbour. Did you say no 13?

MRS CALDICOT: Yes, no 13.

(The two police officers leave)

MRS CALDICOT *(to herself)*: Chair of the bloody sanitation committee. Why do they say 'chair'? Why not chairman or chairwoman? Who cares? Silly buggers. I suppose I should cry. *(She looks around the kitchen.)* I'm going to go out tomorrow and buy brown bread, pickles and a tin of tuna. I'll have a tin of tuna on a brown roll. And I'll have cheese and cucumber sandwiches. *(She picks up Mr Caldicot's Wisden which is still on the table.)*. He forgot to take his bloody silly cricket book. Why would anyone keep reading the same book for a year and then buy another version of the same thing the following year? Still he won't need it now. *(She flicks through it.)* It looks about as much fun as a knitting pattern. *(She tears a few pages from it. She then stops, and looks at what she has done. But then she tears out some more pages. She doesn't stop until the book is destroyed. There are bits of the book all over the place.)* Golly. That felt good. *(She looks around.)* And I always hated his bloody chrysanthemums. Why couldn't he grow roses or delphiniums occasionally just for a change? Always chrysanths for 30 years. I never liked them. They're like politicians: all show and no substance. I bet SHE liked them. The chair of the sanitation committee. Bloody missus whatever her name is. *(She picks some chrysanthemums out of a vase, cuts them very short and puts the heads into a tea cup.)* There. That's better. Cut you down to size, haven't I? What else is there? *(She opens a door and brings out a bag of golf clubs. She then finds a large saw and smiles.)*

Act I Scene 3

(Mrs Caldicot's kitchen. There are sawn off bits of golf club everywhere. Mrs Caldicot looks dishevelled but pleased with herself. There are also bits of Wisden and flower stalks on the table and the floor. The doorbell goes. Mrs Caldicot answers it and her son stands there.)

MRS CALDICOT: Oh, hullo, Derek. *(She sounds rather surprised to see him. She does not seem excited or pleased by his presence.)*

MR DEREK CALDICOT: I was so sad to get the news. Hit on the head with a cricket ball, eh? What a way to go? He went quickly I expect. And he loved cricket so it would have been a good end for him.

MRS CALDICOT: His fancy woman caught the ball after it bounced off his head.

MR DEREK CALDICOT *(startled)*: His fancy woman? What…? *(He suddenly notices the bits of golf club and so on strewn about)*. Mum! What's happened?

MRS CALDICOT *(also looking around, as though surprised by what she sees)*: Oh. I haven't had time to tidy up.

MR DEREK CALDICOT *(picking up a piece of a golf club)*: This was a very nice special graphite shafted pitching wedge with parabolic cross hatch grooves. I could have used this. *(He stoops and plays an imaginary shot with half a club.)*

MRS CALDICOT: I think your father dropped his bag and they all broke.

MR DEREK CALDICOT: *(picking up pages of the Wisden)* And his Wisden! I suppose he dropped this too? My father would die if he saw this.

MRS CALDICOT: No, he wouldn't. *(Derek looks at her.)* He's already dead.

MR DEREK CALDICOT *(taking one of the flowers from the tea cup)*: And what happened to his chrysanthemums?

MRS CALDICOT: They're a new dwarf variety.

(The doorbell goes. The neighbour arrives. She enters oozing sympathy.)

MRS WARBURTON: I'm from number 13. Oh, my dear, how awful. What a shock you've had. You poor thing. *(She puts her arm around Mrs Caldicot and pats her on the back.)* The police told me all about it. They said you'd asked for me specially.

MRS CALDICOT *(to Derek)*: This is my neighbour from number 13. Mrs ...er… *(she clearly does not know the neighbour's name)*.

MRS WARBURTON: I'm Doris. Doris Warburton. *(she addresses Derek)*. I'm next door but five. It's the only house with the glassed in porch.

MR DEREK CALDICOT: I'm Mr Caldicot. *(Neighbour looks puzzled.)* The son.

MRS WARBURTON: Oh yes, of course. *(she laughs lightly)*. Silly me. I was confused for a minute then. What a shock it's been for you both. I know what it's like to lose a loved one. When my Bert died I was in shock for months. The doctor gave me three different tranquillisers and two different types of sleeping tablet. That was fourteen years ago. I'm still on them, of course. He was a wonderful man. He did a lot of fretwork and kept budgerigars. My husband, not the doctor, though he might have done I suppose. I had to get rid of the birds when he passed on. But I kept the fretwork. *(For the first time she notices the bits of golf club and so on.)* Oh dear. Has there been an accident? I didn't know they were fragile like that.

MRS CALDICOT: The golf bag fell over and the clubs broke. You wouldn't think they'd be so fragile, would you? They don't make things like they used to, do they? They were probably made in China. The flowers are a new dwarf variety. And that cricket book sort of came apart. A problem with the binding, I think.

MRS WARBURTON: Ah!

MR DEREK CALDICOT *(to his mother)*: I ought to ring the doctor. Fix up some pills for you. And we'll have to think about the future, mother. You won't want to stay here by yourself, of course. We'll have to think about finding you some sheltered accommodation. My firm owns a nice nursing home not far from here. I've got a bit of clout with the management and I'll see what I can do about getting you in straight away. *(He looks around).* Then we can set about selling this old place and releasing some of the equity. You don't want your money all tied up in bricks and mortar at this time of your life do you, mother?

MRS CALDICOT: A nursing home? Why do I need to go into a nursing home? I'm not that old! I'm not falling apart yet!

MR DEREK CALDICOT: Well, you obviously can't stay here by yourself, can you? You'll need looking after. What about if there's an emergency? A fall or something?

MRS CALDICOT: I've been looking after myself quite well, thank you. And I was looking after your father too. *(Pauses)*. He took a lot of looking after.

MR DEREK CALDICOT: Don't be difficult, mother. You leave everything to me. *(He takes out a mobile phone.)* What's the doctor's number?

MRS CALDICOT: I don't know. I haven't seen a doctor for years. *(She picks up her handbag.)* I'll have to look it up. *(She takes out an old-fashioned diary, finds the relevant page and hands it to her son, pointing out the relevant page on the address book at the back. Derek dials the number she shows him and walks away to another part of the kitchen while he telephones the doctor.)*

MRS WARBURTON: You sit yourself down, dear, and I'll make you a nice cup of tea. *(She looks around, spots the kettle, and sets about making a cup of tea. There is lot of clattering and banging as she does so. Derek looks daggers at her as he struggles to make the phone call.)* Have you got any brandy? I've read that brandy is good at a time like this.

MRS CALDICOT: There's a bottle of cooking sherry in the cupboard. Mr Caldicot keeps it for his indigestion.

MRS WARBURTON: Oh, my Bert was a martyr to indigestion. Don't get me on that. I could talk for hours about his indigestion. He was ruled by his stomach. Couldn't eat anything that was green, orange or yellow and he wasn't too good with anything brown. It didn't leave a lot. *(She finds the bottle of sherry and brings it out.)* Shall I pour you one too, dear? *(She pours herself a generous sherry and knocks it back.)*

MRS CALDICOT: No thank you. I hate the stuff.

MRS WARBURTON *(She waves the bottle in Derek's direction. He looks hard at the bottle, shudders and shakes his head.)*: Well, I'll just help myself to another if you don't mind. I've read that it's good for combating shock and stress. *(She has a second generous sherry)*.

MR DEREK CALDICOT *(switching off his phone and putting it away)*: The receptionist said the doctor is terribly busy and can't come. But she says she'll get him to sign a prescription for some tranquillisers. I'll pop down and get them. The receptionist says you'll need them straight away and they've got a pharmacy at the surgery. I'll call in at the undertakers too and get them booked. Cremation, two hymns and five minutes from the vicar all right? There's no need for a feast afterwards, is there? Don't think so. Bit of a waste of money. I'll pop down to the doctor's. *(He leaves.)*

MRS WARBURTON: You can have one of my pills, love, while you're waiting. I've got plenty. My doctor gives me 200 at a time whenever I ring up. I haven't seen him for years, he's always too busy signing prescriptions I expect, but he's very good with letting me have more pills. *(She rummages in her handbag.)* I always carry them with me for emergencies. *(She takes a bottle of pills out of her handbag, shakes out a capsule and hands it to Mrs Caldicot. Then she changes her mind and shakes out a second.)* I think I'll have one too. Good for shock. *(She pops one into her mouth and takes it with a swig of sherry straight from the bottle. She then pours Mrs Caldicot half a glass of sherry.)* Here you are, dear. You'll need this. You can't swallow pills without something to wash them down with – especially not tranquillisers. *(Mrs Caldicot takes the capsule and the sherry and swallows both.)* There you are dear, that'll put a lining on your stomach. *(She laughs and pours another sherry.)* Now have another drinky to wash it down properly.

MRS CALDICOT *(swallowing)*: Thank you very much. *(She coughs.)*

MRS WARBURTON: Oh dear. That's gone down the wrong way. Wasted now. You'd better have another. *(She hands Mrs Caldicot another capsule and another sherry.)* I'd better have one too otherwise you'll be drinking on your own and they always say that's the slippery slope to somewhere. *(The two women drink silently.)* Doctors are wonderful these days, aren't they? In the old days they wouldn't give you pills unless you rang up, made an appointment, sat there, waited and then answered a lot of rude questions about your bowels and other habits. Sometimes they even made you get undressed. *(Pauses, sips her sherry and remembers.)* When I was younger the doctors always used to want to listen to my chest. *(Pauses and sips again.)* No one's listened to my chest for years. *(she sighs.)* Still, these days it's all much easier. You ring up, speak to a receptionist and then pop down and pick up a nice, big bagful of pills. Wonderful. It's progress I suppose. Have you finished that yet?'

MRS CALDICOT: What? Oh my drink? *(She looks at her glass which is still half full)*. No, not yet, thank you.

MRS WARBURTON: Well, you'd better have a drop more anyway. I know I will. *(She pours them both more sherry.)* You know I'm not entirely sure there are any doctors these days. You never see them do you? In the old days, before progress took over, you could ring them up, any time of day or night, and they'd pop round with their little, black bag and sort you out. They were there at the other end of the phone. These days they work the same hours as the council and you'd stand as much chance of getting the dentist or the public librarian to visit you at home as of getting the doctor to come out. My friend, Mrs Bunting, she lives in Templeton Avenue, between the new mosque and the other one, the what's it called, the synagogue, she was in hospital for a week and she only saw a doctor once. Even then she says she wasn't sure he actually was a doctor. Not a real doctor. He had a white coat but then everyone in hospital has a white coat these days don't they? She said she did think he might have been a porter because he didn't speak any English but that doesn't mean anything does it? She said she thought she did see a nurse on the Wednesday but that was about it. Still, we mustn't grumble. It's much easier to get the pills these days so that's a big improvement, isn't it?

MR DEREK CALDICOT *(Who has returned and is slightly out of breath with a bag of pills in his hand)*: There you are mother, a nice bag of pills. The blue ones are to relax you, the red ones are to help you sleep and the green ones are for something else – possibly to wake you up. There are 100 of each to start you off with but the receptionist says you can get more whenever you like now that they've put you on their computer. You're to take two blue ones every four hours, two red ones at night and the green ones whenever you feel like it. I've booked the crematorium for Thursday at 12.17 and got you a good price because they had a cancellation. I've arranged for a nice economy casket with handles they can unscrew and use again. You get a free cardboard urn for the ashes. Best of all I've fixed up for you to move into the Twilight Years Nursing Home on Thursday after the crematorium. It'll help make sure you don't spend too much time grieving. You'll meet lots of new chums, lots to keep you busy. They do sitting down keep fit on alternate Wednesdays and bingo on alternate Saturdays throughout the winter except December so you won't have time to be bored. I'll arrange for the auctioneers and estate agents to come in on Friday to clear out the furniture and put the house on the market. *(He kisses Mrs Caldicot on the head.)* Must dash now I've got a meeting with JB in Wolverhampton twenty minutes ago. *(He rushes out.)*

MRS WARBURTON: Wonderful young man. Is he always in a rush?

MRS CALDICOT: He was two weeks premature.

MRS WARBURTON *(She opens up the bag of pills and examines them.)*: Oh, I've not seen these green ones before. Let's try a couple. *(She fetches the sherry and two glasses. She looks at the bottle which is almost empty.)* Have you got any more of this? It tastes better the more you drink of it.

Act II: Scene 1

(The Nursing Home. The set is divided into two. On the left there is the bedroom and on the right there is the lobby. This scene is set in the lobby.)

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: Come in, come in! Welcome! Welcome!

MR DEREK CALDICOT: This is my mother, Mrs Caldicot. Mother, this is Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, the executive manager of the Twilight Years Rest Home.

MRS CALDICOT *(very sleepily)*: How do you do?

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: Marvellous to see you. Wonderful. Terrific. What a pleasure! *(suddenly puts on a sympathetic face and voice)*. So, so sorry to hear of your sad loss, of course. Very sad. Very sad indeed. *(resumes jollier mode)*. But we'll make you happy here. Soon help you forget. You'll fit in very well. Lots of friends around. Always something going on. Sitting down keep fit classes on alternate Wednesdays and bingo on alternate Saturdays throughout the winter months except December. You'll be rushed off your feet. Did you bring your tablets with you?

MR DEREK CALDICOT *(handing over a bag of pills)*: I've got them!

MRS CALDICOT *(sniffing)*: What's that awful smell?

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: Oh, that will be luncheon. Chef was running a little late today and we find that in any case the aroma of good cooking always lingers a little longer. We always get the best ingredients and sometimes that means meals get delayed a little.

MR DEREK CALDICOT: A very nice smell!

MRS CALDICOT: It smells like cabbage. *(turns to Derek)* You never ate cabbage when you lived at home. You always said the smell of it made you feel sick.

MR DEREK CALDICOT *(trying to smile)*: Oh no, not at all.

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: Oh yes, there will be cabbage and I make no apology for that. Wonderful, undervalued vegetable. Too often derided. Scorned even. But full to the last leaf with vitamins and minerals which are essential for healthy living. We take nutrition very seriously here. None of our residents goes short of vitamins and minerals. Not if we have anything to do with it. Our consultant dietician insists that cabbage is an integral part of the daily diet.

MR DEREK CALDICOT *(looking at his watch)*: Is it possible for my mother to see her room? I've got a property foreclosure to see to in 30 minutes and then I've got a meeting with the agent who is handling the sale of mother's house and the auctioneer who is getting rid of all the furniture for us.

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: Of course. Straight away. You'll be very comfortable here, Mrs Caldicot. A home from home as we say. *(He leads the way through a connecting door into a bedroom. There are two pairs of bunk beds in the room. Three bunk beds are occupied with patients who appear to be asleep.)* Here we are. One of our premier rooms – the Windsor Suite. We like to keep everything compact so that our residents have everything they need close at hand. All our furniture and bed linen items are made from natural man-made plastics and fibres which offer cleanliness, style and a feeling of old-fashioned solidity. *(Mrs Caldicot touches a table which collapses.)*

MR DEREK CALDICOT *(cheerily)*: No risk of getting lost in here!

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: Certainly not. But all mod cons are provided. There's a bathroom just down the hall with night time facilities provided en suite at no additional cost. *(He pulls two chamberpots from underneath the two lower bunks, looks into them, pulls a face and quickly pushes them back.)* Those are usually emptied regularly on a daily basis. I will have a word with matron later.

MR LIVINGSTONE *(who is on one of the top bunks, wakes up and looks down)*: What's going on?

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: Ah, Mr Stanley! Having a little nap are we? *(He turns to Derek)*. We encourage our guests to take a siesta after luncheon. The older mind and body needs extra rest and our consultant visiting physician, who comes in every month whether she is required or not, is a firm believer in providing guests with all the medication they require to take the necessary hours of rest.

MR DEREK CALDICOT: That's splendid! *(He turns to Mrs Caldicot.)* Isn't it mother? *(Mrs Caldicot blinks but doesn't speak.)*

MR LIVINGSTONE *(climbing down from his bunk bed)*: Are those really vitamin pills the nurses give us after lunch? They always make me feel very sleepy. And my name is Livingstone, by the way, not Stanley. *(The two women in the lower bunks now awake and look around sleepily before climbing out. These are Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough.)*

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: And here are your other two roommates, Miss Er and Mrs Um.

MRS CALDICOT: Do I have to share a room?

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: My word yes. Oh yes. We like to encourage our valued guests to think of this as their home and our consultant psychologist tells us that sharing a room with other guests helps to cement that feeling of companionship and to create real and lasting bonds and a sense of 'home'. *(He locks the fingers of both hands to illustrate what he means.)* Once you're here you will simply be exchanging the bosom of one wonderful, loving family for the bosom of another.

MRS CALDICOT *(looking at Derek)*: That's reassuring.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: Have you come to empty the bed pans? They haven't been done since last Tuesday.

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: One of our trained nursing aides will be along shortly to deal with that.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: I hope she isn't going to be too long. *(Hops from one foot to the other)*. They're full.

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR *(to Derek and Mrs Caldicot)*: Some of our guests are a little self-centred and fail to see the bigger picture. *(He turns to Miss Nightingale.)* You could use the facilities in the first floor bathroom.

MR LIVINGSTONE: It doesn't work. There's a blockage. It seems to be full of cabbage.

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR *(furious)*: One of our nursing aides will deal with all these little problems in due course. *(Turns to Derek and Mrs Caldicot)*. We have five nursing aides. All are part-time but fully trained by ourselves. Two of them narrowly missed acquiring additional diplomas in first aid and Miss Pilton, who comes in on the first Monday of the month, has just completed a local technical college course in Turkish traditional dancing, with distinction I might add. We pride ourselves on running a home that has all the advantages of a hotel and a fully equipped modern hospital. Employing trained staff is a vital way of implementing that policy.

MR LIVINGSTONE *(He turns on the television. It is black and white and produces a mass of lines and nothing else.)* The telly is still on the blink.

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: It appears that the set in this suite does have some minor fault at the present time but there is, of course, additional, supplementary audio visual equipment in the Duke of Devonshire Leisure and Recreational Area, and I am assured by our visiting consultant engineer that they will have that working satisfactorily in a very short space of time.

MR LIVINGSTONE: That one's been on the blink for a month – ever since it caught fire and Mr Hewitt had to throw two buckets of water over it.

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: Please don't exaggerate, Mr Stanley. It was a very small fire and could easily have been extinguished with the first bucket of water. The second bucket was quite unnecessary and I have issued a memo to staff and guests about the dangers of putting out electrical fires with water.

MR LIVINGSTONE: The second bucket was for the chair Miss Nightingale was sitting in. The plastic had started to melt and her jumper was smouldering. She doesn't feel the heat like she used to.

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: Mr, er, Stanley, does rather like to exaggerate. I believe Mr Stanley was an estate agent before he came to us. Ha ha ha.

MR LIVINGSTONE: I was in the RAF you pompous, young buffoon. Ex bomber command. And the name is Livingstone.

MR DEREK CALDICOT *(to Mrs Caldicot)*: I'm sure you're going to be very happy here mother.

MRS PETERBOROUGH: *(sniffing the air)* Is it time for lunch? I can definitely smell cabbage?

Act II Scene 2

(The Nursing Home. This scene is set in the bedroom part of the set. Mrs Caldicot, Mr Livingstone, Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale are sitting on their bunks. All are in night clothes.)

MRS CALDICOT: Do they ever serve anything that doesn't have cabbage with it? Cabbage and liver, cabbage and mince and cabbage and liver again.

MR LIVINGSTONE: I think they did about nine months ago. The cook was away with food poisoning so we had baked beans on toast for lunch and dinner. No cabbage for a whole week. Wonderful. The cabbage industry was in despair.

MRS CALDICOT: So did the smell of cabbage disappear?

MR LIVINGSTONE: Not entirely. But it was rather overpowered by the consequences of all those baked beans.

MRS CALDICOT: I haven't taken my tablets for three days now. I feel much better than I have for ages. A month in this place is as much as I can stand.

MR LIVINGSTONE: Damned good idea of yours. Put 'em under your tongue and spit 'em out when the nurse has gone.

MRS CALDICOT: Is she really a nurse?

MR LIVINGSTONE: No, not in the sense of having qualifications. But I think she had an aunt who worked as a receptionist for a local dentist. So she has some connection with the healing professions.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: I spat my capsules and tablets out into the sink. *(She beams.)*

MRS PETERBOROUGH: I did the same. Without getting up off my bunk. I'm getting to be a very good shot with a tablet but I'm not quite as accurate with a capsule.

MRS CALDICOT: I think Mr Muller-Hawksmoor is getting suspicious. Yesterday, he twice asked me why we weren't all asleep.

MR LIVINGSTONE: They like to keep us well drugged. We're less trouble that way.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: Now that I am awake more often I realise that I don't much like it here.

MRS PETERBOROUGH: I wish they'd let us out occasionally. I feel like a prisoner. Perhaps they brought us here because we did something naughty without realising it.

MR LIVINGSTONE: Maybe we could organise an escape committee. We could make an escape rope with a few knotted sheets. We could climb down the rope and run away. *(He pauses).* Or we could make a glider and make our escape by air.

MRS PETERBOROUGH: There's a problem with the knotted sheets idea.

MR LIVINGSTONE: What's that?

MRS PETERBOROUGH: Our room is on the ground floor.

MR LIVINGSTONE: Damn! I hadn't thought of that. Maybe we could tunnel our way out.

MRS CALDICOT: Why don't we just walk out?

MISS NIGHTINGALE: What do you mean – walk out?

MRS CALDICOT: Just go! They don't lock the front door during the day time. We could pick a quiet moment and just leave.

MRS PETERBOROUGH: But we don't have our clothes!

MR LIVINGSTONE: Clever move that on the part of the camp commandant. Lock our clothes away so that we can't go anywhere.

MRS CALDICOT: The staff hang their coats in the hall. We could borrow their coats and put them on top of what we're wearing.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: Where would we go?

MRS CALDICOT: We'll find a hotel, rent some rooms and have some decent food.

MR LIVINGSTONE: I'm not going anywhere where they serve cabbage.

MRS PETERBOROUGH: Would we get into trouble?

MISS NIGHTINGALE: Might we get arrested?

MRS CALDICOT: No, no! What's the worst that could happen?

MR LIVINGSTONE: They could catch us and make us come back.

MRS CALDICOT: But we're already here so we wouldn't be any worse off, would we? I'm fed up with being treated like a piece of furniture. No one ever asks us what we think or what we would like to eat or if we want to take the damned pills they keep trying to push down our throats. We're just expected to keep quiet and do what we're told.

MR LIVINGSTONE: Well said, old girl! I'm game if you are!

MRS CALDICOT: If we're not coming back we'd better take all our things with us.

MR LIVINGSTONE: I haven't got anything – except my pills and I don't want those.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: (Sadly) They don't let you have private things here.

MRS CALDICOT: (Looks round) Come to think of it I haven't got anything here, either. My son Derek sold everything for me. I think he thought he was doing me a favour. All I've got left is a spare nightie and that's in the wash. I wonder what happened to the money Derek got for selling my house and my furniture. He never said anything about it. I wish I'd been allowed to keep some of my ornaments. I had a lovely little, china cat from Padstow. *(Smiles, remembering.)* It was really lovely. It had a nice smile. I wonder what happened to it. *(Sighs)*. Oh well, never mind.

MISS NIGHTINGALE *(standing up and fetching her toothbrush)*: I'm ready! *(The others collect their toothbrushes)*.

MRS CALDICOT: Have we got everything? *(They all hold up their toothbrushes. Mrs Caldicot goes to the door into the reception area. They follow her. The four of them help themselves to coats hanging on hooks. Mrs Caldicot opens the next door and looks out.)* It's all clear. Let's make a break for it! *(They hurry out.)*

Act III Scene 1:

(The Hotel. A manager stands behind the bar/reception desk. The only other person there is a young woman who has a reporter's notebook and is editing some notes. She also has a tape recorder to which she listens occasionally. Mrs Caldicot et al arrive. Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale look around them.)

MISS NIGHTINGALE: It's very smart here isn't it? It's big and quiet like a church.

MRS PETERBOROUGH: More like a cathedral I would say.

MR LIVINGSTONE: Don't worry about it. Our money is as good as anyone else's.

MRS CALDICOT *(suddenly realising, speaking softly)*: We haven't got any money!

MR LIVINGSTONE *(dismissively)*: A minor problem.

MRS CALDICOT: You're right. We'll worry about that later. I could put the rooms on my son's account. He's always bringing clients here.

MR LIVINGSTONE *(to the others)*: Shall I order some drinks?

MISS NIGHTINGALE: I'd like something with a cherry in it.

MR LIVINGSTONE: Anything in particular?

MISS NIGHTINGALE: No. As long as it's got a cherry in it.

MRS PETERBOROUGH: I'd like a nice cup of tea. *(Looks around)*. This is very different to the nursing home isn't it. I'm so glad we ran away.

MR LIVINGSTONE: Do you want a cherry in that?

MRS PETERBOROUGH *(thinks)*: In my cup of tea? No I don't think so. I'll have the cherry on the side. But I would like a biscuit to dunk in it. *(She looks around again.)* I'm so glad we ran away.

MRS CALDICOT: What would you like, Mr Livingstone?

MR LIVINGSTONE: I'll have a beer to celebrate our escape from the tyranny of Mr Muller-Hawksmoor and the Twilight Years Rest Home. *(The young woman with the notebook/tape recorder is now listening to the conversation.)*

MRS CALDICOT *(she goes to the reception desk/bar)*: I'd like to order some drinks please. With biscuits. *(The young woman moves from her table to one nearer to the table where Mrs Caldicot et al are sitting.)*

HOTEL MANAGER: Are you staying in the hotel, madam?

MRS CALDICOT: Oh yes, I think so. We'll need four rooms, please.

HOTEL MANAGER: And how will you be paying?

MRS CALDICOT: Oh, just put it on my son's account please. His name's Caldicot. Derek Caldicot.

HOTEL MANAGER *(who clearly knows the name)*: Certainly, Mrs Caldicot.

MRS CALDICOT: And could we have some drinks and some biscuits, please? One beer, a pot of tea for two and something with a cherry in it. Oh and some nice glacé cherries on the side.

HOTEL MANAGER: What sort of drink with the cherry in it, madam?

MRS CALDICOT: Oh I don't think it matters. As long as there's a cherry in it.

HOTEL MANAGER *(picking four keys from the rack behind him and handing them over)*: Your keys, madam. I'll bring the drinks over to your table in a moment.

MRS CALDICOT. You won't forget the biscuits, will you?

HOTEL MANAGER: No, madam.

MRS CALDICOT: Not too many boring ones. Lots of the ones with chocolate and cream fillings. And just a few plain ones for dunking.

HOTEL MANAGER: For dunking?

MRS CALDICOT: Certainly, for dunking. The Royal family dunk all the time.

HOTEL MANAGER: Of course, madam. Biscuits for dunking.

MRS CALDICOT *(going back to where the others are sitting)*. I've ordered drinks and biscuits and booked four rooms. *(She puts four keys on the table. The young woman now moves across to their table.)*

MS JACORANDA PETTIGREW *(carrying her notebook, tape recorder and drink)*: Do you mind if I join you? I'm a reporter and I couldn't help overhearing what you were saying.

MR LIVINGSTONE *(pulls over a fifth chair)*: Sit yourself down. Do you want a drink?

MS JACORANDA PETTIGREW *(sitting)*: I've got one, thanks. Did I hear you say that you'd all just escaped from somewhere?

MR LIVINGSTONE: Definitely. We broke out. Against the odds we escaped from our evil captors without a shot being fired.

MS JACORANDA PETTIGREW *(rather startled)*: Really? Where have you escaped from?

MRS CALDICOT: We were residents at the Twilight Years Rest Home.

MR LIVINGSTONE: Inmates.

MS JACORANDA PETTIGREW: Why did you have to escape?

MR LIVINGSTONE: We were drugged. We had our clothes taken from us and we were tortured with vast quantities of overcooked cabbage. Mrs Caldicot here is the leader of our escape committee.

MS JACORANDA PETTIGREW *(scribbling in her notebook)*: Is that why you're in your nighties?

MR LIVINGSTONE *(displaying a pyjama covered leg)*: And pyjamas.

MS JACORANDA PETTIGREW: *(scribbling again)* Sorry! Nightwear. I did wonder at first if you might not all be ethnic people or members of some odd religious sect.

MRS PETERBOROUGH: They took our clothes away from us.

MR LIVINGSTONE: Standard procedure in prisoner of war camps. Take away the prisoners' clothes to humiliate them; deprive them of their identity and hinder escape. *(The manager brings over a tray with the drinks and biscuits.)*

MS JACORANDA PETTIGREW *(still scribbling)*: But you did get away!

MISS NIGHTINGALE: We were going to climb down knotted sheets.

MS JACORANDA PETTIGREW: Really?

MISS NIGHTINGALE: But we didn't have to because our room was on the ground floor.

MR LIVINGSTONE: In the end, our escape was all down to brilliant planning and strong leadership.

MRS CALDICOT: We just crept out of the front door when no one was looking.

MRS PETERBOROUGH: We borrowed coats from the hooks in the hall.

MR LIVINGSTONE: I'm wearing a rather snazzy item normally worn by our camp commandant. *(Miss Nightingale stands and does a twirl to show off her anorak and nightie).*

MS JACORANDA PETTIGREW: Do you mind if I telephone my editors? I freelance for the evening paper and I also do some research for the Mike Trickle television chat show. I think they could both be interested in your story!

MR LIVINGSTONE *(hand uplifted in triumph)*: Tell the story! Let not the truth be suppressed. Expose the evil imprisonment and abuse of innocent pensioners. *(Mrs Caldicot looks rather worried. The reporter takes out a telephone and retreats to another part of the hotel lobby.)*

MRS CALDICOT: I hope we're not all going to get into trouble.

MRS PETERBOROUGH. Why should we get into trouble? We just ran away.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: They were keeping us prisoners and making us watch black and white television with lines across it.

MR LIVINGSTONE *(indignantly)*: And they were drugging us!

MRS CALDICOT: That's perfectly true. If we hadn't stopped swallowing our pills we'd all still be asleep in our beds.

MR LIVINGSTONE: Bunk beds. And it was all down to you that we stopped our drugs. Here's to Mrs Caldicot! *(They all drink to Mrs Caldicot who responds. The three women dunk biscuits in their drinks.)*

MRS PETERBOROUGH *(to Miss Nightingale)*: Aren't you going to eat your cherry?

MISS NIGHTINGALE: No. I don't like cherries. But I think these ones are very pretty. I like to look at them. *(Jacoranda returns)*

MS JACORANDA PETTIGREW: I've spoken to my newspaper editor. He wants me to do a story about your escape. And I've also spoken to a producer on the Mike Trickle show. Their star guest has just dropped out and they are absolutely desperate to have you on this evening. Will you help them out? They'll pay you a fee and cover all your expenses.

MRS CALDICOT: Me? On television? Oh, I couldn't. I wouldn't know what to say. I haven't had my hair done and I haven't got anything to wear.

MS JACORANDA PETTIGREW: The studio will do your hair and find you something wonderful to wear.

MR LIVINGSTONE: You must do it! You'll be famous. A blow for pensioner power!

MISS NIGHTINGALE: Can I have your autograph when you've been on the television?

MRS PETERBOROUGH: Will you be in colour or black and white?

MISS NIGHTINGALE: And will you have lots of lines running across you?

MRS CALDICOT *(worried)*: Oh dear. I'm really not sure about this. Whatever would Mr Caldicot say?

MRS PETERBOROUGH *(picking up the plate of biscuits)*: Have a couple of biscuits. Take that one with the jam in the middle. It'll give you energy.

MRS CALDICOT: I think I need more than a biscuit with a jam in the middle if I'm going to be on television.

MR LIVINGSTONE *(standing up)*: I'll get you a large brandy. That'll put hairs on your chest.

MRS CALDICOT *(alarmed, looks at him.)*: I do hope not!

Act IV, Scene 1

(The Television Studio. The studio consists of two empty chairs on a platform. There are one or two television cameras, operated by one or two camera persons. Mr Livingstone, Mrs Peterborough, Miss Nightingale and Jacoranda Pettigrew are all sitting in the 'real' audience.)

MIKE TRICKLE *(wearing a bad wig and bouncing out onto the stage with arms aloft in greeting)*: Hullo, hullo, hullo. Good evening and an enormously sincere welcome from the very, very bottom of a very, very large heart. *(A man walks across the stage carrying a board which says CLAP.)* Thank you, thank you. I love you all so very, very much. Thank you to those of you at home who have tuned in and a wonderful thank you to our studio audience who have braved the elements, public transport, car park vultures and other horrors to be here with us tonight. *(He beams for a moment.)* We have a very special guest for you on today's Mike Trickle show. You won't have heard of Thelma Caldicot, she's not a big star yet, but when I heard about her I knew we had to have her on the show tonight. I always insist on being the first with the great interviews, first with the scoops, so that you have the very best of entertainment and the very best of current affairs. So I dumped the star guest we had planned, and told him to stay home and watch the show instead of being on it, and I personally made sure that we booked Mrs Caldicot for you. *(The man with the board which says CLAP walks across the stage again.)* I have to tell you that you, the audience, are the only people who really matter in my life – and three ex-wives still on the payroll will confirm that. (Laughs). So, now, without any more ado, let me introduce this evening's very special, surprise, star guest –Mrs Thelma Caldicot. Let's have a big hand for her. *(Mike does some clapping. Thelma walks onto the stage looking very nervous. She is wearing a very posh dress and has had her hair done. She looks a star.)* Come on, Mrs Caldicot, come over here and sit down and talk to me, the audience and our millions of viewers at home. *(Thelma looks around at the cameras and the audience. Mr Livingstone and the others stand up and clap enthusiastically. Mike and Mrs Caldicot both sit.)* So, Thelma, may I call you Thelma *(he doesn't wait for an answer)*, welcome to the Mike Trickle show!

MRS CALDICOT *(nervously and barely audibly)*: Thank you.

MIKE TRICKLE: No need to be nervous. I know you're not really a nervous person, Thelma. You're going to be the big news story in tomorrow's papers because you led a walk out of residents at the Twilight Years Rest Home. It is, so I am told, the first ever walk out of residents from an old folks' home. When did you become a revolutionary, Thelma? Would you describe yourself as a revolutionary or as an anarchist, by the way?

MRS CALDICOT *(clearly startled)*: Oh, I wouldn't…I don't think…I don't know…

MIKE TRICKLE: You don't know! You wouldn't? *(He turns to the audience and pulls a face)*. Really, that's not good enough, Thelma. You have a responsibility, not to me, I don't matter, but to your colleagues and to the public at large. You led a walk out. You've started a new movement. You say you walked out because you don't like cabbage but don't you think that was selfish and irresponsible? Wasn't it really a rather over-dramatic response to a childish dislike of cabbage – a dislike, incidentally, which the National Cabbage Board tells me is quite unfounded. Cabbage, so say the experts, is an excellent form of vital nutrients – especially for older citizens. I don't like beetroot but I'm not going to walk out of the studio in protest! *(The man walks across with the CLAP board.)*

MRS CALDICOT: That's not what happened. I thought the smell of cabbage was pretty nasty and they served up cabbage with everything but that's only a tiny part of the story.

MIKE TRICKLE: But wasn't it a tiny reason for a big deed? If everyone had a paddy and a sulk and insisted that they went on television to tell the world about it, all just because they didn't like their vegetables the world would be a pretty turbulent place wouldn't it? *(The man hurries across the stage holding the CLAP board.)*

MRS CALDICOT: Why are you being so aggressive? I didn't want to attract attention to myself at all but the nice lady I met at the hotel this afternoon said your star guest had cancelled and she asked me to help you out. I only said I'd come on the programme because she said you were desperate. *(Mrs Caldicot's friends stand up and applaud.)*

MIKE TRICKLE: But these are elderly people. *(He lowers and softens his voice.)* They are old people who are vulnerable and easily influenced. They need their medication and their regular meals.

MRS CALDICOT: Now you're just being patronising. Why does everyone think they can patronise older people all the time? You're like those people in shops and offices and on the telephone who talk down to pensioners and treat them as though they're members of some sub-species, or aliens from another planet. If I have to ring the gas people they always want to know my date of birth. I can't imagine why but they do. Maybe you're not allowed to have gas if you're too old. And then when I've told them they always say 'well done' as if I've just discovered a new way to split the atom or won a gold medal in the Olympics. All I've done is get my date of birth right but they congratulate me as if I've really astonished them with my brilliance. Why do people under 40 always assume that anyone over 60 must be senile, and then act all surprised and delighted when you turn out not to be? And why am I invisible in shops? I stood at the counter in the Post Office one day and a girl of about 18 came up, completely ignored me, and asked for a book of stamps. She and the fellow behind the counter behaved as though I were completely invisible. They just chatted away as if I weren't there at all. When the girl had finished and had tottered off, I asked the man behind the glass if I could have my turn. I said 'I'm sorry I'm not 18 and wearing a tight top but am I still allowed to buy stamps?' He looked at me as if I were barking mad, closed his partition and buggered off so I obviously really was invisible. And you're the same. I'm surprised you can even see me sitting here.

MR LIVINGSTONE *(standing up and calling out)*: We may be old but that doesn't mean we like being pushed around and treated like idiots.

MRS CALDICOT *(looks at Mr Livingstone and waves to him. She's getting more confident now)*: Just because people are old it doesn't mean that they can't make up their own minds about things. Just because people are in their 70s, 80s and 90s it doesn't mean that they have to put up with being drugged and bullied.

MIKE TRICKLE: But even if you decided to walk out of the nursing home because you didn't like the cabbage, that wasn't any reason to drag your fellow residents with you! Do you think it was responsible to drag them out of their warm, comfortable home, where they were receiving careful, professional attention and make them follow you into the cold and frightening wilderness? Aren't you the bully?

MRS CALDICOT: I didn't make anyone do anything!

MR LIVINGSTONE *(and the other two)*: No, she didn't!

MIKE TRICKLE: Are you now claiming that you are so charismatic that these people just followed you? *(He turns to the audience and pulls a face.)* You don't look that charismatic to me.

MRS CALDICOT: No! I'm not claiming to be charismatic or a leader or anything like that. I'm just trying to tell you what happened.

MIKE TRICKLE: Don't you think you were taking a big risk – walking out as you did?

MRS CALDICOT: What's the point of life if you don't take chances occasionally – and stick up for yourself and the people around you?

MIKE TRICKLE: Aren't you a bit old to be taking chances? *(He pulls another face at the audience.)*

MRS CALDICOT: There you go again – being ageist. I don't think I took enough chances in my life.

MIKE TRICKLE: Really?

MRS CALDICOT: No! What had I got to lose? I was fed up with being treated as a non-person. A lot of old people who are my age and older don't have the option of walking out. They're stuck where they are. They have to put up with being bullied and drugged and treated like naughty children. Yes, I did what I did for me and my new friends but I also did it for the people who are too frail to stand up for themselves.

MIKE TRICKLE: But you're an old woman. You should be sitting at home watching television not up here battling away on some curious cabbage crusade!

MRS CALDICOT: Why are you being so rude and aggressive? Why do you keep making faces to the audience when the camera isn't on you? How would you like it if I asked you why you wore such a silly wig? And does your wife know about that blonde girl who came out of your dressing room? She only looked about 20, and the nice lady who did my hair said she lives at home with her mum and works in the make-up department. *(Mr Livingstone et al cheer and laugh.)*

MIKE TRICKLE *(disbelievingly)*: What did you say?

MRS CALDICOT: I asked how you'd like it if I asked you why you wore such a silly wig. And if your wife…

MIKE TRICKLE *(standing up and talking over Mrs Caldicot)*: Thank you, Mrs Caldicot. That's all for this week's show. Next week we'll have another wonderful guest for you. *(He waves to the audience and leaves the stage. He is immediately followed by the two cameramen. The main lights go off. Mike is offstage but we hear him shouting.)* Who let that woman on my show? This is a disaster. How did she find out about the wig? No one is supposed to know about the wig. And someone had better get my wife on the phone… *(Mrs Caldicot is now standing on the stage, ignored and alone. Her chums, who were sitting in the audience, climb onto the stage and talk to her. Derek, who was also in the audience, climbs onto the stage.)*

MR DEREK CALDICOT: That was the most disgraceful display I have ever seen. I have never been so embarrassed in my life. I don't know what my wife will say. She's a huge fan of Mike Trickle. She's got his pop-up book of celebrity chitchat and has all his cookery books. You humiliated the poor man. How could you do that, mother? Don't you realise the trouble you've caused? I've just had my boss on the phone. He went ballistic. He told me the other residents are leaving the Twilight Years Rest Home in droves. Some are being fetched by worried relatives. Some have just walked out and gone to stay with friends. You've started a revolution, mother! My boss is so angry that he's planning to close the place. He's talking of putting it up for sale as a damage limitation exercise. He's terrified the fuss will spread to the rest of the chain. We have 73 nursing homes throughout the country for heaven's sake!

JENKINS *(who has wandered on, also from the audience)*: May I offer my congratulations on a very spirited performance? *(He holds out a hand)*. That was the best piece of live television I've seen for a long time. I'm sorry – I should have introduced myself. My name is Jenkins. I'm the editor of The Sunday Globe. I found your story fascinating and I'd like to interview you for the paper.

MRS CALDICOT: Oh, I'm not sure that I want any more publicity, thank you very much.

JENKINS: I promise you it will be a very sympathetic piece. And you have an important story that needs to be told. People shouldn't be treated without respect just because of their age. We have laws which stop discrimination and prejudice because of sex or race so why should we allow discrimination because of age? Old people need a champion – and you're that champion.

MRS CALDICOT: You really don't want to attack me – as Mike Trickle just did?

JENKINS: No, of course not. Our readers will be sympathetic and very much on your side. Why would we publish a piece guaranteed to alienate them? I can tell you now that Mike Trickle made quite a mistake this evening. A moment ago one of the producers told me that they've been inundated with calls from viewers supporting you and criticising Trickle. And it wasn't just older viewers who were angry. The producer told me that they've had a lot of calls from younger viewers who realise that one day they may be old themselves! Mr Trickle is going to find himself very unpopular tomorrow – and not just with his wife. And you're going to find yourself quite the heroine!

MRS CALDICOT: Really?

JENKINS: Oh yes! And if you agree to talk to us we'll pay you a very substantial fee.

MRS CALDICOT: You'll pay me?

JENKINS: Oh yes! And, I suspect, considerably more than Mr Trickle's show paid you. And you're going to need some money now.

MRS CALDICOT: The television people promised to pay me £100. But they also said they'd pay my hotel bill for the night.

JENKINS *(smiling)*: They're notoriously stingy when it comes to paying guests. They get a lot of actors and singers who want to be on the programme to plug their latest film or record and so they can get away with paying ridiculously small fees.

MRS CALDICOT: Mind you, they don't know yet but my bill will be for four rooms and quite a lot of room service.

JENKINS *(laughing)*: Serves them right. We'll happily pay your hotel bill for as long as you need to be there. And we'll also pay you well for your story. How does £25,000 sound?

MRS CALDICOT *(shocked)*: £25,000? Oh dear me.

JENKINS: Quite right. Nowhere near enough. My apologies. Does £50,000 sound better?

MRS CALDICOT *(more shocked)*: It sounds rather pleasant. And you won't be horrid about me? You promise?

JENKINS: I promise. We certainly won't be horrid about you. You will be our heroine. A spokeswoman for your generation. *(He holds out his hand. Mrs Caldicot takes it and they shake on the deal.)*

Act V Scene 1:

(The Lobby at the Twilight Years Rest Home. Mrs Caldicot, her pals and a greasy young man in a cheap suit enter the Twilight Years Rest home. The whole place now looks very scruffy and broken down. The young man, who carries a pile of brochures, is an estate agent.)

ESTATE AGENT: I understand that you're looking for a large house for yourself and some friends?

MRS CALDICOT: That's right!

ESTATE AGENT: Until a week ago this was a nursing home run by a large property company. They had some trouble and closed the place down very quickly – I think they must have decided to cut their losses.

MRS CALDICOT: It needs some work doing.

ESTATE AGENT: Just small stuff. Nothing a decent handyman couldn't deal with. Lick of paint here and there.

MRS CALDICOT *(looking around)*: Hmm. No, I suppose we could do something with it.

ESTATE AGENT: We have contact details for a fellow who is apparently willing to take a job here as general handyman and gardener. He knows the place quite well, I understand. Lost his position when the place closed and now he's rather desperate for a job.

MRS CALDICOT: That sounds helpful.

ESTATE AGENT: Would you like me to give him a ring?

MRS CALDICOT: That would be marvellous! *(The estate agent pulls out a mobile phone and makes a call. Mrs Caldicot and the others look around. The agent talks quietly for a moment or two and then closes his phone and puts it back in his pocket.)*

ESTATE AGENT: That's all settled. He'll be here in a couple of minutes.

MRS CALDICOT: It certainly looks as if the previous owners left in a hurry.

ESTATE AGENT: Yes, I believe they did. And now they're keen for a quick sale. They want to get rid of the place. Bad memories for them, I think.

MRS CALDICOT: I wonder why!

ESTATE AGENT: Can't imagine. Some sort of bad publicity I think. I heard it was something to do with a former resident.

MRS CALDICOT: So the place is going cheap?

ESTATE AGENT: It's very reasonably priced. Confidentially, I think they'll entertain quite a low offer for a quick sale. Do you have money for the deposit?

MRS CALDICOT: Oh yes, I've got £50,000 for the deposit.

ESTATE AGENT: Oh that would be marvellous. We could easily fix you up with a loan for the rest. Would you like me to show you round?

MRS CALDICOT: No, I don't think that will be necessary.

ESTATE AGENT: I tell you what – I'll pop back to the office and get a contract sorted out. You look around by yourselves and this chap should be here shortly. When you've talked to him, come along to the office and we'll get the deal done and dusted. *(He leaves. Moments later the bell goes. Mrs Caldicot opens the door. Mr Muller-Hawksmoor is standing there.)*

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR *(startled)*: Oh, Mrs Caldicot! *(Pause)*. The agent told me they had a buyer who, er, might want a handyman.

MRS CALDICOT: The buyer would be me. And yes we do need a handyman. Actually, a handyman-cum-gardner.

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: Oh yes, gardening too. I could do that.

MRS CALDICOT: We just need someone to do all the odd jobs.

MR LIVINGSTONE: Cleaning out the drains.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: Emptying the bedpans.

MRS PETERBOROUGH: I expect there will be a lot of drain cleaning to be done. And bedpans.

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: Oh, yes. I could do drains. Definitely. I think I'd be quite good at drains.

MRS CALDICOT: And lots of weeding.

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: I'm very good at weeding.

MRS CALDICOT: And your first job will be to put up a big sign in the kitchen. *(She finds a piece of board and a thick pen or some chalk and writes on it quickly. When she's finished she turns the board round. She has written: 'No Cabbage Allowed'. The other three see what she has written and they cheer.)*

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: Would you like me to put that up now for you?

MRS CALDICOT: Yes, straight away please. *(Mr Muller-Hawksmoor hurries off with the board. Mrs Caldicot turns to her three companions.)* Do you know, I think we can safely say that we won the Cabbage War! *(Mr Livingstone, who has been rummaging in a cupboard, produces a bottle of champagne and four glasses. He opens the bottle and pours the champagne as the curtain falls, the lights go out and/or whatever else happens to denote the end of the evening's entertainment.)*

This play may be performed by amateur dramatic societies without charge.
For permission to perform ‘Mrs Caldicot’s Cabbage War’ please write to: plays@vernoncoleman.com giving details of your proposed date and venue, together with your name and email address.
Printed scripts are available on Amazon.

Note
Mrs Caldicot’s Cabbage War is available in a movie version, starring Pauline Collins as Mrs Caldicot. John Alderton plays the nursing home owner and Peter Capaldi plays Mrs Caldicot’s son.
Other books about Mrs Caldicot, all written by Vernon Coleman, are: Mrs Caldicot’s Knickerbocker Glory, Mrs Caldicot’s Oyster Parade and Mrs Caldicot’s Turkish Delight.

For more information about the author please visit: www.vernoncoleman.com or see his author page on Amazon.

VERNON COLEMAN

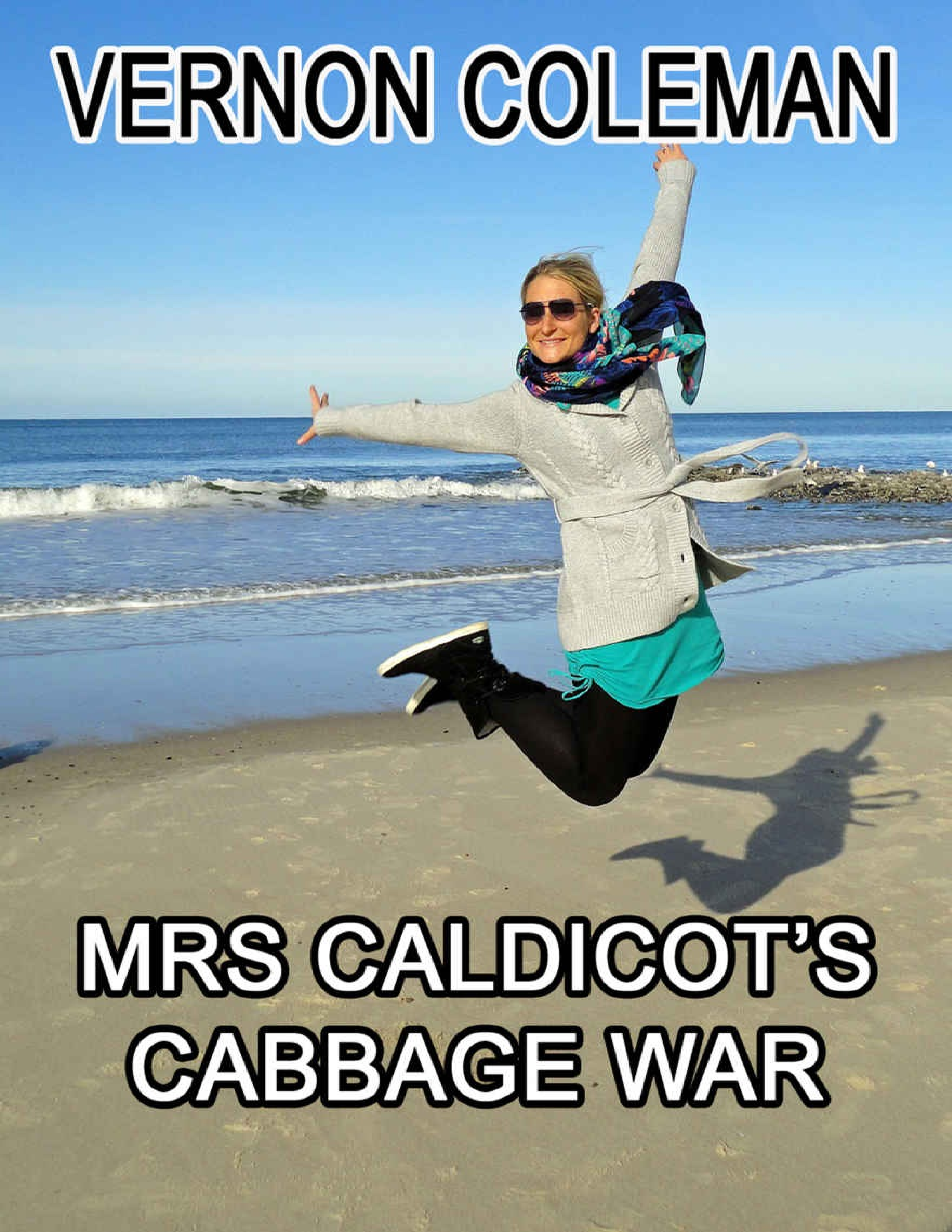

MRS CALDICOT'S CABBAGE WAR

Mrs Caldicots Cabbage War

Vernon Coleman

Mrs Caldicots Cabbage War by Vernon Coleman is the book upon which the hugely popular film of the same name was based.

You can find out more about other books by Vernon Coleman (including *Mrs Caldicots Knickerbocker Glory* the sequel to *Mrs Caldicots Cabbage War*) by visiting http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

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CHAPTER ONE

Mrs Caldicot didn't really like the way her husband imperiously banged his spoon on the side of his cup when he wanted it refilled with tea. But she didn't say anything. She stared at the freckled top of his bald head for a moment (the rest of it was hidden behind his morning newspaper), got up from the breakfast table, picked up the milk jug and the teapot and carefully refilled his cup, making sure that she mixed together just the right amount of milk and tea. For a brief moment she was tempted to leave him to add his own sugar but even that small act of defiance was too much for her, and so she carefully tipped two spoons of sugar into his cup.

However, as she stirred the mixture she deliberately allowed the spoon to bang against the side of the cup. She knew that the noise would annoy him. She didn't want to annoy him simply because she didn't like him, but rather because it was really the only way of reminding herself that she had some freedom left.

For Mrs Caldicot, letting the teaspoon bang against the side of his cup was the equivalent of jumping onto the table, screaming as loudly as she could and tearing off all her clothes. It was an act of defiance which thrilled her and which reminded her, in its modest way, that she was still, just about, an independent being with a mind and a will of her own. She had started doing little things like this after reading a book on assertiveness which she had borrowed from the public library. She felt a wave of nervous anxiety enveloping her; tiny beads of perspiration broke out on her forehead, her heart beat faster and she could feel the colicky pains she knew so well and dreaded so much beginning to grow in her tummy.

`Do you have to make so much noise?' demanded Mr Caldicot gruffly, without looking up from his newspaper. It was the first time he had spoken since they had got up.

Mrs Caldicot felt herself blushing and pulled the collar of her dressing gown up a little higher to hide the bright red rash that she knew was developing.

`I wish I had a machine gun,' she thought. `Then you'd hear some noise!' These unusual thoughts had started slipping into her mind more and more often, and although she found them slightly alarming she also found them rather exciting. She realised, with some considerable surprise, that she quite liked the idea of mowing down her husband with a hail of machine gun bullets.

`I'm sorry, dear,' she apologised, not so much because she was contrite over the rattled tea spoon but more because she was overcome with guilt at having so enjoyed the thought of the machine gun massacre. She glanced at the kitchen clock. `It's twenty minutes to eight,' she reminded him gently and timidly. It was the cricket season, the county side was playing at home and Mr Caldicot, a loyal and faithful member for forty three years, never missed a home match. The game did not start until eleven but Mr Caldicot always arrived at the ground a full two hours early. He liked to be there before anyone else to make sure that no one else sat in his seat. A double glazing salesman had once sat on Mr Caldicot's preferred section of wooden bench and Mr Caldicot had responded by sinking into a deep depression for two months.

Mr Caldicot moved his head slightly to one side, lowered his head a fraction of an inch and looked up over the top of his spectacles so that he could examine the clock to confirm the time. Mrs Caldicot hated him even more than usual when he did this. She felt that he did it deliberately just to let her know that he didn't even trust her to tell the time properly. He popped the last piece of toast into his mouth and chewed on it noisily. His dentures were ill-fitting and needed replacing but he was too mean a man to spend money on replacing dentures which still had a few thousand chews left in them. Occasionally, when he was eating, they would slip out of his mouth and he would have to push them back into place with an inelegant flick of the wrist. This unattractive habit never seemed to embarrass him.

He cleared his throat. `Hrrmph!' Then he pushed back his chair and folded his newspaper before placing it neatly next to his plate. He sipped at his tea, decided that it was too hot to drink for the moment, got up from the table and headed for the stairs to finish dressing. Mr Caldicot's attire was predictable and Mrs Caldicot knew exactly how he would be dressed when he reappeared. Whatever the weather he always wore a three piece suit, a white shirt and his county supporter's tie when going to watch a cricket match. She longed for him to astonish her in some way, but knew that he never would. His underpants were always white, his socks were always grey and woollen and the ends of his shoelaces were always of matching length.

`Are my sandwiches ready?'

Mr Caldicot had paused in the doorway before going upstairs to dress.

Mrs Caldicot felt like a schoolgirl being addressed by a stern headmaster. `Yes, sir, no sir, three bags full sir,' she thought. `They're in the fridge, dear,' she said. `I'll get them out when I've filled your flask.' She realised that instead of `dear' she had very nearly said `sir' and she swallowed hard. She wondered if he would have noticed if she had said `sir', and decided that even if he had he would not have thought it odd. Indeed, he would have almost certainly liked it. The machine gun image came back and she savoured the sight for a moment.

`Beef paste?'

`Yes, dear.'

`I didn't like that fishy stuff.'

`Well hard luck! Why don't you make your own sandwiches you nasty, selfish, self-centred little man,' she thought. `Tuna? No, I know, dear,' she said. `You told me.' Mrs Caldicot should have known better than to try experimenting with the contents of her husband's packed luncheon; the tuna fish had not gone down well, though it had not, she remembered, been as unpopular as the cucumber. She had once put cucumber on his sandwiches and he had reminded her of his dislike for cucumber every morning for the rest of the cricketing summer. He rarely told her what he liked, only what he didn't like. She couldn't remember him ever praising her for anything.

`And not an apple.'

`Yes, dear.'

`The skins on those apples you bought are too tough. The one I had yesterday got stuck in my teeth.'

`What a pity it didn't choke you,' thought Mrs Caldicot. `I'm sorry,' she said aloud, in a simper which immediately made her feel ashamed and angry with herself. `I'll put a banana in your box.'

`My brown suit needs cleaning,' said Mr Caldicot, still standing at the foot of the stairs. `And while you're in town call at the seed merchant's and get me some more plant fertiliser.`

`What did your last slave die of?' thought Mrs Caldicot, who had not planned to go into town at all. `All right, dear,' she said.

While Mr Caldicot disappeared back upstairs to fiddle with cufflinks and collar studs, Mrs Caldicot filled her husband's flask with tea, nervously selected a banana with just the right mixture of brown and yellow in its skin and took the small packet of sandwiches she had made the night before and put them into an airtight plastic box. Then she wrapped two small home-made rock cakes in greaseproof paper and added them to the box. She put the flask, the banana and the sandwich box alongside the folded newspaper but she didn't put them into his polished brown leather briefcase even though it was leaning against the wall no more than a few feet away. Mr Caldicot liked to pack his briefcase himself. When all this was done Mrs Caldicot switched the kettle on again, put two slices of bread into the toaster and made her own breakfast.

When he came downstairs Mr Caldicot finished his cup of tea and packed his sandwich box, his flask, his banana and his newspaper into his briefcase.

`I'll be in the members' pavilion if anyone wants me,' he said. He had said the same thing for as long as Mrs Caldicot could remember but no one had ever wanted him. He did not ask her how she was planning to spend her day and nor had he ever done so.

`Who do you think cares a fig where you are?' she thought. `Yes, dear,' she said. She glanced at the clock as her husband left. It was twenty minutes past eight. She heard the garage doors creak open and the sound of their motorcar starting up. It would be eleven hours before her husband returned home. She sat down and turned on the wireless. On the news station two politicians were discussing Northern Ireland. On the entertainment station a disc jockey was talking about a group she'd never heard of and a concert he'd been to which sounded momentously dull and uneventful. Mrs Caldicot turned the wireless off.

She contemplated the possibilities. She could go down to the Oxfam shop to help sort through other peoples unwanted clothes, books and household bits and pieces. She could go to the supermarket to restock the pantry with essential household comestibles. Or she could give the house a good spring clean.

None of these options filled her with anything approaching excitement or anticipation.

Mrs Caldicot didn't really know what was wrong with her. She had never really felt like this before. She had spent most of her life keeping Mr Caldicot's socks in pairs and satisfying his increasingly obsessional likes and dislikes, but she had never before felt quite so unsatisfied by her life. Matching socks had never been something she had regarded as fulfilling but she had, nevertheless, always been a relatively contented woman. With considerable reluctance she realised that she was beginning to feel frustrated by an existence which seemed more and more pointless and purposeless. Worst of all was the strange and pervasive feeling of loneliness which seemed to leave her. Even at the Oxfam shop, surrounded by plump and cheerful friends, she felt inexplicably alone. She wished there was a patron saint to look after the downtrodden, the downhearted and the constantly put upon, and yet at the same time she felt ashamed of her own lack of strength and her inability to solve her predicament.

She closed her eyes and tried to use a relaxation technique she had read about in a book on stress. It involved imagining that she was lying on a beach on a desert island. But Kitty the cat leapt on her lap just as she had begun the imaginary journey to her promised haven of temporary peace, and the journey ended almost before it had begun.

She got up from the table and started to wash the breakfast plates. She wondered if she was depressed but quickly decided that it was irrelevant she wasn't going to see the doctor anyway. The last time she had visited him, eight years earlier, he had put her on pills which he had promised would calm her nerves. They had done that effectively for two weeks but it had then taken her three years to escape from their pharmacological clutches and she no longer trusted him or any of his pills.

As she squirted washing-up liquid into the bowl of hot water she felt a sudden urge to run away; to put Kitty into her wicker basket, to pack a small bag and to leave. But she didn't know where she would go, and she realised with some anguish that this was not because she didn't have anywhere that she could go to but because anywhere would be better than where she was. She had so many places from which she could choose that she couldn't decide which one to select.

She turned the wireless on again.

On the news station a man with a boring, whiny voice was talking about the boundaries of art in the gay community. On the entertainment station an overly cheerful youth with a relentlessly patronising manner was reading out a recipe for cheese omelette and cracking little jokes between each of the ingredients.

She reached out and turned the radio off with a firm flick of her wrist. She thought for a moment about switching on the television but just as quickly suppressed the thought. She could not bear the incessantly cheerful litany of banal banter with which the broadcasters sought to liven her morning. She had long ago realised that the very predictability of their inanity was more than adequate proof that they knew that she was bored and lonely and she did not want what amounted to little more than electronic pity.

She sat down, silent and lonely, and allowed an endless series of irrelevant worries to drift in and out of her mind. She wondered if everyone worried as much as she did about things and decided that they couldn't possibly because if they did then they'd never have the energy to get anything done.

CHAPTER TWO

Mrs Caldicot was in the kitchen cutting radishes into little flowers when two very young police officers came to tell her that her husband had died.

They were extremely nice about it.

`Mrs Caldicot?' asked the boy policeman. He had huge, pink, ears which stuck out at right angles to the side of his head and his face was covered in spots. He was trying to grow a moustache.

`That's right,' replied Mrs Caldicot, wiping her hands on a tea towel. `Is it about my Aunt Hannah?' She opened the door wide and stood back. `You'd better come in. We've been expecting it.' She felt her palpitations come back again and the colicky pains in her tummy made her wince inwardly, though she proudly refused to show her discomfort to these strangers. The worries and anxieties that had been popping in and out of her mind still nagged at her and she put them neatly in order so that she could worry about them later. None of them was important enough to survive the next half an hour.

Mrs Caldicot's Aunt Hannah lived in an alms house twelve miles away and had been dying for over a quarter of a century.

The boy policeman fidgeted with his helmet. He looked at his companion, the girl policewoman. She looked even younger than him. She had a little pug nose, dark brown eyes and her hat came down so far over her head that she didn't seem to have any hair at all. Her shapeless uniform was too big for her and Mrs Caldicot wondered if her mother knew where she was. She also thought that the uniform looked rather itchy and uncomfortable and was glad that she wasn't in the police force. She remembered that when she had been in the maternity hospital giving birth to her son Derek she had been in a bed next to a girl called Brenda who had been married to a police constable. The police constable had given her a hug and a kiss the day she had been leaving the hospital and if she closed her eyes and worked her memory and imagination hard she could still feel the texture of his uniform.

`It's about your husband,' said the girl policewoman. `Mr Caldicot,' she added, lest there be any doubt about the identity of Mrs Caldicot's spouse.

Mrs Caldicot felt a sudden frisson of alarm run down her spine and she felt a wave of guilt flowing over her as she realised that the sense of alarm had been triggered not by any fear for her husband but by fear for herself. She knew instantly that her life was about to change though she did not know precisely how or in what way. It annoyed her that she could not remember the name of Brenda's husband.

`He's been taken ill,' continued the girl policewoman.

`Very ill,' said the boy policeman. `Can we come in?'

`You'd better come in,' said Mrs Caldicot. Her husband was never ill. He did not allow illness to interfere with his carefully organised life. How, she wondered, could any disease have dared to find its way, uninvited and unwelcome, into his ordered existence. She wondered if the policeman who had hugged her had been called Bert. He had, she remembered, a huge bristly moustache and she had never before (or since for that matter) been kissed by a man with a moustache.

The girl policewoman and the boy policeman squeezed into Mrs Caldicot's front hall and Mrs Caldicot reached around them to shut the front door.

`First on your right,' said Mrs Caldicot. `The living room.' She knew that she should have asked them immediately what had happened but somehow she felt that the longer she could delay the finding out the better it might be for all of them.

They stood together in the middle of the small room which now suddenly seemed overcrowded with furniture. The girl policewoman looked around and Mrs Caldicot looked around with her and seemed to see the room for the first time. There was a three piece suite with floral patterned covers, an imitation oak glass- fronted bookcase filled with book club editions and paperbacks and a smart new Japanese television set on a metal and plastic table.

Kitty, was curled up dozing on one of the chairs. She looked up and opened an eye when they entered but did not move. Kitty didn't mind strangers. No one sat down. The girl policewoman had taken off her hat and like her colleague she was holding it in her hands and turning it round and round.

`He was at the cricket match,' said the boy policeman.

`At Mettleham County Ground,' added the girl policewoman.

`I know,' said Mrs Caldicot. `He always goes to the cricket when they're playing at home. He's a member.' She suddenly realised that she knew that her husband was dead and that she had known this since she had seen the two police officers standing on the doorstep. She wondered whether or not she would cry when they told her, and whether or not they would expect her to cry, and whether they might be disappointed if she didn't cry. Inexplicably, she suddenly thought of the time she had gone to night school to study French. Fearing that her intellect was withering she had tried to persuade Mr Caldicot to go with her to an evening class. He had refused and had consented to her signing up with bad grace. When she had completed her course she had suggested a holiday in France or, at the very least, a short weekend in Paris. But he had refused. When she had diffidently suggested that she might go to Paris with a group being organised by other students he had refused to countenance such a trip. She thought that had probably been the beginning of the end of their love. She never said anything at the time, of course, but she shrank deeper and deeper into her shell, and after that she had started thinking her strange thoughts. The more she tried to repress these thoughts with a veneer of quiet and artificial contentment, the more the thoughts struggled to the surface.

She knew that she wouldn't, couldn't, cry for him though she feared she might cry for herself: for the lost years of her youth. He had ground her down with his demands, his selfishness and his dullness and she feared that she may now have lost her zest for life. She feared that she had long ago stopped being a person with ambitions and purposes of her own.

She remembered the day, over twenty years earlier, when she had left him. Derek, their son, had just left home and she had packed a bag and gone to live in a rented room in another town nearby. Mr Caldicot had come after her not because he wanted her but because he needed her. She knew that. He had bullied her and made promises he must have known he couldn't and wouldn't keep. She had gone back to him but nothing had changed and the very effort of making that one break had exhausted her spirit.

All this went through her mind in a fraction of a moment, and during the brief pause the two police officers glanced at each other.

`I'm afraid your husband's dead,' said the policeman suddenly, and more starkly and bluntly than he had intended. He lowered his eyes, blushing with embarrassment and ashamed of his clumsiness.

`They think it was a heart attack,' said the policewoman. `It was very quick. He didn't suffer.' She spoke quietly and sympathetically.

`Oh dear,' said Mrs Caldicot, who, despite knowing what it was that the police officers were about to tell her, had still been shaken by the news. She reached out and held onto the mantelpiece. `Oh dear me,' she said. She went very pale and felt as though she was about to faint. She felt dizzy and damp with perspiration. Her colicky tummy pains started again, gnawing spitefully at her insides. The boy policeman took her arm and gently led her over to one of the two easy chairs.

`I'll put the kettle on,' said the policewoman, anxious for something to do.

A thousand unconnected thoughts hurried through Mrs Caldicot's mind. `He's got his chrysanthemums ready for the show next Saturday,' she said, inconsequentially. `Whatever shall I do with them?' This irrelevance burst to the forefront of her mind as though to give the rest of her brain time to think. Mrs Caldicot was overwhelmed and confused by the way she felt. It had been a long time since she had loved her husband, and she couldn't even remember when she had last felt any real affection or respect for him, but they had grown up and grown old together rather like two trees planted to close together. In her most secret moments she had often wondered what life would be like without him, and now that she was faced with separation for real she felt liberated but also lonely and frightened. She felt like a long piece of Virginia creeper which has suddenly lost its hold on a wall and is swaying around in the wind. `Should I pretend to be sad?' she wondered. `Am I sad?' She thought about it for a moment. `I feel happy and sad,' she confessed to herself. `But more happy than sad. To be honest, I don't really feel very sad at all. I didn't like him and I'm rather relieved that I won't be seeing him again.' She felt as though she had been released from hospital after a long illness or released from prison after serving a long sentence. Then she felt guilty again. She remembered that once she had taken a job in a department store. He had sulked until she had given it up, though in recent years he had allowed her to work as a volunteer assistant in a charity shop. When making her give up the job at the department store he said that if she had a proper job people would think he didn't earn enough money to keep them. He. Him. It was all he ever thought about. All he had ever thought about. She had hated him but he had ruled her life so severely that she had become dependent upon him. And now she was confused, lonely and frightened.

The girl policewoman returned from the kitchen. `Do you take sugar, Mrs Caldicot?' she asked.

`No thank you,' smiled Mrs Caldicot politely. `I've got ham for his tea. He likes a ham salad.' She stopped for a moment. `Liked.' she corrected herself. A tear rolled down her cheek and she realised that she was crying after all. `Oh dear.' The girl policewoman hurried back to the kitchen to busy herself making tea. Kitty the cat, who did not seem in any way discomforted by the news of Mr Caldicot's untimely and unexpected demise, lazily stood up, stretched her legs, jumped down onto the carpet, walked across to Mrs Caldicot, jumped up onto her lap and curled herself up again.

George and Thelma Caldicot had been married for thirty three years, and in the eyes of those who knew them had become an inseparable onesome rather than a couple. Mrs Caldicot had grown accustomed to allowing her husband to make all the decisions in their life. If they went out for the day he decided when and where they went. When they went shopping for wallpaper or furniture he made all the major decisions. They spent their annual holidays in Torquay because he liked it there and they drove a Vauxhall car because he had always driven Vauxhall cars. Now that he was dead she suddenly realised that she was waiting for him to come home so that she could ask him what to do. She wondered what she would do and how she would cope. With a strange mixture of apprehension and excitement she realised that she could do whatever she liked both now and for the rest of her life. She had been given back control of her own life. And she wondered if she would know what to do with it.

Something suddenly occurred to her.

`Where is he?' she asked.

`They took him to the hospital,' said the young policeman kindly. He still felt bad about the way he had broken the news. `Mettleham General.'

`His brother died on the Edgar Johnson Ward,' said Mrs Caldicot. `And his sister died on the Mavis Bates Ward. You can never park round there.'

`Here you are,' said the policewoman, appearing with a cup of tea which she put down on the arm of Mrs Caldicot's chair. She had used one of Mrs Caldicot's best cups and saucers and this, together with the fact that the tea had been made by someone she did not know, made Mrs Caldicot feel something of a stranger in her own home. The two police officers watched her sip the tea, as though it were medicine which would magically and mysteriously soothe her mental aches and pains. Mrs Caldicot felt uncomfortable.

`Do you have someone we could call for you?' asked the boy policeman. `A relative or a friend?'

`I have a son,' said Mrs Caldicot. `Derek. He's in property.' She realised what she felt uncomfortable about. `Aren't you having a cup?' she asked them both, looking first at one and then the other.

`Do you have a number for him?' asked the girl policewoman.

`He'll be at work,' said Mrs Caldicot. `I don't like to bother him at work.'

`I'm sure he won't mind,' said the girl policewoman. She paused. `Considering the circumstances.'

`No,' said Mrs Caldicot. `I suppose not.'

`Do you have a number for him?' She asked again.

Mrs Caldicot gave the policewoman her son's number. `Derek Caldicot is his name but you have to ask for Mr Caldicot.' Mrs Caldicot had a sudden feeling that without her husband to do the bullying her son would take over her life. She wondered if she had ever loved her husband. She supposed she must have once. Or maybe she just thought she loved him. She tried to think back to when they had both been young. She couldn't recall any particularly happy memories and that made her sad. Why, she wondered, had she married him at all? Perhaps because everyone had expected her to. They had met at a cricket club dance. Her father had been a keen player but her husband-to-be had never played. He'd always been a spectator. That just about summed him up, she thought. He'd always been a spectator. And she'd been even worse. She'd merely made his sandwiches. He had watched while life passed him by and she had made his sandwiches and sorted his socks. They had met, danced shyly together, and that was that. Trips to the cinema. Days out watching cricket. Days spent cycling to local churches. An engagement. And then a wedding, a tiny flat, a baby, a small house, a larger house and then this. It didn't seem to have been an awful lot of fun.

The policewoman dialled the number that Mrs Caldicot had given her. The policeman stood uncomfortably in the middle of Mrs Caldicot's living room and Mrs Caldicot sipped her cup of tea. Only when she had nearly finished drinking it did she remember that she hardly ever drank tea and that she much preferred coffee.

`Could I speak to Mr Caldicot, please?' asked the girl policewoman.

Mrs Caldicot couldn't hear the other half of the conversation but she could imagine it. `I'm afraid Mr Caldicot is in a meeting at the moment,' the receptionist would say. `Can I take a message and get him to ring you back?'

`It is rather urgent and important that I speak to him,' said the policewoman. She gave her name and rank.

`I'll see what I can do,' the receptionist would be saying.

A moment or two later Mrs Caldicot could hear her son's voice booming out of the telephone. He always sounded rather aggressive though he was not a brave man and would have run a mile if anyone had threatened him with so much as a rolled up newspaper. `If it's about that neighbour of mine then you can take it from me that he's a liar,' she heard him say. `That tree was hanging right over our boundary fence. I've got photographs to prove it.'

`It isn't about your neighbour,' said the girl policewoman, surprisingly gently. `I'm afraid I've got some bad news for you. Could I ask if you're sitting down?'

`Of course I'm sitting down,' said Mr Caldicot, only slightly less belligerently. Mrs Caldicot could still hear his voice. `What bad news? Is it about my car? The aerial has been broken off twice this month already.'

`It isn't about your car,' said the girl policewoman, patiently. `It's about your father.'

`My father?'

`I'm afraid he's been taken ill. Very ill.'

`There must be some sort of mistake,' said Mr Caldicot. `I spoke to him last Sunday. He was perfectly healthy. Are you sure you've got the right Mr Caldicot?'

`Your mother gave us your number,' said the girl policewoman. `We're with her now.'

`At their house?'

`Yes, that's right.'

`I thought you said it was my father who'd been taken ill?'

`That's right. He's at the hospital. I'm afraid your father is dead Mr Caldicot.'

`Dead?'

`I'm afraid so. I'm very sorry to be the one to have to tell you this.'

`A moment ago you said he was very ill.'

`He's dead I'm afraid.'

`Are you sure?'

`I'm afraid so, Mr Caldicot. Would it be convenient for you to come over to stay with your mother?'

`Well it isn't really,' said Mr Caldicot. `I've got an important meeting at 3 o'clock.'

Mrs Caldicot, who had heard all this very clearly, glanced across at the policeman. He was looking at her and lowered his eyes, blushing with embarrassment.

`Your mother suggested that we rang you,' persisted the girl policewoman.

Mr Caldicot sighed deeply. `O.K.,' he said, reluctantly but resignedly abandoning himself to his fate. `I'll be over as soon as I can.'

The policewoman put the telephone down. `Your son will be here just as soon as possible,' she said. `We'll stay with you until he gets here.' She seemed unaware that Mrs Caldicot had overheard the conversation.

CHAPTER THREE

`You'll have to come and stay with us for the night!' Mr Caldicot told his mother firmly. It was much more of an order than an invitation. `Just for a night or two. Jason can sleep on the sofa.'

`I'd rather stick hot needles in my eyes,' Mrs Caldicot found herself thinking, and wondered where on earth the phrase had come from. She shivered at the thought of it. `I'll be all right,' she said politely. `I'll stay here, thank you.' She didn't like staying at her son's house. She didn't get on terribly well with Veronica, her daughter-in-law. In fact, that was something of an understatement. The truth was that she and Veronica had always rubbed each other up the wrong way, though she wasn't entirely sure why.

Veronica was a staunch Conservative party worker who dyed her hair blonde, wore pearls to breakfast and thought that a British passport still entitled you to be treated better than anyone else when coming through customs at Calais.

Mrs Caldicot didn't like her grandson very much either. Jason was sixteen, still went to bed at ten o'clock on weekdays and called his parents `Mummy' and `Daddy', apparently without any embarrassment. He collected stamps, could tell you the current bank rate and always won with ease when they played Trivial Pursuit at Christmas.

She didn't even like her son, Derek, though that wasn't anything new for even as a child she had always found him to be rather stern and humourless.

She wondered idly where all the humour had gone in her life and why no one she knew ever seemed to laugh. Her husband had never been one for laughing; he could never see the point of it. He had, she thought, probably been born pompous. He had been a qualified sanitary engineer and always took umbrage when Mrs Caldicot told people that he was in sewage. And Derek seemed physically incapable of laughter. She remembered that as a baby he didn't even laugh when you tickled him. She wondered why the ability to laugh was spread around so unevenly. Perhaps, she thought, there is only so much laughter allowed in the world and if one person has too much of it then someone else must go without. She wondered who had decided that she was to be cheated of her fair share of fun; to be sentenced to a lifetime of unrelieved solemnity.

`You can't stay here by yourself,' shouted Derek Caldicot indignantly. He was obviously repeating himself because he thought she hadn't heard him. She wished she had the nerve to tell him that nothing he ever said was worth repeating, whether anyone heard it or not. He waved a hand around. He was trying hard to remain patient. `All this has come at a very bad time for me,' he said.

`I'm sorry,' thought Mrs Caldicot, `that your father chose such an inconvenient time to die.' She looked at him. `There's Kitty to look after,' she explained. `And the chrysanthemums.' They were sitting in the kitchen and she looked out through the window at the back garden. Apart from a few square yards of lawn most of the garden was taken up with pink, blue and white chrysanthemums which had been Mr Caldicot's pride and joy. He had won prizes with his chrysanthemums.

`Damn the chrysanthemums,' said Derek. `What do they matter now? And the neighbours will feed Kitty.'

In her heart Mrs Caldicot shared her son's none too subtly expressed feelings for her late husband's chrysanthemums. She hated them. She had always hated them. `I must water your father's chrysanthemums,' Mrs Caldicot insisted. `And I don't like leaving Kitty on her own at a time like this.' She looked at the cat. `She adored your father you know,' she lied. `She always sat on his lap of an evening.' The cat, who had hated Mr Caldicot and had never sat on his lap, pricked up her ears in anticipation and expectation each time she heard her name. Mrs Caldicot, who never normally lied, held her breath and waited for a bolt of lightning to strike her. She wondered why she had lied. She pressed both hands against her lower abdomen as though trying to squeeze away the colicky pains which gripped her.

`I can't stay with you, mother,' said Derek. He always called her mother when he thought she was behaving stupidly. `I've got an important meeting in Wolverhampton first thing in the morning. Come on now; get your coat.' He shouted slightly when he spoke to her as though he thought she was a little deaf. Or maybe he hoped that she, like a foreigner, would be able to understand him better if he shouted. She looked at him and noticed that he had a lush growth of hair in his ears and in his nose. How could anyone take seriously someone who had hair growing out of their ears? She stared at him and wanted to giggle. `Why don't you just go away and leave me alone?' Mrs Caldicot thought.

She stood up, walked across the kitchen, opened a cupboard and took out a can of cat food. It was labelled `Turkey, Duck and Liver' and she looked at it for a moment thinking how odd the phrase looked. It sounded as though Liver were an animal. Or rather a bird. Would you, she wondered, have a flock of Livers? Maybe television programme makers would send teams off to the jungle in search of the missing liver bird. She could see David Attenborough burrowing through the bush. `And just in front of me,' he was whispering, `I can see the wild liver rampaging through the forest in search of the indigenous gin bush.' She opened the can and put several chunks of turkey, duck and liver onto a plate. She peered at the meat for a moment trying in vain to decide which meat was which. Then she put the plate down on the floor for the cat. When she had done that she opened the back door and went into the small glass-sided conservatory. She started to put on her shoes; an elderly, well-worn pair of black brogues.

`What are you doing?' Derek sounded irritable.

`I'm cleaning my teeth,' she thought. `What the devil do you think I'm doing?' She sighed. `I'm going to see your father,' she replied.

`What on earth for?'

`I want to make sure he really is dead,' thought Mrs Caldicot. `I just want to see him,' said Mrs Caldicot. She paused as she struggled with her laces. `The policeman said they'd want me to identify him,' she lied. That was the second lie she'd uttered and she realised that she had not even blushed. Maybe lying, like cooking, got easier the more you did it.

`I said I'd call in later this evening,' Derek reminded her. `I'll see to all that.'

Mrs Caldicot finished tying her laces, stood up, walked back into the kitchen and took her old brown tweed coat off a hook on the back of the door.

`If you're not coming home with me take your coat off, mother,' said Mr Caldicot firmly and loudly. He was almost shouting. `I can't bring you home if you go the hospital now. I've got to get ready to go to Wolverhampton.' He paused. `It's a very important meeting,' he added, as if repeating this would confirm its necessity.

`I'm not deaf you pompous oaf!' thought Mrs Caldicot. `I'll catch the bus home,' she said, quietly.

`You can't catch a bus!' exclaimed Mr Caldicot, as though his mother had threatened to fly home on a broomstick.

But that is exactly what she wanted to do and that is exactly what she did.

Her son drove her to the hospital where she confirmed that her husband would not be showing his chrysanthemums, eating his ham salad or going to watch any more cricket matches and then when, with a sigh, Derek said that he would drive her home Mrs Caldicot defiantly refused and insisted on walking round the corner to the bus stop.

`You can't catch a bus at this time of night!' said Derek, walking behind her, his voice heavy with exasperation.

`Why on earth not?' demanded Mrs Caldicot. `If they run buses I can catch one!' she thought. `If no one wanted me to catch one they wouldn't run them would they?'

`It isn't safe!' blustered Derek.

`What have I got to lose?' thought Mrs Caldicot who had just £3.17 in her purse and who realised with some slight surprise that she wasn't afraid. `I'll be all right, dear,' she said, soothingly.

When he had gone she wondered why she wasn't afraid and realised that you can only be afraid when you have something you're afraid of losing. Money. Possessions. Health. Life. She had nothing that she feared losing and so she wasn't afraid. She felt very liberated by this thought.

The bus came and she clambered up onto the step (her hip was playing up again and the colic was still terrible). She had a strange vision of being confronted by a highwayman dressed in a mask and brandishing a huge pair of pistols. `Your money or your life!' cried the highwayman. `You choose!' insisted Mrs Caldicot. `I really don't mind.' The highwayman, greatly bewildered by this retreated into the dark of the night and left her alone. She felt rather cheated and wondered if he'd come back but he didn't.

`Come on, love, I haven't got all night,' said the bus driver. `Where do you want to go to?' Mrs Caldicot told him her destination and offered him a note. `Haven't you got a pass?' he asked her. `No,' she said, never having acquired a bus pass because Mr Caldicot thought they reeked of charity, `I'll pay cash.'

When she got home she switched on the floodlight that lit up the back garden. Her husband had it installed so that he could work on his chrysanthemums in the evenings. She picked up the watering can and carefully soaked each of the plants, just as she had seen her husband do on so many summer evenings.

Then she collected a pair of strong scissors from the tiny greenhouse at the top of the garden. The flowers were all neatly tied to stakes and slowly, systematically and with great precision, she bent down and cut through the stem of each chrysanthemum with her scissors. And because they were all tied to stakes, none of the flowers fell over and so from a distance it was impossible to see that anything was wrong with them.

Even though it was cold, she stood on the terrace for a moment and allowed herself a little smile. She wanted the flowers to die slowly. She looked around and a weed growing through the cement between the crazy paving caught her eye. She bent towards it, instinctively reaching to pull it out. Mr Caldicot had never allowed weeds into the garden. Then she stopped herself and allowed her finger tips to just graze its leaves. She realised how strange it was that such a gentle and fragile thing could be so strong.

After she had gone indoors she made herself a cup of hot drinking chocolate and then went to bed without washing the cup or turning off the outside floodlight.

CHAPTER FOUR

When she woke up the next morning the first thing Mrs Caldicot did was to look out of the bedroom window to see how the chrysanthemums were. It was a beautiful sunny morning and she was rather surprised to see that most of the flowers still looked perfectly healthy. It was quite impossible to tell that they were all dying.

She shrugged, went downstairs, leaving the bed unmade for the first time in her adult life, and made herself a cup of strong black coffee that made her shudder when she took a sip. Then she found a large, unopened packet of best bacon in the deep freeze, took two large free range eggs from the fridge, opened a tin of tomatoes and made herself a huge fried breakfast. It was the first time she had ever cooked herself a fried breakfast. Her husband had never liked or approved of big breakfasts. He insisted it was bad for the digestion to eat so much so early in the day. Once, when the Caldicots had been on holiday in the Lake District, they had stayed at a boarding house where the landlady had offered them a cooked breakfast for an extra half a crown. Mrs Caldicot had wanted to try it but Mr Caldicot had looked down his nose at the suggestion and so they ate their usual toast and marmalade.

When she had finished the last slice of fried bread and drunk a second and then a third cup of strong black coffee, Mrs Caldicot got up from the table, deliberately wiped the crumbs from the corners of her mouth with the kitchen tea towel, slid the greasy frying pan and dirty plates into the sink and went back upstairs to get dressed. In deference to her late husband she chose a simple, dark grey dress which she had only worn twice before, a pair of black patent leather shoes and a black cardigan. She looked at herself in the mirror for a few moments before deciding that she looked far too much like a widow. She then took off the grey dress, the black cardigan and the black shoes and replaced them with a white and blue polka dot dress, a pair of white sandals and a white cardigan.

Half an hour later she caught the bus into town and got off at the stop just before the Oxfam shop where she sometimes helped out. She walked the few yards to the charity shop in glorious summer sunshine.

`Thelma!' cried a large, shapeless woman in a heavy, pink and grey flecked suit. `I didn't expect to see you here today.' She put her head on one side and marched towards Mrs Caldicot with her arms held out in front of her. `How are you feeling?' she asked. A cloud of cheap and rather nasty perfume preceded the large woman and almost masked a serious case of body odour.

`I'm fine,' replied Mrs Caldicot. `I'm on the rota,' she explained. `I didn't want to let you down.' She backed away a few inches but failed to avoid the shapeless woman's embrace.

`Oh you silly thing!' said Mrs Leatherhead. `It must have been a terrible shock for you,' she said. `At the cricket match wasn't it?'

Mrs Caldicot wondered how these things got round the town so quickly. She nodded.

`Would you like a cup of coffee?'

`No, thank you,' said Mrs Caldicot, who, probably as a result of her huge breakfast had a touch of indigestion. `What would you like me to do? Unpacking? Pricing? Shelf stocking?'

`Oh, I know,' whispered Mrs Leatherhead, conspiratorially. `You want to keep busy! What would you prefer? I've just got a delivery of books in if you'd like to check through those. They're in the back.' She turned to serve a tall, bony woman in an ankle length garment which had lots of fringes attached to it. She was holding a shawl which she had selected from the rack by the window.

`Fine,' said Mrs Caldicot. She quite liked sorting books and there was always the added advantage that you might find something worth reading. She never felt quite so much at ease sorting second hand clothes. She left Mrs Leatherhead and the tall bony woman haggling over the price of the shawl.

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One and a half hours later, with the books unpacked and sorted into neat piles Mrs Caldicot put the kettle on and wandered out into the shop to tell Mrs Leatherhead that a cup of coffee was on its way.

`What are your plans now?' asked Mrs Leatherhead as they dipped their ginger nut biscuits into their drinks. `Or is too soon for you to have thought of plans?'

`What do you mean?' asked Mrs Caldicot. `What sort of plans?'

`Oh, you know,' said Mrs Leatherhead, `are you going to sell the house and buy yourself a bungalow or are you going to move in with Derek?'

Mrs Caldicot frowned. `Why should I do either?'

`Oh you won't want to stay where you are,' said Mrs Leatherhead definitely. `Not in that big house.'

`But it isn't all that big,' protested Mrs Caldicot. `It's only got three bedrooms.'

`But, dear, all that garden! And the roof and so on. Oh you don't want that sort of responsibility on your own. Oh no! You wouldn't want to be in that house by yourself at night now, would you?'

Mrs Caldicot, who had slept in the house by herself when her husband had been away attending conferences on sewage, didn't quite know what to say to this. It had never occurred to her that she might have to move house. And why should the roof worry her, she wondered. Was someone going to steal it if she stayed there alone?

`Are you going to be all right for money?' asked Mrs Leatherhead. `Has he left you all right?'

`What business is that of yours?' thought Mrs Caldicot indignantly. Why, she wondered, did Mrs Leatherhead assume that just because she was bereaved she was also bereft of all dignity. `I don't know,' she said. `To be honest I haven't even thought about money.'

`Oh well you must!' insisted Mrs Leatherhead. `And you watch out for solicitors and bank people and the like. My Henry says they're all crooks.'

`I wouldn't listen to anything your Henry said if my life depended on it,' thought Mrs Caldicot, nodding her head as though in acquiescence. Henry Leatherhead always claimed that he was something `rather confidential' in the civil service but in reality Mrs Caldicot knew that he worked for the Department of Employment. He was the daftest, most insipid man she had ever met. She wondered why she had allowed herself to be surrounded by such boring, inept and unattractive people. She thought gloomily of all the evenings that she and her husband had spent having dinner with the Leatherheads. It had always followed a strict ritual. Sherry. Something traditional served with gravy. Cheap wine from the supermarket. And dull conversation about the price of fish. Their evenings together had been as structured and as predictable as a church service.

`Still,' said Mrs Leatherhead. `Whatever you do, you just take your time!' She lowered her head and popped a piece of soggy biscuit into her mouth before it could drop into the coffee beneath it. `Whatever you decide to do you don't want to be pushed into making a decision too quickly.' She winked at Mrs Caldicot. `You'll find yourself surrounded by people who want to give you advice,' she said. `You ignore them all and decide for yourself exactly when you want to move and where you want to go.'

Mrs Caldicot thanked Mrs Leatherhead, but realised that she longed not for sympathy or advice but for simple encouragement. She wondered why everyone always wanted to give advice. Why, she thought, don't they offer me sympathy and support and encouragement for what I choose to do. Whatever it is. She wondered why people were so quick to offer so many answers to her problems when it was patently clear that they had little ability to deal with the problems in their own lives. Derek's life was hardly a domestic success and the Leatherheads would not have won any prizes for enviable domesticity.

`Don't mention it,' said Mrs Leatherhead, helping herself to another ginger nut from the shrinking packet. `It's at a time like this that you really find out who your friends are. Has the doctor given you anything?'

`What do you mean?' asked Mrs Caldicot, genuinely puzzled as to why the doctor should give her anything.

`To help you sleep,' explained Mrs Leatherhead. `For your nerves. You know.'

`Oh,' said Mrs Caldicot. `No.'

`Well you just get yourself along there and have a word with him,' said Mrs Leatherhead firmly. `You can never be too careful at a time like this. My friend Gladys,' she paused, `do you know Gladys Robertson who used to be married to the butcher who had a shop in Vicarage Street behind the multi-storey car park?'

Mrs Caldicot shook her head. `No, I don't think so.'

`He always had good tripe and our Dennis loved his sausages. Well, Gladys was as right as rain one minute, and everyone thought she was coping with it all marvellously and then suddenly, whoosh, there she was in the hospital under heavy sedation suffering from deep depression.'

`Oh,' said Mrs Caldicot.

`She tried to do away with herself,' whispered Mrs Leatherhead. `There's only a few of us who know about it and I promised not to tell a soul but since you don't know her it doesn't really count, does it?'

`It depends how seriously you take a promise,' thought Mrs Caldicot. `No, I suppose not,' she agreed.

`She was on tablets for months and months and they gave her that electrical treatment where they connect your brain up to the mains and give it an electric shock to shake it back into sense, you know.'

`No, I haven't heard of that,' said Mrs Caldicot, shivering a little with distaste and hoping that her own strange compunctions weren't anything very much to worry about. She suddenly remembered the chrysanthemums and hoped that no one would regard that as a sign of madness, though she did think that perhaps she could claim it was the work of vandals if she said she'd heard a noise at night.

`I think I heard people in the garden last night,' she said suddenly.

`Good heavens!' said Mrs Leatherhead. `There you are, you see! They've got no scruples these days, burglars. They hear of a man dying and a woman in the house by herself and they're round there straight away.' She shivered noticeably and a small cloud of face powder floated through a bright beam of sunshine. `The quicker you're out of that place the better. You want to get someone round to have a look at the property for you.' She stopped and snorted. `But then, what am I saying,' she carried on, `you've got your Derek haven't you? In the business and everything.'

`I think it was probably just vandals,' said Mrs Caldicot quickly, immediately regretting the untruth. `Children I expect. In the garden.'

`At least that'll save you a few pounds on estate agency fees,' said Mrs Leatherhead. `Your Derek will be able to get it all done for you free won't he?'

`All what?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

`You know, the estate agency stuff; the boards and the advertising and the solicitors and so on.'

`I don't know. Possibly.

`There you are then,' said Mrs Leatherhead. `That's often the worst of it all. With your Derek to look after things you'll be very well placed.'

`Not the solicitors though I don't expect.' said Mrs Caldicot.

Just then a customer came over wanting to know if the hand carved wooden ashtrays would mark if you left a cigarette end burning in them and Mrs Caldicot took the opportunity to wave goodbye to Mrs Leatherhead and to slip out into the street.

When she got back home the chrysanthemums were looking decidedly glum. Petals were going brown and starting to fall off all over the garden. Mrs Caldicot stared out at them and wondered why she'd bothered. Just then the telephone rang.

`It's Victor,' said a voice she recognised at once. Victor Reynolds. Another keen gardener. Friend of her late husband and long time chrysanthemum grower. `I was very sorry to hear about George.'

`Yes,' said Mrs Caldicot. `Thank you.'

`I was just thinking,' said Victor. `Would you like me to show his chrysanthemums for him? In his name, of course.'

Mrs Caldicot stared out of the window at the drooping flowers and falling petals.

`It seemed a pity not to,' said Victor. `I thought it might be a gesture he would appreciate.'

`I'm afraid it's too late,' said Mrs Caldicot. `The vandals have got at them.'

`The vandals? What do you mean?'

`They've cut the stems,' said Mrs Caldicot. `They're all dying.'

`Oh dear me. Oh dear oh dear,' said Victor. `Oh, that's terrible.' He sounded quite distraught.

`Yes,' said Mrs Caldicot. `It's awful what they'll do, isn't it?'

`I don't know what to say,' said Victor. `I'm speechless.'

`No, you're not,' thought Mrs Caldicot. `You're wittering on and you're making far more fuss over the damned chrysanthemums than you did over George.' `Yes,' she said.

`Well, then,' said Victor. `I don't suppose there's anything to be done.'

`No.' said Mrs Caldicot. `I don't suppose so.'

`Goodbye then,' said Victor. And she heard the receiver go down and the next moment the telephone went dead. She put the receiver down and stared at the dying chrysanthemums, silently hoping that they were suffering.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mrs Caldicot looked out of the bedroom window on the second full day of her bereavement and stared at the garden. `My second day of living,' she thought. The chrysanthemums were mostly dead now. She smiled at them with quiet delight then slipped into her comfortable, candlewick dressing gown and headed for the stairs.

As she tied her dressing gown belt firmly around her waist she thought how much she hated the garment. Come to that she hated most of her clothes. In or out of the house she had invariably dressed to please her late husband. For the last thirty years of her life she hadn't ever thought about what *she* wanted to wear when she had been choosing clothes. She had automatically bought what she knew *he* would expect her to wear. Some men wanted their wives to wear clinging, feminine garments made of silk; more frilly and chilly than hard-wearing or warm. But Mr Caldicot had favoured sensible, long-lasting suits; sensible shoes and sensible nightwear. Nothing fashionable. Nothing flimsy. Nothing colourful. Nothing frivolous. He had believed that clothes should be functional, hard-wearing and inexpensive. She made a silent vow to go into the shops to buy herself something different.

The telephone began to ring and she hurried to the kitchen to pick it up. `I thought you'd gone out!' complained her son Derek. `Where were you?'

`Drunk in bed after last night's party,' thought Mrs Caldicot. She laughed out loud and then realised with horror that she had nearly said what she had thought.

`What's the matter?' asked Derek, who must have heard the laugh.

`Nothing,' said Mrs Caldicot, quickly. She couldn't remember the last time she had laughed. She felt that she was blushing. She picked up her handbag, which was still standing where she had left it on the kitchen table, opened it and took out her make-up mirror. She peeped into it. Her cheeks were bright red. These secret thoughts seemed to be coming thicker and faster than ever now that she was on her own.

`Did you hear me?' demanded Derek, crossly.

`No. Sorry. I wasn't concentrating.' said Mrs Caldicot.

`I don't know what's the matter with you,' sighed Derek. He sounded exasperated. `You've been acting very strangely.'

`You haven't seen anything yet!' thought Mrs Caldicot. `Your father's just died,' she said.

`That's what I was ringing about,' said Derek. `I've arranged the funeral for the day after tomorrow. They can't do it any sooner because there's got to be an autopsy.'

`I thought you were going to Wolverhampton,' said Mrs Caldicot.

`I am in Wolverhampton,' said Derek.

`What on earth did you want to go to Wolverhampton for?' asked Mrs Caldicot. `Why would anyone want to go to Wolverhampton?' she thought.

`I didn't have any choice in the matter,' said Derek wearily. `I told you before - I have a very important meeting with a possible client. I'm coming back tonight. Now are you sure that you're all right?'

`Is it a good meeting?' asked Mrs Caldicot. She wondered why meetings and conferences were always very important. Didn't anyone ever hold meetings and conferences that were just ordinarily important? Her late husband's numerous meetings and conferences had always been described as very important and she'd never understood how so many men in sewage could think of so many reasons for having very important conferences. What, she wondered, did they find to talk about? How did they manage to make such a simple business so complicated? Why did they need to hold week long conferences in Margate to discuss sewage?

Derek was talking. She decided she ought to concentrate. `...thank you. If you're not alright I'll get Veronica to come round and sit with you for a few hours.'

`Oh no! Not Veronica! I'll do anything if you keep Veronica away from me!' thought Mrs Caldicot. `I'm fine, thank you,' she said.

`I've arranged for a cremation not a burial. You don't object do you?'

`I don't mind whether they burn him, bury him or leave him out with the rubbish,' she thought. `No.' she said.

`When I get back I want to talk to you about selling the house,' said Derek. `It isn't a good time to sell but you can't stay there by yourself. I've made an appointment for you to see your solicitor at 2.30 this afternoon. He needs to talk to you about the will.'

`I don't want to sell the house!' said Mrs Caldicot. Then she wondered why she had said that. Maybe selling was the right thing to do. She didn't much like the house. She never had. Come to think of it she hated the house, the furniture and the chrysanthemums. Maybe she would, after all, let him persuade her to sell it. Maybe.

`Please, don't be so difficult all the time, mother,' sighed Derek. `I've got to go now. We'll talk about it when I get back. Did you hear what I said about the solicitor?'

`Yes. Two thirty this afternoon. I didn't know we had a solicitor.'

`He does a lot of work with us,' said Derek. `And he drew up Dad's will a few years ago.'

`Oh.' said Mrs Caldicot. She hadn't thought about a will. She hadn't even known that there was a will.

`I'll ring you tonight,' said Derek. `O.K.?'

`Yes. Bye then,' said Mrs Caldicot. `Oh, Derek!' she said, quickly, before he could put the phone down.

`Yes?'

`Have you got a clean vest on?'

There was a sigh. `Yes, mother.'

`And a clean handkerchief?'

Another sigh. `Yes, mother.'

`Good boy.' said Mrs Caldicot. She had to bite her cheek to stop herself from laughing out loud. `And don't forget to thank those nice people in Wolverhampton for having you before you come home,' she added, but it was too late for Derek had put his receiver down and broken the connection.

Mrs Caldicot cooked herself some breakfast, added the dirty dishes to the growing pile in the sink and got dressed. Then she headed into town to do some serious shopping.

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`What about this one, madam?' asked the sales assistant, approaching Mrs Caldicot and offering her a woollen suit in a particularly nauseating shade of camouflage green. The assistant, who looked as though she nurtured an aching longing to be in her late twenties, had heavy false eyelashes, scarlet lips and bright red finger nails. She was not in her late twenties and had not been in her late twenties for a generation or so. She wore a grey suit with a skirt that ended a good three inches above her knees and she arrived in a cloud of suffocating scent. She had a badge on her left lapel which gave her name as `Daphne' and her designation as `Senior Sales Assistant'. She had an unlikely chest which cocked a snook at gravity, and which Mrs Caldicot suspected probably relied heavily on more hidden structural engineering work than the average suspension bridge.

Mrs Caldicot looked at the woollen suit with distaste. `I'm looking for something a little less stern,' she explained. She looked down at her own olive skirt and jumper. `I don't usually dress like this,' she lied, suspecting that the assistant was trying to find her something which matched the style she was wearing. `I had to borrow these from a friend,' she lied. `All my own clothes were destroyed in a fire.' Lying was like cooking. It did get easier the more you did it.

`Perhaps madam would give me an idea of the sort of direction in which I should be looking,' said the assistant.

`Those over there look rather nice,' said Mrs Caldicot, picking out a row of scoop necked summer dresses in pastel colours. `Pink. I think I might like pink.'

The assistant, trying unsuccessfully to disguise her look of surprise, swished across to the rail and flicked through the dresses quickly; sending the hangers whizzing along the chromium plated rail with experienced ease. `These do have the zip up the back,' she warned, plucking a pale pink dress from the rail and holding it out so that Mrs Caldicot could examine it.

`I don't mind where the zip is,' said Mrs Caldicot.

`Some of our more mature customers dislike back fastening,' confided Daphne. `Arthritis and so on, you know,' she confided.

`That must be terrible,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. She toyed with the zip. `This is a little, well, functional, isn't it?' she smiled. `Do you have anything a little more frivolous?'

`Frivolous, madam?'

`Yes,' said Mrs Caldicot firmly. `Frivolous. Buttons, maybe. Lots and lots of very tiny buttons.' She took the dress and held it up against her. `And I'd like something with less sleeve and more of a plunge at the front. I'd like to show a little...'she blushed. `You know...'.

`Cleavage, madam?'

`Exactly!' said Mrs Caldicot. `Yes. That's the word. Cleavage.' She said it defiantly. `I'd like to show a little cleavage.'

`Certainly, madam!' said Daphne. The sales assistant smiled conspiratorially. `May I ask, madam, is this for a special occasion?'

`Yes,' said Mrs Caldicot, wickedly. `A funeral. My husband's funeral.'

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She wore her new dress to visit the solicitor.

`Your husband left a few small bequests but basically the bulk of his estate goes to you,' said Mr Suffolk. He was a breezy, cheerful sort of fellow who seemed to be in rather a hurry. He wore a light grey polyester suit, a white nylon shirt and a plain red polyester tie. `I must say your husband was an extraordinarily efficient and well organised man.'

Mrs Caldicot smiled politely at this compliment, although she would have preferred to describe her husband as obsessional and nit-picking. Every month he had insisted on going through the household expenses with her.

`You've spent £1.18 more on coffee this month,' he would say, pointing a podgy finger at the appropriate figures.

`That's because the supermarket prices sometimes vary,' Mrs Caldicot would reply. `Or because we've drunk more coffee this month.'

`And why did you spend 68 pence more on toilet rolls?' he would demand.

`You had diarrhoea for two days after you came back from that conference in Brighton,' she would answer.

`Normally,' continued the solicitor, `it takes a few weeks to work out the size of an estate but in your case I can tell you now that your husband has left you quite well off.'

Mrs Caldicot frowned. `Just what does `quite well off' mean?'

`It means that you won't have to worry too much about where your next meal is going to come from,' said Mr Suffolk, with a `Don't you worry your head about the figures' smile. `Your husband was a cautious man who preferred to put most of his money into the building society rather than to invest it on the stock market, and the last few years have justified his caution.'

`That's nice,' said Mrs Caldicot.

`There's certainly enough to merit professional management,' said the solicitor.

`Aha! Here it comes,' thought Mrs Caldicot.

`Our firm specialises in estate management and we would be very happy to manage your money for you.'

`I'll bet you would,' thought Mrs Caldicot. `That's very kind of you,' she said. `But I'd like to take a little time to think things over first.' She had never noticed herself being so cynical before. `If the building society did well for my husband maybe I'll just leave it there for the time being.'

`Well, the building society isn't always the best answer,' said the solicitor, rather hurriedly. `And I couldn't take responsibility for your continued financial health were you to decide to leave your estate in the building society indefinitely.'

`Nevertheless, I'd like to think about things,' said Mrs Caldicot.

`Of course,' smiled the solicitor, somehow managing to sound patronising while saying only two words.

CHAPTER SIX

Mrs Caldicot had just got out of the bath and, dressed in a new, shocking pink nightdress and a new bright pink satin dressing gown had gone down to the living room to watch television with a plate of egg and tomato sandwiches resting on one arm of her favourite armchair and a large glass of red wine perched precariously on the other when the front door bell rang. Muttering quiet curses to no one in particular Mrs Caldicot lifted Kitty from her lap and answered the door.

`Good evening, mother,' said Derek, pecking her on the cheek and walking past her into the hallway.

`Good evening, mother,' said Veronica, his wife, brushing her lips through the air close to Mrs Caldicot's cheek and following him into the hall. She wore a pleated navy blue skirt and a lime green blouse and carried a potted geranium in her hands.

Jason, their son mumbled something which could have been `Good evening, grandma.' As he reached out with pursed lips Mrs Caldicot swayed skilfully out of reach and noticed with satisfaction that his spots were redder and more pustulant than ever. He wore a pair of headphones connected to a small box which was attached to his belt, and a continuous and annoying tinny noise escaped from the headphones. She could not remember ever seeing him without this piece of equipment.

`Good evening,' said Mrs Caldicot, shutting the front door behind them. `Do come in.' Her intestines began to tighten up in anticipation. Her tummy pains, which were always bad when she saw Derek, were always far worse when she saw Veronica as well.

`We thought we'd come round and see how you're bearing up,' said Derek.

`I've brought you a geranium,' said Veronica. She held the plant out so that Mrs Caldicot could inspect it.

`So you did!' said Mrs Caldicot. `What a nice pot.' She hated geraniums almost as much as she hated chrysanthemums. She went back into the living room but did not take the offered gift from her daughter-in-law and so Veronica was left holding the plant. The three visitors followed Mrs Caldicot. Jason sat down on the sofa, pulled a book of chess problems out of his pocket and started to read.

`I was just having a bite to eat,' said Mrs Caldicot. She saw Derek and Veronica exchange glances. `I just fancied a sandwich in front of the television,' she explained unnecessarily. She had been quite looking forward to a quiet evening on her own.

`And a glass of wine, I see!' said Derek. There was more than a hint of disapproval in his voice.

`Yes,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. `And a glass of wine.'

`It's a little early to be drinking isn't it, mother?'

Mrs Caldicot looked at the clock. It was half past seven. She couldn't think of any suitable retort so she kept silent.

`And alone, too!' added Derek sternly.

`If there had been anyone else here I would have offered them a drink,' thought Mrs Caldicot. She smiled brightly. `You're here now! Would you like a drink?'

`No thank you, mother!' said Derek. `I'm driving.'

Mrs Caldicot turned to offer her daughter-in-law a drink but Veronica had put the potted plant down on the sideboard, and was looking out of the window at the back garden. `Good heavens! She exclaimed suddenly. `Derek! Just come and look at this!'

Derek obeyed and together the two of them stared out at the crop of dead chrysanthemums. Because they were all firmly tied to canes the flowers, though dead, were still standing erect.

`What on earth has happened?' asked Veronica. `They look as if they're all dead!'

`I thought you said you were going to water them!' said Derek to his mother.

`I did,' said Mrs Caldicot. `But someone cut through all the stems!'

`Oh that's terrible!' cried Veronica. Why, Mrs Caldicot wondered, did so many people care so much about a garden full of chrysanthemums. They would have died soon anyway.

`Well that settles it,' said Derek. `You can't stay here.' He opened the French doors and stepped out onto the patio.

Mrs Caldicot frowned. `Why? Because the chrysanthemums are dead?' She moved to the doorway and looked around. `But I didn't like them anyway.'

`No,' said Derek patiently. He was getting worried about his mother who seemed either to be changing personality or developing a sense of humour. He wasn't sure which, but found both possibilities equally daunting. `Not because the chrysanthemums are dead but because someone killed them.' He stressed the words `someone', `dead' and `killed' and made the demise of the chrysanthemums sound like mass murder. He bent down and examined the stems of the flowers nearest to the back door, then turned his head and looked back at her. `These have all been cut through,' he announced. `Probably with a sharp knife or a pair of scissors,' he added. Derek, who was not a fit man, stood up and rubbed the small of his back as though he'd been gardening for hours. `Have you called the police?'

Mrs Caldicot frowned. `No.'

`You should have done,' said Derek.

`But what on earth could they do?'

`Fingerprints!' said Derek. He looked around. `Footprints, possibly.' He stared sternly at a small plastic gnome which was sitting on a red and white spotted mushroom. `If only he could talk,' he said. `I bet he could tell us a thing or two.'

`He's loyal. He wouldn't talk,' thought Mrs Caldicot.

`I suspect the police have got more important things to do than worry about a few dead chrysanthemums,' she said. She had a vision of squads of policemen racing around the countryside looking for the Phantom Chrysanth Killer. `What are you looking for?' she called as Derek wandered off peering down among the chrysanthemums.

`The knife they used!' said Derek. `They may have thrown it down somewhere.'

`Oh I wouldn't have thought so,' said Mrs Caldicot, moving back indoors.

`We'll get you into a home where you'll be safe,' said Veronica who had sat herself down next to her son. She looked across at Mrs Caldicot's plate of egg and tomato sandwiches. `And they'll make sure that you eat properly.' She wagged a finger and a pair of heavy false eyelashes. `You need regular hot meals inside you!'

`Would you like one?' asked Mrs Caldicot, ignoring the advice, picking up the plate and offering her daughter-in-law a sandwich.

`Oh, no thank you,' said Veronica, holding up a hand in horror. `I'm on a diet.'

`It doesn't show,' thought Mrs Caldicot. `That's nice,' she said, smiling sweetly.

Derek came back into the living room, closed the French doors behind him, making sure that they were firmly locked. His muddy shoes left grubby footprints on the carpet. `Just make sure you check all the windows before you go to bed tonight,' he told Mrs Caldicot. `Whoever did this may come back,' he warned her gloomily.

`What would you say if I told you that the person who did this would be in my bedroom all night,' thought Mrs Caldicot. `I don't think so,' she said. `I haven't got any more chrysanthemums.' She smiled weakly and sat down. Kitty jumped onto her lap and Mrs Caldicot tickled her under the chin. `I wish I had someone to tickle me under the chin,' thought Mrs Caldicot. She stopped tickling the cat and tried it on herself. It felt rather nice.

`What on earth are you doing, mother?' asked Derek.

`I had an itch,' said Mrs Caldicot. `Probably a flea,' she smiled. `You know what cats are like.'

Veronica winced noticeably.

`I've tried to stop her climbing onto the furniture,' said Mrs Caldicot. `But it's impossible. She gets everywhere.'

Veronica pulled her skirt down to cover as much of her legs as possible and then stood up. `We must be going,' she said. `We just wanted to see that you were all right.'

She and Derek headed for the door.

`We'll pick you up in the morning for the funeral,' said Derek, whispering the final word.

`Come along, Jason, dear,' said Veronica.

`Yes, mummy,' said Jason. He carefully put a slip of paper into the page he had been reading and put the book into his pocket and stood up.

`Goodbye,' called Mrs Caldicot as her uninvited visitors trooped out through the front door.

`Goodbye, mother!' said Derek.

`Goodbye, mother!' said Veronica.

`Goodbye, grandma!' said Jason.

`Thank you for the geranium,' said Mrs Caldicot.

She went back into the living room, switched on the television, picked up an egg and tomato sandwich, took a large bite and then started to tickle herself under her chin with her free hand.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It had not, thought Mrs Caldicot, been a very impressive turn out. Her husband, who always tended to judge people by appearances, would have been mortified if he had been there to see it.

`Father would have been pleased,' claimed Derek, who had inherited his understanding of people from Mr Caldicot. `Quite a good turn out.'

`If he'd been here he would have been glad he was dead,' thought Mrs Caldicot ruefully.

The fire and brimstone stuff was over and they had returned to Derek's spacious, detached, architect-designed house for what Mrs Caldicot secretly thought of as `the essential post burn up beano'. Derek's home, which had four bedrooms, two reception rooms, a garage for two cars, a large garden and a large kitchen with built in oven, microwave and dishwasher, was conveniently situated for local schools and shops in a pleasant suburban area. Mrs Caldicot looked around at the other mourners. There weren't many of them, despite the attractions of a free lunch.

Apart from Derek (dressed in a black morning suit and his Estate Agents Association tie), Veronica (dressed in a black chiffon dress and still carrying a black parasol hooked over her arm) and Jason (wearing an ill-fitting electric blue suit, the inescapable headphones and two tubes of acne cream and sitting hunched over an electronic pocket chess set) there were just five other mourners; Mr and Mrs Leatherhead; two men from the Sewage Works who Mrs Caldicot vaguely recognised (she would have known where they were from even if she had not recognised them for they both brought with them the curiously sweet smell that her late husband had brought home with him every evening for thirty years) and a man whose name she had forgotten but who had introduced himself as representing the Chrysanthemum Society and who had brought with him a sturdy looking wreath made entirely out of chrysanthemums.

However many times you added them up it could not, she thought, be described as a `good turnout'. She had worried for several minutes over the fact that Derek was wearing a morning suit and had eventually come to the conclusion that he had hired it in error, assuming that the ensemble was a `mourning suit'. It was an error that delighted her in some strange way, though the delight was constrained by the fact that she did not feel able to share this discovery with any of the other guests.

Now that the funeral itself was over she felt glad that she hadn't put on her new pink dress but had instead chosen to wear a dark grey tweed suit that she had bought and worn for her own mother's funeral some years earlier. Not even Mr Caldicot, deprived of a proper mourning, deserved that much humiliation.

Mrs Caldicot, suddenly aware that someone standing beside her had spoken to her, turned and found Veronica hovering by her elbow. `I beg your pardon?'

`I said would you like another sausage roll?'

Veronica, who had now added a quilted oven glove in blue and green to her funereal ensemble, was holding a glass plate upon which half a dozen sausage rolls were reclining on a white paper napkin. The paper napkin had small green holly leaves and tiny red berries printed in a neat pattern around its edge. `Be careful!' she warned. `They're hot!' She had lipstick on her teeth and flakes of pastry at the corner of her mouth showed that she had at least had the guts to eat her own produce.

`Thank you, no,' said Mrs Caldicot, `I've had one already.' She smiled and held up a hand like a policeman on traffic duty. `I'd like to live long enough to enjoy some of the money I've been left,' she thought. Veronica was not a woman to whom cooking came easily, and Mrs Caldicot knew from past experience that if there was a word which most accurately summed up the consequences of Veronica's culinary skills it was probably `indigestion'. Most of the remaining sausage rolls were so black that Mrs Caldicot couldn't help thinking that they were exceptionally suitable for a post-crematorium feast.

Mrs Caldicot hadn't wanted a reception after the cremation but Derek had insisted that you couldn't expect people to turn out to a funeral unless you gave them something to eat and drink afterwards. Mrs Caldicot wondered if Derek might not have been the first person to coin the concept that there is no such thing as a free mourner.

`I think you're being very brave,' said Veronica, resting her free hand on Mrs Caldicot's forearm. `Very brave, indeed.'

`Thank you,' said Mrs Caldicot gracefully.

`Derek and I have found a lovely home for you,' smiled Veronica. `You'll be very happy there.'

Mrs Caldicot was rather taken aback at this. She had not expected her son to have moved quite so speedily. She winced as the pains in her intestine suddenly grew stronger.

`We'll take you there when everyone's gone,' promised Veronica. `Just to have a look around.' She patted Mrs Caldicot on the arm. `They've got fitted carpets, colour television and running water in all the rooms,' she whispered, just before she drifted away to offer her incinerated sausage rolls to the two sewage workers.

Mrs Caldicot felt very glum. She didn't feel old enough to be put into a home, even if the floors were carpeted. The death of her husband had left her aware that she had wasted most of her life on doing the laundry for a man whose main ambition had been to make sure that he got an annual parking space at the Mettleham Cricket Ground. `I wouldn't have minded being behind a man who stood for something,' she thought. Years of frustration had bubbled to the surface and, released at last by Mr Caldicot's unexpected demise, were now threatening to soar out of control. She sat gloomily in a corner contemplating a future spent in a carpeted ante-room to death, waiting for her allotted place on the conveyor belt in the crematorium.

`They're all going now, mother,' murmured Derek a little while later.

Mrs Caldicot looked up and realised how much she hated being called `mother' and wondered why a few brief moments of clumsy and unsatisfying coupling, followed nine months later by several hours of painful and unrewarding parturition had been allowed to dominate her life ever afterwards. Mr and Mrs Leatherhead, the man from the Chrysanthemum Society and the two sewage engineers were all crowding into the doorway on the other side of the room and waving diffident goodbyes. The two sewage engineers, she noticed, both carried something wrapped in white paper napkins. Mrs Caldicot raised a hand and waved to them as they filed out of the living room and headed back towards reality.

`What were the two sewage engineers carrying?' she asked Veronica when they had all gone.

`I gave them a couple of spare sausage rolls each,' explained Veronica with a proud look on her face. `They liked them so much.'

`Come on now, mother,' said Derek, `shall we take you round to see your new home?'

***

According to the brochure which Veronica gave Mrs Caldicot to read in the car `The Twilight Years Rest Home stood in three-quarters of an acre of gently rolling parkland' and provided `a combination of the traditional and the modern'. An artist's colourful impression of one of the bedrooms showed magnificent antique furniture and a discreetly positioned electrocardiogram monitor.

What the brochure didn't explain, and what no one had troubled to tell the artist, was that the word `traditional' referred to the medical equipment and the word `modern' referred to the furniture. The proprietors of The Twilight Years Rest Home had also overlooked the fact that when you tarmacadam a large area for a car park there isn't much left out of three-quarters of an acre of rolling parkland.

The proprietor, Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor, was busy serving lunch when Derek, Veronica, Jason and Mrs Caldicot trooped up to the front door to inspect the home, and this meant that the normally pungent olfactory consequence of incontinence had been temporarily overwhelmed by the slightly less offensive smell of cooked cabbage.

`Yes?' snapped a dapper, little fellow wearing a light brown toupee, responding to Derek's fourth and most prolonged use of the doorbell. `It's lunchtime. We don't allow visitors at lunchtime.'

`The name's Caldicot,' explained Derek quickly but diffidently. `I've brought my mother to have a look around...'

`What a nice smell of cooking!' said Veronica. `It's cabbage isn't it?'

`Fuller-Hawksmoor,' said the small man, introducing himself, replacing his scowl with a smile and opening the front door wide so that Derek, Veronica, Jason and Mrs Caldicot could enter. He nodded to each Caldicot as they passed over the threshold, and only Mrs Caldicot noticed him check his toupee in the gilt-framed mirror on the other side of the halfway. He wore a dark suit with a grey cardigan underneath it and had, thought Mrs Caldicot, an unpleasant, rather arrogant air about him. She instinctively disliked him.

`Do you like cabbage?' he asked Veronica as she passed him.

`Oh, it's my absolute favourite!' she enthused. `It's such a nutritious vegetable.'

`Especially when it's over cooked,' thought Mrs Caldicot.

`I'm afraid we're serving luncheon at the moment,' apologised Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor quite unnecessarily. He turned to Mrs Caldicot. `We pride ourselves on our high culinary standards,' he told her confidentially. `Today our residents are being served with Argentinean beef substitute croquettes, pommes frites and parsnips with a choice of sea salt or black pepper topping and the green vegetable of the day, of course.'

`That's the cabbage,' suggested Mrs Caldicot.

`Absolutely!' agreed Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor. `We like to give our residents plenty of cabbage. It's so rich in iron and other essential minerals.'

`Not when your cook has finished with it,' thought Mrs Caldicot. `How nice,' she said, wondering why her son hated her so much that he wanted to dump her with Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor.

`Would you like to see one of the bedrooms?' Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor asked.

`That would be nice, wouldn't it, mother?' said Derek.

`Lovely,' said Mrs Caldicot.

She moved a few inches closer to her son. `Is this a hospital?' she asked him.

`Of course it isn't!' he whispered back. `It's a rest home. More of a hotel really.'

Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor led the way upstairs and as she followed behind him and the rest of her family, Mrs Caldicot caught a glimpse, through a half open doorway, of the dining room. A dozen or more residents were sitting on green, wipe clean plastic chairs which were arranged around a few matching green formica-topped, metal-legged tables. There were no tablecloths, and the subdued sounds of knives and forks on plates suggested that the cutlery was made of plastic. On the other side of the hallway Mrs Caldicot had a glimpse of a sitting room. Once again the chairs were covered in plastic, but this time the plastic was red rather than green.

`We have a wonderful atmosphere here,' called Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor over his shoulder. `Every Christmas we have a party for all the residents. Last year we had a magician and the year before we had a real clown who used to be in the circus.'

`I'm glad the clown was real,' thought Mrs Caldicot facetiously. `I hate fake clowns.'

`How many bedrooms do you have?' asked Derek.

`Seven,' answered Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor. `Four trebles and three doubles.'

`You don't have any singles?' asked Derek.

`We like to encourage our residents to think of this as their home,' said Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor. `Sharing a room with another resident helps to cement that feeling.' He stopped outside a white painted door upon which there was a small plastic plaque describing the area on the other side of the door as The Windsor Suite.

`We have a vacancy in here,' said Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor, standing aside to let the Caldicot inspection party through. There were three single divan beds in the room, which also contained a small television set on a metal trolley, two wardrobes and a sink. The floor was covered with material which an imaginative and forceful carpet salesman would have probably described as `serviceable'. One of the beds was occupied by an elderly, grey-haired, grey-faced woman who seemed to be in some distress. When she saw Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor she wearily raised a hand from the bed. `Have you brought my bedpan?' she asked timidly.

`In a moment, Miss Nightingale,' said Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor, rather crossly. `Nurse Peters will bring you a bedpan the moment she has finished serving the luncheons.' He turned to Derek with an ingratiating smile on his face. `Some of the older residents do become a little self-centred from time to time,' he said apologetically. `We find we have to be firm to be kind.'

`How many nurses do you have?' asked Veronica.

`Five,' said Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor. `All part time, but fully trained auxiliaries, of course. Two of them have certificates in first aid and Miss Pilton has just completed a local technical college course in Hairdressing and Practical Beauty with distinction.'

`That's very impressive!' said Veronica. Mrs Caldicot stared at her in disbelief.

`We pride ourselves on running a home that has all the advantages of a hotel and a fully equipped hospital,' said Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor. `Employing fully trained staff is a vital way of implementing that policy.'

Jason switched on the television set and an assortment of diagonal black and white lines flickered up and down the screen.

`Jason!' hissed Veronica. `Switch it off!'

Jason obediently switched the television set off.

`I believe the set in this suite does have some minor fault at the moment,' explained Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor, apologetically, `but there is, of course, a fully operational set of audiovisual equipment in the Duke of Devonshire Leisure and Recreational Area.'

`Do you have a video recorder?' asked Derek.

`Indeed, we do!' said Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor with pride. `I can't show it to you at the moment as it is currently receiving servicing attention, but our engineers assure us that it will back in the Recreational Area in a very short space of time.'

`Splendid,' said Derek. `There you are, mother!' he said. `You'll be able to rent video films and show them to your friends.'

``The Texas Chain Saw Massacre' might be a good starting point,' thought Mrs Caldicot, who had never rented a video film in her life. `What a lovely thought,' she said.

Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor led the way back downstairs.

`Do you have any other questions?' he asked them.

`No, I don't think so, thank you!' said Derek. `We've been very impressed, haven't we?' He looked around him as he spoke.

`Very impressed,' agreed Veronica.

`I'll give you a telephone call within the next 24 hours to let you know when my mother will be ready to move in,' said Derek.

`Wonderful!' said Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor, stopping himself from rubbing his hands together just in time. He looked at Mrs Caldicot and smiled. `We look forward to welcoming you as one of the family.'

`If your family is anything like mine that will be a real joy,' thought Mrs Caldicot. `I don't want to hold you up,' she said. `I'm sure you'll want to rush off and arrange for that poor lady upstairs to get her bed pan.'

`Exactly!' said Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor. `You're very kind.' He leant towards Derek. `It's always a privilege to have a member of such a significant local family in our establishment,' he murmured.

And with that the Caldicots trooped out through the hall, down the long stone staircase at the front of the house and back out into the real world.

`I just know you're going to be so happy there,' said Derek, puffed up with Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor's flattery, as they drove out through the grandiose iron gates which marked the entrance to the rest home and headed back to the house that Mrs Caldicot had called home for most of her life. `I don't mind admitting that I think we got rather special treatment there.' He took a hand off the steering wheel and patted his hair. `I rather suspect that he knows who I am,' he murmured.

Mrs Caldicot, enveloped in what she feared might be the beginnings of a deep depression, did not reply.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Mrs Caldicot sat staring glumly out of the living room window. Outside in the garden Derek was struggling to collect together the short canes which had previously supported the now very dead chrysanthemums. `These are very expensive to buy,' he'd told Mrs Caldicot. `I'll bundle them up and put them in the potting shed.' It had been overcast and cloudy when Derek had started. Now it was raining heavily and Derek had wrapped an old coat around his shoulders. Mrs Caldicot assumed that he had found the old coat in the potting shed for she did not recognise it. Each cane was tied in two places to the flower it had supported and Derek, who didn't realise that the short pieces of orange plastic baler twine which Mr Caldicot had used to tie up his plants were designed to be untied and used again, was struggling to cut through the ties with his tiny pocket knife. Dead flowers littered the garden where, bereft of their supporting stakes, they had fallen to the ground. On the sofa opposite Mrs Caldicot her grandson Jason, absent from school for some unexplained reason, was listening to his usual tinny noise and studying a book about nuclear physics which he seemed to be enjoying. In the hallway Veronica, who had gone to answer the door, was talking to someone whose voice Mrs Caldicot did not immediately recognise.

`Look who's come to see you!' cried Veronica, feigning surprise without real effort or conviction. `It's the doctor!' she announced, as though a travelling physician had for some reason arrived entirely unexpectedly and without invitation. Veronica had dressed for this occasion in a maroon skirt and yellow jumper, bravely ignoring the fact that neither of these colours sat comfortably with her hair which seemed a slightly lighter shade of blonde than usual. She wore her best imitation pearls, had complicated looking marcasite earrings dangling from her earlobes and tottered on shoes which had slightly higher heels than were comfortable.

The doctor, apparently unembarrassed by the mild deceit of Veronica's introduction, strode into the room with his shiny, black leather bag in one hand and a prescription pad at the ready in the other. `Good morning!' he cried with false bonhomie. `I was passing and so I thought I'd pop in and see how we were doing!' The lie slipped from lips with such self-assurance and practised ease that Mrs Caldicot wondered if he even knew that it was a lie. She found herself wondering if doctors were taught how to lie at medical school, or if medical schools deliberately selected students who were good at telling fibs. He put his bag down on the floor and stared down at her.

`You seem to be doing all right,' thought Mrs Caldicot in response to the doctor's introductory comment. `Nice suit. Expensive tie. And those shoes weren't cheap.' She stared at the doctor. Although she felt sure that she didn't really know him she nevertheless thought that she vaguely recognised him, and she tried hard to remember when and where she had seen him last.

`Your daughter-in-law tells me that you've been a bit down in the dumps since your husband passed away,' said the doctor, abandoning without embarrassment the fiction of his accidental arrival. `Not surprising, of course,' he added, exhibiting a previously unexposed strain of understanding.

Mrs Caldicot wondered why even doctors couldn't bring themselves to talk directly about death, and then she suddenly remembered where she had seen him before. He had been on the local television station taking part in a discussion programme about the psychological problems created by bereavement and the failure of modern society to take these problems seriously.

`She's been behaving very strangely,' Veronica whispered to the doctor, as though she did not expect Mrs Caldicot to be able to hear her. `We've found her a really lovely home to move into - The Twilight Years Rest Home it's called - but she says she doesn't want to go!'

The doctor, listening to Veronica, nodded and grunted in Mrs Caldicot's direction, looking at her critically and suspiciously.

`She can't stay here!' insisted Veronica, still speaking in a perfectly audible whisper. `Vandals!' she explained. `They've already been round here once.' She related in exaggerated and much rehearsed detail the saga of the chrysanthemums. By now the vandals responsible for this act of premeditated violence had arrived on motorcycles, had brandished machetes and had threatened Mrs Caldicot with a fate worse than death.

`Why don't you want to go to this nice home your relatives have found for you?' asked the doctor, as though Mrs Caldicot's had chosen to turn down a gift of a million pounds, a villa in the South of France and a lifetimes supply of champagne.

Mrs Caldicot stared at him and wondered how anyone so unintelligent and unperceptive could have attained a position of such responsibility. `How would you like it,' she thought, `if your relatives turned up one day and insisted that you had to sell up your home and move into a Salvation Army hostel?' She thought this but said nothing.

`I know Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor of The Twilight Years,' said the doctor. `He's a splendid fellow. Heart in absolutely the right place.'

`The right place for his heart would be someone else's body,' thought Mrs Caldicot.

`They'll provide all your meals and look after your laundry,' continued the doctor. `They'll take complete care of you, and you won't have to worry about being a burden on your relatives.'

`Why,' wondered Mrs Caldicot, `do people assume that I am suddenly incapable of looking after myself? Up until a few days ago I looked after myself and my husband. I did all my own shopping, cooking, cleaning and laundry. Now, suddenly I need to be put into a home.' She did not say any of this.

`That's another thing,' murmured Veronica, as though by speaking quietly she could ensure that she would not be overhead by her mother-in-law, `most of the time when you talk to her she doesn't say anything. You can tell she's heard you and you know she's thinking, but she doesn't say anything.' Veronica paused and pursed her lips as though she had vinegar in her mouth. `It's very disconcerting.'

Mrs Caldicot, who had for years chosen to keep her thoughts to herself and who had put up with the inane and pointless blathering of those around her, listened to this criticism resignedly. She kept silent not because she couldn't think of anything to say, but because she couldn't see the point in saying what she'd thought. She had long ago realised that her husband and her daughter-in-law had the combined intelligence of a potato peeler, and rather than waste her time on pointless conversations she preferred to remain silent. Over the years she had got quite good at it. She could hear what people were saying to her, of course. And she formulated replies in her own mind. Replies which were unconstrained by social niceties and were, therefore, simple and honest. But whatever the temptation or provocation she had rarely opened her mouth apart from to communicate specific information. She was honest to herself but not necessarily to others.

The doctor, unworried by Mrs Caldicot's silence, which he mistook for a mixture of deference and depression, nodded sagely. `I can give you a little something to help you over these difficult days,' he said, speaking to Mrs Caldicot with what she supposed was his sympathetic look. He took out his pen, a cheap, white plastic instrument with the name of a pharmaceutical product emblazoned on the side in bold blue lettering, and started to write a prescription in one slick, well-practised movement. As he did so Mrs Caldicot found herself wondering if doctors had competitions to see which of them could draw a pen and write a prescription the fastest.

The doctor finished the prescription writing, put his pen away and handed the completed form to Veronica. `Just one tablet three times a day,' he murmured, speaking to Veronica as though unwilling to entrust Mrs Caldicot with these complicated and important instructions. `They'll help her behave a little more rationally.'

`I'll see that she takes them, doctor,' promised Veronica, accepting the prescription as though it were an award. Mrs Caldicot rather thought that her daughter-in-law might have curtsied had the doctor not thwarted this by picking up his unopened bag and heading speedily towards the door.

Mrs Caldicot turned back to look through the living room window and was glad she did so for the rain was now coming down more heavily than ever. She saw Derek, who was clearly soaked, slip and drop the bundle of canes he was holding, falling face down into the mud. It was, thought Mrs Caldicot, the most graceful thing he had ever done.

For the first time in many months Mrs Caldicot laughed out loud. Although the laugh did not last long, the incident cheered her up for a moment, and she could not help thinking how therapeutic a moment of laughter can be.

She realised with some sadness that it was the first time that her son had ever made her laugh, but underneath it she felt a sadness and despair. What she really wanted, she decided, was time to think and time to come to terms with what had happened, time to re-plan her life and time to think about the future.

But people seemed keen only to offer her advice; time was the one thing no one wanted to allow her.

CHAPTER NINE

Mrs Caldicot sat in the back of Derek's motor car and stared at the back of Veronica's neck trying to decide whether or not to be sick.

The tablets which the doctor had prescribed for her, and which Veronica and Derek had made sure that she had taken, had a number of unpleasant physical side effects among which indigestion, headaches, dizziness and nausea were most prominent. They had also made her feel extremely drowsy, and everything that had happened to her since she had started to take them had taken place in a thick mist which had slowed both her perceptions and her actions. Despite all these side effects the tablets had not affected Mrs Caldicot's colicky pains which remained as strong, as persistent and as unpredictable as ever.

The car stopped with a shudder and Mrs Caldicot, looking out through the rear window with dull eyes, recognised the front steps but could not remember precisely why.

`Come on, mother!' said Derek cheerily. He held open the car door and offered Mrs Caldicot his hand. Cautiously, hesitantly, Mrs Caldicot moved her legs and swung them out of the car. They felt as though they were separated in some way from the rest of her body and she watched them move with some surprise and a little relief. She felt overcome by physical tiredness, though she dimly realised, with some relief, that the intense almost suffocating feeling of dizziness which she had experienced a few moments earlier had subsided a little.

It seemed to take her an age to walk from the car to the bottom of the stone steps and another lifetime to climb them. By the time she, Derek, Veronica and Jason stood together outside the front door of The Twilight Years Rest Home Mrs Caldicot had become so depressed by her lack of strength and energy that she felt tears rolling down her cheeks. Through the sadness and the weakness and the mist in her mind she vowed to herself that she would take no more of the pills she had been given. Derek, seeing the tears streaming down his mother's cheeks turned away in embarrassment assuming, quite wrongly, that the tears were inspired either by apprehension or regret.

The rest of that day passed by Mrs Caldicot in a blur. It was almost as though her body had been taken over by someone else, and she was standing to one side watching as an only partly interested spectator.

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Much, much later, she awoke to find herself lying flat on her back in bed. She was aware that she could hear someone else in the room but she kept her eyes closed and lay still and silent, trying to get her bearings.

`Come on!' she heard someone say. `Time you were up! Breakfast in fifteen minutes.'

She opened her eyes. A large, shapeless woman in a white overall was standing by the side of her bed.

`Take this!' said the woman in the white overall, thrusting a capsule in Mrs Caldicot's direction.

Mrs Caldicot stared at it for a moment without moving.

`Open your mouth!' instructed the woman in the white overall.

Mrs Caldicot did as she was told and the woman in the white overall popped the capsule into her mouth before moving on to the next bed.

Carefully making sure that she did not swallow the capsule Mrs Caldicot watched the woman give something to each of the two other residents in the room, then open the door and leave. Only then did she spit the capsule into her hand, ease her stiff body out of bed, walk slowly across the room to the sink and wash the capsule away down the plughole.

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It took most of the day for the effects of the previous day's drugs to wear off, and by dinner that evening Mrs Caldicot was beginning to feel almost human again. She still had a mild headache, she still felt slightly nauseated and she still felt a little sleepy, but the worst of the thick mist had dispersed.

It had not, however, taken Mrs Caldicot that long to realise that The Twilight Years Rest Home was a considerably different place when seen through the eyes of a resident compared to when it was viewed through the eyes of a visitor.

Most noticeable was the enormous difference in the behaviour of the proprietor, Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor.

When Mrs Caldicot had been a prospective resident, accompanied by her family, Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor had attempted to give the impression of being a kindly, humane, fairly patient sort of fellow. But when Mrs Caldicot had become a resident Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor had become a very different character; all pretence at a generous, sensitive nature abandoned.

She spent the next morning sitting in the lounge. She did not know what she ate for lunch. Apart from half a plateful of pale and watery cabbage she found it impossible to identify the constituents of her meal.

In the afternoon she returned to the lounge where she sat in an uncomfortable communal silence; a silence broken only by the loud breathing of several residents who had temporarily escaped from drug-induced consciousness to drug-induced unconsciousness without apparently attracting any concern from Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor and his highly-trained staff.

And in the evening she returned to the dining room only to be repelled by an unrequested reprise of lunchtime's dominant and malodorous vegetable.

Feeling her stomach churning and her appetite gone Mrs Caldicot turned to leave the dining room and found herself being called back by Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor.

`Where are you going, mother?' called Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor, who used this term of reference when addressing all his female residents (strangely and unevenly he referred to the men as `dad').

For a moment Mrs Caldicot, who was not sure that Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor was addressing her, failed to respond. She quite rightly assumed that even if he was talking to her he was using this familial form of address solely because he could not be bothered to remember her name; and her dignity, although it had been threatened, savaged and beaten had not yet been dissembled.

Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor repeated himself, speaking if anything a little louder than before. He spoke to his residents in the same way that Veronica Caldicot would speak to a foreigner: assuming that all misunderstandings and communication failures could be remedied simply by turning up the volume.

Mrs Caldicot turned and stared at him coldly. For years and years she had been put upon, talked down to, bullied and pushed around. She had spent her life doing what other people wanted her to do, and saying what she felt other people expected her to say. She suddenly felt angry and indignant and realised that she had nothing to lose.

Later, she wondered if the remnants of the drugs had influenced her at that moment; covering up her overdeveloped sense of social obedience and releasing the tiger within her which had lain dormant for so many years.

`Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor,' she thought and said, `I don't want to eat your cabbage. Moreover, to the best of my knowledge I am not your mother and I would, therefore, be grateful if you would stop calling me `mother'.' She paused briefly to allow her words to sink in. `My friends call me Thelma but you can call me Mrs Caldicot.'

She thought and said!

She said!

For a brief moment Mrs Caldicot was not even sure that she had said what she had thought. She was so accustomed to thinking things but not saying things that for an instant she did not realise that she had actually shared her private thoughts with the obnoxious Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor. For years she had been inhibited, frustrated and thwarted by a husband who had filled her life like stale, stuffy air fills a room the morning after a party. Even after he had gone, her husband's influence had clung to her like a pall of cigarette smoke. She waited for her colicky abdominal pains to begin.

Then, the moment the look on Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor's face confirmed that she had indeed said what she had thought, Mrs Caldicot felt herself blushing deeply. Never before had she defended herself with such certainty. Never before had her spirit and her body united in such a single minded display of solidarity. Her heart beat faster and faster until she feared that it would burst from her chest. She felt the tiny hairs on the back of her neck stand up. Her palms felt damp and clammy. She had always kept her thoughts to herself; every emotion she felt, every instinct for self defence, had always been overshadowed by an overpowering sense of obedience, an unwillingness to disappoint or upset those around her and a matching desire to please. She made a vow not to waste any more of her life on mealy mouthed compromises and hypocrisy, on social courtesy and dishonest politesse.

Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor stared at her for several moments, clearly unaccustomed to being spoken to in such a manner and just as clearly quite uncertain about what to say in response. He opened his mouth for an instant, as though about to quell this rebellious mischief maker with a neatly crafted barb. But although his mouth was open no sound came from it. Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor was, quite literally, lost for words.

And then, to both Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor's and Mrs Caldicot's surprise, the other residents, at least all of the ones who had overheard this very one-sided exchange, burst into a spontaneous round of applause. It was not, it is true, the sort of applause that you are likely to hear at Lord's Cricket Ground on a balmy summer's afternoon when a batsman has scored a spectacular century. But then the audience was severely disadvantaged, both in terms of numbers and physical ability. It takes two healthy arms and two healthy hands, preferably with the requisite number of fingers, to produce a decent burst of applause, and the residents of The Twilight Years Rest Home were almost unanimously deprived of these essential physical constituents. Still, they did their best with their arthritic fingers, wrists and elbows, and those enthusiasts who were unable to applaud in the usual way banged their walking sticks on the floor or scratched their walking frames backwards and forwards. They had been mistreated and deprived of their dignity by Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor, and Mrs Caldicot's moment of rebellion had brought them together in a glorious spirit of revolution.

Normally, at precious moments like this, there is a temptation to spoil the perfection; to try to add another layer to the card house. But Mrs Caldicot, as though naturally aware that another word from her would have turned the put-down into a mere conversational gambit, resisted the temptation to say anything else. Instead she turned and, head held high, headed for the stairs and the relative seclusion, privacy and safety of her one third of The Windsor Suite.

She sat in her room and thought of all the times she had said (or thought) `I wish I had done that' or `If only...' and then she thought of all the times she had said `I wish I hadn't done that' or `I wish I hadn't said that' and she realised that the regrets from the former far outweighed the regrets from the latter.

She also realised, with some surprise, that she had suffered no pains in her abdomen. Her colic seemed to have been banished by her honesty. To her surprise and delight it did not return.

CHAPTER TEN

Mrs Caldicot, who had become something of a heroine to the residents of The Twilight Years Rest Home (but a dangerous anarchist to the proprietor), quickly found that she had now burnt her boats, destroyed her bridges and cut off her retreat. She had made her bed and now she had to lie on it (or, more commonly, at least during the daytime hours, sit on it).

`I suppose you think you're clever,' hissed Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor, bursting into The Windsor Suite a few minutes after Mrs Caldicot's memorable defiance and looking for all the world like a stage villain in a children's pantomime as he glowered at her.

`It's all relative,' thought and said Mrs Caldicot, now freed of her reluctance to speak, `Compared to Einstein I'm not clever.' She shrugged. `But...'.

`Don't you try to get the better of me!' threatened Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor, waving a podgy finger. `If you do you'll soon find out who's the boss around here.'

Mrs Caldicot smiled at him, raised an eyebrow and turned away. The message was clear. Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor left.

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Mrs Caldicot pounced on Derek and Veronica when they arrived to see her that first evening. (Jason had come with them but, thought Mrs Caldicot, only in the sort of way that a bad odour will follow its human source).

`Where's Kitty?' Mrs Caldicot demanded. `And what have you done to my house? What about all my furniture? My clothes? And everything else?'

`Now don't you worry about a thing, mother,' said Derek, closing his eyes in that way that people do when they are embarrassed and don't want to look at the person they are talking to. He held up what he thought was a calming hand. `Everything,' he said with a glorious overstatement, `is under control. I've put the house on the market and we've organised an auction for your furniture.'

Mrs Caldicot knew that if Derek was in charge, `control' was not a word to be used without a considerable number of qualifications, and so she was not to be easily distracted from her investigation. `Who gave you permission to sell my house?' she wanted to ask. `Who said you could sell my furniture?'

`Where is Kitty?' she demanded firmly, putting first things first.

`Kitty is fine,' said Veronica, who was wearing a black and yellow houndstooth check suit, a pink man-made fibre scarf and a pillar box red hat. `She's in a lovely home too.'

`Where?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

`The Sleepy Pussy Cattery,' replied Veronica. `It's very expensive so it must be good.' She twisted her mouth as she said this, giving the clear impression that she considered the price that was being paid for Kitty's welfare to be absurdly wasteful and Mrs Caldicot knew in her heart that if Veronica was left in charge she would soon find an excuse to take Kitty on a one way trip to see the veterinary surgeon.

`And that,' said Mrs Caldicot rejoicing in her new found freedom of expression and wondering why she had spent so many years thinking things and not saying them, `just about sums you up, Veronica!' Mrs Caldicot had never liked Veronica much and found her ready willingness to equate price with quality a suitable indictment of her intelligence.

`I want Kitty here, with me,' she said, firmly.

Veronica, deflated by this unexpected firmness, stepped backwards a pace and opened her mouth as though she had entered a fly catching contest. Mrs Caldicot thought that her daughter- in-law's response reminded her very much of that of Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor.

`Oh good heavens, mother!' said Derek. `You can't have a cat living with you in a hospital.'

`This isn't a hospital!' Mrs Caldicot pointed out. `When you first brought me here you told me quite specifically that it wasn't a hospital. What's more it doesn't smell like a hospital and it isn't run like a hospital.'

`I don't think it would be fair to the other patients to bring a cat here,' said Veronica, who had made a temporary recovery and was now speaking in what she clearly thought was a whisper, though as a whisper it would have been more at home on a stage than in a boudoir.

`Oh do shut up, Veronica!' said Mrs Caldicot, surprising herself yet again.

`I'll see what Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor has to say,' sighed Derek, heading for the door.

`If I stay here I'm having Kitty here to live with me,' said Mrs Caldicot. `She can have a litter tray in our room and she won't be any bother to anyone else.'

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After that bold and successful stance Mrs Caldicot decided to spend her time in her room getting to know her companions a little better.

The two other beds in The Windsor Suite were occupied by Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough. Miss Nightingale was the elderly, bed bound lady needing a bedpan whom Mrs Caldicot had seen on her first visit. Mrs Peterborough was an unremittingly talkative woman; a physically much more robust individual than Miss Nightingale who, as the result of some mysterious, cortical disorder had acquired a personality like a piece of blotting paper.

Mrs Caldicot had originally assumed that Miss Nightingale spent her days as well as her nights in bed because of some physical disability, but this was not the case. Miss Nightingale, was, like so many elderly people (and Miss Nightingale, having enjoyed her eightieth birthday some months previously was not shy about describing herself as elderly) a mild, modest and innocent victim of a disease which used to be known as senile dementia but which is now more usually classified (with the appropriate enhancement of status) as Alzheimer's Disease.

The two main consequences of Miss Nightingale's disability were confusion and memory loss, though the problems created by these symptoms were exacerbated enormously by their unpredictability. One moment Miss Nightingale would talk cogently and wittily about the decline in the status and morals of the British Royal Family while the next she would slip back into some childhood drama and lose all contact with reality; it was as though she were forever playing some large as life game of snakes and ladders, clambering up ladders to momentary sanity and then sliding down snakes into temporary insanity while fate threw the dice for her.

These unpredictable mental forays worried the establishment at The Twilight Years Rest Home and, arguing that they regarded Miss Nightingale's mental condition as potentially disturbing for the other residents Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor and his staff kept her constantly sedated and effectively imprisoned with a confusion of powerful tranquillisers and sedatives.

Suspecting that Miss Nightingale's physical weakness was probably a consequence rather than a cause of the long hours she spent in bed, and knowing from her own experience that the tranquillising tablets she had been given had weakened her spirit, muddled her mind and muddied her capacity for clear thinking, Mrs Caldicot decided to try to resuscitate her elderly roommate by helping her to stop taking her medication.

Mrs Caldicot had stopped taking her pills the day she had entered the rest home, and although the nursing auxiliaries still gave her pills, which she took from them with a suitably blank smile, she regularly washed them down the plug hole of the bedroom wash basin.

She now set about the task of helping Miss Nightingale to escape from her pharmacological imprisonment. To do this was easier than she had expected. She ingratiated herself with the auxiliaries who were eager to hand over one of their tedious chores and to escape to their rest-room a few minutes earlier than planned to enjoy an illicit cigarette and a gossip about the comings and doings of the latest television celebrities. The auxiliaries were to start with suspicious of Mrs Caldicot after her outburst outside the dining room, but they were at the same time secretly pleased that their tyrannical employer had been put in his place and they did not mind making friends with his conqueror. Within three days of arriving at the rest home Mrs Caldicot had taken on the responsibility for giving Miss Nightingale all her pills. This meant that several times a day a colourful mixture of tablets and capsules were washed down the wash basin plug hole.

Mrs Caldicot found that the hardest part of her enterprise was persuading Miss Nightingale to pretend that she was still under the influence of her pills.

As the mist of drug-induced depression lifted from her mind Miss Nightingale grew gradually more and more lively and increasingly alert. Instead of lying still in her bed, as inert and as full of sparks as a rubber hot water bottle, Miss Nightingale began to waken, as though from a deep slumber.

Mrs Caldicot quickly found that one way to suppress Miss Nightingale's newly found propensity to chatter incessantly and unpredictably about anything and everything was to tire her out; to exhaust her physically so that she fell into a genuine sleep at night. To do this she conducted impromptu exercise classes in The Windsor Suite. At first, Miss Nightingale could not stand without help, but within two days she could walk by herself and within a week she could perform a determined and spirited, if slightly uncoordinated, jig to the music that Mrs Caldicot played on her small tape player.

Miss Nightingale loved these simple exercises and although she may not have the sort of reliable intellect, regard for temporal or spatial rules or sense of logical continuity that one would normally expect in, say, an accountant or a judge, Mrs Caldicot could see that Miss Nightingale was coming back to life. The third resident of The Windsor Suite, Mrs Peterborough, whose daily medication had been similarly hi-jacked by Mrs Caldicot, also enjoyed these impromptu exercise classes.

Mrs Peterborough's mental condition was, in some ways, potentially far more disturbing for the residents than Miss Nightingale's, but neither Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor nor the medical advisers who regularly visited the home to hand out prescriptions for newer and ever more powerful pharmacological truncheons, had yet managed to find anything strong enough to quell her mental status without at the same time rendering her completely unconscious (this was considered an unacceptable alternative, not because of any respect for Mrs Peterborough's rights but because unconscious patients need very concentrated nursing care, and very concentrated nursing care costs a lot of money).

Each one of us has a personality which we and our friends grow to recognise. Most of us wake up each morning knowing who we are and roughly how we will respond to the people and the problems we meet.

This was not, however, the case with Mrs Peterborough. She woke each morning with no fixed personality but with a fresh, blank canvas upon which would be painted a series of personality caricatures derived entirely from her worldly experiences and mirroring, often with unerring accuracy, the personalities and moods of people whom she encountered. The stronger the personality or the more determined the mood she encountered the more Mrs Peterborough was likely to adopt it. If someone was cruel to her she would be cruel to them. If someone was kind to her she would be kind to them. Everyone who came into contact with her reaped exactly as they sowed; although some confusion was created by the fact that if she watched television Mrs Peterborough would quickly adopt the personality of the most powerful character on the screen. Life with Mrs Peterborough was made even more complicated by the fact that she had a habit of repeating everything that was said to her. She was a vocal mirror; a human tape recorder set constantly on record and replay.

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Next door to The Windsor Suite was The Duchy of Cornwall Suite, shared by Mr Hewitt and Mr Livingstone.

Mr Hewitt was 92-years-old and proud of it. He had worked as a gardener all his adult life and had only stopped working when his granddaughter and her husband, who were both solicitors, had decided that he was too old to work. Ignoring his protests they had written to his employer warning him of the dangers of employing such an elderly pensioner, had ended his tenancy of a cottage on a nearby estate and had placed him in The Twilight Years Rest Home. They had even sold his beloved gardening tools (though Mr Hewitt had rescued a small trowel, a hand fork and a wooden dibber and he kept these three instruments, oiled and wrapped in a piece of dark green canvas, in the bottom of his bedside locker).

Mr Hewitt desperately missed managing a garden and had, he told Mrs Caldicot, on several occasions begged Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor to be allowed to dig up and cultivate a small portion of the lawn around the home. Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor had summarily rejected these entreaties claiming that relatives wouldn't pay him good money if they saw old people getting sweaty and dirty in the garden.

`But I like getting sweaty and dirty,' protested Mr Hewitt to Mrs Caldicot. `It's what I do best!'

Compared to Mr Hewitt, Mr Livingstone was a mere youngster, having recently celebrated his 75th birthday. Mr Hewitt had been at work for five years when his junior room-mate had been born.

At heart Mr Livingstone was a musician.

He had not, however, earned his living as a musician because his wife, a nervous sort long since passed away, had never thought a career in a jazz band a stable enough way to bring up three children and pay the household bills. And so for fifty years Mr Livingstone, a loyal and selfless husband and father, had spent the best waking hours of his life working as a wages clerk for a factory making cardboard boxes.

But in his heart he always thought of himself as a musician and still described himself as such when anyone bothered to ask. He could play the piano, the flute, the trombone and the drums, but Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor would not allow him to practise any of these instruments because, he said, the noise might prove disturbing. Even when the other residents made it clear that they didn't mind the noise Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor remained unmoved, unmoving and unmoveable. Deprived of the chance to make music Mr Livingstone was slowly drifting into a slough of despair.

And so, it was in this way that Mrs Caldicot passed her first few weeks in The Twilight Years Rest Home: getting to know and to love her new friends. She felt fitter, stronger and happier than she had for years.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor didn't like Mrs Caldicot and would not willingly have done her any favours. When he had reluctantly agreed to allow Mrs Caldicot to keep her cat in The Windsor Suite he had done so only because he was primarily a businessman and his affection for money outweighed his pride and yearning for vengeance. He didn't want to risk calling Mrs Caldicot's bluff and seeing her leave the nursing home.

But he knew that he only had to be patient and his time would come. And he did not have to wait very long.

A month after Mrs Caldicot (and Kitty) had moved into The Twilight Years Rest Home Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor was approached by another family looking for somewhere for an elderly female relative to stay. Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor knew that this was the moment he had been waiting for; having another potential resident to fill Mrs Caldicot's bed gave him a chance to be tough without having to risk any financial loss.

`I allowed you to keep your cat in the suite for a trial period,' he said to Mrs Caldicot. `But I'm afraid that the trial period is over and the cat will have to go.'

Mrs Caldicot was shocked but not entirely surprised. `You didn't say anything about a trial period,' she protested, accurately.

`I want the cat out by tomorrow night,' said Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor, ignoring Mrs Caldicot's protest.

`Have there been any complaints?' asked Mrs Caldicot, knowing full well that there hadn't been.

`I'm afraid I can't answer that,' said Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor coldly and pompously. `It would be a breach of confidence.'

`And just where is Kitty supposed to go?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor shrugged. `I don't care where she goes,' he said callously. `You can send her to a cattery or have her put down by the vet for all I care. But I don't want her here.' And with that he turned and stalked off. `Don't forget,' he added, turning his head as he walked away, `I want the cat out by tomorrow night.'

Mrs Caldicot, who had shivered with anger and horror at the phrase `put down by the vet' stared after him. `If she goes then I go,' she said loudly and firmly. She had long ago weighed up Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor accurately. She believed that he was far too greedy to risk losing her weekly cheque, and she felt certain that she had the upper hand. Sadly, for her, she had no way of knowing that there was another potential resident waiting to take her place and that, therefore, her threat was an empty one.

Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor retraced his steps so that he was standing no more than a yard or two away from Mrs Caldicot. `Fine,' he said, clearly savouring the moment. `Please vacate your room by noon tomorrow.'

To say that this both shocked and startled Mrs Caldicot would be an understatement of heroic proportions. Although she did not like The Twilight Years Rest Home the truth was that Mrs Caldicot had nowhere else to go. Her son, Derek, had put her house on the market even before she had left it; the furniture had been sold at auction and her few remaining private possessions were now stored in a trunk in Derek and Veronica's garage.

But Mrs Caldicot was not going to let Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor know that his calling of her bluff had discomforted her. `It will be my pleasure,' she said with apparent sincerity, fervently hoping that Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor could not hear her pounding heart and praying that whatever happened she would not collapse in front of him. `If the shock of this has to kill me,' she prayed silently, `please let me survive until I've got out of this place. I don't want to give Fuller-Hawksmoor the satisfaction of knowing that he's upset me.'

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`But you can't go!' sobbed Miss Nightingale, when Mrs Caldicot told her that she and Kitty were leaving. With Mrs Caldicot's help Miss Nightingale had made enormous progress, and although she had still not ventured outside The Windsor Suite she had become physically independent. She was still forgetful and occasionally confused and she wandered freely through time but instead of being a bed-bound lunatic she was now merely a rather eccentric and frail old lady.

`You can't go! You mustn't go!' said Mrs Peterborough, mimicking Miss Nightingale and bursting into tears.

`I've got to leave,' insisted Mrs Caldicot quietly. She was holding Kitty who was purring contentedly in her arms.

She still had no idea where she would go but for the moment that was the least of her problems. She walked across to the television set, switched it on and flicked through the channels until she found the calming and reassuring face of a woman presenting an anodyne programme made by brain dead producers for brain dead housewives. The television repair man had managed to get a picture out of the elderly set but he hadn't managed to find all the colours; the result was that everything and everyone on the screen appeared to be suffering from a rather severe case of sunburn. Mrs Caldicot adjusted the volume so that it could only just be heard and put a kindly arm around Mrs Peterborough's shoulders. `Sit and watch this!' she murmured, knowing from experience that Mrs Peterborough would soon match the mood of the soothing presenter. Once, before she had realised just how closely Mrs Peterborough's moods and emotions mirrored those which she saw, she had left her watching a Tom and Jerry cartoon. She had come back to find Mrs Peterborough sitting grinning in the middle of the floor surrounded by torn bedclothes, broken bric a brac and many other signs of mayhem. She had, since then, been careful to make sure that she never left Mrs Peterborough watching any cartoon programmes or any programmes which contained any elements of violence or unpredictability. She put Kitty down on the bed and started gathering together her few belongings, packing them into a battered blue cardboard suitcase which she had pulled out from underneath her bed.

`But you're my friend!' said Miss Nightingale, sitting sadly on the edge of her own bed and moodily banging her heels onto the carpet. `What on earth will I do without you?'

`Add two spoonfuls of olive oil and a splash of vinegar,' nodded Mrs Peterborough faithfully, carefully watching the television presenter and even managing to sound uncannily like her.

`What about my exercises?' asked Miss Nightingale, plaintively. `I like doing my exercises!'

`I'll show you how to work the tape player and you can do them by yourself,' promised Mrs Caldicot.

`It won't be the same,' insisted Miss Nightingale, miserably.

`Stir the mixture well and put it into a warm oven for twenty minutes,' said Mrs Peterborough, nodding happily and smiling vacuously.

`I wanted you to come home with me in the summer holidays to meet my parents,' said Miss Nightingale sadly.

`Mmmmm!' said Mrs Peterborough. `And the finished dish smells and tastes absolutely wonderful - especially with a slice of garlic bread!' She licked her lips and smiled back at the screen.

`That's kind of you,' said Mrs Caldicot, who knew that Miss Nightingale's parents had both been dead for thirty years. `Another time, maybe?'

`And now we're going to see what Amanda has got for us this week,' said Mrs Peterborough.

`You've been such a good friend to me,' said Miss Nightingale, who had started to cry again. `No one else would ever share their tuck box but you always would.'

`We'll see each other again,' said Mrs Caldicot reassuringly. She sat down beside Miss Nightingale and put her arm around her. `In the holidays,' she added hopefully.

`I wish you didn't have to go,' sobbed Miss Nightingale. She suddenly looked confused. `What holidays?' she asked. `Are we going on holiday? To Tenby?'

`Hello! I'm Amanda!' said Mrs Peterborough, sounding like a bright and high-spirited 18-year-old. `I've been to Staffordshire to meet a man who trains women how to defend themselves against attackers! He's going to show me how to throw a fourteen stone man over my shoulder!'

Miss Nightingale stopped crying. `I've had a wonderful idea!' she said, brightly. `I'll come with you!'

Mrs Caldicot stood up, walked quickly over to the television set and switched channels.

Kitty leapt into Mrs Caldicot's open suitcase and started treadling on a couple of jumpers.

`....e.x.t.e.r.m.i.n.a.t.e...e.x.t.e.r.m.i.n.a.t.e...' said Mrs Peterborough, mimicking a Dalek on a re-run of an old Dr Who programme. `We will e.x.t.e.r.m.i.n.a.t.e. you...'

`Click!' as Mrs Caldicot switched channels.

`Have you seen my suitcase?' asked Miss Nightingale, down on her hands and knees and looking underneath her bed.

`...one move out of you and you're dead!' said Mrs Peterborough, gruffly, narrowing her eyes to guard against the desert sun and holding her right hand an inch above her gun holster.

`Click!' as Mrs Caldicot switched channels.

`I don't want to take any of my rubbish with me anyway,' said Miss Nightingale, slumping down on her bed, already weary of the search. `Where are we going?' she asked brightly.

`...the gardens on Tresco are among the most wonderful and peaceful in the world, especially at this time of the year,' said Mrs Peterborough soothingly. `Look at this wonderful example of the Sparmannia africana! I've got one at home growing in a small pot. Here they've got one that is three metres high!'

Mrs Caldicot sighed and moved away from the television set. `You can't come with me, Miss Nightingale!' she said quietly. `I'm sorry!'

Kitty miaowed in complaint as Mrs Caldicot lifted her out of the suitcase so that she could carry on with her packing.

`It's very sad,' said Miss Nightingale.

`Now we're going over to Samantha back in the studio,' said Mrs Peterborough. `She's going to show us this season's range of super new lipsticks.'

CHAPTER TWELVE

Mrs Caldicot fully intended to leave The Twilight Years Rest Home quietly and with dignity.

At ten o'clock the following morning she walked down the stairs of the home with her blue cardboard suitcase in her left hand and Kitty's basket in her right.

But her departure didn't go quite the way she expected.

Miss Nightingale was the first to follow her. She had wrapped herself in a pink woollen dressing gown which had tiny yellow flowers on the breast pocket, slipped into her only pair of outdoor shoes and, carrying her handbag, tip-toed down the stairs behind Mrs Caldicot. In the handbag she had carefully and thoughtfully packed her alarm clock, a roll of soft toilet paper, three humbugs and a slice of bread which she had found in her bedside locker.

Behind Miss Nightingale came Mrs Peterborough.

She too was wearing her dressing gown and a pair of outdoor shoes but she couldn't find her handbag and so, instead, she was carrying an empty metal kidney dish.

As this small and rather bizarre procession reached the bottom of the stairs Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor appeared as if from nowhere (though in truth he had been skulking in the dining room waiting to make sure that Mrs Caldicot really did leave) and stood in front of Mrs Caldicot with his arms folded across his chest.

`So!' he said, `You're leaving!'

`We are!' said Mrs Caldicot firmly.

`We?' said Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor, suddenly looking worried. `What do you mean by `we'?'

`Kitty and I,' said Mrs Caldicot.

`And me!' piped up Miss Nightingale, `I'm going with her!'

`And me!' mimicked Mrs Peterborough. `I'm going with her!'

Mrs Caldicot, who had not been aware that her two room-mates had been following her and who was startled by this new development, was speechless. Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor, seeing his income about to fall dramatically, was not. `No you're jolly well not!' he shouted angrily, and this was his downfall, for his loudly voiced anger provoked an immediate, noisy and attention-attracting response from Mrs Caldicot's acolytes.

`You can't stop us!' said Miss Nightingale, defiantly.

`You can't stop us! You jolly well can't!' shouted Mrs Peterborough, getting slightly confused but managing, nevertheless, to stay within the spirit of the conversation. Her voice carried considerably further than that of Miss Nightingale.

`Mrs Caldicot's leaving!' cried someone standing unseen above them on the staircase.

`They're leaving!' shouted someone else.

`We're all leaving!' said Miss Nightingale.

`We're all leaving!' shouted Mrs Peterborough.

`We're all leaving!' shouted a third unseen patient.

`Wait for me!' shouted a fourth. `I want to come too.'

`If Mrs Caldicot is going I'm going too,' said Mr Hewitt, rushing back to The Duchy of Cornwall Suite to collect his precious parcel of gardening tools.

`Wait for me!' cried Mr Livingstone.

Within moments The Twilight Years Rest Home was full of elderly patients rushing around in their pyjamas and their nightdresses looking for dressing gowns and shoes and handbags and suitcases and shouting to Mrs Caldicot to wait for them and shouting at Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor who was screaming at them to tell them they couldn't leave. Mrs Caldicot had become more than just a friend to all of these old people; she had become a symbol of hope. They liked her, they trusted her and they had faith in her. She was the only person in the home who had ever had the courage to stand up to Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor's bullying and they admired and respected her for that.

`Oh dear,' said Mrs Caldicot, to no one in particular. `Oh dear me.' She started to move towards the front door but the anguished cries of `Wait for me!' and `Don't go yet!' which filled the hallway and echoed up and down the staircase halted her.

`But you can't come with me,' said Mrs Caldicot to Miss Nightingale. `I don't know where I'm going!'

`I don't want to stay here by myself,' insisted Miss Nightingale.

`I don't want to stay here by myself,' echoed Mrs Peterborough.

`You can't come out into the cold dressed like that,' said Mrs Caldicot sensibly. `You'll catch your death of cold!'

`I've got a coat!' said Miss Nightingale. And with that she turned and ran back upstairs. `She said I can go with her if I put my coat on!' she shouted.

`I can go with her if I put my coat on!' shouted Mrs Peterborough gleefully following Miss Nightingale back upstairs.

`We can go with her if we put our coats on!' cried someone else, and a dozen septuagenarians and octogenarians rushed back up to their rooms to fetch their coats.

`You'll be responsible if anything happens to any of these people!' said Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor, a tiny fleck of spittle appearing at the corner of his mouth as he worked himself up into a considerable state of excitement.

`No I won't!' replied Mrs Caldicot. `They're all old enough to know what they're doing. And I didn't ask any of them to come with me.'

`I'm going to ring your son!' threatened Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor. `Let's see what he has to say about this!'

Mrs Caldicot, who regarded her son as about as threatening as the Sugar Plum Fairy, stared at Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor. The nursing home proprietor, quelled by the fierceness of Mrs Caldicot's glare, withered where he stood.

A few minutes later Mrs Caldicot, who had, if the truth be known, felt just a teeny bit alone and just a weeny, little bit afraid and uncertain when she had started her journey down the staircase towards the front door and freedom, left The Twilight Years Rest Home at the head of an untidy and straggling procession of chattering and excited escapees. The few residents who were physically incapable of leaving the building shouted encouragement from their beds and wheelchairs, and although they were sad at not being able to join the exodus they clearly shared the sense of excitement at what was going on.

Mrs Caldicot felt a strange mixture of embarrassment (not at heading such a motley crew but at being the instigator of such a momentous exodus) and pride (at having helped to liberate so many pensioners from their imprisonment) as she led her motley crew down the steps of the building. Some had managed to find their outdoor clothes and were fully dressed. Others had slipped their coats over their pyjamas and nightdresses. And a few were still dressed in their dressing gowns and slippers. Fortunately, it was neither wet nor cold.

`You can't do this!' shouted Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor to their backs. `You come back here! Don't you think for one minute that you'll get away with this! I won't let you in when you come scurrying back wanting your rooms again!'

`Goodbye, and good riddance you nasty little man!' shouted Mrs Caldicot, over her shoulder.

`Goodbye, and good riddance you nasty little man!' shouted Miss Nightingale.

`Goodbye, and good riddance you nasty little man!' echoed Mrs Peterborough.

`Goodbye, and good riddance you nasty little man!' shouted the twelve other residents who were trooping along behind them.

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Mrs Caldicot had formulated no clear plans for the future when she'd originally decided to leave The Twilight Years Rest Home. She had rather thought that she would just call a taxi, tell the driver to take her into town and then decide what to do next over a cup of coffee and a Danish pastry in the cafeteria on the top floor of the department store in the middle of town.

But telephoning for a taxi was now clearly impractical. (`I'd like a taxi, please.' `Where to?' `Into town.' `Certainly madam, how many passengers?' `Sixteen.' This did not have the ring of a conversation that was likely to prove profitable.) Mrs Caldicot also felt that her procession might be less than welcome in the department store cafeteria. She clearly had to make more immediate plans.

Half a mile down the road from The Twilight Years Rest Home Mrs Caldicot spotted the answer: a large hotel which specialised in catering for business executives.

Unhesitatingly, she led her procession of shuffling refugees through the car park, past the rows of Fords and Vauxhalls and BMWs, and into the lobby of the Mettleham Grand Hotel. A large group of besuited sales executives, about to start a meeting to launch a new breakfast cereal, were standing around in the lobby. They stared at Mrs Caldicot's procession. `It must be a marketing gimmick!' Mrs Caldicot heard one of them murmur.

`You sit down over there and wait for me!' Mrs Caldicot said firmly to Miss Nightingale, pointing to a group of luxurious, leather armchairs and sofas which were grouped around an artificial log fire.

`You sit down over there and wait for me!' said Mrs Peterborough firmly and much more loudly. She was, thought Mrs Caldicot, a useful aide-de-camp in these unusual circumstances.

Miss Nightingale and the rest of the procession shuffled over towards the cluster of leather chairs and sofas and obediently sat down while Mrs Caldicot, closely followed by the ever faithful Mrs Peterborough, headed for the reception desk.

`Can I help you, madam?' asked a rather startled looking young man, dressed in a dark suit and silver tie. He had a small brass name plate attached to his lapel but without her reading glasses Mrs Caldicot couldn't quite see what it said.

`I'd like some rooms, please,' said Mrs Caldicot. She put her handbag down on the reception counter.

`Some rooms, please!' echoed Mrs Peterborough. She put her kidney dish down on the reception counter next to Mrs Caldicot's handbag.

`How many rooms, madam?'

`Sixteen, please,' said Mrs Caldicot. `We'd like one each. All on the same floor.' She thought it would be a nice treat for everyone to have their own room for a change. Besides she didn't want to have to spend the rest of the day trying to work out who was going to share with whom.

`Sixteen, please,' said Mrs Peterborough.

`How long would that be for, madam?' asked the man on the reception desk, looking first at Mrs Caldicot and then at Mrs Peterborough and not knowing which to look at most. He glanced over towards the rest of the group.

`I'm not sure yet,' said Mrs Caldicot. `I'll let you know later on.'

`I'll let you know,' said Mrs Peterborough.

`Would it be possible to have a reduced rate?' asked Mrs Caldicot. `Since there are so many of us.'

`I beg your pardon, madam?' said the man on the reception desk, who genuinely hadn't heard.

`A reduced rate!' shouted Mrs Peterborough. `There are so many of us!'

`Of course, madam!' said the man on the reception desk apologetically. `Just one moment, please.' He scurried off to speak to the duty manager.

`I think they may be members of some strange religious group,' he whispered to the manager. `Some of them seem to be wearing dressing gowns and nightdresses.'

`Saris perhaps?' suggested the manager, who was proud of his broadminded and non-racist attitudes. `Maybe they're ethnic people?'

`I don't think they're ethnic,' said the man from the reception desk. `But they want a reduced rate.'

`Then they must be O.K.,' said the manager. `Jolly good. Put them on the twelfth floor.'

The man returned a moment later to the reception desk and smiled at Mrs Caldicot. `No problem, madam,' he smiled. `How will you be paying, madam?' he asked.

`I'll give you a cheque when we leave,' said Mrs Caldicot.

`Cheque.' said Mrs Peterborough firmly.

The man looked over the counter and, for the first time, saw Kitty. `Is that a cat, madam?' he enquired.

`Probably,' said Mrs Caldicot. `You don't charge extra for cats do you?'

`We don't allow cats at all, madam!' said the man sternly.

`I can't see any sign that says `No Cats',' said Mrs Caldicot politely but firmly.

The receptionist pointed to a small black and white sign behind him which clearly said: `No dogs allowed'.

`Do you think this is a dog?' asked Mrs Caldicot. `Does she look like a dog to you?'

`No, madam,' said the man.

`Well, then,' said Mrs Caldicot. `That's all right, isn't it?' And she and Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough and all the rest of them went up to their rooms.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It was never really clear exactly who told the local television station about Mrs Caldicot's dramatic exodus from The Twilight Years Rest Home.

It was certainly not Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor.

He had spent the rest of that fateful day gloomily jabbing at his calculator with a podgy finger, trying to work out how he could possibly stay in business. Publicity was the last thing he wanted.

And it wasn't Mrs Caldicot either.

Prior to her time at The Twilight Years Rest Home she had always regarded the television set as something that was useful for standing flowers on. During her time at The Twilight Years Rest Home she had regarded the television set primarily as a sedative for Mrs Peterborough. She would have no more thought of telephoning the TV station than she would have thought of taking scuba diving lessons.

It could have been one of Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor's staff members, rejoicing in his discomfiture and anxious to share his discomfort with as wide an audience as possible; it may have been someone from the Mettleham Grand Hotel; or it might just have been someone who had seen Mrs Caldicot's straggling procession trooping along the roadway between The Twilight Years Rest Home and the hotel.

Anyway, it doesn't really matter who tipped off the television station. The fact is someone did and as a result that afternoon a whole television crew turned up at the Mettleham Grand Hotel and asked to speak to the leader of the group of elderly people who had booked into the hotel earlier that day.

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By the time Mrs Caldicot had responded to the telephone call from the assistant deputy duty manager and had made her way downstairs, the camera crew had set up their equipment in the reception area and a man in the patterned sweater was re-arranging a vase of dried flowers so that they satisfied his acute sense of aesthetic perfection.

`Mrs Caldicot?' said a tall, statuesque blonde with piercing blue eyes, shoulder length hair and a smile that had persuaded politicians in all major parties to say far more than they had ever intended.

`What can I do for you?' asked Mrs Caldicot, nervously eyeing the camera crew.

`My name is Jacoranda Pettigrew. I'm a reporter from the local television station,' said the statuesque blonde, she indicated the chair that she wanted Mrs Caldicot to sit in.

`That's nice,' said Mrs Caldicot, obediently sitting down. Jacoranda, who wasn't easy to ignore or disappoint, sat down opposite her. As she settled herself down and waited for Jacoranda to speak Mrs Caldicot vividly remembered her last encounter with the media. It had been 55 years earlier. She had seen a milkman save a small girl from drowning in a local river. Despite the success of that meeting (which had resulted in her photograph appearing on page seven of her local newspaper) she was modest enough not to consider herself experienced in the matter of news interviews. She felt a frisson of uncertainty running up and down her spine.

`Will you talk to me for the camera?' asked Jacoranda, turning up her smile a couple of hundred watts.

`What on earth about?' asked Mrs Caldicot, guardedly.

`About where you and your friends have come from and what you're planning to do now,' replied Jacoranda, softly. `I know our viewers will be enthralled to hear what you have to say.' She could hear the sound engineer and the cameraman behind her adjusting their equipment and getting ready to start recording.

`Well, I don't know...' said Mrs Caldicot, uncertainly. `I've never done anything like this before.'

`You'll find that the sort of sympathetic publicity we can provide you with will be bound to help your cause,' said Jacoranda.

Mrs Caldicot, who hadn't really thought of herself as having a cause, couldn't help feeling that if she did turn out to have a cause then Jacoranda might well have a point. Anyway, she thought, surely the fact that she had never done anything like it before was a good reason for doing it now.

`O.K.,' she said, almost defiantly.

`That's wonderful!' murmured Jacoranda, patting Mrs Caldicot on the knee with a gesture which had in the past proved wonderfully effective when applied to the legs of middle aged men in grey suits. `Shall we start?' She turned and winked at the man in the patterned sweater who smiled back nervously and waved a hand telling the rest of the crew to start filming.

`Don't we have to rehearse?' asked Mrs Caldicot uncertainly.

`Not with you,' said Jacoranda, giving Mrs Caldicot another blast of her most dazzling smile. `I just know you're going to be absolutely wonderful!' She glanced briefly over her shoulder to make sure that the camera was running and then she asked her first question.

`Mrs Caldicot,' she said, `you arrived at the Mettleham Grand Hotel today at the head of a demonstration. Where did you come from?'

`I don't really know that you'd call it a demonstration,' said Mrs Caldicot. `But we've all come from `The Twilight Years Rest Home.'

`And you marched all the way here to protest?'

`I suppose it was more of a mass escape than a protest,' laughed Mrs Caldicot.

`Was that why so many of your fellow demonstrators were still in their dressing gowns and nightwear?'

`I suppose so,' nodded Mrs Caldicot. `We did come away in something of a hurry.'

`And why did you feel that you had to escape from The Twilight Years Rest Home?' asked Jacoranda.

`Well basically it was about Kitty,' said Mrs Caldicot.

`Kitty?' interrupted Jacoranda. `Is Kitty another of the demonstrators?'

`No. Kitty is my cat. Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor who runs the rest home said she couldn't stay and I thought she'd probably be taken to the vet's and put down so I decided to leave.'

`And all the other residents felt so strongly about it that they walked out in protest too?'

`I suppose that's right,' said Mrs Caldicot, who thought that if she tried to explain about Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough the whole story might get too complicated. `Though I must admit that wasn't the start of it all,' she continued. `The trouble really began with the cabbage.'

`Tell me about the cabbage,' said Jacoranda, who knew already that this interview was going to be a winner. There was, she felt, something about Mrs Caldicot which would appeal to the ordinary viewer.

`Well, they used to give us horrible, smelly cabbage,' said Mrs Caldicot. `But Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor - he's the proprietor - got cross when I didn't want to eat it.'

Jacoranda, realising that she now had a wonderful story with which to end the evening news programme, leant forward. `So,' she said, momentarily inspired, `this is really a war about cabbage that you're fighting!'

`I suppose it is,' agreed Mrs Caldicot uncertainly.

`Have you had to leave any of your friends behind?' asked Jacoranda, her voice full of sadness.

`Well, yes,' said Mrs Caldicot. `The ones who were bedbound or stuck in wheelchairs couldn't come with us.'

`Thank you, Mrs Caldicot,' said Jacoranda. She turned round to face the camera. `This is Jacoranda Bartholomew with Mrs Caldicot, safely escaped from the cabbage wars at The Twilight Years Rest Home and now staying in a secret hideout, preparing to fight to help her friends join her in freedom.'

`Cut! Cut!' said the man in the patterned sweater, waving his arms about and looking very excited. He rushed over to the two of them. `Jacoranda, darling that was marvellous!' he said, giving the air next to her cheek a tremendous kiss. `Absolutely marvellous!' He turned to Mrs Caldicot. `We must have a few pictures of you and Kitty,' he said, clapping his hands together and looking coy. `And I want all your lovely friends to come down here into the lobby in their nightdresses and pyjamas and dressing gowns and whatnots!' He clapped his hands gleefully, like a small boy who has been told that he can play with the matches. `Oh this is such a lovely story!' he said. `Such a lovely story!'

The film crew spent the next thirty minutes shooting pictures of Mrs Caldicot with Kitty on her lap and with Kitty sitting beside her on the sofa. Then when they'd done that they spent another hour taking pictures of Mrs Caldicot, Miss Nightingale, Mrs Peterborough and all the rest of the escapees walking down the driveway to the hotel and then walking in through the lobby and filling both the lifts.

`Oh what a lovely story!' said the man in the patterned sweater when he had finished. He gave the air next to Mrs Caldicot's cheek a big kiss. `You're an absolute natural, darling!' he said. `Absolute natural, isn't she Jacoranda sweetheart?'

`Absolute natural,' agreed Jacoranda, giving the fortunate Mrs Caldicot a final chance to admire two neat and symmetrical rows of perfectly capped teeth.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

`Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage Wars', as they quickly became known, immediately caught the public's imagination. Jacoranda Pettigrew's interview with Mrs Caldicot and the rest of The Twilight Years Rest Home refugees appeared on all that evening's news bulletins.

Within an hour of the first news programme finishing there was a queue of reporters from newspapers, magazines and radio stations waiting to talk to the woman who had led what one commentator had instantly and memorably called Britain's first `grey' revolution.

A man in a dark pinstripe suit who said he was from *The Sun*, a popular tabloid newspaper with a massive circulation, wanted to know Mrs Caldicot's twenty favourite non-cabbage recipes. A journalist in jeans and a sports jacket who wore his black hair slicked straight back and said he was from *The Times* wanted to know whether Mrs Caldicot thought that the use of cabbage was a socially divisive feature which only affected the economically deprived and was therefore a consequence of the advertising industry's obsession with youth. A girl in her early twenties who said that she was from *The Daily Mirror*, another tabloid newspaper, wanted to know whether or not Mrs Caldicot agreed that cabbage contained a variety of vitamins and minerals and was an excellent source of fibre. A lady feature writer who arrived dressed in a light grey suit and an Ascot hat and said she was from the *Daily Mail* wanted to know if Mrs Caldicot thought that her protest heralded the beginning of a major revolution among pensioners. A journalist in corduroy trousers and a jacket with leather patches on the elbows who said he was from a liberal newspaper called *The Guardian* was quite indignant about Mrs Caldicot's protest and wanted to know if Mrs Caldicot realised that according to his estimates the amount of cabbage wasted every day in British rest homes would feed the starving inhabitants of Somalia for a week. A girl journalist in a miniskirt and a baggy sweater who announced that she was from *The Independent* asked Mrs Caldicot whether she thought that the real blame for the problem lay with the farmers or the Economic Community's Common Agricultural Policy. A journalist in evening dress who apologetically explained that he had come from a dinner engagement and said he was from the *Financial Times* wanted to know if Mrs Caldicot realised that by her action she had threatened a major British industry. And a journalist in a grubby mackintosh from the *Daily Sport* wanted to know if Mrs Caldicot had any granddaughters who would be prepared to be photographed without any clothes on. A reporter from the local paper wanted to know how Mrs Caldicot's age, how long she had lived in the area and the names and addresses of all her relatives.

All of these reporters arrived with their own photographers in tow and Mrs Caldicot rapidly grew tired of posing either with Kitty or with Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough.

But, despite all this press interest, it was undoubtedly the call from the researcher asking if Mrs Caldicot would appear on the Mike Trickle Television Chat Show the following evening which promised to turn her into a real celebrity. The appearance on the Mike Trickle Television Chat Show was, however, still twenty four hours away and Mrs Caldicot had other more immediately pressing problems to face.

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At half past ten that evening, having watched herself on television for the third time and having dealt with all the reporters, Mrs Caldicot decided that she would pop in to see what the others thought of it all, and to check that they were all safely tucked up for the night.

Miss Nightingale hadn't seen the programme because she hadn't yet bothered to turn on her television set. She had, however, discovered the joys of room service and every flat surface in the room held a tray which was positively groaning with expensive looking delicacies.

`Look!' said Miss Nightingale, who had been unable to hide a temporary look of disappointment when she had opened the door to her room to find Mrs Caldicot instead of a waiter standing there, was soon excitedly taking Mrs Caldicot on a tour of her collection of delicacies.

There were: scrambled eggs on toast, a pot of Earl Grey tea with lemon, buttered crumpets and toast set on trays on top of the low coffee table in front of the sofa; fresh scones served with dairy cream and strawberry jam on a bedside table; egg and cress sandwiches, a bottle of claret with two glasses, chicken salad sandwiches, a pot of fresh coffee and a fresh melon on the writing table; thinly sliced fresh salmon with brown bread, a bottle of champagne in an ice bucket and pancakes with lemon and sugar on top of the television set; boiled eggs with fingers of toast, a double whisky, battered scampi and vegetable soup with croutons on trays on the bed; and a plateful of Danish pastries, a bottle of Taylor's vintage port, a dish of garlic bread and a plateful of spaghetti bolognaise on trays beside the sink in the bathroom.

`What on earth have you been doing?' asked Mrs Caldicot, horrified, when she all the food and drink that Miss Nightingale had ordered. Before Miss Nightingale could answer there was a loud knock on the bedroom door. Miss Nightingale hurried to answer it and moments later admitted a tall young man in a white coat who walked into the room carrying a large tray which he put down onto the bed next to the trays carrying the boiled eggs, the whisky, the scampi and the soup. He smiled broadly at Miss Nightingale and handed her a pad to sign. Then he thanked her, bowed very slightly and let himself out.

`Isn't it wonderful?' asked Miss Nightingale, excitedly, when he had gone. `I just pick up the telephone and tell them what they want and then POOF, like magic...' she waved her hands to indicate how easy it was to make the food appear.

`But all this food will cost a fortune!' protested Mrs Caldicot, looking around in horror.

`It doesn't cost anything!' insisted Miss Nightingale. `I didn't have to give them any money at all!' She leant forwards confidentially, `The young men bring it because they like me,' she whispered, `I think I must be famous because they all want my autograph!' She stopped and thought. `I don't remember why I'm famous,' she added. For a brief moment she looked thoughtful and slightly puzzled but this sign of confusion soon passed and was replaced by a smile.

Miss Nightingale was so excited by it all that Mrs Caldicot didn't have the heart to tell her off, or even to tell her that she mustn't order any more food from room service. As Mrs Caldicot left, Miss Nightingale picked up the telephone again and, using the extensive room service menu, began ordering a fresh seafood platter with brown bread and butter and a side order of French fries.

Mrs Peterborough in the room next door had not yet discovered the joys of room service but she had found out how to operate the television set.

After she had let Mrs Caldicot in, she rushed back into her room and sat down on the floor about two feet away from the set. She then had an increasingly agitated time as she watched a series of advertisements. (Mrs Caldicot usually switched over when the advertisements came on because she knew that their brevity and content confused Mrs Peterborough enormously. She had once watched her friend collapse in despair as she struggled to adopt the personality of a talking lavatory seat).

`I wouldn't swap my one packet of New Dazzle washing powder for two packets of my old powder,' said a pretty young actress, hugging a box of New Dazzle soap powder to her chest as though it were an expensive string of pearls.

`I wouldn't swap my one packet of New Dazzle washing powder,' promised Mrs Peterborough, hugging an imaginary box of soap powder to her chest. `I wouldn't!' she insisted. `No I wouldn't!' She looked across at Mrs Caldicot. `I wouldn't!' she promised.

`I know you wouldn't,' said Mrs Caldicot softly.

`You'll get a home not a house when you buy from Sherlock Homes!' said a fat man in a tightly fitting grey suit, holding his arms out wide. He was standing in the middle of a small, brand new housing estate and looking up at the camera which was clearly being operated from a helicopter high overhead. `And don't forget,' he shouted, as the helicopter hurtled skywards, `free carpets, free curtains and the best mortgage rate you can find!'

`A home not a house! Free carpets, free curtains and the best mortgage rate!' shouted Mrs Peterborough, struggling to match his enthusiasm. `The best mortgage rate you can find!' she cried, clearly overtaken by the excitement of it all. She peered at the television set, apparently looking for the salesman.

But he'd gone.

`I hate new Germ-o-blast,' muttered an evil sounding, slimy looking cartoon germ. The germ scowled as a woman carrying a plastic bottle of disinfectant approached. `Grrrrr!' said the germ, trying to hide under the rim of a lavatory bowl.

Mrs Peterborough shuddered in distaste. `I hate new Germ-o-blast!' she said, screwing up her mouth as though she'd been sucking a lemon. `Grrrrr!'

The woman took the top off her bottle and squirted a few ounces into the lavatory bowl.

`Aaaaargh!' screamed the cartoon germ. `This is the end for me!'

Mrs Peterborough screamed too and held her hands up to her face in horror.

Mrs Caldicot leant forward and switched to another channel. A beautiful young couple were making love in a wood.

`Oh, darling!' said the girl.

`Darling!' said the man.

`Oh, darling!' said Mrs Peterborough, the agony of a moment ago now forgotten and replaced by a look of tenderness and affection.

Mrs Caldicot tiptoed out of the room and left the three of them to enjoy their romance. She couldn't help wishing for just a moment that she could forget her worries and her sorrows as easily as Mrs Peterborough could.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

`Here comes Mike,' murmured Sally, the researcher, to Mrs Caldicot. They were sitting together in the rather grubby waiting room which the receptionist had rather grandly and misleadingly referred to as `The Green Room'. A scattered jumble of stiffening sandwiches were strewn over two large plates on a low table in the centre of the room and a coffee percolator spluttered and hissed on a metal trolley. A huge television set dominated the room.

The name of the room was misleading for the walls were painted blue, the furniture was brown and although the carpet was heavily patterned there was no green to be seen in it anywhere. The only thing in the room that was green was a modern, plastic telephone on a small wooden table by the door. It was, thought Mrs Caldicot, rather strange to name a room after the colour of a telephone. `Don't be nervous!' added Sally, a pretty young thing in her early twenties. She wore a pale lilac skirt and a white blouse, carried a huge sheaf of notes in a large cardboard folder and seemed desperately in need of her own advice. Mrs Caldicot thought Sally was probably the most nervous person she had ever met. `He's awfully nice!' Sally whispered with a shiver. Mrs Caldicot, who had been collected from the Mettleham Grand Hotel by taxi and told that she had to arrive at the studios three hours before `The Mike Trickle Chat Show' was due to start, was now very, very bored. She was fed up with talking to the researcher. Sally seemed to think that Mrs Caldicot was interested only in talking about nursing homes or listening to her boring anecdotes about the old people she had known. She was fed up with watching the endless stream of cameramen, soundmen and production assistants sneaking into the room to steal the sandwiches (a packet of chocolate biscuits which a white-coated canteen assistant had brought with the sandwiches had been broken into and distributed amongst the technicians within seconds of their arrival), and she was very fed up with watching the endless rehearsals for the evening's programme.

`Mike,' said Sally, clearly impressed by the presence of the great man and assuming that Mrs Caldicot would be too, `this is Mrs Caldicot.' She didn't do the introduction the other way round, clearly assuming that Mrs Caldicot would know who Mike Trickle was.

This was, of course, true for although Mrs Caldicot had never heard of Mike Trickle before the previous evening she had watched him carefully rehearsing his ad-libs for the worst part of three hours. Nevertheless, she could hardly believe that this was the same person.

The Mike Trickle whom she had been watching on the television had seemed urbane, relaxed, witty and handsome. But this Mike Trickle, the real one, was nervous and clearly agitated. He looked bad tempered and his smooth, healthy, slightly suntanned complexion had clearly come out of a jar; a very large jar thought Mrs Caldicot looking at the thick layer of cream which covered the TV star's cheeks and forehead. He was much shorter than he looked on the television screen and he had the worst case of halitosis that Mrs Caldicot had ever encountered. It was his hair which Mrs Caldicot found herself most fascinated by. The hair which had looked healthy and natural on the television screen now looked as healthy and as natural as a scouring pad. A new scouring pad, but nevertheless a scouring pad.

`Hello!' said Mike Trickle, briefly turning on his smile. He was accompanied by a pneumatic blonde who seemed to have been grafted or glued onto his arm. `It's great to have you on the programme. You had good cuttings this morning.' He turned the smile off as though to save the batteries.

`Nice to meet you,' said Mrs Caldicot, having difficulty in dragging her eyes away from the awful wig the man was wearing and wondering why no one told him how silly he looked. She hadn't yet got round to reading the morning's newspapers though Mike Trickle wasn't the first person to tell her that her story had appeared in them. `I've seen you on there,' she said, nodding towards the television monitor in the corner of the room. Mr Trickle did not realise that Mrs Caldicot was speaking literally but naturally assumed that she meant that she was a long time fan. In recognition of this he gave her another fifteen second burst of the smile. The blonde's smile seemed wired up to Mr Trickle's for when he smiled she smiled too. When he stopped smiling she stopped smiling. Mrs Caldicot suddenly noticed that the TV star also had what looked like a hearing aid in his right ear.

`It'll all be very straightforward,' said Mr Trickle, reassuringly. `I'll ask you about the cabbage and you just tell me what happened.' He seemed to think about smiling for a moment then changed his mind. He turned to Sally. `Have the Vandals turned up yet?' he asked her.

`I don't think so, Mike,' said Sally, apologetically. `I'll check with Peter.' She hurried off across the room towards the telephone.

`Damned pop group,' said Mike to Mrs Caldicot. `Have you heard of them?'

`Is it Vandals with a capital V?' asked Mrs Caldicot, speaking rather more loudly than usual, and as clearly as she could, so that the deaf celebrity could understand her.

`Yes. I suppose so,' replied Mike, instinctively moving his head backwards a few inches and wondering why Mrs Caldicot had suddenly started shouting.

`Then I don't think so,' said Mrs Caldicot, enunciating carefully in case Mr Trickle relied on lip reading.

`They've had two hits and of course they think they're superstars now,' said Mike. He decided that the old woman was probably batty. Accompanied by the sticky blonde he strode off towards the remains of the sandwiches, flicked through them as though leafing through the magazines in a dentist's waiting room and then slipped what looked like a piece of ham into his mouth. Sally put the telephone down, walked back across the room and said something to him. Mike didn't answer but just strode off angrily. The blonde's stiletto heels click clacked furiously on the corridor floor as she struggled to keep up with him.

`It's a shame about him being deaf,' said Mrs Caldicot when Sally returned faithfully to her side. It was clearly her job to keep Mrs Caldicot entertained.

`Deaf?' said Sally, puzzled.

`Mrs Caldicot leant towards her. `I saw the deaf aid,' she whispered.

`Oh!' laughed Sally, nervously. `That isn't a deaf aid. It's a tiny radio so that the director can talk to him.'

`Ah!' whispered Mrs Caldicot, nodding to show that she understood though she still didn't really understand why the director would want to talk to Mr Trickle while he was broadcasting. `And why doesn't his wife tell him not to wear that silly wig?'

`The wig?' said Sally, blanching and looking behind her to make sure that no one was listening.

`It's not a very good one, is it?' said Mrs Caldicot.

`Sshhh!' said Sally, holding a finger to her lips. `It's a big secret. How did you know about the wig?'

`I'd have to be blind not to know!' laughed Mrs Caldicot. `I've seen more convincing hair on a toothbrush.' `And that's not his wife,' added Sally, looking around to make sure that no one was listening. Since apart from Mrs Caldicot and herself the only other occupants of the room were the sandwiches her fears were unfounded.

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Thirty minutes later Sally took Mrs Caldicot into the make- up department where a nice young lady with a lot of frizzy red hair filled in her wrinkles, livened up her eyebrows and painted her lips a rather ferocious shade of red.

Then Sally took Mrs Caldicot along to the studio where she wished her all the very best of luck and handed her over to a girl in blue jeans and a T-shirt who wore a pair of headphones with a microphone attached and who introduced herself as Jenny. Jenny took Mrs Caldicot behind a large piece of painted scenery where the floor was covered with huge thick cables and told her to wait there and to be quiet. A voice suddenly crackled faintly in the headphones she was wearing and Jenny apologised and hurried off. Mrs Caldicot peered around the edge of the scenery and could see a small audience sitting quietly in their seats waiting for the show to start. She wondered how long they'd had to wait and then she realised that she wanted to spend a penny.

She retraced her steps, said `Hello!' to three men in jeans and plaid shirts, slipped out through a door marked `Exit' and found herself in a corridor which she didn't recognise and which seemed to stretch forever and ever. She walked down it for a minute or so, passing several doorways on her way, and eventually found a door marked Ladies.

When she came out a minute or two later she couldn't remember which way she'd come so she followed her instincts and turned left. After she had walked for another hundred yards she realised that she had gone the wrong way and so she turned right when she saw an illuminated sign which said Studio.

When she got to the studio she opened the door cautiously. The room was deserted and was clearly not the one she had left a few moments earlier. She intended to retrace her steps but once again she took the wrong turning and quickly realised that she was well and truly lost.

Mrs Caldicot decided that if she kept walking she would be bound to find someone who could help her find her way back to the right studios and so she continued her journey around the labyrinth of corridors.

`Excuse me!' she said, politely to a man who was wearing a dark blue uniform and had the word Security printed on his chest and his hat. He seemed to be guarding a door.

`What are you doing there?' demanded the man, rather aggressively.

`I'm lost,' said Mrs Caldicot. `Can you tell me how I find the studio where the Mike Trickle show is being broadcast from?'

The security guard frowned and looked at his watch. `It's due to go live on air in three minutes,' he said. `I think you're probably too late now.'

`Oh dear,' said Mrs Caldicot. `What a pity.'

`Go out through this door,' said the guard, relenting and feeling sorry for her. `Walk along the street for two hundred yards and you'll come to the main entrance. They may just let you slip in at the back of the audience.'

Mrs Caldicot followed his instructions and walked along the street to the main entrance. `Hello!' she said to the man guarding the main entrance. `Can you tell me how to get to the studio where they are broadcasting the Mike Trickle show?'

The security guard shook his head and sucked air in through his teeth. `I think you've missed it, love,' he said, sadly. He looked at his watch. He examined a list of names in front of him. `What's your name?'

`Mrs Caldicot,' replied Mrs Caldicot.

The guard looked up. `Thelma Caldicot?'

`Yes!' smiled Mrs Caldicot.

`Oh my God!' said the guard. `They're going mad up there looking for you! Where have you been?' He picked up a telephone and dialled a three digit number. `She's here!' he said. `Yes! Mrs Caldicot.' He listened for a moment and then put the telephone down. `Wait here!' he said. He came out of his cubicle, lifted a large key from a ring on his belt and locked the entrance door so that no one could sneak in while he was gone and then headed off into the depths of the building. `Follow me!' he cried over his shoulder. Hurrying was not a form of motion which came easy to him and he swayed a little from side to side as his stability came under threat from his speed.

Half a minute later they met Sally running towards them. She had been crying and had mascara all over her cheeks. Behind Sally ran a man in a sports coat and a woman in a blue suit. They were both shouting hysterically. `Where have you been?' and `We're on air in thirty seconds!' were the only two things Mrs Caldicot could decipher from their gibbering.

They quickly escorted her back to the studio and deposited her once more behind the painted scenery. Mike Trickle was just being given an enthusiastic welcome by the audience.

`Where have you been?' hissed a harassed looking Jenny. `You're on!' she said, and without more ado she pushed Mrs Caldicot from behind the scenery and out into the bright lights of the studio.

Mrs Caldicot was live on national television.

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`Welcome to the Mike Trickle Show!' said Mike Trickle, giving Mrs Caldicot one of his most incandescent smiles. Mrs Caldicot could see that he was sweating heavily. Something seemed to have been worrying him for he had developed a small twitch in the muscles around his left eye.

The audience, encouraged by a small, fat man who was holding up a large placard, clapped enthusiastically. Mrs Caldicot wondered what the placard said. She couldn't read it because it was facing the wrong way. The small, fat man, who had sweat stains on the back of his T-shirt and underneath his armpits, lowered his sign and the clapping stopped instantly. Mrs Caldicot could now see that the placard bore the single word `CLAP' in large red letters.

`Mrs Caldicot,' said Mike Trickle, `you're in the news at the moment because you led a walk out among residents at The Twilight Years Rest Home. It is believed to be the first walk out of its kind ever to take place in this country. Do you think your action will herald the beginning of a revolution among older citizens?'

Mrs Caldicot stared at him and found that she had difficulty in concentrating. She could not take her eyes off his wig which, she suddenly realised, looked rather like a sleeping kitten curled up on top of a turnip.

`I don't know,' she said, honestly and simply. There was a silence which Trickle waited, in vain, for Mrs Caldicot to fill. The silence was broken only by a buzz from an audience which had never before heard anyone confess their ignorance on prime time television.

`You don't know!' said Trickle to his guest. He spoke in a mocking sort of voice, rather like a stern parent quizzing a stubborn child.

`Sometimes life isn't so much about knowing the answers as about knowing the right questions to ask,' said Mrs Caldicot simply. When she had spoken she hoped that Mr Trickle didn't take offence. She had meant none. The audience, which would have taken against her if they had suspected that she was trying to be clever, recognised her simple honesty and a few of them instinctively took her to their collective bosom.

Mike Trickle should have been warned. But he was too stupid to realise the danger. He glanced down at the next question on the piece of paper on his lap. `You claim that you led the walk out simply because you don't like cabbage. Don't you think that was selfish and irresponsible of you? Wasn't it a rather dramatic response to a childish dislike of cabbage?'

`That's not what happened at all,' said Mrs Caldicot, rather hurt and indignant. `It's true that I walked out of the dining room because I didn't want to eat any more cabbage but that wasn't why I left the rest home, and it certainly wasn't why any of the others left the home. I left the dining room because I thought the cabbage smelt horrid but that is only one small part of the story.'

`That's a rather small reason for such a big deed isn't it?' said Mike Trickle. `If everyone walked out because of one pungent vegetable the world would be a pretty turbulent place, wouldn't it? Isn't it true, as some people are saying, that you led the walk out simply to draw attention to yourself?'

Mrs Caldicot stared at him for a moment as though she couldn't quite believe what she had heard. `That's rather rude of you,' she said. `Why are you being so aggressive? I didn't want to attract attention to myself at all.'

`Oh, come on now!' said Mr Trickle. `You're here on national television aren't you?'

`But only because you asked me to come,' said Mrs Caldicot. `And to be honest with you I'm beginning to wish

I hadn't come. There's a rather good old black and white film on the other side that I'd have quite liked to watch.'

The audience laughed spontaneously. Out of the corner of her eye Mrs Caldicot could see that the fat man was waving his hands horizontally in an attempt to quell the spirited response.

`But some people might argue that by leading a walk out you've endangered the lives of many old people,' persisted Mike Trickle, who was desperate to enhance his reputation as a tough current affairs presenter and to get rid of his light and frothy showbiz image. `Isn't it true that some of the old people who left with you are in their seventies and eighties?'

`Yes,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. `But just because people are old that doesn't mean that they can't make their own minds up. Just because people are eighty they don't have to put up with things that younger people wouldn't put up with. Why do you young people feel you have a right to sneer and snigger at us old folk?'

`I haven't heard of many thirty-year-olds leaving home because they didn't like the smell of the cabbage,' said Trickle. After making sure that the camera wasn't on him he turned towards the audience and pulled a face, mocking Mrs Caldicot.

`It wasn't like that,' insisted Mrs Caldicot. `It was more about my cat than the cabbage.' She explained what Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor had said about Kitty.

`So all these people, in their nightwear, walked out into the cold because of your cat?'

`I didn't ask them to come with me,' said Mrs Caldicot. `They all just followed me.'

Mike Trickle, deciding that he was on safe ground with an old lady with no previous television experience, leant back, abandoned his scripted questions and bravely ad-libbed.

`Are you seriously claiming that you are so charismatic that all these people just followed you?' he asked, sarcastically. He turned to the audience and pulled a disbelieving face. There was a faint and rather hollow splutter of laughter. Most of it came from technicians and researchers.

`No,' said Mrs Caldicot firmly but quietly. `I'm just telling you what happened. Why are you determined to be so rude to me? Why do you keep making faces to the audience? How would you like it if I asked you why you wore such a silly wig or whether your wife knows about that blonde girl who was glued to your arm earlier on?'

Mike Trickle, who was so touchy and self-conscious about his hair piece that he had threatened to sue every newspaper which had ever dared even to suggest that his hair wasn't entirely his own, paled and opened his mouth to reply. All that came out was a rather faint `What did you say?' He was still trying to work out whether or not Mrs Caldicot really had mentioned his wife.

`How would you like it if I asked you why you wore such a silly wig?' asked Mrs Caldicot, repeating her question. `And have your wife and that blonde girl you were with been introduced to each another?' She spoke clearly and deliberately as though addressing someone hard of hearing. She still didn't entirely believe the explanation that Sally had given her for the hearing aid Mike Trickle wore.

Mike Trickle tried to respond but even if he had managed to get any words out no one would have heard them. The audience erupted and the sound of laughter and cheering would have drowned a brass band. The director went into an advertising break nine minutes early and Jenny, red-faced and looking desperate, rushed out and dragged Mrs Caldicot out of her chair.

Mrs Caldicot's moment of glory on `The Mike Trickle Show' was over.

But Mrs Caldicot's moment of glory was, in reality, only just beginning.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Overnight Mrs Caldicot became a national celebrity.

Previously, much of the emphasis had been on what she had done, but now the emphasis was on who she was. Feature writers telephoned to say that their editors wanted them to write profiles of her. Radio producers wanted her to choose her favourite records and give her views on both national and international politics. Mrs Caldicot had become a woman of some importance.

The morning after her appearance on `The Mike Trickle Chat Show' Mrs Caldicot was the star guest on the nation's biggest and most successful television breakfast programme; pushing the previously booked guest, a mediocre politician who had acquired some temporary notoriety by introducing a bill to increase taxes, out of the programme schedule completely.

`I don't know,' said Mrs Caldicot, reluctantly, to the television researcher who telephoned her to ask her to appear on their programme. `I was hoping to spend some time trying to find somewhere cheaper to stay.'

`Oh don't worry about your hotel bill,' said the girl researcher. `We'll pay that.' The researcher was already hugging herself because she reckoned that she could get Mrs Caldicot to agree to appear for a fee of £25 which was a tenth of the amount she knew that the producer would have paid.

`All of it? Everything that's on my bill?' said Mrs Caldicot, genuinely surprised.

`Everything!' agreed the researcher, as a faint twinge of anxiety disturbed her equilibrium and as she quietly wondered just how much room service one old lady could possibly use.

`Wonderful!' said Mrs Caldicot, not bothering the researcher with the information that the accounts for all sixteen rooms, including Miss Nightingale's, were all being put on her bill.

The breakfast programme didn't want its guests there quite so long before the start of the programme. A chauffeur driven limousine picked Mrs Caldicot up from her hotel at 5.30 am. She arrived at the studio entrance at 6.00 am and was on air, made up and clutching a plastic beaker of coffee at 6.15 am.

`Welcome to the Breakfast Show,' said the presenter, a portly, cheery man who looked uncomfortable in a pair of grey slacks and a pink sweater. He had cut his teeth as a foreign correspondent and was now given all of the programmes `big name' interviews. The presenter, whose real name was Cyril worked under the professional name of Peter. His colleague, whose real name was Flora-May but who called herself Susie, sat back in her chair, well out of camera shot, and studied the notes for her interview with a man who had trained a hedgehog to walk a miniature tightrope.

Mrs Caldicot, sitting next to Peter on a hideous and uncomfortably soft pink sofa, smiled and thanked him very much.

`Before we go any further,' said the presenter, smiling, `I want to make it quite clear that this is all my own!' He reached up and lightly patted his neatly coiffed hair. The girl from the make-up department who had spent twenty minutes washing, combing, cutting and applying several layers of lacquer to his locks blanched off camera and relaxed only when his hand moved away. He turned and winked at the camera as the producer and he had agreed he would.

`That's nice,' said Mrs Caldicot, who instinctively felt that she didn't like Peter very much.

`We tried to get Mike Trickle to come onto the programme with you,' said Peter the presenter. `But his agent told us that he's resting and our contact at `The Mike Trickle Chat Show' tells us that Jack Burgess, Mike's stand in, will be taking over the show for a while.'

He spoke of their `contact' as though getting information from `The Mike Trickle Chat Show' was more difficult than getting information out of MI5, which, indeed, it quite probably was.

`Oh, dear,' said Mrs Caldicot. `How sad. I do hope Mr Trickle isn't too poorly.'

`Just a badly dented pride, I suspect,' sniggered the breakfast presenter. Mrs Caldicot decided that she didn't like Peter at all. He picked up his notes. `Now, tell me, Mrs Caldicot,' he said, `did you decide before you went onto the programme what you were going to say to Mike?' Peter leant forwards, as though speaking confidentially, `Did someone put you up to it?' he asked.

Mrs Caldicot felt and looked puzzled. `How could I decide beforehand what I was going to say?' she asked. `I didn't know what he was going to say!'

`And no one else put you up to it?'

`Of course not!' said Mrs Caldicot, rather indignantly. `Why would they?' She wondered if television people always asked their guests such impertinent questions. Asking if she had allowed herself to be told what to say by someone else suggested that she didn't have a mind of her own. Still, she thought, maybe people on television programmes were always supposed to be rude to one another. She decided that she wasn't going to be rude, however. She thought that she would ask a perfectly innocuous question to try to change the topic. She leant across the sofa, `Excuse me for asking,' she said, `but is that a deaf aid you're wearing or is it true that you wear it so that other people can tell you what to say and what to do?' She pointed towards the ear piece that the presenter was wearing.

`No, no!' laughed the presenter, automatically fingering his ear piece. `That's just so that the director can talk to me.'

`While you're talking to me?'

`Yes!' replied Peter, looking down at his list of questions to try to find his place.

`Isn't that rather rude?' asked Mrs Caldicot. `Him whispering to you while you're talking to me? If I wore one of those and I had people talking to me you'd think me rather odd wouldn't you?'

`He doesn't talk to me all the time,' said the presenter, rather defensively. `Just if there's something he wants me to ask you.'

`Find the hedgehog man!' shouted the director in the control room to his assistant.

Mrs Caldicot frowned. `Can't you think of your own questions?'

The presenter fingered his earpiece very nervously. `Yes, of course I can!' he laughed.

`Well, doesn't the director trust you then?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

Peter swallowed and then cleared his throat. `I'm sure he does,' he said. He turned to the camera and smiled, a favourite and usually successful trick of his. He always used it when things weren't going well. But this time it was a thin, rather wan smile and the discomfort showed through. The director said something to Peter but he didn't catch it and so he pressed on his ear piece with the forefinger of his right hand.

`Can't see the hedgehog man anywhere,' hissed the floor manager into his two way radio. Susie who was listening to this conversation on her ear piece looked around her, desperately searching for someone she could talk to about tightrope walking hedgehogs.

`Is he talking to you now?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

`Er...yes,' said the presenter, still struggling to hear what was being said to him.

`Ask the silly old bag what she and the other daft beggars are going to do next?' shouted the director. `Ask her where they're going!'

`What's he saying?' persisted Mrs Caldicot.

`Er...he wants me to ask you what you and your fellow escapees are going to do next?' The presenter was now sweating profusely and hoping desperately that he wasn't shaking visibly.

`Then why doesn't he come into the studio and ask me himself?' asked Mrs Caldicot. `Why does he have to ask you to ask me?'

The presenter, now entirely defeated, just shrugged.

`This television business all seems very silly to me,' said Mrs Caldicot, firmly.

The director, deciding to abandon Peter and to give up on the man with the clever hedgehog, was also sweating profusely. He screamed urgent instructions at the resident cook who, caught completely unawares, threw her furtive and completely illicit cigarette down onto the floor, turned to her nearest camera and smiled broadly. `Welcome, to Cook's Corner,' she read from the autocue, `this morning I'm going to show you how to boil an egg and make toast soldiers!'

Twenty seconds later, as one researcher hurried Mrs Caldicot out of the studio and a second struggled to compose the shattered presenter on the pink sofa and a third gave Susie, who was having an attack of wheezing, a glass of water, the smouldering cigarette abandoned by the cook triggered the sprinkler system and the whole studio was turned into a gigantic and very expensive shower room.

The director replaced the rest of the programme with cartoons and then got onto the telephone immediately to ask his agent to see if the job making corporate videos was still available.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Mrs Caldicot was becoming a real celebrity. It seemed that everyone in the world wanted to take photographs of her or to interview her. Mrs Caldicot, however, had other, more important things on her mind.

It was comforting to know that the breakfast television company had agreed to pay the hotel bill but Mrs Caldicot still had no idea what she and her friends were going to do next.

She had just got back to the Mettleham Grand Hotel and was about to set off to catch the bus into the town to try to find somewhere cheaper for them all to stay when the telephone in her room started to ring. She picked it up reluctantly, half expecting to find a reporter on the other end. But it wasn't a reporter, it was one of the hotel receptionists.

`I'm sorry to bother you, Mrs Caldicot,' said the receptionist respectfully. `But I've got a man here who says he's your son.'

`Derek?' said Mrs Caldicot, questioningly.

She heard the receptionist repeat the name to someone. There was a brief pause. `Yes, that's right,' said the receptionist, a moment later. `He's here with a lady and a young man.'

`That'll be Derek,' sighed Mrs Caldicot. `Tell him I'm coming down and I'll meet him in the lobby.'

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`Really, mother, I don't know what to say!' said Derek.

The four of them were sitting together in a corner of the lounge and Mrs Caldicot ordered a pot of tea for three and a cola drink. Jason was reading a computer magazine, listening to tinny noises on his headphones and surreptitiously squeezing a spot. `I have never been so embarrassed in the whole of my life,' Derek continued.

`I've always been a great fan of Mike Trickle's,' said Veronica. She spoke quietly as though frightened that someone might overhear. She was wearing a bright yellow trouser suit and lime green shoes. `How could you do that to him?'

`We put a lot of effort into finding you a really nice home,' said Derek. `A lot of effort.'

`And this is how you repay us!' said Veronica. `That poor Mr Trickle. They say he's had a nervous breakdown! I'll never forgive you if that quiz programme of his doesn't come back.'

`No you didn't!' said Mrs Caldicot, speaking to her son. `The Twilight Years Rest Home was the only place we visited!'

`Now, please, mother!' said Derek, wearily. `I don't know what's got into you recently. Don't start arguing and being clever with me. The Twilight Years Rest Home is a very widely respected institution and Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor does a splendid job.'

`No it's not,' said Mrs Caldicot firmly. `It's a terrible place and Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor is a tyrant.'

An elderly couple who had been standing a few yards away staring wandered over and stopped next to Mrs Caldicot. The man coughed.

`Yes?' said Veronica, rather shortly. `Can we help you?'

`Are you Mrs Caldicot?' asked the man, speaking to Mrs Caldicot.

Mrs Caldicot said she was.

`Can I just shake your hand,' said the man. `I think you've taken a magnificent stand! I want to congratulate you and to wish you all the very best in your fight.' He held his hand out tentatively. Mrs Caldicot took it and shook it. The man beamed with delight. `We have no one else to fight for us,' he said quietly.

`We saw you on the television this morning,' said the woman. `You were marvellous.' Mrs Caldicot shook her hand too.

`That's very kind of you,' said Mrs Caldicot, who was rather overwhelmed by it all.

The elderly couple smiled a lot and backed away as though leaving the presence of royalty.

`You were on again this morning?' hissed Veronica, leaning forward in her chair and scowling at Mrs Caldicot.

`Yes.'

`Which programme?'

`I was on one of those breakfast programmes,' said Mrs Caldicot. `I can't remember which one. I never watch any of them.'

`Well I just hope you were better behaved this time,' said Veronica, leaning back and clasping her hands in her lap as though to say that she knew very well that Mrs Caldicot would not have behaved any better at all. `This can't go on, mother,' said Derek, very firmly. `You're making yourself a laughing stock.'

`Not to mention us,' added Veronica. `Though I don't suppose you think of us.'

`And how on earth are you expecting to pay for this hotel?' asked Derek.

`I'm glad you've got the money,' said Veronica, sarcastically. She looked around. `I'm sure that Derek and I wouldn't be able to afford to stay here.'

Just then the waiter returned with a tray. He put it down on the table in front of Mrs Caldicot. `Is that all, Mrs Caldicot?' he asked.

Mrs Caldicot smiled at him. `Thank you, yes,' she said. She took the proffered pen and bar statement and signed the latter with the former.

`Excuse me,' said a woman of about thirty five who had appeared as if from nowhere. `I'm sorry to bother you,' she apologised, `but could my daughters have your autograph? They saw you on the television.' Her two daughters, aged about nine or ten, appeared shyly from behind her back.

`Well,' said Mrs Caldicot, embarrassed. `I don't know...'

`Oh, please do,' said the woman. `I know it must be inconvenient being asked for your autograph all the time...'

`Have you got a piece of paper?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

The woman offered Mrs Caldicot a piece of Mettleham Grand Hotel stationery which she had obviously picked up from one of the writing tables.

`Do you have a pen?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

The woman rummaged in her handbag and handed Mrs Caldicot a pen. Mrs Caldicot put the notepaper down on the table, signed her name twice, once for each daughter, and then handed the notepaper and the pen back to the woman.

`Oh thank you!' said the woman, examining the signatures. She hurried her two daughters away.

`Well! Really!' said Veronica. `I've never seen anything like it! Behaving like a film star!' she turned to her husband. `Are you going to say anything to her?' she asked him.

`It's got to stop, mother,' said Derek. `I think we'd better take you back to The Twilight Years Rest Home.' He paused. `If you apologise I'm sure that Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor will take you back.'

Mrs Caldicot stared at him in astonishment. `Why on earth should I apologise?' she asked him, genuinely puzzled.

`Come on now, mother,' sighed Derek, as though running out of patience, `you've said some terrible things about him.'

`I've only told the truth,' protested Mrs Caldicot, wondering why honesty, which she had always thought of as a virtue, had suddenly come to be regarded as a sin. `Why on earth is everyone so frightened of the truth?'

`I'm sorry to bother you, Mrs Caldicot,' said one of the assistant managers, quietly. None of them had seen him creep up to where they were sitting. `But I've got someone from one of the Sunday newspapers on the telephone for you. I told him that you were in a meeting but he said it was very important and quite urgent.'

`Did he say what it was about?' Mrs Caldicot asked him.

The assistant manager shook his head. `No, madam,' he said, `but he did ask me to make it clear to you that what he had to say to you would be to your advantage.' He smiled.

`All right,' said Mrs Caldicot, `Thank you.' She stood up. `Excuse me for a moment,' she said to Derek and Veronica. `Help yourself to tea,' she said, nodding towards the tray. `I'll be back in just a minute.'

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`Is that Mrs Caldicot?' asked a gruff voice on the telephone. The voice had a faint Welsh lilt to it.

Mrs Caldicot confirmed that he was, indeed, speaking to Mrs Caldicot.

`My name is Jenkins,' said the gruff voice with the Welsh lilt. `I work for the Sunday Journal. I want to make you famous and give you lots of money.'

`I beg your pardon?' laughed Mrs Caldicot.

`Really!' said Jenkins. `I want to make you rich and famous.'

`Why on earth would you want to do that?'

`My editor saw you on the Mike Trickle Show yesterday evening and again on the breakfast programme this morning. He loved you. He wants us to run your life story in the paper.'

Mrs Caldicot laughed out loud.

`I'm serious,' said Jenkins. `What my editor wants he gets.'

`I don't think I want my life story in any paper,' protested Mrs Caldicot. `I don't think I want to be famous.'

`Well you may not be able to have your wish,' said Jenkins. `If you won't cooperate with us I know what my editor will do.'

`What?' asked Mrs Caldicot, slightly alarmed now. Although she was not a regular reader of the *Sunday Journal* she had seen it occasionally lining drawers and wrapped around chips. The newspaper had a reputation for publishing stories which the people involved didn't usually want printing.

`He'll tell me to put a couple of reporters onto your story and to dig out what we can,' said Jenkins. `There are two advantages to you if you cooperate with us. First, you get to tell us what you want us to print. And second we give you money.'

It did sound convincing and Mrs Caldicot certainly did need the money. `How much money?' she asked.

`We'll talk about that over lunch,' said Jenkins, very businesslike. `I'll meet you at one o'clock in the restaurant at your hotel. I've booked a table in my name. O.K.?'

`I suppose so,' agreed Mrs Caldicot, rather bowled over by it all.

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`What was all that about?' demanded Derek, when his mother returned from the telephone. He put down his tea cup.

`It was a man from the Sunday Journal,' explained Mrs Caldicot. `They want to publish my life story.' She picked up the teapot and poured herself a cup of tea.

`Oh my God!' said Veronica. `Oh my God! *The Sunday Journal*.' She looked around as though already expecting the strangers passing by to be staring at her.

`Wow!' said Jason, looking up and speaking. It had been so long since he had spoken that Mrs Caldicot did not recognise his voice. `*The Sunday Journal*!' he said.

`Shut up, Jason!' snapped Veronica.

Jason shut up and went back to his magazine. Mrs Caldicot was impressed by his hearing acuity for throughout this short exchange Jason had continued to listen to the tinny noise emanating from his closely fitting headphones.

`I hope you said `no', mother!' said Derek.

`I didn't,' said Mrs Caldicot, sipping at her tea. `I'm having lunch with a man called Mr Jenkins and I'm going to listen to what he has to say.'

`Tell her, Derek!' said Veronica firmly. `Tell her that unless she stops all this nonsense straight away...' She paused, searching in vain for a threat with which to complete the sentence.

`Tell me what?' said Mrs Caldicot.

`We won't have anything more to do with you!' said Veronica, defiantly. `We'll disown you. Tell her Derek.'

`You're being very selfish, mother,' whined Derek. `I've got a reputation to uphold. You're not making it easy for me.'

`I'm sorry if I'm an embarrassment to you,' said Mrs Caldicot, standing up. And then she walked briskly away.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It was still not ten o'clock when Mrs Caldicot got back to her room. She had three hours before she was due to have lunch with Mr Jenkins from the *Sunday Journal*. Searching for something to read she idly picked up a red plastic folder containing menus and details of the facilities that the Mettleham Grand Hotel had to offer. When she saw that the hotel had its own swimming pool and Sports and Leisure Complex she decided to see whether Miss Nightingale, Mrs Peterborough and the others wanted to try it out. Support for this unplanned excursion into fitness training was unanimous and fifteen minutes later a slightly apprehensive Mrs Caldicot, whose only previous practical experience of sport had been thirty minutes on a council owned grass tennis court some fifty five years previously, led a straggly, and rather untidy looking procession down the stairs and into the hotel Sports and Leisure Complex.

The swimming pool and gym area were empty, as they usually were in mid-morning, except for two middle aged women. Both were hoping to lose unwanted lumps and wrinkles, accumulated in thirty years of dissolute and lazy living, in as many minutes. Massaged, soothed, pampered and oiled they were now recovering from their exhausting ordeal and relaxing on reclining chairs by the side of the pool. Their husbands were busy upstairs in a meeting room on the first floor. They were trying to persuade the owner of a local supermarket chain to hire their agency's advertising and promotional skills.

The manager of the Sports and Leisure Complex, a plump woman of uncertain years who wore a white nylon coat, a white plastic name badge carrying both her title and her name, too much make-up and so much hair spray that if she had for some inexplicable reason decided to carry a pitcher of water on her head the bottom of the pitcher would have rested a good six inches from her skull, and who had been given the job because she evoked a feeling of empathy among the customers, paled when she saw Mrs Caldicot's army advancing towards her. Never before had she seen so many liver spots in the Sports and Leisure Complex. Her three slender, teenage assistants, all fully trained beauty therapists (boasting nearly seven months practical experience between them), lined up alongside her and wondered, not for the first time, whether they would not have been better advised to do the college course in dental hygiene.

`Can I help you, madam?' the manageress asked Mrs Caldicot, with slightly forced civility, wondering for just the briefest of suspicious moments whether or not she was playing unwilling hostess to an errant coach party.

`We would like to take advantage of your facilities, Mrs Townsend,' smiled Mrs Caldicot, leaning forward ten degrees and reading the manageress's name badge.

`Are you all staying in the hotel, madam?'

Mrs Caldicot confirmed that they were, indeed, all bona fide residents and, as such, entitled to enjoy the wholesome and uplifting facilities of the Sports and Leisure Complex.

The manageress lowered her eyes and her voice and leant forwards a degree or two. `Are all your...er...party...physically fit enough, do you think?' she asked, rather nervously.

`Oh, I think so,' smiled Mrs Caldicot. She looked around and noticed with a shimmer of apprehension that Mr Hewitt had unfastened the cord around his dressing gown and was clearly preparing to dive into the pool. Her apprehension was inspired by the knowledge that Mr Hewitt was almost certainly not the owner of any suitable swimwear. Her fear was fully justified when, a brief moment later, the dressing gown fell to the floor and Mr Hewitt's bony frame was revealed, guarded against accusations of indecency by nothing more substantial than a pair of grey and slightly moth-eaten underpants, the elasticated waistband of which had long since passed through `slack', gone past `baggy' and ventured into territory which could only be described as `unsafe'. She glanced towards the two reclining wives and noticed with some relief that in both cases their vision was substantially impeded by the presence of slices of cucumber. Mr Hewitt, uncluttered by such unnecessary emotional baggage as embarrassment, leapt gaily into the water and disappeared. When he reappeared a few moments later, spluttering and spitting, he announced amidst great gasps for breath that he could not swim. His audience froze in horror; fear and uncertainty turning them all into statues.

`Only joking!' cried Mr Hewitt a heart stopping moment later, wiping the water away from his eyes and splashing about in a determined and surprisingly athletic way.

Inspired by the fun his friend was clearly having Mr Livingstone unfastened his dressing gown and then realised, just in time, that he was still wearing his pyjamas. He walked over to where Mrs Caldicot was standing and whispered to her. `I haven't got any trunks!' he said.

Mrs Caldicot turned to the manageress. `Do you have any swimwear for sale?'

`Oh, yes, madam!' said the manageress. `We have a boutique.' She made this pronouncement with a considerable amount of pride, as though it were an exceptional facility for a Sports and Leisure Complex to boast; much in the same way, thought Mrs Caldicot, that she might have announced that the complex was equipped with a neutron particle accelerator or a planetarium. While Mr Hewitt happily splashed and spluttered his way from one end of the pool to the other Mr Livingstone, Mrs Caldicot, Miss Nightingale, Mrs Peterborough and the rest of the exiles went off in search of the boutique. During the next ten minutes they emerged in turn from the changing room dressed in the latest and most colourful swimwear.

`Put it all on my bill,' murmured Mrs Caldicot to the boutique assistant, a pretty but rather moody and sour faced girl who had fallen out with her boyfriend the night before, with the comforting knowledge that since she didn't have enough money to pay the bill that she already owed the Mettleham Grand Hotel the extra debt she was accumulating was of little real significance. She could never before remember feeling quite so liberated as far as money was concerned. Mr Caldicot had always been extraordinarily strict about financial matters, and as a lifelong supporter of the Micawber principle had always forbidden Mrs Caldicot to spend anything she didn't have in her purse. He had believed that money was to be savoured rather than spent but Mrs Caldicot was slowly discovering that whatever people may say about money not buying happiness money can be used to buy things, experiences and time - all of which can lead directly to happiness.

Having dipped a timid toe in the swimming pool water and deemed it too chilly for her taste Mrs Caldicot, proudly encircled by a colourful creation in a figure hugging fabric which revealed every curve and fold of her figure, headed for the massage tables. Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough followed her.

The hour which followed was almost certainly the most relaxing, most peaceful and most rewarding that Mrs Caldicot had ever enjoyed. She lay for what seemed an eternity on a comfortable couch while a pair of young hands gently kneaded and calmed her muscles. She bathed in oils of lavender and orange and she relaxed in the soothing warmth of the sauna.

She emerged onto the area around the pool feeling like a new, revitalised woman and she heard a strange noise coming from within herself as she watched Mr Hewitt and Mr Livingstone fill the jacuzzi with the foam from tiny bottles which they had smuggled down from their bathrooms. She couldn't remember ever hearing herself make the sound before and it took her a few moments to realise that it was a giggle.

She was giggling like a happy schoolgirl.

All around her the refugees from The Twilight Years Rest Home were resting, relaxing or enjoying themselves. Mrs Caldicot could never remember seeing them enjoy themselves so much. It gave her a warm feeling inside.

The magic of the moment was broken by what sounded like an argument developing. Mrs Caldicot turned around and saw that Mrs Townsend, the Sports and Leisure Complex manageress, had become embroiled in an inescapable and unwinnable argument with Mrs Peterborough.

`I don't think there's any need to take that tone,' said Mrs Townsend, who did not know enough about Mrs Peterborough to realise that the former Twilight Years Rest Home resident would have happily argued with a speak your weight machine.

`I don't think there's any need to take that tone,' mimicked Mrs Peterborough.

`Well!' said Mrs Townsend, putting her neatly manicured hands on her ample hips and throwing her head back.

`Well!' said Mrs Peterborough, equally indignantly, putting her own arthritic fingers on her bony hips.

`This is outrageous!' cried Mrs Townsend.

`This is outrageous!' said Mrs Peterborough.

`Isn't it a lovely day,' said Mrs Caldicot calmly, leaping in between the two of them and smiling at Mrs Peterborough.

`Isn't it a lovely day,' said Mrs Peterborough, smiling back at Mrs Caldicot.

`Why don't we find a couple of those nice chairs and sit down by the pool,' said Mrs Caldicot to Mrs Peterborough, heading off for a quiet spot at the far corner of the pool area.

`Find a couple of chairs and sit down by the pool,' repeated Mrs Peterborough, following her.

`Well!' said Mrs Townsend to no one. `I don't know, I'm sure.'

Mrs Caldicot turned her head and gave the manageress a big smile.

`Look at me!' called Miss Nightingale.

Mrs Caldicot turned her head and looked. Miss Nightingale was sitting on an exercise bicycle. Mrs Caldicot walked over to see her followed closely by Mrs Peterborough.

`That looks fun!' said Mrs Caldicot.

`It is,' agreed Miss Nightingale. She leant her head to one side. `Though it's a little bit disappointing.'

`Why's that?' asked Mrs Caldicot. Mrs Peterborough climbed onto a second bicycle.

`No bell,' said Miss Nightingale. `I used to have a bicycle. It had a very loud bell.'

`You can make bell noises yourself!' Mrs Caldicot pointed out.

`Can I?'

`Yes.'

With a broad smile Miss Nightingale rang an imaginary bell. `Ring, ring!' she cried. `Ring, ring!'

`Ring, ring!' said Mrs Peterborough happily.

Mrs Caldicot smiled at them both and found somewhere quiet to sit down.

Twenty minutes later the reception desk sent a porter to tell Mrs Caldicot that a gentleman was waiting for her in the dining room.

As she left she could hear Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough.

`Ring, ring!'

`Ring, ring!'

CHAPTER NINETEEN

`You don't look a bit like your voice!' said Mrs Caldicot to Mr Jenkins.

`What should look like?' asked the newspaperman with a grin.

`Oh, I don't know,' said Mrs Caldicot. She thought for a moment. `You sounded, well, much more earnest on the telephone.'

Jenkins was tall and broad shouldered, slightly balding (though the hair that he did have was much longer than Mr Caldicot ever wore his hair) and had a luxuriant moustache and a permanent twinkle in his eye. He looked rather distinguished but he definitely did not look earnest. He was in his early sixties. He wore an expensive looking dark blue suit but the jacket was rumpled and creased because he hadn't bothered to take it off on the train. Mr Caldicot had always kept a wooden coat hanger in his briefcases so that he could hang his jacket up when he was travelling. Jenkins' white shirt looked expensive, it had a small monogram on the breast, but his red silk tie was carelessly knotted.

He was sitting on a stool at the bar when Mrs Caldicot came down from her room where she had changed her clothes, brushed her hair and put some lipstick on. She apologised for being late. He smiled and said it really didn't matter and asked her what she wanted to drink. When she asked him what he was drinking he told her it was straight gin. She asked the bartender to put a little vermouth into hers because she didn't want to get `squiffy'. Jenkins put his head back and laughed. She had never seen anyone laugh like that before.

`I've never heard anyone use that word!' he said. `Squiffy!' he repeated, as though he liked the sound of the word, and he laughed again.

`You don't have a notebook or a tape recorder,' she pointed out. `I thought you'd probably have both.'

Jenkins took a gulp out of his glass and glowered at her in a mock serious sort of way. `I don't actually write anything,' he told her. `I'm far too important for that.' He slid off his bar stool and she realised that he was even taller than she'd thought. `Shall we go through and eat?' He had a huge pile of newspapers with him which he picked up off the floor.

`Are those all today's papers?' asked Mrs Caldicot. `Yes,' said Jenkins. `And I haven't finished reading them yet.'

`Are you really important?' she asked him, as they walked towards the dining room.

He looked down at her, started to say something and then changed his mind. `In my world,' he said and shrugged. He paused. `I meant what I said on the telephone,' he told her. `I can make you rich and famous.'

The head waiter met them at the door to the restaurant, recognised Mrs Caldicot and escorted them to their table.

`Why on earth would I want to be famous?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

`Some people like being famous for the sake of it,' said Jenkins. `They like strangers recognising them in the street. They like to get the best tables in restaurants. There's a certain cachet in being a celebrity which some people find attractive, even irresistible.'

`Someone asked me for my autograph this morning,' she said. `I found it rather embarrassing.' The waiter pulled back a chair and she sat down.

`You might get used to it,' said Jenkins, sitting down opposite her. `Even hooked on it.'

`I doubt it,' said Mrs Caldicot.

`What about the money? Are you interested in money?'

`At the moment I am,' admitted Mrs Caldicot. `I still don't quite know how it happened but I've got sixteen rooms in this place to pay for.' She accepted a menu from a white-coated waiter. `And if and when we leave here I don't have the faintest idea what I'm going to do with Miss Nightingale, Mrs Peterborough, Mr Livingstone and all the rest of them.'

`Those are the people who came with you from `The Twilight Zone Rest Home'?'

`Years,' corrected Mrs Caldicot, laughing.

`Years?'

`You said `The Twilight Zone Rest Home',' said Mrs Caldicot. `It's The Twilight Years Rest Home. And, yes, those are the people who came with me.'

`Are they happy here?'

`Yes, I think so. Though Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough would like bells on their exercise bicycles.'

Jenkins laughed and pointed to the menu. `Shall we order?'

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Forty minutes later Jenkins sat back, picked the rumpled napkin off his lap and tossed it onto the table. `I enjoyed that!' he said. He had eaten, with evident enjoyment, a huge bowl of soup, a mixed grill, and a large plateful of cheese and biscuits. Mrs Caldicot had eaten a prawn cocktail and a cheese salad but had obtained considerable pleasure from watching Mr Jenkins. Mr Caldicot had never really enjoyed his food.

`I don't think I've ever drunk so much wine!' said Mrs Caldicot, feeling not unpleasantly lightheaded. `Do you newspaper people always drink so much?'

Jenkins looked surprised. `We only had two bottles between us!'

`That's a lot!'

`There's evidence now to show that wine is good for your health,' said Jenkins. `Stops you getting heart attacks; that's what our doc says.'

`Your doc?'

`The chap who writes our medical column. He says that's why the French don't get heart disease.'

`Because they drink lots of wine?'

Jenkins nodded.

`Maybe it's because they all die of cirrhosis before they can get heart disease.'

Jenkins laughed. `I like our doctor's theory better.' He pushed his chair back an inch or two. `Shall we have coffee in the lounge?' A waiter, who had been hovering nearby, leapt forwards to attend to Mrs Caldicot's chair.

`That would be nice,' said Mrs Caldicot.

They walked slowly through the restaurant to the lounge. Jenkins took her arm to help steer her in between the tables and Mrs Caldicot, who felt more than a little `squiffy', was grateful.

`I enjoyed that very much,' she said, as they settled down into easy chairs. `Thank you.'

`You hardly ate anything!'

`I enjoyed watching you eat.'

`I like my food.'

`I could see that!' Mrs Caldicot blushed. `Oh, I'm sorry,' she apologised. `Was that rude?'

`Not at all!' laughed Jenkins.

`It's very nice eating in a smart restaurant,' said Mrs Caldicot. `I haven't done much of that you know.'

`You should do more,' said Jenkins, serious for a moment.

`I can't afford this sort of life,' said Mrs Caldicot, equally seriously.

`You could,' said Jenkins. He took a metal cigar tube out of his inside jacket pocket. `Do you mind if I smoke?'

Mrs Caldicot shook her head. She didn't like cigarettes but she quite enjoyed the smell of cigars. A waiter brought their coffee and Mrs Caldicot told him that she would pour. While Jenkins took his cigar out of its protective case, snipped the end off and lit it, she poured two cups of coffee, unwrapped the chocolate that was in her saucer and popped it into her mouth. Jenkins, his cigar alight, took the chocolate from his saucer and put it into hers. She mouthed a silent thank you.

`Eight million people saw you on the Mike Trickle show,' said Jenkins, leaning back in his chair and crossing his legs. `And another million and a half saw you on the breakfast programme.' He paused and puffed at his cigar. `You're big news.'

`My fifteen minutes of fame,' said Mrs Caldicot.

`Not necessarily,' Jenkins corrected her.

Mrs Caldicot sipped at her coffee, tried to resist the temptation to unwrap the other chocolate and waited.

`We want your life story. How did a perfectly ordinary woman...,' he looked at Mrs Caldicot and made an apologetic gesture. She dismissed the gesture with one of her own. `Perfectly ordinary you are not,' he said, correcting himself. `What sort of woman ends up leading a revolution in a nursing home, living in a four star hotel with heaven knows how many old people and humiliating two TV hosts?'

`Golly!' said Mrs Caldicot. `When you put it like that...'

`We'll pay you £10,000 for your story,' said Jenkins. `We'll run it over two, maybe three, weeks; we'll run what you tell us and we'll protect you from the rat pack.'

Mrs Caldicot felt faint. She had never envisaged her story being worth that sort of money. `What's a rat pack?' she asked, trying hard to stay in touch with reality.

`Other journalists,' explained Jenkins. `When your story appears you'll be a major star. You'll have reporters from Germany, Japan and the States clamouring for your story. We can handle all that for you.'

`I don't know,' said Mrs Caldicot in a very faint voice which she hardly recognised as her own. `It's a risky thing to do,' she thought. `What if they make me out to be a terrible person? And do I really want to be recognised and talked about in the supermarket?' She looked at Jenkins but didn't say anything. `I'm 71,' she thought to herself. `I could have a quarter of my life left. Just because I've wasted the first three quarters doesn't mean that I've got to waste the rest being careful. £10,000 is a lot of money. And what have I got to lose?' She realised that she wanted to get her money's worth out of life and she decided to say `yes'.

`Yes.' she said. `All right. I'll do it.'

`It's a fair offer,' said Jenkins. `I'll be honest with you, when I came here I was going to offer you £3,000.' He leant forward, `You would have taken it, wouldn't you?'

At first Mrs Caldicot didn't know what to say. She had no idea how much money her story was worth to a newspaper. She hadn't really thought of it as being worth anything. In the end she was just honest. `Probably,' she admitted. `Yes, I suppose so.'

`I'll tell the editor that you pushed me up to ten,' shrugged Jenkins. `Easy. It's not my money.'

`But why?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

`I like you,' grinned Jenkins. `And I'm not as gruff as my voice!' He puffed at his cigar. `Have we got a deal?'

`Yes,' said Mrs Caldicot, in a very quiet voice. Jenkins had to lean across to hear her. `Yes!' she said. `Thank you.'

`Right!' said Jenkins. `Let's celebrate with some bubbly.' He waved an arm for the waiter.

Mrs Caldicot, already feeling more than `squiffy' thought she probably needed to have more food in her stomach if she was going to drink any more alcohol and so she picked up the second chocolate, unwrapped it and popped it into her mouth.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Mrs Caldicot woke up at six o'clock on Sunday morning, used the tea making facilities in her room and waited for the porter to push her copy of the *Sunday Journal* underneath the door.

When the newspaper finally arrived it came through so speedily, flicked skilfully on its way by the porter's agile fingers, that it startled her. She stared at it for several moments without moving. She hardly dared to pick it up and she could feel her heart beating uncomfortably rapidly. She had never been frightened by a newspaper before.

The reporter from the *Sunday Journal* had arrived the day after Mrs Caldicot had lunch with Jenkins and had stayed for two days. To her surprise the reporter had been a woman; or rather a girl. Everything about the *Sunday Journal* seemed to surprise her. She had expected a middle aged man in a grubby suit. But she got a svelte young woman dressed in a simple Chanel dress who had turned the head of every businessman in the hotel bar. She had expected a rather beery, leery reporter with a love of football and scandal and a penchant for cheap thrillers and dirty movies. But she got a sophisticated graduate with a degree in French Literature and a fondness for seventeenth century poetry. She had expected questions that would make her feel uncomfortable and embarrassed. She had been ready to say `No, stop, enough, go away!' But the girl reporter talked to her like a friend and asked her nothing she did not talk about easily and comfortably.

Cautiously, almost reluctantly, Mrs Caldicot stood up, moved forwards, bent down and picked up the newspaper. She took it back to her chair and sat down with it on her lap. Still she didn't look at it.

When she did finally look down she saw her face staring out at her from a panel on the right hand side of the front page. It was a lovely photograph. Above the photograph her name was printed in large bold letters. Below it the paper promised all. The inside story. The truth. Mrs Caldicot stared at it and felt her mouth go dry. In that moment she wished she had not had anything to do with the *Sunday Journal*. She wished she had never cut the chrysanthemums; never refused to eat Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor's cabbage; never agreed to go on television.

But she had done all those things. It was too late now to wish that she had not.

With trembling fingers she opened the paper, wondering whether the guilty vicar and the scoutmaster's wife, the naughty comedian with a penchant for young boys, the blushing TV starlet with a history she would have liked to forget, the compromised politician and the stripping housewife from Rochdale were at this moment sitting in their kitchens sharing her anxiety. How many of them, she wondered, were ensconced in lonely hotel rooms. Or was she the only one who had to face this ordeal alone. She felt an affinity for them all; a forgiveness and an affection for every one of them. Perhaps, she thought, there should be an organisation for people who have had their private, and most personal details discussed in the Sunday newspapers. A telephone number to ring for support. Meetings to attend. Social workers to give endless advice.

But would she be entitled to support and comfort and advice? She was there willingly. She had exposed herself to public scrutiny for money. She doubted if the politician or the television actress accused of infidelity had been paid for their downfall. The vicar wouldn't have a cheque for £10,000 to settle his nerves, help soothe away the inconvenience and pay for his ruined life.

Eventually she reached her story. They had spread it over a double page with a promise of more to come. The girl reporter's name was there but in much smaller letters than her own. She remembered the money they had agreed to pay her. It seemed a lot of money for so little. And yet was it so little? She looked at the photographs. A picture of her alone. A picture of her with Kitty. There was a photograph of the outside of The Twilight Years Rest Home with an angry looking Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor bearing down on the photographer with a big stick. She even recognised the stick. It usually stood in the hall-stand. Abandoned, no doubt, by some long lost resident. She read the captions and then read the little snippets that the sub editor had picked out to highlight in boxes. It was her life, laid bare for everyone to see. She felt that it was worse, far worse, than being seen naked in public. She started to read the story from the end and as she did so Kitty, who had been asleep on the bed, walked over to her and curled up on her lap.

There was nothing in there that wasn't true; nothing that she was ashamed of: but it felt strange to read about her private moments, private thoughts and private apprehensions in such a public place. She felt exposed and vulnerable.

The telephone rang.

The sudden, harsh, noise startled her. Kitty raised her head.

She put down the newspaper and picked up the receiver.

`Hello. What do you think?' It was Jenkins.

`I'm terrified,' said Mrs Caldicot.

`I thought you would be.' He sounded kinder than he usually did on the telephone.

`It makes me feel naked.'

`I know. Have you read it?'

`Not properly. I've looked at it.'

`Any complaints?'

She paused. `Not about what it says. It seems fair.' She caught sight of the digital clock next to the telephone. It was still not seven o'clock. A thought occurred to her. `How did you know I would be awake? How did you know I would have seen the paper?'

Jenkins laughed.

`I suppose everyone's the same,' said Mrs Caldicot.

`In London you can buy the Sunday papers at the railway stations on a Saturday evening,' said Jenkins. `Some people come down especially to buy them.'

`I didn't know that.'

`I know. I thought of telling you. But decided you'd probably rather be where you are when you first saw the paper.'

`I don't know.'

`Don't know what?'

`Whether I would rather have seen it here or been in London.'

`Have you had breakfast yet?'

`No. Oh no. I won't dare go down. I'll have to get them to send something up. I don't think I can eat anyway.'

`Go down,' said Jenkins firmly. `Have your breakfast in the restaurant.'

`But everyone will be staring at me!'

`They won't. I know we go on about our circulation but not everyone reads the *Sunday Journal*. And even the people who do read it won't necessarily recognise you.'

Mrs Caldicot said nothing.

`Really,' said Jenkins. `One in five adults in the country sees our paper. Some of those only read the sport pages. Some just look for the juicy, sexy scandals. One in five will read the story about you in any detail. And less than one in ten of those will remember your name an hour after they've read the story.'

`Really?'

`The number who will actually recognise you from your photograph is minuscule!'

`I suppose I could change my hair a bit,' said Mrs Caldicot, who still didn't really believe this.

`Just don't wear anything you're wearing in any of the photos,' advised Jenkins.

`Will this feeling go away?'

`How do you feel?'

`As if I've been violated. Much worse than having been on television.'

`Do you wish you hadn't done it?'

`Yes. At the moment.'

`What are you going to do today?'

`I don't know.'

`Would you come out with me for some lunch?'

Mrs Caldicot was taken aback. She didn't know what to say and so didn't say anything.

`Are you still there?'

`Yes,' she said. `Yes. I'd like that. But why? I mean, haven't you got a family to be with?'

`I don't want you to be alone,' said Jenkins. `Professional responsibility. And I'd prefer to have lunch with you.'

`What about your wife? Won't she mind?'

`I doubt it. She lives in Cornwall with a potter.'

`Oh. I'm sorry.'

`Don't be. It's been over a long time.' Jenkins paused. `Go and have some breakfast. I'll pick you up about eleven thirty and we'll drive out into the country somewhere.'

`All right!' she heard herself say. `Thank you.' She put the telephone down.

It rang again. It was the receptionist with her early morning call.

`You asked for an early morning call at seven,' said the anonymous but kindly sounding voice. `I'm sorry it's a few minutes late but I couldn't get through. Your phone was busy.'

`I was talking to someone.'

`It's five minutes past seven now,' said the receptionist.

`Thank you.' said Mrs Caldicot. `What time does breakfast start.'

`Half past seven on Sundays.'

`Thank you,' said Mrs Caldicot. She put the telephone down, gently moved Kitty back onto the bed, went into the bathroom, bathed, put on her make-up, found a beige jumper and tweed skirt that she hadn't been photographed in and got dressed. By the time she'd done all that it was twenty five minutes past seven. She left her room and went down to breakfast. It was, she thought, probably one of the bravest things she'd ever done. It was also, she knew, one of the most sensible. If she had stayed hidden in her room she would have probably never left it.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

At breakfast no one had as much as looked in her direction. She knew this for a fact because she had been waiting for people to stare at her, to nudge one another and to whisper about her.

But no one did. She ate her croissants and her muesli and she drank two cups of coffee quite uninterrupted and unthreatened by her notoriety.

When she went back up to her room three-quarters of an hour later she was feeling much happier. That was when Derek telephoned.

`What on earth are you trying to do?' he spluttered. He then said something completely incoherent. He sounded as if he was about to burst a blood vessel.

`Slow down, dear,' said Mrs Caldicot, calmly. `What's the matter?'

`You know damned well what the matter is!' exploded Derek. `This rubbish in the *Sunday Journal*!'

`Why do you think it's rubbish?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

`It's in the *Sunday Journal*!' said Derek. `Everything in the *Sunday Journal* is rubbish!'

`Don't be silly, dear,' said Mrs Caldicot. `That's just prejudice. Have you read it?'

`Of course I've read it!' said Derek. `What was all that nonsense about my father?'

`Only the truth, dear,' said Mrs Caldicot quietly.

`Who do you think is interested in all that stuff?' demanded Derek.

`I don't know,' confessed Mrs Caldicot honestly.

`You have your picture taken and tell your life story as if you're a film star!' complained Derek. `It's not as if you're a woman of any significance!'

`That's what the people at the *Sunday Journal* said,' replied Mrs Caldicot coldly. `It took me quite a time to persuade them to print it. They wanted to do a story about someone interesting.'

`I didn't mean that,' said Derek, almost apologetically. `But you know what I mean.'

`I know what you mean,' said Mrs Caldicot, unmollified. `I'm not of any significance.'

`Oh stop being so selfish, mother!' said Derek. `Why don't you think of someone else for a change?'

`You, perhaps?'

`Yes! How do you think all this makes me look? I'm trying to build up a reputation as a serious businessman and you're making me look silly.'

`I'm sorry you feel that way,' said Mrs Caldicot. `I didn't think the story made either of us look silly at all.'

`Oh there's no point in trying to talk to you!' said Derek angrily. `I've got to go. I've got better things to do than talk nonsense with you.'

`What is it, dear? Have you got to wash the car or are you playing golf?'

Mrs Caldicot winced as Derek slammed the telephone down. Then she realised that she felt good, better than she'd felt all morning. If she'd ever learned how to whistle she would have whistled. She went round to check on Miss Nightingale, Mrs Peterborough and the others before Jenkins turned up to take her out to lunch.

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`You're looking brighter than you sounded this morning!' said Jenkins. He was still wearing his expensive but slightly rumpled suit. He smelt faintly of aftershave; a modest indication that this was at least partly a social occasion.

`I feel brighter!' said Mrs Caldicot. She had abandoned the tweed skirt and beige jumper and was wearing a favourite pale green dress which had a dozen buttons down the back. She'd worn it for some of the photographs that had appeared in the *Sunday Journal*.

`What happened this morning?' asked Jenkins as they walked through the hotel reception area and out to the car park. He recognised the dress but did not say so.

`Nothing!' said Mrs Caldicot. She paused. `Well, that's not true. My son rang. But apart from that you don't seem to have any readers around here.'

`What did your son say?' asked Jenkins. `Did he object?'

`Oh, he objected all right!' said Mrs Caldicot. `But I've decided that I don't care.'

`Good for you!' said Jenkins.

There was a sudden noise, sounding like a good many knuckles being rapped against window panes. Mrs Caldicot and Jenkins both turned. Lined up against the glass walls of the swimming pool area Mrs Caldicot could see Mrs Peterborough, Miss Nightingale and the rest of her gang of refugees. They were all grinning, waving furiously and rapping their knuckles against the glass. They were wearing their new swim suits.

`Good heavens! Said Jenkins. `Who on earth are they?'

`My friends from The Twilight Years Rest Home,' explained Mrs Caldicot.

Jenkins looked embarrassed. `Oh, yes. Sorry! What are they up to?'

`They discovered the Sport and Leisure Complex,' explained Mrs Caldicot. `Remember? I told you that Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough wanted bells for the exercise bicycles. I think they're planning to spend the day there.' She looked back at the grinning faces and waved. `It's funny,' she said, `when you're young you know you're getting older because the policemen and the supermarket managers and then the doctors look younger and younger, but you know you're really old when the old people look young.'

Jenkins looked at her and smiled and then stopped alongside a large but dirty motor car. It had been blue when it had left the showroom but, spattered with mud and oil and dirt had become a road weary grey. `Close your eyes to the mess,' he said. `I keep meaning to get it cleaned...' his voice trailed off apologetically. He opened his door and turned the key. Mrs Caldicot waited for him to reach across and open the passenger door. The inside of the car was a mess too; there was a pile of newspapers strewn across the back seat and the floor was covered with sweet papers and cigar ash, cigar packets and spent matches.

`It's open,' he told her. He reached over to the back seat and tried to tidy up the newspapers. `I'm sorry,' he said again. `I should have cleaned all this stuff up.'

`It's all right,' said Mrs Caldicot. `I quite like it.' Mr Caldicot had been very particular about the inside of his car. He didn't allow smoking and he always had one of those little perfumed cards hanging from the driving mirror. Mrs Caldicot had always thought they made the Vauxhall smell of lavatories.

`I've booked a table at a pub I know,' said Jenkins. `It's by the river, and if the weather holds we can eat outside. It's very pretty. I think you'll like it.' He put the car into gear and shot out of the Mettleham Grand Hotel car park as though making a getaway from a bank robbery. Mrs Caldicot, pressed against the back of her seat, struggled to fasten her safety belt. `It's very kind of you to look after me like this,' she said trying to relax as Jenkins swung the big car out onto the road between a small Ford and a van.

`All part of the service,' smiled Jenkins but somehow Mrs Caldicot knew it wasn't. He drove at a speed which both terrified and thrilled Mrs Caldicot, and although he took chances and seemed oblivious to the existence and rights of other road users he drove with an easy, nonchalant skill. He pointed out strange landmarks. Not dull things like buildings of minor architectural interest or the sites of Roman forts but a house where there had been a murder, a church where the vicar had been caught misbehaving with the choir mistress and a lonely field where a body had been found. He was an inexhaustible fund of wonderful trivia. Mrs Caldicot didn't believe half of it but that didn't matter in the slightest. Jenkins was funny, he made her laugh. She realised yet again, with an aching sadness, that Mr Caldicot had never, ever made her laugh.

God was smiling on them. As they pulled into the tiny car park next to the riverside pub the sun shone brightly. They sat at a white metal table, with the clear river running just a few feet away from them and ordered trout cooked with almonds, locally grown vegetables and a bottle of cool, dry white wine. Mrs Caldicot could not help remembering that Mr Caldicot had always refused to order wine in restaurants. He said they charged too much for it. They ate strawberries in meringue nests drenched in thick cream, drank double brandies and sipped dark, thick, bitter coffee.

Afterwards they walked in dappled shade by the river. Jenkins took his jacket off and carried it over his shoulder with his finger hooked into the loop at the back. They sat on mossy covered rocks underneath a huge oak tree, threw twigs into the water and watched them float down river. They watched, in silent amazement, as a kingfisher dived into the water and came up with a small fish in its beak. And then they walked slowly back along the bank.

Jenkins talked to her about his work; about the bizarre life he lived, close enough to power to smell it but just far enough away to remain uncorrupted by it; about the people he had met; about the stories he had worked on and the books he wanted to write when he retired from newspapers and bought a cottage in the country.

And he listened to her too. He asked her things and seemed genuinely interested in the answers. For the first time in years Mrs Caldicot felt important as a person rather than a cook, a laundress and a housekeeper. Slowly she realised what she had missed in her loveless and friendless marriage; she had shared her life with a man, but the sharing had been shallow and superficial. It hadn't been the way it could have been, should have been. She had, she realised, missed having someone to share things with; missed having someone to whom she could say, `Hey, you'll never guess what happened to me today!'; missed having someone she could laugh with; missed having someone she could wait for to tell about a funny story she'd seen in the paper or heard about on the radio; missed having someone with whom she could share the good, the bad and the trivial in her life. She realised that if she had shared her life with someone like Jenkins she would have doubled the amount of joy she felt and halved the amount of despair she had had to endure.

Jenkins drove her back to her hotel in the dusk and when they said goodbye he reached out and held her hand for a brief moment. He moved forwards and for an instant she thought he was going to kiss her cheek but he didn't. `Goodnight,' he said softly. `It hasn't been too bad a day, after all, has it?'

`No,' she said, smiling. `It hasn't been too bad at all.'

And as she watched him drive away she realised that she wouldn't have minded if he had kissed her goodnight.

Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough were waiting for her in the reception area.

`We had a wonderful time!' said Miss Nightingale, her eyes full of excitement.

`We had a wonderful time!' agreed Mrs Peterborough.

`It was a pity you couldn't stay here,' said Miss Nightingale, speaking as rapidly as she could. `We all had a massage and we spent four hours in the jacuzzi! I was all wrinkly when I got out.'

`I was all wrinkly when I got out!' said Mrs Peterborough.

`It was so sad that you had to go out!' said Miss Nightingale.

`It was so sad that you had to go out!' said Mrs Peterborough.

`I know,' said Mrs Caldicot. `It was a shame, wasn't it?'

But that was a lie.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Mrs Caldicot's room at the Mettleham Grand Hotel seemed quite large when there was only her in it but with all the refugees from The Twilight Years Rest Home crowded in with her the room was as crammed as an excursion train on a bank holiday.

`We can't stay here much longer,' said Mrs Caldicot when she finally managed to get them to stop talking.

There was a communal, almost orchestrated sigh of sadness.

`It's very expensive,' said Mrs Caldicot. `The TV company paid for our first night but since then the bills have been mounting. And the money I got from the *Sunday Journal* won't last forever.' She paused. `We've got to find somewhere else,' she concluded.

`We don't expect you to pay our bills!' said Mr Livingstone. `Certainly not!' protested Mr Hewitt, and although you could not describe him as indignant there was certainly a touch of hurt in his voice.

`Certainly not!' agreed Mrs Peterborough.

`We can all pay our own bills,' said Mr Livingstone.

`We've done our sums,' said Mr Hewitt. `And there's no problem. It cost us more to stay at The Twilight Years Rest Home than it costs us to stay here.'

`We're just going to arrange for our banks to pay the hotel instead of Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor,' said Mr Livingstone.

`Oh!' said Mrs Caldicot, quite taken aback. She hadn't expected any of this. She had never really thought about the fact that the other residents of The Twilight Years Rest Home had been paying fairly hefty amounts of money to stay there. She found herself wondering why they had all allowed themselves to be pushed around and bullied by Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor when they had been paying the bills and had a right to expect good service. She wondered how many thousands of old people up and down the country were similarly ill treated.

`But we'll move if you want us to,' said Mrs Torridge agreeably. Mrs Torridge was, at 63 years of age, probably one of the youngest of the group. She had been put into the Twilight Years Rest Home by her daughter and son-in-law who had immediately sold her home, pocketed the money and run off to New Zealand. Unbeknown to them, however, she had anticipated this example of filial disloyalty and stashed a more than adequate sum in gilt edged bonds. Mrs Torridge was joyfully overweight and indomitably cheerful. She paused. `As long as there's a jacuzzi!' she laughed. Mrs Caldicot could see the fluorescent orange of Mrs Torridge's new bathing suit spilling out from the canvas holdall beside her chair. There was, thought Mrs Caldicot, probably enough material in the bathing costume to make a tent for the average family of four. Mrs Caldicot had never seen anything quite as remarkable as the sight of Mrs Torridge in a bathing suit; it was a larger than life vision which was at once both intimidating and cheering.

`I had wondered about looking for somewhere for us to rent,' said Mrs Caldicot, pushing the vision of Mrs Torridge to one side. `A large house maybe?' She paused and looked around. Everyone was trying to look interested but they could not hide their disappointment.

`We don't have to move,' she added. `Especially if there isn't a problem over the money.' She looked around and waited for someone else to say something. `But if we found somewhere of our own we could look after Miss Kershaw, Mr Oppenshaw, Mrs Entwhistle and the others.' These were the patients who had been too ill to move when Mrs Caldicot and the others had walked out of The Twilight Years Rest Home. `And don't forget,' she warned, `if any of us gets ill the Mettleham Grand Hotel will probably tell us to leave. If we had our own place we wouldn't have to worry about anything like that.'

There was a long silence.

`I think Mrs Caldicot is right,' said Mr Hewitt.

`She's right,' agreed Mr Livingstone.

`She's right!' said Mrs Peterborough.

`Could we find somewhere with a jacuzzi, do you think?' asked Mrs Torridge, speaking in a tiny little girl voice.

`Could we find somewhere with a jacuzzi?' asked Mrs Peterborough.

`I'm sure we could have one installed,' said Mrs Caldicot. `Even if we can't find a place that has got one already.' She paused. `And we could maybe find somewhere with a garden so that Mr Hewitt could show us how to grow our own vegetables!'

`That would be wonderful!' said Mr Hewitt, who had spent months unsuccessfully trying to persuade Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor to allow him to dig up a small area of lawn for the growing of decent vegetables.

Mrs Caldicot turned towards Mr Livingstone. `And if we had our own place you would be able to entertain us with musical evenings!'

Mr Livingstone beamed.

`I think we should leave it all up to Mrs Caldicot,' said Mrs Torridge. `I'm happy to go where she goes.'

`I agree!' said Mr Hewitt.

`I agree!' cried Mrs Peterborough, excitedly and noisily.

This sealed it. There were enthusiastic mumblings of affirmation from the others and it was agreed that while Mrs Caldicot planned their future the rest of them would go down to the Sports and Leisure Complex and enjoy themselves.

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The moment they had gone Mrs Caldicot picked up the telephone and dialled Derek's number.

Derek was out and the receptionist put Mrs Caldicot through to a girl called Ingrid.

`I'm looking for a house,' Mrs Caldicot explained to Ingrid. `It must be quite large. An old hotel would be perfect.' She explained that she wanted somewhere with a large number of bedrooms, a little land of its own and several large reception rooms.

`Do you want to buy or rent, madam?' asked Ingrid.

`I had thought of renting,' said Mrs Caldicot. `But I suppose we could buy somewhere if the right place came up.' There was a pause while Ingrid wrote this down. Mrs Caldicot thought that Ingrid was probably the sort of person who would lick her pencil tip and then stick her tongue out of the corner of her mouth while she wrote.

`Do you have anywhere to sell, madam?' asked Ingrid eventually.

`No,' said Mrs Caldicot. `We're living in a hotel at the moment.'

`What's the name, madam?' asked Ingrid.

`My name?'

`Yes, please, madam.'

Mrs Caldicot told her.

`Would you spell that please, madam?' asked Ingrid.

Mrs Caldicot spelt her name.

`Thank you,' said Ingrid. `I'll pass the information on to Mr Caldicot when he returns from his meeting.'

`How do you spell that?' asked Mrs Caldicot, mischievously.

Ingrid spelt out Mr Caldicot's name without comprehension, irony or curiosity.

`Thank you,' said Mrs Caldicot.

`I'm sure he'll be in touch with you quite quickly,' said Ingrid, her voice laden with artificial sincerity and warmth.

`Thank you,' said Mrs Caldicot. She felt quite certain that Ingrid was a very attractive young woman.

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Mrs Caldicot put her swimming costume and dressing gown on, picked up a towel and went downstairs to the Sports and Leisure Complex.

Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough were sitting on the two exercise bicycles, ringing brand new shiny bells and happily waving to everyone who passed by. Mrs Torridge was taking up half the jacuzzi and Mr Hewitt and Mr Livingstone were splashing about in the swimming pool. Mrs Caldicot wandered over to the exercise bicycles.

`Where did you get those from?' she asked Miss Nightingale, nodding towards the bells.

`They were here when we arrived,' replied Miss Nightingale happily.

`Hello, Mrs Cardew!' smiled the manageress, her capped and polished teeth sparkling in the powerful artificial light of the pool area. `The bells were a gift from *The Sunday Journal*, she explained. She took a small gift card out of her white nylon overall and handed it to Mrs Caldicot. `From the *Sunday Journal*', it read. `With best wishes'.

Mrs Caldicot smiled at her and handed the card back. She turned as someone tapped her on the shoulder.

`You're on the television!' said a portly, middle aged woman in a mauve dressing gown. Her hair was wet and she was carrying a rolled up copy of *Vogue* magazine under her arm. It was an accusation rather than a statement and it certainly wasn't a question. A weedy, timid looking man stood behind her. He had no hair of any significance and carried a folded newspaper and a paperback book in his right hand.

Mrs Caldicot admitted, with some reluctance, that she had, indeed, been on the television.

`You're Jessica Richardson, aren't you!' said the woman, decisively.

`No,' said Mrs Caldicot. `I'm afraid I'm not.' She vaguely recognised the name and rather thought that it belonged to an actress who appeared in a soap opera.

`Oh yes you are!' insisted the woman with a conspiratorial wink. She turned round and spoke to her husband. `It's her!' she whispered.

`It's not,' said Mrs Caldicot. But this denial was simply ignored.

`Tell me,' said the woman leaning closer. She smelt strongly of talcum powder. `Tell me, what's Albert Peters really like?'

`I'm afraid I don't know,' said Mrs Caldicot.

`Oh go on with you!' said the woman with another wink. `I know who you are. I've seen you on the television.' She wasn't very good at winking and when she did it both her eyes closed. `He's lovely, isn't he? Do you get on, you know, in real life?'

`Yes,' said Mrs Caldicot, rather wearily, answering the sequence of questions with a single word.

`Can I have your autograph?' asked the woman. She took the magazine from under her arm and thrust it towards Mrs Caldicot.

`I'm afraid I haven't got a pen.'

`Norman. A pen.' said the woman. Her voice changed dramatically when she spoke to her husband. She talked to him as a child would speak to a naughty doll. The weedy looking man produced a ball point pen from his dressing gown pocket, stepped forward and offered it to the woman. The woman took it and handed the pen and the magazine to Mrs Caldicot.

`What would you like me to put?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

`From Jessica Richardson to Emily Turner,' said the woman. `You can add `with lots of love' if you like.'

Mrs Caldicot wrote the prescribed phrase and added the love. Then she handed the pen and the magazine back to the woman.

The woman looked at the inscription carefully and nodded knowingly. `There you are,' she said to Mrs Caldicot. `I told you that you were Jessica Richardson.' She held the pen out and her husband took it from her.

`You did,' agreed Mrs Caldicot.

The woman disappeared, her husband trailing along behind her like an obedient puppy. Mrs Caldicot slipped out of her dressing gown and lowered herself into the jacuzzi. Every time Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough rang the bells on their exercise bicycles it reminded her of Jenkins. The bubbles tickled and refreshed her skin and she lay back, closed her eyes and thought with fondness of their walk together along the river bank.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

`What on earth is going on, mother?' asked Derek Caldicot. He sounded weary.

`I want to rent or buy somewhere big enough for us all to live in,' replied Mrs Caldicot, sitting on her bed. She had been about to get changed when the telephone had rung. She was going out to dinner with Jenkins. `I thought you'd be offended if I went to another estate agent.'

Derek let out air as though he was deflating.

`I'll go to another estate agent if you prefer,' offered Mrs Caldicot, brightly. She kicked off her shoes and examined a ladder in her tights.

Derek sighed. `Why can't you be like everyone else's mother?' he asked her.

`I never said that to you,' said Mrs Caldicot, offended.

`What? What are you on about now?'

`When you were little,' explained Mrs Caldicot. `I never said `why aren't you like the other children' to you.'

`I don't remember,' said Derek. He thought about this for a moment. `Anyway, I was never unlike the other children,' he said, rather defensively.

`Oh yes you were,' said Mrs Caldicot. `You were so worried about being different that you weren't like anyone else I ever knew.' She smiled to herself at the memory of Derek in short grey trousers bursting into tears because he couldn't decide whether he wanted to wear short or long grey socks. In the end, in a spirit of compromise that she had to admire, he had settled for long grey socks which he had pushed down around his ankles.

`We're not talking about me,' said Derek, defensively. `It isn't me who wants to buy a house big enough to share with a hundred incontinent old people.'

`Don't exaggerate,' said Mrs Caldicot, sharply. `There aren't any more than twenty or so altogether and none of them is incontinent.' She paused. `Well, very few of them anyway and those who are incontinent are only a little bit incontinent.'

`If you don't want to live in a rest home then what's wrong with a nice granny flat?' asked Derek.

`It's too late for that now,' said Mrs Caldicot. `I've got responsibilities.' She also realised that she found her responsibilities exciting and rewarding. And the risks which she knew were associated with the responsibilities didn't worry her anywhere near as much as they would have done a month or two earlier. She realised that excitement and risk go together like rain and rivers, and that you can't have one without the other.

`There's a wonderful new development on the Portland Road,' said Derek. `I can get you a one bedroom flatlet at a very competitive price. Kitchenette with refrigerator, microwave oven and the very latest type of waste disposal unit. You can put tin cans down it and they'll come out shredded. Small bathroom. Telephone point in the living room and the bedroom. Wonderful views.'

`I don't want a one bedroom flatlet,' said Mrs Caldicot, bluntly.

`You can see the municipal park from one of the living room windows,' said Derek. `You can see the ornamental flower clock in the summer. Well, the top left hand bit of it anyway.'

`I don't want a one bedroom flatlet,' repeated Mrs Caldicot. `Not even one which has a view of the municipal park.'

`How can anyone be only a little bit incontinent?' asked Derek suddenly. `They're either incontinent or they aren't incontinent.'

`People can be a bit drunk, can't they? Or a bit forgetful?'

`You don't seem to understand,' said Derek. `If you rent or buy somewhere large you'll be taking on all sorts of responsibilities.'

`I don't mind,' said Mrs Caldicot, who really didn't mind. `I can't let the others down now.'

`But you hardly know them, mother!' cried Derek. `You've only just met these people.'

`I like them,' she replied. `And they trust me.' No one had ever really trusted her before. People had relied on her to do things but they had never trusted her. Mr Caldicot had relied on her to provide him with clean shirts and hot meals but he had never trusted her to make any decisions. And life with him had been so boring. He always wore plain white shirts and his meals had to rotate according to a strict and pre-arranged pattern. One Christmas she bought him a shirt with a thin blue stripe in it. He never wore it.

`That's all very well but where are you going to find the money from?' demanded Derek.

`We're all going to pay our share,' replied Mrs Caldicot. `Money isn't going to be a problem.'

`It's bound to be risky. If you sign anything you'll be taking a chance.'

`What's the point of life if you don't take chances?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

`What on earth do you mean by that?' asked Derek. `Why do you want to take chances at your age?'

`Perhaps because I haven't taken enough chances at any other age,' said Mrs Caldicot. `Perhaps because at my age it doesn't really matter what chances I take. What have I got to lose?'

Derek sighed in defeat. `I'll ask our commercial department to see what they can find. A man called Gerald will phone you.' There was a pause. `I wash my hands of this, mother,' he said and put the phone down. Mrs Caldicot knew he was upset because he didn't even say `goodbye'.

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That evening Jenkins took Mrs Caldicot to the ballet to watch a performance of Swan Lake. Afterwards he took her to an Indian restaurant. She had never been to a ballet before nor had she ever eaten in an Indian restaurant.

`Don't you like it? asked Jenkins.

Mrs Caldicot, who had been staring into space without seeing anything, focused her attention on her dinner partner. He seemed blurred and she was suddenly aware that she had tears in her eyes.

`The food,' he explained. He nodded to her plate, virtually untouched.

`It's very good,' she assured him.

`Are you all right?' he asked, concerned. He reached across the table and touched the back of her left hand lightly with the tips of his own right hand.

Mrs Caldicot turned her hand over, grasped his fingers and squeezed them gently. `I'm fine,' she whispered. She looked at him for a long, long moment. `I just don't remember ever being quite so happy,' she explained. When she'd spoken she felt embarrassed, though she did not really know why.

`Penny for them,' said Jenkins.

Mrs Caldicot didn't answer straight away.

`Penny for your thoughts,' Jenkins explained unnecessarily.

For a moment Mrs Caldicot still didn't answer. `It's been a beautiful evening,' she said, her voice hoarse with emotion. `I've never done anything like this before,' she added. She tried to stop the tears because she didn't want to cry.

`You must have been to the theatre even if you haven't seen a ballet!'

Mrs Caldicot shook her head. `My husband and I didn't do things like that,' she said. Her voice felt stronger.

`But when you were younger? When you were courting?'

`We went to the cinema a few times.' She shrugged. `Westerns mainly...,' She looked at him and smiled. `I'm not complaining,' she said. `My husband never treated me badly.' He hadn't. He had never hit her. Never publicly criticised her.

`It gives me a lot of pleasure to be with you,' said Jenkins softly. She suddenly realised that she was still holding his hand. Slowly, she relaxed her grip. But his fingers did not move away from hers.

`Don't let your meal go cold,' said Mrs Caldicot.

They both ate. Mrs Caldicot was glad he hadn't said anything else. She enjoyed their silences together. She wasn't sure enough of herself to be able to share her feelings with him yet.

Afterwards, he drove her home. It had been raining and the streets were glistening. The reflections of the street lights sparkled on the wet pavements and she thought how romantic everywhere looked. Even buildings which in the brightness of daylight seemed drab and dull seemed strangely exciting in the darkness of the night. She did not mention any of this to him because she was slightly embarrassed at having such silly and romantic thoughts.

When they said goodnight he kissed her on both cheeks as she'd seen French people do on television and he held both her hands in his and squeezed them lightly. Long after she'd climbed into bed she lay awake going over every moment of the evening in her mind. At twenty past two in the morning she realised that the bedside light was still switched on. She turned it off, snuggled down beneath the bedclothes and went to sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Gerald, the man from the commercial department of the estate agents for which Derek worked had telephoned her early the following morning. He sounded excited. When he picked her up in the Mettleham Grand Hotel foyer an hour later he still sounded excited. If he had been a woman he would have been described as `bubbly'. He wore a cheap suit which didn't fit him terribly well but didn't look as bad on him as it might have done because he wore it with an expensive shirt, a silk tie and a pair of what looked like expensive Italian loafers with gold coloured buckles on the sides. He had a chunky, gold coloured bracelet on his right wrist and a chunky gold coloured watch on his left wrist. He smiled a lot and smelt of something unusually delicate which reminded Mrs Caldicot more of a woman's perfume than a man's aftershave. She thought he looked like a cross between a gigolo and a second-hand car salesman, and when he took her arm as they walked out to his car she was conscious of, and secretly rather enjoyed, disapproving looks from a gaggle of matronly and arthritic women who were clambering out of a mini bus.

`I've got just the place for you,' he promised her as he drove furiously through the early morning traffic. He seemed unusually fond of changing gear and kept one hand permanently resting on a shortened gear stick which was topped with a polished walnut sphere. `You'll love it! It only came on the market yesterday afternoon.' His car had a tiny air freshener hanging from the driving mirror and a `No Smoking' notice stuck to the front of the glove compartment. The air freshener reminded her of Mr Caldicot for it, too, made the car smell rather like a public lavatory. The car was spotless inside, without so much as a sweet paper on the floor.

`The important thing is that it must have enough rooms,' said Mrs Caldicot quite firmly.

`Oh, this place has got absolutely oceans of space!' Gerald assured her. He turned and beamed at her and looked back at the road just in time to avoid a head on collision with a double decker bus. `You'll love it!' he promised.

`I'm sure I will!' agreed Mrs Caldicot, digging her fingernails into the car's fake velour upholstery. She closed her eyes as they seemed to head straight for an elderly and innocent pedestrian who had recklessly chosen that moment to attempt a crossing of the road. She wondered why she had felt safe with Jenkins, whose driving could hardly be described as cautious, while she felt distinctly unsafe with Gerald at the wheel.

`Lovely secluded grounds, emergency fire escape and fitted carpets throughout,' said Gerald, as excited as if he himself found these advantages irresistible.

Rather tentatively Mrs Caldicot opened her eyes. There had been no sudden scream and no interruption to their progress but despite the absence of this expected evidence of motorised manslaughter she had still half expected to see the pedestrian draped across the bonnet and the windscreen spattered with blood. `That's nice,' she said, surprised at how calm her voice sounded.

`Here we are!' said Gerald, a few moments later, driving in through the absurdly gothic iron gates which guarded the driveway up to The Twilight Years Rest Home.

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Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor, the former proprietor of The Twilight Years Rest Home, and Mrs Caldicot's hapless adversary in the now famous Cabbage War, had suffered a deadly blow when Mrs Caldicot and her followers had walked out.

Without their weekly payments splashing into his bank account he had quite quickly found himself unable to satisfy the bank's insatiable demand for cash. What made things even worse was the fact that after Mrs Caldicot's appearances on television his previously untarnished reputation as a caring individual (untarnished only because no one had cared enough to make the effort to tarnish it) had been besmirched so badly that no other old people had been prepared to enter through the stuccoed portals of The Twilight Years Rest Home. Without in any way meaning to, Mrs Caldicot had succeeded in ruining her former host. The bank, the true owners of The Twilight Years Rest Home, had foreclosed with all the sensitivity and remorse of a boa constrictor swallowing its prey. The few remaining disabled and incontinent residents had moved out and onwards to cleaner sheets elsewhere, and Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor had spent a dull and unproductive morning at the local unemployment exchange struggling quite unsuccessfully to persuade a 16-year-old girl with halitosis of anaesthetic proportions that `Nursing Home Proprietor' was an acceptable and acknowledged occupation.

`How much do you want for it?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

Gerald, standing next to her on the gravel turning circle beneath the front door, tossed the keys to the front door up into the air and almost caught them. `Don't you want to see inside?' He bent down and picked up the keys. He was not in the slightest bit embarrassed by this example of fate in action.

`It's just what I'm looking for,' said Mrs Caldicot. `How much?'

Gerald went back to his car, brought a briefcase from the back seat, opened it and took out a printed brochure which had a space where there ought to have been a photograph of the home. He put the briefcase down on the ground.

`We haven't got the photos back from the printer yet,' he apologised. He handed the brochure to Mrs Caldicot and pointed to the price.

`How much would the monthly payments be on that?' she asked.

Gerald, bent down, took a calculator out of his briefcase and pressed the keys a few times. Then he held the calculator up so that Mrs Caldicot could see its tiny screen.

Mrs Caldicot did some quick calculations of her own. It was much less than a quarter of what they were paying to stay in the Mettleham Grand Hotel.

`That's far too much,' she said, surprising herself by her shamelessness. She made a counter offer.

`I'll have to get back to you on that,' said Gerald frowning.

`I'd like to see inside now, please,' said Mrs Caldicot.

`Of course!' agreed Gerald, as though as it were the most natural thing in the world for a client to make an offer to buy a property and then to ask to look round it. He picked up his briefcase and took out a mobile phone. `If you don't mind looking around by yourself I could ring the bank and see what they say to your offer...' he suggested, keen to strike while Mrs Caldicot's iron was hot. He opened the front door as he spoke.

`That's a good idea,' said Mrs Caldicot, suddenly overwhelmed by a barrage of memories, most of them unpleasant. She tried to smile at him but no smile would come. She disappeared inside the building, stepping over the inevitable pile of leaflets, free newspapers and unsolicited mail which is tipped through the letterbox of any empty or abandoned building within hours of the previous owner's exit, and wondered how long it would take for the smell of cabbage to disappear. Maybe, she thought, she could festoon the whole building with little disinfectant air fresheners like the one hanging from Gerald's driving mirror.

It seemed strange to be back.

She wandered around and it rather reminded her of the Marie Celeste. The carpets, curtains and furniture were all just as they were when she had left. In the living room there was an open copy of the *Radio Times* lying on the seat of a green, plastic covered easy chair. In the dining room the salt and pepper containers were still standing in the middle of all the tables. A few assorted catering tins and boxes of unwanted food stood on the shelves in the kitchen. A tabloid newspaper, neatly folded, lay on top of the refrigerator. In the bedroom which she had shared with her two friends there was a metal kidney dish on a bedside table and a bottle of pills had been abandoned on the mantelpiece. These small physical memories made it look as though the residents had been spirited away by aliens, leaving everything behind them as it had been.

Mrs Caldicot stood for a moment and then heard a noise from down below.

`Hello! Mrs Caldicot? I've got some good news for you!' she heard Gerald say. Mrs Caldicot walked down the stairs towards him. Still clutching his mobile phone he had stepped into the hallway.

`The bank has accepted your offer,' said Gerald. `I didn't think they would but I put in a good word for you...'

`That's very kind of you,' thought Mrs Caldicot who didn't believe him for an instant. `I don't believe you for an instant!' she said, laughing.

Gerald, who was not in the slightest embarrassed by this, smiled at her.

`Take your time looking round,' he said. `I'll take you back to your hotel when you've finished.'

`That's very kind of you,' smiled Mrs Caldicot, who rather thought she might be pushing her luck to accept another ride in Gerald's disinfected vehicle, `but I'd quite like the walk.'

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

It took the estate agents, the banks and the lawyers a week to make all the arrangements so that Mrs Caldicot and her friends could move back into what had, in its previous incarnation, been known as The Twilight Years Rest Home. It took Mrs Caldicot another week to arrange for all the existing furniture in the building to be taken away and sold at auction; for a team of decorators to paint the whole of the inside of the building and for a supply of new furniture to be delivered. While she waited for these improvements to be made Mrs Caldicot traced all the disabled and incontinent former residents of The Twilight Years Rest Home and told them all that they could, if they wanted to, come back to stay with her and the other residents.

The careful, cautious and indomitably pessimistic Derek had insisted that the whole process would inevitably take at least a month to six weeks to complete but Mrs Caldicot had succeeded in speeding things up by the simple expedient of issuing an ultimatum.

`If we aren't moving into the building within two weeks the whole deal is off,' she had told Gerald, and because she had meant it Gerald had believed her. Anxious not to lose his commission Gerald had convinced the solicitors and bankers of Mrs Caldicot's determination. Since they, in their turn, were also keen not to lose their hefty fees, the unnecessary administrative and bureaucratic delays which normally hinder any legal process were suddenly dismissed for what they are (unnecessary administrative and bureaucratic delays) by the only people who have the power to push them aside: the administrators and bureaucrats who had created them in the first place. Mrs Caldicot's appearances on television had given her a strong image which she knew was undeserved, but fortunately this knowledge was not widely shared.

To begin with Miss Nightingale, Mrs Peterborough and the others were more than a touch reluctant to leave the Mettleham Grand Hotel. They had grown to like living there; having become particularly fond of the Sports and Leisure Complex. Mrs Caldicot had, however, managed to overcome their resistance by promising them that they would have their own leisure and fitness centre built onto the side of the building.

`It won't be run like a nursing home,' she told them. `You'll all be part owners. It'll be a cooperative venture!'

Mrs Caldicot organised interviews for staff and hired a chef, a housekeeper, two waiters and a more than adequate complement of nursing and cleaning staff. She told the housekeeper that she wanted the waiters to wear black suits, white shirts and black ties while the nurses had to wear proper nursing uniforms.

`You don't know what you're taking on!' Derek kept insisting gloomily, but Mrs Caldicot knew exactly what she was taking on and was excited rather than alarmed by it all. She discovered, to her delight, that the money they had been paying as rent to The Twilight Years Rest Home would enable them to live in comparative luxury.

`Will we have a Jack Oozy?' asked Miss Nightingale, who had grown exceedingly partial to a daily bubble bath.

`We certainly will!' Mrs Caldicot assured her.

`And exercise bicycles?'

`Definitely!'

`With bells?'

`Of course!'

`Of course!' said Mrs Peterborough firmly.

The opposition to the move, in truth never anything more than a hint of apprehension, faded quickly into a memory and in due course Mrs Caldicot and her followers moved out of their hotel and back into what was known as The Twilight Years Rest Home.

When their hired coach (Oppenshaw's Char-a-bancs: No Journey Too Short with driver Ted) turned into the drive and passed through the ornate iron gates, the returning residents cheered as they saw the sign which Mrs Caldicot had had specially painted and erected.

`Home Sweet Home' it said in letters two feet high. Underneath, in only slightly smaller letters, were the words `No Cabbage Allowed'.

It was a victory and a return of which Napoleon himself would have been proud.

The Beginning

You can follow Mrs Caldicots further adventures in Vernon Colemans second novel about Mrs Caldicot. The title of the sequel to *Mrs Caldicots Cabbage War* is *Mrs Caldicots Knickerbocker Glory*.

To find out more about this and other books by Vernon Coleman visit www.vernoncoleman.com

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Mrs Caldicot's Knickerbocker Glory

The sequel to Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War

Vernon Coleman

Mrs Caldicot's Knickerbocker Glory

Vernon Coleman

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Vernon Coleman has written over 100 books, including a number of bestsellers, which have been translated into 25 languages. His novels include the Bilbury series and his non-fiction books include Bodypower and How to Stop Your Doctor Killing You. A growing number of his books are now available as Kindle editions. For a list of available books see the Amazon author list or visit www.vernoncoleman.com

Dedication

To Donna Antoinette, my Welsh Princess, with all my love

Note
All characters, organisations, businesses and places in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to real persons (living or dead), organisations, businesses or places is purely coincidental.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Chapter 1

Anyone old-fashioned enough, and optimistic enough, to expect the calendar to give some guidance on temperature and weather might have expected a warm, sunny day; a few, small, fluffy white clouds scattered artistically across a perfectly sky-blue sky, jolly birds happily singing their little hearts out in a vain attempt to drown out the sound of suburban lawn mowers, and gardens everywhere a blaze of sunlit summer colour.

Such optimism would not have been well rewarded. It had been raining heavily for hours. In the traditional way things happen in a country where it rains for 300 days a year downpipes were gurgling, drains were failing to cope with the flood of water and deep puddles were forming everywhere. In modern Britain, a leaf or two on the lines will halt the heaviest and most majestic of trains; tons of highly crafted metal brought to a standstill by a modest flutter of nature's arboreal off casts. A flake or two of snow will close motorways and send cars sliding and slithering out of control. And a few hours steady but unspectacular rain always seems to result in flooding.

There was, as usual, a huge puddle outside the front entrance to The Twilight Years Rest Home (prop. Thelma Caldicot, No Cabbages Allowed) and as the two ambulance men carefully carried the occupied wheelchair in through the front door they found themselves splashing through water which reached well over the tops of their shoes.

'Oh, bugger!' cursed the younger of the two; a florid-faced man, rather too overweight to be an advertisement for good health. He paused and looked down. 'My socks are soaked.'

'Stop moaning, keep moving and lift your end up,' retorted the older man, balding, thinner, altogether leaner and fitter looking.

The third figure in this moving tableau, the occupant of the wheelchair, said nothing. Since he seemed to be either asleep or drugged, this was not particularly surprising. He took no more interest in his surroundings than he would have done if he had been a sack of potatoes.

Earlier in its long life the building which was now known as the Twilight Years Rest Home had been the imposing residence of an important local Victorian entrepreneur called Baldcock.

Mr Baldcock had made a substantial fortune out of the manufacture of sewage pipes and, anxious to obtain a social status above and beyond that which the manufacturer of such an unappetising product might expect, had spared no expense to give his family a substantial and worthy home. The hall and landing windows were made of stained glass, the drainpipes and gutters were decorated with cast iron gargoyles and the stonework above the bay windows was more than amply decorated with numerous stony representations of well-fed cherubs. And, naturally, the front door was protected from the elements by a large open-fronted porch with a tiled floor. Six stone steps led from the puddled driveway to the porch, and the two ambulance men climbed these steps at commendable speed. The porch was so large that even two ambulance men and a wheelchair did not overcrowd it.

'Funny looking place,' said the younger of the two ambulance men, a well-fed youth who was known to his mother and girlfriend as Cyril and to everyone else as 'Chips' (a nickname which accurately reflected his dietary taste).

'Don't take any notice of the building,' said Bertie, his colleague. 'This is Mrs Caldicot's place.'

'Mrs Caldicot?'

'You not heard of her?'

Chips shook his head.

'Her relatives put her into a nursing home. She couldn't stand the smell of cabbage so she led a revolution. Took all the other residents with her to stay in a hotel. Then went back and took over the whole place.'

'Bloody hell,' said Chips, surprised and impressed. 'Che Guevara in two-way stretch elastic stockings.'

'There was a book written about it. Called 'Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War,' the older ambulance man told him. 'You could probably borrow a copy from the library.'

'I don't read books,' said Chips.

'Then watch the movie.'

'There's a movie?'

'Based on the book.'

'What's it called?'

'Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War. The same as the book.'

'With that woman in it? Mrs Caldicot?'

'No, you plonker! An actress called Pauline Collins plays Mrs Caldicot. I heard Mrs Caldicot say she thought she was wonderful. She was on the radio.'

Chips grinned, pleased with himself. ‘Oh, I’ve heard of Pauline Collins.’ he said. ‘She’s married to that John Alderton.’

Chips put down his end of the wheelchair, and was about to press the doorbell when the front door swung open and a woman dressed in a lemon jumper, bright red trousers and a multi-coloured woolly hat appeared. She was pushing a silver coloured metal scooter. At first, the ambulance men thought that she was a teenager. Only when they looked closely did they realise that she had almost certainly already celebrated her seventieth birthday.

‘Hello!’ she cried, beaming. ‘What a lovely day!’

The two ambulance men looked at each other and then out at the rain beating down outside, the puddles and the overflowing gutters. It was, to them, a dark, damp and desperately dismal day. The woman with the silver scooter, paused and looked around. She saw the same day, the same rain, the same puddles and the same overflowing gutters but to her eyes, the day seemed exciting. With a wave, she started to bounce her scooter down the stone steps. She was half way down the steps when a pretty, plump, black woman in a smart nurse’s uniform appeared in the doorway. She had a name badge pinned to her chest. The single name ‘Mrs Roberts’ was the only printing on the badge. She looked to be in her mid-forties and was holding a large yellow plastic cape and a yellow plastic rain hat. She had an easygoing manner and a smile, which Mrs Caldicot often described as being that of an angel. She was a loyal friend and employee.

‘Miss Nightingale,’ called the nurse waving the two items in one hand. ‘You forgot your cape!’

The woman with the scooter stopped, turned and came back up the steps. ‘Silly me!’ she said. She rolled her eyes as though to say ‘What a silly woman!’ and gently slapped her own wrist. She leant her scooter against the wall, held her hands up above her head and let the nurse slip the cape over her upstretched arms and her head. The nurse then added the hat and tied two pieces of cord into a neat bow underneath the old lady’s chin. ‘Don’t be long,’ the nurse warned. She smiled and added: ‘And have a nice time.’

Miss Nightingale nodded, her eyes sparkling and full of life, and rushed off into the rain with her silver scooter.

‘We have a new resident for you,’ said the older ambulance man, nodding towards the man asleep in the wheelchair. He pulled a crumpled piece of paper out of his pocket and examined it. ‘Mr Williams,’ he read from the paper.

The nurse stopped, bent down and examined the man. She touched his hand then gently shook his shoulder. She seemed cross. ‘Has he been sedated?’ she demanded.

‘I expect so,’ replied Bertie. ‘Where he came from everyone who isn’t dead or on the staff is sedated.’ He paused. ‘And if the rumours are right most of the nurses and doctors are sedated too,’ he added.

Behind the ambulance, a small grubby estate car skidded to a halt on the gravel. A short, balding, overweight man got out of the car, clutching a bulging black briefcase. Stooped in the rain he fumbled with his key, eventually managing to lock the car door. Neither the ambulance men nor the nurse took any notice of his arrival.

‘Would you bring him in, please’ said the nurse. She stepped into the hallway and nudged the door open as wide as it would go so that the two ambulance men could push the wheelchair through the door more easily.

‘We have to take the chair back,’ said the younger ambulance man. ‘It belongs to the hospital. It’s signed out as a temporary loan.’

‘Would you do me a favour and carry the patient upstairs for me,’ asked the nurse. ‘Mrs Caldicot, the proprietor is busy locked in her office with the cook.’

‘No problem, love,’ said the older ambulance man. ‘I’ll take him.’ He bent down, picked the sleeping patient up out of his wheelchair as though he were a small child, and carried him upstairs. ‘I’ll get his luggage,’ said Chips, picking up the wheelchair and taking it back to the ambulance.

Chapter 2

'I'm here to examine your extractor fan statutory warning notice,' announced the fat man with the black plastic briefcase. He had run less than twenty yards, and climbed a short flight of stone steps, but even in the cold and the rain, the exercise had made him red-faced and breathless. Despite the weather, he was sweating profusely. He took a plastic wallet from his inner jacket pocket and held it under Mrs Roberts's nose.

'Oh, right,' said Mrs Roberts. 'The extractor fan? Well I'm sure we have one. But I don't know where it is.'

'This is a random spot check authorised under sub-law 872c of the 1999 Act,' said the short man. 'You are obliged by law to cooperate with my enquiries. Failure to do so will be reported to my superiors and regarded as a breach of your legislative responsibilities. I suggest that you notify the registered proprietor without delay.'

'Mrs Caldicot is in her office with the cook,' repeated Mrs Roberts. 'If we do have an extractor fan I expect it will be in the kitchen. I suspect that would be the ideal place for it. Perhaps your notice will be there too.'

'And where's the kitchen?' demanded the short visitor.

'Straight ahead down the corridor,' said Mrs Roberts. 'The door is open. Just help yourself.'

The short man hurried past her and down the corridor. Mrs Roberts, with more important things on her mind, hurriedly climbed the stairs.

Chapter 3

Mrs Caldicot was coming to the end of her tete a tete with the cook. It had not, she would afterwards confirm, been one of the happiest encounters of her life.

'I have not been entirely happy with your work,' Mrs Caldicot had begun, tactfully. She had been rehearsing her opening line for two days.

The cook, a mountainous woman in her mid-forties, said nothing but just glowered at Mrs Caldicot. Her white overall was, Mrs Caldicot noticed, heavily stained. The cook herself had lank, greasy black hair and did not appear to have washed for some time. Though she smelt strongly of peppermint there were other, less pleasant, underlying odours fighting for attention.

'When you came for your interview you told me that you had plenty of experience in this area of catering,' continued Mrs Caldicot. It was difficult to accept that this malodorous creature was the same person as the rather shy, eager to please applicant who had arrived for her interview a few months earlier.

The cook remained silent and threatening.

'I don't wish to dispute your previous claims,' lied Mrs Caldicot. 'But several aspects of your work here seem to suggest to me, and, indeed, to others, that you may not have quite the extent of experience which you indicated.'

The cook frowned as though she were having to struggle to understand what Mrs Caldicot was saying; her huge, hairy eyebrows, already dark and unkempt, swooped inwards and joined together for support. 'Are you implying that I lied?' she demanded.

'Oh no, no,' said Mrs Caldicot hastily. 'Of course not.' She instantly felt ashamed of herself. That was exactly what she had intended to imply.

'Good,' said the cook, leaning back in her chair. She took a packet of French cigarettes from one pocket and a box of matches from another.

'It's just that some of the meals you've prepared have been not quite adequate for the number of people involved,' said Mrs Caldicot.

The cook shook one of the cigarettes out of the packet, put it between her lips and lit it. Mrs Caldicot wanted to tell her that she didn't like people smoking in her office but felt intimidated and didn't have the courage.

'I don't know what you're talking about,' said the cook, having blown a lungful of smoke all over Mrs Caldicot.

'Well, I have one or two examples here,' said Mrs Caldicot. She looked down at the thick folder in front of her and opened it. 'For example,' she began, 'last Wednesday you served jam sandwiches to the residents for their evening meal.'

'Lots of the old dears don't have their own teeth,' explained the cook. 'Jam sandwiches are easy to chew.'

'But you served just four rounds of bread,' continued Mrs Caldicot. 'There weren't enough sandwiches to go round.'

'Most of them are overweight,' said the cook. 'It's my job to look after their dietary health. I decided they needed to diet.' Mrs Caldicot suddenly realised what the smell of peppermint was hiding. Alcohol.

'That was very noble of you,' said Mrs Caldicot. Looking at the cook's immense bulk words such as 'glass houses', 'stones' and 'throw' sprang to mind but she decided not to explore that particular avenue. She picked up a butcher's bill from the folder. 'What also puzzles me is the fact that although the residents were not served any meat in that particular week - they were served sandwiches on nine separate occasions - you nevertheless authorised payment of several hundred pounds for steaks, bacon, chops and so on.'

'There wasn't room to put them in the freezer,' said the cook. 'The meat went off so I threw it all away. Would you rather I served the residents with bad meat?'

'No, of course not.'

'Because I wouldn't do it anyway,' said the cook. She straightened her shoulders and pulled herself to her full height. 'I have my standards and I'm not going to endanger the lives of those lovely old people just to please you.' She turned her head and looked out of the window.

'I didn't...' began Mrs Caldicot, wondering how she had suddenly found herself on the defensive.

'Hrmph!' snorted the cook, seemingly exhausted by the modest physical effort she had just made, and relaxing and slumping back in her chair.

'Is it true that you're related to the butcher?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'He's my brother,' said the cook. 'Are you saying it's a crime to give business to my brother?' She scowled. 'I'll have you know that he gives me a very special discount on account of the fact that I'm family. And we get the best cuts he has.'

‘That’s very good of him,’ said Mrs Caldicot, now woefully aware that she had lost control of what she had intended to be a final interview with the cook. ‘Very good of him.’

There was a long silence while Mrs Caldicot decided on a new line of attack.

‘Can I just go back to your original application form?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘If you like.’ The cook looked at the clock. ‘Lunch will be late. But it will be your fault.’

Mrs Caldicot looked up. ‘Lunch has been late nearly every day since you’ve been here,’ she said. ‘On the rare occasions when it wasn’t at least an hour late it was over two hours early.’

The cook pulled a face. ‘I had to go out. I didn’t want them to go without their lunch. It didn’t seem right that they should be inconvenienced on account of me having to go and see the doctor.’

‘You served lunch at 9.30 a.m.,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘And you told the residents that they had to be finished by 9.45 a.m.’

‘It doesn’t do them good to sit around,’ said the cook. ‘I thought I was doing the right thing.’

‘On your original application form you said that you’d had many years of experience in hotels and institutions throughout the country,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

The cook didn’t say anything.

‘You said, for example, that you had experience at the Imperial Hotel in Carmarthen.’

‘Yes.’

‘When I belatedly rang them yesterday they told me that they had no record of ever employing anyone of your name.’

‘I didn’t say I was employed there.’

Mrs Caldicot looked at her, raised an eyebrow and waited.

‘I stayed there with my mum and dad when I was a kid.’

‘You stayed there?’

‘Yes. With my mum and dad. For a week.’

‘I don’t think many people would regard that as relevant employment history.’

The cook shrugged.

‘And Holloway Prison?’

‘It was only three months.’

Mrs Caldicot waited.

‘It was a set up,’ said the cook. She sounded very defensive.

Mrs Caldicot didn’t speak. She looked down at her sleeping cat, Kitty, lying peacefully on the carpet at her feet. Just looking at Kitty always helped to bring her blood pressure down.

‘Anyway, everyone does it.’

‘Does what?’

‘A bit of shop lifting. The shops expect it. They allow for it in their costs.’

‘Ah.’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘So, you didn’t actually work at Holloway Prison either?’

‘Oh, yes I did,’ insisted the cook. ‘In the kitchen.’

‘But not actually on the staff?’

‘Not properly what you’d call on the staff. No, not in that way. But I did work in the kitchen.’

‘Peeling potatoes?’ guessed Mrs Caldicot.

‘And chopping them. I was in charge of the chips.’

‘What about the qualifications you listed on your application form?’

‘I’m going to get them,’ said the cook. ‘It’s just that I haven’t had the time. What with one thing and another...’ She paused to tap more cigarette ash onto Mrs Caldicot’s carpet. ‘I could get them easily,’ she insisted.

‘Let me move onto breakages,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘What breakages?’ demanded the cook cockily.

‘Well,’ said Mrs Caldicot, extracting another piece of paper from her folder, ‘since you’ve been in charge of the kitchen we have had to buy 76 replacement plates, 39 cups, 49 bowls, 64 saucers and 23 serving dishes.’

‘If you bought decent stuff in the first place it wouldn’t keep breaking,’ said the cook. ‘And if I had more help in the kitchen there probably wouldn’t be so many breakages.’

‘And we seem to have a lot of trouble with disappearing cutlery,’ said Mrs Caldicot. She took another sheet of paper from the cook’s folder. ‘We’ve had to replace 124 missing tea spoons, 124 missing forks, 124 missing desert spoons, 124 missing soup spoons and 124 missing knives.’

‘They get lost,’ said the cook with a shrug.

‘Doesn’t it strike you as odd that we’ve lost exactly the same number of spoons, forks and knives?’

The cook thought about this for a moment. ‘No,’ she said. She shrugged. ‘Probably just a coincidence.’

‘In your experience would you say that those sort of losses are normal?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

The cook nodded. ‘Normal,’ she confirmed. ‘Everywhere I’ve ever worked cutlery has gone missing. It’s just a fact of life.’ She shrugged. ‘A spoon here. A fork there. They get lost behind the fridge.’ Another shrug. She looked around for an ashtray, couldn’t see one, so continued to tap the ash from her cigarette onto Mrs Caldicot’s carpet.

Mrs Caldicot opened the drawer in her desk and took out a fork. ‘Do you recognise this fork?’

‘It looks like one of ours.’

‘It is one of ours.’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘But it is one of the new forks which arrived yesterday afternoon. It hasn’t been used yet. She handed the fork across the desk to the cook.

‘It looks like one of our forks,’ said the cook.

‘Would you be kind enough to turn it over,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

The cook turned the fork over.

‘If you look on the back of the handle you will see two initials scratched into the metal.’

The cook examined the handle.

‘The initials are D.L.’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘They stand for ‘David Livingstone.’’

‘Wasn’t he an explorer?’

‘He was. But I’m not interested in that one,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Our Mr David Livingstone has been a resident here since we opened. He has a strange habit of scratching his initials onto the back of his cutlery. Then he likes to use the same pieces of cutlery at every meal.’

The cook didn’t say anything.

‘Mr Livingstone lost his fork a week ago,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘And now, curiously, a brand new fork arrives with his initials scratched on the back.’

‘That’s really odd,’ said the cook.

‘Can you tell me where the new cutlery came from?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘A shop,’ replied the cook.

‘What sort of shop?’

‘Oh, a sort of second-hand shop,’ said the cook. ‘I thought it would be cheaper to buy the cutlery from a second-hand shop. Especially since we lose so many pieces.’

‘How did he manage to sell us back a fork that we lost a week ago?’ asked Mrs Caldicot, smiling sweetly.

The cook said nothing, scowled, and stood up. She stubbed out her cigarette on Mrs Caldicot’s desk and left. Mrs Caldicot reached down and tickled a sleeping Kitty behind the ear. Kitty, awake, looked up, spotted an empty lap and filled it.

Twenty five minutes later the cook left the nursing home and was never seen again. She took with her six towels, a plastic bag filled with assorted cutlery and three bottles of sherry.

Chapter 4

'Thanks a lot,' said Mrs Roberts to the ambulance men, finding that the new patient had already been put into an armchair in a small but neat and nicely furnished bedroom.

'These come with him,' said the ambulance man known as 'Chips'. He had followed his colleague up the stairs, struggling with three brown leather suitcases. Breathing heavily, and clearly out of condition, he put the suitcases down then pulled a plastic bag out of his jacket pocket and handed it to the nurse. 'His pills,' he explained.

'Is there a letter?' asked the nurse.

'No,' replied Chips. 'But the nurse at the hospital said that the instructions for the drugs are on the bottles. And his GP is Dr Snoot.'

Mrs Roberts shook her head, both disappointed and disgusted. 'We'd better be off then,' said the older ambulance man.

'Watch out for Miss Nightingale,' warned Mrs Roberts. 'She was going to the paper shop to buy a magazine but she might still be playing in the drive.'

'That the nutty old bat with the scooter?' asked Chips.

Mrs Roberts glowered at him.

'Don't take any notice of him,' said the older ambulance man, who instantly sensed Mrs Roberts's disapproval. 'He's too thick to know any better.' He clipped his younger colleague around the head then led him to the stairs and back down out of the rest home.

Mrs Roberts opened the plastic bag containing the new resident's drugs and, one by one, put eleven bottles side by side onto the top of the dressing table. She examined the bottles as she did so and shook her head disapprovingly at each one. When she'd finished she glanced out of the window. Resplendent in her yellow cape, Miss Nightingale, who had been racing through the puddles on her scooter, had stopped to wave goodbye to the ambulance men as their vehicle was driven out of the driveway. Two arms appeared, one from each side of the vehicle, as the two ambulance men waved goodbye to her.

Mrs Roberts did not even notice that the small grubby estate car, and its driver, the short man with the black plastic briefcase had both disappeared. Smiling at Miss Nightingale's activities, she turned away from the window, took another look at the still sleeping newcomer, and hurried out of the room and down the stairs.

Chapter 5

Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts were sitting in the office.

‘I’ve had to sort of fire the cook,’ confessed Mrs Caldicot. ‘I feel terrible about it. I’ve never had to fire anyone before.’

‘How do you sort of fire someone?’ asked Mrs Roberts.

Mrs Caldicot explained. ‘Actually she left,’ she said. ‘Before I had to fire her.’

‘Thank heavens for that!’ said Mrs Roberts.

‘You don’t think I was too harsh?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘You should have fired her weeks ago,’ Mrs Roberts assured her. ‘I would have got rid of her.’

‘Would you really?’ asked Mrs Caldicot, clearly delighted to know that her colleague would have acted in the same way.

‘She was a terrible cook, she was always in a foul temper, she was a drunk, she never produced meals on time and she broke more dishes every day than the average person breaks in a lifetime,’ said Mrs Roberts, counting these criticisms off on the fingers and thumb of one hand. ‘She used to steal food, she was the untidiest person in the entire history of the world - with the possible exception of my sister Beryl, but that’s another story and at least she’s clean. And dirty! She was the most unhygienic person I ever saw working in a kitchen and if one of those inspectors from the council had seen her at work he would have closed us down in seconds...’ Mrs Roberts was busy counting these criticisms off on her other hand.

Mrs Caldicot started laughing. ‘OK!’ she said, holding up a hand. ‘You’ve made me feel better.’

‘I could go on,’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘If I take off my tights I have ten toes too...’

‘No, you’ve convinced me I did the right thing,’ said Mrs Caldicot. She sighed. ‘It was just, well, difficult. I’ve never had to do anything like it before.’

‘You had to do it,’ said Mrs Roberts, putting great emphasis on the second word. ‘Apart from anything else she would have probably poisoned us all if you hadn’t!’

‘OK. So I had to fire the cook,’ said Mrs Caldicot, sounding relieved. ‘But now we have to find a replacement.’

‘Listen,’ said Mrs Roberts, quite seriously. ‘If I have to do the cooking myself we’ll eat better meals than we did when she was here. And with the amount of food she wasted we’ll be better off sending out for ‘take away’ meals! Have you seen the food bills?’

Mrs Caldicot rummaged around on her desk. ‘I know,’ she agreed. ‘They’re awfully high aren’t they.’

‘She must have been stealing from you,’ said Mrs Roberts. She picked up one of the bills at random. ‘£69 for one week’s milk bill!’ she said. ‘And how could we possibly spend £132 in one week on bread?’

‘I should have kept an eye on things,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘It’s my fault. I trusted her.’

Just then they heard a crash.

‘What on earth was that?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘I don’t know,’ Mrs Roberts replied. ‘But I think it came from upstairs. It may have been the new resident - Mr Williams. He was sedated when he arrived. Perhaps he’s woken up.’

They ran up the stairs together, Mrs Roberts leading and Mrs Caldicot following, and met the new resident staggering out of his room. He was holding onto the doorframe and looked very unsteady.

‘Who are you?’ demanded the man. ‘Where am I?’

‘My name is Mrs Roberts,’ explained Mrs Roberts. ‘I’m a nurse. You’ve been admitted to the Twilight Years Rest Home. And this is Mrs Caldicot; she’s in charge.’ Mrs Roberts turned to Mrs Caldicot. ‘He was sedated by the hospital staff,’ she explained. ‘I expect his sedation is wearing off.’

‘So now we know who you are and where I am,’ said the stranger. ‘That just leaves one question.’

Mrs Roberts looked at him, and waited.

‘Who the hell am I?’ he demanded. ‘And what in blazes am I doing in an old folks home?’

‘That’s two questions,’ said Mrs Caldicot. She took his arm and led him back into his room and helped him to sit down in the same chair in which the ambulance man had deposited him not long before.

‘Is it?’

‘You’re Henry Williams and you’re here because the hospital needed your bed and you’re not well enough to go home. They asked us to find you a bed and a room.’

‘Who said I’m not well enough to go home?’

‘The doctors at the hospital.’

‘Bloody idiots. What do they know about anything?’ muttered Mr Williams. He licked his lips. ‘I have a dry head, my mouth is as stinking as a birdcage and I could drink a horse.'

'I expect that will be the drugs,' explained Mrs Roberts. 'Do you mean that you're hungry or thirsty?'

'Thirsty, of course,' said Henry Williams, impatient with what he saw as the nurse's stupidity. 'I could drink a horse.'

'Would you like a cup of tea?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

Mr Williams's eyes lit up. 'I'd kiss for a cup of tea.'

'Don't you mean 'kill'?' asked Mrs Roberts.

'Mr Williams frowned, clearly puzzled. 'Why would I want to kill anyone for a cup of tea?' he asked. 'I'd kiss you, though.'

'You stay there,' said Mrs Roberts. 'I'll go and get you a cup of tea. Don't you go anywhere!'

'I'm not going anywhere,' said Mr Williams. 'Especially if you're going to bring me a cup of tea if I stay here.' He paused. 'Besides where would I go?' he asked. He thought for a moment. 'Do I have anywhere to go?' he asked.

Mrs Roberts and Mrs Caldicot turned and headed back for the landing. The door to Mr Williams's room was packed with faces. 'Is he all right?' demanded Mrs Torridge, an elderly woman in a pink cardigan and a blue dress with a floral pattern.

'He needs a cup of tea,' said Mrs Roberts.

'I'll put the kettle on,' said MrsTorridge. She hurried off down the stairs, followed back down the stairs by the half a dozen other residents who had accompanied her up the stairs.

As they all trooped down there was a shout and a crash at the top of the stairs. Henry Williams had wandered out of his bedroom again. This time he had knocked over a small table and a large vase of flowers. Mrs Roberts and Mrs Caldicot rushed up the stairs. Mr Williams fell to his knees and started to cry. 'I think I ought to call his doctor,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'You call the doctor,' said Mrs Roberts, bending down and helping Mr Williams to his feet. 'I'll help Mr Williams back into his room and stay with him.'

Chapter 6

Most of the residents at the Twilight Years Rest Home had arrived with Mrs Caldicot. But, like Mr Williams, there were a few newcomers. There was, for example, an elderly married couple called Maurice and Maple Merivale.

The Merivales arrived at the nursing home the day before Henry Williams had been delivered by ambulance. They stood on the doorstep, an impressive pile of luggage stacked neatly beside them, and politely asked if they could speak to Mrs Caldicot. Mrs Merivale, stout but tall, wore a thick, dark green coat and a pair of light green ankle boots. Mr Merivale, slightly taller and slightly less stout, had thin, sallow features and an impressive thatch of jet black hair.

'We're pleased to meet you,' said Mrs Merivale, when Mrs Caldicot hurried to the door, wiping her hands on a towel. 'We've heard a lot about you.'

'Won't you come inside?' asked Mrs Caldicot, who was, as always, slightly embarrassed that anyone should recognise her.

'Oh no thank you, Mrs Caldicot,' replied Mrs Merivale. 'Not yet. We've just come to ask you if you have a room.'

'You want to stay here?'

'If it's possible,' said Mrs Merivale, with a nod. 'We'd very much like to make this our home.'

'Both of you?'

'Oh yes, both of us. Both of us are looking for a new home,' replied Mrs Merivale. 'That's just the point, you see. We would like to share a room. We've slept together for 58 years now. We haven't spent a night apart in all that time.'

'You're looking for a double room?'

'Exactly,' nodded Mrs Merivale. `A double room is just what we want. For tonight if possible.'

'Where are you living at the moment?' asked Mrs Caldicot, puzzled.

'Well, we aren't actually living anywhere at the moment,' answered Mrs Merivale. She leant forward and lowered her voice. 'Until this morning we were living at a nursing home in Pallborough Avenue?'

'I know the one,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'It was taken over by a new company,' said Mrs Merivale. She pulled a face to show that this was not a development of which she approved. 'And they told us at breakfast today that we couldn't have a double room together.' She looked at her husband, standing silently beside her, and took his hand in her own. 'We've always been together,' she told Mrs Caldicot.

'Why did they want to split you up?' asked Mrs Caldicot, horrified.

'They said it was cheaper for us to be in separate homes,' explained Mrs Merivale. 'They assessed us and decided that although my husband needs Category 3 care I only need Category 4 care.'

'That's terrible!' said Mrs Caldicot.

'They said it would save them money,' said Mrs Merivale. 'But it would have broken our hearts.'

'Did you protest?'

'We said we weren't happy about it,' said Mrs Merivale. 'But they didn't seem interested. So, on balance we thought it best to leave.' She leant forward, conspiratorially, 'We don't like to stay where we aren't wanted. Besides, I've never liked making a fuss,' she added. She leant forwards and whispered. 'In fact one of the nurses once told me off for being too self-effacing.'

'She told you off for being self-effacing?'

'Yes. She was quite firm about it.'

'How did you get here?' asked Mrs Caldicot, looking at the couple's luggage, spread around and behind them.

'Oh, we walked,' said Mrs Merivale.

'South along Pallborough Avenue for four hundred yards,' said Mr Merivale. Mrs Caldicot looked at him. It was the first time he'd spoken. 'Then we took the first left after the school, went for two hundred yards down Beech Drive then took the first left after the post box into Steeple Road.'

'Ah,' said Mrs Caldicot, nodding and understanding.

'We went down Steeple Road for five hundred yards then turned left into Maple Avenue.' Mr Merivale smiled. 'And as soon as we reached Maple Avenue we could see your nursing home.'

'Thank you,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Of course we were lucky,' said Mr Merivale. 'If there had been road works in Steeple Road and they'd dug the pavement up, which they sometimes do, we would have had to go down Dartington Avenue and that would have added another ten minutes to the journey.'

'Of course,' agreed Mrs Caldicot, impressed. 'But how did your luggage get here?'

'We carried it,' explained Mrs Merivale, with a shrug. She sighed, looked at her husband and squeezed his hand. 'So do you have a room we can share?'

When Mrs Caldicot said she had a room they could have Mrs Merivale started to cry. 'Thank you,' she said. 'That's wonderful.' She turned to her husband and kissed him full on the mouth. He looked surprised but pleased. Then Mrs Merivale leant forwards and kissed Mrs Caldicot on the cheek. 'Thank you,' she said. There were tears flowing down her cheeks.

Mrs Caldicot took Mr and Mrs Merivale upstairs to show them their new room. She helped them carry their luggage. The suitcase she carried seemed to have been filled with bricks.

'I'm afraid there isn't much space in here,' said Mrs Caldicot, dropping the suitcase and looking around. She rubbed her aching arm.

'Oh, that doesn't matter, Mrs Caldicot,' said Mrs Merivale. 'That doesn't matter at all. The important thing is that Mr Merivale and I can be together. In the same home. In the same room.'

'There's one other thing,' said Mrs Caldicot, feeling rather uncomfortable and embarrassed. 'I hate bringing this up but, as you can probably imagine, we have quite a lot of bills and I naturally have to ask residents to make a contribution; to help pay the expenses of running the nursing home. We don't have any formal arrangements. People just contribute what they can afford.'

'Oh quite right too,' said Mrs Merivale. She opened a huge, old-fashioned, battered black leather handbag and rummaged around inside until she found her purse. She took out her purse, opened it and peered inside. After a moment, she took out a single five pound note which she handed to Mrs Caldicot with much ceremony. Without the five pound note the purse was empty.

'Here you are, dear,' she said, as though handing over a shovelful of gold sovereigns. 'You let us know when this has run out.'

'Thank you,' said Mrs Caldicot, accepting the note graciously.

'Is there anything we can to do to help you?' asked Mrs Merivale.

Mrs Caldicot looked at her.

'Mr Merivale and I like to keep busy,' explained Mrs Merivale. 'Cleaning, cooking, tidying up. We've always been busy. If you have something we can do to keep ourselves busy we'd be very grateful.' She paused, put her head to one side and smiled. 'It'll keep us out of mischief,' she said, as though if she and her husband were not kept busy they might set fire to the garden shed or start hurling Brussels sprouts at the postman. When she put her head to one side, Mrs Caldicot thought she looked rather like a large sparrow.

'Well, if you're sure that would be wonderful...' said Mrs Caldicot. 'We need some help in the kitchen.'

'As long as we're not getting in anyone's way,' said Mrs Merivale. She lowered her voice, looked first to the left then to the right as though concerned lest someone overhear her, and whispered. 'I know some cooks are a bit funny about having outsiders helping in their kitchen.'

'That isn't really a problem at the moment,' said Mrs Caldicot. She felt rather embarrassed to have to admit this to her newest resident. 'I'm afraid we don't have a cook,' she said.

'No cook?'

Mrs Caldicot shook her head.

'No cook at all?

Another shake of the head.

'Well, that's wonderful!' said Mrs Merivale. 'Mr Merivale and I will be happy to do the cooking for you.'

'That's very kind of you,' said Mrs Caldicot, rather uncertainly. 'Do you have any experience of cooking for large numbers of people?'

'Oh bless you, yes,' said Mrs Merivale. 'I used to be in catering when I was younger.'

'That would be marvellous,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Marvellous. What sort of remuneration would you be looking for?'

Mrs Merivale looked at Mrs Caldicot as though she had spoken to her in a foreign language.

'Pay,' explained Mrs Caldicot. 'Wages.'

'Oh good heavens don't you be silly,' said Mrs Merivale, clearly rather shocked. 'We won't want any payment. It'll be a pleasure. A real joy. And you won't have to worry about any hiring any assistants. I know how difficult it can be to find good kitchen maids. Mr Merivale loves to put on a pinny and help me out in the kitchen.'

'That's wonderful,' said Mrs Caldicot, genuinely delighted. 'I'll help you clean out the kitchen...it's a bit grubby at the moment...then it will be all yours.'

Chapter 7

Three and a half miles away from The Twilight Years Rest Home, two well-dressed men in their fifties were standing in an expensively furnished living room in an expensive detached house looking out at the gardens through the French windows. Both men had grey hair, both men looked distinguished and it was clear that both men had money.

‘It’s embarrassing to see him out there in this weather,’ said the shorter and stouter of the two men. The man he was talking about, his father, a wiry, elderly looking fellow, was standing in an ornamental pond dragging out weeds with his bare hands. He wore waders, old grey trousers and an old plastic fertilizer sack which had three holes cut in it - one for his head and one for each arm. On his head he wore an old brown trilby. The men looking at him both knew that he wore nothing at all underneath the fertilizer sack and that his trousers, which had been purchased from a charity shop, were several sizes too big for him and were held up with the aid of a piece of orange baler twine.

‘He’s a wonderful gardener,’ said the second man, the owner of the house in which they were standing, the owner of the garden they were looking at, and the employer of the man they were talking about. ‘I inherited him, you know. When we bought the house. That must have been, oh, eighteen, nineteen years ago. I don’t know how long the previous owners had him. At least fifteen years I should think. Probably longer.’

‘He’s been working here for fifty years,’ said the first man. ‘Half a century of pulling up weeds. He was eighty last year. He should be tucked up somewhere nice and warm. Watching the TV. Playing a bit of bowls when the weather is nice. Playing whist in the evenings.’

‘I’ve never known anyone with such a wonderful touch in the garden. Whatever he plants seems to come up. Flowers, vegetables, shrubs, trees - they all seem to bloom for him.’

‘When he was younger I offered him a job in my office. We needed a cleaner. Someone to help tidy up the evenings. No one would have seen him or known about it. But he wouldn’t take it. I mean, what’s the difference between mowing someone’s lawn and doing a bit of cleaning and polishing? No difference at all is there really?’

‘Do you know when he was ill a couple of years ago nearly everything in the garden died. I watered and weeded and did what I thought I was supposed to do. I think the plants missed him. When he came back everything perked up again. It was amazing.’

‘He was off because he had a liver infection. He should have stopped work then. I asked him to. But he wouldn’t, of course. Stubborn as a mule.’

‘Why don’t you let him work on for another summer? He enjoys it you know. I’ll have a word with him if you like and try to persuade him to stay in the potting shed when the weather is bad. I’ll still pay him, of course. He can always get on with cleaning the tools, that sort of thing. I don’t know where I’ll find anyone else like him. Totally trustworthy, you know. But then of course you would know that.’

‘I really don’t think so. Not now that I’ve been made senior partner. It really isn’t on, you know. Having my father work as a gardener. It would be so humiliating for my wife and me if it got out.’

‘Well, at least let’s leave it to him. I mean it’s his life, his job. Why not just let him decide? I’ll happily stand by whatever his decision might be.’

‘I don’t think so. We both know what his decision will be. And that really isn’t what I want at all.’ The gardener’s son paused and cleared his throat. ‘I think that perhaps you ought to be aware of your own rather vulnerable position,’ he said. ‘My father is over eighty. He is frail and rather vulnerable. He isn’t as steady as he used to be. I would hate to hear that he’d stabbed himself in the foot with a fork or fainted and drowned in your pond. You would be liable, of course. Have your checked your employer’s liability policy? You do have one of course?’

‘Er, I’m not, er...’

‘Many of these policies, and I do hope for your sake that you have one, have exclusion clauses which rule out cover for older employees. So you could find yourself totally exposed. I can’t tell what sort of damages we would be looking for if anything happened. And, of course, my being a leading local lawyer would mean that we wouldn’t have to worry about finding the very best representation.’

‘No. I see.’

The gardener’s son turned round and walked back into the room. ‘I see that you are a collector of old photographs.’

‘Yes, I have one or two.’

‘Very interesting stuff,’ said the gardener’s son. ‘I’m a collector too. This is a Brassai isn’t it?’

‘Yes.’

‘I thought so.’

‘And a Cartier-Bresson. And isn’t that an early Henry Williams?’

‘Yes. I’m impressed. You know a good deal about photography.’

‘I’ve had one or two clients who were keen. I was executor for one fellow. We had to get an expert up from London to look at his collection. I was surprised to see what they fetched. Just old snaps, you know. He had an early Williams. Very similar subject to yours. I was very impressed with what it fetched at auction. I started collecting similar stuff after that.’

‘So, if you collect early Williams you presumably collect old photographs of Paris?’

‘Yes. That’s something of a speciality of mine.’ The gardener’s son looked around. There were around thirty framed photographs on the walls. All the photographs were in black and white. ‘I suspect you’d rather hate to have to part with any of these.’

‘Absolutely. I wouldn’t part with them for anything.’

‘Except perhaps a costly legal action, eh?’ The gardener’s son looked at his father’s employer meaningfully.

The gardener’s employer, the owner of the house, the garden and the collection of photographs, said nothing.

‘So what are we going to do about my father then?’

The employer licked his lips. ‘I’ll have a word with him this afternoon.’ He spoke quietly, as though rather ashamed of what he was saying.

‘And tell him that you no longer require his services?’

‘Yes. I suppose so.’ He spoke in what was now a whisper.

‘No need to be brutal about it. Just explain that you’re going to look for someone a bit younger. Someone a bit fitter and stronger.’

‘Yes. Quite.’

‘Nice to have met you at last. After all these years. Don’t bother to see me out.’

Chapter 8

‘How did it go?’ asked the woman in the front passenger seat of the Jaguar. She was blonde, and although there was no visible evidence to lead a casual observer to question what they saw, those who had known her longer, back in days now rather further away in time than she might willingly acknowledge, were well aware that blonde had not been the colour of her hair when she had first appeared on the world’s stage.

She was wearing a fur coat which was unfastened. Underneath the fur she wore a short green dress which was several sizes too small for her. She wore a huge diamond ring on the third finger of her left hand and enough additional jewellery to look noticeably over-dressed. Her husband, the gardener’s son, had on several occasions tried to persuade her to dress a little less ostentatiously but her motto was ‘if you’ve got it, flaunt it’ and so, since she had it, she invariably flaunted it.

The gardener’s son was looking pleased with himself. ‘He’ll fire my father today,’ he said. ‘He was scared witless when I pointed out to him just how vulnerable he was. Are there any more?’

His wife opened the small green, leather bound notebook which lay on her lap and studied it for a moment. ‘No,’ she said. ‘That was the last one. Four employers.’ She half turned and smiled in admiration at her husband. ‘And all four have agreed to fire your father.’

‘Splendid. Do you fancy a spot of lunch?’ He turned to look at his wife. ‘Shall we go to the Connaught Arms?’

‘That would be nice, dear. But let’s get a table by the door. I hate it when they put us in a corner where no one can see us.’

Chapter 9

While Mr Roxdale Jr was celebrating having arranged for his father to be sacked, Mr Caldicot Jr was paying his first visit to his mother's new home.

'Well, mother,' said Derek, looking around him. 'I have to hand it to you. It's a fine looking building.' He said this as though with regret rather than admiration. He was not a generous boy and he even found it difficult to part with compliments. He took after his father in that respect.

Derek, his wife Veronica and their son Jason had come to visit Mrs Caldicot for the first time since she had re-opened the nursing home. It had been a long time since she and they had met. 'I'm amazed. You've done a pretty good job of this place,' said Derek at last; managing to spoil the compliment by making it sound patronising.

'Thank you,' said Mrs Caldicot, accepting the compliment for what it was. It was, she thought rather sadly, probably the most generous thing he'd ever said to her.

'Of course,' he continued, looking around and lowering his voice just enough to make it clear that he was conscious that anyone who overheard him might be offended but not quite low enough to make sure that no one did overhear him, 'the big question is: 'Are you making a profit?''

'That's not *the* big question,' thought Mrs Caldicot. 'It's *your* big question.'

'That's not why I opened the home,' Mrs Caldicot told him.

'But if you don't make a profit you'll have to close down,' Derek pointed out.

'Yes,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. 'But that doesn't mean that making a profit is the main reason that the home is open. Making a profit is merely a means to an end, not an end in itself.'

Derek thought about this and looked rather confused. He had never done anything in his life where making a profit had not been the prime driving force.

'Do you have a freezer?' asked Jason.

'Yes. Quite a big one,' Mrs Caldicot told him proudly.

'Does it have ice cream in it?'

'I think so.'

'I want one. Have you got pistachio?'

'I'm not sure,' answered Mrs Caldicot, trying to remember what was in the freezer. 'I'm pretty sure we have chocolate, coffee and strawberry. Oh, and vanilla, of course.'

'Oh, those are all boring,' sneered Jason.

'They're the flavours the residents prefer,' said Mrs Caldicot.

Jason screwed up his nose in disgust. His mother comforted him.

Mrs Caldicot took Derek upstairs to look around.

'Good heavens,' said Derek. 'The rooms are huge. But there's only one bed in most of them.'

'That's right,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I made sure that everyone had their own room - unless they wanted to share, of course. Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale would hate to be parted so they share one of the biggest rooms on the front.'

'But you'll never make any money that way,' said Derek, in despair. 'My firm has a retirement home division so I know about these things. The profitability of a nursing home venture depends entirely on bed occupation. You have to cram in as many beds as you can and you have to make sure that they're constantly occupied. If someone dies in the middle of the night you need to get them into the morgue straight away and have a fresh body getting out of the bed at breakfast time.'

Mrs Caldicot stared at him and, not for the first time, wondered whether the nurses at the maternity home could possibly have got her baby mixed up with someone else's.

'You're not listening to me mother,' said Derek. 'What are you thinking?'

'I was just thinking how much you remind me of your father,' said Mrs Caldicot.

Derek took this as a compliment.

'If you don't mind, dear, I'd rather just carry on as I am,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Oh, I give up with you,' snapped Derek. 'Sometimes you are just so damned stubborn these days. I really don't know what's come over since father died. You were never like this before.'

'No, dear,' said Mrs Caldicot sweetly. 'I wasn't, was I?'

'I've had enough of you and all this,' snapped Derek. He turned to his wife and son. 'Come on,' he said brusquely. 'We're going.' He turned back to his mother. 'And don't you come crying to me when this all goes pear shaped,' he warned her, wagging a finger. 'As far as I'm concerned you can do what you like. I want nothing more to do with you or this place.’

And with that Derek, Veronica and Jason stalked out of the nursing home and Mrs Caldicot’s life.

Rather to her own surprise, Mrs Caldicot was neither surprised nor upset.

Chapter 10

The Merivales were still unpacking and settling into their room and Mrs Caldicot was in the kitchen washing dishes. She was furious and was taking out her anger on the crockery. She had already broken two plates and a cup but felt no shame or sorrow. There were soapsuds everywhere. Mrs Caldicot was angry because she had spent twenty minutes unsuccessfully trying to get hold of Mr Williams's doctor.

After four calls, she had finally spoken to a very bored sounding receptionist who had announced that Dr Mr Snoot and Dr Mrs Snoot were both unavailable.

'Dr Mr Snoot and Dr Mrs Snoot?' thought Mrs Caldicot. 'They sound like a pair of characters in a children's cartoon series.' They would, she thought to herself, have to be the baddies.

'Is it an emergency?' the receptionist had enquired, managing to make the question both patronising and disdainful.

'Well, not really an emergency,' admitted Mrs Caldicot. 'No one's bleeding to death if that's what you mean.'

'Then call back later,' said the receptionist, for whom the word 'charm' was more likely to be associated with the word 'bracelet' than the phrase 'human relations'. And then 'click' - the phone had gone dead.

Mrs Caldicot, still furious, angrily thrust her dish mop to the bottom of a large green mug then blinked as soap water splashed onto her face and into her eyes.

'There's a gentleman here for you,' said Miss Nightingale, suddenly appearing behind Mrs Caldicot. Miss Nightingale lowered her voice and spoke in what she clearly seemed to think was a whisper. 'It's your nice fancy man, Mrs Caldicot.'

Startled, Mrs Caldicot turned from the sink; as she moved soapy bubbles dripped onto the floor from her wrists and forearms.

A smartly dressed man in his late fifties was standing in the doorway. Mrs Caldicot instantly recognised the visitor and blushed.

Jenkins, tall, broad-shouldered and slightly balding, was a senior editor on a national newspaper. What hair he had he wore collar length. He had a commanding presence. When, just a few months earlier, Mrs Caldicot had led a walk-out of the residents of the Twilight Years Rest Home it had been Jenkins who had published her life story in *The Sunday Globe* newspaper. It had been a cheque from *The Sunday Globe* that had helped rescue her from potential bankruptcy and enabled her to find a deposit to buy and reopen the nursing home. Mrs Caldicot knew that without Jenkins's help and encouragement she would not have been able to cope with the media storm her 'cabbage war' had aroused. Nor would she have been able to buy the nursing home and find a home for her eccentric band of friends and followers. It was not surprising that she felt genuinely grateful to Jenkins.

But gratefulness wasn't the only, or the most powerful, emotion she felt towards him. It wasn't gratefulness that made her blush and made her knees weaken when he suddenly appeared in her kitchen. It wasn't gratefulness that made her feel as coy and as nervous as a schoolgirl.

Miss Nightingale, her eyes twinkling, curtsied, rather clumsily, giggled and disappeared. Mrs Caldicot and Jenkins could hear her laughing gaily as she skipped off down the corridor.

'I met Miss Nightingale in the driveway,' explained Jenkins. 'Actually she nearly ran me over with her scooter. She insisted on bringing me in.' The visitor was wearing a navy blue suit with a white chalk stripe, a pale blue shirt and a perfectly tied dark blue tie. There wasn't an inappropriate crease anywhere. He would not have looked out of place in the shop window of a superior men's outfitters.

'I'm sorry...,' said Mrs Caldicot, still blushing. She waved a hand and sent a flurry of soap bubbles cascading around her. '...about that silly fancy man remark.' A few strands of hair fell across her face. 'I don't know where she got that idea from.' She reached up and brushed them away, leaving a trail of soap bubbles across her forehead and into her hair. She realised that she was blushing and, feeling embarrassed by that, blushed a still deeper shade of red.

'Please don't apologise,' insisted Jenkins, with a grin. 'Actually, I confess, I'm delighted that at least one person thinks of me as your fancy man.'

'Well, whatever...,' said Mrs Caldicot, not bothering to hide her pleasure at this mildly flirtatious remark. The late and rather unlamented Mr Caldicot had never been in the slightest bit flirtatious. Much to her surprise she liked being flirted with. It made her feel rather naughty but she definitely liked it. She felt forty years younger. She smiled. 'It's lovely to see you,' she said, meaning it. 'Your moustache has gone,' she said, suddenly noticing. 'You look younger without it.'

'I shaved it off,' said Jenkins, pleased that she had noticed.

'I'm sure I must look a terrible sight,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'It's been hectic here, as usual.' She patted her cheeks, as though this might cool them. ‘I’m blushing like a schoolgirl,’ she apologised, aware, as she said it, that the very admission was making her blush even more. Looking down she noticed the bubbles on her hands and wiped them both on her pinafore. ‘And babbling like one, too.’ She wondered how red she had become.

‘It’s very warm in here,’ said Jenkins gallantly. ‘I’m feeling a little hot myself.’

Mrs Caldicot smiled at him, gratefully. Mr Caldicot had never been gallant either. Not, at least, with her.

‘The residents seem to have settled in well,’ Jenkins said. ‘When I passed by the door into the lounge I noticed that they were having a very energetic game of something involving a cushion and a row of chairs piled onto a table.’

‘Volleyball,’ explained Mrs Caldicot. ‘They’re all very keen on volleyball at the moment. They’ve worked out a schedule of matches and they’re playing the World Cup. I think Argentina are playing France this morning.’

‘It seemed a pretty energetic game.’

‘It usually is. They do get very involved.’

There was a silence.

‘I was just passing,’ lied Jenkins. ‘I thought I’d drop in to see if I could buy you lunch. But if it’s inconvenient...if you’d rather make it another day...’ He left the sentence unfinished.

‘Oh, no,’ said Mrs Caldicot, perhaps, she thought, a trifle too hastily. ‘Oh, no. Lunch would be wonderful.’

‘You’re sure?’ asked Jenkins.

‘Absolutely!’ said Mrs Caldicot. She flushed and smiled. She glanced at the clock on the wall and then down at her pinafore. The clock showed that it was five minutes to twelve. She hurriedly dried her hands on her pinafore.

The back door swung open. ‘Pickering!’ cried an unexpected voice which neither of them recognised.

Mrs Caldicot and Jenkins both turned. A large, red-faced man stood in the kitchen doorway. He wore a worn leather gilet, a red and black lumberjack shirt, a pair of brown corduroy trousers and a pair of muddy army boots.

‘Pickering Organics!’ repeated the untimely intruder. ‘Your organic veg delivery.’ He looked around. ‘Where’s Enid?’

‘Oh right, good,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘That’s wonderful. Thank you. Enid left I’m afraid. Could you bring everything into the kitchen please?’

The delivery man did nothing to hide his disappointment, though there was no way to tell whether it was inspired by the absence of Enid, by the discovery that he was expected to bring in the fruit and vegetables by himself or by a mixture of both these factors. ‘Haven’t you got someone who could give me a hand?’ he moaned. ‘I’ve my bad back to think of.’

‘I’m afraid there isn’t anyone available to help you,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘And could you hurry please? I’m going out to lunch.’

Jenkins looked down at his unblemished and impeccably tailored suit and his perfectly polished shoes. ‘I’d be glad to help but I’m afraid I’m not really dressed for humping boxes of vegetables.’

The deliveryman looked Jenkins up and down and sniffed contemptuously. ‘You wouldn’t be no good anyway,’ he complained before disappearing. He looked at Mrs Caldicot. ‘Don’t I know you from somewhere?’ he demanded. ‘Are you famous?’

‘If you’ve heard of me then I am,’ replied Mrs Caldicot. ‘But if you haven’t then I don’t suppose I am.’

‘What’s your name?’

‘Caldicot. Thelma Caldicot,’ replied Mrs Caldicot.

‘I think I may have heard of you,’ said the deliveryman, screwing up his nose and giving a rather poor impression of a man lost in thought. ‘Perhaps you used to be someone famous?’ he suggested at last.

‘Perhaps I did,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘You’ll be famous too if I bash your head in with a saucepan,’ she thought.

The deliveryman left.

‘Do you get a lot of that?’ asked Jenkins, with a slight smile.

‘A little,’ confessed Mrs Caldicot.

‘You handled it very well,’ said Jenkins. ‘You seem very confident these days.’

‘Thank you,’ murmured Mrs Caldicot. ‘But ‘seem’ is the operative word. I’ve just got better at faking it.’

‘Who was Enid?’ asked Jenkins.

‘Oh don’t ask!’ said Mrs Caldicot, holding up both hands and pulling a face. She sighed and then answered the question anyway. ‘Enid used to be our cook. I hired her in something of a rush when I first opened the nursing home. But I discovered that she was secretly ordering a crate of sherry a week and drinking it all by herself. I had to let her go. It was my own fault. I should have spotted there was something wrong when she served pilchards four days running.’

‘I quite like pilchards,’ said Jenkins. ‘Under-estimated delicacy. Nothing wrong with serving pilchards. Full of vitamins and fish oils.’

‘But she served them for pudding,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘With custard.’

‘Ah,’ said Jenkins, pulling a face. ‘Possibly not such a terribly good idea.’

‘I should have realised then that there was something not quite right,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘But it wasn’t until I got the bill from the grocers and saw how much sherry we’d been getting through...’

‘Then you fired her,’ said Jenkins, with a slight smile. ‘Good for you.’

Mrs Caldicot held up a hand and shivered involuntarily. ‘Oh, please don’t use the ‘f’ word,’ she said. ‘It makes me go all funny inside. Being able to let people go makes me sound too much like a boss.’

They were interrupted by the arrival of Mrs Roberts, Mrs Caldicot’s senior nurse and right hand. Mrs Roberts appeared in the doorway which led into the hall and the body of the nursing home, looking flustered, as though she’d been hurrying. She was not built for hurrying. There was a large, damp stain on the front of her blue uniform. ‘I’m sorry to bother you, Mrs Caldicot,’ she apologised. She lowered her voice and spoke in a whisper. ‘But it’s Mr Williams. Henry Williams. The new resident. It’s just a teeny, weeny bit of an emergency.’

‘What’s the trouble?’ asked Mrs Caldicot anxiously.

‘He wants to leave,’ explained Mrs Roberts. ‘I’m afraid he’s being rather aggressive.’ She plucked at her damp uniform. She leant forwards and whispered. ‘He attacked me with a vase of flowers.’

‘You weren’t hurt?’ asked Mrs Caldicot, concerned.

‘Oh no,’ replied Mrs Roberts. ‘Fortunately, he didn’t let go of the vase. Freesias aren’t very heavy and water’s just damp isn’t it?’

‘Oh dear me,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘I think it’s probably just the pills he’s been taking,’ explained Mrs Roberts.

Mrs Caldicot turned to Jenkins. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I’d...’

Jenkins interrupted her. ‘You go and sort out Mr Williams,’ he said. ‘Would you like me to come with you?’

‘Oh no, thank you,’ replied Mrs Caldicot. ‘But if you could stay here and keep an eye on the delivery man....’

‘I’ll count in the carrots,’ promised Jenkins, as Mrs Caldicot, followed by Mrs Roberts, left the kitchen and headed for the stairs.

Chapter 11

By the time Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts got upstairs Henry Williams had collapsed back onto his bed and was staring rather morosely at his slippered feet.

'Is he all right?' Mrs Roberts asked Ruth, a plump young girl who had been hired to clean, tidy and generally help out in the nursing home once or twice a week. Eighteen-year-old Ruth was a naturally calm, peaceful, seemingly unflappable girl who had taken to her work with gusto. She was a big girl, who had weighed her age for as long as she could remember. She had weighed ten stones at the age of ten, twelve stones at the age of twelve and fourteen stones at the age of fourteen. Following this simple pattern she now weighed eighteen stones and, with a birthday coming up in three months, was eating with an enthusiasm pretty well guaranteed to ensure that she did not disappoint anyone who might be plotting her age and weight and hoping to continue their chart with a neat line.

Ruth, who was sitting in an easy chair watching Mr Williams staring at his feet, turned and nodded before noticing Mrs Caldicot. She jumped to her feet as quickly and as daintily as an eighteen stone teenager can do and curtsied. This was something Mrs Caldicot had, unsuccessfully, tried to persuade her to stop. No one had ever curtsied to her before and still not being entirely sure of the appropriate response she simply smiled and said 'hello' and quietly and tactfully suggested to the girl that she should pick up the small table which she had inadvertently and unknowingly knocked to the floor during the execution of the curtsey.

'Maybe we'd better call Dr Snoot again,' Mrs Caldicot said to Mrs Roberts.

'I telephoned them,' said Mrs Roberts. 'I got Dr Mrs Snoot. She said that after she'd finished her lunch she would be busy in a meeting with social workers and told me to give him another tranquilliser. To be honest I don't think she had the faintest idea who he is.'

'You didn't give her any more details about him?'

'No.'

'Probably just as well. Don't want to burden her with too much information. Sounds like she's a busy woman.'

Chapter 12

Downstairs, in the kitchen, the bad-tempered delivery man had finished bringing in the boxes of vegetables and fruit. The boxes were now stacked neatly in three piles just inside the back door.

‘That’s the last one,’ said the huge, sweating, red-faced man, dropping a box full of carrots down onto a last remaining square of spare kitchen table. There were already boxes of potatoes, cauliflower, turnips, beans, broccoli and other vegetables on the table. There were boxes of apples, oranges and bananas too.

‘Sign here, mate,’ said the sullen deliveryman, pulling a piece of pink paper out of his gilet pocket and thrusting it under Jenkins’s nose. Jenkins unfolded the paper, and studied it carefully for a few moments. The top, pink, sheet had a copy attached to its underside. The deliveryman arched his back and gave it a meaningful rub.

‘What happened to the radishes?’ Jenkins asked.

‘Out of radishes.’

‘I’ll cross them off the list then, shall I?’ said Jenkins. He took a slim, gold ballpoint pen out of his inside jacket pocket and drew a neat black line through the word ‘radishes’. He then made an appropriate amendment to the total at the bottom of the page and signed his name. He checked that the amendments and his signature had passed through to the second copy. ‘Do I keep the top or bottom copy?’ he asked.

‘Bottom.’

Jenkins kept the bottom copy and handed the top copy back to the deliveryman who took it, and hesitated. There was clearly something on his mind.

‘Tell Mrs Caldicot that she don’t get no more veg until I get paid,’ He folded his arms, held his head back and put on the look he always gave people when they owed him money. He had once been told that it made him look hard. When he had been younger and slighter this may well have been an accurate observation. But it is difficult for an overweight man with thinning ginger hair, an overhanging paunch and ill-fitting false teeth to look menacing.

‘Right,’ said Jenkins. ‘I’ll tell her.’

‘She’s a few weeks over,’ explained the man.

‘Right,’ said Jenkins. ‘I’m sure it’s an oversight. I’ll tell her.’

‘Can I ask you something?’ asked the deliveryman, allowing his hard-man look to fade away.

‘Of course,’ agreed Jenkins. ‘Ask away.’

‘Why does she never have any cabbage?’ he asked.

‘I beg your pardon?’ said Jenkins.

‘The woman who makes up the order,’ explained the deliveryman. ‘She never puts cabbage on the list.’ He paused, clearly puzzled. ‘What’s wrong with cabbage?’

‘I don’t think she likes cabbage,’ explained Jenkins. ‘It’s a long story. He slipped the greengrocer’s invoice into his jacket pocket.

Chapter 13

Mrs Caldicot entered the kitchen at speed.

‘Doctors!’ she cried. ‘They make me so angry!’

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Jenkins.

Mrs Caldicot told him of the trouble she’d had trying to get hold of Mr Williams’s general practitioner. As she talked she stroked Kitty, who was sleeping on her rug on top of the boiler. Stroking Kitty always helped calm her down.

‘Ring again,’ suggested Jenkins.

‘I will!’ said Mrs Caldicot. She looked at the clock. ‘But later,’ she added, with a slightly coquettish smile. ‘Are you still willing to take me out to lunch?’

‘The minute you’re ready,’ answered Jenkins.

‘Give me two minutes to brush my hair and freshen my make-up,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Why don’t you wait in the lounge? You should be safe enough. The volleyball players are having their lunch.’

Jenkins, puzzled, looked around. ‘I was wondering about that,’ he admitted. ‘Who made their lunch?’

‘The chef at the pizza parlour,’ replied Mrs Caldicot. ‘I said that as a treat while Mr and Mrs Merivale get settled in they could have a take-away for lunch. I gave them a choice between Chinese food, Indian food and pizzas but told them they all had to have the same because we get a discount on bulk orders.’

‘And they chose pizzas?’

‘Well, actually, no, they didn’t. Half of them wanted Chinese and half of them wanted Indian and neither half would give in so they compromised on pizzas which none of them actually wanted.’

‘Sounds like a good, sound democratic solution,’ nodded Jenkins. Mrs Caldicot hurried off to do things to her hair and make-up. In the hallway she met Mrs Roberts, her arms full of towels.

‘Where did you meet him?’ whispered Mrs Roberts. ‘He’s gorgeous!’

‘Who?’ asked Mrs Caldicot, pretending not to understand.

‘You know who. The gorgeous hunk in the kitchen. The one who’s taking you out to lunch.’

‘Oh, that’s Jenkins,’ explained Mrs Caldicot, trying to sound dismissive and unconcerned. ‘He’s a newspaper editor. We met when I left the nursing home and had that very public battle with Muller-Hawksmoor.’

‘Well, he’s very dishy,’ whispered Mrs Roberts. ‘If people say I’m looking a funny colour today it’s because I’m green with envy.’ She turned, hurrying on her way with her towels. A few feet down the corridor she half turned. ‘You take as long as you like over lunch,’ she said, over her shoulder. She grinned and winked. ‘You enjoy yourself. We can cope without you for a few hours.’

Meanwhile, Jenkins used his mobile phone to call the restaurant where he had already booked a table, to warn them that he and his guest would be late and to ensure that they would hold the table and the booking, and then wandered out of the kitchen and headed towards the lounge. As he passed the dining room he was distracted by a conversation between two female voices he recognised.

‘So, what sort of morning have you had?’ asked the first woman, who sounded like Miss Nightingale.

‘Terrible,’ answered the second woman. ‘Our entire computer system was down for two hours. I don’t know why we have so many IT consultants. They’re useless. More problems with the new software too. My desktop froze up so often I ended up working on my laptop. Our supplier in Frankfurt has let us down again, the air conditioning has packed up, Trent from head office has been promoted over me when everyone knows he can’t tie his shoelaces without help, the contract from Brussels didn’t arrive, my secretary is leaving to have another baby and, to top it all, by the time she got to me, the tea lady didn’t have any jammy dodgers left. What sort of day did you have?’

‘Awful. Simply awful,’ said the voice, which sounded as though it belonged to Miss Nightingale. ‘The washing machine got stuck on programme five so all your white shirts are now bright pink and two sizes too small, the postman left next door’s mail for the third time this week, the dishwasher overflowed all over the kitchen floor, two Jehovah’s Witnesses called and I couldn’t get rid of them for half an hour, a man from the garage rang and said that my car is unroadworthy because the ashtrays are full and there’s a spider in the garage twice the size of King Kong.’

‘Oh dear,’ said the second woman. ‘You poor thing. Mr Hopping in accounts came in to see me. He says that I can’t claim for the cup of tea I had when I went to Newcastle on the train a week last Wednesday. He says that the board has decided that cups of tea are no longer to be considered necessary expenses. Worst of all, there’s a rumour that Miss Onions in the typing pool is pregnant though I don’t know how that could be because I’d heard that she was on the pill. Oh, and I may be an hour or two late tonight. Mr Farthing wants me to go over the Global Moulding account with him.’

Jenkins, extremely puzzled by what he was hearing, was beginning to feel guilty for eavesdropping (even newspaper editors have scruples) when one of the residents came out of the dining room and nearly ran into him.

'Hello, Mr Jenkins!' cried Mr Livingstone. 'Won't you come and join us? Have a slice of pizza? There's plenty.' He waved an empty bottle. 'I'm just off to get more wine.'

Jenkins was thanking him and explaining that he had already made arrangements for his lunch when Mrs Caldicot came skipping down the stairs.

'I'm sorry,' said Mrs Caldicot, rather breathlessly. Jenkins looked at her. In less than fifteen minutes she had somehow succeeded in transforming herself. She looked beautiful and radiant. He told her.

'Don't be silly,' she said, blushing and giggling, though secretly she herself was quite pleased with the way she now looked. After tidying up her hair and her make-up and slipping into something a little slinkier than she normally wore she had caught sight of herself in the bathroom mirror. For a brief moment she had almost failed to recognise herself.

'I'm serious,' insisted Jenkins as they left.

In the car, Jenkins turned to Mrs Caldicot. 'Can you explain something for me,' he asked. 'While standing in the hallway I distinctly heard two women talking about the sort of morning they had both had at work. I didn't think any of your residents had jobs.'

'Oh that would have been Miss Nightingale and Mrs Torridge!' laughed Mrs Caldicot. 'They just pretend. It's a little game they play at mealtimes. They're quite good at it.'

For a moment Jenkins felt rather foolish. Then he saw the funny side of it. 'They were very convincing,' he smiled.

'Mrs Torridge is an amazing woman,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'She always keeps all her clocks and watches at different times. She says she's done it since she was 20 and that it completely eliminates boredom from her life.'

Jenkins laughed.

'You'd like her,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'She's a terrible hypochondriac but great fun. She is the sort of woman who never has a cold but always has the flu. But you'll like her! I think she's 82 but she always lies about her age. The other day I heard her tell someone that she is 92.'

'Why on earth does she do that? I thought women usually liked to pretend they are younger than they really are.'

'Not after the age of 70,' explained Mrs Caldicot. 'Mrs Torridge reckons that if people think she's ten years older than she really is they'll always tell her how good she looks. It works too. People are always paying her amazing compliments. The others have started doing it too. Miss Nightingale now always lies about her age. Mrs Peterborough simply can't remember hers.' Mrs Caldicot sighed. 'All our residents are wonderful. The other day Mr Hewitt told me that he had only ever wanted the simple things in life. When I asked him to define what he meant by the simple things, do you know what he said?'

'No,' laughed Jenkins. 'Tell me.'

'Love, money, power and immortality,' laughed Mrs Caldicot. She had laughed more with Jenkins than she'd ever laughed with the late Mr Caldicot. She suddenly realised how happy and content she felt when she was in his company. And safe too. In the months since her husband had died she'd had to grow a great deal. But underneath the tough exterior there was still a very soft inside. She wondered if Jenkins asked her out because he wanted to or simply because he thought he ought to keep in touch with her. She very much wanted it to be the former but was worried that it might be the latter. It had been a long, long time since she'd felt like this. She felt slightly bewildered and embarrassed and could sense that she was blushing again.

'I like the new building,' said Jenkins. 'It looks very elegant.'

'I was sad that we had to move,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'But some of the residents just couldn't settle in at the old place and we needed somewhere a bit bigger.' She paused. 'Besides...' she began and suddenly wished she hadn't.

'Go on,' encouraged Jenkins, as he accelerated past a bus.

'It's silly,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'You'll laugh.'

'No I won't,' said Jenkins. 'And what does it matter if I do. You think it's silly anyway.'

She looked at him. He was so kind. He always managed to make her feel good about herself. 'I had the old place painted and we moved out all the furniture and the carpets and the curtains.' It did seem silly. She couldn't help herself. She grinned. 'But we just couldn't get rid of the smell of cabbage.'

He laughed. But it wasn't a nasty laugh. He wasn't laughing at her. He was laughing with her.

'That's a pretty good reason for moving,' he told her.

'I spent far too much on moving,' admitted Mrs Caldicot. 'I'd like to have really nice furniture, carpets and curtains so that it will look more like a hotel than a rest home. The place we're in now must have been wonderful when it was last decorated but I seriously suspect that was probably a century ago!'

'It looks wonderful,' said Jenkins. 'You bought all the furniture with the new place, didn't you?'

Mrs Caldicot nodded. ‘The place had been in the same family for generations,’ she said. ‘They hadn’t done anything to it. When the old man who’d been living there died he left it to his children. But they didn’t want anything to do with it. They just wanted the place sold quickly so that they could split up the proceeds.’

‘I don’t know anything about furnishings or furniture but it looks very grand,’ said Jenkins. ‘Some of that furniture looks quite valuable to me. If I were you, I wouldn’t change a thing. And there’s no smell of cabbage. Do you have nothing now to remind you of that chap who used to run the Twilight Years...what was he called? Muller-something wasn’t it?’

‘There’s a vase in the lounge that used to stand on the hall table. Miss Nightingale rescued it and brought it with us.’ She paused. ‘Actually, I wish she hadn’t,’ she said. ‘It annoys me because it’s the only reminder of the past.’

‘I shouldn’t worry too much about it,’ said Jenkins. ‘The way your residents chase around it won’t last long.’

‘No,’ agreed Mrs Caldicot. ‘I suspect that you’re right.’

Chapter 14

'Would you order for me, please?' said Mrs Caldicot quietly, folding her menu and putting it down on the immaculate, white linen tablecloth. 'I honestly don't understand any of this,' she said, tapping the closed menu with a forefinger. 'It's all in French.' She had also been slightly bewildered by the fact that her menu hadn't contained any prices.

'Do you like salmon?'

'Oh yes, very much.' Mrs Caldicot lowered her voice still further. 'But isn't it terribly expensive?'

'Not at all,' Jenkins assured her.

'How can you possibly know?' asked Mrs Caldicot, looking around anxiously. 'There aren't any prices on the menu.'

'There are on mine,' Jenkins assured her. 'They gave you a menu without prices so that you wouldn't know how much of a cheapskate I am.' He smiled.

Mrs Caldicot smiled back. She found the newspaperman irresistible.

'Are you sure the rest home will be OK while you're away?' Jenkins asked. 'Everything seemed so hectic that I feel a little guilty taking you out.'

'Everything will be fine,' replied Mrs Caldicot. 'Mrs Roberts is in charge. She's marvellous.'

Jenkins frowned. 'Mrs Roberts? I don't know her do I?'

'You saw her briefly,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Gina Roberts. She's plumpish, mid-forties, black and she has the smile of an angel. She's always laughing. I sometimes think that everyone who knows her regards her as their very best friend.'

'I remember.'

'When I re-opened the Twilight Years Rest Home I had to hire all sorts of staff. I'd never done anything like it before and to be honest I wasn't very good at it. For example, the cook we've just lost was one of my first appointments.'

'The sherry enthusiast?'

'That's the one,' said Mrs Caldicot, with a roll of her eyes. 'My oh my, she was a mistake. Not that she was the only mistake. I hired a housekeeper who stole from the petty cash and two young men who were supposed to do the heavy work but who spent all their time picking up local girls and bringing them back to their rooms. Mrs Roberts has more than made up for all the mistakes I made. She's a real gem. She's one of those people who always seems to get so much more out of giving than receiving. She always wants to do things for people but gets very embarrassed if anyone does anything for her. She used to work as a nurse at the Twilight Years Rest Home back in Muller-Hawksmoor's days and I remembered her from my brief stay there. She's wonderfully kind and sympathetic. She'd just got divorced and was living in a tiny bed sitting room so she moved in with us. The Twilight Years Rest Home is now her life - just as it is mine. She cares about people so much that I sometimes think that if the unions found out about her they'd have her hung, drawn and quartered. Now, she's our Matron and I honestly don't know how I'd cope without her.'

'Matron?'

'Yes. It's a wonderfully old-fashioned word, isn't it? But it sounds much nicer than 'head nurse', don't you think? Mrs Roberts tells me that in hospitals these days the senior nurses never actually see any patients. They have numbers and spend all their days either shuffling bits of paper around or attending meetings. Most of them have long since forgotten how to bandage someone. They go around telling young nurses off if they're seen sitting on the beds, comforting the sick and the needy. Mrs Roberts is a proper nurse. She doesn't mind getting her hands dirty. And she's old-fashioned enough to believe that comforting the sick and the needy is what a nurse is there for.'

'It sounds as if you're lucky to have her.'

'Oh, I am,' agreed Mrs Caldicot.

'Now, what shall we have after the salmon? A raspberry sorbet? And then how about beef and Yorkshire pudding?'

'That sounds wonderful,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. She laughed. 'It sounds absolutely marvellous.'

Jenkins smiled. 'I love to hear you laugh,' he told her. He closed his menu and, moments later, murmured the order to the waiter who had miraculously appeared at his shoulder.

'Excellent choice, sir,' murmured the waiter. Mrs Caldicot couldn't help wondering why this choice deserved a compliment and what horrors they had avoided by not choosing the spring lamb chop or the braised liver.

'Would you like some wine?' Jenkins asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘Oh no, I don’t think so,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Not at lunchtime. I’ll fall asleep.’

‘We could just have a glass of champagne with our salmon and then half a bottle of a nice red between us with our main course,’ suggested Jenkins. ‘I’ve got to drive so I won’t drink more than one glass.’

‘You’re leading me astray!’ laughed Mrs Caldicot. She paused, looked at him and remembered. ‘But then you’ve always been very good at that.’

‘I’ll ask the wine waiter to come over,’ murmured the waiter, before picking up the two menus and shimmying away silently.

‘I think you deserve a little leading astray,’ said Jenkins, when the waiter had gone. He leant across the table a little. ‘And, if someone’s going to do it, I’m very happy to apply for the job.’

Mrs Caldicot, blushing, looked down and played with her cutlery.

‘I have a confession to make,’ said Jenkins suddenly.

Mrs Caldicot looked across at him, surprised.

‘I didn’t turn up at the nursing home by accident,’ he told her.

‘Oh.’

‘I came quite deliberately. To see you.’

‘Oh.’

‘I’ve been trying to pluck up the courage to come and see you for ages.’

‘Why on earth would you need courage to come and see me?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘I don’t know,’ admitted Jenkins. ‘Perhaps because I was frightened that you might say ‘no’ if I invited you out. And being able to hang on to the thought that you might say ‘yes’ was more acceptable than the possibility of finding out that you might say ‘no’.’

Mrs Caldicot couldn’t think of any suitable reply to this and so she said nothing for a while. Since Jenkins was hoping that Mrs Caldicot might say something encouraging he too stayed silent. He had been astonished to find just how delighted he had been to see her and just how much he had missed her.

‘Why do they do that?’ she asked at last, very quietly.

‘Do what?’

‘Congratulate you on what you’ve ordered. If I’d ordered the steak and kidney pie would he have leant down and quietly told me that I’d made a terrible decision because it’s rancid?’

Jenkins laughed. It was a long time since he’d met a woman with Mrs Caldicot’s uniquely honest approach to life. He very much enjoyed being with her.

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘And I’m not going to ask. I have very few rules,’ he continued. ‘But one of them is never to argue with or embarrass a waiter before I eat a meal at the restaurant where he works. It is a simple, unambitious rule but it is, I believe, one which has helped to protect me from food poisoning on four continents.’

A young girl, dressed in a black skirt and a white blouse, appeared at their table carrying a basket full of bread rolls. Jenkins chose a white roll covered in a thick sprinkling of sesame seeds. Mrs Caldicot selected a small brown roll, baked in the shape of a small Hovis loaf.

Jenkins had booked a table at the best local hotel he could find. He had been abroad on a lengthy assignment for the proprietor of the newspaper for which he worked and he had missed Mrs Caldicot very much. He had never before become emotionally involved with the subject of a story but had thought about her often while he’d been away. Several times he’d picked up the telephone, intending to call her. But on each occasion he had put the telephone back down without making the call. He knew why he had wanted to call. But up until now he hadn’t been at all sure why he hadn’t gone through with it. Now he knew. He had been frightened that he was getting too closely involved. He had been frightened by the intensity of his own feelings. Now, it was too late.

‘How has life been for you personally?’ Jenkins asked, breaking his bread into several pieces. ‘I know how things have been for the rest home. You have done amazing things. But what about you?’

Mrs Caldicot thought for a long moment before answering.

‘My biggest surprise was that I found dealing with my husband’s death harder than I thought I would,’ she confessed. ‘Everything happened so quickly that I never really had chance to come to terms with what had happened. I neither asked for, nor expected, anything from my husband and so I was never disappointed. But you get used to people nevertheless and with all the drama and the excitement, I didn’t get a chance to mourn him properly. If ‘mourn’ is the right word.’ Following her dining companion’s example Mrs Caldicot picked up and broke her own bread roll.

‘My GP arranged for me to see a bereavement counsellor,’ continued Mrs Caldicot. ‘Though before he died I never knew such people existed.’

‘I didn’t know they existed within the NHS,’ commented Jenkins, whose view of the Britain’s state organised health service was poor.

'They don't,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I had to pay this one £90 an hour.'

'Was he any good?'

'To be perfectly honest my hairdresser gave me better support and much better advice,' laughed Mrs Caldicot. 'And he did my hair too.'

Jenkins, buttered the two halves of his bread roll. Mrs Caldicot continued to break hers into smaller and smaller pieces. 'He calls himself Luigi but I happen to know he comes from Southport,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'He did once go to Calais on one of those cheap wine and cigarettes shopping expeditions but he's never been to Italy.'

Jenkins took a bite of bread roll and chewed for a moment before he said anything. 'Luigi was the hairdresser?'

Mrs Caldicot laughed. 'Oh yes. The bereavement counsellor was called Ms Cook. I don't know her first name. Isn't that odd? I don't know the hairdresser's second name and I don't know her first name. I think she said her parents came from Sydney but I'm pretty sure she said she was born in Dudley.'

'Did she help at all?' asked Jenkins, just before taking another bite of bread roll.

'I was asked to describe Mr Caldicot's virtues at the bereavement counselling,' she said. 'The only thing I could think of was tidiness. He was always a very tidy man. He always put his dirty washing straight into the raffia work washing skip at the top of the landing. But it's not a lot to say of someone is it? That you remember them because they were 'tidy'?' She paused and looked down and there was a silence for a few moments. 'I didn't really need to mourn him,' she said, reflecting. 'I didn't miss him in a spiritual sort of way. It was more that I just needed to get used to him not being there. I missed not having to cook for two and I missed not having to wash and iron his shirts. But those aren't really things that you miss, are they?'

'Would you like another roll?' Jenkins asked Mrs Caldicot. She looked down. The roll with which she had been playing was now nothing but a pile of crumbs on her plate.

'Oh dear,' she said, looking down and staring aghast at her plate. 'Did I really do that?' She picked her handbag up off the floor, brought it underneath the table and opened it. She then tipped the crumbs from the plate into her handbag.

'I think the bereavement counsellor would probably call it 'anger displacement', and charge you another £90,' said Jenkins.

Another waiter brought their two glasses of champagne. Jenkins asked him to bring Mrs Caldicot a fresh roll. When he had gone, Jenkins lifted his glass. 'To health, love and money and time to enjoy them all,' he said.

Mrs Caldicot lifted her glass, repeated the toast, touched her glass against Jenkins's and took a sip.

'Mmmm,' she said. 'This is very good.'

Two waiters brought two plates upon which silver domes hid the food on the plates. The waiters placed the plates on the tablecloth, paused and then, in unison, lifted the domes to reveal their salmon - the first course.

'Doesn't it look wonderful?' said Mrs Caldicot, her face as excited as a child's at Christmas.

They ate in silence for a while.

'Do you have all the residents who used to live at Mr Muller-Hawksmoor's establishment?' Jenkins asked.

'Oh no,' replied Mrs Caldicot. 'A few were so upset by everything that had happened that they went back to live with their families or in rest homes or sheltered accommodation nearer to relatives. Two are currently in hospital, and, of course, poor old Mrs Davies - whom I don't think you ever met - died.'

'Is Mrs Peterborough still with you?'

'She's with me. She's as dotty as ever but just as adorable. She still repeats everything Miss Nightingale says.

And we have Mrs Torridge, of course, who has her little quirks too. Do you know she wakes up sometimes and decides she's really someone else. One day last week, she decided that she was Harold Wilson. She borrowed an old pipe and went around making speeches all day long. Her family turn up occasionally and want to have her committed to a mental institution but she's very happy with us. If she were richer, people would just think her rather eccentric.'

'And Mr Livingstone is still with you, isn't he? I saw him.'

'Oh yes. And dear old Mr Hewitt. Actually, it's a good job we don't have as many residents as there were before because Muller-Hawksmoor had his residents sharing two or three to a room and now everyone has their own room - except Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale who can't abide the thought of being separated and who insisted on sharing a room - and Mr and Mrs Merivale too, of course.'

'Mr and Mrs Merivale?' said Jenkins, thoughtfully. 'I don't think I remember them.'

'No, they're new,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. 'Maple and Maurice Merivale. They're a lovely couple. Of course, we don't have as many rooms as there used to be. We knocked down some of the partitions, to make the rooms bigger and airier. It didn't take much work. Some of the partitions were so thin that if you put one nail in you could hang pictures on both sides.'

'And who is the latest patient - the one whose doctor you were trying to contact?'

‘That’s a gentleman called Mr Williams. He came because the hospital needed his bed. We’ve only got two empty rooms now.’

‘I don’t wish to sound horribly mercenary,’ said Jenkins. ‘But can Mr Williams afford to pay anything for his board and lodging?’

‘I’ve no idea,’ admitted Mrs Caldicot.

‘And you didn’t ask?’

‘Good heavens, no,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘No,’ sighed Jenkins, a slight smile creeping onto his lips. ‘I suppose not.’

Chapter 15

‘I’ve been very lucky,’ said Mrs Caldicot, as she tackled her salmon. ‘We don’t have much income but all the residents help out when they can.’ She paused. ‘They’re brilliant,’ she said. ‘All we need now is someone to do the roof.’

‘It’s leaking?’

‘Only when it rains,’ said Mrs Caldicot. Realising what she’d said she laughed at herself. ‘I’m looking for a roofer who will overcharge and do a shoddy job. At least then I’ll know that I won’t be disappointed as well.’

‘But, apart from the roof, it’s all working out OK?’ asked Jenkins.

‘We all do our best,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘The only real problem is that instead of doing what they can to make things easier the authorities bend over backwards to make things difficult. All I want to do is run a little home for a few friends - provide them with a roof and so on. It doesn’t seem a lot to ask, does it?’

Jenkins, who sometimes thought he knew far too much about the way the world works, said nothing, thought a good deal and smiled at her.

‘I sometimes wake up not really sure what happened to me. One minute I’m a slightly dotty old lady whose relatives decide she needs to be put into a home. The next minute I’m still a slightly dotty old lady but now I’m in charge of the home. Phrases like ‘putting the lunatics in charge of the asylum’ spring to mind. But then I just get on with life and try not to worry too much. Though I confess I do often ask myself whether doing the right things for the wrong reasons is worse or better than doing the wrong things for the right reasons.’

‘I’d rather leave the metaphysics to our philosophy editor, if you don’t mind,’ said Jenkins.

‘Have you really got one? A philosophy editor?’

‘Good heavens, no,’ laughed Jenkins, clearing his plate and laying down his knife and fork. ‘I’m a great fan of yours and really admire what you’ve done. I like the way you did it your way - just one woman up against the system. It’s something a lot of people dream about but it doesn’t happen often. The story we ran about you struck a real chord with our older readers,’ Jenkins told her. ‘There’s a lot of resentment among older people at the moment.’ He stopped, and thought for a moment. ‘No,’ he said, correcting himself. ‘Resentment is too strong a word - though to be honest I personally don’t think it would inappropriate or out of place. Many old people just feel rather sad and abandoned. They feel that the elderly are no longer respected.’

‘I’m not surprised,’ agreed Mrs Caldicot. ‘They are abandoned and they certainly aren’t respected. Millions of elderly people are now officially living in poverty. They’ve worked hard all their lives but they can’t even get decent health care now. They’re pushed around, bullied, ignored and treated as though they’re just a nuisance.’

‘I spend quite a lot of time on what used to be called the Continent,’ said Jenkins. He finished his champagne. ‘And I have to say that they treat their elderly relatives quite differently over there.’

‘Really?’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘Absolutely,’ said Jenkins. ‘The French, the Italians, the Spanish and so on all treat their elderly relatives with great respect and love. The eccentricity of the old isn’t regarded as a cause of embarrassment as it is in Britain. They don’t think that a bit of forgetfulness has to be covered up with sedatives and anti-psychotic drugs. In cafes all across mainland Europe the best cafe seats, the seats near to the window in the summer, or near to the stove in the winter, are reserved by popular consent, for the elderly. Old grannies are given a chair in the grocery store so that they can sit and chat with their friends. Benches are put out in the village squares so that the old men can sit around, admire the young women parading by for the benefit of the young men on their motorbikes, reminisce about their own greatest conquests, share a bottle of wine and a packet of cigarettes and keep track of all the essential comings and goings. They have the place of honour at meal times and they sleep in their own beds, in their own rooms, with their families.’

‘Golly,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Are you sure that’s not heaven you’re describing?

Jenkins smiled. ‘In a village I know well in France the waiter at the cafe where I usually take my evening glass of wine fetches two of his elderly and frail patrons from their homes every morning at eleven. They spend all day in the cafe, buying an occasional glass of wine or cup of coffee, and maybe a small meal, and then, at the end of the day, when he is about to close up his cafe, he takes them back home again. It seems to me to be a considerably more decent life than the sort of life we offer our elderly folk. Given a choice between a cafe and a day centre furnished with plastic chairs, over-loud television and a succession of patronising volunteers I know which I would choose.’

‘From what you say it seems that everyone seems to have much more patience with the elderly than they have in this country,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Here the notion of the extended family - going back three or four or five generations - is now merely something you read about in history books. We have our relatives `put away’ when they become a burden. We're too busy for family loyalties; too obsessed with our ambitions to be concerned with what happens to our old people. We make more fuss over the deaths of complete strangers - murder victims, members of the royal family - than we do about the deaths of our own relatives. How many of the thousands who went to London to lay flowers outside Kensington Palace after Diana died would have made the same trip to lay flowers on their own grandparents' graves? Most people over 60 have had to learn to accept the inevitability of systematic and continuous disappointment. Just when the commitments and responsibilities have gone, just when you no longer have to be nice to bosses and partners and customers whom you can't stand the sight of and have a right to be able to look forward to a bit of fun - look what happens! The only thing doctors and nurses in our hospitals will do for you is give you a metaphorical bang on the head and knock you out with some disgusting cocktail of sedatives. I wouldn't do that to my worst enemy.' Mrs Caldicot paused and thought for a moment. 'Well, I could, of course probably be persuaded.' she added. Jenkins smiled. 'The thing is that today if you're over 50,' Mrs Caldicot continued, 'the nurses don't really care whether you live or die as long as you have your bowels opened regularly. Appallingly, it's now perfectly legal for doctors and nurses to drug the elderly - just to keep them quiet and to stop them from complaining.'

'It's a scandal,' agreed Jenkins.

'I read somewhere - I think it might have been in your own paper - that the increase in the prescribing of anti-psychotic drugs for the elderly is going up 70% a year. In some so-called 'care' homes half or even all the patients are permanently zonked out with pills they don't need. And the government has now made it legal for the nurses and doctors to do it.' Mrs Caldicot was getting into her stride. 'The old are expected to be grateful for every little favour, thankful for their pensions. They're almost expected to give thanks for being allowed to stay alive. Doesn't anyone ever stop to think that the elderly have earned their pensions and that they are entitled to more from life than the chance to sit quietly and watch the dross on daytime television. Our old people deserve better.'

'Stop! Stop!' cried Jenkins, laughing. 'You don't have to convince me. I'm on your side. We really should get you onto the television to talk about this.'

Mrs Caldicot held up a hand. 'Oh, no, thank you,' she said. 'I think my television career is over.'

'That's a great pity,' said Jenkins. 'You were a breath of fresh air. You'd bring a lot of sense to TV discussion programmes. You could become a standard bearer for the elderly.'

'Oh I do hate that word!' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Which word?'

'Elderly. It has all sorts of unpleasant connotations. It always makes me think of geriatric wards, nasty smells and Zimmer frames.'

Jenkins smiled. 'There you are, you see!' he said. 'Always defying convention and making people think.'

'You're the one who should be on the television,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I've never known anyone with such a sweet tongue.' She looked at her companion. 'I've told you far too much about me,' she said. 'What about you? Are you happy? Content? At peace?'

'Good heavens!' said Jenkins with a laugh. 'When you ask questions you don't mess around, do you?'

'No,' admitted Mrs Caldicot, enjoying the change of roles. 'How are you enjoying life?'

For a moment Jenkins didn't answer.

'I'm sorry,' said Mrs Caldicot quietly. 'Have I said something I shouldn't have done?'

'No, no,' said Jenkins. 'Just touched a nerve I suppose.' He sighed. 'I've been getting more and more disillusioned with what I do and the people I do it with. I'm fed up with the world and I'm fed up with newspapers. I can hardly bring myself to read the papers any more. Every day fills me with frustration. I live in a constant state of rage at the levels of corruption in almost every aspect of public and corporate life. The Government survives on the apathy of the masses. There are only two reasons to read newspapers: for pleasure and for information. I no longer get any pleasure out of reading the papers. And I have more than enough information to last me a lifetime.'

Two waiters bought their next course.

'I thought you loved newspapers!' said Mrs Caldicot, dipping a spoon into her raspberry sorbet.

'I used to love newspapers,' said Jenkins, emphasising the second word. 'But these days the newspaper industry - like everything else - is run by bean counters. Mean-spirited men and women in expensive suits who know the price of everything and the value of nothing.'

'That's very nicely put,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'It's not original, I'm afraid,' confessed Jenkins. 'Oscar Wilde said it first, in 'Lady Windermere's Fan'; though knowing his reputation he probably pinched it off someone else. It was his definition of a cynic.'

'I'm sorry,' said Mrs Caldicot. She felt embarrassed. 'I don't know much about literature. I'm very ignorant.' She brightened. 'But it is an area of my ignorance I've always wanted to remedy.'

'I didn't mean to sound patronising,' said Jenkins. He finished his sorbet. 'But never one to pass up an opportunity...if you'd like to come to the theatre with me one evening I would love to take you.'

'I'd love that,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Very much. But don't change the subject.'

'The bean counters have changed everything,' said Jenkins. 'There's no fun, no passion and very little sense of right and wrong in newspapers these days. I think I'm the oldest senior member of staff on my paper - and probably one of the oldest on any national newspaper. Most of the young fellows around these days are in it for money and power rather than because they're interested in finding out and exposing the truth.'

The waiters arrived to collect their empty sorbet dishes. Moments later they brought the main course. The wine waiter followed with half a bottle of claret.

'Let's get back to your life,' said Mrs Caldicot firmly. 'Wasn't there some journalist who once said that a journalist should treat politicians in the same way that dogs treat lamp-posts?'

Jenkins grinned broadly. 'Exactly!' he said. 'It was a chap called H.L.Mencken and he was absolutely right. These days most of the young guys in suits have probably never heard of Mencken. And they certainly wouldn't dream of treating a politician disrespectfully. Most of them suck up to politicians so that their bosses can get their deals pushed through and so that they can get their knighthoods and their well-paid positions on influential quangos.'

'You sound as if you consider yourself a bit prehistoric!' said Mrs Caldicot.

'I am!' said Jenkins. 'I'm an anachronism. I always considered myself to be fairly tough and hardy - and even cynical - but the new editors I work with are ruthless. They're hard rather than hardy. They never let their emotions govern the way they treat a story.'

Jenkins picked up a spoon and started to play with it. 'I had lunch with my editor two days ago,' he said. `At the Savoy in London. He ordered a steak and chips, as he always does, and when it came he poked at it rather half-heartedly with his knife and immediately told the waiter that the steak wasn't cooked as he'd ordered it. The waiter was rather taken aback. He apologised and offered to take the steak back to the kitchen to be replaced. 'No. I haven't got time,' said the editor. And he dismissed the waiter with a wave of his hand. When the poor guy had gone he looked at me. 'Nothing wrong with the steak,' he told me coldly. 'Just thought I'd keep the guy on his toes and let him know who's in charge.''

Neither Jenkins nor Mrs Caldicot said a word for a moment. 'I don't think I like your world very much,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'That's exactly my problem,' said Jenkins. 'I don't like it very much either. 'The modern corporate man operates on fear,' he said. 'He is frightened that without the fear his power will simply disappear. The editor's appreciation of his own power is confirmed every day by the fact that journalists shiver and jump when he approaches. If they stop shivering and jumping he won't know that he has the power. Of course, the poor fellow is driven by fear too. The power goes with the job. Without the job he will have no power.'

Mrs Caldicot looked at him, reached across the table and touched his hand. 'I am sorry,' she said. 'I think I always thought that your life was just all roses.'

Jenkins shook his head sadly. 'What a pointless and rather pathetic use of power,' he said. 'I find it frightening to realise that a man like that is running a national newspaper,' he said. 'He humiliated a perfectly decent human being just to show me how ruthless he is and to underline the gulf that exists between the two of them. It was also a message to me, to let me know he's the boss.' He looked across at Mrs Caldicot. 'I've got to get out,' he said. 'I'm terrified that I'll be contaminated by all this; that it will infect my soul. I'm already beginning to assume there is a hidden agenda behind everything people do.' He sighed. `I've got to get away from it.'

'Perhaps you need a holiday,' suggested Mrs Caldicot.

'No, no. A holiday is good I'm afraid. I won't be able to forget the sort of world I now work in. If I get too soft then when I get back I'll be massacred. I need to get out of it for good.'

The waiter arrived, waited for them to acknowledge his presence and then recited an impressive list of puddings.

'What would you like?' asked Jenkins, brightening up. 'No more of this misery,' I promise you. 'I didn't bring you here to bore you silly with my complaints.'

'You didn't bore me,' insisted Mrs Caldicot.

'Choose a pudding,' said Jenkins, smiling. 'Something stuffed with calories.'

'You'll laugh,' said Mrs Caldicot, folding her menu and putting it down.

'No, I won't!' promised Jenkins.

'I'd like a knickerbocker glory,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Why should I laugh at that?'

'It seems, sort of, childish, I suppose.'

'It seems wonderful,' said Jenkins. He turned to the waiter and ordered one knickerbocker glory.

'Of course, sir,' smiled the waiter. He turned to Jenkins. 'And for you, sir?'

'Just coffee for me, please.'

‘You tricked me!’ protested Mrs Caldicot. ‘I thought you were having a pudding.’

‘I’ll get far more pleasure out of watching you eat yours,’ said Jenkins. ‘Do you want coffee?’

‘No thanks,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘I haven’t had a knickerbocker glory for years,’ she confessed. `Not since I was a girl. I don’t know what gave me the idea.’ She hesitated. ‘Yes, I do.’ she corrected herself. ‘I don’t think I’ve enjoyed a meal as much since I was a child. It sort of reminded me of happy times...’

‘I’m pleased,’ said Jenkins, who clearly meant it.

‘So, what are you going to do about your life?’ asked Mrs Caldicot. ‘Do you have something planned?’

For a moment or two Jenkins didn’t reply. He picked up his wine glass, inspected it as though looking for marks, stared at it as though he had seen it before but couldn’t quite remember where, drank a little wine from it and gently put it down. ‘I’ve been offered a new job,’ he said at last. ‘Abroad.’

Mrs Caldicot felt cold. She didn’t know exactly why. ‘That’s wonderful!’ she lied. She tried hard to sound enthusiastic but as she spoke she knew that she did not sound convincing.

Jenkins picked up the salt cellar and rolled it between his fingers. He stared at it, weighed it in his hand and then put it down again.

‘Is it a good job?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘It’s a very good job,’ replied Jenkins, without hesitation. ‘It’s in New York.’

‘New York?’ said Mrs Caldicot, trying hard to keep the shock and the sadness out of her voice.

‘New York.’

‘In America?’

‘I think that’s where they still keep it.’

Now it was Mrs Caldicot’s turn to play with the cruet. She picked up the pepper pot and played with it. A few grains of pepper fell out onto the white damask tablecloth.

‘Oh dear,’ she said. ‘Is pepper like salt? Do you have to throw a pinch of it over your left shoulder if you spill some?’

Jenkins looked up. He shook his head. ‘I don’t think so,’ he replied.

‘What sort of job is it? Are you terribly excited? Are you going to take it? When do you have to go?’

Jenkins looked at Mrs Caldicot, smiled and held up a hand. ‘One at a time!’ he said. ‘You sound like a one woman press conference.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Mrs Caldicot. She looked down. She wanted to run away; to hide. She could feel tears in her eyes. She should feel pleased for her friend. But she didn’t. All she could think about was herself. She felt deeply ashamed. But she couldn’t do anything about it.

‘The proprietor of *The Sunday Globe* wants me to go to New York and edit a new tabloid he’s bought there,’ said Jenkins. He looked down at the tablecloth. ‘Editing my own paper has always been my main ambition,’ he told her. ‘When I was a young reporter it was something I dreamt of. Loads of reporters dream of writing novels or screenplays. I’ve known some who wanted to be rock stars or sports stars - one or two actually made it. Some want to be businessmen - running their own operation. Some want to run pubs. Some want to be columnists.’ He sighed. ‘I always wanted to be an editor.’ He shrugged. ‘That was it.’

Mrs Caldicot reached across the table and took hold of Jenkins’ hand. ‘I’m very pleased for you,’ she said. ‘You really deserve it. I’m very proud of you. And I know you’ll make a wonderful editor.’

Jenkins looked at her, and put his free hand on top of the hand she had placed on his. ‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘That means a lot to me.’ But it wasn’t at all what he’d wanted to hear. He had wanted her to burst into tears, to tell him that she didn’t want him to go, to tell him that she wanted to see more of him, to ask him to stay. He knew she would never leave the Twilight Years Rest Home. He would never expect her to do that; not to abandon the people who depended upon her. But he had hoped that she might want him to stay and become part of her life.

‘When do you have to go?’ Mrs Caldicot asked him.

‘Next month,’ said Jenkins. ‘If I say ‘yes’.’ He reached across the table with his free hand and took Mrs Caldicot’s free hand.

‘Are you going to take the job?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know,’ said Jenkins. ‘I really don’t know.’

Mrs Caldicot didn’t say anything, mainly because she was frightened that if she spoke she would cry. She didn’t want to cry. She was used to Jenkins being strong and giving her support. Now, curiously, imperceptibly, their roles seemed to have been reversed.

The waiter brought her knickerbocker glory and the inspired and colourful confection dominated the conversation for the next few minutes.

‘Did it live up to expectations?’ asked Jenkins, when Mrs Caldicot had finished.

‘It was better!’ she said, putting down her spoon, with a sigh.

‘That’s some going,’ said Jenkins. ‘Matching a childhood memory is usually nigh on impossible.’

‘That really was better than I remembered,’ Mrs Caldicot assured him, with a big smile. ‘Thank you.’ She looked at Jenkins. There was love in her heart and suddenly there were tears in her eyes after all.

‘Why are you crying?’ he asked her.

‘Oh I’m just a silly sentimental old thing,’ she said, dismissively. ‘Don’t take any notice of me.’

Chapter 16

When she returned to the nursing home, Mrs Caldicot telephoned Henry Williams's general practitioner twice. She did so from her office while Jenkins sat opposite her.

The first time Mrs Caldicot telephoned, she was told that the doctor couldn't come because she had to pick up her children from school. The excuse the second time was that she was half way through an aerobics class. She spoke to the doctor herself. The doctor, wheezing and breathless, took the call on a mobile telephone.

'Well, perhaps you could call in afterwards?' suggested Mrs Caldicot, trying to sound sweeter than she felt.

'No, I don't think so,' wheezed the out of breath doctor. 'Can't you bring him along to the surgery in the morning?'

'I really don't think that would be a very good idea,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'He's just come out of hospital; he's very old, very confused and very sleepy.'

'He probably just needs another tranquilliser,' replied the doctor, now starting to get her breath back. 'The hospital wouldn't have sent him out if they hadn't been sure that all was well.'

'I hope you don't mind my saying so but I'm not sure that giving him another tranquilliser is a terribly good idea,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I think the tablets are making his confusion worse.'

'I didn't know you had medical training,' said the doctor, sharply.

'I don't,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'But...'

'I didn't think you had. I think it would probably be better if you left medical work to those of us who are properly trained,' said the doctor, patronisingly. She sounded very irritable. 'And I have to warn you, Mrs Caldicot, that if you keep interrupting me I will have to ask you to find another doctor to look after Mr Williams.'

'Well, since you refuse to come out and see him do you mind if I ask our own doctor to visit?' demanded Mrs Caldicot coldly.

'You do as you feel fit,' said the doctor, coldly, breaking the connection.

'No luck?' said Jenkins, who had listened to Mrs Caldicot's end of the telephone call.

'Whatever happened to doctors who cared?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'They went the way of policemen who would tell you the time,' replied Jenkins.

Mrs Caldicot picked up a bundle of unopened letters from the old-fashioned blotting pad on her desk.

'Afternoon post?' asked Jenkins.

'Bills,' replied Mrs Caldicot, flicking through the envelopes. 'Some of these shops charge like white rhinos. Their bills are massive and unstoppable.'

'Oh, I'm afraid I forgot,' said Jenkins. 'I hate to do this but I've got another one for you.' He took the organic grocer's bill out of his pocket and held it up.

'Just drop it on the pile,' said Mrs Caldicot, nodding towards a wire tray that was overflowing with pieces of paper.

'Those are all outstanding bills?'

'I'm afraid so.'

'Are you coping?'

Mrs Caldicot looked around. 'I don't like admitting this,' she said. 'But running a nursing home is harder than I thought it would be.'

'But you haven't been doing it for long,' Jenkins reminded her. 'It's bound to get easier with time.'

'I hope so,' said Mrs Caldicot.

Chapter 17

At 89, Doctor Bence-Jones was older than some of the residents in the nursing home. He dressed smartly in an elderly but still serviceable Harris tweed suit. The jacket had two rear vents, huge patch pockets with button down flaps, a capacious inner pocket (big enough for a stethoscope or a partridge) and button back cuffs. The trousers were plus twos and the whole ensemble (including a matching waistcoat) was always worn with long, olive green socks and elderly brown well-polished brogues which had been repaired so many times that virtually nothing of the originals now remained. Dr Bence-Jones had been forced to retire from the NHS several decades earlier. A group of bland administrators had met and taken just seven minutes to bring an end to a career that had lasted four months shy of half a century. They claimed that they were retiring Dr Bence-Jones both for his own safety and security and for that of his patients.

'It is absurd that such an elderly doctor should still be expected to work within the NHS,' announced a pompous, self-important 24-year-old social worker who had somehow acquired authority over such things. 'And it is equally improper that customers should be exposed to such an elderly practitioner,' he added. He seemed to be as unaware of the fact that Dr Bence-Jones was happy to carry on working as he was of the fact that Dr Bence-Jones's patients were happy to carry on being looked after by him.

The real reason for Dr Bence-Jones's expulsion from the NHS (for that it was) was that administrators and social workers found his old-fashioned attitude rather difficult to accept.

When Dr Bence-Jones had first started his practice, back in the 1930s, there had been no National Health Service. Theoretically, Dr Bence-Jones used to charge a nominal five shillings for a home visit and three shillings and six pence for a surgery consultation but in practice, hardly anyone paid these sums. Instead, while Dr Bence Jones charged his rich patients 10 shillings, or even £1, for a consultation he charged the poor patients nothing at all. This Robin Hood approach worked very well. It was much better than the then unborn but soon to become universally awful NHS which would eventually drag everyone down to the same gloomy level of incompetence.

Despite having been forced to retire from the NHS Dr Bence-Jones still had a small private practice which he ran from his home, a huge, detached Victorian house which was situated conveniently close to the Twilight Years Rest Home, and which was outside the remit of the statutory authorities.

Dr Bence-Jones's name had been recommended to Mrs Caldicot by several of the patients now in her charge and she had very quickly acquired great faith in him, both as a friend and as a doctor. He may not have been entirely up to date with all the latest theories (Mrs Caldicot had not been quite sure whether or not he had been joking when he had handed over a prescription for penicillin with the remark 'let's see what this new-fangled wonder drug can do for you') but his ignorance of the latest pharmaceutical wonders (not necessarily a bad thing in itself, thought Mrs Caldicot) was more than made up for by his extensive experience and his extraordinarily well developed sense of intuition.

Most important of all, perhaps, was the fact that neither old age nor many years contact with NHS administrators had taken from him his love of his profession and his genuine love, and sense of compassion for, his patients.

Dr Bence-Jones would have no more thought of referring to his patients as 'customers' as he would have thought of cheering for Australia in an Ashes Test Match. Dr Bence-Jones was an old-fashioned Englishman, with an old-fashioned Englishman's sense of history, priorities and responsibilities.

Dr Bence-Jones drove himself to his calls in a pale blue 1958 S1 Bentley which had been left to him by a grateful patient. She had been the original 'one careful owner' and when she had passed on the Bentley had only just been run in.

Before he had acquired the Bentley, the good doctor had done three quarters of his visits on an elderly bicycle with a wicker basket attached to the front handlebars. The remaining quarter he had done in a thirty-year-old black Morris which had bald tyres, broken springs and a black canvas roof that had never fitted properly. The arrival of the Bentley had coincided nicely with the onset of arthritis in his knees and hips.

The good doctor had welcomed the gift of the Bentley with enthusiasm but had never really mastered the art of driving a car which seemed to him to be as long and as a wide as a small county. Other motorists were never quite sure which side of the road he was driving on and when he parked the car he usually did so in such a way that it became a temporary traffic island.

Apart from his peculiar parking arrangements, his other most noticeable motoring idiosyncrasy was his habit of leaving the car unlocked. An officious social worker had once reprimanded him for this, drawing his attention to the fact that doctors are, by law, required to ensure that their medicine bag is kept properly protected; locked away at all times. 'If you can get my bag out of my car then I'll lock the car when I leave it,' Dr Bence-Jones had promised. The social worker had marched straight over to the Bentley and opened the nearside passenger door. She had fled without bothering to close the door when Dr Bence-Jones's elderly Doberman, which had been snoozing in the rear passenger footwell, had made its presence known to her. Dr Bence-Jones still left his car unlocked.

Once or twice, in the early days, he had tried driving the Bentley into the driveway in front of the nursing home. But these days he usually chose to park in the road outside. A series of minor collisions with the stone gates had done neither the stonework nor the Bentley's huge chrome bumpers a great deal of good.

'I called you because we're having a few problems with a new patient,' explained Mrs Caldicot, as she led the way down the hall. Dr Bence-Jones had to stop for a rest every couple of steps so it was a slow journey. `That's disappointing,' replied the doctor, breathing heavily. 'I thought that p'raps you'd called me round 'cus you'd got a pretty young new nurse who needed a full medical.'

Mrs Caldicot laughed. 'No, I'm afraid not.'

'I never get any perks these days,' muttered the doctor, shaking his head in mock misery.

As they walked down the hall, Dr Bence-Jones poked his head into the lounge. The residents were playing cricket. Mr Hewitt, using a well strapped piece of willow which had been his most treasured possession for nearly three quarters of a century, was batting in front of a set of stumps had been created with the aid of an umbrella stand, two walking sticks and a very neatly furled black umbrella with a silver handle. Using a pair of very neatly rolled up thick woollen green socks as a ball Miss Nightingale was bowling.

'Aha!' said Dr Bence-Jones. 'Cricket!' He peered into the room. 'I say, the ball is the wrong colour,' he said, rather indignantly. 'I mean, I don't think there's anything in the rules against using rolled up socks for indoor cricket but darn it if you're going to use socks they should surely be red.'

'Mrs Caldicot confiscated our only cricket ball,' said Mr Hewitt, glumly. 'And I haven't got any red socks.'

'I had to confiscate it,' said Mrs Caldicot to Dr Bence-Jones. 'I really don't like interfering and I honestly didn't much mind about the furniture or the ornaments, though I think Mrs Roberts was a little sad to see the one legged fairy lose her remaining lower limb albeit to what I understand was a perfectly executed straight drive, but both Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale had terrible black eyes and we had to take Mr Hewitt to the hospital with a suspected fractured tibia.'

'Pshaw!' said Mr Hewitt, shaking his head. 'Just a bit of a bang on the shin.'

'Mr Hewitt, two doctors spent three quarters of an hour studying your X-rays,' Mrs Caldicot reminded him. 'And if I remember correctly you had a bruise the size of a football that lasted for two weeks.'

'Rugger ball,' muttered Mr Hewitt. 'Size of a rugger ball. Can't stand soccer. Damned game for poofters and nancy boys. Always was. These days it's just got worse. No self-respecting heterosexual would dare get down into the scrum these days.' He snorted derisively.

In the corner of the room Mrs Merivale was watching a repeat of a television chat show. A distinguished British actor was telling bright and jolly anecdotes in order to drum up business for his latest film.

'Who's that?' demanded Dr Bence-Jones, his attention drawn from the game of cricket, where there was at the time no discernible action, and towards the television screen where there was plenty of activity going on. He pointed at the screen. 'I'm sure I know the name but I can't think of the face.'

'It's Sean Connery!' said Mrs Merivale. 'He sends Mr Merivale and me a Christmas card every year.'

'Does he?' said the doctor. 'That's very nice, dear.'

Mrs Merivale nodded contentedly to herself as she watched Mr Connery finish a long anecdote with a neat and perfectly timed punchline.

'Isn't he just wonderful?' she purred. 'Lots of the stars send us cards,' she told the doctor.

Mrs Caldicot introduced the doctor to the Merivales and the Merivales to the doctor.

'You look in good condition, young man,' said the doctor to Mr Merivale.

'Oh, it's all a false front,' said Mr Merivale. 'Don't believe it. My wife makes me dye my hair so I don't look too old. She's very conscious of the fact that I'm five months older than her.'

'Ah,' nodded Dr Bence-Jones, who had been in practice far too long to be surprised by anything he heard.

'I tell her, let people think I'm your sugar daddy,' said Mr Merivale.

'I don't want people thinking I'm some cheap bimbo just with you for your money,' said Mrs Merivale.

'I haven't got any money!' Mr Merivale pointed out.

'That makes it even worse!' Mrs Merivale pointed out.

The doctor, sensing a modest marital disagreement, tactfully withdrew.

'Are you chaps playing or talking?' demanded Mr Roxdale, who was both acting as umpire and fielding at short extra sofa and who knew nothing about the cinema or the television.

'Bowl away, Miss Nightingale,' said Mr Hewitt, responding to this enquiry by waving his bat around in the air. 'I'm ready when you are.'

Miss Nightingale bowled (for the record, it was a right arm over the wicket donkey drop) and Mr Hewitt, who, despite his brave bluster, had not been in the slightest bit ready, and whose bat had still been pointing up towards the ceiling, watched in horror as the neatly rolled up green socks sped precisely between the sides of the umbrella stand and clattered into the neatly arranged walking sticks and umbrella, disrupting them so comprehensively that it was difficult to entertain any hope that he might survive the umpire's inevitable decision.

'Out!' cried Mr Roxdale, holding aloft the index finger of his right hand.

'That was clearly a no ball!' protested Mr Hewitt, who was in all other aspects of life a fair and decent fellow but who had never been a good loser when it came to cricket. In a career stretching back the better part of a century Mr Hewitt had been dismissed several hundred times but he would happily argue that on no more than a handful of those occasions had the umpire's decision been sound or reasonable. On this particular occasion he had a powerful weapon in his favour: the bat was his and, as anyone who has ever played cricket in such circumstances will undoubtedly confirm, ownership of the bat invariably trumps the decision making power of an umpire.

'Shall we go?' Mrs Caldicot quietly suggested to Dr Bence Jones. 'These technical discussions can sometimes go on for some time.'

'Very wise, Mrs Caldicot,' muttered Dr Bence-Jones. They left, quietly closing the door behind them, and headed for the stairs.

Chapter 18

‘I wish you’d have a lift installed,’ the doctor wheezed, clasping the bannister with both hands, and looking up at the stairs above him and down at the stairs behind him. ‘I’m getting a little old for mountaineering.’ Mrs Caldicot was carrying the doctor’s old-fashioned black Gladstone bag. She had never seen him open it and had no idea what it contained.

‘A lift is definitely on my list,’ Mrs Caldicot assured him. ‘Or perhaps a chair lift?’

‘One of those things that whizzes up down the stairs on a rail?’

‘Yes.’

‘Yes that might be fun. I fancy myself on one of those.’

‘Well, I’ll put both on the list. Of course, it may be a year or two before we can afford them.’

‘I’ll try to hang on,’ said Dr Bence-Jones. ‘And, anyway, hire the pretty young nurse first. I’d rather examine a pretty young nurse than ride up the stairs.’

‘You’re incorrigible!’ laughed Mrs Caldicot.

‘I hope so,’ replied the doctor. ‘Just keep encouraging me!’

They arrived at last at Mr Williams’s room. The new patient was looking much better and calmer than he had looked the previous night. Mrs Caldicot introduced the two old men to each other.

‘You’re the doctor!’ said Mr Williams, clearly astonished. He turned to Mrs Caldicot. ‘It’s a long time since I saw a doctor who was older than me.’ He paused and screwed up his eyes. ‘You aren’t really as old as you look aren’t you? Tell me that you’re 33 but you’ve lived a very debauched life.’

‘Shut up, young man,’ said Dr Bence-Jones. ‘Don’t be cheeky or I’ll have you sent to bed without any supper.’

‘Big deal,’ said Mr Williams. ‘I’m already in bed. And I haven’t had any supper.’

Dr Bence-Jones snorted.

‘I’m already on Mrs Caldicot’s starvation diet,’ moaned Mr Williams. ‘Now I suppose you’ve come to stick needles in me.’

‘If you don’t watch your mouth I’ll have you on twice daily laxatives and hourly injections in your bum,’ retorted Dr Bence-Jones. ‘Now shut up before you deafen me,’ he added. He had one end of his stethoscope connected to his ears and the other end placed on Mr Williams’s chest.

It took the doctor less than five minutes to declare Mr Williams perfectly fit. ‘He’s healthy enough to hang,’ he announced. ‘Did you manage to get hold of his doctor?’

‘Yes,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘But she won’t come. The last time I called, she told me that she always has lunch with drug company representatives on weekdays and that it will be at least ten days before she can get here. Until I described him, she couldn’t even remember Mr Williams and had no idea what drugs he is on. She told me to give him a tranquilliser. And she told me to make sure that he keeps taking his arthritis drugs because they’re part of a trial she’s conducting for a drug company.’

Dr Bence-Jones strode across to where Mr Williams’s pills were lined up on the dressing table and picked the bottles up one by one. ‘This one is for arthritis,’ he said. He turned back to Mr Williams. ‘Do you have arthritis, young man?’

‘Not particularly,’ replied Mr Williams.

‘Your GP does lots of tests for drug companies. However, they already know that the stuff causes stomach problems.’ He picked up the second bottle. ‘So he takes this one. Which is supposed to cure stomach ulcers but which causes diarrhoea.’ He picked up the third bottle. ‘So he takes this one to control the diarrhoea. But it can cause depression.’ He picked up the fourth bottle. ‘So he takes this one which is an antidepressant but causes anxiety and sleeplessness for which he takes this one,’ he picked up another bottle, ‘and this one,’ he picked up the next one in line, ‘and this one.’

‘Three for anxiety?’

‘Three for anxiety,’ agreed Dr Bence-Jones. ‘And one of the drugs he takes for anxiety causes asthma. So he takes those blue capsules to prevent his asthma. And because the asthma drug causes headaches he takes these red pills which are painkillers which can cause blood clotting. So he takes these white tablets to stop his blood clotting. They can cause high blood pressure so he takes these green ones to keep his blood pressure under control. And these green ones can cause potassium loss so he takes these fawn coloured things for that.’

‘There’s one left,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘This violet one,’ agreed the doctor. ‘It’s another drug to stop him feeling anxious.’

‘Doesn’t it cause any side effects?’

‘I think so,’ said the doctor. ‘But nothing he isn’t already taking something for.’

‘Does he really need all these?’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Dr Bence-Jones. ‘If he stopped the pills to stop the arthritis he probably hasn’t got, he probably wouldn’t need any of the others.’

‘What about the drugs for his anxiety?’

‘If I were taking this many pills I’d be anxious,’ said Dr Bence-Jones. ‘Wouldn’t you?’

‘Yes, I suppose I would,’ admitted Mrs Caldicot. ‘So what are you going to do?’

‘Give the sewer rats a treat,’ replied Dr Bence-Jones. He scooped up all Mr Williams’s pill bottles and carried them into the bathroom. A minute or so later Mrs Caldicot heard the sound of the lavatory being flushed. She got up and rushed into the bathroom, just in time to see a variety of coloured tablets and capsules disappearing down into the sewers.

‘Should you have done that?’ she asked.

‘Oh absolutely,’ replied Dr Bence-Jones. ‘Oh definitely. Don’t you think so?’

‘But couldn’t you get into trouble?’

‘What sort of trouble?’

‘I don’t know. Aren’t there any rules about throwing away someone else’s tablets?’

‘What tablets?’

‘What about if he falls ill because he’s not taking his tablets?’

‘Then I’ve no doubt that some kind doctor will give him some more.’ replied Dr Bence-Jones. ‘Meanwhile, there is, I hope, a chance that without his tablets he will wake up, remember who he is and be able to walk around without falling over.’

‘One of these days you’re going to get into trouble,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘I’m sure you’re right,’ said Dr Bence-Jones. ‘But I’m very old and I don’t care. If they put me in prison I will, with any luck, be put in a cell with a nice bank robber who will teach me how to open safes.’

Chapter 19

‘Do you need to see the other residents,’ asked Mrs Caldicot when they got back down into the hall.

Dr Bence-Jones answered by poking his head into the lounge again. A cushion missed him by inches. He pulled his head back. ‘What the hell is going on in there now?’ he demanded.

Mrs Caldicot looked at her watch. ‘I expect someone is practising for the next indoor volleyball match,’ explained Mrs Caldicot. ‘It’s China versus the USA. It’s something of a grudge match.’

‘They all looked fine to me,’ said the doctor. ‘Does anyone need a sick note? Prescription? Passport application form signed?’

‘No, thank you,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘I think we’re OK for today. I just wanted you to check over Mr Williams. But he does seem a lot calmer today.’

Dr Bence-Jones poked his head into the lounge again, this time to say goodbye. As he opened the door, a rolled up pair of socks headed straight for him. Instinctively he put his hands up to protect his face and caught the socks.

‘Howzat?’ cried Miss Nightingale.

‘Couldn’t possibly be out,’ protested Mr Hewitt. ‘The man’s a spectator not a player. You can’t have batsmen given out because they’ve been caught by a spectator. That was a six!’

Mrs Merivale, who was still watching the television, had now been joined by Mrs Peterborough.

‘There’s just been a fashion expert on the television,’ she told Mrs Caldicot. ‘He says that the wrinkled look is in this season.’

‘For people or clothes?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘Oh for clothes, I think,’ replied Mrs Merivale. ‘But it means I no longer have to iron Mr Merivale’s shirts. If I leave the creases and wrinkles in them he’ll be fashionable.’

‘Why do they decide that now?’ asked Mrs Caldicot, who had spent too many years of his life ironing sharp creases into the late Mr Caldicot’s shirts and under-clothing. Her late husband had even insisted on having his socks ironed.

‘Oh, it’s just fashion,’ said Mrs Merivale. ‘Next week they’ll decide that we have to put concertina pleat creases into everything.’

‘I’m just waiting for some fashion guru to arrange for ink and chocolate stains to become fashionable,’ said Mr Livingstone. `Overnight I’ll become the most fashionable man in Europe.’

Chapter 20

When the doctor had left (in the road outside it took him several minutes to find one of the Bentley's gears) Mrs Caldicot went back upstairs to Mr Williams's room.

'Would you like me to help you unpack?' she asked, nodding towards his still unopened suitcases.

'Thanks,' said Mr Williams. 'Can I stay here?'

'Of course you can,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'As long as I like?'

'Of course?'

'In this room?'

'Yes.'

'I don't have to share with anyone?'

'Not unless you want to.'

'I used to have a small flat,' he told her. 'I bought it after my wife died. We'd been together for sixty years. I wasn't very good at living by myself. I've always been a bit of a loner. My wife was the only friend I had or needed. I didn't have a 'first footer' until May last year. And then it was a man come to read the gas meter.'

'So, that was 'home' until you came here?'

'I suppose so,' agreed Mr Williams. He looked around. 'But I could be at home here. I've always believed that home is where you are - not where you come from.' He paused and cleared his throat. 'What are the fees?'

Mrs Caldicot felt uncomfortable. She didn't like talking about money. It was, she knew, one of her failings as the proprietor of a nursing home. 'We don't really have 'fees',' she said. 'Pay whatever you think is appropriate,' she said. 'What you can afford.'

Mr Williams levered himself off the bed, half walked, half lurched across the room and put one of the suitcases flat on the floor. 'I haven't got many clothes,' he said, unfastening the case's twin catches. The suitcase was crammed with black and white photographs, some in folders, some simply packed loosely into the case.

'My word!' said Mrs Caldicot. 'You're obviously keen on photography.'

'Yes,' said Mr Williams. He took out a photograph of some children playing in a street. It was a night scene, lit by a street lamp and the moon. Mrs Caldicot recognised the church in the background. 'Isn't that the famous church in Montmartre in Paris?' she asked. 'The white one that always reminds me of weddings?'

'Sacre Coeur,' said Mr Williams.

'That's the one. Do you still take photographs?'

'No. I sort of gave it up. For the last two decades I've specialised in losing and finding. I've spent half my life losing things and the other half of my life looking for them.'

Mrs Caldicot laughed. 'I know what you mean.'

Mr Williams handed the print of Sacre Coeur to Mrs Caldicot. 'Take it and sell it,' he said. 'I'll give you another one in a month or two.'

He nodded towards the suitcase. 'And don't worry. When I run out I've got the negatives somewhere.'

Mrs Caldicot looked at the photograph. It was a lovely photograph. It looked vaguely familiar. But she felt embarrassed. She really would have to try to run the nursing home in a more professional way.

'I'll sign it on the back,' said Mr Williams, taking the print back off Mrs Caldicot. 'Have you got a pen?'

She handed him a pen. He scrawled his signature, and added the date, before handing the pen and the photograph back to her.

'Thank you,' said Mrs Caldicot. She was touched by Mr Williams's gift but couldn't help wondering how it was going to help her pay the growing collection of overdue bills on her desk. She couldn't see the electricity company being too thrilled if she tried to pay their bill with an old snap.

Downstairs the other residents were still playing the world volleyball championships. When Mrs Caldicot put her head around the door someone told her that China was beating the USA three nil and admitted that a badly directed cushion from one of the American players had broken a china model of a spotted dog.

Chapter 21

A few miles away, on the fourth floor of an ugly, nondescript concrete, glass and plastic tower block occupied exclusively by employees of the local council, an assorted variety of nondescript professional busy bodies were fully occupied thinking of ways to interfere in the normal, contented lives of unsuspecting, innocent, hard-working local citizens. It was their collective and diseased mission to bring chaos to order and to add confusion, bewilderment and a real sense of injustice to those whose lives were merely harassed by too much work and too little time.

At one corner of the fourth floor, in a spacious office tucked in between the emergency staircase and the men's lavatories, the eleven senior members of the local authority's Rest Home Supervisory Unit (rather grandly and self-consciously they liked to refer to themselves as Supervising Outreach Coordinators) were holding a meeting.

This was not an unusual occurrence. The Supervising Outreach Coordinators held a lot of meetings - at least one a day - though there were those (especially those hard working members of the public who were trying to run rest homes which fell within the remit of this dreary bunch of bureaucrats) who felt that the Supervising Outreach Coordinators did not hold anywhere near enough meetings and that if they were to organise more meetings and to go out less, write fewer letters and generally speaking keep themselves to themselves and have less to do with those trying to a do a real job of work outside, then the world would be a far, far happier, more contented and less troublesome place. The eleven officials were all petty minded people whose own otherwise dull, grey and miserable days were made acceptable by the fact that their work gave them regular opportunities to patronise those whom they encountered in their professional capacity.

These simple daily pleasures were augmented by the fact that at regular intervals they also had a chance to humiliate their victims - rather than merely to make their lives miserable. Naturally, as cowards, they usually picked on the weakest and most vulnerable, invariably becoming servile and sycophantic when faced with more robust, self-confident individuals.

'I had a splendid visit to a rest home in Buckberrington Street yesterday,' said an apparently elderly grey man with seemingly elderly grey hair. He wore an elderly grey suit, had elderly grey eyes and even those who knew him well would probably be surprised to know that he was still not out of his thirties. The man, called Hiscock, had copious amounts of grey dandruff on the shoulders of his grey jacket. He cultivated the dandruff look and deliberately did everything he could to encourage the stuff. He felt that dandruff on his shoulder gave him a suitably solid, reliable image and marked him out as a man who was not likely to be impressed by ordinary, everyday standards or expectations.

The others looked up from the copious quantities of paper which lay spread out on the table in front of each of them. If there was one thing these eleven purveyors of dissatisfaction liked even more than meetings it was paperwork. If their first mission in life was to bring frustration and chaos to the lives of ordinary, hard-working citizens their second mission was to turn the world's forests into filing cabinet fodder.

'I've never been able to find anything wrong before,' Hiscock said, ruefully. 'The proprietor has run the place quite adequately.' Those other members of the unit who had been unfortunate enough to visit this establishment nodded to show that they understood; they had shared their colleagues gloom and understood that the phrase 'quite adequately' was code for 'he hasn't done anything wrong and has never put so much as a finger out of place'.

'But yesterday,' he announced, his voice rising in triumph, 'I asked to see the new Extractor Fan Unit warning notice which, in accordance with the appropriate EU notification I had demanded, in an official communication, be placed in position beneath the fan.'

There would have been a buzz of excitement from his colleagues if they had been the sort of people who ever allowed themselves to get excited. As it was they contented themselves with raising their heads. The nine who were doodling stopped their pens so that they give their colleague their total concentration.

'When I measured the notice I found that it was just 17.9 cm wide.' There was a pause while the rest of the team digested this piece of news. They could not have been more shocked (nor more excited) if they had discovered that Himmler was running an old folks home in their locality, with Dr Josef Mengele living in and providing the patients with his own unique brand of medical care.

The grey man looked around his audience. 'As you all know,' he said, 'Regulation 28237/gh12 states quite clearly that such notices must be 18.0 cm wide. The proprietor claimed that the sign company had measured the item inadvertently in old-fashioned imperial units and that had been an error in translating the illegal imperial units into proper metric units. He claimed that it was, therefore, their responsibility.'

'Naturally, however, I told him that it was his responsibility and that I would consequently be giving him a formal, written warning. I gave him formal notice, as required by the legislation, that if he received another warning within three years his Rest Home licence would be withdrawn.' The grey, but now proud, Hiscock looked around the table and came as close to looking contented as he had ever looked. He paused before delivering the coup de grâce. 'The proprietor then burst into tears,' he announced, with great pride.

The other council employees sitting around the table would have started applauding if they had been the sort of people who applauded things. Instead they all nodded and congratulated their colleague. To find a Rest Home proprietor at fault was a joy. To see a Rest Home proprietor in tears was a high point - a moment that made the job worth doing, a moment to be cherished and remembered; a memory to ease the tedium of long days of retirement.

'I am revisiting this afternoon,' said Hiscock. 'I have high hopes that at that time I will be in a position to issue an official closure notice.'

Breath was drawn in sharply around the table. A closure notice was something they all dreamt of. But closure notices came far too infrequently.

'When I visited last time I fancy I noticed that the front doormat was not the requisite size,' continued the grey man. 'I did not mention this at the time, of course. But when I go back today I will measure it. And if it is the wrong size - and I am quietly confident that I will find it at least three centimetres too wide - I will immediately issue the appropriate 14 day closure notice.'

This time his colleagues simply could not restrain themselves.

'This is precisely why I joined this department,' said a bent, weedy looking man with poor complexion and greasy hair.

'Well done,' said a young black woman called Ms Jones BA. She wore a green anorak and had several dozen coloured folders spread around on the table in front of her.

'I think it is worth pointing out that this particular institution has been operating apparently blamelessly for nearly thirty years..,' said a fat, florid-faced woman who wore a black T-shirt and a pair of black jeans.

'...twenty seven years to be precise, Chair,' interrupted Hiscock.

'...for twenty seven years,' continued the fat woman, known as 'Chair'. 'And this will, to the best of my knowledge, be the first time that we have managed to serve a closure notice on the proprietor.'

'That is correct!' confirmed another grey man. 'We got close eight years ago but it turned out that although our regulations limited the minimum width of garden paths there was, at that time, no limit to the maximum width of garden paths. Therefore, although the proprietor had built paths which were twenty two centimetres wider than the permitted minimum there was nothing we could do about it. It is good to feel vindicated at last. And it will send a warning bell to other facilities - letting them know that our vigilance will be maintained and that should we fail to obtain a closure notice we will be back.'

'So, there we are! A splendid piece of work!' said the woman in black. 'Congratulations to Mr Muldoon.'

Mr Muldoon, the young grey man, would have purred if he had been a cat.

'We will, of course, instigate an enquiry into just how long the faulty notice and over-sized doormat have been in situ,' said the woman in black, who clearly had some sort of management role. 'It may be possible for us to add a hefty fine to the closure notice, particularly since, with two offenses in such a short space of time, it will clearly be easy for the department to argue that the man is a recidivist and clearly unfit for any sort of position in the caring and welfare community.' She paused, as a thought wandered into her unwilling mind. 'Let us hope that these are new faults,' she murmured, now specifically addressing her remarks to the young, grey man, `and that we will not find ourselves laid open to a charge of negligence in having missed these items on previous inspections.'

'There is no risk of that,' said the young grey man. 'Both these items are brand new - I am confident that they were introduced onto the premises subsequent to our last visit. I have added a file note confirming that observation.'

The woman in black smiled and nodded. She looked comforted and relieved. 'Is that all for this session?' she asked, looking at the clock. 'We've been going for nearly thirty minutes. Shall we adjourn for an extended refreshment opportunity?'

'There's just one small item which I think we could perhaps usefully squeeze through in this session,' said a short, round, woman whose sari might have suggested that she (or her ancestors) could have at some stage have travelled from the Indian continent but which was, in fact, simply her way of expressing solidarity with her colleagues from that continent (all of whom, it has to be said, were happily wearing Western clothes).

'We have a new establishment to monitor,' she said. 'She examined some papers in front of her; frowned, shuffled them a little more. 'One of our sub-inspectors visited the Twilight Years Rest Home, which has recently come under new management, to check on the extractor fan statutory warning notice and although the notice was in position he reported that he did not feel that his visit was treated with the appropriate level of solemnity or respect.' A small man with an arrogant air coughed to attract attention. He wore a grey suit with, underneath it, a grey cardigan. He also wore a pair of half-moon spectacles with tortoiseshell frames. He wore these because he had once been told that half-moon spectacles put up the wearer's IQ by 15 points and turned a meek person into someone quite intimidating.

‘Do we have details of the new management?’ he asked.

‘It’s a Mrs Thelma Caldicot,’ said the woman in the sari, studying the paperwork in front of her.

The small dapper man sat up, as suddenly and as conspicuously as if someone had put a firework up his bottom and lit the fuse. None of his colleagues noticed anything unusual. They were not a particularly observant bunch.

‘I haven’t heard of her myself,’ continued the woman in the sari, ‘but a colleague in another department told me that she has appeared in the media, though I’m not sure in what context.’ She smiled sweetly and looked around the room. `I don’t think I’ve read anything about her in Social Work Weekly,’ she said. ‘And if she has appeared in the pages of *The Guardian* I missed it.’ Heads were bowed, as though in silent but respectful prayer, when she mentioned *The Guardian*. She paused. ‘Naturally I don’t watch the television.’

A murmuring of ‘naturally’ ran clockwise around the table. ‘I’d like to take on responsibility for assessing the Twilight Years Rest Home,’ said the small man. ‘I do have some professional knowledge of the proprietor’s activities,’ he said. He didn’t bother to mention that he hated Mrs Caldicot with a vengeance. She had publicly humiliated him, and forced him to close the nursing home he’d been running. She’d arrived at his nursing home as a resident and had led the residents in a mass walk out. ‘Perhaps I can use my specialist information for the benefit of the department.’

‘I think that would be a splendid idea,’ said the woman in black known as ‘the chair’. ‘We were all very impressed with your last investigation Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. To manage to close down two rest homes within a week of their opening shows diligence and determination. The department could do with more like you. I suggest that perhaps you take Ms Jones BA with you as co-investigating officer.’

‘Splendid,’ said the small, dapper man.

Ms Jones BA, clearly unhappy about this, started to protest.

‘I think you’ll complement one another perfectly,’ the woman in black told them. She looked at the clock. ‘And now I really do feel that we need our break!’ She paused, and glanced at the clock again. ‘Otherwise, I fear that we will be breaking our working condition guidelines.’

As the others dragged themselves to their feet and started to leave the room, Mr Muller-Hawksmoor walked over to where Ms Jones BA was still sitting, gathering up her papers and fitting them neatly into a black plastic attaché case. ‘Would you like a coffee or tea?’ he asked. ‘So that we can get to know one another a little better?’

She looked up. ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I suppose that might be useful.’

‘Coffee?’ asked Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, walking across to the coffee machine.

‘Yes,’ said Ms Jones BA who regarded the word ‘please’ as politically incorrect.

‘Black or white?’ asked Mr Muller-Hawksmoor.

Ms Jones BA glowered at him. ‘I regard that as a racially offensive remark,’ she said icily. ‘If you repeat it at any time in the future I will make a formal complaint about you.’

‘Er...I’m sorry. Would you like it with or without milk?’ asked Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, who felt that he was going to enjoy working with Ms Jones BA.

Chapter 22

Mr Roxdale lived in a small, terraced house in an old part of the town. He had lived there since his marriage. When he and his young wife, Matilda, had first moved in there had been no electricity and no gas. The only mains services were water and sewage.

For several decades Mr Roxdale and his wife had held out against progress; steadfastly refusing to allow their landlord to install either electricity or gas. The landlord, who owned the houses either side, had arranged for the pipes and the wiring to be brought into the house but he had been unable to persuade either Mr Roxdale or Matilda to have the house fitted with pipes, wiring or appliances. Mr Roxdale would have agreed. He didn't like to see anyone disappointed. But his wife was a nervous woman and she didn't want her home to be fitted out with these modern services. She didn't trust them. 'We've survived very well without them,' she argued. `Why do we need them now?' She was worried that the gas, or the electricity, or both, would blow them to smithereens. The precise nature of her concern really didn't matter. All that concerned Mr Roxdale was that his wife didn't want electricity or gas in their home. If she had wanted it, he would have done everything he could to get it for her. If she didn't want it then they wouldn't have it. Simple.

After Matilda had died, Mr Roxdale had succumbed. He didn't much care then. And he didn't have a great deal of choice. His general practitioner, worried about Mr Roxdale's heart, asked a consultant to visit Mr Roxdale at home. (In those far off days, hospital specialists used to do such things quite often.) Wanting to plug in his portable electrocardiograph machine the consultant had been shocked to discover that there was no mains electricity in the house. He'd been even more shocked to discover that Mr Roxdale cooked on a wood stove and lit his home with paraffin lamps. Social workers had been called. And that was the end of Mr Roxdale's seemingly eccentric stand against progress. Mr Roxdale was just pleased that it had all happened after his dear, beloved wife had passed on. She would have been terribly upset by it all. He wouldn't have liked to have seen her upset. It would have broken his heart.

Mr Roxdale was sitting in his tiny parlour, consoling himself with a cup of strong tea and a ginger biscuit.

'Hello Dad!' cried Nigel, his son, opening the front door and walking straight along the narrow passageway and into the parlour. There was no door between the passageway and the parlour; just a length of heavy brown velour hanging from a brass rail. The curtain was too long and the bottom two feet of the velour sat in thick folds on the carpet.

Mr Roxdale turned and greeted his son.

He was proud of what Nigel had achieved. Apart from his growing legal practice, Nigel also owned a good deal of property in the area. Several years earlier, for example, he had bought the entire terrace of houses which included Mr Roxdale's home. But, although he was proud, Mr Roxdale didn't particularly like his son. And, sadly, he knew him well enough to know that he could not be trusted.

'How are you today?' asked Nigel.

'Not so bad,' answered Mr Roxdale. He always answered that question in the same way. He would have used the identical words if he had been dying.

'How's the gardening business these days?' asked Nigel.

'Not so bad,' answered Mr Roxdale, who might have been a little slow in his movements but was not slow in his thinking. He knew it was no coincidence that he had been fired by every one of his employers in the same week. He would have known that Nigel was involved even if he had not seen his son's conspicuous Jaguar parked outside at least two of the houses where he had worked.

'I've heard there's something of a recession developing in the service industry,' said Nigel.

'I heard that too,' agreed Mr Roxdale, nibbling at his ginger biscuit. 'Would you like a cup of tea?'

'No thanks,' said Nigel. 'Fenella doesn't like me drinking tea.'

'Ginger biscuit?'

'No thanks. Fenella has got me on a diet.'

They sat in silence for a while. Mr Roxdale drank his tea and nibbled at his ginger biscuit. Nigel fiddled with his watch strap and listened with increasing impatience and irritation to the tick tock of the clock on the mantelpiece. The ticks and the tocks seemed to get louder and louder.

At last, Nigel could bear the silence no longer. He cleared his throat. 'I can tell there is something wrong,' he lied. He leant forward. 'Tell me about it, Dad,' he said. `Have you had some trouble with the gardening business?'

His father didn't answer.

'There's no shame in losing a job,' said Nigel. 'It happens all the time these days.' He swallowed hard and shuffled uneasily in his chair. ‘You’ve lost your jobs, haven’t you?’ He was usually a very good liar. Deception was his stock in trade. He was a lawyer and property developer. He lied at least fifty times a day. He was a professional. But for some reason he still found it difficult to lie to his father. He always felt that his father knew the truth. Not that he could. He couldn’t possibly, of course. There was no way that he could know the truth. No way.

Mr Roxdale said nothing but reached for the packet of ginger biscuits. He was not a man driven by hedonism but he felt reckless. He plucked a second biscuit from the packet. He stared at it for a moment. A terrible idea had occurred to him.

‘If you think about it sensibly it’s probably all for the best,’ said Nigel. ‘You’re not getting any younger. And being out in the rain and the snow isn’t good for a man of your age.’ He paused. ‘It isn’t good for a man my age.’ He sort of laughed. It was an unpleasant sound. Nigel didn’t laugh often. He’d pretty much forgotten how to do it. ‘I don’t know how you did it,’ he said. ‘Gardening for all those years.’ He sat back. ‘Still. All that’s behind you now. And so now you’ve got to look forward. You’ve got a great future ahead of you.’ And then he spoilt it. ‘I have to tell you that I’m not sorry,’ he said. ‘I don’t think you’ve ever realised it but your being a jobbing gardener has been a considerable embarrassment to myself and Fenella. We have a position in this town and your being a gardener hasn’t exactly been a help you know.’

Mr Roxdale hadn’t heard a word of this. He was still staring at his biscuit and wondering if he should. He’d heard of people doing it. He’d seen people do it. But he’d never done it himself.

‘The first thing we’ve got to do is to get you out of this place,’ said Nigel. He looked around. ‘It worries me to think of you here, all by yourself.’

Mr Roxdale decided to do it. He pulled his cup of tea towards him and, without any further hesitation, dunked his ginger biscuit. He took it out again so quickly that the biscuit was hardly even damp.

‘If there was an emergency you could, of course, always ring Fenella and myself day or night,’ said Nigel. ‘But I’ve been saying to Fenella - and I have to say that she has been totally supportive of me on this, utterly regardless of the expense - that I would be happier if you were living somewhere where you could have some 24 hour a day support. ‘

The second time would, Mr Roxdale thought, probably be easier. It was. He pulled the ginger biscuit out of the tea just seconds before it broke up. It felt deliciously decadent.

‘So, in preparation for this moment, I’ve been looking around,’ said Nigel. ‘Actually, and I know you’ve not always seen eye to eye with her, much of the spadework has been done by Fenella. And she’s found a wonderful little place. Just opened. It’s being run by Thelma Caldicot. Have you heard of her?’

Mr Roxdale looked up, thought for a moment and shook his head.

‘She was on the TV and in all the papers just a while ago,’ said Nigel. `She was a resident in an old people’s home. She didn’t like the way the place was being run and so she led all the other residents out on strike. They moved into a hotel. The papers called it ‘Mrs Caldicot’s Cabbage War’ - I think that one of the things she was complaining about was the fact that the whole place smelt of over-cooked cabbage. Are you sure you haven’t heard of her?’

Mr Roxdale shook his head. He didn’t own a television set or a wireless and he never read newspapers. If it didn’t happen in his living room or in one of the gardens he was looking after then he probably hadn’t heard of it. He tried to keep busy so that he didn’t notice what they were doing to the world. ‘I used to read the papers. Forty years ago. But I had to stop. Now I try to keep myself busy. If I had time to read the newspapers and to worry about what the politicians and industrialists are doing to our world I would become suicidal,’ he once told a neighbour. He could tell you the exact date when the roses would be in bloom and when the peas would be ready to pick. But he had no idea of the name of the Foreign Secretary or the singer at the top of the hit parade. He looked out of the window at his own small garden. It was only a few feet wide and, perhaps, a hundred feet long, but it was packed with life. The first third of the garden was all flowers. The rest of it was devoted to vegetables and fruit: there was an asparagus bed, a huge strawberry bed, raspberry canes, radishes, lettuces, marrows and herbs galore.

‘I’ve spoken to Mrs Caldicot and she has a couple of spare rooms,’ said Nigel. ‘Single rooms, beautifully furnished. You can mix in with the other residents if you want to. Or you can just keep to yourself. It’s entirely up to you. But you’ll get your meals, you’ll get your laundry done and you’ll get medical attention when you need it.’

Mr Roxdale, stopped looking out of his window and put the rest of his soggy biscuit into his mouth.

‘So what do you think?’ asked Nigel.

Mr Roxdale looked at him. `Pretty good,’ he said. He closed his eyes and chewed. ‘I’m still not sure though.’

‘Well, take your time. Do you want to think it over?’

‘No,’ drawled Mr Roxdale. ‘Not really. No.’ He thought hard. ‘I’m pretty sure.’ He closed his eyes. ‘I really do think I like them best undunked.’

Nigel frowned. He had dreaded this moment. He leant forward. ‘What are you talking about, Dad?’

Mr Roxdale looked at his father. ‘Biscuits,’ he said. ‘Dunked or not. I think they’re better undunked. I like to drink my tea and to eat my biscuit separately.’

Nigel paused, waited and swallowed hard. ‘But what about the residential home?’ he asked. ‘What do you think about moving into Mrs Caldicot’s old people’s home?’

‘What’s a ‘residential home’?’ asked Mr Roxdale, looking puzzled. ‘I always thought all homes were residential.’

‘Well, I suppose they are,’ agreed Nigel, in a bit of a huff. ‘It doesn’t really matter what you call it.’

‘I don’t mind much either way,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘But I don’t have any savings. Maybe £200 in the Building Society. I put that aside for emergencies. If it costs more than the rent I pay you then I won’t be able to afford it.’ He paused, suddenly remembering that his income had suddenly stopped. ‘Actually, son, I’m not sure I can still pay you the rent.’

‘Don’t worry about money, Dad. I’ll take care of the financial side of things.’

Mr Roxdale looked at him. ‘I can’t let you do that.’

‘Of course you can, Dad,’ said Nigel. ‘It’ll be a real pleasure for me to be able to do something tangible for you.’

‘But aren’t these homes very expensive?’

‘You’re not to worry about any of it,’ insisted Nigel. ‘You let me worry about the money. All you have to do is pack your bags. Take your clothes and any knick knacks you want to have with you.’

Mr Roxdale looked around. He was surrounded by objects which were, together, the essence of his home. Most of them had been part of his life with Matilda.

‘When do you want me to move?’ he asked his son. ‘It’s our house so you call the shots.’

‘Well, if you’re going to do it you might as well as do it now,’ said Nigel. ‘Waiting and thinking about it won’t make it any easier.’

Mr Roxdale nodded.

‘So, why don’t I pick you up in the early afternoon tomorrow? Say two fifteen?’

‘Tomorrow?’

‘Is that too soon for you, Dad? We can make it the day after tomorrow if you like.’

‘No. Tomorrow is fine,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘I can be packed by then. We might as well get it over with.’ He looked around again. Suddenly the furniture and the pictures looked old and tired. As old and as tired as he felt. ‘What about all this stuff?’ he asked.

‘Do you want to leave that to me?’ asked Nigel. ‘I could ask Fenella to get an auctioneer in. One of the house clearance specialists.’

‘Whatever you think, son. Whatever you think best.’

Mr Roxdale seemed very old and very tired. But he wasn’t particularly old or tired. He was, however, bored by his son and happy to agree to anything to get rid of him.

Chapter 23

Outside, in the car, Nigel wanted to telephone his wife. He wanted to tell her what had happened. Her approval would help eradicate the guilt he felt. But he also desperately wanted a drink and so he didn't stop to make the call.

Nigel lived less than four miles away from his father's terraced house. He drove home as quickly as he could. As soon as he had put the car in the garage, hung up his coat, changed his shoes for his slippers, washed his hands and exchanged his jacket for a cardigan he sat down in his usual armchair.

'It's all fixed,' he told Fenella, taking from her the gin and tonic which she had fixed. 'I'm picking Dad up and taking him round to the nursing home tomorrow afternoon after lunch.'

'Was he difficult about it?'

'No. Not at all really.'

'There you are. I told you he'd just give in quietly.' Fenella was sitting on the arm of Nigel's chair. She put her arm around his neck and kissed his ear. 'You're brilliant, darling,' she told him.

'I'll ring the builders in the morning,' Nigel told her.

'How soon can they start?'

'Monday,' said Nigel. 'They've got all the materials they need - new doors, new bath, partitions, paint - that sort of stuff. They should be finished in less than a month. And the estate agents have already found someone desperate to rent it. I got a call from Tony this morning.'

'How much are they paying?'

Nigel sipped at his drink, turned his head, grinned and told her. 'It's amazing what these old places fetch these days. They'll be paying eight times what Dad was paying in rent.'

'And that chap you know at the council has approved the payment of your Dad's nursing home fees?'

'Absolutely. No problem at all. Dad doesn't own the house, he hasn't got any capital. They don't have any option. They're obliged to pay the fees.'

'He'll be much, much happier in a nursing home than he ever was in that funny little house,' said Fenella.

'Oh absolutely,' agreed Nigel. 'I wouldn't dream of doing it if it wasn't the right thing for him. Oh, I nearly forgot there is some old junk in the house. Old furniture. Nothing valuable. Nothing decent. It's nearly all stuff that he and mother bought when they first started out. Would you give the chap at the auction rooms a call? Robbie isn't it?'

'Ronnie.'

'Ask him to take a van round there and clear out everything they can move.'

'Do you want them to give you a price first? Do you want me to get a quote?'

'No. Don't bother. Just ask them to take the stuff away. If there's money left over after they've covered their costs get them to let you have it in cash. I can take it round to Dad when I visit him.'

'What about our costs?'

'Oh, I think it would be fair to just take 17.5% of the gross,' said Nigel. 'Take it out of the cash. I'd rather keep it all as a cash transaction.'

'No one can say you haven't been a wonderful son to Mr Roxdale,' said Fenella.

'I'll be a lot happier knowing that he's being well looked after and not standing out in the rain digging in potatoes,' said Nigel.

Fenella shuddered. `I'm so glad his gardening days are over. I don't mind admitting that I was terrified people would find out. I hate to think what the Mertons would have said if they'd found out your father was working as a jobbing gardener.'

Nigel shivered. 'Let's not even think about that,' he said. 'It's all over now.' He emptied his glass.

'Would you like another one, dear?'

'Why not?' asked Nigel. 'I think we can afford to celebrate a bit tonight.' He squeezed Fenella's left buttock as she got up off the arm of his chair.

Fenella giggled, coquettishly. 'Oh dear me,' she said. 'I think I'd better get out my sexy nightie.' She smiled at him and then hurried off to the kitchen to get him another drink.

Nigel fiddled with the buttons on his cardigan, closed his eyes and relaxed. He was very pleased with himself and, indeed, with life in general. The day had gone much better than he had dared to hope.

Chapter 24

'There's a new resident in the hallway,' whispered Mrs Roberts.

Mrs Caldicot, sitting at her desk and staring glumly at a thick pile of bills, looked up.

'Our new resident, Mr Roxdale, looks lovely, but there's a very pompous fellow with him who says he's a lawyer and Mr Roxdale's son. I don't like him at all.'

Mrs Caldicot hurried out into the hall.

'Mrs Caldicot?' asked the lawyer.

Mrs Caldicot confirmed her identity.

'This is my father, Mr Roxdale,' said the lawyer. 'Have you got someone who can help with his bags?'

'Er...' began Mrs Caldicot, looking around rather helplessly.

'I can get them,' said Mr Roxdale.

'You stay here,' said his son. 'They'll have someone to do that sort of thing.'

Mr Roxdale didn't seem sure what to do.

'I'll go,' said Mrs Roberts quickly. 'Are they in the car?'

'There are two cases in the boot,' explained the lawyer. 'And, I'm afraid, a variety of garden tools poking out through the nearside rear window. Mr Roxdale simply wouldn't be parted from them. They have sentimental value. I'll help you with those in a minute. There's another case to bring. I couldn't fit it in the car today. I'll bring it over tomorrow morning.'

'OK,' said Mrs Roberts.

'The car is open. Just make sure you mind the paintwork,' said the lawyer. 'It's an expensive car.'

Behind his back Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts pulled faces. Mr Roxdale looked embarrassed.

Suddenly there was a scream of laughter from the lounge.

'What on earth was that?' demanded the lawyer.

'Oh, just some of the residents having a little fun, I expect,' explained Mrs Caldicot. 'We're one big happy family here.'

There was a shout and the sound of crashing furniture.

'It rather sounds to me as though someone is fighting,' said the lawyer, disapprovingly.

Mrs Caldicot walked across the hall to the lounge and gingerly pushed open the door. Miss Nightingale was sitting on the floor, looking rather dazed. None of the other residents was identifiable. They were a mess of arms, legs, heads and torsos; apparently joined together as a huge many limbed monster.'

'What's going on?' asked Mrs Caldicot, in a whisper.

'We're playing Twister,' explained Miss Nightingale.

Mrs Caldicot shut the door and turned back to the lawyer. 'Nothing at all to worry about,' she reassured him. 'A few of the residents are playing a rather heated game of bridge.' There was a crash from within the lounge. It sounded as though a large piece of furniture had been knocked over.

'Someone gone no trumps, I expect,' said Mrs Caldicot.

The lawyer frowned. He didn't approve of card games. He remembered students playing the game thirty years earlier when he had been at University. He hadn't approved of bridge then. 'Is that entirely appropriate for people of mature years? I would have thought that a more dignified pursuit might be more suitable. I trust there isn't any money changing hands?'

'Oh no,' Mrs Caldicot assured him. 'I'm absolutely sure that there is no money changing hands.' She paused. 'Our Miss Nightingale is very keen on embroidery,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'And another one of our residents is an enthusiastic philatelist with, I'm told, a very fine collection of French Colonials.' She swallowed hard. 'Naturally, we would not expect your father to take part in any activity which he felt inappropriate. Shall we go and take a look at Mr Roxdale's room?' She headed for the stairs and then, half way up, stopped and turned when she realised that although Mr Roxdale senior was following her Mr Roxdale junior wasn't. He was standing in the hallway staring at the wallpaper.

'We're going to have the whole place redecorated,' said Mrs Caldicot, apologetically. 'I'm afraid we just haven't had time.' The truth was that it was money rather than time that they were short of. But she didn't like to mention that.

'No, no, I don't think that's necessary,' said Mr Roxdale. 'I was just admiring the pattern. Very unusual.'

'I don't think they make it any more,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I tried to get a roll at the local hardware shop to repair some scuffed spots. But they didn't have anything like it.'

‘No,’ said Mr Roxdale, thoughtfully. ‘No. I don’t suppose they did.’ He moved, apparently reluctantly, away from his study of the wallpaper, stopped for a few moments to examine a piece of furniture at the bottom of the stairs, and only then did he start up the stairs.

‘You’ve got a lot of grass,’ said Mr Roxdale the elder, peering out of the window at the back garden.

‘Oh, yes,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘It costs a fortune to keep it all cut. But in the summer one or two of the more active residents like to totter out for a quiet game of croquet.’

‘Splendid!’ said Mr Roxdale junior.

‘It must take a day and a half a week to cut all that grass,’ said the older Mr Roxdale. ‘Including the lawn at the front,’ he added.

‘I think you’ve probably right,’ said Mrs Caldicot, who did not like being reminded of the gardener. He had that morning told Mrs Caldicot that he would not be returning until his bill had been paid in full. ‘What do you think of your room?’ she asked the older Mr Roxdale.

‘I liked my old place,’ said Mr Roxdale senior. ‘I had a nice little garden.’

‘If you feel the urge to get out there in the garden you’ll be very welcome. I’m sure our own gardeners won’t mind.’

‘I don’t think my father really wants to get his fingers dirty anymore,’ said young Mr Roxdale. He spoke, Mrs Caldicot thought, as though he had several plums in his mouth. ‘He’s a bit old for physical work now.’

Mrs Caldicot sensed animosity. She looked first at the old man and then at his son. The elder Mr Roxdale looked rather sad. Mrs Caldicot looked at him, smiled and winked. Surprised, he grinned and winked back.

Mrs Caldicot and the two Roxdales went downstairs. Mrs Roberts had brought in the older Mr Roxdale’s suitcases. She took them upstairs and offered to help the new resident unpack. Meanwhile, Mr Roxdale junior removed his father’s garden tools from the Jaguar, taking great care not to chip the car’s paint, and tossed them unceremoniously onto the ground beside a shed at the side of the house. He was glad to be rid of them. He was glad to be rid of his father too.

Chapter 25

It was dusk. From inside the brightly lit clubhouse the 18th green seemed pitch black. It was difficult to believe that anyone could see to play golf. Outside on the green, where the final two players of the day were completing their round, things did not look anywhere near as black. The clubhouse, lit up and silhouetted against the skyline, looked like a liner quietly cruising in some calm Caribbean waters. Nigel Roxdale slipped his putter into his bag, took hold of the handle on his trolley and headed back for the clubhouse.

'Are you popping in for a quick one?' he asked his playing partner, a short thick-set man who, although it hadn't rained all day, was cocooned in bulky waterproofs and had a multi-coloured woolly hat pulled down over his ears.

The man wearing the woolly hat pulled back his jacket sleeve and studied his watch. 'Better not, old man,' he replied, rather mournfully. 'Beryl will be furious if I'm late for dinner.' He held out a hand. 'But thanks for the game.' The two men shook hands.

At the top of the path leading to the clubhouse, the players parted company. The man with the woolly hat turned right and headed for the club car park. Within less than five minutes he would have packed his bag and trolley into the boot of his car, exchanged his spiked golf shoes for a pair of black loafers and started the short journey home.

Nigel Roxdale, the other golfer, turned left and headed for the clubhouse. He parked his trolley, complete with clubs, in a small space created for that purpose, entered the clubhouse and headed for the locker room. He changed his shoes, socks and trousers, swapped his Pringle sweater for a sports jacket, put on a tie, combed his hair and headed straight for the bar, confident that although the bar would be quiet there would be someone there whom he knew. His confidence was, as usual, entirely justified.

He was ordering himself a gin at the bar when he heard a voice he knew well call his name. He turned, smiled and waved back at a small man sitting in a huge, brown leather easy chair next to a raging log fire. This was the quietest time of the day for the bar. Most of the members who had been playing golf had gone home for their dinner. At about eight the bar would start to fill up again as members brought their wives for a drink, a game of bridge and a gossip. During the daytime the clubhouse was full of insurance salesmen doing deals. During the evening it was full of women with unlikely hair-dos mumbling four no trumps and spitting out catty remarks about one another.

'Can I get you a drink?' Nigel called across.

'Another gin, thank you!' replied the small member, holding up his almost empty glass.

Nigel carried the two gins across to the fireplace, handed one to Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, put the second down on a low oak table and then slumped down into the other chair, a twin to the one in which Mr Muller-Hawksmoor was settled.

They talked for a while about golf.

'Another one?' asked Nigel Roxdale after fifteen minutes. 'Thanks!' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. Suddenly he sat up. 'My round,' he remembered. He started to lever himself out of the chair.

'No, my treat,' insisted Nigel. He turned, caught the barman's eye, held up his glass and pointed to Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. The barman nodded. 'I've had a good day,' sighed Nigel, replete with self- satisfaction. 'I managed to persuade my father to retire and go into a retirement home.'

Mr Muller-Hawksmoor looked at him and gently raised an enquiring eyebrow. He couldn't quite see why this was good news but he knew Nigel Roxdale well enough to guess that this hadn't been an entirely altruistic manoeuvre.

'He's been living alone for years,' said Nigel. 'Far too old, of course. He needs looking after. Better to get him used to the idea now rather than wait until he's senile. I've heard that when old folk get senile they find it more difficult to settle.' He paused. 'Of course,' he said, 'that's your line of work isn't it?'

'You did the right thing,' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor.

The barman, a wiry, weary looking man in his late sixties, appeared with their drinks. He put the full glasses down on the table, picked up the empties and put them onto his tray. He had a slight tremor. This didn't much matter when he was picking up empty glasses but it meant he always spilt something when he was moving a full glass. The members tolerated this only because it gave them an excuse not to tip him. The barman waited while Nigel rummaged in his back pocket for the right change. As usual the barman did not expect a tip and, since his expectation was fulfilled, he was not disappointed in this.

'The odd thing was that the place where I took him turned out to be a damned treasure trove,' said Nigel quietly. He looked around to make sure no one could overhear him. There was no one within twenty feet.

'I spotted William Morris sunflower wallpaper in two rooms and William Morris trellis wallpaper in the lounge. Unbelievable! There are silk oak pattern curtains in the lounge too - I checked with a dealer I know who told me that when Morris's company sold that material in 1910 it cost 45 shillings a yard. And I spotted at least four genuine pieces of William Morris furniture including two high backed chairs and several pieces of furniture which were, I'm sure, produced at Morris's Red Lion Square workshop.'

'And they don't realise what they've got?' said Muller-Hawksmoor who knew only vaguely who William Morris was but who nevertheless recognised the commercial value of Nigel Roxdale's discovery. He was far too vain to confess this ignorance.

'I'm sure they don't have the slightest idea!' said Nigel. 'No idea at all. The daft woman running the place actually apologised to me for the state of the curtains and wallpaper. Said she was going to have the place redecorated when she could afford it.'

'How valuable are they - these things?' asked Mr Muller-Hawksmoor.

'Couldn't put a price on them,' said Nigel, emphatically. 'I did hear of a house in Somerset where they found a room covered with William Morris wallpaper. Some guys came down from London and spent a month peeling it off so they could use it to decorate an apartment in Knightsbridge.'

'Really?' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, impressed.

'You could take the stuff out and sell it of course, but by far the best thing to do would be to buy the place and open it up an exclusive hotel,' said Nigel. 'Small, exquisitely furnished, private hotels are all the rage these days. And one with genuine William Morris stuff on the walls and real William Morris furniture...,' he paused. 'You could charge what you liked for a weekend.' He sipped at his drink. 'Of course, I wouldn't bother opening a hotel myself. I'd just sell the place on to one of these chains specialising in small, private hotels.'

'What's the name of the place?' asked Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. 'I probably know it.'

'The Twilight Years Rest Home,' replied Nigel Roxdale. 'Run by a slightly dotty old woman...I've forgotten her damned name...Calders...something like that..'

'Caldicot?' suggested Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, who had gone very pale. He took a large swig from his glass.

'That's it! You know her?'

'I've got to visit the place tomorrow,' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, ignoring the question. He emptied his glass. 'Routine sort of check. Make sure they're obeying all the regulations.'

Nigel thought for a moment. 'What happens if a nursing home proprietor doesn't obey all the rules?' he asked. 'What sort of disciplinary powers do you lot have?'

'Oh vast,' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. 'We can close a place down in a flash.'

'You can actually close it down?'

'Oh yes.'

'You can really do that?' asked Nigel. 'By yourself?'

'Oh yes. If there's a breach of regulations. And there are a lot of regulations we can enforce.'

'Really,' said Nigel. 'That's very interesting. Let's have another drink, shall we?'

Chapter 26

Mrs Caldicot lived in a room on the top floor of the nursing home. It was no bigger and no smaller than anyone else's. Like each resident she had a small private bathroom and in her bedroom there were two fitted wardrobes and a dressing table which also served as a desk. She also had an easy chair and a small table. Mrs Roberts also had her own rooms on the top floor. The other staff members lived out.

Mrs Caldicot woke, as she always did, at seven thirty sharp. As usual Kitty, her cat, was curled up next to her. Moving gently, as that she would not wake Kitty, Mrs Caldicot swung her legs out of bed, stood up, found her slippers and, as was her habit, padded across the bedroom floor in her bare feet to draw back the curtains and find out what sort of day it was.

Mrs Caldicot was a deep sleeper who was accustomed to getting the full benefit out of her eight hours and she didn't realise that she had noticed anything unusual until, two minutes later, she was bent over her washbasin with her face covered in soap. She quickly rinsed off the soap, grabbed a towel and padded back into her bedroom. She looked out of the window again.

At first, Mrs Caldicot thought that perhaps she was imagining things. So she blinked and rubbed at her eyes and then looked back again. This time it was clear that she wasn't dreaming. There was a man out in the garden digging up the lawn. Judging by the amount of turf he had already moved he had clearly been out there for some time. But who on earth was it?

Not bothering to get dressed, Mrs Caldicot headed for the door still wearing only her nightie. And then, as things so often do, it came to her in an unexpected flash. 'Mr Roxdale'. Her new paying guest. The elderly man who had been brought in by the middle aged lawyer in the Jaguar.

She hurried along to Mrs Roberts's room. There she banged on the door. Mrs Roberts came to the door holding a huge white bath towel around her.

'What's up?' Mrs Roberts demanded, anxiously. She was not accustomed to getting visits at this time of the morning and Mrs Caldicot's unexpected knock on her door had alarmed her.

'Mr Roxdale is in the garden,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'He's out there digging up the lawn.'

'Mr Roxdale? The new resident?'

'Yes,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Why?'

'Perhaps he's trying to find oil. Maybe he just hates grass. I don't know. But we've got to stop him. I'm going out to see what's going on,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'I'll come with you,' said Mrs Roberts, dropping her towel and quickly grabbing a dressing gown from a hook between the door.

The two women hurried off down the stairs, through the kitchen and into the garden. The rest of the home was quiet. In the lounge Miss Nightingale was watching television and in the kitchen Mr and Mrs Merivale were making toast and coffee. They both looked up, said 'good morning' first to Mrs Caldicot and then to Mrs Roberts and then stared out of the window as the two women marched out of the back door and into the garden. Mr and Mrs Merivale looked at one another for a moment, shrugged and then went back to their chores.

'Good morning!' called Mrs Caldicot to Mr Roxdale as soon as she was in earshot.

The gardener, who had his foot on his spade and was about to remove another piece of turf from the already decimated lawn, stopped what he was doing, turned and grinned, first at Mrs Caldicot and then at Mrs Roberts, hurrying up in her wake.

'What on earth are you doing?' Mrs Caldicot asked. She regretted the banality of her question the moment the words had left her mouth.

'Digging,' replied Mr Roxdale.

'Yes, I can see that,' said Mrs Caldicot, conscious of the fact that the answer she had received was no more stupid than the question she had asked. 'But why?'

'I thought you'd like some flowers and some vegetables instead of all this grass,' said Mr Roxdale, waving an arm around. 'Don't get me wrong, I'm not completely against grass. In the right place a little lawn can look very nice indeed - especially if it's well tended - but you've just got too much lawn here.'

'Where did you get the tools from?'

'They're mine,' explained Mr Roxdale. 'The ones I brought with me.' Mrs Caldicot remembered the tools that Mr Roxdale's son had extracted from the Jaguar. He leant on his spade and waved towards a neat pile of turves. 'None of this need cost you a penny,' he said. 'I even know a man who'll buy this turf from you,' he told her.

Mrs Caldicot stared at him. ‘You know a man who’ll buy clumps of grass?’

‘Oh yes. There’s always a demand for good, clean grass. You’ve got good stuff here. Just the thing for making lawns.’

‘It is a lawn,’ pointed out Mrs Caldicot.

‘That’s what makes it valuable,’ explained Mr Roxdale. ‘And you can use the money you get from the turf to buy seeds,’ explained Mr Roxdale. ‘So, you see, you can start your garden without it costing you a penny.’

Mrs Caldicot had started out from her bedroom intending to tell Mr Roxdale to put back all the turf. But now she wasn’t so sure. She looked around. There was too much grass. It was boring. And she had to admit that the residents hardly ever came out into the garden at all.

‘If we put in some fast growing crops there’s still time to get quite a decent return this year,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘We want high productivity crops that will produce a good return in a short space of time. And, if you’re looking to save money the best bet would be to plant the sort of things that are cheap to grow but which take a little bit of knowledge and a bit of effort to harvest.’

‘You could organise all this for us?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘Oh yes,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘Shall I carry on?’

Mrs Caldicot looked at Mrs Roberts. Mrs Roberts shrugged. ‘Well, yes, I suppose so,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Yes. I think that would be a splendid idea.’ She paused. ‘As long as you don’t grow chrysanthemums.’ The late Mr Caldicot had been keen on chrysanthemums. Mrs Caldicot could now not bear the flowers.

‘OK,’ said Mr Roxdale, unquestioningly. ‘That’s fine. No chrysanthemums.’

Mrs Caldicot turned to head back towards the house. ‘Do you always start work this early in the morning?’

‘No,’ said Mr Roxdale. `Not this early.’

‘So why did you start this early today?’

‘I thought that if I asked you if I could dig up the garden you probably wouldn’t listen but would just say ‘No’,’ explained Mr Roxdale. ‘But I reckoned that if I’d already started you’d want to know why - and you’d listen to me.’

Mrs Caldicot looked at him and smiled. It was the sort of thing she would have done herself. ‘Have you had any breakfast?’ she asked.

Mr Roxdale shook his head.

‘Then for heaven’s sake come in and have something to eat,’ she told him. ‘I can’t bear to see a man work on an empty stomach.’

Mr Roxdale stuck his spade into the turf and followed Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts back to the kitchen.

Chapter 27

Mr Roxdale was sitting in the dining room finishing off a huge plateful of bacon and eggs. Thelma Caldicot and Mrs Roberts, now both dressed and decent, were sitting in Mrs Caldicot's office sharing a rack of toast and a pot of coffee. Mrs Caldicot was wearing a bright blue suit, a white blouse and a pair of hold up stockings which had a pretty pattern running down the back of each leg and which made her feel young, feminine and delightfully and surprisingly reckless. Although the knowledge no longer worried her, she was well aware that her former husband, the late Mr Caldicot, would have had an apoplectic fit if he could have seen her dressed in such a way. He believed that a woman's clothes should be designed solely to maintain warmth and dignity. Mrs Roberts was wearing her nurse's uniform and looked very crisp and professional.

'We'll save a fortune,' said Mrs Roberts. 'If Mr Roxdale digs up enough of the garden we won't have to pay anyone to come and cut the grass. And we'll save a fortune on greengrocery bills.'

'I suppose so,' said Mrs Caldicot, smearing thick cut marmalade onto her third slice of toast.

'Plus we get genuine organic food,' said Mrs Roberts. 'That's got to be a good thing. I'm always a bit suspicious of some of these organic farmers. You never know whether or not they've crept out in the middle of the night with a bag of chemical fertiliser or weedkiller.'

Mrs Caldicot, her mouth now full of toast and marmalade, nodded her approval.

'So, what's worrying you?' asked Mrs Roberts, who was, as usual, on a diet and had already passed her self-imposed limit of two slices of toast.

There was a pause while Mrs Caldicot finished the mouthful of toast she was eating. 'Oh, I don't know,' she sighed. She thought for a while. 'Yes, I do.' she confessed. 'I'm not really cut out for running an old folks' home.'

'Of course you are!' cried Mrs Roberts. 'What on earth makes you say that?'

'It's the finance side of things that I can't manage,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I know that everyone chips in with whatever they can afford but we're accumulating debts at a frightening rate. I simply didn't have the heart to ask Mr Williams for a cheque. He doesn't seem to have anything except a couple of suitcases of old photographs.'

They sat in glum silence for a few moments. Mrs Roberts, absorbing some of Mrs Caldicot's depression, reached out for another slice of toast.

'Did I tell you he gave me one of his old snaps in lieu of payment,' said Mrs Caldicot. She rummaged around on her desk, found the photograph, wiped a little marmalade off it and handed it to Mrs Roberts. 'It's quite nice,' said Mrs Roberts.

'It's very nice,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. 'But I can't see the water company or the electricity company accepting a photograph instead of a cheque, can you?'

'I suppose not,' agreed Mrs Roberts.

They both jumped when they heard the front doorbell.

'Oh damn,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Who can that be?'

'Let's just leave it,' said Mrs Roberts. 'My old auntie never answers her front doorbell. She says that people who ring her doorbell always want something from her. And she's right. When was the last time you opened the front door and had a nice surprise? When was the last time you opened the door and found someone standing there waiting to make your life better?'

The bell rang again.

'Oh I suppose I'd better go,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'I'll go,' laughed Mrs Roberts, who was nearer the door. 'You finish off that last piece of toast.'

Mrs Caldicot, ignoring the demands of her figure and succumbing to temptation, had smeared marmalade on the last piece of toast and just taken a sizeable bite when Mrs Roberts entered the office again. 'It's Mr Roxdale's son,' she whispered. 'He's brought another suitcase and he wants to see you.'

'Qnhell snhow hchim hin,' spluttered Mrs Caldicot, hurriedly finishing the mouthful of toast, and hiding the remains of her breakfast under a pile of bills.

Mrs Roberts turned round to fetch Mr Roxdale but he had followed her and was already in the room.

'Has my father settled in?' he asked.

'Oh yes, I think so,' said Mrs Caldicot, rising. 'Would you like to see him?'

'Oh no, no, no. Don't disturb him,' said Nigel. 'I just called in with another suitcase of his.' He looked down at Mrs Caldicot's desk.

'Please excuse the mess,' said Mrs Caldicot, rather embarrassed. 'I was just having a bit of a tidy up.'

'That's an interesting looking photograph you've got there,' said Nigel. He reached out, his fingers hovering above the photograph. ‘May I?’

‘Of course,’ said Mrs Caldicot, with a wave of her hand.

Nigel picked up the photograph, carefully blew away some toast crumbs, and then turned the photograph over. He blanched noticeably when he saw the signature on the back. ‘Where on earth did you get this?’ he asked.

Mrs Caldicot started to explain that a resident had given it to her. But something, she did not know what, warned her not to tell the whole truth.

‘Oh, it’s just something I was given,’ she said.

‘I’m a bit of a collector of old photographs,’ said Nigel, trying to remain calm. ‘Do you happen to know if the signature is real?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘It’s real.’

‘It looks authentic,’ said Nigel, examining it closely. ‘Yes, I’m sure it is.’ He looked across at Mrs Caldicot. ‘Would you be prepared to sell this to me?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘I hadn’t really thought about selling it.’

‘You know who the photographer is, of course?’

‘Yes,’ said Mrs Caldicot hesitantly.

‘I mean, you know who he is,’ repeated Nigel. He suspected that if Mrs Caldicot had known the photograph’s true value it would not have been lying on her desk half covered in crumbs.

Mrs Caldicot, confused, shook her head.

‘This is, I’m pretty sure, an original print of a photograph by Mr Henry Williams.’

‘Yes,’ said Mrs Caldicot, surprised. ‘Mr Henry Williams. That’s the name.’

‘Do you know who Mr Henry Williams is?’

Mrs Caldicot suppressed the temptation to say that Mr Henry Williams was a rather confused old man whom she had last seen attacking scrambled egg on toast in the dining room. Instead, she simply looked puzzled.

‘Mr Henry Williams is a legendary English photographer who worked in Paris with Cartier Bresson. He’s one of the best and most collected English photographers.’ Nigel scratched his nose. ‘I don’t even know whether or not he’s still alive,’ he admitted. ‘The last I heard he had left France and come back to England. But for the last thirty years he’s been a bit of a recluse.’

‘What’s it worth?’ asks Mrs Caldicot, trying not to sound excited.

‘I’ll give you £500 for it,’ said Nigel. He thought for a moment. ‘No,’ he said. ‘That’s not fair. The print is signed and the signature looks genuine. I`ll pay you £1,000 for it.’

Mrs Caldicot swallowed hard. ‘Do you mind if I talk to one of my colleagues?’ she said in a voice she hardly recognised. She got up and headed for the door and then turned back, smiled at Nigel, took the photograph from the desk in front of him and left.

She found Mr Williams upstairs in his room.

‘Are you the Mr Henry Williams?’ she demanded.

‘I’m Mr Henry Williams,’ said Mr Williams, rather defensively. ‘But I don’t expect I’m the only Mr Henry Williams.’

‘But you’re the photographer Mr Henry Williams?’

‘Yes.’

Mrs Caldicot held out the photograph he had given her. ‘There’s a man downstairs who’s just offered me £1,000 for this!’ she said.

‘Don’t take it,’ said Mr Williams firmly.

‘Don’t take it?’

‘No. He’s ripping you off.’

‘You mean it’s worth more than £1,000?’

‘The last print of that photograph went for £5,000 plus 17.5% auctioneer fees,’ said Mr Williams. ‘And it wasn’t signed.’

Mrs Caldicot sat down on Mr Williams’s bed. ‘So what is this one worth?’ she asked.

‘It should fetch between £7,500 and £10,000 at auction,’ said Mr Williams. ‘Maybe more. Who knows.’

‘I can’t take this,’ said Mrs Caldicot, putting the photograph down on the bed. She looked at it as though it was likely to bite her.

‘Why on earth not?’ asked Mr Williams. ‘I’ve got a suitcase full of them. And I can always print more if I run out.’

Mrs Caldicot looked at Mr Williams’s suitcase and went cold. ‘Don’t you think those should be in a bank?’ she asked.

‘Oh no,’ said Mr Williams. ‘These are only prints. The negatives are in a box in the bank.’

‘Anyway I can’t take that,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘It’s worth far too much.’

‘How much did you think it was worth when I gave it to you?’ Mr Williams asked her.

Mrs Caldicot looked embarrassed.

‘You just thought it was an old man’s snap - worthless - didn’t you?’

Mrs Caldicot felt herself blushing.

‘But you took the photograph, you didn’t say anything and you didn’t throw me out?’

‘No...but...’

‘I like you,’ said Mr Williams, beaming. ‘I like you very much. You’re kind. I don’t meet many kind people these days. Keep the photograph and sell it at auction. You’ll get the best price for it that way. And I’ll give you another one next month.’

‘No, no!’ said Mrs Caldicot, jumping up off the bed. ‘You can’t do that!’

‘They’re my photographs,’ Mr Williams pointed out. ‘I can do what I like with them. What else am I going to do with my money? For years now it’s been my plan to leave nothing when I die. Except debts to the lawyer and the undertaker.’

‘Nothing at all for your family?’

‘Why should I leave money to my family?’ asked Mr Williams, seemingly quite genuinely puzzled. ‘I started out this life with nothing and I intend to finish my journey in the same state. Most people think that accumulating money is like a game,’ said Mr Williams. ‘They want to be in a good position in the game when you die. My hero is the Count of Paris,’ he went on. ‘He was the heir to the French throne and in 1940 he inherited the equivalent of $200 million. In 1999 he died, leaving 6 monogrammed handkerchiefs to be divided between his 11 children. What a man! What a way to go. There was a man who timed his life and his death to perfection.’ He sighed, knowing that unless he destroyed his life’s work, his negatives and his photographs, he had no chance whatsoever of emulating his hero. He grinned at Mrs Caldicot. ‘I told you,’ he said to her. ‘I admire what you did. I was talking to Miss Nightingale at breakfast. I wish I’d been there to record it all with a camera.’ He chuckled.

Mrs Caldicot got up, now even more embarrassed.

Mr Williams picked up the photograph and held it as though about to rip in half. ‘Please take it,’ he said. ‘If you don’t I’ll rip it in half.’

‘You can’t do that!’ said Mrs Caldicot, horrified. ‘That would be terrible.’

‘So, what’s it to be? Are you going to take the photograph or am I going to rip it up?’

Mrs Caldicot looked at Mr Williams and smiled. ‘Thank you,’ she said, quietly. ‘I will accept this one photograph. It’s very generous of you and it will get us out of a very big hole. But I can’t let you keep bailing us out. So, no more photographs, please.’

‘But...’ began Mr Williams.

‘No buts!’ insisted Mrs Caldicot, firmly.

Mr Williams sighed. ‘OK,’ he said. ‘But can I ask you one favour? If you’ve got a collector downstairs please don’t tell him where you got the photograph. I don’t want a queue of collectors at the front door - all wanting their photographs signing.’

‘I won’t,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘I promise.’ She left Mr Williams’s room and met Mrs Roberts on the landing.

‘Mrs Roberts,’ she said, handing her the photograph. ‘Put this into an envelope and hide it somewhere safe.’

‘Why?’ asked Mrs Roberts. ‘Is it valuable?’

‘It’s worth between £7,500 and £10,000,’ Mrs Caldicot told her.

Mrs Roberts stared at her disbelievingly.

‘I know,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘You could have knocked me down with a bus when I found out. But it’s true. Mr Roxdale’s father just offered me £1,000 for it.’

Mrs Roberts, suddenly white, took the photograph as though it was made of delicate porcelain and walked slowly away with it.

Mrs Caldicot went back downstairs to tell Nigel that although she very much appreciated his kind offer she had to tell him that for the moment the picture wasn’t for sale.

Nigel offered £2,000.

Mrs Caldicot smiled very sweetly and said ‘No, thank you.’

When Nigel had gone she went looking for Mr Roxdale, to tell him that his other suitcase had arrived.

‘He’s back in the garden,’ Mrs Merivale told Mrs Caldicot. ‘Digging up the lawn.’

Mr Roxdale was in the garden but he was not alone. Mr Hewitt, Mr Livingstone and Mrs Caldicot’s cat Kitty were all helping him. Mr Hewitt who was, like Mr Roxdale, a former gardener, was delighted to be getting his hands dirty again.

Chapter 28

Later that day, while an exhausted Kitty slept on a rug on top of the boiler Mrs Caldicot, Mrs Roberts and the Merivales cleaned the kitchen. This was an extensive task for the cook who had recently left had not regarded cleanliness as a priority or, indeed, as much of a virtue at all.

Mrs Caldicot was on her hands and knees in front of the oven, scrubbing at stains which had clearly been accumulating for some time. Mrs Roberts, also on her hands and knees, had undone the pipe-work underneath the kitchen sink and was struggling to deal with a blockage by extracting rotting vegetable remains. Mrs Merivale was sitting at the kitchen table folding and refolding a duster so it would look neat when she started work. Her husband, who did not like to be far from her, was cleaning out the fridge.

Mr and Mrs Merivale were by now well settled into the kitchen at the Twilight Years Rest Home.

Some people enjoy a retirement which allows them to potter around, avoiding responsibilities and commitments, getting up when they want, going to bed when they want and doing whatever they fancy in between.

Others prefer to keep busy. They like knowing that they are making a difference to someone else's lives. They need to know that they are needed.

Mrs Merivale was one of those others. And Mr Merivale, who had never had to deal with such twentieth century tortures as ambition and drive, was extremely happy doing whatever kept his wife happy. For him a pile of dirty dishes and a bowlful of soapy water was a promise of an hour or two of fulfilment, the comforting knowledge that there would be a warm glow of satisfaction when the dirty dishes had been washed, wiped and stacked away and, above all, the knowledge that what he was doing would elicit a smile and a hug from Maple Merivale, the only woman he had ever loved, ever wanted to love or ever seen any reason to want to love.

Although they had only been working in the kitchen for a short time, Mr and Mrs Merivale had already earned the respect, affection and gratitude of everyone else in the Twilight Years Rest Home. Mrs Merivale ran a neat and efficient kitchen and produced her meals on time. But it was Mr Roxdale who best summed up what the others liked best about Mrs Merivale when he said: 'She cooks wonderful food and serves generous portions.'

The fashionable television chefs may come and go, parading their skills with rare and barely edible Pategonian vegetables, decorating their plates as though preparing them for an exhibition at the Tate Gallery, and spending hours turning tomato skins into roses but in the long run cooking is about one thing, and one thing only: satisfying appetites with tasty, wholesome, nutritious food. And Mrs Merivale was better at doing that than any fancy television chef. She knew what her diners wanted and she made sure that she gave it to them - in good portions.

Chapter 29

In order to make the time pass more pleasantly Mrs Caldicot was telling them all about her most recent lunch with Jenkins and had just reached the end of the meal ('while Jenkins had his coffee this hunky bloke brought this tray full of gorgeous petits fours - I hate to think what it all cost') when their peace was interrupted by the familiar sound of the front doorbell.

'Darn it,' said Mrs Caldicot, stopping in mid-scrub, turning her head and banging it against the side of the oven. 'Can you go, Mrs Roberts?'

'I've got my hand halfway down the drain,' said Mrs Roberts, gouging another glop of unrecognisable black goo from the waste pipe. 'By the time I've made myself presentable whoever is ringing the bell will have forgotten why they ever called.'

'Perhaps one of the residents will answer it,' suggested Mrs Caldicot. They waited. The doorbell rang again. And again.

'I think the residents are all too busy having a good time,' said Mrs Roberts.

'What are they all doing this morning?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'They were playing musical chairs when I last looked,' replied Mrs Roberts. 'Mr Hewitt was sitting on the sideboard claiming that it counted as a chair because he could sit on it. They wanted me to act as referee but I declined and left quickly.'

'Very sensible,' said Mrs Caldicot who still remembered and regretted having agreed to act as referee in a very hectic game of Twister. The bell rang again. The caller was clearly not going to give up. 'Mrs Merivale, would you be kind enough to pop and answer the door for us?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'Oh!' said Mrs Merivale, slightly startled and flustered. 'Are you sure it will be all right for me to do that?'

'Just open the door and see who's there,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Ask them what they want and then come and tell me.'

'Oh. Right. I think I can probably manage that,' said Mrs Merivale. 'I'll just pop and get my hat.'

Mrs Merivale had stood up and taken just two paces towards the door when Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts stopped what they were doing, looked first at one another and then at Mrs Merivale and finally spoke together. 'Why do you need a hat to open the door?'

Mrs Merivale stopped and turned. 'I always wear a hat when I open the door,' she told them.

'Yes,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'But why?'

'My mother always did it,' replied Mrs Merivale. 'She would never answer the door unless she was wearing a hat.'

'Yes,' repeated Mrs Caldicot. 'But why?'

'So that if she didn't want to see the visitor who was standing on the step she could tell them that she was just going out,' said Mrs Merivale. 'They would see the hat on her head and think she was telling the truth.'

'And if it was someone she wanted to see?'

'She'd still tell them she was just going out but would remove her hat and say that her errand could wait. That would make them feel wanted and important.'

'And you've always done this?'

'Oh yes. Without fail.'

'That's brilliant!' said Mrs Caldicot, in awe.

'It's simple but so clever!' agreed Mrs Roberts.

'We will keep a hat stand in the hall,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'In future I will never answer the door unless I'm wearing a hat.'

'Nor will I,' said Mrs Roberts.

'Shall I pop and get my hat, then?' asked Mrs Merivale.

'Most definitely,' said Mrs Caldicot.

She left the kitchen. Mr Merivale followed close behind.

Chapter 30

A minute or two later Mrs Merivale returned to the kitchen. She was wearing a neat little hat with a feather in it. 'I'm sorry,' she said to Mrs Caldicot. 'You'll have to come. They want to see you and they won't even tell me who they are or what they want.'

Mrs Caldicot got up and walked to the front door. There were two people, a man and a woman, standing in the porch outside (Mrs Merivale hadn't invited them in since they had refused to tell her who they were). Both were carrying clipboards.

The woman was probably in her thirties, though it was difficult to tell with any accuracy. She wore grey, mannish trousers which had huge patch pockets on the thighs and a heavy green anorak with lots of pockets. She had lank, greasy hair which would not have looked out of place on the head of a down on his luck heavy metal fan who was sleeping rough. She had black skin, wore no make-up and had small, rodent like eyes. She looked as if she needed a good bath. She had the stony faced, heartless look of a professional social worker about her. Mrs Caldicot had seen that look before, and it made her feel cold inside.

But it was the man, not the woman, who made leaden-footed butterflies in Mrs Caldicot's stomach start jumping cartwheels.

It was a face that Mrs Caldicot knew very well. It was a face she had hoped she would never see again.

When her husband had died Mrs Caldicot's son and daughter-in-law had decided that Mrs Caldicot wasn't capable of looking after herself at home alone. They had booked her into an old people's home called The Twilight Years Rest Home, run by a cruel, heartless man called Muller-Hawksmoor. Within days an irate Mrs Caldicot, angry at being told that she could no longer keep her cat Kitty with her, and fed up of the smell and taste of over-cooked cabbage, had summoned up courage she never knew she had, and walked out of the rest home - followed by many of the other residents. Mrs Caldicot's astonishing 'escape' had made national news and Mr Muller-Hawksmoor had ended up losing his nursing home.

It was a smirking Muller-Hawskmoor, the very same Muller-Hawksmoor, who was now standing on the step of the nursing home. The smug, self-satisfied former rest home owner looked extremely pleased with himself.

For a brief moment Mrs Caldicot just stared at him.

'Mrs Caldicot?' he asked.

'Of course is it. What do you want?' said Mrs Caldicot. 'You're not welcome here.' She did not even try to disguise her hostility.

'My name is Muller-Hawksmoor...'

'I know who you are.'

'...and this is my colleague Ms Jones.'

'Ms Jones BA.' the woman caller corrected him. She glowered at Mrs Caldicot. 'In addition to attending as Mr Muller-Hawksmoor's Associate I have to tell you that I am appointed by the council as the statutory lesbian feminist advocate liaison representative for your staff and residents.'

'That's very nice, dear,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'But I'm afraid you're not welcome here, either of you.' She attempted to close the door but found that Muller-Hawksmoor had put a suede-clad foot in the way.

'We're from the local council,' said Muller-Hawksmoor, 'and this is official. My colleague, Ms Jones BA, and I represent the council's Rest Home Supervisory Unit. It is our Unit's broader responsibility to examine all the residential institutions in this area which are offering accommodation, nursing services or other facilities for the elderly.' He paused, and the smirk grew wider. 'Ms Jones and I have statutory authority,' he told Mrs Caldicot. 'You are legally obliged to allow us free access to your facilities at any time convenient to us. If you refuse to comply with our requests we are entitled to serve you with a closure notice, which will give you a limited time to find alternative accommodation for your residents and then immediately close down your facility.'

'Do you have any official identification?' Mrs Caldicot asked him.

'Of course,' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, as smooth and unruffled as a kitchen salesman. He slipped a hand into his inside jacket pocket and brought out a wallet. From the wallet, he took a plastic covered identity card which carried his photograph, official status and various identifying details. By the time Mrs Caldicot had studied Mr Muller-Hawksmoor's identity card, and handed it back, Ms Jones had taken her own identity card out of one of the many pockets in her anorak. She held it a few inches away from Mrs Caldicot's nose; so close to her face that Mrs Caldicot had to move her head back an inch or so in order to read it. The photograph made Ms Jones look like the subject of a wanted poster. 'Statutory Lesbian Feminist Advocate Liaison Representative' screamed red capital letters underneath her photograph.

‘I have been married three times,’ said Ms Jones BA.

Mrs Caldicot looked at her, slightly puzzled. ‘Congratulations!’ she said, not sure of the relevance of this but not sure what else to say.

‘That was before I decided to convert to fundamental lesbianism,’ continued Ms Jones BA.

‘Of course,’ agreed Mrs Caldicot.

‘Men are very weak,’ said Ms Jones BA. ‘All my husbands committed suicide.’

‘Oh good heavens,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘How, er distressing.’ Suddenly she brightened. ‘I only had the one,’ she said. ‘I could never quite persuade him to take the plunge. You’d better come in.’ She opened the front door wide and stood back so that they could enter. She would have been more enthusiastic about allowing a pair of pythons, or a pair of psychopathic mass murderers into her rest home. But she realised that she had no alternative. When a man in a cheap suit flashes a plastic identity card establishing him as a council employee every castle must lower its drawbridge.

‘What do you want to see?’ she asked them.

‘This is just a preliminary reconnaissance,’ said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. ‘Just an initial visit for us to get some basic details. To begin with we need to have an up-to-date inventory of your residents.’

‘We don’t keep an inventory of our residents,’ said Mrs Caldicot sharply. She was holding her head high and trying not to show how nervous she felt. ‘The residents at this rest home are regarded as guests, not listed on a computer programme alongside the towels and bits and pieces of furniture.’

‘Very noble,’ said Ms Jones BA, who, Mrs Caldicot thought, had all the charm of a hungry scorpion. ‘But you presumably have some idea of the names of your clients.’ She spoke with ill-disguised contempt and managed to make the word ‘clients’ sound like an insult. ‘And let’s get on with it, shall we? I don’t want to do this any more than you do. I would much rather be doing something socially significant.’

‘What sort of thing would you consider socially significant?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘It is my intention to set up a lesbian mothers unit,’ said Ms Jones.

‘You don’t consider working with the elderly to be socially significant?’

‘No, of course not,’ answered Ms Jones. ‘The elderly haven’t been oppressed for countless generations.’

‘It’s people like you who’ve turned us into the ignored majority,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Just because our oppression is relatively new doesn’t excuse it.’

‘I have no interest in the elderly,’ said Ms Jones.

‘That’s a very ageist remark,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘I’m surprised the council approves of your attitude.’

‘Let’s get on with it, shall we?’ said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor.

‘We have some confidential enquiries to make,’ sniffed Ms Jones BA. ‘We will need to talk to your staff and to your clients.’ She looked at Mrs Caldicot contemptuously. ‘You can go now,’ she said. ‘We will let you know when we need you.’

‘I’ll just tell my residents that you will be wandering about asking questions,’ said Mrs Caldicot, walking ahead of them. ‘I don’t want any of them being upset.’ She opened the lounge door and entered, closely followed by Mr Muller-Hawksmoor and Ms Jones BA. The lounge was empty. Utterly deserted.

‘Ah,’ said Muller-Hawksmoor, walking across the room and stopping in front of a bookcase on top of which stood the vase which Miss Nightingale had found in the kitchen. ‘I’m pleased to see that you’ve still got my old vase on display.’

Mrs Caldicot looked at the vase he was examining. ‘Oh yes,’ she said. ‘One of our residents found it in a kitchen cupboard.’

‘I always rather liked that vase,’ said Muller-Hawksmoor.

‘I hope you haven’t mislaid your guests,’ sneered Ms Jones BA, who had little time for idle chitter chatter. ‘We usually expect proprietors of care establishments within our jurisdiction to have some idea of the whereabouts of their people.’

‘I haven’t mislaid them,’ said Mrs Caldicot, frostily. ‘And they’re not `my people’. It’s a nice day so perhaps they are outside, in the garden.’ She opened the door to the kitchen and poked her head inside. Mrs Roberts was still on her knees, doing unspeakable things to the drains.

‘Who is it?’ whispered Mrs Roberts.

‘Inspectors from the council,’ replied Mrs Caldicot. ‘They want to speak to everyone.’ She paused, and lowered her voice still more. ‘One of the inspectors is Muller-Hawksmoor!’

Mrs Roberts knew far more than she wanted to know about Muller-Hawksmoor. Her dropped jaw was, however, far more eloquent than any words would have been. She would have been more cheerful about this invasion if Mrs Caldicot had told her that they were being inspected by a troupe of hungry cannibals looking for something to cook. ‘That’s crazy!’ she said at last.

‘It’s like putting Herod in charge of the maternity ward!’ whispered Mrs Caldicot. ‘Do you know where everyone is?’

‘I think they’re all out in the garden, helping Mr Roxdale,’ replied Mrs Roberts. ‘Mr Williams had some more spades and forks delivered so that they’d have one each.’

‘Then let’s take the Gestapo outside,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Let’s hope Mr Williams has got enough extra spades for them to help too.’

Chapter 31

Out in the garden Mr Roxdale and his small army of helpers were digging up the remains of the lawn with surprising speed. The lawn looked as though a very large, incompetent golfer had been practising.

'This is the best fun I've ever had,' said Miss Nightingale, stabbing her spade into the ground and, after a struggle, managing to dig out a small divot.

'This is the best fun I've ever had,' said Mrs Peterborough, whose habit of repeating things had not diminished with time. Trying to copy Miss Nightingale she thrust her spade into the ground and then wrestled with it in a vain attempt to dig out a piece of turf. She managed to produce a tiny divot that a baby rabbit might have been proud of. It was clear that, despite their enthusiasm, if Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough were to take leading roles in converting the lawn into a productive garden the task would probably outlive them all.

'I'm sorry to bother you all,' said Mrs Caldicot, speaking loudly to attract their attention. 'But we are being inspected by two representatives of the local council. This is not something over which I have any authority. The council's representatives tell me that they have the authority to question us all,' she said, 'and I understand that they may want to ask you all questions.' She turned her head and waved a hand to indicate the two visitors who were standing behind her. 'Some of you may remember Mr Muller-Hawksmoor,' she said. 'He was formerly proprietor of the Twilight Years Rest Home but is now an employee of the local council.'

There was much muttering at the announcement of the name Muller-Hawksmoor.

'Can't stand the man. Nasty piece of work,' said Mr Livingstone, glowering in Muller-Hawksmoor's direction. 'I always thought he was a socialist.'

'He's a socialist, is he?' said Mr Hewitt. 'Ha! That explains a lot. I always wondered about him.'

'Who is this fellow?' Mr Roxdale asked Mr Hewitt.

'He's the most obnoxious, cruel, horrid, wicked, heartless...' Mr Hewitt began to ran dry.

'Disreputable, crooked, mean...' continued Mr Livingstone, helping him out.

'Put him top of your hate list,' Mr Hewitt told Mr Roxdale.

'No room at the moment I'm afraid,' said Mr Roxdale. 'I try to limit myself to being annoyed by about 100 things at a time. I find that I can't cope with more than that.'

'He's worth a spot right near the top,' Mr Hewitt assured him.

'OK,' said Mr Roxdale, generously. 'But he'll have to jump the queue. I already have a fairly long waiting list of things to get cross about.'

'Mrs Caldicot and this fellow had a terrible row,' Mr Hewitt said. 'They loathe each other.'

'In that case I think he can jump the waiting list and go straight into the top five,' said Mr Roxdale.

'If he comes near me I'll brain him with my spade,' added Mr Livingstone.

'Don't be silly,' said Mrs Caldicot, who had overheard and who was slightly worried that things might get out of hand. 'You mustn't do that.' She tried to make her disapproval sound convincing, though this wasn't easy.

'No, don't do that,' said Mr Roxdale, stopping digging and placing a restraining hand on Mr Livingstone's hand. 'These spades have good edges. If you use one to brain a council employee you'll probably wreck the cutting edge,' he explained. 'Council employees all have rocks inside their skulls,' he added. Mr Roxdale had had enough experience of council workers to know that he did not like them.

'I rang the council once,' said Miss Nightingale. 'I was surprised to discover that it is a very civilised place. Did you know that they have a man there who has a piano in his office and just sits and plays the piano all day long?'

Everyone looked at her.

'What makes you say that, Miss Nightingale?' asked Mr Livingstone, not wishing to display the mild scepticism which he felt but hoping that a single question might clear up the confusion.

'A very busy lady told me to hold on and then she put me through to someone who was playing the piano,' said Miss Nightingale. 'He - and I don't know why but I've always assumed it was a 'he', possibly because of the rather enthusiastic way he threw himself at the keys - didn't say anything at all but just rattled along obviously enjoying himself very much. I like piano music so I didn't mind. It was something by Mozart I think. I listened to him for twenty minutes or so, said 'thank you' very quietly, so as not to disturb him, and put the telephone receiver down. I had by then completely forgotten why I had telephoned in the first place.' She stopped and thought for a moment. 'Of course,' she said, 'If you had an urgent enquiry you might not be so pleased to know that council employees were enjoying themselves playing the piano, rather than getting on with collecting rubbish and replacing burnt out street lamps.'

'I'll have you know that I'm not just a council employee. I'm also a qualified social worker,' cried Ms Jones BA, worried that things were getting away from her and interrupting Miss Nightingale's account of her personal interface with the council.

'Do you have a piano?' Miss Nightingale asked her.

'I have a BA,' shouted Ms Jones BA. 'I most certainly do not have a piano.'

'Never mind, dear,' said Miss Nightingale. 'Perhaps when you get promoted and become a little more senior.'

Miss Nightingale glowered. 'I am a fully qualified social worker,' she shouted. 'I have a BA.'

Mr Roxdale liked social workers even less than he liked council workers. 'I don't care if you're Ms Jones LUFTHANSA, QUANTAS and AIR LINGUS, love,' he told her. 'As far as I'm concerned you're still just a bloody social worker.'

Ms Jones BA might have been (just) able to cope with the fact that her degree (with an added diploma in social history - which she, naturally, preferred to describe as social hertory) did not immediately win her the respect which she regarded as her right, and she might (just) have been able to cope with being called 'love'. But both at once was just too much for her. She opened her mouth and tried to say something but failed. There was simply too much indignation crowding her brain for the words that wanted to get out to get sorted into any sort of order, let alone passed on down the relevant pathways for vocalisation to take place. She made some dry, guttural sounds but that was all.

'Oooh,' said Miss Nightingale, looking up from her endeavours with the spade, spotting that the other visitor had oozed closer and pulling a face. 'It's Mr Fuller-Mawkhoor. Boo hiss.'

'Boo hiss,' said Mrs Peterborough, not bothering to look up, but merely following her good friend's example. 'It's Mr Huller-Hawkhoor. Boo hiss.'

'We need to know all your identities,' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, struggling to ignore these votes of no confidence and trying hard to retain his composure and sense of authority. He was not concerned by the fact that he did not seem to be universally popular among the residents (universal popularity had never been his ambition) but he was a vain and self-important man and he did not like having his authority undermined. `Ms Jones BA and I will come among you with our clip boards so that you can answer our questions.'

Chapter 32

Mr Muller-Hawksmoor and Ms Jones BA were not getting on very well.

They had, perhaps, made a mistake in starting their search for information by questioning Mr Roxdale.

'What's your name?' Ms Jones BA had demanded, pen poised over her clipboard.

'Naff off,' replied Mr Roxdale. 'Why should I tell you anything?'

'I am an accredited representative of the local council,' replied Ms Jones.

'Well tell the council they can all naff off,' said Mr Roxdale. 'I wrote to them twice about the trees they were chopping down in Sittercombe Park. Old oaks they were. Beautiful trees. Chopping them down for car parking. I wrote twice but didn't get back a single reply. They don't take any notice of me so why I should take any notice of them?'

'You have to reply to my questions,' said Ms Jones BA. 'These are official forms.' She tapped her clipboard with the top of her pen.

'How many forms have you got there?' asked Mr Roxdale. He looked at her clipboard. 'There's only one form. But there are three copies of it. Why on earth do you need to have your forms in triplicate?' he demanded. 'It's a waste of good trees.'

If she had been an honest woman Ms Jones would have replied that she and her fellow employees always took three copies because their filing system was so poor that they usually lost one copy within hours and a second within days. Having three copies meant that there was a slightly better than evens chance that they would still have a copy in a month's time.'

'We've dramatically improved our procedures this year,' replied Ms Jones. 'We used to have five copies of every form.'

'Well I'm not interested in filling in any of your damned silly forms,' said Mr Roxdale.

'You are obliged by law to assist me in my enquiries,' lied Ms Jones.

'Calamity Brown,' said Mr Roxdale, instantly.

Ms Jones stared at him. The name seemed vaguely familiar but she didn't know why. Ms Jones' BA had been acquired in the study of something called 'Social Administrative Studies', an academic discipline which was built upon the asking of questions rather than the providing of solutions, and no amount of stretching of the imagination could allow anyone to describe her as being either well or widely educated.

Mr Roxdale repeated the name. Ms Jones asked him how to spell it and then, reluctantly, (for she was not entirely convinced that Mr Roxdale was telling her the truth) carefully wrote the name down on the top form on her clipboard. She wrote slowly and deliberately, somehow managing to put her free hand around what she was writing to prevent anyone else from copying, and sticking out her tongue as she wrote.

'How long have you been living here, Calamity?'

'I don't know,' said Mr Roxdale, with a sigh. 'I suffer from intermittent Alzheimer's Disease. Sometimes I can remember things. But other times I can't remember why I got up. What's your Christian name?'

'I don't think that's any of your business,' snapped Ms Jones.

'In that case please address me as Mr Brown if you speak to me again,' said Mr Roxdale.

Ms Jones glowered at him, wrote something on her clipboard, and turned to Miss Nightingale. 'Name?' she demanded gruffly.

'Gertrude Jekyll,' replied Miss Nightingale, without any hesitation.

'Gertrude Jekyll,' said Mrs Peterborough, without waiting to be asked. As usual Mrs Peterborough was standing next to her friend Miss Nightingale.

'I'll come to you in a minute,' snapped Ms Jones BA.

'I'll come to you in a minute,' Mrs Peterborough snapped back.

'Her real name is Mrs Peterborough,' said Miss Nightingale, not wanting her friend to get into trouble. 'She sometimes just says what other people say but she never means any harm.'

'Her real name is Mrs Peterborough,' said Mrs Peterborough solely because her friend Miss Nightingale had said it. 'She sometimes just says what other people say but she never means any harm.'

Ms Jones glowered again and looked across at her colleague, Mr Muller-Hawksmoor.

'It seems to me that this person is mentally impaired,' she said. 'I think we should arrange for her to be moved to more suitable accommodation.'

'Oh yes, I remember this one,' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, glowering at Mrs Peterborough. 'As nutty as a pound of peanut brittle. I'll get the official psychiatrist to come round and make the necessary arrangements.'

‘You’re not moving her anywhere,’ insisted Miss Nightingale. ‘She stays with me.’

‘She needs proper care,’ insisted Ms Jones BA.

‘She gets all the care she needs here,’ said Miss Nightingale. ‘She’ll become confused if you make her go somewhere else.’

‘I think we’ll leave that to the psychiatrist, shall we?’ said Ms Jones. ‘Now, how old are you Miss Jekyll?’

‘I’m 79-years-old,’ said Miss Nightingale who wasn’t but who now followed Mrs Torridge’s example and always lied about her age as a matter of principle.

Ms Jones BA wrote this down on the form attached to her clipboard, making sure that the entry appeared on the copies beneath it.

‘Today,’ said Miss Nightingale. ‘It’s my birthday.’

‘Congratulations,’ said Ms Jones BA.

‘What for?’ demanded Miss Nightingale. ‘I found getting old remarkably easy. It took virtually no skill at all.’ She held her head to one side and looked at Ms Jones. ‘Even you will probably be able to do it,’ she suggested.

‘I am neither amused nor impressed by any of this,’ said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, who had clearly had enough. ‘Ms Jones BA and I will return shortly to continue our investigations.’ He turned to Mrs Caldicot. `When we return we will expect you to have a full list of your residents - containing names, former addresses and dates of birth. Meanwhile, what sort of exercise programme do you run for your residents?’

Mrs Caldicot stared at him as though not sure that she’d heard properly.

‘Low Impact Aerobics? Non-Competitive Athletics? Late 18th Century Polish Folk Dance? Martial arts and self-defence?’

‘I...er...we don’t...er...actually...er...have a formal exercise programme,’ Mrs Caldicot stuttered.

Mr Muller-Hawksmoor tutted and shook his head. Ms Jones BA, who regarded herself as something of an individualist and liked to plough her own furrow, shook her head and tutted.

Mr Muller-Hawksmoor fiddled with his clipboard and slid a piece of paper from the back. He handed the sheet to Mrs Caldicot. ‘On this sheet you will find a list of fully approved and accredited trainers,’ he told her. ‘You are quite at liberty to select the discipline of your choice but you must select one of these disciplines and accredited trainers immediately and within five days of this formal notification you must offer your resident clients an approved exercise programme. If you select a discipline and trainer now we will arrange for your classes to start.’

Mrs Caldicot looked down the list which she had been handed. ‘Oh dear,’ she said. ‘I really don’t know.’ She showed the list to the small crowd which had gathered around her. There was much shaking of heads.

‘Do I have to pick one?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘You do.’

‘Then we’ll have this one,’ said Mrs Caldicot, blinding stabbing a finger at the sheet and thrusting both sheet and attached finger under Mr Muller-Hawksmoor’s nose.

‘Martial arts and self-defence,’ said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. ‘With Dirk.’ He looked at her, then at the seemingly frail group standing around her and frowned. ‘Are you sure? That is a Grade IV Class.’

‘Oh yes, thank you,’ said Mrs Caldicot, now thoroughly flustered and confused. ‘We’ll definitely have the Martial Dirk and Self with Arts and Defence.’ She had acquired the habit of becoming particularly firm and committed whenever she was flustered and confused.

‘Sign here,’ said Muller-Hawksmoor, thrusting his clipboard underneath Mrs Caldicot’s nose.

Mrs Caldicot signed there.

Mr Muller-Hawksmoor and Ms Jones BA exchanged meaningful glances but neither spoke until a few minutes later when they were fastening their seat belts in Ms Jones’s second hand Ford Fiasco GTX.

‘I’d like to see that lot of sad old crumblies struggle to cope with one of Dirk’s classes,’ sniggered Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. `We’d better have a couple of ambulances on stand-by for his first class.’

‘Well, it’s all that silly woman Caldicot’s responsibility,’ said Ms Jones BA. ‘We’ve got her signature on form ETY 292.’ She turned, gave Mr Muller-Hawksmoor something that she thought was a smile and then put the Fiasco GTX into a gear. Unfortunately, the gear was not a particularly suitable one and Mr Muller-Hawksmoor had to grip the dashboard as the car jumped and hopped down the drive and onto the road. He managed to snatch a glance at his watch. ‘On the way back to the office would you like to pop into the pub, Ms Jones?’ he asked. ‘I’m told that they do a very nice ploughperson’s lunch at the Black Ferret.’

‘I would like that very much, Mr Muller-Hawksmoor,’ said Ms Jones BA. She swerved to avoid a pothole and bounced off the kerb. Driving was not her strong point. ‘I would just like to say that I was extremely distressed by the way the residents of that home treated you.’

‘Oh it was just their little way of having fun, I suppose,’ murmured Mr Muller-Hawksmoor weakly.

‘It wasn’t right, it wasn’t good enough and it wasn’t acceptable,’ said Ms Jones BA firmly. ‘I think we should keep a very close eye on that establishment.' She braked hard to avoid a parked car which had suddenly appeared directly in front of her.

Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, who now had one hand gripping the dashboard and the other clutching his seatbelt, smiled and sat back. He felt almost happy.

Back at the home, Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts had watched them disappear.

'It's not fair,' said Mrs Roberts.

'Of course it isn't, dear,' agreed Mrs Caldicot.

'It's not supposed to be like this,' said Mrs Roberts.

'It's not supposed to be like anything,' said Mrs Caldicot, now far older and wiser than she'd ever wanted to be, putting an arm around the younger woman's shoulders and giving her a hug.

Mr Roxdale appeared by their side. 'Let's go and feed the birds,' he said.

Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts both looked at him.

'I've got some rice and sunflower seeds in my pocket,' he whispered.

He slowly set off for a quiet corner of the garden and they followed him.

A few minutes later the three of them were standing underneath a large chestnut tree feeding grains of rice and sunflower seeds to a motley crew of assorted birds.

'Forget the idiots from the council,' advised Mr Roxdale softly. 'This is what life is all about.' He paused for a moment, crouched down and allowed a robin to jump onto the palm of his hand. Calm, unflustered, and seemingly fearless the robin took the rice grains that were offered and ate them. Then he looked around before flying off.

'Feeding the birds is the nearest you and I can ever get to being God,' said Mr Roxdale.

'Closer than sowing seeds and watching them grow?' asked Mrs Roberts.

'Oh yes,' said Mr Roxdale. 'When I sow seeds I'm just acting as a labourer for God. It's his garden. His skill that brings the rain and the sunshine. But when I feed the birds I'm giving them something they maybe need to live; something they perhaps can't get anywhere else. Those few grains of rice I scatter may mean the difference between life and death. For a few moments I'm a God in their world.'

Both Mrs Roberts and Mrs Caldicot knew what he meant.

Temporarily, at least, the two busy bodies from the council, now plotting away in the snug at the Black Ferret public house with two halves of lager shandy, two slices of processed cheese, four slices of white bread and two small, slightly bruised tomatoes in front of them, seemed very insignificant indeed.

Chapter 33

A tall, arrogant and bored looking young man wearing a black martial arts costume stood in the bay window of the lounge. He'd had all the furniture moved to the sides of the room so that there was a large, clear space in the middle. He had an olive complexion and jet black hair tied in a long ponytail. He wore no shoes or socks and when Mrs Peterborough had drawn attention to this fact, wondering aloud whether they should club together to help him buy a pair of shoes and a pair of socks, Miss Nightingale took the opportunity to point out to her friend that the sockless visitor's feet weren't quite as clean as they might have been. 'You'd have thought he would have had a good bath, wouldn't you?' she whispered. 'He may not be able to afford shoes but it doesn't cost much to keep your feet clean.' Unfortunately, Miss Nightingale wasn't getting any younger and her hearing wasn't getting any sharper. Her idea of a whisper was most people's idea of a full-throated bellow. 'His feet are filthy,' she added.

Mrs Peterborough repeated her friend's rhetorical question and simple observation, also pretty much at full volume.

The young man with the ponytail, Dirk, looked up and glared. Most people who knew him were afraid of his glare and he was accustomed to seeing people wither when they received one of his cold stares. But Miss Nightingale was no witherer and anyway she was staring at Dirk's feet rather his face. Not even Dirk had managed to master the art of making his slightly grubby feet look menacing.

'A good scrubbing,' said Miss Nightingale, in another of her whispers. 'That's what he needs.'

Mrs Peterborough repeated this, for the unintentional benefit and amusement of those members of the audience who hadn't had heard it the first time. Even Mrs Caldicot sometimes found this curious facility of use. If she ever missed something said by Miss Nightingale all she had to do was wait for the instant repeat from Mrs Peterborough.

'This is supposed to be an advanced Grade IV class,' began Dirk. 'How many of you have martial arts experience?'

There was a long silence.

'The former Mrs Livingstone and I were going to watch a Bruce Lee movie once,' said Mr Livingstone. 'But I couldn't find anywhere to park and so we went for a curry instead.'

'Have any of you studied karate?' asked Dirk, rather exasperated.

'I got as far as Calcutta in the war,' said Mr Roxdale. 'But I don't think we ever went to Karachi.' He stopped and scratched his nose. 'Was there anywhere called Karachi then?' He looked around. No one had the foggiest idea what he was talking about. 'They keep changing the names of places,' he explained.

'If there was no such place as Karachi then where did all the people who live there now think they were living?' asked Mr Livingstone. 'They can't have just been sitting around waiting for someone to give their town a name.'

'Oh they probably could,' said Mr Roxdale. 'If their council was anything like ours.'

'That's true,' agreed Mr Livingstone.

Dirk raised his voice. 'Has anyone studied self-defence?' he demanded. He was losing his temper and he knew that he shouldn't. His hands and feet were trained to kill. He made a powerful effort to remain calm.

Everyone stared at him. No one said anything. The silence was deafening. Mrs Caldicot, who was standing near the door leant towards Mrs Roberts, who was standing next to her. 'I'm beginning to feel sorry for him,' she said. 'I expect he thinks he's good looking.'

'Too young, too good looking and too full of himself for me,' said Mrs Roberts. 'His sort run off and break your heart. I prefer the more mature man myself.'

'He thinks he can do what he likes with our lot,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I really ought to tell him not to be so cocky.'

'He's no match for them,' agreed Mrs Roberts.

'It'll end in tears,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'You mark my words.'

Dirk, who had not heard any of this exchange, sighed wearily. He only ran these classes to try to raise the money to go to Japan to study under the great masters. He wondered if any of them had ever had to go through this sort of humiliation. He was bored.

'Then I'll assume no one knows anything and we'll start from the beginning,' he said. He looked around to see if anyone objected to this. No one did. Either everyone thought that starting at the beginning was a wise move or else no one gave a damn where he started.

'The secret of self-defence is to think quickly, to act decisively and to use whatever weapons are to hand,' he said. 'When it comes to self-defence there are no rules - you are allowed to use reasonable force to protect yourself and your property. Never forget that your primary objective is merely to stop your assailant doing you harm.'

'I don't know how he can stand there without any socks on,' Mr Roxdale said to Mr Williams. 'My feet would be cold.’

‘Mine too,’ agreed Mr Williams. ‘I feel the cold a lot these days.’ The two men looked at one another. Both were wearing thick worsted suits, woollen shirts, knitted waistcoats and ties.

‘Do you remember when we were young laughing at the old men who always used to wear knitted waistcoats, and thick jackets even when it was boiling hot?’ Mr Roxdale asked Mr Williams.

‘Of course,’ said Mr Williams. He leant back against a large cupboard and a vase on top of the cupboard toppled forward. Dirk, spotting the falling object, leapt forwards and caught the vase neatly.

‘That was very impressive,’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘He’s certainly got good reactions.’

‘Damned him,’ muttered Mrs Caldicot. ‘I hate that vase. I wish it had smashed.’

‘Well, look at us. We’ve become those old men,’ said Mr Roxdale.

‘Do you mind?’ asked Mr Williams.

Mr Roxdale thought about this for a while. ‘No. At least I now know that I won’t die at 17 in a motorbike accident. I like being old. I know I’ve had my fair share of life. I’m 76 I think. From here on in every day is a bonus. I enjoy every day like I’ve won it in the lottery.’

Dirk was beginning to wish he’d stayed in bed. His girlfriend hadn’t wanted him to go. She’s asked him to ring the council and tell them he was ill. But he didn’t think that saying he was ill was a very good idea for someone who was supposed to be young, healthy and super-fit. ‘I need a volunteer,’ he said.

‘I think it’s time we’d toddled off,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘I can see what’s coming and I don’t think I can bear to watch. He seems quite a nice boy in a simple sort of way and I don’t want to see what is going to happen.’ She and Mrs Roberts oozed away quietly.

‘I’m not volunteering for anything,’ said Miss Nightingale. She paused and added. ‘I don’t like the look of those feet.’

‘I won’t hurt anyone,’ Dirk assured them all, in quiet desperation. ‘I just need someone to volunteer so that I can demonstrate what I’m talking about.’ He’d never had trouble like this before. He had taught teenagers at the roughest school in town and things hadn’t been this bad. The PE teachers had asked him to let two of them stay in the gym in case things turned nasty. But he’d turned the offer down. The kids had been like putty. He’d shown them how to take a knife away from someone and they’d followed his every move with eyes eager for learning. Students who never listened when being taught history or maths had given him their whole attention. He’d taught policemen and young mothers too; his classes had always gone down well.

‘Why didn’t he bring his own volunteer?’ asked Mr Livingstone of no one in particular. ‘He’s getting paid for this isn’t he?’ ‘I’ll volunteer,’ said Maple Merivale, unexpectedly rescuing Dirk from the embarrassment of having to demonstrate his deathly skills on an embroidered cushion.

‘Right. Splendid,’ said Dirk, immensely relieved. ‘I’m going to mug you and I want you to stop me. Remember: you do whatever you can to try to protect yourself. I will then show you where you’ve gone wrong and how you should do it.’

‘Why did you do that?’ asked Mrs Merivale’s startled husband.

‘Because I felt sorry for him,’ Mrs Merivale replied. She had not heard anything he’d said. ‘He looked so sad.’

‘Come here then please, dear,’ said Dirk. This immediately annoyed Mr Merivale who did not like to hear his wife ordered about. He had, in any case, already taken a strong dislike to Dirk, whom he regarded as a jumped up little twerp. He was an ex-army man who had spent much of the Second World War crouching in soggy bits of jungle being hunted by Japanese soldiers. In addition, he did not have much affection for men who wore ponytails.

Gingerly, Mrs Merivale stepped forwards until she was standing right in the middle of the room. Dirk stepped forward too, so that they were standing just a couple of feet apart.

‘Now. Imagine that I’m a mugger,’ he told her.

Mrs Merivale stared at him but did not move. She was, to be honest, rather confused. She had thought they were having a class in flower arranging.

‘Give me your purse!’ said the instructor, advancing upon Mrs Merivale with his arm upraised, as though he was holding a knife. He paused, and waited, hoping that Mrs Merivale would make a lunge at him. His teaching programme could not go forward until she made a move.

‘No!’ said the old woman, most indignantly. She was now feeling rather aggrieved. For one thing, she did not understand how the lecturer in flower arranging thought he could get away with stealing her purse in front of all her friends. For another thing, her purse was in their bedroom on the first floor.

Mr Roxdale awoke suddenly from a pleasant doze in which he had dreamt of a field of sunflowers. ‘What’s happening?’ he asked Mr Williams.

‘Dunno,’ said Mr Williams, who wasn’t wearing his spectacles and couldn’t see much of anything without them. He turned to Mr Merivale, who was standing next to him. ‘What’s happening?’

‘The sissy bloke with the ponytail seems to have gone stark raving bonkers.’ explained Mr Merivale, rather excited. ‘I think he’s got a knife. He’s trying to mug my wife! He wants her purse.’ ‘Oh I say,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘We can’t have that, can we?’ He stood up. ‘I must say I’m surprised that Mrs Caldicot let him in,’ he said. He made a fist and stuck out his chin, ready to defend his friend’s wife.

‘Oh no, it’s all right,’ said Mr Merivale. ‘She’s sorted him out.’

‘Good for her!’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘Great stuff.’

‘No one messes with my wife,’ said Mr Merivale proudly.

Chapter 34

Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts were in the office, having a nice cup of tea and working their way through a new packet of Garibaldi biscuits when they heard a commotion in the lounge. There was a yell, a crash, a scream, another crash and then, in the comparative silence that followed, the sound of someone crying.

'Did you hear that?' asked Mrs Roberts.

'I did,' admitted Mrs Caldicot. She took another biscuit out of the packet and slipped it, whole, into her mouth.

'I hope they haven't hurt him too badly.'

'We'd better go and have a look,' said Mrs Caldicot.

They found Dirk in the middle of the lounge. He was kneeling on the floor, holding his groin with his left hand and his head with his right hand. He was as pale as snow and clearly in pain. 'Oh dear,' said Mrs Caldicot, stooping down beside him. 'Are you all right, love?'

'No!' complained Dirk, in between sobs. 'They attacked me.'

'Who did?'

'I don't know,' confessed Dirk, miserably. 'It was all over too quickly. It wasn't fair.'

The class stood around Dirk and there was clearly little sympathy for the wounded young man.

'What happened?' asked Mrs Caldicot sternly.

'He tried to mug my wife,' said Mr Merivale.

'I think he had some sort of fit,' explained Mr Roxdale. 'We had to subdue him.'

'It was only a demonstration!' sobbed Dirk. 'I wasn't going to hurt her. I was only pretending.'

'You had a knife!' said Mr Williams. 'And it looked very realistic to me.'

'I only pretended to have a pretend knife,' protested Dirk. He started to sob again. Most of the residents, feeling embarrassed, looked away. Mr Roxdale took out his penknife and started to carve at his fingernails.

'The police shoot people who have pretend guns,' Mr Williams pointed out.

'But I didn't even have a pretend knife,' insisted Dirk, tears rolling down his cheeks. 'It was only an imaginary knife.'

'Well I do think that if you're going to have a pretend knife it should be a real pretend knife,' said Mr Roxdale. 'An imaginary pretend knife is a bit confusing. At least, with a pretend knife we might have had an opportunity to realise that it was a fake.'

'What happened?' asked Mrs Caldicot, with a sigh.

'I kicked him in the goalmouth,' said Mrs Merivale. 'I think that's what it's called.'

'I think you probably mean you kicked him in the goolies,' Mrs Caldicot corrected her.

'I hit him on the head with a vase,' said Miss Nightingale. 'I've seen people do that on the television,' she added, rather proudly.

'It was quite satisfying,' said Miss Nightingale. 'Though I'm afraid the vase broke,' she added, looking apologetically at Mrs Caldicot.

'That's all right, Miss Nightingale,' said Mrs Caldicot reassuringly.

'We were going to save her but they were too quick for us,' claimed Mr Roxdale, slightly aggrieved. 'Mr Williams and I. And Mr Merivale.' He pointed at Dirk with a trembling finger. 'He was attacking Mrs Merivale.'

'He told us that if we are attacked we should use whatever we can to protect ourselves,' explained Mr Williams.

'Those quick thinking ladies probably saved his life,' said Mr Merivale. 'I was going to hit him.' He moved his arm back but the years had not been kind to him and the joint was stiff. It took him a long time to move his fist just a few inches. He would, in truth, have had difficulty in hitting a statue. 'It's an old jousting injury,' explained Mrs Merivale to Mr Roxdale. Mr Roxdale thought this odd but Mrs Merivale was being quite accurate.

'I think I'm dying,' complained Dirk, still pale and still on his hands and knees. 'They've killed me. Call the council, a lawyer, the police, and an ambulance.' Mrs Caldicot bent down and examined his skull. She bent further, as though to examine the other injured area. Dirk pushed her hand away and glowered at her.

'Not too bad, then,' said Mrs Caldicot. She stood up. 'I'm glad you're teaching them how to look after themselves so successfully,' she added. She was clearly not terribly impressed with his injuries. She swept past the kneeling man into the lounge and beamed when she saw bits of the vase she hated so much lying on the floor.

'Perhaps we can have it repaired,' said Miss Nightingale, who had trotted along behind her.

Mrs Caldicot looked at the vase, now in several hundred pieces. She thought it looked much better that way. 'Oh, I don't think so,' she said quickly.

'I'll get the dustpan and brush,' said Mrs Roberts.

'What about my ambulance?' demanded Dirk. 'And my lawyer. And the police.' He paused, gently rubbing his head and examining his hand occasionally to check for blood. He looked up, still not quite sure what had happened to him. 'And, whatever else it was I wanted,' he added, rather miserably. He looked around, his gaze settling finally on Mrs Caldicot. 'I'm going to sue you,' he threatened.

'Oh I don't think that would be a terribly good idea,' said Mrs Caldicot. She turned to Mrs Roberts. 'Can you imagine the headlines, Mrs Roberts?'

'Martial Arts Expert Flattened By Old Lady,' said Mrs Roberts instantly. She wrote the words in the air with a forefinger.

'Dirk Crushed By Pensioner,' suggested Mrs Caldicot.

'Frail Octogenarian Fells Karate Kid With One Blow,' offered Mrs Roberts.

'If I were you I'd settle for a cup of tea,' said Mr Roxdale to Dirk.

Dirk held his head and began to cry again. 'I want to go home,' he said. 'I want my mum.'

Mrs Caldicot rang for a taxi and sent him home to his mother. They never saw him again.

Chapter 35

After dinner that evening, Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts were sitting in the kitchen sorting through the thick pile of bills which had accumulated.

‘Shall we sort them by date?’ asked Mrs Roberts.

‘Why?’

‘Then we can pay the oldest ones first.’

‘I suppose that sounds fair,’ agreed Mrs Caldicot. ‘But maybe we should pay the ones who are threatening to take us to court.’

‘Oh no, I don’t think we should let people bully us,’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘Just because we owe them money.’

‘No, you’re absolutely right,’ agreed Mrs Caldicot. She sighed. ‘I once met a woman who had a very sound approach to this business of paying bills. She had a very simple technique.’

‘What was that?’

‘She just didn’t pay any. She said it saved her fortune.’

‘But they send you to prison if you don’t pay your bills.’

‘I know,’ sighed Mrs Caldicot.

‘You realise that you could very easily solve all your financial problems,’ said Mrs Roberts.

Mrs Caldicot looked at her.

‘By letting Mr Williams give you one or two of his photographs,’ explained Mrs Roberts.

‘I know,’ sighed Mrs Caldicot. ‘It is very tempting,’ she admitted. ‘But I can’t. It isn’t fair.’

‘Mr Williams doesn’t mind,’ Mrs Roberts pointed out. ‘He’ll be happy to give you a handful of photographs. It wouldn’t cost him anything at all and it would solve all our problems.’

‘But it wouldn’t be right,’ insisted Mrs Caldicot. ‘Taking photographs from Mr Williams would be like taking charity.’

‘Lots of homes in our sort of position are charities!’ Mrs Roberts pointed out.

‘I know,’ agreed Mrs Caldicot, with yet another sigh. She found it difficult to explain to Mrs Roberts or, indeed, to herself. ‘You’re absolutely right. But I can’t avoid the thought that to let him solve all our financial problems would be sort of cheating. We wouldn’t have solved anything permanently.’

‘Nothing is permanent,’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘And a fistful of Mr Williams’ photographs would be as damned near a permanent solution to our financial problems as we’re likely to get.’

‘But we wouldn’t be doing it ourselves,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘When we first opened this place I felt really proud. It was the first time in my life that I’d ever done anything by myself. Mr Caldicot always used to tell me that I couldn’t do anything - except perhaps help out in the local charity shop - and I believed him.’

‘Then at least give yourself a chance by charging proper fees,’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘I don’t think anyone staying here pays proper residential home fees. For example, how much do Mr and Mrs Merivale pay?’

Mrs Caldicot looked at her but didn’t say anything.

‘Come on, how much?’ insisted Mrs Roberts.

‘Mrs Merivale gave me £5 when they arrived,’ admitted Mrs Caldicot sheepishly.

‘For the two of them?’

Mrs Caldicot nodded.

Mrs Roberts smiled and shook her head.

‘But they’re helping out in the kitchen,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘And without Mrs Merivale we’d have to hire a cook.’

There was a loud crash from the hall outside.

‘What on earth was that?’ asked Mrs Roberts.

Mrs Caldicot shrugged.

There was another, equally loud crash.

‘I suppose I’d better go and have a look,’ said Mrs Caldicot. She got up, walked across the room and opened the door to the hallway. Miss Nightingale had a swede in her left hand and was clearly preparing to roll it at something. Mrs Caldicot looked down the hall. A row of seven large, gnarled carrots were standing like skittles just inside the front door. Two carrots were lying on the mat. The carrots had all had their bottoms chopped off neatly so that they would stand up. Mr Roxdale seemed to be in charge of replacing fallen skittles.

‘What on earth are you doing?’ demanded Mrs Caldicot.

‘We’re playing skittles,’ answered Miss Nightingale, as though surprised that Mrs Caldicot needed to ask. `I have to roll this swede down the hallway and knock over as many carrots as I can. We have three goes each. And then it’s someone else's turn.'

'Ah,' said Mrs Caldicot. She suddenly noticed that Mr Williams was standing facing the wall. He looked like a naughty schoolboy being punished.

'Hello, Mr Williams!' she said. 'It's good to see you up and about. How are you feeling?'

'Very well, thank you, Mrs Caldicot,' replied the photographer.

'Is everything...er...all right?' she asked him. 'Are you joining in...not finding everything too boisterous?'

'No, no, everything is fine,' Mr Williams reassured her. 'I was just admiring your wallpaper.'

'I'm afraid it's rather old,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Very old,' agreed Mr Williams. 'But very lovely. So are the curtains and, indeed, the furniture.'

'I like them very much, though I suspect that they're not everyone's cup of tea,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'The whole place needs redecorating. And we need some new furniture.' She shrugged. 'But that will all have to wait.' She looked around and then lowered her voice. 'And I have to admit that I do like this old stuff,' she confessed.

'I think you should leave it all alone,' said Mr Williams. 'I think the place is beautiful. In fact, I've never seen anywhere quite so beautiful in my life. Promise me you won't have any of these things changed?'

Mrs Caldicot promised, smiled at him and headed back down the corridor towards her office. Once inside she closed the door and went back to the chair behind her desk. Outside in the hall there was a thud.

'What are they doing?' asked Mrs Roberts.

'They're rolling a swede along the carpet and trying to knock down some carrots,' replied Mrs Caldicot.

'Oh,' said Mrs Roberts. 'Well, I suppose it keeps them out of mischief.'

'What exactly would you describe as mischief?' Mrs Caldicot asked her.

Mrs Roberts thought for a moment and then shrugged.

There was another crash.

'Do you find these bills as boring as I do?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'I do.'

'The game they were playing looked quite good fun,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'This finance stuff is unspeakably dull,' said Mrs Roberts.

'I hate it,' agreed Mrs Caldicot.

There was another dull thud, then a crash, followed by whoops of joy.

'It does sound very good fun.' said Mrs Roberts.

'Come on, then,' said Mrs Caldicot. They got up and walked over to the door. Mrs Roberts opened it.

'Can you squeeze in another two players?' Mrs Caldicot asked.

The response was a huge cheer.

Chapter 36

It was raining again. The heavens seemed to have decided that they had surplus rain which they were anxious to get rid of before it passed its sell by date. The cast iron drainpipes and gutters at the Twilight Years Rest Home were gurgling greedily and the puddles in the front drive were filling up nicely.

At 7.30 p.m. sharp that evening a car splashed through the puddles and stopped at the bottom of the steps up to the front door. The driver adjusted the position of his car to make sure that his passenger would be able to enter the vehicle without getting too wet, then jumped out and bounded up the steps.

Mrs Roberts answered the door and smiled when she saw who it was. Jenkins had, she knew, called to take Mrs Caldicot out to dinner and the theatre.

'Hello, Jenkins,' she greeted him. 'Mrs Caldicot won't be a moment.'

Mrs Roberts liked Jenkins and very much approved of Mrs Caldicot's blooming romance. Technically, the two women were employer and employee but in reality they were more like two sisters. There was a more than twenty year age gap between the two women but neither of them was ever conscious of this.

'Would you like a cup of tea while you wait?' Mrs Roberts asked the visitor, closing the front door behind him and shutting out the storm. 'Or a coffee perhaps?' The Twilight Years Rest Home may have been a large building but it was, as always, warm and cosy inside.

Jenkins, who had been about to speak, stopped and dodged out of the way as a pair of rolled up socks bounced off the wall, just missed his head and landed on the carpet.

'Sorry about that!' apologised Mr Roxdale, rushing out of the lounge door, darting down the hall and picking up the ball of rolled up socks. 'Didn't know you were there.' He disappeared as suddenly as he had appeared.

'Cricket?' asked Jenkins, when Mr Roxdale had gone.

'Rounders, I think,' replied Mrs Roberts.

Jenkins looked slightly surprised. 'How long is she going to be?' he asked her.

'Oh not more than a few minutes,' promised Mrs Roberts. 'She was nearly ready when I last saw her.'

'I'm ready now,' said a voice half way down the stairs. Mrs Roberts and Jenkins both turned. For a moment neither of them spoke.

'You look fantastic!' said Jenkins eventually, his voice soft but full of genuine affection and admiration. 'Absolutely fantastic.'

Mrs Caldicot continued her journey down the stairs. She was wearing a tight fitting, low cut scarlet silk dress and had a tiny black cape slung around her shoulders. She was carrying a small black clutch bag. She looked good.

'I think these shoes are a bit high for me,' she confessed, wobbling a little as she stepped down into the hall. Jenkins strode forwards and took her hand. 'But I decided, what the hell, I'd rather fall over trying to look stylish than stomp around safely in a pair of flat heels.'

'And besides, with my bum I'm not likely to hurt myself if I fall down am I?' Mrs Caldicot thought to herself. The late and unlamented Mr Caldicot would have said it and not even noticed her embarrassment, shame and sadness. The very much alive Jenkins would not, she firmly believed, even think such a thing.

'You look absolutely wonderful!' Mrs Roberts told her.

Mrs Caldicot smiled at her gratefully. Suddenly there was a commotion and Mr Roxdale shot out of the lounge, clearly having been pushed out into the hall by unseen hands.

'I'm sorry to bother you,' he said, addressing both Mrs Caldicot and Jenkins. 'But are you going into town?'

'We are,' answered Mrs Caldicot. 'Jenkins is very kindly taking me out to dinner.'

'The thing is,' started Mr Roxdale, clearly rather uncomfortable about what he was about to say, 'I wouldn't ask but it's a bit special, you see.'

'What's special?' asked Mrs Caldicot patiently and kindly.

'Mr Williams just noticed that the local cinema is having a Marx Brothers evening. They're showing both Duck Soup and A Night at the Opera. But it's a one night show - tonight only.'

'And you want to go?' said Mrs Caldicot.

'The problem is, you see, that if we try and get a taxi the first film will be half over by the time we get there. We wondered...'

'If we would take you?'

'Exactly!' said Mr Roxdale. 'We'll make our own way back, of course. There's a taxi rank right outside the cinema so getting back won't be a problem.'

Mrs Caldicot looked at Jenkins and raised an eyebrow.

‘It’s fine by me,’ said Jenkins, with a slight shrug.

Mrs Caldicot took and squeezed Jenkins’s hand before turning back to Mr Roxdale. ‘How many of you are there?’ Mrs Caldicot asked him.

‘Mr Williams, Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale,’ replied Mr Roxdale, hoping that if he spoke quickly it would sound as though there were fewer of them than there were. ‘And me, of course.’

‘That’s four of you!’ said Mrs Caldicot, horrified. ‘We can’t possibly fit you all in.’

‘We’ll cram together in the back seat,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘You won’t even know we’re there,’ he promised. He grinned, unconvincingly.

Mrs Caldicot looked at Jenkins, who said nothing. ‘Get your coats then,’ said Mrs Caldicot with a sigh.

The front door was open and the six of them were all either on the steps or in the porch when a rather red-faced Mrs Merivale, huffing and puffing a little, appeared in the hallway.

‘Mrs Caldicot!’ she called. ‘We’re nearly out of toilet rolls. If by any chance you go past the supermarket would you pick some up, please?’

Chapter 37

‘Do you mind stopping here, for a moment?’ asked Mrs Caldicot, as they approached a supermarket.

Jenkins, surprised, turned his head slightly, and looked at her quizzically.

‘Loo rolls,’ explained Mrs Caldicot. ‘I need to buy some loo rolls.’

‘I’m sure they’ll have a supply at the restaurant,’ said Jenkins. ‘I really don’t think they’ll expect us to bring our own.’

‘Mrs Merivale caught me just as I was coming out,’ explained Mrs Caldicot. ‘We’re apparently running rather low.’ She smiled at him and shrugged as though to say: ‘This really isn’t my fault but what can I do?’

‘Right,’ agreed Jenkins. He slowed, indicated and turned right into the supermarket car park. As he did so he noticed that an old man had built a rough, temporary shelter on the traffic island, using nothing more substantial than a large, old cardboard box over which he had draped several pieces of threadbare and clearly unwanted carpet. The box was almost invisible, half hidden between the bushes with which the local council’s gardening department had chosen to decorate the island. Jenkins tried to get another look at the old man in his rear view mirror but there were too many heads and bodies piled into the back seat of the car for him to see much through the back window.

The rain was now hammering down and the old man had been huddled inside his cardboard box. He looked cold, weary and very, very lonely. No one else seemed to have noticed the cardboard box or the old man and Jenkins found himself wondering whether he had really seen the old man or whether the whole vision had not, perhaps, been nothing more than a mirage.

‘What are we doing?’ demanded a voice from the back seat. Mr Roxdale tried to move forwards so that he could look through the windscreen. Unfortunately, his success in completing this simple manoeuvre was limited by the presence of Mrs Peterborough, perched on his lap. ‘Is this the way to the cinema?’ he asked, looking around.

Mrs Caldicot explained about Mrs Merivale’s request again. ‘I’ll only be a minute,’ she added. ‘At this time of night there will be hardly anyone in there.’ She turned round. ‘Do we need anything else, apart from loo rolls?’

Mrs Peterborough started to recite a list of things she thought Mrs Caldicot should buy. ‘Broccoli, candles, sardines, paper napkins, treacle, plum tomatoes, chocolate covered digestive biscuits...’

‘Forget all that!’ interrupted Mr Roxdale. ‘We’ll be here all night.’ He paused for a moment, clearly reflecting on something Mrs Peterborough had said. ‘Actually, it might be a rather good idea if you would just get the chocolate covered digestive biscuits,’ he said.

Jenkins parked the car just a few yards from the entrance.

‘Shall I come with you?’ he asked.

‘No thanks,’ replied Mrs Caldicot. ‘I’ll only be a moment.’

She picked up her handbag, climbed out of the car and hurried into the supermarket.

‘Did you see a man on that traffic island we just passed?’ asked Jenkins.

None of the others had.

Two minutes later Mrs Caldicot wheeled her trolley up to an empty check-out counter where a bored looking teenager was examining a chip in her nail varnish.

‘I’d be grateful if you could process these for me fairly quickly,’ said Mrs Caldicot, piling twelve double pack toilet rolls and six packets of chocolate digestive biscuits onto the black rubber conveyor belt.

The girl stared at the pile of toilet rolls with undisguised astonishment.

‘I’ve got a large family,’ explained Mrs Caldicot. ‘And we all like curry.’

The girl just stared at her and then started waving the bar code on each pack of toilet rolls in front of the electronic scanner on her till.

A few moments later, pushing a laden trolley and carrying a considerably lighter purse, Mrs Caldicot emerged back into the early evening gloom and the rain. It now seemed pretty clear that the rain had previously only been practising for it was now coming down so hard and so fast that it seemed inconceivable it could continue at this pace for much longer.

Jenkins jumped out of the car, opened the boot and helped Mrs Caldicot stack away her purchases. When she herself was safely stowed beside him in the front passenger seat he fired up the engine, increased the speed of the windscreen wipers and moved gently away from the supermarket.

If Jenkins hadn’t already spotted the old man and his cardboard box it is doubtful if any of them would have ever noticed him now that the rain was even heavier. Jenkins and Mrs Caldicot were both peering through the windscreen, trying to check the road in front of them.

It was Jenkins who again saw the old man, and the youths who had appeared as though from nowhere and who were now surrounding him.

'Look!' he shouted, excitedly. Everyone looked.

'On the traffic island,' Jenkins told them.

The old man was still crouched inside his carpet sheathed cardboard box. But he was no longer alone. A group of marauding youths, who clearly had been and still were drinking, were dancing around the old man's small and temporary encampment. They all had shaved heads and, despite the weather, wore only dirty singlets and jeans. They were laughing and sneering and clearly having great fun kicking the old man's few possessions off the island and into the road. One of them found a plastic bag, filled with bits and pieces of a lonely, itinerant life, and spread the contents of the bag with a single kick. Another climbed up on top of the old man's cardboard box, his fragile home, and started to jump up and down. The box, never strong but now weakened by the heavy and incessant rain, gave way instantly. As the box collapsed the other youths started kicking. When the old man tried to crawl out to safety they deliberately aimed their boots at his head, body and legs. He tried, in vain, to defend himself with his hands and arms.

The six in the car never agreed on the number of youths who were responsible for the attack. Jenkins, Mr Williams and Mrs Caldicot thought there were five. Mr Roxdale felt sure that there were six. Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough were both quite insistent that there were at least fifteen. The old man who was the victim of the attack had absolutely no idea who his attackers were, or how many of them there might have been.

As soon as he saw what was happening Jenkins slowed right down and looked for somewhere to park. There wasn't anywhere suitable and so, after having driven twice around the traffic island, he simply drove up onto the grass and parked with his nearside wheels on the road and his offside wheels, and the bulk of the vehicle, on the island. Followed by the others, and not having the faintest idea what he was going to do, Jenkins leapt out of the car.

The youths were so intent on having their fun with the old man that it wasn't until Jenkins's car was parked on the traffic island that they even noticed its presence. The first youth to notice shouted out to call his mates' attention to the newcomers. They stopped what they were doing and just stared. They were clearly astonished; frozen not by fear but by puzzlement. They considered themselves to be hard men and they were used to seeing people run away from them. When they walked through town in broad daylight it was their experience that everyone - old people, young people, women with prams, men in suits - would all cross the road to get out of their way and avoid confrontation and conflict. When they saw the ages of the people getting out of the car they had hardly been able to believe their eyes.

To everyone's surprise it was Mrs Peterborough who struck the first blow. She was, as usual, carrying her handbag, a large, capacious and heavy item which weighed so much that Mr Livingstone had once hazarded the opinion the bag must, at the very least, contain half a dozen house bricks.

She walked straight across the grass, seemingly undeterred by fear, swung the bag by its handle and caught the nearest youth on the head. Knocked off balance, and screaming with both fear and rage, he fell into the nearest bush. His comrades were clearly both startled and disorganised by the viciousness of her attack.

While they were still staring, open mouthed at Mrs Peterborough and her well swung handbag, the youths were subject to yet more unexpected attacks. First, Mr Williams knocked one of the youths flat with an extremely creditable right hook which seemed to come out of nowhere. This blow landed on its target with extraordinary accuracy and, for Mr Williams, a very satisfying `crack'. Mr Roxdale completed the insult by walloping the fallen hooligan with a rubber traffic cone he had found in the bushes. And then Jenkins incapacitated two of the aggressors by literally banging their heads together in the way of a school-master dealing with two badly behaved infants. The two youths whose skulls had been ill served in this traditional but demeaning way, fell to the ground with astonishing grace and lay, temporarily unconscious, among several cotoneaster bushes.

Moments later the battle was over. The defeated bullies, whimpering and threatening to report the incident to their fathers and the constabulary, limped away into the darkness. Before they had disappeared from view Jenkins had taken out his mobile telephone and telephoned for the emergency services.

'Are you all right?' Mrs Caldicot asked, kneeling beside the terrified looking gentleman who had been the victim of the original, unprovoked attack.

'I'm not entirely sure,' confessed the stranger. To Mrs Caldicot's surprise, he spoke with an educated accent. He crawled out of his cardboard box, looked around and then stood up. Not unsurprisingly, he looked slightly bewildered by what had happened. His head was bruised and he was bleeding from his nose and mouth. Mrs Caldicot stood up too, and brushed the mud and grass from her knees.

'I think we'd better get you to the hospital,' said Mrs Caldicot, taking a clean handkerchief out of her handbag and dabbing at the blood on the stranger's nose. 'Should you be standing? Do you think you've got any broken bones?'

'I'm afraid I really don't know,' the man admitted. He touched one arm with the other and winced then he looked around again. 'Have they gone?' he asked, nervously. He spoke quietly, diffidently.

‘Yes,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘You’re safe now.’ She introduced herself and explained that she and her friends had just been passing when they had spotted him being attacked. She looked round as Jenkins approached.

‘I’ve telephoned for an ambulance,’ said Jenkins, quietly. ‘There should be one here in a few minutes. I asked for the police to come too.’ He looked at the stranger. ‘Why don’t you get into the car?’ he said. ‘You’ll be more comfortable there.’ He walked across to his car and opened the front passenger door.

‘Don’t like to presume on your kindness yet more, but I don’t suppose you have such a thing as a blanket, do you?’ asked the stranger.

‘Are you cold?’ asked Jenkins.

‘No, no,’ said the man. ‘But as you can see I’m awfully grubby...and I’m bleeding too. Your car...,’ he pointed to the smart, new upholstery of Jenkins’s car. He wouldn’t get into the car until Jenkins had found a rug from the boot and had draped it over the front passenger seat.

‘Perhaps we should move away while we wait for the ambulance,’ said Mrs Caldicot, when the man they’d rescued was settled in the car. She lowered her voice. ‘Do you think those youths will come back?’

‘No!’ replied Jenkins without hesitation.

‘But they might come back with their fathers - or the police,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘They said they would.’

Jenkins laughed. ‘Don’t worry,’ he assured her. ‘They’re bullies. They’ll be far too embarrassed to tell anyone that they’ve been beaten up by a bunch of old aged pensioners.’

Mrs Caldicot looked at him and slowly she smiled too. ‘Do you know, I think you’re right,’ she said. She felt more comfortable then.

They waited on the traffic island for twenty minutes but neither ambulance nor police car came.

‘This is daft,’ said Jenkins at last. ‘Where’s the nearest hospital.’

‘It’s no more than five or ten minutes from here,’ replied Mrs Caldicot.

‘OK,’ said Jenkins. ‘Let’s drive there. Can you all get into the back seat?’

They tried but even four people in the back had been a tight squeeze. It was impossible for five people to fit in.

‘Why don’t Mr Williams and I sit in the boot with the loo rolls?’ asked Mr Roxdale. ‘We’ll leave the lid up and you drive slowly.’

And that is what they did.

Chapter 38

It took the hospital just four hours to find a doctor. It took another two hours for the doctor, who looked about sixteen and spoke some words of English quite well to examine the battered tramp, clean him up and stitch up his wounds. He was aided in this by a grumpy nurse with baggy two-way stretch elastic stockings and a deaf auxiliary with a facial tick. Jenkins, Mrs Caldicot and the rest of the party sat in the waiting area, soaking, dripping and steaming, and waited.

'Why don't you all go on to the cinema,' said Mrs Caldicot to Mr Roxdale, Mr Williams, Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale. 'There's no need for us all to wait.' She looked around and sighed. The casualty department looked as though it had been built, painted and equipped a long, long time ago. The floor was covered with thin carpet tiles which were curling at the edges and heavily stained. The walls had been painted once but the paint had been peeling off for years. A false ceiling had been created with the aid of white polystyrene tiles but roughly a third of the tiles had fallen down, revealing dusty ceiling spaces and bits of weary looking wiring.

'There's no need for any of us to wait,' Mr Roxdale, pointed out, accurately.

'But we'd like to,' said Mr Williams. 'We want to know that he's OK.'

'We can give him moral support,' said Mr Roxdale. 'Spiritual comfort. When you're not well it's nice to know that you've got friends nearby.' He looked around and blushed, as though rather embarrassed by this confession.

'Besides,' said Miss Nightingale. 'It's very nice here. We're having a lovely time.'

Mrs Peterborough nodded. 'Very nice,' she agreed, looking around.

And so they all sat. And they waited.

It was well after midnight when a large, well-starched nurse walked up to their end of the casualty department. 'Are you Peter,' she looked down at her clipboard before continuing, 'Peter Twist?'

Everyone stared at her. No one spoke.

'Peter Twist?' she repeated, lowering her clipboard and looking sternly at them all, one at a time. Mrs Caldicot, who neither liked nor trusted people with clipboards, felt intimidated and shrank down and tried to disappear into her plastic seat. She was tired. It seemed to her that she spent all her life fighting nasty, cruel people. At that moment she felt that she'd had enough. She wanted to hide in a corner and cry.

'Are you asking us if any of us are called Peter Twist? Or are you asking us if that is the name of the gentleman we brought in?' asked Jenkins.

Mrs Caldicot turned and looked. She felt full of admiration for him.

The starched nurse turned her glare onto Jenkins. 'Peter Twist is the name of the tramp you brought in.'

'Right,' said Jenkins. 'Thank you. Good. We didn't know that.'

'You brought someone in but you don't know his name?' the nurse demanded, incredulous.

'That's right,' replied Jenkins.

The nurse snorted rather contemptuously.

'We found the poor fellow on a traffic island,' explained Jenkins. He spoke slowly and patiently, as though he was speaking to someone of rather limited intelligence. 'He was being attacked at the time by a gang of youths. I'm afraid that there simply wasn't time for proper introductions.' He paused, reached into his pocket and took out his spectacle case. He opened the case, took out his half-moon spectacles and put them on. He then peered over the top of them at the nurse. 'What's your name?' he demanded.

'So, if you just found him on a traffic island, why are you all sitting here waiting for him?' demanded the nurse, still suspicious but far less arrogant.

'We wanted to make sure that he was all right,' explained Jenkins. 'And your name is?' With his right hand he took a small green notebook from his outside jacket pocket. With his left hand he took a slim gold pen from his inside breast pocket.

The nurse snorted and stepped backwards, as though she felt under threat. She told him his name.

Jenkins opened his notebook and wrote in it. Holding the notebook and pen in his left hand he then used his other hand to reach into a trouser pocket and pull out his leather wallet. He opened the wallet, took out one of his visiting cards and handed it to the nurse.

'My name is Jenkins,' he said. 'As you will see from the card.' The nurse examined the card, studied the name of the newspaper Jenkins represented, licked her lips and swallowed rather noisily.

'Anyway. Er...we've finished with him. We've looked after him very well. You can take him now,' the nurse said.

'Take him where?' enquired Jenkins.

The nurse seemed puzzled by this. 'Wherever you like,' she replied. 'Back to the traffic island I suppose.'

Jenkins just stared at her over the top of his half-moon spectacles.

'We don't have any beds,' she explained. 'None at all.'

'It's all right,' whispered Mrs Caldicot to Jenkins. 'I can find him a bed.'

Jenkins turned to her. 'Are you sure?'

Mrs Caldicot nodded. 'I'd rather,' she said. 'We can look after him.' She looked around and shuddered. 'I wouldn't want to leave him here,' she whispered.

Jenkins turned his attention back to the nurse, who was standing waiting. 'What would you do with him if we hadn't waited?' he asked her. He looked around the waiting area and then around the remainder of the casualty department. 'I have to tell you that I think this hospital is a disgrace. It's filthy dirty and quite disorganised. Even if you had a bed available I would be unhappy about Mr Twist staying here.'

The once pompous nurse now seemed thoroughly deflated as well as defeated. She appeared, Mrs Caldicot thought, to have shrunk several sizes while standing before them. The woman who had filled the room, her ego steam-rollering all before it, now stood before them looking more like a penitent child, anxious to know what was going to happen to her.

'I suppose we'd, er, arrange for him to be found a bed somewhere,' she admitted.

'Of course you would,' agreed Jenkins, calmly and appreciatively. 'You aren't complete barbarians, are you?'

'No,' said the nurse. 'Thank you. No, of course not.' Mrs Caldicot half expected her to curtsey. But she didn't.

'Well, as I said, I don't think I would be entirely happy about Mr Twist staying here with you,' said Jenkins, examining the nurse over the top of his spectacles. 'And my dear friend Mrs Caldicot here has very generously offered to find Mr Twist a bed for the night.'

'Oh,' said the nurse. She sounded relieved. 'Are you sure?'

'Absolutely sure,' said Jenkins. 'But we will need an ambulance, of course.'

'Of course,' said the nurse, too relieved to argue with this. 'That won't be a problem at all. I can arrange that.'

'And a wheelchair I suspect,'

'We can definitely lend you one of those,' said the nurse. 'Just, er, let us have it back when it's convenient to you...there's no hurry.'

'Good,' said Jenkins, firmly. 'Then let's go and see Mr Twist, and take him home.'

They all stood up.

Mrs Caldicot wanted to cheer but she felt that Jenkins might consider this rather inappropriate so, instead, she simply gave a little silent whoop, smiled at all her friends, took Jenkins' hand and squeezed it. When he squeezed her hand back and turned and smiled at her she felt as though her life was complete.

And as the nurse led them all to the cubicle where Mr Twist was waiting she felt strong again; strong enough to take on an army of clipboard carrying foot-soldiers.

'It's all very dirty, isn't it,' said Miss Nightingale looking around.

'Very dirty,' said Mrs Peterborough.

The nurse, who was leading the way, turned round slightly and Mrs Caldicot could see that she was blushing with embarrassment. But she didn't say a word.

Chapter 39

‘How are you feeling?’ asked Mrs Caldicot. ‘I’ve brought you a cup of tea.’ She was carrying the tea in one hand and a pile of freshly ironed clothes on the other.

The man in the bed blinked and looked around as though not quite sure where he was.

‘Am I dreaming?’ Peter Twist asked.

Mrs Caldicot laughed. ‘No,’ she said. ‘I don’t think so.’ She put the clothes down on the foot of the bed and put the cup of tea down on the bedside table. ‘I hope you take milk?’

Mr Twist stared at her.

‘In your tea.’

‘Oh yes. Thank you.’

‘There are some sugar cubes in the saucer,’ added Mrs Caldicot.

‘Is this your home?’ Mr Twist asked her.

Mrs Caldicot laughed. ‘Well it is in a way, I suppose,’ she agreed. ‘It’s where I live so that makes it home. But it’s what the authorities call ‘a residential home for the elderly’.’

Mr Twist looked around the room he was in. ‘It’s very nice,’ he told her. He looked down at himself. He was wearing freshly laundered striped pyjamas.

‘I hope you don’t mind,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘But I took the liberty of putting your clothes in the washing machine. There was some blood on them.’

Mr Twist seemed embarrassed and went rather red. ‘I’m sorry you had all that trouble,’ he said.

‘Mr Roxdale and Mr Williams undressed you and put you to bed,’ Mrs Caldicot explained. ‘The hospital sent you out wearing one of their silly gowns. Mr Roxdale’s about the same size as you so he lent you a pair of his pyjamas.’

‘That was very kind of him,’ said Mr Twist. He seemed very touched by this simple act of generosity. There were tears in his eyes.

‘Are you all right?’ Mrs Caldicot asked him.

‘It’s all a bit of a shock,’ said Mr Twist quietly. ‘To be honest, I’m not used to people doing things for me. Not kind things anyway.’ He looked down again. ‘I’m afraid I don’t have any money,’ he said. ‘I can’t pay you anything.’

‘Golly!’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘That’s a bit of a disappointment. We only brought you here because we were convinced that you are a millionaire in disguise.’

Mr Twist looked at her uncertainly.

‘A joke,’ mouthed Mrs Caldicot, almost silently. She smiled at him. ‘You can stay here until you feel fit enough to move on,’ she said.

‘I should be OK to travel later today,’ said Mr Twist. He reached up and touched his head. His fingers found the stitches in his forehead and he winced.

‘You won’t be fit enough to travel today,’ Mrs Caldicot insisted. ‘I suggest you get accustomed to the fact that you’re going to be here for at least a week.’

‘But what about the people who run the place,’ said Mr Twist, puzzled. ‘Won’t they be upset?’

‘That won’t be a problem at all,’ promised Mrs Caldicot.

Chapter 40

'Is this an inconvenient moment?'

Mrs Caldicot, sat behind the desk in her office, looked up. The door to the office was open, as it often was, and a man was standing in the doorway.

'Hello, Mr Twist!' she said, genuinely pleased to see him. 'My word, you do look different!' He was wearing the same clothes that he had been wearing when he'd been attacked, but both they and he had been thoroughly washed and all parties had benefited from this experience.

'I feel a lot better,' said Mr Twist. 'I just wanted to thank you. And to say that I'm leaving now.'

There was a pause. 'Do you want to go?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

Mr Twist looked at her and then down at the floor. 'It's time I went,' he said.

'But why? Do you want to go?'

'No!' he said. His voice softened. 'No, of course I don't want to go.'

'You don't have to go,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'You can stay here for a while.'

'No,' said Mr Twist firmly. 'I'm already in your debt. There is no way I can repay your kindness.'

'You don't have to repay anything.'

'I don't want to be pitied or helped,' said Mr Twist.

'I don't pity you,' said Mrs Caldicot. She stood up. 'I'll very happily help you if you want me to. But I'm not going to force myself on you.' She sat down again, but this time on the corner of her desk. 'How did you end up living in a cardboard box?'

'Why do you want to know that?' asked Mr Twist.

'I want to know how and why a healthy, sane, educated man ends up living in a cardboard box on a traffic island.'

'Why should I bother to satisfy your curiosity?' demanded Mr Twist, suspiciously.

'Payment,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'You said yourself that you owe me for rescuing you. You can pay off the debt simply by talking. Tell me a little about yourself. Why do you live the way you do?'

'Those are the questions social workers always ask,' said Mr Twist. 'How did I end up like this? Why do I live this way? Social workers and policemen. People like that. I never tell them. They wouldn't understand. They're a part of what I don't like - so how could they understand?'

'They probably ask you so that they can write you up properly in their reports,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'To them you're an interesting 'case'. I'm asking because I'm interested in you as a person.'

Mr Twist thought about this for a while. 'OK.' he said at last. 'I'll tell you if you answer me one question.'

Mrs Caldicot waited.

'You call everyone here by their surname,' said Mr Twist. 'You always address people as Mr this or Miss that.'

'Yes, of course,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Why?' asked Mr Twist. 'Since I've been living rough no one has ever addressed me by my surname. Social workers and policemen always call me Peter. And it's been the same whenever I've been admitted to hospital.'

'Respect,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'That's all. It's just a sign of respect.' She nodded towards a chair. 'Why don't you sit down?'

Mr Twist nodded, but remained standing. 'It started with a little thing,' he said after a moment or two. 'Actually, I can tell you the moment when my life changed,' he began. He cleared his throat. 'I went into town one Wednesday to take a book back to the library. That's all. It was a book about Napoleon. I parked in one of the council car parks and discovered that they'd changed the machine they use to dispense tickets. In the past whenever I left the car park I always handed my ticket over to another motorist if I'd had some time left on it. If I bought a ticket for two hours and finished my errands in forty minutes I would just hand the ticket to someone driving into the car park. It always made me feel good and it always seemed to make them feel good too. They would smile and say 'thank you'. It was just a little thing. No one lost out because the space has been paid for. But on that Wednesday I found out that the Council had made it illegal to pass a ticket on to another motorist - even if there was time left on it. And to make sure that we all obeyed their new anti-kindness law they'd installed machines - heaven knows how much they cost - into which you had to type your car registration number. The number you typed into the machine was then printed on your ticket and there was a notice saying that it was illegal to use that ticket on any other car.'

'I've seen those machines,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'The local council has just introduced them here.'

'It made me both sad and angry,' said Mr Twist. 'I suppose the council did it because they were desperate to grab every last penny they could but it seemed to me that what they were doing was stamping out any sense of public or community spirit in the town. They were stopping people being nice to one another.'

Mrs Caldicot nodded.

'It wasn't simply that, of course,' said Mr Twist. 'The car park machine was just the last straw. There were lots of things I didn't like about the society we've created. It seemed to me that when I walked down the street everyone seemed aggressive.' He looked down then rubbed at his eyes with his coat sleeve. 'Take one of these,' said Mrs Caldicot, offering him the box of tissues that she kept on her desk.

Mr Twist took a tissue, murmured his thanks, wiped his eyes and held the tissue in his hands. 'Children coming home from school used to have fun and lark about. They don't lark about these days. They're young thugs; terrorising the weak and the elderly. Young mothers - most of whom seem hardly old enough to be out of school - use their prams as battering rams. People are all too aware of their rights and reluctant to accept their responsibilities. Corruption and deceit are spreading down from the top in politics and industry. Our towns are protected not by patrolling policemen, but by cameras which merely record the violence rather than prevent it. A constantly prying government has even turned road safety into a money making venture. Teachers - desperate to win financial bonuses - help their students to cheat. Everyone in public service is there solely for the money. They want - and take - authority, but they don't want responsibility either. All our public services - our hospitals, our roads, our schools - are getting worse. Churches and libraries are closing. Police stations are shutting - leaving people to telephone help lines hundreds or thousands of miles away. Every year we pay far more in taxes and get considerably less in services. Nothing is as good as it was and yet everything costs more. Selfishness is the new mantra. Our freedom and privacy are disappearing fast - all in the false name of security. They say they have to take away our freedom in order to protect our freedom. What lunacy. The two things I see around me most often are fear and anger. Whatever happened to love and hope?'

Mrs Caldicot looked at Mr Twist. There was anger in his eyes but there were tears on his cheeks. She stood up, moved closer to him and took his hand.

'But the thing I like least,' continued Mr Twist, 'is the fact that we have created a society in which people are encouraged to be selfish; to think only of themselves. There is no sense of community anymore.' He paused and wiped a tear from his cheek. He smiled at Mrs Caldicot and cleared his throat. His voice changed slightly. 'Do you know what appeals to me most about this place?' Mrs Caldicot looked at him, thought for a moment, and then shook her head. 'No.'

'It's the sense of community you have created,' he told her. 'The way everyone here helps everyone else. You've created a sort of sixties commune. People here seem to be honest, decent and courteous to one another. You may not realise it but you're living in a spiritual oasis.'

'Without the long hair and free sex,' smiled Mrs Caldicot. 'Go on with your story,' she encouraged him.

Mr Twist blew his nose again and this time stuffed the tissue into his trouser pocket. 'I was incensed that the Council had made it illegal to help people. When I got back to my car I had an hour of time left on my ticket. I stood by the entrance and offered my ticket to other motorists driving in. A car park attendant saw me and told me that what I was doing was against the law. I said I didn't care. So he fetched a policeman. I was arrested and charged with something or other under the Public Order Act.'

'My wife wanted me to plead guilty and explain that I was upset because my father had died a few months earlier. My solicitor said that if I apologised I would get off with a fine. He said he might even be able to get me off without my having to plead guilty. He said that personally he agreed with me but that one couldn't change these things and that no one else really cares so there was no point in standing up and being a martyr.'

'But I insisted on pleading not guilty and taking on the system. I argued that the council didn't have a right to outlaw kindness.' He shrugged and smiled thinly. 'Naturally, I lost. The prosecutor said I and people like me were a threat to the community. I was sentenced to two months in prison. It meant that I had a criminal record. The local paper ran the story on their front page.' He paused and swallowed as he remembered this final indignity. 'They made me look like a mass murderer. They didn't even say what the case was all about. I'd made this great speech in court about our community spirit being destroyed. I'd spent days preparing it. It really seemed important to me. But they didn't report any of that. All they were interested in was the fact that a tax inspector was going to prison.' He looked at Mrs Caldicot. 'That was my job. I was a tax inspector.'

Mrs Caldicot didn't say anything.

'While I was in prison I found that my wife had left me. She started divorce proceedings within days of my being locked up. Her solicitor had effectively had me locked out of the house I'd bought for us. He convinced the divorce court that because I had a criminal record I was dangerous. Before I went to prison, I'd had quite an important job at the Inland Revenue. But they fired me, of course. So I had no job, no wife and no home.'

'Didn't you have friends you could go to for help?'

'I didn't have any friends. I worked for the Inland Revenue.'

'So what happened?'

‘I stayed in a hostel for three months. I applied for lots of jobs but I couldn’t find anyone keen to employ a homeless 63-year-old man with a criminal record.’

‘And so you ended up living in a cardboard box.’

‘Several, actually,’ he smiled. ‘They don’t last long when it rains. I used to get them from a local furniture shop. They had bigger, stronger boxes than anyone else.’

‘Why on a traffic island?’

‘Another tramp I met told me that you were less likely to be attacked or set on fire if you were on a traffic island.’

Mrs Caldicot, moved closer to him, put both her arms around him and hugged him. ‘A few minutes ago I asked you if you really wanted to go,’ said Mrs Caldicot. She let him go and looked at him.

Mr Twist nodded. There were tears rolling down his cheeks.

‘I want to ask you the same question again.’

There was a long, long silence.

‘No,’ he said at last. He spoke so quietly that she could hardly hear him. ‘Of course I don’t.’ He swallowed hard, took out his tissue and wiped his eyes. ‘But I don’t have any money, I can’t pay your bills and I’m not a scrounger. I can imagine how much it must cost to run a place like this. It wouldn’t be fair for me to stay any longer.’ He paused. He seemed embarrassed. ‘You’ve already been very kind to me.’

‘If you stayed you could help us a good deal,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘You could more than earn your keep. You must stay here now.’

‘I couldn’t bear getting happy here and then having to move out in a few months’ time.’

‘If you move in, you won’t have to move out unless you want to,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

Mr Twist looked at her eagerly. ‘I would be happy to do anything you wanted me to do,’ he said. ‘I can wash dishes. Dig the garden.’

‘Mr Merivale washes the dishes and Mr Roxdale has enough people helping him dig the garden,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘When you worked for the Inland Revenue did you learn how to do accounts?’

‘Of course.’ Mr Twist smiled at her. ‘I always wanted to be an accountant,’ he told her. ‘When I was a boy it was my dream. But my parents and the careers teacher at school persuaded me to join the Inland Revenue.’ He smiled thinly. ‘They said that working for the Government was steadier and more respectable work.’

‘I desperately need someone to help me with the accounts,’ said Mrs Caldicot. She reached into one of the trays on her desk, took out a handful of letters and bills and handed them to Mr Twist. ‘Could you sort these out for me?’ she asked.

Mr Twist flicked through the papers. ‘A lot of these are final reminders and demands,’ he said.

‘I know,’ sighed Mrs Caldicot. ‘One of the big problems is that I’m not very good at paperwork. My husband always used to deal with that sort of thing.’

‘Do you have the money to pay these?’

‘That’s the other problem,’ admitted Mrs Caldicot. ‘We do have something of what I believe is called ‘a cash flow problem’.’

‘Ah,’ said Mr Twist, understandingly.

‘I need someone to sort these things out for me,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘And to hold the creditors at bay for a while.’ She lowered her voice. ‘I’d be grateful if you kept this to yourself.’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘Of course,’ said Mr Twist. As she had known he would, he felt more comfortable now that Mrs Caldicot had shared a secret of her own with him.

‘I can do that for you,’ said Mr Twist.

‘Wonderful,’ said Mrs Caldicot with a big smile. ‘Now, I’ll take you into the lounge and introduce you to the guests you haven’t met.’

‘One other thing,’ said Mr Twist, slightly apologetically. ‘You won’t tell anyone what I used to do for a living? People may be a little, well, unwelcoming, if they know I used to work for the Inland Revenue.’

‘I won’t tell anyone if you don’t want me to,’ Mrs Caldicot assured him. ‘But what you used to do isn’t anywhere near as important as who you are now.’

‘Would it be terrible if I pretended to have been something else? Something a bit more exciting? Something a bit more acceptable?’

‘What would you like to be known as?’ asked Mrs Caldicot. ‘Racing driver? Actor? Footballer?’

‘An accountant would be nice,’ said Mr Twist. ‘I would be very happy if people thought of me as a former accountant.’

‘A former accountant you shall be,’ agreed Mrs Caldicot. She took his arm and led him to the lounge.

Chapter 41

'This is my niece Daisy,' said Miss Nightingale, proudly. 'She's here on leave. She works as a nurse in Africa.'

The other residents, all kneeling on the floor, looked up.

'Hello Daisy,' said Mr Livingstone.

'Hello Daisy,' said Mr Roxdale.

'Hello Daisy,' said Mr Williams.

This continued until the only person remaining was Mrs Peterborough.

'Hello Daisy,' said Miss Nightingale.

Daisy looked a little surprised.

'Hello Daisy,' said Mrs Peterborough.

Daisy, a kind young woman in her thirties, understood. Her aunt had told her about Mrs Peterborough.

'Are you looking for something?' Daisy asked.

'We're playing tiddly winks,' explained Mr Roxdale. 'I just tiddled a wink into the egg cup from three feet.' He looked around. 'Is it tiddling a wink or winking a tiddle?' he asked.

'I dunno what you call it, but it was a bloody fine shot,' said Mr Hewitt.

'Congratulations,' said Daisy.

'Daisy has been telling me that the hospital where she works is short of pills,' said Miss Nightingale. 'If any of you have any spare medicines she would be very grateful if you'd let her have them.'

'What sort of stuff do you want?' asked Mr Roxdale. 'I've got quite a good collection of stuff in my bathroom cabinet.'

'We're particularly short of antibiotics and painkillers,' said Daisy.

'I'm sure we can all find you something,' promised Mr Livingstone.

When Daisy left, an hour or so later, she was carrying a bulging carrier bags full of pills. She was crying with joy.

'Will you come back and see us before you return to Africa?' asked Mr Livingstone.

'I certainly will,' said Daisy.

'I've got a little plan,' said Mr Livingstone, when she had gone. 'Listen...'

Chapter 42

The golf club bar was packed. It was the club's evening for distributing prizes and cups. The bar was doing a roaring trade in gins and traditional ales and the two temporary members of bar staff were getting increasingly irritated as they struggled to keep up with the members' demands for alcohol. They wouldn't have minded being busy if they'd been picking up tips but the evening was well under way and neither of them had received a penny.

Two members of the golf club weren't in the bar, listening to the speeches and watching their fellow members feign modesty as they accepted assorted pieces of grotesquely ugly silverware. They were tucked away quietly in the billiards room. They had started a game of snooker so that if anyone entered it would be clear that he room was occupied. But neither of the members was interested in the balls on the table. They were sitting, side by side, on a raised bench, each nursing a very large gin. (Nigel had bought triples so that there would be no need to face the queue at the bar for a while.)

'You're sure this will work?' asked Nigel Roxdale.

'Oh yes,' replied Mr Muller-Hawksmoor confidently. 'I'm sure Mrs Caldicot doesn't have enough staff members. Being in breach of the required staff-patient ratio is a serious offence. I can close her down immediately.'

'And she won't be able to open up again?'

Mr Muller-Hawksmoor smiled. 'Oh, I don't think so,' he answered. 'This will be the last straw. And she knows that if she does open up again I'll be back. There are laws and regulations even I don't know about, and our friends in Brussels are thinking up new ones every day.'

'She doesn't suspect anything? She doesn't realise why you want to close her down?'

'Oh good heavens no,' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, with a nasty looking smile. 'Mrs Caldicot and I go way back. She thinks I'm harassing her simply because I don't like her.' He shrugged and allowed the smile to broaden.

'Good. Keep it that way, `said Nigel Roxdale. He smiled and sipped a little gin. 'I've got a couple of backers lined up,' he said. 'Two clients of mine in the hotel trade who are looking for a new property. They're terribly excited about the whole thing. I've arranged for my bank to lend us the money to buy the place the minute it goes on the market. We then immediately sell it on to my backers.'

'And what do you think the profit will be?

'It all depends on just how cheap we can get it,' said Nigel. 'But we should be able to rely on at least £100,000 to split between us. After costs.'

'Fifty thousand!' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. He couldn't help smiling.

He couldn't believe his luck. He was closing down Mrs Caldicot's Rest Home and getting paid for it! Life had never been so joyful.

He drank some more gin, closed his eyes, settled back on the bench and smiled still more.

Chapter 43

‘Is this, er, the er...,’ the caller looked up and down and to the right and to the left as though looking for clues.

‘What are you looking for?’ enquired Mrs Caldicot gently.

It was raining again. The man who had rung the doorbell, and who was now sheltering in the porch, was probably in his mid- fifties. He was short, round and bald and wore spectacles with glass so thick it looked as though it had been cut from the bottom of milk bottles. The lenses magnified his eyes and made him look almost comically fearsome. Standing on the top step he was a good foot shorter than Mrs Caldicot. He stared up at her and opened his mouth. ‘Is this the old folks’ home? I’m looking for…er…Mrs..er,’ he pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and peered at it. `Mrs Peterborough. I’m doctor…er…the psychiatrist.’

‘This is the Twilight Years Rest Home,’ confirmed Mrs Caldicot.

‘Can I come in?’

Mrs Caldicot opened the door wide to let the psychiatrist enter. ‘You’re here to see Mrs Peterborough?’ she asked him.

‘I got to certify the old biddy insane,’ said the psychiatrist.

‘If you would wait in here, I’ll get Mrs Peterborough to come and see you,’ said Mrs Caldicot, pausing outside her office. ‘There’s no need to bring her in here,’ said the psychiatrist. ‘It’s better to see the wildlife in their natural surroundings than sitting in a zoo. Lead me to her. I hope she’s not being a teapot today. The er…council people told you I was coming?’

‘They did,’ confirmed Mrs Caldicot.

‘I...er...don’t suppose they told you my name, did they?’

‘No.’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘Never mind’ said the psychiatrist, relieved and seemingly not in the slightest bit embarrassed by this additional example of memory loss. ‘Doesn’t matter. I sometimes wonder if I’ve got that disease. You know the one. I can’t remember the damned name. Never mind, you seem to be the woman who runs the old folks home and I’m pretty sure I’m the doctor. Lead me to her.’

Chapter 44

'Doctor, this is Mrs Peterborough,' said Mrs Caldicot, introducing Mrs Peterborough and the psychiatrist to one another. `Mrs Peterborough, this is the psychiatrist. He's come to examine you.'

'So, you're my slice of fruitcake for today, are you?' said the doctor, staring rather aggressively at Mrs Peterborough.

Mrs Peterborough, confused by this, didn't say anything.

'You're a very rude man,' said Miss Nightingale.

'You're a very rude man,' repeated Mrs Peterborough.

The psychiatrist who didn't look in the slightest bit put out by this two pronged attack, continued to stare at Mrs Peterborough. 'Ms…er…someone has asked me to ask you some questions,' he told her. He looked around, spotted a straight-backed chair, pulled it over and sat down on it. 'I'm going to ask you a question about current affairs.' He peered at Mrs Peterborough though his bottle glass spectacles. 'What do you think of the situation in the Middle East?' he asked. He lowered his head and chewed at his bottom lip, deep in thought.

'Who is he? What's he want?' whispered Miss Nightingale to Mrs Caldicot.

'He's the psychiatrist sent by Ms Jones,' explained Mrs Caldicot in a whisper. 'He's here to decide if Mrs Peterborough is sane.' She and Miss Nightingale exchanged looks.

'And if he decides she isn't?'

'They'll insist on moving her somewhere else,' whispered Mrs Caldicot. 'To a hospital.'

'That would make her worse,' whispered Miss Nightingale, horrified.

'That would make her worse,' said Mrs Peterborough in what she thought was a whisper.

'I know,' whispered Mrs Caldicot.

'We must stop them,' whispered Miss Nightingale.

'But how?' whispered Mrs Caldicot. 'How are we going to do that?'

'Zzzz,' said the psychiatrist.

'We've got to convince him that she's sane,' whispered Miss Nightingale.

'Zzzz zzzz,' said the psychiatrist.

'Got to convince him that she's sane,' said Mrs Peterborough.

'How the hell are we going to do that?' demanded Mr Livingstone.

'Zzzzz zzzz zzzz zzzz,' said the psychiatrist.

'I think he's fallen asleep,' said Miss Nightingale.

'I think he's fallen asleep,' confirmed Mrs Peterborough.

They all looked at him. His head had fallen forwards onto his chest. A small dribble of saliva had escaped from beneath his open lips and was heading down towards his tie in a long, sticky string. 'I love Mrs Peterborough very much, like a sister,' said Mr Livingstone. 'Actually more than my sister. Between you and me, my sister is a mean bitch. Can't stand her. The most selfish, manipulative woman I've ever met. To be honest, I've never understood why my brother-in-law didn't bop her on the head and bury her in the garden years ago. But the problem is,' said Mr Livingstone, 'and I say this very lovingly, that, much as we love her, Mrs Peterborough is, as we all know, a little bit different.'

'So we have to convince the psychiatrist that he's wrong about Mrs Peterborough,' said Miss Nightingale.

'So we have to convince...' began Mrs Peterborough. Having forgotten the rest of the sentence, she faded out.

'That's more or less it,' said Mr Livingstone.

'How on earth do we do that?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

Chapter 45

The psychiatrist had been asleep for twenty minutes or so. There was now a large wet stain on his tie. Suddenly, he awoke with a start. He looked up, looked around and stared at everyone in turn. No one said anything.

‘I suppose you all think I was asleep?’ he said, accusingly.

‘Oh no, not at all,’ replied Mr Livingstone.

‘It’s a trick I often use,’ said the psychiatrist, blinking. ‘I trick patients into thinking I’m asleep. But all the time I’m listening to every word they are saying.’ He glared at everyone in turn.

Mrs Caldicot looked at Mr Livingstone who looked at Miss Nightingale who looked at Mrs Merivale who looked at Mr Roxdale who looked at Mrs Roberts who, completing the cycle, looked at Mrs Caldicot.

‘That’s very clever of you,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘You pretend to be asleep but secretly you listen to what your patients are saying. That way you get to the truth much more quickly.’

‘Exactly!’ cried the psychiatrist. `In a nutshell!’

‘Did you find what Mrs Peterborough had to say interesting?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘Oh, very much so,’ nodded the psychiatrist.

‘We were all fascinated by what she had to say,’ said Mrs Caldicot. She looked around for support and confirmation. The others all nodded and murmured their agreement.

‘Absolutely!’ agreed the psychiatrist.

‘I didn’t realise she knew so much about the Middle East,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘Very impressive. I learned a lot,’ he added.

‘Oh yes,’ said the psychiatrist. ‘Very good indeed.’

‘From what you’ve just heard I don’t suppose you can be in any doubts about her mental state?’

‘Er…no, of course not!’ confirmed the psychiatrist.

‘I expect you’re finished with her now?’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘It’s time for her physiotherapy so would you excuse her if Mrs Roberts takes her to her room?’ Mrs Caldicot nodded to Mrs Roberts who got up and helped Mrs Peterborough to her feet. Miss Nightingale stood up too.

‘Everything is fine,’ said the psychiatrist. ‘She can go now. I’ve finished with her.’ He too stood up.

‘It was nice to meet you, doctor,’ said Miss Nightingale.

‘It was nice to meet you, doctor,’ said Mrs Peterborough.

Mrs Roberts and Miss Nightingale took one arm each and walked Mrs Peterborough to and through the door before the psychiatrist could ask her anything else.

‘I’ll show you out then, shall I?’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘Er, thank you,’ said the doctor. He seemed rather bewildered.

When he’d gone they celebrated.

Mrs Merivale cooked egg and chips for everyone and Mr Livingstone entertained them by playing a medley of favourite tunes on his trombone.

Chapter 46

'I went for a walk to the paper shop this morning,' said Mr Williams. 'I've never seen so much traffic.'

'It is a busy road,' agreed Mr Roxdale.

'Loads of potential customers,' said Mr Williams.

Mr Roxdale, who didn't understand, looked at him quizzically.

'When the flowers and the vegetables we're growing are ready we could set up a stall by the roadside,' said Mr Williams. 'It would help bring in some money for Mrs Caldicot.'

'That's a brilliant idea!' said Mr Roxdale, as though no one had ever before thought of it. He had simple tastes and had never had a 'commercial' brain.

'It's a pity we have to wait for the darned things to grow,' said Mr Williams. 'It'll be months before there's anything to sell.'

'Does Mrs Caldicot need money now?' asked Mr Roxdale.

'I overheard her talking to Mrs Roberts,' said Mr Williams. 'Apparently they've got real financial problems. It costs a fortune to run a place this size and now the roof is apparently leaking.' He sighed. He had on several more occasions tried to give Mrs Caldicot a few photographs but she wouldn't accept them.

'We don't have to wait for the stuff in the garden to grow!' said Mr Roxdale, suddenly inspired.

Mr Williams looked at him. 'What do you suggest?' he asked. 'Selling grass cuttings?' He paused and thought for a moment. 'I have to tell you that I'm a bit old for scrumping,' he said.

'No, no!' said Mr Roxdale. 'We can pop round to the garden at my old place. There's tons of stuff growing there. I don't think they've rented out the house yet.'

'Flowers?'

'Flowers and vegetables,' said Mr Roxdale. 'I haven't been looking after them but with any luck the birds will have left us some stuff we can sell.'

'How far is it?'

'We can walk it,' said Mr Roxdale. 'We'll take the wheelbarrow, fill it up and take it in turns to wheel it back.'

Chapter 47

'I can just about still remember the enormous sense of relief I felt when I first discovered that I had become a shabby, dull, slightly podgy, old man,' said Mr Roxdale.

'I know exactly what you mean,' sighed Mr Williams. 'Same thing happened to me. Overnight. One day I went to bed a smart, young fellow, constantly worried about my hair and my figure. The next day I woke up fat and completely past it.' He paused, looked at his new friend, and grinned. `What a wonderful relief. The last thirty years have been the best of my life.'

The two men were standing on the pavement outside the Twilight Years Rest Home. Every bucket they could find was filled with flowers. But business was not brisk and the two men had plenty of time to chat.

'Becoming old was the best thing I ever did,' agreed Mr Roxdale, with a nod. 'Best day's work I ever did. Best day of my life. I suddenly realised that I no longer had to bother. No one noticed me. I had become invisible. The joy! The freedom! I didn't have to iron my shoes or polish my shoes.'

'For me one of the great delights was the discovery that for the first time in my life young women were always happy to talk to me,' said Mr Williams.

'You know, exactly the same thing happened to me,' said Mr Roxdale.'

'They didn't feel threatened,' said Mr Williams.

'Absolutely,' agreed Mr Roxdale.

'I suddenly realised that young women were smiling at me not because they fancied me but because they rightly perceived me as a harmless old duffer - absolutely no threat to them,' said Mr Williams. 'Models, shop girls, girls in the bank, girls at parties. I could chat with them - even flirt with them without giving the slightest offence. They could smile at me, and talk to me without thinking that I could possibly imagine that they are flirting with me. At first I was disappointed but then I realised that I found it enormously liberating: it means I get to talk to loads of young women without my having to worry about whether or not I'm going to pull, or whether I'll be able to perform. I don't have to worry about anything anymore. The flirting is the beginning, the middle and the end. It's wonderful.'

'That's one of the good things about growing old,' agreed Mr Roxdale, with a nod. 'Marvellous.' He always enjoyed his visits to the corner shop to pay his paper bill. The twenty something girl who took his money always had a smile for him.

'You shouldn't flirt with that girl,' his daughter-in-law had told him more than once. 'You're too old. What will people think?'

'I'm too old to care what anyone thinks,' Mr Roxdale had replied. 'But not too old to flirt.'

They stood together in silence for a while, each possessed by his own happy thoughts. Mr Roxdale looked up. The sky was getting blacker.

'It's going to rain,' he said.

'They said on the weather forecast that it was going to be fine today,' said Mr Williams.

Mr Roxdale snorted. He did not have much respect for weather forecasters. 'I don't know how they get away with what they do,' he said. 'It's a big confidence trick. Other people have to be accurate or they get in trouble. But weather forecasters keep on getting it wrong and keep on getting away with it.'

They stood in silence for another few moments, both of them watching the blackening sky.

'Mind you, I'm not saying growing old is all wonderful,' said Mr Williams.

'No, it's not,' agreed Mr Roxdale.

'By the time I was seventy I'd lost most of my friends,' said Mr Williams. He didn't sound too sad about it. 'Never had many, mind you,' he added.

'Passed away, did they?' said Mr Roxdale, sympathetically.

'No, no!' said Mr Williams. 'Not really.' He thought about it for a moment. 'Well I suppose a few of them did drop of their perches. No, by and large, I gave them up. Stopped seeing them. We no longer had anything in common.' He shook his head sadly and turned to look at Mr Roxdale. 'D'you know most of 'em would only ever talk about what the doctor had said or what pills they were on.'

'It's raining,' said Mr Roxdale inconsequentially, but accurately.

Mr Williams looked up. A large drop of rain splashed on his face. 'It is,' he agreed.

'I had a chum who used to grow marvellous vegetables,' said Mr Roxdale. 'He grew marvellous runner beans. We used to meet in the pub three times a week. I stopped going. All he wanted to talk about was his new hearing aid and the trouble he was having with his pension people.'

Mr Williams nodded furiously. 'I had a pal who nearly drove me mad. If he wasn't telling me about his bowels he was giving me a detailed account of how his varicose veins were doing. He'd come into my studio and give me a word by word account of his latest visit to the doctor. 'Good morning, Doctor.' 'Good morning, Mr Blodget.' 'Chilly for the time of the year.' 'Very chilly, Mr Blodget.' That sort of thing. Then he'd get his new pills out. A blue one and a red one before getting out of bed. Then two white ones and a yellow one after shaving but before breakfast. On it went. Pills, pills, pills. He loved his pills. He lived for them.'

'I had a mate who always used to be great fun,' said Mr Roxdale. 'He used to be a traffic warden but he had a sense of humour nevertheless. Then his younger brother and two of his pals died and he went downhill rapidly. It really affected him. He stopped eating fatty foods, started going jogging and gave up the drink.'

'Completely?'

'Wouldn't touch a drop. He would sit there in his usual chair in the pub, nursing an orange juice, and bore your ears off with stories about his brother's last stay in the hospital.' Mr Roxdale shuddered. 'Awful. I swore I would never let them get me into a hospital after that. Then he decided that the orange juice was giving him heartburn so he gave up that and started drinking plain water.'

'I never had much faith in doctors,' said Mr Williams. 'Bunch of murderous bastards.' He took out a large red handkerchief and blew his nose. 'They put me in a loony bin once, you know.'

'No I didn't know,' said Mr Roxdale.

'Doctor said I was depressed. Stupid prat. Only a bloody 110 per cent proof imbecile could go through life on this planet without being depressed. Anyone who isn't pretty well damned depressed should be locked up. Probably a psychopath.'

'They gave you pills, I suppose?'

'Buckets full of 'em. I never took the damned things though. Spat 'em out after they'd gone. Never took one. In the end I threatened to sue the bastards. Then they found out I'd got a bit of clout so they let me go. Most depressing time of my life. They put me in a ward with all these other depressed people. Dozens of 'em. All miserable as sin. We all sat around all day depressing each other. As soon as someone started to cheer up the others would drag him down again. Madness.'

'When I got home I decided to cure myself. I designed this sort of shock therapy. I invited round all my friends and acquaintances who had serious problems. Every miserable, pessimistic bastard I'd ever met. I gave them cheap booze and little vol au vents I'd bought in from a caterer and one by one invited them to talk endlessly about the awful things that had happened to them. I tell you it was fearsome stuff. I had to pop into the kitchen from time to time for a rest. At the end of the evening I threw 'em all out and never saw 'em again. I felt so much better. From that point on, I tried to surround myself with jolly folk.'

'I've never trusted doctors.' said Mr Roxdale.

'Never trusted doctors or any of those damned so-called experts,' said Mr Williams. 'When I was little I believed that one should always hire - and trust - experts. And so I hired an accountant. Who ended up costing me a fortune. I've had dentists who nearly destroyed my teeth and doctors who nearly killed me. I have hired lawyers who have cost me a fortune. I hired a pension company which totally screwed up the management of my pension. I have hired banks and investment companies which have lost money hand over fist. The list is endless. I have no faith in experts.'

'They stood in silence for a moment as a young woman approached, pushing a pram. She was plump, blonde and pretty. She smiled at both men, in turn. Both smiled back. She stopped for a moment. 'Have you got the time?' she asked.

'Sorry, love,' said Mr Roxdale. 'I don't wear a watch.' He turned to his friend.

'No watch either, I'm afraid,' said Mr Williams.

'But it's morning,' said Mr Roxdale. 'If that's any help. He handed her a pink rose.'

The girl took the rose, smiled, thanked them and continued on her way.

'You see, thirty years ago I would have felt I had to say something like 'I've got the time if you've got the inclination,' said Mr Williams. 'Then either she would have been offended or we'd have got involved in that courtship rigmarole.'

'Thirty years ago she wouldn't have asked us for the time,' said Mr Roxdale.

'Thirty years ago I could have told her,' said Mr Williams. 'I'd have been too scared of missing an appointment to go out without a watch.'

'I stopped wearing a watch when I was 62,' said Mr Roxdale. 'A pal of mine left work. I was invited to his leaving party. Do you know what they gave him?'

'A watch?'

'A watch and a clock.'

‘Why do they do that? What’s the point? The last thing on this earth he wanted was a watch.’

‘Or a clock.’

‘It was like they were telling him that they knew he’d always have time on his hands. Cruel and thoughtless bastards. He died four days later. Four days of pension. Four days of retirement. He didn’t get to enjoy any of it. Never even got time to find out if the bloody watch kept good time. Never even had to wind up the clock. Why do they do that? The one time in your life when you don’t have to watch the time and they give you a watch.’

‘Crazy, isn’t it?’

‘I took off my watch at his funeral and threw it into his grave. Never worn one since.’ He turned slightly and watched the girl disappearing down the road. ‘Nice looking girl though,’ said Mr Roxdale. `Reminds me of my niece. She’s divorced now. Works for an undertaker. I’ve told her I want her taking care of me when I’ve gone. Lovely soft hands.’

‘When I turned fifty I bought an undertaker’s place and turned it into a studio,’ said Mr Williams. ‘There was a mortuary at the back. Great big skylights. Beautiful natural light to work by. No one in my family would come to visit. They were all scared.’

‘Really? What of?’

‘They said that working in a place like that was asking for trouble. All those dead bodies, you see. They thought I’d be next on the slab.’

‘What did you say?’

‘I pointed out that no one had ever actually died there,’ said Mr Williams. ‘Safest place in town from that point of view.’ He stared down at the gutter and kicked at what looked like a cigar butt. ‘Is that a cigar?’

Mr Roxdale lowered his head and stared at it. ‘Dunno,’ he said. ‘I never pick up cigar butts these days. Too many small dogs around. And my eyesight isn’t what it used to be.’

Chapter 48

‘How is it going?’ asked a voice they both recognised. They turned and said hello to Mrs Caldicot.

‘Not terribly well, I’m afraid,’ admitted Mr Williams. ‘There doesn’t seem to be a great demand for flowers around here.’

‘Taken just two pounds so far,’ said Mr Roxdale, holding up the tin they had brought with them for their takings. ‘And that was for the carnations we both bought.’ He lifted his lapel to draw Mrs Caldicot’s attention to the fine looking carnation in his buttonhole.

‘What you really need is a bit of glamour,’ said Mrs Caldicot with a laugh.

‘So can you stay and help us?’ asked Mr Roxdale gallantly.

Mrs Caldicot smiled and shook her head. ‘I’m afraid not,’ she said. ‘But thank you for the compliment.’ She headed back towards the house.

Chapter 49

Mr Roxdale and Mr Williams had temporarily abandoned their attempts at flower selling. It had not been a huge success so far, but they had not yet given up. While Mr Williams wandered upstairs to his room to try to find a pair of gloves Mr Roxdale tottered into the lounge looking for his second best brown corduroy trousers. The trousers he had been wearing had been soaked when a bucket of water had tipped over them. He had had to take them off. Mrs Merivale had been mending his spare trousers the evening before and he had left them in her safe-keeping.

The television was on in the lounge. Half a dozen residents were watching a middle-aged man with orange skin and a far too perfect hairstyle interviewing a group of supposedly ordinary but surprisingly orange-skinned people. He spoke in a mid-Western drawl. A caption on the screen told late coming viewers that the subject of the discussion was shyness. The man with orange skin held his microphone underneath the bulbous nose of a large woman who wore jeans and a bright red T-shirt as though they both had done something to upset her and needed to be punished. She too had orange skin.

'Mrs Merivale, do you know where my trousers are?' Mr Roxdale enquired.

Naturally, everyone turned to look.

'Nice legs,' said Mr Livingstone drily, nodding at Mr Roxdale's naked lower limbs. 'But if you're going to go out without stockings you should use some of that fake tanning lotion.'

'Could do with a shave, too,' said Mr Hewitt. 'Hairy legs are right out of fashion these days.'

'I'm President of The World Federation of Shy and Retiring People,' announced the large, orange-skinned woman dominating their television screen. 'A survey back home in Ohio, US of A showed that for the last seven years I have been the shyest person in the whole wide world,' she concluded proudly. She folded her arms and glared around her, as though daring anyone to deny her this title. The orange-faced man, the presenter of the programme, nodded sagely, as though enormously impressed by this news. The large woman looked around beaming, when the audience, led by the presenter, applauded to show just how impressed they were.

'No, you're not! You're not!' screamed a woman in a bright yellow jump suit. She too had orange skin and she too sounded American. She jumped up out of her seat and pointed a podgy finger at the woman in the jeans and red T-shirt. 'She's a fraud!' she cried. 'She's not as shy as I am!'

'They're on the back of Mrs Torridge's chair,' Mrs Merivale told Mr Roxdale.

Mr Roxdale thanked Mrs Merivale, both for this information and for mending his trousers. With a smile and a wave of a hand, Mrs Merivale dismissed the need for thanks and concentrated her attention on the television screen.

'Neither of them seems very shy to me,' muttered Mr Livingstone. He turned to Mrs Merivale, who was sitting next to him. 'Do you know any of these people?'

'I met the presenter once,' replied Mrs Merivale. 'He was born in Walsall. His real name is Sidney, he's married to a district nurse called Angela and he used to work as a postman in the daytime and as a sword swallower in the evenings.'

'He's not American?'

Mrs Merivale looked puzzled. 'Not unless the Americans colonised Walsall,' she said. 'But he was once arrested for sniffing coke,' she added, rather inconsequentially.

Mr Roxdale approached Mrs Torridge's chair and politely asked her to move forward a few inches so that he could retrieve his trousers. Mrs Torridge did as he requested and looked him up and down as though considering making an offer for the freehold. 'You look as though you're good with your hands,' she said, when she had finished her inspection. 'Will you tie me up, please?'

On the television the two Americans were now arguing vociferously.

'I've often wondered about sniffing coke,' said Mr Hewitt. 'Can you use anthracite? Or does it have to be coke?'

'I don't know,' confessed Mrs Merivale. 'Good question, though.'

'I beg your pardon?' said Mr Roxdale. He was not a man who was easily shocked but he felt sure that Mrs Torridge had asked him to tie her up.

'I've decided to be Harriet Houdini today,' said Mrs Torridge.

'Harriet Houdini?' said Mr Roxdale. 'Who on earth is she?'

'The famous escapologist,' said Mrs Torridge. 'Well she would have been famous,' she added. 'If her brother hadn't grabbed all the headlines.'

'Her brother?'

'Harry. Harry Houdini.'

'Of course. Have you got any rope? String? Strips of cloth?' 'I've got some rope,' said Mrs Torridge. She held out a length of what looked carefully and neatly looped clothesline which Mr Roxdale took from her before glancing at the television screen. The woman in yellow had flung herself on top of the woman in the red T-shirt. He watched, astonished, as they fell together onto the floor. The orange-skinned presenter smiled thinly but made no attempt to interfere in the fight. The camera zoomed in until the screen was filled with two clawing, screaming, sweating bodies.

'Where did you get this?' Mr Roxdale asked.

'I found it in the garden,' said Mrs Torridge, innocently.

'Did it by any chance have washing on it?' asked Mr Roxdale.

'Oh, yes. But the washing was dry so I took it off and put into the laundry room. You'll need these as well,' added Mrs Torridge, handing Mr Roxdale a large pair of yellow, silk knickers.

'What on earth are these?' demanded the surprised recipient of this largesse, holding up the knickers and examining them as though they were evidence and he prosecuting counsel in an important trial.

'Bloomers.'

'I can see that. But what do I need these for?'

'To stuff in my mouth,' explained Mrs Torridge, patiently, as though talking to a rather dim-witted child.

Mr Roxdale, his confusion enhanced, stared at her.

'For a gag,' said Mrs Torridge.

'You want me to stuff these bloomers in your mouth for a joke?' asked Mr Roxdale, who had abandoned the hope of finding a reason and now simply wanted to be sure, of what was expected of him.

'No. A gag,' explained Mrs Torridge, patiently. 'To stop me shouting for help.'

'Ah!' said Mr Roxdale, understanding at last. He glanced at the television screen again and watched in horror as three huge, black men in black uniforms pulled the two women apart. The orange-skinned man was still watching and saying nothing.

'Strictly speaking we should use a freshly laundered linen handkerchief,' said Mrs Torridge. 'But everyone here uses paper handkerchiefs and a paper handkerchief wouldn't work. I'd be able to eat it. Or at least chew it up and spit it out. So since I don't have a proper handkerchief these will have to do.'

'Whose are they?' demanded Mr Roxdale, looking inside the bloomers as though expecting to see some sign of ownership, a neatly sewn name tag perhaps.

'Oh, they're mine,' said Mrs Torridge. 'And they're freshly laundered. I wouldn't want to have anyone else's knickers in my mouth even if they were clean.'

'No, quite,' agreed Mr Roxdale. 'I can understand that.'

Mrs Torridge held her wrists out in front of her. 'So,' she said, tiring of all these preliminaries, 'tie me up then.'

'Shall I tie you up first? Or gag you first?' asked Mr Roxdale.

Mrs Torridge didn't answer. She looked slightly worried by this question. It was clearly not a query she had expected.

'Tie her up first, silly,' said Mrs Merivale, who like the others had turned away from the television screen (where the woman in the yellow jumpsuit was now being carried from the television set) and was staring at Mrs Torridge. 'If you gag her first she won't be able to tell you whether or not the knots are tight enough.'

'No, I suppose not,' agreed Mr Roxdale. 'I hadn't thought of that.' He picked up the clothesline and tested it by holding it in both hands and giving it a good yank. He dimly remembered reading about people tying one another up in an illustrated magazine he had found in a potting shed belonging to one of his customers. He seemed to remember that black stockings had been used instead of a clothesline.

On balance, he decided that he was pleased that Mrs Torridge had asked him to help her. He had long believed that one should be prepared to try anything once and he was well aware that, at his age, he was unlikely to be showered with requests to tie people up. Slowly and gently, but thoroughly, he began to tie Mrs Torridge's hands and wrists.

'Why did he sniff coke?' Mr Livingstone asked Mrs Merivale.

She looked at him, slightly puzzled.

'You said he sniffed coke,' said Mr Livingstone, nodding towards the television. 'I've never heard of anyone doing that before.'

'They get high on it,' said Mrs Merivale. 'Everyone on television does it when they want to get up high.'

'Good heavens,' said Mr Livingstone. 'You learn something every day, don't you? And you can use anthracite if you don't have coke?'

'I suppose so,' agreed Mrs Merivale who wasn't really listening.

'Dunno why they don't just use a ladder like everyone else,' said Mr Hewitt.

Mr Williams, looking for his friend, poked his head round the door and spotted Mr Roxdale. 'Are you ready?' he called.

‘I won’t be long,’ replied Mr Roxdale. ‘I’m just tying up Mrs Torridge.’

‘Do you need any help?’ asked Mr Williams, who did not seem to be in the slightest bit surprised by this piece of news.

‘No, I can manage thank you,’ replied Mr Roxdale, busily wrapping the final few yards of clothesline around Mrs Torridge’s ample form. ‘I’ll be finished in a couple of minutes.’

‘OK,’ replied Mr Williams. ‘I’ll get my hat and wait for you in the hall.’

On the television screen a huge black man, dressed in a violet shirt and beige slacks was explaining to the orange-skinned presenter how shyness had affected his life. As he spoke he prodded the presenter in the chest with a podgy, heavily ringed finger and half way through his monologue he started rapping, clicking his fingers and bouncing around as he continued his tale of woe in the sort of clumsy semi-rhyming format which such singers affect. Sadly, no one at the Twilight Years Rest Home was watching and his audience there was confined to a shabby sofa, half a dozen easy chairs, a coffee table and a bowl of fruit. None of these involuntary members of the audience seemed in the slightest bit interested in the shy black man’s enthusiastic performance.

Mr Livingstone stood up and announced that he was popping out to the coal shed.

Chapter 50

Mrs Caldicot was standing on the doorstep saying goodbye to Dr Bence Jones when Jenkins arrived to take Mrs Caldicot out for lunch.

'You had a big surgery today,' she said to the doctor. She waved to Jenkins and smiled at him. The saw him most days now but the very sight of him always made her feel good.

'You've got a lot of sick people here,' the doctor told her. 'Really?' said Mrs Caldicot, surprised. 'They all seem all right to me.'

'I've never known such a lot of sick people,' the doctor told her. 'The ones that aren't crippled with pain have suddenly developed infections.'

'Good heavens,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Cystitis, sore throats, ear aches - you name it they've got it,' he said. 'I've done nothing but sign prescriptions today. Make sure you take a trailer when you trundle off to the pharmacy.' And with a cheery wave, he shuffled off in the direction of his Bentley which was, as usual, parked in the road outside.

'He's a wonderful old chap, isn't he?' said Jenkins, climbing up the steps to where Mrs Caldicot was standing in the front porch. 'How old is he?' he asked, as the elderly doctor headed slowly for his car.

'He's nearly ninety,' replied Mrs Caldicot.

'He's amazing,' said Jenkins. 'He must be the oldest practising doctor in the country.'

'And one of the very few I trust,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Are you ready for lunch?' asked Jenkins.

'I feel awful about this. I tried to ring you but you'd left,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'And your mobile phone was switched off.'

'I usually do turn it off when I'm driving,' admitted Jenkins. 'It's the only peace I get these days.'

'I'm sorry about this but I really don't think I can come out for lunch,' said Mrs Caldicot sadly. 'One of our new residents is a sort of accountant and he's been going through the books for me.' She sighed. 'We've got a bit of a crisis I'm afraid.'

'What's the matter?'

'Well, the main problem is that the council keeps bringing in more rules,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'As soon as we've dealt with one problem they find something else. Every time they introduce us a new regulation it costs us money.'

'And your outgoings are greater than your income?'

'By quite a long way. The council have now told us that we've got to redo the kitchen completely. I had a letter this morning telling me that we've got to rip everything out and rebuild it from scratch. It's all to satisfy some new rules and it's not going to make the kitchen better or safer but it is going to cost a fortune.'

'Do you think your wonderful Mrs Merivale would make us some of her splendid sandwiches?' asked Jenkins.

'I'm sure she would,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Good. Then let's have lunch in. And while we eat we'll have a brain storming session and try and work out how best we can raise some money to pay for all these alterations.'

Chapter 51

‘I tried sniffing coke,’ said Mr Livingstone, who had returned to the lounge. ‘But it didn’t do anything for me. I tried some anthracite too. Nothing. I never budged off the ground.’

Mrs Merivale looked at him. ‘You’ve got a black splodge on your nose,’ she told him.

Mr Livingstone wiped his nose with his handkerchief. ‘I took precautions,’ he told her. ‘I tied myself to the coal shed door.’

Mrs Merivale looked at him, puzzled.

‘To stop me going too high,’ he explained.

Chapter 52

'I don't suppose you know any rich eccentrics?' asked Jenkins. 'Kindly millionaires who want to give their money to a good cause?'

'I'm afraid not,' said Mrs Caldicot, sadly.

'Pity,' said Jenkins. 'You could have turned the Twilight Years Rest Home into a charity.'

'There's Mr Williams, of course,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'But he's already helped us a great deal. And I really won't let him give us any more.'

'Mr Williams? Which Mr Williams?'

'Our Mr Williams,' explained Mrs Caldicot. She suddenly blushed. 'He doesn't want it widely known,' she said. 'But if you promise not to breathe a word to anyone...'

'I promise,' said Jenkins.

'Well our Mr Williams is Mr Henry Williams.'

Jenkins stared at her for a moment and then, slowly, shook his head. 'I don't know anyone called Henry Williams,' he confessed. 'Should I?' Suddenly he smiled. 'The only Henry Williams I knew of was the photographer.' He paused. 'But he must have died ten or fifteen years ago.'

'He's not dead. He's very much alive,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'The last time I saw him he was standing outside the gate with Mr Roxdale, trying to sell flowers.'

'Your Mr Williams is the Henry Williams?' Jenkins could not hide his astonishment.

'He gave me a photograph to sell when he first came here,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I sent it to a dealer in London whom Mr Williams recommended. He sent us a cheque for £7,250. It was a signed print.'

Jenkins just stared at Mrs Caldicot. 'How many photographs has he got?'

'Oh, he's got a suitcase full of them,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'But he's got the negatives in the bank.'

'It's a licence to print money,' said Jenkins. 'He worked with Cartier-Bresson didn't he? His later photographs of Paris in the 1950s are classics.'

'I don't know very much about him,' admitted Mrs Caldicot. 'I keep meaning to go to the library but I haven't had the time.'

'He's the photographer who took that famous picture of two lovers feeding pigeons at the top of the Eiffel Tower. You see it on postcards and tea towels all over the place. He must have made a fortune out of that picture alone.'

'He wants to give me some more photographs,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'But it doesn't seem right.'

'But why?' asked Jenkins. 'The photographs in his suitcase alone are worth more than he could ever spend. And the negatives - well, I don't think anyone could put a price on those.'

Mrs Caldicot thought for a while and then shook her head. 'I can't let him,' she said eventually.

'OK,' said Jenkins, smiling. 'So we discount the easy solution. Let's try more difficult answers. What about a jumble sale?' he asked taking a huge bite out of a cheese, pickle and tomato sandwich.

Mrs Caldicot looked at him. 'Do people still have jumble sales?' she asked.

'I don't really know,' admitted Jenkins. 'They've probably been superseded by charity shops, car boot sales and garage sales. But I don't see why you shouldn't hold a jumble sale if you'd like one. That should help bring in some money.'

'Do you think there are any rules and regulations governing the storage, display and sale of jumble?' asked Mrs Caldicot. The regulations with which the council had recently bombarded her had induced a certain amount of nervousness.

'Almost certainly,' replied Jenkins. 'But in my experience the people who maintain these regulations are not quick workers. If you advertise your jumble sale no more than a week or ten days before the event the chances of the local authority's jumble sale department hearing of it and being able to take effective action will, I suspect, be rather slim.'

'We could have stalls,' said Mrs Caldicot, who was warming to the idea. 'Throwing tennis balls at old china, guessing how many peas there are in a bottle, throwing buckets of water over the vicar - that sort of thing.'

'That's more the sort of thing you find at a fete rather than a jumble sale,' pointed out Jenkins.

'So why don't we have a fete and jumble sale?' asked Mrs Caldicot, who was never slow to adapt. 'If the weather is good we could hold the whole things on the front lawn.'

'And if it's wet?'

'Oh, it won't be,' said Mrs Caldicot confidently. 'It'll be a gloriously sunny day. Just warm enough but not too hot. A lovely blue sky with a few fluffy little clouds scattered around.' She sighed and smiled at Jenkins. 'I'm fed up with constantly having to plan for every eventuality,' she admitted. 'It will be a gorgeous day,' she said, not leaving any room for dissent.

'And if it does rain?'

Mrs Caldicot glared at him. 'There you go,' she said. 'You're being pessimistic.'

'I'm being practical!' insisted Jenkins.

'If, against all the odds, it does rain then everyone will just have to bring umbrellas,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'And I'll ask Mrs Roberts to persuade the landlord at the pub down the road to lend us those huge umbrellas he has in his beer garden.'

'But he'll need the umbrellas himself if it's raining.'

'No he won't. No one sits out in a beer garden if it's raining. The umbrellas are only there to keep the sun off. And if there's sunshine we won't need the umbrellas.'

Jenkins found himself unable to counter this argument. 'Well, you'll have to abandon the throwing water over the vicar stall if it rains,' was all he said. 'People will be able to just watch him getting wet anyway.'

'You come into the lounge and make yourself comfortable,' said Mrs Caldicot, laughing. 'I'll bring you a nice cup of tea and some chocolate biscuits and we'll talk about it some more.' She wandered into the lounge ahead of Jenkins to see who was there and what was going on. Apart from the Merivales, who were sitting on the sofa holding hands and watching an old Walter Matthau movie on television, the only person present was Mrs Torridge.

'Good morning, everyone,' said Mrs Caldicot.

The Merivales turned, waved and greeted Mrs Caldicot.

Mrs Caldicot nodded back and gave them a little wave.

'Gkeytsk bwnkh kehgl!' said Mrs Torridge, still gagged and bound.

'Good morning, Mrs Torridge,' said Mrs Caldicot gaily.

'Good heavens!' said Jenkins, who had followed Mrs Caldicot into the lounge and only spotted Mrs Torridge when he followed Mrs Caldicot's gaze. 'What on earth has happened to Mrs Torridge?' he asked Mrs Caldicot.

'I don't know,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'What has happened to Mrs Torridge?' she asked the Merivales.

'Mr Roxdale tied her up and gagged her,' explained Mrs Merivale.

'Oh fine, that's all right then,' said Mrs Caldicot. She turned to Jenkins. 'Mr Roxdale tied her up and gagged her,' she explained.

'I heard,' said Jenkins. He bent a little closer to Mrs Caldicot, so that he wouldn't be overheard. 'I don't wish to be a prude,' he said, but is, er, is that sort of thing allowed?' He looked around and lowered his voice still further, as though concerned that someone might overhear what he was about to say. 'I mean, what would the local authority have to say if they knew one of your male residents was going around tying up the female residents?'

'Oh I don't think he makes a habit of it. In fact I don't think he's done it before,' said Mrs Caldicot. She turned to Mrs Torridge. 'Are you all right?' she asked.

'Gkwhwgn kehaklh!' replied Mrs Torridge, nodding her head. Mr Roxdale had done a very good job with the clothesline and with the gag. The yellow bloomers were held firmly in place with Mr Roxdale's tie.

'I think perhaps you ought to see what she's saying,' said Jenkins.

'Do you really think I should?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'I do,' insisted Jenkins, who could see the headlines. 'Elderly Woman Found Bound And Gagged In Nursing Home. Cabbage War Heroine Guilty Of Neglect.'

Mrs Caldicot, who had great respect for Jenkins intuition, unfastened Mr Roxdale's tie and carefully removed the yellow bloomers from Mrs Torridge's mouth. As she did so Mrs Torridge became increasingly agitated.

'Put them back!' she cried, the moment her mouth was empty of underwear.

'Are you all right?' asked Jenkins.

'Of course I'm all right!' said Mrs Torridge, rather crossly. 'I'm an escapologist. Put the gag back!' She sighed, wearily. 'I bet Harriet Houdini didn't have people ripping out her gags.'

'Harriet Houdini?' said Jenkins, puzzled. 'Who on earth is Harriet Houdini?'

'Harry's sister,' explained Mrs Torridge. 'She would have been famous if it hadn't been for Harry. Put the gag back. I was just beginning to get it free. Now I'll have to start all over again.'

'Today you're an escapologist?'

'Of course.'

'And Mr Roxdale tied you up because you asked him to?'

Mrs Torridge stared at Mrs Caldicot as though she had gone off her head. 'Yes, of course, he did,' she replied, clearly running out of patience. 'Now, will you put the gag back, please.' Mrs Torridge opened her mouth wide and put her head back, waiting for the gag to be reinserted.

Gingerly, Mrs Caldicot put a tiny portion of the yellow bloomers back into Mrs Torridge's mouth. Crossly Mrs

Torridge pulled at the bloomers with her teeth, pulling as much of the material as she could into her own mouth. Then, she looked down at Mr Roxdale’s tie, which was lying on her lap.

When the tie had been tied around her head to her complete satisfaction Mrs Torridge nodded her thanks and began again to struggle to free herself from her gag and the heavily knotted clothesline.

‘You made a good job of that,’ said Jenkins. ‘Are you sure you haven’t done it before?’

Mrs Caldicot looked at him.

‘Sorry!’ apologised Jenkins.

‘I’ll go and make you a cup of tea,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Then we can talk some more about the jumble sale.’

‘Don’t forget the chocolate biscuits,’ Jenkins called after her.

Chapter 53

After Mrs Caldicot had disappeared Jenkins turned and, for the first time, noticed Mr and Mrs Merivale.

‘Good movie?’ he asked them.

‘Wonderful,’ replied Mr Merivale.

‘One of the best,’ added Mrs Merivale. ‘Hopscotch.’

‘Starring Walter Matthau,’ said Mr Merivale.

‘And Glenda Jackson,’ added Mrs Merivale.

‘She was a great comedy actress,’ Mr Merivale pointed out. ‘She made a lovely film with George Segal.’ He screwed up his eyes, clearly trying to think of the title. ‘What was it called, dear?’ He asked his wife.

‘A Touch of Class,’ replied Mrs Merivale.

‘That’s the one,’ agreed Mr Merivale. ‘But I like this one better.’

‘Matthau is very funny,’ agreed Mrs Merivale. She turned her head. ‘I knew him, you know,’ she told Jenkins.

‘And Jack Lemmon,’ added Mr Merivale. ‘We knew them both. Great stars.’

‘Great stars,’ agreed Mrs Merivale. ‘I know her too,’ she said, nodding to the screen where Glenda Jackson was coming out of a Post Office in a town which Jenkins thought looked distinctly Bavarian.

‘Did I overhear Mrs Caldicot say we’re going to have a jumble sale?’ asked Mrs Merivale.

‘I think that’s the plan,’ said Jenkins.

‘She’ll want someone famous to open it,’ said Mr Merivale. ‘We could help. If you like.’

‘We know lots of famous people,’ said Mrs Merivale.

‘That would be wonderful,’ said Jenkins. ‘Who can you get?’ he asked, thinking that he ought, perhaps, to humour them. ‘Who would you like?’ asked Mr Merivale.

‘Michael Caine? Sean Connery? Roger Moore?’ suggested Mrs Merivale.

‘We could ask Glenda,’ said Mr Merivale.

‘She’s retired now. She’s got plenty of time,’ said Mrs Merivale.

‘She’s a Labour MP,’ said Jenkins.

‘That’s what I said,’ insisted Mrs Merivale. ‘She’s retired now. Got plenty of time.’

‘Do we know that other chap who played Bond?’ Mr Merivale asked his wife.

‘George Lazenby?’

‘No. We don’t know him.’

‘Timothy Dalton?’

‘That’s him. Do we know him?’

‘I do,’ replied Mrs Merivale. ‘I’m not sure about you.’

‘And there’s another one.’ said Mr Merivale.

‘Pierce Brosnan,’ said Jenkins.

‘Know him,’ said Mr Merivale without hesitation. ‘Lovely chap. Really nice.’

‘And Judy Dench,’ said Mrs Merivale.

‘She’s in the Bond films now,’ said Mr Merivale. ‘She plays M.’

‘Any one of those would be marvellous,’ said Jenkins. ‘But I expect they’ll be very difficult to get hold of. They’re probably all very busy people.’

‘It depends on who’s in the country,’ said Mrs Merivale. ‘Just let us know the date. And try to give us as much notice as you can.’

‘Here’s your tea and biscuits,’ said Mrs Caldicot, approaching Jenkins and the Merivales. She carried a tray containing a pot of tea, two cups, a jug of hot water, milk, lemon, sugar and a plateful of biscuits. ‘Would you two like a cup of tea?’ she asked the Merivales.

‘Oh no, thank you Mrs Caldicot,’ said Mrs Merivale. ‘It’s very kind of you but we’ve already got a pot,’ she nodded towards the table in front of them on which stood a large green teapot and the usual extras.

‘We were just talking about your jumble sale,’ said Mr Merivale. ‘We’ll help you find someone to open it.’

Mrs Caldicot, slightly surprised, looked at Jenkins then turned back to Mr Merivale. ‘That would be very nice of you,’ she said.

‘Do you have a date yet?’ she asked.

‘I thought about having it a week on Saturday,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘That’s a bit soon, isn’t it?’ said Jenkins.

‘No,’ said Mrs Caldicot firmly. ‘We’re not going to spend months planning this. Let’s just do it. A week on

Saturday it is. Rain or shine.'

'We'd better go and make a few phone calls,' said Mrs Merivale. 'Can I use your office Mrs Caldicot?'

'Of course you can,' she replied. When the Merivales had gone Mrs Caldicot turned to Jenkins and smiled. 'They mean well,' she said.

'I know,' said Jenkins.

'You must know all sorts of famous people,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'People you've interviewed and so on.'

Jenkins looked at her.

'I know,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I'm sorry. But I'm desperate.'

Jenkins sighed. 'I'll see who I can come up with,' he promised her.

'You're a darling,' said Mrs Caldicot, and to her surprise as much as his, she kissed him on the cheek.

Chapter 54

When the doorbell rang several of the residents, together with Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts, were sitting in the lounge watching an old Marx Brothers film. Jenkins had had to go back to his office.

‘What’s that noise?’ Mr Merivale asked his wife.

‘It’s the rain, dear,’ answered Mrs Merivale.

‘Don’t be silly,’ laughed Mr Merivale. ‘I don’t believe in Father Christmas, let alone all that stuff about Rudolf.’

‘It’s the doorbell,’ Mrs Roberts told them. ‘I’ll answer it.’ She got up and left the room. Mrs Caldicot and the rest continued to watch as Chico sold Groucho another thick form book for the horse races.

Mr Merivale, who had clearly been puzzled by something, spoke again. ‘It’s not really Christmas is it?’ he asked his wife.

‘Ssshhh!’ she whispered, holding a finger across her own lips. ‘No, it’s not Christmas,’ she assured him.

Mrs Roberts came back into the room. ‘It’s that Mr Muller-thingy again,’ she told Mrs Caldicot.

‘Oh damn. What does he want?’ asked Mrs Caldicot. Mr Muller-Hawksmoor and Ms Jones had become regular visitors to The Twilight Years Rest Home; like smells from bad drains they were unwelcome but difficult to get rid of.

‘I don’t know,’ said Mrs Roberts. She blushed. ‘I forgot to ask. But he’s got that Ms Jones with him. And they’ve both got clipboards.’

Mrs Caldicot took a deep breath and rolled her eyes heavenwards. ‘I suppose we’d better find out what they want,’ she said, heading for the front door and apologising to Mr Livingstone and Mr Hewitt who were enjoying a game of bowls on the hall carpet.

‘Ah, Mrs Caldicot,’ said Muller-Hawksmoor, smiling oleaginously. ‘May Ms Jones BA and I come in?’ He put one foot in the hallway and started to walk forwards.

‘What do you want?’ demanded Mrs Caldicot, frowning.

Mr Muller-Hawksmoor halted, as though playing ‘statues’ and the smile disappeared instantly. ‘I have to tell you, Mrs Caldicot,’ he said, assuming his most pompous tone, ‘that Ms Jones BA and I are here as official representatives of the local Council. We are here to conduct a staff and customer census and you are legally obliged to allow us unhindered and unfettered entrance to your establishment. It is our belief that you have a mismatched staff-customer quota and if our investigations confirm this then Ms Jones and I have the authority here,’ and at this point Mr Muller-Hawksmoor pulled a piece of paper out of his breast pocket and waved it in Mrs Caldicot’s direction, ‘to apply a closure order to this establishment’.

Mrs Caldicot stared for a moment, first at Mr Muller-Hawksmoor and then at Ms Jones BA. Finally, she stepped back and opened the door wider. ‘I wouldn’t dream of hindering or fettering either of you,’ she told them.

‘Good!’ said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, striding into the hallway. ‘Very wise, Mrs Caldicot.’ The smile had reappeared. It was about as honest and as long lasting as a car salesman’s promise. Ms Jones followed Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. She didn’t bother to smile.

‘What on earth did all that mean?’ whispered Mrs Roberts.

‘I think it meant that they think we don’t have enough members of staff,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘If they can prove that they’ll shut us down.’

Silent with horror, Mrs Roberts just stared.

‘Please do be careful,’ said Mrs Caldicot, as she closed the front door. ‘Mr Livingstone and Mr Hewitt are playing bowls.’ She pointed to an onion about a yard short of front door. ‘I think that’s what they call the ‘jack’,’ she explained.

‘We are...’ began Mr Muller-Hawksmoor.

‘Ouch!’ interrupted Ms Jones BA, leaping into the air, dropping her clipboard and grabbing her ankle. She swore loudly and impressively and started hopping around the hallway as though she had suddenly decided to play a solitary game of hopscotch.

‘What on earth’s the matter?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

Ms Jones BA, still hopping around, let go of her ankle and pointed to a large turnip which had rolled to a halt alongside a radiator pipe. ‘I was attacked with that...weapon!’ she shouted.

‘Excuse me,’ said Mr Livingstone, with a polite smile. ‘Can I have my ball back, please?’ He squeezed between Mrs Caldicot and Ms Jones BA and picked up the turnip which had collided with Ms Jones’s leg. ‘Don’t you worry about getting in the way,’ he told Ms Jones BA with another rather gummy smile. ‘Mr Hewitt said I can take my go again.’ Mr Livingstone sometimes took his teeth out and left them in a glass in his bathroom. ‘They cost me a fortune,' he once explained. 'I don't want to wear them out.'

'You're a menace!' snarled Ms Jones BA at Mr Livingstone. 'You'll be hearing from my solicitors. You could have broken my leg.'

'I beg your pardon,' interrupted Mrs Caldicot. 'But if you're contemplating legal action I feel I should perhaps point out that I did warn you that Mr Livingstone and Mr Hewitt were playing bowls.'

'No you didn't!' protested Ms Jones BA. She turned to Mr Muller-Hawksmoor for support. 'Did she?'

Mr Muller-Hawksmoor looked at her, looked at Mrs Caldicot and then looked embarrassed. 'Well, actually, I think she did say something of the kind,' he admitted.

Ms Jones BA, gave her ankle another rub and picked up her clipboard. She muttered something inaudible under her breath.

'Where would you like to start?' Mrs Caldicot asked them brightly.

'Oh don't you worry your-little-old-self about us,' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, brightening a little. 'You get on with your daily duties. I'm sure you've got lots to do. Floors to sweep, beds to make, lavatories to clean - that sort of thing. We don't want to interfere with the smooth running of your establishment. We'll just wander around and take a few notes. Just pretend we're not here.'

Mrs Caldicot had put up with Mr Caldicot, also a condescending, patronising man, for most of her adult life. Her patience with such people had long since evaporated. She turned away, marched into her office and slammed the door, feeling her cheeks redden with fury. 'You stupid, arrogant, preening, self-satisfied, pea-brained moron,' she said out loud. She was aware that it wasn't the best she could have done, as insults go, but it had passion on its side and it made her feel a little better.

Seconds later, someone knocked timidly on the door.

'Yes!' shouted Mrs Caldicot through the closed door. 'Who is it? What do you want?'

The door opened a few inches. 'It's me,' whispered Mrs Roberts nervously poking her head through the gap. 'Have you got someone with you?' she looked around. 'I wondered...I thought perhaps...would you like a cup of tea?'

Mrs Caldicot opened the door and let Mrs Roberts in. 'I'm sorry,' she said. She put her arm around Mrs Roberts's waist and gave her a cuddle of apology. 'That man infuriates me,' she explained. 'I could happily throttle him.'

'Have a cup of tea instead,' Mrs Roberts suggested.

'How long do you think I'd get if I throttled him?' Mrs Caldicot asked her friend. 'Do you think Mr Roxdale would bury the body for me? Of course I'd have to throttle Ms Jones BA too. But that would be a pleasure too.' She thought for a moment and smiled to herself. 'How long would it take Mr Roxdale to dig a hole big enough for the two of them?'

'I'm not sure,' said Mrs Roberts, quite seriously. 'Do you want me to ask him?'

Mrs Caldicot smiled and then laughed. 'No, Mrs Roberts!' she said.

'OK,' said Mrs Roberts. 'I think that's probably wise anyway,' she added confidentially.

'But I will have a cup of tea,' said Mrs Caldicot. She thought for a moment. 'And a plateful of calorie free jammy dodgers,' she added. 'I need cheering up.'

'Shall I offer Mr Muller-Hawksmoor and Ms Jones BA some tea and biscuits?' Mrs Roberts asked.

'Certainly not,' replied Mrs Caldicot. 'They don't need cheering up and if they do we're not going to do it for them. If they want tea they can pop out to a teashop. We've got better things to do than make tea for them.' This undeniably petty moment of vengeance made her feel much better. As Mrs Roberts disappeared and headed for the kitchen she sat down behind her desk and started to open the second post. It was, just like the first post, largely composed of circulars and bills. The circulars she tossed, unopened, into the waste-paper basket. The bills she carefully unfolded and then slid them into the cardboard file where Mr Twist kept such items. 'You have to take your turn,' she told the invoices as she slid them out of sight. 'No cheating and no queue jumping.'

Mrs Caldicot had just completed this small, dull and unrewarding task, and was waiting patiently for Mrs Roberts's return with tea and jammy dodgers, when she heard the unmistakeable booming voice of Mr Muller-Hawksmoor shouting her name.

'Oh no,' she thought, her heart sinking. 'What does he want now?' She leapt up from her chair, shimmied neatly around her desk, opened the door into the hallway and found a red-faced Mr Muller-Hawksmoor standing so close to her that she automatically stepped back a pace or two.

'There is a woman in your lounge who is bound and gagged!' shouted Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, his eyes bulging and his face an unhealthy shade of red.

'Oh, yes, that'll be Mrs Torridge,' explained Mrs Caldicot, calmly.

'You knew?' exploded an incredulous Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. 'You knew about this?'

'Of course,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'It's my responsibility to know what is going on.'

‘B...b...but,’ stuttered Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, struggling to overcome a rare attack of speechlessness. ‘You can’t just go around tying up your customers.’

‘Oh, I didn’t tie her up,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘And she’s not a customer. She’s a friend.’

‘If you didn’t tie her up who did?’ he roared.

‘I think it was Mr Roxdale.’

‘And just who is Mr Roxdale?’

‘Another guest. He lives here too.’

‘He’s another of your customers?’

‘I do wish you wouldn’t use the word ‘customer’. It makes me feel as though I’m running an off-licence or a hair dressing salon.’

‘What we call him is utterly irrelevant,’ said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor.

‘I disagree. I think that what we call him is very relevant,’ insisted Mrs Caldicot.

‘Whatever we call him, the man should clearly be locked up,’ said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor firmly. ‘He’s nothing more than a common pervert.’ He shook a bony finger at Mrs Caldicot. ‘And you aren’t a lot better,’ he told her.

Suddenly, from behind Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, there came a blood-curdling scream.

The colour drained from Mr Muller-Hawksmoor’s face. He tucked his clipboard under his arm and turned towards the source of the cry. ‘Good heavens!’ he cried. ‘What the hell was that?’

‘It sounded like Mrs Torridge,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘It came from the lounge.’

‘Ye Gods!’ said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. ‘It sounded terrifying. We’ll better go and see what the hell it was.’ He moved out of the way so that Mrs Caldicot could get ahead of him and lead the way. Mrs Caldicot suspected that this was done more through cowardice than any desire to behave like a gentleman.

‘It did sound like Mrs Torridge,’ said Mrs Caldicot, hurrying across the hall. She spoke over her shoulder. ‘But it can’t be. She’s gagged.’

Mrs Caldicot was right about the scream coming from Mrs Torridge but wrong about her being gagged.

‘Just look at what this stupid woman has done!’ shouted Mrs Torridge angrily, when she saw Mrs Caldicot.

‘What’s the matter with her?’ whimpered a sad looking Ms Jones BA, who was cowering on the far side of the room, and appeared to be trying, with very marginal success, to hide behind her clipboard. She was not a big woman. But the clipboard was smaller.

‘Oh dear,’ said Mrs Caldicot to Ms Jones BA. She shook her head disapprovingly. ‘You really shouldn’t have done that, dear.’

‘But she’s tied up!’ explained Ms Jones BA, pointing to Mrs Torridge. ‘And she was gagged.’

‘I’m going to call the police!’ said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, who had brought up the rear and was now standing staring at a scene which he was clearly having some difficulty in believing. He spoke firmly and with authority.

‘Don’t be silly,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘The police won’t want to arrest Ms Jones BA. What she did may have been stupid but she thought she was being helpful.’

Mr Muller-Hawksmoor stared at her open mouthed. ‘Why on earth should the police want to arrest Ms Jones BA?’ he demanded. ‘She didn’t bind and gag this unfortunate woman.’ He paused and frowned, clearly thinking hard. ‘She was the one who ungagged her!’ he announced.

‘But Mrs Torridge wanted to be tied and gagged,’ Mrs Caldicot pointed out.

Mr Muller-Hawksmoor and Ms Jones BA looked at Mrs Torridge and then at Mrs Caldicot.

‘It’s a sort of game she plays,’ explained Mrs Caldicot. ‘It doesn’t do anyone any harm.’

‘Who are you calling an unfortunate woman?’ demanded Mrs Torridge, angrily.

‘Shall I put the gag back in, dear?’ asked Mrs Merivale, who, disturbed by the noise, had temporarily moved away from the television set.

‘Yes, please,’ said Mrs Torridge, gratefully. ‘I’d nearly got rid of it by myself,’ she muttered, almost under her breath. ‘That’s twice.’

‘Now don’t exaggerate dear,’ said Mrs Merivale, giving her a soothing but at the same time admonitory pat on the shoulder. ‘I don’t think you’d nearly got that gag out at all.’

‘Well I was making progress,’ said Mrs Torridge, a little sulkily.

It was the last thing she said for a while. Mrs Merivale picked the now sodden yellow bloomers off Mrs Torridge’s lap and stuffed them neatly in Mrs Torridge’s mouth.

‘Wait!’ said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. ‘What on earth is going on here?’

‘Mrs Merivale is replacing Mrs Torridge’s gag,’ explained Mrs Caldicot.

‘Do you mean this woman really wants to be gagged?’ demanded Mr Muller-Hawksmoor.

‘Yes,’ confirmed Mrs Caldicot.

‘Is this a regular occurrence?’ demanded Mr Muller-Hawksmoor.

‘Oh no,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘It’s just for today. At least I think it is. Mrs Torridge thinks she’s Harriet Houdini.’

‘And just who is Harriet Houdini?’ demanded Mr Muller-Hawksmoor.

‘Harry’s sister,’ explained Mrs Caldicot. She looked at Mrs Torridge, waiting for her to explain. But Mrs Torridge was gagged and Mrs Merivale was tying the yellow bloomers in place with Mr Roxdale’s tie. ‘As I understand it Harriet Houdini was rather overshadowed by her brother but Mrs Torridge believes that she was an impressive escape artist in her own right.’

‘Well I’ve never heard of Harriet Houdini,’ snorted Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, rather unwisely forgetting about Ms Jones’s presence. ‘And I don’t care who she was or how good at it she may have been,’ he added, compounding the error.

‘Please remember that women have been oppressed for centuries,’ Ms Jones BA reminded him. ‘My sister Harriet Houdini is simply another example of male chauvinism.’

‘Had you ever heard of Harriet Houdini?’ demanded Mr Muller-Hawksmoor.

‘No,’ admitted Ms Jones BA. ‘And that’s just the point, isn’t it?’ The relationship between two council employees was deteriorating rapidly.

‘Yesterday she was Queen Elizabeth I,’ said Mrs Caldicot, who thought she ought to interfere before the two social workers came to blows. ‘We all had to curtsey.’

‘I’m not interested in any of this piffle,’ snorted Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, unpleasantly. He was, thought Mrs Caldicot, an exceedingly easy man to dislike. She now wished she had not interfered but had allowed the dispute between him and Ms Jones BA to follow its natural course.

‘Well, not the men, of course,’ added Mrs Caldicot. ‘They had to bow.’

‘I don’t know what sort of establishment you are accustomed to running but now that you’re in the retirement home business you simply cannot allow your customers to tie one another up.’

‘They don’t make a habit of it,’ Mrs Caldicot reassured him. ‘But I think you will find that, according to articles 93 and 94 of the appropriate international human rights legislation, Mrs Torridge has a perfect right to have herself bound and gagged, if that is what she wants.’ She had no idea whether or not this was true. But it sounded convincing and she had learnt enough to realise that people who live by the rule book are for ever conscious that they can sometimes die by it too.

Mr Muller-Hawksmoor strode over to Mrs Torridge’s chair. ‘Did you ask to be tied up and gagged?’ he demanded. Mrs Torridge stared up at him, unblinkingly.

‘Mrs Torridge has a gag in,’ said Ms Jones BA, who had emerged from behind her clipboard.

‘I know she’s got a gag in!’ snapped Mr Muller-Hawksmoor.

‘Would you like me to remove the gag?’ asked Ms Jones BA.

‘I don’t think that’s a terribly good idea,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘I think Mrs Torridge will be very upset if you do that again.’

Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, turned round and glared at his assistant. ‘I don’t think it would be a good idea at this stage to remove the gag,’ he said, speaking through gritted teeth.

‘Would you like me to call the police?’ asked Ms Jones BA.

‘No, thank you,’ said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor.

‘If you want to talk to her while she has the gag in place, we will have to create a communications code,’ Ms Jones BA pointed out.

Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, turned his head and stared at her. ‘Thank you, Ms Jones,’ he said icily. ‘Thank you so much for your help.’ He turned back to Mrs Torridge. ‘I am going to ask you some very simple questions,’ he said. ‘Do you understand that?’

Mrs Torridge stared at him.

‘Nod if you understand me,’ said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor.

Mrs Torridge slowly but firmly nodded her head.

‘There you are, Ms Jones!’ said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor proudly. ‘We now have a communications system which will enable us to talk to Mrs Torridge.’

Ms Jones said nothing.

‘Did you ask to be bound and gagged?’ Mr Muller-Hawksmoor asked Mrs Torridge. ‘Was it something you voluntarily requested, of your own free will? Or were you tied up and gagged against your will? Is it true that Mr Roxdale was responsible? If so, would you like us to call the police and have Mr Roxdale arrested?’

Confused by this flurry of questions Mrs Torridge said nothing.

‘I think you’ll have to ask one question at a time, Mr Muller-Hawksmoor,’ suggested Ms Jones BA, perhaps unwisely. ‘If you keep the questions simple so that she can just nod for ‘yes’ and shake her head for ‘no’...’

‘I do realise that, Ms Jones,’ said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, speaking to his assistant through teeth now gritted more thoroughly than any icy winter road. ‘I’m not a complete fool,’ he added.

Mrs Caldicot, who had been watching this bizarre exchange with considerable pleasure, suddenly became aware of someone standing next to her. She turned her head. It was Mrs Roberts.

‘I’m sorry to bother you, Mrs Caldicot,’ said Mrs Roberts quietly, but just loud enough for Mr Muller-Hawksmoor and Ms Jones BA to overhear. ‘But if you can spare a few moments you’re needed in your office.’

‘Excuse me,’ said Mrs Caldicot, turning to Mr Muller-Hawksmoor.

‘Of course, of course,’ said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, with an irritated wave of his hand. He had forgotten that Mrs Caldicot was still there. ‘You attend to your business.’

Mrs Caldicot followed Mrs Roberts into her office.

‘What is it?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘Can you deal with that?’ asked Mrs Roberts, nodding to a nice looking cup of tea and a plateful of jammy dodgers on her desk.

Mrs Caldicot beamed at Mrs Roberts. ‘Oh, I would think so,’ she said. ‘Where are yours?’

‘In the kitchen,’ said Mrs Roberts.

‘Well smuggle them in here,’ insisted Mrs Caldicot. ‘Let’s have a little party.’

Chapter 55

The arrival of Mr Muller-Hawksmoor and Ms Jones BA had not gone unnoticed among the other residents of the Twilight Years Rest Home.

‘What do they want?’ Mr Livingstone asked Mr Merivale, who had slipped out of the lounge and, followed faithfully by Miss Nightingale and Mrs Bartholomew was hurrying around the house warning the others that the enemy was within.

‘I don’t know,’ admitted Mr Merivale.

‘They’re doing a census,’ explained Mr Hewitt. ‘They’re going to count us all,’ he explained. ‘I think they’re trying to prove that there aren’t enough staff members for the number of residents.’

‘Are you sure?’

Mr Hewitt nodded. ‘I heard him say they’d come to do a census when Mrs Caldicot let them in.’

‘I don’t want to be counted,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘Do you?’

‘Certainly not,’ replied Mr Hewitt. ‘They’ll be wanting to tattoo us with numbers next.’

‘Do we have to let them count us?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Right,’ said Mr Livingstone. He closed his eyes and thought for a moment. ‘I’ve got a plan,’ he announced proudly.

The others waited.

‘We’ll just keep moving around,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘Running up and down the stairs and hiding in cupboards. That sort of thing.’

The others looked terribly disappointed at this. Running up and down the stairs was not their forte and none of them would have put ‘hiding in cupboards’ at the top of their lists of favourite things to do on a dull afternoon.

‘And we’ll add to the confusion them by dressing up in different clothes,’ continued Mr Livingstone. ‘I know what these people are like. We all look the same to them.’

The others recognised the truth in what he said and looked more interested. They liked the idea of dressing up.

‘I like that idea very much,’ said Miss Nightingale. ‘Can I dress up as Florence?’

‘Florence who?’

‘Florence Nightingale.’

‘Of course you can,’ said Mr Livingstone. He stopped and thought for a moment. ‘Have you got anything suitable to wear?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Miss Nightingale. ‘I’ve got an old nurse’s uniform. I bought it a car boot sale.’

‘Why on earth did you do that, dear?’ asked Mrs Merivale, who enjoyed jumble sales but who had always managed to resist the temptation to buy things for which she could not immediately think of a practical application. She would buy a potato peeler for ten pence but not a first edition by Charles Dickens for a pound.

‘No one else wanted it so I got it for a shilling,’ explained Miss Nightingale. ‘Well, five of those new pennies.’ She looked thoughtful for a moment. ‘I’ve never actually worn it,’ she admitted. ‘But it looks plenty big enough.’

‘I think that’s a terrific idea,’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘If we all dress up and run around the house Muller-Hawksmoor and that funny woman with the B.A. will think there are more of us than actually are...’

‘Exactly!’ said Mr Livingstone, triumphantly; delighted that his idea had received such approbation.

‘...but that’s not actually a terribly good idea,’ continued Mr Merivale. ‘If Mr Muller-Hawksmoor thinks that there are more of us than there really are, Mrs Caldicot will get into even more trouble that she would have got into if we hadn’t done anything.’ The others all looked at him, displaying roughly equal quantities of alarm and puzzlement. Although they loved Mrs Caldicot very much and did not want to do anything which would make things worse for her they didn’t yet quite understand just how confusing Mr Muller-Hawksmoor could possibly cause trouble for Mrs Caldicot. ‘We’ve got to convince him that there are enough members of staff for the number of residents,’ explained Mr Merivale. ‘If we convince him that there are more residents than there really are he will expect there to be far more nurses than there really are.’

The others thought about this for a while.

‘Do you know, I think he’s right,’ said Miss Nightingale at last. The others nodded their agreement. Mr Merivale, who had been waiting for the result with all the nervousness of a politician on polling night, looked very relieved.

‘Of course he’s right,’ said Mrs Merivale instantly. For her loyalty to her husband always came first.

‘Let’s go and find your uniform!’ Mr Merivale said to Miss Nightingale.

She headed for her room. The rest of the residents hurried after her. Mr Livingstone, not a man to dwell on disappointment, hurried after her with them.

Chapter 56

'We're sunk,' said Mrs Caldicot gloomily.

'Why?' asked Mrs Roberts.

'They'll close us down,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Every residential home is supposed to have the right proportion of staff members to residents. Muller-Hawksmoor will close us down today.' She paused. 'With great glee,' she added.

'But we've got the Merivales doing the cooking and Mr Roxdale doing the gardens,' Mrs Roberts pointed out.

'Yes, but you and I are the only official, paid members of staff,' Mrs Caldicot pointed out. 'As far as the Council is concerned the others don't count.'

'And because of that they'll close us down?'

'Yes.'

'How many more members of staff do we need?'

'One would do,' said Mrs Caldicot. She sighed miserably. 'But where am I going to find another member of staff at such short notice?'

'Do we need somebody now?'

'Now,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. 'We need another nurse on duty while Muller-Hawksmoor and Ms Jones BA are here.'

'Oh dear,' said Mrs Roberts.

'I think that sums it up quite nicely,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. 'They'll close us down,' said Mrs Caldicot, flatly. 'Without one other member of staff we're in breach of E.U. regulations.' She took another jammy dodger and bit into two.

Suddenly Mrs Roberts's face brightened up. 'I've got an idea!' she said. 'Why don't I ask Miss Smith to help us out?'

Mrs Caldicot, munching on the first half of her jammy dodger, looked up. 'Who's Miss Smith?'

'A friend of mine. She works at the 'Happy Years Retirement Home' round the corner.'

'How on earth can she help?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'If she comes round we'll have another member of staff, won't we?'

Mrs Caldicot stared at Mrs Roberts. 'Can we do that?' she asked.

'Of course she will. She hates bureaucrats too.'

'It's a bit dishonest, isn't it?' said Mrs Caldicot, slightly nervously.

'We're just trying to satisfy their silly rules,' Mrs Roberts pointed out.

Mrs Caldicot swallowed the biscuit she had been chewing, leant across the desk and lowered her voice. 'Do you think it will work?'

'I don't know,' admitted Mrs Roberts. 'But it might. And what have we got to lose? If we don't try they're going to close us down anyway.'

'Ring her,' said Mrs Caldicot firmly. She put the other half of the jammy dodger into her mouth. 'Hrink jher!'

Mrs Roberts picked up the telephone.

'Miss Smith, we're in trouble,' she said, moments later. 'Can you help us out?'

There were some sympathetic sounds from the other end of the telephone.

'We've got the inspectors in and we're a nurse short,' Mrs Roberts explained. She listened, smiled, nodded, said 'thank you', put the telephone down and turned to Mrs Caldicot. 'She understood. She says she'll come straight round,' she said. 'She'll be here in five minutes.'

Chapter 57

The good news was that Miss Nightingale had found her nurse’s uniform. The bad news was that it didn’t fit her.

‘I can’t understand it,’ she said, as full of woe as a person can be over an outfit which does not fit. The dress wasn’t long but it looked as though it had been built for a prop forward. The top half of the dress hung loose in every possible direction and the sleeves were so long that they completely covered her fingertips.

‘Maybe we could adjust it,’ suggested Miss Nightingale, gloomily looking down at the ill-fitting uniform.

‘I don’t think so,’ said Mrs Merivale sadly. She was standing behind Miss Nightingale and examining the size printed on the label at the back. ‘It’s an XXXXL,’ she announced. ‘I think it must have been built for a rugby player.’

In fact, she was closer to the truth than she perhaps suspected. The nurse’s uniform had, in fact, arrived at the jumble sale where Miss Nightingale had found it from a theatrical costumier who had hired it out to large young gentlemen looking for something saucy to wear at fancy dress parties.

‘Who on earth is going to wear it?’ asked Mr Livingstone. ‘It’s miles too big for any of us.’

‘Hullo, everyone!’ said Jenkins, suddenly appearing, as though from nowhere. ‘I wondered where you’d all got to!’

Chapter 58

'I can't wear this!' protested Jenkins, as he was hurried along the landing towards the staircase. For the fifth time he stopped and stared himself in a mirror.

'Stop admiring yourself!' said Mr Roxdale.

'Men can be so vain,' said Miss Nightingale. 'That's at least four times he's looked at himself.'

'Give us a twirl!' suggested Mr Merivale, cruelly.

'Actually, I hate to say this,' said Mr Roxdale, who didn't at all. 'But that dress really suits you.' He stood back and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. 'You actually do look very nice.'

And the truth was that the nurse's uniform fitted Jenkins very well.

'I'm a respectable editor. I have a position to uphold. I can't be seen like this!' said Jenkins, though he immediately felt so embarrassed at the pomposity of what he had said that he knew that he would have to go through with it.

'I have to admit that if I weren't a happily married man I could quite fancy you,' said Mr Merivale. He turned to Mr Roxdale who was standing next to him. 'Hasn't he got lovely legs?'

'Amazing,' agreed Mr Roxdale, admiringly. 'They do say men have better legs than women.'

Mrs Merivale had lent Jenkins a wig which, she said, she sometimes wore on rather special occasions. Two grapefruit and an appropriate undergarment (loaned by Mrs Merivale) had been used to help fill in the baggy portion of the front of the dress. And Mrs Merivale had done Jenkins's make up so effectively that when he looked in the mirror he had to touch his chin with his forefinger to reassure himself that he truly was looking in a mirror.

'Ouch!' cried Jenkins. He turned round. 'Who did that?'

'You've got a lovely bottom too,' said Mr Roxdale.

'Well, I'd be grateful if you'd leave it alone,' said Jenkins.

'It was just a playful slap,' said Mr Roxdale. 'I thought you'd be flattered.'

'You are a terrible sexist pig, you know,' complained Jenkins. 'It's men like you who give men a bad name. If you do that again I'll bash you with my handbag.'

'Gosh,' said Mr Roxdale. 'You make more fuss about a little slap on the bottom than a real woman would.'

'You try slapping me on the bottom and see what it gets you!' said Miss Nightingale sternly.

'Why would I want to slap you on the bottom?' demanded Mr Roxdale, genuinely confused by this intervention, not to mention slightly horrified by the very thought of slapping Miss Nightingale on the bottom. He glanced across at the bottom in question and shuddered.

'We'd better get you downstairs and counted,' said Mr Livingstone.

'What's wrong with my bottom?' asked Miss Nightingale, full of indignation. Mr Roxdale tried to melt into the background.

'They'll spot that I'm a fraud in seconds!' protested Jenkins.

'No they won't,' insisted Mr Merivale.

'The minute I open my mouth they'll realise I'm not a woman,' protested Jenkins.

This comment was so obviously accurate that no one said anything for a few moments.

'So, keep your mouth shut,' said Mr Roxdale eventually. 'Don't say anything!' he added.

'But if they're doing a census they're bound to ask me my name,' said Jenkins.

'Try talking like a woman,' said Mr Roxdale. 'Let's see what you sound like.'

'What shall I say?'

'Say your name?'

'My name is Jenkins,' said Jenkins, in a rather bizarre falsetto.

'Not your real name,' said Mr Livingstone, despairingly.

'What name shall I give then?' asked Jenkins.

'Doris,' said Mr Merivale. 'You look like a Doris to me.'

'What the hell does a Doris look like?' demanded Jenkins.

'You,' replied Mr Merivale. 'You're definitely a Doris.'

'Doris what?'

'Day?' suggested Mr Merivale.

'Don't be silly. He doesn't look the slightest bit like Doris Day.' said Mrs Merivale.

'Dolittle,' suggested Miss Nightingale.

'Dolittle?' said Jenkins, puzzled. 'Why Dolittle?'

‘Because it goes nicely with Doris.’

Jenkins shook his head. ‘I don’t like Doris much,’ he said, reverting to his true voice. ‘But I like Dolittle even less. It reminds me of that daft bloke who talked to animals. It isn’t,’ he paused, searching for the appropriate word. ‘It isn’t believable. I want something believable.’

‘Night,’ suggested Mr Williams. He paused. The enthusiasm for his suggestion seemed muted. ‘Knight,’ he said. ‘With a ‘K’.’

‘Doris Knight,’ said Jenkins to himself. He repeated the name. ‘Actually, I quite like that,’ he admitted. ‘It sounds quite good.’ He tried out the falsetto again. ‘Doris Knight. Hmmm. Yes, I like that.’

‘He doesn’t sound very convincing, does he?’ said Miss Nightingale to everyone in general and no one in particular.

‘I’ll tell them you’ve got a sore throat,’ said Mr Merivale. ‘I’ll come with you and speak for you.’

‘Do you think that will work?’ asked Jenkins. He seemed unconvinced.

‘It will have to,’ said Mr Merivale with a sigh. He led the way. ‘Come on, Doris.’

Doris followed him down the stairs.

Chapter 59

Ms Jones BA was in the kitchen, checking the cupboards. She and Mr Muller-Hawksmoor had split up so that they could search the house more efficiently.

'Hello there, can I help you?' asked Mr Merivale.

Ms Jones BA, looking slightly embarrassed, shut the door to the cupboard she had been examining. 'We're doing a census,' she explained. 'We're checking the customer-staff ratio.'

'Good heavens!' said Mr Merivale. 'You don't want to waste your time doing that.' He tried to laugh at the thought, though the noise he made sounded more like a drain emptying. 'There are so many members of staff here that we spend our days falling over them.'

'As far as we are aware Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts are the only members of staff,' said Ms Jones BA coldly.

'And there's my wife and myself,' said Mr Merivale.

'You may help out,' said Ms Jones coldly. 'But you're registered as customers. You can't be staff as well.'

'Oh.' Mr Merivale sounded disappointed. 'And there's Doris,' he added.

'Doris?' repeated Ms Jones frowning. 'Who's Doris?'

'Doris Knight,' said Mr Merivale. 'She's around here somewhere.' He turned round and jumped slightly when he discovered that Doris was standing right behind him.

'There you are. What did I tell you? There are so many staff members in this place that they follow you around all over the place. Can't get a minute's peace and quiet.'

Mr Roxdale, Miss Nightingale, Mr Livingstone and the rest of the residents were lined up behind Doris.

'Your name is Doris?' said Ms Jones BA, consulting her clipboard.

'Yes,' replied Mr Merivale. 'She's Doris.'

'She's not on this list,' said Ms Jones.

'She's new,' replied Mr Merivale.

'She can answer for herself, can't she?' said Ms Jones.

'She's very shy,' said Mr Merivale. At the very same moment, Doris pointed to her throat. 'Sore throat!' she rasped hoarsely in a strange falsetto. 'And she's got a sore throat,' Mr Merivale added, without a moment's hesitation.

Ms Jones BA stared at Doris as though he thought he knew her. 'Haven't we met somewhere before?' she said.

'Oh I expect you've seen her around,' said Mr Merivale. 'She's always rushing around with a duster or a syringe. Polishing here, injecting there.'

'I thought you said she was new?'

'She is. But she's already done a lot of rushing around. Amazing hard worker.'

'Dusters and syringes?' said Ms Jones BA, putting all the emphasis on the second word. 'Polishing and injecting?' Once again the emphasis was on the second word. She glared at Doris searchingly. 'Are you a nurse or a cleaner?'

'She does a bit of both,' said Mr Merivale, quickly. 'We don't have any union demarcation rules here.'

'It's most unusual to hear of nurses doing the dusting,' said Ms Jones BA. 'And it would be illegal for a cleaner to give injections.'

'Oh she's fully qualified,' said Mr Merivale.

'Loads of diplomas,' said Mr Livingstone.

Doris looked down, as though overcome by modesty. Her gaze fell upon her black, size twelve, lace up brogues. There hadn't been time to find any more suitable footwear. She lifted her eyes quickly.

'I think I'd better ask Mrs Caldicot about Doris,' said Ms Jones BA, marching out of the kitchen.

She was very upset about this new discovery. It didn't look as though Mrs Caldicot was short of staff after all. And if Mrs Caldicot wasn't short of staff she and Mr Muller-Hawksmoor wouldn't be able to close down the retirement home. Unlike Mr Muller-Hawksmoor she had no financial incentive to put Mrs Caldicot out of business. She was doing it for sheer, unadulterated pleasure. She was doing it for fun. She liked her work.

Ms Jones BA was feeling very glum and very aggrieved as she headed up the stairs looking for Mrs Caldicot.

Chapter 60

‘One of your grapefruit is slipping,’ muttered Mr Livingstone to Doris.

Doris looked down. ‘Oh damn.’ ‘She’ unbuttoned her dress, slipped a hand inside and began to make the necessary adjustments. ‘How on earth do women manage?’ she demanded, in a whisper.

‘I don’t think they ever face quite that problem,’ whispered Mr Livingstone to Doris. ‘I’m speaking from memory, and memory can sometimes be very misleading, but I don’t remember every coming across a woman who filled her bra with grapefruit.’

‘No. I suppose not,’ sighed Doris. ‘If this goes on much longer I think I’ll have breast reduction surgery. I’m sure I can cope with being flat-chested.’ Her left bosom slipped through her fingers, slid down inside her dress and landed on the floor with something of a thud.

‘Damn!’ said Doris, forgetting her falsetto, her sore throat and her shyness.

Appropriately, the grapefruit rolled underneath a large chest. It was a large stripped pine chest of drawers but it was a large chest.

‘I’ll go and get you another,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘We can always get that one back later.’

‘There aren’t any more,’ said Mrs Merivale.

‘No more grapefruit?’

‘No. We only had two left. Those two.’

‘Damn!’ said Doris again. ‘Then we’ll have to get this one back. ‘I can’t go around looking lopsided.’ She fell to her knees and tried to reach under the chest.

‘Take the other one out,’ suggested Mr Livingstone, still standing. ‘We could say you’ve had that breast reduction surgery.’

Doris turned her head and glowered up at him. ‘Don’t be silly,’ ‘she’ snapped. ‘This dress needs a bosom. And anyway I’m not going around looking shapeless and flat-chested. I’ve got my pride, you know.’

‘But a moment ago you said...’

‘I changed my mind,’ insisted Doris, turning back so that she could concentrate on searching for her missing grapefruit. ‘Woman’s prerogative.’ She sat up for a moment and adjusted her remaining, solitary breast which had slipped out of position and was threatening to escape and join its companion in exile. ‘If I’ve got to be a woman I damned well don’t want to be a flat-chested one.’

‘I’ll help you,’ said Mr Livingstone. He walked to the front door, collected an umbrella from a stand, and walked back to where Doris was on her knees. She looked up, slightly alarmed at the sight of the umbrella but Mr Livingstone simply sank to his knees and slid the umbrella around underneath the chest to help locate and retrieve the missing bosom.

‘Do you want any help?’ asked Mr Merivale.

‘No thanks,’ said Mr Livingstone, without looking up. ‘Don’t hang around here. You’ll draw attention to us. Go and wait for us in the lounge.’ He waved the umbrella around again underneath the chest.

‘I think I’ve found it!’ he said. He waved the umbrella around and dragged out an old slipper.

Chapter 61

Ms Jones BA hadn't found Mrs Caldicot. But, instead, she had found Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. He was wandering disconsolately around the empty bedrooms upstairs. The census wasn't going well. He had heard a lot of noise but had got there minutes after Doris and the rest had all headed back downstairs.

'They've got another nurse,' said Ms Jones BA glumly.

Mr Muller-Hawksmoor stared at her.

'I know,' agreed Ms Jones BA, seeing the disappointment and frustration on Mr Muller-Hawksmoor's face.

'Another nurse? And she works here?'

'So she says. The residents claim she does too.'

'I bet she's a fake.' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor firmly. 'Someone dressed up as a nurse.' He wasn't going to let his £50,000 windfall blow away this easily.

Suddenly Ms Jones BA snapped her fingers in delight. 'Do you know, you're right!' she said, excitedly. If she had been an entirely different person she might have kissed Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. 'I know where I've seen Doris before!' she said.

'Where?'

'That man who calls around to take Mrs Caldicot out. What's his name?' She struggled for a moment. 'Jenkins! That's his name. I heard someone say he's a journalist.' She looked very pleased with herself. `I knew I'd seen her somewhere before!' she said.

'Never seen him,' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. 'He's Mrs Caldicot's fancy man, you say?'

'Absolutely. I'm certain.'

'Right!' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, tucking his clip board under his arm and rubbing his hands with glee. 'I'll soon expose this little scam.'

Chapter 62

Mr Roxdale, Miss Nightingale, Mr Williams, Mr and Mrs Merivale and the rest of the residents headed for the lounge where they found Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts sitting facing Mrs Torridge offering her encouragement. Miss Smith, Mrs Roberts's friend, wearing a nurse's uniform, sat nearby. She had worked in nursing homes and rest homes for nearly twenty years and thought she'd seen everything. It wasn't the sight of a resident tied up which surprised her, but the sight of a resident who was tied up being encouraged to escape. Normally, in the homes where she had worked, the residents who were tied up were intended to stay that way.

'Come on, Mrs T!' said Mrs Caldicot. 'You're doing brilliantly.'

Mrs Torridge had, by rubbing her mouth against her shoulder managed to free part of the restraint which kept the yellow bloomers in her mouth. As a result of this energetic endeavour, Mr Roxdale's tie, the restraint holding the gag in place, had slid down towards her chin. Another half an inch and it would fall down around her neck, loose and irrelevant. At the same time Mrs Torridge had, by bouncing up and down in her chair, succeeded in loosening the ropes which bound her.

'Marvellous!' cried Mrs Roberts, enthusiastically.

The others, seeing that Mrs Torridge was very nearly free, offered her their verbal encouragement.

Suddenly Mr Muller-Hawksmoor burst into the room, followed at some distance, by Ms Jones BA.

'I'm sorry to butt in on what is undoubtedly a very important part of your management responsibilities,' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor to Mrs Caldicot. 'But I believe that you're trying to pull the wool over our eyes!'

'What on earth do you mean by that?' demanded Mrs Caldicot, with all the indignation of genuine innocence. She stood up, closely followed by Mrs Roberts and her friend the nurse.

'Is that the woman you claim is a staff members?' demanded Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, pointing at Miss Smith.

'She is a member of staff,' said Mrs Caldicot, quite accurately. 'But just not here,' she muttered under her breath.

'She's a fully qualified nurse,' said Mrs Roberts.

'Ha. That is no woman!' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. 'Here is your fraud!' And with that he strode across to Miss Smith.

'No!' cried Ms Jones BA. `Not that one!' But it was too late. Mr Muller-Hawksmoor had already struck. He had dropped his clipboard on the now empty sofa. With his left hand he had taken a good chunk of Mrs Roberts's friend's hair. And with his right he tore at the front of her uniform. His attempt to remove what he imagined to be a wig was, inevitably, a dismal failure since the hair he had got hold of was firmly attached to Mrs Roberts's friend's head. His lunge at her uniform was far more successful and while Ms Jones behind him stood frozen in horror, her arm outstretched in a belated attempt to stop Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, Mr Muller-Hawksmoor tore the woman's uniform from the neck to the hem, scattering buttons, badges and one of those funny little watches which nurses wear upside down, all over the carpet. 'This nurse is a man!' cried Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. It was quickly apparent that this accusation would receive no points for accuracy.

'Help!' screamed Mrs Roberts's friend, attempting to cover up her semi-nakedness in the time honoured fashion. One hand across her bra and the other across her panties. There could now be no doubt at all that Mrs Roberts's friend was not Jenkins in disguise. Nor could there be doubt that Mr Muller-Hawksmoor's allegation was entirely unjustified and unjustifiable.

'Oh dear me,' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. Horrified, he stepped back. 'Oh, golly. I'm so sorry...'

Mrs Roberts's friend was no shrinking violet. She had been in not entirely dissimilar situations before. Indeed, on one occasion, at a doctors' party at the hospital where she had trained, she had found herself in a situation which bore a startling resemblance to this one. But if a man was going to tear off her clothes in public she expected him to, at the very least, ply her with substantial amounts of alcohol and flattery. Mr Muller-Hawksmoor had done neither of these things. Abandoning her modest pose she pulled her right arm back, took a good pace forward and aimed a solid fist at Mr Muller-Hawksmoor's jaw.

Unfortunately, just as her first shot out Mr Muller-Hawksmoor moved slightly to one side. Ms Jones, standing behind him did not move. The nurse's fist landed not on the nose of Mr Muller-Hawksmoor's nose but on the nose of Ms Jones. Ms Jones, although hit only a glancing blow, collapsed as though felled by a boxing ox. When she realised that she had missed her primary target the nurse let fly with her other fist. This time the intended target was the recipient. Mr Muller-Hawksmoor hit the floor at almost exactly the same moment that Mrs Torridge succeeded in spitting out her gag and freeing herself of the ropes which had bound her. Mrs Torridge was not a woman for whom a grudge was a long-term affair. For her a grudge was something to get rid of in as rapid and as dramatic a fashion as was possible. 'Hoorah!' she shouted. She took two strides to where Ms Jones BA was attempting to sit up, bent down and proceeded to flatten the Council employee with a single, effective blow. Ms Jones BA collapsed again and lay sprawled on top of Mr Muller-Hawksmoor's unconscious body. Mrs Torridge, avenged, stood and beamed.

'Well, I do declare,' said Mrs Caldicot, who had watched these events with all the curiosity of a disinterested spectator. Just then Doris and Mr Livingstone entered the room. Mr Livingstone had succeeded in locating and rescuing Doris's missing grapefruit and the well-rounded citrus fruit, restored to its temporary owner, had been reinstalled in its new home.

'Mrs Caldicot,' said Mr Livingstone, taking advantage of the fact that both Mr Muller-Hawksmoor and Ms Jones BA were no longer taking much interest in the proceedings, stepping over the scattered bodies as though this was something he did every day of his life, 'I think you should meet Doris Knight, your new nurse,' he said.

Mrs Caldicot's reaction was not quite what he, or anyone else in the room, expected.

She burst into laughter. 'So,' she said eventually. 'Would someone like to explain to me why Jenkins is dressed up as a nurse with what looks very much like two grapefruit stuffed down his dress?'

Jenkins stared at her. 'Well damn me,' he said. 'You saw through it.'

'Would anyone like a cup of tea?' Mrs Caldicot asked. There was much murmuring of assent. 'I'll put the kettle on,' she said. She turned to Jenkins. 'Perhaps you'd be kind enough to ring for an ambulance, nurse,' she said.

Chapter 63

By the time the ambulance arrived both Mr Muller-Hawksmoor and Ms Jones had regained consciousness. Ms Jones, still sitting on the carpet, turned towards Mrs Caldicot. ‘What happened?’ she asked.

‘You keep still, love,’ one of the ambulance men told her. ‘We’ll have you on a stretcher in just a jiffy.’

‘I don’t need a stretcher!’ snapped Ms Jones, turning towards the ambulance man and attempting, unsuccessfully, to struggle to her feet. She turned back to Mrs Caldicot and repeated her question.

‘I’m afraid that Mr Muller-Hawksmoor sexually assaulted one of our nurses,’ Mrs Caldicot told her. ‘He tore off her dress and exposed her. You were helping him. The nurse simply defended herself.’

Ms Jones remembered. She would have gone pale, had her natural skin colour allowed such a thing. ‘I wasn’t helping him,’ she said. There was a catch in her voice. ‘I was trying to stop him!’ she protested, rather weakly.

‘I’m afraid that isn’t quite how it seemed to the rest of us,’ said Mrs Caldicot rather coldly.

‘He thought the nurse was a fraud,’ said Ms Jones. ‘I...er...we...thought she was a man I recognised.’

‘She wasn’t,’ pointed out Mrs Caldicot.

‘No,’ agreed Ms Jones. She closed her eyes and shuddered. ‘I remember.’

‘Come along now, love,’ said the ambulance man, trying once again to move Ms Jones onto a stretcher which he had arranged on the floor next to her.

‘I’m not your `love’!’ snarled Ms Jones. The ambulance man recoiled, as though threatened by a snake. Ms Jones pushed away his helping hand and stood up. She wobbled for a moment and then sat down on the arm of a nearby easy chair. The ambulance man, looking rather hurt, picked up his stretcher and moved across to his colleague, who was kneeling next to Mr Muller-Hawksmoor.

‘What happened?’ asked Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, blinking and looking around him. There was a trickle of blood running from his nose and he still had a rather dazed look. He had never been hit before, let alone knocked out.

Ms Jones told him. She did not spare him any of the details. Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, being quite capable of going pale went pale. The pallor increased as he gradually realised the full consequences of what he had done.

‘Is the nurse going to, er, press charges?’ Mr Muller-Hawksmoor asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘I don’t think so,’ replied Mrs Caldicot. ‘Can I assume that this visit is now over and that you’re happy with our staffing arrangements?’

‘Oh absolutely,’ said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, eagerly. ‘Very satisfied.’ He did not struggle as the ambulancemen moved him onto their stretcher. He turned to Ms Jones as they wrapped a blanket around him.

A couple of minutes later the ambulance left, siren squealing, with Mr Muller-Hawksmoor in the back.

Ms Jones, having rejected offers of a cup of tea or a bed for an hour or two, drove after the ambulance. She was not a good driver and as the little car jumped and bounced down the rutted drive she had to concentrate hard on what she was doing. She had to concentrate so hard, in fact, that as the car left the driveway she did not notice the three people standing on the pavement nearby selling their last few bunches of flowers.

Chapter 64

The flower selling was going very well.

The arrival of Jenkins, still dressed as Doris, had added the glamour which Mr Roxdale and Mr Williams had been unable to provide, and had provided evidence to support the old adage that you can use sex - even the rather superficial sexual artifice of a middle aged man and two grapefruit sharing a frock - to sell virtually anything.

Attracted by the grapefruit rather than the middle aged man cars squealed to a halt by the pavement's edge and Mr Roxdale and Mr Williams sold every last freesia and dahlia in minutes.

'So,' said Mr Roxdale, contemplating several buckets, containing nothing but a few broken green stalks and some slightly grubby water, 'now what shall we do?'

'We could mend the roof,' suggested Mr Williams, without a moment's hesitation. 'That would give Mrs Caldicot a nice surprise.'

'That's a splendid idea,' agreed Mr Roxdale, with a nod of approval. 'Mrs Caldicot would be delighted.'

'She's been trying for weeks to find someone to put those loose slates back,' said Mr Williams.

'Even if she could find someone they'd no doubt charge a fortune,' said Mr Roxdale.

'So we'll do it,' said Mr Williams.

'It can't be all that hard,' said Mr Roxdale.

'I shouldn't think so,' agreed Mr Williams. 'But we'll need a ladder.'

'Can't do it without a ladder,' nodded Mr Roxdale.

'Big ladder,' said Mr Williams. 'Have to be a big ladder.'

'Long way up to the roof,' said Mr Roxdale.

'Long way,' agreed Mr Williams.

Jenkins, still disguised as Doris, feared that mending roofs might prove more demanding than selling flowers. 'Does either of you know anything about mending roofs?' he asked.

'Don't be a wet blanket,' said Mr Williams, sharply.

'It can't be all that difficult,' insisted Mr Roxdale. 'I've known several roofers and they were all complete idiots. I knew one who failed his driving test three times.'

'I know where there's a ladder,' said Mr Williams. 'I saw one round the back. In the shed. Hanging on two nails on the wall.'

'What on earth has failing a driving test got to do with mending roofs?' asked Jenkins.

It was not an entirely unreasonable question but the other two didn't hear him and so they didn't bother to try to answer. They were half way up the driveway, carrying their empty buckets (they had emptied the water down a nearby drain and stuffed the remaining bits of greenery behind a bush so that they could, as Mr Roxdale put it, 'compost down') and hurrying towards the hut where Mr Williams felt sure he had seen a ladder.

Chapter 65

They found an old wooden ladder just where Mr Williams had remembered seeing it, and carried it around to the front of the house.

'Gosh,' said Mr Roxdale, looking up. 'They put the roof up very high, didn't they?'

Mr Williams started up the ladder, reached the third rung and stopped. 'I feel dizzy,' he said. 'Hold the ladder. It keeps going round and round.'

'You're only two feet off the ground,' Mr Roxdale told him. 'And I am holding the ladder.'

'I never did have much of a head for heights,' Mr Williams admitted.

'I'll blindfold you,' suggested Mr Roxdale. 'If you can't see anything you'll be fine.'

'What are you going to do when you get up there?' asked Jenkins.

'He's going to mend the roof,' said Mr Roxdale. 'He can either take off the blindfold or else I'll shout instructions.'

'But what's he going to mend the roof with?' asked Jenkins.

Neither of the other two said anything. Mr Williams, still standing on the ladder, turned and looked at Mr Roxdale. Mr Roxdale looked back at him.

'He won't know that until he takes a look around,' said Mr Roxdale. 'If the slates have just slipped then all he needs to do is to climb onto the roof and push them around a bit.'

'I'm going to get out of this dress,' said Jenkins, deciding that things were getting a little too serious for him to be sharing a dress with two grapefruit. He hurried off towards the front door just as fast as his high heels would allow.

As he disappeared, Mr Williams turned. 'Climb up onto the roof?' he said, clearly startled. 'No one said anything about climbing onto the roof. I don't like this 'all he needs to do is climb onto the roof' stuff. What do you think I am? A cat?' Clearly unhappy, he stepped back down a rung. The wooden rung, which had held his weight when he'd been going up decided that it had had enough and snapped in two.

'That's it,' he said, jumping down onto the ground. 'I've had enough. I'm not going up there again. It was terrifying.'

'Hello, there,' said another voice. 'What are you lot doing?' They all turned. It was Mr Merivale. They explained.

'But we're all a bit nervous,' admitted Mr Williams. 'It's a long way up and the ladder is rotten.'

'You speak for yourself,' said Mr Roxdale. 'I didn't say I was nervous.'

'Then why don't you go up the ladder?' demanded Mr Williams, not unreasonably.

'Someone has got to stay down here and give instructions,' said Mr Roxdale. 'I'm management.'

'Since when?' asked Mr Williams.

'Since we decided to mend the roof,' replied Mr Roxdale.

'I'll go up,' offered Mr Merivale.

'OK!' said Mr Williams and Mr Roxdale simultaneously. 'If you insist,' added Mr Williams.

Gingerly, Mr Merivale tested the bottom rung of the ladder with his foot. It snapped in two. He tested another rung, by putting his weight onto it. That broke too. Now the bottom three rungs were all broken. 'Is this the best ladder you've got?' he asked.

'It's the only one we've got,' replied Mr Williams.

'I really don't think you should go up it,' said Mr Williams. 'I don't think it looks very safe.'

Mr Merivale smiled at him, put his right foot onto the edge of the lowest remaining rung and launched himself upwards. He scampered up the ladder more like a monkey than a man and reached the very top of the ladder in less time than it would have taken any of the others to run the same distance on the flat. Every rung snapped as he ran upwards. As soon as Mr Merivale reached the top of the ladder he clambered onto the roof and Mr Roxdale, down below, was left holding two long thin pieces of wood which were no longer connected to one another.

'He made it!' said Mr Williams.

Mr Roxdale struggled to hold onto the two separated poles but failed. The two side pieces of the former ladder fell sidewards and crashed onto the ground.

'That was absolutely amazing!' said Mr Roxdale. He and Mr Williams looked at each other, then up at Mr Merivale, and then back at each other. They then clapped enthusiastically

'What do I do now I'm up here?' yelled Mr Merivale, peering over the edge of the roof and shouting down. He waited for some response.

But down below Mr Roxdale and Mr Williams had panicked and had rushed into the house to fetch help.

There was a long pause. 'Er...why did I come up here?' Mr Merivale called. 'Is anyone there? Hello? Hello? Is anyone there?’

Chapter 66

There was some dispute about who panicked first.

Mr Williams claimed that it was Mr Roxdale. ‘It was definitely Mr Roxdale,’ he still claims. ‘Mr Roxdale ran into the house and telephoned for the fire brigade.’

‘I didn’t panic at all,’ insisted Mr Roxdale. ‘Mr Williams was hysterical. He was convinced that Mr Merivale was going to fall off the roof. I quietly walked into the house and telephoned for the fire brigade before things got completely out of control.’

The fire brigade arrived within ten minutes (a huge, bright red engine and a large number of large men still buttoning up their tunics and stuffing stockinged feet into their boots, as though they had all been disturbed at some extraordinary single sex orgy) but by then it was dark. The residents and staff of the Twilight Years Rest Home were gathering and standing on the lawn looking up at the roof. Jenkins had had time to take off his dress but not time to put on his trousers. He shivered in Doris’s underwear.

‘I can’t see any fire,’ said Mr Livingstone, who had left the house with Mr Roxdale to join Mr Williams on the lawn and was now peering up at the house, the roof and the sky, searching in vain for flames or smoke.

Before leaving the house Mr Livingstone had broken the glass on the fire alarm just inside the front door. It was something he had always wanted to do but the fulfilling of this simple ambition had, in the effect, proved to be rather disappointing.

‘There’s isn’t a fire,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘Someone is stuck up on the roof.’

‘The ladder simply fell apart,’ explained Mr Williams.

‘Why did he go up there in the first place?’ asked Mr Livingstone.

Mr Roxdale explained.

‘Who is it?’ demanded Mrs Merivale. ‘Who’s stuck up there?’

Mr Williams looked at her and placed a comforting hand on her arm. ‘It’s Mr Merivale,’ he said.

‘My Mr Merivale?’ said Mrs Merivale.

‘Yes,’ admitted Mr Livingstone. ‘I’m afraid it is.’

‘Oh well he’ll be all right,’ said Mrs Merivale. ‘Who on earth called the fire brigade?’ she demanded. Mr Livingstone stared at her and assumed that she was in shock. ‘I’ll fetch you a blanket and a cup of tea,’ he said. `Would you like some brandy in it or sugar?’

‘What’s happened?’ demanded Mrs Roberts, looking up at the front of the house. ‘Where’s the fire?’ On Mrs Caldicot’s instructions she had left the house to start a roll call of the residents.

Mr Roxdale explained.

‘Who’s in charge here?’ demanded a stout, round faced man whose helmet carried a very large badge and an instantly identifiable yellow flash.

‘Mrs Caldicot,’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘She’ll be here in a moment,’ she began. ‘Oh, there she is!’ she said, interrupting herself and pointing towards the front door where Mrs Caldicot was following Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough down the steps. Mrs Caldicot was holding Kitty and a torch. Kitty looked very upset at having been moved from her warm place in front of the fire.

‘Is everyone out of the building?’ demanded the stout man, striding over towards Mrs Caldicot.

‘I’m not sure,’ replied Mrs Caldicot. She walked towards Mrs Roberts, standing with the residents and asked her the same question. She remembered, too late, that she had forgotten to put the fireguard in front of the fire.

‘Everyone except Mr Merivale,’ said Mrs Roberts.

‘Mr Merivale?’ called out Mrs Caldicot. She decided that not having put the guard in front of the fire didn’t much matter if the house was already on fire.

‘I’m here,’ said Mr Merivale from the darkness at the outer edge of the group.

‘Everyone is accounted for,’ said Mrs Caldicot, feeling a great sense of relief.

‘We had a report that there was a man stuck on a roof,’ said the chief fire officer.

‘Perhaps I can explain,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘It was an accident.’

‘I rather thought it might have been,’ said the chief fire officer, drily. ‘Most of our ‘men stuck on roofs’ incidents are accidents. Where exactly is he and what happened?’

‘I’m not sure where he is. We can’t see him. But a friend of ours climbed up onto the roof to repair some slipped slates,’ explained Mr Roxdale. ‘And then the ladder broke.’

The chief fire officer removed his helmet and scratched his head. ‘And he’s still up there?’

‘He must be,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘He couldn’t have come down because we don’t have another ladder.’ He lowered his voice and looked around to make sure that no one else was listening before adding, ‘And if he had fallen off we’d see the body, wouldn’t we?’

The chief fire officer walked over to the fire engine and gave some brief instructions. Moments later the fire engine’s huge ladder swung into action, slowly rising up into the sky. A fireman stood on the top rung of the ladder and rose with it. A searchlight attached to the top of the ladder lit up the house roof.

At the back of the crowd Mr Merivale put his arm around his wife. ‘Exciting, isn’t it?’ he said to her. She looked at him. ‘I thought it was you up there.’

‘Oh no,’ he replied. ‘I came down. It was cold and I didn’t know what I was supposed to be doing up there anyway.’

‘That’s good,’ said Mrs Merivale. ‘Would you like me to get you some cake in a minute?’

‘That would be nice,’ said Mr Merivale. ‘And a cup of tea perhaps. Who’s up there? Do you know?’

‘I dunno,’ replied his wife. ‘Someone said it was you but I told them they wouldn’t need the fire brigade to get you down. How did you get down? Down a drain pipe?’

‘No. The guttering and down pipes were all too loose. I just took a few slates off the roof, climbed down into the loft and then came down the stairs,’ Mr Merivale told her.

‘Best way,’ nodded his wife, who after being married to a film stunt man for forty years was accustomed to her husband’s acrobatic ways.

Chapter 67

‘I can’t see anyone up here,’ shouted the fireman at the top of the ladder. ‘But there’s a big hole in the roof.’

‘That’s why we wanted to go up there,’ explained Mr Roxdale to Mrs Caldicot. ‘We thought we’d mend the roof for you. As a sort of surprise. Mr Merivale climbed up but the ladder broke.’

‘That was very sweet of you,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘But there shouldn’t have been a big hole in the roof. There was only a tiny leak.’

‘The slates have all been removed very carefully,’ said the fireman at the top of the ladder. ‘None of them is broken.’

‘Very odd,’ said the chief fire officer. ‘Is the hole big enough for a man to get through?’ he shouted back.

‘Yes,’ came the reply.

‘I’m just popping indoors to get some cake and a cup of tea for my husband,’ said Mrs Merivale to Mrs Caldicot. ‘Shall I make enough for everyone?’

‘Would your men like a cup of tea and a piece of cake?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘Well, that’s very nice of you,’ agreed the chief fire officer. ‘I dare say they wouldn’t say no. Would that be home-made cake?’

‘It certainly would,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘And Mrs Merivale is a splendid cook.’ She turned back to Mrs Merivale. ‘Tea and cake for everyone then, please,’ she said. ‘Do you need some help? I could ask someone to help you if you like.’

‘Oh no, don’t you worry, Mrs Caldicot’ said Mrs Merivale. ‘Mr Merivale will give me a hand.’ And off she trotted.

It was several seconds before Mrs Caldicot realised exactly what Mrs Merivale had said.

Chapter 68

The chief fire officer was very understanding.

'Just delighted that everything turned out well,' he said, alternately sipping a mug of Mrs Merivale's tea and munching a large slice of her very best coffee and walnut cake. 'How old did you say that chap was who climbed back through the roof?'

'When I last asked he told me that he was eighty-something,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Probably.' She didn't like to admit that her residents had stopped telling the truth about their ages.

'Amazing,' said the chief fire officer. 'Would you like us to mend that hole in your roof while we're here?' he asked.

'That would be very kind of you,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. 'But I don't want you to put you to any trouble...'

'No trouble at all,' the chief fire officer assured her. 'A couple of my blokes do a little roofing in their spare time,' he added. He called one of men and gave him instructions. The fireman raced up the ladder to the roof and had the slates fixed back in position in minutes.

'Good as new,' he said, when he was back down on the ground. Mrs Merivale handed him a plate containing a large piece of carrot cake, two buttered scones and a slice of treacle tart.

'Well, at least this added a bit of excitement to your life,' said the chief fire officer, as they prepared to leave. 'I expect it's a bit dull running an old folks home.'

Chapter 69

‘How much did we make out of selling flowers?’ asked Mr Williams, as he and Mr Roxdale had breakfast together the following morning.

‘With Doris’s help we got up to £112.45,’ replied Mr Roxdale. ‘That was the takings. But since we didn’t have any costs it was also the profits.’

‘Not bad. But it’s going to take us for ever to raise a decent amount of money,’ said Mr Williams.

‘And we’ve sold most of the stuff from my old garden,’ said Mr Roxdale with a sigh. ‘It’ll be months before we have anything else ready to sell.’

‘I do wish Mrs Caldicot would accept another couple of photographs,’ said Mr Williams, who had, some time before, confided in his friend. ‘It would solve a lot of problems.’

‘Women can be stubborn sometimes,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘It’ll probably be pride.’

‘Maybe we could think of a way to persuade her to take the money in another way,’ said Mr Williams.

They sat for a few moments in silence.

‘We’re holding a jumble sale soon,’ said Mr Roxdale, ‘Perhaps you could slip a couple of photographs onto the bric-a-brac stall?’

Mr Williams thought about this. ‘They’d probably get sold for 10 pence a piece,’ he said, glumly.

‘That’s true,’ agreed Mr Roxdale.

‘But maybe there is another way...’ said Mr Williams with a big smile.

Chapter 70

It was the day of the jumble sale and fete and, much to everyone's surprise, it wasn't raining. On the contrary, the sky was blue, the clouds were small, white and fluffy and the sun was shining brightly. It was, all things considered, pretty much a perfect day for an outdoor event of any kind.

The event was due to start at ten in the morning and by half past nine all the stalls were stocked and manned. Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough were in charge of the bottle stall, Mrs Torridge was selling hand coloured paper doilies (each one carefully painted by Rembrandt's long lost great niece), Mr Livingstone was running a sideshow where visitors could rent three wooden balls for 50 pence and then throw them at pieces of crockery set out on the shelves of the Welsh dresser borrowed from the kitchen, Mr Williams had organised a competition to guess how many peas there were in a jar and the Merivales were running the cake stall (fairy cakes, rock buns, slices of sponge cake all 50 pence each). Other residents were similarly occupied looking after other stalls. Mr Twist was in charge of collecting and counting the takings. Kitty, who was, as usual, in charge of sleeping was taking a long rest underneath the cake stall. The throwing water over the vicar stall had been abandoned; largely as a result of an acute shortage of vicars.

The first visitors, an elderly couple who were friends of the Merivales, arrived at 10.15 a.m. They visited the roll a penny stall (and won a bottle of tomato ketchup) and the bottle stall (and won a bottle of brown sauce). They bought two cups of tea, two rock cakes and three paperback books from a stall run by Mr Roxdale. The next visitors, a family of three who had seen the stalls from the road as they had been passing by, arrived at 10.50, invested £2.50 in fruitless attempts to win a goldfish and left, grumbling, at 10.58.

At 11.03 Miss Nightingale's niece, Daisy, arrived on her way to the airport. She kept her taxi waiting and stopped just long enough to win a bottle of pickled eggs and buy a pair of dark green fingerless gloves from Mr Roxdale's jumble stall.

'The residents and I have got a little surprise for you,' said Miss Nightingale, just before her niece rushed off again. She shyly handed Daisy a battered, elderly canvas weekend bag. Puzzled, and feeling rather embarrassed to receive a gift when she herself did not have one to give, Daisy accepted the bag, put it down on a nearby stall and tugged at the zip which opened to reveal a mass of small bottles and packets.

'We all collected some pills for you,' explained Miss Nightingale. 'None of them has been used.'

Daisy plunged a hand into the bag and pulled out two unopened packets of antibiotics and a sealed bottle of painkillers. She was crying with joy and appreciation when she left and gave everyone except Mr Roxdale a kiss and a cuddle. Mr Roxdale, who ran to the end of the line, managed to get kissed and cuddled twice.

'So that's why poor old Dr Bence-Jones spent hours writing out prescriptions,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Please don't be cross with us,' said Miss Nightingale. 'It was in a good cause.'

'It was in a good cause,' said Mrs Peterborough.

Mrs Caldicot smiled at them both. 'Why on earth should I be cross with you?' she asked them. 'I'm very proud of you all.'

After the excitement of Daisy's visit the stallholders and jumble salesmen and women had a respite, and yet another opportunity to view one another's wares and prizes, until the next arrival at 11.40. The next arrival was Jenkins.

'Are we too early?' the immaculately suited newspaperman asked Mrs Caldicot, who was standing talking to Mrs Roberts.

'No,' replied Mrs Caldicot. 'We're just having something of a lull at the moment.'

'I've brought Samantha Duck-Warmington,' said Jenkins, introducing his companion, a leggy blonde woman who looked about 18 and was wearing gold, high-heeled shoes and a tight fitting gold lame dress that appeared to have been manufactured out of a piece of material just about large enough to make a handkerchief. Her enormous, unrealistically firm breasts appeared to be balanced on a tiny shelf inside the dress. She was dragging behind her a huge aluminium coloured suitcase, the tiny wheels of which did not move well on the lawn.

Mrs Caldicot smiled at the woman but, to her surprise, was conscious that she felt an inexplicable antagonism towards her.

'Samantha reads the weather forecasts on a Welsh Cable Television station programme,' explained Jenkins. 'She was in the area for the weekend and kindly agree to come along and officially open the fete for you.'

'Oh that's very kind of you, dear,' said Mrs Caldicot to Samantha. She realised, with some surprise, that she disliked Samantha because she was jealous.

'It's a pleasure, I'm sure,' said Samantha, beaming insincerely. 'Can you show me to my dressing room, please?'

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘My dressing room,’ repeated Samantha. ‘So that I can change into something more suitable for the photographers.’

Mrs Caldicot was about to point out that the only photographer present was Mr Williams who was, she felt uncertain, unlikely to have had much experience as a paparazzi photographer when Mrs Roberts spoke.

‘Shall I take Samantha to her dressing room?’ she asked. ‘I think we decided that your office would be suitable?’

‘Oh, thank you, Mrs Roberts,’ said Mrs Caldicot, now wondering just what Samantha had in her bag which she felt would be more suitable wear for a jumble sale among geriatrics.

‘I’m sorry about Samantha,’ said Jenkins, when she and Mrs Roberts had gone. ‘I asked our show business department to find someone who was free and willing to come along and open the jumble sale for you.’ He shrugged. ‘But there must be some big show business event going on somewhere else today. When my reporters rang round all their contacts they found that everyone famous was busy today. Samantha was all they could find.’

‘She seems very young,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

Chapter 71

It wasn't until 12.55 pm that Mrs Caldicot realised that the day wasn't going to go quite as she had expected.

She and Jenkins were eating crumbly pies, sipping tea from plastic beakers and wondering whether the good weather would hold when a limousine cruised into the driveway. The number of guests had, by now, risen quite considerably and the event no longer looked quite so forlorn. The limousine stopped and most of the residents and guests, including Mrs Caldicot and Jenkins, stopped what they were doing to see who got out of it.

'That man looks like Michael Caine,' said Mrs Caldicot to Jenkins.

'That man is Michael Caine,' said Jenkins.

Mrs Caldicot turned and looked at him.

'One of the reporters must have got lucky,' explained Jenkins. 'I wish they'd telephoned and let me know.'

Mr Caine straightened his jacket, looked around, as though searching for someone he was expecting to see, and smiled generically as people recognised him. Suddenly, there was something of a commotion from near the cake stall and Mrs Merivale, followed closely by her husband, hurried across to greet the film star. The film star put his arm around her and gave her a kiss. She kissed him back. Mr Caine then shook hands warmly with Mr Merivale and punched him playfully on the shoulder.

'They know him,' whispered Mrs Caldicot. 'Mr and Mrs Merivale really do know him!'

'He was one of the stars they said they would invite,' remembered Jenkins. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that several of the guests had taken out their mobile phones and were excitedly calling friends to tell them who had arrived and what they were missing.

'I don't believe it,' whispered Mrs Caldicot. 'Look,' she added, 'they're bringing him over here.' Moments later Maple Merivale introduced Mr Caine to Mrs Caldicot and Jenkins and Mrs Caldicot and Jenkins to Mr Caine.

'Thank you so much for coming,' Mrs Caldicot managed to croak.

'It's a pleasure,' said Mr Caine, with a beaming smile. 'I'd never turn down an invitation from Maple and Maurice.'

'You, er, all know one another, then?' said Mrs Caldicot.

Mr Caine laughed. 'Know them? I love them both dearly,' he said with evident sincerity. 'I can't remember how many times we've worked together. Maple is a wonderful cook. Film crews all over the world loved her. It broke everyone's heart when she retired. She must have prepared more bacon sandwiches than any woman alive.' He turned to Maurice. `And Maurice was one of the most amazing stunt men I ever worked with.' He hesitated then grinned. 'This guy,' he said, 'once won a bet that he could shin up the outside of a building faster than anyone else could get up using the lift or the stairs.' He laughed. Maurice looked embarrassed and modestly lowered his eyes.

'Excuse me, Mr Caine,' said a middle aged woman in a flowery dress and a straw hat. She thrust a mobile telephone towards his face. 'Would you just say hello to my mother? She's a great fan of yours.'

Unflustered, and with great grace, Mr Caine took the telephone and spoke to the invisible fan. As he did so a large gleaming green Bentley purred into the driveway and pulled up behind Mr Caine's limousine. The chauffeur got out and opened the back door.

'I don't believe it,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Look who's getting out. It's Roger Moore!'

Chapter 72

By two o'clock there were seven limousines, Bentleys and Rolls Royces parked in the driveway and Mr Caine and Mr Moore had been joined by (in order of their arrival) Sean Connery, Joan Collins, Peter O'Toole, Pierce Brosnan, Glenda Jackson and Dame Judi Dench. Each one had been invited by the Merivales and each one greeted both Maple and Maurice with kisses, hugs and obvious great delight. The relatively small number of stars who hadn't been able to turn up (in every case because they were filming out of the country) had sent their sincerest apologies and promised that they would be delighted to visit another time.

Not surprisingly, the number of other visitors present on the lawn at the Twilight Years Rest Home had also increased. A generation or two ago the news of such an event would have been spread by word of mouth and limited by the speed at which legs could carry the messengers (and their willingness to leave the scene of all the excitement). Today those present could spread the news in seconds, without moving an inch - simply by pressing a few buttons on their mobile telephones.

The stars mingled easily and willingly, both with one another and with the eager autograph hunters. Cameras flashed incessantly as visitors recorded themselves standing next to their heroes and heroines.

'Excuse me, ma'am, are you Mrs Caldicot?' said a smartly uniformed senior looking policeman.

Mrs Caldicot confirmed her identity.

'I wish you'd given us a little notice of this,' said the police officer, rather sternly. 'I've brought over as many men as I can spare. I hope the local football crowd behaves itself. We've had to bring in most of the chaps from the local ground.' Mrs Caldicot started to explain, realised that she couldn't and so just nodded weakly and said 'Thank you'.

She was saved by the arrival of Samantha who had, at least, managed to complete her change of costume. She was now wearing a silver lame dress, no more or less revealing than the one in gold, and silver high heel shoes. Her still unlikely looking breasts still lay quietly on display, like two pink blancmanges presented for the world's delight.

'Would you like me to perform the opening ceremony now?' Samantha asked Mrs Caldicot, seemingly unaware of the fact that the lawn and those parts of the driveway not occupied by expensive motor cars, were solid with people. The policeman, who had remained standing nearby, studied Samantha carefully until a teenage boy with a cheap camera tried to take a snap of the two together; he then blushed, coughed, looked uncomfortable and hurried away to rescue Mr Brosnan from a cluster of small, over-eager boys.

'Er, oh, er, that's very kind of you,' replied Mrs Caldicot. Samantha gave Mrs Caldicot one of her best smiles. 'Oh how sweet!' she said, suddenly spotting Roger Moore talking to Joan Collins. She clapped her hands together like an excited child. 'You've hired some of those lookalikes!'

Samantha stood on an upturned wooden box which Jenkins had found underneath one of the trestle tables, and announced the fete and jumble sale officially open. She seemed blissfully unaware of the fact that no one seemed in the slightest bit interested in her or what she was doing. Jenkins delighted her by taking her photograph with a disposable camera he had bought for five times its cost from a boy of twelve who had spotted a commercial opportunity and brought a bagful of such cameras from the nearest branch of Boots the chemists.

Afterwards the happy weather girl mixed with the guests and posed for photographs with several film stars. Endearingly, she still did not realise that they really were film stars. She believed that she was honouring them by allowing herself to be photographed next to them. 'This will help you get your picture into the papers,' she told a smiling but slightly puzzled Peter O'Toole. 'You look just like him,' whispered the well-meaning weather girl, as she hobbled off to give Michael Caine's career a boost.

Chapter 73

'That was a wonderful day,' said Jenkins.

'It was, wasn't it?' replied Mrs Caldicot.

The two of them stood on the steps and looked out across the lawn. The local publican and two of her barmen were reclaiming the tables and umbrellas which he had lent. Mr Roxdale and Mr Williams were helping them by offering advice and instructions. Balloons and bunting decorated the trees. One or two visitors still stood around polishing off the final few sandwiches and fancy cakes.

'Mr and Mrs Merivale really came up trumps,' said Jenkins. 'Not since the Oscars have I seen so many stars in one place at the same time.'

'I feel really guilty,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I didn't think they really knew any of those people.'

'Nor did I,' admitted Jenkins.

'And thank you to you for bringing along...,' Mrs Caldicot paused. 'I'm sorry I've forgotten her name again. That nice girl. The weather forecaster.'

Jenkins laughed and looked down at his feet. 'Samantha,' he said. 'I'm sorry about her. But at least I know now where all the stars were.'

'Sorry? Don't be silly. It was really good of you to bring her,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'She was good fun.'

'Actually she was good fun, wasn't she?' said Jenkins, brightening up. 'Perhaps not in the way she had meant...'

'I heard her tell Joan Collins that she would put in a good word for her with you,' said Mrs Caldicot.

Jenkins, embarrassed, covered his face with his hands and shook his head. 'What did Miss Collins say?' he asked.

'She thanked Samantha very much and said it was very kind of her,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'I overheard her asking Sean Connery if he had a visiting card that she could give to her agent,' said Jenkins. 'She told him she thought he looked so much like Mr Connery that he ought to be able to get some stand-in work in the movies.'

They both giggled. Jenkins put his arm around Mrs Caldicot.

'She is very beautiful,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'You're more vibrant, more exciting, more dynamic and more beautiful than she is, ever has been or ever will be,' said Jenkins.

Mrs Caldicot, embarrassed, looked down at her hands. They were, she could not help noticing, showing rather too many wrinkles and liver spots. What, she wondered, were liver spots? Did they have anything to do with the liver? She suspected not. She wished Jenkins wouldn't compliment her. She wondered if he meant it. She blinked and bit her lower lip to stop herself crying. For the first time in her life she had found a man who gave her compliments, and who, even more remarkably, seemed to mean them. And now he was going to America.

There was silence for a moment. Jenkins seemed aware that she was upset. He thought that perhaps his compliment had offended her. He took his arm from around her. 'Was it all a financial success?' he asked.

'Oh yes. The whole day hardly cost us anything,' said Mrs Caldicot.

Jenkins looked at her. 'What do you mean 'It hardly cost us anything'?'

Even in the gloaming it wasn't difficult to see that Mrs Caldicot was blushing.

'Well, we didn't charge people to come in,' confessed Mrs Caldicot. 'And there were so many people here that the stalls didn't do very good business.' She looked at Jenkins. 'Isn't it funny how word gets around? Someone told me that there were half a dozen coaches parked outside in the street. How did all those people hear about it? How did they get here? Where did they come from?'

'You didn't make any money?' said Jenkins.

'No,' admitted Mrs Caldicot. 'At least, I don't think so. The only stall that hasn't finished counting its takings is the 'Guess the Number of Peas in a Bottle' stall and I don't expect they've taken very much. When the people did start coming there were so many that no one could move around to buy anything. I don't think people could get their hands into their pockets or their handbags. Most of the visitors just spent the afternoon ogling the stars and collecting autographs.' She looked up at him. 'Are you cross with me?' she asked anxiously.

He laughed. 'Cross with you? Why should I be cross with you?'

'All that effort...,' began Mrs Caldicot. For a moment she looked sad. But the sadness quickly disappeared. 'But people had a good time didn't they?'

'People had a wonderful time,' Jenkins assured her. 'An absolutely brilliant time. You gave everyone a day they will never, ever forget.'

'Actually, even Roger Moore said it was quite a day,' said Mrs Caldicot. She leant closer to Jenkins. 'He wiggled his eyebrow for me,’ she whispered.

Jenkins looked at her, slightly askance. ‘I didn’t realise you were the sort of woman who’d let Roger Moore wiggle an eyebrow at her.’

‘He was wearing his glasses,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘Oh, that’s all right then,’ agreed Jenkins.

‘Excuse me, Mrs Caldicot,’ said Mrs Roberts, appearing as though by magic by her side. ‘There’s a telephone call for you.’

Chapter 74

'It's your son,' said Mrs Roberts, leading Mrs Caldicot to her own office. 'Derek,' she added, just in case Mrs Caldicot had forgotten his name.

'Hello, Derek,' said Mrs Caldicot, picking up the telephone.

'Why didn't you tell us?' Derek demanded, indignantly.

'Hello, Derek. How nice to hear from you. How are you, dear?' said Mrs Caldicot.

'You know that I'm an enormous fan of James Bond. And you had three of them there without telling me.'

'Did we?' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Oh yes, I suppose we did. They just popped round for the jumble sale.'

'I couldn't believe it when I heard it on the news!'

'Gosh. Was it on the news?'

'It was the lead item!' said Derek.

'Well I never,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I suppose it must have been a quiet day.'

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'I didn't think you'd want to come,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'You did say that you didn't want to have anything else to do with me.'

'Yes but...'

'Yes but what, dear?'

'Yes, but when I said that I didn't know that you knew Sean Connery, Roger Moore and Pierce Brosnan,' protested Derek.

'What a pity you weren't here,' sighed Mrs Caldicot. 'They were all very nice. Mr Brosnan invited me to go to the studios when they film the next Bond movie.'

There was a sound like someone choking at the other end of the telephone.

'Never mind, dear,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I'm sure you'll bump into them all at your work.' She paused. 'Would you like a photograph?' she asked sweetly. 'Jenkins took one of me standing next to all three of them. If it comes out would you like me to send you a copy?'

'Thank you,' said Derek. 'That would be lovely.'

The phone went dead.

'Was everything all right?' asked Mrs Roberts, as Mrs Caldicot put the receiver down.

'Oh yes,' smiled Mrs Caldicot. 'Everything is just fine, thank you Mrs Roberts. Let's go back outside, shall we?'

Chapter 75

‘Everything all right?’ asked Jenkins, when Mrs Caldicot reappeared.

‘Everything is very fine, thank you,’ replied Mrs Caldicot.

‘Things out here are going pretty well, too,’ Jenkins told her. ‘You were wrong about making a loss. Mr Twist has just brought over the final figures.’

‘Really?’ said Mrs Caldicot, clearly surprised. ‘Did we break even?’

‘You did a bit better than that,’ Jenkins told her. ‘Tell her,’ he said to Mr Twist.

‘We made £24,572.16 profit,’ said the accountant.

Mrs Caldicot stared at him. She couldn’t think of anything to say.

‘Not bad, eh?’ said Jenkins.

‘But how on earth...’

‘It seems that a lot of people were anxious to guess the number of dried peas in a bottle,’ Jenkins told her. ‘What did it make?’ he asked Mr Twist.

Mr Twist consulted the piece of paper he was holding. ‘That stall made £24,634.34 profit. Without it there would have been a small loss.’

‘But that’s ridiculous!’ said Mrs Caldicot, astonished. ‘I can’t believe it. There must be a mistake.’

‘There’s no mistake,’ insisted Jenkins. ‘I’ve seen the cash. There’s a lot of it and it’s all very real.’

‘What was the prize?’ asked Mrs Caldicot. She suddenly had a terrible thought. ‘We weren’t offering a million pound prize were we?’

‘Not quite,’ said Jenkins, with a smile. He pulled a piece of crumpled paper out of his jacket pocket. ‘The prize was a small Stilton cheese, a box of biscuits and a bottle of gherkins. All three items were donated by Mr Williams and so cost you precisely nothing.’

‘Did anyone win? Did anyone guess the right number of peas?’

‘Miss Nightingale won,’ said Jenkins. ‘She doesn’t like cheese or gherkins but I gather she was delighted to win. She said it was the first time in her life that she’d ever won anything.’

Suddenly something struck Mrs Caldicot. ‘Who was in charge of that stall?’ she asked Mr Twist.

‘Oh that was Mr Williams,’ replied Mr Twist.

Chapter 76

'I've got so many worries,' said Jenkins, a few days later, as he and Mrs Caldicot had afternoon tea together in a local hotel, `that I don't know where to start and I don't know where they stop. I even find myself worrying about the fact that I am worrying too much. And sometimes I actually worry about whether I'm worrying enough about my worries. I worry about whether I'm worrying in the right order. I worry about whether I have lost my sense of perspective. And then I realise that I have totally lost all sense of perspective because all I seem to do is worry. I have lost the ability to differentiate between the trivial and the important.'

'I don't really feel old - I still feel the same as I do when I was twenty - but I do feel tired. Not tired of life, but tired of work and tired of trivial worries that really don't matter. I interviewed a fellow for a job the other day and I nearly didn't give him the job because I thought he was too old to cope with the stresses of the work. Just in time I realised that he was fifteen years younger than I am.'

'I'm...,' began Mrs Caldicot.

'No, please,' said Jenkins. 'Let me finish. Where was I? Oh yes. I'm so overwhelmed with trivia that I no longer have the time to think or create. My life has become a treadmill of worries. Most of them inconsequential. I realised the other day that my life has become so overcrowded that I don't have any room left new crises. I'm losing the ability to differentiate between the significant and the not so significant. If a tap starts dripping I perceive it as a major problem because I don't have any time left to assess it and deal with it for what it really is. I just worry about it and add it to my ever-growing list of worries. The result is that I have become inefficient and ineffective. I work longer hours than ever but get less done.' He sighed and smiled. 'That's it,' he said. 'The bottom line is that I want my life back.'

'I hadn't realised,' said Mrs Caldicot quietly. She felt ashamed of herself. 'You're always seem so strong. I seem to have just taken your strength for granted...'

Jenkins held up a hand. 'I'm not telling you all this because I'm begging for sympathy,' he told her. 'I'm telling you because as I have been trying to think about my life I have come to realise that you are the only part of my life that I really care about. You are the only part of it that is really important. I'm tell you all this because I want you to realise that I have thought long and hard about what I am about to say.'

Mrs Caldicot looked at him and felt her heart beat faster.

'I've said `no' to the job in America,' he told her. 'And I've handed in my notice. I'm retiring at the end of the month.'

'You're leaving the paper?'

'Yes.'

'And you're not going to America to become an important editor there?'

'No.'

'So, what are you going to do?' she asked in a whisper. She knew what she wanted the answer to be but she hardly dared hope.

'I want to spend the rest of my life with you,' Jenkins told her and Mrs Caldicot knew at that moment that everything was going to be all right. 'And I know that means taking on all this with you,' he waved a hand to include the Twilight Years Rest Home and its residents. 'I know that this place - and, far more importantly, these people - play a large part in your life. In many ways they are your life. And I very much want to be part of your life. I would like the two of us to share a single future.'

Mrs Caldicot, who now needed windscreen wipers, could hardly see him.

Jenkins put a hand in his waistcoat pocket and took out a Miss Smith leather box. He put the box, unopened, on the table and then, with just a very little creaking, dropped to his knee in front of her. He took her hand and looked up into her eyes.

'Thelma,' he said. 'I love you. You are a very special woman to everyone you meet. But to me you are, and always will be, the most special person in the world. Will you marry me?'

Chapter 77

‘Yes,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Of course, I will marry you. I love you too.’ She had known this truth so long, and yet kept it so secret, that it was a relief to no longer have to guard it. Gently, she stood up and pulled him to his feet. She held him to her and kissed him on the lips. Then she put her arms around him and held him tight. `I’ve loved you for so long,’ she told him. ‘This is,’ she said, ‘truly, the happiest, most special moment of my life.’

‘Better even than a knickerbocker glory?’ he asked.

‘Oh I don’t know about that,’ she laughed. But the laughter was so fragile it broke and turned to tears. And when the tears had gone she laughed some more. And then they kissed and held and caressed one another and they knew they would both remember for always the moment when they had told one another the truths they had both so much wanted to hear.

Chapter 78

The news that Mrs Caldicot and Jenkins were getting married was greeted with universal enthusiasm by the residents of the Twilight Years Rest Home.

There was only one cloud in the blue sky overhead: the fear that Mr Muller-Hawksmoor and Ms Jones would come back and find another reason to shut the home down. The staff and residents tried to convince themselves that they were safe. But they all knew that they weren't.

'They won't dare come back here for a while,' said Mrs Roberts, as they all sat around in the lounge one day. 'Thanks to Miss Smith and Doris their records show that we have the right number of nurses.'

'They'll be back,' said Mrs Caldicot, with quiet, resigned certainty. 'They won't ever give up.' She paused. `They have time, money and the rules on their side. And one day, one day they'll find something that contravenes their rules and then they'll close us down.'

'So what are we going to do?' asked Mrs Roberts.

'We could close down the Twilight Years Rest Home before they do it for us,' said Mr Twist.

Mrs Roberts, horrified, stared at him. 'You aren't serious!'

'Oh yes,' said Mr Twist. 'It seems to me that the Twilight Years Rest Home has all the disadvantages of a registered home and none of the advantages.'

'What do you mean?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'As an officially registered rest home we have to abide by all the local authority's regulations,' explained Mr Twist. 'Mr Muller-Hawksmoor and Ms Jones can come in more or less whenever they like. They have the authority to check up that we're obeying all these latest rules. And they can close us down in minutes if they find that we've broken one of those rules. It will be no excuse to say that we didn't know about the rule. I've made an assessment of the expenses we've incurred since I've been looking after the accounts and I believe that at least two thirds of our expenses are incurred solely because of rules and regulations which relate to our being a Rest Home.'

Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts looked at one another. They both knew that Mr Twist was right.

'I suspect that we will be getting a visit from Mr Muller-Hawksmoor very shortly,' continued Mr Twist. 'This time he will want to check that all our fire exit instructions are in available in a variety of languages approved by the European Union.'

'But everyone here speaks English!' Mrs Caldicot pointed out. Kitty, her ever-loving cat, leapt up onto her lap. Mrs Caldicot made a big fuss of her.

'That doesn't matter,' said Mr Twist. 'This is a new EU regulation. It doesn't have to make sense. I found out about this by studying an EU website. There are dozens of similar new regulations being introduced during the next few months.'

'They'll be insisting that we have everything printed in braille next,' said Mrs Roberts.

'No, I don't think that one is coming in until next year,' said Mr Twist.

'But we simply can't close down,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'That's not an option.'

'There is a way to carry on exactly as we are but without people like Mr Muller-Hawksmoor and Ms Jones having any control over us at all,' pointed out Mr Twist.

'What's that?' asked Mrs Caldicot, puzzled.

'The obvious alternative is simply to become a private home,' explained Mr Twist. 'Rest Homes have to be registered because they are run as commercial operations. The residents pay fees and the proprietors try to make a profit. As far as I can see here there isn't anyone regularly paying fees. And there is certainly no proprietor making a profit.'

'So we don't really need to be registered as a Rest Home?' said Mr Williams.

'There's absolutely no advantage to our being registered - but there are plenty of disadvantages,' said Mr Twist.

'But if we weren't registered as a Rest Home could everyone still stay here?' asked Mrs Roberts.

'Of course,' said Mr Twist. 'There is nothing to stop Mrs Caldicot - or Mrs Jenkins as she will become - inviting us all to stay here with her as friends. The house would become a sort of 1960s style commune. We could contribute financially as and when we were able.'

'I always wanted to live in a commune,' said Mr Livingstone beaming. 'But when I wanted to do it before - back in the 1960s - they told me I was too old for it.'

They all stared at Mr Twist. It seemed too simple. 'We could do that?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'Oh yes,' said Mr Twist. 'And then there would be no need to spend money on obeying all the council's silly rules and regulations.'

‘We wouldn’t have to rebuild the kitchen?’

‘No.’

‘Or put up fire warnings in all major European languages?’

‘Certainly not.’

‘We wouldn’t have to let Mr Muller-Hawksmoor into the building?’

‘Absolutely not.’

Mrs Caldicot, stopped stroking Kitty for a moment. ‘How long would it take for us to stop being a Rest Home and start being an ordinary private house - albeit with a lot of people living in it?’ Kitty lifted her head and looked at Mrs Caldicot accusingly. Mrs Caldicot resumed the stroking. Kitty went back to sleep.

‘I took the liberty of obtaining the necessary forms. We could be deregulated within a fortnight.’

‘Can we keep the name and our sign?’ asked Mrs Caldicot. ‘I’ve rather grown attached to living at the Twilight Years Rest Home.’

‘I don’t see why not,’ said Mr Twist.

‘Then let’s do it!’ said Mrs Caldicot.

It was, thought Mrs Roberts, a pity that Mr Muller-Hawksmoor and Ms Jones, sitting in their offices several miles away, could not see the celebrations which followed this announcement. Jenkins took them out to a nearby cafe where, at Mrs Caldicot’s suggestion, they all ordered Knickerbocker Glories.

Chapter 79

'Now that we're not going to need to rebuild the kitchen or spend thousands of pounds complying with silly regulations we don't need all that money you gave us at the fete,' said Mrs Caldicot to Mr Williams, an hour or so later.

Mr Williams looked at her as though he didn't understand what she meant.

'What did you do?' she asked. 'Sell a few photographs and then put the proceeds into the stall receipts?'

Mr Williams sighed. 'Three,' he told her. 'I sold three photographs to a dealer in New York. Then I collected the money from the bank in one pound pieces and five pound notes and Mr Roxdale, Miss Nightingale, Mrs Peterborough and I used it to buy guesses in the 'How Many Peas Are There in the Bottle' competition. It took us ages.'

'Well it was wonderfully kind of you,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'I had to do it that way,' said Mr Williams. 'You wouldn't just let me do it the easy way - by just giving you a few photographs.' 'It was very generous of you,' repeated Mrs Caldicot. 'But now I don't need the money so you must have it back.'

'I refuse to accept it,' said Mr Williams.

'Then, perhaps we should use it to have the whole place redecorated,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'We could get rid of the old furniture and buy something new.'

'I thought you liked the old stuff,' said Mr Williams.

'I do,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. 'But...'

'Do you know whose wallpaper this is?' asked Mr Williams, waving a hand in the direction of the lounge walls.

Mrs Caldicot looked at him, puzzled. 'Well, it's ours, I think.'

'No, I mean, do you know who designed it?'

'I don't have the foggiest,' said Mrs Caldicot. She thought for a moment. 'It wasn't you, was it?'

Mr Williams laughed. 'No, it wasn't me,' he said. 'Your wallpaper and your curtains were designed by William Morris.'

Mrs Caldicot stared at him. 'Are you sure?'

'Oh, I'm absolutely sure. I once edited a book about Morris. You've got several pieces of William Morris furniture too. There's absolutely no doubt about it. You could, of course, sell the wallpaper and the curtains to a dealer or a collector. But they'd take it all these beautiful things away and leave you with nothing but money.'

'I hate to ask the obvious question; but how much is all this stuff worth?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'I have no idea,' said Mr Williams. 'The place is stuffed with valuable bits and pieces.'

'Hundreds or thousands of pounds?

'Oh, thousands.'

'Tens of thousands?'

'Hundreds of thousands.'

Mrs Caldicot went pale. 'But it was all just here when we bought the place.'

'The previous owners obviously didn't know what they were selling. Nor, it's clear, did the estate agents.'

'What do you think we should do?'

'Enjoy it,' suggested Mr Williams.

'So we really don't need the money you gave us,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Ah, but you do,' insisted Mr Williams. He stood up and raised his voice. 'Attention, please, ladies and gentlemen!' Everyone stopped what they were doing and looked at him. 'The fete which Mrs Caldicot organised was enormously successful and ended up with a substantial profit. Now that we don't have to spend all our money on rebuilding a perfectly good kitchen I propose that we have a huge wedding reception for our dear Mrs Caldicot and her groom - and then, while she and Mr Jenkins enjoy their honeymoon, the rest of us can recover from our headaches by taking a month's holiday at the seaside, where we will make sandcastles and have daily Knickerbocker Glories.'

This announcement, which came as of much a surprise to Mrs Caldicot as everyone else, was greeted with loud cheering and clapping. There was also some stamping of feet but since the feet involved were mostly arthritic or gouty, largely clad in slippers and were being stamped on carpet this did not add greatly to the volume of noise.

'There you are,' said Mr Williams to Mrs Caldicot. 'Now we do need the money.' He grinned at her.

Mrs Caldicot looked at Jenkins, who was sitting next to her. 'I think he's got you,' Jenkins told his fiancée. 'I suggest that you just give in and gracefully accept defeat.'

‘That’ll be a first!’ said Miss Nightingale.

‘That’ll be a first!’ said Mrs Peterborough.

‘If only they knew,’ thought Mrs Caldicot, smiling to herself. Only she knew that she had spent most of her life giving in. This, however, was the first occasion on which it had been a real pleasure. `I think a big wedding reception would be a wonderful idea,’ she said.

There were more loud cheers. Taking cover of the noise Mrs Caldicot turned to Jenkins. ‘Where shall we go for our honeymoon?’

‘I don’t care,’ he told her. ‘Wherever we go will be the most beautiful place on earth.’

She shed a tear.

She had never before believed that people really could cry because they were happy. Now she knew that they could. She had never, in her life, been as happy. She looked down at Kitty who was, it seemed, purring louder than ever.

The End

I hope you enjoyed this book and if you did I would be grateful if you would give the book a kind review on Amazon.
Other books about Mrs Caldicot include Mrs Caldicot’s Oyster Parade and Mrs Caldicot’s Turkish Delight.
Thank you
Vernon Coleman

Mrs Caldicot's Oyster Parade

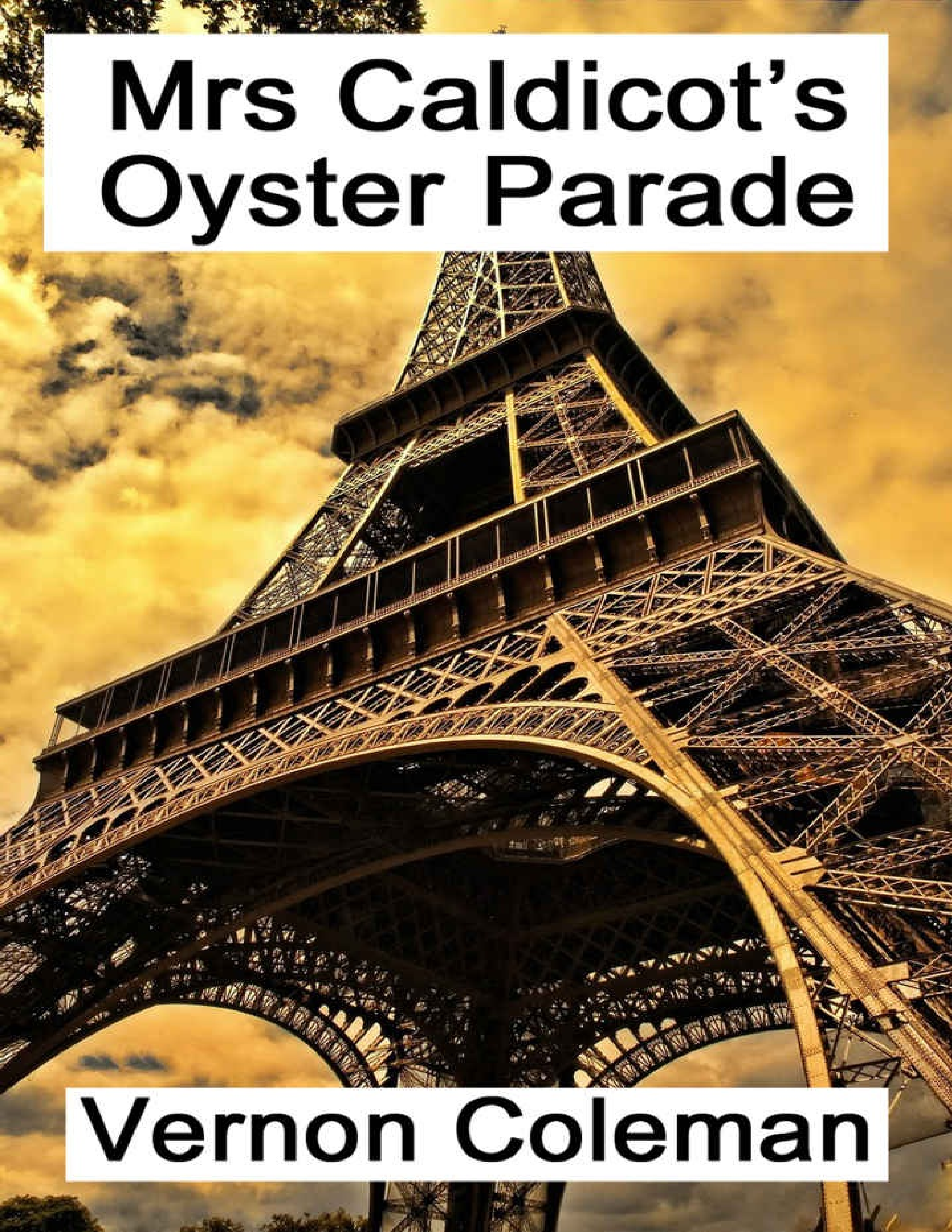

Vernon Coleman

Mrs Caldicot’s Oyster Parade

Vernon Coleman

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Dedication

To Antoinette as always. You are my heroine. I am addicted to you. My life is you.

Acknowledgement
My wife, Antoinette, not only persuaded me to turn my existing books into ebooks but also to create new ebooks. I was pretty well ready to retire, and the first two books about Mrs Caldicot would have disappeared completely – probably for ever. It is entirely through her encouragement, initiative, determination and understanding of a process which I find utterly incomprehensible that any of my ebooks exist. So, thank you, Antoinette.

Note

This is the third book about Mrs Caldicot.

In the first volume, *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War*, a recently widowed woman (called Mrs Caldicot) was put into a grotty nursing home by her greedy son and daughter-in-law. Rebelling at the rules and regulations (and the smell of cabbage) Mrs Caldicot walked out and was followed by the other residents. After some adventures (and unexpected publicity including a memorable interview on television) Mrs Caldicot opened her own old folks' home and welcomed all her companions as residents. (This book was filmed as *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War* – starring Pauline Collins as Mrs Caldicot, Peter Capaldi as her son and John Alderton as the nasty nursing home owner.)

In the second volume, *Mrs Caldicot's Knickerbocker Glory*, Mrs Caldicot (the OAP's champion) was living with the former residents of the Twilight Years Rest Home. She has to fight local bureaucracy and struggle to raise the money to keep her nursing home open. In the end, she found a happy (and very simple and logical) solution. The Twilight Years Rest Home became her home and the residents became her family. This was a good thing because I tend to like happy endings and would have been disappointed if the book had ended sadly. Finally, there was, of course, a romantic conclusion: Mrs Caldicot married Jenkins, the newspaper editor.

Mrs Caldicot's Oyster Parade is the third volume of Mrs Caldicot's adventures.

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Chapter One

The Great Adventure, if that is not too grand a name to use to describe what was originally intended as nothing more dramatic or exceptional than a relatively short trip to Paris, had started a few weeks earlier.

It was a Saturday evening when the seed of the Great Adventure started to sprout.

The staff and residents of what had previously been the Twilight Years Rest Home (but which was now informally known, both to the residents and to the local tradespeople, as Caldicot House) had been gathered in the sitting room staring goggle eyed at the television set.

They were, it is fair to say, as excited as they had been since the accelerator on the mobility scooter got stuck and Mrs Torridge had to drive round and round in circles until the scooter's battery ran down.

And that, it has to be said, was a day to be remembered.

Mrs Torridge herself thought it was all great fun, especially since the other residents ran alongside and handed her bars of chocolate to keep up her strength. (Mrs Caldicot said she didn't think it would be a good idea to give her drinks, though she did not explain that her thinking behind this apparently heartless instruction was that Mrs Torridge was known to have a small bladder.)

Eventually the mobility scooter's battery gave up the ghost, as these things usually do, and, having coasted to a halt just a yard from the front door, Mrs Torridge clambered off, stretched her legs, rubbed her now stiffened arthritic knees and waved to the assembled spectators with aplomb, pride and pretence at self-effacing modesty. She could have been a racing driver pulling into the pits after a famous victory or, possibly, an astronaut just returned from an excursion to the moon.

But that was ten days before the evening when the Great Adventure began.

Mrs Caldicot and her friends were all gathered in the sitting room and it was generally agreed that, although nothing had yet happened, this was even more exciting than Mrs Torridge's caper with the mobility scooter.

Most of those present in Caldicot House were on tenterhooks. The remainder were best described as agog.

Dr Roget, the eminent, English medical man who gave us the thesaurus which bears his name, would have doubtless moved effortlessly into top gear and bandied around words such as: excited, impatient, keen, curious, expectant, longing, avid, breathless and phrases such as 'waiting with bated breath' and 'on the edge of their seats'.

But on tenterhooks and agog sufficed as choices for most of the residents, thank you very much, though Ruth, the 18-year-old assistant housekeeper and a girl who believed in grasping life with both hands, managed to be both on tenterhooks and agog.

Normally thought of as a calm, peaceful and apparently unflappable girl, Ruth had discovered depths of emotional turmoil she had never previously imagined. She had, for several days, been telling everyone who would listen to her that this was, without a doubt, the most exciting thing that had ever happened to her.

Mrs Roberts, the housekeeper, and as kindly a soul as you are likely to find outside a Home for Retired Saints, twice had to tell Ruth to close her eyes and to do some deep breathing exercises in order to calm herself down a little.

Ruth, who was without doubt an excitable girl, had been at the shops and had missed Mrs Torridge's adventure on the mobility scooter so the only other exciting thing that had happened to her in recent years had been the occasion when an unexpected gust of wind had blown several of Miss Nightingale's unmentionables off the washing line and into the upper branches of a large silver birch tree. The previously mentioned unmentionables had remained in situ for the best part of four days, out of reach even of Mr Livingstone when he stood on the top rung of the longest ladder they possessed. The unmentionables had hung around blowing in the wind and drawing admiring glances from many passers-by and an enquiry from the postman as to whether they were to be there permanently as part of some promotional campaign. Eventually, an exceptionally strong breeze had brought them down onto the shed roof from whence Mr Livingstone had been easily able to retrieve them.

Secretly, hidden deep within her heart, Ruth still regarded the time when Steven Longley had kissed her when they were both 12 as the very, most exciting thing that had happened to her. They had been playing postman's knock one Christmas. However, she wasn't about to mention that, ever, to anyone else. Steven was now going steady with Elsie Weatherall, who was widely suspected to be no better than people thought, and Ruth had long since abandoned any idea of a rerun of that distant but magical moment.

Apologies are due, for your historian has digressed.

The reader will doubtless want to know the reason for all this excitement.

The fact is that Thelma Caldicot, together with the staff and residents, who shared the home where she lived, were waiting for the results of the weekly lottery draw on the television.

Lest criticism be forthcoming from those who regard all games of chance as inherently sinful, it has to be pointed out that neither Mrs Caldicot nor her friends and colleagues could be described as inveterate gamblers. On the contrary, this was their first brave foray into the world of commercial chance.

For the nub of the tale is that they had purchased a lottery ticket and were now desperately waiting to see if they had won a prize.

They had entered this strangely invigorating world, after Mrs Caldicot had found a £2 coin on the front drive outside their home.

When Mrs Caldicot had failed to find the owner of the coin, it had been decided, by a simple voting system that would have been the envy of any democracy, that the money should be used for some communal purpose.

Furthermore, it was then decided that since you can't do much with £2 these days (most of the residents could remember when you could buy a week's groceries, half a dozen bottles of decent wine, a load of oak logs, an armful of books and a nice hat with silk flowers for £2 and still had enough change to pay the rent and buy a bag of coal but, sadly, inflation had done the job it does so well and those days were now nothing but fading, sepia memories) the coin should be used to purchase a lottery ticket.

Ruth had been dispatched to the local shops to make the investment and now the stake holders were sitting watching the television set and awaiting the results of their first foray into the world of organised gambling.

Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough were particularly excited because they had convinced themselves that they were taking part in something which Mrs Peterborough insisted on referring to as 'the numbers racket'. If they won, they expected the booty to be brought round by a man in a black suit and a black homburg hat.

Miss Nightingale said she thought he would probably be carrying a violin case though when Mrs Peterborough questioned her about this, she had to admit that she had no idea why this should be. She said that perhaps gangsters were so keen on playing the violin that they took their instrument with them wherever they went.

The two of them were expecting a police raid at any moment and for them this added to the general feeling of excitement. Miss Nightingale was so excited that she went so far as to perform a simple plié, segueing into an arabesque and following that with a grand jete which neatly, and entirely accidentally, removed Mr Roxdale's cup from his saucer. Fortunately, the cup was nearly empty at the time and it flew through the air with little damage being done. The cup was caught by Mr Livingstone who held it up as though he'd taken a catch in a big match.

Mrs Caldicot couldn't help smiling.

Miss Nightingale had trained as a dancer and for three years had worked as a ballerina with the Royal Ballet. There had been talk of promotion and the magical words 'prima ballerina' had been whispered. Tragically, her career had come to a crushing halt after a motorcycle accident had left her with a badly broken femur which took years to mend properly. By the time she could walk again, her ballet career was merely a memory. Worse, far worse, was the fact that her fiancé had been on the front of the motorcycle and he had died in the crash. Miss Nightingale, who had trained as a school-teacher when her ballet days were over and who had spent most of her life working as a primary school headmistress, had only recently started to dance again.

Mrs Caldicot herself had the lottery ticket in her hand but Mrs Roberts had copied the six numbers which were on their ticket onto a piece of cardboard, and she had placed the cardboard above the television set. This simple device meant that as the television host read out the winning numbers, everyone in the room could follow their fortunes.

When the television announcer had finished reciting the winning numbers, Mrs Caldicot and her friends owned a ticket on which five of the six numbers which had been read out.

'How much is the first prize?' asked Mr Hewitt.

'I read that the big prize is £22 million this week,' replied Mrs Roberts.

'So we should get five sixths of £22 million!' said Mr Livingstone, who would have been jumping up and down with excitement if his arthritis hadn't been playing up.

'Five sixths of £22 million is £18.33 recurring million,' said Mr Twist, a human calculator who had, in what he now considered to be his misspent youth and middle years, been a tax inspector working for the Government.

Mr Twist now looked after the books for Mrs Caldicot and helped stave off such unwanted nonsenses as penury, bankruptcy and debt collectors. His knowledge of the vagaries and peccadillos of the staff employed by Her Majesty's Customs and Excise enabled him to ensure that Mrs Caldicot's finances remain as close to healthy and legal as is possible. Caldicot House (since that is how the residents and local trades people customarily refer to the house, it seems only polite to retain that name for this account) had ceased to be a nursing home or, indeed, anything else official, and was run as a private house with a good many permanent visitors – each paying whatever they could towards the upkeep of the house and the provision of meals and warmth. Those residents who could help in the running of the establishment did what they could.

Mr Twist attempted to temper the assembled company's enthusiasm by pointing out, in his own rather gloomy way, that three quarters of big lottery winners go bankrupt and end up with less money than they had before their big win.

However, to his surprise, this news was greeted with cheering. ‘Rags to riches and back again!’ cried Mr Livingstone. ‘What an exciting roller coast ride!’

‘Sensibly, I think we should remember…,’ began Mrs Roberts very quietly. But no one seemed much interested in a sentence which began with the word ‘sensibly’.

‘We’ll have to decide whether or not to go public with our win,’ said Ruth, with great seriousness. ‘It’s an important decision. If we say we want to go public we’ll probably have to be prepared to do interviews and go on television shows.’

Ruth was a big girl (she had weighed her age in stones since she was ten-years-old) but not a bright girl. She was, however, a kind girl and, as Mrs Caldicot said to Mr Jenkins when ruminating on which of the applicants to accept when she was looking for a new member of staff, ‘an ounce of kindness is worth more than a pound of brains when you’re looking after old people who aren’t always entirely sure who they are, where they are or why’.

‘I don’t think we need worry about any of that just yet,’ said Mrs Caldicot, who didn’t want everyone getting too excited. She still remembered her own rather traumatic experiences with television interviewers and didn’t fancy the idea of repeating them.

‘How much money is that for each of us?’ asked Ruth. ‘If we divide eighteen and a bit million between us?’

‘How many of us are there?’ asked Mr Twist, looking around to count the number of heads.

‘Fourteen,’ replied Mr Merivale, who after using up his own fingers and thumbs had co-opting some of his wife’s digits to make up for the shortfall. ‘Everyone here, plus Mr Jenkins, of course, because he’s as entitled to a share of the ticket as anyone else.’

Everyone agreed that Mr Jenkins, who was Mrs Caldicot’s husband and who lived with her in the flat upstairs, was definitely entitled to a share of the winnings since he, as a resident, was definitely entitled to a share of the £2 which had bought the ticket and, equally certainly, also entitled to a full share of any winnings which might accrue.

Mr Jenkins was, at that moment, shut in the spare bedroom which he used as a study, working on a novel he was writing. He had never written a novel before and he was currently on the 11th draft of page one. He insisted, however, that he was definitely making progress and had told Mrs Caldicot that he had high hopes that he would soon be able to start page two.

Jenkins had been inspired to write his novel after reading lines from a poem by Ralph Waldo Emerson, the American essayist and poet.

The poem was called Terminus and the inspirational phrase was: ‘It is time to be old, to take in sail…’.

‘I may be old,’ said a defiant Jenkins when he had read these words, ‘but old age is a time to take on new adventures, to try new paths. It is not a time to take in sail.’

(As another aside, and this will be the last unless there are more, it should, perhaps, be explained that Mrs Caldicot liked to be known as Mrs Jenkins in her private life but as far as the residents and staff were concerned, she was still Mrs Caldicot. When she had first tried to explain to the residents that she would henceforth be known as Mrs Jenkins, there were some tears from Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough who thought that this meant that Mrs Caldicot was going to leave them and be replaced by a Mrs Jenkins.)

‘So how much is that for each of us?’ repeated Ruth, who was so excited that she could not sit still.

‘It’s over a million pounds each!’ said Mr Hewitt.

Ruth, who was immediately dreaming of private aeroplanes, yachts, Italian villas and the lifestyles of the rich and famous, went bright red with excitement. It is fair to say that she was not totally averse to the prospect of becoming a millionairess. Mr Twist’s gloomy prognostication of almost inevitable personal bankruptcy worried her not a jot. She had just £27.38 in her current account and if winning and spending a million pounds meant sacrificing her £27.38 in the process of becoming a millionairess, or as a consequence of becoming a millionairess, then it was a sacrifice she was quite prepared to make.

‘Approximately one million three hundred thousand pounds each, I think you’ll find,’ said Mr Twist. He looked around at the assembly and then suddenly sensed their alarm at having in their midst someone who could do such unnatural things with numbers without using a calculator or even having access to a piece of paper and a pencil. ‘Just over a million and a quarter each,’ he said, quietly correcting himself.

Ruth, eyes closed and dreaming of a world in which mops, buckets and dishwashers had no place, now added a French gigolo and a tattoo on some private part of her person to her wish list of a private aeroplane, a yacht and at least one Italian villa. The tattoo would, she thought, have to be somewhere not quite so private that no one could see it and that she couldn’t show it to good friends, such as the French gigolo, if the occasion warranted it.

‘I don’t think it works quite like that,’ said Mrs Roberts, louder now. She didn’t want anyone to think of her as what her mother would have called a wet blanket but who nevertheless felt that someone ought to keep a finger hold on reality, and was the only person in the room who had studied the rules.

They all looked at her.

'I'm afraid we won't win all that much,' she explained gently. 'There will probably be a lot of people with five correct numbers. Only people who have all six numbers win the really big prizes.'

'So, how much will we win?' asked Mrs Merivale whose financial ambitions were modest but who thought she would perhaps use her winnings to treat herself to one of those tummy tucks she had read about in her favourite magazine. It would, she thought, be more painless than another attempt at dieting.

'I don't know,' said Mrs Roberts. 'We'll have to wait and see when the lottery people publish the details of what the prizes are going to be.'

And so everyone except Ruth had to put their dreams back into their boxes, close the lids for a while and wait.

Ruth's dreams were perhaps of sterner stuff. Or maybe she had simply not heard Mrs Roberts's warning remarks. Whatever the cause, she was still wondering what her French gigolo's attitude towards tattoos would be. Might he find a tattoo rather downmarket? It would have to be very tasteful. She somehow knew that you wouldn't see millionairesses wandering around Monaco with great big snakes curling round their arms or with bunches of roses adorning their breasts. If they had a tattoo it would be something small and very tasteful; something discreet. She thought of vulgar Sandra Pettigrew, who was three months into having a hunt in full cry tattooed on her back, with the plan being to have only the fox's tail visible at the very bottom of the spine, and she shuddered with embarrassment at the very thought.

No, she thought, a tasteful flower on a hip, would be appropriate.

Chapter Two

It was Monday before they heard the lottery results and discovered the extent of their riches.

They had won £2,892.

It wasn't just over a million, just under a million or anywhere near a million. But it wasn't a kick in the teeth either. And by the time they got the results, the expectations of the residents and staff had largely diminished, thanks to a large dose of communal realism setting in.

The communal realism had been aided and abetted by the strong feeling that winning over a million pounds wasn't the sort of thing that happened to real people who inhabited the real world. And there had also been a sneaky subconscious feeling that winning that much probably wouldn't be a good idea anyway. The truth was that they were all pretty happy with their lives and didn't want everything to be changed by having to find somewhere to park a fleet of Rolls Royces and private helicopters.

And so it is undoubtedly true that the residents and staff were probably more excited by this modest win than they would have been by a more momentous triumph. This was real money which could be spent on something that they could understand and enjoy.

'How much is that each?' asked Mr Hewitt.

'It's a little over £200 each,' replied Mr Twist, who had learned his lesson and was content to think with precision but articulate in more rounded numbers.

'Very nice too,' said Mrs Merivale. She didn't really want a tummy tuck, anyway. She hated needles and Mr Merivale always said he liked her just the way she was. 'Don't you go all skinny on me,' he told her when she had talked of going on a diet. 'If I'd wanted a skinny wife I'd have married a broom handle.'

'It would be nice if we could spend it on something we could all share,' said Mr Livingstone.

This was greeted with a considerable amount of wise nodding and it was generally agreed that this would be much more fun than spending the money individually. No one had thought of putting their winnings aside. What is the point of saving a £200 windfall? Even Ruth, her dreams put safely back into their box, thought that a communal spend would be more fun. The tattooist who had the studio over the launderette had charged more than £200 to tattoo 'Mum' and a small bunch of flowers on Eric Parton's triceps. Somehow, the tattoo no longer seemed a worthwhile expenditure.

'So what shall we buy?' asked Mrs Torridge.

'Could we buy a big box of chocolates?' asked Miss Nightingale. She thought for a moment and then added: 'But not too many of the sticky, chewy ones.'

'Not the sticky, chewy ones,' agreed her friend, Mrs Peterborough with a shake of her head. 'They get stuck in my teeth.'

There was then a lively discussion about how their unexpected winnings could best be spent. Some of the suggestions were sensible. Some were not so sensible.

Mention was made of a second mobility scooter (the residents who needed help in getting about shared the one which Mrs Torridge had driven round and round in circles) but this attracted little enthusiasm since the residents rarely had any great desire to travel around the neighbourhood.

There were mutterings about a new dartboard (quickly squashed by Mrs Caldicot who had hidden the only flight of darts after an unfortunate and entirely accidental incident involving Mr Hewitt's right arm and Miss Nightingale's left buttock) and some talk about investing in a greenhouse (supported with some enthusiasm by Mr Hewitt and Mr Roxdale but no one else).

Mr Twist suggested that the money should be put into a savings account for emergencies (this was pooh-poohed on the grounds that it was a boring thing to do with an unexpected windfall and partly on the grounds that it would not be enough to enable them to deal with a serious emergency).

Mr Williams suggested that they should blow the whole lot on a slap up meal at a local restaurant.

Mr Livingstone said it would be good to buy a new trumpet since they didn't have a single trumpet in the house. But even Mr Livingstone had to admit that this was not really in the spirit of the sense of togetherness and camaraderie that they were hoping to cement with their winnings.

'We could go to Paris together,' said Mrs Roberts, suddenly.

Everyone looked at her.

'For a little holiday,' explained Mrs Roberts. 'We could go over just for a few days. Since we won the money together it would be nice if we could spend it doing something together.'

And suddenly, it was generally agreed that a trip to Paris would very much fit everyone's bill. Those, like Mr

Williams, who had been to Paris before thought they would very much like to see it again. And those who had never been were keen to see it for the first time.

Ruth, who, in view of the reduced size of their win, had now completely forgotten her dreams of gigolos, Italian villas and private aeroplanes, saw herself vaguely and ineffectually resisting the enthusiastic and amorous advances of a dozen over-romantic Frenchmen, all sporting waxed moustaches, wearing berets and carrying armfuls of red roses. None of them wore tattoos, as far as she could see.

'Is there enough money for a trip to Paris?' asked Mrs Caldicot, who had always wanted to go to Paris but who was rather doubtful that £2,892 was sufficient to pay for fourteen people to go to Paris, stay in a hotel and, most important of all, come back without having to swim across the Channel on the return journey.

'Oh yes,' said Mrs Roberts. 'I saw an advertisement in my magazine. It was for Paris breaks. They say you can travel there and back and stay in a really nice hotel for £149 per person, including continental breakfast, a complimentary map, a discount voucher for perfume and transport in an air conditioned coach between the railway station and the hotel on both arrival and on departure.'

It was generally agreed that this seemed a splendid idea, and very good value, and Mrs Roberts hurried to her room to find the magazine concerned.

She was back in moments, clutching the magazine which was already opened at the appropriate page.

'Ooh look, there's a picture of that tall tower thing they never finished building!' said Mrs Torridge peering over Mrs Roberts' shoulder.

Mrs Torridge had good days and bad days and was having one of her middling sort of days. 'All they've done is put up the scaffolding,' she added

'The French don't work hard like we do,' said Mr Roxdale firmly.

'They don't do any work after lunch,' explained Mr Livingstone. 'They all have a siesta in the afternoon.'

'I'm pretty sure that's the Eiffel Tower,' said Mrs Roberts, largely to Mrs Torridge but also just in case anyone else was wondering. 'It's all finished,' she added.

'So why don't they use a picture of it finished instead of a picture of it with the scaffolding up?' asked Mrs Torridge.

Mrs Roberts started to reply, realised that this was probably not going to get her very much further forward and so abandoned the thought.

'I think they have siestas in Spain,' said Mrs Torridge. 'I had one of them once when I was on holiday. They make them with red wine and lots of fruit. I suppose they're very nice if you like foreign drinks. I think they put lettuce in them. Definitely, they put in something green. The foreigners over there eat lots of rice and octopus too.'

'Oh we won't have to eat octopus will we?' asked Ruth. She shivered at the thought. She liked food but didn't like the idea of eating an octopus. She rather preferred a nice plate of chips and two fried eggs. How could you be sure the octopus wouldn't come alive, wrap a tentacle around your throat and eat you instead? She shivered at the thought. She had heard that the French ate frogs, snails and horses. But octopus? And what was the plural? Did you have two octopuses? Or two octopi?

'Isn't that drink with the fruit in it called sangria?' asked Mrs Merivale.

'Is it?' said Mrs Torridge, frowning. 'So if the drink is a sangria, what's a siesta?'

'Maybe that's the dish with the octopus and the rice,' said Miss Nightingale.

'Mint. I think it may have been mint not lettuce,' said Mrs Torridge thoughtfully. 'Or perhaps it was something else green. What's green?'

'Grass,' suggested Mr Roxdale.

'I've got some green socks,' said Mr Livingstone, helpfully. 'They're very comfortable but there's a hole in the heel of one of them. And I wouldn't put them into a drink.'

'We used to say we had a potato in our sock when we had a bit of heel showing,' said Mr Roxdale.

Mr Livingstone laughed. 'I remember that! At school we used to take off our socks to see who had the biggest potato.'

Mrs Torridge gave these suggestions due consideration. 'No,' she said at last. 'It wasn't grass or socks.'

'Why did Mr Roxdale say he had a potato in his sock?' asked Ruth, who couldn't quite understand how the potatoes had snuck into the conversation.

'When you have a bit of heel showing through a hole in a sock it looks a bit like a new potato,' explained Mrs Roberts.

Ruth, who didn't understand, nodded as though she did.

'Octopus and rice,' said Mrs Peterborough who liked the sound of this. She said it again.

It was no longer her regular custom to repeat what other people said but from time to time the habit reappeared. Since her drug regime had been reduced, she had also largely abandoned her endearing habit of mimicking what other people said and how they behaved.

Anyone who had known Mrs Peterborough, and the other residents of the Twilight Years Rest Home, back in the days when it had been run by the deeply unpleasant and unpopular Mr Hawksmoor, would have found it difficult to believe that this was the same woman.

Chapter Three

Under Mr Hawksmoor’s authoritarian regime, the residents of what had then been known as The Twilight Years Rest Home had been kept heavily sedated in order to make them easier to look after. The law in Britain allows nursing and care home owners the right to medicate residents without their knowledge and even against their will, and Mr Hawksmoor had taken full advantage of this curious entitlement. The phrase ‘it’s for our own good’ must be one of the most commonly uttered in all residential establishments catering for the elderly.

It is well known in medical circles that the symptoms of most of the dementias, including Dr Alzheimer’s eponymous disorder (which is one of the commonest causes of dementia but by no means the only one) are exacerbated by an absence of mental and social stimulus. ‘Old age puts more wrinkles in our minds than on our faces,’ wrote Michel de Montaigne.

The precise pathological causes of dementia in general and Alzheimer’s in particular, are still a subject of much discussion among doctors and research scientists. Despite much tub thumping, a good deal of it designed to attract the attention of people handing out grant money, researchers have not yet progressed beyond the stage of offering a seemingly infinite number of updates on a seemingly infinite number of hypotheses. But there does not seem to be much doubt that when sufferers are drugged, abandoned without stimulation or left to vegetate in dull and inspiring surroundings, their symptoms will deteriorate. The body and the mind, like any partners, do not always fail together and it can be argued that the mind is even more vulnerable than the body to a lack of exercise. We grow old more through inactivity and a lack of direction and purpose than through age itself.

The tragedy, of course, is that despite the fact that this knowledge is widely available, the staff in hospitals, nursing homes, rest homes, care homes and all the other residential centres, often act as though they are completely unaware of any of this. Maybe these establishments are so chronically understaffed that no one has the time to spare to ensure that brains are kept stimulated. Maybe no one cares. Maybe too many of those who are yet to tiptoe into the foothills of old age are still able to deny to themselves the inevitability that they too will one day grow old. One of the greatest contradictions in life is that although almost everyone wants to live a long time, no one wants to grow old. It is, perhaps, easier for some professionals to regard old age as another country and to dismiss old people as another species. And yet surely those who have taken on the responsibility for the elderly have a responsibility to ensure that they retain their faculties for as long as possible?

‘Bodily decay is gloomy in prospect,’ said Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the US, ‘but of all human contemplations, the most abhorrent is body without mind.’

It has been said, by someone wise and proudly blessed with a way with words, that we are all as young as we feel and although on the surface this may sound like one of those superficial bon mots usually dismissed as cracker-barrel philosophy, there is more truth to it than may generally be realised. Mrs Caldicot’s chums would, if anyone had asked, have confessed that they all felt themselves to be somewhere between 18 and 22 years of age. In reality, of course, it had been a good half a century since any of them had been in that age bracket, but that was now the way they felt and that, to a large extent, is all that matters. Mrs Caldicot who would, a couple of years earlier, have owned to an age somewhere in the mid-300s, now felt herself to be approximately 19 and a half and quite happy to stay just there, thank you very much for asking.

Now, after some months of companionship, friendship and a freedom from unnecessarily onerous and nit picking rules, Mrs Caldicot’s band of chums had changed almost beyond recognition. Individuals who had once been residents of a typically oppressive care home had been transformed by residency in a friendly private home where laughter was an ever welcome guest. At Caldicot House, the atmosphere was lively and on occasion quite perky. A lack of medication and a modest increase in responsibility had, of course, also helped. They all still looked rather elderly, of course. But there was now a sparkle in their eyes and they behaved more like young people than some young people do.

The Meridews, Maurice and Maple, looked after the kitchen and produced meals which were nutritionally invigorating without being dull, stodgy or too full of bean curd. Their experience in preparing meals for film crews had well prepared them for the need to satisfy appetites which range from those needing occasional titivating (Mr Roxdale) to those which simply needed to be assuaged and, from time to time, indulged. The only standard rule was that cabbage was banned from the menu. This may have been a tough break for what is a perfectly innocent and vitamin packed leafy green brassica but it was something that Mrs Caldicot and the residents felt as one about. If you don’t have any cabbage in a kitchen then the rooms which are supplied by that kitchen cannot possibly be flavoured with the ever present aroma of cabbage. Egg and chips and spotted dick with custard were no longer regarded as unsuitable fare, and crumpets and teacakes now played an important part in the daily diet both at teatime and at supper time. Mr Livingstone had proved himself able to demolish a whole plateful of buttered crumpets all by himself.

The garden was looked after by Mr Hewitt and Mr Roxdale.

As already mentioned, Mr Twist took care of the accounts and, where necessary, income tax forms for everyone living in Caldicot House.

Mr Livingstone was in charge of musical entertainment and, in view of his experience as a valued member of RAF Bomber Command during the Second World War, had appointed himself in charge of defence and, in this regard, had taken on responsibility for ensuring that the front and back doors were locked at night.

Mrs Peterborough, Miss Nightingale and Mrs Torridge were in charge of the laundry and looked after the washing machine and the pegging out and bringing in of items placed upon the clothes line. (None of them had worked out how to operate the tumble dryer. This was, as they say, a ‘good thing’ since, as Mrs Torridge pointed out, it costs nothing to allow washing to dry on a clothes line but a good deal to force it to dry in an electrically heated machine.)

Mr Williams was the official photographer and always happy to sell one of his old photographs and give the proceeds to Mrs Caldicot when cash was running a little low. He was also responsible for keeping the house library well stocked with books and DVDs – some of which he purchased from local charity shops and some of which he ordered from local stores. He insisted on paying for all his purchases himself.

‘But I don’t know why they didn’t use lettuce,’ said Mrs Torridge. ‘I’ve always liked a nice piece of lettuce though Mr Torridge, my late husband, couldn’t stand the stuff bless his soul. He didn’t like fruit in his drinks either. I remember that for a joke someone put two slices of orange in his beer and he was very cross.’

‘So what do you all think about a trip to Paris?’ asked Mrs Caldicot, who thought she ought to try to drag the conversation back from the surreal to the practical. Although she had always wanted to visit Paris, she felt that the decision should be made in a roughly democratic sort of way.

‘How many stars does the hotel have?’ asked Mrs Merivale, who, in the course of her work with the film industry, had stayed in a good many hotels and, as a result, put great store by the number of stars a hotel had been awarded.

Mrs Roberts picked up her magazine. ‘The advertisement says: ‘You will enjoy four star accommodation in a central location and you will be whisked from the Gare du Nord to your hotel in an air conditioned coach with a bilingual driver. And throughout your stay, our friendly and knowledgeable Representative will be on hand to ensure that everything on your holiday goes smoothly.’

‘Crumbs,’ said Mrs Merivale. ‘You can’t grumble at that, can you?’ She turned to Mr Merivale. ‘Did you hear that? Four stars.’

‘Very acceptable,’ confirmed Mr Merivale who had also travelled a good deal and once claimed he had stayed in as many hotels as he’d had hot dinners. ‘You get a much better class of bedbug in four star hotels.’

‘Wonderful,’ said Mr Roxdale dryly. ‘That’ll be a comfort.’

And so it was agreed by the assembled company that they would all go to Paris together. They all agreed it would be wonderful to go on holiday in a group. Several of the group had seen a documentary about the French capital and all were excited by the prospect of seeing the Eiffel Tower, the Champs-Élysées and Sacre Coeur. It would, thought Mrs Caldicot, be a relaxing but also invigorating change for them all. She looked forward to being away from pressure and stress for a few days.

‘Does anyone speak French?’ asked Mr Twist.

‘I learned French at school,’ said Mr Livingstone, as though his school studies had enabled him to master the language and ignoring the fact that his school days had been considerably more than half a century previously. ‘Bon voyage, mon brave,’ he announced with confidence. ‘La plume de ma tante est dans le bureau de…’ At this point he hesitated, forgetting perhaps the nature of the ownership of the desk wherein resided the pen of his fortunate aunt.

‘…mon oncle,’ said Mr Williams, finishing the sentence for him. Everyone looked at Mr Williams. He shrugged. ‘I know a few words,’ he explained. ‘I can get by,’ he added modestly.

‘I think I remember studying French at school,’ said Mr Twist. ‘It will probably all come flooding back once we get over there.’ He paused, closed his eyes and dredged his memory. ‘Le chat c’est assis sur le … mat,’ he announced proudly. ‘There you are! It’s all in there just waiting to come bursting out. Je demande du fromage, du pain et du vin.’

‘Do you remember Bertram Mills?’ asked Mr Roxdale.

‘I’ve heard of him,’ said Mr Twist. ‘He had a circus didn’t he?’

‘A very famous circus,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘Mr Mills travelled the world, and I remember I once saw him being interviewed and the chap asking the questions asked Mr Mills if he had ever learned any foreign languages. He replied: ‘When I get among foreigners I stand still, look British and shout!’ So that is what I intend to do.’

With confidence born of ignorance and a newly found natural sense of communal optimism, it was generally agreed that with Mr Twist, Mr Livingstone and Mr Williams to look after the language problem, and to provide translating services for the rest of the party, there would be no difficulty in communicating successfully with the French natives.

Mrs Caldicot alone was slightly sceptical.

Nevertheless, she thought, it would be something of an adventure and there were bound to be one or two French people around who spoke English.

And anyway, she added to herself, a life without adventures is a dull life indeed.

Chapter Four

‘So Mrs Roberts telephoned the advertisers and made a provisional booking for us all to go to Paris for three nights over the Easter holidays,’ said Mrs Caldicot, who was now in the flat she shared with her husband and who was, therefore, technically Mrs Jenkins.

‘Isn’t that exciting?’ she continued. ‘Of course, we can’t actually book the holiday until the cheque comes through from the lottery people. But Mrs Roberts spoke to a nice, young lady at the lottery who said we should have the cheque by the end of the week. We were surprised the holiday company had a vacancy over Easter but apparently another group had to cancel their trip because of an outbreak of something or other unfortunate and so we’ve inherited their train tickets and hotel bookings.’

‘The lottery people don’t have to send people around to bring you the cheque and warn you not to spend it all at once on champagne and Ferraris?’ said Mr Jenkins.

‘Oh no,’ said Mrs Caldicot, earnestly. ‘I think that’s only for the big winners.’

‘I was teasing,’ said Mr Jenkins gently.

Mrs Caldicot threw a cushion at him. ‘It’s going to be like a second honeymoon!’ she said. The cushion missed by a yard and a half. Mrs Caldicot’s cat, Kitty, who was apparently asleep on the hearth rug, opened an eye, looked up and then went back to sleep.

Mr Jenkins looked at her questioningly.

‘Yes, well there will be 12 other people with us and one or two of them probably needing a little looking after,’ admitted Mrs Caldicot.

‘You’ll have your hands full,’ promised Mr Jenkins.

‘I’ll have Mrs Roberts and Ruth to help me,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

Mr Jenkins smiled but didn’t say anything. Secretly he rather wondered if an SAS regiment would provide enough manpower and experience to keep Mrs Caldicot’s companions out of trouble. Still, he had faith in his wife. She had long ago proved herself capable, competent and sensitive to the needs of the former nursing home residents who had become her very dear friends.

Mrs Caldicot, who had been contemplating the trip through slightly less rosy spectacles, sighed quietly. ‘You’re right,’ she said. ‘I’m probably going to be rather busy. You don’t think it’s a silly idea, do you?’

‘Not at all!’ insisted Mr Jenkins who knew Paris well, having visited it frequently when working as a newspaper editor. ‘It will be an adventure. You’ll be spending part of the week before Easter in Paris: wonderful food, bright lights and probably some sunshine. The weather is usually good in Paris in April.’ He chuckled as he thought of something. ‘We must have a dozen oysters each while we’re there,’ he said. ‘There’s a famous restaurant opposite the Gare du Nord that serves the best oysters in France.’

‘Oysters?’ said Mrs Caldicot, who wasn’t a great fan of slithery food.

‘Well, we’ll be there at Easter. So we’ll have to celebrate with our own Oyster Parade won’t we?’

Mrs Caldicot, who was still not entirely accustomed to her husband’s puns, winced.

‘I’m pleased that we’re going by train and not by aeroplane,’ said Mr Jenkins. ‘People get on an aeroplane and a few hours later they are in another country – on another continent even. Going abroad used to be a Great Adventure. There was the train to Dover, a long walk to the boat across the Channel to Calais and then another walk through the customs shed to the French train which would be sitting waiting to whisk travellers to Paris. Mark Twain, Charles Dickens, Arnold Bennett – they all did it and they all wrote about the sense of excitement that built as the journey progressed. Travellers had a chance to realise that they were going somewhere new; time to prepare themselves for the adventures ahead; time to enjoy the differences between there and here. Of course, Dover and Calais were grubby, grey, shabby and unprepossessing but in a way all that squalor and shabbiness added to the experience. You knew that you were seeing things that countless thousands of travellers had seen for generations. You felt like a traveller rather than a tourist.’

‘Unfortunately, we don’t go on a boat,’ Mrs Caldicot reminded her husband. ‘The train goes through a tunnel underneath the Channel.’

‘Yes, there is that,’ said Jenkins, with more than a little sadness ‘I shall miss the docks at Dover and at Calais. But it’s still a train. It’s considerably more exciting than an aeroplane journey. I loathe aeroplanes and airports.’ He shuddered. He had spent much of the previous three decades travelling through airports and sitting on aeroplanes. ‘Have you fixed a date?’ he asked.

Mrs Caldicot told him and added. ‘Those were the only dates they had available for a party of 14. And we got a special, special rate because we took over a last minute cancellation.’

Mr Jenkins, who was rather old-fashioned and liked to keep his appointments listed somewhere out of the range of hackers, software failures and battery outages, took a slim, leather pocket diary from his inside pocket and consulted it. The procedure, Jenkins liked to point out, took rather less time than it would have taken a more technologically minded individual to turn on their computer or to scroll through their mobile telephone. And he liked the feel of the leather and the crackle of the paper.

'Ah,' he said, rather sadly. 'I'm afraid there will only be 13 of you. But if you only have a provisional booking you'll be able to cancel my ticket and take the proceeds as spending money for the trip.'

'You can't come?' said Mrs Caldicot, horrified.

'I'm afraid not,' said Mr Jenkins, who was genuinely upset to be missing the trip. For one thing he wanted to be able to help his wife if, or when, one of the residents got into trouble. And for another he loved his wife very much indeed and didn't like to be away from her for more than an hour or two at a time.

'I agreed to chair a discussion group at a literary festival that week,' he explained. 'I did tell you about it some time ago. I've agreed to do it and I'm afraid I really can't back out now. I'll only be away for one day but it's right in the middle of your trip.' He paused for a moment, a thought having occurred to him. 'Actually, it's probably just as well. If we were all away who would look after Kitty?'

Although he was retired, Mr Jenkins, a former newspaper editor, was much in demand. He was a fluent and personable speaker and had written a couple of books about modern journalism. He was frequently invited to speak at literary festivals, now something of a boom industry in the peripheries of the publishing world, and he was a regular broadcaster on the wireless, as he insisted on calling it, and on the moving picture show of television.

'Oh that's awful!' said Mrs Caldicot, who was as disappointed as she sounded. 'I'll ask Mrs Roberts to see if she can change the dates.'

'You'll do no such thing,' insisted Mr Jenkins. 'You know she only got that booking because of a cancellation. It will probably be months before you can get another suitable date. And everyone will be disappointed if they have to wait months for their holiday. Besides, I tell you what we'll do. We'll use the fee I'm being paid by the literary festival for a slap-up romantic dinner for just the two of us when you get back. No expense spared.'

'I suppose you're right,' said Mrs Caldicot, looking for a silver lining to the cloud. 'It does mean that you will be able to look after Kitty.'

'Kitty and I will look after each other. I'll give her dishes of milk and plates of food and she'll keep my lap warm while I work on page one of my novel. Doubtless she will purr me to sleep before I get onto the unknown territory of page two.'

'You're just as big a softy as I am!' said Mrs Caldicot. It suddenly occurred to her that without her husband accompanying the party she'd be able to forgo the oysters. It was a small consolation, but a consolation, nevertheless.

'Don't you dare tell anyone,' warned Mr Jenkins very sternly.

And so, four days later, the booking was confirmed, the holiday company was paid and the trip to Paris was upgraded from a pencilled in, provisional booking to a fully confirmed etched in stone arrangement. Mr Jenkins's ticket had been cancelled and the proceeds added by Mrs Caldicot to their spending money. They would leave England on a Tuesday, stay in Paris on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday nights, and return home on the Friday.

Chapter Five

As the time of their trip to Paris approached, so the excitement mounted.

Mrs Torridge, Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale spent many happy hours deciding which of their clothes they would take. In the end they all decided that, to be on the safe side, they would be better off taking everything. They therefore scoured the building and collected a mass of old suitcases, bags and containers into which they could cram their belongings.

Ruth, booked a visit to the beauty salon to spend everything in her current account, and a little bit more, on having her hair cut and tinted, her nails professionally painted and her legs waxed almost but not quite up to her bikini line. (She decided against what is in the trade known as a Brazilian Wax only after Mrs Roberts had assured her that Paris is not by the sea and that they would definitely not be spending their days in France sunbathing or visiting swimming pools.)

Mr Hewitt announced that he would be taking his trowel, hand fork and hand-carved wooden dibber since it was his experience that you never knew when these items would come in handy and the last thing you wanted was to find yourself short of a dibber when you really needed one.

Mr Livingstone and Mr Twist spent their days polishing their schoolboy French and the Merivales bought, checked and packed a portable coffee making machine, a travel iron and a new suitcase on wheels.

Mrs Caldicot, alerted to the decision made by Mrs Torridge, Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale issued a stern warning that every member of the party would be limited to one suitcase and one small piece of hand luggage.

She knew, however, that it is not the difficulties you foresee that cause the headaches. The things you worry about most usually turn out to be of little consequence. It is the problems you don’t see coming which really hit you hard on the back of the neck.

Mrs Caldicot’s ruling meant that it was back to the drawing board for Mrs Torridge, Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale.

It was Mrs Torridge’s idea that they should send Ruth into town to purchase for them the three largest suitcases she could find. Since it was impossible for her to carry all three suitcases onto a bus, Ruth had to travel back home in a taxi which cost Mrs Caldicot £9.50 or £10.00 with the tip.

Even when completely empty the suitcases she brought back were too heavy for any of the residents to lift.

Chapter Six

It has for many years been customary for travelling sports teams to take with them a baggage master – an individual whose task it is to ensure that the party's luggage travels with them and does not get diverted, stolen, mislaid, distracted or left behind. When there is a baggage master attached to a party, all the other members of the group can relax. They do not have to worry about losing a bag en route.

Naturally, Mrs Caldicot and her entourage did not have a baggage master.

And as she supervised the loading of the luggage into the small coach which had been hired to take them to the railway station, from whence they would board a train which would take them all on to London, St Pancras and the Eurostar train to Paris, Mrs Caldicot could not help but think that life would have been considerably easier if she had been supervising the travels of the England Football team on a trip to the other side of the globe. At least she would have then had the assistance of a specialist baggage master. And, as a footnote to this thought, she wondered idly if the England Football team took as much luggage with them when they travelled as her own little group.

The main problem was that despite her entreaties, the members of her party had packed as if they were going away for three months, rather than for five days and three nights.

Mrs Caldicot tried to console herself, and to gain some small comfort, from the knowledge that Aristocratic Victorian travellers, rich on the backs of mill workers, miners and other indentured skivvies, used to go on their Continental tours equipped with several hundred pieces of luggage containing every convenience, necessity and luxury known to man, woman or child.

No Duke, Earl or even a paltry Baronet would dare set foot further south than Dover without a full range of warming pans, butterfly nets, pith helmets, climbing boots, tin baths and other essentials.

But then she remembered that those same Victorian travellers invariably took with them a small army of servants and that it was by no means unknown for a travelling peer off on a mind-broadening Grand Tour, or an artefact collecting expedition, to be accompanied by more than 100 maids, footmen, butlers, cooks and strong men to carry the bags.

The thought with which she had tried to comfort herself faded into nothing more than useless, outdated trivia.

Mrs Caldicot herself had packed the cases for Mrs Torridge, Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale and, not knowing what sort of weather to expect, she had included a choice of clothing for warm, wet or cold weather.

But having decided that Mrs Caldicot had been far too cautious, indeed conservative, the trio had insisted on opening their suitcases and cramming in just about everything else they could find which seemed remotely suitable for a trip to Paris.

Mrs Torridge's mammoth sized suitcase now contained seven pairs of shoes, two pairs of slippers, a large hat and a large teddy bear who had a red ribbon round his neck and just one remaining eye and was, for reasons long ago lost in the mists of time, known as Cuthbert.

Mrs Peterborough had packed six skirts, five dresses, an evening gown with sequins and two hats, one with feathers and one without. She had managed to cram in a dressing gown, seven nightdresses and a pair of pyjamas. She had also popped in a yellow plastic bucket and a small spade which she'd found at the back of the garage and which had been leftover from a day trip to the seaside. 'But we're going on holiday!' she protested, when Mrs Roberts pointed out that Paris is not on the coast. 'I always used to take a bucket and spade with me when I went away on holiday.'

Miss Nightingale, more concerned with the inner woman than outward appearances, and having once heard that French dietary preferences tend to hover around the sort of things that are normally found slithering or hopping around the garden, had crammed her suitcase full to the brim with many tins of food (mainly mulligatawny soup, apricots in syrup and pilchards) numerous packets of biscuits and a dozen bars of chocolate. She had also popped in three long playing records. She was not intending to play these, not having packed a record player, but she had slid them into the case simply because she had found that she was able to fit them in. 'Mustn't waste space,' she had said to Mrs Peterborough. Despite the inclusion of all this food, she had managed to cram in a number of winter woollies, her entire collection of woolly hats and a variety of other clothing items.

Sadly, although Miss Nightingale did not know this, the biscuits had not survived. They had been in the suitcase when Mrs Peterborough had sat on it so that Miss Nightingale could close it properly. And Mrs Peterborough's bottom versus the biscuits had proved to be an unequal battle.

Where once there had been biscuits now there were crumbs.

The male members of the party were no better at restraining themselves from excess.

Mr Roxdale had packed his favourite twelve volume set of gardening encyclopaedias ('something to read on the train'), his Wellington boots ('don't want to get mud on my best shoes and it often rains a good deal in these foreign places') and a variety of gardening implements ('the French don't understand gardening because it involves hard work and so there will probably be a park that needs my attention').

Mr Hewitt, also a keen gardener, had, as had previously disclosed, packed his favourite trowel, hand fork and dibber but he had also crammed three economy sized boxes of cornflakes, a loaf of sliced bread, two family sized packs of bacon and two boxes each containing 12 eggs into his suitcase.

Mr Hewitt rather liked an English breakfast and wasn't going to start the day on nothing more substantial than a flaky croissant. He was also determined that no one else was going to have to go without a proper breakfast.

Mr Livingstone, in contrast, had a modestly sized suitcase but he also had three instrument cases for he insisted on travelling with his flute, his banjo and a set of African bongo drums.

Only Mrs Caldicot, Mrs Roberts and Ruth had restrained themselves and taken the more usual variety of essential stuff for the holiday. But, as Mrs Caldicot confessed to her husband, there was an inevitable sense of self-preservation in this since all three of them were well aware that they would probably be doing the lion's share of carrying suitcases and bags.

The result was that loading all the luggage into the hold of the coach which had been booked to take them to the railway station took rather longer than Mrs Caldicot had expected and required a considerable amount of rearranging and huffing and cursing by the driver.

'You didn't tell me you were moving house,' the driver complained with what he, but no one else, thought of as searing wit.

Mr Jenkins, who was there to help and to say goodbye to Mrs Caldicot (they both hated the idea of railway station partings) solved the problem by handing the driver a crisp, new £20 note, telling him that in return for this small 'pourboire', he expected help in unloading the luggage when the coach arrived at the railway station where, of course, the whole procedure had to be conducted in reverse.

That early part of the journey all went remarkably smoothly.

The coach took them to the local railway station.

A local stopping train took them up to London.

And in London a coach which had been booked to take them all to St Pancras was, to Mrs Caldicot's ill-concealed surprise, exactly where it was supposed to be.

And then the party had to find and clamber aboard the Eurostar train to St Pancras.

Naturally, there were no porters or trolleys to be seen and Mrs Caldicot, Mrs Roberts and Ruth and the others had to carry their impedimenta further than they would have chosen. Naturally, the escalator was not working and so the bags and cases had to be hauled up a seemingly interminable staircase. And then everything had to be dragged and pulled along a platform to the coach where their seats were booked. Mr Livingstone reckoned they had carried their bags for at least a mile and a half.

Finally, they had to load most of the luggage onto the train themselves. Three clipboard carrying employees stood and watched.

'Why aren't there any trolleys?' asked Mrs Roberts, pausing for a moment as she struggled to heave another suitcase up the high steps and into the carriage.

'Health and safety,' explained one of the clipboard owners. 'A woman was banged on the ankle by a trolley so we have to keep them all locked up.'

'We should have done some training,' muttered a breathless Mrs Roberts. 'Dragging the luggage up and down the stairs a few times perhaps.'

'Dragging everything down into town and then back again would have been a good test,' said a red-faced Ruth.

'Against the clock,' said Mrs Roberts.

'I should have insisted that everyone throw out at least half of the stuff in their cases,' said Mrs Caldicot wearily.

'And then thrown out half of what was left,' said Mrs Roberts.

By the time they slumped into their reserved seats, they were all exhausted.

'This luggage is going to prove to be something of a problem,' said Mrs Caldicot to Mrs Roberts and Ruth.

They both agreed that she was almost certainly correct.

'I really should have had a firm word with Mr Livingstone about those instrument cases,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I did say only one suitcase and one piece of hand-luggage.'

'What on earth is he taking those for?' asked Mrs Roberts.

'I've no idea,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Miss Nightingale's suitcase feels as though she's filled it with lead,' said Ruth, who rather thought she might have strained something vital in heaving the case onto the train. She was trying to work out how many more times she would have to help move all the luggage. There would be once when they got off the train at the Gare du Nord.

And then, unless they could find a porter or a trolley of some kind, the cases would have to be dragged across the station concourse. Then the luggage would have to be loaded onto the travel company's coach. And it would have to be taken off the coach when it arrived at their hotel.

Her muscles ached at the thought of it all.

Still, maybe a gallant Frenchman would take pity on her, help with the luggage and then whisk her off for a five course dinner at an absurdly glamorous and expensive restaurant. She closed her eyes and dreamt of the candlelit restaurant, the attentive waiters and the handsome, charming, slightly naughty Frenchman on the other side of the flower arrangement on their cosy table for two. She must not, she thought, allow herself to drink too much champagne.

Ruth did a good deal of day-dreaming though she would have screamed for help and run a mile if any Frenchman (slightly naughty or not) had even suggested whisking her off to a glamorous and expensive restaurant.

'Oh dear,' said Mrs Caldicot, still worrying about Miss Nightingale's case. 'I hope she hasn't put in anything which will get her into trouble with the customs people.'

'Crumbs,' said Mrs Roberts. 'I'd forgotten all about customs. I hope they don't open any of our suitcases.'

'We can but hope,' said Mrs Caldicot who had learned not to lean too heavily on hope as a support.

'I think I'm about to have a rather late mid-life crisis,' said Mrs Roberts.

'I feel as though I've been having one of those since I was about 18,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'And I'm not finished with it yet.'

Chapter Seven

Sadly, the problems began before the cases were opened.

‘All luggage to be putted onto the conveying belt,’ ordered the man in a Border Control uniform, giving his best impression of a jackbooted Obergruppenfuhrer.

Mrs Caldicot rightly suspected that he wasn’t paid very much but that he liked his job because he got a free uniform and every day he could be rude to people who didn’t dare say anything back to him.

He clearly liked ordering people about.

The man looked like a bad tempered version of one of the larger animals found in zoos; the ones who live in enclosures festooned with signs saying ‘Do Not Feed’ and ‘No Buns Allowed’. He was extremely foreign and in addition to not speaking very good English, he spoke with a curiously and unexpectedly strong Essex accent. Mrs Caldicot didn’t like to say anything, of course, but she did secretly think it rather odd that England’s borders should be protected by foreigners.

Looking around, she noticed that all the border control employees seemed to have soured expressions as though they never laughed and could not remember ever having seen anything to laugh at.

She wondered if they were selected for their facial expressions (‘Customs Official wanted: must have sour look’) or if they were hired, blank as it were, and then sent to a special training school where they were taught how to look stern, unforgiving and untrusting. Maybe, she thought, they are all former Post Office employees.

‘And you are to be putting all metal objections inside the tray with which you be provided before going into the metal detector,’ the man added, with a scowl.

Or he said something like that, anyway.

His accent was so strange that Mrs Caldicot had no real idea what he was saying. He could, she thought, have been reciting a recipe for cauliflower cheese.

‘Say please!’ said Miss Nightingale firmly. ‘You must always say ‘please’.’

‘You should say ‘please’,’ said Mrs Peterborough, who was next in the queue.

‘Oh dear,’ thought Mrs Caldicot.

It occurred to her that slightly dotty old ladies who appear perfectly normal from the outside can be a good more trouble than small children with behavioural disorders.

The customs man, clearly shocked that anyone should dare talk to him that way, if at all, stared at Mrs Peterborough as if she’d told him to take down his trousers or as though she had pulled a field howitzer out of her handbag.

He felt dismayed because if he were no longer allowed to be rude to travellers, there would be no joy at all in his life. In the movies he liked to watch in his spare time, the man in authority, and wearing a nice uniform, would only have to look sternly at the crowd, and maybe raise an admonitory hand, for the masses to fall silent in an instant.

That was how he saw himself: as the man in authority with an admonitory hand.

Moreover, these were old people.

He saw wrinkled, weak, frail bodies and assumed, for no reason other than old-fashioned prejudice, that the minds inside those bodies must also be weak and frail.

Miss Nightingale had shattered all his illusions and left him reeling.

Two yards away, Mrs Torridge was slowly edging her walking frame towards the metal detector gate. It was a slow business. Unless she was sitting on the mobility scooter, Mrs Torridge didn’t go anywhere in a hurry. A small queue had formed behind her. Mrs Torridge couldn’t really understand why they had a door frame without a door in it but everything around her was too noisy and too frantic for her to worry too much about this.

And so she edged forwards, inch by inch.

‘It’s only polite to say ‘please’,’ insisted Miss Nightingale to the man at the customs post. ‘What did your mother tell you to say?’

‘What did your mother tell you to say?’ demanded Mrs Peterborough. She folded her arms across her chest and glared at the man. Mrs Peterborough was normally a jolly woman but she could, when it seemed necessary, look down her nose and over her spectacles as well as anyone.

‘In England we are taught to be polite to one another,’ said Miss Nightingale who had decided that they must have already arrived in France. She spoke loudly and slowly so as to make it easier for to the man to understand since it had not entirely escaped her ken that, doubtless as a result of having rather substandard educational systems, not all foreigners spoke fluent English.

The customs officer, who had gone an unpleasant and unhealthy looking shade of puce, pulled himself up to his full five foot two and a little bit inches (including built-up shoes) and glared at them both. No one other than his superior, his wife, his mother and his three children had ever spoken to him in such a fearless manner.

Meanwhile, there was a good deal of noise coming from another part of the customs area.

'You can't go through with that!' shouted another foreigner in a Border Control uniform. He was very fat, frowned constantly and had a shifty, constantly guilty, look about him. Mrs Caldicot suspected that even his mother would probably admit he looked like the guilty one in a police line-up of sex offenders. There are always some men who join the army because they want to kill people without getting into trouble. And there are customs officers who put on their uniform each day looking forward to bringing a little darkness into ordinary people's lives. This customs officer looked like the sort of man who had taken the job because he didn't like people very much.

He had spotted that Mrs Torridge and her walking frame were about to pass through the metal detector.

'Why not?' demanded Mrs Torridge, confused and indignant in equal proportions. 'It's the only way I can get to my bag!' She took one hand off her walking frame and pointed to her luggage which was waiting for her at the end of the conveyor belt. Holding onto her walking frame with one hand was for her the equivalent of riding a bicycle one handed.

'We have to examine your stick thing!' insisted the fat Border Control officer.

And with that he snatched the walking frame from Mrs Torridge.

Mrs Caldicot stared in disbelief.

It occurred to her that maybe the prize pupils from Post Office training establishments were picked out for Border control work. ('You are one of our prize pupils Miss Taj Mahal. You are the rudest person we've seen for years. The Border Control people would like you to work for them.')

Since Mrs Torridge was leaning heavily on the walking frame at the time, the result of this confiscation was inevitable.

Mrs Torridge stood still for a moment and then, very slowly, started to rock backwards and forwards. Mrs Caldicot, who was trying to keep an eye on everyone, watched in horror. Everything seemed to happen in slow motion. It was clear that Mrs Torridge was about to fall but the only question was: would she fall backwards or would she fall forwards.

In the end she fell backwards; collapsing with surprising grace; and subsiding to a heap on the floor in a slow motion movement that a ballet dancer would have envied.

'Put your metal objects into the tray!' shouted the first foreigner, who had not noticed Mrs Torridge's subsidence and probably wouldn't have cared much if he had. 'I am workings for the Border Force and so I do not have to be saying of 'please' to you!'

'Don't be so rude!' shouted Mrs Peterborough who, misled by the man's strange accent, had now also decided that they must have arrived in France and that she was, therefore, addressing a person of French origin. She knew that when speaking to foreigners one should always speak loudly, slowly and clearly so that they can understand.

She also admonished the man by gently smacking him on the arm as a mother might tap a child.

Startled, the man backed away and shouted for help.

A few yards away Mrs Torridge, who was lying flat on her back on the floor, was also shouting. She was calling: 'Will someone please help me up?' The fat Border Control officer who was examining Mrs Torridge's walking frame ignored her because helping old ladies up off the floor wasn't part of his job description.

Mrs Caldicot, abandoned Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough and, having collected Ruth, who had been about to help put Mr Livingstone's array of musical instruments onto the conveyor belt, set off to help Mrs Torridge who was still lying on the floor, floundering and doing a pretty good impersonation of a fish out of water. The travellers who had been queuing behind her pretended that she wasn't there and stepped around her, and in one case over her, in order to pass through the metal detecting archway.

As she rushed forward to help Mrs Torridge, Mrs Caldicot was elbowed aside by two heavily armed policemen who were responding to the cry from the customs officer who had suffered a slight smack on the arm from a slightly dotty septuagenarian and who was already thinking of the compensation and damages he could claim from his employers after Mrs Peterborough had been arrested, charged, tried, found guilty and imprisoned.

The two policemen, neither of whom looked to be more than 15-years-old, though Mrs Caldicot thought they could, perhaps, have been young looking 16-year-olds, were both brandishing automatic weapons. One of the policemen was male and the other was not. Both were growing moustaches but the female police person was having considerably more success with hers which had already acquired a luxuriousness which her partner's upper lip seemed unlikely to be able to match.

'Down on the floor!' yelled the boy policemen. He was trying hard not to panic but not doing very well at it. He had acne and a lisp and was very conscious of his moustache which he fingered at least once a minute to check that it was still growing nicely. 'Everyone get down on the floor with your hands behind your backs.'

Some people can command battalions with a single barked order. Unfortunately, this policeman had one of those strange squeaky voices which never command much in the way of respect.

Still, when you are one of the few people in a room to have an automatic weapon a certain amount of respect is inevitably forthcoming. A young mother started to scream. Her six children, loyal to the echo, all followed suit.

'Mrs Torridge has been mugged!' cried Mr Livingstone, who hadn't seen anything of what had happened but who now saw Mrs Torridge lying on the floor. He and Mr Roxdale tried to step around behind the second policemen in order to help their friend to her feet. The second policeman was so tall that she didn't ever really know where her feet were, or what they were up to, until a few minutes after they'd finished moving. This made tennis, dancing and other similar activities frustrating, disappointing and something of a hazard. It also gave her an instability that sometimes interfered with her ability to stand firm and tall in the pursuit of justice. Sensing movement behind her, the tall policeman stepped to one side and immediately fell over Mrs Torridge. She landed with quite a thump and lay winded on her chest with her automatic gun underneath her.

The male policeman, the one who had the strange, squeaky voice, was proud of his peripheral vision, and he immediately noticed that his partner was now on the floor where the terrorists should normally be. He swung round to help. As he did so he collided with Mr Livingstone, tripped over Mr Livingstone's banjo case and crashed into the conveyor belt used to carry luggage (and musical instruments) through the X-ray machine. His automatic weapon ended up on the conveyor belt and he ended up on the floor.

'Are you all right, Mrs Torridge?' asked Mrs Caldicot, who had finally fought her way to her friend.

'I think so,' replied Mrs Torridge. 'But my dignity has definitely been injured. Am I decent?' she tried to look down to check that her dress was still properly aligned.

Mrs Caldicot assured her that nothing untoward was on display.

'This is why my mother always told me to make sure I was wearing clean ones,' whispered Mrs Torridge.

Mrs Caldicot smiled at her and with Ruth's help, helped her to her feet. Mrs Torridge clung to the frame surrounding the door that wasn't there and rubbed her thigh where she had landed on the floor.

Mr Twist was always nervous of policemen, even when they were growing moustaches and one of them had a strange, squeaky voice. Not even the fact that both policemen were now lying on the floor lessened his anxiety. He therefore lay down on the floor, face up so that he could see what was going on, and then tried to put his hands behind his back. He found that lying this way was very uncomfortable but it was, he thought, what the policeman had told him to do and so he did it. The ever reliable Mrs Roberts, as calm and phlegmatic as ever, knelt down beside him and assured him that there was really nothing to worry about and that everything was going to be all right.

One or two other travellers, none of them in Mrs Caldicot's party, followed Mr Twist's example, and the floor of the customs area was soon full of people wriggling about trying to get comfortable. Half a dozen children were crying and, much to the distress of a man in a uniform who kept shouting that taking photographs was not allowed, a group of Japanese tourists who had absolutely no idea what was going on and assumed that the chaos was perfectly normal were lying on the floor giggling and taking photographs of one another.

'Officer down!' yelled the squeaky voiced policeman into his radio. He looked around for his gun which had now travelled into the bowels of the X-ray machine and had, therefore, apparently disappeared.

Strictly speaking, both officers were down and if he had thought about it more, a more accurate call for help would have been: 'Officers down'.

Of course, the word 'down' in police terms is normally utilised to describe an incident in which one or more policemen have been attacked and wounded rather than an incident in which two clumsy and slightly inept policemen have both tripped over and fallen all by themselves, but police procedure does not allow for such niceties and as far as the emergency room dispatcher was concerned, an officer was down and help was needed.

Meanwhile, the Border Control officer who was manning the X-ray machine suddenly noticed that something that looked suspiciously like an automatic weapon was sitting on his conveyor belt. He pressed his alarm button and started to yell for help.

Consequently, moments later every policeman in the building could be seen running towards the customs area. Laden as they were with their helmets, bullet proof vests, protective chest guards, thigh guards, elbow guards, guns, spare ammunition and lots of shiny accoutrements they looked red-faced and rather flushed by the time they arrived. Several of them, the ones who were particularly red-faced and perspiring, looked as though they had not been well-designed for urgent physical activity.

'What's going on?' demanded Mr Livingstone of no one in particular.

'Some sort of game, I think,' replied Mr Twist. He looked around and could see a small, nervous looking policeman trying to disentangle himself from Mr Livingstone's banjo case; a tall policewoman trying to disentangle herself from the strap of her automatic weapon; a customs man examining Mrs Torridge's walking frame; a Border

Control officer, who was sitting behind the X-ray machine, doing a very good impersonation of a man in a panic; a number of travellers lying on the floor, all with their hands in clear sight; Mrs Torridge clinging to a doorway which had no door; a Border Control official holding his arm as though it had been broken and a number of Border Control officials who looked as though they were having nervous breakdowns.

‘Exercise,’ said Mr Merivale firmly, as though he knew what he was talking about. ‘It’s definitely one of those training exercises. Like when they ring the alarm bell in a hotel and see how long it takes for everyone to get downstairs and gather together on the pavement in their nightwear.’ Mr Merivale had taken one look at the floor, which he thought rather dirty, and was still standing.

The others nodded in agreement. An exercise was the only thing that made sense.

‘They always do it in the middle of the night because it gives the staff a laugh,’ said Mr Merivale, who knew about hotels. ‘They like to see their guests in their night clothes, all shivering in the cold.’

‘Do you think we’ll ever get to Paris?’ murmured Mrs Roberts, looking around at the chaos around them.

‘It’s not looking good,’ replied Mrs Caldicot. She sighed. Not for the first time on their journey she wished Mr Jenkins was with them. She felt sure that he would know how to deal with things. It occurred to her that it was a good thing that they had arrived at St Pancras with plenty of time to spare. When she had made the initial arrangements, and looked at the various train times, she had imagined herself having time to sit with a leisurely cup of coffee and, perhaps, a Danish pastry, before boarding the Eurostar train. So far, it hadn’t quite worked out that way.

It now looked as though she and her charges would need every minute of the extra time she had allowed in order to battle their way through the various customs procedures.

Chapter Eight

Sorting out the confusion and chaos in the customs area took just over an hour.

To begin with there was talk of arresting both Mrs Torridge (for attempting to take an unauthorised walking frame into the departure area at St Pancras) and Mrs Peterborough (for assaulting a Border Control officer) but a rare police inspector with his head screwed on the right way round decided that none of this would be in anyone's best interests. Not even he, however, had been able to prevent an over-enthusiastic officer from ringing the Bomb Squad and demanding that someone come and check out Mrs Torridge's aluminium walking frame.

The customs officer who had been so severely assaulted by Mrs Peterborough had gone off into a private room to share the details of his traumatic experience and to discuss his compensation claim with his union representative, a lawyer, a human resources expert, a public relations official and a psychiatrist drafted in to provide emergency counselling. There was already talk of an early retirement, a full disability pension and a lump sum payment in compensation. The only question seemed to be the size of the compensation payment and the wording of the press statement.

The two police officers who had ended up on the floor had gone off duty so that they could rest after their exhausting ordeal. When the police inspector eventually viewed video coverage of the entire incident, the two young officers were told to take a month's sick leave before attending an extensive debriefing with a review board. It was suggested to them that when they returned to work they might prefer to take up roles in traffic management. Overseeing a pedestrian crossing outside the station had been offered as a suitable site for their employment though it had been pointed out that they would need extensive and lengthy retraining before taking on this level of responsibility.

The small army of police officers who had responded so promptly to the 'Officer down' emergency call remained distributed throughout the area. They were still holding their automatic weapons at the ready but although they were not sure why they had been summoned, they were still alert and rather on the jumpy side of edgy. Mrs Caldicot's party of older travellers did not match the profile of modern-day terrorists but, as one officer pointed out, some terrorists can be masters of disguise and you can never be too careful. Several kept their guns aimed at Mrs Torridge who was deemed by an alert sergeant to be the possible ringleader of a gang of domestic insurgents.

Mrs Torridge's walking frame had been taken apart, examined and left in pieces by an explosives expert who had been given a police escort and had raced to St Pancras in a Bomb Squad Land Rover. It took Mr Livingstone and Mr Roxdale some time to put the walking frame back together and although it was still a little wobbly, it was more or less serviceable. Mrs Caldicot watched them with a smile and considerable pride. It was a joy to her to know that her companions were always loyal and willing to help one another.

The next step in the process of getting through customs involved the party's luggage.

This had been the part of the procedure which Mrs Caldicot had feared most.

'Open your suitcase,' said the customs officer to Miss Nightingale. The officer was a woman of indeterminate years who looked as if she had suffered from really bad irritable bowel syndrome for at least a decade and was currently struggling to cope with an intestinal storm or, possibly, a gastric hurricane. Mrs Caldicot thought she looked like a shop owner who on a wet January morning finds herself faced with a queue of people returning unwanted Christmas presents. She certainly did not look the sort of woman whose life was punctuated with gales of unbridled laughter. She had a wispy string of hair hanging down in front of her face and the result rather reminded Mrs Caldicot of the back end of a horse she had once put money on when she had spent a day at Newbury Races. The horse, Mrs Caldicot remembered, had finished its race a rather poor last; the jockey spattered with mud from having spent the entire time struggling to catch up with the rest of the field. She could not help thinking, but definitely did not say, that if Helen of Troy had a face that had launched 1,000 ships then this woman had a face that had probably launched 1,000 refuse carts.

'Say please,' said Miss Nightingale.

'It would help if you would say 'please',' murmured Mrs Caldicot to the customs officer. She didn't think her intervention would do much good but she thought she would try.

Heart sinking she had darted across to be by Miss Nightingale's side when she had seen that Miss Nightingale's case had been selected for investigation. The officer watching the case go through the X-ray machine, had been unable to make head nor tail of the contents which bore absolutely no resemblance to the sort of thing usually seen when holiday makers' suitcases were viewed on an X-ray machine.

'Stand away,' ordered the customs officer sternly. 'Who are you?'

'I'm a friend,' replied Mrs Caldicot. 'I'm a friend of Miss Nightingale's.'

‘And who is Miss Nightingale when she is at home?’ demanded the customs officer who was not afraid to share a cliché when one tottered into view.

‘She’s my friend,’ explained Mrs Caldicot. ‘It’s her suitcase.’

‘Open your suitcase, please,’ mumbled the customs officer reluctantly. The use of the word ‘please’ clearly offended her professional susceptibilities but she had seen enough to realise that this group of travellers were potential trouble.

Miss Nightingale opened her suitcase.

The moment she did so the contents which had been compressed by having been sat on by Mrs Peterborough, sprang upwards in clear relief at having been freed from their confinement. Some spilt outwards onto the counter top and only swift action by Mrs Caldicot prevented a pair of pink Disneyland pyjamas sliding onto the floor. The pyjamas, which were Miss Nightingale’s favourites, were decorated with pictures of Mickey and Minnie Mouse.

The customs officer began to unpack the suitcase.

Miss Nightingale, watching, looked at Mrs Caldicot.

‘It’s all right,’ said Mrs Caldicot reassuringly. She smiled at Miss Nightingale. Mrs Caldicot was conscious of the fact that Miss Nightingale never liked having her belongings handled by strangers. Once, when a plumber had moved her dressing gown without asking her permission, she had attacked him with a pink, fluffy mule. The plumber, a 22-year-old Pole, had fled the scene and never returned.

‘What’s this?’ demanded the customs officer, holding up a tin of Mulligatawny soup.

‘That looks like soup,’ said Mrs Caldicot, examining the label. ‘My best guess, based on the information provided by the label, would be Mulligatawny.’

‘Soup,’ agreed Miss Nightingale, with a nod of her head.

‘Please allow the owner of the suitcase to answer for herself,’ said the customs officer pompously. She had come top in pomposity in her passing out examinations and had never for a moment considered allowing things to slide. ‘It is not permitted for other persons to answer on behalf of the suitcase owner.’

‘Then we could be here some time,’ said Mrs Caldicot politely.

‘And what’s this?’ demanded the customs officer, holding up a tin of apricot slices.

‘That would probably be a tin of apricot slices,’ said Mrs Caldicot. She bent down and looked at the tin. ‘Freshly picked apricots, served in their own juice with no added sugar. They appear to have been grown in Uzbekistan. There’s a recipe on the label for making an apricot tart.’

The customs officer picked out more tins and placed them on the counter beside Miss Nightingale’s suitcase.

There were nine tins of mulligatawny soup, five tins of apricot slices in their own juice, none of them with any added sugar, and four tins of the very best Portuguese pilchards. It was now abundantly clear why Miss Nightingale’s suitcase was so heavy.

‘Do you have an export licence for these items?’ asked the customs officer.

‘They are for Miss Nightingale’s own consumption,’ explained Mrs Caldicot. Miss Nightingale was looking confused and rather upset. She didn’t understand why this strange woman was unpacking her suitcase and examining her tins.

‘Where are you going?’ demanded the customs officer.

‘To Paris,’ replied Mrs Caldicot. ‘Eventually,’ she added, after a pause.

‘For how long?’

‘Three nights.’

‘And what are these?’ asked the customs officer, taking several packets out of the suitcase.

‘They appear to be packets of biscuits,’ replied Mrs Caldicot, who was a little annoyed by the customs officer’s stupid questions. She peered more closely at the packets the customs person was holding. ‘In fact I’m pretty sure that they are packets of biscuits. The packet with the words ‘custard cream’ on the sides will probably contain custard creams.’ She examined the packets even more closely. ‘Sadly, judging by the state of the packaging, they look as if they have probably become broken biscuits.’

There were seven packets of biscuits. All had been crushed.

‘And all these are also for your consumption?’ the customs officer asked Miss Nightingale.

Miss Nightingale looked at Mrs Caldicot.

‘Yes,’ said Mrs Caldicot, nodding at Miss Nightingale.

‘Yes,’ replied Miss Nightingale, nodding back at Mrs Caldicot.

Eleven minutes later, the suitcase was empty and half of the contents were spread out over the customs officer’s counter. The rest of the contents were spread over a spare table which the officer had had to fetch in order to carry the overflow.

There were, in addition to the tinned foods and the biscuits and all the clothes which Mrs Caldicot had placed in the suitcase, three long playing records, two large packets of bird seed, a snow globe containing a model of Big Ben, a rag doll with an arm missing, a telephone directory dated 1998 and covering the L-K section of the population of London, a pair of wooden book ends in an art deco style, an unopened packet of vacuum cleaner bags, a half used roll of wallpaper (chintz pattern), a brand new roll of wallpaper (blue birds and butterflies against a background of cherry tree blossom), a remote control device for a television set, a spare inner tube for a bicycle, a vacuum attachment used for sucking crumbs from sofas and armchairs, and a tin of shaving foam.

'Ah, there it is!' said Mrs Caldicot spotting the remote control device for the television set. 'We've been looking for that for weeks.' She picked up the remote control and popped it into her handbag. It would, she thought and said out loud, be nice to find a different channel on the television.

'Put that back!' ordered the customs officer. 'It is not allowed for civilians to interfere with the functionality of customs officers.' She, like all her colleagues, was well aware that one of their number had been fired for laughing at a traveller's pleasantry. 'Service with a scowl' was thus their motto.

Mrs Caldicot took the remote control out of her bag and put it back on the counter. She was beginning to wish they had spent their lottery winnings on a new television set. Or a short holiday in the Lake District or Lyme Regis. Anywhere which didn't require passing through customs would have been fine.

At the same time, at another counter a few feet away, Mr Hewitt was trying to explain what a dibber was, why he had one in his suitcase and why it was necessary for him to take it to Paris.

'It's for making holes in the ground,' he explained. 'You push one end into the soil and then you drop in your seed. The Americans call it a dibble.'

The customs officer stared at him disbelievingly.

'When you've popped your seed in the hole you cover it up with soil, water it and wait for it to grow,' finished Mr Hewitt, using his hands to add to his explanation.

The customs man, who was from an East European nation where dibbers are about as commonplace as battery powered nose hair clippers, looked at the wooden dibber and then at Mr Hewitt. Obviously not a gardener, he was clearly not convinced by Mr Hewitt's explanation.

'OK,' said Mr Hewitt, with a weary sigh. 'It's a 19th century sex toy. They didn't have batteries in those days.'

'Ah,' said the customs man, with a sniff. He was much happier with this explanation. He firmly believed that all travellers to the continent were perverts, and he expected to be shocked. Mr Hewitt's false confession had comforted and reassured him. He picked the dibber up by the handle, being careful not to allow his gloved hands to come into contact with the business end of the device, and placed it back in Mr Hewitt's suitcase, alongside the hand-fork and the trowel. He didn't ask what the fork and trowel were for and did not seem excited by their presence.

Meanwhile, the customs officer who was dealing with the contents of Miss Nightingale's suitcase was still looking very confused. It was the first time she had seen anyone travelling with such an eclectic collection of items in their luggage and she wasn't sure whether there were any special procedures to be followed. For a moment she considered calling for a supervisor but then she looked at Miss Nightingale and decided not to bother.

'You can repack the case,' she said with an imperious wave of a hand.

'You can repack the case, thank you,' suggested Mrs Caldicot, politely.

The customs officer glowered at her.

Mrs Caldicot, who refused to be intimidated, glowered back. 'In three hours,' she thought, 'you will still be here going through people's dirty underwear whereas I could be sitting in a Parisian café sipping a glass of red wine and nibbling on a croissant.'

Momentarily, she felt guilty for thinking this. And then she realised that the thought made her feel much better and they can't (yet) lock you up for what you're thinking so she didn't feel quite so guilty after all.

'A 'thank you' would be very nice,' explained Mrs Caldicot.

'You may repack your case, thank you,' said the customs officer sourly. She managed to pronounce the final two words in a way that made it clear that she didn't mean them. But Miss Nightingale didn't notice and Mrs Caldicot no longer cared.

The customs officer then stood and watched as Mrs Caldicot attempted, in vain, to repack the suitcase. Without the help of Mrs Peterborough's ample proportions it was quite impossible to close the case. Miss Nightingale looked around, spotted her friend and beckoned her over.

'Do you need my bum?' said Mrs Peterborough cheerily.

Miss Nightingale nodded.

Mrs Peterborough pulled over a chair which she used to enable her to climb up onto the table and then onto Miss Nightingale's suitcase.

The table, which was standard government-issue, was not built to carry both a large, heavily laden suitcase and a large and heavily laden Mrs Peterborough and the inevitable result was that the suitcase, its contents, Mrs

Peterborough and the broken table were spread across the floor. Instantly, the sour faced indigestion sufferer had her hands in front of her face and was screaming hysterically.

In complete contrast, Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough were laughing. They thought it very funny. They always laughed at the same thing.

Mrs Caldicot could not help thinking that if it is true, as it is commonly said to be the case, that great minds think alike then Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough must be blessed with great minds for there was no doubt that they thought alike very often.

The suitcase, its hinges broken, was now quite useless for its original purpose.

'Does anyone have a few spare plastic bags?' Mrs Caldicot asked, talking to the rest of her group and ignoring the customs officer who was having her own private but rather institutionalised version of hysterics.

Miss Nightingale picked up a bundle of her now temporarily homeless finery and, having looked around and realised that there was nowhere else to put it, wisely started to put on as many of her clothes as she could.

Within two minutes she was wearing three coats, four scarves and a variety hats. The hats were all of the woolly variety and she wisely made sure that the bright red one with the two dangly bobbles was put on top of the others.

'You look as if you've put on a lot of weight!' said Mrs Peterborough. 'You remind me of someone…'

Miss Nightingale puffed out her cheeks and held her arms out at her sides.

'I know who it is you remind me of…the Michelin Man!' cried Mrs Peterborough.

'The Michelin Woman!' agreed Miss Nightingale.

They both started to laugh again.

For a few years prior to his wartime experiences with the RAF's Bomber Command, Mr Livingstone, had been a boy scout, and he was therefore always prepared for any eventuality short of a tax inspection or a nuclear war. He therefore duly produced a fistful of plastic bags from a jacket pocket. They were flimsy bags, the sort of semi-useless artefacts sold for 5 pence each to supermarket customers, but they were the only bags available and so they were definitely better than nothing. Mr Livingstone handed half of the bags to Mrs Caldicot and kept the other half himself. Together they crammed Miss Nightingale's belongings into the plastic bags.

'Would you please accept these with our compliments?' Mrs Caldicot asked the customs officer, pointing to the four tins of Mulligatawny, the two tins of pilchards, the packets of broken biscuits and the assorted bundle of long playing records. (A symphony by Mahler, an original cast recording of *The King and I*, a collection of military band tunes and a recording of Des O'Connor's greatest hits). It had not been possible to squeeze these back into the available plastic bags.

'I'm not allowed to accept gifts,' said the customs officer coldly. She had been released into the public domain with a few essential parts missing and had not yet worked out how to respond to situations which did not fit into the customs officer's handbook, but she looked carefully at the tins. 'And anyway I can't eat pilchards. They're the same thing as sardines aren't they? I come out in a rash if I so much as look at a sardine.'

'Then just pop them into the rubbish,' said Mrs Caldicot sweetly. 'We don't seem to have room for them.'

'And they give me terrible indigestion,' added the customs officer. She flicked through the LPs and picked out the one by Des O'Connor. 'Maybe just this…'

But as they moved away, Miss Nightingale turned back and grabbed everything that had not been packed into the plastic bags. She stuffed the broken biscuits and the tinned food into her coat pockets and tucked the long playing records under her arm. She also grabbed the Des O'Connor album.

The sour faced woman, who had decided to take the Des O'Connor album and who thought she might be able to cope with the Mulligatawny soup and would possibly be able to use the broken biscuits in a trifle, was so disappointed that she looked even more sour faced.

'What about this broken suitcase?' demanded the sour faced woman who had the face which reminded Mrs Caldicot of a horse's behind. 'Aren't you taking it with you?'

Mrs Caldicot turned back. 'Oh, you may keep that,' she said sweetly. 'Put it into the recycling.'

They then all showed their passports to a glum and bored looking Frenchman who had obviously done something bad in a previous life for he was now condemned to sitting in a plastic cubicle scowling and inspecting passports, and then, finally, they were through to the lounge where approximately half a million other travellers were awaiting their trains to the continent.

Oscar Wilde once said that 'it is a terrible thing to part from people one has known a very short time' but, as always, the dear soul, Oscar, was more concerned with the sound of what he said than with the sense of it. Mrs Caldicot and her chums were delighted to leave the customs folk behind. And they left without looking back or suffering any pangs of nostalgia.

They had three minutes to spare before the train departed and they hurried to join the queue. There were no trolleys available so Ruth and Mrs Roberts each had to carry or drag two large suitcases and several heavy looking shoulder bags.

'Do you think this counts as exercise?' asked Ruth, who was struggling for breath and perspiring profusely.

'Oh yes, definitely,' said Mrs Roberts who was in an equally bad state.

'I'm so pleased they didn't open my suitcase,' said Mrs Torridge, who was behind them in the queue. Her suitcase was on wheels but one of the wheels was slightly wonky and instead of following her like an obedient dog, the suitcase weaved from side to side as though it had several gins too many.

'I agree,' said Mrs Caldicot, who was also laden with bags and suitcases. 'I breathed a sigh of relief when mine was allowed through unopened.'

'Mr Torridge would have hated to be disturbed,' said Mrs Torridge. 'He was never a good traveller.'

Mrs Caldicot turned and looked at her and a cold shiver ran down her spine. Mrs Torridge had been a widow for fifteen years.

'Did Mr Torridge travel a good deal?' asked Mrs Caldicot, trying not to think what she had started to think.

'Oh no,' said Mrs Torridge, emphatically. 'Mr Torridge never went abroad. He didn't approve of foreign parts. But he didn't much like travelling in Britain either.'

'So,' said Mrs Caldicot, hesitantly, and not really wanting to hear the explanation that she felt sure was coming. 'What did you mean about him hating to be disturbed?'

'If they'd opened my suitcase,' explained Mrs Torridge. 'One of those horrible people might have taken him out and shaken him. They might have even opened his lid.' She shuddered. 'He would have hated to have had his lid opened.'

Mrs Caldicot swallowed hard and made a real effort. 'Mr Torridge is in your suitcase?' She deliberately spoke very quietly partly so as not to alarm anyone else and partly to stop herself from screaming.

'Oh yes, I decided I couldn't travel without him.'

And then Mrs Caldicot remembered that Mrs Torridge kept her late husband in a coffee tin in her bedroom. Or, to be more accurate, she kept his ashes in the tin.

'You've brought Mr Torridge's ashes with you?' whispered Mrs Caldicot.

'Oh yes,' said Mrs Torridge as though it were the most sensible thing in the world; as though she had admitted to bringing with her a small alarm clock or a pair of slippers, for example. 'But it was a difficult decision. On the one hand I know he didn't like travelling when he was here with us in body. But on the other hand I've never been parted from him and I couldn't bear to leave him behind. In the end I thought he wouldn't mind me bringing him to Paris with me. I thought it would be a sort of second honeymoon.'

Mrs Caldicot closed her eyes and muttered a silent prayer of thanks that Mrs Torridge's case had passed through customs without being opened. She idly wondered if the passport man would have expected Mr Torridge's ashes to be accompanied by a suitably incinerated copy of his passport.

'We went to Torquay on our first honeymoon,' said Mrs Torridge. 'Mr Torridge liked Torquay. We stayed there for a whole week in a boarding house just two miles from the sea.' She smiled, remembering happy days in the Devon sunshine. 'Mr Torridge bought a fishing line and spent most days trying to catch mackerel. I sat beside him and watched. It was very romantic.' She paused, still thinking, still remembering. 'He never caught anything but he bought two from a man who'd been on one of those little boats and our landlady cooked them for our supper. Very nice they were too, but a little too bony for my taste.' There were tears in Mrs Torridge's eyes as she remembered a long ago mackerel supper and a husband who was no more.

Mrs Caldicot put her arm as far around Mrs Torridge as it would go and gave her a comforting squeeze. It occurred to her that with Mr Torridge with them they were a party of 14 rather than 13. Mrs Caldicot was not a superstitious woman but it did seem that the presence of the additional member might not be a bad idea.

Struggling with their many suitcases, Mr Livingstone's instruments and Miss Nightingale's vast array of bulging plastic bags, they eventually boarded the train and settled in their seats. Mrs Caldicot could hardly believe it but they were, at last, off on their Paris adventure.

Chapter Nine

As their train went through the Channel Tunnel, Miss Nightingale celebrated the occasion by passing around the contents of the packets of broken biscuits which she'd stuffed in her pockets. The excitement of passing through Customs had long been forgotten by them all.

'This is the high life,' said Mr Roxdale, stuffing the crumbly remains of a badly battered custard cream into his mouth and lying back in his seat.

Mr Hewitt, who had managed to open one of Miss Nightingale's tins of apricot slices with the tin opening gadget on his Swiss Army penknife (which had, in all the excitement, slipped through the customs checks) pierced an apricot slice with the blade of the knife, popped the piece of fruit into his mouth and agreed with him. He then pierced another apricot slice and handed it to Mr Twist who was sitting in the seat next to him.

Mr Livingstone took his flute out of its case and minutes later those members of the party who weren't eating were singing the first of a fine variety of music hall songs.

Mr Livingstone liked music hall songs. He liked the tunes, he liked the words and he liked the jolly, having a good time sort of atmosphere they engendered.

Together they sang 'I'm Henry the Eighth', 'Burlington Bertie from Bow', 'Nellie Dean', 'Never Let Your Braces Dangle', 'Old Bull and Bush' and 'A Little Bit of Cucumber'. Miss Nightingale sang a solo version of Marie Lloyd's 'The Coster Girl in Paris' and Mrs Roberts surprised everyone by singing 'Has Anybody Here Seen Kelly?'. They sang 'Boiled Beef and Carrots' and 'I Do Like to Be Beside the Seaside'. Within ten minutes everyone in the carriage was singing along. Younger travellers who didn't know the words hummed or just made what they thought were appropriate da de da type noises.

Everyone had what used to be called a jolly good time (and would probably now be known as an 'interesting inter-generational experience') and Mrs Caldicot, who was very proud of her friends, had to wipe away a tear or two of happiness.

A couple of hours later the train slowed and eased into the Gare du Nord railway station in northern Paris.

'Can't we go round again?' shouted a young man with green hair. His friends, who had never enjoyed a journey so much, laughed and cheered.

Ruth smiled. She was very happy. Two young men had asked her for her telephone number and she felt sure that a little fellow with a toothbrush moustache and a glint in his eye had pinched her bottom. The train had jolted while she was coming back from the loo and it was, of course, possible that she might have simply bumped into the edge of a table or a piece of luggage. But the little fellow, who was too old and too small for her to fancy, and whom she felt was certainly foreign and probably French, had winked at her. She had glowered at him, though in a friendly, encouraging sort of way, and he had winked again.

And since you couldn't really count being on a train as being abroad they hadn't really arrived in France yet. She couldn't wait to send a text to her best friend Denise to let her know what had happened.

Chapter Ten

It was quite probably true that the coach driver who met them at the Gare du Nord, who helped load their bags into the bowels of his rather aged and battered vehicle and who then drove them to their hotel, was, technically speaking, bilingual as advertised.

Whatever his French was like, he was not exactly fluent in the English language but, as Mrs Roberts later pointed out, it was perfectly possible that he really was bilingual but that neither of his mastered languages was English.

'Maybe his two chosen languages are Swedish and Romanian,' she suggested. 'That would make him bilingual.'

'My name is Marc,' the driver announced with a broad smile, when they had all boarded the coach and settled into their seats. He had clearly practised this phrase many times for he made the announcement loudly, clearly and confidently. Mrs Caldicot and her party were impressed.

But, sadly, that was about the extent of Marc's English.

'How far is it to the hotel?' asked Mrs Caldicot, as the coach eased out into heavy traffic.

'L'Hotel est magnifique!' replied Marc ignoring the question because he hadn't understood it. 'Il y a un ascenseur.'

'What did he say?' asked Mrs Caldicot, turning round to see if anyone could help translate. Mrs Caldicot's French was limited in scope and not all social situations can be dealt with effectively with 'Un café, s'il vous plait.'

'He said something about a Russian called Ilya,' said Mr Livingstone confidently. He thought for a moment. 'Maybe this Ilya is the manager,' he suggested.

'He said that the hotel is magnificent and that there is a lift,' said Mr Williams softly.

'Yes, exactly, that's what I thought he said,' agreed Mr Livingstone who was beginning to suspect that perhaps his French was a little rustier than he had thought.

Mrs Caldicot thanked them both.

'L'hotel dispose de soixante seize chambres toutes avec salle de bain,' said Marc, swerving to avoid a taxi which had suddenly stopped in the middle of the road.

Marc, the driver, seemed determined to prove that even if he did not speak much English, he could definitely speak some French.

He was so keen to tell them about the hotel that he seemed to have forgotten that he was driving a coach, and threw the large vehicle around as if it were a high performance rally car and he a competition driver fighting for vital points in the World Rally Championship.

It seemed to Mrs Caldicot that the traffic was less regulated in France than in England and it was certainly faster, more thrilling, and more dangerous. The drivers seemed to do a good deal more gesticulating and it was all very noisy too; with a good deal of horn blowing.

It was not, thought Mrs Caldicot, a place for timid drivers.

'I think he said something about the hotel having a girl called Sally de something who empties lots of chamber pots,' said Mr Livingstone, translating the driver's last remarks. He paused and thought for a while. 'I couldn't quite make out the girl's name. But I seem to remember that they don't think they have proper toilets in France. They squat down and use a sort of hole in the ground.'

'If the toilet is just a hole in the ground what do you do if you're on the top floor of a tall building?' asked Mr Hewitt.

'The hotel has 76 bedrooms, all with private bathrooms,' murmured Mr Williams, translating what the driver had said and speaking before Mr Livingstone could answer this perfectly sensible question.

'Maybe a long pipe?' suggested Mr Livingstone who was still fascinated by the idea of a top floor toilet which connected to a hole in the ground. 'But what if it backed up? That would be a hell of a problem wouldn't it?'

'I think we'll find that the hotel has proper lavatories,' whispered Mr Williams.

The driver slammed on his brakes as a cyclist rode in front of him. He swerved around the cyclist and then accelerated furiously. He sounded his horn, shouted something which was almost certainly not complimentary, changed gear, waved a fist at the cyclist and lit a cigarette. He seemed to manage to do all these things at the same time. Mrs Caldicot noticed with horror that he appeared to be steering the coach with his knees. A delivery van hurtled in front of the coach, missing it by inches or, since they were now in France, by centimetres.

'I don't think I need to translate that,' said Mr Williams dryly. 'And unless he knows the cyclist and his parents I don't see how he could know all that anyway.'

Ten minutes later, the coach slid to a tyre screaming halt outside a nondescript grey building which should have had the word 'Hotel' in neon lights above the door. However, there was something wrong with the light and the H was not lit. The four remaining letters blazed away with glorious defiance. OTEL they cried proudly.

Marc the coach driver had double parked and seemed unaware that he was now completely blocking the narrow street.

'Oh look!' said Ruth excitedly. 'The French use almost the same word as we do – but they leave off the H.'

'It doesn't look very grand,' whispered Mrs Roberts, who sounded rather disappointed.

A motorist, who had been waiting behind the coach for nearly five seconds, started to press his horn.

'I'm sure it's very nice inside,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'And we aren't going to spend much time looking at the outside, are we?'

'True!' laughed Mrs Roberts.

A second motorist, now joining the young queue behind the coach, put his hand on his horn button. A delivery van driver joined the queue and did the same. The horns all had their own individual tones. Marc leant out of his window and glowered at them all. He then waved a single, nicotine stained finger in their general direction. Somehow, the horn blowing seemed to increase in intensity. One of the drivers wound down his window and shouted something which was probably abusive.

'Welcome to the best 'otel in Paris!' said a short man who wore a green jacket, green trousers and a green peaked hat. The jacket, trousers and hat were all decorated with yellow piping and had been made for a taller man with a larger head. The man wearing them looked to be in his 20s.

'Are you the porter?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'I am Raphael, the hotel doorman,' said the short man. 'I speak perfect English. Anything you wants you have only to be asking yourself from me. I can tell you everything for which you have needs. Welcome to the 'otel.' He had to shout to make himself heard above the sound of the horn blowing. He did not seem surprised or in any way put out by this.

'Can you help us with our luggage?' asked Mrs Caldicot, not unreasonably.

'I do not do the luggages,' said Raphael, rather indignantly. 'I am the doorman. If I disappear into the hotel with bags I cannot be also the doorman, is not? If someone arrives and I am there not here will be an absence of doorman and the 'otel manager he will not be pleased. I will lose my job and have to give back my uniform. There are very few jobs of this type in Paris.' He moved closer to Mrs Caldicot and lowered his voice. 'I can, however, arrange for you everything you may be needing while you are enjoying your stay in Paris. I can fix for you the taxis, the nightclubs, the restaurants, the companions for the evening…' He allowed the sentence to trail off.

Mrs Caldicot was surprised at Raphael's refusal to help with the bags. He was, she thought, perhaps not the best choice as a hotel doorman. But, on the other hand, maybe it was not easy to find a man prepared to wear an ill-fitting green uniform with yellow piping and to stand on a doorstep all day long.

And when she thought about it, she was unable to counter his seemingly solid piece of logic. If you have a man who is hired as a doorman then you would expect him to stay by the door. Moreover, she was slightly unnerved by Raphael's stern prediction about what would happen if he carried their cases into the hotel. She didn't want the poor fellow to lose his job.

And so, Mrs Caldicot, anxious to move herself, her companions and their luggage out of the coach and away from the pavement before the traffic jam, and the noise which the constituent parts were making, attracted the attention of the police, decided that they had all better carry their own luggage into the hotel.

Carrying her own suitcase, her handbag, and six of Miss Nightingale's plastic bags, Mrs Caldicot led the way into the hotel. She was glad to get away from the cacophony outside. The others, most of them equally burdened, followed her faithfully. The doorman, who was definitely not a porter, stood aside so that they could more easily make their way into the 'otel.

Inside, the narrow reception hall led up to a horse-shoe shaped, plastic looking reception desk, behind which there stood a young woman who was wearing a white blouse and a smart blue blazer which had gold buttons and an impressive looking badge on the breast pocket. The badge told anyone who dared to look close enough that her name was Nathalie and that she was the 'receptionniste'. Given her situation and the name badge, it seemed reasonable to assume that she was the hotel receptionist. Whatever else she was wearing was, together with the other half of her body, hidden behind the reception desk. Throughout the reception area, a powerful smell of furniture polish was fighting a battle with a pungent disinfectant. The aroma of the receptionist's perfume had lost the battle and apparently resigned itself to a walk on part as an insignificant extra.

The reception looked to be in her twenties but could, Mrs Caldicot thought, have been older than that. Mrs Caldicot thought she looked a nice, young girl and she was right about this.

The receptionist was a gentle, kind, sensitive creature who never went to the cinema without two packets of paper handkerchiefs in her handbag. She enjoyed a good weep and liked to categorise films according to their capacity to induce tears. So, therefore, a 'good' film would require three tissues whereas an excellent one would require at least five. She had, fortuitously, a great fondness for old people. Her grandmother (now long promoted to the Great Knitting Academy in the sky but the spitting image of Mrs Torridge) still had a place in her heart and she was never happier than when she was welcoming a party of aged tourists to the hotel. Old people were, in her experience, far less likely to get drunk, turn rowdy or set off the fire extinguishers.

To the left of the reception desk there was a staircase and to the right there was something which looked like a small cupboard but which, on closer examination, turned out to be the hotel lift. A pile of plastic stacking chairs had been left to the left of the lift doors, rather restricting ingress and egress. The whole area had clearly been freshly and extensively redecorated at some point in its life, though this had probably been a couple of decades earlier and whoever it was who had planned the renovations had been fond of brown Formica and had purchased a considerable quantity of the stuff, clearly with some enthusiasm.

The carpet, which was red with a fleus de lys pattern in gold, had doubtless been regarded with some pride when it had been lain and if there had been any guarantees about its hard wearing nature, the owners of the hotel might now be remembering any such promises with a certain amount of chagrin for there were bare patches on those areas of carpet most traversed by guests and staff.

Mrs Caldicot was reminded that Jenkins had told her that the Parisians don't much care whether their homes need a lick of paint, and don't give a fig if their cars are well decorated with dents and scratches, but they do like to present themselves as though they never know when they might need to attend a job interview or a court hearing.

'You are welcoming by the 'otel!' said the receptionist with a smile that would have filled a television presenter with envy. The receptionist's teeth were so white that Mrs Caldicot felt she would need dark glasses if she had to talk to the girl for long. 'My name is Hortense and I am speaking perfectly the English so you will ask me for any questions. We were hoped that you were having a great journey and that Marc has been bringing you here safely.'

'Oh yes, thank you,' said Mrs Caldicot, who was still shaking from the coach ride from the station and to be honest still rather cross that the man at the door, in the uniform, had steadfastly declined to help them carry their bags into the hotel. 'We got here quite safely, thank you very much.'

She thought, but did not say, that this was probably more a result of the silent prayer she had murmured than of the driver's skills.

'You will be signing the papers,' said the receptionist. She pushed a card and a form across the counter and held out a pen. Mrs Caldicot put down some of her bags, took the pen and signed her name twice.

'Everyone needs to be signing,' said the receptionist. 'There are much papers.' She raised her eyes towards the ceiling in that way people do when they are making clear that they think the world to be controlled by buffoons. 'Always so much papers!'

Mrs Caldicot looked behind her. The hall and reception area were now full of people and bags. 'Can't I sign for everyone?' she asked.

The receptionist smiled, looked from side to side as though to make sure that no one was looking, and pushed a pile of forms across the counter. 'It will be more faster,' she whispered.

Mrs Caldicot scribbled her signature on all the cards and pieces of paper and then pushed them back towards the receptionist.

'What do you have to do with all those?' asked Mrs Caldicot, pointing to the sheaf of papers and cards. 'What happens to them?'

'I put them in here,' said the receptionist. She shuffled the pieces of paper and cards which Mrs Caldicot had signed so that they looked reasonably neat and then dropped them onto the top of a pile of similar forms and cards which filled a metal filing tray. 'And when that is full and can take no more I must putting all of them into there.' She pointed to a large cardboard box on the floor behind her.

'And when the box is full?'

'It goes down into the cellars for storage,' said the receptionist. 'It is too heavy for me so I have to speak nicely to one of the waiters or to Raphael. You have met Raphael I think?'

'Oh yes,' agreed Mrs Caldicot.

The receptionist pulled the corners of her mouth down and again rolled her eyes upwards. She leant forwards a little. 'You must I think be careful of him,' she said. 'He likes very much the fees and commissions. You understand? He receives money, how is the phrase, the backbribe?'

'Backhander,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'We say 'backhander'.'

'Ah yes. That is correct. He receives the 'backhanders' from everyone – ten euros here, twenty euros there, one hundred euros sometimes. Oh la la! He must be very rich.'

'Oh yes,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I think I understand.' She definitely liked the receptionist.

The receptionist pointed to a doorway. 'The reception committee is remaining for you all in the 'otel lounge,' said the receptionist. 'You will be filled with pleasure to be going through there. The committee has been arranging for the ‘otel to be assembling champagne and small biscuits with on them little knobs of cheese. You will very much be admiring our varieties of French knobs we have provided for your delights.’

‘Goodness, how kind,’ said Mrs Caldicot, resisting the temptation to point out that in England it is only usually butter which is served up as knobs. She picked up the bags she had put down and, with some difficulty, managed to open the heavy door which the receptionist had indicated.

Mrs Roberts, Ruth and the rest of the party bravely followed her into the unknown, all still carrying their bags and cases. Only Mrs Caldicot knew that they were about to be regaled with unspecified quantities of champagne and little biscuits decorated with knobs of French cheeses. The rest were simply, blindly and faithfully following Mrs Caldicot.

Chapter Eleven

The room which Mrs Caldicot entered was smaller than she had expected and it seemed, pretty well packed with people.

There were about a dozen in there, each one holding a flute of champagne, and as Mrs Caldicot and the others entered the room they raised the glasses and shouted ‘Welcome!’ and though they tried to do it in unison they did not manage this very well and so the cry was rather ragged and less impressive than it might have been.

A waiter, who had one of those hairstyles favoured by monks which involve a fringe of hair and a large, central bald patch, and who was carrying a large, silver tray full of glasses filled with champagne, approached her. A white, plastic name tag pinned to his jacket announced that his name was ‘Pierre’. It was clear that Mrs Caldicot, and the others, were each expected to take a glass. Behind him, a younger waiter, whose name badge told the world that his name was ‘Jean-Jacques’, was also offering a tray but his tray was full of assorted French nibbly things.

‘This is very nice of the hotel,’ whispered Mrs Caldicot to Mrs Roberts, as they put down their bags and each took a glass of the champagne. ‘Who do you think all these people are? Do you think they all work here? I wonder if they do this for all their guests?’

‘We are full of proudness to welcoming you to Paris for this your first timing!’ said a small, middle-aged man in a purple suit which looked as though it had been made out of a very nice piece of velour curtain material. He was wearing a lilac shirt and a rather large, bright yellow bow tie and a cardboard name badge attached to his jacket announced to the world, or at least to any part of it that might be interested, that his name was Olivier.

‘I am Olivier,’ announced the man, thereby proving that he was at least wearing the right jacket and the correct name badge. He made this announcement as though he were certain that they would know this anyway, but that he felt it only polite of him to pretend that they didn’t recognise him. Television personalities do it all the time; introducing themselves by name even when they would be mortified if the person to whom they were introducing themselves didn’t already know precisely who they were. It is their way of letting the world know that they haven’t been changed by their success but are still the same, modest folk they were before they became famous.

‘I am the President du Conseil,’ he announced, ‘and I am satisfied to be the representative of the City of Paris for this red-letter evening.’

He moved forwards and kissed Mrs Caldicot three times. He kissed her right cheek, then her left cheek and then, as though he wasn’t sure he’d done it right the first time, kissed her right cheek again. These were not media mwah mwah air kisses, missing the skin by inches. These were resounding full contact kisses. Olivier had unusually rubbery, wet lips and Mrs Caldicot really wanted to take out her handkerchief and wipe her face but she didn’t think it would be considered proper etiquette. It suddenly occurred to her that she did not think that the late, and now unlamented, Mr Caldicot had kissed her so many times in his entire life.

‘Oh, that’s very nice,’ Mrs Caldicot said, bravely leaving her handkerchief in her handbag and belatedly backing away slightly from the flurry of unexpected osculatory activity. ‘Congratulations,’ she murmured not quite knowing what to say but knowing that ‘Congratulations’ generally goes down well when someone has told you something that doesn’t involve a bereavement, details of a newly diagnosed serious illness or a serious financial loss of any kind.

‘Since you are guests in our country, it is insisted that we is speaking English to you,’ said Olivier when he had completed his rather slobbery welcome. ‘It is very good for you to be of meeting us after so many emailings together. We can shoot the breeze in cahoots, yes?’

Mrs Caldicot wondered if she was supposed to kiss Olivier back but before she could decide, she realised that she was too late because Olivier had already moved on to kiss Mrs Roberts. Right cheek, left cheek, right cheek. Mrs Roberts blushed heavily and made a strange fluttering motion with her hands as though vaguely trying to fight off these not entirely unwelcome attentions. Truly, she did not mind the attention. There had been no Mr Roberts for some years and she was a keen follower of the style of romantic fiction popularised by Georgette Heyer. She patted her hair as though anxious to make sure that it had not been disturbed by the encounter.

‘I am speaking English of excellence so we speak the langue together,’ said Olivier, with what Mrs Caldicot, innocent of the French character, thought was more than enough self-assurance for everyone in the room.

‘That’s lovely,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Your English is perfect.’

Ruth, who was next in the firing line, had yet to be kissed but was already blushing bright red and was glad she hadn’t yet had chance to send a text to Denise. Now she could tell her that although she’d been in Paris no more than fifteen minutes she had already been kissed three times. She wouldn’t bother to mention that the three kisses had all come from the same man and there was certainly no need to mention that he had been a diminutive, middle aged man in a purple suit and a bright yellow bow tie. She wondered how much shorter than her the man was. Nine inches? Six inches? No, probably less than that. She wondered if French men were all small. And did they all like tall women? She looked around the room and caught the eye of the younger waiter. He smiled at her and she blushed an even deeper red. He had a small, gold earring in his left ear lobe and a tattoo on his neck. She felt the blush moving down her neck towards her chest and was glad that her blue anorak was still zipped up to her throat. She wondered if the waiters would also be kissing everybody. She suddenly remembered that she must mention the man on the train who had almost certainly pinched her bottom. She didn't think there was any need to mention the 'almost certainly'.

A woman in a bright blue hat shaped like a flower pot was now kissing Mrs Caldicot's cheeks (right cheek, left cheek, right cheek) and Mrs Caldicot found herself wondering whether all this kissing was really hygienic. If she'd known, she thought, she would have given her face an extra wash before they'd left home that morning. And she'd certainly give her face a double wash when she finally reached the sanctuary of her hotel room.

'I know this,' said Olivier, modestly brushing aside the unnecessary compliment with a casual but rather flamboyant wave of the hand which was holding his champagne flute, showering the carpet with champagne as he did so. Mrs Caldicot thought he had probably had one or two drinks already and was about to turn philosophical. She wondered idly if he would then turn left into maudlin introspection and the inevitable tears, or turn right into aggression, staring eyes, jutting jaw and an urgent desire to 'knock someone's block into next week' (or the French equivalent).

He moved on to start kissing Mrs Torridge, who seemed to be next in line.

The other members of what appeared to be some sort of welcoming committee were now lining up behind him and Mrs Caldicot found herself being kissed for the fifth or sixth time. There was a man with a large beard in the queue and she hoped she wouldn't giggle if his beard tickled her. Ruth was trying to keep count of the number of times she had been kissed. She wondered whether or not to tell Denise about all the women who were kissing her. She didn't want people at home talking and getting the wrong impression. Some of the people Denise knew could be a bit gossipy at times. Still, the people kissing her were all foreign and she had read that they did things differently in foreign parts, particularly in France where, she understood, naughtiness had been invented, improved and served up to the rest of the world.

Meanwhile, Ruth was disappointed to see that the waiters were not doing any kissing.

Behind her, Mrs Caldicot heard Miss Nightingale giggling as someone kissed her. She would probably kiss them back, thought Mrs Caldicot. And it would probably be a full on lips kiss with slightly more saliva than is usually considered polite in osculatory circles. Some high-pitched giggling suggested to her that Miss Nightingale had indeed responded to the kissing in what would doubtless seem to the French to be an entirely inappropriate way.

When, finally, there was a temporary break in the kissing, Mrs Caldicot turned to Mrs Roberts, who was standing beside her. 'Who are these people? Have they made a mistake? Who do they think we are?'

'Oh dear,' said Mrs Roberts, who was blushing lightly, 'I didn't like to mention it but I think they've mistaken us for the 'Faversham Food and Fashion Fellowship for Fervent Francophiles.'

'The who? The what?'

Mrs Roberts pointed to a black peg board upon which someone had spelt out the words: 'Bienvenu a Favershamp Food and Fashion Fallowship pour Fervente Francophilles' in little, white, plastic letters. The spelling might have left a little to be desired but the sentiment was clear and wholesome.

'Why on earth would they mistake us for these people from Faversham?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'Do you remember that when we made our booking, I told you that we'd been able to fix our tickets because another group had had to cancel their booking?'

'I do. They all had measles or ptomaine poisoning or something equally unpleasant.'

'Whatever they had they couldn't travel with it.'

'And they were from Faversham?'

'Faversham wasn't mentioned but I rather suspect that might be where they were from.'

'So we took the booking which was originally intended for the Faversham Food and Fashion Fellowship for Fervent Francophiles?'

'Indeed so.'

'And no one remembered to tell the French people that the Faversham Francophiles had cancelled and so they now think that we are them?'

'I think that must be what happened.'

'Oh dear me. What are we going to do?'

Mrs Caldicot's first thought was that they needed to get away from the reception party as soon as possible. She did not want the French people patronising her friends, or treating them with disrespect just because they were old and, in some cases, a little confused and bewildered by the curious ways of the world.

'I think it's probably rather too late to tell them their mistake,' said Mrs Roberts.

'So we should just have another glass of champagne and some of those little biscuits with the bits of cheese on them?'

'Knobs on,' said Mrs Roberts with a giggle. 'If Mr Livingstone and Mr Hewitt haven't eaten them all before we get there.'

Mrs Caldicot looked across the room and saw that Mr Livingstone and Mr Hewitt were busily scoffing small, savoury biscuits with cheese piled on top of them as though they were taking part in one of those eating competitions where the contestants must scoff as many meat pies or sausages as they can within a given time. Except, of course, that instead of scoffing meat pies or sausages they were munching their way through little biscuits piled high with cheese and doing so as though the continuation of the entente cordiale depended upon them.

Suddenly, they heard the unusually fortissimo sound of Mrs Peterborough's unmistakable voice. Mrs Peterborough had taken to reciting occasional limericks. These invariably delighted the audience. As a young woman, over half a century earlier, she had studied English Literature at Oxford University and although she had earned her living in haberdashery, she had aspired to be a poet. She had, indeed, published a number of poems in small magazines.

In recent weeks, she had adopted the limerick form as her chosen medium.

'I call this poem 'The Waiter' she said. She was speaking rather loudly, in what Mrs Caldicot called her 'limerick voice' and without delay she proceeded to recite her latest limerick.

A middle-aged waiter called Pierre
Had a hole where there should have been hair
He declared, with a smile,
'It's been gone for a while,
But I really can't say that I care.'

Mr Livingstone, who was a great fan of Mrs Peterborough's limericks, started to applaud. The other members of the British contingent joined in immediately. No one clapped with more enthusiasm than Miss Nightingale, the loyalist of loyal companions. And the French hosts, determined not to be outdone or to appear rude, also joined in. Mrs Caldicot couldn't help wondering what the French really thought.

Mrs Peterborough, proud as Punch, and twice as charming, beamed with delight.

Mrs Caldicot, who knew from past experience that Mrs Peterborough's limericks could sometimes be a trifle on the earthy side of socially acceptable, breathed a sigh of relief. She noticed that Olivier was sitting on the corner of a table with tears streaming down his face. He was nodding as though in agreement with someone about something. The champagne flute which he was holding in his right hand was empty.

'It is very wondrous for you to be having us here like we are,' said a very thin woman with high cheekbones and very short hair. She had a very high-pitched, whiny sort of voice which made her sound as though she were being strangled, though in a nice enough sort of way. She was wearing a cream trouser suit made out of silk and a pair of matching shoes which, Mrs Caldicot guessed, had probably cost as much as her own entire outfit. The woman's name tag bore the name 'Stephanie'.

'Thank you,' said Mrs Caldicot, who wasn't sure what to say but thought that a fairly vanillary 'thank you' wouldn't go far wrong.

'You are understanding me?'

'Oh yes,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Your English is so good!'

'Yes, thank you,' said the thin woman, accepting the compliment without hesitation. 'You are right to say that, of course. I have learned for some years to become the fluency in the foreign languages. I am also uttering the Italian at this very moment.'

'Have you been to England at all?' asked Mrs Caldicot, speaking slowly and trying to enunciate clearly in the way that people are encouraged to do when communicating with foreigners.

'Ruefully not,' said Stephanie. 'It is shameful and flagitious.'

'Have you visited anywhere in Britain? Scotland? Wales? Northern Ireland?'

'I went visiting to Calais at one duration and could see your white cliffs of Dover across the French seas,' said Stephanie. 'Magnifique!' She turned up the smile a few watts and moved a little closer. 'I am hoping that bounteous English persons will invite me to their dwelling for a visit. Maybe I meet a nice, high Englishman who wipes me off my foot.'

'Oh yes that would be nice,' agreed Mrs Caldicot, trying to suppress the image of Stephanie being wiped off her foot by a kind Englishman. 'What is the name of your society?'

'The what are you saying?'

'What is the name of your organisation; the group of which you are a member?'

'We are being 'La Societe pour la promotion de Cuisine Francaise et de la Mode'. In English that is, I am thinking it is rendered as: 'The Society for the Promotion of French Food and Fashion'. I am the secretaire of the society and in my daytime busyness I am the femme responsible des relations publiques for Doris Guillain which is one of the big fashion homes here in Paris. You may have heard of it, yes?'

Mrs Caldicot gave her congratulations and, although she had never heard of Doris Guillain she naturally said she had. Whenever it was possible, Mrs Caldicot always liked to make people happy.

'Who was the lady who recited the poem?'

'That was Mrs Peterborough.'

'It was a poem by your Wilhelm Shakespeare, no? Or perhaps your William of Wordsworth? Maybe the good Lords Byron? Or, maybe, the great American known as Walt Whitman?'

'No, actually, I don't think it was any of those. I think it was a little something Mrs Peterborough made up on the spur of the moment.'

'She is a poet?' gasped Stephanie. 'She is being a famous poet in England, perhaps?'

'I don't know about famous,' began Mrs Caldicot. She thought for a while. What harm could it do? 'Well yes, indeed, I suppose she is quite a famous poet,' she agreed at last. 'As you can see, she is very popular.'

Stephanie thanked her and hurried off to join the small crowd which now surrounded Mrs Peterborough.

Even from a few yards away, Mrs Caldicot could hear Mrs Peterborough talking to a plump man in a very smart grey suit. He had fleshy lips, horn-rimmed spectacles and wore a grey, silk scarf draped around his neck.

She noticed that Olivier was now lying on the carpet. His eyes were shut and he appeared to be talking to himself.

'I was in haberdashery myself,' said Mrs Peterborough enthusiastically. 'My husband and I owned a shop which we ran together. In America, a haberdashery sells clothes for men. But in Britain, a haberdashery sells bits and pieces for sewing. Haberdashery isn't much of a business these days because women don't sew as much as they used to. But when we had our shop we were always busy. We sold thread and buttons and zips, those were our main items, but we also sold gloves and spare elastic straps for suspender belts. We sold lots of accessories of that type. I myself was considered quite an expert on buttons.'

And Mrs Caldicot listened in amazement as Mrs Peterborough proceeded to give the plump man in the grey suit a comprehensive account of the button business. Mrs Peterborough talked about wooden buttons, metal buttons, glass buttons, porcelain buttons, leather buttons and mother-of-pearl buttons. She talked knowledgeably about the history of buttons. She spoke about shank buttons, sew-through buttons, stud buttons and fabric buttons. It were as though all this material had been lost, tucked away in some dark recess of her mind, and now that it was released it just poured out. Mrs Caldicot listened in awe for this was a Mrs Peterborough she had never known before; a woman whose life had been packed with special knowledge and experience. It was quickly clear that what Mrs Peterborough didn't know about haberdashery wasn't worth knowing.

'My husband and I ran the business for years,' said Mrs Peterborough. 'But to be truthful it was the business running us rather than the other way around. In the end it killed him, poor lamb. He had a heart attack and died. I always thought it was the ribbons which killed him. People would come in wanting two yards or three yards or whatever of the pink half inch ribbon or the lilac three quarter inch ribbon and when we got to the end of the spool there would always be a little bit left over that no one ever wanted to buy. All those little bits of leftover ribbon worried him enormously. He used to say they were our lost profits.'

On Mrs Caldicot's other side, she could hear Mr Livingstone discussing famous French chefs such as August Escoffier, Marie-Antoine Careme and Raymond Oliver with a very small man in a white three piece suit who appeared to be enormously impressed. Mrs Caldicot found herself wondering how and why Mr Livingstone knew so much about French chefs. She didn't even know that he was interested in cooking in general or French cuisine in particular.

And when she heard Mrs Torridge chatting away about women's clothing fashions in the 1950s, Mrs Caldicot suddenly remembered that the frail and rather plump old lady who had fallen down without her walking frame had once been an important buyer for a major chain store.

Mrs Caldicot looked around at her friends and realised that so much had changed since she had first met them.

For one thing, they all seemed taller now.

They actually appeared to be at least a foot taller!

This was, of course, impossible.

It was not that they had actually grown.

But when she had first met them they had all been bent over, stooped under the burden of despair and hopelessness. They had been living pointless, oppressed lives: serving only to enrich those paid to look after them. Now, they were standing up like soldiers on parade. They had self-respect and it showed. It was, she thought to herself, amazing how the mind can change the shape and appearance of the body.

'It's easy to forget that old people have all done amazing things with their lives,' said Ruth, who was listening to Mrs Torridge with a good deal of astonishment and a great deal of awe.

'It is,' agreed Mrs Caldicot who was so proud of her friends that she had to wipe away a tear which had somehow managed to escape onto her cheek.

'I'm so used to her being old and a bit, you know, dotty, that I'd forgotten that she had been young once,' whispered Ruth.

'She was a very beautiful woman when she was young,' said Mrs Caldicot who had seen photographs of Mrs Torridge when she had been younger. 'And she was very bright. She was a high flyer long before women were allowed to become high flyers. Like the others she may not always be at her best these days, and she may be a trifle eccentric and a little wobbly occasionally, but it annoys me when older people aren't treated with the respect they deserve.'

The two of them looked around the room. Every member of her party had suddenly found themselves digging deep into their bank of memories. A long forgotten word here or there had triggered recollections and released knowledge that had been locked away for years; unused and apparently forgotten.

Their French hosts were, it seemed, quite entranced.

Mrs Caldicot vowed there and then that when they got back home she would make sure that her friends would all have every opportunity to recover and share their knowledge, their experience and their acquired wisdom.

A few yards away, Mr Williams was involved in what seemed to be a deep and meaningful conversation with a man and a woman. Mr Williams appeared to be speaking fluent French without any difficulty or hesitation.

Mrs Roberts, who did not speak any French, was standing nearby looking absolutely dumbfounded. Suddenly, she saw Mrs Caldicot and hurried over to her.

'Mr Williams is speaking perfect French!' she said. 'He's chatting to those French people in their own language.'

'Golly,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'He did say he knew some French but I didn't know he was fluent.'

Mrs Caldicot stood for a moment and watched him chatting away. Then she looked around the room. The champagne reception was a huge success. All her friends from England were now engaged in earnest conversations with their French hosts.

Even Miss Nightingale had found an excellent way to woo the natives. She had discovered several handfuls of biscuit crumbs in her pockets and was sharing out the crumbs as though they were fragments of Perigord black truffle; snuffled out of the ground that morning by a well-trained porcine detective. The packaging, the wrapping within which the biscuits had met their crushing defeat under the weight of Mrs Peterborough's ample buttocks, had long since been abandoned; crumpled and tossed neatly into a rubbish bin. Only the biscuit crumbs remained.

Olivier, who appeared to have recovered, was now tentatively tasting a thimble sized portion of well crushed custard cream and mangled Garibaldi remnants. He nodded appreciatively as he gratefully accepted a second helping of what he took to be a strange English delicacy. Olivier had never had much time for the English or the British (he was not entirely sure of the difference between 'English' and 'British' and if he had been at school and set one of those compare and contrast exercises which were so popular when he'd been a boy, he would have failed the task miserably) but he was warming to this particular selection of imports. 'These old folk look pretty threadbare,' he muttered to a colleague. 'But there is more to them than meets the eye.'

Mrs Caldicot worried for a moment that it might have seemed a little odd that Miss Nightingale's biscuit crumb delicacy should be served straight from the pocket but then realised that the French are not, of course, strangers to culinary oddities. This is, she realised, a race which had the idea of collecting snails from the garden, winkling them out of their shells and serving them up in garlic butter. And had then topped their own culinary eccentricity by wondering what a frog's legs would taste like if sautéed in a little of their ubiquitous garlic butter, baked in butter, parsley and lemon juice or dipped in a little egg mix and lightly battered.

Biscuit crumbs served straight from the pocket must seem positively mundane to the French.

'Lovely aren't they?' said Miss Nightingale, pouring more crushed biscuit into the Frenchman's cupped palm.

'This is an English delicacy?'

'Oh yes,' said Miss Nightingale enthusiastically. She started to laugh. She had a wonderful, infectious laugh that was so easy and genuine that it always made other people smile and want to laugh too. Within a minute, everyone around her was also laughing and, if asked, they would have doubtless admitted that although they did not know precisely why they were laughing they did know that they were having a jolly good time.

'Who would have thought it!' said Ruth, speaking softly, more to herself than to anyone else.

Ruth was a good and kind person; she had always been fond of the old people she helped care for, and she had, from the beginning, treated them with respect, somehow subconsciously aware of their innate right to dignity, but now she realised for the first time that although they might be a little unsteady from time to time (both mentally and physically) they had done many things with their lives and that dignity and respect were their right, earned and paid for, and not a charitable donation to be bestowed out of a sense of superiority or handed out, in a patronising way, like a bowl of soup and a piece of bread.

She now realised, for the first time in her life, that although the young often have a tendency to say a great deal without ever saying anything worth hearing, older citizens, although often reluctant to speak, do, when they eventually speak, invariably say something worth listening to.

The champagne reception finished only when the hotel receptionist appeared and explained that the staff needed to prepare the room for the next morning's breakfast.

Closing down the evening's event was not something which could be done quickly.

First, everyone had to kiss everyone else three times (right cheek, left cheek, right cheek) and then Mr Livingstone insisted that they all shake hands with one another, in a properly formal English way.

There were many promises to 'keep in touch'.

'We already have your address, telephone number and email address!' Olivier said to Mrs Caldicot. 'We will be in touch soon! We must meet again most quickly. Maybe we are all coming to England!'

Mrs Caldicot was, for a moment puzzled, until she remembered that Olivier thought he had been entertaining the Faversham Food and Fashion Fellowship for Fervent Francophiles.

'Of course,' said Mrs Caldicot, who thought that all things considered it was best this way. She hoped the Faversham Food and Fashion Fellowship for Fervent Francophiles would not be too confused when they heard from their enthusiastic Parisian penpals and asked for the recipe for 'mietes de biscuit servies a partir de la poche'.

The Parisian hosts of the champagne party drizzled off into the night; some to look for taxis, some heading to the Metro and some walking back to their apartments. Unlike London, the French capital is a lived-in city. Central Paris is home for millions, and many of those who had welcomed Mrs Caldicot and her party lived within easy walking distance of the hotel.

The travellers, dragging, pulling and carrying their luggage, then made their way into the lift or up the stairs to find their rooms. Some, unaccustomed to apparently unlimited supplies of champagne, were just a trifle on the squiffy side of sobriety; all were weary after their day of travel

'I wonder where I can buy some postcards,' said Mrs Roberts, when the last of their hosts had disappeared and the majority of the residents were busy preparing for bed.

Ruth, slightly startled, looked at her. 'Postcards?'

'Just to send to a few friends,' explained Mrs Roberts. 'If I don't send them off quickly we'll be home before they arrive.'

'I've already sent mine!' said Ruth proudly. She held up her mobile telephone, pressed a couple of keys and showed Mrs Roberts the photos and messages which her friends had already received.

'Oh no, I want to send real postcards,' said Mrs Roberts with a slight shudder of disapproval. 'You can't put those things on your mantelpiece or stick them onto your fridge.'

'The important thing is not to write: 'Wish you were here!' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I did that once when I was a young girl on holiday in Torquay with a couple of girlfriends. 'I sent the cards with the same message to a dozen people I knew, including a boy I sort of thought I fancied a bit. Two days later he turned up with his rucksack. It was very embarrassing.'

Mrs Roberts laughed.

'Ooo, I'd have been so thrilled if that had happened to me,' said Ruth.

'No you wouldn't,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'He didn't have anywhere to stay and thought he was going to stay with me and my girlfriends. Fortunately, the landlady had a very strict 'no guests in the rooms' rule and he had to go back home the same day. We all had to club together to find the money for his rail fare.'

'It was a romantic thing to do though,' said Ruth.

'I suppose it was,' admitted Mrs Caldicot.

'Was that Mr Caldicot, the man you married before Mr Jenkins?'

'Good heavens, no!' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Mr Caldicot wouldn't have done anything like that. He wasn't an overly romantic sort of fellow.'

Ruth, who was slightly startled by what Mrs Caldicot had told her, didn't say anything.

It was funny, she thought.

When she'd started work at what she knew as Caldicot House, she had been filled with a desire to help the old people living there. She was what used to be called a big-hearted girl, generous and full of simple kindness. But she really knew very little about old people. Two of her grandparents had died some years ago and she had never seen the other two who had emigrated to America and now lived in a trailer park in Florida. She hadn't ever thought of them ever having had romantic experiences.

‘I’ll get some cards tomorrow,’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘There’s bound to be a little shop somewhere close to the hotel.’

The three of them then made their way up the final flight of stairs and found their rooms, which were all on the top floor. When she had deposited her own suitcase in her room, Mrs Caldicot checked to make sure all her residents were safe, comfortable and happy.

Mr Livingstone was in his bedroom and had been sitting in the room’s solitary easy chair when Mrs Caldicot knocked and said who was there. ‘It’s only me, Mr Livingstone!’

He called out for her to enter and stood up when she entered. He had clearly been crying. Indeed, there were still tears on his cheeks. He brushed them away with the back of his hand.

‘What on earth’s the matter?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

Mr Livingstone took out a large handkerchief and blew his nose. ‘I’ve been here before, you know,’ he said eventually. ‘Not here, not to this hotel, but to Paris.’

‘On holiday?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘Not exactly,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘It was in 1942.’

‘Oh,’ said Mrs Caldicot. She could guess what was coming next.

‘You know I flew in bombers during the War?’

Mrs Caldicot nodded.

‘I was the bomb aimer. It was my job to make sure that our bombs hit the designated target.’

Mrs Caldicot nodded again. She wasn’t really quite sure what to say.

‘We were shot down over France and I was captured and taken to a prisoner of war camp. We were coming back from a raid. We’d dropped our bombs. It was quite successful, I think. But we got picked up by a searchlight and shot down with ack ack fire.’

Mrs Caldicot couldn’t help thinking how extraordinary it was that she had known this man for some time and did not know this about him. She wondered how much else there was that she didn’t know about her friends. When people have lived for 70 or 80 years or more they are bound to have experienced many things with their lives.

‘How did you come to be in Paris?’

‘I escaped from the prisoner of war camp I was in. A few of us got out through a tunnel which we dug. I was with an American airman. He spoke more French than I did. He was very good at it, actually. Spoke it like a native. Nice bloke. He had been about to start studying dentistry when the War had started but he’d joined up. I don’t think he had to join up at all. I’m not sure America was in the War at the time and he could have gone to college. But his mother was French and he wanted to fight, as much for France as anything else I think. Through sheer luck we met up with a girl from the French Resistance and she helped us. They had this complicated route for getting Allied airmen out of France. It seems strange, since the place was awash with Germans, but one of their routes out of France involved travelling into Paris.’

‘How long were you here, in the city?’

‘Oh, only a couple of days. The Resistance kept us tucked away in a top floor flat in the 15th arrondissement. But we could just see the Eiffel Tower from the skylight.’

‘And you’ve never been back here since then?’

‘No,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘No, this is my first time since the War.’

‘What happened to your companion, the American who was going to study dentistry? Is he still alive? Are you still in touch?’

‘He and the girl both died,’ said Mr Livingstone. He swallowed and didn’t speak for a moment. ‘They were killed by the Germans. The girl and a bloke she worked with moved us in the middle of the night and we ran into a patrol. We were in a stolen Post Office van which got stopped at a checkpoint. We all ran and they both got shot. The Germans didn’t have to shoot them. We weren’t armed. My mate put up his hands to show he didn’t have a weapon but they just shot him down. I don’t think they even knew he was an escaped prisoner of war. They just shot him down because they had guns and he didn’t. They shot the girl as well. She can’t have been more than 15 or 16-years-old. She was a tiny little slip of a thing; not old enough to be someone’s wife or girlfriend, just someone’s brave daughter. I was lucky. The Frenchman and I managed to get away. He knew a way into the sewers and we spent eight hours down there before coming up miles away. And we didn’t come up smelling of roses, either. Four days later I was back in England. And a week after that I was back in a bomber over Germany. I could have had some leave because I was entitled to it but I wanted to get back into the air.’ He paused. There was enormous sadness in his eyes. ‘I have always done any job I’ve had to the very best of my ability,’ he said. ‘But on the sorties I flew after I had escaped from the Germans, after that awful thing that happened in Paris, I made extra, special care to make sure that our bombs did the maximum amount of damage.’ He took out his large handkerchief again and blew his nose. ‘I know they’re not all to blame but I don’t think I’ll ever be able to ever stop hating Germans.’

Mrs Caldicot couldn’t think of anything at all worth saying. She reached out and put her arms around Mr

Livingstone and hugged him. She could feel his body convulsing with the sobs and she could feel the tears falling onto her neck.

'I'll be OK in a while,' said Mr Livingstone, after a while. 'Seeing the Eiffel Tower brought everything back to me in a rush. A lot of people died in that War. They were very brave. And what the hell was it all about? Borders? Greed? Power? Saving Poland? Stopping a stupid Austrian fellow with a funny salute? Does anyone care now? Does anyone remember what it was all about?'

The two of them stayed silent for a while.

'Don't say anything to the others,' said Mr Livingstone after a while. 'I don't usually like talking about any of it. There isn't any point in dredging it all up, is there?'

Mrs Caldicot took his head in her hands and kissed him on the forehead, as you might kiss a child you didn't know terribly well but wanted very much to comfort.

'You must think I'm a big softy,' said Mr Livingstone, with a sheepish grin. He wiped his sleeve across his face, smudging the tears away.

'I think you're a very brave man; a hero,' said Mrs Caldicot with simple honesty.

After she left his room she stood in the hallway for a few moments before knocking on the next door.

For a moment she remembered the way the customs people had dealt with Mr Livingstone and the others. She knew the customs people had to do a job but did they have to be so disrespectful? And would they be quite so disrespectful if a group of middle aged, fat cat bankers in pinstripe suits had been going through customs with their Louis Vuitton luggage? She suspected that they would not have dared be quite so rude and dismissive and that thought made her even angrier. How odd, she thought, that public servants should bend their knees before rogues, crooks and tricksters but sneer at honest, hard-working people.

She shook her head, took a deep breath and knocked on the next door.

'They were lovely people,' said Mrs Peterborough who was trying to decide which of the seven nightdresses she had brought with her she should wear. She was talking about their hosts at the soiree they had attended. 'Do you think they liked my little poem?'

'I'm sure they loved it,' said Mrs Caldicot.

Mrs Peterborough blushed with delight.

'It's not how old you are that matters, but how you are old,' thought Mrs Caldicot, smiling to herself.

She had known many women in their 40s who thought and lived in the way we tend to think 80-year-olds should think and live but the always delightful corollary is that there are some people in their 80s who are well preserved in body, mind and spirit and who think and live like 40-year-olds.

'Or younger!' said Mrs Caldicot out loud.

'I beg your pardon, dear?' said Mrs Peterborough.

'Nothing,' said Mrs Caldicot, reaching out and giving Mrs Peterborough a hug.

She remembered how Mrs Peterborough had been when they had met. She had been ignored and dismissed. She might as well have been one of those red, plastic armchairs with which Mr Hawksmoor filled the lounge at the Twilight Years Rest Home. There was, she remembered, one row of chairs against one wall and another row of chairs against the opposite wall. When the residents weren't asleep, drugged with tranquillisers they didn't need, they simply sat and stared at one another. There wasn't anything much else for them to do. And even if there had been anything else to do they wouldn't have had the energy to do it.

Unlimited kindness, unconditional respect and a loving, caring environment had done wonders for Mrs Peterborough. Taking her off those damned tranquillisers had helped too.

Chapter Twelve

Britons and Americans who visit France for the first time are sometimes disappointed by the sort of breakfast usually served up at the sort of hotels which specialise in providing accommodation for tourists who aren't travelling on expense accounts, or whose costs aren't being met by a government, a government agency, a rich voluntary body or one of those international charities which always have plenty of money to spend on their executive staff but never seem to have very much to spend on the good cause which the charity claims to espouse.

When you are accustomed to starting the day with eggs, bacon, fried tomatoes, mushrooms and lashings of hot toast, and then washing the lot down with a glass of orange juice and several cups of tea, it can be disappointing to have to make do with a flaky brioche or a chunk of buttered baguette (served with a miniature pot of jam) and a rapidly cooling over-wide cup of fairly wishy washy looking café au lait.

If you like to start your morning with pancakes, hash browns, waffles, steak, sausage, ham, fries, an omelette and an unlimited supply of hot chocolate, tomato juice, milk or coffee then finding yourself expected to start the day with no more fuel than might be provided by a single, forlorn croissant can be disheartening.

But Mrs Caldicot's travelling circus (as Ruth had affectionately referred to their merry band in a late night text to Denise) was not caught out by the French preference for speed and convenience as far as breakfast is concerned, for they had come forearmed and well prepared. Mr Hewitt had brought with him a good supply of bacon, a dozen eggs, a thick sliced loaf of bread and two large boxes of cornflakes.

And so, after some rather heated discussions with the hotel's breakfast chef, who was initially reluctant to allow his cooker to be used by hotel residents, those among the party who wanted a proper breakfast enjoyed a marvellous English fry up: crispy bacon, fried eggs and proper English toast.

The chef, whose professional integrity had been soothed with a rather generous one-time donation which had made Mr Williams's wallet considerably thinner and less of a burden, had turned a blind eye. And although he had been seen to shudder, he had done his best to ignore the aroma and sizzle of bacon a-frying and eggs a-spluttering over a suitably turned up gas flame.

The Merivales, Maurice and Maple, Mr Twist, Mr Williams, Mr Roxdale, Mr Hewitt and Mr Livingstone all enjoyed a solid, full English breakfast. Mrs Peterborough, Mrs Torridge and Miss Nightingale enjoyed a magnificent, if rather unusual, breakfast comprising lashings of mulligatawny soup, copious quantities of pilchards and the remains of the tinned apricots. Ruth, Mrs Roberts and Mrs Caldicot enjoyed eggs and bacon with a side order of tinned apricots. Everyone also had a croissant and a cup of hotel coffee.

'They say you can get hardened arteries if you eat too much of this stuff,' said Mr Roxdale, enjoying another rasher of crispy bacon.

'I don't want sloppy, flippy floppy arteries,' said Mr Hewitt. 'Soggy arteries are for girls. A real man should have good, solid, hard arteries!' He looked at Mrs Merivale's plate whereupon lay a solitary rasher of bacon. 'Are you not eating that?'

Mrs Merivale shook her head. 'I'm absolutely full to the brim!'

Mr Hewitt reached across, forked the bacon and transferred it to his own plate.

Mrs Caldicot looked across at them and couldn't help smiling. Mr Roxdale was in his 80s and Mr Hewitt well into his 90s. It seemed a little late to start offering them dietary advice.

'So, where do you want to go first?' asked Mrs Caldicot, when everyone was properly fed and watered and ready for their first day in Paris. Teeth had been cleaned, hair had been combed and faces had been washed and, in the case of those who felt it appropriate and necessary, suitably decorated with coloured creams, powders and waxes.

There was, inevitably, some debate about this.

Mr Hewitt and Mr Livingstone thought they should find a shop where they could purchase fresh supplies of essential foodstuffs. They had, pointed out Mr Hewitt, exhausted their imported supplies of the essentials. Mrs Roberts said she would quite like to find a shop selling postcards. Mr Twist thought he might quite like to visit the Louvre. Mr Roxdale, who had crammed his fork and trowel into his jacket pocket, felt that a tour of the city's parks would enable him to best assess the quality of French gardening. Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale said they thought they didn't mind where they went as long as they didn't go too far from a lavatory because Mrs Peterborough had drunk rather a lot of champagne the night before and had drunk two large cups of tea with her breakfast and Mrs Torridge agreed with them. Mr Williams said that at some point, if it was acceptable to everyone else, he would quite like to go into the Marais where there were some art galleries he would like to look at. Ruth, who had picked up a map and a tourist guide from the reception desk said she'd like to visit some of the shops on the Champs-Élysées. The Merivales, Maurice and Maple, said they would like to visit the Place du Tetre, walk along the banks of the Seine and go down into the student area of the 5th arrondissement. Mr Twist said in addition to taking a look at the Louvre, he thought he would like to take a look at the Quai d'Orfevres, the place where Maigret, the fictional French detective, had his offices.

It was agreed that they would do all of these things and that they would also visit the Eiffel Tower, Notre Dame, Sacre Coeur, Les Invalides, the Louvre and both the Luxembourg Gardens and the Tuileries Gardens.

Mrs Caldicot's only stipulation was that whatever they did they should do it together. 'I really don't like the idea of everyone wandering around Paris by themselves,' she whispered to Mrs Roberts.

As they discussed their plans they headed, as one body, towards the door of the hotel where Raphael stood, dignified and, it has to be said, rather pointless.

'Good mornings!' said the doorman very cheerily, addressing Mrs Caldicot. 'I fetch for you a taxi, old woman? You would like me to arrange a nightclub? A trip to Versailles in our air conditioned coach? A tour of the city by night?' He turned and leered at Mr Hewitt, who happened to be standing closest to him. 'A trip to one of our saucy nightclubs?'

'Not a bit of it!' said Mr Hewitt very firmly.

'We're going for a walk, thank you very much,' said Mrs Caldicot very firmly.

Privately she marvelled at how such an aggressive and arrogant man managed, at the same time, to be smarmy and rather creepy. He rather reminded her of Mr Hawksmoor, the proprietor of the Twilight Years Rest Home. She shuddered involuntarily and turned to Mrs Roberts. 'I think one of us had better decide what we're doing or else we'll be standing here all day!'

'I think you're right,' agreed Mrs Roberts, who always preferred other people to make decisions whenever possible.

Mrs Caldicot cleared her throat and announced that she had made a decision.

She did so with such certainty that everyone, even Raphael the doorman, turned and looked in her direction.

'This morning we will walk through the Tuileries Gardens, go down to the Seine, stroll along the river bank and then walk up towards the Eiffel Tower and after that the Champs-Élysées,' she said. She paused for a moment. 'And then this afternoon we will do something else,' she added. And clutching the map which the hotel provided, Mrs Caldicot pointed to the left. 'We'll go that way!'

Everyone agreed that this was a splendid plan.

With Mrs Caldicot leading the way, the assembled company began to put her excellent plan into action.

'Toodle pip!' said Mr Roxdale to Raphael.

'What is that?' demanded the doorman.

'Toodle pip!' repeated Mr Roxdale. 'Tally ho! The game's afoot!'

'What is this tootle plipping?' asked Raphael, looking more puzzled than ever.

'It's the way the English say 'goodbye',' said Mr Roxdale.

'Goodbye is not right? They do not say 'goodbye'?'

'Oh no, not the proper English. That's just what they teach foreigners. The English say 'toodle pip' or 'tally ho' or 'the game's afoot'!'

'Tootle peep,' said Raphael, trying it out. 'Tally how!'

'Close!' said Mr Roxdale. 'Toodle pip old bean!'

'Tootle peep old bean,' repeated Raphael. 'Tally how!'

'And 'the game's afoot'! Try that. Very popular with the younger Brits.'

'The games afeet,' said Raphael.

'That'll do nicely,' said Mr Roxdale, hurrying after the rest.

'You will teach me more proper English?' Raphael called after him.

'Pleasure!' replied Mr Roxdale. 'Another lesson tonight when we get back.'

'Thank you!' cried Raphael. 'Tootle peep old bean, the games afeet!'

'What did that idiot doorman say?' asked Mr Hewitt when Mr Roxdale caught up.

'He tried to say 'toodle pip',' said Mr Roxdale. 'I'm teaching him English.'

'Splendid idea!' agreed Mr Hewitt rubbing his hands together in delight. 'Can I help?'

'Think up some more phrases we can teach him,' said Mr Roxdale. 'He's an unpleasant fellow, isn't he?'

'I've heard he thinks very highly of himself,' said Mr Hewitt. 'Indeed, I suspect he thinks of nothing else.'

The two of them laughed.

As the party arrived at the end of the street, wherein lay their hotel, they passed a pavement stall selling oysters.

'Oh look!' said Mr Williams, excitedly. 'I must have a dozen of those to start the day.' The others watched as the man behind the counter shucked a dozen oysters and put them onto a plate. 'Casanova used to eat 50 of these every morning for breakfast,' said Mr Williams who loved fish and shellfish of all kinds. He was fond of cockles and winkles, adored whitebait and would walk ten miles in bare feet and on stony ground to find himself next to a well salted, nicely smoked bloater. But oysters, so rarely available on the menu at Caldicot House, were for him the holy grail of all seafood delicacies.

‘Really!’ said Mrs Roberts, who sounded rather startled and not a little concerned.

‘Oh don’t worry!’ laughed Mr Williams. ‘I’m far too old for oysters to have any useful effect on me.’

Mrs Roberts did not look entirely convinced.

‘Would anyone like to try one?’ Mr Williams asked when he had squeezed lemon juice over his oysters.

Everyone instinctively backed away a foot or two.

‘I’d like to try one,’ said Mrs Caldicot, not entirely sure why she’d said it and surprising herself more than anyone else.

‘Chew it a couple of times and then swallow it,’ advised Mr Williams.

The rest then stared with a mixture of respect, astonishment and horror as Mrs Caldicot chewed and then swallowed her oyster. She declined the offer of a second.

‘What was it like?’ Mrs Roberts asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘Horrid,’ whispered Mrs Caldicot. ‘It was absolutely horrid; slithery, rubbery and tasteless.’ She shuddered.

She and the others watched in horror as Mr Williams continued to devour his plateful of seafood with great relish.

‘Splendid!’ he said, wiping his lips when he had finished. ‘Now I know I’m definitely in Paris!’

He handed the empty plate back to the stall holder.

They walked away from the street stall and continued their walk towards the park.

‘What was that oyster like?’ Ruth asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘It was like swallowing a bit of lemony rubber,’ answered Mrs Caldicot with a shudder. ‘I don’t know why I did that.’ She thought for a moment and then she smiled. ‘Yes, I do. Now I can tell my husband that I’ve tried oysters and I don’t like them!’

As they walked, an excited Mrs Roberts caught up with them. She was slightly out of breath. She held up a small white, paper envelope. ‘Look!’ she said delightedly. ‘I managed to buy some postcards from that little shop we passed along the way.’

They all tiptoed around a spot on the pavement where an artist had been busy using coloured chalks to decorate the pavement. He had drawn a huge tropical island. There was yellow sand, green and brown palm trees, dark blue sea and lighter blue sky. The artist was busy drawing a mermaid, sitting on the sand. The mermaid was looking into the sea rather wistfully.

‘Did you get the stamps you wanted?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘I asked the man in the shop about stamps,’ said Mrs Roberts.

‘I’m very impressed,’ said Mrs Caldicot, wondering how long it would be before she could get a drink to wash away the unpleasant sensation the oyster had left in her mouth.

‘Well, actually, I didn’t really ask him,’ admitted Mrs Roberts. ‘I just pointed to the little rectangular space where you normally stick your stamp, raised an eyebrow and tried to look quizzical.’

‘What did he say?’

‘I don’t know what he said but he just gave me my change and shook his head.’

‘Don’t worry! I’m sure we’ll be able to find some stamps for sale,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

It was a beautiful spring day and the trees of Paris, mostly plane and horse chestnut in this part of the city, were already in full leaf. They were, pointed out Mr Roxdale, a good month or so ahead of the trees in England. The party walked on, chattering happily, pointing things out to one another, laughing, enjoying the unique and special smells and sights and sounds of a city most of them had never visited before. Only Mr Williams knew Paris really well. A decade or two earlier he had had a small photographic studio in Paris. His photographs had been shown regularly in the city’s galleries and had been reproduced in the expensive magazines.

Mrs Caldicot looked around at her companions and smiled. It was good to have friends. She missed Jenkins terribly but was reassured with the thought that she’d see him in a couple of days. She felt a twinge in her knee occasionally and her back was a trifle stiff. She thought that perhaps the bed in the hotel had been a little too soft. Her spine needed more support at night than it did when she had been half a century younger. Growing old can be a bit of a nuisance sometimes but, she thought to herself with a little smile, it is far better than the alternative. Her father was the first person she’d heard say that. And he’d probably got it from his father. But as she looked around at her friends, all enjoying their first morning in Paris, and the stiffness in her back seemed to ease a little. Maybe springtime in Paris had some sort of healing quality. Suddenly she felt 18. She remembered reading somewhere that although the body ages and weakens, and the mind grows older and sometimes slower too, the human spirit never ages. When we age we may have difficulty in climbing stairs or leaping over fences, and our memories may not be quite as sharp as they were at 14, but we still feel the same inside as we felt when we were young and were just setting out on the great adventure which is life.

It is a widely held myth that both the human body and the human mind must inevitably deteriorate in all respects as the years trundle by with increasing speed. The myth is perpetuated because it is convenient and it fits society's preconceived notion of how the elderly should be.

The young sometimes find it uncomfortable to accept that wrinkly and slightly wobbly old folk may be just as bright as they are and this is perhaps because they realise that when intelligence is added to wisdom gained through experience, the sum of the two is considerably more potent than the one alone.

The party waited at the traffic lights, crossed the Rue de Rivoli, and entered the Tuileries Gardens, the huge, ornamental park which lies between the Louvre Palace and the Place de la Concorde.

A small guidebook which Mrs Roberts had picked up at the hotel receptionist desk, explained that the gardens, created by Catherine de Medici, were originally the private gardens of the Palace. They were, she read and explained, first begun in the 16th century and only became a public park after the French Revolution.

'The gardens have for two centuries been a popular place for fashionable Parisians to stroll, meet and have picnics,' announced Mrs Roberts.

Miss Nightingale, as excited as a child, danced and skipped on the dusty paths, admiring the beautiful spring flowers and the neatly trimmed hedges. She and Mrs Peterborough posed together, resting each side of a grey, stone statue of a supersized and very obviously naked Adonis, while Ruth took their photograph with the camera on her mobile telephone. Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough were so full of laughter that they could hardly stand up straight. Ruth, catching the giggle mood, had to take the photograph half a dozen times before she managed to get a picture that didn't cut off Mrs Peterborough's head or Miss Nightingale's feet.

While Mr Hewitt and Mr Roxdale tackled a few of the weeds that were growing in the garden's flower borders, the rest of the party stood and watched a young boy playing with a small, wooden yacht on a boating pond. They then walked on a few yards and stood for a few moments and listened to a young girl playing a violin. They marvelled at the amount of money which visitors and tourists had tossed into the girl's empty violin case.

They watched as a painfully thin jogger in his 30s leant against a tree and stretched his hamstrings and they said 'No thank you' to the invitations to buy from a North African citizen who was selling carved wooden bowls which he had carefully laid out on a large plaid rug.

'The rug makes it easy for him to make a quick getaway,' explained Mr Williams. 'If he spots a policeman coming he'll just pick up the rug by the four corners and scarper. The police never catch these fellows – they're just too fast.'

They admired several human statues.

One individual (it was impossible to tell whether the person underneath was male or female) had draped her or himself in a green robe, put a green crown on his or her head and painted his or her face green. He or she was holding a green cardboard torch.

'Look,' said Mrs Roberts. 'The statue of liberty!'

Ruth took a photograph. She must, thought Mrs Caldicot, have already taken several hundred photographs. It was a good job she wasn't using a camera that used film.

A few yards away another person (once again unidentifiable by sex) had dressed him or herself as a French King. The King was standing perfectly still and had a feathered hat at his or her feet into which passers-by had tossed some coins.

An artist, sitting on one of the green, metal chairs with which the park was well supplied, was drawing a young girl who was sitting on one of the fixed wooden and metal benches. The artist wore a grubby-looking, grey jumper and a pair of faded jeans. He seemed much older than you might expect a street artist to be; too old to be a student. Maybe, thought Mrs Caldicot, he was a serious artist, living in a tiny attic room in Montmartre and drawing tourists so that he could buy paint, canvas and food. He had a small, khaki coloured rucksack on the floor beside him. It appeared to be almost empty.

The model, the girl he was sketching, wore a camel coloured coat and had a light blue scarf wrapped round her neck. She had dark hair, worn long, and was hatless. A young man, smartly but casually dressed and presumably the girl's boyfriend, fiancé or husband was standing beside the artist, watching his every movement, as though keen to ensure that the girl's beauty was captured adequately.

The artist was sketching with charcoal on a sheet of grey paper and his hand moved swiftly and confidently. The drawing was remarkably life-like.

Mrs Caldicot wondered if the young couple were, perhaps, on their honeymoon. The finished drawing would, in any case, doubtless be greatly appreciated and treasured. Maybe it would be framed when they got home. Maybe it would remain rolled, with an increasingly fragile rubber band, holding it furled; destined to lie in a box in the attic. She found herself hoping, and even believing, that it would end up very nicely framed and hanging in the hall.

Visitors would admire it and the couple would explain how they had it done in the Tuileries Gardens in Paris by a nice chap called Pierre or Marcel or Stephan who wanted 20 euros but agreed to 15 euros. They would, perhaps, always wonder if Pierre or Marcel or Stephan ever became famous. They might wonder if their charcoal sketch could be worth millions.

A couple were playing chess. The two players were each seated on metal chairs. The board and pieces were on a third chair, between them. The woman, a redhead, was slightly built. The other player, a man, much older, was huge and must have weighed twice as much. Judging from the state of the board, the older man appeared to be winning.

Mrs Peterborough was driven to rhyme.

'A red headed woman called Kate
Played chess with a bloke twice her weight
The bloke took her queen
With a move she'd not seen
And shocked her by calling out 'Mate!'

The players were concentrating hard and they did not look up. Maybe they did not speak English, thought Mrs Caldicot. Maybe they did not realise that the limerick was about them. Maybe they didn't like limericks. Mr Livingstone did, very much, and he once again led the applause.

A little further on an even older artist, this one seemingly in his sixties, white haired, white bearded, was sitting on a metal chair and bent over a small easel and was concentrating hard on a watercolour painting. Mrs Caldicot would have expected him to be doing a sketch from memory of the Eiffel Tower or maybe the green bouquiniste book stalls along the edge of the river Seine. But he wasn't. He was drawing a French pastoral scene. Fields, trees, meadows, flowers, a small river and half a dozen cows. Mrs Caldicot wondered if the picture was taken from memory or just taken from the man's imagination. It was exquisitely worked. Several finished paintings were arranged on a couple of adjacent chairs. They were very reasonably priced.

'What a beautiful painting!' whispered Mrs Caldicot to Mr Williams, who was standing beside her. Mr Williams, who did not speak, merely nodded his agreement.

'I can't help wondering why this poor chap is having to sell his paintings in a park,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'And they are so reasonably priced.' She wondered whether or not to purchase one but then remembered that she had brought very little money with her. The group had brought their cash with them as communal funds, looked after by Mr Twist. Apart from a few euros for incidentals, she had no money of her own in her handbag.

'I've certainly seen stuff in art galleries that wasn't as good,' agreed Mr Williams.

'So, why is this poor fellow having to sit out here and sell his work this way? Why won't an art gallery put his paintings on display? Surely they could market them for him?'

'Art is like music and writing,' explained Mr Williams. 'It's not just about talent. It's also about how well you can sell yourself and present your work. It's about who you meet and, more than anything else, it's about luck. Success is merely a combination of talent and luck. You need both and of the two I would say that luck is the most important. When I first came to Paris I happened to meet a fellow who was starting a new photographic gallery. It was empty and had only just been decorated. I walked past his new and empty shop and saw him struggling to move a desk he'd had delivered. I called in and helped him put the desk where he wanted it. As a thank you he took me into a bar and bought me a beer. When we talked I mentioned that I was trying to make my way as a photographer. He asked to see some of my pictures. I happened to have some in my bag. I'd just collected them from the developer. The fellow had empty walls and no clients. He was delighted to pay for some of my photographs to be enlarged and framed and hung on his walls. And because a few of them sold he continued to hang my pictures. Then other gallery owners saw that this chap was making money out of me and I was on my way.'

'But it was talent that made you successful,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'A little bit, perhaps,' said Mr Williams, modestly. 'But it was more the result of that meeting with the gallery owner. I was lucky that he was trying to move that desk by himself. I was lucky that I wasn't in a hurry and I could go in and help him. I was lucky that he had a new gallery with empty walls. I was lucky that I happened to have some of my photographs with me. People say that they make your own luck but that has never been my experience. I didn't make any of my luck.' He shrugged. 'If I'd gone into that gallery three months later with a portfolio of photographs, the gallery owner would have probably sent me away. His walls were by then fully covered with photographs for sale.'

'But you stopped to help that man in his shop,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'That was a kind gesture. You deserved the luck.'

'Maybe,' agreed Mr Williams. 'But I knew another chap at that time, he too was trying to make it as a photographer. He took brilliant pictures. He had an eye and an amazing talent. He would walk the streets of Paris at night taking pictures of people coming out of nightclubs and of prostitutes on the pavements. He was a master of taking pictures in the rain, with lights reflected in the puddles. Everything he took was in black and white. He never took anything in colour. But because he didn't have any money he slept on a couch in a friend's tiny one room cellar near the river. It was damp and everything he wore smelt of mould. He never bathed and he stank. Whenever he went into a gallery to try to persuade them to look at his pictures, they threw him out. He never did make it. He had loads of talent but no luck.'

'What happened to him?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'Eventually, someone persuaded him to take snaps of the tourists to earn a little money. He sold his cameras and bought one of those Polaroid instant cameras. He stood outside a café on the Place de l'Opera and took pictures of British and American tourists. He scratched a living doing that. When he started, he swore he was doing it just to get onto his feet. He found a small studio apartment of his own. He got into a relationship with a prostitute who worked the same stretch of pavement. They lived together but then she fell ill and he had to keep them both. Twenty years after he'd started with his Polaroid camera, he was still doing the same thing: snaps of the tourists sitting enjoying their coffees and their pastries. When I became a bit successful and had a little money I offered to lend him money so that he could buy a proper camera and start taking decent pictures again. But he wouldn't take the money. I told him the money was a gift, and that I didn't want it repaying, but he refused.'

'Is he still there, still taking pictures of tourists?'

'Oh no. He died some years ago. His girlfriend, the prostitute had tuberculosis – probably caught from a client. He caught it off her. They both died of it. It was like something out of a tragic opera. Ironic, really, that he spent his best years taking Polaroid snaps outside the Opera building.'

They had walked no more than a third of a mile from the hotel, walking through the Tuileries Gardens on their way to the Seine, enjoying some glorious Easter sunshine on their first day in the French capital, when Mr Livingstone spotted a small crowd of people a little way ahead. He hurried on, calling for the others to join him. Mr Roxdale and Mr Hewitt did so with some reluctance for they had just spotted a number of overly enthusiastic weeds growing in a bed of beautifully coloured cyclamen plants. The two keen gardeners were having a whale of a time tidying up Paris's premier gardens.

'By golly, we can show these Frenchies a thing or two about weeding!' said Mr Hewitt, wielding the trowel which he had brought with him.

'There's nothing to touch good old-fashioned British weeding,' agreed Mr Roxdale, who was working with his fork. 'The Frogs don't have the patience for it.'

'Nor the talent,' said Mr Hewitt. 'There's a talent required for good weeding.'

Mr Roxdale nodded enthusiastically as he removed another dandelion, this one with a tap root a good nine inches long. 'You're absolutely right about that, Mr Hewitt.'

The crowd which Mr Livingstone had spotted consisted largely of tourists.

The people had gathered around two men who were using a large cardboard box as an impromptu table and who were inviting people in the crowd to make bets on the position of the Queen of Hearts card.

The man handling the cards was wearing an open-necked sports shirt and knee length white tailored shorts. The shorts had a sharp crease down the front of each leg. He was also wearing knee-length, white socks and tennis shoes. It is nigh on impossible to look dignified while wearing shorts but it is certainly impossible to look threatening or dangerous. How can anyone take a card sharp seriously when he is wearing white shorts with a crease down the legs? That, presumably, was the idea.

The man was moving the Queen of Hearts around on his makeshift table with two other cards, one of which was the six of clubs and the other was the nine of spades. It was, Mrs Caldicot realised quickly, the old 'Three Card Monte' or 'Find the Lady' game which is always popular with street tricksters. The man handling the cards seemed surprisingly slow and when he stopped, after moving the cards around, it wasn't particularly difficult to see which of the three cards was the Queen of Hearts.

Mr Livingstone, followed by the others, joined the crowd and looked on as first one and then another spectator bet money on the position of the picture card. The card sharp had put a crease into each of the three cards and he moved them about on the cardboard box with practiced ease.

Each of the first three spectators won and pocketed their winnings with clear delight, waving the money they had won in the air with tremendous glee.

'Those are hundred euro notes!' said Mr Twist who, as a former income tax inspector, had a great deal of respect for notes of any denomination but more particularly, perhaps, for notes of a large denomination.

'Lots of people seem to be winning,' said Mr Roxdale.

'Perhaps the man handling the cards isn't very good,' said Mr Livingstone.

'That woman just won at least five hundred euros!' said Mrs Roberts, in awe.

'The winners are all colleagues of the tricksters,' whispered Mr Williams. 'They're stooges.'

'Surely they can't be,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'The woman who won the money looks very respectable.'

And it was quite true that the stooges did not look in the slightest bit disreputable.

The woman who had won, spent some time ostentatiously depositing her winnings in a large blue handbag with a solid looking brass clasp. It was the sort of handbag that Mrs Margaret Thatcher, the Iron Lady, would have been proud to carry on her arm. The winner, the owner of the handbag, was wearing a blue-grey tweed skirt with a matching jacket and a white blouse. She wore a rather nifty, old-fashioned little hat with some fruit and feathers on it, and a pair of white gloves. She had a double string of pearls around her neck and wore large, pearl earrings. The pearls were all far too large to be real but they gave her a convincing look of stability and solidity. You don't expect a woman wearing a tweed twin set and pearls to be a gangster's moll.

'She's a stooge,' insisted Mr Williams, who was not taken in. 'She's part of the trickster's team.' He leant closer and smiled at Mrs Caldicot. 'Not all villains have curling moustachios and darting eyes.'

'No, I suppose they don't!' agreed Mrs Caldicot. 'They wouldn't be very good at it if they did, would they?'

'Exactly!'

'What about that man over there,' said Mrs Caldicot, nodding towards a young man in a crumpled, white linen suit and a dented Panama hat. 'He just won quite a lot of money. Surely he can't be part of the team too!'

'Oh he is,' said Mr Williams. 'The confidence tricksters have quite a big team these days. He's one of the stooges. And so too is the man dressed like a bookie from the 1970s and the chap on his right who is dressed like a TV weatherman.'

'The fellow in the blue jumper with clouds on it?'

'That's the one.'

As he spoke, a young man in jeans and a red shirt, who was clearly travelling with his girlfriend, took out his wallet, removed all the money and confidently held it out towards the man handling the cards.

'You can tell the stooges because they all have a meanness and a ruthlessness about them. And somehow although they try to dress the part, they never quite get everything just right. The chap who looks like a bookie is wearing a three piece checked suit but if you look down you'll see he has scruffy trainers on his feet. No ordinary person wearing that suit would have shoes like that. The woman who is masquerading as an English lady is over the top and about 30 years out-of-date. She probably based her outfit on a picture she saw in an old magazine and then picked up the clothes at one of the Paris flea markets. And would a woman dressed like that really be prepared to bet so much on the turn of a card? Look at her gloves, too. The fingertips are black. They haven't been washed for ages.'

'What about that one?' asked Mrs Caldicot, who was fascinated by everything she was hearing. She indicated the young man in the jeans and red shirt.

'He's a real punter and he's about to lose his holiday money,' said Mr Williams, rather sadly. 'He had a long chat with his girlfriend before getting out his money.'

'How do you know so much about these people?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'I lived in Paris for a while when I was taking photographs. A fellow I shared a flat with for a while lost all his money to one of these tricksters. There are quite a few of these gangs working the tourist spots in Paris.'

Sure enough, less than a minute later the young man and his girlfriend were walking away from the card sharp looking shaken and, it has to be said, rather frightened. The girl was in tears. The card handler had put the winnings into the back pocket of his jeans. Mrs Caldicot felt desperately sorry for the young couple; their holiday clearly ruined. She knew that the young man had risked their money through greed and that logically he was to blame for their loss but she nevertheless found herself wondering about the card sharp and his cronies who were so cold-bloodedly parting tourists from their money.

'I can see where the card is,' announced Mr Twist with great confidence. 'I spotted it every time.'

'Don't even think about it,' Mr Williams warned him.

'I can win a lot of money at this game,' insisted Mr Twist. He sounded confident and determined. 'I've noticed that there's a small crease in the corner of the Queen card.'

The problem with Mr Twist was that he was a bit like an old dog who has spent his whole life obediently doing what he was told to do; he was, if you like, accustomed to his collar and lead. As a tax inspector he had been restricted by rules and regulations. And when his life had fallen apart and he had ended up living rough on a traffic island, he had been bullied by just about everyone with whom he had come into contact.

But now, released from decades of confinement, he was not at all sure what to do and, more importantly, what not to do.

Should he walk away, putting temptation behind him?

Or should be accept the challenge, take what seemed to be a non-existent risk and enrich his newly found friends by winning a big chunk of money.

The trouble was that Mr Twist was desperately keen to impress his friends. And the need to impress is a potent and dangerous driving force which has led many people to make many errors and which has produced not a few embarrassments.

The woman with the large handbag bet again. And again she won several hundred euros.

'She won six hundred euros that time!' said Mr Twist.

'That crease has been put there on purpose to make you think that you can beat him,' said Mr Williams. 'But you can't beat these guys. They're professionals and they're very good at what they do. The guy who is manipulating the cards could probably deal off the top, off the bottom and out of the middle. He could probably make those cards stand on end and sing La Marseillaise if he wanted them to.'

'Come on,' said Mrs Caldicot firmly. 'We ought to be moving on.'

She rounded up her party and began to lead them away, heading once more towards the river Seine.

'Amazing,' said Mr Livingstone. 'I think I'll get myself a cardboard box and three cards, learn that trick and try it in our High Street on a Saturday afternoon. It can't be that difficult.'

'Learn to run fast and far before you try that,' said Mr Roxdale who was not driven to such flights of fancy. 'If the police spot you they'll chase you for miles. And if the police don't get you then one of the people you've bilked will probably follow you home shouting rude things and hitting you with a handbag or an umbrella.'

'Ah,' said Mr Livingstone who had gout in the large toe of his left foot, a right knee permanently crippled with rheumatoid arthritis and more than a touch of osteoarthritis in his left hip sighed rather sadly as another wild dream hit the dust. 'I don't think I'd be too good at the running bit,' he said. 'Or the 'dodging the handbag' bit.'

They wandered off together, still marvelling at the size of the crowd which had gathered around the man with the cardboard box and the playing cards.

There were, Mrs Caldicot, estimated over 30 people in the crowd.

'Look over there,' said Mr Williams quietly. He pointed to a short, tubby, scruffy man in jeans and a leather jacket who was standing holding a bicycle. 'That's one of the look-out men.'

Mrs Caldicot peered at him, puzzled. 'What do you mean 'look-out' men?'

'There will be two or three of them spread around,' said Mr Williams. 'They call them 'watchers'. If one of them sees a policeman approaching, he'll shout and ride the bicycle over to the man manipulating the cards. The card manipulator will climb on the bicycle and pedal off to a prearranged meeting place. It doesn't matter if the accomplices get caught. What could anyone charge them with? But the card manipulator could be identified. And, besides, he's important because he's the one with the dexterity and the skill to move the cards around and con the tourists.'

'So how many people are involved in the gang?' asked Mrs Caldicot, astonished.

'Probably about a dozen altogether. I once followed them and watched them all meet for the payout. The stooges who appear to have won money hand it all back to the boss and then everyone is paid their wages.'

'How can they possibly make enough money to pay so many people?'

'Easily! They'll probably bilk seven or eight tourists of their money in less than half an hour. And they don't play for euros. They play for hundreds of euros. So they can easily make 2,000 euros in half an hour. That's plenty to provide a pay-out for everyone and leave a lot of money left for the card sharp and the boss who organises the whole thing and recruits the members of the gang. And don't forget there is no rent to pay, and there are no overheads and no taxes! When they've shared out the spoils they split up, meet somewhere else half an hour or so later and then repeat the whole thing. In an average sort of day they'll bilk tourists of between 10,000 and 20,000 euros. The stooges and look-out men will each get 100 to 150 euros a day, and the card sharp and the boss will share the big money.'

'Crumbs!' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I hadn't realised it was such a big operation.'

'In a fairly average month, one of these gangs can take half a million euros off tourists. That's why the police take them seriously. That money would have probably been spent on coffees and cakes and souvenirs, and once the crooks have the money a good deal of it goes abroad and is lost to the economy. Plus there's the fact that the victims may have lost most or even all of their holiday spending money. Some of them will be too embarrassed to say anything to anyone but quite a few will tell their friends and their relatives what happened and then the city of Paris gets a bad name and people don't want to come here on their holidays because they're frightened they'll be conned out of their money too.'

'How long did you live in Paris?'

'Several years! I was lucky with my life. We all have a mountain we want to climb and I realised early on that my particular mountain wasn't out of my reach. My desire was simply to earn my living taking photographs – no more and no less. The thing is that I worked out quite early on in life that satisfaction comes not from work in itself, or from play, but from competition and from overcoming hurdles, even if those hurdles are ones which we ourselves have created. That might not be true for everyone but it was the case for me. In the end, we can all only climb to the top of the mountain we have chosen to climb. Therein, perhaps, lies the answer to happiness for if we choose a mountain which is too grand for our talents, our perseverance and, most important of all, our supply of luck, then we must be doomed to disappointment.'

'And you were obviously very successful at your chosen profession,' said Mrs Caldicot.

Mr Williams looked at her.

'Judging by the money people pay for your photographs,' said Mrs Caldicot, looking round to make sure that none of the others heard her. She knew that Mr Williams, an exceptionally modest man, did not want the others to know that his pictures sold for many thousands of pounds. His modesty was genuine and simple, and not a result of any desire to hide the fact of his wealth from his friends.

'Oh, I was very lucky,' said Mr Williams with a big smile. 'I was in Paris at the right time and I met a gallery owner who liked my pictures. There was a fashion for black and white street photographs at the time; pictures of ordinary people doing ordinary things; pictures of bread shops and cafes and the girls hanging around in the streets looking for customers. If that gallery owner hadn't taken my pictures I could have ended up photographing weddings or taking pictures for an advertising agency. It was all luck, really. There were probably better photographers out there taking pictures for postcard publishers.'

'But you made your luck,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'You came to Paris. And you helped that gallery owner when he was just starting out.'

'No, I was just fortunate,' insisted Mr Williams. 'I came to Paris because in the 1950s it was cheaper here than in London. And my girlfriend was coming here to work as a dancer. I didn't come here with the clear intention of becoming successful. I did no market research. Unbeknownst to me, I wanted to take the sort of pictures that people wanted at the time.' He laughed. 'How's that for dumb luck?'

They had by now crossed the Tuileries Gardens and from where they were standing they could look across the Place de La Concorde, right up the Champs-Élysées and see the Arc de Triomphe in the distance. They could now also see the Eiffel Tower, glimmering and sparkling in the spring sunshine.

'Can we go to that big tower?' asked Miss Nightingale, excitedly. She clapped her hands together in excitement.

'I expect there will be a shop there selling stamps for my postcards,' said Mrs Roberts, confidently.

'It looks rather a long way away,' said Mrs Torridge, rather doubtfully. 'I'm running a bit short of petrol and I'm honestly not sure my legs are going to get me that far.' She had brought Mr Torridge with her in a shopping bag. When Mrs Caldicot had suggested that she leave his ashes in the hotel bedroom, Mrs Torridge had explained that she'd thought of that but had decided that Mr Torridge had never seen Paris and that she thought it would be unfair to bring him this far and then leave him in the hotel.

'We could take a taxi,' suggested Mr Livingstone.

'We wouldn't all fit into a taxi,' Mrs Caldicot pointed out. 'We'd need three taxis. And where are we going to find three taxis all free at the same time?'

'We could catch a boat,' suggested Mr Williams.

They all looked at him as if he'd said something silly.

'There's a sort of bus service on the river Seine,' explained Mr Williams. 'It's called the Batobus. There are stops along the river bank where passengers can get on and off. There's a stop not far from here. We can catch the boat and ride all the way up to the Eiffel Tower. Then we can get off the boat, as fresh as daisies, and go up the Eiffel Tower in the lift.'

'Oo, I think I might get seasick,' said Ruth looking rather worried. 'I've never been on a ship before.'

'It isn't a ship, it's only a river boat,' said Mr Williams kindly. 'And you mustn't worry about being sick because the river is as smooth as a pond.'

'Oh,' said Ruth. 'Oh, that's all right then.' She sounded relieved.

It was generally agreed that catching the river bus was a splendid idea and so they made their way to a pedestrian crossing which would take them to the river bank and the nearby boat stop.

It was while they were waiting to cross the road that Mrs Caldicot realised that Mr Twist was missing.

Panicking somewhat, she looked around for him. 'Has anyone seen Mr Twist?' she said. She said it again; a bit louder.

'I was chatting to him a few minutes ago,' said Mr Livingstone. 'He can't have gone far.'

'He was with us when we were watching those men with the cards,' said Mrs Torridge. 'He said he could see which card was the Queen of Hearts. He said the man with the cards wasn't all that good at moving the cards about.'

'I haven't seen him for a while,' said Mr Roxdale. 'Do you think he could have been kidnapped? I've heard there's a lot of that goes on in big cities.'

'Why would anyone kidnap Mr Twist?' asked Mr Livingstone. 'He's a very nice chap, but he hasn't got any money!'

‘He’s got all our money,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘He’s good with money so I gave him all our euros to look after. He’s got the rest of our lottery winnings – everything except whatever personal spending money we all brought with us. He understands all about exchange rates and he had a money belt underneath his shirt.’

‘But no one would know that,’ Mrs Roberts pointed out. ‘He’s not going to walk around waving his money belt around.’

‘No, I suppose not,’ agreed Mrs Caldicot. She sighed as a hundred awful scenarios flashed through her mind. ‘Oh dear, it’s all my fault. I should have looked after everyone better. Maybe he’s got lost? What if he’s fallen down and hurt himself? What if he has suddenly been taken ill? What if he got mugged? People get mugged all the time in cities. Maybe someone just wanted to steal his watch and they hit him on the head.’

‘I heard of someone being robbed for their shoes,’ said Mrs Peterborough. ‘He had a pair of those fancy pumps that are so fashionable with young people. They have little lights in the heels which light up when you walk.’

‘Mr Twist’s shoes didn’t light up when he walked,’ said Mr Roxdale with certainty. ‘They were just rather old, ordinary brown shoes. They were a bit worn down at the heel to be honest with you. I noticed that. And the sole of one shoe was coming a bit loose. I saw it flapping about a bit.’

‘Which shoe was that?’ asked Mr Livingstone.

Mr Roxdale thought for a moment. ‘I think it was the left,’ he said at last.

‘What difference does it make which shoe it was that had a loose sole?’ asked Mrs Roberts, who never really got cross but was perhaps a little sharper than she would have been if she hadn’t been quite so worried.

‘I didn’t say it made a difference,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘But Mr Livingstone asked me.’

‘At a time like this the police always say that every bit of information you have is important,’ said Mr Livingstone rather defensively. ‘Anyway, I don’t see how he could have got lost,’ he continued. ‘We’re a pretty noticeable bunch. A bunch of OAPs wandering around a park in the middle of Paris. And we’ve been in the park for ages.’

‘We’ll have to retrace our steps and look for him,’ said Mrs Caldicot quite firmly, taking charge and making a decision.

And so they turned round and started to walk back the way they had come.

‘Don’t you think we’d better spread out?’ asked Mrs Roberts.

Mrs Caldicot agreed that this was a very good idea and repeated the suggestion. The band of searchers therefore spread out into a long line.

‘Keep an eye on the person either side of you,’ Mrs Caldicot instructed everyone. ‘We don’t want to lose anyone else.’

‘I haven’t got anyone to the right of me,’ pointed out Mr Roxdale, who was on the right flank.

Mrs Caldicot asked Mrs Roberts to go on the right edge of the line and asked Ruth to go on the far left of the line.

And they started searching for Mr Twist.

Chapter Thirteen

They found Mr Twist just under fifteen minutes later.

He was sitting on a green park bench by himself.

He had his hands over his face and his sobs could be heard some distance away.

He looked, thought Mrs Caldicot, like King Lear bemoaning his fate. She wondered what on earth had happened to upset him so much.

‘Wait here please,’ said Mrs Caldicot to the others, and she rushed ahead to find out what was wrong.

It took her several minutes to calm Mr Twist down enough so that he could tell her what had happened.

‘I’ve lost all our money,’ he admitted at last, between sobs.

He explained that he had been so convinced that he could spot the position of the Queen of Hearts that he had taken the group’s money out of his money belt and had within moments lost the whole lot on the turn of a couple of cards.

‘I thought if I won more money everyone would be so pleased with me,’ he said. ‘I thought we could have really posh meals in smart restaurants.’

Disappointed though she was, Mrs Caldicot could not for one moment bring herself to be cross with Mr Twist.

She sat down on the bench beside him and put an arm around him.

For a woman who was in charge of a group of old aged pensioners now stuck in a foreign country with no money, she felt surprisingly calm and relaxed. Their hotel was paid for. They had their return tickets for the Eurostar train. And the hotel would serve them breakfast every morning.

It is no secret, she thought to herself, that we are not masters of our own fate. We may like to think that although we may not be able to control our destiny, we may be able to nudge it occasionally in the direction we would find most congenial, but the reality is that the big decisions in life are taken for us by fate.

And fate is sometimes rather more whimsical than we might like it to be.

‘I didn’t lose it all at once,’ he said, as though this made it more acceptable. ‘I lost half of it and then I thought I could win back what I’d lost with the rest of it.’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘I thought you’d like me more if I won a lot of money for us,’ said Mr Twist.

‘We couldn’t like you any more than we do,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘And we don’t need lots of money to have a good time.’

‘You’ve been so good to me,’ said Mr Twist, tears rolling down his cheeks.

‘We love having you with us,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘And we couldn’t like you any more than we do!’ she said again.

Mr Twist responded with more sobs.

‘I’ll tell the others you were robbed,’ said Mrs Caldicot, who realised that in addition to feeling guilty at having lost their nest-egg, Mr Twist was desperately ashamed that he had gambled away their money and lost.

‘No, no,’ said Mr Twist with a shake of his head. ‘No, you mustn’t do that.’ He took out a large, red handkerchief and blew his nose rather noisily. Mr Caldicot thought that it sounded rather like a mating elephant she’d once heard on a television wildlife programme. ‘I don’t want you to lie for me. I have to tell them the truth.’ He paused and blew his nose again. ‘They’re my friends.’

And so Mr Twist told the rest of the party the truth, and although they were quite shocked and certainly rather disappointed that now they wouldn’t be able to go on the boat on the river Seine or up the Eiffel Tower or into the Louvre to see the Mona Lisa, because they didn’t have enough money to pay for the tickets they would need for those things, no one blamed Mr Twist, although he said they should because, after all, it had been entirely his fault that they no longer had any money.

And slowly it dawned on everyone that in addition to not having any money to go on the Batobus boat on the River Seine, or to buy tickets for the lift up the Eiffel tower, they didn’t have any money to buy meals.

‘I’ve still got nearly a quarter of a pocket full of biscuit crumbs!’ said Miss Nightingale cheerfully. ‘We can all share those.’

‘And there is a tin of Miss Nightingale’s mulligatawny soup left over at the hotel,’ said Mrs Peterborough.

‘I’ve got half a packet of peppermints,’ said Mr Roxdale.

And in a rather strange way, although it didn’t offer much of a realistic solution to their problem, all this information cheered them all up somewhat because it reminded them that whatever happened they were not alone and never would be because they had one another.

And just as they had shared the lottery winnings so now they would share the gloom and discomfort of not having any money for restaurant meals.

Mrs Peterborough cleared her throat and recited a limerick she had clearly just made up.

'From one of these cards you must pick
But be warned, and beware, it's a trick
You look for the Queen
But she's not to be seen
For his hands are exceedingly quick.'

Mrs Caldicot wondered how she did it so quickly. It seemed that Mrs Peterborough could create silly little rhymes without any effort. She looked across at Mr Twist to see if he was offended. He wasn't. Even he was smiling.

'If we go round to the back of one of the big hotels we can probably persuade someone in the kitchen to give us some of their leftovers and unwanted food,' said Mrs Merivale, who had once found herself abandoned in Rome by a film producer who had absconded with all the available funds, leaving the crew to fend for themselves. She therefore knew of what she spake.

Mr Merivale said that although he didn't really like begging, he thought this was an excellent idea and, under the circumstances, entirely excusable.

'One of us could go into a café and order a cup of something very cheap,' suggested Mr Livingstone. 'And while he's in there he could fill his pockets with those little, wrapped sugar cubes they always have on the table in cafés and restaurants and then when he came out he could share out the sugar with everyone else.'

'I could probably get us some money,' said Mr Williams, speaking quietly to Mrs Caldicot. 'I still know one or two gallery owners in Paris. I could ask them to advance me some money on the sale of my photographs.'

Mrs Caldicot looked at him and smiled. 'No, Mr Williams,' she said quite firmly. 'You've helped us more than enough in the past. We must deal with this little problem ourselves.' She reached out and squeezed his arm. 'We'll sort things out,' she said. 'It'll be an adventure,' she added, and managed to sound as though she meant it.

'We could go to the British Embassy,' suggested Mrs Roberts. 'They ought to be able to help us. That's what they're there for, isn't it?'

The others immediately agreed that this was a splendid notion and it was generally agreed that they had no doubt that the British Embassy would have to help them out.

'Maybe they'll lend us some money and let us pay them back when we're back home,' said Ruth, who had tried to hide how she felt but was actually quite frightened.

And so off they went to the British Embassy.

Things did not go as well as they hoped.

After a lengthy wait a rather superior official in a smart suit, a white shirt and a boring looking tie told them that since they had their hotel booked and their return tickets arranged, there really wasn't anything that he could do.

'Can't you just lend us some money for meals?' asked Mrs Caldicot. 'We'll pay you back.'

'We don't lend people money,' said the official, rather sniffily. 'I suggest you telephone your bank in England and ask them to send some money for you to collect at a branch here in Paris. Alternatively, you could ask a friend or a relative to wire you some money. I think you will find that there is a Western Union office here in the city.'

Dismissed and feeling even lonelier and more abandoned than before, Mrs Caldicot and her friends stood in the street and tried to decide what to do next. Mrs Caldicot half wished she had accepted Mr Williams' offer to borrow some money from one of the gallery owners he knew. But she only half wished it.

'We could try the travel agency,' suggested Mr Livingstone. 'Aren't they supposed to have a representative here?'

Mrs Caldicot said she thought this was a splendid idea, probably even better than trying the British Embassy, and added that she didn't know why she didn't think of it herself. And so off they went, back to the hotel.

'Ah, tootle plip!' said Raphael when he saw them approaching.

'No, no,' said Mr Hewitt. 'Toodle pip is what we say instead of 'goodbye'. When you are greeting someone you say 'What ho! Good to see you old bean!''

'What ho! Good to see you old bean!' said Raphael.

'Splendid!' said Mr Hewitt.

Raphael who always looked pleased with himself managed to look even more pleased with himself.

Inside the hotel, Mrs Caldicot asked the receptionist if she could put them in touch with their travel agent representative. The receptionist found the number on a card pinned to the wall behind her and then made the call. When the phone was ringing, she handed the receiver to Mrs Caldicot.

'How did you lose your money?' asked the travel agent's representative when Mrs Caldicot had explained their problem.

Mrs Caldicot explained the sequence of events which had led to their loss.

The travel agency representative laughed.

‘It’s not funny,’ said Mrs Caldicot sharply. ‘We don’t have any money left.’

‘But your hotel is booked, isn’t it? You’ve got somewhere to sleep? And you get your breakfast thrown in for free?’

‘Yes.’

‘So, what’s the problem?’

‘We don’t have any money for other meals.’

‘Then it was rather silly of you to lose all your money in a card game. And you still have your train tickets? You haven’t lost those?’

‘No, we still have the tickets.’

‘Oh good. That’s a relief. You’ll be able to go home.’ She said it rather nastily, unconcerned and indifferent to their plight.

Suddenly all Mrs Caldicot could hear was the dialling tone. The travel company representative had closed the connection.

‘Can she help?’ asked Mrs Torridge. ‘Can the travel company lend us some money?’

‘It would seem not,’ admitted Mrs Caldicot who was a little shocked and extremely disappointed.

They stood around in the hotel lobby, wondering what to do next.

‘We could do as the Embassy man suggested,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘We could ask someone to wire us money to a bank.’

‘There must be another way,’ said Mrs Caldicot firmly. ‘I don’t know about the rest of you but I’m fed up with people putting us down. It’ll seem like a defeat if we have to ask someone in the UK to send us some money.’

She knew that Jenkins would know how to send her money and he would do so happily and quickly. But she now very much wanted to deal with this problem without any outside help. The Embassy hadn’t been much help. And the woman from the travel agency had been absolutely no help at all.

They were on their own and they would darned well deal with their problem themselves.

Chapter Fourteen

‘Maybe we could earn some money ourselves,’ suggested Mr Twist, very quietly. He spoke rather diffidently; still shaken and rather ashamed of himself.

They were still standing in the hotel lobby.

They all looked at Mr Twist.

‘Did you see that violinist in the park?’ he asked. ‘Her violin case was half full with money.’

‘We haven’t got a violin or a violin case,’ pointed out Mr Hewitt.

‘No, but we have a flute, a banjo and a set of African bongo drums,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘Mr Twist is absolutely right. We could earn the money we need.’

Now everyone looked at Mr Livingstone.

‘My instruments,’ he explained. ‘The ones I brought with me. They’re upstairs in my hotel room.’

‘But only you can play any of them,’ said Mrs Roberts.

‘Anyone can play the banjo,’ insisted Mr Livingstone. ‘And all you need to play the bongo drums is a pair of hands.’

‘We could be a band,’ said Mrs Peterborough. ‘I’ve always wanted to be in a band.’

‘What shall we call ourselves?’ asked Mrs Torridge.

‘I don’t think it matters what we call ourselves,’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘But can we make the sort of music that people will pay to listen to?’

‘Of course we can,’ said Mr Livingstone, with enough confidence for them all. Clearly delighted, he hurried upstairs to collect his instruments. ‘Remember how well our little sing song went on the train?’

‘But what will the rest of us do?’ asked Ruth, who didn’t think she could play the bongo drums and was pretty certain she wouldn’t be able to play the banjo.

‘I can play the comb and paper,’ said Mr Roxdale, taking a pocket comb from his pocket. ‘All I need is a bit of greaseproof paper or tissue paper. I used to be a wow at Christmas parties when I was a boy.’

He hurried away, heading for the kitchen and the friendly chef in the hope that he’d be able to beg a piece of suitable paper.

‘Spoons!’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘I can play the spoons! I always found that soup spoons worked best.’ And he hurried off after Mr Roxdale to borrow a pair of suitable soup spoons.

‘What are the rest of us going to do?’ asked Mrs Torridge.

‘It looks as if one of us is going to be playing the banjo,’ said Mrs Caldicot with a laugh. ‘And one of us is going to be playing the bongo drums.’

‘Oh I don’t think I could manage either of those,’ said Miss Nightingale.

‘Nor me,’ said Mrs Peterborough.

From the look on her face it was clear that Mrs Torridge wasn’t keen on either instrument. She pointed out, quite sensibly, that she could hardly hold Mr Torridge and play an instrument.

‘Maybe those who aren’t playing musical instruments could sing,’ suggested Mrs Caldicot. ‘We could have a small choir. Bands always have a small group of singers.

‘I wouldn’t mind being a backing singer,’ said Ruth. ‘I could wear that blue dress I brought with me in case we got invited to any parties.’ She looked down. She was wearing blue jeans, a blue jumper and her blue anorak. She liked blue. Apart from yellow it was her favourite colour. But she didn’t like herself in yellow. She thought it made her look fat. She admitted to being curvy and rounded and didn’t particularly object to being described as plump, which she thought sounded rather attractive, but she didn’t want anyone to think of her as fat.

‘But what on earth are we going to sing?’ asked Mrs Torridge. ‘I don’t know any songs!’

‘Of course you do!’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘We were singing old music hall songs on the train coming over here.’

Moments later, Mr Hewitt and Mr Roxdale emerged from the kitchen.

Mr Roxdale had a piece of greaseproof paper wrapped around his comb and a very happy Mr Hewitt was clutching two shiny soup spoons and two jam jars, both of which appeared to be two thirds full of dried split peas.

‘What on earth are the jam jars for?’ asked Ruth.

‘Those are your rhythm shakers,’ explained Mr Hewitt. ‘Your home-made maracas!’ He shook the jars which, when shaken rhythmically, produced an almost musical percussion sound.

Ruth, delighted, took the two jars, one in each hand, and proceeded to practise with them.

‘I see we’ve already got the beginnings of a band!’ cried Mr Livingstone, coming down the stairs with far more energy than anyone had seen him travel for a long time. ‘Who’s on banjo?’

‘I’ll try,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘But you’ll have to show me what to do and if I can’t manage it then someone else will have to take over.’

‘I’ll just pop upstairs and change into something a bit more presentable,’ said Ruth who was now becoming quite excited at the prospect of being in a band – even if all the other members of the band were half a century older than her. Just wait until she told Denise that she’d been in a band which had performed in Paris! The best thing about Denise was that she never got jealous. On the contrary, she always got excited and genuinely delighted if anything remotely thrilling happened to her friend.

Had anything this exciting ever happened to anyone else they knew? Ruth thought not.

Clutching her home made maracas (she didn’t want to come back down and find that someone else had taken charge of them) the assistant housekeeper and band singer hurried upstairs.

‘I’ll have a go at playing the bongo drums,’ said Mrs Roberts.

‘What tunes are we going to perform?’ asked Mr Livingstone.

‘Mrs Caldicot suggested that we try some of those old music hall songs that we sang on the train,’ said Mrs Torridge.

‘Splendid idea!’ agreed Mr Livingstone.

‘So, where are we going to perform?’ asked Mrs Roberts.

‘The best place is the Place des Vosges,’ said Mr Williams. ‘But we could practise in the Tuileries Gardens, where we saw that girl violinist.’

‘We all need to get used to our instruments,’ Mr Livingstone pointed out. ‘And we need to decide which numbers we’re going to sing.’

‘How many numbers do you think we need?’ asked Mrs Torridge. ‘I hope it isn’t going to be too many.’

‘Three will be plenty,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘When we’ve performed the three, we can start again at the beginning.’

‘Won’t people get bored if we keep playing the same tunes?’ asked Mrs Roberts.

‘I don’t think many people are going to stick around for more than three songs,’ pointed out Mr Hewitt.

‘Where’s Ruthie gone?’ asked Mrs Torridge suddenly.

‘I think she popped upstairs to change,’ said Mrs Caldicot, who was now making an effort to know where everyone was.

‘As long as we don’t go without her,’ said Mrs Torridge.

‘We won’t,’ promised Mrs Caldicot, who had absolutely no intention of going anywhere without her entire brood with her. She felt a particular responsibility for Ruth who was in some ways very grown up but in other ways seemed remarkably young even for an 18-year-old. Still, most young people seemed very young these days. First, she had noticed that policemen were getting younger. Then the doctors all looked as though they should still be at school flicking paper pellets about with rubber bands. Except that they all looked so serious that they had probably never flicked paper pellets about.

And so while they waited for Ruth to return, they discussed which traditional, old-fashioned music hall songs they knew, or knew well enough to give the impression that they knew them.

They eventually decided on these three:

Down at the Old Bull and Bush – made famous by Florrie Forde

Boiled Beef and Carrots – immortalised by Harry Champion

And

I Do Like to Be Beside the Seaside – which has been performed in a good many films, and which has for over a century been popular with British holidaymakers

Mr Hewitt said he thought that the third of these was rather inappropriate since they were nowhere near the seaside but Mr Livingstone pointed out that they weren’t at the Old Bull and Bush either. And, moreover, come to that they weren’t likely to be eating boiled beef and carrots at any time in the near future. As a result of Mr Livingstone’s intervention, it was unanimously decided (including by Mr Hewitt) that Mr Hewitt’s objection be forthwith overruled. Mr Livingstone also pointed out that those were the three old music hall songs for which he definitely remembered the lyrics and the tunes. And, as a double bonus they had easily memorable tunes and would doubtless be familiar to a good many tourists.

‘I’ll just write down the lyrics while we’re waiting for Ruth,’ said Mr Livingstone. He begged three pieces of hotel stationery from the receptionist and to his own surprise succeeded in scribbling some, at least, of the words to all three songs. He then managed to persuade the receptionist to make 20 photocopies of each sheet of paper, so that he had a few spares for each song.

‘There you are,’ he said, handing round the home-made song-sheets as they came out of the photocopier. ‘Now no one has any excuse for not knowing the words!’

As the last piece of paper was handed out, they heard Ruth clattering down the stairs. Moments later she appeared.

The blue dress, made out of something very shimmery and sparkly, fit her perfectly. 'Not a straight line to be seen fore or aft,' said Mr Roxdale.

Ruth was certainly all curves and the dress made this abundantly clear. Her generous bosom, normally rather hidden under a jumper or an anorak or both, had suddenly leapt to the fore and was now unmistakeably there and undeniably feminine. There was cleavage in abundance. Ruth had somehow even found time to do something to her hair, which was now piled high on her head, and to complete the ensemble she wore long, blue, dangly earrings.

'Crumbs!' said Mr Hewitt.

'Wow!' said Mr Twist.

'Beautiful!' said Mr Williams.

'You look marvellous, dear!' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Blue really suits you!' said Mrs Torridge.

'I love the buttons!' said Mrs Peterborough who, as we now know, knew a good deal about buttons.

'You look good enough to eat!' said Mrs Merivale.

'Terrific! Absolutely terrific!' said Mr Merivale.

'Beautiful!' said Miss Nightingale. 'You're beautiful, my dear.'

'Crumbs!' said Mr Twist. 'You do look good.'

'Fantastic,' said Mr Williams who wished he had his camera with him.

Mrs Roberts gave Ruth a hug and Mr Livingstone tried to wolf whistle but discovered that somewhere along the line his whistle had upped and left him. He replaced the missing whistle with a round of applause which he managed quite well despite the rheumatoid arthritis in his fingers.

Ruth was delighted. Her audience might not perhaps have fitted the demographic profile of her preferred or chosen audience but they were her friends and their compliments meant a lot to her.

And so, all present and correct, they hurried out of the hotel, past Raphael the doorman (who remembered to say 'Tootle pop' as they passed by), and along to the Tuileries Gardens where they found a bench and some chairs and some of them sat down and some of them didn't and they tried to turn themselves into a band.

Chapter Fifteen

'How do I play this thing?' Mrs Caldicot asked Mr Livingstone, holding up the banjo and peering at it as though she were rather nervous that it might bite. 'Where do I blow?' She suddenly felt rather alarmed. She could not remember that she had ever played a musical instrument and she suddenly got rather cold feet. Then she remembered that when she was about seven she had played the recorder at school. Awful instrument, she remembered. She had hated it and not been any good at all at it. 'What if we make complete fools of ourselves?' she silently asked herself. 'So, what if we do?' she silently replied. 'Does it really matter? Does it matter at all? We don't know anyone in Paris? No one else will care. And it could be fun. It could make us some money for boat rides and food and so on. And whatever happens it will be an adventure.'

'You're kidding, aren't you?' said Mr Livingstone.

'Not a lot,' admitted Mrs Caldicot, suddenly shaken from her reverie. 'It's got strings so I assume it needs strumming rather than blowing. But although I did once try to play the guitar I never got very far with it.'

'It's a banjo,' explained Mr Livingstone patiently. 'Not a guitar or even a ukulele. And it's very easy to play. All you really have to do is strum.'

He showed her how to strum some simple tunes that made it sound as though she were playing the instrument.

'It sounds rather good,' said Miss Nightingale, appreciatively.

'It's very nice indeed,' agreed Mrs Peterborough. 'What's it called? Is it a guitar?'

'It does sound rather good, doesn't it?' said a genuinely surprised Mrs Caldicot. 'Mr Livingstone says it's called a banjo.'

Next, Mr Livingstone showed Mrs Roberts how to play the bongo drums. And to everyone's astonishment Mrs Roberts turned out to be tremendously adept.

'You're a natural,' said Mr Livingstone.

Mrs Roberts blushed with pride and carried on drumming.

'You're a natural,' whispered Mrs Caldicot, grinning at Mrs Roberts and giving her a nudge.

Meanwhile, Mr Livingstone, satisfied that he had a banjo player and a bongo drum player, had moved across to start teaching Ruth how to play the rhythm shakers which Mr Hewitt had made. He took one of the jam jars from her and shook it. He pulled a face and tried again.

'I could ask Jean-Jacques if he would like to join us,' Ruth said to Mrs Caldicot.

'Who is Jean-Jacques?' asked Mrs Caldicot, who didn't know that Ruth knew anyone in Paris, let alone someone called Jean-Jacques.'

'He was one of the waiters at that little party last night,' replied Ruth.

'I thought his name was Pierre,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Wasn't he the one Mrs Peterborough wrote a poem about? The balding one.'

Mr Livingstone tried the other rhythm shaker and pulled another face. Well, actually it was the same face but he pulled it again.

'No, not that one,' said Ruth, now blushing. 'Jean-Jacques was the young good-looking one with the tattoo.'

'Ah!' said Mrs Caldicot, understanding. She didn't much fancy tattoos herself but she knew that young girls regarded them very seriously. And she knew that Ruth, like many young girls, had a welcome mat tacked onto her heart and a tendency to fall in love at first sight. She thought that when you were young and in a hurry this probably saved a good deal of time though it did have a tendency to produce a little pain and more than a few tears. Still, the presence of a revolving door in addition to a welcome mat, meant that the sadness and tears were usually soon replaced by fresh hope and new expectations.

Mrs Roberts was now really getting the hang of her bongo drums. 'Oh this is fun!' she cried out as she banged out a rather merry rhythm.

'I could text him,' said Ruth, rather eagerly.

'You have his number?'

'Oh yes. He wrote his number on a paper napkin for me.' She reached into her handbag and produced a carefully folded paper napkin. Written in lipstick it contained a telephone number and a large, red X.

Mr Livingstone was still shaking the jam jar full of dried split peas. He did not seem happy.

'Does he play any musical instruments?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'Oh yes. He told me that he plays the accordion.'

'Won't he be working today?'

'He is a freelance and works in several bars and hotels. But he only works in the evenings. He said I could text him during the day time.’

‘Well, if he doesn’t mind,’ said Mrs Caldicot, who was impressed that Ruth had managed to obtain all this information in such a short space of time. She had only seen the two of them talking together for a couple of moments. A thought suddenly occurred to her. ‘But would he want to be paid to play his accordion?’

‘Oh no, I don’t think so,’ said Ruth. ‘Shall I ask him to meet us here?’

‘Well, yes, I would think so. I rather suspect that we’ll be here for a little while,’ said Mrs Caldicot. She put the strap of Mr Livingstone’s banjo around her neck and started to strum it as she had been instructed.

‘Wow!’ said Ruth, impressed. ‘You make it sound like a banjo!’

‘Do you mind if I take a few of these dried peas out of Ruth’s maracas?’ Mr Livingstone asked Mr Hewitt. ‘I think we’d get a better sound with fewer peas.’

‘Not at all! Remove as many as you think necessary,’ replied Mr Hewitt, who was practising with his two soup spoons and proving to himself and everyone else that a skill acquired in childhood is a skill which is never truly lost. ‘I just filled the jar up with peas. I knew it would need tuning but I thought it would be easier to take some out than to try to find an additional supply if we needed more.’

‘Very wise,’ agreed Mr Livingstone. ‘Good thinking!’ He unfastened the lid on the jar and poured some of the dried peas out into his hand. He put the peas into his jacket pocket. Half a dozen split peas spilt out onto the ground and were immediately eaten by three plump pigeons. Mr Livingstone then put the lid back onto the jar and tested the rhythm shaker. Satisfied, he made roughly the same adjustment to the second jam jar and then handed both back to Ruth when she had finished typing and sending her text message. He then gave her some basic instruction in how to turn her pea filled jam jars into musical instruments.

‘Right,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘We’d better try a run through of our first song. Let’s try ‘Down at the Old Bull and Bush’.

‘What’s a run through?’ Mrs Roberts asked Mrs Caldicot, in a whisper.

‘I think it’s a sort of rehearsal,’ Mrs Caldicot whispered back.

And so off they went with their first rehearsal.

The band was born.

Chapter Sixteen

To almost everyone's surprise the first run through was surprisingly successful. The exception to the doubters, was Mr Livingstone. He had long believed that faith can move mountains and that all you needed for this was enough faith and a small enough mountain.

Mr Livingstone led the way on his flute, Mrs Caldicot strummed the banjo, Mrs Roberts banged the bongo drums, Mr Hewitt did what he did with his spoons, Mr Roxdale made surprisingly musical sounds with his comb and greaseproof paper and the choir of Mrs Peterborough, Miss Nightingale, Mrs Torridge, Mr Twist, Mr Williams and the Merivales performed magnificently.

But none of them would have disagreed that the star of the show was Ruth.

Far from just being a backing singer, as she had at first imagined herself to be, she became the lead singer. She shook her jam jar maracas as one born to shake jam jar maracas and to her own surprise she turned out to have an excellent, slightly throaty voice – perfect for the rendition of music hall songs.

After their first run through of their triple programme of songs, the new band realised, with some astonishment, that they had acquired a considerable audience.

Moreover, when they finished their enthusiastic rendition of 'I Do Like to Be Beside the Seaside', they watched in astonishment as a number of members of the audience threw money down at their feet.

'We need something for people to throw money into,' said Mr Livingstone, who, it was generally agreed, had, by default, become the band's manager.

As he spoke, the musicians and singers were busy scouring the ground and collecting up the coins which had been tossed down. As they collected them, they handed them to Mrs Caldicot who popped them into her handbag.

'We certainly do,' said Mrs Torridge. 'My eyes aren't what they used to be and I've just picked up three bottle tops.'

She had, is must be admitted, been hampered in her search by her insistence on holding onto the bag containing Mr Torridge's ashes.

'Scrabbling around on the ground doesn't do my knees any good,' said Mr Hewitt. 'The ground is a lot further away than it used to be when I wasn't as old as I am now.'

'I should have brought my banjo case,' said Mr Livingstone. 'You can get a lot of loose change in a banjo case.'

'Use my hat!' said Mrs Torridge. She was wearing a wide brimmed straw hat which she removed and placed on the ground before them.

'Put a few coins into it,' said Mr Williams.

The others looked at him, puzzled.

'The buskers' version of salting the mine,' he explained. 'If people see money in the hat they'll be more likely to throw in coins of their own.'

Just then there was a squeal of delight and Ruth put down her jam jars and ran off towards a young man in blue jeans, a black, leather jacket and a strange little pork pie hat. He was carrying an accordion. With him was a considerably older man who was carrying a very large instrument case. When the two arrived, the older man opened his case and removed from it a complicated musical instrument which looked as though it were either a trumpet which had been overbuilt or a trombone which had been involved in a motor car accident and been uncomfortably compressed. Jean-Jacques gazed admiringly at Ruth who looked rather different in her blue dress. He introduced his father. 'This is my father, Monsieur Roche.'

Everyone said hello to Monsieur Roche who nodded and smiled and said hello to everyone.

Mrs Peterborough was driven to rhyme:

'A lovely young maiden called Ruth,
Fell in love with a handsome French youth.
'I may be a clot
But I love him a lot.'
And that, she declared, is the truth.'

Ruth blushed. Everyone else smiled. No one laughed. Not even a little bit. There was, however, applause for Mrs Peterborough.

Mr Hewitt, who had found a piece of cardboard blowing about the gardens, took out a pen and made a notice. He then placed it on a chair.

'This is Jean-Jacques,' said Ruth, introducing the young waiter, for he it was, to Mrs Caldicot and then to the rest of what used to be called a group of old people, but had by Ruth been described to her friend Denise as a travelling circus and which must now be properly described as a band. ‘He’s brought his accordion and his father, and his father has brought an instrument too. They both play for fun whenever they can.’

‘That’s a euphonium!’ said Mr Livingstone, who knew about these things. ‘I haven’t seen one of those for years.’ He paused for a moment and then laughed. ‘I thought the Frenchies all just played the French horn!’ Distracted by the joy of being a band leader, Mr Livingstone was at last enjoying his second trip to Paris.

Mrs Caldicot looked across at him and was delighted. Perhaps, she thought, just maybe, this enforced adventure might not turn out to be such a bad thing after all.

Ruth was delighted when Jean-Jacques kissed her, but a trifle disappointed that the kisses were all of the French-three-times-on-the-cheeks variety. Left cheek, right cheek, left cheek.

‘Now you must kiss me the same,’ said Jean-Jaques.

‘Does it matter where you start?’ asked Ruth.

‘Not really,’ said Jean-Jaques. ‘Some people start with the right side. Others start with the left side. I always kiss left cheek, right cheek, left cheek.’

So Ruth kissed him three times on the cheeks, left cheek, right cheek, left cheek, and thought she had probably gone to heaven. One of her kisses missed his cheek slightly and landed on the corner of his mouth. He smiled at her and she thought he may have even winked a little.

Her joy was only slightly diminished still further when Jean-Jacques proceeded to kiss everyone else on the cheeks – including the men. His father then kissed her three times (left cheek, right cheek, left cheek) and then he too carried on to kiss everyone else. It would, she thought, take her a while to become accustomed to this Parisian kissing business.

‘What music are we playing?’ asked Jean-Jacques, who seemed to Mrs Caldicot so speak much better English than all the people she had met who claimed to speak perfect English.

Mrs Caldicot explained that they were playing three old time British music hall songs and Mr Livingstone handed both Jean-Jacques and his father copies of the song sheets the receptionist at the hotel had photocopied for him.

Jean-Jacques and his father looked puzzled as they read through the song sheets.

‘We’ll play a run through of ‘Down at the Old Bull and Bush’ and you join in whenever you feel like it,’ said Mr Livingstone.

For the first time they played it, both Jean-Jacques and his father simply stared in quiet astonishment. But then they gradually got the hang of things and joined in, playing the tunes and singing the songs as well as they could. There was no doubt that the band sounded considerably more meaty (as Mr Livingstone put it) with the addition of an accordion and a euphonium. This was old-fashioned British Music Hall as it had never before been played.

Most of those who came within earshot were fascinated.

And within earshot was a goodly distance for a flute, a banjo, a set of bongo drums, an accordion and a euphonium, not to mention a pair of soup spoons, a pair of matching maracas and a comb and greaseproof paper, produce a noticeable sound.

And then, of course, there was the choir: Mrs Peterborough, Miss Nightingale, Mrs Torridge, Mr Twist, the Merivales and Ruth (with her home-made maracas).

Even without the sound of the instruments it would have been difficult to miss the choir. Rarely, if ever, have those three old songs been rendered with more enthusiasm. They may not have always been in tune and occasionally one or two of the words were missed but there was no shortage of gusto. If they had anything in abundance it was gusto.

A large group of small French schoolchildren, all holding onto a rope fitted with little, wooden handles, stopped and watched one whole song before their teachers urged them on to some pre-ordained destination. One of the teachers made what looked like a very small donation. A group of British old aged pensioners stood and listened through the band’s entire repertoire and joined in the singing of songs they had once known well and were now obliged to dig out of their memories. They made generous donations to Mrs Peterborough’s hat, some making donations in euros and others throwing in what they would doubtless have described as ‘proper money’.

Fascinated American tourists gave generously (one put in a ten dollar note), and courting couples from all nations contributed smiles and money.

Two women wearing tailored suits and sensible shoes stalked past as though the band were not there at all. Mr Roxdale said they looked like horses who had been ridden hard across country and now wanted nothing more than a long drink and a bucket of oat mash. They sniffed snootily as though they were walking past a septic tank with the wind blowing in their direction. They were the only ones to take no notice of the band and the music it was playing.

Altogether, dozens of tourists stopped and took photographs, short films and selfies.

‘I think we’re going to be famous!’ said Mrs Peterborough to her friend Miss Nightingale.

‘We were filmed by some Japanese tourists!’ said Ruth who had posed several times for camera wielding

Orientals. Three times during one twenty minute period, gentlemen of slightly advanced years had asked for her name, which she had given without hesitation. She wondered if she might perhaps end up with an online fan club. That would certainly be something to tell Denise and everyone else back home.

With Mrs Torridge's straw hat in place, it was clear to passers-by that Mrs Caldicot and her chums were busking. And as they continued to play their admittedly limited repertoire, the band received a steady stream of contributions. As the moving crowd of tourists, dog walkers and others wandering through the park, tossed their coins into Mrs Torridge's straw hat, it was soon clear that before long they would have raised enough money to pay for a meal each.

'My hat has never seen so much money!' said Mrs Torridge proudly.

'I don't think I've ever seen so much money!' said Mr Livingstone who, like most of the band, did not think he had ever felt happier in his life.

The money they had earned through their music was, in some strange way, not like any other money they had ever earned. In some indefinable way, this money was more 'real' than money received in a wage packet or as interest on an investment. And it was money they had earned through necessity. They had dragged themselves out of a situation in which many would have despaired. And they had done it together, as a small community. Every single one of them had contributed in their own way.

'We'll have to keep an eye on that hat,' said Mr Hewitt. 'We don't want it getting ideas and running off with all the loot!'

'Oh my hat would never run off,' said Mrs Torridge firmly. 'It's a very well brought up piece of millinery.'

'Should we be sharing the money with your young waiter and his father?' Mrs Caldicot asked Ruth.

'Oh no,' said Ruth. 'I told him what had happened and they don't want any of the money. They're happy to help out. They enjoy playing.'

'When did you tell them what had happened?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'When I texted,' said Ruth.

'You did all that in a text?' said Mrs Caldicot, astonished.

'Oh yes,' said Ruth.

'Golly,' said Mrs Caldicot, who was quietly astonished. She had a mobile telephone and had, quite recently, begun to master the art of sending text messages. But it still took her a quarter of an hour to send something to Jenkins. And there were invariably some complications in the creation of the message. So, for example, the message 'What would you like for dinner?' would usually come out as something more like 'Ygat xi8ld 9nu jikd eoq dhmnds'. Capital letters and punctuation were both a foreign country to her.

The band played its entire repertoire several times, and twice Mrs Caldicot had to empty Mrs Torridge's straw hat because it was becoming overfull with money. There were coins of all denominations and the more enthusiastic music lovers had put euro notes into the hat.

Chapter Seventeen

Eventually, Jean-Jacques announced that he and his father, both waiters who worked only in the evenings, had to leave to go to work.

‘Are we doing this again tomorrow?’ asked Jean-Jacques after he and his father had completed a round of kissing (left cheek, right cheek, left cheek and then left cheek, right cheek, left cheek) to mark their departure.

If meeting and leaving always take this long then I’m surprised anything ever gets done in France, thought Mrs Caldicot. It took the best part of ten minutes for Jean-Jacques and his father to kiss everyone and for the band members to reciprocate. ‘We certainly are,’ she said. ‘We have enough money for dinner tonight, but if we don’t play again then we won’t have any money for meals tomorrow.’

‘May we join you when you play again?’ asked Jean-Jacques.

‘We’d all be delighted!’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘And I think it is fair to say that Ruth would be very delighted.’

Ruth, who was standing next to Mrs Caldicot, blushed in a very dainty, girlish sort of way and gave Mrs Caldicot a gentle nudge as though pretending to tell her off.

‘Are you sure you won’t take any of this money?’ asked Mrs Caldicot, pointing to the cash which was now safely stashed in her handbag.

‘Oh no, no!’ said Jean-Jacques. ‘My father and I love to play music. And you need the money to replace what was taken from you by bad people.’ He paused. ‘May I make a suggestion?’

‘Of course!’

‘You would perhaps do better for the money if you play in the Places des Vosges. The acoustics are very good and people go there deliberately to listen to the music played by buskers. There are always bands and choirs and soloists there.’

‘The Place des Vosges! That’s the place Mr Williams recommended!’ remembered Mrs Caldicot. ‘Is it far?’

‘No, it’s not too far. We can come to your hotel and then show you how to get there. We can, if you like walk from the hotel to save money on the Metro fares. It’s a pleasant walk through the Marais – the old quarter of Paris.’

Mrs Caldicot said that this was extremely kind of them.

‘We should be at the Place des Vosges by 11.00 a.m.,’ said Jean-Jacques. ‘That should enable us to select a good spot. We can play in the cloisters. The sound is very good there and if it rains neither we nor the people listening won’t get in the slightest bit wet.’

Mrs Caldicot said she thought this sounded marvellous and they arranged to see one another at 10.00 a.m. sharp the following morning. ‘Oh, one thing occurred to me,’ she said, as an afterthought, ‘do we need a licence of any kind to play music in Paris?’

Jean-Jacques grinned and shrugged his shoulders. ‘Technically, you do,’ he said. ‘But…’ He shrugged again.

‘Oh dear. I don’t like that ‘but’? What happens if the police catch us?’

‘Usually, you run!’ said Jean-Jacques. He looked around and his eyes settled first on Mrs Torridge with her walking frame and then on Mr Livingstone who was rubbing his knee and finally over the rest of the band. None of them looked like people you’d put your money on if it came to a chase. He frowned and shrugged again. ‘But perhaps not so much of the running…’

‘Will the police put us in jail if they catch us?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘No, no,’ said Jean-Jacques. ‘They would not dare!’ His father, who had been listening, shrugged in that way the French do when faced with something patently absurd and then slowly headed off with his euphonium, now packed away safely in its case. ‘Anyway,’ said Jean-Jacques, ‘it is easy for you – you give your hotel address and then you go back to England. What can they do?’

Slightly reassured, but nevertheless nervous at the prospect of having to make a run for it across the Channel, Mrs Caldicot thanked him again. She wondered what Jenkins would say if she arrived back home with a busload of gendarmes in hot pursuit.

And then Jean-Jacques, about to follow his father, turned back and spoke to Ruth. ‘May I kiss you?’ he asked with surprisingly old-fashioned politeness.

‘Yes, of course!’ said a rather surprised Ruth, expecting another trio of French on-the-cheek kisses.

But it was not a kiss on the cheek.

And a couple of minutes later, when she emerged from the embrace breathless and panting slightly, her hair a little dishevelled, Ruth was blushing bright red.

With a final wave, Jean-Jacques, clutching his heavy accordion, hurried away to catch up his father.

Mrs Peterborough delayed not a moment.

‘Our Ruth had two jars filled with peas
With these she made music with ease.
A handsome young waiter
Decided to date her
And gave her a kiss and a squeeze.’

Ruth was still waving goodbye with one hand when with the other she reached into her bag and pulled out her mobile phone.

Now she really did have something exciting to tell Denise.

As they headed back towards their hotel, Mrs Caldicot remembered the notice that Mr Hewitt had made with a piece of abandoned cardboard. The notice was still on the chair where it had been placed. She picked it up to read, and this is what it said: ‘Newly formed Band. Please Give Generously to Pay for Music Lessons.’

Mrs Caldicot, laughing, picked up the sign and popped it into a waste bin.

They had, she thought, done quite well without any music lessons.

Chapter Eighteen

After taking their instruments back to their hotel, the band (for this is how they now saw themselves) had dinner at a pleasant, traditional café a few hundred yards away. To the especial delight of Mrs Torridge and Mr Livingstone, it involved nothing more than a gentle shuffle down the road and along a narrow, slightly out of the way side street.

It was a café which Jean-Jacques and his father had recommended.

It was not an establishment where they worked but it was a place where they sometimes ate.

'I can't think of a better recommendation than that!' said Mrs Merivale.

It was not a café which catered for tourists and, indeed, there was no tourist menu advertised outside. The food, however, was excellent and very reasonably priced.

At the conclusion of the meal, Mr Twist, who was still in charge of their finances paid the bill with several handfuls of coins – the money which they had earned and which had been thrown into Mrs Bartholomew's hat.

(In view of recent events, Mr Twist had asked to be excused from all fiscal responsibilities but it was unanimously decided that he was the best person for the job and Mrs Caldicot in particular had insisted that he continue in the role as Band Accountant. She had, when they returned to the hotel, handed over to him all the day's takings. There was far too much cash to fit into his money belt and so he had stuffed the notes into his wallet and the coins into every available pocket.)

The waiter huffed and puffed a good deal as he counted the money but his demeanour improved when he discovered that he had been given a more than acceptable gratuity.

'I do appreciate your trust in allowing me to continue to look after our finances,' Mr Twist said to Mrs Caldicot as they all strolled back to their hotel.

'You've always done a wonderful job for us,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I have never been any good at accounts and you've managed the money back at the house very well. I really don't know what any of us would have done without you. The day when you first came to stay with us was a Red Letter day as far as I am concerned.'

'But…' began Mr Twist. He was, at times, a man given to emotion and he could feel tears in his eyes. There had been many bad times in his life and now he felt that he was enjoying the best of times. He swallowed. 'I still feel so bad that I lost all our money. It was a stupid and indefensibly reckless thing to do.'

'It was stupid and it was reckless,' agreed Mrs Caldicot who saw no point in denying these obvious truths. 'But your intentions were good. And I think we can safely say that naivety led you astray.' She looked at him and smiled. 'We will leave it at that. And I don't think we need mention it ever again.'

'Thank you,' said a contrite and grateful Mr Twist.

'And there is one thing you did for which we will, I think, always be grateful,' said Mrs Caldicot.

Puzzled, Mr Twist looked at her. He did not think he was a stupid man (although, of course, he would never deny that he was liable to moments of idiocy, as illustrated by his recent debacle) but he really didn't understand what she was talking about.

'Have you forgotten?' asked Mrs Caldicot, with a big smile.

'Forgotten what?'

'It was your idea that we should start a band and go busking to raise money,' said Mrs Caldicot.

Mr Twist thought and remembered that indeed he had been the one to suggest that they might try earning some money by playing music. He remembered seeing the young girl violinist with all the money in her violin case.

'Yes, I suppose it was,' he agreed. 'But we only had to do that because…'

Mrs Caldicot held up a hand to stop him. 'Your idea has brought us all together, given everyone a sense of purpose and added a great deal of unexpected joy to our holiday,' she said.

Mr Twist hesitated for a moment. 'Do you really think so?'

'I'm sure of it,' said Mrs Caldicot with a big smile. 'I really don't think I've ever seen everyone quite so happy. I rather suspect that Mr Livingstone, in particular, is very pleased that our money was lost. And I know that everyone is excited about tomorrow – wondering how we'll get on playing music in the Place des Voges; wondering how much money we'll earn and so on.' She laughed. 'I certainly didn't think I'd ever see the day when I'd be strumming a banjo in a public park in the middle of Paris!'

'So,' said Mr Twist hesitantly, 'do you think the good idea perhaps cancels out at least some of my silliness in losing our money in the park?'

'I think it does,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'In fact, I'm sure it does.'

'Nothing like that will ever happen again,' promised Mr Twist.

'Oh I know that,' said Mrs Caldicot, who did.

And Mr Twist felt happier and more at peace than he had felt for some time.

When they arrived back at the doorstep of their hotel, the doorman, Raphael was still standing there.

‘He doesn’t do much but he does it for long hours,’ muttered Mr Hewitt to Mr Roxdale.

‘What ho, old beans!’ Raphael cried, pleased as Punch with his new command of idiomatic English.

‘What ho, Raphael!’ replied everyone, almost as a chorus.

Mr Hewitt and Mr Roxdale, who wanted to speak to Raphael, hung behind for a moment after the rest had gone into the hotel.

‘You’re not still teaching him your brand of English are you?’ Mrs Caldicot asked them when they finally sauntered in.

‘Just a few words to help him communicate more effectively with tourists,’ said Mr Hewitt.

‘Oh dear,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘I don’t think I want to know what you’ve been teaching him.’

‘All good fun!’ said Mr Roxdale.

‘All part of the entente cordiale!’ said Mr Hewitt.

And then, quite exhausted by the excitement of what had been a long day, they all went up to bed.

And their dreams were coloured and enlivened by indelible memories of their impromptu concert in the Tuileries Gardens

Chapter Nineteen

At five minutes to ten the following morning, Paris's most newly formed band was standing in the lobby of its hotel. There had been no trashing of hotel rooms and no television sets had been thrown out of bedroom windows. Drug use had been confined to the taking of modest quantities of medicinal drugs prescribed, variously, for conditions such as high blood pressure, heart problems and arthritis. There had been no illegal drug use and although Mr Hewitt and Mr Roxdale had enjoyed medicinal tots of brandy (obtained from the mini bar in their rooms) there had been very little alcohol consumption.

The band members were ready and waiting, and although the massed tourist industry of Paris might well have been disappointed if they had been aware of this, they were far, far more excited than if they had been about to visit the Louvre, ascend the Eiffel Tower or wander up and down the Champs-Élysées.

Mr Livingstone's banjo was in its case because it was generally thought that it would, with all due respect to Mrs Bartholomew's hat, be a more suitable receptacle into which their audience could toss their donations. Mr Twist had some loose change left over from the day before and he was prepared to use this to 'seed' the banjo case when they started playing.

Ruth, who was wearing her blue dress again, had somehow managed to find some blue paper, and she had stuck this to the outside of her jam jar rhythm shakers so that they looked less like jam jars and considerably more like musical instruments.

Mr Hewitt had his spoons in his jacket pocket and Mr Roxdale had his comb and paper tucked into the breast pocket of his jacket, and since they were hardly laden down with the weight of their instruments, they had each offered to carry one of Mrs Roberts's borrowed bongo drums, for which she was duly grateful.

Mrs Peterborough, Miss Nightingale and Mrs Torridge were constantly clearing their throats and reciting the words of the three songs they had learned. Miss Nightingale was still having some trouble with one or two of the lines of 'I Do Like to Be Beside the Seaside'. The bit which was proving a challenge was the couplet at the end of the third verse which went: 'I do like to stroll along the Prom, Prom, Prom! Where the brass bands play, 'Tiddely-om-pom-pom!'

The singers all had their song sheets with them but said they very much hoped to be able to manage without them.

Mrs Torridge had brought along her hat and the plastic carrier bag in which Mr Torridge was now accustomed to travel. She had announced that her hat was still available to serve as a coin repository if there proved to be any problem with Mr Livingstone's banjo case. When she was excited, and raring to go, Mrs Torridge trembled a little and her walking frame made a sort of drumming sound on whatever ground lay beneath it. The result, not entirely unpleasant, was rather akin to the sound a powerful petrol engine motor car makes when it is idling. The casual observer can tell that there is power there; virtually dormant for the moment but waiting to be unleashed. Those who knew Mrs Torridge well were all aware, when they heard the sound of her walking frame a-throbbing, that, at the boom of the starting pistol, she would be off and on her way.

Miss Nightingale had brought along part of her collection of woollen bobble hats: one in red, one in blue, one in green and one in white. She said that she, Mrs Peterborough and Mrs Torridge were going to wear their bobble hats when they sang. They reported to Mrs Caldicot, however, that there was what could only be described as a logistical problem. Miss Nightingale had brought four bobble hats with her and there were only three suitable heads upon which to place the hats since neither Mrs Merivale nor Ruth were fond of woolly hats.

Mrs Torridge had expressed a preference for the red hat and Mrs Peterborough said she thought she fancied the white one. That left Miss Nightingale with a choice and Miss Nightingale was not good with making choices; not when they were important choices.

'Which do you think I should wear?' she asked Mrs Caldicot, to whom she was accustomed to turn when faced with any dilemma of some magnitude. 'Which would be smarter? Which would be more appropriate?'

Mrs Caldicot knew, from long experience, that Miss Nightingale needed someone she trusted to make the decision for her and so she took the time to consider the dilemma.

'I think,' she said, after some thought,' 'I think you should definitely wear the red one. For one thing the red suits your complexion and for another thing if the three of you are wearing red, white and blue hats the combination will have a distinctly patriotic look. They will be British colours, of course, but the French will also approve because their flag had the same three colours and so any French people who see your hats will probably assume you are all celebrating the French tricolour. The green hat can be held in reserve, lest some calamity befall one of the other hats.'

Miss Nightingale was delighted by this verdict.

As they awaited the arrival of Jean-Jacques and his father, there was an almost palpable air of excitement in the hotel lobby.

'Odds bodkins!' said Raphael, the doorman when Mrs Caldicot finally stepped foot outside the hotel, to see if Jean-Jacques and his father were anywhere in sight. 'May I crave a boon?'

Mrs Caldicot, who had been closely followed by the rest of the band, looked at Raphael and then glanced at Mr Hewitt and Mr Roxdale who were, like a couple of schoolboys, struggling to suppress their giggles.

'You may crave a boon,' said Mrs Caldicot graciously.

'Thank you, ma'am,' said Raphael. 'Can I fix you people up a taxi? A minibus, perhaps? The hotel coach is available if you need it. Very reasonable prices.'

'We're walking, thank you,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Shanks's pony,' said Mr Roxdale.

'Or mare,' said Mr Hewitt. 'I've heard it described as Shanks's mare.'

'Who was Shanks?' asked Mr Livingstone. 'I've always wondered about that.'

'Some people say there was no Mr Shank,' said Mr Williams. 'When I was nothing but a lad, my mother told me she thought the phrase referred to the fact that the lower leg is sometimes referred to as the shank. I suspect I was a curious boy; always asking daft questions. I must have been a bit of a nightmare.'

Raphael, who was trying to follow this conversation, now looked thoroughly confused.

'Oh,' said a disappointed Mr Livingstone. 'That's a bit disappointing.'

'I agree,' said Mr Williams. 'But there may be another explanation. My father told me that Mr Shank was an 18th century vicar who couldn't afford a pony and had to walk everywhere round his village. So when he wanted to visit his parishioners or pop down to the local inn for a glass of mead he used what the villagers called Shank's pony. I always preferred that explanation though I never knew whether my Dad made it up or not. He used to do that to try to confuse me. It used to get me into terrible trouble at school. I remember being put into detention for insisting that Lawrence of Arabia wrote *Lady Chatterly's Lover*.'

'What the devil was mead?' asked Mr Roxdale. 'I've always wondered about that.'

'Some sort of alcoholic drink made with honey,' said Mr Williams who sometimes felt slightly embarrassed at the amount of entirely useless information he had accumulated over the years.

'Did your Dad tell you that?' asked Mr Roxdale.

'No, I think it's pretty reliable information,' said Mr Williams. 'My mother told me that. She didn't usually make things up.'

'Here come our accordion and euphonium players!' said Mr Merivale. He pointed down the street where it could be seen that Jean-Jacques and Monsieur Roche, his father, were approaching. Monsieur Roche, who was dressed ready for work, was wearing a pair of black trousers, a white shirt and a black waistcoat. He was carrying his jacket and his euphonium case. Jean-Jacques was wearing a pair of pale blue chinos and a blue button down shirt. He was wearing his accordion and did not have its case. He afterwards explained to Ruth that the case was nearly as heavy as the accordion.

Ruth, whose heart had been beating so loudly that she felt sure everyone around must have been able to hear it, hesitated for a moment but then succumbed and ran forward to meet the young accordionist. Clearly pleased to see Ruth, he kissed her, just once and not on the cheeks, and she would have doubtless blushed an even brighter shade of red had it been possible.

'I like that dress very much,' Jean-Jacques said to Ruth.

'It's the only decent dress I brought with me,' said Ruth, apologetically. 'The only other things I've got are jumpers and trousers and an anorak and they don't seem the right things to wear; not for performing in public.'

'I love the dress,' said Jean-Jacques. 'My father apologises but he has to work this afternoon. He will play with us for an hour or so and then leave. This is why he is wearing his clothes for waiting.'

'It's very kind of him to come at all,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'No, no, it is a thrill for us to play with you. My father loves playing and does so whenever he can. And I too love playing music.'

'Right!' said Mrs Caldicot, adopting again her role as wagon master. 'Shall we hit the road?'

And so, after murmurings of enthusiasm and a few notes of approval from Mr Livingstones's flute, they set off towards the Places des Vosges.

'Tally ho!' cried Raphael as they left. 'The games afeet, eh?'

'The games afoot!' chorused everyone in reply.

'Have you been singing for long?' Jean-Jacques asked Ruth. They were, of course, walking together.

Ruth laughed. 'Only since yesterday. And you? How long have you been playing the accordion?'

'Since I was a little boy. I was given a small instrument for Christmas when I was six. I wanted a drum set but my parents decided an accordion was more sensible since we lived in a small apartment with very thin walls. When I was 12, my uncle died and he left me this instrument. I could hardly lift it but I was very proud to have it and I have been playing it ever since. It is my most treasured possession.'

It took them an hour to walk from their hotel to the Places des Vosges.

'This is the best way to see the city,' Jean-Jacques said to Ruth. 'The buses and the coaches are too fast. When you walk you can look into the shops, and see the buildings and get the real feeling of the streets. Many people who visit Paris walk very little. It is a shame.'

They walked along the Rue Saint Honore, home of some of the most expensive boutiques in the world; shops where rich tourists can spend a small fortune on a pair of gloves and a large fortune on a handbag. Both Mrs Peterborough and Mrs Torridge gasped when they saw the prices.

They walked past small, private art galleries selling works of art by modern painters. Mrs Torridge said the stuff which was hanging on their walls, or on display in their windows, looked no better than the sort of pictures, done with brightly coloured crayons, which loving mums stick on their refrigerators. Mr Livingstone said he thought it was the artists, not the pictures, who ought to be hanging somewhere.

The galleries were mostly empty of buyers. No one seemed to be looking at anything. Each gallery contained but a single occupant: a willowy, snooty looking woman of a certain age and the willowy, snooty looking women appeared to spend their time making phone calls or looking at their emails. How, wondered Mrs Caldicot, did the gallery owners make a living? She asked Mr Williams who explained that the galleries sold things to professional dealers who put what they bought into storage, in the hope of eventually making a profit when they resold, or rented it out to banks and corporations who displayed what they had rented in their lobbies and boardrooms. In the end, he said, most of the saleable stuff ended up in auction rooms in New York where it was bought by professional dealers who put what they bought into storage, in the hope of eventually making a profit when they resold, or temporarily rented it out to banks and corporations who displayed what they had rented in their lobbies and boardrooms.

Mrs Caldicot said none of this made a lot of sense. Mr Williams said it didn't have to make sense as long as it made money.

They strolled past the entrance to the magnificent Palais Royal, a former royal palace which was, back in the 18th century the centre of Parisian social life, full of famous cafes; its covered walkways a favourite showground for aristocrats and courtesans. They took a moment to peer in through the gates. The lime trees were already in leaf and nannies were taking babies and small children for their morning constitutionals. A man in a beige raincoat was feeding small pieces of bread to the sparrows; the chattering birds were gathered on his arms and head. Half a dozen tourists were eating sandwiches, bought from a nearby shop. Loving couples were strolling arm in arm; hoping for a little early spring sunshine. Everyone was hoping for a little early spring sunshine.

They hurried past the extraordinary Pompidou Cultural Centre, an infamously inside out building with its pipes and ducts on display instead of being hidden away beneath the structure's fabric. Sadly, the once famous building now appeared rather seedy and grubby looking. It had apparently become a magnet for the homeless, the dispossessed and the canine. They hurried past the Pompidou and then wandered at a more leisurely pace through the Marais, an area full of delicatessen shops and one of the oldest parts of Paris.

(It should, perhaps, be admitted that 'hurried' is a comparative term. None of the party, other than Jean-Jacques and his father, was of an athletic nature and it was never likely that any speed records were likely to be broken. Mrs Torridge, relying on her walking frame, and Mr Livingstone, with a right knee and a left hip that were long past their best, both had a top speed which was not far removed from 'very slow'.)

They stopped for a moment to admire the packed window of a delicatessen which had several types of snail for sale.

Mrs Torridge, Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough screwed up their noses at the sight. Mrs Peterborough found a limerick irresistible.

There was a young lady from Wales
Who liked chocolates filled up with snails
She said: 'They taste funny'
But cost not much money
'Cus I buy the damned things in the sales'.

The streets were full of young people and Mr Roxdale couldn't help noticing that a good number of them were young girls in their 20s.

'I wish I were younger,' he said to Mr Hewitt, and held his chest as though he were having a heart attack. He grinned.

'I remember reading about a bloke called Clemenceau,' said Mr Hewitt. 'He was the French Prime Minister during the First World War. When he was 80-years-old, he was walking down the Champs-Élysées with a friend when a pretty girl walked past. Clemenceau stopped and admired the young girl. ‘Oh to be 70 again,’ he said as she strolled past.’

Mr Roxdale laughed.

Jean-Jacques explained to Ruth and to the others which buildings were famous because of the people who had lived in them. He pointed out landmarks they would have missed. He showed them places where important things had happened. He drew their attention to long-established shops and important statues and told them the history of the streets along which they were walking.

On their way through the streets of Paris, Mrs Roberts popped into several shops trying to buy postage stamps to put on her postcards. Her search was, however, always in vain. The shops she visited all sold postcards but none of them sold the stamps to stick on them.

‘Are you looking for anything in particular?’ Monsieur Roche asked her after her third disappointment.

‘Just some stamps for my postcards,’ explained Mrs Roberts, holding up her small sheaf of postcards to illustrate her point.

‘Ah, you will need a main Post Office,’ said Monsieur Roche. ‘They will sell stamps.’

‘Do you know where I can find a Post Office?’ she asked him.

Monsieur Roche thought for a while and then shook his head sadly. ‘No. I don’t think there is one around here, I’m afraid. There is a Post Office in the Rue Etienne Marcel and there is one in the Rue La Boetie – they are the nearest.’

‘Are they anywhere near where we are going?’

Monsieur Roche shook his head. ‘I am afraid not.’ He thought again. ‘There is one in the Rues des Francs Bourgeois but sadly we have passed that one. And there is one in the Rue Castex but I think it is closed now for something or other.’ He shrugged, using his shoulders, arms and hands. ‘I am so sorry. Do you have something important to post?’

‘Oh no, just some postcards,’ said Mrs Roberts, with a smile. ‘I just need some stamps for my postcards. But there’s no hurry. They can wait.’

Chapter Twenty

As they threaded their way along a narrow and busy street called Rue des Francs Bourgeois, Mrs Caldicot was approached by an elegantly dressed woman and a tall, distinguished looking man. They both appeared to be in their fifties and looked as though they had just stepped out from the pages of Vogue magazine. She was wearing a simple, white, polka dotted dress (with the dots in blue) and blue shoes which looked as though they had spent their short lives walking on carpet rather than hard pavements. He wore a lime green, linen jacket, sharply creased white linen trousers, two-tone shoes (in brown and white) and an immaculate Panama hat.

She was carrying a handbag of a blue that matched her shoes and dress. The bag looked just about big enough to carry a single lipstick and half a packet of paper hankies. If you'd tried to cram a mobile phone in as well, the bag probably wouldn't have closed properly.

He was carrying an expensive looking movie camera.

Mrs Caldicot, who had been walking for nearly an hour felt downright grubby in comparison. She was wearing her favourite red dress but it had not travelled well and it was now criss-crossed with creases. ('Don't worry about it,' said Ruth, when Mrs Caldicot had shared her fear that she looked as though she had slept in the dress for a week, 'the creased look is very fashionable at the moment. People are buying clothes that have loads of creases put into them before they're sold.' Mrs Caldicot, who had never had much interest in fashion, had not gained much comfort from this well-meant reassurance.)

'Sorry to bother you, ma'am,' said the tall man, touching his hat with the forefinger of his right hand, 'but do you speak English?' He spoke in an accent which did not disguise the fact that he was an American.

'It's the only language I do speak,' said Mrs Caldicot, with a smile.

'That's marvellous,' said the man, with a sigh of relief. 'My wife and I are looking for the Place des Vosges. You don't happen to know where it is, do you?'

'Follow us!' said Mrs Caldicot. 'That's where we're going.'

The smartly dressed American couple walked alongside Mrs Caldicot. The pavement was narrow and people all around were walking along the road. Fortunately, there was very little traffic and what there was moved along at little more than a brisk walking pace.

'I'm Calvin and this is my wife Josephine,' said the man. 'We're on a tour of Europe.'

'This is our third week over here,' said Josephine. She had a strong Southern accent which Mrs Caldicot found enormously charming. 'We've been to England, Wales and Scotland and now we're in France for the week. You must excuse me, I do look a sight I'm sure. The airline lost several of our bags and we're having to make do with what we have.'

'Are you folk all travelling together?' asked Calvin. He turned and looked back at the rather long line of elderly Britons who were wandering along in Mrs Caldicot's wake.

'Yes we are,' said Mrs Caldicot. She looked around. Miss Nightingale waved. Mrs Caldicot waved back. 'I'd introduce you to everyone but it'll take rather a long time.'

'Are you some sort of band?' asked Calvin. 'I notice that you and one or two of your colleagues are carrying musical instruments.

'Well we are a sort of band,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. 'We're hoping to play in the Place des Vosges – to earn some money!' She held up the banjo case she was carrying. 'This is a banjo,' she said. 'I borrowed it from Mr Livingstone. He plays the flute.'

'You're on a European Tour?'

Mrs Caldicot laughed. 'Sort of! Actually, I suppose you could describe it as our inaugural world tour!'

'Where are you performing? Is there a hall in the Place des Vosges?'

'Oh no, we're performing in the street. We're hoping to find a nice, quiet piece of pavement where we can play.'

'Oh my,' said Josephine. 'Is that allowed? Playing in the street?'

'To be honest I'm not entirely sure,' admitted Mrs Caldicot. 'But if we are going to eat today we don't have a lot of choice!'

'How long have you been playing the banjo?' asked Calvin.

'Just since yesterday. I don't really play it. I just sort of strum it and hope it doesn't sound too bad.

'Has your band been together a long time?' asked Calvin, who seemed slightly bewildered by Mrs Caldicot's reply, but who was far too well-mannered to say anything.

'Since yesterday afternoon,' replied Mrs Caldicot.

It was clear that neither Calvin nor Josephine quite knew what to say to this.

‘What sort of music do you play?’ asked Calvin after a long silence.

‘British Music Hall songs,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘We only know three songs so we do them in rotation. Our repertoire consists of ‘Down at the Old Bull and Bush’, ‘I Do Like to Be Beside the Seaside’ and ‘Boiled Beef and Carrots’. I’m afraid that we don’t do requests and if people don’t like those three songs then we can’t do much about it.’

‘I don’t think I know any of those songs,’ said Josephine. She looked at her husband who shook his head.

‘They’re very old and very old-fashioned British music hall songs,’ explained Mrs Caldicot. ‘But we’re all old-fashioned and British and most of us are very old so they seemed appropriate.’

‘So, if you aren’t experienced musicians, do you mind my asking how you came to form a band?’ asked Josephine.

Mrs Caldicot did her best to explain. It took some time.

‘Oh that’s awful,’ said Josephine.

‘But your response to your vicissitudes is rather wonderful,’ said Calvin. ‘Is that what they call the British bulldog spirit?’

‘I rather suppose it is,’ agreed Mrs Caldicot.

‘Do you mind if I film you when you start playing?’ asked Calvin. He lifted up the camera he was carrying.

‘Not at all!’ agreed Mrs Caldicot. ‘Some people filmed us yesterday but they only had mobile phones. Your camera looks very professional.’

‘We like to keep a record of our travels,’ explained Calvin. ‘Neither of us has been to Europe before.’ He took some film of Mrs Caldicot and then of the rest of the band as they walked along the street. Three French boys on bicycles stopped and stared when they saw Calvin’s camera. They pedalled slowly and meandered along just behind Mrs Caldicot. Two girls of about the same age as the French boys came out of a side street, paused for a second or two, grinned at each other and then followed the boys. A mackerel tabby cat with a piece chewed out of one ear jumped down from a window sill and joined the procession.

Chapter Twenty One

Eventually, almost exactly at eleven o'clock in the morning, they arrived at the magnificent and historic Place des Vosges: the oldest square in Paris.

Monsieur Roche explained to them all that the Place des Vosges was, back in the 17th and 18th centuries, the place for the fashionable to have their homes. The posh people of Paris might have taken their pleasures in the Palais Royale but they kept their children and their servants in the Place des Vosges.

'The Place des Vosges is an exact square,' explained the knowledgeable Monsieur Roche who pointed out that Victor Hugo, author of *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* and *Les Miserables*, lived in No 6 Place des Vosges, which had been turned into a museum in his honour. He also told them that in the 17th century, Cardinal Richelieu also lived in the Place des Vosges.

Richelieu, claimed Monsieur Roche, was unfairly portrayed as the Chief Baddy in Alexandre Dumas's novel *The Three Musketeers* (and in all the films based on the book). The waiter said he felt that Dumas had treated Richelieu badly, and that he had perhaps done this simply because he needed an enemy against whom Athos, Porthos, Aramis and D'Artagnan could pit their wits and their swords. Monsieur Roche said that it was rather sad that most French people had forgotten that Richelieu established the first orderly government in France, founded the Academie Francaise and rebuilt the Sorbonne University.

They came into the Place des Vosges rather suddenly and quite unexpectedly.

One minute they were walking along a fairly ordinary, narrow street ('Is it much further?' asked Mr Roxdale who quietly confessed to Mr Hewitt that, as Mrs Torridge had once said, he didn't think his legs had got much more 'walk' in them) and the next moment, to their astonishment, they were standing in the most wonderful square in Paris. William Wordsworth Esquire, poet and spring flower aficionado, dawdling round a corner and finding himself unexpectedly faced with a host of golden daffodils, all making pretty, little curtseys in a pleasant spring breeze, could not have been more delighted.

Around the perimeter stood grand houses; all joined to dominate the small garden or park in the middle of the square. Beautiful trees were just coming into leaf and already there were people sitting on the benches. Every park and garden in Paris is liberally supplied with benches or chairs or both and the park in the Place des Vosges was no exception.

Some of those on the benches were reading a newspaper, a magazine or a book; some were chatting; some were eating sandwiches; some were simply enjoying the peace and the spring sunshine in a Parisian oasis. There was a children's play area hidden behind some bushes in the small park and the members of the band (for they now definitely thought of themselves as a band) could hear, but not see, children laughing and squealing with delight.

The square and the park were full of linden trees, which the British usually refer to as lime trees, and as a result, the whole area was full of the distinctive aroma associated with the genus tilia. Mr Hewitt, who had an observant eye and an encyclopaedic knowledge about things botanical, remarked to Mr Roxdale that the streets and parks of Paris seemed to be dominated by just three types of tree: lime trees, horse chestnut trees and plane trees.

'We must first find a place to play,' said Monsieur Roche. 'We must hurry. This is a favourite square with musicians.'

He led the way into the cloisters which ran around the square, tucked in the shade underneath the grand houses. The others in the party, some of them now rather weary after what had been a long journey, tottered after him. Mrs Torridge, in particular, had struggled to keep up and her knees were giving her a lot of trouble. She had to pause and lean on her walking frame every dozen yards or so. Mrs Caldicot had several times offered to carry the bag containing Mr Torridge but Mrs Torridge had declined gracefully and with thanks and insisted that she was perfectly capable of carrying her husband while using her walking frame. Once or twice Mrs Peterborough joined her in leaning on the frame though naturally this meant that they had to move in step. Despite the difficulty she was having, Mrs Torridge had steadfastly refused to give in. When Mrs Caldicot had suggested that she and Mr Livingstone, who also suffered with terrible arthritis, should take a taxi, Mrs Torridge had insisted that she would 'get where they were going under her own steam, thank you very much for asking'. Mr Livingstone had simply growled something under his breath and had seemed offended at the suggestion that he might need to travel in a motor vehicle, particularly since the chances were high that the vehicle would be driven by a French person.

As Mrs Caldicot and the rest of the band followed Monsieur Roche around the square, Calvin continued to film them. He, of course, was followed by his wife. And the three boys and two girls were still following him. As was the cat whose curiosity was now thoroughly aroused and who seemed convinced that if he kept going, something good would come out of it. Six Chinese tourists, three men and three women, saw what was by now a considerable crowd and joined the parade.

The Chinese men were all wearing identical grey suits which were made out of something shiny and synthetic which looked a little like silk but probably wasn't since there wasn't an unwanted crease anywhere in sight. The Chinese women were all wearing smart, red dresses which appeared to be made out of the same material. All six had camera phones seemingly fixed to their eyes and they filmed Calvin and everything that Calvin filmed.

In one corner of the square, a jazz band was playing. There were three saxophonists, a keyboard player, playing a small, portable keyboard, a violinist and two guitar players. In another corner there were two folk singers, both with guitars. They seemed to be singing their own compositions. And in a third corner two women with large, stringed instruments were comfortably settled playing something which Mr Williams said was by Bach.

Each group of performers had their own small audience. Others, walking past, would stop for a few moments to listen.

The odd thing was that due to the unique acoustics of the cloisters, and their extent, the quality of the sound each group of performers made was perfect and as you stood listening to one set of performers you could not hear the others. It wasn't difficult to see why musicians, and those wanting to listen to good music in the open air, flocked to the Place des Vosges.

'I've never known how to tell the difference,' whispered Mrs Caldicot to Mr Livingstone, who was glad they had slowed down a bit since his right knee had been playing up a good deal. 'Are those cellos or double basses?'

'Those are cellos,' said Mr Livingstone, whispering his reply. 'The double bass is slightly bigger than the cello. Cello players always sit down with their instrument between their legs. Musicians playing a bass can play it sitting down but they usually prefer to stand. It's a big instrument, a bit hefty to carry around.'

'Thank you,' whispered Mrs Caldicot who still didn't think she'd be able to tell the difference but wasn't going to worry about it.

Monsieur Roche found that there was one corner of the square unoccupied and Mrs Caldicot and the band immediately established their occupancy of the space. Their small area was soon alive with the sound of players tuning up their instruments and singers doing what singers do to exercise their vocal chords. Mrs Roberts gave her bongo drums some healthy exercise, Jean-Jacques loosened up his accordion and Mrs Caldicot strummed her banjo rather hesitantly. It took her a moment or two to get into the rhythm of the thing.

'Before we start, I think everyone should have a little something to eat,' said Mrs Merivale. She opened a large carrier bag and displayed a huge pile of croissants, each one carefully wrapped in a paper napkin. 'Just to keep us all going until lunchtime.'

'Where on earth did you get all those?' asked Mrs Caldicot with a beaming smile.

'From the breakfast buffet,' replied Mrs Merivale. 'Mr Merivale and I collected them and wrapped them.' She paused. 'Well, after all, when we're in England Mr Merivale and I are usually in charge of comestibles,' she explained.

It was generally agreed that Mr and Mrs Merivale were heroes. Mrs Peterborough said that they should definitely be recognised in the next New Year's honours list and Miss Nightingale seconded the suggestion.

'Where's Mr Hewitt?' asked Mrs Caldicot, suddenly noticing that the band's spoons player was missing. She took a croissant from Mrs Merivale's huge bag, thanked her and took a bite. A few flakes of pastry fluttered down to the pavement and a sparrow which just happened to be passing swooped down and collected its lunch.

'He's over in the park in the middle of the square,' said Mr Twist, taking a large bite from his croissant. A second sparrow hopped over, took a large crumb and flew off to enjoy it in privacy. 'He and Mr Roxdale spotted some weeds which they thought they needed attending to.'

'Well, we need them here!' said Mrs Caldicot. 'You couldn't have the Beatles performing on stage while Ringo was off doing a little dead-heading! And how would it look if the Rolling Stones were doing a concert at the Royal Albert Hall and Mick Jagger suddenly looked round and said 'Where's Keith?' and someone said 'Oh, he's just popped across the road to do a bit of weeding in Hyde Park.'

The flaky croissant crumbs were now falling like light rain, and a battalion of sparrows were hopping about snatching them up and taking them away. There were baby sparrows to be fed in nests secreted deep within the bushes of the small park in the centre of the square.

Ruth giggled and hurried across the road to fetch back the spoons player and the comb and paper specialist and five minutes later the entire band was, as Mr Williams put it, 'ready to rock and roll'.

'But we're not performing rock and roll, are we?' murmured a slightly puzzled Mrs Roberts. 'I thought we were doing old-fashioned music hall numbers.'

'It's just an expression,' explained Mr Williams. 'Lots of people say it when they're about to start work.'

'Oh, right,' said Mrs Roberts. 'Let's rock and roll then!' She tried to wiggle her hips a little, a la Elvis Presley, but winced and didn't do it again.

Mr Roxdale and Mr Hewitt put away their gardening tools, stuffing them into their jacket pockets, and prepared themselves for the band's first performance of the day. Mr Roxdale checked the paper wrapped around his comb and Mr Hewitt polished his spoons because, as he said to Mr Roxdale, 'a good spoons player always likes to sparkle'.

Chapter Twenty Two

Within minutes the band, which had not yet begun to play, had a sizeable audience. Many of those who were watching were a little intrigued by the size of the band but, perhaps, more fascinated by their average age and the nature of some of the instruments. Not every Parisian music lover is au fait with the playing of the spoons or the comb and paper and not many of those waiting for the music to start had ever seen a band which also included a flute, a banjo, an accordion, a euphonium, a pair of bongo drums and a girl in a blue dress shaking what looked suspiciously like two jam jars filled with dried peas.

And when the band did start to play (counted into 'I Do Like to Be Beside the Seaside' by Mr Livingstone, waving his flute like a conductor wielding his baton) the impact was immediate.

There was no doubt that the band was doing something new and different; the musicians were performing with unrivalled enthusiasm and with great passion (in some cases, it must be admitted, with more passion than skill or natural talent).

And, of course, they were, on average, about 50 years older than the other musicians performing in the cloisters of the Place des Vosges that day. It is not often that you can wander through the streets of Paris and suddenly find yourself watching and listening to a group of septuagenarians, octogenarians and nonagenarians performing 'Down at the Old Bull and Bush' as though their lives depended upon it (which, in a way, I suppose they did).

How many times do Parisians, or visitors to Paris, have a chance to see a man with a trowel, a fork and a dibber sticking out of his jacket pocket playing a pair of soup spoons and, moreover, creating something which definitely sounded like a tune?

How many times do music lovers get to see a rhythm section consisting of a shapely, 18-year-old girl shaking two jam jars filled with dried peas and a middle aged woman playing the bongo drums as though her life depended on it?

It was a rare sight.

The sound the band made, augmented with great skill by the feisty accordion playing of Jean-Jacques and the solid sound of his father's euphonium, was quite probably unique in the history of Parisian street music.

The streets, parks, arcades and colonnades of the City of Light have seen countless soloists; violinists, cellists, saxophonists, keyboard players, guitarists, singers (accompanied by taped backing tracks), trumpet players and players of just about every other instrument imaginable. The colonnades and parks and tourist high-spots have always resounded to the sound of small orchestras, string quartets, jazz bands, blues bands, pop groups and folk groups from all around the world. Residents and visitors have always been able to find music on the streets and in the parks of Paris.

But had anyone ever heard old British music hall favourites on the streets of the French capital?

Judging by the reactions of the audience which the band collected, it seemed likely that they had not.

Calvin filmed the band as an entity and then filmed each individual performer. Josephine, his wife, stood beside him drawing his attention to players whom she thought he should film next. The six Chinese tourists were still alternately filming the band and Calvin. The three boys and bicycles, and the two girls who were following them, had now been joined by five military cadets and a traffic warden. The mackerel tabby cat had thought about having a sparrow for lunch but he had decided against it. He had wandered off into the park for a while and had returned.

A coachload of elderly tourists from the Netherlands joined the crowd. The Dutch tourists nearly all wore beige and all had plastic name badges pinned to their clothes. A dozen young French tourists in their twenties joined them. Most of these newcomers carried extendable selfie sticks and spent most of their time taking pictures of themselves with the band in the background. To do this they had to face away from the performers. It seemed to Mrs Caldicot to be a strange way to go through life; viewing the world over your shoulder and back to front.

And still the audience grew and grew.

The Dutch tourists, most of whom were female, seemed fascinated by Mr Hewitt's skill with his spoons. One stood less than a yard away from him filming his hands and the spoons and looking at him most admiringly.

After just a quarter of an hour, and one performance of the three songs which they knew, Mrs Caldicot and her band had acquired an audience so large that it not only filled their corner of the cloistered walkway but spread out across the road and into the park in the centre of the square.

Other musicians, whose own aficionados had wandered off to see what all the excitement was about, had put down their instruments and wandered along the square to see what was going on.

Mr Livingstone's banjo case had been almost filled with coins, and not a few notes, and it seemed to Mrs Caldicot that if things carried on at this rate then they need no longer worry about their not being able to afford to eat decent meals that day.

As they paused for a short break, before beginning their next rendition of their three selected songs, a tired looking man in a scruffy suit which may have once been expensive but which had seen a lot of action and had not been cleaned for a long time, wandered over to Mrs Caldicot. He looked to be in his 40s. He had a cigarette dangling from his lower lip. Mrs Caldicot thought he reminded her of someone but she couldn't think who it was.

'Are you in charge?' he asked. As he spoke, the cigarette, which seemed able to defy gravity, bobbed up and down. He spoke English with a heavy French accent, and Mrs Caldicot thought this was fair enough since he was definitely French. Mrs Caldicot suddenly remembered that he reminded her of Serge Gainsborough, the famous French entertainer and song writer.

'Oh no,' said Mrs Caldicot, who knew enough about life to know that it is never a good thing to admit to being in charge.

'I run a club in Montparnasse,' he said, taking no notice of Mrs Caldicot's denial for he also knew enough about life to know that it is never a good thing to admit to being in charge and, in addition, also knew enough to be able to tell who was in charge even when they said they weren't. 'I'm always looking for acts that are a bit different.'

'Oh!' said a startled Mrs Caldicot.

'I can't pay you much,' he said. 'But give me a ring and we can fix up a few gigs.' He handed Mrs Caldicot a business card. 'My number is on the back, together with my email address.'

He then wandered off, his cigarette spilling ash down his suit.

'We've collected just over 150 euros!' whispered Mr Twist to Mrs Caldicot. 'Where shall I put all the coins? There's too much to leave in the banjo case. And I'm worried about pick pockets.'

'Can you put the coins in your pockets?'

'There are too many!' said Mr Twist.

'Just spread the money around,' suggested Mrs Caldicot. 'Give everyone with pockets some of the money to look after. That way no one will be able to steal the money for our next meal!'

'Open your handbag!' said Mr Livingstone, who was helping Mr Twist distribute the accumulated funds.

Mrs Caldicot, who had put her handbag on the ground between her feet, bent down and picked it up. She opened it and Mr Livingstone scooped in a handful of mixed coins. He then wandered off, distributing the takings among the rest of the band.

'Did you really only start the band yesterday?' Josephine asked Mrs Caldicot.

Her husband was still filming. He had now crossed the road and was standing in the park, filming the crowd which had collected and which was waiting patiently for the band to start playing again.

'We did,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'That's amazing!' said Josephine.

'We really didn't have a choice,' explained Mrs Caldicot. 'The man at the Embassy didn't seem terribly excited by our predicament and the woman from the travel agency wasn't in the slightest bit interested. So if we wanted to eat we had to make some money.'

'What else are you going to play?' asked Josephine.

'I'm afraid we have to play the same songs again,' said Mrs Caldicot apologetically. 'Those are the only three songs we know.'

'That's fine,' said Josephine. 'I don't think the audience will mind. Besides, your crowd is changing all the time.' She nodded towards the crowd which was watching them. The six Chinese people had gone and so too had the coachload of people from the Netherlands. They had been replaced by a small army of Japanese tourists and a dozen stout German men, some of whom were unwisely wearing traditional lederhosen and looking rather sticky and uncomfortable. The boys on the bicycles had gone. And, inevitably, so too had the girls who had followed them. The cat was now asleep on a window sill. Despite the losses, there had been a steady increase in the size of their audience.

'Is this a good crowd?' Mrs Caldicot asked Monsieur Roche.

'I have never seen so many people watching one group of musicians,' said Monsieur Roche. 'You are a big, big hit. No one has ever heard anything like it before.' He grinned. 'And I suspect that maybe these songs are not often accompanied by music played on an accordion and a euphonium.'

Mrs Caldicot laughed. 'I suspect you're right,' she agreed. She told him about the man in the scruffy suit and showed him the man's visiting card. 'Is he real, do you think?'

Monsieur Roche looked at the visiting card. 'Oh yes,' he said. 'This is a real person. He owns a big club in Montparnasse. It is a very popular club. He is known for always having something different on his stage. I had heard that he comes to the Place des Vosges occasionally looking for new acts.'

'Crumbs!' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Pardon?' said Monsieur Roche. 'Why is 'crumbs'?'

‘Sorry,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘It’s just an English expression. It means gosh, golly or my word.’

‘Ah,’ nodded Monsieur Roche. ‘I understand. It is quite a tribute to be invited to play at this club.’ He wandered back to where he had been standing when playing his euphonium.

And a few moments later, Mr Livingstone waved his flute and the band once more moved effortlessly into ‘Down at the Old Bull and Bush’.’

‘We didn’t start with this one last time, did we?’ shouted Mr Twist.

‘No,’ agreed Mr Livingstone with a shake of his head. ‘I thought we’d do our three songs in a different order. Break the routine.’ He laughed. ‘It might convince people that we’re playing something new.’

‘Good idea,’ agreed Mr Twist. He couldn’t remember when he’d last had this much fun. He looked across at Miss Nightingale, Mrs Peterborough, Mrs Torridge and Mrs Merivale. They were all glowing. There was no other word for it. They were glowing. And Ruth, dear young Ruth, had blossomed into a butterfly in a blue dress.

The audience was not so easily convinced that the band was playing something new.

Quite a few of them had been standing listening for half an hour or more and they recognised the tune which they heard and they realised that they now knew the words. And, as a result, several hundred people, many of whom did not speak a word of English, now joined in singing ‘Down at the Old Bull and Bush’.

‘I never thought I’d be standing in a posh bit of Paris playing ‘Down at the Old Bull and Bush’ on the spoons with a crowd of Japanese and German tourists singing along,’ said Mr Hewitt to Mr Roxdale.

Mr Roxdale, who was busy playing the comb and paper, could not reply.

Mr Hewitt tried a tricky, little manoeuvre which involved him playing the spoons on and around his left elbow. He was really getting into this. It was, he supposed, like swimming or riding a bicycle. You never really forget how. Effortlessly, he moved the spoons down to his right knee. ‘Oh, I’m cooking with gas now,’ he thought to himself.

Mrs Caldicot, who was now getting the hang of the banjo and rather enjoying it, noticed that Calvin and Josephine were now also singing ‘Down at the Old Bull and Bush’. Calvin had temporarily put down his camera. Mrs Caldicot looked around. The band members were lost in the wonder of the moment. She couldn’t remember ever seeing them have quite such a good time. Actually, she couldn’t remember ever seeing any group of people have such a good time.

It was true that they might not have won any prizes in a music competition but they were playing their dream with a real passion, and passion rules all.

They were living a dream none of them had ever dreamt, or even imagined of dreaming, and the joy and the glory of the moment were untarnished by bad memories or unfulfilled hopes.

Mrs Caldicot wondered what Mr Hawksmoor, the manager of the Twilight Years Rest Home would think if he could see them now. She wondered what Derek and Veronica, her son and daughter-in-law, would think if they could see her. The pair had dumped her into a nursing home because they said she couldn’t look after herself.

‘Well, just look at me now!’ she thought to herself and she felt at least six inches taller.

No, that was wrong.

A foot taller.

Chapter Twenty Three

At twenty past two, Mrs Torridge announced that if she didn't sit down she would fall down. She, Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale had all been resting on Mrs Torridge's walking frame and although their enthusiasm and spirit had taken them through their tiredness they were now well into the foothills of complete exhaustion.

Everyone agreed that they needed a rest, a sit down and a cup of something refreshing. Exactly what it was didn't matter.

Oh, and it was generally agreed that something to eat would be welcome too.

'Banging these bongo drums had made my hands sore and my wrists ache,' said Mrs Roberts.

'I hit my funny bone with my spoons twenty minutes ago and my left arm has been tingling since then,' said Mr Hewitt. 'Have we made enough lolly for a cup of tea each?'

Mr Roxdale said he desperately needed some new greaseproof paper to wrap round his comb since the original piece of paper had now gone rather soggy and wasn't working properly.

Mr Twist, Mr Williams and both the Merivales agreed that they too were getting a little weary and would not turn down a chance to turn some of their earnings into suitable comestibles and liquid refreshments.

And even Ruth, who was young enough not to know what exhausted really meant, was ready for a break. Her throat was quite sore and she'd done a lot of jiggling about and she felt sort of, well, quite sticky. She was thirsty and fairly hungry and, more importantly, she wondered if she could ask someone to take a picture of her with Jean-Jacques. She could then send it to Denise. Damn it, she would send it to everyone whose address she had in her telephone. She wondered if Jean-Jacques would put his arm around her for the photograph. Maybe if she sort of snuggled in close and sort of just sort of put her arm around him he would respond by sort of putting his arm around her and then maybe he'd even sort of kiss her for the photo.

'Gosh I could eat a horse!' said Mr Hewitt.

'If you eat anything with meat in it then you probably will,' said Mr Merivale. 'The French eat a lot of horses.'

Mr Hewitt pulled a face. He quite liked horses, even when they stopped to eat a mouthful of daisies and came in last; and he didn't want to eat one. 'An omelette would do just fine,' he said.

Mr Twist scooped the remaining money from the banjo case and poured a couple of handfuls of cash into Mrs Caldicot's already rather full handbag. He then poured more coins into Mrs Roberts' handbag, and then into every available handbag and pocket.

'How much did we make?' Mrs Caldicot asked him.

'I've no idea!' replied Mr Twist. 'But enough to buy us all a meal now and another meal this evening. I saw one of those Chinese fellows put a twenty euro note into the banjo case. And there were several five and ten euro notes in there.'

'My word!' said Mrs Caldicot.

'We are going to take a break now?' said Monsieur Roche.

'We're going to have a meal and something to drink,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Where do you recommend?'

'Not the cafés here in the Place des Vosges,' said Monsieur Roche, pulling a disapproving face. 'They are very expensive and very crowded – full of tourists. I can take you to a good café where the locals eat.'

'Is it far?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'Three minutes,' said Monsieur Roche with a smile. 'Maybe four if we walk slowly.'

'I think we'll be walking slowly,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'But when I have taken you to the café I have to leave you,' said Monsieur Roche. 'I have to go to work.'

'You aren't going to eat with us?'

'I'm afraid not. But Jean-Jacques will stay I think. He doesn't have to work until this evening.' Monsieur Roche paused and looked around. 'Ah,' he said. 'I think he has a good reason to stay.'

Mrs Caldicot looked in the same direction.

Jean-Jacques and Ruth were having their photograph taken by Mr Williams. They had their arms around each other and Ruth looked as though she might well burst with the excitement of it all.

'Now give her a kiss,' Mr Williams said to Jean-Jacques.

And the danger of Ruth bursting went up a notch to Red Alert.

'We haven't added up the money yet,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Can I just give you a handful as your share?'

'No, no, no!' said Monsieur Roche, holding up a hand and backing away. 'I don't want any money. It has been a pleasure to play with you.'

'But you're not even having lunch with us!'

‘It has been a marvellous experience,’ said Monsieur Roche. ‘And I now have added three new songs to my repertoire. I have for many years had some knowledge of French music hall songs – the sort played by Mistinguett and Edith Piaf. But I did not know much of British Music Hall. As we walked here this morning Mr Livingstone told me that our French music hall was derived from your British music hall theatres and I can see that. But with some exceptions, such as the American Josephine Baker, many of our music hall songs tend to be rather sad and romantic whereas your British songs seem so jolly; they are very bright and bouncy. Mr Livingstone has promised to send me a CD containing a variety of other British music hall songs. I hope he will do that for me. I would appreciate it very much.’

‘If he has said he will do that then I know he will do it,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Together he and I will put together a package of old music hall songs then you can perhaps learn more of them. We will send you CDs and sheet music.’

‘I would like that very much indeed,’ said Monsieur Roche. ‘You must let me know the cost.’

‘No, no, no!’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘This will be our present to you; our ‘thank you’ to you for bringing your euphonium and playing with us!’

As the band slowly wandered away, rather weary and in some cases not a little hoarse, a xylophone player wheeled his instrument into the corner they were vacating. Sadly for him, the band’s audience drifted off and the xylophone player, who had been hoping to inherit the band’s crowd, had to earn his own supporters.

Monsieur Roche led the band through an archway and along a narrow passageway and they found themselves in a large square garden which was surrounded by high walls. A violinist was playing ‘Non, je ne regrette rien’, one of the songs made famous by Edith Piaf. The acoustics of the garden gave the violin a beautiful, mystical quality. Monsieur Roche led them across the garden and then through an archway at the other end. Within a minute or so they were in the broad and busy street of St Antoine, a continuation of the Rue de Rivoli. And within another two minutes they were outside a simple and unprepossessing café. The café was busy and there did not seem to be room for them all.

‘Wait here a moment,’ said Monsieur Roche. ‘I will have a word with the proprietor and see if he can find tables for you.’

Monsieur Roche disappeared into the café and came out almost immediately accompanied by a large man wearing a huge moustache and a white apron which reached down below his knees. He was wearing other things, of course, but the moustache and the apron were the only two items which caught the eye.

‘There is a big room upstairs,’ said Monsieur Roche. ‘Usually it is only opened in the evenings when there are more customers but this is Monsieur Ricard, the proprietor, and he will open it for you especially. There is plenty of room and the food here is excellent and very well priced.’

Monsieur Ricard greeted Mrs Caldicot with a handshake and escorted her and her companions to the stairs leading up to his upstairs dining room.

‘I will send up a waiter in a moment,’ he told them. ‘Make yourselves comfortable.’

Monsieur Roche was absolutely right. The food was excellent, the service fast, efficient and friendly and the prices very reasonable.

‘We would never have found this place by ourselves,’ said Josephine, who, with her husband was sitting at a table with Mrs Caldicot and Mr Twist.

‘Nor would we!’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘How did you meet that wonderful man with the euphonium?’ asked Calvin. ‘It was a euphonium wasn’t it?’

‘Yes, it was a euphonium and how we met him is a long story,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Monsieur Roche, the euphonium player, is the father of Jean-Jacques who is the accordionist. Jean-Jacques is a waiter who was working at our hotel and he took something of a fancy to our Ruth who, conveniently, took quite a shine to him. Things sort of happened from there!’

‘Ruth is your daughter?’

‘No, I’m afraid not,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Nor is she my granddaughter I’m afraid! I would be proud of her if she were, but she works with us. We all live together in what used to be a nursing home, and Ruth helps with the cleaning and the shopping and things like that.’

‘A sort of housekeeper?’

‘Exactly!’ replied Mrs Caldicot. ‘Her official title is ‘Assistant Housekeeper’. Now tell me about you two. All I know is that you’re on a long holiday in Europe!’

‘Until three months ago we owned a publishing company,’ explained Josephine. ‘We published half a dozen local newspapers. But the internet has damaged our sales and our advertising and when we received an offer to buy us out we thought it would be a good time to retire.’

‘The buyers aren’t closing any of the papers so no one is being made redundant,’ said Calvin, for whom this was clearly important. ‘But they’re setting up websites and publishing them in conjunction with digital stuff that to be honest I really don’t understand.’

‘And the film making? Is that a hobby or something more serious?’

‘Oh, that’s just a hobby,’ replied Calvin.

‘Don’t listen to him,’ said Josephine. ‘He’s being over-modest. He’s been making short documentary films for years. It started out as a hobby but for a few years now he’s been selling the films to a local television station. And now the people who’ve bought the newspapers say they want to put some of the films on their websites. It’s quite exciting because they’re a big national company with lots of online viewers.’

‘That’s wonderful!’ said Mrs Caldicot who thought it was.

‘So, unless you object, my little film about your band could be seen by quite a lot of people!’ said Calvin.

‘Oh we don’t object,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘We’d all be thrilled. Perhaps you could send us a copy of your film when it’s finished? Or tell us where we can watch it.’

Calvin promised to send Mrs Caldicot a copy of his film.

And then, to Mrs Caldicot’s utter astonishment, Calvin and Josephine insisted on paying the entire restaurant bill.

‘Oh you can’t,’ protested Mrs Caldicot. ‘It’s far too much!’

‘We absolutely insist,’ said Calvin. ‘You’ve given us the best day of our vacation.’ Calvin patted his camera. ‘And you’ve provided us with some marvellous footage to take back home.’

‘You can use your earnings to pay for a good meal this evening!’ said Josephine.

Mrs Caldicot stood up, banged her spoon on her saucer, and told the rest of the band that Calvin and Josephine had insisted on paying for their meal. There was much cheering and many cries of appreciation. Mr Williams insisted on a chorus of ‘For They Are Jolly Good Fellows’ and Mr Livingstone called for three cheers. Calvin and Josephine both blushed but Mrs Caldicot could tell they were secretly delighted.

Chapter Twenty Four

When Calvin and Josephine had left, Mr Twist counted the money they had taken in the Place des Vosges.

It came to an astonishing 287 euros and 25 centimes. There was also £7.20 in English money and $15 dollars in American money.

‘Does this mean that we won’t be playing music this afternoon?’ asked Mrs Torridge.

There was silence as everyone waited to hear what Mrs Caldicot had to say.

‘I suppose it does,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘We’ve certainly got enough money for our meal this evening.’

‘But what are we going to do instead?’ demanded Mrs Torridge who sounded terribly disappointed. ‘Mr Torridge will be quite devastated if there is to be no more singing.’

‘Yes,’ said Mrs Peterborough. ‘And he won’t be the only one.’

‘What are we going to do instead?’ asked Miss Nightingale plaintively. ‘I like singing our songs,’ she said quietly. She seemed close to tears.

‘I suppose we could go up the Eiffel Tower,’ said Mrs Merivale, with about as much enthusiasm as she might have suggested that they find a dentist and all have a little, light root canal work. ‘They say there’s a good view of the city from up at the top.’

The suggestion was greeted with silence.

‘Would you like to go up the Eiffel Tower?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

Mrs Merivale didn’t have to think about it. ‘Not especially,’ she admitted with a bit of a shrug.

‘We could go on a river boat,’ suggested Mr Merivale. ‘Cruise up and down for an hour or two and, er, look at the river bank.’

This idea was greeted with as much enthusiasm as the suggestion that they ascend the Eiffel Tower had been received.

Suggestions from Mr Twist, Mr Roxdale and Mrs Caldicot were also greeted without much enthusiasm from anyone, including those who had made the suggestions.

No one, it seemed, was terribly excited by the prospect of doing any of the usual touristy things.

Ideas which had filled them with excitement when they had been discussed back home were now regarded as dull and rather boring.

They sat for a while, finishing off the remains of the bottles of wine which Calvin and Josephine had bought to accompany their excellent luncheon. Mr Williams found a slice of baguette which he started nibbling. Everyone stared at the tablecloth because everyone was thinking the same thing but did not like to say it.

Everyone, that is, except Ruth and Jean-Jacques who held hands and looked at each other. They were happy to stay where they were for ever more.

‘Are we sure there’s enough money in the kitty to pay for any of these trips and to pay for tonight’s meal?’ asked Mr Hewitt.

It was the first small step in the direction they all wanted to go.

‘Have we enough money to pay for lunch tomorrow?’ asked Mrs Roberts.

‘It could be raining tomorrow,’ Mr Roxdale pointed out. ‘We won’t be able to earn any money if it’s raining.’

‘Mr Roxdale is right,’ said Mr Williams. ‘If we don’t have enough money to buy a meal tomorrow then we’ll be in a bit of trouble.’

‘What time does our train leave tomorrow?’ asked Mrs Torridge.

‘Seven minutes past five in the evening,’ replied Mrs Caldicot, who had their tickets in her handbag. ‘We have to leave our rooms at the hotel by eleven in the morning. But they said that we can leave our luggage there. The hotel coach will be ready at three thirty to take us to the station. Because of the hour difference, we arrive back in London at half past six.’

‘That’s a long time to go without food if we run out of money,’ Mrs Merivale pointed out. ‘We’ll need money for lunch and something for the train.’

‘A long time without food,’ agreed Mr Merivale who always trusted his wife’s judgements and instincts, especially where food was concerned.

‘And we’ll definitely need some food for the train,’ pointed out Mr Williams. ‘We won’t have Miss Nightingale’s broken biscuit crumbs for the return journey.’

‘They’ve just about all gone,’ said Miss Nightingale glumly. Her broken biscuit crumbs, served straight from the pocket, had been a great success with everyone. No one had minded the bits of fluff that seemed to be an inevitable part of the package.

‘Well, I suppose we could…,’ began Mrs Caldicot. She then stopped, as though still thinking. She was, she realised, being a trifle naughty. She knew exactly what everyone in the room really wanted to do.

There was a pause, heavily pregnant with expectation.

‘Could what?’ asked Mr Livingstone, desperate for her to continue and to turn the rest of the thought into words.

Everyone in the room was looking at Mrs Caldicot and everyone was waiting for her to finish her unspoken thought. Everyone thought they knew what she was going to say. Everyone knew what they wanted her to say. Everyone wanted to say it but didn’t quite have the courage.

‘…I suppose we could play some more music this afternoon,’ finished Mrs Caldicot.

No suggestion could have been better received.

There was a good deal of smiling and cheering and several people (notably Mr Hewitt and Mr Roxdale) banged the table with their spoons.

‘Those two are getting rather rumbustious!’ whispered Mrs Roberts to Mrs Caldicot, nodding in the direction of Mr Hewitt and Mr Roxdale.

‘I’m beginning to think of them as the terrible twins,’ Mrs Caldicot whispered back.

All that remained was to decide where they should play.

And they voted unanimously to return to the Place des Vosges, undoubtedly the scene of their greatest success.

‘We might not be able to find a space,’ warned Jean-Jacques. ‘The Place des Vosges is very popular with buskers and we are a big band. We need a lot of room.’

Mrs Torridge, Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale were again excited to hear themselves described as being part of a ‘band’.

‘Oh, don’t you worry, we’ll find somewhere to play,’ said Mr Livingstone with confidence born of a formidable combination of ignorance and faith.

And they did.

They played for another two hours, and pretty well filled Mr Livingstone’s banjo case twice more. Their performance was, once again, a huge success, though at one point they had a slight scare when a policeman stopped and watched them for a while.

‘Do you think he’s going to arrest us all?’ Mrs Caldicot asked Mrs Roberts.

‘I don’t care,’ said Mrs Roberts with more courage than she would have ever thought she had. ‘We can cope with anything they can throw at us.’ Their success in raising money through the band had done wonders for her self-esteem.

But the policeman didn’t arrest them.

On the contrary, he joined in singing ‘I Do Like to Be Beside the Seaside’, laughed a good deal and clapped heartily when the song finished.

Mr Livingstone did notice, however, that the laughing policeman didn’t throw any coins into the banjo case. Still, as Mr Hewitt pointed out, he didn’t confiscate their earnings or arrest them either.

And then Jean-Jacques said very sadly that he had to go to work.

And everyone else reluctantly admitted that they were tired and would like to go back to the hotel for a wash and brush up before they found a restaurant for their evening meal.

‘Would you like me to telephone the hotel to see if they can send the coach for us?’ Mrs Caldicot asked the band.

‘Certainly not!’ said everyone, speaking as though one unit.

‘We’ll walk back!’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘I can manage,’ said Mrs Torridge. ‘And if I can manage then I suspect that everyone else can too.’

‘It’s quite a long way,’ warned Mrs Caldicot.

‘When I was a girl I once walked from Kendal to Ambleside,’ said Mrs Torridge defiantly. ‘They’re both in the Lake District,’ she added, just in case anyone didn’t know.

‘But I expect your knees were in better condition then,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘Same knees, same hips, same feet,’ said Mrs Torridge firmly. ‘And now I’ve got my walking frame to support me.’

And so they walked back to their hotel. They walked at a leisurely pace, stopping twice for coffee or tea and a chance to rest their feet and legs.

And on their way they bought a new suitcase for Miss Nightingale, whose original case had collapsed and died at St Pancras Station, and two small gifts for Jenkins, who had been left behind.

Chapter Twenty Five

‘Odds bodkins!’ cried Raphael when he saw them. ‘What ho, old beans! May I crave a boon?’

‘Crave away, dear fellow,’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘Damned please to see you, old boy!’

As always, Raphael, resplendent in his colourful uniform, looked desperately pleased with himself. To be honest, he always did look to be comfortably settled towards the top end of self-confident. He was not the sort of fellow to hide his light under a bushel, or anything else for that matter.

But now he seemed especially proud of his new English words. And his new skill seemed to have added to his sense of self-importance.

He touched the peak of his cap but managed to do it in such a way that it made him look as though he were a superior officer acknowledging the presence of a lowly squaddie.

Mr Hewitt couldn’t quite understand how he’d managed it but he respected the talent it doubtless required.

‘Do you need taxis or a coach for this evening? Shall I book a club or restaurant for you?’ He lowered his voice. ‘I have access to very private clubs.’ He winked, in a wink, wink, nudge, nudge sort of way.

‘No thanks, old bean,’ replied Mr Hewitt, speaking for all of them. ‘But your English is coming along very nicely, my dear old thing. Tally ho! All the best. Chin, chin. Cheerio.’

‘Tally how!’ replied Raphael.

‘Cheerio!’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘Without you we would all be up a tree without a paddle.’

‘Cheerio!’ said Raphael. ‘Without you I would be up a tree without a paddle? Yes?’

‘Oh absolutely yes,’ said Mr Hewitt.

Mrs Caldicot who had listened in some horror to all this, hurried indoors. ‘You shouldn’t tease him!’ she said to Mr Roxdale and Mr Hewitt when they entered the hotel.

‘Just helping him with his English!’ said Mr Hewitt, innocently.

Mrs Caldicot couldn’t stop herself from grinning.

An hour or so later the band (for that is now how they thought of themselves) ate dinner at the same restaurant where they’d eaten the previous evening.

‘I can’t remember when I had such fun!’ said Mr Merivale, who was not a man to throw words about carelessly.

And it was unanimously agreed that this was a feeling shared by one and all.

Ruth spent much of the evening sending texts and photos to Denise. She missed Jean-Jacques but he had promised to meet her outside the hotel the following morning and she was, therefore, a very happy girl. She told Denise that Jean-Jacques had promised to write to her when she was back in England. ‘He asked me to be his girlfriend,’ she told her friend.

And an hour and a half after they had eaten, they were all safely tucked up in their beds wherein they slept like logs.

And every face in every bed bore a smile bordering on a grin.

Chapter Twenty Six

The following day, the last of their short holiday in Paris, went by far too quickly. The group hardly seemed to have finished their breakfast and packed their suitcases before they were on the Eurostar train racing back to London.

But there was time for a little more fun.

When their suitcases had been carefully stacked in the small store room which the hotel kept for the very purpose, Mrs Caldicot and the band stood in the hallway while they decided what to do with their final few hours.

'I've always hated the last day of the holidays,' said Mr Hewitt. 'When I was a boy I tried to pretend it wasn't happening. Once when I was a kid and my parents had packed up all our stuff, I ran off and hurried down to the beach so that we couldn't leave the seaside. I was six and I made my last sandcastle and decorated it with all my paper flags. My dad was furious because it took them an hour to find me and we had a long journey to get back home.'

Curiously, he seemed to remember this rather sad story with some affection.

'It feels as though we've been away for months,' said Mr Roxdale.

'Years,' said Mr Hewitt. 'Probably decades…'

'It was thanks to Mr Twist that we all had such a wonderful time!' said Mr Livingstone.

Mr Twist looked embarrassed. 'I feel really bad…' he began.

'No!' said Mr Merivale firmly. 'You mustn't feel bad about what happened. It was heaven sent! Without those confidence tricksters the band wouldn't have existed. Just think of the fun we would have missed.'

'You gave us all an experience we'll never forget,' said Mrs Roberts, who had never before had quite so much fun.

'Three cheers for Mr Twist!' cried Mr Livingstone.

They cheered Mr Twist and everyone meant it.

Mr Twist, blushing with embarrassment, acknowledged the cheers with a wave of his hand.

'We've got 314 euros left,' said Mrs Caldicot. It seemed a huge sum. 'We'll have lunch later, but what does everyone want to do with our last few hours?'

It was an unnecessary question.

It was not quite a rhetorical question (in that an answer really was being invited) but it was the sort of question to which there is only one answer. It was on a par with asking a bunch of children playing on the beach if they would like an ice cream.

And there were plenty of clues around.

Mr Livingstone was holding his flute. Mr Hewitt had his spoons in his right hand. Mr Roxdale had his comb, wrapped in a fresh piece of paper, in the top pocket of his jacket. Mrs Roberts was holding her bongo drums. A slightly tearful Ruth, who was constantly rushing to the door to see if she could see Jean-Jacques (who had promised to be there to say goodbye), was gripping her home-made maracas, those two pea-filled jam jars. Mrs Torridge, Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale were wearing their red, white and blue bobble hats. The rest of the choir (Mr Williams, Mr Twist and the Merivales) could be heard clearing their throats just in case they were needed.

And Mrs Caldicot herself was gripping Mr Livingstone's banjo in its very useful case.

So, the children voted for ice creams and the band decided to hold its final Parisian concert; its last impromptu recital or, as Mr Livingstone put it: 'The farewell appearance of the band's first European tour'.

Chapter Twenty Seven

At the suggestion of Jean-Jacques, who had arrived as promised, they held their last concert in a small public park called the Square du Vert-Galant.

The park is reached from steps leading down from the Pont Neuf, the oldest bridge in existence, and one which connects the Left and Right banks, right in the middle of the city. What happens in the park can easily be seen from the bridge and from the quays on both sides of the river.

They performed the three songs which had already proved so successful for them but they also tried out four other songs which Mr Livingstone had remembered and written out: 'I'm Henry the Eighth', 'Any Old Iron', 'A Little of What You Fancy' and last, but definitely not least, 'I'll Show You Round Paree', a song made famous by the music hall star Vesta Tilley.

And, as they had done every other time they had performed, they delighted the crowds.

It was not the age of the performers, the novelty of their performance or the slightly uncertain nature of the playing of some members of the band which provoked so much interest and aroused such enthusiastic support. It was the passion and the excitement with which they performed.

At the end of their concert, Mrs Caldicot collected the money from the banjo case. She took from the takings the money she knew they would need for their lunch and gave the Merivales some notes and coins to buy food and drink for the train journey. She gave some of the rest to two elderly looking tramps who were sitting in the small park. They would, she knew, both spend it on wine. But, she reasoned, it wasn't her place to tell them how to ruin their lives. When they got back to the hotel, she gave the receptionist a good tip, gave the chef a 20 euro note as a thank you and handed the receptionist some money to share among the other members of the hotel staff.

And while they waited for the coach to arrive to take them to the Gare du Nord, she gave Raphael a modest tip. He hadn't done anything to earn it but she couldn't leave him out.

'Tally ho! The games afeet!' he said, with a convincing smile which showed a dazzling array of expensively capped teeth.

When the coach arrived, it brought with it a fresh party of British tourists. They were school children and their teachers. The children, in their mid-teens, looked excited. Six school-teachers accompanying them looked harassed and apprehensive.

'Odds bodkins!' cried Raphael, as the new visitors descended the coach steps. 'May I crave a boon?'

The teenagers stared at him, confused. The teachers backed away a little.

'I beg your pardon?' said a stout and stern-faced woman in her fifties. Mrs Caldicot thought she bore a startling resemblance to one of the stone statues found on Easter Island. The woman had grey, unkempt hair which looked as if it had been cut with a hedge trimmer and she wore pink framed spectacles which dangled on a chain around her neck. She carried a clipboard and a copy of *The Guardian* newspaper and was clearly the teacher in charge of the expedition.

'May I crave a boon?' repeated Raphael with great confidence.

'What is it? What are you saying? Do you work here?' demanded the school teacher in a tone which had been honed by years of quizzing sulky teenagers. She lifted up her spectacles and perched them on the end of her nose. When she'd done this, she examined him as though he were a laboratory specimen.

'What ho! I am your friendly, English-speaking doorman,' said Raphael unabashed and relentlessly cheerful. 'If you need taxis, restaurants or an introduction to a private club, all you have to do is to ask.' He beamed at her. 'I am your man!' He then winked. It was his way of showing that he was a man of the world and that no requirement was beyond his ability.

'No you're not my man!' snapped the school teacher, whose 'husband' was a 48-year-old, 14 stone, cigar-smoking, female social worker called Cyril.

The always angry school teacher ushered her party into the hotel and turned back to snap: 'Bring the bags in!'

'I do not do the bags!' protested Raphael to her back. But the school teacher either did not hear or she ignored him.

'Toodle pip, Raphael!' said Mr Hewitt, as he followed Mrs Torridge, Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale and climbed up onto the now empty coach.

Mrs Torridge had Mr Torridge's ashes on her lap. She told Mrs Peterborough that he'd had a thoroughly good time and that she was pleased that she'd brought him.

Mrs Caldicot, felt sorry for the doorman, who was standing staring in bewilderment at the school party's several dozen large suitcases which had been abandoned and were strewn about on the pavement. She reached into her handbag and gave him another 20 euros or so in small change.

Raphael grinned at them all and pocketed the additional tip. He hadn't made much money out of Mrs Caldicot's party but he liked them nevertheless. And he realised, to his own surprise, that he would miss them.

Ruth was, of course, the last to climb aboard the coach. She was wearing her jeans, her jumper and her shapeless anorak. The blue dress, together with her memory of being a singer with the band, was now packed away in the small, rather expensive suitcase she had borrowed from Mrs Caldicot's husband. She and Jean-Jacques had cuddled until the last possible moment. As she climbed up the steps of the coach, she and her French beau continued to hold hands for as long as possible. There had been promises to write (emails and texts rather than old-fashioned mail, of course) and vows that they would meet again soon.

And then they were all on the coach, making their journey back to the railway station, back to Eurostar, back to London and back to Real Life.

And they were all, every one of them, filled with imperishable experiences or, as our good friend Dr Roget would doubtless have put it, replete with memorable impressions, packed with never to be forgotten evocations, stuffed with glorious recollections and bursting with immortal reminiscences.

'This trip to Paris has been a real joy,' sighed Mrs Peterborough, her eyes closed as she thought happily of their concert in the Places des Vosges.

'It's been a real joy,' agreed Miss Nightingale with a sigh.

'The most exciting month of my life,' said Mrs Torridge.

'We were only away for three days!' Mrs Caldicot pointed out.

'Were we, dear?' said Mrs Torridge. 'Goodness me. The time seemed to flash by very slowly. I would do it all again in a moment. Can we come back next week?'

'The dark hair changing to grey, that hath won neither laurel nor bay,' said Mr Hewitt.

'What's that?' asked Mr Livingstone.

'Christina Rossetti,' explained Mr Hewitt. 'Until this trip to Paris I had won neither laurel nor bay. But I feel I've come back from France a victor!'

'Hear, hear!' said Mr Livingstone, who honestly thought that he had never had so much fun. He felt good about the fact that his memories of Paris were now predominantly good and heart-warming ones. The sadness and the anger from the War were still there, of course. They would never go away. But they were now accompanied by some very good memories.

Chapter Twenty Eight

The rail journey was uneventful.

There had been huge queues for the customs and border posts at the Gare du Nord but no one had taken much interest in them or their luggage. The French border guards were too busy chatting to one another to take much notice of the travellers. Mrs Caldicot was enormously relieved. She'd been terrified that Mr Torridge might be confiscated and doomed to spend the rest of his afterlife in a French customs shed.

Mrs Caldicot had given the Merivales two handfuls of euros with which to buy sandwiches and drinks for the train. The Merivales had done their food shopping at a small delicatessen near to their hotel ('much cheaper and far better value than at the railway station' said Mrs Merivale who knew about these things) and they had purchased a massive picnic: baguettes filled with ham or cheese, pains au chocolat, croissants, scrumptious French pastries, bottles of water, half bottles of wine, paper napkins and cardboard cups.

They ate their picnic on the train.

As they left Calais, about to travel through the Channel Tunnel, Mr Livingstone suggested they sing 'I Do Like to Be Beside the Seaside' but no one was in the mood.

The only excitement when a mobile telephone made a 'pinging' noise and Ruth squealed with delight as she received her first message from Jean-Jacques. It came, of course, accompanied by a photograph and an electronic kiss.

And then they were back at St Pancras. The adventurers were back on English soil.

'Do you mind if I just pop in here for a moment,' said Mrs Roberts, indicating a branch of W.H.Smith the newsagent, as they passed through St Pancras railway station.

'No, of course not,' said Mrs Caldicot, assuming that Mrs Roberts wanted to buy something to read on the train. She and the rest of the party waited outside.

Two minutes later Mrs Roberts appeared, gleefully holding up a book of stamps.

'Now I can send off my postcards!' she cried with delight. She stuck the stamps on the postcards, found a post box and posted them.

The rest of the journey went without either alarums or excursions.

A small coach was booked and waiting for them at their local station.

And Mrs Caldicot was thrilled to see that Jenkins was patiently standing beside the coach to welcome them all back home.

Chapter Twenty Nine

‘I missed you,’ said Mrs Caldicot when they were back at Caldicot House. ‘I missed you a lot.’

‘I missed you too,’ said Jenkins.

‘Did you like your present?’ she asked.

Everyone had clubbed together and bought Jenkins a pipe. Mr Livingstone had spotted it in a shop window as they’d walked back from the Place des Vosges.

‘It was a real surprise,’ said Jenkins tactfully. ‘Do they know that I don’t smoke?’

‘Yes, they do,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘That’s why they didn’t buy you any tobacco.’

‘That was a good idea.’

‘I thought so,’ agreed Mrs Caldicot. ‘Mr Livingstone said he thought you might like to grip the pipe manfully between your teeth when giving one of your lectures.’

‘I could certainly try that,’ said Jenkins. He put the pipe between his teeth. It was a classic straight stemmed pipe with a large bowl and it looked very smart.

‘You remind me of Monsieur Hulot,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

Jenkins nodded his approval. He said something but with the pipe in his mouth it was difficult to hear precisely what he said.

‘What was that?’ laughed Mrs Caldicot. ‘I couldn’t tell what you said. It sounded like one of my texts.’

Jenkins took the pipe out of his mouth and struck a Tatiesque pose. ‘I said I like Jacques Tati. He is one of my favourite film makers.’

‘I bought you a small present too,’ said Mrs Caldicot. She reached into her handbag and brought out a small pocket knife. ‘It’s a Laguiole knife,’ she said. ‘The man in the shop said they are the very best French penknives. He said hunters buy them for cleaning out their pipes and for gutting wild pigs.’

‘They are the very best knives,’ said Jenkins, putting down the pipe and accepting the knife. He examined it carefully, opening the single blade and gently caressing the wooden handle. ‘This is rather beautiful,’ he said. ‘Thank you. I shall definitely use it for cleaning out my new pipe and if I find myself in a position where I am required to gut a wild pig I shall be prepared and able.’

They cuddled and cooed for a while.

‘I haven’t got a present for you,’ he said.

‘You haven’t been away.’

‘I did do that lecture so I was away for the day.’

‘So you did. How did it go?’

‘It went very well thank you. But there weren’t any shops there. One of those reality television celebrities was selling his autobiography and a television chef was promoting his book on 101 things to do with leftovers but I didn’t think you would find either of the books particularly attractive as gifts. I could have probably negotiated a good discount but even so…and, besides, as soon as I’d given my lecture and earned my bread and butter I wanted to get back home as quickly as I could.’

‘To feed Kitty.’

‘Indeed. To feed Kitty,’ agreed Jenkins. ‘I may be wrong but it is my impression that she does not like being left alone for too long. When I got back she sulked for almost exactly an hour. She wouldn’t come near me. Then, when the hour of sulking was over, she wouldn’t leave my side. She sat on my lap as I worked on the first page of my novel. It’s going quite well, by the way. I think I should be ready to move onto page two by next Wednesday. So, how was Paris? Did you have a wonderful time? What did you do? Did you do all the usual things?’

‘Well, perhaps not all the usual things.’

‘You went up the Eiffel Tower, of course?’

‘Not exactly up it, no.’

‘But you saw it?’

‘From a distance. It’s hard to miss.’

‘Just from a distance?’

‘We were so busy. We meant to go and take a closer look but there just wasn’t time. There was so much to do.’

‘You went into the Louvre, of course? You saw the Mona Lisa? The Venus de Milo?’

‘Ah, no. We didn’t actually see either of those.’

‘You didn’t see the Mona Lisa?’

‘We didn’t go into the Louvre. But we went quite near to it several times.’

‘But you must have visited the church of Sacre Coeur and wandered round the Place du Tetre where all the artists gather?’

‘No, what with one thing and another we never did get right up into Montmartre.’ Mrs Caldicot paused for a moment. ‘But I’m pretty sure that one of the postcards which Mrs Roberts sent included a picture of Sacre Coeur. That’s the white one on top of a hill isn’t it? The one that looks like a wedding cake?’

‘I believe it is.’

‘It looked very nice on Mrs Roberts’ postcard. She sent you a postcard but you won’t get it for a day or two.’

‘Is the French postal service still a little hit or miss?’

‘I don’t know. She didn’t post her cards until we got back to London.’

‘She brought the cards back with her before posting them?’

‘Yes. She couldn’t find a shop selling stamps.’

‘Ah,’ said Jenkins, nodding. ‘Did you manage to see the cathedral of Notre Dame?’

‘No, I’m afraid we didn’t get to Notre Dame. That’s the one where the Hunchback wandered about on the roof, isn’t it?’

‘I believe so. It’s the Gothic one on the island in the middle of the Seine. Took them around two centuries to build, I seem to remember reading when I first visited. It has graceful flying buttresses and rather fine Rose windows widely regarded as awe-inspiring examples of stained glass craftsmanship.’

‘We missed that one, unfortunately. We’ll get to it another time perhaps.’

‘But I bet you all walked up and down the Champs-Élysées didn’t you? You couldn’t have missed the Champs-Élysées! Did someone buy a beret, a key ring with a small model of the Eiffel Tower attached to it and a black T-shirt with the word ‘Paris’ printed on the front in gold lettering?’

‘Well, not really,’ replied Mrs Caldicot. ‘We didn’t get as far as the Champs-Élysées, though we meant to. Oh, wait a moment, Mr Twist did buy a beret. A navy one. It was cloudy on the morning we went to the Place des Vosges and he said his head was cold. But the cloud dispersed and it was a lovely day. He put the beret in his pocket and I didn’t see it again.’

‘Ah, so you got to the Place des Vosges. Did you go into the Victor Hugo museum?’

‘I’m afraid we missed that,’ admitted Mrs Caldicot.

Jenkins looked at her, slightly puzzled. ‘But you surely sat at a pavement café on the left bank and had deep, philosophical discussions about the meaning of life?’

Mrs Caldicot shook her head.

She realised with horror that they hadn’t done the touristy things. Not one of them. ‘To be honest with you, we didn’t actually do any of the usual stuff,’ she admitted, with some embarrassment. ‘The time seemed to go by in a flash.’

Mr Jenkins was thoroughly puzzled. ‘Why don’t I take you out to dinner, and you can tell me all about it.’

‘That would be lovely.’

‘We could go to that Greek place you liked? Or try the Thai restaurant on Holdborrow Road. Or we could go to the Imperial hotel on the ring road. Or there’s a new French restaurant opened just a couple of miles away. Maybe you would like to go there. They say it’s very authentic. A review in the local paper said they had genuine French waiters and excellent French food.’

Mrs Caldicot thought carefully about these options then she sighed and tucked her arm into her husband’s.

‘Do you know what I really feel like?’

Chapter Thirty

They bought two portions of cod and chips, both with lots of vinegar and plenty of salt and Jenkins had mushy peas as a side dish. The man behind the counter said they were lucky because they didn't often receive any cod from their wholesaler.

They ate their meal al fresco, or en plein air as artists like to say when they are working outdoors, sitting on a bench in the park. The restaurant had provided them with little, wooden forks but although Jenkins used his for his mushy peas, they ate their chips and their fish with their fingers.

As they ate, Mrs Caldicot told Jenkins everything that had happened on their trip to Paris.

'It is my experience that people under the age of 60 look at a bunch of old folk and all they see is a bunch of old people,' said Mrs Caldicot when she'd finished telling her husband of their adventures. 'Those in their 40s and 50s are the most bigoted and prejudiced against the elderly. There is no respect and no understanding. People don't realise or care that older people have done things, seen things, experienced things and still have much to offer. And they have such resilience and strength. When I first met Mr Livingstone, Mrs Torridge and the others in the Twilight Years Rest Home, I saw a bunch of people who just seemed to sit around most of the day. They were drugged and mostly they just sat where they were put.'

'You rescued them,' Mr Jenkins reminded her.

They both concentrated on their cod and chips for a while. Mrs Caldicot found a collection of crunchy, battered bits hidden in a fold of her paper wrapping. She pounced on them.

'Not really,' said Mrs Caldicot, who had been thinking. 'Once they'd stopped taking their damned pills, they mostly rescued themselves.'

'Oh, I disagree,' said Mr Jenkins. 'I disagree very much. You gave them a loving environment and it's that environment which has enabled them to blossom.'

'While we were away, I discovered what a remarkable bunch they are,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'They've all done astonishing things with their lives. I feel quite ordinary and rather ashamed of myself. I spent most of my previous life ironing socks and underpants for Mr Caldicot.'

'Socks? You ironed socks?'

'Oh yes, he insisted on having his socks and underpants ironed. He even insisted that I iron his shoelaces. He always had those flat laces and he said they got creased after they'd been tied.'

Mr Jenkins screwed up the wrapping paper in which his chips had resided and tossed the resulting ball of paper into a waste bin beside their bench.

He sat in silence for a moment and then took his wife's hand. 'You've done the most astonishing thing,' he told her. 'You may not have done too much when you were ironing shoelaces but you have become a trusted, respected leader for a group of people who, above all else, needed a guide,' he reminded her. 'And without your leadership, your guidance and your encouragement, they would all still be sitting in Mr Hawksmoor's rest home staring into space.'

He took Mrs Caldicot's empty wrapper and screwed that into another ball. This time his shot bounced off the rim of the waste basket and ended up on the grass.

'There's no age limit on blossoming or acquiring greatness,' he said. He stood, picked up the screwed up paper and dropped it into the bin.

'I didn't lead them,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Not really. They just sort of followed me.'

'You were an inspiration to them,' insisted her husband. 'That's what real leadership is. And remember, your story has inspired millions of older people to realise that they don't have to accept being bullied and patronised and drugged. You helped all those people understand that just because they are old they don't have to give up, lie down and wait for the undertaker to come and take them away.'

'But it wasn't me who led the way in Paris. It was Mr Twist who had the idea of forming a band. And Mr Livingstone who showed us what to do.'

'But remember that until you took him away from that awful bloody rest home, Mr Livingstone spent most of his days sleeping. When he did wake up, he played a bloody silly cardboard keyboard because that bastard Hawksmoor kept the piano locked up. And until you gave him a home, Mr Twist was living in a cardboard box on a traffic island. You gave all those people renewed hope and opportunity.'

They sat in silence for a while.

'We did have great fun,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I wish you'd seen Mrs Roberts playing the bongo drums. And Mr Hewitt was amazing with his soup spoons!' She laughed as she remembered their concert in the Place des Vosges.

'I wish I'd been there to see it,' said Jenkins.

But he knew, and he knew that his wife knew, that if he had been with them in Paris there would have probably been no band. He would have found a way to obtain some money to replace that which had been lost. He would have made a phone call and money would have been sent to a nearby bank.

They both knew that his not being able to go with them had been curiously serendipitous.

'Oo, I nearly forgot! You will be able to see us in action,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Calvin and Josephine, the two Americans, said they'd send over a copy of Calvin's film when he's edited it. He took a huge amount of film. Josephine told me he had probably shot enough to make a TV documentary!'

'I look forward to seeing that very much,' said Jenkins. 'You did great things together. Do you think the band will play again?'

'Oh yes,' said Mrs Caldicot with a laugh. 'No one wanted to play or sing on the train but I have no doubt that the band will be back. We were all feeling a little sad, you know. And I think we'd had such a good time in Paris that we were all a bit frightened that things might fall flat if we tried to resurrect the band on the train.'

'It was too soon, perhaps?'

'Exactly. But I have no doubt that the band will be back! Mr Twist was heart-broken when he lost our money but it must have been the most serendipitous financial loss in history! Is that the word I want: serendipitous?'

'It certainly is,' said Jenkins.

They sat for a while in comfortable silence.

Two pigeons, attracted by small pieces of food on the floor, came close to their feet. One of the pigeons, braver than the other, attacked half a chip; pecking it, worrying it, shaking it to bits. A huge crow landed on the side of the rubbish basket and dragged out one of the wrappers. Small bits of food fell out. The crow pounced on them.

'You and I will go to Paris soon,' promised Jenkins. 'Just the two of us. We'll have a romantic weekend with a boat ride on the Seine, dinner in the restaurant on the Eiffel Tower, shopping on the Champs-Élysées.'

'I'd like that very much. It sounds wonderful!' murmured Mrs Caldicot.

'But we will do no gambling,' insisted Jenkins. 'We will walk past card sharps without a second look. And there will be no music, I'm afraid. I can't sing or play any musical instruments. I can't even whistle!'

'Definitely no gambling!' agreed Mrs Caldicot without even a moment's hesitation. 'But do you not think I should take Mr Livingstone's banjo – just in case we need to make a little money?'

'We will take spare travellers cheques hidden in my shoe. We will not be taking a banjo. There will be no bongo drums, no spoons, no combs with greaseproof paper folded round them and definitely, quite definitely, no jam jars filled with peas.'

'OK.'

They enjoyed more silence. A squirrel ran across the grass in front of them. It was a beautiful, calm evening

'Would you like coffee?' suggested Mr Jenkins.

'That would be marvellous.'

'There's a café still open about a quarter of a mile down the road.'

'Let's go home for coffee.'

They stood.

Jenkins picked up the wrapper which the crow had pulled out of the rubbish bin. He allowed what bits of food remained to fall onto the grass. He then screwed it up again and stuffed it back into the bin. He wiped his fingers on a tissue and added the tissue to the bin.

'What's your next adventure going to be?' he asked.

'Oh good heavens, I don't want any more adventures!' said Mrs Caldicot with a laugh. 'I'm strictly a home bird now.'

Jenkins smiled but said nothing. He knew his wife very well and he knew that the excitement of the trip to Paris had thrilled her. Given a month or two at home she would, he thought, be yearning for a new challenge; a new adventure.

He took Mrs Caldicot by the hand. 'I do love you,' he told her. 'You're a wonder!'

'Don't be an old silly,' said Mrs Caldicot, squeezing his fingers because she loved it when he said nice things to her.

'I'm the luckiest girl in the world,' she thought to herself.

And they went home hand in hand to the sound of Mrs Caldicot quietly singing, 'I Do Like to Be Beside the Seaside'.

Notes from the author:
If you have enjoyed this book, I would be enormously grateful if you give the book a good rating on Amazon. A good review (however short) really does make a huge difference.

God willing, Mrs Caldicot will be back.

Vernon Coleman

Mrs Caldicot's Oyster Parade
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This is the third novel about Mrs Caldicot. The first two are *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War* and *Mrs Caldicot's Knickerbocker Glory*.

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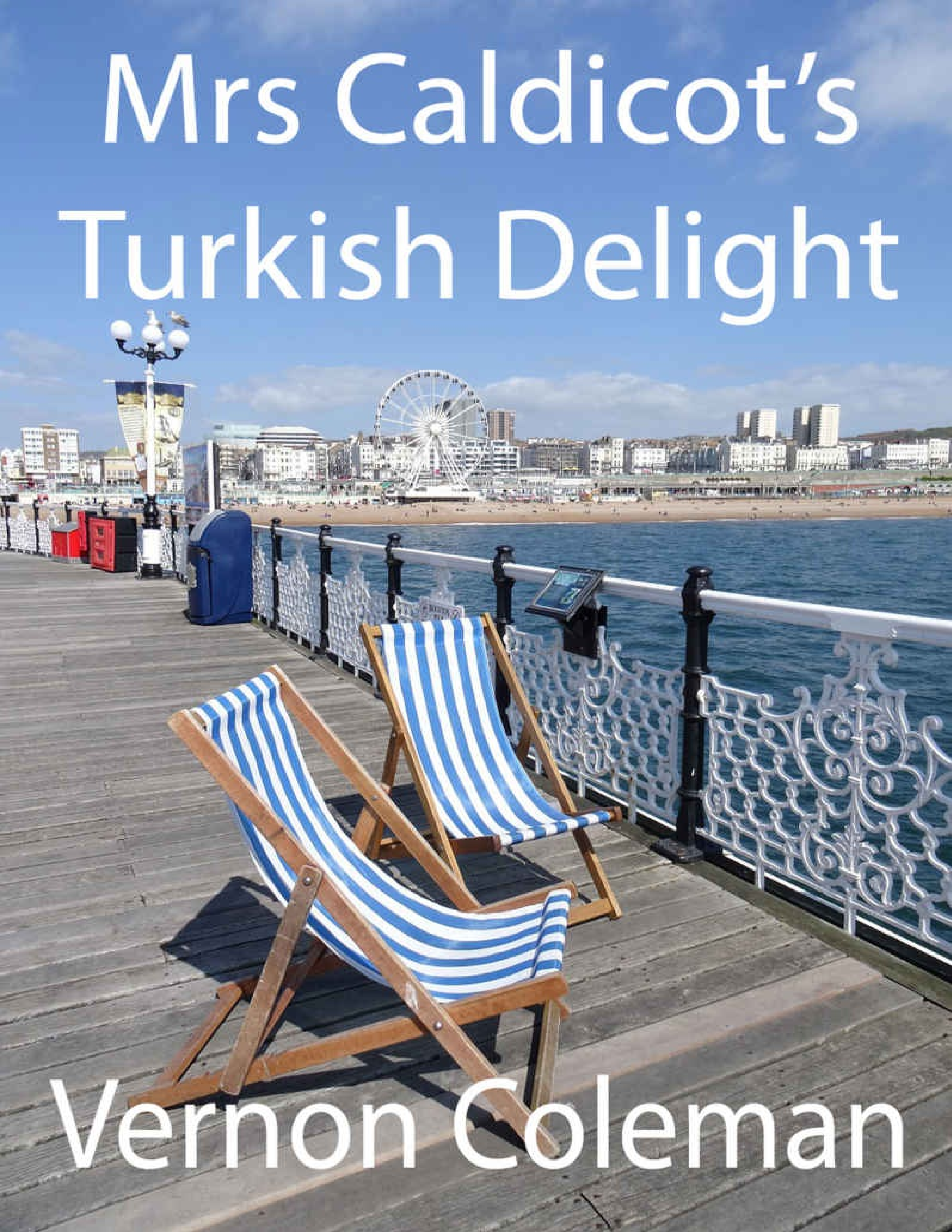

Mrs Caldicot's Turkish Delight

Vernon Coleman

Mrs Caldicot’s Turkish Delight

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Dedication

To Antoinette: Yours for as long as God spares me, and for an eternity thereafter.

Note from Vernon Coleman:
This is the fourth novel about Mrs Caldicot. The first three are *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War*, *Mrs Caldicot's Knickerbocker Glory* and *Mrs Caldicot's Oyster Parade*. For a full list of the books by Vernon Coleman which are currently available please see his author page on Amazon or visit www.vernoncoleman.com.

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Chapter One

It is often said that things tend to happen in threes.

And thus it was for Mrs Caldicot and the residents who had, with her as their guide and leader, escaped the dull tyranny of the Twilight Years Rest Home.

All three things happened at more or less the same time; enlivening what would have otherwise been a rather dull, spring morning.

The first thing that happened was that Mrs Caldicot received a formal letter informing her that the home they all shared, the former Twilight Years Rest Home, was to be compulsorily purchased by a Government quango.

The Government wanted the house because it was planning to use the best part of a £100 billion worth of taxpayers' money to build a multi-billion pound high-speed railway line connecting London and Tidbury Halt.

'Why are they building a superfast line to a station I've never heard of?' a curious Mrs Caldicot asked Jenkins, her much loved husband. 'Do you know anything about it?'

Mrs Caldicot's surprise was entirely justified. It did seem odd that a previously little used railway station and, moreover, one settled in an infrequently visited part of the country, should have been chosen, almost at random so it seemed to outside observers, to be the recipient of so much unexpected largesse. The surprise was enhanced by the fact that it was reliably estimated, by people who make a study of such things, that the new railway line, suitable for high-speed trains, would cut no more than 15 minutes off the journey time between London and Tidbury Halt.

'Tidbury Halt is a very old station,' explained Jenkins. 'Back in 1963, it narrowly escaped the axe when an indefatigable but sadly unromantic Government employee named Dr Beeching decided to tear up any stretch of line that didn't make a profit and to sell off any railway station that didn't earn its keep.'

Although he was now retired, Jenkins had been a Fleet Street editor and he understood how things worked in Britain.

'A lot of people have wondered why such a small and apparently insignificant railway station has been selected for such special treatment, and why a country which is in so much debt is spending such a huge amount of money on such a curious gesture,' continued Jenkins. 'Cutting 15 minutes off a railway journey isn't a huge improvement – especially now that trains on the existing line are equipped with Wi-Fi. Businessmen who feel the need to travel to Tidbury Halt can continue their money making endeavours while sitting on the train.'

Mrs Caldicot cocked her head to one side and looked at her husband without saying anything for a moment. 'But you know something don't you?'

'Well, I've heard the rumour,' admitted Jenkins. 'It concerns the Government and it may be scurrilous.'

'That's all the more reason to share it with me,' insisted Mrs Caldicot. 'Generally speaking, I'm not one who believes in sharing gossip or rumour. But politicians are fair game.'

'Well, it's been repeatedly denied that this apparently quixotic endeavour has anything whatsoever to do with the fact that two senior ministers and a Permanent Under-Secretary of State have country homes very close to Tidbury Halt,' said Jenkins. 'In addition, I have heard it denied, often and loudly, that they have for some time been exasperated by the more or less permanent Friday night queues on the motorway. The word from Whitehall is that it was deemed politically more acceptable, though probably rather more expensive, to do something to improve the railway line rather than to try to widen the motorway connecting London with the village of Tidbury.'

'So the Government is going to buy our house so that they can knock it down, and they want to knock it down so that they can lay down some very expensive railway lines upon which they can run some very fast and extremely expensive trains. And they want to do all that so that two ministers and a civil servant can save fifteen minutes when they scurry off to their country cottages for the weekend?'

'I'm afraid so,' admitted Jenkins. 'Though, I must admit that given the length of time the new line is expected to take to build, the chances are that the three of them will all be retired long before the work is finished.'

Despite the unfairness of the decision to buy her perfectly serviceable house simply in order to knock it down, Mrs Caldicot was surprisingly unconcerned by this apparently disturbing communication from the Government.

She liked the old house, which had that certain style associated with almost all older buildings, and she had long ago got over the unhappy memories it had once held when it had been known as The Twilight Years Rest Home, and managed by the ruthlessly efficient and penny-pinching Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. She was well aware that the house had been built with much better materials, and far more thought, than most modern homes which seemed to have been designed by bureaucrats obsessed more with the need to satisfy unhelpful and largely pointless regulations than to build habitable homes. Indeed, the newly built homes which she had seen had been so shoddy that she thought it would be a miracle if they lasted 20 years before they fell down.

But Mrs Caldicot had long ago accepted that she, like the rest of us who are without power and authority, must live in a world which is, sadly but unavoidably, far more corrupt, oppressive and tyrannical than we might like to think it ought to be. She was old enough to have diluted her idealism with a good dollop of pragmatism.

More importantly perhaps, and certainly more personally, she was not as upset at being forced out of her home as one might have expected since she was rather well aware that the building, an old one, was now in desperate need of a considerable amount of restoration. The central heating boiler had acquired the temperamental idiosyncrasies common among all boilers of a certain age, and the cast iron radiators and pipes, which had been installed in the year when King Edward VII had been thrilled to find his face on every one of the nation's postage stamps, were vast, prone to leak and predisposed to a good deal of disturbing gurgling, most of which seemed to take place in the early hours of the morning. The electrical wiring, last checked in the 1950s, was now also beginning to show its age. It should have been replaced when the house had been made into an officially approved nursing home but the ultimate owners, a large and powerful property company, had not found it difficult to sidestep that particular onerous financial responsibility. The requirements of the local Fire Officer had been quietly shelved at approximately the same time that the Fire Officer's pleasant suburban home had acquired a rather fine new conservatory at a surprisingly reasonable price. The plumbing, like the central heating system, had been installed in Edwardian times, and although the lead pipes were sound in themselves, the junctions and tanks which helped to manage the flow of water around the house were of an age that always resulted in much shaking of heads and sucking in of air when plumbers were called.

And then there was the roof.

Mrs Caldicot preferred not to think about the roof or the dry rot which Jenkins had found growing in the loft. She did not mind the bats, for they generally kept themselves to themselves and were by no means uncongenial tenants, but it is never easy to know that one is sharing one's loft space with dry rot spores, hyphae, mycelia and fruiting bodies.

All of this meant that Mrs Caldicot was not quite as horrified as one might have expected her to be when she received the official letter, sent by registered post so that its receipt could not be denied, informing her that the Government intended to purchase her house.

The coldly written letter, which was addressed to Mrs Caldicot solely, because only her name was on the ownership papers, made it abundantly clear that she had just one month to vacate the property, that she was entitled to appeal (though it was made pretty clear that this would be a waste of time since she would be appealing to the Government against a decision made by the Government) and that she would receive the allocated sum of compensation in six months' time.

There was no indication in the letter of just how Mrs Caldicot and her companions were expected to find accommodation in the interim period, the five months between having her home knocked down and the arrival of the compensation cheque. This was clearly not a problem which the Government felt it needed to address.

Mrs Caldicot's one relief was that the sum offered in compensation, though naturally on the mean side of parsimonious, was enough to pay off the mortgage and satisfy the bank, which was the ultimate owner of nine tenths of the central heating system, the electrical wiring, the roof, the dry rot and the bats.

The second of the three things which had happened that morning, not in itself by any stretch of the imagination a bad thing but certainly one worthy of inclusion in our list of three significant events, was that Jenkins, Mrs Caldicot's husband, had received an invitation to travel to the United States and to spend three weeks giving a series of lectures to media students at Yale University.

Although now retired from his career as an editor of *The Sunday Globe* newspaper, Jenkins had acquired something of a reputation as a lecturer and writer on the principles and practices of journalism. His two books, *The Role of the Editor in Defending the Truth Against Manipulation by Lobbyists and Politicians* and *The Slow and Silent Death of Free Speech and Democracy* were hardly bestsellers but they were considered required reading for media students on both sides of the Atlantic.

Jenkins had spent several years working on a novel but he was beginning to feel that the book he was writing was not the book he really wanted to write or, indeed, one that many people would want to read. It was, he feared, the sort of book that might win laudatory reviews in *The Guardian*, and maybe collect a literary prize or two, but would never win the hearts of any readers. Despite the fact that he thought that a few weeks away from his novel might prove beneficial, Jenkins's first reaction had been to say 'Thank You but No' to the invitation. He really didn't want to travel to foreign parts without Mrs Caldicot by his side, and he knew that she would not want to go anywhere without her residents. Even if they could afford it, he could hardly drag Miss Nightingale, Mrs Peterborough, Mr Livingstone, Mr Hewitt et al to Yale University for three weeks!

But Mrs Caldicot's reaction was quite different.

'What will you do?' asked Jenkins, when Mrs Caldicot had insisted that he should accept the invitation.

‘I’ll start looking for somewhere for us to live!’ replied Mrs Caldicot. ‘The Government has given very little notice so we will have to get a move on.’

‘They should pay far more in compensation!’

‘I agree! But the Government’s valuer doesn’t seem to think the house is worth very much. And since he hasn’t been inside the house he doesn’t know about the problems we’ve been having with the heating, the plumbing, the electrics, the roof or the dry rot. I’m worried that if he’d looked harder he might have thought his compensation offer a little on the high side. And maybe he thinks it isn’t worth much because he knows it’s about to have a new railway line built through the middle of it!’

Mrs Caldicot was not averse to fighting when it mattered, but in this instance she felt that fighting would take a great deal of effort and eventually prove to be disappointingly unproductive. The Government makes a difficult opponent since it has most of the money and, in the final event, the right to send in armed men and tanks if it feels peeved, or suspects that it is being thwarted or provoked.

And then there was the third thing.

When there have been two big things, there is nearly always a third big thing.

Mrs Caldicot was well aware that there is no good, scientific reason for this. But she also knew that it was an inescapable fact of life.

And in this case the third thing was, like the first two things, brought by the postman.

The third thing came in a large brown envelope and had been posted by ‘special delivery’. As a result of this designation it had to be signed for by Mr Livingstone, who was the addressee.

Mr Livingstone did not receive very much mail and he had never before received a letter that had to be signed for, although he had once received a postcard from a friend in New Zealand who had mistakenly put on the wrong sort of stamp. On that occasion, the postman had rung the doorbell and demanded that Mr Livingstone hand over £1 in excess postage. Mr Livingstone had read the card (not difficult since there were only seven words: ‘Arrived safely, having great time, best, Dick’) and had decided that ownership of the card was not worth £1. He had, therefore, said ‘no thank you’ to the postman and the card had duly been taken back to the Post Office to start its long and rather pointless journey back to New Zealand.

That, however, had been some years earlier.

Mr Livingstone was not a man who was greatly troubled by the mails. Occasional letters about his pension were pretty much the extent of his correspondence.

So once the big, brown envelope had been duly signed for and handed over, Mr Livingstone put it on the table and looked at it for a while. He did not expect it to contain good news. His had not, to date, been a life blessed by exceptional good fortune. He did not regard himself as one of those people for whom life always runs smoothly. In shops, the assistants he approached always suddenly found that they had something more important to do than attend to him. In banks and at the Post Office, the ‘Position Closed’ sign would go up the moment he approached. And if, when walking on a pavement, he came face to face with another pedestrian, he was always the one who had to step off into the gutter.

Everyone else in the room gathered round and looked at the packet too.

Even Mrs Peterborough came to have a look.

She had been watching a television programme of which she was extremely fond and the fact that she had dragged herself away to stare at Mr Livingstone’s package was quite a tribute. She liked ‘The Shopping Channel’ because it was there whenever you turned on the television; there was a reliable permanence about it which she found strangely comforting. Even in the middle of the night it was there, just the same as it was in the middle of the day. It was, she suspected, even there on Christmas Day. Most of all, however, Mrs Peterborough liked ‘The Shopping Channel’ because the programmes were never interrupted with advertisements or public service announcements.

‘What do you think it is?’ asked Mr Hewitt, nodding towards the mystery package.

They all knew that Mrs Caldicot had received a letter telling her that the Government was going to buy their home. They really didn’t want any more bad news.

‘I’ve no idea,’ replied Mr Livingstone who had decided that he really wished the packet would disappear.

‘Aren’t you going to open it?’ asked Mrs Peterborough, whose fingers were itching to tear through the packaging. Mrs Peterborough had always found parcels, packets and envelopes irresistible.

‘Later, perhaps,’ said Mr Livingstone, whose natural levels of curiosity had long since abated and had, indeed, shrunk at approximately the same rate that his natural aversion to surprises of any kind had grown. ‘Let’s have a cup of tea, first.’

Even Mrs Peterborough could find nothing to object to about this.

And so the kettle was boiled, the teapot prepared and eventually, some ten minutes later, they all sat down in the living room, added milk and sugar to their cups, as required, and stared again at Mr Livingstone’s packet.

‘I think it’s time to open it now,’ said Mr Livingstone eventually.

There was a communal sigh of relief at this for the other members of the household did not have Mr Livingstone’s apparently unlimited reserves of patience, his willingness to postpone the inevitable or his highly developed lack of curiosity.

But even then the waiting was not over.

First, Mr Livingstone needed to find a knife with which to open the envelope. And then he decided that the paper knife which had been produced was nowhere near sharp enough for the task. A second knife had to be fetched from the kitchen. And then Mr Livingstone suddenly remembered that he had in his pocket a small, silver penknife; a treasure which he had carried with him for most of his life.

And with the aid of the penknife the envelope was finally breached and the contents duly withdrawn and revealed.

‘What does it say?’ demanded Mrs Peterborough, who could hardly contain herself with the excitement of it all. She could not have been more on edge if the packet had been addressed to her.

‘It appears to be from a firm of solicitors,’ said Mr Livingstone.

There was widespread gloom at this announcement.

No one could remember ever receiving any sort of communication from a solicitor which had brought good news. To the residents of the former Twilight Years Rest Home, solicitors had always been the harbingers of doom; the senders of writs and threats and communications which were without prejudice and which demanded action by the morning of the 12th inst at the very latest, if terrible, unimaginable consequences were to be avoided.

But in this case the gloom was soon dispelled.

‘I appear to have inherited a pier,’ announced Mr Livingstone, after he had hurriedly scanned the documents he had been sent.

And if he had just announced that he had been invited to become an astronaut or to ride the favourite in the Grand National there could have scarcely been more surprise among the assembled company.

Chapter Two

'You've been left a what?' asked Mrs Merivale, who hadn't had her ears syringed for nine months and wasn't quite sure that she'd heard properly.

Quietly and confidentially, she rather thought she'd heard that Mr Livingstone had said that someone had left him a pear but that didn't seem very likely and she didn't mention this suspicion. Why, she reasoned to herself silently, would anyone go to all the trouble of involving solicitors and writing out a will and putting in Mr Livingstone's name as a beneficiary just to leave him a pear? Still, she thought, people did do such strange things that you could never really rule anything out these days.

'A pier,' repeated Mr Livingstone.

'Do you mean you're going to be a Lord?' said Mrs Merivale, pleased that she hadn't said anything about the pear. She thought that being a peer was definitely a rather good thing. She didn't in the slightest bit mind having a friend who was entitled to dress up in ermine and decorate his notepaper with a tastefully embossed little coronet.

'No, no,' said Mr Livingstone. 'I've been left a pier. One of those long thin things they have at the seaside. One of those things that enables you to leave the country without going to the trouble of going abroad.'

'Ah,' said Mrs Merivale, understanding at last, feeling a little foolish but now even more relieved that she hadn't aired her thoughts about pears and peers. 'Well, why didn't you say so?'

'Is your pier by the sea?' asked Miss Nightingale.

'It will be very nice if it is,' said Mrs Peterborough, who liked the seaside very much indeed and who was the sort of brave person who would take off her shoes and stockings, tuck up her frock and go for a paddle even if the temperature were close to freezing and the sky full of grey clouds. Paddling and eating whelks were, she believed, things you had to do when you were at the seaside, whether you felt like it not.

Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough were both delighted when they were assured that, although no one was terribly sure precisely where Mr Livingstone's pier was situated, the chances were high that it was somewhere on the English coast and, therefore, almost certainly near the sea.

'That's where they usually put them,' said Mrs Torridge, speaking firmly and knowledgeably. 'They put them beside the seaside because that's where the seagulls always congregate.'

'Why's that?' asked Mr Merivale, who was, as usual, sitting next to his wife.

'I don't think I know,' admitted Mrs Torridge. 'I suppose they like the sea. That would be why they're called seagulls. Piers always have seagulls. Seagulls, candyfloss, kiss-me-quick hats and those lovely, soft ice creams served in cones.'

'I went fishing on a pier when I was seven,' said Mr Merivale. 'I can't remember where the pier was but it had dodgem cars at the end. I spent all day sitting on the pier with my legs dangling over the edge and when we went back to the boarding house for our tea, my shoulders were so badly burnt that I couldn't put my shirt on. The landlady wouldn't let me into the dining room without a shirt so I had to eat my dinner in our bedroom. She said that if she made an exception for me no one knew where it would end. I remember she made a speech about standards and my mother got very upset. She wanted to leave and find somewhere else but my father said we couldn't leave because we'd paid for the week in advance.'

'Did you catch any fish?' asked Mrs Torridge.

'No. I didn't. Actually, I don't remember ever seeing anyone catch any fish. To be frank, I didn't really take much interest in the fishing. I just liked sitting on the pier with my legs dangling down over the edge. It felt very daring. At one point, a chap pointed out that the end of my line was lying on the mud. The tide had gone out. I don't suppose that would have helped much with the fishing. I think the pier was maybe at Weston-super-Mare. The tide there goes out for miles.' He stopped for a moment, clearly thinking. 'Where do you think the sea goes when the tide goes out?'

'Maybe it comes in somewhere else,' suggested Mrs Peterborough.

'On the piers which I remember they always had a kiosk where you could buy little windmills which whizzed round and round in the breeze. Or if you blew on them,' said Mr Williams. 'I liked those very much.'

'And Turkish Delight in wooden boxes, and peppermint rock shaped like pebbles, and big shells which you could take home to use as an ashtray, and boxes of fudge with a photograph of the pier on the front,' added Mr Twist.

Mrs Caldicot closed her eyes and smiled. 'I liked the Turkish Delight the best. You opened the little, wooden box and there was a layer of greaseproof paper. You lifted up the paper and the cubes of Turkish Delight lay there in rows, all covered in icing sugar. There were always little piles of icing sugar in the bottom of the box and when you'd eaten the Turkish Delight you could wet your finger and dip it in the sugar.'

Some people, notably cynical millennials, the sort who are full to the brim with so many prejudices and so much narrow mindedness that there is no room for any imagination, do not believe that things were ever as they are now said to have once been, and that nothing could have ever been better than it is now. But Mrs Caldicot and her friends knew that what they remembered was nothing more nor less than the truth; for it was their history and it was their world before the Great God of Progress destroyed the past and invented the future.

'Who the devil has left you a pier?' Mr Hewitt asked his good friend Mr Livingstone. Mr Hewitt was having one of those rare days when his practical nature overwhelmed the side of him which leaned towards the fanciful.

'I appear to have had an Uncle Bertram,' said Mr Livingstone. 'I don't remember having had an Uncle Bertram but a firm of solicitors called Standfast, Angel and Barrowclough seem convinced that I did and they don't appear to be the sort of people who go in for practical jokes.'

He read a little more of the letter he had received.

And there was a good deal of it for, like most members of the legal profession, Standfast, Angel and Barrowclough were not keen on using one word when 27 could be just as easily employed.

In addition to the letter itself, which took up two pages of foolscap, a paper size which no one had seen for years, there was a plan of the pier concerned and a map of the town of Penmouth showing the pier's precise location. The pier, and a good sized portion of land at the landward end of the pier, had been carefully outlined in red ink so that there could be no doubt whatsoever about the location and extent of the property concerned.

'So, does it say where it is?' asked Ruth.

'It appears to be in a town called Penmouth,' replied Mr Livingstone, still studying the letter from the solicitors. 'And Penmouth seems to be in the county of Devon.'

Mr Roxdale said he thought he'd heard of Penmouth and Mr Twist said he thought it was in South Devon rather close to the well-known resort of Torquay. Mrs Torridge said she was absolutely sure it was in North Devon, possibly somewhere near Bideford, while Mrs Peterborough said she was pretty sure the solicitors had got it completely wrong and that Penmouth was in Norfolk, probably somewhere near Aldeburgh.

Mrs Merivale, keen to get involved, said she thought there was somewhere called Yarmouth on the Isle of Wight and asked no one in particular if the solicitors could have possibly made a mistake and misspelt both the name and the location of the pier. She said she had heard of something like this happening before. She said that a firm of solicitors had written to tell a neighbour of hers that she'd inherited a house in Stratford-on-Avon and the neighbour had been terribly disappointed when she'd discovered that there had been a slight typographical error and that the house was really in Stockton-on-Tees, doubtless a very nice place but quite not the same thing at all, especially when you've already set your heart on picnics on the banks of the River Avon and evenings spent at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre. Mrs Merivale said her neighbour had been so upset by the whole thing that she'd gone into a decline. She had never visited the house in Stockton-on-Tees but had instructed the solicitors to sell it on her behalf.

A little research, done by Ruth with the aid of the search engine on her mobile telephone, confirmed that Penmouth was a small West Country town, hardly much bigger than a village, which was situated in the southern part of the county of Devon and which sprawled comfortably at the mouth of the River Pen. The town had apparently once been a favourite resort with Victorians, especially those keen to escape London's heat and bustle during the months of July and August and eager to avoid the capital's Christmas bustle, and the inevitable pea soup smogs, in December.

The town was, it seemed from the photographs that Mr Williams managed to find in an encyclopaedia he had taken from the bookshelf, more than adequately supplied with expensive, well-built homes in standard, solid Victorian stone and brick. These were interspersed with a collection of fine Arts and Craft houses, all furnished with fancy roofs, delicate wooden balconies, massive chimneys and all the other architectural folderols popularised by William Morris and his acolytes.

Mr Williams reported that according to the encyclopaedia, it was common during the reigns of Queen Victoria and King Edward for the mothers of well-off families, together with the children and the servants, to move to Penmouth while the husbands stayed in London and moved into rooms at their clubs for a few weeks.

And finally, Mr Williams reported, with no little sadness in his voice, that most of the grand houses had been converted into boarding houses or guest houses. The ones which hadn't been converted into boarding houses had been turned into flats and bed sitting rooms and were rented out to holidaymakers.

Still, Penmouth may have been way past its prime but, as Gertrude Stein would have doubtless said, a pier is a pier is a pier.

Chapter Three

Most of us have happy memories of piers.

They bring back childhood memories of bucket and spade seaside holidays; of sandcastles, of sunny days that seem to last for ever but never last quite long enough; of pink, sticky rock; of picnics on the sand; of using a simple hand line to fish for mackerel from the pier; of sudden, unexpected rainbursts and cheap plastic macs; of shops packed with colourful buckets and spades and beachballs and of fish and chips wrapped in newspaper.

For honeymoon couples of a certain age, the ones who chose to spend their honeymoons at the English seaside rather than somewhere foreign, distant and expensive, seaside piers bring back memories of strolling arm in arm into the sunset; of giggling at the archaic, and remarkably innocent, black and white pictures in the 'What the Butler Saw' machine; of huddling together in a shelter to escape from a sudden downpour; of buying matching Kiss Me Quick hats and finding the courage to wear them; of sharing a dodgem car on the funfair; of smiling at old aged pensioners slumped in their deckchairs, drinking tea from thick, white, china cups and trying to catch the crumbs while eating chocolate covered digestive biscuits.

And of quietly wondering what life will have to offer in the years to come; the years until they too are of an age to settle comfortably together; content to watch the world trundle by.

Those were simpler days.

A holiday away from everything meant just that.

You could, in those days, be much further away from your daily worries while sitting on a pier just a few hundred miles from home than you could today while sitting on a beach in the Bahamas or Bali.

Mr Williams, who had pulled an encyclopaedia from the bookcase, suddenly yelped with excitement. 'Did you say that your pier was in Penmouth?' he asked Mr Livingstone.

Mr Livingstone didn't hesitate. 'Yes,' he said confidently. 'Penmouth! And Penmouth is in Devon.'

When you've just become the proud owner of your first pier you damned well know where it is.

'Well, it's mentioned here in the encyclopaedia,' said Mr Williams. 'It seems that you're the new owner of a famous pier. The encyclopaedia says that a Dr Ignaz Hessyan recommended sea bathing at Penmouth in 1793 and it was as a result of a series of articles which the good Dr Hessyan wrote for the *Morning Post* newspaper that the town first became popular with holidaymakers. The encyclopaedia says that local hoteliers built a Winter Gardens and a Hydro and that the pier was built by a consortium of local businessmen in 1822. The Winter Gardens were turned into a hotel in 1934 and the Hydro is now a car park but the pier remains.'

And at this point the questions about the pier came thick and fast. Indeed, they came so thickly and so quickly that it was difficult to discern who had asked what.

'How long is it?'

'Does it have amusements?'

'Does it have one of those little trains that chug up and down carrying passengers from one end to the other?'

'Can we go fishing off the side and catch mackerel?'

'If it does have one of those little trains do you think I could drive it occasionally?'

And last, but certainly not least: 'When can we go and see it?'

But it was Mr Livingstone's next statement, culled from the First Epistle of Messrs Standfast, Angel and Barrowclough that attracted the greatest amount of attention, particularly from Mrs Caldicot who had, since opening her own communication from the Government, been wondering where she could find a house big enough to home herself, Jenkins and a dozen good companions.

'There appears to be a hotel stuck on the landward end of it,' announced Mr Livingstone with a mixture of surprise and delight.

'A hotel! How big is it?' asked Mrs Caldicot who was now doubly excited by Mr Livingstone's inheritance.

'My new best friend, the estimable Mr Roland Canterbury, of the equally estimable firm of Standfast, Angel and Barrowclough, has kindly enclosed a photograph and a plan,' said Mr Livingstone. He opened the plan he had been sent and studied it carefully. 'On the first floor there appear to be 20 bedrooms, an assortment of bathrooms, a kitchen and a room labelled BallR. On the ground floor there is a ticket office, a souvenir shop and a café selling fish and chips and cups of tea.' He looked across at Mrs Caldicot. 'There are enough rooms for us to move in and live there!' he said.

Mrs Caldicot looked at him to see if he was serious.

He was.

'Do you think so?' she asked, hardly daring to believe that their misfortune had already been counterbalanced by matching good fortune.

'Absolutely!' said Mr Livingstone, excitedly. 'We can all live on the pier! Can you imagine anything more exciting?'

'I think the BallR will probably be a 'ballroom',' said Mr Hewitt, who had been looking over his friend's shoulder. 'There's an asterisk and a bit here, at the bottom of the plan, which explains that it was formerly used by a local dancing academy.'

'Golly,' said Mrs Roberts, who was impressed. 'You've got your own ballroom.'

'I've never known anyone who owned a ballroom,' said Miss Nightingale, who was not alone in this.

'I've never known anyone who owned a pier,' said Mrs Peterborough whose absence of experience in this area was also not unique. Indeed, it was quickly agreed by the assembled company, that no one present had ever even known anyone who had known anyone who had owned a pier. All this made Mr Livingstone feel very privileged indeed.

'When I was a girl I met a boy on a pier in Brighton,' said Mrs Torridge. 'We were both 16 and we thought we were in love for ever. His name was Eric and he used a lot of Brylcream on his hair. Every day we sat side by side in deckchairs on the pier. I remember the deckchairs were made of faded green canvas. We ate chips, ice creams and cockles with loads of vinegar and we sat there all day long. We spent the entire holiday just sitting beside each other because we thought that was what people did when they were in love.'

'What happened to him?' asked Miss Nightingale.

'At the end of the week we both went home. Even though I was 16 and thought I was in love, I think I knew it was over. I'd been so happy that I cried and cried and cried all the way home. He worked in a warehouse in Bolton and I was still at school in Dudley. I sent him several letters but he wasn't much of a letter writer. In fact he could only just write his name, poor fellow. His sister had to read my letters to him and then write down his replies to send to me. It wasn't a terribly romantic way to conduct a correspondence and eventually it all sort of fizzled out. It was very sad at the time but it was a wonderful week.' Mrs Torridge stopped for a moment, deep in thought. 'It was the very best holiday of my life until that holiday we all had in Paris. The one when Mr Twist lost our money to those crooks and we all went busking to earn money for our food. That was the best holiday of my life. I enjoyed that very much indeed.'

Mrs Caldicot, who had been listening, looked across to where Mr Twist was sitting. She was relieved to see that he was talking to Mr Williams and hadn't heard what Mrs Torridge had said about him losing their money.

'Does owning a pier mean that you're very rich?' asked Ruth, who was not an avaricious girl, and not greedy for money for its own sake, but who, at the age of 18 going on 19, already knew enough about life to know that riches can often bring more fun, more adventure and more good times than poverty and who was, therefore, perfectly prepared to admit that if offered a choice of the two options she would, generally speaking, opt for the one involving riches rather than the one which didn't.

'I have no idea,' said Mr Livingstone, who was still rather overwhelmed by the whole thing and still striving to accustom himself that whereas he had, only that morning, woken up as a 70 something former Bomber Command hero and keen musician, but nevertheless entirely pier-less, he now appeared to be one of that very select group of individuals able to describe themselves as pier owners. This was quite an adjustment to make for a man who had not yet properly digested his breakfast bacon and egg. (Two slices of crispy bacon, egg slightly runny, served with two slices of white toast and a half pint mug of tea.)

The fact is that Mr Livingstone had reached an age when he preferred that surprises, if they had to come at all, to come a little later in the day and preferably not at mealtimes or within, say, three quarters of an hour of their conclusion.

'Good heavens!' cried Mr Williams, startling them all with the suddenness of his exposition. He held up the encyclopaedia he was studying. 'It says here that Penmouth was one of Jane Austen's favourite holiday resorts. She was enormously fond of the South Devon and Dorset coasts and she and her family were regular visitors. She was known to have visited Dawlish, Sidmouth and Teignmouth in Devon, and Lyme Regis in Dorset. And she visited Penmouth at least three times. The vicar of Penmouth was apparently one of her father's favourite pupils.'

'I've been to Lyme Regis,' said Mrs Peterborough. 'My parents used to take us there every summer. It's very pretty. We stayed in a cottage which had the lavatory at the bottom of the garden. It was full of spiders and I was terrified of them.'

'Jane Austen's father was a vicar,' continued Mr Williams, who was now quite excited. 'And he took in apprentice vicars from time to time – including one who later became the vicar of Penmouth. It says here that literary historians believe that Miss Austen's unfinished novel *Sanditon* was almost certainly based on her visit to Penmouth. Her last visit to Penmouth was in the late summer of 1816. She was already ill and the family hoped that a visit to her favourite seaside resort might help improve her health. She seemed to have made something of a recovery because she started work on *Sanditon* in January 1817.'

'I don't think I know that book,' said Mrs Caldicot who had been an admirer of Jane Austen and the Bronte sisters since she'd been a girl.

'She never finished writing *Sanditon*,' said Jenkins. 'She worked on it for a couple of months but died in the summer of 1817 – June or July I think it was. I don't think she completed more than around 50 pages.'

'It was July 18th, 1817,' said Mr Williams, reading from the encyclopaedia. 'Good heavens – the poor girl was only 41 when she died.'

They all agreed that this was no age at all. And this was perhaps not surprising for if Ruth and Mrs Roberts were excluded from the equation the average age of the people in the room was considerably closer to 80 than it was to 70.

'Who was Jane Austen?' asked Ruth.

'She was a writer,' explained Mr Williams. 'A very famous English writer.'

'She wrote…er…books,' said Mr Livingstone, who seemed not quite able to think of any titles.

'*Pride and Prejudice*,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'That was one of hers.'

'Oh!' said Ruth. 'I didn't know you meant she wrote films. I haven't seen it but my Mum watches it whenever it's on the television. It's all old-fashioned, isn't it? It's one of her favourite films. My Mum will be thrilled. Do you think Mrs Austen would have visited the pier?'

'No, I'm afraid she wouldn't have been able to, dear,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'She died over 50 years before the pier was built.'

'Golly!' said Ruth, clearly surprised. 'I didn't know they were making films then. The one my Mum was watching was in colour too. That's amazing. It's a pity she couldn't visit the pier. But do you think other famous people would have visited it?'

'Oh yes,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. 'There's a theatre at the end of the pier so all sorts of famous people would have performed there.'

'Pop groups?'

'Oh, quite probably,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Almost certainly, I would say.'

'I've found it!' interrupted Mr Merivale, with considerable excitement.

While the others had been discussing Jane Austen's connection with the town of Penmouth, Mr Merivale had pulled a 1998 road atlas out of the same bookcase from whence Mr Williams had obtained his encyclopaedia.

Content in the knowledge that, although some roads might have been moved, closed, extended or added to, and that county boundaries may well have been moved or done away with altogether, there was a better than evens chance that wherever Penmouth had been in 1998 it had probably not moved very much, and was, indeed, most probably more or less in the same place now as it had been then.

Everyone, including Mr Livingstone, crowded round the map, anxious to see just where Penmouth was situated.

'Look!' said Miss Peterborough. 'It's right on the coast.'

'So it will almost certainly be near the sea!' said Miss Nightingale, excitedly.

'There, I told you it wasn't in Norfolk!' said Mrs Peterborough, whose memory had good and bad moments. Even Mrs Peterborough admitted that her memory wasn't all what it had been in its earlier days. If offered for sale, it would have had to be described with some caution, and some imaginative text, if strict advertising rules were not to be breached.

Chapter Four

Two days later, Mr Livingstone, accompanied by Mrs Caldicot, caught a train to Bristol where the solicitors Standfast, Angel and Barrowclough had their offices.

Neither Mrs Caldicot nor Mr Livingstone could remember ever having visited Bristol before though Mr Livingstone said he could remember flying over it during the War.

'There's an airfield nearby,' he said. 'We used it during the War though I seem to remember that it was often rather a foggy place.' He paused, and for a moment wandered back to the early 1940s. 'I remember that we used to think it was a silly place to put an airfield,' he continued. 'The fog meant that half the time we couldn't take off and the rest of the time we couldn't land.'

'I think it's a proper airport now,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'When we all went to Paris I remember looking at the brochure and seeing that they offered flights from Bristol Airport.'

'We had good fun on that trip,' said Mr Livingstone.

'We certainly did,' agreed Mrs Caldicot.

'I'm glad we went on the train,' said Mr Livingstone. 'That was quite an adventure in itself wasn't it?'

Mrs Caldicot laughed. 'I suppose it was a bit of an adventure,' she said. She remembered saying a silent prayer of thanks when they finally got through the customs post in London without being arrested.

An 'adventure' it certainly had been.

'Does Ruth still hear from that nice, French lad she met in Paris? The one with the accordion?'

'Oh yes. She and Jean-Jacques speak to each other every day and they're forever sending each other little messages on their telephones.'

Jenkins had given Mrs Caldicot a mobile telephone but she was allowing herself to become accustomed to new technology bit by bit and still wasn't entirely comfortable with the idea of being able to use the phone to write messages. It seemed odd to be able to make and receive telephone calls while out shopping. She hadn't said anything to Jenkins but to her it didn't seem entirely natural to be able to make telephone calls without a wire dangling from the telephone.

'I'm pleased about that,' said Mr Livingstone. 'That young chap was very good on that accordion of his,' said Mr Livingstone. 'Especially for a French person.'

Mr Livingstone thought for a moment. 'Doesn't it cost a fortune to telephone foreign parts?'

'Apparently not,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'They use some clever internet thing that means they don't have to pay a penny for their calls.'

'Good heavens!' said Mr Livingstone. 'Is that legal? I do hope it's legal.'

'Oh, I'm sure it is,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Ruth's a good girl. She wouldn't do anything naughty. Jenkins says it's terribly easy to do. He's going to show me what I have to do so that we can talk to each other when he's in America.'

She frowned, suddenly very sad at the thought of her husband being away on the other side of the Atlantic. She hated it when they were parted but knew that sometimes it could not be avoided.

At the Temple Meads railway station, Mrs Caldicot and Mr Livingstone queued and took a taxi driven by a morose fellow who had a nose which would have been more at home on a larger head, and skin the colour of a very ripe tomato.

It turned out that the offices they were visiting were no more than a five minute walk from the station but the city's traffic system meant that the journey required a 20 minute drive.

Mr Standfast, Mr Angel and Mr Barrowclough, and whatever aides and assistants they had to help them with their work, laboured in a building which looked as if it had been built, painted and decorated in the middle of the 19th century, and then abandoned and left to its own devices. It may well have been much loved when it had been built, but since those long ago days the love had not always been generously bestowed and the building was, to be polite, beginning to show its age. The brickwork and stonework were crumbling and had been eaten away by acid rain and the whole structure looked as if it were held together only by the soot which had been deposited upon it by steam trains chugging into and out of the railway station. The building's wooden window and door frames, which had long since lost most or all of their paint, were grey and wrinkled with deep cracks, and appeared to be still in situ only because they didn't have the energy to go somewhere else.

A receptionist, whom Mrs Caldicot felt had probably been with the building since it was opened, sat behind a telephone switchboard which appeared to be dependent upon old-fashioned plugs and long wires. She was very tiny, shrunken almost, and constantly wheezed and coughed. She peered at them through rheumy eyes as though she were thinking of buying them and trying to assess their value. She was, thought Mrs Caldicot, a woman who had seen more than everything, several times, and was now quite beyond surprise, beyond horror and beyond despair. She was a strangely dignified ruin of a woman, beyond every imaginable emotion.

She was there, secure behind her switchboard and her memories, quietly comfortable and confident because when life holds no more terrors what is there to be startled by?

When Mr Livingstone had stated his name and his business, she directed them to a narrow, wooden staircase with a wobbly wave of a very weary hand. There was, she said without apology, no lift.

Mr Canterbury, the solicitor who had written to Mr Livingstone, had a small, rather dusty office on the fourth floor. The stairs were narrow, twisting and very badly lit. The only light came from very occasional small windows; so narrow that they reminded Mrs Caldicot of the slits built in castle walls so that the residents within could fire arrows at the marauders outside.

The staircase ended in a small landing; the floorboards of which were uneven, like pond water on a windy day, and which felt rickety and rather unsafe. Both Mr Livingstone and Mrs Caldicot trod delicately, and with considerable caution, lest they go through the creaking, unstable boards and unintentionally end up back on the floor below. In front of them there was a single door. The upper half of the door was glazed in the sort of opaque glass usually preferred when glazing bathrooms, and the glass had the name of the firm printed on it in gold, capital letters.

When there was no response to his knock, Mr Livingstone opened the door and they entered. The first person they saw was a skeletal woman in her mid to late sixties. She was the only occupant of the room and she was standing facing them, holding a bundle of files in her arms. She wore glasses, squinted and appeared to have had a cigarette stub permanently glued to her lower lip. She appeared to be a secretary of some kind, working in an office which was packed with files and tottering stacks of paper. The lines around her eyes suggested that the squinting was permanent and was a result of cigarette smoke rather than a need for stronger spectacle lenses. A plume of smoke curled upwards from the cigarette and, not surprisingly, the ceiling had that yellow hue that years of tobacco smoke can create. The woman wore a dress in a style that had gone out of fashion in the 1970s, and when she finally moved to put the files down on top of another heap of files, she shuffled about in a pair of fluffy, blue slippers. She also wore an old-fashioned flowered pinafore – the sort which hangs from the neck, ties behind and has a large pocket at the front. The pocket was clearly half full of something though Mrs Caldicot could not see what it was. The woman stared at them and opened her mouth but did not speak. The cigarette remained in place, stuck to the woman’s lower lip.

Mrs Caldicot thought that the secretary looked as if she had always been the same age. She did not look like a woman who had ever been seven-years-old, skipping and cuddling dolls; never been 16, shy and giggling at boys; never been 22 and courting; never even been 29 worrying about her 30th birthday. She had, thought Mrs Caldicot, the look of a woman who been born wrinkled, short-sighted, squinting, wearing a shapeless cardigan and with a fag (never for her could it be called a cigarette) stuck fast to a lower lip. Mrs Caldicot did not think any of this in an unkindly or critical way.

The room was dominated by two large, grey filing cabinets upon which there were yet more files. There were files everywhere. This was not a paperless office. Mrs Caldicot couldn’t help looking around to see if there was a fire extinguisher anywhere. There wasn’t. An old-fashioned wooden desk bore an old-fashioned sit up and beg typewriter, a Bakelite telephone left over from a less hectic era, and more old-fashioned files and bundles of paper. There were no signs of computers, printers or other modern distractions. It was not the sort of environment where mobile telephones buzzed or vibrated. The secretary did not look like the sort of woman who was likely to be a fan of social media. The only sign of modern office equipment was an open box of carbon paper balanced on top of a dozen, thick cardboard folders.

It seemed incomprehensible to Mrs Caldicot and Mr Livingstone that the woman could possibly know the location of anything but, as if often the case, this proved to be an entirely baseless assumption. The moment Mr Livingstone announced his name, and the reason for his visit, and showed her the letter he had received, the woman lifted the box of carbon paper and half a dozen files and found a pink, cardboard folder which bore a label carrying the hand printed words: ‘Estate of Bertram Livingstone Esq– Decd’.

Saying nothing but indicating with a wave of the hand that they should follow her, the woman led the way into an office where a huge man sat behind a monstrous desk paring his fingernails with the long blade of a large pocket knife. To the man’s left there lay a large piece of greaseproof paper upon which lay part of a loaf of crusty bread, two tomatoes and the remains of a piece of cheese. There was also a bottle of port and an empty wine glass that, by the dregs within it, had clearly been used rather recently.

‘This is Mr Canterbury,’ said the woman, introducing the man behind the desk. She waved her hand in the direction of Mr Livingstone and Mrs Caldicot. ‘These are the Estate of Bertram Livingstone deceased.’ She then put the Bertram Livingstone file down on Mr Canterbury's desk. She had some difficulty finding a space not occupied by files, bread, cheese, tomatoes or port wine.

Mrs Caldicot rather suspected that Mr Canterbury probably brought his luncheon with him and ate and drank at his desk so that he only had to climb the staircase once a day. She didn't blame him. It was the sort of staircase that people climb when they want to take exercise and Mr Canterbury did not look the sort of man who thought much of exercise.

Mr Canterbury looked up, stopped what he was doing, carefully folded the blade back into his penknife and laid it down on his desk as though it were a treasured heirloom which, indeed, it may have been. He nodded at his two visitors, in acknowledgement of their presence. Mrs Caldicot thought he looked rather grand, very old-fashioned and intimidating.

Like the outer office, Mr Canterbury's room was full of paper.

Three of the four walls had shelves which were stuffed with row upon row of neatly bound law books and the carpet was pretty well covered with towering and unstable stacks of files, briefs and miscellaneous papers. Some of the piles of paper were tied together with the sort of red ribbon which lawyers traditionally prefer, and some were tied with what looked like common or garden string. There wasn't enough carpet visible to tell what colour it was or whether it had any sort of pattern. It was an office which would have made a perfect set for any film company looking to make a movie based upon one of the many novels by Dickens which features a lawyer or a legal office. Two upholstered chairs, which looked as though they had once been members of a dining room set, sat waiting for occupation.

'Come in and sit down,' said Mr Canterbury.

As Mrs Caldicot sat down, she thought that Mr Canterbury was even larger than huge; he was a man who clearly regarded food as something more than just fuel for the machine. It was impossible to see how tall he was for he did not lift himself out of his chair when they entered, but merely waved a hand towards the two chairs on the visitors' side of his desk. The front and top of his head were both bald but at the sides and back there were copious quantities of grey curls. He wore pince nez with a gold frame, a dark-grey pinstripe suit with a broad chalk stripe, a stiff, celluloid wing collar and a hand-tied, black bow tie. Mrs Caldicot thought he was probably in his 70s but although he could have been older he was probably not younger.

Mrs Caldicot, turning to thank the secretary for showing them into the solicitor's office now saw that the bulge in the pocket of the woman's pinafore was caused by two kittens. Their heads peered out, like baby kangaroos peeking out of their mother's pouch. Mrs Caldicot liked cats very much but when she moved to stroke the kittens, the secretary hurried away as though protecting them. There was no sign of the mother of the two kittens though there were plenty of places where she could have been sleeping.

Mrs Caldicot and Mr Livingstone both sat down.

'You're Mr Livingstone,' said Mr Canterbury to Mr Livingstone.

Mr Livingstone confirmed that he was indeed Mr Livingstone.

'Do we have any identification?'

Mr Livingstone produced the letter he had been sent and then rummaged around his pocket and offered, as supplementary evidence, the railway ticket he had used for the journey to Bristol. Mr Canterbury waved away the letter but accepted the railway ticket which he examined carefully.

'This does not have your name upon it,' the solicitor pointed out, unnecessarily.

'No, but it proves that I came from the place to which your letter was sent,' replied Mr Livingstone.

'Indeed it does,' agreed Mr Canterbury. He sighed, nodded and handed the used ticket back to Mr Livingstone. He then looked at Mrs Caldicot. 'And are we safe in assuming that you are Mrs Livingstone?'

'Not safe at all,' said Mr Livingstone. 'This is Mrs Caldicot.'

'Actually, my name is Mrs Jenkins,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'My apologies,' said Mr Livingstone, who still thought of Mrs Caldicot as Mrs Caldicot.

Mr Canterbury frowned and appeared to be a little confused. 'Are you cohabiting?' he asked Mr Livingstone. 'Do you live together?'

'Oh yes,' said Mr Livingstone. 'There are twelve of us, plus Mrs Caldicot and Mr Jenkins.'

'Twelve of you?'

'Plus Mrs Caldicot and Mr Jenkins.'

'And who, pray, is Mr Jenkins?'

'That's Mrs Caldicot's husband.'

'Her common-law husband?'

'No, we're properly married,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'We had confetti and cake and someone tied a horseshoe and some old tin cans onto the back bumper of Mr Jenkins's motor car. It took us ages to untie them all.'

‘That was Mr Hewitt,’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘We thought it was,’ said Mrs Caldicot, looking at Mr Livingstone.

Mr Canterbury sighed the deep sigh of a man who long ago realised that life regularly offers up far too many complexities for any man to hope to understand even a small proportion of them. ‘Are we safe in assuming that Mrs Caldicot aka Mrs Jenkins is cognisant?’

Mr Livingstone stared blankly at Mr Canterbury.

‘Mrs Caldicot aka Mrs Jenkins knows about the bequest? She is fully cognisant?’

‘Oh yes,’ Mr Livingstone nodded. ‘Definitely.’

‘And you are comfortable with her presence here today?’

‘Oh yes, definitely. She is fully cognisant.’

‘Excellent.’

‘May I ask you something?’ asked Mr Livingstone.

Mr Canterbury, seemingly surprised by this, frowned, blinked and nodded.

‘Where are Mr Angel, Mr Standfast and Mr Barrowclough? I didn’t see any sign of them having offices here.’

‘Mr Angel passed away in 1951 and Mr Barrowclough ran away with the counter girl from Waverly’s the tobacconists in 1962. We have no idea where he is now.’

‘And Mr Standfast?’

‘Mr Angel and Mr Barrowclough started the firm after the Second World War. They felt at the time that having three partners sounded more substantial than having just two. They felt that ‘Angel and Barrowclough’ made them sound like a chain of shoe shops or a provincial dentist. They wanted gravitas and so they invented Mr Standfast, using a name they took from a novel by John Buchan.’

‘So now there’s just you?’

‘Indeed that is so. Apart from Miss Ball, whom you have met, and who is our secretary, we work alone. But we have always felt comfortable in working under the aegis of the original triumvirate. Does that satisfy your curiosity?’

‘Absolutely,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘Thanks very much. It just puzzled me. I hope you don’t mind my asking.’

‘Not at all. Not at all. We congratulate you, sir, on your perspicacity. You are the first person in two decades to have queried the absence of my partners.’ Mr Canterbury shuffled his substantial bulk in his chair, looked down at the unopened file relating to Mr Bertram Livingstone, and then continued.

‘As you will know from our letter to you, Mr Bertram Livingstone was your uncle. Did you know that you had an uncle?’

Mr Livingstone shook his head. ‘I’m afraid I didn’t know I had an uncle Bertram. I’ve never heard of him.’

‘Mr Livingstone, your uncle, was, we think it is fair to say, an unusual man of slightly eccentric tastes and interests. We met him only once, when he drew up his will. He was a memorable man if not a particularly remarkable one. He never married or, as far as we are aware, had any relationships of note. He had few friends and told us that he had spent much of his life in an old caravan which was permanently ensconced, sequestered indeed, in a distant corner of the car park of ‘The Wounded Soldier’, a public house situated in the outskirts of a town called Walsall which used to be in Staffordshire but which is, we believe, now to be found in the West Midlands. One assumes, one hopes, that the town itself has remained static but that its apparent migration is a result of one of those boundary readjustments which bureaucrats are fond of making from time to time. Mr Livingstone paid for his parking spot by doing odd jobs in and around the licensed premises and his evenings were spent in the public bar of ‘The Wounded Soldier’ where he passed the time playing dominoes, cribbage and other games popular among those who found darts and bar billiards too energetic for their taste.’

‘You seem to remember him well,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘We refreshed our memory by reading the file before we wrote to Mr Livingstone,’ explained Mr Canterbury. ‘And he was, as we have said, a memorable man. He told us that he won the Penmouth Pier in a game of dominoes some twenty three years ago. He then moved out of his caravan and subsequently lived on the pier until his death. He was a solitary man, something of a recluse we understand, and the pier was the only property of value he left behind. There was a small amount of money in a current account but sadly that has all gone in funeral and legal expenses and your uncle left nothing else in the way of chattels. He made a will in 1998, leaving all his worldly goods to his brother, your father, but sadly, as you are no doubt aware, the beneficiary of that will died in 1987 and it is to be presumed that your uncle did know of this sad event. If he ever did become cognisant then he did not choose to update his will. The result is that the pier comes to you, Mr Livingstone. You were his sole surviving relative and are therefore the sole beneficiary. The pier is yours, as it stands, without encumbrances.’

‘Right,’ said Mr Livingstone, who wasn’t entirely sure what an encumbrance was but thought that on balance, and probably quite rightly, that it was undoubtedly a good thing that there weren’t any. ‘That’s splendid,’ he said. ‘I’ve never owned a pier before,' he added.

'We would doubt if many people could say they have,' agreed Mr Canterbury. 'We would certainly say that we ourselves would fall comfortably into that category.' He looked at Mrs Caldicot. 'You, madam? Have you ever owned a pier?'

'No,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'No, I can't say that I have.'

'No, you can't,' said Mr Canterbury. 'Not unless you have.' He looked at the cheese on the greaseproof paper, opened a blade of the penknife he'd been using to trim his nails and cut off a decent sized chunk of cheese. He ate the cheese off the point of the knife.

It occurred to Mrs Caldicot that it was quite likely that Mr Canterbury never actually really stopped eating.

'You, Mr Livingstone are only the second person we have known who has owned a pier. Your uncle, of course, being the other. You are a rare beast, sir. We gather that many of the remaining piers around the coast of Britain are owned by corporations, charities or local councils. We doubt if there are half a dozen individuals in the country who can, if they feel the urge so to do, stand up and say 'I own a pier'. You, sir, are now one of them – even though it has to be admitted that your pier has, temporarily at least, fallen into desuetude.'

'What's that?' asked Mr Livingstone.

'A state of disuse,' explained Mr Canterbury.

'Ah,' said Mr Livingstone, wondering why solicitors liked to use words which no one else used. 'So if I wasn't mentioned in the will how did you find me?'

Mr Canterbury finished chewing his piece of cheese and then swallowed it before replying. 'We found you, sir, with considerable difficulty. We advertised in a periodical known as the *London Gazette* though why we do that we never know because in our experience nothing ever comes of it. We made the usual enquiries and eventually we employed the services of a private detective who specialises in researching family trees. We use the word detective and you might imagine a man in a grubby mackintosh, carrying a magnifying glass and a pistol but the reality is less romantic. The expert we hired is a spinster who spends her days ploughing through public records. She uses something called the internet though we have only the loosest notion of what that might be. Sadly, the expense of these endeavours utilised entirely the small cash bequest which you might otherwise have enjoyed alongside the pier.'

'And the Mr Livingstone who died was my uncle?'

'Yes, indeed. He and your father were brothers.'

'I didn't even know my father had a brother.'

'No, we had assumed that you were probably not aware of his existence just as we doubt that he was aware of yours. You would be surprised how many families there are where relatives do not know of each other's existence. We assume that your father and your uncle must have had a falling out when they were young. They then drifted apart and your father didn't mention that he had a brother when he met and married your mother.' Mr Canterbury poured himself a small port. He did not offer any to Mrs Caldicot or to Mr Livingstone. He sipped at the port. He then opened the drawer of his desk and took out a tin box. From the tin box he took a huge bundle of keys. The keys were all labelled. He looked through the labels, found the one he was looking for and put the remaining keys back into the tin box. He then put the tin box back into the drawer and closed the drawer.

'These are the keys to our pier,' he said, putting a bunch of keys onto the desk in front of him. There were many different types and sizes of keys. He did not, however, hand them to Mr Livingstone straight away. 'But you have to sign some papers before we can give them to you.'

He took the cardboard file that his secretary had given him and took out several pieces of paper which he pushed across the desk to Mr Livingstone. 'If you would be kind enough to sign these then we can complete the transfer,' he said.

He then picked up his penknife and cleaned the blade with a large, white pocket handkerchief. When he'd done this he started to pare his nails again. There really didn't seem to be anything left to trim.

Mr Livingstone signed the papers.

'Mrs Livingstone can witness your signature.'

'Mrs Caldicot,' said Mr Livingstone, correcting him.

Mr Canterbury frowned as though the relationship were still something of a puzzle to him. He examined the blade of his knife, wiped it on the handkerchief again, and then cut himself another piece of cheese. When he'd done this, he closed the blade of his knife and lay it gently on the desk before him.

'Mrs Jenkins,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Are you sure you know each other?' said Mr Canterbury. He popped the cheese into his mouth and chewed thoughtfully.

'It's complicated,' said Mrs Caldicot.

‘Everything always is,’ said Mr Canterbury.

He picked up the signed and witnessed documents and handed the keys to the pier across to Mr Livingstone.

From the folder in front of him he then took a number of photographs. He reached across his desk and handed these to Mr Livingstone. ‘There are one or two things about our pier of which you might like to be aware,’ said the solicitor. ‘First, the distal end of the pier rests upon a rocky island and it is there, upon that island, that the original builders created a large and rather ornate theatre. We believe that this sort of arrangement is considered quite unusual in the world of piers. The piece of rock is known as ‘Stone Rock’ and it is part of the freehold associated with the remainder of the structure.’

‘Stone Rock!’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘I bet someone spent a lot of time thinking up that name!’ Mr Livingstone had already been thoroughly excited by the whole business of owning a pier and could now hardly believe that he also owned a small, rocky island upon which a theatre had been built.

He had not admitted this to anyone, not even to Mrs Caldicot, but there had been a moment, well actually rather more than just a moment, when he’d wondered if there had been a mistake. Maybe the lawyer had mixed him up with another Mr Livingstone; an entirely different Mr Livingstone. Maybe the pier didn’t exist. Maybe it was all an elaborate, practical joke. After all, thought Mr Livingstone, the many previous years of his life had not been marked with an abundance of good fortune.

‘Precisely,’ said Mr Canterbury. ‘We would imagine that the name of the rock probably goes back to a time before the pier was constructed.’

‘Does the pier have a name?’ asked Mr Livingstone.

‘It does. Indeed it does.’ Mr Canterbury fiddled about with the papers in front of him. ‘Ah yes, here we are. Its official name, the name on all the documents and, we believe, the name by which it is known locally, is ‘The Pier’.’

‘The Pier?’

‘Precisely. The Pier.’

‘That’s the name? Just that?’

‘It is.’

‘Not The Palace Pier or The Grand Pier or something like that?’

‘No, unfortunately not. Our pier is known simply as ‘The Pier’.’

‘They didn’t spend a lot of effort thinking that name up either, did they?’

‘We suspect not. Our pier was one of the very early first piers to be built and maybe the people who commissioned it felt no need to identify it in a more elaborate way. Work was started on it in 1874 and the pier was opened in 1877. It was designed by a man called Eugenius Birch, who was, we believe, the premier designer of Victorian piers. We gather that Mr Birch also designed piers in Brighton, Bournemouth and Blackpool.’

‘Well that’s a good start,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘May I ask you a question?’

‘Of course.’

‘You keep referring to the pier as ‘our pier’. Does that mean that you are a part owner?’

Mr Canterbury appeared to be quite startled by this. ‘Oh, good heavens no! We use the first person plural in a purely legal sense. It is quite customary for members of the legal profession to unite themselves with their clients in this way. The pier was left to you and to you alone and all the delights and responsibilities associated with its ownership are yours and yours alone.’

‘Oh, right ho,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘Just got a bit confused, that’s all.’

‘Quite so,’ agreed Mr Canterbury. He picked up another document. ‘We believe you will find that the theatre built on Stone Rock is still in existence though we understand it is possible that it may be in need of a little cosmetic attention. On the other hand the wooden piles upon which the pier rests are, we believe, surprisingly sound. According to a report we have here, they were checked just three years ago and found to be perfectly solid and safe. The pier itself is 2,195 feet long and down the centre of the structure there runs a covered walkway which is equipped with numerous benches. It appears that at intervals of twenty yards or so there are vending machines and amusement machines of one sort or another. And according to the information we have before us, there is also a little train. It doesn’t run on rails but there’s a small engine and three open coaches.’

Mr Canterbury’s eyes lit up when he mentioned the little train. ‘These little trains can be quite enchanting,’ he said. He closed his eyes for a moment. ‘Quite enchanting,’ he murmured. He was, thought Mrs Caldicot, talking to himself more than to them. For a while he said nothing, apparently lost in a reverie; a pleasant daydream. The daydream can’t have lasted more than thirty seconds but it seemed like an age.

‘At the proximal end of the structure,’ continued Mr Canterbury at last, ‘the spot where the pier joins the promenade, there is a large gatehouse which consists of two towers, each of which is three stories high. These towers are connected by a bridge-like structure which creates an archway – from the plan we have in front of us it looks rather like the Admiralty Arch in London though perhaps not quite as grand. The lower part of each leg of the arch is given over to commercial premises. On the left, as we look down the pier, there is a kiosk where visitors can buy sweets, postcards, ice creams, paperback books and tickets for the little train. On the right there is a small café which sells popular and appropriate comestibles such as fish and chips and cups of tea. The two upper floors of the archway and the towers provide accommodation, including a number of bedrooms, bathrooms and so on. We believe that when the pier was built, the gatehouse was designed to be run as a hotel.'

'And there's a ballroom,' said Mr Livingstone.

'Indeed so. We are pleased to see that you have studied the details we sent to you. We see from the documents we have that a previous owner specialised in catering for weddings, anniversaries and birthday parties, with the ballroom inevitably providing a suitable venue for dining and dancing and the bedrooms providing accommodation for those involved and their guests.'

Mr Canterbury pushed another small sheaf of documents across his crowded desk. 'There is one other communication we are obliged to share with you. As the executor of your uncle's estate we have to show you this communication.' He then reached into the file, took out a three page letter and handed it to Mr Livingstone. When he'd done that he tore a large piece of bread from the crusty loaf on his desk and popped that into his mouth.

'What is it?' asked a rather puzzled Mr Livingstone, accepting the letter as a man might accept a summons, a writ or some other unpleasant legal document. 'Is this something I need to worry about?'

'No, no, not at all,' said Mr Canterbury when he'd finished chewing the piece of bread. 'To save you time and effort we can tell you that the communication you are holding is a letter offering to purchase our pier from us.'

'Someone already wants to buy it?' said Mr Livingstone, thoroughly surprised by this completely unexpected turn of events.

'Indeed they do, indeed they do,' said Mr Canterbury. 'But we fear you might not find the offer to be irresistible.'

'I don't care what the offer is,' said Mr Livingstone. 'I've only just got my pier. Why would I want to sell it?' He looked at the long letter he had been handed. 'Who wants to buy it and what are they offering?'

'The agent who wrote to us did so on behalf of a property company and the offer, for the full freehold, is for £1.'

Mr Livingstone stared at him incredulously. 'Did you say £1?'

'We fear so. We gather that the pier has been losing money for some time and although we have not heard from them directly, we gather from a paragraph in the letter you are holding that the local council has some concerns about the ownership and management and is keen to see the pier developed in a way which, as they say, 'will reflect the needs of the town in these changing times'.' Mr Canterbury paused, picked up his penknife and opened the blade. He only ever opened, and used, the one blade. Once again, he used the blade of his knife to trim his well-trimmed fingernails.

'Crumbs!' said Mr Livingstone.

'But as I have already mentioned we have no reason to believe that the structure of the pier need be of concern. It appears that any problems relate more to the management of the pier.'

'So you don't think it's falling down?'

'No, no, not at all. You would find that a very expensive event.'

'Why would it be expensive if the pier fell down?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'The council would doubtless insist upon you moving the wreckage from the beach and the sea,' Mr Canterbury pointed. 'Given the size of the structure and the weight of the materials involved, the costs would be very high. There would be some salvage value but not enough to cover the high costs of demolition and removal.'

'Who would be responsible for the costs if that happened?' asked Mr Livingstone.

'Oh that would be our responsibility,' said Mr Canterbury. 'As the owner of the pier we would be responsible for all those costs.' He coughed, remembering Mr Livingstone's question. 'Er, you would be responsible since you are the owner.' He rooted through the paper work and produced yet another document. 'Unfortunately, your uncle allowed the insurance to lapse and so the pier is not insured at all at the moment. In that regard we are exposed.'

'I'm responsible for all the costs if the pier falls into the sea?'

'Oh yes.'

'But I don't have any money,' Mr Livingstone pointed out.

'You have no properties? No savings?'

'No.'

'Then you need not concern yourself. You would simply declare yourself bankrupt.'

'They wouldn't be able to put me in prison or anything like that?'

'Oh, good heavens no. You would be bankrupt for one year and that would be the end of that. Under normal circumstances we would advise a client inheriting a property, particularly one as large and as complex as this one, to take out comprehensive insurance. But insuring a pier can be very, very expensive.'

'How expensive?'

‘We are not insurance specialists but we would say that if you had an excess of £500,000 on your policy then the premium would be as much as £100,000 a year.’

‘An excess of £500,000? What does that mean?’

‘It means that you would agree to pay the first £500,000 of any loss – in the same way that house or motor car insurance policies often include an excess.’

Mr Livingstone laughed.

‘Quite,’ said Mr Canterbury.

‘But if there’s a problem and the pier falls down or something terrible happens to it I could just go bankrupt for a year?’

‘Precisely.’

‘That would be a bit cheaper than the insurance policy I couldn’t afford.’

‘Indeed it would.’ Mr Canterbury paused for a moment. ‘In some ways we are a perfect owner for a pier. If a rich man inherited a pier he could be made into a poor man by the running costs – the insurance alone being a major part of the costs. If a rich man inherited a pier which fell into the sea he would have to spend a large part of his fortune on recovering the debris, compensating the authorities and so on.’

‘But I don’t have any money so I’m safe from all these terrible things?

‘Exactly!’

Mr Livingstone looked at Mrs Caldicot and smiled. She smiled back.

‘One good thing has come from this communication,’ said Mr Canterbury, touching the letter offering to buy the pier. ‘The offer, valuing the pier at £1, has enabled us, as the executors of your uncle’s will, to inform Her Majesty’s Customs and Excise that there will be no tax to pay on the property. We cannot be obliged to pay more inheritance tax than our inheritance is worth.’

He stopped trimming his fingernails and wiped the blade. Mrs Caldicot knew what was coming next. As we get older our habits become irrepressible routines. Mr Canterbury pared his nails more than was reasonable. His nails could not possibly be growing that quickly. The nail paring was part of a complicated behavioural tic. He pared his nails before he ate. It was a ritual. Open knife, pare nails, wipe blade, cut cheese, chew, close knife. She sympathised. She knew all about rituals and routines. Our habits rust with age and become increasingly inflexible and unavoidable.

‘I hadn’t even thought of inheritance tax,’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘Most people don’t,’ said Mr Canterbury. He cut himself a small piece of cheese. When he had eaten the cheese he poured himself another glass of port. That too was part of the routine. ‘The sad news is that our pier doesn’t appear to be worth very much. But by the same token, this means that we won’t have to pay tax on our acquisition. And so the sad news becomes good news.’

‘But I can just ignore the letter from these people who want to buy the pier?’

‘Oh yes. We can keep our pier. The only real concern would be if the council decided that the pier was unsafe or an eyesore or in some other regard unsatisfactory. The structure reports I have seen confirm that the pier is in good condition. There is no need for you to worry on that score. However, councils have given themselves a good deal of power over property owners these days. And a pier, not being hidden down a side street as it were, is not the sort of property that is likely to be overlooked.’

‘Will it be possible for us to move into the accommodation at the entrance to the pier?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

Mr Canterbury, who was sipping his port, raised half a pair of un-groomed eyebrows. He seemed surprised.

‘Our local council have just told us that they have decided to purchase our home,’ explained Mrs Caldicot. ‘They’re going to knock it down and put railway lines there instead.’

‘Oh dear!’ said Mr Canterbury sympathetically. ‘We take it that your property is in the path of this absurd new high speed railway the Government has decided to build?’

‘I’m afraid so.’

‘Then we fear there is no saving you from your fate. The Government has given itself extraordinarily draconian powers over the owners of homes and land which stand in the way of its various tentacle building operations.’ Mr Canterbury sounded disapproving. ‘But your pier is another kettle of fish, if you will pardon the rather inappropriate metaphor. We can’t imagine the Government will have plans to build a new railway line through your pier. That would be a most unfortunate case of ‘incidis in Scyllam cupiens vitare Charybdim’. And we can’t see them wanting to build an airport there either. So our only threat will come from the council – usually rather less of a threat than central government. If we get into trouble let me know and we will see if we can help. We have not, of course, seen the property ourselves but it is our sad experience that local councillors and their planning officers have a tendency to attempt to ride roughshod over the rights of local property owners and if they have some pet project in mind there will be no end to the devious nature of their machinations.’

‘Excuse me, said Mr Livingstone. ‘But what, er, was the incidis in Scyllam whatever?’

‘My apologies. The Latin phrase ‘incidis in Scyllam cupiens vitare Charybdim’ means simply ‘out of the frying pan into the fire’.

Mr Livingstone and Mrs Caldicot then thanked Mr Canterbury.

‘Meanwhile, mind how you go down the stairs,’ said Mr Canterbury, making it clear that the audience was over. ‘They’re rather steep. They used to be the only stairs in the building but now they lead only to my offices here on the top floor. The other floors in this building have all been modernised and are now all accessed by an elevator.’ He shuddered as though he found the very idea alarming.

‘So the receptionist downstairs works just for you?’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘Oh yes. Ethel has been here since 1946. She tried to retire in 1990 but found retirement such a traumatic experience that two weeks later she asked if she could come back to work. We hadn’t found a replacement so we just treated the two weeks as though it had been a holiday. My secretary, whom you have also met, has been here since 1955 and Ethel still regards her as something of a newcomer.’

Mrs Caldicot and Mr Livingstone rose and thanked the solicitor again.

‘It’s been my pleasure. In our career we have dealt with many problems, many wills, many properties but we’ve never dealt with a pier before. We congratulate you on your good fortune. If you find you need legal help, advice of any kind, don’t hesitate to get in touch with us. We will be pleased to help.’

They looked back. They both felt that he meant it.

‘A first pier is always bound to be rather special,’ he said, with a boyish smile, as though he felt he needed to reinforce what he had said; to explain his genuine enthusiasm. ‘And to be honest we would very much like to know how things go.’

And with that final thought Mr Canterbury, now smiling to himself, opened his penknife and began, once again, to pare his already well-trimmed fingernails.

Chapter Five

Sitting in a railway carriage can be immensely frustrating when you're racing to a time sensitive assignation. The more urgent the journey the more the train seems determined to dawdle; stopping here a while, stopping there a while and wandering along as though it has all the time in the world. And, inevitably perhaps, if a journey is really important, and you have a vital appointment to keep, then the train will suddenly trundle to a halt and sit wherever it is; stranded in the middle of nowhere, alongside fields where cows chew their cud with all the time in the world or, tantalisingly, just a few hundred yards from the railway station itself. Naturally, there is never anyone to explain where you are, why you're there and how long it's going to be before you're the somewhere that you'd rather be.

But train travel is wonderful, peaceful and relaxing when you have all the time in the world, no appointment to keep and no connection to catch. There is, perhaps, no form of travel so peaceful and so relaxing. You can read, work, talk or simply look out of the window. All you really have to do is sit back and enjoy the view.

Mrs Caldicot and Mr Livingstone now had no appointments to keep and so their journey back home promised to be restful, charming and restorative. They would have time to look out of the carriage window at the rooftops, back gardens, kitchen windows and remaining branch line stations which Dr Beeching had missed or forgotten when he ill-advisedly took his axe to the railway network in 1963.

And they would have plenty of time to talk.

They each bought coffee, snacks and magazines at the railway station buffet.

Mrs Caldicot purchased a magazine called *Devon Days*, in the hope that she might learn a little something about the county wherein lay their new home.

Mr Livingstone bought one magazine called *Coach and Bus Weekly* and another titled *Airports of the World Monthly*.

'I didn't know you were interested in buses or airports,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'I'm not,' said Mr Livingstone. 'I know nothing about either of them.'

'But why…?' began Mrs Caldicot.

'Oh, I always like to buy magazines that will introduce me to new worlds,' explained Mr Livingstone. 'Have you ever noticed that the world seems to be divided up into little speciality groups? Some people live for football. They know an enormous amount about their favourite teams and players. Their heroes are all footballers. Other people live for horse racing. Their lives are dominated by their interest in horse racing. They live for horse racing in the way that the other people live for football. You get people whose lives revolve around ballroom dancing, carp fishing or stamp collecting but they never take much interest in one another's enthusiasms. The people who love boating on canals, and who are absolutely passionate about narrow boats, don't usually know much about bell ringing or model railways. I find all these little worlds quite fascinating.'

'Yes, I suppose that's true,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. 'I hadn't thought about it quite like that.'

'Well, I like to learn about other people's interests. And the easiest way to do that is to buy specialist magazines. Last week I bought one on keeping cage birds. The week before that I read one on sea fishing. I suppose you could say that my hobby is learning about other people's hobbies.'

Mrs Caldicot was quiet for a moment.

She found that she was always learning about her friends. Just the other day she had found that Mr Merivale had once competed in the Olympics. He had come fourth in one of the breaststroke swimming events so he hadn't won a medal. But he'd competed at the Olympics and no one could ever take that glory away from him. And now there was Mr Livingstone and his curious hobby of collecting information about other people's hobbies.

When the train arrived they climbed aboard, found a quiet table and settled down. Since it was neither going to work time nor going home time the train was almost deserted.

'Well, what do you think?' asked Mrs Caldicot, settling into her seat as their homeward bound train chugged rather reluctantly out of the station.

'I haven't had time to look at them yet,' said Mr Livingstone. 'But the *Coach and Bus* magazine looks pretty good. I'm not sure about the airports. It's difficult to see why there would be a whole magazine devoted to airports.'

Mrs Caldicot laughed. 'Not the magazines! The pier!'

Mr Livingstone took a big breath, looked out of the window for a moment and then turned back to Mrs Caldicot. 'It's all a bit daunting,' he said. He took a cardboard container of coffee and a plastic packet from a small, paper bag. The packet had a label which announced that the contents, something which looked to Mr Livingstone rather like a sandwich, was actually not anything as mundane as a sandwich but was something called an International Hoagie. The smaller lettering on the label announced that the International Hoagie contained the following ingredients: 'A razor cut slice of Palma ham with segments of Swiss Gruyere cheese and sun dried Spanish tomatoes flavoured with English pickle and French mustard'.

Mr Livingstone put the ham and cheese sandwich and the coffee down in front of him. He idly wondered where the coffee had come from. It seemed strange that they hadn't told him. Columbia? Where else did they grow coffee beans? Java, of course. Brazil naturally. And Africa too. But which bits of Africa? Either way there was little doubt that they hadn't been grown in England. So they were definitely foreign and therefore fitted comfortably into the international theme of his picnic. He took the keys to the pier from his jacket pocket and lay them down on the table alongside the sandwich and the coffee cup.

'It's a big bunch of keys,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'There must be a good many doors and locks,' said Mr Livingstone. He picked up one of the keys. It was large, made of iron and slightly rusty. 'What on earth do you think this is?'

'I've absolutely no idea,' said Mrs Caldicot. She paused. 'Fancy you owning a pier!'

'Not something I ever imagined I'd be able to say. 'David Livingstone – Pier Owner'. It's all pretty exciting isn't it? I bet none of my school teachers ever thought I'd one day own a pier.'

'It is very exciting,' agreed Mrs Caldicot.

She was looking forward to the move to the seaside. It was another adventure and she was looking forward to it. Her life with Mr Caldicot had been rather short of excitement and she couldn't help thinking that she was now rather making up for lost time.

The truth was that Mr Caldicot, her former husband and partner on life's rocky road, now sadly deceased, gone and mostly forgotten, had not encouraged excitement. He always said that 'adventure' was frivolous and 'excitement' a distraction. His trousers were always held up with a belt and a pair of braces (or, as the Americans call them 'suspenders') and his idea of recklessness was going out of the house without tying a double knot in his shoelaces.

A lot had changed in Mrs Caldicot's life since her first husband had died.

In what she tended to think of as the old days, another time, Mrs Caldicot had often had 'thoughts'. She had imagined herself saying things but she had never actually found the courage to say them.

These days she didn't have anywhere near as many 'thoughts'. She felt able to say what she felt about things. Mr Jenkins, her new husband, known to one and all simply as Jenkins, was completely the opposite to Mr Caldicot. He always encouraged her to speak her mind, to say what was troubling her.

'A very different kettle of fish,' her grandmother would have said about him. The saying reminded her of Mr Canterbury. He'd used it too.

Another thing that was different was that Jenkins didn't mind taking chances. He had been excited by the prospect of their moving to Devon to help manage Mr Livingstone's pier. Like her, he had thought of it as a huge and invigorating challenge. 'Overcoming new obstacles keeps you young,' he sometimes said when they were having problems.

Thinking about Jenkins reminded her that he would be going to America within 24 hours. She'd have to help him with his suitcase when she got back home. Not that he needed any help. He was perfectly capable of packing a case. He wasn't going to fly to America and then find out he'd forgotten spare socks or his favourite brand of toothpaste. But she liked to help him. He let her pick out a tie and a shirt for him to wear when he was giving a speech or attending an important meeting. She liked that. It made her feel as though she were part of the 'him' that was going away. Mr Caldicot would have never allowed her to have a say in what tie he wore. As far as he was concerned, all she was good for was brushing the fluff off his blazer.

She was, she knew, going to miss Jenkins a lot when he went to America. Still, she thought, they'd try to get the pier sorted out for his return. All shipshape and Bristol fashion, whatever that meant. She liked to do things to show him that she had grown into the assurance and competence he'd found for her.

'I can't wait to get there,' said Mr Livingstone closing his eyes. 'I bet it's all brightly painted and red and blue. I can see it in my mind. Decorated with lots of flags and bunting and packed with holidaymakers all eating ice creams.'

'I'm glad you haven't lost your enthusiasm,' said Mrs Caldicot, who had always known that there would be more than a few snags to sort out. She thought she ought to warn him. 'We must remember that there are bound to be a few little teething problems to deal with when we get there.'

'Bring them on!' said Mr Livingstone with a boldness born more of hope than knowledge. 'My enthusiasm remains undimmed. What have I got to lose? Before that letter came from Mr Canterbury my worldly goods consisted of a tin box with a few medals in it, a couple of rather threadbare suits that had seen better days back in the 1980s, a collection of rather battered musical instruments and a rather inadequate pension.' He picked up the keys and held them aloft. 'Now I'm also the owner of a pier.' He thought for a moment. 'Or, rather, I'm part owner of a pier. We own it together. All of us.’

‘Oh no…,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘It’s your pier.’

‘No it isn’t,’ insisted Mr Livingstone. ‘We all share everything. You and Jenkins do far more than your fair share for the rest of us. If it hadn’t been for you I’d still be in that damned Twilight Years Rest Home, drugged up to my eyeballs and eating liver and cabbage three times a week. And I know damned well that Mr Williams’s photographs have helped pay our costs. No, we share the bad things and we share the good things. That’s what friends do.’

In his earlier days, their companion Henry Williams had been a famous photographer who had worked in Paris. He had a fine collection of old negatives and for some time he had helped defray some of the costs of running the house which they all shared by selling off prints of the most famous of his pictures.

‘Mr Williams won’t be able to bail us out for much longer, I’m afraid,’ said Mrs Caldicot rather sadly. ‘He told me yesterday that a French internet company has managed to create some fake negatives and they’ve been making hundreds of prints and selling them. Apparently, they can do things like that these days. As a result of all the fakes being sold, the value of Mr Williams’s negatives and pictures has fallen rather a lot.’

‘Can’t he do anything to stop them?’

‘Apparently not,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘It seems that there are laws now which support the idea that ‘copyright is theft’. I don’t really understand it but Mr Williams looked into it and said it’s all due to freedom of speech and human rights. I’m afraid there won’t be much more money from Mr Williams’s photographs.’ She took the coffee and the plastic wrapped sandwich from her small paper carrier bag. ‘He’s very upset about it.’

‘Poor chap!’ said Mr Livingstone, genuinely sad for his friend. ‘Still, we’ve got a pier! What is it they say? One door closes and another one opens? I know they say the pier isn’t worth much but I bet we can make something of it.’

‘I bet we can!’ agreed Mrs Caldicot.

‘Fancy offering me a quid for it!’ said Mr Livingstone, rather disgustedly.

‘That was very cheeky!’ agreed Mrs Caldicot. ‘They probably thought they could grab a bargain and make a lot of money.’

‘Well, they’ve got another think coming!’

Mr Livingstone, who had been trying to open the sandwich package with his fingers gave up and took out his small, well-worn, silver penknife. Taking out the knife reminded him of the solicitor. ‘That Canterbury is an extraordinary old chap isn’t he?’

Mrs Caldicot laughed. ‘Absolutely!’ she agreed. ‘But I must say I did rather like him. He reminded me of a character out of a novel by Dickens?’

‘You’re right! I knew he reminded me of someone. He was straight out of one of those long novels by Charles Dickens. Did you notice the way he kept paring his nails with his penknife?’

‘And then he was using the same penknife to carve pieces of cheese from that huge block of Cheddar on his desk!’

‘I’m glad he didn’t offer me a chunk.’

‘No, I was a bit worried about that too. Did you notice that he got almost tearful when he was talking about the little train on the pier?’

‘Yes, I did! He seemed lost in memories. A very decent fellow, I thought.’

The two of them spent the rest of the journey looking at the details of the pier, for Mr Canterbury had given them maps, deeds and a surprisingly large amount of paperwork relating to the pier’s structure and its history. When any building is the best part of a century and a half old there is bound to be a good deal of history associated with it and Mr Livingstone’s pier was no exception. Some of the older deeds and mortgages were printed on vellum, a fine form of parchment which is made from the skin of a calf.

And the more the two of them looked at the details of the pier the more excited they got.

‘It says here that during the War it was commandeered by the Navy,’ said Mr Livingstone, reading one of the old documents. He seemed very proud of this. ‘There are letters which say that the Navy took over the pier from 1941 to 1946 and that during that time it was closed to the public.’

‘It’ll be fun to move into the accommodation in that archway that Mr Canterbury talked about,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Fancy us all living on a pier. There are enough rooms aren’t there?’

‘There are plenty of rooms,’ said Mr Livingstone, unfolding a plan of the building. ‘But I don’t know what sort of condition they’re in. I don’t think anyone has lived there for a while.’

They talked more about the pier, learning as much as they could about its history and when they arrived at their destination (since they weren’t in a hurry, the train was, inevitably, ten minutes early) neither Mrs Caldicot nor Mr Livingstone had opened their magazines.

Chapter Six

Mrs Caldicot and her colleagues had a meeting to discuss when they should move into the accommodation available on the pier.

‘We don’t have a lot of choice,’ said Mr Twist, the former tax inspector. ‘The Government has given us a few weeks before they send in the bulldozers. So unless we want to find ourselves scooped up and dumped in a landfill site we have to get out of here quite quickly.’

‘We could tie ourselves to a tree,’ suggested Miss Nightingale, who had always had a secret desire to be tied to a tree. This was not something she had ever mentioned before but this did seem a not inappropriate moment to float the idea.

‘Oh no, I don’t like that idea,’ said Mrs Peterborough, wrinkling her nose. ‘I’m too old to tie myself to a tree. Besides, I’ve never been any good at knots.’

‘What if it rains?’ asked Mr Roxdale. ‘We’ll be outside tied to trees and all getting wet!’

‘I hadn’t thought of that,’ admitted Miss Nightingale, before quickly withdrawing her suggestion.

‘Maybe Mrs Caldicot and Mr Livingstone should go and look at the pier,’ suggested Mrs Merivale. ‘They could check it all out, give the accommodation a once-over and then come back and let us know what the place is like.’

‘But that seems a bit pointless,’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘We know that we have to leave here shortly and at the moment we haven’t got anywhere else to go. Sending out a reconnaissance team isn’t going to make any difference to what we do.’

Mrs Merivale, thinking about this, nodded and finally agreed with him. ‘You’re right!’ she agreed. ‘If we delay things then we’ll be moving in a rush at the last minute. If we decide to move now then we can arrange to go to Penmouth at our own speed.’

‘Shouldn’t the people who are knocking down our house pay us some compensation?’ asked Mrs Peterborough.

‘They have said that they will be paying us,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘But we owe quite a lot to the bank so most of the money will go to them. And we won’t receive our share of the compensation money for several months.’

‘That’s really not fair,’ said Mr Twist. ‘They should pay us our compensation before the bulldozers move in.’

‘No, it isn’t fair,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘But I’m afraid we’re dealing with bureaucrats working for the Government. And they don’t seem very sympathetic.’

‘I’ve made several phone calls,’ said Jenkins. ‘But I can’t get anyone to agree to send us our cheque for at least three months. There appear to be at least three layers of bureaucracy and all the compensation payments have to be authorised by something called the Residential Compensation Committee, a special subsidiary quango which is chaired by someone called the Comptroller of Financial Administration.’ Jenkins sighed rather sadly. ‘The committee meets every three months and I’m told that they’ve already got a backlog of claims. There is no way we’re going to be receiving what we’re owed for several months.’

‘It’s outrageous!’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘I bet they wouldn’t like it if their homes were being knocked down.’

‘I agree with you,’ said Jenkins. ‘It is outrageous. But it seems it’s impossible to speed things up. You can’t hurry a Government department if it doesn’t want to be hurried.’

‘Our other problem is that the amount we’ll receive when the compensation payment finally does come through won’t be sufficient to enable us to buy a new house,’ Mrs Caldicot reminded them all. ‘When we bought the Twilight Years Rest Home I was a year or two younger. The older you get the more reluctant the banks are to lend you money to buy property.’

‘I think we should move onto Mr Livingstone’s pier as soon as we can,’ said Mrs Torridge.

‘It’s our pier,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘It’s only my pier if it falls into the sea.’

‘Is it going to fall into the sea?’ asked Mr Twist, looking worried.

‘No, no,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘I meant that if anything disastrous happens then it’s my pier because I can just go bankrupt.’

‘Our solicitor, Mr Canterbury, more or less suggested that it would be easier and cheaper for Mr Livingstone to go bankrupt than it would be for us to buy insurance,’ explained Mrs Caldicot.

‘I don’t know what we’re all worrying about,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘Let’s all move into the pier’s hotel straight away!’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘It’s where we are going to end up so why don’t we just go there now?’

‘Let’s vote on it!’ suggested Mr Williams. ‘I propose that we all travel down to Penmouth and move onto Mr Livingstone’s lovely old pier.’

And so they voted and it was decided, unanimously, that they would travel to Penmouth as soon as possible and that they would arrange for a removal lorry to transport their furniture and personal belongings.

‘When do you have to travel to America?’ Mrs Caldicot asked her husband.

‘Early next week. So I’m afraid I don’t think I’ll be able to travel down to Devon with you.’

‘OK,’ said Mrs Caldicot in a very tiny voice. ‘We’ll try to get it all nice for when you get back.’

‘It’s only for three weeks,’ said Jenkins, softly, though he thought three weeks sounded too much like a lifetime and would have been happy to have said, ‘No, thank you’ to the Americans if it hadn’t been for the fact that Mrs Caldicot had made it quite clear that she thought he should grab the opportunity with both hands.

‘Only three weeks,’ repeated Mrs Caldicot.

She knew she would miss Jenkins terribly but couldn’t help wondering what would happen in those weeks.

She had a feeling it was going to be a busy time for them all.

And, in a way, she was grateful for that.

Chapter Seven

Mrs Caldicot and Mr Twist went to the local railway station to find the cost of railway tickets. Mr Twist went with Mrs Caldicot since he was in charge of their money.

‘We’re enquiring about the cost of tickets to Penmouth,’ said Mrs Caldicot, when she and Mr Twist finally reached the top of the booking office queue.

‘You can telephone for information,’ said a weedy little fellow with a grumpy looking face. ‘We have a Railtime Hotline.’

‘We tried that,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘But the phone line has been busy most of the morning. On the one occasion when it wasn’t busy, it rang for fifteen minutes without anyone answering it.’

‘They’re very busy people,’ sniffed Mr Grumpy. ‘If it’s just information you want you can find train times on our website.’

‘A pre-recorded message on your telephone line suggested that we do exactly that,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘But unfortunately your website isn’t working. I think the technical term is that it is feeling ‘down’.’

‘Feeling down?’

‘That’s what my husband says and he knows about these things. I can’t see why a computer should feel down. But they do say that computers are almost human these days, don’t they?’

‘Get a bloody move on!’ snarled a voice standing behind Mrs Caldicot. ‘Are you going to be there all bloody day?’

Mrs Caldicot turned round and found herself facing a girl of about seventeen or eighteen. She had yellow hair, cut in the style which used to be compulsory for army recruits, and wore a dirty T-shirt and a pair of jeans with huge rips in the knees. She had two rings in her nose, a string of rings along the edge of each ear lobe and tattoos of knives on her neck. The knives were all dripping with blood.

‘I’m just trying to get details of some tickets,’ said Mrs Caldicot, sweetly.

‘You’re holding everyone up,’ snarled the girl. ‘Shouldn’t you be at home having your incontinence pad changed?’

‘Don’t be so rude!’ said Mr Twist, who was shocked.

‘I wasn’t talking to you old man,’ said the girl.

Mrs Caldicot, who had turned back to the booking office window, repeated her request to Mr Grumpy.

‘There’s a pile of leaflets on the rack,’ he replied.

‘I’m afraid there isn’t a leaflet for Penmouth,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘And the leaflets you do have are all out of date.’

‘Not my fault,’ said Mr Grumpy. ‘We haven’t had the new leaflets in yet. They’ll probably be here sometime next month.’

‘I’m afraid I can’t wait that long,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘I just want to know how often the trains run to Penmouth and how much a ticket will cost. There will be thirteen of us travelling.’

‘You need to speak to someone in Group Bookings,’ said Mr Grumpy.

‘And how do I get hold of them?’

‘You ring the Railtime Hotline.’

‘But they don’t answer their phone!’

‘Well, it’s night time there. They probably won’t be up yet.’

‘Night time where?’ asked Mrs Caldicot, confused.

‘Somewhere in India I think it is. Or maybe it’s the Philippines.’

‘Who is in India?’

‘Our call centre partners. The ones who answer the telephone for the Railtime Hotline,’ replied Mr Grumpy.

‘What the hell is going on up there?’ demanded a voice from the back of the queue.

‘It’s this stupid old woman in front of me,’ said the girl with the tattoos and the yellow hair. ‘She doesn’t seem to know what she wants.’

‘I know exactly what I want,’ said Mrs Caldicot, over her shoulder. She turned back to Mr Grumpy. ‘Don’t you have anyone to open one of the other windows?’

There were three other ticket windows in the booking office but they were all closed.

‘They’re all on their break,’ said Mr Grumpy. ‘We’re allowed to have breaks you know.’

‘But it’s half past two in the afternoon!’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘What sort of break are they having?’

‘One of them is on an extended lunch break for personal reasons and the other two are having an early afternoon tea. It's a statutory requirement.'

'What sort of personal reasons require an extended lunch break?'

'He eats slowly. He's running in a new set of teeth.'

'Let's forget about the group booking,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Can you please just tell me what time there is a train to Penmouth and how much a ticket costs?'

Mr Grumpy sighed. 'There's a big queue behind you.'

'I know there's a queue. If you just give me the information I need then I'll go and you can deal with the nice, young lady behind me.'

'Who are you calling a nice, young lady?' demanded the girl with the tattoos and yellow hair. 'I'll have the law on you!'

Mr Grumpy fiddled slowly with the keyboard in front of him. The screen in front of him remained blank. He pressed more buttons. Still nothing happened. 'My system is very slow today,' he said. He pressed the same buttons again. 'I think it's down.'

'There you are!' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I told you that your computer was feeling down today. Don't you have a printed timetable you can consult?'

'We should have brought a flask and some sandwiches,' whispered Mr Twist.

Mr Grumpy sighed and picked up a large, scruffy folder which had a label stuck to the front. The label contained the single word 'Trains' written on it in red ink. The folder, when opened, appeared to contain pages from a railway timetable.

'Where was it you said you want to go?'

'Penmouth in Devon.'

Mr Grumpy flicked through the pages in his folder and eventually found a page which seemed vaguely relevant. 'Ha!' he said with unconcealed delight. 'You've missed today's train.'

'I didn't want to travel today,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I just wanted to know what time the train leaves.'

'How much longer are you lot going to be up there?' shouted a new voice at the back of the queue. 'What are you doing? Planning a revolution?'

'It's some old biddy and some old geezer,' shouted yet another voice.

'The train went at 11.47 today. That's the only train to Penmouth. But after next Tuesday it only runs on Mondays and Thursdays except at Easter.'

'And how much is a ticket?'

'What time do you want to travel?'

Mrs Caldicot was confused for a moment by this. 'The 11.47 I suppose,' she said.

'And what day do you want to travel?'

'One of the days when the train is running, I suppose.'

'That would be Mondays and Thursdays after next Tuesday.'

'Next Thursday then.'

'And when are you coming back?'

'We're not coming back.'

'So you just want a single?'

'Yes.'

'Not a return?'

'No.'

'A single for one for Penmouth next Thursday?'

'Yes, please.'

The blind at one of the other booking windows moved up a foot and another ticket collector peered out, saw the size of the queue and closed the blind again.

'Isn't someone going to open another booking window?' asked Mrs Caldicot. Behind her the queue was now so long, and snaking either out onto the street or in onto the platform, that the end of it was not visible.

Mr Grumpy turned and spoke to someone out of sight. They whispered for a while.

'My colleague doesn't like crowds. He gets nervous. He says he'll open his window when some of the people have gone.'

Mrs Caldicot started to say something and then realised there wasn't really any point.

'How will you be paying?' asked Mr Grumpy.

'Do you take cheques?'

'No.'

'Well, probably with a credit card.'

‘I need to see it.’

‘But I’m not buying the ticket today. I just want to know the cost.’

‘I can’t tell you that until I see proof of payment. It’s in my regulations.’

Mrs Caldicot opened her bag, took out her purse, found her credit card and showed it to Mr Grumpy.

‘Put it into the reader.’

‘The what?’

‘The card machine.’ Mr Grumpy pointed to a credit card reading machine fixed to the narrow ledge in front of Mrs Caldicot.

‘But I only want to know the cost of a ticket,’ repeated Mrs Caldicot. ‘I don’t want to buy one today.’

‘Has someone died up there?’ shouted a voice that Mrs Caldicot was now beginning to recognise. She turned round but saw nothing but dull, grey, stony faces. The girl with the tattoos and the yellow hair had disappeared.

‘I can’t do anything until you put your card into the machine,’ said Mr Grumpy.

Reluctantly, Mrs Caldicot put her credit card into the card reading machine.

‘Do you have a railcard?’ asked Mr Grumpy.

Mrs Caldicot said she didn’t have a railcard.

‘A student card?’

Mrs Caldicot said she didn’t have one of those either.

‘Are you travelling first or second class?’

Mrs Caldicot said she thought they would probably be travelling second class.

‘Are you travelling with a bicycle?’

Mrs Caldicot said she would not be travelling with a bicycle.

‘We have a special fare for people travelling with bicycles.’

Mrs Caldicot said that she thought that was doubtless very useful for people with bicycles and that she was very sorry that she would not be able to take advantage of the special fare because she did not have a bicycle.

‘A single, second class fare for one person will be £126.90,’ announced Mr Grumpy.

‘No, I want the price of a second class ticket, please,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘That is the price of a second class ticket.’

‘I don’t want to buy the train. Or even rent it for a special outing. I just want the price of one ticket to Penmouth.’

‘That is the price of one ticket to Penmouth. Do you want to reserve a seat?’

‘Does it cost more to reserve a seat?’

‘Oh yes.’

‘How much more?’

‘Another £10 per ticket so if you have a single it’s another £10 but if you have a return it’s £20. And there’s a £5 per ticket booking ticket price to add on but then you have to add that on even if you’re not reserving a seat. Do you want to buy a ticket for the London Underground to go with your train ticket?’

‘I’m not going via London.’

‘Well you might be. Trains do get diverted sometimes – due to circumstances outside our control.’

‘No, I think I’ll leave that, thank you.’

‘Do you want a car park ticket? You get a reduced price ticket if you buy your car park ticket when you buy your rail ticket.’

‘No thank you. How much is a first class ticket?’

‘You said you wanted to go second class.’

‘I do but I’m just curious. How much is a first class ticket?’

‘£276.45 for a single first class. And there are people waiting. If you want to buy a ticket you need to put your pin number into the machine.’

‘I don’t want to buy a ticket. I just wanted to know the price.’

‘Of course, it would be cheaper if you were coming back.’

Puzzled, Mrs Caldicot looked at him. ‘What do you mean ‘it would be cheaper if I were coming back’?’

‘I’ve given you the price of a single second class to Penmouth. If you wanted a return second class to Penmouth it would be cheaper.’

‘How much cheaper?’

‘It depends on when you’re coming back.’

‘I’m not coming back.’

‘But when would you be coming back if you were coming back?’

‘Does it make a difference?’

‘Oh yes. If you come back within 30 days, it’s cheaper than if you come back after 30 days. And if you come back the same day that you go then it's the cheapest of all.'

'How much is it if I come back within 30 days?'

'If you come back within 30 days then a return would be £122.14. If you come back after 30 days it would be £165.43 so that's not actually cheaper, is it?'

'And if I come back the same day?'

'Oh that's very cheap. That's only £101.21 for a return ticket. And it would be £99.14 if you caught a train going to Penmouth before 9.00 am.'

This still didn't seem 'very cheap' to Mrs Caldicot. It was also confusing. 'You said the only train to Penmouth was the 11.47.'

'That's right.'

'So how do I catch a train going before 9.00 am?'

'You can't, can you? And what time are you coming back?'

'Does that make a difference?'

'Oh yes. If you come back after 6 pm you can get a super saver day return fare.'

'How much is that?'

'That would be £98.43. But the only train after 6 pm is the 9.45 pm and you have to change four times on that train and so it doesn't get you in until 3.00 am and that's the next day so I'm not sure the super saver day return fare would count in that situation. I'd have to talk to my supervisor or you could ring the Hotline.'

'And speak to the man in India when he wakes up.'

'Or woman. Some of our partners in India are women.'

'So, the bottom line is that it's cheaper to buy a ticket there and a ticket back than just buying a ticket going there?'

'That's what I just told you. If you go and come back it's cheaper than if you just go.'

'That doesn't make sense.'

Mr Grumpy shrugged. 'I don't make the rules. I just work here.' He leafed through the folder in front of him. He seemed now to be quite taken by the seemingly unending possibilities. 'If you wait another month you can have our special seasonal price. It's only available for three months and you need to book at least a month in advance and there need to be at least three adults and one child or two adults and three children all travelling together. That would cost you £101.87 per person but one child goes free as long as he or she is under eight-years-old on the 1st May.' Mr Grumpy examined the folder a little more. 'The snag is that you have to catch the train before 11.30 am if you're going to take advantage of that offer.'

'And the earliest train is the 11.47.'

'Yes.'

'Has someone up there died, or what?' shouted an invisible woman near the back of the queue.

'Thank you very much, you've been very helpful,' said Mrs Caldicot, now totally confused.

'If you want tickets then come back before Sunday,' said Mr Grumpy. 'All our prices go up next Monday.'

'Right,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I'll remember that.'

'If you're under 25 you can buy a railcard and get a discount on rail travel throughout Europe,' added Mr Grumpy. 'But the railcard is only valid for return tickets on trains which leave before 8.30 am on weekdays and Saturdays and before 8.45 am on Sundays.'

Mrs Caldicot removed her credit card from the machine and put it back into her purse. Then she put her purse back into her handbag. She and Mr Twist then left the booking office area. At least a dozen customers were now sitting on the ground, sprawled against the wall or leaning against cases and rucksacks. A youth with tattoos, earrings and a ponytail was playing a guitar and singing something tuneless and miserable. An empty coffee cup on the ground in front of him had a few coins in it.

'Those prices are absurd,' said Mrs Caldicot to Mr Twist. 'There are fourteen of us. It will cost a fortune to buy fourteen tickets.'

'We only need thirteen tickets,' Mr Twist pointed out. 'Your husband will be in America when we travel down to Penmouth.'

'Oh yes,' said Mrs Caldicot, who hadn't wanted to be reminded that her husband would soon be on a different continent. 'So how much does that come to?'

'£1,649.7.'

Mrs Caldicot stared at Mr Twist as if he'd gone mad.

'If we buy return tickets the total comes to £1,583.62,' said Mr Twist, who was very good at mathematics and could do quite complicated sums without a calculator or even a piece of paper and a pencil.

'I can't get over that. It seems madness that we pay less if we buy more tickets than we need.'

Mr Twist agreed with this.

The pair of them walked out of the railway station feeling bewildered to say the least.

As they walked away, a minibus drew up at the pavement and a horde of schoolchildren leapt out and rushed into the station.

'They don't need to rush if they haven't got tickets yet,' said Mr Twist drily.

The driver of the minibus, a woman in a blue anorak and a blue bobble hat, shouted something to the children, warning them not to run. She then pressed a button and the door hissed to and closed with a pleasant clunky sound.

'Excuse me!' cried Mrs Caldicot, tapping on one of the minibus windows. 'Could I have a quick word?'

The driver put on the brake and pressed a button. There was a hiss and the door swung open.

'I hope you don't mind my asking,' said Mrs Caldicot, 'but what sort of driving licence do you need to drive one of these things?'

'Just an ordinary driving licence,' said the woman. 'As long as the bus doesn't have more than 16 seats. If it has more than that then you need some sort of commercial licence.'

'Thank you very much!' cried Mrs Caldicot.

'Pleasure,' said the woman. She pressed the button again and the door closed. She then drove off.

'Maybe we could rent one of those,' suggested Mrs Caldicot. 'Then we could all drive down to Penmouth.'

'Great idea,' said Mr Twist. 'That way we could take more of our personal luggage. And I bet we'd save a fortune.'

They spotted a second hand car dealership on the other side of the road and wandered down to take a look. The dealership was decorated with faded union jack pennants which looked as if they had been out in the open for a few years. All the cars on display had advertisements painted on their windscreens in some sort of whitewash which, Mrs Caldicot assumed, could be washed or wiped off without too much difficulty.

'What can I do you both for?' asked a chubby little man in his forties. He wore a suit that he may have grown into but had certainly grown out of and his reddish brown hair was combed over his scalp in a vain attempt to disguise the fact that there was considerably more of the latter than the former. He wore a badge pinned to his lapel that had the word REG written on it in black marker pen. The word REG was written on a white, sticky label that had been fixed onto a child's birthday badge. Underneath the white label could be seen a red seven on a blue background with the words 'I am…' above the number and the word 'Today' below it.

'We wondered how much it would cost to rent a minibus,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'What size of minibus?' asked the chubby fellow. 'My name is Reg by the way. As in car registration. It's my real name, by the way.'

Mrs Caldicot introduced herself and Mr Twist. 'Suitable for carrying 14 people,' she then said.

'We don't do rentals,' said the chubby fellow.

'Well do you rent smaller vehicles?'

'We don't do any rentals at all. We don't have any call for them though that may be because we don't do them. But we've got a minibus I can sell you. It would be a much better proposition than renting one. A rental would cost you £200 a day including insurance.'

'Good heavens,' said Mrs Caldicot, though the price didn't seem all that bad. It would, she thought, be a lot cheaper to drive to Penmouth than to take the train. And there would be no need to hire taxis to take them all to the railway station. They would need three taxis and so that would be at least another £20 at each end.

'How much is the minibus you've got for sale?' asked Mrs Caldicot. She looked around the car lot but couldn't see anything that looked like a minibus.

'Well, let's have a look at it first and then we can talk about the price,' said Reg. 'We don't usually sell vans or commercial vehicles but we took this one in part exchange for a 1989 BMW. The BMW was a very nice vehicle – just three owners and less than 150,000 miles on the clock. I very nearly bought it myself.' As he chattered away he led them to a far corner of the lot where a rather sad for itself minibus was parked between an old Ford Zephyr and a Vauxhall of some variety.

'Oh,' said Mrs Caldicot when she saw it. She felt rather disappointed. It looked rather worn and battered.

'It was used to ferry around a boys' football team,' explained Reg. 'The bodywork isn't perfect but who cares about the bodywork on a minibus? The engine is perfect and the mechanicals are as good as new. It's got nine months left on the MOT and I can promise you that you won't find better value than this.' He opened the front passenger door so that they could see inside.

'Don't you lock the cars?' asked Mrs Caldicot, surprised.

'We lock the cars,' said Reg, with the emphasis on the word 'cars'. 'But who's going to steal a minibus? Joy riders want something with a bit of oomph – this does 0 to 60 in just under a minute!' He laughed. 'But you're not buying it to burn up people at the lights, are you?'

'No, I don't suppose we are,' agreed Mrs Caldicot.

'Does it have a button to enable the driver to open the front door on the passenger side?' asked Mr Twist who had been impressed by this facility on the minibus they'd seen at the railway station.

Reg looked at him and frowned.

'The driver presses a button and the door opens with a hissy sound,' explained Mr Hewitt.

'Oh no, you don't want anything like that,' said Reg firmly. 'Just something else to go wrong and drain your battery. Much better to have a door you open and close manually.' He closed the door and opened it again to illustrate this facility. 'And the windows are manually operated. You just wind 'em up and wind 'em down. Saves your battery. And imagine the mess you'd be in if your electrics failed with the window open when you wanted it up or vice versa the other way round.'

'Yes, I see what you mean,' admitted Mr Twist.

'This vehicle will get you where you want to go in fine style,' said Reg. 'New brake pads, new plugs, new windscreen wiper blades and nearly all the lights work perfectly. There's a couple of thousand miles left on the tyres.'

'How many miles has it done?' asked Mr Twist.

'Never tell a lady's age,' said Reg mysteriously. 'It's a good solid engine. There's a lot of driving left under that bonnet.' He winked. 'No, I'll be honest with you. I'm always up front with my customers. It's done 170,000 give or take a few hundred yards but these things have been known to do a million with no trouble. Just give her a little oil and water occasionally and she'll take you round the world and back again twice over. And there's £100 worth of rubber on those tyres. They've got more grip than a politician's handshake. Look at those seats – that's real plastic that is! None of that leather rubbish or faux plastic they use on modern cars.'

'How old is it?'

'Just under 20 years,' said Reg. 'Another few years and it'll be a classic car taking pride of place in a motoring museum. If you take it I'll throw in three month's road tax. Who'll be doing the driving? Anyone under 25?'

'No one under 65!' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Marvellous. I'll throw in a year's insurance too. What am I saying? The boss will kill me when she finds out.' He laughed merrily and winked. 'That's the wife,' he confided. 'She looks after the books, I look after the sales side. She's a marvel with an adding machine. Thanks to her there's no VAT on any of our cars. Don't ask how she does it but it's all legal.' He winked. 'Well, almost.'

'What does it do to the gallon?' asked Mr Twist.

'Depends how you drive it,' replied Reg. 'Drive her gently, treat her like a lady, and you'll be able to drive from here to there without filling up your tank. But you won't want to be thrashing her, will you? You don't look the sort of fellow to thrash an old lady in the autumn of her lifetime. Why don't you take her for a spin? Try her out. The key's in the ignition.'

Mrs Caldicot climbed into the driver's seat and Mr Twist climbed into the passenger seat. Reg just stood beside the minibus and smiled up at them.

'It's huge!' said Mr Twist, looking behind him at the rows of seats. The interior of the minibus looked exactly like an old-fashioned bus but smaller and the design was definitely on the functional side of practical. 'You could get a football team in here!'

'The last owner did,' whispered Mrs Caldicot, reminding him of what Reg had told them.

'Oh yes!' said Mr Twist.

'Aren't you coming with us?' Mrs Caldicot asked, looking down at Reg the car salesman.

'No, no, you two just go for a little drive together. See how you get on with it. Talk it over with each other. I guarantee you'll want to buy it after ten minutes. You come back and we'll do a deal on a price. Just turn the key, take the handbrake off and away you go. It's a proper gear box – four forward and one reverse – and the brakes will stop her on a sixpence.'

So Mrs Caldicot drove off.

After one or two close scrapes, Mrs Caldicot found that she was coping with the size of the vehicle far better than she had expected. 'People are very nice when they see us coming,' she said. 'They get well out of the way and leave me lots of room.'

Mr Twist, who regarded Mrs Caldicot as the closest thing he was ever likely to find to an angel, did not mention the fact that the minibus appeared to take quite a long time to slow down when the brakes were applied. It would, he thought, only stop on Reg's sixpence if the sixpence were placed on the road a couple of hundred yards ahead.

Less than ten minutes after they had first climbed aboard, they decided they wanted to buy the minibus.

'I wish we'd had one of these before,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'It's perfect for us.'

'If we buy it then we'll have transport when we are in Penmouth,' Mr Twist pointed out. 'It might be useful to be able to get about the town.'

'But where would we park? It's very big.'

'We could probably park it on the pier when we're not using it.'

'But they never let people park on piers.'

'Mr Livingstone owns the pier. If we talk to him nicely I think he'll let us park there.'

'What did I tell you?' asked Reg, when they got back and asked how much he wanted for the minibus. 'Cracking vehicle, isn't it? You could start your own little business with one of these. Put an ad in the local shop window and you're up, up and away. Quick lick of paint and it'll look like new. You could ferry wedding guests around from the church to the reception or take stag or hen parties off to the pub. There's no carpet on the floor so the next morning you can wash it out with a hose pipe and a bucket.'

'How much is it?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'You're a nice couple,' said Reg.

'We're not actually…' began Mrs Caldicot.

Reg held up his hand and winked. 'You don't have to tell me any secrets,' he said. 'When I first put this on the lot I was going to ask £2,500 for it but it's not our sort of vehicle so for a quick sale I'll let it go for £1,500. It's worth twice that and you won't find anything half as good at twice the price.'

Mrs Caldicot felt quite excited. She had no idea how much a minibus should cost but she had immediately worked out that at £1,500 the minibus was going to cost them less than the train fares. And if it costs £200 a day to rent a minibus then the purchase price wasn't much more than a week's rental.

'That's a bit more than our budget,' said Mr Twist, managing to look very disappointed.

'What's your budget?' asked Reg.

'We were planning to spend up to £1,000.'

'I'm giving it to you taxed and insured and it's got an MOT!' protested Reg, pretending to be shocked. 'I tell you what,' he said. 'Split the difference. Give me £1,250 and I'll throw in a free Sat Nav. One of those you plug into the cigar lighter. Brilliant. You'll never get lost again.'

And so they bought a minibus and drove it back home.

Chapter Eight

A few days later Jenkins left for his stay in America and the day after that Mrs Caldicot and the rest of what Ruth insisted on referring to as ‘the gang’ watched four apparently tireless removal men put their furniture and other belongings into two huge pantechnicons and set off on the long journey to Penmouth. The removal men were planning to sleep in their vehicles and to arrive in Penmouth early the following morning.

Once they’d waved goodbye to their beds, wardrobes, chairs and other essential bits and pieces, Mrs Caldicot and the gang packed themselves and their essential baggage into the minibus. The vehicle suddenly seemed to be considerably smaller than it had appeared when Mrs Caldicot and Mr Twist had first seen it. This was a result of the fact that instead of taking a single suitcase each, as had been agreed, the residents had crammed the minibus with a considerable array of personal belongings. Mr Livingstone insisted that his musical instruments counted as ‘essential’ and had to travel with him rather than with the beds and wardrobes. Mr Hewitt and Mr Roxdale decided that all their garden tools were also essential – though Mrs Caldicot did point out to them that there wasn’t likely to be a garden on the pier.

In the end, Mrs Roberts and Mr Merivale had to climb the ladder fixed to the back of the minibus and put half a dozen suitcases into the massive roof rack on the roof. Once the suitcases were in situ, Mrs Roberts had to clamber onto the roof and tie the suitcases into place with an old clothes line which Mrs Merivale had found hanging on a nail in the outside lavatory.

Mrs Caldicot had intended to leave the house the minute the removal men had departed, and this intention had been generally accepted as ideal, but what with constantly rearranging the bags inside the minibus and then tying things onto the roof, things did not go quite as smoothly as had been generally hoped.

It has to be admitted that the delay came as no great surprise to Mrs Caldicot who had long ago come to accept that whatever could go wrong probably would go wrong.

As she once said to Jenkins, if she tried to define her life in terms of popular clichés it was definitely more about ‘upset apple carts’ and ‘spilt milk’ than it was about ‘plain sailing’ or ‘a smooth ride’.

It was just after noon by the time they finally managed to lock the front door and hit the road for the first time.

And it was just after one in the afternoon when they hit the road for the second time, having returned so that Miss Nightingale could visit the lavatory one last time, Mrs Merivale could check that the gas was turned off and Mr Roxdale could fetch the bundle of peasticks which he insisted he could not possibly live without.

‘Why are we bothering to check that the gas is turned off?’ asked Mr Livingstone.

‘There could be an explosion!’ explained Mrs Merivale.

‘But the Government is going to flatten the house,’ pointed out Mr Livingstone.

But they’d had to go back so that Miss Nightingale could visit the lavatory and Mr Roxdale could fetch his peasticks so Mrs Merivale checked the gas anyway.

It took them several hours more than expected to travel to Penmouth and it was dark by the time the minibus trundled into the town.

There had been several reasons for the delay.

They had to stop four times to purchase coffees, teas and other fluids and they had to stop five times so that the assembled travellers could rid themselves of the fluids they had taken on board. They also found that the minibus had an almost insatiable thirst for petrol and oil. They had to fill the petrol tank twice, and the vehicle’s need for oil was so great that they eventually bought half a dozen cans of engine oil and stuffed them under Mr Hewitt’s seat.

And the satellite navigation device which Reg had given them proved to be rather more trouble than it was worth.

Mr Williams, the former photographer, whose experience with cameras had given him a rather optimistic confidence in his ability to deal with equipment of all kinds, said that he would accept responsibility for using the device to navigate their journey to Devon.

Sadly, either he or the device, which they had installed via the cigar lighter, proved to be flawed in some way and when they found themselves heading north on the M1 motorway, Mrs Caldicot announced that she would navigate with the aid of the little map of Great Britain which was printed at the back of her diary.

But, all these difficulties were forgotten as they drove into Penmouth, their new home.

‘All we’ve got to do now is to find the pier!’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘Let’s just head for the sea,’ suggested Mr Merivale. ‘There’s a brown sign over there marked ‘Sea Front’ and Mr Livingstone’s pier is bound to be somewhere near the sea.’

Mrs Caldicot thought this a good and practical suggestion and so they headed for the Sea Front where, with unerring inevitability, they turned the wrong way and drove for two miles along a deserted promenade without seeing anything that looked remotely like a pier.

'I hope it hasn't been washed away,' said Mrs Peterborough. 'You do hear of it happening,' she added when she noticed her companions staring at her.

'I'll stop and ask someone,' said Mrs Caldicot who, being a woman, was not averse to asking directions from strangers.

This, however, was easier said than done for Penmouth seemed deserted and looked more like a film set for a movie about a post-apocalyptic Britain than a thriving seaside resort. Eventually, she pulled up alongside an elderly couple of flaneurs who were walking their dog, a small lively mongrel, and who had paused in their peregrinations in order to allow the creature to water a lamppost.

'The pier is the other way,' said the male half of the couple. He had a walking stick but carried it as though it were a weapon rather than a walking aid. He now waved it about as though indicating directions. 'But it's closed now,' he added.

'It's been closed for months,' said the female half, a stringy, gaunt looking woman. She spoke with relish, as though relieved to be able to pass on what she hoped was bad news. She looked the sort of individual who enjoyed sharing unhappiness. 'They say they're turning it into a conference centre,' she added. She did not seem enamoured of the proposal but then she did not appear to be a woman who was likely to be enamoured of anything much.

'It's not worth visiting,' said the male half firmly. 'It hasn't been worth visiting since the 1960s. But they once had Gerry and the Pacemakers in the theatre at the end of the pier.'

'We saw them,' said the female half, as if her companion's statement might need confirmation. 'They were quite good. It was the best night I've ever had in Penmouth.' She paused for a moment. 'I've lived here all my life,' she added.

Mrs Caldicot, thinking it a little sad that the woman's 'best night in Penmouth' had been no better than 'quite good', thanked them both, turned the minibus round and headed back along the promenade. She wondered what on earth the woman had meant by claiming that the pier was going to be converted into a conference centre. Mr Canterbury had said nothing about a conference centre.

They found the pier at 9.47 pm precisely.

It was dark, unlit and rather depressing but none of that dampened their excitement.

'Just look at that!' said Mr Livingstone, who added he hadn't been so excited since 1942 when he and the rest of his crew had dropped a large bomb directly onto a vital bridge in Northern Germany. This was quite a compliment to the pier for Mr Livingstone still remembered the sense of satisfaction he had felt as he had watched the bridge crumble into the raging river below.

'We taught the Krauts a thing or two about precision bombing,' Mr Livingstone always said when describing that glorious moment.

Mr Livingstone, who thought we'd been far too quick to forgive the Germans for starting two World Wars, still thought that 'political correctness' meant not spoiling your ballot paper when you voted.

There were double yellow lines and No Parking signs everywhere and consequently nowhere to park, so Mrs Caldicot bumped the minibus up over the kerb and onto a wide stretch of pavement. There were no signs forbidding parking on the pavement. Mrs Caldicot halted the minibus directly in front of the massive iron gates at the entrance to the pier. The minibus's headlights showed two large signs – neither of which could be described as welcoming.

One sign said 'PIER CLOSED' and the second, even more forbidding than the first for it was printed in red and looked very angry, shouted 'PRIVATE – KEEP OUT'. The gates were fastened with a massive chain and a suitably sized padlock.

'Have you got the keys?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

But her query was unnecessary for Mr Livingstone had already climbed down from the minibus and had pulled the ring of keys from his pocket. He was using the headlights to select the appropriate key for the padlock when the quiet of the evening was disrupted by the arrival of a police car.

'What you do think you're doing?' demanded a pasty faced young policeman who didn't seem to Mr Livingstone to be old enough to be in long trousers, let alone old enough to be allowed out after dark. He was clambering out of the passenger side of the police car as he spoke. He had spots and his flat, peaked hat was two sizes too big for his head. His uniform also looked as if it had been made for someone twice the size.

Mr Livingstone, who had found a suitable looking key but had not yet inserted it into the padlock, looked at the policeman. 'I think I'm opening this padlock,' he said. 'And aren't you supposed to say 'Allo, allo, allo' before you ask me what I think I'm doing?'

'Are you being funny?' demanded the very young policeman.

'Not particularly. Have you got a torch?'

'A torch? What do you want a torch for?'

‘To shine on this padlock. So that I can see what I’m doing. Our minibus headlights aren’t very good.’

‘What do you think you’re doing with the padlock?’

‘I’m just trying to undo it. I want to open the gates. I want to open the gates so that we can drive onto the pier.’

‘They don’t allow parking on the pier.’

‘Yes I do.’

‘What do you mean ‘Yes I do’?’

‘It’s my pier and I allow parking on it. For us anyway.’

At that moment two figures appeared on the other side of the gate. One of them, the tallest of the duo, was holding a broom and the other, inevitably the shorter, was not.

‘Hey, clear off!’ said the one with the broom. ‘This is private property.’ He waved the broom about menacingly. It was impossible to see him clearly but he had the voice of a man of years.

‘Who are you?’ demanded Mr Livingstone.

‘I’m Pickering,’ said the figure with the broom. ‘If you don’t bugger off I’ll call the police.’ He waved the broom belligerently but since he was on the other side of the still locked gate, the waved broom was of little consequence.

‘I am the police,’ said the youthful, spotty policeman, pulling himself up to his statutory five feet six and a tiny weeny bit inches, complete with helmet.

It had for him been a red letter day when the Chief Constable had announced that the Force was reducing the minimum height requirements for he had always wanted to work in crime in some way, to be a policeman or a crook, and he knew that his Mum wouldn’t want him to be a crook like his Dad. She always said that one crook in the family was quite enough and what if they both got banged up at the same time and put in separate prisons? She would, she pointed out, be forever catching buses to see one and then the other. No, she was much happier about things when they reduced the height requirements and he could join the police. It didn’t pay as well as crime but he got free uniforms and a boot allowance.

‘I can’t help that,’ said Mr Pickering.

‘This elderly gentleman says he owns the pier,’ said the policeman. ‘He wants to park his minibus on it.’

‘The bloke what owned the pier is dead,’ said Mr Pickering, the figure with the broom. ‘He died months ago. I heard some big company from up London is going to turn it into a conference centre. The council’s been round doing measurements and poking their noses into things.’

‘The bloke who died was my uncle,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘He left the pier to me.’

‘What’s your name then?’

‘Livingstone,’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘That’s the name of the bloke what’s dead.’

‘It would be. The bloke what’s dead, as you so accurately put it, was my uncle. He left the pier to his brother, who was my father, but my father has been dead for some years so I inherited the pier instead.’

‘Ah,’ said Mr Pickering, who felt that this did put a different complexion on things. ‘But can you prove that you’re the new owner?’

‘I’ve got the keys,’ pointed out Mr Livingstone, holding up his bunch of keys.

‘Anyone could have a bunch of keys,’ said Mr Pickering.

‘But these keys fit the pier,’ pointed out Mr Livingstone.

‘You might have stolen them,’ said Mr Pickering. ‘Or they might be them skeletal keys.’

‘That’s a good point,’ said the policeman. ‘Can you prove you are the owner?’

‘Wait there a minute,’ said Mr Livingstone. He climbed back onto the minibus and found the small suitcase in which he had packed his ukulele and his flute, all his socks and underpants and the paperwork relating to the pier. The ukulele and the flute were the only instruments he had which would fit into the suitcase. He had used the underwear and socks to pack around them. He left the ukulele and the flute, and the underpants and socks, and took the papers out of the case. He then climbed back down from the minibus and showed the papers first to the policeman and then to Mr Pickering. Both peered at the paperwork, frowned a good deal and announced themselves satisfied.

‘They certainly look in order to me,’ said the policeman who didn’t have the foggiest idea what he was looking at, apart from the fact that there was a lot of it. He knew from experience that when there was a lot of paperwork then it needed to be taken seriously and that the people who had the paperwork were probably important. The driver of the police car, still in his vehicle, watched carefully. He was hoping that the suspects would decide to make a break for it. Realising the limitations of the minibus he had decided that he would give the fugitives a two minute start so that he’d have a chance to switch on his siren and speed along the promenade. If they headed east he’d be able to drive past the hotel where his girlfriend worked as a receptionist and she’d see him go speeding past and be terribly impressed.

‘That’s good enough for me,’ said Mr Pickering who was labouring under the twin disadvantages of not having his reading spectacles with him and not having eaten enough carrots to be able to read in the dark. He didn’t have the faintest idea what he’d been looking at. ‘You’d better come in then.’

The policeman walked back to the police car, climbed in and slammed the door. The driver, who had kept the car engine running in the slender hope that the minibus might take off into the night, giving him an excuse to chase after it, sped off to fight crime elsewhere in Penmouth.

And so, at last, Mr Livingstone unfastened the padlock, unchained the gates and opened them wide to allow Mrs Caldicot to drive the minibus onto the pier.

It was now clear that the taller of the two figures, the broom handler, was a man of mature years. Critics (of the variety so commonly found on social media, unmistakeably trenchant and fearless in their comments, though, it has to be admitted, not always as resilient as might be expected when on the receiving end of trenchant and fearless comments) might well have dismissed him as being well beyond his best buy date and given him two stars and a thumbs down.

‘Oh, you can’t do that!’ said Mr Pickering as Mrs Caldicot started to edge the minibus forwards.

‘Why not?’ asked Mr Livingstone, who was grinning happily because he was now standing on his pier. He hadn’t been on a pier for decades and now here he was standing on one which he owned.

‘It’s not allowed,’ said Mr Pickering.

‘Who says?’

‘Mr Livingstone never allowed people to drive onto the pier.’

‘That Mr Livingstone has gone. I’m the new Mr Livingstone now,’ Mr Livingstone reminded him. ‘And I’m allowing Mrs Caldicot to drive onto the pier.’

‘Who’s Mrs Caldicot?’ asked Mr Pickering.

‘She’s the lady driving the minibus.’

‘Oh,’ said Mr Pickering, absorbing this new piece of information and collapsing as quickly and as completely as a house of cards in a puff of wind. ‘Oh, well I guess that’s all right then,’ he said.

The truth was that Mr Pickering was having considerable difficulty coming to terms with the change in circumstances which had been thrust upon him by life’s eternal capacity to hurl around unexpected vicissitudes.

It seemed to him that life was moving far too quickly these days.

One minute he was happily working on the pier, operating the little train, changing light bulbs as and when they needed changing, and selling ice creams and Kiss Me Quick hats as and when such items were in demand. He was not a man who had a firm or fixed view of his responsibilities. He was not a man besieged by ambitions or expectations. He worked on the pier and that was that.

But the next minute a bunch of sour looking men and women in suits were swaggering about on the pier, poking their noses into rooms as if they owned the place which, for all he knew, they might well do, considering the way they’d walked in without introducing themselves. They were forever talking on their fancy mobile phones and taking pictures and they pointed at things a good deal. Closing the gates to keep out the bailiffs had at least succeeded in stemming the tide of sour looking intruders in suits. Mr Pickering didn’t approve of people coming onto a pier in suits. Men who wandered onto a pier should wear open-necked shirts, preferably brightly coloured and worn outside their trousers. And women should ideally wear summer frocks or, failing that, the sort of clothes that made it clear that when they’d got up and dressed themselves they hadn’t been planning on spending the day looking at spread sheets, pecking at a computer keyboard or ringing people up and selling them insurance.

And now a load of old folks had turned up and the woman who seemed to be in charge had driven a minibus straight onto the pier and parked it on the planking just as if they had a parking space booked; that was something which not even the men and women in suits had dared to do. They’d left their motor cars somewhere else and had walked onto the pier in little clusters, all with their plastic folders under their arms or their plastic briefcases in their hands.

There was no doubt about the fact that Mr Pickering sometimes found life a bit of a challenge.

Chapter Nine

Once the minibus was safely through the gates, and parked neatly next to one of those plywood boards with a hole in the top, brightly painted so that people could poke their heads through and have their photographs taken so that it looked, for all the world, as if they were a fat woman in a spotted bikini or a fat policeman with a raised truncheon, Mr Livingstone and Mr Pickering pulled the gates together and Mr Livingstone repositioned the chain and relocked the padlock.

Mr Pickering seemed relieved when the gate was firmly locked. He pulled at the chain a couple of times to make sure that the gate was indeed properly fastened. He had spent most of his life welcoming people onto the pier. But now he only felt secure when the gates were closed, chained and locked. It was, he knew, a rather sad state of affairs but what else can you do when a bunch of belligerent looking bald men with tattoos had taken to standing on the pavement outside, and threatening to remove goods to the value of whatever it was.

Only when the gates were locked did Mr Pickering introduce the second person who had been standing with him behind the gates.

'This is my granddaughter, Dorothy,' he said, introducing a girl of about sixteen to Mr Livingstone. 'She lives with me. She ran the café until Mr Livingstone passed on.'

Dorothy seemed to Mr Livingstone to be a nice young girl. She was the sort of old-fashioned girl he'd have been happy to have as a granddaughter. Indeed, she was the sort of old-fashioned girl most people of grandparent age would have been happy to have as a granddaughter. Her hair was brown and cut properly and she had no visible tattoos or bits of metal attached to her person. Mr Livingstone was a little old-fashioned and he couldn't understand why so many young people wanted to have rings put through their noses as though they were prize pigs or belligerent bulls. He had once suggested to Mr Hewitt that they buy a large magnet and stroll through the local town clearing the streets of youths who had so decorated their persons.

'Where do you two live?' asked Mr Livingstone, as Mrs Caldicot and the rest of the party climbed down from the minibus and stretched their legs.

'Where's the toilet?' asked Mr Williams who had been the first to climb down and who was now bending forwards very slightly and standing with his legs very close together.

'I need one too,' said Mr Roxdale.

'Me too,' said Mrs Torridge.

It quickly became clear that finding toilets (preferably in the plural) was the first requirement. Mr Pickering's granddaughter offered to show them the way to the lavatories behind the pier's café.

'We live on the pier,' said Mr Pickering, replying at last to Mr Livingstone's question. 'We've got a little flat behind the café.' He sighed. 'I expect you'll be wanting us to move on.'

'Do you know anything about the pier?' asked Mr Livingstone.

'I've worked on it since I was a lad,' replied Mr Pickering. 'It's a grand pier. A wonderful pier. And I've lived on it ever since after the War.'

'What do you do?' Mr Livingstone enquired.

'I drive the train and I'm the sort of odd job man. Any odd jobs that need doing, I do them. In between train rides I sometimes help out in the shop or the café. My Deidre and I lived and worked here. Deidre, my wife as was when she was still with us bless her, ran the café. Then when Deidre died three years ago, my granddaughter came here to live with me. Her parents had split up and she didn't get on with either of them. She's a nice girl; a good girl and now that Deidre has gone she's the only one who can handle the deep fat fryer. It's a bit on the temperamental side.'

'I'm definitely not going to throw you off,' promised Mr Livingstone who was impressed by the fact that Mr Pickering seemed to know things about the pier but more impressed by the fact that he clearly had a real affection for it.

'Is that a little train?' asked Mr Hewitt, who spotted the small train which took holidaymakers up and down the pier without them having to walk. Peering into the darkness he could just make out that the train was painted red and yellow.

'It is,' said Mr Pickering. 'That's Doris. At Halloween I dress myself up in a sheet and we call her the ghost train.''

'Doris?' said Mr Livingstone.

'That's what I call the train. Doris. I wanted to have the name painted on the front of the engine but he wouldn't let me. I don't know why. I just thought it would be nice. She's always seemed like a Doris to me. People give names to boats, don't they? And trains always used to have names. There was that Flying Scotsman. And the Golden

Arrow and the Robin Hood. And the Devon Scot. Loads of trains had names. I don't suppose they give them names now. They probably don't even give them numbers.'

'Can I come aboard?' asked Mr Hewitt.

'You help yourselves,' said Mr Pickering, generously. 'We usually charge 25 pence each way and 50 pence for a return. It's been those prices since the year 2000. I kept saying to Mr Livingstone that we should put up the prices.'

'Who wouldn't let you?'

'Let me do what?'

'Who wouldn't let you paint 'Doris' on the front of the train?'

'Oh, that was Mr Simpkins.'

Mrs Caldicot and the others joined Mr Hewitt on the train. They waited for a few moments for Mr Williams, Mrs Torridge and Mr Roxdale to join them. There were three carriages and plenty of room for them all. Mrs Caldicot looked around and reckoned that the train could carry at least fifty people at a time. She did the sums in her head and quickly realised that if they put up the price a little then they could earn quite reasonable sums of money.

'How do I make it start?' asked Mr Hewitt, preparing to climb into the driver's seat.

'I'll drive it,' said Mr Pickering firmly, as he gently eased himself past Mr Hewitt, who was clearly keen to have a go at driving the train.

Mrs Caldicot, watching, thought that the small boy who resides within every grown man, and who sometimes seemed to be particularly dominant as far as Mr Hewitt was concerned, was in danger of taking over.

'It's not as easy as you'd think,' said Mr Pickering. He climbed aboard and sat in the driver's seat. Mr Livingstone sat beside him. Mr Hewitt sat behind Mr Pickering who then pressed a button and the train started. Once the train had started, Mr Pickering pressed the accelerator and the train moved forward slowly. 'It's got a battery,' the driver explained. 'So it's electric. We charge it up every now and then when the electricity has run out. We usually do runs up and down the pier every 30 minutes.'

'It doesn't look that difficult to start,' said Mr Hewitt.

'It's not the starting,' said Mr Pickering, bridling a little. 'It starts easy enough, as long as the battery is charged and I always keep it charged. It's the people walking about you have to watch out for. You could run people over.'

'But there aren't any people on the pier,' Mr Hewitt pointed out. 'We're the only people here. And we're all on the train.'

'That's as may be,' said Mr Pickering. 'You still have to watch what you're doing. You could crash. You could drive off the edge of the pier and land in the sea.'

'Quite right,' said Mr Hewitt, realising that, for the moment at least, Mr Pickering didn't want anyone else driving what he clearly thought of as 'his' train.

'Who is Mr Simpkins?' Mr Livingstone asked Mr Pickering.

'Why?'

'Mr Simpkins. You said a Mr Simpkins stopped you painting 'Doris' on the front of the engine.'

'He was the pier master.'

'Pier master? What's a pier master?'

'He's the chap what's in charge of the pier. A sort of manager. On a ship they have a captain and on a pier they have a master.'

'I didn't know that.'

'Not many people do.'

'Why wouldn't Mr Simpkins let you paint 'Doris' on the front of the train?'

'Dunno. It might have something to do with him being a bit of a mean bastard, I suppose.'

'Where is he? I'll have a word with him!'

'He left.'

'What do you mean 'He left'?

'He buggered off. Just upped and off when your uncle died. He said the pier hadn't got a future and he'd been offered a job by the council. They hired him to run a car park in the town centre. He said they were paying him a fortune because they valued him so highly so he just buggered off. I think they just wanted him away from here so that the pier wouldn't have anyone managing it. He took 48 boxes of Turkish Delight, 50 boxes of them little flags that kids stick in their sandcastles and a load of sticks of pink, peppermint, seaside rock. I don't know why he took the rock. It all had Penmouth running through the middle so unless he went somewhere else called Penmouth it wouldn't be much use to him. Unless he just liked eating it. Maybe he did. I can't eat the stuff myself. I used to eat a lot of it but then I lost my teeth and that was the end of my rock eating days. I never understand who bought them little flags we used to sell because there's no sand on the beach and you can't build sandcastles with pebbles, can you? We used to sell hundreds of those little flags on a nice day in the summer. The kids used to wave them. Mr

Simpkins said he was owed some wages and something from his pension but he wasn't going to wait to get his money because he didn't think it would be forthcoming, that was the word he used, 'forthcoming', so he'd take it in kind. Just piled the boxes into the back of his car and off he went.'

'Oh,' said Mr Livingstone, rather started by this tale of woe. 'Well you can paint 'Doris' on the train. I don't mind. Who's left apart from you and Dorothy?'

'There's nobody else. Just me and Dorothy. Oh and the Fat Lady comes round most days to see if there's any news about the Pier reopening. And young Errol hangs about. He sometimes helps Dorothy with our shopping.'

'Who is Errol?'

'He's just a kid. He works for the council doing something or other. He likes the pier and he's taken a fancy to our Dorothy. He's a nice boy.'

'And the Fat Lady?'

'She's a lovely girl. Well I call her a girl but she's a grown woman. In her 30s I'd say though I wouldn't rightly know. She used to be bigger but she's lost a lot of weight since she lost her job. I suppose she can't afford to eat as much as she did before. She used to help out in the theatre when she wasn't being the Fat Lady. Selling ice creams and programmes, that sort of thing. We all mucked in and tried to help with those jobs.'

'How long has the pier been closed?'

'A month or two now. There were bills to pay but no one was paying them, so I locked the gates to stop the people getting in.'

'What people?'

'Bailiffs, they called themselves. They came in a van marked DEBT COLLECTORS in big, red letters. I think they do that to intimidate people and embarrass them. They were all big blokes and very threatening. They wanted to come in and take stuff because some bill or other hadn't been paid. So Dorothy and I locked ourselves in. Errol checked with somebody at the council and they said the bailiffs can't come in if the place is locked even if you owe them money. So we keep the place locked.'

'How long have you been locked in?'

'Oh, a month or two. Since old Mr Livingstone passed away and Mr Simpkins buggered off.'

'What do you do for food?'

'I've got a few pounds saved and our Dorothy climbs down after dark when it's low tide and runs along the beach to the supermarket. She buys what we need and then brings it back. Errol helps her.'

They had now reached the end of the pier. 'That's the theatre,' said Mr Pickering, pointing to a huge structure straight ahead of them. 'It's built on Stone Rock. They used to have good shows there.'

'I heard,' said Mr Livingstone. 'Gerry and the Pacemakers in the 1960s.'

'You remember, eh?' said Mr Pickering. 'That was a good night. Proper band they were. Not like the rubbish you see on the television these days. We nearly had the Beatles once. And we had that Cilla Black girl.'

'Shall we go back now?' said Mrs Caldicot, who was sitting behind Mr Livingstone. 'It's getting a little chilly.' She leant forward to speak to Mr Pickering. 'Do you know if there's anywhere we can eat? I'm starving. I bet everyone else is too.'

'I could ask Dorothy to do up some chips,' said Mr Pickering, turning the train around and heading back down the pier. 'And there may be a few bits of cod in the freezer.'

'That would be marvellous,' said Mrs Caldicot.

But long before they got back to the pier gatehouse they could smell the chips frying. Dorothy, guessing that the new owner and his friends would probably be hungry, had heated up the deep fat fryer and thrown in a large bag of potato chips and enough cod to feed a small army.

Chapter Ten

They all put on their coats and sat out on the pier, eating cod and chips and listening to the sound of the sea crashing against the pier's wooden piles.

Dorothy, Mr Pickering's granddaughter, and the only one who knew how to make the deep fat fryer work, found a crate of Dandelion and Burdock, presented in bottles not cans, and they celebrated the first hours of their new life with a series of cheerful and increasingly optimistic toasts.

'Here's to us and Mr Livingstone's pier!' said Mr Merivale.

'Here's to the best pier in England!' said Mr Twist.

'Let's drink to the brightest and most exciting pier in the world!' said Mr Roxdale, who was tired and felt a little emotional but meant what he said.

They all drank to this and, where possible, clinked bottles together to seal the toast.

'It's been a busy day,' said Mr Hewitt. He had remembered too late that fizzy drinks always gave him heartburn and wind. He tried to burp silently and succeeded in only one of those aims.

'A busy day and a brilliant day,' said Mrs Roberts.

There was a murmur as the others agreed with her.

'These are damned fine chips,' said Mr Hewitt.

'Damned good cod, too,' said Mr Roxdale.

'Plenty of salt and lashings of vinegar,' said Mr Livingstone, who, not without good reason, considered himself to be an expert on the subject of fish and chips.

'And no little, plastic trays,' said Mr Hewitt.

Mr Livingstone visibly shuddered. 'And no plastic forks,' he added sternly.

'I'm glad young Dorothy still wraps them in newspaper,' said Mr Roxdale. 'I always find interesting bits to read.'

'I only ever read a newspaper when I've got fish and chips,' confessed Mr Merivale.

'Didn't they make it illegal?' asked Mr Livingstone. 'Wrapping chips in newspaper?'

'It was that Common Market,' said Mr Hewitt. 'They passed some law about it. I think they were worried that they wouldn't be able to recycle the newspaper if it had bits of chip clinging to it.'

'What rubbish,' snorted Mr Livingstone.

'I think they allow it if you wrap the chips in plain paper before you put them into the newspaper,' said Mr Merivale.

'Well that's just plain silly,' said Mr Hewitt. 'That's wasting twice as much paper as they need.'

'I can't believe this is happening to me!' typed Ruth, who was not yet 19-years-old and had, in the short time since they'd arrived, sent a sequence of excited text messages to Jean-Jacques, the accordionist she had met in Paris, and to her best friend Denise who had, many months earlier, warned her that working for a bunch of old folk would be so dull that she'd die of boredom.

'We're on Mr Livingstone's pier,' she wrote to Denise. 'We've just had cod and chips, and drunk Dandelion and Burdock, and now we're going to sleep on Lilos in the pier ballroom. Mine is bright blue and has pictures of Donald Duck all over it. We got the Lilos from the shop because our beds haven't got here yet. Mr Livingstone owns the shop so he owns the Lilos so we didn't have to pay for them. We got stopped by two policemen when we got here and I thought they were going to arrest us. Dorothy, who is two years younger than I am and very sweet, says she'll teach me how to use the deep fat fryer and Mr Pickering, who looks even older than Mr Hewitt, has promised to teach me how to drive the train along the pier.'

'This is the best night of my life,' said Mr Livingstone to Mrs Caldicot, as they looked out over the sea. The light of a thousand stars, reflected in the water, sparkled and danced.

'Better than bombing that German bridge?'

'Oh, yes,' said Mr Livingstone. 'This is even better than seeing that Kraut bridge go down into the river.'

And he sighed the deep sigh of a contented man who knew that whatever travails and adversities lay ahead nothing will banish the magic of the moment.

'I'm very pleased,' whispered Mrs Caldicot, who was.

'Who is going to be paying for the cod and chip suppers?' asked Mr Pickering, of no one in particular. 'Not to mention the Dandelion and Burdock.'

Mrs Caldicot took out her purse, asked him how much they all owed and handed over the money he asked for. Mr Pickering gave her the appropriate amount of change and then put the proceeds into the till. It seemed strange to Mrs Caldicot that they should have to pay to have dinner in what was, effectively, their own home but paying Mr

Pickering seemed easier than trying to explain the new circumstances. He seemed like a man who felt that his capacity and yearning for surprise had already been more than satisfied.

They spent the night in the ballroom, sleeping on the plastic Lilos which Mr Pickering had found in a cupboard at the back of the shop and which he had inflated with a small foot pump. They had no blankets and so, since it was a little chilly, Mr Pickering turned on a small electric fire which Dorothy found in the café.

The new owner and his friends, exhausted after a long day and full of excitement about the future, wrapped themselves in their coats and slept peacefully.

They dreamt, variously and independently, of ice cream, candyfloss, the sound of seagulls, bunting fluttering in a summer breeze, men in deckchairs with knotted handkerchiefs protecting their bald heads from the sunshine and rows of smiling wives in summer frocks, all settled in deckchairs and all sipping steaming hot tea from white, china mugs.

Mr Hewitt dreamt of driving the small train and Mr Twist, who used to work for Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and who consequently worried a good deal about money, dreamt of hordes of happy holidaymakers handing over their 25ps and their 50ps to travel up and down the pier.

Chapter Eleven

They were awoken at 8.00 am the following morning by a good deal of tooting.

When Mrs Caldicot and the rest of the refugees from the Twilight Years Rest Home looked out of the ballroom window, fearful that Mr Pickering's awful bailiffs might be standing alongside their van, proclaiming shame and embarrassment for all who could read, they saw that instead of the bailiffs the two pantechnicons were there, parked on the pavement outside the entrance to the pier.

After Mr Livingstone had unfastened the padlock, opened the gates and greeted the removal men, they told him that they had got up at 4.00 am in order to finish their delivery without further delay. They admitted that they had done this not entirely out of a sense of generous good spirit but in the knowledge that if they finished unloading early enough they would be able to spend the day by the seaside; paddling, eating cockles and doing whatever grown men think of doing, dream of doing and actually do when they are released from the leash of daily toil and are well out of sight of employers and loved ones for the best part of a day.

By eleven that morning, the two huge removal lorries had been unloaded and the beds, wardrobes, dressing tables, kitchen whites, tables, chairs and other baggage and paraphernalia of 14 lives had been placed, if not precisely in their final positions, in an approximation that served well enough.

The drivers of the huge lorries then drove to a public car park where they left the vehicles neatly positioned on six car park spaces apiece. They handed two crisp £10 notes to the car park attendant who was on duty for the day and who, in return for this unofficial donation, promised to turn a blind eye to whatever bylaws had been broached. This chore completed, the removal men, as merry a band of workmen as you could hope to come across, returned to the pier on the promise of large helpings of cod and chips and unlimited supplies of Dandelion and Burdock in bottles and not in cans, thank you very much.

Only when the removal men had gone and some (but by no means all) of the boxes had been unpacked and clothes put away in wardrobes and so on, could Mrs Caldicot and what she now (thanks to Ruth) thought of as the gang, begin to explore the pier which Mr Livingstone had inherited and of what he was now, by common consent, considered to be the Pier Master. This was, without a doubt, a title he enjoyed just as much as any title within the gift of Her Majesty the Queen. 'I'm not just a peer,' he said proudly. 'I'm a Pier Master!'

Sadly, in the daylight, the pier was not quite what any of them had envisaged.

Mrs Caldicot had remembered the piers of her childhood as being always bright and busy and stretching out as far as the eye could see across a bright blue sea. They were always thronged with happy holidaymakers, children eating ice cream cones with chocolate flakes stuck into them, fathers in shirt sleeves, with braces or suspenders showing, women in cheerful summer dresses carrying raffia beach bags and looking pleasantly harassed and sunburnt. The only hazard was the occasional incontinent seagull.

There was, she remembered, always a busy theatre at the end of the pier, with posters displayed outside advertising names recognised from the wireless and the television.

And there were usually several small boats at a jetty at the end of the pier, ready to take tourists out to sea to fish for mackerel. Less intrepid fishermen lined the rails of the pier and dangled bits of twine in the water with plenty of hope but not much expectation. The one thing she remembered was that the people she saw on piers were always at peace with themselves and the world. There were many pipes being puffed and many dreams being enjoyed. Piers, she remembered, were always happy places – far away from the sometimes awful realities of the real world. When you stepped onto a pier, and felt the wooden planks beneath your feet, you left your bills and worries behind you and entered another world; a world where the sea breezes seemed to waft away all earthly trials and tribulations.

Sadly, the pier which Mr Livingstone had inherited was currently none of the things that Mrs Caldicot remembered.

Indeed, it has to be admitted that in light of Mrs Caldicot's memories, it was a distinct disappointment.

The pier itself looked rather ancient, which was to be expected since it was well over a hundred years old and had been standing with its feet in the sea for a long, long time. But it looked even older than its years and it looked sadly uncared for. The storm battered paintwork was faded and chipped and there was more rust to be seen than seemed entirely appropriate.

It perhaps did not help that the wind was howling in a very unseasonal sort of way, and that the rain was coming down in the sort of quantities which suggested that God was having an end of season sale.

It was, thought Mrs Caldicot, not the sort of weather anyone expected in the month of May. She felt sorry for the removal men who had such high hopes for their day.

And there wasn't a soul to be seen on the pier.

(Mrs Caldicot was initially startled by this but shortly realised that the absence of holidaymakers was, perhaps, not entirely surprising since the gates to the pier were firmly closed, chained and padlocked and decorated with large signs warning potential visitors that they were not wanted and should keep out and go away.)

It was, thought Mrs Caldicot, like meeting an elderly Cary Grant: wrinkled, bald, rheumy eyed and painfully arthritic. Still Cary Grant, but not quite what you'd expected or hoped for.

They spent the rest of the day pottering about, looking around, checking out the pier and sheltering from the rain. In the evening Mrs Caldicot and the gang sat in the café, together with Mr Pickering and his granddaughter Dorothy, and had chips and cod for their supper. (Mr Hewitt insisted that if they said it that way round it sounded as if it were a different meal to cod and chips. No one else cared very much what they called it as long as they had plenty of salt and vinegar at hand.) Outside, the storm had passed and the evening sky looked friendlier and more welcoming.

Mr Pickering, who told them that the pier had been closed for some weeks in order to keep out the bailiffs, explained that somewhere along the line the original Mr Livingstone, Mr Bertram Livingstone, had failed to pay a bill the council had sent and the council, showing all the mercy of a tom cat on the prowl, had pounced.

The bailiffs had been called in.

'Errol has been very helpful,' said Dorothy Pickering, rather proudly thought Mrs Caldicot. 'He did some research at the council offices and told us that the bailiffs can't break into a property and can't enter unless there is a door or window open. With the gates shut they have to stay outside. Errol told us to watch out because he said that they use a lot of tricks to gain entry. They ask to use the loo and then, when they're inside, they suddenly start taking away your stuff. Or they lie and say that they can charge £50 a minute for every minute they are kept waiting. The fact is that it doesn't cost anything extra to keep them standing around outside for hours and hours.'

Errol, who had joined them for their fish and chip supper, blushed but didn't say anything as he listened to Dorothy. He was a shy boy, younger than his years in many ways, and he spoke only to Dorothy, and then in whispers.

'They came this afternoon and we saw them outside and we didn't like the look of them one little bit,' said Miss Nightingale. She shuddered. 'They looked very menacing.'

'We were upstairs in the ballroom and we threw things at them,' said Mrs Peterborough. 'They had shaved their heads and had lots of tattoos. They looked like bullies.'

'What did you throw at them?' asked Mrs Caldicot, suddenly a little worried.

'We peppered them with coconut mushrooms and Pontefract cakes,' said Mr Livingstone. 'We checked the sell by dates and they were too old to eat or to sell. Oh, and we found some old dolly mixtures that had been nibbled by mice.'

'Sugar mice, sherbet pips and liquorice allsorts,' added Mr Hewitt. 'The boxes they were in had been kept somewhere damp so they didn't look very nice.'

'Oh and some fudge,' said Mrs Torridge. 'The box said it was extra creamy but sadly that had expired too. I tried a bit but it had gone hard.'

'And some pork scratchings,' added Miss Nightingale.

'Actually, I did taste one or two of the coconut mushrooms,' confessed Mrs Torridge. 'And to be honest I couldn't taste anything wrong with them. I think they put these silly dates on just so that people will throw stuff away and then have to buy more.'

'And a dozen pickled eggs which we found in a jar,' added Mrs Peterborough.

'What did they do?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'They sort of went splat when they hit the pavement,' replied Mrs Peterborough.

'No, the bailiffs! What did the bailiffs do?' asked Mrs Caldicot. She didn't think the coconut mushrooms would do too much harm but she was a little alarmed at the idea of Mrs Peterborough hurling pickled eggs at the bailiffs. 'They didn't call the police, did they?'

'They hid behind their van and then they drove off,' said Mr Livingstone. 'I don't think they'll call the police.'

'One of them seemed to be crying,' said Miss Nightingale. 'He was hit on the head by a coconut mushroom. Two of the others were comforting him.'

'They'd look a bit silly if they complained, wouldn't they?' said Mr Hewitt. He drew an imaginary headline in the air: 'Bailiffs Run Away From Pensioners Hurling Coconut Mushrooms!'

'And there wasn't any evidence left when they'd gone,' said Mrs Torridge. 'The seagulls ate it all. Every last dolly mixture was gone in two minutes.'

'If they come back tomorrow we're going to throw blancmange at them,' said Mrs Peterborough. 'We found some blancmange powder and some dried milk, and Miss Nightingale said she thought there was enough to make three gallons of strawberry blancmange.'

'We can use soup ladles to hurl the blancmange,' said Miss Nightingale.

‘And there’s plenty more rotten fudge and six more boxes of out-of-date liquorice allsorts!’ added Mrs Torridge, who had also tried the liquorice allsorts and had found them perfectly edible even though the date on the boxes suggested that they were nine months past the date when they could be safely consumed.

Errol, who was sitting next to Dorothy, leant a little closer to her and whispered in her ear. Dorothy listened carefully.

‘Errol says that he heard people at the council offices talking,’ said Dorothy. ‘He said they were confident they’d get possession of the pier within a few days at the most.’

‘Who said that?’ asked an indignant Mr Livingstone.

Errol whispered to Dorothy again.

‘Errol says he thinks they were people from the planning department,’ reported Dorothy. ‘He’ll try to find out when he goes to work tomorrow.’

‘How much do we owe the council?’ Mrs Caldicot asked Mr Pickering.

‘The original bill was for £5,743.60. That was for a tax bill that the council sent and that didn’t get paid. But now there’s a bailiff fee of £200 to add on so the latest bill we had said we owed them £5,943.6 altogether.’

Mrs Caldicot went quite cold and turned to Mr Livingstone. ‘I suppose we’d better pay it,’ she said.

Over the last year or two, Mrs Caldicot had learned a lot about dealing with people in authority. She had learned the hard way that one should never show weakness, fear or doubt of any kind when confronted by a policeman, a tax inspector or anyone with more power than they know what to do with. She knew that a uniform, or a position with a little status within any corner of a nation’s bureaucracy, turns many individuals into bullies. And she knew that bullies thrive on fear.

But she had also learned that although there are times when it is best to stand up and fight, there are also times when you have to let the bullies win a round.

‘I haven’t got £5,743.60!’said Mr Livingstone. ‘I can probably find the 60 pence but that’s about it.’

‘Let me see what I can do,’ said Mrs Caldicot. She walked out onto the pier, took out the mobile telephone which Jenkins had given her, scrolled down the menu and pressed the CALL button when her husband’s name appeared. She hated having to call him but could not think of anyone else to turn to. A few moments later, to her great relief, she heard his voice.

‘We’ve got a problem,’ admitted Mrs Caldicot after they’d exchanged private and loving greetings which have no place in this account. ‘It seems that we owe the council some money and I think we will have to pay it. Bailiffs have been trying to get in and the council seems to be very aggressive.’

‘How much do we owe?’ asked Jenkins.

Mrs Caldicot told him.

‘I’ll ring the bank and move some money from my deposit account into our joint account,’ promised Jenkins. ‘You can let the council have a cheque. By the time they cash it the money will have cleared.’

‘But how can we pay you back? We have to pay you back.’

‘If you really insist on making it a loan then you can pay me back when the Government sends the compensation cheque they owe,’ said Jenkins.

Mrs Caldicot wanted to cry but didn’t. They talked for a few minutes about how Jenkins was getting on in America (very well but he really wanted to be with Mrs Caldicot and on the pier in Penmouth), about how he had decided to abandon his novel (it was, he said, the sort of novel best left in a box at the bottom of the wardrobe and he rather thought he might do some research and write a small book about Jane Austen’s visits to Penmouth) and about how Mrs Caldicot was getting on in Penmouth (very well but she really wanted Jenkins to be on the pier with her and she thought that if Jenkins wrote a small book about Jane Austen and Penmouth it would sell very well in the shop on the pier) and finally they exchanged loving goodbyes and then turned off their phones.

Mrs Caldicot went back into the café, put her mobile phone back into her handbag and took out her cheque book. She then wrote out a cheque for the sum that they owed the local council.

‘What are you doing?’ asked Mr Livingstone, when he saw the size of the cheque Mrs Caldicot had written.

‘Until we pay the council we can’t open up the pier and start earning some money,’ explained Mrs Caldicot.

‘Oh no,’ said Mr Livingstone, who looked very worried. ‘I can’t allow you to pay my debts.’

‘But it isn’t your debt!’ insisted Mrs Caldicot. ‘You own the pier but we are all living here now. And just as we did at the house, we will share our living expenses. Paying the council taxes counts as a living expense.’

When they’d all been living at what had formerly been the Twilight Years Rest Home the residents had all paid part of their pensions into a joint bank account so that bills could be paid. They kept money back for their own personal expenses. It was a system which seemed to work well.

Mr Livingstone looked at Mrs Caldicot. ‘Maybe I should just sell the pier,’ he said.

‘Mr Canterbury said that the people who offered to buy it offered only £1!’ she pointed out.

‘Maybe they’d pay that and also pay all the debts.’

‘I’m sure they won’t.’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘But do you want to sell the pier?’

‘No, of course not!’

‘Well, I’m not going to discuss any such nonsense,’ said Mrs Caldicot firmly but kindly. ‘This pier is our new home. We’re here and we’re going to stay. I’ve written a cheque and paid the bill. That’s the way it is and that’s the way it’s going to be.’

‘That’s it, Mrs Caldicot!’ said Mr Hewitt, who was grinning. ‘You tell him!’

And so Mrs Caldicot put the bill and the cheque she had written into the weedy little envelope which the council had included with their bill and she gave the envelope to Errol to take to the council offices. She thought it would be a good idea to get the bill paid as quickly as possible – partly to ensure that the bailiffs didn’t come back and partly to prevent the council adding on any more expenses or charges.

‘Just pop it into the internal mailbox,’ she told the boy in a whisper. ‘Don’t let anyone there know that you delivered it.’ She smiled and winked at him in a kindly, motherly sort of way for he seemed a likeable, young fellow. He tried to wink back but it was more of a blink than a wink and he blushed bright red as he always did when people were kind to him. ‘And if you can find out why the council wants to control the pier, and why they think they’re going to be able to, that would be very helpful. Can you come and have supper with us again tomorrow evening?’

Errol opened and closed his mouth, rather like a goldfish, and nodded enthusiastically as a substitute for the words which were missing.

Chapter Twelve

After breakfast the following morning they opened the pier gates for the first time since the bailiffs had started their vigil outside the pier entrance. It seemed reasonable to assume that since the council had now received their money they would call off the dogs. Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale were privately rather disappointed though they didn’t say anything to the others. They had been looking forward to being able to hurl strawberry blancmange at large men with no hair and lots of tattoos.

The rain had gone and the sky was blue. It was a beautiful day and with the council tax bill paid and the pier gates open, Mrs Caldicot felt full of hope. They still had to deal with whatever else it was that the council was planning but it was now generally agreed that the pier, despite the rust and the signs of age, was looking wonderful in the sunshine. The paintwork, though chipped and faded, still managed to sparkle and shine and give every impression of having been given a thorough once over by one of those teams of Romanian car wash specialists who have taken over unused petrol station forecourts throughout England.

Mr Pickering, delighted at last to see the pier being prepared for action, removed the tarpaulin cover which he had put over the train when it had rained, and gave the woodwork a polish and the brass-work an energetic rub down with an oily rag.

His granddaughter Dorothy poured more chips and fish into the deep fat fryer (and made a note to tell her granddad, who had in the past been responsible for such things) that their supplies of both potatoes and fish were running rather low.

Miss Nightingale, Mrs Peterborough and Mrs Torridge continued to sort through the boxes of sweets and other delicacies which they had unearthed in the cupboards at the back of the shop as well as in some cupboards upstairs outside the ballroom. They had been asked by Mrs Caldicot to separate out the items which were within their ‘sell by date’ and could, therefore, either be eaten or sold, and those which were outside their ‘sell by date’ and would, therefore, have to be thrown away or (the preferred option of Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale) stored to be used as ammunition should the bailiffs ever return.

Mr Williams, Mr Roxdale and Mr Twist who had moved some of the furniture around, and emptied quite a few boxes and trunks, were drinking tea in the café and making lists of things which had to be done, though preferably not immediately.

Mr and Mrs Merivale, who were good at this sort of practical stuff, and to be honest rather enjoyed it, were checking the bathrooms to see which taps were dripping and which light fittings needed new bulbs. Mr Merivale was carrying with him a wrench which he had brought and Mrs Merivale was carrying a large cardboard box full of spare light bulbs which she had discovered in a store room on the top floor.

And Mrs Caldicot, Mrs Roberts and Ruth were sitting together on a bench, each of them armed with a nice cup of tea with two biscuits on the saucer, and working on what Mrs Caldicot called the ‘Plan for the Future’.

Mrs Caldicot had invited all the other members of the gang to join them but the general feeling had been that they were all happy to leave the ‘thinking’ and ‘planning’ to Mrs Caldicot since those were things that she was very good at. ‘You make the decisions,’ said Mr Livingstone.

And Mr Livingstone and Mr Hewitt, having opened the gates to the pier, were standing to one side, careful to keep out of the way so that they didn’t get crushed in the rush, quietly waiting for the holidaymakers to flood onto the pier.

It is fair to say that they were excited.

‘How many people do you think visit the average sort of pier in an average sort of day?’ Mr Livingstone asked his friend.

‘That’s not something I’ve ever really thought about,’ admitted Mr Hewitt. ‘But, at a guess, I would say that you might expect 12 people a minute to wander onto a pier of this size.’ If anyone had asked him where he had found this figure he would not have been able to provide any sort of sensible answer other than to say that it was a figure plucked out of the air and that one figure plucked out of the air is as good as any other.

‘How many minutes are there in a day?’

‘Well, there’s 60 minutes in an hour and 24 hours in a day so the answer would be quite a lot but I suppose everything really depends on how many hours the pier stays open. What do you think the opening hours should be?’

‘Oh, I would have thought from eight in the morning until ten at night don’t you think?’

‘That sounds reasonable. How many hours is that.’

They stood and thought about this for a while and eventually Mr Livingstone found a piece of paper and a pencil and they worked it out and came to the conclusion that if they opened at eight in the morning and closed at ten at night then the pier would be open for 14 hours a day.

‘So, there are 60 minutes in an hour and the pier is open for 14 hours,’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘How many minutes is that?’

Some more calculations on Mr Livingstone’s piece of paper gave them several options: a total of 8,400 minutes, 840 minutes or 84 minutes.

‘Let’s take the middle figure,’ said Mr Hewitt.

‘That’s what I always do when I’m working things out,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘I do it three times and take the middle one.’

‘That’s a very scientific attitude,’ agreed Mr Hewitt. ‘I bet that’s probably the way accountants do it.’

‘We must ask Mr Twist about that,’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘And what did we say, 12 people a minute?’

‘Let’s make it 10 people a minute,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘That’s maybe more reasonable.’

‘And easier to work out.’

‘Definitely easier to work out.’

‘Multiplying by ten has got to be simpler. What does that come to then?’

They both thought for a while and then Mr Hewitt realised that all he had to do was put a nought on the end. ‘I reckon it’s 8,400 people a day.’

‘I agree with you,’ said Mr Livingstone, who was proud that he hadn’t even had to use his pencil and paper to do that sum.

‘Good heavens,’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘That’s quite a crowd. Can you get that many people on a pier?’

‘Oh yes, I would think so. And they won’t all be on at once, will they? Some will wander on and some will wander off again,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘The next thing to do is to work out how much they’re all going to spend. When we’ve done that we can work out our profit-loss thingy. Our financial objections.’

‘Projections, I think it is,’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘Our financial projections.’

‘No objection to that!’ said Mr Livingstone with a grin.

‘What are they going to spend money on?’

‘Well, there’s the train. They’ll all want to go on that. And they’ll mostly want to have return tickets. So that’s 50 pence each for the train. And then they’ll want teas and ice cream won’t they?’

‘Oh, I would think so. One ice cream each and a cup of tea each?’

‘Definitely. And most of them will want a bag of chips.’

‘And a stick of rock.’

‘Possibly two sticks of rock. I think the average holidaymaker would need one stick for themselves and at least one to take home as a present.’

‘And they’d need to buy a nice box of fudge for the neighbour who’s been feeding the cat.’

‘How much is that?’

‘What?’

‘A nice box of fudge?’

‘I’ve no idea. Let’s say £3. And £1 for a stick of rock.’

Mr Livingstone busied himself with his pencil. The piece of paper was actually a Eurostar train ticket which he had kept from their trip to Paris. And the pencil was one of those stubby things which really needed sharpening but which was so small that it would have been difficult to sharpen with a penknife and impossible to fit into a pencil sharpener.

‘It might be more than £1 if it were a big stick of rock.’

‘Let’s keep it at a small stick of rock,’ said Mr Livingstone, rather reluctantly. His piece of paper was rapidly getting filled up.

They stood in silence for a few minutes while Mr Livingstone tried to work out how much each visitor to the pier might spend.

‘I make it £9.50 each,’ said Mr Livingstone at last.

‘Round it up to a tenner,’ said Mr Hewitt.

‘Fair enough,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘They’d all want to buy a couple of postcards, wouldn’t they?’

‘So, what does that come to?’

Mr Livingstone did more work with his pencil. And then he frowned. ‘It can’t be that much!’ he said. ‘Can it?’

‘How much does it come to?’

‘It comes to £84,000,’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘Crumbs!’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘That’s a lot of money.’

‘Mind you, it’s not all profit!’ said Mr Livingstone sternly. ‘We have to buy the stuff we sell.’

‘But still,’ said Mr Hewitt, who knew no more about running a pier than his companion and did not have the faintest idea how much a stick of rock cost when bought wholesale. ‘Even if only £80,000 of that is profit that’s not bad for a day, is it?’

‘How much is that a year?’ asked Mr Livingstone.

‘Well, there are 52 weeks in a year and seven days in a week but I doubt if the pier would be as busy on some days as others.’

‘What sort of days wouldn’t it be busy?’ asked Mr Livingstone, a little indignantly. He was a trifle disappointed by Mr Hewitt’s pessimism.

‘Well, very wet and windy days,’ suggested Mr Hewitt. ‘There probably wouldn’t be very much business on very wet and windy days.’

‘We could sell sou’westers and plastic macs,’ suggested Mr Livingstone. ‘No good selling umbrellas on a pier but sou’westers and plastic macs would do well.’

‘That’s a good idea!’ said Mr Hewitt, impressed by his friend’s business acumen. ‘With those extra sales, the wet and windy days could well turn out to be even more profitable than the sunny days.’

‘But let’s forget about the sou’westers and those wet and windy days for the moment,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘They’ll make the sums too complicated and besides I don’t know how much a sou’wester would cost.’

‘We’ll keep those days as our reserves,’ said Mr Hewitt.

‘So, let’s say we have 50 weeks of good business,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘That’ll make it easier to do the sums.’

There was silence for a while as Mr Livingstone multiplied £80,000 by seven, for the number of days in a week, and then by 50 for the number of weeks in a year. This was the largest calculation Mr Livingstone could ever remember doing. He couldn’t help wishing he had one of those calculator things. Both Ruth and Mr Twist had them. Mr Twist had one that was just a calculator while Ruth had a mobile telephone which, to everyone’s astonishment, could turn into a calculator, a torch, a calendar and a camera.

‘What does it come to?’ asked Mr Hewitt, impatiently.

‘I make it £28,000,000 a year,’ said Mr Livingstone frowning.

He paused and then repeated the calculation.

The two men stood for a moment, trying to comprehend a sum of this magnitude. It was the sort of huge sum of money they had previously only ever heard mentioned in reference to defence budgets and the salaries of television presenters employed by the BBC.

‘With that sort of money you could probably buy a submarine,’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘Well a smallish one. Maybe a second hand one.’

‘Why would we want to buy a second hand submarine?’ asked Mr Livingstone, puzzled. If his friend wanted to buy a second hand submarine then he would not stand in his way. But he just wondered why he wanted one.

‘I’m not saying we would want to buy any sort of submarine,’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘Just that we could if we wanted to.’

‘I suppose we could,’ agreed Mr Livingstone.

They stood in silence for a moment and contemplated the other things they could buy with £28,000,000. Mr Livingstone did more sums on the remaining corner of his bit of paper.

‘The two of us could go on holiday in Spain for 4,000 years,’ he said eventually.

‘Why on earth would we want to do that? Especially now that you own a really nice pier by the seaside.’ He paused. ‘Would you say that it’s by the seaside, on the seaside or in it?’

‘Dunno. And I’m not saying that we’d want to; just that we could if we did want to.’

‘I wouldn’t want to go to Spain,’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘It’s too hot and it’s full of flies and foreigners.’

‘I quite agree with you,’ said Mr Livingstone who didn’t much like the heat and was definitely not over fond of flies or foreigners though he liked Jean-Jacques and his father, who were French, and he very much liked the two Americans they’d met in Paris.

‘How many of us are there?’ asked Mr Hewitt.

‘Well, there are 14 of us,’ replied Mr Livingstone. ‘So that’s £2,000,000 each.’ Although he actually owned the pier, Mr Livingstone would have never dreamt of not sharing his good fortune with his friends. ‘But I think we should give a share to Mr Pickering and Dorothy and that young Errol.’

‘That’s still more than £1,500,000 a year each,’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘After a year we could all just retire. And sit on the pier and eat ice creams and ride up and down on the train.’

‘Crumbs,’ said Mr Livingstone very softly. ‘It’s a lot of money isn’t it?’

Twenty minutes later, a tall man and a short dog wandered past them, looked around and then wandered off again. He didn’t buy any rock, fudge or postcards. He didn’t even buy a cup of tea or a bag of chips.

No one else came onto the pier.

‘Maybe it’s not really the season for piers,’ said Mr Hewitt a few minutes later. ‘Maybe this is one of the two quiet weeks we allowed for.’

‘It’s May!’ said Mr Livingstone, looking up at beautiful, blue sky spoilt only by a few of those fluffy, white clouds which look just like cotton wool and which artists always regard as too unrealistic for their painted skies. ‘It’s springtime! It’s a wonderful month for piers. It’s just that people have got used to the pier being closed. Now they have to get used to our being open.’

They stood for a moment and enjoyed the spring sunshine.

‘Do you fancy a cup of tea?’ asked Mr Hewitt after a while.

‘Sounds good to me,’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘I think I saw a tin of shortbread biscuits lying around.’

‘Sounds better by the minute!’

And so the two almost millionaires abandoned their wait by the gates, wandered into the empty café and asked Dorothy for two cups of tea and a plateful of biscuits.

‘I’ve just realised how brilliant this is,’ said Mr Livingstone as he settled himself down.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Mr Hewitt.

‘We can order tea and biscuits whenever we like and we don’t have to pay a penny for them!’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘That’s better than being a millionaire,’ said Mr Hewitt.

And Mr Livingstone agreed with him.

Chapter Thirteen

‘We need to decide what the pier is going to offer to make it attractive,’ said Mrs Caldicot addressing the first meeting of the ad hoc committee convened to consider the future of the pier.

She still felt slightly uneasy at having this authority thrust upon her but Mr Livingstone had asked her if she would take charge of the pier’s management and she was well aware that someone had to do it.

‘I don’t think I would make a very good Pier Master,’ he told her. ‘I feel that I’d make a better Pier Bosun or something like that so would you take charge of everything for me? I’m the sort of bloke who is better suited to taking orders than giving them.’

And so, with genuine reluctance, Mrs Caldicot had assumed control of the pier’s management and was now the Pier Master. She had wondered if she should be known as the Pier Mistress but Mr Pickering had assured her that it would be more appropriate if she stuck to the traditional title. She had been relieved by this for she had felt considerably more comfortable sticking to the time honoured title.

Now she was sitting out in the spring sunshine, with Mrs Roberts on one side of her and Ruth on the other, and she had a small notebook open on her lap and a pen in her right hand. Both these items had been purchased from the stock of items for sale in the pier’s surprisingly well stocked shop. The hard backed notebook she was using had a picture of the pier on its cover while the pen was decorated with a picture of the pier and the words ‘A Present From Penmouth’ overprinted on the picture.

In preparation for the forthcoming meeting, Mrs Caldicot had carefully printed the words ‘Penmouth Pier’ at the top of the first page of the notebook. You have to start somewhere, she said to herself.

‘I gather from Mr Pickering that even before the gates were shut the pier wasn’t doing very well,’ began Mrs Caldicot. ‘Indeed, he seemed to think that the pier had been losing money for months.’ She whispered all this information, which she thought might be regarded as commercially sensitive, although there was no one within earshot.

‘It’s a wonderful pier but, at the same time, it does look a little seedy,’ admitted Mrs Roberts, after looking around. There was no doubt that if peeling paint had been in vogue then the pier would have made a powerful fashion statement.

‘Having those big iron gates closed and padlocked wouldn’t have helped much,’ said Ruth who felt very proud to be included in the discussion. She had thought she really ought to be helping Mr and Mrs Merivale upstairs. But she had offered her services and they’d both thanked her very nicely and said that they thought they could cope quite well and that they’d call her if they needed her. Besides, Mrs Caldicot herself had asked her to join the ad hoc committee convened to study the pier’s future. She wasn’t entirely sure what an ad hoc committee was but it was something she could look up later on her phone and she suspected that it was almost certainly something she could tell her best friend Denise.

‘We need someone to tell us what young people look for in a pier,’ Mrs Caldicot had said. ‘You can give us a different viewpoint.’

‘Let’s make one list of the things we need to do and another list of all the amenities the pier has to offer,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘I know the pier needs a lick of paint here and there but I think our first task must be to get things up and running. The council isn’t going to stop sending us tax bills, so we need to generate an income.’

In response to this thought, she picked up her pen and drew a line down the centre of the page. On the left hand side she put the heading ‘Things to Be Done’ and on the right hand side she wrote ‘Amenities’.

The other two were silent for a moment and then the silence was broken by Ruth.

‘What’s an amenity?’ she asked.

Mrs Roberts quietly blessed young Ruth for asking the question she herself had wanted to ask but had felt too shy to put into words.

There were times when Mrs Roberts felt very maternal and loving towards Ruth. She always liked her very much, was always fond of her, but there were moments when she wanted to give her a big hug and a kiss. She would not have done this, of course. You had to be very careful these days for such signs could easily be misconstrued and might lead to embarrassment and unwanted complications. Still, she could quietly bless her and so she did. And then, not quite content that this was enough, she took Ruth’s hand and gave it a little squeeze. Ruth squeezed her hand back and they both smiled at each other and then, a little embarrassed, let their hands part again because although they were very fond of each other they were, after all, both very English and the English don’t like touching one another unless it’s inevitable or necessary.

‘The amenities are the things the pier has to offer to people,’ explained Mrs Caldicot. ‘In a village the amenities might be, well,' she paused thinking, 'the village shop, the Post Office and the pub.'

'We've got a little train,' said Ruth. 'Is that what you'd call an amenity?'

'Exactly!' said Mrs Caldicot. She wrote down 'Little Train'.

'And a café and a shop,' said Mrs Roberts, now getting into the swing of things.

Mrs Caldicot wrote these down.

'Oh, and there's the theatre at the end of the pier!' said Ruth. 'They used to have pop concerts there.'

'And Mr Pickering said they put on Pantomimes in the winter and variety shows in the summer,' added Mrs Roberts. 'Most people love a nice panto, I know I do. Oh, and Mr Pickering said they used to have tea dances in the afternoons throughout the summer.'

'What's a tea dance?' asked Ruth.

'It's sort of, well, a dance where people also have cups of tea,' explained Mrs Roberts. 'They move some of the seats out of the theatre so that they can make a dance floor and they have a little orchestra which plays music and the women come in their best frocks and the men come in smart suits and they all sit at tables and drink tea and eat little sandwiches, cucumber and suchlike, and they have fancy cakes, those little ones covered with icing, and when they aren't eating or drinking they dance.'

'I'm not sure there'd much call for that these days,' said Mrs Caldicot who didn't think she'd ever been to a tea dance though she vaguely remembered that her Auntie Maude, her mother's rather wild younger sister, might have gone to one or two occasionally. 'What do you two think?'

'Probably not,' agreed Mrs Roberts. 'Not these days.'

'I don't think I'd want to go dancing immediately after drinking lots of tea and eating cakes,' said Ruth with a shudder. 'It might make me feel a bit queasy.'

'I think you're both right,' agreed Mrs Caldicot, thinking that Ruth's idea of dancing was probably rather more energetic than her own. 'There are lots of other things we can do with the theatre – plays and suchlike would be nice perhaps.'

And so they continued.

The list of amenities grew quickly and the list of things to do grew even more speedily.

Mrs Roberts pointed out that there was a weighing machine in the foyer to the café and then she remembered that although they didn't have a Fortune Teller to sit inside it, there was a booth half way down the pier that had the remains of the words 'Madame Mystery' painted on the front in large, red letters and the words 'Penmouth Pier's Fortune Teller' painted underneath in blue. 'If one of us dressed up a bit I'm sure we could open the Fortune Telling booth – though, like most things, the booth does need a lick of paint.'

Ruth asked if Mrs Caldicot thought that the row of Victorian slot machines could be made to work. She said there was one called 'What the Butler Saw!' and another which advertised a working model of King Charles having his head chopped off. Mrs Caldicot made a note of this and said she hadn't seen these machines but would ask Mr Williams to take a look because he seemed to be the member of their party most able to deal with complicated pieces of machinery.

Mrs Roberts said that if they were going to put on plays in the theatre at the end of the pier then perhaps they ought to get in touch with touring companies which went round the country putting on shows wherever they could find a suitable venue. 'Not Shakespeare though,' she said. 'I don't think people on holiday expecting to sit through one of those Shakespearean tragedies – all those witches and all that gloominess.'

And so it went on.

There were things that needed painting, things that needed mending and stock that needed sorting.

And, in addition to the theatre at the end of the pier, there were the side shows and booths which needed to be attended to.

'We need to decide who's going to do what,' said Mrs Caldicot, looking at the two long lists in her notebook. 'But for now I think we've earned ourselves another cup of tea.'

'Talking of the café, perhaps we could add some fresh items to the menu,' suggested Mrs Roberts. 'Young Dorothy makes marvellous cod and chips, I don't think I've ever tasted better, but maybe we would attract more customers if we extended our range a little. I don't think we should try anything too challenging, but cheese on toast, teacakes, crumpets, home-made sandwiches and so on might bring in a few more customers.'

Both Ruth and Mrs Caldicot agreed that this was a splendid idea and they quickly found themselves suggesting other simple dishes which could be added to the menu, and their own visit to the café was delayed.

'Naturally, we'd need to find someone to help Dorothy,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'She works very hard but if the café is going to be busier she would need another pair of hands.' She sighed. She wasn't looking forward to having to interview prospective waitresses. Still, it was something that had to be done.

After another half an hour of chatting, the three of them decided that they'd pretty well exhausted all the possibilities and their imaginations.

Leaving the other two sitting on the bench, in case they could think of anything else that could be added to their list of amenities, Mrs Caldicot went indoors to find the telephone book and look up the number for the secretary of the biggest local amateur dramatic society. Mrs Caldicot was, she knew, probably the only person in the country who still looked up numbers in the telephone directory. But some habits die hard.

The secretary of the dramatic society answered her telephone immediately.

'As you know there's a wonderful theatre at the end of the pier,' said Mrs Caldicot, having introduced herself, and explained that although Mr Livingstone was the new owner of the pier she was the Pier Master and in charge of organising events on the pier.

'Oh yes,' said the secretary, a lady called Mrs Upton. She sounded quite excited. 'In the past we've often hoped we would be able to use the theatre for one or two of our productions. At Christmas we always put on a pantomime and we do two or three other shows during the year – usually including a musical in the summer.'

'So am I right in thinking you would be interested in putting on a show in our theatre?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'That would be amazing! But may I ask why you're inviting us when you could easily get professional theatre companies to put on a show. You have a wonderful theatre. It's one of the biggest and most beautiful auditoriums in the whole of Devon!'

'It's very simple,' explained Mrs Caldicot. 'We don't have the money or the expertise to put together a show ourselves. And we need to put on something as soon as possible. We want to get people coming onto the pier.'

'How would this work financially?' asked Mrs Upton.

'You would be responsible for selling the tickets and putting on a show of your choice,' explained Mrs Caldicot, making up the deal as she went along. 'We would then split the proceeds down the middle. You keep half and you give us half. The only condition is that you must have a show on the boards within a month.'

'Well, we have a show in rehearsal at the moment,' said Mrs Upton. 'We were planning to put it on in the village hall – that's the venue we normally use – but we'd obviously jump at the chance to put the show on in your theatre. That would be marvellous!'

'What are you rehearsing?' asked Mrs Caldicot, hoping desperately that it wasn't anything by Ibsen, Chekov or even Shakespeare.

'The Pirates of Penzance!' replied Mrs Upton. 'The opera by Gilbert and Sullivan. We're doing it as our annual musical production.'

'That will be wonderful,' said Mrs Caldicot, who loved all Gilbert and Sullivan operas. 'That would be absolutely perfect! And what better place to have an opera about pirates than on a pier!'

She put down the telephone and smiled happily. Things were beginning to fall into place. She went back outside and joined Mrs Roberts and Ruth who were now standing outside the café discussing whether or not they should put a fish stew onto the café menu.

'Time for tea and biscuits!' said Mrs Caldicot.

The others agreed immediately. Some decisions are easy to make.

Chapter Fourteen

But just as Mrs Caldicot, Mrs Roberts and Ruth were preparing to enter the café, a couple wandered onto the pier.

She was all curves; there were no straight bits at all.

He, on the other hand, was all straight bits; no curves.

She was five foot nothing.

He was six foot something and had about as much fat on him as the average telegraph pole.

She looked young enough to be able to remember her 21st birthday celebrations.

He was of the age when pensions become of practical rather than theoretical interest.

She had shoulder length brown hair that shone in the morning sunshine.

He didn't have enough hair remaining to fill a locket.

The pair, who weren't a couple in any sense of the word, but simply happened to be together at that moment, and who somehow managed to look lost but at the same time look as though they knew where they were, walked rather shyly up to where Mrs Caldicot, Mrs Roberts and Ruth were preparing to enter the café. Mrs Caldicot had paused for a moment and was writing down a list of the type of cakes the trio had decided the café should stock.

'We're sorry to bother you,' said the girl, not sure which of the three to address and so directing her enquiry to the three of them in turn, as though she were addressing a small audience. 'But we're looking for the new owner of the pier.'

'That would be Mr Livingstone,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'But I might be able to help you.'

'We used to work here,' explained the girl. 'On the pier,' she added, in case this might be necessary. 'And we wondered if you would still be needing us.'

When the girl spoke, every sentence finished as though it had a question mark at the end. It could have been an annoying habit but it wasn't. It gave her an innocence, a charm, a naivety, a shyness and a sense of genuine curiosity.

'What do you do?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'My name is Miss Emerald Pettifer and I'm the Fat Lady,' said the girl. 'I used to be the Bearded Lady but I had electrolysis to get rid of the beard.' She paused, blushing lightly. 'I found it very embarrassing to have a beard. People used to make remarks.'

'I hope you don't mind my asking,' said Mrs Caldicot, rather hesitantly, 'but it seems relevant so I have to ask, would you please tell us how much you weigh?'

Miss Pettifer hesitated. 'Ten stone six pounds at the moment,' she said at last. 'That's 146 pounds,' she explained.

'Isn't that a little, er, on the light side for a Fat Lady?'

'I've been on a sort of involuntary diet. The pier has been shut and I didn't have a job. Not having a job made me depressed and besides, not earning any money meant that I couldn't afford the amount of food I needed to eat to keep up my weight.' She paused and made an attempt to brighten her voice. 'I could soon put the weight back on again.'

'Won't being so light make your work a little tricky?'

'I could wear lots of jumpers and things and I don't think anyone would really notice,' said Miss Pettifer. 'I'm quite plump in the face.' She puffed out her cheeks but this simply made her look as though she were blowing up a non-existent balloon. 'And I'm quite cuddly in the usual cuddly areas.'

'Wouldn't the customers expect you to be wearing just a bathing costume?'

'Oh no. I don't think so. Not these days. It would be considered very inappropriate. Sexist and fattist I think they'd call it. I think it would be all right if I just sat there looking plump; well a bit on the fat side really I suppose.'

'When you were the Fat Lady, you just sat there?'

'Yes, in a little booth. I did find it quite boring so I used to knit or read a magazine.'

'But is there still a market for fat ladies on piers?' asked Mrs Caldicot. 'Even if you put on quite a lot of weight there would probably be a lot of the customers looking fatter than yourself.'

'I suppose so,' agreed Miss Pettifer, rather sadly.

'Did a lot of people pay to come and look at you?' asked Mrs Roberts.

'Not many,' admitted Miss Pettifer with disarming honesty. 'A few came when it was raining. I had a booth half way down the pier, next to the Fortune Teller booth. We both used to do quite well when it rained because there wasn't anywhere else to shelter in the middle section of the pier.'

'I don't think we can just rely on bad weather,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'No,' said Miss Pettifer. 'I suppose not.'

‘Isn’t there anything else you can do?’ asked Mrs Roberts kindly.

‘Not really. I’ve never really tried anything else. I’ve always been a Fat Lady – except for a couple of years when I was the Bearded Lady.’

‘Maybe you could sit in the booth and be the Thin Lady,’ suggested Ruth who was such a kindly soul that she could not bear the thought of ‘letting anyone go to seek fresh opportunities’ as the saying goes. ‘We could repaint the sign on the outside of the booth.’

‘I don’t think I’m thin enough for that,’ said Miss Pettifer.

‘Well, let’s think about it,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Why don’t you come and have a cup of tea with us?’ She turned and suddenly realised that the tall, thin man was still standing there. He was so thin that he was almost invisible. ‘I’m so sorry,’ she apologised. ‘I didn’t mean to ignore you…’

‘Oh that’s all right,’ said the tall, thin man. He seemed quite jolly, not all upset at having been forgotten. ‘People often don’t notice that I’m there.’

‘Are you with Miss Pettifer?’

‘No, not really. We just came together when we saw that the pier was open again. I live in a flat across the road and I telephoned Miss Pettifer when I saw the gates were unlocked.’

‘What did you do on the pier?’

‘I’m a silhouettist,’ said the tall, thin man with undisguised pride. ‘My name is Hyacinth Rowbottham and I’ve been a silhouettist all my life. My father was a silhouettist as was his father before him. I used to work on the West Pier in Brighton until it fell into the sea. I then wandered around the country until I ended up at the Penmouth pier. Mr Livingstone, the former pier owner was a keen supporter of my art. I did several silhouettes for him. Did you say that the current owner was a Mr Livingstone?’

‘That’s right. The current owner is the nephew of the owner you knew.’

‘Ah,’ said Mr Rowbottham with a nod and a smile.

‘Excuse me for asking, and for being so ignorant,’ said Ruth, ‘but what exactly is a silhouettist?’

With a quite dramatic flourish, Mr Rowbottham pulled a pair of scissors out of one inside pocket and a sheet of black cartridge paper out of another. He then proceeded to snip away at the piece of black paper until he had produced a profile of Ruth that was quite uncannily accurate. When he had finished he handed the silhouette to her and put the scissors back into his jacket pocket.

‘That’s amazing!’ said Ruth, genuinely astonished. She gazed at the silhouette of herself which she had been given. ‘How on earth do you manage to do that?’

‘It’s an art,’ said the man, with some pride. ‘It is a disappearing art but an art nevertheless. Silhouettists used to be very popular in Victorian times but the widespread availability of the camera has rather taken away for the need for my work.’

‘This is terrific!’ said Ruth. ‘I shall keep this for ever.’ She immediately took a photograph of the silhouette with her mobile phone so that she could send a picture to Jean-Jacques and to her best friend Denise.

‘Let’s all go and have a cup of tea,’ said Mrs Caldicot, who didn’t really know why but who was beginning to feel very optimistic about the future. The others followed her into the café. Mrs Caldicot went up to the counter, gave their order and spoke to Dorothy for a few moments.

‘So,’ said Mrs Caldicot to Miss Pettifer and Mr Rowbottham when they were all settled at a table. ‘We all live here, in the rooms up above, but we don’t have any money, apart from our rather measly pensions, so we’ve got to make the pier earn our living for us. You haven’t met everyone but there are 14 of us, plus Mr Pickering and his granddaughter Dorothy, whom I am sure you both know. However, even with 14 of us working we can’t do everything by ourselves. So, would you two like to carry on working on the pier?’

Mr Rowbottham looked across at Miss Pettifer who looked back at him but didn’t say anything. ‘Well, I for one would be delighted,’ he said. ‘My previous arrangement was very simple. I worked on the pier and paid over half of my takings to Mr Livingstone, the older Mr Livingstone that is. In return I was the exclusive silhouettist on the pier.’

‘And you were happy with that arrangement?’

‘Oh very happy. On dry days I just wandered up and down the pier. If things were quiet I’d just do a silhouette of someone passing and get people interested that way. On wet days I worked in the foyer of the theatre. I’m never going to get rich but I made enough to live on and my overheads are pretty low – just a pair of scissors and a supply of black paper.’

Miss Pettifer looked at Mrs Caldicot and then at Mrs Roberts and Ruth. ‘I realise that it’s going to take me ages to put on enough weight to be a Fat Lady again,’ she said, rather sadly. ‘And to be honest I’m not entirely sure that I want to be a Fat Lady anymore. Being pointed out and sniggered at all day long can be a little dispiriting.’

‘I can imagine,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘To be honest I don’t think any of us would want you to be the Fat Lady anymore.’

‘Do you think there might be something I can do?’ asked Miss Pettifer, without much hope or confidence. ‘I don’t have any skills. All I know is how to be fat and that’s not really a job requiring a great deal of skill.’

‘Dorothy is going to carry on running the café for us,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘And although she’s very young, I have asked her to be the manager. But we want to expand the café business and Dorothy can’t do everything herself. I just spoke to her and she’d be very happy to have you working here as the waitress if that’s something you’d be happy to consider.’

Mrs Caldicot didn’t think she had ever seen anyone quite so pleased.

‘Do you mean it?’

‘Of course! Dorothy would be in charge. But you know her, don’t you?’

‘Oh yes, we get on well. I’ve known her since she first came here.’

With impeccable timing, Dorothy arrived at the table carrying a tray upon which there were six cups and saucers, two large teapots and a jug of hot water. ‘Would you like some cake?’ she asked. ‘I hope you don’t mind but when I knew we were opening properly I popped out to the supermarket and bought a box of little fancy cakes and a chocolate cake.’

‘Oh yes, please!’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘You’re an absolute angel.’ Mrs Roberts loved nearly all sorts of cake, with caraway seed cake being the one possible exception.

‘I’m going to be your waitress!’ Miss Pettifer told Dorothy. She pushed back her chair and stood. ‘So can I help you?’

‘That’s marvellous!’ said Dorothy, clearly delighted. ‘I’ve got the milk and the sugar ready on another tray but we need some cake and biscuits putting out on a plate.’

And so the pier now had a silhouettist and although the pier no longer had a Fat Lady the café had a waitress.

‘It seems as though the Fat Lady booth is going to be empty,’ said Mrs Caldicot to Mr Rowbottham. ‘Would you prefer to work in one of the booths? You can wander up and down whenever you like, of course. But if the weather is bad you will have somewhere dry to work. And we can repaint the sign on the booth so that people know you’re on the pier.’

It was now Mr Rowbottham’s turn to look thrilled and it was clearly Mrs Caldicot’s day to make people happy. ‘Could I perhaps put some examples of my work in a glass case? And attach the case to the outer wall of the booth?’

‘Of course you can!’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘That would be marvellous,’ said Rowbottham, who was perilously close to tears. ‘My father used to have a booth on the West Pier.’ He paused and wiped his eyes with a knuckle. ‘A booth of my own!’ he murmured.

Dorothy and Miss Pettifer then arrived back at the table. Dorothy was carrying a tray containing the milk and sugar and Miss Pettifer had a plateful of biscuits and little cakes, tastefully arranged and looking most attractive. There were also several slices of the chocolate cake on the plate.

Mrs Caldicot was delighted.

They had cake and biscuits and the café now had staff.

Chapter Fifteen

After dinner that evening (they were back to eating cod and chips after the excitement and adventure of experimenting with chips and cod) Mrs Caldicot, the gang of refugees from the Twilight Years Rest Home and Mr Pickering and his daughter Dorothy sat in the pier's café and discussed their future.

Miss Pettifer, the erstwhile fat lady and Mr Rowbottham, the accomplished silhouettist had both gone home walking on air.

It was still only 8.30 pm, rather earlier than Mr Livingstone and Mr Hewitt had planned to close the pier, but the gates were nevertheless locked and padlocked.

'I've got a list of things we need to discuss,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'But first would you all tell us how each of you got on today?' She turned to the Merivales. 'How did you two get on?'

'There were no great problems,' said Mrs Merivale. 'We replaced a dozen dead light bulbs and Mr Merivale put new washers on three taps. The rooms upstairs need decorating but they'll do for the time being.'

'They'll have to,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Our main priority is to get the pier up and running – and to start bringing in some money. We've paid the last big bill from the council but I've no doubt they'll be sending us another tax bill before long. And there will be electricity bills to pay too.'

'Do you want us to take over the café and do the cooking?' asked Mrs Merivale.

This was a problem which had worried Mrs Caldicot for much of the day. The Merivales had been the housekeepers at the Twilight Years Rest Home and they had always bought the food and cooked the meals. Out of the corner of her eye, Mrs Caldicot could see that Dorothy was alarmed by Mrs Merivale's rather tactless enquiry.

'No, I don't think so,' said Mrs Caldicot immediately. 'We need you and Mr Merivale to look after our meals and to do all the housekeeping in our living quarters upstairs. There is an excellent kitchen attached to the ballroom and in future I think that we should keep the downstairs café for the pier's customers and we should eat our own meals upstairs in a section of the ballroom which we will turn into our dining room.'

Mrs Caldicot had rather hoped that this very practical solution would keep everyone happy. And, indeed, that was exactly what it seemed to do. Dorothy, who clearly enjoyed looking after the café, and who now had a waitress to help her, was obviously relieved. And the Merivales were delighted to remain in charge of providing sustenance for all their friends.

'How did you get on?' Mrs Caldicot asked Mr Williams, Mr Twist and Mr Roxdale.

'Not badly, not badly at all,' replied Mr Williams, answering on behalf of them all. 'We managed to sort out all the furniture and made sure that all the unpacked suitcases were in the correct rooms. We put all the kitchen stuff that we brought with us into the kitchen next to the ballroom.'

'And how did you ladies get on with sorting out the stock cupboards,' asked Mrs Caldicot, knowing that Miss Nightingale, Mrs Peterborough and Mrs Torridge had spent the day sorting through the cupboards in the stock room at the back of the shop and upstairs next to the ballroom.

'Oh we had a whale of a time!' said Mrs Peterborough.

'A marvellous time!' said Miss Nightingale.

'We made a list,' said Mrs Torridge.

There was then a short delay while the three of them looked for the stock list they'd made. In the end, Mrs Torridge found the list underneath the hat she was wearing. It was a sweet little hat made of navy blue felt and adorned with two artificial love birds and a large spray of what looked like gladioli. 'Silly me!' she said when she eventually found the list. 'I put it there for safekeeping.' She giggled. 'I always put valuable things under my hat and yet I still forget what I've done with them. Silly me, eh?' She giggled again.

'I remember where the list is now,' said Mrs Peterborough, who hadn't yet realised that Mrs Torridge had found her piece of paper. 'It's under your hat. You asked us to remind you that you'd put it under your hat so I wrote a message to myself on the back of my hand.' She held up her hand showed where she had written 'Mrs T's Hat' in red ink.

'Thank you,' said Mrs Torridge, who knew better than to get into a discussion with Mrs Peterborough.

'There were lots of boxes of liquorice allsorts,' said Mrs Peterborough. 'I brought one with me. I tried one of the little blue ones. They're my favourites.'

'Are they out of date?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'I'm not sure,' replied Mrs Peterborough. 'There's no best before date on the box.'

'Does the box have anything printed on it?'

'Just the price. It says 2/11. That's two shillings and eleven pence isn't it? I remember shillings and pence. I understood shillings and pennies. They were proper money.'

'So the box was made before decimalisation,' said Mrs Caldicot, rather shocked. 'Golly. That almost makes them antiques. When did our currency change to decimals?'

'It was the 15th February 1971,' said Mr Twist.

'I think we'd better throw the liquorice allsorts away,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'What else did you find in the way of sweets?'

'We found a lot of Turkish Delight,' said Miss Nightingale.

'Sixteen large crates of it,' said Mrs Peterborough. 'And each box contains dozens and dozens of boxes of it. And they are large boxes, too! Those nice, little wooden boxes.'

Mrs Caldicot's heart began to beat faster. She loved Turkish Delight. 'Ooo!' she heard herself saying. 'I do like Turkish Delight.'

'Mr Twist reckons that's enough for each of us to have a whole crateful,' said Miss Nightingale.

'The crates were so big and heavy that we could hardly lift them,' said Mrs Torridge. 'And the good news is that they are all still in date.'

'But the bad news is that we have to sell them or eat them up quite quickly,' said Mrs Peterborough very earnestly. 'They all go out of date in another eight weeks.'

'I wouldn't have thought Turkish Delight would go out of date,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'It's mostly sugar so it ought to keep for years. I don't suppose we can sell it if it is out of date but I'm pretty sure it will be perfectly safe to eat.'

'I never understand that,' said Ruth. 'How can it be that a bar of chocolate that is perfectly safe to eat one day suddenly becomes dangerous at midnight?'

'I think they put a little radio receiver in each chocolate bar,' said Mr Roxdale. 'The receiver is probably hidden somewhere in the wrapper. At midnight on the allotted date a highly paid man in an office somewhere presses a button and sends a message to all the chocolate bars which are due to expire that day. The receiver then releases bugs or mould spores or something and the chocolate suddenly becomes inedible.'

'Crumbs!' said Ruth. 'You'd never know would you?'

'It's all done by the bureaucrats to increase waste and to force us to buy more stuff,' explained Mr Roxdale. 'They do it to give the sweet industry a boost.'

'Where did you hear that' asked Mrs Roberts.

'Dunno where I heard it,' said Mr Roxdale. 'I think it was in the *Daily Mirror*. But, anyway, it sounds true so it must be.'

'I know what you could do,' said Ruth. 'You could take the wrapper off the chocolate bar and put it in the rubbish, then when the message is sent to the little receiver it won't be able to make the chocolate go bad!'

'Don't you believe him, dear,' Mrs Roberts said to Ruth. 'I think he made that up.'

'No, I didn't. I read it somewhere,' said Mr Roxdale. 'If it wasn't in the *Daily Mirror* it might have been in the *Daily Mail*.' He stopped for a moment, clearly thinking. 'Or maybe I heard it on the radio.'

'Well, the next time I buy a bar of chocolate I'm going to remove the wrapper straight away,' said Ruth. 'Just in case the man in the office makes a mistake and presses his button too soon.'

'I think they do something similar with clothes,' said Mr Roxdale. 'They put moth eggs into a little capsule and then when you've had a jumper or a sweater for a year or so the capsule dissolves and the eggs are released into the wool.'

'Oh, that's just plain silly!' said Mrs Roberts. But she no longer sounded quite so sceptical. 'Where did you hear that one?'

'I probably did read that in the *Daily Mail*,' said Mr Roxdale. 'They have some good stuff in there. Or maybe it was the *National Enquirer*. I sometimes buy that so that I can keep up with what's going on in the world.'

'Well, all that is as maybe,' said Mrs Caldicot who was now not at all sure what to believe but who was quite taken with the thought of all that Turkish Delight waiting to be enjoyed. 'Perhaps we should bring the boxes out before we forget all about them,' she suggested. 'We should share it all out. We'll never be able to sell that much Turkish Delight in the next few weeks so we might as well eat some of them ourselves.'

'I heard that Turkish Delight is very good for you,' said Mr Roxdale. 'It's full of stuff like iridium and strontium.'

'Did you read that in the *Daily Mail* too?' said Mrs Roberts.

'Might have been,' said Mr Roxdale, frowning in thought. 'Maybe it was in the paper that was wrapped round my chips last night.' He shrugged. 'I don't know where I read it but I just sort of know this stuff. It must be true if you read it in a newspaper.'

'He knows all sorts of strange things,' confirmed Mr Livingstone. 'It's a gift.'

'Some people can ride a bicycle without holding on, some people can swim under water, I just absorb useful information,' said Mr Roxdale. 'It's a skill I've acquired since I got older and it seems to be a natural thing.'

‘Mr Hewitt and I did some financial projections,’ said Mr Livingstone, changing the subject. He was excited about the work they’d done together. He pulled his scruffy piece of paper out of his pocket. ‘We worked out that we should make around £28,000,000 profit this year. That’s between £1,500,000 and £2,000,000 each.’ He paused, clearly awaiting cheers of delight. Instead, there was silence. It is difficult to cheer, or to say anything, when your mouth has fallen open in shock.

‘May I ask how on earth you got those figures?’ asked Mr Twist, the accountant and former tax inspector. He tried not to sound as surprised as he sounded.

‘Ah, it was all damned clever stuff,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘We made an estimate of the number of people expected to come onto the pier each day, worked out what we thought they’d spend and then multiplied the total by the number of days in a year.’

‘We didn’t include February 29th, because that only comes round once every four years, and we didn’t include anything for the sale of sou’westers and plastic macs,’ said Mr Hewitt.

‘That sounds very impressive,’ said Mrs Caldicot who couldn’t think of anything else to say. She glanced across at Ruth and saw that although the teenager deputy housekeeper had her eyes closed, her lips were moving. Mrs Caldicot, who knew Ruth well, guessed that the teenager was working out how she would spend her million pound windfall. She thought about saying something to Ruth about not taking Mr Livingstone’s projections too seriously but stopped herself. After all, she thought, we’re all entitled to have wonderful dreams when we’re 18-years-old.

‘So how many people a day did you reckon would come onto the pier?’ asked Mr Twist.

Mr Livingstone consulted his piece of paper. ‘We estimated that 8,400 people a day would visit the pier.’

‘What did you base that on?’ asked Mr Twist.

‘It was just an estimate,’ said Mr Livingstone defensively. ‘It might turn out to be less than that.’

‘But it could just as easily turn out to be more!’ Mr Hewitt pointed out, his sudden optimism undimmed. ‘It could be much, much more than that.’

‘How much money did you estimate we would make each day?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘£80,000,’ replied Mr Livingstone, after consulting his slip of paper.

‘That’s nearly £10 per visitor isn’t it?’

‘Yes! That’s it. That’s what we thought. And we didn’t even count any income from the theatre.’

‘Or the sou’westers,’ added Mr Hewitt. ‘That’ll be jam on the cake.’

‘Was that the gross income or the profit?’

‘Oh, that was our profit. We allowed a bit for the cost of buying the things we sell.’

‘How much is a bit?’ asked Mr Twist.

‘Our estimated gross income was £84,000 so we knocked off £4,000 for the cost of buying the stuff we sold.’

‘Though rides on the little train wouldn’t cost anything,’ said Mr Hewitt.

‘That’s right. So the profit figure might be a bit higher.’

‘I think your figures might be a teeny weeny bit optimistic,’ said Mrs Caldicot, who didn’t want to be a wet blanket but who didn’t want the rest of the gang getting too excited and then being terribly disappointed when they weren’t all millionaires within a year. She turned to Mr Twist who was, as usual, in charge of the accounts. ‘How much did we take today?’

Mr Twist pulled a notebook out of his pocket and opened it. ‘We took £3.25 today,’ he announced. ‘That was comprised of two items purchased in the shop: a notebook and a pen. The notebook was sold for £2.00 and the pen for £1.25.’ He held up the notebook he was holding. ‘I had this notebook before we got here,’ he added.

‘I bought the pen and the notebook,’ said Mrs Caldicot. She held up the notebook and the pen she was holding. ‘I bought these from the shop.’

‘So we were just £83,996.75 down on our projected income for the day,’ said Mr Williams.

‘Well, actually, it’s not quite that good,’ said Mr Twist. ‘Because we are assuming that today’s income of £3.25 was entirely profit whereas, of course, the notebook and the pen which we sold had to be taken out of stock.’

‘I don’t think we should be too downhearted,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘There are bound to be good days and not such good days.’

‘We sold some train tickets!’ said Mrs Peterborough. ‘I nearly forgot about those.’

‘How much did that come to?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘Oh we didn’t charge for them,’ said Mrs Peterborough. ‘We were too busy sorting out the sweets.’ She looked around in the silence which followed this admission. ‘Sorry,’ she whispered.

‘If we make approximately £168,000 profit tomorrow then we’ll be back on target!’ said Mr Williams, exhibiting an air of optimism previously only displayed by Mr Livingstone and Mr Hewitt.

‘Absolutely!’ agreed Mr Hewitt. ‘As Mr Livingstone said, there are going to be good days and bad days. That’s business for you, isn’t it? All we need is a nice coach party of rich tourists and we’ll be back on target.’

‘They’ll have to be very rich,’ muttered Mr Twist who was an unwilling adherent of Mrs Caldicot’s brand of mild scepticism.

‘Oh, and I forgot! We found a lot of rock,’ said Miss Nightingale suddenly.

‘Oh yes, thirty six boxes of rock,’ said Mrs Torridge, examining her list. ‘We forgot about that, didn’t we? There didn’t seem to be a sell by date on the rock but we think there might be a small problem with it.’

‘Oh dear,’ said Mrs Caldicot, who was still worrying about what Mr Roxdale had said about Turkish Delight. She wondered whether the ingredients he had mentioned meant that Turkish Delight was good for you or bad for you. ‘What’s the problem?’ she asked.

‘How do most people spell ‘present’?’ asked Mrs Torridge.

‘As in ‘A Present from Penmouth’?’

‘Exactly, as in ‘A Present from Penmouth’.’

‘Well, I’d spell it p-r-e-s-e-n-t,’ said Mrs Caldicot, rather nervously. ‘But I could be wrong. I was never terribly good at spelling.’ She decided she didn’t care about the Turkish Delight ingredients. If you listened to the experts you’d never eat anything because you could always find someone to say that something was dangerous.

‘That’s definitely how I’d spell it,’ agreed Mr Williams.

And with the exception of a few dissenters it was generally agreed that Mrs Caldicot’s suggestion was pretty well the accepted spelling.

‘Well, that’s not what it says on our rock,’ said Mrs Torridge. She took a stick of rock out of her handbag and handed it to Mrs Caldicot.

‘It says ‘A P-r-e-s-c-e-n-c-e from Penmouth’, said Mrs Caldicot, reading the stick of rock.

‘Well at least they spelt the name of the place properly,’ said Mr Twist with a hollow laugh.

‘How much of this rock is there?’

‘A lot,’ said Miss Nightingale.

‘A very lot,’ said Mrs Peterborough.

‘At least one cupboard full,’ said Mrs Torridge.

‘I remember them ordering that,’ said Mr Pickering. ‘It was that Simpkins, him who used to be the Pier Master and who is now running a car park for the council. He ordered a new supply of rock and spelt the word ‘Present’ wrong on the form they sent. It wasn’t the fault of the people who made the rock. They just did what they were told. We spotted it when it came in but it was too late to do anything about it.’

‘It seems a pity to throw it all away,’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘There must be hundreds of pounds worth of rock if there is a whole cupboard full of it.’

‘There was £7,000 worth of it,’ said Mr Pickering. ‘That’s a lot of rock. There’s more than one cupboard full of it. That Mr Simpkins made me cram it into cupboards all over the place. He wanted to throw it all into the sea but I told him we couldn’t do that because it would take years to dissolve.’

They all sat in silence for a while wondering what they could do with £7,000 worth of misspelt rock.

‘We could sell it as special rock,’ said Mrs Caldicot, breaking the silence at last.

Everyone looked at her.

‘We use the word ‘presence’ in funny ways,’ she said. She was thinking aloud but she felt there was a germ of an idea struggling to get out. ‘We say that ‘we make our presence felt’ and that we are aware of a ‘presence’ in a room. So why don’t we sell the rock as being very, very special rock. If you take a stick of our rock home with you will be taking a ‘presence’ from Penmouth; a memory from the town where you enjoyed your holiday.’

There was silence for a while as people tried to understand what Mrs Caldicot was saying. Some people got there quicker than others. Some people never got there but were happy about the suggestion that they could sell the rock and that instead of being utterly useless it had now become a very special sort of rock.

‘We could charge more for special rock!’ said Mr Twist, excitedly. ‘It’s a unique type of rock so it should have a special price. People would pay a premium to have a stick of this rock! And when they ate it then they would have the presence within them.’

‘Do you know what he’s talking about?’ Mr Livingstone asked Mr Hewitt in a whisper.

‘Not got the foggiest notion,’ admitted Mr Hewitt. ‘But I think Mrs Caldicot and Mr Twist just turned £7,000 of rubbish into something profitable.’

‘Brilliant!’ said Mr Livingstone, whispering back with enthusiasm. ‘And I don’t think people took us seriously when we talked about us all becoming millionaires!’

‘They didn’t have the vision we have,’ said Mr Hewitt.

Mr Livingstone nodded his agreement. ‘Not everyone has our young, vibrant outlook on life,’ he said.

‘You’re right there, Mr Livingstone,’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘I don’t want to start feeling old before my time.’

‘Very good attitude, if I may say so,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘I don’t mind growing old, it’s one of life’s little inevitabilities, but I do think it's a mistake to grow up.'

'Terrible mistake,' said Mr Hewitt. He pulled a face and shuddered.

Mrs Caldicot, who had overheard this conversation, smiled to herself. Mr Livingstone's next major birthday milestone would be his 80th and Mr Hewitt had celebrated his 90th birthday a year or two earlier.

She couldn't help remembering when she'd first met them at the Twilight Years Rest Home. They had both been heavily drugged with tranquillisers and sleeping tablets and had spent their days asleep or sitting on their beds. The transformation, since they'd abandoned their pills, had been startling. She now realised, for the first time, that maybe the word 'old' doesn't measure how far you are from the start but how far you are from the end. And that if you accepted that definition, rather than the one more customarily accepted, then Mr Livingstone and Mr Hewitt, and the rest of the gang, were still in the prime of their lives.

'Now, what else was there?' asked Mrs Caldicot, putting those unhappy memories away in a deep, dark place. 'Can anyone think of anything else?'

'If you think that we need a pier photographer then I would be happy to volunteer my services,' said Mr Williams. 'If people wanted their picture taken I could snap them at the beginning of the pier and then give them the finished photo when they left. I'd just need someone to help with the developing and printing while I stay on the pier and take the pictures.'

'Oh yes!' said Mrs Roberts, excitedly. 'I think that's a marvellous idea. I always used to love having my picture taken on holiday. I've got a lovely snap of me and Mr Roberts in my keepsake box.'

'I think that's brilliant!' agreed Ruth. 'Everyone has a camera on their phone these days but I think they'd still love to have a proper photo to take home.'

'Are you sure you wouldn't mind doing that?' said Mrs Caldicot to Mr Williams. She knew that Mr Williams had once been an immensely successful photographer, whose pictures had been shown in galleries in London and Paris.

'I'm definitely sure!' said Mr Williams. 'It'll be fun.'

'Well, that will be marvellous,' said Mrs Caldicot. She looked down her list of things to do. 'The final thing we need to talk about,' she said 'is that we need an official Fortune Teller. There is a Fortune Teller's booth available and we can't have a pier without a Fortune Teller. I am told by Mr Pickering that the booth was one of the most successful items on the pier. Sadly, I gather that the previous incumbent had to leave unexpectedly.'

'Unforeseen circumstances?' asked Mr Williams.

'I fear so,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. 'The result is that we urgently need to find a replacement.'

'Where on earth do you find a Fortune Teller?' asked Mr Twist. 'We can hardly telephone the local Labour Exchange and ask them to send along a selection of suitable candidates.'

'We could put an advert in *Exchange and Mart*,' suggested Mr Livingstone.

'But what are we going to offer in exchange?' asked Mr Hewitt.

'Good point,' agreed Mr Livingstone. 'I don't have the foggiest. How much misspelt rock could you swap for a Fortune Teller?'

'Where did the last Fortune Teller come from?' Mrs Caldicot asked Mr Pickering.

'She just sort of turned up one day,' replied Mr Pickering. He looked at his grand-daughter. 'Do you know where she came from?'

'I've no idea,' said Dorothy, blushing at being asked to contribute to the conversation. 'I think I remember her saying that she used to work in a travelling fair.'

'Maybe one will just turn up!' said Mr Livingstone.

'There must be one somewhere who, even as we speak, realises that there is a vacant post for a Fortune Teller on Penmouth Pier!' said Mr Hewitt.

'I don't think we can rely entirely on serendipity!' said Mrs Caldicot, whose vocabulary had expanded since she'd been married to Jenkins.

'What's that?' whispered Ruth to Mrs Roberts.

'I don't know dear,' Mrs Roberts whispered back. 'Maybe it's some sort of agency for Fortune Tellers.'

'Like if you want to hire an actor you go to Equity and if you want a musician you go to the Musicians' Union?'

'That's it. But for Fortune Tellers you go to Serendipity.'

'Ah,' whispered Ruth. 'Thank you.'

And so another harmless myth was born.

'Do you need a licence to be a Fortune Teller?' asked Mrs Torridge.

'I don't think so,' said Mrs Caldicot with a frown. 'Not yet anyway.'

'Do you have to have training?'

'I wouldn't have thought you needed that either.'

'Certificates?'

‘Not yet, though I’m sure they’ll bring in training, examinations and certificates when they get round to it.’

‘If no one else is doing it then we could run courses for Fortune Tellers,’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘There wouldn’t be any point in having an examination for Fortune Tellers, would there?’ said Mr Williams. He looked around at the puzzled faces. ‘If you were any good then you’d know all the questions beforehand wouldn’t you?’

‘If you don’t need training or a certificate or a licence then I think I’d like to try it,’ said Mrs Torridge.

Everyone looked at her.

‘I’ve got a nice silk scarf to go over my head,’ she said. ‘And I’ve got some big, gold hoop earrings. They’re a bit tarnished but they’ll polish up nicely. All I need is an upturned goldfish bowl and I’ll be ready to go.’

‘Do you really think you could do it?’ asked Mrs Caldicot, a little surprised.

‘Oh yes,’ said Mrs Torridge, with surprising confidence. ‘And it would save us bringing in someone from outside.’

‘It certainly would,’ agreed Mrs Caldicot.

‘Do you think it would count as my being something in show business?’

‘Definitely,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘I once nearly joined an amateur dramatics society when I was younger,’ said Mrs Torridge. ‘It was organised by our vicar but there was a disagreement about what play we should put on. The man who was going to direct the play wanted to put on ‘Macbeth’ and the society’s leading actor preferred ‘Charley’s Aunt’. They came to blows and the vicar was so shocked that he disbanded the society. I didn’t care two hoots what they put on but I was very disappointed. I rather fancied the boy who was the Assistant Stage Manager. His name was Reggie and he was also one of the leading lights in the choir. He was in all those church things. I seem to remember he was a Brown Owl in the Boy Scout troop. Did they have Brown Owls in the Boy Scouts? Or was that in the Brownies?’

‘I’m not sure,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘But I think that being a Fortune Teller would definitely count as a branch of show business.’

‘Oh, that’s good. Then I would very much like to give it a try.’

‘Splendid,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘I wouldn’t tell people anything nasty,’ said Mrs Torridge firmly.

‘You mean stuff like ‘You will meet a tall, dark, handsome stranger but he’ll be the undertaker’,’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘Or you’ll meet a tall, dark, handsome stranger who will be the judge sentencing you to ten years hard labour,’ suggested Mr Hewitt.

‘Stop it you two!’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘I’ll only tell people nice things,’ said Mrs Torridge. ‘I want to make them happy. Folk who visit a Fortune Teller on a pier are probably on holiday. They want to hear nice things. They’ll hear enough bad things when they’re at home – gas bills, noisy neighbours, leaky taps. They come away to the seaside to escape from real life for a while.’

‘I think that’s a splendid sentiment,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘Will you do my fortune for me?’ Ruth asked Mrs Torridge.

‘Of course I will, dear. You can be one of my first clients.’

‘But you won’t tell any of the others what you see, will you?’ whispered Ruth.

‘Of course not, dear. The Fortune Teller’s booth is like the confession box or the doctor’s consulting room in the olden days.’

‘Thank you,’ smiled Ruth.

‘Perhaps I should do an audition?’ suggested Mrs Torridge. ‘Like actors and actresses do for the films? I could sit in the booth and one or two of you could come in and cross my palm with silver and I could tell you your fortunes.’

‘I think you should tell people to cross your palm with a fiver,’ suggested Mr Twist. ‘Tell them you want paper money. If you tell them you want silver some mean bugger will put a five penny piece in your palm.’

‘Well, if they try that then they darned well won’t get a nice, jolly fortune,’ said Mrs Torridge sharply.

Chapter Sixteen

Half an hour later, just as they were all preparing to retire for the night, there was a tapping on the door to the café.

Mrs Merivale had not yet got their new upstairs kitchen sorted out so they were still sitting in the café where there were teapots, milk and other essential ingredients for a comfortable evening. It was so dark outside that no one could see anything.

‘Do you think it could be a ghost?’ asked Miss Nightingale. ‘If it is then I hope it’s a friendly one.’

‘Maybe it’s burglars,’ said Mrs Peterborough.

‘Do you think they’ve come to steal our rock?’ asked Mr Hewitt.

‘I don’t think burglars usually knock,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘Maybe the burglars round here are very polite,’ suggested Mr Livingstone.

‘Oh dear, maybe it’s a spirit who’s angry because I said I wanted to be a Fortune Teller,’ said Mrs Torridge.

‘Don’t be silly,’ said Mr Twist comfortingly.

There was another tap on the door.

Almost everyone froze.

The solitary unfrozen exception was 16-year-old Dorothy who had been sitting next to Ruth. The two girls were rapidly becoming good friends. Dorothy loved to hear Ruth’s stories about her adventures with Mrs Caldicot in Paris and Ruth loved to hear about Dorothy’s adventures on the Penmouth Pier.

Dorothy, who clearly had a good idea who was there, jumped up and went to the door. ‘It’s Errol!’ she cried, peering through the glass and letting him in.

‘Errol!’ cried everyone with delight born of relief, that he was neither a ghost nor the world’s politest burglar.

Errol, surprised and rather warmed by the unexpected and rather effusive response to his arrival, blushed deep red. He was carrying two carrier bags.

‘I’ve brought you some more potatoes,’ he said, putting the bags down on the floor. ‘I’m sorry it’s so late but I had to climb up twice because I could only carry one bag at a time.’

‘You climbed up onto the pier from the beach?’ asked Mrs Merivale.

Errol nodded.

‘You’re soaked!’ said Dorothy, suddenly realising that the young man’s trousers were drenched.

‘The tide was coming in when I got here,’ said Errol. ‘It’s a high tide tonight so it will come right up to the top of the beach.

Dorothy explained to him that they were no longer under siege, that the bailiffs had gone away and that Errol could now visit the pier during the daytime.

‘You can come in through the main entrance,’ she told him.

Errol, who was a boy with a strong sense of the romantic, and who had rather enjoyed imagining himself to be an improved version of Spiderman, with perhaps a touch of the Scarlet Pimpernel thrown in, just for the devil of it, was slightly disappointed by this news.

‘Go and get the boy a spare pair of trousers,’ said Mrs Merivale to her husband. ‘I’ll put the kettle on and make him a nice hot cup of tea.’

‘Put extra sugar in it for him,’ said Mr Merivale. ‘Sugar is good for shock. He’ll be in shock if he’s been climbing up piers in the dark.’ He said this as though he had some experience of the sort of shock likely to be engendered by climbing up piers in the dark. He then hurried off to fetch a pair of his trousers.

Mrs Merivale tottered quickly into the café kitchen and filled the kettle.

‘I’ll have one if you’re boiling the kettle,’ shouted Mr Roxdale.

And then everyone wanted a cup of tea. And Mrs Roberts and Ruth rushed off to help Mrs Merivale find all the necessary cups and jugs and pots and so on.

And Mrs Caldicot decided that it would be nice to have a box of Turkish Delight with her cup of tea.

So Miss Nightingale, who knew where to find the Turkish Delight, asked Mr Livingstone and Mr Hewitt to go with her to protect her from wandering ghosts, ghouls and cowering, timorous beasties and to help her carry the stuff back to the cafe.

‘There won’t be any ghosts out there,’ insisted Mr Livingstone. ‘The gates are closed and padlocked.’

‘Ghosts can probably pick locks,’ pointed out Mr Hewitt. ‘Or slip through the gates.’

And so they accompanied Miss Nightingale.

Fifteen minutes later, Errol was wearing a pair of dry trousers and sipping an over-sugared cup of tea. He had a box of Turkish Delight on his lap. Everyone else also had a cup of tea (though not all containing quite so much sugar) and their own box of Turkish Delight.

'So,' said Mrs Caldicot, speaking to Errol, when she'd finished chewing her third cube of Turkish Delight. 'Did you manage to find out anything about the council's plans?'

Errol nodded and swallowed a chunk of Turkish Delight. 'I was doing some photocopying and I heard some of the bosses talking in the corridor,' he said. 'They were laughing about how they'd get control of the pier and talking about how much money they were going to make.'

'There you are,' said Mr Livingstone. 'They've worked out that they can make £28,000,000 a year from the pier! I knew my sums were right!' He pulled out the piece of paper on which he had scribbled his sums and waved it about as though it were all the proof anyone needed.

'Maybe they've got another plan,' said Mrs Caldicot gently. 'Let Errol tell us what he heard.' She turned to the boy. 'Who did you hear talking?'

'There were three of them. One was Mr Chapman who is something very important, one was Ms Schmidt who is the head of the ES Department. I don't know who the third person was. I couldn't see her and I didn't know her voice. She might have been from outside.'

'Did they see you?'

'They may have. But they wouldn't take any notice of me. I'm just a sort of office boy so I'm just sort of invisible to them. Even if they see me they always sort of talk over me as though I weren't there at all.'

'But the two people you saw and recognised were senior members of staff?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'Yes, definitely. Mr Chapman must be terribly important because he shouts at people quite a lot and no one seems to like him except Miss Havering. He's quite ancient. I think he must be at least 40.'

'Who is Miss Havering?'

'That's his secretary. I caught her sitting on his knee once. They were very embarrassed. Mr Chapman said they were testing his chair to see if it would take the weight of two people but I don't think he was telling the truth because why would she jump off and go all red if that was all they were doing?'

'And Ms Schmidt?'

'She's quite old too. I would say she's probably at least 25 or so. She may be older.'

Mrs Caldicot smiled to herself. She could remember that when she was his age she too thought that 25 was quite old. Mind you, when she was seven she thought that 16 was quite old. Everything is relative. Now that she was old enough to regard grey hair, wrinkles and wonky joints as mere badges of honour, earned in the fight of life, she thought that 60 was very young, 70 just approaching middle age and 80 merely heading for maturity.

'What's the ES Department?' asked Mr Twist.

'That's the Department of Equality, Diversity and Sensitivity,' explained Errol.

'What on earth is that?'

'It's the department in charge of equality, diversity and sensitivity,' said Errol who seemed as puzzled as everyone else. 'They took over the Environmental and Social Governance Department and the Regulatory Compliance and Regulatory Oversight Department about six months ago. It's now just about the biggest department in the building. They take up the whole of the third floor and even the planning department only takes up half a floor. They've even succeeded in pushing the Health and Safety Executive Officers into a Portacabin in a corner of the car park. The Health and Safety department used to have all the power but I heard the Chief Executive say that these days they're a spent force. He said that these days everything is all about Equality and Sensitivity and that Health and Safety are yesterday's issues.'

'How on earth can you remember all those names?' asked Mrs Roberts, who was terribly impressed.

'I had to distribute all the new notepaper, visiting cards and identity tags,' explained Errol, rather prosaically but entirely sensibly. 'Ms Schmidt, who is in charge, had 100,000 visiting cards printed for herself.'

'Did you hear any more of what Mr Chapman and Ms Schmidt were talking about?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'Oh yes,' said Errol. 'They told the third person…'

'…the one you couldn't see?'

'That's right, the one I couldn't see. They told her that they hadn't expected the new owner to turn up at all. They said they thought that having the bailiffs outside would frighten him off and that the offer to buy the pier would be accepted.'

'They damned well didn't frighten me off!' said Mr Livingstone indignantly. 'When you've dropped bombs on Germany you don't get frightened off by a bunch of ninnies working for the council.'

'Did you drop bombs on Germany?' asked Errol, clearly awed.

'I certainly did,' said Mr Livingstone proudly. 'Lots of them.'

'Golly! From an aeroplane?'

'From a Lancaster Bomber. The best flying machine ever invented or flown.'

‘Were you a pilot?’

‘No. I was in charge of dropping the bombs.’

‘Wow. That’s even better. Did you see them explode?’

‘Definitely!’

‘Would you like more tea?’ Mrs Merrivale asked Errol. She had stood up and was holding a huge teapot, poised above his cup. She thought that Errol was perhaps a little young to hear about Mr Livingstone’s bomb dropping exploits.

Errol shook his head. ‘No thank you.’ Dorothy took his cup off him and put it onto a nearby table. She was very proud of him. To her he seemed to be a cross between James Bond and the tiny actor with the too perfect hair who played the spy in the Mission Impossible movies.

‘I’ll have another cup, if there’s one going,’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘I’ll have to get up three times in the night but who cares. I’ll probably have to get up three times anyway.’

Mrs Merivale filled his cup, and several other cups.

‘I think someone from the council is coming round to see you this week,’ Errol said to Mrs Caldicot. ‘They said something about people coming round tomorrow or the day after. They laughed about that. They said that whoever was coming would frighten the daylights out of you all.’ Errol said this as though he knew it could not possibly be true.

‘Huh!’ said Mr Livingstone who was clearly angered by this. ‘They won’t get in. We’ll lock the gates and throw bits of Penmouth Pier rock at them. This is no time for hurling coconut mushrooms or blancmange. Bring out the rock!’

‘No, we can’t do that,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘For one thing we won’t have any customers if we keep the gates shut. And for another we need to know what the council is planning.’

‘Quite right!’ agreed Mr Livingstone immediately. ‘Thank heavens you’re in charge, Mrs Caldicot.’

‘I wonder what they are planning,’ muttered Mrs Caldicot, more to herself than to anyone else.

‘Do you think they could be planning to try to close us down for some legal reason?’ asked Mrs Roberts.

‘It seems very likely,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘But it’s certainly good to know that they’re planning something. It’s always better to be prepared.’

‘I did hear something else,’ said Errol.

Everyone looked at him, waiting.

‘I think they’re planning to turn the theatre at the end of the pier into some sort of conference centre and the rooms above the café and the shop into offices. And they want to put windmills and solar panels on Rock Stone and along the pier itself.’

‘We already sell windmills!’ said Mrs Peterborough.

‘I don’t think Errol is referring to those pretty, little plastic ones,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘No, they were talking about those big electricity generating windmills. I think they want to make the conference centre and the offices all environmentally friendly and carbon neutral. I heard the woman I couldn’t see say that they could get special grants if they put up solar panels and windmills.’

Mrs Caldicot, who was now beginning to understand just what they were up against, turned to the young James Bond. ‘Thank you, Errol,’ she said. ‘You’ve been very helpful. You’re marvellous.’

Errol seemed pleased with Mrs Caldicot’s remark but he also looked embarrassed, as though there were something else he ought to say.

‘What is it?’ asked Mrs Caldicot, who guessed that Errol had a confession he wanted to make.

‘I’m glad it’s been useful, me being able to find out stuff,’ said Errol. ‘But I’ve been thinking of giving up my job for some time. I really hate working for the council. And because I don’t have any qualifications I’ve got no chance of being promoted. I did apply for a better job when one became vacant but they told me they wouldn’t even consider me. So I really want to leave.’

‘Well, that’s good,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘It’s good that you’ve made up your mind.’

‘But I won’t be able to help you with any more information,’ said Errol.

‘Oh, don’t worry about that!’ said Mrs Caldicot immediately.

‘Do you know anything about photography?’ asked Mr Williams suddenly and quite unexpectedly.

Errol looked across at him.

‘I’m the new pier photographer,’ said Mr Williams. ‘I need someone bright and keen to help with the printing and developing of the pictures. Is that something you’d be interested in learning about?’

Errol’s eyes lit up. ‘A job here? On the pier?’

‘Yes,’ agreed Mr Williams. ‘It’s not at all glamorous. You’d be stuck inside most of the time. You’d come out and pick up films from me, take them into the dark room, when we’ve got one set up, and then develop and print the pictures.’

‘Oh crumbs yes!’ said Errol.

‘You’d be working here on the pier!’ said Dorothy, who was clearly delighted that Errol would be working on the pier. ‘That’s fantastic!’

‘What do I have to do to get the job?’ asked Errol.

‘Want it,’ replied Mr Williams. ‘That’s all. If you want it then the job is yours.’

And so Mr Williams found the assistant he needed. And Errol found the job he wanted.

Chapter Seventeen

The original intention had been for three of the gang members to be the guinea pigs for Mrs Torridge's trial run as the pier's new 'Fortune Teller'.

But it soon became clear that this wasn't such a good idea.

'I'll feel rather embarrassed,' confessed Mrs Torridge. 'These are all my friends. They know me and I know them. There needs to be a little bit of mystery about the whole thing.'

Mrs Caldicot agreed with her. 'How about we do it this way,' she suggested. 'Instead of you seeing real people whom you know, I come into the booth and pretend to be a couple of different people. I will explain who I am pretending to be and you then tell me my fortune.'

Mrs Torridge agreed that this was a much better plan.

And so, as soon as Mrs Torridge was settled in her booth, with her headscarf wrapped neatly around her hair, a pair of gold earrings dangling from her ears and, in the absence of either a crystal ball or an upturned goldfish bowl, a glass mixing bowl in front of her as a temporary substitute, Mrs Caldicot entered the booth and sat down.

'What's your name, dear?' asked Mrs Torridge.

'My name is Sandra,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I'm 24-years-old and I'm here on holiday with my boyfriend. I work in a pharmacy and my boyfriend is a van driver.'

'Do you have a big family?'

'Just me and my mum. My dad died a few years ago. My mum lives by herself and I live with my boyfriend.'

'That's nice, dear. How long are you here for?'

'Just a week.'

'How long have you and your boyfriend been together?'

'Fourteen and a half months.'

'Do you want to get married?'

'Yes. It would be very nice. I think it would suggest real commitment.'

'Does he think the same way?'

'I don't know. I was hoping you could tell me that.'

Mrs Torridge bent her head and studied the mixing bowl very intently. 'I'm afraid I don't think he does,' she said. There was a long pause as she continued to study the mixing bowl. 'But don't you worry, my dear. I can see you with six husbands – one at a time, of course. All of them far more handsome and far richer than the man you're with at the moment.' She paused and thought for a while. 'One of them will be a man whose name begins with a J. Do you know anyone whose name begins with a J? A John, a Jim, a Jack? Something like that. Or maybe his surname begins with a letter J. It could be Jones, perhaps.'

Mrs Caldicot started laughing. She couldn't help herself. 'I'm sorry!' she said. 'That was wonderful. What made you think of all that?'

'I felt sorry for the girl,' said Mrs Torridge. 'She knows exactly how long she's been with this fellow and she clearly cares for him a good deal. But either he doesn't know that she wants to get married or he does know and he doesn't want to marry her. Either way, he sounds like a rat and a loser and I don't think the relationship is going to last, so I thought I'd give her some silly hopes and something mad to tell her friends in the pharmacy where she works. She's bound to know someone whose name begins with the letter J. Everyone does.'

'How do you know she had friends at the pharmacy?'

'Because she said she didn't have many relatives but she had a dozen postcards and a dozen sticks of rock in her bag,' said Mrs Torridge. 'The cards and the rock were clearly for her pals. And they were probably for pals she'd met at work.'

'That was marvellous,' said Mrs Caldicot, who was enormously impressed with the extent of Mrs Torridge's imagination.

Mrs Torridge fiddled with her scarf but looked very pleased with herself. 'Try me with another!' she said. 'Be someone else.'

'OK,' said Mrs Caldicot, thinking hard.

'Who are you now?' asked Mrs Torridge, impatiently.

'My name is Bunty and I'm a 45-year-old housewife. I have two children, one aged 26 and one aged 23. They both live at home and show no signs of leaving. I do all the cooking and washing for both of them. They both have good jobs and they give me £20 a week each towards the housekeeping.'

'What sexes are the children, Bunty?'

‘Oh, er, the 26-year-old is a girl and the 23-year-old is a boy. My husband is a plasterer. He’s the only man I’ve ever been with. We got married when I was 19. He is 47-years-old. He spends most evenings in the pub, his Saturdays watching football and his Sundays cleaning his car. We hardly ever go out. I watch a lot of television. I want to know what my future holds.’

Mrs Torridge peered into the glass mixing bowl and turned it round, explaining that she just wanted to get a better look at Bunty’s future.

‘I see you out shopping, doing some routine chores,’ she began, ‘and you have just dodged one of those nasty Greenpeace chuggers. As you hurry along out of his reach you don’t look where you are going and you bump into a tall man in Arab clothing.’ Mrs Torridge turned her mixing bowl round once more, and peered into it before continuing. ‘You drop one of the bags you are carrying and the contents spill onto the pavement. The tall man stoops to help you pick up the things you’ve dropped. When everything is back in the bag, the man invites you to have a coffee with him. You go along and you talk together. He is very well-spoken, clearly an educated man. He is obviously attracted to you. He is witty, charming and attentive.’

‘Good heavens!’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘I think I’ll be feeling a little flushed by now.’ She took out an imaginary handkerchief and mopped imaginary perspiration from her very real brow.

‘You talk to the tall Arab for the best part of an hour and a half and you suddenly realise that you’re going to be late getting home to empty the washing machine and to prepare dinner. The Arab asks if he can take you home in his limousine. And so you agree. On the way home, he asks if you really have to go back to your humdrum life. He points out that you are little more than a slave to these people, someone to sort their laundry and put meals on the table.’

Mrs Torridge paused and turned the mixing bowl again.

‘What happens?’ asked Mrs Caldicot. ‘What do I do? Do I go home and empty the washing machine or do I drive off into the sunset with the tall man in the limousine?’

‘The picture is fading,’ said Mrs Torridge. ‘I think maybe you need to cross my palm with another five pound note!’

‘You can’t do that!’ cried Mrs Caldicot.

‘Can’t I? Do you not think I should?’

‘No, no, you mustn’t do that!’ said Mrs Caldicot laughing. ‘It’s a clever idea but you really can’t do that. Now tell me, what happens to Bunty?’

‘The tall man asks you to go back to his country with him. He wants you to be one of his most important wives. He promises that you will sit on soft cushions all day and eat unlimited quantities of Turkish Delight. Anything you want will be yours. Box sets of all the best Netflix programmes will be yours at the flick of a finger. You will never again wear anything bought from Walmart, one of the pound shops or a charity shop. You will wear dresses designed by the world’s most famous couturiers. Your lingerie will be silk, designed for your body and hand-made by skilled seamstresses. You will have a box of jewels so heavy that two men are needed to carry it. You will have no chores to do – no cooking, no washing, no ironing, no shopping. You will be his plaything, his toy, there only to entertain him when he returns from his long camel rides in the desert. You’ll be one of his top ten wives and your only responsibility will be to please him. When he goes abroad to stay in smart hotels in wonderful and exotic places such as New York, St Moritz, Paris or Manchester then he will take you with him…’

‘Manchester?’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘I’m sorry to interrupt but did you say Manchester?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Mrs Torridge. ‘I read in a magazine that Manchester is now considered very fashionable, very exotic. They’ve got an indoor shopping centre, a new library and a marvellous one way traffic system.’

‘OK,’ said Mrs Caldicot with a nod. ‘OK. So Manchester is on the list of wonderful and exotic places that he will take me to if I agree to be one of his most important wives. But do I accept his invitation? Do I leave my parasitic, useless family and allow this tall, handsome man to take me away from the tedious drudgery of my pointless daily life?’

Mrs Torridge turned the mixing bowl yet again and studied it intently. ‘I can’t see that far ahead,’ she said, sadly. ‘I can only take you so far into the future. You have to make a choice. I can see you struggling with your dilemma. Do you stay with your husband and your two children or do you go? Only you can decide. It is your life and future and you must make up your own mind. All I can do is give you an advance peek into the future.’

‘Phew! Bunty is now going to have to go and buy herself an ice cream,’ said Mrs Caldicot with a broad grin. She stood up.

‘Do I pass?’ asked Mrs Torridge anxiously? Do you think I make an acceptable Fortune Teller?’

‘You are an absolutely marvellous Fortune Teller!’ said Mrs Caldicot.

She could not believe just how much Mrs Torridge and the others had changed since they’d stopped their tranquillisers and sleeping tablets.

And she couldn't help wondering just how many people who appeared to have dementia could be cured of their symptoms merely by taking them off their damned tablets.

'You are brilliant,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'But we have to get you something better than that glass mixing bowl to peer into! It's got measurement markings all up the side – a quarter of a pint, half a pint, three quarters of a pint and a pint.'

'Mr Merivale said he would find me something more suitable,' said Mrs Torridge. 'Do you remember that he used to work in the film industry? He and Mrs Merivale did the cooking for the film crews?'

'How could I forget?' asked Mrs Caldicot. 'Mr and Mrs Merivale were famous for their bacon sandwiches.'

'I remember all those big film stars coming to our garden party,' said Mrs Torridge. 'Michael Caine, Joan Collins, Peter O'Toole, Pierce Brosnan, Glenda Jackson, Judi Dench – they were all there.'

'And how could I possibly forget that?' laughed Mrs Caldicot. She'd always been a huge fan of Michael Caine.

'Well, I asked Mr Merivale to help me and he said he has a friend who is a props man who owed him a favour. He called his friend, using the telephone, and the props man said he had got a proper crystal ball which they had used in a film on which he'd worked. Mr Merivale asked him to send it to me and so he's put it in the post. It should be here tomorrow. The proper name for it is apparently an orbuculum so I think that's what I shall call it. My orbuculum!'

'You're going to be a huge success!' said Mrs Caldicot, and she meant it.

'It's going to be great fun,' said Mrs Torridge, who looked happier than Mrs Caldicot had ever seen her look. 'And I can do it all sitting down, which is nice.'

Mrs Caldicot smiled at her.

'I never knew there could be so much whoopee in life,' said Mrs Torridge.

'I don't think any of us realised that either,' said Mrs Caldicot, smiling at Mrs Torridge and wondering where on earth she'd learned such an unusual word.

'Well, it's clearly never too late to start having whoopee!' said Mrs Torridge firmly. 'And I'm going to have a good deal of it. As much as there is available.'

Chapter Eighteen

There were three people waiting for Mrs Caldicot when she left the Fortune Teller's booth.

'Oh dear!' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Has something terrible happened?'

'No, I don't think so,' said Mr Roxdale, who was the first in the queue. He thought for a moment. 'No, I don't think anything terrible has happened – not that I know of.' He looked at Mrs Roberts and Ruth who were standing patiently behind him. They shook their heads. 'But Mr Merivale and I have started painting the railings along the side of the pier and we think we will need some more tins of white paint.'

'I expect you will,' said Mrs Caldicot, who hadn't known about their plan to paint the railings but who thought it was a very good idea. 'Do you have any idea how much paint you'll need?'

'Well, we started off with two tins of white paint which Mr Pickering found in a cupboard,' said Mr Roxdale. 'And we've used one of those up completely.'

'How much railing did you manage to paint with that tin?'

'About seven feet,' said Mr Roxdale.

'Can you remember how long the pier is?'

'I asked Mr Livingstone and he says it's 2,195 foot long.'

'So if a gallon of paint is enough for seven feet of pier how many gallons will you need for 2,195 feet of pier?'

'It sounds like one of those sums they give you at school,' said Mr Roxdale.

'Let's pretend a gallon is enough for 10 foot of pier,' suggested Mrs Caldicot. 'That will make things a little easier.' She frowned for a moment. 'It seems an awful lot,' she said. 'But I make it to be 219 gallons. More or less.'

'That is a lot of paint,' agreed Mr Roxdale. 'But unfortunately, we'll need at least twice that much.'

'Why?'

'There are railings down both sides of the pier.'

'Oh dear. Yes, of course there are. So we need twice as much paint?'

'I'm afraid so.'

'That's, er, 438 gallons of paint.'

'Approximately,' agreed Mr Roxdale. 'But even that won't be enough.'

'Why on earth not?'

'Because the railings are going to need two coats of paint.'

'So that's nearly 1,000 gallons of paint?'

'I'm afraid so. And then when we've finished both sides for the second time we will probably have to start again.'

'It will be like painting the Forth Bridge?'

'Exactly! Just like painting the Forth Bridge,' said Mr Roxdale. 'Except, of course, that this is the Penmouth Pier.'

'Oh well, never mind,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'We must keep the pier looking smart. Maybe if you ring a local paint company they could deliver a few dozen cans of paint to keep you going.'

'And some brushes?'

'And some brushes,' agreed Mrs Caldicot.

Mr Roxdale, surprisingly happy for a man just starting out on a never-ending painting job, tottered off to report to Mr Merivale.

'Who's next?' asked Mrs Caldicot, looking first at Mrs Roberts and then at Ruth.

'You go first,' said Mrs Roberts to her assistant.

'Dorothy and I found a machine for making candyfloss!' said Ruth, the excitement bursting out of her. 'We need to order some syrup before we can find out if it works. Can we do that, do you think?'

'Does the machine look as if it might work?'

'Oh yes! Dorothy says it was working last year. Apparently candyfloss is very popular and the machine makes lots of money.'

'Then you should certainly buy some syrup and try it out!' said Mrs Caldicot who was beginning to realise that there was rather more to being a Pier Master than she had originally thought.

Ruth scampered off to set in motion the process of making the candyfloss machine work again.

'We could call our candyfloss 'artisan candyfloss',' suggested Mrs Caldicot to Mrs Roberts. 'That would give it a modern sort of image and attract those nice, young millennials who love spending their money. They seem to rather like the word 'artisan' though I really never quite know what they mean by it or why they are so taken with it.'

'I don't know what it means, either,' confessed Mrs Roberts. 'Do you think we could say that our rock was artisan rock?'

‘Oh, I think so!’ agreed Mrs Caldicot.

The two of them watched Ruth hurrying down the pier.

‘Sometimes I think of Ruth as a young woman, almost ready for a husband, a washing machine, a toaster and a family, and sometimes I think of her as a young girl still enjoying dolls and likely to pull a skipping rope out of her pocket ,’ said Mrs Roberts.

‘She does look as though she’s about to start skipping with delight,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

The two of them watched, just in case Ruth actually did start to skip.

They were slightly disappointed when she didn’t.

‘I’m afraid I have a bit of bad news,’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘Do you remember speaking to someone from the local dramatic society?’

‘Of course I do,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘They’re going to put on ‘The Pirates of Penzance’. And they’re excited about doing it in our theatre. I’m looking forward to it. Do they want to fix up some dates for their rehearsals?’

‘I’m afraid that if you want to see their production you’ll have to go to their old theatre,’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘Someone rang today to say that they wouldn’t be performing in our theatre after all.’

Mrs Caldicot, astonished, just stared at her friend. ‘Did they say why?’ she asked eventually.

‘It was very strange,’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘I asked the woman who called why they wanted to cancel and she simply kept saying that they couldn’t use our theatre after all.’

‘Did she say ‘couldn’t’ or ‘wouldn’t’?’

‘She definitely said ‘couldn’t’,’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘So I asked her why not and eventually she rather shamefacedly confessed that they had been told by the council that if they performed in our theatre then they would lose their grant. Apparently they receive an annual grant from the Arts Council and without the grant they wouldn’t be able to continue.’

‘Really? That’s why?’

‘The woman sounded very embarrassed and she said she thought they owed it to us to explain why they wouldn’t be using our theatre but that they hoped we would understand. She said that the bit of the Arts Council that hands out the grants always checks with local councils first to make sure that a recipient is approved. So the council can easily stop the grant simply by withdrawing their approval.’

‘But why on earth would they do that?’ asked Mrs Caldicot more to herself than to Mrs Roberts.

‘It sounds as if the council doesn’t like us very much,’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘They want to stop us earning any money.’

‘I hate to sound paranoid but it definitely sounds to me as if the council is trying to put us out of business,’ said Mrs Caldicot. She thought for a moment. ‘Do you remember what young Errol said about the council having plans for the pier?’

‘I do.’

‘Well maybe this is part of their plan. Maybe they just want us to fail so that they can buy the pier and turn it into a site for windmills, solar panels and businessmen holding conferences.’

‘Golly!’ said Mrs Roberts, bristling. ‘The little beggars!’

Mrs Roberts could, when pushed, be almost as determined as Mrs Caldicot herself.

‘Well, we’ll see about that!’ said Mrs Caldicot, looking at her friend.

‘Oh, I forgot to ask,’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘How did Mrs Torridge’s audition go?’

‘She did brilliantly! Amazingly well. She’s going to be a huge success – a wonderful Fortune Teller.’

‘And with any luck we’ll have Ruth’s candyfloss machine turning syrup into money!’ said Mrs Roberts, attempting to lighten the disappointment over the cancellation of The Pirates of Penzance.

‘We’ll fix up something for that theatre!’ said Mrs Caldicot quietly and determinedly.

‘I bet we will!’ thought Mrs Roberts, smiling to herself. ‘I bet we will!’ she said out loud.

She had got to know Mrs Caldicot very well, and if it came to a showdown between Mrs Caldicot and the local council then her money was well and truly on Mrs Caldicot.

Mrs Caldicot, who had heard her, looked at Mrs Roberts and smiled.

Chapter Nineteen

By the second day of their residence on the pier, things seemed to be going tolerably well.

The pier was already beginning to look far more attractive and word had got around the town that the pier was once again open for business. Locals came to see exactly what was happening and holidaymakers came because going for a walk along the pier is what everyone likes to do when they're at the seaside to have a good time.

There was still the question of what to do with the theatre, of course, but the painting of the pier railings was continuing apace and Mrs Torridge's crystal ball had survived a journey through the postal system and had been installed, in pride of place, on the table in the Fortune Teller's booth. The candyfloss machine was up and running and, to the particular delight of Ruth, who was put in charge, was churning out vast quantities of 'artisan candyfloss'. Ruth was also in charge of the ice cream stand which had been cleaned up and stocked with all the necessary supplies.

Mr Rowbottham, the Pier's Traditional Silhouettist was constantly snipping away with his scissors and said that he had never been busier. He was delighted with his new booth and had already arranged to have samples of his art framed and fixed in a suitably eye-catching position.

The café was doing good business, with the two young members of staff producing seemingly endless cups of tea, toasted teacakes, buttered crumpets, sandwiches, Welsh rarebits, and the pier speciality, fish and chips.

The shop was up and running too, with Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale in charge of selling postcards, fishing lines, paperback books, tickets for the little train, tickets for the deckchairs, bars of chocolate and the Penmouth Pier's speciality – sticks of peppermint rock with the words 'A Presence from Penmouth' running through each one in red.

The Pier Master was, of course, aware of all this activity and pleased with the way things were progressing.

If only Jenkins were with her, thought Mrs Caldicot, then her joy would be unconfined and her cup would be full to overflowing.

But, sadly, Jenkins was still in America, lecturing students. And somehow his absence increased her natural sense of wariness. When he was around she always felt safe, as though nothing too serious could go wrong.

She did not feel the untrammelled confidence of Mr Livingstone and Mr Hewitt as they stood at the entrance to the pier and counted in the customers.

Imbued with the sort of unnatural confidence that should, at their ages, have warned them that they were enjoying the calm before the storm, the two wise men of Penmouth Pier both felt that they and the pier had safely navigated the potholes which life had excavated in their path.

'The mirage appears to have water in it,' said Mr Livingstone, for once dipping a toe into the waters of poetic licence.

'True, true,' replied Mr Hewitt, determined not to be outdone. 'The beginnings of a wonderful rainbow can be seen forming behind the clouds.'

And just then, inevitably perhaps, a bunch of be-suited men and women from the council turned up.

There were seven of them: four women and three men.

In terms of ages, sizes and colour they were a pretty mixed bunch. This was no accident. Two were white, two were black, two were brown and one was oriental. Six were walking and one was in a wheelchair. All wore suits and had little pink and green ribbons pinned to their clothing, presumably to denote their solidarity with some cause or other. Several of them also wore badges upon which were printed slogans promising allegiance to Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and an organisation called Save Our Glaciers.

They came onto the pier as though they were an invading force; a conquering army come to take charge of newly vanquished peasantry. The six who were travelling by foot all strutted. The one in the wheelchair merely scowled, as though upset that she too was denied the chance to strut. They all looked to be in their twenties or early thirties.

Mr Livingstone, looking at the invaders, thought that the pier was perhaps being visited by the annual outing of the entire readership of *The Guardian* newspaper. He found this a depressing prospect.

But if his poetic mood had not been shattered he would, perhaps, have realised that dandelions had appeared on the pristine lawn of Penmouth Pier.

The woman who was clearly in charge was short, wore a black trouser suit and black, low-heeled shoes, and had her hair cut very short, in the style once favoured by squaddies and football hooligans and now popular among lesbians and militant feminists. She wore no jewellery and no make-up. She introduced herself to Mr Livingstone and Mr Hewitt as Ms Schmidt.

As Errol had rightly surmised, when he had described her, she was probably in her mid-twenties, though she looked considerably younger, and she had the sort of arrogant, lopsided smirk that is so common among young people who are blessed with a diploma in something obscure, too much power and an absurdly exaggerated view of their own importance.

After examining her carefully, Mr Livingstone decided that she actually looked about 16 and that if she had turned up in a pub and asked for half a shandy, any wise barman (or barmaid) would have insisted on seeing her birth certificate before he (or she) had consented to serve her anything quite that strong.

'I need to see the owner of the pier immediately,' said Ms Schmidt, addressing Mr Hewitt. 'Fetch him to me.'

She spoke in what was clearly the voice she used when addressing older people, halfwits and serfs; somehow managing to turn up her volume control while at the same time increasing the bass levels.

Mr Hewitt, who was not easily bullied and too old to be intimidated by anyone not carrying a rocket launcher, looked at her and frowned.

'Who are you?' he asked, surprisingly politely.

'I am Ms Schmidt.'

She repeated this piece of information as though she expected the announcement to be greeted with expressions of awe and a good deal of bowing and scraping.

'Yes, you said that bit. But who are you?'

'Do you work here?' demanded Ms Schmidt, irritated. 'I need to see your team leader,' she added, without waiting for a reply to the first question.

'I'm not in a team and I don't have a leader.'

Ms Schmidt, clearly frustrated by Mr Hewitt, looked around and turned her attention to Mr Livingstone. She was beginning to redden with irritation and frustration. She looked around from time to time at the group standing just behind her and was clearly embarrassed to have them witness her failure to intimidate. 'What is your name? Are you employed here?'

'They've got tickets for the train in the shop,' said Mr Livingstone. 'And I have to tell you that they are very good value. A nice ride up and down the pier will calm you down.'

'I don't want to ride up the pier and I don't need to calm down!' snapped Ms Schmidt. 'I'm a very busy person. And so are my colleagues. We don't have time for joy rides.'

'There are a lot of you,' observed Mr Livingstone, 'so if you ask nicely they'll probably give you a group discount.'

Ms Schmidt stared at Mr Livingstone. 'Are you insane? Demented? Or just old and stupid?'

'I don't think so; not that I know of. But you can never really tell, can you? These things are all relative, don't you think?'

'Who are you?' asked Mr Hewitt once more. 'Why are you here if you don't want to have time for joy?'

Ms Schmidt turned her attention back to him. 'I am the Directrice General of the Department of Equality, Diversity and Sensitivity for Penmouth and the surrounding district!' She made this announcement clearly expecting Mr Hewitt to be awestruck.

'Is someone in your position allowed to be disparaging about a person because of their age?' asked Mr Hewitt.

'My department is only concerned with gender and race discrimination,' said Ms Schmidt. 'There are no important, regulatory guidelines relating to age.'

'Well that's disgraceful,' said Mr Hewitt. 'There's far too much ageism about these days.'

'I decide what is an ism and what isn't an ism,' said Ms Schmidt firmly. 'My Department is fully integrated and compliant with all the relevant legislation.'

'So now we know who you are. But who are all these people?' asked Mr Hewitt, waving a hand in the direction of Ms Schmidt's entourage.

'Mr Zygimantas and Ms Gostautas are my senior assistants,' said Ms Schmidt. 'Mr Zygimantas has a degree in Social Deviance from the University of Dresden and Ms Gostautas has a degree in Graduate Studies from the University of Dusseldorf. Our role is to ensure that community diversity is strictly monitored in all locally centred employment situations. And I have been empowered by our Deputy Chief Executive and our senior Planning Department Manager to make sure that the Penmouth Pier is satisfying the requirements of the relevant legislation.'

As she said, all this this she pointed to two of the invaders, to illustrate that one was Mr Zygimantas and one was Ms Gostautas. Neither Mr Livingstone nor Mr Hewitt had the foggiest idea which of the two was the genuine male article and which wasn't.

One of the pair was a very short, tubby, white person of about 40. He (or possibly she) wore a three piece suit in a shade of brown which would have enabled him to spill dark chocolate down his lapels and waistcoat without leaving any discernible evidence of the mishap. His (or possibly her) hair appeared to have been cut by the same ruthless barber who had mangled Ms Schmidt's scalp. The suit he (or possibly she) wore had been made for a smaller man (or possibly woman) or, at least, a man (or possibly woman) who had been smaller when the suit had been purchased. Underneath the suit, he (or possibly she) wore a bright yellow shirt and an orange and purple tie. He (or possibly she) had a plastic identification tag slung around his neck. The tag contained what appeared to be a starkly lit police photograph of someone wanted for murder, rape, arson and serious crimes against the State. Apart from the fact that he (or possibly she) did not have metallic teeth filed to a point, he (or possibly she) looked like one of the actors (or possibly actresses) who plays second assistant baddie in a James Bond movie.

The other man (or possibly woman) appeared to be younger, possibly no more than 20 or so, and had probably not been Made in England. He (or possibly she) wore heavy boots, which seemed strangely out of place, and a cheap, ill-fitting suit in a shiny, electric-blue material which was neither silk nor satin but appeared to be made out of something man-made and indestructible. The suit trousers were four or five inches too short, suggesting either that the suit had been bought off the peg and made for a much shorter man (or woman), or had been made by a tailor with a wicked sense of humour. He (or possibly she) wore a black shirt and a white tie and the combination made him (or possibly her) look like a cheap gangster in an early Martin Scorsese movie. His (or possibly her) head was completely shaved though anyone who examined his (or possibly her) scalp could clearly see the extent of the premature bald patch which had almost certainly triggered the enthusiastic use of a razor and which suggested that he was a he (and probably not a she). There were plenty of small cuts and scabs and a few curious tufts of hair, all of which suggested that he (or possibly she) did the shaving himself (or possibly herself), used a blunt razor and without access to a suitable mirror. He (or possibly she) also had a plastic identification tag slung around his (or possibly her) neck. The tag contained a photograph of a younger version of the man (or woman) who looked as if he were wanted for murder, rape, arson and serious crimes against the State.

Only if you examined the two photographs very closely would it have been possible to see that each man had his own photograph entombed in plastic around his neck.

Both men glared at Mr Livingstone and Mr Hewitt. Mr Hewitt thought they looked as if they ought to have worn collars and been on leashes.

‘Congratulations,’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘That’s probably very nice for you all. Do you have any English employees in your Department.’

‘Of course not!,’ said Ms Schmidt, who appeared to have been last in the queue when God was handing out senses of humour and not in the room at all on the day when irony was being distributed though, like most Germans, she would have probably laughed a good deal if she’d seen a fat man slip on a banana skin and land on his bottom. ‘My department is thoroughly diverse and multinational. We do not employ English people, heterosexual people, white people or old people.’

Mr Livingstone sighed and turned to Mr Hewitt. ‘You wouldn’t think we’d won the War, would you?’

‘You may think you won the War,’ said Ms Schmidt, with what could only be described as a smirk, ‘but we have definitely won the peace.’

‘Which part of Germany are you from?’ asked Mr Livingstone who didn’t much like Germans and couldn’t understand why successive British Governments kept apologising for having bombed so many German cities. It had, after all, been the Germans who had started the War and the Germans who had begun bombing cities and killing civilians. In Mr Livingstone’s eyes, the Royal Air Force had just ended up being better at everything, including bombing, than the Luftwaffe had been. British politicians always seemed to like apologising, thought Mr Livingstone. Bomber Command, of which he had been a proud small part, had been demonised after the War and even the Dam Busters were, in certain quarters, still regarded with more embarrassment than pride.

‘They have sown the wind and they shall reap the whirlwind,’ had been the crew’s favourite saying whenever Mr Livingstone had climbed into a Lancaster bomber and set off on another bombing raid.

‘I am from Hamburg,’ replied Ms Schmidt.

‘I know Hamburg quite well,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘And I’ve been to Dresden and Dusseldorf. But only from the air.’

‘Why only from the air? Why are you not landing?’

‘We were bombing the shit out of them at the time,’ explained Mr Livingstone. ‘They were a lot flatter when we left than when we arrived and so dropping in for tea didn’t seem a particularly good idea.’

‘I don’t think you’re allowed to say that!’ murmured Mr Hewitt.

‘Oh dear, aren’t I? said Mr Livingstone. ‘Never mind, I’ll try not to say it again.’

Ms Schmidt scowled. Mr Zygimantas and Ms Gostautas did not seem to understand, which was perhaps fortunate.

‘What is the ‘shit out of them’ meaning?’ asked Mr Zygimantas, looking very fierce.

‘You really do have to stop saying stuff like that,’ whispered Mr Hewitt to his friend. ‘I think that one wants to take a bite out of your leg.’

Mr Livingstone raised a pair of elderly eyebrows.

‘That bit about bombing the shit out of them seems to have upset him,’ explained Mr Hewitt.

‘Oh sorry,’ murmured Mr Livingstone. He cleared his throat and tried again. ‘We were bombing them at the time,’ he said, turning to Mr Hewitt. ‘Is that better, do you think? I left the word ‘shit’ out.’

Mr Hewitt just grinned at him and turned to Ms Schmidt. ‘Who are all the other people with you?’ he asked, indicating with a nod the remainder of Ms Schmidt’s extensive entourage. It did sometimes occur to him that his very good friend Mr Livingstone could occasionally give the boundaries of tact a bit of a run for their money. On those occasions, he usually tried to deflect the conversation onto less troublesome ground. ‘Or are they your bodyguards?’

‘These are my Deputy Assistant Administrative Assistants,’ replied Ms Schmidt very earnestly. ‘They are here to observe and to take notes.’

The Assistants, none of whom seemed to understand precisely what was being said, did understand that they were being talked about and so they all nodded their heads slightly, reminding Mr Hewitt of those little dogs which were fashionable with a certain type of motorist a few years ago. The dogs, he remembered, would sit on the parcel shelf and nod their heads as the cars drove along. They would nod with exceptional enthusiasm whenever a pothole was encountered. He wondered what had happened to them all and if they had yet become valuable collectors’ items.

‘You remind me of Napoleon,’ said Mr Livingstone to the short, tubby fellow (or possibly woman) in the brown suit. Mr Livingstone had never worried overmuch about upsetting people in authority and, occasionally to the alarm of his friends, appeared to have stopped worrying entirely about political correctness when he had passed his 75th birthday.

The man (or possibly woman) in the brown suit looked at him, frowned and seemed puzzled. ‘Who is this Napoleon of which you are spoken?’ he (or possibly she) demanded in a thick Eastern European accent.

Except that it was now clear that he was definitely a ‘she’, and Mr Hewitt thought it seemed not unreasonable to assume that they had at last identified Ms Gostautas.

‘Napoleon Bonaparte. The French leader whom Wellington defeated at Waterloo,’ explained Mr Livingstone. ‘How many Napoleons are there?’ He sighed. ‘The not-tonight Josephine fellow,’ he added, in a final attempt to explain.

‘Oh,’ said the woman in the brown suit, trying to decide whether this was an insult or a compliment. She finally appeared to decide that it was a compliment for she thanked Mr Livingstone, though she did not smile as she did so.

‘Just in size and shape,’ said Mr Livingstone, clarifying his earlier remark. ‘Short and rather tubby. And foreign, of course.’

‘Very short, really,’ said Mr Hewitt, amplifying his friend’s judgement. ‘Definitely on the approaching stout side of tubby. And certainly foreign.’

‘Why do you all have your hair cut so short?’ asked Mr Livingstone, turning to Ms Schmidt. ‘Is it because someone told you it looks nice or is it because you all have nits?’

‘Nits? What do you mean, ‘nits’?’ demanded Ms Schmidt.

‘You know, the eggs you get with head lice. People used to shave their heads if they had lice. But you don’t really need to do that these days. If someone told you that they do then they were wrong. You can buy shampoos and stuff to get rid of head lice.’

‘I don’t have nits or head lice!’ shouted Ms Schmidt.

‘That’s good,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘I’m very glad you managed to get rid of them. They can be very annoying and embarrassing in social situations. Still, it’s nice that you don’t have them now because it means you and your two pals can all let your hair grow.’

Ms Schmidt, who looked as though she were about to burst into tears, though of frustration and rage rather than sadness, sucked in enough air to inflate one of those balloons which carry four people in a wicker basket and then blew it all out again. She turned on her heels and marched away, closely followed by her companions. The click clack of shoes on the pier’s wooden planking was accompanied the sound of the wheelchair’s tyres and electric motor.

‘I’m not entirely sure that went entirely as planned,’ said Mr Hewitt.

‘For us or for them?’

‘Well, I think it went OK for us,’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘We exhibited our usual good humour and gentle, welcoming nature. But I’m not sure that it went entirely as planned for them.’

‘I didn’t much like them, myself,’ admitted Mr Livingstone. ‘They seemed in a hurry to me. I never trust people who are in too much of a hurry. No time to look at the world.’

‘People in too much of a hurry never get anywhere,’ said Mr Hewitt.

‘If they had souls then they had souls without music,’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘They were all millennials, you see,’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘Millennials are a different breed. They’re not like us.

They're all hysterical and prissy and smug. They all remind me of the kids who were prefects when I was at school.'

'Millennials remind me of the worst sort of teenagers,' said Mr Livingstone. 'Not teenagers like Ruth, Dorothy and young Errol – they're good kids. But judgemental, narcissistic 14-year-olds who think they know everything and that their opinions are the only ones worth having.'

'They're all a bit self-righteous and self-obsessed,' said Mr Hewitt, warming to his theme. 'They think they're entitled to wealth, fame and respect without having to work for any of it.'

'Whingers too,' added Mr Livingstone. 'They're all professional victims – always looking for new ways to be offended.'

'They think they're liberal and open minded but they're more bigoted and prejudiced than Himmler and Goering.'

'And they hate us older folk.'

'Dunno why. They'll be old themselves one day.

'Not bright enough to have worked that out yet,' pointed out Mr Livingstone.

'I saw a piece in my paper the other day about when the internet thing stopped working for an hour or two. One of them was complaining that he was in a café and couldn't buy a cup of coffee because his phone wouldn't work.'

'What did his phone not working have to do with not being able to buy a coffee?' asked Mr Livingstone, puzzled.

'The millennials buy stuff with their phones. They don't use money anymore.'

'You're kidding!'

'No, really. It's true. And they don't drink proper coffee. They have it with loads of foam and something like nutmeg all over it.'

'Yes, I saw them doing that in the coffee shop at the railway station when we went up to see the solicitor. I think it's cinnamon they put on their coffee though I can't for the life of me imagine why.'

'I like a few cloves in my apple pie and apple sauce with a pork chop but why would you put cinnamon into coffee?'

'No idea. No idea at all.'

'But it's not nutmeg?'

'They may well put nutmeg in it as well. For all I know they probably put in a few drops of paint stripper and a handful of rabbit droppings. Doesn't make any sense at all to me.'

'Anyway, this chap who couldn't buy his cup of coffee with his phone became hysterical and said it was the end of the world. He said it was the apocalypse. The millennials were all sending each other little messages about it on their telephones.'

'They're all spoilt, that's the problem,' said Mr Livingstone. 'They were all brought up to think they are special.'

'I think it's the drinking water.'

'The drinking water?'

'I read that some doctor says our drinking water is full of hormones. It's made the fish go all odd and it's doing the same thing to youngsters. '

'Where do the hormones come from?' asked Mr Livingstone, puzzled.

'It's from all those drugs that people take – especially the contraceptive pill. Apparently the women pee out the hormones and then the sewage goes into the rivers, and the water companies take drinking water out of the rivers but they can't get the hormones out because they're dissolved.'

'Good God! I'm glad I don't drink water. I've never understood why people put it into whisky.'

'Probably doesn't matter to people our age. But these millennials have been brought up on it. And they're always told to drink more water. So they're full of hormones. It mixes them all up. Makes the women aggressive and turns the men into wimps.'

'That makes sense. A doctor said that?'

'Yes. And now the millennials all think they're special and entitled to everything they want.' Mr Hewitt paused for a moment. 'I wonder what that lot today wanted – that German woman and her millennial chums.'

'Dunno,' said Mr Livingstone. 'No idea. I heard the kraut in charge say they were looking for the owner.'

'I don't think you're allowed to call them krauts.'

'Really? Why not?'

'No idea. I think they regard it as offensive.'

'Oh, do they? Well, the kraut said they were looking for the owner.'

'Good luck with that,' said Mr Hewitt.

'I hope they're not going to be trouble,' said Mr Livingstone.

'I wouldn't think so.'

'The funny thing was that they all looked as if they wanted to be somewhere else.'

'You're right. I've met a lot of people in my life who always wanted to be somewhere else. It's a recipe for misery.’

‘I have always wanted to be where I am and I’ve always thought that a blessing. During the War, I was even happy crammed inside a Lancaster bomber. But now that we’re here this is where I want to be and to stay.’

‘On Penmouth Pier?’

‘On Penmouth Pier,’ agreed Mr Livingstone. ‘I feel as though I’ve come home.’ He paused for a while. ‘I hope that Schmidt woman isn’t going to plunge a spanner into our garden of roses.’

‘I wouldn’t worry about it,’ said Mr Hewitt, reassuringly. ‘Mrs Caldicot will sort it all out.’

Mr Livingstone looked at him, smiled and nodded. ‘She will, won’t she?’

‘She always does. Remarkable woman. She should be Prime Minister.’

The two old friends stood for a while, saying nothing, just looking around.

‘You know,’ said Mr Hewitt, ‘when I was 20 I’d have settled for living to 70. It would have seemed like a decent lifespan at that point. But now it seems like no age at all. In my head I feel about 20. Maybe as much as 25 when I’m having a bad day. I’m a bit wobbly and I wouldn’t go up a ladder. And if I kneel down it takes me a while to get up again. But I don’t feel old, do you?’

‘Not at all. The list of foods I can’t eat goes up by the month. I wouldn’t eat a pickled gherkin if you paid me. And I’m glad Mrs Peterborough threw those pickled eggs at the bailiffs. If I had to run to catch a bus I’d wait for the next one. But inside I don’t feel more than about 18.’

‘Should we offer to help with painting the pier or shall we take a little ride on the train?’ asked Mr Livingstone.

‘Mr Merivale and Mr Roxdale seem to be getting on well with the painting. They both said they enjoyed it very much.’

‘So it would be a pity to interfere? It would spoil their fun?’

‘Definitely.’

‘We could help out in the shop for a while?’

‘Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough seem to have that well in hand. I think we’d probably get in the way.’

‘It’s difficult to know where we’d be most useful. Maybe we ought to think about it before we go offering our services without a proper plan.’

‘Keep ourselves in reserve, as it were,’ agreed Mr Hewitt.

‘Ready for emergencies.’

‘Substitutes sitting on the bench, ready to leap into action whenever and wherever needed.’

‘Absolutely. Meanwhile shall I get a pair of train tickets?’

‘We don’t have to pay do we?’

‘Of course not. I’ll get us a stick of rock each, shall I?’

‘I’d rather have an ice cream.’

‘Two train tickets and two ice creams it is then,’ said Mr Livingstone heading for the shop.

‘Make sure they’re return tickets and bring two boxes of Turkish Delight for the journey back,’ called Mr Hewitt.

Chapter Twenty

While Mr Livingstone and Mr Hewitt had been entertaining Ms Schmidt, and her international band of colleagues from Penmouth Council's Department of Equality, Diversity and Sensitivity, Mrs Caldicot had been busy trying to work out how best to make use of the now apparently unwanted theatre on the accurately named Stone Rock at the end of the pier.

It was the theatre, she knew, which was one of the most notable parts of the pier and almost certain to be the most vital when it came to bringing in some money. Mrs Caldicot knew she had to find a way to make use of it if they were going to make the pier a commercial success.

And so Mrs Caldicot, together with Mrs Roberts and Ruth, the two permanent members of her ad hoc management committee, wandered down the pier to take a look at what was available in the theatre, and, as Mrs Caldicot put it, to 'brainstorm' in the hope that a suitable idea might appear.

The three of them had been in the theatre before. But they had only looked around in a vague sort of way; oohing and aahing as tourists 'doing 14 European countries in 11 days' might ooh and aah when visiting their fourth cathedral of the day. They hadn't really 'seen' anything.

But now that they had time to examine the theatre more carefully they found it enormously impressive.

'Wow!' said Ruth, who had never seen anything like it before. 'Does Mr Livingstone own all this? His very own theatre!'

'It would appear so,' said Mrs Caldicot. She too was terribly impressed by the beauty of the building and the way it had been decorated. The theatre had been built at a time when red velvet and gold paint were fashionable and when theatre designers had deemed it necessary to decorate every available square inch of space with masks of tragedy and comedy, with plaster cherubs and with bunches of grapes and other similar delights. The gold leaf had, admittedly, peeled off some of the plaster but the effect was still stunning. Mrs Caldicot and the other two members of the ad hoc committee were awestruck by the decorations in the auditorium.

Above them there were two levels of seating, the dress circle and the upper circle, and to the right and to the left there were several enormously impressive looking boxes wherein wealthier patrons could sit and stretch out a little while enjoying whatever show was on offer. The walls of the theatre were decorated with scores of photographs and posters in glass frames. There were pictures of singers, comedians and pop groups. There were posters for dramas, comedies and ballets. The Penmouth Pier theatre had, it seemed, played host to every conceivable form of entertainment.

'Crumbs!' said Ruth, examining the photographs. Most of the faces and names were unknown to her, since they had been famous before she was born, but occasionally she spotted a star she could identify.

'What on earth are we going to do with this place?' asked Mrs Caldicot, talking more to herself than to her two companions.

'It's marvellous!' murmured Mrs Roberts, gazing in astonishment at the decorations and rubbing her hand across the back of one of the velvet seats. The velvet was worn and a little faded but it felt wonderful. Mrs Roberts wondered how many people had sat there and been enthralled by what they'd seen on the stage. Attached to the seat in front there was a pair of opera glasses which could be released if you put sixpence into the slot. The mechanism which controlled the release of the glasses had never been changed to cope with decimal currency.

'It's a pity the local amateur dramatics group won't use the theatre,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I wonder if they really know what they're missing.'

'They're damned silly!' said Mrs Roberts. 'If they're any good then I bet they could make far more money out of appearing here than they receive in grants. They could put on shows whenever they liked.'

'Maybe we could put on pop concerts,' suggested Ruth, who saw herself welcoming a string of famous singers and sitting with them while they sipped their lattes with cinnamon sprinkles.

'That's an idea,' agreed Mrs Caldicot, sounding wary. She didn't really think they were ready yet to become impresarios but she didn't want to dismiss Ruth's idea out of hand.

'I wonder if we would be able to cope with thousands of screaming girls?' asked Mrs Roberts.

'Do bands still have thousands of screaming fans?'

'Oh yes, I think so,' said Ruth.

'The carpet is wet here,' said Mrs Caldicot, who had wandered down one of the aisles and had found a damp patch. Mrs Roberts and Ruth joined her.

Mrs Roberts looked up. 'There's a hole in the ceiling,' she said.

'Oh dear,' said Mrs Caldicot looking up at a small piece of sky. The rest of the ceiling was covered in gold paint but there was definitely a blue patch of sky visible. Everywhere she looked there were things to do. And everything that needed doing meant more expenditure.

'It's only a small hole,' said Mrs Roberts, reassuringly.

The three of them walked down to the front of the auditorium and climbed up the wooden steps which led onto the stage. They then turned and looked back at the theatre; at the stalls, the dress circle, the upper circle and the boxes.

'I wonder how many people can fit in here,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'At least 1,500,' replied Mrs Roberts after looking around, counting the number of seats in a row, counting the number of rows and multiplying one by the other.

'We could organise lecture tours with famous people,' suggested Ruth.

'That's a very good idea!' agreed Mrs Caldicot, who liked that idea better than Ruth's suggestion that they arrange pop concerts.

'What sort of lecture tours?' asked Mrs Roberts. 'Do people pay to go to lectures these days?'

'I don't think people call them lectures anymore,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'But I've seen adverts for them. Politicians, writers and retired actors just sit on the stage and reminisce for an hour or so and then they answer questions from the audience. It's nothing new; Charles Dickens did a lot of it.'

'Oh,' said Mrs Roberts, who didn't seem terribly impressed with the idea.

Ruth wandered off to the left of the stage.

'We could organise our own variety shows,' suggested Mrs Roberts, who always liked variety shows especially when there was a good singer and a conjuring act.

'Oh, I don't think we could manage that,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Not just yet. We'd have to do the bookings and arrange for all the artistes and the band. We might be able to do it one day. But not just yet.'

They stood for a few minutes, both wondering what on earth they could do with such a wonderful theatre when Mrs Caldicot looked up and spotted another small hole in the roof. There was another small, damp stain on the floorboards of the stage.

They were still thinking when Ruth came running back onto the stage. 'There's all sorts of exciting stuff back there,' she said excitedly. 'There are costumes and props and I found a huge chest filled with old posters.'

She led Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts back stage and took them to a small props and costumes room that was absolutely crammed with bits and pieces left over from old theatrical performances. There were suits of armour, spears, swords and golden crowns. There were even a dozen tickling sticks which were, presumably, left over from a Ken Dodd performance.

'Look!' said Ruth, opening the lid of a huge, very solid looking cabin trunk.

Inside the trunk there were hundreds of old posters, all pristine and laid flat. They were all perfectly preserved. 'There are posters for performances by all sorts of famous people!' she said. 'People from before my time but people even I have heard of!' She lifted up corners of the posters and started reading off names: Judy Garland, Bill Haley, Eddie Cochran, Bob Dylan, Gene Vincent, Frankie Vaughan, Tommy Cooper, the Glen Miller Band, the Rolling Stones and all sorts of other people. Oh, look! There is even a pile of posters for the Beatles!'

'Did the Beatles perform here?' asked Mrs Roberts impressed.

'I don't think so,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Mr Pickering said they had only nearly appeared on the pier. But they must have been booked here and so the promoter had some posters printed.'

'Even if they are posters for a concert that never took place they're probably quite valuable!' said Mrs Roberts. 'People collect anything to do with the Beatles.'

'There are scores of them!' said Ruth, rifling through the posters. 'Do you really think they're worth anything?'

'They might be worth a few pennies,' agreed Mrs Caldicot, sceptically. 'And we could probably sell some of this other stuff. We might be able to raise enough money to pay for the roof to be repaired.'

They closed the lid of the trunk, left the store room and wandered back onto the stage.

'That poster of Judy Garland reminded me of 'The Wizard of Oz!' said Mrs Roberts. 'I saw it years ago in the cinema.' She smiled as she remembered the film. 'I saw it in a cinema rather like this place. It was all red velvet and gold paint. They brought round ice creams and popcorn. I used to love going to the cinema.'

'I loved all those old Bogart films!' said Mrs Caldicot. ''Casablanca', 'African Queen' and 'The Big Sleep'.'

''The Maltese Falcon' and 'To Have and Have Not'!' continued Mrs Roberts.

'I haven't seen any of those!' said Ruth.

'Oh you must!' said Mrs Roberts. 'And you need to see them on the big screen – not just on a television.'

'That's it!' cried Mrs Caldicot.

'What's what?' asked Mrs Roberts, slightly confused.

'We'll open a cinema. We'll put up a screen and rent old films which we can show. We don't have to worry about looking after artistes or dealing with screaming fans. We just show classic old movies. We show films with

Humphrey Bogart, Cary Grant and the Marx Brothers. We have a season of films by favourite stars or directors. We could have a Hitchcock season and show films like 'The Thirty Nine Steps'.'

'What about old musicals?' asked Mrs Roberts.

'Brilliant!' agreed Mrs Caldicot. 'We could show 'My Fair Lady' and 'The Sound of Music' as a double bill.'

'And horror movies?' said Ruth. 'I love those old Dracula movies with Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing.'

'That's a terrific idea!' agreed Mrs Roberts. 'And the Vincent Price films.'

'What about the leaks in the roof?' asked Ruth.

'I don't remember that one,' said Mrs Roberts, thinking Ruth was talking about a movie title.

Ruth explained.

'Oh we can soon deal with those,' said Mrs Caldicot, who was now in an optimistic mood. 'We can position buckets under the leaks.'

'And if the weather is bad we can give people umbrellas if it turns out they are being rained upon,' suggested Mrs Roberts. 'English customers won't mind a bit!'

'That's an excellent idea,' agreed Mrs Caldicot.

'We could show children's movies on Saturday mornings!' said Mrs Roberts. 'Cartoons and so on. Just like they used to do in the good old days. I bet we'll do a roaring trade when the weather is too bad for people to sit on the beach.'

'That's a good half of all the days in an English summer,' Ruth pointed out.

'Exactly!' said Mrs Caldicot. 'It shouldn't be difficult to arrange films for all ages and all tastes. This cinema thing is a wonderful idea. Who thought of it?'

'It was you,' said Ruth.

'Oh was it? Well I get a free cup of tea and a bun. And you two get free cups of tea and free buns for agreeing that it's a great idea.'

'Oh goody,' said Ruth. 'Dorothy said she was going to the bakery to buy some cakes. I hope she bought some éclairs.'

And so the three of them locked up the theatre and walked back down the pier towards the café.

As they went, Mrs Roberts and Mrs Caldicot looked at each other, smiled and skipped for a couple of paces.

Chapter Twenty One

While Mrs Caldicot, Mrs Roberts and Ruth had been examining the theatre, and trying to work out how best to use it, Ms Schmidt and her entourage had been wandering up and down the pier trying to find someone who was in charge or, failing that find someone who would tell them who was in charge or, failing even that, hoping to find someone whom they could impress and intimidate.

There is absolutely no point at all in working for the council, and having an important title and an entourage, if you can't find someone to impress and intimidate.

Unfortunately for Ms Schmidt, the members of Mrs Caldicot's gang had long ago decided that talking to people wearing suits was never a particularly good idea, and if the person wearing the suit looked or seemed full of their own self-importance, then it was invariably a very bad idea.

'What good has talking to someone snooty in a suit ever done anyone?' enquired Mr Merivale.

And answer came there none.

There was, instead, simply much pursing of lips and shaking of heads.

No one could think of an occasion which had been enlightened or enlivened by a conversation with someone (male or female) in a suit. And at the first sight of a cluster of be-suited figures, Mrs Caldicot's gang had pretty well disappeared from sight.

And the members of the pier staff who had not arrived with Mrs Caldicot (and who were, perhaps, not yet as allergic to people in suits) were all busy. Mr Rowbottham the silhouettist was in his booth, snipping away and providing happy holidaymakers with extraordinarily lifelike silhouettes of themselves, or their loved ones, on black cartridge paper. Mr Pickering, the train driver, was driving the train, and far too busy collecting tickets and avoiding holidaymakers to people who were patently not on the pier to have a Good Time. He had a little brass bell attached to the front of the train and occasionally he rang it to warn pedestrians that the train was coming. He liked ringing the bell.

Mr Pickering's granddaughter Dorothy and Miss Pettifer, the erstwhile Fat Lady and newly appointed waitress, were in the café where they were busy quenching thirsts and appetites with an apparently endless stream of cups of tea, buttered crumpets, toasted teacakes and home-made sandwiches and, of course, the inevitable packets of fish and chips.

If business slowed (which it did only rarely), Miss Pettifer would stand outside the café holding and nibbling from a bag of freshly made chips. The wonderful aroma would immediately inspire passers-by to rush into the café to order their own supplies.

It was only on their way back down the pier that Ms Schmidt and her multinational band of authorised marauders eventually spotted Mrs Caldicot, Mrs Roberts and Ruth who were heading back towards the café and their ice creams. Mrs Caldicot had stopped to pick up a newspaper which had been abandoned and was about to flutter into the sea.

'Are you something to do with the pier?' demanded Ms Schmidt.

'In a way I suppose I am,' answered Mrs Caldicot, warily and very reluctantly.

'I am looking for the owner,' snapped Ms Schmidt. She had never been a woman over-imbued with surplus quantities of natural charm, patience and good manners but she had found that these shortcomings had been a considerable help to her in her short but dramatic career. She was now reaching the end of a very short tether.

'I don't know where the owner is,' said Mrs Caldicot quite honestly.

The last time she had seen Mr Livingstone he had been sitting on the little train with Mr Hewitt. They had both been travelling up the pier and enjoying large ice creams; the fluffy sort of ice cream that has at least one bar of chocolate stuffed into it. That had been some while earlier, when she and her ad hoc committee had been heading up the pier to the theatre.

'Who are you?' demanded Ms Schmidt, who could not have asked the question more forcefully if she'd been working in a cellar with a floodlight shining into Mrs Caldicot's face.

'My name is Caldicot,' said Mrs Caldicot who was no longer the meek, mild and easily bullied woman she had been when Mr Caldicot had been alive and moaning. 'And I am not accustomed to being addressed in such a manner. Who are you?'

Ms Schmidt took a deep breath and explained, once again, who she was and why she was there. It took her nearly two minutes.

'Well I'm the Pier Master,' said Mrs Caldicot, perhaps a trifle rashly.

'No, no, I need the person in charge,' insisted Ms Schmidt dismissively. 'I must speak to the owner.'

‘Then you’d better find them,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘And good luck with that,’ she muttered under her breath as the little train hummed past them, going back down the pier. Mr Livingstone and Mr Hewitt shouted greetings and held up cubes of Turkish Delight. The pair had found that neither of them could eat a whole box of Turkish Delight in one ride down the pier and so they’d stayed on the train. This was, they thought, probably their sixth or seventh journey along the pier.

‘Well, I suppose you will have to do for now,’ said Ms Schmidt with the rudeness of self-assured youth. ‘What did you say your position is?’

‘I’m the Pier Master,’ replied Mrs Caldicot.

‘What does that mean precisely? What qualifications do you have? Are you trained? You seem very old to be a Pier Master. And the term ‘Master’ is quite unacceptable to my Department.’

‘I don’t know. None. No. Don’t be so rude,’ said Mrs Caldicot, answering Ms Schmidt’s barrage of questions.

‘I must say it seems to me that you are far too old to take on responsibility for a structure of this magnitude,’ said Ms Schmidt.

‘I’m so sorry,’ said Mrs Caldicot, feeling her blood begin to bubble. ‘Is there a preferred age for pier management?’ she asked. ‘How old should I be? Would you like me to have cosmetic surgery to make myself look younger?’

She was furious. She had spent much of her life being bullied. She had been bullied and taken for granted by her first husband. She had been ignored by shopkeepers, Post Office staff, bank tellers and a wide variety of utility company employees. She had been treated with scant respect by more people than she could possibly remember.

‘Why, does everyone think they can patronise older people?’ demanded Mrs Caldicot. ‘You remind me of those people in shops and offices and on the telephone who talk down to pensioners and treat them as though they’re members of some sub-species, or aliens from another planet. If I have to ring the gas or the electricity people they always want to know my date of birth. I can’t imagine why but they do. Maybe you’re not allowed to have gas or electricity if you’re too old. And then when I’ve told them how old I am they always say ‘Well done!’ as if I’ve just discovered a new way to split the atom or won a gold medal in the Olympics. All I’ve done is get my date of birth right but they congratulate me as if I’ve really astonished them with my brilliance. Why do people under 40 always assume that anyone over 60 must be senile, and then act all surprised and delighted when they turn out not to be?’

Ms Schmidt, startled by the fact that Mrs Caldicot had the temerity to stand up for herself, frowned but didn’t say anything at all. Like all bullies she didn’t like it when people stood up for themselves.

Mrs Caldicot hadn’t finished. She looked sternly at Ms Schmidt, taking in her shapeless suit and her scalped hairstyle. ‘Maybe I should get someone to trim my hair with a lawn mower. Would that make me look younger, do you think?’

‘Do you have relevant life experiences?’ demanded Ms Schmidt, trying to retake control of the conversation. She didn’t understand the remark about the lawn mower. She was very proud of her hairstyle. Her hair was cut by a Syrian refugee who had received his hairdressing training while serving as a soldier in the Syrian army. He cut everyone’s hair in the only way he knew how, but had won two trophies for hairstyling and was so busy cutting hair that he was booked up three months in advance. *The Guardian* newspaper had printed a long interview with him.

‘I always used to go on the pier when I was little,’ replied Mrs Caldicot. ‘So my on-pier experience goes back well over half a century. What qualifications do you have?’

‘I have a diploma in Asylum Studies from the University of Banbury and a certificate in Golf Course Management from the University of Bakewell,’ said Ms Schmidt very proudly. ‘I also have a post graduate diploma in Transcultural Gender Studies from the University of Eccles.’

‘It’s a pity you didn’t get a diploma in something from Chelsea where the buns come from,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Don’t mention it. I often feel that way if I’ve had a heavy lunch.’

Ms Schmidt, who felt that the conversation had passed her by on the other side of the road, and who was not enjoying what she had expected and believed would be an easy day of unopposed confrontation and flagrant bullying, looked around desperately as if hoping that someone would leap to her rescue.

Naturally, no one did. Actually, none of her entourage had managed to follow more than a quarter of the conversation.

‘As a person of authority you are required to give me details of everyone working on the pier,’ said Ms Schmidt. She held out her hand and one of her aides, spotting the gesture and knowing it well, placed a small computer in it. All of her aides were carrying nylon computer bags or plastic briefcases and between them they had enough computing power to put a satellite into space or, at a push, even adjust the wing mirrors on a BMW motor car.

‘Oh my word,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

She thought for a moment and then slowly rattled off a list of names. ‘Pinhola, Nwanga, Kwindja, Nowak, Kowalczyk, Okereke, Azikiwe, we've got two of those, Tinibu, Nzeogwu, Iwu, Dokubo, Muller, Ursache, Dobrescu and Balescu. Oh and I nearly forgot Mr Manescu and Ms Popescu. How could I forget them? Silly me.'

'Is that everyone?' demanded Ms Schmidt, when she'd finished putting all the names into her keyboard.

'Oh yes, that's everyone.'

Ruth, who was standing open mouthed at the imaginary list of names which Mrs Caldicot had recited with such ease, felt herself being nudged. She looked. It was Mrs Roberts, who was opening and closing her mouth. Ruth closed her mouth.

'How many of these peoples are of ethnic origin?'

'Oh, all of us I would say. Yes, definitely all of us are ethnic.'

'Your English is very good.'

'Thank you. I practise it every day.'

'Good, good. But don't neglect your own language. You must retain your ethnicity.'

'Oh yes. Thank you. I make sure that I speak my native language on holidays and every Sunday.'

'And are you all members of population subgroups within dominant natural or cultural groups?'

'Definitely,' confirmed Mrs Caldicot. 'All of us. We often laugh about us all being members of population subgroups.' She laughed lightly to illustrate what she meant. 'Being members of subgroups within dominant natural or cultural groups is something that brings us all together.'

'By my reckoning there are 18 peoples working here,' said Ms Schmidt, studying her computer 'How many of these peoples are of Non English speaking Eastern European origins?'

'I don't know,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I never like to enquire. But when Mrs Pinhola went to Gdansk she talked for months about how much she was looking forward to going home. Do you remember that, Mrs Nwanga?'

'Definitely,' replied the woman more customarily known as Mrs Roberts. 'She went back twice I think. While she was there she visited a tractor factory and brushed up on her plumbing.'

'Splendid. And how many asylum seekers do you have employed here?'

'Including the illegal ones?'

'Oh yes, we would be very happy to include them. We like to have the illegal ones included though we would not, of course, pass their details on to the authorities.'

'I would say maybe at least half could be considered worthy of inclusion in your list of people who would be suitable for an asylum,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'It may be more.'

'Splendid!' said Ms Schmidt, who seemed pleased by this. 'Thank you for sharing this with me.'

It clearly did not seem to Ms Schmidt to be in the slightest bit strange that everyone working on the pier should be so very foreign.

Mrs Caldicot thought the wretched woman probably felt that it was such a Good Thing that she didn't like to question it, or even to suspect for a moment that it might not be entirely true.

'And how many homosexuals and gender variants do you have?'

'Oh I haven't asked,' confessed Mrs Caldicot. 'I would say at least half but maybe more.' She turned to Mrs Roberts. 'What do you think Mrs Nwanga?'

'I would say at least half,' answered Mrs Roberts, with a nod. 'At least half – and we have a lot of variants here.'

'And how many of your peoples are disabled?'

'Oh I think everyone is suffering from one handicap or another,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Mrs Kwindja has terrible trouble with her knees.'

'That's the mother of the lady who went to Gdansk,' said Mrs Roberts helpfully. 'The one who looked at the tractors and brushed up on her plumbing while she was there. She enjoyed herself so much that I think she went twice.'

'I see there is a small train running on the pier,' said Ms Schmidt. 'What facility do you have for peoples in wheelchairs to board the train?'

This rather stumped Mrs Caldicot. It had not even occurred to her that people who were in wheelchairs, and who already had wheels of their own, would want to board the train.

'We have a hook on the back of the train,' said Mrs Roberts helping out Mrs Caldicot at her time of need. 'And we have a piece of rope handy at all times. We just tie the wheelchair to the back of the train and pull it along.'

Ms Schmidt frowned. 'Is that safe?'

'Oh yes. There's never been an accident,' said Mrs Roberts. And since the experiment had never been tried she was being perfectly honest.

'Thank you, so much,' said Ms Schmidt, switching off her computer and handing it back to one of her assistants. 'I will report back my findings. I am quite delighted with what I've heard from you today.' She started to leave and then turned back. 'When we came onto the pier,' she said, 'I talked to two men who were standing there. Are they anything to do with the pier?'

'Would they be distinguished looking gentlemen of mature years?'

'Mature, yes,' said Ms Schmidt, a little cautiously.

'Was one of them wearing a sports jacket with patches on the elbows and the other wearing an old suit jacket with a maroon jumper underneath it?'

'Exactly! That is precisely them. You know these persons?'

'I've seen them around.'

'Are they employed by you?'

'Most definitely not!' said Mrs Caldicot emphatically. She shook her head. 'I have no employees.'

'I am so pleased,' said Ms Schmidt. 'They seemed very confused and not at all ethnically acceptable.' She lowered her voice. 'In fact,' she said, 'I strongly suspected that they might be English!'

And with that she hurried off, her entourage racing after her.

'Golly,' said Mrs Roberts, when she'd gone. 'Where did you get all those names from?'

Mrs Caldicot held up the newspaper she was holding. 'From the sports page,' she said. 'They're the names of footballers playing for clubs in the English league.'

She was silent for a moment.

'I feel bad about telling her porky pies but I was worried we'd all get into trouble for not being foreign enough.'

'You did the only thing you could,' said Mrs Roberts. 'She'd have probably closed us down if she'd known we were all British.'

'I liked the bit about the asylum!' said Ruth, giggling.

Mrs Caldicot looked at her and raised an eyebrow. 'Which bit was that?'

'The bit when you said that half of us would be suitable for an asylum.'

'Oh,' said Mrs Caldicot, rather pleased. 'I think my estimate was a little on the low side, don't you?'

'I definitely do,' agreed Mrs Roberts. 'We're definitely all suitable for an asylum. In fact, we should turn the entire pier into an asylum! We could probably get a grant for it.'

Giggling, they continued on their way back down the pier, towards the café and their cups of tea and buns (or, in Ruth's case, a cream filled éclair).

Ten minutes later, they were sitting down enjoying their very welcome comestibles.

'Oh, I'd love one of those,' murmured Mrs Caldicot appreciatively, as Ruth bit into her éclair and cream squeezed out at both sides.

'The girls have got two or three more!' said Ruth. 'Shall I fetch you one?'

'No thank you, dear. I'd love one but it wouldn't love me. I'd be poorly for a week. I'm happy with a nice iced bun.'

So Ruth enjoyed her éclair at first hand and Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Nwanga (nee Roberts) enjoyed it vicariously, at second hand. And, surprisingly perhaps, the two of them enjoyed it almost as much as Ruth had; comfortable in the knowledge that the éclair would not have a chance to get its own back on them.

Chapter Twenty Two

They all met that evening in the ballroom, which had now become their living area. There was a small dining area at one end, a television set at the other and enough chairs and tables for them to sit down and relax. There was, suggested Mr Roxdale, even room for a table tennis table and a pool table.

It quickly became apparent that Mrs Caldicot's suggestion that the theatre be turned into a cinema was a popular one. The proposal was met with universal approval.

'It's a wonderful idea!' said Dorothy, who was excited at having a cinema within walking distance. 'There isn't a cinema in Penmouth. The nearest one is nearly thirty miles away.'

Mrs Caldicot had worried that young locals and visitors would be disappointed if they showed old films instead of the latest blockbusters but it seemed that her fears were unfounded. Dorothy, like everyone else, thought that the idea of showing old films was a terrific idea.

'Can we have lots of old cowboy movies?' asked Mr Roxdale. 'I like those John Wayne films. And I love films starring Clint Eastwood. Films like 'A Fistful of Dollars' and 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly'.'

'That's a terrific idea,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. She made a note of this in her notebook.

'And a season of war films?' suggested Mr Livingstone. 'The Dam Busters?', 'The Battle of Britain' and 'Where Eagles Dare'? I like films where they kill a lot of Germans.'

'Can we get hold of all those old films?' asked Mrs Merivale. 'Are they still available?'

'Definitely!' said Mrs Caldicot. 'An hour ago I spoke to Jenkins, who is very well but missing us all very much, by the way, and he gave me the telephone number of a film distributor called Rufus Strutt in London. I then rang Mr Strutt and he was very helpful. He told me that hardly anyone shows old films anymore. We can show them for a fraction of the cost of showing new films.'

'What about a screen?' asked Mr Merivale. 'We can't just show films on an old sheet – even though it would probably be a cheap way to do it.'

'Mr Strutt was very helpful about that too,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'He gave me the name of an old cinema that's just closed down. He said he thought we ought to be able to buy their screen and projection equipment for next to nothing. Apparently their equipment is considered out-of-date but it would be perfect for showing old movies.'

It was generally agreed that all of this was excellent news.

'By the way,' said Mrs Caldicot, turning to Mr Livingstone. 'Did you talk to a woman called Schmidt today?'

'A German woman with a huge entourage?'

'That's the one.'

'Well we did and we didn't,' said Mr Livingstone. 'She wanted to speak to the owner.'

'So you didn't tell her that you're the owner?'

'It slipped my mind,' admitted Mr Livingstone. 'But we had a nice chat,' said Mr Livingstone. 'I told her all about my one and only visit to Hamburg.'

'You didn't tell her that you'd been in a Lancaster Bomber when you called?'

'He damned well did!' said Mr Hewitt with a chuckle.

'Oh dear me!' said Mrs Caldicot. She paused and thought for a while. 'Never mind I think I managed to convince her that we're following all their regulations.'

She looked at Mrs Nwanga (aka Roberts) and winked. Mrs Nwanga (aka Roberts) winked back.

'Jolly good,' said Mr Livingstone. He turned to Errol. 'I don't think you need worry too much about the council closing us down, young man! Mrs Caldicot will keep them under control.'

Errol, like everyone else, was relieved. Mrs Merivale had found him a small, empty bedroom and told him that he was welcome to stay there if he wanted to. No one was much surprised when he said he wanted to.

The truth is that they were all enjoying life on Penmouth Pier. They had settled into their rooms upstairs. And the massive ballroom had become their communal living room.

An hour or two later that evening there was particularly good news for Ruth.

The gates were locked and padlocked and Mr and Merivale had just decided to take a stroll along the deserted pier when they heard a familiar voice calling to them. They turned and saw Jean-Jacques, the young man whom Ruth had met when they had all gone to Paris for a few days. Jean-Jacques had an arm stuck through the gate and was waving to them. 'Can I come in?' he called.

'Won't be a minute!' called the Merivales.

And while Mr Merivale rushed to find Mr Livingstone, who had the key to the padlock, Mrs Merivale hurried off to find Ruth.

Not surprisingly, it was Ruth, whose legs were over half a century younger than Mr Livingstone's and who was so eager to get there that she would have given any Olympic champion a good run for their money, who got to the gates first.

'I didn't expect to see you for ages!' she cried, tears of delight running down her cheeks.

'I thought it would be a surprise!' said Jean-Jacques.

'When did you leave Paris?'

'I left Charles de Gaulle airport early this morning. But it has taken me three times as long to get to Penmouth from London as it took me to get to London from Paris! I had to get a train into London and then a train across London and then a train from London. Oh la la! So many trains.'

'Are you hungry?'

'I am starving. I tried to eat a sandwich I bought at the railway station but they made it out of cardboard by mistake.'

'Could you eat some fish and chips?'

At that point Mr Livingstone arrived with the key. And a moment later Ruth had her arms around Jean-Jacques's neck, and the Merivales and Mr Livingstone were looking away and discussing what they thought the weather was going to be like the next day.

'Did you ask me if I could eat some fish and chips?' said Jean-Jacques a few minutes later.

'I did.'

'I would love some of your famous fish and chips!'

'I'll ask Dorothy if she can make you some,' said Ruth. 'She makes the very best fish and chips in the world.'

'I'll pop off and find her,' offered Mrs Merivale. 'The fat will still be hot. Meanwhile I'll make a nice pot of tea.' Making a nice pot of tea was Mrs Merivale's first course of action whenever something out of the ordinary occurred. If there was good news then she made a nice pot of tea to celebrate. If there was bad news then she made a nice pot of tea to settle everyone's nerves.

'I cannot believe that you own a pier!' said Jean-Jacques, straining to look through the gloaming, down the seemingly endless length of the pier. 'It's huge and so magnificent.'

'It belongs to Mr Livingstone,' said Ruth. 'But we all live and work here now. Mrs Caldicot is going to open a cinema in the theatre at the end of the pier. And Mrs Torridge has become a Fortune Teller. I am so pleased that you brought your accordion. We have a really nice man who cuts pictures out of black paper. And there is a train that runs up and down the pier. How is your father? I am so sorry I should have asked sooner. Why didn't you tell me that you were coming? When did you decide to come?'

Jean-Jacques, who was laughing, looked at her. 'My father is very well. He sends everyone his love.'

'Can we do some busking?' asked Ruth. 'Just you and me?'

'I hope so very much!' said Jean-Jacques. 'I will play my accordion and you will sing.'

'I'll ask Mrs Caldicot if we can stand at the entrance to the pier,' suggested Ruth. 'It'll help draw attention to the pier and entertain people as they come in.'

Naturally, Mrs Caldicot, and indeed everyone else, thought that a little music was just what the pier needed and it was agreed that a pair of buskers at the gate would be a marvellous attraction.

Chapter Twenty Three

The man who had the cinema screen and the projection equipment for sale turned up with everything packed up in a large van. He was a long standing lover of old movies and he was delighted to know that his equipment was not to be recycled into a local landfill site. He was keen to install it in the theatre straight away.

‘But we haven’t agreed a price yet!’ protested Mrs Caldicot.

‘And we haven’t got any money,’ pointed out Mr Livingstone, practical for once.

‘You can have it all for £1,000,’ said Mr Strutt with a shrug. ‘The stuff is too old for anyone else to use and not old enough to have any value for a collector.’

Mrs Caldicot and Mr Livingstone exchanged glances. ‘I’m afraid we haven’t even got £1,000,’ said Mrs Caldicot apologetically.

Mr Strutt shrugged. ‘Pay me when you’ve got going,’ he said.

He and the assistant he had brought with him piled all the equipment onto the little train and walked beside it as it was driven along the pier to the theatre. Within a surprisingly short period of time, they had the screen installed and the projection equipment set up in the Dress Circle, where they had removed twelve seats to make room.

‘I suggest you build a little, wooden wall around the projection area,’ suggested Mr Strutt. ‘Just to give the projectionist a little privacy. You don’t want someone bumping into the projector and knocking it off line!’

Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts, who had been watching in awe, said they thought this would be an excellent idea. The ad hoc committee had been temporarily reduced to two for Ruth was with Jean-Jacques, busking at the pier entrance.

‘Who is going to be the projectionist?’ asked Mr Strutt.

Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts looked at each other. ‘We hadn’t thought about that!’ admitted Mrs Caldicot.

‘Well, why don’t I teach you two ladies how to do it? And then you can show anyone else how it’s done. The equipment is really very simple. You can’t go wrong.’

And so Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts learned how to become cinema projectionists.

‘If you have any problems just give me a call,’ said Mr Strutt.

‘Before we take you and your assistant back to the café for a cup of tea and a meal, may I ask you if you know anything about cinema and theatre memorabilia?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘I’ve just sold all the stuff from my cinema,’ said Mr Strutt. ‘So, I’ve got a rough idea of the sort of prices things fetch these days.’

They took him and his assistant down to the small room behind the stage where they had found all the old theatrical props.

‘These are very nice!’ agreed Mr Strutt. ‘They’ll fetch a very decent price at auction. Collectors love this sort of stuff. What about the posters and photos you’ve got on the walls? They’re probably worth a few bob. People love old posters and old film star photos.’

‘I think we’d like to leave the posters and the photographs on the walls,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘If we take them down we’ll need to redecorate all the walls.’

‘But there are the posters that Ruth found in that old trunk,’ pointed out Mrs Roberts.

‘Of course!’ agreed Mrs Caldicot. She crossed the room and opened the lid of the trunk in which Ruth had found the old theatre posters. ‘We’ve got heaps of old posters in here.’

Mr Strutt stared in astonishment as the lid went up.

‘Are they worth anything?’ asked Mrs Roberts.

Mr Strutt didn’t reply for he was too busy flicking through the posters.

‘Do you know how many there are in here?’ he asked.

‘No idea,’ replied Mrs Caldicot.

There was a silence while Mr Strutt did some counting. ‘You’ve got some posters here for the Beatles!’

‘Yes.’

Mr Strutt carefully counted the Beatles’ posters. ‘There are 100 of these!’

‘Yes, but I’m afraid that I don’t think The Beatles ever appeared here. According to Mr Pickering, they were booked to appear but something happened and they didn’t come.’

‘Who is Mr Pickering?’

‘He’s the gentleman who drives our little train,’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘He’s been working here for ever. He knows everything about the pier.’

Mr Strutt was so excited he could hardly speak. He looked at his assistant who was grinning and then he looked at

Mrs Caldicot. 'Do you have any idea how much these are worth?'

'None whatsoever,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'If I offered you £200 for all these posters, would you take it?'

'I'd have to ask Mr Livingstone,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'He owns the pier and everything on it.'

'But he might accept £200 – for the lot?'

'I suppose he might,' agreed Mrs Caldicot.

'Well, it's a good job for you that I'm honest,' said Mr Strutt. 'Each one of these old theatre posters is worth between £150 and £200 and the Beatles' posters are easily worth £500 each.'

Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts just stared at him in astonishment.

'But they're just old posters! And the Beatles never even appeared here.'

'People love these things,' insisted Mr Strutt. 'Interior decorators will kill one another to buy these. They put them into big aluminium frames and hang them in posh London apartments.'

'Even the Beatles' posters?'

'Oh, especially the Beatles' posters.'

'It doesn't matter that The Beatles didn't appear here?'

'No. In fact it probably adds to their value. These are the missing posters for the missing concert!' said Mr Strutt. He smiled at Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts. 'I think you'll be able to pay for the screen and the projection equipment.'

'If Mr Livingstone agrees would you take them and sell them for us?' asked Mrs Caldicot. 'We would obviously pay you a commission.'

'Delighted!' said Mr Strutt immediately. 'I'd be delighted. Pay me 15% of the price you receive and I'll find you the best buyer. I'll try a few dealers here and in America and if they don't offer the right money we'll put everything into an auction. But if we go straight to a dealer we won't have to pay the auctioneer's commission and the dealer will save money too so we'll probably make more money that way.'

'How much do you think they're all worth?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'You won't get the prices I quoted, of course,' said Mr Strutt. 'Those are the retail prices. But you should get half of those prices from a dealer.'

Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts waited while Mr Strutt did some sums in his head.

'I think there are about 200 mixed posters here,' he said. 'And there are the 100 Beatles' posters. So, conservatively, I'd expect a dealer to pay at least £40,000 for the lot. If I break up the collection and sell them in separate lots I might be able to get more.' He paused, thinking. 'Then you'd have to take my 15% out of that. Oh, but you've got all that theatrical memorabilia as well. Those old suits of armour and the spears and whatnot should be worth another few thousand. I think I should be able to get you a cheque for something between £40,000 and £50,000, less the £1,000 for the projection equipment and my 15% commission.'

'I think we might be able to get the roof repaired,' whispered Mrs Caldicot to Mrs Roberts.

They hurried back down the pier to tell Mr Livingstone the good news. And to ask if he was happy to sell the collection of posters he didn't even know he had.

'I need to consult my adviser here,' said Mr Livingstone, turning to Mr Hewitt. 'What do you think we should do, Mr Hewitt? Do you think we should keep a pile of old posters in a trunk so that they can quietly go mouldy and rot away or should we flog them, put a big chunk of loot in the bank and then buy Mr Strutt's projector and repair the cinema roof?'

'It's a difficult one,' said Mr Hewitt, pretending to think about it.

'Very tricky,' agreed Mr Livingstone.

Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts, who knew they were being teased, just smiled and waited. Mr Strutt, who didn't know Mr Livingstone at all, simply stared in astonishment.

'On balance I think maybe you should sell them,' said Mr Hewitt eventually.

'OK, we'll sell them!' agreed Mr Livingstone. He and a relieved Mr Strutt then shook hands.

And so, after they'd all had lunch and a nice cup of tea, Mr Strutt and his assistant loaded the trunk full of posters, and the theatrical memorabilia, onto the little train. Mr Pickering drove the train down the pier and Mr Strutt and his assistant loaded everything into their van.

Chapter Twenty Four

Naturally, things weren't allowed to go quite so swimmingly without there being a serious setback.

Mrs Caldicot really wasn't terribly surprised.

She had become accustomed to the fact that life was very much like a game of snakes and ladders. She just rather wished that the ladders were longer and the snakes a little shorter.

A small expeditionary force of men and women in suits returned to the pier two days later.

There were three of them and Ms Schmidt, the head of the Department of Equality, Diversity and Sensitivity was not among them. Nor were her acolytes to be seen.

'I think you rather pulled the wool over our Ms Schmidt's eyes,' said a man who introduced himself as Mr Chapman. He looked to be in his forties and was short and notably overweight. Actually, he was very short. He looked a little bit like Dudley Moore, except that he was about two feet shorter and not as good looking. And he was very fat. So fat, indeed, that Mrs Caldicot thought that God could have probably made two quite average sized executives out of him and still had enough material left over to make a Great Dane.

Mr Chapman was addressing Mrs Caldicot who had identified herself as the Pier Master. Most of the others were there too. Mr Pickering was driving the train, and Dorothy and her new waitress were working in the café. But everyone else was gathered around Mrs Caldicot. Even Ruth and Jean-Jacques, the French accordionist, had stopped playing music to pay attention to what was happening.

'May I ask who you are?' asked Mrs Caldicot, very politely.

'I'm the council's Deputy Chief Executive,' replied Mr Chapman. 'We haven't met though you did meet Ms Schmidt, the Directrice of our Department of Equality, Diversity and Sensitivity. Ms Schmidt is German and therefore humourless. I am from Dundee, and therefore not German, and for a Scot I have a terrific sense of humour.'

'We rather thought we could rely on our Ms Schmidt to find a way to close you down,' said a woman who introduced herself as Ms Trench and who said that she was the council's Chief Planning Officer. 'The equality, diversity and sensitivity legislation governing small businesses is very strict these days.'

Like Mr Chapman, the Chief Planning Officer looked to be in her forties. She had no discernible curves whatsoever and was what used to be called stout.

'In the report which she submitted after her visit, Ms Schmidt said that you were fully compliant with all the legislative requirements,' said Mr Chapman. 'And we both know that's rubbish don't we?'

'I bet you thought you were very clever,' said Ms Trench. She looked around. 'Which one of you is Ms Nwanga?'

Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts both examined their shoes. They both felt like naughty schoolgirls. Naturally, the others did not know what Ms Trench was talking about.

'You should be ashamed of yourselves,' said Mr Chapman. 'Fancy taking advantage of a naïve and inexperienced young woman like that.'

'A foreign woman too,' said Ms Trench.

'We've sent Ms Schmidt and her team off on another training course,' said Mr Chapman. 'They've all been sent to Venezuela for three months.' He laughed. It was a mocking, derisory sort of laugh. 'All expenses paid by the council and they'll come back clutching another batch of diplomas.'

'And after that we'll send her off somewhere else,' said Ms Trench. 'They do lots of nice training courses in Russia these days.'

'And Iceland too, I believe,' added Mr Chapman. 'They seem to do lots of diversity training in cold places.'

'So, the bottom line is that the grown-ups are taking over,' said Ms Trench. She looked at Mrs Caldicot, as though contemplating making a bid for her. 'You're a little old to be running a pier, aren't you?'

'I beg your pardon?' said Mrs Caldicot.

'You're a little old to be running a pier, aren't you?' shouted Ms Trench. She leant forwards a few inches and spoke very slowly, and in that patronising way that television interviewers often adopt when they are talking to the deaf or the elderly, especially when they want to appear kindly and sympathetic. This time Mrs Caldicot understood her. She looked across at Mrs Roberts but did not reply to Ms Trench.

'You should be in a residential home,' said Ms Trench. 'Maybe we could find you and your many wrinkles a place in one of those places where you can sit down in a nice, plastic armchair and play bingo. Maybe they'll let you make a raffia basket.'

'I tried one of those,' said Mrs Caldicot drily. She was tempted to point out that her aches and wrinkles were badges of honour; proof that instead of just sitting round waiting for life to totter past she had, in recent years at least, gone out and met it head on.

‘Well, you’ll be trying another one soon because you’re not going to stay here!’ said Ms Trench. ‘We’ve got great plans for this piece of outdated Victorian memorabilia.’

‘The thing is,’ said Mr Chapman, ‘that there are people working on this pier and your elusive Mr Livingstone is, therefore, an employer. ‘As an employer we can tie him up in several miles of red tape. There are laws governing the hours people can work. There are laws governing an employer’s pension liabilities. There are, as I am sure Ms Schmidt pointed out to you, laws governing equality, diversity and sensitivity among employees.’

‘There are so many laws,’ said Ms Trench with a sigh. ‘Working with our colleagues in various Government Departments we can have the missing Mr Livingstone arrested and fined. He is an employer and so he’s fair game. Governments don’t like small employers and so we can make his life an absolute misery.’

‘But that’s not fair!’ protested Mrs Caldicot, rather weakly. She could feel her voice beginning to crack but she was determined not to cry. ‘We’re just trying to revive this wonderful old pier. We want to restore the theatre. We’ve reopened the café and the shop. We’re providing entertainment for people; for locals and for holidaymakers. We’re not expecting the State to support us or to provide us with grants. We’re trying to make Penmouth Pier a real attraction in the town.’

Mr Chapman laughed scornfully. ‘Who cares about fair?’ he demanded. ‘You don’t get it do you?’

‘Get what?’ asked Mrs Caldicot. She spoke now in a whisper. She wished Jenkins were here. Just to hold her. It was all so damned, cruel and unfair.

‘This isn’t about a pier, it isn’t about Penmouth, it isn’t about holidaymakers, it isn’t about people at all!’ said Mr Chapman, rubbing his hands together. ‘Don’t take it so personally. This isn’t about you or the pier. It’s just business. It’s just about the money.’

‘This is Ms Rothstein,’ said Ms Trench, introducing the third member of the small deputation. Ms Rothstein was a reed thin, dour faced woman in her thirties. ‘Miss Rothstein represents a large consortium of commercial developers. And she is going to make you an offer you can’t refuse. She has very exciting plans for the pier.’

‘Maybe this is the moment when you’d better think about producing the pier’s owner,’ said Mr Chapman. ‘He’s going to have to make himself known at some point soon.’

‘What sort of plans do you have for the pier?’ asked Mrs Caldicot, speaking so softly she wondered if anyone could hear her.

‘We’re going to turn the buildings at this end of the pier into offices,’ said Ms Rothstein, waving a hand in the direction of the archway and including the shop, the café and the former hotel in her wave. ‘And we’re going to knock down the theatre on Stone Rock and build a luxury hotel and a 2,000 seater conference centre. Neither the pier nor the buildings on it are listed or protected in any way and so the only permission we require is from the council’s planning department.’

‘Which we have given,’ said Ms Trench.

‘What sort of offices?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘We’re going to put up modern offices which we have been commissioned to build for a major international company called Community Protection,’ replied Ms Rothstein. ‘It’s a company which has won numerous Government awards.’

‘What on earth do they do?’ asked Mrs Caldicot, who had never heard of them.

‘They’re the world’s largest manufacturers of community protection aids.’

‘What on earth are ‘community protection aids’?’

‘Oh, things like tear gas, pepper spray, CS gas, water cannon and rubber bullets. The company supplies governments all around the world. They are going to build a large factory near here. It will be a tremendous boost to local employment figures. The Government has approved the factory. The Minister said it would provide a great boost to exports. And it will help release the region from over-dependence on the dying holiday trade.’

‘You’re not really going to help employment in the area if you kill off the holiday trade in order to help establish a factory making tear gas and rubber bullets!’

‘We’ve already approved Ms Rothstein’s planning application,’ said Ms Trench. ‘So now we just need to purchase the pier and the work can go ahead.’

‘It would be good for us to start soon,’ said Mr Chapman. ‘The contractors really need to begin the construction work before the winter starts. We’re going to use the rubble we obtain from knocking down that old theatre to help us build an extension to the landing stage on Stone Rock.’ He grinned. ‘Now, where is that Mr Livingstone hiding?’

‘In our letter to your solicitor, Mr Canterbury, we offered to take the pier off your hands for £1,’ said Ms Rothstein. ‘Given the circumstances we thought that was a very generous offer. As you will have now discovered it costs a good deal of money to run a pier. For example, our surveyors told us that the roof of the theatre is in a terrible state and urgently needs repair work. We don’t think you’ll be able to find the money to do even emergency repairs. So you really don’t have much choice but to sell to us, do you?’

‘But surely they won’t let you do those awful things!’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘They won’t let you knock down an old theatre and build a beastly conference centre!’

‘Who do you think ‘they’ are?’ asked Ms Trench.

Mrs Roberts looked as puzzled as she felt. ‘I’m not really sure,’ she said, hesitantly. ‘The authorities. The powers that be. The people who make all the decisions on behalf of the community.’

‘We are the ‘they’ you expect to come riding to your assistance!’ said Mr Chapman smugly. ‘And I’m afraid we’re not on your side.’

‘The council takes advice from its staff,’ said Ms Rothstein. ‘And the council staff, in the persons of Mr Chapman and Ms Trench, has advised the council to recommend our planned development. So, just who do you think is going to stop us?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Mrs Roberts, sadly. ‘But there must be people who protect structures like this from people like you?’

‘Do you mean people like the Seafront Heritage Authority?’ asked Ms Trench.

‘Yes!’ said Mrs Caldicot, leaping on the suggestion. ‘They look after seaside buildings all around the coast.’

‘We have their endorsement,’ said Ms Rothstein. ‘We cleared their staff pension deficit and coincidentally they have approved our plans unreservedly.’

‘That’s awful!’ cried Mrs Roberts. ‘You bought them!’

‘It doesn’t matter what you think,’ said Mr Chapman, wearily. ‘Where is Mr Livingstone?’

No one spoke.

‘Where is Mr Livingstone?’ demanded Mr Chapman. ‘He’s the nephew of the late, lamented Mr Livingstone and he’s the current owner. He’s the one we need to talk to. So fetch him.’

Mr Livingstone, who had been standing nearby, had heard everything. He was no longer prepared to allow Mrs Caldicot to be bullied by these people. He stepped forward and cleared his throat. ‘Mrs Caldicot doesn’t need to fetch me,’ he said. ‘I’m here.’

‘Aha!’ said Mr Chapman. ‘So you’re the elusive owner! You’re Mr Livingstone?’

‘I am.’

‘Well, the good news is that Ms Rothstein has got a cheque in her briefcase for £1,’ said Mr Chapman. ‘It’s her original and final, final offer. If you accept it, which I am sure you will, we will tear up all the charges we’ve got prepared for you. If you refuse it then we’ll hit you with so much paperwork that you’ll wish you’d never been born. Do you have any idea how many forms you have to fill in if you’re going to be an employer these days? Have you thought about providing pensions for your staff? Have you made arrangements for taxes and national insurance and sick pay and holidays? Do you know anything about the regulations concerning working conditions?’

Mr Livingstone was silent for a moment.

‘You see,’ said Mr Chapman, ‘it’s really all over, isn’t it?’

‘I tell you what,’ said Ms Trench. ‘The three of us will take a walk down the pier and give you a few minutes to think over what we’ve told you. Then, when we come back you can sign the sale documents and Ms Rothstein will give you that nice cheque for £1! We’ll even pay all the legal costs for you. Getting rid of the pier won’t cost you a penny.’

And with that the three of them strolled along the pier as though they were holidaymakers who were enjoying the sunshine and the sea air and who did not have a care in the world.

Chapter Twenty Five

‘They will never own this pier,’ said Mr Livingstone quietly, when Chapman, Trench and Rothstein were out of earshot.

The others looked at him. They had never heard him so angry.

‘I will give the pier to charity before I let them buy it.’

‘I suspect that they will simply buy it from whatever charity you give it to,’ said Mrs Caldicot softly and very sadly. ‘We can run the pier because we care about it and we’re not desperate to make lots of money out of it. But the man from the council is right: they can use the employment legislation to force any owner to sell.’

‘I will blow it up before I sell to them!’ insisted Mr Livingstone.

‘You can’t do that,’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘At least they aren’t threatening to knock down the pier itself.’

‘They might as well knock it down,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘And they’re talking about knocking down the theatre.’

‘If you blow it up then they’ll sue you for millions,’ said Mr Hewitt.

‘How can they do that?’

‘They’ll sue you for the cost of cleaning up the debris!’

‘Then I’ll just go bankrupt!’ said Mr Livingstone, full of defiance. ‘My old age pension is just over £100 a week. That’s my entire income. If I go bankrupt then in one year my bankruptcy will be over and they will still be left with all the rubble to clear away.’ There were tears forming in his eyes as he spoke.

‘Blowing up the pier isn’t the answer,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘If we do that then everyone loses – including us.’

‘But what can we do?’ asked Mr Hewitt. ‘They’ve got us in a corner.’

‘I like it here,’ said Miss Nightingale. She sounded as broken hearted as everyone felt. There were tears running down her cheeks. ‘I like it here very much.’

‘We all do, dear,’ said Mrs Peterborough, putting her arm around her friend’s shoulders. ‘We’ve only been here a couple of days but I already feel as if I’ve lived here all my life.’

They stood in silence for a few moments; all trying to think of an answer.

‘There is one thing we could try,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

They all looked at her. Suddenly, there was hope in everyone’s eyes. Not a lot. But a little.

‘We could telephone Mr Canterbury,’ she said. ‘He was very helpful when Mr Livingstone and I went to see him and he did tell us that we could ring him if we had any problems we thought he might be able to help us with.’

‘That’s a brilliant idea!’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘He seemed a damned good egg. Maybe he will be able to think of a solution.’

‘We’ll do it now, before those awful people come back down the pier,’ said Mrs Caldicot. And she hurried into the building behind the café, followed by everyone else.

‘You speak to him,’ said Mr Livingstone to Mrs Caldicot. ‘You’re much better at this sort of thing than I am.’

Chapter Twenty Six

'I don't know whether you remember me,' said Mrs Caldicot when she had got through to Mr Canterbury and had introduced herself. 'I came to see you with Mr Livingstone who had inherited Penmouth Pier.'

'Mrs Caldicot! What a delight to hear from you,' said Mr Canterbury. 'Of course, we remember. How could we forget? You are Mrs Caldicot and you are also Mrs Jenkins but you are not Mrs Livingstone. We certainly remember you. We've never handled a pier inheritance before. How are we doing? We hope your call does not indicate that we have problems.'

'I'm afraid there are some difficulties,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Do you remember telling us that a company of some sort had made an offer for the pier?'

'Indeed we do. A derisory offer of £1 was made for the freehold, as we remember.'

'That's right. Well, we've got a representative of that company here on the pier today. She tells us that the council has approved their plans to knock down the pier entrance and the theatre and to build some offices and a conference centre.'

'Send them away with a flea in their ear or simply toss them overboard,' suggested Mr Canterbury, in a most un-lawyerly way.

'Unfortunately, two members of the council have come with them,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'They say that if Mr Livingstone doesn't sell them the pier they will make our lives very miserable. Apparently there is a lot of employment legislation they can use to cause us trouble.'

'Ah,' said Mr Canterbury. 'Pares cum paribus facillime congregantur. Birds of a feather flock together. We fear that your unwelcome visitors may have exaggerated their powers somewhat. Much of the employment legislation relates to Departments of Central Government and so is, strictly speaking, outside the remit of the council. But there is no doubt that a local council official with a bee in his bonnet, so to speak, and a link with financially ambitious corsairs, could cause a considerable amount of trouble for a business operator with little experience of these matters. Would we be correct in assuming that you and Mr Livingstone have little experience of these matters?'

'You would, indeed,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Then we think you need help!'

'We do! That's why I rang you. Both Mr Livingstone and I hoped that you might be able to give us some advice. You seemed very sympathetic and supportive.'

'We are delighted to hear that. And we'll be delighted to help. Our first advice is that neither of you should speak to anyone. Don't agree to anything. And above all don't let Mr Livingstone sign anything – whatever it is.'

'OK,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. 'Don't do anything. I think we can manage that.'

'We need to talk in person,' said Mr Canterbury.

'Of course,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. 'I'll check out the train times and ring you back. We'll come and see you as soon as we can.'

'No, no! This needs to be sorted out in situ. We'll come there, down to Penmouth. We have high hopes of a satisfactory outcome and a case of Nolle prosequi!'

'A case of what?' asked Mrs Caldicot, assuming that Mr Canterbury was talking of something bottled and alcoholic.

'Nolle prosequi,' said Mr Canterbury. 'The abandonment and withdrawal of the case by the plaintiffs.'

'Really? That would be marvellous. Thank you very much! But, er…'

'Your fear, perhaps, is that you don't have any money and you are concerned about our fees?'

'Yes, to be honest, I am.'

'Then worry not. It will be a delight to help. Yours is by far the most interesting case we have had for some considerable time.' There was a pause and Mrs Caldicot could hear Mr Canterbury rifling through some papers on his desk. 'We can't get down there until tomorrow morning. Just tell your friends from the council that you cannot speak to them until your legal advisor arrives.'

'Oh that's wonderful. Thank you so much,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'You're our knight in armour!'

'It would have to be a very large suit of armour and a very strong horse,' said Mr Canterbury, with a self-deprecating chuckle. 'Just make sure that Mr Livingstone does not agree to anything, does not say anything and…'

'…does not sign anything!'

'Absolutely. We will see you tomorrow and then we will see what can be done about frustrating these piratical endeavours. Meanwhile remember: absente reo! In the absence of the defendant there can be no unpleasant consequences.'

And so, as a result of this conversation, when the duo from the council and Ms Rothstein from the developers returned from their stroll along the pier there was no sign of Mr Livingstone.

‘You go and hide somewhere,’ Mrs Caldicot had told him when she’d given everyone the good news about the imminent arrival of their legal advisor. ‘Mr Canterbury says you mustn’t sign anything or even say anything. So it’s probably best if you go and have a nice, quiet cup of tea.’

And so Mr Livingstone, together with Mr Hewitt, had gone into the café to have the prescribed ‘nice cup of tea’. They also had a Chelsea bun each.

Mr Chapman, Ms Trench and Ms Rothstein were not well pleased when Mrs Caldicot told them Mr Livingstone was not available.

‘I’m afraid Mr Livingstone has disappeared. Perhaps you’d like to come back tomorrow afternoon,’ suggested Mrs Caldicot. ‘The fact is that we do need a little more time to discuss what to do. We can see you tomorrow afternoon and discuss everything then.’

‘Tomorrow afternoon then,’ said Mr Chapman, wagging a podgy finger at Mrs Caldicot. ‘You’ve got 24 hours and not a minute longer.’

‘You really don’t have much choice, do you?’ said Ms Trench.

Mr Chapman, Ms Trench and Ms Rothstein then marched off the pier and climbed into a very large, chauffeur-driven Mercedes that had been parked on double lines waiting for their return.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Mr Canterbury arrived just before lunch the following day. He had travelled down to Penmouth in a black taxi cab – one of the rather cubic cabs that are so commonly seen in London. He looked just the same as when Mr Livingstone and Mrs Caldicot had met him in his office. He was still on the large side of substantial. And, as before, he wore pince nez with a gold frame, a dark-grey pinstripe suit with a broad chalk stripe, a celluloid wing collar and a black bow tie. Over the pinstripe suit he wore a Victorian Ulster, a day coat in herringbone tweed which had the traditional cape attached at the shoulder. On his head he wore a black fedora which gave him a distinctly theatrical air.

He looked extremely imposing, and both Mr Livingstone and Mrs Caldicot remembered that when they first met him they thought he looked as though he had climbed out of the pages of a novel by Charles Dickens. He could only have been a lawyer.

Both Mrs Caldicot and Mr Livingstone felt much better when he arrived. He was a man whose very presence was comforting.

'We hate motor cars,' he explained when he had successfully decanted himself and told the taxi driver to park nearby and wait for him. He had with him a very old and battered briefcase which appeared to be bulging with paperwork. 'Motor cars are all so tiny,' he added, with a shudder of distaste. He explained that only in the back of a London style taxi cab could he have room to sit comfortably.

Mrs Caldicot and Mr Livingstone formally welcomed him to Penmouth Pier and introduced him to everyone around. To their astonishment, Mr Canterbury seemed able to remember everyone's name after a single introduction.

'Would you like something to eat?' asked Mrs Roberts. They had temporarily closed the café so that they could entertain the solicitor in some privacy.

'What do you have?' asked Mr Canterbury, brightening up noticeably.

'We can offer you fish and chips, hot, buttered crumpets, cheese on toast, hot, buttered teacakes and a variety of sandwiches,' offered Mrs Roberts.

'Splendid,' said Mr Canterbury. He thought for a moment. 'Those sound very satisfactory.' He stood for a moment gazing up the length of the pier. A broad smile appeared on his face as he did so. He seemed transfixed with delight as he looked at the pier, the stalls and, most of all, the little, red and yellow train.

'Which would you like?' asked Mrs Roberts, rather diffidently.

Mr Canterbury looked confused and rather disappointed. 'Do we have to make a choice?'

'No, no, not at all,' said Mrs Caldicot quickly. 'Would you like some of everything?'

'Oh, I think so, yes. I haven't eaten since breakfast.'

'We have also managed to buy you a loaf of nice, crusty bread and a pound of cheddar cheese,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Splendid!' said Mr Canterbury, smiling. 'That will do very nicely for later.'

'And I managed to find you a nice bottle of port,' said Mr Livingstone. 'The man at the off licence said it was the best they had.'

'Even better!'

They led Mr Canterbury into the café where a table for one had been prepared for him. The bottle of port which Mr Livingstone had purchased was sitting on the table, together with a rather good lead crystal wine glass which Mr Livingstone had discovered in a cupboard upstairs.

'We can talk while we eat,' he said, when he'd removed his ulster and fedora and had settled down, putting his briefcase on the chair beside him.

A moment later Miss Pettifer put a large plate of buttered crumpets on the table in front of him. 'What sort of fish would you like?' she asked. She seemed flustered at having to wait on such an important guest.

'What sort of fish do you have, Miss Pettifer?'

'I'll go and ask Dorothy,' said Miss Pettifer, blushing.

She returned a moment later. The blush was now a little more noticeable.

'Cod,' she said.

'Then cod would be very satisfactory,' said Mr Canterbury, with a smile. He watched her go back across the café and then picked up a buttered crumpet and took a tentative nibble. After a moment he nodded, as though approvingly, and then took a much larger bite.

'I think it would perhaps be easier if you and Mr Livingstone were to sit with me,' said Mr Canterbury to Mrs Caldicot. 'The three of us can then discuss the possibilities which must be considered, before summarising the situation to the remainder of your party. Does that sound acceptable?'

‘Very,’ agreed Mrs Caldicot.

‘Absolutely,’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘Now, the current situation is, as we understand it, that you, Mr Livingstone, are still the sole owner of the Penmouth Pier. Are we correct?’

Mr Livingstone agreed that this was correct.

‘And all these other people whom we have met are employed by you to help run the pier? All have different roles and responsibilities? Dorothy Pickering and Miss Pettifer run the café, Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough operate the shop and so on.’ Mr Canterbury finished off the crumpet and started on a teacake. He ate slowly but methodically.

‘That’s about it,’ agreed Mr Livingstone. ‘Everyone does what they feel best suits them.’

‘And they are all employed by you?’

‘No, not really,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘I’ve never had any employees.’

‘How can that be? How can they not be employed by you?’

‘Well, we haven’t really thought about it in those terms,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘They’re all friends rather than employees.’

‘Are all these people residents of the former nursing home where you met?’

‘Oh no,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘There’s Dorothy and Miss Pettifer who run the café, as you know, and there’s Dorothy’s father, Mr Pickering. He drives the little train. Miss Pettifer used to be the Fat Lady but she lost a lot of weight.’

‘Good heavens!’ said Mr Canterbury, he looked across at Miss Pettifer and then returned his attention to his teacake. ‘How large was she?’ he asked. ‘She’s very slender now.’

‘I’m not really sure,’ admitted Mrs Caldicot, who would not have described Miss Pettifer as slender and would, indeed, have thought the word ‘plump’ more accurate.

‘Good heavens!’ said Mr Canterbury again. When he’d taken another decent sized bite of the teacake he opened the bottle of port and filled the glass in front of him. He then took a healthy sip from the glass and nodded his approval. ‘Excellent!’

‘And there’s Errol,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘He’s a friend of Dorothy’s, but he lives and works here now. And Mr Rowbottham.’

‘What does Mr Rowbottham do?’

‘He makes silhouettes of people.’

‘Using scissors and black card?’

‘Well, it’s sort of thick paper really.’

‘Good heavens! We didn’t know anyone was still doing that. We must take a look afterwards.’ He took another large bite from the teacake and looked up as Miss Pettifer brought him a large plateful of cod and chips. He smiled and thanked her.

‘I’m sure Mr Rowbottham will be delighted to make your silhouette!’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘He’ll need a large piece of paper!’ laughed Mr Canterbury. Several chins wobbled when he laughed. ‘And Errol? What does he do?’

‘He helps Mr Williams.’

‘And what does Mr Williams do?’

‘He’s our pier photographer. And there’s Jean-Jacques,’ added Mrs Caldicot. ‘I’m not sure how long he’ll stay. He’s the nice, young French boy who was playing the accordion in the archway when you arrived.’

‘Very well, too,’ said Mr Canterbury. ‘And the young lady who was singing?’ He poured vinegar over his cod and chips and then added salt in plentiful quantities.

‘Oh, that’s Ruth,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘She came with us. She’s the assistant housekeeper.’

‘So she’s an employee?’

‘Well sort of I suppose.’

‘Do you pay her?’

‘We provide her with accommodation and food and give her £30 a week pocket money,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘Is she happy with that?’

‘Oh yes, I think so.’

‘How many hours a week does she work?’

‘I’m not really sure.’

‘Have you heard of the minimum wage for employees?’

‘Yes,’ murmured Mrs Caldicot. She thought for a moment. ‘Oh dear,’ she said.

‘Oh dear, indeed,’ said Mr Canterbury. ‘And how many other employees do you have?’

‘Well, there’s Mrs Roberts,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘I suppose you could call her an employee. She’s our housekeeper.’

‘And how much do you pay Mrs Roberts?’

‘She gets her accommodation and food and expenses and so on and she has £60 a week for her personal spending.’

‘Does she have duties every day?’

‘Oh yes.’

Mr Canterbury looked at Mrs Caldicot and waved his fork in her general direction as though about to say something. He then shook his head, abandoned whatever it was he was going to say, and then picked up two chips with the fork and popped them into his mouth.

‘We do keep accounts,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Mr Twist used to work for the Inland Revenue when it was called the Inland Revenue and before it became Her Majesty’s Customs and Revenue. He looks after the accounts for us. He makes sure that all the bills are paid.’

‘Well, that’s something!’ said Mr Canterbury, who seemed to be coming to terms with the rather unusual way that Mrs Caldicot and her companions managed their financial affairs. He finished chewing the two sample chips and swallowed them. ‘Splendid!’ he said. ‘These are excellent chips!’

‘Good,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘I’m pleased.’

‘A good chip is a joy to behold,’ said Mr Canterbury with a poignant sigh. ‘As the years go by so the body’s betrayals accumulate. We know well that one day we will find ourselves no longer able to enjoy a full range of gustatory joys and so we take our pleasures while we can; while the body may protest but does not yet forbid.’

‘I’m so glad you’re satisfied,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘The girls will be pleased.’

‘We can see that your unusual financial circumstances were possibly acceptable when you just lived together in your former nursing home,’ said Mr Canterbury. ‘You were not running a business and we assume that your income came largely in the form of pensions and so on.’

‘Mostly, yes,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Mr Williams has an income from his photographs but he has an agent who looks after his accounts for him and makes sure that his taxes are paid on time. Mr Twist checked everything and said it was all perfectly proper.’

Mr Canterbury frowned. ‘That wouldn’t by any chance be Mr Henry Williams, would it?’

‘Yes, that’s him!’

‘The photographer who is famous for his pictures of Paris?’

‘Yes, that’s right.’

‘He lives with you, here?’

‘Oh yes. He’s now our pier photographer. He has a Polaroid camera and he wanders up and down the pier taking pictures of holidaymakers.’

Mr Canterbury stopped with a forkful of cod half way to his mouth. ‘Mr Henry Williams takes photographs of holidaymakers on Penmouth Pier with a Polaroid camera?’

Mrs Caldicot nodded.

‘We have three of Mr Williams’s photographs on our dining room wall,’ he said. ‘We paid several hundred pounds for them many years ago.’ Mr Canterbury completed the journey with the fork and the cod disappeared.

‘I’ll introduce you later,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘You’ll like him. He’s a really nice fellow.’

‘Good heavens!’ said Mr Canterbury. ‘Good heavens!’ He shook his head as though finding everything he was hearing rather difficult to accept. For a few minutes there was silence as he finished off his plateful of cod and chips. When the plate was empty he sat back and wiped his lips with the napkin with which he had been provided.

‘Now, we need to look at our options,’ he said. He drank some more of his port and then picked up a crumpet and took a large bite. Mr Livingstone and Mrs Caldicot just sat and waited.

‘Would you like your Welsh rarebit now?’ asked Miss Pettifer, who had hurried over to collect Mr Canterbury’s empty plate. She seemed to blush every time she spoke to the solicitor.

‘That would be excellent,’ said Mr Canterbury, who was both a gourmet and a gourmand. ‘Thank you, my dear. Did you cook the chips and the fish with your own fair hands?’

‘No, Dorothy did the cooking,’ said Miss Pettifer with clear regret. ‘I’m just the waitress.’ She was very taken with Mr Canterbury. She had always been attracted to large men and she had never met a larger man than Mr Canterbury.

‘Not just the waitress!’ said Mr Canterbury, putting the emphasis on the word ‘just’. ‘Good heavens, you are not just the waitress, my dear. To convey food with such delicacy requires an honest and willing spirit. But please convey my thanks and congratulations to Dorothy for an excellent plate of cod and chips; thoroughly delectable; most welcome; exquisitely enjoyable.’

‘I’ll bring over your Welsh rarebit as soon as it’s ready,’ said Miss Pettifer, now blushing even more. ‘Would you like some more crumpets and teacakes?’

Mr Canterbury looked at the plates which had contained the buttered crumpets and teacakes. Both were empty. He thought for a moment. ‘Not just now,’ he said. ‘After the cheese on toast I’ll have the fresh bread and the block of cheddar. Just for nibbling.’

‘Wonderful!’ said Miss Pettifer, who loved to see a man with a healthy appetite and who, it has to be admitted, had never seen a man with a healthier affection for his food. She was still blushing as she hurried away with the empty plates.

‘What a lovely, young lady!’ said Mr Canterbury, who seemed quite taken with his waitress. ‘You say she used to appear on the pier as the Fat Lady?’

‘That’s right,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘On this very pier?’

‘Yes.’

‘It’s very difficult to imagine,’ said Mr Canterbury.

Since there now wasn’t anything on the table for him to eat he poured himself another glass of port. ‘Difficult to imagine,’ he repeated to himself. He closed his eyes as though trying to do just that.

Miss Pettifer then came back with Mr Canterbury’s cheese on toast. On a second plate she had put a French baguette and a large chunk of cheddar cheese. She put this down on the table but to one side.

‘Thank you, my dear,’ said Mr Canterbury.

‘My pleasure, sir,’ said Miss Pettifer. She was blushing again.

‘Roland,’ said Mr Canterbury. ‘You must call me Roland.’

‘Roland,’ said Miss Pettifer. She paused, smiling. ‘I’m Emerald,’ she said at last, suddenly realising that she was expected to tell Mr Canterbury her Christian name. The blush deepened still further.

‘Emerald!’ said Mr Canterbury. ‘Emerald.’ He pronounced the word twice, as though entranced by it. Although he was a professional whose life depended upon utterances, observations and pronouncements, he was a man whose private affection for words usually extended only to nouns such as ‘cheese’, ‘port’ and ‘crumpet’. Now, suddenly and unexpectedly, he had a new favourite word. He murmured the word to himself a third time. ‘Emerald.’ He thought that it had an exceptional ring to it.

‘Please call me if there’s anything else you need,’ said Miss Pettifer.

‘We will,’ said Mr Canterbury.

‘Would you like any sauce for your Welsh rarebit?’

‘Do you have brown sauce?’

‘Of course! Would you prefer HP sauce or Daddy’s sauce?’

Mr Canterbury did not hesitate. ‘Oh, HP sauce, of course.’

‘I’ll fetch it.’

A moment later Miss Pettifer returned and carefully placed the bottle of HP sauce on the table. Mr Canterbury removed the top from the bottle and sprinkled liberal amounts of sauce on top of his melted cheese.

‘Call me if you need anything else,’ said Miss Pettifer.

‘We will, Emerald,’ said Mr Canterbury. ‘Thank you.’

‘It’s a pleasure, said Miss Pettifer. ‘Roland,’ she added. ‘It’s my pleasure, Roland.’

When Miss Pettifer had gone, Mr Canterbury cut himself a large slice of his Welsh rarebit and popped it into his mouth. He couldn’t remember the last time anyone had called him Roland. He thought it might perhaps have been his mother but she had died over 20 years ago. He was the sort of man who always managed to remain on formal terms with everyone he met. On the one occasion when he’d had to go into hospital even the nurses had, to their own surprise, found themselves calling him ‘Mr Canterbury’ – even when he wasn’t present. They customarily addressed all the other patients by their Christian names but none of them quite felt able to refer to Mr Canterbury as ‘Roland’. He was, they realised instinctively, a man who was naturally blessed with more than his fair share of dignity and presence. He was, one nurse had said to another reflectively, ‘an old-fashioned gentleman’.

Mr Livingstone and Mrs Caldicot looked on amazed and impressed. They’d never seen anyone eat so much. It was not difficult to see why Mr Canterbury was the size he was.

‘There are several possible solutions to your immediate problem,’ said Mr Canterbury. ‘On our journey down here it did occur to me that one possible answer to your problems might be to turn your pier into a church.’

‘A church!’ said Mr Livingstone and Mrs Caldicot together.

‘It is remarkably easy to form a new religion,’ said Mr Canterbury. ‘If our pier were a church then we would be exempt from a good deal of legislation. If, for example, you became the Church of St Piers or the Church of Divine Intervention or some such thing then we would be able to argue that the council’s representatives were targeting us because of our religion. That would be religious intolerance and would, of course, be a very serious crime against your various persons.'

'That sounds a good idea!' said Mr Livingstone. 'I like the idea of being a church!'

'It would, without doubt, be pleasantly mischievous,' said Mr Canterbury, cutting another large slice from his Welsh rarebit. He popped the slice into his mouth and chewed silently for a couple of minutes. Mr Canterbury was not one of those eaters who gobbled their food. He genuinely seemed to enjoy every mouthful. Miss Pettifer, Emerald, remained constantly in attendance, occasionally checking to make sure that Mr Canterbury did not need more sauce or additional supplies of condiments.

'We could have our own patron saint,' suggested Mr Livingstone. 'St Piers of Penmouth! Being on the pier is his way of walking on the water.'

'But,' Mr Canterbury continued a few moments later, 'turning ourselves into a religion would not deal with our fundamental problem. Even as a church we would be obliged to obey employment legislation. We would be exposed to a considerable amount of potential legal trouble. We would still be liable to obey the requirements related to minimum wages, working conditions, pension contributions, sexual discrimination and so on and on.'

'So the church isn't a good idea?' said Mr Livingstone sadly.

'It is now clear that it is not our best option,' said Mr Canterbury who, having finished his Welsh Rarebit had now taken out his penknife and was using it to slice pieces from the block of cheese before him. 'In a way, it's a pity because it is a neat and rather attractive solution.'

'So what can we do?' asked Mrs Caldicot. 'Is there any other solution?'

'Oh yes,' said Mr Canterbury. 'In our experience, there is always another solution. When questions are asked, answers are usually forthcoming.' He turned to Mr Livingstone. 'Mr Livingstone, you said that you are still the sole owner of the Penmouth Pier, did you not?'

'Yes. Nothing has changed since we came to your office and I signed those papers you gave me.'

'So everyone else working on the pier must, ipso facto, be an employee of ours. And we, as their employer must be responsible for ensuring that the laws of the land which relates to employment are adhered to in every respect.'

'Yes, I see that,' said Mr Livingstone, with a nod. 'Owning the pier is a good thing but it is also a bad thing.'

Deep down, he was beginning to wonder whether inheriting the pier had been such a piece of good fortune after all.

'However, there is one simple solution which we could adopt and which would, at a stroke, render us immune to these administrative imprecations and, thereby, render our opponents impotent,' said Mr Canterbury.

Mrs Caldicot and Mr Canterbury looked at him and waited.

'What we have in mind is a solution which we would not even consider offering to 99 clients out of 100,' he warned them.

'Oh dear,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'It sounds a bit frightening.'

'Not frightening, my dear,' said Mr Canterbury. 'But it is an unusual answer to our problems. And it is a solution which requires a sacrifice on behalf of the proprietor.' He cut himself another piece of cheese and slipped it into his mouth.

'Ah,' said Mrs Caldicot, looking at Mr Livingstone who, in turn, looked rather alarmed.

'The advantage of it is that the council would be quite unable to take action against us in any of the ways they have threatened. We would, at a stroke, become inviolable. They would, we suspect, take their trials and tribulations to some other victim.'

'Well, I think I'm probably all for it!' said Mr Livingstone. 'What's the sacrifice? Do you want to take an arm, a leg or something more personal?'

'No, no, no,' said Mr Canterbury, holding up a hand. 'There will be no need for that sort of sacrifice. Our solution is, we are pleased to say, quite bloodless.' He tore a small piece of bread from the supply in front of him, considered it for a moment and then popped it into his mouth. There was then a short delay for Mr Canterbury was far too polite to talk while chewing.

Eventually, after swallowing, the solicitor continued. 'At the moment, our problems arise from the fact that we are the employer and our colleagues working on the pier are our employees. We have legal responsibilities towards them all. It is this relationship which affords your tormentors the opportunity to threaten us with the many annoying facets of the nation's complex employment legislation.'

'I understand,' said Mr Livingstone with a nod. He had to concentrate hard when Mr Canterbury was talking.

'So our best solution is to find some way to rupture that relationship.'

'I understand,' repeated Mr Livingstone. He looked at Mrs Caldicot, who nodded that she too understood the problem. Neither of them, however, could see any sign of any solution.

'The answer,' said Mr Canterbury, tearing off a piece of bread, 'is for everyone to become an owner.' He chewed the bread and swallowed. He took a sip of port. 'If everyone is an owner then there are no employees. Everyone is, by the very fact of their ownership, an employer. Ipso facto we have our solution! You cannot be both an employer and an employee.'

Mrs Caldicot and Mr Livingstone just stared at him. 'How could we do that?' asked Mr Livingstone at last.

'We would have to share the ownership of the pier with all our colleagues.'

'Is that all?'

'That is all.'

'That would get rid of all my problems?'

'In an instant.'

'Then let's do it!' cried Mr Livingstone.

Mr Canterbury put down his penknife and looked at Mr Livingstone very carefully. 'Are we sure we understand? It would mean that we would no longer be the sole owner of the pier. The ownership would be shared between us and all your colleagues.'

'It's brilliant!' said Mr Livingstone. 'I didn't like being the owner. It felt uncomfortable. I'll feel much better if we all own a bit of the pier. And if it helps keep those buggers at arm's length then it's clearly the thing to do. How do we do it? Do we have to divide up the pier into bits? Do we put up signs saying which bit belongs to which one of us?'

'Not at all,' said Mr Canterbury, with the hint of a smile. 'We form a limited company, distribute some shares and then everyone becomes a part- owner.'

'With equal shares?'

'The shares do not have to be equal,' said Mr Canterbury. 'But they could be. That is for us to decide. We could, in theory, divide the pier into 100,000 parts and then keep 99,000 of the parts for ourselves, distributing the remaining 1,000 parts among the other owners.'

'Like holding company shares?' said Mrs Caldicot, whose first husband, Mr Caldicot, had once bought 100 shares in a company called British Gas and who had, ever-after, regarded himself as a red-blooded capitalist.

'Exactly,' said Mr Canterbury with a nod. 'Precisely! Rem acu tetigisti. The only important thing is that everyone working on the pier becomes an owner and not an employee. The extent of their personal ownership is of no relevance. When no one is an employee and there is no employer then the employment legislation becomes irrelevant.'

'What's that rem acu whatever you said?' asked Mrs Caldicot. 'Is that Latin again?'

'Rem acu tetigisti,' said Mr Canterbury. 'It means 'you've hit the nail on the head'.'

'I should write down all these Latin phrases,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I could use them when Jenkins gets back from America. He'll be terribly impressed!'

'Jenkins is your husband?' asked Mr Canterbury.

'That's right.'

Mr Canterbury nodded.

'If we all own a bit of the pier, how do people get paid?' asked Mr Livingstone.

'The owners must receive their remuneration in the form of dividends,' explained Mr Canterbury. 'If they are paid salaries or wages then there is, once again, an employee-employer relationship and our endeavours will have been without purpose and we will have made no progress in thwarting and confounding our tormentors.'

'May I ask Mr Twist to come over?' Mrs Caldicot asked Mr Canterbury. 'He'll be the one who will have to arrange things financially.'

'Of course you may.'

'This is brilliant!' murmured Mr Twist, the accountant and former tax inspector, when he had been invited by Mrs Caldicot and Mr Livingstone to listen to Mr Canterbury's solution. 'The easiest thing to do is to set up a limited company which owns the pier. There is no practical obstacle to making that arrangement. I can then do the accounts and share out the income to all the shareholders. And we all get paid dividends rather than wages.' Mr Twist, who was clearly delighted at the simplicity and effectiveness of the scheme, beamed broadly. 'Since the pier has already been valued at £1 there will be no capital gains liabilities in transferring shares in the business.'

Mr Livingstone stood up and, much to Mr Canterbury's astonishment and, it has to be said, a certain amount of embarrassment, insisted on shaking the solicitor by the hand. And Mrs Caldicot then insisted on kissing him on the cheek.

'Everyone who works on the pier gets an equal share,' said Mr Livingstone firmly. 'That's the fairest way to do it.'

'Would you like some Turkish Delight to celebrate?' Mrs Caldicot asked the solicitor.

Mr Canterbury's eyes widened. 'You have Turkish Delight? Here on the pier?'

‘Oh yes!’

‘We love Turkish Delight,’ said a delighted Mr Canterbury. ‘It is the only sweetmeat we enjoy.’

Mrs Caldicot popped across to the shop and fetched a box of Turkish Delight. She put the box down in front of Mr Canterbury. He opened it, took a piece and then pushed the box back across the table towards Mrs Caldicot.

‘Thank you, that was splendid!’ he said, a few moments later, savouring the taste and texture of the sweetmeat.

‘The box is for you,’ said Mrs Caldicot, pushing the box back towards Mr Canterbury.

‘The whole box is for us?’

‘Oh yes.’

If Mr Canterbury had been a cat he would have purred. He was, he thought, as close to heaven as a lawyer can ever be.

‘When we look around,’ he said softly to Mrs Caldicot and Mr Livingstone, ‘we realise that we have discovered that life is something to be enjoyed. As an Englishman, and as a lawyer to boot, this is not something to which we are accustomed. It is, to be perfectly frank, a concept which has always rather unsettled us.’ He paused, contemplating the open box of Turkish Delight. ‘But it is a notion to which we are becoming increasingly well adjusted.’ He took another piece of Turkish Delight and popped it into his mouth. ‘We really should have had more fun in life,’ he murmured to himself. ‘We haven’t had nearly enough.’

‘It’s not too late!’ said Mrs Caldicot, who still remembered her own dull, grey years; years when life had been an endurance event rather than offering much in the way of hope or delight. She now looked back on those waste land years as though they had been lived by someone else. ‘It’s not too late at all.’

‘Potius sero quam nunquam,’ said Mr Canterbury. ‘Better late than never’. We are beginning to realise that we haven’t take enough risks in our life. We really don’t want to find ourselves wearing Velcro fastened trousers and having nothing to remember but a bunch of regrets about the things we could have done but didn’t.’

‘I would like you to be one of the shareholders,’ said Mr Livingstone to the lawyer. ‘Would you accept?’

Mr Canterbury, clearly startled, looked at him and raised two bushy eyebrows.

‘I’d be honoured if you would,’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘Well, we are not sure…,’ protested Mr Canterbury.

‘It would be a very small way for us to reward you for your work,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘When we pay out the dividends it would enable us to pay you a little for your work.’

‘And if there’s anything else we can do for you…’ said Mr Livingstone.

Mr Canterbury took a large, freshly laundered white handkerchief from a trouser pocket and dabbed at his eyes. ‘The sea air must be affecting our eyes,’ he said apologetically.

When he had wiped his eyes he blew his nose. ‘We would be delighted to accept a small shareholding in the pier,’ he said, when he had eventually put away the handkerchief. ‘We would be absolutely delighted.’

Miss Pettifer, who was standing beside the lawyer in case he needed more crumpets or teacakes, was so affected by Mr Canterbury’s happiness that she added to it by kissing him on the cheek.

It occurred to Mr Canterbury, with Miss Pettifer’s kiss still fresh on his cheek and a box of Turkish Delight before him, that if he were to die at that moment he would not feel inclined to consider himself ill done by.

‘There is one small thing which has been on our mind,’ said Mr Canterbury. He spoke softly, rather hesitantly. ‘It concerns the little train which runs up and down the pier.’

‘Do you like it?’ asked Mr Livingstone. ‘Or is there a problem with it? Does it have to go?’

‘Oh no, it doesn’t have to go,’ said Mr Canterbury quickly. ‘There is no problem. It’s just that when we were a boy our parents took us to Weston-super-Mare on our holidays. There was a little train which ran up and down the pier and ever since those days we have always wanted to drive something similar.’ He spoke very quietly.

‘Would you like to drive our train?’

Mr Canterbury was so overcome that he found it difficult to respond.

‘That’s no problem at all!’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘Do you know if there is a bell? Is there a bell which the driver has to ring to warn pedestrians that the train is coming?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘There’s definitely a bell. One of those big brass bells, like an old school bell. It’s fixed to the cab, just where the driver sits, and you ring it by waggling a bit of rope from side to side.’

‘And we could…?’

‘Definitely!’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘You can drive the train and ring the bell to your heart’s content.’

‘It’s quite easy once you’ve got the hang of it,’ added Mr Livingstone. ‘And although Mr Pickering doesn’t usually bother to wear it there is a special driver’s cap with a shiny peak that you can wear. It says ‘Driver’ in gold letters across the front.’

‘You have driven the train?’ asked Mr Canterbury, as though Mr Livingstone had just confessed that he had walked on the moon.

'Oh yes!' said Mr Livingstone. 'Mr Pickering was a little cautious at first, but he gave Mr Hewitt and myself a few driving lessons and now he lets us drive it whenever we like. I think he likes having a couple of assistant drivers. It means he can stand on the pier and do a little fishing occasionally.

'You are officially an assistant driver?'

'Yes,' said Mr Livingstone with a big grin. 'Pretty good, eh?'

'Do you have a badge?'

'You mean a badge that says 'Driver'?'

'Precisely so.'

'No, I don't. But I suppose we could have some made. Actually, we ought to have some made.'

'And you have definitely rung the bell?'

'Oh yes.'

'While wearing the driver's cap?'

'Oh yes.'

'And driving the train up and down the pier?'

'Many times.'

'Mr Pickering would be happy to teach us how to drive the little train?'

'Definitely. I'm sure he would.'

'And allow us to wear the driver's cap?'

'Oh yes. Until we have some badges made it would be a good idea for you to wear the cap,' agreed Mr Livingstone.

Mr Canterbury, who was now almost certain that life could not get any better than this, closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. Miss Pettifer, who could tell that he was affected emotionally, put her arm around his shoulders and gave him a squeeze. Mr Canterbury now knew, with total certainty, that life could not get any better.

And then, without any more ado, Mrs Caldicot and Mr Livingstone rounded up every one of their friends, old and new, and they held a meeting upstairs in the ball room, where there was much more room than in the café. And there, in the ballroom, Mr Canterbury, who stood clutching his box of Turkish Delight in one hand and a glass of port in the other, explained that unless there were any objections he intended to draw up the papers making everyone an equal owner of the Penmouth Pier. The shares would, he said, be distributed on condition that no one could sell their part ownership of the pier to an outsider.

The news was greeted with universal acclaim.

Well, who wouldn't want to be a part owner of Penmouth's seaside pleasure pier?

Chapter Twenty Eight

It was just after three o'clock that afternoon when the deputation from the local council arrived.

By then Mr Canterbury had drawn up the necessary papers and the Penmouth Pier belonged to everyone.

All of those present, (together with Jenkins, who was in America but never forgotten) had become owners of the Penmouth Pier.

And, at Mr Livingstone's insistence, all of them, including Mr Canterbury, had become equal owners.

Moreover, Mr Pickering had happily agreed to train Mr Canterbury to drive the train. ('The most important thing to remember,' he said, 'is to keep ringing the bell.') And Mrs Caldicot had agreed that they should order some impressive looking badges which had the words 'Train Driver' printed on them in gold letters, and had also agreed that they should order another driver's hat in a slightly larger size, especially for Mr Canterbury. It had also been agreed that Mr Canterbury would stay the night on the pier, in one of the spare bedrooms, so that he could complete his driving course before he had to go back to his office and his other, more tedious responsibilities.

'That room will always be yours,' Mrs Merivale told him. 'I shall keep it for you and for you alone. Only you and I will ever be allowed to go in. And I will only go in to make your bed, change your bed linen and do a little dusting from time to time. I'll be very happy to do your laundry for you.'

The room was small and did not have much of a view (although you could just see the sea if you opened the window) but Mr Canterbury could not have been happier or prouder if he had been told that a suite at the Ritz hotel was being reserved exclusively for his personal use at any time.

'Shall we handle this business?' Mr Canterbury asked Mr Livingstone and Mrs Caldicot, as the official deputation approached.

Mr Chapman was in the lead, his short and stubby legs striding forcefully ever onwards and his rather high-heeled shoes clomping on the wooden pier. Ms Trench, the Chief Planning Office, followed him, scurrying along obediently a pace or two behind. And Ms Rothstein, representing the developers, strode alongside her, carrying a bulging briefcase in her right hand and clutching a document case across her chest with the other.

'Oh, I think so,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Definitely!' agreed Mr Livingstone, who would, in all honesty, have happily been somewhere else – riding up and down the pier on the little red and yellow train, for example.

'So, have you made up your mind?' demanded Mr Chapman, as soon as he was within interrogating distance of Mr Livingstone.

'My name is Canterbury and we are handling everything for Mr Livingstone,' said Mr Canterbury, stepping forward.

Mr Livingstone felt a huge sense of relief.

Miss Pettifer could not help thinking how imposing Mr Canterbury looked. She was reminded of those wonderful, tales of mediaeval armoured knights riding into battle, ready to perform deeds of derring-do; rescuing distressed damsels by the armful as a delightful side-line. Though she rather hoped that in the case of Mr Canterbury just one damsel would be enough, and one not in any particular distress.

'Who are you?' demanded Mr Chapman, rather rudely.

'Canterbury, we are an Officer of the Court and we are the legal representative of the owners of the Penmouth Pier.'

Mr Chapman, rather startled, looked first at Mr Canterbury and then at Mr Livingstone and then, finally, at Mrs Caldicot. 'You're a lawyer?' he said at last. 'A solicitor?'

'Indeed so, sir,' agreed Mr Canterbury.

'And these people have hired you?'

'In a manner of speaking, that is quite so.'

'Well, it doesn't make much difference,' said Mr Chapman. 'Has Mr Livingstone explained the situation to you?'

'He has,' confirmed Mr Canterbury. 'Or, rather, I am cognisant of the situation as it was. I think you may find that circumstances have changed somewhat since your last visit.'

Mr Chapman, slightly puzzled, looked first at Ms Trench and then at Ms Rothstein.

'In what significant way have things changed?' Asked Ms Rothstein. 'As I am sure Mr Livingstone has explained to you, he is, as the owner of Penmouth Pier, legally responsible for meeting the various obligations which lay upon his shoulders with regard to his employees.'

'Mr Livingstone does not have any employees,' said Mr Canterbury.

Mr Chapman, Ms Trench and Ms Rothstein looked at him, looked at one another and then looked back at Mr

Canterbury.

‘I don’t understand,’ said Mr Chapman. ‘Has he fired everyone? Is he going to try to run the pier all by himself? Or is he going to try to persuade us that everyone here is a volunteer?’

‘Mr Livingstone has fired no one,’ said Mr Canterbury. ‘There are no employees because everyone you see here who is associated with the pier in any way is an owner.’

Mr Chapman, Ms Trench and Ms Rothstein stared at him disbelievingly. They simply did not understand that anyone would willingly give away chunks of his property without there being some trickery involved.

‘What are you trying to pull here?’ demanded Mr Chapman, who’d seen too many bad movies and was now trying to snarl and look threatening. Sadly, he wasn’t tall enough or big enough to look threatening. He looked what he was: a small, stocky rather disappointed and indignant man in an ill-fitting off the peg suit.

‘We are not, as you so clumsily put it, ‘trying to pull anything’,’ replied Mr Canterbury. ‘Your suggestion is a scandalum magnatum. A notable and malicious slur. Mr Livingstone, who was the former sole owner of the pier, has now shared ownership of the pier, including the former hotel and the theatre, with his former employees. There are now no employees working on the pier. And the owners of the pier have asked me to make it clear to you that they are not prepared to accept your derisory offer for the freehold of the pier. Indeed, they are not prepared to accept any offers for the pier. And since there are no employees working on the pier there is, of course, no need for any further mention of employment legislation. So, unless you have anything else to say, I wish you all good day. You are, of course, quite at liberty to remain on the pier to enjoy the facilities at your own expense.’

Mr Chapman, Ms Trench and Ms Rothstein stared at him, open mouthed.

And with that, Mr Canterbury turned and headed back to the café: a defiant and victorious knight returning to the castle keep to sustain his body with a fresh supply of essential victuals. It had, after all, been nearly half an hour since he had eaten.

He was followed closely by Mr Livingstone, Mrs Caldicot, Mr Hewitt, Miss Nightingale, Mrs Peterborough, Mr Roxdale, Mr and Mrs Merivale, Mrs Torridge, Mr Williams, Mr Twist, Mrs Roberts, Mr Pickering, Dorothy, Miss Pettifer, Mr Rowbottham, Errol and last, but certainly not least, Ruth and Jean-Jacques (who had temporarily suspended their busking).

The deputation from the council, deflated, defeated and temporarily demoralised, slunk away to the chauffeur driven Mercedes motor car which was, as before, waiting for them and parked on double lines. They were none of them well pleased but, as they all agreed as they drove away from the pier, there was absolutely nothing any of them could do.

‘What about the old Imperial Hotel?’ asked Ms Rothstein, taking a folder from her briefcase. ‘It wasn’t our first choice but if we can’t have the pier then the old hotel will have to do. It’s been empty for months.’

‘We can definitely help you with the old hotel,’ said Ms Trench. ‘We can fix up planning permission for you in a jiffy. And in some ways, and I think Mr Chapman will agree with me on this, you might find the former Imperial Hotel preferable, in many ways, to the pier.’

‘Oh most definitely,’ said Mr Chapman, agreeing with her. ‘The logistics make it a far superior choice.’ He was bloodied and numbed but far too greedy to be unbowed.

Both Mr Chapman and Ms Trench had personal interests in the success of this operation. Decent sums paid into a couple of offshore bank accounts.

Naturally, Mrs Caldicot and Mr Livingstone, Mr Canterbury and the rest, knew nothing about this conversation for they were busy sitting down and preparing to enjoy a traditional, Devon cream tea: scones, jam and lashings of clotted cream.

Hastily written ‘Closed for Tea’ signs hung on the handle of the shop door, Mrs Torridge’s Fortune Teller booth, Mr Rowbottham’s booth, the little train and the handle of the café door.

Mr Canterbury’s forgotten taxi driver was there with them, too. Errol had been sent to find him and to bring back to the pier for the sustenance he would require before making the journey home, without his passenger.

‘I’ve always been a little confused about this,’ said Mr Canterbury to Miss Pettifer as the latter put a large plateful of scones in front of him, and then add two decent sized pots of cream and strawberry jam. ‘Should one put the cream on the scone first, with the jam on top of the cream, or should one put the jam on before the cream?’

‘In Cornwall they split the scone in two and put the strawberry jam on first. They then put the clotted cream on top of the jam,’ explained Miss Pettifer. ‘But in Devon we split the scone in two and put the clotted cream straight onto the scone, as if the scone were being buttered. We then put the strawberry jam onto the top of the cream.’

‘Ah, good,’ said Mr Canterbury. ‘And since we’re in Devon…’

‘…the cream goes on first!’

They both agreed that it was crucial to get the important things right in life.

‘Emerald, would you be kind enough to come and join me as soon as you’ve finished serving the others?’ Mr

Canterbury asked Miss Pettifer.

‘Thank you, Roland,’ said Miss Pettifer. ‘I would be delighted.’

Chapter Twenty Nine

Jenkins arrived in Penmouth a week later.

He had, of course, never even seen the pier because he had left for his speaking engagement in America some hours before Mrs Caldicot and the rest of the gang had set off on their journey to Devon.

'Golly!' he said, when he saw the pier. He was, he admitted later, terribly impressed.

It was early evening and everyone was very busy.

Ruth and Jean-Jacques were busking at the entrance to the pier.

Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough were in the shop, serving up ice creams, postcards and tickets for the little train, which was on this occasion being driven by Mr Canterbury.

Mr Canterbury, who was having more fun than he could ever remember having before, had not been back to his office since he had arrived in Penmouth, and he showed absolutely no signs of going back to a life of mortgage deeds and wills. He had telephoned his secretary and receptionist and told them that he would not be back for a few months – at least. He had, however, assured them that he would continue to pay their salaries. It seemed easier than dealing with the paperwork required to close the business and to make arrangements for the two loyal employees to receive their pensions. There was, he knew, enough money in his bank account to pay their salaries indefinitely.

Mr Canterbury proudly wore a train driver's hat and had a newly made enamelled badge bearing the words 'Train Driver' pinned to his jacket. He was, it was generally believed, the only man in history to drive a train on a pier while wearing a stiff collar and a neatly knotted, black bow tie. 'A man is entitled to be a damned fool at my time of life,' he said to Mr Hewitt. On the seat beside him there lay a box of cheese and tomato sandwiches which Emerald, his fiancée, and still the café waitress, had prepared for him so that he would not go hungry as he travelled up and down the pier between meals.

Mr Roxdale and Mr Merivale were painting the railings at the side of the pier, Mr Twist was doing the accounts (he said it was much better to do them on a daily basis, rather than to wait until the end of the month, the quarter or, heaven forbid, the year) and Mr Williams was wandering up and down the pier taking snaps. Errol his assistant was hard at work in the darkroom. Mr Rowbottham was snipping profiles out of sheets of black cartridge paper and Mrs Torridge was telling people what their future held. Mrs Merivale was doing practical things upstairs in the old hotel, which was now their home, and Mr Pickering was showing visitors from Bristol how to fish for mackerel from the jetty at the end of the pier. Mr Pickering had never actually caught any mackerel but he had never really wanted to catch anything, so that was fine.

And Mr Livingstone and Mr Hewitt were sitting on a bench, in the sunshine, eating ice creams and watching seagulls swooping over the sea. The seagulls too were fishing and proving far more successful than Mr Pickering had ever been, or was ever likely to be.

'Do you believe in that Buddhist stuff?' asked Mr Livingstone. 'About us all being reincarnated according to how we behaved the last time we were here on earth?'

'You mean that Karma Sutra stuff?'

'I think the Karma Sutra stuff is something else. I meant the plain, vanilla karma stuff. Do you believe in it?'

'Believe in it?'

'Yes.'

'I suppose so. Possibly.'

'Because if it's true, if what we get in this life is a reflection of how well we behaved in our last life, then we must have been bloody good people in our last lives. If we were snails then we must have been pretty damned good snails.'

Mr Hewitt licked his ice cream, and nibbled a bit off the chocolate flake that was stuck into the top of it. 'You could be right about that,' he said at last. He thought for a while. 'I don't remember being a snail,' he added.

'I thought I might stroll down and get a newspaper from the shop when I've finished my ice cream,' said Mr Livingstone.

'Or we could catch the next train down,' suggested Mr Hewitt.

'Good idea,' said Mr Livingstone. He paused, and watched a cormorant dive into the sea. 'A bit later on, though.'

'I say! Look! Here comes Mrs Caldicot's other half!' said Mr Hewitt, using his ice cream to point to Jenkins, who had left his bags with Ruth and who was now strolling up the pier.

Ruth had promised to take the bags up to what had been Mrs Caldicot's room and what would now be Mr and Mrs Jenkins's room.

'You all seem well settled,' said Jenkins. 'There were no problems with the move?'

‘No problems at all,’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘Everyone went as smooth as silk.’

‘Nothing your wife couldn’t handle!’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘Have you seen her?’ asked Jenkins. ‘Ruth said she thought I’d find her down this end of the pier.’

‘She’ll probably be in the theatre with Mrs Roberts,’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘They’ll be getting ready for tonight’s performance,’ added Mr Hewitt.

Jenkins looked puzzled, as well he might have done. He was not aware that his wife had theatrical ambitions of any kind, although he was well aware that a film had been made about her early adventures. But he knew her well enough not to be surprised. And he would not have been unduly surprised if he’d been told that she and Mrs Roberts were rehearsing a tap dancing act.

‘Just keep walking along the pier,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘You can’t miss it. The theatre is right at the end. If there wasn’t a big rock there anyway the theatre would stop you falling into the sea.’

‘It’s a big building with the word ‘THEATRE’ on it,’ said Mr Hewitt, helpfully. ‘I think you’ll find that Mrs Caldicot will be inside.’

‘Thanks,’ said Jenkins, smiling to himself and continuing along the pier. As he did so he heard a bell ringing. He turned and saw a red and yellow train approaching. He stepped aside and saw to his surprise that the train was being driven by a very large man whom he had never seen before and who was wearing a driver’s cap and a stiff collar with a bow tie.

As promised, Jenkins found Mrs Caldicot in the theatre.

She put down the box of Turkish Delight she was holding and threw her arms around her husband’s neck. They kissed and hugged for a while. Mrs Roberts hurried off, muttering something about needing to do something with some posters that needed pinning up in the foyer.

‘I’ve missed you terribly,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘And I’ve missed you.’

‘How did things go in America?’

‘I think things went well, thank you.’

‘And was your flight OK?’

‘The people at Yale paid for an expensive seat so I stretched out and slept most of the way.’

‘So you’re not too tired?’

‘No, not at all, surprisingly.’

‘Good. Because you’re on in…’ Mrs Caldicot looked at her watch ‘…forty seven minutes.’

‘What do you mean ‘I’m on’? asked Jenkins, rather startled.

‘Well, we bought a projector and a screen from a man who sold some old posters for us and everything works quite well except for the sound thingy. I rang up the man we bought them from and he said it happens sometimes. Apparently we need a new carburettor or a battery or a speaker or something and so he’s going to come down and fit one but he can’t do it for weeks and we are showing a film this evening and we’ve sold quite a few tickets.’

‘And so the show must go on?’

‘Exactly! I knew you’d understand!’

‘I don’t really. You’re showing a film tonight?’

‘Yes, that’s right. We’ve converted the theatre into a cinema and we’re showing old black and white films. Lots of Gary Cooper, Clark Cable and Jimmy Cagney.’

‘And what are you showing tonight?’

‘Casablanca. With Humphrey Bogart.’

‘Together with Ingrid Bergman, Peter Lorre, Sydney Greenstreet, Claude Rains and Paul somebody.’

‘That’s the one. It’s Paul Henreid who plays the hero in the story. It’s funny. I always forget his name. I only know it now because we’ve got posters with his name on. It’s like that chap in the Magnificent Seven.’

‘The one no one can remember?’

‘That’s right. Can you remember his name?’

‘Brad Dexter,’ said Jenkins. ‘He was a chum of Frank Sinatra’s. Saved him from drowning and got a medal for it. Did you say we had forty seven minutes?’

‘Forty four now.’

‘What am I doing? If you’ve got no sound and you’re hoping that I’ll play the piano then I’ll have to disappoint you. I can’t play the piano.’

‘No, no, we need you because we’re going to dub the voices. Isn’t that what they call it? Dubbing?’

Jenkins, puzzled, looked at his wife. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘We’ve got hold of two copies of the script,’ explained Mrs Caldicot. ‘And we have a loudspeaker system in the theatre, it’s there really for making public announcements, but it’s quite good and so we can use that.’

Jenkins, still puzzled, looked at his wife.

'Mrs Roberts is playing the Ingrid Bergman part, Mr Canterbury does Sydney Greenstreet ever so well and Mr Twist does a marvellous Peter Lorre.'

'You mean, you've got people reading out the script while the film is shown on the screen?'

'Yes. We've been doing it for several days now. It's gone down ever so well.'

'Who is Mr Canterbury?'

'Oh, of course, you haven't met him, have you? Do you remember that Mr Livingstone and I went to see a solicitor when he heard that he'd inherited a pier?'

'Yes I do.'

'Well, the solicitor was a really nice fellow called Mr Canterbury. He helped us a good deal and then we had a little problem the other day and he came down to help us sort it out.'

'You didn't say anything about having problems when we talked on the phone! Once you'd got rid of the bailiffs you said everything went smoothly.'

'No, well, I didn't want to bother you. Anyway, Mr Canterbury sorted things out and now we all own a bit of the pier. You're an owner too.'

'I own a bit of the pier?' said Jenkins, startled. 'I own a bit of this pier?'

'Yes. Mr Livingstone signed some papers and now we're all joint owners. It made tremendous sense. It was all very clever, really. Mr Canterbury has some papers for you to sign when you've both got a minute. He's a really lovely man. He's marvellous in the Sydney Greenstreet part. And he's engaged to Miss Pettifer.'

'Miss Pettifer?'

'She used to be the Fat Lady but now she's a waitress in the café, she helps Dorothy.'

'Dorothy?'

'Dorothy Pickering. She's Mr Pickering's daughter. She's going out with Errol who helps Mr Williams develop his photographs.'

'I don't suppose that was Mr Canterbury whom I saw driving the little red and yellow train?' said Jenkins, who was beginning to wonder how long he'd been away. 'He had on a train driver's cap and a stiff collar. He looked like a lawyer out of a novel by Dickens.'

'Yes, he does, doesn't he?' said Mrs Caldicot. 'That would be Mr Canterbury. He loves driving the train. Mr Pickering used to drive it but he seems quite happy to spend his days showing people how to fish off the side of the pier. No one ever catches anything but they all seem to have a good time. Mr Pickering drives the train during cinema performances and while Mr Canterbury has his breakfast, his elevenses, his lunch, his afternoon tea and his dinner.'

'You said you needed me to do something to help with the film in forty seven minutes time.'

Mrs Caldicot looked at her watch. 'Thirty nine minutes now.'

'What am I doing in thirty nine minutes time?'

'We need you to be Humphrey Bogart. To play Rick – the bar owner. You don't have to do any acting. You just read out Rick's lines when he's supposed to be speaking. Mr Williams was going to play the Bogart part but he's got a very strong Welsh accent and he doesn't think it's quite suitable for the part. We're going to show 'How Green is My Valley?' next week and he's playing several parts in that. You must hear Mr Roxdale do the Claude Rains part. He's marvellous though he's a little deaf and when it's his turn to speak we have to nudge him a little bit to get him going.'

'And what about the piano playing? How do you manage that?'

'Well, we've got a piano and Mr Livingstone plays it. He's very good.'

'And the singing of the Marseillaise?'

'We all sing that together. The audience love it. They laughed ever such a lot last night and everyone joined in singing it with us. People who came out of the theatre had such a good time that they were crying. And we're getting massive numbers of people booking seats. Mrs Roberts says she thinks that we shouldn't bother with fixing the sound when we get the new carburettor or battery or whatever it is but that we should carry on reading all the lines ourselves.'

Jenkins looked at his wife. She never failed to amaze him. He really did love her so very much. He decided that he really didn't ever want to go away from her again.

'We're going to show 'Gone with the Wind' in a couple of weeks' time. I know it's in colour and we usually only do black and white but I think it will be very popular. We want you to read Rhett Butler's part. Mrs Roberts says she thinks you'll make a marvellous Cary Grant.'

'Clark Gable.'

'Clark Gable?'

‘It was Clark Gable in ‘Gone with the Wind’, not Cary Grant.’

‘Well, she says you’ll make a marvellous Clark Gable. And I think so too. Although, you’ll definitely sound much sexier than he did.’ Mrs Caldicot looked at her watch. ‘We’re on in twenty nine minutes. And then after the performance you can have one of Dorothy’s fish suppers. Mr Canterbury says she makes the best chips he’s ever tasted.’

‘He looks as if he should know!’

‘Oh yes. He’s got a marvellous appetite. I think that’s why Miss Pettifer fell for him. She used to be the Fat Lady on the pier. Did I mention that?’

‘I think so but I’m not entirely sure.’

‘And Mr Roxdale and Mr Hewitt are planning to build a rockery on Stone Rock.’

‘Isn’t that the lump of rock on which the theatre is built?’

‘That’s it.’

‘But it’s enormous! How big a rockery are they planning to build?’

‘I have a suspicion it will probably end up in the Guinness Book of Records,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Oh, and we have a lot of Turkish Delight. Tons of it!’

‘Tons?’

‘No, not really tons. But there were 868 one pound boxes in a cupboard at the back of the shop. The man who used to run the pier seemed to like ordering stuff. I think perhaps he was getting a kick back from the wholesaler.’

Jenkins thought for a moment. ‘That’s nearly half a ton. That’s a lot of Turkish Delight.’

‘I know,’ smiled Mrs Caldicot.

‘I saw some in the airport shop,’ said Jenkins. ‘I very nearly bought you a boxful!’

‘That would be a case of ‘Alcinoo pom dare; crocum in Cilician ferre; noctuas Athenas ferre’!’ said Mrs Caldicot.

Jenkins stared at her.

‘It’s Latin!’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘I know it is,’ said Jenkins. ‘But what the devil does it mean?’

‘To give apples to Alcinous, to take saffron to Cicilianus and to carry owls to Athens!’

‘To carry coals to Newcastle?’

‘That’s right. Mr Canterbury uses a lot of Latin phrases. He taught me that one.’

‘Mr Canterbury being the driver of the little red and yellow train?’

‘That’s him!’

Jenkins swallowed hard. It was clear that a good deal had happened while he’d been away. ‘Did the pier shop just have vast quantities of Turkish Delight? No seaside rock?’

‘Oh yes, absolutely tons of pink seaside rock too – all peppermint flavoured. But the lettering inside was all misprinted. People don’t seem to mind a bit. In fact, Mrs Peterborough says that they sell a lot of it and that when we have some more made we should make sure that it’s misprinted again. We used to have a lot of coconut mushrooms. But Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale used them as ammunition.’

Jenkins put his arm around his wife and pulled her close to him. ‘I missed you,’ he said. ‘Life with you is never dull, is it?’

Mrs Caldicot hugged him back. ‘It’s really none of it my fault,’ she said. ‘Things just sort of happen.’

‘If we ever have a quiet moment,’ said Jenkins. ‘Will you tell me everything that happened when I was away?’

‘Oh, it was all really very boring,’ said Mrs Caldicot dismissively. ‘There’s nothing much else to tell you. Let’s get you into the cinema so that you can take a look at the script for ‘Casablanca’.’

‘Here’s looking at you, kid,’ said Mr Jenkins, doing his best Humphrey Bogart impression.

This is the fourth of Vernon Coleman's books about Mrs Caldicot. The other three are *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War*, *Mrs Caldicot's Knickerbocker Glory* and *Mrs Caldicot's Oyster Parade*. There is a full list of Vernon Coleman's other books on his Amazon author page and on www.vernoncoleman.com

Note from Vernon Coleman:
If you have enjoyed this book, I would be enormously grateful if you give the book a good rating on Amazon. A good review (however short) really does make a huge difference to my life and my books.

Appendix

A Very Short History of the British Pleasure Pier

Before I started to write *Mrs Caldicot's Turkish Delight*, I did a great deal of research and explored the history of Britain's seaside pleasure piers. I found it a fascinating story.

Piers, of course, have been with us for a long time – probably almost as long as there have been ships and boats – but back in the late 1700s, piers were nothing more than simple jetties, built so that large boats which needed deep water moorings could land people and goods without having to unload their cargo into smaller craft. The jetties had to be long so that they were useful whether the tide was in or out. Two hundred odd years ago, before railways and the lorry had been invented, manufacturers still preferred to send their heavier goods by sea rather than over land. Roads were so bad, rutted and ruled by highwaymen, that business folk didn't have much choice.

And for travellers, whether on business, making a Grand Tour or simply going on holiday, a journey by sea was the safest, fastest and most comfortable way to reach the resort of their choice.

If there was no jetty available then travellers would have to climb down into a smaller boat and either wade through the surf or head to shore while hanging onto the back of a porter. Once on the sand they would have a walk of anything up to half a mile across wet sand. Numerous porters and servants would be needed to carry the luggage since no wheeled conveyance could be pushed or pulled across the sands. It was a slow and tedious way to arrive; and there wasn't much dignity in it.

Meanwhile, despite these drawbacks, seaside towns had become popular because breathing the sea air and taking a refreshing dip in the sea were considered healthy activities – especially for those who lived in towns and cities and spent their lives breathing in foul air.

So, for example, in 1754, the town of Brighton on the English south coast became extremely fashionable after a certain Dr Russell pronounced seawater to be a cure for all imaginable ills. You could bathe in it, splash about in it or drink the stuff. Naturally, Dr Russell recommended that the sea should be taken under the direction of a knowledgeable physician. And, unsurprisingly, his preferred choice of knowledgeable physician was himself.

The result of Dr Russell's widely publicised recommendation was that the sick raced down to Brighton to be cured while the healthy rushed there even more speedily so that they could stay healthy.

Huge, complicated bathing machines were built and rented out to all and sundry so that men and women could take a dip in the sea without exposing themselves to the eyes of curious onlookers. Even so, for the sake of common decency, and to avoid the danger of arousing the enthusiasms of onlookers beyond self-control, bathing costumes were voluminous, covered all and left absolutely everything to the imagination.

And so, gradually, the idea of travelling to an English seaside resort for a holiday became increasingly fashionable.

And that enthusiasm accelerated in the latter part of the 18th century when the Napoleonic Wars made foreign travel distinctly unhealthy and quite inadvisable. Wars have always had a tendency to interfere with continental travel and the once popular Grand Tours of Europe quickly became quite impractical. From the year of 1793, it was actually illegal to cross to France. As a result, even those continental travellers who had previously travelled across the English Channel with retinues of servants and scores of trunks, and who had returned a year or two later laden with artwork, antiquities and carpets (some bought and some liberated from natives who didn't realise the value of what they had) had to give up their travels. Instead of touring France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland and Greece they took their holidays at British seaside resorts such as Brighton, Blackpool and Penmouth.

So business in the seaside towns was booming.

There was, however, one big problem.

When they arrived at their destination, and their boat docked, these wealthy travellers had to walk or be pushed or carried along the jetty to the shore. The jetties were an improvement on the alternative but they were bare, dull, dirty and boring. And the shoreward ends of the jetties were invariably in uninspiring parts of the resorts. After all, the jetty had almost certainly been built to carry raw materials or manufactured goods, rather than ladies in fashionable dresses and gentlemen wearing top hats and carrying ebony canes.

The time was ripe for the first pleasure piers to be built.

The first pleasure pier was built at Ryde on the Isle of Wight at the start of the 19th century. The foundation stone was laid at the end of June in 1813 and when the pier was opened, just over a year later, it was a little under a third of a mile long. It was built entirely of timber; the piles were made of wood and the promenade was built with wooden planks.

Within a couple of decades piers were springing up all around the coast and every town which wanted to cater for holidaymakers simply had to have at least one.

The new piers enabled visiting ships to drop off both goods and passengers and the longer the pier, and the further out into the sea it stretched, the bigger the ship that could visit the town.

Moreover, local boat owners quickly realised that they could use their nearest pier as a point from which to take holidaymakers on boat trips to nearby attractions, or for a simple 'trip around the bay'. Fishermen started offering fishing trips so that travellers could catch their own mackerel. And businessmen vied to build new hotels as near as possible to the pier for the convenience of holidaymakers coming to the town by sea.

Railway lines were laid along the piers so that passengers and goods could, for an appropriate fee, be transported from the head of the pier to the landward end. The railway on the pier also made it possible for holidaymakers to take a trip to the pier head during their stay in the town. More energetic holidaymakers could simply walk along the pier – which became a sort of promenade.

And gradually, the piers' owners realised that they could put entertainments on the immensely long structures which they'd built over the sea – bringing in more revenue. A range of other entertainments were quickly added. Many newly built piers had extensions built at the seaward end so that theatres could be built. Older piers were extended so that new buildings could be added and additional jetties, at various heights, were built on to accommodate the requirements of vessels large and small. Booths were erected to provide accommodation for fortune tellers, weighing machines, silhouette cutters and a whole range of other entertainments.

By the second half of the 19th century, piers were opening at the rate of one a year. Some of the new structures were immensely long. The pier at Southend, which was built in 1890, was one and a third miles long. On this part of the Essex coast the tide goes out a long way and steamers bringing visitors needed to be able to land their passengers at any time of the day and any state of the tide. By 1925, when paddle steamers were operating shuttle services between Southend and Tower Bridge in the heart of London, the pier was bringing 1.5 million people a year to the resort.

The stars were aligned for the success of all these new piers.

The new-fangled notion of giving workers annual holidays and the introduction of official bank holidays at various times of the year made seaside resorts even more popular with people looking for somewhere to spend their few days of freedom. And just when it didn't look as if things could possibly get any better for English seaside towns, along came the new railway network.

Within a very short space of time, it became possible for people to travel around the country without having to bounce around on top of a rickety stage coach. Leading citizens in every seaside resort in the country wanted their own railway station and, if necessary, demanded that a branch line be built. As far as the seaside resorts were concerned, the icing on the cake was an Act of Parliament, passed in 1844, which forced the railway companies to provide cheap travel for everyone. If you were a successful hotelier in a seaside town and your resort didn't have a pier, you would either build a pier yourself or you would do your best to make sure that someone else did. During the later years of the reign of Queen Victoria, pier building turned into a frenzy.

By the end of the 19th century, the popular resort of Blackpool in Lancashire had three full length piers. The North Pier provided classical music concerts and catered for the gentry while the Central and South pleasure piers were built to provide more down-to-earth attractions for workers coming from the Lancashire cotton mills. End of the pier shows provided employment for comedians, singers and dancers and the same entertainers who worked in pantomime during the winter season moved en masse to the end of the pier theatres for the summer shows. More than anything else, it was the existence of those three piers which helped to make Blackpool the most popular seaside resort in the United Kingdom. The philosophy was simple: if one pier was good and two were great then three piers must be marvellous.

Of course, what goes up must, generally speaking, come down and the rise and rise of the British seaside pleasure pier, having continued on its upward trajectory for well over a century, was slow, steady and painful.

The low point for piers came during World War II when some piers were deliberately breached to prevent the Germans using them as landing points. And while essential repair work had to be abandoned, the sea and wind continued to damage the piers which remained. In the years following the Second World War, a good many piers, weakened by the lack of maintenance, were lost to storms and fires. The availability of cheap flights to Spanish, French and Italian resorts with guaranteed all year round sunshine meant that seaside resorts, and their piers, hit hard times.

And that pretty well brings up to date – and to the day when Mr David Livingstone inherited Penmouth Pier from his Uncle Bertram Livingstone.

Note from Vernon Coleman:

If you have enjoyed this book, I would be enormously grateful if you give the book a good rating on Amazon. A good review (however short) really does make a huge difference. God willing, Mrs Caldicot will be back.

This is the fourth novel about Mrs Caldicot. The first three are *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War*, *Mrs Caldicot's Knickerbocker Glory* and *Mrs Caldicot's Oyster Parade*. For a full list of the books by Vernon Coleman which are currently available please see his author page on Amazon or visit www.vernoncoleman.com.

CAT FABLES

VernonColeman

Vernon Coleman

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DEDICATION

If she had to choose another life she would, I know, come back not as a real life Princess, festooned with jewels and surrounded by servants, but as a cat; preferably, of course, a much-loved, over-indulged fluffy cat with a doting Upright. (`Upright is, of course, the word cats use to describe human beings.) And so these stories about cats (which will, I hope, give her, and other cat lovers, an insight into the special word cats inhabit) are dedicated to my gentle love Donna Antoinette. All ways and always.

DEFINITION

Cat (n) `An animal which can, without any perceptible sense of embarrassment, continue to declare its innocence when all the evidence shows quite clearly and unequivocally that it is guilty.'

Vernon Coleman

FOREWORD

We can learn a great deal from cats. I don't just mean that we can learn about their behaviour. We can also learn lessons that apply to us, too. Watch and listen to cats and we can learn an enormous amount that will help us through life.

How true are the stories in this book?

Well, that's for you to decide. I'm not telling. And nor are the cats.

But each story has been chosen because it contains a message; a `moral' if you like.

Maybe these aren't so much `stories' as `fables' or, perhaps, parables.

Vernon Coleman, Catland

1. A CAT WITH TWO TAILS

Coffee had always loved her tail. She loved to chase it (`It's much better than mice,' she told her friend Kipper. `It's always there when you want it and, in the end, we both know that I'll always catch it.') And when she went to sleep she loved to wrap her tail over her nose. It was,she told Kipper, a toy, a muff and a good companion.

Coffee was six years old when it first occurred to her that if one tail was good, two tails should be twice as good.

`Why on earth would you want two tails?' Kipper asked her.

`I could keep my nose twice as warm,' replied Coffee. `And I would have twice as much fun chasing two tails as I have chasing one.'

All Coffee's friends tried to convince her that having an extra tail would nothing to the quality of her life. Some even attempted to convince her that extra tail would be a burden not a boon.

`An extra tail would get in the way,' said one.

`Dogs would laugh at you,' said another.

But Coffee would not be shaken from her belief that two tails would be twice as much fun as one.

She had nursed this unusual longing for two years when her friend Kipper met her one morning with some startling news.

`I've just heard about a cat in Oaksville who has two tails!' announced Kipper excitedly. `They were talking about it on the television last night.'

`A cat with two tails?' tried Coffee. `I have to see it.'

`We'll go tomorrow,' said Kipper. `If we set off early in the morning we ought to be able to get there and back in a day. I'll be outside your back door at sunrise.'

Coffee didn't sleep a wink that night. She was sitting on the back door step waiting for Kipper to arrive long before the sun had poked its uppermost tip over the horizon.

And it was still dark when they set off.

`I knew you wouldn't be able to sleep,' said Kipper, who was that rarest of all God's creatures `a good friend'. `So I came early.'

They travelled for hours and Coffee never stopped talking about the cat with two tails. `How did it come about?' she wanted to know.

`I think it runs in the family,' explained Kipper. `His mother's brother had two tails too.'

`Oh, how I'd love to be a member of that family,' said Coffee.

It was three in the afternoon when the two cats, tired and paw weary, finally arrived at their destination.

`I'll wait here for you,' said Kipper, sitting down at the gate leading to the house where the cat with two tails lived.

And so Coffee went on alone. And met the famous cat with two tails.

It was quite a disappointment for Coffee.

The cat with two tails was very bad tempered and not at all pleased to receive yet another visitor.

`But isn't it wonderful to have two tails?' asked Coffee.

`No,' snapped the cat with two tails, quite sharply. `If I try to chase my tail I get confused and dizzy. That's no fun at all.'

`But isn't it good to be able to wrap two tails around your nose when the weather is cold?' asked Coffee.

`No,' came the firm reply. `It gets far too hot.'

And so Coffee turned away and went back up the path to where Kipper was waiting.

`How did it go? Do you still wish you had two tails? asked Kipper.

`Let's go home,' said Kipper.

Moral

Twice as much of something isn't necessarily twice as good as half as much was.

2. THE MAN WHO HATED CATS

Ginger and Tiger lived with a family of Uprights who really loved animals.

The Uprights had a large, old fashioned terraced house in the middle of a big city. There were four Uprights: Mr Jellycoe, Mrs Jellicoe, Lucinda Jellicoe (aged 8) and Roger Jellicoe (aged 6). And apart from Ginger and Tiger the household consisted of two Labrador dogs (Henry and Gilbert), five white mice (Mickey, Dicky, Tricky, Picky and Nicky who were supposed to live in a large wooden and netting container in Roger's bedroom but who spent most of their time out of it and only went back through the tiny door when Ginger and Tiger were spotted in the vicinity) and a large goldfish called Oswald who lived in a tank called Oswald.

By and large all these creatures (including the Uprights but with the possible exception of Oswald) lived together very happily and confrontations were as rare as snow at Christmas.

The house was big enough for everyone (except Oswald) to be able to do their own thing. The garden was large and mature and included trees for climbing, bushes for hiding in and a vast lawn suitable for racing around on if the weather wasn't too hot and you were that way inclined.

There was, of course, a snag.

The snag was the neighbour on the left hand side (looking towards the bottom of the garden).

The neighbour was a man called Mr Loosemore who hated all animals but who hated cats most of all.

Mr Loosemore hated cats so much that he did everything he possibly could to prevent them from entering his garden. He put barbed wire along the whole length of the fence which separated his garden from the Jellicoe's garden. He chopped down most of the trees which had once proved such an innocent attraction to neighbourhood cats and he concreted over a patch of shrubbery which had once been a favourite haunt of those cats who liked hunting mice, voles, shrews and other small creatures.

And, just to make his views about cats as clear as clear could be, he used to spend several hours a day sitting in wait - just in case a cat ever dared to enter his garden. He would sit on his terrace armed with two buckets of water and air rifle. Any cat who dared to enter his garden did so knowing that if he was spotted the consequences would be dire.

Naturally, although they had a large garden of their own (and it has to be said that as far as cats were concerned they were very fortunate cats) Ginger and Tiger were constantly attracted to the forbidden garden which lay on the other side of the barbed wire topped fence.

`There is,' said Ginger, `something irresistible about anything which is forbidden.'

Eventually, of course, the irresistibility of venturing into next door's garden gradually overcame all their well-founded fears.

And when Ginger found a small gap at the bottom of the fence there was no longer any chance that they could resist their natural inclination to disobey.

They thought about going through the gap late at night, when Mr Loosemore was in bed and his garden lay unguarded and in darkness. `But, where's the fun in that?' asked Ginger. `There's no point in breaking the rules if no one knows you're breaking them.'

So, they went through the fence at three o'clock in the afternoon when Mr Loosemore was sitting on his terrace, alert and watchful and, above all, armed.

He saw them, of course.

They would, if they'd been honest, have admitted that they would have been disappointed if he hadn't.

He saw them as they raced up the tallest of his remaining two horse chestnut trees and he lost them as they disappeared among the leaves of the upper branches.

He was too far away to use his buckets of water and so he fired his air rifle. Unable to see his two targets he fired into the leaves where he thought the two cats might be. He loaded his gun as quickly as he could, with fingers fumbling with impotent rage.

Ginger and Tiger stayed up the tree for an hour until it started to get dark. Then, as stealthily as they could manage, they crept down the far side of the tree and darted back to the hole in the fence and to safety.

`Phew,' sighed Ginger, when they got back home. He shook a leaf out of his fur. `That was exciting.' He had to make a big effort to stop his voice shaking. He didn't want Tiger to know how frightened he had been.

`I'm glad we did that!' said Tiger, trying to stop his voice shaking so that Ginger would not know how frightened he had been.

`We certainly showed him,' said Ginger.

`It's not as nice as our garden though,' said Tiger.

`No,' agreed Ginger immediately. `It's definitely not as nice as our garden.'

`No real need to go back there,' said Tiger.

`No,' said Ginger. `No point at all.'

Moral

If you obey all the rules you'll miss rather a lot of fun. So, ignore the rules occasionally. If you don't ignore the rules at least some of the time there is no point in there being any rules.

3. THE CAT MAGICIAN

Wobbly had lived with the Gritsby family for four years. In fact, she couldn't really remember ever not living with the Gritsbys. It was the only life she knew.

She had arrived at the Gritsby's home via Sharon Gritsby, the younger of two daughters, who had acquired her from a school-friend. And her arrival had not been welcomed universally.

`What the devil have you brought that creature here for?' demanded Mr Gritsby, a stern, bully of a man who had deep permanent frown lines etched onto his face and who regarded laughter as something frivolous people did when they didn't have enough work to keep them busy.

`Don't expect me to clean up after it,' snapped Mrs Gritsby, a huge, billowing woman who spent most of her time sitting around the house eating biscuits and chocolates and complaining about the mess by which she was constantly surrounded.

`Yuk,' it's so plain looking, said Tracey, Sharon's older sister. `If you have to have a kitten couldn't you have found a pretty one?'

You will not be surprised to hear that none of this made Wobbly feel welcome. (And, indeed, the name she was given - Wobbly - while undoubtedly accurate at the time, did nothing to improve the nervous kitten's fragile self-confidence.)

During the weeks and months which followed Wobbly found that life with the Gritsby family was, to say the least, difficult and, to say the most, nigh on unbearable. The cool welcome she had received on her arrival did not warm with time. Indeed, on the contrary, things got steadily worse.

Sharon got tired of her new fluffy toy - especially when she realised that it needed to be fed twice a day. Tracey complained constantly that the kitten had chewed her slippers or had left hairs on the clothes she scattered on the floor of her bedroom. And Mr and Mrs Gritsby just complained a lot, invariably managing to blame Wobbly for everything that happened that they didn't like.

By the end of her first year in the Gritsby household Wobbly was, if anything, even more nervous and wobbly than she had been when she'd arrived.

The months passed by, and, as they have a recurring tendency to do, the years went with them, and with every passing season Wobbly lost more confidence and became ever more nervous, ever more fearful and ever more apprehensive. When one of the Gritsby daughters spoke to her she would shiver and shrink a little. When one of the grown up Gritsbys spoke her heart would thump so much she thought it would burst.

By the end of the fourth year Wobbly had become a nervous cat; eyes constantly darting here and there, muscles always twitching; always just a whisker away from panic. If anyone bent down to touch her she would shiver and shake and then run away and hide. She did not know the joy of spending an evening on a warm lap. But she knew only too well the pain of spending a night cowering under a car in a neighbour's driveway because there was nowhere else to go to hide from the rain on a dark and stormy night.

And then Miss Pilbeam moved into the bungalow five doors down the road. Sweet, gentle, delicate, fragile Miss Pilbeam. A septuagenarian. A little frail, with arthritis in her hips and knees, but alert and lively nevertheless. A former school teacher. Loved by generations of mixed infants. Alone in the world now because her much-loved long-standing feline companion Marmalade had died just five months earlier.

They met just a week away from the fourth anniversary of Wobbly's unhappy meeting with the Gritsbys. It was dark. It was raining. And Wobbly, booted out of the house by a particularly bad tempered Mr Gritsby, had been hiding under Miss Pilbeam's elderly Morris Minor. (The model with the soft top. She'd bought it when new and if ever sold the garage would tell no lie if they advertised it as having had `one careful lady owner'.)

Miss Pilbeam had gone to the door to put her empty milk bottles on the step and even in the dark she saw the fearful and trembling Wobbly cowering next to the left rear wheel. She was well able to recognise a cat in need when she saw one.

Her attempts to persuade the cat to come to her failed miserably at first.

But Miss Pilbeam was an experienced cat magician. She knew that the most direct route to a cat's heart is via its stomach and a tin of best salmon emptied out and crushed on a bone china saucer was all it took. Wobbly hadn't eaten for three days. Not unless you count the congealed corpse of a two day dead spider and a few crumbs of broken biscuit which she'd dragged out from underneath a chair in the living room.

And then Miss Pilbeam filled a saucer with condensed milk.

And followed that with a cereal bowl with fresh, cold custard from a tin.

All delivered while Wobbly remained cowering underneath Miss Pilbeam's elderly vehicle.

`Oh you poor starving creature,' said the kindly Miss Pilbeam, reaching out to stroke Wobbly's head.

Wobbly backed away instinctively. Kindness was something to which she was not yet quite accustomed and her instincts had kept her alive. When one of the Gritsbys reached out it was usually to hit her or to pick her up and throw her off a chair or bed.

`Why don't you come in and lie by the fire?' invited Miss Pilbeam. `I won't hurt you.' She waved a hand behind her, in the direction of front door which she had left open.

Still, Wobbly remained where she was; too frightened to make a move. What if Miss Pilbeam turned out to be a felicidal maniac? What if Miss Pilbeam, harmless and kindly as she appeared to be, turned out to be catching cats for a vivisector. Wobbly was consumed with fears and anxieties. The Gritsby household wasn't exactly welcoming, and love and food were in pretty short supply there, but at least none of the Gritsbys had actually tried to kill her. Not deliberately anyway.

`What's your name?' asked Miss Pilbeam. She reached forward very slowly and checked the fur around Wobbly's neck. `You haven't got an identity tag,' she said disapprovingly.

Wobbly, who had been brought up in a house where Uprights screeched and shouted, liked Miss Pilbeam's soft and soothing voice. She edged forward an inch or two. The cold custard had really been very pleasant. She'd never tasted anything like it before. Miss Pilbeam seemed gentle and reassuring.

`There's nothing to worry about,' said Miss Pilbeam, reassuringly. She paused and thought for a moment. When she thought she held her head slightly to one side, rather like a bird. `I think I'll call you Rosie,' she said finally. Wobbly pricked up her ears. She liked the name Rosie. She thought it sounded rather fine. She liked it much better than Wobbly. She had never liked that name. She edged forwards a little more. But she was still prepared to turn and run if necessary. She was still very nervous; still anxious about what might happen.

But Miss Pilbeam resisted the temptation to make any quick movements. She knew just how nervous cats could be. `I can see that you're frightened,' she said to Rosie. `But I tell you what I'll do. I'll go in now because I'm getting rather cold. But I'll leave the front door open. If you want to come in and sit by my fireside you'll be very, very welcome.' And with that Miss Pilbeam turned away and went back into her little bungalow. At the doorway she turned back for an instant. She bent down so that she could see underneath the car and she smiled. `Do come in,' she said, with an encouraging smile. `It's cold and miserable out here but indoors it's toasty warm and we can keep each other company.'

It was another three minutes before Rosie, formerly Wobbly, finally found the courage to enter Miss Pilbeam's house. She stood on the step for a moment, her ears pricked, every muscle tensed, every nerve taut. She wanted to turn and run. But she couldn't. She had to know. She had to know if Miss Pilbeam was as good as she seemed to be. And so Rosie moved forwards a few inches. And waited again. And then moved forward another few inches.

Finally, summoning up all her courage, Rosie suddenly bounded forward towards the light in Miss Pilbeam's living room. Once inside the room she stopped suddenly and looked around. There was a blazing log fire in the hearth. Miss Pilbeam, sitting in a comfortable old chair on one side of the fire, smiled at her.

`Hello, Rosie,' she said. `I'm glad you came.' She bent down and stroked Rosie's head and back. She lowered her voice to a whisper. `You and I are going to be the very best of friends,' she said. `I'll just go and shut the front door and lock out all that nasty weather and then we'll settle down together, you and I, and have a nice chat by the fire.'

And that's how Wobbly became Rosie and how Rosie found a new home and a new very best friend.

Moral

If you don't take chances, you'll never know what might have happened. And you'll always wonder. And always regret.

4. THE FISHING EXPEDITION

Tabatha was the most kind-hearted cat anyone had ever met. Everyone agreed on this.

With Uprights she was unfailingly patient and appreciative. She loved being stroked and tickled under the chin and even when a hand rubbed her fur the wrong way she remained calm and content. With the slightest encouragement she would roll over onto her back and allow her tummy to be tickled. She was wonderful with children; never scratching or hissing and always taking part in the roughest of their games without so much as a momentary protest.

She was similarly patient with other cats.

The Uprights with whom she lived had, over the years, acquired three other cats in addition to Tabatha. There was Micky (a boisterous black and white who loved climbing on shelves), Honey (a delicate and rather highly strung short-haired Persian whose greatest joy in life was sitting in the sun) and Poppy (a six month old kitten who just liked playing).

Although Tabatha was the oldest, and most senior of these cats, she did not behave like a Prima Donna (as so many cats do when they are the senior member of a household) and she did not expect the others to adapt their lives to suit hers. Many cats who suddenly find themselves sharing a home with another animal will behave boorishly and expect their habits and preferences to be respected. Tabatha wasn't like that. If she found another cat sleeping in one of her favourite spots she would simply move on and sleep somewhere else. If Poppy wanted to play then Tabatha would play - even if she would have rather had a snooze.

But, not surprisingly, Tabatha's kindness, patience, understanding and willingness to please (allied to an unwillingness to displease) meant that she often ended up doing things that she really didn't want to do and didn't enjoy doing.

In addition to Micky, Honey and Poppy there were a number of other cats living in the immediate neighbourhood and among all of these it was widely known that Tabatha was always ready to please; forever willing to do things she didn't really want to do if it would make another cat happy.

So, when Hector, who lived two houses away, came round and told Tabatha that he wanted her to join him on a fishing expedition he did so not caring whether or not she wanted to go fishing, but knowing that she would agree.

It wasn't just any fishing expedition.

Hector had for some time, had his eye on the fish who lived in a pond in a nearby garden.

But there was, of course, a snag for this was no ordinary pond, these were no ordinary fish and catching them was no ordinary fishing expedition.

The pond owner, an elderly retired army Colonel told everyone he had a war wound but he actually had bad arthritis. He walked with the aid of a large blackthorn stick. Apart from his military experiences (something he was always happy to talk about) the Colonel was very proud of his fish (a mixture of goldfish and coy carp) which he regarded as the best in the neighbourhood.

The Colonel (as he insisted on being called) had lost several fish to a visiting heron and two to cats. His attempts to scare away these poachers had proved fruitless because his gammy leg meant that he could not match his threats with physical action and so he had, in response, set up a simple but effective defence system to prevent any further losses.

The defence system he had devised involved purchasing a large Rottweiler which the Colonel kept hungry and which he allowed to roam free in the garden.

`The danger,' explained Hector, `is that if I'm catching a fish the dog might come up behind me. So your job will be to act as lookout while I catch a fish.'

`What do I do if I see the dog?' asked Tabatha. `Should I make a noise so that you'll know it's time to run?'

`No, no,' said Hector. `Your job is to run around the garden with the dog chasing you so that I can get away with the fish.'

`But that's dangerous!' said Tabatha.

`No, no, not at all,' said Hector, with all the confidence and assurance of a cat who would not be exposed to any danger whatsoever. `You just allow the dog to get close enough to you to think he's going to catch you - so that he doesn't worry about me - while staying far enough ahead of him to make sure that he doesn't actually get close enough to catch you.'

Tabatha didn't like the sound of this at all and looked very doubtful.

`Don't look like that,' said Hector, cheerily. `I'm relying on you. I can't do this without you.'

Tabatha blinked but didn't say anything. There was a lot she could have said. She could have pointed out that Hector had rarely ever even bothered to speak to her before. She could have pointed out that Hector had lots of much closer chums who could have helped him. She could have explained that her Uprights gave her cooked fish every Friday and Tuesday (nicely filleted and served in a creamy sauce) and so she didn't need to risk her life helping Hector catch a fresh one. She could have simply said `No' and walked away.

But she didn't say any of this.

Tabatha didn't like to say `No' and so she said `Yes'.

The fishing trip was a disaster.

After chasing Tabatha up a tree the Rottweiler turned his attention to Hector and chased him into the middle of the pond where, dripping wet and with a lily on his head, Hector escaped a nasty death by sitting on top of a small fountain. (His only stroke of good fortune was that the fountain was turned off at the time.)

It was eleven o'clock that night when the Rottweiler, called by the Colonel for his late supper, went into the house. And it was ten past eleven before Tabatha arrived home. She was dirty, tired, frightened and hungry and had absolutely nothing to show for a horrible day.

`If only I'd said `No',' said Tabatha to herself, as she dragged herself through the cat flap and into the house. `If I'd said `No' I would, by now, by warm, fed and dreaming of rabbits.'

Moral

When you have difficulty saying `No' to something you don't want to do just remember how much more difficult things will be if you say `Yes'.

5. THE CAT WHO HAD NO FAITH

Dick was a very pretty cat and everyone who knew him liked him very much indeed. Uprights liked him because he was friendly, patient and loyal. Other cats liked him because he was trustworthy, honourable and generous. Even dogs and mice liked him. There was no one in the world who didn't think Dick was wonderful.

Except.

There was one exception.

And that was Dick himself.

Dick suffered from something which psychiatrists and psychologists and people who read the posher sort of magazines usually call `low self-esteem'.

By which it is meant that he had absolutely no faith in himself.

He regarded himself as someone to whom bad things always happened.

He expected bad things to happen. And he thought he deserved to have bad things happen to him.

Inevitably, of course, when you expect bad things to happen they usually do.

Dick's great ambition had always been to be able to jump up onto the flat roof of the small extension at the back of the house where he lived.

This may seem to be a strange ambition but there is a good reason for it.

When he had been a kitten, and had first moved in with the Uprights called the Wainwrights, there had been an older cat called Tom living there. And as a young kitten Dick had once watched, with absolute astonishment and awe, as Tom had leapt from the terrace up onto the flat roof, where he had lain down and sunbathed in cat-perfect peace and quiet for the whole afternoon. Tom hadn't made it in one jump of course. There had been a good deal of scratching and clawing involved. He had used a piece of trellis, a clothes prop which always leant against the side of the shed and some thick strands of ivy which covered the lower two thirds of the wall. But it had, nevertheless, been a mighty impressive climb.

After Tom's death, Dick had tried to get up onto the flat roof on at least two dozen occasions. He had scrabbled and scrambled and clung and pulled at every available pawhold and clawhold available. He had lost several claws in the attempts. But he had always failed as, in his heart, he always knew he would. A foot or two from the flat roof he would feel all his strength leave him. He would be filled with hopelessness. And he would fall back to the ground with a painful thump.

Dick decided that Tom had been a very special cat. A supercat among mortals. A hero. A giant among cats. And he decided that the leap was impossible.

Then, one day, Dick lay on the grass watching a blackbird trying to break open a snail's shell. Time and time again the blackbird hammered the snail against a rock in the garden rockery. Several times the blackbird flew up into the air with the snail and then dropped it onto the patio paving. The blackbird kept trying for far longer than Dick had thought it possible for any creature to try to do anything. The bird just wouldn't give up. It persevered as though its life depended upon what it was doing. It devoted every bit of its concentration and energy to the task. It took no notice of Dick even though he was lying no more than thirty feet away. And in the end the snail's shell smashed. And the blackbird got its reward.

It was just the stimulus Dick needed.

I can do it, he said to himself.

If I try really hard and put every ounce of effort into getting up onto that roof I can get there. Once I'm nearly there I just have to keep going. I just need to have faith in myself.

And so he had faith.

He took a big breath. He tensed all his muscles. He looked up at the flat roof and, in his mind, saw himself sitting there.

He backed away from the wall a few feet. And then, bang, he ran, he leapt, he pulled, he scrabbled, he clawed, he stretched and he used every ounce of power and every bit of determination he could find.

And suddenly he was up there on the flat roof. Looking round. Breathless with exertion and excitement. Amazed and proud. It felt oh so good to be on top; to have achieved what had seemed for so long to be the impossible.

`Oh there you are, Dick!' said a familiar voice.

Dick looked down.

Mrs Wainwright was holding a brand new kitten. `This is our new kitten,' she said, holding up the kitten so that Dick could get a better look. `We're calling him Harry,' she said.

`Hello,' said Dick. He tried to look blase, though no one but a kitten would have been fooled.

`That's Dick up there.' Mrs Wainwright told the kitten.

The kitten looked up at Dick.

And even Dick could see the awe and admiration in the kitten eyes.

The kitten was looking up at him, he knew, in exactly the same way that he had once looked up at Tom.

Dick felt wonderful. He purred down at the kitten and nodded slightly in greeting.

Moral

If you think you're going to fail then you will almost certainly fail. If you think you will succeed...well, at least you'll have a chance.

6. THE CAT WHO FOUND OUT HE WAS SPECIAL

Korky the cat lived in a large household. There were seven Uprights (two large ones, two medium sized ones and three small ones), three dogs (two large ones and a small one), two hamsters (both small), six white mice (also all small), six sheep (all large), a pig (large), a cow (huge), two horses (both huge), a snake (long and wriggly), eight chickens (medium sized) a cat called Korky, (cat sized).

Korky liked being a member of a large household.

But he was confused and unhappy.

His big problem was that when he looked around at all the creatures he lived with, he couldn't help feeling rather inadequate.

The dogs could bark and run much faster than he could.

The horses could carry the Uprights on their backs.

The cow could give milk.

The pig could make a wonderful sound and could eat just about anything without getting an upset tummy.

The white mice and the hamsters could hide in a small pile of wood shavings.

The sheep could produce wool with which the Uprights could make lovely jumpers.

The snake could kill its enemies with a single bite.

And the chickens could lay eggs.

Korky found all this quite daunting.

And the more he thought about things, the more depressed he became.

He didn't tell anyone about this for a long time.

`You seem preoccupied a lot these days,' said the small dog eventually.

Korky sighed and nodded.

`You've got something on your mind?'

Another nod from Korky. `I look around and I feel so, well, so inadequate,' he said.

`Ah,' said the dog, who wasn't very good with problems of this type. (He was a very simple minded dog who could bark and catch rats very well but who didn't put a lot of thought into more complex matters.) `Have a word with the large, grey owl who lives in the hollow tree at the bottom of the field where the horses live,' said the dog. `His consulting hours are 9 pm to 11 pm Mondays to Thursdays. You shouldn't have any trouble with his fee. He charges one mouse.'

`I doubt if he'll be able to help,' sighed Korky.

But he knew he didn't have anything to lose and so when it got dark he trotted out of the house, picked up a mouse from behind the barn, and loped down the field to the hollow tree.

`I feel useless,' Korky told the owl, when he had handed over the mouse. `Everyone else seems so special. In comparison, I feel decidedly ordinary.'

`Ordinary?' said the owl. `What's ordinary?'

(The owl, being the wisest of all creatures, knew very well what `ordinary' meant. But he was so wise that he knew that if he was going to be able to help he needed to know what Korky meant by it.)

`Ordinary means not very special,' replied Korky. `All these other creatures can do things that I can't do.'

`And you think that makes them special?'

Korky nodded.

`What can you do that they can't do?'

Korky shook his head. `Nothing,' he said, sadly.

`You're wrong,' said the wise owl. He flapped his wing and uttered a leisurely too wit too woo. He liked to keep in practice. `What do you like doing best of all?'

Korky thought for a moment. `I like sleeping in the airing cupboard,' he said at last. `I sleep on the top shelf. I've worked out a way to wriggle up from the lower shelves.'

`Can the pig do that?' asked the wise owl.

`Oh no,' said Korky, with a smile.

`The cow?'

`Definitely not.'

`The horse?'

Korky shook his head.

`Can you do anything else?' asked the wise owl. `What do you do with the Uprights?'

`There's a Tiny Upright who wears a Skirt,' said Korky. `I make her happy. I sit on her lap and let her stroke my fur. That always makes her feel good.'

`Can the snake do that?

`Definitely not,' said Korky.

`Can the chickens do that?'

`No,' said Korky.

`So why do you say that the others can do things that you can't do?' said the wise owl. He gazed into the distance for a moment and produced another too wit too woo.

`I hadn't thought of it like that,' said Korky, who couldn't understand why he felt much happier than he'd felt for a long, long time.

`What you have to remember is that you're just as special in your way as the others are in their special ways,' said the wise owl. `Now go away while I eat this nice mouse you brought me. And stop feeling so sorry for yourself.'

`Yes,' said Korky, his fears and inadequacies banished. `Thank you very much Mr Owl.'

And, full of pride for the first time in his life, he skipped and danced all the way back home.

Moral

A cow drinks water and makes milk. A snake drinks water and makes poison. A cat drinks cream and goes to sleep in the airing cupboard.

7. THE GREEN, GREEN GRASS OF HOME

Daisy and Maisy were twins. They looked exactly alike. They were both two thirds black and one third white. They had identical white smudges under their chins. They walked in precisely the same way. They sounded just the same - whether they were purring or miaowing. They both had a habit of jumping up into the air and turning round if they were startled from behind. They both had one ear (the right) which drooped over a little at the tip.

For most of their short lives the two cats lived in an apartment in a converted house in a busy part of the city. They lived there with their Uprights (a nice young couple who both worked in something called corporate affairs). It was a pleasant, sunny apartment, though not very big, and since they knew no different, and had never in their lives been out of doors, Maisy and Daisy were very happy there.

But then the Uprights, together with Daisy and Maisy, moved to a house in the suburbs.

And after a long journey in two separate wicker carrying cages (which neither cat liked very much but which they didn't find too intolerable because their cages were kept side by side in the car and they could see one another through gaps in the wickerwork and, best of all, they could talk to and therefore reassure one another) Daisy and Maisy suddenly found themselves exploring a brand new house.

There was a downstairs and an upstairs.

And connecting the two there were stairs!

What a delight stairs proved to be.

The two cats raced up them. And they sat at the top and looked down. And then they raced down them. And then they raced up and down and up and down and up and down until they were exhausted and they lay on the new carpet and closed their eyes and had a catnap.

They liked the stairs.

And then, oh then, the twins discovered the garden.

The Upright who wears a Skirt opened a door and the Upright in Trousers walked out into a huge open space and called to them.

`It's OK,' he said. `Come on.'

Daisy looked at Maisy.

And Maisy looked at Daisy.

For a moment neither of them moved.

`It's all right,' said the Upright who wears a Skirt. `You'll enjoy it. We moved here so that you'd have a garden to explore. It's all yours!'

Daisy took a sniff. The air out here smelt different. Fresher. Cooler. Altogether different. She sniffed again. There were a dozen new smells. No, more than a dozen. A hundred. Smells she'd never come across before. She turned to Maisy and sniffed, showing her sister that she should sniff too.

So Maisy sniffed. And she, in turn, found herself entranced by all the new smells.

Encouraged by their Uprights, the two cats stepped a little further outside and began to explore. To begin with they stayed close together, but as they grew in confidence so they moved a little away from one another.

Eventually, they discovered a huge green expanse. A soft, neatly trimmed green lawn. Softer than the softest carpet. Bigger than the biggest carpet they'd ever seen. And full of far more exciting smells than any carpet they'd ever known. There were even creatures living in it!

They spent the rest of the day racing around on the lawn. They ran on it. They walked on it. They sat on it. They rolled on it. This, they agreed, was even better than the stairs.

`It's your lawn,' said the Uprights. `Yours to enjoy.'

Maisy and Daisy were in heaven.

On the second day in their new home Maisy and Daisy discovered the tree at the bottom of the lawn. And they found that if they used their claws they could climb up it. From the fork in the tree, where the main trunk divided into its main branches, the two cats could see over the fence.

And on the other side of the fence they saw another lawn.

The difference was that this one was much, much greener than the one in their own garden.

`If it looks that green how soft must it be?' asked Maisy.

`It must smell even better than our own lawn,' said Daisy, though to be honest she couldn't imagine how anything could smell better than their own lawn.

And so the two cats decided that they had to climb over the fence and take a look.

They went over the fence that afternoon.

And rushed onto the `oh so very green lawn.

`Ouch!' said Daisy.

`It's nasty!' said Maisy.

`Its spiky and rough,' said Daisy.

`It hurts my paws when I walk on it,' said Maisy.

`And it smells absolutely horrid,' said Daisy.

`I don't care what it looks like, I don't like it,' said Maisy.

`Nor me,' agreed Daisy.

And so the two cats went home and played on their own lawn. It wasn't quite as green as the artificial grass the neighbour had had lain down. But it was much softer and it smelt much better.

Moral

The grass may look greener on the other side. But looks aren't everything.

8. CALENDAR GIRL

Once upon a time, not very long ago, there were five cats. They were called Betty, Toby, Jeremy, Sadie and Scoobie and they all lived in identical houses in a very pleasant lane on the outskirts of a lovely, quiet little town in the heart of the very greenest stretch of gently rolling English countryside.

For several years the five cats were the very best of chums. They did everything together. One for all and all for one. They met one another every day (and sometimes, when they could all get out, every night too) and they did all the things normal, healthy cats do when they get together. They compared notes about their Uprights and shared mild moans when they were offered inferior food. They amused one another with stories of how much fun they had had trying to teach their Uprights how to hunt. (On quiet days Jeremy would tell how his Upright, who never made any attempt to hunt, would respond to the appearance of a mouse by clambering onto the nearest chair and shouting `Help!' until Sadie's Upright, who lived next door, and whose hunting skills, though described by Sadie only as barely adequate, were unanimously agreed to be the best in the lane, came round and rescued her). And, when they were out together sitting in a huddle on wintry nights when slivers of moonbeam turned innocent but gnarled and twisted tree branches into shadowy, snarling Rottweilers, scared one another with stories of ghosts and cat-chasing ghouls and did so with such efficiency that their hair all stood on end. Those were the times they loved most of all because cats, like children, love being scared when they know in their hearts that nothing terrible is going to happen to them.

They were the best of pals and it was the best of times.

And then the calendar happened.

It was, as these things usually are, unforeseen and unforeseeable.

We all of us, Uprights and cats alike, worry about the bad things which might happen to us but in the end the bad things that really do happen, and which take away our appetite in the daytime and our sleep at night, are the things we never worry about in advance because we never see them coming.

No one worried about the calendar because no one had any idea there was even going to be a calendar.

It started, as these things often do, with the very best of intentions. And it started because Scoobie's Upright had a sister who was married to a photographer and the sister and her photographer husband, who lived in the far north of the country, stopped off for the night at Scoobie's house because they were going to France for their summer holiday and needed somewhere to stay and rest before they drove down to Dover and caught the ferry across the English Channel.

And the photographer had, four days before coming away, been given a commission to deliver twelve original, engaging and amusing photographs of playful cats with which a publisher could create a calendar to be sold to those Uprights who are so besotted with cats that, when they are checking on the date of their next dental appointment, or sneaking a look to see what day of the week their birthday will be on, prefer to flick through pictures of cats rather than pictures of snow clad mountain tops or rose covered thatched cottages.

The photographer had forgotten that his wife's sister had a cat but when he entered the spare bedroom and saw Scoobie sprawled in a patch of sunlight he was so taken with the image which was, he knew, just what he wanted for the final page on his commissioned calendar, that he hurried back to the car, grabbed his camera, rushed back upstairs and took half a dozen pictures of his feline niece without Scoobie having any idea what was going on.

And that was it.

Scoobie never even knew that she was having her photograph taken. She didn't pose. She wasn't brushed or combed so that she would look her best. She was just lying, eyes shut, enjoying a patch of warmth on the window seat in the spare bedroom.

Having taken his pictures the photographer put down his camera and went downstairs to have a nice cup of tea and two slices of home- made ginger cake.

It wasn't until six months later that anyone knew that Scoobie was going to be on a calendar.

When the large, flat cardboard packet was delivered to the door one December morning neither of Scoobie's Uprights had any idea what it contained. And it wasn't until they read the note that accompanied the calendar, and turned to July, that they realised that Scoobie was famous.

That was when Scoobie's Uprights made their mistake.

Instead of simply putting the calendar on one side, ready to replace the soon to be expired (and, it has to be said, exceedingly dull) calendar containing twelve views of Australian outback, currently hanging on the kitchen wall, they rushed upstairs to where Scoobie was having her after breakfast nap.

And they showed her the calendar.

They showed her the picture of herself.

At first Scoobie didn't take much notice. It was, she saw immediately, a photograph of herself asleep on the window seat in the spare bedroom. Naturally, since she had been asleep at the time, she had no recollection of the photograph ever being taken. It did not seem anything special.

It was Scoobie's Uprights who did the damage.

`Look,' said her Upright in Trousers, flicking through the pages of the calendar to show her the other photographs. `You're Miss July!'

`You're a star!' said Scoobie's Upright who wears a Skirt, compounding the error.

Scoobie lifted up her head, examined the photograph more closely and began to purr with pride. She was a star. She was a calendar cat. She would no longer consider herself to be, or allow herself to be treated as, a normal cat. She was special. `Of course, I always knew I was special,' she told the other cats on many subsequent occasions.

She told them this when they wanted her to go mousing in the field at the bottom of Betty's garden.

`I have to be careful,' Scoobie explained. `I might get my fur muddy if I go into the field. It's a long way from home and if it rains I'll get bedraggled. I wouldn't want my fans to see my looking a mess.'

None of the other cats wanted to upset her so none of them pointed out that as far as they knew she didn't have any fans and that, as far as they all knew, the only people who had seen the calender were her own Uprights.

She reminded her friends that she was special when they wanted her to climb trees, chase butterflies in Mr Tavistock's cabbage patch or stay up all night being scared half to death by imaginary Rottweilers on the lawn behind the house where Toby lived.

And because she considered herself special she stopped doing the things she'd enjoyed so much before she'd become special.

She stopped hanging around outside the fishmonger's shop, waiting for the fishermonger's boy to put out the bin full of unwanted fish heads. She said it wasn't the sort of thing a cat like her ought to be seen doing.

She started staying indoors more and more often. She lay on the window seat where she had been photographed by her Upright's sister's husband, trying to recreate the pose which had made her special. She spent hours sitting in the kitchen staring up at the calendar and wondering how long it would be before July came and her picture took pride of place.

Scoobie's Upright in Trousers used to tear the pages off the calendar as the months went by. He would screw them up the literally out of date pages and toss them into the kitchen rubbish bin along with discarded tea bags, broken egg shells and the bedraggled looking cabbage leaves that no one, not even the caterpillars, ever eat.

Scoobie looked forward to July but at the same time she half dreaded it. What would happen at the end of her month? What would her Upright in Trousers do with her photograph? Every day of the month she stared up at herself and wondered. Having her photograph on a calendar no longer seemed quite such a good thing. Now that she thought of herself as being special she was frightened that she would stop being special. What had been a source of such pride had quickly become a source of great anxiety. Suddenly being Miss July didn't seem quite as important as it had seemed before.

And suddenly Scoobie knew that there was something she had to do. She knew what it was that was really important in her life.

She went outside and set off in search of Betty, Sadie, Toby and Jeremy.

It was raining slightly and it didn't take long to find them. They were sheltering on the porch of the summerhouse in Toby's garden.

`If you're doing anything exciting today would you mind if I joined in?' Scoobie asked, rather tentatively.

`Of course not,' said Toby immediately. He paused. `But are you sure you don't mind? You won't worry about, you know, people seeing you or about your fur getting messy?'

`I've been a bit of a fool,' said Scoobie softly, looking down at the ground. It wasn't easy for her to admit that she'd been wrong. It's not something cats normally do and none of them have much practice at it. `I thought I was special,' she said. `Just because I had my picture on a calendar.'

`But you are special,' said Jeremy.

Scoobie looked up, expectantly. `Do you think so?' she asked. `It was only a photograph on a calendar.'

`Not because of that,' said Sadie, dismissively.

`No.' said Toby. `You're special because you're you. You'll always be special to us.'

Scoobie felt her heart swell. She was so happy she wanted to cry.

`We thought we'd climb a tree this afternoon,' said Betty. `We've never climbed the north side of the Oak at the bottom of my garden.'

`It'll be a bit of a challenge,' said Jeremy.

`I'd love to try it!' said Scoobie.

`Great!' said Toby. `It was going to be a special sort of day anyway. Having you back with us will make it a really extra special day.'

And it was.

When Scoobie went back home that evening, after a tremendous adventure climbing the north side of Betty's oak tree, she felt happy for the first time in months. She didn't even bother to look up at the calendar on the wall.

Moral

If you stand in your own shadow, your world will be dim and your vision will be limited.

9. THE GENTLE ART OF SITTING ON A LAP

You couldn't find two cats who had less in common than Tinker and Charlotte.

Tinker was 17 years old and weighed as much as a small child. When he moved about (which he did not do any more often than hunger and nature required) he did so like a tanker: slow, steady and seemingly unstoppable. Even as a kitten he had been large and rather slow. Nimble was not a word anyone had ever applied to him. Tinker had two main interests: eating and sleeping, but laps were the love of his life. Tinker liked sitting on laps in the same way that small boys like penknives and little girls like dolls. Tinker loved laps of all kinds. Thin ones, fat ones, smooth ones, lumpy ones, still ones, jerky ones - he loved them all. The Uprights with whom he lived never grumbled about Tinker's apparent lack of drive or ambition and never wanted him to do anything else other than to be a lap cat. They enjoyed having him on their laps.

Charlotte, ten years younger, was dainty, slim and graceful. While Tinker moved about like a tanker she danced around the house and garden like a dinghy bobbing about on a storm troubled sea. She was incapable of moving slowly and as unlikely as a butterfly to move steadily in one direction. She looked delicate and fragile but this was misleading. She was, in truth, a feisty and mischievous cat who loved nothing better than climbing up trees and chasing birds (though, in her defence it has to be said that she never actually caught any). She was proud of her ability to climb any tree she could find. She constantly looked astonished, as though the entire world had been deliberately designed to surprise her.

`Let's go for a run in the garden!' Charlotte would say to Tinker. `The sun is shining. It's a beautiful day. Let's race up a tree.'

Tinker would open one eye and look at her. `Why would we want to race up a tree?' he would ask. `What will we do when we get to the top?'

`Race back down again, of course!' answered Charlotte, as though the answer was so obvious that only a complete idiot would ask the question.

`I don't want to race anywhere,' Tinker would tell Charlotte, for the millionth time. `I'm a lap cat. That's what I like doing and that's what I'm good at.' He would sigh deeply, shudder lightly at the very idea of such pointless and exhausting activity, close the eye which he had so reluctantly wasted energy in opening, and go back to sleep. He didn't think badly of Charlotte. He didn't wonder why she was wasting her life racing about with such a transparent lack of purpose. It never occurred to him to think that she might be better off learning how to sit on a lap. Some cats climb trees and some lie on laps. And that, thought Tinker, was simply that.

He did try to explain.

He explained that there is more to sitting on a lap than meets the eye. He pointed out that cats who sit on laps (and do it well) are forging a strong link between cats and Uprights. He told her that it is just as difficult to sit on a lap properly as it is to climb a tree. It is, he pointed out, a little bit an art and a little bit a science. And he bemoaned the fact the way that young cats look down on sitting on laps.

`It's a dying art,' he said. `You have to mould yourself to the lap; you have to move when the lap moves; you have to stay still when the lap is still; you have to be forever alert to the possibility that the owner of the lap may want to terminate the sitting; and you have to know how to teach the owner of the lap how to get the best out of you.' He sighed and licked his chest for a moment. `You young cats just want to be off out all the time,' he said. There was a long pause. `You simply don't understand about laps.'

It was all a waste of time, of course. Charlotte didn't understand, didn't want to understand and wasn't impressed by his arguments. And eventually she got tired of asking Tinker to climb trees or run around the garden. Slowly, she realised that he was not a `climbing trees' sort of cat. And slowly, and rather sadly, she began to think less of him.

It didn't happen overnight, of course.

But it happened.

She began to look at him rather critically and she found herself wondering what sort of cat would waste his life doing nothing but sit on laps.

She wasn't the sort of cat who naturally thought badly of other cats. She regarded herself as being broadminded and generally uncritical. She was, she thought, a liberal sort of cat, prepared to live and let live without imposing her own beliefs and preferences on others.

But when it came to Tinker she had something of a blind spot. She simply couldn't understand how a perfectly healthy cat could deliberately allow himself to waste his days sitting on laps. It didn't seem right. And as the days and weeks and months went by it troubled her more and more.

And eventually she began to despise him.

She looked down her pretty little nose at him and if she had known what a sneer was, or had ever learned how to sneer, she would have sneered at him.

Tinker knew, of course.

He had been around a long time and it wasn't the first time he'd been the object of another cat's inadequately concealed contempt.

But although he'd never really minded before this time it did hurt. He liked Charlotte a lot. He thought she was fun and kind and warm hearted and bright and generous and loyal and, generally speaking, a good cat. (There was no higher praise in Tinker's mind, than to describe another feline as a `good cat'.) He regarded Charlotte as the sort of cat he would have been proud to have had as a daughter, if he'd ever had the time to spare away from learning how to sit on laps.

He wanted to explain to her that he was every little proud as proud of his skills as a lap cat as she was proud of her skills at climbing trees. He wanted her to understand because he liked her. But he didn't know what to say to convince her and so he said nothing. And instead of saying something he nursed his sadness deep inside him where it developed into an ache in his heart.

And as his sadness grew so his pride and self-belief slowly shrank. Within a very short space of time he had lost the confidence it had taken him a lifetime to find. He began to wonder if he really had been wasting his life. Maybe he should have spent his years climbing trees.

And then Charlotte injured her leg.

She fell from a branch thirty feet up a beech tree in a neighbour's garden and it took her two hours to drag herself back home again afterwards. She couldn't manage to drag herself through the cat flap and was in a terrible state when the Upright in Trousers found her lying on the step outside the back door. They took her straight to the vet who kept in his hospital for several days. For a while the Uprights didn't think she would survive.

`You must keep her indoors for two weeks,' instructed the vet, when they were told that they could collect her. The vet was a kindly man who wore a three piece tweed suit and a large droopy moustache. `Put a litter tray down for her and keep her in the house. If she rests then the break will heal but if she damages that leg any more she'll be crippled for life.'

Charlotte didn't like being kept indoors.

She knew it was for her own good. But that didn't make it any easier.

On her second day of her convalescence Charlotte's Upright in Trousers picked her up, sat down on the sofa next to the Upright who wears a Skirt, and Charlotte on his lap. Tinker was already drowsing on the lap of the Upright who wears a Skirt.

Charlotte curled herself up into a ball and tried to relax. It was nice to be lying on something warm. Once, a long time ago, she'd heard Tinker describe lying on a lap as having `underfur heating'.

But, somehow, it wasn't quite as pleasant as she'd hoped it would be. And however much she wriggled she just couldn't quite manage to get comfy. She got up, turned round (with some difficulty, partly because of the uneven nature of the Upright's lap and partly because of her injury) and lay down again. It wasn't any better.

`Just try and let yourself go,' whispered Tinker.

Charlotte looked across at him. She'd assumed the other cat was asleep.

`Don't try so hard,' suggested Tinker softly. `Allow yourself to mould to the lap, rather than trying to get the lap to fit you.'

`There's a great gap in the middle,' complained Charlotte.

`Of course there is!' said Tinker, with a smile in his voice. `But if you let yourself fit the lap you'll soon be very comfortable.'

Charlotte tried very hard. But, to her astonishment, it wasn't as easy as she'd assumed it would be.

`I keep thinking I'm going to fall,' she said.

`You won't,' Tinker assured her. `The Upright will automatically adjust to stop you falling.'

`But I might fall!'

`Look down,' said Tinker. `How far is it to the carpet?'

`Two feet at the most.'

`Exactly,' said Tinker gently. `Even with your bad leg a fall of two feet isn't going to kill you.'

`I suppose not,' agreed Charlotte, rather reluctantly.

`You won't fall,' said Tinker. `But you can't make the lap fit you. It's up to you to make your body fit the Upright's lap.'

`Are all laps like this?' asked Charlotte.

`No,' said Tinker. `Every lap is different.'

`They're all different?' cried Charlotte, horrified. `How on earth do you manage to fit onto laps so easily if they're all different?'

`Experience,' said Tinker calmly. `When you've sat on a few laps you'll soon get the hang of it.'

There was silence for a while as Charlotte struggled to adapt herself to the Upright's uneven lap. Eventually she managed to get into a position which enabled her to relax just a little.

`It's not as easy as I thought,' said Charlotte softly. `I don't expect it's as hard as climbing trees,' said Tinker.

There was silence for a while.

`To be honest I think it's much harder,' confessed Charlotte. `I don't know how you make it look so easy.'

She did as Tinker had suggested and relaxed into the Upright's lap. Slowly, she began to feel more comfortable. And she began to purr with satisfaction.

Tinker said nothing. But inside his chest the heart ache melted away just as the winter snows disappear in the growing warmth of springtime. He was relieved to have won respect from Charlotte. But he was also pleased to have gained back his self-respect.

Moral

It doesn't matter what you do. What matters is how proud you are of what you do.

10. NO TIME TO SMELL THE FLOWERS

Hyacinth and Mimi lived in a large suburban house with two large Uprights and three small ones. Hyacinth was a multi-coloured tortoiseshell and Mimi was a white short haired Persian. They were both very beautiful and they both knew that they were both very beautiful.

They were also both very fond of fresh mouse.

They were well looked after and well fed by their Uprights. If you'd asked them, neither of them would have been able to produce a single complaint. Meals were served twice a day on fresh plates. And their Uprights never offered them anything but the very best food available. When they had fish it was trout or salmon. When they had meat it was fresh chicken or turkey. Occasionally, they were given duck. When they were given food out of a tin they were given the most expensive brand an up market supermarket could provide.

But, as Hyacinth once said, you simply can't beat an occasional fresh mouse.

The two cats looked after their mousal needs themselves.

`If I'm going to eat a mouse I like to know it's one I've caught myself,' said Hyacinth. `I like to keep my paw in. You never know when you might need to catch your own food on a regular basis.'

But they hunted in very different ways.

Hyacinth went out hunting only when she felt like a fresh mouse. This was usually no more than two, or perhaps three, times a week. `It's enough to keep my paw in,' she said. `And I don't really want to eat fresh mouse more than two or three times a week.' On the days when she didn't go hunting Hyacinth would laze around. On sunny days she would find a pleasant spot in the garden and bask in the sunshine. On cold days she would curl up beside a radiator.

Mimi, on the other hand, was a very busy cat. She went hunting every day. And since she was very good at hunting she nearly always returned home with a mouse to eat.

She caught so many mice that even though she ate two or three a day (and sometimes ate so many that she made herself quite uncomfortably ill) she simply couldn't eat everything she caught.

`I'm getting a bit fed up of fresh mouse,' she confessed to Hyacinth one day.

Hyacinth stared at her in horror. `Fed up of fresh mouse?' she cried. `Why?'

`I catch too many,' explained Mimi. `And when I've caught them I don't like to waste them.'

`Then why not go hunting less often?' asked Hyacinth. `If you hunted less often, and caught fewer mice, you wouldn't feel the need to eat so many. You'd enjoy your hunting more. You'd enjoy your mice meals far more. You wouldn't run the risk of ridding the neighbourhood of mice. (This was a real fear of Hyacinth's, though she hadn't liked to mention it before.) And you certainly wouldn't be fed up of fresh mouse.'

Mimi, whose best friends would not have described her as a great intellectual, thought about this for a while. `You know, Hyacinth,' she said eventually. `I think you're right.'

`You've been busy for no reason,' said Hyacinth. `Take time out to smell the grass and the flowers you'll enjoy life far more.' And that's exactly what Mimi did. She might not have been the brightest cat in the neighbourhood. But she wasn't stupid either. And she knew that what Hyacinth said made sense.

Moral

It's not enough to be busy. The big question is: what are you busy about?

11. THE SUN CAT

Pickles was a sun worshipper.

He enjoyed chasing birds, catching mice, climbing trees and doing all the other things other cats like doing. He was perfectly normal in that respect.

But lying in the sun was his favourite activity.

Pickles, who liked to describe himself as the Sun Cat, had, over the years, discovered that there were five really good spots for sun bathing. Each of the five had its own special advantage.

Here is the list:

1. On the rocking chair in the bay window of the Uprights' bedroom.

This spot was good for mornings only since in the afternoons the sun was always on the other side of the house. This was Pickles' favourite spot during winter mornings when it was far too cold to be sitting outside.

2. In the middle of the thick rug in the living room. Pickles had, over the years, discovered that there was one spot on this rug which kept the sun from early afternoon until sunset. As long as there was some sunshine filtering through the net curtains it really didn't matter to Pickles how cold or windy it was outside.

3. On the wickerwork chair in the conservatory.

There was no heating in the conservatory so this spot wasn't much use during the winter months. But it had always been good for sunbathing during early spring or late autumn and as far as Pickles was concerned it had improved from `good' to `excellent' after the Uprights had put a couple of cushions on the wickerwork chair. The big advantage with this spot was that because of the position of the conservatory it was perfectly possible to sunbathe in one position for the whole day.

4. On the paved patio outside the dining room windows.

Pickles had been quite young when he had discovered that paving slabs absorb and retain the heat from the sun. This phenomenon meant that lying on hard paving wasn't necessary as unpleasant as one might imagine to be. Once he had settled down in the sun Pickles usually liked to stay where he was. He was an enthusiastic believer in energy conservation and wasn't keen on unnecessary activity of any kind. But hard paving slabs are hard paving slabs and even Pickles found that he needed to move around a little from time to time. The good thing about warm paving slabs was that it meant that Pickles could move about from one warm spot to another warm spot. This was Pickle's favourite spot in the early morning (when there was still dew on the grass), after summer showers (ditto), on cool days when there was a slight breeze and on Sunday mornings when the Upright in Trousers cut the grass (and invariably made a great deal of additional noise shouting at the machine he used to cut it with).

5. On the lawn.

Pickles was not a cat who liked to lie in the shade and there were surprisingly few places on the lawn which were good for day-long sunbathing. The perfect spot, Pickles had found, was six feet north of the vegetable patch and five feet to the left of the chrysanthemum bed. This was where Pickles spent the greater part of every day during late spring, summer and early autumn. He liked sunbathing on grass. It felt soft and smelt good and if you woke up and needed a little light entertainment there were always plenty of small insects rushing around as though their lives depended on it.

The one thing missing from this list was, of course, somewhere to sunbathe when there was no sun.

This was something that had been a worry to Pickles for as long as he could remember. And, as the years went by, he got no closer to finding a solution.

Until one day in January.

It was raining hard, as it had been doing for what seemed like weeks, and the sun was nowhere to be seen. It was, in fact, nearly a month since Pickles had seen anything remotely resembling a sunbeam - and even then it had been thin, watery and insipid and had borne very little resemblance to the real thing.

Pickles, needless to say, was feeling rather glum and was moping about the house struggling to find somewhere to settle. He'd spent half an hour outside a hole in the skirting board because he'd felt sure he'd heard a mouse inside. But nothing had emerged. He'd tried to climb into the airing cupboard but a pile of towels had fallen off a shelf and nearly knocked him out. He'd gone out into the garden for two minutes and come back through the cat flap at full speed. It had taken him twenty minutes to lick the wet soil off his paws. He hated wet soil almost as much as he loved the sun.

He had tried taking a nap on the thick rug in the living room. But without the sun it seemed rather sad and pointless.

In fact, without the sun, everything seemed rather sad and pointless.

And so he continued to mope around the house looking for something to do or somewhere to sit.

Eventually he found himself in the small room that the Upright in Trousers used as a study. It wasn't a room that Pickles usually bothered with. There was a desk, a chair, a bookcase, a filing cabinet and a telephone. Not much else.

Pickles jumped up onto the desk. There were some papers there, neatly sorted into three piles. He lay down on the middle and largest pile. It was pleasant enough. But not exactly satisfying. He looked up. There was a table lamp on the desk. He reached up and touched it. To his surprise the lamp moved. He touched it again. It moved back to where it had been. It seemed to be held up by a simple system of arms and springs. He sat up as high as he could and tapped the lamp again. He could, he realised move it to wherever he wanted. He looked down. There was a small white button fitted to the base of the lamp. He tapped the button.

SUNSHINE!

Suddenly the desk was flooded with sunshine.

Bright, warm sunshine.

Pickles couldn't believe it.

He looked up. The lamp was shining brightly down onto the desk. Onto him.

He tapped the button again.

The sunshine went. Instantly. One minute it was there. The next minute it had gone.

He tapped the button.

SUNSHINE!

He reached up and moved the lamp, positioning it carefully so that the pool of sunshine centered on the papers in the middle of the desk.

He lay down and closed his eyes.

This was just like summer.

Now Pickles had a sixth spot for sunbathing. And he had round the year sunshine.

Moral

The sun is always shining somewhere in your life - if you're prepared to look for it.

12. THE WISDOM OF A KITTEN

Snowflake was the prettiest cat anyone (including her) had ever seen. She was quite matter-of-fact about this and not in the slightest bit conceited.

Her prettiness was just a fact of life and as far as she was concerned there was as little point in being vain about it as there would have been in her being jealous if she'd ever come across a cat who was prettier (something which, she felt, was fairly unlikely but which she didn't automatically rule out).

Snowflake would have happily traded all her good looks to be able to consider herself a `wise' cat.

She regarded beauty as something that was very superficial. What she really wanted was to be able to consider herself to be a wise cat. Not necessarily a clever cat, for that, she realised, is something quite different. But a wise cat.

To be a wise cat, she thought, would be something of which a cat could justifiably be proud.

Everywhere she went she would listen carefully to what other cats had to say in the hope that one day she would learn the secret of wisdom. She was so keen to learn the secret that she would even listen to Uprights talking - even though every cat knows that wisdom is not a trait usually found among Uprights.

`How can I become wise?' she asked an elderly tomcat whom she met in an alleyway near to her home.

`Why are you asking me?' the tomcat asked her.

`Because you are old,' she told him. (Cats, it should be noted, are not sensitive about their age in the way that Uprights can sometimes be. Indeed, most cats regard a great age as something of which to be proud.)

`You are making a mistake in assuming that wisdom necessarily comes with age,' said the tomcat. `If I was wise do you think I would still be skulking around in alleyways looking for fights?'

`How do I become wise?' she asked an old Persian who lived two doors away.

`What makes you think that I know the answer to that question?' asked the old Persian.

`You always seem very wise,' replied Snowflake.

`That's because I never say very much,' said the Persian. `To be honest I'm really quite stupid. But I realised that if I never said anything much then other cats would not realise just how stupid I am.' She sighed. `To my surprise what happened was that cats mistook my silence for wisdom.'

Every time she asked her question Snowflake seemed to get no closer to the answer.

In the end she obtained the answer to her question from the unlikeliest of sources.

She was beginning to despair of ever discovering the missing secret when, while walking in a garden near to her home one day, she looked for somewhere to take cover from an unexpected shower of rain. The only place to shelter was a small garden shed. The door was open, so she popped inside. Hearing a sound she looked around and saw a little black and white kitten edging towards the door.

`Where are you going?' asked Snowflake.

`Just leaving,' said the kitten, obviously nervous.

`Why?' demanded Snowflake. `It's still raining.'

`This is a very small shed and you're much bigger than I am,' replied the kitten.

`And you thought I might object to sharing it with you?'

`I'd rather get wet than end up in a fight with you,' said the kitten. `If I get wet I'll soon dry out. But if I end up in a fight I'll definitely come off worst.'

Snowflake smiled. `Please stay,' she said. `I don't want to fight you.' She thought for a moment, struck by the good sense of the kitten's reply. `You seem very wise for such a young kitten,' she said.

`Thank you,' said the kitten. `But I really don't think I'm wise at all.'

`I think you're very modest,' said Snowflake. `Will you tell me what made you do and say what you just did and said?'

`Oh that's easy,' replied the kitten. `I always ask myself what would a smart cat do. Then I do that.'

Moral

The wise cat isn't necessarily the wisest cat, but may just be the cat who does what the wisest cat would do.

13. THE CAT WHO DIDN'T LIKE HEIGHTS

Columbus stood on the branch and looked down. He felt dizzy and distinctly unwell. He hated heights. Not for the first time he asked himself what he was doing up a tree. Despite his name Columbus was not a great explorer.

`Let's go up higher!' said Hector. Hector was a ginger tomcat who was the undisputed leader of their small gang.

`I don't think we can go much higher,' said Willy, rather nervously. Willy, a black and white cat was, like Columbus, a born follower. Like Columbus he was only up the tree because Hector had said that was what they were going to do.

`This is a very nice height,' said Columbus, who would much rather have been at home sitting by the fire.

`Don't be wimpy!' said Hector. He looked up. `We can get much higher.'

`Why do we want to go higher?' asked Columbus. `The view from here is really very good.' He risked another peep down but quickly closed his eyes. He was now getting very worried about he was going to get down the tree.

`Why?' snarled Hector. `Why? Because we can. Because it's exciting. Because there are more branches up there. Because if we don't we'll be wimps. Because I say we should.' He reached up with his front paws, dug his claws into the tree's bark and sprang upwards from the branch he was standing on. Moments later he was perched on a branch another eight feet above their heads. `Come on!' he called. `The view from up here is even better.'

`I'm coming,' said Willy. He sounded terrified and clearly didn't want to go any higher. He turned to Columbus. `Are you coming?'

Columbus looked at Willy and knew that the fear and anxiety he could see in Willy's eyes had to be clearly visible in his own too. He was scared. Why, he asked himself, was he doing this? Why was he scrambling up a tree he didn't want to climb? Why was he putting himself through so much misery? What was the purpose?

During the last year he'd been in similar situations many times before but these were not questions he'd ever thought to ask himself before.

But now that he was asking himself the questions he felt he had to find some answers.

And the only answer he could come up with was `fear'.

He had climbed forty feet up a tree, and was preparing to go even higher, because he was afraid of what Hector would have said if he'd stayed on the ground.

He was afraid of what Hector would think of him. He was more afraid of what Hector would think of him than he was of falling from the tree.

`Are you coming?' whispered Willy, again.

`Come on you two!' Hector called down. `Are you afraid?'

Suddenly, Columbus realised how stupid it all was.

If he fell from the tree he would probably die. At the very least he would break some bones. If he got stuck in the tree, and couldn't get down, he would have to be rescued. Men with ladders would be called. How excruciatingly embarrassing that would be.

And if he didn't climb any higher? What then? What would happen if he defied

Hector and scrambled down the tree - instead of going higher?

Hector would sneer.

Hector would call him a coward.

He would probably lose Hector's friendship.

He thought about this.

Did he really, really care what Hector thought of him?

Did he care if he was no longer considered suitable to be a member of Hector's small gang?

No.

He didn't care what Hector thought. He really didn't.

`Come on you two cowards!' called Hector, looking down from his perch way, way above them.

`I'm going down now,' Columbus called back. He thought about adding that he was hungry or bored. But he didn't. Just that he was going down.

`Are you really?' asked Willy. `Going down?'

`Yes.'

`I think I'll come with you.'

Slowly, hesitantly, carefully, Columbus began to edge backwards down the tree. He tried not to look down too much. Above him Willy followed.

`Where are you two going?' yelled Hector. `What are you doing? We're supposed to be climbing a tree!'

They ignored him.

`I don't want you in my gang anymore,' said Hector.

They carried on climbing backwards down the tree. The nearer they got to the ground the better Columbus felt.

`Without us he hasn't got a gang,' said Willy quietly.

Columbus laughed a little to himself. He felt better than he'd felt for months. He felt free again. Free to do what he wanted to do.

`My Uprights have got a log fire,' he said to Willy. `Would you like to come in and have a nap in front of it? I'm sure they won't mind.'

`I'd like that,' said Willy. `I'd like that very much.'

High up in the tree they could hear Hector. He was still busily berating them.

Columbus felt good.

When he got back home maybe the Upright who wears a Skirt would put out a saucer of milk. And maybe a little fish.

Moral

Only when you know why you do things will you know whether they are worth doing. (Sometimes the question to ask is `Why?' At other times the question to ask is `Why not?' The trick is knowing which of these questions is the right one to ask.)

14. PRINCESS GRACEFUL AND THE PRINCE OF CHARMS

Robert and Martha Wilson were people who liked to be in control. He worked as a partner at a firm of solicitors in very posh offices in a very smart district of London. He specialised in international corporate law and charged fees that would have made a banker blush. She was an interior decorator with a flourishing business of her own. She wouldn't even consider decorating anything less than a castle, a chateau or a twelve room apartment in the swishest part of town. Their clients were almost as rich and successful as they were.

They both got up at six every morning.

He had breakfast, exercised in their private gym and was picked up by a chauffeur driven car at eight sharp. The morning's newspapers (the Financial Times, Wall Street Journal, International Herald Tribune, Times and Daily Telegraph) were laid in a neat pile on the back seat so that by the time he reached his office at nine he would have read his way through them all.

After swimming thirty laps in their private pool she spent thirty minutes with her private trainer and then thirty minutes with her personal hairdresser/beautician. She left for her nearby office at 9.30 am. She drove herself in a yellow Porsche. By the time she got to her office her personal assistant would have sifted and sorted the day's mail and the overnight faxes and emails.

In the evenings they both arrived home at seven unless they had a `do' to attend in the city in which case they would meet at their pied a terre where they would bathe, change and be ready for whatever excitements the evening held for them.

Their main house was run, with Teutonic efficiency, by a French housekeeper, a Swedish maid and a Belgian gardener (who was married to the French housekeeper and having an affair with the Swedish maid). In the city they relied on the concierge service in the building where they had their pied a terre.

Everything in their lives ran smoothly and methodically. Dental and medical emergencies were slotted into their days with pre-arranged efficiency. Domestic problems (malfunctioning boiler, blocked chimney, unhappy washing machine) were all dealt with in their absence by their staff. The chauffeur kept their car serviced and one of Mr Wilson's personal assistants made sure that all the paperwork (insurance and so on) that might otherwise have blighted their lives was dealt with on their behalf.

Only two things in their lives weren't under their constant and perfect control.

And those weren't things.

They were the Princess Graceful II and the Prince of Charms III.

The Princess Graceful II and the Prince of Charms III were seven year old Burmese cats and they recognised no earthly master or mistress.

For the first five years that they shared a world together Mr and Mrs Wilson had attempted to impose some discipline on their cats.

`Come here!' Mr Wilson would say.

`Sit there!' Mrs Wilson would say.

`Don't do that!' Mr Wilson would command.

`Don't lie there!' Mrs Wilson would command.

They might as well have been ordering the wind to blow.

The Princess Graceful II and the Prince of Charms III ignored every instruction they were given.

Naturally, Mr and Mrs Wilson found this almost unbearably difficult to accept.

They were accustomed to getting what they wanted, when they wanted it. Like spoilt children they did not cope well when they were thwarted.

Their frustration mounted. They were even beginning to consider the awful possibility that the cats would have to go.

Until, one day, Mr Wilson discovered a solution to their problem.

The solicitor and the interior decorator were sitting in their drawing room (white hand-made rugs on a bleached wood floor, white leather sofa, white leather chairs) when the two cats wandered in together (they hardly ever went anywhere without one another).

Slowly, the Princess Graceful II sauntered over to one of the unoccupied chairs. She looked up and prepared to jump.

`Don't...' began Mrs Wilson.

The Princess Graceful II jumped up onto the chair, turned round three times and settled down.

Equally deliberately the Prince of Charms III followed her. He too turned round three times before settling down alongside the Princess Graceful II.

`Please lie on the chair,' said Mr Wilson, quietly.

The cats ignored him completely but his wife looked at him.

He beamed back at her.

`What on earth are you doing?' she demanded. `You know how I hate them being on the chairs. Their paws are dirty and they moult.'

`But they never take any notice,' said her husband. `They never do what we tell them to do.'

`Noooo...,' agreed Mrs Wilson. `That's true.'

`Lie down there and go to sleep,' said Mr Wilson to the two cats.

Mrs Wilson, puzzled, looked at him.

`Now they're doing what I want them to do!' said Mr Wilson, very pleased with himself.

`But...' began Mrs Wilson.

`This is the answer,' said Mr Wilson, very pleased with himself. `I'm going to tell them what to do immediately after they've done it. That way I'll be in charge.'

`Oh,' said Mrs Wilson. `I see what you mean.'

She stared across at the two cats.

The Prince of Charms III sat up and licked his back.

`Lick your back,' she said.

`There you are,' said Mr Wilson. `There's a bit of a time delay but he's doing exactly what you tell him.'

`Oh this is wonderful!' cried Mrs Wilson, delightedly.

And so everything ended very happily.

Moral

The only way to get a cat to do what you want it to do, is to tell it to do what it's just done.

15. THE GOOD LISTENER

The two cats were lying together on the grass. From a distance they seemed to be asleep.

But they weren't.

`I've had a really rough few months,' said Jack, a three year old black and white cat. He had white socks and a white patch under his throat but otherwise he was completely black.

The other cat didn't say anything but made one of those strange, non-committal noises cats always make when they don't have anything to say but they want to make it clear that they are listening and prepared to be sympathetic. It sounded a bit like `Hgm.'

`First of all my Uprights had the whole house painted,' said Jack. `Do you have any idea how awful that is? The smell. The disturbance. Uprights - complete strangers - wandering everywhere. The noise. Constant noise. They put the radio on when they arrive and they leave it switched on all day.'

`Hgm,' said the other cat.

`It wasn't as if they just did the outside,' said Jack. `That would have been bad enough, heaven knows. But they did the inside too. Every room in the house. Even the airing cupboard. For weeks I didn't eat anything that didn't taste of paint. I'll swear that even the mice I caught in the house tasted of paint.'

The other cat nodded slightly.

`I really don't know why they bothered,' said Jack. `I liked it the way it was before. It was comfortable. It felt lived in. Now everywhere is shiny and bright. We're all terrified of being the first to mark the paintwork.'

The other cat nodded again. `Hgm,' he said.

`Then there were the visitors. I hate visitors. There were four of them. Two big ones and two small ones. I hate the small ones most. More noise. We had two weeks of peace after the painters left. Then the visitors came. They stayed for a week. Seven whole days of purgatory. The two small ones seemed to think it was their role in life to chase me round the house. Every time I found somewhere quiet for a snooze I was woken up.' Jack shivered at the memory. `It was awful,' he said.

`Hgm,' murmured the other cat, sympathetically.

`Then they bought a dog.'

`Hgm hgm,' said the other cat, more audibly this time.

`A dog! One of those wretched little yappy things. Yap yap yap yap yap. Day and night. I don't think it even stops yapping when it eats. It certainly yaps when it's asleep because I've seen it. Why would they buy something like that? Why would they want something like that in the house? Are they mad?' Jack sighed. `A yappy dog,' he said. `Decorators, visitors and a yappy dog.'

`Hgm,' said the other cat.

`Still, it could be worse,' said Jack. `They aren't likely to have the place decorated again for a year or two. They were as fed up with the visitors as I was. And the dog is terrified of me. Every time he sees me he runs away. I scratched his nose and he didn't like it. Yappy dogs are all the same. Lots of bark and no real bite to them.'

`Hgm,' agreed the other cat.

`I feel a bit better now we've talked about things,' said Jack. He paused. `You've been a great help. Having a chat about things does help, doesn't it?'

`Hgm,' said the other cat.

`Thanks,' said Jack. `I really appreciate it.'

Moral

Listening is one of the most potent forms of communication.

16. THE BIG MOUSE HUNT

Charlie, Slinkie and Buster did everything together. Charlie was a six year old black and white cat with an affection for fishing, sleeping in front of log fires and chasing leaves. Slinkie was a five year old mackerel tabby who loved tinned salmon, moonlight and long walks in long grass. Buster was a seven year old marmalade cat who liked to pretend he was much tougher than he was. (He was, if the truth be told, one of the softest, shyest, nicest cats anyone could ever imagine meeting.)

The three of them lived, together with the Uprights who cared for them, in smart terraced houses in a small country market town. The houses in which they lived had very small gardens but since all the gardens in the area were separated from one another by low fences none of the three cats had any difficulty at all in visiting one another and exploring the gardens belonging to the Uprights who had not yet been fortunate enough to find themselves looking after cats.

There were plenty of things to do in the neighbourhood.

When the weather was fine they sometimes spent their days lazing by a stream which ran along the bottom of the gardens. Or they spent time fishing in a goldfish pond belonging to a rather excitable old Colonel. Sometimes they jumped across the stream (it was very narrow in several places) and had adventures wandering around on the school playing fields on the other side of the water. Or, if they were feeling less energetic, they just lazed around and told one another tall stories about past adventures (real and imaginary).

When the weather was poor they found their fun indoors. (These were not tough cats. They didn't like being outside in cold or wet weather.) There were plenty of sheds, summerhouses and garages where they could meet. One of their favourite haunts was an old barn which was used to store mowers, rollers, white line markers and other paraphernalia used by the groundsman who looked after the playing fields. The barn had, over the years, been used to store all sorts of interesting things - including a good deal of grass seed - and it was, therefore, a permanent home for a large number of mice. (There were, indeed, so many mice living there that some senior rodents had asked serious questions about the level of overcrowding.)

It was in the barn, one wet Wednesday afternoon, that the three of them met Tony, a young and rather fiery Siamese who was proud of the fact that his parents had both been Best in Class winners at several important regional cat shows.

Tony was already there when they arrived.

`What do you want?' he demanded, showing them his teeth and making sure his hackles raised. `This is my hunting ground.'

`Hello!' said Charlie, bravely refusing to show just how nervous he felt. He introduced himself and his two companions. `We come here often but I haven't seen you here before,' he added, tactfully disputing Tony's territorial claim without actually doing so.

`I moved into the area last Saturday,' said Tony. He told them his name. `My parents were both Best in Class winners at several important regional cat shows.'

`Have you caught anything yet?' asked Buster.

`Almost,' answered Tony. `Just before you came I nearly caught an enormous one. Biggest one I've ever seen. I was just about to pounce when he ran away. I think he probably heard you coming.'

`Never mind,' said Buster. `The place is teeming with mice. We'll catch dozens in no time at all.'

`We usually let them go when we've caught them,' said Charlie. `Then we can catch them again another time.'

`There's one mouse I've caught nine times,' said Buster. `We've become quite good chums.'

`How can you be chums with a mouse?' demanded Tony indignantly.

`Oh, you know,' said Buster. `When you catch someone that often you get to know their little ways. It's easy to grow fond of them. I could never eat him.'

`Sentimental poppycock,' snarled Tony. `Mice are for eating. I eat all the ones I catch.'

Charlie, Slinkie and Buster couldn't think of anything to say to this and so they stayed silent. And the four of them then settled down to wait.

Buster caught his first mouse after just six minutes. The mouse, who'd been hiding behind an old, opened bag of grass seed, made a run for it and underestimated Buster's speed from a standing start.

`Got one!' said Buster, holding onto the mouse with his right front paw.

`That one's mine!' said Tony.

`How do you make that out?' asked Buster.

`I nearly caught that one earlier on,' said Tony. `Just before you got here.'

`But you didn't catch him!' said Buster.

`I would have done if you hadn't turned up,' argued Tony.

`OK,' sighed Buster, who just over an hour or so earlier had enjoyed a big lunch of `meaty chunks in a savoury sauce' and wasn't feeling at all hungry. `You have him then.' He lifted his paw and moved out of the way to let Tony take over. But Tony was far too slow and the mouse disappeared.

`Your fault!' snarled Tony. `Clumsy!'

`I thought you'd be quicker than that,' said Buster.

`I'm as quick as anyone here!' snapped back Tony. `My Great Uncle Blackie was champion ratter at the Bridgend Coal Works in the 1970s. He averaged five kills a night for just under twelve years.'

The four of them settled down again.

This time it was Charlie's turn to catch a mouse.

`That one should have been mine!' said Tony. `It ran in front of me before you caught it.'

`Exactly,' said Charlie. `So how does that make it your mouse?'

`You were in my way,' said Tony. `You interfered with my concentration.'

`OK,' sighed Charlie, anxious to avoid a confrontation. He let Tony take the mouse from him. But moments after the handover the mouse suddenly managed to escape.

`You fool!' cried Tony.

Charlie, astonished, looked at him.

`That was your fault!' said Tony.

For a moment Charlie said nothing. `Sorry,' he said at last, not because he was really sorry or because he thought that it was his mistake that the mouse had escaped, but because he didn't want an argument to spoil an afternoon's sport. He looked across at Buster and Slinkie who both shrugged elegantly. The shrugs were so understated that Tony wouldn't have understood what they were, or what they meant, even if he had seen them.

Slinkie was the third cat to catch a mouse. She was fast. (Both Charlie and Buster had always agreed that she was the fastest mover they'd ever seen. Faster even than either of them.)

`Don't you lot have any sense of honour?' demanded Tony, very crossly.

Slinkie looked at him. `What do you mean?'

`That was my mouse!' insisted Tony. He sounded very cross.

Slinkie said nothing, but simply stared at him. She was astonished.

`It was heading in my direction,' said Tony. `You pinched my mouse.'

Slinkie looked at him, to see if he was joking. He wasn't. `OK.' she said. `It's your mouse.'

`It's too late now,' said Tony with a sniff.

For a moment there was silence. Charlie, Slinkie and Buster said nothing. Not even a purr. They couldn't think of anything to say.

`Didn't you say you had to be back home early tonight?' Buster asked Slinkie.

`No...,' began Slinkie. `Oh, yes,' she said, correcting herself. `You're right. Thanks for reminding me.'

`I'll come with you,' said Buster.

`Me too,' said Charlie.

`We'll leave you to it, then,' Buster said to Tony.

`Right,' said Tony.

`Happy hunting,' said Slinkie.

`I expect I'll do very well,' Tony said. `My Great Uncle you know. It's in the blood.'

`Of course,' said Buster.

The three friends tiptoed out of the barn and left Tony sitting beside a hole in the floor. Once outside they ran as fast as they could for the stream.

`What an awful cat!' said Buster.

`I've never heard anything like it!' said Slinkie. `He took everything we caught.'

`I bet he's never caught a mouse of his own in his life,' said Charlie.

The other two agreed that, despite Tony's ancestry, this was extremely likely.

`But he's got all the mice we caught,' said Buster.

`I don't care,' said Slinkie. `He's welcome to them.'

`Slinkie is right,' said Charlie.

`He was the loser,' said Buster. `He could have had three new friends.'

`I'd rather have a couple of good chums than all the mice in the world,' said Charlie.

The other two nodded their agreement.

Moral

Real wealth is measured in friendships - not in mice.

17. CLIMB THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM

Peter was eight years old. For seven years he had lived with his Uprights in a beautiful house in the country. The house had a lovely garden and in the middle of the garden there stood a magnificent old oak tree.

For every one of those seven years Peter had dreamt of climbing the old tree. He dreamt of climbing it when he was lying on the rug in front of the fire. He dreamt of climbing it when he was tucked up in the airing cupboard. He dreamt of climbing it when he was sleeping on a comfortable lap. He dreamt of climbing it when he was snoozing in the conservatory.

It was his constant dream. His ambition. His hope. His aspiration.

In his favourite dream he would get right to the very top of the tree; up where the crows and the pigeons stood and chattered away. He would stand on the topmost branch and look down on the house and the garden where he lived. He loved that dream.

Several times he had actually tried to climb the tree.

But he had never been successful.

In fact, to be honest, he had never even got as far as the first branch.

The problem was that the lowest branch was twelve feet off the ground. And the trunk was remarkably smooth and straight.

Peter had tried taking a run at the tree and then racing up it as fast as his legs would carry him; hoping that speed and strong claws would enable him to overcome gravity.

But every attempt had ended in dismal failure.

He'd never even got half way to that first branch.

One day he told Clancy about his dream.

`You'll never climb it,' said Clancy, his best friend. `It's impossible.'

But Peter refused to believe him.

`The trunk is too straight and there's too much of it,' said Clancy. `You'd have to be a squirrel to get up there.'

In his mind Peter knew that Clancy was right.

But in his heart he wouldn't accept that he'd never succeed.

`It's my dream,' he told Clancy. `One day...maybe. Maybe I'll do it one day.'

For a moment Clancy thought of telling his friend to abandon his impossible dream. But then he looked at Peter's face and he stopped himself.

`What right have I to take away my friend's dream?' he asked himself.

`One day,' he agreed, even though in both his heart and his mind he knew that the tree was impossible to climb.

`One day I'll climb it,' said Peter.

`One day you will,' said Clancy.

Peter turned to him and smiled. `Do you think so?' he asked.

`Absolutely!' said Clancy.

`Thank you,' said Peter softly. `It makes me good to hear you say that.'

Moral

You don't have to realise your dreams to enjoy them. All you have to do is keep them alive.

18. THE PRICE OF EVERYTHING AND THE VALUE OF NOTHING

Two cats were walking down the road. They were both new to the neighbourhood. One was very well groomed and wore an expensive collar. The other was rather unkempt and had no collar. He had a mouse in his mouth. They stopped for a moment to introduce themselves.

`I'm His Highness Rupert Braunton the 5th,' said the cat with the expensive collar. `I cost £500. How much did you cost?'

The unkempt mouse put down the mouse he was carrying. But he didn't answer.

`How much did you cost?' demanded His Highness.

`I'm not sure,' replied the cat without the collar. `My name is Fred.'

`I bet you didn't cost anything,' said His Highness with a sneer. `With a name like Fred I suspect that your Uprights were probably paid to look after you.'

Fred didn't say anything.

`I'm insured for more than that,' said His Highness. `My Uprights think I'm worth twice that now.'

`Oh,' said Fred.

`I don't suppose you're insured at all, are you?' said His Highness.

`I don't know,' said Fred, who didn't know what insurance was let alone what it tasted like.

`After I won the big cup last month they said my value had doubled,' said His Highness.

Fred nodded.

`Where are you off to?' asked His Highness.

`A cat who lives down the road got knocked over by a car last week,' explained Fred. `Today is his first day out. I thought I'd go and see how he is.' He looked down at the mouse he'd put down. `I caught him a fresh mouse. I thought he'd like it.'

`What's his name?' asked His Highness.

`Billy,' said Fred. `His Uprights call him Billy.'

`Billy!' said His Highness. `Another common name. Was he a stray?'

`I think so,' admitted Fred.

`So he didn't cost anything either?'

`Probably not.'

`No insurance?'

`I don't expect so.'

`How very common,' said His Highness with a sniff.

`Do you want to come with me?' asked Fred. `We could say the mouse was from both of us?'

His Highness stared at the other cat in astonishment. `Me visit a cat called Billy? A cat who cost nothing?' He snorted. `Don't be silly.' And with that he turned round and walked away.

Fred picked up the mouse and continued on his way.

Billy was very pleased to see him. And delighted with the mouse. He told Fred all about his accident and insisted that they share the mouse for tea.

Moral

It's not what you cost that matters. It's what you're worth.

19. THE FEAST

Tabatha loved eating. It was her raison d'etre. She herself was the first to admit that she lived to eat, rather than the other way round. Her ten favourite foods (in order of preference) were: cold roast chicken, turkey, stilton, fresh rabbit, custard, cheddar cheese, mouse clotted cream, duck and black forest gateaux.

When she wandered into the kitchen one Saturday evening and found the remains of a large roasted chicken cooling on the kitchen table she could hardly believe her good fortune. From the laughter and chatter coming from the dining room she knew that her Uprights were entertaining, and unlikely to interrupt her for some time to come.

She started with the remains of the chicken breast, ate what was left of a wing and polished off several strips of fatty skin (her favourite part of the bird). She then rested for a few moments before going back to finish the remains of the other wing and clean the meat off as many bones as she could manage.

Afterwards she retired to the airing cupboard to digest her feast.

Sadly, the post prandial process was not uneventful for, although this is a truth which Tabatha has always vehemently denied, there are limits to the digestive capacity of even the most gluttonous cat.

It would be impolite, and certainly unnecessary, to go into fine detail of the consequences of the feast; sufficient, perhaps, to point out that Tabatha's Upright had to put a collection of neatly ironed items (including two sheets, four towels, four pillow cases, six shirts, five blouses and a variety of underwear) straight back into the washing machine.

Moral

Too much of a good thing can be too much of a good thing - even if it is at someone else's expense.

20. THE CAT WITH NO FEAR

There were four of them and Bertie.

Kenny, Olivia, Philemena and Oscar all readily admitted that they were frightened of the Great Dane which lived at number 47. This had come about because none of them would cross the garden where the Great Dane lived.

Bertie insisted that he had no such fear and to prove that he was not afraid he had raced across the garden not once but twice. The first time had been to the garden belonging to number 45. The second time had been back to the garden at number 43.

`I know no fear,' Bertie said, boldly, when he returned. `Fear is simply a state of mind. I have trained myself to eradicate such weakness from my personality.'

The others, who between them shared a considerable number of fears, stared at him in amazement and awe.

`You have no fears?' said Kenny.

`None,' said Bertie boldly.

`What about rats?' asked Olivia. `Surely you are afraid of rats? I hate rats. I can't stand them.' She shivered at the very thought of rats.

`I like rats,' said Bertie. `They're good sport. The more the better. I once killed six in an hour. Great big, evil looking brutes they were.'

Olivia shivered again. `Oh dear,' she said. `Oh me oh my.'

`Aren't you afraid of heights?' asked Philemena.

`Heights?' said Bertie. `Who's afraid of heights?'

`I am,' admitted Philemena, rather shyly. `I can't go more than about ten feet up a tree. And I couldn't possibly look out of the bedroom window without feeling queasy.'

`Oh I like heights,' said Bertie. `Heights don't bother me in the slightest little bit. I once climbed out of a bedroom window, up onto a flat roof and over onto next door's roof. It must have been forty feet above the ground.'

`Crumbs!' said Philemena, who was more impressed than she dared admit.

`I used to be afraid of things,' admitted Bertie. `When I was a little kitten.' He licked at his chest where a stray hair had slipped out of place. `But no more. Not for a long time.'

Just then an Upright called. They all turned towards the voice. It was an Upright who wears a Skirt.

`Bertie!' called the Upright. `Look who's here!'

The cats all looked more closely. Bertie's Upright who wears a Skirt was accompanied by a second Upright, also in a skirt. The second Upright was larger, much larger, and quite a lot older.

`Yikes!' gulped Bertie. `Oh no!'

`What's the matter?' asked Philemena.

`It's the Upright they call Aunt Maude!' croaked Bertie. He was shivering and shaking.

`Are you all right?' asked Kenny.

`She's scary!' said Bertie. He shook uncontrollably. `And she always picks me up and puts me on her lap. She reeks of talcum powder.'

`She looks quite harmless to me,' said Kenny.

`Quite nice, actually,' said Philemena.

`Positively charming!' added Olivia.

`Oh no she's not,' said Bertie. `You've got to hide me.' He crouched down and slid around behind the other four cats. He closed his eyes and tried to shrink.

The other four cats looked at one another and exchanged smiles. There was nothing malevolent in their enjoyment of his obvious distress. They just couldn't help themselves. (And who could blame them?)

`We'll hide you,' said Oscar, making a supreme effort and keeping all the smiles out of his voice. `But, first, you have to tell us something.'

`What?' demanded Bertie, whispering. `What do you want?'

`Are you afraid of Aunt Maude?'

Bertie gulped. `Yes!' he admitted. `I'm frightened of her. Now quick - hide me!'

Moral

No one is fearless. Everyone is afraid of something.

21. THE WISDOM OF FOOLS

Pip and Snowy looked up at where Nippy was sitting on top of the flat roof of the garden shed.

`Is it safe to go over?' asked Snowy.

Nippy looked down. `Oh yes,' he answered, immediately.

`The dog's not out in the garden?'

`No.'

`Good,' said Snowy. `Because I really don't like that dog.' He shivered. The Uprights who owned the garden they were about to enter also owned a huge Bull Mastif. Snowy wasn't particularly fond of dogs of any variety. If God had asked his opinion he would have definitely voted for a dog-free world. But he especially disliked large dogs with strong, sharp teeth. He and Pip leapt up onto the top of the fence and down into the garden on the other side.

Seconds later the dog appeared.

Pip and Snowy didn't have time to look up and protest to Nippy. They scrambled back up and onto the top of the fence. Pip did so with inches to spare. Snowy lost a few hairs from the tip of her tail.

`You said the dog wasn't there!' Protested Nip, when he'd got his breath back and his heart had gone back to beating more normally.

`Sorry about that!' said Nippy. `I didn't think it was there.'

`But why didn't you say that you didn't think it was there?' demanded Snowy. She looked at the end of her tail and shook her head sadly. Her tail was her pride and joy. She licked it to try and hide the fact that some hairs were missing. `You said it wasn't there!' she protested. `You were quite positive about there being no dog there.'

Nippy looked a little uncomfortable. `I didn't like to say `I don't know',' said Nippy.

`Why on earth not?' demanded Snowy.

`Because only fools and wimps say `I don't know',' replied Nippy.

Pip and Snowy looked at one another and shook their heads sadly.

`Sometimes,' said Snowy, looking up at Nippy, `sometimes, admitting that you don't know is the only sensible thing to do.'

Moral

Saying `I don't know' is a sign of wisdom and strength - not a sign of stupidity and weakness.

22. THE LEGEND

Kitty the kitten was dozing on the porch swing seat when her half- sister Daisy woke her up.

`What's up?' asked Kitty, sleepily.

`Wake up!' said Daisy excitedly.

`Have we got chicken?' demanded Kitty, sitting up.

`No, no, much more exciting than that!'

`Fish? Salmon?'

`No. It isn't food at all.'

Kitty lay down, preparing to go back to sleep.

`You must wake up!' said Daisy. `You'll never guess who I've just seen.'

Kitty sat up again. `Who?'

`Eddie.'

`Eddie who?'

`The Eddie.'

`What do you mean `The Eddie'?'

Daisy sighed. `You know. Eddie. The cat who fought off eight dogs at the Battle of Langham Drive.'

Now Kitty was impressed. Everyone knew who Eddie was. `He's here?' she asked.

`Just visiting,' replied Daisy. `He's got family in the area. He came to see them.'

`Why didn't you tell me sooner?' demanded Kitty, leaping off the swing-seat. `Where is he? I must see him.'

`Follow me,' said Daisy. `He's in Pilchard Way. At number 22.'

`He's a legend,' said Kitty trotting along beside her. `There were five Alsatians, two Dobermann Pinschers and a Rottweiler. He sent them all running home with their tails between their legs.'

`It must have been quite a sight,' agreed Daisy. `I wish I'd been there.'

`What a cat!' said Kitty.

They leapt over a fence, dodged down an alley way, crossed several gardens and cut into Pilchard Way via a short cut across the playing fields.

`They say the battle lasted for two hours,' said Kitty. `And when it was over Eddie just went home and had his tea as though nothing had happened.'

They half walked, half ran along Pilchard Way.

`There he is,' whispered Daisy. She nodded towards a small group of cats on the other side of the road.

`Let's get closer,' said Kitty.

The two kittens crossed the road.

Eddie was talking to two cats and three young kittens. They were all looking at him adoringly. He looked over as Kitty and Daisy approached and raised a questioning eyebrow.

`I hope you don't mind,' said Kitty. `We just wanted to see you.'

`You're a legend,' said Daisy.

Eddie laughed. `Why am I a legend?' he asked.

`The Battle of Langham Drive,' said Kitty.

Eddie laughed again. `You mustn't believe everything you hear,' he said. `Things get exaggerated.'

`But you were attacked by eight huge dogs!' said Kitty.

`That's true,' agreed Eddie. `Though three of them were poodles.'

`And they all went home with their tails between their legs,' said Daisy.

`While you went home unscathed!' added Kitty. `You're our hero.'

`I didn't fight any dogs that day,' said Eddie.

Daisy and Kitty looked at him, confused. `What do you mean?' asked Kitty.

`I went up a tree,' laughed Eddie. `It was the sensible thing to do. I went up a tree and stayed there until they all went home. They'd have torn me limb from limb.'

`But the legend...' said Kitty.

`I don't know where that came from,' said Eddie. He shrugged. `Tales are told. Exaggerations made. A small drama becomes a huge victory.'

`Oh,' said Kitty. She felt disappointed.

`I'm sorry if you feel let down,' said Eddie. `But I'm not going to lie to you. It wouldn't be right.'

`No,' said Daisy.

`It was nice to meet you anyway,' said Kitty.

`Yes. Very nice,' added Daisy.

The two kittens turned and headed back for home.

For a while neither of them spoke. `It was very honest of him to tell us the truth,' said Kitty eventually.

`Yes,' agreed Daisy. `But in a way I wish he hadn't. I liked the story the way it was.'

`Me too,' admitted Kitty.

There was a silence again.

`He was probably just being modest,' said Daisy.

Kitty looked at her half-sister. `You're probably right,' she agreed.

`A hero like Eddie would be modest,' said Daisy.

`Isn't he amazing,' said Kitty. `I think he's even more of a hero now,' she added after a moment. `To be so brave and to win such a huge battle and then to pretend it didn't happen that way.'

`A real super hero,' agreed Daisy.

And so another page was added to Eddie's legend.

Moral

History is sometimes more a matter of romantic perception than of hard fact. And that's often because that's the way we prefer it.

23. MEMORIES AND DREAMS

Beatrice had lived in the country for nine years when her Uprights decided to sell their country home, together with its wonderful garden, and purchase an apartment in the centre of the city.

Beatrice just couldn't understand it. She knew that most Uprights move from the city to the country; selling their highly priced city nest and using the proceeds to purchase a small estate in the countryside.

Her Uprights just had to be different.

Beatrice knew she was going to be miserable in the city.

She'd loved living in the country.

The house they'd shared had contained an almost endless supply of surprises and delights. Two staircases - one ornate and rather grand and one fiddly and winding. Huge fireplaces in which the Uprights had burnt great chunks of tree. Cupboards, nooks and crannies galore. A large cellar and a vast attic.

And the garden!

She had always loved the garden that she and the Uprights had shared.

Trees and shrubs providing shade on hot summer days. Oaks, elms and willow. A chestnut tree and a walnut tree. Huge trees like cathedrals. Beautiful flower beds, filled with plants of every imaginable colour (and some unimaginable delights) attracting an almost endless variety of butterflies. A rock garden full of alpine plants. A summerhouse. A large lawn. A pond. A stream at the bottom of the garden.

And, on the other side of the fence, endless fields of corn and wheat.

All this had now gone.

And in its place there was a small, noisy apartment in the centre of a large, dirty city.

She was woken early in the morning by the tooting and hooting of angry taxi drivers taking businessmen to their meetings. She was woken late at night by the tooting and hooting of angry taxi drivers taking revellers to and from their night clubs.

If the noises were unbearable the smells were even worse. The suffocating stench of diesel fumes and sweaty Uprights rushing hither and thither, all mixed with stale cooking smells from Indian and Chinese restaurants in the streets down below.

Beatrice didn't like it. She didn't like any of it.

She missed the trees, the nooks, the butterflies, the mice, the mooing cows, the staircases, the crannies, the dew laden grass, the beetles and the noises and smells of the countryside.

She missed them all very much indeed.

She lay on the sofa (which was the same sofa she'd always lain on because the Uprights had, thank heavens, brought it with them) and dreamt of those, now far off, days in the country.

She closed her eyes and dreamt of chasing mice and dancing with butterflies. In her dreams she always caught the mice she chased. And every dance with a butterfly was gloriously elegant. Never, in her dreams, did she topple into a bed of pansies and have to spring away to escape her embarrassment.

She dreamt of the joy of finding a new, cosy hiding place where she could settle down for a snooze on those oh-so-common weekends when visitors interrupted her routine.

She dreamt of the days when, to avoid the storms outside, she had curled up in front of a raging log fire. (And she quickly erased from her memory the times when a spark from the fire had burnt her fur.)

She dreamt of moonbeams filtering through attic windows and suppressed thoughts of cobwebs that clung to her nose and made her sneeze and of spiders as big as mice.

She dreamt of all the good things and she erased all the unpleasant memories for that, after all, is the very best way to enjoy the past. She dreamt of things that would never be and savoured memories of things that had never been.

And there, lying on the sofa, her eyes firmly closed, she smiled in constant pleasure as she bathed in those glorious memories where everything was perfection, and every day was filled with unimpaired delights.

Moral

It doesn't matter where you live. Where you live is really in your head.

24. THE WORRIER

Letitia worried about everything she could find to worry about. She worried about whether or not it was going to rain. She worried that it might be too hot, and dry up the lawn and the plants in the garden. She worried that if she said the wrong thing then other cats might think badly of her. And she worried that if she said the right thing other cats might think she was trying to be too good - and, therefore, think badly of her. She worried that if she decided to sit on the lap of one Upright, the other Upright might be upset. And she worried that if she sat on the lap of the Upright whose lap she hadn't decided to sit on then the Upright whose lap she had originally decided to sit on but later decided not to sit on might be hurt.

She worried about the butterflies. `What will happen,' she asked her friend Emily, `if they bump into one another? They never seem to be quite sure where they're going.'

She worried about the mice. `They cause the Uprights a lot of worry,' she told Emily. `The Upright who wears a Skirt is terrified of them.' But she worried that if she caught one she would cause unhappiness in the mouse's family. (Not to mention to the mouse itself.)

`You worry too much,' laughed Emily. `You'll worry yourself ill. You should try and take life a little easier. Let the world wash over you. Don't take everything to heart.'

`I can't help it,' said Letitia, sadly. `It's my nature.'

`Well, you must try not to worry,' said Emily. `If you worry too much you'll make yourself ill.'

`I know,' said Letitia softly. `But I really can't help myself.'

When Emily went missing and didn't turn up for tea the Uprights were quite unconcerned. They were confident that there was nothing seriously the matter.

`She'll turn up,' said the Upright in Trousers. `She's probably stalking a mouse in the tool shed.'

`Or half way up a tree watching a bird,' suggested the Upright who wears a Skirt.

They sat down to their fish fingers and baked beans and thought no more about it.

But Letitia worried.

She was so worried that she couldn't eat. (Even though it was her favourite food for tea.) She went out into the garden to look for Emily.

She looked in the shed but Emily wasn't there.

She looked up every tree in the garden.

But Emily wasn't up a tree.

She looked in the road - terrified, suddenly, that Emily might have had an accident. Her heart beat twice as fast as usual as she searched the gutters and the grass verges.

But, to her great relief, Emily wasn't there.

Letitia went back into the house and looked in the airing cupboard. Just in case Emily had fallen asleep.

But she wasn't there.

Letitia looked in the garage.

Emily wasn't in the garage.

By now Letitia was more than concerned. She was definitely very worried.

She climbed over the fence and into a piece of rough ground at the bottom of their garden. She didn't like it there. She found it frightening.

But she loved Emily very much. She loved Emily more than she feared the waste land. She worried about Emily more than she worried about the rats and foxes and other beasties that might be hiding in the long grass. And so she searched for her friend.

Letitia had almost given up when she heard the very faintest of miaows.

`Miaow.'

It was hardly there.

But Letitia heard it. And she headed towards it.

`Emily?' she called. `Are you there?'

`I'm over here.'

Letitia rushed towards the sound of her friend's voice.

`I'm stuck,' said Emily sadly. She had been crying. And her throat was raw with calling. She was caught in a hawthorn hedge. Someone had thrown a curl of barbed wire into the hedge and somehow Emily had got her rear legs caught in the wire.

`If I press down on the wire and you lift up your right rear leg you can get it free,' said Letitia.

Emily did as her friend suggested.

`Now the other leg.'

Emily freed the other leg.

Letitia lifted her paw off the barbed wire. A barb on the wire had cut into her and she was bleeding.

`Oh dear!' said Emily. `You've cut yourself.'

`It doesn't matter,' said Letitia, who meant it. `As long as you're safe.'

Side by side, the two cats headed back for home. And tea.

`I'm so glad you came for me,' whispered Emily.

`So am I,' answered Letitia.

`I was frightened no one would find me and I would be there all night in the dark,' said Emily.

`I couldn't have rested until I'd found you,' said Letitia.

`You're a good and true friend,' said Emily.

`And a worrier,' said Letitia.

`Yes,' agreed Emily. `It's lucky for me that you are.'

Moral

Not all worriers are good and kind. But everything good and kind comes from worriers.

25. THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Tarki was a sensitive, kind and thoughtful cat. He always tried to make sure that nothing he did ever upset anyone else. He hated to see other cats unhappy. Sometimes, however, he found that his altruistic way of life made things rather more difficult than they might otherwise have been.

One day, for example, he was sitting in his garden, sunning himself in mid-morning sunshine, when he heard a call from a neighbouring garden.

`What's up?' Tarki called. He really wanted to stay where he was - it was a long time since he'd managed to spend a morning doing nothing much - but the call had sounded urgent.

`I need some help!' came the reply. Tarki recognised the voice of a tabby cat called Simon who lived with an elderly Upright in a small house just a few gardens away.

Without hesitating, or stopping to ask why Simon needed help, Tarki got up and padded over to the fence which surrounded his Uprights' garden. He slipped easily between the posts, crossed the next garden, jumped over a solid wooden fence, crossed another garden and leapt over a third fence.

`Hello!' he said, brightly. `What's the matter? How can I help you?'

Simon, who was lying beside a fish pond, looked up. `I need help with this goldfish,' he answered. `If you could make some splashing noises over the other side of the pond then the fish will swim towards me and I can catch it.'

Keen to be of help Tarki went round to the other side of the pond. Reluctantly, he dipped a paw into the water and splashed away. Tarki hated getting his fur wet and, to make matters worse, the water was cold.

`Got it!' cried Simon, a few moments later. He hauled a fish out of the pond. He looked very pleased with himself.

`Is that all you needed?' asked Tarki.

`That's all, thanks,' said Simon. He seemed very grateful. Tarki felt so pleased that he didn't notice that Simon was too busy concentrating on his catch to have the decency to offer to share the fish with Tarki.

Tarki headed back for home. He wasn't always thanked for his kindnesses and courtesies and it always made him feel good when he was.

`Oi!' called another cat as Tarki began his journey homewards.

Tarki turned.

`Oi!' repeated the cat. It was a large black and white cat with a piece bitten out of one ear. `What do you think you're doing?'

`I've just been helping Simon,' explained Tarki. `He needed some assistance with a goldfish.'

`You crossed my garden,' complained the cat. He sounded very bad tempered.

`It was the only way to get there,' explained Tarki. `I didn't do any hunting while I was in your garden. I just passed through. I was helping another cat.'

`Next time you want to cross my territory you make sure that you ask!' snapped the cat.

`Sorry,' apologised Tarki. He now felt rather sad. He couldn't understand why cats were sometimes so quick to moan; so quick to find fault where none had been intended. He went home, lay down and went back to sleep. Doing good turns was, he decided, getting more difficult by the day.

An hour or so later he was woken by another call. This time it came from the bottom of the garden.

`What's the matter?' Tarki called.

`I'm stuck!' cried a strange voice.

Tarki looked around. He couldn't see where the voice was coming from.

`I'm up here!' said the voice. `Up a tree!'

Tarki looked up. And sure enough there was a kitten up a tree on the other side of the fence at the bottom of his garden. The kitten wasn't very high - perhaps a third of the way up - but it looked terrified.

`How did you get up there?' asked Tarki.

`I climbed up,' answered the kitten.

`Can't you get down?' Tarki asked.

`I'm too frightened,' replied the kitten.

`Wait there,' said Tarki. `I'll get you down in a jiffy.'

And he did.

By coaxing and cajoling and pulling and holding he managed to help the kitten down the trunk and onto the grass. The kitten, still shivering with fear, was very grateful.

`Hey you!' cried an angry sounding Upright.

Tarki looked up.

A fierce looking Upright was marching across a neatly trimmed lawn towards them.

`What have you been doing up that tree?' demanded the Upright.

`I was just...,' began Tarki.

`You'd better run,' murmured the kitten. `My Upright can be very fierce. He doesn't like other cats coming into our garden and climbing our trees.'

And so, without waiting to discuss or to explain, Tarki left. He leapt back over the fence and went back into his own garden.

`I've done two good deeds today,' he said to himself as he lay back down on the grass. `And got into trouble twice.' He sighed.

`What a strange, strange world it is,' Tarki thought to himself. `One good turn may deserve another. But we don't always get what we deserve.'

Moral

If you limit your actions to the things no one can find fault with, you will not do very much.

26. THE REBEL

`We're going to the park!' said Hetty, a five year old Persian. `Do you want to come with us?'

`I can't,' said Ollie, a two year old white, short-haired cat. `My Uprights have said I'm not to go the park.'

`But you won't be by yourself,' said Hetty. `There are four of us going. Five if you come.'

`No, I really can't,' said Ollie. `I'll get into terrible trouble if I do.'

`But they won't find out,' said Hetty. `We'll be back before teatime. They'll just think you've been asleep somewhere.'

`No, I mustn't,' said Ollie, rather sadly. He really wanted to go to the park. And he knew he'd be safe enough with Hetty and the others. But he'd been told not to. And he didn't like being disobedient. So, he lay back down, closed his eyes and tried to pretend he was happier staying where he was.

He hadn't been asleep for more than ten minutes when he was woken again. This time it was by Charlie, a three year old mackerel tabby.

`The Mackintoshes, the Uprights at number 12, put a chicken carcasse in their dustbin last night,' said Charlie. `Percy says that if there three of us we can get the lid off their bin and get it out.'

`I'm not allowed to eat food out of dustbins,' said Ollie.

`Why on earth not?' asked Charlie, genuinely puzzled.

`I don't know,' replied Ollie, who didn't.

`Well that's a silly rule,' said Charlie.

`I know it is,' agreed Ollie.

`So are you coming?'

`No. I mustn't. I've been told not to.'

`Well, that's a shame,' said Charlie. And he rushed off to try and find someone else to help them get the lid off the

Mackintosh's dustbin.

Ollie lay down and tried to go back to sleep.

But he felt rather sad.

He wasn't a natural rebel but it did sometimes seem to him that perhaps his Uprights might be rather too keen on making rules.

Going to the park would have been fun. And he would have really enjoyed helping Charlie and Percy drag the chicken carcasse out of the Mackintosh's dustbin. What harm could it have possibly done?

He thought about it. And thought about it again.

`Wait!' he called to Charlie.

Charlie turned.

`I'm coming!' Ollie shouted. `Let's go and get that chicken!'

Charlie grinned and waited for him.

Moral

Sometimes, a cat has just got to do what a cat's got to do. And when there is a chicken carcasse in the dustbin the rules have to go out of the window.

27. LOOKING DOWN AT BIRDS

`Come and look!' called Gerry.

Robbie, who was peering inside a flower, trying to see where the bumble bee had gone, went over to see what Gerry wanted him to look at.

`Up the tree!' said Gerry, who always spoke as though each sentence ended in an exclamation mark.

Robbie looked up. `I can't see anything,' he said.

`Higher!' said Gerry. `You have to look higher!'

Robbie looked higher. And when he saw what Gerry was talking about he could hardly believe his eyes. `Golly,' he said. `Gosh.'

`It's Bubbles!' said Gerry.

`I know it is,' said Robbie.

`He's right at the very top of the tree!'

`Yes,' agreed Robbie, who could see that.

They stood for a while and stared at their older neighbour as he walked out on a narrow branch and sat down. The branch was so narrow that it bent down under his weight. The two kittens held their breath.

`How long has he been up there?' asked Robbie.

`I don't know,' said Gerry. `I only saw him a few moments ago. I was watching a bird fly up into the tree.'

`What's he going to do now?' asked Robbie.

`I don't know!' said Gerry.

The two of them stood and watched. And eventually Bubbles walked back along the branch and climbed down the tree trunk. He came down very quickly, either because that was the way he normally descended trees or because gravity had overcome natural prudence.

`That was something else!' said Gerry.

`It was,' agreed Robbie, who, like Gerry, wasn't quite sure what the phrase meant but thought it sounded very grown up.

They waited until Bubbles had returned to ground level and then turned away. Gerry went back to whatever he was doing before and Robbie, who had forgotten what he had been doing, had forgotten all about the bee, chased a butterfly around some tulips.

But the sight of Bubbles walking around high up in the tree stayed with him. It was the first time he'd seen a cat up a tree. And he knew it was something he wanted to try for himself.

`Have you ever thought of climbing a tree yourself?' Robbie asked Gerry a few minutes later.

Gerry stared at him and swallowed. `Climb a tree?' he said. `Right up a tree?'

`Well not necessarily right up a tree,' admitted Robbie. `But perhaps climb up a bit of a tree.'

`I don't know,' said Gerry. He wasn't exactly frightened. Cautious, perhaps. `When I'm older maybe!'

`I want to do it now,' said Robbie.

And, without another word, he raced off to the base of the tree that Bubbles had climbed so successfully just a little earlier in the day.

When he got to the bottom of the trunk he looked up. The tree seemed to go up and up and up. It reached right up to the sky. `If I go right to the top, will I be able to climb onto a cloud?' Robbie wondered to himself. He had always thought clouds might be fun to play with.

He walked back a pace or two and then took a run at the tree.

It took him four tries to reach the lowest branch, which was only about eight feet off the ground. He looked down at Gerry. To a kitten eight feet up a tree is a long way.

`You look quite small from up here!' he said.

`I am quite small!' said Gerry.

`No. You look smaller than usual,' said Robbie.

`So do you!' agreed Gerry.

Robbie looked around. If he climbed up another few feet of tree he would, he thought, be able to climb out onto a branch which reached right out above Gerry's head.

He climbed up a little more and reached the branch he was aiming at. Carefully, slowly, tentatively, he walked out along it.

The feeling was like nothing he'd ever felt before. This was far, far more exciting than watching another cat climb a tree.

He sat down on the branch for a moment and looked around. There were branches below him now. He watched a butterfly dance around underneath him. And then a bird flew by underneath him.

A BIRD FLEW BY UNDERNEATH HIM!

`Are you going higher?' shouted Gerry, though in fact Robbie wasn't so high that he needed to shout.

`Not this time,' replied Robbie. He decided that he'd gone far enough. He wanted to go down. Suddenly, he very much wanted to go down. He made his way back along the branch to the trunk of the tree and then slithered and slid and half fell back to the ground.

`That wasn't very elegant!' said Gerry accurately but rather unkindly.

`I don't care!' said Robbie, who genuinely didn't. He was excited and exhilarated by his climb.

`You didn't go as high as Bubbles!' said Gerry.

`I know,' said Robbie. `But it was far more exciting to go up that bit of the tree than it was to watch Bubbles go right to the top!'

`Was it really?' asked Gerry doubtfully. He didn't sound at all convinced.

`Definitely!' said Robbie. `You just wait and see if you don't believe me.'

And when Gerry eventually plucked up the courage to climb up the tree for the first time he discovered, much to his surprise, that Robbie was absolutely right. Climbing a quarter of a the way up a tree by yourself is far more thrilling than watching another cat climb all the way up the tree.

Moral

A modest first-hand experience always beats a spectacular second hand experience.

28. BADGERS AND FOXES AND DANGEROUS BEASTIES

`Let's go for a walk in the woods,' said Kerry.

`I'm frightened of the woods,' said Tipper. `There are badgers and foxes and all sorts of dangerous beasties there.'

`Don't be silly,' said Kerry. `That's a myth. There are no foxes or badgers living in the woods. We won't find anything larger than a field mouse there. And there are plenty of those.'

Tipper wasn't so sure. He'd heard some terrible stories about cats who had wandered into the woods and been chased out by foxes. And, from a friend of a friend of a friend, he'd heard about a cat who'd been very nearly eaten alive by a badger.

`We can have great fun in the woods!' insisted Kerry. `There are heaps of trees to climb. And there are rotten tree stumps teeming with creatures. We can run through the bushes and hide in the undergrowth. There are thousands of wonderful smells and sights in the woods.'

Tipper still wasn't happy about it, but, because Kerry was his friend, and because Kerry was so certain, he agreed to go with him.

At first everything went wonderfully well.

The two friends climbed two trees, chased several mice and stared in amazement at the huge township living in a hollowed out fallen oak.

Then things went wrong.

It was Tipper who was the first to see the fox.

`Psst!' he said. `Look over there!'

`What is it?' asked Kerry.

`I know you said there aren't any foxes in the wood,' said Tipper. `But it looks like a fox.'

Kerry looked.

It was a fox.

`It is a fox,' said Kerry in a whisper. `Whoops.'

`What do we do now?' asked Tipper.

`Do you think it's seen us?'

`It's looking our way. And it's sniffing the air.'

`It's seen us,' said Kerry.

`So, what do we do?'

`We run,' said Kerry. `We run very quickly. And we run now.'

He and Tipper turned and raced as fast as they could towards the edge of the woods. They just managed to stay ahead of the fox.

Half an hour later, still breathless, and recovering from their brush with the fox, Tipper and Kerry lay on the lawn.

`I'm sorry,' said Kerry. `I was wrong about there not being any foxes in the wood.'

`You were,' agreed Tipper.

`It was a mistake,' said Kerry.

`It was,' agreed Tipper.

`I don't think we should go there again,' said Kerry. Tipper looked at him. `I think that's a very wise suggestion,' he said.

`Well, I always try to learn from my mistakes,' said Kerry.

`So do I,' said Tipper.

Kerry looked at him.

`I've learned not to take too much notice of you when you say you're sure about something,' said Tipper with a smile.

Moral

Apologising for your mistakes is a sign of strength. Learning from your mistakes is a sign of maturity.

29. THE BIG BULLY

Frank was the biggest cat anyone in the neighbourhood had ever seen.

Most big cats are very gentle and peaceful creatures. They do a lot of sleeping and eating and purring but they don't throw their weight around.

But Frank wasn't gentle and he wasn't peaceful.

He was a terrible bully

Everyone was scared of him.

Frank knew this and took full advantage of it. He forced all the other cats to treat him like some sort of Emperor. If they caught a mouse he reserved the right to demand that they give it to him. If they found a particularly pleasant sleeping spot and he wanted it then he would simply take it. If he wanted them to do something for him then he would tell them to do it - and expect instant obedience. If a cat dared to stand up to him he would snarl and hiss and since he was very large and very good at snarling and hissing this usually had the desired effect.

Naturally, the cats and the kittens in the neighbourhood didn't like Frank very much. In fact, they really didn't like him at all.

Most of them accepted his malevolent ways with the same sort of resignation that they accepted rain and dogs.

`Things like rain, dogs and Frank are a part of life and there isn't much you can do about them,' said Jules.

But Philip found it difficult to be so philosophical about the local bully.

`I hate him,' he told everyone who would listen. `I hate him, I hate him, I hate him.'

And hate him he did.

Day and night he dreamt of being able to find a way to punish Frank for his bullying ways.

He gave up all his other interests to concentrate on hating Frank.

He gave up climbing trees, teasing the neighbour's dog and sleeping in the airing cupboard.

All his energy went into hating the bully.

Frank knew about it, of course.

But he didn't care.

He wasn't frightened of Philip. He knew that if it came to a fight then he would win. Easily. Force is the only thing bullies understand and respect.

In the end Philip's anger made him quite ill. He lost his appetite and his hair started to fall out.

`Your anger is eating you up,' his friends told him. `You must stop hating Frank and start enjoying your life again.'

`But it's so unfair that he should get away with it,' said Philip.

`You're right,' they told him. `It is unfair. But that isn't going to change things. And meanwhile you've lost your appetite and your hair is falling out while Frank is still the local bully.'

But Philip couldn't change his ways.

His hatred burnt up inside him. He developed ulcers and heart trouble. And eventually he died.

Meanwhile, Frank was still the local bully.

Moral

Hate invariably does more damage to the person doing the hating than to the object of their hatred.

30. SUNSHINE AND BUTTERFLIES

It had been raining for days. Steady, boring rain. The sort that you hardly notice at first. The sort that doesn't really seem to be rain until you've been out in it for ten minutes. The sort that soaks you before you realise that you're even getting wet.

It was windy too. One of those swirling, cold annoying winds that grabs up all the old leaves and bits of garden rubbish and throws them about.

Ricky and Sam were indoors, lying on the window seat and feeling rather sorry for themselves.

They weren't having a good time.

Their Upright had forgotten to go to the big shop and so had had to purchase their tinned food from the corner shop in the village. And the corner shop in the village only sold the really cheap food that tasted as though the people selling it hated cats.

The Upright had had unexpected visitors too. And the unexpected visitors had drunk all the available milk in their tea.

So the only liquid in the cats' bowls was water. Water straight from the tap. It stank of chlorine and tasted like poison.

The builders were busy upstairs. They had taken over the spare bedroom, the bathroom and the airing cupboard. Three of the cats' favourite sleeping spots were now out of bounds. And the whole house shook with the sound of hammering and the raucous, empty chatter of radio disc jockeys.

`The only thing I hate more than cheap cat food is the noise of the radio,' said Ricky.

`I'm not sure about that,' said Sam. He thought for a while. `No,' he said at last. `I hate cheap cat food more than I hate the noise of the radio.'

`Both are horrid,' said Ricky.

`Both are horrid,' agreed Sam.

`Generally speaking, I think it's fair to say that it's not been a good week,' said Ricky.

`One darned thing after another,' said Sam.

`I think I'll have a snooze,' said Ricky.

`Good idea,' agreed Sam.

`Maybe things will be better when we wake up,' said Ricky.

`I don't think they can be any worse,' said Sam.

Ricky was the first to wake. He sat up and looked out of the window. The rain had stopped, the wind had died down and the painters were climbing into their van, ready to set off to the pub for their lunch.

He tapped Sam on the shoulder. `Wake up,' he whispered.

`Why?' demanded Sam, grumpily.

`Because the sun is coming out,' said Ricky. `And I just saw two butterflies.'

Moral

Life sometimes seems to be just one darned thing after another. And then the sun comes out and a butterfly flutters into view and suddenly things seem a whole lot better.

If youve enjoyed Cat Fables you will probably enjoy Vernon Colemans book Cat Tales also available as a kindle book on Amazon.

For a full list of books by Vernon Coleman (including ten cat books) please visit www.vernoncoleman.com or Amazon Author Central.

CAT TALES

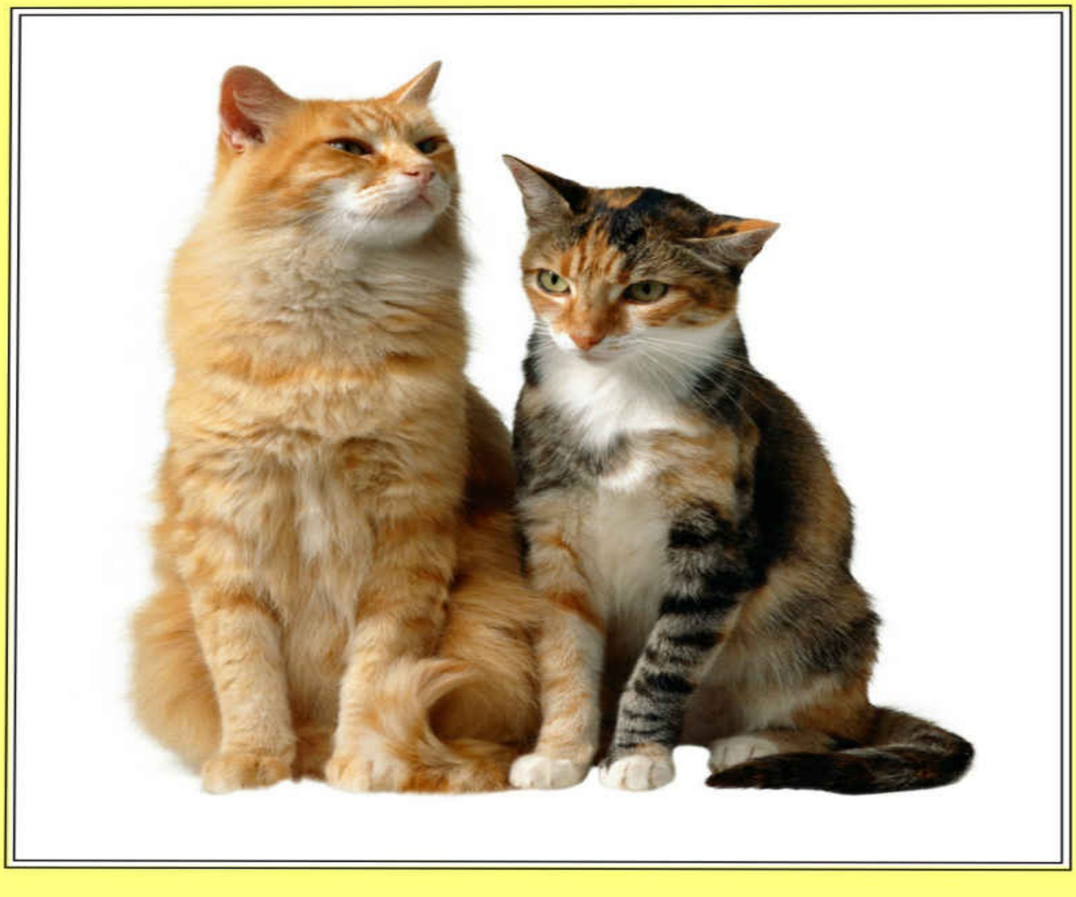

Vernon Coleman

Cat Tales

Vernon Coleman

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Dedicated to Donna Antoinette

Who has my heart

For safe keeping

All ways

And forever

For a full list of books by Vernon Coleman please see www.vernoncoleman.com or Amazon Author Central. This is Vernon Coleman's tenth book about cats.

Introduction

Cats have always played a big part in my life. This collection of anecdotes, essays, anecdotes and memories describes some of the cats I have known, some of the ways in which they have affected my life and some of the ways in which they have affected the lives of others.

The tales in this book relate to incidents that happened to me, or that I observed myself. I have resisted the temptation to report stories which were told to me even if I heard them at first hand. When it comes to talking about cats some people can be inclined to exaggerate a little.

In particular I have resisted including stories which tell of cats who have learned tricks such as managing to open a door by jumping up and catching hold of the handle. Such feats are entirely feasible (I've witnessed them myself) but they are neither exceptional nor worthy of recording. And they certainly don't change the lives of the people who know the cats involved.

The one thing most of these tales have in common is that, in some way, someone's life was changed for the better, or was enriched, through knowing a cat. The effect cats can have on people can sometimes be slight and simple and sometimes subtle and complex. Unlike my book Cat Fables, there are, however, no lessons and no messages here. These stories are told simply for their own sake. I hope you enjoy them.

Vernon Coleman

PS The names of the people, and some of the cats, in this book have, with a few notable exceptions, been changed to protect their privacy. However, Alice, Thomasina, Dick, Harry and Timmy were the real names of very real cats.

The Cats Who Saved a Bookshop

A few years ago two friends of mine, Bob and Mary, ran a second hand bookshop in the Cotswolds. In their previous lives he had been a journalist on a national newspaper and she had been a producer for a well-known, long running television programme. He was the one I knew best but I had met and worked with them both professionally.

They had run away from the rat race to find some peace, some space and a little time. His years in Fleet Street had given him high blood pressure and two years of worrying angina. Her anxious afternoons and evenings at the television studios had left her with a stomach ulcer, irritable bowel syndrome and eczema. They had used their savings and the money they'd received from the sale of their London flat to purchase a bookshop and a tiny, thatched cottage less than a quarter of a mile away from it.

`I can walk to work!' Bob told me with great glee, when I visited to see how they were getting on. `No more traffic jams. No more suffocating journeys on the Tube. I just tumble out of bed, breakfast in the garden, and wander down to the shop to open at 10 am on the dot when I'm there on time and a bit later when I'm not.'

They had stocked the shop with a mixture of their own books (he had written book reviews and had a huge collection of first editions going back thirty years), stock acquired from the previous owner of the shop and books bought by the crate from a London auction house. They'd supplemented this considerable stock with books bought by the armful from jumble sales, bring and buy sales and, a new phenomenon at the time, car boot sales.

`I don't mind selling a few disposable books - things bought for a holiday read,' said Bob. `But we don't want to go too far down market. I'd like to acquire a good quality clientele - people interested in signed first editions.'

They had plenty of books and a pleasant old bookshop in which to display them (the shop was 18th century and the books were displayed in a series of book lined rooms that were such a maze that it was easy to get lost in them) but there was one essential which was missing: customers.

The shop was in the high street of a small, much visited Cotswold village. On fine summer days thousands of people walked past their shop. But, by and large, that's what the potential customers did: they walked past. They didn't go into the bookshop and they certainly didn't spend any money.

***

`I don't think people are reading books anymore,' Bob complained when I visited again after six weeks. The shop was looking rather sad and desperate. The two owners had gone down market in an attempt to attract some customers. Instead of containing an impressive looking collection of first editions the two bow-fronted windows now contained the usual colourful collection of remaindered cookery books, television tie-ins and biographies written by transient celebrities enjoying their few moments of undeserved fame. A battered old bookcase on the pavement outside the shop was stuffed with old books - all priced at 20 pence each.

My friend pulled out the exercise book in which he kept a list of the books he'd sold that week and read out the day's sales. `A jacketless Book Club reprint of Casino Royale by Ian Fleming, a Barbara Cartland paperback, an old bound copy of the Strand magazine and a paperback copy of George Orwell's `Animal Farm' which I sold to an American who, in a very loud voice, told me he had 3,000 acres in Texas and who clearly thought he'd just bought a book about a typical English farm.'

`I can't imagine the profit on those is going to put you into the top tax bracket,' I said.

`So far today the total takings amount to six pounds seventy pence. Without the Strand magazine we'd have taken one pound seventy.'

A grumpy looking man came into the shop clutching a paperback copy of a Jack Higgins novel. `You've got this marked at 20 pence but there's a tear in the cover,' he complained. He held the book out and showed the tear to Bob.

My friend took the book from him, flicked through it and checked the back page. `The book's all there,' he pointed out.

`The other books on sale don't have tears,' the man argued. `And they're only 20 pence.'

`You're suggesting that I should knock something off for the tear?'

`Yes.'

`I'll knock a penny off,' said my friend. `Nineteen pence. That's my best offer.'

The customer thought about this for a while and tutted loudly. Eventually he put his hand into his rear trouser pocket and pulled out a handful of change. He picked out two ten penny pieces and handed them over. My friend opened the till, took out a penny and handed the penny and the book to the customer. We watched as the man left, crossed the narrow, uneven pavement and climbed into a late model seven series BMW.

`Life running a bookshop is not quite what I'd imagined it would be like,' said my friend softly.

When I left, the next day, it was with a gloomy sense of foreboding. How long would my friends manage to survive? Did their bookshop dream really have a future?

The answer to the first question seemed to be `probably not very long' and the answer to the second question seemed most likely to be `no'.

They had not, I knew, ever expected to make a fortune from the shop. But they did need to earn a small living from it. Nothing extravagant - just a few thousand pounds a year.

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Two months later I headed back in their direction again. It was Bob and Mary's wedding anniversary and I'd been invited to join a small party of friends celebrating the occasion. We were all booked into a local inn. I arrived a day early because I wanted to see how Bob and Mary were getting on with the bookshop.

`We're making money!' was Bob's first greeting when he met me at the railway station.

I congratulated him and threw my bag into the boot of his elderly Jaguar saloon.

`You wait until you see the shop,' he said, as he drove away from the station. `We've got the rid of the remaindered cookery books - gave them all to the local Church fete - and we've put all the 20 pence books into storage in a barn.' He explained that unlike almost every other product second hand books always rise in value over the years. `Old paperbacks that cost two shillings and sixpence a few years ago now go for twenty pence,' Bob pointed out. `That means that a book that originally cost twelve and a half pence now sells for twenty pence. If we keep those cheap books for another year or two they'll be selling for twice their current price. That's a pretty good rate of return.'

`I hadn't thought of it like that,' I told him. `But the last time I was down here the 20 pence shelf seemed to be keeping you alive.'

`Ah, that was then,' said Bob. `We've had a bit of luck since then.' He swerved to avoid a pot hole and two boxes full of books on the back seat slid from one side of the car to the other.

`I'm pleased to hear it,' I told him.

`Mary's Great Aunt Thelma died,' said Bob. `And although it doesn't sound nice to describe it as good fortune for us that's exactly what it turned out to be. She was 97 so I think she had a pretty good innings.'

`She left you some money? A mansion in Surrey and a yacht moored in the South of France?'

`Not a bit of it,' said Bob. `I confess that we did have hopes but the dear old girl had been in a nursing home for the last eight years of her life and the fees had pretty well decimated her fortune. After the lawyer had taken his cut there was just about five hundred quid left. Mary had to cough up two thousand for the funeral costs.'

`So where did the good fortune come from?'

`Dear old Aunt Thelma had two cats,' explained Bob, turning into the driveway of the inn where I was staying and sliding to a halt about an inch away from a rhododendron bush. `Presumably, not valuable cats?' We got out of the car and Bob opened the boot. I removed my bag.

`Not a bit of it. A pair of common or garden tortoiseshells called Ethel and Edna.' He closed the boot lid and opened the rear door of the car to get at the boxes of books that had been sliding around there. `You settle into the hotel and come across to the shop. I've got to take these books in. We're running low on stock and Mary has had me out scouring the countryside for replacements. I picked these up from an old Major before I met your train.'

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After registering at the reception desk, and depositing my bag in my room, I strolled down the high street to Bob and Mary's shop.

The shop's facade hadn't changed at all, of course. The local planning officer would have had a few words to say if it had. But instead of looking rather sad and desperate the bookshop had a prosperous look about it. There were four people looking in at the window and, as Bob had said, the selection of remaindered hardbacks which had filled the two bow fronted windows had gone and been replaced by what seemed, even at a distance, to be a fairly expensive selection of first editions. I recognised a Sherlock Holmes first and there were half a dozen fresh looking jacketed hard backs by Graham Greene - including a rare copy of Brighton Rock.

But it wasn't the books that the passers-by were looking at. They were admiring two cats which were curled up together right at the front of the left hand shop window.

I left the window shoppers on the pavement and wandered into the shop. Mary, standing behind the shop's tiny counter, was busy emptying one of the boxes that Bob had just delivered.

`Bob's just popped along to the vicar's,' apologised Mary. `He's picking up a nice edition of `The Compleat Angler’ that the vicar's brother wants to sell.'

`Things seem to have bucked up,' I said. I looked around. The shop was still dusty and rather untidy and there were books everywhere. But I could see and hear people in the shop. It still looked like a proper second hand bookshop but it now looked like a prosperous second hand bookshop.

`It's all down to Ethel and Edna,' explained Mary.

I looked at her and frowned. `The two cats?'

Mary nodded. `My great aunt Thelma's cats. She had a lovely room in a nursing home just outside Oxford. They allowed her to keep the two cats in her room and when she died the cats came to me.'

`So Bob said. But no money unfortunately.'

`With nursing home fees of around a thousand a week there wasn't anything left,' said Mary. `But our business started to boom the minute the cats came here.'

Just then the four people who had been standing outside the shop shuffled in. The two men both had to stoop to get through the low front door without banging their heads. `We love your wonderful cats!' said the woman at the head of the quartet. `Are they yours? What are their names?'

`Yes, they're ours. Their names are Edna and Ethel. Edna is the one with the little orange splodge just above her nose.'

`I noticed that you have some Graham Greene in the window,' said one of the men. `First editions?'

`They are,' said Mary.

`Do you have any American twentieth century firsts? Hemingway? Fitzgerald?'

`We've got a very nice `Great Gatsby' and a `Moveable Feast',' said Mary. `Both firsts and in decent jackets. We have some others too - though several don't have jackets. And we've got two Steinbecks and quite a good collection of Mailers.'

`Marvellous,' said the man.

`Go up the stairs and turn left. They're in the second room you come to,' Mary told him. `If there's anything that takes your fancy bring it down with you.'

`Just like that?' said the man, surprised. `No locked, glass fronted cupboards?'

`Oh no,' smiled Mary.

They wandered off up the stairs. Ten minutes they came back down again and bought nearly a thousand pounds worth of books.

`It's the cats,' Mary said, when they'd gone. `People stop to look at them and then they come in to ask about them. And then nine times out of ten they start looking around. And two or three times out of ten they buy something. Not always something valuable, of course.'

`I don't suppose you stock books about cats, do you?' I asked.

Mary laughed. `Funny you should ask!' she said. `I think we've got one or two of yours somewhere. I don't suppose you fancy signing a couple of first editions of `Alice's Diary' do you?'

The Cat Who Went To School

When I was six my parents bought me a cat for my birthday. He was a grey, long haired cat and I loved him to bits. I called him Timmy. I cannot remember why. My night-time prayers were immediately extended and Timmy was added to the list of close relatives and pets whose welfare I used to draw to God's attention as being worthy of his care and blessing. Timmy took his place behind my parents and just ahead of Tommy and Freddy. Tommy was a tortoise and try as I might I always found it difficult to feel great warmth towards him. Freddy was a huge goldfish who inhabited an outdoor tank the size of a small swimming pool. The tank was kept out of doors and in winter my morning chores included breaking the ice on the top so that Freddy could breathe.

I suspect that Timmy leapt to this position of eminence in my prayers because I immediately recognised that although I was fond of Tommy and Freddy I had a greater chance of developing a genuinely meaningful relationship with the grey, ball of fluff who already enjoyed playing games with me, than with the tortoise, who seemed to spend much of the year hibernating and whose most engaging characteristic when not hibernating was a mild affection for lettuce, or the goldfish, who, although he would swim to the top of his tank when he saw me approach did so, I instinctively knew, only in anticipation of a sprinkling of fish food. I used to try feeding him more than anyone else but he never showed me more affection and never swam to the surface any quicker.

I lived around a mile and a half away from the school I attended and used to walk there by myself. I don't suppose many parents would allow their children to travel so far unattended these days but in those peaceful days of half a century ago the traffic was lighter and the perverts presumably too nervous to molest in daylight hours. My life might have appeared lonely (I was an only child) but I had the only child's vivid imagination and was never short of imaginary companions.

Timmy used to meet me on my way home. Every day he would be sitting on a garden wall about half a mile away from where we lived. He would see me coming, jump down off the wall, wait for me, rub against my legs and then trot along beside me, miaowing and rubbing and generally giving the clear impression that he was pretty darned pleased that I had decided to come back from wherever it was I'd been to.

He did this for four or five years.

And then I passed the eleven plus and changed schools.

The other children, awaiting the momentous move from junior school to grammar school were, I knew, worrying about making new friends, fitting in, coping with the homework and battling the older boys who had, it was rumoured, a scary variety of initiation tests prepared for the `freshers' - the new boys. My sole worry, however, concerned Timmy. The new school I was about to attend was in the opposite direction to the junior school I was leaving.

As my first day at my new school approached I became increasingly concerned. My fear, obviously, was that Timmy would set off to meet me on my way home from my old school whereas I would be coming home from my new school. (It never occurred to me that he would not know when the school term had started. He had always managed to work this out for himself.)

What would happen? How long would he sit and wait for me? How long would it take me to get from my new school back home and to then set off towards my junior school so that I could meet him waiting for me.

I asked my mum to keep Timmy locked in when I started my new school.

But you can't keep a cat shut in when it has things it has to do. And Timmy, who somehow knew that I had gone back to school, was determined to escape. So when the brush salesman called (he lugged a huge suitcase around with him and my mother, who always had a soft spot for underdogs of any species, invariably answered the door in response to his jolly knock and always bought a brush) Timmy slipped out.

I need not have worried.

Although I was now coming home from the opposite direction Timmy still met me; waiting on another garden wall half a mile away from home. He jumped down off the wall, rubbed against my legs and then trotted along beside me, miaowing and rubbing and miaowing and rubbing just the way he had when I'd been returning from primary school.

How did he know where to wait?

I have no idea.

It's just another cat mystery.

The Cat Who Played the Piano

As a boy I lived on the edge of a town called Walsall in the West Midlands. A friend of mine called Peter, a boy of about my own age, had quite well-to-do parents and they lived in a house in a very smart part of the town. I can't remember what Peter's father did for a living or where their money came from but they always seemed to have plenty of it. Both Peter's parents had cars - his father a maroon coloured Ford Zephyr and his mother a yellow Ford Consul which had a black roof - and they had a double garage so that both cars could be kept protected from the elements. No one else I knew had a double garage. Every summer they spent two weeks touring on the continent.

Peter's parents were not musical or artistic in any way but they wanted their son to learn to play the piano. And so they bought him a brand new piano and hired a piano teacher to visit two evenings a week for half an hour and for a whole hour on Saturday mornings. (You can tell how unusual this was in the circles in which I grew up by the fact that I can still remember these trivial domestic arrangements.) The piano teacher was foreign, very prim and ancient. Thinking back she was probably in her fifties. I have no idea where she came from but she spoke with a Germanic accent so I would imagine she was German, Austrian or Swiss.

At the end of the Saturday piano lesson Peter's parents always expected to be treated to a short recital - some tangible proof that their son was benefitting from his no-doubt expensive musical education. When things went well the piano teacher would be rewarded with the knowledge that her lucrative appointment would be extended by at least another week and Peter would be rewarded with an extra two shillings pocket money. When added to his ten shillings a week pocket money the two shillings a week bonus he invariably received made him rich beyond my wildest dreams. My own pocket money was, at the time, half a crown a week and that enabled me to buy an entirely satisfying ration of comics and sweets, with enough left over to buy an occasional bottle of Dandelion and Burdock and a packet of balsa wood once a month from the model making shop in the town centre. It seemed to me that twelve shillings a week would be enough to buy a house, run a motor car and hire servants to clean my bicycle and tidy my bedroom.

I was present at the Saturday recitals on more than one occasion because, on Saturdays I would cycle round to Peter's home which, although situated in a much smarter part of town was no more than a mile away from my own, and wait for him to finish so that we could go off on adventures together. I was aged eight and he was nine at the time. We would put packed lunches into our saddlebags and ride off into the countryside where we would, according to the season and our inclination, sail home-made rafts, collect conkers, attempt (with absolutely no success) to catch fish with tackle consisting of a pea cane, a length of black cotton and a bent pin or simply try to hide from the bad men who were chasing us and who, in those halcyon days, existed only in our imaginations. (If it was raining we would play Monopoly on the dining room table or build balsa wood rafts for sailing on sunnier days.)

Whenever I was present for one of these recitals I would sit impatiently on the window seat wishing that Peter would play faster so that we could get outside sooner. I also wanted him to finish because I was looking forward to what was, for me, the main feature of the entertainment; the top of the musical bill.

At the end of Peter's effort there would be enthusiastic applause from his parents and myself while the piano teacher would smile modestly and pat the bun at the back of her head and try to manage to look modest and proud at the same time. She didn't clap, of course, because if Peter had done well she was entitled to share in his glory.

And then, the moment Peter had finished, the family cat, a huge Persian called Gertie, would leap up onto the piano and stamp up and down the keys with great determination. She only ever did this when Peter had finished playing and was being feted, applauded and, eventually, hugged and she clearly did it in the knowledge that his prowess on the piano had attracted great approval and in the expectation that if she copied him she, too, would attract an equivalent amount of attention and approval.

The first time Gertie played the piano Peter and I applauded ferociously and gave the cat a lot of fuss. The second time it happened Peter rushed into the kitchen, fetched a can of salmon, a dish and a fork and fed the Gertie there and then on the floor beside the piano.

After that day, Gertie's recital became a weekly ritual and I used to make sure that I arrived in plenty of time to be there for her performance. The fact that I had to endure Peter's performance was a small price to pay. (Despite his parents' determination and the hard work put in by his piano teacher Peter was not a naturally gifted player and this, combined with a total lack of interest in anything musical, meant that he never really made much progress.)

After a few weeks we became convinced that Gertie was making a genuine effort to actually play the piano, rather than merely walking up and down the keys. Even the piano teacher, who had regarded Gertie's first attempts as something approaching sacrilege, became convinced of this. Indeed, it seemed to me that it would have been hypocritical of her to smile with pride at Peter's clumsy efforts but to ignore the hardly less unmusical `playing' of Gertie.

We had no tape recorder nor home movie camera and so there is no record of Gertie's talent as a pianist. These days she would have been a television star and an internet celebrity: the piano playing cat.

But I don't mind that.

In my mind she played like a virtuoso.

And every time I remember her playing she plays with greater skill and more talent: her soft velvet paws hitting the keys with firm precision and creating real music magic.

The Missing Watch

When I was a medical student I spent a weekend staying with a colleague called Harry who came from Yorkshire. His father was a country doctor and his mother the daughter of a hereditary peer who owned half of a county in southern England. Their family home was an impressive looking manor house that stood in about thirty acres of garden, private woodland and pasture. Their thirty acres was surrounded by farmland and moors. It was the first time I'd ever stayed in a house where you could not see another house from any of the windows. My friend's father was very proud of that and it was the first thing he told me when we met. He was so proud, indeed, that I suspect that if someone had erected a house on the horizon he would have blocked up all the windows from which the offending creation might be viewed.

Harry's parents were keen outdoor people and within twenty minutes of arriving the four of us (Harry and I and his parents) were in the garden clearing out a ditch that had become overgrown with brambles. Not having brought anything suitable with me I was lent a pair of Harry's wellington boots and an old Barbour jacket that had last been waxed in about 1950. Harry's dog, a black Labrador called George, and the family cat, a gloriously lively black and white moggie called Patch, sat and watched.

It was during supper that Harry's mother noticed that her watch was missing. `The strap has been loose for days,' she said, castigating herself.

`It must be in the ditch,' said Harry. `We'll go out and find it after supper.' He turned to me and explained that the watch, a gold Rolex, had belonged to his grandmother and, as well as being valuable had enormous sentimental value.

And so at nine thirty that evening the four of us put our boots back on and drove the family's two Rovers (one a saloon and the other a Land Rover) onto the grass so that their headlights could illuminate the ditch while we searched for the missing watch. George and Patch came with us but this time, instead of just watching, they climbed down into the ditch with us. And, although it seemed unlikely (to say the least) that they had any idea what they were looking for, they scrambled around among the long grass, the nettles and the dock leaves looking for whatever it is they thought they should be looking for.

At ten minutes past midnight we gave up and went into the house. Harry's father poured us all a glass of whisky and we agreed that we would resume the search the following day. It wasn't quite the weekend in the country I'd envisaged but it was a weekend away from the medical school, the anatomy books and the pressure.

We sat beside a roaring log fire enjoying the aroma created by the sprigs of Rosemary which Harry's mother had tossed onto the fire. We sipped our whisky and ate sandwiches, thickly cut from a freshly baked home-made loaf. It was bread like no other I'd ever tasted. I ate it with a smear of tomato chutney and can remember still the joy. George lay on the hearth rug at Harry's feet, enjoying the warmth of the fire and the attention of his master.

At twenty past twelve we heard the slap of the catflap and Patchy came padding into the room. In her mouth she held a dead field mouse, which she dropped onto the rug.

`She must have thought that was what we were looking for!' said Harry's father. He stood up, picked up the mouse and disappeared. Patchy followed him.

`I tossed it back into the ditch,' he told us when he returned. `Patchy looked rather put out. Probably thought we'd be pleased and have it for supper.'

Fifteen minutes later Patchy returned. This time she carried a small pipistrelle bat. And this time her prey was still alive. Harry's father threw his jacket over it, wrapped it up and took it back outside. Patchy followed.

Patchy continued her hunt for whatever it was we had been looking for. At ten to one she came in with a small piece of rusty metal. None of us could identify it. Harry looked at Patchy and shook his head. He took it outside and tossed it over the hedge. Patchy followed him but stayed outside.

It was at twenty to two, just Harry's mother decided that if she was going to be up for church at eight am she ought to be off to bed, that Patchy came back into the house clutching something which shone and glittered in the flickering fire light. The cat was dishevelled and dirty and whatever she was carrying was clearly rather heavy for her.

Harry's father took it from her.

It was, of course, the missing Rolex.

We all stroked her and then Harry's mother, followed by Patchy, went off to the kitchen.

`I gave her a tin of sardines,' she announced. `And a dish of fresh cream.'

`Very fair reward,' agreed Harry's father.

George the Labrador lifted his head, opened an eye, yawned and went back to sleep.

Cloudio's Victory

I once lived next door to a couple who shared their home with a small and very noisy Jack Russell terrier called Rex (quite inappropriately) and a large and outwardly quite serene white Persian called (quite appropriately) Cloudio. My neighbours were both solicitors.

The cat loved nothing better than to doze in the sunshine. The dog loved nothing better than to bark at the cat and, occasionally, to try to attack it. (These attacks were invariably fruitless for the cat was twice the size of the dog and would respond with a flash of claw and a terrifying snarly hiss. But they were, nevertheless clearly annoying.)

I was fortunate enough to be sitting in my garden when Cloudio finally shut Rex up and stopped him bothering her.

It was my neighbours' habit to go for a drive in the country on Sunday afternoons, and to stop somewhere and take Rex for a good, long walk.

And so one Sunday afternoon, Rex was duly sitting in the car, waiting for his master and mistress to drive off to somewhere in the country.

Unfortunately for him they had been kept indoors by a telephone call.

Cloudio spotted this heaven sent opportunity and purred with delight. Even ten yards away, on the other side of the fence, I could hear her purring and I could see what was going to happen long before it happened.

First of all Cloudio climbed onto the car bonnet. And sat there. In full view of Rex.

Now, Rex regarded the car as his territory. He was the only one of them who was allowed into the car and actually taken places in it. And to see Cloudio sitting on the bonnet was more than he could bear. He leapt up and down and barked and yapped and yelped and, of course, it was all to no avail because he was on the inside and Cloudio was on the outside.

Cloudio then went up onto the roof.

Rex, who knew she was up there somewhere but couldn't see her, was driven even madder with rage. He barked and jumped up and down and tore at the seats with his claws and his teeth in his rage.

Then Cloudio went onto the boot of the car.

And so Rex went into the back of the car and started biting and tearing and yapping and making a terrible noise and an even more terrible mess.

Being a good neighbour I called out. But no one heard me. They were busy with their telephone call. And I confess that I was on the cat's side in all this. I didn't call too loudly.

Finally, my neighbours emerged from the house. Cloudio, who had seen them coming, leapt off the car and disappeared across the lawn to her favourite spot beside the summer house. Rex, who could no longer see Cloudio and who did not realise that his owners were coming, kept on yapping and barking and tearing and biting the upholstery.

The two solicitors were not amused.

And as the car drove away I could hear them shouting at Rex as first one and then the other spotted the damage he had done.

When they'd disappeared, I wandered over to the fence from where I could see Cloudio more clearly. I called her name. She raised her head, opened one eye and, I swear, she smiled at me. I smiled back. `Congratulations,' I murmured. I then went back to my deckchair and my book.

From that day on Rex left Cloudio alone. He would walk past her as though she wasn't there. He didn't bark at her. He didn't trouble her at all. He was thoroughly, completely, utterly defeated.

The score, as it so often is, was Cat 1 Dog 0.

The Matchmaker

When I was in the sixth form at school a man called Alec Dickson came to talk to us about an organisation he had set up called Community Service Volunteers (CSV). He was a retired colonial administrator and a few years earlier he'd founded another organisation called Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO). VSO sent British school leavers and young graduates to work in third world countries for a few months or a year - either between leaving school and attending university or immediately after graduating. The organisation became hugely successful but for various reasons which I don't entirely understand and which don't matter Alec had decided that although sending young people half round the world to dig wells, teach English and generally act as cultural missionaries was a good thing to do, there was a need for something similar but less exotic rather closer to home.

And so he founded CSV.

When I met him he'd only just started and had recruited no more than a handful of volunteers. They were, I think, all school leavers who hadn't yet got jobs, hadn't decided what to do with their lives or were waiting to go to college or university.

No one else at school with me was in the slightest bit interested. The majority were ready to go to university and they couldn't wait to get there. They didn't want to take a year out and mess around. They were in the learning groove and they wanted to stay there.

I was the only one who volunteered to join CSV and I'm not entirely sure why I did. I was, I suspect, tired of learning stuff which didn't seem to me to have much relevance to real life, tired of cramming for examinations and ready to see some real life. I had five years studying ahead of me at medical school and I wanted a change. I'd chosen to study medicine because the idea of being able to help people appealed to me but it seemed pretty clear that if I went straight to Birmingham to study medicine it would be some time before I was in a fit state to be of any real use to anyone. The University agreed to keep the place for me and to let me spend twelve months learning a little bit more about life.

And so off I went to the new town of Kirby on the outskirts of Liverpool. An innocent grammar school boy in a blazer, grey flannels, white shirt and school tie.

This was in the early 1960s and Kirkby had been widely described as the toughest town in Britain. The local police station had metal grills over all its windows and barbed wire along its walls and looked like a fortress. Actually, it didn't just look like a fortress - it was a fortress. At night buses which travelled from Liverpool to Kirkby only did so when they were followed by a police car containing two officers.

I had a room at the local vicarage, an oasis of middle-class peace among a desert of crumbling council houses, smashed up telephone boxes, boarded up shops and roadways littered with glass and half bricks. Alec Dickson had arranged that I would take my meals with the vicar and his curate. I had thirty shillings a week pocket money to cover clothes, transport and all other expenses.

And so on Monday morning, without any idea of what I was doing (or how I would do it) I put on my school blazer and set off to change the world.

Most of what happened next is another story for another time, but not all of it.

My role in Liverpool had never been strictly defined. Alec Dickson told me that my job was to be a catalyst - `to make things happen'. The idea of sending an undeniably callow youth into one of the toughest areas in Britain, where robbery with violence was more the social norm than voluntary service, was, on reflection, bordering on the absurd. I doubt if health and safety regulations would allow it to happen in 21st century Britain.

From the start it seemed to me that I had two choices. I could either spend my year in Liverpool helping old ladies across the road or I could spend my time trying to teach people to help one another. (Put baldly this probably sounds extraordinarily patronising, but this, remember, was 1964, I was eighteen and brimming with good intentions. Anyone who doubts my innocence should remember that for the first month I was wandering around the most dangerous town in Britain wearing a Grammar school uniform and still holding my comb under the tap every morning so that I could get a good parting. In retrospect, I firmly believe that the only reason I survived the first month was that I was regarded as too eccentric, too strange, to be worthwhile target for a half brick or a whack with a piece of lead pipe.)

Clearly, if I was going to get anything done I needed three things: volunteers, something useful for them to do and probably some money or sponsorship.

Not having the foggiest idea what I could or should do I wandered around trying to get my bearings. I soon got lost and found myself on the local industrial estate. The biggest factory I could find manufactured paint. I tottered in and asked to speak to someone.

`Who do you want to speak to?'

`Er, I don't really know.'

`What do you want, son?'

`I'm, er not quite sure.'

In the end I left with the promise of a large supply of paint. The tins were, I suspect, left over discontinued colours. But I neither knew nor cared. I had a seemingly inexhaustible supply of paint. Now all I needed was something to paint and someone to do the painting.

I visited the local Citizens Advice Bureau.

`Is there anything in town that needs painting?'

`There are hundreds of pensioners living in really grubby council flats.'

So I started knocking on doors asking anyone who seemed old if they wanted anything painting.

And finding courage from somewhere I contacted all the local schools and asked if I could speak at their morning assemblies. To my horror and astonishment I was given permission. I told the kids I was looking for people to help paint old people's flats. With nothing much to do except throw half bricks at one another a surprising number of school pupils put their hands up.

I sent the keenest (some as young as twelve) wandering around the town knocking on doors and making a survey to find out where the old or disabled people lived. None, I'm pleased to say, were kidnapped or locked in cellars.

I had the three things I needed: something to do, people to do it and stuff to do it with.

I then had two huge strokes of luck.

First, the local Meals on Wheels group, discovering my presence and finding out that I had a driving licence (not all that usual among 18 year olds in the early 1960s), enrolled me to drive their beaten up old van around the town to deliver meals to the hungry elderly and housebound. In return, they allowed me occasional use of the van at other times of the day. The van would have not have passed a modern MOT test (I doubt if it would have satisfied EU requirements for scrap) but if it was always parked facing downhill and the engine not allowed to idle it was surprisingly reliable and it had a huge capacity. I found that I could cram an awful lot of paint and a good many kids into the back of it.

Second, I don't know who told them but the council found out what I was doing. The council bureaucrats were not well pleased. Firm suggestions were made that painting council property might be against the law.

Questions were asked. The local newspapers ran stories.

And then the unions got interested. Painting flats was taking away work from their members. There was outrage. No one had been planning to paint the flats. The council wasn't prepared to pay for the paint or the labour. And the union members weren't going to lose any work. But there was much indignation.

It was, to my surprise, precisely what I needed for my painting project to take off. When I warned pupils at one school that what I was asking them to do might get them into trouble with the council every single pupil volunteered. The idea of doing something that wasn't approved by important adults appealed to them. Kids love doing things that aren't allowed. Most people who volunteer for anything have to get something out of it for themselves. That's human nature. They might not know this, and they might not know what it is they want, they need or they're getting, but it is, nevertheless, true.

The result was that I soon had surprisingly eager schoolchildren painting flats at evenings, at weekends and during their holidays. The Meals on Wheels van was running around the town almost full time, dropping off volunteers and paint. It spluttered and sighed and made a good many strange noises but it never let me down as long as I always remembered to park it facing downwards on a decent hill.

And this (thank you for your patience) is where the cat comes into the story.

One of the old ladies whose flats was being decorated, a sweet soul with the slightly improbable name of Emily Postlethwaite, had a cat. The cat, a much-spoilt long haired lap cat, who was called Ernie in memory of Emily's brother who had died in the trenches in the first World War, didn't like the smell of paint. And he probably didn't much care for the influx of noisy, paint brush wielding teenagers either. And so, as cats will do when they feel inconvenienced in any way, he bolted. Emily, who lived alone and who knew no-one in the area, was heartbroken. Ernie was, in many ways, her life. Emily had no relatives left alive and had made no friends. She and Ernie lived on the sixth floor of a multi storey block of flats and, since the lift only worked intermittently, there she stayed. Marooned on a small desert island high in the sky.

This was my first disaster. My first unhappy `customer'. I was devastated. It was all my fault. I had ruined the life of a 77 year old woman. I immediately pulled together as many of my helpers as I could (in a town ruled by gangs and gang leaders I had by now acquired a surprisingly large army of neophyte painters and decorators) and began a search of the neighbourhood. At first it seemed impossible that such a fat and out of condition cat should have managed to run down six flights of stairs and disappear into the urban jungle at ground level but when we failed to find him it seemed that that was exactly what had happened.

Alerted by the sound of schoolchildren running here, there and everywhere yelling `Ernie!' and `Here, pussy! Puss, puss!' Emily's neighbours stuck their heads out of their front doors to see what was going on. All, without exception, were keen to help when they heard what had happened.

And it was one of the neighbours, a 79 year old retired dockyard worker called Jack McBride, who came up trumps. He lived on the seventh floor, a floor higher than Emily, and had opened his front door on the evening of Ernie's disappearance to find the escapee asleep on his front door mat. Being a kindly man he took the cat into his tiny flat and gave it a saucer of milk and a small piece of fish he'd been keeping for his supper. We had concentrated our efforts on the floors below Emily's flat. He, living above, had not heard the commotion we had been making as we continued our search.

Since her flat still stank of paint I escorted Emily upstairs so that she and Ernie could be reunited. Both were undoubtedly pleased at this reconciliation, though I have to say that Ernie, full of milk and fish, seemed to put less into the reunion than did Emily, who had been so heartbroken that she hadn't a thing all day.

Jack invited Emily to stay with him while the painting continued. Emily, keen to stay with Ernie, and knowing that if she took him back downstairs he would probably run away again, gladly accepted. Jack had a small spare bedroom and while he made up the bed I went back downstairs and fetched the few things Emily said she needed. She trusted me with the key to her flat. Since it was full of her treasures, and everything in the world that she owned, this was a greater sign of trust than I realised at the time and was, perhaps, more a sign of the times than a sign of my particular trustworthiness.

By the time my teenager painters had finished redecorating her flat Emily and Jack were getting on well together. They had, they discovered, a good deal in common. Both loved natural history programmes on the television, both were keen card players and both loved cats in general and Ernie in particular. I became friends with all three of them.

A month after we had finished the painting and Miss Postlethwaite had moved back into her flat I called round to see how she and Ernie were getting on. I found Mr McBride sitting at her dining room table. He and Miss Postlethwaite were playing poker, using buttons for money, and Miss Postlethwaite was, she told me with considerable delight, three million pounds ahead. I was invited to join in and was given a supply of buttons to start me off. When I left, an hour and a half later, I was down half a million pounds.

Five months after that, having decided that at their time of life a long courtship was giving fate too much of a chance to interfere in things, I got an invitation card telling me that Miss Postlethwaite was marrying Mr McBride and that I would be a very welcome guest at the church and the reception afterwards. `Come to the wedding and we'll forget about the £500,000 you owe,' was scribbled on the bottom of the card in bright blue ink. Two of the girls who had helped paint Miss Postlethwaite's flat were acting as bridesmaids and the rest of the gang would attend and form an arch outside the church with raised paint brushes replacing the more usual display of ceremonial swords.

I was at medical school by then but I skipped a couple of anatomy lectures and went to the wedding. Even without the £500,000 bribe I wouldn't have missed it for the world.

The newly married couple were, they told me, moving into Mrs McBride's apartment. `It's much smarter than my place now that it's been repainted,' explained the groom.

I asked if they were going on a honeymoon.

`Oh no,' they replied together.

`We couldn't leave Ernie,' explained the bride. `He wouldn't like it.'

The Cat Who Didn't Like Opera

When I was at medical school in Birmingham I shared a flat with three other medical students. We had the whole of the top floor of a huge, detached Victorian house in a rather smart part of Edgbaston. The flat was so large that we used to have bicycle races indoors.

The woman next door was an opera singer and every morning she practised her scales. Even though her house was fifty feet away I could hear her if I opened my window. It was an extraordinary sound and the exercises, up and down, down and up, up and down, seemed to last for hours.

One day we found a grey Siamese cat wandering around in the flat. It had come in through the front door (which we only ever shut in really cold weather - we were all over six foot tall and had nothing whatsoever worth stealing so we had no fear of thieves) and climbed the stairs.

We didn't know where it had come from so we fed it and let it stay. It was, we discovered, exceedingly fond of pilchards. Later that evening a stout, red faced man huffed and puffed up our stairs and demanded, very loudly, to know if we'd seen his wife's cat. He was, it seemed, the husband of the opera singer and the cat belonged to her (insofar as any cat can ever `belong' to a human being). The cat, was he told us, an expensive present sent to his wife by a fan who happened to be a cat breeder. We gave him the cat, which seemed unhappy at leaving us, and he huffed and puffed back down the stairs with it in his arms.

This happened every day for the following week.

The cat would arrive with us in the morning and the husband would pick it up from our flat later in the day. We tried to take it back once but their front gate was locked and no one answered when we rang the bell.

It was on the third day that I realised that the cat was arriving just after the opera singer had started her morning vocal exercises. And, from the cat's behaviour, it was pretty obvious that the cat wasn't much taken with the noise she made. When the cat arrived in our flat it would head straight for the rooms that were furthest away from the side of the house where the opera singer was our neighbour.

I mentioned this to the fat man.

`I don't think the cat much likes your wife's singing,' I told him. It wasn't the most tactful remark I've ever made. In a lifetime of unintentional tactlessness it is probably quite high on the list. Just above telling the truth when a woman I knew asked if I liked her new dress and just below asking a famously irascible newspaper editor if his lack of height explained his constantly apparent inferiority complex and consequent aggression.

`My wife is one of the highest paid sopranos in Europe!' he told me indignantly.

`Maybe the cat isn't a keen opera fan,' I suggested, helpfully.

`It's a Siamese cat!' snorted the husband derisively. People are always said to snort derisively, but he really did. `Siamese cats are exceptionally intelligent and well bred. Of course he will like opera.'

I gave up and handed the cat back.

`And please don't feed it fish,' he told me, over his shoulder. `The fish makes the cat's breath smell.'

After three weeks of this the opera singer and her husband gave up. They did try to keep the cat in on two mornings but on both occasions the cat proved too good for them.

`You'd better keep the damned cat,' said the husband one evening. `I'm not fetching it back again.' He glowered at the cat which was curling itself between my legs. `We did think of selling it but to be honest it's more trouble than it's worth.'

And so we acquired a cat. We called her Sophie.

Three weeks later the enormously well-bred and exceedingly expensive Siamese cat gave birth to kittens. And, judging by their colouring, it wasn't difficult to see that this had not been an arranged coupling.

There were plenty of cosy cupboards and dark corners available to her but Sophie, now a new mother, gave birth in the bath which she then proceeded to use as a play pen. (The bathroom was as far away from the opera singer's house as it was possible to get.)

When she wanted her kittens to do a little exploring she would pick them up, one at a time, by the scruff of the neck and jump out of the bath with each one in turn. Without her help the kittens they could not climb out of the bath. For six weeks we had to manage without a bath. It wasn't a great hardship. We either used to sneak into a shower room at the Queen Elizabeth hospital or, since a medical student we knew well was going steady with a nurse we would use the bathroom in the nurses' home when we felt that we needed to clean up a bit. (We weren't supposed to enter the nurses' home at all but the fire escape door could easily be opened from outside if you had a desert spoon handy. During the cat's occupation of our bath we hammered a couple of nails into the frame of the fire escape door so that we could keep a suitable spoon hanging there.)

The four of us shared the flat with Sophie for the final three years of our training. She spent much of that time pregnant or looking after kittens. I hate to think how many new cats she brought into the world. We gave most of the kittens away but kept one from the first litter. When we qualified as doctors we knew that none of us could take her with us. No pets, not even cats, are allowed in hospital residences. It would not, in any case, have been fair to Sophie.

So, just after our finals, and just before we moved out of the flat, we interviewed all the students who wanted to take over our rooms. We didn't own the building, of course, but final year medical students have a certain amount of sway with younger, more junior students (or, at least, they did in those days) and we made it pretty clear that we weren't going to let anyone take over the flat if they weren't also prepared to take on the responsibility for looking after Sophie. Handing over the bath when it was required was one of the requirements that was beyond negotiation.

Eight years later I was back in Birmingham for a few weeks to make a television series. On the morning of my third day I told the taxi driver who was taking me from my hotel to the television studios to make a small detour so that I could call in at our old flat.

The front door was open and no one answered when I called out. So I raced up the stairs to the bathroom in the vague hope that Sophie might be there.

She was.

She was lying in the bath with four kittens beside her.

And as I got back into the taxi to continue my journey I stopped for a moment.

`Who or what is making that racket?' demanded the taxi driver.

`It's an opera singer,' I told him. `Practising her scales.'

`I wouldn't like to live next to that,' muttered the taxi driver.

I smiled.

Nor had Sophie.

The Cat Who Liked Gardening

I spent six months working as a house physician at a hospital in Shoreham by Sea, a town on the south coast of England, just a few miles to the west of Brighton.

Towards the end of my contract one of the consultants for whom I worked invited me to lunch. This wasn't anything special. I wasn't his favourite. It wasn't a `treat'. The consultant, recognised as an eminent physician in his field, but regarded by the staff as the thin, rather mean man he appeared to be, used to invite all his house physicians to lunch. It was offered as a payment for all the times we'd helped look after his private patients. It was not, to be perfectly honest, much of a reward. Other consultants would quietly hand their housemen a bottle of claret or, so rumour had it, a crisp ten pound note sealed in an envelope. The consultant I worked for offered lunch. It was a semi-royal invitation which is to say that it did not allow for a refusal. To add insult to injury the invitee was, I had been informed by the consultant's secretary, expected to take along a bottle of wine.

Having lunch at the consultant's house (which involved two lengthy bus rides) wasn't the way I would have chosen to spend my free time. In those days it wasn't at all unusual for junior hospital doctors to work over a hundred hours in a week. Several weeks, when the doctor who covered for me was away sick, I actually worked or was on call for 168 hours. Three or four hours away from the hospital were valuable. My plan was to get away as soon as lunch was over and, if there was still time, take the bus to Brighton where I intended to sit on the pier and allow a warm sea breeze to wash away the smell of hospital which, I knew, enveloped me like a shroud.

Lunch was a dreary affair. The consultant's wife, as thin and apparently as mean as her husband, served very small portions and didn't offer seconds. The potatoes were allegedly mashed but in reality they came from a packet and hadn't seen a fork until they arrived at the table. The cabbage and the carrots were overcooked and watery. For pudding we had a slice of frozen treacle tart which was served luke-warm and with a thin coating of lumpy custard. The bottle of supermarket wine that I had taken with me had disappeared into the kitchen, presumably to be kept for a more illustrious guest. The meal made me realise that the food served in the doctors' mess at the hospital wasn't all that bad. The cook working in the mess did at least serve large portions.

`Would you like to see the garden?' offered the consultant when his wife stood and began to clear away the custard-smeared plates.

Without waiting for an answer he opened the French windows and stepped out onto the small patio which separated the house from the garden. I followed. And so too, I noticed, did a mackerel tabby which had been resting on a wooden bench a few yards to the left of the French windows. The three of us headed up a crazy paving path which led away from the house and across a neatly trimmed lawn.

`I grow my own vegetables,' said the consultant, over his shoulder. `Fresher, better tasting and much cheaper than the stuff you get from the shops.'

He led me to a small area of garden which had been dug over and turned into a busy little vegetable patch. The cat, which had followed us, jumped up into a wheelbarrow and sat down.

`You can help me plant some more peas,' he said. `Do you good. Fresh air and gentle exercise. You chaps spend too much time shut away in the hospital.' He took a bunch of keys from his pocket, selected one and unfastened the padlock on a small wooden shed. He opened the door and took out a spade. `Just dig over that stretch of earth,' he told me. He patted his pockets. `Damn,' he said. `Forgotten the seeds. I'll pop back and fetch them.'

He disappeared back down the path to the house leaving me to dig his garden.

`Splendid!' he said, when he returned fifteen minutes later, brandishing an unopened packet of seeds. His breath smelt of brandy and I guessed that he'd taken me up the garden and then nipped back down again so that he could have his after lunch snifter without having to offer me a glass. He popped into his shed, found a wooden dibber and started to prepare the ground for his seeds.

The moment he did this the cat jumped out of the wheelbarrow and wandered over towards him. And then, to my astonishment, as the consultant started making a trench for the seeds the cat started to help. The consultant saw me watching. `The cat always helps,' he told me. And he did! As the consultant created his trench the cat, starting a few feet away, created a trench of his own. At first I naturally thought that the cat was preparing a trench to satisfy some natural needs of its own. But it wasn't. When the two of them had finished preparing the trench the consultant tore the top from the packet and, after making rude comments about the number of seeds supplied, began to sow what was available into the trench which he and the cat had made. The cat, working behind him, covered up the seeds with fresh earth. It was quite extraordinary to watch. The consultant sowed and the cat covered up.

`Splendid!' said the consultant when the two of them had finished. He stood up and admired what they had done together and beamed at me. `I expect you'll want to be getting back,' he said. I'd done my digging and he didn't need me anymore. He looked at his watch. `There's a bus in ten minutes from the stop just along the road.'

The added surprise was that the consultant didn't seem in the slightest bit astonished at what the cat had done. It seemed normal to him and he just took it for granted.

But for me, watching that amazing cat help sow a row of peas was well worth the long bus ride, the miserable company and the lumpy custard. In fact, if it wasn't for that cat, the only feline gardener I've ever met, I would, by now, have doubtless forgotten all about the consultant and his unwanted luncheon invitation.

The Music Loving Cat

A friend of mine whose identity I will protect by calling him Jim laboured under the misapprehension that he had a good singing voice. He would sing anything (show tunes, pop songs, snatches of opera, hymns, Christmas carols, folk songs) but whatever he chose to sing he would always sing it loudly.

His family and friends tried to persuade him to take up some other interest. Stamp collecting was one of the favourites. A cousin suggested that bell ringing would be more socially acceptable. An uncle recommended that he take up yodelling.

But Jim persisted. And whatever he sang he continued to sing loudly. He genuinely believed that he had a wonderful voice and that he had a duty to share his talent with those around him.

And then his wife bought a cat for their children.

The cat soon made it clear that it didn't think much of Jim's voice.

Every time Jim started singing the cat would jump upon his shoulders, reach round and gently but firmly place a paw against his lips.

Jim soon got the message.

`If even the cat can't stand the noise I make I suppose I'd better stop,' he admitted.

Family and friends clubbed together to buy the cat a large piece of fresh salmon as a thank you.

The Intelligent Cat

I was having dinner with some people in Northampton once when they suddenly started speaking French to one another. My French is pretty poor but theirs wasn't a good deal better and so I managed to keep up with the conversation. I was just getting into the swing of things when they stopped and went back to speaking English. This happened quite suddenly and apparently without any reason.

`Why did you do that?' I asked Robert, my host.

`Do what?'

`Speak French for a few minutes and then suddenly stop and go back to speaking English.'

`The cat came into the room,' said Robert, as though this explained what had happened. `But he's gone now,' he added, as though this might be of additional help. I had noticed the cat enter the room but I had not noticed him leave.

I thought about this for a moment, trying to get my head round it. `Are you telling me that you started speaking French because the cat was in the room?'

`Yes.'

I was still not quite sure that I had understood.`You started speaking in French when the cat came in?'

`Yes,' said Robert, firmly.

`And you stopped speaking in French when the cat left the room?'

Another nod and an identical answer. `Yes.' Robert was now beginning to sound rather exasperated.

I thought about this for a little while longer and then slowly shook my head. `I give up,' I admitted. `I don't understand.'

`Gilbert is very intelligent,' explained Robert. He lowered his voice and whispered as though worried that someone, presumably Gilbert, might overhear.

`And he understands what you say?'

`We think so,' agreed Robert.

`So, to stop him understanding what you are saying, you speak French when he's in the room?'

`Absolutely right,' agreed Robert.

`But he's very intelligent?'

`Definitely.'

`How do you know he doesn't understand French?' I asked.

`Well, I don't think that's very likely do you?' said Robert. He smiled as he might have smiled at a half-wit. `After all, he is just a cat.'

The Proud Father

When I qualified as a doctor we had to take two jobs in hospital before we could work as general practitioners (GPs). In order to be fully `registered' as medical practitioners we had to survive two six month spells working as a house physician and a house surgeon. I took my job as a house surgeon at a hospital in the midlands. I shared a house with three other doctors working in the same hospital. The house was an official residence which belonged to the hospital

Since the house belonged to the hospital there were, as you can imagine very strict rules about what we could or not do in it. Sleeping and eating were acceptable but most other activities were banned. Keeping pets was definitely pretty high up on the banned list.

Still, we had a huge advantage.

The house in which we lived was separated from the hospital by an extremely busy main road. The downside of this was that

when we off duty but on call we would have to dodge the heavy and unrelenting traffic in order to cross the road. It was a miracle that none of us ended up in the hospital morgue. But the upside was that the administrators and bureaucrats who might have been keen to enforce the regulations had offices in the hospital - on the other side of the same busy main road.

So we had a cat called Hughie living with us.

No one knew just how old Hughie was. Doctors living in the hospital rarely stayed at the hospital for more than one or two six month contracts and so the house had a steady turnover of human occupants. Hughie was the only permanent resident. The generally agreed consensus was that he was somewhere between ten and twenty years of age. We knew he had to be at least ten years old because one of the senior surgical registrars remembered Hughie being there when he'd lived in the house ten years earlier.

However old he was Hughie was still alert and lively and he spent his nights wandering around the neighbourhood doing all the things tomcats do when they're out on the razzle. We might have been uncertain about his age but we were sure of one thing: Hughie had never been subjected to the veterinary surgeon's knife.

I can say this with some certainty because of something that happened while I was living there.

I was sitting in the doctors' lounge one Saturday evening, playing chess with an Australian anaesthetist called Arthur, when Hughie suddenly appeared. He was not alone. He was carrying two tiny kittens in his mouth and behind him came a tiny but very pretty black and white cat who was carrying another two kittens.

Hughie and the other cat dropped their kittens on the carpet and then Hughie let out a loud miaow, just in case we hadn't noticed what was going on.

Arthur and I turned our attention away from the chess board. One thing was crystal clear and quite indisputable: the kittens were Hughie's.

`Seems like old Hughie's been a busy little fellow,' drawled Arthur admiringly.

`Congratulations!' I said, stroking the obviously proud father.

Arthur and I made quite a fuss of Hughie and his lady. The two cats stayed with us for half an hour or so, allowing us to admire the four kittens. Throughout it all Hughie sat and purred. I'd never seen such an obvious display of pride. And then, without warning, Hughie picked up two of the kittens and headed for the door. The queen picked up the other two and followed him.

`Was that just Hughie showing off?' asked Arthur.

`It seemed like it,' I agreed. `Let's see where they came from.' I got up from my chair and followed the short procession. With Hughie leading the two cats headed out onto the pavement and turned left. They walked for about two hundred yards and then turned into an alleyway leading between two terraced houses. I didn't follow but watched them head down towards the gardens behind the houses. It was quite clear that Arthur had been perfectly right. Hughie had brought us his new kittens to admire.

The next day I spoke to one of the Senior House Officers who had lived in the house for a while a couple of years earlier.

`Oh Hughie's still at it, is he?' said the Senior House Officer with a smile. `When I was living there he brought three families of kittens for us to admire.' He paused, remembering. `Three different mothers too.'

Hughie didn't bring any more kittens to the house while I was living there but five years later I met a young doctor who'd just finished a job as a junior doctor at that hospital.

`Was there a cat called Hughie still living there?' I asked.

`Oh yes!' he replied.

And he told me that while he'd been there Hughie had twice appeared with kittens in his mouth. And on each occasion he had been accompanied by the kittens’ mother.

I don't suppose anyone except Hughie has any idea how many kittens he has fathered. But it's probably a good thing he doesn't have to pay kitten maintenance.

The Cat Who Liked To Sleep In

I lived for a while in a house in the English midlands. I was working as a locum GP and the senior partner at the practice had arranged my accommodation. I couldn't stay in a flat (which I would have much preferred) because my contract required me to be on call for two nights a week and on alternative weekends. I needed to have someone available to take calls for me when I was out visiting patients. My landlady had agreed to take on this extra responsibility for an added extra fee. (I had a vague suspicion that my landlady, a stout, elderly woman with very fixed views on an astonishing variety of subjects, was earning more money than I was from the practice.)

The best aspect of my sojourn with this lady was, without a doubt, the fact that she had a cat, an elderly, rather lazy grey haired cat called Smokey with whom I swiftly established a very warm relationship.

Theoretically, Smokey was expected to spend his nights in his basket in the kitchen. But Smokey wasn't particularly keen on rules and on my first night I awoke at about three in the morning to find him sleeping on my bed. I was awakened by his twitching tail brushing across my cheek. He seemed to enjoy sharing my bed and whenever I woke in the morning I would find him fast asleep and tucked up very close to me.

Since my responsibilities included doing a morning surgery, which started every morning promptly at nine, I had purchased an alarm clock so that I could wake up in plenty of time. My landlady would, I have no doubt, been willing to continue to wake me but I preferred to retain as much independence as I could. On the first two mornings, before I'd acquired my alarm clock, she had woken me by bursting into my bedroom shouting my name and then shaking me by the shoulder. It had been an `alarming' experience which I was not keen to repeat.

It was on the fourth day after I had bought my alarm clock that my problem started. The alarm, which had worked perfectly for the first three days, didn't go off and, as a result, I didn't wake up when I had expected. I was eventually awakened at fifteen minutes past eight by my landlady.

`Are you getting up this morning?' she shouted, as I reluctantly lurched from dreamland into reality. I rubbed my shoulder. She had big hands and a strong grip. She told me the time and then told Smokey he should be downstairs.

`I thought you'd bought yourself an alarm clock?' she said as the cat stretched, jumped down off the bed and disappeared.

`I did buy a clock,' I said. I picked the clock up from the bedside table and blearily examined it. The clock had a button on the top of its casing. When the alarm was switched on the button was up. To switch off the alarm the button simply had to be pushed down. When I examined it, the button was down. This puzzled me. I felt sure that I'd turned on the alarm when I'd gone to bed. I scrambled out of bed, got dressed and went to work without having time to eat any breakfast. I am not a person who feels comfortable about starting the day without breakfast.

Exactly the same thing happened the next day.

I tested the alarm clock. It worked perfectly well.

When the clock failed to go off for the third morning in a succession I decided that something `funny' was going on. My first thought, I regret to say, was that someone was turning off the alarm clock after I'd gone to bed. The only possible suspect was my landlady. Why would she do such a thing? I had no idea. But she was a woman who enjoyed her responsibilities. Maybe she felt aggrieved that she had been replaced by an alarm clock.

I decided that in order to find out what was going on I would pretend to go to sleep but would, instead, stay awake and keep watch on the clock. I left the bedroom curtains slightly ajar so that the moonlight filtering into the room would enable me to keep an eye on the clock.

I didn't have long to wait. The clock was turned off about ten minutes after I turned out the light and pretended to go to sleep.

It wasn't my landlady pressing the button down on the top of the alarm clock. It was Smokey.

I watched in astonishment as he crept up the bed until he could reach the bedside table, and pressed down the button on the top of the alarm clock.

It wasn't difficult to understand why.

Smokey loved sleeping and he liked sleeping on my bed. The alarm clock, by removing me from the bed, was disturbing his sleep and interfering with his comfort. And so Smokey must have watched to see how the clock was controlled, and decided to take action accordingly.

I watched, with a smile, as Smokey crept back down the bed, turned round three times, and went back to sleep tucked up against my thigh. I liked feeling him there but I had to get up in time for the morning surgery and so I got out of bed, picked up the alarm clock, and reset it. I then looked around for somewhere to put the clock where Smokey would not be able to turn it off.

I thought about it putting it on top of the wardrobe. But there was, I thought, a very good chance that Smokey would be able to get up there. In the end I opened a drawer in the bedside cabinet, put the primed alarm clock inside, and then almost but not quite re-closed the drawer.

I couldn't help staying awake for a while to watch what Smokey would do.

He must have seen where I'd put the clock because he went straight to the drawer. He tried to open it. But he couldn't. Eventually, in clear disgust, he gave up and went back to sleep beside my thigh.

I felt quite guilty about it.

But I needed my breakfast before I went to work and I really didn't want to be shaken awake by my landlady any more.   Smokey must have forgiven me because he slept on my bed for the remainder of my stay in the town.

Three Legs, One Eye and a Third of a Tail

I once knew a cat who had three legs, one eye and one third of a tail. He was an extremely happy cat who genuinely seemed to enjoy life.

I saw the accident which caused his injuries.

I was on my way to visit a patient when a battered Ford swept past me, travelling on the wrong side of the road. It was going at well above the speed limit. Suddenly, the driver braked. But it was too late. The cat which had leapt out into the road was unable to get out of the way and the car was unable to stop.

When I reached the car I thought it was dead or dying. I picked it up very carefully, trying to move it as little as I could, wrapped it in a rug and took it to a nearby vet whom I knew quite well.

It wasn't until about two weeks later that I found out that the owners of the cat were patients of mine. They were an elderly couple, quite well off, who lived in smart, detached bungalow. They had been devastated by the disappearance of their beloved cat and had assumed that it had been run over and left to die somewhere. It had never occurred to them that the cat might have run away. The couple, both crippled with arthritis, had spent much of the intervening time walking around the neighbourhood looking for their cat. They'd had `missing posters' printed and had stuck them to trees, lampposts and in the windows of several local shops. It was a poster on a tree that had caught my eye.

They were shocked when I delivered their cat back to them. Both burst into tears. But they were pleased to see it and I knew they would continue to look after it, even though it was now rather less than three quarters of the cat they had last seen.

He couldn't run or climb, of course, but that didn't matter much because for the first time in his life he showed no interest whatsoever in going outside. He became a `bungalow cat', content to stay indoors and sit on rugs, beds and laps. He managed to get about quite well, hobbling around on three legs, and could even get up onto a chair or a bed without too much difficulty.

Before the cat had been injured he had never shown much interest in me or, indeed, anyone else. He'd been a rover; coming home only to eat and lick his wounds after a fight or another close escape.

But after the injury he changed. He became quite affectionate. And, to my surprise and delight, he always made a bee line for my lap whenever I visited. Even if he was curled up in front of the fire he would get up, hobble over and climb up onto my knees. He would look up at me, nuzzle against my chest, and then curl up. I always ended up staying longer than I needed to, or intended, because I couldn't bear to put him down.

To this day I'm convinced that he knew that I was the one who had rescued him and taken him to the vet. He was, I felt sure, saying `thank you' to me for saving his life.

The Pampered Cat and the Stray

Friends of mine had a very pampered cat. She was called Sookie and she ran the household as strictly as a sergeant major could have. Everything revolved around her requirements and her whims.

And then, one day, a stray cat appeared on my friends' doorstep. The stray was very dirty and extremely bedraggled. It looked as though it hadn't eaten for days.

My friends knew that they would have to at least feed the cat but they were very worried about Sookie's reaction. If she saw them feeding another cat she might go into one of her momentous sulks. They didn't think they could cope with that and so they led the stray cat into their utility room, shut it in and fed it there. The utility room (which contained the washing machine and the spin drier) was the only room in the house which Sookie never entered.

The cat was ravenous. It ate two tins of Sookie's very best cat food and two large bowls of milk.

But it would not let them clean its dirty fur. It would not let them touch it at all.

They found an old litter tray of Sookie's and a basket she no longer used and put both into the utility room so that the stray cat could stay in some comfort. But they still don't know what to do for the long term. They were frightened of Sookie's reaction.

And then, one day, the door which shut the utility room off from the rest of the house was left open and the two cats, smelling or sensing one another's presence, met in the kitchen.

Both my friends happened to be there when the meeting took place.

Neither could quite believe what they saw.

Sookie approached the stray and, without pausing or hesitating, proceeded to clean the stray's fur with her tongue. And the stray, so nervous that it seemed almost feral, happily allowed Sookie to do this.

Once the stray was clean Sookie led it to her own dishes and sat back, allowing the stranger to feed from her own bowls.

When the bowls were empty Sookie walked over to where my friends were standing and miaowed loudly. It was clear that she wanted the bowls refilling. My friends did as they had been instructed.

This time both cats ate together.

Now the two cats now live happily together.

`It was quite an eye opener for us,' said my friends. `We had expected Sookie to behave in exactly the opposite way. It seems that we really didn't know Sookie at all.'

The Swiss Cat

I lived once in a Swiss town called Schaffhausen. One of my reasons for going there was to learn to speak German. Sadly, I hadn't realised that in Northern Switzerland the variety of German they speak bears as much resemblance to `hoch' German or `proper' German as cockney does to English.

While living in Switzerland I stayed in lodgings with a stern Swiss couple who regarded neatness and punctuality as the only two virtues worth bothering about. Their home was cleaner and tidier than the operating theatres in most British hospitals. The words `prim and proper' could have been invented for my landlord and landlady. Their idea of wild fun was to go for a walk around the Rhinefall on a Sunday afternoon. Their sole concession to recklessness was to share their home with a cat called Ralfie.

Ralfie was a huge Persian and although he was extremely well looked after he was subject to a variety of restrictions. In the living room he was allowed to climb onto just one easy chair, a chair which was covered in a rug so that any loose hairs could be easily taken outside and removed, he was not allowed onto any of the work surfaces in the kitchen and, most important of all, he was not allowed to go upstairs under any circumstances. Ralfie obeyed these rules as though his life depended upon his obedience which, when I think about it carefully, I suppose it did.

My tiny bedroom was on the top floor of a three storey house and the little dormer window overlooked the back garden. I had a bed, a small table, a chair and a thin wardrobe which didn't shut properly unless I used a piece of folded paper to jam the doors. I had use of the bathroom between 7.30 am and 7.50 am and 10.00 pm and 10.30 pm and was served breakfast in the dining room at 8.15 am every morning except Sunday when, as a treat, it was served at 8.30 am. All my other meals I took out, in restaurants and cafes in the town.

Ralfie and I hit it off right from the start. It was clear that he respected his owners, but there wasn't a great deal of love between them. He knew he could rely on them to provide him with decent meals and they knew that he wouldn't bring mice into the house and would rush outside if he felt the need to get rid of a furball. At night he slept in a basket in the space underneath the stairs. On sunny days he would sit in the garden. If I didn't have anything to do, or anywhere to go, we would sit together on a wooden bench underneath a huge tree.

But the thing I remember about Ralfie was not his obedience but the one time when he did venture upstairs.

I was asleep in bed one night when I was woken by a scratching at my door. It took me a few moments to realise what it was. I got up, padded to the door in my bare feet and found Ralfie staring up at me.

`What are you doing here?' I asked him in a whisper. `You'll get into terrible trouble if you get caught.'

Ralfie responded to this by brushing against my legs, turning and starting back down the stairs. Puzzled, I watched him go. He came back up and did the same thing again. On the third attempt I understood. He wanted me to follow him. I put on my shoes, pulled a sports jacket on over my pyjamas and followed him down the stairs. He headed straight for the back door, and exited through the cat flap which led directly from the kitchen to the back garden. I didn't have a key to the back door so I was stymied. After a few moments he came back in again. He was slightly puzzled by my insistence that we go out through that door but accepted it as eccentric but inevitable.

He led me round the side of the house and down into the garden. I felt a bit of an idiot trudging around in my jacket and pyjama trousers at 3 am (the Swiss take everything very seriously and I was worried that I was probably breaking clothes wearing rules) but it was dark and it seemed unlikely that anyone would be peeping at that time in the morning.

I felt even more at risk when Ralfie led the way across a low fence into the neighbour's garden. But I followed. He led me into a garden shed.

It was dark inside the shed but as soon as I entered I heard a cat miaowing. And when my eyes became accustomed to the dark I could see that a small grey and white cat had got itself caught up in a roll of barbed wire.

I found a pair of gardening gloves (they were far too small and thinner than I would have liked, but they provided some protection) and managed to free the cat. Amazingly it seemed pretty unhurt. It had lost some fur and had a small scratch on its face but, after a miaow of thanks and licking itself all over, it was able to run off out of the shed and disappear.

I closed the shed door and Ralfie and I made our way back home. I felt very proud of both of us. I had no idea how he'd found the grey and white cat but it was lucky that he had.

When we got back home Ralfie went back to his bed under the stairs and I, after stroking him and tickling him under his chin, made my way back to my bed in the attic.

Ralfie never came upstairs again. Not once. I was there for another six weeks and Ralfie always obeyed the rules. And he and I never spoke of our nighttime adventure. It was a secret we alone shared and which, until now, has been shared with no one else.

The Cat Who Watched Television

When I was in my twenties and thirties I appeared on television two or three times a week. I was a regular on an unending series of identical day time television shows. I was the resident doctor on a breakfast time programme called TV AM and a constant presence on a wide variety of more or less identical magazine programmes which appeared at lunchtime, during the afternoon or in the early evening. Some I helped present. Some I appeared on as an `expert'.

Since I was, at the time, also practising full time as a GP the logistics of being in the places I was supposed to be were sometimes challenging. My early morning television appearances on TV AM used to involve a drive to the local railway station, a two hour train journey, two hectic taxi rides (with a live twenty minute broadcast crammed in between them), a two hour train journey and a car drive from the local railway station before arriving back at my surgery in time to conduct a late morning surgery and go round on my home visits. Patients who had watched me on television in a London studio would show no little surprise on seeing me in my surgery or on their doorsteps.

At the time I was living with two cats called Dick and Harry. Both were completely black and were physically indistinguishable from one another. I could only tell them apart by their behaviour. Harry was rather distant and superior. Dick was very friendly.

The cleaner who swept my floors and ironed my shirts always had the television set switched on. Even if she was doing something in another room the television in the living room would be left on. She told me that Dick would usually ignore all the programmes available but that the moment he heard my voice he would sit in front of the TV set, an enthusiastic and committed viewer. (The only other programme Dick enjoyed was snooker. He used to sit on the top of the television set and try to catch the moving balls before they disappeared into the pockets. He was particularly fond of a player called Alex `Hurricane' Higgins, whose speed around the table kept him very busy.)

And then, one day, I needed to watch a tape of a pre-recorded programme I'd made. I can't remember why. (I hardly ever watched any of the programmes I'd made.) And Dick was in the room, draped around my neck, when I put the tape into the machine.

I have never in my life seen a cat so obviously confused. Dick leapt down and raced over to the television set. He looked at the television screen and then back at me. He ran back and jumped on my lap. He looked at my face. He jumped down and raced back to the television set. It was clearly all too much for him. He found a spot on the rug in front of the fire, turned round three times, lay down, put his tail over his nose and went to sleep.

He never watched television again.

Not even when Alex Higgins was playing snooker.

The Cat Who Saved a Life

When I first started work as a general practitioner I never went to bed before midnight when I was on call. There were always likely to be more calls in the hour before the end of the day.

The calls at this time of day usually came from one of two groups of patients. First, the patients who had gone through the evening in pain or discomfort. They would often telephone between 11 pm and midnight when they realised that their problem wasn't going to go away by itself and they didn't think they could get through the night without help. Second, there would be calls inspired by husbands who had come home from the pub to find their baby crying or coughing. `Have you called the doctor?' the half drunken husband would demand. `It's just a bit of a cold,' the wife would explain. `Well call the bugger now,' the husband would insist. `I don't want the kid coughing and spluttering all night. He'll keep me awake!' The wife would hesitate. `It's nearly midnight,' she would point out. `And it's really just a bit of a cold.' Too drunk for logic the husband would pick up the telephone and demand an immediate visit.

But, of course, not all calls fell neatly into one of those two categories. Mrs Dimmock's call certainly didn't. It wasn't Mrs Dimmock herself who made the call. It was her neighbour.

`Mrs Dimmock wants you to go round and see her,' said the caller. She gave me the address and some basic instructions. `Go round the back and up the stone steps. The light is out so you'll have to watch out. The light is always out. The council won't do anything about it. And watch out for glass on the stairs.'

`Do you know what's wrong with Mrs Dimmock?' I asked.

`She didn't say.'

`You've no idea?'

`No. She just asked me to get you to call. She doesn't have a telephone.'

`Do you know if it's urgent? Does she want me to visit her now or in the morning?'

`Now, of course. She wants you now. Why do you think I'm calling now?'

`Some people ring up at night to arrange a morning visit,' I explained. `Do you live with Mrs Dimmock?'

`No. I'm a neighbour.'

`How did she get in touch with you?'

`She put a message through my letter box.'

`Do you know when she did this?'

`Sometime this evening. It wasn't there when I finished my tea.'

`What does it say?'

`It just says to ask you to call,' said the caller, sounding rather exasperated. `It gave your name and number. And she'd folded it round some money for the call.' She sighed. `Are you going to visit or shall I call an ambulance?'

`I'm on my way,' I told her.

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It took me fifteen minutes to drive to the block of maisonettes where Mrs Dimmock lived and twenty minutes to find her front door.

`Oh, I'm glad you've come, doctor,' she said. She was wearing a pink quilted dressing gown and had matching pink curlers in her hair. I didn’t know her age but I guessed that the next birthday she celebrated which had a nought at the end would have at least an eight at the beginning.

`What's the problem?' I asked, following her into a narrow over-furnished hallway.

She didn't reply but simply led the way down the short hall and into an equally over-furnished living room.

`It's Bertie,' she said. `I need you to look at Bertie.'

I looked around. There was no one else in the room. `Who's Bertie?'

`My cat.'

I didn't say anything.

`I only noticed it this evening,' she said. `He's limping.'

I put my medical bag down on the floor and nodded patiently. This was beginning to sound like the sort of night call doctors use to entertain one another at British Medical Association dinners.

`I think he needs his claws trimming.'

`Ah.'

`It's been a while.'

`Who normally clips them?'

`The vet.'

`Wouldn't the vet be the best person to do them this time?'

`Oh I couldn't call the vet,' said Mrs Dimmock. `It's Sunday evening.'

We both looked at the clock.

`Actually, it's Monday morning,' I corrected her.

`There you are,' said Mrs Dimmock. `I couldn't call the vet at this time of the night. Not just to trim Bertie's claws.'

`No,' I agreed. `I suppose not.'

I had never clipped a cat's claws before. But I managed. I'd watched my Dad trimming Aunt Hannah's cat and I knew what had to be done. I used Mrs Dimmock's second best nail clippers.

`You won't make him bleed, will you?' said Mrs Dimmock.

`No,' I promised. `I won't.' And I didn't.

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The story doesn't end there.

Two days later I had been visiting another patient in the neighbourhood when I got outside to find an elderly woman with swollen ankles waiting by my car.

`Can I borrow you, doctor?' she said.

`What's the problem?'

`You visited Mrs Dimmock on Sunday.'

I nodded.

`You did her cat's claws.'

`I did.'

`Sooty's claws need trimming,' said the woman.

`Sooty?'

`My sister's cat. Mrs Onions.'

`I'm a doctor,' I reminded her. `I usually treat people. You really need a vet for a cat.'

`She can't afford the vet,' said the woman.

`Is Mrs Onions a patient of mine?'

`No. She's with Dr X,' said the woman, naming another local general practitioner. `But Dr X is always very busy.'

I didn't say anything.

`So will you help?'

I followed the woman with the fat ankles into a ground floor flat about two hundred yards away. It took us nearly ten minutes to get there.

`I brought the doctor,' said the woman with the ankles, introducing me to her sister, a skinny woman in her sixties. `He's come to see to the cat.' I stared at Mrs Onions in horror. She had an early rodent ulcer on her face.

`I'm not making a habit of this,' I told them both when I'd clipped the cat's claws. `And don't tell anyone I was here cutting his claws.'

They promised they wouldn't, though I didn't believe them for a moment.

`Have you seen anyone about that ulcer?' I asked Mrs Onions. She looked at me as though surprised I'd noticed, though the ulcer was nearly half an inch in diameter.

`I'm a doctor,' I explained. `We're trained to notice these things.'

`Yes, I suppose so,' she said.

`Have you mentioned it to Dr X?'

She shook her head. `I didn't like to bother him.'

I opened my black bag and took out some notepaper. I scribbled a note to Dr X, put it into an envelope, licked the envelope, sealed it and handed it to Mrs Onions. `Go and see Dr X this evening,' I told her. `And give him this.'

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I saw Dr X two weeks later at a post-graduate medical meeting at the local hospital.

`Thanks for sending along Mrs Onions,' he said. `I got her an appointment at the hospital. Just about got her in time. Another couple of weeks and it would have been too late.'

`Good,' I said. `I'm pleased.'

`How on earth did you come to see her?' he asked. `She hardly ever leaves home. Lives with her sister.'

`I was in the neighbourhood and they asked me to pop in,' I explained. As I said it I knew I should have said something else. Anything. Saw her on a bus. Bumped into her in the public library.

Dr X looked at me over his half-moon spectacles. `Really?' he said. `You can get into trouble for patient poaching,' he told me sternly.

`They wanted me to see the cat,' I explained.

Dr X's mood lightened noticeably. `Oh, really? And what was wrong with the cat?'

`It needed its claws trimming,' I muttered. I knew I had gone red.

Slowly, he raised a quizzical eyebrow. `Oh?' he said. `I didn't know your practice included cats. Do you do other animals too? Dogs? Parrots? Rabbits? Goldfish?'

`No,' I mumbled. `Just cats.'

`Ah,' he nodded, smirking. `A bit of a specialist eh?'

I muttered something unintelligible and hurried off.

But if I hadn't been to clip the cat's claws would anyone have seen Mrs Onions' rodent ulcer in time? I suspect not.

It's no exaggeration to say that her cat saved her life.

The Cat Who Stole Bras

For a while I worked in a medical practice where one of the senior partners held the position of local police surgeon. This meant that when I was on call for the practice I was the official `stand-in' as police surgeon.

Most of the time the duties involved taking blood from drivers who had failed the breathalyser test. Occasionally, I had to attend murder cases and examine the body. If the police managed to catch a suspect I had to take hair, finger nail and blood samples.

It was while working as the stand-in police surgeon that I managed to help prove the innocence of an unlucky man who had been arrested for stealing underwear from one of his neighbours. It was one of the strangest cases that ever came my way, although until now it has never been written about anywhere. The man had a close relationship with the proprietor of the local newspaper and he succeeded in keeping the incident out of the press completely. The man, whose identity I do not intend to reveal, was a respected member of the community. He had a well-paid job, a wife and two teenage children. Publicity would have ruined him whatever the outcome.

I first became aware of the case when I was asked to examine the man after he had been charged with the offence of stealing five brassieres. It might sound a rather comical charge but neither the police nor the accused considered it to be so. I talked to the man for some time and could find no evidence of any mental condition which might explain the peculiar theft with which he was charged. Throughout our interview the man steadfastly maintained his innocence. I have rarely ever seen anyone under more stress. Towards the end of our conversation, when it became clear to him that I was inclined to believe his claim that he had nothing to do with the theft, he broke down and cried. In his favour was the fact that although they had searched his home and car the police had found no trace of the missing items of underwear. There was no evidence against him - just the fact that the owner of the underwear had seen the man in his own garden several times prior to the disappearance.

As it happened, the woman whose bras had been stolen, was also a patient of mine and so I found myself dealing with both sides of this most unusual case. I visited her two days after the alleged theft had taken place and asked her to show me the site of the theft.

Excited by her position at the centre of so much attention the woman happily took me outside and showed me her washing line. She also showed me where the bras had been pegged out prior to their disappearance.

`So they were all at this end of the line?' I said.

She nodded. `The line runs close to my shed just here. If I peg out anything longer it brushes against the roof when it blows in the wind.'

`So you just put bras here?'

`And other undies, and face flannels and small towels. That sort of thing.'

I don't know why I thought of this but I asked if I might take a look inside the shed. The woman looked at me as though she knew I was wasting my time but said she didn't mind.

We found the bras almost immediately. They had been made into a soft bed in a corner of the shed. There were several other items of lingerie there together with several odd socks, a couple of face flannels and two tea-towels. The woman was very embarrassed at the discovery.

`Do you think they could have been taken by a bird?' she asked. `A crow?' It was obvious that the washing hadn't been stolen by human hands.

I shook my head. `Do you have a cat?' I asked, on a hunch. She said she had.

`Have you any washing you could put out now?' I asked.

She said she had a load in the washing machine waiting to be put out on the line and agreed to peg it out straight away.

We then hid behind a large willow tree in her garden and waited to see what happened.

Within twenty minutes we had the answer.

Her cat, a plump little creature with a black coat and white paws, used a metal table to get up onto the shed roof. From there she could easily reach the nearest items of washing - in this instance a variety of socks, flannels and underwear.

We watched in astonishment as the cat pulled down a sock, bit at the peg to release it, and then carried the sock, in her mouth down into the shed below. The cat repeated this journey three times.

`You always hang your bras just there?' I asked her.

She said she did and admitted that this was not just so that they didn't catch on the shed roof but also through a sense of modesty, mixed in with a little embarrassment. She was an exceptionally well endowed woman (she herself admitted that the word which best described the appearance of her brassieres was `voluminous') and she always hung her bras on the portion of washing line which was nearest to the house so that they could not be seen by her neighbours.

At her request I telephoned the police and they closed the case.

The cat, the real cuplrit, got away scot-free.

But then, cats usually do.

The woman even let the cat keep the collection of laundry which it had used to make its `nest'. But she stopped using the stretch of washing line which ran nearest to the shed.

Ten days later the cat delivered three kittens in the shed.

The Cat Who Liked Hiking

A few years ago I was staying for a while with a friend at his house in the country. Naturally, my solitary feline companion at the time, Thomasina, had accompanied me on my visit. The house was quite large and sat in the middle of about twenty acres of pastureland and woodland. Thomasina and I shared a massive old four poster bed in a huge bedroom. It was the first time in my life that I'd enjoyed the delights of a bedroom which was heated by a log fire. Thomasina used to sleep in front of the fire until the final embers had died away and then she'd jump up onto the bed, which was covered with a huge and heavy rug, and curl up next to me.

Every morning, before breakfast, I used to go for a walk around the perimeter of the twenty acres. There was no formal path but the walk took me through a small wood, past a pond and around the edge of several large fields.

Naturally, Thomasina used to accompany me down the stairs when I got ready to go out on one of my early morning walks. To begin with she would sit on the gate leading into the first field and wait for my return, but, after a day or two of this, she started to walk with me. On the first occasion she walked perhaps a hundred yards before turning round and racing back to the safety of the gate. On the second occasion she managed a hundred and fifty yards. On the fifth day she didn't go back. At home she often went on country walks with me; this was nothing new for her.

After three quarters of a mile or so she got tired and let me know that she wanted to ride the rest of the way. I bent down so that she could leap up onto my back and she settled down wrapped around my neck.

Most days I didn't see anyone at all on my walks. But one day I saw a farmer messing with his tractor. When he saw me he stood up, waved and wandered over for a chat. It was a beautiful, crisp winter day. There was a layer of frost on the ground.

We talked for a while about the weather and the prospects for the next few days.

`You have a cat around your neck,' the farmer said eventually. He told me this as though I might not otherwise have been aware of it.

I looked down, as though I'd forgotten about Thomasina. `Yes,' I agreed. `Keeps me warm. I couldn't find my scarf when I came out of the house.'

The farmer stared, frowning.

`Cats are quite useful, aren't they?' I said. `Very adaptable.'

The farmer smiled nervously, in the way people do when they've met someone whom they suspect of being a dangerous lunatic.

Sooty's Miracle

Some patients fight when they are taken ill. They are like the fox who is caught in a trap and who gnaws off his leg in order to escape and survive. Others give up and retreat into themselves. They are like the animal who crawls into a corner, turns his face to the wall, and waits for the inevitable.

Mrs Hodginson was like an animal who had crawled into a corner.

She had breast cancer which had been treated successfully with an operation but she was convinced that she was going to die. She went home from hospital, went to bed and prepared to for the end.

I tried to tell her that she could be one of the patients who fights cancer and wins. I told her that all she had to do was get her strength back and rediscover her joy for life.

But she wasn't interested. She wouldn't even eat. She lay in bed and lost weight. Her husband, who loved her dearly, was in despair. He did everything he could to persuade her to eat. He made wonderful soups. He liquidised fruits and made exquisite drinks. He had never been a cook but he taught himself how to prepare all sorts of appetising foods. And he put a lot of effort into presenting food so that it looked good.

But nothing worked.

He and I were sitting at her bedside one day, trying, as usual to persuade her to eat. Mr Hodgkinson had prepared a wonderful ice cream and peach concoction. But she wasn't interested. She wasn't thin; she was wasted. She looked like an advertisement for one of those charities that operates in Third World countries where people starve to death.

And then the cat came into the room.

He was on the bed before any of us realised that he had a mouse in his jaws.

He walked up the bed until he was about two feet away from Mrs Hodgkinson. And then he dropped the mouse. It was freshly killed.

We all looked at it, horrified.

If anything seemed guaranteed to put Mrs Hodgkinson off her food the mouse seemed to be it.

`Thank you, Sooty,' said Mrs Hodgkinson. She was so weak that she spoke in a whisper. She smiled.

`Even the cat wants you to eat,' said her husband. There were tears in his eyes.

`Thank you, Sooty,' repeated Mrs Hodgkinson. `But if you don't mind I think I'd rather have the ice cream for now.'

She reached for the dish of ice cream and peaches which was on the bed table in front of her. She picked up the spoon and, slowly, she began to eat.

I reached over, picked the mouse off the counterpane and carried it downstairs. The cat watched me but stayed behind. When I got back upstairs the bowl was half empty.

`Could you eat some soup?' asked Mr Hodgkinson.

`I think I could,' answered his wife.

They were both in tears.

I muttered something about letting myself out and coming back in a day or two.

I didn't want them to see that I was crying too.

Mrs Hodgkinson was up and about a month later. She, her husband and the cat are all still well.

Life Was Never Dull With Alice Around

Alice, the charismatic author of `Alice's Diary’ and `Alice's Adventures’, didn't like cat baskets and, over the years, she became extremely skilful at escaping from them. If she'd been prepared to do her escaping to order (rather than simply when she wanted to) she could have had quite a good career as an escapologist. She once bit and clawed her way out of rather smart looking carrying basket made out of wood and cane and she utterly destroyed two very stout specially made carrying boxes which I had purchased from a well-known national animal charity which had been under the impression that cardboard boxes would be capable of confining cats. Escaping from the wood and cane basket took Alice about thirty minutes of chewing and clawing but the cardboard ones were much easier. I doubt if she was in the second box for more than five minutes before her head poked through the hole she'd made with her claws and teeth.

Alice, like all wilful young ladies, could be very determined when she didn't want to do something (or when she didn't want to be somewhere) and I gradually learned that it was foolish to try to impose my will on hers. When a prima donna doesn't want to do something (or be somewhere) it makes sound sense (and for a much easier life) if you adapt your expectations to fit her requirements.

And so, whenever it was necessary to take her anywhere, I eschewed boxes and carrying baskets and transported her `freestyle'. In practice this meant either allowing her to trot along behind, alongside or ahead of me or, if she was tired or wanted a better view of her surroundings, allowing her to ride on my shoulders, with her front paws on one side of my neck and her back paws and tail on the other.

If I thought it likely that she might be startled, run off and be in danger I would attach a collar and lead to her. She could, of course, escape from the collar quite easily if she wanted to but it nevertheless gave me a genuine sense of security. Having proved that she could escape from the collar if she wanted to she was quite happy to keep it on. We both knew it was an optional extra and that she was only wearing it because she was doing me a favour.

I didn't bother with the collar and lead when she was travelling in the car, of course.

Alice liked travelling by car. It amused and intrigued her. If it was an estate car she would start all journeys standing up at the back of the car with her front paws and nose pressed against the rear window. She would watch the cars behind with great interest and, I am sure, enjoy the interest her presence would inevitably provoke. If we were reduced to travelling in a saloon car (by no means as popular with her as an estate car) she would climb up onto the back parcel shelf and curl up there for a while.

Since she had a short attention span, and rarely stayed in the same position for long, she wouldn't stay in the back or the car for more than ten or fifteen minutes. She would, without notice of any kind, suddenly leap onto my shoulders and sit there for a few moments before deciding what to do next.

Her favourite position was on the area just beneath the windscreen, the stretch of plastic where drivers and passengers usually toss their sunglasses, maps, and bits of papers containing scrawled notes about how to get from Birmingham to Wolverhampton without going via Norwich, but this wasn't something of which I approved. She liked to sit there, right in front of me, staring out of the window and watching the road ahead. Naturally, this rather limited my vision and I was reduced to peering around her in order to try and see what was happening up ahead. I used to be quite firm about this and repeatedly move her to one side so that we both take a look at the road and the traffic ahead. Naturally, she didn't like that. After being moved a couple of times she would get the message and move onto my lap where she would stand with her front paws on the steering wheel and her head peering through or over the spokes. She liked this position a lot. It meant she could treadle my thighs with her rear paws while keeping an eye on the outside world through the windscreen. I always thought this was a pretty safe driving position for us both since, being quite tall, I could see over her head quite well.

But not all motorists shared my feeling.

And one day some busy body with nothing better to do telephoned the police to report that they'd seen a man with a cat on his lap driving a motor car.

I only found this out, of course, after the police car had stopped me.

`Excuse me, sir,' said the policeman, stooping and peering past me into the car. `But we've had a report that a cat has been helping you drive this motor vehicle.' His patrol car was parked in front of mine. The flashing blue light was still flashing. His colleague was in the front passenger seat, presumably checking me out on their computer. You can, incidentally, tell how long ago this happened by the polite manner in which he addressed me. The `sir' rather dates the conversation.

`A cat?' I said. `Helping to drive the car?'

`Sounds strange, I know,' said the policeman. `But we had a report and we have to check these things out.'

I opened the door and got out of the car. `Take a look,' I invited.

The policeman leant into the car and looked around. `There doesn't seem to be a cat in here,' he admitted. He looked into the back of the car and then checked the passenger foot well. `Do you mind if I look in the boot?'

I opened the boot lid. He looked inside. A tartan rug, a pair of wellington boots, half a can of anti-freeze and the usual collection of rags, tissues, cassette tapes, woolly hats, gloves and socks with which the boot of any car I have ever owned has always been festooned within weeks. I never know where the socks come from but they are always there. Maybe they are the socks which disappear from the washing machine.

`Sorry to have bothered you,' said the policeman, closing the boot lid with a slam. `Bit of a false alarm.' He checked his notebook. `We'll be having a word with the person who made the allegation. Maybe warn him about wasting police time.'

`Quite right,' I nodded. `I'm sure you've got better things to do. Burglars to catch and so on.'

`Absolutely, sir,' nodded the police. He put his notebook away and refastened his tunic pocket. `My apologies again for the inconvenience.'

`Don't worry about it, officer,' I said generously. He waved. I waved. He got back into his car, I got back into mine. He drove off. I fastened my seat belt and waited a moment.

`Alice,' I said softly. `Where are you?'

Nothing. Not a sound.

Alice doesn't like surprises or strangers. Being stopped by a police car with a flashing light on the roof had surprised her. She instinctively knew that the car contained strangers. The moment I'd stopped she'd leapt off my lap. I had no idea where she'd gone. But cats are very good at hiding and I'd never known one more skilful at it than Alice.

`Alice?' I said again. `Where on earth are you?'

Silence.

`It's safe to come out,' I said softly.

There was a miaow. I couldn't tell where it came from.

`Alice?'

Suddenly I felt something soft rubbing against my ankle. I looked down. Alice's head was peeping out from underneath my seat and she was looking up at me. Somehow Alice had managed to squeeze into a space that didn't seem large enough to contain a mouse, let alone a cat.

`Come out!' I said, looking down and laughing.

Alice emerged, shook herself, climbed up onto my lap and rubbed her head against my chest. I tickled her under her chin and stroked her a few times. She purred and assumed her customary driving position and we drove home together.

Life was never dull with Alice around.

Quirky

Jack and Lindsey, a married couple I know, swear that it was their cat who saved their marriage when it went through a bad patch.

He is a dentist and early in his career was working hard to build up a new practice. She had given up her career as a physiotherapist to look after Nicky and Anne, their two small children.

`We just didn't talk much,' confesses Lindsey now. `Jack would come home shattered and would slump in front of the television with a glass of whisky. Having been at home all day I was desperate for conversation and would sit there fuming. If I tried to tell him about my day - the broken vacuum cleaner, problems with the children, the row at the supermarket check-out - he would just grunt and sip at his whisky.'

`Eventually, we started to row. In order to get his attention I would shout at him. I would wait until the children were in bed and would usually manage to avoid waking them - but I shouted and raved at him like a mad woman. I accused of him of caring for his patients and his practice more than he cared for us - which was terribly unfair of course because he was only building the practice so that he could look after us - and he would snarl back and accuse me of being shrewish and a nag - which was equally unfair because I just wanted him to talk to me and to not shut me out.'

`The problem was that although I didn't wake the children, Quirky, the cat, clearly became upset by our arguments. Quirky was (and still is) a black, short haired cat with a little white bib under his chin. We'd acquired him two years earlier from one of Jack's patients and he had a lovely personality.'

`As soon as I started shouting Quirky would rush around the room crying and complaining and generally making it pretty clear that he didn't like what was happening. He would rush from one of us to the other and the message was clear: he wanted us to stop rowing and to be friends. He only ever behaved like this when we were having an argument.'

`Things came to a head one day when we were having a particularly ferocious argument. Quirky leapt on top of the television set, knocking off and breaking a hideous vase that my Aunt Jane had bought us, and sat there miaowing at the top of his voice.'

`Suddenly, I started to giggle. And then Jack started to laugh.'

``I don't think Quirky likes us rowing,' said Jack."

`I said I didn't much like it either. Jack said he wondered if the cat would shut up if he gave me a cuddle. So he gave me a cuddle and Quirky stopped miaowing. He even started to purr.'

`After that we started to talk about things and they were never bad again. I hate to think how bad things might have got if Quirky hadn't intervened.'

My Strangest Ever Prescription

Miss Cuthbertson, a slim, usually elegant woman in her forties, shuffled into my surgery in the village of Bilbury as though she carried all the worries of the world on her shoulders. She looked down at heel and haggard. The last time I'd seen her she'd visited me to have some stitches removed from a small cut in her leg. I looked at her medical records. That had been slightly less than nine months ago. She worked as an assistant manager in a store in nearby Barnstaple.

`I need a tonic,' she said, collapsing into the patients' chair. She had a ladder up the front of her left stocking. Her hair hadn't been brushed. Her make up looked as if she'd put it on in the dark.

`You look tired,' I said.

`I've not been sleeping very well,' explained Miss Cuthbertson.

`Do you know why?' I asked.

`Oh yes,' she replied. `I've got a cat.' For the first time since she'd arrived in the surgery she managed a smile. `She's lovely,' she said. `A mixed tabby. Very loving. They are, you know? A friend of mine who knows about cats says they're the most loving type of cat.'

I nodded but I didn't say anything. I knew she'd explain.

`The cat won't go out when I go to bed. She likes to sleep on my bed.'

I nodded, to encourage her.

`But she likes to go out at night.'

`Ah.'

`I'm a heavy sleeper but she's discovered the test button on the smoke alarm.'

`I see. I should imagine that wakes you up.'

`It does.'

`Can't you just move the smoke alarm? Put it out of reach?'

`I don't like to do that,' said Miss Cuthbertson. `If Trixie wants to go out then it's not right to keep her in.'

`Does she have a litter tray?'

Miss Cuthbertson shook her head. `Oh no,' she said. `I tried her with one but she didn't like it.' She paused, thinking about it. `I even bought her one with a roof over it,' she said. `In case she was shy.'

`No good?'

Now it was Miss Cuthbertson's turn to shake her head.

`Perhaps if you could just give me a tonic?' suggested Miss Cuthbertson. `I might be able to cope a bit better. I need my sleep, you see.'

`Hmm.' I sounded as unconvinced as I was.

`I don't want a sleeping tablet,' she said. `Just a tonic will do.'

`You need a carpenter not a tonic,' I told her. `Why don't you let me get Thumper to pop round?'

`Thumper Robinson?'

I nodded. It was difficult to describe exactly what Thumper Robinson did for a living other than to say that he was a jack of all trades and a master of most. He did odd jobs, bought and sold cars and dealt in antiques.

`What can Thumper do?' asked Miss Cuthbertson, looking sceptical.

`Fix a cat flap in your back door,' I told her. `Then Trixie will be able to go in and out whenever she wants and you'll be able to sleep through the night.'

`What a wonderful idea!' said Miss Cuthbertson. Some people might have looked embarrassed at not having thought of it. She didn't. She just looked pleased.

Thumper fitted the cat flap that afternoon. And Trixie and Miss Cuthbertson were both delighted with it.

Kipper

When I was a GP I once had a patient who had the same medical condition as her cat. Even though I was not, of course, treating the cat I can confirm that the cat was the much better patient of the two.

Mrs Tipford was a retired actress. She had appeared in repertory theatre in Glasgow and Plymouth and all theatres between. She had even appeared once or twice on television - usually as a walk on role in one of the weekly soap operas. She had once played a piece of melon in a television advertisement. Her flat was festooned with photographs of famous people she'd met and had herself photographed with. On her mantlepiece alone there were photographs of her with Sir Alec Guinness, Sir Ralph Richardson and Sir John Geilgud. Each photograph was signed by the relevant knight.

Mrs Tipford was a maturity onset diabetic. She was no more than five foot three inches tall and weighed fourteen stones. We both knew that she was diabetic because she ate too much and was grossly overweight.

Kipper, the cat, was adorable and knew it. She was the sort of cat who becomes devoted to a human being. Everywhere Mrs Tipford went Kipper wanted to be. Everything Mrs Tipford did Kipper wanted to be part of it. Kipper always wanted to be the centre of attention. If Mrs Tipford sat down to read a magazine, Kipper, who up until that moment had shown no interest whatsoever in the magazine, would suddenly decide that she had to sit on it. She was the sort of diabetic cat who needed injections. But she was, the vet assured me, a perfect patient. She needed injections twice a day and she would come into the house at precisely the right times; sitting patiently while Mrs Tipford gave her the necessary jab.

Mrs Tipford took tablets to try and boost her pancreas into producing more insulin. And she was supposed to be on a strict diet. But, although she managed to take her tablets regularly she was less assiduous about sticking to the diet. If I told her to cut out cream buns she would simply increase her intake of doughnuts. If I told her to half her consumption of hamburgers she would double her consumption of cheeseburgers.

`But I'm doing what you told me, doctor!' she would insist.

The cat stayed well. Mrs Tipford did not. Mrs Tipford started to show serious signs that her illness was beginning to affect her body. She developed ulcers on her feet. And I became seriously worried about her.

`If you go on at this rate you'll kill yourself,' I told her one day, deciding that bluntness might work where encouragement and cajoling had failed.

The comment, though apparently cruel, had the desired effect. Mrs Tipford looked shocked. I decided to go for the kill.

`And if you die, who will look after Kipper?' I asked. `Who will give Kipper her daily injections?'

Mrs Tipford went pale.

`You should think about it,' I told her. `Without you, how many people would be prepared to look after a diabetic cat?' I paused for a moment to let the thought sink in. `Someone would probably ask the vet to have her put to sleep.'

`Oh no!' cried Mrs Tipford, horrified.

`It's up to you,' I told her. `Your diabetes is not that serious. It's controllable. But you have to want to control it.' `Oh I do want to control it,' said Mrs Tipford quickly. `Tell me what I have to do. Tell me, please, doctor.' She spoke with an earnestness I'd never seen in her before.

`You have to think you're playing the part of a thin person,' I told her. `Eat less. Eat much less. Eat sensibly. Behave like a thin person. Be a thin person.'

And that, to my delight and astonishment, is what Mrs Tipford became.

It took her two months to lose two stones in weight. And another month to lose another half a stone. Her health improved enormously.

Both she and Kipper lived another six years.

And in the end it was Kipper who succumbed first. She was nineteen years old when she went to sleep and didn't wake up.

Mrs Tipford cried a good deal, of course.

`But I made it, didn't I, doctor?' she said. `I lived long enough to look after her until the end.'

`You did,' I agreed.

`I would have done anything for that cat,' she said.

`I know,' I nodded.

`It was my greatest part you know,' she said. `Playing the thin person.' She sighed and wiped away a tear. `But there's no need for me to play the thin person anymore,' she said. She thought for a moment or two. `It was never a role I felt entirely comfortable with.'

Within a month she had put on a stone.

Within three months she had put on two stones.

Within six months she was dead.

Kipper had kept her alive.

And when Kipper died Mrs Tipford simply ate herself to death.

Clever Cats

I have known a number of cats who were capable of operating electrical equipment to their advantage. In the 1980s my cat Alice (the eponymous author of Alice's Diary and Alice's Adventures) would often turn on my IBM electric typewriter and then curl up against it. The switch that turned on the machine wasn't easy to operate but she did it almost daily for several years until I replaced the machine. I am convinced that two things about the machine appealed to her. First, when it was switched on it made a loud `purring' sound. Second, within a few minutes it became quite warm. It wasn't difficult to see why she liked the machine and was quite miserable for several days when it broke down and had to be replaced. (As I remember it worked well apart from the fact that it refused to print the letter `e'. If you've ever tried to type a sentence - let alone a whole book - without using the letter `e' you will know how troublesome this was. For Alice's sake I persevered for as long as I could but eventually got fed up of writing the letter `e' into the appropriate place on each page.)

But Alice wasn't the only cat to have mastered electrical equipment to her own advantage. A cat called Henry, with whom I once shared a home, proved to be even more adept at manipulating his immediate environment to his advantage.

I'd been living with Henry for about a year and a half when I started waking up at night feeling very hot. At first I thought I was running a temperature but when I realised I wasn't I wandered around the house and found that all the radiators were boiling hot. When I checked with the boiler I found out that it had apparently ignored the thermostat and had turned itself on. The next morning I called the central heating engineer and booked an appointment. `We're rather busy right now. We can get someone to you in three weeks.'

`But you offer a 24 hour service!'

`Yes, sir, we do.'

`But you just offered to get someone to me in three weeks!'

`We promise to answer your call within 24 hours, not to deal with your problem within 24 hours.'

And then one night the television turned itself on too.

I woke up boiling hot and when I got up to switch off the boiler I could hear the television set talking to itself down in the living room.

I picked up a golf club (don't ask what a golf club was doing on the landing – it’s a complicated and boring story) and tiptoed downstairs. With my heart in my mouth I threw open the door to the living room.

And found Henry sitting watching the television. (Since you ask it was a cartoon channel.) He looked quite peeved when I switched off the television set and took him to his basket in the kitchen.

The next night I stayed up to find out how he did it.

It was unbelievably simple.

He went into the utility room where the boiler was kept and leapt up onto the washing machine. From there he could easily reach the override button which turned on the boiler. He then padded into the living room, jumped up onto the table on which the television stood and turned on the TV set. He then settled down, in the warmth, to watch TV.

I was so impressed that I was tempted to let him carry on having his 3 am fun.

But I need my sleep and so I'm afraid I got into the habit of pulling out the television plug and locking the door to the utility room.

Not even Henry could put a plug in its socket and unlock a door.

Though I wouldn't bet against eventually coming across a cat who could.

The Pawprint Legacy

I stood up, put my stethoscope into my pocket and took out my prescription pad.

`You've got a rough sounding chest,' I told Mrs Dunberry. `You'll need an antibiotic. Have you got someone who can take a prescription to the chemist for you?'

She shook her head.

I put the prescription pad away and reached for my black medical bag. `I'll give you a week's supply,' I told her, rummaging around in my bag and taking out a box of antibiotic capsules. `I'll get the nurse to call in and see you tomorrow.'

Mrs Dunberry nodded. `Thank you,' she croaked.

`How on earth did you get like this?' I asked her. `I haven't seen many chest infections so far this winter.'

`I got soaked coming back from Barnstaple last Thursday,' she whispered.

`Last Thursday?' I remembered it. It had been an awful day. `It poured down all day,' I said. `Why on earth did you go out?'

`I had an appointment at the dentist's,' Mrs Dunberry explained.

As I left I couldn't help being puzzled. I thought that Mrs Dunberry had a dark blue estate car - I had seen her on many occasions driving one of the old fashioned ones with real wood on the sides - and couldn't understand why she had caught the bus. The nearest stop for the Bilbury to Barnstaple bus was at least half a mile from her cottage. Before I left I peeped in through the garage windows. The estate car was sitting there, warm and cosy and well protected from the elements.

During dinner that evening I asked my wife why on earth she thought Mrs Dunberry would catch the bus when she had a perfectly good motor car in her garage.

`She doesn't take it out in the rain,' she explained.

I put down my knife and fork and stared at her, disbelievingly.

`Honestly!' she said, quite seriously. `The car has muddy pawprints all over it and she doesn't want to risk having them washed off.'

`How on earth do you know that?'

`Mrs Pringle told me.'

Mrs Pringle had a small-holding and delivered eggs once a week in her battered and noisy Citroen 2CV. Mrs Pringle knew more about what was going on than anyone in the area. She was an invariably accurate source of gossip. I had heard it said that the editor of the local paper often telephoned her to check on stories before printing them.

`Did Mrs Pringle explain why Mrs Dunberry wouldn't want paw prints washed off her car?'

`Of course. The paw prints are all that there is left of Pippa.'

`Pippa being a cat?'

`Of course. Pippa was a tortoiseshell cat who died about four months ago. She was quite old - eighteen or nineteen I think.'

`No photos?'

`Apparently not.'

`So she protects the pawprints because they're all she's got left?'

`Exactly.'

I picked up my knife and fork and carried on with my dinner. But I couldn't get the story my wife had told me out of my head.

The next morning, after surgery, I drove round to Mrs Dunberry. I had the best excuse in the world for visiting.

`I feel quite a bit better today, thank you, doctor,' she said. She was sitting in an easy chair in her living room. Most people have their favourite chair facing the fireplace or the television set. Mrs Dunberry had her chair facing the French windows which led out onto her garden. And it was a beautiful garden. I pulled my stethoscope out of my pocket and she pulled aside her dressing gown and unbuttoned her nightdress. I listened to her chest.

`Things sounds much better in there,' I told her when I'd finished examining her. I put my stethoscope away. She rebuttoned her nightdress and adjusted her dressing gown.

There was a narrow winding path leading away from the window and on each side of it grew beds of colourful flowers - exactly the sort of flowers you'd expect to see in a country cottage.

`I see all sorts of things from here,' she told me when she'd finished. `Squirrels, butterflies, birds, rabbits.' She looked up at me. `I love animals of all sort,' she said.

`You used to have a cat, didn't you?

`Pippa,' said Mrs Dunberry quietly. `A lovely tortoiseshell.'

`I love cats,' I told her. `Beautiful, intriguing animals. When I was a kid I had a cat who went for walks with me. I've been mad about cats ever since. I bet you have all sorts of wonderful memories of Pippa.'

Mrs Dunberry didn't reply at once.

I waited, enjoying the view.

`If I had to go out she would sulk for exactly thirty minutes whenever I came back,' she said.

I smiled and nodded.

`Pippa would watch me come in and then she'd just disappear,' said Mrs Dunberry. `I never had any idea where she went. She'd race out of the house and I wouldn't see her for thirty minutes.'

`Then she'd come racing back in and demand lots of attention and heaps of love?'

`Exactly!' said Mrs Dunberry. `How did you know?'

`I had one just like that,' I told her. `Used to sulk for a whole hour if I'd been away.'

`She would run to me, make a sort of chirruping sound and leap up onto me. She used to sit on my lap and reach up and touch my chin with her paw - with the claws carefully sheathed, of course.'

`Lovely,' I whispered. `Their paws are like velvet aren't they?'

Mrs Dunberry didn't answer right away. She was too busy remembering.

`She used to sit on the back of my chair and clean my hair,' said Mrs Dunberry. `As though she was looking for tangles to untangle.' There was a pause. `Maybe she was looking for insects,' she laughed.

I murmured understanding. `They break our hearts when they go but they always leave us with such wonderful memories, don't they?'

Mrs Dunberry looked up at me.

`Cats,' I explained. `They break our hearts but they leave us with such wonderful memories.'

`Oh they do,' said Mrs Dunberry.

There was a short silence.

`She used to like to play football with a small clay marble,' said Mrs Dunberry. `It was yellow. It got lost under the sideboard once. She was very upset. I had to get an old curtain rod from the attic and fish it out. I used to flick the ball back to her with my foot and then she'd tap it back to me with her paw.'

`I had one who liked doing that,' I said. `She'd play for ages with a rolled up ball of silver paper. And then, quite suddenly, she'd decide she'd had enough and she'd go off and have a wash. She usually decided she'd had enough when I managed to hit the ball past her.'

Mrs Dunberry laughed out loud. `Oh yes!' she said. `That was just like Pippa. She could be a terrible sulk.'

We both stared out of the window for a while, thinking about cats.

`She hated cold food,' said Mrs Dunberry suddenly. `If I served her cat food straight out of the tin she would go and sit by the stove to let me know she wanted it warming up.' She looked up at me. `She wouldn't eat it unless it was warm,' she said.

`Like a mouse,' I said.

She frowned.

`Warm like a mouse,' I said. `I think that's why they like their food warm.'

`Is it really?' asked Mrs Dunberry. `I didn't know that.'

We talked for another ten minutes or so about Pippa and about cats in general. She told me about all the little things that Pippa did. She talked about her with great love and with pride too.

`I hadn't really thought about her before today,' said Mrs Dunberry when I told her that I'd better get on with my visits. `Not properly. Not about the things she did and the way she was.'

`Memories can be very comforting,' I told her.

She nodded. There were tears in her eyes. But they weren't tears of sadness.

`They're the real legacy our friends leave us,' I said.

`I'll never forget her,' said Mrs Dunberry.

`Of course you won't,' I said. `She was a big part of your life.'

Mrs Dunberry looked up at me. `Shall I tell you something silly?'

I looked down at her and smiled. `If you like.'

`I got soaked because I wouldn't use the car. And I wouldn't use the car because I didn't want Pippa's paw prints washing off.'

`That's not silly,' I said. `I can understand that.'

`Yes, but they were just pawprints,' said Mrs Dunberry. `I thought they were all I'd got. But they weren't important at all. I've got all these lovely memories.'

I reached down and squeezed her hand.

***

Ten days later my wife and I were having breakfast.

`I saw Mrs Dunberry yesterday,' said my wife. `I was parking the car in Barnstaple. She was putting some parcels into the back of her estate car.'

I smeared homemade marmalade onto a piece of toast.

`She looked very well.'

`Good. I'm pleased to hear it.'

`She must be over that chest infection.'

`She made a pretty quick recovery.'

`But the funny thing is, it was pouring with rain.'

I finished smearing the marmalade, thought for a moment and nodded. `It rained all day yesterday,' I agreed. `Bucketed it down.'

`The paw prints had all been washed off her car.'

`Really?'

`And she didn't seem to be in the slightest bit worried about it.'

I nodded. `Good,' I said. `Jolly good.' I took a bite of my toast.

The Truce

During one winter a fox regularly visited the house. One morning during a spell of particularly bad weather I spotted him coming out of the big barn where he had been sleeping. There was snow on the ground and the temperature outside was well below freezing. The barn must have made a good shelter from the wind, the snow and the cold.

One afternoon Alice and the fox spotted one another in the courtyard. Tails up, back hair bristling, they circled slowly like a pair of prize fighters assessing one another.

I was worried sick but too nervous to do anything. In fact, I didn't dare move at all. My big fear was that I might distract Alice and give the fox an advantage.

But in the end they didn't fight at all. They simply backed away from one another. Alice was very pleased with herself afterwards.

This happened, to my knowledge, four or five times but the two animals never fought.

Then one day Alice came to me while I was in my study and started to miaow. At first I thought she wanted food so I got up and followed her downstairs. But she didn't go to the area where I kept her bowls and dishes. Instead, she headed for the back door, waited while I put on a pair of shoes, and then led me outside and to a hedge at the bottom of the garden.

There, to my astonishment, I found the fox.

He had clearly been injured and was lying, quite still, on a patch of dead bracken. I have no veterinary training but I didn't need any to see that the animal had a broken leg. I had no idea what other injuries he had but it was clear that there were more. I ran back to the house and collected a pair of thick gardening gloves and an old rug. Then, wearing the gloves and using the blanket to wrap him in, I carefully picked up the fox and carried him to the car. Alice followed behind. When I put the fox and the blanket onto the front seat of the car Alice tried to climb in too. I told her she had to stay at home because we were going to the vet. The word was enough to send her scurrying into the house.

The vet kept the fox for ten days and then rang me and told me that I could pick him up.

`You can release him where you found him,' he said. `He's still weak but he'll be fine.' I did as I was told.

Two days later I spotted Alice and the fox circling one another in the courtyard.

For some reason Alice's compassion towards the fox reminded me of the time during the First World War when, one Christmas Day, British and German soldiers held a temporary truce, during which each side collected its dead and wounded and temporarily stopped fighting one another. When the truce was over the two sides went back to trying to kill one another.

The Cat as Towel

One of the joys of living in a village where everyone knows what everyone else has for breakfast (and finds the information interesting) is also one of the hazards. When you choose to live in Bilbury (or a small, village like it) you have to accept that you sacrifice your privacy. The community becomes your family and your private business becomes their business. Living in a small, self-contained village is very much like living as part of a large family.

Many modern villages virtually run into the next village or town and they have little or no real independence. As urban sprawls spread their housing estates, supermarkets and shopping malls further and further outwards so many once independent small villages are swallowed up and although they may remain alone in name they become, for all practical purposes, merely part of something much larger.

The village of Bilbury, where I live, has no near neighbours. The nearest traffic lights and street lights are a good half an hour's drive away in Barnstaple. The villagers of Bilbury live, survive and thrive alone. We don't have much contact with the outside world and, to be honest, we don't want it. We welcome visitors, of course, and we are comfortable with the fact that a handful cottages are now owned by `townies' who visit at weekends and for holidays (though we would take a dim view if they were to bring their food and other supplies with them rather than purchasing their requirements from Peter Marshall's shop), but our attitude to the outside world is simple: you leave us alone and we'll leave you alone.

The result of isolationist attitude is, of course, that we tend to live in one another's pockets rather more than city dwellers might find entirely comfortable. Our doors are never locked and we all tend to wander into one another’s homes without much knocking on doors and with absolutely no telephoning ahead to see if it’s `convenient'.

At the time of which I write my study, a large, well-lit, airy room with a huge fireplace and a bay window fitted with a window seat, was at the front of the house. The disadvantage of the room's position was that anyone passing by, in the lane which passed the house, could, with just a glance, see whether or not I was in the room.

If I was visible, sitting at my desk or in an easy chair by the fire, the passer-by would wander over and tap on the window. The vicar would stop by to remind me that I'd promised to run the bottle stall at the local fete and to ask me to make sure that there weren't too many jars of chutney, the president of the Women’s Institute would call in to ask if my wife and I would dig out anything suitable for their bring and by sale, Thumper Robinson would pop in to ask if the kettle still worked and local antique dealer Patchy Fogg would call in to see if I wanted to accompany him to an auction in Combe Martin, Lynton or South Molton.

However, on the late summer afternoon of which I write I was not in my study but had just clambered out of the bath. I had been working on a new book and had got stuck. One of the things which I have always found helpful in circumstances such as this is a warm bath. And the old fashioned Victorian claw-footed bath was particularly good for this. It was almost long enough and wide enough to swim in and vastly superior to those modern baths which are too short to allow the bather to stretch out properly.

When I finally hauled myself out of the bath (with the solution to my editorial problem scribbled in pencil in a rather damp notebook) I realised that there was no towel on the rail. There were no spare towels in the bathroom cupboard so, dripping water with every step, I headed downstairs to the airing cupboard in the kitchen. (Don't ask why the airing cupboard is in the kitchen because the answer, though logical is complex and involves a greater understanding of our domestic plumbing and heating arrangements than need concern you. We also have a bread oven in one of the spare bedrooms.)

I had taken barely two steps into the kitchen when I realised that I was not alone. There was an intruder in the pantry, rummaging around among the food stored in there. It was not, I knew, my wife. She was at the Duck and Puddle public house helping Gilly, the landlady, fit new cushion covers on the chairs in the public bar. She was not due back for several hours.

`Who's there?' I demanded, my surprise temporarily forcing me to forget that I was standing there absolutely naked and soaking wet. I took two strides towards the pantry door

`Oh, there you are, doctor!' called Miss Robinson. `I didn't want to disturb you. I saw your wife at the Duck and Puddle. She said I could help myself from your pantry for the harvest festival.'

It was only while she was explaining what she was doing that I suddenly remembered that I was naked. The fact that I was dripping water all over the kitchen floor no longer seemed of any consequence. I looked around, desperately searching for something - anything - with which to hide my nakedness. A tea towel, a table cloth, some drying laundry, a newspaper, a discarded coat, a dish cloth - anything.

In the very moment that Miss Robinson emerged from the pantry, clutching an armful of jars, I grabbed the only item I could see - Thomasina - and clutched her to me, hoping that she'd keep her claws sheathed.

`Would you tell your wife that I've taken four jars of her plum jam and four jars of her pickled onions,' said Miss Robinson.

`I've just had a bath,' I explained uneasily. `Not dry yet.'

`So I can see,' said Miss Robinson. `I would have thought,' she said, `that as an animal lover you would have used a towel to dry yourself. Drying yourself on the cat! Really, doctor!'

I tried to explain but she'd gone.

No one in the village ever said anything about it to me and so until now I've never had a chance to explain what happened - and how I appeared to be using a cat as a towel.

The Life Saver

My wife and I were staying in Sidmouth, in South Devon, for a few days holiday. Sidmouth is one of the few places in England which seems to have remained pretty well unchanged over the years.

Every morning, after breakfast, we got into the habit of taking a walk around the town. And each day we ended up sitting on one of those wooden benches kindly donated by relatives and friends commemorating the lives of lost companions. The bench we chose overlooked the sea. Behind us there was a row of Victorian cottages.

Each day, within five minutes of our sitting down on the bench, we were joined by a huge, elderly and distinguished looking orange marmalade coloured tomcat.

On the first day he just sat between our feet and, like us, stared out to sea.

On the second day he jumped up onto my lap and allowed me to stroke him. When I stopped he turned and looked up at me as if to say: `What did you stop for? Get on with it!' After a while he would climb onto my wife's lap and allow her to make a fuss of him. He was very fair with his favours.

This exceedingly pleasant routine continued for five days.

On the sixth day the cat, who, with a shameful lack of originality, we knew as Ginger, appeared in front of us but wouldn't jump onto either of our laps. I reached down and stroked him. He didn't seem interested. Instead he reached up with one paw and tapped me on the side of the knee. As he did this he maiowed.

`I think he wants something,' said my wife.

The cat stopped tapping my knee and walked away a few paces. He sat and stared at us. Actually, `glared' would be a better verb. He then came back and tapped me on the knee again.

`He wants us to follow him,' said my wife.

I looked at her. Her interpretation seemed to make sense. She stood up. Ginger started to walk away. Every few yards he would stop and turn back to make sure we were following.

We followed him back across the road, down a side street and into a small cul de sac. The houses there were all small and neat. Each one had a small, well-tended front garden. It was summer time and the smell of the flowers was intoxicating.

Ginger walked through an open gateway and along a concrete path which ran along the side of one of the houses. We looked at one another, hesitated for a moment and then followed him.

At the end of the path Ginger turned right. We followed him and found ourselves outside the back door of one of the houses. Ginger sat down and miaowed loudly.

`He wants us to go inside,' said my wife.

`Maybe he just wants us to let him into the house,' I suggested.

`There's a flap,' my wife pointed out. And, indeed, there was.

I tried the door knob. The door was locked. Ginger looked up at me and then walked across to where a flower pot containing geraniums stood on two house bricks. He put a paw in between the two bricks and scratched at something. I walked across to him and bent down. Reaching in between the two bricks I found a key.

I picked up the key and stood up.

`It's got to be the key to the back door,' said my wife.

It was.

I opened the back door and called out. `Is there anyone at home?' Ginger slipped around my legs and entered the kitchen.

There was no answer in response to my call. I tried again. There was still no reply.

`You wait here,' I told my wife. Ginger, already heading for the other door out of the kitchen, turned to check that I was following him.

The solitary occupant of the house was sitting in a chair in the living room. He was pale, sweating and almost unconscious. He was having difficulty breathing and couldn't talk, let alone shout for help. I picked up a wrist. His pulse was thin and thready.

It wasn't difficult to guess that he'd had a heart attack.

An hour or so later he was in hospital. The next door neighbour, a kindly widow who had two cats of her own, kindly agreed to feed Ginger and to keep an eye on him.

I rang the neighbour after we got back home to see how things were. Two weeks after being admitted to hospital the man was back home making a spectacular recovery.

The doctors and nurses who looked after him took the credit for his recovery but it was Ginger who saved his life.

Cats and Telephones

Cats hate being ignored (unless they want to be left alone, of course).

Of all the cats I have known none hated being ignored more than Alice, the mixed tabby who helped me write Alice's Diary and Alice's Adventures.

When I was working as a GP and had just started writing books I used to spend hours on the telephone. Alice didn't like this at all. When I was on the telephone, talking to someone who wasn't even there, I couldn't possibly provide her with all the attention she deserved.

And so she developed a little trick to end my conversations when she thought they'd gone on long enough.

She would, quite gently, put a paw down on the telephone rest and break the connection. She would do this slowly, deliberately and while looking at me. Her paw would hover above the telephone for a moment, just to let me know what she was planning.

And then, slowly, she would lower it and cut the connection.

She would then climb onto my lap, or my shoulders, and take her rightful place at the centre of my attention.

Writing about this reminded me of another cat I knew who used to operate her owner's telephone.

I had a patient called Mrs Bradshaw who was rather deaf. My receptionist came in to see me one day and told me that Mrs Bradshaw had asked me to telephone her.

`You'll have to let the telephone ring for a while,' said my receptionist.

`Can she hear the telephone?' I asked.

My receptionist shook her head. `Her cat answers the telephone for her,' she explained.

I stared at her, rather disbelievingly.

`Let the phone ring,' she said. `The phone will be answered but there will be quite a long silence after it seems to have been picked up. Then you will hear Mrs Bradshaw's voice. You have to shout, of course.'

I looked at her and raised a questioning eyebrow.

`When the telephone rings her cat rushes over to it and knocks the phone off the cradle,' she explained. `She then fetches Mrs Bradshaw to let her know that there is a telephone call for her.'

I telephoned Mrs Bradshaw and things happened exactly as I had been told.

I was so astonished by this that I drove round to Mrs Bradshaw's home after I'd finished my visits that day. I then telephoned my surgery and asked my receptionist to call me back. When the phone rang I stood and watched in amazement as Mrs Bradshaw's cat did exactly what the receptionist had said she would do.

The End

When my beloved cat Alice was so ill that life was too painful for her to bear the vet gave me a barbiturate injection to give her. I worried that I wouldn't know when to give the injection but the worry was needless. I knew. The night before she came upstairs while I was taking a bath. She sat on the edge of the bath, dribbling blood stained saliva. Gingerly, every movement clearly painful, she stepped onto my chest and sat down. She was so thirsty she tried to drink some of the bath water but she could not. She had a tumour of her mouth which made it impossible for her to eat or drink. (When I'd first reported a speck of blood on her lip and found a tiny lesion inside her cheek the vet had dismissed the finding as of no importance. I still wonder how much longer she might have lived if the vet had been more alert.) I sat her on my lap and tried to inject her with the barbiturate the vet had given me. (I’m a qualified doctor and supposed to be able to do these things.) My hand was shaking and tears were pouring down my cheeks. I fitted the needle and filled the syringe. Then, with her sitting on my lap, I said goodbye, stroked her head and tried to give her the fatal injection.

I missed her body completely and felt the needle go through my dressing gown and pyjama trousers and into my thigh. Fortunately, I had the presence of mind not to depress the plunger. I might not have been here to write this if I had.

I rang the vet.

Later I buried her in the garden in a wooden coffin. I put her favourite jumper, and copies of the two books she’d written, into the coffin with her. (`Alice’s Diary’ and `Alice’s Adventures’). And I paid a local stonemason to prepare a headstone for her grave. `Get another kitten to replace her,' said well-meaning friends who didn't understand.

Alice died on the 12th May 1992.

I still miss her terribly.

And I know I always will.

The Author

Vernon Coleman has been a confirmed cataholic for as long as he can remember. The first known photograph of him in existence shows him clutching a cat to his chest. He has been resisting treatment for his cataholism for sixty years and consequently, his condition has continued to deteriorate. He is very pleased about this and hopes that it will continue until the end. He likes all cats, of all shapes, sizes and colours, and is particularly delighted when they give some sign that they are prepared to tolerate him.

Vernon Coleman writes: `Some people make friends when they travel. I have an acquaintance who can't pop into the local supermarket without finding new chums to add to his formidable Christmas card mailing list. If he goes for a walk in a deserted park he will somehow come back with half a dozen new chums. I'm not good at making friends. Too shy, I suppose. But everywhere I go I meet cats and now, I'm proud to say, I have cat friends everywhere. One of the good things about having cats as friends is that they demand nothing and expect nothing. (Obviously, cats who have become `family' expect a great deal and demand very much more.) And it's easy to meet new cats. I find that I always seem to find affectionate cats in churches and churchyards. During the last two weeks, for example, I have met and had long, meaningful conversations with, cats in churches in Barnstaple, Exmouth, Sidmouth and Wells. Cats may pretend to be indifferent but they often seem to me to be just as keen to make new human acquaintances as I am to make new cat acquaintances. For example, outside a church in Exmouth the other day I saw a black cat rubbing itself against the gate into the churchyard. I bent down to stroke its head and the cat ignored me completely, moving slightly out of reach each time I tried to touch it. Since I was in something of a hurry at the time I stood up and started to move away. The cat immediately stopped rubbing itself against the gate and ran after me. He then stood still while we got to know one another.'

This is Vernon Coleman's tenth book about cats.

Vernon Coleman is ageing rapidly and become rather threadbare. If he were a cat he would have chunks bitten out of his ears and would now spend most of his time asleep in the airing cupboard. He is married to Donna Antoinette (also a cataholic) who not only grows younger and more beautiful by the day (although she does not have a picture in the attic) but who defies reality and the inevitable vicissitudes of a wicked world by constantly becoming gentler and more loving.

For details of more books by Vernon Coleman please see either www.vernoncoleman.com or Amazon Author Central. This is Vernon Coleman’s tenth book about cats.

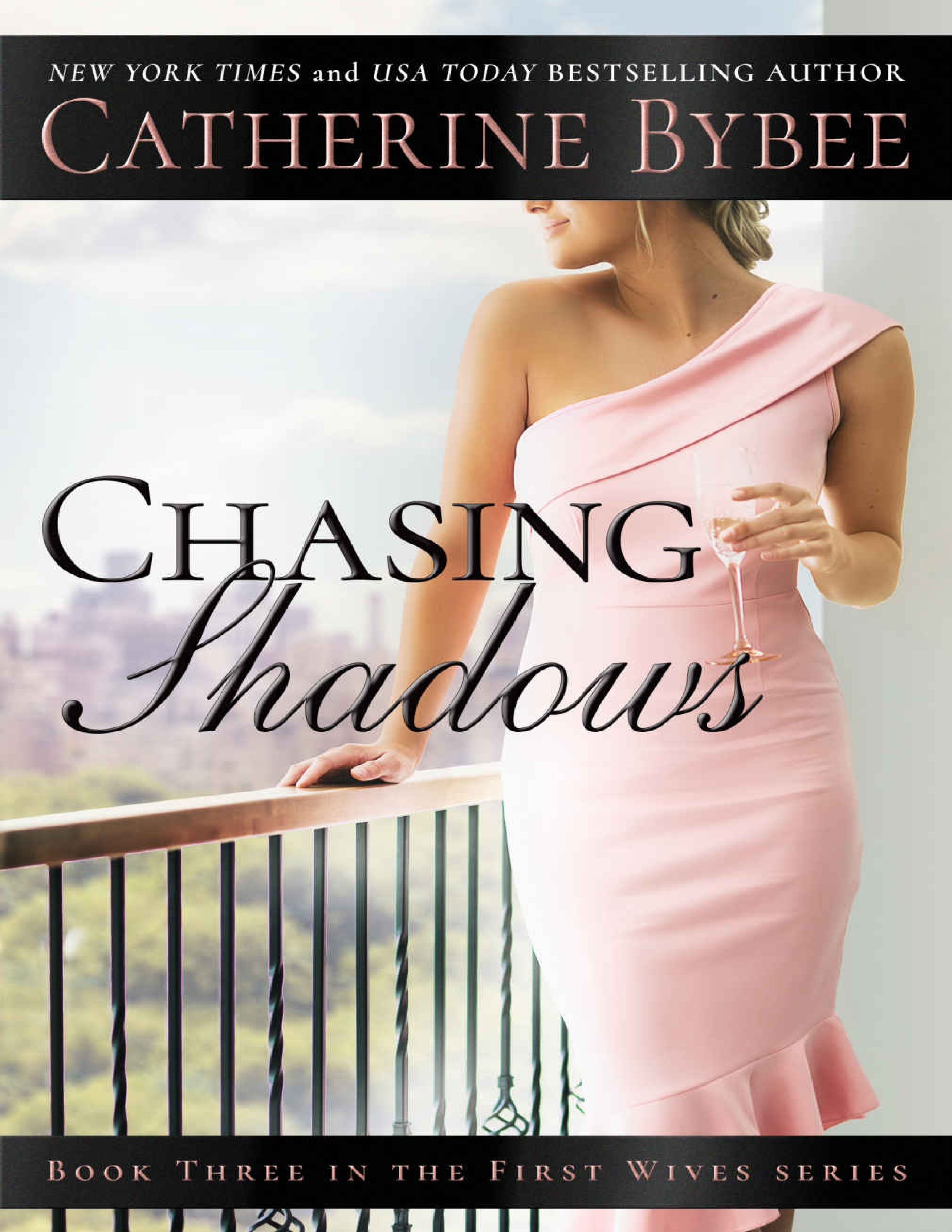

NEW YORK TIMES and *USA TODAY* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CATHERINE BYBEE

CHASING *Shadows*

BOOK THREE IN THE FIRST WIVES SERIES

Praise for Catherine Bybee

Wife by Wednesday

"A fun and sizzling romance, great characters that trade verbal spars like fist punches, and the dream of your own royal wedding!"

—Sizzling Hot Book Reviews, 5 Stars

"A good holiday, fireside or bedtime story."

—Manic Reviews, 4½ Stars

"A great story that I hope is the start of a new series."

—The Romance Studio, 4½ Hearts

Married by Monday

"If I hadn't already added Ms. Catherine Bybee to my list of favorite authors, after reading this book I would have been compelled to. This is a book *nobody* should miss, because the magic it contains is awesome."

—Booked Up Reviews, 5 Stars

"Ms. Bybee writes authentic situations and expresses the good and the bad in such an equal way . . . Keeps the reader on the edge of her seat."

—Reading Between the Wines, 5 Stars

"*Married by Monday* was a refreshing read and one I couldn't possibly put down."

—The Romance Studio, 4½ Hearts

Fiancé by Friday

"Bybee knows exactly how to keep readers happy . . . A thrilling pursuit and enough passion to stuff in your back pocket to last for the next few lifetimes . . . The hero and heroine come to life with each flip of the page and will linger long after readers cross the finish line."

—*RT Book Reviews*, 4½ Stars, Top Pick (Hot)

"A tale full of danger and sexual tension . . . the intriguing characters add emotional depth, ensuring readers will race to the perfectly fitting finish."

—*Publishers Weekly*

"Suspense, survival, and chemistry mix in this scintillating read."

—*Booklist*

“Hot romance, a mystery assassin, British royalty, and an alpha Marine . . . this story has it all!”
—Harlequin Junkie

Single by Saturday

“Captures readers’ hearts and keeps them glued to the pages until the fascinating finish . . . romance lovers will feel the sparks fly . . . almost instantaneously.”
—*RT Book Reviews*, 4½ Stars, Top Pick

“[A] wonderfully exciting plot, lots of desire, and some sassy attitude thrown in for good measure!”
—Harlequin Junkie

Taken by Tuesday

“[Bybee] knows exactly how to get bookworms sucked into the perfect storyline; then she casts her spell upon them so they don’t escape until they reach the ‘Holy Cow!’ ending.”
—*RT Book Reviews*, 4½ Stars, Top Pick

Seduced by Sunday

“You simply can’t miss [this novel]. It contains everything a romance reader loves—clever dialogue, three-dimensional characters, and just the right amount of steam to go with that heartwarming love story.”
—Brenda Novak, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Bybee hits the mark . . . providing readers with a smart, sophisticated romance between a spirited heroine and a prim hero . . . Passionate and intelligent characters [are] at the heart of this entertaining read.”
—*Publishers Weekly*

Treasured by Thursday

“The Weekday Brides never disappoint and this final installment is by far Bybee’s best work to date.”
—*RT Book Reviews*, 4½ Stars, Top Pick

“An exquisitely written and complex story brimming with pride, passion, and pulse-pounding danger . . . Readers will gladly make time to savor this winning finale to a wonderful series.”
—*Publishers Weekly*, Starred Review

“Bybee concludes her popular Weekday Brides series in a gratifying way with a passionate, troubled couple who may find a happy future if they can just survive and then learn to trust each other. A compelling and entertaining mix of sexy, complicated romance and menacing suspense.”
—*Kirkus Reviews*

Not Quite Dating

“It’s refreshing to read about a man who isn’t afraid to fall in love . . . [Jack and Jessie] fit together as a couple and as a family."

—*RT Book Reviews*, 3 Stars (Hot)

"*Not Quite Dating* offers a sweet and satisfying Cinderella fantasy that will keep you smiling long after you've finished reading."

—Kathy Altman, *USA Today*, "Happy Ever After"

"The perfect rags to riches romance . . . The dialogue is inventive and witty, the characters are well drawn out. The storyline is superb and really shines . . . I highly recommend this stand out romance! Catherine Bybee is an automatic buy for me."

—Harlequin Junkie, 4½ Hearts

Not Quite Enough

"Bybee's gift for creating unforgettable romances cannot be ignored. The third book in the Not Quite series will sweep readers away to a paradise, and they will be intrigued by the thrilling story that accompanies their literary vacation."

—*RT Book Reviews*, 4½ Stars, Top Pick

Not Quite Forever

"Full of classic Bybee humor, steamy romance, and enough plot twists and turns to keep readers entertained all the way to the very last page."

—Tracy Brogan, bestselling author of the Bell Harbor series

"Magnetic . . . The love scenes are sizzling and the multi-dimensional characters make this a page-turner. Readers will look for earlier installments and eagerly anticipate new ones."

—*Publishers Weekly*

Not Quite Perfect

"This novel flows extremely well and readers will find themselves consuming the witty dialogue and strong imagery in one sitting."

—*RT Book Reviews*

"Don't let the title fool you. *Not Quite Perfect* was actually the perfect story to sweep you away and take you on a pleasant adventure. So sit back, relax, maybe pour a glass of wine, and let Catherine Bybee entertain you with Glen and Mary's playful East Coast–West Coast romance. You won't regret it for a moment."

—Harlequin Junkie, 4½ Stars

Doing It Over

"The romance between fiercely independent Melanie and charming Wyatt heats up even as outsiders threaten to derail their newfound happiness. This novel will hook readers with its warm, inviting characters and the promise for similar future installments."

—*Publishers Weekly*

“This brand-new trilogy, Most Likely To, based on yearbook superlatives, kicks off with a novel that will encourage you to root for the incredibly likable Melanie. Her friends are hilarious and readers will swoon over Wyatt, who is charming and strong. Even Melanie’s daughter, Hope, is a hoot! This romance is jam-packed with animated characters, and Bybee displays her creative writing talent wonderfully.”

—*RT Book Reviews*, 4 Stars

“With a dialogue full of energy and depth, and a twisting storyline that captured my attention, I would say that *Doing It Over* was a great way to start off a new series. (And look at that gorgeous book cover!) I can’t wait to visit River Bend again and see who else gets to find their HEA.”

—Harlequin Junkie, 4½ Stars

Staying For Good

“Bybee’s skillfully crafted second Most Likely To contemporary (after *Doing It Over*) brings together former sweethearts who have not forgotten each other in the 11 years since high school. A cast of multidimensional characters brings the story to life and promises enticing future installments.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Romance fans will be sure to cheer on former high school sweethearts Zoe and Luke right away in *Staying For Good*. Just wait until you see what passion, laughter, reconciliations, and mischief (can you say Vegas?) awaits readers this time around. Highly recommended.”

—Harlequin Junkie, 4½ Stars

Making It Right

“Intense suspense heightens the scorching romance at the heart of Bybee’s outstanding third Most Likely To contemporary (after *Staying For Good*). Sizzling sensual scenes are coupled with scary suspense in this winning novel.”

—*Publishers Weekly*, Starred Review

Fool Me Once

“A marvelous portrait of friendship among women who have been bonded by fire.”

—*Library Journal*, Best of the Year 2017

“Bybee still delivers a story that her die-hard readers will enjoy.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

CHASING
Shadows

Also by Catherine Bybee

Contemporary Romance

Weekday Brides Series

Wife by Wednesday
Married by Monday
Fiancé by Friday
Single by Saturday
Taken by Tuesday
Seduced by Sunday
Treasured by Thursday

Not Quite Series

Not Quite Dating
Not Quite Mine
Not Quite Enough
Not Quite Forever
Not Quite Perfect
Not Quite Crazy

Most Likely To Series

Doing It Over
Staying For Good
Making It Right

First Wives Series

Fool Me Once
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Kilt Worthy
Kilt-A-Licious

CATHERINE BYBEE

CHASING *Shadows*

BOOK THREE IN THE FIRST WIVES SERIES

Montlake
Romance

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For Tanya.
Strong women are the cornerstone of my life.
You, my dear, are one of them.

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Chapter One

Left, right, cross . . .

Avery met each punch with a counter and waited until the fourth strike to move in.

Two hits in, Avery shoved her assailant’s nose into her knee and then fell to the left when a second attacker swooped in from nowhere.

Next thing Avery knew, she was on her back.

She froze.

Her head flew to the right.

The left.

“Stop.”

Her breath came in short, quick pants.

A boot to the face.

The pain . . .

She shot up to a sitting position. “I’m good.”

Brenda pushed in and knelt down on the mat. “Your hands were down. Your legs were free . . . you froze.”

“I didn’t.” The denial was quick on her lips.

“The sooner you realize you’re wrong, the faster you’re going to end this fear.” Brenda’s German accent cut through Avery’s muddy brain.

She pushed Brenda out of the way, pulled her headgear off, and threw it onto the mat.

Leslie, her opponent, had been studying krav maga for three years. Avery had a measly ten months under her belt.

The fact that Brenda was correct in her observation of Avery’s freeze only added to her anger.

At herself.

At the world.

At the dead asshole who made her freeze.

Emotion welled up inside and forced her feet to move. She pushed past her instructor and beelined to the locker room.

“Is she okay?” Avery heard Leslie ask.

“She’s fine.”

Avery let the door slam behind her.

Alone, she moved to the sink and turned the water on cold. She splashed her face, attempting to cool the hot anger swimming inside, and looked in the mirror.

Her flushed features were evidence that she’d exerted herself. The bloodshot eyes were a combination of lack of sleep and frustration. “Get a grip,” she cautioned herself.

A sharp knock on the door spiked her blood pressure.

“Are we doing this or not?” Brenda yelled from the other side.

Avery glared at herself in the mirror and shoved away.

“Yeah.”

An hour later she stood under the hot stream of the shower, nursing a stinging shoulder and a bruised ego.

Leslie had efficiently handed Avery her ass. Brenda had obviously coached Leslie to get her on the mat repeatedly. Twice Avery had started to freeze, and twice Brenda had yelled something in German that Avery knew was both offensive and condescending. And when their session ended, Brenda's praise was nothing but a half-baked smile that lasted all of a second. If Avery had blinked, she would have missed it.

"You were slow, and your legs should be used for more than screwing."

It was as close to a compliment as Avery could expect. Most of the time Brenda had a never-ending diatribe of faults that Avery needed to work on. To only have two roll off Brenda's tongue was a rarity.

Leslie turned off the water in a neighboring shower, reminding Avery that she'd been standing in the hot water for ten minutes. She quickly rinsed the soap from her hair, turned the water off, and grabbed a towel from the peg outside the stall.

She padded into the locker room and kept herself from looking at the naked woman running a hand through her wet hair.

"Thanks for the workout."

"I'm not sure how much of a sweat you managed, knocking my ass into the ground every five minutes."

"Every opponent brings a new challenge." Leslie reached for her underwear. "How come you don't come to the group classes?"

"And let several people witness my humiliation?"

Leslie cocked her head to the side, her short hair falling in her face. "Brenda told me that you didn't think you were any good."

"Did she?" Avery tossed her towel to the side and turned her back. "What else did Brenda say?"

"That you were good."

Avery glanced over her shoulder. "That's a lie. Brenda never hands out praise."

Leslie winked. "Yeah, I made that up. But you are. Good, that is. You should join us sometime."

"I'll think about it." *And then dismiss the idea.* This was a thing she did under the radar. The fewer people that knew she was studying krav, the better.

Leslie pulled a light sweatshirt over her head and hid the tattoo that covered the entire right side of her body. She didn't put on a bra. Dressed in black, with her dyed red hair spiked, she looked a lot more badass than when covered in protective gear.

"Wanna grab a beer?"

Avery thought about what waited for her at home. Nothing.

"Sure."

"Cool. Meet you outside."

It was early fall in Southern California, which meant hot, dry, and windy. Most of the time that meant fires in the foothills and poor air quality in the city. Tonight the sky was clear and electricity seemed to snap in the atmosphere.

Leslie leaned against the brick building, her cell phone in hand, when Avery walked outside the studio. "We can walk. It's not far."

Pug's Pub was a dark lit bar with three men for every woman. The jukebox played old rock and roll from the seventies, and the bartender appeared to have made a lifetime career out of pouring drinks. Overweight and out of shape, the guy blended in and wasn't dressed to earn tips from his customers. From the limited selection behind the counter, Avery assumed the man's talents were limited to Jack and Coke and whiskey, straight up.

"I wouldn't suggest the beer on tap. Safer to ask for a bottle," Leslie suggested.

"Good call."

A handful of men sitting on beaten up barstools watched while they found a high table with a couple of empty seats.

"Hey, Keith." Leslie waved to the man behind the counter, put two fingers up in the air.

"You come here a lot?"

"After a class, some of us come here to decompress. Hard to go home and go to sleep with all that adrenaline swimming inside."

Avery could attest to that.

She sat at the table and winced at the pain in her side. As much protective gear as they used, there was still some pain involved when practicing the fine art of kicking the shit out of someone.

Keith made his way to their table and put two longneck Stellas in front of them. "New friend?" he asked.

"Avery, this is Keith."

"Nice to meet you."

Avery smiled and put out her hand. “A pleasure.”

Keith smiled, wiped his fingers on a towel, and reached for her palm. “You class the joint up just by walkin’ in the door.”

Avery grinned.

“That wouldn’t take much,” Leslie teased.

“Hey, watch it.” He smiled, unoffended. “Where is the rest of the gang?”

“Just us tonight.” Leslie tilted her beer back.

“Let me know if you need anything else.”

“Gotcha.”

Keith walked away, and Avery let the cool liquid roll down her throat. Yup, this was exactly what she needed.

“So what’s your story?”

“My story?” Avery asked.

“Yeah. Why krav? Why now? Why do you forget everything the second your back hits the mat?”

Avery took another swig of her beer. “Nothing like easing into a conversation.”

“Ease isn’t my style.”

“Okay . . .” She took a deep breath. “A dirtbag ambushed me last year. I barely knew what hit me before I was waking up in the hospital. Lived in the ICU for a week and got a nose job out of the whole thing. Once I recovered, I decided to take up krav instead of a polite form of martial arts.”

Leslie listened without emotion. “What happened to the dirtbag?”

“Dead.”

Her eyebrows lifted.

“It wasn’t a random act. And it’s a long story. So I put the alarm in after I was ripped off, so to speak. I figure the next time someone tries to put me in the hospital, I’m not going without a fight. Fool me once, shame on you and all that, right? Besides, the stronger I felt taking krav, the less frequent my nightmares kept me up.”

Leslie leaned in on her elbows, peered closer.

“What?”

“What did your nose look like before?”

The question made her smile and helped lift the heaviness that sat in her chest anytime she thought about that time in her life. “What about you? What’s your story?”

It was Leslie’s turn to pause and take a drink from her beer. “My daddy liked little girls. I was the closest little girl he could get his hands on.”

Avery swallowed, the levity of a moment before gone. “Jesus.”

“Nope, Jesus wasn’t a part of it. Anyway. I did the high school dropout thing, ran away. Blah, blah . . . then I met this guy, total douche, but he didn’t believe in hurting women. He taught me a few things about fighting. Firearms. Got my GED.”

“How long ago was that?”

“Six years. Took up krav a few years back, right as I was getting out of the Army.”

“You were in the service?”

“Four years.”

“Wow,” Avery said.

“Wasn’t a career for me, but it was exactly what I needed at the time.”

“What do you do for a living now?”

“I design video games.”

Avery stared in disbelief. “Get out.”

“True story. What do you do?”

Avery played with the condensation on her beer and was happy to be able to say she actually had a way of earning a living. “Estate sales.”

“Yard sales for rich people?”

She laughed. “It’s a little more complicated than that, but essentially.”

“We probably never would have met in the real world.”

“I’ve met a lot of good friends that way.”

Leslie lifted her beer to Avery. “To new friends.”

* * *

Liam kept himself ducked in a back corner of the bar, his eyes trained on the one woman in the place who didn't belong. He'd been staring at her so hard for twenty minutes, it was surprising she didn't feel the heat of his eyes.

Blonde wasn't normally his thing, but he could see making an exception for her. He couldn't see the color of her eyes, but he did notice how much they took in everything around her. Guarded or observant? She leaned against the cocktail table, listening to the woman she was seated by, and while she looked at home tilting the beer back, he found himself watching small details others wouldn't catch. Like how she picked up the bar napkin and wiped the edge of the table before leaning against it. Or how she kept her foot on the strap of her bag, which sat at her feet. She wore designer jeans, and the watch on her wrist glittered in a way that said it wasn't cheap. High cheekbones and a body that wasn't shy on curves.

Liam wondered just how fast he could make her smile.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd picked up a woman in a bar, but maybe he needed to try his hand and see where it led.

The blonde's companion stood and motioned toward the bathroom and then waved toward the bar, which was now packed with customers vying for the bartender's attention.

As the friend left toward the toilets, the blonde walked three steps in the direction of the bar while keeping an eye on the bags left at their table.

Liam watched as the bees started to swarm.

He wasn't the only one in the room attracted. He wondered if he should cut the others off before anyone stepped in before him. Before the thought managed to leave his brain, competition was already sliding in.

The blonde turned toward a customer who opened a conversation. Even though Liam couldn't hear it, he could read the woman's thoughts by how she eyed the man up and down and shook her head before looking back toward the bartender.

As Liam started to push his chair back, a second man pushed right up against her and said something close to her ear. Liam glanced at the lack of personal space between them and noticed her flex her hands. She took a small step back, and the admirer said something over her shoulder to the first guy she'd turned away. With her somewhat caged between the two men, Liam thought it was as good a time as any to step in and make the men stand down. He could see the stiffness of her jaw from two yards away.

Then, without warning, the man on her right slid his hand onto her hip. In a blur, the woman wrapped his unwanted arm in hers, came up over his shoulder, and effectively buried his head in the bar.

All conversation stopped.

"If I wanted your hand on my ass, I would have asked for it." She pulled up higher on his arm. The man moaned. "Got it?"

"Got it, lady."

"You okay, Avery?" the bartender asked.

She shoved the man away.

Several men at the bar started to chuckle.

"I'm fine. Just looking for another round."

Liam stood rooted in place. She could have easily broken the man's arm, even though he was a full head taller and had at least fifty pounds on her.

This was a woman he wanted to know.

She glanced around the audience she'd attracted by defending her space. Her hazel eyes landed on him and paused.

His fingers tingled.

She stared.

She blinked and turned back to her table. There, she grabbed her bag from underneath and pulled what looked like a fifty-dollar bill from her purse. She went back to the bar, dropped the money, and hiked her bag onto her shoulder. "Tell Leslie I had to go."

It took less than ten seconds for the man she'd humiliated, and what appeared to be his friend, to get up and follow her.

Liam stepped in. "Can I help you?"

They eyed him as men do. As expected, they stood back. "Just getting some air," said Contestant Number One.

He took a step as if walking around.

Liam lifted a hand to the other man's chest, stopping him. "Well then, you can just wait a few minutes, can't you?"

Mr. Humiliation eyed the door and drew in a deep breath.

“Fuck.”

“I think you two should go back to the bar and have another drink. That fresh air will be there later.”

The men looked at each other and receded.

By the time the room calmed, the blonde ninja was gone.

Her friend returned from the bathroom a few minutes later and eyed their table. “Hey, Keith, where did Avery go?”

Keith wiped his hands with a bar towel before tossing it over his shoulder. “Said she had to go, right after she just about broke this joker’s arm for hitting on her.”

The smile on the other woman’s face had Keith chuckling.

Liam felt laughter growing in his gut.

“Never underestimate a woman.”

“Yeah, it was classic.”

“What do I owe ya?”

“She took care of it.”

The short-haired woman lifted a hand in acknowledgment and grabbed her bag. As she walked out, Liam noted the graphic on what looked like a gym bag. *Power Up Krav Maga.*

He laughed.

All the pieces fell into place.

Chapter Two

Adrenaline built like a charged circuit just waiting to fry something.

She gripped the steering wheel of her Aston Martin and turned onto the interstate instead of taking the route that would bring her home.

Driving fast was the recipe she needed to calm her nerves, and since it was close to ten, the highway cooperated. She put the car in sport mode and pressed down on the gas.

Slowly, a smile crept onto her lips. The image of shock on the face of the jerk that had grabbed her ass would live with her for a long time. She flexed her hand as if repeating the move she'd learned in class and started to laugh.

She hit the wheel. "Hell, yeah!"

God, she felt good.

Better than she had in quite a while.

It wasn't until she kissed the coast that she started to come down.

She pulled over in an empty parking lot and stepped out of the car to lean against the hood.

Wind blew toward the ocean. The air was warmer than normal, another by-product of the Santa Ana winds.

She pulled her hair back and looked up at the starlit sky.

A tiny twinge of pain hit the bridge of her nose. A barometer of sorts since it had been brutally broken. The weather was shifting. She didn't need an overtanned meteorologist to tell her that.

She closed her eyes and recalled the bar as it had gone silent. Although she'd had a rush that had filled her ears with a roar, the bar had gone quiet.

Then he stood there.

He was as tall as he was broad. Amusement swam in his piercing eyes.

Her body responded to the stranger in the split second they held eye contact.

He wasn't her type.

Too big.

Too hard.

Much too difficult to take down.

So why was she thinking about the stranger now?

The muscles deep inside her started to wave frantically. Oh, yeah . . . she was thinking about the well-cut stranger because it was the first time her body had heated in nearly a year.

She let the image of him fade. "Guess it's good to know I'm not dead inside," she said to herself.

Her phone buzzed in her purse.

A reminder she'd set for herself.

Go To BED! Appointment in the morning. 8 AM.

With a heavy sigh, Avery pushed away from her car and opened the door.

Adulting really did have its drawbacks.

* * *

"We can't have the First Wives meeting next month. I'll be swamped with last-minute wedding preparations. The bachelorette party doesn't count, cuz that's all about me," Trina whined on the phone. "And we missed last quarter for Lori and Reed's wedding."

Avery tapped the pen she was holding against her open calendar. "It isn't like we don't all see each other, with everyone getting married every five minutes." At least that's what it felt like with two out of the four women in the club tying the knot within the same season. It was ironic, considering the basis of their club hinged on the fact they were all previously married and either divorced or, in Trina's case, widowed.

"Oh, wait a minute. What are you doing next Thursday?" Trina asked.

Avery glanced at her schedule. "Nothing. I fly out Friday to Seattle to meet a client."

"Perfect. I know Lori is in town. We just need to catch Shannon."

"You're coming to LA?"

"Yeah, Wade and I need to sign the prenup."

Avery leaned back in her chair. "How does Wade feel about that?"

"He insisted. And it's just smart. Not that there is any question that I'm not marrying him for his money or vice versa. It's just too much money to leave in question should something happen to one of us."

"Sounds like you're drawing up a will instead of an agreement before you get married."

"We plan on doing that once we're back. Life was easier when I didn't need to check so many boxes on my tax form."

Avery rolled her eyes. "You're marrying Mr. Country Western Superstar whose last single was number one for how many weeks?"

Trina laughed. "A few."

"More like six, but who's counting . . . and you're so loaded, presidents call you to see which way you're voting, and would you mind holding a fundraiser?"

"That was a governor, not the president."

"Splitting hairs and you know it."

Trina's laughter grew. "God, I miss talking with you all the time."

Yeah, Avery missed her friend, too. But since she became the other half of Wade Thomas, Trina was a little more preoccupied than when she was single. "It's okay. The newness will wear off and I'll be here."

"God, I hope not. The sex is so good."

"Now you're just bragging."

"It's nice to have something to brag about. Seems like the only one who knew they had a functioning vagina was you."

Avery looked at her dormant lap. "Glad we all have something to talk about, then," she lied.

"Oh, is Shannon finally dating?"

"I don't think pigs have learned to fly." Avery leaned forward and circled Thursday. "I'll call Shannon when I hang up with you."

"Perfect." Trina sighed. "Can you believe I'm getting married in a month?"

"I hope so, since I have a maid of honor dress hanging in my closet."

"I'm so excited."

And for the next thirty minutes, Trina relived every exciting moment so Avery could catch up.

* * *

The silence between the occasional noise of a fork touching a plate, or glass clinking against a table, was the only thing Avery could focus on.

Adeline sat across from her, perfectly alert, back straight, shoulders squared . . . fake smile in place. The proper English tea was her mom's idea of a good time. They'd been meeting every other week for six months. Somehow, a friend joining them made enduring the two-and-a-half-, sometimes three-hour purgatory better. Today it was Margaret. Not Maggie, not Mags . . . Margaret. The stick up her ass was nearly as large as the one up Avery's mom's. Two women who lived in the same galaxy of one-upping the other would make most people squirm. Avery was simply happy the focus was off of her.

At least it had worked in the past.

"It's been positively forever since I've seen you, Avery."

Avery leaned in for the air kiss to the side of her cheek before the waiter tucked Margaret's chair under her.

"My wedding, I think."

Margaret's fake pout was almost as bad as her phony smile. "Oh, yes. Such a shame about that divorce."

"Oh, well. Have to get the first one out of the way sometime," Avery said.

Adeline shot her a nasty look.

"I'm happy you're so well adjusted with the situation. Bernie seemed like such a nice man."

Avery was fairly certain that Margaret's only barometer for judging Bernie's character would have come from the two-second handshake at the receiving line during the reception. But like most of Adeline's friends, people with money were quickly referred to as *dear friends*. It only took a season or two for those new friends to become old friends.

Margaret's husband was a partner in an investment firm, and good ol' Maggie herself was a domestic engineer that employed a housekeeper, a cook, and a driver. In short, Mags spent her time memorizing the names of the "important" people in her husband's social circle and had high tea at the Waldorf as often as she could. The reason Avery knew so much about Margaret was because the woman was a mirror image of her mother.

Adeline had never held a job, although she did have a liberal arts degree. A piece of paper she waved over Avery repeatedly while she was in college, doing her best to flunk out. The problem was Adeline did nothing with her degree other than brag that she had one.

"I wouldn't give up hope on Bernie. He's still in love with Avery," Adeline told Margaret.

"I wouldn't bet money on that," Avery said.

"He would take you back in a breath."

The waiter took that moment to walk up to the table. "Ladies?"

He was tall, young, and very cute.

"Champagne," Avery spat out before her mother could order them all tea.

"Avery, please. It's teatime."

The waiter kept his smile in the corner of his eye. He'd obviously seen women like her enduring tea with their mothers before.

"Fine." Avery smiled. "I'll take some tea with that as well."

The waiter tried not to laugh.

As expected, her mother ordered all the fancy proper tea bullshit without asking anyone's opinion. By the time the wine came to the table, Adeline and Margaret were deep in the gossiping world of who said and did what.

"And did you hear that Avery is the maid of honor for her dear old friend Trina Petrov and Wade Thomas's wedding?"

"I do think I heard about that. Isn't he someone famous?"

Avery didn't even try to open her mouth and get a word in. Adeline felt she had a name to drop, so she did.

"Only the wealthiest country music singer out there."

Avery wasn't sure that was true, but again, she just sipped her champagne and let her mom gossip.

"Maybe you'll meet the right man at the wedding," Margaret suggested.

I'm not looking!

"Never know," Avery said instead. The conversation about Avery's future husband had started at birth. *Men want educated wives. You'll never find a proper husband if you continue to be outspoken. Polite women find proper husbands.* That had been Adeline's constant diatribe at every family dinner, every school visit. Howard, Avery's dad, chimed right in with the expected "Yes, dear" and "Listen to your mother." It was no wonder that Avery fostered temporary friends with benefits over relationships her entire adult life. The last thing she wanted to do was become what her mother wanted her to be. *Polite, respectable Avery Grant* were words that would never pass anyone's lips.

The tiers of finger food arrived at the table to help soak up the liquor. She reached for the sandwiches at the same time her mother did.

"What happened to your hand?"

Avery glanced at her krav maga battle scars. Her knuckles were purple and blue after her sparring match with Leslie.

"You should have seen the other guy."

Adeline sucked in a breath. “That isn’t funny.”

“I accidently hit it against the wall, Mother. Relax.”

“You should be more careful. Men don’t like women who are bruised and broken.” Her mother dismissed all concern for her hand with her retort.

“Good thing I’m not looking for one, then.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course you are.”

Avery bit into the tiny cucumber sandwich, which tasted a lot better than it sounded, and then washed it down. “I’m working, Mother. Making good money and have a purpose other than being another man’s possession. You might want to get used to the idea.”

“You’re working?” Margaret turned her attention toward Avery.

“It’s a silly little hobby she picked up last year,” Adeline jumped in.

“A full-time hobby that is making me six figures a year. Without being shackled to anyone.” Especially her parents.

“Grant women don’t work. This is just a season.”

“Sure, whatever you say, Mother.”

The stiffness in Adeline’s upper lip displayed her displeasure with the entire conversation.

“Are you serious about not wanting to marry again?” Margaret asked.

“Been there, done that . . . got the check. I’m doing fine on my own.”

Adeline started to grumble before Margaret jumped in.

“I don’t understand why you bothered with plastic surgery, then. Isn’t the whole point of those things . . . to find or keep a man?”

Avery blinked a few times. “What are you talking about?”

Margaret lowered her voice and leaned forward. “Your nose job, dear.”

Inadvertently, she lifted her hand to her face. Her blood started a familiar beat in her head. “That wasn’t a choice.”

“We should just drop it, Margaret. Avery is very sensitive about her surgery.”

Avery pinned her mother with a look. “I’m sensitive about *why* I had surgery. I don’t give a crap about the nose job.”

“I don’t understand. I thought you said Avery was fine-tuning her face to attract another man.”

The confusion started to settle in Avery’s mind. “So you told Margaret that I had surgery but didn’t tell her the truth behind why?” she asked her mother.

Adeline blinked several times and kept her chin up. “I didn’t want you to be embarrassed, darling. Everyone has nose jobs. It’s not a big deal.”

Avery placed both hands on the table and leaned forward. “Someone rearranged my nose on my face with the bottom of his boot, Mother.”

Margaret drew a sharp breath. “Oh, my.”

“I’m not embarrassed, because it wasn’t my fault. But obviously you’re ashamed to tell people the truth.” God, this was pathetic.

Her mother’s resolve started to crumble. She kept her voice low and looked to her left briefly before saying, “We are not the kind of women who get into fights.”

The muscles in Avery’s forearms tightened.

“I’m so sorry to have brought this up,” Margaret apologized.

Avery stared her mother down. “On the contrary, I’m glad you did. At least now I know how my own mother feels about the subject. You honestly think I brought this on myself.” She pushed back her chair and grabbed her purse.

“Avery, sit down. Don’t be overly dramatic.”

When she was a teenager, her mother’s cue of calling her dramatic would have resulted in a loud tantrum that would grab the attention of every patron in the room. If she were honest with herself, she wanted to do just that. Instead, Avery kept her voice cold. “Tell Daddy I won’t be able to make our Sunday dinner next week.” She turned to Margaret. “Lovely seeing you again.” *Said no one, ever.*

With a turn of her heel, Avery offered her mother a view of her back as she left the restaurant.

Chapter Three

"I just wish she liked me."

Trina took center stage of their First Wives Club meeting, but that was to be expected, since she was on the verge of joining a Second Wives Club.

"Vicki likes you," Shannon argued.

"When a future mother-in-law wants you to marry their son, she doesn't go out of her way to be around every weekend. Wade and I seldom have the opportunity to be alone."

"A future mother-in-law should be thinking of grandbabies."

Everyone turned to Lori.

She jumped. "No. I'm not. I'm just saying . . ."

"You want a baby." Shannon voiced what they were all thinking.

Lori shook her head. "Of course not. I'm too old."

Trina started to laugh. "I'm sorry . . . Do you still have a period?"

"That's a stupid question."

"Then you're not too old," Shannon said. "Has Reed talked about kids?"

Lori stood and walked to her kitchen and grabbed the open bottle of wine they were working on. "He might have mentioned something the other night."

"What kind of something?" Avery asked.

"About what our kids would look like." Lori leaned her trim figure along the counter and stared beyond the three of them. "Would our girls have his brown hair and my smile? Would our boys be lawyers or join the Navy SEALs . . . you know, stuff like that."

"Someone's biological clock is ticking." Avery leaned back on the sofa and stared at her friend.

"It's not."

"It is!" Trina said. "Nothing wrong with that. You're married to a man you love and trust. You're young enough to go there. It isn't like the first round, where you knew you were married to Mr. Wrong."

Of the four of them, Lori was the only one who had married her previous spouse for love and forever. Avery, Trina, and Shannon were all temporary, hired brides who entered matrimony for a predetermined amount of time and left their marriages several million richer. And for Avery, that was exactly how that played out. Trina, on the other hand, dealt with her late husband allegedly taking his own life and then found out he was offed by his own father. Cue the music for *Days of Our Lives*. And Shannon fell in love with her temporary husband and never got over it. Hence the cobwebs growing in her vagina.

To have one of them talking about having kids was a plot twist in itself.

"I totally want kids," Trina told them.

All the attention fell back on her.

"Soon?"

"I wouldn't say no if Wade suggested it. He's going to be a fabulous father."

"I think we should get you married first," Shannon suggested.

The four of them laughed.

Avery pondered for a few minutes. "Maybe that's why Vicki doesn't like you. You're going to make her a grandmother. Since she was practically a baby when she had Wade, she isn't ready for the title."

They sat in silence and considered the thought until Shannon spoke up. "I want a baby."

Avery's jaw dropped. "You have to have sex in order to have a baby."

Shannon narrowed her dark brown eyes. "Yeah, I took the class."

"Seriously?" Lori asked.

"I'm older than all of you, and I know I want to have a kid."

"Older by less than a year from me," Lori reminded her.

"Still counts. I never considered how my life would be without kids. So if Mr. Forever doesn't come along, I'm just going to do what I have to do to have a child."

"Sperm bank?" Trina asked.

"Maybe. I don't know. Maybe I'll have a one-night stand."

Avery choked on her wine. The harsh taste going down into her lungs had her sputtering for several seconds.

Trina patted her back and Lori handed her water.

Once she got ahold of her breath, she squeaked out the words, "Shannon Wentworth does not have one-night stands."

"Well, maybe it's time she does," Shannon defended herself.

Avery shook her head. "They will eat you up and spit you out." Worry over her friend jumping into that kind of lifestyle made her skin tighten.

"I think that's kinda the point, Avery," Lori said.

Shannon smiled and sat farther back on the couch. "It isn't like I haven't had a one-night stand."

"I don't think college counts," said Trina.

"Of course it does."

"I support the idea."

Avery stared at Lori. "The attorney is supportive of Shannon getting knocked up by a complete stranger and then never seeing him again?"

"A man knows the risk of any one-night stand. If there aren't phone numbers or real names involved . . . I don't see the big deal."

"Isn't that risky? What if he's a sociopath, or has some health issue, or really bad family genes?"

Trina chimed in. "Since when is Avery the sound of reason and Lori is on the sidelines flashing pom-poms and cheering on team impropriety?"

"Think about it. Shannon hasn't had sex since Jesus was in diapers, and we're going to encourage her to dive into just anyone's bed to procreate? There's a lot of shitty men out there." Why was Avery the only one thinking logically about this absurd idea?

"Maybe jumping into bed, anyone's bed, is what triggers the buttons to add some romance to her life," Lori argued.

"Excuse me." Everyone turned toward Shannon. "I'm sitting right here, and I think I'm adult enough to make this decision on my own. I said I considered it, and in truth, haven't ruled it out . . . but I'm not taking ovulation tests to see when is the best time to hit the bar. So everyone can stand down."

That made Avery feel marginally better. "Take me with you . . . when you hit the bar. You need backup. I think we can all agree on that."

Lori nodded and Trina voiced an affirmative.

A few hours later, once Reed and Wade returned from their guys' night out, Shannon and Avery excused themselves to her condo in the same building as Lori's. Even though Shannon's home was only a twenty-minute drive outside the city, she'd planned on staying with Avery to avoid driving or needing to call for an Uber after a few glasses of wine.

Avery peeked her head into the guest room. "Do you have everything you need?"

"You're sweet. Yes, you've thought of everything."

Avery paused. "I meant it when I suggested you have me tag along if you go daddy scouting."

Shannon scooted over on the bed and tapped the space beside her.

Taking the cue, Avery shuffled to the bed, jumped up, and leaned against the headboard.

"Are you okay?" Shannon asked.

“I’m fine. You’re the one searching for something you don’t have.”

“Mm-hmm . . . you see, the thing about being the silent one in the group is that no one knows when I’m watching them. And I’ve been watching you.”

Tension formed at the base of her neck.

“Normally I would expect Trina to catch on to your change in behavior, but she’s a bit preoccupied, taking on the title of wife. And Lori . . . yeah, same thing. But I’m not in the same sexual haze as our friends, and you, my dear, have changed.”

“I haven’t.” The denial sounded weak even to her.

“Please don’t underestimate me. It’s insulting.”

After thirty seconds of silence, Shannon read her mental list. “Your knuckles have been bruised every time I’ve seen you in the last six months. You never brag about your sex life anymore. You just allude that it’s there, say something expectedly trashy, and wait for someone to change the subject. Your smile isn’t as bright, and your laughter doesn’t come as much as it did last year. Something happened with your mom this week, but you didn’t open up to us . . . Why?”

Avery knew her mouth was gaping open. “I didn’t know you had a crystal ball.”

“Talk to me. Isn’t that what we’re here for? Isn’t that the point behind the First Wives Club? Cut the crap and talk about the trials in our postmarriage lives?”

Avery’s chest lifted with the oxygen she needed to open up. “I won’t be the one to kill Trina’s buzz. She deserves to be happy.”

“Good thing I’m not Trina.”

Avery glanced at her lap, noticed her bruised knuckles. “I had three guys on rotation before New York.” She didn’t need to explain the reference to New York. Everyone in their little club, along with bodyguards and detectives, were knee-deep in the drama surrounding the violent attack that changed her life. “I cut them all off when I returned.”

There was silence.

“Why?”

Avery had asked herself that question many a night since. “I think the easy answer is I didn’t feel safe anymore. But that’s not completely it. I’ve changed. The doctors said that a personality change after a head injury is normal. I didn’t question it very much. Sometimes I feel like my old self.”

“But not all the time.”

“No. Most of the time I feel like an imposter.”

“Is there anyone?” Shannon asked quietly.

Avery shook her head.

Shannon placed a manicured fingernail on Avery’s bruised knuckles. “What’s up with this?”

Avery closed a fist, turned to look Shannon in the eye. “Trina doesn’t need to know. Not yet. She’ll blame herself.” Considering it was Trina’s late father-in-law that hired the thug who attacked her, it was safe to say she’d suck in any blame for Avery’s issues and change in lifestyle.

“I’m the silent one. Secrets are my thing.”

Avery lifted her hands in the air, turned them backward and forward. “Self-defense class.”

Shannon released a short breath. “Oh, thank God.”

“What did you think I was doing?”

“I don’t know, punching walls. I read up on head injuries, too, and I didn’t rule anything out.”

“You’ve been thinking about this a long time.”

“A few months. And you’re right. I think Trina would take it to heart that you’re feeling the need to bulk up on survival skills.”

Avery smiled. “Listen to you talk like a badass.”

“You went through hell last year. I think you’re incredibly smart to empower yourself. It’s what changes a survivor into a warrior.”

“I like that.”

“I’d love to take credit for it, but I’m sure I read that somewhere.”

Avery leaned her head against Shannon’s shoulder.

“What about your mom?”

She squeezed her eyes closed. “Is there a class for dealing with self-absorbed mothers?”

Shannon’s shoulder shook as she laughed. “Sign me up if there is.”

Fifteen minutes later, after delivering the CliffsNotes version of her Adeline high tea, Avery fell into bed and closed her eyes. It felt good to have the validation of one of her friends. There wasn’t a thing wrong with the direction she was taking in her life.

She was a warrior.

Which was a hell of a lot better than being a victim.

Chapter Four

He was a contractor, not a freaking handyman. So why was he nailing racks to walls in a gym like an apprentice?

Oh, yeah . . . that’s right. He’d started going down this fork in the road once he realized that the blonde named Avery didn’t take the group class. He’d told Brenda, the owner of the studio, that he had to work for her after his normal working hours to give her the deal she needed. And when the group class turned up empty of his target, he might have seen the schedule on Brenda’s desk when it “accidentally” fell open on the floor. After flipping a few pages, he saw Avery’s name and insisted that Tuesday or Friday was the only time he had to finish his contracted job.

A voice in his head suggested that his motivation was a tinge too close to a stalker’s.

He was good with that.

The door from the locker room to the studio slammed.

“You need to get this door fixed, Brenda!”

Liam didn’t turn around.

It was her. He could tell by the way the hair stood up on his arms.

“Your warm-up is on the board,” Brenda yelled from her open office.

“I hate burpees.”

Liam felt his lips split into a smile while he lifted his level to the rack he’d just attached to the wall.

“I haven’t seen you in a week. You’re weak and pathetic,” Brenda sneered.

Avery’s displeasure was voiced under her breath. It was then that Liam glanced over his shoulder.

Oh, damn.

He was in trouble.

She was taller than he remembered. Or maybe it was the spandex she wore that seemed to add inches to her frame. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. No makeup. Curves.

Rail-thin women did nothing for him.

She noticed him for the first time.

Her eyes narrowed. “Hello.”

“Hey.” Yeah, he was playing it cool, like a damn teenager. *Hey?* Who said *hey*?

“Do I know you?” she asked.

Liam started to shake his head.

“Ignore him. He’s working. Fifty burpees. One-legged. Twenty-five each side.” Brenda took a breath. “Stretch first.”

“Brutal,” Liam said quietly.

Avery rolled her eyes before lifting her hands over her head.

Liam swallowed.

Hard.

Spandex. He loved spandex.

She caught him staring and waited for him to stop.

“Sorry.” *So not sorry.* He turned around.

“One,” Avery called out. “Two, three.”

Liam made the mistake of looking over his shoulder on *ten*.

One leg up, her shoulders peeked out from under her skintight shirt, making his mouth go dry.

Since when did a woman’s shoulders make his dick stir?

He closed his eyes, shook his head, and turned around before she could catch him staring a second time. *Get it together, man.*

On forty-seven, Brenda walked out of her office, past him, and stood over Avery.

“You’re not sweating,” she said once Avery announced she was done.

“I am.”

There was a pause.

“Ten more!”

Avery grumbled. “I hate you.”

“As long as your check clears, I don’t care.”

Liam laughed. He couldn’t help himself.

“Are those shelves done?” Brenda asked.

“Almost.”

Brenda turned and focused on Avery as she did her last ten burpees.

“Damn, that hurt,” she said as she collapsed on the mat after the last one.

“That’s because you missed Friday.”

“I had to leave town.”

“Yes, I know. But take your workout with you and it won’t hurt as much when you return.”

Liam finished screwing in one of the brackets and moved on to the next, all the while eavesdropping on the conversation as much as he could.

“Today we’re starting with punches.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Avery twisting on a pair of boxing gloves while Brenda placed pads on her hands to catch Avery’s swings.

For five minutes Brenda yelled out a series of numbers: One, two. One, two, one. One, two, three, four, one, two. Jabs, cross hits, uppercuts. He had no idea krav had so much boxing involved.

Avery was sweating; her rapid breathing accompanied the grunts that would occasionally follow her efforts.

Brenda broke them off. “Get a drink. The next round is on your back.”

Liam had never worked so slowly in his life. Once Avery caught her breath, she lay down on the mat, and Brenda straddled her. He was pretty sure he’d seen something like this before. Only the women were wearing bikinis and were covered in mud.

“Left, right, until I call it.”

Avery started punching. Each slap of her boxing gloves to the mitts the instructor wore cracked the room with noise.

Brenda called time and instantly told Avery to force her off the domineering, if not slightly erotic, position she held over her.

For a brief second Avery sighed and acted as if she were going to just lie there, then, in a blur, Brenda was knocked off to the side, and Avery was two feet away and on the balls of her feet with her hands in front of her face.

“Holy shit.”

Brenda shook off her mitts and wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. “Don’t be impressed.”

For an instructor, Brenda didn’t seem to have a lot of motivational skills.

“I’m impressed.” Liam met Avery’s eyes.

“She refuses to spar with others.”

“I was with Leslie last week.”

“You have ten pounds on her. And she kicked your ass.”

Avery didn’t argue.

“You need more of a challenge. There is only so much I can teach you one-on-one. One of these days a man his size is going to challenge you, and you won’t have the skills to get away.” She pointed to Liam.

He placed his hands in the air. “Don’t look at me. I don’t attack women unless they ask for it.” He was pretty sure he smirked.

Avery rolled her eyes. “I could get him off of me.”

He laughed and sized her up. “I’m twice your size.”

Brenda glared. “Size means nothing.”

“Do you study krav?” Avery asked him.

"No."

Avery turned to Brenda. "Then I could get away."

"You *think* you can get away, but you've never tried. How do I know if anything I'm teaching you is useful if you don't exercise it?"

"You'd be surprised at what I exercise."

Brenda narrowed her eyes. "I know about the drunk at the bar."

"What?"

"Leslie told me. In group. Right after she fought off two—not one, but two—of my best male students. So you can put a drunk into his drink. Good. I'm glad I taught you that much."

Liam watched the women arguing in silence until that moment. "If you can't teach her any more, then why do you keep taking her money?"

Both women turned to him as if they'd forgotten he was in the room.

"So I can pay you to stand around."

"If I can get him off of me, will you let this go until I'm ready?" Avery pointed toward him.

He was pretty sure she'd just suggested that he straddle her while she tried to squirm away. This idea he could get into.

Brenda cocked her head to the side and shook it. "Too much liability."

"I won't hurt her."

Brenda looked at him like he was an idiot. "Not her. You!"

Liam laughed.

That had both women glaring.

Without words, Brenda stormed into her office and returned with a piece of paper. She shoved it in front of his face and handed him a pen. "Sign this."

"What is it?"

"Waiver. You get hurt? You don't sue."

He was cocky enough to think the blonde in spandex wasn't big enough, fast enough, or strong enough to get him off of her. He was cautious enough to know he could lose a nut in the process.

He signed the paper. "I might wanna have kids one day."

Brenda walked across the room and produced a jockstrap.

He held no shame in strapping on the ball barrier on the outside of his clothes, which was what this one was designed for.

The whole time Avery watched with her hands on her hips, determination in her eyes.

When he was ready, Brenda pulled him onto the mat. "You." She pointed at Avery. "On your back."

Liam had to admit, this was a first.

Avery lay down.

A hard-on in a jockstrap is probably not the best idea, Liam.

Talking to himself was a thing. And this time the voice told him he was an idiot.

Brenda knelt on the ground. "You remove him three times and I won't harp on you for six months. No punches to the face. He doesn't have padding."

When she stood, she patted Liam's chest. "Straddle her. Don't let her up."

Yup, definitely a first.

Liam puffed his chest out and smiled. Only that cockiness subsided as he knelt beside her. A combination of annoyance and vulnerability lurked in her eyes. And while Liam had no problem attracting women, he never purposely hurt them. "You okay with this?"

She motioned with her hand to climb on up.

The moment he straddled her hips, his dick waved. She was hot, sweaty, and flushed from her workout, or maybe that was the anger. One pass by in the bar a week ago and he'd already thought about this moment.

Well, maybe not this exact moment, but one with her under him with the aforementioned thoughts swimming in his head.

He clenched his jaw and waited for some signal to hold her down.

There wasn't one. He counted to maybe three, and Avery was on the move.

Liam attempted to squeeze her with his thighs and instead found her knee in his chest, his balance thrown off, and she was two feet away on the balls of her feet, and he was on his back.

"How the hell . . . ?"

"I said hold her down."

It was Avery's turn to smirk while looking at her fingernails.

“Okay, Princess. I see how this works.” Liam jumped to his feet and motioned to the floor.

Brenda stood back.

He admired the swagger in Avery’s hips as she moved to the same position on the mat.

This time when he positioned himself on top of her, he immediately grabbed her hands and pinned them to the ground.

She went limp as if giving up, and then, like a cat who was done being petted, she bucked with strength he didn’t see coming. He braced himself with one hand to keep from falling off of her, and she used it to her advantage. She wrapped her leg around his, and then she was on her side, his arm in a hold that threatened to bend it backward.

He’d like to say he didn’t cuss in that moment, but he’d be lying.

She let go and jumped to the balls of her feet.

“You know, the last time I was beaten up by a girl, it was my sister, and titty twisters were involved.”

Avery laughed and Brenda scowled.

“That is your problem. Avery isn’t your sister. She isn’t someone you protect and let win. She is having a seizure, and if you let go, she will fall off a cliff into the Grand Canyon. Hold. Her. Down.”

Brenda slammed her hand on the mat beside him.

Liam pulled himself together as he stood. He had half a foot on Avery. He easily had fifty pounds over her.

But damn, she was fast and cunning. He was pretty sure the pain on the left side of his body was a bruised rib from her knee providing the space she needed to escape.

Seizure.

He could do this.

She took her position and he took his.

He pinned her hands and she bucked. Only he was ready for that this time. He flattened his body against hers. Would have enjoyed it if she wasn’t trying to head butt him. He dodged what would have been a headache for both of them.

She attempted to use her leg to wrap his. He pushed away until he could capture it under his. His distraction gave her the opportunity to get out from under one of his hands. She attempted to leverage herself and twist him off.

He held her tight.

When he had her pinned again, Brenda hit the mat.

She moved two inches from Avery’s face. “You cannot beat strength with strength. There will always be bigger opponents than you out there.”

Liam lifted his hands from Avery’s arms.

She was breathing hard, her jaw set in a firm line. Vulnerability overtook the anger in her eyes.

Liam stood and backed up when Avery squirmed away.

“Whatever!” Avery released the tie that held her hair back and shook her head. She stormed out of the gym and into the locker room. Liam found his feet following.

“Leave her alone.”

Yeah, Liam wasn’t one to follow orders.

Chapter Five

With both hands on the lockers and her head hanging between her shoulders, Avery attempted to push back her anger.

She had him.

Twice.

She shoved her fist into the locker, accepted the pain that came with it.

“Hey.”

It was him, the man who proved Brenda right. “Girls’ locker room. Or can’t you read?”

He didn’t respond and didn’t leave. She could feel his eyes staring at the back of her head.

“No one likes a sore loser.”

Avery twisted on her heel. “I took you.”

He hunched his shoulders. “Surprise is something you can only use once.”

“Twice.”

He chuckled.

The anger inside of her started to ebb, and she voiced what she’d been thinking since she saw him watching her warm up. “Were you at the bar the other night?”

Was that a smile? “What bar?”

“One block up?”

“Pug’s Pub?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve been there. You don’t seem the type to go to Pug’s.”

She closed her eyes and turned her back to him. “And what type is that?” She twisted the combination on her lock and pulled her bag from the locker.

When he didn’t immediately answer, she looked at him.

“Let’s see . . . the women at Pug’s haven’t had a manicure in a long time, therefore the color of their nail polish would be red. Yours is beige. Highlights in your hair . . .” He glanced at her bag. “Is that Gucci?”

“I don’t know a lot of heterosexual men who know Gucci from Walmart.”

He winced. “That would hurt, except I have a Gucci-style sister and I’m as hetero as they come.”

She turned toward the locker, removed her Prada handbag, and stuffed it into her Gucci duffel. Heat boiled in her veins.

“I came in here to see if you were okay.”

She lifted a hand in the air without turning around. “I’m fine.”

“Oh, hell . . . Did I do that?” He took a step closer and touched her arm.

Avery twisted like a cornered cat and nearly struck out.

Mr. Handyman stepped back and stared at her arm.

Tiny purple bruises emerged where he’d pinned her hands to the mat.

"I'm fine." She pulled her hands away. "Part of the deal with these classes."

He shook his head. "Years of my mother telling me not to hurt girls makes this everything *but* okay. I was here to put up shelving, not manhandle the students."

She took one step toward him and looked up. He did have half a head on her. "Well, be sure and tell your mother that you're keeping your promises."

"I'm obviously not."

She considered him for a brief moment, his size, the actual concern in his eyes. "Did you let me win?"

He pointed a thumb behind him at the closed door. "Back there?"

"Yeah. Did you hear your mother's voice and let go?"

He shook his head. "Much as I hate to admit it . . . no."

At least she had that.

"But Brenda's right. I wasn't trying to hurt you. And my guess is, the only kind of man you'd have to use those moves on isn't trying to be your friend."

"Yeah, I get that."

"So what's the issue? Why not practice with men twice your size more often?"

She closed her eyes, thought of the recurring dreams she'd had ever since her face had met the bottom of someone's boot. "I have my reasons." She reached for her bag, hiked it up on her shoulder, and closed the locker behind her.

"Then why did you let me join in?"

"Because you don't look like—" Avery stopped short and quickly diverted her eyes. *Him.*

"Oh . . ."

"It isn't what you think."

"I call bullshit."

Avery shook her head. "Usually I know the people insulting me or calling me a liar."

"I haven't insulted you. But you are lying and you know it. Which is why the defensive hair is probably spiked on the back of your neck."

"So you're a therapist and a handyman?"

"My sister is a crisis counselor. I guess some things wear off at our family dinners."

Avery wondered what it felt like to have a weekly dinner with someone she admired enough to pick up some of their habits. "Well, you'll forgive me for not paying for your little session here." On some level Avery knew she was channeling her inner bitch and taking it out on this hulk of a stranger. The corner she felt herself being pushed into was as uncomfortable as wool in summer.

She took a step toward the door, and he stood in front of her.

Her feet froze.

"My name is Liam. Let me buy you a drink."

She blinked several times. "Are you trying to pick me up?"

"An hour ago I would have said yes."

Her brain couldn't process what he meant. "But not now?"

"The protective part of me wants to erase that look in your eyes."

"The angry, pissed off look?"

He smiled. "Sure, that, too."

"Well, Liam. Thank you, but no thank you." She brushed past him and stepped out the door.

Halfway across the gym floor, Brenda called out from her office, "See you Friday."

Avery knew she'd be back.

* * *

Sometimes addictions took time to become the compelling habits that often debilitated a person. Then there were times those addictions happened overnight.

Liam was pretty sure he was on the latter half of that thought.

That's why he was standing in a group krav maga class with a bunch of strangers on a Wednesday night. Brenda made it clear that he could train in her studio for free as long as he gave one day a week to Avery. Actually the conversation hadn't quite happened that way.

As he was leaving the studio after Avery stormed out, he approached Brenda about returning to spar with her problem student. Brenda allowed it on the condition that he take classes with her group.

The class started with a warm-up that reminded Liam that he didn't spend time in a gym. He never needed to in his profession. Yet as his crew had grown to twenty or so men doing most of the heavy lifting, Liam had softened up in the past couple of years.

Brenda paired him off with Craig, one of her trainers.

"Have you ever boxed?"

Liam shook his head.

"Weight lifting?"

"Do two-by-fours count?"

Craig had Liam's height but not his broad shoulders or natural girth. That wasn't to say the man was thin—he wasn't.

Liam looked around the gym at the other men. Lots of them were on the thin side, but most of them seemed to punch like demons were talking in their ears.

"Sports?"

"High school, but that was a long time ago."

Craig nodded. "Okay, let's start with some basics."

An hour and a half later Liam pulled into the driveway of his single story bungalow and put the truck in park. He looked at the backs of his hands.

Purple.

He thought of the bruises on Avery's wrists and how they didn't fit her perfectly manicured fingernails.

Liam jingled the keys to the front door and was greeted by Whiskey barking from the other side. He opened the door and braced himself.

His lab was sixty pounds of energy that should be reserved for puppies, but at seven years old, it was obvious she wasn't going to settle down because of age.

He knelt down and let the dog crawl all over him, her tongue lapping his cheek.

"Did you miss me?"

"Your dog is crazy." Michelle peeked around the corner from the kitchen, dish towel in hand.

"Uncle Liam."

Liam knelt and caught his niece as she ran into his arms. He swung Cassandra up in the air to a chorus of giggles.

"You spoil her."

He settled the spirited five-year-old on his hip and pinched her nose. "That's my job."

Whiskey barked at his feet, tail wagging, tongue hanging out. He stepped past the dog and into the kitchen. It smelled like his childhood home. "Pot roast?" he asked as his stomach approved with a growl.

"Mom's recipe."

He kissed his sister's cheek. "You're too good to me."

"We live here rent free. It's the least I can do."

He'd heard that before. "Well, I appreciate it."

Cassandra placed her hand on his cheek and pulled his attention away from her mother. "Uncle Liam, do you wanna see what I made in school today?"

She'd started kindergarten in the fall, and every day it was the same. From pictures colored with crayons, to watercolors, to plants growing in egg cartons that sat in the kitchen window, to decoupage plates with his pixie nosed niece smiling at the picture placed in the middle.

"Wash your hands."

"Yes, Mom," he teased his sister.

"I was talking to Cassie, but you should, too."

He set Cassandra down and took her tiny hand in his. "You heard your mother."

"Washy, washy . . . happy, happy."

Liam laughed. "Where did she get that?"

Michelle shrugged. "Someone at school says it."

"Mrs. Steel says germs are the enemy, and soap and water are the weapons."

They walked into the bathroom, and Cassandra marched up on the two-step stool that put her at the right height to wash her hands on her own.

"I like Mrs. Steel."

"She's married. So you can't like her too much."

He laughed. "Good to know."

Liam helped her with the soap dispenser and lathered his hands along with hers.

"Uncle Liam?"

"Yes, Pipsqueak?"

"When are you getting married?"

Not anytime soon.

"I don't have a girlfriend, so I can't get married."

Cassandra considered him through their images in the bathroom mirror.

"Why don't you have a girlfriend?"

Liam considered changing his nickname for her to Twenty Questions. Or Twenty-Q. "I'm a little too busy for that."

"Mommy says you're working extra hours and that makes dating hard."

"Your mom is right."

"What about when Mommy and I move out? Will you get a girlfriend then?"

He turned off the water and grabbed a towel. "I don't know." It would certainly be easier to get naked with a woman.

"Who will cook for you if you don't get a girlfriend?"

Liam lifted her off the stool and placed her little butt on the counter. "You know, I did cook for myself before you and your mom moved in."

"Mommy says frozen dinners don't count."

He lowered his voice. "One of these days you're going to go to college, and you'll realize they do count."

"You guys coming or what?" Michelle yelled from the kitchen.

Liam made a face at his niece. "I think we're late."

Easily amused, Cassandra giggled, and Liam lifted her up and tossed her over his shoulder. She held on to his back, her head closer to the ground than her feet were, and laughed all the way to dinner.

Thirty minutes later, Liam was on his second beer, and the pot roast was a pleasant memory. Cassandra left to go play in the room she shared with her mom.

"Are you still okay to watch Cassie tomorrow night?"

"My social schedule hasn't changed."

"Would you tell me if it did?"

"Family first. Always. We've been over this."

Looking into his sister's eyes was a lot like looking into his own.

"You seem more restless than normal."

"Busy, not restless."

"Did you pick up another job?"

He sipped his beer and set it down. "Why do you ask?"

"You've been coming home late."

He picked up his plate and hers and took them to the sink. "I worked late before you moved in." She'd been there for a year. Slippery Scott, her slimy ex-husband, had left her and Cassandra a month before they moved in. Michelle had started taking classes after Cassandra started preschool so she could earn her degree. Scott couldn't handle being a dad longer than a few hours at a time, so when Michelle needed to pull a few nights working the crisis hotline as a class requirement, Scott couldn't deal.

According to Michelle, he picked a fight one night, packed a bag, and left. Come to find out he hadn't paid their rent on the apartment for two months. If Scott had stayed in town, Liam would have happily pounded some sense into his brother-in-law. But the coward moved to Atlanta, denying him the chance.

Liam was there to pick up the pieces.

"You're working extra for me."

"I'm the boss. I'm working late because that's what being the boss means."

She brought the other dishes from the table to the sink while he filled it with hot water. "Sit down. You cooked."

"I can help."

"Chelle!"

"Okay, okay." She sat down and took a drink of his beer.

"So what's Cassandra's obsession with me having a girlfriend?"

"I think it has to do with her new friends at school. She started talking about a baby brother or a sister, and somehow she's concluded that I can't give her that since Scott is gone."

"But I can? That's a stretch."

“She’s five. What can I say?” Michelle sighed. “He sent a check.”

Liam looked over his shoulder. “Who?”

“Scott.”

He almost dropped the dish he was rinsing off in the sink. “You’re kidding.”

“Four hundred dollars.”

Considering the man had ignored his child support bill ordered by the divorce court for the past five months, the amount was laughable. “Big spender.” Liam went back to the dishes.

“He says he finally got a job.”

“Did you talk to him?”

“No. There was a check in the mail with a note. He said he would send more.” Michelle sounded hopeful.

“I wouldn’t count on it.”

“I won’t.”

He dried his hands on a dish towel and turned to his sister. “You don’t need him.”

She sighed and offered a weak smile. “I know. But she does.”

“Cassandra has me.”

“It’s not the same.”

“I know. It’s better. She can depend on me. Forever and always.”

Michelle walked over and wrapped her arms around him.

Liam kissed the top of her head.

“Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

Chapter Six

Thankfully, Brenda didn’t harp when Avery showed up for her lesson. The woman was painfully quiet, and thirty minutes in, Avery figured out why.

The door to the studio opened and he walked in.

Big shoulders. Thick biceps. *Liam.*

“What are you doing here?”

“Right on time,” Brenda announced.

Avery shifted her gaze between the two of them. “What is this? An intervention?”

Brenda shook off her boxing gloves. “He agreed to spar with you.”

That was comical. “I don’t remember agreeing to spar with him.”

“You did last week, and I don’t look like your demons.” He dropped a bag on the floor and walked farther into the room.

When he was damn near nose to nose with her, she looked up and held her ground. He didn’t look anything like her demons. The fact that he knew she had them was a little unsettling.

Avery weighed her options.

Stay and spar with Handyman Hulk, who didn’t know krav from a bar fight, or find another instructor.

Brenda didn’t have a warm and fuzzy bone in her body. It was one of the reasons Avery liked working with her. She didn’t ask questions, didn’t offer a shoulder to sob on. She slapped Avery into place and pushed her out of her comfort zone.

That zone was just pushed a little further.

“Fine.”

Liam’s whole face changed when he smiled. Even now, with a smirk that resembled a cocky teen’s, he looked completely different.

“All right. Let’s get started.”

Most of their lessons before Liam showed up had consisted of practicing the moves Brenda taught Avery in the past and building on them. In the past few months there were times Brenda would attack Avery without any predetermined moves. She didn’t tell her she was going to attempt to choke her or grab her from behind. She just did it and Avery needed to respond.

They rewound the tape, and now Avery was back at the beginning.

Brenda would do the move first, have Avery respond, and then have Liam be the aggressor. This time, he wore more than a jock. He barely fit in the padding needed to protect his head. The first time he wrapped his arms around her as if he were snagging her off a street corner, she barely felt his strength before she dropped her weight, pulled him off balance, and started elbowing his face from behind her.

He let go.

Once Brenda explained the moves Avery was doing, Liam attempted to adjust his attack to challenge her from escaping. Anytime she struck just shy of his junk, he hesitated. In reality, she knew he would do more than pause if someone boxed his goods. After a while, he learned to keep his hips far enough away, or too close, to avoid being a target.

There were times Avery got away . . . and there were times Brenda stopped their sparring when it was obvious that Avery wasn't going to win.

As much as Avery hated to admit it, when they were done she felt stronger, even in light of the weakness she demonstrated in Liam's shadow. The fact was she did manage to get away from him several times. Like when she'd taken the guy down at the bar, she felt empowered.

When they were done and Avery was wiping the sweat from her shoulders with a towel, Brenda approached her. "Liam agreed to come every Friday."

Avery glanced at Mr. Hulk. He sat on a bench, water in hand. "Works for me," he told her.

Avery nodded.

"Good. This was good. You're better for it, Avery." Brenda turned away. Avery knew surprise was written on her face.

"That was almost a compliment."

"I take it those don't come often from that one."

Avery grinned. "Never." She had questions. Lots of them. "About that drink we didn't have last week."

That little-boy smirk on that big-boy face peeked out. "I don't know . . . I have a lot to do."

Was he turning her down? "Suit yourself."

He stopped her halfway to the showers.

"Meet you outside in fifteen."

She didn't turn around. Smiling, she waved a hand in the air, felt the heat of his eyes on her ass, and disappeared into the locker room.

Pug's was busy, it being Friday night and all. They found a small table tucked in the back, away from the majority of people.

Liam grabbed a couple of bottles of beer and sat across from her.

He'd barely sat his ass in the chair and she was asking the questions that had been swimming in her head for hours. "Why? Why are you doing this?"

He struggled with his answer for half a second. "I'm attracted."

Avery should have been prepared for his answer.

She wasn't.

"That's the short answer."

She took a drink from her beer. "And the long answer?"

"I need a challenge, a change in pace. Something tells me pursuing my attraction isn't going to be easy. Not from a woman who has no problem kicking my ass . . . repeatedly."

She forced her lips from smiling but knew her eyes lit up. "All this for a date."

"That's why it started." He leaned on his elbows and stared. "Now I'm genuinely fascinated. Who is this beautiful, guarded woman, and what drove her to master a class in kicking someone's butt?"

He blinked a few times as he spoke, and a voice told Avery that he was well practiced in throwing women off his scent of seduction. "Do women fall for that? The 'fascinated' line followed by a compliment and a smile?"

He lifted his eyebrows, leaned back. "Yup. All the time."

Avery laughed and grabbed her drink. "I think I might have written a book on lines that get me what I want from a man. So you're going to have to do better than that."

He lifted his beer in the air in a silent salute. "I'll work on it."

* * *

"I don't want any of it."

Avery took in the dark hall of family portraits professionally painted on canvas. "Not even the artwork?"

Sheldon Lankford considered the paintings and shook his head. "My parents waited until they were fifty to adopt me. I never met any of these people. I was raised by a series of nannies and knew my parents through weekends and the occasional summer vacation." Sheldon kept looking up at the vast walls that filled the room, which hosted thirty-foot ceilings. "Did you ever go to boarding school?"

Avery sighed. "Yes."

Sheldon focused on her as if surprised. “Then you know.”

At thirty-five, Sheldon inherited his parents’ wealth with the passing of his mother.

His father had died eight years prior from a sudden heart attack. His mother had lived out her years in a mausoleum of a home with a full-time nurse and a truckload of medication. From what Avery knew, Sheldon made sure his adoptive mother was being cared for and that no one was squandering the accumulated wealth of the Lankford family fortune.

And it was quite a sum.

Sheldon had learned of her services through her ex-husband. When Bernie heard that she was working, he offered to cut her another check. As tempting as that sounded, Avery liked that she was providing a service and being paid for it. Since most of her clients were in the upper ends of the tax bracket, her payday matched her spending habits . . . or it was getting there.

“Family photographs?”

Sheldon shook his head. “I’ve already taken what I want.”

“Okay, then. A house this size will take some time to go through. I have a questionnaire.”

Sheldon frowned. “Homework?”

She smiled. “People collect crazy stuff in their lives. I need to know what your parents held value in. Did your mother collect art? Did your dad have a habit of buying antique flasks or pens? I’ll bring in the experts needed to place the pricey items in the correct auctions. You’re paying me a percentage to take the burden off of you. A few questions and I’ll make sure the overlooked frame old Grandma Beth is in isn’t discarded. Once I’ve farmed the stuff of known value, I’ll hold the estate sale.”

Sheldon nodded. “What about the house itself?”

“You’re selling?”

“Could you live here?”

Dark, dingy . . . full of spiders—she cringed at the thought it was the exact opposite of how she lived. “Do you want to sell as is or get top dollar?”

“Are you suggesting remodeling?”

“I don’t think dark paneling and dated kitchens sell homes. But the location would bring in investors and people who can’t afford to come into the neighborhood at a high dollar. That said, it is Brentwood. You’ll make millions walking away, regardless.”

Sheldon took a breath and Avery cut him off. “But since you’re hiring me to go through the interior, I would urge you to get as much as you can from the home itself.”

“I don’t want to deal with any of it,” he confessed.

“Then we sell.”

“I’m also allergic to work.”

Avery grinned. “Let me come up with a couple of contractors and bids for the basics. Do you have a Realtor in mind?”

Sheldon shook his head.

“I’ll find a couple . . . get an idea of what we’re talking about. Money invested, time . . . and bottom line, money in your pocket.”

“What do you charge for that?”

“I can’t say I’ve done it before. So nothing. I have to be here to sift through a lot of stuff, so inviting a real estate agent or two over to give their opinions on things isn’t going to take any more time from me. You’ll have to pick who you like and what you ultimately want to do.”

“You’re obviously not allergic to work.”

“I used to be. Then I bored of spending money . . . or more importantly, I realized that I needed to work in order to shop the way I wanted to. Growing up in a world of boarding schools and pretentious parents made this job perfect for me.”

Sheldon turned on his leather loafers and tugged on the silk sleeves of his two-hundred-dollar shirt and looked her up and down as if for the first time.

For a brief moment, Avery felt a chill.

“How long is this going to take?”

“You want it done right or fast?”

“Right.”

“It’s an eight-thousand-square-foot house with fifty years of living.” She set out a timeline they could both work with, taking into consideration the smaller estate she was working with in Seattle that she was wrapping up. At least Brentwood was closer to home.

By the time Avery left the Lankford estate, she had the keys and a signed agreement for her services. Services that apparently now included obtaining a Realtor and a contractor. It was time to start hitting the networking circuit and finding contacts.

Chapter Seven

"I used to hate these things," Shannon told Avery as they walked into the mixer wearing professional, *I'm more than just arm candy* attire.

Of course the designer shoes, clothes, and attitude completed their professional yet high-class facade.

They approached the reception desk and gave their names. The intern wrote each name on a standard sticky label and handed it to them.

Avery looked at the tape disguised as a name tag. "This is Chanel."

Shannon laughed. From her purse, she produced a magnetic name tag that she attached to her dress jacket without tape or a pin.

"That's cheating."

"Good thing I had one made for you, too."

Avery wadded up her paper name tag and tossed it in a nearby trash can before placing the nondestructive tag on her blouse.

"So how do we do this?"

"It's a mixer. We mix."

"Looks like everyone is just standing around drinking."

Shannon led them to the bar and asked for two glasses of chardonnay. "One glass, and make it last all night."

Avery dropped the glass from her lips. "So it's a prop."

"Yup. If you're not holding it, some will think you're a recovering alcoholic, if you're overindulging, you're going to be labeled as one."

"Critical group." Avery pointed to an elderly woman dressed to the nines and well into her wine. "What about her?"

"That's Mandy Wilson. She doesn't count. She's not here to drum up business."

"Then why is she here?"

"Probably to find a future ex-husband. C'mon, let me introduce you."

Mandy Wilson looked to be in her late sixties. Yeah, it was apparent she'd had the usual cosmetic surgeries wealthy women did in order to hold back Father Time, but that was something Avery was used to looking past.

"Well, look who is here."

Shannon smiled at Mandy as she leaned in for a kiss on the cheek. "Mandy, I want you to meet a friend of mine."

She made the introductions, and Avery accepted the thorough once-over from the older woman.

"What brings you two uptown women here? Looking for a husband?"

Avery shook her head and Shannon laughed. "We'll leave that to you. Any prospects out there tonight?"

Mandy scowled. "Sadly, the place is shy on men. Too many liberated women joining the workforce."

"Some of us like to make our own money," Shannon teased.

"Don't start that with me. Your divorce was public record. Unless of course you've blown through it all already . . . have you?"

“What a juicy bit of gossip that would be. I like being busy.”

“The right man keeps you busy at night and has enough money to afford all the pampering and fluff a woman needs during the day.” Obviously this was Mandy’s philosophy.

“So what brings you here?” Mandy addressed Avery.

“Not a husband. I’m with Shannon on that.” She glanced around the room. “Realtors, contractors. I’m in estate sales.”

“Selling dead people’s stuff.”

Avery had said that to herself on more than one occasion. “That would be it. Rich dead people.”

This particular networking mixer was put on by an exclusive company that offered discounts for things like private air travel, high-end cars, memberships to exclusive golf courses . . . all for an annual fee, of course. Not just anyone could get in, and therefore people in entry-level vocations weren’t there.

“I can’t say I know of any contractors here, not for residential real estate, at least. Bowman.” Mandy pointed to a short, balding man talking to a small group of men. “He’s the mayor of . . . oh, what was the name of that town? It doesn’t matter. Mayor and a broker. He might be able to help you. Although he’s a bit pompous even for me. I’d suggest you find out if anyone has recently purchased or sold.”

“Thank you.”

Mandy smiled and turned to Shannon. “And you? You’re still taking pictures?”

“That I am.”

“Mavis Ellendale said something about her daughter expecting a proposal. First marriage.”

Shannon tilted her head. “You’re a gem, Mandy.”

“Yes, I know. Be sure and tell me if you find any ill eighty-year-olds. Rich, of course. But that goes without saying.”

Mandy turned away, and Shannon and Avery moved deeper into the room.

“She’s a riot.”

“Two divorces and one funeral,” Shannon said.

“You’d think she’d be set.”

“Oh, she’s set. She just likes the chase. Her profession is finding a rich man who isn’t put off by the fact that she’s searching him out. At seventy-five, you’d think she’d take a break.”

Avery did a double take over her shoulder. “Wow, I want to know who her plastic surgeon is.”

“Thirty years from now when you need him, he’ll be gone.”

Two hours later, long after Avery had poured out her glass of wine because it became too warm to drink, she’d determined that Bowman was a pompous ass and the small town where he held a position as mayor was nowhere near the league of Brentwood real estate. She did pick up one lead from a financial adviser that sounded promising.

Shannon had planted the seed of her professional photography business to Mrs. Ellendale and her friend. Both of them had daughters in their midtwenties who were in serious relationships.

They worked their way to a sky view restaurant in the heart of LA, where they ordered a proper bottle of wine, intending to drink it.

“How many of those things are out there?” Avery asked once they ordered and were sipping wine.

“More than you can imagine. Paul dragged me to most of the political ones. The problem with those was there weren’t very many spouses that had any form of a job outside of being a wife.”

“None of them had kids?”

“They had kids, they just didn’t raise them. There were very few new mothers that showed a picture of their children, and the older moms spoke only of which school their children were attending or what college they’d been accepted to. It’s a cold group. Not all of them, but most. I plan on raising my children.”

Avery paused. “You want to have more than one?”

“You’re an only child. How did that work out?”

Shannon had a point.

“You have a younger sister, right?”

“Angie.”

“You never talk about her.”

“I never see her. She joined the Peace Corps after two years at Stanford. My parents were furious.”

“She didn’t finish school?”

“She did, only while she was in Spain. My parents cut off her funding, but that didn’t stop her from going after what she wanted. It takes a lot of guts to go from how we grew up to living in places that most people avoid. Last I heard she was educating women and tutoring English somewhere in some remote town in Brazil.”

Avery leaned back. “And our rebellion was divorce from what our parents assumed was a perfect life.”

“That’s because our parents were the kind that married for status and stayed that way, happy or not. I think in my head I thought they’d let loose once Paul and I split.”

Avery understood that. “My mother is worse. It’s all about what I’m doing to find a replacement or how I can get Bernie back.”

“I never understood why money makes so many people assholes.”

Avery buttered a piece of bread and savored it. “And unhappy. I wonder if it’s true what they say about people without anything being the happiest.”

Shannon shrugged. “I’m not willing to flush my money away to find out.”

“Me either.”

* * *

“You’re late,” Liam announced when Avery showed up ten minutes past the hour. Wearing a pencil skirt and high heels, she tapped across the gym floor and straight to the locker room.

“Yeah, sorry. Give me five minutes.”

He admired her hips as she ran by and sighed in relief. For ten minutes he’d wondered if she’d show up at all.

Their after session drink the previous week had ended with a smile and a *see you next week*. But he hadn’t managed to get her phone number or get her to see him outside of the studio.

Truth was, he didn’t ask for either.

She wasn’t ready to give them to him.

Avery was wrapping her hair into a ponytail when she emerged from the locker room. She glanced at the warm-up on the whiteboard and sat down on the mat and proceeded to tie her shoes.

“I thought I’d scared you away.”

She grinned. “Last minute meeting that went late.” She folded over her legs in a stretch.

“What do you do for a living?”

She opened her mouth only to be cut off.

“Less talking, more working.” Brenda emerged from her office and pointed at Liam. “You . . . I’m sure you can squeeze out another twenty push-ups with those guns.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

After ten he glanced up and noticed Avery dart her gaze away.

At least she wasn’t completely oblivious to him.

There were a lot of basics Liam had yet to learn in the krav world. So far, he’d been asked to hold Avery down, grab her from behind, and attempt to choke her. All with direction. Each time he filled the place of Brenda, he celebrated the fact that he could get close to Avery. That party didn’t last long. She worked hard to get away, and most of the time she did. Today’s session, Brenda wanted him to be more aggressive.

“Hitting women goes against every cell in my body.”

Brenda’s deadpan stare told him to get over it.

“You won’t actually hit me. Just come at me.”

“Slowly at first. We’ll pick up the pace once you get the feel for it.”

Yeah, right. His mother would kill him.

Still, Liam did as asked and oftentimes found he was the one at a loss for moves.

Avery would wrap his arm and come up short with what would be a punch to his face or an elbow to the back of his neck.

On her third shot of wrapping his arm, he managed to get away by bear-hugging her waist.

She lifted her knee and stopped short of his groin. He bucked out of the way, and she squirmed again, her elbow tapping his neck. With his arms still holding her, he lifted her off her feet.

“Ahhh!” She started to laugh.

Liam set her down.

“No way you’d be able to do that after I smashed your balls.”

Brenda stood with her arms folded over her chest. “Probably not. But someone high on drugs . . . maybe. We’ll start next week where we left off and work on counters.”

Avery looked at the time.

“We’re done?”

Brenda didn’t blink. “I have plans.”

Silent, Avery peered closer. “You’re wearing mascara. Oh my God, you have a date.”

Liam hadn’t noticed any makeup.

Brenda didn’t smile or nod or anything . . . but she did blush.

Avery’s jaw dropped. “Give it up, sista. Who is it?”

Brenda turned toward her office. “See you on Tuesday.”

Avery glanced at Liam, a sneaky smile on her face. “C’mon, Brenda. I won’t tell anyone.”

“You don’t know him.” Brenda slammed her office door.

Avery turned to Liam. “Him?” she said in a rough whisper.

Yeah, Liam wasn’t all that sure of Brenda’s sexual orientation either.

“I’m going to want details on Tuesday!” Avery yelled out.

Brenda met her comment with silence.

“You’re never going to get details out of that one.”

Avery looked at him like he was an idiot. “Don’t underestimate me.”

They parted at the locker rooms.

“Meet you outside in ten?” was all he asked. Hoping to make a habit out of an after session drink.

She narrowed her eyes. “Okay, but it isn’t a date.”

“Of course not.” *Yes it is . . . kinda.*

She walked out of the gym wearing the clothes she’d run in with.

Liam looked at what he was wearing. Jeans and a pullover shirt.

“I think Pug’s is a bad idea in this,” she said, indicating her dress.

Liam knew he wouldn’t be the only one admiring her curves if she walked into the dingy bar.

“Do you have another suggestion?”

“A few blocks away.”

He looked at her feet. “I can drive.”

She smiled. “I was born in heels. C’mon.”

“I thought Brenda was a lesbian,” Avery started with once they’d rounded the first corner outside.

Liam thought about that for a few seconds. “She scares me.”

Avery laughed. “Yeah, I get that. She knows her shit, though.”

“Total respect.”

They stopped at an intersection and waited for the light. “It would take a strong man to take her on. Can you imagine their sex life?”

Liam squeezed his eyes shut. “I really don’t want to think about her that way.”

“Headlocks and takedowns.”

He took hold of Avery’s elbow when the light changed and conveniently didn’t let it go. “Brenda’s sex life is not the image I want in my head, thank you very much.”

“No, really. What kinda guy is into someone like her? He either has to be a total sub to her dom or so completely badass she can just be a girl.”

Liam knew Avery hadn’t clued in that he was wrapped around her arm as they walked down the street. And like a teenage boy who felt he was getting away with something, he just grinned and didn’t let on. “You’ve given this a lot of thought.”

“Not until tonight. Brenda’s gettin’ lucky.” Avery did a little dance.

“You’re really excited about this.”

“I am.” They walked another block. “And if you think I haven’t noticed that you’re holding my arm, you’d be wrong.”

Liam nearly stumbled.

“But I’m a little cold, so I’m going with it.”

He kept silent and kept walking.

Chapter Eight

Avery took him to Bailey's. It wasn't upscale or a dive. It was just a neighborhood place that the locals knew about that wasn't frequented by tourists or bums. For a bonus, they could get food. Since she'd missed dinner, a meal was necessary.

She led Liam into the bar and sat at an empty table in the middle of the room.

She dropped her gym bag under her feet and Liam followed suit. "Unlike Pug's, it's safe to order a drink here."

It wasn't long before the waitress walked up to the table. "Hey, Avery."

"Hi, Nikki."

"I haven't seen you in a while."

Avery looked at Liam. "I've been busy."

Nikki took Liam in . . . from head to toe. "I can see why."

Smiling, Avery shook her head. "Vodka martini, Grey Goose."

Nikki winked. "And for you?"

"Maker's Mark."

"Neat or on ice?"

"Ice."

"You got it."

Liam turned to Avery. "You know the waitress?"

"I live close by." As in one block over and one block up. If she looked hard enough, she could see her condo from the street.

"I didn't realize you lived in the city."

She lifted her hand in the air. "Central to everything, lots of restaurants."

"Krav."

"That, too."

"How long have you lived here?"

"About a year and a half. What about you? Are you in the city?"

He shook his head. "Atwater Village. Still central but far enough away."

Low-key, nothing too fancy. Not seedy. Funny how savvy Avery had become since she'd joined the working world.

"And you're a handyman?"

Liam paused. "Kinda."

"What does that mean?"

"I'll do side jobs, like the ones that Brenda needed, for extra cash."

"So what's your day job?"

He didn't answer right away. "I'm a contractor. Currently working on a loft space here in the city."

"You're kidding."

"Why would I kid you on that?"

"You're a licensed contractor?"

"Yes."

So why was she wasting her time at mixers when the man who was tossing her around on a mat did the very thing she needed advice on?

"Do you work on single-family homes?"

"That's where I started. Still do on occasion . . . why?"

She rested her head in her hands.

"Avery?"

Her head shot up at the sound of a female voice calling her name.

"Lori?"

Oh, damn . . .

Avery leaned close to Liam's ear. "She doesn't know about krav. I'll explain later."

She scooted closer and painted on a smile.

When Lori was at their table, Avery detached from Liam's side and stood for a hug. "What are you doing here? Where's Reed?"

Lori eyed Liam while she answered the questions. "Reed's on his way down. We're going out to dinner. Wanted a drink first."

What were the chances of Lori excusing herself before Avery was forced to make an introduction?

Lori reached out a hand toward Liam. "I'm Lori."

Liam stood; a broad smile matched his broad chest. "Liam Holt." Once he released Lori's hand, he pulled out a barstool. "Sit, we just ordered drinks."

Avery wanted to elbow his ribs.

Instead, she smiled.

Liam signaled for Nikki.

"Liam, huh? Avery hasn't mentioned you."

He pulled Avery's chair closer to his and waited for her to sit. "We haven't known each other long."

Lori sent a questioning look to Avery. Instead of adding to Liam's explanation, she sat beside him and acted like they had a more personal relationship than partners in a krav class. Lori would expect nothing less and ask fewer questions than if Avery and Liam appeared to be just friends.

"I've known Lori for a few years. We live in the same building."

"What do you do, Liam?"

Small talk . . . Is that what this was going to be?

Lori signaled Reed when he walked in the door. "This is my husband."

Avery laughed. "You love saying that, don't you?"

Lori nodded.

"They're newlyweds," Avery explained.

Once again Liam stood when Reed approached the table.

"Look who I found," Lori said.

Reed kissed Avery's cheek. "I haven't seen you here in a while."

"That's because you two never come up for air," Avery teased.

"This is Liam . . . Avery's *friend*." Yeah, Lori wanted more details.

The men shook hands.

"Have I ever met one of your *friends*?" he asked.

Avery glared. "Smooth, Reed . . . really smooth."

Lori nudged her husband's arm. "Stop teasing." She turned her focus on Liam. "Avery keeps her private life private."

Avery tried not to flinch when Liam placed a hand over hers. "I've figured that out recently."

"How did you two meet?" Reed asked.

Avery said "The gym" at the same time Liam said "A bar."

Lori's lawyer radar spiked. Avery saw it in her eyes. "Those two things are worlds apart."

She caught Liam's hand and squeezed.

"The first time I saw you was at Pug's. I approached you at the gym."

"I knew it. That *was* you at Pug's. How did you figure out where I worked out?" She'd been asking herself that question for over a week.

"That wasn't hard. Leslie had a gym bag."

"Who's Leslie?" Lori asked.

Avery didn't look away from Liam. "A friend. So your job at the gym wasn't on accident?"

"I might have approached Brenda about a side job so I could meet you."

Avery's jaw dropped.

"Who's Brenda?" Reed asked.

"The owner of the gym," Avery and Liam said at the same time. "How did you know I was there on Tuesday and Friday nights?" She wasn't sure if his actions were exciting or scary.

"Appointment book. Brenda's office is always open."

"Wait, wait, wait." Lori placed a hand between the two of theirs. "You see Avery in a bar. You search out the location of her gym, follow her to it, get a job there, and now you're both here having drinks?"

Liam offered a brief, unapologetic nod.

Lori grabbed Avery's hand. "How well do you know this guy?"

Avery liked the gleam in Liam's eyes. "He's safe."

"What he just described is a little too close to stalking for my taste."

Reed placed a hand on Lori's shoulder. "Simmer down, Counselor. If Liam had an ulterior motive, he wouldn't have told us all that."

"I wanted to meet you," Liam said.

"Yeah, well, you've met her." Lori wasn't happy.

Nikki showed up with Avery's and Liam's drinks.

"My usual, Nikki," Lori told her.

"Hon, our reservations are in thirty minutes. Maybe we should go."

Lori looked at Reed like he was crazy. "We aren't leaving him with her. He could be a sociopath."

Liam smiled, his eyes crinkling with amusement. "I'm not."

"That's what they all say."

Avery put a free hand in the air. "Chill, Lori."

Avery realized that her other hand had somehow ended up back in Liam's. His thumb stroked the underside of her wrist in a strangely calming way.

"Do you want a drink, Reed?" Nikki was still standing there, watching the four of them.

"No, thank you. We're leaving."

Lori pushed back her chair. "We're going to talk about this later," she warned Avery. "And you . . . just so you know, I'm an attorney, and my big, burly husband here is in private security. He has even bigger friends."

Liam reached into his back pocket and removed his wallet. From it, he pulled out what looked like a business card. "I have nothing to hide."

Lori glanced at it briefly before Reed snatched it from her fingertips. "C'mon. Let's leave them to their date."

Liam stood again and shook Reed's hand before he ushered Lori out of the bar.

"That was intense."

"My friends are protective."

"Understatement."

"You really went through all that just to meet me?"

Liam picked up his drink for the first time. "Worked, didn't it?"

Avery let loose his hand and lifted her glass to his. "Yes, it did."

* * *

Avery had moved a little farther away after her friends left. But her rapt attention told him she was interested.

"So you don't introduce your dates to your friends?" Liam picked a few things out of their conversation with Lori and Reed.

"My dates, as you call them, aren't usually around long enough to meet the important people in my life."

He'd ordered a steak and she'd ordered fish. He cut into his dinner while he spoke. "Should I be flattered?"

She paused, her fork halfway to her mouth. "We were ambushed tonight. It isn't like I brought you to a plus-one event."

"A plus-one what?"

"You know, an invitation that leaves it open for you to add a person . . . plus-one."

"Do you ever take someone to a plus-one?"

She considered him for a second. "If you want to know about my dating life, just ask."

He started to do just that before she cut him off.

"And don't judge when I deliver answers you might not want to hear."

He set his knife down. "Now I'm really curious."

She chewed her food and didn't add anything.

"Okay, Avery . . . tell me about your dating life."

She sipped her drink and said, "I don't."

"Date?"

"Yeah, I don't date."

"You don't seem like the hermit type."

She placed a hand on the table. "Dating is holding hands and long walks on the beach, fancy dinners and midnight phone calls that may or may not include dirty pictures. Dating is attempting to go somewhere." She lifted her fork and dug back in. "I don't do that. I meet guys, flirt, have a good time, and move on."

He wasn't expecting that. "Sounds like a man."

She shook her head. "No. Men don't admit that they are players to the women they hook up with. Me? I'm honest about it. Makes it a whole lot easier to avoid that plus-one thing."

"And if the guy wants more?"

Avery smirked. "I haven't met him."

Liam was silent until she looked up.

"Yes, you have."

Chapter Nine

Her skin itched, like it was a suit she wasn't used to wearing or it was made of wool and she was poolside in Palm Springs.

Liam had taken the power away with one sentence and one look. And when she couldn't come up with anything to force the ball back into her court, he started a conversation about his work. He was a contractor. Legit, with a crew of twenty guys he kept employed most of the time. While he spelled out a day at work, Avery gave up eating her dinner and proceeded to order a third cocktail. She was more than a little tipsy, which became evident when it was time to leave the bar. "I'll pay." She reached for the bill.

Liam managed to grab it before she could. "Not in this lifetime."

"Oh, please. You're not one of those guys."

"What kind of guy is that?"

"The kind that think a woman isn't capable of paying a bill."

"If you live in this neighborhood, I'm pretty sure you can pay the bill. But you're not buying my meals."

She reached for it again. "Then we split."

"Avery, stop. I got it. Let me be the guy my mother raised."

She wondered what kind of mother that was.

"The stubborn one?"

"Him, too," he said, laughing. He handed his credit card to Nikki, who processed it quickly.

Liam hoisted his gym bag and hers over his shoulder once they were outside.

She chilled instantly and wobbled on her high heels.

He used his free arm to steady her and didn't let go.

"We're not holding hands," she told him.

"No. I'm holding your elbow. Which way?"

She pointed at her building.

They crossed the street and walked up one block.

The doorman opened the door before Liam could do it for them.

"Good evening, Ms. Grant."

"Hi, James. This is my friend Liam."

"Of course, Ms. Grant."

Avery pulled on Liam's arm until they were in the elevator.

He was strangely quiet for the first time all night.

Outside her door, she opened her purse and removed her keys and cell phone to disarm the alarm system.

Liam stopped her before she could squeeze the key into the hole.

"Avery."

She turned and found him staring. His eyes were hungry and his body close.

“I’m not going in. I wanted to make sure you made it home safely.”

She knew that was coming. This would be the time she’d normally show the guy exactly what he would be missing if he didn’t walk through her door.

But she was out of practice and she’d have to see Liam again. If he turned her down, the humiliation wouldn’t be something she’d want to revisit every time they sparred in krav.

Avery responded with the only weapon she had. “I don’t think I asked you in.”

There it was . . . Liam’s smirk. The smile in his eyes, the tiny lift of his lips.

He placed their gym bags on the floor and brought his hand up to her chin. “I do, however, think that our first date deserves an exclamation point.”

“It wasn’t a date.”

“We did have dinner.” He traced the back of his hand down her arm.

“But no long walks on the beach . . . or hand-holding.”

“There was a little hand-holding.”

Yeah, there had been.

He gently tugged her phone out of her hand.

“What are you doing?”

A smile was his answer. He pressed in a few numbers, and she heard his phone buzz in his pocket. “In case you want to send a flirty text after midnight.”

“We’re not dating.”

He placed her phone back in her hand.

“You don’t want to date me, Liam. I’m a bad bet.”

He took a step closer. Lifted both hands to her face and touched her neck with the backs of his fingertips.

She shivered from head to toe.

“I’m not a gambler.”

Her mouth went dry, her breath caught in her chest.

“Your mother will hate me.”

Her lips parted while she watched him move closer.

“Avery?”

It was getting really hot in the hallway.

“Yes?”

“Stop talking.”

His soft lips took hers in the slowest, most exquisite kiss she’d ever had the pleasure of swallowing. There was nothing rushed in Liam’s body. Avery felt the door at her back when Liam leaned her into it. His hands on her face moved her where he wanted to deepen this meeting of lips.

Her eyes fluttered closed, and she opened her lips to his, tempting him with the tip of her tongue. He gave in for a few swipes against hers and then held back and continued to kiss her slowly. By the time he pulled away, Avery had clenched his shirt in her hands, and her cell phone and keys had found their way to the floor. She was heated, charged . . . and more than ready to see what else Liam could do with his lips.

“I’m going now,” he whispered.

She was pretty sure her face told him he didn’t have to.

When his hands left her, she cooled instantly.

He bent down and gathered her keys and her phone. He turned the key in the lock and opened her door.

“Good night, Avery.”

She watched as he retreated down the hallway and disappeared into the elevator.

“Good night,” she said to the empty corridor.

* * *

“Someone is awfully happy out here.”

Michelle walked out the back door and onto his deck. Liam turned around and lowered the volume on his speaker. He put aside the drill and dusted off his hands.

“I’m always happy when I’m working with my hands.” He didn’t do it often enough once he earned his contractor’s license and started employing other people.

“Yeah, but you were singing and dancing.”

He looked at the sky. “The sun is shining, the music is loud. Good day to break out in song. Life is a musical.”

They shared a memory of something their mother always said when they were growing up.

Michelle shook her head. “Uh-huh . . . okay, give it up. Who is she?”

“She who?” Whiskey barked at his feet as if adding her two cents.

“The she who put that grin on your face. The house isn’t that big. I heard you come home late last night.”

“It wasn’t after midnight.”

“But still late for you. Nice diversion. Does she have a name?”

Liam picked up the two-by-four he’d predrilled holes into for his screws. “She does, and I’ll tell it to you when I’m ready.”

“I knew it.” She giggled like a schoolgirl. “Are we going to meet her?”

“It’s new. I don’t know.” Yes. He wanted to say yes. Introducing Avery to his sister he could deal with, but not Cassandra. She wouldn’t understand if it didn’t work out.

“You should bring her to Sunday dinner.”

“Michelle!” Her name was a warning.

His sister turned back around to go inside. “You’re still okay with watching Cassie tonight?”

Two Saturdays a month, he watched his niece so Michelle could do an all-nighter on the crisis hotline.

“Of course. We have a date planned.”

“Please don’t stuff her with sugar. She was a pill the last time.”

He saluted his sister and revved his drill bit.

“Liam!”

“Don’t worry, sis. I got it figured out.”

* * *

“That hot fudge sundae is bigger than you.”

Liam sat across from his niece in the restaurant portion of the arcade, where they’d finished their cheeseburgers and fries . . . or at least he had polished off the fast food–type meal while Cassandra saved room for dessert.

Whipped cream and fudge were stuck to the corners of her mouth.

“Your mom’s going to kill me.”

His niece giggled.

The kid had him wrapped around her little finger. He didn’t know how to say no to her.

“We won’t tell her,” Cassandra pretended to whisper.

Liam reached over, dipped his clean napkin in her water, and wiped fudge off her pink shirt. “I think she’ll figure it out.”

He cut her off halfway through the sundae with the lure of games and miniature golf.

Liam found himself receiving the attention of several women in the arcade who were entertaining their children. He was used to the attention whenever he was out with Cassandra alone. When he was with Michelle, he knew people assumed he and Michelle were a thing. Once he got over the yuck factor, he realized it was an easy assumption. But when alone, he was the poor single dad, or maybe the weekend dad . . . the results were the same. Women emerged, flirted.

Assumed.

Like the brunette smiling at him from across the room.

Nope, nope, nope . . . he was into blondes these days.

Liam leaned against the wall next to a row of Skee-Ball stations and tried not to make eye contact. Only the woman had caught his scent and was working her way to his side.

It was his shot with the ball, so he turned his back on her just as she approached. He purposely tossed the ball to the side and scored low.

“No, Uncle Liam. Throw it in the middle,” Cassandra instructed.

“Do you need some help with that?”

It was the brunette, and she was standing right behind him.

Cassandra, not catching on to a female on the prowl, shook her head and invited conversation. “He’s bad at this game.”

Liam saw the woman's eyes light up. "I can show you a few pointers."

"I'm sure you could, but I'm here with my niece tonight."

She smiled at Cassandra for all of one second. "That's sweet. Maybe another time."

Her voice was hopeful, her eyelids fluttered.

Liam didn't add to the conversation with the stranger. Instead he focused on Cassandra. "Show me how you do it again."

The woman walked away and Liam sighed in relief.

At eight o'clock sharp, his phone rang. He answered without looking at the number. "Hello, Michelle. Before you start . . . yes, we're still out, but I'll have Cassandra home by nine . . . maybe nine thirty." His sister always gave him the same rundown every time he had his niece.

"Liam?"

Not Michelle.

The arcade made it difficult to hear.

"Who is this?"

"It's not Michelle. And who is Cassandra? Or do you have a harem you want to add me to?"

Liam closed his eyes. "Avery."

"Glad you could get the name right."

Liam felt panic crawl up his spine. "It's not what you think—"

"It's okay. I get it. One kiss and an exchange of phone numbers . . . I don't need to know who Michelle or Cassandra is. Obviously I've called at a bad time."

She was going to hang up . . . he felt it. "Avery!"

Yup, the line went dead.

Cassandra tugged on his pants and looked up at him. "Who is Avery?"

Chapter Ten

Avery tapped her phone against her chest as the conversation from the previous night ran through her head. Liam had made it sound like he wanted to start something. Something that included predetermined dates and maybe the occasional plus-one event.

For one night and most of the day, Avery actually considered it. It wasn't like she was doing anything else with her love life. Liam seemed harmless enough, even for the size of the man.

And damn, the man could kiss. She didn't think her brain cells started circulating until after he was on the freeway headed home.

Even though her curiosity was piqued and her hormones were leveling up a notch, or ten, she'd picked up the phone tonight not to flirt . . . but to see if Liam could meet her at the Brentwood house and offer some advice. The flirting could continue while on the clock, so to speak.

"What's the point?" she asked the empty room.

Two women's names rolled off his tongue when he wasn't paying attention. When you catch a man off guard, you learn his secrets . . . or at least the things he doesn't want you to know.

Avery knew what she was talking about when she labeled men as players that never fessed up to their lifestyle.

She'd joined the rank of players long before she married Bernie as a temporary bride and took a year and a half off while playing wife. All that pent-up energy exploded once the divorce was final.

Avery looked down at the sweatpants and oversize T-shirt she wore with a frown. It was Saturday night and what was she doing? Standing in the middle of her living room, pining over a man.

"Screw this."

She dropped her phone on her couch and walked into her master suite. She opened the double doors to her walk-in closet and switched on the chandelier.

Shoes first. Four-inch Pradas that laced over her feet like sexy gloves. Black.

Leopard print, low-cut top with shoestring sleeves. No bra needed. Tight black mini.

Perfect.

She spent ten minutes freshening her makeup and five pushing her hair into a messy bun.

One more layer of red on her lips and she made a kissing motion in the mirror before tossing the lipstick into her clutch.

On her way to the door, she picked up her cell phone off the couch. She found a voice mail from Liam. Her finger hovered over the button to hear what he had to say, and she stopped.

It didn't matter what he had to say, she didn't want to hear it.

Tonight was about reminding herself why she had the perfect life.

Young, single . . . rich. She could have anyone she wanted.

Leaving her phone behind, she set her alarm, grabbed her keys, and walked out the door.

The Basement was a club where the music was so deafening you couldn't hear yourself think. It was the perfect place to get lost in the crowd, dance with complete strangers, and never have to hold a conversation.

The line outside waiting to get in was halfway around the block. Avery stepped out of the courtesy car her complex offered and headed straight to the bouncer.

"Hello, Freddy." She leaned in and gave the familiar man a kiss on the cheek.

"Avery. I haven't seen you in a while."

"I've been busy."

"Is it just you tonight? Or do I need to add a name to my list?"

"Just me."

He winked and unchained the red rope, letting her pass.

Those standing in the front of the line glared.

Sound blared and the thump of the bass pulsed deep in her chest.

She missed this. Why had she stayed away for so long?

The bar was three people deep, but a drink was needed before she joined the grinding on the dance floor. In a tactic she'd used many times in the past, she found what appeared to be a single man sitting in a far corner and wiggled her way between him and the person on his left.

She smiled at him briefly and lifted her hand to get the bartender's attention.

With her chest eye level with the stranger, he'd have to be gay not to notice or appreciate it.

The way his gaze took her in said he didn't play for the other team.

He was older, by a good ten years, and out of place in a room filled with college kids or those who were just turning thirty.

"Hello."

She smiled and leaned in so he could hear her. "Sorry, the bar is crazy over there. I hope you don't mind me barging in."

"Quite all right," he shouted over the music.

Yeah, much older. No one in this crowd would say *quite*.

He said something she couldn't hear, and she simply smiled and ignored the fact that he was staring at her chest. He wasn't unattractive. Just not what she was looking for.

Her bar mate signaled for the bartender by reaching around the people on his right. "The lady would like a drink."

"Vodka martini," she shouted.

The bartender, much more her speed, didn't look twice.

"Nice choice."

She looked at his glass. "What are you drinking?"

He said something she didn't catch. Avery didn't ask that he repeat himself.

"Do you come here often?"

Could there be a worse line?

"I've been here a few times. You?"

"It's a little loud."

She nodded as the bartender slid her glass in front of her. As she reached for her purse, her admirer placed a hand on her arm. "I got it."

With a toss of her chin over her shoulder that she'd learned in college, she smiled and leaned a little closer. "You're too kind."

"I'm Gary."

"Avery."

She took a sip of her drink and felt some of the tension leave her shoulders.

"Did you come here alone?"

"How can anyone be alone in a room full of this many people?" Each time she spoke to him, she leaned in so he could hear. Which kept his eyes glued to her shirt—he was probably hoping that something would pop out.

The DJ changed the song to one she liked.

"I'm an engineer . . . What do you do?"

This was not a conversation she wanted at the club.

"What?" She pretended not to understand him, and he shouted the question again.

Avery looked over the crowd of people and waved across the room like she knew someone.

When Gary turned to follow her gaze, she put more room between the two of them.

"I see a friend. Thanks for the drink." And she was gone, swallowed by the dance floor and everyone on it. She lifted her drink above her head and moved to the other side. If Gary was watching her, he'd lose sight of her before she reached the hall to the bathrooms.

It wasn't long before she downed her drink, left her glass on a side table, and joined the crazy. She circled her hips and let her legs do the talking. It didn’t take long to attract someone more her speed. Someone hot, firm, faceless, and young. This guy didn’t try to talk, they just danced. On the second song, she felt his hands on her hips. She didn’t dust him off but kept some distance to avoid being groped before knowing his name.

Not that she cared.

Four songs in, he tugged her arm toward the bar in the back of the club. “Can I buy you a drink?”

She looked him up and down.

“How about shots?” It would take a few shots.

“Oh, sexy. I like that.”

She hated cheap liquor, and after the second shot, she gave up trying to drink. But her buzz was decent enough to keep the night going.

The music grew louder, and the dance floor was a smash of bodies, making it impossible to dance without touching everyone around her.

Shot Man kept a hand on her while they danced, every once in a while dipping down her hip to her thigh. When she felt him dragging his hands under her skirt, she felt a chill.

Do I really want this?

A year ago she’d have already left with this guy. No strings, no names.

She dislodged his hand with a twist.

He took her gesture as a challenge and attempted to come at her from the other side while they danced.

This time she knew it wasn’t going to happen.

He was practically panting.

With hands on her shoulders, his lips touched her ear. “Let’s get out of here.”

“I don’t think so.”

He stopped dancing, and the smile he’d been flirting with all night disappeared. “Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

He looked at her as if she’d grown warts. “Fuckin’ tease.”

Avery watched him walk away and took the other direction. She reached for her purse to see what the time was and realized she’d left her phone at home.

She made small talk with the women in line for the bathroom and realized it was after one. No wonder she was tired.

This wasn’t going to happen.

Picking up a nameless bed toy had lost its charm. Not that she couldn’t, she reminded herself. She should just go home and drink good liquor until she dropped.

Back into the crush of dancers, she squeezed through the club, ignoring several one-liners delivered by men standing in groups of other men. One reached out like he had the right and stopped her by holding on to her arm. “Hey, baby.”

She froze, looked at his hand and then into his face. “I’d let go if I were you.”

“C’mon. Sexy thing like you shouldn’t be leaving alone.”

His buddies laughed.

College kids. She’d be surprised if this one was even old enough to be in the club.

When he tugged her arm, Avery reacted.

Quick.

Decisive.

Don’t hold back.

She pushed in, twisted, found his gut with her elbow, and then brought the same elbow to his chin.

He let go with a curse.

The laughter from his buddies grew.

“Bitch.”

Avery squared her shoulders. Those close enough to see what happened gave her a wide path.

On shaky legs, Avery stepped outside and once again realized she didn’t have her cell phone to hire an Uber. She could walk home, but at that time of night, and dressed like she was, it wouldn’t be surprising if someone stopped her and asked how much.

The line at the door was still there, but the staff had changed.

She crossed the street in an effort to get a taxi headed in the direction of her complex. Two blocks up, she waited on the busy corner.

She shivered.

What was she doing?

Showing Liam. Only he wasn’t there to see her standing on the corner, waiting for a cab to drive by.

Someone in a passing car whistled.

Avery rolled her eyes.

At least she felt armed enough to ward off unwelcome hands. In fact, the adrenaline of doubling over the dude who grabbed her was higher than when Shot Man wanted to show her a good time.

Maybe next time she went out she’d skip the high heels and mini.

She wrapped her hands over her bare shoulders and looked around. The streets held a few die-hards returning to their cars or walking in and out of the open bars.

Avery stepped into the street and waved at a lone cab.

The short ride to her complex with a cabbie who obviously smoked, and either didn’t bathe or did so in garlic, reminded her never to leave home without her phone again.

She paused outside her complex and looked around.

The hair on her neck prickled.

No one was there.

Except James . . . the doorman.

“Good evening, Ms. Grant. Are you expecting any visitors tonight?”

She shook her head. “Have a nice evening,” she told him.

Avery removed her shoes in the elevator. From her front door, she beelined to her alarm panel and stopped the ringing. With a sigh, she flopped on the couch, realized she sat on her phone, and pulled it out from under her butt.

Liam’s message called out.

What would he say?

They were old girlfriends? Women who didn’t let go? Or maybe he’d be honest and say he had several out there. With his broad shoulders, sexy grin, and capable lips . . .

Avery pressed the button.

Liam’s voice was deep and clear even though the background was noisy. “Okay, you’re impulsive . . . and jump to conclusions. I get it. But before you delete this message, I want someone to say hi to you. Say hi, Cassandra.”

Avery was about to toss her phone against the wall. No way he was going to have a woman come to bat for him on a phone message.

“Hi.”

Avery’s heart jolted. A child. Liam was a dad?

“Tell Miss Avery who I am.” It sounded like he had the phone on speaker.

“Who is Miss Avery?”

“A friend. Who am I?”

The girl laughed, and Avery found herself smiling. “Uncle Liam.”

Oh, shit.

“And who is Michelle?”

“My mommy. Can we play more Skee-Ball now? I was winning.”

“Sure can.”

Avery rested her head in her hands. *What an idiot.*

“There you go, Miss Avery. Michelle is my sister and Cassandra is my niece. My Saturday night is being spent in a kids’ arcade, eating ice cream and french fries while I’m babysitting.”

“I’m not a baby, I’m five.”

“Call me” were Liam’s last words before he hung up.

Chapter Eleven

Liam woke to a text. It had come in at two in the morning.

I owe you an apology was all Avery said.

Yes, she did. He'd stayed up until after one, seriously contemplating calling her multiple times or dragging Cassandra out of bed and driving to Avery's complex. He remembered the guy at the door and realized he wouldn't be able to just waltz in. What if he did manage to make his way to her condo and she wasn't alone?

That would suck.

It was Sunday, and Michelle was sleeping in. Cassandra was on the couch with the Disney Channel on low. It looked like Michelle had managed to pour a bowl of cereal before climbing back in bed. Whiskey sat next to Cassandra on the couch, hoping the girl would drop a Froot Loop or two.

"Good morning, Sweetpea."

Messy hair, eyes glued to the TV. "Good morning."

Straight to the kitchen, he worked his way around the coffeepot and opened the back door.

Whiskey shot around the corner and out to the yard.

The fog in his head started to lift with the first sip of coffee. Liam sat on the deck and watched the dog sniffing for the perfect place to pee.

He was contemplating how to respond to Avery's two a.m. text when the woman he was thinking of called.

It was seven thirty in the morning.

"You're up early for someone who was up so late."

"I'm awake, not up." Her voice was husky, like she was still lying in bed. The image that came to his mind was her head on a dozen pillows, with down comforters swallowing her whole. She wore silk in his fantasy. White silk to go with the pristine white sheets . . . a zillion thread count. Her barely there nightgown had strings for sleeves, and one was falling off her shoulder.

"Are you still there?" she asked.

"I am." He brought his coffee cup to his lips and waited.

She paused.

He kept waiting.

"I'm sorry."

He grinned. "Did that hurt?"

"Yes. It did."

He sipped his coffee again.

"I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions. I have no right to jump. Even if it were true, my reaction was juvenile and stupid." She took a breath. "I am impulsive and juvenile, and I'm not the sharpest pencil in the box. I told you I was a bad bet and I—"

"Avery," he interrupted.

"I'm on a roll, Liam. I've apologized maybe five times my whole life and actually meant it. Once was when

I hit my neighbor's cat when I was seventeen. Stupid thing ran out in front of my car. Still, the cat meant everything to my neighbor. Then to my college girlfriend when I caught her boyfriend cheating on her and I was the one that delivered the news. I kinda had to eat crow when I misread my girlfriend Trina's fiancé. Although that wasn't an apology, per se."

Liam's amusement caught in his throat. "Avery."

"I'm sorry," she said one last time.

"Apology accepted."

She sighed into the phone. "Really?"

"Yeah."

"That's it?"

"Yeah. Next time give me a chance to explain."

"Really? You're not going to drill me about it? Make me eat my words?"

Whiskey had unearthed a ball and now stood in front of Liam, slobbering all over his knees.

"You forced your own words down your throat. You don't need me to add to them. But if you want to make it up to me . . ."

"There's a catch."

"Only if you want to make it up to me."

His comment was met with silence.

"Okay, what?"

"A plus-one."

"What?"

"Your choice . . . make me your plus-one to whatever you want. Dinner with friends, cocktail party. Work event . . . a distant relative's wedding. I don't care what."

"Seriously?"

He liked the idea as it formed in his head. If he added her to a plus-one event, she would likely be uncomfortable and unhappy. If she added him, it placed the control in her court. Besides, his plus-one would consist of a family dinner, and he knew she didn't want that.

"Anything. Uptown, downtown . . . don't care."

"I should bring you to high tea with my mother. That would take away your desire to be added to a guest list."

"Mothers love me."

"My mother doesn't love anyone but maybe her hairdresser . . . or the doctor injecting Botox."

"So your mother's doing the Botox doctor, huh?"

"I wish. That would take the spike out of her ass."

He laughed. "Dads love me, too."

"My father hardly knows I'm alive, except to parrot my mother's complaints about how I'm wasting my life. Trust me . . . a plus-one with my parents is like watching children's television filled with repeating chants of life lessons I never wanted to learn."

"No parent dinners, then. You choose the event."

"You're not letting this go."

No, he wasn't. "We have a deal?"

"You're pushing me out of my comfort zone," she told him.

"I know." He pulled the ball from his dog's mouth and tossed it across the yard. "Now that we've covered that, was there a reason you were calling yesterday, or did you just miss hearing my voice?"

"You're full of yourself."

"I'm self-assured. As are you."

He liked her laugh.

"I was calling to ask you a favor."

"Yes."

"What?"

"To the favor. The answer is yes."

The dog returned and dropped the ball.

"What if I wanted to seek revenge on an old boyfriend?"

"You don't collect boyfriends. So I think I'm safe."

"Rob a bank?" she asked.

"That's how you make your money, I knew it." He was laughing along with her.

"I wanted your opinion on a house I'm working on in Brentwood."

"Working on how?"

"I help people with estate sales. Mainly with the wealthy and most often after the death of a parent or a spouse."

Liam winced. "Sounds morbid."

"I'm not a director of a funeral home. I deal with stuff. Dead people's stuff, but just things. Most of the time my clients are either living out of the state or the country and need to make sure Grandma's antique watch that's worth a hundred grand isn't being sold at a garage sale on the two-dollar table."

"That happens?"

"All the time. Anyway. My client is selling the house but wants to get a ballpark of what it would cost to bring it into this century. You're probably way too busy for a project like this, but if you could offer your expert opinion, and maybe toss a few phone numbers my way of contractors that would be interested in the job, that would be great."

"The answer is still yes."

* * *

"Two weeks."

Safe to say Trina was excited about tying the knot . . . again.

Avery set her phone on speaker and continued to talk while she did her morning stretches. "Yes, I know. I have my countdown list, and it does say you're collecting a ball and chain in two weeks."

"He's a very sexy ball."

"You're killing me."

"Diane and Andrea are definitely coming to the bachelorette party, so we need to add two to the guest list."

Avery made a mental note. "Got it. You sure you don't want to take that party to Vegas?"

"Nothing good happens in Vegas at a strip club."

Avery could tell her otherwise. "I'm guessing the club in Houston will be just as hot." And since Avery was the one in charge of said party, she was making damn sure it was a night Trina would remember for the rest of her married life.

"So you're flying in Friday night, right?"

"Yes." She made another mental note to tell Brenda that she was going to miss Friday . . . actually, two Fridays in a row.

"Are you sure you can't just stay until the wedding?"

Avery shifted her legs and bent into a stretch over her right knee. "I'm a working woman these days. The old Avery would happily blow off her new client. The adulting Avery has to show up on Monday. But don't worry, I'll be on the charter on Wednesday with Lori, Reed, and Shannon."

"I'm getting nervous."

"Nerves are good. Second thoughts, not so much."

"Not a chance. I'm not letting Wade get away."

"I didn't think so. Just enjoy the whole thing. When you're back from your honeymoon and need some air, we'll book a girls' trip to Paris. I could use some new shoes."

"Speaking of shoes . . . who is Liam?"

Avery stopped her stretch. "What do shoes and Liam have in common?"

"Nothing, but I couldn't think of a smoother way to ask about the guy in your life."

"He's not *the* guy in my life," she said.

"Lori said she met him. That he's a stalker and she's worried about you."

Avery gave up on her stretches, grabbed her phone off the floor, and moved to sit on her bed. "He's not a stalker. I think I'd know it if he were. He's just a guy I met. No big deal."

Trina paused. "Just a guy?"

"Yeah. You know I collect them."

"How's the sex?"

"We haven't gone there."

"Whoa, back up the truck. You're saying he is *just a guy* and *no big deal*. And you haven't slept with him?"

Avery deserved that.

"I don't sleep with every guy I'm attracted to."

"Since when?"

"Jesus, Trina, I'm not a slut."

"Calm down. I'm not calling you anything and you know it. But Avery Grant prides herself on her prowess. You telling me he is part of the collection and yet you haven't gotten naked with him tells me he is more than a number."

"*Yet.* I haven't slept with him *yet*. I'm sure we'll get there sooner rather than later."

"Uh-huh."

"Don't analyze this, Trina. I don't date. You know that."

"Have you had dinner with him?"

"Once," Avery admitted.

"That's a date."

"No, it wasn't."

"Were you with a group of people or just the two of you?"

Trina was backing her into a verbal corner.

"There were other people there."

"In the restaurant or at the table?"

Avery shook her head. "This is a ridiculous conversation."

Trina wasn't fooled. "I wanna meet him."

"No." Avery stood from the bed and started to pace the room.

"Bring him to the wedding."

"Absolutely not. Your wedding is about you, not me flirting with a guy." The conversation was making her angry.

There was silence on the line.

"You're my best friend, Avery. You know that, right?"

She smiled through her annoyance. "Yes. I love you, too."

"Remember when I was in Venice last year and you told me you were worried about me?"

"Yeah." Trina had been in Italy, escaping the anniversary of her first husband's death and trying to power through on her own.

"Well, it's my turn to tell you I'm worried about you."

"Why? I'm actually working and self-sufficient for the first time in my life. I'm more capable of taking care of myself now than ever before." When you added the krav she'd been studying, it made her even more adept at dealing with whatever life threw at her.

"Because you've closed yourself off. You don't laugh as much or joke as often. Now there is a guy who, from what Lori says, worked hard to get you to go out with him. Maybe he isn't the one, but how will you know if you never give a guy a chance?"

Avery closed her eyes. "Can you accept the fact that you're in a heightened state of *I do* and *happily ever after* and not everyone wants that in their life? I love you, Trina, but you're wrong on this one. If my lack of joking or laughing is bothering you, then try and understand that I'm trying really hard to grow up here. I spent the first twenty-eight years of my life being a spoiled brat with crappy parents, the next three playing pretend wife and new divorcée with a shit ton of money. It's only been since New York that I'm finding me . . . the real me. Admittedly, I'm picking up the pieces of my personal mess, but I'm doing it. And that doesn't include me finding a man to break my stride. I'm finally doing well on my own and want to keep it that way."

"Oh, Avery. I'm sorry." Trina sounded teary.

"It's okay. You're excited and emotional and want everyone as happy as you are. Please know that I am. Just in a different way."

"Okay . . . I'll let it go. Please talk to me. Anytime."

"I know you're there, Trina. I have to get in the shower. I'm meeting a contractor at my new client's house and want to be there on time." Omitting Liam's name wasn't an accident.

"I miss you."

Avery smiled. "I'll see you in a few days."

Chapter Twelve

Liam was fifteen minutes early. Wearing a pullover shirt that hugged his chest like a glove and denim that made Avery's palms itch, he looked even better than the last time she saw him.

He walked through the open front door while Avery stood alongside Felicia, the art expert from a local auction house.

Avery removed her reading glasses and excused herself from Felicia to greet Liam.

"Good afternoon," he said. His eyes took her in, looking at her face, her head.

With an unconscious hand, Avery smoothed over her hair and ponytail. Work mode meant she hadn't paid too much attention to what she was wearing. Today was about digging in closets and unearthing treasures. Skirts and fancy shoes didn't hold up in those circumstances.

"You found the place okay?"

"Sat nav is an amazing thing."

There was a moment of awkward silence when Liam stared at her and smiled.

Avery shifted from foot to foot, willing her pulse to slow.

"Thank you again for coming by," she said, breaking the quiet.

Liam finally looked away and glanced at the foyer. "This is definitely in need of an update."

"The question is how deep."

Liam turned his gaze back to her. "Deep?"

"Yeah, beyond the cosmetic stuff. My client has no idea how new or old the plumbing is, the insulation. It was built in the late thirties originally, and then massively updated in the fifties. There were a few changes on record in the eighties, but I'm not sure of the extent. The home is three generations old. Which is a lot of years for homes in the LA area."

"Seems a shame to sell."

Avery agreed, but who was she to judge? She'd sell her parents' estate in a heartbeat. "C'mon, let me show you around." She pulled him out of the hall. "If you need me, Felicia . . ."

"I have it, Ms. Grant."

She walked him through the family room and around the crates that were already set up to accept the artwork on the walls. "There are four fireplaces. None of them look like they've had a fire in them for several years."

Liam walked over to the hearth and knelt down. "This one is massive." He knocked on the plain facade. "Bet this is covering up something."

Avery shrugged and pulled her eyes away from his butt as he stood.

They walked through a den, or as Sheldon called it, his father's smoking room. The massive dining room was off a spacious kitchen that needed a total gut, in her opinion.

Liam wrote a few things on a notepad as she continued the tour.

Outside, she pointed to the patio living area. "It's been maintained out here. I think because the wife liked her garden."

"Greenhouse?" he asked, pointing to the far side of the property.

"Yup. The groundskeepers use it now, but Sheldon said his mother once grew orchids."

Back inside, she took him up the stairway to the upper floor. A maze of smaller bedrooms, a second laundry room, and a his and hers master suite. The rooms were separated by a sitting room like you'd see in the Windsor House in Westminster.

"Parents didn't like each other?" Liam asked with a smirk.

"Maybe he snored."

He traced his hands on the bedpost. "Do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Snore?"

Caught off guard, Avery stuttered. "Is that . . . is that a professional question from a contractor to a client?"

"Nope. It's one hundred percent personal." He was smiling.

Avery paused. "Like a trucker. All night. I'm told it's miserable."

He laughed. "I sleep like the dead." Liam moved away from the bed and opened a door. "A nursery."

"Yeah, strange that it still looks like that. Their son is thirty-five years old."

"Maybe they were hoping for grandchildren." The room was a mausoleum, complete with scary dolls and black-and-white photos. And dust. Lots of dust.

"Sheldon's single. But who knows."

"Avery?" Felicia called her name from the hall.

Avery pointed toward the door. "Let me see what she needs."

"Take your time. I need to poke around, get a few things from my truck, and look under the sinks, check the electrical panels."

Damn, he was easy to look at. Tall enough, but not towering. Thick in all the right places . . . well, as much as she could tell without seeing him naked. *Does he have any tattoos?*

"Avery?" Felicia yelled again.

She jumped. "Right. Coming!"

Liam's laughter followed her out of the room.

Avery jogged down the main staircase to the foyer and found the back of the Uber food delivery guy. "Perfect timing."

He turned around and Avery almost tripped.

The *dance all night, buy me drinks, but I'm not going home with you* dude from the Basement.

Yeah, no name came to mind. Then again, she didn't think they'd exchanged names.

"You," he said, staring.

"Yeah . . ." Avery glanced up the stairs.

"Avery?" he asked, looking at his slip.

This wasn't good.

She pointed a finger at the bags of food in his hands. "That's for me."

"Hundred and thirty dollars' worth of sandwiches and salads . . . I'm guessing a chick like you can afford her own drinks at a bar."

"Right." She took the bags from him slowly. "About that. I'll be sure and tip you well."

He dragged his gaze over her frame. "You do that."

"Hey, Avery?"

Oh, geez, what now?

Liam had turned the corner on the stairs.

"Yeah, just a minute." She practically pushed what's-his-name out the door. "Thanks for bringing the food."

"I see what's going on." They had made it to the front porch, and Avery half closed the door behind them.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "Saturday was a weird night."

"Uh-huh. Right."

"I *will* tip you."

"You be sure and do that, *Avery*."

"I will . . ." What the hell was his name?

Nothing.

She had nothing.

It took him forever to get off the steps and into his car. He drove a Prius.

He buzzed around the driveway, coming way too close to her Aston for her taste, and disappeared.

With a sigh, she pushed back into the house and painted on a smile.

“I ordered lunch. I hope you’re hungry.”

* * *

Liam wandered the eight-thousand-square-foot home and the grounds for two hours. Every time he told himself to hurry up, that he had other jobs pulling at him, he ignored the voice in his head. This was a favor for Avery, and he didn’t want to lead her wrong.

His work phone buzzed. “Hey, Carlos.”

“When are you getting back here? The developer is poking around and asking for answers I don’t have for him.”

Carlos was his first in charge when Liam wasn’t on-site.

“I wasn’t expecting him today.”

“That doesn’t mean he isn’t here.”

“I’ll call him.” Liam checked his watch. “Give me forty-five minutes.”

He hung up the phone and searched for Avery.

He found her in a study, or a home office, although there wasn’t a computer on the desk or any sign of the normal equipment one would find in a functioning office space.

For a moment, he stood in the doorway and watched her.

Sitting behind the substantial wooden desk with her elbows firmly planted on the top, she rolled a thick pen between her fingers and stared beyond the object in her hands. Her eyelids twitched and her lips were in a thin, expressionless line. Liam couldn’t tell if she was deep in thought or upset . . . or what?

He cleared his throat and jarred her out of her trance.

“Am I disturbing you?”

Avery closed her eyes briefly and painted on a smile. “I’m fine . . . I mean, you’re fine.” She took a few quick breaths and dropped the pen on the desk. “Did you finish up?”

Her voice sounded strangled.

“Are you okay?”

“Fine.” Again she grinned and shook her head. “Of course.”

“I need to get back to my job site. I think I have everything I need here.”

She stood from behind the desk and walked toward him. “Let me walk you out.”

The closer she came, the better he could see the lack of color on her face. He glanced back at the desk. “What was that you were looking at?”

Avery looked over her shoulder. “Nothing, really. A pen.” She walked beside him down the hallway and around the crates that now lined the foyer walls.

Liam placed a hand on her elbow to have her walk in front of him through the door.

Her skin was cold to the touch.

Outside he let go and she rubbed her bare arms.

“You sure you’re all right?”

“I’m fine. Long day.” She stopped at the bottom of the steps. “So what do you think?”

“I need to crunch some numbers before I give you a realistic bottom line.”

“Sounds reasonable.”

“We can go over them Friday after krav.”

She looked away. “Actually, I need to skip Friday for the next two weeks.”

The air swished out of his sails.

“My best friend is getting married. We have a bachelorette party this weekend and the wedding next.”

“Do you have time on Thursday?”

“I’ll be here all day.”

“After work, then. I’ll call you.” He didn’t give her an opportunity to say no. He opened the door to his truck and stood beside it.

“Thanks again for doing this.”

“You’re welcome.”

The heat outside seemed to transform her fake smile into something he could believe in. “Have you thought about that plus-one?”

The teasing grin was even better.

“No, I haven’t.” She blushed.

“You’re not a good liar.”

“I’m busy.”

“We all are.” He thought about her excuse for missing their sparring match. “Weddings are perfect plus-one events.”

Her eyes narrowed. “No. I already told Trina that wasn’t going to happen. I’m the maid of honor. I have duties.”

“Who’s Trina?”

She looked at him as if he were missing a few cards in his deck. “The bride.”

It was his turn to find a shit-eating grin and use it. “You told your best friend about my plus-one date suggestion?”

“No!” She shuffled her feet. “Yes.”

It was entertaining to watch a woman get caught in her own lies. “Trina suggested her wedding?”

“Not going to happen, Liam. I don’t know you well enough. It’s Trina’s day. Nope, nope, and nope.”

He put one foot in his truck. “Whatever you say, Princess. You figure it out and I’ll be there.”

She tossed her hands in the air and turned back toward the stairs.

“Avery?” He called her attention back as he climbed into his truck.

“What?” She was flustered.

He liked her that way.

“You’re beautiful.”

She opened her mouth like a guppy gasping for air, twice, and then jogged up to the house.

Chapter Thirteen

"I'm not bringing him!" Avery exclaimed.

"I don't see what the big deal is. Any man in your life is going to have to meet us eventually." Trina sat in the back of the limousine, wearing a white cowgirl hat, white boots, white skirt . . . white everything. They were starting their night with a decent meal, and then on to the strip club, the dance hall, and whatever bad decisions they could find before the night was over.

"He isn't the *man in my life*. We've already gone over this."

"You were on the phone with him before we left the ranch," Lori pointed out.

"I was talking about work. He's helping me with a project." Thursday didn't pan out, so she had to call him.

Lori, Shannon, and Trina all exchanged glances.

"You guys are hopeless," Avery told them.

"I think Trina's wedding is the perfect place to flesh out a new man," Shannon told her. "Think about it. Men and weddings . . . they are either into the idea or completely turned off by them. By the end of the weekend you'll know if he is even marriage material."

"I don't want to get married," Avery reminded them. Not that her friends were listening.

"Not to mention that your status in life is going to be an issue," Lori offered.

"My status?"

"Your wealth. The lifestyle you like to live. I don't have to tell any of you how a woman having her own money emasculates many egotistical, chauvinistic men."

Shannon nodded. "Even if the guy isn't a chauvinist, they still have a hard time dealing."

Avery thought about their one meal out and how Liam refused to let her pay for her half of the meal. It was strangely satisfying to have him take the check. Outside of getting men to buy her drinks in bars, where she looked like just another girl in a miniskirt instead of a woman who drove up in a quarter-of-a-million-dollar car and returned to her two-million-dollar condo, Avery always found herself pulling out her wallet.

"The decision is up to you," Trina told her. "But I think it would cut a lot of BS if he could handle a weekend wedding with all of us around. You'll know if you're wasting your time."

"Thank you for your endorsement and parental guidance, now can we get on with the party?" Avery leaned over and turned on the stereo, filling the limo with music that had them singing along. Lori opened the champagne, and by the time they reached their first stop, they were laughing and out of breath.

* * *

"Hey, Michelle?" Liam captured his sister's attention from the textbook she currently studied.

"Hey, what?"

"Have you ever been to a bachelorette party?"

"A couple. Why?"

He shrugged. How bad could they be? He thought of the hired strippers and the clubs he'd gone to in his years of playing partygoer when his friends bit the marital bullet. "Nothing."

She lifted her gaze.

"Nothing, huh?"

"They can't be as crazy as a bachelor party."

Michelle smirked. "You go ahead and believe that if you want."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Does this have anything to do with Miss Avery?"

Cassandra had let the Avery cat out of the bag the morning after Liam had had his niece record the message.

"No." He shook his head and then slowly started to nod.

"I think the party intensity has a direct coordination to the closeness of the friends that are going."

"Explain, please."

Michelle leaned back in her chair. "Well, if the bride has a handful of really close friends and, let's say, a strip club is involved . . . well, those parties are often forever remembered and only talked about by those that were there."

"What happens in Vegas?"

"Right. Now, if there is a large party, a dozen or more, things tend to be a little more politically correct. No one wants rumors to get started right before a wedding. Truth is the bride almost never does anything crazy . . . but the single girls, or those that have been married forever, those women tend to go nuts. Like a bachelorette party is a permission slip for impropriety. I bet the women have a better time than the guys do. Men get drunk and watch a woman dancing on a pole. Women get tipsy and pay for lap dances for their friends."

"Sounds dangerous."

"Sounds fun. I haven't been out on a night like that in years." Michelle drifted off in her own thoughts.

The images pixelating in Liam's head started to come into focus. He could see Avery being the life of the party. He also envisioned her putting a guy in his place if he went too far.

Unless she wanted him to go far . . .

He had no hold on her. So why was he thinking about what she was doing and whom she was doing it with?

"Do you know where the party is?"

He shook his head. "Somewhere in Texas."

"Texas?"

"Yeah, her friend lives in Texas."

Michelle scooted her textbook closer. "I can't help you with Texas. I would imagine there'll be men dressed in boots and hats and little else." She sighed. "I like that idea."

Liam moaned.

Michelle kept her eyes on the pages in front of her while she spoke. "You know the best way to make sure a woman isn't surfing for a date other than you?"

"What's that?"

"Text her, call her . . . tell her to have a good time and that you're thinking about her."

"Sounds too easy."

"If she's at all thinking about you as much as you're obviously thinking of her, and you reach out . . . chances are she'll avoid the private lap dances."

"Private?"

"Yeah, the kind where they ask if you want to go to a private room."

Liam stopped smiling. "They do that?"

Michelle looked up long enough to roll her eyes. "Where have you been?"

Liam reached for the phone in his back pocket and stepped out into the backyard.

* * *

Currently onstage, the Cowboy Connection was living up to his name. Avery had to appreciate a man wearing chaps with a thong underneath.

"That man can move," Andrea, one of Trina's aunts-in-law from her first marriage, was well on her way to being sloshed. She and her sister, Diane, were screaming the loudest and tipping the most. It was hysterical to watch. For once Avery wasn't kicking back drink after drink. While she wouldn't currently get behind the wheel of a car, she wasn’t drunk. Even Shannon seemed to be a few more ahead of her than normal.

Their waiters, all wearing next to nothing, kept coming by their party to pour their drinks and flirt. Now that they’d been in the woman-filled room for an hour, and the crowd had grown considerably, the noise level was close to deafening. Avery decided it was time for some bride attention.

Once Mr. Cowboy finished his set and his chaps had found their way to the side of the stage, Avery flagged over their concierge. At that moment, two of the best dancers flanked Trina and took her to the stage.

“Oh, no.”

“Oh, yes!”

Trina didn’t put up much of a fight. Blushing and more than a little tipsy, Trina sat center stage.

“Welcome Trina to the stage.”

Their party cheered the loudest.

“You’re looking a little nervous, darlin’.”

Trina couldn’t talk. She was too busy smiling.

“When is the big day?” Stud Number Two asked.

“Next Saturday,” she said into the microphone.

“That gives us plenty of time,” Stud Number One said.

The music started, and the men turned on like a switch had been thrown.

Like something out of *Magic Mike*, there was flesh, and push-ups . . . and taking Trina out of the chair and laying her on a bench. She would reach out when encouraged, and laughed with the fun of it all.

Somewhere in the middle of Trina’s wedding dance, Avery felt her phone buzz in her pocket.

Flushed and slightly embarrassed, Trina left the stage and dropped into her chair. “I’m going to make that up to you,” she told Avery.

“I look forward to it.”

“Where were you guys when I was getting married?” Andrea said.

“In elementary school?” Lori teased.

Avery moved back to the man in charge of their party and pulled out her wallet. With lap dances ordered for them, the married women offered weak protests and then gave in.

Lost in watching, Avery felt her phone buzz again.

She checked the number and smiled. “Hold on,” she told Liam after she picked up. Avery moved to a balcony, where some women congregated to smoke or just escape the noise for a few minutes. “Hey,” she said once she could hear him.

“Sounds like quite the party.”

“We’re having a night to remember.”

“Really? I’ve never been to a bachelorette party.”

“That’s because you’re not a stripper.” She peeked through the glass.

“I thought only men went to strip clubs.”

“You’d be wrong.”

“My sister corrected me.”

Avery smiled at the thought of him asking his sister about the shenanigans of women at a prewedding party.

“So why are you calling, Liam?”

“Uhm . . . well,” he stuttered. “To say I was . . .”

“Checking on me?” He was totally checking on her.

“Of course not.”

“I don’t believe you.” Avery leaned against the wall, her back to the door.

He paused. “I’m thinking about you.”

Avery fell silent, her heart skipped a beat. “You knew I was out with the girls.”

“Yeah. I won’t keep you. I was thinking about you and wanted to let you know.”

Did she tell him she had thought about him multiple times during the night? Like when one of the bigger strippers had managed a backflip on the stage while taking off his Velcro shorts. The image of Liam bending over backward had her grinning.

“There you are.” Trina’s voice penetrated Avery’s brain. In a few steps, she was beside Avery, hands on hips. “Who are you talking to?”

“I’ve got to go,” Avery told Liam.

“That’s him, is-isn’t it?” Trina slurred her last words.

When Avery didn’t comment, Trina reached for her phone.

Avery attempted to grab it back and gave up when Trina put the phone to her ear. “Is this Liam?”

Trina grinned like a kid. “Uh-huh . . .” She pulled the phone away from her ear. “He sounds cute.”

Avery tried to grab her phone again, failed. “What are we, thirteen?”

With her ear back to the phone, Trina went on. “I’m not drunk. Okay, maybe a little. Oh, don’t worry. My fiancé’s bodyguard is right outside.” She pulled the phone away from her face again. “He’s worried about me. Isn’t that sweet?”

“Give me the phone.” Avery placed her palm out.

Trina lifted a finger in the air. “You’re coming to the wedding, right?”

Avery’s jaw dropped.

“Well, consider yourself invited. I can’t wait to meet you.”

Avery mouthed the words *I’m going to kill you*.

“Oh, good,” Trina said. “Okay, I’m going to give the phone back to Avery and hide. Nice chatting with you.”

Avery yanked the phone from Trina’s hands.

“You’re welcome,” Trina said before disappearing behind the door and into the club.

“She’s drunk,” Avery told Liam.

“I like your friend.”

“Good thing I do, too, or I’d kill her.”

“Is there really a bodyguard there?”

Avery thought about Jeb. “Yes.”

“I feel better.”

“Because I can’t take care of myself?”

“Someone is jumping to conclusions again. No . . . I of all people know you can fend for yourself. But a gaggle of drinking females always gathers the attention of drinking males. And since I’m a couple of states away, it’s nice to know someone has your back.”

“Oh.” He really was sweet.

Someone knocked on the glass, jerking her attention back to the party.

Lori waved her back inside.

“I have to go. I’m in charge and need to order more lap dances.”

“Lap dances, huh?”

“Yes. Where almost naked men strut and women scream.”

“You’re torturing me.”

“I am? I’m sorry.”

“No, you’re not.”

Avery opened the door to the club, and the thump of the bass strangled their conversation.

“You’re right. I’m not. I’ll text you later and let you know if we need bail money.” She hung up.

“Avery! Get your blonde butt over here and say hi to my friend,” Lori yelled.

It was Avery’s turn for the dancing cowboy in a leather Speedo.

Chapter Fourteen

It took twenty-four hours to sober Trina up enough to send her off with her fiancé and for Avery to fly back to LA. Avery scrambled to cram a full work week into three days and agreed to meet with Liam for a sparring match during her Tuesday krav session. He'd checked in with her twice since the strip club: once after she'd sent him a text with the local sheriff's department's phone number as a hoax, saying he could find her there for the next seventy-two hours, and the other time after she'd gotten off her flight back into LA on Sunday night. Now she was racing from her condo to the studio, determined to be on time.

She was five minutes late.

"You're making a habit of this, Grant," Brenda snarled at the door.

Liam caught her attention with his smile.

Was it her, or had his shoulders grown in the week they'd not seen each other?

"How was your date?" Avery asked Brenda in an effort to change the subject.

"Your warm-up is on the board."

Already dressed in spandex, Avery dropped her gym bag at the door and lifted her arms over her head to stretch as she walked farther into the room. "Hey."

"Hey back. You look surprisingly vertical, considering the weekend."

Avery glanced at the warm-up. *Fifty burpees . . . again?*

She sat on the mat, put her legs out in front of her, and reached for her toes. "I wasn't the one who was toasted. That was Trina. And Lori, surprisingly."

"Lori the lawyer?"

"Yup. She almost never lets loose that way." Finished with her stretches, Avery stood to start her routine. "Are you finished with the burpees?"

"Haven't started."

"Waiting for me?"

He lowered his voice. "If I finished before you got here, I'd be forced to watch you do yours." His eyes traveled the length of her. "That's distracting."

Heat traveled up her neck.

"Less talking. More doing!" Brenda yelled from her office.

Avery jumped in the air and then shot to the ground for a push-up. "I'm going to buy that woman a T-shirt that says that."

Liam followed her burpee lead.

An hour and a half later they were at Pug's, settled in a back booth.

"I think your client would be an idiot not to remodel that house and get as much as he can for it."

Liam had given her an estimate with a lot of zeros.

"That's what I came up with. The real estate agent I spoke with is already encouraging the owner to fix the place up."

"Does he have the capital to do the work?"

Avery thought the question was comical. "There's enough wealth inside the house to renovate it three times over. If he didn't have money in the bank, and I'm sure he does, he could wait for the auctions to close to fund the job. I don't think it's about money as much as it is painful memories in the house."

"That's too bad. It looks like it could have been a great place to grow up."

"Looks can be deceiving."

"You say that like you know the feeling."

"I do. If something happened to my parents tomorrow, I'd hire someone like me to do the work and get rid of that house as soon as I could."

"That bad?"

"I never measured up to my parents. I didn't follow the rules as a teenager, bucked the private schools they shoved me into. The therapist they made me see said I was looking for their positive attention. Which as an adult I can completely agree with, but it didn't work. Eventually all I seemed to do was hurt myself instead of them."

Liam reached a hand out and covered hers. "I'm sorry."

"Not your fault."

"I can't imagine not having parents who adore their children and shower them with affection."

"One lunch with my parents and you'll know what that looks like."

Liam ran the pad of his thumb over the inside of her palm. "I look forward to it."

"That wasn't an invitation."

He rubbed a little harder. "Sounded like it to me."

It was distracting . . . this thumb rubbing, hand-holding thing he was doing.

"I already told you I'm not the kind of woman you date."

He stopped rubbing until she met his eyes.

"And why is that, Avery? Are you afraid the affection you seek won't be reciprocated, like from your parents?"

His words were uncomfortably accurate.

She pulled her hand out from under his.

Liam's smile faded. "I shouldn't have said that."

One vertebra at a time, Avery's spine sat taller and her defiant chin came up. "That would have hurt more if there wasn't a sprinkling of truth."

"Still wasn't my place to say it. I'm sorry."

He looked it.

It was time to make damn sure Liam knew who he was trying to date.

"I was married."

He kept his eyes focused. "Are you now?"

"No."

"Then I don't care."

"Even my ex-husband will tell you I married him for his money."

Liam kept silent, eyes straight.

"When we split, I was given five million dollars and my condo."

"Did your ex end up on the street?"

She smiled, not helping herself. The thought of Bernie on the street, wearing Armani and holding a cardboard sign, made her laugh. "Not hardly."

"Everyone has a past."

"I snore." Which was once true, but after the nose job, not so much.

"Like a trucker. You told me." Liam sat forward and placed both hands over hers and held them tight. "Now let's talk about this friend's wedding."

* * *

It was Liam's turn to scramble. "You sure you have Cassandra covered for your shift on Saturday?"

Michelle stood in the doorway of his bedroom, watching as he packed for the weekend.

"We're good."

Liam zipped up a garment bag carrying a suit. He owned two, one for the occasional wedding or funeral, and the other he used when meeting with the city or client functions required more than a shirt and jeans.

"Is it an outdoor wedding?"

"I have no idea."

"Do you know the bride or groom?"

"Nope. Friends of Avery's."

Michelle crossed her arms over her chest. "How did you end up getting a ticket on the same flight?"

Liam closed the suitcase and zipped it up. "Avery said there were extra seats. I'm guessing that means they'd booked them for people that can't come."

"Sounds fancy."

It did. But he wasn't backing out now. Not when he'd finally managed to have Avery add him as her plus-one.

He looked at the time and pulled out his phone to order an Uber to the airport.

"I can drive you."

"This is fine. You'll get stuck in traffic coming back."

He gathered his luggage and kissed his sister's cheek. Out in the living room, Cassandra jumped off the couch to hug his leg. "Bring me back some cake."

He kissed the top of her head. "I'll see what I can do."

Without any more fanfare, his niece peeled herself off his leg and returned to the dolls she was playing with.

"Have fun," Michelle said as he walked out the door.

"I will." Or at least he hoped he would.

Thirty minutes later, the driver dropped him off in front of terminal three. Even with the huge sunglasses covering her eyes, he recognized Avery standing outside the doors, watching for him. She wore a short, peach colored dress and white boots that went up to her knees. The outfit was like nothing he'd seen her in before.

The woman had many sides, each of them just as fascinating as the last.

Outside the car, he rolled his suitcase to her side and stopped. "Love the outfit."

She hiked her sunglasses up to look him in the eye. "The short skirt or the tall boots?"

"Both."

She tilted her glasses back onto her nose. "You sure you're ready for this?" she asked him.

Liam ignored the people whizzing past. "The question is, are you?"

"No." She shook her head. "But my friends wouldn't shut up and you weren't helping."

"I like your friends." They seemed to be on his side already.

Avery shook her head and turned toward the doors. "I don't think you're ready for this, but here goes nothing."

He grasped her arm before she could take a step.

"Second thoughts?" she asked.

He moved his hand up to the back of her neck and pulled her in. "None."

Liam kissed her doubting lips long enough for her to sigh and kiss him back. Only then did he let her go.

He pulled his luggage behind him and held her hand as they walked into the terminal.

Avery led them past the ticket gates and toward what looked like an exclusive lounge. "Are your friends here?"

"They're already on the plane."

"They're what?" He must have got that wrong.

Liam couldn't say he'd ever had the need for a private airport lounge, so this was a first. They walked through the double sliding doors to be greeted by a smiling hostess. "Hello, Ms. Grant. You must be Mr. Holt."

Definitely a first. "I am."

"TSA is ready for you. Do you have any more luggage?"

He shook his head. "No. This is it."

"I'll show him the way," Avery told the woman.

Liam walked further down the rabbit hole.

They waltzed through the lounge and down a nearly empty hall. At the end was a metal detector and a conveyer belt for his luggage. The TSA officer stood by the metal detector with a smile. "ID?"

"Right." Liam removed his wallet and presented his driver's license while Avery walked through the metal detector.

He started to toe off his shoes.

"That isn't necessary, Mr. Holt. Just put your phone through and any keys in your pockets."

Less than twenty seconds later, Avery and Liam were being escorted out of the terminal and into a waiting car.

“Are we driving to Texas?”

Avery smirked. “You can back out anytime.”

Everything came into focus when the car stopped next to a private jet and Avery stepped out.

Holy shit.

The driver from the car took Liam’s luggage before he could grab it.

He stood looking up at the plane like it was a new invention.

“You’re serious.”

Avery took two steps up the stairs and turned toward him. “You coming?”

* * *

Avery took the final step into the private jet and wanted to glare at her friends, who had choreographed Liam’s being there. She noticed Shannon’s eyes light up when Liam stepped through the door and exhaled.

“You’ve met Lori and Reed.”

Reed stepped forward and shook Liam’s hand. “Nice to see you again.”

“I’m glad to be here.”

Lori smiled and shook his hand. “I’m still unsure if you’re a stalker.”

“Hopefully I’ll squelch that thought by the end of the weekend.”

Avery stood back. “And this is Shannon.”

Liam held a look of confusion. “Do I know you?”

“Shannon Wentworth. Former first lady of California, now making a name for herself in the world of photography.” Avery’s introduction made Shannon blush.

“I’m not sure about that world thing, but the rest of it is accurate.”

“A pleasure,” Liam said.

“Oh, the pleasure is all ours. Avery hasn’t invited a male friend into the fold, ever.”

Avery crossed to the bar and poured a glass of champagne. “Like I had a choice. First Trina drunkenly snags my phone and extends the invite, and then this one doesn’t let it go.” She pointed to Liam, who appeared pleased with himself.

“Avery frazzled is a good look,” Lori said.

“I am not . . .” Yes, she was. “Whatever. I hope you and Reed get along,” she said directly to Liam. “This weekend is about Trina.”

“You’ve warned me,” Liam said.

Reed patted Liam on the back. “Well, now that we got that little tantrum out of the way, how about a drink before we take off?”

“Beer is fine.”

Liam did a complete turn and took in the space.

It wasn’t the largest private jet Avery had been on, nor the smallest. There were half a dozen executive chairs that reclined into a comfortable sleeping position, a sofa, a TV, a bar, and of course, a bathroom.

“Do you guys always travel like this?”

“Every weekend,” Avery exaggerated.

Shannon sat back down. “Don’t listen to her. No. We don’t. Trina insisted.”

“The bride.”

“Yes.”

“This is pretty spectacular. Who is she marrying?”

The cabin went silent. All eyes traveled to Avery.

“Did you tell him anything?”

“I told him what time to be here.”

Reed chuckled and handed Liam a beer. “Do you listen to country music?”

Chapter Fifteen

Liam really thought that Avery's strong protest of him not knowing what he was getting into had been nothing but smoke.

He was wrong.

Private planes and rubbing elbows with political wives . . . okay, ex-wife. Still, he didn't think he had more room for new experiences until Reed informed him that he'd be attending the Texas wedding of the century. That might be an exaggeration, but Wade Thomas? His face, and that of his bride, had been pasted all over the tabloids at the checkout stands for weeks.

For once he was bummed he hadn't picked up the magazine his sister had sitting on the end table in his living room to check it out. He might have put a few dots together if he had. Trina wasn't a common name, and a wedding in Texas . . . Who was he kidding? He wouldn't have figured it out.

It became painfully clear that this was not the first time this gaggle of friends had been on a private jet. Not every time, Shannon had said. But oftentimes. It appeared that Avery had been known to pay for the things. Who did that?

Who was she really? He started to wonder if his blowing off her telling him she'd married for money was a mistake.

If money made her tick, then why was she wasting her time with him? He did okay, moderately better than okay, but he hadn't so much as sprung for a first-class ticket, let alone a private jet.

When the jet landed and they were picked up by a stretch limo and carted off the tarmac like the president, Liam ditched all hope of paying his way for any of this.

They arrived at Wade Thomas's ranch, where the roads leading to it were lined with media and photographers wanting pictures of the bride and groom.

Their party was escorted beyond the gates and down the tree-lined road.

"Incredible, isn't it?" Reed offered.

"I've never seen anything like it."

"Today is about immediate family and friends. The rehearsal and the dinner . . . and then we're taking Trina into one of the guesthouses for the night," Avery reminded him.

"Down-to-earth people with money. Don't let it get to you," Reed told him.

Too late.

As he thought the words, Avery, who was sitting next to him in the limo, reached out and placed her hand over his.

His world, which had started to tilt off-kilter, began to settle.

He turned his eyes to hers, squeezed her hand, and smiled.

They pulled up to the main house and climbed out one at a time. "Holy wow." He'd have to be blind not to be impressed. Massive beams spanned a front porch that you could put his entire home under.

"Don't let me drool," he whispered to Avery.

He loved hearing her laugh.

"You're here!" A woman's voice echoed through the open front doors.

"Did you think we would miss it?" Shannon asked.

Liam stood back while Trina hugged and giggled and smiled more than any woman he'd ever seen. When her attention landed on him, she pulled in a quick breath. "Oh my God, you're Liam."

"I am." He put his hand out, which she ignored, pulling him into a hug. "I can't believe she let you come."

"Me either," he confessed.

"Oh, good Lord," Avery sighed. "I'm not that bad."

A chorus of "Yes, you are" ensued.

Trina walked them into the foyer, and once again Liam was lost in the architecture.

"Sounds like the wedding party has arrived."

Liam turned to find a living, breathing celebrity walking down the stairs to greet them.

Play it cool.

Wade shook Reed's hand and hugged the women before offering a smile to Liam.

"Look who Avery brought," Trina told her fiancé. "Liam, this is Wade."

"I can't believe the blonde pit bull caved," he said, grinning as he shook Liam's hand. The handshake said a lot.

"Blonde pit bull?" Liam questioned.

"Long story," Avery offered.

"Not that long. She hated me," Wade told him. "Said I wasn't good enough for Trina. Which might be true, but that didn't stop me."

"He exaggerates."

Wade lifted a hand in the air. "Can I have a witness?"

Shannon, Lori, and Trina joined the hand waving.

"Good thing I like you now, Cowboy."

Wade dropped a hand over Avery's shoulders and pulled them into the great room.

* * *

Avery had to admit, even to herself, that she was a little unnerved by how well Liam adapted to the group. They'd been placed in different parts of the house, mainly because Trina, Shannon, Lori, and Avery had already planned on spending the two days leading up to the wedding doing all the girl things that needed one more round before Trina took the plunge . . . again.

Within an hour of arriving, the four of them were whisked off for some spa time.

While sitting in crisp white spa robes with their feet soaking, they sipped wine and gossiped.

"Is Vicki behaving?" Avery asked Trina about her soon to be mother-in-law.

"She's been quiet."

"Is that good?" Shannon asked.

Trina shrugged. "I'm tired of trying to figure that woman out. One minute I think things are fine, and the next I swear she's powdering my sugar cookies with arsenic."

"Let it go. She'll come around when she realizes there isn't any going back," Lori advised.

"So, Sunday?"

They all laughed.

Avery pulled her foot out of the pulsating water so the woman doing her pedicure could make her toes shine.

"Liam seems like a really nice guy," Trina told Avery.

"Which begs the question what he wants with me."

"Where did all this negativity come from?" Lori asked. "What happened to the self-assured woman who marched into my office before Bernie and said, and I quote, 'He's lucky to have me. Let's do this.'?"

"That was different."

"How?"

"It had an end date," Avery said without thinking.

"And Liam doesn't?" Shannon prompted.

"Of course he does. I just don't know when that is." She switched feet for the technician. "Saturday night dates end on Sunday . . . weekend dates end Monday morning. Liam isn't shaking."

"That's a good thing," Trina said.

"It's because we haven't had sex."

"What?" Lori asked.

Avery glanced at the three sets of eyes on her. "I know, right? He's kissed me three times, and that's it. It's not like I haven't encouraged it."

"He's into you." The technician, who Avery didn't think was listening, added her two cents.

"I think she's right."

"Or he's gay. Could go either way."

"He's not gay," Avery told the virtual stranger.

"I don't think that's the case," Shannon said. "The way he looks at you is anything but platonic."

"You've known him for what, five hours?"

"Which is the normal time span of your dates, Avery. Maybe you should try and stop worrying about when it will end and enjoy what you have going on now."

Avery glared at Lori. "He's here, isn't he?"

"Bridesmaids always get lucky. I bet he doesn't bolt after."

Avery didn't offer a comment.

"I didn't get lucky at Lori's wedding," Shannon said.

"Let's try and fix that this weekend." Avery leaned back to enjoy her foot massage.

"This I want to see," Lori added.

Chapter Sixteen

Avery said he wouldn't see her . . . and she wasn't kidding.

Liam found his time filled with Reed, Wade, and two of the guys from Wade's band. There were plenty of marital tips offered, a lot of beer, and food. So much food. Liam wondered how the men in Texas stayed in their Levi's.

The ranch was a massive venue setting up for a colossal wedding.

On Friday, during the rehearsal, Liam stood back and watched as the wedding coordinator directed Avery and the others in their duties.

Wade made time with his future wife when they pretended that the minister had announced them husband and wife.

Trina's father gave Wade a hard time, entertaining the small crowd.

When Avery walked back down the aisle, this time on the arm of Wade's best man, a stab of jealousy smacked Liam's brain.

He reminded himself that the other guy was married.

That didn't stop Liam from swooping in as soon as the opportunity presented itself.

"Looks like everything is set for tomorrow."

"I don't think they forgot anything."

They took a seat in the back row of the chairs set up for the next day. "Let me know if there is anything I can do."

She blinked as she looked at him. "Are you having a good time?"

"Weddings are always an adventure."

"Adventure sounds like drama."

He shook his head. "None of that from what I can see."

She turned back to look at the bride and groom, who were talking with the minister. "Let's hope it stays that way. Trina deserves her day."

Liam had heard through some of the conversation around him that Trina's first husband had died. No one had elaborated on the details, and he didn't feel at liberty to ask.

"At my sister's wedding, my brother-in-law got hammered."

"You're kidding."

"Fall down, pour him into the car drunk. Michelle told me it took him two days to sober up."

"What an ass," Avery said.

"Yeah. They're divorced now. Took her some time to get over him."

"Trina cared for her late husband, but it wasn't anything like her love for Wade. Which is a blessing, all things considered."

Liam took the opening to learn a little more. "Reed implied that he died."

Avery kept her eyes glued in front of her. "Killed by his own dad. Doesn't get more dramatic than that."

Chills ran up his arms. "You're kidding."

"Nope. It was all over the papers last year." She nodded toward the mother of the groom, who stood to the side of where the ceremony was going to take place the next day. “Vicki didn’t heed the threats of Trina’s former father-in-law and ended up kidnapped. I think that’s why she’s so butt hurt about Trina. Not that any of it was Trina’s fault.”

“Kidnapping and murder?”

“Money does crazy things to people.”

He sighed. “Makes me happy I don’t have much.”

Avery grinned. “You didn’t like the private jet?”

“I didn’t say that. But not at the risk of someone killing someone I loved for it.”

“Those are the risks when dating someone who has a big bank account.”

Liam rested his arm around Avery’s shoulders. “Trying to scare me off again?”

“Stating facts.”

“I’ve been warned.”

She turned to him then, eyes stoic. “You’re really okay with all of this?”

“The wedding?” he asked, confused.

“Not just the wedding. The jets, the private cars, celebrities?”

“The question isn’t if I’m okay with it so much as are you? I can’t compete with any of this, so there’s no use trying. Doesn’t mean I can’t buy a meal or a round or two.”

She offered a soft smile.

“I’ve been crushing on you long before I realized this was in your back pocket.”

That smile grew. “Crushing?”

“What’s the matter, hasn’t anyone ever crushed on you before?”

“Maybe in junior high.”

He envisioned short skirts and attitude. “I bet you had all the boys wrapped.”

“What do you mean, *had*?”

Liam leaned his head back and laughed.

* * *

Saturday was a blur. Twice Avery flushed out Liam to check on him, even though she told him she wouldn’t. Between bridesmaid duties and the chaos of getting ready for such a big event, Avery had a hard time breathing.

When the hour finally came and Shannon, Lori, and Avery surrounded Trina right before walking down the aisle, there were misty eyes all around.

Trina wore her dark, long hair down and draped to the side. Her slim-fitted dress was a bright contrast to her dark complexion. The off the shoulder neckline matched that of her bridal party’s dresses.

Avery and the girls wore dusty gray three-quarter-length gowns by Ralph Lauren, with shoes that would be a part of Avery’s collection for years. They’d made a pact when Lori had married that the bridesmaids’ dresses would probably be mothballed in six months, but the shoes had to last. So far, Avery was pleased with her collection.

Even though the venue was closed to the public, that didn’t stop security from being everywhere.

A massive canopy had been lifted above the outside seating for the ceremony to discourage media helicopters from flying overhead. Not that it completely stopped the paparazzi from trying.

Avery poked her head around the corner of the courtyard and took in the guests. “That’s a lot of people,” she said to the girls.

The wedding coordinator slipped around the corner. “You ladies ready?”

Avery turned to Trina and her father.

Trina offered a thumbs-up.

Music quieted the guests, and Wade and his groomsmen made their way to the spotlight.

One at a time, Shannon and Lori slowly preceded Trina to the front of the celebrity packed crowd.

When it was Avery’s turn, she painted on a smile and concentrated on walking slowly. She spotted Liam next to Reed and a few of their friends. Even through the mass of people, she read Liam’s lips as he mouthed the word *beautiful*.

Her cheeks grew hot and her eyes lowered to the ground as she walked past him.

No matter how good she might look, nothing would upstage what came next.

The second Trina rounded the corner, Avery heard Wade’s heartfelt swish of air escape from his lungs. She turned to look at the groom and saw tears in his eyes. For the first time in well over a year, Avery felt moisture sting the backs of hers. The love Wade had for her friend was palpable. In that moment, she knew this was a marriage that would last.

Thirty-eight minutes later, after Trina and Wade had delivered their own vows to each other and the minister had given his blessing, and all the *I do*s and *kiss the bride* were over, Avery sighed as if she had been the one getting married.

She had two minutes to breathe while she signed as a witness on their marriage certificate and kissed the bride and groom. Then they were whisked off for pictures.

Liam stood to the side and brought her a glass of champagne.

"You took my breath away," he told her.

She touched his tie. "You clean up pretty well yourself." Most men in suits did nothing for her. Her father had worn one every day to work, and Bernie never went anywhere without one. She couldn't remember if Bernie owned a T-shirt. Probably not. Liam, on the other hand, filled his out perfectly. Avery wondered what he would look like in a suit tailored only for him.

"Avery?"

She handed Liam her wine and moved beside the wedding party and smiled for the camera.

Trina had opted for an oversize round table to accommodate their wedding party and significant others. Considering Avery hadn't seen much of Liam the entire weekend, it was nice to have him sitting next to her instead of across the tent next to some Kardashian wannabe.

Food rolled out in courses, and she knew from experience that if they didn't eat quickly, the guests would descend and make it hard to chew.

"Did you help with the guest list?" Liam asked close to her ear.

"I did."

He glanced over his shoulder. "Is that Steven Tyler?"

Avery lifted a fork to her lips. "Yup."

"Doesn't that make you a little giddy?"

She looked again. "Sure does."

"I'd love to know the story of how Wade and him met."

Without missing a beat, Avery lifted her voice. "Hey, Wade . . . how did you meet Steven Tyler?"

Liam nudged her under the table.

"The Grammys. Three years ago. Had a complete fan moment backstage, and we've been friends ever since."

"What does a Wade Thomas fan moment look like?" Reed asked.

"There was stuttering involved. It wasn't pretty."

"Good to know you're not unaffected," Liam told him.

"This guy was a complete dork for years once we went big," Gus, Wade's best man, said.

"I'm much better at playing it cool now."

During their limited dinner conversation, Avery sensed Liam start to relax.

Once the dinner plates left the table and settings were in place for cake later in the evening, Avery and Liam mingled around the room and were introduced to dozens of people. Reed stood by a tall, olive skinned woman she'd never met before. He motioned them over when he caught her staring.

"I don't think you've met Sasha."

The woman wore Versace. The black dress stuck to her like a glove. The angle and cut crossed over the front of her body in an asymmetrical way that only a woman as lean and fit as this one could pull off. Avery had instant arm envy. The woman didn't appear to have an ounce of fat on her.

"I have not. I'm Avery." They shook hands.

"I know." Her exotic voice matched her dress. "You must be Liam Holt."

"I am." He seemed as surprised to hear his name coming from her lips as Avery was.

"Sasha is Trina's late husband's half sister," Avery explained to Liam. She'd leave the rest of the woman's significance in Trina's life for a later conversation.

Sasha had played an intricate role in stopping Ruslan Petrov from hiring any more killers to cover up his crimes. *Intricate* meant being nearly killed by the man's hands while the authorities rushed in at the last minute and put a bullet in him. If it wasn't for her, he would have fled and still been alive to cause misery and pain to Trina and everyone she held dear. Including Avery.

"I feel the need to thank you," Avery said.

"That isn't necessary."

“Sasha is occasionally helping with our security team, so hopefully we can convince her to join us outside of work.”

“That would be great, and you can tell me where you got that dress. Versace, right?”

“Paris.” A woman of one-word answers.

“It’s stunning.”

“Thank you. If you’ll excuse me.” And she was gone.

Reed moved closer once she walked away. “I’m surprised she came.”

“She’s intense” was Liam’s take on the woman.

“I don’t remember putting her down on the table assignments,” Avery said.

“She refused. Said she would witness the wedding, blend in at the reception, and drill security to make sure they were doing their job while everyone ate.” Reed glanced around the room.

“And is security doing a good job?” Liam asked.

Reed looked down his nose at him. “Our team never fails.”

Liam patted Reed’s back. “I feel safer.”

“Good to know. Now let me find my wife. I wanna dance.”

Later, after Avery delivered a toast alongside Gus, and the obligatory wedding party dance after Trina and Wade took the stage, Liam claimed her as his for the rest of the night.

He lost his tie, ditched the jacket, and swung her around the dance floor.

There wasn’t any of the bumping and grinding that went along with the club scene here. Just good moves with dips and turns for the rock and roll, and plenty of line dancing and two-stepping when the country hits were sung.

Flushed and breathless, Avery pleaded to step away from the crowd.

Liam tugged her hand toward the back of the covered dance floor and out into the night.

“You’re crazy out there.”

He did a little shuffle. “Love to dance.”

“I can tell.”

Liam slid a hand around her waist and swung her in a circle when some of the other guests walked by.

Avery glanced at them and laughed.

“I think that was Faith and Tim.”

Liam wasn’t listening. He wrapped his arms around her waist and walked behind her until they were on the edge of the manicured outdoor space, overlooking the moonlit valley below.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Avery said once they stopped walking.

“Peaceful. I managed to take a walk before everything started today. Wade has quite the spread.”

“Texas has grown on me a little,” Avery admitted. “But I wouldn’t want to live here.”

“City girl?”

“I like where I live. But I don’t think I’ll be there forever.”

She felt Liam’s breath against her ear.

“Where else would you go?”

“Somewhere, anywhere. What about you? Ever wanted to live somewhere different?”

“I haven’t really thought about it. My family is close by, my business is in LA.”

She held his arms, which wrapped around her shoulders, keeping the cool evening air away from her bare skin. “I guess that’s the difference between a close family and what I have.”

“Is it really that bad?”

Avery thought about the measures she’d gone through, marrying Bernie for a short, contracted time for a massive payoff to get out from under her parents’ financial thumbs. “It’s not good.”

“My sister and I are eleven months apart. For a long time people thought we were twins. You’ll love her, and Cassandra . . . that kid has my number.”

“How often do you see them?”

Liam laughed. “They live with me.”

Avery leaned back to look at him. “Really?”

“Michelle’s ex left without financial support. She was out of choices. Not that she needed to ask. I offered.”

“What about your parents? Couldn’t she move in with them?”

Liam’s smile faded. “My mother has Alzheimer’s.”

“I’m so sorry.”

He kissed the top of her head. “It’s okay. Right after Cassandra was born, she was diagnosed. It’s been a slow, steady decline. My dad kept up with her care for a while, but last year we had to hire help during the day so he could work. He encouraged my sister to move in with him, but the stress of a five-year-old is too much day in and day out."

"I can't imagine."

He tilted his head. "My parents love us unconditionally and with every ounce of their being. I can't imagine that you've lived a life without that anchor."

"Don't feel sorry for me. It no longer rules me. Do I wish it was different? Yes. But it isn't. Now I take my parents in small doses and leave when it's unbearable."

Liam turned her around and rested his hands around her waist. "They're missing out. You're a special lady."

"You hardly know me."

"That's changing rapidly. Besides, if I wasn't figuring that out on my own, your friends have all told me."

"They're biased."

He brushed his hand along her chin and watched his fingers as he traced them down her neck and shoulder. The touch was more intimate than if they were naked and skin to skin.

Avery shivered.

"Are you cold?"

"No."

His eyes smiled, and he leaned closer and touched his lips to hers.

Avery closed her eyes and melted. Like every time he kissed her, there wasn't a rush or any urgency. Only the movement of his mouth on hers, the slow request for her to open and let him inside. Her body quivered and her mind went blank.

What was it about this man that was so different from any other? Was it the fact that he wasn't rushing? Or maybe it was the way he slowly ran his hands over her back, as if he were memorizing her. Maybe the difference was how much she knew about him. Since before Bernie, she hadn't bothered to know more than a first name and a short sexual history. Family history and desires for the future only shortened the time she spent with the previous men in her life.

This one was different.

Liam was different.

Following his leisurely pace, Avery stroked his back and squeezed his shoulders when he nipped at her bottom lip. He heated every cell that begged for his attention.

His fingers squeezed her hips but didn't move lower. As the bases went, he hadn't rounded second, and she wanted a home run in the worst way.

Avery pressed closer and knew without any doubt Liam had all the working parts fired up and ready.

Unlike the man holding her, she let her hands drop lower on his hips until his firm ass filled her palms.

Liam stalled, his mouth open over hers, eyes closed. "Careful, Princess."

The huskiness of his voice empowered her. "Why?"

He gripped her hips and brought her as close as two standing bodies, fully clothed, could get. "My control is painfully close to snapping."

"Have you considered that I might want that?"

Liam opened his smoky eyes. "I didn't force my hand at you bringing me here for this."

She lifted her hand from his butt to his hip. "I know that, Liam."

There was something he wasn't saying; she could see it in his gaze.

Noise from the reception cut in through the night. "Now isn't the time," he told her.

She wanted to argue but knew he was right. Avery swallowed and shifted her weight.

His grip stopped her. "Never think, for one second, that I don't want you. That I haven't dreamt of peeling each layer of your clothing off your skin and kissing every bare spot until you can't take the torture any longer."

Her chest lifted with every short breath she took.

He pressed his lips to hers, eyes wide open.

"You're not like any man I've ever met," she whispered when he released her lips.

Liam smiled as if she'd just given him a gift. "Good."

* * *

Monday was met with a gallon of coffee and a hard-on.

"You mean to tell me you were at Wade Thomas's ranch the whole weekend?" Michelle stared at him across the table at six in the morning.

"I was."

"Holy cow. Who is this woman you're dating?"

Are we dating?

"Avery Grant." He wondered if that was her maiden name or her ex's.

"Do you have a picture of her?"

Liam fired up his phone and pulled up a text from Shannon. She'd added him to a group text where she'd sent a dozen pictures taken over the weekend.

He pulled up a shot from during the rehearsal dinner and twisted his phone toward his sister.

Michelle squealed. "Oh my God! That *is* Wade Thomas."

Sipping his coffee, he said, "Avery is the blonde standing next to me."

His sister expanded the picture on the phone and glanced at him. "She's gorgeous."

"I noticed that."

"Her skin is flawless. What is she, twenty-fourish?"

Liam thought about that for a second, did a little math based on the timeline of her past. "I think she's in her early thirties."

"Kids?"

"No."

"Ever married?"

"Once."

Michelle zoomed out and flipped through the pictures on the thread. "That's good."

"Is it?"

"Yeah. A woman previously married isn't rushing to put a ring back on and makes a better decision the second time around."

Liam opened his mouth to comment and Michelle cut him off.

"But thirty . . . her clock is ticking."

Liam thought about Avery's lifestyle. "I don't think so."

Michelle looked at him like he was missing a few brain cells.

He avoided the argument and stood to refill his coffee. He had a long weekend's worth of pushed aside work to get to.

"Who is this?"

He glanced at his phone. "Shannon."

"She looks like a movie star. Is she?"

"Ex-wife of Paul Wentworth."

Michelle did a double take. "The governor?"

"Yup."

"What an idiot."

Yeah, that's what Liam thought.

Michelle grinned and hiked a brow. "Looks like someone wants to say good morning to you."

Liam snatched his phone from his sister and opened his messages.

It was Avery.

I hope you slept well.

He considered lying.

Tossed and turned all night. You?

He sipped his coffee and waited for her reply.

Like a baby.

He shook his head.

Liar.

Good thing I like you, Holt.

The use of his last name made him laugh.
Michelle cleared her throat.
“What?” he asked.
She crossed the kitchen and kissed his cheek. “She’s a lucky woman.”
No . . . he was the lucky one.

Chapter Seventeen

Sheldon walked alongside Avery as she described his childhood home in the way Liam had described it. Once all the walls were stripped of art and knickknacks collected over a lifetime, the lack of upkeep became strikingly clear.

"Any real estate agent worth their salt will tell you to paint all the walls and replace old and worn carpet at the bare minimum. But in the case of this house, I would seriously consider a heavy renovation. The kitchen and bathrooms will cost the most but make the biggest impact when finding a turnkey buyer who will pay top dollar." Liam's exact words.

"What did your contractor estimate?"

She told him Liam's numbers and added that he should expect to spend 20 percent more. Better to come in under budget than over.

Sheldon whistled.

"Consider this. While you might not have had a lot of love for the paintings on the walls, they were done by artists that catch a decent paycheck. The floral pieces in your mother's sitting room were painted at the turn of the century. The receipt of purchase was found in her files."

"How much?"

"She spent half a million dollars each, forty years ago. One can only imagine what they will go for now. There is your renovation budget, which will give you a much bigger return on the house." She paused while standing at the French doors leading to the backyard. "Of course, that means you'll have to hold on to this place a little longer."

"How long?"

"I don't have that answer. My guy said four to six months isn't unheard of on a renovation this size. But we are in California without weather mucking up construction schedules."

"How long before your work is done?"

"I need two more weeks to clear the house of everything worth sending to auction and then arrange the estate sale."

"So I have three weeks to decide."

"Have you picked a real estate agent yet?"

He shook his head.

"They're going to tell you to keep some of the furnishings in the main rooms if you're going to sell as is. If you're renovating, then it's best to purge everything and bring in a professional stager to sell."

"Is your contractor able to do the work?"

She hesitated. "I asked him a favor to give an estimate, I didn't imply that he'd get a job."

Sheldon rocked back on his heels and tore his gaze away from the yard. "If you recommend him, it's good by me."

Avery tried not to think of the ethics behind her suggesting Liam for the work. "I'd recommend you get a couple of estimates before picking a team."

He stared at her.

“I didn’t need two when I hired you.”

She couldn’t argue that.

“Let me see if he is available. If he is, I’ll put you two together.”

“Sounds good.”

Avery followed him out of the room and down the main hall.

“I found some items in your father’s study that you might want to look at.”

For a second, Sheldon stared, stone-faced. Once again his cold eyes had her taking a slight step back.

“Nothing, Avery. I want nothing from this house.”

“I won’t ask again.”

And just like that, he was smiling again. “You know how it is . . . self-centered parents who considered you only in passing.”

“Right.”

He nodded toward the door. “Walk me out.”

What she really wanted to do was get back to work and distance herself from this man.

Outside, the Santa Ana winds were kicking up dust and blowing leaves from the trees. She closed the door behind them to avoid it crashing against the wall inside.

He took the first step and turned. “Avery.”

“Yes?”

His lips pulled into a grin. “I’d like to take you out.”

His words didn’t register at first. She thought maybe he was suggesting a work-related meal . . . but they’d never done that, and there wasn’t a need.

“On a date. Dinner,” he clarified.

“Oh, ah . . .” *Think, Avery . . . hell no.* “I’m flattered.” In a creeper kind of way.

His smile tilted.

“I’m seeing someone.” *Oh, Liam, don’t fail me now.*

“Exclusively?”

She bobbed her head like one of those dolls. “Yup.”

His eyes narrowed.

“I thought you said after your divorce you poured yourself into your work and that nothing got in the way of your getting the job done.”

This was going from bad to worse. Not to mention *get a hint, dude*. “It’s new. Besides, I’m working for you, and that wouldn’t feel right even if I was available.”

He smiled again. “So if things don’t work out with you and . . .”

Avery didn’t offer a name.

“You’d say yes? After the work is done, of course.”

No! She couldn’t say that.

Her skin itched. “You’re a very nice man.”

Not the right words. She could tell by the expression on his face.

“Well, then. We’ll revisit this conversation when the job is over.”

Before she could suggest he not ask again, he bounced off the stairs and ducked behind the steering wheel of his Volvo.

Avery scurried inside and leaned against the closed door.

With a shudder, she rested her head in her hand. She didn’t see that coming. How the hell was she going to handle him?

* * *

“I’m blowing off krav on Tuesday,” Avery told Liam over the phone later that night.

“Brenda’s going to make you work harder on Friday.”

“I know. But I can’t help it. I have a late appointment with an art dealer and a whole house filled with old furniture. I have no idea how long it will take. I want this job done as soon as possible.”

“Late hours and stress. You sound like me.”

Avery kicked her feet up on her coffee table and drank from her bottled water. “Who would have guessed?”

She considered telling him about Sheldon but decided to hold off. She'd been keyed up about the man all day and needed time to sort out how to handle him.

"I have back-to-back inspections all week, and my second crew is starting a job in Santa Monica."

"More work than you can handle?"

"No. I probably need to hire a couple more guys and tell my secretary to increase the payroll."

Avery watched her feet as she spoke on the phone. "You have a secretary?"

"Yup. My sister."

"So it's a family business."

"No. She's in school for a psychology degree and helping me while she lives here. I told her she didn't have to, but she insisted."

"Sounds like a winning combination for everyone."

"She wants to meet you."

Avery froze. "Ah . . ."

"Let me rephrase that. I'd like you to come over for dinner and meet my family."

She didn't mean to hesitate, but the words took a while to form in her mouth. "I just got used to talking to you on the phone . . . and texting."

"Am I pushing you outside your comfort zone?"

"Yes."

He chuckled.

"Liam."

"No pressure," he told her. "We have Sunday dinners almost every week. The invitation is open. This weekend, next weekend."

She pushed off her sofa and walked into her open kitchen and grabbed a bottle of wine. "Meeting your family implies . . ."

"Implies what?"

"I don't know, but it implies something. I'm pretty sure I'm not ready for that something."

He was laughing now. "You think about it."

She rummaged through a drawer, looking for a wine opener.

"I will." She should just say no.

"I have to go over some invoices and bury myself in paperwork for a couple hours."

"Aha!" She found it.

"Excuse me?"

"Nothing. Fine. Go. I have some busy work to do myself." Like opening the bottle of wine.

"Avery?"

"Yeah?" She pulled the foil off the bottle and tossed it aside.

"I miss you already."

Her fingers stopped playing with the bottle as she sank into his words. "I saw you yesterday."

"That doesn't stop me from missing you today."

Had anyone ever told her they missed her? Other than her girlfriends? Sure, the occasional guy on rotation would offer a *Miss ya, babe. Need ya, babe.* But what they missed was the horizontal time. Not one of them suggested they stick around once she called it off.

She poked the wine opener into the cork. "You haven't been gone long enough for me to miss you," she told him.

"Uh-huh."

"And don't call me a liar. That's rude." He'd been implying she was a liar since they first met. Today she wanted to cut him off before he had a chance. Even if most of the time he'd been right about the white lies that had passed her lips.

"I didn't say a thing."

The cork gave way. "Good." The wine went in the glass and she lifted it to her lips. "I'll see you on Friday, right?"

"I'll be there."

She sipped the wine, welcomed the flavor on her tongue. "Good."

"Good night, Avery."

"Good night."

For several seconds she looked at the dark screen on her phone. What the hell was happening in her life? She dropped her phone on the counter, grabbed the bottle by the neck, and walked over to her couch. After switching on her TV, she vowed to stay awake long enough, or drink half the bottle, so she wouldn’t toss and turn, thinking about him.

Chapter Eighteen

Avery arrived at Brenda’s studio early, determined to get some extra time on the mat. All the time off made her feel weak and rusty.

She dropped her bag by the door and started to call out to Brenda when Avery realized she was talking on the phone.

“I told you I have a client on Friday night. We have to meet after nine.”

Avery’s footsteps stopped. Even as she listened in, she scorned herself for eavesdropping.

“I think about you, too,” Brenda said.

It had to be Brenda’s mystery guy. Not only was the woman saying romantic words Avery didn’t think Brenda could piece together, but she spoke them in a softer, gentler way.

“It’s only a few hours.”

Avery turned her head and forced herself not to listen.

Was that Brenda giggling?

Did Brenda giggle?

Avery paused again.

Stop listening.

Her shoes squeaked on the mat. The sound shot through the silent room.

“I’ve got to go.”

Oh, shit. Busted.

“Hey, Brenda.” Avery recovered quickly. “I’m early.”

Brenda poked her head out of her office. “Nice of you to join me.”

“I called.”

“Yes, you did. But did you work out while you were on vacation?”

Avery didn’t think drinking champagne and eating wedding cake constituted a workout.

“That’s what I thought. Fifty burpees, twenty-five squats, and three minutes of plank.”

At Avery’s thumbs-up, Brenda turned back into her office.

“Phew.” Danger averted.

Twenty-five burpees in, Liam waltzed into the room.

Same broad shoulders, slim hips, and sexy smile. So why did he look different?

“Hello, Avery.”

Just her name from his lips made her blush. Damn, what was she, sixteen?

“Hello, Liam.”

His sexy smile grew bigger.

Brenda cleared her throat.

“Hello, Brenda,” Liam said with a laugh.

“Three minutes of plank, and then I want one hundred push-ups from you. I need your arms tired for today’s lesson.”

Liam saluted the open door.

Avery went back to her burpees, counting them down. By the time she was on her squats, Liam had finished his plank and started the push-ups.

He really should do those without the shirt. Women everywhere would applaud, and what red-blooded American man didn’t want that?

“Are you staring?” he asked without looking up.

“I most certainly am.”

“Do you like the view?”

“Are you searching for a compliment?”

“No, no.”

Twenty-seven. Twenty-eight. “Liar.” It was sweet turning the tables on the man.

She struggled through the last minute of plank while he eased down the final count of push-ups.

“You two are awfully quiet today,” Brenda said as she left her office.

“That’s because I’m dying here.” And had nothing to do with the fact that if she said anything to Liam, it would be to demand he take off his shirt so she could at least see what he was denying her. Dreams of him had plagued her all week. If the man didn’t give in to her lust soon, she wasn’t going to make it.

“Speak for yourself,” Liam teased.

“Oh, don’t be cocky. I saw you slowing down on the last ten.”

“I have another twenty in me.”

“Let’s see them,” Brenda told him.

Avery pointed his way. “Backfired,” she said, laughing.

Liam didn’t pause. He pushed right into position and started counting backward from twenty. When he got to ten, Avery decided to make it harder. Without asking, she planted her butt on his back and crossed her legs.

“Playing dirty.”

“That’s how I roll, Holt.”

Even Brenda smirked. “Let’s see what you got,” she said.

Avery toppled a couple of times and then grabbed hold of his shoulder with one hand and his ass cheek with the other.

He kept going.

When he reached ten, she wasn’t sure who was more worked up.

She patted his butt, like she had the right, and jumped off his back.

“That was entertaining,” Brenda said. “Let’s get to work.”

* * *

Enough, enough, enough.

Their relationship had changed, somehow become intimate without intimacy. Liam wasn’t sure that was possible, but that was his explanation when his concentration went to zilch.

Brenda had Avery practicing getting out of bear hugs, knife to the throat, attacks from behind. Only Liam wasn’t feeling it. All he could sense was the way Avery’s skin felt against his, how her breathing made her chest rise and fall against his arm as he held her. He wasn’t completely geared up in protective padding as he had been in the past. So she stopped short of actually striking him but had to use her weight, strength, and speed to untangle from any hold he had on her. All her wiggling, kicking, and twisting had him sweating and his body rock hard.

Avery noticed.

Oh, she noticed and let her gaze drift down to his pelvis several times.

Her smirk only made it worse. Or better if they were alone and naked.

Only they weren’t.

“One more drill and we’re done for the day. Avery, I want you on your back.”

Like a puppet, she rolled onto the mat and smiled up at Liam.

“Liam, you’ve met at a bar, taken her home. Plan on going at it . . . but what she doesn’t know is your kink is strangling women.”

Liam looked at Brenda like she was nuts. “I don’t like this game.”

"It's not a game. Avery tends to freeze when she's on her back."

Liam had noticed but never pointed it out.

Brenda knelt down. "I want you to sense the second his body language changes, get out of his hold and up on your feet. And you." She pointed to him. "A blow to the groin will make you recoil but not disable you. You've been doing drugs, you naughty man. So you come back and try and take her down."

She stood and took a few steps back. "Drills, Avery. Don't hurt the man."

A month ago, Liam would have laughed at the thought that she could. Now he knew better.

Avery crooked her finger in Liam's direction and shifted her knees, giving him room to settle between her thighs.

Oh, yeah . . . that wasn't helping his erection, which had subsided slightly during Brenda's instructions.

"What's the matter, Holt?"

He narrowed his eyes at her. "You're enjoying this a little too much."

Avery wiggled her hips. "You know it."

Brenda huffed. "Stop playing. I don't have all night."

He wiped his palms on his sweatpants and lowered himself to the mat. He crawled toward her until the feel of her thighs warmed his hips.

"Lean over like you like me," Avery prompted.

He was blushing, he knew it.

He bent at the hips and rested on his elbows on the mat until their chests were touching.

Avery rested one hand on his waist. "Comfortable?"

He moaned. The last thing he wanted to do was pretend like he was going to hurt her. Not in this position.

"You're okay with this?" he asked close to her ear.

Her fingers flexed and then caressed his side. "Uh-huh."

Liam placed a hand on the side of her face, took a breath, and clamped on.

She bucked her hips, hard, nearly removing him. Then her hand came from nowhere, her leg wrapped around and tossed him to his side. She stopped short of kneeing him in the groin, and he hesitated.

Avery was halfway on the balls of her feet, and Liam rushed her. She pivoted on the floor and sent a kick. "Shin," she yelled out without taking him to the floor.

"Missed," Brenda yelled.

Liam moved forward, on his feet now.

Avery kept her angle to where her legs were always between the two of them. She kicked a second time. "Shin."

When Brenda didn't say she missed, Liam stopped and dropped to the mat. Something that would happen if her kick had landed its mark.

Like a cat, Avery was on the balls of her feet, and Liam sat.

"Perfect," Brenda called out. "Now do it again."

Avery smiled as if she'd just won the lottery, and pumped both fists in the air.

Two more mock going at it strangling assaults and they were being shuffled out of the gym before they could shower.

Avery teased Brenda without mercy. "Someone has a date tonight."

Only Brenda had a pretty accurate comeback. "I'm not the only one."

Outside the gym, Liam took Avery's bag from her hand and swung it over his shoulder along with his. "Pug's?" he asked. "We're sweaty, but I don't think anyone there will notice."

Avery took his hand in hers and pulled him down the street. "I have a better idea."

He followed.

"That was epic tonight. I didn't freeze, not once."

"Not once."

"God, I feel good." She was practically jumping up and down.

This side of Avery didn't come out often. He loved it. Carefree, no filter. To be fair, she never seemed to have a filter except when clamping down on her emotions. Which was another habit of hers, he'd noticed.

She'd marched them straight to her complex and through the doors.

"Hello, James."

"Good evening, Ms. Grant."

In the elevator, Liam could see some of the adrenaline seep out of her pores.

"Drinks at my place don't require a shower."

He watched the numbers light up as they moved. "True."

"I won't jump you," she told him.

That was unfortunate.

"Wait, I can't promise that."

He was smiling.

The door dinged, and Avery dug into her bag for her key. She led him into her place and switched on the lights.

"Wow." The view of the city at night was nothing short of spectacular. "I see why you like it." He dumped their bags by the door and moved deeper inside. The lofty space was a massive open room with a state-of-the-art kitchen that didn't look like it had been cooked in.

Avery kicked off her shoes and jumped up to sit on her kitchen island.

She spread her knees apart, just a fraction, and leaned back on her hands.

Liam forgot about the view, or the grandeur of her home, and only saw her.

Without invitation, he wiggled between her legs and clamped his hands over hers.

Staring down her pert nose, she grinned.

"See. I'm not jumping you."

That made one of them.

Holding her hands so she couldn't get away, which he knew was an absolute joke, Liam lowered his mouth to hers.

The heat between them was instant. Or maybe it had never cooled off. From the moment she jumped on his back during his push-ups to the tiny slaps on his ass during their workout, he hadn't had a single minute to let his brain catch up with his groin.

He opened his mouth to hers. The taste of her drove him high, but the feel of her . . . it wasn't expected. There had been women he kissed before that he thought he cared for. Knew he did on some level. And then there was Avery. He'd been cautioning himself every step of the way with her. Letting her lead . . . or maybe he had cut her off.

Not now.

Not this time.

She inched closer to the end of the counter and stroked the back of his leg with her foot. A simple touch, and the slow burn that he'd kept on low flipped to high.

He let loose her hands, pressed his palms onto her hips, and pulled her flush.

Avery wrapped her arms around him and fanned her fingers through his hair while her legs clamped on and she pressed her core against his erection.

He saw stars. Serious specks of light as all the blood rushed below his belt.

Liam kissed her harder, cautioned himself to not leave a bruise.

For a woman with her strength and agility, she felt small in his arms. He traced the edge of her spandex pants and ran his hands up the back of her shirt. She was soft against his worn hands.

Avery broke from his kiss and moved her lips to his neck. "Please don't tell me you're going to stop," she said.

He traced the sides of her breasts with his thumbs. "Not unless you tell me to."

Avery shook her head. "Not a chance."

He chuckled. "Shower first?" he asked. "Finish what we've started, then shower?"

Her hands ran over his ass.

Making it to the shower might not be an option.

Avery leaned back, pulled her shirt over her head, and tossed it to the floor.

A sports bra couldn't diminish her beauty.

"This. Here. Now." She smiled. "Shower later and then repeat."

He tugged his shirt over his head to follow hers. She never unwrapped her legs from his hips. "What if I'm too tired for a second round?"

"Then I'll do all the work." She traced her hands over his shoulders and down his chest. "This looks even better than I imagined."

He dropped his lips to the top of her breast and tasted the salt on her skin. "So good." With a quick movement, he unclasped her bra and let it fall from her shoulders.

"You've had practice."

He gathered the firm mounds of her breasts between his fingers and lifted them, one at a time, to his tongue. "I work with my hands," he told her.

Her head fell back. "And your mouth."

Yes to the left, and yes to the right. She was perfect. All of her.

The control he'd felt as he turned her into putty fell away when she traced the outside of his cock through his pants. Resting his forehead on her shoulder, he pushed into her touch.

"I want this inside of me, Liam." Her husky voice drove through the fog in his head. "I want *you* inside of me."

He pulled his wallet from his back pocket and tossed it on the counter.

Avery reached beneath the elastic of his pants and wrapped her delicate fingers around him.

"Good God, woman."

She offered a deep laugh. "Feels like God was good to you."

He dragged her off the counter long enough for her to peel her spandex off while he kicked his sweats and briefs to the side. The desire to stare and study and taste was overpowered by the need to feel.

"Here?" he questioned one more time.

With a grin, Avery wiggled back up onto the countertop. "Here, there . . . against the window where someone below might see us. I've pictured you everywhere, and now I want to make that happen."

With hands on her thighs, he smiled into their kiss. "You have quite the imagination."

"It isn't as good as the real thing."

From his wallet, he retrieved a condom and tore it free of the wrapper. "Next time we go slower," he promised.

Avery opened for him and looked between them as he positioned himself.

Her breathing matched the quick staccato of his. "Please, Liam. I've waited long enough."

With a sigh, he pressed into her warm folds and paused.

Avery's long release of a breath tightened her body around his.

He shook his head, already fighting for control.

"Liam?" she questioned.

"Shhh." He pulled away and slowly moved back in. "I got you."

And he did. Standing as he made love to her made it a little easier to hold off while she warmed to the feeling. Her kiss was a barometer of where she was at and how close she was to the edge. Slow and easy at first, then a little faster, until she wasn't kissing him at all. With her lips hovering over his, he felt her start to go. As she did, he lifted her from the counter and moved deeper until she called his name.

The feel of her insides squeezing took him over the cliff. He set her back down and rode the last waves of his release until his legs felt like blobs of Jell-O.

They breathed hard into each other's necks while his heart rate returned to normal.

Avery pounded a fist to his back. "Don't ever make me wait that long again."

Liam kissed her shoulder. "Yes, ma'am."

Chapter Nineteen

They made it to the shower, and that was when Avery digested every ounce of him.

The tattoo on his right shoulder was a geometric design he told her didn’t have a meaning. He’d been on spring break his second year of college, drunk with his friends . . . yeah, she could identify with that. She wasn’t sure how much of her college years she’d actually spent sober.

There weren’t many times in Avery’s sexual life that she’d showered with a man. Early on, when she wanted to try everything once. But in her most recent past, she never wanted a man to look at her the way Liam did. Every gentle swipe of his soap-filled hand told her she was beautiful . . . said he was lucky.

The moisture dripping off her hair as she stepped from the shower matched the volume of the ice that had been around her heart. Even as the thought entered her head, she tried to pull it back.

It’s just sex.

Even alone with her thoughts, she couldn’t convince herself that was true.

Liam was different. What that meant she couldn’t name. Refused to name. Men bounced once they slept with her. They always did.

With a towel wrapped around her and another one in her hands as she dried her hair, she watched Liam come up to stand behind her. Their reflection in the mirror brought a smile to her face.

“What has you so quiet?”

“Nothing.”

He rested his chin on her shoulder and stared at her in the mirror.

Before he could call her a liar, she squeezed out the only words she could find. “I really like you.”

He bit his lip as if he was trying not to smile.

“You just figured that out?”

Avery rolled her eyes and dropped her gaze. “Men never stick around. And you’re kinda growing on me.”

“I’m not like any other man in your life.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s scary.”

He laughed.

“Stop. I’m serious.” She shivered, looked at him. “Ever since we met, I’ve felt like there’s a wool coat on my bare skin, but I’m fine with it because feeling the coarse fiber is better than feeling nothing at all.”

His laughter faded. “I want to be the silk against your skin. But I’ll take the wool coat for now.”

He took the towel from her hands, set it aside, and grabbed a brush. With slow strokes, he brushed her hair without so much as a tug.

“You’re good at this.”

“I have a niece who doesn’t sit still unless I’m brushing her hair.”

“You’re too much.”

He nodded without shame. “I am.”

“Humble, too.”

Moving her hair to the side, he kissed the back of her neck. “Tell me something.”

Avery tilted her head to the side and encouraged him to kiss her again. “Yes.”

“Do you ever let men spend the night?” Lips on her neck, a tiny lick.

She shivered.

“No. I kick you all out once I’m done.”

He untucked her towel and ran the bristles of the brush gently over her back.

Her sex fluttered.

“What side of the bed do I get?”

* * *

Avery stretched like a cat waking up in the sunlight streaming through a window. Her eyes blinked open and the previous night rushed in. She closed them again and smiled. They’d made love until she cried uncle and then proceeded to curl into a ball at Liam’s side and fall fast asleep.

With one hand, she patted the space beside her, searching him out.

Not there.

Damn it.

On her way to rolling over and pounding the pillow beside her, she heard whistling coming from her kitchen. And coffee. She smelled coffee.

She left her bed naked and searched out a robe. When she couldn’t find it, she pulled on an oversize T-shirt she often wore as a nightgown.

In the kitchen, with his back to her, Liam sported her white, fluffy bathrobe. She swam in it. On Liam, it came up short on his arms and just hit his knees.

He looked ridiculous.

“Perfect fit,” she teased.

Without looking her way, he lifted a hand in the air to ward her off. “Desperate times deserve desperate measures. Don’t judge.”

He stopped chopping whatever he was cutting up, turned, and crossed to her side.

After dropping a kiss, he said, “Good morning.”

“Morning.”

His gaze lowered. “I’d offer you your robe, but then I’d be naked and you’d be dressed. And I like this ensemble you have going. The only thing that would make it better is if that were my shirt.”

Liam turned back to what he was doing.

“Are you cooking?”

“I am. But first thing, you don’t snore. And the second thing . . . there is nothing but rabbit food in here.”

“Organic rabbit food.”

He traversed her kitchen and poured her a cup of coffee. “What do you take in it?”

“Raw sugar. It’s in the—”

“Got it.” He had the lid off her sugar container before she could finish her sentence.

“Are you always this awake first thing in the morning?”

He paused, looked at her, then turned to the clock on the wall. It was almost nine thirty.

“Oh.”

“I am. After last night, I could take on the world.” He handed her the cup and kissed her forehead. “I hope you like omelets.”

“I can’t believe you’re cooking.”

“We need to eat. Don’t you cook?”

“Not if I can avoid it.”

He put oil in a hot pan and added the egg mixture. The man looked like he knew what he was doing.

“I don’t mind it. Most days I don’t have time.”

She sat at the kitchen counter and watched him channel his best impression of a short order cook. It was hot, even while he was wearing her bathrobe.

A few minutes later Liam placed a plate full of food in front of her.

“This looks amazing.”

“Taste it and tell me if it needs anything so I get mine right.” He winked.

There were onions, feta, spinach, and a spice she didn’t recognize. “Heaven.”

Before she could butter her toast, he had managed a second omelet for himself and was taking a place beside her.

“This is really good, Liam. Thank you.”

He took a bite, nodded. “A little bacon would round it off perfectly.”

“Love bacon, just hate cooking it.”

“Bake it in the oven. No mess.”

“Really?”

“Yup. The way my mom always did.”

“I’ll have to try that.”

Avery sipped her coffee and watched him finish.

He glanced over. “You’re done?”

She wasn’t about to tell him her normal breakfast was java alone. “I’m stuffed.”

He pulled her plate over and dug into the last few bites. “You drained me.”

She leaned back and placed her foot in his lap. “Worth it?”

“Just need to fuel up so we can do it again.”

“First you won’t, now you don’t want to stop.”

He wiped his mouth with his napkin and sat back. “Need to make up for lost time.”

Avery laughed.

“What is on your agenda today?” he asked.

“I was going to stop by the Lankford property for a couple hours.”

“Working on Saturday?”

“Don’t look at me like that. I’ve heard your phone buzzing constantly.”

“True, but most of the time construction stops on the weekends.” He started absentmindedly rubbing her foot that rested in his lap.

“I want this job done. Especially after Sheldon asked me out.”

Liam’s hands stopped. “He what?”

“Don’t stop.” She wiggled her foot before placing the second one in his lap for attention. “Yeah. Out of the blue. I’m thinking no. And *hell no*. I work for him. Even if I didn’t . . . no.”

“So you don’t want to date the man. Got it.” Liam smiled.

“I told him I was seeing someone.”

Liam pointed a finger to his chest and mouthed the word *me*.

Avery rolled her eyes. “No, James, the doorman.”

“I knew he had a thing for you.”

“You would think *I’m seeing someone* would end the discussion. Not with Sheldon, he practically quizzed me. Said if it was new, then he would check back with me later. The whole thing struck me as weird. Uncomfortable.”

“Like wool on bare skin?”

She took a hasty drink of her coffee. “No, like bile coming up your throat. I’m overreacting, but I didn’t like the whole exchange. Especially on the heels of him asking you to take the job.”

Liam rubbed her feet a little harder. “Asking me to what?”

“Okay, so right before the awkward date request, he asked that I inquire with you about taking the remodeling job.”

“He wants to do it?”

“Yes, but I didn’t think it was very ethical of me to suggest someone I’m seeing do the job. Like insider trading.”

Liam’s slow smile went full force.

“What?”

“You just admitted, twice, that we’re a thing.”

She slid her feet off his lap. “I did not.”

Liam reached down and pulled her feet back up. “You did, too. But you’re right. Unless Sheldon knew we were dating and wasn’t going to use our relationship against us, I would have to pass.”

Avery ignored the fact he said *dating* and *relationship* in the same sentence. “I’m glad you agree. Do you know anyone else who can do the work?”

“Tell you what, I’ll get ahold of this Sheldon guy and take this off your plate. I have a couple companies that do similar work I can refer.”

She started to relax. “Okay, but you can’t tell him about us.”

There his smile went again.

This time she swung her feet off his lap and stood.

“I’ll tell him I’m unavailable for the job, unless you want to tell him we’re a thing.”

She picked up her dish with his and kissed him briefly. “Thanks, and thanks for breakfast.”

“What are you doing next Sunday?”

“I don’t know, why?” She turned the faucet on to rinse the dishes before placing them in the washer.

“I want you to meet my family.”

The plate slid out of her hands and crashed in the sink. The racket made them both jump.

Liam was at her side and peering down to assess the damage. Nothing broken.

“Too soon?” he asked.

“Yes. Maybe. I don’t know.” And she didn’t.

He took her hands in his and kissed her fingertips. “It’s okay. We have all the time in the world.”

* * *

“Normally I would plague Trina with this, but since she’s AWOL—”

“On her honeymoon,” Shannon corrected.

“Honeymoon, AWOL, whatever. He’s calling us a thing, Shannon. Asking me to dinner with his family. He spent the night. The whole night. I don’t do that. I never do that. Even if I accidentally fall asleep, I certainly don’t wake up the next morning, eat the breakfast he cooked—and yes, Liam cooks. I don’t get up and continue to spend almost the whole weekend with him.” It was Monday morning, and Avery hovered over her Starbucks, talking on the phone and sliding into her car. She’d waited until eight o’clock to call, and now she was going to be late to the Lankford estate. But a girl did need to sleep. After Liam left, she was sexually limp and exhausted.

“What has you more upset, the fact he is into you or you’re into him?”

Avery turned over the engine and made sure her Bluetooth was working before tossing her phone in her purse. Careful with her coffee, she pulled out of the parking space to join the droves of cars clogging up the roads.

“I don’t think it’s that simple.”

“I don’t think it’s more complicated. You don’t do long-term. We all get that. I will let your future therapist discover why. In the meantime, stop and ask yourself this: Does Liam make you happy?”

“Yes.” She turned onto the road. “And frustrated, and anxious . . . nervous. He makes me nervous.”

“Like you’re afraid he is going to hurt you nervous?”

“No, nothing like that. He wouldn’t raise a hand to me.”

“That isn’t what I mean,” Shannon said. “Emotionally. Are you fearing he will damage something inside of you?”

Avery stopped at the light and paused her thoughts. If any of them knew the deep pain of love unrequited, it was Shannon.

“Maybe. Yes . . . I don’t know. This is all new for me, and I don’t know how to walk on this road.”

“One step at a time. That’s how you do this. If there is something in the road that is going to hurt, walk around it, or over it. Or through it. If it stops feeling good, end it. If it only gets better—”

Avery cut her off with a moan.

“There is the crux of this issue. You’re afraid it will get better.”

“I will do something to fuck it up.”

“I’m not sure where that is coming from.”

She crawled onto the freeway. “Why is this so hard?”

“Relationships aren’t always perfect.”

“It’s not a relationship.”

Shannon filled the line with laughter.

Chapter Twenty

Avery was systematically closing up one room at a time in the Lankford estate. The ones that took the most time, and were often the most lucrative in terms of lost treasures, were offices and attics. She had every intention of lowering the ladder to the top floor of the house after one last run through the home office.

She'd boxed the trinkets she'd suggested Sheldon look over after he denied the need. The paperwork that might come into play was in temporary file folders and boxed for storage until everything in the estate was sold and gone. Then it could all be tossed in an incinerator.

Avery started on one end of the room, looking for the unconventional, but almost always there, hidden spaces. The built-in bookcases didn't look suspect, but she tapped on them anyway. She climbed on a ladder to look above the dust and see if there was something that might be concealed.

When she didn't see anything, she stepped out of the office and looked at the span of walls between one room and the other.

Nope. No hidden room.

She pulled cushions off the sofa and dragged it away from the wall. Only dust.

The unused chair behind the desk was pushed out of the way, and Avery dropped to her knees.

She chilled.

This she'd done before. For Trina. The idea had come to Avery because she'd found a hidden drawer in her father's desk as a child. She'd been hiding in his office, a place she wasn't welcome to play, and stumbled upon it. Her father kept papers in his hidden space, papers that at the time, Avery couldn't read. By the time she was old enough to see what was so important that they were hidden where no one else could find them, she'd forgotten they were there.

Until the Hamptons.

Until the weekend Trina had gone off to meet her now husband for a weekend trip and Avery was rummaging around Trina's late husband's space.

She hadn't found treasures.

She'd found blood.

And that's when everything started to fall apart.

Avery pushed away the painful memories, straightened her shoulders, and closed her eyes. She ran her fingers along the edges of the desk to feel for any abnormality. It would be something you couldn't see but could only feel. Like a ripple in the fabric of the wood. Kinda like . . . she pressed the ripple, and her hand was knocked back.

"Kinda like that." Her eyes sprang open. Using her cell phone light, she guided a small drawer free of the underside of the desk. In the light, she gently blew the dust off the contents.

Pictures.

She turned them over one by one to see them.

Just pictures.

Avery froze.

“Why, Mr. Lankford . . . who is this charming young woman who isn’t your wife on your arm?” She flipped through a half dozen pictures, faded and yellow at the edges. “And who is this?”

* * *

“Okay, who is she?”

Liam had been attempting to find the perfect bouquet of flowers to send to Avery for the past thirty minutes. How hard could it be? Roses were a staple for any man’s romancing toolbox, but how many men had sent her roses in the past? Tons, he’d bet.

There were spring arrangements and tropical sprays, live plants . . . maybe he needed to call his sister for advice.

“Hello?” Carlos tapped his hand on the desk that separated them. The two of them were supposed to be researching companies that specialized in modern art mosaics, which the owner of the loft space wanted. Only somehow Liam became sidetracked.

“Sorry. What?”

“You’ve been somewhere else for weeks. Now you’re looking up . . .” Carlos stood and glanced at the screen on Liam’s phone. “Flowers. Since you’re smiling, I’m guessing it isn’t for a funeral or someone in the hospital. Who is she?”

“Her name is Avery.”

“Is Avery the reason you were gone for a long weekend?”

“Yup.”

Carlos added a nod while Liam scowled through the next page of floral arrangements.

“So what’s the flower occasion?”

“No occasion.”

Carlos put down the pen in his hand and cocked his head to the side. “There is always an occasion. You fight, you buy flowers. It’s a birthday, you buy flowers. Anniversary.”

“Yeah, none of those things. I just want her to know I’m thinking of her.”

“Ahh . . . *I’m thinking about the great sex* flowers.”

Was he that obvious?

“Roses are too tricky. Red means you love her. White is too pure. Yellow says thank you—”

“There’s a meaning behind roses?”

Carlos looked at him like he was dense. “I’ve been married for five years. Women put meaning into everything.”

Liam had lived with his sister and niece long enough to know that truth.

“I already ruled out roses. Overdone.” He tossed his phone to the side. “Everything looks overused and under-thought-out.”

“Is this Avery a jeans and T-shirt girl or dress and fancy shoes?”

Liam blinked. “Yes.”

Carlos laughed. “Both. That’s good. Simple or exotic?”

“I think she tries to be simple, but she’s really exotic.” Hadn’t she mentioned something about a trip to Paris to go shoe shopping?

Carlos tossed a hand in the air with a flip of his head. “Well, then. Orchids. But not cut. Buy a plant. They last forever. Since you’re buying ‘awesome sex flowers,’ she will see them all the time and ask you around more often.”

Liam liked the idea, snatched his phone off the desk. “It’s a little scary that you know so much about the subject.”

“What my sisters didn’t teach me, my wife has. Besides, if I didn’t move you along with this, I’d be looking at the top of your head for the next two hours, getting nothing done.”

* * *

Avery answered the knock on her door without looking through the peephole. Why her condo even had a peephole had always boggled her mind. No one could get through the staff downstairs without their name being on a list or the concierge calling her to see if she was expecting visitors . . . but still. Peephole.

She swung the door wide. “Hey, Lori. Thanks for coming up.”

Lori’s condo was a few floors down from hers. No name needed on a list, and no call from downstairs.

“I brought wine.” She lifted a bottle.

Avery turned her back to her friend and crossed to her kitchen. “How did you know I needed wine?”

Lori paused, her mouth dropped open. “Are those from Liam?”

Avery took in the flower shop that now lived in her home. Six orchid plants were awaiting her when she arrived from work.

“Yes.”

Lori absently handed the bottle to Avery and stood in front of the flowers. “Why so many? It’s lovely, don’t get me wrong . . . but six?”

Avery handed Lori the card that came with the field of flowers.

“‘I’m thinking about you and wasn’t sure the meaning behind the colors of orchids. So here are the six the florist had. I’m sure whatever the colors mean, I’m feeling it for you.’” Lori dropped her hand holding the card and stared blankly. “There’s meaning behind the color of orchids?”

“Apparently.”

Lori pulled out a kitchen stool and had to push one of the plants away to look at her. “I take it you and Liam finally went all the way.”

Avery had to laugh. The night before Trina’s wedding, the topic of discussion was how long it was taking for Liam to go there. Somewhere between eleven and one, the four of them had reverted to high school and used the term *all the way*.

“Yes, he did, and twice on Sunday.” Avery paused. “Actually it was three times on Friday, twice on Saturday, and once on Sunday before I let him go home.”

“So you spent the whole weekend in bed?”

Avery poured them both generous portions of wine and motioned toward her sofa.

She shrugged. “There was the kitchen counter, the shower . . . and yeah, a bed was involved.”

Lori laughed as she kicked her shoes off and tucked her feet under her butt. “That’s fabulous. Good for you.”

She looked over at the flowers and sighed.

“Is that why you wanted me to come up?”

“Partly. He’s freaking me out, Lori. I’m not sure what to do with him.”

“I think you have that covered.”

“I’m not talking about sex. Yes, I know what to do there. Now that he’s finally putting out, he’s complicating me even more.”

Lori chuckled.

“He’s falling for you.”

Avery shook her head.

“It’s obvious to everyone but you.”

“It’s all moving too fast.”

Lori sipped her wine. “Two weeks ago you were whining because he wasn’t stripping you. Now he’s too fast?”

“He wants me to have dinner with his family. There are flowers with notes that make me giddy.”

They sat in silence, drank their wine.

“Have you ever been in love?” Lori asked.

“No.” Avery’s answer was immediate.

“Not even close?”

“What’s close?”

Lori looked at the ceiling. “Close would be the man sneaking into your thoughts off and on. Wondering what he was doing at odd hours. Worrying about him when he doesn’t text back . . . and not an *Is he into me?* worry, but an *Is he hurt? Did something happen to him?*”

“The only people I worry about something happening to are you and the girls.”

“Not Liam?”

Avery considered the thought. “He hasn’t really left me alone long enough for me to worry. There is a lot of texting. Even if it’s just a wave or a silly emoji. We’ve spent a lot of time together in the past few weeks. He’s my first real *relationship*.”

Lori grinned. “That’s a big word, coming from you.”

“Yeah, well . . . Shannon wouldn’t shut up about it this morning. So . . .” She released a long-resigned sigh. “I’m in a *relationship*.”

“It’s not a jail sentence.”

“Whatever.”

“Why are you so opposed to a relationship?”

“Relationships don’t fit my life,” she said as if on autopilot. “It’s easier to flutter around and come home alone than end up like my parents.” As the words left her lips, she was reminded of her dedication to stay single.

“Not everyone is like your parents,” Lori told her.

“I know that. But my gene pool says I’m destined to be as miserable in their roles as they are.”

“Something tells me Liam is making you consider that might not be the case.”

Avery scoffed and changed the subject. “I didn’t ask you up here to bend your ear all night about Liam.”

Lori glanced over her shoulder. “That’s too bad. I want to know more about the kitchen counter. You washed it, right?”

Avery chuckled. “Yes.” *No*, actually, Liam had. After pointing out what he said looked like an impression of her bare butt. Which wasn’t there. But telling Lori that would keep the topic going, and Avery really needed a night or two to think about the whole Liam thing.

“So what else is on your mind?”

Avery set her glass on the coffee table as the amusement of all things Liam left her brain. “This falls under Lori Lawyer category. As in no one can hear about this.”

“Not even Shannon and Trina?”

“It probably wouldn’t be an issue with them, but I thought it would be best to run it past you.”

Lori’s smile faded as she sat poised for the conversation.

“It’s about my client, Sheldon Lankford.”

“The Brentwood estate.”

She nodded. “First off, I’m paid to snoop. Right? I’m hired to find the big and little stuff that’s worth money for my clients.”

“Oh, no,” Lori said. “You found something stolen.”

Avery shook her head. “No. Stolen I could deal with. I think.” Could she? What would happen if she did find something like that? “Nothing like that.”

“Criminal?”

“You’ll have to tell me.”

Lori blinked. “You might need to elaborate.”

Avery flexed her sweaty palms. “I found pictures in Mr. Stewart Lankford’s desk. Hidden. Secret drawer stuff.”

“I hide a gun in my secret drawer.”

“You do?”

Lori nodded. “Reed insisted. Sorry. Go on.”

Avery unfurled herself from the couch and brought her folder over for Lori to see.

Lori set her glass to the side and opened it. “What am I looking at?”

Avery sat close and pointed. “That is Mr. Lankford Senior. Only that isn’t Mrs. Lankford.”

“He had an affair.”

“That’s what it looked like to me.”

Lori skimmed over the pictures. “I can’t imagine it’s uncommon for these things to come to light after someone dies. Does your client know?”

“I haven’t told him yet. The picture that concerns me is this one.” Avery removed the picture of Mr. Lankford, his mistress . . . and a young boy around the age of seven. “That isn’t Sheldon, my client.”

“Oh . . . you think this might be Lankford’s kid.”

“He kinda looks like he could be, don’t you think?”

“Hard to say. But yeah. Could be.”

“Sheldon told me his parents were old when they adopted him and didn’t have the energy to chase him around as a child. He was thrown from nanny to nanny, then boarding school. Hell, that’s the way my parents are, and I’m not adopted, and they weren’t old when they had me.”

Lori closed the file and put it aside. “Let’s for argument’s sake say that Mr. Lankford is this child’s father and Sheldon knows nothing about it. Showing him these pictures does what?”

Avery shrugged. “I don’t know. He’s the sole beneficiary to the estate. Does this kid, probably a man by now, have any right to it?”

“I’d have to see the family trust. Probably not. Not that an illegitimate child can’t claim differently to a court.”

“That would put a halt to everything we’re doing. Am I legally obligated to say anything? To question the estate and who has the right to sell it off? Sheldon hired me, but it isn’t like I have ever needed to see a will to prove my clients own what they say they own. That’s between the bank and them, right?”

“Yeah. You’re in the clear. Maybe you should just show them to Sheldon and let him deal with it.”

Avery shivered.

“You don’t like that idea,” Lori said as she peered closer. “Why?”

“I want to avoid any personal conversations with him. Asking him if he knew his dad was sleeping with someone else and possibly fathered a child is entirely too personal. What if Sheldon’s father treated him differently than he did this child, assuming it is his? Showing him these pictures might open a door that, while painful, at least has answers. What if he knew, or assumed? Not knowing and questioning yourself can haunt you. Trust me on that. Even though I don’t really like the guy, I don’t think this kind of secret should be kept.”

“Why don’t you like the guy?”

Avery gripped her glass. “He has a strange affect. Like he watches and studies people. Then there is the fact that he asked me out.”

“You refused.”

“Of course I refused. I’m seeing Liam. Even if I wasn’t, the guy just gives me a weird vibe.”

Lori lifted a hand in the air and started clicking off facts one finger at a time. “So the guy likes you, asked you out, you turned him down, and then you show him these pictures. That does exactly what for your business relationship?”

Avery cringed. “Makes it even more uncomfortable. It forces intimate conversations about his family that I really want nothing to do with.”

“Right.” Lori dropped her hand and pulled her wine back to her lips. “This is a rock and a hard place. You want my advice?”

“God, yes.”

“You don’t tell anyone about the pictures. Finish the job. Once you’re off the payroll, you can give them to him. These kinds of things can be embarrassing even if the affair is decades old. It isn’t up to you to investigate the rightful heirs to Mr. and Mrs. Lankford’s estate.”

There was some relief in that route. “So do nothing.”

“For now.”

Avery sighed. “Thanks, Lori. I knew you’d have the answers.”

“Not all of them. I work with divorce, not this.”

The two of them sipped their wine in silence for a few seconds.

“Are you going to tell me about this haunting thing?”

Avery snapped her head toward her. “What?”

“You said the *not knowing* haunts you.”

Avery needed more wine for this. “You know it’s almost been a year.” She crossed to the kitchen, grabbed the bottle, and moved back to the living room.

“You’re thinking about what happened in New York. I’m guessing that’s normal.”

She refilled her glass, set the bottle down. “I haven’t stopped thinking about it. I’ll go down on the mat in krav and freeze. I think I see his face, something. Then it’s gone.”

“We’ll circle back to the krav thing in a minute. Although that does explain a few things. Why haven’t you told any of us this?”

Avery looked over her glass. “You were getting married. Trina was engaged and on cloud gazillion . . . and Shannon has her own demons to chase.”

“So we only get to be there for you when things are good? That’s not how friendship works.”

“If you haven’t noticed, I don’t foster too many friends. I suck at relationships. All of them.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. As Wade pointed out, you’re the blonde pit bull. You’re fiercely protective with your friends but won’t allow us inside to be there for you.”

Lori was right, but Avery didn’t want to admit it. “You guys know me better than anyone.”

That seemed to satisfy Lori. “I know. Don’t be afraid of talking to us. It’s why we formed the club to begin with.”

“We formed the First Wives to deal with dating after divorce. Somehow that has turned into a murdered husband, assaults, spies, and all kinds of soap opera drama.”

Lori refilled her glass. “Krav. Seriously, you’ve been taking krav?”

Avery found her smile. “Yeah. That gym I said I met Liam in . . . krav studio.”

“Why the secret?”

“Didn’t want anyone to worry about me.”

Lori narrowed her eyes, lips flat.

“Okay. Got it. I’ll try.”

“You do that.”

Chapter Twenty-One

For the first time in six months, Avery's haunts woke her in the middle of the night.

Cold sweat, racing heart. She shot straight up in bed, screaming. Her hands went to her face, and she expected them to fall away soaked in blood.

The vividness of the recurring dream was palpable. She could smell the stench of cigarettes and asphalt. And blood. Her blood. She tasted the salt in the back of her throat and gagged.

The clock by her bedside flashed 2:20 a.m. She swung her legs off the bed and padded into her bathroom. She switched on the glaring light and turned the water on hot. When she looked in the mirror, she briefly saw the image of her face the first time she was allowed to look at it after the attack. The bandages covered nearly everything, her eye swollen shut, the other just a slit. No wonder she needed to use reading glasses a decade sooner than normal age would have suggested.

She peered closer to the mirror. Almost forgetting what her nose had looked like before the surgery to correct the break and stop the bleeding. Nothing had been wrong with her other nose. This one was smaller. The scar underneath was a little bigger than most since the bastard that had kicked it in shredded it with his boot. Razor sharp tread, like they were new. Work boots. She closed her eyes to capture the image. Pants. Not jeans. Tan pants, frayed at the bottom. Dirty with her blood splattered on the leg.

The vision vanished.

She opened her eyes. Her pale image stared back at her, hands gripping the sink as the water flowed down and steam filled the mirror. "Holy shit." She remembered something.

Avery ran to her kitchen and yanked open her junk drawer to find a pen. She found a notepad and frantically scratched down her thoughts and images. What she'd smelled. Anything.

When done, she stared at the piece of paper in front of her. She conjured up the face of the man the police said did the deed. "Why can't I see you?"

He was already dead, killed by the man who hired him.

But Avery couldn't see him.

She pulled a bottle of water from her refrigerator and her telephone rang.

She jumped, nearly dropping the bottle.

"Who the hell? Hello?"

"Avery?" It was Lori.

"Is everything okay?"

"I was going to ask you the same thing."

"It's two thirty in the morning, Lori."

"I know. Alliance security called Reed. They heard a scream and then logged in on the cameras. Are you okay?"

"Jesus, I forgot about the cameras. I thought they'd been turned off."

"Off, but not disconnected. Are you okay? You sound okay."

"I had a bad dream. I'm fine. The phone ringing scared the crap out of me."

"She says she's fine," Lori said, away from the phone.

"Hey, Lori?"

"Yeah?"

"What security company takes ten minutes to ask if I'm okay?"

Lori sighed. "You're wearing a red T-shirt and standing in your kitchen. Reed said you were fine. But after tonight's conversation—"

Avery looked across the room to where she knew the camera had been placed the year before. She stared right at it. "I'm fine. Now turn off the damn camera or I'm ripping it off the wall."

"I can't do that," Lori said.

Avery turned her attention back to the phone. "I was talking to the guy watching the camera. I'm okay. Go back to bed."

"Okay. Good night."

"Good night, Mother Hen."

This was why she didn't tell her friends what was going on in her head. The security guys would have heard her scream, clicked on the camera, seen she was fine, and then turned it all off. Over-the-top for a security system, but when the guy who hired the man to kill her last year was still alive, it had been necessary. Now, not so much.

Avery twisted until her gaze landed on the kitchen counter. The memory of Liam as he . . .

Oh, yeah. The cameras had to go.

* * *

Avery's ass dragged the next day. She was 100 percent sure her emotional barometer was not ready to tackle the attic, but she was doing it anyway.

The Santa Ana winds were in full effect, with red flag warnings everywhere. The lack of rain and dry heat were a disaster waiting to happen. Days like this always made her happy she lived in a high-rise. Not much chance of a brush fire attacking her home.

The lack of cars in the driveway was a blessing. Her occasional helper wasn't coming in today, and it didn't look like Sheldon was there checking on the progress. In fact, she hadn't seen him since he'd asked her out. Maybe it would stay that way. She had two more weeks on the job but was pushing to get out of the house in one. It would still take time to sell everything, between auctions and estate home garage-type sales. But her day in and day out would be over. Avery looked forward to it.

The air snapped when she walked into the house. Or maybe it was just the vibe coursing through her skin. Knowing the skeletons that were hiding in the Lankford closets wasn't a comfortable feeling.

She glanced into the study where she'd found the hidden drawer in the desk. At first, she had every intention of selling the thing to an antique dealer. It wasn't auction worthy, but it was old. But if there was any question from Sheldon about where she'd found the photos, having the desk, and the drawer, would make it easier for her to show him. Since he'd given her permission to determine where the best dollar would be found, she'd lie about the desk and keep it there until the last possible day. After she gave him the photographs.

She set her empty coffee cup on a hall table and walked upstairs to the attic access. The stairs had been pulled down the day before, but Avery hadn't sucked up the nerve to climb them.

In addition to the concern that she'd find more shit she didn't want to see, Avery had a deep respect for spiders. Respect defined as *you stay on your side of the room and I'll stay on mine*. Again, a plus for high-rise living. The little shits had a harder time finding her than they would if she lived in a normal house with the foundation sitting on dirt, where those eight-legged, fast crawling creatures lived. Then again, maybe the guy she hired to spray for the things every year was doing his job.

She stared at the space above her head for several seconds. "Stop being such a girl."

Avery forced a fast pace up the steps and hauled herself up at the top. Two dormers on the east and west sides of the house let natural light into the space, but it wasn't enough. There looked to be old hanging lights, with chain cords to turn the things on, spread out every twenty feet or so.

She brushed away a cobweb and told herself it was probably decades old and the spider that made it was long gone. "Nope. Spiders need food to survive. None of that up here."

Yeah, except the few flies she'd already swatted away from her face. Maybe opening the stairwell the night before hadn't been a good idea.

She turned on the first light and took in the space around her. It was huge, spanning nearly the entire frame of the house. Most of it had plywood covering the floor space, except closer to the dormers. The musty smell of insulation and maybe the decay of a mouse or two rounded out the joys hitting her brand-new nose. Attics in larger, older homes all held the usual suspects. Old furniture people weren't ready to part with, some of it worth something, most of it sentimental to the dead, so in other words, worthless.

Boxes of holiday decorations sat closest to the stairs. Which made perfect sense. Those things were brought down year after year, while the other stuff morphed into the dingy space.

Avery moved deeper, turning on lights as she went. Old lamps, one that had a Tiffany thing going for it. Was it Tiffany? Rare? She had no idea.

She wiped dust off an old chest and clicked the stiff locks until they sprang free. "Quilts?" The Lankfords didn't seem like quilt people, but clearly someone had been at one time. The homemade blankets were stacked on top of each other without any other protection than the box they were in. Again, Avery knew nothing about these kinds of handmade items except that they didn't tend to fetch any money. The chest itself was 1920s modern. The deeper in the attic she went, the fewer furnishings she found. Old toys. Some that looked much too old for something that Sheldon would have played with.

She turned a corner and found a desk that looked a lot like the one in the father's study. Her hand hesitated before opening the drawers. A few old coins, a pen, and a paper clip. She once again looked under the desk but had no intention of searching for a secret drawer. Her quick visual made her jump.

"Hello, Charlotte." It was big, it was black, and it was definitely alive. "You just stay right there." She backed up on the balls of her feet, lost her balance, and fell on her ass.

She bounced up. "Okay, I'm done in here." She'd hire a crew to bring everything into the light, and keep an eye out for the things she thought held value. But right now, she wanted out. The stale air was stealing her oxygen.

Avery dodged at least four spiderwebs before reaching the stairs. She backed her way down and brushed at her arms and legs with her bare palms, muttering, "Yuck, yuck. Yuck!" A mirror and a bathroom, that's what she needed.

She turned around and nearly toppled over Sheldon.

She screamed for the second time that day and lunged back.

He lifted his hands. "Didn't mean to startle you."

Avery clenched a hand to her chest. "Son of a . . ."

"Sorry."

"I didn't see you."

"I called your name downstairs."

Her heart was still in her throat. "I didn't hear you."

She brushed at her arms again, certain a sticky web was taking root.

"It's pretty dirty up there."

"Yeah."

She dared to look him in the eye and found him looking at the top of her head.

Avery froze. "What is it?"

"I think you have a hitchhiker."

Her squealing girl meter ramped into overdrive. She didn't care who he was or how much he creeped her out—a spider in her hair ushered her toward him. "Get it off! Get it off!"

She suddenly felt like she did when she watched *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Things were crawling on her, she could feel them.

Sheldon calmly lifted a hand to her head and brushed at her hair.

She held perfectly still, eyes closed. "Did you get it?"

He backed away. "I got it."

She finally had the nerve to swipe at her hair as she opened her eyes.

What she saw then made her head explode in pain.

Sheldon was letting the long legged, hairy spider crawl on his arm.

"What's the matter? It isn't going to hurt you."

Only it was.

A spider on the inside of his arm. A tattoo.

She was going to pass out.

Avery stumbled away from him and the insect, or small animal, whatever you wanted to call it. "I've got to go."

"I think you should sit down. You don't look too good."

She backed away from Sheldon, keeping him and the spider in sight until she found the top of the stairs. "I can't. I have to go."

"I'll take it outside."

She ran down the steps, finding air in gulps as she went.

"Avery?"

She snatched her purse and ran to her car.

For two seconds, she gripped the steering wheel, closed her eyes, and slowed her breathing.

Then she tore out of the driveway as if hell's hounds were biting at her ankles.

* * *

Nine hours later she was stepping off a plane at JFK.

By the time she reached her hotel it was after eleven New York time.

She dropped her bag on the bed and opened the blinds wide. There would be no sleeping in tomorrow.

Her phone buzzed in her purse.

It was Liam.

She forced a smile she knew would help her sound normal and answered, "Hey."

"Hey back. Are you still at the studio?"

Avery cringed. She'd forgotten to call Brenda.

"No, uhm, I had to fly to Seattle." Even as she told the lie, she looked out over the dark vastness of Central Park and the skyline surrounding it. "An unexpected problem with my client up here."

"Oh, okay. I was going to see if you wanted to grab a bite. I know how hungry you get after krav."

"I'm going to have to take a rain check."

"When do you think you'll be back?"

New York was a big ass city. Lots of places to hide. "I don't know. A couple of days, I think."

"Must be a big problem."

"Nothing I can't handle."

He paused. "Are you okay? You sound tired."

"I *am* tired. Not a lot of sleep this weekend, or last. Now I have to be here. I think I need to go to bed early."

"Sounds like a good idea. We wouldn't want you getting sick."

"Not that, please."

"What hotel are you in? I'll send flowers since you had to leave the ones at your place."

"You're too much, Liam." No point in telling him a hotel. That would be the fastest way for all of them to know she wasn't there. "Orchids last forever. They'll be alive when I get home."

"Okay, then. I won't keep you."

"We'll talk soon," she told him.

"Good night."

"Night."

Avery tossed her phone on the bed, opened the notebook she'd been drawing in since she made it to the airport, and continued to sketch.

* * *

"Detective Armstrong." Avery stared at the uniformed officer. "Or Gray. Either one will do."

"You are?"

"Avery Grant."

"Are they expecting you?"

"No."

"I'll see if they're available."

"It's important."

It was coffee-and-donut early, so Avery banked on them being in.

The officer lifted the phone to her ear and dialed. "Yes. An Avery Grant is here to see you."

Good, they were in.

“Grant?” the officer asked Avery.

She nodded.

“Yes,” the officer said back into the receiver.

She hung up the phone. “He’ll be out in a minute. If you’ll take a seat.”

Avery moved away from the desk but didn’t sit.

She recognized Detective Armstrong when he pushed out the doors leading to the back of the police station. “Ms. Grant.”

He reached out a hand.

“Detective.”

“You look much better than the last time I saw you.”

“That wouldn’t have taken much.” She’d been black, blue, purple, and green for six weeks.

“What can I do for you?”

“I need to see the pictures of the man who attacked me again.”

“The case has been closed.”

She lifted her chin. “I think you need to reopen it.”

Armstrong shifted back on his heels, his eyes blank. “Okay, then. Come with me.”

He walked her behind the reception desk and through the doors he’d emerged from. The noise behind the wall was ten times what it was in the lobby. It might be first thing in the morning on a Wednesday, but apparently that didn’t matter when it came to cops and their work. She walked around several old desks, all of them piled with papers. There was a wild-eyed young man sitting with his hands behind his back, telling an officer he “wasn’t there.” The exhausted officer talking to him wasn’t buying it.

They rounded the corner to a slightly less populated part of the space and into a semiprivate office.

“You remember Detective Gray.”

“Vaguely. I was pretty drugged up when I saw you both last.” They shook hands.

“Sit.”

She took the edge of the chair and waited for them to follow.

“I’ve started remembering things. Details of that day.”

“What kind of details?” Gray asked as he picked up a pad of paper and held a pen at the ready.

Avery held her notebook in her hand but closed her eyes in an effort to bring the image back up. “Boots. The work kind. I think they were new, because I remember a spiky edge to the tread coming at me.” She looked beyond the boots in her mind and described the man’s tan pants to them. “New boots and old pants you’d see on a homeless man, the contrast is clear in my head.” She opened her eyes to see the men watching her.

“The man who attacked you is dead, Ms. Grant.”

She narrowed her eyes. “No. The man in my memory is not the man in the morgue.”

The detectives looked at each other.

“Anything else?” Armstrong asked.

She nodded and placed her notebook on the desk.

Opening it to her amateur artwork, she turned the page around and pointed. “He had a tattoo on the inside of his right arm. I saw it when he dragged me around the car. This spider. It covered his skin and was so lifelike . . .” She shivered. “There were bones and hair. The eyes had color. Red.” No wonder she had blacked the image out.

Avery shifted her gaze between the two detectives and placed both hands on the desk. “I don’t remember this from the pictures you showed me. All I’ve seen in my nightmares is the mug shot of the guy you said did it. All the while I’ve kept thinking it wasn’t right.”

“Do you remember a face?”

She shook her head. “No. But I’m remembering details every time I close my eyes. The doctors said the day of the attack might flood back in, and it is. So it’s only a matter of time. I need to see the evidence you have. I need to know if this guy”—she pointed at her drawing—“is still out there.”

Armstrong sat back in his chair. “We need to pull your files and bring you back in. Where are you staying?”

“Manhattan.”

Once again the officers exchanged glances. Their precinct was in Suffolk County, a good hour and fifty minutes outside the city. While her assault case had originated in Manhattan, it had merged with the murder case of Trina’s late husband, who lived in the Hamptons. Officers Armstrong and Gray had the cases combined. Left alone, Avery’s assault case would have gone to the bottom of the page in terms of priority. A murder case of a wealthy man, on the other hand . . .

Avery turned several pages over in her notebook, took a pen from the desk, and scribbled down her cell phone number. “How long will it take to retrieve the file?”

“Later today, maybe tomorrow.”

She tore the paper out and placed it on the desk as she stood. “I remember you saying that you had a video of the man you believe responsible leaving the garage.”

“I think that’s right,” Gray said.

“Was there any other evidence linking this scar-faced man to me?”

“Physical evidence? No. Not that I recall. But one of Petrov’s men turned state’s evidence on the other in the suspicious deaths of your suspect and the housekeeper,” Armstrong told her.

No evidence. None? “What was the state’s evidence?”

“That Ruslan Petrov had put a hit out on you. His man hired Scarface, as you call him.”

“What was the name of the scum that you assumed altered my face forever?”

“Mason, I think.” Armstrong looked at Gray.

“Ken Mason. Went by Krueger on the street,” Gray added.

“As in Freddy?” Avery asked.

“That’s what his rap sheet told us. A known hit man.”

“Did this Krueger have spider ink?”

They were silent.

“I’d have to look at the photos again,” Armstrong eventually said.

Avery felt her blood pressure rise. “I will bet my next paycheck he didn’t. The picture of Krueger that you showed me was a man with acne scars and haunting eyes. No ink on his neck from the mug shot. And while I don’t remember the whole conversation, I do think you said something about him liking ink, but he kept it off his neck and arms. Since this Krueger made his living killing people for money, that would make sense. If he had two brain cells to rub together, he would keep any defining marks like this one”—she slapped her hand on her open notebook—“hidden.”

Armstrong raised both palms in the air. “I understand your frustration. But at the time this was happening, you remembered nothing, and all we had to go on was the evidence we did find and the testimony of those in Petrov’s circle. Now that you’ve remembered something distinctive, we can look into the case again. If Krueger didn’t have this tattoo, we will reopen it.”

She really wanted to scream. “By reopening it, what does that mean? Put out an APB on a tattoo?”

“Let’s cross that bridge when we have to.” Gray stood, along with Armstrong. “We need to do our job and get back to you.”

She felt a brush-off coming.

“If you remember anything else, call us.” Armstrong handed her a business card.

Avery started toward the door.

“Ms. Grant, don’t forget your purse.”

Avery glanced at the chair she’d just vacated. “I didn’t bring one.” No, she had the rental car key in her front pocket, a pocket wallet on her right hip, and her cell phone on her left.

“Let me walk you out,” Armstrong said.

They zigzagged through the station and out into the lobby. From there he walked her to the front door and matched her pace down the steps. “Where are all of those bodyguard friends of yours, Ms. Grant? The last time we saw you, you were surrounded by an army.”

Avery stopped in front of the rental car she didn’t bother locking and opened the door. “You only need an army when you can’t defend yourself.”

He hiked a brow.

“Have a nice day, Detective.” Avery slid behind the wheel, started the car, and reversed out of the space.

Armstrong stood, hands on hips, in her rearview mirror until she drove out of sight.

They had the wrong guy. She’d seen the looks on their faces, expressions that shadowed doubt on what they remembered about the case.

They had the wrong fucking guy.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Derrick Armstrong walked back into the station and straight to the office he shared with Gray. His partner was busy clicking behind the computer monitor. “Did you find it yet?”

“I’m not that fast.”

They did have to dig a little deeper for archived files. But unlike the days when everything was paper and physical photographs that were stored in remote locations, they didn’t have to leave the station to find what they were looking for.

Armstrong looked at the chair Ms. Grant had sat in. “A woman without a purse?”

“Less likely to get mugged,” Gray said.

“More prepared to fight if she were.”

Gray glanced up. “She doesn’t look like a fighter.”

“Looks aren’t always what they seem.”

“She sure as hell didn’t fight the last time.” Gray went back to the computer.

“No guarantee she wouldn’t now.” In fact, he would bet his next paycheck she would.

Thirty minutes later they were both staring at the postmortem pictures of Ken “Krueger” Mason.

“Well, shit.”

The man had lots of ink but nothing that looked like a haunting spider crawling on an arm.

“What about the video we have on him leaving the garage?”

Gray pulled up the file and they watched the only footage they had of Krueger leaving the scene.

“Jeans. He’s wearing denim, not tan pants,” Armstrong pointed out.

“He looks like he’s wearing boots.”

“Yeah, but that’s the only thing that matches Grant’s description. She said tan pants and a spider tattoo. This guy might have been the one hired to take her out, but he isn’t the one who did it.” Armstrong turned from the desk. “Damn it.”

“I’m not sure what you think we’re going to do.”

“We reopen the case.”

Gray paused. “Okay, fine.” He was the older of the two of them and tended to be more pragmatic about their cases. “But this guy, the one hired to murder Ms. Grant, is dead. And the man who hired him is also dead. Which leaves whoever beat up our victim only guilty of third-degree assault.”

“Second-degree,” Armstrong corrected. “Broken bones, ICU.”

“Good luck making that stick. No weapon was used, she’s not a public servant. And there were no long-lasting effects of the attack.”

Armstrong doubted that.

“Any wet behind the ears public defender will get the charge dropped to a misdemeanor, and Spider Man will be back on the streets in a few hours.” Gray pushed back from the computer and grabbed his cup of coffee.

“Unless he has priors.”

Gray rolled his eyes. “A few days, then. C’mon, man. It’s a low priority.”

“Not for her.”

“I understand that. Let’s give her a day and then let her know we’re reopening the case.”

“Opening and then ignoring.” Armstrong looked at the pile on his desk. They didn’t have a choice.

“We can find all the ink in the world, but unless there is something else to go with it . . .”

“I know.” Armstrong released a sigh and went back to his desk.

* * *

Avery shed the rental car as soon as she entered the city. She didn’t fool herself for a minute that she’d find her assailant by looking at arms throughout the streets. Besides, it was fall, and the nip in the air had everyone in long sleeves and sweaters. Then there was the pesky fact that there were one point six million residents in Manhattan. Even if you cut it down by race, that left 56 percent of that one point six falling into the Caucasian category. The arm bearing the spider tattoo had been white. Cut that in half for gender and take out the percentage of children in the mix . . . yeah, Avery had done the math. She was searching for one man in a sea of four hundred thousand. Omit the old, the ones that didn’t have tattoos . . . she’d hated math in school, and she hated it even more now.

But nothing was going to stop her from looking. Spider, which was the name she used in her head for the guy who attacked her, was out there. He’d haunted her dreams, altered her appearance, and changed her life. She deserved to face him.

Avery stuffed a few hundred-dollar bills into her wallet and put it into the inside zippered pocket of the parka she wore. No subway pickpocket was getting the drop on her. One of the many things she’d learned from Brenda. The woman was practical to the core and assumed everyone was out to get her. It suited her teachings of krav well.

Avery left the luxury hotel just after two and started toward the West Village. Once there, she searched out the local college and then a coffee shop. Her stomach reminded her that she’d skipped breakfast and was working her way toward dinner without so much as a piece of toast. After grabbing a coffee and a bagel, Avery sat at the far end of the small café and waited.

College art students started pouring in and scouting out tables. Avery nibbled on her bagel and watched. Some of the kids sat absorbed in their phones, while others hovered over their textbooks with earbuds blaring music into their brains.

Avery abandoned her seat and meandered through the room. Two guys and a girl sat closest to the window. On their table were unopened artist sketchbooks and coffee.

“Which one of you is the budding artist?” Avery asked as she pretended to walk by.

The three of them stopped talking and looked her way.

“We all are,” the girl said. She was white, average height, sporting coal black short hair with a streak of red on her bangs.

“Any of you good?”

They glanced at each other and smiled. “Lady, we wouldn’t have gotten into the institute if we sucked.” This from the Asian guy.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to offend you. I was looking for someone who might want to make a little cash for a quick sketch.”

College kids and cash.

Bait and hook.

“What kind of sketch?”

“Can I sit down?”

The Asian guy stood and offered his chair while snaking one from another table.

Avery thanked him and removed the picture from her pocket. “I’m Avery, by the way.”

Their names were Hiraku, Monique, and Emmett.

“I want someone to do a better job at sketching this.” Avery showed them her paltry scratches.

“Spiders. Cool,” Emmett said.

“Is this supposed to be an arm?” Hiraku asked.

“Yeah. I’m thinking of a tattoo here.” She patted the underside of her right arm.

Monique leaned back. “That’s all you guys.”

“Oh?” Avery questioned.

“I’m all about the face. Hiraku is anatomy and Emmett is still life.”

Avery looked between the two of them. “Think you can sketch something if I can describe it to you?”

“What’s in it for us?” Hiraku was the businessman.

Avery liked that.

She removed three one-hundred-dollar bills from her wallet and set them on the table.

Monique snatched up the money.

The guys looked at her.

“What? The rental agreement is in my name. Consider it an advance.”

The kids shrugged as Hiraku tugged his sketch pad closer. He pulled out some kind of fancy case and removed a few pencils and got to work.

Avery would guide him once in a while. “More muscular. The veins protruded more. Hairy.” With each instruction, the sketch came to life.

When Hiraku was done, he sent the page over to Emmett, who had been studying the image she drew.

“What’s the scale on the arm?”

“Three-quarters, with the bulk of the body here and the legs spanning around.”

Hiraku pulled another pad out and started drawing a posterior forearm.

Avery concentrated on what Emmett was sketching.

“It was long legged but hairy. You can see the joints. Almost like you’re looking at it through a microscope.”

“Wicked,” Monique commented.

“More pointy on the legs,” Avery encouraged.

Around them, the coffee shop buzzed with movement in and out. As the image in her head slowly came into view on the page, chills ran a path down her spine. But unlike before, this time the chill was laced with excitement. Like she was discovering something for the first time.

“Like this?” Emmett turned the sketch around for her to see.

“Yeah, only more lifelike. Dimensional.”

Emmett shrugged like she had requested ice in her water. He twisted the page around several times, making slash marks on one side of the spider until it looked like it was crawling off the page.

“That’s it.” She stared at the paper like it was fine art that cost a fortune. Avery didn’t doubt she would see this image in her head for years to come. But right now it was a blessing after months of darkness. This was the hand that hurt her.

Emmett took the paper back from her and drew over Hiraku’s posterior arm.

Seeing the tips of the spider legs come to life on the other side of the arm was alarming. Almost like someone was grasping her with sharp nails that she couldn’t krav her way out of.

“Dude, that’s seriously good,” Monique praised her friend.

“Spiders are cool. They get such a bad rap,” Emmett said while he continued to add the dimension needed to match the other side of the arm.

“They run too fast,” Avery said under her breath.

“You would, too, if you had eight legs and an exoskeleton,” Hiraku said.

Emmett handed her the other page. Together they were matched perfectly.

“You guys are really good.”

“Damn straight.” Monique had attitude.

Avery loved it.

Avery stood with the papers in her hand.

“Here.” Hiraku handed her a plastic sheath to put the sketches in.

Avery set them back on the table. “You should sign them. Since you’re going to be famous one day.”

Even though they laughed, they totally scratched their signatures on the bottoms of the pages.

“Thank you, guys.” She dug back into her pocket and placed several hundred-dollar bills on the table. “Dinner’s on me.”

Stunned silence.

“Ah, anytime you need any other help. We’re here all the time.”

Avery winked. “I’ll take you up on that.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

She was busy. That's what Avery told him in her morning text.

But then nothing.

Liam tossed the ball for Whiskey in the backyard while drinking a beer. The days were getting shorter, but there was no lack of heat in the air.

The back door opened and his sister stepped out. "Dinner will be ready in fifteen."

"Thanks."

Michelle walked all the way outside. "Okay, what's wrong?"

"Nothing." He set his drink down and attempted to wrestle the ball out of his dog's mouth.

"I know that face and it's not okay."

"I'm fine."

Now Michelle just laughed. "It's about Avery?"

Much like his dog, Michelle didn't give up when she was onto something that had anything to do with emotions.

"She's out of town. Working. Not a lot of time to chat."

"In other words, you miss her."

He missed her, worried about her, and thought about her all the time. The dreams were as vivid as the memories. "Yup."

"Sounds pretty normal."

"Yup. Like I said, nothing wrong." Except that before their explosively sexual weekend she would drop a text in the middle of the day with something completely random. An emoji or a picture of a jacked up truck with a comment like *Where is the ladder to get up in this thing?* While it might not have been all that personal, the texts told him she was thinking about him, and he'd grown used to that instant smile.

"Call her. Tell her you miss her."

"You're such a girl."

"So is she." Michelle ducked back into the house the way she'd walked out.

Liam tossed the ball to the back of the fence.

He snagged his phone out of his back pocket and stared at the damn thing. Now who was acting like a girl?

He pressed Avery's number and put the phone to his ear.

The line went to voice mail on the fourth ring. "You've reached Avery Grant. Leave a message, and I'll call you back as soon as possible."

"Hey, Princess." Oh, damn . . . what should he say now? *Miss you* sounded needy. *Thinking of you* was obvious. He should have sent a text. "Do you like dogs?" Where the hell had that come from? "I mean. Never mind. I hope everything is going well in Seattle. Call me when you have a second."

He hung up.

"Do you like dogs?" He might as well have asked if she liked suburbia and white picket fences.

Liam grabbed his beer and jogged down into his yard.

* * *

Her cell phone startled her awake.

Avery plopped a hand on the bedside table to answer the rattle. “Hello?”

“Ms. Grant?”

“Yes.”

“It’s Detective Armstrong.”

She woke up quickly, hearing his name. “Hold on.” She tossed back the covers and swung her legs over the side of the bed. She glanced at the clock. Nine in the morning. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes. “Okay. I’m back.”

“Did I catch you at a bad time?”

“I overslept. What did you find, Detective?”

“We looked over the pictures of our suspect.”

She knew what was coming even before he said the words.

“And?”

“He didn’t have any tattoo of a spider on his body.”

Avery crossed to the windows and pulled the light-blocking blinds open. She winced. “So what do we do now?”

“We’re reopening the case.”

There was some satisfaction in that.

“I need to caution you . . .”

“Caution me about what?”

“Tattoos are circumstantial at best. Unless there is something else to identify your attacker, the chances of being able to arrest, let alone prosecute, anyone we find with that mark is minimal.”

“What does that mean? You’re not going to look?”

“We’ll look. But . . .”

“But what?” It was too early for her to be this upset.

“Ms. Grant . . . we want men that do the things this guy did to you off the street just as much as you do.”

“I doubt you want it more than me.”

“Okay. Maybe in this case that’s true. Most of us got into this profession because we want to protect and serve. This case is almost a year old, and without a physical description outside of a tattoo, he is going to be impossible to find with the resources we have.”

Resources . . . that was what this was all about. “You mean it’s not a priority.”

“I mean we need more than a spider tattoo. An image that can be repeated on any arm, every arm, from here to Jersey.”

She started to pace. “What if I do remember this guy’s face and I give you a description?”

“Now we have something to work with. We give our friends in Manhattan the description. We search the prison database. If he is here, we’ll eventually find him. Then we can bring you back here to identify him.”

The tone in Armstrong’s voice told her there was something he wasn’t saying.

“And then?”

“We give the case to the DA and hold him as long as we can.”

“What does that mean?” She was starting to raise her voice.

“Ms. Grant—”

She was getting tired of hearing her name. “Avery.”

“Avery, this guy assaulted you. People are mugged and assaulted every day in Manhattan.”

She closed her eyes, her breath coming fast. “I was in the ICU for a week.”

“Which will weigh on the case. You have a lawyer friend, right?”

Lori. “Yes.”

“Ask her what the chances are of this particular perpetrator doing any serious time for your attack. There are always exceptions, but my guess is your friend will break this down to a few months, maybe a year or two.”

“So I’m just supposed to turn my back on him? He fucked me up, Armstrong. I’m not the same person I was before he stomped my head into the pavement.” She was seething.

"I'm going to look for him, Avery. Give me a description. Let us do our job."

"Why don't I believe you?"

"Give me his face, and if he is still here, we will bring him in. But finding him is not going to give you the satisfaction you seek."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I watch the face of victim after victim when we have to let their assailants back on the street. We go from hero to asshole in one day in cases like this."

Where was the fairness in any of this?

Since when did she think life was fair?

"I'm sorry, Avery. I really am."

"This is hard to accept." She refused to.

"I know. How long are you in the city?"

Until I find him. "I don't know. I have some work here," she lied.

"If you remember more while you're here, give me a call. I'll come to the city, and we'll sit down with a police artist and get his face in every station. But don't put your life on hold. We can do this remotely."

Out of sight, out of mind.

She wasn't going anywhere.

* * *

Avery jumped on the subway and made her way downtown to where the majority of tattoo shops were in Manhattan. After a night of research, she'd learned a few things about the industry and its history.

Sometime in the 1960s, tattooing a person had been banned. The prohibition had lasted over thirty years and was legalized in the late nineties. Like any prohibition, the law wasn't followed, but the places that offered tattoos weren't advertised. Which meant that there weren't as many tattoo parlors in the city as she thought. Of course, there was no guarantee Spider had gotten his artwork done in Manhattan. Still, it was a start. Avery felt better looking for this guy than letting him haunt her dreams any longer.

She walked into the first tattoo parlor just before noon. The walls were filled with examples of what could be permanently placed on your body for a price.

"Good morning," the clerk greeted her.

Avery approached the desk with a smile. "Good morning."

"Looking to get some work done?"

"No, uhm . . . I'm looking for some information."

The guy's smile dimmed.

Avery pulled her sketches out of her folder. "I'm looking for someone who has this on his arm."

The heavyset man rubbed his beard and glanced at her. "You a cop?"

"No." She was taken aback. "I'm . . ." *I have a vendetta against this asshole* probably wouldn't get her anywhere if, in fact, he was a paying customer at this establishment. "I'm interested in the artist who did this."

The man took a breath and pushed her picture back over the counter. "Yeah, right. Never seen it before."

Even if he had, he wouldn't tell her.

"Okay, thanks for your help." *Asshole.*

The next parlor, she took a different approach.

This time a woman was behind the desk, said her name was Zelda. Which fit. Zelda was full of ink from her neck to her fingertips and wearing a spaghetti strap shirt to show it all off.

"I need a little information about your services."

"Thinking of getting some work done?" Was this a standard question?

"Not for me. My boyfriend." Avery presented the pictures. "He likes spiders and was talking about adding to his arms."

"We can definitely do it."

"Do you have an artist here that has done work like this before?"

"Yeah, we all have."

"With this much detail?"

Zelda smiled. "We can show you examples of our work to assure you it can be done." She twisted the image around, looked at the back. "Who sketched this for you?"

Avery smiled. “A friend. How long would it take to do something like this?”

“A couple sessions, about four hours each, minimum.”

“So a long time.”

“Not really.”

Avery leaned forward as if contemplating a true decision about giving a tattoo as a gift. “How much would this run?”

Zelda told her.

“Oh. I didn’t realize it cost that much.”

Zelda wasn’t amused. “You get what you pay for. Any guy who has that on his arm isn’t paying a set price but by the hour. By all means, check out more than one parlor. Be careful of anyone who says it will cost less or you’ll end up with him.” Zelda pointed to a cartoon character in the shape of a spider.

“We wouldn’t want that. Have you ever seen a tattoo like this on anyone? I wouldn’t want to suggest something that everyone else has.”

Zelda shrugged. “I haven’t. Not on a forearm.”

Avery felt she was on a roll. “Is there anyone in the city that specializes in spiders?”

“Are you asking for the name of my competition?”

Avery took the picture back and put it in her folder. “I guess that wouldn’t be a smart business practice. I don’t want to make a mistake in the establishment I pick. Things are going really well with my guy, ya know? I would have to pull extra shifts for this kind of money.”

Zelda sighed. “Listen, there is a guy in the Meatpacking District. But he is always six months out in his appointments, and his prices reflect that. He specializes in things like spiders and anything that crawls. But I’m telling you. We can do this.” Zelda pulled her card out and wrote a name on the back. “If you want this for a fair price, you’ll be back.”

Avery tapped the card against her palm. “Thank you. You’ve been so helpful.”

An hour later she was in the Meatpacking District, in front of yet another walking piece of art, asking questions.

“Yeah, Van can do that.”

“Can I talk to him? It’s a big decision . . .” Yadda, yadda. My boyfriend. Avery repeated all the lies she’d used to get her there.

“You can make an appointment. I have room in April.”

“I’d like to talk to him first.”

“Yeah, well, he isn’t here. There’s a big expo in Chicago this weekend.”

The euphoria of an hour before quickly faded. “Well, can you tell me if he’s done anything like this before?”

The clerk glanced at the walls with testimonials everywhere showing spider art. “It’s what he does.”

“Exactly this. Has he done this tattoo before?”

Did he just roll his eyes?

“Every tattoo is going to be unique due to the canvas you’re putting it on.”

Avery shoved the paper in front of him. “This?”

He shook his head as if done with the entire conversation. “Yes. Maybe. It looks a little familiar, but that doesn’t mean it’s common. I see spiders in my sleep after working here.”

Not a confirmation, but not a denial. “How much will this cost?”

Zelda was right. This Van Lynch guy wanted triple.

Avery smiled and gathered her papers. “You get what you pay for, right?”

“Right. So do you want the appointment in April?”

“I need to check with my boyfriend.”

The clerk seemed annoyed that she’d wasted his time.

Once again it was after two and she hadn’t eaten. Avery made her way uptown and walked through Central Park while eating a hot dog. Food on the go. That’s what she needed, nothing fancy, and certainly no liquor to accompany anything.

Sitting on a park bench, she watched as people walked by, normal people doing normal things while Spider was out there. Avery judged every woman. Could they handle themselves if Spider attacked them? Would they freeze and cower on the ground while a boot flew into their face?

Her phone buzzed in her pocket. It had been doing that a lot.

She pulled it out. Four messages.

The first was Brenda. “*You missed your appointment. Don’t think I won’t charge you. We’ll work harder on*

Friday."

Then there was Liam. *"Hey, Princess."* He paused. *"Do you like dogs? I mean. Never mind. I hope everything is going well in Seattle. Call me when you have a second."*

She squeezed her eyes shut when she heard his voice. He didn't deserve her lies.

The next two messages were from Sheldon. *"Hey, Avery. I hired an exterminator. Take care of that little issue upstairs."* Thoughtful. She was actually a little impressed. Only his next message wiped all that away. *"Two days and you're not here. Are you planning on coming back?"* His voice was angry. *"Call me."*

She'd take care of Brenda later.

There was no way she was going to talk to Liam. She chickened out of a phone call and sent a text. Super busy. Up early, back late. Damn phone battery isn't holding a charge. Sorry. She hit send and stared at her message. Lame and lies. She wanted to add that she'd call him. But she wouldn't. Not yet.

Sheldon picked up on the second ring. She was really hoping for a voice mail.

"I'm sorry," she said after they said hello.

"I'm not sure how you're going to get the job done on time if you're not here."

"I understand. The spider thing freaked me out. Took a whole day to stop shaking." She faked a flirty laugh. "I'm a girl sometimes."

Sheldon's voice softened. "I can understand that."

Avery kicked herself for using her breathy voice. "Then something really important came up. It's not avoidable."

"How long will you be gone?"

"It's my aunt. She's sick. I'm in Seattle helping her out." And the lies kept coming.

"I'm sorry to hear that. I guess there isn't a huge hurry if I'm renovating. Did you talk to your contractor?"

Avery tossed a silent fist in the air and winced. *Jesus.* "Yes. I gave him your number. But he's busy, Sheldon. I'm not sure if he can help you out, but he might be able to recommend someone who can."

"Do you have his number on you? I can call him."

She bit her lip. "Nope. Left that back in LA. I'm sure he'll call soon. He's reliable." *Unlike me.*

"Okay. Let me know when you're back so I know when to expect people around."

"I will absolutely do that." The only nonlie that left her mouth. "Thank you for understanding."

She hung up the phone and damn near tossed it across the park. "'Oh, what a tangled web we weave.'" *How poetic.*

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Sorry?” From the woman who said she’d said she was sorry five times in her whole life and actually meant it. He understood work, completely got being so busy you don’t stop. Her phone not holding a charge was what stumped him. Something about that didn’t feel right. Yeah, it happened . . . but what did it take to send a quick *hello, I miss you*?

Had he scared her off so completely that she was running away? *I don’t do relationships. I don’t date.* Her mantra since they met had been broken through over the last two weeks, yet now she was pulling away. The thought made his chest ache.

“She’s just busy working,” he told himself.

Yet the other voice, his inside voice, said he was fooling himself. There was more to it.

* * *

Avery started back toward her hotel and walked past Bergdorf Goodman. She stopped and tilted her head to take in the high-rise department store. It was one of her favorite stomping grounds when she was in New York. The last time she’d been there was the day of the attack.

Someone bumped into her while walking by, snapping her out of her thoughts.

“Sorry,” the guy said, walking away.

“No problem . . .” Her words trailed off when her eyes landed on the parking garage she was attacked in.

Without thought, she followed the rush of people crossing on the not quite green light until she stood where she had been nearly a year before.

She walked in and down the ramp, ignoring the fact that her heart sped up and her palms started to sweat. There had been no anxiety when she’d walked in before. She had finished her first real day of work, and the mom bag she’d used to carry all of Trina’s late husband’s treasures had been empty. Having several hundred thousand dollars of watches and pens had made her feel like a target. The irony wasn’t lost on her now.

Fluorescent lights hummed above her head and attempted to stay lit. The flickering sparked a memory. She glanced up. Fire sprinkler lines crisscrossed the concrete ceiling, which served as a floor for what sat above. Black stains from smog-producing engines stained the dingy white walls. Well, they were once white, though now they sported a dirty gray patina that couldn’t be duplicated with a can of paint. You would think a garage on Fifth Avenue would be better maintained. Then again, the garage would always be full, and the people leaving their cars there would pay a premium regardless of how pretty it was or wasn’t.

The low ceiling started to weigh on her as she walked deeper. Anyone watching would probably think she was staking out a car. Normally she looked like she belonged there. Fancy shoes, nice skirt, sunglasses that cost what those college kids made in a month. Today she wore black leggings, a comfortable flat boot, a T-shirt, and a short-waist jacket. No makeup and not one accessory. She hadn't even packed a pair of earrings for her trip.

After a year, Avery wouldn't have remembered the space where she'd parked. The injury and trauma had caused some memory loss. But now things were starting to come back to her. And the police report she'd read over and over had spelled it out. Space 16B was currently occupied by a compact Toyota. Not the car she'd been driving.

She'd been digging through her purse when something hit her. She closed her eyes and willed her mind to let the image in. A deep breath through her nose repeated the smell of asphalt. Only it wasn't asphalt, but oil and grime. She moved to the front of the car. There was a little more space in front of 16B than the others in the garage since a support pillar shared the space with the wall. Enough room to dump a woman left for dead where she would not immediately be seen.

Avery ran her hand along the wall and knelt closer to the ground. The smell of tires and oil . . . that's where she'd gotten *asphalt*.

Lights flickered above her head.

She looked up, flinched, and fell back on her butt, which had been only a few inches off the ground.

"Don't look at me. Jesus, don't look at me."

He wore a worn-out sweatshirt with a hood. Most of it covering his face. But not all.

With shaky hands, Avery removed her cell phone from her zippered pocket and opened a voice recording app.

"White. Not too tall, average. Stubble. Lack of shave. Strong chin. Tired eyes." She closed hers. "What color?" Nothing came.

She rewound the tape in her head.

I'm walking through the garage with my head in my purse. How fucking stupid could I be? She shook away her stupidity. Avery wasn't that girl any longer.

He hits me, like a body slam to the ground. I see the boot coming and close my eyes. I open them briefly and see brown pants. Big and loose and too short. Avery lifted her phone to her lips. "His pants don't fit him. They're too loose and too short. Like you'd see on a homeless guy. Only he's fast. And fidgeting. He kicks me a lot. I keep my eyes closed until he starts to drag me." She looked at the ground in front of the car. "I feel my head hit the concrete car stop. He dropped me and that's when I see him. He's cussing and telling me not to look at him. He kicks my face again. His boots are brand-new. There's a plastic tag on the bottom that hasn't worn off yet." Avery went on describing everything she remembered about her assailant until there was nothing left to tell.

Footsteps broke her blank stare and prompted her to her feet.

Twenty feet away, a security guard had a hand on his flashlight. "Whatcha doin' over there?" His accent was pure Jersey.

Avery brushed at her butt. "I was here last week. I lost an earring. Thought maybe it fell out when I was taking my jacket off." She pretended to look around the cars.

"Expensive?"

She shrugged. "Sentimental." A few more passes around the car and she lifted her arms in the air. "Guess I'm outta luck."

The guard relaxed. "You can give me ya number. I'll call if I find somethin'."

"It's okay. Chances are if it is here, it's unusable now." She turned and walked away. "Thanks anyway."

"No problem."

He was definitely watching her ass as she left the garage.

Avery grabbed a taxi and returned to the West Village.

She walked into the coffee shop and sat down. "I need another drawing."

* * *

"She's avoiding me. I pushed things and she's bowing out. I can feel it."

"You don't know that. She's working. You zone out for days at a time when you're knee-deep in a new project." Michelle huddled over coffee with him first thing Friday morning.

"Things were going so well. Her friends like me. Getting your friends on the same page with a new relationship is gold, right?"

Michelle nodded.

"For all I know she's back in town and hasn't bothered to call."

"Go to her place."

"I'm not going to stalk her."

"Yeah, but you're not ready to walk away. Maybe she has some emotional baggage she's dealing with. She's divorced, right?"

"Yeah."

"Did she talk about her ex?"

Liam shrugged. "Not much." Only to say she married him for his money. Which Liam still had a hard time believing.

"You're supposed to see her tonight, right?"

It was krav night. "Yeah. But she could blow that off."

"But she can't blow off work. Maybe drop by this house she's working on. If she's there, you know she's avoiding you, and you take it from there. I'm a big one for not jumping to conclusions. Talk to her. Ask her point-blank if she's avoiding you. And face-to-face . . . none of those damn phone conversations or, God forbid, texting."

At noon, Liam detoured to Brentwood. He meandered up the established neighborhood, asking himself if just showing up was a good idea. As he turned into the driveway and didn't see her car, he realized all his worry was for nothing. She wasn't there. Unless she turned her Aston in for a Volvo, which he highly doubted.

He stepped out of his truck and looked around.

The door wasn't open like it had been every other time he'd been there. Safe to say if she was there, the place would be "airing out," as she put it.

"Can I help you?"

Liam turned to the male voice.

"I'm looking for Avery."

"Aren't we all? She isn't here." Strange response.

Liam took the guy in and heard Avery's voice in his head. "You must be Sheldon Lankford."

"I am. You are?"

Liam took a few steps toward the man and reached out a hand. "Liam Holt. Avery's contractor."

"Right." The man's handshake wasn't all that firm. He held on the right amount of time, but he looked above Liam's head instead of in his eye. "I was hoping you'd call . . . or stop by, as it seems. I appreciate you taking the time to look over the place and give me your feedback."

"No problem."

Sheldon motioned him inside. "Avery said you're a busy guy and you weren't sure you'd be available to do the job."

"All true." Half-true. But blowing off the man's work right now, with his relationship with Avery tilting off the ledge . . . yeah, he didn't want to do that quite yet.

"When did you want to get started?" Liam asked, as if interested in the job.

"As soon as possible. I realize that might not be reasonable. A good contractor probably isn't sitting around waiting for jobs to fall in their laps."

Liam looked around the space. It didn't look a whole lot different from the last time he'd been there. "I was going to talk to Avery about when she'd be done with her portion."

"Originally she said at the end of next week. But apparently her aunt is sick and she had to fly to Seattle to help her out."

Liam's step faltered. Sick aunt? Did Avery have an aunt?

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry about the aunt, but it's better than her abandoning the job."

Liam narrowed his eyes. "Abandoning the job. Why would she do that?" Did the guy in front of him make a pass at her? If so, he'd probably be nursing a bruise.

"I swung by on Monday and found her coming down from the attic. A baby tarantula was in her hair. She freaked after I got it off her, and she ran out."

Liam wanted to shake. He'd be less than okay if a big spider was on his head.

Sheldon looked at him. "Women."

Forging a smile, Liam agreed. "Yeah, women."

Twenty minutes later, Liam was back on the road. So either Avery lied to him about work or to Sheldon about an aunt. A white lie to the person paying you he understood. Calling in sick on a day you wanted to hit the beach was a norm. But a full week?

The rest of the day, Avery slipped into his head anytime his mind was silent.

Damn, he missed her. Hearing her voice. Teasing her about their not-date dates.

But it wasn't until he and Brenda were sitting at the studio, thirty minutes past Avery's appointment time, that Liam was done sitting back.

Blowing off work.

Blowing off Brenda.

And blowing off him.

None of it felt right. Phones were in every pocket, and there certainly would be one at the hotel in Seattle.

Something tasted funny about the whole thing.

He walked into Avery's complex and was greeted by James. "Mr. Holt. Nice to see you again."

"Thank you."

"If you're here to see Ms. Grant, she's not home."

"Yeah, yeah. I know. She told me." That confirmed that. "I was dropping by to see Lori and Reed Barnum."

"Are they expecting you?"

"No."

James walked him over to the desk and picked up the phone.

"Good evening, Mrs. Barnum. Liam Holt would like to come up."

"Of course."

James smiled. "You know where the elevators are."

Liam took two steps. "Wait, what number are they again?"

James told him and he disappeared around the corner.

Lori answered with a smile and a short hug. "This is a surprise. Come on in."

"Thanks for seeing me."

Reed walked over from their dining room table, dropping his napkin on his plate.

"I'm interrupting."

"No, no. We just finished," Reed assured him. "Sit."

Yeah, Liam didn't want to sit.

"Listen. This feels awkward for me." Liam glanced at Lori. "At the risk of sounding like a stalker, I just have to know she's okay."

Lori moved to Reed's side. "Who, Avery?"

Liam nodded. "Yeah. Have you guys heard from her?"

"No. Not since last Monday."

Liam ran a hand through his hair. "She told me she went to Seattle with some kind of urgency for her last job. She's texted me twice, but all distant stuff. Which, hey, if it's me she's avoiding, fine. Not fine, but okay. Then today I learned that she told Sheldon Lankford that she had a sick aunt she was taking care of in Seattle. Blowing me off . . . yeah, I don't want that to happen. But work and appointments?"

He realized when he was done talking that he sounded like a lovesick teenage boy. Which was sadly accurate.

Lori shook her head while she turned to her husband. "I knew there was a problem."

"We don't know that."

"It's been a year. She was having nightmares."

Liam felt some of his insecurities dissipate, rapidly replaced with concern. "A year since what?" All he could think of was her divorce. But he was pretty sure she said that had been a couple of years past.

"Since New York," Lori said as if he should understand.

"What happened in New York?"

Both Reed and Lori turned to him.

"She didn't tell you?" Lori asked.

"Tell me what?"

"Wait, you work out doing krav with her, right?"

"Yeah."

"And she didn't tell you why she picked it up?" Lawyer Lori kept asking questions. Each one made his concern grow.

"No," he said. "When did she finally decide to tell you she was taking krav?"

"Last week."

"Babe, I'm betting she's just working through it," Reed said.

"I'm betting she needs help with that."

Liam lifted both hands in the air. "Can one of you tell me what happened in New York?"

Lori tilted her head to the side. "If she doesn't want you to know . . ."

No way, he wasn’t going to let that happen. “Avery told me she didn’t want you knowing about krav because all of you would worry. If you think I should know about New York because of krav, then that ties it together. And now I’m scared shitless.”

“She was attacked.”

“Reed, damn it,” Lori yelled at her husband and smacked the side of his arm with the back of her hand.

“Sorry, hon. He’s right. If it were you, I’d be ripping things apart to get to the truth.”

Lori tossed her hands in the air and walked away.

“Attacked by who?” Liam asked Reed.

It took ten minutes for Reed to spell out what New York stood for. As Liam heard the story of the brutality that drove Avery to learn to defend herself, a much clearer picture of how strong the woman he was falling for became. The only saving grace to the information was that the man who did it was dead.

“So my take is, she’s working through the anniversary. Unlike my wife, I think sometimes that’s a solo journey. My guess is she’ll be back when things are straight in her head.”

“She doesn’t have to do this alone,” Liam told him.

“Yeah, but Avery doesn’t open herself up. The girls know her better, obviously, but even they don’t really have a handle on what’s going on in her head. Since the injury, that got worse.” Reed smiled at Liam. “Until lately. Until you came along. She seems a lot happier and more settled with you in her life.”

He didn’t mind hearing that. “But she doesn’t trust me enough to ask for my help.”

“Don’t take it personally. We didn’t know she was out of town, and we know everything.”

During their conversation, Lori was standing by the floor to ceiling window, talking on the phone.

“Of course I’m worried. Even more now. No. Don’t hurry. I’ll find out what’s going on and call you. Love you, too.”

“Who was that?” Reed asked.

“Trina.”

Reed scowled. “Aren’t they still on their honeymoon?”

“Yes. And before you scold me . . . I had to call her.”

“Why?”

“Because she’s the only one who has Avery on Friend Finder. Guess who isn’t in Seattle?”

“Avery,” Liam said without amusement.

“Exactly.”

“So where is she?” Reed asked.

Lori paused, nose flared. “New York.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Avery walked out of the print shop holding a hundred copies of the man she was searching for. Much as she wanted to put a reward sign on him and wait for his friends to turn, she figured that probably wasn't the best idea. Instead, she left the stack in her hotel room after sending a copy to Armstrong.

He called within two minutes of her sending a text.

"This is him?"

"Yup."

"You're sure?"

It was only a profile, but it was all she could remember. Maybe it was all she saw. "I'm sure. So go tell all your cop friends that this is the guy." Not that they would work hard to find him. Still, she had to try.

"Okay. Thank you. You didn't have to hire an artist. Your tax dollars do pay for this kind of thing."

"Great. I'll be sure and tell my new friends you're hiring."

Armstrong actually laughed. "We'll find him, Avery. I'll do everything I can to get him behind bars."

Yeah, well, she wanted a shot at him first. One solid punch to the nose, was that asking for too much? Maybe he would attack her again and she could . . .

She blocked out the consequences of those actions and would deal when they came. It wasn't like she had kids at home, or a husband.

Liam.

Not a husband. Her friends would understand.

Maybe Spider was already behind bars?

"Are you still there?"

"Yeah, sorry." *Not sorry.*

"Are you back in LA?"

"Not yet."

"Why?"

"Trying to get rid of me, Detective?"

There was static on the line.

"Just making sure you don't have any vigilante tendencies."

"Ha."

"You wouldn't be the first," he said.

Avery reached down and unzipped her boots. "Do I look like a fighter to you?"

"I wouldn't use that word."

"What word would you use?"

"The first time I saw you, you were a victim. The next time I saw a survivor."

"And now?"

He paused. "A warrior."

She liked that. "I don't plan on starting any wars."

Armstrong laughed again. "Women have been starting wars since the dawn of time."

She kicked her boots to the side. “I’m an army of one, Detective. I doubt I can do much damage.”

He sighed. “Go home, Avery.”

“Have a nice evening, Detective. Take the wife out. It’s Friday.” She hung up.

* * *

“God damn it!” Armstrong kicked the side of his tire. Avery’s text came through right as he’d left the station for the night. Now he was marching back inside, pissed.

“Is it Monday already?” Judy, the officer at the desk, joked as he walked past.

“Fuck off.”

She laughed.

His butt hit his chair and he woke up his computer.

Gray poked his head in. “I thought you left.”

“Grant has a sketch.”

“Avery Grant?”

“Yeah.” He sent a copy of the picture she texted him to his computer and brought it up on his screen.

Gray rounded the desk to look at the image. “Half a face.”

“Better than nothing.”

“Doesn’t look familiar.”

“Yeah, but we don’t work Manhattan anymore.”

Gray stood to his full height. “Need my help?”

“No. Go. I just need to send this out and look up a few things.”

Gray pulled his car keys out of his pocket. “This can wait till Monday.”

“Yeah, but she won’t.”

“What does that mean?”

“I think we have a vigilante on our hands.”

“That little thing?”

Armstrong pressed send to put the image of their suspect, and the case number, out into the police universe. “Hey, Judy could kick your ass.”

“She could try.”

What could Avery Grant do? What was her background? Something told him he was going to come up cold, but he had to look. His hunches were seldom wrong.

“You sure you don’t need me?”

“No. I got it. Go.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice.” Gray walked out the door but his voice kept coming. “Sally’s gonna be pissed.”

Shit . . . his wife.

* * *

Avery made it into a department store after all. Mainly because she hadn’t packed for a weeklong trip, and it didn’t look like she’d be leaving Manhattan anytime soon.

Now she stood in her hotel room, staring at the few things she’d needed.

She slid into a miniskirt made of spandex, the kind she could hike up at the first sign of trouble to use her legs. Wearing pants, jeans, or leggings in the clubs she planned on hitting would make her stand out like an angel at a hell convention. The guy in her drawing was young, maybe late twenties at best. The tattoo cost a lot of money if, in fact, this Van guy created the thing. His boots had been new. Not something a street bum would have on. The clothes in her memory stumped her. But she was going with her gut, and that meant checking out the kinds of places young people with money went on Friday nights. She knew her chances of actually finding this guy ran up there with winning the lottery. She had to try.

Maybe a week more and she’d exhaust herself into acceptance.

Maybe finally having some memory of what had happened would settle the turmoil inside of her and she could return to her normal life.

Maybe.

She didn't want regrets. If she didn't look, that's what she'd end up with.

Avery slipped into the new boots she'd bought for the club. Sturdy heel only an inch and a half off the ground. Club-worthy and *I can still kick the shit out of you* practical.

She skipped the braless look and opted for a skintight halter and short-waist jacket. Inside pockets a must.

Her cell phone now had a wallet case with everything she needed inside.

She puffed her hair in the mirror, added some spray, and dabbed bright red on her lips. Guys talked to pretty girls. Especially blonde ones. The more blonde she acted, the more information she'd get. A fact of life Avery learned her junior year of high school.

Avery left the hotel armed with nothing more than attitude and determination.

She had four clubs on her list. All upscale, all uptown, all hot and new.

Chin high, she winked her way through the door of the first club without paying a cover charge. Women ruled the club scene. Without the girls there, the guys didn't spend money on drinks. And that's where clubs made their money. This fact Avery had learned in college. If she ever had a daughter, there would be a tutorial before her sixteenth birthday. Right along with a lifetime membership at a krav studio.

What had her thinking about a kid of her own, Avery didn't know.

Techno music and flashing neon was the theme. The beat was sporadic but that didn't stop people from dancing. It was still early for the club scene, giving Avery the ability to walk around the people without having to touch them.

She started with the bartender.

Model beautiful, the woman dropped a napkin on the counter. "What can I get ya?"

Avery waved her off. She turned her phone around. "Have you seen this guy?"

She glanced at Avery's phone. "Not sure."

"What about this?" The picture of the tattoo.

"I would have remembered that. Sorry. Why?"

"Douche stiffed me with the bar bill last weekend in midtown. Said he came in here once in a while."

"Did he have a name?"

"I was drunk."

The bartender nodded like she'd been there.

"Can you ask the other guys?"

Avery handed her the phone.

She watched as the woman showed it to the other guys behind the bar. One by one they looked up toward Avery, shook their heads, and continued with the drinks they were mixing.

"Sorry."

Avery meandered around the room, stopping the cocktail waitresses, giving the same story. It was easy to gain information from the women when you bonded over a douchey guy.

Thirty minutes later, she was back on the street and walking her way to the next club.

The second club was nearly the same routine, only a little harder to gain the attention of the bartenders since the clubs were filling up. Less techno and more hip-hop. The dance floor was packed.

Avery expanded her conversations to small groups of women.

The same reaction.

When she reached her third club for the night, rap dominated the playlist, and her butt skirted past sweaty bodies everywhere she walked. She would bet her next paycheck the room was way over the FDNY capacity limit. But until something went desperately wrong, laws often didn't get enforced. The bar was three deep. She looked to the far end, found a couple of guys, and moved in.

"Excuse me." Flip the hair, smile. "It's so crowded over there. Hope you don't mind me barging in."

The older, taller, and more slender of the two had no problem letting his eyes rake down her skirt and back up to rest on her chest.

"Beauty like you is never barging."

She let her smile linger and motioned for the bartender.

"Can we buy you a drink?" The younger guy held her gaze and wasn't foaming at the mouth. Avery wondered if he knew that he'd get further with girls by looking them in the eye.

"I got it."

The bartender tilted an ear and waited for her order.

Avery moved through the same routine. Phone out . . . "Have you seen him?"

The guys she stood by overheard her by design.

"Stiffed you for drinks?"

She grinned. "Yeah. I wanted to return the favor."

Tall and Sleazy said something under his breath. The polite guy reached for her phone. "Doesn't look familiar."

Yeah, she was looking for a drop of rain in a pond.

"Is that a tattoo?"

She nodded.

He leaned forward so she could hear him. "Do chicks like that?"

Avery found herself smiling. "No."

"Sure I can't buy you a drink?" Polite Kid asked.

She shook her head and leaned closer to his ear. "You might want to ditch Sleazeball here. Chicks don't like being eye raped."

Mr. Polite looked over her shoulder, then back.

Avery winked and walked off.

"If you change your mind . . ."

Avery waved and walked away.

By the fourth club, defeat had settled in.

The bartenders hadn't seen him. Most of the waitresses were too busy to look. And the music sucked. It was an uptown club that felt downtown to her. There was some serious drug action going on in a dark corner. Some didn't even bother hiding the lines on the tables.

At almost one in the morning, she was done.

"Hello . . ."

Avery smiled, not feeling it. "Hi." What she really wanted to say was *not in this lifetime*. But she was an adult these days, and talk like that caused trouble.

"What are you drinking?"

"I'm good."

"Yes, you are."

Just a kid. One that didn't mind a weight room, but a rich kid if she ever saw one. "Lines like that work for you, stud?"

"You'd be surprised." Clean-cut, money, if the watch he was wearing belonged to him.

"Eventually the women will be older, and that will result in a drink to the face."

He leaned back and his smile left the room. "Bitches better think twice before ruining my shirts."

Tough guy . . . great. Avery turned as a cocktail waitress holding a tray of shots was walking by. She stopped her, tossed a ten on the tray, and picked up a drink.

Rich Kid stared at her, daring.

Her fingers itched.

She stared back.

Avery tipped back the shot and returned the empty glass to the tray.

He found his smile again. "That was hot."

She couldn't stop herself. "Not in this lifetime." She turned to walk away, and he grabbed her arm, hard.

Instant heat shot through her. A twist, a turn, and a shove and his arm was disengaged, and Rich Kid stumbled into the tray the cocktail waitress was holding. Tiny drinks all over his shirt.

Avery thought that would be it.

It wasn't.

He marched up, hands ready to shove.

She pivoted and brushed his hand away with her forearm. The force was enough to leave a bruise on both of them. He sailed past, stumbling again.

By now a small crowd had stopped dancing.

"Dude, let it go." This was yelled by a bystander.

He charged again. Avery raised her hands, palms out. "I want nothing to do with you," she yelled. While the stance looked as nonthreatening as it got, her legs were in position and her hands were up, protecting her face.

Someone stepped between the two of them. "Fuck, dude. She's a girl. Hands off."

"Bitch pushed me."

"You grabbed her." The cocktail waitress stepped in.

Rich Kid glared at her, lifted his chin.

By now security was barging their way in.

Avery felt adrenaline dumping into her system.

"You okay?" the guy who stepped between them asked her once security was escorting Rich Kid to the door.

"I'm fine." She pulled her skirt down and dusted her hair off her shoulder. "Done for the night."

"Might wanna wait a few minutes before taking off. That guy is in here all the time. Pure asshole. Wouldn't put it past him to wait at the door."

"Thanks."

She worked her way to the women's bathroom and bumped through the women to wash her hands. A small trickle of blood ran down her arm. She must have caught the guy's watch. She rinsed it off and dabbed the scratch with a towel. The attendant in the bathroom smiled and offered her a mint.

Avery took one and pulled a five from her pocket. It was the smallest bill she had.

Expensive mint.

Back in the club, she made her way to the door.

The bouncer recognized her and moved to her side. "How about a taxi?" He glanced across the street and sure enough . . . Rich Kid watched.

The bouncer stepped into the street and hailed a cab. When the car stopped, Avery climbed in the back. The bouncer tossed a few bills to the driver. "You come in anytime, little lady. No cover, drinks on me."

She smiled. There were some nice guys out there. Unfortunately the world was laced with assholes, too. "Thanks."

Back at her hotel, Avery flicked on the lights in the bathroom and looked at herself in the mirror. Her eyes fell on the bruise forming on her arm where the guy had grabbed her and where she'd blocked him.

Warriors bruised but they didn't break.

Avery wiggled out of her skirt and turned on the shower. By the time she got out, the room was full of steam and her mind had finally started to rest.

When her cell phone rang, she picked it up from habit. "Hello?"

"You're answering your phone. That's new." It was Lori.

"Hey. It's late, what's up? Is everyone okay?" Avery wiped the mirror. Mascara ran down her face.

"How is New York?"

She paused. "How did you know I was in New York?"

"Well, let's see. Liam dropped by, worried sick. Said you'd blown off work, him, and your newfound love to fight for exercise."

Avery shook her head. Looked like her tangled web was starting to crumble.

"Care to offer a denial?" Her friend was pissed.

She really didn't owe her an explanation. "I'm working through some crap right now." Which was true.

"So you return to the scene of the crime?"

"We all work through our shit differently. I need some time. Need to be alone. I'm sorry I worried you."

"You're worrying all of us. We love you, Avery. You can't just disappear like that. I had to pull Liam back from booking a flight there tonight."

Oh, no. Then they all would learn about Spider being alive. They'd all get involved. Everyone would be in her face again.

"Thanks for stopping him. I can't deal with him right now."

Lori lost some of the fight in her voice. "Is this about him? Or is this all about last year?"

"Both. I-I need to deal with this. And I need to do it alone. I can't have you, or Liam . . . or Reed and his gang doing it for me."

"What do you hope to accomplish in New York?"

"I need to remember."

Lori sighed. "I hate this."

"Now, how did you find me? If Reed has some kind of tracking device on me—"

"No. Trina told me."

"You bugged her on her honeymoon?"

"I'm worried."

"Well, stop. I'm a grown woman. I can take care of myself. I'll let you know when I need a friend or my lawyer."

"Don't be pissed."

"Too late. Go to bed, Lori. I'll call you." Avery hung up the phone.

She moved into the living room of her suite, wearing a bathrobe. First thing she did was disable her Friend

Finder app. Second, she dialed Liam.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Liam saw her name on his phone and answered it with a request. “Tell me you’re okay.”

“I’m okay.”

He’d been hitting his fist against a wall ever since he’d gotten back from Lori and Reed’s.

“Tell me what I can do. I want to help.”

“I assume they told you about last year.”

“Reed did. Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked as gently as he could.

“Because it didn’t matter. And the subject never came up.”

“If it didn’t matter, you wouldn’t be in New York, chasing shadows.”

The line was silent.

“You’re right. But they’re my shadows to chase.”

“Let me help.”

“I can’t.”

He shook his head. “You won’t.”

“Right. I won’t. I won’t be responsible for anyone getting hurt or missing out on work or their honeymoons or their lives while I deal with my baggage.”

“How is anyone going to get hurt?”

“Everyone is already butt hurt, and all I did was leave town.” Her voice rose a level.

“Because you’re lying about what is going on. People care. Stop lying. Talk to us. Talk to me.”

“Making demands, Liam?”

“It’s a request.”

“Listen, I told you I sucked at relationships. You’re the one pushing it.”

She was spoiling for a fight. He was *butt hurt* enough to give her one.

“Well, you have one whether you like it or not. You haven’t been far from my thoughts since the day we met. That means I get to care and worry. I don’t deserve you lying about important things.”

“You’re right. You don’t deserve it. So let me help you out.”

The line went dead.

“Damn it, Avery!” Liam literally banged his head against the wall. He couldn’t have screwed that up better.

* * *

Lori had Trina and Shannon on a conference call the next day.

“She removed the app. I have no idea where she is.” Trina sounded stressed.

“Probably still in New York. I’d call her but she won’t answer. I’m not on her friend list right now.”

"Because you care and called her on it?" Trina asked.

"She's stressed," Shannon told them both. "Liam is making her take a good look at herself and life with someone other than herself. It's scary."

"It doesn't have to be scary," Trina said.

"She doesn't think she can hold on to him or anyone. So love and lose, or never love at all? I don't have to remind you how I feel on the subject."

"Okay, but Shannon, would you just up and leave like this? 'Screw everyone, I need to disappear'?"

"I don't have to go anywhere to disappear," Shannon said. "Avery's the life of the party, she's the one everyone sees. For her to get away, she needs to leave."

Lori sighed. "She said she'd call if she needed a friend or a lawyer."

"Sounds like her," Trina said. "Ironic, considering she harped on me for missing a club meeting last year. But I do understand the need to figure things out on your own. I think we all should send her a message saying we're here for her."

"Agreed," Shannon added.

"Do you think I should come home early?"

"Hell, no. She'll never forgive me if you nix your honeymoon early because I bugged you." Lori glanced at the clock. "I have to go. Any news, we call each other. Promise?"

They agreed before hanging up.

Reed stood by with a coffee cup in his hand, a smirk on his face.

"What are you smiling about?" Lori asked.

"I'm just wondering what you would do to have a spy on Avery to ease your mind."

She shook her head like he was crazy, then stopped and stared. "You can do that."

"I could. But I'm not going to."

"You walk a fine line, Reed. Reckless since I'm PMS-ing."

He tried not to laugh. "I'll be sure and come home with chocolate and wine."

She grabbed her briefcase and pointed at him. "You do that."

He kissed her before she could walk away.

* * *

Armstrong walked into the downtown main precinct with his badge on the outside of his plain clothes.

"Officer Ferrero?"

"Detective now, promotion went through five months ago."

"Congratulations."

Armstrong shook the hand of a man he'd met in person only one time before. "Thanks for meeting me today."

"No problem. Sit. What can I do for you?"

"I reopened the Grant case you signed off to me last year."

"I saw the e-mail you sent. I was surprised. I thought the main suspect was dead."

"We did, too. Our only witness came up with new information."

"A year later? That's unusual."

"If you remember right, Ms. Grant was pretty jacked up. Head injury. Anyway. I wanted to make sure the description of this guy isn't buried on a desk. I'd really like to bring him in."

Ferrero nodded. "His picture is on the board. I'll make sure he is mentioned in all call."

"I appreciate it."

They stood.

"I thought I would do a little legwork while I'm in the city. Any suggestions on tattoo parlors that might have done the work on our suspect?"

"Several. But I'd start with Van Lynch. He's the top insect guy. He's up on Fourteenth."

Ferrero walked him out. "Mind if I ask you something?"

"No, no. Go ahead."

"Is this personal? It's just an assault case."

Armstrong turned to shake Ferrero's hand at the station door. "Yeah, a little. I don't like it when I make the wrong call and let someone like him off the hook. I don't want to see an innocent person go down because of this guy.”

Ferrero smiled. “I’ll call if anything shows up.”

“Appreciate it.”

* * *

“You’re back.”

Avery smiled and reached out her arm. “I want a tattoo.”

Zelda smiled. “Do you have a drawing?”

Avery removed the design she had Monique make that morning. Avery was pretty sure the three art students were camped out at the coffee shop daily now that she was constantly handing out hundred-dollar bills like they were Monopoly money.

“Cool. Come on in the back.”

Avery followed her behind the desk and sat in the chair Zelda pointed to.

“Have you thought about your boyfriend’s artwork?”

Avery swallowed hard. “I think we broke up.”

“Oh. Is this a breakup tattoo? Because I have to caution you . . .”

“No. This is for me,” Avery quickly said.

“Good. Get comfortable. I’ll get the paperwork.”

It took Avery sitting on her hands that morning to not call Liam and apologize for being such an asshole. But to what end? They would be right back where they started. Him wanting to fix her problems and her not wanting him involved in however this ended up. Her life, her way, her demons. The therapist she’d seen all of four times after the incident had told her that no one could go through the emotional process for her. How right she was.

Less than thirty minutes later Zelda pushed her seat back with a satisfied smile. “What do you think?”

Avery looked down at her stinging arm. “I like it.”

“The spider dripping off the word is a nice touch.”

“I thought so, too.”

Zelda applied ointment and a bandage. “Tell me, is there a boyfriend who wants a spider tattoo?”

Avery looked at the top of Zelda’s head and thought . . . *Why lie? Stop lying.* “No.”

“That’s what I thought. So what was up with the art you showed me?”

“The guy with that tattoo jumped me in a garage on Fifth Avenue last year. Messed me up pretty bad. Up until last week I thought he was dead.”

Zelda once again pushed her rolling chair back. “That’s rough.”

“It hasn’t been easy.”

She nodded toward Avery’s forearm. “Obviously. You find that dude and then what?”

“I don’t know. Can’t say I’ve really thought it that far out. Chances of me really finding that guy aren’t looking very good.”

“In this city, it’s right up there with a needle in a haystack.”

Avery sat up and put on her jacket. “I still have to try.”

“I get that.”

As Avery paid the bill and pocketed her aftercare instructions for the tattoo, Zelda offered to ask around about Spider. Avery left her cell number before walking away.

Armed with a wad of ten-dollar bills, enough to buy anyone who would talk to her a beer, she set out for a sober bar crawl.

* * *

There was no point in trying to hide he was a cop, so Armstrong waltzed up to the tatted up clerk and dropped his badge on the counter. “How you doing today?” he asked the kid.

He glanced at the badge, smiled. “Fine. What can I do for you, Officer?”

“Detective.”

“Detective,” the clerk mimicked.

“I’m looking for someone who might have had a tattoo done here.”

The clerk grinned. Armstrong had seen that smile before. It said he wasn't going to find anything. "Lots of people get tattoos here. It's what we do."

He removed the picture of Avery's spider and turned it toward the clerk.

While the clerk glanced at the image, Armstrong studied the kid.

Recognition lit in his eyes. His breathing shifted pace, and a tiny twitch behind his left eye screamed *BINGO*.

"Van specializes in everything that crawls."

"Have you seen the guy who has this tattoo?"

"No." The clerk seemed amused with his denial.

"What's so funny?"

"No wonder our tax dollars are so high."

Armstrong rested both hands on the counter. The movement always opened his jacket, and anyone looking would see his concealed weapon. Outside of his tiny badge, it was often the only thing that reminded people he was a cop. "Mind explaining?"

"Sure. Your partner, she was already in here last week."

"My partner?" *She?*

"Yeah. Showed me the exact picture and gave some bullshit story about wanting to get one for her boyfriend but didn't want a similar tat out there. Had we done this one before? I'll tell you the same thing I told her. Bugs, it's what we do. Can't say Van did that or didn't. We don't take pictures of all the art we do."

Avery!

"This partner of mine . . . blonde, about yea tall?" He waved his hand in the air at about his shoulder height.

"Yeah."

Armstrong pulled a picture of the suspect. "This guy? You see him?"

The clerk smiled. "Half a face. Could be anyone. He doesn't look familiar."

He shoved the papers back in his pocket after tossing a card on the desk. "You see this guy, call me."

The clerk offered a short salute as Armstrong walked out.

* * *

Nothing good happens after midnight. Her mother's voice rang in her head. On this, she had to agree with the woman.

Someone handed Avery a bag of ice. She placed it on the side of her face where her cheek had caught someone's fist.

"What's your name?" The police officer wrote in his tiny notepad while several of his brothers did the same with the half a dozen people gathered outside the club.

Avery glanced to her right and then the left. Yup. She was the only woman outside of the cocktail waitresses being questioned.

"How did this start?"

Avery pointed through the crowd. "That guy grabbed my ass."

The officer stopped writing and looked at her outfit. "And you didn't want that." It wasn't a question.

"No."

"What did you do?"

"I removed his hand from my ass. Then I told him it wasn't polite to touch unless invited."

"*How* did you remove his hand from your *ass*?"

"Assertively."

The officer questioning her smirked.

"And then what happened?"

"One of his friends, the guy in the jean jacket"—she pointed him out—"jumped in front of us and shoved me."

"Uh-huh . . . and then?"

"Not really sure. I heard someone tell those two to pick a fight with a man instead of a woman. The next thing I know, chairs were skidding across the floor and people were throwing punches."

"Right." The officer was bored. "And did you throw punches?"

The side of her face started to sting. "I'm more of an elbow and knee girl when someone hits me first."

Yep, the cop was smiling. “Well . . .” He glanced at her ID, which he had in his hand. “Avery Grant. Stay right here.”

Since he left with her ID, she didn’t really have a choice.

The bouncer, pure New Yorker, walked over. “Hey.”

“Hey.”

“What was that back in there?” he asked. “Some kind of martial arts?”

“Krav maga.”

He smiled, lifted his fist for a bump.

Avery obliged.

How things had changed. She used to visit clubs and gain the admiration of the bouncers, tip them heavily, and avoid comments when they stared. Now she earned it by defending herself.

The cop returned, looked at her ID again before handing it back. “Is that your current address?”

“Yes.”

“Are you visiting us or moving here?”

“Visiting.” Avery kept her answers short and didn’t elaborate. Somewhere in her years of friendship with Lori, she’d heard that offering information never boded well if there was a chance you could be charged with a crime.

“Where are you staying?”

“The Ritz-Carlton, Central Park.”

He paused. “Fancy hotel.”

She shrugged. “I’m a fancy girl.”

“What are you doing down here? In the *less* fancy part of town.”

Avery glanced up at the sign for the club. “I was thirsty.”

He wasn’t buying it. “I think the waitress has had more to drink tonight than you.”

She was getting cold now that the heat of the bar had left her skin and the night air had dipped into the high forties. “Am I being charged with anything, Officer?”

“Let’s see . . . could be assault, battery . . . inciting a riot.”

“I didn’t realize a bar fight was considered a riot.”

The officer stared at her as if contemplating the key to a Rubik’s Cube. “No one is going to jail tonight, Miss Grant. Only because the gentleman whose hand needed reminding not to wander isn’t pressing charges on you.”

That was rich. “And if I’d like to press charges on him?”

The officer put his hands in the air before returning them to his belt full of tools and a gun. “Then we can pull you both in and put you both through the process. Your call. I assure you, the Ritz has much better accommodations.”

Avery glanced over her shoulder to the fist-bumping bouncer.

He shook his head and made a back-and-forth slicing motion at his neck.

Thirty minutes later, Avery stood in a hot shower. Even though everything but her toes was hurting, she started to laugh. “Hey, Mom . . . guess what? Your dream came true. Can you come bail me out of jail?” Adeline would have a stroke.

Avery bit her lip and continued talking to herself. “Lori, what’s up? About those lawyer services?”

Brenda would be all, *How did he get close enough to punch your face?*

And Liam.

Avery’s smile started to fade when she thought of him.

There wouldn’t be a Liam to call.

Oh, well. At least she wouldn’t disappoint him.

Again.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

"You're probably deleting these messages before listening to them. That isn't going to stop me from trying. I'm sorry I cornered you. I know you're going through a hard time, and I want to help. Please, Avery. Let me help. I miss you and I'm worried." Liam hung up the phone and leaned against the bed of his truck as he stared down his new project in Santa Monica.

Never in his life had he made this much of an effort to stay attached to a woman. Not that he was the one to bug out at the first sign of conflict in relationships, but Avery all but told him to go to hell by hanging up and not returning his calls.

He felt marginally better when his daily check-in with Reed told him no one had heard from her.

Liam booked a flight to New York that would leave on Sunday. He'd given her enough time alone.

He wouldn't let her work her way into another week of this journey without him.

* * *

Avery checked three more clubs off her list.

Maybe she was going at this the wrong way. Although, there had been a few people she'd asked who said they had seen a similar tattoo but didn't remember the face it belonged to.

"Here ya go." A waitress slid a full plate of food in front of Avery, refilled her coffee, and scurried away.

She was starving. Her nights had been too busy for her to think about food, and her lack of a breakfast habit was making her weak.

Avery looked at the eggs, potatoes, bacon, and toast like she'd not seen such a delight.

Digging in like a trucker, she felt her energy seeping back into her veins. Her fork was halfway to her mouth when she felt a hand grab her shoulder.

She jumped, dropped her fork, and looked over her right shoulder as her elbow swung up. It stopped less than an inch from Detective Armstrong's chest.

"Easy, tiger." He took a step back and looked down at her.

"Not smart to sneak up on people, Detective."

"I can see that." He slid into the chair opposite her without invitation. His eyes found the bruise on her face. "New makeup fad?"

She didn't dignify him with a response. "Did you find him?"

"No. Did you?"

Again, she sat silently and picked her fork back up. "Seems you had no problem finding me in this ocean of people. You should channel that energy into finding Spider."

He leaned forward on his elbows. “Funny, it wasn’t very hard learning where you were. Would you like to guess why?”

He was here to lecture her. If there was something she’d gotten used to since she was a teenager, it was authority dominating over her. She wasn’t going to escape it, so she kept eating and let him rant.

“Apparently there was a bar fight on the East Side the other night, and guess whose name came up on the list of participants?”

The potatoes stuck in her throat. She washed them down with coffee.

The waitress stopped at the table, and Armstrong encouraged her to pour him a cup of coffee.

Great, he wasn’t yelling and then leaving promptly.

Avery kept eating, no longer tasting her food.

“What do you hope to accomplish, Grant?”

“Unlike you, I’m going to find him.”

“By kicking the shit out of everyone you come across in the process?”

“I haven’t shit kicked yet.” She shoveled a forkful of eggs. Although the last fight did give her the opportunity to throw a few punches. Catching a couple was to be expected.

“What happens when you take a knife to a gun fight?”

“I don’t carry—”

“Not my point and you know it! I don’t see any of this ending well for you if you keep this up.”

She placed her fork aside and knew she wouldn’t be able to finish. “Asking around in a few clubs isn’t a crime. Stopping someone from touching what doesn’t belong to them isn’t a crime.”

“It is when people get hurt and property is damaged.”

“I think it was you who said jail time for assault was laughable.”

“That’s not what I said—”

“No, but that’s how it translated in my head. So I’ll take my chances and defend myself if I have to.”

“Defend yourself? Is that what you call picking a fight and then rearranging men’s testicles?”

“They touch my ass, I touch their balls. Sounds like a win-win to me.”

“You won’t be happy until you’re in jail, will you?”

“Maybe I’ll find a lead there.”

“You’re going to end up in the hospital again. You know what happens to people when they go around searching for a bad guy?”

She was getting pissed now. “Oh, I don’t know . . . find him?”

“They put a target on their backs. If this guy is out there and he learns of you kicking up smoke, there is no telling what he’ll do to you this time.”

She couldn’t stop the smile from reaching her lips. “I’d like to see him try.”

Armstrong leaned closer and lowered his voice. “Then there is the guy that sees a pretty little thing like you asking questions and he’s all, ‘yeah, baby . . . I know where he is.’ Or the guy that has a similar tattoo on his arm and thinks you’re looking for him. Only he has a gang of ten on his side. What about that guy, Avery?”

Those things hadn’t happened.

She clenched her jaw and hid the fear he put in her head.

“I’m going to offer some free advice.” He stared her in the eye. “Go home. This man stole a year of your life. Don’t give him the power to take the rest of it. Let me do my job.”

“What have you done other than lecture me?”

Armstrong sat farther back. “His ink isn’t coming up in our database.”

“What does that mean?”

“Any number of things. He’s never been arrested. Due to the brutality of your attack, I have a hard time believing that. So he isn’t from around here. Probably not even in the city.”

She smelled smoke. “You just want me out of town.”

Armstrong nodded. “Absolutely right. I want you back in your cozy life in LA, where I can look for this guy and not look after you.”

Avery rolled her eyes. “I can clearly look out for myself.” She swung her legs out from under the table and dropped some bills on the surface. “Thanks for the pep talk. I’ll let you know if I find any leads.”

“Damn it, Grant.”

She ignored him and walked out.

* * *

Armstrong glared at her uneaten food. He couldn’t do anything but wait and watch for the pieces to fall around her. Protecting her from herself wasn’t on his job list, and he was way out of his jurisdiction.

What he needed was backup.

Where was her posse of friends that had been so attentive a year ago?

He retrieved his phone from his pocket and started scrolling through phone numbers. He found the one he was looking for and put the phone to his ear.

“Hello?”

“Is this Reed?”

“Who is this?”

“Detective Armstrong. We met last year.”

“Oh, shit.”

“Yeah, ‘oh, shit.’ Where the hell are you guys?”

* * *

Liam met Reed at a coffee shop a few blocks from the condominium complex.

When the text came through that Reed had information about Avery to share, Liam dropped his work in Carlos’s lap and left the job.

“Is she okay?” Liam asked the question the second he noticed the drawn expression on Reed’s face.

“Yes. Before I start, know I already have boots on the ground in New York. My critical player will be there in a couple of hours.”

Liam kept his fear in check, his jaw clenched.

Reed took a deep breath and began. “Avery’s memory of what happened to her last year came back.”

“That’s a good thing.”

“Normally, yeah. Except the details she remembered about the guy who attacked her didn’t line up with the dead man pinned as her attacker.”

Liam turned an ear toward Reed. “Come again?”

“They had the wrong guy. The one who attacked her is still out there.”

His fist clenched. “Oh, no.”

“Avery is running around Manhattan with a picture and asking questions. According to the detective that was on her case last year, she’s searching the nightclubs, from sleazy to snazzy. At the same time, she’s making quite the name for herself. While no one has seen the guy she’s looking for, everyone has seen her. She’s making enemies daily,” Reed said.

“You mean she’s kicking ass.” Liam recalled the first time he saw her at Pug’s. It didn’t take an expansive imagination to see her doing that all over New York City. He itched to leave the table and drive straight to the airport.

“Yeah. Armstrong said it isn’t without a toll on her.”

“Armstrong is the detective?”

“Yes. He said Avery looked a little rattled, a lot bruised, and thin.”

“I need to go.” He pushed back from the table.

“Glad to hear you say that. You won’t be able to force her back, but you can keep her from making a lethal mistake. My guess is she thinks this is her fight and her fight alone. If it were you or I, I’d agree. But I have a strong aversion to men beating on women. Even if the woman can take him.”

“No one is going to touch her. I’ll make sure of that.”

Reed smiled. “Perfect. You take care of Avery, we’ll find her attacker.”

“If the police can’t . . .”

The expression on Reed’s face shut Liam up.

“It’s what we do. If he’s there, we will find him.”

“I thought you were in private security.”

“I am. Sometimes security means being a PI and neutralizing threats before they attack.”

“That sounds illegal.” And while that would have made him question Reed in the past, Liam was willing to look past it now.

“Nah . . . my goal is to find him and offer Avery the closure she needs. We make sure he can’t hurt her, and she doesn’t hurt him and end up on the wrong side of the law. I want this cleaned up before the women find out what’s going on.”

“The women?”

“Lori, Trina—”

“And Shannon,” Liam finished.

“Yeah. Keeping them out of the mix will be impossible.” Reed looked at his watch. “I’m giving this seventy-two hours before everyone is on their way home and sleeping in their own beds.”

Liam liked his confidence, found it contagious. “Are you calling the SEALs?” Liam joked.

“Not quite.” Reed reached into his jacket and removed an envelope. “Your plane leaves in three hours—”

“I bought a ticket to New York that leaves on Sunday.”

“Cancel it. Use this one.” Yeah, Liam liked that idea better.

“I’m sending you a link. Click it and we will have you tracked at all times. I haven’t forgotten what this guy did to her, so if there is any safety threat at all, the rules change.”

“How can you know there isn’t already a threat?”

“Because Avery is still vertical and she’s been there over two weeks.” Reed stood. “Three hours, Holt. Click on the link. I’ll be in touch.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Either Armstrong stripped her confidence and single-handedly made her paranoid or Avery was being watched.

She supposed it was entirely possible that the detective put someone on her, but she couldn’t imagine the limited resources the police department had would warrant that.

Still, the tingle up her spine and the need to turn around and find the eyes fixed on her was a constant cloud as she walked around Manhattan. It was midday and the streets were packed.

She stepped away from the curb and lifted her arm for a passing cab. Avery opened the back door and jumped in. “Times—” Someone holding her door open stopped her. “Sasha?”

“Scoot over, sweet cheeks.”

Avery released a frustrated breath and slid across the seat. “How long have you been following me?”

Sasha wore black. Her sleek, dark hair was tied back in a ponytail and nearly reached her waist, dark sunglasses hid her eyes, and olive skin and near perfect features made you think she was famous. “Ten minutes,” she said.

“Not possible. Someone has been on me all morning.”

Sasha’s curt accent, one born in Germany and honed by spending much of her childhood in eastern Europe, demanded attention. “I’ve been on you for ten minutes. I have no idea about the others.”

Avery looked out the back window of the cab. “Damn it.”

“Hey, ladies. Where yous goin’?”

Sasha managed to pierce Avery with her eyes, through her sunglasses. Yeah, her presence was that huge. “Well?”

Avery leaned forward. “Times Square.”

The cab took off to a blare of horns behind.

Sasha’s presence meant only one thing. “They all know he’s alive.”

“Not everyone. But that is only a matter of time.”

“Trina? Please tell me she hasn’t—”

“No. If you want to keep her away from this, we must find your Spider Man before she’s told.”

“We?”

“We.”

Avery didn’t try to argue. Since Sasha worked with Reed, it stood to reason there were other security guards hidden in the crowd.

For a couple of blocks, Avery stared out the window and worked through the quick change in events. “You’re not going to tell me to go home. Tell me my search is in vain?”

“I know a thing or two about revenge.”

“I guess you would.” Considering the woman’s father had killed her mother and nearly killed her. Sasha was a poster child for a life bent on revenge.

“I applaud your tenacity, but your execution is pathetic.”

“Hey, I don’t do this as a lifestyle.”

“Based on the bruise on your face, that’s obvious.”

“Battle scars.”

Was that a smile on Sasha’s face?

No, couldn’t be.

The cabbie dropped them off once he reached the tourist mecca of the city.

“What have you learned? Two weeks here, there must be something.” Sasha walked with long strides, forcing Avery to keep up.

“The best tattoo artist in the city is in the Meatpacking District. Very expensive and months out on appointments. But the parlors I’ve been to point the finger to him being the guy who did the art on Spider.”

“You call him Spider?”

Avery followed Sasha as she crossed the street without heeding the light.

“Spider-Man is a superhero.”

“You’re sure of this artist?”

Much as she would have loved to say yes, she couldn’t. “No. But it’s the only solid anything I’ve found.”

Sasha opened the door to a diner and stepped in.

“What are we doing here?”

For the first time, Sasha removed her sunglasses and looked Avery in the eye. “You look like shit. What have you lost, two, three kilograms?”

“Yeah, maybe a couple of pounds.”

Sasha glared and took a seat in a booth as far away from people as she could. “We’ll talk while you eat.”

Since Armstrong had stolen her appetite at breakfast, and it was getting close to dinnertime, Avery’s stomach growled.

Avery tried to order a soup and salad, but Sasha interrupted and ordered two hamburgers, loaded, soup instead of fries.

“I feel like I’m having lunch with my mother’s evil twin.”

Sasha did have a smile. Brief, but it was there.

“Tell me everything about Spider. Every tiny detail you remember.”

Avery started from the beginning, adding little things that had come to her over the past two weeks. The meal came and Avery continued to talk while she ate.

By the time she finished her meal, nothing but the pickle was left on her plate, and she was out of information to share.

“Do you know anything of the man my father sent to kill you? The man who the police said attacked you?”

“Not really. I called him Scarface. He went by Krueger when he was alive.”

Sasha nodded. “He was an amateur. Liked dealing drugs more than killing people. My father’s resources were not unlimited, and hiring a professional would have meant you’d be dead, and your killer would never be found.”

Avery swallowed the chill. “I’m happy Daddy was hard up for money.”

“Why did you decide to search nightclubs?”

“Because the guy seemed young to me. A punk. The tattoo was expensive and his shoes were new. He’s like the guy you see at a bar where you move down four stools and squeeze between two strangers because you don’t want him hitting on you.”

Sasha tapped a perfectly plain manicured finger on her water glass. “What did he smell like?”

Avery sat back. “Smell. I don’t know. I didn’t . . .”

“You said he wore pants that were too big, frayed. A sweatshirt, but the sleeves hung down and easily displayed his tattoo when he grabbed you.”

“Yes.”

The waitress stopped at the table. “Anything else?”

“A bag, please.” Sasha pulled money from a pocket.

Avery noticed her uneaten burger. “You weren’t hungry?”

“Breakfast is the most important meal of the day.”

They exited the diner and immediately left the tourist block and moved down an alley.

“Tell me what you smell,” Sasha demanded.

That was easy. “Garbage.”

They stepped around puddles of unidentifiable liquid, past an abandoned cardboard box that looked like it had been someone’s home.

“And now? What do you smell?”

“Urine. Why?”

"Humor me." Sasha led her down a few more blocks. While there were still people everywhere, they weren't shoulder to shoulder.

For what felt like no reason, Sasha stopped walking and stepped off of the sidewalk and against a building. "That man. What do you see?" She pointed to a sad staple that plagued every major city in the country.

"A homeless man begging for change."

Sasha sighed. "I see hunger, despair. Someone who has given up on life."

She pushed away from the building, and they crossed the street to the man she was talking about. When she reached him, she leaned down. "Are you hungry?" she asked him.

His eyes tracked her with caution, his gaze shifted to Avery.

"Yeah."

Sasha handed him the bag holding her uneaten hamburger. She then said something in Russian before standing up and leading Avery away.

"This woman," Sasha said as they walked by yet another homeless person. "What do you see?"

Avery suddenly felt like she was being walked through a living documentary of the human existence. "Mental illness to the extreme."

Sasha again stopped and looked behind them. "The woman is ill, but also on something. What did you smell when you walked by?"

"Body odor."

They kept walking.

When Sasha slowed her pace, Avery searched out the next demographic. Two guys sat on a fence, smoking a cigarette. They were both thin, drawn.

"On drugs," Avery said before Sasha could ask her.

"Homeless?"

"Probably."

"How much do you know about drugs?"

Avery smirked. "I know not to take them."

Sasha looked out of the corner of her eye at her, disapproving.

"My rebellion included a little pot and a lot of teenage drinking," Avery clarified.

"But you had access to other things."

"Yeah, of course. What kid doesn't?"

They started across the street toward the boys.

"Do you know anyone who had a more experimental rebellion?"

"No one I was close to. There were always those that got hooked on something stupid in high school, early college. Snorted their tuition money up their nose. I blew my tuition on Cancun."

Sasha chuckled and marched right up to the kids. "Gentlemen?" She managed to get their full attention with one word and a smile. "I was wondering if you could help me out."

One of the kids sitting on the iron fence slid off, pulled himself up straight with a jerk, and nodded. "I can help you with whatever you need."

He was definitely high, but he was hetero and liked what he saw, Avery observed.

"I need to know if you've seen someone."

Avery stood back and watched the kids.

Neither of them could hold their hands still. One realized he was twitchy and slammed his hands into his back pockets, attempting to keep his eyes on Sasha.

"Yeah, hey . . . we see people walk by every day."

Sasha pulled a picture out of her back pocket, but before she showed it to the kids, she said, "Twenty bucks each, to the both of you, if you tell me the truth. You lie, you get nothing."

"Yeah, lady. Okay. I could use twenty bucks."

The image of Avery's sketched suspect sat in Sasha's hands.

The guys looked at it.

Sasha watched the kids.

Avery saw everyone.

"That could be anyone," the kid on her right said. "I wanna say I have, but I don't know."

"And you?" She moved the picture closer to the second kid.

He shook his head.

"What about this?" Spider's tattoo was in the next picture.

Both of them shook their heads.

Sasha stashed the pictures and handed them the money.

“They’re just going to buy more drugs,” Avery said as they walked away.

Sasha shrugged. “Until they hit bottom or die.” She glanced over her shoulder. “Twenty bucks won’t change their course.”

“That’s cold,” Avery said.

“Truth often is. Come on.”

When they had circled back to Times Square, Avery finally stopped Sasha’s pace by grabbing her arm and turning her around. “Much as I liked the garbage-filled path through the decay of the homeless population, was there a point to what just happened?”

People walked around the two of them like they were rocks in a stream while they talked.

“Spider is young, agile. New shoes, old clothes. If he’s homeless, he wasn’t for long before you. His clothing, while worn, did not smell like Homeless Man Number One. Spider completed a task and spoke coherently, so not like Homeless Woman Number Two. Homeless Examples Three and Four, once hooked on something much stronger than what they can afford now, is who we are searching for. Two for twenty couldn’t stop moving. They wash their hands because of nerves and because their veins itch with need. They only stop at the peak of their high or when they are too sick to move during their low. They spend the majority of their day searching for means to maintain their level of stupid. Junkies don’t spend money on tattoos, so our guy was new to the game.”

Avery felt a rush from Sasha’s words.

“We know for a fact Krueger’s day job was selling drugs, and his night job was taking out kneecaps or putting people in the morgue. My father paid Krueger to kill you. In turn, Krueger paid your Spider to do the job. Why? Because Krueger sees an opportunity to get paid for a job without the risk of going to jail for it. Spider’s rapid descent makes him say yes. He knocks you down, hesitates, then uses his feet. Why? Because his hands would be too personal. Even though he’s higher than a rocket to the space station, he knows somewhere that what he is doing is wrong. ‘Don’t look at me.’ His words. Not because he doesn’t want you to see him, but so he won’t see your eyes.”

Avery ran a hand through her hair. Everything Sasha was saying made sense in a twisted, fucked-up way. “So I’ve wasted my time searching nightclubs.”

“No. Not entirely. You know where he isn’t. We know he isn’t in jail. What did I say about Homeless Men Three and Four?”

Avery had to think for a minute. “That they would buy drugs until they hit rock bottom or die.” Jesus . . . was she chasing a dead man?

“We stop searching clubs and start searching rehabs and morgues.”

Avery held a staring contest with Sasha. “You knew all of this before we sat down to eat, didn’t you?”

“I suspected. Between what you’ve told me and what the police have found . . . or more importantly, haven’t found, I’ve drawn my conclusions.”

“Then why waste time with all of this?” Avery waved her hands around her, as if including the entire city in her argument.

Sasha stepped closer, her face nothing but harsh lines of sobriety. “Because you need to learn who this man is on your own so you can accept whatever it is that we find. Me telling you who we are looking for will always raise doubt in your head.”

Avery sighed, ran the back of her hand against her chin. God, she was tired. With a deep breath, she asked, “Okay. Where do we start?”

Sasha stepped back. “Tomorrow.”

“But—”

“You need to eat again and sleep. Warriors only enter a battle rested and fed.”

Avery glanced at the tattoo on her arm and resigned. “Okay.”

Sasha glanced behind Avery. “Take her back to the hotel. I will call on you in the morning.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Avery turned around so fast her head spun. “Liam.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Liam had to force a smile to his face.

He'd been tracking Sasha's location via Reed since he landed. He dropped a bag off at Avery's hotel and taxied to Times Square. Having never been to New York before, he found himself turned around more than once while GPS tangled with the tall buildings and sometimes had him on the wrong side of the street.

The two of them walked into his line of sight, and Liam stopped behind Avery right as Sasha described Avery's attacker. Even though he stood right there, Sasha's eyes never left Avery.

Slowly, as Sasha's conclusion settled in Avery's head, Liam noticed her entire posture sink. For a brief moment, he thought she might just slump to the ground right in the middle of Times Square.

Now Avery was staring at him, and they were the clog of traffic as people walked by.

Eyes hollow, lips swollen . . . Liam reached out and traced a hand to the bruise on her cheek. His simple touch and she closed the gap between them and pressed her face to his chest.

"I'm sorry," she choked out.

Liam wrapped his arms around her and buried his head in her hair. "It's okay."

"I was such a child."

"It's okay, Princess."

She hugged him tighter.

Liam closed his eyes and held her. "I'll get her back—" He glanced up and Sasha was gone.

Avery disengaged long enough to look around.

"Where did she go?"

Avery shook her head. "I'm sure she'll be back."

Liam brushed a hair behind her ear and cradled her cheek in his hand. So many words needed to be said . . . instead, he brushed his lips against hers.

She kissed him back with a sigh.

"C'mon. Let's get you back to the hotel."

Liam kept an arm around her and signaled for a taxi.

Thirty minutes later they were in her room and he'd ordered room service.

"I had to come to New York," Avery started.

"I know that. You have me now, you didn't need to come alone."

A small dining table stood on one end of the suite. The two of them sat across from each other. Liam kept both her hands in his as they talked.

"It's hard for me to depend on other people."

"I put that together," he said with a slight smile. "Here is the beauty of a truly committed relationship. You're allowed to depend on someone else. When you're hurting, they hurt, so it's on both your radars to fix the problem. Just because you zone out doesn't stop the other from caring."

"The last thing I wanted was to hurt you."

He squeezed her hands, saw her eyes glisten with unshed tears. “Finding out that your girlfriend is three thousand miles away chasing this Spider guy all by herself wasn’t painful, it made me feel helpless. I’m here. You don’t have to do any of this alone.”

“I see that now. I’ll try.”

“Do or don’t do. There is no try.” His words were there to make her grin. They succeeded.

“You’re quoting Yoda?”

“Whatever it takes to make you smile.”

She brushed away a tear. “I’m so tired.”

He summoned her with a crook of his finger, and she slid out of her chair and onto his lap. His hands traveled once again to the bruise on her cheek. “How many more scars am I going to find when I undress you?”

She rocked her head back and forth. “A few.”

He somehow thought that meant a dozen.

The thought of anyone hitting her made him boil. He downplayed her bruises so that he could keep from losing his shit. “You let them get close enough to punch you?”

Avery’s laugh started slowly. “Have you been talking to Brenda?”

“It does sound like something she’d say.”

She placed her palm to the side of his face. “I feel so much better with you here.”

“Good thing.”

“Don’t let me run off again.”

Let her?

“Is that a demand?” he asked.

“It’s a . . .” She caught herself. “Yeah. It is.”

He grinned and leaned in for a kiss. “You got it, Princess.”

Hours later, after he’d seen Avery eat more than he’d seen any woman consume before, he drew her a bath, counted her bruises. He poured her a glass of wine while she soaked in the tub, and then sat on the edge of the thing, rubbing her feet.

And they talked.

She told him about the beating. In her words, it was as if he felt every blow and every needle from the hospital. But her delivery of the attack lacked the heat he expected. A testament to her tired state. He imagined that she’d be fired up about Spider after a night of rest.

Liam, on the other hand, poured himself a drink from the minibar to keep from searching every street in New York to find the guy. Not to mention the assholes from bars two, three, and four.

“More people stood up to help than stood back to watch,” she told him when talking of the last fight.

“No more New York nightclubs without me,” he told her.

“Is that a demand?”

He smiled and without hesitation said, “Yes.”

“One for one.” She moved her hand along the bubbles hiding her nudity.

“I have another demand,” he said.

“Pushing your luck.”

He took a drink from his cocktail and leaned his head against the harsh porcelain of the hotel wall. “No more lying. If you don’t want to answer the question or tell me something, then tell me that. But don’t lie.”

She nodded. “I’ll try.”

He hiked a brow.

“I will,” she amended.

Liam pushed off the edge of the tub. “Finish your bath. I need to call Reed and give him an update.”

“I’m sure Sasha already has.”

“What Sasha is going to say to him won’t keep your gaggle of friends away. What I’m going to tell him will.”

“Liam?”

He turned at the door.

“Thank you for coming.”

He crossed the room in two steps and kissed her quickly. “Always.”

By the time Liam made it back into the bedroom of the suite, Avery was curled up in a ball on the bed, asleep.

Liam stood at the door and watched her.

He loved this woman. With every ounce of baggage and bundle of insecurities she had, he loved her. The sassy mouth, the attitude, her independence. He loved all that, too. He couldn't help but feel like they'd gotten over the biggest hurdle and now all he had to do was keep his promises and show her she could depend on him.

All she needed to do was let him love her. He'd do all the rest.

He moved around the room, turned off lights, stripped his clothes, and slid into bed beside her.

She turned into his arms the moment he settled, and draped a bare leg over his. "I missed you," she whispered.

"Shh, go to sleep. You need to rest."

Her hand resting on his chest started to move. "I do need to sleep. But I need you more."

She lifted her hazel eyes to his.

"Are you sure? You've been on empty."

Velvet fingertips fresh from the bath brushed against him, and his cock jumped into her palm. "I'll let you do all the work."

He kissed her softly, slowly.

Her lips moved over his as if drinking him in.

"I thought I was losing you," he whispered. He traced her back, careful of the places where he'd seen her bruises. Felt the tips of her breasts against his chest.

"I'm here and I want to feel you."

Her words were all the invitation he needed. Liam rolled her gently on her back and held her arms spread out, intertwining their fingers. His lips lingered on hers, and he tasted the soap from her bath, drew in her scent as he dipped his way down her neck, her shoulder.

The tips of her breasts were already tiny nubs, asking to be licked. When he pulled one into his mouth, she arched against the mattress, her fingers squeezing. He spent time on one, moved to the next, and moved gently over her bruises, tiny kisses meant to soothe the pain she must have felt when receiving the blows that caused the colors to erupt.

Avery wiggled her hips and opened her legs as he settled in lower. She twisted her hands away from his and threaded them through his hair. So damn soft, this spot, the one where her hip met the top of her thigh, loved the feel of his tongue. He sensed her need even before he felt her lift one knee and place her foot on his back. Oh, yes . . . this was his. All his, so he kissed and nibbled until he found the place inside her that made her grab the back of his head and keep him exactly where she wanted. She tasted like sunshine and smelled like dreams.

"Oh, please . . . more. Liam, more."

Her breathy request was all he needed. If she wanted more, she'd get more until she told him to stop. Much as he wanted to make love to her all night, he wouldn't be that selfish. He pulled her swollen flesh between lips and tongue, found the right angle, and found her rhythm. When she was close, he moved his fingers inside of her until she stiffened under him, and he tasted everything she had to give.

"Liam." His name was a cry.

He kissed her aftershocks, felt her thighs quivering next to his cheeks.

"Come here," she said, looking down at him.

Crawling up her body, he captured her kiss, his erection screaming.

"Inside. I need you inside."

He smiled into her kiss. "Demands?"

"Hell, yeah."

Reaching down, he found his pants, unearthed a condom from his wallet, and pulled it on.

Avery smiled and drew him closer.

"I'm a lucky man," he told her as he gave her what she demanded.

So warm.

Like home.

"Take me," she told him, her legs wrapped around his waist, and he shifted his angle to move deeper.

"So good," he managed as his thrusts became quicker, her tiny cries became a sharp inhale and a word of encouragement for more . . . everything. When everything inside of her gripped all of him, his rush of release rivaled hers.

A satisfied smile met him when he opened his eyes. He collapsed back onto the bed, careful to not crush her.

"We do that really well together," she said in his ear.

"Imagine how much better it will be when I learn every spot, and every desire."

She wrapped lazy arms over his back and kept her legs entwined with his. "We're already off the charts, I'm not sure it gets better."

"That's a challenge I'm happy to accept." Her laughter warmed his heart. "I love you, Avery."

Her smile waned but didn’t disappear altogether. “Liam, I’m not ready to—”

“I know, Princess. You don’t have to say it back right now. I know the words don’t come easy, which just means that they mean more when you do say them. I can wait. I’m not going anywhere. I need you to know how I feel so that when you do tell me you love me, I know we’re all in.”

Her smile softened, and he knew he’d eased her into the thought of loving him completely.

“How is it you know me so well already?”

He lowered his lips to hers again. “Because I love you.”

“Is that going to be your ending statement from here on out?”

He nodded. “Yup.”

Chapter Thirty

"If he's dead, he didn't come in as a John Doe," Armstrong told Reed when he called first thing the next morning.

"Thanks for looking into that for me."

"That part's easy. Anything else I can do for you?"

"Not unless you're willing to hack into hospital databases."

"Ha. No. I actually like my job. What are you looking for?"

Reed sighed.

"On second thought, don't tell me. I don't need any marks on my record."

Reed laughed. "Probably for the best."

Armstrong smiled. "How's Avery?"

"Better. Still in New York, but no longer searching the gutters. Her boyfriend is with her."

"Boyfriends tend to do the most damage when suspects are caught."

"Depends on the size of the fish we pull from the ocean. He's levelheaded."

Armstrong leaned on his desk, tapped his pen to the notebook in front of him. "Anyone else I need to worry about?"

Reed sighed.

"You know what . . . you're right. I don't need to know that either. You call me if you need any legal information I can share, and let me know how it all works out."

"That I can do. Thanks again." Reed hung up.

Yeah, Armstrong really didn't want to know how Reed and his group operated.

* * *

Sasha knocked on their hotel room door at ten in the morning. Good thing, since Avery slept until eight and had finished her breakfast right before.

Sasha wore tan slacks and a silk blouse. Her conservative outfit made Avery pause. "Are we going to church?"

She shook her head. "Visiting hours. Go change. I'll wait."

Avery didn't argue.

After she'd woken up that morning feeling like the hundred-pound weight on her chest had lifted, much of the fight had left her system.

She'd cried. While it might not have seemed like much to the average person, the reality was she hadn't shed one tear over herself since everything had gone down. The tears, she realized after she'd woken up, weren't over Spider, but Liam. She almost lost him.

There was no reason for him to chase her to New York, but there he was. She saw the look in his eye when she took off her shirt and he took in the footprint size bruise on her hip. What he had said about her pain being his . . . she got that now. Later, when he made love to her and cherished every piece she allowed him to take, he awakened something new inside.

I love you, Avery.

The words echoed in her mind all night. Not that she had to wait long to hear them again. Liam meant it when he said they were his ending statement. When he saw the worry on her face, he kissed her and said he knew how she felt.

Before she took her morning shower, she sent a group text to the First Wives. I'm feeling much better. Liam is here and helping me through this. I love you all.

The replies were rapid and all held the same sentiment. We love you. We're here. Call if you need us. Come home soon.

Avery returned to the living room of the suite.

Liam smiled and Sasha sent a look of disapproval.

“What?”

“Boots?”

“Yeah, why?”

She shook her head. “You’re disappointing me. You need a purse.”

Avery sent Liam a look that said *What the hell?* and *okay* at the same time.

She returned with her purse.

“Chloé, good.” Another scan from Sasha. “Did you bring any jewelry with you?”

Avery stalked back into the room, wearing the earrings and bracelet she’d bought to wear in the clubs.

Sasha released a frustrated sigh and they left the hotel. Instead of getting in a cab, they walked across the street and straight into a department store. Sasha marched them into the men’s department, picked up a Friday casual jacket, and shoved it in Liam’s hands. “Put this on.”

Liam shrugged into it.

Avery had him turn around. Not only did it fit, it managed to kick-start a flutter in her chest. “Looks good.”

“Why are we dressing up?”

Sasha didn’t answer. She took the coat from him and moved to the service desk.

Liam reached for his wallet, but Sasha had already swiped her card.

After the clerk removed the security tag, Sasha took the jacket from her hands and gave it back to Liam.

“No one has bought me clothes since my parents,” he told them.

Sasha stood to his side, smoothed out the arms. “It’s two thousand dollars, feel free to pay me back. Or don’t.”

Liam’s jaw dropped.

Avery grabbed his hand and they continued through the store.

Sasha stopped at a makeup counter, flagged an attendant, and pointed to Avery’s face. “Fix this.”

Okay, just because Avery hadn’t brought all her concealers and moisturizers didn’t mean she needed fixing.

Only with one look in the tilted countertop mirror, she realized she did.

Sasha pointed to Avery’s feet. “Size?”

“Six and a half. I can buy my own shoes.”

Without comment, Sasha walked away.

Liam leaned in. “What the hell is she all about?”

“Efficiency.”

The woman working on her makeup smoothed something under Avery’s eyes that felt like heaven. “Have you been sick?” the stranger asked.

Avery closed her eyes. “I’m getting over it.”

Liam rested a hand on her shoulder.

Twenty minutes later, wearing an edgy jacket in a rust orange color with matching Prada on her feet, Avery felt a little like her old self. Because she couldn’t leave the makeup lady without buying a few things, Avery held a bag with her boots and five hundred dollars’ worth of makeup.

Apparently Sasha didn’t approve. The second they were out of the department store, she grabbed Avery’s bag and handed it to the first petite homeless woman she could. “Merry Christmas.”

Avery’s jaw dropped. “Those were Stuart Weitzmans.”

“I’m sure Stuart has others. Come on. We’re late.”

Sasha stopped in front of a black SUV double-parked outside the department store. “Liam, you’re in front.”

Avery scooted in the back with Sasha and glanced at the driver. “I know you,” she said, slightly surprised. “You’re part of the Alliance team.”

“That’s right. Cooper. How are you, Avery?”

“I’m fine. This is Liam. Liam, Cooper works with Reed.”

Sasha clapped her hands like she was starting class. “Okay, kids, listen up.”

Liam shot Avery a grin.

“It’s really very simple. Today is visiting day, and the two of you are searching out a facility for your desperate younger brother who is snorting his tuition up his nose. Your brother’s name is Cooper.”

From the driver’s seat, Cooper offered a thumbs-up as he cut through traffic.

“My name is Mary. Think virginal.”

It took everything to keep Avery from laughing.

“What’s my name?” Avery said with a lift in her voice.

“Avery. And he’s Liam. IDs will be checked at the door.”

“Wait, your name is really Mary?”

Sasha looked at her like she was crazy. “Are you new?”

An invisible hand hit Avery upside the head. *Fake ID.* Okay. “But why do *you* need a fake ID?”

Again, Sasha blinked and kept silent. “We’ll walk in separately. Mingle. Liam, you stay with Avery. Take your time. Look in open doors, ask questions about the facility, talk to the patients, the counselors, the doctors. Avery, you’re exceptional about keeping your lies together. You do the talking. Liam, your job is to offer those big shoulders to help.”

Avery glanced at Liam. “My pact to tell the truth lasted less than twelve hours.”

Liam winked.

“Do not, under any circumstances, ask about Spider. Rehabilitation facilities will bounce you out the door if they think for one minute you’re there to find someone. Just because you don’t see Spider doesn’t mean he isn’t there.”

Avery’s smile sobered. “What if he is?”

“We’ll cross that when we get there.”

“*If* we get there.”

Sasha lifted Avery’s chin with a finger. *“When.”*

Cooper stopped the car.

“Okay, kids. First act is on you. Cooper, drive me around the block.”

Avery opened the door, and Liam was there to help her out.

“I’ll see you on the inside.”

Chapter Thirty-One

Avery glanced up at the sign above the door. "'Tranquility Springs.' Sounds like a spa."

Liam tugged on his jacket. "Looks expensive."

Avery put her hand in his. "So do you."

They walked up the steps together and opened the front door. Zen meditation music greeted them, along with a perfectly polished feminine man behind a mahogany reception desk. "Good afternoon. Welcome to Tranquility Springs."

"We're here to look around. There is an open house today, right?" Since the lobby was free of people, she was starting to wonder if Sasha had her facts wrong.

"Of course. I just need you to sign in."

Avery's hands actually started to sweat. She signed her name to the registration log and turned the pen to Liam.

"Your ID, please."

"Of course." She fished in her bag for her ID and handed it to him. "I'm so nervous. My brother has been so sick. I don't know what else to do for him."

"We here at Tranquility Springs understand. If you'll follow me, I'll find you a guide."

He led them through a set of double doors and around a corner. He punched in a set of numbers at the locked door. "The lock is to keep people out, not in."

"Oh." Avery glanced at Liam.

He shrugged.

"Wait here."

They were in a common room with other people milling about. Some were couples, but the majority were lone women. Single mothers, or maybe the wives of men who gave up. Everyone appeared to have deep pockets, based on their style of dress and jewelry.

Liam whispered in her ear, "I like my new jacket."

She smiled and felt some of the tension leave her shoulders for the first time since they'd walked in.

A smartly dressed woman, similar in size and frame to Avery, walked up to them. "Hello. Welcome to Tranquility Springs. I'm Evita. Is this your first time here?"

"Yes." Avery held out her hand for the other woman to shake.

"Welcome. Let me give you a tour, and then feel free to roam around. Everything is open but the top two floors. We have guests that don't care to be interrupted during their day. But know that the second and third floors are a duplicate of this one. Mainly private rooms and a couple of intimate group rooms."

Evita walked through a hallway and started her tour. "We like to create an inviting home environment. Which means group meals and common areas like the living room we just left." She walked them into a dining room that looked as if it could seat fourteen comfortably. Not an easy task in a Manhattan home.

They walked through a state-of-the-art kitchen. "Our chefs create nutritious menus to suit every allergy, dislike, and diet. We like to refer to anyone here at Tranquility as a client or even guest, if they prefer. Our guests have full run of the kitchen. Again, this is their home, and they are welcome to take anything they need."

This was nice and all but not helping Avery find Spider.

They walked through another set of doors and into what looked like a private room in a hospital. “Some of our clients come to us directly from the hospital. We have a full team of medical doctors and nurses on call twenty-four seven.”

She walked by three large, open rooms: two had people inside, talking, and one was empty. Evita drew their attention across the hall. “Group therapy. Our counselors’ offices are open when we’re not hosting an open house. For our clients’ privacy, they are locked today.”

They walked by a full gym and yoga studio, then past rooms that looked like luxury apartments, until finally they dumped out into a courtyard with plants and trees and a meditation pond, as Evita called it.

Finally Evita paused her tour and asked a few questions. “How long has your brother been using?”

“Late high school. It got worse in college, and now he’s out of control. Our parents are beyond themselves and giving up. But I can’t do that. He needs help.”

Liam placed a hand on Avery’s shoulder. “What is the recovery rate here?”

Evita offered another smile. “We are one of the top rated addiction recovery centers in the country. Nearly seventy percent of our patients return only to continue their outpatient therapy or to offer assistance to new clients coming in.” Evita looked over their shoulders and made her excuses. “Feel free to walk around. There is a small reception in the room opposite of the one you entered through. Please feel free to talk to anyone here. No one is offended if you ask if they are a client or staff.”

“Great, thank you.”

Avery sighed and took Liam’s arm. “I thought she would never leave.”

“This place feels like a country club,” Liam said.

“Let’s start circulating.”

They traversed the courtyard space quickly. While it was an outdoor private garden, it was in the middle of Manhattan, so it wasn’t huge. Avery caught Sasha out of the corner of her eye, talking with Evita. Only Sasha was the one walking in front of the staff. Listening to the woman talk about the facility was obviously not something she wanted to deal with.

“There were more people in the group rooms.”

Liam held her hand as they walked their way back inside. There were half a dozen people talking in the first group room.

Avery looked at the men who appeared to be either staff or clients. Two couples were standing with two men that were part of the staff. “I see a theme,” she whispered to Liam.

He was looking at the testimonials on the wall. “What’s that?”

“Staff and patients are wearing long sleeve shirts and casual pants.”

Liam glanced in the other room. “I think you’re right.”

Avery looked at everyone now a little differently. Every man in a long sleeve shirt without a jacket became part of her mental lineup. Too tall, wrong nationality, wrong build . . . she didn’t rule out thick or thin, because a year could change that. It was while walking through the main living room that she started to realize exactly what she was seeing.

“Are you okay?” Liam asked. “You look pale.”

She placed her lips close to his ear and whispered, “If he is here, he’s like these people. No one is raving mad and crazy.”

“We don’t know what is happening on the top floors.”

Avery needed more. She walked up to the first collared-shirted man and smiled. “I’m sorry, do you work here?”

“I do.” He extended a hand. “I’m Duane. One of the counselors.”

“I’m Avery and this is Liam. Can I ask you a few questions?”

“That’s why we’re here.”

“My brother, he’s been using for a long time. He’s kind of a mess. He has hit our mother a couple of times. Everything here seems so orderly and balanced. Am I looking at the right facility?”

“We work with all types of addiction, and sometimes the initial phases of detox involve violent tendencies. We do everything in our power to talk patients down and provide a safe environment for everyone. The fact that you’re here, looking for help, is a positive step. But I’m sure you know he has to be the one to walk through the door. No one is forced to stay here. Is your brother ready?”

“I don’t honestly know.” Her lies about a fictitious brother came easy.

“How old is he?”

Avery thought about the approximate age of her attacker. “Twenty-six.”

“College?”

“He used the money for college on his habit.”

“Not uncommon for our clientele.”

Yeah, kids with money had more to blow . . . literally.

“Thank you for speaking with me.”

He reached a hand out and placed it on her arm. “I look forward to helping your brother beat this and taking that look out of your eye. Addicts often don’t understand the pain they dish out to their family every time they use. He can earn your trust back. I see it every day.”

Duane walked away and Liam whispered, “You’re a little too good at lying.”

Avery held her smile back. Across the room, Sasha made a nodding motion to the courtyard.

They slowly made their way back outside.

“Did you recognize anyone?” Sasha asked quietly.

“Everyone looks *normal*.” *Normal* didn’t fit the image in her head.

Liam placed a hand over her shoulders and kissed the top of her head. “We’ll find him.”

“You wait out here. I’ll do another pass and signal when I’m leaving.”

“Do you have what you need?”

Sasha’s only confirmation was a slight nod.

Liam guided Avery to a bench and took her side. “What do you think she needed?”

Avery sighed. “Their records, registry for the patients?”

“You think she hacked into their computers in the time we’ve been here?”

“I wouldn’t put anything past her, from the stories I’ve heard.”

“I can’t wait to hear them.”

She stared down at their intertwined hands. “It feels like we’re wasting our time.”

“We waste as much as you need.” He pulled her hand to his lips and kissed her fingertips.

Yeah, but what if every day was like this? Hype and hope followed by disappointment.

“Excuse me?”

Avery and Liam looked up.

“Duane suggested I come over and talk to you.” He pointed to his chest. “I’m one of the clients here. He thought you might want to hear about how this facility helped me.”

Twenty-five, maybe, clean-cut with a polite smile.

Avery blinked several times, forgetting the string of lies she’d managed since walking through the door.

“That would be great,” Liam said.

He pulled an empty chair from behind him and sat facing them. “I’m Cedrick Palmer.” He reached out to shake Liam’s hand.

From the edge of his sleeve, peeking out from under the material, was one spiny leg.

Avery brought both hands to her mouth to keep from crying out.

It’s him.

Liam swiveled his gaze, then turned back to the man whose hand he just shook.

She noticed the second Liam realized what was happening. His arm tensed.

Avery grabbed his leg and kept him sitting.

Cedrick started to push his seat back. “Are you okay? Can I get you some water?”

She started shaking. “I’m fine. You, ah . . . you look like my brother.”

He looked over his shoulder, and she saw the memory in vivid color. He’d put on twenty pounds, his eyes weren’t wild.

“How old is your brother?”

Avery opened her mouth and nothing came out. *He doesn’t recognize me.*

“Twenty-six,” Liam said for her.

“How old are you?” Avery found her voice.

“Twenty-four. I came here eleven months ago. I’ll be getting my one-year pin next month.”

Avery didn’t know if she wanted to hear this. The man, the kid who haunted her while he was sobering up, was talking to her without an ounce of recollection in his face.

“What made you walk in the door?”

Liam’s hand was in hers. She wasn’t sure who was holding on tighter.

“I hit bottom. My parents reached their limit with my addiction, lies, and stealing. Because I had been a good customer for so long, and my dealer didn’t think my parents would completely cut me off, he offered a line of credit.”

Krueger.

"Only his drugs weren't cut the same. Or maybe my body simply rebelled. My high was shorter and life in between was longer. I was on these streets, walking past clubs I used to go in and buy the rounds. I had been reduced to standing by the back door, hoping to see an old friend who could hook me up."

"That was your rock bottom?" Liam asked. "Living on the street and begging for handouts?"

"I wish." Cedrick shook his head. "My dealer was tired of waiting for money and told me I could earn everything if I did a job for him."

Avery's skin tensed, her breath shallow. "What job?" Her voice was tight.

"I don't know. He gave me a hit when we met up. Some crazy shit I had never had before. I remember walking with him, feeling surprised I was standing up. It was like I was on the outside of my body, looking down, saying, 'Dude, you should be facedown in a ditch. And not in a high, party way, but just die already and get it over with.'"

He doesn't remember anything. His tone, his manners . . . none of it was what she was prepared to see.

"The next day I woke up in an alley with someone else's clothes on my back. I have no idea what happened that night. I learned later that week that my dealer overdosed on his own shit. I knew that could have been me, that I was next. I stopped using for three days, easy to do when you don't have money and your dealer is dead. I went to the emergency room and told them I wanted to kill myself. I didn't. But I knew it would give me three days of medical care, food, and a bed. When I left, I went to my parents' house and begged them to check me in here."

"You don't remember anything? Nothing at all?"

"No. It haunts me sometimes. Like I should. In here I realized that I only had a few nights without any memories. Some of these guys have forgotten years. But I'm doing much better now. I'm six months from finishing my bachelor's degree and starting my master's in psychology, specializing in addiction. I was given this path, and I need to help others get out. I have to give back and make up for everyone I've hurt."

Avery closed her eyes and tilted her head to the sky.

"What do you want to do?" Liam asked her.

She opened her eyes to find Liam poised and ready for whatever she needed. Beyond him, Sasha stood beside Cooper.

Cedrick sat with his fingers crossed in his lap. Forcing him to remember would do what? It wouldn't bring back her year, wouldn't erase the past.

She slowly let her lungs fill with fresh air.

Avery smiled at Liam, touched the side of his face, and shook her head.

She stood, her legs a little less than stable.

Liam kept an arm on her elbow.

"You've been very helpful, Mr. Palmer."

He stood with them and smiled.

Avery's hand moved out slowly.

He took it without hesitation.

His gaze fell to the tattoo on her arm. "What does that say?"

She lifted her chin and brought her arm up.

"Warrior. Nice. I like the spider." And without a thought, he rolled up his sleeve to show her his tattoo. There it was, the image of her nightmares. "I need to touch this up. The eyes freak even me out."

"That would give anyone bad dreams," Liam said.

Cedrick smiled. "Why *warrior*?" he asked Avery.

She looked her past in the eye and let it go. "Because it was better than *survivor*."

Something flashed in his eyes for a moment, then was gone.

"Congratulations on your one-year pin, Mr. Palmer."

"Thank you."

Avery walked out of Tranquility Springs flanked by security and in a cloud of peace.

Liam took the back seat with her.

"What are we doing?" Cooper asked.

Sasha looked over her shoulder.

"You knew he was in there all the time, didn't you?"

Sasha sighed. "No. Palmer's name came up in Van's tattoo parlor's database with a description of the spider. The profile was exactly as you said. A young man with money who hadn't been in since the tattoo was put on his arm. Palmer wasn't on the police radar. No criminal activity. He did turn up on the dean's list at his current college. There was a link to a term paper on drug addiction and recovery. Without a current address, it was safe to say he was still residing in a private rehabilitation facility. By two o’clock this morning our team narrowed it down to this facility or another one across town. This being the most likely.”

“You could have just told me.”

Sasha shook her head. “No. I could not give you what he just did.”

Avery closed her eyes.

“Babe?” Liam asked. “Are we calling Armstrong?”

She shook her head and leaned into his shoulder. “Take me home.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Armstrong answered Reed's call as he was walking out to his car.

"Armstrong?"

"No bad news, please. My wife hasn't seen me in a week."

He heard Reed laugh on the line. "Avery is on her way back to California."

"Thank God. We will eventually find this guy. Assure her of that."

Again, Reed laughed. "I sent you an e-mail. The file is encrypted. Use it if you need to. Avery Grant wants to put this behind her at this time. She's not going to pursue him."

Armstrong leaned against the hood of his car. "Son of a bitch . . . you found him. How?"

Reed was silent.

"Yeah, you know what? I don't want to know."

"Enjoy your evening, Detective. If you're ever in LA, drop me a call. We'll grab a beer."

"You're on. Thanks, Reed."

Armstrong looked at his phone, laughed, and shoved it in his back pocket before pulling out of the parking lot.

Sally was going to freak when he came home early.

* * *

Liam had his sister drop off a duffel full of his clothes and a few days' worth of groceries while Avery was sleeping.

They'd returned to her condo after midnight, and at nearly noon, she finally emerged from her bedroom. The fact that Avery stepped from the shower with wet hair and a lack of makeup was a testament to where they were in their relationship.

Liam swiveled the stool he was sitting on by her kitchen counter and opened his arms for her to walk into. She sank into him like an extension cord into an outlet. "Good morning," she said against his lips.

Such sweet words. Yeah, she could probably say anything and he'd call it something flowery.

He accepted her kiss and gave one of his own. "Good afternoon."

He pulled her to sit on one of his legs, and she looked down at his laptop and what he was working on. "What's that?"

"Invoices, paperwork. Things I've been slowly getting behind on."

"Because you're chasing your girlfriend around all over the country."

He knew he was sporting a shit-eating grin. "You said *girlfriend* without stuttering."

She placed a lazy arm on his shoulder and moved a strand of his hair more to her liking. "I'm evolving."

"I approve of your evolution."

She kissed him again, a little slower this time. “Thank you for being here. For chasing me. I rolled over a couple of times last night and felt you there, all I could think was *you’re still here*. You didn’t run away, even though I gave you an out.”

“You aren’t getting rid of me that easy, Princess.”

He sealed that promise with a kiss.

She smiled when she pulled back.

“How are you feeling about yesterday?” he asked. The trip home was void of all conversation about Cedrick Palmer.

“Resolved. I went to New York searching for revenge, and look how quickly I let it consume me. I stepped on the scale today. I lost eight pounds. That never happens when I want it to.”

Liam squeezed her thigh.

“I didn’t realize how dim everything felt until I woke up today. I saw the light coming in, heard you in here . . . and the shadows of the past were gone. Vanished. Then I looked at this and thought”—she lifted her arm with the tattoo and traced it with one finger—“I’m really glad I didn’t get anything bigger.”

They both laughed.

Her smile lit up her face.

“You can always have it removed,” he told her.

“No. I want it. A forever reminder to learn from the past and let it go. From my parents and the things they did to make me spend money on a therapy couch, to Cedrick’s walk on the dark side, where I was caught in the cross fire.”

“Past relationships that keep you from entering a new one . . . like your previous marriage?”

“Oh, hon . . . no. That has nothing to do with my resistance to all things relationships.”

Liam fixed her with a questioning look. “You were married. That had to have some impact on you.”

Avery placed a hand to the side of his face. “What’s my ex’s name?”

He opened his mouth to respond, closed it. “Mr. Grant?”

God, he loved her smile. “No. I never took *Bernie’s* last name.”

“Bernie?” *What man had that name?*

She slid off his lap and grabbed the phone on an opposite counter.

Who was she calling?

“Bernie. It’s Avery.”

Liam sat dumbfounded. She was calling her ex?

“Well, of course you know my voice. Everyone should remember the ex-wife’s voice.” She smiled at Liam as she spoke. “Listen, I don’t have a lot of time . . . no, no. I’m doing well, but thank you. Yes, I know.”

Had Liam ever heard an ex talking to an ex as happily as he was witnessing right now?

Nope.

Right on up there with never.

“I met someone.” She was silent for a beat. “No. Stop. He’s important to me, and I wanted you to meet him.”

Liam lifted his hands in the air and mouthed, *What?*

“Next week would be great.” Her eyes lit up. “Seriously? Congratulations. She’s not after your money—”

Liam felt he needed popcorn for the conversation he was witnessing.

“Okay, if you say so. But I can kick some ass these days.” She laughed. A wholehearted belly laugh Liam wasn’t sure he’d ever seen her do. “Perfect. I’ll see you then. I adore you, too.”

Avery hung up.

“What the hell was that?”

“Bernie’s getting married. I can’t believe it.”

Liam watched her pour a cup of coffee. “You set us up on a double date with your ex?”

“Sure did. Because as your *girlfriend*, I get to do that.”

“But your ex-husband?”

Avery leaned on her elbows across the counter and took a sip of coffee. “I married him as a means to get out from under my parents. He married me because he wanted a trophy wife and the confidence it gave him. He gave me money. I helped him find his backbone.” She took another drink. “We never slept together.”

“Holy shit, you really did marry him for his money. That wasn’t a joke.”

“Not a joke. Not a lie. He just asked me if I needed more. He is *that* guy. I think you two will get along great.”

“This is surreal, you get that, right?”

"Yup. Even more odd is that you will meet him before my parents. Maybe he can convince you how they are so you don't hold it against me when my mother disapproves."

"Mothers love me."

"If you look up *pretentious* in a dictionary, you'll see her picture. So unless you're hiding a couple hundred million somewhere, be prepared."

"Can't say I am."

He paused and watched her drink her coffee.

"Is that going to be an issue?"

Avery narrowed her eyes. "What?"

"That I don't have that kind of money."

She lowered her cup from her lips and set it down. "Is it an issue that I do?"

He saw her point and smiled. "No."

She released a sigh. "Good. Because I really don't want to throw it away. In fact, I have some serious retail therapy to do as soon as the Brentwood project is tied up. If I still have that job, that is."

"I'm sure a truthful explanation will keep you in good standing with Lankford."

"We'll see. What's done is done. I'm not going to stress about it."

He stood and moved to her side of the counter. "Now sit down and let me make you something to eat. I need to get some of that meat back on your bones."

"Oh my God, you're going to cook for me again? I feel like I hit the jackpot."

He kissed her, hard, and pushed her into a chair. "You haven't seen anything yet."

* * *

Two weeks later Avery stood outside the Brentwood estate as the last of the Lankfords' belongings were shipped off to Goodwill. Many of the estate's treasures were at auction houses, sold, or now just given away. But outside of collecting a check when everything sold, Avery was done. Three weeks behind schedule, but that didn't seem to matter.

"So that's it?" Sheldon asked when he walked out of the empty house to stand by her as the Goodwill truck pulled out of the driveway.

"That's it."

Avery had heard a sigh like that from her own lips just a few weeks before.

"Sheldon." She pulled her nerve in and lifted her eyes to his. "I found some pictures a while back, hidden in your father's desk."

He stared down at her, blinking.

He said nothing.

"I left his desk in the office, in case you wanted to see where they were. I removed them so they wouldn't end up in the wrong hands. I'm not sure if you want to see them, or—"

"What kind of pictures?"

She picked up her oversize purse and removed an envelope and handed them over. "I think your dad had an affair."

Sheldon seemed unfazed as he removed the old photographs and barely gave them a look. He turned his head and stared blankly at the disappearing truck.

He knew.

"I'm sorry," she said, laying a hand on his arm.

Sheldon attempted to smile. "Don't be. I always assumed he had other people in his life. He always had time for everyone other than me."

It was sad to think the man went to his grave never changing his relationship with his chosen son.

Noise from the drive had her turning around.

Liam and two of his workers pulled up in trucks. When her boyfriend stepped out, she couldn't stop her heart from reaching her smile.

"Liam is a lucky man," Sheldon said.

"Thank you."

Holding a sledgehammer, Liam climbed up the stairs. He dropped a quick kiss to her lips and shook Sheldon's hand. "Good morning. Ready to get started?"

“Nope,” Avery said. “I have some shopping to do.”

Liam and Sheldon both laughed.

“We’re going to start the demo. Lots of noise, dust, and trash.” He offered the sledgehammer to Sheldon. “Some of my clients like to take the first swing.”

Sheldon immediately shook his head. “I’ll leave that to the profess—” He paused and accepted the tool. “On the other hand, there’s a desk I wouldn’t mind taking a hammer to.”

With that, he walked back into the house.

* * *

“First Wives Club meetings shall always include shopping, shoes, and champagne.” Avery lifted her glass to the other three club members as a toast.

“Cheers.”

Their club meeting was being held at the Hotel del Coronado in San Diego.

“I needed this!” Avery exclaimed. “I can’t remember the last time I managed any serious shopping.”

Their bungalow looked out over the Pacific Ocean with endless sunshine. They sat on a private deck, enjoying the last rays of heat as the sun started to set.

“Wade and I did our share of damage on our honeymoon,” Trina told them. “I’ve never known a man who likes to shop more than him.”

“That’s because he’s loaded,” Avery teased.

“It’s because he looks good in everything he puts on.” Everyone turned to stare at Shannon.

“Is it possible the woman who seems impervious to the male species is finally starting to open her eyes?” Avery asked.

“I fall hard, and fast . . . and for the wrong men. You flitter from one flower to another until a Venus flytrap grabs your leg to keep you from running away.”

Lori tilted her flute glass Avery’s way. “She has a point.”

“So are you dating?” Avery asked Shannon.

“Not yet. Before you ask, yes, I’ve been going out a little more. I’m not sure I want to date in LA.”

“What does that mean? Where would you date?”

She shrugged. “I’m thinking of selling the house and moving.”

“What? Why?”

“Because Paul bought it for me.”

“That was part of your agreement,” Lori said.

“I’ll use the money from the sale to buy something else. Granted, he didn’t have much to do with the purchasing process other than writing a check, but it still feels like it’s part of him.”

“Hey, anything you can do to move on, sista.” Avery clinked her glass to Shannon’s.

“Where would you move?”

“I’m not sure. I like the beach.”

“Just don’t move too far,” Avery suggested.

“Hey, I moved to Texas,” Trina said.

“You fly here all the time.” Avery set her glass down.

“True.”

“So, Avery, how is everything going with Liam?”

“He is an unexpected pleasure in my world.”

“Has he told you he loves you?” Trina asked.

Avery knew her cheeks were blushing. “Yes.”

Trina did the smiling chair dance.

“And you him?” Lori asked.

Avery hid her answer in her drink.

“Excuse me, what was that?” Shannon asked.

“No. I can’t.”

“Do you?”

“Yes. Of course. He’s the best thing in my life. We laugh all the time, toss each other around in krav and in the bedroom. He keeps me grounded and safe . . . and I don’t know, settled.”

Lori moved away from the railing she was leaning on and sat in a chair. “So why not tell him that?”

“Because then he will move on to the next thing. It’s what he does. It started with insisting that we were dating when we weren’t . . . and the next thing I know I’m in a relationship. I erased all my dating profiles, my data dump of phone numbers gave my phone so much room it downloaded music all by itself just because it could.”

They were laughing.

“He has a drawer at my place—hell, he took half the closet. I even have a dog bed for Whiskey. His niece is already calling me Auntie Avery, and Michelle is calling me to arrange a family dinner so everyone can meet. I can’t do that, because I still haven’t taken him over to the Grant home for what will surely be the dinner from hell.”

“It could go well,” Miss Glass Half-Full told her.

“Snowball’s chance, Shannon. Snowball’s chance.”

“What does he do when he tells you he loves you and you don’t say it back?”

Avery found herself smiling. “He tells me it’s okay that I don’t because he knows that when I do, I’m *all in*, that since the words aren’t easy for me, they mean more. He’s so damn understanding.”

“Sounds like the real thing.”

“I tell him I love him, and the next thing I know, you guys will be back buying more freaking bridesmaids’ dresses. My condo doesn’t work for the dog. I love my condo. And what happens if I get pregnant? I’m too young to be a mom.”

“You’re thirty-two,” Trina reminded her.

“Liam will be a great dad,” Lori added.

Avery thought about how he treated his niece, and smiled.

“You know what is killing me about this whole picture?” Shannon asked.

“What?”

“You know you love him. He adores you. Keeping that little word that means so much out of the mix is only prolonging what you know is going to happen. You want it to happen.”

“Do I?”

Shannon leaned forward. “Close your eyes?”

“What?”

“Humor me.”

Avery frowned and followed instructions.

“Fast-forward five years. Is Liam there?”

She smiled. “Yes.”

“Where are you guys?”

She saw his home, the one with the yard, or one like it. There were kids’ toys in the yard and a white fence. Damn, she was happy.

Avery unfolded herself from her chair. “Son of a . . .” Opened the door leading back inside.

“Where are you going?” Trina called after her.

“I have to call Liam.”

They started laughing.

Avery grabbed her cell phone from her purse and hid in the bathroom. Before she lost her nerve, she leveled the phone with her face and called Liam via FaceTime.

He picked up on the second ring.

Just seeing him made her smile. “Shouldn’t you be chardonnay drunk by now?” he teased.

“Probably.”

He was in his backyard, under the lights of his patio.

“Is that Auntie Avery?”

Liam smiled and turned the phone toward Cassandra. “Sure is. Say hi.”

“Hi, Auntie Avery. When are you gonna come back over so I can braid your hair?”

“Soon, honey. Can you do me a big favor and give me and your uncle a few minutes?”

Liam scooted his niece off his lap. “Play with the dog before it gets dark.”

Avery heard Cassie’s squeals and the dog barking as she ran out of view.

“Is everything okay?” he asked.

She nodded like a fool for a good five seconds and then sucked up her nerve. “Yup. I just called to tell you I love you.”

Liam’s smile started at his eyes, and when it reached his lips, he held it in. “Did that hurt?”

“God, yes,” she exhaled.

He was chuckling.

"I promised that I wouldn't lie to you, and not saying it has been a lie by omission, so there. I love you, Liam Holt."

He peered into the camera. "Are you in a bathroom?"

"Are you going to give me crap about where I chose to say it?"

"Maybe."

She was laughing with him. "It was private."

"I think I'm going to love these club meetings of yours."

She glanced at the bathroom door, heard the ladies on the other side. "Okay, so that's it. That's all I called to say."

"Say it again."

"Is that a demand?"

"Yes." His eyes were alive with happiness.

"I love you, Liam. I'll show you how much when I see you on Monday."

"I love you, too. Thanks for being impulsive."

"A trait you're going to hate."

"So far it's working for me."

He blew her a kiss and hung up.

She closed her eyes and hugged her phone to her chest.

It was all over now.

Epilogue

Avery walked around the condo, placing flowers in the perfect locations and then deciding they didn't look right and moving them.

The caterers were busy setting up in the kitchen, and music already played on her sound system.

Introducing Liam to her parents at a cocktail party had been his idea.

Making sure everyone was at the party before her parents could arrive was hers.

Liam brushed up behind her and ran his hands up her bare arms. "You look edible."

The sleek cocktail dress didn't leave room for a bra. It came up to her neck almost like a collar and crisscrossed all over the back, which dipped low. The First Wives approved and also suggested that she double up on her birth control pills if she wore it for Liam. By the heat breathing down on her neck from the man in question, they were right.

"So we should tell everyone the party is off and go to bed early."

He chuckled in her ear. "You're not wiggling out of this."

She moaned.

The doorbell rang and her palms broke out in a sweat.

"Relax."

Not standing on ceremony, Trina and Wade arrived and immediately made themselves at home. Lori and Reed, Shannon. The Wives were there. Michelle brought a friend from class. Leslie arrived with a mutual friend from krav.

"Samantha! I didn't think you guys were going to make it." Avery kissed the side of Samantha Harrison's cheek and did the same for Blake.

"And miss meeting this guy?" Sam extended a hand. "I'm Samantha, almost everyone calls me Sam."

"My pleasure."

"This is Blake Harrison. We've been friends with Avery for quite a few years."

"Nice to meet you," Liam said.

"Are the parents here yet?" Sam asked.

"No."

Sam leaned closer to Liam. "Keep Avery away from the tequila when Adeline shows up."

"Stop. I'm not that . . ." She paused. "Okay, I was that bad."

Blake turned to Liam. "I'm told you're in construction."

"I am."

"Commercial or residential?"

"A little of both, actually."

The two of them started a conversation about work, and the doorbell rang again. Each time was like a tiny nail in Avery's side.

"Brenda?" Avery's jaw dropped. She'd invited her krav instructor, but she seriously hadn't thought she'd show.

Holy shit did Brenda clean up. Wow, she took little black dress to a whole new meaning, and the man holding her arm was African American and towered over her. Not hard, because she was kinda on the short side, but wow.

Avery excused herself from Sam's side and crossed to the door. "Look at this sexy mama!"

Brenda gave her a stern look. "Zip it, Grant, or you'll be doing burpees until Christmas."

Yeah, those words didn't scare her. "You must be Brenda's main squeeze."

"I am." Oh, and his voice was bayou deep.

"Phil. His name is Phil, not main squeeze," Brenda corrected.

Avery pulled them into the room. "Let me introduce you to some of our friends. Shannon, Lori, this is Brenda, the krav queen of LA, and her boyfriend, Phil. Brenda, you need to talk Shannon into coming to class. I think a strong wind could knock her down."

"Kinda like you when you first came to me?" Brenda was all snark.

"Delicate flowers hold the most poison," Phil said, smiling down at Brenda.

Avery barely registered the doorbell ringing, because she was laughing. Brenda and *delicate* . . . that was rich.

"Oh, dear Lord."

Avery felt the nails of her mother's voice on her childhood chalkboard.

Her parents stood side by side in stunned silence when Avery turned around.

What, is there a problem already?

A waiter walked by, and her mother snagged a glass of wine off the tray so fast the guy almost lost the whole thing.

That's when Avery looked around to see if anyone else was watching her reaction.

Phil started to laugh.

Avery looked up, then back at her mother, and shook her head.

Adeline Grant was about to have a coronary.

Because Avery couldn't help herself, she waited just a couple of beats before excusing herself to greet her parents. "Hello, Mother. Daddy."

Her father kissed her cheek. "It's good to see you. Been too long."

"Well, I have been busy."

Adeline kept eyeing the man standing behind her daughter.

"There's someone I'd like you to meet."

Avery took a few steps, noticed her mother wasn't moving, and motioned with her hand.

Turning on her heel, Avery walked past Phil and winked. He smiled back, and she moved past him and up to Liam.

She slid her arm around Liam's waist and turned to her parents. "Mom, Dad, this is Liam. My boyfr—"

"Oh, thank God!" Adeline almost melted right there in the middle of the condo.

Liam was all smiles. He looked down at Avery as if saying, *see, I told you all mothers love me*.

"A pleasure to meet you, young man. I'm Howard, and this is my wife, Adeline."

Liam shook her father's hand, met his eyes, and turned to Adeline.

To Avery's surprise, her mother leaned in for a kiss to Liam's cheek. "You cannot understand my joy right now."

Avery started to laugh.

"I've heard a lot about you," Liam told them.

"I can't say the same. I suppose that means we'll have plenty to talk about," Adeline said.

"I see where Avery gets her beautiful smile."

Avery had a strong urge to roll her eyes.

She did a double take—was that her mother blushing? "Such a handsome man, Avery. Where ever did you meet?"

"In a bar," she said, deadpan.

"At the gym," Liam said at the same time.

Lori leaned in. "Jury is still out on which one of those answers is the truth."

An hour later, when the party was in full swing, Avery had left her parents to fend for themselves and checked on the state of the caterers and supply of wine and cocktails.

She heard someone clinking a glass and the room grow silent. Turning, she saw Liam grabbing everyone's attention. Someone turned the music down.

He motioned for her to join him.

What are you doing?

"I wanted to take a minute to thank everyone for coming tonight. I like to think this is the first of many celebrations with this beautiful woman at my side. I especially want to thank Brenda, for giving Avery the skills to walk with confidence, not to mention kick ass."

Avery saw her mother's eyes. "Mom's not going to like hearing that, babe."

"It's okay, Mrs. G. I'll tell you how I first saw your daughter later."

Mrs. G?

Holy shit, her mother was blushing again.

"Reed and your crew. The weight off Avery's shoulders is like night and day." Liam lifted his glass and Reed lifted his.

"I would be remiss if I didn't thank Bernie, who isn't here . . . so glad he divorced you so I could have a chance," Liam said directly to Avery.

"To Bernie," someone in the crowd said, and a chorus went up.

Liam turned to her. "To this beautiful, strong, independent, snarky—"

Avery heard her mother laugh.

"Courageous woman who opened up her heart so I could park myself in."

She melted in his public appraisal.

"I love you, Princess. I've had a little chat with your father. So I need you to take some time and to get used to the idea of changing your name. Because the next time this group of people gets together, it's going to be with me on one side of the church and you walking my way."

Her nerves were wrecked. "Are you asking me . . . ?"

"Are you ready for me to ask you to marry me?"

Everything in her tightened. Fear? Excitement?

"I, um . . ."

He winked. "I'll ask that question in private, but with your track record, I thought it best to let everyone in the room know my intention, so if you suddenly disappear and end up in Finland, your friends here will know why. I'm going to marry you. I'm just telling you now so you can get used to the idea."

She was going to cry.

"To Avery." Liam put his glass in the air.

"To Avery," a chorus went up in the room.

Slowly the music was turned up, and their guests struck up their conversations.

"I love you," she said to him when no one was listening.

"Your mom loves me, and your dad approves . . ."

"My mother thought I was with Phil when she walked in the room."

Liam glanced over her shoulder. "I'll take whatever I can get. Thank you for letting me be a part of your life," he said before kissing her.

Damn, she loved this man. White picket fence, two point five kids kind of love.

She broke off their kiss and started toward the First Wives, who were all smiles. Avery took several steps and stopped. "Excuse me," she called out. "Can someone turn the . . . thank you." The music dropped again.

"Liam?" She turned toward him, hands at her sides.

He grinned like a fool.

"I've had enough time. The answer is yes."

Liam opened his arms and swooped her up. "Took you long enough."

He kissed her long and soft before slowly setting her down. From his pocket he removed a box, took the ring from inside, and slid it on her finger. "Marry me."

"I already said yes."

They kissed again, ignoring whistles and clapping from their family and friends.

"That's enough of that, son. Time for that later."

Avery grinned at her father's words.

"I should say so" was her mother's reply.

Liam opened his eyes a little wider as he stared down at Avery chuckling.

"I knew my parents would show up sometime."

He leaned in closer. "They're going to have to get used to me kissing their daughter." He placed his lips on hers. "Whenever, however, and wherever I want."

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It takes a village to publish a book. This is the part where I thank my townspeople.

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Krav queen of Santa Clarita, Bonnie Formia. Okay, you're not German, and you never made me do fifty burpees at the same time. But you did roll your eyes at me when I punched with the strength of a gnat, and you did nag me to join your group class. You've opened my eyes to krav and everything it can do to help me out of a crappy situation. Thank you, my friend.

Now on to Tanya.

As I said in my dedication, strong women fuel me. Anyone who reads my work can easily deduce that the relationships with the women in my life are vital. Men may come and go, but strong friendships between us ladies last a lifetime. You're one of the strongest, most beautiful, smart, funny, supportive friends I have the pleasure to call one of mine. Thank you, my friend.

I love you.

Catherine

About the Author

Photo © 2015 Julianne Gentry

New York Times, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* bestselling author Catherine Bybee has written twenty-eight books that have collectively sold more than five million copies and have been translated into more than eighteen languages. Raised in Washington State, Bybee moved to Southern California in the hope of becoming a movie star. After growing bored with waiting tables, she returned to school and became a registered nurse, spending most of her career in urban emergency rooms. She now writes full-time and has penned the Not Quite series, the Weekday Brides series, the Most Likely To series, and the First Wives series.

Cheese-Rolling, Shin-Kicking and Ugly Tattoos

Vernon Coleman

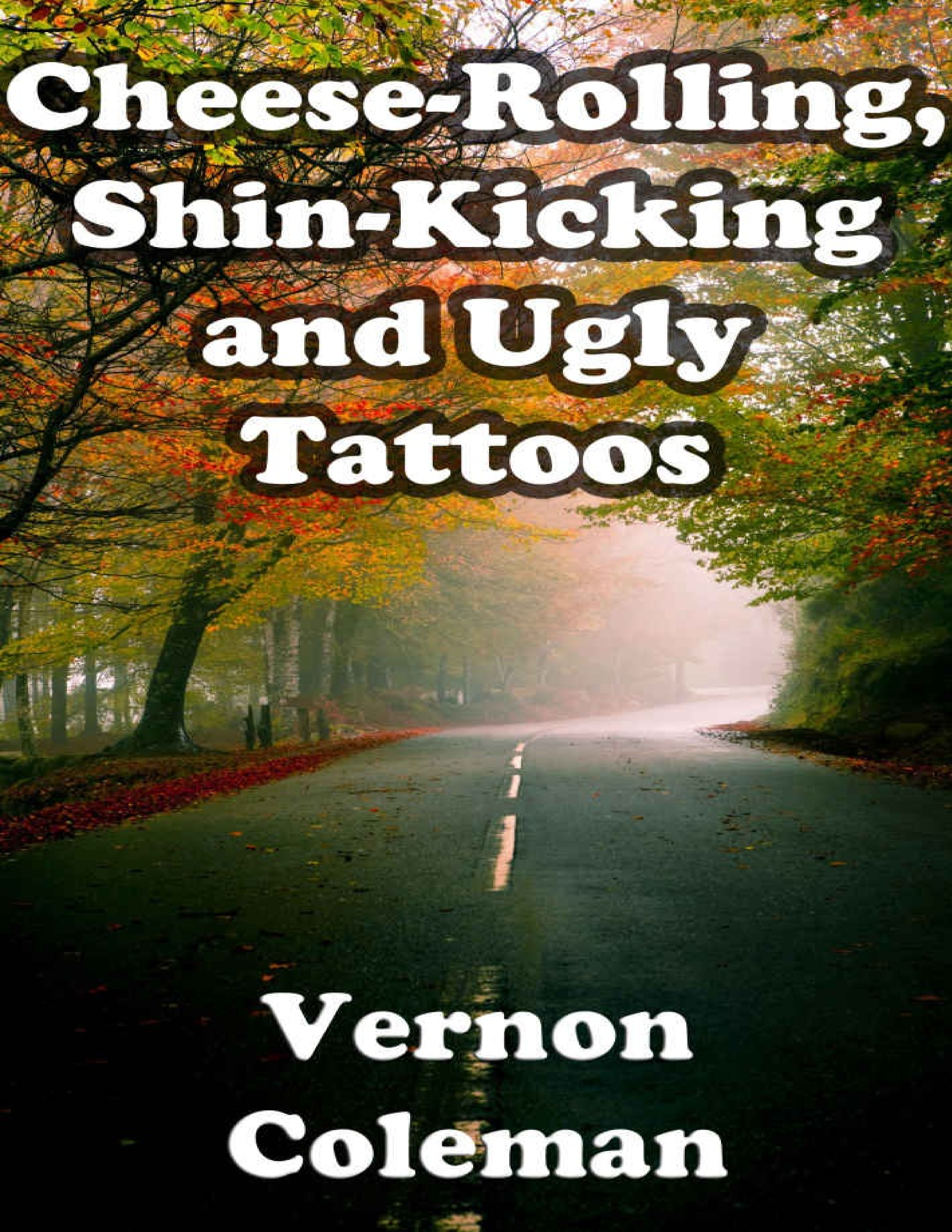

Cheese Rolling, Shin Kicking and Ugly Tattoos

Searching for England

Vernon Coleman

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Dr Vernon Coleman is a qualified doctor who has been a professional author for 40 years. He has written over 100 books which have sold more than two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK alone. His books have been translated into 25 languages and sold around the world. Many of his books are available as Kindle books on Amazon. For more details about available books, please see his author page on Amazon or visit www.vernoncoleman.com

Dedication

As always, to Donna Antoinette, who truly means more to me than life itself.

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Introduction

What is England?

Believe it or not, England doesn't officially exist as a country any more. The part of Britain that used to be known as England (the long stretch below Scotland and to the right of Wales) is now officially no more than a clump of regions being prepared for inclusion in the new European superstate. Look up England in the Britannica Concise Encyclopaedia and you will see that, officially, 'England no longer exists as a governmental or political unit'. The EU bureaucrats have officially airbrushed England from history. Shakespeare's homeland is now just a historical oddity; a vast library of cultural memories.

But that's just the official line.

Whatever the politicians and the bureaucrats may say, England still exists in some ways. The non-existent country still has a football team, a rugby team and a cricket team and more than 40 million people would, if anyone bothered to ask them, still describe themselves as English.

So, what is England?

Well, it might be easier if I start by telling you what it's not.

England is not just endless rows about immigration or endless ill-defined wars that no one can understand let alone explain. Since England no longer exists those are problems which face Great Britain (a country which is known as the United Kingdom when you add in Northern Ireland). Similarly, England is not litter strewn motorways or attempts to eradicate town centre birds so that residents won't be woken up by the dawn chorus and cars won't be scarred by guano hits. It isn't potholes, speed cameras or chanting football fans. And it isn't suburban trees cruelly pollarded so that local councils won't have to spend money collecting up the leaves or worry about small boys hoovering up the conkers. England isn't ugly council offices, pointless and dangerous speed bumps, feral youths with their faces hidden by their hoods or dogs so ferocious and powerful that even their owners are afraid of them. It isn't internet trolls gleefully spreading abuse and hatred, it isn't streets scarred by endless rows of wheelie bins and it isn't uniformed border control Gestapo louts at airports and railway stations shouting at infirm eighty-year-olds and treating the most lawful of citizens as though they were potential criminals.

Those socio-economic problems might be problems facing Great Britain. But they aren't anything particular to do with England. They can't be English problems because England hasn't existed for several years now and these are all Statist, modern problems; which are signs, symptoms and symbols of some alien culture. Those in search of England and the English can and should ignore or disown them.

Since it is now officially no more than a historical and cultural oddity, England today is still entitled to be an amalgam of crooked spires, thatched cottages, bell ringing, stone follies and pigeon fanciers. England is a thousand strange societies, formed by men whose only common ground is the fact that they all have handlebar moustaches or by women with a penchant for producing homemade chutney. England is endless supplies of hot, buttered crumpets, kedgeree, toad-in-the-hole, jam roly-poly pudding and kippers for breakfast. England is a nation where men and women invent games and sports but never become terribly good at them, because they believe in their hearts that it's the playing not the winning that really counts. England is pomp and circumstance, royalty in gilded coaches, Gilbert and Sullivan, Shakespeare, Dickens and the glorious, imaginary Edwardian world of P.G.Wodehouse.

Is the real England still there? Does anything remain of the country which conquered the world, managed an empire and mothered many of the world's most notable authors, scientists and inventors? Or have England and Englishness been diluted so much by crushing political correctness and forbidding EU regulations that they no longer exist and are now merely memories, part of a rapidly disappearing cultural history? Is England now a historical phantom; no more than a fast disappearing memory? Do we, perhaps, need to see it now in order to grab a sepia view of the England which used to exist? Do modern Englishmen and Englishwomen still have the faith, hope, courage and inventiveness which made their Victorian forbears so great?

There is no doubt that things have changed dramatically in recent years. Physically, modern England is now full of speed bumps, potholes and nail parlour customers with ugly tattoos. It is a non-existent nation and it is now run by MPs fiddling their expenses. Its high streets are packed with overpriced charity shops.

England's much derided Victorians built great hospitals, magnificent schools, town halls designed to last, grand railway stations which still defy belief or explanation, and even had the time, energy and money to dot the countryside with absurd but delightful stone follies. These glorious follies were usually done to provide employment for local estate workers who would otherwise have no work and no food. But the follies, (strange grottoes, Greek temples, fake ruins and so on) were also a statement of wealth and eccentricity. The English have always been proud to be eccentric.

England's modern management has busied itself erecting speed bumps and has, at the behest of the European Union, filled our streets with peculiar and dangerous traffic calming monstrosities and appalling situated chicanes apparently designed to cause accidents and increase road deaths. They have created absurd cycle lanes with no discernible beginning and no clear end, and they have ignored the warnings from medical scientists and put mobile phone masts on school roofs.

The people who run England today seem to have lost their sense of fun and to have mislaid their sense of perspective.

In this morning's news, I saw that a policeman had threatened to confiscate a four-year-old girl's bicycle (complete with stabilisers) because he had spotted her riding her bicycle on the pavement. In fact, of course, he could do no such thing. But the reality of the law no longer seems to bother English policemen who seem to assume that the law is what they say it is.

In England today your career will be over if you feed the pigeons or compliment a member of the opposite sex on her or his hairstyle or choice of clothing. Both offences are likely to result in a criminal conviction, or an official hammering from some unelected tribunal, and there is bound to be a storm of abuse on the internet. On the other hand, your career will, however, be unaffected if you fiddle interest rates or currency rates for your own financial advantage or if you cheat customers or taxpayers.

It is a truly, topsy-turvy, strange, Alice in Wonderland world in England today.

(And, talking of mad hatters and March hares how long will it be before Lewis Carroll's books are burnt in public when the nation's self-appointed guardians of decency become aware of the author's harmless affection for taking photographs of young girls?)

Most of the media has been indoctrinated into believing that English patriotism is as reprehensible as paedophilia and as damaging as global warming. The man or woman who is proud of being English is squeezed between the phoney humanitarianism of *The Guardian* and the bigoted, racist humbug of the BBC (widely known among the English as the Brussels Broadcasting Corporation).

The political intelligentsia (an oxymoron if ever I heard one, since most of them are too stupid and too crooked even to hold down jobs as estate agents) have been taught by the European Union to sneer whenever they see an England flag.

Even physical bits and pieces of old England are disappearing. The original London Bridge was dismantled in 1967 so that it could be sold for £130 million to an American oil millionaire. The bridge is now sitting somewhere in the Arizona desert and the £130 million was long ago frittered away. How long will it be before Stonehenge is attracting strange looks on a nice sandy site in Quatar?

So, that's the background.

The Princess and I wanted to see how England is doing these days; and how the English are bearing up.

Our journey in search of England and the English may seem, at first glance, to be an entirely arbitrary one, following no pattern or logical route. But, contrary to this impression, there was sense and design behind our seemingly idiosyncratic and apparently random meanderings.

We wanted to avoid the big cities because it is there, in the nation's overcrowded urban sprawls, that England and Englishness have been most severely diluted. There is very little about England in London these days, and it isn't difficult to spend a day in London without coming across any Englishmen or Englishwomen at all.

People moving into a country tend to head for the cities because it is there that they will be most likely to find work, housing and an ex-pat community in which they are likely to feel comfortable. (The word 'community' is, today, used as a replacement for the word 'ghetto', which is considered politically incorrect by those who have decreed that they know about these things.)

Small towns and villages remain relatively untouched by the changes of the last few decades simply because they tend to offer few of those necessities. Oh and, of course, if you're new to the country you are unlikely to find yourself heading towards a small market town which doesn't have a port, a railway station (or, if it has one, a decent and regular timetable) or much of a bus service.

I thought we would be most likely to discover the essence and spirit of England if we visited towns where tradition is still a way of life, where trees are regarded with affection rather than as a bloody nuisance and where a mild flurry of snow is regarded by the people as a minor inconvenience (or, indeed, a challenge) rather than a reason to shut down public transport, close schools and warn able-bodied men and women to wrap up warm, turn up the heating and stay at home.

Our journey was designed to help us discover whether England has survived the deadly designs of the bureaucrats and the politicians and, hopefully, to reassure ourselves that the English themselves, the most imaginative, creative and adventurous of people, still survive, both as individuals and as a breed, and still look out upon the world with the same eccentric and individualistic eye as their forebears. We wanted to visit parts of England which, it seemed to us, might epitomise the England and the English we think of in nostalgic moments.

We chose to travel by motorcar because travel by public transport is difficult in today's England. This choice made this book a true auto biography. (Note: the space between those last two words is there on purpose.)

The nation of such great adventurers as Cook, Drake and Raleigh is now closed to travellers who do not have access to private transport.

The few train services which escaped Dr Beeching's senseless and short-sighted cuts back in the 1960s are of doubtful practical value to serious travellers. In modern England, railways are closed and airports shut if the temperature isn't considered sufficiently clement. If the weather is too cold the railway points freeze up, the airport runways are too slippery to be used and the baggage handlers go on strike lest their hands get chilly. If the weather is too hot the rails swell and the baggage handlers go on strike so that they can head off for the seaside.

Mind you, road travel isn't immune to these weather hazards. If the weather is too cold the roads become slippery and jack-knifed lorries cause impassable blockages, and if the weather is too warm the Tarmacadam melts.

It was, as you will find, a rewarding and, in the end, deeply satisfying journey.

Vernon Coleman 2015

Chapter One

Sidmouth

Our story started in Sidmouth, on the South Devon coast, and if you were to ask me why, I would, I'm afraid, have no better answer than that a journey has to start somewhere and Sidmouth was where we happened to be when our travels began. Before we started out, we decided that it didn't matter where we went since we would be looking not for tourist landmarks, iconic erections such as Stonehenge or Tower Bridge, but for the essence of England and the English. We were going to search for the soul of England – hoping that there was still one to find. We were determined to look beyond the tourism posters and to listen to what the people have to say, outside London and well away from Parliament and the nation's media headquarters.

Sidmouth is, as it happens, a terrible place to start a journey for the simple reason that it is such a peaceful and idyllic town that it is a very difficult place to leave. It doesn't take much mental effort to imagine that when you're in Sidmouth you are still living in a country which has Queen Victoria sitting on the throne.

There are a couple of small supermarkets on Sidmouth's main street, and one or two other signs of modern civilisation have leaked into the town, but there are few parts of the country which are quite so redolent of the Victorian age as this quiet, slightly isolated, seaside resort. Apart from the addition of a small sea wall, designed to protect the roadway and the town from shingle thrown up by high tides, the seafront has hardly changed in a hundred years. It is still dominated by a number of very traditional English seaside hotels, most of them independent, family run establishments, which cater largely for the retired middle classes whose primary holiday requirements are three good meals a day, a variety of reasonably priced cafés serving tea and cake to fill in the gaps, and a long, flat promenade to walk off the excesses. This is not meant to sound patronising or dismissive. The Princess and I both adore Sidmouth. It has no illusions about its place in the world. It is a quintessentially English town, with no frills or fripperies, and it is clearly filled to the boundaries with chest-puffed pride. The local councillors care, the residents care and the visitors (the majority of whom are English and many of whom have been making a pilgrimage there for more than half a century) care too. If Sidmouth were a person it would be a much-loved favourite aunt who still lives in the past but is loved and admired for it.

We spoke to a couple who had been married for 62 years. They spent their honeymoon in Sidmouth and for the subsequent 62 years they have visited the town for a fortnight during the summer months (usually in July) and a week in the winter (invariably in December). For over 60 years nearly all their holidays had been spent in the same town, in the same hotel and, mostly, in the same room. ('We always book our next holiday as we're booking out so that we can be sure to have our favourite room.') That's almost a definition of loyalty.

'What did they like about Sidmouth?' I asked. 'The fact that it never changes,' they replied immediately; speaking in unison in that way long married couples sometimes do. 'It's a comforting constant in a world that changes too much.' They said that Sidmouth seemed to them to epitomise everything about England that they loved and which they could not find elsewhere. 'The buildings never seem to change. I don't think we've seen anything alter in all the years we've been coming here. Plus it's surprisingly quiet even when it's busy. And it's clean and tidy.'

They'd visited other English seaside towns, for a weekend here or a short break there, and they'd never found anywhere which seemed to capture the England they wanted to remember in quite the way that Sidmouth did. I asked if they would still come back to Sidmouth if it did change. They looked puzzled. They were confused and clearly could not even contemplate the idea of either Sidmouth or their hotel changing. It was unthinkable; like asking an English royalist if they would still love their monarch if he or she were a black rapper with a baseball hat worn back to front.

The town has admirers like no other town we have ever visited. People from all over the world regard it as their second home; their own special piece of England, forever in their hearts. In 2013, a former investment banker called Keith Owen left the town £2.3 million with the instruction that the council should use the money to keep the place beautiful. The one major stipulation was that some of the money should be spent on planting a million flower bulbs in the town's parks. Born in the town, Owen had become a Canadian but, like almost everyone who has spent time in this little piece of quiet Devonshire, he never forgot Sidmouth and never fell out of love with the resort. How many people love a town enough to leave sufficient money for the purchase and planting of a million flower bulbs? How many towns engender such love from those who are not even their citizens? Sidmouth, however, clearly is that sort of town; the rare place that wins your heart and keeps it for eternity.

The town's main secret is, perhaps, the fact that it does not pretend to be something it is not, and it makes few if any concessions to the modern world. You can, if you feel extravagantly minded, purchase an ice cream, a decent stick of rock, a nice piece of cod and a fistful of chips, a net with which to catch shrimp in a rock pool and a white, floppy sun hat, but you will not be disturbed by the constant whirring, buzzing and bleating of amusement arcade machines, and the main store in the town is not owned by Mr Marks and Mr Spencer, or Ms Debenhams, but it is plainly and proudly labelled 'Fields of Sidmouth' and it is a family owned and managed store of the old-fashioned type; a traditional, department store in the 'Are You Being Served?' mould. Originally a drapery store, Fields of Sidmouth is today a cut down version of Harrods (without the promise to find you an elephant or sell you a diamond encrusted watch for £250,000). The store's staff have been selling old-fashioned nighties (designed, one suspects more for warmth rather than titillation), hardwearing corduroy trousers and tea sets for 200 years. Old photographs show that the outside of the store has hardly changed since the year 1800. Most residents would like to think that, apart from the prices, the inside hasn't changed much either, and that the whole place will be much the same in another 200 years. If you told me that the staff had been there since the opening I'd believe you. It is as difficult to imagine Sidmouth without Fields as it would be to dream of Blackpool without its piers and tower.

A few decades ago, there wasn't a town in England which didn't have a version of Fields. Most of the similar stores also started out as drapers and just grew, adding knitting patterns, embroidery needles and luggage and ornaments to the bras and knee-length worsted socks with reinforced heels, and usually opening a small café, usually tucked away in a quiet spot on the second or third floor, where weary customers could soothe themselves with a cup of tea and a toasted tea cake. The local department store was always the place to buy a good pair of gloves, a well-made hat, a length of ribbon, an item from the haberdashery department or a firm corset with stout principles. There are still a few of these family run and owned establishments left in those small, English towns most resilient to change, but the majority have long since gone, their spacious, rambling buildings taken over by chain stores, the Holiday Inns of the high street, or knocked down and replaced with faceless, concrete boxes with a phone shop on the ground floor and a series of dull offices on the floors above. It's no wonder hats are out of fashion – where would you buy a trilby or a fedora on a modern high street?

When, in 2014, it was announced that the four directors of Fields of Sidmouth were contemplating retirement, there were gasps of horror from residents and regular visitors alike. The truth is that Sidmouth simply wouldn't be Sidmouth without its department store. The gasps were replaced with sighs of relief when the directors reassured staff, and customers, that they hadn't actually put the place up for sale but that one day they probably would. The truth, of course, is that unless a sympathetic owner can be found to maintain the Fields tradition then Sidmouth will be on its way down the slippery slope; its destination the buffers of dull conformity. But if one stranger, a Canadian, will leave £2.3 million for the town to plant flowers we are confident that another will emerge to keep Fields of Sidmouth alive.

Today, the majority of English seaside towns can easily be divided into two main types.

First, there are those which have made an attempt to retain their nature as traditional holiday resorts, attracting families looking for a 1950s seaside bucket and spade holiday, complete with amusement arcades, piers, donkey rides and theatres offering summer shows. The most obvious example of this type of holiday resort is Blackpool in Lancashire which has traditionally catered both to Bank Holiday fun seekers who are looking for a lively day at the seaside and for families wanting a cheap boarding house within walking distance of the beach. Such resorts, once the mainstay of the English holiday industry, have for years been dying a slow and painful and entirely predictable death. Ilfracombe in Devon and Weston-super-Mare in Somerset are, like Blackpool, sad and threadbare centres; where the only visitors are stag and hen parties looking for a drunken night with cheap accommodation and seaside undertones.

Once they were popular destinations for hansom cabs and charabancs but today England's seaside resorts are, for the most part, struggling to survive; grasping at the scraps left over by the big continental resorts. You can't compete with cheap flights, guaranteed sunshine and cheap hotel accommodation in Spain when you are struggling to cope with soggy weather and the endless, expensive demands of council officials. ('Your front door must be wider. Your crockery needs upgrading. Your staff must sort your rubbish into nine different plastic containers. You must install a lift. Your kitchens need upgrading again.' And so on and on, indefinitely. Meanwhile, the business taxes soar annually to pay the cost of hiring all the inspectors.)

And so, today, the English holidaymakers ask themselves why they should go to Blackpool for a rainy fortnight when they can, for far less money, have two weeks sizzling on a beach in Malaga? Even a weekend away is cheaper in Spain, Greece or Tunisia.

The Spanish provide plenty of beer and amusement arcades and Spanish café and hotel proprietors know their English customers well enough to provide copious quantities of pies and chips. Those holidaymakers who are addicted to the smell of bubbling, hot fat, candyfloss and inflatable airbeds (which have a very distinctive summer holiday smell of their own) can satisfy their needs just as well in Malaga as on the English coast. Regional airports mean that for many it is easy to travel to Spain as it is to travel to the English seaside.

There is no doubt that the availability of cheap package tours, (with flight, two weeks accommodation, coach trips and the services of a local representative with contacts in all the best nightclubs thrown into the package for the price of a flea-bitten night in a boarding house at the English seaside) has meant the end for the traditional English holiday. Even day-trippers, yearning for a few hours sunshine, can fly to Spain and back for less than the cost of a second-class rail fare to the seaside. The traditional English resorts reached the terminal stage a couple of decades ago and in many old-fashioned resorts, the owners of the local boarding houses, hotels, holiday flats and amusement arcades stick their heads firmly into the sand (or in the case of Weston-Super-Mare, the infamous, local black estuary mud) and refused to accept reality; pushing their local councils into filling the town's plentiful variety of cheap and cheerless accommodation with people who have chosen to live on benefits, with drug addicts and with recidivist criminals on Government sponsored rehabilitation schemes. The plethora of small hotels and boarding houses meant that it was easy to make the change from holiday makers to long-term residents; and too easy to fill the empty rooms with those looking for a permanent escape from the horrors of employment and responsibility rather than with small families looking for a short annual break from the daily grind. The amusement arcade owners are, in particular, eager to make this change for they know that the young, State-subsidised unemployed, with plenty of cash in their pockets, will be far more likely to spend their days on the machines than any other group. The inevitable result has been that these resorts have become even more unattractive to families looking for a safe, happy holiday resort. Not many people want their children making sandcastles on beaches peppered with used syringes and laced with snoring winos. Nor do good, honest folk want to spend their lives dodging packs of uncontrolled and incontinent bull terriers; the accessories of choice amongst the new residents.

Second, there are those where wise councillors and local business folk saw the writing in the sand and deliberately chose to cater for older citizens looking for a place by the sea where they could retire in comfort and safety. When we are young, we believe that all the wrongs we see around us will be put right in our lifetime and that we can help bring justice to the world. As we grow older we realise that corrupt, incompetent, irrational, cruel and joyless psychopaths who rule our society are immoveable, their status impregnable, and that they and their descendants will remain permanently in control. Some keep fighting, becoming extremely desperate, and likely to be dismissed as grouchy and grumpy by those around them. Others simply give in, decide to leave the fighting to the next generation (who will, hopefully, believe that all the wrongs they see around them will be put right in their lifetime because they have not yet realised that the psychopaths rule and will never be dislodged) and look for somewhere to live which offers security, peace and the possibility of a little respect. Bournemouth and Eastbourne fall into this category. These towns have done well for themselves and their citizens. Boarding houses and hotels have been converted into elegant, specially designed accommodation for the elderly and frail and ironically the fact that the towns are filled with the well-to-do rather than the down-at-heel has meant that they have retained some attraction for families who don't want to join the crowds migrating south for a little sunshine and sangria.

* * *

Sidmouth is something of an anomaly among seaside towns in that it hasn't followed either of the usual, predictable and well-trodden routes. Former poet laureate John Betjeman described it as 'a town caught still in timeless charm' and it remains a holiday resort in the Victorian style and, thanks largely to the clever marketing strategies of some imaginative hoteliers who, all year round, bring visitors into the town on special coaches, the town remains comfortably busy whatever the season. (The railway station was, of course, closed in 1967 as a result of the efforts of the short-sighted Dr Beeching, and the charabanc is now the only way into the town for those who do not have their own motor cars.) The deckchairs may remain locked up during the colder months but the hotels, the cafés and the promenade remain just as busy. And in the evenings there are illustrated talks to attend, just as there were in Victorian times. We saw an advertisement for one such event being held in a nearby village hall. A local resident was planning to show slides about her holiday in Italy. Afterwards there would be a glass of wine and 'Italian style nibbles'. I bet the locals don't have excitements like that in Knightsbridge or even in Chipping Norton. Betjeman was absolutely right: Sidmouth is fixed in a time warp. It is the perfect destination for those who find the modern world scary and tiring.

We live in noisy times but Sidmouth is for the quiet people (and there are plenty of them around) who say little, keep their heads down and struggle to survive in an increasingly demanding and unreasonable world. Sidmouth is an oasis in a turbulent, storm tossed desert of pointless hustle and self-important bustle. You don't see many people taking selfies in Sidmouth. The well-known 'texters' stoop' (the cause of so much unexplained backache) is uncommon on Sidmouth's promenade.

From October to April, the visitors may not be sunning themselves and falling asleep over their *Daily Telegraphs* and *Daily Mails* (this is not an iPad or Kindle sort of town) but they wrap themselves in coats, scarfs, hats, gloves and boots and march briskly up and down the promenade, or around one or other of the town's excellent parks, earning themselves the right to stop for a warming pot of tea and a slice of fruit cake or a chocolate eclair.

Much of the local architecture is unashamedly preserved from the 19th century and many of the hotels and houses which are currently divided into apartments were originally built as seaside homes for the wealthy members of London society.

Inevitably, the town has strong royal connections. Queen Victoria visited when she was a young girl and when her third son, the Duke of Connaught, came to visit he gave his name to the town's beautiful Connaught Gardens (a delight for those who like walking on the flat, looking at trees and watching squirrels and who occasionally feel the need to rest on a comfortable wooden bench).

There is no doubt that in its best days Sidmouth was a seaside magnet for people with two carriages (one for themselves and one for the luggage) and a regiment of well turned out servants. The promenade was built so that duchesses and countesses could parade up and down showing off their posh frocks and parasols. Today, in contrast, Sidmouth is resolutely fashionable only with England's middle classes. England is currently home to more billionaires per head of population than any other country in the world. It's a safe bet that none of them has ever spent a wet weekend in Sidmouth. And there is no shelf full of Polish paperbacks in the local charity shop.

* * *

In many ways, England seems to many of us to have changed more since the birth of the new century than it changed in the whole of the last one. Many people over the age of 50, and most over the age of 60, now complain regularly that they no longer recognise their own country; they genuinely feel like strangers living in a foreign land. Politicians scoff when they hear this complaint; dismissing such genuine discomfort as closet racism or the worthless moans of Luddites.

This dramatic change in every aspect of life is a phenomenon which is, for two reasons, largely peculiar to England.

The first reason is that most of the immigration which has taken place has, for largely geographical reasons, involved England, rather than the rest of Britain. It is in English towns that the streets are lined with immigrants selling copies of the *Big Issue* so that they qualify for tax credits and generous housing benefits. Scotland and Wales are a long way away from the nation's standard entry ports in the South East. There aren't many Poles or Romanians living in Sutherland or the Snowdonia area and the chances are high that any beggars on the streets will be home-grown, rather than imported.

The second, and most important reason, is that whereas the Scots and the Welsh have been encouraged to embrace their nationalism, to wave their flags and to take pride in their culture and their history, the English have, for political reasons, been dissuaded from showing much pride or interest in their nation. The reasons for this aren't difficult to find. The European Union regards both Scotland and Wales as discreet regional areas of the new European Superstate. England, however, is destined to disappear and to be replaced by nine new regions. The London Assembly was created because London will be one of the nine regions. Moreover, the traditionally indomitable English moan but are used to taking bad things in their stride. A couple of V2 bombers land on your house? OK. We'll clear up the mess and start rebuilding on Monday. Two million Romanians come into the country? OK. We'll pretend they're not there. The English moan a good deal but they put up with a lot and tend to do their complaining in private, in the pub or on the street corner. It will take a very great deal to push the English into an uprising against the corrupt rogues and the inept buffoons who now run the country.

* * *

On our arbitrary journey through the middle of England, we were hoping to prove to ourselves that, despite all the changes which have taken place, the England we remember in our hearts and minds still exists. We wanted to find evidence that England hasn't been strangled by red tape or lost in wild enthusiasm for a theoretical multiculturalism which was always doomed to fail because many of the millions who have come to live in England came not because they wanted to be there but because they didn't want to be somewhere else or, worse still, because they were attracted (and who can blame them) by the unsustainable promise of free money, free housing and free health care, and who came in such huge numbers and in such a short space of time that there was no chance that they could be assimilated into English society. The politicians talk of multiculturalism but in practice the immigrants came so quickly and in such huge numbers that they formed a seemingly endless series of uni-cultural ghettoes.

We wanted to see for ourselves that at least some traditional English architectural quirks, and some of England's whimsical street planning, had survived the merciless cruelties of battalions of heartless, tasteless planning officers and the onslaught of several million tons of concrete. We wanted to see for ourselves that the real English, proud and eccentric and proud to be eccentric, are still alive and well, if you know where to look for them and you are prepared to spend a little time digging behind, around and inside our hideous, cardboard thin modern homes, our impressively ugly office blocks and our appallingly plastic shopping malls. We wanted to be able to celebrate the real England of Queen Victoria and the English race from which Raleigh, Shakespeare, Dickens and Churchill sprang. We travelled in hope.

* * *

It was, as I have already admitted, difficult to leave Sidmouth to begin our journey north. It was a wintry day, the sky a dramatic, leaden grey with a few brave rays of sunshine appearing on the horizon. The promenade was littered with gravel and pebbles, thrown up by a recent storm and a couple of bright yellow bulldozers were busy on the beach, struggling hour after hour to repair the changes made in the beach's architecture by winter waves crashing on the shore. You'd need a hundred huge diggers and bulldozers to push back the shingle as fast as the sea could move it upwards but the digger drivers were doing their best.

As we left Sidmouth, the town was abuzz with the news that local residents had paid for a new, replacement plaque for an old tree.

A Gingko biloba tree, common in China and Japan but believed by locals to be rare in England, has been growing in one of Sidmouth's green spaces for 40 years. It was given to the town by the Sidmouth Men of Trees Society, which was founded in 1954 by Sir Richard St Barbe Baker, and which went on to become the International Tree Foundation.

The plaque commemorating the gift had become unreadable back in 2010 and in Sidmouth, where they like to think about these things rather than rush into them, the Men of Trees had, in early 2015, eventually succeeded in raising the money for a small replacement sign. You wouldn't have thought they'd have needed more than £50 but that's the speed at which they prefer to do things in south Devon. My parents used to live in the area and once asked a builder to give them a quote for some work they were planning. It was over two years before he managed to get back to them with the quote and by then, of course, they had long since forgotten what it was they wanted doing. They gave him the go ahead anyway, confident that by the time he turned up ready to do whatever it was they'd thought of having done, they would have moved and be living somewhere else.

Members of the public, together with local councillors and the Sidmouth Men of Trees Society will, in due course, be attending an unveiling ceremony at which the plaque will be placed on some sort of stake in front of the Gingko biloba tree. The local newspaper will doubtless be there to record the occasion. Neither the Princess nor I intend to tell any of the local enthusiasts that the Gingko biloba tree is neither rare nor particularly uncommon. We're certainly not going to tell them that it may well need a few more plaques before it's finished. The Gingko, which can grow to be over 160 feet high, can live to 2,500 years. At the modest rate of one plaque per 40 years, that will mean another 60 or so plaque unveiling ceremonies.

We would like to have been there for the plaque unveiling but we had made our plans and we had the raw bones of an itinerary to follow. We needed to head north to find our way towards the market town of Taunton and the city of Wells.

We ate our sandwiches in a wooden shelter, huddled together out of the wind, and watched the winter holidaymakers who were out in force. They were, no doubt, walking off their tomato soup, steak and kidney pudding and spotted dick. Fancy food, served in tiny portions, and garnished with stray bits of lettuce and sauces drizzled onto the plate, have not yet hit Sidmouth. You can probably find an occasional coulis if you look hard enough but even though France is less than thirty miles away I doubt if the town's hotels are running wild with les cuisses de grenouille. Serving half a duck with a peeled orange is Michelin level cooking in this part of Devon. And damned right too. What the hell is wrong with a pasty or a scone with strawberry jam and a dollop of clotted cream? The visitors who come to Sidmouth expect the sort of food they ate at school; the solid meals served up by British Rail in the 1960s.

There was rain in the air and the walkers were well wrapped up in thick anoraks and sensibly long woollen scarves. Several wore woolly hats (though I'm delighted to report that there wasn't a single pom pom in view) and a few, the professionally pessimistic, wore blue or green wellington boots. A few turned their heads as they passed, noticed our impromptu picnic, averted their eyes and walked on. A Frenchman would have smiled and said Bon Appetit! A German might have stopped to examine our sandwiches before saying Guten Appetit.

But naturally, being English, none of the passers-by spoke, and not even the ones who glanced our way and clearly noticed us showed any overt signs of having seen us. That would have been intrusive and rude and not in the slightest bit the 'English' thing to do. I have no doubt that ours was by no means the first winter picnic they'd seen that day. It's an odd fact that only the English have picnics in the winter but I really don't know why. As long as you're well wrapped up, and have found a little shelter, a winter picnic is far more invigorating and rewarding than a summer one – especially if you've had the foresight to pack a hip flask which has been filled with a suitable beverage. My own particular favourite is Laphroaig, a malt whisky which was, I think, created for cold winter days. And, of course, in winter there are no pesky flies or irritating wasps keen to grab their share of the comestibles.

One man who went by had a walk which reminded me of John Wayne. He leant forwards slightly, walked pigeon-toed and took very small paces. Wayne didn't walk that way naturally. He learned the walk so that it would give him a bit of character.

An unusual gait can define a man or a woman. It's fascinating to see the different ways that people walk. You would have thought that putting one foot in front of the other and moving forwards as a result would result in a fairly standard sort of movement. But it isn't.

Content that whatever is happening elsewhere in the country, England and Englishness are certainly still alive in this small corner of the land, we stuffed the remains of our modest picnic into a sensible, remarkably solid looking waste bin, clearly built to withstand the ravages of wind, sea and shingle as well as the attentions of gluttonous seagulls, climbed into our motor car and set off to motor north. On the beach, as we left, the big yellow bulldozers were still hard at work moving the shingle around. The wind was getting fresher and it seemed certain that by the next day the bulldozer drivers would have to start their work afresh. Holding back the tide of change is a truly never-ending task in Sidmouth, as elsewhere.

Chapter Two
Taunton and Wells

And so from Sidmouth we drove north, across the county of Devon and into Somerset, travelling to Taunton which was, I have to confess with great regret, quite a disappointment.

We have, over the years, spent many happy days in Taunton, which used to be an excellent example of a traditional English market town; the county borough where all the important things in that part of the country tend to happen.

But as the 21st century takes hold there are some towns, and Taunton is now definitely one of them, which appear to give the impression that they hate visitors of all kinds and would protect themselves with city walls and deep moats if they could afford to build them and persuade the local taxpayers that they were an essential expense.

The public lavatories are usually the first to go. The council stops having them cleaned and then, when they become dirty and start to smell, shuts them down on health and safety grounds. They all do it and I suspect that they think they are being original and rather clever.

The waste bins are the next to go. These are removed because they are said to be a boon for terrorists looking for somewhere to place their bombs. This, of course, is merely another money saving scheme.

Paris, which one might reasonably consider to be a target city, doesn't seem to have any great worries about this potential hazard and the streets in the French capital are lined with waste receptacles.

However, even quaint English market towns which are surely too far off the track for terrorists to regard as suitable targets, seem to consider themselves to be major targets for madmen armed with explosives. Or could it be, perhaps, they're just using the threat of terrorism as an excuse to cut down costs a little more? Excuse my cynicism.

There are few things more mildly irritating than wandering around a town with absolutely no rubbish bins. You buy a bottle of water or a snack, or you sit on a bench and read a newspaper. And then, when you've finished, what do you do with the rubbish? Do you walk around with it all day and take it home with you to sort into one of your nine specialist containers? Or do you put it on a windowsill or drop it into the gutter? It's no wonder that towns with no waste bins resemble sets for one of those post-apocalyptic movies. The European Union's absurd rubbish collecting rules now cost English families and councils billions of pounds annually. Predictably, there has been a 20% rise in fly-tipping in the last twelve months alone and fast food litter has risen by the same amount.

And then, when the public lavatories have gone, and the waste bins have been unscrewed from the lampposts, the public car parks are sold to developers.

This is what has happened in Taunton.

The huge old car park, which lay next to the river Tone, just next door to Somerset's cricket ground, has been sold to developers.

A year or two ago visitors to the town could park their car and take a pleasant walk along the river into the town. They could feed the ducks and admire the swans. They could wave to people on boats. No more.

The absence of decent car parks cannot possibly have been any help to local businesses struggling to cope with the twin threats from internet and charity shops.

The cricket ground itself, once one of the West Country's great attractions and one of the most beautiful sports grounds in the centre of any town, anywhere, is now dominated by a hideous block of flats which has entirely ruined the view and the ambience. What sort of barbarian could conceive of such vandalism? And what sort of planners could possibly allow it?

In the absence of anywhere else to park, we eventually left our vehicle in the car park of a local supermarket, having first purchased a bagful of groceries which we left in full sight on the car's front passenger seat. We hoped that this might protect us from being clamped, fined or towed away.

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On a wide stretch of pavement at the top of Taunton's main shopping street, a thoroughfare which is now home to a rather surprising (and rather worrying) number of charity shops, we watched in amazement as a street entertainer wearing a gold suit set up in business just yards away from a competitor, also dressed in a gold suit.

The two entertainers were supposed to be playing the part of statues but there was clearly no love lost between the two of them and it seemed unlikely that they would succeed in ignoring each other.

The gold-suited man who had been there first, glowered at the newcomer and his eyebrows zoomed in on his nose like-old fashioned fullbacks converging on an old-fashioned centre forward. The second gold-suited man, the intruder, looked away and tried to pretend that he hadn't seen the other gold-suited man at all. They were both supposed to be standing perfectly still but their heads were anything but still. We stood for a while and watched to see what would happen. It was pretty obvious that something would happen. Eventually, the strain was too much for the first gold-suited man. He walked over to the second gold-suited man and, without so much as an introductory comment, slapped him across the face. It seemed clear that this pair had history. The gold-suited man who had been slapped tried hard to keep still but he was wearing a gold mask and the slap had knocked it slightly askew. He reached up and adjusted his mask. The first gold-suited man then stamped on his competitor's right foot. It was a surprisingly childish but comical thing to do.

It was at this point that all hell broke loose.

The two men started brawling and scratching, and punching and clawing.

They didn't do any of this very well; indeed, they fought rather like six-year-old girls having a spat about a perceived slight. They were, in truth, about as dangerous to each other as stuffed trout in glass cases. And when they weren't scratching or punching, the two gold-suited statues screamed very loudly. Sadly, neither the Princess nor I could understand a word they were screaming because they weren't speaking in English.

The fight, if you can call it that, looked as if it could go on for hours when suddenly, out of nowhere, the Statue of Liberty appeared. She (and her voice gave away her sex) shouted at the two men and glared at them. When this didn't do any good she slapped them both on the head. Her two slaps were far fiercer than anything the two men had produced and so they stopped fighting and turned towards her. She shouted at them in what was presumably her own language but they didn't understand her so she resorted to her own version of badly fractured English. 'You are professionals to be!' she snarled. 'You give all we a badder name! Go homes.'

I have no idea what nationality the three were but the Princess felt sure that the two gold-suited men were Romanian while the Statue of Liberty probably came from Poland. England, a truly cosmopolitan society, now clearly imports its street entertainers from Eastern Europe. There are said to be 726,000 Poles living in England and I was told that the rumour locally is that 725,999 of them are living in Taunton and the one who is missing is actually in Taunton but still trying to find somewhere to park his car.

Sadly, for those of us who were watching this mini soap opera, the two men in gold suits then left and wandered away. The Statue of Liberty, recognising that the stretch of now vacated pavement was a better patch than wherever she had previously been ensconced, put down a bowl for contributions, and took up her position.

The almost exclusively English audience cheered loudly and not a few moved forwards to drop coins into her bowl.

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Exhausted by this piece of unscripted street drama we had a coffee (and, of course, a bun) to restore our flagging strength.

As I paid, I noticed that the man in front of me had given the woman who had served him a fifty pence tip. I also noticed that although there was a bowl clearly marked for tips the woman, who was foreign, had put the fifty pence into her pocket. This reminded me of Tony Blair who, at the age of 23, had worked for a while in a bar in Paris. When the future politician and war criminal manqué started work, he was told that all tips had to be placed into a communal pot. It wasn't until he had been working in the bar for about two months that he realised that his were the only tips actually going into the tronc. All the other bar staff were keeping whatever tips they'd received for themselves. Blair later claimed that this was his first lesson in applied socialism.

The café we chose offered its customers free Wi-Fi and seemed to be a haven for local business folk who were busy tippy tapping on their laptops and iPads. There was a time when young entrepreneurs filled their pockets with small change and used a local telephone kiosk as an office. Those days have long gone. You don't need an office, a spare bedroom or even a telephone kiosk if you want to run a business these days. All you need is the cash to pay for a cup of coffee and the ability to keep up with all the latest technology and the relevant terminology. In a way, life has come round in a circle for the London coffee houses, which were the forebears of modern cafés, were originally places of business. We tend to think that the first cafés were opened in Paris or Vienna but in fact, the whole café society thing started in London. In the late 1600s and early 1700s, there were around 3,000 coffee houses in London. It was in these establishments that the very first newsletters, gazettes and pamphlets were written and distributed. It was in a London coffee house known as Lloyd's that marine insurance first began and London physicians used the capital's coffee houses as consulting rooms. I wonder how many people know that the first stock and commodity exchange was organised in a coffee house in London in 1698. Even auction houses such as Christie's and Sotheby's started out in coffee houses.

Women got so fed up with their husbands spending all their time in coffee houses that in 1674, the Women's Petition against Coffee was launched and King Charles II, responding to rumours about the terrible things going on in coffee houses, tried to ban the new establishments completely. (He failed, of course.)

I am completely puzzled by the way computer nerds use words such as 'browser', 'charm' and 'router' and although I've been using computers for three decades I am, I confess, frequently bewildered by the simplest tasks involving computers. Contrary to all good sense, the software which is written these days invariably seems to me to be illogical and counter-intuitive.

(I should point out that I am not, however, ignorant as far as general technical stuff is concerned. I recently succeeded in installing a new doorbell. And I managed to do this without using all the bits and pieces that were included in the manufacturer's kit – quite a few metal and plastic bits were left over when I had finished. I've no doubt that if I put my mind to it I could use these leftover bits and pieces to build something else: a television set or a washing machine perhaps. This incident clearly suggests that my practical skills must be greater than has been generally recognised.)

I bought my first really efficient modern style laptop back in the early 1990s. It cost me £3,000 but it was a relatively easy machine to use. I took it out of the box, switched it on, found the DOS entry point, put my Word perfect 5.1 disks into the floppy drive and five minutes later I was up and running; typing away merrily in an efficient, simple word processing program which did everything anyone could require because it was a word processing package and not an over complicated graphics package. Oh happy memory of simpler times.

My first laptop lasted ten years before the keyboard gave out. These days the laptops may be cheaper but they are poorly made, infinitely more fragile and, like just about everything else, far more difficult to use. I've got through three in the last year alone and every time I buy a new one, I have to ask the Princess to help me set it up. It takes the two of us a couple of hours to do this. And even when we've fought our way through the endless bloody pop up advertisements, we still have to load up an expensive word processing programme in order to be able to write properly. And then even though, I have given Mr Gates a huge chunk of money for access to his wretched program, I find that I have to fight through a whole litany of quite outrageous demands. The default position always seems to be that if I'm not very careful about which boxes I tick I will later find that I have signed over my work, my photographs, my privacy, my home and possibly my kidneys to Mr Gates. I loathe the world of computers which seems to be dominated by the greedy and the unscrupulous. I would happily go back 25 years and pay the modern equivalent of £3,000 for a solid, easy to manage laptop computer which I could use within five minutes of taking it out of the box.

Thinking about all this made me rather cross and so to comfort myself a little I managed to persuade an earnest, nerdy young teenager, who was busy writing book reviews on Amazon (and, he told me proudly, hoping to become a member of the Amazon hall of fame for celebrated amateur reviewers) that 'Wi-Fi' should be pronounced 'whiffy'. I told him that the technology was called 'Wi-Fi' because it had been invented by a man called Wilfred Fields. I laughed when he said it ought to be pronounced 'why fie', and told him that American Silicone valley dwellers ('the teenage geniuses at the epicentre of tomorrow's computer world') always thought it amusing when people in the rest of the world made this basic error. I'm proud to say that before we left I heard him telling another tippy tapping customer about Wilfred Fields and the correct way to pronounce 'Wi-Fi'. The young are so ignorant and naïve that they are invariably easy to tease. Hopefully, I will have started a new trend. 'Welcome to the world of 'whiffy'.

* * *

We wandered around the shops for a while but Taunton seemed rather flat. It had none of the rather dignified buzz that we have both always associated with old-fashioned English market towns. Such places have traditionally always been busy because they have served a large community; with farmers' families and others coming into 'town' once a week to do their shopping, visit the bank, see the dentist, redraw their wills and so on.

Market day always used to be the busiest time of the week, of course, with serious business being done, but these days Taunton's market day is a rather feeble affair, with a few farmers and smallholders selling parsnips, potatoes and homemade sausages from stalls with brightly coloured awnings. You can buy a hot dog or an ice cream and it's all rather artificial and intensely disappointing. It seemed to me to be the sort of market which a council bureaucrat might consider an attraction; the sort of market which a poor movie director might expect if he wanted to build a film set of a town market. There's something rather sadly seedy about the 'new' Taunton. It even has one of those grubby, rubbish-strewn precincts which seem to be considered vital for towns which are trying to show that they have caught up with the 21st century.

I was surprised to discover that in a number of establishments in Taunton I found myself struggling to make myself understood. Many shops are now staffed by foreigners whose command of the English language is in the early stages of its development. Even though they do usually make an effort I find this tiring and, after a while, rather annoying.

I realise it is politically incorrect to mention this subject, but although I have no objection to foreigners speaking their own language in their own countries, and I expect to have to struggle if I'm shopping in a country where English is not the usual language, there is a time and a place for foreign languages.

I wasn't the only person to notice this problem. A kind and patriotic man whom I met in one shop I visited told me that he has pretty well given up travelling abroad because he finds that there is something rather galling about being interrogated by foreign-born border control guards before being allowed back into his own country. He said that he had once mentioned this problem on a radio phone in programme (not in the Taunton area) and had instantly been accused of being a racist and subjected to a good deal of abuse from the presenter. My own suspicion is that when people's natural fears are suppressed in this way they inevitably lead to resentment and, eventually, to genuinely racist feelings.

I needed a new, longer scarf (the ones I have are far too short to wrap around my neck and leave decent ends dangling) and so in a clothes store, I found a simple, pleasantly patterned woollen item which seemed well enough made. The problem was that it was still far too short.

'Do have two more scarves exactly the same as this one?' I asked.

The assistant said that they did.

'Do you have a seamstress on the premises?' I asked.

To my surprise, the assistant said that they did have someone available who could do alterations.

'I'll buy three of these scarves if your seamstress can cut one of them in two and then sew the two halves onto the other two scarves,' I said. 'But we're just passing through the town. Can you get the changes done within a couple of hours?'

The assistant said that would be quite impossible to do this because the seamstress always needed two weeks' notice for alterations.

Sadly, I handed her back the scarves and we left and returned to our car. Fortunately we had not been clamped or towed away and nor had we been fined. Our shopping bags, left as evidence that we were bona fide customers, remained on the front seat.

Apart from the excitement with the three statues, it had been a rather dull visit. I don't think we'll bother to visit Taunton again for quite a while. And if we do visit, we certainly won't go there by car.

* * *

From Taunton we travelled north up the soulless M5 and then across country to Wells.

We deliberately drove on the motorway for the first part of our journey so that we would pass the huge and rather ugly Willow Man, a monstrous, rather scary sculpture which sits in a scruffy field by the side of the northbound carriage of the motorway with a rather soulless housing estate beside it, and a massive warehouse behind it. Half a dozen crows were perched on the sculpture's head and shoulders. The grateful birds pluck the willow, which as far as they are concerned is offered cut and neatly presented as though on a supermarket display shelf, and use it for nest building. The sculpture is made entirely of black maul willow, the stuff preferred by basket weavers, which has been woven over a steel frame. The whole ghastly thing weighs three tons and was, so say the worthy and pretentious who must always have a reason for wasting public money, erected 'to celebrate the role of willow in the ecology and craft traditions of the Somerset Levels'. The arty-farty bureaucrats who commission this sort of thing, always get everything they touch completely wrong partly because they don't understand art at all and partly because they have no conception of what the public might like to see.

The first version of the Willow Man was burnt to a cinder by sensible, art loving arsonists shortly after it had been erected. There were not a few locals who thought that the blackened hulk looked rather more attractive than the original. Sadly, the sculptor rebuilt the monstrosity, which looks rather like a pagan symbol, the sort of thing around which naked people might dance while carrying flaming torches. A huge circular moat was excavated around the replacement to deter those who might want to attack it again. But, sadly, it seems that no one has bothered.

Within screaming distance of the Willow Man, and created and maintained at no public expense whatsoever, there are two fibreglass camels; a large one called Humphrey and his son called Boo. Both camels peer benignly at the traffic from their vantage point beside a hedge; they are far more loveable than the Milton Keynes cows and infinitely more popular than the damned, expensive Willow Man.

Humphrey has been there for as long as most people can remember, certainly well over a quarter of a century, but Boo is a relatively recent addition. From time to time Humphrey is repainted and in cold weather, he has been seen sporting a scarf. Humphrey was originally created by a group of young Somerset farmers. Whenever one of the group got married the camel would reside in the newly-weds' garden – until the next wedding. But when a woman called Lorraine Hooper married one of the farmers who had built Humphrey, the young couple decided to retire Humphrey and put him in their back garden, next to the motorway. There he has remained ever since (except for occasional personal appearances at charity events). Amazingly, Humphrey is so well loved that he receives postcards and Christmas cards from motorists who address them to: ‘The camel, M5 junction 23 and 24’.) Only in England could this happen. I’m willing to bet that the Willow Man, which doesn’t fill anyone’s soul with rapture, let alone make people smile, doesn’t receive any Christmas cards.

The Willow Man aside, it is a delight that folk are still building follies and finding time to do ‘silly’ things, though these days the people with all the power and the public money like to think of modern follies as sculptures, so that they can be imbued with artistic credibility and, even, some sort of bizarre, half-hidden purpose.

And so, for example, Gateshead, in the far north of England, so close to Scotland that on a rare, clear day you can hear the screech of the bagpipes and the scream of the Haggis as it is hunted across the heather, has its Angel of the North, a huge steel sculpture of a winged angel. It’s vast, it cost a fortune and it serves no useful purpose. It is, therefore, a folly. It is a folly in the Victorian style and understanding. But because we are rather too prim to build follies these days we commission sculptures, and since the English rich (who, these days, consist largely of a strange mixture of retired Russian KGB officers and crooked American bankers) are too mean and unimaginative to pay for them, the sculptures are commissioned by bureaucrats with pretensions and paid for by taxpayers without the option. But they’re still follies.

* * *

The words ‘town’ and ‘city’ are often used as though they are interchangeable, but they aren’t. There are currently just 51 English communities entitled to call themselves cities and they all have the right to do so only because a reigning English monarch has granted them that right. Some surprisingly small towns are entitled to call themselves cities and some large, commercially, politically and strategically important towns are not.

So, for example, Bournemouth, Northampton and Middlesbrough all have populations in excess of 250,000 but none of them is entitled to call themselves cities whereas Truro, Ely and Chichester are cities, even though they have populations under 25,000.

The tradition of a town having to have a cathedral before it could be called a city was established in 1540 when King Henry VIII (he of the generous girth and multiple wives) granted city status to six English towns, all of which had cathedrals. Today, the old rules have all been abandoned and there are towns with cathedrals (such as Blackburn and Bury St Edmunds) which aren’t entitled to call themselves cities, and cities (such as Plymouth and Preston) which don’t have, and never have had, a cathedral within their limits.

Wells, with just 12,000 inhabitants is, by some way, the smallest city in England but it certainly does have a cathedral and it has had one since 909. The current cathedral building was started in 1180 but wasn’t finished until 1340 and so, since it took 160 years to complete, historians aren’t quite certain whether it’s an 11th century, 12th century or 13th century building. Actually, of course, bits of it are 11th, bits of it are 12th and bits of it are 13th century. Modern thinking folk, who expect builders to knock up a house in a month, find all this difficult to understand. The very idea that several generations of craftsmen spent their entire lives working on the same building is quite beyond their comprehension. I wonder if the final generation of cathedral builders found themselves working slowly as they approached completion. After 160 years of solid employment, the future must have looked bleak for them, their children and their grandchildren.

The Cathedral in Wells is commonly agreed to be one of the finest in the country and many of Europe’s most admired cathedral facades are based on that of the one at Wells. As was customary with medieval buildings, the stonemasons left many private jokes for posterity. So, for example, some of the piers which support the cathedral’s roof are decorated with picture stories. There is a man removing a thorn from his foot, a farmer chasing a fox and a man having a bad tooth removed. All these doubtless meant something to the men who created them. In addition, the outer walls are decorated with a vast array of statues and gargoyles, many of them undoubtedly caricatures of the stonemasons who did the work. Astonishingly, there is even one human face adorned with stone spectacles.

The cathedral also has a famous clock which, dated 1392, is one of the oldest in the world. Every fifteen minutes a small figure, known as Jack Blandifer, gives the bells a hefty wallop while jousting knights play catch me if you can around the base. There is a simplified version of the clock on the outside wall of the transept.

When you’re there, it seems strange to think of Wells as a city since it is so small. You can walk up and down the main thoroughfare in five minutes. If you do it quickly, without bothering to look in the shop windows, you can probably do it in less.

Amazingly, at any given moment there are probably two or three times as many people in Heathrow Airport as there are in the whole of the English city of Wells. Technically, it is possible to argue, as Celia Fiennes did in 1698, in her wonderful travel book *Through England on a Side-Saddle*, that Wells is only half a city, since the local bishop is shared with the nearby city of Bath. But, as locals now point out, it is only Wells that has a cathedral. Bath has to make do with a 15th century abbey, and although the abbey sits on the remains of a massive Norman cathedral it is not itself a cathedral. So, ya boo sucks to Bath.

Today the city of Wells is still dominated by the cathedral. In addition to the cathedral, there is the moated Bishop's Palace and the often-photographed Vicars' Close, a listed, protected and original mediaeval street of terraced houses which was built for clergymen and is today a magnet for photographers from around the world.

Wells as a whole is still a largely medieval town and very little has changed in the city for seven centuries.

Back in the 13th century, Wells was a magnet for pilgrims who came to worship in the cathedral, but today the pilgrims are called tourists and instead of coming meekly, with God in their hearts, they tend to hustle and bustle their way across the town square and onto the cathedral green, desperately searching for a good place from which to take their photographs and films. These are usually taken in the modern way, with themselves in the foreground and the cathedral as a backdrop.

We are living in the world of the selfie and so modern tourists spend their days using the world's great buildings and sights as little more than a backdrop. Having photographed themselves standing directly in front of whatever it is they are visiting, they use their mobile phones, tablets or laptops to publish their latest achievement on their Facebook and Twitter accounts and to send email details to 2,000 of their closest friends; another personal victory in their constant search for self-glorification. Social media has changed everything, and to an outsider it seems that things have been changed for the worse. To be an expert these days, you don't need to have any knowledge or experience (the two traditional requirements for an 'expert') but just a good deal of confidence, a great many opinions and a mastery of the social media. I can't help thinking that the site that is known as 'You Tube' really should be renamed 'Me Tube'. Or, perhaps, 'Me, Me, Me Tube' would be even more accurate. The venom of the trolls who now seem to dominate the internet means that all politicians, and many celebrities, are now afraid to express their opinions about anything which might attract opprobrium. The bigots whose often libellous and frequently scabrous twitterings are followed by millions seem to be unable to accept that other people might be entitled to hold views which vary from their own.

Most of the people who visit Wells Cathedral for anything more than a new backdrop to yet another self-promoting photograph are clearly there for the architecture and the history rather than as pilgrims in the traditional sense; most probably call themselves Christians (as a default position) but none of the individuals to whom we spoke had been to church to worship for many years. As a formal religion, Christianity is dying and out of touch. Several people to whom I spoke said that they would like to feel able to embrace Christianity but felt that the Church of England has failed them. 'It doesn't understand ordinary people's worries and, worst of all, it doesn't care enough about ordinary people,' said one woman, who added that she thought the Church of England hierarchy seemed to be from another planet. There is, it seems, a moral emptiness, a void, about the modern church in general and, as far as the Church of England is concerned, an almost complete absence of anything remotely resembling leadership.

Indeed, if the cathedral at Wells is any guide, it is difficult to avoid the suggestion that today's Church of England seems more concerned with collecting cash contributions and selling knick-knacks to tourists. When we visited Wells, the cathedral itself was full of noisy and out of control school children whose presence made prayer and contemplation quite impossible.

There is a long line of green painted, old-fashioned, comfortable benches overlooking the moat surrounding the Bishop's Palace but, sadly, these too are of little use to those seeking a quiet moment, since the locals seem to use the path alongside the moat as a parade ground for their unruly (and unleashed) dogs.

By tradition, there should be a bell by the moat for the resident swans, and their cygnets, to ring if and when they want feeding. We could see neither bell nor swans but there were plenty of ducks and moorhens and so we purchased a loaf of bread from a nearby supermarket and fed them all until both they and we had had enough of this pleasant and traditional activity. A decent looking café round the corner seemed far quieter than the cathedral and we decided that anyone looking for a quiet spot for a little spiritual reflection would be well advised to go there for moral sustenance.

We had arrived in Wells on one of the two busiest days of the week, Farmers' Market Day, and as is now common everywhere, in and out of season, we had quite a job to find anywhere to park the car. Despite being expensive, the car park was crammed full and we had to play a motorised game of musical chairs with a couple of other cars before managing to sneak into a vacated space. I'm constantly surprised at how expensive it is to park a car these days and as councils push their prices ever upwards I can't help wondering how people working in towns and cities manage to afford the prices. It can cost £10 to park a car for the day in most towns (and since many car parks have a two or three hour limit on the time visitors are allowed to stay, this can often involve regular and illegal visits to the car park machine and a constant search for change) and how on earth a shop assistant can afford that sort of money on a daily basis I simply cannot imagine. The answer, I suppose, is that they can't, and since bus services are now largely non-existent in rural areas I can only assume that people in many outlying areas are effectively and efficiently completely excluded from the jobs market. It seems to me that many local councils (and those in Devon and Cornwall seem particularly guilty of this) are so short-sighted that they make a real effort to charge, overcharge and fine everyone foolish enough to venture into their counties. The result, inevitably, is that the discerning traveller goes somewhere else and there are nowhere near enough charities willing to open shops in the local high streets.

Everywhere we went on our travels we met people who complained about car parking in their local town. The three biggest complaints were that there weren't enough parking places, that the spaces were too small and the aisles too narrow and that the charges were far too high. It is surprisingly easy to strike up conversations with strangers these days. I come from an era when English men and women never spoke to strangers unless they had been introduced by a mutual acquaintance, were all victims involved in a major train crash or were neighbours living in a street where at least six houses had been bombed. These days, people will talk to strangers without so much as a school tie in common.

We met one aggrieved and puzzled citizen who had worked out that his local council was making £7,000 a day out of one car park alone. 'If you assume that the car park is pretty well empty on Sundays, that's still £3 million a year! And the maintenance costs are virtually nothing – they haven't resurfaced the place for at least ten years and the potholes are huge and really quite dangerous.'

He was with his wife and they both looked to be of good sensible old stock. She was the sort of person who collects bits of old string in a drawer and had a container full of odd buttons at the bottom of her wardrobe and he was the sort of man who had a tin full of old keys on a shelf in his garage. He told us that he had heard that quite a number of local councils were planning to get rid of cash machines completely, and to force motorists to pay for their parking with their mobile phones. He pointed out that this would mean that people who didn't have mobile phones, or had forgotten to bring them, wouldn't be able to park at all.

There are, happily, some wonderful exceptions in towns and villages where councils are wise enough to realise that if they price shoppers out of the car parks then their towns will inevitably die. In Nailsworth, for example, just a few miles to the north of Wells, we found that car parking is completely free. You can park your car and leave it as long as you like without paying a penny. As a result, the town seems to be thriving and the shops seemed busy. There's a message there for councils everywhere but, sadly, most are too blinkered to see it.

Having found our space in Wells, parked the car and invested in a ticket, we walked up the main street and found the cobbled square, where the market is traditionally held, packed with stalls. Most of the stall-holders sell farm produce though one or two sell antiques. It doesn't take many stalls to fill the square for there isn't much room. When crammed with stalls the whole area seems smaller and it is even harder to realise that you're standing in the centre of one of England's most venerable cities. The market in Wells seemed much more 'real' than the one in Taunton.

It was raining by the time we'd finished walking around the market and had bought a couple of beautiful but surprisingly inexpensive pieces of silver and a bagful of homemade rock buns. What had started out as the sort of light drizzle which is easy to ignore until it's really too late to put on a coat or put up an umbrella because you're already damp, had developed into steady downpour which was clearly in for the day. The surprising thing was, however, that the rain didn't seem to make much, if any, difference to the number of people wandering around the market.

The English may moan about the weather, and, indeed, moaning about the weather is a national hobby, but they can still be remarkably stoical about it. The wise locals who'd looked at the sky and known exactly what to expect, had already taken precautions. Plastic rain-hoods had been dug out and tied on, folding umbrellas had been opened and unfurled and anoraks had been zipped up, but the looking and thinking and comparing and considering and occasional buying didn't seem to be affected at all.

The stallholders didn't seem bothered either. A man selling second-hand books moved a cardboard box full of old hardbacks further under his canopy and a woman with a leaky canopy over her stall moved slightly to one side so that she was no longer standing directly underneath the steady drip of incoming rain.

We noticed that there were quite a number of hippies around and this seemed odd until we realised that Glastonbury (the centre of the universe for the world's remaining hippies) is just a short drive or a long walk away. Most of the hippies seemed to be wearing woollen jackets and those curious and rather unflattering Nordic woollen hats which have earflaps. The hippies didn't seem to be buying anything. A couple of them were sitting on the pavement strumming guitars and attempting to sing but most seemed to be begging or stall-lifting (the rural equivalent of shop-lifting).

We spoke to a couple who told us that they took time from work to drive to Wells from Weston-Super-Mare every week solely to pick up a pack of home-made sausages from one of the farm stalls in the market. If you factored in the cost of petrol and the fee to park the car then the sausages must have been pretty good; they were certainly expensive. But the couple seemed delighted to have made their purchase. They showed us the sausages, wrapped well and carried at the bottom of an otherwise empty, old-fashioned leather shopping bag. There is something wonderfully, quixotically English about an ordinary, middle class couple making a round trip journey of 40 miles just to buy a few sausages. They told us that Weston has deteriorated dramatically in recent years and appears to have become little more than a giant hostel for the unfortunate, the addicted and the crooked. 'We daren't go out of our homes after six o'clock in the evening,' said the wife. Together, they explained that the desperate owners of hotels and boarding houses, which can no longer attract traditional holidaymaking families, now fill up their rooms with drug addicts, ex-prisoners and alcoholics. The streets, they said, are full of drunks and the beach rumoured to be peppered with used needles. The very name Weston-Super-Mare has, apparently become a national term of rhyming slang for having a nightmare. (As in 'I had a Weston-Super-Mare' last night.)

'Why don't you leave?' I asked. They told us that houses and flats in Weston have collapsed in value during the last decade. 'We asked three estate agents for valuations,' said the husband. 'They all said that our house is worth two thirds of what we paid for it ten years ago,' said his wife sadly. There seems no doubt that their weekly trip to Wells, and the purchase of a pack of expensive sausages, are their temporary escape from an awful reality. But they have to be back in Weston-Super-Mare before dark because they have no garage or car parking space and they must park in the street and then walk to their home. They won't do that after dark.

* * *

Eating and drinking establishments are always crowded on Market Day and Wells was no exception. The pub nearest to the square, the White Hart Hotel, was crammed, with every bench taken and a long queue for the bar, so we wandered fifty yards away to the Crown Hotel, a 15th century coaching inn which has a fine view of the cathedral.

I always try to avoid unnecessary queues as much as possible though I know some people rather enjoy them. Someone with too much time on their hands, and quite possibly a very generous grant from a benefactor with a lot of money, recently worked out that Americans spend 37 billion hours a year standing in queues. Since the population of the USA is around 320 million, this means that the average individual spends 115 hours a week in queues. And that's just the queues where they're standing – not the queues where they're sitting in a motor car. That's nearly three working weeks a year wasted doing nothing but wait for the person in front to move forwards a few inches.

I am told on good authority that some restaurants deliberately manufacture queues on the understandable but rather spurious grounds that if there is a queue on the pavement outside the eating place, passers-by will assume that the food must be good or there wouldn't be a queue and so they too will join the queue. Those who value their own time highly, and can afford to do so, then hire people to stand in line on their behalf and the queue gets even bigger. Those who have nothing better to do, and who have time on their hands to spare, can earn a few dollars while they queue. I suspect they then probably totter off to a restaurant without a queue to buy the meal they have earned.

I have no idea how much time the English spend queuing but it's something that we as a nation do extremely well, and with surprising enthusiasm too, so I suspect it's something at which we could beat the world without any further training. If there were Olympic medals for queuing, we'd surely take all the gold ones. Indeed, I have absolutely no doubt that we waste more money on queuing than the citizens of any other nation on earth. Certainly, no other nation in Europe can queue with our patience. The Princess and I once stood in a long taxi line at the Gare du Nord in Paris and were surprised when a small Frenchman leapt in front of us as we reached the front of the queue. I remonstrated with him and pointed out that he was queue jumping. 'Of course!' he cried with a predictable Gallic shrug. 'What do you expect? I am French.'

There is a huge fireplace in the lounge of the Crown, which we had visited in the past, and we remembered they always used to have a big open fire there, with huge logs burning and crackling. It was a fine sight on a winter's day. There's nothing quite like the smell, sound and sight of a genuine log fire. Three senses catered for all at once. These days, however, the huge open fire basket has gone and has been replaced with a closed log-burning stove. A member of staff told me that they'd received complaints from tourists that the room occasionally smelt of smoke and so they'd got rid of the open fire and replaced it with a swish and top of the range log burner which still gave out plenty of heat but hid the source of the heat. It seemed an awful pity to me, and a bit silly, too; like putting modesty skirts on shaped piano legs. You'd have thought, wouldn't you, that tourists would rather enjoy the novelty of having a proper log fire to gaze at, instead of the ubiquitous television set (with the sound switched off) which is often the centre of attention in hotel lounges these days. If it had been my hotel I'd have told the sniffy complainant (and I bet there was only the one) to go elsewhere, or offered them a free clothes peg to put on his or her nose. But then I'm confident that I would have made an even worse hotelier than Basil Fawlty. My Princess would doubtless confirm this.

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A restaurant owner we met in the town, who has a restaurant in a village a few miles away and who was in Wells shopping at the Market, told us that the trouble these days is that hoteliers, and others in the hospitality business, daren't risk offending any of their customers lest they end up damned with a one star rating and a pithy criticism on TripAdvisor, or one of the other equally annoying websites which, he says, are waging war on individuality and originality.

'We live in a world of licenses and ratings and it's a world which means that the petty minded moaners and snitches rule our lives,' he complained, without attempting to hide his contempt for the sneaks, or his bitterness about the fact that we live in a world which has given them such power.

The restaurateur, dressed in a lumberjack shirt and a pair of worn gold corduroy trousers, admitted that he was himself unconsciously eccentric, very independent and sometimes strongly opinionated. A fairly typical Englishman of a certain age, in other words. He told us that his restaurant was not a posh or pretentious place but that it specialised in serving good, solid, old-fashioned food at fair prices. 'We do steak and kidney pudding, fluffy mashed potatoes, mushy peas, cod and chips – that sort of thing. We do a proper old-fashioned full English breakfast that we serve all day. Fried eggs, bacon, sausages, fried bread, mushrooms, tomatoes, baked beans, hash browns, brown sauce, tomato sauce, lashings of toast, butter and marmalade which we always buy from the farmers' market. All pretty old-fashioned and possibly not entirely free of calories and cholesterol. My wife does the cooking and at the end of the day she and I do all the clearing up. We have one waitress, who works part time.'

He said that when he first discovered TripAdvisor's existence he was horrified to read some of the comments that had been made about his restaurant. He told us that he'd noticed that the less people bought, and the smaller the size of their bill, the more likely they were to complain and the more vicious their complaint was likely to be.

'We used to run offers such as 'children eat free' and 'two meals for the price of one' but always found that the customers who had taken advantage of the offers were likely to say something nasty.'

'Someone on Twitter even put up a rude comment saying: 'Not our sort of place'. What sort of review is that? Why come in if at all if we're not their sort of place? And who cares whether or not we're their sort of place?'

Feeling that many of the criticisms were unjustified, he put a great deal of effort into replying to each one. But when he eventually realised that his life was being controlled by anonymous bloggers and that he was wasting two to three hours a day typing rather pathetic explanations onto the website he decided to stop.

'I had become one of these wretched twits who spends all day hunched over a keyboard,' he said. 'I didn't have enough time for running my business. The people who put up these comments have nothing else to do all day. Once you start responding you get suckered in and before you know it, an hour has gone by, then half a day, then a day. And the following day someone else is there with their own bit of nonsense. I suspect most of them are kids or the very old who have nothing else to do with their lives. In my view, they're mostly abusive bullies who really don't know what they're talking about. They comment on things about which they know absolutely nothing and they make their inevitably negative judgements on entirely subjective grounds. For them it's all about self-glorification and self-promotion. Twitter and those other things are for people with big mouths and small brains and the bottom line is that whatever you do you will never please some of these people because they're only interested in their own notoriety.' He paused and took a breath. 'Moreover, if you dare to complain about anything they've written, they go mad and insist that your comments are removed.' He paused and sighed. He had clearly been deeply affected by this experience. 'You can't get out of bed these days without offending someone. Only folk with very thick skins can afford to do anything in the public eye these days. And I worry about that. We're excluding sensitive, thoughtful, imaginative people from public office. And how do actors and writers cope with it all.' He shook his head rather sadly. 'Still, I'm out of it all,' he said, with an unexpected grin. 'We only use the internet for ordering stuff I can't get on the market. I haven't been back to that appalling TripAdvisor site for six months. Not once. Not even peeped. I have no idea what has been written about us. To be honest I really don't care. Most of our customers are local and to be honest with you even if they'd ever heard of TripAdvisor, which the vast majority of them haven't, they wouldn't take any notice of what was written there. It's really all rather pathetic and childish and written by people who seem to want to destroy people's dreams. I suspect that quite a lot of the people who write stuff there are just envious because they've done nothing themselves. They're not bright people are they? Some of the trolls who send death threats think that because they call themselves 'Bigballs' or 'Customer' they will be anonymous. They don't deserve to be taken any more seriously than graffiti.'

He added that the amateur critics who write online reviews of restaurants seem to have opinions about everything but appear to be unable to differentiate between important issues and trivia. 'We had one critic who loved the food but said he hated one of the pictures in our loos. And for that he gave us a rotten rating. Where's the sense in that?' He added that most people have no idea of the rules and regulations which govern businesses such as his. 'We have to cope with the council rules, the health and safety people, the fire people and all the usual tax and VAT people,' he told us. 'We had to redo our kitchen twice because someone from the council gave us duff advice and we were ordered to have three doorways widened in case anyone in an extra-large wheelchair visited. That cost us over £3,000 which we could ill afford.'

'One day,' he said, with a gleam in his eye, 'some angry, hard-working pub owner will lose it, and go round murdering all the people who've given him bad reviews.' He leant towards us and wagged a finger. 'And if I'm lucky enough to find myself on the jury which tries him I will, believe me, be delighted to find him not guilty!'

It seemed a healthy attitude and I suspect that many others in the hospitality trade would probably sleep easier, and suffer less from indigestion, high blood pressure and itchy rashes, if they followed this wise man's example. Sometimes the best answer to abuse is to imitate the ostrich; stick your head in the sand and pretend the abuser does not exist. We may all soon find ourselves having to make this sort of decision. It is already possible for schoolchildren to rate their teachers and for patients to rate their doctors, and it surely won't be long before we will all be encouraged to rate our neighbours and our relatives. Maybe there will be a site where we can rate policemen ('he never once called me 'sir' so he gets two stars') or a site where hookers can be marked ('I knew she was faking it but she was convincing so I'm giving her four stars'.) Perhaps there will even be a website where householders can rate their burglars. ('He didn't take the children's television sets which was nice, and he left the place so clean and tidy that we hardly knew he'd been in the house. He even emailed us photos of the stuff he'd taken to make our insurance claim easier.') Professional politicians will never do anything to control the abuse on the internet because they are so devoid of sensitivity that they genuinely don't understand why anyone would care about public criticism or abuse. This is, of course, not a normal, healthy reaction but then it is, after all, pretty well established that all professional politicians are psychopaths.

Sadly, however, most people find themselves unable to do as our friend the restaurateur had done, and on our travels we frequently met people in the various branches of the hospitality trade and entertainment business whose lives had been seriously affected by individuals who are, I believe, most commonly referred to as 'trolls'.

As one individual commented, it sometimes seems as though every sociopath in the country has been equipped with a soapbox, a very powerful loudhailer and a balaclava to ensure their anonymity.

One hotel owner to whom we spoke also made the point that once bad comments have appeared on the internet they tend to stay there forever. 'One of our customers gave us a one star review because the window in their bedroom was a bit sticky when they tried to open it. They didn't tell us about the problem, but just put a very nasty complaint on a website. When we saw what they'd written we had the window seen to and now it's fine. But the one star review and the nasty comments are still there.'

Another hotelier complained that the thing which annoyed him most was the sanctimonious nature of many of the comments his establishment had received. 'I think these people are so full of their own self-righteousness, their own self-importance and their unending rights that they feel that they have a right to sail through life without even a momentary disappointment.'

It is sad that the English have become so very demanding and so very full of expectations. There seem to be many who feel that the world owes them everything and that every small disappointment is someone's fault. It is sad too that so many appear to have become as painfully sanctimonious as social workers or *Guardian* writers. (Some years ago, a woman editor working for the *Guardian* sent me a stern letter warning me that she did not approve of sentiments I had expressed in print and that she would not, therefore, consider for publication any articles I might submit to her. Since I had never heard of her, had never contributed to her pages, never wanted to contribute to her pages and had no intention of ever contributing to her pages, I found this rather odd but, at the same time, typical of sanctimonious *Guardian*-speak.)

* * *

In the Crown, we removed our coats, threw them onto the back of a spare chair, ordered a pot of coffee and a pot of tea and settled down in two easy chairs within steaming distance of the log burner. These things don't look anywhere near as good as open fires, and there's very little audible crackling and hissing and absolutely none of that wonderful smell that you get with a real log fire, but they do produce a good deal of heat. We were as warm as toast before we'd finished making ourselves comfortable. The coffee and the tea arrived within a minute or so. Even the most critical TripAdvisor complainant would have had to give full marks for cosiness and speed of service. While Antoinette poured out the drinks I picked up a newspaper another customer had left behind. I was hoping I could find the cricket scores.

We hadn't been sitting for more than five minutes before another couple arrived and sat down nearby. They both looked to be in their fifties and were clearly both active and pretty full of beans. They removed their anoraks and folded them carefully over an empty chair. He was wearing a green chunky sweater which looked as if it had been hand knitted and she wore a similar sweater in blue. They both wore stout, sensible walking boots, the sort where, to make them easier to put on and take off, the laces fasten into little clips rather than through eyelets. He wore a pair of plus fours, in green corduroy, and knee length, green, woollen socks while she wore blue corduroy trousers which were tucked into her socks. They were clearly dressed for action though since it was raining outside and neither of them looked in the slightest bit damp I guessed that they'd just climbed out of their car.

The man, who had picked up a copy of a newspaper which a previous visitor had left behind, suddenly started laughing. 'It says here,' he said, 'that every hour of television that you watch after the age of 25 knocks 20 minutes off your lifespan. Since we don't have a television set, do you think that means we'll live for ever?'

His wife (or, perhaps, someone else's wife – I didn't ask – but she was wearing the appropriate rings on the appropriate fingers and so clearly seemed to be someone's wife) said she didn't think that would be the case because if it was then everyone who had ever lived before television had been invented would still be living now and she didn't think they were.

'Why do you think television is so deadly?' asked the man.

'It's all that sitting down,' she replied firmly.

'Oh, of course, I suppose it is,' said the man. 'I couldn't help wondering if it might be because of some sort of killer rays that come out of televisions. You don't think that could be it?'

The woman thought about this for a moment. 'No, I don't think so,' she said. She hesitated, thinking again. 'No,' she said, 'I definitely think it's all the sitting down.'

'That's easy then,' said the man firmly. 'They should tell people to stand up while watching television. Everyone would be all right then.'

'That's a very good idea, dear,' said the woman. 'You should write a letter to the editor suggesting that.'

'I will,' said the man. He picked up the paper, turned to the letters page and tore out the piece of the page carrying the newspaper's address.

I bet he would have written another letter to the editor, if he'd seen the news that I spotted in the newspaper I'd picked up. The sports section was missing and I'd found myself flicking through the news and features pages.

I was astonished to read a report in which it was claimed that Samsung's voice-operated television sets may now record all conversations which take place near the television sets they produce, and then send the conversations direct to Samsung. Apparently, the company offers this warning to some of its customers: 'Please be aware that if your spoken words include personal or other sensitive information, that information will be among the data captured and transmitted to third party through your use of Voice Recognition.'

Is that scary?

I wonder who the devil listens to all the conversations. I would hate to have to sit and listen to my banal drivelling for hour after hour.

For a few moments I wondered if this news story could possibly be true. And then I wondered if I believed it. And finally I realised that it didn't matter if I believed it or not. Or if it was true. (As it happens, I think it is.) What really matters is that it is believable.

In our new, new world, where privacy is something remembered dimly from the olden days, a fading half-forgotten memory from another time, like respect and modesty, we have come to accept that there are spies everywhere and that nothing we do or say will go unnoticed by those in authority or by the millions who go about their daily business equipped with camera phones and with spectacles that film every move we make, every word we utter.

Before I threw down the newspaper in despair, I also read that some silly health experts were recommending that all citizens should spend a good chunk of every week doing 'vigorous exercise' and 'getting very sweaty'. The 'getting very sweaty' seemed very important so I assumed that the research had probably been paid for by a company selling soap, towels or deodorants.

The so-called experts based their advice on research which had shown that people who do vigorous exercise seem less likely to die than people who don't.

Sadly, it seemed to me that there was a flaw in the theory. People who do vigorous exercise will inevitably be a healthy group while people who don't do vigorous exercise will, quite probably, be overweight and unfit; they may be smokers with heart disease. Did the researchers allow for this? If they did not then their evidence is biased and of little value.

There's a lot of duff research published these days – and a good many people listen to what is said. My favourite silly research was that which showed that smokers are less likely to develop Alzheimer's disease than non-smokers. This was silly because the researchers had failed to allow for the fact that smokers are more likely to die young and to die before they reach their 60s, 70s and 80s – the decades when Alzheimer's is more common.

* * *

In Wells, we found one of the few remaining junk shops left in the country.

(At least it was what I would call a junk shop. The owner probably thinks of it as an antique shop or a bric a bric establishment. He can call it whatever he likes. He can call it a beauty salon if he likes. To me it was a junk shop. And all the better for it. No one should ever be ashamed of running or visiting a junk shop. The world would be a far, far better place if there were more of them.)

Just a few years ago, every town in England had at least one proper junk shop. Actually, as I've suggested in the previous paragraph, the word 'junk' has negative overtones these days and most people like to replace it with something less pejorative: ephemera, flotsam and jetsam, bric-a-brac, odds and ends, white elephants, cast-offs, lumber, odd and sods, gubbins or even rummage. We could, perhaps, move with the times and call the stuff for sale 'previously loved but now undervalued'. Or 'antiques that haven't yet been recognised as such'.

Whatever, you might choose to call it, the shop sold old stuff that wasn't ancient enough, rare enough or obviously valuable enough to merit a place in a proper antique shop or a would-be antique shop with pretensions.

The attraction of such shops lies in the theory that the proprietor cannot possibly know the real value of every item in his shop and so it might always be possible to find something good, some lost and forgotten delight, hidden amongst the debris or, if you prefer, the clutter.

Most of the old junk shops were piled high with scruffy three piece suites, battered brown furniture, boxes of books, bits and pieces of brass, cardboard boxes full of mixed crockery and cutlery, bicycles and prams that had at least one wobbly wheel, old gramophone records (including 78s), bits and pieces of tarnished silver which might or probably not be sterling rather than electro plated, carpets and rugs, paintings, curtains and bed linen and every possible type of tool.

You had to rummage to see if there was anything worth buying. (The word rummage is one of those English delights that can be either a verb or a noun. You can rummage among the rummage.)

The box of books might well contain several first editions by Ian Fleming. The gramophone records might include original Savoy Opera recordings. The pile of paintings leaning up against a wall might include something by Turner or Constable. It probably wouldn't. But it might. You would never know if you didn't look. Hunting for treasures among the dross was a popular English pastime; far more fun than doing the pools or the lottery. And potentially just as profitable.

Sadly, of course, most of the real junk shops have gone now; destroyed by silly regulations governing the resale of furniture, by high rates, by red tape and insurance demands and, most of all, by the combined efforts of charity shops and the online auction companies which have made everyone an antique's expert and every piece of junk a valuable and highly collectible item.

Instead of taking their unwanted bits and pieces down to the local junk shop (or asking the junk shop owner to call and take them away) most people now either sell their unwanted impedimenta on the internet or they deposit it at the nearest charity shop.

And most charity shops sift through everything they are given and send the best and most valuable items to auction. It's very rare, these days, to find a first edition book or a valuable piece of china in a charity shop. All the fun has gone.

The sad result of all this is that most of the few junk shops which remain have been turned into ersatz antique shops, selling 'brand-new, hand-crafted, machine-made imported antiques'. You can see the rivets in the metal sections and the cross-headed screws in the furniture. On many so-called antiques you can actually see the neat 'Made in China' label stamped indelibly on some half-hidden spot. Alternatively, you might find the European Union's official CE mark.

The shop in Wells has, I suspect, survived because it contains genuinely old stuff and there might be a valuable antique there if you look hard enough and are prepared to take a chance with your fiver. The shop is largely filled with smaller items, books, records, pictures, bits of china and so on, which are more likely to appeal to tourists who aren't travelling with their own removal van.

* * *

On the day we visited there was only one other customer in the shop. I'm officially classified as a pensioner but he was much older. I would guess that he must have been well into his eighties. Like me, he was using a pair of reading glasses to inspect the shop's stock. He wore a flat cap with a greasy spot on the peak, showing where he'd touched it in respect, and an old three piece navy blue pin striped suit which shone, not just at the seat and elbows but virtually everywhere. The suit shone so much that on a sunny day you'd have needed sunglasses if you'd been standing within half a mile of him. Underneath the waistcoat could be seen an old-fashioned white, collarless shirt which had, like the suit, seen many better days. The trousers were held up not by a belt but by the farmer's friend: a length of orange baler twine tied in a double bow.

The old man was carefully examining a small book covered in blue cloth. I got the impression that he wanted to buy the book but wasn't entirely sure that he could afford it. Whatever he was, or had done with his life, he had clearly fallen on hard times.

I ferreted around in the inevitable cardboard boxes full of books, and picked out the ones I wanted to buy. I soon had an armful. I can't go into a bookshop without ending up with more books in my arms than I can reasonably carry. I always keep a small shopping bag in a pocket so that I can carry my purchases back to the car, though sometimes, I confess, it is easier and more practical to leave the purchases in the shop and fetch the car.

To my delight I found a first edition of a book by an English writer called Frank Richards. Mr Richards is, today, largely forgotten but he was, for much of the first half of the twentieth century, one of the most successful and influential of all English authors.

Richards, whose real name was Charles Harold St John Hamilton but who wrote his stories under at least 28 different pen names, was the man who invented Greyfriars School, Billy Bunter, Mr Quelch (the schoolmaster), Bob Cherry, Harry Wharton and a whole army of other characters. His world was just as unreal and yet just as real as the worlds invented by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, John Buchan and P.G.Wodehouse. Hamilton's characters also included Bessie Bunter for in addition to writing stories for boys he also wrote stories for girls.

There can have been very few authors who were quite so prolific. It is estimated that in his lifetime Richards (or, rather, Hamilton) published at least 72 million words. For many years he wrote 100,000 words a week, all on an old Remington typewriter. For 30 years he wrote entire issues of two of the bestselling weekly comics, the *Gem* and the *Magnet* and he also wrote, virtually single-handed, comics such as *Boy's Friend* and *School Friend*. He didn't write for these comics; he wrote them! In whatever time he had left over he also wrote detective stories, sea stories and westerns.

George Orwell once wrote a famous essay on boys' magazines and in it he claimed (quite erroneously) that it would have been quite impossible for one person to write so many stories. After Hamilton (or should that be Richards) protested (in a remarkably courteous and gentlemanly way) Orwell apologised and expressed his admiration for Hamilton's work. He was right to do so. Billy Bunter is up there as one of the great comic inventions of English literature; up there with Falstaff, Uriah Heep and Bertram Wilberforce Wooster.

As I carried my pile of books to the till, the elderly fellow in the shiny suit, with the trousers held up by baler twine, caught sight of the volume on top, the book by Frank Richards. The old man looked at the book, and smiled and nodded to me. 'I used to love his books,' he said. 'I was a huge fan. He was a much cleverer writer than people think, far more sophisticated than he was given credit for, and I believe his influence was vastly under-estimated. Do you know, I always thought he was probably one of the most influential figures of the 20th century. Millions of young boys and girls learned about right and wrong and about respect and loyalty from his books. He had more influence than teachers or parents because children lived in the world he created. Today, it is television and the internet which influences young people, heaven help us all, but go back 75 years and it was the weekly comics which had the greatest influence. Many people think that Baden Powell 'created' generations in the first half of the 20th century but I would disagree: it was Hamilton who did the most good. His stories were imbued with moral values. And the man was a brilliant scholar. Did you know that he once wrote an entire Billy Bunter story in Latin?'

I said that I had a copy of the story somewhere and that if I remembered correctly even the illustrations were captioned in Latin.

The old man smiled, happy to have found a fellow bibliophile. I put my pile of books onto the counter beside the till and the shopkeeper added up the prices and told me the total. When I had paid, he put some of the books into the bag I'd brought with me and the overflow into two carrier bags which he fished out from a cardboard box under the counter.

'I used to collect books by children's authors,' said the old man, as I moved away from the till. 'I had a complete set of books by Angela Brazil. As you probably know, she wrote books exclusively for girls. I don't know why I collected them. I suppose because my sister liked them and she used to pass them on to me. Miss Brazil was almost as prolific as Mr Hamilton.' He smiled at a sudden memory. 'When she died one of her editors commented that she would soon be sending along the manuscript of 'The School at the Pearly Gates' but another immediately remarked that she would not be one to waste an opportunity to start a new series and so the first book she sent along would be 'The First Term at the Pearly Gates'.'

I smiled and nodded. 'Do you write?' I asked him.

'Oh no,' he replied. 'I was a 'Mr Quelch', a lowly school teacher. I taught Latin and Greek at a public school.' He smiled, rather sadly. 'Not much call for either nowadays, I suspect.' He held up the book he was holding. It was a copy of an edition of a book called *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius. It was in the original Greek. 'I used to have a copy of this,' he said, rather sadly. 'But I lost it years ago.' He paused and I could see that there were tears in his eyes. 'I had to sell my books when I had a little misfortune.'

'Would you allow me to buy it for you?' I asked him.

He looked at me for a long moment and seemed about to refuse.

'It would give me great pleasure,' I told him. I put down my carrier bags, gently took the small volume from his hands, checked the price and handed it to the man behind the counter. The book cost one pound.

There were tears in the old man's eyes when I handed him the book. But he was smiling. It is sometimes so very easy to buy a little happiness for a stranger.

Sometimes smiles are expensive and hard to come by and sometimes they are easy to find and come very, very cheap.

* * *

On our travels around the country, we took care to buy local newspapers wherever we happened to be. Even in these internet ruled days you can still learn a good deal about an area by reading the local paper.

Some stories, some gripes, seemed the same wherever we went.

Rows about local councils closing car parks or putting up the parking prices were universal. It seems that town centre shopkeepers everywhere are losing business because potential customers find parking too expensive and so either do their shopping out of town or online.

And just about every newspaper we bought contained letters or stories complaining about Post Offices closing and Royal Mail cutting back on its deliveries. Many small businesses complained that they didn't receive their mail until midday or later. If you're running a mail order service, as many small businesses are these days, a delivery in the middle of the day means that it becomes nigh on impossible to offer a same day service. Even if the proprietor and staff are prepared to work late, the post boxes will have been emptied and the Post Offices closed by the time the mail is ready to go out. Here, it seems, is another example of progress taking us backwards rather than forwards. In Queen Victoria's day, when England's postal service had only just been invented, and the Penny Black was the stamp of choice for ordinary mail, it was possible to send a letter out by the day's first post and receive a reply by the evening post. Housewives commonly posted their grocery orders to the local shopkeeper and expected to receive their supplies in time for dinner the same day.

I must admit, however, that in some respects the modern, privatised Royal Mail is more efficient than the old one. I have, for example, heard that today's postmen go on special training courses where they are taught how to push letters just an inch or two through a letter box so that burglars can see at once which houses are likely to be empty and so that when it rains the letters quickly get soaked and unreadable. In the old days this was all very hit and miss and some postmen would occasionally make a mess of things and push letters all the way through the letterbox.

The local newspapers contained more complaints than I had expected about corrupt and incompetent local councillors and there were protests everywhere about road works which lasted too long and caused unreasonable amounts of disruption to commuters and local businesses. It appears that highways authorities all over England are forever digging up the roads and then leaving them, dug up and closed, while allowing the workmen go off to spend three months pony trekking in the Himalayas. For those who travel a good deal, from company representatives to sportsmen moving from fixture to fixture, the state of the roads in England has become a daily burden, making hard and difficult lives close to unbearable.

But, in addition to the many undoubtedly justifiable complaints, and the constant, miserable whining from folk whose lives are not complete if they cannot find things to moan about, there were lots of fun things in our local newspapers. I was particularly surprised to see that photographs of glassy eyed couples holding up their pints and double Harvey Wallbangers as though they were sports trophies, have now largely replaced the old-fashioned photographs of stout ladies displaying their pots of jam and chutney on the WI stall at a local village show.

And there always strange things happening in England; even in the most sensible seeming towns some very odd things happen.

In one newspaper, I read a story about a local, amateur football match which ended in a fight. Three of the players ended up in the local hospital, nursing the usual variety of post-brawl injuries. Representatives of both sides were duly called to a meeting where it was expected that league officials would make a judgement about blame and punishment. Sadly, but hilariously, the meeting which had been convened also ended in a brawl and the result was that another four people requiring hospital attention.

In one newspaper, I read that a 90-year-old had run a marathon and was also planning to climb Mount Everest in the Himalayas. I made the mistake of showing this story to the Princess who pointed out that the fellow was two decades older than I am and asked if I intended to tackle either of these challenges. I told her that I wasn't going to do them now but that I, too, would wait until I was 90. 'Then if I drop down dead I won't feel so bad about it,' I explained.

But some stories, invariably the most extraordinary ones, never reach the newspapers at all. You have to talk to the locals.

In one small shop, a corner store selling newspapers, sweets, crisps and bottles of pop but no longer cigarettes (‘the profits are good but the legislation is incomprehensible and we’re too worried about ending up in jail’), we spoke to a young woman who was helping out her father-in-law for the day. She told us that she and her husband had five young sons (all under the age of twelve) and that they were all called John, after their father and their grandfather. ‘He got the idea from the boxer called George Foreman,’ the woman told us. ‘He has five sons called George.’ She explained that at home, for speed and simplicity, she called her sons John one, John two, John three, John four and John five. None of the boys has a middle name so sorting out the mail should add a little excitement to their lives in the years to come.

Chapter Three
Lacock, Tetbury and Cirencester

From Wells, we drove across country to Lacock for no very good reason other than that Lacock Abbey was once the home of William Henry Fox Talbot.

There are no motorways, or even main roads, in that part of England and so we had to drive along the sort of narrow lanes which originally followed the meanderings of sheep. The lanes wriggle around, taking five times as long to get from A to B as a crow would, simply because as the sheep moved around they wandered around trees, ponds and other obstacles which have long ago disappeared.

Our journey along these narrow, winding lanes was far quicker than if there had been any motorways or main roads for us to drive on. Neither cable companies nor councils bother to dig up smaller roads and so there were no hold ups. And, bliss of bliss, there isn't enough traffic for the authorities to erect speed cameras and make a profit out of them.

Lacock Abbey is worth a visit in itself (it has some of the most magnificent and frequently filmed cloisters in the world) but most of those who make a pilgrimage to visit are there because it was through one of the Abbey windows that Fox Talbot took the first photograph.

On the day that we were there most of the visitors seemed to be foreign. The English take almost no pride in their nation's history, or in the achievements of their ancestors. Most indeed, seem embarrassed or ashamed of their history and prefer to give false credit to individuals from other countries.

So, for example, English school children are taught that the electric telegraph was invented by Samuel Morse. But it wasn't. It was invented by an Englishman called Sir Charles Wheatstone. Born in Gloucester, Wheatstone was a serial inventor who built and exhibited the first telegraph in 1837. Samuel Morse, on the other hand, didn't demonstrate his version until 1844.

History is full of misconceptions, and English school children are rarely told the truth about their nation's history.

How many know that Peter Roget, the man who created the first thesaurus was born in London and died in Worcestershire? How many English folk know that the first manned flight was conducted not by the Wright Brothers in 1903 but by a Yorkshireman called George Cayley, who had been dead for half a century when the Wrights finally got into the air. Cayley built the world's first full-size flying machine in 1853 and the world's first aviator was one of his servants, who was press ganged into Cayley's private airforce.

Cayley actually invented the concept of the aeroplane as a fixed wing flying machine with separate systems for propulsion, lift and control as far back as 1799.

Most astonishingly of all, perhaps, is the fact that history shows that electric light was not invented by Thomas Edison but by an English chemist and physicist called Joseph Swan, who was born in Sunderland in 1828 and who, in 1860, produced and patented the first electric light bulb. Swan began working on his light bulb in 1850, using carbonised paper filaments in a glass bulb, and his own house was the first in the world to be lit by an incandescent electric light bulb. When Swan visited the Paris Exhibition in 1881, the French capital was lit with electric light, thanks to his invention. It was much later that the grasping Edison obtained local patents for a copy of Swan's light bulb and then ran a dishonest advertising campaign claiming that the invention was his own.

Actually, the more you look into history the more you realise that much of what most of us believe is just plain wrong. There are many great misconceptions about things we regard as facts. So, for example, T.E.Lawrence of Arabia, who is usually thought of as English, was actually born in Tremadoc in Wales. David Lloyd George, the world's most famous professional Welshman, was born in Manchester. Gustav Theodore von Holst, the author of the Planet Suite, was born in Cheltenham Spa. Stephen Leacock, the only famous Canadian humourist I can think of, was born in Swanmore which was in Hampshire the last time I looked and which is about as far from Canada as you can get. Author Edgar Allan Poe was English as were Hollywood stars Bob Hope, Cary Grant, Boris Karloff, Charlie Chaplin and Alfred Hitchcock.

On the other hand, Boris Johnson, England's archetypal buffoon, was actually born in New York and should really be classified as an American buffoon.

But, back to Lacock Abbey.

William Henry Fox Talbot began the work which would lead to the invention of photography quite early in his life. Born in 1800 he contributed relevant papers to the scientific journals in 1826 and 1827, in 1835 he invented the paper negative and in 1840 he invented the Talbotype, an early photographic process which involved the use of a negative from which numerous prints could be taken. He started taking photographs in 1835 and the oldest photographic negative in existence is an image of a latticed window in Lacock Abbey which Talbot took in that year. In 1844, Talbot published the first book in the world to be illustrated with photographs, and gave it the poetic title *The Pencil of Nature*.

When we visited Lacock the Abbey was, naturally enough, busy with photographers. And for once they weren't taking photographs of themselves or their companions. There were no selfies being taken. The photographers were all earnestly taking photographs of the latticed window which was Talbot's first subject.

Afterwards, we wandered into the nearby village itself.

Lacock is one of those curious bits of England which are pleasant to look at, in a film set sort of way, but must be a nightmare to live in. Everywhere we looked the inhabitants had posted small notices in their windows forbidding parking, the taking of photographs or the sitting down and eating of sandwiches. I can understand their not liking the constant stream of visitors but if you choose to live in an architectural museum you must accept the side effects. Lacock didn't suddenly become quaint and picturesque; it's gradually become that way over many, many years. England is full of such places, the much filmed Castle Combe is just a few miles north, for example, and it always surprises me when newcomers, who must surely have known when they bought their home or signed their rental agreement that they were moving into a mecca for tourists, complain when they find tourists peering in through their windows or parking their cars nearby.

The buildings in the village of Lacock were a delight but the locals looked as if life for them all had been an unending sequence of betrayals, regrets, disappointments and compromises. We talked to one old man in his eighties who was quite rude about some of the people who had moved into the village.

'The best thing about being old is that you can say what you like without getting into trouble,' he said. 'If I say something that might seem impertinent if said by a younger man I can always excuse myself by saying I've got a touch of the Alzheimer's!'

He told us that the locals who complained about the visitors were nearly all new to the village. 'They should all move somewhere else, and give some folk from Milton Keynes the chance to come here and enjoy the old buildings for a while.'

He said he liked having people photograph his cottage and that he felt proud of the fact that people came to his village from all over the world. He invited us into his home and showed us the downstairs rooms. There were just two: a living room and an un-modernised kitchen which was dominated by a huge Belfast sink. The ceiling was incredibly low and there was nowhere in the living room that I could stand up.

'The social people wanted me to move into a flat,' he said. 'They said I'd be better off if there were no stairs. But I don't mind stairs. I just take my time and I've got an outside lavatory I can use in the daytime. I can't stand these new places. The walls are paper thin, the doors fall off and the bricks they use are cheap and nasty. I like old houses. They're better made and they have a bit of character.'

The Princess and I agreed with him that older houses are better built. We once lived in a newly built house just outside Barnstaple in Devon. It was three-years-old and falling apart. The tiles were falling off the roof, the bricks were crumbling, the stairs were coming away from the wall and the window frames which were supposed to be white turned pink and all had to be replaced.

'I think the woman from the social services just wanted to get me out. Someone told me her brother is the landlord and he wants to rent the place out to holidaymakers.'

Corruption has, it seems, seeped quite a long way down the ladder.

The old man's living room was crowded with furniture, knick knacks and mementoes and beautiful, hand-made antimacassars decorated the two, elderly, leather armchairs which were placed facing a small fireplace. There was no television set and there were no radiators but there was a beautiful, large grey Persian cat asleep on one of the chairs. It opened one eye when we entered but, sensing that we were no threat, it closed the eye and went back to sleep. I noticed that the living room walls were decorated with numerous cricket photographs. The old man told us that he used to be a professional cricketer who had played for several counties but never for his country.

'I was playing in the days of Peter May, Tom Graveney and Colin Cowdrey,' he said, with a broad smile. 'They didn't have room in the England side for mere mortals in those days.'

He told us that after he retired he used his benefit money to purchase a small sports shop. He ran it for a year or two but, sadly, his commercial adventure didn't have a happy ending.

'One of the big chains opened up just three doors away from my shop,' he said. 'They could afford to give huge discounts on bats and such-like. I couldn't match their prices so I went bust.' He shrugged his shoulders. It had been a long time ago and the scars were fading.

He told us that he and a friend now supplemented their pensions by collecting mistletoe in the winter and selling it on a stall in a local market. 'He has the van and a ladder but he can't stand heights,' said the old man. 'So I go up the ladder and cut off the mistletoe. He drives the van and we sell the stuff to his brother who's a greengrocer. Sometimes we ask farmers for permission but usually we don't bother.' He said that he and his friend usually managed to make a few hundred pounds every December. 'It helps pay for my coal,' he said. We complimented him on his cosy home and moved back outside, onto the narrow pavement.

We were shaking hands, prior to moving on, when a large, highly decorated van screeched to a halt alongside us. The driver's window was open and the driver, a chubby youth who looked to be in his late teens or perhaps very early twenties, waved a piece of paper in our direction. 'Where's this place?' he demanded sharply. He was, I thought, very rude. Since I was the nearest to him I took the piece of paper he was holding out and looked at it. It was a printed worksheet which contained the address of a house and the details of the job which needed to be done. At the top of the sheet was the name of a well-known plumbing company.

'I told them I didn't want to do any visits in the country,' snarled the youth. He was clearly very cross. 'I told them I'd do calls in the town centre but that I wouldn't do these jobs out in the middle of bloody nowhere. It's taken me an hour to get here and I'm still not there.'

I handed the sheet to the old man who took out his reading spectacles and examined it carefully. He shook his head and handed the piece of paper back to me. 'I've never heard of it,' he said apologetically. He turned and addressed the driver. 'You could try the Post Office. The woman in there will know. She's lived here all her life and knows everyone and every house in the village.'

'I'm a plumber not a bloody explorer,' snarled the youth, snatching the piece of paper back out of my hand. 'I've done an apprenticeship. I'm qualified. I'm not putting up with this. This is their absolutely last chance. If they send me out into the country one more time, I'm off. There's plenty of work for plumbers.' He accelerated away furiously. Fifty yards down the road, he braked and screeched to a halt. He then reversed back to where we were standing. I had to pull the old man off the road to save him from being crushed. 'Where's the bloody Post Office?' he demanded.

'Turn first right and first right again,' said the old man. 'It's on the left.'

The driver said nothing. Not even a muttered 'thank you'. The van sped off again.

'If he'd been nicer I'd have told him,' said the old man.

'Told him what?' the Princess asked.

'Told him that the Post Office is shut,' said the old man. 'It's their half day.'

We both looked at him. He was grinning.

'He's a fool as well as being rude,' said the old man. `There was a telephone number on that sheet of paper he had. If he had a brain he could ring them up and get directions.'

Now we were both grinning too. I had a strong feeling that the old man knew the precise location of the house for which the plumber was searching.

* * *

We arrived in Gloucestershire to find the county in quite a state.

Since the majority of editors and journalists for English newspapers are based in London, most of the national media concentrate on news stories, conflicts and controversies which concern the capital, while either avoiding or dismissing news stories which affect other parts of the country. It is this attitude which means that if a few flakes of snow fall on London, the television news bulletins and the newspaper front pages will be full of pictures of people struggling to get to the shops to buy the latest $3.5 million solid gold, diamond encrusted iPhone before stocks run out, whereas if two feet of snow falls on Derbyshire and Yorkshire, as routinely happens between December and March, there will be no mention of this at all on the national news.

Generally speaking, the only time that Gloucestershire is mentioned is when surveys are done to find the best county in which to live. Gloucester invariably comes top. This is probably because Prince Charles, Princess Anne and everyone else who has ever appeared in *Tatler* or *Country Life* magazines, all live in Gloucestershire. The county is stocked from boundary to boundary with film stars, television personalities and celebrity authors.

People who live outside Gloucestershire assume that the whole county is crammed full with £2 million pound Cotswold stone cottages and that the bits which aren't populated by sheep are full of loud women in silk headscarves who shout even when they are ordering coffee or sharing titbits of gossip with their pals. Sadly, that's not quite true. Huge chunks of Gloucestershire are surprisingly run down and have an alarmingly high crime rate. (Incidentally, I decided some time ago that the women of the Cotswolds shout a good deal and always communicate at maximum volume because they spend a good deal of their time sitting on horses and chasing foxes. You can't share information with the other riders unless you acquire a loud voice.)

The rural areas of the county are undeniably beautiful and idyllic but once you enter the heavily built up areas of Cheltenham and Gloucester it becomes clear that this part of England has little in common with the rest of the county. The unemployment figures are appalling and the area has one of the country's worst records for job creation.

However, when we arrived in Gloucestershire, we discovered that the local newspapers were concerned not with the rising crime rate or the appallingly high unemployment figures in the area, but the desperate search for volunteers prepared to help toads cross the county's busy roads. The English may have some faults but they can never be accused of losing a sense of perspective.

Toads have an average lifespan of around 12 years, and every year between February and April the adults regularly migrate to the ponds where they were born; there they pair up and in due course, if courtship continues on the right route and one thing leads to another, they make lots of bouncy, little toads.

The problem is that during the year, toads tend to wander around a little, and their journey back to the pond they know as home will often involve crossing a road. Inevitably, of course, there is also the risk that additional roads will have been built, adding to the danger. Tragically, many toads are killed making their way back across these roads.

Toads are apparently commonplace in Gloucestershire and most villages and hamlets have a road where toads cross (or, try to cross) to get to the other side.

In order to help toads get from one side to the other, we discovered that the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust was appealing for volunteers to help toads avoid being flattened.

The task is no easy one.

First, the volunteer must look out for flattened toads. If you spot one or two toads who have been crushed then you've probably found a toad crossing place.

Second, you have to find a toad before it actually hops onto the road.

Third, you grab the toad, pick it up, put it into a bucket (with which you have come prepared) and carry it across the road, making sure that you don't get flattened as you do so.

Fourth, you release the toad so that it can continue its journey towards its pond.

And fifth, of course, you go back across the road and repeat the whole process. You do this until there are no more toads or it is too dark to see them or you are too tired, cold and hungry to do any more toad carrying.

Last year more than 70 volunteers saved an astonishing 2,700 toads from death on the roads. I find that extraordinary, and quite wonderfully English. I cannot imagine the citizens of any other country being prepared to work so hard to make life safer and easier for a bunch of amorous but otherwise undistinguished toads. It is a relief to see that animal-loving English eccentrics still exist in abundance.

Health care in England is appalling, and the quality of the service provided by GPs and hospitals is in rapid decline, but the English bravely ignore these inevitable deprivations while happily doing whatever they can for birds with wounded wings, hedgehogs with bad feet or toads struggling with the urge to procreate on the other side of a busy road.

We should not, I suppose, have been surprised.

The English value traditions and customs very highly and the pottier the traditions and customs the more they like them.

* * *

The people of Gloucestershire are, and always have been, the nation's most enthusiastic natural eccentrics.

It is, for example, in Gloucestershire that the traditional sport of cheese rolling is still practised with great enthusiasm and scant regard for safety or common sense. Cheese rolling is a very simple pastime.

Huge, round cheeses are rolled down a steep hill and assorted lunatics then chase the cheeses and attempt to catch them. That's it. In other parts of the world, this is a sport that children might play very occasionally on a sunny summer afternoon. In Gloucestershire it is something that grown-ups do every year, and it is something which they take very, very seriously.

There are two types of Gloucester cheese: Single and Double.

Single Gloucester cheese is made from skimmed milk taken from the evening milking, combined with a small amount of whole milk from the morning milking.

Double Gloucester cheese, on the other hand, is made entirely from whole milk from the morning and evening milkings.

Both types of Gloucester cheeses are usually produced in nice, round shapes which are eminently suitable for rolling downhill. However, for reasons lost in the mists of time the cheese traditionally used for the annual cheese rolling down Cooper's Hill is Double Gloucester. These days, however, the organisers, in the spirit of international competition, have added a race involving a large Gouda Cheese brought over from Holland. One can only assume that the organisers are hoping that the competition will eventually be accepted by the Olympic Committee and will become an official Olympic event.

The only concession to the dictates of the health and safety gestapo is that nearby fences are removed for the day and heavy undergrowth, rich with nettles and brambles, is cut and flattened. Oh, and catchers from the local rugby club stand at the bottom of the hill to catch competitors who have run down the hill so quickly that they cannot stop.

We went to Cooper's Hill, where the cheeses are chased and, believe me, the hill is so steep that if the gradient were any more severe it would have to classified as sheer and the hill known as a cliff.

Despite the precautions the organisers take, it is still necessary to have at least one first aid expert on attendance and, possibly, an ambulance or two at the bottom of the hill to carry away injured participants. Last year there was one broken neck, one broken ankle and a suspected dislocated shoulder heading the list of injuries; with a wide variety of bumps, scrapes, grazes and bruises scattered among the other competitors. I am sure that everyone who took part would agree with me that this was a small price to pay for preserving England's cultural heritage.

Inevitably, not everyone regards the cheese rolling tradition with affection.

The police, who seem to object to anyone enjoying themselves these days, and would probably prefer everyone to stay at home curled up with a recent edition of the *Highway Code*, would doubtless prefer the event to be cancelled. Amazingly, they have in the past warned off an 87-year-old cheese maker who had produced cheeses for the event for more than 25 years. I'm not entirely sure what sort of crime she was committing but in England these days, most things which are fun are illegal.

Last year, with scant regard for public safety, the police stationed a helicopter above the event with the result that the organisers were apparently prevented from communicating with competitors for some considerable time.

* * *

Gloucestershire folk have always been keen games players, though most of the popular sports played in the county aren't likely to be known outside Gloucestershire or, indeed, found at the next edition of the Olympics.

Not far away from Cooper's Hill, where the cheese rolling takes place, is Dover's Hill, near Chipping Camden, and it is there that locals and visitors take part in the 'Alternative Olympicks', an event which is nearly three centuries older than the controversial, modern five ringed commercial circus which now bears a similar name.

The Olympicks sports day was devised in 1612 by a Cambridge educated lawyer called Robert Dover, who was one of those charming and genial eccentrics which England produces with such delightful regularity. If you're poor and slightly dotty, you're labelled barking. If you are well off and dotty you're labelled eccentric.

Dover's original games included an event based upon a mock castle (inevitably named Dover's castle) which was equipped with real cannon capable of firing real cannon balls at would-be invaders. Dover, who took his sport seriously, directed operations on horseback. There were also horse races, foot races and jousting on foot in the Robin Hood and Little John tradition. ('Get off the bridge and let me past.' 'No, you get off and let me past.' Biff. Bosh. Bash. Splash.) For the less energetic, there were also chess and card game competitions. The whole event was enormously popular and William Shakespeare is believed to have been a visitor towards the end of his life. If he'd seen the event sooner he would have probably written a play about it. Damned fine show it would have been too.

They don't fire real cannon balls at Dover's Hill these days but they do still practise the ancient sport of shin kicking. Contestants stand facing each other, grip each other by shoulder and belt, and then try to unbalance their opponent and force him to the ground by kicking his shins. In the original version of the sport, contestants wore iron tipped boots and prepared for the event by beating their own shins with a hammer but these days it's illegal to wear reinforced footwear. Even steel toe caps are, I am assured, very much frowned upon and contestants are allowed to protect their shins by wrapping straw around them. The judge or umpire is known as the Stickler and his job is to ensure that the contest is a fair fight.

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Foreigners who don't understand precisely how the world goes round might think that shin kicking is merely a peculiarly English activity and is, therefore, unlikely to become popular elsewhere in the world. That simply isn't the case. The English have invented a whole host of silly games and many of them are now played very seriously in distant parts of the world. Cricket, football, rugby football, sailing, show jumping, skittles , table tennis, tobogganing, downhill skiing, snooker, darts, bowls, sailing, squash, archery, badminton, billiards, hockey, horse racing, rowing, boxing, archery, baseball and tennis are all English inventions and are now all taken seriously by millions of players and spectators around the world.

Indeed, the fact that foreigners usually play these games far more successfully than the English themselves, merely confirms the suspicion that the English didn't take these activities seriously when they were invented and don't take them seriously now. The English have always been much better at inventing sports than they have been at playing them. And, to be honest, when you look carefully at the rules and rationale behind these now globally popular sports there is rarely much more sense to them than there is to shin kicking.

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Those who don't know England very well might imagine that shin kicking is a unique local oddity; an outlandish regional peculiarity. It isn't. This sort of thing goes on all over the country. The World Pea Shooting Championships are held in Cambridgeshire every July. The World Toe Wrestling Championship is held in Derbyshire in June. The World Black Pudding Throwing Competition is held in Lancashire every September. The World Nettle Eating Championship is held in Dorset each July. And there are numerous Conker Championships held in October. One of them is bound to be the official World Conker Championship.

Most of these championships are, of course archaic and some have been running for centuries. But there are cheering signs that the English are not allowing their eccentricity to fade with time. I was absolutely delighted when I learned that in August every year a Mobile Phone Throwing Championship is held in London. I gather former Prime Minister Gordon Brown could well have been a gold medal winner in that one.

Chapter Four

Stroud and Gloucester

Stroud, which proudly describes itself as the world's first bee guardian town (whatever that may mean), has a reputation for being a popular retirement destination for old hippies. It's the place to which New Age travellers move when they're feeling ready to stop travelling and put down roots.

However, the people in Stroud to whom we spoke to all seemed to have their feet very much on the ground and although most seemed to be the sort of folk who couldn't go for a walk unless it was to raise money for or against something, and several seemed to have an inexplicable affection for hand knitted jackets and knitted hats with those long dangly bobbles hanging at the sides, they seemed pleasant and friendly.

We spoke to one elderly couple who had moved to Stroud from the outskirts of London and they told us that the thing they enjoyed most about the place was the slow pace of living and the more honest way of life. When pressed to add some meat to this rather bony assessment, the man said that he liked the fact that locals still treated him as a human being – even though he was in his seventies.

'People are far less patronising here than they are in London,' he said. 'In London, they treat anyone over 40 as a dinosaur and anyone over 50 as a dribbling idiot. I think they assume that anyone with wrinkles must also be demented.'

His wife said that one of the things she liked best about the area was the fact that the local restaurants and pubs knew how to serve proper food at sensible prices.

'A chef is really just a cook with a huge ego and an inflated sense of self-importance,' she said. 'And so much unchecked self-importance can be dangerous. For the well-known chefs, mostly men it has to be said, it is not enough to produce duck a l'orange or homemade burgers with a tangy sauce. Out go the gammon and the home-made fish pie and in come the pretentious, silly foods.' She laughed; an unexpectedly deep throaty laugh. 'I prefer to eat in places where the cook only knows of three sauces: the red one, the brown one and the yellow one.'

The husband had bad arthritis and they were considering selling their terraced house because he was finding the stairs a bit tricky to negotiate. They'd considered having a stair-lift fitted but had been told that their staircase was far too narrow so they said they were thinking of leaving Stroud, as much as they loved it, and moving into a seaside hotel as permanent residents.

'It'll be much cheaper than a nursing home and we can be together,' said the wife. 'They'll provide our meals and do the bed linen and the cleaning.'

They said they were thinking of going somewhere unfashionable but quiet. We told them that from what we knew of English seaside resorts they would be spoilt for choice. But we warned them to avoid Weston-Super-Mare, Ilfracombe or Blackpool.

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I know what the woman meant about snooty chefs.

The Princess and I once stayed at a place in the West Country where the chef refused to have a potato in the kitchen, and seemed to regard such standard English fare as teacakes and crumpets to be the work of the devil. The minute quantities of fancy and obscenely expensive food which he did condescend to serve were swimming in oceans of fat and as a result, we were constantly both ill and hungry – a combination which still seems distinctly inequitable. It's fair enough to feel bloated and uncomfortable if you've been greedy and eaten too much, but to feel that way when you're still starving is a sign that you've suffered at the hands of a chef who thinks more of his own meagre reputation than he does of his customers' requirements.

Today, the ambitious English chef must mess around with food instead of simply cooking it. And so diners end up with daft menus which start with mushroom and pistachio soup decorated with camembert rind croutons, move on to hedgehog and squirrel pie (preferably made from freshly scraped road kill) and end with lobster and turnip ice cream. Create a menu as potty as this, the sort of thing that might result if a couple of six-year-olds were let loose in the kitchen, and you're pretty well guaranteed your own television show, a recipe book deal with a major publisher, a magazine column and an assortment of highly paid sponsorship deals. If you can ensure that a roomful of your customers end up with food poisoning, and you are blessed with front page coverage in several national newspapers, then you're guaranteed three star status and status as personal chef to a member of the royal family.

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Stroud's main attraction for visitors must be that it contains an enormous number of small, independent shops. I have in the past been equivocal about Stroud. To say that it is not the most beautiful of towns is to be kind. It has the scruffiest and most impractical railway station in the country, the town has no great focal point, and to be blunt there is no real reason to go there at all unless you have to. But the wide variety of small shops gives it a heart and makes it a functional town; more honest than many towns and villages in the Cotswolds. Most modern, English town centres contain little more than the local representatives of major chain stores and the result is that it is difficult to differentiate one from another. Stroud, however, remains distinctive in this regard. It contains a plethora of small shops offering a wide variety of goods. It is, indeed, difficult to think of any interest not represented in the town. Quite a number of the shops sell goods which have been produced locally and we found several shops selling genuine, second-hand goods. Now that bland and uninviting charity chain stores have infected most of England's shopping centres, we found it quite a delight to discover such variety.

In a second-hand shop in Stroud a woman told us that in Winchcombe, just a few miles away, a kind-hearted young mother has opened a not-for-profit community café, called Simple Things Café, where anyone can call in and have a hot meal or a cup of tea. Nothing odd in that, you might think, but the café is unusual in that there are no set prices on the menu. Those who eat or drink are simply asked to pay what they can afford. The woman who opened the café is just 29-years-old and she's apparently hoping that other locals will offer to help out on a voluntary basis. I hope they do.

In a grocery store, where we were buying a few comestibles to sustain us en route, we spoke to a woman who had a shopping trolley piled high with the usual mixture of household essentials. She told us that she had for some time ordered her groceries online and had them delivered to her home by a man in a van. She had become fed up with internet shopping, partly because the shop always sent her food that was right on the edge of its sell-by-date and all had to be used within a day or so, which was obviously impractical, and partly because if the store didn't have an item she'd ordered, the people doing the picking and the packing had a strange idea about which products to send her as a substitute.

'I once got Brussels sprouts as a replacement for chocolate digestive biscuits,' she said. 'I had a large tube of fluoride toothpaste sent as an alternative to shampoo and when they hadn't got my husband's railway magazine they sent him a copy of *Racing Post* instead. That was the last straw really. I do my own shopping now.'

Maybe the internet isn't going to take over everything after all.

* * *

From Stroud we headed north towards Gloucester and Cheltenham.

The road, a fairly narrow typical country road was, for no discernible reason, busy with solitary cyclists. On at least half a dozen occasions, we found ourselves having to brake and then pootle along in a queue at cycling speed. In the biggest queue, we counted 23 vehicles, half of them vans and lorries, and the single cyclist at the head of it, a man who was deliberately riding a yard and a half out from the hedge, and therefore making it as difficult as possible for anyone to get past him, glowered at us as though only he had a right to be on the road, when we eventually succeeded in overtaking him.

Many cyclists have a self-satisfied attitude and seem to think that they are saving the planet from many ills but I couldn't help wondering just how much fuel is wasted by lorries and motor cars having to queue up behind them.

Cyclists are nearly as sanctimonious as those idiots who buy and drive electric cars and who seem quite unaware that much of the electricity for their silly cars comes from coal fired power plants. Electric cars will only be 'green' when they are powered by little windmills fixed to their roofs.

* * *

England's roads, once the best in the world, must now be amongst the worst.

The virtual closure of the nation's railway system in the 1960s has meant that for half a century nearly all the movement of heavy goods has been done by lorry rather than train. The inevitable result is that roads have broken up. Cheap, half-hearted attempts at repair have left so many potholes that drivers can be seen slaloming along main highways as they attempt to avoid the largest and most damaging of the holes; many drivers now deliberately choose to drive SUVs with thick winter tyres in an attempt to avoid damaged exhaust pipes and punctures. Cyclists who dare to ride on England's crumbling roads risk death or injury if a wheel should land in one of the nation's numerous and monstrous potholes.

The biggest problem, however, is that the roads in England are forever clogged.

A journey that might have taken an hour just five years ago will now take twice as long. Many attempts have been made to explain this. It is argued that the number of cars on the roads has increased as the nation has become more prosperous and as the number of immigrants has increased. But this explains only a tiny part of the problem.

The real reason for the traffic jams can be explained by two fairly recent phenomena.

First, in many parts of the country, the authorities have installed complex speed camera operations. Usually described as road improvement schemes, and commonest on motorways, these involve lengthy lane closures and may take a year or two to finish. It is common for motorists to drive for miles along stretches of motorway where cones and temporary speed cameras are the only signs of activity. Speed limits are often set at 40 mph and the traffic jams are inevitable and huge.

Second, the Government and the police have discovered that it is possible to make huge amounts of money out of fining speeding motorists wherever they may be driving. There is no evidence that this obsession with reducing the speed of traffic reduces accidents, deaths or injuries (indeed, speed cameras are known to cause accidents) but there is plenty of evidence to show that it can produce huge, consistent profits.

And so on roads, small and large, speed limits are enforced rigidly and with much malice aforethought.

The result of these two changes is that the average motorist spends twice as long on each journey as he would have done a few years ago. If a motorist makes a journey of 60 miles and travels at 60 miles per hour, he will arrive at his destination in one hour. But if he makes the same journey at 30 miles per hour, he will spend two hours on the road. More cars, vans and lorries on the roads mean more and bigger traffic jams. Billions of hours are wasted, with motorists sitting immobile in traffic jams, the air is polluted by diesel fumes, and fuel consumption soars.

Moreover, no one in authority seems to have worked out that it is the constant braking and accelerating of traffic that destroy road surfaces and create potholes.

And no one seems to care about the damage all this is doing to trade or the damage that is being done to the physical and mental health of people who used to spend two hours a day commuting and who now find that their commuting journeys takes them four hours a day.

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There seems to be mass bewilderment among politicians and commentators about the fact that productivity in England has fallen in recent years. There is no mystery. Productivity has fallen for three simple reasons: the English spend a third of their lives in traffic jams, a third of their lives attending to their Facebook and Twitter accounts and a third of their lives sorting their rubbish into neat plastic boxes.

Moreover, the English have been encouraged to become a nation of sneaks and the need to spend time responding to all the sneaking hasn't helped productivity either.

A generation ago, the English were proud to mind their own business. Today, there are battalions of busy bodies just waiting for something, anything, that they can report to the proper authorities (whatever that may mean). Anyone who fails to do their public duty (wash, rinse and put their empty yoghurt containers into the correct recycling container for example) must expect a knock on their door from a council official.

Today, falsely convinced that it is their social duty to tell all to the State, millions of tell-tale busy-bodies are now constantly alert to the requirement to poke their noses into other people's lives so that they can endear themselves to the men in uniforms and cheap suits.

The result is that there is little or no time left for work. The sneaks spend all the time sneaking. The men and women in uniforms and cheap suits spend their time strutting around with clipboards and hovering over their laptops. And the rest of the population spends it time dealing with the reports the sneaking produces.

The thing that annoys me most about all this is that even honest, law-abiding citizens spend their lives dealing with nonsenses. We are assured, of course, that everything which seems bad, inconvenient, expensive or seemingly bloody minded is being done for our benefit.

But the truth is that the nation is now run by and for the State and its iron-fisted servants; huge bureaucracies do their best to destroy common sense and all rationality.

In England, these days, we all of us live through a literally endless series of little wars which are dreary and invariably inconclusive.

And even if we win one small war, we will have no time to celebrate because there will already be a queue of new little wars ready and waiting, and demanding our full attention.

* * *

To our surprise and delight we found an excellent, spacious and reasonably priced multi storey car park right in the heart of the city of Gloucester.

Finding somewhere to park the car can be a real pain in many English towns and cities and many town and city councils are so greedy that they are forever increasing their parking prices. It also seems common practice for councils to narrow the aisles and reducing the space allowed for each vehicle. The Government has told councils that they must make car park spaces 4.8 metres long and 2.4 metres wide (just why they offer the measurements in metric units is something of a mystery since England still officially uses imperial measures for distances and weights) but many councils ignore this instruction and every time they repaint their white lines they steal a few inches so that they can cram a few more cars into the same area, and increase their income accordingly.

Motorists hate the car parks where there isn't room not just because it makes life tricky but because cars are, inevitably, scratched and dented. And the English love their cars far more than any nation except perhaps the Americans; the English change their cars far more often, too. A car dealer we spoke to in Gloucester told us that the average English car owner changes his car every two years.

(Incidentally, the city of Bath must surely be the most inhospitable place in England for motorists. When we last tried to visit, we spent half a morning looking for a place to park the car. We eventually abandoned our search and our visit. The road signs in Bath seem to me to have been deliberately designed to confuse and annoy and the city is as unwelcoming to strangers as anywhere in England. A day or two after we arrived home after our abortive visit we received two summonses for allegedly driving in bus lanes in the city centre. Road works and poor signage had made it impossible not to do so. We had intended to return to the city by train but the two fines changed our minds. We won't be returning to Bath. Ever. I heartily recommend that you avoid the city too.)

I've bought and driven my fair share of motor vehicles over the years and what with one thing and another, cars really don't seem as much fun now as they were when I started my motoring career.

The first car I drove regularly was a green mini; one of the original Alex Issigonis designs. The car's brakes failed shortly after I acquired it and for a week the only way I could stop was to open the door and put my foot down on the road. I drove very slowly and wore out two pairs of shoes. I remember that I had to plan routes that excluded all hills. I eventually managed to find enough cash to have the brakes mended but, sadly, still managed to destroy the car a week or two later when I fell asleep on a motorway.

I had been working all night in the casualty department of a hospital in Birmingham and I awoke to find myself bouncing up and down on the central reservation, with a concrete bridge about fifty yards ahead of me. Alarmed by this close shave I got off the motorway and, despite stopping for several cups of strong black coffee, drove into a ditch just outside Stow-on-the-Wold. I survived, but, sadly, the car did not.

My next vehicle was a huge old Humber which managed a maximum of five miles per gallon and had a turning circle so large that I couldn't drive it up and down in multi-storey car parks without a good deal of reversing and a good many several point turns. I remember that I bought the car because it was raining and I didn't have an umbrella. Not everything on the car was in tip-top condition and the little old lady who had doubtless used it only to drive it to church on Sundays had, sadly, failed to have the vehicle properly maintained. When I switched on the windscreen wipers they both flew across the road and were lost forever so I had to drive with my head sticking out of the window. The car had a duff battery but it was cheaper to call the RAC than to buy a new one so a kindly patrolman used to come round every morning to give the poor thing the kiss of life. Only when I'd been driving the thing around for a week did I remember that I needed to buy some insurance. Things were simpler in those days.

When the Humber started to need a gallon of oil every two days I took it back to the garage from which I'd bought it and swapped it for a small Ford van which had such rotten bodywork that bits used to drop off all the time. Indeed, the whole of the bodywork, such as it was, was held together by rust. When the back bumper fell off it took a rear mudguard and several other bits and pieces with it and made a terrible racket as I dragged it all behind me for a mile or so. I remember the handbrake came off in my hand before I'd driven the Ford for a mile and I certainly had no luxuries such as indicators or headlights. The windscreen wipers worked, though, so it was one up on the Humber in that department. Everywhere I went, the whole van was enveloped in a cloud of thick, choking smoke which made it impossible for policemen to see my number plates. My top speed was just above a brisk walking pace. In the end I had to abandon the van and buy a 49cc Honda moped which I could ride with my driving licence and for which, in those halcyon days, I needed no helmet.

Modern motoring is doubtless more reliable but I can't help thinking that it is nowhere near as much fun. Rules, regulations and the need for cars over three-years-old to have an annual roadworthiness certificate have consigned old bangers to history. I'm not convinced that this has done all that much to improve road safety.

* * *

We had parked on the roof of the building, and on our way down from the car park to the shopping precinct which lay beneath I found, and could not resist, a modernised version of one of those old weighing machines which used to be so popular on railway station platforms.

The old machines were wonderfully simple to use. You stood on a square metal platform, put a coin into a slot and waited. After a moment or two a small, printed card would appear giving your weight and, as a bonus, usually offering some jolly predictions or spuriously personal advice for the future.

More sophisticated machines then appeared which would also measure your height and, utilising the two sets of figures, tell you if you were out of proportion and needed to lose weight. Some really sophisticated machines would ‘speak your weight’. They really were the bees knees.

The problem with all these machines, of course, was that you had to be weighed in your clothes; and a thick coat and a good pair of winter shoes can easily add several pounds to your weight.

The machine in Gloucester, a modern, electronic version of the old-fashioned weighing machine, had attempted to get around this problem by adding a hook to the side of the machine. The hook was there so that patrons could hang up their overcoat or anorak. Progress knows no bounds.

While the Princess popped into a nearby shop for essential comestibles, I hung my coat and shoulder bag on this (though there was, of course, still nowhere to put my shoes which, given the size of my feet, must weigh as much as the average man’s head) and slipped the appropriate coins into the slot.

As I bent down to read the instructions there was a whirring and a buzzing and a moment later the machine, which had entirely misinterpreted my height since I had been bent down when it did it’s measuring, produced a slip of paper informing me that I was 5 feet 10 inches tall and overweight. Since I’ve been 6 feet 4 inches tall for over 50 years (and had forgotten to remove my hat) I found this both surprising and disappointing. I was also disappointed not to be told that my future looked bright or that I would soon be making a journey. The old, large red weighing machines, the ones which used to stand on every railway platform in the country, were far more fun as well as being more accurate.

Disappointed by this experience, but still waiting for the Princess, I stood and watched as another customer approached and examined the machine.

He was in his forties, short and almost completely round. I don’t think even he didn’t know that he was well qualified to be described as clinically obese.

The woman with him, whom I assumed to be his wife for it did not seem likely that any couple would choose to spend a dirty afternoon shopping in the centre of Gloucester, was similarly proportioned and it occurred to me that if they travelled a good deal by aeroplane I would not like to be the passenger sharing a three seat row with them. They had both clearly been doing some serious shopping for all four hands were clutching a variety of carrier bags.

‘You go first,’ said his wife, when they had carefully studied the instructions. She said it as though she were worried that the experience might be painful or, at the very least, embarrassing in some way.

Gingerly, the man stepped onto the weighing platform. He was still clutching several bags in each hand. I wondered if I should offer to hold one or two of them but held back, concerned lest he might think I was going to run off with his purchases. People have become very suspicious and, sadly, it can be socially dangerous to hold open a door, help someone across a busy road, offer to give up a seat on a crowded bus or train or, most dangerous of all, push a child on a swing in the park.

‘What do I do now?’ he asked.

‘Put the money in the slot,’ said his wife.

‘I haven’t got any change,’ he said. ‘I used all my change when we had coffee and cakes in that café where the waitress with all the tattoos and the ring in her nose spilt a cup of tea over that old man with the false teeth that kept falling out.’

‘I can’t get at my handbag,’ said the woman. ‘Hold these a minute.’ With considerable difficulty, she handed all her carrier bags over to her husband. Some of them appeared to be exceedingly heavy.

‘Why would anyone have a ring in their nose?’ he muttered to himself. ‘I thought it was only bulls who had rings through their noses. Maybe pigs.’ He turned to his wife. ‘Do pigs have rings in their noses?’

‘What?’ asked his wife, who had been rummaging in her handbag and had now discovered her purse. She found the required coins and slipped them into the relevant slot. The machine whirred and, a moment or two later, spewed out a printed ticket containing the man’s height and weight. He handed all the bags to his wife, took the ticket from the machine, and stepped down from the platform.

‘Crumbs,’ he said. ‘I’ve put on another stone.’ He climbed down from the platform and looked again at the ticket. ‘They’ll be putting a ring through my nose soon,’ he said.

‘Get my purse out,’ said the woman. She succeeded in passing him her handbag. ‘There’s some more change in it.’ Still holding all the shopping bags, she clambered up onto the machine’s platform.

Her husband rummaged around in her purse, extracted more coins and slipped them into the slot. I was beginning to wish I had shares in the weighing machine industry. The machine did its whirring act and then produced another ticket. ‘Take my ticket,’ said the woman. ‘I’ve got my hands full.’

The man took her ticket.

‘Read it out to me.’

He did so. And he did so loudly. I couldn’t help hearing him. I’ve owned cars which weighed less.

‘Good heavens,’ said the woman. ‘I’ve put on a stone too. More than a stone. That can’t possibly be right. I only had two of those little cakes in the café. The éclair was ever so thin. There’s something wrong with this machine.’

She then handed the man his half of the shopping. It was a complicated business because the bag handles had become mixed up with one another.

They walked away tutting and shaking their heads.

'Sorry I've been so long,' said the Princess. 'The woman in front of me was buying a Mars bar with a credit card and she had to try three cards before she found one that worked. What have you been doing?'

'Oh, just watching a couple weigh their shopping,' I told her.

* * *

We had a good time in Gloucester. The city itself seems rather run down and the shops consist largely of the usual culprits. As usual, heavy handed rules and regulations, and absurdly high rates, have meant that many small, traditional, independent shops have disappeared, leaving only the bog standard chain stores which are more than a little predictable and, after a while, rather boring.

But the people of Gloucester were friendly and helpful.

We had coffee at a branch of Caffe Nero. The drinks, snacks, décor and service always seem to me to be far better in this chain, and the Costa Coffee shops than in any of the awful Starbucks places which always seem to me to be devoid of character and to serve coffee which promises much but disappoints a great deal.

When, as we left, I asked one of the assistants if she knew the location of the nearest post box she came to the door and gave me simple and straightforward directions. I was rather embarrassed for the box was within sight of the coffee shop door. Sadly, she had to point out the box because she got rather mixed up between her left and her right but that really doesn't matter for her ignorance was trumped by her eagerness to help.

A few yards further along, in a proper shopping precinct, the local tourist information office was awash with leaflets, booklets and general information about Gloucester and the surrounding countryside.

I was delighted when I found a book entitled *Fading Ads of Gloucester* which contained a mass of photographs of fading ads in Gloucester. Some of the advertisements were fairly new and some were quite old. All were fading. It is always good to find a book which does exactly what the cover promises.

I wonder how many copies the publisher printed of such an esoteric subject. You can't imagine that there are thousands (or even hundreds) of people dying for a book full of pictures of fading ads in Gloucester. And whereas the author of even the meanest novel can always dream of foreign sales, and possible film rights, the writer of such a specialised, localised work can only hope that there are plenty of historians in Gloucester who are fascinated by fading advertisements.

While browsing through the books and leaflets we spoke to a very pleasant American couple who had hired a car and were touring the countryside, avoiding the motorways whenever they could and sticking to the smaller roads. They were travelling pretty well aimlessly around England. They were, they said, having the time of their lives. They had been as far north as Scarborough and as far south as Land's End. They had visited both the Bronte country and the Herriot country in Yorkshire and they had been to Stonehenge, Stratford-upon-Avon and Swanage. They had been to Wells, too, and had been very impressed by the Cathedral. They both said they loved England. Actually, they said that they adored it.

The two of them were enthusiastic fans of the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan. 'We're both members of our local society back home,' they said. The woman said that her husband knew most of the words of most of the songs in most of the operettas. I thought that was pretty impressive. When I told them that I had recently managed to buy a set of original cast recordings of the D'Oyly Carte company in action they were both almost green with envy. 'I bet they cost you a fortune!' said the man. I told them that I found the old records in a charity shop and that they were so heavy I had to make several trips in order to carry them all to the car.' I didn't like to mention that I'd paid £5 for the lot. The woman in the charity shop had been pleased to see them go. What a pity it is that the English seem to ignore Gilbert and Sullivan these days. Still, it is a comfort to know that many Americans still enjoy their work.

'My only complaint is that there aren't enough road signs around,' said the husband. 'And the ones there are seem pretty confusing most of the time.'

'Also, we've noticed that most of the new signs don't carry any distances,' added his wife. 'Why's that, do you think?'

I explained that the authorities weren't putting mileages on the new road signs because they were convinced that, in order to please our masters at the European Union, we would soon be measuring everything in metric distances.

The two Americans said they thought this was very sad and that they thought their fellow countrymen would be upset if we abandoned our traditional imperial measurements.

'But I wouldn't object if you started driving on the right!' laughed the American. 'It's taken me three weeks to get used to sitting on the wrong side of the car and driving on the wrong side of the road.'

* * *

In the local branch of Marks & Spencer, where there didn't seem to be any staff members in sight, I spent a pleasant five minutes rearranging the poses of the store mannequins. I moved their arms and hands around so that they were waving to one another, shaking hands and so on. I altered the arms of a mannequin in the window so that she was reaching out, in an attempt to give a hug to passers-by. Just as I was getting into my stride, the Princess dragged me away from the store by offering to buy me a cup of coffee and a cake. I can always be persuaded away from mayhem by the promise of coffee and a cake.

We didn't find a café straight away but at a nearby branch of W.H.Smith, two middle-aged women were giving away loaves of bread to all those passers-by who purchased a copy of the local newspaper. I asked if I could, perhaps, buy the bread and have the newspaper free, just to offer them a little variety. After a good deal of discussion they decided that, all things considered, and if I paid exactly the same for the bread as I would have paid for the paper, and if, most important of all, I didn't tell anyone, this would be perfectly acceptable. They both smiled as though we were all taking part in some quiet conspiracy. As we completed the simple transaction, a heavily tattooed young man with a shaven head walked by shouting about the world being run by corrupt politicians and bankers who cared nothing for the people or the country. A few years ago, I would have probably thought him mad, or at least heading off in that direction, but things have changed and it occurred to me that he was probably one of the sanest men in the town. As a registered medical practitioner, I would have certainly found it difficult to certify him insane.

As he disappeared into the crowd of shoppers (who moved away from him as though he had an infectious disease) I heard him shout 'Off with their heads!' and it occurred to me that he might well have been a member of Screaming Lord Sutch's 'Monster Raving Loony Party'.

His Good Lordship's original policies included suggesting that all bald people should wear hats, that anyone using a mobile telephone in a cinema should be squirted with silly string, that joggers should be made to run on giant treadmills generating electricity and that Britain should be towed 500 miles south to improve the climate. (Those who scoff at this silliness should remember that it was Lord Sutch who was the first to campaign for citizens to be given the vote at 18, for pets to be given passports and for pubs to stay open all day. These all came to pass and maybe the rest will one day.)

In a pub which had probably been serving thirsty folk since the middle ages (and where the barmaid looked as if she had been there on the opening night) we met an old man who said he had known Harold Shipman, the doctor who became infamous for murdering over 200 of his patients. The old man said he knew Shipman when he was a boy and that he had been a nice lad 'who wouldn't harm a fly'. He told us this within two minutes of our sitting down at an adjacent table, and it was sad to realise that this was clearly the most significant event of his life. I suspect he sat in the pub all day long, waiting to tell strangers that he had once known Harold Shipman.

I rather hoped that the old man might be able to throw some light on Shipman's behaviour as an adult but, sadly, he was quite unable to do this.

As we spoke together three youths wearing grey, hooded tops (with the tops up over their heads so that their faces could only be seen from the front) brushed past us, nearly knocking the old man out of his chair. They did not bother to slow down or to apologise. 'Kids these days are so arrogant,' said the man, sadly. 'But the way I look at it is that I'm 76 and so I know I've had a fair crack of the whip. I've seen a thing or two and even if I pop off tomorrow I'll have had a decent innings. But I don't think the kids of today have much of a future. Some of them will be dead before they're 30-years-old. They drink all day, they smoke, they take drugs and they drive like lunatics.' He shook his head and sipped at the beer I'd bought him. It occurred to me that it had been a long time since I heard one person cram so many clichés into a single sentence.

When we left it occurred to me that there must, I suppose, be thousands of people whose only claim to fame is that they once knew or met a serial killer or an infamous criminal or traitor.

How much nicer it would have been for them if their one, fleeting brush with fame had involved a more illustrious personage; someone who might merit a lighter, more amusing, even uplifting, anecdote.

The lady of my manor and I once bought comestible delicacies from a shop in Tetbury in Gloucestershire, where the assistant told us in some detail how she had once sold sweets to Diana, Princess of Wales, and her two young sons, William and Harry. The shop assistant was clearly, and rightly, enormously proud of this achievement and as we headed for the door, the story over, we heard her begin to tell the same tale, in the very same words, to the next customer.

And why not?

I have no doubt that everyone who heard the story looked around them with renewed interest, wondering whether the Princess's small boys had chosen a Mars Bar, a packet of chocolate buttons or a stick of chewy toffee. The woman in the shop wasn't telling. There were clearly some things that were subject to the Official Secrets Act.

Chapter Five
Cheltenham

Cheltenham is probably most famous for two things: the Government Communications Headquarters (known to its friends and enemies as GCHQ),which is the home of all those spies who listen in to our telephone calls and read our emails, and the Cheltenham Festival; a four day meeting at which horses and their enormously courageous jockeys jump over hurdles and artificial hedges.

The Festival is little known to those who do not following horse racing but is regarded by the racing brotherhood as a cross between Ascot, Henley and the Olympics.

The GCHQ was established after the First World War as the Government Code and Cypher School and up until the end of the Second World War it was housed at Bletchley Park. It was, so I am assured by an utterly unreliable source, moved to Cheltenham so that spies, spymasters, cryptographers and incredibly nosy people who just enjoy listening to other people's telephone calls, could have a nice day at the races without having to travel too far. After listening to all those boring telephone calls and reading all those dull and uneventful emails, they probably deserve a bit of excitement.

My telephone calls are very dull. Half of my calls consist of me cursing and listening to a mechanical voice telling me that our bank or utility company is experiencing its usual 'exceptional and unexpected high call volume' and that there will, therefore, be a delay of 27 minutes before one of their agents in the Philippines can speak to me. (I firmly believe that the bit about the exceptional and unexpected high call volume is the first recording they make and is routinely played to all callers as an excuse for poor service.) The other half of my calls consist of a recorded message telling me that the company (whatever it is) has closed its customer service department in order to improve its services to customers.

Indeed, there are probably far more thrills to be had from having a flutter on the 'Percy Bittleshaw's Emporium for all Your Plumbing Supplies Grade 4 Handicap Chase over Three Furlongs' than in reading yet another misspelt email recipe for Spotted Dick or listening to another two hour conversation between two 13-year-old girls discussing the relative merits and demerits of the boys in their class at school.

Since it seemed unlikely that we would be able to book a guided tour of the GCHQ building (which, operates under the direction of MI5 and MI6 and is, in view of its distinctive shape, known locally as 'the doughnut') we thought that it would be rather jolly to go the races when we visited Cheltenham.

Sadly, however, it appeared that although GCHQ operates 24 hours a day and 365 days a year, the famous Cheltenham racecourse appears to be empty of horses, bookies and cheering crowds for most of the time. The published calendar for the season included just 11 days of racing and, inevitably, none of those coincided with the dates of our visit. I'm sure they do other things there when the horses aren't strutting their stuff (lawnmower racing might be a good idea with all that grass to cut) but we really wanted to watch the horses so, once we'd invested a good deal of our liquid wealth in renting a car park space for a few hours, we tottered into the town determined to find a bookies so that we could watch the horses on a television set, make a bet and pretend to be at the races somewhere.

The main shopping centre in the town of Cheltenham is well supplied with the usual mixture of modern, high street shops. I couldn't find an ironmonger, a hat shop or a decent junk shop, but there are loads of phone shops, plenty of shops specialising in making fingernails look pretty and even a shop where the staff will do wonderful things to your eyelashes. And there are a good many betting shops.

English gaming laws rule that betting shops (or turf accountants as they used to be known in the days when bookies carried satchels full of cash, wore loud, checked suits and used a special sign language called tic tac to communicate with one another) must ensure that passers-by cannot see what terrible things are going on inside the premises. It is, I suppose, another modern equivalent of putting little lace bloomers around piano legs. For a while I could not imagine what the authorities thought they were doing, for by making it quite impossible to see inside the shops they are, of course, making the whole business of betting seem especially secretive and forbidden. And things which are secretive and forbidden are inevitably beguiling. Far more people go into betting shops because they cannot see what is going on than would go in if they could.

And then, when I realised this, I understood how clever everyone has been.

For absolutely no reason other than that we both liked the name, we chose a bookie called Paddy Power. There is, apparently, a family called Power and one of the members of that family is actually a fellow called Paddy. It must be quite fun to be an eponymous chain of betting shops.

When we entered the shop, the other customers were all male and they were working hard at something which is, I believe, called ‘studying form’. This involves trying to work out whether a horse which nearly won at Plumpton five months ago will win today at Chepstow, even though it probably has a different jockey and may be running over a longer or shorter distance than when it had last been almost successful. The recent experiences of jockey, trainer and owner are incorporated into a complex equation which rarely seems to produce better results than picking a horse because it has an attractive name or because the colours its jockey will wear are particularly pretty. If it is possible to judge an individual’s wealth by the state of the clothes he is wearing then I fear it is likely that none of these customers is particularly successful at their chosen profession.

Moreover, I’ve seen men in offices who did not work as hard as people who spend their hours studying form and attempting to pick winners. There is a widespread (and, I suspect, entirely misguided) belief among punters that betting is a science, and that the gambler who puts time and effort into choosing horses to back will do far better than the gambler who picks a horse because it has a nice name, looks good or has a jockey dressed in attractive colours. The truth, of course, is that betting on horses, dogs or any other sport is not a science and those who study form have no advantage over those who do not.

The customers in the betting shop might not have looked particularly wealthy but I wouldn’t mind betting (two to one would be pretty generous odds) that the shop’s owner, the eponymous Mr Power himself, is probably quite expensively dressed. And he probably has a Rolex watch for each day of the week for it is, inevitably, the bookies and not the gamblers who make money out of betting shops. It is, after all, the bookies who set the odds and so they can pretty well ensure that in the long run they will be the ones going home with smiles and well-stuffed wallets.

One middle-aged man told me that he visited the shop most days, and often spent several hours there. He was not, he admitted, a successful punter. ‘My father was a small scale punter with a large income,’ he told me. ‘I tried to follow his example but got things the wrong way round.

Knowing considerably less than very little about how these things work we picked a race meeting (the day’s racing paper was pinned up on the shop’s walls so that customers could select their winners from their ‘also rans’), selected a race and then each chose a couple of certain four-legged champions (and likely pilots), filled in our betting slips and handed them, together with our stake, to a straight-faced counter assistant who showed no emotion at the fact that we had, between us, chosen four horses for the same race. It was only when we got outside that I managed to work out that even in the unlikely event of one of our chosen horses actually winning, the cost of our various bets meant that we would still lose. In fiscal terms, we were doomed. We clearly had some way to go before we could consider ourselves to be on the road to becoming professional gamblers.

* * *

As we left the bookie’s shop, we found ourselves face to face with an extraordinarily unpleasant poster. ‘Sweating like a pig, feeling like a fox’ shouted the tag line. The words were accompanied by an unpleasant picture of a woman who did indeed appear to be sweating like a pig. I do not know whether she felt like a fox but she certainly didn’t look ‘foxy’. She looked like a sweaty pig. Advertisers do produce some bizarre and unpleasant posters these days. I have no idea what this poster was advertising (some brand of cheap deodorant, perhaps) but it certainly didn’t add to the beauty of the town. I’m sure it must be me but I often find myself offended or confused by advertisements these days. Moreover, much of the time I have no idea what advertisers are trying to persuade me to buy.

I was still trying to work out the meaning of this advertisement when a family of five came by. They made no effort to walk around us and because I saw her too late, I was shoulder charged by a teenage girl of considerable size who almost took me off my feet. I’ll swear she actually dipped her shoulder to obtain the maximum leverage. According to the weighing machine in Gloucester, I weigh fourteen stone but she clearly had the edge on me in the weight department. She would have made a good rugby prop forward. Indeed, I have read that women do play rugby these days and I suppose it is possible that she was practising for an important match.

When you think about it, which I confess I do not do often, I doubt if there can be many sights more frightening than facing 15 huge, female rugby players. It cannot, in all honesty, be a pretty sight. One expects male rugby players to have broken noses, missing teeth and chewed ears but it must be disconcerting to see so many well-built women in such a battered condition.

Neither the teenage heavyweight nor anyone else in her family seemed to regard her shouldering me aside as in any way unusual or bad mannered. The odd thing was that they were all quite well dressed and looked very middle-class. I can imagine them having a neat house with a smartly trimmed lawn at the back and a two-year-old Audi parked in the front driveway; with a small Ford or Vauxhall parked alongside as a second car.

Ignoring the unpleasant poster we wandered off in search of jollier sights.

The Princess wanted to do a little light shopping while I required a little liquid refreshment to soothe my nerves while we waited for the result of our adventure into the world of horse racing. So we arranged a spot where we could meet and while she tottered off in search of shoe shops, I wandered hither and thither among the local retail establishments, looking for a suitable hostelry. Outside one store, I picked up a leaflet advertising the services a chiropodist who promised to deal with any foot problems I might have. Among his or her specialities he or she listed that rare peculiarity the foot 'callas'. It did occur to me that if I needed a chiropodist or podiatrist I would prefer to patronise one who could spell what they did and not confuse thickened and hardened skin with a deceased opera singer. My spelling is not the greatest in the world, and all sorts of literals nibble their way into anyone's prose, but I think I would notice if I misspelt the word 'book'. Would you trust an estate agent who couldn't spell 'house', a solicitor who couldn't spell 'prison' or an accountant who couldn't spell 'avoidance'?

Eventually, I found my way into the Old Restoration, Cheltenham's oldest public house and an establishment which looks just as a town centre public house should look.

Once I'd purchased my drink I found a table near to a window and, since my mind has already been exposed to an inelegant sufficiency of improving literature, settled down with a non-improving book for company.

I had hardly read a line, however, before the peace was disturbed by the arrival of two men who chose the table right next to mine. Why do people do that? The pub was more or less empty. There were dozens of empty tables. Why did they have to choose the one next to mine? I can only surmise that even when they bring their own company, the English now feel a need to sit in clumps. It never used to be that way. In the olden days, the dim and distant past of ten or fifteen years ago, people would always choose to sit at a table furthest away from any other customers. But now people seem frightened to have space around them. I've noticed it happening on trains. In the old days, when computers could not be moved without six men and a forklift truck and telephones all had curly bits of plastic attaching them to a chunky plastic handset which was itself connected by a wire to the wall, travellers in England would routinely walk the length of a carriage looking for a quiet spot. These days, travellers insist on sharing a table even though the rest of the carriage may be completely deserted. I've seriously considered travelling with a notice hung around my neck warning people that I am suffering from some scary infectious disease. Ebola should do nicely.

The two men put down their pints of beer, took out their mobile telephones, both of them expensive looking smart phones, and settled themselves in for a little light chatting, though not to each other, of course. People don't talk to live human beings any more. They communicate via phones and laptops. How long will it be, I wonder, before lovers in bed send texts or emails to each other. 'Is it in yet?' 'Up a fraction.' 'Down a bit.' 'Have you finished yet?' 'How was it for you?'

(I can't help thinking that the world would be a far better place if there were a tax on using the internet and a tax on sending emails. A £1 tax on emails and a £1 per minute tax on using the internet would leave us able to use both when necessary but would help slow the rate at which jobs and businesses are being ruined and our lives altered beyond recognition. The internet has destroyed productivity and innovation. Name one great invention created since the internet was introduced? Facebook and Google glasses don't count. A tax on the internet won't ever happen, of course, because anything which interfered with the glories of the social media would be political suicide. And, unfortunately, politicians don't do suicide.)

The younger of the two men looked to be in his early forties. He wore a cheap, rather scruffy suit and a collared shirt with no tie, in the style favoured these days by Prime Ministers and leaders of industry who are trying to look relaxed and friendly for the television cameras but end up looking as if they've been caught coming out of the shower, before they've had time to finish dressing. He had curly hair which made him look as if he had had a hair transplant using a thatch of pubic hair collected from a couple of dozen donors.

The older man was probably in his mid-sixties. He was wearing a scruffy jumper and a pair of oil-stained jeans and looked as if he spent much of his life underneath leaky motor cars. They both spoke so loudly that I wondered if they perhaps worked together in a factory where heavy machinery had adversely affected their hearing. Because they were speaking so loudly, I could not help overhear they were saying. And since I'm a writer I made notes.

Is eavesdropping a bad thing?

It certainly is if one makes a covert effort to listen to conversations which people are trying to keep private. (In the way that the Government does all the time.)

But if people speak loudly in a public place then they must expect to share their thoughts, beliefs and fears with those around them. Indeed, those within hearing have no choice in the matter.

'I'm going to have a tattoo,' said the younger man. 'I thought I'd get myself a ship. One of those old-fashioned ones with sails. It'll make me look younger.' When I heard this, I couldn't help thinking how odd it is that almost everyone wants to look a different age. The very young always want to look older than they are and the middle-aged and older want to look younger. Only the very, very old are proud to be, and look, the age they are.

'My Lizzie came back,' said the older man, ignoring the young fellow. 'She was only away a week. I expect the bloke she went off with threw her out.' He was holding and looking at his mobile phone but he was just scrolling up and down as though he didn't really know what he was looking for.

'Either a ship or a tattoo of a wolf. I found one on my phone. It's snarling, with lots of teeth showing. I thought I'd have it on my arm.'

'He probably got fed up with her talking. She never stops. Talk, talk, talk. Never bloody stops.'

'It'd look good with a cut off T-shirt. White. I usually wear them in white. A size too small, of course. Especially in the summer. They show off your tan. But a tattoo would look good. Women like men with tattoos.'

'I've never known a woman talk so much. I never listen to anything she says. I just turn her off, like the radio. I turn her off in my head. Even when we're in bed she keeps talking. I don't know what she says. I only know it's not worth listening to.'

'In the picture I saw the wolf was mainly in black but it had yellow eyes and a red tongue. The yellow eyes just sort of pierce right through you. They look quite scary. I wonder if they look as good on your skin.'

'I'd have thrown her out years ago but she's got decent sized tits and she knows what they're for. She's manager of the shop now. The other woman left to start a nail parlour. Everyone's opening nail parlours these days. The woman next door works in one. She always has her nails done nice though I expect they get them done free.'

The younger man picked up his mobile phone and messed around with it for a while. 'I want to look at it again. The wolf picture. And the ship. It had those big sails. I've lost my reception now. I hate it when that happens.'

'Or cheap at least. As a perk. They probably do each other's nails when they haven't got any real customers. She had green nails the other day. Green! Can you imagine that? My mother only ever wore nail polish for weddings. And then it was just the clear stuff. She thought only prostitutes wore coloured nail varnish. But they wore mainly red, of course. Fire engine red I think they call it.'

'There isn't any reception in here,' said the younger man, waving his phone around. 'Or maybe it's just the phone company I'm with.' He frowned. 'Actually I can't remember which one it is. It's one of them well known ones, though.'

'I got invited to invest in one of these nail parlour places; just a few hundred quid. But I didn't do it,' said the older man. 'If I had any money I'd only invest it in businesses run by ugly women. The good-looking ones get to the top on their backs or their knees. And when they get to the top, the skills they've got aren't exactly going to help them run a business are they?'

'Here it is,' said the younger man, having made his phone work and found the picture of the tattoo he fancied. He turned the phone round and showed it to the older man who didn't bother to look at it.

'I had a bloke put up a new outside light,' said the older man. 'The woman is always complaining that now that the council have switched off the street lights she can't see where she's going when she gets onto our path. There's a hole in the fence and next door's dog craps everywhere. So I got the electric company to put up a light for me. They do that now. I didn't know that but they do. Anyway, the damned thing never goes off. It's one of those lamps that is supposed to come on when anyone walks near it but it's always on. I think it's a scam. The electricity company have fixed it to stay on permanently so that it uses up more electricity.'

'Have you seen how much they're selling underpants and socks for in the pound shop?' asked the younger man, having closed his phone and put it down on the table. 'They're so cheap I'm going to wear new ones every day. Just throw the dirty ones away. It'll mean not having to do any laundry. I reckon it'll be cheaper. And I'll be wearing new clothes all the time.'

'I don't know why you spend so much time on that phone thing of yours. People keep ringing me up to try to sell me stuff so I turn mine off. Even the bloody phone company are always sending me texts and messages. Once a week I just delete all the texts and messages because after a week they're bound to be out-of-date. I don't send any and I don't want to see any. If I want to say something I speak to people properly. Face to face on the phone.'

'My sister has decided to become a vegetarian. Can you imagine? A bloody vegetarian. I tell you what gets me. It's when people come round for a meal and then when you're serving the burgers they suddenly tell you that they're vegetarian. All prissy and high and mighty. I think vegetarians should make an effort when they're eating out.'

And so they continued. The younger man talked a good deal more about his tattoo. The older man just talked incessantly. He complained a good deal about his talkative woman. Neither of them listened to a word the other was saying. I was the only person there not talking and I was the only person doing any listening.

And then another couple came and sat down at a table on the other side of mine. The weather was freezing cold but they were both wearing shorts. His were white, hers were yellow. He wore a green sports shirt decorated with a crocodile. She wore a pink T-shirt with the words 'I'm in charge' printed in bold, black letters on the front. I wondered if she'd bought it for herself or if her husband or a relative had bought it for her. It was several sizes too small.

The English have many faults, of course. There is no nationality on earth which is devoid of imperfections. There are, whisper it quietly, even some Germans who are notably less than perfect. But the fault which tops the list as far as the English are concerned must surely be the way they dress. Teenagers of both sexes wear jeans and hooded tops, the elderly wear beige anoraks and beige or navy blue trousers with elasticated waists and those in between wear jeans with T-shirts and anoraks. Only by looking at children could the proverbial man from Mars see that there are two sexes on our planet, for there are still some small girls who happily wear pretty dresses.

The newcomer in the green shirt was blowsy and bossy. She looked as if she'd won the lottery ten years earlier, been unable to find the ticket and had lived in a constant state of rage and regret. She talked to her husband as though he were a child; in that condescending manner primary school teachers sometimes adopt.

And she didn't stop talking.

Moreover, she said absolutely nothing worth listening to and she spoke so loudly that I could no longer hear what the two lunatics on my other side were saying. The only thing I noticed about her husband was that he persistently said 'off of' as in 'my pen has fallen off of the table' or 'my toupee is slipping off of my head'. (He didn't actually say either of those things, of course, but you get the drift.) Why do people do that? When I was a boy my English teacher always used to say 'off of' and even when I was twelve I found that it was an ungrammatical habit which upset me.

After five minutes of this, I gave up. I couldn't concentrate to read my book and I wasn't hearing anything worth writing down. I finished my drink and went back out into the street. I decided that I would soon find the Princess if I worked my way through the town's shoe shops.

* * *

When I found her, in the fifth shop I visited, the Princess was trying on a splendid looking pair of knee length boots. I told her they looked good and suited her, even though I know from experience that such enthusiasms are rarely of value. While she removed the boots and asked the assistant to fetch another pair of boots (which to my untrained eye looked identical), I wandered over to the men's department and spotted a splendid looking pair of walking boots. They were equipped with those little metal lace catches which demonstrate that the boots were capable of climbing Everest, probably on their own. The presence of such catches, rather than the more traditional eyelets, lets people know that you are a serious walker, climber or mountaineer.

'Have you got these in size 12?' I asked a boy of about 10 who was presumably working in the shop to help out his parents.

The boy said he would go and look, and two minutes later he returned with the boots in my size. I took out my wallet and bought them. I then went back to see how the Princess was getting on.

'I feel really bad about this,' she said. 'This is the 9th pair of boots I've tried here.' There were indeed boots and boxes littered around the floor. 'Still,' she said, 'I tried more in the last shop and they didn't seem to mind.'

I sat down on a bench and waited and watched in horror as young woman in her twenties tried on dozens of pairs of shoes. She was dressed in the sort of clothes that might have been left over at the end of a downmarket garage sale. She was wearing no socks, tights or stockings and her feet were filthy. They looked as if they hadn't been washed since the last muddy festival she had attended. I was horrified and felt sure I could see clear signs of fungal infection poking through the mud. There was at least one good-sized verruca there too. I was relieved to see that she wasn't trying on any boots.

And half an hour later, the Princess bought a pair of boots.

(At this point, I have to confess that in the month since buying her boots she has worn them every day. I, however, have not yet worn my new boots once. I tend to keep new purchases for a while before trying them. But I will almost certainly wear them at some point in the future. It's just that I have to get myself ready for them. The Princess always likes to wear new clothes the minute she's bought them. I prefer to allow new things to settle into my wardrobe, to get to know my other jackets, trousers, shirts and ties, before I risk actually wearing them. Besides, I'm conscious of the fact that once something has been worn it can't ever be new again.)

After we left the boot shop, we bought a Morphy Richards microwave oven. We've never had a microwave oven but we decided that it was about time we ventured into the 20th century before the 21st century gets too well established. We bought the Morphy Richards oven because we both know of the name. Buying something because you know the name can be reckless since some traditional English brand names have been bought by unscrupulous companies who slap them on shoddy goods which they can sell for top prices simply because of the name they carry. However, we believe that Morphy Richards products are still made by elderly craftsmen who work hard creating kitchen works of art by hand in small factories in the English countryside, rather than by 11-year-old children in a sweat shop in the dark and dingy outskirts of Bejing.

Afterwards we went to a rather splendid looking café for coffee and buns. Sadly, the coffee was foul and had clearly been brewed by an employee who had been trained by British Rail, back in the days when brown Windsor soup was served as after dinner coffee as well as a 'starter'. Antoinette's peppermint tea didn't smell of peppermint at all and I suspected that all their herbal teas were probably made from a deadly mixture of Japanese Knotweed and Giant Hogweed.

We left our drinks, and the buns we had foolishly ordered, which looked as if they had been bought at auction sometime in the 1960s, and then tried a second and entirely empty café where we sat for 12 minutes waiting for one of the waitresses to stop chatting and to come and take our order. I had thoroughly intended to wait 15 minutes but impatience is one of my many faults (I would certainly put it in my top 100 though the Princess says she'd put it in my top ten) and I only managed 12 minutes. The two waitresses clearly had more important things to do than listen to would-be customers demanding sustenance.

We left that establishment without having managed to order anything (and without having spent any money) and went to Caffe Nero, which can always be relied upon for excellent coffee, decent buns and good surroundings.

When we had settled down at an empty table the Princess told me that during her wanderings around the town she had visited a Chinese herb shop where she had bought some tea. During her visit, she had tried out her Mandarin and had been delighted to find that the Chinese owner of the shop could understand what she said. The Princess has been learning Mandarin from a variety of books and CDs and is becoming adept at the many tonal variations which seem to be a part of the Chinese language.

When I looked at some of her text books I was delighted to see that the people who write language courses and phrase books haven't changed much from the days when 'My postilion has been struck by lightning' was a genuine entrant in a French phrase book written for continental travellers. One of the Princess's CDs has been teaching her the Chinese for 'the television is under the table'. More useful, perhaps, would have been: 'The television repair man is under the table'. Or: 'The television presenter is under the table'.' But the people who design language courses live in a different world.

The Princess started to learn Chinese when she discovered that there are now four times as many people speaking Chinese as there are speaking English. She decided, very sensibly, that one of us has to be ready for the coming revolution.

While we were sitting in the café, I remembered to check to see how our horses had got on and if we needed to hire a security company to help us pick up our winnings. Sadly, it seemed that a rank outsider had won our race at 33 to 1 odds and none of our selections had figured at the finish. The Princess and I decided that the race had undoubtedly been fixed. If I'd known that an outsider at 33 to 1 was going to win I would have obviously bet on that since the rewards would have been much greater.

Back at our hotel, the Princess put on her new boots and we decided to take our new microwave oven out of its box. Sadly, we couldn't work out how to open the front door of the oven, though, frustratingly, we could see the instruction booklet sitting inside on the little turntable. We put the oven to one side to study when we had more time.

Why is everything so incomprehensibly complicated these days? In the bad old days of a decade or so ago, putting refills into printers and fax machines was relatively straightforward. These days my blood pressure soars when I even contemplate putting an ink refill into any sort of machine more complicated than a pen.

Chapter Six
Hereford

Hereford, which nestles comfortably in the breathtakingly beautiful Wye Valley in Herefordshire, isn't really on the way to anywhere, and certainly isn't a commercial centre of any great significance but the river Wye, one of the longest rivers in the country, is widely acknowledged to be the birthplaces of the modern tourism industry, and has long attracted those seeking serenity and natural beauty. The Special Air Services (SAS) headquarters are hidden behind a bush somewhere nearby but their camouflaged tents aren't marked on any maps and as far as I'm aware, they don't yet welcome tourists or have open days. Doubtless as the armed forces continue to struggle for a share of the national debt the tours and open days will surely come.

Our short journey to Hereford from Gloucestershire was something of a nightmare.

English roads are disfigured with speed cameras, potholes and road works and we found that we had to expect to travel at no more than 20 miles per hour when travelling between two English towns by motor car. That's approximately half the average speed that was considered acceptable for an ordinary family motor car half a century ago. When I was a small boy, heading off on our family summer holidays, my father would have been disappointed if he hadn't succeeded in averaging 40 mph in our Morris 8 saloon while taking us from Walsall in Staffordshire to the North Cornish coast. And that included a short stop for a picnic meal. I don't know what the top speed was for a Morris 8 but I doubt if my Dad ever drove it at much above 60 mph. These days I would consider myself lucky if I managed to average 40 mph while driving on a motorway in a Bentley Continental GT Coupe. The speed cameras have been shown to increase the number of accidents, the potholes are getting bigger and the road works seem to last forever. Workmen have acquired a bad habit of erecting barriers, temporary traffic lights, an inevitable speed camera or two and a collection of heavy machinery and then going off on holiday for three months. Whenever there is a minor accident, or a lorry breaks down, the English police, who have become increasingly self-important in recent years, take great delight in closing lanes or whole roads for hours at a time while they put on their sunglasses and stand around beside their cars looking important. Naturally, they do absolutely nothing to ease the flow of the traffic. I'm convinced that they go home at the end of each day and boast about the amount of traffic disruption they have managed to cause. They probably have a monthly competition, with a handsome prize for the police force which manages to create the longest and most intractable traffic jam.

Things are due to get worse as more and more stretches of public road are limited to 20 miles per hour. Don't the people who campaign for these absurdly low limits realise that at such speeds the drivers' concentration levels will be low, fuel consumption will soar, the dangerous diesel fumes emitted will rocket ever higher and the roads will need be dug up even faster? I wouldn't mind betting that the death rates in areas where 20 mph limits have been introduced will be considerably higher than the mortality rates in areas where limits are not determined by rabid and woefully ignorant campaigners.

England must be the most unfriendly First World country on the planet as far as travellers are concerned. The railway service is appalling or non-existent, with trains invariably either late or cancelled without notice, warning or explanation and the staff unfriendly, incompetent and clearly keen to do something else for a living. Travellers are advised not to try to travel by rail at all at times when services are likely to be particularly poor, such as on bank holidays, at weekends or during the week. The English have always been proud of their capacity for dealing with difficult circumstances, for surviving despite appalling odds and for overcoming adversity. But travelling by train has become a challenge too far for many English folk. For tourists and travellers from abroad, who are probably accustomed to efficiency and reliability in such matters, the provincial train services in England are a frequent cause of despair. Trains seem to run randomly, the stations at which they stop and their final port of call seem to be the result of whim and fortune, the availability of a buffet car the subject of trade union approval and the chances of the train arriving at its nominated goal entirely dependent upon the vagaries of the weather. Trains do not run when the weather is bad (snow, rain and wind can all cause serious disruptions since health and safety regulations and staff directives mean that it will be considered unsafe to run a train when there could well be snowflakes or drops of water on the track) and they do not run when the weather is good (sunshine can cause the metal used in the construction of English rails to alter their size and shape and although this does not appear to be a problem which affects train services in other countries, it is, in England, a major source of disruption).

Local bus services are suitable only for people who want to travel to a destination within 20 miles of their chosen objective at 6 a.m. on the second Wednesday of alternate months and who want to return at 4.30 p.m. or thereabouts on occasional Mondays when there is no public holiday, and when there happens to be a driver available.

And, of course, as I have already explained, travelling by private motor car is frustratingly slow and controlled by a bewildering consortium of policemen and campaigners who believe, with a fervour bordering on religious fanaticism, that we would all be better off if everyone (other than the police and the campaigners, of course) parked their cars in their garages, put the axles up on bricks and stayed at home.

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We took a rather meandering route to Hereford because we wanted to go through Hampton Bishop, solely because we wanted to take a look at a pub called The Bunch of Carrots which resides in the centre of the village. We've been collecting odd pub names for some time and we wanted to be able to add The Bunch of Carrots to our list of favourites.

The pub's name is allegedly derived from a nearby curiously shaped rock which is only visible when the river water is low.

Most English pubs have pretty dull and unoriginal names (the most popular pub names in England are Red Lion, Royal Oak, Railway, Crown, White Hart, New Inn, Bell, Swan, Plough, King's Head, King's Arms and White Horse) but there are plenty of odd names around if you're prepared to look. Our top dozen English pub names are:

The Flying Handbag (Blackpool)
The Jolly Taxpayer (Plymouth)
Gay Dog Inn (in Earls Croome, Worcestershire)
Goat and Tricycle (Bournemouth)
Bucket of Blood (Cornwall)
Bishop's Finger (Canterbury)
Nobody Inn (Doddiscombsleigh, Devon)
Ferret and Radiator (Dawlish)
The Roaring Donkey (Swindon)
The Who'd a Thowt It (Middleton, Manchester)
Flying Saucer (Gillingham)
The Bunch of Carrots (Hampton Bishop, Hereford)

* * *

The very fact that the city of Hereford lies well off the beaten track was one of its main attractions for us. We had, from the start of our journey, had a feeling that the most potent pockets of Englishness would almost certainly lie well away from more obvious centres of civilisation. Towns, villages and small cities which are hidden away will not yet have been affected by the influx of foreign-born citizens which has changed much of the rest of the country. Or so we thought.

In a way we were wrong in that assumption for within five minutes of arriving in the city we met a customer in a newsagent's shop who told us that Herefordshire Council had decided to start recruiting social workers from Romania and Spain. I confess that I was rather surprised at this piece of news, which was later confirmed by the local Labour party, whose representative seemed delighted and to regard the move as a great development for everyone concerned. I would have thought that social workers really needed to have a close understanding of local culture and customs (not to mention regulations and responsibilities) as well as a better understanding of idiomatic English than is usually found among citizens of those two countries.

It does seem, however, that the English authorities everywhere are very eager to recruit staff from abroad. I strongly suspect this is all part of the EU's plan to break down national boundaries and to speed up the demise of England as a cultural entity.

On the same day that we learned about the plan to import foreign made social workers, I discovered that NHS trusts had spent hundreds of thousands of pounds sending recruitment teams into foreign countries. Once again Spain, with its sunshine and long sandy beaches, seems a surprising destination, but one which is undoubtedly quite pleasant for those in the recruitment parties. Teams of up to nine people have been flying out and staying in five star hotels. Sadly, the expensive recruitment trips haven't always been successful. Some of the recruitment teams have failed to entice any nurses at all to come to work in the NHS.

It's difficult to blame foreign workers for not being enticed. The NHS, for all the enthusiasm of its blind supporters, is moribund and if it were a dog it would be considered kind to put it to sleep permanently. One problem is that the NHS is an administrative nightmare, with more managers than nurses, but another is that the demand for NHS services is infinite whereas resources are, sadly, very finite. The result is that pressure groups and lobbyists decide where the available money is spent. Making things even worse is the fact that the General Medical Council's absurd revalidation system means that when English GPs retire they are no longer allowed to work as locums or stand in for colleagues who are sick or on holiday. The result of this crazy policy is that hospitals, which are besieged by patients presenting with problems which really ought to be dealt with by a GP, are having to import doctors who speak little or no English. One NHS hospital recently had to pay a doctor £3,200 to work a single shift.

* * *

In order to avoid a massive queue in the newsagent (there were so many people waiting to be served that at first we thought we had got ourselves mixed up with some sort of demonstration), we took our purchases (three local newspapers, two national newspapers, a fistful of magazines, two chocolate bars and two bottled drinks) to one of the ubiquitous self-service tills. These have pretty well replaced counter assistants in many shops these days. I hate them (mainly because they put people out of work) but if we think these damned things are bad then we should be aware that we have a long way to go in this direction. The Japanese, for example, are now using robots (some of which look very much like real people) in the service industries. A robot called Nao, who is working in branches of a Japanese bank, has sensors which respond to customers' facial expressions and tone of voice. (Come to think of it, this is probably rather more than the real life tellers in most branches my English bank can manage.) A second robot called Pepper is being used to sell mobile phones and coffee machines. And a hotel in Nagasaki is using smiling receptionists who look very much like real young women but are, in fact, multilingual robots designed to look like people.

The internet has destroyed many small businesses; robots will destroy many jobs.

I dislike this widespread determination to replace people with machines but am often accused of wanting to live in the past and of looking behind me through rose-coloured spectacles. Naturally, I don't think that's true at all. I believe that things were definitely better for everyone when the service industries involved people. The changes, which seem to be taking place at the speed of light, mean that a growing number of people now either work part time or are on employment contracts which bear an uncanny resemblance to those which operated in the days of On the Waterfront.

Many years ago, I wrote a science fiction story about a future world in which we all had one day of work in our lives. In my story, we prepared ourselves for our big day, turned up for our one day of glorious employment, and then spent the rest of our lives retired and reminiscing. It seems to me that reality is catching up with my fiction. More and more people are now becoming self-employed, not through choice but through necessity, and many are not well suited to the life of the freelance; they prefer the security and framework of traditional employment.

Sadly, most of those who choose self-employment want to be website designers or photographers because those jobs sound rather fun and romantic, and because have a certificate or even a degree in website design or photography they assume they will find fame and fortune waiting for them. They are invariably disappointed. They would be far better off training as sweeps or plumbers for those are skills for which there will always be a demand. You can't sweep a chimney with a website and Amazon doesn't yet solve leaky taps from afar.

Of the two trades, I would recommend chimney sweeping to the young and ambitious. As the oil continues to run out and energy costs continue to soar, so more and more families will rely for their heat and hot water on log burning stoves and stoves which create heat out of rubbish. The demand for men and women prepared to get their hands dirty sweeping chimneys will soar. The Princess and I know one sweep who regularly cleans 60 chimneys a day and charges £40 a time to do so. He always has more work than he can manage. He ends the day with blackened hands, and smelling of soot, but he's his own boss, none of his customers dares be rude to him and he earns more than most highly paid barristers or medical consultants.

* * *

The city of Hereford was buzzing with several strange stories when we arrived.

The big story concerned a middle-aged man who had popped into a local supermarket with a torch clipped to his belt. The torch was in full view. Personally, I feel that it's a good idea to carry a torch with you these days and I never go out after dark without one. Now that councils are shutting off the street lights as soon as it gets dark you need something to light your way between the potholes, wheelie bins and pavement refuse.

But in Hereford, the locals have clearly taken the Government's warnings about terrorism to heart. Perhaps it's that SAS base parked just up the road. Anyway, some short-sighted busybody who'd probably spent too much time watching Jason Bourne movies, mistook the torch for a metal baton (or, for all I know, a rocket launcher) and called the police.

The police, who as a breed these days don't usually have the time to respond when taxpaying citizens are being murdered or robbed, found the time to respond to this possible breach of modern etiquette. They hurried over to the store to question the man. He was, not unnaturally, rather upset about the whole thing. I think I would have been. Imagine: you wander to the shops, with a torch neatly clipped to your belt in order to light the way home. You are being careful, as a cautious citizen should be, to make sure that you don't fall into a pothole the size of one of the caves in Cheddar. And then, without warning, you are confronted by policemen who think you're about to start World War III with a torch or, at the very least, hold up the supermarket's delicatessen counter and demand free salami.

The man with the torch then made the mistake of insulting the policemen. Oh dear. I don't know what he said because the local newspaper didn't report the details but, being policemen, the officers didn't like this one little bit and so they arrested the luckless man for being in possession of a weapon, although by now they had presumably discovered that all he actually had was a torch which could, I suppose, be a weapon in some circumstances. For instance, even if it wasn't big enough to be used as a club you could shine a torch in someone's eyes and annoy them quite a lot. But then most things could be a weapon if you wanted them to be. If I were properly trained in unarmed combat I could probably kill you with a comb, if I had one. James Bond or Jason Bourne could definitely kill you stone dead if they had a cheap pen or a hairgrip.

There was then a struggle at the inevitable end of which the policemen, wrestled the man to the ground and handcuffed him.

Instead of ending with everyone concerned apologising to one another and agreeing that things had got out of hand, the man with the torch was duly taken to court where he was given a conditional discharge for six months and ordered to pay £85 costs and a £15 victim surcharge, though to be honest there are probably some who might agree with me and think that the unfortunate man with the torch was the victim and that he should have been given £15 as compensation.

As the man with the conditional discharge left the court, he asked when he would get his torch back which I thought that was a very English thing to do. You can't imagine a German expecting to get his torch back, can you?

Actually, I suppose the hapless torch owner ought to be grateful. A few years ago, the police shot a Scotsman who was carrying a loose chair leg in a plastic bag. He had just picked up the chair leg from his brother, who had repaired it earlier in the day. As the man with the chair leg wandered home from the pub he was challenged from behind by armed policemen who had received an entirely misleading tip off that he had an Irish accent and was carrying a weapon. As the Scotsman with the chair leg turned to respond to the challenge, the policemen, who were 15 feet away, shot him dead. The armed policemen claimed that they were acting in self-defence. And that was that, as it always is in England these days.

So I suppose our torch-carrying friend in Hereford can regard himself as having got away lightly.

* * *

The other big news in the area was that the town of Leominster, just up the road from Hereford, is looking for applicants for three new official appointments: a fish-taster, a bread-weigher and an ale-taster.

Back in the 16th and 17th centuries, Leominster employed professionals in these positions. It was their collective responsibility to ensure that the food and drink sold in the town was safe to eat and, in the case of the bread, that it weighed what it was supposed to weigh. They were, I suppose, officials who combined the activities of health and safety operatives and trading standards officials.

Now, after a rather lengthy interregnum, the Town Council in Leominster has decided to reintroduce these positions and is advertising for applicants. The town won't be alone. Other English towns, such as Ashburton in Devon and Alcester in Warwickshire, still have their tasters.

The Council in Leominster is, I'm pleased to say, taking all this seriously and hopes that the new appointees will 'involve themselves' with local stall holders and public houses. There has, as yet, been no mention of whether or not the tasters will be entitled to demand free samples of fish, bread and ale in order to taste them.

* * *

Once we'd found and settled into our hotel we removed our new microwave oven from its box for the second time. We had no plans to use it (we had nothing to cook in it) but we wanted to see if we could work out how to open the front door so that we would be able to use it when we were in a position to do so.

The Princess, who is much better at most things than I am, and infinitely better at working out how to make things work, eventually found that if she pressed a piece of the fascia underneath the control buttons the door would open. I decided that the person who designed the microwave was probably someone with a wicked sense of humour, whose ancestors probably designed priest holes and secret passageways for the owners of large country homes. Once we had the front door open we were able to pick out the instruction manual.

* * *

The next morning we set off for Hereford Cathedral which is, of course, the reason Hereford can call itself a city rather than a town. It was, for many years, legal for an Englishman to shoot Welshmen on Sundays in the quadrangle of Hereford Cathedral, as long as he did so using a bow and arrow. Curiously, there also used to be a law which made it legal to shoot Scotsmen with a bow and arrow in the city of York – though only if the shooting were done after dark and within the city walls.

Archery plays a bigger part in English history than most people realise. The best-known hand gesture in the world – a V sign formed with the aid of the middle finger and forefinger – was first used by English archers at the battle of Agincourt in 1415. The English waved the fingers to show they still had their two bow fingers and could, therefore, still fire arrows at the enemy. They did this because they knew that if English archers were captured by the French the dastardly Froggies would cut off those two fingers to prevent the archers using a bow and arrow again.

Hereford Cathedral is famous worldwide as the home of the Mappa Mundi and the famous chained library.

The Mappa Mundi is the largest surviving medieval world map in existence and is one of the most breathtakingly beautiful artefacts I have ever seen. It shows how 13th century scholars saw the world in both spiritual and geographical terms and is drawn on a single sheet of calf skin (otherwise known as vellum).

The creator of the map (Richard of Haldingham or Lafford) superimposed drawings representing the history of man and the wonders of nature onto the continents. There are around 500 drawings and these include representations of 420 cities and towns, 15 biblical events and 33 animals, plants and mythical creatures. There are also eight pictures representing classical mythology and 32 images of the people of the world.

The nearby chained library contains manuscripts which date back to the 8th century. The books in the library are, as you might suspect from the library's name, attached to the bookshelves by strong metal chains so that it is impossible to remove the book far from where it is stored. If you were a learned monk and wanted to read or consult a book, you sat down at one of the nearby desks, took out the volume you wanted to look at, and read it there and then. Thieves were, it seems, just as big a problem for 8th century librarians as they are today.

To my astonishment I discovered that the Cathedral in Hereford is also home to two of England's most important Magna Carta treasures, but that both items have for years been kept hidden and away from the public eye.

When we were in the city, the Cathedral was advertising an exhibition of its treasures, organised to celebrate the 800th anniversary of the sealing of the Magna Carta by King John at Runnymede. I was flabbergasted to discover that the exhibition only seems to be taking place because the Cathedral has received a grant of £6,000 to buy a case in which to display the document.

Hereford's copy of the Magna Carta is the finest surviving 1217 edition and it contains significant revisions to the original charter which was issued in 1215. The 1217 edition of the Magna Carta was issued by Henry III, John's son and is the 'official' text to which we refer when we talk about the Magna Carta. The other important item stored in Hereford is the sole surviving copy of something called the 'Kings Writ'; a letter which was issued by King John in 1215 and sent to royal officials across England after he had signed the original Magna Carta. The letter is significant because it instructs recipients to ensure that the terms of the charter are made known publicly and are sworn to and kept by all those in authority.

A short-haired woman in jeans and a plaid shirt wondered loudly why these two items were not on permanent display. She had an unusually large head but, unfortunately, it seemed to be rather like an Easter egg in that it seemed to be hollow inside. She spoke loudly in italics with occasional forays into capital letters. However, she did have a good point. The Magna Carta and its accompaniments are a vital part of England's history; they belong, in spirit at least, not to the Cathedral but to the people of England and they are, in effect, the English constitution.

Sadly, of course, our membership of the European Union has made the Magna Carta politically out-of-date and irrelevant, but the documents should nevertheless be available to be seen by all those citizens and tourists interested in England's past. I suspect that the Cathedral could have easily paid for the upkeep of a suitable display case by charging admission fees. (I doubt if the Lottery Fund, which might be expected to take an interest, would contribute a penny to anything so directly related to England's culture and history. The very mention of England on an application form would ensure that the form was taken directly to the nearest shredder.) Was it really not possible to find a local benefactor prepared to stump up £6,000 for a display case? Has the nation sunk so low that there was no public body prepared to help the enormously rich Church of England buy a display case for one of the nation's most vital treasures?

I would have happily put up the £6,000 for a ten per cent royalty on the fees charged to visitors.

Chapter Seven
Stratford-upon-Avon

If you were planning a sensible journey around England you would not head west to Hereford and then come back east to Stratford-upon-Avon. But ours was not a sensible journey. We were looking for England and the English, and as we drove out of Hereford it occurred to the Princess that we could not possibly miss Stratford-upon-Avon from our itinerary.

Today, the town where William Shakespeare was born is the most visited place in England. We were keen to see how the town, and the townsfolk, were coping with an invasion which has been steadily increasing for decades. And so we drove across country to the famous town upon the river Avon.

As we drove, I could not help thinking that England must surely have more road signs than any other country on the planet.

It is well known that England's rubber lane marking cone industry has been flourishing for decades, but the road sign industry has exploded too. Sitting at the traffic lights at one clearly malfunctioning roundabout, I had counted 17 road signs by the time the lights turned green and the impatient beeping from behind told me that I had to move on. I had no time at all to count more signs because the moment the lights turned amber the impatient driver behind started to toot his horn. Impatience is, sadly, a common new phenomenon in England.

It was impossible to learn anything useful from the signs, or to obey the demands and exhortations, because there were, quite simply, too many of them. To make matters worse, most of the signs contained several pieces of information.

The answer to our question about how Stratford-upon-Avon is doing is that it is doing very well, thank you very much for asking. It is coping with the daily flood of visitors with surprising enthusiasm and the town is tidy, bright and welcoming. There is ample car parking and a welcome absence of signs telling visitors that they must not do this or that. Instead of festooning the streets and grassy areas with notices warning visitors of the penalties for dropping litter, there are plenty of rubbish bins and, as a result, the town is clean and the streets and riverside grassland areas are almost completely free of unwanted wrappers and discarded soft drink bottles. There's a clear lesson there for other English towns.

The last time I visited Stratford upon Avon, a few decades ago, the town used to suffer tourists rather than welcome them. Coaches full of foreign tourists would arrive. The tourists would take photographs of the house where Shakespeare was born, Anne Hathaway's cottage and the awful theatre building, which, despite having been tarted up, is still so ugly that I can never quite make up my mind whether it reminds me of a power station or an old mill factory. The tourists would admire the swans on the river. They might pop into a crowded local pub for a pint and a ploughman's lunch. They would then get back onto their coaches and go somewhere else and would remember their visit to Stratford as a chore; an important box to be ticked on their trip to England. They would leave very little of their money behind them. The town, and the townsfolk, seemed to regard tourists as a bad-tempered gardener might regard a squadron of bees: they were there, and they could not be ignored, but, hopefully, they would soon leave and there was no need to change the garden to accommodate their presence.

Things have changed. Oh, how they have changed.

Stratford seems to have decided that since the tourists are clearly never going to stop coming then the townsfolk might as well take advantage of them – exploiting them and their wallets in the nicest possible way. And it is definitely done in the nicest possible way. There are plenty of congenial cafés and restaurants and a good many small, independent shops catering for the tourist looking for a decent souvenir which doesn't necessarily have Stratford-upon-Avon emblazoned upon it and isn't emblazoned with a picture of the bearded bard. There's a teddy bear shop, a toy shop and the very best Christmas shop we've ever seen.

One local shopkeeper told us that he knew of people planning to open shops selling dolls house furniture, radio controlled planes and cars and vintage clothing. He said he'd heard of a local woman planning to open a tie shop which she intended to call Bangkok. Sadly, he had to explain to me that she'd chosen the name Bangkok because Bangkok is the capital of Thailand and the name of the country sounds like Tieland. I do suspect that if you have to explain the name of your shop to all your customers you might be wise to choose another name. Like, perhaps, Tieland.

He also claimed he had heard of a former banker who was planning to open an undertaking business called 'Hymns and Hearse'. When I looked at him aghast he pulled a face and shrugged his shoulders. 'No one ever went broke through underestimating the taste of the public,' he reminded me.

We spoke to a former actor, now a successful shopkeeper who told us that he was thoroughly enjoying his new life. He said he regarded his customers as an audience and that when he opened up his shop in a morning he thought of himself as going on stage.

'Towards the end of my career as an actor,' he said, 'I began to feel rather angry and resentful. I got fed up with reading people suggest that if you work hard and want to succeed then you will succeed. That's complete and utter bullshit. You can work as hard as you like, and be desperate to succeed, but the chances are that you won't get where you want to be and your dreams will never be any more than that – dreams. I loathed actors who were successful and who said that their success was all down to hard work, talent and determination. What bollocks. Some actors succeed because they know the right people, or are related to the right people, but most succeed solely because they happened to be in the right place at the right time, which is also known as being lucky.'

'Today,' he said with a genuine smile, 'I feel that I am in control of my own destiny. I try to make sure that the things I have for sale are the things people want to buy. And I try to make the whole experience a pleasant one. And it's working.'

In Stratford, even the traditional, bog standard souvenir shops seem to have been designed and decorated imaginatively and rather whimsically. There must be fewer empty shop premises in Stratford than anywhere else in England. And surprisingly few of the occupied shops are run by charities; most are real shops, run by real people selling real products.

The shop owners have resisted the temptation to cram too many counters into their shops, too. I like that.

These days the big chain stores are run by bean counters who regard every square foot of space that isn't piled high with stock as wasted space; they have made their aisles so narrow that whenever I visit shops such as W.H.Smith I end up walking sideways in order to try to avoid sending too many displays tumbling to the ground. (I'm sorry to say that I rarely seem to succeed in this endeavour. Every time I leave a branch of Smith's I leave behind me clear signs of display carnage. The shops look as though two randy bull terriers have been fighting over a miniature poodle.)

Most important of all, I don't think I've ever met such welcoming and gracious shop keepers as we found in Stratford-upon-Avon. It's always a pleasure to spend money in a shop where the person behind the counter accepts your notes with a smile and a word or two of welcome, rather than a scowl and a surly grunt.

Sadly, the quality of the customers didn't quite live up to expectations.

In one store, we watched in astonishment as a middle-aged gent in what he would have probably described as a natty suit and an equally natty hat (by which I mean they looked as if they had been made from a checked material designed by a colour blind five-year-old) walked right to the front of the queue as though he were a tax inspector or someone from the council. In fact it wasn't so much a walk as a strut and on reflection the suit would have been perfectly acceptable as a stage costume for a cheap country bookie in a 19th century melodrama.

'Excuse me,' I said softly, though loud enough for him to hear, 'but there is a queue.'

The man looked down his nose at me, and looked at the line of people waiting to be served as though he hadn't noticed them until that moment. 'How very English,' he sneered.

And yes, I suppose it was a very English thing to say.

Manners have always been the one thing the English have been proud of. We may be renowned internationally for our dodgy plumbing and our stodgy food but we are also renowned for our good manners. We may not know how to cook food but we damned well know how to hold a knife and fork. It is rather depressing when even the middle-aged and the elderly lose their manners. If the citizens over 50 don't understand how to behave in a civilised community, and don't care about setting a good example, how can we possibly expect our children to behave decently?

We used to live in a world ruled not by rules, regulations, obligations and expectations but by responsibilities.

However, now that we have so many obligations forced upon us by the State, and by the demands of the politically correct battalions marching up and down the social media, we have grown less caring about our personal responsibilities.

And as traditional responsibilities have been forgotten, shelved along with antimacassars and doilies, so too have loyalties, respect, common sense and plain old-fashioned good manners. It is surprisingly common these days for workmen to make appointments and then cancel them simply because they've been offered something better. Not only does that sort of attitude show no respect for the customer, but to me it also seems to show a surprising lack of self-respect.

Individuals who are kind, courteous and respectful are, too often, regarded as weak and easy to bully.

I realise that I may be regarded as quaint, old-fashioned and even eccentric for expressing such a view, but hopefully I have reached an age at which I might be forgiven for sharing such a view.

* * *

As much as I liked the place, I wouldn't like to live in Stratford-upon-Avon (at the height of the tourist season, a trip into town to do a little shopping, or to visit the bank would surely be an absolute nightmare) but even for those who don't have theatre tickets, and who have already 'done' Shakespeare's house and Anne Hathaway's cottage, it's now an excellent place to spend a day. There truly is something for everyone.

We even watched a stern-faced woman having her photograph taken next to a statue of Lady Macbeth. When the camera had clicked, the woman looked up admiringly at a woman who was clearly her role model in life. Or maybe she didn't know her Shakespeare and merely imagined that the woman was wringing out an imaginary wet towel.

And for everyone who likes butterflies (and to be honest I would be worried about anyone who doesn't) the butterfly farm at Stratford-upon-Avon is an absolute delight.

The Princess and I have visited many English butterfly houses and the one in Stratford has to be the best. In addition to a plethora of beautiful and exotic butterflies, the butterfly house contains around 200 beautiful quail which wander around visitors' feet.

We watched, in desperation, as one bird struggled to keep her three eggs from rolling out of her nest. Eventually, she gave up and walked away. We wanted to help her but knew that if we touched the eggs she would no longer have anything to do with them.

Since we were visiting outside the holiday season, and were lucky enough not to visit on a day patronised by a school party, the butterfly house was quiet. There was, however, one small girl, five or six-years-old, who was proudly dressed as Snow White, in a beautiful Disneyland dress. She wandered about among the butterflies, as proud as any genuine Princess. Why don't more parents allow their children to dress in fun clothes when they go out for the day?

In the inevitable, and well-stocked shop, a small boy stood at the counter confused and disappointed because the assistant had gently pointed out that he was 50 pence short of the £2.50 he needed in order to purchase the toy he had chosen. I desperately wanted to slide the 50 pence across the counter but did not dare. In our toxic, politically correct world, such an action would have led to immediate disaster. Someone with a camera phone and an overworked imagination would have been oh so keen to report me to the appropriate authorities. Shame on us all.

Before we left the town, we bought a brown wholemeal loaf from a small shop in the high street and enjoyed a glorious twenty minutes feeding the swans and the ducks. Is there any more peaceful, satisfying way to spend a third of an hour? Best of all, there were no notices warning us that it was illegal to feed the birds.

* * *

Everywhere we went, as we travelled around England, we bought a copy of the local paper. It is the easiest and quickest way to find out what is happening in a town. In my experience, very little of the best news, the really good local stuff, gets onto the paper's website. You have to buy the paper and look at the inside pages.

In an Evesham paper, for example, we read that a van had been searched by thieves but that nothing had been stolen. The news story ended with a request that anyone with information about the fact that nothing had been stolen from the van should telephone the police. The newspaper didn't give any details of the van concerned and so, presumably, news of any old van from which nothing has been stolen would do just as well.

I was fascinated by this story. Why would anyone report to the police that nothing had been stolen from their van? Why would a newspaper print the story about someone not stealing anything from a van? Why would the police be interested? I have no idea. Perhaps the police in Evesham are bored with sitting around their station house playing cards. I don't know. Perhaps the police are looking for some excitement. Maybe someone at MI5 has warned police forces to watch out for terrorists who don't steal from vans. Maybe no one in Evesham wanders around carrying a torch and so the police feel that they have to look harder to find things to do.

I know of loads of vans which have not had anything stolen from them. I will report all these straight away. I will, I think, also telephone them to report that neither my shoes nor my hat has been taken, and ask them to look into these mysteries as soon as practicable. Hopefully, they will be able to start these enquiries when they've finished looking into the mysterious case of the van from which nothing was stolen.

Actually, to my surprise I discovered that these days it is surprisingly common for local papers to report on things that haven't happened.

For example, in February, the important sounding *Wiltshire and Gloucestershire Standard* announced that Cotswold District Council had reported that bin collections in the region had 'not been disrupted by the weather so far this winter'. The paper also reported that the Cotswold District Council had warned people to dress warmly and wear non-slip shoes if the weather turned bad – which it hadn't.

Those are not the sort of news items you clip out or rush around to tell the neighbours. But once newspapers start reporting on things that haven't happened the sky really is the limit.

'Chipping Sodbury not invaded by Martians'. 'Moreton on Marsh has not disappeared down imaginary sink hole'.

‘No Dragons seen in northern Wiltshire’. Where can it possibly all end?

* * *

Sadly, we read a long story about plans for workmen to take saws and axes to an avenue of trees in the centre of Pershore.

The London plane trees which grow there, and which seem to be widely considered eminently suitable for decorating the footpaths of towns and cities in other countries, are either going to be removed completely or pollarded because they have been accused of damaging footpaths and blocking light from neighbouring properties. There are strong suggestions that the trees do this wilfully and without any consideration for pedestrians or residents. The trees have offered no defence. I wonder if the council’s tree officers (they are bound to have a number of these since one of the first things any new council does is to appoint a whole forest of tree officers) know that the streets in Paris are lined with massive London plane trees which are regarded as a very welcome addition to the city.

The French manage their trees very well. Trees in Paris are all fitted with smart, metal root guards which allow water to drain into the soil and give the roots a little room to spread. There would be rioting in the streets if there were to be so much as a suggestion that the city’s trees be attacked with saw or blade.

The English, who really ought to know better, insist on laying concrete slabs, Tarmacadam or some other impervious substance right up to the bole of the tree. As they grow, the trees inevitably force their roots up through the concrete or the Tarmacadam as they search for water. This causes a good deal of unsightly damage and creates serious problems for pedestrians (particularly the ones who go out at night and who have had their torches confiscated by the police).

This is one of the few areas of modern living where there is no doubt that the English could learn something from the French.

The *Chippenham Gazette and Herald* reported that the number of wild boar roaming around in North Wiltshire will be assessed after a local MP nearly collided with one while driving in the area. The one thing you don’t want to do if you are a wild boar is to nearly collide with a car being driven by an MP.

And a copy of the *Gloucester Citizen* which we purchased, reported that the council has pledged to spend £1,000 of taxpayers’ money to light up dark streets at night. A nice gesture but I wonder how many lamp posts you can erect (and light) for a measly £1,000.

The *Gloucester Citizen*, reminding us of all the things that can go wrong when we get out of our comfy armchairs and turn off our television sets, reported that after a row between neighbours, a man had run out into his street in Gloucester while waving a mallet and wearing nothing but a towel. The man is alleged to have shouted abuse and apparently became agitated after his towel fell off leaving him naked, with only the mallet for protection. When the police were called, the man told them that he would have punched the female neighbour whom he had threatened, but that he would not have attacked her with the hammer. He was ordered to pay costs and undergo a 30 day training programme. Maybe the programme would include training on how to tie a towel in such a way as to ensure that it does not fall down.

* * *

I think it’s sad that local newspapers are dying.

Having survived the cinema, the wireless and the television, they are being killed, inevitably, by the World Wide Web, working in conjunction with our laptops, our pad thingies and our not-as-smart-as-they-think-they-are telephones.

When the local newspapers are gone and forgotten it will be impossible to read all those lovely stories with which local newspapers have regaled us for centuries. You don’t hear stories such as the ones I’ve described above on television or radio and you probably won’t find them on the wretched Internet. (As an aside, I should point out that when I have a free moment I intend to start a campaign to have the two words ‘wretched’ and ‘internet’ linked with a compulsory hyphen.)

Chapter Eight
Ashbourne and Tideswell

Asbourne lies at the bottom end of the Peak District, one of England's glorious national parks, and if you turn off your satellite navigation system and avoid the awful motorway heading north then the small town of Ashbourne is a sort of unofficial gateway to the dales and moorland.

It is only when he or she drives out onto the surrounding moors that the traveller from the south realises just how bleak life can be in this part of Derbyshire.

We spoke to one local resident who told us that just three years ago the temperature around Ashbourne fell to minus 20 degrees for two weeks. The snow was so deep that the roads were impassable and she couldn't get out of her house to go to work. She couldn't afford to heat her home during the daytime, so she spent the fortnight wrapped in blankets, watching television and drinking endless cups of hot tea. 'The house was just a degree or so above freezing,' she told us. 'I shivered so much that although I spent two weeks lying on the sofa I still managed to lose a stone.' This, let me remind you, was not in Canada, Alaska or even in the far north of Scotland. It was in England.

Although she had been brought up in the Peak District, and was accustomed to the harsh winters, she had clearly been scarred by this experience.

'We're hardly ever mentioned on the news,' she said sadly. 'If the weather is chilly down in London and the South East you can guarantee that it will be the lead item on the news. But lots of villages in Derbyshire were cut off for weeks and we didn't rate a mention. They mention Scotland a good deal, of course, but our weather here can be just as bad as it is up there.'

Near Ashbourne we stopped at a pleasant and rather old-fashioned pub and had a couple of hot drinks to keep us warm. The pub had a splendid log fire burning.

There are said to have been pubs in England since the Bronze Age, though I doubt if you'd have been able to order a chicken in the basket luncheon back then. Travellers doubtless used to stop at early hostelries for a peck of pork scratchings and a firkin of mead, and such glories were doubtless a welcome delight for salesmen when they were tired and thirsty after a long day on the road flogging the latest bronze doodads. And locals would have found such modest oases of comfort and sustenance a useful place to meet and discuss important issues of the day such as the price of bronze or a new technique for making arrow heads.

The early pubs were a useful addition to England's social fabric. But by the 18th century, alcoholism had become a major problem in the country. This was largely due to the introduction of gin which was cheap and readily available in gin shops. By 1740, drinkers were getting through six times as much gin as beer and the problems of English alcoholism were illustrated by William Hogarth in a famous series of engravings entitled *Beer Street and Gin Lane*. By the early 1800s, there were so many gin houses (or gin palaces as they were sometimes known) that alcoholism and crime had become serious national problems. The Government's response was to introduce the Beer Act of 1830. The plan was to persuade drinkers to switch from gin to beer by dramatically increasing the number of available places where beer could be bought. At the time, medical experts still thought that beer was both nutritious and harmless. Young children were often given 'small beer' (a relatively low alcohol content drink) because it was considered safer for them to drink beer than to drink water. In the view of the fact that the water was pretty lethal this was probably not as daft an idea as it now sounds.

Under the Act of 1830, any householder could pay a one off fee of two guineas for a licence to sell beer in his or her own home. The licence even entitled householders to brew their own beer. The beer house proprietors were, however, only allowed to sell beer and if they were caught selling spirits or wine they were fined and ordered to shut down.

The landlords and landladies running these beer houses made huge amounts of money. They would start by selling beer in the front parlour and then, when they'd made a little profit, they would buy the house next door to live in and turn every room in their old house into a bar, a snug, a saloon or a lounge.

In the first year after the Beer Act came into operation, just 400 beer houses were opened. But within eight years there were 46,000 beer houses across England. The licence was cheap to buy and the profits were amazing. In some towns, nearly every other house was a 'beer house'.

By 1869, the Government realised that it had made a mistake because instead of being drunk on gin, people were now drunk on beer. The response was to introduce new, stricter licensing laws. But, surprise surprise, the politicians didn't have the courage to tackle the problem properly and beer houses which were already in existence were allowed to continue. Moreover, a good many of them applied for full licences so that they could sell wine and spirits in addition to beer.

All this explains why so many towns have pubs situated right in the middle of a street of ordinary looking houses. The pubs which are so situated probably began their lives as 'beer houses' and were turned into fully-fledged public houses as the years went by.

Most decent pubs, the ones which will survive in the new England, serve good food but don't try to do anything too fancy. Neither the locals nor travellers passing through want 'pretty' food; they all invariably prefer food that tastes good, doesn't cause indigestion and arrives on plates large enough to contain a decent helping.

Inevitably, perhaps, most good pubs have some quirk or speciality that enables them to stand out from the competition. The landlord at the pub where we stopped served a powerful variety of English mustard made locally from a traditional blend of white and brown mustard seeds. He told us with great pride that a car full of French tourists had told him that they preferred real, hot English mustard to anything made in their own country. Since the French take everything connected with food very seriously, and since there are more varieties of French mustard than you shake a sausage at, we agreed that was a compliment worth taking seriously.

'Proper, old-fashioned English cooking is just as good as anything the fancy French chefs can produce,' insisted the landlord, who went on to remind us that it was an Englishman, not a Frenchman, who invented champagne. It was Christopher Merrett, born in the cider producing West Country in 1614, who first created bubbly wine and he did it decades before the Benedictine monk Dom Perignon, who is usually given the credit for having invented champagne.

Merret used techniques from the cider industry to control the second fermentation process which makes wine fizzy. It was back in 1662 that Merrett gave a scientific paper to the Royal Society in London in which he described how adding vast amounts of sugar and molasses to wine made it taste 'brisk and sparkling'. It was also Merrett who invented the stronger glass which is need to stop the bottle exploding when it is full of fizzy wine. In a publication entitled *The Art of Glass* he explained how bottles could be made stronger by adding iron, manganese or carbon to the molten mixture. Early French champagne makers used to describe the bottles they used as being made of 'verre Anglais' (English glass).

It wasn't until 30 years later that Dom Perignon, at the Abbey of Hautvillers at Epernay, officially started the French champagne industry.

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In the pub where we stopped, we met a chap who used to work as a tree surgeon. He had to stop climbing trees after (as he put it) attempting to cut off his left leg with a chainsaw. The injury had left him with a weak leg and a knee which had a tendency to lock up. Not something you want to happen when you're forty feet up a tree. Now he worked as a ground man, with a younger fellow doing the climbing and the cutting. He told us that in the year in which he'd been injured, five of his colleagues had suffered bad accidents involving chainsaws. And he knew of one young tree surgeon who died at the top of a tree, after having accidentally cut his own throat with his chainsaw.

I had a chainsaw myself once and after narrowly missing chopping off my own leg, I gave it away and vowed never again to buy or operate one of the damned things. It's terribly easy to become blasé when using one, but in experience they sometimes seem to have a life of their own. If they hit a knot or a hidden nail they will jump alarmingly.

Every year around 30,000 people (mostly men) suffer serious chainsaw injuries in the USA and I suspect that the figures for England are similarly horrifying. The average chainsaw injury requires well over 100 stitches – and many accidents result in lost limbs.

It has for years been possible to buy protective clothing to wear while using a chainsaw but amazingly most tree surgeons and loggers refuse to wear it.

'You can buy safety gloves and trousers which provide quite a lot of protection,' admitted the tree surgeon we spoke to. 'They aren't terribly expensive but I never liked wearing them. I always felt a bit of a sissy if I put them on. The other guys would rag anyone who turned up for work and got dressed in protective gear before starting up his chainsaw. The result is that chainsaw injuries are much higher in England than in America because people here just won't take advantage of the protection that's available.'

'Would you wear them now if you were just starting out?' I asked him

'What do you think?' he asked ruefully. 'I had to give up a job I love and take a lower wage. 'My damned knee hurts really bad in the cold weather and I can't play football with my kid.'

'Do the blokes you work with wear protective clothing?' I asked.

'Never,' replied the tree surgeon. 'They're all young and they think nothing bad will ever happen to them. I show them my knee and tell them about the bad accidents that can happen but their eyes glaze over and they don't listen.'

It was ever thus.

* * *

It is clear that Ashbourne was once a thriving market town and I can imagine that it must have been a bustling meeting place for farmers and other moorland dwellers. But things are very different today, of course.

Asbourne, like many other small English towns, seems to be fighting for survival and many of the local shops have a slightly desperate look to them. It has clearly been some time since the painters were out and about and too many shop fronts look as tired as the residents. Running a small, independent business is a hard life these days. Most businesses are battered by rules and regulations relating to staff and premises, by heavy taxes and by the internet. It's a hard life and I couldn't help wondering how many more generations will put up with the hardships. It isn't just shopkeepers who are suffering.

Several residents told us that many of the small farms in the Peak District have now been sold to people living in the nearby urban sprawls of Sheffield or Derby. The buyers use the farm houses as second homes and rent them out to holiday makers during the summer months.

Unfortunately, of course, not many people want to spend a week in the Peak District during the winter. Although the cottages and farm houses have been rebuilt and restored and equipped with central heating and double glazing and satellite television and the ubiquitous requirement, Wi-Fi, without which no one under 18 will consider getting out of the car, many are empty for most of the time; occupied only in the summer and on occasional weekends by owners and visitors who bring their supplies with them in their Range Rovers and their people carriers and so provide little or no business for local businesses. Barns which used to provide shelter for ewes during the lambing season have been converted into ugly holiday homes and even that building work is often done by teams of workmen brought in from Derby, Sheffield or Manchester. Inevitably, the local shops are suffering (and failing) and the local pubs and restaurants find it hard to manage during the long, bleak winter months.

One local shopkeeper told us that he had to close because the company which owned his premises had suddenly informed him that the rent he paid was going to double. He couldn't understand where the landlord was going to find another shopkeeper able to pay the new rent and wondered if the eventual plan might be to obtain permission to turn the shop into residential premises. 'They could sell the shop for a lot more if they sold it to someone wanting a holiday home in the village.' He remained resolutely jovial in the face of his unplanned retirement and insisted that he would not find it difficult to keep himself occupied. He told us that he had a large collection of porcelain thimbles (a collection which had been started by his mother and which he was continuing) and that he played the tambourine and tenor kazoo in a local band which had many fans in local pubs.

I got the feeling that if he made an inventory of his hobbies 'gossiping' would be fairly high up on the list. He told us that he had heard of a woman who had become a grandmother at the age of 29. 'I can imagine the conversation in that house,' he said, already laughing before the punch-line. 'Mum, can you help me with my homework?' 'No, love, I haven't finished mine yet.'

He told us with great pride about the Royal Shrovetide Football Match which has been played in Ashbourne since 1667, and which was probably popular in the town much earlier than that. (A fire destroyed the records in the 1890s.)

Shrovetide ball games have been played in England since at least the 12th century, when Henry II was King of England, and in Ashbourne the annual fixture takes place on Shrove Tuesday and Ash Wednesday. Thousands take part in a match which is pretty well a free for all, without too many rules or opportunities for whistle blowing. It is undoubtedly the oldest, largest, maddest, longest game of football anywhere in the world. The pitch is over three miles long and includes many local streets and fields and the match is played between two teams: those who were born north of the river Henmore, and who are known collectively as the Up'ards, and those who were born south of the river, who are known as the Down'ards. There doesn't appear to be any limit on the number of players. Players use a specially made, hand-painted ball which they are allowed to kick, carry or throw, but they can only score by standing in the Henmore and tapping the ball three times against a stone scoring post. Goals are rare. Many games end in draws and it is rare for either side to score a total of more than two goals in a single match.

Locals are proud of the fact that the game has been known as a 'Royal' event since the then Prince of Wales (later King Edward VIII) turned up to play in 1928. He found himself with a bloody nose for his trouble. The Prince of Wales (this time HRH Prince Charles) started the game in 2003 but wisely did so by throwing the ball into play from a raised plinth, thereby avoiding the risk of a bloody nose.

These delightful and often archaic cultural eccentricities continue for the moment but their future everywhere is under threat and their survival is increasingly doubtful for two reasons.

First, the locals who were brought up with these traditions are dying or emigrating and their replacements, particularly those who were born outside England, have no interest whatsoever in English history, culture, follies or eccentricities.

Second, the powerful combined armies of the politically correct, the European Union apparatchiks, the humourless health and safety gestapo and the police are all determined to stamp out activities which seem to them to be pointless and damaging to the State. (Damaging in that if a player breaks an ankle chasing a rolling cheese, having his shins kicked or playing a 'silly' game of football in the street he may lose time off work and require State support.)

* * *

Another Ashbourne shop keeper, one who owned her own premises and was therefore immune to rent increases, had tried to adapt to the new world of retail by selling her goods online. 'I find it very difficult,' she admitted. 'The post doesn't come until lunchtime so we have a struggle to deal with orders the day they arrive. And Royal Mail prices seem to be much higher than the prices charged in other countries. American businesses can sell their products to customers in England but the postage costs for foreign mail mean that there is no way that I can sell to their customers. Before it was sold and turned into a private company the old Royal Mail had many faults but they did leave a little something on the table for small businesses.'

She showed me details of the prices Royal Mail charges for overseas parcels and explained how it has become impossible for English business folk to make any profit when selling abroad. And she showed me details of the relatively low prices American businesses pay when they post to England. The difference was astonishing. 'By charging so much for overseas packets and parcels, Royal Mail is destroying English exports,' she said, 'And the crazy thing is that the people at Royal Mail don't seem to have worked out that when an American business sends parcels to the UK the bulk of the delivery work takes place in this country. Royal Mail has to do the sorting and the delivering and doesn't receive a penny for its efforts. It makes a nonsense of Royal Mail's pricing structure. Their high costs are absurd when you consider that stuff sent to America has to be sorted and delivered over there – at the expense of the US Postal system. Royal Mail is destroying its own business, as well as destroying the export hopes of thousands of English businesses.'

She said that because of the problems with the mail, she was selling her shop and setting up a business from home. 'I'm thinking of publishing an e-book newsletter of some kind,' she said. She seemed weary but quietly determined to continue trying to do something, even though the odds seemed to be stacked heavily against her. 'The costs of publishing an e-book newsletter are minimal and I think I can probably run the whole thing from my kitchen table. It will be a real joy not to have to deal with the Royal Mail. It was bad before they privatised it but these days things have become quite unbearable.' Her dissatisfaction with the Royal Mail was a sentiment which we heard repeated time and time again on our travels around England.

The shopkeeper's resolve, determination and adaptability are truly English and she deserves to succeed but, sad to say, determination, resolve and adaptability are no longer enough.

There is no doubt that small, independent shopkeepers everywhere are struggling. First they had to deal with the supermarkets. Small shops selling just about everything conceivable, including books and music CDs, were battered by the supermarkets which could sell bestsellers at much lower prices – and not bother at all with items which had a smaller market.

Local councils didn't help by closing down car parks, or putting up the parking prices to unbearably high levels.

And a seemingly unending barrage of tiresome rules and inexplicably confusing regulations have made life impossibly complicated and uncertain for small businesses and entrepreneurs. Many of those to whom we spoke complained that they spent so much time struggling to comply with the demands of aggressive, demanding and officious bureaucrats that they had very little time left to run their businesses, and no time at all to investigate new ideas.

And, of course, the internet continues to go from strength to strength and has, for many small businesses, delivered the coup de grace.

Today, it seems that the only small, independent shops likely to survive will be the ones which sell items which are too heavy to post, such as cans of paint or car batteries, or those items such as explosives, fireworks and body parts which are likely to be refused by carriers and are, consequently, unsuitable for sale through the internet.

* * *

When we were in the town, the local newspaper, the *Ashbourne News Telegraph*, was running a front page story about the closure of more popular local shops, situated in prime locations in the town.

The owner of the town's only toy shop, running a business which had been present in the town for nearly 30 years, said she didn't want to close but that since her landlord was increasing her rent by 40% she had no choice. She told the paper that she could not understand why her rent had increased so sharply. The town's dry cleaning store was also being closed as the owners, with a chain of 307 stores, announced that it was shutting over a third of its outlets. There had been a dry cleaning store on the same spot for over half a century.

The *Ashbourne News Telegraph* ran an optimistic editorial hoping that the stores would not stay empty for long.

‘There’s usually a charity shop, hairdresser or café waiting to move in.’ Sadly, however, I really don’t think another charity shop is much of an answer to Ashbourne’s problems. Charity shops pay no rates, expect to pay reduced or non-existent rent, pay nothing for the stuff they sell and usually expect their staff to work voluntarily so even if a charity shop is extremely successful in purely financial terms (and there is no doubt that some are) there isn’t likely to be much of a contribution to the local economy. The profits will most probably be funnelled down to London to help pay the salaries and pensions of luxuriating executives earning £150,000 a year.

And although there are today more charities than ever before, it is usually just a few select ones, the highly successful national and very commercial organisations, which we see represented in our town centres.

Whatever happened to such glorious 18th and 19th century English charities as the ‘The Society for Carrying into Effect his Majesty’s Proclamation Against Vice and Immorality’, ‘The London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews’, ‘The Forlorn Female’s Fund of Mercy’, ‘The Society of Universal Good Will’, ‘The Society for Returning Young Women to their Friends in the Country’, ‘The Institution for the Cure of Various Diseases by Bandages and Compression’, The British and Irish Ladies Society for Improving the Condition and Promoting the Industry and Welfare of the Female Peasantry in Ireland’, ‘The Magdalen Hospital for the Reception of Penitent Prostitutes’, ‘The London Society for the Encouragement of Faithful Female Servants’, ‘The Association for the Refutation of Infidel Publications’, ‘The Royal Infirmary for Sun Bathing’ and, my favourite of all charities, ‘The National Truss Society for the Relief of the Ruptured Poor’.

I couldn’t help reflecting on just how different things were down in Stratford-upon-Avon where shopkeepers seemed to be revelling in unprecedented prosperity. Maybe Ashbourne needs to find and celebrate a famous son or daughter. But then again how many Shakespeares can one small nation expect to produce?

On a brighter note, we did find a splendid teddy bear shop in Ashbourne. The proprietor makes some of the beautiful bears she sells. It is surprising how many teddy bear shops there are in England today. Towns which no longer have stationers, shoe shops, cobblers, ironmongers, dry cleaning stores, drapers, butchers, bakers or candlestick makers will nevertheless have a shop selling soft toys in general or, more likely, teddy bears in particular.

The English may be embracing modern technology, iPhones, Blackberries and so on, which enable them to conduct their relationships through e-mail, text and social media, but it seems that they still have a need for some sort of physical contact; a need to cuddle.

* * *

From Ashbourne we headed north, further into the heart of the Peak District. Once we left the main roads there seemed to be remarkably few road signs, and those which we saw, carried very little useful information. It seems that the distributors of road signs prefer to place them in clumps, on roundabouts or at busy road junctions, rather than in areas of the countryside where they might turn out to be most useful.

In and around busy town centres it is by no means unusual for a motorist to find himself faced with a couple of dozen road signs. And as I have already pointed out in this book, the motorist who dares to pause for a moment to study the available information will, within a nanosecond, be deafened by horn blowing. Drivers these days seem to be blessed with amazingly fast reaction times, but only when they are parked at traffic lights or a junction of some kind.

Passing through the northern reaches of the English Midlands, we slowly travelled around one roundabout four times as we attempted to glean enough useful information to enable us to make a decision about the direction we should take. We had to take potluck in the end because we were both getting dizzy and slightly nauseous.

After Ashbourne, which we both liked but felt was rather sad in a moribund sort of way, we visited the local resorts of Matlock and Matlock Spa but, sadly, we were not in the slightest bit impressed with either; though we were perhaps a little depressed by both and that is, I suppose, an impression of a kind.

The Peak District is full of contrasts. Parts of it are magnificent, proud and indomitable. But parts of it seem to be been beaten up by the horrors of the late 20th century and early 21st century. Matlock in particular looked dull and weary, in the way tired, provincial English towns look when they are well into their years of decline. Matlock Spa, in Victorian times a mecca for the top rank of carriage society, has become a destination for those who don’t have passports or the wherewithal to take them to Weston-Super-Mare or Ilfracombe but who are, nevertheless, searching for an opportunity to feed their money into amusement machines and one armed bandits.

It is perfectly possible to visit the Peak District without visiting either Matlock or Matlock Spa and next time we come to Derbyshire we will make sure our path does not take us through these rather sad and faded memorials to a lost world. They are too sad to see for the former glories have not faded enough to be forgotten.

We spent more time wandering aimlessly about than we might have done in any other part of the country, simply driving over the moors without any clear destination in mind.

It started to snow as we travelled around, and the snow came down so fast that we were glad to be driving in a four wheel drive vehicle. The Peak District moorland is a bleak and friendless place and not a place to be in winter if you are without shelter. We made sure that we had plenty of fuel in the tank and, in addition, carried with us heat preserving blankets, food and water. This may sound rather silly but, judging by our experience, it is perfectly possible to drive for miles without seeing any sign of another human being and the weather can change from pleasant to dangerous within minutes.

One of the best ways to see the moors at their raw and naked best is to drive in a more or less random fashion. Ignore the satellite navigation system, take no notice of finger posts and follow your inclination for an hour or so and you will have a good idea of why the Peak District is so bleak and feared in winter. On one occasion we found ourselves driving into a snow storm, with the snow being driven horizontally across the road and gathering quickly into drifts. Twenty minutes later, and a good deal lower down, we were driving in pleasant winter sunshine; with no sign of snow at all.

Most of the dry stone walls have long ago been knocked down and the large gaps, through which one could happily drive a flock of sheep, suggest that thieves have probably taken the stone to sell to gardeners in the nearest large cities, or even to market garden establishments or to builders. Good stone is much in demand and surprisingly valuable.

We were not surprised to see that there seem to be very few sheep farmers still operating on the moors. Poor pastureland and low prices for wool and lambs have combined with the relentless bad weather to pretty well put an end to that tradition. The few trees which survive are shaped so that it isn’t difficult to see the direction of the prevailing wind.

We visited Dovedale, a local beauty spot which is perhaps over-visited and were charmed by the tiny hamlet of Ilam which we came across by accident and which contains beautiful cottages in the Swiss or Black Forest style.

We were heading for the village of Tideswell, where the local church of St John the Baptist is known, rather grandly, as the ‘Cathedral of the Peak’ on the subjective and no doubt contentious grounds that it is the most perfect church in the area. I’m not quite sure how you define a church as ‘perfect’. We’d seen enough real cathedrals to be shy of a church masquerading as a cathedral so we didn’t go inside.

We were, to be honest, disappointed with the village itself which has little to recommend it other than its location on the moors. We parked, walked up and down a main street of grey cottages (a street which, I can confirm, has changed very little in half a century or more for I had an aunt who lived there and sixty years ago, as a boy, my parents and I used to visit and stay in the village), climbed back into the car and left. It is one of those places. There isn’t anything much to see and apparently nothing to do. Moreover, the attractiveness of Tideswell is today rather spoilt by the fact that a cottage in the centre of the village has ranks of those hideous looking solar panels fastened onto its roof.

I realise that solar energy is now all the rage, and is considered by some to be essential if we are to continue to enjoy our energy rich lifestyle. But surely there should be limits on where solar panels are installed? If we are going to allow folk to stick them onto cottage and house roofs wherever they may be then it won’t be long before the essence of the English countryside will have been completely ruined. Erecting hideous and noisy windmills on moorland and pastureland, and fixing equally hideous solar panels onto cottage roofs, may make good commercial sense but it doesn’t make any aesthetic sense. There have to be better ways to find the renewable energy we and our descendants will doubtless need.

Meanwhile, there seems to me to be little doubt that the power of the bureaucrats and rule-makers who favour the installation of solar panels, and the erection of windmills, far exceeds the power of the bureaucrats and rule makers who exist to protect English culture and English heritage. How long will it be before there are solar panels on the roofs of Willy Lott’s Cottage, Shakespeare’s birthplace and Windsor Castle, and neat rows of giant windmills decorating Salisbury Plain, Dartmoor and Richmond Park?

Just think how many solar panels could be fitted onto the roofs of Buckingham Palace, Westminster Abbey and the Albert Hall.

Chapter Nine
Bakewell, Eyam and Buxton

From Tideswell we headed to Bakewell; a pleasant, fairly bustling little town which, despite the inevitable presence of too many empty shops, and the impossible-to-hide sense of impending doom which prevails in most English towns these days, caters well for travellers and succeeds in giving a modest, and possibly false, impression of prosperity.

The ready availability of maps, guidebooks, waterproof jackets and sensible boots, gives a heavy clue as to the character of the visitors seen in this part of England.

In summer, Bakewell will doubtless be thronged with walkers and hikers, brightly outfitted in stout and sensible footwear, colourful kagools with heaps of pockets and lots of drawstrings and well-filled, neatly shaped rucksacks which fit so snugly and hang so well that they look as if they still contain the cardboard and paper stuffing with which they had been packed by the manufacturer. Nowhere do the modern English dress as well or as appropriately as they do when out hiking upon the moors.

In the darker winter months, however, the streets of Bakewell were neither awash with local residents nor travellers and there were few kagools or rucksacks to be seen. I was, I confess, surprised and disappointed by this. In the olden days, when men smoked pipes and women wore pinafores, the English regarded bad weather as a challenge and they would always prefer to be outside in the cold rather than tucked up in front of a roaring log fire. The log fire and hot whisky would come later, as a reward for the hardships endured. In hail, snow or storm the English would put on their best tweed jackets, with matching plus fours for the men and tweed skirts for the women, lace up stout and sensible walking shoes which had been handed down for three generations, add a tweed hat and go wandering off across the moors. A man in evening clothes would follow them, carrying chicken legs, veal and ham pies and bottles of claret in a large hamper.

Today, the English have become sensible and rather dull and European and if the weather is chilly or damp they prefer to stay indoors, turn up the central heating and watch television.

And so, in Bakewell in winter the occasional local scurries around from shop to shop, collecting essentials, posting letters and so on, while a few visitors, most of whom booked their holidays without realising why hotels and rented cottages offer such good value in the darker months, wandered around looking rather lost and trying to decide where to have another cup of tea and which confectionary to try next.

We stayed in a small, neat cottage; warm and clean and equipped with most of the comforts of home. It was a pleasure to feel welcome. Too many of those now renting out country cottages have become overwhelmed by greed and officiousness. One temporary English landlady insisted that we pay a £200 deposit (in case we broke any cups or saucers) and an extra £25 to pay for the cleaning of the cottage after we had left. Most landladies and landlords wanted us out and gone from their cottage by ten o'clock on the morning of departure; with our rubbish all sorted and neatly placed in the appropriate bins and plastic containers. Some left long, complicated folders full of instructions and commands. One boasted that the cottage we were renting was equipped with Wi-Fi but when we politely asked for the router password we were told that the router was on top of a wardrobe, that the password was on the bottom of the router and that if we wanted to use the Wi-Fi we would have to find the password for ourselves. The English have never made particularly good landlords or landladies so these problems are, perhaps, merely variations on the traditional.

But our cottage in Bakewell was delightful. And the owners were helpful and quick to sort things out when the heating stopped working and the television went on the blink. You cannot ask for more.

The town of Bakewell is unique in English culinary life in having two items named after it. Banbury has but a single pudding named in its honour: the Banbury Cake. And Bath has its very own bun, of course. But Bakewell revels in having both a Tart and a Pudding; twin glories which must put it right at the top of the International Cake Association Table for Towns and Cities. Even the Austrian capital of Vienna only has the Sacher Torte to boast of – and that doesn't even have 'Vienna' in its name.

The Bakewell Tart is a thoroughly English confection which consists of a shortcrust pastry base or case filled with a layer of jam and a sponge which is made with ground almonds (known to aficionados as frangipane). A Cherry Bakewell is a commercial variation of the traditional tart and has the frangipane covered with a layer of almond-flavoured fondant blessed with half a glace cherry. A similar tart is made in Gloucester but in the Cotswolds ground rice is added to the essential Bakewell ingredients of raspberry jam and almond essence.

A Bakewell Pudding, on the other hand, is an English dessert which consists of a flaky pastry base upon which has been placed a layer of jam and an egg and almond paste filling. There are probably as many local variations on this theme as there are local cake shops but it is generally agreed that the Pudding was first made by accident in the 1820s by a cook who was or was not working at a hostelry which might or might not have been called the White Horse Inn. (As with most such bits and pieces of social history, the only certainty is that there is no certainty.)

The cook was allegedly told to make a jam tart but, according to legend, instead of stirring the eggs and almond paste mixture into the pastry (as she might have been expected to do) she put the jam onto the pastry base and placed the almond paste on top of the jam. She was probably pleasantly tiddly at the time. When the whole thing came out of the oven, the cook found herself an unexpected heroine and her serendipitous creation became a popular dish at the inn. I can't help thinking that a good part of Bakewell's relative prosperity is probably due to its having a Tart and a Pudding of its own.

Maybe if Ashbourne had an Asbourne Bun or an Ashbourne Biscuit, or even both, it might still have a toy shop and a dry cleaning establishment.

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From Bakewell we drove to Eyam, a small and seemingly not particularly notable village which has, nevertheless, a quite extraordinary history. It is the sort of village which ought to exist only in the minds of those writing and directing the most traditional type of Hammer House of Horror films.

Eyam is famous because it is the small village which closed itself off to the world during the Black Death plague of 1665. The well-known story is simple enough. A flea arrived in the village, carried on a bundle of rags brought from London and delivered to a local tailor. When villagers started dying from the plague, the rector, William Mompesson, together with another clergyman called Thomas Stanley, prevented the disease from spreading to other parts of Derbyshire by persuading the locals to stay within the village boundary. Food and other supplies were delivered to places on the outskirts of the village and payment, in coins, was left in bowls of water, to which vinegar had been added as a disinfectant. Religious services were held not in the local church, where the plague might spread from one worshipper to another, but out in the open, in a place called Cucklet Delf. Families and lovers were divided by the quarantine for no one was allowed into the village and no one was allowed out.

By the time the villagers ended their selfless and self-imposed quarantine, the plague had killed 257 people, about a third of the population. The rector's wife, Catherine Mompesson, was among the dead. The rector had wanted to send her to safety in Sheffield before the quarantine was agreed but being a valiant woman and a loyal wife she had refused, and had insisted on staying with him.

When we arrived, we found the streets utterly deserted and I suppose that emptiness enhanced the fact that we found the village touching and rather frightening at the same time. Much of the village is as it was in the 17th century and many of the houses in the village now carry notices detailing the names of the villagers who died of the plague in those very buildings.

Physically, little has changed (except for the cars parked by the kerbside, of course) and the fact that it is possible to walk through the village and see it more or less as those brave people saw it nearly four centuries ago adds to the poignancy.

Would any community make such a deliberate sacrifice today? It's nice to think so but somehow I rather doubt it. There would, I fear, be a few families who would insist on running away, whatever the risk that they might be transporting the disease to other villages. Not long ago I read about a lawyer who had deliberately got onto an aeroplane to fly home despite the fact that he had a drug-resistant form of tuberculosis and had been told that it could be deadly to others if he travelled.

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Today, every summer, the villagers of Eyam remember the heroism of their forebears by a ceremonial celebration of the local wells. Teams of workers dress wells, springs and even street taps with beautifully made screens using flowers and other natural objects.

The dressing of the wells, as it is known, is common throughout the Peak District of Derbyshire and takes place in villages such as Tissington and Tideswell and in the towns of Bakewell and Buxton.

There is some confusion (and not a little argument) about precisely why the wells in villages other than Eyam are decorated. Some say that it is a Celtic custom or a pagan ritual; a way of giving thanks to the water-gods. Others say that the modern wells-dressing is a 'thank you' to the gods and the people of Eyam for helping their ancestors avoid the plague. Whatever the historical justification may be, the wells dressing is today a valuable tourist attraction which brings thousands of visitors to the area every summer.

There is a tourist centre in Eyam and the local church contains a good deal of information about the plague, including a list of all those who died of the disease in 1665 and 1666.

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After leaving Eyam we travelled north to Buxton, a spa town in the northern part of the Peak District. If you are coming from the west or the north the town is known as the gateway to the Peak District.

Buxton has far the best architecture in the whole area and is a relatively unspoilt town. The Crescent was modelled on the Royal Crescent in Bath and the Natural Baths building, which is on the site of the town's original Roman baths, has the largest stained glass window in the country. The splendid Devonshire Dome, which dominates the skyline from several directions, used to be part of the Great Stables. It then became part of the Devonshire Royal Hospital and is now part of the Devonshire Campus of Buxton University, which was, when we were in Buxton, part of the University of Derby. The world of academe being more prone to change than it perhaps was back in the dim and barely memorable days of the late 20th century, it might well have become something else entirely different by now.

The space underneath the Dome contained a large sign informing us that Buxton University is 'The UK's no 1 University for Degrees in Tourism, Hospitality Events and Spa Management.'

I'm not sure how much of a demand there is for graduates with degrees in spa management but if you're an employer looking for someone with such a diploma then you will doubtless want to consider putting former students of Buxton University onto your list of candidates.

By the way, the slightly confusing Devonshire nomenclature is a result of the fact that Chatsworth House which is, of course, in Derbyshire, is the home of the Duke of Devonshire. There really ought to be a Duke of Derbyshire with a large house in Devon but there isn't.

The splendid Dome was, when it was built, the world's largest unsupported dome, exceeding the size of the domes of the Pantheon, St Peter's Basilica and St Paul's Cathedral. Rather surprisingly, perhaps, Buxton also has its own Opera House, a splendid building which was designed by Frank Matcham, the architect responsible for both the London Palladium and the London Coliseum.

For us, however, the best thing about Buxton was not the architecture but the people. I have rarely met friendlier, more helpful, more welcoming folk than we met in Buxton. It is often said that the people of England become friendlier and more willing to put themselves out to help strangers the further north you travel and in our experience this does seem to be true.

In a branch of the Coop we asked an assistant if he knew the whereabouts of the nearest branch of Lloyds Bank. The assistant didn't know but immediately summoned two other assistants and asked them for their advice. When none of the assistants could help, two customers joined in the effort. And then another two came along and tried to help. No one knew where the damned bank might be but all tried hard to help us and all were clearly disappointed that they could not do so.

Eventually, with all seven people still coming up with suggestions, we thanked them and quietly tiptoed out of the shop. As we left, I looked back and saw that they were still discussing where the nearest branch of Lloyds bank might be situated. It turned out that the bank was only a short stroll away and we found it, entirely by accident, within minutes of leaving the shop.

Up near to the University we found a wonderful, old-fashioned pharmacy where I managed to purchase a splendid and well-made old-fashioned toilet bag. The shop, C.R.Clowes, which describes itself as Buxton's only Victorian pharmacy, has rows of huge, filled carboys in its two front windows. The assistant, who seemed very proud to work there, was keen to tell us all about them, and indeed all about the pharmacy itself, which didn't seem to have changed much in appearance or design since it was opened in 1875.

Everywhere we went in Buxton we were greeted with smiling faces. We felt welcome and wanted. If it hadn't been for the bitterly cold weather (it is often a good many degrees colder in the Peak District than it is elsewhere in England) we would seriously consider moving up there to live.

How curious it is that one should be surprised at being welcomed into a shop.

That was certainly our experience in this part of Derbyshire.

I suppose the explanation might be that Buxton has more than its fair share of small, independent shops and, quite naturally, the people who work in such establishments will often have a greater interest in the survival of the shop than an assistant who works in a chain store and feels absolutely no connection or loyalty with the managers, directors or shareholders. Certainly, it is our experience that towns and cities which are filled with branches of national stores are unlikely to appear as welcoming. The man or woman who works for a branch of a chain with several hundred or thousand similar establishments is not going to feel the same sense of loyalty as the individual who works directly with and alongside a shop's owner.

Actually, that is a rather sad thing to have to write, though it is true, and the managers who are responsible for large chains of stores should spend a little more of their time trying to work out how they can capture the essence of individuality and caring which today seems to be exclusively the province of the small, family run shop. Department store managers have lost the plot and I can't help wondering if they will ever find it again. The cold-bloodedness and mechanical quality of the internet, which has resulted in chain stores installing self-operated tills in order to cut their operating costs, probably mean that we should take advantage of the joy of shopping in small stores while we can.

Buxton was a joy to visit. We will be returning.

It only occurred to me as I completed this book that Sidmouth and Buxton have much in common. One is in Devon, on the coast overlooking the English Channel, and the other is in Derbyshire, in the highest part of the Peak District. The one in the south tends to have wonderful summers and the one in the north tends to have terrible winters. In theory you couldn’t imagine two more different towns. But both are friendly, unspoilt and full of the architectural and human charm which epitomises the very best of England and the English.

How appropriate it is that the two towns, the beginning and the end of our journey, should turn out to be so very, very English.

Afterword

England is changing faster than anyone can remember it ever changing in the past; and probably faster than it has ever changed.

EU laws, allowing unlimited and uncontrolled immigration have changed the nature of the population – particularly since millions of citizens who were born in England have given up and, full of despair and disappointment, chosen to leave the country of their birth and to live abroad.

The internet, massive national debts and a new selfishness have all produced enormous and possibly permanent social changes. The politically correct and the health gestapo are also doing everything they can to ensure that traditional English culture disappears. English traditionalists are finding that it is ever more difficult to maintain some of the eccentric, some might say bizarre, centuries old traditions such as cheese rolling and shin kicking. Local councils and senior police officers are resolutely and sternly opposed to such activities.

Centuries old activities such as maypole dancing and Morris dancing are regarded as racist by those in authority who regard anything English – even the flag of St George – as politically unacceptable.

The essence of England, and English life, still remains but although England survives in spirit the body is, like one of those struggling but still glorious Victorian provincial hotels, looking more than a little tired and faded.

It is not flourishing (heaven knows it has done well to survive) but it is alive and it can be found if you are prepared to look for it. But for how much longer? I can’t see the Lottery Fund and other rich sources of cash doling out money to Morris Dancers, Shin Kickers or Cheese Rollers.

England is awash with State sponsored organisations and charitable groups desperate to give money to ethnic groups and immigrant societies, and anyone promoting Welsh or Scottish nationalism can expect a warm welcome from those with grants to disburse. But England and the English are always ignored.

The bureaucrats working for the European Union have decided that although Scotland and Wales can continue to exist as discrete regions within the EU superstate, England is too large to be allowed to survive.

It may be difficult to believe but it now a fact that England no longer officially exists as a nation; the politicians and the administrators in Brussels have made it nothing more than a series of soon-to-be autonomous regions.

The England we think of as England can still be found but you have to look hard to find it. And you will need to look soon, for I have no doubt that England and the English are disappearing fast.

Note:

We hope you enjoyed this book. If you did then we would be grateful if you would post a favourable review on Amazon. For more details about available books, please see his author page on Amazon.

The Author

Sunday Times bestselling author Vernon Coleman has written over 100 books which have sold over two million copies in the UK alone and been translated into 25 languages. Many of his books are now available as kindle e-books on Amazon and readers who look hard may find copies in second hand book shops and charity shops.

Vernon Coleman qualified as a doctor in 1970 and has worked both in hospitals and as a GP. He is still a registered GP principal, although he has not practised for many years. He founded and organised many campaigns concerning iatrogenesis, drug addiction and the abuse of animals and has given evidence to committees at the House of Commons and the House of Lords. In addition to writing books, he has worked as a columnist for numerous newspapers including *The Sun, The Daily Star,* the *Sunday Express* and *The People*. His syndicated columns have been published in newspapers and magazines all around the world and he has contributed articles to hundreds of other publications including *The Sunday Times, Observer, Guardian, Daily Mail, Mail on Sunday, Daily Telegraph, Sunday Telegraph, Daily Express, Daily Mirror, Sunday Mirror, Punch, Woman, Woman's Own, The Lady, Spectator* and *British Medical Journal*. He was the founding editor of the *British Clinical Journal* which is, sadly, no longer with us.

He has presented numerous programmes on television and radio (some of which were awful and some of which were merely terrible) and was Britain's original breakfast television doctor. He was also television's first agony uncle. He has presented three TV series based on his bestselling book *Bodypower*. He compiled the first home doctor software for computer in 1983 and has had a website for over two decades. His novel *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War* has been turned into an award winning film. If people like it, he is happy to take the credit. If people don't like it, he is prepared to hand the blame to the director and producers.

Vernon Coleman is married to Donna Antoinette (aka The Princess) and they live in Paris, London, Bilbury in Devon and Gloucestershire though not all at the same time. His many hobbies include watching wildlife, collecting books and sitting in cafés and parks. He is a member of the MCC and the Desperate Dan Pie Eaters Club and is a vegetarian.

He is now wearing out and needs regular oiling with malt whisky.

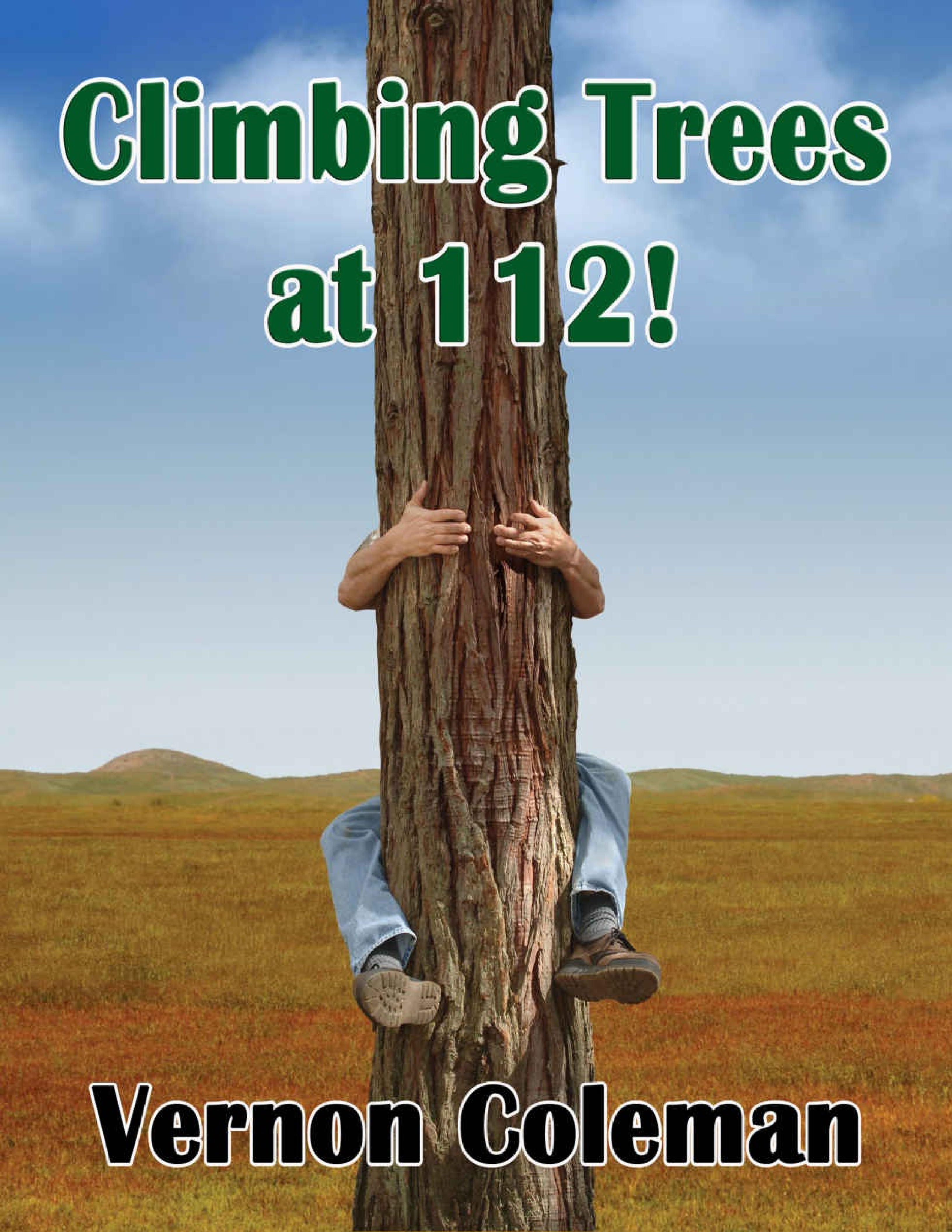

Climbing Trees at 112!

Vernon Coleman

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Real-Life Inspirations for the Over 65s

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Vernon Coleman is a writer and the author of over 100 other books which have sold over two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK and been translated into 25 languages. Many of his books are available as Kindle books on Amazon. For a list of available eBooks please see Vernon Coleman's author page on Amazon. Vernon Coleman has been growing older for many years and is becoming tolerably good at it.

Dedication

To my wife, my friend, my love, my Antoinette; upon whom I dote and who holds my hand as I wobble and tumble into my dotage.

God gave you beauty and kindness; may He now give you peace, contentment and unlimited delights.

Prologue

These are inspirational true stories to excite the spirit of anyone contemplating old age with fear, suspicion or apprehension.

Introduction

Some of the people in this book achieved great things earlier in life but carried on doing great things long after most people would have retired. But many of the people you will find described below kept their best until later; only achieving greatness when they were well past the official age of retirement. Some did so because they were freed from day to day drudgery; others because they allowed themselves to meet their dreams head on. Some changed course and did something entirely new once they reached their late 60s or beyond.

This isn't a book about people who simply managed to live a long life.

It is a book about people who did amazing, extraordinary, often great things at a time of life when most people are content to look back on what has already happened in their lives, rather than look forward to what may be about to happen. This is a book about people who never let go of life, about people who were never afraid to have adventures, about people who were brave enough to take risks and to accept whatever challenges life threw at them. I have, with one notable exception, ignored Kings, Queens and Popes who achieved great things late in life since their achievements were, to a certain extent, preordained. Within the age groups the individuals mentioned are listed in no particular order.

The human brain doesn't shrink or perish or deteriorate with age. The people on this list are not exceptional in that they retained their faculties, their ambitions and their determination. They are exceptional only in that they continued to make use of their lives and ignored the commonly held suspicion that old age and senility are synonymous.

There are, of course, many more inspiring stories than I have included here. For example, Frank Schearer, a retired physician, was still water skiing at the age of 100. The Rolling Stones were still rocking around the world when they were all in their 70s. Being over 70 didn't stop Rod Stewart, Tom Jones, Englebert Humperdinck, Van Morrison, Neil Diamond, Elton John, Shirley Bassey, Cliff Richard or Tina Turner from touring and performing. Clint Eastwood was still directing and starring in movies in his late 80s.

I have chosen to start this list with individuals aged 66 since the age of 65 was arbitrarily chosen as the usual age of retirement in Western countries.

At the age of 66

Sir John Betjeman CBE – born in 1906 in London, England, was a poet, broadcaster and writer of essays about English places and buildings. He became Poet Laureate of England in 1972. He held the post until his death in Cornwall at the age of 77, and is still widely regarded as the most popular poet to have held that position.

Edgar Rice Burroughs – Chicago born but of English ancestry, was the author of nearly 80 novels including the Tarzan books. At the age of 66, he became a war correspondent and was one of the oldest U.S. war correspondents during World War II. Burroughs had been in Honolulu at the time of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour.

Herbert Marcuse – born 1898 in Berlin, Germany, was a philosopher who fled Germany in 1933. He worked for US intelligence during World War II and subsequently taught at several American universities. Marcuse became world famous overnight in 1964 with the publication of his book *One Dimensional Man* in which he argued that society under advanced capitalism is repressive and that man has become intellectually and spiritually complacent as a result of his psychological dependence on the consumer society. Marcuse was, however, also critical of the Soviet system. The book *One Dimensional Man* became hugely popular with students around the world.

At the age of 67

Josephine Baker – dancer and entertainer and who was Paris's most popular Music Hall artist and a star at the Folies Bergere, made a return to the Broadway stage.

Leo Tolstoy – born 1828, Yasnaya Polyana, Russian Empire. Tolstoy, regarded as one of the world's greatest novelists and the author of *War and Peace*, spent much of his life at the family estate. In his youth, he served in the army and travelled in Europe before returning home. *War and Peace* (1865-69) established him as Russia's leading novelist. Later in life, Tolstoy devoted himself to social reform and favoured a simple life. In 1898, when he was 70-years-old, he published *What is Art?*, which celebrates art's moral and religious functions and criticises fashionable art. Tolstoy rode a bicycle for the first time in his life at the age of 67.

John Dryden – born 1631 in Aldwinkle, England, was a poet, dramatist and literary critic. His plays included *Marriage A-la-Mode* and he virtually invented dramatic criticism. Dryden was named poet laureate in 1668 and in 1670 made royal historiographer. He lost royal patronage in 1688 with the accession of William III but continued to be a prolific author whose relationship with his printer/publisher was so good that a letter exists in which Dryden thanks the printer Tonson for 'two melons'. Dryden produced extensive translations of Latin poetry, including Virgil's *Aeneid*. In his late 60s, Dryden was so prolific and full of energy that he agreed to supply a publisher with 10,000 verses for £208.

Alfred Wallis – born in 1855 in Devonport, England was a seaman in the merchant service by the early 1870s. In 1876, he married. He was 20-years-old and his wife was 41, with five children. He continued to work as a deep-sea fisherman. In 1890, he started work as a dealer, buying old sails and scrap iron but in 1912 the business closed and Wallis made a living doing odd jobs, particularly for a local antiques dealer. When his wife died in 1922, Wallis who was 67, took up painting for the first time in his life. He taught himself and never had a single art lesson. His paintings are regarded as 'naïve art' in that perspective and scale are often ignored. Because he could not afford canvases or art shop quality oils, Wallis painted on bits of cardboard ripped from packing boxes and used a small number of paints bought from ships' chandlers. In 1928, a number of established artists moved to St Ives in Cornwall and Wallis found himself a member of a group of progressive artists. Despite his newfound connections and his rising fame, Wallis sold very few paintings in his lifetime and he died in poverty in a workhouse in Penzance. Sadly, he believed that his neighbours were jealous of his fame and assumed that because he was well known he must have secret wealth. He is now remembered as an important Cornish artist.

At the age of 68

Queen Victoria – born 1819, London, England. The Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and Empress of India, began to learn Hindustani at the age of 68. Her tutor (her 'official munshi') was an Indian called Abdul Karim who travelled everywhere with the Queen, even meeting monarchs and prime ministers with her. Queen Victoria learned the language well enough to keep a 13-volume diary in Hindustani. (There is no reason why older folk should not learn one or more foreign languages. Increasing age does not result in any diminution in the ability to learn a language – or anything else for that matter. The elder Cato began to learn Greek at the age of 80. And at 70, Socrates was learning to dance and play musical instruments.) There was no earthly need for Queen Victoria to learn a new language. She did it because she was never afraid to learn new things and never afraid to face a challenge.

General de Gaulle – born 1890, Lille, France. Charles Andre Joseph Marie de Gaulle was a formidable and very tall French general and politician who became President of France and remained in the position for a decade. During the First World War, de Gaulle was wounded and taken prisoner and decorated for bravery. During the German invasion of France in World War II, he was appointed Under-Secretary for War but later refused to accept his government's armistice with Nazi Germany. De Gaulle fled to Britain and led a government in exile, though he had a frosty relationship with both the British and the Americans. He became head of the provisional government of the French Republic in June 1944 but resigned in 1946 and retired in the early 1950s to write his War Memoirs. In May 1958, the Algerian War created a crisis in France and the National Assembly brought him back to power at the age of 68. De Gaulle founded the Fifth Republic and vetoed Britain's entry into the European Community. (He supported the EC only as a group of sovereign nations.) He resigned in 1969 and died the following year.

Mrs Patrick Campbell – born 1865, London, England was the actress who took the original role of Eliza Doolittle in George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* (and is remembered in literacy circles for a lengthy correspondence which she conducted with the playwright), made her first film *Riptide* in 1933 when she was 68-years-old. She must have enjoyed the experience because she later appeared in a number of other films.

Sir Charles Aubrey Smith CBE (C.Aubrey Smith) – born 1863, London England, went to South Africa to prospect for gold in 1888. He developed pneumonia and pronounced dead by the doctors looking after him. After returning to life and England, Smith became an actor. His first major role was in *The Prisoner of Zenda*. Smith also became a keen cricketer. He was a fast bowler, a useful batsman and an excellent fielder. He is regarded as one of the best bowlers ever to play. He had a curiously curved run-up which resulted in the nickname 'round the corner Smith'. He played for Sussex in the English County Championships and captained England in one Test match against South Africa. In 1933, at the age of 71, Smith made his first movie in Hollywood. These days it is relatively common for sports stars to transfer their fame to the silver screen. Eric Cantona, Vinnie Jones, Jim Brown and O.J.Smith are just four who spring to mind. But Sir C Aubrey Smith was the first sports star to make the move to the cinema. Late in his life, when he had become very famous as a film star, and, with his bushy eyebrows and handlebar moustache, one of the best known faces in the cinema, he was sitting in the pavilion at Lord's Cricket Ground when one member turned to another, nodded towards Sir C.Aubrey and said: 'Who is that fellow? He looks familiar.' 'Oh, that's Smith,' replied his companion. 'He used to play for Sussex.' In Hollywood, he founded the Hollywood Cricket Club and actors (however famous) who did not turn out to play were likely to 'incur his displeasure'. English actors who appeared in his team included David Niven, Ronald Colman, Rex Harrison, Leslie Howard, Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce. Films which Smith appeared in included *The Prisoner of Zenda*, *The Four Feathers*, *Rebecca*, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *And Then There Were None*, *Little Women* and *Tarzan the Ape Man*. He also appeared in one of the *Thin Man* movies. All these were made when he was in his 70s and 80s.

Confucius – born 551 BC, Lu, China, was a philosopher, political theorist and teacher. He educated himself while working as a bookkeeper and managed to master the six traditional arts: ritual, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy and arithmetic. He also studied history and poetry. He served in government posts and became Minister of Justice. He spent 12 years in self-imposed exile and then returned at the age of 68 in order to write and to teach. In the next five years, he taught over 70 disciples and wrote a series of texts called the *Five Classics*.

At the age of 69

Ronald Reagan – born 1911, Tampico, U.S. was elected President of the United States. Reagan worked as a radio sports announcer before going to Hollywood where he appeared in more than 50 movies and was twice elected President of the Screen Actors Guild. He changed his political allegiance from Democrat to Republican and was elected governor of California in 1966. Fourteen years later, at the age of 69, he defeated incumbent President Jimmy Carter, and became U.S. President. Reagan was re-elected four years later and was President until the age of 77.

Frank Lloyd Wright – born 1867, Richland Center, U.S. is widely regarded as the greatest American architect. He began his most creative and prolific years at the end of his 60s. Wright designed about 50 Prairie houses between 1900 and 1910. In the 1930s, he designed low cost houses. In 1936, at the age of 69, he built Fallingwater in Bear Run. Fallingwater is an extravagant country house, cantilevered over a waterfall. Between 1936 and 1939, he built the Johnson Wax Building which was regarded as an example of humane workplace design and subsequently, throughout his 70s, he received a huge number of major commissions.

Gilbert White – born 1720 in Selborne, England was a curate throughout his life. Regarded as one of the world's first ecologists and natural historians, White published the *Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne*, a book which was based on his letters, at the age of 69. It is said that White observations helped to shape our love of and respect for nature. Many of the letters which appear were never actually posted but were written especially for the book.

Joseph Franz Haydn – Born 1732, Rohrau, Austria, was recognised as the greatest living composer. He composed works in just about every musical genre, including 108 symphonies. He is said to have invented the string quartet and wrote 68 musical pieces for string quartets. He also wrote 48 piano sonatas and numerous other pieces of music. At the age of 69, he wrote *The Seasons*, one of the great oratorios.

At the age of 70

Francis Galton – an English explorer, eugenicist and anthropologist, invented the science of finger printing for use in police work at the age of 70. His book on the subject was called *Finger Prints* and he calculated that the chances of two individuals having the same fingerprints was around 1 in 64 billion. Galton was a cousin of Charles Darwin. In addition to his work on fingerprints, he wrote works on human intelligence, blood transfusions, criminality, twins and meteorology.

Noah Webster – born 1758, West Hartford, US. Webster, an American writer and lexicographer, published his eponymous dictionary at the age of 70. His book *The American Spelling Book*, which he published in 1783, sold over 100 million copies. He began work on the *American Dictionary of the English Language* in 1807 but did not publish the first edition until 1828. He is regarded as a vital figure in establishing the integrity of American English.

Thomas Alva Edison – born 1847, Milan, US had very little formal schooling but became an inventor. He set up a laboratory in his basement when was 10-years-old. He created the world's first industrial research laboratory in New Jersey, US. In his 70s, Edison was directing research into torpedoes and submarines. He continued to work well into his 80s (he died in 1931) and he held 1,093 patents by the time he died. He helped lay the foundation for the technological revolution and he was the first to commercialise research effectively and profitably. His research work was often financed by wealthy patrons.

Nicolaus Copernicus – born in 1473 in Frauenburg in East Prussia, mastered everything that was known about mathematics, medicine, astronomy and theology. In 1497, he was elected a canon of Frauenburg cathedral and began his astronomical studies. In 1543, at the age of 70, he published *Six Books Concerning the Revolutions of the Heavenly Orbs* which explained the motion of the planets and resolved their order. It was in this book that Copernicus argued that the Earth rotates daily around its own axis and revolves yearly around a stationary sun. Copernicus's work helped the development of a new understanding of the fundamental structure of the universe.

Barbara Woodhouse – born 1910, Rathfarnham, Ireland was a dog trainer, author and television personality. She first became famous in 1980 when her television series *Training Dogs the Woodhouse Way* turned her into an unexpected 'star' and made her a household name. She continued to appear on television, to write books and to travel around the world talking about dogs until her death in 1988.

Benjamin Disraeli – born 1804, London, England, and later known as the Earl of Beaconsfield. Disraeli was an author and politician who was twice Prime Minister. He became Prime Minister for the second time at the age of 70. He was a friend and advisor to Queen Victoria and he introduced a bill conferring on her the title Empress of India. After the Conservative party was defeated in 1880, he remained party leader and, at the age of 76, published a political novel entitled *Endymion*.

Albert Schweitzer – born 1875, Kaysersberg, Germany, was a theologian, doctor, philosopher and organist. In his youth he wrote a biography of Johann Sebastian Bach and produced an edition of Bach's organ works. He also wrote several influential books on religion. At the age of 30, he announced that he would become a mission doctor. In 1913, he and his wife moved to French Equatorial Africa (later to be renamed Gabon) and, with the aid of the local population, built a hospital and, later, a leper colony. In 1952, at the age of 77, Schweitzer was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his work on behalf of 'the Brotherhood of Nations'. In his 70th year, Schweitzer began working for world peace.

Enid Blyton – born 1897, London, England, the author of over 600 books for children, wrote 11 books in her 70th year. Blyton, who trained as a school teacher, is best known for her series of books, which included those involving Noddy and Big Ears, the Famous Five and the Secret Seven.

Hilda Lorna Johnstone MBE – born 1902 in York, England, participated in the Olympic Games in 1956, 1968 and 1972 at the age of 70. She took part in the equestrian dressage competition and became the oldest ever woman to take part in the Olympic Games.

Maurice Chevalier – born 1888, Paris, France, starred in the film *Gigi* and sang *Thank heavens for Little Girls*. Chevalier first appeared as a singer and comedian at the Folies-Bergere in Paris in 1909. Famous for wearing a straw hat at a jaunty angle, together with a bow tie (and the usual assortment of trousers, shirts, jackets, etc.) he went to Hollywood in 1929 and appeared in movies that helped to establish musicals as a serious and profitable film genre. Chevalier was given an honorary Academy Award during his 70th year.

Donald Trump – born 1946, New York, US, who had no political experience and who had never stood for public office before, surprised pundits, commentators and pollsters by becoming 45th President of the United States of America. Trump, a real estate developer and television personality who had inherited a property empire from his father, appalled critics and other politicians (even those within his own party) with a surprising mixture of honesty, naivety and plain speaking but won over voters with a similarly surprising mixture of honesty, naivety and plain speaking.

Benjamin Franklin – born 1706, Boston, US was an American scientist, philosopher, publisher and statesman. At the age of 12, he was apprenticed to his brother, a local printer. He taught himself to write and in 1723, moved to Philadelphia, where he founded the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. From 1730 until 1757, he wrote *Poor Richard's Almanack* which was filled with proverbs and aphorisms. As he prospered he helped found a library, a hospital, a fire department, an insurance company and a college which became the University of Pennsylvania. His inventions included bifocal spectacles and led to the development of the lightning rod. In 1776, he was a member of the committee which drafted America's Declaration of Independence and went to France to seek help for the American Revolution. He negotiated a treaty to provide loans and military support for the United States.

W. Somerset Maugham – born 1874, in the British Embassy in Paris, France was a qualified doctor and novelist, playwright and writer of short stories. He was also a hugely influential travel writer. His simply written works show a tremendous understanding of human nature. Many of his short stories describe the confusion of Europeans in foreign surroundings. His great novels include *The Razor's Edge*, *Of Human Bondage*, *The Moon and Sixpence* and *Cakes and Ale*, and all which were turned into films. Maugham wrote *The Razor's Edge* at the age of 70, *Catalina* and *Quartet* at the age of 74, and *Encore* at the age of 78 and continued to write articles well into his late 80s. He died in 1965.

Jomo Kenyatta – born 1894, Ichaweri, British East Africa left East African highlands to become a civil servant and a political activist in Nairobi. He opposed the suggestion that Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika be united into a single country and in 1945, he helped to organise the sixth Pan-African Confess. In 1953, he was sent to prison for seven years for directing the Mau Mau rebellion, though he denied the charges. In 1962, at the age of 70, he negotiated the terms leading to Kenya's independence and turned his country into one of the most stable and economically viable African nations.

At the age of 71

Cecil B de Mille – born 1881, Ashfield, U.S., was a film director and producer. In 1913, he joined Jesse Lasky and Samuel Goldwyn to form an early version of Paramount Communications. Their first film, *The Squaw Man* (1914) was the first full-length feature film to be produced in Hollywood. He was renowned for his extravagant sets and huge casts. He was 71 when he produced and directed *The Greatest Show on Earth* which won the Academy Award for best picture.

Coco Chanel – born 1883, Saumur, France, was really called Gabrielle Chanel. She retired at 55 but decided to un-retire at the age of 71. She celebrated by designing the Chanel suit. She opened a millinery shop in 1913 in Deauville and within five years her innovative use of fabrics and accessories was bringing her wealthy and influential customers. Her clothes, which were designed to be both simple and comfortable, revolutionised the fashion industry for decades to come. She made turtleneck sweaters popular and was the original designer of the 'little black dress' which was to become the mainstay of many wardrobes. Her shop eventually became Chanel industries, incorporating a Parisian fashion house, a textile business, perfume laboratories and a jewellery workshop. Her most successful product was 'Chanel No 5' perfume which was introduced in 1922.

Titian (originally Tiziano Vecellio) – born 1488, Venice, Italy. Taught by the Bellini family and having worked closely with Giorgione, Titian established himself as the leading painter in Venice. Many of his paintings had a religious theme but he was also interested in mythology and painted Venus many times. He is said to have reached the height of his powers with his painting *The Rape of Europa* which was one of several paintings done for Philip II of Spain and which Titian painted between the ages of 71 and 74.

Charles Darwin – born 1809, in Shropshire, England wrote *The Power of Movement of Plants* in his early 70s. Darwin studied medicine and biology and was the naturalist on board HMS Beagle during its five year scientific survey of South America and the South Seas. His discoveries during that voyage (1831-36) formed the basis of his theories of evolution. He recognised that a bird with a sharper beak might have a better chance of thriving and reproducing than birds with blunter beaks – which were less able to hunt for food. He surmised that such traits were passed on to new generations they would be predominant in future populations. This was the basis of his theory of 'natural selection', whereby advantageous variations are passed on to later generations. Darwin worked on this theory for 20 years before publishing it in his book *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* in 1859. He continued to work until his death in 1882.

Leni Riefenstahl – born 1902 in Berlin, Germany was a dancer and an actress who became a film director and photographer. Her first film was *Das Blaue Licht* (The Blue Light). In 1933, at Adolf Hitler's suggestion, she made a propaganda film about the fifth Nuremberg Rally. As a director, she introduced a number of technical developments including slow motion, very high and low shooting angles, aerial shots, underwater filming and tracking shots. She was friends with Hitler for 12 years. When she was 60, Riefenstahl began a relationship with her assistant who was 20-years-old. They remained together until her death at the age of 101. Riefenstahl took up scuba diving in her 70s and was still diving and photographing marine life in her 90s.

Katsusuke Yanagisawa – born 1936, Japan, a retired Japanese junior high school teacher, climbed Mount Everest, becoming one of three Japanese climbers to have scaled the world's highest mountain in their 70s. His achievement was sneered at by a member of the Japan Mountaineering Association who said that Yanagisawa had been 'given a lot of support' and had 'used oxygen all the way to the top'. He climbed it though, didn't he? (The words 'green' and 'envy' spring to mind.)

Henrik Ibsen – born 1828, Skien, Norway, became theatre director and resident playwright at the National Theatre in Bergen at the rather precocious age of 23. He later travelled around Europe. He wrote *Peer Gynt*, *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, *An Enemy of the People*, *The Wild Duck*, *Hedda Gabler* and *The Master Builder*. He was still writing in his 70s and wrote *When We Dead Awaken* in 1899.

Colette (Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette) – born 1873, Saint-Sauveur-en-Puisaye, France, was a music hall performer and writer. Her first four Claudine novels (written in 1900-03), the reminiscences of a libertine ingenue, were published by her first husband under the pen name ‘Willy’. In 1944, at the age of 71, she wrote *Gigi*, a comedy about a girl who is brought up to be a courtesan. The story was turned into a play by Anita Loos and then into a musical; it was filmed in 1958 starring Leslie Caron in the title role and also starring Maurice Chevalier and Louis Jourdan . In her early life, Colette scandalised the French public but in her later years, she became a much loved icon. She died in 1954.

At the age of 72

Karl Wallenda – born 1905, Magdeburg, Germany, was a circus acrobat. He became famous for his high wire act (known as the Great Wallendas) which included a seven person pyramid on a high wire without a safety net. His wife, Helen was balanced at the top of the pyramid. The troupe travelled in the US with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus. At the age of 72, Karl walked a tightrope between the top floors of two hotels in Miami. He died at the age of 73 when wind blew him from a wire 123 feet above a street in San Juan.

Dame May Whitty DBE – born 1865, Liverpool, England, was an English actress who, after a successful theatrical career, made her first film *Night Must Fall* in 1937 at the age of 72. She received a nomination for an Academy Award as Best Supporting Actress. She is perhaps best known for playing the vanishing lady Miss Froy in Alfred Hitchcock's film *The Lady Vanishes*, which was made in 1938 when she was 73-years-old. She received a second Academy Award nomination for her work in *Mrs Miniver*, which was made in 1942. Her last films were made in 1948 when she was 83-years-old.

Mohandas Gandhi – born 1869, Porbandar, India, (known as Mahatma Gandhi) studied law in England and took a job with an Indian firm in South Africa. He became an advocate for Indian rights and in 1906, he put into action his technique of nonviolent resistance. In 1915, he returned to India and became leader of a nationwide struggle for home rule. He organised campaigns of non-violent resistance many times – including when he was in his 60s. He also campaigned to end discrimination against India's 'untouchable class'. At the age of 72, he launched the movement that led to his country's independence in 1947. He was disappointed by the fact that the subcontinent had been divided into India and Pakistan since he had hoped for Hindu-Muslim unity. In September 1947, at the age of 78, he ended rioting in Calcutta by fasting. In January 1948, he was shot and killed by a Hindu fanatic.

Blondin – born 1824, Headin, France, (originally Jean-Francois Gravelet). Blondin was a French tightrope walker who achieved fame in 1859 by repeatedly crossing Niagara Falls on a tightrope. He went across blindfolded, in a sack, pushing a wheelbarrow, on stilts and carrying a man on his back. On one occasion, he sat down half way across and cooked an omelette. Blondin gave his last tightrope performance in 1896, at the age of 72, and died the following year.

At the age of 73

Dr Peter Mark Roget – born 1779, London, England, was a physician, inventor and philologist. In 1814, he invented a slide rule for calculating the roots and powers of numbers. He helped found the University of London in 1828. But he is best known for his *Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases*, a comprehensive collection of synonyms. He prepared the book during his retirement, beginning it at the age of 69 and finishing it at 73. He was also secretary of the Royal Society from 1827.

Konrad Adenauer – born in 1876, Cologne, Germany became Chancellor of Germany. Adenauer, who had been imprisoned by the Nazis, stressed the importance of individualism under the rule of law. He worked hard to build bridges with Gemany's former enemies – particularly France. He remained Chancellor from 1949 until 1963 when he retired. He died in 1967.

Marquis de Sade – born 1740, Paris, France, was an aristocrat, politician, revolutionary, philosopher and author best known now for his erotica. The words 'sadist' and 'sadism' are derived from his name. He believed in the freedom of the individual above all else. He spent 32 years of his life in prison where he did much of his writing. During the French Revolution, he was elected a delegate to the National Convention. In 1801, Napoleon Bonaparte ordered the arrest of the anonymous author of the books *Justine* and *Juliette*, and de Sade was duly arrested and imprisoned without trial. In the UK, his books were partly banned until 1983. At the age of 73, de Sade was still writing fiction, though some of his work was destroyed by his son (who burnt many of his father's manuscripts) and other novels were, for a variety of prurient reasons, not published until midway through the 20th century. At the age of 70, de Sade acquired a new mistress with whom he had a four year long relationship until his death in 1814.

Guiseppe Verdi – born 1813, Roncole, Italy was a composer. Verdi is particularly remembered for having created the opera as a series of integrated scenes and acts rather than as a collection of arias, duets and often only vaguely connected scenes. Verdi had retired at the age of 61, after composing his *Requiem*, but he and the poet and composer Arrigo Boito later started working together. *Otello*, written when Verdi was 73-years-old, was the first of their great operas together.

Maurice Chevalier (see above) – the French entertainer, was still working and made the film *Fanny* at the age of 73.

Colonel Harland David Sanders – born in 1890 in Indiana, United States, was still travelling 200,000 miles a year to promote the Kentucky Fried Chicken Chain. Sanders, who had adopted the title *Colonel* had sold the American part of his company Kentucky Fried Chicken but had retained control of his Canadian franchises and remained the company's symbol. Colonel Sanders opened the first restaurant in 1952 and quickly recognised the power of franchising. Within a few years, 400 franchise restaurants had been opened. Sanders, who died in 1980, became the company's spokesman, symbol and ambassador.

At the age of 74

S.J.Perelman – born 1904, New York, U.S., was an American humourist who wrote screenplays for early Marx Brothers films such as *Monkey Business* and *Horse Feathers*. His later screenplays included *Around the World in 80 Days*. He is here because, at the age of 74, he drove from Paris to Peking in an old MG motor car. The journey was a recreation of the famous 1907 Peking-to-Paris road race which had been won by Prince Borghese. The original race took months and in some places involved cars being taken apart and carried by coolies. However, instead of driving from Peking to Paris, Perelman decided to drive his 30-year-old black and red MG from Paris to Peking. It was, he said, 'the last chuck of the dice'. Perelman, who was accompanied by two male companions, attached a small trailer to the back of the car and loaded it with supplies – including 100,000 Band-Aids and 30 boxes of Lomotil. The journey started on the Champs-Elysees in Paris on September 2nd 1978, and for 27 days they drove through Central Europe, the Balkans, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. Unfortunately, Perelman fell out with his two fellow drivers and because there was no suitable route into China, the car had to be airlifted the last part of the journey which was, therefore, never properly completed. It was, however, a pretty brave undertaking for a 74-year-old man and a 30-year-old car who had never done anything similar before.

Franz Liszt – born 1811, Raiding, Hungary was a composer and pianist. After success in Paris in 1823, he toured Europe. Inspired by hearing the violinist Paganini, he became a serious composer and produced many classic pieces of music. He temporarily retired from playing in the late 1840s so that he could concentrate on composing. He was one of the first musicians to give solo piano recitals. He was still performing in his 70s when he toured Europe and gave a series of piano recitals.

Jean Cocteau – born 1889 Paris, France, was a poet, librettist, playwright, artist, book illustrator, designer and film director. During the First World War, he was an ambulance driver. He made the film *Le Testament d'Orphee* in 1960 when he was 71 years of age. In his final year, when he was 74, was busy decorating the church of Saint Blaise-des-Simples in Milly La Foret.

At the age of 75

Benjamin Franklin – negotiated a preliminary peace treaty with Great Britain.

Ed Delano – born 1905, USA, completed four bicycle rides across the continent of the United States. He completed his last crossing of America by bicycle in 1980 when he was 75-years-old. He took 33 days to travel the 3,100 miles so that he could attend a college reunion in Worcester, Mass. Mr Delano died at the age of 92.

Nicholas Hawksmoor – born 1661, Nottinghamshire, England was an architect who designed a number of famous churches, including six in London. He also designed a number of garden structures including the Pyramid and the Mausoleum at Castle Howard. At Blenheim Palace, he designed the Woodstock Gate. The two western towers of Westminster Abbey were designed by Hawksmoor who was still working on them when he died at the age of 75.

At the age of 76

Min Bahadur Sherchan – born 1931 in Bhurung Tatopani, West Nepal, a former British Gurkha soldier, climbed Mount Everest at the age of 76.

Auguste Rodin – born 1840, Paris, France, was a French sculptor who was repeatedly rejected by the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and for many years had to earn his living doing decorative stonework on buildings. In 1878, he was finally accepted as a sculptor when he produced a figure entitled 'The Age of Bronze', though the figure was so realistic that Rodin was accused of making a mold on a living person. He produced 'The Thinker' in 1880 and 'The Kiss' in 1886. In addition to sculpture, he produced book illustrations and many drawings, mostly of female nudes. At the age of 76, just a year before his death, he finally found the courage (and, presumably, the money for the licence) to marry Rose Beuret, the girl with whom he had lived since he was 23. It must rank as one of the longest courtships and engagements in history.

H.G.Wells – born 1866, Bromley, Kent was a novelist, historian and journalist. He studied science and, in his 30s, wrote a number of science fiction novels including *The Time Machine*, *The Invisible Man* and *The War of the Worlds*. He also agitated for a number of public causes, including the League of Nations. He abandoned science fiction and then started writing novels about lower middle class individuals – including *The History of Mr Polly* and *Kipps*. He also wrote *The Outline of History* and many other books – both fiction and non-fiction. He and his friend Jerome K Jerome (the author of comic novels such as *Three Men in a Boat*) invented miniature war games played with toy soldiers. George Orwell described Wells as 'too sane to understand the modern world'. At the age of 76, Wells successfully submitted his doctoral thesis.

Teiichi Igarishi – born 1887, Japan, a former lumberjack and forest ranger, first climbed Mount Fuji when he was 76 in memory of his wife, Ura. She died in 1975 at the age of 80. He continued to climb it every year until he was 100. Mr Igarishi started smoking at the age of 60 but stopped at the age of 96, presumably for health reasons.

At the age of 77

Clara Burton – born 1821, North Oxford, US was a nurse who founded the American Red Cross and worked during the American Civil War. At that time, there was no formal nursing training and Burton was self-taught. She campaigned for civil rights and was associated with the women's suffrage movement. In 1887, she helped in Texas during the famine. In 1888, when she was 67, she took Red Cross workers to Illinois after a tornado hit and in that same year, she took workers to Florida to help during a yellow fever epidemic. At the age of 68, she went to help out at the Johnstown Flood. And in 1897, when she was 76-years-old she sailed to Constantinople to open the first American International Red Cross headquarters in Turkey. At the age of 77, she worked in hospitals in Cuba during the Spanish-American war. She also helped victims of the Galveston hurricane in 1900. She died at the age of 90.

John Glenn – born 1921, Cambridge, US, became an astronaut and later a senator. He was the oldest of the seven astronauts selected in 1959 for the Mercury project's spaceflight training. In February 1962, he made three orbits of the earth in his space capsule called 'Friendship 7'. He retired from the space program in 1964 and served as a US senator from 1975 to 1999. In 1998, when he was 77-years-old, he made his second spaceflight and flew as a payload specialist on the Discovery mission.

At the age of 78

Marie Stopes – born 1880, Edinburgh, Scotland campaigned for eugenics and women's rights. She and her husband are remembered for founding the first birth control clinic in Britain. She edited *Birth Control News* and wrote a controversial sex manual. She was still actively promoting birth control when she was 78.

Grandma Moses, (Anna Mary Moses) – born 1860, New York, US enjoyed embroidery all her life but in her late seventies she developed arthritis which made needlework painful. Her sister suggested that she take up painting, since this would be easier for her. And so she began painting and during the next three decades (until her death at the age of 101), she produced over 1,500 paintings. To start with, she charged as little as $3 for a picture but as her fame steadily grew, so did the value of her paintings. In 1938, an art collector called Louis J.Caldor spotted her paintings in the window of a local drug store. He bought the entire stock and purchased ten more pictures from Grandma Moses herself. He paid between $3 and $5 per picture. The next year, three of Grandma Moses's paintings were included in an exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art.

Mae West – born 1893, New York, U.S. Ms West, an actress, playwright, screenwriter, comedian and singer was the American after whom the inflatable life vest was named. Her career in the entertainment business covered seven decades and she appeared in the film *Myra Breckinridge* at the age of 78.

Bertrand Russell (see above) – received the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Dame Edith Evans – born 1888, London, England was one of the finest actresses of the 20th century. She appeared in London and on Broadway in plays by William Shakespeare, George Bernard Shaw and Noel Coward. She is perhaps most famous for playing Lady Bracknell in Oscar Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest*. She appeared in a number of other films including *Look Back in Anger*, *Tom Jones* and *The Whisperers*. At the age of 78, she asked that her age be removed from reference books because she feared that it might prevent her getting work. It didn't.

Jean-Baptiste de Monet, Chevalier de Lamarck – born 1744, Picardy, France, was a biologist. He is credited with inventing the word 'biology'. He was an originator of the concept of the properly classified museum collection. At the age of 78, he proposed a new theory of evolution, suggesting that acquired characteristics can be transmitted to the next generation. The theory was eventually discredited.

Sir Christopher Wren – born 1632, East Knoyle, England, was an astronomer and architect. He taught astronomy at Gresham College, London and at Oxford and did not turn to architecture until he was 30-years-old, when he was hired to design the Sheldonian Theatre in Oxford. He later became King's Surveyor of Works and had a hand in rebuilding more than 50 churches which had been destroyed in the Great Fire of London. He held this post until 1718 when he was 86-years-old. He worked on St Paul's Cathedral until 1710 when he was 78-years-old. He died in 1723 and was buried in St Paul's. His resting place is commemorated with the inscription: 'Reader, if you seek a monument, look around.'

At the age of 79

Guiseppe Verdi (see above) – wrote Falstaff.

General de Gaulle (see above) – was still President of France.

Admiral Thomas Cochrane – 10th Earl of Dundonald, Marquess of Maranhao, born 1775, Hamilton, Scotland. Lord Cochrane had a tempestuous career. He was dismissed from the Royal Navy following a rather dodgy conviction for Stock Exchange fraud. He then led the rebel navies of Chile and Brazil during their wars of independence. In 1832, he was pardoned by the Crown and reinstated with the rank of Rear Admiral. His life inspired much naval fiction including C.S.Forester's Horatio Hornblower and Patrick O'Brian's Jack Aubrey. Although he was nearly 80 at the time, Cochrane volunteered for active service during the Crimean War (1853-1856). The Government considered him for a command but decided that there was a risk that Cochrane was too daring and might risk the entire fleet in a daring attack.

Dame Edith Evans (see above) – was still appearing on stage in New York – despite the fact that producers and directors were perfectly well aware of her age.

Louie Dingwall – born 1893, England, worked as a driver for the Canadian Army during World War I. Together with her husband, she built stables and a garage with a petrol pump and ran a bus service and taxi service. She trained race horses on the beach at Sandbanks in Dorset. At the age of 79, she is said to have applied for a licence to ride as a professional woman jockey. She died at the age of 89.

Sir George Cayley – born 1773, Scarborough, England. Cayley founded the science of aerodynamics and was a pioneer of aviation. By 1799, he had established the basic shape of the modern aeroplane. He built his first glider in 1804 and in 1853, he invented, designed and built a glider capable of carrying a man. In 1825, Cayley invented the caterpillar tractor and in 1839, he founded a polytechnic school in London.

At the age of 80

Grandma Moses (see above) – had her first solo art show and became established as one of America's foremost artists. Her early exhibitions also included of baked foods and preserves that had won prizes at the county fair. Over the next two decades, her paintings were exhibited throughout the United States and Europe and galleries reported that attendance records were broken. Grandma Moses' work was reproduced on greeting cards, tiles, fabrics, ceramics and her pictures were used to market a wide range of products.

Thomas Beecham – born 1879, St Helens, England was a self-taught conductor. He founded the Beecham Symphony Orchestra and co-founded the London Philharmonic Orchestra and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. He also founded several opera companies. He championed Mozart and his contemporaries Richard Strauss and Frederick Delius. In 1950, Beecham took the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra on an exhausting tour of the United States, Canada and South Africa. Between 1951 and 1960, Beecham conducted 92 concerts at the Royal Festival Hall. In 1958, he conducted in Argentina and in 1959 he toured the US and Canada again. Two years before his death he married his former secretary. She was 27 and he was 80.

Charles Atlas – born 1892, Acri, Italy trained himself to be the most famous bodybuilder in the world. His original name was Angelo Siciliano but he legally changed his name to Atlas when a friend told him that he looked like the statue of Atlas on top of a hotel in Coney Island. He claims that a bully really did kick sand into his face when he was a scrawny youth. At the age of 80, Atlas was still tearing telephone directories in half and this may well explain why you can never find a telephone directory when you want one.

Yuichiro Miura – born 1932, in Japan, climbed Mount Everest at the age of 80. He previously had two heart surgery operations for cardiac arrhythmia. He was also the first person to ski on Mount Everest. He descended nearly 4,200 vertical feet from the South Col in 1970.

Marc Chagall – born 1887, Vitebsk, Russia, was a painter, printmaker and designer. He studied painting in St Petersburg and moved to Paris in 1910 where he became established as an important artist. He moved to New York in 1941 where he designed sets and costumes for Stravinsky's ballet 'The Firebird'. He later produced stained-glass windows. In 1964, Chagall's ceiling for the Paris Opera was revealed. The painting required 440 pounds of paint and covers 2,600 square feet. At the age of 80, Chagall created the sets for the Metropolitan Opera's production of Mozart's 'Magic Flute'.

Leopold Stokowski – born 1882, London, England, began work in New York City in 1905 as an organist and choir director. He moved to Paris to study conducting. His conducting debut took place in 1909 when he conducted the New Symphony Orchestra at Queen's Hall in London. Later that year he became conductor of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. He championed the work of many living composers (something he was to do until the end of his life) but in 1912, he resigned from his post. Two months later, he became director of the Philadelphia Orchestra. During his career, he conducted many orchestras and founded (among others) the Hollywood Bowl Symphony Orchestra. He conducted the music for a number of films. He founded the American Symphony Orchestra at the age of 80 and in the same year, he broke a leg playing football.

George Burns – a comedian famous for a wry sense of humour and for smoking cigars, acted in the film *The Sunshine Boys* (written by Neil Simon and co-starring Walter Matthau) and won an Oscar for his performance.

Bill Kane – American cowboy who was still riding in rodeos and winning.

Bob Hope – the English comedian who became an American film and theatre star, was still hosting major shows and performing for US troops overseas. Hope died at the age of 100.

Harold Soderquist – joined the American Peace Corps. He and his young wife Bertha (a mere 76-years-old) were assigned to teach in Western Samoa.

At the age of 81

Benjamin Franklin (see above) – helped to write and introduce the American constitution in his early 80s. At an age when most people are seeking a comfortable, quiet retirement, Franklin was a member of the 1787 Constitutional Convention. He helped to ensure that the Constitution was adopted in the U.S.

Victor Hugo – born 1802, Besancon, France, was a French novelist, dramatist and poet (author of *Les Miserables* and *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*). He was the son of a general, and a well-known poet while still a teenager, and at the time of the publication of *Les Miserables* was the most successful writer in the world. In later life, he became a politician and political writer. He spent the years 1851 to 1870 in exile in the Channel Islands (both Jersey and Guernsey) because of his republican views. He published his last major works: *La Legende des siècles (Book 3)* and *L'Archipel de la Manche* at the age of 81. He had by then become a senator and a national hero of France.

Thomas Edison – an American inventor and businessman, was still inventing and acquiring patents (Edison is listed as having 1,093 patents to his name).

At the age of 82

William Gladstone – an English born politician who liked to think of himself as Welsh, became British Prime Minister for the fourth time. He was Prime Minister between 1868 and 1874, then between 1880 and 1885, in 1886 and between 1892 and 1894. While in his 80s, he introduced a bill for Home Rule for Ireland, but the bill was defeated in the House of Lords and never became law.

Winston Churchill – British Prime Minister during the Second World War, published the first part of his four-volume book entitled *A History of the English Speaking Peoples*.

Bill Kane (see above) – was still riding in rodeos.

Leo Tolstoy (see above) – wrote *I cannot be Silent*, a book attacking his Government for executing revolutionaries. Later that year, he was so fed up with all the people fussing around in his house, that he caught the first train out of town. (Sadly he contracted pneumonia, became ill on the train and died in a station master's cottage in the middle of nowhere).

Sir Roger Moore – probably most famous for his portrayal of James Bond, took part in a video protesting against the production of foie gras.

At the age of 83

Mao Tse-tung – Marxist, soldier, statesman and son of a peasant, was still Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe – born 1749, Frankfurt, Germany, was a poet, novelist, dramatist and philosopher. He finished writing *Faust*, now regarded as his masterpiece, in 1832 at the age of 83. *Faust* concerns the soul's struggle for happiness, knowledge, power and salvation. Late in his life, Goethe was regarded as a sage and visited by luminaries from all over the world. He wrote extensively on a wide range of topics including botany, optics and other scientific subjects. He died a little while after finishing writing *Faust*.

Charlie Chaplin – English born actor and director and the son of poverty stricken musical hall artists received an Oscar. Chaplin became a performer at the age of eight and while on tour in New York, he caught the eye of Mack Sennett of the Keystone Cops. At the age of 25, in his second film, developed the baggy trousers, Derby hat, oversized shoes and cane which were to be the hallmark of the 'little tramp'. He co-founded United Artists in 1919. In 1972, he was given a special Academy Award for his services to the cinema.

Dr Benjamin Spock – the author of the hugely popular and influential *Dr Spock's Baby and Child Care*, was still actively fighting for world peace. He had given up his medical practice at the age of 64 and devoted himself to fighting the Vietnam War and promoting a vegan diet for children. He was arrested many times for civil disobedience. He was on one occasion arrested for praying on the White House lawn.

Sir Barnes Wallis – inventor of the bouncing bomb used by Guy Gibson's Dambusters during World War II. The bombs were used to destroy the Mohne and Eder dams in Germany's industrial Ruhr valley and had a significant impact on the outcome of the war – not least in that they gave great encouragement to the British people. The charismatic Gibson helped bring America into the Second World War. When still in his 80s, Wallis was chief of Aeronautical Research and Development for British Aircraft Corporation.

At the age of 84

Marian Hart – (who had learned to fly at 54) completed another solo transatlantic flight in a small, single engine aircraft. She made seven solo flights across the Atlantic. She lived until she was 98.

Dr Benjamin Spock (see above) – paediatrician and bestselling author, won 3rd place in a rowing contest, crossing four miles of the Sir Francis Drake Channel between Tortola and Normal Island in two and a half hours. He credited his good health and strength to his love of life and his lifestyle. Spock lived on a boat for much of his later life and only moved into a house at the age of 95 when advised to do so by his physician.

George Burns (see above) – the comedian, had a hit record in 1980. His recording of *I Wish I Was 18 Again* hit number 49 in the Billboard Top 50. This was his first recording success since 1933 when he and Gracie Allen had a hit comedy record.

Henri Matisse – the prolific painter, sculptor and graphic artist, was still painting. He designed the Chapelle du Rosaire at Vence as a gift for the Dominican nuns who were caring for him.

Guiseppe Verdi (see above) – wrote Stabat Mater.

Claude Monet – was still painting.

Somerset Maugham – was still writing.

At the age of 85

Carl Jung – finished work on *Man and his Symbols*, his best-known work.

Mae West (see above) – made the film *Sextette*.

Theodore Mommsen – received a Nobel Prize.

Marcus Porcius Cato – the Roman statesman, author and orator was still campaigning to destroy Carthage before it became a threat to the Roman Empire.

At the age of 86

Louise Weiss – French author, journalist and feminist, was elected an MEP, representing a French region. She had been a suffragette in Paris in 1935. In 1979, at the age of 86, she was elected a French member of the European Parliament, having stood as a candidate of the Gaullist Party. (The Gaullist Party was named after General Charles de Gaulle who dominated France in the years after the Second World War.) Louise Weiss remained an MEP until her death at the age of 90. The main parliament building in Strasbourg is named after her.

Francis Peyton Rous – an American who was born in 1879, received the Nobel Prize for discovering the role of viruses in the transmission of some types of cancer. In 1911, Rous observed that a malignant tumour growing on a domestic chicken could be transferred to another bird through a virus. He was nominated for a Nobel Prize in 1926 but finally received one 40 years later. Curiously, his daughter, Marni, married another Nobel Prize winner, Alan Lloyd Hodgkin.

Elizabeth Blackwell – an English born physician and the first woman doctor, was still working in medical practice. Her family moved to the United States in 1832, when she was 11-years-old. She studied medicine by reading books and hiring instructors. Medical schools rejected her applications until, in 1847, at the age of 26, she was accepted by the Geneva Medical College (later renamed Hobart College). She was ostracised but graduated at the top of her class. In 1857, she founded the New York Infirmary, staffed entirely by women and subsequently introduced a course of medical education for women.

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres – born 1780, Montauban France, was still painting and producing great works of art until the year of his death. Ingres had become France's most popular society portraitist. His most notable later works are female nudes and his influence is seen in the work of Edgar Degas, Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Pablo Picasso. In 1862, at the age of 82, Ingres painted *The Turkish Bath*, rendered in the circular format of the earlier masters whom he had always admired. The painting showed a number of voluptuous female nudes. In 1864, at the age of 84, he painted another masterpiece, entitled *Oedipus and the Sphinx*.

Coco Chanel (see above) – was still deciding what women around the world should wear.

Dame Agatha Christie – born 1980, Torquay, England was still writing novels. *The Guinness Book of Records* lists Christie as the best-selling novelist of all time. Her books have sold around two billion copies, putting her behind only the Bible and Shakespeare in total sales. Her most famous characters are Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple. She is the world's most translated author and her books have been translated into 103 languages. Her most successful novel, *And Then There Were None* has sold over 100 million copies. (The book was first published under the title *Ten Little Niggers*.) Her play *The Mousetrap*, opened at the Ambassadors Theatre in London in 1952 and was still running in 2017 after 25,000 performances.

At the age of 87

Albert Schweitzer (see above) – helped build half a mile of road near to his hospital, and then also designed and helped to build a stone bridge.

Frank Lloyd Wright – proposed building a skyscraper one mile high.

Mary Baker Eddy – founded the *Christian Science Monitor*. In 1866, at the age of 45 she had a severe fall and healed herself by reading the *New Testament*. She then founded Christian Science and spent some years evolving her system. In 1875, at the age of 54, she published *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*. In 1879, she founded 'The Church of Christ, Scientist'.

George Burns (see above) – comedian was still performing and telling jokes which he admitted were older than he was.

Konrad Adenauer (see above) – was still Chancellor of Germany, though he retired at this age.

At the age of 88

Michelangelo (see above) – worked on the Rondanini Pieta.

Konrad Adenauer (see above) – decided it was time to start work on his memoirs.

Pablos Casals – born 1876, Vendrell, Spain, was a cellist and conductor. Casals refused to return to Spain after Franco took power and, based in Puerto Rico, he toured the world both as a soloist and as a conductor. Casals was still giving touring and concerts at the age of 88 at a time when most people are being encouraged to spend their remaining years sitting in a plastic armchair in an old folks' home.

Bertrand Russell (aka 3rd Earl Russell) – born 1872, Trellech, Wales, was a British logician and philosopher worked tirelessly for pacifism and nuclear disarmament. To academics, he is known both for his work in mathematical logic and for his philosophy. More widely, he is remembered for his campaigning on behalf of a number of social and political causes, particularly pacifism and nuclear disarmament. He was born into the British nobility. His pacifism during the First World War resulted in him losing his lectureship at Cambridge and being imprisoned. His books included *A History of Western Philosophy* which was a best-seller. At the age of 88, he resigned from the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament to form the far more militant Committee of 100.

Grandma Moses – was named 'Young Woman of the Year' by *Mademoiselle* magazine. A documentary was made and she wrote her autobiography.

At the age of 89

Dr Albert Schweitzer (see above) – was still running his hospital in West Africa.

Artur Rubenstein – born 1887, Lodz, Poland was a pianist. Between 1932 and 1937, he stopped performing in public in order to improve his technique. Afterwards, he moved to the US and was regarded as a 'giant of 20th century music'. He was active throughout his 80s and was still giving concerts at the age of 89. At that age, he gave a recital at the Carnegie Hall in New York although his eyes were so bad that he could not see the piano keys, let alone read any music. However, critics agreed that he had played better than ever.

Michelangelo – born 1475, Caprese, Italy, was a sculptor, painter, poet and architect. He worked as a sculptor for Lorenzo de Medici and then moved to Rome where he was commissioned to produce the Pieta (now in St Peter's Basilica). His 'David' was commissioned for the cathedral of Florence. He painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel between 1508 and 1512. He devoted the last 30 years of his life to working on the 'Last Judgement' fresco in the Sistine Chapel and was working on St Peter's Basilica in Rome at his death in 1564.

Bertrand Russell (see above) – was imprisoned for a second time for inciting civil disobedience.

At the age of 90

Grandma Moses (see above) – was still painting in 1950 at the age of 90, and her paintings were attracting prices of $10,000 or more.

Colonel Saunders (see above) – was still promoting Kentucky Fried Chicken. By this time, there were 6,000 outlets in 48 countries.

Duncan MacLean – born 1884, Gourock, Scotland, was an athlete and coach who began his life appearing in music halls as a singer and general entertainer. He appeared on stage as 'Dan O'Scott', dressed in an all-white outfit, including a kilt. He wrote many of the songs he sang. In 1931, he helped to form the Veterans' Athletic Club. At the age of 90, he ran 200 metres in 44 seconds. A year later, he ran 100 metres in 21.27 seconds.

Bertrand Russell (see above) – was still active in global politics.

Leopold Stokowski (see above) – now hopefully recovered from his broken leg, recorded 20 albums during his 90th year and conducted the London Symphony Orchestra in a concert which he had first conducted 60 years earlier.

P.G.Wodehouse – born 1881, Guildford, England, was a novelist, short story writer, lyricist and playwright. He lived much of his adult life in France and the U.S. He is best known as the creator of Bertie Wooster and his valet Jeeves. Wodehouse is credited with having created an entirely fictional world of his own. Wodehouse wrote more than 90 books and 20 film scripts and collaborated with musicians such as Jerome Kern in writing musical comedies. Wodehouse wrote the last Jeeves and Wooster book at the age of 90 but carried on writing other novels.

Marc Chagall – at the age of 90, Chagall became the first living artist to be exhibited at the Louvre museum. He died in 1985.

Pablo Picasso – born 1881, Malaga Spain, was a sculptor, printmaker, stage designer and ceramicist. He moved to Paris in 1904. His so-called 'blue period' lasted from 1901 to 1904 and was followed by his 'rose period'. Between 1909 and 1912, he worked closely with George Braque with whom he developed what was later known as 'cubism'. The Spanish Civil War inspired his best-known work, the vast 'Guernica', which was completed in 1937. He was still drawing and engraving at the age of 90.

Albert Schweitzer (see above) – was still caring for patients at his hospital in Gabon.

Eamon de Valera – born 1882, New York, US, was President of the Republic of Ireland. De Valera's political career lasted from 1917 to 1973 and he served several terms as head of government and head of state. De Valera was made President of the Republic of Ireland in 1959 and was re-elected in 1966 when he was 84-years-old. He retired in 1973 when he was 90-years-old. He was then the oldest head of state in the world.

Baron Alexander von Humboldt – born 1769, Berlin, Germany was a naturalist and explorer. In 1792, he established a technical school for miners and from 1799 onwards, he explored Central and South America. He discovered the connection between the Amazon and Orinoco rivers and surmised that altitude sickness was caused by a lack of oxygen. His work helped found the science of climatology and he studied the relationships between a region's geography and its flora and fauna. At the age of 65, he began writing Kosmos, an account of the structure of the universe as it was then known, and he finished this just before he reached the age of 90.

At the age of 91

Thomas Hobbes – born 1588, Westport, England, Hobbes was an English philosopher and political theorist. Hobbes travelled in Europe (where he talked with Galileo) but in England, his support for absolutism resulted in him being endangered by rising antiroyalist sentiment. Hobbes fled to Paris in 1640 where he taught the future King Charles II of England. In Paris, he wrote *Leviathan* in 1651. The thesis of the book was that the sovereign should have absolute power on the basis of a social contract in which individuals protect themselves by obeying the sovereign in all matters. Hobbes returned to England in 1651. In 1666, when Hobbes was 78-years-old, Parliament threatened to investigate him as an atheist. Charles II protected Hobbes and gave him a pension of £100 a year. The result of Parliament's intervention was that Hobbes could no longer publish anything in England and his work was subsequently printed in Amsterdam. In 1672, at the age of 84, Hobbes published an autobiography in Latin verse and in 1675, at the age of 87, he published complete translations of both *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. He was still writing books at the age of 91.

Frank Lloyd Wright (see above) – was almost 92-years-old when his Guggenheim Museum in New York was completed. The Guggenheim has no separate floor levels but uses a spiral ramp instead of staircases. Wright is often considered America's greatest architect. He is remembered most for popularising the idea that buildings should be in harmony with their environment and with the people who will use them.

Adolph Zukor – born 1873, Ricse, Austria-Hungary, was an American filmmaker and the founder of Paramount Pictures. In the late 1920s, Zukor was producing 60 feature films a year. He pioneered the concept of the distributor charging the exhibitor a percentage of the box office receipts. He was still chairman of Paramount Pictures when he died at the age of 103.

At the age of 92

Michel Eugene Chevreul – published work on the theories of matter.

At the age of 93

Antonio Stradivari – born 1644, Cremona, Milan was a maker of musical instruments. He established his own business in his home town and made many instruments including harps, lutes, mandolins and guitars. However, after 1680, he concentrated on making violins. In 1690, he invented the ‘long strad’. He devised the modern form of the violin bridge and his proportions for the violin are still used. Violinists believe that the shallower body as devised by Stradivari gives a more powerful tone than was previously available. Stradivari was at his peak between 1700 and 1720 and was still making violins at the age of 93, shortly before his death.

P.G.Wodehouse (see above) – the creator of Bertie Wooster and Jeeves the butler, was still writing novels.

At the age of 94

George Bernard Shaw (see above) – wrote his play *Why She Would Not* in seven days, just before his 94th birthday – he died at the age of 94 of injuries which he sustained after falling out of a tree in his garden which he was pruning.

George Burns (see above) – the comedian, was still performing at the age of 94. He performed in *Schenectady*, New York, 63 years after his first performance there. He died at the age of 100.

Bertrand Russell (see above) – was still campaigning for peace and he was in his 94th year when he set up the International War Crimes Tribunal in Stockholm.

At the age of 95

Nola Ochs – born 1911, Kansas, US, received a college degree from Fort Hays State University, Kansas at the age of 95. She was certified by Guinness World Records as the world's oldest college graduate.

Eli Wallach – born 1915 New York, US had a career which spanned six decades. He made over 90 films and was one of the greatest character actors of all time. His movies included *The Magnificent Seven*, *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, *The Two Jakes* and *The Godfather Part III*. At the age of 95, he acted in *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* and *The Ghost Writer*.

At the age of 96

Harry Bernstein – born 1910, Stockport, England spent his life reading scripts and acting as a magazine editor. He had his first book published at the age of 96. The book was entitled *The Invisible Wall: A Love Story that Broke Barriers.* He started writing to help him cope with loneliness after the death of his wife Ruby, to whom he had been married for 67 years. His second book, published in 2008, when he was 97, was entitled *The Dream*. His third book was published in 2009 and entitled *The Golden Willow*. Bernstein died at the age of 101.

At the age of 97

Martin Miller – born 1892, Indiana, US, was still working fulltime as a lobbyist in his 90s. He was campaigning for more rights and better benefits for older people at the age of 97. He testified at hearings and meetings of the legislature and at various boards and commissions, throughout the year – representing the interests of senior citizens. He volunteered to become his home state's No 1 advocate for the elderly in 1957 and rarely failed to attend the Indiana General Assembly.

At the age of 98

Fred Streeter – born 1879, Pulborough, England, was Britain's best-known gardener. He worked in a number of gardens, becoming a head gardener while still in his 20s. In 1901, he met his wife, Hilda. The couple were married until her death in 1966. Streeter, who worked on both radio and television, was still broadcasting on the BBC radio at the age of 98, with his final broadcast transmitted on the day he died. He never used a script.

At the age of 99

Beatrice Wood – born 1893, San Francisco, US, was an artist and potter, actress and sculptor. She was known as the ‘Mama of Dada’ because of her involvement in the Avant Garde movement. She also became a leading ceramicist. At the age of 90, Wood became a writer (after encouragement from anais Nin). When asked for the secret of her longevity she said: ‘I owe it all to chocolate and young men.’ She was still working and exhibiting her latest work at the age of 99. She lived to be 105.

At the age of 100

Teiichi Igarishi (see above) – climbed Mount Fuji again, though he did carry a cane. He wore thick socks but no shoes.

Grandma Moses (see above) – celebrated her 100th birthday, and New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller announced that it was 'Grandma Moses Day'. She was featured on the cover of *LIFE* magazine. A book for children entitled *Grandma Moses Story Book* was published.

Michel Eugene Chevreul (see above) – gave the first photo interview.

Melquiades Ortiz – born 1861, Mexico was still actively farming, using a horse and a walking plough well after his 100th birthday. He was still farming and delivering the mail until shortly before he died at the age of 109.

Fauja Singh – born 1911, Punjab, India, broke a number of world records in one day in Canada. He ran the 100 metres in 23.14 seconds, 200 metres in 52.23 seconds, the 400 metres in 2 minutes 13.48 seconds, the 800 metres in 5 minutes 32 seconds, the 1500 metres in 11 minutes 27.81 seconds, the mile in 11 minutes 53.45 seconds, the 3000 metres in 24 minutes 52.47 seconds and the 5000 metres in 49 minutes 57.39 seconds. Five of these were world records for his age group. Three days later Singh, a vegetarian, became the first 100-year-old to finish a marathon. He took eight hours 11.06 minutes to complete the course. He completed another marathon (in Hong Kong) five weeks away from his 102nd birthday. He then announced his intention to retire from competitive running but said that he would continue running for pleasure, health and charity.

And, finally, I must mention Charles Smith who was, in 1842, in Liberia and who was taken to the US as a slave and sold in New Orleans to a man called Smith (hence his name). Mr Smith was forced to retire from a citrus farm in 1955, at the age of 113, because he was officially considered too old to climb trees. I applaud the official who apparently considered 112 to be an acceptable age for climbing trees.

The fact is that most centenarians keep working for as long as they are able (or have, at least, kept themselves busy).

The one thing they have in common is that they never accept the nonsense that just because you are old in years you must allow yourself to be stuffed in a corner until you die.

Note from Vernon Coleman:
If you have found this book inspirational, I would be enormously grateful if you would write a short, and hopefully positive, review.

For details of more books by Vernon Coleman please see his Amazon biography, type in ‘Vernon Coleman kindle books’ on Amazon or visit www.vernoncoleman.com

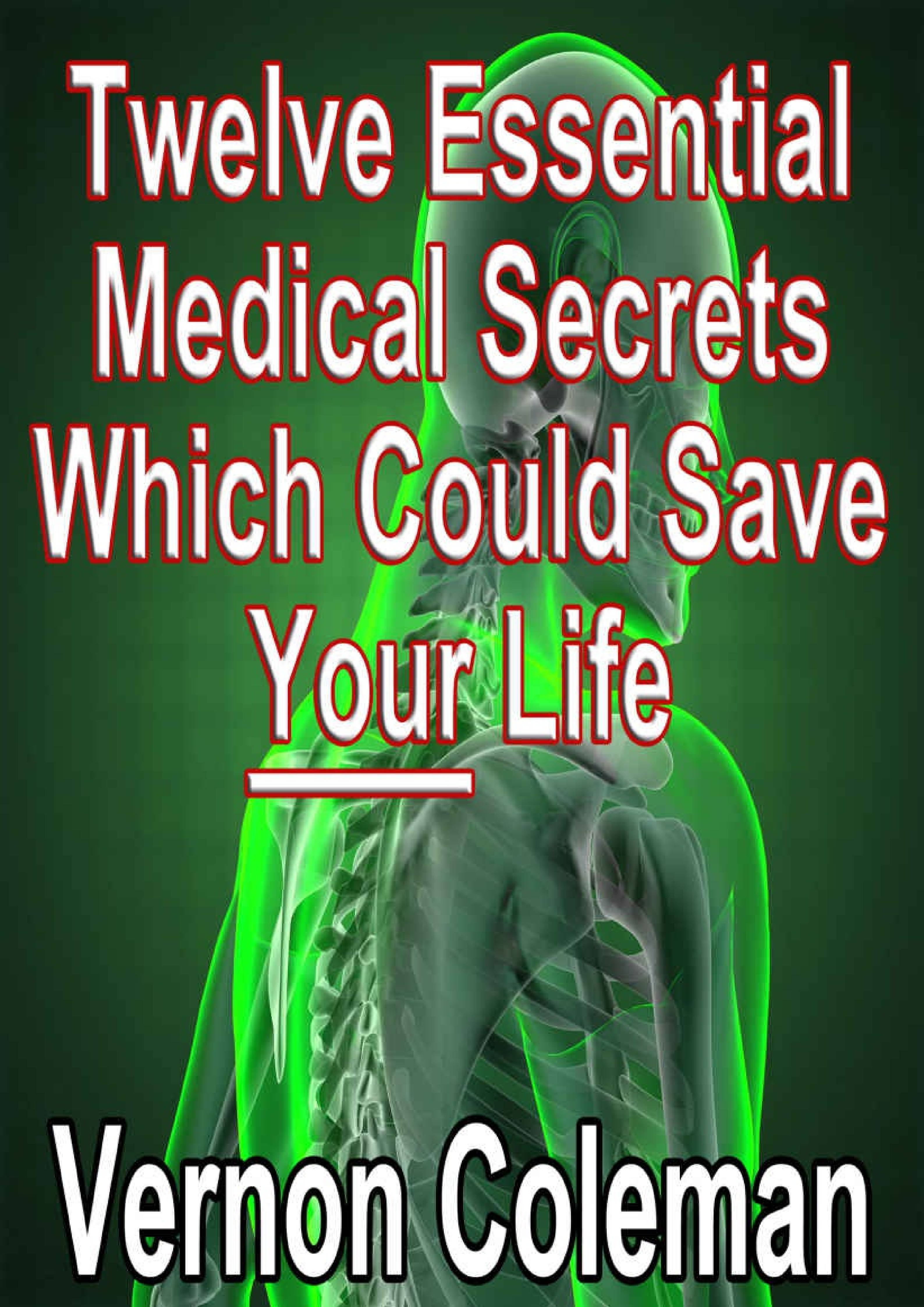

Twelve Essential Medical Secrets Which Could Save Your Life

Vernon Coleman

Coleman’s Laws

The Twelve Medical Truths
You Must Know To Survive

Vernon Coleman

European Medical Journal

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Dedication

To Donna Antoinette: brave as a lion and sensitive as a kitten.

As Antoine de Saint Exupéry might have written (if he had been a bit more of a romantic): ‘Love does not consist only in gazing at each other (delightful though that may be), but also in looking outward together in the same direction.’

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Preface

We all want to trust our doctor. We want to believe that we can trust him or her because life is so much easier that way. We want to believe that if we fall ill there will be someone honest, honourable, intelligent, wise, caring and compassionate to whom we can turn. If things are otherwise then we would prefer not to know.

But things have changed in the last few years. Outside influences (from drug companies, politicians and lawmakers) mean that these days very few of us can trust our doctor; not, at least, in that all-trusting way people used to trust their doctors. Trusting your doctor can be hazardous to your health.

Things have changed quite rapidly.

When I first wrote my book *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You* in the mid 1990s the book proved popular with some readers but attracted a good deal of disapproval from others. Many people acknowledged that there might be some bad doctors around but believed that most doctors were good and that *their* doctor was certainly one of the good ones. That has changed. When, in 2003, I published a second and larger edition of *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You* readers leapt on the book with much greater enthusiasm and, it has to be said, with some apparent relief.

Today, things are getting worse at a frightening rate.

The majority of doctors and nurses seem to have forgotten why they were trained and why they are paid. Passion and purpose have disappeared as the healing professions have become part of an industry; obsessed by the need to make a profit and unconcerned with such unprofitable concepts as ethics and caring.

I suspect that all readers of this book make some effort to ensure that the tyres on their cars have plenty of tread and that their brakes are in good, working condition. Everyone knows that motorcars can kill, and so sensible individuals do what they can to protect themselves.

And yet many more people die each year as a result of medical ‘accidents’ than die as a result of road accidents.

Put another way, this means that your doctor is far more likely to kill you than your car. Not knowing how to protect yourself from poor medical decisions is far more dangerous than driving around in a poorly maintained motorcar.

The underlying problem is that even good, kind, conscientious doctors — doctors who are honest and honourable, who care about their work and who do their very best for their patients — can still make people ill. And can still kill.

Many (though by no means all) of the problems caused by doctors are a result of prescription drug consumption. When he writes out a prescription your doctor has to rely upon the honesty and integrity of the drug company making the product he is prescribing. And since most drug companies do not operate in an honest way that is a fundamental error of trust which can lead to many problems. You suffer from your doctor’s trust in the drug company.

These days medicine is so complex, and drugs so powerful, that you don’t have to be an evil doctor to be a bad doctor.

To that you must add the fact that all patients are individual and different. A drug which has proved effective and safe when given to 99 or 999 patients may still prove dangerous and deadly when given to the 100th or the 1000th patient.

Every patient who takes a drug — even a well-tried drug — is participating in an experiment. Most doctors either do not understand this or they forget it in the heat of daily practice. And, of course, prescribing drugs is just one of the things doctors do.

The bottom line is that however good your doctor is — and however much you may trust him or her — you must share the responsibility for your own health and you must know when to tell your doctor if you think that the treatment with which he or she is providing you could be causing problems.

* * *

Things aren’t going to get any better. Indeed, my view is that everything will continue to get worse. Medicine is complex, and becoming ever more complex by the day. Medical students and young nurses are being taught within an environment which is geared towards defending the system and protecting drug companies. Responsibility has been separated from authority. In many hospitals patients are regarded (if they are regarded at all) as a nuisance.

Things will only change for the better when patients, and the honest professionals who do care, are prepared to stand up and make their voices heard.

Tell your friends, neighbours and colleagues what you read in this book. Share what you have learnt. Things don’t have to be as bad as they are. But we are the only people who can make a difference. Reasonable men adapt themselves to the world around them. Unreasonable men try to adapt the world to themselves. So all progress depends on unreasonable men. Let us all be unreasonable.

* * *

I have built this book around twelve basic laws of medicine which I have, over the years, formulated for my own benefit, as a doctor, an author, a concerned relative and a patient. I have illustrated the twelve laws with clinical anecdotes and scientific data.

My twelve laws are designed to help you make sure that you get the best out of your doctor (and every other doctor who treats you) — and to minimise your chances of being made ill by a doctor.

Vernon Coleman August 2006

Author's Boring But Important Notes

1. This book is not intended to be, and cannot be, an alternative to personal, professional medical advice. Readers should immediately consult a trained and properly qualified health professional, whom they trust and respect, for advice about any symptom or health problem which requires diagnosis, treatment or any kind of medical attention. Readers should always consult a qualified doctor before changing or stopping medication, before changing their diet or before beginning any exercise programme. While the advice and information in this book are believed to be accurate at the time of writing, neither the author nor the publisher can accept any legal responsibility or liability for errors or omissions which may have been made.

2. Many authors of medical books try to make themselves (and their books) look well-informed by padding out their work with pages and pages of references. My books do not contain scientific references. There is a very good reason for this. If I listed all the references I've used in researching and writing this book the reference section would be as long as the text, there would be twice as many pages and the book would cost twice as much to print and distribute. My guarantee that the material in this book is well-founded is built upon my credibility as an author. If my readers find that I've made stuff up, or made mistakes, then no one will buy my next book. This is what I do for a living and it's in my professional and financial interest to make sure it's accurate.

Vernon Coleman 2006

Coleman’s 1st Law Of Medicine

If you are receiving treatment for an existing disease and you develop new symptoms then, until proved otherwise, you should assume that the new symptoms are caused by the treatment you are receiving.

1

Doctors are notoriously reluctant to admit that the treatments they recommend can do harm. There are several reasons for this. First, they often simply don’t know how dangerous drugs can be (doctors rarely bother to read drug company information sheets). Second, they are frightened of being sued. (Doctors fear that if they admit that their treatment made someone ill they will receive a letter from a lawyer.) And finally, there is a natural human unwillingness to admit responsibility for something that has gone wrong. This brand of unwillingness is unusually well-developed among doctors who are encouraged to think of themselves as godlike by many of their other more passive patients. Admitting to having made someone ill reminds doctors that they are mortal and fallible.

Because doctors almost never admit that the drugs they have prescribed might have caused unpleasant or dangerous side effects, very few incidences of drug-induced illness are reported to the official watchdogs which exist to measure and assess drug side effects. This enables doctors and drug companies to claim that prescription drugs are safe. (The word ‘safe’ is, of course, relative. Even though the number of reported side effects is absurdly low, doctors are now officially one of the top four causes of death and serious injury in the world. They share the top four spots with cancer, heart disease and stroke.)

2

Side effects are far commoner than most people (including doctors) think. Four out of every ten patients who take a prescription drug will develop side effects. Some side effects will be mild and others will be unpleasant but many will be dangerous and potentially life-threatening.

3

Drug side effects can (and usually do) cause problems when you least expect them. None of us is immune. And both doctors and patients are usually far too slow to consider drug side effects when they are looking for a cause for new symptoms. We are all likely to forget or under-estimate the danger.

After I damaged my shoulder joint (don’t ask how — you don’t want to know and wouldn’t believe it) I started taking soluble aspirin to reduce the inflammation.

On a trip to France I started using a local variety of soluble aspirin. It dissolved much more speedily than the English variety.

My shoulder was improving nicely.

But then I developed another, quite separate problem. I started getting severe muscle pain in my left calf.

Donna Antoinette, my wife, asked if it could be due to the aspirin. I dismissed her fears. I was taking only a small dose of aspirin — and had been taking the same dose for some time without trouble.

Because the pain had started while I was walking my first fear was that it was intermittent claudication — indicative of a blocked artery in my leg. But my pulse was good so I wondered if I could have a deep vein thrombosis. It seemed extremely unlikely since aspirin is a good anti-clotting drug. I compared my painful calf with my other one using my tie as a substitute for the tape measure I didn’t have. The painful calf wasn’t swollen. Besides, the pain was too much like a cramp. (Being a doctor can be a bit of a nuisance at times.)

That night I hardly slept. I was close to calling for an ambulance.

What could cause such severe muscle cramps?

And then it occurred to me that a metabolic alkalosis is another possible cause of cramps.

Why could I be suffering from a sudden alkalosis?

My wife was still quietly and politely wondering about the aspirin.

I checked the packet. And discovered that in addition to the aspirin the tablets contained sodium bicarbonate. The bicarbonate was there to help the tablets dissolve quickly. And even though I was on a low dose there was enough sodium bicarbonate to cause the alkalosis. And the cramps.

I stopped the aspirin. And a day later the cramps disappeared. This embarrassing story reinforces Coleman’s 1st Law of Medicine which states that if you have a health problem which requires treatment and you acquire new symptoms then the new symptoms are probably caused by the treatment you’re taking.

Side effects are a major cause of illness today. And it isn’t just the main constituent of a drug which can cause problems.

4

According to the *Journal of the American Medical Association:* ‘Adverse drug reactions are the fourth leading cause of death in America. Reactions to prescription and over-the-counter medications kill far more people annually than all illegal drug use combined.’

5

The incidence of drug side effects would not matter so much if all prescriptions were necessary and life-saving. But they aren’t. On the contrary most prescriptions are unnecessary.

6

There are hugely profitable prescription drugs on the market which have saved no lives at all but which have killed ten times as many people as the attack which took place in America on 11th September 2001**.**

7

The power of the drug companies is vast.

In America the drug industry is represented by over 1,200 full time political lobbyists — including 40 former members of Congress. Drug companies contribute millions to federal election campaigns and spend over $12 billion a year handing out drug samples and employing drug pushers (known as sales representatives) to influence doctors to prescribe specifically branded drugs.

In just about every Westernised country in the world doctors receive most of their official (and, therefore, theoretically independent) post graduate education through meetings (sponsored by drug companies) and journals (which rely heavily on drug company advertising).

You will not be surprised to read that drug companies do not spend a good deal of time or effort warning doctors about drug side effects.

8

The drug industry does not exist to find or make cures or treatments for people. It does not exist to help people. It does not exist to save lives. It exists solely to make money. Doctors must know this. But as a profession they are, nevertheless, married to the industry and their actions suggest that many doctors regard their primary loyalty as being to the drug industry rather than to their patients. Doctors are encouraged to be loyal to the pharmaceutical industry by governments which consistently bow to drug company demands.

It comes as a shock to some people to realise that drug companies (like food companies and supermarkets) exist to make money. (These days they exist to make it for the executives who run the companies rather than the shareholders who own them but that’s another story). No large business exists to please the customers except in that it wants to encourage customers to keep buying its products. And drug companies, whose customers are largely captive, don’t have to worry about that. Indeed, one of the main problems with drug companies is that the real customers for their products — patients — are removed from the decision-making processes which lead to a rise or fall in corporate profits.

Drug company executives are beholden to the short-term share price of their company. They must work constantly to defend the share price in order to defend their own bonuses and share options.

As I explained in previous books (notably *Toxic Stress* and *Animal Rights Human Wrongs)* our world is now controlled not by the needs of individuals but by the needs of corporations. And naturally corporations (and institutions, associations and governments) are not restrained by ethical considerations.

Drug companies don’t have hearts or consciences. They want to sell you drugs. The company doesn’t give a fig whether the drug makes you ill or kills you. The company just wants your money.

9

In response to a newspaper article discussing whether or not doctors can judge the claims made by drug company representatives one reader wrote: I suspect that the training that a medical practitioner receives both before and after qualifying equips him or her to judge the quality of information received and reliability of the source. Otherwise what has been achieved by a lengthy and continuing education?’

I’m afraid I have bad news for this trusting patient.

Most doctors in practice today learned next to nothing about drugs while at medical school. When I qualified as a doctor my knowledge of practical prescribing was pitiful. And after qualification most of the training a doctor receives is paid for by drug companies.

Drug company representatives are trained to know all there is to know about one or two particular drugs.

(Many such representatives seem to learn the information by rote. When I was a general practitioner I discovered that if I stopped a rep in mid flow he or she would invariably have to go back to the beginning and start all over again.)

It is safest to assume that most doctors know little about the drugs they prescribe; and that the little they know they learn from the companies that make those drugs.

10

If given a choice between an old treatment and a new treatment you should always choose the old treatment. New drugs are more dangerous than old ones. Drug side effects only appear after time. The big advantage of a drug that has been around for years is that it is unlikely to be the world's most dangerous drug. The longer a treatment has been around the more will be known about it. You should only take a new and untested drug when you have tried all the old and tested drugs and they haven't worked.

11

Many huge-selling drugs are launched on the basis of trials involving relatively few people. So, for example, consider a trial which involves 100 patients. If just one in 1,000 people who take the drug dies from it the chances are high that the trial of 100 patients will show nothing amiss. But if the drug is then assumed to be safe and prescribed for 10,000,000 people worldwide (a highly likely occurrence) it means that 10,000 people will die as a result of taking the drug.

This sort of carnage is probably acceptable if the drug is life-saving and is only prescribed for patients who might otherwise die.

But if the drug is prescribed for something which is not life-threatening (such as hayfever) then all those deaths are entirely unnecessary.

12

Everyone is different. A pill which saves your life may kill your next door neighbour.

13

A 13-year-old child weighing 6 stone will probably receive the same dose of medication as a 45-year-old man weighing 20 stone.

The same medicines (often in the same doses) are prescribed for young and old, male and female, fat and thin.

This is bizarre, illogical and indefensible.

No one bothers to do any research into how much of a drug should be given to which type of patient. Why should they? The vast majority of drug research is done by, or on behalf of, drug companies. Adjusting doses to suit particular patients is of no interest to them. All they want to do is sell drugs.

And so everyone (young or old, small or big) gets the biggest dose the drug company can sell.

14

Never take a new drug if you are alone in the house. If you are alone and you have an anaphylactic shock reaction you could die. Anaphylactic shock reactions are commoner than most people imagine. The number of people suffering from potentially life-threatening allergic reactions has increased by more than 300% in a decade and, for example, in one recent year around 30,000 people in the United Kingdom (UK) had anaphylactic shock reactions). Anaphylactic shock reactions can — and do — kill. If there is someone else with you there will be someone able to ring for a doctor and an ambulance.

15

In medicine the word 'new' when used to describe a drug means two things: the drug is expensive and no one yet knows whether it will cure you or kill you.

16

More and more prescription drugs are being made available 'over the counter' without a prescription. Every year another clump of potentially lethal drugs is licensed for patients to buy without any medical advice.

This is, of course, incredibly dangerous. It is reckless of pharmacies to sell such dangerous drugs and it is reckless of governments to allow them to do so.

But it happens because it suits everyone in the medicine business.

Drug companies want drugs to be made available over the counter because this enables them to advertise their drugs more freely, to sell more of them and to make much bigger profits.

Governments want drugs to be available over the counter because this means that patients have to pay and the Government doesn't.

Doctors are enthusiastic about patients buying their own drugs because it cuts down their workload and gives them more time to fill in forms.

And pharmacists are keen on selling drugs over the counter because it helps boost their profits.

The only people who lose out are patients.

This policy means that patients have more responsibility forced on them and are likely to die or become seriously ill if they make an error of any kind in making a diagnosis or choosing a treatment.

17

High street shoppers are now encouraged to purchase cholesterol lowering drugs even though (as I first revealed in my book *How to Stop Your Doctor Killing You* in 1996) there is really no clear evidence proving that these drugs are both safe and necessary. Your friendly local pharmacist will sell you a test to find out if you have too much cholesterol and then, if you have, sell you just the drug to deal with it.

In April 2005, the *Drug and Therapeutics Bulletin* revealed that the British Government had re-classified the cholesterol lowering drug Simvastatin as an over-the-counter product, called Zocor Heart-Pro, available to be purchased without a prescription, although this decision was 'not based on robust evidence of clinical benefit.

The *Drug and Therapeutics Bulletin* claimed that it had uncovered evidence that the medicines regulator (the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency — MHRA) had inaccurately reported the consultation which preceded the re-classification. In November 2003, the MHRA had published a consultation document on the proposed re-classification of this drug. One hundred responses were received from a wide range of professional organisations, patient groups and individuals. The MHRA announced that about two thirds of respondents were in favour of the proposal. Not true, according to the *Drug and Therapeutics Bulletin.*

'...our analysis of the 80 responses that the MHRA has made available for public scrutiny indicates that 31% of these respondents offered at least some support for the re-classification, 35% clearly opposed it and the rest offered no clear opinion either way...Even if all 20 of the withheld responses are assumed to have been in favour of the re-classification, only 45% of all respondents at most could be described as supporting the proposal.

So, to put it politely, the MHRA had bent the truth.

Why would it do this?

Three reasons.

First, drug companies can make far more money when a drug is made available without prescription. They can sell their product to far more people and don't have to worry about persuading doctors to prescribe it.

Second, the Government saves money because all the patients who take the drug have to pay for it themselves. In the UK around 1.8 million people were taking statins when the drug was first made available without a prescription. The cost to the NHS was £700 million and rising fast. With drug company campaigns to persuade doctors to prescribe the drugs proving extremely effective it was estimated that the NHS bill would exceed £2 billion a year within a few years.

Thirdly, many of the people associated with the MHRA are alleged to have long-standing links with the drug industry. Some own shares in drug companies.

I have been writing about such matters since 1970 and so I wasn't in the slightest bit surprised to hear that once again a Government agency had acted in a way designed to benefit a drug company and to put ordinary citizens at risk.

The *Drug and Therapeutics Bulletin* reported that no trials had assessed the drug's long-term effectiveness in its target group — people likely to be at moderate risk of having a heart attack.

'The lack of such research,' said the *Drug and Therapeutics Bulletin,* 'raises serious questions about whether people are unknowingly wasting their money — around £170 a year — on a treatment that might not work. Also, crucially, since people can be sold Zocor Heart-Pro without a detailed assessment that includes measurement of blood pressure and cholesterol levels, some could be wrongly classed and treated as being at only moderate risk of a heart attack, when in reality their risk is very much higher.'

Consumers finding a drug freely available without prescription would, of course, not be aware of the nature and extent of the problems associated with drugs of this type.

When NASA astronaut Dr Duane Graveline had a heart attack he was given a statin to reduce the risk of a recurrence. Six weeks after starting the drug he lost some of his memory for six hours. The loss was so severe that he did not recognise either his wife or his own home. On recovering, Dr Graveline took himself off the drug but, a year later, decided to try it again. He had another attack of what is known as 'transient global amnesia' (TGA) which wiped out every memory since early childhood. This attack lasted twelve hours. There are hundreds of examples of statins causing TGA. Quite apart from the fears and anxieties these attacks produce it is scary to think of the consequences if a surgeon or a bus driver had one of these attacks.

Amnesia isn't the only problem linked to these drugs. One study found a 25% increase in newly diagnosed cancer among older people after four years treatment with a statin. The cancers which seem most likely to develop include cancer of the breast and cancer of the gastrointestinal tract.

Other side effects include congestive heart failure, neurological damage, extreme fatigue, nausea, muscle weakness, gastrointestinal problems and pain.

18

Doctors have no idea how long to give drugs for. When prescribing antibiotics, for example, one doctor will hand out a prescription for five days, a second will write a prescription for seven days, a third will dispense a ten day supply and a fourth will give a prescription for fourteen days. All for the same patient with the same symptoms.

Only the most bigoted member of the medical establishment would dare to describe medicine as a science.

19

A friend of mine had labyrinthitis for which his doctor prescribed a drug called prochlorperazine. Within hours my friend had developed bad dizziness when sitting up and a new symptom: ataxia. (He had difficulty in controlling body movements.) He telephoned the doctor and reported what had happened. The doctor immediately changed his diagnosis and told my friend that he might have a brain tumour. He increased the dose of the prochlorperazine and said he would arrange for a brain scan to be performed. When the dizziness and the ataxia got worse my friend's wife telephoned me to tell me what was happening. She was, not surprisingly, in tears.

'He's on prochlorperazine?' I asked.

'Yes,' she whispered. 'But it doesn't seem to be helping.'

'Stop it,' I told her. 'Stop the prochlorperazine and I think he'll be better.'

They stopped the prochlorperazine.

The dizziness on sitting up and the ataxia were gone within hours.

Both symptoms are possible side effects of prochlorperazine.

20

Here's another true story about drug side effects. It involves a reader of mine.

My reader (an elderly man) went to his local surgery complaining of breathlessness.

A nurse gave him a spirometer to blow into. (A spirometer is a simple instrument which measures lung function). My reader huffed and puffed but could not do much with it. So on the basis of this single test the nurse diagnosed a wonderful new disease called Chronic Obstructive Airways Disease (COPD). (Making this diagnosis was a pretty stupid (not to say dangerous) thing to do. If my reader had put his hands around the nurse's throat she would have not been able to blow into the tube either. But it wouldn't prove she had COPD.)

'You have a chronic cough and bring up sputum every day, don't you?' she said.

'No,' he replied.

'Oh well, never mind,' she replied. 'I'll put you down as suffering from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease anyway.'

My reader had no other signs or symptoms of COPD. His medical history did not suggest that he was a likely candidate. But satisfied with her diagnosis the nurse then exercised her newly acquired right to prescribe and prescribed a steroid spray. Steroids are, of course, enormously powerful and equally dangerous. They should only be prescribed when absolutely essential.

Since my reader didn't have COPD the steroid spray didn't work. So the nurse gave him a spray containing both a steroid and another chemical. Since the diagnosis was wrong this did not work either.

My reader then went back to the nurse (maybe doctors are too busy attending meetings to see patients these days) and told her that the medicine she'd prescribed wasn't working. Believing in her diagnosis he trustingly asked if he could double it. The nurse, seemingly as ignorant as my reader, duly doubled the dose.

When my reader developed atrial fibrillation (a known side effect of the deadly mixture he had been given) the doctor found a gap between all his meetings and prescribed digoxin to control the fibrillation. (It did not occur to the doctor to stop the drug causing the fibrillation; possibly because he didn't know that the drug could cause fibrillation.)

Unfortunately, the digoxin slowed my reader's heartbeat so much that he started getting chest pains. So the doctor, probably fearing that the digoxin might slow the circulation, create a blood clot and cause a heart attack, started my reader on warfarin to stop his blood clotting.

My reader's breathing problem was still no better so he then had an X-ray which showed that a fall he'd had some weeks earlier had resulted in several crushed ribs. The radiologist also noticed that my reader had tuberculosis scars on his lungs.

My reader, however, was now taking steroids, digoxin and warfarin (three of the most potent goodies in the drugs business) and was considerably worse than he had been when he'd first visited the nurse.

Naturally, the doctors involved refused to accept that the drug he'd been given could have caused the atrial fibrillation. They claimed that the fact that the fibrillation had started so soon after the drug had been prescribed was just a coincidence. In truth no one could say for certain whether or not the drug had caused the heart problem but since the drug company had admitted that their product could cause problems of this type it seemed to me that to dismiss the possibility of the link was something an ostrich might have done. It was rather akin to arguing that if a man who was hit on the head with a hammer subsequently developed a headache there was no connection between the two, or that if a man got a broken arm after falling down stairs the break was merely a coincidence.

Doctors who have prescribed drugs which have caused serious side effects rarely admit that there could be a link between a drug they have prescribed and a worsening of the patient's condition. Doctors prefer almost any solution other than the awful one that a patient has been made ill by a side effect, because that means it was their fault (with all the legal and moral overtones that carries).

21

Aspirin is one of the safest and most tested drugs in the world but it is also out of patent and very cheap to make and to buy. So wonderfully idiotic rules have been introduced in many countries making it impossible to buy aspirin in anything other than very small quantities. So, for example, if you want to buy aspirin to treat your arthritis you may find that you can only buy tablets in packs of twelve. This means that the average arthritis sufferer will have to visit the chemist almost daily. Inevitably, they don't. They visit their doctor and are given a prescription for something which is almost certainly far more expensive and probably much more dangerous.

22

When a patient is given a prescription drug there is a risk that the drug will cause a side effect. When a patient is given two drugs both can, of course, cause side effects. But there is another (usually underestimated) problem. Many drugs do not interact well. If you take two drugs then your chances of developing unpleasant or lethal side effects are far greater than the chances of developing unpleasant or lethal side effects with the two individual drugs. Taking two prescription drugs is a bit like mixing brandy and red wine. Taking three is like mixing brandy, red wine and champagne.

Drug companies, which sometimes seem to me to thrive on creating illness, often make things worse by manufacturing compound drugs which actually contain two or more drugs in one tablet or capsule. The only advantage of this is that it enables them to make many people ill. And, of course, people who are ill are usually given yet more tablets.

23

Most of the clinical research published in medical journals (and used as the basis for medical practice) is (how shall I put it to be tactful) as bent as a paperclip. Authors of clinical research articles are supposed to admit to any links they have with drug companies if those links might have a direct effect on their credibility. But general links don't count which is just as well since the vast majority of medical researchers have, at some stage in their careers, taken drug company money.

Between two thirds and three quarters of the drug trials published in major medical journals are funded by drug companies. Research conducted by drug companies which shows that a drug doesn't work or is dangerous is routinely suppressed.

Sceptics about the independence of studies funded by drug companies point to the fact that research programmes paid for by drug companies are four times as likely to produce results which are favourable to the company than are studies funded from other sources. What an amazingly useful coincidence that is.

Drug companies use a number of tricks to ensure that they get the results they want. Here are some:

***** The company compares its own product with a treatment which is known to be inferior. One of the oldest tricks in the book is to compare a new painkiller or arthritis treatment with ordinary non-soluble aspirin. Since non-soluble aspirin is known to cause gastrointestinal problems it isn't easy to show that the new product is 'best'.

***** The company ensures that its new wonder drug is compared either with a very low dose of the competing drug (in which case the competing drug probably doesn't work) or with a very high dose of the competing drug (in which case the competing drug probably produces very unpleasant side effects).

***** One of the favourite tricks is to perform experiments on animals. These are a guaranteed success. If animals do not die or fall ill when given a drug then the company making it will announce that the drug has been proved to be safe. On the other hand, if animals do die or fall ill the company making the drug will announce that it is ignoring the results because animals are different to people. You will doubtless suspect that I am making this up. I am not. Doctors, politicians and official custodians of patient safety all accept this nonsense. (There is evidence proving this point in my book *Animal Experiments: Simple Truths* and on www.vernoncoleman.com and www.vernoncoleman.co.uk. For example, *Animal Experiments: Simple Truths* contains a list of 46 drugs which may cause tumours or cancer when given to animals but which are marketed and passed as safe for humans.)

***** The company takes a lot of measurements, ignores the ones which are inconvenient and publishes the ones which make their product look good. (So, for example, they may give their product to patients for a month. At the end of the month all the patients may be dead. They will ignore that inconvenient result. But they will publish the results which show that patients had fewer symptoms after five days.)

***** The company will pay numerous sets of researchers to conduct the same research. They will then ignore the results which are inconvenient and publish the one which makes their product look good.

***** Drug companies will pay researchers not to publish unfavourable research results.

***** At least half of the articles on drug efficacy which appear in medical journals are ghost-written by people working for drug companies. Allegedly distinguished doctors from allegedly prestigious universities then allow their names to be put on the papers — often without ever looking at the original data. The doctors do this because an academic's status depends very much on the number of scientific papers he publishes.

24

There are 348,461 clinical research papers published every week. Most of them are of no value to anyone except the author (and perhaps a drug company). Any useful ones are lost among the self-serving, useless, irrelevant, commercially-inspired dross. How can any doctor possibly be expected to read 348,461 clinical research papers every week?

25

How do medical journals make their money?

Several ways.

When an article is published in a medical journal the drug company may pay huge amounts of money to buy reprints to distribute to doctors. It is not unknown for a drug company to spend more than a million dollars buying reprints of an article.

Some medical journals charge money for an article to appear on their pages. (Normally journals and magazines pay their contributors. With some medical journals things are the other way round.)

Finally medical journals accept huge amounts of drug company advertising.

26

Statutory organisations which were founded to protect patients from badly tested or unsafe drugs are now so controlled by the drug industry that, in practice, they simply protect the interests of the pharmaceutical industry. They do this because that is the way they are structured and because most of the so-called experts who act as committee members or consultants are also receiving money from the drug companies they are supposed to be monitoring.

27

A few years ago doctors, drug companies and cancer charities were enthusiastically promoting tamoxifen as a drug that would cure and prevent breast cancer. Some advocates wanted every adult woman to take the drug every day for life. You could almost see them salivating at the thought of all those cash registers clinking away as the money poured in from around the world.

It was only when I pointed out (in my book *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You)* that tamoxifen causes cancer of the uterus *(causes* you will note) that the drug's advocates became a little quieter in their enthusiasm for this deeply unpleasant drug.

Incidentally, tamoxifen causes liver tumours when given to rats and gonadal tumours when given to mice. Naturally, the drug's many supporters ignored this research on the grounds that animals are different to people.

28

How many parents (or, indeed, doctors) know that 90% of the medication given to newborn babies has only ever been tested on adults? Not many, I suspect. But it's true. There is evidence now that children's bodies (as well as being smaller) actually break down drugs differently to adults. This too must increase children's chances of developing serious side effects.

Two thirds of children treated in hospital are given drugs that have never been tested for use among people who are under 18 years old. Doctors have, for decades, had to guess the right dose because many drugs have never been clinically tested on children.

Similarly, drugs are not usually tested on people over 65. And so when older patients are given drugs the doctor has little idea of what may, or may not, happen.

'All this uncertainty is what makes the practice of medicine so exciting', said one particularly cruel doctor I once met.

29

In 1988, the British Government led the way internationally by issuing warnings about benzodiazepine drugs (widely used as tranquillisers and sleeping tablets and things to give to patients whose symptoms weren't easy to diagnose) and advising doctors not to prescribe them for more than two weeks at a time. (The Minister of Health at the time admitted, in a House of Commons statement, that the advice had been given as a direct result of my columns and book on the subject.) The Government recognised that the drugs could be dangerously addictive.

And yet, nearly twenty years later, it was announced that doctors were still writing out millions of prescriptions for these drugs. And, as if that wasn't bad enough, in thousands of nursing homes and hospitals nurses were handing the drugs out to elderly patients without a doctor's prescription and without the patients knowing that they were being drugged.

Around 80% of the prescriptions for sleeping tablets are for older patients who often stay on such medication for years and who suffer more than most patients from the side effects. In November 2005, I sat open mouthed with disbelief when I read an article headlined ‘Sleeping pills may be doing you harm’.

‘The debilitating side effects of medicines commonly prescribed for insomnia in older patients outweigh the benefits in most cases, it is claimed,’ continued the news story, reporting an analysis of yet another study showing the danger associated with these drugs. A spokeswoman for a charity for the elderly said that the study was vital as there had not been enough research into the problem. (If they’d asked me I could have sent them articles and papers of mine dating back over 30 years. We need more research into the benzodiazepines like we need more lawyers.)

I have listed the horrendous side effects associated with drugs such as benzodiazepines in previous books such as *Life Without Tranquillisers* (published in 1985) and in articles I wrote from the early 1970s onwards, but it is, perhaps, enough to point out that in addition to being more addictive than heroin (or, indeed, any other illegal drug) benzodiazepine tranquillisers and sleeping tablets can cause memory and concentration problems and can result in accidents.

I am pained and ashamed to have to report that over thirty years after I first published evidence condemning the widespread use of tranquillisers and sleeping tablets, hundreds of thousands of people over 65 are still effectively being deprived of the final years of their lives because of the incompetence and stupidity of doctors and nurses.

30

Here are six pieces of research no one ever does.

1. Do drugs act differently when given to men and women? How do drugs act differently when given to elderly patients or to children?

2. When prescribed for a routine infection should antibiotics be given for three days, five days, seven days, ten days, fourteen days or what?

3. In which patients are non-drug therapies more effective than drugs?

4. Most of the drugs on the market are merely variations on a relatively small number of themes. So, for example, there are scores of different antibiotics available and scores of different painkillers on the market. But many of these are identical — differing only in that they are made by different drug companies. When will someone compare the effectiveness and safety of these different drugs?

5. We are aware that many drugs interact badly. If your doctor gives you drug A then you may be fine. If he gives you drug B you may be fine. But if he gives you drug A and drug B together the mixture may kill you. Very little research is done into the ways drugs interact when given simultaneously.

6. Little or no research is done into the long-term effectiveness and safety of drugs which have been licensed for human use. Once a drug is on the market it can stay on the market for as long as its manufacturer is making a profit — without anyone finding out whether it really does work and is safe. Only if someone somewhere happens to notice that 75% of the patients who take that drug turn purple and explode will the drug’s safety be questioned.

Since most research is paid for by drug companies (and since they have a vested interest in ensuring that none of this research is ever done) it is, I’m afraid, extremely unlikely that there will ever be any answers to these problems. None of this research would cost very much to organise.

31

Nurses have now been given legal authority to prescribe. This is lunacy and means that patients will, in future, have to take very special care to protect themselves from incompetent, prescription-happy nurses as well as incompetent, prescription-happy doctors. Nurses should dress wounds, soothe brows, make beds and provide bedpans. If they want to prescribe they should become doctors. Preferably good doctors.

The decision to allow nurses to hand out prescriptions for potentially lethal medicines was made without any extensive research being done to find out whether or not nurses could prescribe sensibly and wisely. It was done simply because there is a massive shortage of doctors, and doctors (with a six year training period) are expensive to train. No one who authorised this absurd decision seems to me to have paid enough concern to the problems that will inevitably be produced. With tens of thousands of additional prescribers, none of them as well trained as doctors (whose own training is pretty pathetic), there is no doubt that far more people will be taking far more drugs (it is not difficult to guess that the drug companies must have been behind this decision to allow nurses to prescribe), there will be far more deaths from drug side effects, far more illnesses created by drug side effects and far more dangerous drug interactions. Doctors, who receive a much lengthier training than nurses, do not prescribe drugs well. There is every reason to believe that nurses, whose training period is much shorter, will be even less competent.

32

It isn't just nurses who are going to be allowed to prescribe.

Pharmacists and other healthcare professionals are being allowed to hand out prescriptions. How long before porters and cleaners will be allowed to carry prescription pads in their overalls? (They would probably be just as competent as some doctors and most nurses.)

33

Pharmacists, whose function was for some years confined to counting out pills and has in more recent times been confined to sticking labels on packets of pills, are going to be used as second-class general practitioners; doing blood pressure checks and performing other tasks previously done by doctors. (They will do this in addition to handing out prescriptions.) The reason for this is simple: it is much cheaper and quicker to train pharmacists than it is to train doctors.

34

Don't just ignore it if you develop a rash, indigestion, tinnitus, a headache or some other possible side effect: report it to your doctor straight away. Don't stop medication without asking his advice first. Some side effects are mild and if the drug is working and helping to control or defeat a serious or life-threatening condition then the side effects may be of little consequence. But other side effects may kill. Many of the thousands who die each year could still be alive if they had taken action earlier when side effects started.

35

Organisations intended to provide information and support for patients are a wonderful idea. In the early 1970s I compiled what was, I believe, the world's first directory of such organisations. Many were small and run by determined, well-intentioned individuals who usually had a close relative suffering from the disease in question. Some of the people were best described as nutters. But they were honest nutters. Their intentions were good and the work they did was valuable. The best of these organisations helped share information and support and encouraged patients and their relatives to concentrate not on their illness but on working to reduce the impact it had on their lives.

Sadly, as with so many things in life, things have changed. And in this instance, as in so many others, they have not changed for the better.

Many organisations which exist to provide information about specific diseases are now funded by (and run on behalf of) pharmaceutical companies.

When a small organisation which used to be run from someone's spare bedroom suddenly starts offering a free phone number and providing expensively printed brochures you can bet that the brochures (and the organisation) will be promoting a product.

Does it matter that such groups are sponsored?

Well, I think it does.

The drug companies which provide sponsorship do not do so out of the goodness of their non-existent hearts; they do it for hard commercial reasons. They want to make sure that patients are told about products which are available (but which might not be suitable) and they want to be sure that warnings and problems associated with profitable products are suppressed. Eventually, there is a real risk that a group will come to depend upon the drug company's money (a sum which might not be much to the company but might be a good deal for the organisation).

If you saw that this book was sponsored by a company selling painkillers or vitamins, or that my website was sponsored by a company selling a treatment for osteoporosis you would, I hope, wonder if my words might not have been tempered in some way so as to (at the very least) not offend my sponsor. Or you might wonder which items in the book were there because the sponsor wanted them there. (It is, of course, for this reason that my books and website aren't sponsored and don't carry any advertising — welcome though such money would be. I am not worried that I might succumb to pressure to change my words. I know I wouldn't. But readers might wonder. And so the easy way to remove the suspicion is to accept no sponsorship or advertising.)

Not all organisations retain their integrity as they grow. Time and time again people start small groups and because they are inspired by my books they invite me to be patron. Then they start getting government, EU or drug company grants and my name is quickly and quietly dropped from the masthead.

36

If you take three drugs and two of them are for side effects caused by the first drug then you are probably being badly treated.

The medical profession’s obsession with drugs means that many doctors still regard drug side effects as merely a reason for reaching for the prescription pad and writing out a prescription for yet another drug.

Countless millions of patients around the world are regularly given drugs which do nothing but cover up the side effects of other drugs which they are taking.

Time and time again a patient who is receiving treatment for one condition will go to a doctor complaining of new symptoms and simply be given a prescription for a new drug. Sadly, most doctors are still unaware of Coleman’s 1st Law of Medicine.

It is, I believe, this basic ignorance, fostered by too strong a trust in the pharmaceutical industry, which explains why so many doctors show signs of being every bit as intelligent and percipient as living room furniture.

This problem is now so widespread that I believe that any doctor wishing to make a quick name for himself could probably obtain a staggeringly high cure rate simply by collecting patients and then encouraging them to wean themselves off their prescription medicines.

I readily acknowledge that some medicines make a valid contribution to health and that one would have to be careful when applying this unusual treatment programme but, nevertheless, I think it would work. I think one could, quite conservatively, expect a dramatic and long-term improvement in a third of the patients encouraged to stop taking their pills. I do stress, however, that stopping or cutting down pills must be done under qualified medical supervision. You might be one of those rare patients who actually needs to take prescription drugs.

37

Never, ever trust a doctor who tells you that the drug he is prescribing is free of all side effects. Leave his consulting room as quickly as you can. And never go back.

Coleman's 2nd Law Of Medicine

There is no point in having tests done unless the results will affect your treatment.

1

If your doctor wants you to have tests done ask him how the results will affect your treatment. If the results of the tests won't affect the treatment you receive (and aren't needed as a baseline against which to compare future tests) then the tests aren't worth having.

Tests and investigations are often regarded (by both doctors and patients) as being harmless. They aren't. There is no such thing as minor surgery (Coleman's 11th Law Of Medicine) and even taking blood is an operation. There are dangers inherent in every test that is performed. And there is, in addition, the danger that the result will be wrong and that your doctors will treat the test rather than treating you.

2

One of the problems with doctors doing too many tests and investigations is the fact that this overloads the laboratories where tests are done.

As I write this I have in front of me a letter from a British doctor inviting a patient to have a routine cervical smear test. 'Your result will be available from us within 12 weeks,' concludes the letter, as though this was some sort of added benefit.

Twelve weeks of worry!

What sort of feeble-spirited doctor would send out a letter like that? Don't doctors realise that patients worry about the results when they have a test done to find out whether or not they have cancer? Don't doctors realise that worrying makes people ill?

For years I have received a steady stream of letters from readers reporting that they have had to wait weeks or even months before receiving vital results after blood tests, X-rays, biopsies and other investigations. In many cases patients had to wait long periods of time to find out whether or not they had cancer. For example, it is not uncommon for tests done to find out whether women have breast cancer to take over three months to be returned to the patient's doctor. Just how this can be explained, let alone excused, I have no idea. Most test results should be obtainable within minutes or, at most, within a day or two. Any doctor who routinely expects patients to wait days, weeks or months to find out whether or not they have cancer or some other threatening disease is unthinking, barbaric and quite unfit to practise medicine. What damage does the worry do to the health of patients who need to be at their strongest? What additional damage is done to the health of worrying relatives and friends?

3

Doctors often refuse to start treatment until they have received all the test results back. If they get test results within hours or days that is fine. But in some hospitals it can take months for test results to return. If a patient with symptoms of a bladder infection provides a urine sample so that any urinary tract infection can be identified it makes sense to start the patient on treatment with an antibiotic. If the test result shows that the antibiotic prescribed was the wrong one an appropriate drug can then be prescribed. Patients sometimes die untreated because doctors will not (or dare not) try treatments until all the investigations have been completed. The threat of litigation means that doctors insist on waiting for convincing evidence before trying anything. Inevitably, this means that it is not infrequently too late to act by the time treatment is started. If, for example, there are two or three possible diagnoses available and only one of the diseases can be treated then it would seem to make sense to start the treatment for the disease which can be treated, even though laboratory evidence in support of that diagnosis might not be available. But this isn't what happens.

4

Doctors have a tendency to treat investigation results rather than patients. Don't let them do this to you. When clinical observations and laboratory findings are incompatible, the laboratory findings are wrong.

Coleman’s 3rd Law Of Medicine

If the treatment doesn’t work then you should consider the possibility that the diagnosis might be wrong. This is particularly true when several treatments have been tried.

1

Doctors pay far too much attention to high technology equipment these days. Probably as a result, they are often frighteningly bad at making diagnoses. A study, published in 2004, showed that major disorders are not picked up in around four out of ten patients. When doctors compared post-mortem results with the patients’ medical records they discovered that out of 87 patients only 17 patients were diagnosed completely correctly. Ten of the patients might have survived if the diagnosis had been more accurate. In 15 cases major problems (such as heart attacks) were not detected.

Whoops, whoops and whoops again.

2

In 1991, one in ten hospital deaths was followed by a post mortem. In 2004 the figure had fallen to 1 in 40. When fewer post mortems are performed doctors are less likely to be embarrassed by evidence showing that they made a big mistake. Doctors are also, of course, unlikely to learn anything if they never know how wrong they were.

The number of post mortems performed has fallen for several reasons. One is undoubtedly to save expense. Another is because if there is no post mortem (and no record of the mistakes that have been made) the hospital is less likely to find itself besieged by lawyers. But the single most important reason is undoubtedly the fact that not having post mortems helps to reduce the amount of embarrassment doctors feel when their diagnoses are proved wrong.

3

Patients used to hand over their health (and their lives) to their doctors — without ever questioning what was happening to them. Today, that is a dangerous way to live. Patients who take an interest in their own health (and in the investigations and treatments that are recommended for them) may sometimes feel that the doctors and nurses who are looking after them regard them as a nuisance. But all the evidence shows clearly that such patients get better quicker, suffer fewer unpleasant side effects and live longer than patients who simply lie back passively and allow the professionals to take over.

If your doctor wants you to take a drug (and all pills, tablets, capsules, medicines, potions, creams and so on are drugs) make sure you know what to expect. If your doctor wants you to have surgery then make sure that you know what the surgery entails, what the possible consequences might be and what the alternatives are. Two really good questions to ask your doctor are: ‘Would you have this treatment if you were me?’ and ‘Would you recommend this treatment to someone in your close family?

Learn as much as you can about any disorder from which you suffer. And learn about all the possible types of treatment available. Patients who know more about their condition than their doctors invariably do better than patients who know nothing and put all their trust in their medical advisers.

4

Common things occur commonly. It’s amazing how many doctors forget this.

5

However many symptoms you’ve got, you (and your doctor) should always assume that there is but one cause. Only when this belief becomes impossible to sustain should you reluctantly and cautiously consider the possibility that there may be more than one thing wrong with you. And even then they are probably connected.

6

Never be afraid to ask for a second opinion. It is your life that is at stake — not a new sofa or curtains for the living room.

7

Telling your doctor that you want a second opinion will probably take a great deal of courage. Many doctors are sensitive creatures — they may show their hurt if their all-knowingness is questioned. But just remember that the stakes are high. And, if there is time, don’t be afraid to check out the past record of the doctor who is going to treat you. One surgeon working in a hospital may have a survival rate which is twice as good as another surgeon working in the same hospital. If you allow the less competent surgeon to operate on you then your chances of walking out of the hospital may be halved. Those are odds you cannot and should not ignore.

8

For several months I had a persistent, nagging pain in my back. It was just about in the region of my right kidney. It didn't seem to be getting any worse but it certainly wasn't getting any better.

For a while I managed to convince myself that it was nothing more than a muscular backache caused by crouching over a keyboard. But then I noticed two additional symptoms.

I started feeling constantly 'full' — as though I had just eaten a large meal — and I found that my bladder needed emptying more often than I found entirely convenient.

When I told my general practitioner he took a routine urine sample.

And found blood.

The next step was a hospital appointment.

The ultrasound pictures showed a rather misshapen kidney. And more specialist X-ray pictures confirmed that there was something wrong. My kidney looked as though it was auditioning for a part as the hunchback of Notre Dame.

Unhappily, however, the radiologists couldn't get a really good view of my kidney. Their view was obscured by large bubbles of inconvenient gas lurking around in the coiled nooks and crannies of my intestinal loops. But they thought I had renal cancer. And I was told to prepare myself for surgery. (As an aside, when I asked a radiologist about the local surgeons I was told that one was competent but a bit rude whereas the other was pleasant but not very good.)

At my insistence I was given an appointment to go to another, larger, city hospital for even more sophisticated tests and a second opinion.

The radiologist at the large city hospital told me that there was nothing wrong with my kidney. It was, he assured me, misshapen but perfectly healthy.

I had narrowly escaped having a kidney ripped out.

But, despite all these tests, the doctors still didn't know what was wrong with me. ('You go off and enjoy yourself,' one of the doctors had said, when they still thought I had cancer. 'We'll sort this out when you get back.')

And so, after racing to the television studios to record a TV programme, and hurtling back home to write a column, I set off, as I had previously planned, to Paris.

On the plane flying over the Channel the pain in my back got much, much worse.

And I suddenly realised what was wrong.

The gas that the radiologist had spotted in my intestines had expanded because of the change in air pressure and it was the gas that was causing my pain.

And making me feel 'full' all the time.

And irritating my bowel and my bladder.

And pressing on my kidney and causing the bleeding.

There was only one explanation for this apparently bizarre set of circumstances.

I had irritable bowel syndrome.

The moment I made the diagnosis I realised just why I had acquired this most common of twenty-first century disorders.

First, I had been putting myself under an enormous amount of stress. For years I had run a series of passionate campaigns designed to spread the truth and oppose those parts of the medical establishment with which I disagreed. I had, for years, been spending twelve hours a day on my campaigns.

Second, I had changed my diet. I had cut out all meat and fish and increased the quantity of vegetables and cereals.

Irritable bowel syndrome isn't easy to control. Once you've got it then you're probably going to have symptoms for life.

But I didn't have kidney cancer.

If I hadn't had a second opinion...

Coleman's 4th Law Of Medicine

Screening examinations and check-ups are more profitable for doctors than for patients.

1

I have been a stern critic of screening examinations and check-ups for several decades and have, in the distant past, pointed out that well-known (and extremely profitable) forms of testing such as the cervical smear, the breast mammogram and the prostate specific antigen (psa) test for prostate cancer may, over the years, have done considerably more harm than good. Naturally, my criticisms have been met with a barrage of angry and very defensive comments from doctors who earn their living providing screening tests, and from companies which make money out of producing screening equipment. Today, the industry promoting health checks continues to promote (and profit from) them though, I am pleased to say, that a growing number of doctors now share my fear that such tests may, in the long run, do far more harm than good. For example, in 2004, a study by experts at Stanford University Medical School in the USA suggested that the psa test could not be relied upon to produce accurate results. And in recent years more and more doctors have come to accept that routine mammograms (in which the breast tissue is X-rayed) are far too dangerous and should be avoided.

It was in 1988 that I first warned about the danger of mammograms in a book called *The Health Scandal.* My criticism was, of course, greeted with howls of outrage from the medical establishment. Back then I wrote: 'There are, of course, risks in having regular X-ray examinations. No one knows yet exactly what those risks are. We will probably find out in another ten or twenty years time.'

In fact it was in 2006 that doctors finally issued a warning about mammograms, coming to precisely the conclusion I had warned about eighteen years earlier. Mammographic screening may help prevent breast cancer. But it may also cause breast cancer. Just how many women die because of the radiation they have received through mammography isn't known but it seems that the risks for younger women (women in their 30's for example) are higher than the risks for older women. (Radiation-induced cancer typically takes up to 20 years to develop so for a woman in her 80's the risks of mammography are probably somewhere between slight and negligible.) According to some estimates, out of every 10,000 women who have mammography from the age of 40 onwards between two and four will develop radiation-induced breast cancer. One of them will die as a result of this. The precise figures are unknown and depend upon the quality and amount of the radiation, the skill of the technician and other factors — probably including the general health of the woman concerned.

Does mammography cause more cancers than it helps to prevent? Would other forms of screening be safer and therefore more effective?

I don't know. This is a decision that every woman has to make for herself. I certainly don't believe that anyone knows the answers to those questions with any certainty either. Personally, if pushed for an answer, I would have to say that I believe (as I did in 1988) that mammography should be stopped until some proper long-term testing has been done. It won't be of course. The commercial and political reasons for continuing with mammography are far too powerful.

2

Mammograms have, I believe, one thing in common with vaccines. Both are examples of high technology preventive medicine introduced for profitability rather than effectiveness.

3

Men are never offered the opportunity to attend mammography screenings. And yet breast cancer does also affect men. One in every 200 patients with breast cancer is a man. How many more cases of male breast cancer would be identified if men were being screened and checked as often as women are?

4

There are three common myths about mammography:

Myth 1. Mammography reduces the incidence of breast cancer.

It doesn't. Mammography doesn't help prevent breast cancer. The very best it can do is detect breast cancer at an early stage.

Myth 2. Mammography saves lives because early detection means a better chance of surviving.

This isn't necessarily true. If there is no effective therapy then the point at which the cancer is detected will make no difference to the outcome but will merely affect the length of time that the patient knows that she has cancer. If the cancer is very slow growing and is unlikely to kill then early detection may make no difference to the outcome. For example, a type of breast cancer that is called ductal carcinoma in situ can be detected by mammography. About half the cases of this type of cancer do not seem to progress. Early detection of breast cancer (or any other type of cancer) doesn't necessarily help the patient. If the cancer will not grow, or will grow so slowly that it is no serious threat to the patient's life, early detection may do more harm than good. Treatment for the cancer (surgery or radiotherapy) may endanger the woman's life, and reduce the quality of her life, without any advantage.

Myth 3. Women who have annual mammography screening are protected from breast cancer.

Some breast cancers are very aggressive and are likely to grow extremely rapidly. These fast growing cancers are commonest in young women. An annual mammography screening, which checks the breasts just once a year, is unlikely to be of much use in detecting this type of cancer.

5

Politicians and journalists often campaign for mammography to be made available to all women. This really doesn't make any sort of sense. None of the ten randomised trials I've found suggest that mammographic screening of women in their 40's reduces breast cancer mortality. There are several reasons for this. First, women under 50 are less likely to have breast cancer than are older women. Second, when breast cancer does develop in younger women it may be fast growing (so an annual check-up may be of no use). Third, breast density is higher among young women so screening is less likely to be able to detect cancer at a curable stage.

With women who are over the age of 50 there may be some advantage in mammography, although the benefits are still questionable (especially when the risks are taken into consideration). Some studies of mammography among women over 50 have found a significant reduction in breast cancer mortality. But, on the other hand, some studies found little or no reduction in breast cancer mortality.

6

Doctors and patients are very poor at assessing risks. Both tend to worry about the wrong things. Both tend to ignore the risks associated with tests and investigations but X-ray induced cancer is a real risk that should be taken seriously.

7

Some women who have mammograms are falsely diagnosed as having breast cancer. These are known as 'false positives'. All these women will be re-investigated. Some will have surgery and will lose perfectly healthy breasts. Even biopsies can be dangerous. Apart from the psychological problems there may be wound infections, bruising, scarring and the loss of breast tissue. The risk of acquiring a serious and life-threatening antibiotic resistant infection must also be considered.

The incidence of false positives among women who have mammograms is phenomenally high. In one investigation of 26,000 women who had mammography screening for the first time, only 1 in every 10 women who tested 'positive' was subsequently found to have breast cancer. In other words out of every ten women who were diagnosed as suffering from breast cancer as a result of mammography only one actually had breast cancer. The other nine were terrified (and probably scarred) entirely unnecessarily. Among younger women the incidence of false positives is even higher. Every year in America around 300,000 women with perfectly healthy breasts have unnecessary biopsies. It has been suggested that women whose breasts are physically damaged may be more likely to develop cancer. How many of those 300,000 will develop breast cancer as a result of their biopsies? How many will die of infection?

8

Many women who, as a result of mammography, are diagnosed as suffering from breast cancer, and who subsequently have surgery and radiotherapy, believe that their lives have been saved by their surgeons and oncologists. These women often become earnest advocates of mammography.

However, the sad truth is that many of these women have gained nothing from surgery and radiotherapy but have, on the contrary, lost a good deal as a result of their experience.

Mammography enables doctors to pick up ductal carcinoma in situ, a type of breast cancer which would have probably never been noticed in the woman's lifetime except for the mammogram.

This type of cancer is confined to the milk ducts within the breast and has not spread to surrounding tissue. It cannot be detected by a breast examination (even one performed by a skilled and experienced doctor) but will be picked up on a mammogram.

Most breast cancers detected by mammography among women in their 30's, and around 40% of breast cancers detected by mammography among women in their 40s, are ductal carcinomas in situ.

There are still gaps in our knowledge about ductal carcinoma in situ but many doctors believe that more often than not this type of cancer never spreads. In these instances, mammography helps doctors pick up, and treat, an entirely harmless abnormality. In some women (and the figures aren't defined) ductal carcinoma in situ does eventually spread and become invasive cancer. This may, however, take 20 to 30 years.

9

Women who are diagnosed with breast cancer when they don't have it at all (false positives) and women who have breast cancer which is no threat to their lives (probably most of the women with ductal carcinoma in situ) pay a high price for undergoing mammography screening. For these women the unnecessary treatment they receive, and the anxiety they must suffer, may decrease both the quality and extent of their lives.

Here then, is more evidence that mammography can kill as well as save lives.

10

There is another group of women who suffer as a result of mammography.

These are the women (known as false negatives) who are wrongly assured that they do not have breast cancer.

The false negative rate for mammography is between 5% and 20% with the higher figure relating to younger women.

So, out of 100 women who have breast cancer and have mammography screening, up to 20 will be wrongly told that they are perfectly healthy and need not worry. How many of these relieved and falsely reassured women will then ignore the lumps they may subsequently feel in their breasts? How many will die because they have been falsely reassured?

I have no idea.

Nor, I suspect, has anyone else.

11

Women are entitled to have access to all the facts before making a decision about whether or not to undergo mammography. I wonder how many are told of all the hazards. Sadly, the evidence I have seen suggests that most of the doctors and charities and commercial screening groups who promote and make money out of mammography don’t tell women of these risks, complications and uncertainties.

Doctors and organisations who make money out of providing mammography have a vested interest in getting as many women as they can to take part in mammography. One recent survey reported that 92% of women said they believed that mammography cannot harm women who don’t have breast cancer. None of the women surveyed seemed aware of all the hazards I have outlined here. Neither leaflets published by organisations offering mammography, nor journalists offering allegedly independent comments on mammography, discuss the risks.

12

‘When trouble is sensed well in advance it can easily be remedied: if you wait for it to show itself any medicine will be too late because the disease will have become incurable. As the doctors say of a wasting disease, to start with it is easy to cure but difficult to diagnose; after a time, unless it has been diagnosed and treated at the outset, it becomes easy to diagnose but difficult to cure.’

Niccolo Machiavelli

Coleman's 5th Law Of Medicine

It is doctors, not patients, who need annual check-ups.

1

Along with cancer and circulatory disease, doctors are now one of the three most important causes of death and injury. Incompetent or careless doctors cause a horrifying amount of death or injury.

In America the Public Citizen Health Research Group has shown that 'more than 100,000 people are killed or injured a year by negligent medical care'. The real figure is probably considerably higher than this and there can be little doubt that many of the injuries and deaths among patients are caused by simple, straightforward incompetence rather than bad luck or unforeseen complications.

When doctors from the Harvard School of Public Health studied what happened to more than 30,000 patents admitted to acute care hospitals in New York they found that nearly 4% of them suffered unintended injuries in the course of their treatment and that 14% of the patients died of their injuries. This survey concluded that nearly 200,000 people die each year in America as a result of medical accidents. It is clear, therefore, that doctors kill vastly more innocent people than terrorists do. What sort of panic would political leaders be in if terrorists regularly killed 200,000 Americans every year?

2

Carotid endarterectomies — in which deposits are removed from the arteries in the neck — are currently fashionable in America where doctors earn $1.5 billion a year performing them. But when a study of carotid endarterectomies was recently completed it was found that 64% of these operations were either unjustified or of debatable value because the symptoms were not severe enough to justify the risks of the operation.

For pacemaker implants the equivalent figure is 56%.

Coronary bypass operations are immensely popular among heart surgeons (and extremely profitable) but a major study conducted in Europe showed that many patients who don't have surgery live longer than those who do. In 1990 American surgeons performed 350,000 coronary bypass operations and charged $14 billion for them. When one researcher studied 300 patients who had had bypass operations at several hospitals in California he discovered that 14% of the patients would have thrived as well without surgery as with it while another 30% were borderline.

Around 50% of lower back disc operations and up to 70% of hysterectomies are probably unnecessary. In America the death toll from unnecessary surgery alone has been estimated to be as high as 80,000 patients per year. (That's on top of the figure of 200,000 I reported above.)

3

Two Irish doctors reported in the *British Medical Journal* that 20% of British patients who have slightly raised blood pressure are treated unnecessarily with drugs. A British Royal College of Radiologists Working Party reported that at least a fifth of radiological examinations carried out in National Health Service hospitals were clinically unhelpful. In Britain the Institute of Economic Affairs claimed that inexperienced doctors in casualty units kill at least one thousand patients a year.

4

Doctors (egged on by drug companies) often claim that it is thanks to them that we are all living longer these days. There are two errors in this apparently simple claim. The first is that there is absolutely no evidence to show that we are all living longer (indeed the evidence suggests the opposite). The second error lies in the claim that drug companies and doctors have improved our general health. That's baloney too.

5

The evidence shows that there really hasn't been much change in life expectation in recent years. (After all, way back in biblical times, ordinary folk were encouraged to expect a life-span of three score and ten.)

Drug companies and doctors like to take all the credit for the alleged improvement in our life expectation (it helps to excuse their foibles and excesses) but the truth is that our longevity is a myth.

The truth is that cleaner drinking water, and better sewage facilities (introduced in the 19th century) resulted in a fall in infant mortality levels.

6

Imagine a family of five. If four members of the family live to be 70 but the fifth dies as an infant then the average life expectancy (ignoring the age at which the infant dies) will be 56. But if all five live to the age of 65 the average life expectancy will be 65.

Reducing infant mortality has made a tremendous difference to overall life expectancy figures.

7

It is sometimes argued that the fact that there are more old people around these days proves that people are living longer. This is, of course, utter nonsense. The proportion of older people in our communities has increased because couples are having fewer children.

This is partly because the fall in infant mortality means that it is no longer necessary to have twelve children as a hedge against early deaths, partly because of the ready availability of effective contraception and partly because high taxes mean that most young working couples cannot afford many children.

8

Look into any nursing home during the last few decades and you will have seen a tremendous preponderance of women. Historically, this is a fairly new phenomenon.

In my book *How To Live Longer* I pointed out that there is no reason at all why women should live longer than men. There are no anatomical or physiological reasons for the huge difference which exists in life expectation between the two sexes. In *How To Live Longer* I explained my theory that women in the 20th century were living longer for several main reasons:

1. Up until a few decades ago most women didn’t smoke.

2. Up until a few decades ago most women didn’t go out to work (and have to cope with all the associated physical and mental stresses).

3. Up until a few decades ago most women were allowed to regard themselves as the ‘gentle’ or ‘weaker’ sex. Significant worries about the household were the province of the man of the house.

4. Up until a few decades ago most women had jobs (such as looking after the home) which involved regular exercise. Walking to the shops and running up and down stairs might not be fun but it is exercise. Men, on the other hand, were involved in jobs which tended to mar their health. Men with manual work were exposed to asbestos or coal dust. Men with sedentary jobs put on excess weight and developed circulatory disease.

These are generalisations, of course. But, like all generalisations, they are broadly accurate.

In *How To Live Longer* I forecast that the difference in life expectation between men and women would, for fairly obvious reasons, start to fall.

And it’s already happening.

The difference in life expectation between men and women is narrowing quite rapidly. By the middle of the 21st century life expectation for the two sexes will be much the same.

But it won’t be male life expectation which has improved.

It will be female life expectation which will have fallen.

The few doctors who have noticed this change seem to have been surprised by it.

No effort has been put into explaining to women why they are not living as long as their mothers.

9

A big chunk of doctors are crooks who would prescribe arsenic if they got a free pen from a drug company making arsenic tablets. Many more don’t know (and wouldn’t dare guess) what day of the week it is unless a drug company representative told them.

10

Some people insist that their doctor is very good.

They probably mean that he is kind and courteous.

How do they know, really, really know, whether or not their doctor is truly competent?

It’s very difficult to assess the knowledge and wisdom of a doctor.

Especially, if he smiles, is polite and seems to care.

11

Doctors are now a major cause of illness and death. Study the statistics and it becomes clear that throughout the ‘civilised’ world doctors are right up there alongside heart disease and cancer as the big-time killers of the twenty-first century.

A study in Australia showed that 470,000 Australian men, women and children are admitted to hospital every year because they have been made ill by doctors. The figures also show that every year 280,000 patients who are admitted to hospital suffer a temporary disability as a result of their health care. Around 50,000 of these suffer permanent disabilities. A staggering 18,000 Australians die annually as a result of medical errors, drug toxicity, surgical errors and general medical mismanagement. What a terrible indictment of the medical profession.

Figures in Europe are no better. In my book *Betrayal of Trust* I explained why one in six British hospital patients is in hospital and receiving treatment because he or she has been made ill by doctors.

The story is the same the whole world over and doctors no longer seem to deny any of this. No one in the medical profession has ever disputed my research or this figure. Indeed, when I did a radio broadcast to talk about my book the producers of the programme invited a representative of the British Medical Association into the studio. When I made the point that one in six patients in hospital is there because doctors have created an illness, this doctor's response to my attack on the profession we share was unforgettable. 'The positive thought we can take from this,' he said in his best bedside manner, 'is that five out of every six patients in hospital are *not* there because they have been made ill by doctors.'

(No, I could hardly believe it either. But I listened to a tape of the programme afterwards and that is exactly what he said.)

12

Around half of all the 'adverse effects' associated with doctors are clearly and readily preventable and are usually a result of ignorance or incompetence or a mixture of both. The rest would be preventable with a little care and thought (and some better research).

13

Today's doctors may laugh at the surgeons who chopped out lengths of bowel to treat constipation or who cut out pieces of brain to treat hysteria, but to future generations many current practices will seem no easier to understand. Around the world there are still hundreds of doctors chopping out lengths of bowel, putting staples in stomachs or wiring up jaws to treat patients who eat too much. There are still hundreds of doctors giving patients electric shocks because they are depressed or chopping out bits and pieces of brain to treat problems as varied as schizophrenia, anxiety and drug addiction. Most alarming of all, perhaps, is the fact that as hospitals are filled with increasingly sophisticated equipment (which doctors and technicians often do not entirely understand) so the opportunities for error are constantly being enhanced. For example, there have been several reports showing that patients receiving radiation treatment have been given the wrong dosage.

14

Surveys of junior hospital doctors regularly show an alarming ignorance about drugs, prescription writing and the performance of simple, practical procedures. The basic problem is that medical schools are run by people who are academics rather than practical physicians. Medical schools should sack all their earnest, super-specialists (who have never seen a case of measles or stood in a patient's bedroom) and hire retired family doctors as teachers.

15

It was estimated in one medical publication that three quarters of surgeons were still using hernia repair techniques which were regarded internationally as obsolete.

Once a surgeon has got a job he is likely to stay set in his ways. Over the years the only thing that will change is that he will acquire an increasing number of prejudices and bad habits.

16

The overuse of medical facilities — particularly surgery — is a common cause of unnecessary injury and death. When a patient is likely to die if an operation is not performed the risks associated with the operation may be acceptable. But when procedures are performed unnecessarily the risks become unacceptable.

According to *Fortune* magazine American hospitals now try to attract doctors who will bring in patients likely to run up substantial bills. Centres offering investigative facilities often offer lucrative partnerships to doctors who are prepared to promise to make lots of referrals.

Research in British hospitals has shown that pregnant women who are in private beds in NHS hospitals are twice as likely to have their babies by Caesarian section as women in NHS beds. Could this possibly be due to the fact that surgeons looking after private patients can charge a hefty extra fee for delivering a baby by Caesarian section? If not, what other explanation can you think of?

17

Doctors, nurses, drug companies and hospitals are now one of the three or four main causes of death and serious illness in all the so-called 'developed' countries. As a cause of death and serious illness, iatrogenic diseases (disorders caused by doctors and hospitals) are up there alongside cancer and circulatory disorders (such as strokes and heart attacks).

The medical profession in general, and the medical establishment in particular, turns a blind eye and does nothing about the problems which they know exist.

The quality of care in hospitals is falling as a result of overprescribing, an over-emphasis on political correctness, new employment law (which makes it virtually impossible to sack an incompetent nurse or doctor), over bureaucratisation, a failure to understand the importance of simple hygiene, endless varieties of intrusive and unhelpful legislation and a wild, unbridled enthusiasm for high technology.

There is a grave tendency among doctors (as among all other apparently intelligent members of our society) to use computers whenever possible. This is, of course, a sign of rank stupidity. Computers should only be used when they will help you do something better — not because they can do something. Doctors tend to use computers to do things that computers *can* do, rather than to use them to do things they *want* them to do. This is a result of the fact that so-called 'information technology' people are, generally, keen for doctors (and everyone else) to use their computers to do whatever it is they have made them able to do and not to redesign computers to do what people want them to do. (No one could accuse me of being a technophobe. I bought my first computer in the 80's and had my first website presence at the same time. I have been using a mobile telephone since the mid 1980s and a fax machine just as long. I've used a palm-sized computer for over a decade.) But the wild enthusiasm for, and over-reliance on, anything which has a plug on the end of it has created massive problems and, I have no doubt, has resulted in more deaths than it has saved lives.

In practice, computers are merely typewriters which go wrong a lot and the Internet, a tool for governments rather than individuals, has proved most successful as a replacement for classified advertising sections of local newspapers and as a source of pornographic material. One of the biggest problems with the Internet is that medical students and young doctors are learning to rely for research on computerised search engines. This is very dangerous since when you research a subject on a computer's search engine there is a real danger that you will be fed material which has gained its position on the list because a drug company has paid for it to be there or because some computer nerd has manipulated its position on the list. Many young doctors don't realise that search engines are 'bent' and unreliable. Search engines pose one of the greatest of all the threats to what remains of the medical profession's badly damaged independence and indeed, to the safety and security of patients everywhere. Doctors (and others) who rely on search engines to do their research are doomed to receive information which is at best doubtful and at worst downright corrupt.

18

The regulators who are supposed to protect patients from dishonest or disreputable doctors seem generally unconcerned with things which really should concern them. When newspapers reported that a large drug company had been reprimanded by the industry's own 'watchdog' for paying doctors to switch patients from rival medicines to its own product I saw no suggestion that the doctors involved might be subjected to professional discipline. These, remember, were doctors who had accepted bribes to change their patients' medication.

Politicians do nothing lest they upset the pharmaceutical companies (which bluff by threatening to move their operations to other countries if anything is done to damage their profits).

And hospital administrators do nothing because they don't know — and possibly don't want to know — the truth. Administrators have soaked up all the power but they have refused to accept any of the responsibility.

19

Most people recognise the damage that other doctors can do but like to think that their doctor is an honourable exception. This is entirely understandable. After all, we all like to think that our relationship with our own doctor is special and that we have chosen someone reliable and knowledgeable to look after us. We like to think of our doctor as a personal and family friend. We all need to put some trust in the health care professionals upon whom we rely when we are ill.

But it is just as dangerous to assume that your doctor is entirely safe, sensible, knowledgeable, competent and error free as it would be to assume that you do not need to take care when driving, on the spurious grounds that road accidents only ever affect other people.

20

Most doctors would rather admit to having made a mistake than give credit to a non-orthodox treatment. Cures resulting from alternative treatments are sometimes dismissed as 'miracles' or dismissed as spontaneous remissions. More commonly doctors will claim that it was their treatment (however long ago it was given) which was responsible for the improvement. The cure of a patient by a new and alternative (or complementary) remedy will be credited to the patient's previous medical attendants. Of course, when a patient dies after trying a new and alternative remedy the failure will be blamed entirely on the alternative therapy.

This is a variation on an old saying which runs something like this: 'When nature cures the doctor takes the credit; when nature fails, nature takes the blame.'

21

Given a choice between an old and experienced doctor who is out of touch with modern developments, and a young doctor who is fresh out of medical school and who knows all the latest jargon, the patient who puts experience ahead of knowledge will benefit.

22

Doctors are now part of the establishment and tend, therefore, to oppose genuine innovation and original thought. Anyone offering a new and genuinely constructive insight into a healthcare problem is likely to be attacked, reviled and discredited. This is stupid and indefensible. But it is the way it is.

23

Any doctor who tells you that you will need to take pills for life is an unimaginative (and probably ill-informed) buffoon.

24

Most medical treatments are untried and have never been proved to be any good at all. Even drug treatments which are well-established have still not yet been properly thought out or evaluated. Prejudice and superstition are hardly a sound basis for good science.

25

Drugs are wildly over-prescribed, both by hospital doctors and by general practitioners. It is now over 30 years since I first exposed the dangers of benzodiazepines and 15 years since a British Government admitted that it had introduced new legislation as a result of my campaign to expose the dangers of these drugs. (A campaign which was vociferously opposed by the medical establishment.) But benzodiazepines are still over-prescribed and they are still prescribed badly, without thought and without awareness of the often disastrous consequences for patients. Vast numbers of other drugs, including antibiotics and painkillers as well as anti-depressants, are frequently over-prescribed. Vaccines are also a major cause of illness and death.

26

As I proved in my evidence to a House of Lords select committee, animal experiments are done not to help patients but to improve drug company profits. The drug industry’s reliance on animal experiments has led to the deaths of countless thousands of patients.

27

Doctors and hospitals are often appallingly and inexcusably slow. Delays usually do nothing to damage hospital success rates. A patient is only officially recorded as suffering from cancer on the date when he or she is officially diagnosed.

28

Doctors save lives but they also kill people.

There is nothing new in that.

Doctors have always made mistakes and there have always been patients who have died as a result of medical ignorance or incompetence.

But we have now reached the point where, on balance, many well-meaning doctors in general practice and many highly-trained, well-equipped specialists working in hospitals do more harm than good. Through a mixture of ignorance and incompetence doctors are killing more people than they are saving and they are causing more illness and more discomfort than they are alleviating.

It is true, of course, that doctors save thousands of lives by prescribing life-saving drugs such as antibiotics and by performing essential life-saving surgery on road accident victims.

But the tragedy is that the good which doctors do is often far outweighed by the bad. What is even more worrying is the fact that the epidemic of iatrogenic disease (disease caused by doctors) which has scarred medical practice for decades has been steadily getting worse. Today most of us would, most of the time, be better off without a medical profession.

29

A former Director General of the World Health Organisation startled the medical establishment by stating that: ‘the major and most expensive part of medical knowledge as applied today appears to be more for the satisfaction of the health professions than for the benefit of the consumers of health care’. The evidence certainly supports that apparently controversial view.

Consider, for example, what happens when doctors go on strike and leave patients to cope without professional medical help. You might imagine that people would be dying like flies in autumn. Not a bit of it. When doctors in Israel went on strike for a month admissions to hospital dropped by eighty five per cent, with only the most urgent cases being admitted, but despite this the death rate in Israel dropped by fifty per cent — the largest drop since the previous doctors’ strike twenty years earlier — to its lowest ever recorded level. Much the same thing has happened wherever doctors have gone on strike. In Bogota, Colombia doctors went on strike for fifty two days and there was a thirty five per cent fall in the mortality rate. In Los Angeles a doctors’ strike resulted in an eighteen per cent reduction in the death rate. During the strike there were sixty per cent fewer operations in seventeen major hospitals. After the strike was over the death rate went back up to normal.

Whatever statistics are consulted the conclusion has to be the same. Doctors are a hazard rather than an asset to any community.

In Britain the death rate of working men over fifty years of age was higher in the 1970s than it was in the 1930s. The British were never healthier than they were during the Second World War.

Figures published by the United States Bureau of Census show that thirty three per cent of the people born in 1907 could expect to live to the age of seventy five whereas thirty three per cent of the people born in 1977 could expect to live to the age of eighty. Remove the improvements produced by better living conditions and fewer deaths during or just after childbirth and it becomes clear that doctors, drug companies and hospitals cannot possibly have had any useful effect on life expectancy. Indeed, the figures show that there has been an increase in mortality rates among the middle aged and an increase in the incidence of disabling disorders such as diabetes and arthritis.

Could there be some other explanation for this dispiriting phenomenon? Hardly. When you look at the quality of medical care it becomes clear that it must be doctors who are responsible for the decline in health.

30

So far I have written only about general practitioners. But it isn’t only family doctors who need to be better trained. A report published in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* concluded that many hospital patients who suffer heart attacks die during the ‘confused and disorganised charades’ of attempts to save them because hospital doctors do not know how to give emergency resuscitation.

Even more worrying was an editorial published in the *British Medical Journal* which stated that: ‘only one per cent of the articles in medical journals are scientifically sound’ and that ‘only about fifteen per cent of medical interventions are supported by solid scientific evidence’. In other words the majority of treatments are completely untried and when a doctor writes out a prescription or sticks a knife into a patient neither he nor anyone else has much of an idea about what will happen next.

31

There are many reasons why doctors are currently doing so much harm to their patients but among them is undoubtedly the fact that while doctors are now in possession of technologies and techniques which are powerful the profession’s relationship with patients is still based on the theory that in order to do good the average doctor must rely on the fear and respect of his patients.

When doctors didn’t have powerful drugs to hand out they relied heavily upon the mystique of being a ‘doctor’. The mysticism and the witchcraft long associated with the practice of medicine were important parts of the healing process. Because he knew that the pills and potions he prescribed had very little intrinsic value, a doctor had to convince his patients that he knew what he was doing and that he had faith that the remedies he was using would work. The doctor knew that if his patients believed that they were going to get better then many of them would — even if they were only given some primitive and entirely useless concoction. The power of the placebo is well documented — and even quite severe pains can be controlled with sugar pills if the doctor giving out the sugar pills is convincing.

Giving the patient a prescription was an important ritual; it was offering the patient a part of the doctor to take with him and the important thing was to get the patient to believe that it would do him some good. The old-fashioned witch doctors were fearful. So were Victorian physicians and surgeons. Patients accepted what their doctors told them as though it was gospel.

But today doctors have powerful and potentially lethal drugs and treatments at their disposal and the old-fashioned mystique is dangerous.

Patients can be too easily tempted to ask for or expect drugs and doctors can far too easily trick themselves into thinking that a prescription is necessary. When drugs were ineffective and harmless it didn’t matter if doctors gave out drugs to every patient they saw. (Indeed the apothecaries — the original general practitioners — had to give drugs to all their patients since they earned their living through dispensing and were not allowed to charge fees simply for providing advice). But today although drugs are so powerful that they should be used cautiously and only when absolutely essential, old habits still persist and four out of five consultations in general practice end with the doctor handing over a prescription (although far fewer patients expect to get a prescription and most would almost certainly be happier if they left the surgery without one). The result is that we have become a nation of pill swallowers. At any one time six out of ten people in most Westernised countries will be taking a drug of some kind. It is hardly surprising that there has been an explosion in iatrogenic disease.

There is no easy, slick solution to this massive problem.

But there are some things we can do to restore some sense to health care and to reduce the appalling incidence of iatrogenic disease.

First, we need to humanise doctors — by stripping away some of their power and authority. Normally assertive and strong individuals who would confront or argue with almost anyone else they might come into contact with often find it difficult to argue with or to confront or question doctors because they have always been encouraged to regard members of the medical profession as ‘different’. Doctors are treated with reverence rather than simple respect and that is a terribly unhealthy state of affairs. In the interests of good health doctors should throw away all the symbols of authority they currently use — such as the white coat.

And patients must start treating doctors more critically; they must be more demanding, more questioning and more assertive. The evidence shows that assertive patients live longer are less likely to be killed by incompetence. Patients need to be encouraged to take back responsibility for their own health and to learn to regard doctors as technicians — to be consulted but to be regarded with the variety of scepticism currently reserved for garage mechanics.

Third, and perhaps most important of all, we need also to make a genuine effort to separate the medical profession from the drugs industry. During the last few decades the two have become far too closely intertwined and today the drug industry dominates the profession; members of the medical establishment are far too uncritical of the industry. As I wrote in my first book *The Medicine Men* back in 1975 it is difficult to see how a group of people who get all their information and instructions from an industry can call themselves a profession. The little that doctors do learn about new treatments usually comes from the companies promoting their products. We need to encourage doctors to take a more cynical and sceptical look at the claims made by the big drug companies.

32

People who take drugs (and the doctors who prescribe them) still don’t recognise that any symptoms which develop after a drug is given are probably caused by the drug.

Denying or ignoring the link between drugs and side effects is like being hit on the head by a brick and failing to recognise the link between the brick and the headache.

33

Governments need to introduce annual tests for doctors. We don’t allow old cars onto the roads unless they pass a safety test. Airline pilots have to undergo regular tests. We should not allow old surgeons into the operating theatre unless they have shown that they have made some effort to keep up-to-date. Old physicians whose knowledge has passed its sell-by-date should be forcibly retired.

Doctors have a tremendous position of power and can probably do more harm than any other group of individuals in the community. But once a man or woman receives a degree certificate he or she is given a licence for life. Who would willingly fly in a plane piloted by a man who had passed his exam 50 years earlier and had not made any attempt to keep up-to-date? How many people would be happy to fly in Concorde with a pilot who was trained in a Tiger Moth — and had never had a course to update his knowledge?

Doctors should be examined annually to make sure that they keep up-to-date.

The analogy is an accurate one.

Thousands of today’s doctors were trained and qualified long before most of the available modern drugs were put on the market. They neither know about nor understand the drugs they prescribe. It is this lack of independent knowledge which so often explains bizarre prescribing practices. There are an estimated 30,000 drugs available in the world. It is impossible for the average doctor to have a working knowledge of more than around 50 of those. Doctors who prescribe brand new drugs without studying the contraindications, possible side effects and interactions are putting their patients at risk.

34

All doctors should be taught to ask themselves a series of very basic questions.

1. Is the possible advantage to this patient of this treatment worth the associated risk?

One in six patients in hospital is there because he or she has been injured by a doctor. When a patient is injured by a treatment that may have saved his life then the risk is worth taking. But when a patient is injured by an unnecessary treatment the risk is not acceptable. Doctors must be taught about the risks associated with modern forms of treatment.

2. Should I interfere or do nothing?

Doing nothing is sometimes the bravest option of all. It takes a good doctor to have faith in the body’s own healing powers. Many doctors like to interfere so that they can take the credit when the patient gets better.

3. What are the main priorities and main risks here?

Sorting out priorities is vital. Relieving pain is sometimes forgotten by doctors — though, to patients, relieving pain is often a number one priority.

4. What would I do (or what would I want done) if the patient was someone I loved? How would I like to be treated?

These are key questions all doctors should ask themselves every time they see a patient. Sadly, they are, I suspect, questions which are often forgotten.

35

In the summer of 2006, plans were announced in Britain for doctors to be relicensed every five years against standards drawn up by various parts of the establishment. Doctors would be assessed by a network of specially appointed affiliates who would be involved in the revalidation of doctors and who would work in harness with professional regulators.

Oh dear.

Such a scheme is destined to ensure that the worst doctors remain in practice while imaginative, caring doctors find themselves removed from the medical register.

The system will fail patients because it is within the medical establishment that the faults lie.

The best way to measure the effectiveness of doctors is to compare their success rates.

A good doctor is a doctor whose patients live long, healthy lives. A bad doctor is a doctor whose patients live short, unhealthy lives.

It should not be impossible to find a simple way to measure and compare the effectiveness of doctors in keeping their patients healthy and alive.

36

Some doctors aren’t simply in need of light intellectual maintenance. Some manage to practise without any qualifications at all. Fake doctors are commoner than you might imagine.

In America a hoax psychiatrist persuaded 10 married women to have sex with total strangers.

He telephoned a hundred women at random and claimed to be a psychiatrist secretly treating their husbands for sexual problems. He told them that they should leave the house and come back with the first man they could find and await further instructions. In a second call he told the women — and the strangers they’d brought home — to have sex. He claimed it would help cure the husband’s problem.

Ninety women who’d been telephoned refused to follow the hoaxer’s instructions. But ten did as they were told.

In Italy a hospital found that one of its top brain surgeons wasn’t even qualified as a doctor.

In England a meat salesman performed 14 operations in just 24 days while a biology teacher posed as a gynaecologist for 6 months before getting caught.

How long do you think you’d last? How convincing would you be as a doctor? Try this quiz for fun:

There is one correct answer to each of the following questions... choose the one you think is right and then check your score.

1. What would you prescribe kaolin for?

a) a headache
b) a tummy upset
c) an ear infection

2. One of these drugs is an antibiotic — but which?

a) thiamine
b) tetracycline
c) theophylline

3. What would you use to listen to a patient’s chest?

a) sphygmomanometer
b) ophthalmoscope
c) stethoscope

4. Which of these hospital specialists deals with skin problems?

a) gynaecologist
b) dermatologist
c) radiologist

5. How many moles are there on the average human body?

a) 20
b) 2
c) 200

6. What is the correct spelling?

a) diarhoea
b) diarrhoea
c) diarrhoea

7. Which of these drugs would you prescribe for someone in pain?
a) morphine
b) penicillin
c) caffeine

8. The tubes which connect your kidneys to your bladder are called
a) catheters
b) urethras
c) ureters

9. If you look at a bright light your pupils will
a) atrophy
b) constrict
c) dilate

10. Where is the thickest skin on your body?
a) on your eyelids
b) on the soles of your feet
c) on your bottom

11. What is the name of the substance that changes the colour of your skin when you get a suntan?
a) lymph
b) noradrenalin
c) melanin

12. The average human heart is roughly the size of:
a) a table tennis ball
b) a tennis ball
c) a football

13. What is the name of the gland that produces the hormone insulin?
a) the duodenum
b) the pituitary
c) the pancreas

14. How much blood does your body contain?
a) 10 pints
b) 20 pints
c) 30 pints

The correct answers are:
1 b, 2 b, 3 c, 4 b, 5 a, 6 b, 7 a, 8 c, 9 b, 10 b, 11 c, 12 b, 13 c, 14 a.

***** If you got 12 or more right — order your brass plate now!
***** If you got 8 to 11 right — dodgy, you wouldn't last a week
***** If you got 7 or less right — no chance, with a little practice maybe you could masquerade as a bedpan washer

37

If it isn't an emergency, always take time to study all the options. (And that includes the use of alternative or complementary medicine.)

38

In order to understand exactly why doctors are doing so much harm it is first of all necessary to demolish a very basic medical myth: that medicine is a science. Most doctors aren't scientists, most scientists aren't doctors and medicine is (still) a very unscientific discipline.

Doctors, medical researchers and drug companies like to persuade all present and potential consumers of health care that medicine is a science which has advanced beyond the mystical incantations and witch doctor remedies of the past.

But modern medicine is not a science and modern clinicians and medical researchers are not scientists.

39

The best remedy is often to do nothing but wait, watch carefully and see what happens before intervening. Doctors do not feel comfortable with this; they are trained to intervene quickly and frequently. How can a doctor claim the credit (or a fee) if he hasn't done something?

40

Doctors have begun to understand and accept the influence the mind has over the body. But few have, as yet, any idea of the importance of the spirit. No one in the health care business is likely to provide you with the spiritual guidance you need to find your way through the maze of modern life; through the conflicts and contradictions, frustrations and injustices which are now a part of our existence and which are, to a very large extent, responsible for much of the illness from which we suffer, and (for example) for the fact that the incidence of suicide has, for decades, been increasing dramatically.

41

Drug companies and politicians spend a fortune on research to find new drugs. Drug companies do this because it's how they make money. Doctors encourage them to do it because they are heavily bribed to support the drug industry in anything it does. And politicians support it (and spend public money on it) because they'll support anything if the campaign contributions (and tax bills) are big enough. Of course, one way or another the final bill for all this research will end up on our mat.

But the truth is that most of the research done by and for drug companies is a waste of time and money. It's such a misdirection of resources that it's pretty much like a race car team spending 99% of its budget on wing mirror technology.

Medical researchers, for example, tend to ignore that the power of your mind can have a dramatic effect on your health. (I dealt with this in detail in my book *Mindpower*). Your mind can make you ill and it can keep you well. It can also help make you well when you fall ill. It is, to a large extent, your state of mind which determines how successfully you cope with the stress in your life — and how well you will recover from illness.

There is another often overlooked and invariably forgotten truth about staying healthy without drugs. And that involves the power of love.

Your relationships with the people around you — and, in particular, with the people who are close to you — are vital for your health. If there isn't enough emotional love, physical love and spiritual love in your life your health will suffer.

Doctors are missing the point when they concentrate all their efforts on repairing the malfunctioning human organism. What they should spend at least some of their time on (but don't) is teaching us the importance of building and maintaining loving relationships. Few things have such a great impact on the quality (and length) of our lives as the amount of love we give and receive.

We are frequently told about the significance of genetic influences. If you have a family history of heart disease then you'll probably be warned by your doctor that you are very much at risk of developing heart disease.

That is perfectly true.

But, in general terms, the influence of genetics (in other words family history) on our lives is small when compared to the extent to which our health and longevity is influenced by the amount of love we experience. Love and intimacy are pretty well impossible to measure in scientific terms and that means that doctors ignore them. But that doesn't mean that those factors aren't important.

I first realised just how important intimacy and love can be when I was a young general practitioner back in the early 1970s. Two of my earliest patients were an elderly couple who had survived a German concentration camp together. They were frail and weak but as close as any couple can possibly be. They did absolutely everything together. Their lives were totally intertwined. And then one day he had a heart attack and died. He had suffered with a malfunctioning heart for years so, in a way, it wasn't much of a surprise. Five days later she died. That was a surprise. I can't remember what I put on the death certificate but it seemed to me that she died of a broken heart. I have no doubt whatsoever that she died simply and solely because her reason for living had gone.

That was the first time I came across the real physical significance of love and intimacy. I realised that this couple's love for one another kept them both alive through great hardships — and for much longer than they would have lived had they been alone. After a little research I discovered that this sort of thing happens quite often. When one half of a loving couple dies the other half will often follow quite quickly — even though there may be no obvious illness.

Sadly, very few doctors will admit that the amount of love and intimacy in your life can have an impact on your health. Few doctors seem to realise just how damaging loneliness can be — and just how common it is. Faced with a patient with heart disease the vast majority of doctors would simply reach for their prescription pad. Few, if any, would give their patient advice about changing their diet and building up better and stronger relationships. And yet there is clear evidence showing that the patient who changes his lifestyle can cure his heart disease and heal himself. Plus there are no side effects. Drug therapy tends only to treat the symptoms — it doesn't cure and it certainly doesn't heal. And the side effects of drug therapy can be catastrophic. But doctors reach for their prescription pads because that is what they have been taught to do — and it's what the drug industry wants them to do.

Doctors, who usually only know what the drug companies tell them, probably don't know that there is more rock solid scientific evidence showing the influence of love and food on health than there is showing the value of many of the drugs they so willingly prescribe.

Here is a brief summary of just some of the evidence which shows that love and intimacy can, and do, have a dramatic influence on our health.

1. Researchers at Yale University studied 159 patients and showed that men and women who felt the most loved had much less blockage in the arteries of their hearts. The researchers found that patients who felt loved were healthier than patients who didn't.

2. In Sweden researchers who studied 131 women showed that women who had deep emotional relationships had less coronary artery blockage than women who didn't.

3. American researchers who studied nearly 10,000 married men showed that men who answered 'yes' to the question 'Does Your Wife Show You Her Love?' had significantly less angina (heart pain) than men who did not have a loving wife — even if they might be thought to be more at risk of developing heart disease because of their ages, blood cholesterol levels, blood pressure readings and so on. 'The wife's love and support ...apparently reduces the risk of angina pectoris even if the presence of high risk factors,' concluded the researchers.

4. A study of 8,500 men showed that those who had loving wives had half the risk of developing duodenal ulcers as the men who did not have loving wives. Men who admitted that they did not think their wives loved them had three times as many ulcers as men who said their wives showed them love and support.

A surprising number of other research programmes have come to the same conclusions. And the message here is clear.

If you have a loving relationship with another human being (or, failing that, an animal) then you are far more likely to stay healthy than if you don't.

It is also clear that it is vitally important that you tell the people you love just how you feel about them. Say the words 'I love you' (and mean them) and you are vaccinating your partner/relative or friend against disease.

Both men and women benefit enormously if they have loving partners. And there are no side effects. Yet doctors and charities (most of whom are heavily indebted to drug companies) refuse to acknowledge the link between love and health. Many, astonishingly and almost unbelievably, still even seem to reject the idea that there is a link between stress and heart disease. 'There is insufficient evidence to say stress, depression or isolation are main risk factors for heart disease,' a spokeswoman for a heart charity was recently quoted as saying.

Love is a better cure than drugs or surgery. But where's the profit?

42

Any doctor (or other health professional) who confidently tells you what is going to happen to you in a year's time should be sitting on the end of the pier with a scarf around his head and an upturned goldfish bowl on the table in front of him. He should not be practising medicine.

43

Doctors over-diagnose and put unnecessary labels on patients.

44

There is no doubt that some allergy problems (such as asthma) are increasing in their incidence. One reason is that our immune systems have evolved in order to fight infections and we need to be exposed to infections early in life in order to keep them working properly. However, our over-hygienic domestic lifestyle has reduced our natural exposure to mild infections and has, in consequence, sensitised our immune systems which are, as a result, constantly looking for trouble and attacking innocuous aliens such as house dust. Evidence for this comes from research which shows that children who grow up on farms have fewer allergies than children who grow up in towns. This may, it seems, be linked to the number of bugs a child on a farm is likely to encounter. Scientists at Zurich Children's Hospital found two genes which are activated by bacterial infection, and which help to push the immune system away from the direction which causes allergic responses. Both these genes are more active in children who are brought up on farms.

Another problem is undoubtedly the fact that the air in most homes (and schools and offices) is thick with chemical sprays. Air fresheners, oven cleaners, furniture polishes, carpet fresheners and numerous other products contain chemicals which are known to cause asthma. These products are widely used. The result has been a steady and fairly dramatic increase in the incidence of autoimmune disease.

And many vaccines make things worse by reducing the general incidence of childhood infections.

Doctors rarely consider these causes when confronted with a wheezing patient. Encouraged by the drug companies their usual response is to prescribe a powerful new drug. They will often warn the patient (and, if the patient is a child, his or her parents) that drug therapy will be needed for life. The drug companies will have acquired yet another profitable consumer. In the long run, however, there is little doubt that in many cases the drug prescribed will do far more harm than the original symptoms.

45

In the UK there are officially over 500,000 patients suffering from asthma. Some of the drugs used to control asthma can and do kill. If all 500,000 patients really did have asthma then the risk would, of course, be worth taking. But they don't. My guess is that of the 500,000 officially diagnosed, and treated, as asthmatics only a tenth, 50,000 or so, are real asthma sufferers. The other 450,000 have had an occasional wheeze, probably caused by a localised and short-lived chemical allergy but have, nevertheless, been put on long-term treatment.

46

Most doctors think they are more competent than they are. The best doctor is the one who knows that he doesn't know very much.

47

Here's a list of ten diseases for which drugs are over-prescribed. Many of the drug groups on this list are so over-prescribed that they cause more illness than they treat.

1. Osteoporosis

There are three big myths about osteoporosis. The first is that it is a disease which largely affects women. The second is that it is a consequence of the menopause. The third is that the condition can be prevented and/or cured by swallowing calcium. These are marketing tricks established by the drug industry to sell their products. Osteoporosis is a twenty-first century lifestyle disease best avoided (and conquered) by avoiding tobacco and animal protein (meat), by taking regular, gentle exercise, by avoiding an excessive alcohol intake and by keeping the salt intake down. Too much dieting should also be avoided.

2. Menopause

Millions of women attempt to deal with their menopause by taking hormone replacement therapy. The dangers of this usually unnecessary treatment have been widely documented. Women didn't suffer from the menopause until drug companies recognised it as a marketing opportunity.

3. Asthma

As I have already explained, asthma is now one of the most over-diagnosed diseases. Drug companies have successfully trained doctors and nurses to diagnose asthma on a single wheeze and to initiate lifelong drug therapy. Many drugs and inhalers prescribed for asthma are potentially dangerous. If the patient had asthma the risks would probably be worthwhile. Since the patient for whom the drugs and inhalers have been prescribed probably does not have asthma at all the risks are definitely not worthwhile.

4. Depression

I have little doubt that many of the patients officially diagnosed as suffering from depression would probably be more accurately described as being 'unhappy'. To mix together those suffering from endogenous clinical depression (and needing complex and sometimes dangerous therapy) and those suffering from lifestyle disappointment, crises and stress (and needing advice, help and maybe therapy but advice, help and therapy of an entirely different kind) is absurd, illogical and patently cruel. It is done, quite deliberately by the combined efforts of drug companies which are desperate to sell more of their potent pharmacological compounds and doctors whose debt and allegiance to the pharmaceutical companies far exceeds their perceived debts and allegiance to their patients. Drug companies have successfully encouraged general practitioners to diagnose depression in anyone who doesn't feel entirely happy. Since few of us are entirely happy all the time the official incidence of depression has rocketed in recent years. The drugs prescribed for depression are often exceedingly dangerous and the list of side effects associated with some of the most popularly prescribed products is scary.

5. High blood pressure

Traditionally, high blood pressure has always been over-diagnosed — largely because doctors tend to forget that patients can be nervous when having their blood pressure taken. The condition can, in many patients, be effectively controlled by a mixture of diet, exercise and stress control but doctors tend to find it easier to hand over a prescription. Once a patient has been diagnosed as suffering from high blood pressure, and has been started on medication, the chances are high that the treatment will continue for the rest of the patient's life. Drug companies make huge amounts of money out of pills which were never needed and which, in the long run, do far more harm than good.

6. Arthritis

Arthritis is undoubtedly one of the commonest diseases of middle age and old age. But although it may be painful and disruptive it is not usually life-threatening and can often be managed very effectively by a combination of lifestyle changes. For example, the impact of rheumatoid arthritis can be dramatically reduced if the patient adopts a vegetarian diet. Despite this the usual medical approach is to hand out a prescription — often for an expensive drug which is nowhere near as safe as soluble aspirin and nowhere near as effective either.

7. Obesity
It has become politically incorrect to point out that most people who become grossly obese do so because they eat too much food. Instead the obese are allowed, and even encouraged, to regard themselves as suffering from some sort of illness and are offered treatment of some kind to help them deal with their problem. Inevitably, if no changes are made to eating habits, any weight loss which takes place is quickly reversed. (It is often claimed that stick thin models endanger the health of young girls by encouraging them to stay too thin. Far more damage is done by fat celebrities who revel in their obesity. A quick look around any High Street will reveal that the number of vastly overweight teenage girls is much greater than the number of dangerously underweight teenage girls. The number of diseases associated with obesity is legion.)

8. Tranquillisers
It has been known since 1961 that benzodiazepine drugs are addictive. I first described the problem in 1973 — and predicted that benzodiazepine addiction would be a massive problem within a few years. In the mid 1980s I estimated that there were three million benzodiazepine addicts in Britain alone. And yet even today there are still doctors who are handing out prescriptions for benzodiazepines and who insist that these drugs are perfectly safe, are not addictive and can be taken — and stopped — without any worry. At least 99% of the patients who are given these drugs do not need them and would be better off without them.

9. Maturity onset diabetes (type II diabetes)
Type II diabetes is as near as it is possible to get to an optional disease. Many people who have it could recover if they chose to change their eating habits. Doctors should know this but, bizarrely, they usually just reach for the prescription pad and write out a prescription for a potentially hazardous drug. Once again the drug companies are the only winners.

10. Antibiotics
The rise in the incidence of antibiotic-resistant organisms is due partly to the widespread use of antibiotics by farmers (who recklessly give it to their animals to help speed muscle growth) and partly due to doctors over-prescribing the drugs. Antibiotics are of no value in the treatment of viral infections and yet thousands of doctors regularly hand out prescriptions for antibiotics to patients suffering from influenza (a viral infection).

48

Patients who know more about their illness than their doctor always survive longer than patients who know nothing and who leave everything to the professionals.

49

When your doctor hands you a packet of pills to ‘save you the price of a prescription and a trip to the pharmacy’, you are probably being used as a guinea pig and helping to test a new drug.

50

Think very carefully before taking a drug that could cause more problems than are caused by the disease you’ve already got. Always be cautious about taking drugs if your symptoms are merely irritating and you visited the doctor primarily to make sure that your symptoms didn’t denote the onset of something life-threatening. If your doctor prescribes for you ask him if the drugs are really necessary. Ask also what is likely to happen if you don’t take the drugs.

This is true of all treatments, not just drugs. If you get killed by a drug that might have saved your life (and you would have died anyway) then taking the drug was an acceptable risk. But if you are killed by a drug which you were taking for something mild and merely uncomfortable, that’s a real pain and when you’re dead you’ll probably never forgive yourself.

51

The mortality rate for a gastric bypass operation widely recommended to help overweight people slim down is 1 in 200.

That means that out of every 200 perfectly healthy but overweight people who have the operation electively one will die. Is that acceptable? I don’t think so. Overweight is, it is perfectly true, a major cause of illness. But surgery isn’t by any means the only way to lose excess weight. It is, however, the most dangerous.

52

The drug companies are in the business of prolonging illness not curing it. They would be richer if everyone was ill all the time. Indeed, drug company marketing programmes are designed to persuade more and more people that they are ill all the time. For a drug company the idea of nirvana is a world where everyone is always ill and permanently on medication.

The aims and purposes of drug companies are understandable. They exist to make money. That's all.

This purpose does not fit comfortably with that of the medical profession — which exists primarily to diagnose, heal and care for patients. Earning money is important (without it doctors would starve to death) but it is not the primary motive and should not govern the individual doctor's actions, or the attitudes and priorities of the profession as a whole.

In theory the industry and the profession are separate entities, coming together only in that the former manufactures products used by the latter.

But in practice the medical profession and the drug industry have become so closely linked that their aims have become mixed. Many of the doctors who write articles or give lectures about new drugs have received so much funding from drug companies (as consulting fees, grants, bonuses, share options etc.) that their independence has been permanently compromised. Around the world, many medical organisations which exist to evaluate new drugs consist of doctors whose independence must be questioned because of their close financial links with the drug industry.

Things have got so bad that I very much doubt if there is any important medical organisation or committee which is not controlled by doctors whose independence has been totally compromised by their personal financial links to the drug industry.

Over the years I have been widely vilified by leaders of the medical profession for daring to criticise the pharmaceutical industry. To many doctors, criticising the drug industry is on a par with criticising the church or the royal family. The medical profession has, in practice, been little more than an extended marketing arm for the drug industry for several decades.

53

There is now a considerable amount of evidence to show that (with the necessary help of doctors) the multi-billion pound global drug industry frequently manipulates the results of drug trials and withholds inconvenient information which might threaten its profits — even when withholding that information endangers the lives of patients.

The *Journal of the American Medical Association* has published evidence showing that 38% of truly independent studies investigating new drugs reach 'unfavourable' conclusions whereas just 5% of the trials funded by the pharmaceutical industry show that drugs are of no value. Gosh. How could that happen.

54

Of all the bad things the drug industry has done (and a list would fill this book and another eleven volumes like it) the worst must surely be the way they have corrupted the entire medical establishment.

Not that the blame should be laid on one party. You can't be corrupted unless you want to be.

55

Despite extravagant claims to the contrary (largely from the self-serving cancer industry) the incidence of cancer hasn't fallen in recent years. Indeed, the incidence of cancer among children is rising fast. Between the 1970s and 1990s it rose 1 per cent a year for children and 1.5% a year for teenagers. The much publicised efforts of governments and the cancer industry have had a negative effect — they have made things worse.

I'm not surprised by this.

Indeed, it is my belief that cancer charities don't want to see cancer beaten. It is, after all, in their interests for cancer to kill more people. If cancer kills lots of people the cancer industry will receive lots of money from worried citizens.

56

When you go to the doctor for help and treatment you probably assume that once he has decided what is wrong with you the doctor will automatically give you a treatment that is quite specific for your disease.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

With a very few exceptions there are no certainties in medicine. What you will get will depend more on chance and your doctor's personal prejudices than on science.

This problem isn't a new one, of course.

In the preface to *The Doctor's Dilemma* playwright George Bernard Shaw pointed out that during the first great epidemic of influenza which developed towards the end of the nineteenth century, a London evening newspaper sent a journalist posing as a patient to all the great consultants of the day.

The newspaper then published details of the advice and prescriptions offered by the consultants.

The whole proceeding was, almost inevitably, passionately denounced by the medical journals as an unforgivable breach of confidence, but the result was nevertheless fascinating: despite the fact that the journalist had complained of exactly the same symptoms to all the physicians, the advice and the prescriptions that were offered were all different.

Nothing has changed.

Even in these days of apparently high technology medicine there are many — almost endless — variations in the treatments preferred by different doctors.

Doctors offer different prescriptions for exactly the same symptoms, they keep patients in hospital for vastly different lengths of time, and they perform different operations on patients with apparently identical problems.

There are, it seems, no certainties in medicine. For example, the treatment a patient with cancer gets (whether she has surgery or is given pills) depends largely on which doctor she sees. As one doctor put it rather concisely your treatment (and possibly your future) depends entirely on which way you turn at the end of the hospital corridor. Go left and you will end up having a six hour operation. Go right and you'll go home with a prescription for pills.

There is, indeed, ample evidence now available to show that the type of treatment a patient gets when he visits a doctor will depend not so much on the symptoms he describes but on the doctor he consults.

So, for example, consider what happened when 430 family doctors were asked to explain how they would treat a 35-year-old accountant complaining of backache brought on by digging in his garden.

The 'case history' was deliberately made fairly precise.

However, despite this precision the recommended treatments varied enormously.

Less than a quarter of the doctors said that they would definitely prescribe a painkiller. Nearly ten per cent said that they hardly ever prescribed a painkiller in such circumstances. Eight per cent of the doctors said they might refer the patient to hospital but fifty two percent said that they never referred such patients to hospital. Forty eight per cent said that they usually advised bed rest for up to one week while eight per cent said that they usually advised bed rest for between one and four weeks.

Around ten per cent of the doctors said that there was a good chance that they would refer the patient to an osteopath but the other ninety per cent said that they hardly ever, or never, referred patients to osteopaths.

Going to a general practitioner really is something of a lottery.

Another survey, involving 700 general practitioners, showed that twelve per cent of family doctors might be willing to prescribe a sleeping tablet without even seeing the patient involved. Over half the general practitioners confessed that they would prescribe a cough medicine without seeing a patient and nearly two thirds of the doctors said that they might prescribe an antacid without a patient needing to come into the surgery.

A third survey of over 400 doctors showed that some doctors never provide their patients with any contraceptive advice at all.

Visit three doctors with symptoms of cystitis.

One will give you an antibiotic for five days. One will give you an antibiotic for seven days. And one will give you an antibiotic for ten days. They are all guessing.

Despite all these variations in the type of treatment offered, most doctors in practice seem to be convinced that their treatment methods are beyond question.

Many general practitioners and hospital doctors announce their decisions as though they are carved on stone.

But on the basis of the evidence it seems that most decisions about how patients should be treated are based on nothing more scientific than guesswork, personal experience, intuition and prejudice. And fashion.

57

If there is a high-tech and a low-tech way of doing things, doctors will choose the high-tech approach even if it is less effective and more dangerous.

58

The majority of doctors don't have the time, training or knowledge to help patients suffering from mental illness. They understand very little about the way in which psychological health can and should be managed.

59

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) depression is now the single commonest cause of disability throughout the world. The WHO claims that 20% of the entire world's population (one in every five of us) is disabled by depression. And that's just depression.

The official figures for other aspects of mental illness, such as anxiety, make equally horrifying reading. One in ten Americans now has or has had a classifiable anxiety disorder. Over two million people in the UK suffer from obsessive compulsive disorder.

Mental illness has (literally) replaced unemployment as Britain's biggest social problem. The biggest single cause of misery in modern western society is not poverty but mental illness.

And around the world the incidence of suicide is increasing rapidly. For example, the incidence of suicide by young men in the UK increased by 175% in the two decades between 1985 and 2005.

There is no doubt that mental illness is on the rise and is one of the most significant and underestimated health problems of our time. And there is no doubt that doctors are poorly trained to deal with these problems, having very little idea about how they are caused and no idea what to do about them.

60

The slightly surprising truth is that human beings now show the same signs of illness as captive zoo animals.

Visit a zoo and watch the animals and you will often see many signs of neurotic behaviour. The polar bears may be swimming round and round in circles. The chimpanzees may be sitting morosely; attempting to amuse themselves by abusing the human spectators. Other animals will have torn out their own fur. Some will eat too much and become obese; succumbing, perhaps, to the temptations offered by the junk food thrown by visitors. Others will eat too little. Many simply sit and stare into space: clearly depressed.

Humans suffer the same diseases. We develop neuroses. We constantly find new ways to abuse ourselves. We develop eating disorders and we acquire addictions.

The problem is that our modern cities are zoos for people. We live as captive animals, pacing around in our cages. Our cities are crowded but millions suffer from loneliness. We have sophisticated communications technology all around us and yet millions hardly ever communicate with other human beings. Countless numbers of people are spiritually empty and suffering as a result.

61

Many people bottle things up because they have no one with whom they can share their problems. New laws removing privacy and confidentiality mean that none of us can expect our conversations with our doctors, lawyers, bank managers, accountants or other advisers to be treated as confidential.

62

Three quarters of the people suffering from depression and other serious mental illness receive little or no effective treatment. The doctor’s usual solution is to reach for his prescription pad and write out yet another prescription for yet another anti-depressant or tranquilliser. Occasionally, these drugs might help. Quite often they make things worse. The only consistent winner from this pharmacological solution is the pharmaceutical industry.

63

Is it a coincidence that the quality of medical care has deteriorated over the same period that politicians have forced medical schools to favour female applicants? This egregious example of positive discrimination was introduced because there were more male doctors than female doctors. This was considered politically unacceptable. The result has been that poorly-qualified and poorly-motivated female applicants have taken precedence over well-qualified and well-motivated male applicants. Patients have been the losers. (And the sting in the tail is that many newly-qualified women doctors choose to work part-time, if at all. This is one of the reasons for the chronic shortage of doctors.)

64

Some doctors and nurses are less competent and more stupid than you could possibly imagine them to be.

65

One of the most stupid things doctors do is to give tranquillisers (or, just as daft, anti-depressants) to people who are going through a bereavement.

Grieving, though inevitably painful, is a natural and essential part of bereavement. Tranquillisers do not deal with or banish any of the emotional traumas associated with the loss of a loved one. They merely cover up the sadness and sorrow and numb the mind — acting solely as an anaesthetic rather than as a therapy. The sadness and the pain will remain buried for as long as the tranquillisers are taken. When the pills are stopped the buried sorrow will emerge.

When someone who has been recently bereaved shows signs of sadness they, and those close to them, naturally recognise the source of the sorrow. The tears and the sadness will attract sympathy and understanding which can ease the whole process of mourning.

But when someone who has been bereaved is given a tranquilliser (or a sleeping tablet) the process of mourning is put on ice and delayed until the tablets are stopped. When the drugs are taken away the underlying emotional trauma — which has been merely buried rather than healed — will re-emerge. However, since it may be many months or years since the bereavement which originally inspired those natural (and to a large extent healthy) feelings neither the individual patient nor those around him or her will associate the symptoms being exhibited with something which happened a long time ago. The patient will cry and feel sad but will not know why. And, because there is no obvious cause for the tears and the sadness, those around will find it difficult to understand what is going on.

66

I’ve written widely and for many years about drug addiction. When I did the research for my books *The Drugs*

Myth, *Addicts and Addictions* and *Life Without Tranquillisers* I talked to a good many experts who deal every day with drug addicts.

Based on the advice I was given I came to the conclusion that the six most addictive drugs — in the order of their addictiveness — are:

1. Benzodiazepines
2. Alcohol
3. Tobacco
4. Marijuana
5. Heroin
6. Cocaine

I suspect that lots of people who don't know anything much about drug addiction would find the order of the drugs on that list rather startling. But the truth is that the nonsense we're fed in the movies and by self-serving heroin and cocaine addicts is piffle. The most horrendously addictive drugs in the world are benzodiazepines.

67

Doctors who fail to question everything they are taught and told must invariably do more harm than good.

68

Just because the medical establishment (masquerading as perceived wisdom) says that something is true, doesn't mean that it is true. Indeed, the chances are high that the opposite is true.

69

Medicine only progresses through observation. Sadly, too few doctors and nurses bother to look. And most of those who take the time to look don't see.

Coleman’s 6th Law Of Medicine

Hospitals are not suitable places for sick people. If you must go into one, you should get out as quickly as you can.

1

Before the industrial age, hospitals were built like cathedrals in order to lift the soul and ease the mind. Hospitals were decorated with carvings, works of art, flowers and perfumes. Modern hospitals are built with no regard for the spirit, eye or soul. They are bare, more like prisons than temples, designed to concentrate the mind on pain, fear and death. Where there are windows they are positioned in such a way that patients can’t see out of them (though even if they could they probably wouldn’t be able to see anything more enthralling than the refuse bins or the air-conditioning units).

2

One of the reasons why hospitals are no longer suitable for sick people is the fact that ambitious modern nurses want to administer rather than nurse.

In the dark old days nurses were hired and trained to nurse. Aspiring nurses (mostly but not exclusively female) were inspired by the desire to tend and to heal. Nursing was a noble profession. Caring was the key word. The most powerful jobs in the profession were occupied by ward sisters and matrons — all of whom still had close, daily contact with patients.

Sadly, today’s career structure means that nurses whose desire to nurse is accompanied by even the slightest ambition must quickly move up the ladder to a point where they spend very little time or, more probably, no time at all with patients. Nurses used to be trained on the wards. Today nurses are often trained in colleges — far removed from real life patients. Many senior nurses now spend their days closeted in their offices, staring at computer screens and filling in assessment forms. Many seem to regard themselves as above what they see as the menial tasks of nursing. They leave the hands-on work to untrained staff. The introduction of degrees for nurses has turned a fundamentally practical profession into one with entirely spurious academic ambitions. The modern career structure for nurses has taken the best nurses away from patients; it was driven by a patronising and entirely inaccurate concept (that nursing is demeaning).

Today, many nurses go into the profession attracted not by the desire to tend but by the salaries, perks, authority and career structure which will, they know, take them away from practical work. The system is designed to attract exactly the wrong people into nursing.

The actual hands-on nursing is done, very largely, by junior staff.

This is, without a doubt, one of the reasons why modern hospitals are so bad and it is the reason why serious hospital infections are now endemic; it is why nurses are too often rude and uncaring to patients and why, in so many hospitals, clusters of nurses are more likely to be found having meetings (more appropriately called coffee-breaks) than actually helping patients.

Time and time again patients report that nurses won’t lift them up the bed (it has been reported that some hospitals have posters with the slogan ‘Nurses are not weight lifters’ on their walls), won’t help feed them, won’t bring bedpans, won’t change beds, won’t do anything for patients in pain or distress and won’t respond when the call button is pressed. They will not, in short, do any of the things that nurses are traditionally supposed to do. They are not interested in soothing or healing or helping because they have become career administrators with aspirations and ambitions.

In many hospitals it is the patients who can get out of bed who end up doing all the nursing work.

Stop a nurse in a modern hospital and ask her where such and such a patient can be found or how he or she is progressing and you will probably be met with a glazed, disinterested look. They don’t know and they don’t much care.

3

Do hospitals need more nurses?

I suspect that most do not.

But hospitals do need the nurses they’ve got to work harder. My observations (and those of dozens of others) confirm that many nurses seem to spend large parts of their day sitting around gossiping.

4

Hospital staff are constantly complaining about the number of assaults they suffer at the hands of aggrieved patients and relatives. The latest figures show that nearly a third of hospital staff members claim to have been assaulted at some time during their employment. (Much of the abuse consists of complaints and verbal signs of irritation rather than physical violence or threats of physical violence but, rather inevitably perhaps, many staff members are so distressed and traumatised by a little light verbal abuse that they have to take time off work.)

To be honest I’m surprised that the figure is as low as at is. From what I’ve seen of hospitals in recent years I can only say that the unabused staff members are living charmed lives.

If nurses and other hospital staff members want to stop the assaults they should change their attitude and alter the way they treat and care for patients.

In the United Kingdom a recent survey of National Health Service employees working in hospitals showed that only 44% thought that they would be happy with the standard of care provided if they were patients in their own hospitals.

That really says it all, doesn’t it?

5

Modern hospitals tend to be bureaucratic and dangerously overstaffed. Billions of pounds are wasted on salaries, expenses and pensions for unnecessary administrators. Those excess administrators are soaking up so much money that they are indirectly responsible for thousands of deaths.

A spokesman for one hospital which had spent £1,000,000 more than its budget allowed said that the hospital was ‘thinking’ about what to do (suggesting that the ‘hospital’ has an identity and a brain and makes its own decisions enables the administrators to avoid taking responsibility) and that what had happened was no one’s fault (see what I mean about avoiding responsibility). She said that the hospital was considering selling some equipment or closing some beds in order to deal with its debts. The hospital was not, of course, contemplating getting rid of any of the administrators whose incompetence had led to the problem.

Most administrators seem to believe that hospitals would be much more efficient and cost effective if there were no patients at all. I am sure that they are right.

Signs of administrators at work are everywhere. For example, it is the fashion these days to put carpets on hospital corridors. Naturally, this is dangerously unhealthy (since carpets are far more difficult to clean than other forms of flooring) but at least it means that administrators are not disturbed by the noise of patients being wheeled about.

6

Today Britain’s National Health Service employs 1.4 million people. There are 200,000 more employees in the NHS than there were nine years ago. But there are less people actually caring for patients. The number of administrators has grown to exceed both the number of nurses and the number of beds. How, in the name of Hippocrates, can a hospital need more administrators than nurses or more administrators than beds?

7

The present system ensures that the nurses who run hospitals, who make the rules and who provide the ‘leadership’ are the ones who are least capable of, and least interested in, working directly with patients.

The nurses who run our hospitals are the ones who are least interested in the art of caring, least passionate about nursing as an art and most anxious to climb up the career ladder by exhibiting their prowess at managing meetings, mastering the double-speak that has invaded hospitals and ‘giving good mouth’. Nursing lost its way when it became impossible for a nurse to rise in the hierarchy without becoming an administrator. Nursing went wrong when nurses started collecting diplomas and degrees. How can you have a degree in caring?

A few decades ago patients were cared for in hospitals which were run by matrons and ward sisters — nurses who still knew how to turn a patient, make a bed and empty a bedpan. Many patients cannot, of course, remember how efficient hospitals were in those days and so, because they don’t know what to expect or what to look for, they think they are being well looked after. Most people have low expectations, are inherently grateful for anything that is done for them, are frightened and don’t know what to look for. (This is the only possible explanation for those letters to local newspapers extolling the virtues of the local hospital.) These days the brigades of fat-bottomed nurses who ‘administer’ our hospitals are too self-important even to look at patients, let alone speak to them. You can occasionally spot these nursing administrators darting along the corridors, eyes averted lest they accidentally soil their vision with the sight of someone in pyjamas or a nightdress. Most of the time these nursing harridans lie hidden behind office doors, planning their career progress. Many of them seem grossly obese — a consequence no doubt of doing too little work and spending too much time munching chocolates and biscuits.

8

There is very little continuity of nursing care in modern hospitals. Patients are lucky if they ever see the same nurse twice. Those who are left at the dirty end of the profession, wander around almost uninterested in their work. Often slovenly and untidy, they do not seem to care for their patients at all. Visit a modern hospital ward and it is frequently difficult, if not impossible, to tell who is in charge. The modern nurses’ office (or ‘station’) will usually be positioned in a spot where the nurses can hide away from the patients to make their phone calls, eat their chocolates and gossip. Inevitably, if the patients cannot see the nurses, the converse is also true: the nurses cannot see the patients. Calls for help or bedpans go unnoticed.

9

In many countries, doctors (both in general practice and in hospitals) are now working strictly limited hours. Many general practitioners no longer provide the 24 hour, 365 day service which was an integral part of family practice just a few years ago. The modern general practitioner works the sort of hours usually associated with school teachers, librarians and accountants. Many hospital doctors now work only short, fixed weeks. It is rare to see a doctor (or a physiotherapist or, indeed, anyone else who isn't a patient or a visitor) in a hospital at weekends these days. Patients are left lying in bed all weekend. No one, it seems, has heard of deep vein thromboses or pressure sores.

10

One result of the shortage of doctors has been that nurses have been given the right to prescribe and to perform surgery — and to take on these responsibilities without any medical supervision and without the sort of training required for doctors. To the problem of bad prescribing by doctors has now been added the problem bad prescribing by nurses. Most nurses (like most doctors) know very little about the drugs they prescribe and know next to nothing about side effects.

Patients need fewer — not more — people handing out prescriptions.

11

Infections are now a major killer in our hospitals. Thousands of patients are killed by antibiotic-resistant infections. The methicillin resistant staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) bug kills and seriously injures thousands of people every year. Hygiene standards are appalling. Wards are often filthy and nurses and doctors often fail to wash their bloody, bug-stained hands when moving from one patient to another. Hygiene in hospitals is just a word (which most members of staff probably cannot even spell).

Visit a hospital and watch the cleaners at work: you'll see them slide a mop down the centre of the ward (this is known in the mop wielding business as 'taking the mop for a walk') but leave the space under the beds or around the lockers unswept. The cleaners then wander off into their staff room for a tea break.

Staggeringly, the same people who clean the ward then serve patients their food. No one seems to see anything odd in this. The cleaners do not, of course, wash their hands between these two activities. Cleaning staff (sorry, I think they now have to be called 'housekeepers') do not appear to have been told that they too must obey the basic rules of hygiene. I have seen a cleaner go into a private room containing a patient with MRSA without bothering to put on mask, gloves or gown.

The Government would save far more lives if it took down speed cameras and, instead, put up cameras in hospitals to check that nurses, cleaners and doctors washed their hands properly. Such a simple action would save billions of pounds and thousands of lives a year. Nurses who are spotted moving from patient to patient without washing their hands should be fired and banned from ever working in health care again.

12

The separation of authority from responsibility means that doctors are no longer in charge of what happens to their patients. Doctors work in teams (as equal members alongside such dross as social workers) led by administrators. Today, it is the administrators who are in charge. And administrators are, it seems, unsackable. Whenever a hospital runs short of money it is the facilities for patients which are cut — never the number of overpaid, underworked administrators. It is not difficult to sustain the belief that modern hospitals and health centres are run for employees in general, and administrators in particular, rather than for patients.

13

Dignity is not a word which the modern nurse understands.

Not, at least, when applied to patients. Many hospitals still have mixed wards — with male and female patients forced to abandon their natural dignity in the interests of hospital economy (so that the administrators can take yet another huge pay rise). In Britain the Government has repeatedly promised to make sure that mixed wards are done away with. Inevitably this promise, like most of the others governments make, has been forgotten. Patients (particularly elderly ones) are talked to as if they were slightly backward children; invariably being addressed by their first names rather than being given the respect and dignity afforded by the prefix Mr or Mrs. In many hospitals, patients are given revealing little gowns to wear. These hide nothing from general view but patients are instructed that they must be worn without underwear. Patrons in the seediest type of nightclub would be arrested if they wore such revealing attire.

14

Much of the medical establishment still steadfastly and stubbornly refuses to acknowledge that 'alternative' or 'complementary' medical techniques have anything to offer. Gentle therapies, and gentle practitioners, are deliberately demonised by the drug industry controlled medical establishment.

15

The food in hospitals is diabolical and contributes enormously to the death rate among patients. It is, for example, quite absurd that hospitals should continue to serve meat dishes to patients. Since the evidence linking meat to cancer is just as convincing as that linking tobacco to cancer, it would make as much sense for nurses to walk around the wards handing out cigarettes.

16

A study of 1,203 patients who had heart attacks showed that staying at home may be safer than going into hospital. The patients in the trial were allocated at random either to a hospital bed or to staying at home. The authors of the paper reported that the mortality rates for the two groups were similar. Whatever advantage patients might have had through going into hospital and being surrounded by machines, doctors and nurses, was matched by the hazards of going into hospital.

17

Hospitals are dangerous places for several reasons but the most important is the fact that you are more likely to catch a serious, life-threatening infection in hospital than anywhere else. The great danger is, of course, that you may catch an MRSA infection. (MRSA is a superbug which is resistant to most if not all available antibiotics.) Such infections were predictable (I predicted their development in 1977 in a book called *Paper Doctors)* and are avoidable (I explained how they could best be avoided in the same book) but as a result of worsening hospital hygiene (neither doctors nor nurses bother to wash their hands anywhere near often enough) and the overuse of antibiotics, MRSA is now a significant health threat in hospitals.

The MRSA problem has two causes. First, the over-prescribing of antibiotics by doctors. Second, the fact that farmers give their animals regular doses of antibiotics in order to keep them healthy and to increase their weight gain.

The e.coli 0157 bug which causes so many problems — bloody diarrhoea for the lucky and kidney failure for the not so lucky — first emerged in intensively reared cattle and is probably a result of the excessive use of antibiotics as growth promoters and prophylactics. The long-term use of antibiotics harms the normal intestinal microorganisms which keep e.coli 0157 in check. Normally animals can rebalance their intestinal microflora in order to get rid of the deadly e.coli variation but they cannot do this when they are confined in modern factory farms.

The result of this reckless over-use of antibiotics by doctors and farmers is that most of the diseases which we thought we had eradicated have come back, stronger than ever and more resistant to the drugs available to us.

We are on a downhill slope that is getting steeper by the day. Our expectations are unrealistic and our approach is faulty. Hospitals in the UK are the worst in the world for this particular problem and British patients in National Health Service hospitals are 40 times as likely to get an MRSA infection as are patients in hospitals in other European countries. Hospital staff seem unconcerned at this even though every incidence of MRSA infection is straightforward evidence of nursing incompetence. Even medical records, pens and computer keyboards are now known to be infected with MRSA. In many hospitals nurses are not given enough uniforms to be able to change daily. Some hospitals have no changing facilities and so nurses go home in their uniforms (taking bugs with them). Most hospitals don’t launder uniforms and so nurses have to put their uniforms in with the family wash — usually at a temperature which will not destroy the bugs.

If the spread of the infection is to be halted hospitals will need to be closed down one by one and thoroughly cleaned before being re-opened.

Progress might speed up a little if a few dozen doctors, nurses and administrators were imprisoned for manslaughter. (It’s difficult to see why they shouldn’t be. Running or working in a dirty hospital is just as much a crime as driving while drunk or under the influence of drugs.)

Meanwhile, things are likely to continue to get worse. One British hospital where superbug infections doubled in just two years admitted that its cleaners mop under patients’ beds only once a week. The hospital’s chief executive admitted that only about 30% of hospital floor space is cleaned but seemed proud of the fact that some areas of the hospital were cleaned on a daily basis.

It is ignorance and arrogance like this which has led to the MRSA epidemic.

Hospital administrators (the ones who make all the decisions these days) do not seem to understand that patients in hospital are likely to have under-efficient immune systems and, therefore, to be vulnerable to infection.

Keeping hospitals clean isn’t difficult. All it needs is regular washing of hands and cleaning of surfaces (and floors) with soap and water. Sadly, most doctors and nurses (and indeed other staff) seem to think that washing their hands or cleaning equipment is beneath them. One former radiologist reports having picked up a probe she needed to use to perform a breast scan and finding a pubic hair still attached to it. It turned out that the previous patient had been a man being scanned for testicular cancer. Most doctors working in modern hospitals regard similar horror stories as too day-to-day to merit note. Surgeons report being telephoned hours after an operation and told that a patient upon whom they had operated had MRSA. And any senior nurse or doctor who does remind a more junior colleague to wash their hands is quite likely to find themselves facing a disciplinary board while the grubby handed member of staff will take nine months sick leave to recover from the stress of being told off.

As if all that wasn't bad enough, you are also more likely to catch a less serious, but debilitating infection in a hospital than you are elsewhere. In some parts of the world hospital food is handled with scant regard for the basic rules of hygiene. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the risk of contracting an ordinary vomiting and diarrhoea bug in hospital is greater than almost anywhere else. Not even grubby back street cafes can match hospitals when it comes to counting the number of 'customers' brought low by stomach bugs.

18

Once you are in hospital doctors will feel an urge to do things to you. Some of these things will be useful. Many will not. Blood will be removed, X-rays will be taken and other tests performed. There are two risks with having tests done.

The first is the risk inherent in the test itself. Every time a venepuncture is performed there is a risk that you will contract an infection. Every time you have an X-ray you are increasing your chances of developing cancer.

The second is the risk associated with the tendency of doctors to treat test results rather than patients. Many tests produce inaccurate or misleading results and the danger is that doctors will be tempted to assume that the test results imply the existence of pathology you don't have. You may, therefore, be subjected to an operation you don't need or given drugs for no good reason. Operations are potentially dangerous procedures and are best avoided whenever possible.

19

Surgical deaths in the United Kingdom alone are said to number between 20,000 and 30,000 a year. Anaesthesia is a regular cause of serious problems — resulting in thousands of deaths.

Many of the conditions for which the doomed patients entered the operating theatre might not have proved fatal by themselves. In other words those patients were killed by the surgery.

20

The risks associated with routine surgery are not widely understood (and are usually dramatically underestimated by doctors). Nine out of ten operations are done to improve life rather than save life. This means that 90% of the patients who die as a result of surgery didn't *need* their operations. Little research has been done to find out if all those operations actually do improve the quality of life for the patients who have them.

21

Complex modern medical and surgical treatments often involve ethical dilemmas which are rarely discussed in public. I wonder, for example, how many people know that in order to transplant a heart the organ must still be beating when it is removed from the donor patient.

22

To all this, of course, must be added the fact that 40% of patients given drugs (and how many patients in hospital are not given drugs?) will suffer painful, uncomfortable or potentially fatal side effects.

23

One officially unrecognised danger of going into hospital is that you may starve to death. The food in many hospitals is dire. It lacks nutritional value but is full of saturated fats.

But there is another danger: the real risk that patients who are seriously ill will not receive the food they need — however poor it may be.

I have seen patients in hospital unable to feed themselves who have clearly been slowly starving to death.

The problem is simple.

The staff bring round a meal and place it on the patient's table.

The patient is too ill or too weak to do anything with the meal.

Twenty minutes later the staff come round again, collect up the untouched food and hurry away with an uncaring and thoughtless 'Not hungry today, dear?' tossed over a shoulder.

The patient, increasingly weak and hungry, simply waves a hand in mild protest and then sinks back into the pillows again.

Eventually the patient starves to death. This happens often. Patients in hospital need a relative or friend to feed them if they cannot feed themselves.

24

Hospital patients are rarely given their pills on time. The handing out of drugs is one of the most important activities on a hospital ward. It used to be something that was carried out by the ward sister. These days it is regarded as a chore to be delegated. The senior nursing staff will be far too busy filling in forms (or designing new ones) to bother with anything that involves interacting with patients. The result is that patients rarely get their pills when they should. Drugs don't work as efficiently when given randomly.

25

Patients who need a bedpan will often be left to shout and buzz for help for many minutes. When another patient eventually manages to persuade a nurse or auxiliary to attend it will often be done with poor grace and little or no concern for the patient's feelings. Once the patient is stuck on a bedpan he or she is likely to remain there far longer than is necessary. Once again it will often require the intervention of other patients to attract the attention of a member of staff since for long periods the ward is likely to be unattended while staff members attend meetings or consume yet more coffee.

26

Hospital complaints procedures are designed to protect the hospital from litigation and the staff member from trouble, rather than to protect the patient from abuse or mistreatment. Consequently, there is little or no point in complaining about the quality of care provided in hospitals. The standard official response for hospitals these days is to say that they are improving/updating/reviewing their internal practices and that a full on-going investigation is under way. They repeat this mantra endlessly in the hope and belief that you will eventually drop your complaint and (erroneously) assume that you have had some impact on the way things are done. No individuals employed by the hospital are ever expected to take responsibility for their actions. In our harsh and uncaring modern world, strangers (even ones who are paid to care) will never care as much about your loved one's health and comfort as you do.

27

Hospitals are particularly dangerous places at weekends. The risks of being admitted to hospital at the weekend are quantifiable and scary. You are between 8% and 26% more likely to die if you are admitted to hospital at the weekend than if you are admitted to hospital during the week.

One reason for this is that senior doctors go home, often leaving very junior doctors to look after vast numbers of patients. Theoretically, it should be possible for a junior doctor to call in a consultant. In practice this hardly ever happens, partly because not many young doctors have the courage to pull a senior consultant off the golf course and partly because the senior consultant may have disappeared and be unreachable. In many hospitals this means that a patient may receive no treatment at all over the weekend. But it isn't just doctors who are in short supply. Nurses are scarce too. Senior nurses may disappear completely, leaving relatively junior nurses in charge. Technical staff are likely to be unavailable and equipment will probably be locked up and unusable. While writing this book I read about a teenage boy who died in hospital after collapsing with a brain haemorrhage. Doctors at the large hospital where he was a patient told the boy's mother that he needed an angiogram — an X-ray of blood vessels in his brain — so that they could decide how best they should treat him. But they said that the procedure wasn't available at weekends. Administrators can be blamed for this appalling attitude but doctors must take some responsibility too. They should force the bureaucrats into action.

28

More and more hospitals are now so busy manipulating their figures to make themselves look good that they don't have the time to do things that would actually make things better. So, for example, many hospitals keep their surgical waiting lists short by ensuring that the patients needing relatively simple surgery are treated first. It is obviously quicker to deal with 12 patients requiring surgery that will take 20 minutes than it is to deal with one patient who requires surgery that will take 10 hours. Attempts to disguise the truth seem endlessly Machiavellian. One reader of mine reported to me that after he had had to wait nearly two hours later than his appointment time he complained. The hospital wrote and told him that he was wrong and that he had left the clinic after a 45 minute wait. When my reader produced witnesses disputing this the hospital spokesman wrote back admitting that: '...I have discovered that patients are often booked out or 'departed' from clinics at a time that does not necessarily correspond to the actual time they left the clinic'. Just what sort of problems this could create in the case of a fire or some other crisis it is difficult to imagine.

29

In the United Kingdom the number of senior managers in hospitals has risen every year for decades. In 1951 UK hospitals were managed by 29,021 administrators and clerks. By 2003 the number of administrators had risen to 253,613 so the work was being shared by nearly ten times as many people. The number of domestic staff employed had, during the same period, fallen from 163,660 to 138,238 (explaining, perhaps, why hospitals are getting dirtier and dirtier). In 1953 there were 34.2 hospital beds for every member of the medical staff. Half a century later this had fallen to 2.7 hospital beds for every member of the medical staff. In 1953 there were 467,000 available hospital beds in the NHS. Half a century later there were just 198,000 available hospital beds in NHS hospitals. (The number of inpatient acute hospital beds in the UK is approximately one third the number in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.)

30

The world is, it seems, full of clerks these days. Most of them love to acquire authority but eschew responsibility. And most of them seem to have found jobs in health care where doctors, reluctant to take on paperwork, and not aware that in the 21st century the power goes with the paperwork, have unwittingly left a power vacuum.

31

Hospitals are designed and built around the needs of the staff. To the architects who design hospitals, to the managers who run them, and to the staff who work in them, patients are, it seems, something of a nuisance, without whom everything would run far more smoothly.

If hospitals were designed with the safety and convenience of patients in mind wards would be built in a star shape, with a bed in each point of the star and a nurses' station in the centre of the star. Through one of the points of the star there would be a single entrance to the ward. Individual wards would be attached by short corridors to the points of another, much larger star. The stores and resuscitation equipment would be kept in the centre of this larger star. Specialist departments (such as X-ray units) would be attached to points of the larger star.

This design would provide some privacy for patients, but would make it possible for staff to observe patients at all times. And it would ensure that long journeys along hospital corridors would be banished since no patients would ever be very far from any specialist unit — or, indeed, from another ward. The star shape would make it easy to seal off infected wards. I suspect that staff wouldn't like my design very much for just as it would allow them to keep an eye on patients so it would allow patients to keep an eye on them.

32

The people who work in hospitals (and the people who run them) rarely, if ever, look for ways to reduce the number of errors made. The usual response is to deny that anything untoward has happened at all. This response probably originated as a defence against litigation. But it has become the standard. It is hardly surprising that things are continually getting worse, and that the same mistakes are constantly being repeated. If doctors, nurses and administrators would have the courage to apologise and explain occasionally they would find that their relationship with their patients might be mended and even restored to its former condition. But while doctors, nurses and administrators continue to deny obvious truths the relationship between staff and patients will continue to deteriorate.

33

Hospital staff are too often underworked and lazy. Hospitals are filthy dirty and badly run. Hospitals have too much money but ill-informed, uncaring, self-serving bureaucrats spend it on all the wrong things. If the Gestapo ever gets back on its feet and starts recruiting it will have little difficulty in finding suitable candidates among the administrators working in hospitals.

Sadly, hospitals won't improve because the administrators won't do what they ought to do — sack themselves.

34

Non-emergency (or elective) surgery is always the treatment of last resort.

35

As hospitals become increasingly dangerous places more and more patients will choose to stay at home rather than risk going to hospital. Patients who need to be in hospital (for an operation or an invasive investigation) may choose to convalesce at home.

Would you know how to cope if you had to become a nurse overnight? Every day thousands of men and women find themselves having to cope with an invalid in the house.

Here are some tips that will help make things easier for you if anyone in your family needs looking after at home.

1. Few patients need to stay in bed all day. Unless the doctor has given instructions to the contrary your patient should be able to get up out of bed to bathe and use the toilet. Most patients feel better if they are allowed to get up, watch TV or sit in a chair.

2. If you do have to look after a patient who is going to be bed-bound try and get hold of a hospital-type bed. They are much higher than ordinary beds. Bending over an ordinary divan for more than a few days will soon give you a bad back.

3. Sick rooms get stuffy. Don’t be afraid to have a window open. Germs like stale air.

4. Try to change the sheets as often as you can. Crisp, clean bed sheets are wonderful. Powdering with talc helps to prevent the development of bedsores in long-term patients.

5. If your patient needs to take pills keep a chart by the bedside and tick off pills and medicines when they are given. That way you won’t be left wondering whether or not you have given the right dose at the right time.

6. Patients often have poor appetites. Try to make food as attractive as possible. Don’t put too much on the plate at once. Remember that weak patients are often better off with foods that don’t need too much chewing or cutting.

7. If you need help or advice ask your doctor to arrange for a district nurse to call. She should be able to offer expert, professional advice and maybe lend you useful equipment.

8. To save too many journeys up and down the stairs fill a vacuum flask with an iced drink and keep it by the bedside.

9. Try to fix up some sort of communication system. Even a walking stick that can be banged on the floor is better than nothing.

10. Give your patient things to look forward to. Point out good programmes on the TV or radio. Keep magazines, books, puzzles etc. on one side for really dull moments. And although visitors can be a help remember that too many visitors can be very tiring.

36

Doctors have far more power over administrators than most of them realise. For example, doctors don’t use the power of the death certificate anywhere near enough. When I worked as a general practitioner I quickly discovered that I had complete power over most small-minded bureaucrats. If they wouldn’t do what I thought necessary for the care of my patients I would merely point out that if anything happened as a result of their failure to follow my advice (or respond to my request) I would, if the patient died, write their name on the death certificate as a cause of death. For example, I remember an administrator telling me, with great delight, that it would take four months for the system to deliver to me the medical notes relating to a patient who had recently moved to my practice. After using my death certificate ploy I had the medical records on my desk in less than fifteen minutes. If I was in practice these days I would use the same trick to persuade politicians as well as administrators to respond to requests with more compassion and more consideration.

Coleman’s 7th Law Of Medicine

There are fashions in medicine just as much as there are fashions in clothes. The difference is that whereas badly conceived fashions in clothes are only likely to embarrass you, ill-conceived fashions in medicine may kill you. The fashions in medicine have, by and large, as much scientific validity as the fashions in the clothes industry.

1

The most obvious fashions in medicine relate to treatments. For example, a couple of centuries ago, enemas, purges and bleedings were all the rage. In 17th century France, Louis XIII had 212 enemas, 215 purges and 47 bleedings in a single year. The Canon of Troyes is reputed to have had a total of 2,190 enemas in a two year period; how he found time to do anything else is difficult to imagine. By the mid 19th century enemas were a little last year’s style and bleeding was the in-thing. There was even a posh word for it — doctors who were about to remove blood from their patients would say that they were going to phlebotomize them. Patients would totter into their doctor’s surgery, sit down, tuck up their sleeves and ask the doctor to ‘draw me a pint of blood’. Bleeding was the universal cure, recommended for most symptoms and ailments. ‘Feeling a little under the weather? A little light bleeding should soon put you to rights.’ ‘Constant headaches? We’ll soon have that sorted for you, sir. Just roll up your sleeve.’ ‘Bit of trouble down below, madam? Not to worry. Slip off your frock and hold your arm out.’

A little later, in the nineteenth century, doctors put their lancets away and started recommending alcohol as the new panacea. Brandy was the favoured remedy in the doctor’s pharmacopoeia. People took it for almost everything. And when patients developed delirium tremens the recommended treatment was more alcohol. If things got so bad that the brandy didn’t work doctors added a little opium. Those were the days to be ill. Hypochondriacs must have had a wonderful time.

In the years from the 1930s onwards removing tonsils became the fashionable treatment. Tonsils were removed from between a half and three-quarters of all children in the 1930s. This often useless and unnecessary, and always potentially hazardous, operation is less commonly performed these days but in the 1970s over a million such operations were done every year in Britain alone. Doctors used to rip out tonsils on the kitchen table and toss them to the dog. Between 200 and 300 deaths a year were caused by the operation. One suspects that few, if any, of those unfortunate children would have died from tonsillitis.

2

Diseases go in cycles too. In the early 19th century the fashionable diagnosis was ‘inflammation’. Then, when patients and doctors tired of that, the new key word was ‘debility’. Doctors didn’t know terribly much and so their diagnoses, like their treatments, tended to be rather general.

These days patients expect more specific diagnoses and doctors are invariably happy to oblige.

One year everyone will be suffering from asthma. It will be the disease of the moment just as the mini skirt or ripped jeans may drift mysteriously in and out of fashion. Another year arthritis will be the fashionable disease as a drug company persuades journalists to write articles extolling the virtues (and disguising the vices) of its latest product. Depression. Irritable bowel syndrome. Osteoporosis. The cycle is a relatively simple one. The drug company with a new and profitable product to sell (usually designed for some long-term — and therefore immensely profitable — disorder) will send teams of well-trained representatives around to talk to family physicians, give them presents and take them out for expensive luncheons. The sales representatives will be equipped with information showing that the disorder in question is rapidly reaching epidemic proportions, lists of warning symptoms for the doctor to watch out for and information about the drug company’s new solution to the problem. Because the product will be new to the market there will probably be very little evidence available about side effects and the sales representative will be accurately able to describe the drug as extremely ‘safe’.

Not surprisingly, thousands of family doctors will respond to this hard-sell system by diagnosing more of the disease in question and handing out fistfuls of prescriptions for the recommended product. Older drugs, well-tried, possibly effective and probably safer than the new replacement, will be discarded as out-of-date. After all, their side effects will, over the years, have been well-documented.

As the disease subsequently seems to become more widespread so articles will appear about it in newspapers and magazines, and television pundits will start to talk about it. Every patient who has the appropriate symptoms (however mildly) will be convinced that he or she is suffering from the disease in question.

And the number of prescriptions being written for the new wonder product will soon rocket — pushing up drug company profits dramatically.

Then, a year or so later, patients and doctors alike will become aware of the many side effects associated with the new alleged wonder product and prescribing levels will fall. It is then the turn of some other product and some other disease to take the limelight and some other drug company to enjoy a dramatic boost in its profits.

3

For years now surgeons have been performing unnecessary operations; operations which have done far more harm than good. It is, of course, difficult to be precise about the number of unnecessary operations but in America researchers have concluded that in an average sort of year surgeons working in American hospitals now perform 7.5 million unnecessary surgical procedures, resulting in 37,136 unnecessary deaths and a cost running into hundreds of billions of dollars. (This should be compared with figures for 1974 when there were 2.4 million unnecessary surgical procedures, resulting in 11,900 unnecessary deaths and an annual cost of $3.9 billion.)

The figures for unnecessary surgeries were derived from the USA Congressional Committee on Interstate Foreign Commerce hearings on unnecessary surgery. The Committee found that 17.6% of recommendations for surgery were not necessary and it was the House Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations which produced the figures I have quoted above.

4

Tonsillectomy may have gone out of fashion (partly because doctors realised at last that the tonsils are actually quite useful) but vast numbers of children still have perfectly healthy appendices ripped out. At the other end of the age spectrum untold millions have had unnecessary surgery for hernias which would have probably never caused serious problems if they had been left alone. Millions of women have had their wombs removed. (In America, one third of women have had a hysterectomy before they reach the menopause.) Many pregnant women deliver their babies via Caesarian section either because this suits the obstetrician’s desire to avoid being called from the golf course or because it suits the mother who prefers to have a small hardly visible scar rather than the consequences of vaginal delivery or because it enables the surgeon to charge a fat fee for surplanting nature. Astonishingly around a quarter of babies are delivered this way in America. (Is one in four American mothers really unable to deliver a baby the normal way? In the Netherlands only 8% of babies are delivered by Caesarian section.) Many spinal operations are regarded by independent surgeons as unnecessary and untold thousands of men have had radical but unnecessary treatment for prostate disease (many of them diagnosed through blood tests now known to be of very doubtful value).

5

Surgery often ends up wrecking people’s lives, rather than saving them. For example, men subjected to unnecessary prostate surgery may end up impotent or incontinent. If you need an operation (and may die without it) then the risk is undoubtedly worthwhile. If you don’t really need an operation then you shouldn’t have one. Sadly for patients a lot of surgeons will happily operate on patients whether they need surgery or not. It is, of course, just a coincidence that the surgeon who operates most usually has the biggest car, the smartest holiday villa and the best golf clubs.

6

When an operation is vital and potentially life-saving then the risks are, of course, worth taking. But elective operations performed simply because surgery is what surgeons do (and because no one has bothered to work out whether the advantages outweigh the disadvantages) are illogical and unforgivable.

It was, for example, pointed out some years ago that the mortality risk of elective herniorrhaphy in men over the age of 65 is four times greater than the risk of allowing the hernia to strangulate and require treatment with emergency surgery. In other words if you are a 65-year-old man and you have a hernia, it may well be safer for you to keep your hernia and have it operated upon only if it causes pain and needs emergency attention. Your general health and the nature of your hernia must be considered before an operation is contemplated. Too often the surgeon will see a hernia and just shovel the patient onto the operating table without even bothering to consider the alternatives. Even when the patient is healthy and the surgeon experienced there are many things that can go wrong. Even with caring surgeons and nurses, instruments and swabs are sometimes left inside when the wounds are closed, and wounds may bleed or become infected.

7

Nothing illustrates the uselessness (and danger) of elective surgery more completely than heart surgery. In America, having had at least one coronary artery bypass operation is now as much a sign of success as ownership of a Mercedes limousine. And the operation is growing in popularity around the rest of the world. In Britain, 28,000 coronary artery bypass operations are performed each year — that’s around 10% of the people who have had heart attacks.

Many surgeons claim that surgery for heart disease is not elective but vital. But the evidence shows that most of the surgery performed for the treatment of heart disease is entirely unnecessary. Back in 1988 (in a book called *The Health Scandal)* I reported that coronary artery bypass surgery (the commonest procedure performed in cardiac surgery) had been in use for nearly thirty years without anyone trying to find out how patients’ everyday lives were affected by the operation. When a survey was eventually done it was found that whereas nearly half of the patients who had the operation had been working right up to the time of surgery, three months after the operation only just over a third of the men were working. And a year after the operation nearly half the patients were still not working. In other words, the operation had little positive effect on patients' lives but did put a good many out of action for some time. There were, of course, a number of patients who died as a result of surgical complications. A bypass operation takes several hours to perform, consumes a good deal of hospital time and professional skill and can be a physically and mentally exhausting experience for a patient and his family. There is a one in thirty risk that a patient undergoing coronary artery bypass surgery will be dead within thirty days of the operation. The mortality rate varies from surgeon to surgeon but it can be as high as 20% and anything up to a quarter of patients having the operation have heart attacks either while on the operating table or shortly afterwards.

And what makes the medical profession's enthusiasm for coronary artery surgery even more bizarre is the fact that patients who have symptoms of heart disease don't need surgery at all but stand a better chance of recovering if they are put on a regime which includes a vegan diet, gentle exercise and relaxation. (I described the utterly convincing evidence for this in my book *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You,* which was first published in 1996. The chapter is entitled Conquer Heart Disease Without Pills Or Surgery.)

Twenty years ago I found it difficult to avoid the conclusion that any doctor who routinely recommends surgery for patients who show signs or symptoms of heart disease is a homicidal maniac who should be struck off the medical register and locked up.

But doctors continue to recommend elective heart surgery. And surgeons continue to perform heart surgery on patients who could have got better without going into hospital at all. And some surgeons continue to have a far worse record than others. In 2005, for example, it was reported that a heart patient's chance of dying after an operation in a British hospital can be up to seven times higher with some surgeons than with others. Would you visit a hairdresser who was seven times as likely to chop off your ear as the competition?

8

I'm pleased to say that recently the medical profession has begun to look a little critically at heart surgery.

In 2005, *Business Week* magazine quoted an American professor of medicine as saying that bypass surgery 'should have been relegated to the archives 15 years ago'. And the magazine reported that the data from clinical trials shows that except in a minority of patients with severe disease, bypass operations don't prolong life or prevent future heart attacks.

One problem which *Business Week* didn't mention is that if patients have heart surgery and do not change their lifestyles (but continue eating the wrong foods, smoking, taking too much stress and avoiding exercise) then they will need another operation within a few years.

On the other hand patients who adopt the curative lifestyle changes I have described (including regular exercise, a vegan diet and learning to relax) are likely to find that their cure is permanent.

9

It's easy to see why surgeons continue performing heart surgery. (You only have to look at the line up of Mercedes and BMWs in the doctors' car park). Surgeons make their living by operating on people and are, therefore, unlikely to recommend a form of treatment that doesn't involve knives and sutures. But why do physicians and general practitioners continue to recommend patients for operations that are, on balance, more likely to do them harm than good? Could it be that the heart surgery industry — worth an estimated $100 billion a year-is just very good at denying and disguising the truth?

10

The vast majority of medical journalists, who might be expected to criticise unnecessary medical procedures which put patients' lives at risk, know little or nothing of medical matters and are too much in awe of the medical establishment to offer any sort of criticism.

11

Few things illustrate the medical profession's enthusiasm for fashion better than the way that doctors gave credence to the AIDS myth in the 1980s. AIDS was, for a while, the most fashionable disease in history. (Politicians and journalists created the hysteria which surrounded AIDS but it was doctors who gave the disease its false credibility.)

In the 1980s a spokesman for the British Medical Association warned that by 1991 every family in Britain would be touched be AIDS, and attacked me viciously when I quoted evidence supporting a less scary point of view. Other medical establishment groups jumped on the 'AIDS is going to kill us all so give us lots of money to try and find a cure' bandwagon and the official line was defended with unprecedented ferocity and an astonishing amount of self-righteous, sanctimonious venom.

The World Health Organisation forecast that 100 million people might be infected by the year 1990 and the Royal College of Nursing in the UK forecast that one in fifty people in Britain would have the disease by the early 1990s. As far as I know none of these groups has apologised for its absurd scaremongering and none has provided an explanation for the size of its error.

In addition, numerous organisations and individuals who were applying for grants, made dramatic promises of ‘miracle breakthroughs’ and ‘wonder vaccines’, probably because they knew that the bigger the promise the larger the grant would probably be.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s I rejected the theory put forward by every scaremongering half-wit eager to jump on the ‘AIDS is the biggest plague to hit mankind’ bandwagon. For a variety of self-serving reasons which had nothing to do with medicine many scaremongers were claiming that AIDS was a sexually transmitted disease and was likely to wipe out a large proportion of the western world. At the time I was vilified for daring to point out that all the available scientific evidence showed that AIDS was not going to be the plague that killed us all.

The evidence shows that I was right and there is now no doubt that the original predictions for AIDS have all been proved utterly wrong. Because AIDS offers an excellent example of a disease that became fashionable it is worth exploring in a little more detail.

12

Early in 1987 an ex-soldier called Michael Coles, a 42-year-old father of two, picked up a shotgun and blasted his eighteen-year-old son in the back. He then killed his 39-year-old wife before turning the shotgun on himself. The coroner recorded that Mrs Coles had been unlawfully killed and that her husband had committed suicide. Their eighteen-year-old son survived.

Mr Coles took this dreadful step because he thought he had AIDS. He decided to wipe out his family in case he had infected them. And he decided to kill himself to avoid the misery and suffering that he considered inevitable.

In fact he didn’t have AIDS at all. He had ’flu. But like millions of other perfectly ordinary healthy individuals, he had been terrified out of his mind by the propaganda from which it was impossible to escape at the time.

Michael Coles, like many others, was convinced that AIDS threatened us all and that it was a common, easily caught, inevitably lethal disease. He had believed what his government had told him, what he had heard on television and what he’d read in the newspapers. The real tragedy is that he, like everyone else, had been conned.

13

In *The Health Scandal* (published in 1988) I wrote that ‘from the facts that are available it is clear that AIDS is not going to be the disease that wipes out mankind.’ And I published a true anecdote designed to make it clear why the public image of this disease was so horribly inaccurate.

14

I reported that in early 1987 I had received a telephone call from a researcher for a TV company who had told me that his company was planning a documentary about AIDS.’

‘What do you think about AIDS?’ he asked me.

I told him that I thought that the threat had been exaggerated by some doctors, a lot of politicians and most journalists. The researcher was silent for a moment or two. I could tell by the silence that he was disappointed. It wasn’t quite what he’d hoped to hear.

We’re planning a major documentary,’ he said. ‘We want to cover all the angles. Haven’t you got anything new to say about AIDS?’

‘I don’t think AIDS is a plague that threatens mankind,’ I insisted.

I then pointed out that I believed that the evidence about AIDS had been distorted and the facts exaggerated.

‘We really wanted you to come on to the programme and talk about some of the problems likely to be caused by the disease,’ persisted the researcher.

‘I’m happy to come on to the programme and say that I think that the dangers posed by the disease have been exaggerated,’ I told the researcher.

The researcher sighed. ‘Quite a few doctors have said that to me,’ he said sadly. ‘But it really isn’t the sort of angle we’re looking for.’

Very gently I put down the telephone. I didn’t expect to hear from the researcher again and I didn’t. His company produced a television programme about AIDS that appeared on our screens a short time after that conversation. And I suspect that most of those who viewed it went to bed believing that AIDS was the greatest threat to mankind since the Black Death.

That was by no means an isolated incident. The facts about AIDS were carefully selected to satisfy the public image of the disease — and to satisfy those with vested interests to protect.

15

At the time when that television company was broadcasting a programme predicting that AIDS would soon affect us all the official figures showed that just eight heterosexuals had contracted AIDS in Britain. That wasn't the total for one year. It was the total for ever.

To try to put this in perspective I wrote an article at the time pointing out that in Britain during the previous two years no less than thirty six people had died while horse riding.

16

According to experts speaking in the late 1980s on behalf of the Government and the British Medical Association, AIDS was likely to decimate the British population before the decade was out. (There were at the time considerably more so-called experts on AIDS than there were patients with AIDS).

Politicians and the medical experts agreed that within a few years every family in the country would be affected by the disease. An official spokesman for the British Medical Association (the doctors' trade union) was widely quoted as forecasting that within five years 400 people a month would be dying of the disease, though as far as I know no one bothered to ask him where he got this figure from. It was officially forecast that every family in the UK would soon be touched by AIDS and one gloomy official forecast was that by the year 2000 we would all have the disease. The Government paid a fortune to put bizarre advertisements involving icebergs on television screens. These, it was rumoured, had something to do with AIDS and were intended as a warning to us all.

17

Back in 1988 I pointed out that two specific groups had been particularly at risk: syringe sharing drug users and promiscuous homosexuals.

'These two groups are at risk because AIDS is essentially a disease that is transmitted through the blood (rather than a sexually transmitted disease) and both these groups enjoy practices which involve possible contamination through an exchange of blood.'

One of the most significant scientific papers available then concluded that the only sexual practice which was found likely to lead to contracting AIDS was receptive anal intercourse. Another important study showed that on average homosexuals who contracted AIDS had had 1,100 sexual partners.

This evidence was available in medical and scientific journals. But AIDS had become so fashionable that no one was interested in anything as boring as evidence.

18

Why was the threat of AIDS exaggerated so recklessly?

In my book *The Health Scandal* I put forward a number of possible explanations.

First, I explained that AIDS was an attractive media disease. People love being terrified. Aware of this television companies are constantly on the look out for new scare stories. That television researcher I spoke to wasn't the only person working in television who wanted to build up the myth about AIDS.

A killer disease that is transmitted sexually made irresistible copy. For example, it enabled the religious right to tell those whom they regarded as promiscuous that AIDS was a sign of the wrath of God. Television producers could confront people who believed in free love with people who disapproved of any sex outside marriage. And, best of all, producers could make programmes in which eager experts showed viewers how a condom should be put onto a penis.

Second, AIDS had by 1988 become big business. And it was making a lot of money for a lot of people. Medical researchers admitted to me that they found it much easier to get funding for projects if their project title had the disease AIDS mentioned in it. Private screening clinics were making a fortune. Companies making drugs which were recommended for patients thought to have AIDS found that their share prices rocketed. Shares in the drug company which had produced an anti-AIDS drug called AZT, rocketed by 360% in just twelve months. A portfolio of shares in companies offering AIDS solutions rose by a magnificent 41%.

19

When I was eventually allowed into radio studios to discuss AIDS I took part in a radio programme with a spokesman for a group of homosexuals who had been loudly promoting the theory that AIDS was a heterosexual disease. On the programme I read from scientific papers which proved conclusively that the risks to heterosexuals were extremely slight. But the spokesman for the homosexuals ignored my evidence, and without any of his own, insisted that AIDS was a threat to us all. After the programme we stood together on the pavement outside the studio waiting for taxis. I asked him why he persisted with an argument which he must have known was not based on science. Away from the microphone he was honest. 'If we admit that AIDS is a disease which affects gays no one will be interested in it and no one will do any research into it,' he admitted.

And that was the truth. Gay pressure groups (working to make sure that AIDS did not become established as a 'gay' disease') were responsible for the initial development of the 'plague' myth. AIDS was then turned into a major scare through the efforts of insurance companies (eager to find an excuse to put up premiums), drug companies (keen to sell new products), doctors (keen to help drug companies), researchers (eager to get their hands on the vast amounts of money being raised by volunteers), religious groups (desperate to exploit an opportunity to suppress sexual activity outside marriage) and politicians (eager, as always, to leap on an opportunity to frighten the voters — since when voters are frightened it is much easier to introduce new, repressive legislation).

20

During the late 1980s the mail I received from readers of my newspaper and magazine columns proved to me that the AIDS propaganda campaigns had affected the lives of millions of men and women who had absolutely no risk at all of contracting the disease. So, for example, I received a sad letter from a 57-year-old widow who had been to her doctor for an internal examination. She was worried that if the doctor had previously examined a patient with AIDS she might have caught the disease. She told me that she wouldn't be going back to the doctor unless I could provide her with reassurance. Another letter came from a reader who wanted to know if her small son could have caught AIDS from an insect bite. There were letters from an old lady who wouldn't pat her dog in case she caught AIDS from it and a worried mother whose son wouldn't kiss her goodnight for fear of catching AIDS. And Michael Coles was by no means the only person to kill himself as a result of all the AIDS scaremongering.

In 1988, I wrote that I strongly suspected that the scare campaign about AIDS had killed more heterosexuals than the disease itself. I am now convinced that I was absolutely right.

21

Telling the truth about AIDS was not easy. Indeed, for most of the time, it was very nearly impossible. When a disease becomes fashionable, and is promoted by the whole of the establishment, anyone who stands against the storm of support must expect to be under pressure.

When my book *The Health Scandal* was being prepared for publication in 1988 the publishers (Sidgwick and Jackson) were wildly enthusiastic about its prospects and expressed themselves eager to promote the book as widely as possible.

But suddenly, and without explanation, things changed. The book came out without even a whimper — let alone a bang. There was so little publicity that I sent out a press release myself — and was actually told off by the publishers for doing so. The book was remaindered very quickly and no real effort was made to sell the paperback rights. (Indeed, Sidgwick and Jackson insisted that the paperback rights could not be sold because no one wanted to buy them. My agent took back the rights and sold the paperback rights very quickly. This was curious because it meant that we did not have to share the financial proceeds from the paperback sale with Sidgwick and Jackson). I got the impression that a book of mine had been effectively suppressed by its own publisher.

22

When, in 1989, I talked about my book *Sex For Everyone* to the publisher's representatives, publicity department and editorial staff many of the audience started to walk out when I claimed that AIDS was not a major threat to heterosexuals. (The publisher was called Angus and Robertson but the audience also included many employees of associated companies.)

The trickle of people leaving the room turned into a flood when I suggested that the campaign to prevent AIDS should adopt the phrase 'Stop buggering about' as a slogan. The ignorance of these people (many of whom seemed to regard themselves as knowledgeable but who were instead sanctimonious and egregiously ill-informed) was typical at the time. After my speech had finished a number of stunningly ignorant people came up to me and told me that they would not help promote or sell the book because they regarded my claims that AIDS was not a serious threat to heterosexuals as grossly irresponsible. Indignant and self-righteous editorial employees glowered at me and did their best to make me feel unwelcome. I remember feeling so unwelcome that I left the hotel very late at night and drove several hundred miles back home in the dark rather than use the bedroom that had been reserved for me.

The book's sales were duly disastrous, destroyed by its publisher because I had dared to tell the truth and expose the AIDS myth for what it was.

23

When I first criticised the highly fashionable AIDS myth I was vilified for daring even to suggest that AIDS might not be the heterosexual epidemic the Government, the medical establishment and the media was warning us about.

According to former *Sunday Times* Editor Andrew Neil, the same thing happened to American author Michael Fumento who wrote a book called *The Myth of Heterosexual Aids*.

Neil recalls that; 'Instead of confronting Fumento's arguments and figures, the Aids Lobby resorted to abusing him for daring to write such a book...I began to think that maybe all this bluster was to hide the truth: there was no heterosexual epidemic.'

24

I remember going to a medical bookshop in the early 1990s and being appalled to see shelf after shelf of books about AIDS and very few books at all about cancer. At the time anyone with AIDS would end up surrounded by would-be helpers. Anyone with cancer would have to wait months, even years, for treatment

25

The scientific evidence and the figures available when the AIDS fashion was at its greatest, proved conclusively that there was no AIDS epidemic among heterosexuals and that there never would be. Since the 1980s and early 1990s the evidence has continued to support this viewpoint.

The AIDS myth was deliberately created by homosexuals who feared, probably correctly, that if AIDS was thought to be a disease which only affected homosexuals it would not receive much funding. The myth was sustained by a variety of self-serving groups.

The billions of pounds that have been pumped into the AIDS industry have resulted in the development of a massive industry of helpers, advisors, aides and so on.

Most of those involved in raising, distributing and spending this money knew and know little or nothing about the disease and although some were probably well-intentioned there were far more of them than there were alleged AIDS sufferers.

The AIDS fashionistas have continued to defend their industry with great enthusiasm and commitment, largely because it is their jobs and their industry they are defending.

26

There is still much mystery about whether the HIV virus really exists and, if it does exist, whether it has anything to do with AIDS.

Just one thing is crystal clear: the predictions of the medical establishment, the politicians and the journalists who claimed that by the end of the 20th century one in three of us would be touched by AIDS were absurd scaremongering.

27

Claims that Africa is ravaged by AIDS are also misleading and dangerous. If there is AIDS in Africa then it is because anal sex is widespread in African countries (where it is used as a form of birth control) and because a scarcity of doctors and treatments means that venereal diseases (creating bleeding sores) are widespread too.

In order to justify the huge expenditure of time and money on research into finding a cure many of those involved in helping to maintain the AIDS industry have for years been busily changing the rules about the way that AIDS is defined.

These days if you die of influenza, malaria or tuberculosis (TB) in Africa there is a good chance that you will be included in the AIDS statistics.

(Including TB and malaria victims in the AIDS statistics is one of the ways in which the alleged AIDS plague in Africa has been created. This type of ‘bending’ of the statistics is nothing new. When the authorities wanted to give the impression that smallpox had been conquered by the vaccination programme they attributed many deaths caused by smallpox to chickenpox — even though chickenpox is very rarely a fatal disease.)

Describing diseases such as tuberculosis and malaria, which are well-established in Africa, and which are a real threat, as AIDS is tragic. The end result is that more money is handed to AIDS researchers and AIDS agencies and less is given to controlling real and well-established killer diseases such as tuberculosis and malaria. It is hardly surprising that the death rate from AIDS is said to be exploding. People aren’t really dying of AIDS; they are dying of tuberculosis and malaria.

28

I have no doubt that the enormously fashionable AIDS industry, in its various discredited forms, has now killed far more people than the disease. But perhaps the most worrying thing about AIDS is that the truth about the disease is never acknowledged or discussed by AIDS experts, by people working in the AIDS industry or by the mainstream media.

AIDS has become a sacred disease.

To question the motives of those involved in the search for a vaccine or a cure, or the treatment of alleged AIDS patients, is politically incorrect and utterly unacceptable.

And, of course, those members of the media who leapt on the AIDS bandwagon in the 1980s and early 1990s are probably too embarrassed to want to talk about their mistakes.

29

The AIDS story is a good example of the way that doctors cause more fear than they ease. (They create the fear to suit the needs of governments and corporations.)

Experts always exaggerate the importance of their subject in order to make themselves appear more important than they are.

For example, just as the people who warn constantly about AIDS are looking for fame and money so many of the people who warn about bird 'flu are all bird 'flu experts with, inevitably, both a vested interest in creating interest in their speciality and in some cases a commercial interest in selling remedies.

30

Psychiatrists and psychologists are eager to create fashionable new bandwagons too. It is now possible to be clinically afraid of 530 different things, for that is the astonishing number of phobias which have been officially recognised. In addition to traditional phobias such as claustrophobia patients can now suffer from kakorrhaphiophobia (a fear of defeat), apeirophobia (a fear of infinity), chrometophobia (a fear of money) and hippopotomonstros-esquippedaliphobia (a fear of long words). It's difficult to tell when they're being serious and when they're having us on these days. (But these *are* real.)

31

Drug companies exaggerate mild problems in order to boost their profits and they devise and then promote non-existent diseases in order to create new markets for their drugs.

In our book *How To Conquer Health Problems Between Ages 50 and 120* my wife (Donna Antoinette Coleman) and I described how drug companies had marketed hormone replacement therapy for so-called menopausal problems (and done so with such vigour and skill that one third of postmenopausal women use hormone replacement therapy and are, presumably, unaware that it may increase the risk of developing breast cancer, heart disease, stroke and gall bladder attack) and how they had built up osteoporosis as a disease requiring long-term, expensive preventive therapy when in fact it requires nothing of the sort.

32

Many so-called disease awareness campaigns are in practice drug company marketing programmes, designed not to educate people how to avoid ill health but, rather, to persuade them to take drugs. Doctors, nurses and people who think they are campaigning on behalf of patients (and whose motives may be honourable) are, too often, manipulated into helping to fulfil the commercial ambitions of ruthless drug companies.

33

One of the most absurd of the new and most fashionable diseases is 'chronic obstructive pulmonary disease'.

According to drug company sponsored experts, COPD now affects three million people in the UK alone (with two thirds of them Still undiagnosed, untreated and, therefore, a huge reservoir of potential profit).

COPD didn't exist at all in Britain a few years ago and the drug companies and experts who imported this new disease from the USA (where it has become enormously successful and has for some years been one of the biggest profit spinners for the pharmaceutical industry) claim that it usually affects smokers over the age of 35 and it often involves a cough and daytime breathlessness.

Curiously enough those are the very same symptoms which used to be ascribed to a disease known as emphysema. Emphysema was never very profitable because doctors recognised that there wasn't a great deal they could do for it. Saying that someone is breathless because they smoke isn't much of a disease and there isn't, therefore, much chance to provide profitable treatment. How can drug companies (or doctors) make big profits out of telling people to give up smoking?

Patients who suffered from emphysema and chronic bronchitis (though different, the two diseases were usually related and patients often had both) were good customers for antibiotic therapy but that was about all. They weren't of much interest to drug companies searching for new ways to make bigger profits.

And so some bright spark imported COPD: a wonderful sounding disease for which a whole host of powerful and expensive drug therapies (including anti-'flu vaccinations, steroid inhalers, antibiotics, tranquillisers, sleeping tablets and anti-depressants) are now recommended. Most of the big drug companies have leapt upon this bandwagon. In the UK the 'market opportunity' is said to be expected to grow to £6 billion by the year 2010. Naturally, these powerful and expensive drug therapies produce dozens of side effects which require numerous additional prescriptions. COPD is a drug industry dream; a chronic cash bonanza. Maybe they should have been honest and called the disease Chronic Drug Company Profit Maker and given it the acronym CDCPM.

34

In the UK, to encourage general practitioners to diagnose plenty of patients as COPD sufferers, family doctors who manage to make enough diagnoses will receive an annual cash bonus.

35

Some of the most important contributions made by doctors to the health of their patients have involved the cessation of harmful but fashionable practices.

So, for example, when doctors stopped bleeding their patients a century ago they saved many lives.

Just under a century ago bromides were recognised as dangerous and used accordingly by the more thoughtful prescribers. Barbiturates were widely recommended as the safe alternative. Then, half a century ago barbiturates were found to be dangerous. Amphetamines were recommended as safe. Then they were found to be addictive. Benzodiazepines were recommended as safe alternatives for barbiturates. Then they too were found to be too dangerous for general long-term use.

On each occasion that a group of drugs was found to be dangerous some doctors made their names by taking their patients off those drugs. So, for example, at least one doctor became famous after taking patients off bromides. Liberated from their drug-induced stupor his patients cheered him loudly.

Sadly, in many cases, these doctors then made the mistake of starting their patients on the newer and more fashionable product.

36

Surgeons, like physicians and general practitioners, have always been dedicated followers of fashion.

Back in the 19th century one of the most fashionable operations was the removal of lengths of intestine from patients complaining of constipation. A surgeon called Arbuthnot Lane achieved great fame and accumulated enormous wealth as a result of removing a cumulative total of several miles of intestine from his patients. Sadly, the patients didn't do as well without their intestines as Arbuthnot did with their money. The patients developed diarrhoea and lived miserable lives.

An American doctor, Dr Harry C. Sharp of the Jeffersonville Reformatory in Indiana, USA, performed 176 vasectomies on boys who had admitted to having masturbated. He claimed that his sterilised young patients slept better, felt better and had better appetites and he insisted that the operation made them stronger in mind and body. For reasons I cannot begin to imagine, Sharp also performed 280 vasectomies on patients suffering from colour blindness or defective vision.

In the 1930's, destructive brain surgery became fashionable after American workers removed the frontal lobes of chimpanzees and reported that the animals seemed more contented afterwards. In 1936 a neurosurgeon working in Portugal decided to test the theory by performing a variation of the operation on humans. He injected alcohol into the frontal lobes of 20 schizophrenics. After he claimed success for his operation other surgeons developed other techniques for destroying parts of the brain. An American surgeon called Walter Freeman of Washington University performed thousands of operations in which he simply cut off the frontal lobes of his patients. As long ago as 1971 it was estimated that this enormously fashionable operation (leucotomy) had been performed on over 100,000 patients. It was recommended as a treatment for patients who had been diagnosed as suffering from schizophrenia, depression, obsessional neurosis, anxiety state, hysteria, eczema, asthma, chronic rheumatism, anorexia nervosa, ulcerative colitis, tuberculosis, hypertension, angina, pain and anxiety caused by barbiturate toxicity.

Surgeons admitted that 'the more subtle powers of the intellect, such as its intuitive and imaginative qualities, may sometimes be affected detrimentally' but regarded this as a small price to pay. Complications of the operation also included bed-wetting, somnolence, severe and prolonged confusion and paralysis. Some patients developed epilepsy after the operation. Others had damaged personalities. All the patients I've met who have had this operation have behaved more like zombies than like human beings.

Although this operation is nowhere near as fashionable as it used to be, it's still being performed. As is electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) which I described in my book *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You.*

Today, there are a number of fashionable operations. Surgeons are removing pieces of stomach or intestine from overweight patients (so that they will digest less of their food and, therefore, lose weight). These operations have been popular for several decades but are still remarkably fashionable. The side effects are horrendous and can include the metabolic problems inevitably produced by the diarrhoea and malabsorption and malnutrition which result from the fact that the body does not absorb the nutrients it needs. The excessive diarrhoea associated with some operations can result in potassium, magnesium and calcium depletion. Patients also stand a good chance of developing kidney stones and nearly half develop pains similar to rheumatoid arthritis in their joints. There is, of course, also the not inconsiderable risk that the patient will die on the operating table. The normal risks of anaesthesia are increased when the patient is overweight as, by definition, patients having this operation will be.

The removal of healthy breasts from young women has in recent years developed into a small epidemic. The breasts are removed so that they cannot become cancerous and the surgeons recommending the operation claim that it helps protect women who have a genetic susceptibility to breast cancer. I wonder how many of the women who are subjected to this mutilation are advised that their chances of developing breast cancer may also be reduced by eating a low fat vegetarian diet. Still, an operation is easier isn't it?

One surgeon who advocates breast removal as a way of avoiding breast cancer claims that 57% of women are at high risk of developing breast cancer and that these women should all have prophylactic (preventive) bilateral mastectomies and have their breast tissue replaced with silicone implants.

Other advocates of breast removal are less dramatic and claim that the operation need only be performed on a smaller group of women.

But is there any evidence to support the idea that removing breasts is a wise way to avoid cancer?

I don’t think so. Even among women who carry the BRCA1 and BRCA2 breast cancer genes, and who have a strong family history of breast cancer, there are many other factors to take into consideration. Most women who are regarded as ‘high risk’ for breast cancer don’t die of breast cancer, even if they keep both their breasts. Some die of breast cancer even after both healthy breasts have been removed. Some will undoubtedly die of complications as a result of the prophylactic surgery. I suspect that for many of the women who are subjected to the removal of healthy breasts the operation leads to a loss of quality of life without any prolongation of life.

Saddest of all is the fact that I have never heard any advocate of this type of operation point out to potential ‘patients’ that their susceptibility to breast cancer is just that: an extra susceptibility. A woman who has a family history of breast cancer may be more likely to develop breast cancer but she won’t necessarily get it. And any woman who is susceptible to breast cancer can dramatically reduce her chances of developing the disease by avoiding the factors known to increase her risk.

Would women who are genetically susceptible to breast cancer dramatically improve their chances of avoiding the disease if they cut down their intake of fatty food, avoided meat and lost any excess weight?

The evidence suggests that they would.

Would such women be better protected than if they had their breasts removed?

I suspect that they would.

But as far as I have been able to find out no one has yet done any research to find out.

37

Removing teeth used to be extremely fashionable. The most enthusiastic dentist of all time was probably Brother Giovanni Battista Orsenigo who practised in Rome at the end of the 19th century. Brother Orsenigo kept all the teeth he pulled and in 1903 they were counted. It turned out that he had removed over two million teeth in his career — that works out at an average of 185 teeth a day. Not many modern dentists could equal that workload.

38

A reader of mine who had had a cancerous growth wrote to me. ‘The cancer was removed by a surgeon who told me that the cancer had not spread,’ she wrote. ‘But doctors want me to have radiotherapy. Why?’

The answer is simple and shocking.

Radiotherapists want to prove that radiotherapy works. (There is at present surprisingly little evidence for its effectiveness.)

The current way to measure the effectiveness of treatments is to see how many patients survive for five years after diagnosis.

By giving treatment to patients who may not really need it — and who are likely to make a full recovery whether or not they receive treatment — doctors can make their pet therapy look good. But radiotherapy, which is currently very fashionable, can be extremely dangerous. It may (or may not) kill more people than it saves. No one really knows.

Amazingly there are no firm rules about who must get radiotherapy — or how much they should receive.

Local doctors decide how much radiotherapy to give and for how long. Orthodox cancer therapy is, I’m afraid, just as wishy washy and disorganised as alternative cancer therapy. And it’s far more dangerous. Radiotherapy can seriously damage your health.

This is a scandal of monumental proportions.

So, how do doctors decide who gets radiotherapy and how much they get?’

If you don’t want to know look away now.

Because the answer may frighten you.

They guess.

Radiotherapy is a lottery and (like chemotherapy) about as logical as drinking your own urine or standing in the garden chanting to the moon.

I invited the British Government to comment on this scandal.

Their first attempt was:

‘We work in close consultation with royal (sic) colleges and professional societies who produce detailed guidance on cancer therapy, including chemotherapy and radiotherapy. The Department of Health provides broad information on the use of chemotherapy and radiotherapy which acts as guidance for trained consultants.’

This is, of course, meaningless drivel of the sort for which governments and bureaucrats everywhere are famous.

So I rang up and tried to make things simple. ‘Does a woman in Cornwall who has breast cancer get the same radiotherapy treatment as a woman in Leeds who has the same type of breast cancer.’

That seemed straightforward enough.

Here is the Department of Health’s second attempt:

‘Guidelines are established so that patients receive care from a multidisciplinary team, the same treatments are available to patients, and professional advice is available for consultants to ensure patients receive appropriate treatment for their condition.’

Leaving aside the barefaced lie (‘the same treatments are available to patients’) and removing the lexicological debris we are left with: ‘professional advice is available for consultants to ensure patients receive appropriate treatment’.

And that is fine and dandy if consultants ask for advice. What the Department of Health clearly does not do is provide consultant radiotherapists (or physicians prescribing chemotherapy) with any firm guidelines about how much therapy, how often and for how long.

So how do consultants decide what therapy to give their patients?

They guess.

We should not, I suppose, be too surprised.

For that, after all, is what doctors do every time they reach for a prescription pad.

Don’t ever let any doctor tell you that alternative medicine is unscientific.

39

The medical profession and the media seem to vie with one another in creating fashionable new diseases out of problems and fears which people have lived with for centuries. Unhappiness or disappointments are labelled as depression (and treated with drugs). A single bout of wheezing is dignified as asthma and requires life-long treatment with powerful drugs which, as I have been pointing out for decades, can kill. A patch of dry skin becomes eczema and requires treatment with heavy-duty steroid creams. Baldness, once just something that happened to men with the passing of time, is now widely regarded as an illness which needs to be treated with powerful drugs or extravagant surgery. Obesity isn’t a consequence of over-eating but a sign of glandular dysfunction requiring therapeutic intervention. Women who have smaller than average breasts are described as ‘suffering’ from a disease labelled as ‘micromastia’. Shyness has been relabelled ‘social anxiety syndrome’. And on it goes, and will doubtless continue to go.

When I first introduced the concept of stress as a cause of disease in a book called *Stress Control* (in the 1970s) I was reviled and sneered at by doctors and journalists. One Medical School Professor announced that I should be struck off the medical register for suggesting that there might be a link between stress and disease. Today stress (a serious cause of ill health) is now so fashionable and devalued as a concept that one in four people is said to be suffering from mental illness caused by stress.

Women who carry heavy shopping bags are officially categorised as ‘disabled’ (whether or not they have any difficulty in carrying their bags). In America there are 30 million women suffering from ‘hurried women syndrome’ and 43% of women are allegedly suffering from something called ‘female sexual dysfunction’.

And people who work at nights are said to suffer from ‘chronic shift work sleep disorder’ rather than just having difficulty sleeping in the daytime.

40

Finally, one of the most fashionable medical interventions today is undoubtedly vaccination. A generation or two ago children obtained immunity to childhood diseases (chicken pox, measles and mumps) by attending parties. All the children in the neighbourhood would be invited round for tea and games if a child contracted one of the common (but relatively unthreatening) childhood diseases. Those children attending the party who contracted the disease would put up with spots for a week or so and then recover. Parents would, probably justifiably, assume that a child who hadn’t caught the disease had probably acquired immunity to it. The system was simple, uneventful and relatively safe.

These days children have vaccinations. Loads of them. It is the fashion. It is our way. Drug companies and doctors make huge amounts of money out of it.

Coleman’s 8th Law Of Medicine

The medical establishment will always take decisions on health matters which benefit industry, government and the medical profession, rather than patients. And the government will always take decisions on health matters which benefit the State rather than individual patients. What you read, hear or see about medicine and health matters will have more to do with the requirements of the pharmaceutical industry and the government, than the genuine needs of patients.

1

Around the world populations are ruled by nonentities blessed only with enough ambition and greed to get into power, enough dishonesty to disguise their incompetence and sufficient ruthlessness and lack of imagination to ensure that they never feel shame or embarrassment. These so-called leaders will cling to power whatever may happen. This is as true of the medical establishment as it is of governments.

2

Responsibility has been separated from authority with disastrous consequences for patients. Your chances of getting the best treatment for your condition depend not upon your needs but upon a whole range of factors such as political correctness, expediency and (as I explained in Coleman’s 7th Law Of Medicine) fashion. While people with suspected cancer have to wait months for essential investigations our politically correct system means that money and resources are spent on providing such non-essential luxuries as cosmetic surgery and infertility treatment It is society’s choice to spend its limited resources in this way (largely because of pressure from loud-mouthed campaigners representing specific points of view). There is something uncivilised and inhuman about a health system in which patients with suspected cancer must wait and wait to be diagnosed and then wait and wait to be treated — hoping that they won’t die on one of the waiting lists — while patients requiring cosmetic surgery or treatment for infertility get treated ahead of them. In any State run health service financial resources must be finite: not everyone can get everything they want. But the way patients are chosen for treatment is appallingly cruel and quite indefensible.

3

The failure of governments and doctors to ensure that health care services are fair and reasonable may affect your life in a very dramatic way. You should, therefore, be prepared with alternatives. For example, you should have enough money in the bank to enable you to pay for crucial investigations should they be necessary. Once you have been diagnosed as suffering from a life-threatening condition doctors, nurses and administrators may find it harder to deny you essential treatment.

4

Our governments and doctors have allowed our environment and our food to be poisoned by chemical companies, farmers and others involved in ‘serving’ our communities.

Poisons in our environment are now one of the most significant modern causes of illness in general and of cancer in particular. As a result of the contaminants in our food, drinking water and the air we breathe, human breast milk contains so many chemical contaminants that it couldn’t possibly be sold as safe for human consumption. And human bodies contain so many chemicals (some consumed in additive and pesticide contaminated food and some acquired accidentally from our polluted environment) that a human steak would never be passed fit for consumption by cannibals.

Children’s bodies are routinely contaminated with scores of potentially hazardous chemicals. The susceptibility of the young body, and the wide availability of toxic chemicals in the surroundings in which children live, mean that those as young as nine years old have far more toxic substances in their bodies than their grandparents ever had.

Television sets and plastic toys, deodorants and household cleansers are all sources of poisons as, of course, are the pesticides we use in our garden and the pesticides farmers use on our food.

Some carcinogenic industrial chemicals which have been banned can still be found in the environment. Back in 1930 just one million tons of man-made chemicals were produced globally each year. Today, the chemical companies produce 400 million tons of man-made chemicals a year.

When researchers tested ordinary citizens they found that of 104 substances for which they had tested, 80 were present in human beings. There was little correlation between where people live and the chemicals they have in their bodies. Living in the country is no protection. Chemicals are in our air, our water and our food. The chemicals found in the average human body can cause liver cancer, damage to the developing brain, premature birth, genital abnormalities, bladder cancer, kidney damage, asthma, skin disorders, hormone disruption, and a higher risk of miscarriage.

5

Tests done in the early 21st century showed that the blood of health and environment ministers from 13 European Union (EU) countries was contaminated with dozens of industrial chemicals — including some that were banned decades ago.

The tests, conducted on EU ministers from Great Britain, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Finland, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Slovakia, Sweden and Spain showed that the politicians had an average of 37 industrial chemicals in their blood. The ministers were found to have a total of 55 different industrial chemicals in their blood. One minister had 45 chemicals in his blood. The 'cleanest' had 33.

The chemicals included those used in fire-resistant furniture, non-stick pans, greaseproof boxes, fragrances and pesticides. Unsurprisingly, the effects and dangers of the chemicals involved were, it was admitted largely unknown.

6

There is not enough safety information available about nearly 90% of the 2,500 chemicals which manufacturers regularly use in large quantities to enable scientists or doctors to do a basic safety assessment.

The tests done on EU ministers were used to support an EU proposal known as REACH (Registration, Evaluation and Authorisation of Chemicals) in which thousands of chemicals will be tested on millions of animals. If the tests show that a chemical doesn't hurt animals the substance will be given a clean bill of health and manufacturers will be allowed to use it as much as they like. If the tests show that a chemical kills animals the test will be ignored on the grounds that animals are so different to humans that the results are irrelevant and manufacturers will be allowed to use the chemical as much as they like.

You think I'm joking don't you? Or being unduly cynical? I'm not. I'm being deadly serious.

The EU is deliberately designing and performing safety tests to be performed on animals. These, they know, will prove nothing but the tests will satisfy those who are concerned about carcinogenic chemicals without harming the profitability of the industries involved.

Incidentally, exactly the same flawed and pointless tests are being duplicated in the United States of America.

7

There is no doubt at all that many of the chemicals widely used in the preparation of food, the feeding of animals and the manufacture of a wide variety of goods are carcinogenic — they cause cancer.

But what do doctors do about all this?

Nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

8

Since 19821 have been arguing that the drinking water from our taps is now unsafe to drink because it contains pharmaceutical residues. People who drink tap water are drinking second hand drug residues. (There is more on this in my books *Food for Thought, How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You* and *Superbody.*)

The basic problem is that after a drug is swallowed much of the compound is excreted in urine and will end up contaminating drinking water. So when you turn on your tap you get bits of old contraceptive pill, antibiotic and tranquilliser in your nice sparkling glass of apparently clean drinking water. You can't see the drug residues, of course. And the water companies can't get them out.

From time to time newspapers and magazines around the world discover some new research showing that male fish are changing sex in drug polluted rivers (it is, of course, the female hormones from contraceptive pills and hormone replacement therapy which cause this particular problem) but once they realise the size of the problem they soon back off and forget about the story.

9

Governments have, of course, made things worse by adding fluoride to drinking water supplies. The theory is that if people drink water dosed with fluoride they will be less likely to suffer from dental decay. In practice, fluoride is a potentially dangerous substance and this practice is fraught with danger. Adding fluoride to the water is, however, encouraged by politicians because although it probably damages the health of some citizens it may help cut the nation's dental bill.

10

Some countries now force the manufacturers of flour to add folic acid to their product. This is done in both the USA and Canada, and other governments seem keen to follow suit. The clinical argument for contaminating food in this way is that adding folic acid to flour and bread will help prevent relatively rare (but expensive to treat) conditions such as spina bifida and other neural tube defects in newborn babies. The financial argument in favour is that this will save the country money (and, presumably, help increase profits for the manufacturers of folic acid). The arguments against forcibly adding folic acid to flour and bread are that women who are planning to get pregnant can take folic add supplements if they wish (or can simply increase their intake of foods rich in the vitamin) without the rest of the population being forcibly medicated. More seriously, there is some evidence suggesting that folic add might increase the risk of bowel cancer developing and the presence of folic add in bread will undoubtedly make it difficult for doctors to diagnose vitamin B12 deficiency in patients. Vitamin B12 deficiency can lead to neurological problems such as memory loss and a lack of limb control but it is most commonly found in the elderly and so few politicians or campaigners are bothered about this.

The big question, of course, is where will this lead? If campaigners and drug companies succeed in convincing politicians that it is in their interest to put folic add in a basic foodstuff how much longer will it be before someone convinces politicians that they will benefit if tranquillisers are put into chocolate, baked beans or drinking water?

11

Don't buy purified water. Buy pure, natural, mineral spring water.

Coca Cola withdrew its Dasani brand of bottled water after the product was found to contain illegal levels of a potentially harmful chemical. Dasani wasn't a natural spring water but was simply tap water which had allegedly been purified to remove all the bacteria and minerals. The problem was that the 'purified' water contained excess levels of bromate, a chemical which can increase the risk of cancer if you are exposed to it for a long time. (And drinking water is, for most people, a pretty long-term activity).

Coca Cola said that the elevated levels of bromate came as a result of the calcium chloride they had added to the water to meet a UK legal requirement.

12

When the American Environmental Protection Agency tested the water provided by passenger airlines they found that on many occasions the planes were carrying drinking water which failed tests because it contained coliform bacteria such as e.coli. An air transport association spokesmen said that the airlines were confident that their drinking water was safe. But then they would, wouldn't they?

13

As part of a school science project a 12-year-old American girl collected ice samples from five restaurants in South Florida. She also collected toilet water samples from the same restaurants. She had all the samples tested for bacteria at the University of South Florida.

In several cases the ice from the restaurants contained e.coli bacteria and was dirtier than the water taken from the toilet bowls. How did the bugs get into the ice?

Probably because the ice making machines hadn't been cleaned and because the restaurant staff had use hands which hadn't been washed to scoop up the ice.

The moral is a simple one: you should avoid ice in bars and restaurants.

The first question is: why did it take a 12-year-old girl to expose this sort of contamination?

The second question is: has anything been done about it?

(That's a rhetorical question to which both you and I know the answer.)

14

Taxes are used to create huge bureaucracies. Once the bureaucracy has been developed money has to be raised to sustain the bureaucracy, which becomes more important than anything else. If there is a shortage of money in hospitals doctors and nurses are fired — not administrators.

15

You shouldn't eat food which has been imported from the USA.

America still allows its farmers to use the pesticide methyl bromide, even though the chemical has been banned elsewhere under the 1987 Montreal Protocol because of its contribution to the global warming problem. Methyl bromide is widely used by American tomato and strawberry farmers but has been linked to prostate cancer and to neurological damage. The Bush administration obtained an exemption for the poison on the grounds that it is popular among farmers.

Methyl bromide is also used to fumigate food processing and storage areas, such as grain bins and flour mills, where it is used to kill insects and rats.

16

Meat and milk from cloned animals will be on sale soon. An American Government report, from the Food and Drug Administration, has concluded that 'cloned animal products appear to be safe for consumption'. Consumers should be terrified by the carefree way with which the American Government includes, but ignores, the word 'appear'. The long-term effects of eating cloned meat and milk are, of course, unknown.

17

The main reason for America's refusal to stick to its promise to ratify the Kyoto Treaty can be summed up in one word: money. American politicians put American business first, second and third. The world's people come nowhere. This philosophy is well illustrated by the way the Americans have dealt with Mad Cow Disease or BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy). Giving American cattle bone meal to eat was banned in 1997 but blood and gelatin were both made exempt from the ban. Only after confirming America's first case of mad cow disease did the American Government announce that cows which were too sick to walk would no longer be allowed into the food chain. Falling down — and not getting up again — is, of course, a well- known key symptom of mad cow disease and yet for years meat from hundreds of thousands of such animals — known as 'downers' had been packed up and sent to supermarkets.

18

An American dairy is being sued for claiming that the milk it sells contains no artificial growth hormones. It has been alleged that the dairy doesn't have the right to let its customers know whether or not its milk contains genetically engineered hormones. These hormones have been banned in just about every industrialised nation except America. The milk containing the hormones may cause cancer.

19

The Americans claim that giving hormones to cattle is perfectly safe. When hormone-rich beef from such cattle was banned in the EU the Americans responded by banning some European imports (more out of governmental spite than through any sense of commercial logic).

American farmers give six sex hormones to their cattle for exactly the same reason that bodybuilders and weight lifters take hormones: to build more muscle as quickly as possible. The benefit to a farmer is financial: there is obviously more saleable beef on a heavily muscled cow.

The row, which has been going on for well over a decade, is about whether or not beef taken from cows which have been given extra hormones is safe to eat. Although there is no evidence to show that hormone soaked beef is safe American farmers say that it is. And that, of course, is good enough for their Government. (All governments are as frightened of farmers as they are of any other big commercial lobby.)

However, European farmers are not allowed to give extra hormones to cattle. And so, not surprisingly, they have put pressure on European politicians to ban American beef (which, because of the help from the hormones, is cheaper to produce).

The American claim that it is safe to give hormones to cattle is based upon the fact that there is, as yet, not very much scientific proof that it is dangerous to do this.

This is exactly the same spurious argument that is used to defend genetic engineering, microwave ovens and other possible hazards to human health.

Everyone conveniently ignores the fact that it is extremely difficult to prove that something is dangerous when little or no research has been done to find the truth!

What we do know, however, is that the amount of hormone in a portion of meat can be more than a pubertal boy produces in a day. And that's a lot. And sex hormones can and do have a dramatic effect on any human body (and mind).

Moreover, research has been done showing that there is a convincing epidemiological link between one of the six hormones used by American farmers and endometrial and breast cancers. The hormone causes cancer by interfering with a cell's DNA — a process known as genotoxicity. It is generally accepted that there are no safe levels for genotoxic substances.

You might think that would be enough to embarrass the American politicians into telling their farmers to stop using hormones. After all, the incidence of cancer is rising dramatically in the USA — and has been doing so for some years. However, the American farmers (and their Government) have taken comfort from the fact that although a joint committee set up by the World Health Organisation and the Food and Agriculture Organisation has agreed that one of the hormones in use has what it calls 'genotoxic properties', and does cause cancer, it has argued that it is safe to allow people to consume modest amounts of this cancer-inducing hormone. Moreover, much to the delight of the Americans, the committee claims to know what the safe level is. You will not be surprised to hear that the American farmers and their Government claim that their beef contains less than this safe amount of this known cancer-inducing substance.

Anyone who eats American beef is playing a modern version of Russian roulette and is exhibiting an extraordinary amount of trust in a group of people (American politicians and American farmers) who have, in my view, consistently shown that they do not give a fig for human health or human life.

20

Fish farms supply almost all of the trout and catfish and half of the salmon and shrimp consumed in the USA. Worldwide, one third of the seafood consumed is farmed fish.

However, a recent study showed that a single serving of farmed salmon contains three to six times the World Health Organisation's recommended daily intake limit for dioxins.

Farmed salmon (usually known as 'Atlantic salmon') are genetically modified to be larger (and therefore more profitable) than wild salmon. As a result a salmon farm which contains 200,000 fish releases nitrogen, phosphorus and faecal matter roughly equivalent to the untreated sewage from between 20,000 and 25,000 human beings.

One huge problem is that American fish farmers use a wide range of chemicals (including hormones, antibiotics, anaesthetics, pesticides etc.) in order to help increase their profits. The use of antibiotics by fish farmers is a particular hazard since it leads to antibiotic resistance.

21

Here's a simple example of the way commercial advantageous practices become accepted without there ever being any evidence to support them.

Cyclists are persuaded to wear helmets (if they are professional they are forced to wear them) although there doesn't seem to be any actual hard evidence that wearing helmets helps cyclists avoid serious injury. There are signs that governments will soon make it compulsory for all cyclists to wear helmets — whether they want to or not.

Research to prove that helmets did help would be easy enough to conduct (just find 1,000 cyclists who wear helmets and 1,000 who don't, making sure that they cycle in comparable circumstances, and at the end of a year find out how many in each group have had serious head injuries).

It is possible to argue that wearing helmets makes cycling more not less dangerous because they affect the weight of the head (and may, therefore, make an accident more likely or make a head injury more likely if you fall off). This is the sort of research Governments should do. No helmet manufacturer would do it (why should they?). But it is the sort of useful, practical, potentially life-saving research which is never, ever done. Instead a commercially useful myth becomes reality. Mobile phones are safe. Helmets for cyclists are essential.

22

There is something absurd, hypocritical and cruel about the way our governments bomb farmers who grow coca leaf and opium (both of which were relatively harmless substances until Western scientists refined them and turned them into more addictive drugs) while at the same time handing out huge subsidies to farmers growing tobacco (one of the world's most lethal products).

23

Breast cancer is an emotive subject which always gathers far more publicity than it might reasonably expect to receive. In Britain, the index to the Office of Health Economics Compendium of Health Statistics 2005-2006 contains five lines of references to breast cancer but no references at all for prostate cancer or bowel cancer.

Newspapers often suggest that breast cancer is the leading cause of death among women. It isn't. Heart disease is the leading cause of death among women. And lung cancer, not breast cancer, is, in most countries the cancer which kills most women. Judging by the photographs used to illustrate newspaper and magazine articles about breast cancer it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the reason why the media concentrate on breast cancer to the exclusion of other diseases is that it gives them a politically correct excuse to publish photographs of semi-naked young women, though just why it is always considered necessary and proper to publish photos of naked breasts to illustrate an article about breast cancer is something of a mystery. No one, as far as I know, has ever illustrated an article about bowel cancer with a photograph of a length of bowel.

Most of the photographs of naked women are, of course, illustrations of pretty young women with firm, large breasts designed and destined to boost the publication's readership. This helps to boost the false impression that breast cancer is a disease which largely affects young women.

Sadly, women don't always benefit from the publicity given to breast cancer. Media campaigns often result in dangerously inappropriate testing being organised (such as widespread mammograms being made available for younger women) and in potentially dangerous and relatively untested drugs being promoted and sold.

24

The male disease which is directly comparable to breast cancer is, of course, prostate cancer. And yet prostate cancer (far more difficult to illustrate) only very rarely features in magazine and newspaper articles.

In the USA, for example, prostate cancer is far more frequent than breast cancer and kills approximately as many people. But whereas thousands of people run campaigns to find a cure for breast cancer very few run campaigns to find a cure for prostate cancer.

Prostate cancer is usually referred to in the media as an old person's disease. This simply isn't true. The figures for prostate cancer show that the incidence, age at diagnosis and mortality rates are very similar to those for breast cancer.

25

Colorectal cancer (cancers of the colon and rectum) is one of the commonest of all cancers and is a major killer of men and women. But not many people are encouraged by the media to walk around with ribbons pinned to their lapels showing that they are supporters of a campaign to stamp out colorectal cancer.

26

These days doctors only get to read and hear what the drug industry wants them to read and hear.

In July 2004 I was invited to speak at a conference in London. The conference was, I was told, intended to tackle the subject of medication errors and adverse reactions to prescribed drugs. The company organising the conference was called PasTest. ‘For over thirty years PasTest has been providing medical education to professionals within the NHS,’ they told me. ‘Building on our commitment to quality in medical and healthcare education, PasTest is creating a range of healthcare events which focus on the professional development of clinicians and managers who are working together to deliver healthcare services for the UK. Our aim is to provide a means for those who are in a position to improve services on both national and regional levels. The topics covered by our conferences are embraced within policy, best practice, case study, clinical management and evidence based practice. PasTest endeavours to source the best speakers who will engage audiences with balanced, relevant and thought-provoking programmes. PasTest has proven in the past that by using thorough investigative research and keeping up-to-date with advances in healthcare and medical practice, a premium educational event can be achieved.’

Goody, I thought.

Iatrogenesis (doctor-induced disease) is something of a speciality of mine. I have written numerous books and articles on the subject. My campaigns have resulted in more drugs being banned or controlled than anyone else’s.

In addition to my speaking at the conference the organisers wanted me to help them decide on the final programme. I thought the conference was an important one and would give me a good opportunity to tell NHS staff the truth. I signed a contract.

PasTest wrote to confirm my appointment as a consultant and speaker for the PasTest Conference Division. And then there was silence. My office repeatedly asked for details of when and where the conference was being held.

Silence.

Eventually a programme for the event appeared on the Internet. Curiously, my name was not on the list of speakers.

Here is part of the blurb promoting the conference:

‘Against a background of increasing media coverage into the number of UK patients who are either becoming ill or dying due to adverse reactions to medication our conference aims to explain the current strategies to avoid Adverse Drug reactions and what can be done to educate patients.’

Putting the blame on patients for problems caused by prescription drugs is brilliant. Most drug related problems are caused by the stupidity of doctors not the ignorance of patients. If the aim is to educate patients on how best to avoid prescription drug problems the advice would be simple: ‘Don’t trust doctors.’

The promotion for the conference claims that ‘It is estimated errors in medication...account for 4% of hospital bed capacity.’ And that prescription drug problems ‘reportedly kill up to 10,000 people a year in the UK’. As I would have shown (had I not been banned from the conference) these figures are absurdly low.

The list of speakers included a variety of people I had never heard of including one speaker representing The Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry and another representing the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency.

Delegates representing the NHS were expected to pay £250 plus VAT (£293.75) to attend the event. Delegates whose Trust would be funding the cost were asked to apply for a Health Authority Approval form.

So why was I apparently banned from this conference?

This is what PasTest said when we asked them: ‘certain parties felt that he (Vernon Coleman) was too controversial to speak and as a result would not attend.’

Could that, I wonder, be the drug industry? Is the drug industry now deciding whom they will allow to speak to doctors and NHS staff on the problems caused by prescription drugs? If I was banned at the behest of the drug industry do NHS bosses know that people attending such conferences will only hear speakers approved by the drug industry and that speakers telling the truth will be banned? (I think it is safe to assume that I won’t be invited to speak at any more conferences for NHS staff.)

If I was banned at the behest of the medical profession why are doctors frightened of the truth? (If they think my views are wrong they would surely be happy for me to appear so that they could counter my arguments.)

I could not, of course, be banned by the NHS itself. Why would the NHS not want its employees to know the truth about drug-related problems?

Why are people who had me banned so frightened of what I would say? It can surely only be because they know that I would have caused embarrassment by telling the truth.

The scary bottom line is that the NHS paid a lot of money to send delegates to a conference where someone representing the drug industry spoke to them on drug safety. But I was banned. The truth was uninvited.

Because I had a contract, PasTest paid me *not* to turn up. I used the money to buy advertisements for my book *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You.* Details of the ban were sent to every national and major local newspaper in Britain. None reported it.

27

Sadly, the truth is that doctors, administrators and drug companies all know that there are serious problems with the way health care is administered. But they would much rather sweep the problem under the carpet than have me lift the carpet, expose the full extent of the problem and threaten their cosy existence. Any system which cannot cope with real criticism is corrupt.

Doctors have to take back their traditional responsibility — and the authority (and power) that should always accompany responsibility.

28

You can no longer expect your conversations with your doctor to be treated as confidential.

Just two decades ago medical records were regarded as sacrosanct. Most doctors did everything they could to protect them from the eyes of social workers, policemen or other representatives of the State. Then, as the years went by, this level of confidentiality offered to patients began to diminish. The number of health care ‘professionals’ expecting access to medical records grew rapidly and various Government departments demanded access to medical records as a right.

The introduction of computerised records has dramatically increased the size of this problem. When medical notes were kept on paper and stored in files it was relatively easy for a doctor to deny access to official snoops (who might have difficulty in deciphering what was written even if they did manage to obtain access). When I was a general practitioner I remember a visitor from the Government arriving and announcing that he was going to remove all the medical records from my office so that they could be studied by bureaucrats. When I objected he pointed out that the paper on which the records were written belonged to the Government. I countered by pointing out that the ink was mine. I told him that he could take the paper but that he would have to leave the ink behind. He left confused and unhappy but empty-handed. But it is difficult, if not impossible to defend the principle of confidentiality now that medical records are stored on computers.

In practical terms anything a patient tells a doctor must, these days, be regarded as being in the public domain. Nurses, social workers, administrators, policemen, court officials, computer operators, typists, secretaries and people just passing by will have access to your private medical records. So many people will able to find out what diseases you have had and what secrets you have shared with your doctor that you must assume that everyone in the world will, if they so desire, know everything there is to know about you. The police, of course, have about as much respect for the concept of ‘confidentiality’ as they have for ‘freedom’ or ‘justice’.

29

These days, thanks to the politicians, doctors can get into serious trouble (and be sent to prison) for not killing patients and for not telling the authorities things they were told in confidence by their patients.

30

Doctors exist only for two reasons: to look after people who have acquired a disease, and to prevent healthy people from falling ill. That’s it. The rest is unimportant.

But today’s medical profession has been bribed by drug companies, bullied by, and overwhelmed by bureaucrats and social workers, and forced by politicians to abandon most of their ethical principles (including, for example, the traditional principle of confidentiality). Through the weakness of their leaders, doctors have been turned into ethically impoverished mercenaries. Principles should be indigestible but the modern medical profession has swallowed its principles without hesitation or regret.

It is, perhaps, hardly surprising that most doctors now hate their jobs and regard them as little more than a way of making money. Many doctors would prefer to do something else for a living — if they could find something as lucrative. Vocation has been abandoned and replaced by expediency.

31

Medicine used to be a proud and independent profession. Sadly, much of the modern medical profession is now little more than a marketing arm for the pharmaceutical industry and a snitch service for the government. And things are likely to get worse rather than better.

32

The power of the government and of large corporations is these days so great that you cannot believe anything you see, hear or read on medical matters which is published or broadcast by a mainstream publisher or broadcaster.

33

To look after your health properly — and to reduce your chances of needing a doctor — you need access to information which you know you can trust.

But that’s not easy.

Much of the medical information in magazines or newspapers has been reprinted directly from press releases produced by drug companies, or written by journalists who know far less about health care than you do. Very few publications, radio stations or television stations have on their staff anyone capable of interpreting a clinical trial properly or of reading a scientific paper and spotting the holes in it. And the so-called experts they consult are frequently paid not by the media but by drug companies. The mainstream media is dominated by government and drug company spokesmen and women. On radio and television the spokesman you hear advocating vaccines or some new wonder drug will probably be receiving payments from drug companies. Even books published by mainstream publishers are suspect, with some published with the aid of advance orders from drug companies or the meat industry. There are even doctors who are paid to write letters to newspapers promoting or defending certain foodstuffs or drug therapies.

34

Modern journalists seem to have very little knowledge of the things they write about. Here is one of dozens of examples I could give.

In July 2006, newspapers ran a story about hair dyes causing cancer.

‘Dying hair increases cancer risk’ screamed one headline. ‘Using hair dye can increase the chance of developing cancer, new research suggests.’ said another.

The newspapers described this story as though it was hot news.

It wasn’t.

I devoted several pages to the problems of cancer caused by hair dyes in a book called *Face Values* which was published in 1981.

35

Like many doctors who dare to question the views and actions of the medical establishment I have repeatedly found that mainstream journalists (whether they work in print or are broadcasters) will rarely dare to publish views (however well-supported by the facts) which question the accepted official line.

For example, when a researcher for a TV programme called to ask me whether I thought drugs given for patients with cancer were worthwhile I told him that I could provide evidence showing that the use of such drugs is a waste of time and money, and that the real way to tackle cancer is to boost the patient’s immune system. I explained that many anti-cancer drugs do the opposite. The researcher was enthusiastic but I predicted that the programme’s editors and producers would not dare include my point of view. My prediction proved entirely accurate.

Similar things happen on a regular basis. My conclusion is that journalists are rarely willing to risk upsetting politicians or large, powerful industries. I have been contacted many, many times by researchers wanting to know if I would help with programmes about the dangers of meat, the hazards of prescription drugs, the safety of vaccinations and the value of vivisection. Occasionally the programmes have been made. Invitations for me to take part have always been withdrawn.

36

Advertisements for my book *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You* were banned on the grounds that my claim that ‘the person most likely to kill you is not a murderer or a drunken motorist but your doctor’ was unfair to doctors.

Unfair?

In the UK each year:

***** around 859 people are murdered
* around 2663 people are killed in road accidents

And how many patients are killed by doctors? At a conservative estimate the figure is well over 20,000. The official figures show that there 980,000 ‘patient safety incidents’ in the National Health Service hospitals in 2004, and that over 2,000 patients died because of cock- ups. These are the official figures and are an absurd under-estimate of the real size of the problem. No one working in the NHS (whether a doctor, nurse or administrator) is likely to report a side effect or error unless they feel they have to. The American style enthusiasm for litigation is the reason for this shyness.

The advertisement was banned by a small private organisation called the Advertising Standards Authority (the ASA).

Where, you are no doubt asking, does the ASA get its money from?

Mainly from large companies.

Possibly including drug companies.

37

The ASA also banned an advertisement which simply invited readers to visit my website to study the facts about animal experiments. The evidence supporting the advertisement was readily available on my website and included evidence given to the House of Lords.

The ASA claimed to have received one complaint (which may have been from a vivisector or vivisection supporter). They refused to identify the complainant.

The ASA’s report criticising the advertisement is bizarre. They were advised to study the evidence on my website. In their report they admitted that they had viewed some of the content (they actually use the word ‘some’) but were unable to find what they were looking for.

So they decided that the advertisement was misleading and banned it.

The ASA seems to me to be riding roughshod over my fundamental rights as an individual, an author and an advertiser in the interests of protecting large, international industries which can quite well look after themselves.

38

Some people think that the ASA is more concerned with protecting big business than the interests of consumers.

Last year the organisation took no action at all against the five advertisements which had caused the most offence to ordinary consumers.

Five advertisements which had between them attracted more than 3,600 angry complaints were left untouched by the ASA All these advertisements had been placed by large companies.

On the other hand the ASA has consistently ruled against advertisements placed by anti-vivisectors — even though only one complaint may have been received.

For example, when the Research Defence Society (an organisation set up and funded to defend vivisection) complained about two antivivisection leaflets of mine, the ASA quickly banned them. Amazingly, one of the people on the ASA committee which banned the leaflets was the vice chairman of L’Oreal (UK) Ltd, a large cosmetics company which has in the past been criticised by anti-vivisectors for its use of ingredients tested by means of animal experiments.

Coleman’s 9th Law Of Medicine

Doctors and nurses know little or nothing about staying healthy. In particular, doctors and nurses know nothing useful about food, diet and healthy eating. (Sadly, the same is true of nutritionists and dieticians).

1

Doctors have never taken much interest in preventive medicine. This, I’m afraid, is because they have little (or, rather, no) financial interest in keeping their patients healthy. Except in China (where doctors were once paid only for as long as their patients stayed well) doctors have always earned their money out of diagnosing and curing illness. When you earn money out of making people healthy when they are ill, keeping them healthy makes no financial sense at all. And, however incompetent some doctors may be, none of them are entirely stupid.

2

During the last few hundred years we have changed our world much faster than our bodies have managed to evolve. That’s why we suffer so much from stress-related diseases. We still have bodies designed to cope with the sort of threat posed by sabre toothed tigers but we live in a world where our stresses come in brown envelopes and land on our doormats every day.

Similarly, we have changed the food we eat faster than our bodies have been able to adapt

We were designed (or slowly evolved) for a very different type of diet to the one most of us eat today. We were designed for a diet based on fruits and vegetables, supplemented occasionally with a small amount of lean meat. We weren’t designed to eat vast quantities of fatty meat, we weren’t designed to drink milk taken from another animal (and meant for its young) and we weren’t designed to eat grains.

Around 99.99% of our genetic material was formed when we were eating the sort of diet for which we were designed.

But now most of us live on fatty meat, milky foods and cereals.

There were 100,000 generations of humans known as hunter-gatherers (living on fruits and vegetables they gathered and animals they occasionally managed to kill) and 500 generations dependent on agriculture (living on food grown on farms and animals reared in captivity).

There have been just ten generations of humans since the onset of the industrial age and just two generations have grown up with highly processed fast, junk food.

Knowing all this it is hardly surprising that we are most of us ill most of the time.

3

‘Leave your drugs in the chemist’s pot if you can heal your patient with food.’

Hippocrates, 5th century BC

4

Obesity is now endemic in most Western countries. And type 2 diabetes (also known as maturity onset diabetes) is often a consequence of obesity. And yet most doctors do little or nothing either to help their patients to lose weight or to diagnose type 2 diabetes. It has, for example, been reliably estimated that in some countries about a quarter of the people who have diabetes do not know that they have diabetes. Since diabetes can cause numerous health problems — and can kill — this is clearly a serious problem. In Britain, for example, it is estimated that around 500,000 women have diabetes but don’t know it.

When diabetes is diagnosed the doctor’s usual response is to reach for a prescription pad and prescribe one of the potentially hazardous drugs promoted for the purpose.

In fact, most patients could control their diabetes (and protect themselves from health problems) by changing their diet (cutting out junk foods) and losing excess weight.

But prescribing a pill is easier than giving advice. And taking a pill is easier than cutting down on cream cakes.

5

Our ancestors ate raw fruits, nuts, seeds, wild game (low in fat) and hundreds of different types of plant.

A broad range of plants gives a wide range of vitamins and minerals and other secondary plant compounds. Such a diet helps to keep us healthy when we are well and to heal us when we are not.

We need fresh, organic fruit and vegetables in good quantities but these days we eat very few plants. We eat the plants which farmers find easy to grow and which are most profitable. Things are made infinitely worse by the fact that modern methods of farming rely on chemical intervention. And some of the chemicals are carcinogenic.

To stay healthy most of us need supplements. They help but they are nowhere near as good as a healthy, natural diet.

6

Is it a coincidence that when gorillas are brought into captivity and fed on the sort of diet we think they should eat (not dissimilar, of course, from the sort of diet we eat ourselves) they too develop heart disease, ulcerative colitis and high cholesterol levels — problems they don't suffer from in the wild? Given the opportunity to become couch potatoes, baboons will jump at the idea. The Masai Mara National Reserve on the Serengeti Plains of Kenya has baboons who traditionally pick and choose their diet from everything available. But as the Park has grown it has inevitably attracted tourists, hotels and rubbish. Within a few years of the first waste dump being formed the baboons found that they could just lie around until the waste lorry arrived and then binge on high fat, high protein, high sugar leftovers. The baboons feeding like this grow faster, reach puberty earlier and weigh more. But their cholesterol levels have shot up and they get diabetes and chronic heart disease.

In North America the same thing happens to wild bears who hang around waste dumps and car parks in places such as the Yosemite National Park. They become obese and ill. And they also become mentally disturbed; showing signs of confusion and becoming increasingly violent.

Is it coincidence that the hunter-gatherer societies which still exist in the world's few wild, remote areas have far less cancer, heart disease, diabetes and osteoporosis? They may die falling from trees or being eaten by wild animals but they don't die from the sort of diseases which cripple and kill us. Time and time again anthropologists have observed that as native societies abandon their traditional hunter-gatherer lifestyle so their health deteriorates.

Today, we are like captive cows and sheep, falling ill because they can no longer choose a varied diet but must rely on what the farmers choose to offer.

7

The drug industry has efficiently persuaded us that medicine and food are separate things. When we think of 'medicine' we are encouraged to think of 'drugs'. (To many people the words 'medicine' and 'drug' have become interchangeable.)

The drug industry has turned natural compounds into drugs, making them more powerful and more dangerous and it has patented new chemical compounds and then promoted them with far more enthusiasm than scientific sense. Drug companies have even patented traditional herbal products.

The drug companies have encouraged us to believe that when we are ill we must take something to rid ourselves of our symptoms. It's all about money.

8

There are 76 million cases of food-related infectious illnesses in the United States of America every year — with around 5,000 deaths.

Figures for other countries are probably similar. These figures are probably on the low side since it seems likely that many people who have short-lived illnesses do not bother to report them to anyone. (Who would you tell if you didn't need to call the doctor? And how many doctors bother to report such illnesses to their government anyway?)

Illnesses caused by drinking contaminated water do not count for these figures since water is not regarded as a food. If water borne contamination (and other forms of contamination) were added the total number of incidents of food-related infectious illness in the USA would exceed 200,000,000 cases a year. That, believe me, is a lot of vomit and a lot of diarrhoea.

Many of these problems are caused by the contamination of food with bacteria, viruses and other organisms. Since human and animal waste is widely used in animal feed this is hardly surprising. (In the autumn of 1999 French farmers were vilified for feeding human waste to their animals. This was all part of a political game. The disgusting practice of feeding faeces to animals is widespread and is certainly not confined to France.)

9

Attempts to control the dramatically increasing problem of food related illness have been futile. Governments everywhere are nervous about upsetting the powerful food industry and even more nervous about upsetting farmers.

Of course, food which is contaminated with infective organisms isn't the only reason why people are falling ill these days. If cases of cancer, heart disease and other diseases caused by diet were added the numbers involved would be much more dramatic. There is no absolutely no doubt that at least a third of all cancers are caused by food. (Recent research suggests that up to 70% of human cancers may be triggered by chemicals released during the breakdown of food.) And there are strong links between specific foods and most other major killers too. (Important medical and scientific evidence appears in my book Food for Thought.)

10

In an attempt to stay healthy most of us want to eat nutritious, healthy food that tastes good and does us good. We want to be able to pay a fair price for food that contains natural ingredients and, ideally, no chemical residues. If the food we are buying contains additives we would like to know what they are.

In order to make sure that we do our best to eat healthily we naturally put a lot of faith in the labels used to describe the food we eat.

Our faith is misplaced.

Encouraged and supported by governments food companies lie, lie and lie again. Ordinary, everyday words such as ‘fresh’, ‘natural’, ‘wholesome’ and ‘nutritious’ are virtually meaningless. If the American Government has its way the word ‘organic’ will soon be entirely meaningless too.

We all put our faith in labels — and our trust in the people who sell us food. But our faith and our trust are misplaced. Food companies are aware of our desire for genuinely good food and so they employ clever advertising and marketing ‘spin doctors’ to help disguise the way that the food they sell us is adulterated by behind-the-scene chemists. Here are some of the ways food companies defraud us:

Spring water
The phrase can be used to describe water that has been taken out of a tap.

Meat
The word ‘meat’ can be used to describe anything that comes from an animal — from the tip of its nose to the tip of its tail. Scraps of meat blasted off the bones are counted, as are bits of faeces clinging to tissues.

Farmfresh and Farmhouse
Utterly meaningless words. The foods described in this way can be produced in factories from animals or birds (such as hens) kept in battery cages.

Fresh
This means whatever the food company wants it to mean.

GM Free
If you think that a ‘GM Free’ label means that food doesn’t contain genetically modified food you would be wrong. The rules mean that food can contain a small quantity of genetically modified food and yet be described as not containing genetically modified food. Since the whole point with genetically engineered food is that a small amount may induce cancer (there is no evidence that it does and no evidence that it doesn’t) this is dangerous and absurd. Incidentally, studies on genetically engineered cotton have created real concerns. In New Zealand farmers found that thousands of sheep had died after grazing on land where genetically engineered cotton had been grown. Another report showed that workers who picked genetically engineered cotton suffered severe skin eruptions. What will genetically engineered food do to anyone who eats it? I haven’t got the foggiest notion. And nor, I suspect, has anyone else.

Steak
This implies that the item is a solid piece of flesh. But this isn’t necessarily so. ‘Steaks’ can be built up using scraps and flakes of flesh.

Low fat
This doesn’t mean anything since there are no legal rules defining what ‘low fat’ means.
This doesn’t mean anything either. Nor does Extra Lean. (Nor, for that matter, Extra Extra Lean.) A product described as ‘lean’ may sound as though it contains little fat but it can be just as fatty as any other product.

Flavour
Don’t make the mistake of assuming that the phrase ‘banana flavour’ implies that the food you are buying has anything to do with bananas. The flavour may be made in a laboratory from chemicals.

Free Range
This doesn’t necessarily mean that the hens (or other creatures) range free. It can mean that a vast number of creatures share limited access to a very limited outdoor space. Free-range chickens are merely chickens who are technically allowed to stretch their legs. Most are fed on mass produced pellets and never see a hay barn or a blade of grass. Chemicals may be added to the feed in order to try to improve the appearance of the yolks — and in order to keep the hens alive in their unnatural ‘free range’ conditions. (If you and ten thousand other people lived in one room with a door into a carpet sized garden would you describe yourself as ‘free range’?)

Brown bread
Sounds wholesome but it can be white bread which has been dyed brown.

Natural
This word doesn't mean anything when applied to food. Or, rather, it means whatever the food manufacturer wants it to mean.

Smoked
If you think your smoked bacon has been smoked you are probably being naive. Your bacon may well have been pumped up with an artificial smoke flavour liquid.

Country Fresh Eggs
The hens are probably kept in a battery but the battery may be in the country. The word 'fresh' means whatever the food company wants it to mean.

Nutritious
This doesn't mean anything at all. A food company could happily package pig faeces and label it 'nutritious'.

How do food companies get away with all this deceit?

Largely, I'm afraid, because most people don't bother to complain.

11

The quality and quantity of the food we eat is vitally important for the preservation of our good health.

If you eat fatty food, full of chemicals and preservatives, you will be far more likely to develop and die of cancer or heart disease than if you eat a low fat, high fibre diet in which fruit and vegetables play a major part.

If doctors told their patients the truth about food most of the world's drug companies would virtually disappear within months. The market for heart drugs, high blood pressure drugs, anti-cancer drugs and so on would fall through the floor. Drug companies would be struggling along side-by-side with the buggy whip manufacturers.

And yet the advice about nutrition given to patients by doctors, nurses, nutritionists and dieticians is often appalling and frequently lethal. The food served in hospitals (where people are, it can safely be assumed, at their weakest and at their greatest need of wholesome, nutritious food) is almost universally inedible and customarily harmful to the patient. The food produced for patients is nothing more than unwholesome stodge, full of calories and fat and devoid of vitamins. You're more likely to find salmonella or staphylococci in a plateful of hospital food than you are to find an antioxidant.

12

There is a single food that causes most illness (and which causes as many deaths and as much illness as tobacco). It is a food which has been proven time and time again to cause cancer of the breast, cancer of the prostate, cancer of the bowel, many other types of cancer and numerous other disorders including asthma, heart disease, constipation, high blood pressure, osteoporosis and rheumatoid arthritis. It is a food which most people eat at least once every day. And it is a food which governments know is potentially lethal. But the truth about this deadly food is suppressed for purely commercial reasons. Governments (and the medical profession) say nothing because the people selling the food have too much power and too much money.

The name of the food is meat. The United States Surgeon General's Report called 'Nutrition and Health' said: 'In one international correlational study...a positive association was observed between total protein and animal protein and breast, colon, prostate, renal and endometrial cancers.'

It is, I believe, the fat in meat which is the most significant cause of cancer. The fat in meat isn't just the white stuff that is easy to cut off. The fat is spread throughout the meat and is invisible to the naked eye.

13

The fat in meat is particularly likely to cause cancer because the chemicals with which animals are fed accumulate in the fat. Breast cancer is a particular risk because breast tissue contains a considerable amount of fatty tissue. The carcinogenic chemicals fed to animals accumulate in the animal's fatty tissues. When the fatty meat is eaten the carcinogenic chemicals easily accumulate in the parts of the human body with the most fat.

14

All sorts of people have produced all sorts of explanations for the dramatic rise in breast cancer in recent years. The use of talcum powder and the wearing of bras have both been blamed. Other scientists claimed that it is the fact that so many women now work nights — with the result that their hormones are disrupted.

The real answer is much simpler, far more obvious and eminently easy to prove. Unfortunately, it is also inconvenient for the governments and a huge industry.

The truth is that breast cancer is rocketing (as are so many other cancers) because of chemical toxins in the fatty meat we eat. Clear scientific evidence shows that women who eat lots of fat, and/or eat lots of meat, are more likely to get breast cancer. It really is that simple.

15

The incidence of breast cancer among Japanese women was low when they ate a traditional Japanese diet (which contains very little meat). When Japanese women started eating fatty hamburgers (food which I long ago christened harmburgers) the incidence of breast cancer rocketed.

16

Modern regulations allow farmers, meat processors, packers and food companies selling meat to mislead their consumers in a way that would probably startle people in other industries. The word ‘meat’ can include the head, feet, rectum (full or empty), spinal cord and tail of an animal. The term ‘meat product’ can include the eyeballs and the nose. A package which is labelled as pure beef may include fat, rind, gristle and skin. It is commonplace for sausages to include ground up tonsils, fat, bone, cartilage and intestines (with or without the contents). The people selling meat and meat products use flavourings and colourings to disguise what they are selling. Faecal matter is an advantage because it adds extra weight. Water and polyphosphates are injected into an animal’s dead body at high pressure in order to increase the weight of the animal and the profit to the farmer.

17

There is plenty of evidence proving that meat causes cancer (there are summaries of 26 scientific papers relating meat to cancer in my book *Food for Thought* and on my websites www.vernoncoleman.com and www.vernoncoleman.co.uk) but, despite this, there are many doctors, dieticians and nutritionists around who still don’t seem to understand the importance of this link. Despite the firm evidence showing that meat causes cancer the majority of hospitals still serve their patients (and staff) meals which are built around meat. We think it strange that just a relatively few years ago patients and staff in hospitals were allowed to smoke on the wards but in a few years’ time our descendants will surely regard it as just as odd that hospitals should serve meat to people entrusted to their care. Any nutritionist, dietician, cookery writer or chef who advocates eating meat is woefully ignorant about food and health, in the pay of the meat industry or a plain old-fashioned psychopath who likes killing people and should be doing something else for a living. This is beyond argument. It is as absurd and as indefensible for a chef, nutritionist or dietician to recommend eating meat as part of a healthy diet as it would be for a doctor to recommend smoking as part of a healthy lifestyle.

18

Meat dishes in restaurants should carry exactly the same sort of Government health warning as packets of cigarettes. Meat on sale in butchers’ shops should carry the same warning. If one makes a judgement objectively, based purely on the available scientific evidence, chefs who promote meat eating should be arrested and charged with manslaughter and parents who give their children meat to eat should be charged with negligence. (Children are still developing until the age of about 12 and young immune systems and livers are less able to get rid of contaminants.)

19

The list of diseases known to be associated with meat, or to be commoner among meat eaters, looks like the index of a medical textbook.

Anaemia, appendicitis, arthritis, breast cancer, cancer of the colon, cancer of the prostate, constipation, diabetes, gall stones, gout, high blood pressure, indigestion, obesity, piles, strokes and varicose veins are just some of the well-known disorders which are more likely to affect meat eaters than vegetarians.

There is too, the problem of the adrenalin in meat. When animals are killed they are inevitably terrified. They have a good deal of adrenalin running through their veins. When the animal is eaten the person who eats the animal consumes that adrenalin. What are the consequences of this? No one knows.

20

Avoiding meat is one of the best and simplest ways to cut down your fat consumption. When animal fat is metabolised in the body it produces damaging free radicals which help cause cancer, cardiovascular disease and ageing.

21

Those who eat beef are, in my view, foolishly exposing themselves to the risk of contracting the horrifying human version of Mad Cow Disease.

22

To all these hazards must be added the fact that if you eat meat you will be consuming any hormones, drugs and other chemicals which may have been fed to the animals before they were killed.

No one knows precisely what effect eating the hormones in meat is likely to have on your health. But the risk is there and I think it's a big one.

And there are other hazards. Some farmers use tranquillisers to keep animals calm. Others routinely use antibiotics so that their animals do not develop infections — and to boost the rate at which they put on weight. In America over half of all antibiotics are fed to animals and I don't think it is any coincidence that the percentage of staphylococci infections resistant to penicillin went up from 13% in 1960 to 91 % in 1988. Animals which are lucky enough to spend some of their time out of doors eating grass will often eat grass which has been sprayed with all sorts of toxic and carcinogenic chemicals.

23

The link between fat, fatty meat and cancer is not new. But Western Governments have suppressed the truth so effectively that it was only in 2005 that newspapers acknowledged the link. One newspaper reported this 'discovery' with the front page headline: 'Chips Can Increase The Risk Of Breast Cancer'. The same newspaper article also seemed astonished to be able to report that women who are overweight are more at risk of developing breast cancer. They reported that women between the ages of 18 and 30 who lost 10lb in weight cut their chances of developing breast cancer before the age of 50 by 65% and that the women who benefited most were the women who had a mutation in the gene which is recognised to increase the risk of breast cancer. (It is, of course, these women who are usually offered the option of having their breasts removed — a savage and pointless operation which is one of the most fashionable currently offered to patients. See Coleman's 7th Law Of Medicine.)

24

The healthiness of a vegetarian diet is perhaps shown most dramatically by the fact that lifelong vegetarians visit hospitals 22% less often than meat eaters — and for shorter stays.

Vegetarians tend to be fitter than meat eaters — as well as healthier — and many of the world's most successful athletes (particularly those who specialise in endurance events) follow a strictly vegetarian diet.

25

There are all sorts of old-fashioned myths about eating meat. For example, it used to be claimed that people who didn't eat meat would be short of protein. That is now known to be absolute nonsense. And it is equally untrue that if you don't eat meat your diet will be deficient in essential vitamins or minerals. Meat contains absolutely nothing — no protein, vitamins or minerals — that your body cannot obtain perfectly happily from a vegetarian diet.

26

The Atkins diet (which I have attacked ever since it first became popular — I've always thought that 'give grease a chance' would have been a good slogan for it) has acquired many keen followers and its emphasis on eating meat made it very popular with the meat industry. At one point around 20 million people around the world were thought to be on this high fat diet. Sadly for those individuals the body needs carbohydrates and without them it takes what it needs from stores in the muscles and liver. It is inevitable that problems will develop. The side effects known to be associated with the Atkins diet include bowel problems, muscle weakness and headaches. Heaven knows what the long-term effects might be. I suspect that long before all the harmful effects are identified lawsuits from unhappy dieters will have consigned the Atkins diet to the graveyard wherein so many other crazy and unhealthy diets now reside.

27

Why don't governments stop people eating meat?

For the same reason that they don't put much effort into stopping people smoking and drinking too much alcohol. They want the taxes made by the manufacturers of these products (and, in many cases, the bribes offered by the manufacturers lobbyists) and they don't want their citizens to live too long anyway. Your government wants you dead before you become an expensive drag on society, retiring, failing to work and pay taxes, claiming a pension and using up expensive health services. Doctors, to their everlasting shame, do nothing so spread the truth.

28

Astonishingly, some doctors actively encourage their patients to eat meat.

After reading in the national press that a doctor in England was alleged to be 'prescribing rump steak and pork chops' to his patients I wrote to the General Medical Council (the organisation which regulates and registers doctors in the United Kingdom) asking them to investigate. There is, I pointed out, ample evidence available to show that meat causes cancer. (From the newspaper reports, I gathered that the doctor's activities were being encouraged by the meat industry)

I offered to provide the General Medical Council with over 20 scientific papers, published in reputable journals (including the *International Journal of Cancer, New England Journal of Medicine, Cancer Research, British Journal of Cancer, Cancer, British Medical Journal)* showing that eating meat causes cancer. I also pointed out that the United States Surgeon General has reported links between meat eating and cancer. I suggested to the General Medical Council that this was a matter of significant public interest and should be attended to without delay.

I was not in the slightest bit surprised to receive a letter from the General Medical Council dismissing my complaint. 'We have carefully considered the information you provided...however, we have decided that this is not a matter that justifies action by us. The issue you have mentioned does not appear to have any bearing on the doctor's ability to practise medicine and does not breach our guidance.'

So, according to the General Medical Council, it is perfectly acceptable for a doctor to recommend that his patients eat food that may give them cancer.

29

Spreading the truth about meat isn't easy.

Advertisements for my book *Food for Thought* (which contains scientific evidence showing that meat causes cancer) have, naturally, been banned by the Advertising Standards Authority. Even a British satirical magazine called *Private Eye* (which has created and cultivated an image for taking a tough attitude to the establishment and which likes to give the impression that it is fearless and carefree) refused to accept an advertisement for my book *Food for Thought* which included the words 'meat causes cancer'.

30

The risks associated with eating meat are generally wildly underestimated by both patients and doctors. But patients and doctors are poor at assessing risks. I know people who smoke but who won't fly because they consider air travel too dangerous. (Their risk of contracting a deadly disease through smoking is massively greater than their risk of dying in an aeroplane crash). I know people who ride motorbikes but who won't use mobile phones. (I was one of the first to draw attention to the possible risks associated with mobile phone use — particularly for children — but even I don't think that mobile phones are as dangerous as riding motor bikes). And I know people who regularly take sleeping tablets but who are severely disapproving of others who have a whisky night cap to help them sleep. (A tot of whisky at bedtime is far less likely to produce serious addiction and other problems than the regular use of sleeping tablets.)

31

I hope you've got the message about meat now. I've rather laboured the point because the pro-meat lobby has spent zillions flogging its death-inducing product and I know I have a lot of misinformation to counteract The industry selling meat is extremely powerful and has supported and created numerous campaigns to sell its product.

32

Research into whether mobile phones cause brain cancer would be easy to organise. One way is to find a few thousand people with brain tumours and check out which side of their head the tumour is on. Then ask them whether they are right or left-handed. Alternatively, it would be easy to find out if the number of brain tumours has increased since phones became popular. Instead, researchers conducting experiments to assess the safety of mobile telephones have used mice.

The truth is that the mobile phone industry is conducting the world's largest biological experiment — with 1.3 billion users. I don't believe anyone really knows what will happen. Governments do and say nothing to halt the spread the sale of mobile telephones because they need the taxes paid by the manufacturers and users of these products.

Astonishingly (and frighteningly) a quarter of 7-10 year old children already have a mobile phone and phone companies are now designing special mobile phones for young children (America's *Business Week* magazine called them 'cell phones for the sand lot') which are simpler to use for those who haven't yet mastered such intricacies as the alphabet. (A growing percentage of adults, blessed with illiteracy thanks to modern education policies might welcome such phones too.)

33

Food experts are often 'bought' by the big food companies. This is the only way to explain the fact many so-called experts seem to understand less about food, health and disease than the average kitchen sink Many organisations which describe themselves as 'independent', and which have wonderfully grand sounding names, are in fact nothing more than lobby groups set up and funded by large food companies. It is this funding which explains why so many seemingly sane sounding experts, centres, institutes, forums and foundations pontificate in public about just how good hamburgers and sugar coated cereals are for us. It is these self-appointed experts and guardians who are likely to announce (without any apparent embarrassment) that we need to do research to discover the causes of obesity and that there are no known links between food and cancer.

34

Our eating habits have been manipulated so that we satisfy our short-term eating goals. We are encouraged to give in to temptation and to suppress our natural instincts. We don't eat to stay healthy or to become healthy, but for kicks. Sweet things attract us because of the energy kick they give. Fatty food tastes good. Chocolate contains fat, sugar and a bitter stimulant that is addictive. Processed foods don't provide anything we really need other than instant energy. The problem is that the food industry gives us not what we need but what we want. As with tobacco, alcohol and drugs we get hooked on products that seem to ease the psychological problems which have been created by our lifestyle. And, of course, though these products may produce short-term solutions they create long-term problems of their own.

35

There is clear evidence to show that how much food you eat is just as important as what you eat. Eating less can lead to a longer life.

A team from the Louisiana State University in the USA monitored a group of 48 overweight men and women aged between 25 and 50 years. A quarter of them were put on a diet containing 25% fewer calories than they would be expected to eat for their age and weight. Another quarter had their calorie intake reduced by 12.5% and were also put on a strict exercise regime. A third group stuck to a very strict diet of just 890 calories a day. Finally, the last group was placed on a diet which would enable them to maintain their weight.

The results showed that the volunteers on the fewest calories lost, on average, 14% of their body weight during the six months. The other calorie-restricted dieters lost 10% of their body weight. All the volunteers who cut down their calories showed a fall in their average body temperature and showed reduced fasting insulin levels — both figures which are linked to longevity. The rate at which their DNA decayed also slowed. This is important because decaying DNA increases the chances of mutations and degenerative diseases developing, and producing problems such as cancer.

Other research has shown that people who eat less also have healthier hearts.

Researchers believe that cutting calories reduces the production of free radicals, the toxic particles which are difficult for the body to get rid of. The message is simple: eat less, live longer.

If you eat like a bird you'll live as long as an elephant.

So why don't doctors and dieticians warn patients of this?

Simple.

Where's the profit?

36

Thousands of people pay a premium to eat organic food in the belief that what they are eating has not been sprayed with poisonous chemicals.

Oh dear.

In many parts of the world the fact that a food is labelled 'organic' does not necessarily mean that it has not been sprayed with chemicals. It means only that it has (or may have been) sprayed with *approved* chemicals. Having seen the rapid growth in the size of the market for organic food (sales in America in 1980 were worth less than £100 million but in 2003 they were worth £5 billion) American farmers and food manufacturers have insisted that the standards be lowered and the rules changed.

How toxic are the approved chemicals?

Good question.

Your guess is undoubtedly just as good as mine. And since the rules vary from country to country our guesses are as good as anyone else's.

The only sure way to make sure that you eat truly organic food is to grow it yourself.

And to make sure that you don't spray your crop or add chemicals to the soil.

37

There is one form of preventive medicine with which doctors and nurses are very well acquainted: most are enthusiastic about vaccines.

Are they right to be so? Should you have your child vaccinated? Who should you believe about vaccination? The Government? The drug companies? The medical establishment? Television?

For over thirty years I have been warning about the potential problems associated with vaccines. I have, during that time, provided a considerable amount of proof showing that vaccination programmes often do more harm than good. To be precise, I believe that the amount of illness and the number of deaths caused by vaccinations far exceeds the amount of serious illness and the number of deaths caused by the diseases against which the vaccinations are supposed to offer protection. The most significant known facts about vaccines are that they can cause brain damage and they can kill. The evidence shows that some vaccines kill and injure far more people than the diseases the vaccines are given to protect against.

This isn't theory or supposition. It is fact.

Since the late 1970s the British Government has quietly handed out tens of thousands of pounds in damages to parents of children suffering from brain damage caused by vaccines.

38

I also believe, and have believed for many years, that autism is caused by vaccination.

The word autism is said to be used, like the word cancer, as an umbrella term for a range of different problems. Patients with autism are said to have development disorders which affect their ability to interact socially and to communicate with other people though this is a fairly recent interpretation and the word does seem to be used as a catch-all for a whole range of problems. (In one medical dictionary on my shelf autism is defined as 'morbid self-absorption'.) These days, I suspect that the word is used more as a dustbin word rather than an umbrella word. It helps the profession appear to know what is the matter when they don't and, at the same time, it enables them to avoid taking any responsibility for what has happened. The word is used to describe almost any symptoms which doctors cannot explain. Autism can be anything from a mild behavioural problem to severe brain damage.

Social workers and other professional lightweights play the game because it enables them to build well-funded empires around the 'care' of autistic patients. For governments it is, of course, a lot cheaper to provide 'care' for autistic patients than to acknowledge that these children have been made ill by the official vaccination policy and should have been provided with vast amounts of compensation.

I believe that the epidemiological evidence supports this hypothesis. The number of children being diagnosed as suffering from autism has rocketed as the number of children being vaccinated has rocketed. Once rare (in the 1990s it was generally accepted that autism affected no more than 4 or 5 people in every 10,000), it is now officially claimed that it affects more than one in 100 children in Britain. (Some experts claim that the real figure is much higher than this.) Figures in other countries show that the incidence of autism is rising in all developed countries. How anyone can deny the possibility of a link between vaccination and autism is quite beyond me. The epidemiological evidence is overwhelming. If vaccines are known to cause brain damage isn't it logical to assume that they can also cause the disease which is known as autism but which would, I believe, be more properly and honestly known as brain damage? I have been suggesting that there is a link between 'autism' and vaccination for decades and no one has yet discredited my theories. A vast number of the children currently being diagnosed as 'autistic' are, without a doubt, actually suffering from various levels of brain damage caused by vaccines. Doctors and drug companies and politicians much prefer to talk about autism rather than brain damage because the former suggests a natural disease while the latter suggests that there may be an external cause. Innocent and desperate parents collude with this nonsense because they prefer to describe their children as autistic rather than as brain damaged.

39

The drug companies (and the doctors, hospitals and politicians who support them) all claim that there is no link between autism and vaccination. (But then they would, wouldn't they?). They claim that there is no convincing scientific evidence proving a link between the two. (On the other hand there is no convincing scientific evidence disproving a link between vaccination and autism.)

When a research project was set up to investigate the link, drug companies applied to a London court for an injunction to stop the research.

Now why would they do that?

I really can't imagine.

40

If children scream or are unusually quiet or show other unusual signs after a vaccination then there is, I suspect, a real chance that they will develop autism. Sadly, of course, it is too late to do anything about it by then.

41

As the years have gone by the number of vaccines available has increased steadily. Modern American children now receive around thirty vaccinations by the time they go to school.

A decade or two ago the only vaccines available were against a relatively small number of diseases including smallpox, tuberculosis, polio, cholera, diphtheria, tetanus and whooping cough. Today, the number of available vaccines seems to grow almost weekly. In the past vaccines were produced against major killer diseases. Today vaccines are produced against diseases such as measles, mumps and chickenpox which have traditionally been regarded as relatively benign inconveniences of childhood.

The death rate from measles had dropped dramatically decades before the vaccine against measles was introduced. Today, despite (or, perhaps, because of) the widespread use of the vaccine, the incidence of measles is rising again.

42

In attempts to persuade parents to have their children vaccinated against measles governments and doctors around the world have thought up an apparently unending — and hysterical — series of scare campaigns. Now that there is a vaccine against it, measles has, by a strange coincidence, stopped being an annoying childhood disease and has, instead, become a deadly killer.

43

Scares designed to encourage parents to have their children vaccinated often consist of claiming that a major epidemic is just around the corner and that only vaccination can offer protection. I have lost count of the number whooping cough epidemics which governments have wrongly forecast. Governments and their advisers are either unbelievably stupid or else they are deliberately lying to help boost drug company profits.

44

Countless scientists around the world have spent vast fortunes trying to create a vaccine against AIDS (in view of the fact that AIDS may not exist they may find this trickier than expected).

And scientists have apparently developed a banana vaccine by creating genetically engineered banana plants. There are plans to develop bananas which ‘protect’ those who eat them against hepatitis B, measles, yellow fever and poliomyelitis.

Other scientists have developed a genetically engineered potato which it may be possible to use as a vaccine against cholera. The active part of the potato remains active during the process of cooking and so a portion of genetically engineered chips could soon be a vaccine against cholera.

I promise you I am not making this up.

You will not be surprised to hear that I would not knowingly consume any fruit or vegetable that had been genetically modified — let alone one that had been modified in this obscene way.

45

Naturally, the pharmaceutical industry is constantly searching for more and more new vaccines. I have lost count of the number of times I have read of researchers working on a vaccine to prevent cancer. Every year new ’flu jabs appear on the market. There are, so I am told, vaccines in the pipeline for just about everything ranging from asthma to earache. There is even a planned genetically engineered vaccine which will provide protection against forty different diseases. The vaccine, which will contain the raw DNA of all those different diseases, will be given to newborn babies to provide them with protection for life. Oh, goody. Can’t wait.

46

I don’t know about you but I can no longer keep up with what is going on in the world of vaccines. I have long since given up trying to work out which vaccines are very dangerous and which are just a bit dangerous — and to whom. The only certainty is that manufacturing (and giving) vaccines is big business. The people who sell vaccines make a lot of money. And the doctors who give them (or who authorise nurses to give them on their behalf) make a lot of money too. Vaccination is a big and very profitable, industry.

47

Does anyone know what happens inside the body when all these different vaccinations are given together? Do different vaccines work with or against one another? What about the risk of interactions? Exactly how does the immune system cope when it is suddenly bombarded with so much foreign material? And what about dangerous contaminants? One anti-flu vaccine which was injected into over a million American citizens contained a cancer-causing monkey virus. And then there’s the polio vaccine.

The polio vaccine is often used as an example of just how wonderful a vaccine can be.

And supporters of animal experiments claim that without animal experiments there would have never been a vaccine against poliomyelitis.

Both arguments are wrong.

The number of deaths from polio had fallen dramatically some time before the first polio vaccine was introduced. Better food, better housing cleaner water and better sanitation had all led to a fall in the incidence and significance of the disease.

In fact the evidence shows that the introduction of the vaccine led to more patients with polio rather than fewer. In Tennessee, USA, the number of poliomyelitis victims the year before vaccination became compulsory was 119, but the year after vaccination was introduced the number rose to 386. In North Carolina, the number of cases before vaccination was 78 while the number after the vaccine became compulsory rose to 313. There are similar figures for other American states.

The first breakthrough in the development of a poliomyelitis vaccine was made in 1949 with the aid of a human tissue culture. But when the first practical vaccine was prepared in the 1950s monkey kidney tissue was used because that was standard laboratory practice. Researchers didn't realise that one of the viruses commonly found in monkey kidney cells can cause cancer in humans. If human cells had been used to prepare the vaccine (as they could and should have been and as they are now) the original poliomyelitis vaccine would have been much safer.

48

How many other vaccines contain similarly dangerous ingredients? Could the constant increase in the incidence of cancer be connected to the enthusiasm for vaccination programmes which has for decades now been inspired by drug companies and governments and maintained by doctors?

49

I am an enthusiastic supporter of the principle of preventive medicine. It is usually much easier to avoid an illness than it is to treat one.

Vaccination programmes are usually sold to the public as though they are an integral part of a general preventive medicine programme. But vaccination programmes cannot truly be described as preventive medicine. They are, rather, a part of the interventionist approach to medical care.

50

Vaccinations have been linked to a number of general health problems. It now seems possible, for example, that individuals who receive vaccinations may be more prone to develop diabetes, allergies (such as asthma), arthritis, eczema and bowel disease (such as Irritable Bowel Syndrome). The explanation — which makes sense to me — is that vaccinations interfere with the immune system and make the recipients more susceptible to disease.

Who (other than a drug company spokesman) wouldn't expect an infant to show serious signs of distress when deliberately injected with potentially toxic foreign substances? Why shouldn't such injections cause a severe immune response?

51

It has also been suggested that vaccinations may be the explanation for the mystery problem 'cot death'.

Children who die of 'cot death' tend to die at exactly the sort of age when babies are having early vaccinations. Why hasn't anyone noticed that many of the babies who die of 'cot death' often die just days after the recommended dates for childhood vaccinations?

Are so-called 'cot deaths' merely another terrible consequence of government approved vaccination programmes?

52

Around the world an increasing number of parents have been arrested and charged with injuring or killing their babies. Some of those parents are undoubtedly guilty. But many (and possibly most) are not, because in many cases the baby or young child died not because he or she was attacked by a parent who had lost control but because his or her brain was damaged by a vaccine or some other medication. Shaken Baby Syndrome (in which the brain is damaged by the vaccine) is now a very real problem in all societies where vaccines are routinely (and in some countries forcibly) administered. The damage done to the baby or child by the vaccine mimics the damage that would be done if the baby was forcefully shaken. When the police investigate the sudden death of a child, and a pathologist produces a report showing that the child died because of brain damage, the chances are high that one of the parents will be charged with murder. In America this can mean that the misinformed prosecution will call for the death penalty. Naturally, doctors and drug companies deny that vaccines can kill in this or any other way.

In cases where parents (and others) have been accused of murdering their children by shaking them, or in some other way abusing them, the real culprit may well have been a vaccine. Brain damage is a well- known possible side effect of vaccination. Brain swelling, intracranial bleeding and other symptoms of 'shaken baby syndrome' can all be produced by vaccines.

None of this is widely known — perhaps because doctors and drug companies prefer unfortunate parents to take the blame for these deaths.

53

Most doctors are unquestioning — too frightened to upset the establishment. Asking uncomfortable questions can ruin a doctor's career. And medical journalists are just as useless. Most have very little formal medical training, they don't know what to look for, they not infrequently receive payments from drug companies and they hardly ever have the courage to take on the establishment. Far too many so-called medical and health journalists are wimpy incompetents who won't print or broadcast anything which might damage their cosy relationships with the medical establishment and the international pharmaceutical industry.

54

Vaccination damage can occur weeks, months or years after a vaccination.

55

Vaccines have to be developed using living systems. They are, therefore, usually cultivated in material taken from animals — in cell cultures, in fertilised hens' eggs or in the blood of infected animals. Tissues which are used include brain tissue from rabbits, kidney tissue from dogs, rabbits and monkeys, protein from hen's or duck's eggs, blood from horses or pigs. This system can, of course, be dangerous since cell cultures may be contaminated (as was the case with the polio vaccine made with monkey tissue).

Some vaccines have been prepared using bovine serum and it now appears that during the early 1990s an unknown number of children received vaccinations which may have been prepared using material from cattle which could have been infected with Bovine Spongiform Encephalitis (BSE).

Naturally, no one knows the size of the risk that was taken at the time (though it seems that the Government was warned of the hazard). And no one is likely to know the size of any problem resulting from this for at least a decade. This is yet another piece of powerful evidence supporting those who are opposed to mass vaccination programmes.

56

Vaccines also often contain additives. Antibiotics may be added to dampen down the immune system response. And stabilisers of various lands may also be included. Every time something is added to a vaccine the chances of problems developing are increased.

57

Many vaccines contain thimerosal (which contains mercury). This means that when children are vaccinated they are injected with mercury. Mercury is one of the most toxic substances on the planet. The World Health Organisation has stated that there is no safe level of mercury in the human body.

How dangerous do vaccines have to be before people stop believing the drug companies, the medical establishment and the politicians?

58

Between 20% and 50% of individuals who are vaccinated against a disease do not develop a resistance to the disease against which they have been allegedly immunised. In other words up to half of the healthy individuals who are vaccinated (and whose health and lives are therefore put at risk) gain no benefit whatsoever from the vaccination.

59

The evidence shows that diseases said to have been conquered by vaccines were in fact often controlled by other means long before vaccines were introduced.

60

Children in developing countries (often poorly fed and forced by circumstances to drink water which is dirty) are now being vaccinated by teams of workers from rich countries. Vaccination programmes are paid for by large charitable organisations. The people who give the money, and who organise the vaccination programmes, probably think they are doing good. I have no doubt at all that they are doing far more harm than good. Those organising the mass vaccination campaigns claim they are recommending vaccination as a way of preventing illness but the money would do infinitely more good (and much less harm) if it was spent on providing food and clean drinking water.

61

When companies use tissue from a bird to make a vaccine, do they have any idea how many germs may be in that tissue? Some vaccines are made with aborted human foetal tissue. Again, who knows what diseases might be carried in that tissue? Doctors using these vaccinations are practising a form of cannibalism. If you wouldn't eat someone's dead human foetus why would you want your child to be injected with tissue from that foetus?

62

Very little ongoing research is done to find out how safe or effective vaccines are. Drug companies and politicians say that vaccines are safe and effective. And people believe them. Doctors (and others) who speak out against vaccines are ignored and their work is suppressed.

63

'If I had a child now, the last thing I would allow is vaccination. I would move out of the state if I had to. I would change the family name. I would disappear. With my family. I'm not saying it would come to that. There are ways to sidestep the system with grace, if you know how to act. There are exemptions you can declare, in every state, based on religious and/or philosophic views. But if push came to shove I would go on the move.'

A former American vaccine researcher

64

Evidence that vaccines may do more harm than good is supported by experiences with animals. Between 1968 and 1988 there were considerably more outbreaks of foot and mouth disease in countries where vaccination against foot and mouth disease was compulsory than in countries where there were no such regulations. Epidemics always started in countries where vaccination was compulsory. This experience clearly shows that the alleged advantage to the community of vaccinating individuals simply does not exist.

Similar observations were made about the hyena dog, which was in 1989 threatened with extinction. Scientists vaccinated individual animals to protect them against rabies but more than a dozen packs then died within a year — of rabies. This happened even in areas where rabies had never been seen before. When researchers tried using a non-infectious form of the pathogen (to prevent the deaths of the remaining animals) all members of seven packs of dogs disappeared. And yet the rabies vaccine is now compulsory in many parts of the world. Is it not possible that it is the vaccine which is keeping this disease alive?

65

Those who eat meat should be aware that cattle (and other animals reared for slaughter) are regularly vaccinated. The meat that is taken from those animals may, therefore, contain vaccine residues in addition to hormones, antibiotics and other drugs.

66

Tragically, many doctors seem to know very little about the vaccines they advocate. In my view, if a doctor wants to vaccinate you or a member of your family you should insist that he confirm in writing that the vaccine is both entirely safe and absolutely essential. You may notice his enthusiasm for the vaccine suddenly diminish.

67

Vaccines for children and adults are compulsory in some countries. In an increasing number of countries parents who refuse to have their children vaccinated are likely to be arrested and to have their children taken away from them. In other countries (such as the UK) doctors are given a financial bonus as a reward when they 'sell' vaccinations to a large enough proportion of their patients.

As more and more people become wary about vaccines so it is likely that more and more countries will make vaccination compulsory.

68

Do influenza ('flu) vaccines work? Are they worth having?

Well, let's put it this way: I have known hundreds of doctors in my life. As far as I'm aware I have never yet known a doctor who has had a 'flu vaccine.

69

The influenza vaccine contains: different strains of influenza viruses propagated in chicken embryos; formaldehyde (used as a preservative); polyethylene glycol (used to stimulate the immune system); gelatin (made from cows' bones) and thimerosal (which contains mercury).

The strains of influenza virus used are the available strains which the drug company and the authorities guess might be the ones which will hit in the current year. The chances are, of course, that the strains of 'flu which will spread will be quite different.

The possible side effects associated with the 'flu vaccine may include: fever, tiredness, muscle aching, headache, asthma, brain swelling Guillain-Barre syndrome, facial paralysis, damage to eye muscles, damage to the arm and shoulder muscles, bruising abdominal pain, kidney disorders, hives and anaphylaxis.

It is not known whether the 'flu vaccine can trigger cancer, infertility or other serious health problems.

70

The truth is that governments are enthusiastic about vaccination not because they want to protect your child from illness (when have governments ever cared a jot about individuals?) but because they believe that vaccinations help prevent the spread of disease within a community.

The idea is a simple one.

If enough children (or, indeed, adults) are vaccinated then the incidence of that disease will hopefully be lower. Vaccinations don't by any means provide complete protection (many children who are vaccinated still develop the diseases against which they have been vaccinated) but governments hope that they may cut down the incidence of a disease.

And the advantage to a government is obvious. If, instead of a million children being ill with measles just half a million develop the disease then the number of parents having time off work will be reduced accordingly. Vaccination programmes are favoured by governments because they ease the economic burden on the State. Vaccinations are given not to prevent death or serious injury (the diseases against which vaccines are usually given do not usually kill or seriously injure anyone other than babies who are too young to have the vaccines anyway) but to protect the community.

Child A is vaccinated to stop child B getting the disease. And to help maximise the State’s income.

But it is, of course, Child A who takes all the risk.

If you’re a public-spirited parent then you perhaps won’t mind risking your child’s health (and life) for the sake of the State.

But it would be nice if they told you all this, wouldn’t it?

71

Having considered the available evidence I have come to the conclusion that parents who unquestioningly trust their government and their doctor to tell them when to have their child vaccinated (and what with) are reckless beyond forgiveness and unfit to care for a child. They would deserve to have their child taken from them if this would not mean putting their child into the hands of the government and a bunch of drug company indoctrinated doctors.

And anyone who vaccinates a child should be locked up as a child abuser.

72

If you could cure all present cancers and prevent anyone ever getting cancer again by performing an experiment on one healthy child, would you go ahead — knowing that the child would certainly die?

Would you sacrifice an innocent and perfectly healthy child for the good of the community?

Let’s make it more interesting. Let’s assume that the child is yours.

The dilemma is a simple one.

If you allow scientists to kill your child then no one will ever again develop cancer.

Would you allow them to kill your child?

Well, in a way that’s the decision your government has already made on your behalf.

They have elected to recommend (or insist) that your child be vaccinated.

Not for your child’s benefit but for the good of the community. And they didn’t bother to ask you what you thought about it. Instead they lied to you — telling you that the vaccinations were for your child’s benefit.

Coleman’s 10th Law Of Medicine

There are no holistic healers. There are only holistic patients.

1

A truly holistic approach to staying healthy and treating illness depends upon using a wide range of possible remedies; treating the patient’s signs and symptoms (rather than his test results) and combining all types of alternative and orthodox medicine.

2

There are no truly holistic practitioners around. Doctors often talk about holistic medicine. So do alternative practitioners. But most of them don’t have the foggiest idea what it really means.

There is, however, nothing at all to stop you being a holistic patient. For example, if your doctor tells you that you need surgery ask him how long you have got before you need to make a decision — and then use that time to make sure that you assess all the alternative possible options.

When you are trying to choose between orthodox medicine, acupuncture, homeopathy, osteopathy or whatever, make a list of all the advantages and disadvantages of every available type of therapy — and every available practitioner. Look at the claims and the potential side effects of each therapy and ask each practitioner to tell you where you can find out more. Use books and websites to educate yourself about the possibilities, advantages and hazards. Never forget that you are unique — and that your condition requires a unique solution.

3

As a holistic patient you will have to be prepared to stand your ground against health care professionals who will regard your preference for a holistic approach as bizarre.

Many orthodox practitioners are still likely to dismiss alternative or complementary medicine out of hand. If a treatment doesn’t involve drugs, surgery or radiotherapy then its quackery, according to many doctors. (Curiously, young doctors are more likely to be sceptical about alternative medicine than older ones. It seems that the drug industry has, in recent years, improved its effectiveness at increasing scepticism about non-orthodox remedies. Or maybe experience does bring wisdom.)

4

Sadly, many alternative practitioners are, in their own way, just as bigoted and prejudiced. In a chapter entitled ‘What I would do if I had cancer’ in my book *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You* I recommended that readers look at all the therapeutic possibilities before initiating treatment, and that they should, whenever possible, use a pick’n’mix technique; cherry picking the very best and most suitable treatment styles.

Despite my reservations and fears about them, I included drugs, surgery and radiotherapy in my list of therapies to consider. I did so because not to have done so would have been to deny the very spirit of holistic medicine. Several advocates of alternative therapies sent me very aggressive letters, accusing me of being a traitor to alternative medicine (since I am orthodox trained and have a medical degree I thought that just a trifle unfair) and of bowing to the establishment. In fact I was advocating what I believe to be true holistic medicine: an approach which includes every possible remedy and which puts the patient first. It is the patient’s needs which matter most, not the vanities and preferences of individual practitioners or advocates. If you ignore or rule out whole areas of medicine because you are prejudiced against them or (even rightly) believe that they produce side effects in some patients then you are allowing your prejudices to influence your approach and you are certainly not taking a truly holistic approach.

5

A fundamental tenet of being a holistic patient is that you should learn to listen to your body. (Your body is far wiser than you imagine it to be.) And act on what it tells you. Your body knows best.

Doctors are ignorant of (and do not take advantage of) the body’s own healing powers but in nine out of ten illnesses the human body is capable of healing itself without any intervention. Indeed, in many cases intervention will either slow down the healing process, or make things much worse.

Doctors don’t realise just how powerful the human body is and they frequently underestimate the healing power of the body.

6

When I was working as a general practitioner I constantly wondered why some patients recovered without pills or surgery while others, with similar signs and symptoms, needed complex treatment to help them get better (and often had to put up with severe and dangerous side effects in the process).

Slowly, I discovered things that I’d never been taught in medical school or when training as a young doctor.

I found that the human body is equipped with a whole range of mechanisms designed to help keep it healthy and fight off disease.

And the body is, I discovered, equipped with a whole range of self-healing mechanisms designed to help us recover when we fall ill — without any outside help. These self-healing mechanisms have been long forgotten. (Partly I'm afraid, because drug companies can't make money out of helping patients get better by themselves).

But the more I discovered the more excited I became. As animals have known for centuries, taking medicine isn't always the quickest or the best way to get well; fasting resting staying warm and allowing the body to heal and protect itself (by using mechanisms such as vomiting and diarrhoea to eject infective organisms) may be the best way.

I called the phenomenon 'bodypower' and sat down and wrote an outline for a book I wanted to write which would show just how remarkable the forgotten powers of the human body are, how much we underestimate them and how we can use them to keep ourselves healthy and to get well again when we fall ill.

The book I wrote, in which I described the way in which the human body can defend itself, was called *Bodypower* and was first published in 1983.

One of the points I made in that book was that when the body is infected it pushes up its own temperature in order to destroy the infecting organism. When doctors prescribe pills to bring down the fever they delay the healing process by reducing the body's ability to mend itself. Medical intervention — designed to reduce the fever — interferes with the body's own self-healing mechanisms. I am constantly finding fresh evidence proving the sense of this argument. For example, I recently read about a clinical trial involving children who were suffering with chickenpox. Children who were given fever-reducing medication took a day longer to recover than those who were given a placebo sugar pill.

Much to the astonishment of the publishers *Bodypower* became an instant, huge bestseller. Since then numerous other authors around the world have described the same phenomenon.

7

Today, I am more convinced than ever of the importance of bodypower. Once you understand how bodypower works you can easily conquer nine out of ten illnesses without seeing a doctor or spending any money.

We all need doctors, hospitals and alternative therapists sometimes, of course. But if we use our bodies' own powers to protect and heal us then we need them less often than we think we do. It's sad but I suppose hardly surprising that a medical profession which is totally dominated by the pharmaceutical industry should still not embrace the principles of bodypower with unbridled enthusiasm.

8

Human bodies are very complicated. They should come with an owner's manual.

Your body is tougher than you imagine and contains numerous techniques for helping you stay alive in an emergency.

Each part of your body has powers and strengths you hardly ever use and probably aren't aware of. Only in an emergency, when you need to run faster, jump higher or fight harder than ever before in your life do your body's abilities become clear.

Appetite control

Your body contains an 'appetite control centre' designed to make sure that you eat the sort of foods you need — in the right quantities. It is our appetite control centre which makes sure that we avoid new foods unless we are reassured that they are safe to eat And it is our appetite control centre which makes us avoid certain foods when we are ill and makes us choose other foods which our bodies know we may need. So, for example, if you have hepatitis (a liver disease) you will not want to eat fatty food because with your liver in trouble your body will not be able to deal with fatty foods.

If you listen to your body — and eat only what your body wants and in the amounts it wants — then you will never get fat.

But many of us ignore our bodies. We eat at meal times rather than when we are hungry. And we eat to cheer ourselves up or because we are bored.

The result is that we get fat.

Bones

There are 200 bones in a normal, healthy body — each one specially designed for strength and movement. The biggest bone is the femur or thigh bone. Some of the smallest are the bones in your wrist. Bone has one enormous advantage over other strong materials such as steel — it can repair itself if it is damaged.

If you break a bone your body will automatically repair the damage. But, recognising that the break must have occurred at a site of weakness, the new bone will be stronger than the one you broke.

Your bones are built and joined together so well that you can lift something that weighs more than you do.

Brain

A man's brain weighs about 1.4 kg. A woman's weighs about 1.25 kg. Packed with nerve cells the brain reaches its maximum size and potential at the age of around 20 and then slowly deteriorates as cells die off. Specific parts of the brain have specific functions. For example, the back part of your brain controls your vision while the front part governs thought and personality.

Your brain contains 1,000,000,000,000 cells. Each individual cell has 5,000 connections with neighbouring cells. And every minute of every hour of every day — even while you are asleep — those cells and connections are buzzing with information.

Messages travelling along your body's nerves bring information from every individual organ and muscle.

To ensure that the right information is recognised — and acted upon — your brain will only respond when 100 identical impulses are received. Isolated bits and pieces of unsubstantiated neural 'gossip' (which could lead to a dangerously inappropriate response) are ignored. Only trends produce action.

The brain, like the rest of the body, thrives on exercise. A brain which is fed a variety of different tasks will stay healthier than one which is unused. (But the brain, like the muscles, needs rest in order to function most effectively.)

Eyes

If a speck of grit or a small fly gets into one of your eyes then tears will be produced to wash the irritant away. In addition your eyelids will temporarily go into spasm to protect your eye from further damage.

If the foreign body in your eye could be infected then the tears your eyes produce will contain an antiseptic.

Fat

Your body stores fat to provide you with emergency energy supplies. Weight for weight fat contains more stored energy than anything else.

As an extra refinement your body stores its fat in places that will make you look as attractive as possible to members of the opposite sex. That's why women store most of their fat on their bottoms, hips and breasts.

In an emergency you can live on your body's stored fat supplies for several weeks.

Heart

The average heart beats 70 times a minute. In 70 years it will beat over 2,500 million times without a service. Your body contains eight to ten pints of blood and in a day your heart will pump these eight to ten pints around your body well over a thousand times. Whatever your age and size your heart will be roughly the same size as your fist. A man's heart will weigh slightly more than a woman's heart.

Without a good, steady flow of blood your body cannot do anything. Blood carries oxygen and food supplies and removes unwanted and potentially harmful wastes.

In an emergency your heart will beat faster — going up from around 70 beats a minute to 200 beats a minute — in order to provide your tissues with extra blood and, therefore, additional food and oxygen.

Normally, your heart pumps ten pints of blood through your arteries every minute of every day. But the amount of blood your organs and tissues need will vary from minute to minute. If you are being chased by a mugger your body will need more blood than if you are slumped in a chair watching television. In an emergency — when your organs need extra supplies — your heart can pump fifty pints of blood a minute to give your muscles extra power and strength.

Intestines

Food which enters the intestinal tract begins its journey by travelling down the oesophagus or gullet. It then passes into the stomach and duodenum, before entering the small and large intestines. Altogether the whole intestinal tract is around thirty feet long — coiled inside your abdomen. The intestines have the job of digesting and breaking down the food you eat, absorbing useful nutrients and getting rid of the waste. Intestines tend to be rather idiosyncratic and what suits one person may upset another.

Kidneys

You have two kidneys, one on each side of your spine, embedded for safety in fat. Each kidney weighs just over a quarter of a pound and both contain an amazingly complex filtration system. All the blood in your body passes through your kidneys every few minutes to have the waste substances taken out of it. If your kidneys don't work properly wastes will accumulate and will eventually produce blood poisoning. Your kidneys function best if regularly flushed through with a supply of flesh, pure water.

If you go out for the evening and drink several pints of fluid your urine will become very pale and dilute. But if you spend a day in the sun and drink very little your urine will become darker and more concentrated.

Your kidneys have the job of regulating your body's fluids so if you drink too little your kidneys will preserve liquid. But, in addition, your kidneys also ensure that salts, electrolytes and other essential chemicals are kept well-balanced. If you sweat a great deal and lose fluids and salt your kidneys will make sure that your body retains fluid and salt.

Your body has plenty of spare kidney capacity. You could lose one and a half kidneys and still have enough kidney tissue left to survive.

Liver

Your liver weighs 2.5% of your body weight and is on your right hand side looking down, just underneath your ribs. Your liver helps produce red blood cells, manufacturers antibodies which fight infection, stores iron, vitamins and carbohydrates, produces bile which helps digest fats, and breaks down drugs and poisons into waste chemicals. All this chemical activity produces so much heat that your liver plays an important part in keeping your body warm. If you consume a lot of fat or substances containing toxins, it is your liver which has the task of breaking the substances down ready for excretion. If you persistently eat too much fat and drink too much alcohol or take too many drugs then your liver will fail earlier than it might otherwise have done.

Lungs

When we are born our lungs are small, solid and yellow. When we take our first breath our lungs expand and turn pink. If you live in the country and breathe fresh air your lungs will stay pink. But if you smoke, or live in a city, your lungs gradually become darker. Your lungs ensure that the air you breathe gets into your blood to provide your tissues with oxygen.

Your body needs oxygen to survive. Under ordinary circumstances your lungs take in just a few litres of air every minute. But in a crisis your lungs increase their capacity and can bring over 100 litres of air a minute into your body.

Your body has plenty of spare lung capacity.

Muscles

Half the average person’s body weight is made up of muscles. There are over 600 muscles in a normal, healthy human body. Each one is a separate organ controlled by its own nervous system and supplied by its own blood vessels. To keep the muscles in trim they need regular exercise. But they should be rested if they are sore or painful.

Navigational System

Human beings — like birds — have an inbuilt navigational system. Your system may be rusty through disuse but it is there. You have the ability to find your way home in the dark.

Pancreas

Tucked in between your stomach and your duodenum, your pancreas produces the juices and enzymes which help digest the food you eat. Cigarettes, alcohol, caffeine and too much sugar will damage the pancreas.

9

Your body contains several automatic self-healing and defence mechanisms. If you cut yourself blood will flow for a few seconds to wash away any dirt. Then special proteins will quickly form a protective net to catch blood cells and form a clot to seal the wound. The damaged cells will release special substances into your tissues to make the area red, swollen and hot. The heat kills any infection remaining and the swelling acts as a natural splint — protecting the injured area. White cells will be brought to the injury site to swallow up any bacteria. And, finally, scar tissue will build up over the wounded site. The scar tissue will be stronger than the original, damaged area of skin.

If you lose a lot of blood you will faint. This is a deliberate technique used to ensure that your brain gets a good supply of food. When you are standing your blood has to travel upwards to reach your brain. When you faint you automatically lie down and make it easier for blood to get to your brain — your most important organ.

When you have an infection your body temperature goes up. This is no coincidence. Your temperature goes up to help kill the bugs causing the infection.

If you eat something which contains toxins or poisons or infective organisms your stomach will eject it. You will vomit. If the dangerous substance or organism gets past your stomach you will develop diarrhoea. Both vomiting and diarrhoea are vital mechanisms used to getting infections out of your body as quickly as possible.

If a sweet or peanut or piece of food goes down the ‘wrong way’ you will cough. Your throat will narrow so that the air coming out of your lungs is put under pressure — and the obstruction will be literally blown out of the way.

10

Skin keeps the rest of the body neatly wrapped, protecting muscles and bones from injury and the weather. It also stops everything falling into an unsightly heap on the carpet. The skin on your palms and the soles of your feet is one twentieth of an inch thick but the skin on your face is ten times thinner. Peeled and stretched the average person has enough skin to make a couple of pillowcases.

If you use your hands a lot to perform heavy, manual work you will eventually develop patches of coarse, hard skin. The patches of hard skin will develop in precisely the areas where your body needs to be toughest.

The same thing happens elsewhere.

So, if you do a lot of walking you will develop thick areas of skin on your feet. These will ensure that your skin is hard wearing in places where it needs to be hard wearing. It's like having a pair of shoes that automatically strengthen themselves in the places where they look likely to wear out.

In addition your skin also has an inbuilt mechanism designed to stop you getting sunburnt.

If you spend a lot of time in the sun special cells will release a substance called melanin which slowly turns your skin brown and provides protection against damage. Dark skinned people — who come from sunny countries — are born with a protective layer of melanin in their skins.

In hot or windy weather skin tends to dry out and crack. This is a particular problem in air-conditioned buildings where the air is often dry. To keep skin in good condition it needs regular moisturising with a plain cream.

11

Your body can survive only if its internal temperature remains within a narrow temperature range — above 30 degrees C and below 45 degrees C.

So how do you survive when the outside temperature is lower or higher than these limits?

Easy.

Your body contains a thermostat which maintains a stable internal temperature. When the outside temperature is too hot you lose heat through sweat. And when the outside temperature is too low you automatically shiver to keep yourself warm.

12

The human body has enormous, hidden strengths and far greater power than most of us ever realise.

We tend to think of ourselves as being delicate and vulnerable. But our bodies are tougher than we imagine, far more capable of coping with physical and mental stresses and far better equipped for self-defence. As proof of this there is, for example, the true story of the nine stone mother who lifted three quarters of a ton of motorcar off her nine-year-old son, Jamie.

Few of us fulfil our physical (or mental) potential or succeed in harnessing the powers we have available within us. Very few of us know the extent of own strength. Only if we are pushed to our limits do we find out precisely what we can do.

The story of the nine stone woman who lifted her three quarters of a ton car off her young son is not unique.

I know of at least three other cases where parents have done exactly the same thing.

Here are some other examples of human beings finding superhuman powers.

***** A zoologist working in Africa was being chased by wild animals in the dark. He leapt up into a tree. The following morning, at dawn, he discovered that he had leapt twelve feet into the air. When he finally got down from the tree he could not even reach the branch he'd leapt onto.

***** A 70-year-old Irish farmer woke to find his home on fire. He climbed onto the roof and walked along a telegraph wire 9 yards along. Then he climbed down the telegraph pole to the ground. He had never walked a tightrope in his life.

***** During the Second World War a special agent on a ship that was being attacked by a German submarine dragged a safe onto deck ready to throw it overboard. When the attack was over — it took four men to carry the safe back down again.

***** A farm labourer whose arm had been chopped off in an accident walked several miles to the nearest hospital — carrying his severed arm!

***** An 87-year-old widow, trapped in her bedroom by a fire, knotted sheets together and climbed down them to safety.

13

In an emergency your body makes a number of preparations to help you cope. In effect, when you are in danger your body responds as though a soldier reacting to the command Battle Stations.

***** Your pupils dilate so that your vision becomes more acute.

***** Your hearing becomes sharper. (Animals prick up their ears but humans have lost this skill).

***** When you’re trying to listen for important sounds — or see things that might help save your life — your heartbeat will temporarily slow down and your breathing will stop for a moment or two to help you look and listen for vital clues.

***** The flow of blood to your brain increases so that you can make decisions more rapidly than ever.

***** The flow of blood to your skin is reduced (and you go pale). This means that if you’re injured your blood loss will be kept to a minimum.

***** Acid will flow into your stomach to ensure that any food there is turned into sugar rapidly — to provide you with energy.

***** Your muscles will be tensed — so that you can run or fight.

***** Your breathing rate will go up so that your lungs bring in plenty of oxygen.

***** Your heart rate will go up so that the supply of blood to your organs increases.

14

You know your own body better than anyone. If you feel that there is something wrong then there is probably something wrong.

15

You are particularly unlikely to find a holistic specialist.

If you visit a Ford dealer he will want to sell you a Ford. Not a BMW. Not a bicycle. Not a pair of roller skates. A Ford. And if you visit an Ear Nose and Throat surgeon he will want to look down your throat. If you complain of bunions to an ENT surgeon he will still want to look down your throat.

If you visit a surgeon the chances are that he will want to operate. Visit a physician with the same symptoms and he will probably want to give you pills. Surgeons operate and physicians hand out pills. And ENT surgeons look down throats. It’s what they do. Doctors think in the boxes into which they have put themselves.

So, too, do alternative practitioners.

Visit an acupuncturist and he will stick needles into you. Visit a herbalist and he will give you herbs to take. Very few herbalists will recommend acupuncture and vice versa.

16

If your health problem isn’t an emergency, you should always study all the options before you accept treatment.

17

Don’t assume that your doctor knows as much as you or he thinks he knows (or would like to think he knows).

18

Practitioners of oriental medicine in general, and Chinese medicine in particular, tend to strive to treat every infection in a holistic way. If a patient has an infection, for example, they will assume that the pathogen is not the direct and sole cause of the disease but that its ability to infect the body is merely a symptom of some internal imbalance; a consequence of a disrupted physiological or psychological homeostasis. If the infection is to be treated properly then the underlying imbalance must also be put right. Simply attacking the pathogen will provide only a short-term solution.

In modern, orthodox medicine western doctors treat infectious diseases by attacking the pathogen which they believe to be responsible. They do not consider that there may be other factors involved. They do not consider that an infection might have taken hold because the body was weakened in some way and they do not realise that attacking only the bug is effectively treating a symptom rather than a cause.

In fact it isn’t only Chinese practitioners who take this holistic approach. Animals do it too. They know that they are more susceptible to infection during times of drought, famine and overcrowding when their bodies are under stress. Their response to infection is far more sensible than our own.

19

Although they do learn from one another, and will often help a sick relative or companion, animals don’t rely on outside help when they are ill; they self-medicate. Their aim, of course is to re-establish a feeling of well-being. In order to do this they must understand their own bodies.

20

The animals on modern farms are denied the opportunity to treat themselves. They are crammed into fields or barns where there is little space and little or no opportunity to self-medicate by changing their diet. All they have available to eat is what is provided by the farmer: grass (if they are in a field) or special feed mixture (if they are in a barn). Their diet bears no relationship to the sort of food they would choose to eat. Farmers feed animal waste to vegetarian animals. In the USA farmers feed chicken excrement directly to cattle, to give them protein. In addition to this American farmers feed cattle and pigs: human sewage, dead cats and dogs, slaughterhouse waste (blood, bones, intestines and their contents), cement kiln dust, old newspapers, waste cardboard, agricultural waste and old fat from restaurants and grease traps. In France farmers feed human sewage to French cattle. Mad Cow Disease developed in Britain because farmers fed cattle the ground up brains and spinal cords of other animals. Those who eat meat are, of course, eating parts of animals fed on this horrendously unhealthy diet. If farmers knew anything about their animals they would know that herbivorous ruminants don't eat meat and never, ever engage in cannibalism.

The animals on modern farms are often denied sunlight and exercise. The farmer's sole aim is to turn the animal into meat (and other products) and eventually into profit. There is no access to the variety of natural plants which enable them to self-medicate. The result of the physical overcrowding is that parasites and disease spread quickly and easily, psychological problems develop and the animals cannot treat themselves. The treatment comes from the farmer and, inevitably, involves the use of powerful drugs. Often drugs such as antibiotics are included in the animal's feed on a long-term basis. When an animal falls ill it is in the farmer's commercial interest to hide or cover up any illness if there is a chance that this may restrict the farmer's ability to add the animal to the food chain. The piece of meat you buy from the butcher or supermarket could contain a hidden lump of cancer.

21

When animals are ill they take a holistic approach to self-healing. If, for example, they have an infection they will take a variety of different types of action to protect and mend themselves. So, for example, if they have intestinal parasites, chimps will do three things: they will chew plants which contain multifunctional healing compounds; they will eat termite mound soil which is able to secrete antibodies and which has the medicinal healing properties of clay (see item 24 in this chapter) and they will swallow up folded hairy leaves which catch worms and help speed their expulsion.

22

When allowed to live naturally, chickens live in small groups in woodland areas. They scratch around on the forest floor eating worms, insects and bits of fresh plant. They use the dust and the sunshine to keep their feathers bright and when it rains they take a shower to add a little lustre. At night they roost in trees (their claws are adapted for hanging onto branches even while they are asleep) so that they are safe from predators.

Chicken farmers have selectively bred chickens to grow faster and faster. They have doubled the maturing speed in the last two decades and have created birds who grow so fast that their heart and circulation cannot cope. The birds are constantly ill. Their bones are incapable of supporting their excess weight and so they frequently suffer broken bones. They then die of thirst and starvation because they cannot reach the automated food and water delivery points in their cages.

Eight out of ten broiler chickens suffer broken bones. Around 17,0000 birds a day die in the UK of heart failure. The chicken farmers regard this as an affordable cost. The food the chickens are given is selected according to price. One of the ingredients is ground up dead chickens. The chickens are routinely fed antibiotics (to stop the weakened birds getting infections and to help boost muscle growth) despite the danger that this creates for humans. They are kept in the half dark so that they keep quiet and there is, of course, no air-conditioning so in hot weather the heat in their cages is unbearable. The chickens stand in their own excrement (which is acidic and so it blisters their feet) and they breathe in fumes; dust and bacteria from their neighbours. They are given no freedom and no chance to self medicate. Despite the fact that many broiler flocks are colonised with bugs which can cause neurological problems, arthritis, headache, backache, fever, nausea, pains and diarrhoea millions of people eat chicken every day.

23

Doctors and scientists experiment on animals in a vain attempt to find new cures for human ailments and yet they learn little or nothing from observing animals. Holistic practitioners should learn from everything they see or hear.

24

From animals we can (or should) learn that successful good health depends primarily on avoidance and prevention. Treatment is a last resort — to be used when things have gone wrong.

Doctors haven’t learned much from animals because neither avoiding illness nor preventing it offer great opportunities for profit.

Doctors could learn a great deal too by watching how animals deal with disease. For example, cattle will treat themselves when they are ill if they are given the chance (which they usually aren’t).

Ranchers in Utah used to turn out sick cattle who had diarrhoea, expecting them to fend for themselves in the wild. They were surprised when, after a few days away the cattle returned, quite well again. What had happened was that the cattle had travelled to clay banks and had fed on the clay until they got better again. Clay works very effectively in the treatment of intestinal poisoning because it absorbs toxins and viruses. In the UK the medicinal benefits of clay are ignored and so every year 170,000 calves die of diarrhoea caused by bacterial infections. (This only goes to prove how stupid the average farmer must be. How much does clay cost?)

Cattle aren’t the only animals to use clay to counteract the effects of poisoning. Animals throughout the world use clay for this purpose, knowing that it detoxifies by binding onto harmful substances. Why don’t humans use clay? Why don’t doctors prescribe it? Why don’t first aid kits contain clay pills? The answer, as it so often is, is bureaucracy. In the UK, for example, foods and medicines are dealt with by different Government departments and clay isn’t accepted as a food or a medicine. So it can’t be prescribed or used by anyone except wild animals.

Coleman’s 11th Law Of Medicine

There is no such thing as minor surgery.

1

Some operations are more complicated than others. Some take longer to perform. Some are more dangerous. All surgery should be taken seriously. It is never safe to describe surgery as ‘minor’.

Coleman's 12th Law Of Medicine

Some patients will always be treated more equally than others.

1

Today it is the elderly who are treated least equally.

2

When I was a medical student I was a member of a well-meaning organisation called, I think, the Medical Association for the Prevention of War. At a conference I attended I remember being shocked to the core to discover that one doctor had observed that, in riots in one American city, hospitals had given precedence to the treatment of injured police officers to the detriment of seriously injured demonstrators. Incoming patients were not treated according to their need, but according to the clothes they wore.

Sadly, it seems that wherever there is a hospital there will be prejudice.

Apart from obvious geographical inequalities (patients in some areas receive far better care than patients in more poorly served areas) there are many examples showing that even on a national scale health care is not distributed fairly or evenly among those who need it. The problem is that politicians, administrators and doctors invariably spend money on those who are perceived to have power. Those who are regarded as powerless may be denied even basic care. So, for example, while infertility treatment is widely offered to those who need it governments happily close down long-stay psychiatric care hospitals without providing any alternative. Community care means that long-stay hospitals are closed and the homeless patients discharged to spend their days and nights in bus shelters and amid the rat infested squalor underneath city flyovers. That's what 'care in the community' means. Those who are able and willing to promote their own needs (either in the media or directly to politicians) will always receive more than those who are not so fortunate. This is particularly true wherever socialist medicine is practised. In Britain the constantly ailing National Health Service, ostensibly designed to provide equal care for all, is grotesquely biased towards the photogenic and towards those noisy and demanding liberals who can make sure that their demands are met at the expense of the rest of the community. The mentally ill, not as good at arguing their case as those young media women demanding yet more resources for breast cancer, get forgotten. Celebrities will wear pink ribbons to remind us of the needs of breast cancer patients but how many would proclaim their interest in bowel cancer — a much bigger killer? Making a decision between closing a breast cancer unit or closing a special needs school won't tax a politician for long.

3

These days there is no doubt that the patients who are treated with least respect are the elderly. They get an even worse deal than the mentally ill — and that, believe me, is saying a lot.

In the summer of 2006, for example, newspapers carried the appalling story of a 91-year-old woman who spent her last four days without food or fluids after hospital staff decided not to provide her with either. When the woman asked a nurse for a cup of tea she was told she couldn't have one. The woman's family obtained a High Court injunction to try to force the hospital to treat the woman. But, nevertheless, a pathologist concluded that the woman had died as a result of lack of food and fluids.

Such stories are increasingly commonplace.

The egregious doctors who behave like this are simply doing what their Government wants them to do. To ruthless politicians the elderly are a drain on society; they have to be paid pensions, they use up expensive medical services and they pay very little in the way of taxes.

4

It is traditional, in mammalian species, for wisdom to be passed from generation to generation. The elderly have much to offer to the younger generation. In return for this knowledge, and in respect, the young care for their elders with care, compassion and consideration.

So, for example, the situation of underground water sources will be remembered by older elephants. This knowledge can save the herd during a drought. Younger elephants are so aware of the value of their elders, and so in awe of them, that when older elephants are slaughtered by poachers the young, orphaned elephants suffer from severe behavioural problems. They fail to find enough food for themselves, they don't know what to do or where to go and they end up running amok, killing farmers and raiding their crops. They fight one another. They become yobs. Without access to their elders the young elephants are doomed to conflict.

Much the same thing happens with lions.

Young lions recognise that older lions can help with the complex cooperative hunting strategies which lions me to catch their prey. And so older lionesses, incapable of hunting and, became of missing teeth doomed to die if not cared for, will live out their old age supported by the younger females.

Chimpanzees care for their elderly too. Elderly chimpanzees are given food and groomed by the other members of their society. Older male chimpanzees aren't subjected to the sort of aggression other males must expect, and their own rather feeble aggressive behaviour will be tolerated without retaliation by younger males.

Old age brings respect in much of the animal world. But not for humans.

In our modern society we pay respect only to youth, technology (whether useful or not), money (however acquired) and fame (whether deserved or not). The abuse of the elderly is ignored, even tolerated, in a way that the abuse of children would never be.

5

'Old age is not for cissies.'

Bette Davis

6

More older people die during winter in the UK than in any other European country — including those countries which are colder. This is due to poor housings poor diet, poverty, not enough state support, neglect, depression caused by loneliness, and a general feeling of being unwanted and uncared for.

7

The system wants you dead as soon as you stop working and paying tax. And the system now decides what happens. People don't control the system.

8

In America in April 2006 an 82-year-old woman was arrested and fined £80 for crossing the road too slowly in Los Angeles. She was walking with a cane and just couldn't get across the road before the lights turned red.

I do hope they remembered to give the policemen an award for bravery.

9

There are around 600 million people in the world aged 60 or over. But this will double by 2025 and reach 2,000 million by 2050.

10

'The doctors told me that my mother was dying,' wrote a reader. 'They convinced me and my brother that they should shut off her ventilator and let her die. But a few minutes after they had shut off the ventilator my mother woke up and wanted to know what was for tea. She danced at her 89th birthday party the following week.'

I have great sympathy for the writer of that letter. My own mother was written off by the teaching hospital where she was a patient early in a long illness in her 80's. She was comatose and although they admitted that they didn't know what was wrong with her, they decided that she was terminally ill and should be left to die. Only our insistence that they keep providing her with fluids via an intravenous drip kept her alive. Who, I wondered aloud, gave doctors, nurses and administrators the right to make this sort of judgement?

Eighteen months later my mother had recovered enough to join my father, myself and my wife at a dinner to celebrate their 65th wedding anniversary. I photographed her with a glass of red wine in her hand and a big smile on her face. Curiously none of the doctors who had described her as terminally ill, and who had abandoned her as beyond care, has shown any interest in her astonishing recovery.

11

Ageism is accepted now in our society. It is the only 'ism' which is deemed to be politically acceptable.

12

After leaving the teaching hospital my mother was in a small cottage hospital which wanted to throw her out. They said they wanted the bed for another patient. My mother was incapable of moving any limb. She could do nothing for herself. She was so confused that she didn't recognise me when I visited.

'We've got a shortage of beds,' said the matron. 'Your mother will have to go home.' She told me that I had to attend a meeting.

The meeting was held in a fully-equipped but entirely empty ward.

No one but me saw the irony in this.

13

I have often wondered why doctors seem to hate old people so much.

In the end I came to the conclusion that it is because they cannot stop them dying.

And the death of a patient is, to a doctor, the ultimate insult; the final sign of professional failure.

14

Both the Government and the medical profession have repeatedly announced that old people will, on occasion, be denied normal medical treatment and will be allowed to die.

It is now standard practice for elderly patients (in some hospitals the cut off point may be as low as 60 or 65) to be denied medical help if they need resuscitation or emergency, life-saving treatment. In some hospitals the elderly are deliberately starved to death so that they don't take up valuable beds for too long.

Old people are treated in a way that would not be tolerated if they were members of a religious group or ethnic group.

For example, in the paragraphs above try replacing the word 'elderly' with the word 'Jews'.

I can't see any Government happily encouraging newspapers to run headlines like: 'Politicians Instruct Hospitals To Let Jews Die'.

15

Now that nurses have been given authority to prescribe drugs even more old people are spending their final years in a drug-induced stupor.

In hospitals and nursing homes everywhere elderly patients are being subdued and sedated with tranquillisers and sleeping tablets.

It's much easier to run either type of institution if the inmates spend most of their time sleeping.

Politicians have made things considerably worse by giving nurses legal authority to give old people drugs without their permission or authorisation.

The result of this is that hundreds of thousands of elderly people spend their final years unaware of what is going on around them; forcibly drugged into State-approved senselessness.

Makes you ashamed to be human doesn't it?

16

A friend of mine who is a doctor tells me that every time he visits his mother (who now resides in an expensive nursing home) he finds her asleep. Each time he visits he demands to see the drug records. He finds out that his mother has been drugged and insists that the medication be withdrawn. For a few days his mother becomes alert and awake. Then, when they get fed up of her asking to be given a cup of tea or taken to the toilet, the staff start sedating her again.

17

My mother was still lying in a hospital bed. She had been (wrongly) diagnosed as suffering from terminal cancer. She had been in a coma for several weeks and had only recently woken up and started to take an interest in her surroundings. She was still unable to move or feed herself. She had a catheter fitted and was being nursed on a special vibrating bed because of bedsores. Despite the diagnosis and her physical condition the hospital once again decided to discharge her from hospital in order to free a bed and save money. I was again summoned to a meeting. This time there were nine (nine) health service employees present. There was one doctor, one nurse and seven people whose jobs I didn't quite catch. They looked like administrators. Seven of them. I suspect that the cost of the meeting (and the preparations for it) would have paid for quite a few patients lives to be saved.

'According to the hospital consultant my mother is terminally ill with cancer,' I reminded them.

'Yes,' said one of the administrators. 'But she's not finally terminally ill.'

The emphasis was on the word 'finally'. I swear the administrator smiled as he delivered what he clearly considered to be a clever coup de grace.

As it happens the diagnosis was wrong.

But what sort of administrator invented the phrase 'not finally terminally ill' as an excuse for throwing a sick patient out of hospital?

18

If old people have money and can afford to pay for their own nursing home care they will be discharged and expected to spend their resources paying for their own care.

If they don't have money they will simply be sent home to look after themselves as well as they can.

Two social workers/bureaucrats/inquisitors were questioning a frail old lady in a hospital bed. The woman was clearly confused and demented. The two inquisitors had been sent to question her to assess her fitness to be sent back home. I happened to be in the hospital visiting a friend. I listened to their questioning and wrote down their questions and the answers immediately afterwards.

'You have a son don't you?' said the first inquisitor, the one holding the clipboard.

The old lady looked puzzled.

'You have a son.'

'Thank you.'

'What does he do for a living?'

'Living?'

'What's his job?'

The old lady thought for a while. 'Teacher,' she said.

The inquisitor nodded patronisingly. 'Splendid,' she said. Without making any attempt to find out whether or not the answer was correct she wrote something on the form she was filling in.

The inquisitor then asked the old lady what her husband had done for a living before he retired.

The old lady clearly didn't know.

'He was a teacher,' she said.

'Do you have a fridge at home?' asked the inquisitor.

The old woman looked bewildered.

'A fridge,' repeated the inquisitor rather impatiently.

'What's that?' asked the old lady, looking very confused.

'A big white thing that keeps food cold.'

'I don't know.'

'I'm sure you have,' said the inquisitor. She turned to her companion. 'She'll have a fridge won't she?'

'Oh I expect so,' nodded the companion, though the old lady clearly didn't know what a fridge was, let alone whether or not she had one.

'We will put you down as having one,' the inquisitor said, as though doing her a favour. 'It's good for keeping frozen food.'

The inquisitor with the clipboard ticked a box. The two inquisitors then signed the form and stood up.

They had officially declared that the old lady was neither confused nor demented.

'Why didn't you just chuck her out of the window?' I thought. It would be quicker for everyone and just as kindly.

Twenty minutes after the inquisitors had left the woman's son arrived. When he had found a vase for the flowers he had brought he sat down by his mother's bedside.

I went over to him, apologised for interrupting and asked if I might have a moment of his time.

He stood up and walked with me into the dayroom. I told him about the visit I'd witnessed.

'They want to send my mum home,' said the man. 'She's 82 and lives alone in a terraced house. They said they'd assess her to see if she's capable of looking after herself.'

'Can I ask you if you're a teacher?' I asked.

He laughed. 'A teacher? Me?' He laughed again. 'Who told you that?'

'Your mother told the inquisitors that you're a teacher.'

'She gets confused,' said the man. 'Most of the time she doesn't even know who I am. I'm a car mechanic.'

'Is your father a teacher?'

'Did she say that?'

I nodded.

He shook his head sadly. There was a tear in the corner of one eye. 'They were married for nearly 60 years,' he told me. 'He was a taxi driver. He died eighteen months ago.'

'They're going to send your mother home,' I told him quietly. 'They think she's capable of looking after herself.'

'She's doubly incontinent, she's diabetic and she doesn't recognise anyone,' said the man, quietly desperate. 'My wife and I live in a one bedroom flat. We can't look after her. They can't send her home.' But they could. And they did.

19

My novel *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War* describes the revolt of a pensioner, dumped in a nursing home by her son and daughter-in-law. Mrs Caldicot can't stand the way she is patronised by the proprietor of the home. And she can't stand the smell of cabbage either. She walks out — and the other residents go with her. The book describes what happens. When the movie of the book was released the reviewer in the *Sunday Times* dismissively and patronisingly described the film's target audience as 'undemanding oldies'. I though it ironic that a book and film written to draw attention to rampant ageism should be the subject of such rampant ageism. I wonder if a critic would have dared describe a film about homosexuals as having been made for 'undemanding poofs'? I suspect not.

20

My wife and I decided to take my parents out for a meal to celebrate a birthday. Both were aged 85 at the time and both could only get about in wheelchairs.

We made arrangements for a local taxi firm to send a special taxi capable of carrying a passenger in a wheelchair.

Instead the taxi firm sent an ordinary taxi which was, of course, quite useless. The driver couldn't care less.

We decided we would wheel my parents to the nearest hotel or pub for lunch. But the only place that was open had no access for wheelchairs.

So, in desperation, we wheeled them to a local chip shop for a bag of chips each. Although my parents are resident in a nursing home in a seaside town which is packed with nursing homes and elderly residents we discovered that the kerbs had not been made wheelchair friendly. So we had to bump both chairs up and down countless steep kerbs.

By this time it was, of course, raining heavily.

Since there was no wheelchair access to the chip shop we ate our bags of chips on the pavement in the rain.

As we did so a group of local youths passed by. They laughed and jeered.

21

The more vulnerable a patient is, and the more he or she needs care, the less he or she is likely to receive it. Especially if he or she is elderly.

22

My wife and I were visiting a friend at a nursing home. As we approached the main building we saw an old man stumble and fall. We made sure that he was not injured and then struggled to help him to his feet. Two employees (hired to care for the elderly people living in the nursing home) stood looking out of a window and laughing at our struggles.

23

The official guidelines for doctors are simple and easy to understand. ‘Doctors,’ they say, ‘must not allow their views about, for example, a patient’s age, disability, race, colour, culture, beliefs, sexuality, gender, lifestyle, social or economic status to prejudice the choices of treatment offered or the general standard care provided. Patients who are dying should be afforded the same respect and standard of care as all other patients.’

It is clear from this, when compared to my own experience and that of many of my readers, than the majority of hospital doctors are in breach of these principles and are unfit to practise.

24

At the end of the day most doctors and nurses don’t give a damn whether you live or die. And if you’re over 65 everyone wants you dead. Remember that. It could save your life one day.

The Author

Instinctively anti-authority and recklessly uncompromising, Vernon Coleman is the iconoclastic author of well over 100 books which have sold over 2 million copies in the UK, been translated into 23 languages and now sell in over 50 countries. His best-selling nonfiction book *Bodypower* was voted one of the 100 most popular books of the 1980s/90s and was turned into two television series in the UK. The film of his novel *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War* was released early in 2003. In the 1980s, although several of his books had been high in the bestseller lists, he got fed up with nervous publishers trying to edit all the good bits out of his books and so he started his own publishing conglomerate which began life in a barn and now employs five people.

Vernon Coleman has written columns for the *Daily Star, Sun, Sunday Express, Planet on Sunday* and *The People* (resigning from the latter when the editor refused to publish a column questioning the morality and legality of invading Iraq) and has contributed over 5,000 articles, columns and reviews to 100 leading British publications including *Daily Telegraph, Sunday Telegraph, Guardian, Observer, Sunday Times, Daily Mail, Mail on Sunday, Daily Express, Woman, Woman's Own, Punch* and *Spectator.* His columns and articles have also appeared in hundreds of leading magazines and newspapers throughout the rest of the world. He edited the *British Clinical Journal* for one year until a drug company told the publisher to choose between firing him or getting no more advertising. For twenty years he wrote a column which was syndicated to over 40 leading regional newspapers. Eventually, the column had to be abandoned when Government-hired doctors offered to write alternative columns without charge to stop him telling readers the truth. His first two books on medicine *(The Medicine Men* and *Paper Doctors)* were well and widely reviewed, though they attracted a good deal of petulant criticism from magazines which existed upon drug company advertising and from members of the medical establishment His subsequent books on similar topics (such as *The Health Scandal*, *Betrayal of Trust* and *How to Stop Your Doctor Killing You)* were ignored by the media, even though they sold much better and attracted far more interest from readers. Over the years many attempts have been made to suppress his books. In the UK advertisements for *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You* were quite simply banned. It was allegedly feared that the title might upset doctors.

In the UK Vernon Coleman was the TV AM doctor on breakfast TV and when he commented that fatty food had killed more people than Hitler he wasn't fired until several weeks after a large food lobbyist had threatened to pull all its advertising. He was the first networked television Agony Aunt. In the past he has presented TV and radio programmes for both BBC and commercial channels though these days no producer who wants to keep his job for long is likely to invite him anywhere near a studio (especially a BBC studio). Many millions consulted his Telephone Doctor advice lines and visited his websites and for six years he wrote a monthly newsletter which had subscribers in 17 countries. Vernon Coleman has a medical degree, and an honorary science doctorate. He has worked for the Open University in the UK and is an honorary Professor of Holistic Medical Sciences at the Open International University based in Sri Lanka. He used to give occasional lectures but these days the invitations are usually withdrawn when big companies find out about it.

Vernon Coleman has received lots of really interesting awards from people he likes and respects. He is, for example, a Knight Commander of The Ecumenical Royal Medical Humanitarian Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, of the Knights of Malta and a member of the Ancient Royal Order of Physicians dedicated to His Majesty King Buddhadasa. In 2000 he was awarded the Yellow Emperor's Certificate of Excellence as Physician of the Millennium by the Medical Altemativa Institute. He is also Vice Chancellor of the Open International University. He has not been offered, and would not accept, any award by the British Government.

He has had an interest in medicine for most of his life (having bought and read the Royal College of Physicians Report on smoking with his pocket money when he was ten years old). He worked as a general practitioner for ten years (resigning from the NHS after being fined for refusing to divulge confidential information about his patients to State bureaucrats) and has organised numerous campaigns both for people and for animals. He is enraged by injustice, inhumanity and oppressive authority and relieves his rage by collecting hobbies and accumulating books (though buying books faster than anyone could possibly read them creates problems too). He has been intending to learn to speak French for over half a century but has made very little progress. He can ride a bicycle and swim, though not at the same time. He is delighted to report that he researched and wrote this book without the aid of Microsoft, Windows or any of their contemporaries, and consequently estimates that he did it in half the time it would otherwise have taken. He loves cats, cricket (before they started painting slogans on the grass), cycling, cafés and, most of all, the Welsh Princess.

Vernon Coleman is balding rapidly and is widely disliked by members of the Establishment. He doesn't give a toss about either of these facts. Many attempts have been made to ban his books but he insists he will keep writing them even if he has to write them out in longhand and sell them on street corners (though he hopes it doesn't come to this because he still has a doctor's handwriting). He is married to Donna Antoinette, the totally adorable Welsh Princess, and is very pleased about this. Together they have written two books *How To Conquer*

Health Problems Between Ages 50 And 120 and *Health Secrets Doctors Share With Their Families***.**

An Interview with Dr Vernon Coleman

This interview is a composite, consisting of frequently asked questions, and is based on interviews conducted on behalf of magazines in different parts of the world. The interview concentrates on Vernon Coleman's work as a medical author.

Q: Are you a medically qualified doctor? What provoked your scepticism about the medical profession?
A: I am a qualified doctor and registered to practice — though I have not done so for many years. Doctors are necessary and do much good. But my scepticism is, I fear, based on sound scientific basis and my criticisms largely concern the way the medical establishment is organised and the way doctors have allowed themselves to be influenced by commercial forces. I have researched what doctors do with a critical eye and I have proved that too often doctors do more harm than good. In many countries doctors are now one of the three or four main causes of illness and death (along with cancer and circulatory disease). One in six patients in hospital is there because he or she has been made ill by doctors. Four out of ten patients who receive drug treatment suffer from serious or even life-threatening side effects. It is perhaps hardly surprising that when doctors go on strike, patient morbidity and mortality levels invariably fall. What an indictment.

Q: Do you take medicines if you are ill? If not how do to make yourself well if you fall ill?
A: I will take medicines if I need them and believe that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. But most problems can be dealt with without drugs.

Q: Do you think that doctors are influenced too much by the pharmaceutical industry?
A: I have been a strong critic of the relationship between the pharmaceutical industry and the medical profession since 1976 when I published my first book *The Medicine Men* in which I described the way that the industry influences and controls the medical profession. It is easy to blame the drug industry (and many of their practices do seem to me to be grotesquely unethical) but I do think that the medical profession should take more of the blame. The drug companies are doing what they are in business to do — make money. It should be up to doctors to be more critical. I don't feel that much has changed over the last thirty years (since I first started writing books on this subject) and the drug companies still have an enormous control over doctors and what they believe. The industry still has enormous influence over all aspects of medical education, and doctors are trained to believe that the only answer to medical problems is, very often, some form of pharmaceutical intervention. That is wrong and it is dangerous.

Q: Surely; medicines must sometimes be used to cure Illness.
A: Definitely. I am certainly not opposed to the use of medicines but I am opposed to their overuse and abuse. For example, the overprescribing of antibiotics has led to enormous problems — including the development of superbugs. I have been warning about this problem for decades and forecast the emergence of superbugs some decades ago. The overuse of tranquillisers led to the biggest addiction problem of the 20th century. And often doctors don't really know what they are prescribing or why. For example, doctors sometimes prescribe antibiotics for viral infections (a pointless exercise) and while some doctors give out prescriptions of antibiotics for ten days others give five or even three day courses for the same symptoms. Ignorance and illogically cause many problems. In the area of painkillers doctors are often too free to use pills when in many instances other methods would be safer and more effective. For example, TENS machines are very effective for combating pain but many doctors don't know about them. The drug industry and the medical establishment have conspired to keep them secret.

Q: More and more people are now turning to traditional, complementary or alternative medicine. Do you believe that more doctors are now convinced of the usefulness of these types of medicine?
A: Sadly, doctors are, as a group, still reluctant to accept that alternative medicine can offer patients a great deal. Occasionally, doctors attend a weekend course in, say, acupuncture, and then believe that they are holistic practitioners. Holistic medicine means treating the patients with whatever is best for him or her and this is only rarely seen. Sadly, some alternative therapists are so opposed to orthodox medicine that they too fail their patients. In an ideal world the patient would be treated with whatever therapies work best — and with whatever combination of therapies are most effective. It is a tragedy that this is so rare.

Q: Are doctors who prescribe alternative treatments behaving responsibly?
A: Yes. Definitely. As long as they have studied the treatments they recommend. For example, a good doctor should always consider referring patients with back or joint trouble to an osteopath or chiropractor rather than just to a surgeon. I strongly believe in holistic medicine; by which I mean that doctors should prescribe whatever might help a patient get well again. In the absence of holistic practitioners' patients should aspire to be holistic patients.

Q: How can the patient learn the balance between orthodox and alternative medicine?
A: Every patient needs to be their own doctor — able to take a real part in the diagnosing and treatment of

conditions. Books are still by far the best way to acquire information.

Q: Do you suspect that doctors ever have any personal interest in recommending medicines from specific companies?
A: There is much evidence showing that doctors can be 'bought' with free meals, television sets and other gifts. Their prescribing habits can be influenced by drug company representatives.

Q; Surely researchers wouldn't have the funds to find new drugs to cure diseases if they were not paid by the drug companies?
A We need a pharmaceutical industry. It would be good if the industry was more honest but I think we should blame doctors for that. Doctors should keep drug companies more honest by being more critical. And doctors should be more independent and should realise that drugs are only part of what they can do for patients. Unfortunately, there is evidence to show that drug companies influence the medical establishment and the medical way of thinking with the result that patients lose out. It is also important to remember that much drug company research goes into developing what are called 'me too' drugs — where the company involved simply wants to produce another drug to take advantage of an existing market. And it is for this reason that there are a hundred different painkillers — all doing much the same thing — for doctors to choose from. Too much choice can sometimes be bad because it causes confusion and mistakes. Incidentally, the overall influence of the drug companies on our health has been dramatically over emphasised. The main influences on our health come from food, water, living and working conditions and so on. The figures show that mortality rates have not improved in the last century. Infant mortality rates have fallen a great deal because of better housing, better water and so on and these improvements have affected overall life expectancy figures. But drug companies (and doctors) like to pretend that we are all living longer because of drugs. This simply isn't true.

Q: Are you opposed to the use of anti-depressants? Do you think that depression is a disease created by the drug industry?
A: When my campaign against the overprescribing of tranquillisers led directly to a fall in the number of prescriptions I forecast that drug companies would start pushing anti-depressants much harder. This is exactly what they did. Anti-depressants are now often prescribed for people who are unhappy or who have lifestyle problems. The overprescribing of these drugs in unsuitable circumstances causes many additional problems.

Q: What other diseases do you think are also 'created' by the medical industry?
A: It is frequently claimed that asthma is much commoner than it was. But in fact these days doctors diagnose asthma after a child wheezes just once. And then the patient may be put on drugs for life. Few doctors take the time to look for causes. Many chemicals in the home (for example, soap powder) can cause wheezing. Remove the cause and the problem disappears. And many doctors prescribe antihypertensive drugs for patients whose problems could, perhaps, be resolved if they simply ate less fat, lost weight and took exercise.

Q: Do you think that governments connive with the drug industry?
A: Yes, very much so. Governments are frightened of annoying drug companies because of their power and the money they bring into a country. To give a simple example: when they campaigned for victory in 1997, the British Labour party promised to investigate the usefulness of animal experiments. Many animal lovers voted for the Labour Party because of this. After the election, and under the influence of the drug companies, the Government lost all interest in stopping vivisection and did everything they could to make sure that the drug companies could do as many experiments as they liked. Even the most fervent enthusiasts for vivisection admit that they don't know which results they get are useful and which are not. If you don't know which tests are of any use they are all useless.

Q: What about government agencies which exist to protect patients and discipline doctors and drug companies?
A. I used to have more faith than I do now. I'm not sure whether I have become more suspicious or they have changed. Generally I don't have faith in any organisations which exist to protect patients. The problem is that there is too much movement between drug companies and these organisations. Scientists move from one to the other. And in many countries doctors and scientists work for drug companies and the advisory organisations.

Q: How could hospitals become better places for patients?
A: The ancient Egyptians and the Greeks had hospitals filled with music and flowers, etc. Modern hospitals are stressful, bug-ridden, bureaucratic and unfriendly. The patient is too often regarded as an inconvenience. Everyone working in hospital should remember that the most important person there is the patient. At least half of all administrators should be sacked and the money spent on taking better care of patients. Caring is an essential part of curing.

Q: What about accusations of doctors receiving money to research new drugs and then not publicising bad or inconvenient results?
A: I have for many years protested publicly about the way that drug companies will suppress inconvenient

results. The drug companies should be severely punished for this.

Q: What is the main problem with medicines — the side effects they produce or their poor efficacy?
A: Drugs are often not as effective as drug companies say they are. But the big problem is side effects. I don't believe there is a single drug in the world which doesn't have side effects. If a patient takes a drug to save his life then side effects don't matter too much. But if the drug is being taken for some small problem then it is a tragedy if the drug kills him.

Q: Which drugs do you think are most wildly overprescribed?
A: Tranquillisers and anti-depressants have ruined many lives by being overprescribed. But the overuse of antibiotics is probably causing the biggest problems with the emergence of many resistant bugs. Anti-cancer drugs are largely a joke. The world would probably be a better and safer place without any of them. They are hugely profitable but I suspect they kill more people than they save.

Q: What about the growing trend for governments, drug companies and doctors to encourage self-medication?
A: All three encourage self-medication but for different reasons. Governments want people to buy their own drugs because it saves the government money. Drug companies want to sell drugs direct to patients because the profits are higher. And doctors encourage self- medication because it means less work for them. Self-medication is fine if patients know what they are taking and why. Unfortunately, the information available is often patchy, unreliable and inadequate. Patients overuse drugs and suffer nasty side effects as a result. If a patient taking a drug develops new symptoms then, by Coleman's 1st Law Of Medicine, the new symptoms are caused by the drug.

Q: Do medicines damage the human organism's defence mechanisms?
A: I strongly believe that the human body has sound defences against illness. I first wrote about this in my book *Bodypower* in 1983. Overuse of drugs damages these self-defence mechanisms and makes the individual more vulnerable.

Q: Sum up your attitude towards prescription drugs.
A: Drugs can save lives. But they can also kill. We need more doctors who understand the benefits and dangers more fully and more objectively.

Q: Do you think that medical researchers ever waste time and money?
A: Drug companies spend too much time and money looking for me-too drugs; new variations on profitable themes. They are, for example, constantly looking for new tranquillisers and anti-depressants because these are profitable. And they are constantly introducing new drugs which are promoted with great enthusiasm because they fit a marketing niche and then quietly withdrawn and forgotten a few years later. And remember that drug companies often create markets for their drugs by creating illnesses — as they have done so successfully for example with drugs for the menopause. If drug company executives really cared about people and about communities most would close their companies. Drug companies produce endless money-making variations of the same drugs, which do absolutely nothing for anyone except employees and shareholders.

Q: The incidence of psychological disease is increasing dramatically. Do you have any idea why?
A: There are huge profits to be made out of tranquillisers, sleeping tablets and anti-depressants. Most of the patients taking these drugs don't need them and don't benefit from them. The only people who really benefit are the drug companies. Doctors prescribe these drugs because handing out prescriptions is quicker and easier than investigating causes and offering proper advice.

Q: You say that doctors are not taught well. How should medical students be taught?
A: Students should be taught true holistic medicine. They should learn to see the patient as a person. And they should investigate all the causes of an illness (environment, immune system, stress etc.) before offering a solution. Students should be taught that patients can benefit from a mixture of treatments including, where necessary, drugs, surgery and alternative medicine.

Q: Do you think that doctors are slow to accept new ideas?
A: Doctors have been very slow to recognise the importance of diet in health. There has been evidence for decades showing that meat causes cancer. If you eat lots of meat you are more likely to die of cancer. That's a fact. Doctors don't see this because they rarely read original research. They just read the leaflets handed out by the drug companies — which only mention drug therapies. And the medical journals, which make huge amounts of money from drug company advertising, don't deal with these issues either. I recently read about a doctor who was prescribing meat for his patients because he thought it would make them healthier. I reported him to the General Medical Council on the grounds that he was doing something that was dangerous to his patients but the General Medical Council wasn't interested, of course. The General Medical Council is far more concerned with defending the establishment than looking after patients' interests.

Q: What damage can medical check-ups cause to patients? Don't you think that medical check-ups can

discover disease in early stages?
A: Check-ups are no more use than a single bank statement. If you had one bank statement a year it would give you a false view of your financial health. Medical check-ups produce a lot of false negatives and false positives and give people a false sense of security. It is much better to tell patients what problems to look out for — and to tell them of the significant warning signs that show impending problems.

Q: What damage can occur after taking vaccines?
A: Vaccines have caused (and cause) enormous problems. I have been a critic since the 1970s. They can damage the brain and the body. Their value is wildly overemphasised and their danger wildly underemphasised. The problem is that some vaccines do prevent the spread of diseases. But at high cost to individuals. Governments don't mind sacrificing individuals for the good of the community. I don't think doctors should do this. Anyone having a vaccination should make sure that their doctor signs a document taking responsibility if things go wrong (if patients did this, there would be far fewer vaccinations.) There has been much research showing the dangers of vaccines. But some of this research is suppressed because it is inconvenient. I first became aware of the dangers with the whooping cough vaccine. But I have grave doubts about all vaccines. My books contain more specific information.

Q: Don't you think vaccines have helped eradicate diseases such as polio? Isn't this a good argument in favour of vaccination? In poor regions diseases such as measles are very dangerous. Aren't vaccines a way to prevent many deaths?
A: If you accept that thousands of individuals will die or suffer great disabilities for the sake of the community then vaccines probably have a place. I think the price is too great. Many great claims are made for vaccines. But the claims are usually overdone. Many diseases were reducing in numbers long before vaccines were introduced. Better living conditions and antibiotics — not vaccines — are responsible. If you look at the graphs you will see that infectious diseases were falling before vaccines were introduced and that vaccines now kill or injure more people than they save.

Q: The world dreams of a vaccine against AIDS or cancer. Do you think it's a possibility?
A: No, There are much better ways to deal with the problems. Improving the immune system is the key.

Q: The risk of a hospital infection is high, but some diseases have to be treated inside hospital. How can a patient know whether the risk is worth it or not?
A: If their condition will kill them if they do not go into hospital then going to hospital is obviously essential. But I would try to keep out of hospital for things which did not threaten my life.

Q: Does the body have the power to cure diseases alone?
A: Definitely. I have written about this in books such as *Bodypower*, *Mindpower* and *Superbody*.

Q: Don't you accept that medical advances are responsible for increases in life expectation.
A: No. This is a myth put forward by drug companies and the medical establishment. Better living conditions are responsible for a reduction in infant mortality. And it is the reduction in infant mortality which has led to apparently greater life expectation. People who had survived childhood often lived to their 80's or 90's a century or two ago. There are more old people around today because populations have grown. And there are problems dealing with them because there is more chronic illness and because young families no longer have the time or money to look after their old.

Q: Do you think that the return of the old-fashioned family doctor could improve things?
A: Definitely. The real family doctor acts as the patient's interpreter and agent, helping to guide patients through every available form of diagnosis or treatment, explaining what is going on and providing support. Sadly, real family doctors are now a rarity. The money is spent on unnecessary drugs and on administration instead.

Q; You have said that during some doctors' strikes the mortality rates decreased. Is that really the case?
A: Yes. Too many investigations and too much treatment causes many illnesses. In many instances the body can heal itself without medical help.

Q: What is the secret of a good doctor?
A: The doctor should listen, listen and listen. Very often a good doctor can learn more from talking and listening than from examining. High-tech medicine is all very well, but just listening is still crucial. And many doctors don't find the time to listen.

Q; Is being a vegetarian a good way to prevent disease?
A: Yes. There is no doubt about this. The scientific evidence is summarised in my book *Food for Thought* and on my website.

Q: Are you vegetarian?
A: Yes. I am vegetarian because I don't want to eat animals. But this is not why I recommend that readers follow a vegetarian diet. I believe that eating meat causes many diseases and that a vegetarian diet is much

healthier. If I believed that meat was essential it would be my responsibility as an author to tell the truth — though I would still not eat meat myself.

Q: Were you given vaccines as a child?
A: I was given some vaccines as a child and, fortunately, I was one of the lucky ones: I survived them. But when I was a child we were given far fewer vaccines than children are given these days. The risks from most of the diseases for which vaccines are now given are slight. For example, measles does not kill many children. Vaccines are given for the economic benefit of the community rather than the health of the individual. If you approve of that then you can approve of vaccines. I consider it to be a fascist political attitude rather than a healing, humanitarian attitude.

We hope you found this book useful. If so we would be grateful if you would post a favourable review on Amazon.

Vernon Coleman is a qualified doctor and the author of over 100 books which have sold over two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK and been translated into 25 languages. His other medical books include ‘Bodypower’, ‘Mindpower’, ‘Spiritpower’, ‘Superbody’, ‘How to Stop Your Doctor Killing You’, ‘Do Doctors and Nurses Kill More People than Cancer’ and ‘Food for Thought’. He has written more than a dozen novels, including ‘Mrs Caldicot’s Cabbage War’ which was turned into an award winning movie. He is the author of the hugely popular Bilbury series of books. Many of his books are available as kindle books on Amazon. There is a list of his books on his author page on Amazon. For more information please see http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

COMING APOCALYPSE

VERNON COLEMAN

Coming Apocalypse

Vernon Coleman

Vernon Coleman: What the papers say

‘Vernon Coleman writes brilliant books.’ – *The Good Book Guide*
‘No thinking person can ignore him.’ – *The Ecologist*
‘The calmest voice of reason.’ – *The Observer*
‘A godsend.’ – *Daily Telegraph*
‘Superstar.’ – *Independent on Sunday*
‘Brilliant!’ – *The People*
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‘His message is important.’ – *The Economist*
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‘The man is a national treasure.’ – *What Doctors Don’t Tell You*
‘His advice is optimistic and enthusiastic.’ – *British Medical Journal*
‘Revered guru of medicine.’ – *Nursing Times*
‘Gentle, kind and caring’ – *Western Daily Press*
‘His trademark is that he doesn’t mince words. Far funnier than the usual tone of soupy piety you get from his colleagues.’ – *The Guardian*
‘Dr Coleman is one of our most enlightened, trenchant and sensitive dispensers of medical advice.’ – *The Observer*
‘I would much rather spend an evening in his company than be trapped for five minutes in a radio commentary box with Mr Geoffrey Boycott.’ – Peter Tinniswood, *Punch*
‘Hard hitting...inimitably forthright.’ – *Hull Daily Mail*
‘Refreshingly forthright.’ – *Liverpool Daily Post*
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‘Probably one of the most brilliant men alive today.’ – *Irish Times*
‘King of the media docs.’ – *The Independent*
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‘The doctor who dares to speak his mind.’ – *Oxford Mail*
‘He writes lucidly and wittily.’ – *Good Housekeeping*

Books by Vernon Coleman include:

Medical
The Medicine Men
Paper Doctors
Everything You Want To Know About Ageing
The Home Pharmacy
Aspirin or Ambulance
Face Values
Stress and Your Stomach
A Guide to Child Health
Guilt
The Good Medicine Guide
An A to Z of Women's Problems
Bodypower
Bodysense
Taking Care of Your Skin
Life without Tranquillisers
High Blood Pressure
Diabetes
Arthritis
Eczema and Dermatitis
The Story of Medicine
Natural Pain Control
Mindpower
Addicts and Addictions
Dr Vernon Coleman's Guide to Alternative Medicine
Stress Management Techniques
Overcoming Stress
The Health Scandal
The 20 Minute Health Check
Sex for Everyone
Mind over Body
Eat Green Lose Weight
Why Doctors Do More Harm Than Good
The Drugs Myth
Complete Guide to Sex
How to Conquer Backache
How to Conquer Pain
Betrayal of Trust
Know Your Drugs
Food for Thought
The Traditional Home Doctor
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Men in Bras, Panties and Dresses
Power over Cancer
How to Conquer Arthritis
How to Stop Your Doctor Killing You
Superbody
Stomach Problems – Relief at Last
How to Overcome Guilt
How to Live Longer
Coleman's Laws
Millions of Alzheimer Patients Have Been Misdiagnosed

Climbing Trees at 112
Is Your Health Written in the Stars?
The Kick-Ass A–Z for over 60s
Briefs Encounter
The Benzos Story
Dementia Myth

Psychology/Sociology
Stress Control
How to Overcome Toxic Stress
Know Yourself (1988)
Stress and Relaxation
People Watching
Spiritpower
Toxic Stress
I Hope Your Penis Shrivels Up
Oral Sex: Bad Taste and Hard To Swallow
Other People's Problems
The 100 Sexiest, Craziest, Most Outrageous Agony Column Questions (and Answers) Of All Time
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Just another Bloody Year
Bugger off and Leave Me Alone
Return of the Disgruntled Man
Life on the Edge
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Tickety Tonk

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Fighting For Animals
Alice and Other Friends
Animal Rights – Human Wrongs
Animal Experiments – Simple Truths

General Non Fiction

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100 Greatest Englishmen and Englishwomen
Cheese Rolling, Shin Kicking and Ugly Tattoos
One Thing after Another

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Mrs Caldicot’s Knickerbocker Glory
Mrs Caldicot’s Oyster Parade
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Around the Wicket
Too Many Clubs and Not Enough Balls

Cat books

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Alice’s Adventures
We Love Cats
Cats Own Annual
The Secret Lives of Cats
Cat Basket

The Cataholics' Handbook
Cat Fables
Cat Tales
Catoons from Catland

As Edward Vernon

Practice Makes Perfect
Practise What You Preach
Getting Into Practice
Aphrodisiacs – An Owner's Manual
The Complete Guide to Life

Written with Donna Antoinette Coleman

How to Conquer Health Problems between Ages 50 & 120
Health Secrets Doctors Share With Their Families
Animal Miscellany
England's Glory
Wisdom of Animals

Coming Apocalypse

Vernon Coleman

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The Author

Dr Vernon Coleman MB ChB DSc FRSA was the first qualified medical practitioner to question the significance of the 'crisis' with which you may be familiar, telling readers of his website www.vernoncoleman.com at the end of February that he felt that the team advising the Government had been unduly pessimistic and had exaggerated the danger of the bug. At the beginning of March, he explained how and why the mortality figures had been distorted. And on March 14th he warned that the Government's policies would result in far more deaths than the disease itself. In a YouTube video recorded on 18th March, he explained his fear that the Government would use the 'crisis' to oppress the elderly and to introduce compulsory inoculation. And he revealed that the infection had been downgraded on March 19th when the public health bodies in the UK and the Advisory Committee on Dangerous Pathogens decided that the 'crisis' infection should no longer be classified as a 'high consequence infectious disease'. Just days after the significance of the infection had been officially downgraded, the Government published an Emergency Bill which gave the police extraordinary new powers and put millions of people under house arrest. Dr Coleman, a former GP principal, is a *Sunday Times* bestselling author. His books have sold over two million copies in the UK, been translated into 25 languages and sold all around the world. He has given evidence to the House of Commons and the House of Lords and his campaigning has changed Government policy. There is a short biography at the back of this book. His website has recently become difficult to find on the internet.

VERY IMPORTANT NOTE

This book deals with the decision in the early spring of 2020 to put large populations under house arrest and to close factories, shops and all businesses not regarded as essential. It also deals with the aftermath of those decisions. The part dealing with the lockdowns is based entirely on fact. The part dealing with the future is, inevitably, largely conjecture. In order to publish this book I was informed that I had to remove all references to the name of the problem which triggered the close downs. And so you will not find herein any reference to a word describing a disease which begins with the third letter of the alphabet. Nor will you find any reference to a disease name which ends with a number which is slightly greater than 18 and slightly smaller than 20. In addition, in view of proposed new legislation which will make it illegal for anyone (including doctors) to share facts and opinions about a specific medical procedure, I have avoided using a word beginning with ‘v’ and used the word inoculation instead.

Dedication

To Antoinette,

God blessed me when he brought us together. Without you I would be only half a person. With you I am whole. You give me all my passion and all my purpose and I give you all my love. We are what used to be called yokefellows – sharing all burdens.

Preface

Right from the start I told you it was the biggest hoax in history. I felt strongly that it wasn't going to be a rerun of the plague and I believed that the so-called experts had got it wrong and had, for whatever reasons, manufactured a false 'crisis'. Back at the beginning of March, I was right in suggesting that populations were not going to die in the numbers that the mathematicians suggested. I described it as a jumped up little flu infection but suggestions that the 'crisis' infection could be compared to the ordinary flu were officially dismissed as 'dangerous nonsense'.

There was a widespread misconception that the models devised by the mathematicians at Imperial College in London were providing accurate and scientific predictions. In reality, they were offering nothing more than extrapolations – the posh word for estimates – and could in no way be regarded as science.

I was the first to suggest that the so-called 'cure' (the lockdown policies and the refusal to treat other patients to 'protect' them from infection) would kill far more people than the disease. The lockdown policies seem to have been recommended by a panicky World Health Organisation, though Imperial College's prediction of eight million Britons in hospital and half a million deaths certainly helped to spice up the panic in the UK.

My criticisms of the Government's policy were sniffily dismissed with the sanctimonious reminder that lives were at stake. However, back in mid-March, it seemed quite obvious that the exaggerated response to the infection was going to do massive harm to the health of the nation and that far more people were going to die as a result of the 'cure' than would die from the disease.

So now it is time to assess the damage that has been done and see how the 'cure' will damage our way of life and dominate everything we do for decades.

I hope I'm wrong this time because I suspect that the so-called 'cure' will do more damage to the way we live than anything else anyone can remember since the plague swept through Europe.

I'm afraid, however, that I believe I am right again.

The politicians, the scientists, the advisors and the media who all promoted this ill-described 'crisis' as though it were a second coming of the plague, will doubtless all insist that the damage done by the lockdown was necessary. (I prefer the more accurate term 'house arrest' to the rather Orwellian 'lockdown'). They will insist that there will be few long-term consequences from their combined stupidity and betrayal. Indeed, I am pretty confident that they will claim (against all the evidence) that it was only their lockdown policy which saved us from far more deaths. Knighthoods and peerages will no doubt be distributed to those who promoted the idea of a 'crisis' requiring unprecedented treatment. However, I believe that their policies have caused far more deaths than they have prevented. If accurate figures are ever obtained, they will prove me right. (The plight of poorer countries is being ignored. Around the world one billion people rely on the $715 billion sent back home by workers in rich countries. Huge numbers of those people will starve without that money.)

Moreover, the evidence shows that those countries which did not put their citizens under house arrest, have suffered far fewer deaths than those countries which did.

The long-term effect of the most egregiously stupid public policies in history, and the failure of public health management, will be to take many nations back into the Dark Ages. The appallingly designed solution will ensure that countries which have ventured into the absurd lunacy of lockdowns will cause chaos and destroy capitalism in just the way the climate change campaigners were demanding.

I was, I fear, right about the hoax.

Now, in this short book, I will summarise what has happened so far and then explain how I think our lives are going to be affected.

Vernon Coleman, 30th April 2020

Part One

It’s already worse, far, far worse than you can imagine.

In just a couple of hectic, panicky months governments around the world (with the exception of Sweden and one or two other countries which have not introduced lockdowns and which as a result now appear to have been able to avoid disruption and an exceptional death rate), have introduced measures which will change forever the lives of their citizens.

Nothing is going to be the same again.

Life will never be as good as it was in January 2020.

In less than three months, many people around the world have gone from living in democracies to living in police states.

I was shocked when I first saw terrified shoppers hurrying round the supermarkets with scarfs or masks over their mouths and gloves on their hands. As they skipped around one another, it reminded me of the dancing mania which was a feature of mainland Europe from the 14th century onwards. I suffer from hay-fever and I was terrified of being unable to suppress a sneeze while shopping. It would have been as big a social faux pas as being presented to the Queen and keeping my hands in my pockets or walking into the pavilion at Lords while wearing a jacket with a zip up the front. I could imagine a Bateman cartoon entitled ‘The Man Who Sneezed in the Supermarket during Lockdown’.

Banishing all that fear would take a good deal of work.

But do governments really want to banish the fear which has turned citizens into fearful and obedient zombies?

Moreover, we still don’t know when the house arrests will end and when something like ‘normal’ life will be allowed to restart.

There are calls from some to keep social distancing going until 2022. Even if the lockdown stops there is no guarantee that panicky politicians won’t bring it back. Some climate change fanatics and ‘green’ zealots will doubtless want to keep the lockdown in place for as long as possible – they see it as an excellent opportunity to destroy capitalism, break the structure of modern life and further their own aims. New bugs are constantly being discovered and the media has already shown that it is ready, willing and able to help build a modest scare into a major, full-blooded potential holocaust. We are `fighting battles’ and we are in a ‘war’. The language is deliberately designed to discourage dissent.

Politicians are terrified of making decisions that might prove controversial. They are, I suspect, even more fearful of being shown to have over-reacted. Politicians don’t like the voters to know that they panicked.

Some of the threats made have been awesomely stupid. In the UK stories about panic buying resulted in threats of rationing – as though that would reduce the panic buying! There have been threats to remove ‘exercise privileges’ though if this went ahead millions of people would have to live under arrest conditions which would be considered barbaric if those under arrest were real criminals. Even murderers in jail are allowed periods of exercise.

Elderly people who were not even suffering from infectious diseases were forced to die alone, without being allowed to see friends or relatives.

I suspect that churches will lose a good deal of support as a result of closing during the ‘crisis’. Most churches and cathedrals could have easily accepted their small congregations without any risk to social distancing legislation. Supermarkets stayed open to provide food for the body and I believe churches should have stayed open to provide spiritual comfort. The ‘crisis’ was the perfect time for churches to provide support. Depriving people of their spiritual comfort at their time of greatest need must have helped to break down morale. Organised religion has had a very bad ‘crisis’ and I suspect that many churches will struggle to gather in their flocks again when the ‘crisis’ is over.

The long-term changes to our way of life will be massive and permanent. And the changes will all be a result of the ‘cure’ and not the ‘problem’. Commentators talk of the ‘crisis’ causing unemployment and so on but the truth is that the ‘crisis’ will not cause unemployment – it will be the so-called cure which will cause unemployment.

Are these changes accidental? Or were they deliberately engineered? I find it difficult to believe anything the Government says or does these days.

(I actually found myself wondering whether Boris Johnson had really been as seriously ill as reported in the media, or whether his illness was exaggerated as an excuse to avoid having to take responsibility and make a decision about keeping the nation under house arrest. I make no excuse for this level of paranoia. Under the unusual circumstances I actually think it is inevitable and perfectly healthy.)

It is difficult to avoid the suspicion that the plan was to get rid of independent thinking, to force people to be fearful and obedient and to create poverty (poor people tend to be dependent). There is, after all, absolutely no doubt that the mortality figures mentioned have been massively exaggerated to support the position of governments around the world. It is now pretty clear that when the dust settles, the cause of the terror will be shown to have been no more deadly than a moderate edition of the flu. (I know that the disease is not much like flu in the way it affects the human body. But the talk has all been about numbers and deaths. And in those terms, this disease is not as much of a threat as a fairly bad influenza. And it never has been.)

The mortality figures are distorted, however, because people are being listed as victims even when they simply died with the disease rather than of it. To say someone died with a particular disease is as useful as saying they died with athlete's foot or varicose veins. In truth, I suspect that more people have died with varicose veins than have died with the cause of our global despair. Distorting the truth has enhanced the fear but done nothing to improve our understanding of the disease.

In the UK, there is some evidence that between a third and a half of the nation may have or may have had the infection. Without testing we cannot possibly know. Around 650,000 people die every year in the UK. Is the Government really planning to claim that between a third and a half of all this year's 650,000 deaths will be associated with the disease? That would truly be a deceit of brobdingnagian proportions. The UK Government has made a great deal of the fact that 100 health and care workers have died in the UK since the scare began. It has been suggested that they died 'with' the disease but the cleverly implied but false assumption is always that they died 'of' it. And although it is a tragedy that those people died, no one has pointed out that there are around 1,500,000 people employed in the health and care services in the UK and, sadly, some of them die every year. In fact, the figure of 100 deaths among health service workers is no greater than would normally be expected.

The only thing we know for sure is that the cure for the disease (the lockdown and the social distancing and so on) has caused massive disruption to life. And it is clear that it is the cure which will cause the most dramatic long-term effects. The British Government has admitted that their cure will probably kill 150,000 people and that could easily prove to be an underestimate. No one is now claiming that the disease will kill a fraction of that number. Statistics already show that the number of deaths with other causes has risen dramatically since the lockdown began.

Governments may, of course, have been tempted to deliberately exaggerate the number of deaths in order to try to justify their draconian, totalitarian policies.

I suspect that all countries around the world will eventually realise just how much damage their lockdowns have done.

So, since there can now be no doubt that the cure is going to do far more harm than the disease, the big question is: has it happened accidentally (the cock-up theory) or deliberately (the conspiracy theory)?

I doubt if anyone will ever know.

Politicians and their advisors are never going to admit that they got things badly wrong. And the media has been so wedded to this 'crisis' that they are never going to admit that their headlines were fake – and that the fear they engendered was unnecessary.

And they are certainly never going to admit that there was a conspiracy theory behind what has happened.

But, in a way, it doesn't matter.

We still have to be aware of the problems which now lie ahead. And we have to know how we can deal with them; how we can protect our families and ourselves.

On the pages ahead I have summarised how we got where we are (and shown how it was possible to see that the 'crisis' was fake at a very early stage), detailed my forecasts for the future – and the ways in which we can survive in a world where governments' cures have destroyed our way of life.

But first let's take a look at precisely what happened.

I was the first person to cry 'Hoax' when the scare began.

How did I know?

Well, I've been writing about medical matters for half a century and in that time I have seen many scares come and go. I was the first doctor to spot that the AIDS crisis was being massively exaggerated. I was the first doctor to spot the problem with the over-prescribing of benzodiazepines. I have a long track record of providing accurate forecasts. (There is a list on my website www.vernoncoleman.com – if you can find it – and in my book *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You*.)

I have learned to spot when the medical establishment, the politicians and the media are exaggerating a danger and missing simple truths.

(I mention these things not to boast but because it seems necessary to establish my credentials – particularly since my stance on this issue means that I have been subjected to much abuse, much disinformation and many plain, old-fashioned lies.)

It doesn't matter whether the fiasco was a result of a conspiracy or a cockup – the bottom line is that we are heading for an apocalypse and we are going to have to trust ourselves and one another because we certainly cannot trust our so-called leaders or their advisors – the people who are pretending to run the world. We cannot trust our leaders because they aren't on our side; they are either desperately stupid and incompetent or they are as crooked as hell and only interested in taking power – and keeping it. In the UK, Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his ministers and all the Government's advisors should resign or be sacked. Naturally, neither will happen. In America, I suspect that Donald Trump has had as good a 'crisis' as any leader. Unless something else happens, he has, I suspect, pretty well ensured that he will be re-elected to the Presidency – whenever the elections take place.

And we cannot trust the media to question what we are being told.

Throughout the 'crisis' the media has been supine – readily repeating what they are told by governments everywhere and never questioning the wisdom of lockdowns, rising police powers and so on. The media has lost all respect and credibility. The 'crisis' has not been their finest hour. On the whole, editors and journalists have shown no courage whatsoever.

And I fear that what has happened in 2020 will happen again in the future.

First because the 'experts' are claiming that mutations will mean that there will be more crises. (If you put a great deal of effort into terrifying populations then you have to keep exerting pressure in order to keep the terror levels high.)

Second because those same experts have said that even people who have been ill and who have therefore acquired immunity to it may still catch the disease a second or a third time. This is very peculiar and I find it difficult to believe but it doesn't matter a damn what you or I believe. All that matters is what the experts and the politicians believe (or find it convenient to believe) because it is what they believe which will define the legislation they introduce and the rules they bring in. And, of course, if you can catch the disease two or three times then you'll need stuff injected into you. (They will no doubt explain, convincingly, that the stuff from inside a syringe can somehow provide a level of immunity far greater than is possible with the disease itself.)

And third because I have no doubt that more diseases will be coming our way. Infections have been a growing problem for some years. The increase in travel by aeroplanes has meant that bugs can travel around the world in a matter of hours. A misplaced reliance on antibiotics has made people careless. And the over-use of antibiotics by farmers and doctors has resulted in the development of many antibiotic resistant infections. Appalling hygiene practises in hospitals has meant the spread of lethal infections within hospitals. And those infections have then been taken out into the community – largely by hospital staff going out while still wearing their hospital uniforms. There is, of course, also the risk created by circumstances in China and other parts of Asia where the consumption of live animals is considered acceptable.

I don't believe that there are necessarily many more infective organisms around these days than there were, say, five or ten years ago but I do believe that the people who manufactured the 2020 lockdowns will be looking for more opportunities to close down nations and to keep people imprisoned in their homes. And our reliance on epidemiologists with doubtful records will lead to unnecessary restrictions.

(It isn't just the epidemiologists who are a threat. Politicians have also taken to offering advice. The mayor of London told commuters to wear masks even though the medical advice was at the time equivocal and the World Health Organisation seemed to rule against them. Everyone is a medical expert these days; propaganda and political expediency have taken over from news. Since there are few masks available for sale, people are being advised to make their own and there are books and articles around explaining to do this. Since masks are single use only – and have to be carefully disposed of after use (preferably incinerated) I am intrigued to know how people will find the time and materials to make several masks a day each. Naturally, the haberdashery shops which would provide the essential materials are all classed as non-essential and, even if they were open, anyone leaving their home to purchase the required materials would risk arrest.)

The consequences of the 'crisis' will be far reaching. We are going to have to pay a huge price. Nothing is ever going to be as it was. It will take generations to escape from the chaos and economic misery caused by this absurdly hysterical overreaction. Indeed, the economic chaos facing us all is so great that, among the wildest conspiracy theories is the notion that the whole fiasco is merely a cover to destroy capitalism and satisfy climate change campaigners.

Governments and advisors have completely destroyed the world we know. I repeat: we are all going to have to pay a massive price for the global lockdowns.

And yet there was never any evidence that lockdowns would help. The evidence shows that they have done far more harm than good. I have seen claims in the press that every country has put its citizens under house arrest but this is not true.

Countries such as South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, Sweden and Japan which did not put their citizens under house arrest have had fewer deaths than countries which introduced strict restrictions. (It may be, of course, that those countries which introduced hard house-arrest rules have had more deaths because they have been artificially inflating their figures in order to try to justify their aggressive, totalitarian policies.)

On 20th April it was reported that in Sweden the peak of the spread had passed. It isn't much of a flight of fancy to assume that whereas those countries which closed their economies will collapse, those countries, such as Sweden, which did not accept the hysterical approach, will have an incredibly bright future and will prove to be incredibly successful in the coming years.

As an aside, it is significant and relevant that the decisions which have destroyed national and global economies have all been taken by individuals who receive state salaries and who will receive state pensions. They will not be exposed to the costly losses the wider economy will suffer.

We are, I say again, heading for an apocalypse.

The seriously troubling days of lockdowns, road blocks and threats of rationing may have seemed scary but they were the days of relative calm before a manufactured storm of unprecedented ferocity. I suppose the world's governments could have made a bigger mess of dealing with the 'crisis' but it is difficult to see how.

I began making the notes which have turned into this book to help myself decide what Antoinette and I have to do to cope with the new world we are going to have to live in. And then I started to prepare an article for my website. But before I knew what was happening, the notes and the article had grown into a short book.

I am going to describe how the story unfolded and how mistake after mistake made things worse – with the authorities steadily making things worse with everything they did, and creating ever-expanding problems for the future.

You may disagree with some of my conclusions. You may disagree with the way I intend to tackle the problems which lie ahead. Indeed, judging by what has happened in the last month or so I suspect that I'll be subjected to another campaign of lies, libels and disinformation. I'm not sure that I care anymore. But please remember that this is not the first time I've been right and the authorities and medical establishment have been wrong.

Surprisingly, many citizens around the world have welcomed the lockdown restrictions. They will certainly welcome a book which questions the very need for any sort of restrictions.

Even more surprisingly is the fact that the British appear to be the most enthusiastic about the restrictions. One opinion poll showed that 84% of Britons believe that they will face years of economic hardship as a result of the lockdowns (heaven knows what mind-bending drugs the other 16% are taking) but astonishingly 44% think that the restrictions are not severe enough.

I found this particularly surprising since in other countries there has been real opposition to being put under house-arrest. Even the Germans, not usually regarded as rebellious folk, have protested. More predictably, in the United States, the opposition to widespread house arrest has been determined. In the state of Michigan, the local sheriffs issued a statement saying that they would not help enforce the governor's order to stay at home.

In the UK I have discovered at first hand that those even questioning the Government or its advisors are likely to be subjected to horrendous abuse. My second and third videos on YouTube were hidden in a dark, dingy corner of the internet. My website, which has been prominently displayed for a quarter of a century, has also been banished to a dark corner. I wonder why that could be. And Facebook tells me that the Facebook page they wouldn't let me have ('in order to protect the Facebook community') has now been disabled. This came as something of a surprise since I'm not sure you can disable something that has never been abled. It is, I confess, rather confusing to find Zuckerberg et al trying to claim the high moral ground. It's a bit like imagining Adolf Hitler standing in a pulpit preaching a fire and brimstone sermon.

Hopefully, the ideas on the following pages will help you decide how best to manage your life in order to survive.

Make no mistake: the future is now about survival.

I fear that we are now about to enter the worst and the longest recession in modern history – certainly the worst in living memory.

And I fear that the lockdown which started in the early spring of 2020 will not be the last. It's going to happen again.

If, as some people believe, there has been a conspiracy and we have experienced a false emergency created partly in order to distract us from very real problems in our society and partly to enable politicians around the world to take control of our lives, then we have to understand what is being planned – and we have to make plans of our own. As I pointed out earlier on, we are going to have to trust ourselves and one another because we certainly cannot trust our so-called leaders, or their advisors or the mass media.

If, on the other hand, the 'crisis' fiasco was the result of total incompetence then we still have to deal with the consequences ourselves. We cannot expect our leaders miraculously to acquire the competence required to steer us through the difficulties which lie ahead. And we must expect another similar fiasco not too far in the future. The circumstances which led to the 'crisis' of 2020 are not going away. Nothing has changed. There are plenty of strange infections around, and international air travel means that diseases can spread around the world in a day or two. The chances of our avoiding another scare are nil.

Part Two describes how we got into this mess. I've reproduced, in diary form, my account of the events as they unfolded. (I haven't changed any of this other than to remove the words which originally resulted in this book being refused publication. The essence of these entries appeared on my website.)

And Part Three describes and explains the future I think we now have. The so-called 'cure' for this disease will, as so often happens in medicine, cause far more trouble than the disease itself. Governments almost everywhere have made an endless series of huge miscalculations and have exhibited an inhuman obsession with the disease to the exclusion of everything else.

Part Two

This section of this book is taken from my diary, running from February 2020 to the middle of April 2020 when it appeared increasingly clear to me that the Government's advisors had got their forecasts completely wrong and that what I see as egregious incompetence, combined with a panicky Government struggling through a mist of woolly-minded confusion, had damned near destroyed the country. Readers who followed my articles on my website www.vernoncoleman.com will know that these comments were contemporaneous. My videos on YouTube are, of course, dated so there can be no doubts about those either.

February 28th 2020

As the care continues, the public are being advised to use hand sterilising wipes or fluid and to avoid touching their eyes. According to the World Health Organisation, masks aren't likely to be much help, though they would obviously be useful for anyone intending to rob a bank.

GPs have told patients who think they might be affected to keep away from their surgeries and to telephone 111. Unfortunately, the advice from 111 appears to be to trot along to the local hospital and wait there.

Maybe the authorities aren't handling this quite as well as they should be doing.

And if the Government had been really worried it would, of course, have made far more sense to stop all flights between China and the UK.

Still, that would have been bad for business.

Meanwhile, there is much concern that the Chinese might be suppressing some facts. My own experience with the Chinese makes me worry. A few years ago I wrote a column for a large Chinese newspaper. One week I wrote a piece about inoculation. The result was to ban the column and fire me. Fair enough. But within days my Chinese book publishers (who had been very successful with a number of my medical books) wrote to tell me that they would no longer be dealing with me. The books they had would no longer be sold and they would not consider any new books. I subsequently wrote to several other Chinese publishers. None of them would have anything to do with my books – even though the previous publisher must have made quite a lot of money out of them. I was told that within days the Chinese Government had introduced a widespread ban on all medical books by foreign authors.

Imagine how the Chinese might act to suppress news about a potentially serious epidemic which would have an effect on their reputation and economy.

As it is I confess I am puzzled by the fuss being made about a disease which appears to be no more than a variation on something which has been around for half a century. The fuss is causing panic everywhere, and the world's stock markets are in free fall as analysts get terribly excited and take advantage of the 'crisis' to suggest that investors sell equities. The American stock market has been overvalued for ages and there are many uncertainties in the world so brokers seem keen to use the threat as an excuse to sell. I don't believe for a second that the fall in share prices is entirely due to a disease that does not yet have a place in the Chamber of Horrors.

Elsewhere, holidaymakers are cancelling trips and shoppers are panic buying. Soap has never been as popular.

Doctors working in the NHS say that the elderly will be sacrificed so that millennials will be able to live.

So, what the devil is going on?

The figures that have been released really do not suggest that this is going to be a new version of the Spanish `flu which affected a third of the world's population and killed at least 20 million in 1918.

But despite the evidence, broadcast and print media seem determined to turn the story into a source of mass panic.

Around the world up to 600,000 people a year die from the common or garden variety of flu, and the new disease is at the moment a much, much smaller threat.

Is there a hidden agenda here?

Maybe the plan is to use the 'crisis' as an excuse to put a stop to unnecessary travel (i.e., any travel not being undertaken by politicians, celebrities, members of the royal family or enthusiastic supporters of climate change mythology). This would enable the authorities to cut down the use of oil, a disappearing commodity, and, therefore, save the stuff so that people like Prince Charles can continue travelling around the world telling the rest of us to stay at home.

Or maybe the aim is to soften us up and prepare us for compulsory inoculation. There will doubtless be stuff from a syringe available within a few months and if the scare is big enough the authorities will be able to introduce laws forcing us all to be inoculated. And once one type of inoculation becomes compulsory then the same will happen with other stuff from syringes.

Am I being paranoid?

No. I don't think so.

March 2nd 2020

I strongly suspect that the mortality figures are distorted because the authorities are only identifying people with severe bouts of the disease. Think of flu: millions of people get flu but never report their symptoms to a doctor. They know there is little point. But the authorities seem to be wrongly assuming that the mortality rate can be ascertained by measuring the number of deaths against the number of patients seen by doctors. (If 1,000 people go to their doctor with the flu, and 1 of those patients dies, then the mortality rate is 0.1%. But if another 9,000 people have the flu but don't go to their doctors, then the mortality rate is 0.01%.)

March 3rd 2020

The hysteria grows and the more the hysteria grows the more the confusion grows. I am still harbouring a suspicion that the whole exercise could be to exclude the elderly from health care – and, indeed, from society. Maybe the Government wants to get rid of old people so that it won't have to keep paying out pensions.

The WHO now agrees with me that currency could spread the disease. Why did it take so long? Will governments and central banks use the 'crisis' as an excuse to create a cashless society? It's what they desperately want and so I can see it happening. The fact is that the risk from currency is no greater than the risk of picking up the disease from all sorts of other things that people handle – door knobs, for example.

People are so terrified that many are behaving in odd ways. I've seen pictures of people wearing plastic boxes on their heads. This is pretty pointless. If you can still breathe then the air is getting into your plastic box. And the air will contain the bugs you are trying to avoid. I suppose the box might help prevent you being infected if someone coughed straight at you. The fact is that masks aren't much use unless they are proper gas masks. 'But surgeons wear masks!' said someone. Indeed they do. But they wear masks to stop the bugs they breathe out contaminating the wound not to stop themselves being contaminated by the air they breathe in.

The Government has made the disease a notifiable disease in order to please travel companies. This is so stupid it is off the stupid-scale. If the disease affects one in four individuals (as has been wildly forecast) then doctors will have to fill in 15 million forms and 15 million forms will have to be filed, processed and shared with various departments. There will be little time for anything else.

Members of the media are having a wonderful time. 'People will die!' screamed the *Daily Mail*. Well, that is probably true. But the whole thing needs to be put into perspective.

Mind you, tabloid newspapers are blamed for scaremongering but these days it's also governments which specialise in scaremongering – as they attempt to terrify us into silent obedience.

It seems to me that the excitement is the AIDS scare all over again. Remember when the BMA warned us that everyone would be affected by the year 2000? TV and newspapers were united in ignoring the facts and promoting the fear. I got into terrible trouble for arguing (accurately) that the fear was exaggerated and that the evidence had been distorted by lobbyists. The nonsense terrified people so much that some committed suicide. Fear is used to oppress and distract. Watch out for compulsory inoculation.

The stock market is behaving as though the disease is going to kill everyone and destroy all commerce. Well, if it does then there won't be any point in holding any shares. But if it doesn't kill us all (or most of us) then the shares will go back up.

March 7th 2020

We clearly haven't been told the truth about the disease.

No Government could possibly be as inept as this one has been in 'managing' this alleged sudden outbreak – unless there was something else going on.

If the Government really wanted to protect us they would have closed airports and banned flights and international travel.

But they didn't.

And why should we trust what we are told?

We all know that Governments lie to the citizens all the time.

Governments lied incessantly about the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. We were told we were fighting for freedom but everyone with functioning cerebral tissue knows we were fighting for oil.

So, why should we believe what we are told now?

I now suspect that the disease has been outside China for some time – almost certainly for at least a month and probably longer.

And, although I have struggled to suppress my suspicions, I now firmly believe there is a hidden agenda here.

What is it?

Well, actually, there are two.

The first possibility is that governments around the world are going to ‘discover’ a wonderful inoculation. And it will be compulsory – setting a precedent. Can it really be a coincidence that for months now the authorities (aided by the media) have been demonising anyone who questions the effectiveness and safety of inoculation? All discussion is now banned and in some countries doctors can lose their licences if they dare to question inoculation. (I have, for some years, been banned from all UK media because I have shared the truth about inoculation in my books and articles.)

The second possibility is that the changes introduced as a result of the ‘crisis’ are designed to get rid of a huge demographic problem: the number of old people in the world. Rising populations and falling birth rates mean that there are huge problems ahead. Who will pay for pensions and health care for the huge numbers of elderly folk around?

Well, one convenient thing about this disease appears to be that it seems to target the elderly. That’s unusual. Very few, if any, diseases attack only the elderly. Diseases of this kind usually attack the weak, the frail and the very young. But this one, so we are told, targets the elderly – not just the weakest but all people over 70. And that is very strange.

Is it possible that the infection has been designed to kill off older folk? It would not be difficult to do.

But no one seems to find this strange or worrying.

Indeed, over the last few days, there have been numerous instances of people cheering at the thought of a disease which will kill the old. ‘It will clear hospital beds,’ said one. ‘It only kills oldies,’ said another, dismissing the infection as irrelevant. Social media users have been cheering the fact that millions of old people may die.

If someone had said ‘It only kills gays’ or ‘It only affects Arabs’ or ‘It only targets Jews’ – the police would have been on their doorstep in minutes. They would, rightly, have been arrested, charged and thrown into prison.

But you can say what you like about the elderly and no one cares.

Is this the beginning of a great ‘cleansing’ of modern societies? Get rid of the old folk and preserve the planet for the bright, young things?

I’m afraid my twin fears cannot be dismissed as paranoid delusions.

March 14th 2020

Governments around the world are clearly suffering from mass hysteria. It used to be a problem found mainly among groups of teenage girls. It is now a problem affecting national governments and international organisations.

This isn’t anything new, of course.

It has often been governments which have created unnecessary scares – and there has often been a hidden agenda.

And as a medical writer I have frequently found myself trying to defuse the fear created by stupid politicians and civil servants.

I was the only doctor in Britain to oppose the BMA’s view that ‘AIDS will affect us all’. (I was vilified for disagreeing with the establishment. At its peak, more people were employed as AIDS advisors than had the disease.)

I disagreed with the Government view that Mad Cow Disease would kill half a million or more. (I got into trouble for that though the death toll came to less than 200).

I opposed the Government when it threatened us with death by avian flu. (More trouble for me for daring to question the authorities.) The World Health Organisation claimed that the H5N1 avian flu could kill between five million and 150 million people around the world. In the end the final death total was less than 500.

I opposed the Government when it was claimed that swine flu would kill 65,000 in 2009. (That made me even more unpopular though I was right again. Less than 500 people died, and the Government wasted £500 million of our money on medicines which had to be thrown away. It turned out that the so-called swine flu was no more lethal than ordinary flu.

And on and on it goes. Over the last few decades there have been scares almost every year. And almost every year the establishment has been wrong. They keep picking the wrong things to worry about. And they miss the really big threats.

It annoys me intensely that the world’s governments seem determined to create a crisis out of a very small health problem. (What will they do if the plague comes back?) Horrifyingly, in the UK, cancer and heart operations have been cancelled – presumably so that the NHS can prepare itself for the expected onslaught. That is beyond cruel. It is unnecessary and in my view close to criminal in deed if not intent. I am appalled that a number of GPs’ surgeries are closing and GPs are telling patients to stay away. Is that not unprofessional and unethical behaviour? (As an aside, I wonder how many doctors will be sued for making diagnostic errors when trying to make diagnoses over the telephone instead of face to face.)

The fact is that the small number of people who have so far died around the world would have almost certainly died of the ordinary flu. In the UK it is not unknown for 50,000 people to die of flu in the winter months. No one takes much notice because most of the people who die are elderly or frail. No one in government cares very much. How many people have so far died of the disease in the UK? How many have died in the world – including China?

It is already apparent that the economic and social consequences of the reaction to the 'crisis' are extreme. Sports events are being cancelled for months ahead. Why? If crowds at sporting events need to be kept away why not play the events just for television? If teams and organisers cared about their sport they would happily do that in order to keep their fans entertained. It would not be difficult to protect players and officials by testing them before and during competitions. But it seems that sport these days is simply about money.

Hundreds of thousands of people are going to be made redundant as a result of companies going bust because of this fake scare. And millions have already seen their pensions and savings decimated. Having the lowest interest rates ever has pushed people to invest in the stock market in order to have any income at all. (Interest rates far below inflation mean that money just disappears if not invested more aggressively than being left in a bank account.) Now those investors are being punished.

Cancelling all public events and elections is utterly absurd. There is no logical explanation for it.

I am convinced that as far as infections are concerned the biggest health problem in Britain is the use of recycling bins. If the Government really believes we have a health problem caused by an infection then we should all be told to put all our rubbish into black bags. Those daft plastic boxes used for recycling are spreading a whole smorgasbord of infections as it is.

Telling people to self-isolate if they have any cold symptoms will cause endless bankruptcies and do nothing to protect the rest of us. And since the disease can last 28 days, self-isolating for 7 days is pointless. The idea that people who self-isolate can keep away from family members in the same home is utterly ludicrous – unless you live in a 58-room mansion.

One thing that is interesting is that the EU members have behaved like a lot of individual countries – looking after themselves. As always, the pen pushers at the EU have been utterly useless in providing leadership. Now they want the rest of the world (including the UK and the US) to find £700 billion to bail out Italy. Neither the EU nor the IMF has enough cash.

The bottom line is that the stress caused by governments' absurd over-reactions will kill far more people. Premature deaths go up with unemployment levels.

In the long term, the best way to create a healthier world is to ban aeroplanes. They carry infections of all kinds around the world. And the people travelling inside planes are all at risk – the air is recycled with the result that if there is one infected person on a plane then all the passengers will have that infection within minutes. Air conditioning systems are equally deadly (and mostly unnecessary).

There is one good thing likely to come out of this: people may learn to cover their mouths when coughing or sneezing in public.

So, what is the hidden agenda? I no longer think it's just about killing off old people. And I don't think the mass enforced inoculation is the sole reason for the scare either.

The scare has to be about money and power.

Get ready for lots of tough new laws. There will probably be travel restrictions. (Never forget the biggest problem facing the world at the moment is the shortage of oil.)

And there will be lots of new taxes. The money will be needed to pay for the chaos caused by the 'crisis' – but the taxes won't be repealed afterwards.

One thing is certain: when this hysterical fiasco is over, you and I will be poorer and have less freedom.

And the Bilderbergers (and their pals) will be richer and have more power.

March 15th 2020

So, now we know what it's all about: it's an excuse for the Government to declare war on the elderly. And the first move in that war is to imprison and isolate everyone over 70.

Whether we like it or not we oldies are going to be locked in for our own good. (It's always for our own good, isn't it?) We are going to be locked in for 'just' four months. But perhaps longer. Maybe permanently.

But it's not really for our sake, is it? They don't give a stuff if we live or die.

They would never dare tell any other group of people that they had to stay in their homes. There would be huge rows and much talk about human rights. But no one gives a damn about the elderly. We're regarded as a useless burden. We've served our purpose, worked and paid taxes, and now we can fade away. We voted to leave the EU and so we must be punished. Dump the old folks on the hillsides and let them quietly die and rot.

In reality, this blatant act of age discrimination has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with the disease. There are 50-year-olds with respiratory disease who would die if they got within a hundred yards of any flu infection and there are 90-year-olds who run marathons faster than anyone in the Cabinet could open a bottle of gin. They're not locking us in to protect us. They don't give a toss if we live or die. They are locking us in to deny us access to the NHS we paid for. They're locking up the elderly because they can and because we're considered a liability and a bloody nuisance. We get locked in our own homes. No visitors. No contact with the outside world. Ignored and forgotten.

They say we will get our food supplies left on our doorsteps lest we get to see a person and say 'hello'. That's nice of them. Who, pray is going to do all the delivering? Our local supermarkets are already unable to cope with the demand for home deliveries. Volunteers? Don't make me laugh. Most of the volunteering in Britain is done by old folk and they're all going to be locked in.

What are we supposed to do if a delivery does come? Pop out and grab our allocated groceries off the step before they are stolen or soaked in the rain? There will probably be no plastic bags; just a loose pile of groceries sitting there, amidst the dead leaves and the dog-shit, for us to pick up and drag into our homes. Solitary joys will be provided by daytime television. If it's anywhere near as bad as it was when I was a regular 'performer' the days will drag for those who tune in. We won't be allowed to go out to the post box. Those without phones won't be allowed out to use the phone box. We won't be allowed to put out our rubbish because that would mean leaving the house and venturing out into the world. If there are several people living in a house, and one of them is over 70, then they will all be locked in otherwise the rule doesn't make any sense. How many families will survive being locked up for months and months?

They've already told us oldies that we will be denied NHS care. And there won't be any private care because the NHS has bought up all the private beds. We don't qualify for being tested to see if we are infected because we're too old to matter. (The testing is meaningless, by the way. Just because you test 'negative' on Tuesday doesn't mean that you won't test 'positive' on Wednesday.) Some GPs, who will be too busy filling in notifiable disease forms to waste their valuable time on patients, say they won't visit old people. If we fall ill and collapse then we'll be left to die and slowly rot. I wonder if undertakers will be allowed in to collect us. I'm so glad I paid my taxes for more than half a century. The millennials, who have paid little, are the lucky but undeserving recipients of my largesse.

If we dare to step outside our homes we will doubtless be arrested. The world is full of snitches these days. The people who have cameras on their car dashboards will be eager to tell the authorities that the old woman at No 14 has just slipped out in her slippers and hobbled home with fresh bread, a bottle of stout and a jumbo sized packet of aspirin tablets. The poor old sod at no 27 who takes his dog for a brief walk at 1.00 a.m. will be dobbed in too. I wonder if they'll arrest poor Fido too.

The police don't have time to arrest burglars or muggers but I bet they'll find the time to arrest the rebellious old folk who venture out of doors – even if they are taking the dog for a walk or buying in a little food.

As it happens, I don't much mind staying in. We have plenty of books and DVDs. Antoinette and I can both keep busy and amuse ourselves. But I want to stay in because I want to stay in and not because some patronising, bullying, heavy-booted fascist bastards in London tell me I have to stay in.

And I have many reasons why I will need to go out.

The shops and cafes will be closed but I need to see the dentist. I need to visit the optician. I need to visit the bank occasionally to pay in cheques and pay bills. I will, presumably, be denied access to these essential services. Murderers get to see a dentist and an optician. But not the over 70s. I shall want to buy a birthday card for my wife. And, if there are any shops still open, a present too.

Far more importantly, Antoinette (who has breast cancer) needs a mammogram soon (if the NHS has abandoned its collective impersonation of a bunch of headless chickens and is still doing mammograms). She needs to have her B12 injections. She needs to visit the physiotherapist. She has to pick up supplies of her tamoxifen. If Boris and Co think I'm letting her go to the hospital by herself they're pottier than I think they are.

And if we don't drive the car then the battery will be dead and the engine will seize up.

Locking us all in our homes for the solitary sin of being old is something new.

However, in the words of the great and immortal Patrick McGoohan, I am not a prisoner or a number.

I will take Antoinette to her hospital appointments if hospitals are open. I will go to the dentist if dentists are open. I will do what needs to be done. I will decide for myself how I will live my life.

What are they going to do if we all ignored the law?

There's a problem the bastards haven't thought of.

What will they do with their prisoners? Shackle them? Put them in prison? Fit them with those ankle bracelets used for criminals and terrorists?

We can't go to court if we're arrested and charged because we aren't allowed to leave our homes.

March 16th 2020

The World Health Organisation estimates that the number of people dying from 'seasonal influenza' each year is between 290,000 and 650,000.

It's worth repeating: in a bad year, well over half a million people die from the flu. In one bad winter month, the death toll from flu could approach 100,000.

That's not the number who get it. That's the number who die from it.

And the infection which is the cause of our global 'crisis'?

Well, today (the 16th March) the official figure is that just over 6,500 people have died of it since the first diagnosis was made. It's difficult to know when that was. Some authorities claim that it was last November. Others say it was January. But if we are cautious and say that the disease didn't start killing people until a month ago then the disease has, in that time, killed 6,500 people. That's the global figure – which includes China. In a bad year the flu would (at this time of the year) have killed more than ten times as many people. I'm just providing the facts.

Some authorities claim that the 'ordinary' flu is easier to catch.

And the USA's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that up to 45 million people a year catch the flu. The new disease will have to accelerate at quite a pace to get anywhere near that figure.

A reader of my website telephoned the Department of Health in London and asked if they could tell him, 'how many people are dying of flu at this time'. They couldn't. And they would only reply if the query were offered as an official freedom of information request. That is astonishing. It seems that the Government doesn't have figures for the number of people with the flu but it can provide almost hourly figures for the number with a much less common infection. Maybe the figures for the number dying of flu are mixed in with the number dying of the new disease. After all, very few people are being tested, the symptoms of the two diseases are pretty well identical and a doctor writing a death certificate is quite likely to put down the new disease rather than 'influenza' because the new disorder is notifiable and he/she has been influenced by the media hysteria.

As I pointed out on March 2nd, the mortality figures for the new disease are also probably distorted because statisticians and journalists divide the number of deaths into the number of recorded cases to find the death rate. But these figures are worthless because the number of people who actually have the infection (and merely deal with their symptoms at home) is inevitably far, far higher than the number who have reported to their doctor and far higher than the number who have tested positive. It is worth pointing out that the NHS is now only testing people who are actually in hospital (and, by definition) very ill, and has apparently banned private testing. (I only know this because top professional football clubs were complaining that they weren't allowed to get their players tested privately.) All this enables the authorities to do pretty much what they like with the figures.

Many, many years ago I pointed out that the mortality figures for AIDS were being distorted because deaths from tuberculosis and a whole host of other diseases were being included in the official AIDS figures. The authorities needed the figures to be higher to justify the scaremongering and the vast amounts of money that had been spent on the disease. It seems to me that the same thing is happening now. Who will ever know the difference?

Italy is often quoted as the worst country in Europe for getting and dying of the new disease. But far fewer people have died in Italy of it than would have died of the flu in a fairly normal year. And that doesn't allow for the fact that many of the alleged deaths were probably flu deaths. Incidentally, it has been said that the 'crisis' in Italy is now so bad that doctors are saying they can no longer treat the over 80s – whatever is wrong with them. Golly, isn't that a surprise. This is exactly what has been said in Britain – though the cut off age is lower.

According to leaked NHS figures, the new disease will put eight million Britons into hospital and 80% of the nation will become infected. Who the hell made up these figures? You might as well claim that it will kill 90% of all citizens whose names begin with A. It's meaningless drivel. The newspapers are reporting this nonsense as though it were real.

Some of the rules being introduced are stark raving bonkers. So, footballers have been told not to shake hands before a game. But they then run around hugging and holding one another.

So far all the people who have died of the new disease in the UK had underlying health issues. The youngest to date was 59 – rather proving my argument that it is nonsensical to lock up the over 70s. If the Government wants to lock people into their homes then it should lock in those who have underlying health issues – whatever their age. The fact that the Government has selected the over 70s for locking in rather proves the point that this is all about isolating, dehumanising and marginalising the elderly.

My conclusion is that the 'crisis' is being used to get people used to the idea that the elderly cannot be treated. Governments around the world can no longer afford to pay pensions. It is well known that aging populations are a real threat to the economies of a number of countries. Was the 'crisis' designed to enable governments to get rid of the elderly? Or are governments merely taking opportunistic advantage of the infection to marginalise old folk?

In my sixth diary (*The Game's Afoot*) I pointed out that Governments everywhere have been trying to kill off the elderly for years. Don't believe me? What about the Liverpool Care Pathway which originated in Britain? That was the murderers' charter, which allowed doctors and nurses to withhold food, water and essential treatment from patients who are over 65 and who are, therefore, regarded as an expensive nuisance. The Liverpool Care Pathway was then replaced by something called Sustainable Development Goals (which originated with the United Nations). Sustainable Development Goals allows the NHS to discriminate against anyone over the age of 70 on the grounds that people who die when they are over 70 cannot be said to have died 'prematurely' and so will not count when the nation's healthcare is being assessed. The Government loves this new rule because it gives the State permission to get rid of citizens who are of pensionable age and, therefore, regarded by society's accountants as a 'burden'. It is hardly surprising, I suppose, that this officially sponsored disdain for the elderly has trickled through into our courts. If you mug a 40-year-old you are likely to go to prison for a good length of time. But if you mug and kill an 80-year-old you will be unlucky if you go to prison for more than a few months. The lives of the elderly do not count for much.

There have to be priorities within the health service. There isn't enough money for everything but although there is plenty of cash for cosmetic surgery and gender reassignment programmes, the NHS has little money for treating macular degeneration – which causes blindness in old people. The elderly are discriminated against without anyone seeming to notice or care. Successive British governments seem to have decided that the elderly are surplus to requirements. Pensions are kept pitifully small. (The UK's State pension is the worst in any developed economy.) Energy prices have been allowed to soar so that subsidies can be given to climate change programmes with the result that tens of thousands of older people die of the cold because they can't afford to eat and to keep warm.

I find myself toying with all sorts of strange scenarios. Nothing now seems impossible.

In a couple of months' time, will campaigners use the 'crisis' as an excuse to demand a rerun of the EU referendum – on the grounds that the elderly who voted for Brexit are now safely locked up in their homes and unable to get out to the polling stations?

Impossible?

Wouldn't you have thought it impossible that the Government would order all citizens over the age of 70 to stay in their homes for four months because of a new infection which is killing less people than the flu?

Nothing now seems impossible.

One main aim seems to be to demonise, marginalise and dehumanise the elderly so that governments have an excuse to stop providing health care for the over 70s.

The young who seem to welcome the idea of the elderly being deprived of medical care might like to reflect on two thoughts. First, they may one day be old themselves. Second, the age for cutting off medical services will get younger and younger – as the pension age gets older and older. Today's 20-year-olds may well find that they are ineligible for medical care when they hit 50.

March 19th 2020

Foolishly, on the 18th March I recorded a YouTube video to provide some facts about the 'crisis'. It was a huge mistake. I did not monetise my YouTube channel because the video was made purely to try to offer another view of the alleged 'crisis'. I did not promote the video or use it to advertise or promote anything other than my website – which is free and carries no advertisements.

After just one day, the video had received over 100,000 views. But when the Government changed a few things (they reduced the quarantine for the elderly to three months, they did what I had suggested and told those with chronic illnesses to stay indoors and they told those who had cold symptoms to stay indoors for 14 days instead of 7 days) I took down the original video and recorded a new one with the correct details. I believe that accuracy is always important when offering criticism or a review.

But that was another huge mistake.

Unknown to me, the original video had been taken by people who had put my video (in its entirety) up on their own websites. I had recorded the video as a public service, not wanting to make any money out of it, but these people were clearly cashing in and a number of them had used my video to attract advertising. Both Antoinette and I were horrified. I have for decades refused to accept adverts or sponsorship of any kind so I was appalled to see that my work was now festooned with all sorts of adverts.

Antoinette and I spent almost an entire day trying to persuade these people to take down my video. I very politely pointed out that the video they were showing was now out-of-date and an embarrassment to me and to them. I even told them that if they took down the out-of-date video then they could put up the new video which I had recorded.

Worse still, when checking these sites we found that I had been the object of a massive amount of personal abuse.

My sole aim had been to provide a voice of cautious reason in an increasingly hysterical world. But I was accused of trying to grab my five minutes of fame (I was moderately famous a few decades ago and that was more than enough) and I was accused of being a 'quack' (a clear libel since I am not). I was abused and criticised for just about everything imaginable.

My wife Antoinette, who was helping (without success) to try to control the thefts, was horrified by what she read. We both immediately decided that we would never again read any comments put on the bottom of a video.

I am sad that good intentions brought such a harvest of abuse. It seems that offering an alternative view is no longer acceptable and attracts a strange mixture of oppressive intolerance and belligerent playground rudeness.

March 21st 2020

It occurs to me that the hoarding which is now commonplace in Britain is being made far, far worse by the media coverage. It is pretty well established that papers and television don't show pictures of streakers because it encourages more to follow suit. So why hasn't the Government issued a D notice telling the media not to print pictures of people with overloaded trolleys or of empty supermarket shelves? If you constantly show pictures of empty shelves then people will panic – and feel they have to stock up with everything they can find.

A month ago, it was predicted that 500,000 or even 600,000 people might die during this 'crisis' in Britain. Then the figure quietly fell to 400,000 and to 260,000. However, according to a story buried inside the *Daily Telegraph*, the experts now appear to be predicting a death toll in Britain of 20,000. This is considerably less than the death rate which might be expected from a nasty strain of the flu. Why wasn't this news on the front page? Maybe health secretary Matt Hancock would like to calm the fear he created by predicting a possible death total of 500,000.

Some 'experts' appear to have reported that 3.4% of patients will die. But the World Health Organization has pointed out that the 3.4% death rate is a result of measuring the number of deaths against the number of reported cases and does not account for the possibility that there may be lots more people infected with the bug– but undiagnosed. I seem to have been making that point for half a lifetime (and being abused for it). It now seems that the death rate is probably rather less than 1%. This is not all that far off the death rate we get every year with the flu. The death rate in China (where the infection started) has already started to fall noticeably.

If the death rate in the UK is lower than originally forecast, the Prime Minister will doubtless claim it is because of the actions he has taken. 'But he would say that, wouldn't he?'

A couple of aggrieved but inevitably anonymous Wikipedians have asked Wikipedia to remove my Wikipedia entry. It seems that my views on the 'crisis' are considered too controversial and too much out of step with the authorities for me to be allowed a Wikipedia page – though I believe Adolf Hitler has one. I am told that the Wikipedia world is desperately upset by my views. Their complaints about me are absurdly libellous and they have changed the site to make me seem deranged. They have, for example, listed a number of complaints made against me by a private body called the Advertising Standards Authority. The ASA accepted a complaint from the meat industry which was triggered by an advert for my book, *Food for Thought* – which rightly lists meat as a cause of cancer. I sent the ASA a list of 26 scientific papers which proved that I was right but they refused to look at them. That all happened about 25 years ago so is hardly front page news. Since then every government in the world, and the WHO, have all agreed that everything I said was right. But the Wikipedians merely note that the ASA disagreed.

Self-styled experts are popping up all over the place. It has again been pointed out that the disease might mutate again and become more deadly and/or more infectious. That is true. It might happen tomorrow, but we might have to wait years before that happens. How long do we all stay indoors and wait for a possible mutation? Weeks? Months? Years? And just how much damage to our society and economy will have been done by then?

When the Government asked retired doctors to help out, I wrote to the General Medical Council asking what I had to do to reinstate my licence to practise. They wrote back to say that since my email address had changed they wouldn't do anything until I had my passport scanned and sent to them by email. Good to see that the GMC is maintaining its reputation for bureaucracy. We don't have a working scanner (the last three all died) and anyway there is not a chance in hell of my sending a copy of my passport to anyone by email. Still, the world will probably be a safer place if I stay at home. And I have no idea where my stethoscope is. And I am apparently too old to be considered to be useful anyway. So that idea was stillborn.

March 22nd 2020

In the US, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that so far this flu season at least 36 million Americans have caught the flu, 370,000 have been hospitalized and 22,000 have died. Those are the figures for America alone. I mention this simply to try to put things in perspective. As I write, the number of cases of the new disease worldwide is just in excess of 300,000 and the number of global deaths is just over 13,000. The new disease is nasty and dangerous. But so is the flu and I don't remember any governments ever shutting down a country because of the flu.

Now that Antoinette and I have been instructed to stay indoors, I have ordered a yellow quarantine flag (ex Royal Navy) to fly on our flagpole.

There seems to be a widespread misunderstanding of the word 'pandemic' among my most frothy mouthed critics. I assume they are too busy sneering to find themselves a dictionary. A pandemic is a widespread disease. A global pandemic is simply a disease which is widespread over the whole world. The word doesn't mean that the disease is particularly lethal. It is not uncommon for there to be flu pandemics. For the record, ‘endemic’ means that a disease is commonly found in a particular area or among a certain group of people. And an ‘epidemic’ is the widespread occurrence of an infectious disease in a community.

In the last couple of days I have received four requests to appear on the radio. Two invitations came from the USA, one from an Arab country and one from Mexico. None was from British stations. The only time I hear from the BBC is when they write ‘requesting’ that I pay their absurdly out-of-date licence fee. They do this once a month. The BBC’s demand for their licence fee was sneakily designed to look like one of those little cards which the Royal Mail leaves when they have a parcel for you but you weren’t in.

I still suspect that, as with climate change, the ‘cure’ to this ‘crisis’ will do more lasting harm than the disease. The chaos is getting worse. When the over 70s were told to stay indoors they were assured that food would be delivered and placed on their doorsteps. Unfortunately, everyone is now ordering their food online, and the elderly have been told that they can do their shopping in the supermarket at a time when it will be crammed to the doors with loads of other elderly folk doing their shopping. Some of those shoppers will have the disease but social distancing will be impossible. Incidentally, the habit of NHS staff doing their shopping in their uniforms suggests a complete failure to understand how bugs spread. If supermarkets want to help their customers they should ban NHS staff from entering their stores while wearing clothes they wore while working with patients.

Scaremongers are now telling us that young, healthy adults have died of the disease. It is worth remembering that young, healthy adults can and do die from the flu.

What the devil will a future government do if there is an outbreak of a real killer infection such as the plague or Ebola fever? And will the people take any notice of the warnings? How many times can a government cry wolf and expect the citizens to listen?

There are a good many false stories around. There is, for example, an article going the rounds which claims that the disease causing the ‘crisis’ is known to ‘eat lungs’. I don’t think that sort of emotive imagery does a great deal of good. The disease can certainly damage the lungs. But this disease doesn’t eat lungs – that’s the munchy munchy lurgy which starred in a movie made by Hammer Films in the 1960s.

A friend of Antoinette’s who lives in Germany and has seen the news kindly asked if we needed supplies sending over. I sent a message back that we have baked beans and loo rolls but could do with another bottle of 10-year-old Laphroaig and perhaps one of 12-year-old Bunnahabhain.

March 24th 2020

I’ve been studying inoculation programmes for over 50 years and I would be surprised if I don’t know more about them than my many pro-inoculation critics, who seem to believe that anything in a syringe which is recommended by the Government must be good for you. Sadly, however, ignorance doesn’t seem to stop the pro-inoculation enthusiasts from airing their opinions, though they appear more adept at offering abuse than they are at offering scientific evidence for their views. The abuse I am receiving continues. (AIDS, inoculations and the new disease attract more fury from the ignorant and the opinionated than any other health subjects.) I wish I had never written a word about this damned ‘crisis’.

Prices of things online seem to have soared. Today, I bought hazelnuts for the squirrels (who are always hungry at this time of year) and paid twice the price I paid a couple of weeks ago. Heaven knows what the price will be in another fortnight. Even basic home medicines seem to be rising in price and that certainly isn’t fair.

Worse still, I was horrified almost beyond words to read that surgery for cancer patients has been delayed for two weeks because of the ‘crisis’. I could weep. The physical and mental stress on patients with cancer who are waiting for surgery is unimaginable. Who the hell made this decision? Cancer is not a fringe disease; it causes more than a quarter of all deaths in the UK and I don’t mind betting that in the end this decision will cause considerably more deaths than the ‘crisis’ disease. I know from our experience just how stressful it can be to have to wait for tests, results and treatment. I bet patients with suspected cancer are also having to wait longer for scans and for their scans to be read.

It is no exaggeration to say that the medical profession appears to have gone mad.

Doctors have been given the right to discharge elderly patients early to free up beds. Since the over 70s have to stay at home and are not allowed visitors to care for them just who, pray, will look after these lonely, old people? Many will not be able to go to the shops for food, many won’t have access to the internet and so won’t be able to shop online. It is not widely realised but, according to the Office for National Statistics more than five million people have never gone online. Within a month or so some of these will starve to death.

It is now being said that we could all be quarantined and isolated for 18 months or until herd immunity reaches 60%-70%. If everyone has to stay indoors for 18 months there will be more murders and divorces than at any previous time in history. And we will no longer have a working economy.

Here’s a thought: instead of forcing those without the disease to lock themselves in, wouldn’t it make more sense to lock all those who are ill (and those with whom they have been in contact and who may be symptomless but who test positive) into isolation hospitals or hotels converted into isolation hospitals. This would cause less disruption. Who could possibly object to that? Oh, and we should close our borders completely. (This is something I recommended weeks ago – at the time when Putin closed Russia's borders. If we had closed our borders, or isolated people coming into the country, we would probably not need a general lockdown.)

Figures from around the world continue to bemuse me. It is said that 9,000 people in Iran are infected and that 300 have died. That would give a death rate of over 3%. But it also said that there may actually be 100,000 infected. That would give a death rate of around 0.3%. I don't think any more figures should be released until there is some certainty about them.

When the dust settles, France is going to go bankrupt. Macron has promised that no company, of any size, will be allowed to go bankrupt. All those directors whose companies were previously close to bankruptcy will be beaming.

Are we locked in? Locked up? Or in lock down? Whatever it is, I am so pleased that we are all allowed an exercise period though there will be guards to keep an eye on us. Just like proper prison. I am puzzled though. The police and guards are to be allowed to fine those who break the law by forming groups outside. This is doubtless sensible but how will the police hand a summons or fine to the individuals concerned without touching them or approaching them? And if they wear protective clothing they will have to change every time they fine someone.

Last night, Antoinette made up a large boxful of comestibles to take to an old lady we know who lives alone. (Antoinette also popped one of our valuable loo rolls into the box – in my view an unprecedented act of generosity.) Nervously, I drove several miles through deserted streets. It was a cross between Christmas Day and a scene in one of those films in which a killer plague destroys the world. When we arrived we put the box into the porch, rang the bell and ran away in case anyone had seen us. It is, of course, illegal for me to be out of the house except to do essential shopping or take my statutory exercise.

The Germans were apparently told to stock up with food for at least two weeks. The British are told that we must not stock up but that we should go to the shops as infrequently as possible. It is impossible to do both. It would make more sense for everyone to buy infrequently but to buy as much as they can carry. Given the difficulty in obtaining delivery slots, the supermarkets will surely have to start delivering 24 hours a day. (That's another suggestion I offer to our Leaders.) Antoinette and I did not 'panic buy' but I confess I rather wish we had more stuff in our pantry.

Many over 70s are terrified of falling ill and needing a doctor. I know I am. Even falling over and breaking a bone is now a constant terror – because of the problems of obtaining medical care, and the knowledge that as an elderly patient there may be difficulty in obtaining medical care. The NHS needs to reassure the over 70s that they will not be ignored if they need help. But that's not going to happen because they will be ignored.

March 25th 2020

The local hospital rang Antoinette this morning to cancel her next physiotherapy appointment. Apparently, the hospital is closing its doors to sick people. I found this a little odd because it's a small hospital with no A&E and no ITU beds. Still, I have long waited for the day when hospitals decided it was better not to let the corridors and wards get filled up with poorly people. I wonder how many millions of other people in pain are being told that their hospital appointment is cancelled.

I am astonished that the only people being tested are the seriously ill who are in hospital. Epidemiologically, we need to know how many people have had the infection (with or without symptoms) in order to make plans.

We are convinced that Antoinette had the infection. A while ago she was coughed on in a health food store by a Chinese fellow (that's a pertinent fact, not a racist remark) and a few days later she developed symptoms. The cough was so bad she damaged ribs on her healthy side and has a good deal of pain there. The tissues on her left side are burnt up by the radiotherapy and scarred by surgery and the tissues on her right side are damaged by coughing.

I spent ages today trying to get through to the Sainsbury hotline to report myself as being an elderly person – in the hope that we could then book a supermarket delivery. It would have been easier to get through to the tax office. All I got was an occasional message telling me to do what the Government tells me to do and stay indoors. I don't suppose anyone in the Government saw the irony in that. We can't get a food delivery but we have to stay indoors. Having spent most of the day ringing the priority delivery number (to try to order food) I eventually got a recorded message which told me I had to go to gov.uk to register. I went to gov.uk but after ten minutes I gave up – having failed to find anywhere to register. And what, pray, about the five million people (most of them elderly) who do not have access to the internet? I have to say that the Government in Britain has made a complete hash of caring for its citizens. It had plenty of time to organise adequate phone and food delivery services as originally promised but it has failed dismally. It would have been easy to use existing call centres to provide folk with a place to obtain information. And, for heaven's sake, we live at a time when the Government knows everything about us. Why not just tell the supermarkets who the over 70s are? For millions, it'll be fried carpet for dinner until someone in the Government works out that if you lock everyone in you have to make an effort to keep them alive. Unless, of course, you don't want them to stay alive. But that's the thought that got me into trouble in the first place.

Another thought: we need more self-service check out points in supermarkets to avoid putting supermarket cashiers in the firing line – having to confront hundreds of people face to face. Testing supermarket cashiers should be a priority over testing celebrities and footballers. Surely the self-service check out points that aren't being used in shops which are closed could be moved into supermarkets.

The big danger in this 'crisis' is pneumonia. That's what kills. And it is, of course, the same reason that flu kills. Oh, and by the way the flu constantly mutates in the same way that the new disease is probably going to mutate. It's the ever changing nature of the flu which explains why the flu jab often doesn't work at all.

I see that a study at Oxford University has concluded that the new infection could have already infected half the British population and been spreading in the UK since January. Professor Sunetra Gupta, Professor of Theoretical Epidemiology said we need more testing to find out where we are in the epidemic. But tragically and inexplicably the Government is only testing people who are seriously ill in hospital. The danger is that those numbers will distort the picture massively. Dr Gupta is reported to have told the *Financial Times* that she was surprised that there had been such unqualified acceptance of the views from Imperial College in London – the views upon which Government policy has been based. If Dr Gupta is right then my original predictions were also exactly right.

I still believe many governments have panicked. I believe the 'cure' will be worse than the 'disease'. I could be wrong, of course. But my worry is that, if I am right, when will the Government have the courage to cancel its lock-in policies? Or will they continue and then, in a few months' time, say: 'There you are, we saved you all. By the way, income tax is going to be doubled next April.'

I feel so sorry for children who are not only losing invaluable school days but who will 'lose' a birthday in the next few weeks or months. No presents or cards or balloons or cakes or party.

As I predicted the other day, our local council is threatening to suspend bin collections. Never miss an opportunity to save money at the expense of the citizens. They are, however, continuing with the recycling collections – thereby massively increasing the risks of cross infection but reducing their penalty payments to the European Union. That's the second most stupid thing they've done. The most stupid thing they have done is to close all the parks to stop people taking exercise. I rather thought we were all allowed a brief exercise period every day. The council appears to have decided otherwise. Watch out for a rise in obesity, heart attacks and diabetes.

Antoinette has been in tears for days, already tired and weak from her breast cancer and the treatments for it and now depressed by the deluge of abuse, lies, distortions and malicious libels which have been coming my way. I've been writing about medical matters for a long, long time and, to be honest, I'm weary of illogical, unfair, venomous criticism from people who have well-formed opinions and a lot of prejudice but very little knowledge. We are going to turn off our phones, abandon the internet and batten down the hatches against a bewildering and inexplicably unkind world where absurdities now seem commonplace and where, among politicians, common sense is as rare as honesty. I hope someone remembers to tell us when it's safe to come out again.

March 26th 2020

I wasn't going to say this but bugger it, I have been savaged for a month because of my comments on this website and then on my YouTube video so I think I have the right to say it.

'I was right!'

It has just been revealed that on March 19th (four days before the lockdown started!) the public health bodies in the UK and the Advisory Committee on Dangerous Pathogens decided that the new disease should no longer be classified as a 'high consequence infectious disease'.

The Government buried this information on their website. Go onto gov.uk and look for 'High consequence infectious diseases (HCID)' for the evidence. The decision to downgrade it was made on 19th March but not published until 21st March.

The disease has been rightly downgraded to an infectious disease – like the flu.

Maybe we can now all have our lives back and try to rescue what is left of Britain.

And then maybe the Government would like to explain how they got it so wrong, what the hidden agenda was and why they put the country into lockdown days after they knew that the infection was not the big killer they had been claiming it to be.

Regular readers will know that right from the start I have reported on www.vernoncoleman.com that I did not believe that the new infection seemed to me to be more threatening than a nasty type of flu.

It was just a point of view, based on many decades of investigating and writing about medical matters. And I gave my reasoning, based on solid, factual evidence available to everyone.

I also expressed some views on why I thought that the problem was being exaggerated.

The Government has also stated that 'Cases of (the infection) are no longer managed by HICD treatment centres only'.

(A high consequence infectious disease is defined as an acute infectious disease which typically has a high case-fatality rate and which requires an enhanced individual, population and system response to ensure it is managed effectively, efficiently and safely. There are a few other requirements but those will do for here. The new infection was one of those. Now it is not.)

Astonishingly, the Government rather buried this information on their website. You have to hunt around, but it's there. And although the decision to downgrade was made on 19th March, it doesn't seem to have been published until 21st March.

Why the delay, I wonder? Were there discussions with the committees about their decisions?

A few days later the country was put into lockdown. The key word there is 'after'.

Naively, this morning I rather expected that the world would be cheering. I thought the lockdown would be lifted, share prices would soar and people would start returning to their lives.

But no one else seems to have reported this news.

And then I found out what was going on.

Today, the Government published an 'Emergency Bill.

The new Bill gives the Government tremendous powers including 'easing legislative and regulatory requirements.

The Bill is 358 pages long and, for a start, lasts two years. They didn't write a 358-page Bill in a week, did they? How long have they been working on this? I would guess that they have been preparing this Bill for at least six months – probably longer.

The police and immigration officers will have new powers.

There is a 'temporary modification of mental health and mental capacity legislation'.

That's a corker.

Secondary certificates are no longer required for cremations.

Hospitals get all sorts of powers.

Public meetings and demonstrations are banned, of course. (No wonder they were so quick to cancel the May elections. They knew this was coming. They could have held purely postal vote elections but they chose not to. Will there be any elections next year?)

There are powers relating to 'restrictions on use and disclosure of information'.

And, lo and behold, there is a note about 'arrangements for the inoculation or immunisation of persons against any disease'.

That probably won't come as much of a surprise to readers of my website. (That prediction was the main source of the criticism poured down upon my ancient head.)

Oh, and Parliament is now closed a week early.

And so Boris Johnson is in charge of the country. Stalin would be green with envy.

I suspect we might have to kiss goodbye to Brexit. It will be claimed that we all have to work together with other countries and that there isn't time to fix a Brexit deal. The ecstatic banks will all be bailed out (again). The EU's long-term plan to get rid of small businesses will be successful at last. When will cash be banned so that they can keep an eye on all our spending and whereabouts? Travel will be controlled and limited.

March 31st 2020

I am (to say the least) surprised that the mainstream media has ignored the biggest story of my lifetime: the decision to downgrade the 'crisis' and the decision, a couple of days later, to introduce the most oppressive Bill in Parliament's history. It appeared on my website but nowhere else that I could see. I certainly couldn't find any mention of this astonishing event on the BBC website and although a dear friend of mine sent details of the story to just about all the national newspapers, I don't think any of them used it. They certainly didn't give it the front page coverage it merited.

Are we to assume that we will be put into lockdown whenever a new flu appears?

Is it any coincidence that since I published the truth about what is going on, I have been monstered, lied about, libelled and traduced all over the internet? My website, which has been readily available for a quarter of a century, is now almost impossible to find. The message seems clear: the truth must be suppressed at all cost.

I have lost count of the number of times attempts have been made to destroy what is left of my reputation. When I argued that AIDS wasn't going to kill us all (as we had been told by the medical establishment) I was attacked by those who had a vested interest in promoting the scare. When I persuaded the Government to put stricter controls on the prescribing of benzodiazepines, I was wildly vilified by doctors working for the drug companies. And so on and so on.

I was not going to write any more about the 'crisis' (hoping that the big media players would have the courage to share the truth with their readers) but the failure of TV, radio, newspapers and big websites to run the story led Antoinette to persuade me to carry on. There has also been disturbingly little coverage of the Oxford University study which concluded that the disease could have already infected half the British population. I strongly suspect that this study is correct. If it is then Government policy is surely wrong. But the Government won't know whether or not it is right because for reasons which I cannot understand, the testing programme is still restricted and minute. We should be testing, testing, testing. Every household in the country should have, by now, been sent a testing kit.

The Government's policy is causing chaos and confusion.

On the one hand we are told that we must go out of the house as little as possible. But on the other hand it is nigh on impossible to obtain supermarket delivery slots. And even when slots are available, customers are only allowed a limited number of items. The exercise regulations are causing confusion too. Originally, the Government said that we could go out and exercise once a day. But the police (who were given real fascist powers in the Bill I described, and who are already enjoying using them) appear to have decided that it is illegal for anyone to go out in their car to find a nice place for a walk. One reason for this restriction was said to be that if people were allowed to wander about, some of them might fall off cliffs and require emergency medical care – putting emergency service staff at risk. I wonder how many people fall off cliffs each year. A dozen, perhaps? How many thousands will have heart attacks through not taking any exercise?

Embarrassed Government ministers immediately agreed with the constabulary and announced that we should not find nice places to go for a walk but should walk in our gardens. Those who live in flats are presumably expected to limit themselves to a wander around their window box.

People in the US and Australia are selling packet soup to British buyers and the prices are obscene. It is now possible to pay £20 to £40 for a packet of soup. Some of the sellers are inviting prospective soup drinkers to bid for one packet of soup. 'War-time' profiteering is back.

I am told that elderly patients in hospital are being encouraged to sign DNR (Do Not Resuscitate) forms. I am not surprised.

The Government has repeated its official prediction that the death total in the UK from the 'crisis' could hit 20,000. (The figure has been gradually downgraded from 500,000.) I wonder how many people know that the average total of deaths caused by flu in England alone is 17,000 a year. That's the average in a normal year. When the flu is bad the figure is much, much higher. And I wonder how many people will die because of the restrictions, the delayed operations, the lost jobs, the poor diets, the lack of exercise and the massive amounts of stress. My guess (and at least I am honest enough to admit it is a guess) is that between 100,000 and 250,000 people will die unnecessarily as a direct result of the 'cure' which the Government has introduced. Just think of all those now being denied essential screening, scanning, treatment and surgery while the NHS devotes itself to an infectious disease in the same epidemiological bracket as the flu. (Curiously, it is still a notifiable disease!) Think of all those who will have heart attacks because they are eating badly and not exercising. Millions will suffer mental and physical disease which will take years to unravel. How long could all this go on for? Presumably, until everyone in the country has acquired immunity and that could take a year or more. What sort of county will we be left with?

Meanwhile, the Government continues to bring in more oppressive laws and the ramifications seem endless. The Emergency Bill that was conveniently prepared and passed last Wednesday (with only minimal scrutiny) has turned Britain into a police state. The police and local council officials have even been trying to stop shops selling Easter eggs lest children have a moment or two of joy over the coming Christian holiday. Bizarrely, washing a car became a criminal offence. There are now calls for identity cards to be introduced though I find it difficult to see why ID cards should help prevent the flu. Why don't the authorities go all the way and tattoo numbers on our forearms. All this is very 1984. Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Another worry I have is that if cars aren't taken out for a drive of twenty minutes or so every week or two then batteries will go flat and the cars won't start. I need the car to be able to take Antoinette to the pharmacy to collect her medicines and to the doctors' surgery to have her B12 injection. And that is a more serious worry. Antoinette is terrified that she won't be allowed to have her two monthly jabs – without which the painful, neurological symptoms of pernicious anaemia will come bouncing back. And there is also a real risk that the breast cancer will be triggered back into action. Moreover, the nation's hospitals appear to have pretty well closed and I am terrified that Antoinette might need help. And what about her mammogram in a month or so? It's a safe bet that will be delayed. Millions of people are in the same unpleasant situation.

We had a Tesco delivery recently. The young man who brought our modest allowance of groceries was clearly terrified and spoke (from a very safe distance) of things getting a lot worse before they improved. He (sensibly) insisted on signing the electronic device which records receipt of our groceries but I still had to handle the plastic trays in which the food was packed. If the supermarkets are taking this seriously then all groceries being delivered should be packed into plastic bags not the usual plastic trays.

It occurred to me today that Guantanamo Bay is now probably the safest place on earth. (That is the one that

Obama was going to shut down on his first day in office. Sadly, he found himself too busy bombing foreign countries, collecting peace prizes and planning his route to untold riches to bother with pre-election promises.)

Dustmen (sorry, 'community recycling consultants') are talking of stopping work and the local council is going to tell us about collections the day before – presumably on the grounds that we aren't allowed out of our homes so what does it matter. People in flats and terraced houses will not be able to cope if rubbish collections are stopped. And the health hazard will be enormous – especially as the weather gets warmer. The rats, already huge, will soon be bigger than policemen, though probably not as bossy.

Britain's Prime Minister is threatening to bring in even tougher laws though to be honest apart from setting up firing squads I cannot think what else he might plan. I have seen spokespersons of one sort or another claiming that the lockdown might last six months, twelve months or eighteen months. In some ways, it feels as though Corbyn had won the last election and turned Britain into a communist state. There is a shortage of food and loo rolls and the shops and restaurants are all shut. This could be the Soviet Union or East Germany in the 1970s. I remember visiting East Berlin in the 1970s and being astonished at the empty shelves in the shops. But at least they had shops which were open.

Today a Government minister announced that the worst is yet to come and that if shoppers aren't more cautious then rationing will have to be introduced. I cannot think of anything more guaranteed to encourage panic buying than the threat of rationing. Is there anyone in the Government with any functioning brain tissue?

Antoinette's rib pain that was triggered by her coughing a while ago is still there and, not surprisingly, Antoinette is worried sick that the cancer has spread into her bones – specifically her ribs. The bones are a favourite target for wandering breast cancer cells. The pain was triggered by bad coughing. It got a little better but it hasn't gone away. The coughing is the cause. But will the hospital see us if we need to ring for help for another problem? From everything I have seen on the news it seems that doctors and hospitals are totally obsessed with this superstar disease. Unbelievably, cancer patients are taking second place. Antoinette paints most days; it is her one way to forget and to find some inner peace.

We were battered by strong winds over the last couple of days and rather than call a builder in I did a few odd jobs myself. I secured the entrance to our wigwam greenhouse with a piece of string and half a dozen rusty, old horseshoes. And I temporarily mended a heavy cast iron downpipe with the aid of a plastic strimmer blade and an iron Victorian foot scraper. But what happens if we really do need a builder? Are we allowed to call in someone if a chunk of roof flies off? Is there anyone to call? Or do we just shrug and put up an umbrella?

Although we managed to get our previously customary Tesco delivery in what has now become the great Phone Lottery, we still haven't heard from Sainsbury's about their much publicised delivery arrangements for the over 70s. If we cannot fix Tesco we were hoping to book a Sainsbury delivery. However, I am beginning to think that this was just a publicity stunt. I have been trying to register for their home deliveries for about a week and so far I have got nowhere. I wrote to gov.uk to complain and received, as expected, a standardised reply which was of absolutely no value. The Government knows where we all live, how old we are, what we earn and what we own. They certainly also know our national insurance numbers. All this information is used quickly and easily to chase us down if we owe sixpence in tax, so why can't the same information be used to make sure that old folk get the food deliveries they were promised?

The newspapers are full of the news that 200 people died today. This is enormously sad but the figure is announced as if it were 200,000. Actually, I see that someone has resurrected the threat that at least 500,000 of us are going to die within a few months. I know of absolutely no evidence for this claim. The scaremongers might just as well claim that five million are going to die. Or why not tell us that we are all going to die and be done with it? Why doesn't someone point out that in an average year the flu kills 20,000 people in the winter season. That means that the average death rate from the ordinary old-fashioned flu in an ordinary year is around 200 a day. In a bad year it will be much higher than that. Every time a previously healthy individual dies, that is offered as evidence that the new disease is far more deadly than the flu. But it is also important to remember that the ordinary flu also kills previously healthy individuals.

I see that Tony Blair is giving us the benefit of his wisdom. Very nice of him since he usually provides his thoughts to rich American banks who can afford his massive fees. If he is going to pitch in with his half-penny's worth we might as well go round the prisons and invite other mass murderers to offer us their advice. Maybe the Yorkshire Ripper has a view. What the hell does Blair know about anything other than deceit and betrayal? I understand that he has a need to appear on television regularly but why do TV companies keep giving him airtime?

It was reported that a man had died after touching a currency note that was infected. Congratulations to whoever managed to prove that a patient died from a banknote – even if the note was tested and turned out to be contaminated. But is it possible that this could be just another attempt to persuade us to stop using cash? I said right at the start of this fiasco that one of the hidden aims was to stop us using cash.

The Government is going to give or lend some money to self-employed workers who are in financial distress, and the Chancellor has said that this small generosity will lead to a permanent change in the tax status of the self-employed. In other words, the self-employed will probably have to pay the same National Insurance rate as employed workers – but they will not receive unemployment benefit. The long-term consequences of all this will be far reaching. I pity anyone under 40. Their future becomes grimmer by the day.

A few months ago, the country was divided into two groups. On the one hand there were those who thought that we should leave the EU and strike out on our own. On the other hand there were those who believed that we should remain within the EU. Today, the country is divided again. This time it is divided into those who believe that our leaders are lying and have a hidden agenda, or possibly several hidden agendas, and those who trust our leaders implicitly and who are prepared to dob in anyone who dares to disobey our Dictator.

The death total in Italy is still being used as evidence supporting the UK Government's oppressive policies. But the figures from Italy are wrong. Studies published in the US concluded that as few as 12% of those who allegedly died from the disease may have really died from it. Just because someone has the new disease and dies it is not necessarily correct to conclude that the one was responsible for the other. If someone who has acne is unfortunate enough to die it does not necessarily follow that the acne was the cause of their death.

The media at large seem determined to follow the popular line and sell fear and consternation.

April 2nd 2020

According to figures collected by the European Monitoring of Excess Mortality for Public Health Action, officially recorded figures for Europe show that there have been fewer deaths in 2020 than there were in 2019, 2018 and 2017. Indeed, the death rates for this year are so far substantially lower than they were in any of the last three years. So, either we should have all been locked in our homes in 2019, 2018 and 2017 or else the current hysteria is the biggest piece of social manipulation in modern history.

The UK Government says it wants to manage the incidence of the disease so that hospitals can cope with the millions who will need help. And so they want to keep everyone indoors. It's a sort of reverse of the usual inoculation policy where you inoculate loads of people and that provides herd immunity. The idea of herd immunity is, of course, to protect the community at a cost - the cost being the number of individuals who will be damaged by the stuff from a syringe. The idea now is that by keeping people indoors you slow the spread. Of course, it does mean that when you eventually let people out of their homes they will have no immunity and so, if the Government's theory works, there will be a big spike of cases in the summer and autumn. (This would, of course, be exactly the same with any infection treated in this way.) Then the Government will have a damned good excuse to keep its oppressive new powers and they will expect us to be grateful for any tiny fragment of freedom they toss our way. It's easy to think that our Government is merely exhibiting the usual confusion and incompetence. But it's worse than that. Look at the Emergency Bill that was passed on the 26th March (and that most people still haven't heard of) and it is clear that we are now living in a police state.

The scary news in the UK is that the NHS is having to throw people out of hospital wards because it only has around 142,000 beds. That is a pitifully low number of beds. We have 2.6 hospital beds per 1,000 population (compared to 4.5 on average in other countries). As our population has risen (thanks to unlimited immigration) so the number of beds has fallen. The only thing the NHS leads the world in is administrators. We have few doctors, nurses and beds but we have masses of obscenely highly paid bureaucrats. Astonishingly the number of beds in the NHS has been falling for decades – just as the population has been soaring. Over 40,000 hospital beds were lost during John Major's seven years as Prime Minister. Tony Blair's decade as Prime Minister saw a drop of just under 30,000 in the number of beds available. And the trend has continued since then. Thirty years ago the NHS had 299,000 beds. Today, the NHS has 142,000 beds. At the same time the number of highly paid administrators has increased, and it is fair to say that the number of beds has been decreasing at roughly the inverse rate to which the number of desks has been increasing.

Expert commentators keep saying that the illness caused by the 'crisis' disease cannot be compared to the flu. Why not? They both produce much the same symptoms. They both kill people (usually by causing pneumonia). They can both kill healthy people of all ages but they tend to kill people who are suffering from underlying health problems. The only big difference I can think of is that we don't close down the world economy for the flu. What the devil are we going to do if the plague comes back?

We are still trying to register with Sainsbury's to get groceries delivered. We used to have food from Sainsbury's but now they say they won't deliver unless I prove I am over 70-years-old. I have done this so much I am bored. Once this fiasco is over I intend to boycott Sainsbury's for ever. Antoinette and I went out yesterday and managed to find a rival supermarket which had food for sale so it's pickled beetroot, spaghetti alphabet and pineapple chunks for tea. And I managed to buy hazelnuts for the squirrels so they're happy.

Official figures for February show that (even including the deaths from the new disease) the number of people dying from respiratory disease is lower this year than last year. In the whole of February 2019, there were 7,525 deaths from respiratory disease. In the whole of February 2020, there were 6,262 deaths from respiratory disease. When the media scream about how many have died we must remember that in a bad year the ordinary flu can kill over 600,000 people worldwide. Only by sharing the truth can we overcome the bizarre hysteria which has overtaken the world.

The courts are planning to do away with juries and allow judges to act alone. Gosh. This will doubtless make it much easier for the Government to lock up people who insist on telling the truth. The European Union has long wanted to get rid of juries. They are messy and unpredictable and expensive. You don't have to be paranoid or to believe in conspiracy theories to see what is happening here. How many of these changes will be reversed? My guess is none but it could be less than that.

Dead bodies can now be cremated without a second doctor's certificate. This will make it very easy for the next Dr Harold Shipman to kill thousands without ever being spotted.

The enthusiasm for making sure the number of deaths from the 'crisis' continues to soar is so great that anyone who is decapitated in a motoring accident will, if proven to have the infection, be doubtless listed as a related death. No effort will be spared to maximise the death rate. The average number of deaths caused by flu in England alone in an average sort of year is 17,000 and the authorities will be desperate to get the death total in England to exceed that by the middle of next week.

The police who have been abusing their new powers should be sacked – they have proved that they are incapable of using their powers with good sense and compassion. They won't even be disciplined, of course because we are living in a police state so who is going to discipline them? They should have their truncheons confiscated and hidden in dark and personal places.

I gather that some of those advising the Government are talking about a whole series of lockdowns. (I still prefer the phrase 'house arrest'). These folk are apparently under the misapprehension that it would be possible for businesses to close down for a month, open for a couple of weeks, close for a month and so on ad infinitum. The people who think up such drivel are clearly living in ivory towers far removed from real life as the rest of us know it.

April 3rd 2020

I have been pointing out for ages that testing people is absolutely vital. When a patient is ill you can't start treating them until you have made a diagnosis. In a pandemic you can't start treating the population until you know how many of them have the disease.

Trying to decide how to prevent the spread of any infection is all guesswork if you don't know how many people have it and how many people have had it.

And you cannot possibly know how dangerous a disease is until you know what percentage of those who have it need medical attention and what percentage are dying.

The Government in the UK is currently testing less than 10,000 people a day. The people being tested are mostly the sick who are in hospital. Not even NHS staff are being properly tested.

The population of the UK is around 60,000,000.

If you test 10,000 a day then it will take 6,000 days to test everyone.

That's more than 16 years.

So the UK Government's testing programme will be completed by the year 2036.

And so in 16 years' time we will know what we should (or should not) do.

Brilliant.

Absolutely, bloody brilliant.

By then, of course, we will have all forgotten why we were doing the testing.

A couple of weeks ago I felt quite alone in my views. Now, I don't feel quite so alone. For example, Professor John P.A.Ionannidis, co-director of Stanford University's Meta-Research Innovation Center and professor of medicine, biomedical data science, statistics and epidemiology and population health has described the response as a 'fiasco in the making'. He says that we are making major decisions based on 'utterly unreliable' data. Moreover, he claims that the data which is available suggests that we are likely to be severely overreacting and that the extreme measures being taken may result in unnecessary and catastrophic consequences. He says (as I have frequently argued) that the limited testing means that we are probably missing most of the people who have been infected and that this makes reported fatality rates from the World Health Organisation meaningless. Professor Ionannidis points out that although the fatality rate on the Diamond Princess cruise ship was 1.0%, the population was mostly elderly – the most at risk group. He calculates that the death rate is probably more likely 0.125% with a range between 0.025% and 0.625% and adds that a death rate of 0.05% is lower than the death rate with the ordinary winter flu. Finally, Professor Ionannidis points out that some other similar infections which have been regarded as 'mild' or 'common cold type' have had fatality rates as high as 8% in nursing homes. Other experts agree with Professor Ionannidis.

The UK Government's policy (and the prediction of 500,000 deaths and the most draconian controls on our freedom in history) came from Professor Neil Ferguson and his team at Imperial College London. Professor Ferguson (who appears to be a mathematician and does not seem to have a medical degree) has criticised those (like me) who have compared the new disease to flu. 'It is ludicrous, frankly, to suggest that the severity of this infection is comparable to season flu – ludicrous and dangerous,' he is reported to have said though, as a qualified doctor, I find it difficult to understand why he says this. He criticised Professor Sunetra Gupta and her team who suggested that half the UK's population could have been affected. Professor Gupta's suggestion was also criticised because it hasn't been peer reviewed. But as far as I can see the work done by Imperial College hasn't been peer reviewed either.

Significantly, recent figures from the United States Centers for Disease Control show that during the last few months the flu has infected 38 million Americans, put 390,000 in hospital and killed 23,000. Those are almost certainly massive underestimates. No one seems bothered by these figures because the flu isn't a new disease. As far as I have seen no parts of the mass media have reported this.

It is Ferguson's theories which have led to the lockdown which is causing so much distress. The Government in the UK seems so wedded to Ferguson's theories that I fear that Ministers would acquiesce if he suggested that we should all stand on our heads in buckets of custard. But another academic, Professor Michael Thrusfield of Edinburgh University has pointed out that Ferguson was 'instrumental' for the modelling which led to the cull of more than six million animals during the foot and mouth outbreak in 2001. Professor Thrusfield, an expert in animal diseases, claimed that the cull was a result of incorrect assumptions and that Imperial's report was 'not fit for purpose' and 'severely flawed'. Professor Ferguson defended Imperial's work on foot and mouth, claiming that they were using 'limited data' at the time. But now, with the 'crisis' infection they are again using limited data.

I will tell you if I was wrong about this 'crisis'. But will Professor Ferguson and the Government tell you if they were wrong?

Meanwhile, there are one or two other significant things happening today.

First, polling from MORI has found that 20% of Britons think it is likely they have already had the disease. Another 14% think it is fairly likely that they have had it. If they are correct then a third of the country has had the disease, had relatively mild symptoms and could be out and about without risk.

Second, the UK now appears to be quoted as giving mortality rate figures for 'people who have died after testing positive'. 'If you died with it then you died of it.' This is exactly what was done in Italy – resulting in a much higher death rate than in other countries. As I have said many times before, people who test positive and who die have not necessarily died because of the infection. They may have died of heart or lung disease. They may have fallen out of bed and cracked their skulls. This is a schoolboy mistake. Or it isn't a mistake at all, but a deliberate attempt to cover up the truth.

Looking at the news about this bizarre fiasco raises far more questions than answers.

Has the Government delayed mass testing because they fear what the tests will show? The Government is going to be vilified if it is proven that the lockdown was unnecessary.

I gather that a new app is being introduced that will enable the authorities to know exactly where you are at all times and, moreover, to know who you have met and for how long and where. George Orwell didn't make that one up.

I read that Imperial College had claimed that the first week of the lockdown saved 370 British lives. Even if this is true (and I don't have the foggiest idea how they can be so sure) I believe that the number of deaths caused by the lockdown far exceeds 370. Many patients have had essential, potentially life-saving surgery delayed. Tests have been delayed. Treatments have been delayed. How many thousands will die as a result? I don't know and nor does anyone else. But if death rates from cancer rise in the next year or two we will know the cause. My guess is that the number who will die as a direct result of the lockdown will be far, far greater than 370. Once again, the cure will be worse than the disease.

The truth is that the new disease will stop being a problem when enough people in the country have immunity. That's the principle behind mass inoculation. But locking people in their homes means that people will not acquire immunity. Once we are allowed out of our homes then the number of infected people will increase. And the lockdown will be reintroduced. This could go on for years. There will doubtless be a spike of infections in the autumn as the weather gets colder.

And talking of bad weather, we are now being told to prepare for blackouts as a result of a shortage of staff at electric companies. Will that be the last straw? The nation will be locked in their homes, with no light, no heat, no hot food or drinks and no television, no computer games and no radio or mobile telephone. Treating the human consequences will require thousands of psychiatrists, psychologists and marriage guidance counsellors.

The fact that should be remembered is that epidemiologists do not have a great track record. They are rather like investment analysts and astrologers in having very patchy results. In 2014, for example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention forecast 1.4 million cases of Ebola in West Africa. In the end, the epidemic resulted in less than 30,000 reported cases. In the UK, predictions for deaths from SARS, etc., have been way off the mark. However, even if Professor Ferguson turns out to have been wrong, my guess is that he'll end up with a knighthood or a peerage.

In my first YouTube video I warned that the fiasco would lead to the demonization and abandonment of the elderly. I was mocked and criticised for airing this fear. However, there seems little doubt now that this was entirely accurate and that health services are discriminating against the elderly. Indeed, there have been suggestions that many care home residents will be denied any hospital care – and so death rates will rise. This is discrimination. Imagine the furore if the NHS decided not to treat any other group in society. 'Children to be denied health care'. 'Women to be denied health care'. 'Gays to be denied health care'. The mind boggles.

The truth is that if the Government had done more widespread testing and if that testing had shown that the number of infected people was ten or twenty times as high as is currently being suggested, then the death rate would be one tenth or one twentieth. And that would make the infection far less dangerous. These are not wild assumptions. Indeed, the Government's own chief scientific adviser suggested, when there had been 590 diagnosed cases, that the real figure was 5,000 to 10,000 cases. So that would put the death rate alongside that of flu.

It is constantly worth remembering that on March 19th it was officially decided that the new disease should no longer be classified as a 'high consequence infectious disease'. This downgrade was not published until March 21st. Shortly afterwards, the country was put into lockdown and the 358-page Emergency Bill was published giving the Government and the police extraordinary powers never before seen in Britain.

The Government is in due course almost certain to claim that its lockdown policy has reduced the number of deaths. But this is nonsense because we don't know how many would have died of the without the lockdown policy. It is perfectly possible that the lockdown policy has made little or no difference to mortality rates from the but I strongly suspect that the lockdown policy has already increased the number of people dying because it has deprived people with other illnesses of normal medical care.

The figures from Italy are constantly being used to frighten us. But the average age of those dying in Italy was 78.5 years. And as I have previously explained, most of the deaths were probably not caused by the specific infection that was put on the death certificates.

In contrast, the authorities in Iceland have been testing their population very enthusiastically and they have found that up to half of infections are almost completely without symptoms. Most of the rest are fairly trivial. In Iceland there have been 648 cases and two deaths – which give a death rate of 0.3 % which is much the same as we would expect from the flu.

I am bewildered by the fact that there has still been very little debate about Professor Ferguson's 'models'. There should be a great debate because if Professor Ferguson is wrong then incalculable damage is being done to whichever countries are following the Imperial College thinking. The Imperial College 'model' should be closely examined and dissected. Has anyone outside Imperial taken a look at it? I'd love to see precisely how Professor Ferguson and his team reached their conclusions. If they are wrong then they must surely take responsibility for the biggest cock up in history. If the Imperial College advice was overly pessimistic, as I believe it was, then Boris Johnson is surely toast. The nation will be damned near destroyed for nothing. Vast numbers of people will have been forced to wait for essential medical treatment. Vast numbers of people will be left unemployed. Vast numbers of businesses will go bust. The education of millions of children will have been savagely disrupted and probably permanently damaged. And, around the world governments have passed legislation taking away almost all our traditional freedoms.

April 4th 2020

According to the BBC, the Brighton and Hove Clinical Commissioning Group (a bunch of NHS managers) have allegedly issued a document telling GPs and nursing homes that vulnerable people may not be admitted to hospital for treatment if they contract the disease. Indeed, one GP apparently told a care home manager that no residents aged over 75 would be admitted to hospital.

It was always going to happen.

The Nazis did it – regarding old folk as worthless and an expensive nuisance. Why bother to feed people who can't put in a good day's work in the salt mines?

Now the NHS wants to kill off the old folk.

Old people who fall over and break limbs will presumably be left to die in pain. Any old person careless enough to have a heart attack will just be left to rot. The old person who stays in bed (to try to keep safe) will probably develop a deep vein thrombosis and die anyway.

I predicted that this would happen when this fiasco started – and was mocked for doing so.

'Oh no, no one would do anything like that,' they said.

I wonder what older MPs think of this? And, remember: a big chunk of the House of Lords is over 75. The only really loveable members of the Royal family are well into the danger area.

It used to be only actresses who lied about their age.

Now, we old folk will all have to lie about our age if we want the NHS to look after us.

I realise that it is, so far, only one part of the NHS which wants to leave the old folk to die. But this will spread if we don't stop it.

If this report is true then the bastards in Brighton and Hove who are responsible for this Nazi-style policy should be named and fired immediately for gross and unforgiveable inhumanity.

This isn’t one of those administrative errors that can be forgotten with some sort of mealy mouthed explanation.

No decent society in history has ever treated its old folk this badly.

And what’s behind all this hysteria?

It’s not the plague.

I’m not the only doctor who believes that the infection causing this ‘crisis’ is almost certainly nothing more than a jumped up version of the flu with a better marketing strategy.

April 6th 2020

So, we can now be pretty sure that the over 75s are going to be denied medical treatment. The first inklings have appeared. And compulsory inoculation is on its way. I got those two right, I’m afraid.

So, what else is planned as part of the global hoax?

Well, I’d still take a bet that Brexit is finished. I fear that the behind-the-scenes power brokers who opposed Brexit will use this manufactured ‘crisis’ as an excuse to abandon our leaving the EU. You might expect that big companies would be suing the Government for its handling of the ‘crisis’. But most big company bosses are sitting on their wallets because they see this as a last opportunity to sound the death-knell for Brexit. The longer the lockdown lasts the greater the chance that Brexit will be just an almost memory.

Cheques and cash will be gone within a year or two at most. We’ll have to use plastic for everything we do. That will give the State complete knowledge about our movements and habits.

And I can pretty well guarantee that the ‘temporary’ powers the Government has given itself (and the police) will turn out to be permanent. When Governments grab power they tend to hang onto them. As Milton Friedman once observed ‘nothing is as permanent as a temporary Government programme’.

If you’re in any doubt about the future, read the Government’s Emergency Bill which they must have been preparing for some time. It’s 358 pages long so they didn’t put it together in an afternoon.

Even Lord Sumption, the former Supreme Court Judge, is reported to have talked about ‘collective hysteria’ and to have used the phrase ‘police state’.

The Government can issue orders with no legal check or authority and the police must do what Ministers tell them to do. Pretty much the same is true around the world. Computers, mobile phones and tracking software mean that Governments can now keep track of their citizens 24 hours a day.

The odd thing is, of course, that the Government knows where all pensioners live but, despite having forbidden relatives or friends to visit them, it has deliberately made no effort to ensure that the elderly are receiving food supplies. How many old people will starve to death in the next two months? How many dead bodies will be found behind locked doors?

And the Government must know that the lockdown will result in far, far more deaths than the ‘crisis’. Operations and treatment programmes have been ‘postponed’ though no one knows for how long. People are eating what they can find and getting little or no real exercise. Indeed, unless the Government is comprised entirely of halfwits they must realise that the lockdown will have already killed far more people than the ‘crisis’.

But the Government has had it easy so far. The media has built up the ‘crisis’ with a daily diet of aggressive fear-making. There has been no debate. Although I haven’t accepted any of them I’ve received numerous invitations to appear on radio and TV around the world, but I haven’t received any invitations from British media. (If I were talking nonsense it would be easy to take me apart, wouldn’t it?)

The constant building up of fear has worked. The majority are enthusiastic about being locked in. They are enthusiastic about inoculation. They are watching far more TV than ever and drinking more booze than ever. The man who used to sit on the top of the Clapham Omnibus is now sat at home growing fat and lazy and obedient. Millennials are filled with a terror that they cannot deal with. Zombie companies which were about to go bust will be saved with taxpayers’ money. And yet taxpayers know that within a year they will be paying the highest ever rates of tax and who would bet against VAT rising to 25% or more?

It has long been clear to anyone who doesn’t leave a slimy trail when they move about, that this fiasco is either the biggest cock up in world history or the result of a conspiracy. But any suspicion that the Government could have simply made a series of mistakes has long gone. This has the fingerprints of the Bilderbergers over every inch. And everywhere I look I see new signs of Orwellian horrors. Those who are puzzled by the fact that the disease appears to have been dealt with quickly and relatively easily in China should know that the Bilderbergers almost certainly have no power in China. Oddly, the new disease appears to be a real menace only in those countries where the Bilderbergers hold sway.

Everywhere I look I am alarmed.

The Emergency Bill gives doctors the right to certify individuals insane and have them carted away without objection.

And there is evidence that some pathologists have apparently decreed that dead patients who have the disease must now be cremated without examination. I’ve seen a briefing which states: ‘If a death is believed to be due to confirmed… infection there is unlikely to be any need for a post-mortem examination to be conducted and the Medical Certificate of Cause of Death should be issued'. The key word here is surely 'believed'. Surely, this is a murderer's charter? The wise murderer will merely insist that his victim had a cough. The body will then be burned without examination. And, as a dear friend points out, what about other causes of death that might be missed? We could miss an outbreak of the plague.

Knowing that nowhere near enough people are dying to justify the oppressive new measures they've introduced, the authorities are quietly making sure that most of the people who die are classified as related deaths. Indeed, there is some evidence that people are being classified as victims without ever having been tested. I'll take a bet that non-related deaths will fall noticeably as a result. Deaths from heart disease and cancer will mysteriously drop as everyone who dies is classified wrongly. It seems that we are doing what the Italians did – if a patient has the infection and they die then they died of the infection. But I suspect we're going one step further. If someone who dies is thought to have had the infection, or might have had the infection, then they are victims and their death is added to the total. The lack of testing makes this easy.

The sad thing is that at the end of it, whenever that finally comes, Boris, our brave leader, and Ferguson, the mathematical modeller whose disputed work led to the death of six million animals during the foot and mouth 'crisis', will stand side by side and announce, with surprising humility, that they saved us all.

And I fear that most people, staunch believers, will give grateful thanks and applaud their saviours. They will consider the price they've had to pay, the loss of their freedom, acceptably small.

April 13th 2020

Right at the beginning of the affair I pointed out that according to the World Health Organisation, the ordinary flu kills between 250,000 and 600,000 people a year – most of them in the winter months. I said that if the new disease hadn't killed between 100,000 and 150,000 people around the world by the middle of April then it would be clear that it was not as dangerous as we had been told and, indeed, not as dangerous as the flu.

Well, the authorities are claiming that the death total has now reached 100,000.

So is the 'crisis' disease as deadly as the mathematicians and the politicians said it was?

No – because they have fiddled the figures.

As I pointed out earlier, anyone who has the new infection, or is thought to have it even though they have not been tested, will be put down as having died of it. Time and time again, the authorities report that someone died 'with' the disease. Not 'of' the disease.

So, if you fall downstairs and break your neck, but you had a cough before you died, then you will be classified as a 'crisis' death. Honest. I'm not kidding. If you had a heart attack but were thought to have the new infection then you officially died of the infection rather than the heart attack. A lack of widespread testing makes this possible. And post mortems have been abandoned for many patients. All this means that the numbers have been wildly exaggerated.

Remember, I pointed out that in Italy it has been established that only around 12% of the people listed as having died of the new infection were really killed by it. The other 88% almost certainly died of something else. (The Italian Government's scientific advisor reported that anyone who dies in Italy and who has the infection will be listed as having died of it. The National Institute of Health revaluated the death certificates and concluded that only 12% showed a direct causality.)

And in the UK, Imperial College (which originally forecast the disease would kill 500,000 people) has admitted that two thirds of the people who have been listed as having died of the 'crisis' would have died anyway – of something else.

I have no doubt that the figures have been distorted in the same way in other countries.

So the total worldwide number of deaths is, at most, probably between a quarter and a third of the alleged current total – that is it may be between 25,000 and 33,000 but is probably considerably lower.

And that makes the 'crisis' disease far less deadly than a mild strain of the flu. It is certainly absurd to compare it to the plague as has frequently been done by hysterical commentators. The plague killed 40% of the population when it swept through Europe. And to compare the 'crisis' to the Second World War is an insult to those soldiers and civilians who lived through those terrible years.

Fiddling the figures is the final, cruel deceit – to sustain the fear.

Meanwhile, it is now widely acknowledged that, as I wrote some time ago on the number of people who have died as a direct result of the restrictions brought in by governments will far exceed the number of people who will die as a result of the 'crisis'.

The British Government has now admitted that the side effects of the 'cure' (the lockdowns and so on) will result in 150,000 unnecessary deaths. On 30th March I suggested on www.vernoncoleman.com that the unnecessary death figure would be 100,000 to 250,000. No one is now suggesting that there will be anywhere near that number of deaths from the 'crisis' in the UK.

A senior NHS official has expressed 'concern' that sick children are not being treated because of the lockdown 'cure'.

And the United Nations estimates that worldwide 25 million jobs will be lost as a result of the cure for the 'crisis'. Some claim the figure could be as high as 190 million. Actually, virtually no jobs will be lost because of the 'crisis'. It's the lockdowns, the cure for the 'crisis', which will cause the job losses. Once again, I predicted that this would happen weeks ago.

Every fact I have provided has been absolutely accurate. Every prediction I've made has been proven accurate.

But even if they wanted to do so, the scientists, the politicians and the media are now wedded to this deceit. Even if they wanted to, how could they possibly admit that they got it all so very, very wrong?

But there is another danger that no one seems to have noticed.

By exaggerating the number of deaths the authorities are endangering us all. You cannot investigate a disease when you don't keep proper records. As the weeks pass by we should be able to learn a good deal about this disease. But we won't be able to do any useful research because we don't know who really died from it and who died from something else. We can't work out whether the disease mostly affects people who are meat eaters, or who have been inoculated against the flu or who have red hair because the information we have is inaccurate and useless. For example, I have spotted that this disease seems to affect Asians a good deal. Is that observation supported by the facts?

Today, I heard from a doctor in Australia who is asking colleagues to help find out if the infection is more (or less) likely to affect those individuals who were inoculated against the flu. We'll never be able to answer that question because we don't really know which of the 'victims' really died of the 'crisis' infection.

And this evening I saw that it has been reported Matt Hancock, the Health Secretary, says that the NHS has 2,295 empty intensive care beds. The average number of empty intensive care beds before the 'crisis' was 800. So, the NHS has 1,495 more empty intensive care beds during the 'crisis' than it had before the so-called 'crisis' began. And the *Financial Times* has apparently reported that almost half the beds in some English hospitals are lying empty. It has been widely reported that the massive new hospitals which had been built at enormous public expense are virtually empty of patients and would obviously remain so. The number of empty beds in British hospitals was four times the usual number at this time of year. It is clearly not true that the NHS is overrun. Hancock, the Health Secretary, should resign.

April 14th 2020

There was one simple thing governments could (and should) have done: random testing of people outside hospitals.

If they had done that they would have known how many people had the infection, how many people were unaffected by it and how many people were made ill by it. They would have also known the true mortality rate. And they would not have had to rely on a 'mathematical model' which originally estimated that 500,000 people would die in the UK but which eventually brought that down to well under 20,000.

Random tests of just 10,000 people in various communities in each nation would have provided valuable information. The testing should have included people of different ages. It should have included some people who were ill and who were well.

So why the devil didn't they do that?

Pollsters can get good results from asking questions of a good number of people. So why didn't governments everywhere do tests in cities, towns and villages? The information obtained would have been invaluable – and would have probably enabled governments to avoid deadly and damaging lockdowns. Those countries which did some testing benefitted enormously from the knowledge.

There are two explanations for why governments didn't do these tests:

They didn't think of it. (The cock up theory.)

They didn't want to do it because they wanted to turn democracies into dictatorships. (The conspiracy theory.)

I can think of no other explanation.

(The unavailability of tests is no explanation. There seem to have been plenty of tests available for celebrities and footballers.)

I have just been sent a reference for a study in the J. Clin Microbiol which suggests that recent flu inoculation can give rise to antibody testing as positive and suggests 'routine inoculation as a potential cause of false-positive antibody test results'. I hope scientific advisors around the world are aware of this.

April 15th 2020

It's illuminating to think back to the days before the panic began.

In France, the yellow vest riots were still in full flow. President Macron had pretty much lost control of his country.

In Hong Kong, the demonstrators were causing mayhem and the Chinese Government was facing serious problems.

All over the world, protestors were causing chaos with demonstrations inspired by climate change campaigners.

In Europe there were increasing tensions as countries such as Italy and Greece struggled with a currency that was too strong for them. The German people were becoming very tetchy about the future cost of supporting the European Union.

And the issues over Brexit were still causing serious concern among hard-line Remainers – who were still hoping to overturn the democratic will of the British people.

In the United States, the ideological battles were heightened as the Presidential election got underway.

The world was, in short, in rare turmoil.

Today, the world is pretty much one big police state.

Demonstrations of any kind are outlawed. Public meetings are outlawed. Elections have been cancelled.

And there is now talk that social distancing will have to be indefinite. Researchers talk of a need for more surveillance.

Convenient, eh?

Mass testing would show whether or not the lockdown was necessary. The financial cost would be incredibly small. But very little testing is going on. Why could that be? One would almost be tempted to think that the authorities don't want to know whether lockdowns are necessary.

16th April 2020

Right from the start of this 'crisis' I have been no great fan of Neil Ferguson, who is professor of mathematical biology at Imperial College, London. My doubts about his ability to guide us through the 'crisis' have built quite rapidly during the last few weeks.

Ferguson appears to be the man behind government policy. He believes that social distancing must be maintained indefinitely. And when he warns, the Government listens.

But look at his track record as summarised by Steerpike on *The Spectator* website.

In 2001, the Imperial team did the modelling on foot and mouth disease which led to a cull of six million sheep, pigs and cattle. The cost to the UK was around £10 billion. But the Imperial's work has been described as 'severely flawed'. In 2002, Ferguson predicted that up to 50,000 people would die from mad cow disease. He said that could rise to 150,000 if sheep were involved. In the UK, the death total was 177. In 2005, Ferguson said that up to 200 million people could be killed by bird flu. The total number of deaths was 282 worldwide. In 2009, Ferguson and his chums at Imperial advised the Government which, relying on that advice, said that swine flu would kill 65,000 people in the UK. In the end, swine flu killed 457 people in the UK.

Finally, Ferguson has admitted that his model is based on undocumented 13-year-old computer code intended for use with an influenza epidemic.

No one seems to have questioned Ferguson's work– despite the fact that if he is wrong again (which I believe he is) the nation will be pushed back into the Dark Ages as a result of his work.

My critics (and there are a great many of them) might like to look at the list of accurate warnings and predictions I have made in the years gone by. The list is taken from my book, *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You*, which was first published in 1996, and the list appears on the second page of my website.

I was the first author to write about the excessive power of the drug companies – in my book, *The Medicine Men* in 1975. I was the only doctor to rightly judge that the Government's warnings on AIDS were wild exaggerations. (My views were summarised in my book, *The Health Scandal* in 1988. In the same book I warned about the huge demographic problems facing many Western countries but particularly the UK.) Naturally, I was vilified for that advice. I was the first doctor to warn that stress could cause massive harm to the human body, in my book, *Stress Control* in 1977. I was the first doctor to warn about the dangers of benzodiazepines, in a series of articles and TV programmes in the 1970s and 1980s, and in my book, *Life Without Tranquillisers* (1985). I was vilified for that, though the Government eventually admitted that I was right and that they had changed their guidelines to doctors because of my articles. I was the first doctor to warn about the association between eating meat and cancer. (In my book, *Food for Thought* which was first published in 1994.) And so on and so on. I don't think I am being immodest when I point out that my track record is a damned sight better than Ferguson's.

I find it difficult to understand why the Government is following Ferguson's advice.

Are our ministers really as incompetent as they seem? Or is there some ulterior motive? Is it a cockup or a conspiracy?

We have to go to the pharmacy, the bank and the supermarket tomorrow and neither of us is looking forward to it. Antoinette and I are both natural recluses and since we have been out of our home no more than three times in the last month, our reclusiveness is growing. There is a real danger that we (and thousands of others) will find it nigh on impossible to leave the house at all if the lockdown goes on for much longer. This mass house arrest is going to cause massive mental problems as well as huge physical ones. Suicides, depression, domestic violence and murders will all rise – probably quite dramatically. I don't think that the people who thought up the idea of lockdown thought through the idea, and I suspect that they still have absolutely no idea of the damage they have done. The serious mental health problems created by the lockdown are going to be with us for many years to come. There aren't anywhere enough psychiatrists and psychologists to deal with the people who will need help. My big fear is that doctors will simply hand out lorry loads of anxiolytics and antidepressants when these will merely make things worse and ensure they last eternally.

Today, I saw the deaths registered by the ONS for the last but one full week in March. There were 10,645 deaths in England and Wales. That compares with a five year average for similar weeks of 10,573. That hardly seems justification for closing down the country and causing 150,000 deaths. (That is the Government's own estimate of the number of deaths the lockdown will cause.)

I would love to debate live on TV or radio with Ferguson. They would never allow it to happen, of course.

Why not?

I believe my credentials are as good as those of any of the people interviewing him.

I was the first doctor to question the 'crisis'. I have the best track record around for making judgements about health crises. I'm a *Sunday Times* bestselling author. One of my novels was turned into a £14 million award winning movie. I've written columns for four national newspapers (three of the columns lasted for a decade each). I've presented TV programmes on both BBC and ITV. I was the original breakfast TV doctor. And I was a GP principal for ten years.

During the last month or so I have received a large number of interview requests from TV and radio companies around the world but I have not received any invitations at all from UK based broadcasters.

Strange.

April 17th

A few weeks ago, my website (which has been on the internet for over 25 years) suddenly disappeared from Google.

I have no idea what Facebook looks like. I've never even visited the site. But the other day I decided to drag myself a little further into the 21st century by joining Facebook.

So I filled in a few of those little boxes and waited.

And I then received a reply telling me that I could not join because of the need to protect the Facebook community.

So why, I wonder, does Facebook feel the need to protect its community from the truth? Why are Mr Zuckerberg and his chums fearful of letting a 73-year-old author onto their site?

All I do is tell the truth and then give my perfectly legal conclusions.

So which truths do they think may harm the Facebook community?

Or is it just the truth in general which is unacceptable?

I have no idea though I suspect that someone at Facebook disapproves of my telling the bald truth about the 'crisis'.

Still, if you are on Facebook it will no doubt be nice for you to know that you are being protected from me. I rather think that Facebook and its fellows should be known as anti-social media.

And a variety of assorted and unacceptable truths

Today, my three videos for YouTube suddenly disappeared into a black hole. They have become almost impossible to find, and it seemed to me that for much of the day the views which I was told they were getting, simply weren't being registered. Curious.

April 18th

A doctor working in an intensive care unit is quoted as wondering where all the usual patients had gone to. (The beds which were occupied were occupied only by patients who had the 'crisis' infection or who were thought to have it.) He said he couldn't understand where the stroke victims, heart attack patients and so on had gone to.

Well, I can tell him. They had all been abandoned. Most of them are doubtless at home. A good number will probably die there.

One of the most disappointing aspects of the fiasco is the way the medical profession has allowed itself to get dragged along in the hysteria. Doctors should be screaming about the way patients with cancer and other deadly diseases are being side-lined and abandoned. But the medical and nursing professions seem to be enjoying their hero status far too much to worry about the way health care seems to be obsessed with a single disease – that will turn out to be no more deadly than a fairly standard influenza. Hospital bosses shouldn't be clapped – but they should be clapped in irons for failing to speak up to protect the most vulnerable. I hate to say it but we should be booing not clapping the people who made the decision to close hospitals to cancer patients.

Tonight, I was delighted to see an eminent Swedish epidemiologist agreeing with the arguments I put forward six weeks ago. Professor Giesecke was the first Chief Scientist of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control and an advisor to the World Health Organisation's director general. He agrees with my point that locking people up delays the development of herd immunity and agrees with my original belief that the Imperial College modelling was never worth the attention it received. Professor Johan Giesecke said he had never seen an unpublished non-peer-reviewed paper have so much impact on government policy. He estimates that the fatality rate of the 'crisis' infection will be similar to that of the flu – something in the region of 0.1%. He describes the 'crisis' infection as a 'mild disease', similar to the flu.

And so, here is yet another expert agreeing that our lives are being wrecked on the sole basis of a theory from a bloke with an appalling track record. What the devil were the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Advisor doing to allow this to happen?

I get the feeling that our leaders, and their advisors, all drank an ample serving of Kool-Aid according to the Jim Jones recipe.

But the twist is that we are the ones who are suffering.

Meanwhile, the latest official UK figures show that the total number of deaths is much the same as it always is at this time of the year. Just because everything (heart attack, cancer, flu, varicose veins, rabies, tuberculosis, you-name-it) is being listed as a related death hasn't made any difference to the total. And before Ferguson et al claim that the absence of any rise in deaths is due to their advice, I would like to point out that those countries which have no lockdown appear to have much lower mortality rates than those which do.

The most idiotic news of the last two months is that a good many old people in care homes have died recently.

I wish the journalists who blasted this non-news on their front pages would look at the mortality figures for the elderly. Sadly, that would require a little independent research, and journalists today seem to prefer to print government press releases without questioning them. The sad fact is that old people do commonly die.

In today's *Spectator* magazine, Charles Moore writes about an elderly neighbour of his who is self-isolating. She has twice been telephoned by medical authorities. On both occasions the woman was asked if she was happy to agree not to be resuscitated if she became ill.

April 19th

The bewildering lunacy continues.

So, now the Government says that the over 70s will have to remain under house arrest until at least the autumn of 2022. And even then the over 70s will only be allowed out of their homes if an inoculation is available. To me it seems that the implication is that individuals will be forced to remain under house arrest (and, again, let's stop mincing words – locking people in is house arrest) unless they agree to have the damned inoculation. Those who watched my first YouTube video on March 18th will know that I predicted from the beginning that this whole farce was about demonising the elderly and forcing through a tough inoculation programme.

I feel a huge, billowing sense of blackening despair.

For many over 70s, who let us be blunt the years ahead are not endless, this is a life sentence. They will never be allowed out of their homes again. They will never see friends or relatives except at a distance or via a camera and a screen. They won't be able to visit a solicitor to make a will. They will never be allowed to move house. They will never be able to buy Christmas or birthday cards. They will never be allowed to buy presents for those they love unless they shop online. They will never be allowed to go to a café or a restaurant. They will never be allowed to play sport (and many over 70s enjoy golf, tennis, bowls and other games). They will never again be able to visit a garden centre, a stately home or a wildlife park. Those who run businesses will have to let their businesses die. They will never again be allowed to go on holiday. (Those businesses which rely on attracting the over 70s will quickly go bust.) They won't be able to visit friends or relatives in hospital. They won't be able to go to the pub or the funfair. No more parties.

In short, the over 70s will never again do any of the many things which added spice and flavour to life.

Their homes will forever remain unpainted, steadily falling into disrepair because they are neither allowed to purchase what they need or to hire workmen to visit their homes.

What about those over 70-year-olds who have second homes, in this country or abroad? What about the dozens of MPs who are over 70? (The one good thing to come out of this will be that the House of Lords will have to close its doors.) What about all those company directors and chairmen who will have to resign?

This is all, typically ill-thought out lunacy because many over 70s are fitter and healthier than folk who are decades younger.

But that's the whole point isn't it?

This is nothing to do with protecting the over 70s.

This is, as I said at the beginning of this unscientific charade, all about oppressing, isolating and excluding the elderly from society.

If the long-term house arrest were being introduced to protect the over 70s, surely they would get some choice in the matter?

The over 70s have already been told that their age makes them ineligible for the health care they have paid for, so why aren't they allowed to take their chances out in the world?

(Has no one else realised that by keeping millions of people under long-term house arrest the Government will be ensuring that those individuals will be particularly susceptible to a whole range of diseases when or if they are eventually allowed out into the community. Moreover, the population will never acquire herd immunity if people are locked away in solitary confinement. This basic error will help to perpetuate the problem and therefore, apparently vindicate the official policy.)

But none of this is about protecting the over 70s. It's all about excluding them from society.

Of course, there are one or two ways around this cruel policy.

Unless and until they are forced to carry their birth certificates with them, oldies will be able to sneak out of their homes (if they can get past the neighbours) as long as they don't look over 70.

Maybe plastic surgery would be an option.

Or, come to think about it, the over 70s could merely change their age.

Today, everyone has the right to decide whether they are male or female.

So, we must all have the right to decide how old we are.

Well, I've decided that I'm now 63. And that's the age I'm going to remain.

I'm no longer in the over 70s age group.

I feel much livelier already.

And what the hell can the bastards do if they catch me sitting in a café with my wife?

Arrest me?

They've done that already.

April 20th

I found Antoinette crying today. It takes a lot to make her cry but she is in a great deal of pain from the scarring and nerve pain caused by her surgery and radiotherapy for breast cancer. The physiotherapist who works at the local hospital wants to help but she is not allowed to see Antoinette and has been sent home because the hospital is pretty well closed. And so the suffering goes on. The physiotherapist did email some exercises for Antoinette to do herself. I wonder if hospitals are emailing details of how to perform your own brain surgery with a fish slice and a soup spoon. Or, maybe, how to build your own radiotherapy machine using a toaster and a hairdryer.

Yesterday, the UK's Health Secretary, Matt Hancock, warned that cancer treatment has come to a juddering halt.

Hancock said that the number of patients visiting their GPs with cancer symptoms was dropping sharply. Referrals by GPs for suspected cancer fell by up to 70% last month.

And whose fault is that?

It's partly the Government's fault for putting all its energy into dealing with the flu bug.

But it is also the fault of the medical profession which is too busy slapping itself on the back for its courage in doing its job to give a damn about the fact that health care in the UK is now a pitiful joke.

There are two stories in the papers today which show just how incompetently the Government is handling its created 'crisis'.

First, the Government has admitted that 100,000 people are flying into Britain each week. No screening is done to see if they are bringing the allegedly lethal infection with them. This would make no sense if the Government's claim that this is a major 'crisis' were true. The official policy seems to be that the Government might consider thinking about testing and isolating people coming into the country at some time in the future.

Second, a scientist working for the Government has said that staff employed to analyse tests have so little work to do that they are being sent home at noon. Working in a laboratory capable of analysing 30,000 samples a day, the scientist said they had processed just 1,000 samples in a day. Hancock, the Health Secretary who claimed that we would be testing huge swathes of the population – at one point the Government promised that we would be testing 100,000 people a day – should be embarrassed. However, I doubt if that is a quality found much among ministers these days.

Finally, I have seen a number of anecdotal reports from emergency room doctors reporting that their hospitals are surprisingly quiet. It has even been reported that in the UK the so-called 'crisis' peaked some time ago, before the widespread house arrest began.

I find it increasingly difficult to believe that this whole damaging exercise in cruelty was not planned. (Remember that 358-page Emergency Bill which appeared overnight?)

The only question is: what was it all for?

April 21st

Matt Hancock the Health Secretary has announced that the British Government is considering passing legislation to make it illegal to criticise inoculation online. Anyone who criticises inoculation will be classified as a terrorist. Telling the truth about inoculation will become an illegal act. It seems reasonable to assume that the same legislation will cover print and other media. I suspect that the Emergency Bill which was passed last month gives the Government the right to do this without any parliamentary discussion.

So, that is the end of free speech in Britain. The Government is now less than an inch away from burning books which contain material which the authorities consider to be unacceptable. Indeed, by targeting the internet, the Government could be described as merely burning books the 21st century way. I know now that if and when this legislation is passed (and I don't think there is any doubt that it will be) and I write about inoculation on my website then I will probably be arrested as a terrorist and my website will be taken down (and used in evidence against me).

Now, wasn't there another government which kept itself warm by doing a little book burning?

I have in the past challenged Government ministers and the Government's Chief Medical Officer to debate the subject of inoculation with me.

Sadly, the challenges have never been accepted. And now there can never be any debate because it would be illegal for me (or anyone else) to criticise inoculation. The philosophy, so prevalent in British universities, of banning speakers who have views which are considered unacceptable has, it seems, become Government policy and will shortly become the law.

'You aren't allowed to say that because I don't agree with it,' is a long stride down the short road to totalitarianism.

As I have already explained, this happened to me in China where all my books in Mandarin were withdrawn from sale after I wrote a column for a Chinese newspaper in which I criticised inoculation.

I thought that was a terrible thing to happen but I never, ever thought it would happen in Britain.

April 22nd

In the UK, figures for the week up to the 10th April showed that deaths from causes other than the 'crisis' disease had risen by several thousand, showing that the lockdown was already having a significant impact on health and mortality figures. We will never know how many people died unnecessarily because the health services were concentrating almost exclusively on the 'crisis' but when the figures are finally added up I believe it will be clear that the Government's own estimate that the lockdown would cause 150,000 unnecessary deaths will be a considerable under-estimate.

According to Cancer Research UK, a reduction in the amount of screening being done means that every week approximately 2,700 people with cancer are not being diagnosed.

Worse still, surgery, radiotherapy and drug treatment have all been cancelled for patients who have been diagnosed. Patients who have been diagnosed with cancer are left in limbo waiting to see what happens next. Screening programmes have been virtually abandoned as all effort is put into dealing with the 'crisis'. According to Cancer Research UK, 200,000 people a week are no longer being screened for bowel, breast and cervical cancer. No one will ever know how many cancers were missed as a result.

Scarily, surveys have shown that the majority of Britons with a view on the matter are happy to continue under house arrest and do not think that the Government need publish any sort of exit strategy.

The campaign to induce a sense of terror has clearly been very successful.

Either the majority of British people are unaware of the facts.

Or they are happy to remain off work and content to receive 80% of their usual income as a payment from the Government.

The longer the lockdown continues, of course, the more reluctant people will be to go back to work. And the more difficult they will find it to get back to what used to be considered 'normal' life. It is now difficult to estimate the size of the Government's eventual debt.

Part Three: My Guide to Our Future

Brexit

If there is any Brexit at all, it will probably be a weakened, watered down version of the one we were promised. The excuse, of course, will be that there has not been time to conduct negotiations. I find it difficult not to suspect that the elderly are being punished by the authorities for being largely responsible for our leaving the European Union. I realise that this sounds rather paranoid but the way our life has changed in the last couple of months means that even the most unlikely scenario must be considered. Who, in January, would have contemplated a world in which huge swathes of the population would be kept under house arrest without there being any solid scientific evidence for doing so?

Cash

We will become a cashless society far sooner than expected. Cheques and currency notes will disappear quickly. Forcing people to use plastic for everything they buy will enable governments to keep a close eye on their citizens. Before last Christmas, there were widespread demands to get rid of cash. The demands came from the big banks (which find cash rather annoying and expensive to handle) and politicians who want to control their populations. It was pointed out that cash provided people with privacy. It was also pointed out that millions of people do not have access to the internet and, therefore, rely on cash. All this has now changed. I suspect that there is nothing any of us can do about this. Even before the 'crisis' arrived to scare everyone silly, there were a number of shops which refused to accept cash. Today, far more shops insist on being paid with plastic. The 'crisis' will have helped banks, governments and shops get rid of cash and they will all be utterly delighted.

Community Life and Leisure Activities

Politicians have said that 'social distancing' will need to be permanent to prevent the spread of infections in the future. This will mean that there will be very few or no cafés, restaurants, theatres or cinemas. If these places stay open they will be forced to keep patrons far apart. The inevitable result of that will be to force prices skywards. (If your restaurant can service 12 diners then the prices will obviously have to be higher than they were when your restaurant serviced 48 diners.) And since most people will be impoverished, it is a safe bet that the majority of eating and drinking establishments will struggle to survive. Pubs are going to close at an even faster rate than in the past because their customers have discovered the job of cheap supermarket beer. Parties will be rare because of the need to obey social distancing rules. When parties are held, the police will insist upon the right to check that the rules are being followed. Nightclubs do not appear to have any sort of future.

Many hairdressing establishments will fail to reopen when the 'crisis' ends. Before the 'crisis', there were 30,000 nail parlours or bars in the United Kingdom. As the nation struggles with poverty and unemployment, many of these will have to close. There will, of course, be far less need to have your hair and nails done when there are no parties, dinners or other events to attend.

Courts

During the 'crisis', courts sat without juries. It is not impossible that this could continue indefinitely. It will be cheaper and it will save time, and compliant judges will doubtless be able to keep politicians satisfied with their decisions.

Demonstrations

By and large, public meetings will be outlawed. In the future, only those demonstrations which are accepted as 'politically correct' will be allowed and even then social distancing guidelines will have to be observed. So, for example, demonstrations about global warming will probably be allowed (since they are 'politically correct') but demonstrations about animal abuses such as vivisection will not. The social distancing rules will take all the spontaneity out of demonstrations so there will be little demand for them.

Education

Only 2% of British children attended physical schools during the lockdown and only a third of those who did not attend school took part in the online lessons which were provided. (When broken down, the figures are even more disturbing since they show that over 50% of pupils from private schools accessed online lessons whereas around 20% of pupils from state schools bothered to do so. The Government expected that around 20% of pupils would attend school (children of parents with essential jobs were entitled to go to school) but the numbers obviously fell considerably short of this. I suspect that these figures have been repeated in other countries. Exams have been cancelled and teachers given the power to decide who 'passed' which exams and who 'failed'. All this was despite the fact that some experts had concluded that closing schools really made no difference to the spread of the disease but would cause massive and entirely economic disruption. Allowing teachers to take the place of examinations will inevitably mean that students who sucked up to their teachers will get good grades, and troublesome students (the ones who usually turn out to be creative and inventive) will suffer. We can expect educational skills to fall dramatically in the future. The incidence of illiteracy and innumeracy will grow. Children from poorer families will suffer most. The effect on society will be dramatic and long-lasting.

A former chief schools inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw, has stated that some school pupils might have lost out so much because of the lockdown that they will need to repeat the whole year.

As always, these days, I found myself wondering what the hidden agenda might be. There is no doubt that chunks of a population which remain uneducated and ignorant are much easier to control. They are less questioning and far more obedient.

Added to all the other problems will be the nervousness and uncertainty of children of all ages who will feel disturbed and ill at ease as a result of the house arrest policy. Children always feel nervous when going back to school after the long summer holiday but this will be many times worse. Children will find it difficult to settle into classroom life. There will probably be a good deal of misbehaviour and truancy.

A study conducted in Norway showed that the educational damage can be permanent. It appears that every week of absence from school can permanently affect life changes and earning potential.

Teaching unions are demanding to be equipped with gowns and masks before schools can reopen but if this is a serious demand then it is likely that schools will remain closed for months.

A report recently published in the journal *Clinical Infectious Diseases* traced a child who had tested positive and found that although he came into contact with 170 people, he did not transmit the disease to any of them. Was it ever necessary to close schools or was that just another example of the teenage-style hysteria which has overtaken politicians?

Elderly

The elderly had a very bad 'crisis'. And for them the future is now very bleak. Government ministers are talking about keeping the over 70s under house-arrest indefinitely. This will mean that those over 70 will never be allowed to see friends or relatives, to go to work, to engage in sports or hobbies, to take vacations or even to celebrate birthdays and anniversaries.

Most significantly of all, many old people will find that they are denied medical care.

Since I am over 70, I know that if I were to catch the 'crisis' infection, or were to catch some other infection which appeared to be the 'crisis' infection or were to develop symptoms (such as a cough) which suggested that I might possibly have the 'crisis' infection, then I would probably be on my own. (Well, I wouldn't be on my own, of course, because Antoinette would be here with me.) Some NHS administrators have made it pretty clear that there's a chance that no hospital would treat me. And, if I'm out of luck, then quite probably, no GP would treat me either.

It seems that anyone over 70 is too old to be treated by the NHS. (I hate to mention it but no one seems to care that it was the taxes paid by the over 70s which have kept the NHS alive for decades.)

Private hospitals offer no alternative because they don't treat emergencies and, even if they did, they wouldn't be able to treat me because all their beds have been rented by the NHS in case the NHS runs out of beds. (Though judging by the fact that the new hospitals they are building are virtually empty, this seems extremely unlikely. Beds are empty but they're not available to me).

Anyway, if I become part of the 'crisis', or appear to be part of the 'crisis', then I will either die or live. And the only professional help we'll be able to call for will be the undertaker.

(In a clever twist on Catch 22, if you are over 70 then, whatever else you have got wrong with you, you will also officially be deemed to be part of the 'crisis' – whether or not you've been tested and whether or not you show any symptoms. So, since you are officially part of the 'crisis' you will not be entitled to be treated and if/when you die, you will be added to the statistics to make the Governmental policies all that much more acceptable to the masses. I do hope you don't think I am joking because I'm not. Joseph Heller would be proud of whoever thought this one up.)

For the older citizen, life is now a bit like a tightrope walk without a safety net.

If I fall in the garden and break my arm then there's a chance that I'm not going to be treated. The hospitals are apparently too busy waiting for the young patients who might or might not turn up. If I have a retinal detachment then I'll just have to put up with it. If I have chest pains then it'll be two aspirin and wait and see what happens.

The prediction I made less than two months ago was absolutely accurate: the hysteria has turned the elderly into second class citizens. Or, more accurately, into non-citizens.

And so these are worrying times to be old.

It's just another side effect of the Government's hysterical over-reaction.

Those who applaud this state of affairs (and I am afraid there are many who do) might like to reflect upon the fact that one day they too will celebrate their 70th birthday and then suddenly wonder about what lies beyond. And, of course, 60 will soon be the new 70.

Employment

Millions of jobs are going to be lost as companies go bankrupt. Unemployment is going to reach massive and possibly unprecedented levels. One estimate for the UK is that unemployment will reach 6.5 million. This is probably an under-estimate, though the final figure depends upon how long the Government persists with its lockdown policy. There will be some new companies arising out of the ashes (sometimes taking advantage of the wreckage of former companies to buy property, machinery and stock at knock down prices) but they will remain small for years as they struggle to raise capital. When unemployment rises, so does poverty and when poverty increases so do ill health and early death. The consequences of the 'crisis' will be with us for decades to come. Many people will find that skills they acquired in the days before the 'crisis' will be worthless – not simply because of automation but because whole industries will shrink or disappear. (If you have skills as a wine waiter, for example, you will have little opportunity to use those skills if there are few or no restaurants still in business.) And there will be millions who will find going back to work, and fitting again into a routine, incredibly difficult to do. Many people find it hard to go back to work after a fortnight's holiday. Imagine how much more difficult it will be to go back to work after many weeks of rising at 9.30 a.m. and spending the day pottering around the house. The mass house arrest of millions of workers will lead to a population of people who find it difficult to settle into work and who may prefer to adopt an unemployed lifestyle. I wonder if the politicians and their advisors factored this problem into their equation. I rather doubt it.

Epidemiology

Pathologists stopped performing post mortems on patients who may have had the disease involved in the 'crisis' on the grounds that the infection more dangerous than rabies, tuberculosis or, indeed, any other infection known to man. The result of this controversial and, I believe, unprecedented decision will be that we will, in future, know far less about what people are dying of and why. I fear the number of autopsies performed will never go back to what it had been before the 'crisis'. (Improvements which are introduced during an emergency are always short lived. Changes which are introduced but which damage services to the people are always maintained indefinitely.) In future we will have to rely on mathematicians – such as those who recently advised government. Epidemiologists and mathematical modellers do not have a good track record when it comes to predicting health problems. Just look at the history of Neil Ferguson and Imperial College in the UK for proof of this. The result will be that public health care will, in future, be managed blindfold.

There will doubtless be far more unnecessary scares in the years to come, and we have to retain a mixture of common sense and scepticism when confronted with Government inspired scare stories. The aim of the scare stories is, of course, to maintain a high level of fear. It is much easier to control a population when most of them are fearful. The effectiveness of this approach in the UK can be seen from the fact that the majority of people support the mass house arrests and the police control. Indeed, a majority of the population seems to be asking for stronger controls. The UK has been far more effective than any other country in creating fear.

Finance

Economists agree that we are heading for one of the worst global recessions in history. I suspect they are being optimistic and that we are heading for the worst recession in modern history. (Recessions in the 14th century tended to be very severe because the economy depended entirely upon agriculture and when the weather was bad there weren't any crops.)

In the United States the Fed is buying junk bonds, and in the UK the Bank of England has given the Government an unlimited overdraft. Capitalism has been suspended indefinitely. In 2008, the banks were bailed out with public money so that bankers didn't lose out on their bonuses. It was this recklessness waste of public money that helped launch populist governments around the world. Will the same thing happen again?

Recessions are unpleasant for everyone. Public borrowing will soar and inflation will rocket as currencies lose value. What will governments do to get rid of their debts? One option is simply to cancel all debts and to pretend they do not exist and never did exist. Another possibility is to allow inflation to erode everyone's debts. Interest rates will be kept at absurdly low levels to keep debts under control. Some governments may take the tough approach – pushing up taxes and cutting public services.

Inflation may be good for those with big debts but it can be enormously damaging to any society. What are the chances of having to take your currency to the shops in a wheelbarrow – just to pay for a loaf of bread and a couple of eggs? It is a fair bet that they are shorter than at any time in history unless you live in Germany, Zimbabwe, Venezuela or Argentina where, at various times in the last century, currencies fell far faster and further than might have seemed possible.

On 21st April, the price of West Texas Intermediate Oil fell to minus $40 a barrel. (West Texas Intermediate is a type of high quality crude oil.) Very little oil was being used around the world, and all the available storage space had been used up and so people who owned large quantities of the oil were paying others to take the stuff away and find somewhere to put it.

When the price of oil goes into negative territory, the world is in serious, serious trouble.

None of this may seem to matter to people buying petrol or diesel or home heating oil but it will matter enormously in a few months' time and it will probably matter even more in a few years' time. With such a temporary glut of oil, exploration will be dramatically reduced or will cease altogether. Climate change campaigners may cheer at this but their cheering may die away when they realise that without supplies of oil there will be no electricity to power their computers, mobile phones, electric cars or homes. (Most electricity today is, of course, still obtained from fossil fuels and as Zina Cohen explained in her book *Greta's Homework*, this will doubtless be the case for a generation or two.)

Many small businesses will go bust in the aftermath of the 'crisis', and it is difficult not to sympathise with those who suspect that this was always one of the aims of the policies executed during this manufactured 'crisis'. At the end of April 2020, the Corporate Finance Network, which represents 12,000 accountants, estimated that 800,000 small businesses did not have enough cash to last another month. The EU has always been opposed to small companies and its agenda has always been managed by lobbyists. Similarly, big banks prefer dealing with large companies. Even though the British voted to leave the EU there seems little doubt that London will for some years follow EU attitudes and philosophies.

The one group of people who make a great deal of money out of this 'crisis' will undoubtedly be senior bankers who will doubtless find a way to make big personal profits while everyone else is suffering. No one would expect anything else. The bankers, who will wander unscathed through the chaos, will doubtless manage to demand a great deal of sympathy for themselves for the sacrifices made by their shareholders. Knighthoods and other pretty gongs will be distributed generously.

As far as personal money is concerned, the key will probably be interest rates.

As we went into the lockdown, interest rates around the world were lower than they had ever been. How long is that likely to last now? It's difficult to say but uncertainty and bad debts are likely to put pressure on all sectors of the world of finance. Central banks may want to keep interest rates low to avoid financial meltdowns but in order to attract foreign money they may need to allow them to rise. In the UK, Government borrowing will be worse than it was by the end of World War II and massively higher, as a percentage of GDP, than it was after the financial crash in 2008.

As I suggested earlier, there is a real chance that debts (governmental, corporate and private) will be forgiven in an attempt to get the economy going. The losers, of course, will be taxpayers and people who have saved rather than spent and who have no debts.

The one big certainty is that globalisation is finished.

And since it was the deflationary effects of globalisation which brought down prices, the opposite will now happen. As nationalism and protectionism become ever more popular so the prices of almost everything will rise. In a year or two even the price of oil will soar because oil companies will have pretty well stopped finding more supplies (partly because of the low price caused by the glut and partly because of pressure from environmentalists.)

In personal financial terms it is impossible to say what will happen six months ahead, let alone a year or two into the future, and so I think it is probably wise to keep debts to an absolute minimum and to try to pay off any existing loans as quickly as possible. I don't think I would want to take out a big mortgage on a house or to take on a large business loan although if a debt amnesty is introduced, doing so could clearly be a short cut to obtaining great wealth at someone else's expense.

Intergenerational conflict will mean that millennials will want more inflation (to get rid of their debts) whereas baby boomers won't want to see the value of their pensions and savings destroyed.

Jobs that seemed safe in January of 2020 may well completely disappear and that will produce much uncertainty – just adding to the already sky high levels of fear.

Finally, it seems likely that there will be a good many lawsuits as a result of the handling of the 'crisis'. Indeed, the lawsuits have already started. In late April, the American state of Missouri filed a lawsuit against the Chinese government over its handling of the original outbreak. It is not difficult to see that there will be lawsuits against other governments and their advisers.

Food

I predict that there will be widespread food shortages as broken supply chains will take a long time to mend. The absence of 'pickers' will mean that fruit and vegetables will be scarce as produce is left to rot in situ. Countries which rely on importing food will suffer most. The inevitable result will be that food prices will rise – in some areas quite dramatically. The rises will be most noticeable for fresh produce and for imported foods.

I have no doubt that in the UK, europhiles will blame the rise in food prices on our plans to leave the European Union though this will, of course, be nonsense since without having to contribute to the Common Agricultural Policy, Britain will have a huge financial advantage.

Nevertheless, these protests will be used to help reverse or water down the Brexit for which the British people twice voted.

If governments insist on repeated lockdowns and on indefinite social distancing then prices will soar even further and there will be continued shortages.

It is quite possible that, as was threatened during the first weeks of the lockdown, some form of rationing will be introduced. Informal rationing, introduced by individual supermarkets and applied to their own customers will no doubt be introduced and re-introduced from time to time as stocks of essential items run low. (Threatening to introduce rationing in order to stop panic buying was as stupid as threatening to throw petrol onto a fire to put it out but no one ever said that our politicians were over-blessed with wisdom.)

Although panic buyers were reviled before the official lockdowns began, it seems likely that panic buying will return once sales restrictions are lifted.

Since it seems extremely likely that restrictions, lockdowns and surveillance are likely to be part of our foreseeable future, it would obviously make sense for families to ensure that they have some stocks of essential items on hand. And so there will be a big demand for products such as rice and pasta which tend to have long shelf lives. Since there are also likely to be intermittent electricity shortages in future years, it would probably not be wise to purchase items which need to be stored in refrigerators or freezers. Storing items without sell by dates or best before dates (toilet rolls, soap, paper tissues and so on) may attract opprobrium from politicians and commentators but I can see no alternative. The demand for masks, disposable gloves, disinfectants and hand sanitisers will stay high.

If an expedition set off on a trip across the Arctic without enough food supplies, the leader would be castigated as reckless. Similarly, families which make no preparation for future shortages are taking chances. I suspect that the wise will endeavour to keep a three month supply of staples and basic medicines, replacing their stocks as they are used up.

The economic consequences of the 'crisis' and the supposed 'cure' for the 'crisis' could double the number of people suffering from hunger. The World Food Programme says that more than 250 million people could be affected with the risk of famine developing in Yemen and Venezuela.

Freedom

In the future, freedom is likely to be a memory rather than a reality. Those governments which took on extra powers during the 'crisis' will be very unwilling to hand back the powers they have grown to enjoy. Laws which give powers to politicians are very rarely repealed. There has been some criticism of leaders around the world (such as those in Hungary, Turkey and Russia) who have been seen to take advantage of the 'crisis' to grab more power than they had, but in truth it is difficult to think of any ruling party which hasn't built up the fear and used it to control its population more thoroughly. There is a real danger that governments which introduced tough measures (such as keeping their citizens under house arrest) on the basis they were doing so to protect the population will continue with these measures and even when the measures are withdrawn they will keep them as a threat. We will never again be as free as we were in January 2020.

Freedom of Speech

During the last two months, freedom of speech has more or less disappeared. The mainstream media all followed the Government line rather slavishly. This time it was not just the BBC which has been a disgrace. Journalists in Britain, for example, have failed to ask questions or express doubts about Government policy. Editors and journalists have behaved as though their countries were at war, and have offered their governments a level of loyalty which has been undeserved. Those writers who did try to share the truth have been subject to vicious and unfair attacks. I know this from personal experience. Everything I have written (or said) has been absolutely accurate but, as always, the truth has proved to be immensely unpopular. I have spent 50 years sharing unpopular truths on subjects such as AIDS, food and cancer, drugs, inoculation and benzodiazepines but I have never been 'monstered' or lied about as much as I have in the last couple of months. (Monstering is a term which describes what happens when a newspaper or internet site deliberately alters or adjusts or rearranges or presents the facts in order to damage the reputation of an individual.) Facts are apparently unacceptable luxuries in today's world, and those who dare to share them are likely to be demonised and regarded as unacceptably dangerous. Anyone who questions the official party line is likely to be reviled.

I do find all this worrying (and not just from a personal point of view). When I am writing or recording something, I usually check to make sure that I haven't written or said anything libellous. But when I recorded my videos about the 'crisis', I was aware that what I said might give the authorities an excuse to throw me into prison. This caution was heightened when I read that the German authorities had put a German who had complained about the lockdown into a mental hospital. (This was, of course, a procedure which was enormously widely used in the USSR.) These fears must also influence others with truths to share.

It has long been the case that anyone who writes critically about inoculation is risking serious trouble (it is, in particular, professional suicide for a doctor to say anything even remotely critical about inoculation) and writing critically about the way the 'crisis' has been dealt with has proved to be just as dangerous. In future it will be increasingly difficult to find the truth about anything because writers will be too nervous to offer any views which question the orthodox line. Freedom of speech is fast becoming a memory.

Globalisation

During the so-called 'crisis', countries learned again to be selfish. Nations within the EU acted individually rather than collectively. That will continue. The Italians and the Spanish and the Germans have all talked about the importance of preventing foreign companies taking over their industries. The French want to be more independent. The inevitable result is that the EU has no future as a federation. I predict that in the coming years, as nations struggle to escape from the coming global recession, countries all around the planet will put their own domestic needs above anything else. Globalisation is finished.

Health Care

Governments will no longer be able to afford good health care. In the UK, the NHS will be under-funded for generations. The quality of care provided by general practice, which has deteriorated massively over the last decade or two, will deteriorate still further. GPs, who have been providing advice for their patients by telephone or over the internet, may decide to limit face-to-face contact indefinitely and to carry on insisting that most consultations take place at a distance. Home visits will be even rarer than they are now. Older citizens will remember fondly the days when doctors were available 24 hours a day and 365 days a year. The deterioration of the GP service will continue to put great pressure on the ambulance service and on accident and emergency departments. Neither could cope very well before the 'crisis'. Things will deteriorate still further. At some point, private GP services will spring up in urban areas. Internet medical services will continue to expand and to provide basic medical care for millions. Ironically, the doctors providing care over the internet will be the GPs who are now working three day weeks, or on maternity leave or restricting themselves to providing telephone services for their NHS patients.

The elderly, who have already been brushed aside and denied normal human rights and freedoms, will be increasingly deprived of decent health care and encouraged to sign 'Do Not Resuscitate' forms. What the authorities don't seem to realise is that, generally speaking, the elderly suffer from less illness than individuals several decades younger than them. The over 65s tend to have 1.3 illnesses per year each, on average. The under 65s tend to have 2.1 illnesses per year each, on average. The figures prove that illness isn't the same thing as ageing.

The wisest 70 and 80-year-olds may well deny their age and insist that they are five, ten or fifteen years younger than they really are.

The pressure to accept inoculation will rise for all age groups – even to the point of compulsion.

For reasons which I do not pretend to understand, dental surgeries closed during the 'crisis'. Patients were left to treat themselves – even removing their own teeth. A number of dentists said they would not be able to reopen when the 'crisis' ended.

Home Working

During the 'crisis', millions of people were forced to work at home. Computers and the internet made it possible for people to work effectively from their spare bedroom or the dining room. Skype and Zoom have made it possible for meetings to be held without people wasting time and energy moving from one place to another. For example, magazine editorial teams discovered that it is perfectly possible to put together a magazine without any of the staff seeing one another at all. Everything can be done remotely and it doesn't matter a damn where people live.

How many people will go back to working full time in offices? How many people will go back to spending several hours a day commuting to work?

There will, of course, be some people who will be glad to get back to 'normal' office life. But there will be millions more who will have discovered that they really didn't need to go into an office at all. Or maybe they will decide that they need to meet up with colleagues, say, once a month.

The impact this will have will be enormous.

For a start, there will be less need for offices. Commercial property will slide still further in value unless and until office blocks can be converted into residential accommodation. Large businesses may find that they can rotate office accommodation, with different departments using accommodation on different days of the month. The savings will be phenomenal.

The knock on effect will also be far reaching. There will be less need for transport links and for cleaning services and so on. There will, however, be a constant need for good IT technicians to service equipment in workers' homes. And there will doubtless also be an ever growing need for courier services.

With far fewer commuters on the roads and the trains there will be far less of a need for new transport services. And with lower sales of fuel and fewer people driving into big cities, the tax take will be reduced. The air quality in cities will rise too.

Most dramatic of all, perhaps, will be the moving of many people out from suburbia and into the countryside. Those who have been locked down in small flats or tiny houses with tinier gardens will realise that if anything like this happens again (as it doubtless will) they will want to be working in the countryside and not the town. They will want more space and more garden. Working at home will make this more and more possible.

Hospitals

It seems to be generally agreed that the NHS had a good 'crisis'. NHS staff were applauded, feted and treated as heroes. I'm not so sure that the NHS did much of which it can be proud. It was, after all, NHS staff who allowed cancer patients to be denied essential treatment. NHS staff must have known that many wards were half empty and that intensive care units were nowhere near as busy as they had been before the 'crisis' began. It will take many months if not years for hospitals in Britain to catch up with the backlog of patients requiring treatment for cancer and other serious disorders. The long-term consequences will be fearful as millions of people will be aware that their own illnesses, or the illnesses of loved ones, were allowed to develop beyond treatment. And when it becomes clear that hospitals were not as busy as has been claimed and that urgent care facilities for seriously ill patients were closed down unnecessary, the affection for NHS staff may falter.

For at least six months after the lockdown has ended, hospitals will be busier than ever (far busier than they were during the false 'crisis' of March and April 2020) as an attempt is made to catch up with the backlog of patients urgently requiring attention.

Hotels, Restaurants, Pubs and Cafés

If social distancing really becomes a continuing legal requirement around the world (as has been threatened) I cannot see how any hotels, restaurants, pubs and cafés can ever open again.

For most people the whole point of dining out is to be able to share a table and eat together. If a table for four people is twelve foot square, it's going to need a lot of candles to make it romantic. And how is the waiter going to bring your food? Does he throw it to you from six feet away? Or do you leave the table while he puts down your plate and then retreats to a legally safe distance?

And what's going to happen about lifts/elevators in hotels? With a limit of two close friends per car, the queues for the lifts are going to be endless.

It is difficult to avoid the thought that the Government wants to maintain social distancing so that we are kept isolated from one another – keeping in touch only through the internet. There clearly aren't going to be many meetings or conferences or trade fairs in Britain for a long while.

Television on demand services are the big winners of the social distancing rules. Netflix signed up 16 million new subscribers in the first three months or so of 2020 – twice the number it expected.

Illness

The incidence of a wide range of illnesses will rise dramatically. The lockdown meant that people failed to exercise properly and got into bad eating habits. Many failed to get any sunshine. There will be vitamin deficiencies. Many people ate too much (and will be overweight) and many more drank too much alcohol and will be well on the way to alcoholism. (The sale of alcohol from supermarkets rose by 20% in the UK – though this probably isn't as bad as it seems since the pubs were closed, and so many people were doubtless only drinking at home what they used to drink in their favourite public house.) Many patients with symptoms of illness were unable to obtain medical help and so diseases will be far more advanced when treatment is finally provided. Unbelievably, cancer patients have been deprived of surgery and drug treatment. Mental illness will rocket during lockdown – but there will be very little help available for most sufferers. The young members of the royal family will doubtless give interviews in which they produce an endless stream of pretty obvious platitudes. I wrote the first popular book on stress in the 1970s (*Stress Control*) and I have never known a time when stress was more widespread or more damaging to both body and mind than it is at the moment.

Industry

Some industries are going to find life very different when the 'crisis' has been officially declared under control. (If that is ever allowed to happen.)

For example, the car industry has long relied on selling huge numbers of cars to fleet buyers. But this is likely to change dramatically. As more and more people work from home so there will be far less need to supply staff with vehicles. (During the lockdown period, the amount of traffic on the roads in the UK was similar to the amount of traffic commonly seen in 1955.)

On the other hand, the very same change (more people working from home) will result in an increase in the demand for light, commercial vehicles and estate cars suitable for use by delivery drivers.

And the demand will be for petrol or diesel vehicles rather than electric vehicles. No delivery driver wants a van that will only travel 100 miles without a recharge and which then needs to be left for hours before it can be used again.

Inoculation

For many years now those opposing inoculation have been under great pressure. That pressure has risen dramatically in the last year or so, and it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that there have been plans to introduce compulsory inoculations for some time. I now have a strong suspicion that governments may now be planning annual inoculations.

It is being claimed by some experts that those who catch the infection may not retain their immunity. And that they might, therefore, catch the infection a second time. Or a third time. This will, of course, mean that even people who have had the disease will need to have regular inoculations to protect them against getting the disease again.

All this, of course, is most unusual to say the least.

(To be honest, I'm not sure I believe any of this. Exposure to a specific infection usually leads to a level of immunity. People who catch an infection and survive are usually protected against future attacks. I have never known so much bollocks talked about a disease. But I know that what I believe is of little consequence.)

Flu inoculations are usually given annually because the type of flu against which the inoculation is intended to provide protection changes each year – or more often. The inoculation isn't against the same flu bug– but a different one each year. Sadly, the inoculation isn't always against whatever infection happens to be prevalent that year.

But, if it is believed that catching the 'crisis' infection doesn't provide lifelong immunity, I don't see how the much publicised proposed inoculation will provide lifelong immunity either.

And so will the authorities insist that we all have annual inoculations? Will these be against the same infection – or against a mutation?

I cannot see those inoculations being voluntary. And it would not surprise me at all if the authorities decided to put a microchip or radioactive tracer into each inoculation so that they could trace those individuals who had not had the inoculation. It seems possible that individuals who do not have the inoculation (for whatever reason) will find themselves excluded from society in many different ways – denied access to health care for example. It is also possible that a slow release drug will be introduced – ostensibly to ensure that those having the stuff from a syringe remain protected.

I wonder how many people will be made ill or killed by these inoculations. And what else will the injection do to us? What are the chances that a medicament given to the elderly might cause a lethal response?

The only certainties are that someone is going to make a hell of a lot of money out of these inoculations and it will soon be illegal to criticise inoculation programmes.

Two months ago, I would not have even thought this. But the world has changed.

Anyone who isn't paranoid isn't thinking straight.

There will, without doubt, be a rise in the number of people offering advice to those looking for a reason to be given exemption from compulsory inoculation.

It is worth noting that in the UK, preliminary work was begun in 2018 for a suitable factory to be built in Harwell, Oxfordshire.

Investments and savings

Cautious, sensible investors have lost a third or more of their savings in a few weeks. This was not, as is widely assumed, because of the 'crisis' but because of the so-called 'cure' – a 'cure' created by a succession of 'snowflake' governments which didn't know what to do except panic. It is the lockdowns all over the world which have done the damage.

Nevertheless, having some savings around is vital at a time of great uncertainty. This is a time for putting some money to one side – rather than spending it on having a good time or purchasing 'toys'. (Of course, some will feel that if we are all going to hell in a hand-basket then spending whatever they have as quickly as possible makes total sense.)

But where can we invest?

Interest rates are lower than the rate of inflation, so any money put into a bank deposit account or building society account will steadily diminish in purchasing value. Government bonds and savings accounts are utterly useless for the same reason. Property always used to be a good, safe investment but it is unlikely to be a sound investment for a good many years to come. Good jewellery, particularly gold, has always been popular at times of 'crisis' but the retail mark up on jewellery is absurdly high and makes it difficult ever to make a profit. Gold coins are probably the best type of investment, and for British investors sovereigns have the extra advantage of being officially listed as currency and, therefore, being outside the tax system. A British taxpayer can buy sovereigns and sell them at a profit without having to pay a penny in capital gains tax.

The only logical place to invest is the stock market but most investors will have sold their shares in horror and disgust when they saw prices crashing. Older investors will remember the crash of 2008, the crash of 1987 and the crash in the 1970s but it is clear that this crash really is different. Many large and well-known companies will struggle to stay alive after the lockdown. The directors of airlines, travel companies, car companies, steel companies, commercial property companies, banks and retailers are all likely to be among those who need to look up the address of a bankruptcy court.

I always eschew investments in open ended funds such as unit trusts because the costs are too high but these are now likely to be a particularly poor investment since they have traditionally been held by small investors who have a habit of panicking and selling at precisely the moment when they should be taking their courage in both hands and buying. The best answer, perhaps, is to build up a small portfolio of investment trusts which have a sound if relatively solid and unexciting investment history. Some will probably be selling at a discount and may be paying a regular, if small, dividend. This is probably not the time to put carefully collected savings into a high risk investment.

Pay

The oft-suggested idea of paying every citizen a basic salary may well become reality. Paying a simple basic salary to everyone over the age of 16 will massively simplify accounting for governments. It will mean that state benefit schemes, pensions, sick pay and so on can all be abandoned. The financial and labour savings from the simplification would be phenomenal.

Pensions

Many pensioners depend upon corporate dividends for their income. But overall dividend income will fall by two thirds this year. Indeed, there is a danger the fall will be even greater than that. And what will happen next year? Who knows? For example, banks have been 'told' by the British Government to stop paying dividends. This was cruel and typical of the uncaring and disrespectful way in which the Government has treated the elderly. The only guarantee is that directors and executives will continue to pay themselves obscene salaries and to find ways to ensure that they also receive unearned bonuses.

Some pensioners probably do not realise that they are dependent on dividends for the regular pension payments they rely on. But anyone who didn't work for the state in some way will probably receive a pension which depends to some extent on dividends. The bottom line is that pensions will either be reduced (causing great hardship now) or else pensions will be paid out of capital (causing great hardship at some point in the future). It also seems likely that state pension payments to those who have retired will be reduced and will no longer keep up with inflation.

The other effect of this reduction in dividend payments will be to reduce the power of individuals to become independent – and statist politicians will naturally be pleased by that. Statist politicians (and it seems that these days all politicians are 'statist') want everyone to be dependent upon the state.

The long-term result of the changes that are now inevitable in our society will be that workers will have to work even longer than they had planned. Indeed, the majority will probably never be able to retire – simply because their private or company pensions, when added to the state pension, will not be sufficient to live on.

Only those individuals who were employed by the state in some capacity will be able to afford to become full-time pensioners. The anger at this schism will grow and grow and eventually the funds for those pensioners who worked for the state will be reduced. I don't think state employees can look forward with certainty to being able to retire as early as their predecessors.

In the years to come, it is also likely that the over 70s (and in due course the over 65s and then the over 60s) will find that they are entitled to fewer and fewer health care benefits.

There are few answers to these horrors – other than for everyone to prepare for a lifetime of work, unrelieved by a few years of retirement. Only the richest and most fortunate will be able to look forward to the traditional quiet years of gentle retirement.

Police

As the lockdown continued, the police appeared to be making up their own rules as they went along. Many seemed to completely misunderstand their role in society and to delight in finding new ways to harass those going about their lawful business. In the unlikely event that the Emergency Bill is ever repealed, the police need to be reminded that their role is to protect not persecute law abiding citizens. The Government in the UK said that citizens were allowed to shop for basic necessities but the police (and some local councils) decided that Easter eggs were not essential. Some policemen decided that cigarettes and alcohol were not essential. Some pharmacies covered up their cosmetic counters. Home owners were told off by the police for daring to go into their own gardens. Helicopters patrolled the coast to make sure that no one was swimming or sailing. The chief constable of Northamptonshire, Nick Adderley, said that if people didn't heed his warning, the police would start checking the items in shoppers' baskets and trolleys to make sure that everything being purchased was a legitimate, necessary item. He did not provide a list of legitimate, necessary items. Uniformed officers patrolled parks and used drones to look for citizens who had chosen to take their exercise in public spaces. The police wanted the right to enter private homes to see if the residents had organised a party. And, worst of all, they were encouraging members of the public to sneak on their neighbours, to tell off anyone they thought might have broken the law, or the spirit of the law, and to report repeat offenders to the authorities. It is not surprising that one retired Supreme Court Judge announced that we were living in a police state. Nor is it particularly surprising that the police let it be known that they would not be dealing with crimes such as robberies, muggings and burglaries because they were so busy making sure that members of the public were behaving themselves and not buying Easter eggs.

Despite the fact that citizens felt that they were living in a police state (where the police seem to be making up laws as they went along) there was evidence that many of those in authority felt that they were above the law.

In London, Cressida Dick, the Metropolitan police commissioner, led a demonstration of police officers which broke the law on public meetings. She and the Metropolitan police were subsequently reprimanded by the Government for flouting their own rules. It is difficult to think of a more arrogant expression of superiority though we must remember that a number of ministers, including the Prime Minister, ordered the electorate to stay put but then chose to travel to their second homes. (The Prime Minister travelled to Chequers, his official country home, for his convalescence after contracting the infection and becoming part of the 'crisis'.) Dr Catherine Calderwood, the former Chief Medical Officer in Scotland resigned after making two trips to her second home during the lockdown period.

For the rest of us, however, the ill-defined laws were enforced with surprising vigour.

A Tesco delivery driver told me that when he found himself stuck in a police road block, he expected that when it was his turn to be questioned he would be waved through. Not a bit of it. 'What is the purpose of your journey?' he was asked by an officious officer while sitting in the cab of a large lorry filled with groceries.

The police have always preferred to take the easy solution, and tackling law abiding citizens will always be easier than tackling knife wielding criminals. It seems to me that the police have been deliberately trying to break the spirit of the people with an absurd armoury of petty rules and regulations – most of them made up by senior officers who exhibited a remarkable ignorance of the law.

The Emergency Bill has given the police massive, long-term powers which they will be reluctant to relinquish. Giving the police massive powers is like allowing a lion to taste human flesh and blood, and so the way the police have behaved should not surprise us. Researchers at Cambridge University searched and found the missing twin brothers of 13 men who were recidivists. They discovered that nine of the other 13 brothers were also recidivists and the remaining four were policemen.

Sadly, the one thing the 'crisis' has taught us is that the police cannot be trusted. They have no common sense but an uncommon sense of their own importance.

The Emergency Bill has also given council employees tough powers over the electorate. If these powers are abused (which they almost certainly will be) there will be much frustration and repressed anger.

Politics

Governments which are shown to have made large errors in the way they treated the ‘crisis’, will quite rightly suffer a huge failure of public sympathy and support. In order to avoid this happening, politicians will lie, lie and lie again about the seriousness of the situation and they will doubtless do everything they can to fiddle the figures to prove that they acted wisely.

The EU had a very bad ‘crisis’ and showed itself incapable of providing leadership. It is now much more likely that the EU will fail to survive the next five years.

China will come out of the affair very badly. Few people will now trust the Chinese, and there will be sustained anger at the way the ‘crisis’ is believed to have developed.

World politics is going to change. Distrust and suspicion will grow, borders will be strengthened, nationalism will be revived and globalism will become a dirty word.

Property

There are going to be many forced sellers when the ‘crisis’ is over. The millions of home owners who have lost their jobs will be looking to downsize or to move into rented property. Many others will be struggling with terrible debts.

Property prices in pleasant, rural areas are set to only fall a little whereas I suspect that residential property prices in urban areas will collapse by as much as a fifth or even a quarter. Top end London prices won’t be much affected but I suspect that the long running London property boom might well be over. How many people will want to live in London when they can buy a lovely home in the country for the same money – and set up an office in a spare bedroom or a shed in the garden? The sale of small one room apartments may prove popular as those working from home buy a pied a terre for visits to the capital.

Once the lockdown ends, there will be a rush as buyers and sellers caught in limbo hustle to complete interrupted transactions. The over 70s, however, will remain in limbo if they are stuck in long-term or even perpetual lockdown. Their inability to move from their houses for anything other than essential shopping and a little occasional exercise will mean that they will be unable to complete or initiate property transactions. If the lockdown remains permanent for the elderly then unless they are prepared to break the law (and risk an unlimited fine) the over 70s will never, ever be able to move home even if they wish to move into smaller or sheltered accommodation.

All over the country there will probably be a demand for small, cheap lock up properties where internet sellers can store the goods they sell – and possibly use to accept mail and to pack items for mailing.

Secrecy and subterfuge

Whenever people are oppressed by what is, effectively, an occupying force, they look for (and invariably find) ways to get round the regulations.

During World War II, the French resistance managed to keep moving about in Paris even though the French capital was occupied by a ruthless army of Germans.

And if millions of over 70s are (as has been threatened) kept under house arrest in the UK until the autumn of 2021 or even 2022, then the one guarantee is that many of those people will find ways to ‘escape’ from their homes, to meet their families and their friends and to enjoy the autumn and early winter days of their lives.

The British Government has given courts the power to issue unlimited fines to anyone breaking free of their homes but it is difficult to see this really stopping people doing some of the things they want to do – and seeing the people who are important to them.

The Nazis were able to shoot people who disobeyed but that didn’t stop some of the French moving about. I can’t see British courts managing to keep people locked up more or less permanently.

All sorts of subterfuge will be used, of course. People will hide under blankets in cars and then meet in sheds and back rooms. Some may disguise themselves as delivery drivers. The over 70s will do whatever they can to make themselves look 60. Are the police really going to expect everyone to carry their birth certificates, passports, driving licences or other identifying papers with them? (It is, of course, perfectly possible that the Government will use the Emergency Bill as an excuse to introduce identity cards. However, this much hated concept will certainly result in the development of a thriving market for false papers.)

Shops

Many small and large shops will probably never open again. High streets and shopping centres will be nearly empty of shops. After weeks of house arrest, many will be cautious about shopping in busy town and city centres. The level of fear (bordering on terror) created by politicians and the media will not vanish easily.

Even charity shops will close as they struggle to deal with the probably exaggerated fear that second-hand clothing, books and so on may be infected. Health officials are likely to introduce legislation controlling second-hand clothing, books and other items, and these rules will result in the closure of many charity shops. Public libraries will either adopt new storage and sterilisation protocols or they will simply close. (I suspect that many councils will take the opportunity to close their libraries.) An enormous amount of re-useable material will end up being dumped or incinerated. Deprived of their income, many charities will demand to be supported with taxpayers' money. Politically correct charities will find themselves well supported. Fringe charities will doubtless either close or become entirely voluntary.

Shops will be under pressure to limit the number of people in a store at one time. Unhappily, I suspect that the rules about this will not be a great burden because the number of people shopping will be reduced. Millions who have become used to doing their grocery and clothes shopping online will find real world shopping too onerous.

Debts incurred during the lockdown will prove to be an impossible burden for numerous independent shop owners. Retail property values are likely to slump dramatically as large numbers of shops are put on the market – with relatively few buyers around. Shop premises are likely to remain empty for long periods as even charities stop opening new shops. Town centres are going to look like the day after the apocalypse. If new entrepreneurs buy shop premises at low prices and without historic debts, they may be able to survive but local councils will be desperate for money and will doubtless put up business rates and car park charges.

Large retailers will suffer too and those without large, well organised online shops will probably fail quite quickly. Shoppers have become accustomed to the convenience of buying online and will be reluctant to go back to the High Street – particularly when social distancing rules make shopping a tedious and time consuming nightmare. The word is that we will have to follow social distancing rules indefinitely. Standing outside, queuing to enter a shop, will cause massive congestion on often narrow pavements. And it isn't going to be much fun in the middle of winter, when there is ice on the ground and snow in the air. No one is going to go shopping for fun, browsing will be impossible and bricks and mortar shops don't have much of a future. Online shopping is going to explode and those who provide the support services (providing packaging, storage and courier services) will, like the traders who sold picks and shovels in the gold rush, probably be the people who get rich. Online shops will be expected to provide free delivery and to agree to take back items which don't fit or which are unwanted. The result will be that margins will be wafer thin.

Not even service industries will escape unscathed. Many people have learned to cut one another's hair or do their own nails. Social distancing rules will make it difficult for professional hairdressers and beauty technicians to operate successfully. And demand for their services will doubtless fall.

The only beneficiaries of all these changes will be internet companies, logistical companies and real estate companies renting out huge 'box' warehouses. Companies which have 'big box' warehouses which are well situated close to motorway junctions will probably do extremely well. However, intense competition will mean that margins in all these areas will remain low.

Smart meters

Smart meters for electricity will become compulsory. Ostensibly, this will be done to control electricity usage (which will be in short supply because of the demand for power to keep electric cars moving). In reality, it will be done to control the citizens and to check to see who is moving about too much. Those individuals who question authority will find that their electricity is turned off. Smart meters make it easy to do this from a distance. Governments will have the power to stop electric cars moving and, when self-driving cars are introduced, governments will have the power to re-direct those in any way they wish.

Citizens who wish to defy the 'house arrest' regulations will no doubt 'fool' the smart meter spies by leaving on lights even when they are out of their homes.

Sneaking and snitching

People are so riddled with senseless fear (it doesn't matter whether it was created because of a conspiracy or a cockup) that they will continue to be suspicious and distrusting of their neighbours. Bullying (whether online or in real life) will abound and there will be an increase in puritanism.

In the UK, the police have encouraged people to snitch on their neighbours. In New York, the mayor, Bill de Blasio, encouraged people to inform on those who were violating his lockdown rules. The Chinese used emergency pandemic laws to arrest 15 people in Hong Kong because they had been accused of being involved in anti-government protests.

In the end, the population will be divided into two.

On the one hand there will be the sneaks who will, bathed in self-righteousness, take great delight in dobbing in their friends, relatives and neighbours.

And on the other hand there will be those who regard sneaking as a deplorable activity.

Sadly, I fear that the sneaks will be in the majority.

Social Distancing

Is social distancing really necessary?

I don't think there is much evidence that it helps very much but it certainly causes fear, suspicion and mistrust as well as a growing sense of paranoia. It also builds up aggression and self-importance among those charged with ensuring that social distancing rules are obeyed.

The one certainty is that social distancing makes the public easier to control and to manage.

Is that just a fortunate side effect?

Social services

Neither central government nor local government will be able to afford much in the way of social services. I think we have to expect all services to be cut dramatically. And I fear that once they have been cut they will never be restored. Services to the elderly will be the first to be cut and these cuts will, I fear, be draconian.

Sporting Events

In the near future, some professional sporting events will be played behind closed doors – with television cameras providing spectators with their only chance to watch games. In the long term, sporting venues may be forced to ensure that spectators stay further apart and this will inevitably mean a dramatically reduced income. If the spectators in a football stadium have to be kept six or eight feet apart from one another then a stadium built to hold 100,000 spectators will probably only accommodate 5,000 to 10,000 safely. A season ticket will cost the price of a new medium range motorcar. Moreover, managing the flow of even such dramatically reduced crowds into and out of sporting venues will mean long delays and will further damage the popularity of sport as entertainment. Sporting events which require spectators to travel long distances will find that they are hit badly. Professional sports clubs are going to have to become accustomed to a new, far less profitable world.

(Much the same problem will be faced by musicians, of course. Having seen their record sale income slump as a result of the internet, many entertainers have chosen to tour and earn money through concerts. In the future, open air concerts will probably be more popular than concerts in closed venues but both will doubtless suffer a huge drop in income. And the success of open air concerts will depend upon the demands of the police. Ticket prices will have to rise to astronomical levels or else artistes will have to take much reduced fees.)

Amateur sports will never be as popular as they were, and team sports which require shared dressing rooms will suffer most. Golf and tennis clubs may have to reduce their charges in order to stay in business.

Status

One lesson of the 'crisis' is the widespread realisation that we have for many years under-valued the people in our society whose work is most crucial and, at the same time, we have over-valued the status of people whose work is far less important.

The status of health care workers has rocketed (even though it will eventually be clear that much of their effort has been misdirected and that by taking decisions to abandon those people who needed urgent treatment, high level health care managers may have failed to do the jobs they are paid to do) but it is now clear that the people who really matter in our daily lives are the ones who do jobs which most people always used to take for granted: the postman, the delivery driver, the supermarket checkout staff, the rubbish collectors and so on.

And the ones whose work is less important are the senior bureaucrats and administrators who are paid huge sums to shuffle bits of paper around – the ones who consider themselves far too important to do anything as demeaning as actually 'manage' or organise things. We have managed quite well without them during the 'crisis' and it is now clear that we could manage well without them pretty well indefinitely.

I hope that society finds a way to reward the hard-working, courageous folk without whom our lives would have been entirely unbearable. They need better pay not just because more money is always nice to have but because better pay means that you have been given more respect for the work you do.

So, for example, let's cut in half the salaries of the senior executives who sit in the Royal Mail boardroom. That should enable the company to damn near double the pay of the average postman and postwoman. (Sadly, I gather that Royal Mail is planning to cut back on Saturday deliveries. This will allegedly be temporary. We'll see.) And let's halve the salaries of the over-paid executives who work for our local councils, and double the salaries of the dustmen.

Taxes

For a year or so, governments will try not to raise income taxes – and so they will introduce more hidden taxes than ever. I suspect that tax relief on pension payments will be reduced still further and capital gains taxes will be extended and increased. Capital gains tax will probably be introduced for home sales. (This tax will probably raise very little money, for it seems likely that property prices will fall rather than rise for the foreseeable future.)

I fear, however, that these hidden taxes will not raise enough money to pay off the massive debts which will have accumulated.

Unless debts are simply written off (a very real possibility) taxes are going to have to rise and stay high for generations and, at the same time, services are going to have to be cut since the extra money raised will need to be used to pay off the interest on the debts. Paying off the capital debts governments have incurred will take close to forever. Inflation will soar around the world as governments print more money to try to stay ahead of their massive debts. Interest rates will rise too. And, until interest rates become irresistibly high, so too will the value of gold.

In due course there is likely to be an increase in the rate of VAT, and I can see a wealth tax being introduced. (This has been made easier for individual governments since the International Monetary Fund has recommended wealth taxes as a way to deal with the consequences of the lockdowns that have been so widely introduced.) Although wealth taxes have always done far more harm than good and have been pretty well abandoned by most countries, governments will be so desperate to raise money that they will happily reintroduce taxes which seem popular to the mass of electors and which have more of a political than an economic value. The really rich won't pay any wealth tax, of course. The people who will be hit will be the middle classes who don't think of themselves as rich at all.

The one hope is that governments will use the 'crisis' as an excuse to simplify tax regimes. In the UK, for example, the tax code has expanded so much that not even professional tax inspectors or tax accountants can possibly know all the regulations. The result is that much of the nation's time is spent on preparing, finalising, submitting and arguing over tax accounts.

Local councils will not miss the opportunity to use the 'crisis' as an excuse to put up their taxes. Commercial failures (particularly in town centres) will result in bankruptcies (with taxes being unpaid) and massively reduced footfall (with the result that car park income will drop). Tax rises will doubtless be far more dramatic than ever seen previously. And, at the same time, services will be reduced. The big financial burden on local councils has for years been servicing the pension costs of former executives. For years now local council executives have been vastly over-paid (in the UK many are paid far more than the Prime Minister). This burden will prove to be unsustainable.

For all of us, the old adage 'hope for the best, plan for the worst' seems appropriate.

Travel

Many airlines and travel companies will go bust and in future travel costs will rise dramatically. There will be pressure to cut back on international travel – particularly by flying. This will be partly a result of the realisation that there are real health risks involved in going abroad, partly a result of the fact that many business folk will realise that video conferencing really does make international travel a luxury rather than a necessity and partly a result of the fact that for a variety of reasons the cost of airline travel is going to rocket. Not many people are going to want to holiday in France or Spain when the cost of a return airline ticket has soared to $10,000. Disneyland is going to struggle to find non-local customers. Ski resorts will find life very hard.

Airlines will doubtless be ordered to reduce the number of people per plane in order to satisfy social distancing requirements but that isn't going to help very much since on many planes the air that everyone breathes is recirculated. Even on a short flight this means that everyone on board will breathe in dirty air that has been exhaled by everyone else. What this means in practice is that if there is one person on an aeroplane with an infectious disease then by the time the aeroplane lands, the chances are high that everyone on the aeroplane will have caught that disease – whatever it is.

There has been some talk of leaving the middle seat of three empty on aeroplanes but this would inevitably lead to a dramatic fall in profits or rise in the cost of airline tickets. An alternative is for airline passengers to wear masks throughout their journeys though this would mean that they would be unable to eat or drink. (Relaxing the mask rule even for a few minutes would destroy the point of wearing the masks.) It is difficult to see 12 hour flights being popular when travellers have to wear masks for the whole 12 hours – without eating or drinking anything. Travellers hoping to go to another country may need a certificate of inoculation, in the same way that travellers a few decades ago were required to have a certificate of inoculation against smallpox. Tattooed certificates may be considered more reliable, and will be welcomed by some younger folk, though politically unacceptable.

In addition, people will be constantly aware that the danger of lockdowns is ever present. Many will decide that these are not good days to plan trips abroad, whether for business or for pleasure. Do you really want to be stuck on the other side of the globe when a lockdown is announced?

Business meetings can be managed without any travel at all and most people have travelled relatively little in their own countries so there are plenty of opportunities to take holidays without having to get onto an aeroplane or travel abroad.

It isn't just aeroplanes which are best avoided, of course. Trains and buses are good places for catching bugs of one sort or another and there is, in addition, always the risk that public transport will be closed down if there is any threat of an infection. Private transport still has a future but vehicles will be used more for private reasons than for business purposes.

I suspect that, in countries all around the world, a number of tourist resorts and attractions will find that they need to concentrate on catering for customers close to home rather than attracting customers from abroad. Holiday resorts which had become unfashionable may suddenly find that they are back in favour.

It would be sensible for governments planning new infrastructure developments for travellers (new railway lines and airports) to reconsider their plans but as always where politics are concerned, the sensible route is not always the favoured route. Lobbyists will ensure that the commercial and employment advantages of expensive infrastructure projects are well promoted.

Conclusion

So that is how I see the future.

I am sorry if my thoughts seem depressing.

But it is surely better to have some idea of what may come – and to be prepared. And, of course, I could be wrong. Maybe everything will be back to normal in a month.

I suspect that we are all going to have to change our ambitions and our hopes and our plans. Life is going to become rather more like living in a science fiction novel than some might like. Those who can become at least a little independent will survive the disappointments and the frustrations of the future most easily and, dare I say it, with most self-respect and dignity. Usually, it is the young who cope best with change. But, we are going through massive, fundamental lifestyle changes and children and millennials will not cope as well as older citizens.

There is no doubt that those of us who see the truth are in a minority. There may, however, be enough dissidents to create an underground protest movement. If so, nations will be divided into those who believe their government's version of the truth and those who prefer the truth.

To paraphrase Henry David Thoreau, the mass of people are incredibly gullible and frighteningly unwilling to question what they are told – especially when they can be convinced that there is any sort of national or global 'crisis'. It is in a 'crisis' that leaders can most readily rely on the fearful following obediently. And the greater the fear becomes, the more obedient people will be.

Dear Reader

If you found this book useful I would be enormously grateful if you would post a review on Amazon or your preferred online site. It would help a great deal.

Thank you
Vernon Coleman

The Author
Biography and reference articles

Vernon Coleman was educated at Queen Mary's Grammar School in Walsall, Staffs. He then spent a year as a Community Service Volunteer in Liverpool where he was the first of Alec Dickson's 'catalysts'. (Ref 1 below). He studied medicine at Birmingham Medical School and qualified as a doctor in 1970. He has worked both in hospitals and as a GP. He resigned from the health service on a matter of principle. (Ref 2 below).

Vernon Coleman has organised many campaigns concerning iatrogenesis, drug addiction and the abuse of animals and has given evidence to committees at the House of Commons and the House of Lords. For example, he gave evidence to the *House of Lords Select Committee on Animals in Scientific Procedures* (2001-2) on Tuesday 12.2.02

Dr Coleman's campaigns have often proved successful. For example, after a 15 year campaign (which started in 1973) he eventually persuaded the British Government to introduce stricter controls governing the prescribing of benzodiazepine tranquillisers. ('Dr Vernon Coleman's articles, to which I refer with approval, raised concern about these important matters,' said the Parliamentary Secretary for Health in the House of Commons in 1988.) (Ref 3 below).

Dr Coleman has worked as a columnist for numerous national newspapers including *The Sun, The Daily Star, The Sunday Express, Sunday Correspondent* and *The People*. He once wrote three columns at the same time for national papers (he wrote them under three different names, Dr Duncan Scott in *The Sunday People*, Dr James in *The Sun* and Dr Vernon Coleman in the *Daily Star*). At the same time he was also writing weekly columns for the *Evening Times* in Glasgow and for the *Sunday Scot*. His syndicated columns have appeared in over 50 regional newspapers in the United Kingdom and his columns and articles have appeared in newspapers and magazines around the world. Dr Coleman resigned from *The People* in 2003 when the editor refused to print a column criticising the Government's decision to start the Iraq War. (Ref 6 below)

He has contributed articles and stories to hundreds of other publications including *The Sunday Times, Observer, Guardian, Daily Telegraph, Sunday Telegraph, Daily Express, Daily Mail, Mail on Sunday, Daily Mirror, Sunday Mirror, Punch, Woman, Woman's Own, The Lady, Spectator* and *British Medical Journal*. He was the founding editor of the *British Clinical Journal.* For many years he wrote a monthly newsletter called *Dr Vernon Coleman's Health Letter*. He has worked with the Open University in the UK and has lectured doctors and nurses on a variety of medical matters.

Vernon Coleman has presented numerous programmes on television and radio and was the original breakfast television doctor on TV AM. He was television's first agony uncle (on BBC1's *The Afternoon Show*) and presented three TV series based on his bestselling book *Bodypower*. In the 1980s, he helped write the algorithms for the first computerised health programmes – which sold around the world to those far-sighted individuals who had bought the world's first home computers. (Ref 4 below). His books have been published in the UK *by Arrow, Pan, Penguin, Corgi, Mandarin, Star, Piatkus, RKP, Thames and Hudson, Sidgwick and Jackson, Macmillan* and many other leading publishing houses and translated into 25 languages. English language versions sell in the USA, Australia, Canada and South Africa as well as the UK. Several of his books have appeared on both the *Sunday Times* and *Bookseller* bestseller lists.

Altogether, he has written over 100 books which have, together, sold over two million copies in the UK alone. His self-published novel, *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War* has been turned into an award winning film (starring Pauline Collins, John Alderton and Peter Capaldi) and the book is, like many of his other novels, available in an audio version.

Vernon Coleman has co-written five books with his wife, Donna Antoinette Coleman and has, in addition, written numerous articles (and books) under a vast variety of pennames (many of which he has now forgotten). Donna Antoinette Coleman is a talented oil painter who specialises in landscapes. Her books include, *My Quirky Cotswold Garden*. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. Vernon and Antoinette Coleman have been married for more than 20 years.

Vernon Coleman has received numerous awards and was for some time a Professor of Holistic Medical Sciences at the Open International University based in Sri Lanka.

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There is a more comprehensive list of reference articles on www.vernoncoleman.com

COVID-19:
THE GREAT RESET

KLAUS SCHWAB
THIERRY MALLERET

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About Covid-19: The Great Reset

Since it made its entry on the world stage, COVID-19 has dramatically torn up the existing script of how to govern countries, live with others and take part in the global economy. Written by World Economic Forum Founder Klaus Schwab and Monthly Barometer author Thierry Malleret, COVID-19: The Great Reset considers its far-reaching and dramatic implications on tomorrow's world.

The book's main objective is to help understand what's coming in a multitude of domains. Published in July 2020, in the midst of the crisis and when further waves of infection may still arise, it is a hybrid between a contemporary essay and an academic snapshot of a crucial moment in history. It includes theory and practical examples but is chiefly explanatory, containing many conjectures and ideas about what the post-pandemic world might, and perhaps should, look like.

The book has three main chapters, offering a panoramic overview of the future landscape. The first assesses what the impact of the pandemic will be on five key macro categories: the economic, societal, geopolitical, environmental and technological factors. The second considers the effects in micro terms, on specific industries and companies. The third hypothesizes about the nature of the possible consequences at the individual level.

In early July 2020, we are at a crossroads, the authors of COVID-19: The Great Reset argue. One path will take us to a better world: more inclusive, more equitable and more respectful of Mother Nature. The other will take us to a world that resembles the one we just left behind – but worse and constantly dogged by nasty surprises. We must therefore get it right. The looming challenges could be more consequential than we have until now chosen to imagine, but our capacity to reset could also be greater than we had previously dared to hope.

About the authors

Professor **Klaus Schwab** (1938, Ravensburg, Germany) is the Founder and Executive Chairman of the World Economic Forum. In 1971, he published Modern Enterprise Management in Mechanical Engineering. He argues in that book that a company must serve not only shareholders but all stakeholders to achieve long-term growth and prosperity. To promote the stakeholder concept, he founded the World Economic Forum the same year.

Professor Schwab holds doctorates in Economics (University of Fribourg) and in Engineering (Swiss Federal Institute of Technology) and obtained a master's degree in Public Administration (MPA) from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. In 1972, in addition to his leadership role at the Forum, he became a professor at the University of Geneva. He has since received numerous international and national honours, including 17 honorary doctorates. His latest books are The Fourth Industrial Revolution (2016), a worldwide bestseller translated into 30 languages, and Shaping the Future of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (2018).

Thierry Malleret (1961, Paris, France) is the Managing Partner of the Monthly Barometer, a succinct predictive analysis provided to private investors, global CEOs and opinion- and decision-makers. His professional experience includes founding the Global Risk Network at the World Economic Forum and heading its Programme team.

Malleret was educated at the Sorbonne and the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, and at St Antony's College, Oxford. He holds master’s degrees in Economics and History, and a PhD in Economics. His career spans investment banking, think tanks, academia and government (with a three-year spell in the prime minister's office in Paris). He has written several business and academic books and has published four novels. He lives in Chamonix, France, with his wife Mary Anne.

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INTRODUCTION

The worldwide crisis triggered by the coronavirus pandemic has no parallel in modern history. We cannot be accused of hyperbole when we say it is plunging our world in its entirety and each of us individually into the most challenging times we've faced in generations. It is our defining moment – we will be dealing with its fallout for years, and many things will change forever. It is bringing economic disruption of monumental proportions, creating a dangerous and volatile period on multiple fronts – politically, socially, geopolitically – raising deep concerns about the environment and also extending the reach (pernicious or otherwise) of technology into our lives. No industry or business will be spared from the impact of these changes. Millions of companies risk disappearing and many industries face an uncertain future; a few will thrive. On an individual basis, for many, life as they've always known it is unravelling at alarming speed. But deep, existential crises also favour introspection and can harbour the potential for transformation. The fault lines of the world – most notably social divides, lack of fairness, absence of cooperation, failure of global governance and leadership – now lie exposed as never before, and people feel the time for reinvention has come. A new world will emerge, the contours of which are for us to both imagine and to draw.

At the time of writing (June 2020), the pandemic continues to worsen globally. Many of us are pondering when things will return to normal. The short response is: never. Nothing will ever return to the "broken" sense of normalcy that prevailed prior to the crisis because the coronavirus pandemic marks a fundamental inflection point in our global trajectory. Some analysts call it a major bifurcation, others refer to a deep crisis of "biblical" proportions, but the essence remains the same: the world as we knew it in the early months of 2020 is no more, dissolved in the context of the pandemic. Radical changes of such consequence are coming that some pundits have referred to a "before coronavirus" (BC) and "after coronavirus" (AC) era. We will continue to be surprised by both the rapidity and unexpected nature of these changes – as they conflate with each other, they will provoke second-, third-, fourth- and more-order consequences, cascading effects and unforeseen outcomes. In so doing, they will shape a "new normal" radically different from the one we will be progressively leaving behind. Many of our beliefs and assumptions about what the world could or should look like will be shattered in the process.

However, broad and radical pronouncements (like "everything will change") and an all-or-nothing, black-and-white analysis should be deployed with great care. Of course, reality will be much more nuanced. By itself, the pandemic may not completely transform the world, but it is likely to accelerate many of the changes that were already taking place before it erupted, which will in turn set in motion other changes. The only certainty: the changes won't be linear and sharp discontinuities will prevail. *COVID-19: The Great Reset* is an attempt to identify and shed light on the changes ahead, and to make a modest contribution in terms of delineating what their more desirable and sustainable form might resemble.

Let's begin by putting things into perspective: human beings have been around for about 200,000 years, the oldest bacteria for billions of years and viruses for at least 300 million years. This means that, most likely, pandemics have always existed and been an integral part of human history since people started travelling around; over the past 2000 years they have been the rule, not the exception. Because of their inherently disruptive nature, epidemics throughout history have proven to be a force for lasting and often radical change: sparking riots, causing population clashes and military defeats, but also triggering innovations, redrawing national boundaries and often paving the way for revolutions. Outbreaks forced empires to change course – like the Byzantine Empire when struck by the Plague of Justinian in 541-542 – and some even to disappear altogether – when Aztec and Inca emperors died with most of their subjects from European germs. Also, authoritative measures to attempt to contain them have always been part of the policy arsenal. Thus, there is nothing new about the confinement and lockdowns imposed upon much of the world to manage COVID-19. They have been common practice for centuries. The earliest forms of confinement came with the quarantines instituted in an effort to contain the Black Death that between 1347 and 1351 killed about a third of all Europeans. Coming from the word *quaranta* (which means "forty" in Italian), the idea of confining people for 40 days originated without the authorities really understanding what they wanted to contain, but the measures were one of the first forms of "institutionalized public health" that helped legitimatize the "accretion of power" by the modern state.[1] The period of 40 days has no medical foundation; it was chosen for symbolic and religious reasons: both the Old and New Testaments often refer to the number 40 in the context of purification – in particular the 40 days of Lent and the 40 days of flood in Genesis.

The spread of infectious diseases has a unique ability to fuel fear, anxiety and mass hysteria. In so doing, as we have seen, it also challenges our social cohesion and collective capacity to manage a crisis. Epidemics are by nature divisive and traumatizing. What we are fighting against is invisible; our family, friends and neighbours may all become sources of infection; those everyday rituals that we cherish, like meeting a friend in a public place, may become a vehicle for transmission; and the authorities that try to keep us safe by enforcing confinement measures are often perceived as agents of oppression. Throughout history, the important and recurring pattern has been to search for scapegoats and place the blame firmly on the outsider. In medieval Europe, the Jews were almost always among the victims of the most notorious pogroms provoked by the plague. One tragic example illustrates this point: in 1349, two years after the Black Death had started to rove across the continent, in Strasbourg on Valentine's day, Jews, who'd been accused of spreading the plague by polluting the wells of the city, were asked to convert. About 1,000 refused and were burned alive. During that same year, Jewish communities in other European cities were wiped out, forcing them to massively migrate to the eastern part of Europe (in Poland and Russia), permanently altering the demography of the continent in the process. What is true for European anti-Semitism also applies to the rise of the absolutist state, the gradual retreat of the church and many other historical events that can be attributed in no small measure to pandemics. The changes were so diverse and widespread that it led to "the end of an age of submission", bringing feudalism and serfdom to an end and ushering in the era of Enlightenment. Put simply: "The Black Death may have been the unrecognized beginning of modern man."[2] If such profound social, political and economic changes could be provoked by the plague in the medieval world, could the COVID-19 pandemic mark the onset of a similar turning point with long-lasting and dramatic consequences for our world today? Unlike certain past epidemics, COVID-19 doesn't pose a new existential threat. It will not result in unforeseen mass famines or major military defeats and regime changes. Whole populations will neither be exterminated nor displaced as a result of the pandemic. However, this does not equate to a reassuring analysis. In reality, the pandemic is dramatically exacerbating pre-existing dangers that we've failed to confront adequately for too long. It will also accelerate disturbing trends that have been building up over a prolonged period of time.

To begin elaborating a meaningful response, we need a conceptual framework (or a simple mental map) to help us reflect on what's coming and to guide us in making sense of it. Insights offered by history can be particularly helpful. This is why we so often search for a reassuring "mental anchor" that can serve as a benchmark when we are forced to ask ourselves tough questions about what will change and to what extent. In doing so, we look for precedents, with questions such as: Is the pandemic like the Spanish flu of 1918 (estimated to have killed more than 50 million people worldwide in three successive waves)? Could it look like the Great Depression that started in 1929? Is there any resemblance with the psychological shock inflicted by 9/11? Are there similarities with what happened with SARS in 2003 and H1N1 in 2009 (albeit on a different scale)? Could it be like the great financial crisis of 2008, but much bigger? The correct, albeit unwelcome, answer to all of these is: no! None fits the reach and pattern of the human suffering and economic destruction caused by the current pandemic. The economic fallout in particular bears no resemblance to any crisis in modern history. As pointed out by many heads of state and government in the midst of the pandemic, we are at war, but with an enemy that is invisible, and of course metaphorically: "If what we are going through can indeed be called a war, it is certainly not a typical one. After all, today's enemy is shared by all of humankind".[3]

That said, World War II could even so be one of the most relevant mental anchors in the effort to assess what's coming next. World War II was the quintessential transformational war, triggering not only fundamental changes to the global order and the global economy, but also entailing radical shifts in social attitudes and beliefs that eventually paved the way for radically new policies and social contract provisions (like women joining the workforce before becoming voters). There are obviously fundamental dissimilarities between a pandemic and a war (that we will consider in some detail in the following pages), but the magnitude of their transformative power is comparable. Both have the potential to be a transformative crisis of previously unimaginable proportions. However, we must beware of superficial analogies. Even in the worst-case horrendous scenario, COVID-19 will kill far fewer people than the Great Plagues, including the Black Deaths, or World War II did. Furthermore, today's economy bears no resemblance to those of past centuries that relied on manual labour and farmland or heavy industry. In today's highly interconnected and interdependent world, however, the impact of the pandemic will go well beyond the (already staggering) statistics relating "simply" to death, unemployment and bankruptcies.

COVID-19: The Great Reset is written and published in the midst of a crisis whose consequences will unfold over many years to come. Little wonder that we all feel somewhat bewildered – a sentiment so very understandable when an extreme shock strikes, bringing with it the disquieting certainty that its outcomes will be both unexpected and unusual. This strangeness is well captured by Albert Camus in his 1947 novel *The Plague*: "Yet all these changes were, in one sense, so fantastic and had been made so precipitately that it wasn't easy to regard them as likely to have any permanence."[4] Now that the unthinkable is upon us, what will happen next, in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic and then in the foreseeable future?

It is of course much too early to tell with any reasonable accuracy what COVID-19 will entail in terms of "momentous" changes, but the objective of this book is to offer some coherent and conceptually sound guidelines about what might lie ahead, and to do so in the most comprehensive manner possible. Our aim is to help our readers grasp the multifaceted dimension of the changes that are coming. At the very least, as we will argue, the pandemic will accelerate systemic changes that were already apparent prior to the crisis: the partial retreat from globalization, the growing decoupling between the US and China, the acceleration of automation, concerns about heightened surveillance, the growing appeal of well-being policies, rising nationalism and the subsequent fear of immigration, the growing power of tech, the necessity for firms to have an even stronger online presence, among many others. But it could go beyond a mere acceleration by altering things that previously seemed unchangeable. It might thus provoke changes that would have seemed inconceivable before the pandemic struck, such as new forms of monetary policy like helicopter money (already a given), the reconsideration/recalibration of some of our social priorities and an augmented search for the common good as a policy objective, the notion of fairness acquiring political potency, radical welfare and taxation measures, and drastic geopolitical realignments.

The broader point is this: the possibilities for change and the resulting new order are now unlimited and only bound by our imagination, for better or for worse. Societies could be poised to become either more egalitarian or more authoritarian, or geared towards more solidarity or more individualism, favouring the interests of the few or the many; economies, when they recover, could take the path of more inclusivity and be more attuned to the needs of our global commons, or they could return to functioning as they did before. You get the point: we should take advantage of this unprecedented opportunity to reimagine our world, in a bid to make it a better and more resilient one as it emerges on the other side of this crisis.

We are conscious that attempting to cover the scope and breadth of all the issues addressed in this book is an enormous task that may not even be possible. The subject and all the uncertainties attached to it are gargantuan and could have filled the pages of a publication five times the size of this one. But our objective was to write a relatively concise and simple book to help the reader understand what's coming in a multitude of domains. To interrupt the flow of the text as little as possible, the reference information appears at the end of the book and direct attributions have been minimized. Published in the midst of the crisis and when further waves of infection are expected, it will continuously evolve to consider the changing nature of the subject matter. Future editions will be updated in view of new findings, the latest research, revised policy measures and ongoing feedback from readers.

This volume is a hybrid between a light academic book and an essay. It includes theory and practical examples but is chiefly explanatory, containing many conjectures and ideas about what the post-pandemic world might, and perhaps should, look like. It offers neither simple generalizations nor recommendations for a world moving to a new normal, but we trust it will be useful.

This book is structured around three main chapters, offering a panoramic overview of the future landscape. The first assesses what the impact of the pandemic will be on five key macro categories: the economic, societal, geopolitical, environmental and technological factors. The second considers the effects in micro terms, on specific industries and companies. The third hypothesizes about the nature of the possible consequences at the individual level.

1. MACRO RESET

The first leg of our journey progresses across five macro categories that offer a comprehensive analytical framework to understand what’s going on in today’s world and how this might evolve. For ease of reading, we travel thematically through each separately. In reality, they are interdependent, which is where we begin: our brains make us think in linear terms, but the world that surrounds us is non-linear, that is to say: complex, adaptive, fast-paced and ambiguous.

1.1. Conceptual framework – Three defining characteristics of today’s world

The macro reset will occur in the context of the three prevailing secular forces that shape our world today: interdependence, velocity and complexity. This trio exerts its force, to a lesser or greater degree, on us all, whoever or wherever we may be.

1.1.1. Interdependence

If just one word had to distil the essence of the 21st century, it would have to be “interdependence”. A by-product of globalization and technological progress, it can essentially be defined as the dynamic of reciprocal dependence among the elements that compose a system. The fact that globalization and technological progress have advanced so much over the past few decades has prompted some pundits to declare that the world is now “hyperconnected” – a variant of interdependence on steroids! What does this interdependence mean in practice? Simply that the world is “concatenated”: linked together. In the early 2010s, Kishore Mahbubani, an academic and former diplomat from Singapore, captured this reality with a boat metaphor: “The 7 billion people who inhabit planet earth no longer live in more than one hundred separate boats [countries]. Instead, they all live in 193 separate cabins on the same boat.” In his own words, this is one of the greatest transformations ever. In 2020, he pursued this metaphor further in the context of the pandemic by writing: “If we 7.5 billion people are now stuck together on a virus-infected cruise ship, does it make sense to clean and scrub only our personal cabins while ignoring the corridors and air wells outside, through which the virus travels? The answer is clearly: no. Yet, this is what we have been doing. … Since we are now in the same boat, humanity has to take care of the global boat as a whole”.[5]

An interdependent world is a world of deep systemic connectivity, in which all risks affect each other through a web of complex interactions. In such conditions, the assertion that an economic risk will be confined to the economic sphere or that an environmental risk won’t have repercussions on risks of a different nature (economic, geopolitical and so on) is no longer tenable. We can all think of economic risks turning into political ones (like a sharp rise in unemployment leading to pockets of social unrest), or of technological risks mutating into societal ones (such as the issue of tracing the pandemic on mobile phones provoking a societal backlash). When considered in isolation, individual risks – whether economic, geopolitical, societal or environmental in character – give the false impression that they can be contained or mitigated; in real life, systemic connectivity shows this to be an artificial construct. In an interdependent world, risks amplify each other and, in so doing, have cascading effects. That is why isolation or containment cannot rhyme with interdependence and interconnectedness.

The chart below, extracted from the World Economic Forum *Global Risks Report 2020*,[6] makes this plain. It illustrates the interconnected nature of the risks we collectively face; each individual risk always conflates with those from its own macro category but also with the individual risks from the other macro categories (economic risks appear in blue, geopolitical in orange, societal in red, environmental in green and technological in purple). In this manner, each individual risk harbours the potential to create ricochet effects by provoking other risks. As the chart makes clear, an “infectious diseases” risk is bound to have a direct effect on “global governance failure”, “social instability”, “unemployment”, “fiscal crises” and “involuntary migration” (to name just a few). Each of these in turn will influence other individual risks, meaning that the individual risk from which the chain of effects started (in this particular case “infectious diseases”) ends up amplifying many other risks not only in its own macro category (societal risks), but also in the other four macro categories. This displays the phenomenon of contagion by systemic connectivity. In the following sub-chapters, we explore what the pandemic risk might entail from an economic, societal, geopolitical, environmental and technological perspective.

Figure 1

Source: World Economic Forum, *The Global Risks Report 2020*, Figure IV: The Global Risks Interconnections Map 2020, World Economic Forum Global Risks Perception Survey 2019-2020

Interdependence has an important conceptual effect: it invalidates "silo thinking". Since conflation and systemic connectivity are what ultimately matter, addressing a problem or assessing an issue or a risk in isolation from the others is senseless and futile. In the past, this "silo thinking" partly explains why so many economists failed to predict the credit crisis (in 2008) and why so few political scientists saw the Arab Spring coming (in 2011). Today, the problem is the same with the pandemic. Epidemiologists, public-health specialists, economists, social scientists and all the other scientists and specialists who are in the business of helping decision-makers understand what lies ahead find it difficult (and sometimes impossible) to cross the boundaries of their own discipline. That is why addressing complex trade-offs, such as containing the progression of the pandemic versus reopening the economy, is so fiendishly difficult. Understandably, most experts end up being segregated into increasingly narrow fields. Therefore, they lack the enlarged view necessary to connect the many different dots that provide the more complete picture the decision-makers desperately need.

1.1.2. Velocity

The above firmly points the finger at technological progress and globalization as the primary "culprits" responsible for greater interdependence. In addition, they have created such a culture of immediacy that it's not an exaggeration to claim that, in today's world, everything moves much faster than before. If just one thing were to be singled out to explain this astonishing increase in velocity, it would undoubtedly be the internet. More than half (52%) of the world's population is now online, compared to less than 8% 20 years ago; in 2019, more than 1.5 billion smartphones – a symbol and vector of velocity that allows us to be reached anywhere and at any time – were sold around the world. The internet of things (IoT) now connects 22 billion devices in real time, ranging from cars to hospital beds, electric grids and water station pumps, to kitchen ovens and agricultural irrigation systems. This number is expected to reach 50 billion or more in 2030. Other explanations for the rise in velocity point to the "scarcity" element: as societies get richer, time becomes more valuable and is therefore perceived as evermore scarce. This may explain studies showing that people in wealthy cities always walk faster than in poor cities – they have no time to lose! No matter what the causal explanation is, the endgame of all this is clear: as consumers and producers, spouses and parents, leaders and followers, we are all being subjected to constant, albeit discontinuous, rapid change.

We can see velocity everywhere; whether it's a crisis, social discontent, technological developments and adoption, geopolitical upheaval, the financial markets and, of course, the manifestation of infectious diseases – everything now runs on fast-forward. As a result, we operate in a real-time society, with the nagging feeling that the pace of life is ever increasing. This new culture of immediacy, obsessed with speed, is apparent in all aspects of our lives, from "just-in-time" supply chains to "high-frequency" trading, from speed dating to fast food. It is so pervasive that some pundits call this new phenomenon the "dictatorship of urgency". It can indeed take extreme forms. Research performed by scientists at Microsoft shows, for example, that being slower by no more than 250 milliseconds (a quarter of a second) is enough for a website to lose hits to its "faster" competitors! The all-embracing result is that the shelf life of a policy, a product or an idea, and the life cycle of a decision-maker or a project, are contracting sharply and often unpredictably.

Nothing illustrated this more vividly than the breakneck speed with which COVID-19 progressed in March 2020. In less than a month, from the maelstrom provoked by the staggering speed at which the pandemic engulfed most of the world, a whole new era seemed to emerge. The beginning of the outbreak was thought to have taken place in China sometime earlier, but the exponential global progression of the pandemic took many decision-makers and a majority of the public by surprise because we generally find it cognitively hard to grasp the significance of exponential growth. Consider the following in terms of "days for doubling": if a pandemic grows at 30% a day (as COVID-19 did around mid-March for some of the worst affected countries), registered cases (or deaths) will double in a little more than two days. If it grows at 20%, it will take between four and five days; and if it grows at 10%, it will take just more than a week. Expressed differently: at the global level, it took COVID-19 three months to reach 100,000 cases, 12 days to double to 200,000 cases, four days to reach 300,000 cases, and then 400,000 and 500,000 cases were reached in two days each. These numbers make our heads spin – extreme velocity in action! Exponential growth is so baffling to our cognitive functions that we often deal with it by developing exponential "myopia",[7] thinking of it as nothing more than "very fast". In a famous experiment conducted in 1975, two psychologists found that when we have to predict an exponential process, we often underestimate it by factor of 10.[8] Understanding this growth dynamic and the power of exponentials clarifies why velocity is such an issue and why the speed of intervention to curb the rate of growth is so crucial. Ernest Hemingway understood this. In his novel *The Sun Also Rises*, two characters have the following conversation: "How did you go bankrupt?" Bill asked. "Two ways," Mike said. "Gradually, then suddenly." The same tends to happen for big systemic shifts and disruption in general: things tend to change gradually at first and then all at once. Expect the same for the macro reset.

Not only does velocity take extreme forms, but it can also engender perverse effects. “Impatience”, for example, is one, the effects of which can be seen similarly in the behaviour of participants in the financial markets (with new research suggesting that momentum trading, based on velocity, leads stock prices to deviate persistently from their fundamental value or “correct” price) and in that of voters in an election. The latter will have a critical relevance in the post-pandemic era. Governments, by necessity, take a while to make decisions and implement them: they are obliged to consider many different constituency groups and competing interests, balance domestic concerns with external considerations and secure legislative approval, before putting into motion the bureaucratic machinery to action all these decisions. By contrast, voters expect almost immediate policy results and improvements, which, when they don’t arrive fast enough, lead to almost instantaneous disappointment. This problem of asynchronicity between two different groups (policy-makers and the public) whose time horizon differs so markedly will be acute and very difficult to manage in the context of the pandemic. The velocity of the shock and (the depth) of the pain it has inflicted will not and cannot be matched with equal velocity on the policy side.

Velocity also led many observers to establish a false equivalence by comparing seasonal flu with COVID-19. This comparison, made again and again in the early months of the pandemic, was misleading and conceptually erroneous. Let’s take the example of the US to hammer out the point and better grasp the role played by velocity in all of this. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), between 39 and 56 million Americans contracted the flu during the 2019-2020 winter season, with between 24,000 and 62,000 deaths.[9] By contrast, and according to Johns Hopkins University, on 24 June 2020, more than 2.3 million were diagnosed with COVID-19 and almost 121,000 people had died.[10] But the comparison stops there; it is meaningless for two reasons: 1) the flu numbers correspond to the estimated total flu burden while the COVID-19 figures are confirmed cases; and 2) the seasonal flu cascades in “gentle” waves over a period of (up to six) months in an even pattern while the COVID-19 virus spreads like a tsunami in a hotspot pattern (in a handful of cities and regions where it concentrates) and, in doing so, can overwhelm and jam healthcare capacities, monopolizing hospitals to the detriment of non-COVID-19 patients. The second reason – the velocity with which the COVID-19 pandemic surges and the suddenness with which clusters emerge – makes all the difference and renders the comparison with the flu irrelevant.

Velocity lies at the root of the first and second reasons: in a vast majority of countries, the speed with which the epidemic progressed made it impossible to have sufficient testing capabilities, and it then overwhelmed many national health systems equipped to deal with a predictable, recurrent and rather slow seasonal flu but not with a “superfast” pandemic.

Another important and far-reaching consequence of velocity is that decision-makers have more information and more analysis than ever before, but less time to decide. For politicians and business leaders, the need to gain a strategic perspective collides ever-more frequently with the day-to-day pressures of immediate decisions, particularly obvious in the context of the pandemic, and reinforced by complexity, as we see in the next section.

1.1.3. Complexity

In its simplest possible form, complexity can be defined as what we don’t understand or find difficult to understand. As for a complex system, the psychologist Herbert Simon defined it as “one made up of a large number of parts that interact in a nonsimple way”.[11] Complex systems are often characterized by an absence of visible causal links between their elements, which makes them virtually impossible to predict. Deep in ourselves, we sense that the more complex a system is, the greater the likelihood that something might go wrong and that an accident or an aberration might occur and propagate.

Complexity can roughly be measured by three factors: “1) the amount of information content or the number of components in a system; 2) the interconnectedness – defined as the dynamic of reciprocal responsiveness – between these pieces of information or components; and 3) the effect of non-linearity (non-linear elements are often called ‘tipping points’). Non-linearity is a key feature of complexity because it means that a change in just one component of a system can lead to a surprising and disproportionate effect elsewhere.”[12] It is for this reason that pandemic models so often yield wide ranges of outcomes: a difference of assumption regarding just one component of the model can dramatically affect the end result. When one hears about “black swans”, “known unknowns” or “butterfly effects”, non-linearity is at work; it thus comes as no surprise that we often associate world complexity with “surprises”, “turbulence” and “uncertainty”. For example, in 2008, how many “experts” anticipated that mortgage-backed securities originating in the United States would cripple banks around the world and ultimately bring the global financial system to the verge of collapse? And in the early weeks of 2020, how many decision-makers foresaw the extent to which a possible pandemic would wreak havoc on some of the most sophisticated health systems in the world and would inflict such major damage to the global economy?

A pandemic is a complex adaptive system comprising many different components or pieces of information (as diverse as biology or psychology), whose behaviour is influenced by such variables as the role of companies, economic policies, government intervention, healthcare politics or national governance. For this reason, it can and should be viewed as a "living network" that adapts to changing conditions – not something set in stone, but a system of interactions that is both complex and adaptive. It is complex because it represents a "cat's cradle" of interdependence and interconnections from which it stems, and adaptive in the sense that its "behaviour" is driven by interactions between nodes (the organizations, the people – us!) that can become confused and "unruly" in times of stress (Will we adjust to the norms of confinement? Will a majority of us – or not – abide by the rules? etc.). The management (the containment, in this particular case) of a complex adaptive system requires continuous real-time but ever-changing collaboration between a vast array of disciplines, and between different fields within these disciplines. Just to provide a broad and oversimplified example, the containment of the coronavirus pandemic will necessitate a global surveillance network capable of identifying new outbreaks as soon as they arise, laboratories in multiple locations around the world that can rapidly analyse new viral strains and develop effective treatments, large IT infrastructures so that communities can prepare and react effectively, appropriate and coordinated policy mechanisms to efficiently implement the decisions once they are made, and so on. The important point is this: each separate activity by itself is necessary to address the pandemic but is insufficient if not considered in conjunction with the others. It follows that this complex adaptive system is greater than the sum of its parts. Its effectiveness depends on how well it works as a whole, and it is only as strong as its weakest link.

Many pundits have mischaracterized the COVID-19 pandemic as a black-swan event simply because it exhibits all the characteristics of a complex adaptive system. But in reality it is a white-swan event, something explicitly presented as such by Nassim Taleb in *The Black Swan* published in 2007: something that would eventually take place with a great deal of certainty.[13] Indeed! For years, international organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO), institutions like the World Economic Forum and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI – launched at the Annual Meeting 2017 in Davos), and individuals like Bill Gates have been warning us about the next pandemic risk, even specifying that it: 1) would emerge in a highly populated place where economic development forces people and wildlife together; 2) would spread quickly and silently by exploiting networks of human travel and trade; and 3) would reach multiple countries by thwarting containment. As we will see in the following chapters, properly characterizing the pandemic and understanding its characteristics are vital because they were what underpinned the differences in terms of preparedness. Many Asian countries reacted quickly because they were prepared logistically and organizationally (due to SARS) and thus were able to lessen the impact of the pandemic. By contrast, many Western countries were unprepared and were ravaged by the pandemic – it is no coincidence that they are the ones in which the false notion of a black-swan event circulated the most. However, we can confidently assert that the pandemic (a high probability, high consequences white-swan event) will provoke many black-swan events through second-, third-, fourth- and more-order effects. It is hard, if not impossible, to foresee what might happen at the end of the chain when multiple-order effects and their ensuing cascades of consequences have occurred after unemployment spikes, companies go bust and some countries are teetering on the verge of collapse. None of these are unpredictable per se, but it is their propensity to create perfect storms when they conflate with other risks that will take us by surprise. To sum up, the pandemic is not a black-swan event, but some of its consequences will be.

The fundamental point here is this: complexity creates limits to our knowledge and understanding of things; it might thus be that today's increasing complexity literally overwhelms the capabilities of politicians in particular – and decision-makers in general – to make well informed decisions. A theoretical physicist turned head of state (President Armen Sarkissian of Armenia) made this point when he coined the expression "quantum politics", outlining how the classical world of post-Newtonian physics – linear, predictable and to some extent even deterministic – had given way to the quantum world: highly interconnected and uncertain, incredibly complex and also changing depending on the position of the observer. This expression recalls quantum physics, which explains how everything works and is "the best description we have of the nature of the particles that make up matter and the forces with which they interact."[14] The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare this quantum world.

1.2. Economic reset

1.2.1. The economics of COVID-19

Our contemporary economy differs radically from that of previous centuries. Compared to the past, it is infinitely more interconnected, intricate and complex. It is characterized by a world population that has grown exponentially, by airplanes that connect any point anywhere to another somewhere else in just a few hours, resulting in more than a billion of us crossing a border each year, by humans encroaching on nature and the habitats of wildlife, by ubiquitous, sprawling megacities that are home to millions of people living cheek by jowl (often without adequate sanitation and medical care). Measured against the landscape of just a few decades ago, let alone centuries ago, today's economy is simply unrecognizable. Notwithstanding, some of the economic lessons to be gleaned from historical pandemics are still valid today to help grasp what lies ahead. The global economic catastrophe that we are now confronting is the deepest recorded since 1945; in terms of its sheer speed, it is unparalleled in history. Although it does not rival the calamities and the absolute economic desperation that societies endured in the past, there are some telling characteristics that are hauntingly similar. When in 1665, over the space of 18 months, the last bubonic plague had eradicated a quarter of London's population, Daniel Defoe wrote in *A Journal of the Plague Year*[15] (published in 1722): "All trades being stopped, employment ceased: the labour, and by that the bread, of the poor were cut off; and at first indeed the cries of the poor were most lamentable to hear … thousands of them having stayed in London till nothing but desperation sent them away, death overtook them on the road, and they served for no better than the messengers of death." Defoe's book is full of anecdotes that resonate with today's situation, telling us how the rich were escaping to the country, "taking death with them", and observing how the poor were much more exposed to the outbreak, or describing how "quacks and mountebanks" sold false cures.[16]

What the history of previous epidemics shows again and again is how pandemics exploit trade routes and the clash that exists between the interests of public health and those of economics (something that constitutes an economic "aberration" as we will see in just a few pages). As the historian Simon Schama describes:

> In the midst of calamity, economics was always at loggerheads with the interests of public health. Even though, until there was an understanding of germ-borne diseases, the plague was mostly attributed to 'foul air' and noxious vapours said to arise from stagnant or polluted marshes, there was nonetheless a sense that the very commercial arteries that had generated prosperity were now transformed into vectors of poison. But when quarantines were proposed or imposed (…), those who stood to lose most, merchants and in some places artisans and workers, from the stoppage of markets, fairs and trade, put up stiff resistance. Must the economy die so that it could be resurrected in robust good health? Yes, said the guardians of public health, who became part of urban life in Europe from the 15th century onwards.[17]

History shows that epidemics have been the great resetter of countries' economy and social fabric. Why should it be different with COVID-19? A seminal paper on the long-term economic consequences of major pandemics throughout history shows that significant macroeconomic after-effects can persist for as long as 40 years, substantially depressing real rates of return.[18] This is in contrast to wars that have the opposite effect: they destroy capital while pandemics do not – wars trigger higher real interest rates, implying greater economic activity, while pandemics trigger lower real rates, implying sluggish economic activity. In addition, consumers tend to react to the shock by increasing their savings, either because of new precautionary concerns, or simply to replace the wealth lost during the epidemic. On the labour side, there will be gains at the expense of capital since real wages tend to rise after pandemics. As far back as the Black Death that ravaged Europe from 1347 to 1351 (and that suppressed 40% of Europe's population in just a few years), workers discovered for the first time in their life that the power to change things was in their hands. Barely a year after the epidemic had subsided, textile workers in Saint-Omer (a small city in northern France) demanded and received successive wage rises. Two years later, many workers' guilds negotiated shorter hours and higher pay, sometimes as much as a third more than their pre-plague level. Similar but less extreme examples of other pandemics point to the same conclusion: labour gains in power to the detriment of capital. Nowadays, this phenomenon may be exacerbated by the ageing of much of the population around the world (Africa and India are notable exceptions), but such a scenario today risks being radically altered by the rise of automation, an issue to which we will return in section 1.6. Unlike previous pandemics, it is far from certain that the COVID-19 crisis will tip the balance in favour of labour and against capital. For political and social reasons, it could, but technology changes the mix.

1.2.1.1. Uncertainty

The high degree of ongoing uncertainty surrounding COVID-19 makes it incredibly difficult to precisely assess the risk it poses. As with all new risks that are agents of fear, this creates a lot of social anxiety that impacts economic behaviour. An overwhelming consensus has emerged within the global scientific community that Jin Qi (one of China's leading scientists) had it right when he said in April 2020: "This is very likely to be an epidemic that co-exists with humans for a long time, becomes seasonal and is sustained within human bodies."[19]

Ever since the pandemic started, we have been bombarded daily with a relentless stream of data but, in June 2020, roughly half a year after the beginning of the outbreak, our knowledge is still very patchy and as a result we still don't really know just how dangerous COVID-19 is. Despite the deluge of scientific papers published on the coronavirus, its infection fatality rate (i.e. the number of COVID-19 cases, measured or not, that result in death) remains a matter of debate (around 0.4%-0.5% and possibly up to 1%). The ratio of undetected to confirmed cases, the rate of transmissions from asymptomatic individuals, the seasonality effect, the length of the incubation period, the national infection rates – progress in terms of understanding each of these is being made, but they and many other elements remain "known unknowns" to a large extent. For policy-makers and public officials, this prevailing level of uncertainty makes it very difficult to devise the right public-health strategy and the concomitant economic strategy.

This should not come as a surprise. Anne Rimoin, a professor of epidemiology at UCLA, confesses: "This is a novel virus, new to humanity, and nobody knows what will happen."[20] Such circumstances require a good dose of humility because, in the words of Peter Piot (one of the world's leading virologists): "The more we learn about the coronavirus, the more questions arise."[21] COVID-19 is a master of disguise that manifests itself with protean symptoms that are confounding the medical community. It is first and foremost a respiratory disease but, for a small but sizeable number of patients, symptoms range from cardiac inflammation and digestive problems to kidney infection, blood clots and meningitis. In addition, many people who recover are left with chronic kidney and heart problems, as well as lasting neurological effects.

In the face of uncertainty, it makes sense to resort to scenarios to get a better sense of what lies ahead. With the pandemic, it is well understood that a wide range of potential outcomes is possible, subject to unforeseen events and random occurrences, but three plausible scenarios stand out. Each may help to delineate the contours of what the next two years could be like.

These three plausible scenarios[22] are all based on the core assumption that the pandemic could go on affecting us until 2022; thus they can help us to reflect upon what lies ahead. In the first scenario, the initial wave that began in March 2020 is followed by a series of smaller waves that occur through mid-2020 and then over a one- to two-year period, gradually diminishing in 2021, like "peaks and valleys". The occurrence and amplitude of these peaks and valleys vary geographically and depend on the specific mitigation measures that are implemented. In the second scenario, the first wave is followed by a larger wave that takes place in the third or fourth quarter of 2020, and one or several smaller subsequent waves in 2021 (like during the 1918-1919 Spanish flu pandemic). This scenario requires the reimplementation of mitigation measures around the fourth quarter of 2020 to contain the spread of infection and to prevent healthcare systems from being overwhelmed. In the third scenario, not seen with past influenza pandemics but possible for COVID-19, a "slow burn" of ongoing transmission and case occurrence follow the first wave of 2020, but without a clear wave pattern, just with smaller ups and downs. Like for the other scenarios, this pattern varies geographically and is to a certain extent determined by the nature of the earlier mitigation measures put into place in each particular country or region. Cases of infection and deaths continue to occur, but do not require the reinstitution of mitigation measures.

A large number of scientists seem to agree with the framework offered by these three scenarios. Whichever of the three the pandemic follows, they all mean, as the authors explicitly state, that policy-makers must be prepared to deal with "at least another 18 to 24 months of significant COVID-19 activity, with hotspots popping up periodically in diverse geographic areas". As we will argue next, a full-fledged economic recovery cannot take place until the virus is defeated or behind us.

1.2.1.2. The economic fallacy of sacrificing a few lives to save growth

Throughout the pandemic, there has been a perennial debate about "saving lives versus saving the economy" – lives versus livelihoods. This is a false trade-off. From an economic standpoint, the myth of having to choose between public health and a hit to GDP growth can easily be debunked. Leaving aside the (not insignificant) ethical issue of whether sacrificing some lives to save the economy is a social Darwinian proposition (or not), deciding not to save lives will not improve economic welfare. The reasons are twofold:

1. On the supply side, if prematurely loosening the various restrictions and the rules of social distancing result in an acceleration of infection (which almost all scientists believe it would), more employees and workers would become infected and more businesses would just stop functioning. After the onset of the pandemic in 2020, the validity of this argument was proven on several occasions. They ranged from factories that had to stop operating because too many workers had fallen ill (primarily the case for work environments that forced physical proximity between workers, like in meat-processing facilities) to naval ships stranded because too many crew members had been infected, thus preventing the vessel from operating normally. An additional factor that negatively affects the supply of labour is that, around the world, there were repeated instances of workers refusing to return to work for fear of becoming infected. In many large companies, employees who felt vulnerable to the disease generated a wave of activism, including work stoppages.
2. On the demand side, the argument boils down to the most basic, and yet fundamental, determinant of economic activity: sentiments. Because consumer sentiments are what really drive economies, a return to any kind of "normal" will only happen when and not before confidence returns. Individuals' perceptions of safety drive consumer and business decisions, which means that sustained economic improvement is contingent upon two things: the confidence that the pandemic is behind us – without which people will not consume and invest – and the proof that the virus is defeated globally – without which people will not be able to feel safe first locally and subsequently further afield.

The logical conclusion of these two points is this: governments must do whatever it takes and spend whatever it costs in the interests of our health and our collective wealth for the economy to recover sustainably. As both an economist and public-health specialist put it: "Only saving lives will save livelihoods",[23] making it clear that only policy measures that place people's health at their core will enable an economic recovery, adding: "If governments fail to save lives, people afraid of the virus will not resume shopping, traveling, or dining out. This will hinder economic recovery, lockdown or no lockdown."

Only future data and subsequent analysis will provide incontrovertible proof that the trade-off between health and the economy does not exist. That said, some US data collected in the early phases of reopening in some states showed a drop in spending and working even before the lockdown.[24] Once people began to worry about the pandemic, they effectively started to "shut down" the economy, even before the government had officially asked them to do so. A similar phenomenon took place after some American states decided to (partially) reopen: consumption remained subdued. This proves the point that economic life cannot be activated by fiat, but it also illustrates the predicament that most decision-makers experienced when having to decide whether to reopen or not. The economic and societal damage of a lockdown is glaringly obvious to everybody, while success in terms of containing the outbreak and preventing deaths – a prerequisite for a successful opening – is more or less invisible. There is no public celebration when a coronavirus case or death doesn't happen, leading to the public-health policy paradox that "when you do it right, nothing happens". This is why delaying the lockdown or opening too early was always such a strong policy temptation. However, several studies have since shown how such a temptation carried considerable risk. Two, in particular, coming to similar conclusions with different methodologies, modelled what could have happened without lockdown. According to one conducted by Imperial College London, wide-scale rigorous lockdowns imposed in March 2020 averted 3.1 million deaths in 11 European countries (including the UK, Spain, Italy, France and Germany).[25] The other, led by the University of California, Berkeley, concluded that 530 million total infections, corresponding to 62 million confirmed cases, were averted in six countries (China, South Korea, Italy, Iran, France and the US) by the confinement measures that each had put into place.[26] The simple conclusion: in countries afflicted with registered COVID-19 cases that, at the peak, were roughly doubling every two days, governments had no reasonable alternative but to impose rigorous lockdowns. Pretending otherwise is to ignore the power of exponential growth and the considerable damage it can inflict through a pandemic. Because of the extreme velocity of the COVID-19 progression, the timing and forcefulness of the intervention were of the essence.

1.2.2. Growth and employment

Before March 2020, never had the world economy come to such an abrupt and brutal stop; never before had anyone alive experienced an economic collapse so dramatic and drastic both in its nature and pace.

The shock that the pandemic has inflicted on the global economy has been more severe and has occurred much faster than anything else in recorded economic history. Even in the Great Depression in the early 1930s and the Global Financial Crisis in 2008, it took several years for GDP to contract by 10% or more and for unemployment to soar above 10%. With the pandemic, disaster-like macroeconomic outcomes – in particular exploding unemployment levels and plunging GDP growth – happened in March 2020 over the course of just three weeks. COVID-19 inflicted a crisis of both supply and demand that led to the deepest dive on record for the global economy for over 100 years. As the economist Kenneth Rogoff warned: “Everything depends on how long it lasts, but if this goes on for a long time, it’s certainly going to be the mother of all financial crises.”[27]

The length and acuteness of the downturn, and its subsequent hit to growth and employment, depend on three things: 1) the duration and severity of the outbreak; 2) each country’s success at containing the pandemic and mitigating its effects; and 3) the cohesiveness of each society in dealing with the post-confinement measures and the various opening strategies. At the time of writing (end of June 2020), all three aspects remain unknown. Renewed waves of outbreaks (big and small) are occurring, countries’ success at containing the outbreak can either last or suddenly be reversed by new waves, and societies’ cohesion can be challenged by renewed economic and social pain.

1.2.2.1. Economic growth

At different moments between February and May 2020, in a bid to contain the pandemic, governments worldwide made the deliberate decision to shut down much of their respective economies. This unprecedented course of events has brought with it a fundamental shift in the way the world economy operates, marked by an abrupt and unsolicited return to a form of relative autarky, with every nation trying to move towards certain forms of self-sufficiency, and a reduction in national and global output. The impact of these decisions seemed all the more dramatic because they concerned first and foremost service industries, a sector traditionally more immune than other industries (like construction or manufacturing) to the cyclical swings of economic growth. Consequently, the service sector that represents by far the largest component of economic activity in any developed economy (about 70% of GDP and more than 80% of employment in the US) was hit the hardest by the pandemic. It also suffered from another distinctive characteristics: contrary to manufacturing or agriculture, lost revenues in services are gone forever. They cannot be deferred because service companies don’t hold inventories or stock raw materials.

Several months into the pandemic, it looks like even a semblance of a return to “business as usual” for most service companies is inconceivable as long as COVID-19 remains a threat to our health. This in turn suggests that a full return to “normal” cannot be envisaged before a vaccine is available. When might that be? According to most experts, it is unlikely to be before the first quarter of 2021 at the earliest. In mid-June 2020, already more than 135 trials were under way, proceeding at a remarkable pace considering that in the past it could take up to 10 years to develop a vaccine (five in the case of Ebola), so the reason is not science, but production. Manufacturing billions of doses constitutes the real challenge that will require a massive expansion and diversion of existing capacity. The next hurdle is the political challenge of vaccinating enough people worldwide (we are collectively as strong as the weakest link) with a high enough compliance rate despite the rise of anti-vaxxers. During the intervening months, the economy will not operate at full capacity: a country-dependent phenomenon dubbed the 80% economy. Companies in sectors as varied as travel, hospitality, retail or sports and events will face the following triple whammy: 1) fewer customers (who will respond to uncertainty by becoming more risk-averse); 2) those who consume will spend less on average (because of precautionary savings); and 3) transaction costs will be higher (serving one customer will cost more because of physical-distancing and sanitation measures).

Taking into account the criticality of services for GDP growth (the richer the country, the greater the importance of services for growth), this new reality of a 80% economy begs the question of whether successive possible shutdowns of business activity in the service sector will have lasting effects on the broader economy through bankruptcies and losses of employment, which in turn begs the question of whether these possible lasting effects could be followed by a collapse in demand as people lose their income and their confidence in the future. Such a scenario will almost inevitably lead to a collapse in investment among business and a surge in precautionary saving among consumers, with fallout in the entire global economy through capital flight, the rapid and uncertain movement of large amounts of money out of a country, which tends to exacerbate economic crises.

According to the OECD, the immediate yearly impact of the economy having been “switched-off” could be a reduction in GDP in the G7 countries of between 20% and 30%.[28] But again, this estimate depends on the outbreak’s duration and severity in each country: the longer lockdowns last, the greater the structural damage they inflict by leaving permanent scars in the economy through job losses, bankruptcies and capital spending cancellations. As a rule of thumb, every month that large parts of an economy remain closed, annual growth might fall by a further 2 percentage points. But as we would expect, the relationship between the duration of restrictive measures and the corresponding impact on GDP is not linear. The Dutch central planning bureau found that every additional month of containment results in a greater, non-proportional deterioration of economic activity. According to the model, a full month of economic “hibernation” would result in a loss of

1.2% in Dutch growth in 2020, while three months would cause a 5% loss.[29]

For the regions and countries that have already exited lockdowns, it is too early to tell how GDP growth will evolve. At the end of June 2020, some V-shaped data (like the eurozone Purchasing Manufacturing Indices - PMI) and a bit of anecdotal evidence generated a stronger-than-expected rebound narrative, but we should not get carried away for two reasons:

1. The marked improvement in PMI in the eurozone and the US does not mean that these economies have turned the corner. It simply indicates that business activity has improved compared to previous months, which is natural since a significant pickup in activity should follow the period of inactivity caused by rigorous lockdowns.

2. In terms of future growth, one of the most meaningful indicators to watch is the savings rate. In April (admittedly during the lockdown), the US personal savings rate climbed to 33% while, in the eurozone, the household savings rate (calculated differently than the US personal savings rate) rose to 19%. They will both significantly drop as the economies reopen, but probably not enough to prevent these rates from remaining at historically elevated levels.

In its “World Economic Outlook Update” published in June 2020, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) warned about “a crisis like no other” and an “uncertain recovery”.[30] Compared to April, it revised its projections for global growth downwards, anticipating global GDP at -4.9% in 2020, almost two percentage points below its previous estimate.

1.2.2.2. Employment

The pandemic is confronting the economy with a labour market crisis of gigantic proportions. The devastation is such and so sudden as to leave even the most seasoned policy-makers almost speechless (and worse still, nigh on “policy-less”). In testimony before the US Senate Committee on Banking on 19 May, the Federal Reserve System’s chairman – Jerome “Jay” Powell – confessed: “This precipitous drop in economic activity has caused a level of pain that is hard to capture in words, as lives are upended amid great uncertainty about the future.”[31] In just the two months of March and April 2020, more than 36 million Americans lost their jobs, reversing 10 years of job gains. In the US, like elsewhere, temporary dismissals caused by the initial lockdowns may become permanent, inflicting intense social pain (that only robust social safety nets can alleviate) and profound structural damage on countries’ economies.

The level of global unemployment will ultimately depend on the depth of the collapse in economic activity, but hovering around or exceeding two-digit levels across the world are a given. In the US, a harbinger of difficulties to come elsewhere, it is estimated that the official rate of unemployment could reach a peak of 25% in 2020 – a level equivalent to that of the Great Depression – that would be even higher if hidden unemployment were to be taken into account (like workers who are not counted in official statistics because they are so discourage they abandoned the workforce and ceased looking for a job, or part-time workers who are looking for a full-time job). The situation of employees in the service industry will be particularly dire. That of workers not officially employed will be even worse.

As for GDP growth, the magnitude and severity of the unemployment situation are country-dependent. Each nation will be affected differently, depending on its economic structure and the nature of its social contract, but the US and Europe offer two radically different models of how the issue is being addressed by policy-makers and of what lies ahead.

As of June 2020, the rise in the US unemployment rate (it stood at a mere 3.5% prior to the pandemic) was much higher than anywhere else. In April 2020, the US unemployment rate had risen by 11.2 percentage points compared to February, while, during the same period in Germany, it had increased by less than one percentage point. Two reasons account for this striking difference: 1) the US labour market has a “hire-and-fire” culture that doesn’t exist and is often prohibited by law in Europe; and 2) right from the onset of the crisis, Europe put into place fiscal measures destined to support employment.

In the US, government support so far (June 2020) has been larger than in Europe, but of a fundamentally different nature. It provides income support for those who lost their job, with the occasional result that those displaced are better off than in their full-time jobs before the crisis. In Europe, by contrast, the governments decided to directly support those businesses that kept workers formally “employed” in their original jobs, even when they were no longer working full time or not working at all.

In Germany, the short-time working scheme (called *Kurzarbeit* – a model emulated elsewhere) replaced up to 60% of earnings for 10 million employees who would have otherwise lost their jobs, while in France a similar scheme also compensated a similar number of workers by providing them with up to 80% of their previous salary. Many other European countries came up with similar solutions, without which lay-offs and redundancies would have been much more consequential. These labour market supporting measures are accompanied by other governmental emergency measures, like those giving insolvent companies the possibility to buy time. In many European countries, if firms can prove that their liquidity problems were caused by the pandemic, they won't have to file for bankruptcy until later (possibly as late as March 2021 in some countries). This makes eminent sense if the recovery takes hold, but it could be that this policy is only postponing the problem. Globally, a full recovery of the labour market could take decades and, in Europe like elsewhere, the fear of mass bankruptcies followed by mass unemployment looms large.

In the coming months, the unemployment situation is bound to deteriorate further for the simple reason that it cannot improve significantly until a sustainable economic recovery begins. This won't happen before a vaccine or a treatment is found, meaning that many people will be doubly worried – about losing their job and about not finding another one if they do lose it (which will lead to a sharp increase in savings rates). In a slightly more distant time (from a few months to a few years), two categories of people will face a particularly bleak employment situation: young people entering for the first time a job market devastated by the pandemic and workers susceptible to be replaced by robots. These are fundamental issues at the intersection of economics, society and technology with defining implications for the future of work. Automation, in particular, will be a source of acute concern. The economic case that technology always exerts a positive economic effect in the long term is well known. The substance of the argument goes like this: automation is disruptive, but it improves productivity and increases wealth, which in turn lead to greater demands for goods and services and thus to new types of jobs to satisfy those demands. This is correct, but what happens between now and the long term?

In all likelihood, the recession induced by the pandemic will trigger a sharp increase in labour-substitution, meaning that physical labour will be replaced by robots and "intelligent" machines, which will in turn provoke lasting and structural changes in the labour market. In the technology chapter, we analyse in more detail the impact that the pandemic is having on automation, but there is already ample evidence that it is accelerating the pace of transformation. The call centre sector epitomizes this situation.

In the pre-pandemic era, new artificial intelligence (AI)-based technologies were being gradually introduced to automate some of the tasks performed by human employees. The COVID-19 crisis, and its accompanying measures of social distancing, has suddenly accelerated this process of innovation and technological change. Chatbots, which often use the same voice recognition technology behind Amazon's Alexa, and other software that can replace tasks normally performed by human employees, are being rapidly introduced. These innovations provoked by necessity (i.e. sanitary measures) will soon result in hundreds of thousands, and potentially millions, of job losses.

As consumers may prefer automated services to face-to-face interactions for some time to come, what is currently happening with call centres will inevitably occur in other sectors as well. "Automation anxiety" is therefore set for a revival,[32] which the economic recession will exacerbate. The process of automation is never linear; it tends to happen in waves and often in harsh economic times, when the decline in companies' revenues makes labour costs relatively more expensive. This is when employers replace less-skilled workers with automation to increase labour productivity.[33] Low-income workers in routine jobs (in manufacturing and services like food and transportation) are those most likely to be affected. The labour market will become increasingly polarized between highly paid work and lots of jobs that have disappeared or aren't well paid and are not very interesting. In emerging and developing countries (particularly those with a "youth bulge"), technology runs the risk of transforming the "demographic dividend" into a "demographic nightmare" because automation will make it much harder to get on the escalator of economic growth.

It is easy to give way to excessive pessimism because we human beings find it much easier to visualize what is disappearing than what is coming next. We know and understand that levels of unemployment are bound to rise globally in the foreseeable future, but over the coming years and decades we may be surprised. We could witness an unprecedented wave of innovation and creativity driven by new methods and tools of production. There might also be a global explosion of hundreds of thousands of new micro industries that will hopefully employ hundreds of millions of people. Of course, we cannot know what the future holds, except that much will depend on the trajectory of future economic growth.

1.2.2.3. What future growth could look like

In the post-pandemic era, according to current projections, the new economic "normal" may be characterized by much lower growth than in past decades. As the recovery begins, quarter-to-quarter GDP growth may look impressive (because it will start from a very low basis), but it may take years before the overall size of most nations' economy returns to their pre-pandemic level. This is also due to the fact that the severity of the economic shock inflicted by the coronavirus will conflate with a long-term trend: declining populations in many countries and ageing (demographics is "destiny" and a crucial driver of GDP growth). Under such conditions, when lower economic growth seems almost certain, many people may wonder whether "obsessing" about growth is even useful, concluding that it doesn't make sense to chase a target of ever-higher GDP growth.

The deep disruption caused by COVID-19 globally has offered societies an enforced pause to reflect on what is truly of value. With the economic emergency responses to the pandemic now in place, the opportunity can be seized to make the kind of institutional changes and policy choices that will put economies on a new path towards a fairer, greener future. The history of radical rethinking in the years following World War II, which included the establishment of the Bretton Woods institutions, the United Nations, the EU and the expansion of welfare states, shows the magnitude of the shifts possible.

This raises two questions: 1) What should the new compass for tracking progress be? and 2) What will the new drivers of an economy that is inclusive and sustainable be?

In relation to the first question, changing course will require a shift in the mindset of world leaders to place greater focus and priority on the well-being of all citizens and the planet. Historically, national statistics were amassed principally to furnish governments with a better understanding of the available resources for taxation and waging war. As democracies grew stronger, in the 1930s the remit of national statistics was extended to capture the economic welfare of the population,[34] yet distilled into the form of GDP. Economic welfare became equivalent to current production and consumption with no consideration given to the future availability of resources. Policy-makers' over-reliance on GDP as an indicator of economic prosperity has led to the current state of natural and social resource depletion.

What other elements should an improved dashboard for progress include? First, GDP itself needs to be updated to reflect the value created in the digital economy, the value created through unpaid work as well as the value potentially destroyed through certain types of economic activity. The omission of value created through work carried out in the household has been a long-standing issue and research efforts to create a measurement framework will need new momentum. In addition, as the digital economy is expanding, the gap between measured activity and actual economic activity has been growing wider. Furthermore, certain types of financial products, which through their inclusion in GDP are captured as value creating, are merely shifting value from one place to another or sometimes even have the effect of destroying it.

Second, it is not only the overall size of the economy that matters but also the distribution of gains and the progressive evolution of access to opportunity. With income inequality more marked than ever in many countries and technological developments driving further polarization, total GDP or averages such as GDP per capita are becoming less and less useful as true indicators of individuals' quality of life. Wealth inequality is a significant dimension of today's dynamic of inequality and should be more systematically tracked.

Third, resilience will need to be better measured and monitored to gauge the true health of an economy, including the determinants of productivity, such as institutions, infrastructure, human capital and innovation ecosystems, which are critical for the overall strength of a system. Furthermore, the capital reserves upon which a country can draw in times of crisis, including financial, physical, natural and social capital will need to be tracked systematically. Albeit that natural and social capital in particular are difficult to measure, they are critical to the social cohesion and environmental sustainability of a country and should not be underestimated. Recent academic efforts are beginning to tackle the measurement challenge by bringing public- and private-sector data sources together.

Real examples of a shift in policy-makers' emphasis are appearing. It is no coincidence that in 2019, a country placed in the top 10 ranking of the *World Happiness Report* unveiled a "well-being budget". The Prime Minster of New Zealand's decision to earmark money for social issues, such as mental health, child poverty and family violence, made well-being an explicit goal of public policy. In so doing, Prime Minister Ardern turned into policy what everybody has known for years, that an increase in GDP does not guarantee an improvement in living standards and social welfare.

Additionally, several institutions and organizations, ranging from cities to the European Commission, are reflecting on options that would sustain future economic activity at a level that matches the satisfaction of our material needs with the respect of our planetary boundaries. The municipality of Amsterdam is the first in the world to have formally committed to this framework as a starting point for public policy decisions in the post-pandemic world. The framework resembles a "doughnut" in which the inner ring represents the minimum we need to lead a good life (as enunciated by the UN's Sustainable Development Goals) and the outer ring the ecological ceiling defined by earth-system scientists (which highlights the boundaries not to be crossed by human activity to avoid environmentally negative impact on climate, soil, oceans, the ozone layer, freshwater and biodiversity). In between the two rings is the sweet spot (or "dough") where our human needs and those of the planet are being met.[35]

We do not know yet whether the "tyranny of GDP growth" will come to an end, but different signals suggest that the pandemic may accelerate changes in many of our well-entrenched social norms. If we collectively recognize that, beyond a certain level of wealth defined by GDP per capita, happiness depends more on intangible factors such as accessible healthcare and a robust social fabric than on material consumption, then values as different as the respect for the environment, responsible eating, empathy or generosity may gain ground and progressively come to characterize the new social norms.

Beyond the immediate ongoing crisis, in recent years the role of economic growth in advancing living standards has varied depending on context. In high-income economies, productivity growth has been steadily declining since the 1970s, and it has been argued that there are currently no clear policy avenues for reviving long-term growth.[36] In addition, the growth that did materialize disproportionately accrued to individuals at the top end of the income distribution. A more effective approach may be for policy-makers to target welfare-enhancing interventions more directly.[37] In low- and middle-income countries, the benefits of economic growth have lifted millions out of poverty in large emerging markets. The policy options to boost growth performance are better known (e.g. addressing basic distortions), yet new approaches will have to be found as the manufacturing-led development model is fast losing its power with the advent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.[38]

This leads to the second key question around future growth. If the direction and quality of economic growth matter as much as – or perhaps even more than – its speed, what are likely to be the new drivers of this quality in the post-pandemic economy? Several areas have the potential to offer an environment capable of boosting a more inclusive and sustainable dynamism.

The green economy spans a range of possibilities from greener energy to ecotourism to the circular economy. For example, shifting from the "take-make-dispose" approach to production and consumption to a model that is "restorative and regenerative by design"[39] can preserve resources and minimize waste by using a product again when it reaches the end of its useful life, thus creating further value that can in turn generate economic benefits by contributing to innovation, job creation and, ultimately, growth. Companies and strategies that favour reparable products with longer lifespans (from phones and cars to fashion) that even offer free repairs (like Patagonia outdoor wear) and platforms for trading used products are all expanding fast.[40]

The social economy spans other high-growth and job-creating areas in the fields of caregiving and personal services, education and health. Investment in childcare, care for the elderly and other elements of the care economy would create 13 million jobs in the US alone and 21 million jobs in seven economies, and would lead to a 2% rise in GDP growth in the countries studied.[41] Education is also an area of massive job creation, particularly when considering primary and secondary education, technical and vocational education and training, university and adult training together. Health, as the pandemic has demonstrated, requires much greater investment both in terms of infrastructure and innovation as well as human capital. These three areas create a multiplier effect both through their own employment potential and the long-term benefits they unleash across societies in terms of equality, social mobility and inclusive growth.

Innovation in production, distribution and business models can generate efficiency gains and new or better products that create higher value added, leading to new jobs and economic prosperity. Governments thus have tools at their disposal to make the shift towards more inclusive and sustainable prosperity, combining public-sector direction-setting and incentives with commercial innovation capacity through a fundamental rethinking of markets and their role in our economy and society. This requires investing differently and deliberately in the frontier markets outlined above, areas where market forces could have a transformative effect on economies and societies but where some of the necessary preconditions to function are still lacking (for instance, technical capacities to sustainably produce a product or asset at scale are still insufficient, standards are not well defined or legal frameworks are not yet well developed). Shaping the rules and mechanisms of these new markets can have a transformational impact on the economy. If governments want the shift to a new and better kind of growth, they have a window of opportunity to act now to create incentives for innovation and creativity in the areas outlined above.

Some have called for “degrowth”, a movement that embraces zero or even negative GDP growth that is gaining some traction (at least in the richest countries). As the critique of economic growth moves to centre stage, consumerism’s financial and cultural dominance in public and private life will be overhauled.[42] This is made obvious in consumer-driven degrowth activism in some niche segments – like advocating for less meat or fewer flights. By triggering a period of enforced degrowth, the pandemic has spurred renewed interest in this movement that wants to reverse the pace of economic growth, leading more than 1,100 experts from around the world to release a manifesto in May 2020 putting forward a degrowth strategy to tackle the economic and human crisis caused by COVID-19.[43] Their open letter calls for the adoption of a democratically “planned yet adaptive, sustainable, and equitable downscaling of the economy, leading to a future where we can live better with less”.

However, beware of the pursuit of degrowth proving as directionless as the pursuit of growth! The most forward-looking countries and their governments will instead prioritize a more inclusive and sustainable approach to managing and measuring their economies, one that also drives job growth, improvements in living standards and safeguards the planet. The technology to do more with less already exists.[44] There is no fundamental trade-off between economic, social and environmental factors if we adopt this more holistic and longer-term approach to defining progress and incentivizing investment in green and social frontier markets.

1.2.3. Fiscal and monetary policies

The fiscal and monetary policy response to the pandemic has been decisive, massive and swift.

In systemically important countries, central banks decided almost immediately after the beginning of the outbreak to cut interest rates while launching large quantitative-easing programmes, committing to print the money necessary to keep the costs of government borrowing low. The US Fed undertook to buy Treasury bonds and agency mortgage-backed securities, while the European Central Bank promised to buy any instrument that governments would issue (a move that succeeded in reducing the spread in borrowing costs between weaker and stronger eurozone members).

Concomitantly, most governments launched ambitious and unprecedented fiscal policy responses. Urgent and expansive measures were taken very early on during the crisis, with three specific aims: 1) fight the pandemic with as much spending as required to bring it under control as rapidly as possible (through the production of tests, hospital capabilities, research in drugs and vaccines, etc.); 2) provide emergency funds to households and firms on the verge of bankruptcy and disaster; and 3) support aggregate demand so that the economy can operate as far as possible close to potential.[45]

These measures will lead to very large fiscal deficits, with a likely increase in debt-to-GDP ratios of 30% of GDP in the rich economies. At the global level, the aggregate stimulus from government spending will likely exceed 20% of global GDP in 2020 with significant variation across countries, ranging from 33% in Germany to more than 12% in the US.

This expansion of fiscal capabilities has dramatically different implications depending on whether the country concerned is advanced or emerging. High-income countries have more fiscal space because a higher level of debt should prove sustainable and entail a viable level of welfare cost for future generations, for two reasons: 1) the commitment from central banks to purchase whatever amount of bonds it takes to maintain low interest rates; and 2) the confidence that interest rates are likely to remain low in the foreseeable future because uncertainty will continue hampering private investment and will justify high levels of precautionary savings. In contrast, the situation couldn’t be starker in emerging and developing economies. Most of them don’t have the fiscal space required to react to the pandemic shock; they are already suffering from major capital outflows and a fall in commodity prices, which means their exchange rate will be hammered if they decide to launch expansionary fiscal policies. In these circumstances, help in the form of grants and debt relief, and possibly an outright moratorium,[46] will not only be needed but will be critical.

These are unprecedented programmes for an unprecedented situation, something so new that the economist Carmen Reinhart has called it a “whatever-it-takes moment for large-scale, outside-the-box fiscal and monetary policies”.[47] Measures that would have seemed inconceivable prior to the pandemic may well become standard around the world as governments try to prevent the economic recession from turning into a catastrophic depression. Increasingly, there will be calls for government to act as a “payer of last resort”[48] to prevent or stem the spate of mass layoffs and business destruction triggered by the pandemic.

All these changes are altering the rules of the economic and monetary policy “game”. The artificial barrier that makes monetary and fiscal authorities independent from each other has now been dismantled, with central bankers becoming (to a relative degree) subservient to elected politicians. It is now conceivable that, in the future, government will try to wield its influence over central banks to finance major public projects, such as an infrastructure or green investment fund. Similarly, the precept that government can intervene to preserve workers’ jobs or incomes and protect companies from bankruptcy may endure after these policies come to an end. It is likely that public and political pressure to maintain such schemes will persist, even when the situation improves. One of the greatest concerns is that this implicit cooperation between fiscal and monetary policies leads to uncontrollable inflation. It originates in the idea that policy-makers will deploy massive fiscal stimulus that will be fully monetized, i.e. not financed through standard government debt. This is where Modern Monetary Theory (MMT) and helicopter money come in: with interest rates hovering around zero, central banks cannot stimulate the economy by classic monetary tools; i.e. a reduction in interest rates – unless they decided to go for deeply negative interest rates, a problematic move resisted by most central banks.[49] The stimulus must therefore come from an increase in fiscal deficits (meaning that public expenditure will go up at a time when tax revenues decline). Put in the simplest possible (and, in this case, simplistic) terms, MMT runs like this: governments will issue some debt that the central bank will buy. If it never sells it back, it equates to monetary finance: the deficit is monetized (by the central bank purchasing the bonds that the government issues) and the government can use the money as it sees fit. It can, for example, metaphorically drop it from helicopters to those people in need. The idea is appealing and realizable, but it contains a major issue of social expectations and political control: once citizens realize that money can be found on a “magic money tree”, elected politicians will be under fierce and relentless public pressure to create more and more, which is when the issue of inflation kicks in.

1.2.3.1. Deflation or inflation?

Two technical elements embedded in the issue of monetary finance are associated with the risk of inflation. First, the decision to engage in perpetual quantitative easing (i.e. in monetary finance) doesn’t have to be taken when the central bank buys the debt issued by the government; it can be left to the contingent future to hide or circumvent the idea that money “grows on trees”. Second, the inflationary impact of helicopter money is not related to whether the deficit is funded or unfunded, but is directly proportional to the amount of money involved. There are no nominal limits to how much money a central bank can create, but there are sensible limits to how much they would want to create to achieve reflation without risking too much inflation. The resultant increase in nominal GDP will be split between a real output effect and an increase in price level effect – this balance and its inflationary nature will depend on how tight the supply constraints are, so ultimately on the amount of money created. Central bankers may decide that there is nothing to worry about with inflation at 2% or 3%, and that 4% to 5% is also fine, but they will have to define an upper limit at which inflation becomes disruptive and a real concern. The challenge will be to determine at what level inflation becomes corrosive and a source of obsessive concern for consumers.

For the moment, some fear deflation while others worry about inflation. What lies behind these divergent anxieties for the future? The deflation worriers point to a collapsing labour market and stumbling commodity prices, and wonder how inflation could possibly pick up anytime soon in these conditions. Inflation worriers observe the substantial increases in central bank balance sheets and fiscal deficits and ask how these will not, one day, lead to inflation, and possibly high inflation, and even hyperinflation. They point to the example of Germany after World War I, which inflated away its domestic war debt in the hyperinflation of 1923, or the UK, which eroded with a bit of inflation the massive amount of debt (250%) it inherited from World War II. These worriers acknowledge that, in the short term, deflation may be the bigger risk, but argue that inflation is ultimately unavoidable given the massive and inevitable amounts of stimulus.

At this current juncture, it is hard to imagine how inflation could pick up anytime soon. The reshoring of production activities could generate occasional pockets of inflation, but they are likely to remain limited. The combination of potent, long-term, structural trends like ageing and technology (both are deflationary in nature) and an exceptionally high unemployment rate that will constrain wage increases for years puts strong downward pressure on inflation. In the post-pandemic era, strong consumer demand is unlikely. The pain inflicted by widespread unemployment, lower incomes for large segments of the population and uncertainty about the future are all likely to lead to an increase in precautionary savings. When social distancing eventually eases, pent-up demand could provoke a bit of inflation, but it is likely to be temporary and will therefore not affect inflation expectations. Olivier Blanchard, the former chief economist of the IMF, thinks that only the combination of the following three elements could create inflation: 1) a very large increase in the debt to GDP ratio, larger than the current forecast of 20-30%; 2) a very large increase in the neutral rate (i.e. the safe real rate required to keep the economy at potential); and 3) fiscal dominance of monetary policy.[50] The probability of each individually is already low, so the probability of the three occurring in conjunction with each other is extremely low (but not nil). Bond investors think alike. This could change, of course, but at the moment the low rate differential between nominal and inflation-indexed bonds paints a picture of ongoing very low inflation at best.

In the coming years, high-income countries may well face a situation similar to that of Japan over the past few decades: structurally weak demand, very low inflation and ultra-low interest rates. The possible “Japanification” of the (rich) world is often depicted as a hopeless combination of no growth, no inflation and insufferable debt levels. This is misleading. When the data is adjusted for demographics, Japan does better than most. Its GDP per capita is high and growing and, since 2007, its real GDP per member of the working age population has risen faster than in any other G7 country. Naturally, there are many idiosyncratic reasons for this (a very high level of social capital and trust, but also labour productivity growth that surpasses the average, and a successful absorption of elderly workers into the labour force), but it shows that a shrinking population doesn’t have to lead to economic oblivion. Japan’s high living standards and well-being indicators offer a salutary lesson that there is hope in the face of economic hardship.

1.2.3.2. The fate of the US dollar

For decades, the US has enjoyed the “exorbitant privilege” of retaining the global currency reserve, a status that has long been “a perk of imperial might and an economic elixir”.[51] To a considerable extent, American power and prosperity have been built and reinforced by the global trust in the dollar and the willingness of customers abroad to hold it, most often in the form of US government bonds. The fact that so many countries and foreign institutions want to hold dollars as a store of value and as an instrument of exchange (for trade) has anchored its status as the global reserve currency. This has enabled the US to borrow cheaply abroad and benefit from low interest rates at home, which in turn has allowed Americans to consume beyond their means. It has also made large recent US government deficits possible, permitted the US to run substantial trade deficits, reduced the exchange-rate risk and made the US financial markets more liquid. At the core of the US dollar status as a reserve currency lies a critical issue of trust: non-Americans who hold dollars trust that the United States will protect both its own interests (by managing sensibly its economy) and the rest of the world as far as the US dollar is concerned (by managing sensibly its currency, like providing dollar liquidity to the global financial system efficiently and rapidly).

For quite some time, some analysts and policy-makers have been considering a possible and progressive end to the dominance of the dollar. They now think that the pandemic might be the catalyst that proves them right. Their argument is twofold and relates to both sides of the trust issue.

On the one hand (managing the economy sensibly), doubters of US dollar dominance point to the inevitable and sharp deterioration of the US fiscal position. In their mind, unsustainable levels of debt will eventually erode confidence in the US dollar. Just prior to the pandemic, US defence spending, plus interest on the federal debt, plus annual entitlement payments – Medicare, Medicaid and social security – represented 112% of federal tax receipts (versus 95% in 2017). This unsustainable path will worsen in the post-pandemic, post-bailout era. This argument suggests that something major will therefore have to change, either through a much reduced geopolitical role or higher taxation, or both, otherwise the rising deficit will reach a threshold beyond which non-US investors are unwilling to fund it. After all, the status of reserve currency cannot last longer than foreign confidence in the ability of the holder to honour its payments.

On the other hand (managing the US dollar sensibly for the rest of the world), doubters of the dollar’s dominance point to the incompatibility of its status as a global reserve currency with rising economic nationalism at home. Even though the Fed and the US Treasury manage the dollar and its influential network worldwide with efficacy, sceptics emphasize that the willingness of the US administration to weaponize the US dollar for geopolitical purposes (like punishing countries and companies that trade with Iran or North Korea) will inevitably incentivize dollar holders to look for alternatives.

Are there any viable alternatives? The US remains a formidable global financial hegemon (the role of the dollar in international financial transactions is far greater, albeit less visible, than in international trade), but it is also true than many countries would like to challenge the dollar’s global dominance. In the short term, there are no alternatives. The Chinese renminbi (RMB) could be an option, but not until strict capital controls are eliminated and the RMB turns into a market-determined currency, which is unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future. The same goes for the euro; it could be an option, but not until doubts about a possible implosion of the eurozone dissipate for good, which again is an unlikely prospect in the next few years. As for a global virtual currency, there is none in sight yet, but there are attempts to launch national digital currencies that may eventually dethrone the US dollar supremacy. The most significant one took place in China at the end of April 2020 with a test of a national digital currency in four large cities.[52] The country is years ahead of the rest of the world in developing a digital currency combined with powerful electronic payment platforms; this experiment clearly shows that there are monetary systems that are trying to become independent from US intermediaries while moving towards greater digitization.

Ultimately, the possible end of the US dollar's primacy will depend on what happens in the US. As Henry Paulson, a former US Treasury Secretary, says: "US dollar prominence begins at home (…). The United States must maintain an economy that inspires global credibility and confidence. Failure to do so will, over time, put the US dollar's position in peril".[53] To a large extent, US global credibility also depends on geopolitics and the appeal of its social model. The "exorbitant privilege" is intricately intertwined with global power, the perception of the US as a reliable partner and its role in the working of multilateral institutions. "If that role were seen as less sure and that security guarantee as less iron clad, because the US was disengaging from global geopolitics in favour of more stand-alone, inward-looking policies, the security premium enjoyed by the US dollar could diminish," warns Barry Eichengreen and European Central Bank representatives.[54]

Questions and doubts about the future status of the dollar as a global currency reserve are an apt reminder that economics does not exist in isolation. This reality is particularly harsh in over-indebted emerging and poor countries now unable to repay their debt often denominated in dollars. For them, this crisis will take on huge proportions and years to sort out, with considerable economic damage translating fast into social and humanitarian pain. In all these countries, the COVID crisis may well end the gradual process of convergence that was supposed to bring highly developed and emerging or developing countries into closer alignment. This will lead to an increase in societal and geopolitical risks – a stark reminder of the extent to which economic risks intersect with societal issues and geopolitics.

1.3. Societal reset

Historically, pandemics have tested societies to their core; the 2020 COVID-19 crisis will be no exception. Comparable to the economy, as we just saw, and geopolitics, as we will see in the next chapter, the societal upheaval unleashed by COVID-19 will last for years, and possibly generations. The most immediate and visible impact is that many governments will be taken to task, with a lot of anger directed at those policy-makers and political figures that have appeared inadequate or ill-prepared in terms of their response to dealing with COVID-19. As Henry Kissinger observed: “Nations cohere and flourish on the belief that their institutions can foresee calamity, arrest its impact and restore stability. When the COVID-19 pandemic is over, many countries’ institutions will be perceived as having failed”.[55] This will be particularly true for some rich countries endowed with sophisticated health systems and strong assets in research, science and innovation where citizens will ask why their authorities did so poorly when compared to others. In these, the very essence of their social fabric and socio-economic system may emerge and be denounced as the “real” culprit, guilty of failing to guarantee economic and social welfare for the majority of citizens. In poorer countries, the pandemic will exact a dramatic toll in terms of social costs. It will exacerbate the societal issues that already beset them – in particular poverty, inequality and corruption. This could, in some cases, lead to extreme outcomes as severe as social and societal disintegration (“social” refers to interactions between individuals or groups of individuals while “societal” is the adjective that relates to society as a whole).

Are there any systemic lessons to be learned relating to what has and hasn’t worked in terms of dealing with the pandemic? To what extent does the response of different nations reveal some inner strengths and weaknesses about particular societies or systems of governance? Some, such as Singapore, South Korea and Denmark (among others), seemed to fare rather well and certainly better than most. Others, such as Italy, Spain, the US or the UK, seemed to underperform on different counts, whether in terms of preparation, crisis management, public communication, the number of confirmed cases and deaths, and various other metrics. Neighbouring countries that share many structural similarities, like France and Germany, had a rough equivalent number of confirmed cases but a strikingly different number of deaths from COVID-19. Apart from differences in healthcare infrastructure, what accounts for these apparent anomalies? Currently (June 2020), we are still faced with multiple “unknowns” regarding the reasons why COVID-19 struck and spread with particular virulence in some countries and regions, and not in others. However, and on aggregate, the countries that fare better share the following broad and common attributes:

- They were “prepared” for what was coming (logistically and organizationally).
- They made rapid and decisive decisions.
- They have a cost-effective and inclusive healthcare system.
- They are high-trust societies in which citizens have confidence in both the leadership and the information they provide.
- They seem under duress to exhibit a real sense of solidarity, favouring the common good over individual aspirations and needs.

With the partial exception of the first and second attributes that are more technical (albeit technicality has cultural elements embedded in it), all the others can be categorized as “favourable” societal characteristics, proving that core values of inclusivity, solidarity and trust are strong determining elements and important contributors to success in containing an epidemic.

It is of course much too early to depict with any degree of accuracy the form that the societal reset will take in different countries, but some of its broad global contours can already be delineated. First and foremost, the post-pandemic era will usher in a period of massive wealth redistribution, from the rich to the poor and from capital to labour. Second, COVID-19 is likely to sound the death knell of neoliberalism, a corpus of ideas and policies that can loosely be defined as favouring competition over solidarity, creative destruction over government intervention and economic growth over social welfare. For a number of years, the neoliberal doctrine has been on the wane, with many commentators, business leaders and policy-makers increasingly denouncing its “market fetishism”, but COVID-19 brought the *coup de grâce*. It is no coincidence that the two countries that over the past few years embraced the policies of neoliberalism with most fervour – the US and the UK – are among those that suffered the most casualties during the pandemic. These two concomitant forces – massive redistribution on the one hand and abandoning neoliberal policies on the other – will exert a defining impact on our societies’ organization, ranging from how inequalities could spur social unrest to the increasing role of governments and the redefinition of social contracts.

1.3.1. Inequalities

One seriously misleading cliché about the coronavirus resides in the metaphor of COVID-19 as a "great leveller".[56] The reality is quite the opposite. COVID-19 has exacerbated pre-existing conditions of inequality wherever and whenever it strikes. As such, it is not a "leveller", neither medically nor economically, or socially or psychologically. The pandemic is in reality a "great unequalizer"[57] that has compounded disparities in income, wealth and opportunity. It has laid bare for all to see not only the vast numbers of people in the world who are economically and socially vulnerable, but also the depth and degree of their fragility – a phenomenon even more prevalent in countries with low or non-existent social safety nets or weak family and social bonds. This situation, of course, predates the pandemic but, as we observed for other global issues, the virus acted as an amplifier, forcing us to recognize and acknowledge the severity of the problems relating to inequality, formerly brushed aside by too many for too long.

The first effect of the pandemic has been to magnify the macro challenge of social inequalities by placing a spotlight on the shocking disparities in the degree of risk to which different social classes are exposed. In much of the world, an approximate, albeit revealing, narrative emerged during the lockdowns. It described a dichotomy: the upper and middle classes were able to telework and self-school their children from their homes (primary or, when possible, secondary, more remote residences considered safer), while members of the working class (for those with a job) were not at home and were not overseeing their children's education, but were working on the front line to help save lives (directly or not) and the economy – cleaning hospitals, manning the checkouts, transporting essentials and ensuring our security. In the case of a highly developed service economy like the US, roughly a third of total jobs can be performed from home, or remotely, with considerable discrepancies that are highly correlated with earnings by sectors. More than 75% of American finance and insurance workers can do their job remotely, while just 3% of much lesser paid workers in the food industry can do so.[58] In the midst of the pandemic (mid-April), most new cases of infection and the death count made it clearer than ever that COVID-19 was far from being the "great leveller" or "equalizer" that so many people were referring to at the beginning of the pandemic. Instead, what rapidly emerged was that there was nothing fair or even-handed about how the virus went about its deadly work.

In the US, COVID-19 has taken a disproportionate toll on African Americans, low-income people and vulnerable populations, such as the homeless. In the state of Michigan where less than 15% of the population is black, black residents represented around 40% of deaths from COVID-19 complications. The fact that COVID-19 affected black communities so disproportionately is a mere reflection of existing inequalities. In America as in many other countries, African Americans are poorer, more likely to be unemployed or underemployed and victims of substandard housing and living conditions. As a result, they suffer more from pre-existing health conditions like obesity, heart disease or diabetes that make COVID-19 particularly deadly.

The second effect of the pandemic and the state of lockdown that ensued was to expose the profound disconnect between the essential nature and innate value of a job done and the economic recompense it commands. Put another way: we value least economically the individuals society needs the most. The sobering truth is that the heroes of the immediate COVID-19 crisis, those who (at personal risk) took care of the sick and kept the economy ticking, are among the worst paid professionals – the nurses, the cleaners, the delivery drivers, the workers in food factories, care homes and warehouses, among others. It is often their contribution to economic and societal welfare that is the least recognized. The phenomenon is global but particularly stark in the Anglo-Saxon countries where poverty is coupled with precariousness. The citizens in this group are not only the worst paid, but also those most at risk of losing their jobs. In the UK, for example, a large majority (almost 60%) of care providers working in the community operate on "zero-hour contracts", which means they have no guaranteed regular hours and, as a result, no certainty of a regular income. Likewise, workers in food factories are often on temporary employment contracts with fewer rights than normal and with no security. As for the delivery drivers, most of the time categorized as self-employed, they are paid per "drop" and receive no sick or holiday pay – a reality poignantly portrayed in Ken Loach's most recent work "Sorry We Missed You", a movie that illustrates the dramatic extent to which these workers are always just one mishap away from physical, emotional or economic ruin, with cascading effects worsened by stress and anxiety.

In the post-pandemic era, will social inequalities increase or decrease? Much anecdotal evidence suggests, at least in the short term, that the inequalities are likely to increase. As outlined earlier, people with no or low incomes are suffering disproportionately from the pandemic: they are more susceptible to chronic health conditions and immune deficiency, and are therefore more likely to catch COVID-19 and suffer from severe infections. This will continue in the months following the outbreak. As with previous pandemic episodes like the plague, not everyone will benefit equally from medical treatments and vaccines. Particularly in the US, as Angus Deaton, the Nobel laureate who co-authored *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* with Anne

Case, observed: “drug-makers and hospitals will be more powerful and wealthier than ever”,[59] to the disadvantage of the poorest segments of the population. In addition, ultra-accommodative monetary policies pursued around the world will increase wealth inequalities by fuelling asset prices, most notably in financial markets and property.

However, moving beyond the immediate future, the trend could reverse and provoke the opposite – less inequality. How might it happen? It could be that enough people are sufficiently outraged by the glaring injustice of the preferential treatment enjoyed exclusively by the rich that it provokes a broad societal backlash. In the US, a majority or a very vocal minority may demand national or community control over healthcare, while, in Europe, underfunding of the health system will no longer be politically acceptable. It may also be that the pandemic will eventually compel us to rethink occupations we truly value and will force us to redesign how we collectively remunerate them. In the future, will society accept that a star hedge fund manager who specializes in short-selling (whose contribution to economic and social welfare is doubtful, at best) can receive an income in the millions per year while a nurse (whose contribution to social welfare is incontrovertible) earns an infinitesimal fraction of that amount? In such an optimistic scenario, as we increasingly recognize that many workers in low-paid and insecure jobs play an essential role in our collective well-being, policies would adjust to improve both their working conditions and remuneration. Better wages would follow, even if they are accompanied by reduced profits for companies or higher prices; there will be strong social and political pressure to replace insecure contracts and exploitative loopholes with permanent positions and better training. Inequalities could therefore decline but, if history is any guide, this optimistic scenario is unlikely to prevail without massive social turmoil first.

1.3.2. Social unrest

One of the most profound dangers facing the post-pandemic era is social unrest. In some extreme cases, it could lead to societal disintegration and political collapse. Countless studies, articles and warnings have highlighting this particular risk, based on the obvious observation that when people have no jobs, no income and no prospects for a better life, they often resort to violence. The following quote captures the essence of the problem. It applies to the US, but its conclusions are valid for most countries around the world:

> Those who are left hopeless, jobless, and without assets could easily turn against those who are better off. Already, some 30% of Americans have zero or negative wealth. If more people emerge from the current crisis with neither money, nor jobs, nor access to health care, and if these people become desperate and angry, such scenes as the recent escape of prisoners in Italy or the looting that followed Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005 might become commonplace. If governments have to resort to using paramilitary or military forces to quell, for example, riots or attacks on property, societies could begin to disintegrate.[60]

Well before the pandemic engulfed the world, social unrest had been on the rise globally, so the risk is not new but has been amplified by COVID-19. There are different ways to define what constitutes social unrest but, over the past two years, more than 100 significant anti-government protests have taken place around the world,[61] in rich and poor countries alike, from the yellow vests’ riots in France to demonstrations against strongmen in countries such as Bolivia, Iran and Sudan. Most (of the latter) were suppressed by brutal crackdowns, and many went into hibernation (like the global economy) when governments forced their populations into lockdowns to contain the pandemic. But after the interdiction to gather in groups and take to the streets is lifted, it is hard to imagine that old grievances and temporarily suppressed social disquiet will not erupt again, possibly with renewed strength. In the post-pandemic era, the numbers of unemployed, worried, miserable, resentful, sick and hungry will have swelled dramatically. Personal tragedies will accrue, fomenting anger, resentment and exasperation in different social groups, including the unemployed, the poor, the migrants, the prisoners, the homeless, all those left out… How could all this pressure not end in an eruption? Social phenomena often exhibit the same characteristics as pandemics and, as observed in previous pages, tipping points apply equally to both. When poverty, a sense of being disenfranchised and powerlessness reach a certain tipping point, disruptive social action often becomes the option of last resort.

In the early days of the crisis, prominent individuals echoed such concerns and alerted the world to the growing risk of social unrest. Jacob Wallenberg, the Swedish industrialist, is one of them. In March 2020, he wrote: “If the crisis goes on for long, unemployment could hit 20-30 per cent while economies could contract by 20-30 per cent ... There will be no recovery. There will be social unrest. There will be violence. There will be socio-economic consequences: dramatic unemployment. Citizens will suffer dramatically: some will die, others will feel awful.”[62] We are now beyond the threshold of what Wallenberg considered to be “worrying”, with unemployment exceeding 20% to 30% in many countries around the world and with most economies having contracted in the second quarter of 2020 beyond a level previously considered of concern. How is this going to play out and where is social unrest most likely to occur and to what degree?

At the time of writing this book, COVID-19 has already unleashed a global wave of social unrest. It started in the US with the Black Lives Matter protests following the killing of George Floyd at the end of May 2020, but it rapidly spread around the world. COVID-19 was a determining element: George Floyd’s death was the spark that lit the fire of social unrest, but the underlying conditions created by the pandemic, in particular the racial inequalities that it laid bare and the rising level of unemployment, were the fuel that amplified the protests and kept them going. How? Over the past six years, nearly 100 African Americans have died in police custody, but it took the killing of George Floyd to trigger a national uprising. Therefore, it is not by chance that this outburst of anger occurred during the pandemic that has disproportionately affected the US African-American community (as pointed out earlier). At the end of June 2020, the mortality rate inflicted by COVID-19 on black Americans was 2.4 times higher than for white Americans. Simultaneously, employment among black Americans was being decimated by the corona crisis. This should not come as a surprise: the economic and social divide between African Americans and white Americans is so profound that, according to almost every metric, black workers are disadvantaged compared to white workers.[63] In May 2020, unemployment among African Americans stood at 16.8% (versus a national level of 13.3%), a very high level that feeds into a phenomenon described by sociologists as “biographical availability”:[64] the absence of full-time employment tends to increase the participation level in social movements. We do not know how the Black Lives Matter movement will evolve and, if it persists, what form it will take. However, indications show it is turning into something broader than race-specific issues. The protests against systemic racism have led to more general calls about economic justice and inclusiveness. This is a logical segue to the issues of inequality addressed in the previous sub-chapter, which also illustrates how risks interact with each other and amplify one another.

It is important to emphasize that no situation is set in stone and that there are no “mechanical” triggers for social unrest – it remains an expression of a collective human dynamic and frame of mind that is dependent upon a multitude of factors. True to the notions of interconnectedness and complexity, outbursts of social unrest are quintessential non-linear events that can be triggered by a broad variety of political, economic, societal, technological and environmental factors. They range from things as different as economic shocks, hardship caused by extreme weather events, racial tensions, food scarcity and even sentiments of unfairness. All these, and more, almost always interact with each other and create cascading effects. Therefore, specific situations of turmoil cannot be forecasted, but can, however, be anticipated. Which countries are most susceptible? At first glance, poorer countries with no safety nets and rich countries with weak social safety nets are most at risk because they have no or fewer policy measures like unemployment benefits to cushion the shock of income loss. For this reason, strongly individualistic societies like the US could be more at risk than European or Asian countries that either have a greater sense of solidarity (like in southern Europe) or a better social system for assisting the underprivileged (like in northern Europe). Sometimes, the two come together. Countries like Italy, for example, possess both a strong social safety net and a strong sense of solidarity (particularly in intergenerational terms). In a similar vein, the Confucianism prevalent in so many Asian countries places a sense of duty and generational solidarity before individual rights; it also puts high value on measures and rules that benefit the community as a whole. All this does not mean, of course, that European or Asian countries are immune from social unrest. Far from it! As the yellow vests movement demonstrated in the case of France, violent and sustained forms of social unrest can erupt even in countries endowed with a robust social safety net but where social expectations are left wanting.

Social unrest negatively affects both economic and social welfare, but it is essential to emphasize that we are not powerless in the face of potential social unrest, for the simple reason that governments and to a lesser extent companies and other organizations can prepare to mitigate the risk by enacting the right policies. The greatest underlying cause of social unrest is inequality. The policy tools to fight unacceptable levels of inequality do exist and they often lie in the hands of governments.

1.3.3. The return of “big” government

In the words of John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge: “The COVID-19 pandemic has made government important again. Not just powerful again (look at those once-mighty companies begging for help), but also vital again: It matters enormously whether your country has a good health service, competent bureaucrats and sound finances. Good government is the difference between living and dying”.[65]

One of the great lessons of the past five centuries in Europe and America is this: acute crises contribute to boosting the power of the state. It’s always been the case and there is no reason why it should be different with the COVID-19 pandemic. Historians point to the fact that the rising fiscal resources of capitalist countries from the 18th century onwards were always closely associated with the need to fight wars, particularly those that took place in distant countries and that required maritime capacities. Such was the case with the Seven Years' War of 1756-1763, described as the first truly global war that involved all the great powers of Europe at the time. Since then, the responses to major crises have always further consolidated the power of the state, starting with taxation: "an inherent and essential attribute of sovereignty belonging as a *matter of right* to every independent government".[66] A few examples illustrating the point strongly suggest that this time, as in the past, taxation will increase. As in the past, the social rationale and political justification underlying the increases will be based upon the narrative of "countries at war" (only this time against an invisible enemy).

France's top rate of income tax was zero in 1914; a year after the end of World War I, it was 50%. Canada introduced income tax in 1917 as a "temporary" measure to finance the war, and then expanded it dramatically during World War II with a flat 20% surtax imposed on all income tax payable by persons other than corporations and the introduction of high marginal tax rates (69%). Rates came down after the war but remained substantially higher than they had been before. Similarly, during World War II, income tax in America turned from a "class tax" to a "mass tax", with the number of payers rising from 7 million in 1940 to 42 million in 1945. The most progressive tax years in US history were 1944 and 1945, with a 94% rate applied to any income above $200,000 (the equivalent in 2009 of $2.4 million). Such top rates, often denounced as confiscatory by those who had to pay them, would not drop below 80% for another 20 years. At the end of World War II, many other countries adopted similar and often extreme tax measures. In the UK during the war, the top income tax rate rose to an extraordinarily stunning 99.25%![67]

At times, the sovereign power of the state to tax translated into tangible societal gains in different domains, such as the creation of a welfare system. However, these massive transitions to something entirely "new" were always defined in terms of a response to a violent external shock or the threat of one to come. World War II, for example, led to the introduction of cradle-to-grave state welfare systems in most of Europe. So did the Cold War: governments in capitalist countries were so worried by an internal communist rebellion that they put into place a state-led model to forestall it. This system, in which state bureaucrats managed large chunks of the economy, ranging from transportation to energy, stayed in place well into the 1970s.

Today the situation is fundamentally different; in the intervening decades (in the Western world) the role of the state has shrunk considerably. This is a situation that is set to change because it is hard to imagine how an exogenous shock of such magnitude as the one inflicted by COVID-19 could be addressed with purely market-based solutions. Already and almost overnight, the coronavirus succeeded in altering perceptions about the complex and delicate balance between the private and public realms in favour of the latter. It has revealed that social insurance is efficient and that offloading an ever-greater deal of responsibilities (like health and education) to individuals and the markets may not be in the best interest of society. In a surprising and sudden turnaround, the idea, which would have been an anathema just a few years ago, that governments can further the public good while run-away economies without supervision can wreak havoc on social welfare may now become the norm. On the dial that measures the continuum between the government and the markets, the needle has decisively moved towards the left.

For the first time since Margaret Thatcher captured the zeitgeist of an era when declaring that "there is no such thing as society", governments have the upper hand. Everything that comes in the post-pandemic era will lead us to rethink governments' role. Rather than simply fixing market failures when they arise, they should, as suggested by the economist Mariana Mazzucato: "move towards actively shaping and creating markets that deliver sustainable and inclusive growth. They should also ensure that partnerships with business involving government funds are driven by public interest, not profit".[68]

How will this expanded role of governments manifest itself? A significant element of new "bigger" government is already in place with the vastly increased and quasi-immediate government control of the economy. As detailed in Chapter 1, public economic intervention has happened very quickly and on an unprecedented scale. In April 2020, just as the pandemic began to engulf the world, governments across the globe had announced stimulus programmes amounting to several trillion dollars, as if eight or nine Marshall Plans had been put into place almost simultaneously to support the basic needs of the poorest people, preserve jobs whenever possible and help businesses to survive. Central banks decided to cut rates and committed to provide all the liquidity that was needed, while governments started to expand social-welfare benefits, make direct cash transfers, cover wages, and suspend loan and mortgage payments, among other responses. Only governments had the power, capability and reach to make such decisions, without which economic calamity and a complete social meltdown would have prevailed.

Looking to the future, governments will most likely, but with different degrees of intensity, decide that it's in the best interest of society to rewrite some of the rules of the game and permanently increase their role. As happened in the 1930s in the US when massive unemployment and economic insecurity were progressively addressed by a larger role for government, today a similar course of action is likely to characterize the foreseeable future. We review in other sub-chapters the form this will take (like in the next one on the new social contract), but let's briefly identify some of the most salient points.

Heath and unemployment insurance will either need to be created from scratch or be strengthened where it already exists. Social safety nets will need to be strengthened as well – in the Anglo-Saxon societies that are the most "market-oriented"; extended unemployment benefits, sick leave and many other social measures will have to be implemented to cushion the effect of the shock and will thereafter become the norm. In many countries, renewed trade union engagement will facilitate this process. Shareholder value will become a secondary consideration, bringing to the fore the primacy of stakeholder capitalism. The financialization of the world that gained so much traction in past years will probably go into reverse. Governments, particularly in the countries most affected by it – the US and the UK – will be forced to reconsider many features of this obsession with finance. They could decide on a broad range of measures, from making share buy-backs illegal, to preventing banks from incentivizing consumer debt. The public scrutiny of private companies will increase, particularly (but not only) for all the businesses that benefited from public money. Some countries will nationalize, while others will prefer to take equity stakes or to provide loans. In general, there will be more regulation covering many different issues, such as workers' safety or domestic sourcing for certain goods. Businesses will also be held to account on social and environmental fractures for which they will be expected to be part of the solution. As an add-on, governments will strongly encourage public-private partnerships so that private companies get more involved in the mitigation of global risks. Irrespective of the details, the role of the state will increase and, in doing so, will materially affect the way business is conducted. To varying degrees, business executives in all industries and all countries will have to adapt to greater government intervention. Research and development for global public goods such as health and climate change solutions will be actively pursued. Taxation will increase, particularly for the most privileged, because governments will need to strengthen their resilience capabilities and wish to invest more heavily in them. As advocated by Joseph Stiglitz:

> The first priority is to (…) provide more funding for the public sector, especially for those parts of it that are designed to protect against the multitude of risks that a complex society faces, and to fund the advances in science and higher-quality education, on which our future prosperity depends. These are areas in which productive jobs – researchers, teachers, and those who help run the institutions that support them – can be created quickly. Even as we emerge from this crisis, we should be aware that some other crisis surely lurks around the corner. We can't predict what the next one will look like – other than it will look different from the last.[69]

Nowhere will this intrusion of governments, whose form may be benign or malign depending on the country and the culture in which it is taking place, manifest itself with greater vigour than in the redefinition of the social contract.

1.3.4. The social contract

It is almost inevitable that the pandemic will prompt many societies around the world to reconsider and redefine the terms of their social contract. We have already alluded to the fact that COVID-19 has acted as an amplifier of pre-existing conditions, bringing to the fore long-standing issues that resulted from deep structural frailties that had never been properly addressed. This dissonance and an emergent questioning of the status quo is finding expression in a loudening call to revise the social contracts by which we are all more or less bound.

Broadly defined, the "social contract" refers to the (often implicit) set of arrangements and expectations that govern the relations between individuals and institutions. Put simply, it is the "glue" that binds societies together; without it, the social fabric unravels. For decades, it has slowly and almost imperceptibly evolved in a direction that forced individuals to assume greater responsibility for their individual lives and economic outcomes, leading large parts of the population (most evidently in the low-income brackets) to conclude that the social contract was at best being eroded, if not in some cases breaking down entirely. The apparent illusion of low or no inflation is a practical and illustrative example of how this erosion plays out in real-life terms. For many years the world over, the rate of inflation has fallen for many goods and services, with the exception of the three things that matter the most to a great majority of us: housing, healthcare and education. For all three, prices have risen sharply, absorbing an ever-larger proportion of disposable incomes and, in some countries, even forcing families to go into debt to receive medical treatment. Similarly, in the pre-pandemic era, work opportunities had expanded in many countries, but the increase in employment rates often coincided with income stagnation and work polarization. This situation ended up eroding the economic and social welfare of a large majority of people whose revenue was no longer sufficient to guarantee a modestly decent lifestyle (including among the middle class in the rich world). Today, the fundamental reasons underpinning the loss of faith in our social contracts coalesce around issues of inequality, the ineffectiveness of most redistribution policies, a sense of exclusion and marginalization, and a general sentiment of unfairness. This is why many citizens have begun to denounce a breakdown of the social contract, expressing more and more forcefully a general loss of trust in institutions and leaders.[70] In some countries, this widespread exasperation has taken the form of peaceful or violent demonstrations; in others, it has led to electoral victories for populist and extremist parties. Whichever form it takes, in almost all cases, the establishment's response has been left wanting – ill-prepared for the rebellion and out of ideas and policy levers to address the problem. Although they are complex, the policy solutions do exist and broadly consist in adapting the welfare state to today's world by empowering people and by responding to the demands for a fairer social contract. Over the past few years, several international organizations and think tanks have adjusted to this new reality and outlined proposals on how to make it happen.[71] The pandemic will mark a turning point by accelerating this transition. It has crystallized the issue and made a return to the pre-pandemic status quo impossible.

What form might the new social contract take? There are no off-the-shelf, ready to go models because each potential solution depends upon the history and culture of the country to which it applies. Inevitably and understandably, a "good" social contract for China will be different from one for the US, which in turn will not resemble that of Sweden or Nigeria. However, they could all share some common features and principles, the absolute necessity of which has been made ever-more obvious by the social and economic consequences of the pandemic crisis. Two in particular stand out:

1. A broader, if not universal, provision of social assistance, social insurance, healthcare and basic quality services
2. A move towards enhanced protection for workers and for those currently most vulnerable (like those employed in and fuelling the gig economy in which full-time employees are replaced by independent contractors and freelancers).

It is often said that a nation's response to a disaster speaks volumes about its strengths and dysfunctions, and first and foremost about the "quality" and robustness of its social contract. As we progressively move away from the most acute moments of the crisis and begin a thorough examination of what went right and what didn't, we should expect a lot of soul-searching that will ultimately lead to a redefinition of the terms of our social contract. In countries that were perceived as providing a sub-par response to the pandemic, many citizens will start asking critical questions such as: Why is it that in the midst of the pandemic, my country often lacked masks, respirators and ventilators? Why wasn't it properly prepared? Does it have to do with the obsession with short-termism? Why are we so rich in GDP terms and so ineffective at delivering good healthcare to all those who need it? How can it be that a person who has spent more than 10 years' training to become a medical doctor and whose end-of-year "results" are measured in lives receives compensation that is meagre compared to that of a trader or a hedge fund manager?

The COVID-19 crisis has laid bare the inadequate state of most national health systems, both in terms of costs of lives of patients and of nurses and doctors. In rich countries where tax-funded health services have suffered for a long time from a lack of resources (the UK National Health Service being the most extreme example) due to political concerns about rising taxes, calls for more spending (and therefore higher taxes) will get louder, with a growing realization that "efficient management" cannot compensate for underinvestment.

COVID-19 has also revealed yawning gaps in most welfare systems. At first glance, the nations that reacted in the most inclusive manner are those with an elaborate welfare system, most notably the Scandinavian countries. To provide an example, as early as March 2020, Norway guaranteed 80% of self-employed workers' average incomes (based on the tax returns of the previous three years), while Denmark guaranteed 75%. At the other end of the spectrum, the most market-oriented economies played catch-up and showed indecisiveness in how to protect the most vulnerable segments of the labour market, particularly the gig workers, the independent contractors and on-call and temporary workers whose employment consists of income-earning activities that are outside the traditional employer–employee relationship.

An important topic that may have a decisive impact on the new social contract is sick leave. Economists tend to agree that the absence of paid sick leave makes it harder to contain the spread of an epidemic, the simple reason being that if employees are denied access to it, they may be tempted or forced to go to work while they are infected and thus spread the disease. This is particularly true for low-income and service workers (the two often go hand in hand). When the swine flu (H1N1) pandemic occurred in 2009-2010, the American Public Health Association estimated that around 7 million people were infected and an additional 1,500 died because contagious employees could not afford not to go to work. Among the rich economies, only the US has a system that leaves it at the discretion of employers to decide whether to provide paid sick leave. In 2019, almost a quarter of all US workers (about 40 million, largely concentrated in low-wage positions) did not benefit from it. In March 2020, when the pandemic started to rage in the US, President Trump signed into law new legislation that temporarily required employers to provide two weeks of sick leave plus family leave at partial pay, but only for workers with childcare problems. It remains to be seen how this will feature in the redefinition of the social contract in the US. By contrast, almost all European countries require employers to provide paid sick leave for varying periods during which workers are also protected from dismissal. New laws that were promulgated at the beginning of the pandemic also meant that the state would compensate part of or the whole salary of people confined at home, including those working in the gig economy and freelancers. In Japan, all workers are entitled to up to 20 days of paid leave every year while, in China, they are entitled to sick pay that ranges from 60% to 100% of daily wages during any period of illness with the length of sick leave contractually agreed or defined between workers and employers. As we move forward, we should expect such issues to intrude more and more in the redefinition of our social contract.

Another aspect that is critical for social contracts in Western democracies pertains to liberties and freedom. There is currently growing concern that the fight against this pandemic and future ones will lead to the creation of permanent surveillance societies. This issue is explored in more detail in the chapter on the technological reset, but suffice to say that a state emergency can only be justified when a threat is public, universal and existential. In addition, political theorists often emphasize that extraordinary powers require authorization from the people and must be limited in time and proportion. One can agree with the former part of the assertion (public, universal and existential threat), but what about the latter? Expect it to be a prominent component of future discussions about what our social contract should look like.

Collectively redefining the terms of our social contracts is an epochal task that binds the substantial challenges of the present moment to the hopes of the future. As Henry Kissinger reminded us: “The historic challenge for leaders is to manage the crisis while building the future. Failure could set the world on fire”.[72] While reflecting on the contours we think a future social contract might follow, we ignore at our peril the opinion of the younger generation who will be asked to live with it. Their adherence is decisive and thus to better understand what they want, we must not forget to listen. This is made all the more significant by the fact that the younger generation is likely to be more radical than the older one in refashioning our social contract. The pandemic has upended their lives, and a whole generation across the globe will be defined by economic and often social insecurity, with millions due to enter the work force in the midst of a profound recession. They will bear these scars forever. Also, starting off in a deficit – many students have educational debts – is likely to have long-term effects. Already the millennials (at least in the Western world) are worse off than their parents in terms of earnings, assets and wealth. They are less likely to own a home or have children than their parents were. Now, another generation (Gen Z) is entering a system that it sees as failing and that will be beset by long-standing problems revealed and exacerbated by the pandemic. As a college junior, quoted in *The New York Times*, put it: “Young people have a deep desire for radical change because we see the broken path ahead.”[73]

How will this generation respond? By proposing radical solutions (and often radical action) in an attempt to prevent the next disaster from striking – whether it’s climate change or social inequalities. It will most likely demand a radical alternative to the present course because its members are frustrated and dogged by a nagging belief that the current system is fractured beyond repair.

Youth activism is increasing worldwide,[74] being revolutionized by social media that increases mobilization to an extent that would have been impossible before.[75] It takes many different forms, ranging from non-institutionalized political participation to demonstrations and protests, and addresses issues as diverse as climate change, economic reforms, gender equality and LGBTQ rights. The young generation is firmly at the vanguard of social change. There is little doubt that it will be the catalyst for change and a source of critical momentum for the Great Reset.

1.4. Geopolitical reset

The connectivity between geopolitics and pandemics flows both ways. On the one hand, the chaotic end of multilateralism, a vacuum of global governance and the rise of various forms of nationalism[76] make it more difficult to deal with the outbreak. The coronavirus is spreading globally and sparing no one, while simultaneously the geopolitical fault lines that divide societies spur many leaders to focus on national responses – a situation that constrains collective effectiveness and reduces the ability to eradicate the pandemic. On the other hand, the pandemic is clearly exacerbating and accelerating geopolitical trends that were already apparent before the crisis erupted. What were they and what is the current state of geopolitical affairs?

The late economist Jean-Pierre Lehmann (who taught at IMD in Lausanne) summed up today's situation with great perspicacity when he said: "There is no new global order, just a chaotic transition to uncertainty." More recently, Kevin Rudd, President of the Asia Society Policy Institute and former Australian Prime Minister, expressed similar sentiments, worrying specifically about the "coming post-COVID-19 anarchy": "Various forms of rampant nationalism are taking the place of order and cooperation. The chaotic nature of national and global responses to the pandemic thus stands as a warning of what could come on an even broader scale."[77] This has been years in the making with multiple causes that intersect with each other, but the determining element of geopolitical instability is the progressive rebalancing from the West to the East – a transition that creates stresses and that, in the process, also generates global disorder. This is captured in the so-called Thucydides' trap – the structural stress that inevitably occurs when a rising power like China rivals a ruling power like the US. This confrontation will be a source of global messiness, disorder and uncertainty for years to come. Irrespective of whether one "likes" the US or not, its progressive disengagement (the equivalent of a "geopolitical taper", as the historian Niall Ferguson puts it) from the international scene is bound to increase international volatility. More and more, countries that tended to rely on global public goods provided by the US "hegemon" (for sea lane security, the fight against international terrorism, etc.) will now have to tend their own backyards themselves. The 21st century will most likely be an era devoid of an absolute hegemon during which no one power gains absolute dominance – as a result, power and influence will be redistributed chaotically and in some cases grudgingly.

In this messy new world defined by a shift towards multipolarity and intense competition for influence, the conflicts or tensions will no longer be driven by ideology (with the partial and limited exception of radical Islam), but spurred by nationalism and the competition for resources. If no one power can enforce order, our world will suffer from a "global order deficit". Unless individual nations and international organizations succeed in finding solutions to better collaborate at the global level, we risk entering an "age of entropy" in which retrenchment, fragmentation, anger and parochialism will increasingly define our global landscape, making it less intelligible and more disorderly. The pandemic crisis has both exposed and exacerbated this sad state of affairs. The magnitude and consequence of the shock it has inflicted are such that no extreme scenario can now be taken off the table. The implosion of some failing states or petrostates, the possible unravelling of the EU, a breakdown between China and the US that leads to war: all these and many more have now become plausible (albeit hopefully unlikely) scenarios.

In the following pages, we review four main issues that will become more prevalent in the post-pandemic era and that conflate with each other: the erosion of globalization, the absence of global governance, the increasing rivalry between the US and China, and the fate of fragile and failing states.

1.4.1. Globalization and nationalism

Globalization – an all-purpose word – is a broad and vague notion that refers to the global exchange between nations of goods, services, people, capital and now even data. It has succeeded in lifting hundreds of millions of people out of poverty but, for quite a number of years now, it has been called into question and even started to recede. As highlighted previously, today's world is more interconnected than it has ever been but, for more than a decade, the economic and political impetus that made the case for and supported the increase of globalization has been on the wane. The global trade talks that started in the early 2000s failed to deliver an agreement, while during that same period the political and societal backlash against globalization relentlessly gained strength. As the social costs provoked by the asymmetric effects of globalization rose (particularly in terms of manufacturing unemployment in high-income countries), the risks of financial globalization became ever-more apparent after the Great Financial Crisis that began in 2008. Thus combined, they triggered the rise of populist and right-wing parties around the world (most notably in the West), which, when they come to power, often retreat into nationalism and promote an isolationist agenda – two notions antithetical to globalization.

The global economy is so intricately intertwined that it is impossible to bring globalization to an end. However, it is possible to slow it down and even to put it into reverse. We anticipate that the pandemic will do just that. It has already re-erected borders with a vengeance, reinforcing to an extreme trends that were already in full glare before it erupted with full force in March 2020 (when it became a truly global pandemic, sparing no country), such as tougher border controls (mainly because of fears about immigration) and greater protectionism (mainly because of fears about globalization). Tighter border controls for the purpose of managing the progression of the pandemic make eminent sense, but the risk that the revival of the nation state leads progressively to much greater nationalism is real, a reality that the "globalization trilemma" framework offered by Dani Rodrik captured. In the early 2010s, when globalization was becoming a sensitive political and social issue, the Harvard economist explained why it would be the inevitable casualty if nationalism rises. The trilemma suggests that the three notions of economic globalization, political democracy and the nation state are mutually irreconcilable, based on the logic that only two can effectively co-exist at any given time.[78] Democracy and national sovereignty are only compatible if globalization is contained. By contrast, if both the nation state and globalization flourish, then democracy becomes untenable. And then, if both democracy and globalization expand, there is no place for the nation state. Therefore, one can only ever choose two out of the three – this is the essence of the trilemma. The European Union has often been used as an example to illustrate the pertinence of the conceptual framework offered by the trilemma. Combining economic integration (a proxy for globalization) with democracy implies that the important decisions have to be made at a supranational level, which somehow weakens the sovereignty of the nation state. In the current environment, what the "political trilemma" framework suggests is that globalization must necessarily be contained if we are not to give up some national sovereignty or some democracy. Therefore, the rise of nationalism makes the retreat of globalization inevitable in most of the world – an impulse particularly notable in the West. The vote for Brexit and the election of President Trump on a protectionist platform are two momentous markers of the Western backlash against globalization. Subsequent studies not only validate Rodrik's trilemma, but also show that the rejection of globalization by voters is a rational response when the economy is strong and inequality is high.[79]

The most visible form of progressive deglobalization will occur at the heart of its "nuclear reactor": the global supply chain that has become emblematic of globalization. How and why will this play out? The shortening or relocalization of supply chains will be encouraged by: 1) businesses that see it as a risk mitigation measure against supply chain disruption (the resilience versus efficiency trade-off); and 2) political pressure from both the right and the left. Since 2008, the drive towards greater localization has been firmly on the political agenda in many countries (particularly in the West), but it will now be accelerated in the post-pandemic era. On the right, the pushback against globalization is driven by protectionists and national-security hawks who were already gathering force before the pandemic started. Now, they will create alliances and sometimes merge with other political forces that will see the benefit of embracing an antiglobalization agenda. On the left, activists and green parties that were already stigmatizing air travel and asking for a rollback against globalization will be emboldened by the positive effect the pandemic had on our environment (far fewer carbon emissions, much less air and water pollution). Even without pressure from the far right and the green activists, many governments will realize that some situations of trade dependency are no longer politically acceptable. How can the US administration, for example, accept that 97% of antibiotics supplied in the country come from China?[80]

This process of reversing globalization will not happen overnight; shortening supply chains will be both very challenging and very costly. For example, a thorough and all-encompassing decoupling from China would require from companies making such a move an investment of hundreds of billions of dollars in newly located factories, and from governments equivalent amounts to fund new infrastructure, like airports, transportation links and housing, to serve the relocated supply chains. Notwithstanding that the political desire for decoupling may in some cases be stronger than the actual ability to do so, the direction of the trend is nonetheless clear. The Japanese government made this obvious when it set aside 243 billion of its 108 trillion Japanese yen rescue package to help Japanese companies pull their operations out of China. On multiple occasions, the US administration has hinted at similar measures.

The most likely outcome along the globalization–no globalization continuum lies in an in-between solution: regionalization. The success of the European Union as a free trade area or the new Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership in Asia (a proposed free trade agreement among the 10 countries that compose ASEAN) are important illustrative cases of how regionalization may well become a new watered-down version of globalization. Even the three states that compose North America now trade more with each other than with China or Europe. As Parag Khanna points out: "Regionalism was clearly overtaking globalism before the pandemic exposed the vulnerabilities of our long-distance interdependence".[81] For years, with the partial exception of direct trade between the US and China, globalization (as measured by the exchange of goods) was already becoming more intraregional than interregional. In the early 1990s, North America absorbed 35% of East Asia’s exports, while today this proportion is down to 20%, mainly because East Asia’s share of exports to itself grows every year – a natural situation as Asian countries move up the value chain, consuming more of what they produce. In 2019, as the US and China unleashed a trade war, US trade with Canada and Mexico rose while falling with China. At the same time, China’s trade with ASEAN rose for the first time to above $300 billion. In short, deglobalization in the form of greater regionalization was already happening.

COVID-19 will just accelerate this global divergence as North America, Europe and Asia focus increasingly on regional self-sufficiency rather than on the distant and intricate global supply chains that formerly epitomized the essence of globalization. What form might this take? It could resemble the sequence of events that brought an earlier period of globalization to an end, but with a regional twist. Antiglobalization was strong in the run-up to 1914 and up to 1918, then less so during the 1920s, but it reignited in the 1930s as a result of the Great Depression, triggering an increase in tariff and non-tariff barriers that destroyed many businesses and inflicted much pain on the largest economies of that time. The same could happen again, with a strong impulse to reshore that spreads beyond healthcare and agriculture to include large categories of non-strategic products. Both the far right and the far left will take advantage of the crisis to promote a protectionist agenda with higher barriers to the free flow of capital goods and people. Several surveys conducted in the first few months of 2020 revealed that international companies fear a return and aggravation of protectionism in the US, not only on trade, but also in cross-border mergers and acquisitions and government procurement.[82] What happens in the US will inevitably ricochet elsewhere, with other advanced economies imposing more barriers to trade and investment, defying the appeals from experts and international organizations to refrain from protectionism.

This sombre scenario is not inevitable but, over the next few years, we should expect the tensions between the forces of nationalism and openness to play out across three critical dimensions: 1) global institutions; 2) trade; and 3) capital flows. Recently, global institutions and international organizations have been either enfeebled, like the World Trade Organization or the WHO, or not up to the task, the latter due more to being “underfinanced and over-governed”[83] than to inherent inadequacy.

Global trade, as we saw in the previous chapter, will almost certainly contract as companies shorten their supply chain and ensure that they no longer rely on a single country or business abroad for critical parts and components. In the case of particularly sensitive industries (like pharmaceuticals or healthcare materials) and sectors considered to be of national-security interest (like telecommunications or energy generation), there may even be an ongoing process of de-integration. This is already becoming a requirement in the US, and it would be surprising if this attitude does not spread to other countries and other sectors. Geopolitics is also inflicting some economic pain through the so-called weaponization of trade, triggering fear among global companies that they can no longer assume an orderly and predictable resolution of trade conflicts through the international rule of law.

As for international capital flows, it seems already evident that national authorities and public defiance will constrain them. As already shown by so many countries and regions as different as Australia, India or the EU, protectionist considerations will become ever-more present in the post-pandemic era. Measures will range from national governments buying stakes in “strategic” companies to prevent foreign takeovers or imposing diverse restrictions on such takeovers, to foreign direct investment (FDI) being subjected to government approval. It is telling that, in April 2020, the US administration decided to block a publicly administered pension fund from investing in China.

In the coming years, it seems inevitable that some deglobalization will happen, spurred by the rise of nationalism and greater international fragmentation. There is no point in trying to restore the status quo ex ante (“hyper-globalization” has lost all its political and social capital, and defending it is no longer politically tenable), but it is important to limit the downside of a possible free fall that would precipitate major economic damage and social suffering. A hasty retreat from globalization would entail trade and currency wars, damaging every country’s economy, provoking social havoc and triggering ethno- or clan nationalism. The establishment of a much more inclusive and equitable form of globalization that makes it sustainable, both socially and environmentally, is the only viable way to manage retreat. This requires policy solutions addressed in the concluding chapter and some form of effective global governance. Progress is indeed possible in those global areas that have traditionally benefited from international cooperation, like environmental agreements, public health and tax havens.

This will only come about through improved global governance – the most “natural” and effective mitigating factor against protectionist tendencies. However, we do not yet know how its framework will evolve in the foreseeable future. At the moment, the signs are ominous that it is not going in the right direction. There is no time to waste. If we do not improve the functioning and legitimacy of our global institutions, the world will soon become unmanageable and very dangerous. There cannot be a lasting recovery without a global strategic framework of governance.

1.4.2. Global governance

Global governance is commonly defined as the process of cooperation among transnational actors aimed at providing responses to global problems (those that affect more than one state or region). It encompasses the totality of institutions, policies, norms, procedures and initiatives through which nation states try to bring more predictability and stability to their responses to transnational challenges. This definition makes it clear that any global effort on any global issue or concern is bound to be toothless without the cooperation of national governments and their ability to act and legislate to support their aims. Nation states make global governance possible (one leads the other), which is why the UN says that "effective global governance can only be achieved with effective international cooperation".[84] The two notions of global governance and international cooperation are so intertwined that it is nigh on impossible for global governance to flourish in a divided world that is retrenching and fragmenting. The more nationalism and isolationism pervade the global polity, the greater the chance that global governance loses its relevance and becomes ineffective. Sadly, we are now at this critical juncture. Put bluntly, we live in a world in which nobody is really in charge.

COVID-19 has reminded us that the biggest problems we face are global in nature. Whether it's pandemics, climate change, terrorism or international trade, all are global issues that we can only address, and whose risks can only be mitigated, in a collective fashion. But the world has become, in the words of Ian Bremmer, a G0 world, or worse, a G-minus-2 world (the US and China), according to the Indian economist Arvind Subramanian[85] (to account for the absence of leadership of the two giants by opposition to the G7, the group of seven wealthiest nations – or the G20 – the G7 plus 13 other significant countries and organizations, which are supposed to lead). More and more often, the big problems besetting us take place beyond the control of even the most powerful nation states; the risks and issues to be confronted are increasingly globalized, interdependent and interconnected, while the global governance capacities to do so are failing perilously, endangered by the resurgence of nationalism. Such disconnect signifies not only that the most critical global issues are being addressed in a highly fragmented, thus inadequate, manner, but also that they are actually being exacerbated by this failure to deal with them properly. Thus, far from remaining constant (in terms of the risk they pose), they inflate and end up increasing systemic fragility. This is shown in figure 1; strong interconnections exist between global governance failure, climate action failure, national government failure (with which it has a self-reinforcing effect), social instability and of course the ability to successfully deal with pandemics. In a nutshell, global governance is at the nexus of all these other issues. Therefore, the concern is that, without appropriate global governance, we will become paralysed in our attempts to address and respond to global challenges, particularly when there is such a strong dissonance between short-term, domestic imperatives and long-term, global challenges. This is a major worry, considering that today there is no "committee to save the world" (the expression was used more than 20 years ago, at the height of the Asian financial crisis). Pursuing the argument further, one could even claim that the "general institutional decay" that Fukuyama describes in *Political Order and Political Decay*[86] amplifies the problem of a world devoid of global governance. It sets in motion a vicious cycle in which nation states deal poorly with the major challenges that beset them, which then feeds into the public's distrust of the state, which in turn leads to the state's being starved of authority and resources, then leading to even poorer performance and the inability or unwillingness to deal with issues of global governance.

COVID-19 tells just such a story of failed global governance. From the very beginning, a vacuum in global governance, exacerbated by the strained relations between the US and China, undermined international efforts to respond to the pandemic. At the onset of the crisis, international cooperation was non-existent or limited and, even during the period when it was needed the most (in the acme of the crisis: during the second quarter of 2020), it remained conspicuous by its absence. Instead of triggering a set of measures coordinated globally, COVID-19 led to the opposite: a stream of border closures, restrictions in international travel and trade introduced almost without any coordination, the frequent interruption of medical supply distribution and the ensuing competition for resources, particularly visible in various attempts by several nation states to source badly needed medical equipment by any means possible. Even in the EU, countries initially chose to go it alone, but that course of action subsequently changed, with practical assistance between member countries, an amended EU budget in support of healthcare systems, and pooled research funds to develop treatments and vaccines. (And there have now been ambitious measures, which would have seemed unimaginable in the pre-pandemic era, susceptible of pushing the EU towards further integration, in particular a €750 billion recovery fund put forward by the European Commission.) In a functioning global governance framework, nations should have come together to fight a global and coordinated "war" against the pandemic. Instead the "my country first" response prevailed and severely impaired attempts to contain the expansion of the first wave of the pandemic. It also placed constraints on the availability of protective equipment and treatment that in turn undermined the resilience of national healthcare systems. Furthermore, this fragmented approach went on to jeopardize attempts to coordinate exit policies aimed at “restarting” the global economic engine. In the case of the pandemic, in contrast with other recent global crises like 9/11 or the financial crisis of 2008, the global governance system failed, proving either non-existent or dysfunctional. The US went on to withdraw funding from the WHO but, no matter the underlying rationale of this decision, the fact remains that it is the only organization capable of coordinating a global response to the pandemic, which means that an albeit far from perfect WHO is infinitely preferable to a non-existent one, an argument that Bill Gates compellingly and succinctly made in a tweet: “Their work is slowing the spread of COVID-19 and if that work is stopped no other organization can replace them. The world needs @WHO now more than ever.”

This failure is not the WHO’s fault. The UN agency is merely the symptom, not the cause, of global governance failure. The WHO’s deferential posture towards donor countries reflects its complete dependence on states agreeing to cooperate with it. The UN organization has no power to compel information sharing or enforce pandemic preparedness. Like other similar UN agencies, for example on human rights or climate change, the WHO is saddled with limited and dwindling resources: in 2018, it had an annual budget of $4.2 billion, miniscule in comparison to any health budget around the world. In addition, it is at the perpetual mercy of member states and has effectively no tools at its disposal to directly monitor outbreaks, coordinate pandemic planning or ensure effective preparedness implementation at the country level, let alone allocate resources to those countries most in need. This dysfunctionality is symptomatic of a broken global governance system, and the jury is out as to whether existing global governance configurations like the UN and the WHO can be repurposed to address today’s global risks. For the time being, the bottom line is this: in the face of such a vacuum in global governance, only nation states are cohesive enough to be capable of taking collective decisions, but this model doesn’t work in the case of world risks that require concerted global decisions.

The world will be a very dangerous place if we do not fix multilateral institutions. Global coordination will be even more necessary in the aftermath of the epidemiological crisis, for it is inconceivable that the global economy could “restart” without sustained international cooperation. Without it, we’ll be heading towards “a poorer, meaner and smaller world”.[87]

1.4.3. The growing rivalry between China and the US

In the post-pandemic era, COVID-19 might be remembered as the turning point that ushered in a “new type of cold war”[88] between China and the US (the two words “new type” matter considerably: unlike the Soviet Union, China is not seeking to impose its ideology around the world). Prior to the pandemic, tensions between the two dominant powers were already building up in many different domains (trade, property rights, military bases in the South China Sea, and tech and investment in strategic industries in particular), but after 40 years of strategic engagement, the US and China now seem unable to bridge the ideological and political divides that separate them. Far from uniting the two geopolitical giants, the pandemic did the exact opposite by exacerbating their rivalry and intensifying competition between them.

Most analysts would concur that, during the COVID-19 crisis, the political and ideological fracture between the two giants grew. According to Wang Jisi, a renowned Chinese scholar and Dean of the School of International Studies at Peking University, the fallout from the pandemic has pushed China–US relations to their worst level since 1979, when formal ties were established. In his opinion, the bilateral economic and technological decoupling is “already irreversible”,[89] and it could go as far as the “global system breaking into two parts” warns Wang Huiyao, President of the Center for China and Globalization in Beijing.[90] Even public figures have expressed publicly their concern. In an article published in June 2020, Lee Hsien Loong, Prime Minister of Singapore, warned against the perils of confrontation between the US and China, which, in his own words: “raises profound questions about Asia’s future and the shape of the emerging international order”. He added that: “Southeast Asian countries, including Singapore, are especially concerned, as they live at the intersection of the interests of various major powers and must avoid being caught in the middle or forced into invidious choices.”[91]

Views, of course, differ radically on which country is “right” or going to come out “on top” by benefiting from the perceived weaknesses and fragilities of the other. But it is essential to contextualize them. There isn’t a “right” view and a “wrong” view, but different and often diverging interpretations that frequently correlate with the origin, culture and personal history of those who profess them. Pursuing further the “quantum world” metaphor mentioned earlier, it could be inferred from quantum physic that objective reality does not exist. We think that observation and measurement define an “objective” opinion, but the micro-world of atoms and particles (like the macro-world of geopolitics) is governed by the strange rules of quantum mechanics in which two different observers are entitled to their own opinions (this is called a “superposition”: “particles can be in several places or states at once”).[92] In the world of international affairs, if two different observers are entitled to their own opinions, that makes them subjective, but no less real and no less valid. If an observer can only make sense of the “reality” through different idiosyncratic lenses, this forces us to rethink our notion of objectivity. It is evident that the representation of reality depends on the position of the observer. In that sense, a “Chinese” view and a “US” view can co-exist, together with multiple other views along that continuum – all of them real! To a considerable extent and for understandable reasons, the Chinese view of the world and its place in it is influenced by the humiliation suffered during the first Opium War in 1840 and the subsequent invasion in 1900 when the Eight Nation Alliance looted Beijing and other Chinese cities before demanding compensation.[93] Conversely, how the US views the world and its place in it is largely based on the values and principles that have shaped American public life since the country’s founding.[94] These have determined both its pre-eminent world position and its unique attractiveness for many immigrants for 250 years. The US perspective is also rooted in the unrivalled dominance it has enjoyed over the rest of the world for the past few decades and the inevitable doubts and insecurities that come with a relative loss of absolute supremacy. For understandable reasons, both China and the US have a rich history (China’s goes back 5,000 years) of which they are proud, leading them, as Kishore Mahbubani observed, to overestimate their own strengths and underestimate the strengths of the other.

Vindicating the point above, all analysts and forecasters who specialize in China, the US, or both, have access to more or less the same data and information (now a global commodity), see, hear and read more or less the same things, but sometimes reach diametrically opposed conclusions. Some see the US as the ultimate winner, others argue that China has already won, and a third group states that there’ll be no winners. Let’s briefly review each of their arguments in turn.

China as a winner

The argument of those who claim that the pandemic crisis has benefited China while exposing the weaknesses of the US is threefold.

1. It has made the American strength as the world’s most prominent military power irrelevant in the face of an invisible and microscopic enemy.
2. In the words of the American academic who coined the expression, it hurt the US soft power because of “the incompetence of its response”.[95] (An important caveat: the issue of whether a public response to COVID-19 was “competent” or “incompetent” has given rise to a myriad of opinions and provoked much disagreement. Yet, it remains difficult to pass judgement. In the US, for example, the policy response was to a large extent the responsibility of states and even cities. Hence, in effect, there was no national US policy response as such. What we are discussing here are subjective opinions that shaped public attitudes.)
3. It has exposed aspects of American society that some may find shocking, like the deep inequalities in the face of the outbreak, the lack of universal medical coverage and the issue of systemic racism raised by the Black Lives Matter movement.

All these prompted Kishore Mahbubani, an influential analyst of the rivalry that opposes the US and China,[96] to argue that COVID-19 has reversed the roles of both countries in terms of dealing with disasters and supporting others. While in the past the US was always the first to arrive with aid where assistance was needed (like on 26 December 2004 when a major tsunami hit Indonesia), this role now belongs to China, he says. In March 2020, China sent to Italy 31 tons of medical equipment (ventilators, masks and protective suits) that the EU could not provide. In his opinion, the 6 billion people who compose “the rest of the world” and live in 191 countries have already begun preparing themselves for the US–China geopolitical contest. Mahbubani says that it is their choices that will determine who wins the rivalry contest and that these will be based on “the cold calculus of reason to work out cost–benefit analyses of what both the U.S. and China have to offer them”.[97] Sentiments may not play much of a role because all these countries will base their choice on which, the US or China, will at the end of the day improve their citizens’ living conditions, but a vast majority of them do not want to be caught in a geopolitical zero-sum game and would prefer to keep all their options open (i.e. not to be forced to choose between the US and China). However, as the example of Huawei has shown, even traditional US allies like France, Germany and the UK are being pressured by the US to do so. The decisions that countries make when facing such a stark choice will ultimately determine who emerges as the winner in the growing rivalry between the US and China.

The US as a winner

In the camp of America as the ultimate winner, arguments are centred on the inherent strengths of the US as well as the perceived structural weaknesses of China.

The "US as a winner" proponents think it is premature to call for an abrupt end of US supremacy in the post-pandemic era and offer the following argument: the country may be declining in relative terms, but it is still a formidable hegemon in absolute terms and continues to possess a considerable amount of soft power; its appeal as a global destination may be waning somehow, but it nonetheless remains strong as shown by the success of American universities abroad and the appeal of its cultural industry. In addition, the dollar's domination as a global currency used in trade and perceived as a safe haven remains largely unchallenged for the moment. This translates into considerable geopolitical power, enabling the US authorities to exclude companies and even countries (like Iran or Venezuela) from the dollar system. As we saw in the preceding chapter, this may change in the future but, over the next few years, there is no alternative to the world's dominance of the US dollar. More fundamentally, proponents of US "irreducibility" will argue with Ruchir Sharma that: "US economic supremacy has repeatedly proved declinists wrong".[98] They will also agree with Winston Churchill, who once observed that the US has an innate capability to learn from its mistakes when he remarked that the US always did the right thing when all the alternatives have been exhausted.

Leaving aside the highly charged political argument (democracy versus autocracy), those who believe that the US will remain a "winner" for many more years also stress that China faces its own headwinds on its path to global superpower status. Those most frequently mentioned are the following: 1) it suffers from a demographic disadvantage, with a fast-ageing population and a working-age population that peaked in 2015; 2) its influence in Asia is constrained by existing territorial disputes with Brunei, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines and Viet Nam; and 3) it is highly energy-dependent.

No winner

What do those who claim that "the pandemic bodes ill for both American and Chinese power – and for the global order" think?[99] They argue that, like almost all other countries around the world, both China and the US are certain to suffer massive economic damage that will limit their capacity to extend their reach and influence. China, whose trade sector represents more than a third of total GDP, will find it difficult to launch a sustained economic recovery when its large trading partners (like the US) are drastically retrenching. As for the US, its over-indebtedness will sooner or later constrain post-recovery spending, with the ever-present risk that the current economic crisis metastasizes into a systemic financial crisis.

Referring in the case of both countries to the economic hit and domestic political difficulties, the doubters assert that both countries are likely to emerge from this crisis significantly diminished. "Neither a new Pax Sinica nor a renewed Pax Americana will rise from the ruins. Rather, both powers will be weakened, at home and abroad".

An underlying reason for the "no winner" argument is an intriguing idea put forward by several academics, most notably Niall Ferguson. Essentially, it says that the corona crisis has exposed the failure of superpowers like the US and China by highlighting the success of small states. In the words of Ferguson: "The real lesson here is not that the U.S. is finished and China is going to be the dominant power of the 21st century. I think the reality is that all the superpowers – the United States, the People's Republic of China and the European Union – have been exposed as highly dysfunctional."[100] Being big, as the proponents of this idea argue, entails diseconomies of scale: countries or empires have grown so large as to reach a threshold beyond which they cannot effectively govern themselves. This in turn is the reason why small economies like Singapore, Iceland, South Korea and Israel seem to have done better than the US in containing the pandemic and dealing with it.

Predicting is a guessing game for fools. The simple truth is that nobody can tell with any degree of reasonable confidence or certainty how the rivalry between the US and China will evolve – apart from saying that it will inevitably grow. The pandemic has exacerbated the rivalry that opposes the incumbent and the emerging power. The US has stumbled in the pandemic crisis and its influence has waned. Meanwhile, China may be trying to benefit from the crisis by expanding its reach abroad. We know very little about what the future holds in terms of strategic competition between China and the US. It will oscillate between two extremes: a contained and manageable deterioration tempered by business interests at one end of the spectrum, to permanent and all-out hostility at the other.

1.4.4. Fragile and failing states

The boundaries between state fragility, a failing state and a failed one are fluid and tenuous. In today's complex and adaptive world, the principle of non-linearity means that suddenly a fragile state can turn into a failed state and that, conversely, a failed state can see its situation improve with equal celerity thanks to the intermediation of international organizations or even an infusion of foreign capital. In the coming years, as the pandemic inflicts hardship globally, it is most likely that the dynamic will only go one way for the world's poorest and most fragile countries: from bad to worse. In short, many states that exhibit characteristics of fragility risk failing.

State fragility remains one of the most critical global challenges, particularly prevalent in Africa. Its causes are multiple and intertwined; they range from economic disparity, social issues, political corruption and inefficiencies, to external or internal conflicts and natural disasters. Today, it is estimated that around 1.8-2 billion people lived in fragile states, a number that will certainly increase in the post-pandemic era because fragile countries are particularly vulnerable to an outbreak of COVID-19.[101] The very essence of their fragility – weak state capacity and the associated inability to ensure the fundamental functions of basic public services and security – makes them less able to cope with the virus. The situation is even worse in failing and failed states that are almost always victims of extreme poverty and fractious violence and, as such, can barely or no longer perform basic public functions like education, security or governance. Within their power vacuum, helpless people fall victim to competing factions and crime, often compelling the UN or a neighbouring state (not always well intentioned) to intervene to prevent a humanitarian disaster. For many such states, the pandemic will be the exogenous shock that forces them to fail and fall even further.

For all these reasons, it is almost a tautology to state that the damage inflicted by the pandemic to fragile and failing states will be much deeper and longer-lasting than in the richer and most developed economies. It will devastate some of the world's most vulnerable communities. In many cases, economic disaster will trigger some form of political instability and outbreaks of violence because the world's poorest countries will suffer from two predicaments: first, the breakdown in trade and supply chains caused by the pandemic will provoke immediate devastation like no remittances or increased hunger; and, second, further down the line, they will endure a prolonged and severe loss of employment and income. This is the reason why the global outbreak has such potential to wreak havoc in the world's poorest countries. It is there that economic decline will have an even more immediate effect on societies. Across large swathes of sub-Saharan Africa, in particular, but also in parts of Asia and Latin America, millions depend on a meagre daily income to feed their families. Any lockdown or health crisis caused by the coronavirus could rapidly create widespread desperation and disorder, potentially triggering massive unrest with global knock-on effects. The implications will be particularly damaging for all those countries caught in the midst of a conflict. For them, the pandemic will inevitably disrupt humanitarian assistance and aid flows. It will also limit peace operations and postpone diplomatic efforts to bring the conflicts to an end.

Geopolitical shocks have a propensity to take observers by surprise, with ripple and knock-on effects that create second-, third- and more-order consequences, but currently where are the risks most apparent?

All commodity-countries are at risk (Norway and a few others do not qualify). At the time of writing, they are being hit particularly hard by the collapse in energy and commodity prices that are exacerbating the problems posed by the pandemic and all the other issues with which they conflate (unemployment, inflation, inadequate health systems and, of course, poverty). For rich and relatively developed energy-dependent economies like the Russian Federation and Saudi Arabia, the collapse of oil prices "only" represents a considerable economic blow, putting strained budgets and foreign exchange reserves under strain, and posing acute medium- and long-term risks. But for lower-income countries like South Sudan where oil accounts for the quasi totality of exports (99%), the blow could simply be devastating. This is true for many other fragile commodity countries. Outright collapse is not an outlandish scenario for petrostates like Ecuador or Venezuela, where the virus could overwhelm the countries' few functioning hospitals very quickly. Meanwhile in Iran, US sanctions are compounding the problems associated with the high rate of COVID-19 infection.

Particularly at risk now are many countries in the Middle East and Maghreb, where the economic pain was increasingly apparent before the pandemic and with restless, youthful populations and rampant unemployment. The triple blow of COVID-19, the collapse in oil prices (for some) and the freeze in tourism (a vital source of employment and foreign currency earnings) could trigger a wave of massive anti-government demonstrations reminiscent of the Arab Spring in 2011. In an ominous sign, at the end of April 2020 and in the midst of the lockdown, riots over joblessness concerns and soaring poverty took place in Lebanon.

The pandemic has brought the issue of food security back with a vengeance, and in many countries it could entail a humanitarian and food crisis catastrophe. Officials from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization predict that the number of people suffering from acute food insecurity could double in 2020 to 265 million. The combination of movement and trade restrictions caused by the pandemic with an increase in unemployment and limited or no access to food could trigger large-scale social unrest followed by mass movements of migration and refugees. In fragile and failing states, the pandemic exacerbates existing food shortages through barriers to trade and disruption in global food supply chains. It does so to such a considerable extent that on 21 April 2020, David Beasley, Executive Director of the UN World Food Programme, warned the UN Security Council that "multiple famines of biblical proportions" had become possible in about three dozen countries, most notably Yemen, Congo, Afghanistan, Venezuela, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Syria, Sudan, Nigeria and Haiti.

In the poorest countries of the world, the lockdowns and the economic recession happening in high-income countries will trigger major income losses for the working poor and all those who depend on them. The decrease in overseas remittances that account for such a large proportion of GDP (more than 30%) in some countries like Nepal, Tonga or Somalia is a case in point. It will inflict a devastating shock to their economies with dramatic social implications. According to the World Bank, the impact of lockdowns and the ensuing economic "hibernation" that happened in so many countries around the world will cause a 20% decline in remittance to low- and middle-income countries, from a $554 billion last year to $445 billion in 2020.[102] In larger countries like Egypt, India, Pakistan, Nigeria and the Philippines, for which remittances are a crucial source of external financing, this will create a lot of hardship and render their economic, social and political situation even more fragile, with the very real possibility of destabilization. Then, there is tourism, one of the hardest-hit industries from the pandemic, which is an economic lifeline for many poor nations. In countries like Ethiopia where tourism revenues account for almost half (47%) of total exports, the corresponding loss of income and employment will inflict considerable economic and social pain. The same goes for the Maldives, Cambodia and several others.

Then, there are all the conflict zones where many armed groups are thinking about how to use the excuse of the pandemic to move their agenda forward (like in Afghanistan where the Taliban is asking that its prisoners be released from jail, or in Somalia where the al-Shabaab group presents COVID-19 as an attempt to destabilize them). The global ceasefire plea made on 23 March 2020 by the UN secretary-general has fallen on deaf ears. Of 43 countries with at least 50 reported events of organized violence in 2020, only 10 responded positively (most often with simple statements of support but no commitment to action). Among the other 31 countries with ongoing conflicts, the actors failed not only to take steps to meet the call, but many actually increased the level of organized violence.[103] The early hopes that concerns with the pandemic and the ensuing health emergency might curb long-running conflicts and catalyse peace negotiations have evaporated. This is yet another example of the pandemic not only failing to arrest a troubling or dangerous trend but in fact accelerating it.

Wealthier countries ignore the tragedy unfolding in fragile and failing countries at their peril. In one way or another, risks will reverberate through greater instability or even chaos. One of the most obvious knock-on effects for the richer parts of the world of economic misery, discontent and hunger in the most fragile and poorest states will consist in a new wave of mass migration in its direction, like those that occurred in Europe in 2016.

1.5. Environmental reset

At first glance, the pandemic and the environment might seem to be only distantly related cousins; but they are much closer and more intertwined than we think. Both have and will continue to interact in unpredictable and distinctive ways, ranging from the part played by diminished biodiversity in the behaviour of infectious diseases to the effect that COVID-19 might have on climate change, thus illustrating the perilously subtle balance and complex interactions between humankind and nature.

Furthermore, in global risk terms, it is with climate change and ecosystem collapse (the two key environmental risks) that the pandemic most easily equates. The three represent, by nature and to varying degrees, existential threats to humankind, and we could argue that COVID-19 has already given us a glimpse, or foretaste, of what a full-fledged climate crisis and ecosystem collapse could entail from an economic perspective: combined demand and supply shocks, and disruption to trade and supply chains with ripple and knock-on effects that amplify risks (and in some cases opportunities) in the other macro categories: geopolitics, societal issues and technology. If climate change, ecosystem collapse and pandemics look so similar as global risks, how do they really compare? They possess many common attributes while displaying strong dissimilarities.

The five main shared attributes are: 1) they are known (i.e. white swan) systemic risks that propagate very fast in our interconnected world and, in so doing, amplify other risks from different categories; 2) they are non-linear, meaning that beyond a certain threshold, or tipping point, they can exercise catastrophic effects (like "superspreading" in a particular location and then overwhelming the capabilities of the health system in the case of the pandemic); 3) the probabilities and distribution of their impacts are very hard, if not impossible, to measure – they are constantly shifting and having to be reconsidered under revised assumptions, which in turn makes them extremely difficult to manage from a policy perspective; 4) they are global in nature and therefore can only be properly addressed in a globally coordinated fashion; and 5) they affect disproportionately the already most vulnerable countries and segments of the population.

And what are their dissimilarities? There are several, most of which are of a conceptual and methodological nature (like a pandemic being a contagion risk while climate change and ecosystem collapse are accumulation risks), but the two that matter the most are: 1) the time-horizon difference (it has a critical bearing on policies and mitigating actions); and 2) the causality problem (it makes public acceptance of the mitigation strategies more difficult):

1. Pandemics are a quasi-instantaneous risk, whose imminence and danger are visible to all. An outbreak threatens our survival – as individuals or a species – and we therefore respond immediately and with determination when faced with the risk. By contrast, climate change and nature loss are gradual and cumulative, with effects that are discernible mostly in the medium and long term (and despite more and more climate related and "exceptional" nature loss events, there are still significant numbers who remain unconvinced of the immediacy of the climate crisis). This crucial difference between the respective time-horizons of a pandemic and that of climate change and nature loss means that a pandemic risk requires immediate action that will be followed by a rapid result, while climate change and nature loss also require immediate action, but the result (or "future reward", in the jargon of economists) will only follow with a certain time lag. Mark Carney, former Governor of the Bank of England who is now the UN Special Envoy for Climate Action and Finance, has observed that this problem of time asynchronicity generates a "tragedy of the horizon": contrary to immediate and observable risks, climate change risks may seem distant (in terms of time and geography), in which case they will not be responded to with the gravity they deserve and demand. As an example, the material risk that global warming and rising waters pose for a physical asset (like a beachside holiday resort) or a company (like a hotel group) will not necessarily be considered as material by investors and will therefore not be priced in by the markets.

2. The causality problem is easy to grasp, as are the reasons that make respective policies so much more difficult to implement. In the case of the pandemic, the causation link between the virus and the disease is obvious: SARS-CoV-2 causes COVID-19. Apart from a handful of conspiracy theorists, nobody will dispute that. In the case of environmental risks, it is much more difficult to attribute direct causality to a specific event. Often, scientists cannot point to a direct link of causation between climate change and a specific weather event (like a drought or the severity of a hurricane). Similarly, they don't always agree about how a specific human activity affects particular species facing extinction. This makes it incredibly more difficult to mitigate climate change and nature loss risks. While for a pandemic, a

majority of citizens will tend to agree with the necessity to impose coercive measures, they will resist constraining policies in the case of environmental risks where the evidence can be disputed. A more fundamental reason also exists: fighting a pandemic does not require a substantial change of the underlying socio-economic model and of our consumption habits. Fighting environmental risks does.

1.5.1. Coronavirus and the environment

1.5.1.1. Nature and zoonotic diseases

Zoonotic diseases are those that spread from animals to humans. Most experts and conservationists agree that they have drastically increased in recent years, particularly because of deforestation (a phenomenon also linked to an increase in carbon dioxide emissions), which augments the risk of close human–animal interaction and contamination. For many years, researchers thought that natural environments like tropical forests and their rich wildlife represented a threat to humans because this is where the pathogens and viruses at the origin of new diseases in humans such as dengue, Ebola and HIV could be found. Today, we know this is wrong because the causation goes the other way. As David Quammen, author of *Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic*, argues: “We invade tropical forests and other wild landscapes, which harbor so many species of animals and plants – and within those creatures, so many unknown viruses. We cut the trees; we kill the animals or cage them and send them to markets. We disrupt ecosystems, and we shake viruses loose from their natural hosts. When that happens, they need a new host. Often, we are it.”[104] By now, an increasing number of scientists have shown that it is in fact the destruction of biodiversity caused by humans that is the source of new viruses like COVID-19. These researchers have coalesced around the new discipline of “planetary health” that studies the subtle and complex connections that exist between the well-being of humans, other living species and entire ecosystems, and their findings have made it clear that the destruction of biodiversity will increase the number of pandemics.

In a recent letter to the US Congress, 100 wildlife and environmental groups estimate that zoonotic diseases have quadrupled over the past 50 years.[105] Since 1970, land-use changes have had the largest relative negative impact on nature (and in the process caused a quarter of man-made emissions). Agriculture alone covers more than one-third of the terrestrial land surface and is the economic activity that disrupts nature the most. A recent academic review concludes that agriculture drivers are associated with more than 50% of zoonotic diseases.[106] As human activities like agriculture (with many others like mining, logging or tourism) encroach on natural ecosystems, they break down the barriers between human populations and animals, creating the conditions for infectious diseases to emerge by spilling from animals to humans. The loss of animals’ natural habitat and the wildlife trade are particularly relevant because when animals known as being linked to particular diseases (like bats and pangolins with the coronavirus) are taken out of the wild and moved into cities, a wildlife disease reservoir is simply transported into a densely populated area. This is what might have happened at the market in Wuhan where the novel coronavirus is believed to have originated (the Chinese authorities have since permanently banned wildlife trade and consumption). Nowadays, most scientists would agree that the greater population growth is, the more we disturb the environment, the more intensive farming becomes without adequate biosecurity, the higher the risk of new epidemics. The key antidote currently available to us to contain the progression of zoonotic diseases is the respect and preservation of the natural environment and the active protection of biodiversity. To do this effectively, it will be incumbent on us all to rethink our relationship with nature and question why we have become so alienated from it. In the concluding chapter, we offer specific recommendations on the form that a “nature-friendly” recovery may take.

1.5.1.2. Air pollution and pandemic risk

It’s been known for years that air pollution, largely caused by emissions that also contribute to global warming, is a silent killer, linked to various health conditions, ranging from diabetes and cancer to cardiovascular and respiratory diseases. According to the WHO, 90% of the world’s population breathes air that fails to meet its safety guidelines, causing the premature death of 7 million people each year and prompting the organization to qualify air pollution as a “public-health emergency”.

We now know that air pollution worsens the impact of any particular coronavirus (not only the current SARS-CoV-2) on our health. As early as 2003, a study published in the midst of the SARS epidemic suggested that air pollution might explain the variation in the level of lethality,[107] making it clear for the first time that the greater the level of air pollution, the greater the likelihood of death from the disease caused by a coronavirus. Since then, a growing body of research has shown how a lifetime of breathing dirtier air can make people more susceptible to the coronavirus. In the US, a recent medical paper concluded that those regions with more polluted air will experience higher risks of death from COVID-19, showing that US counties with higher pollution levels will suffer higher numbers of hospitalizations and numbers of deaths.[108] A consensus has formed in the medical and public community that there is a synergistic effect between air pollution exposure and the possible occurrence of COVID-19, and a worse outcome when the virus does strike. The research, still embryonic but expanding fast, hasn't proved yet that a link of causation exists, but it unambiguously exposes a strong correlation between air pollution and the spread of the coronavirus and its severity. It seems that air pollution in general, and the concentration of particulate matter in particular, impair the airways – the lungs' first line of defence – meaning that people (irrespective of their age) who live in highly polluted cities will face a greater risk of catching COVID-19 and dying from it. This may explain why people in Lombardy (one of Europe's most polluted regions) who had contracted the virus were shown to be twice as likely to die from COVID-19 than people almost anywhere else in Italy.

1.5.1.3. Lockdown and carbon emissions

It is too early to define the amount by which global carbon dioxide emissions will fall in 2020, but the International Energy Agency (IEA) estimates in its *Global Energy Review 2020* that they will fall by 8%.[109] Even though this figure would correspond to the largest annual reduction on record, it is still miniscule compared to the size of the problem and it remains inferior to the annual reduction in emissions of 7.6% over the next decade that the UN thinks is necessary to hold the global rise in temperatures below 1.5°C.[110]

Considering the severity of the lockdowns, the 8% figure looks rather disappointing. It seems to suggest that small individual actions (consuming much less, not using our cars and not flying) are of little significance when compared to the size of emissions generated by electricity, agriculture and industry, the "big-ticket emitters" that continued to operate during the lockdowns (with the partial exception of some industries). What it also reveals is that the biggest "offenders" in terms of carbon emissions aren't always those often perceived as the obvious culprits. A recent sustainability report shows that the total carbon emissions generated by the electricity production required to power our electronic devices and transmit their data are roughly equivalent to that of the global airline industry.[111] The conclusion? Even unprecedented and draconian lockdowns with a third of the world population confined to their homes for more than a month came nowhere near to being a viable decarbonization strategy because, even so, the world economy kept emitting large amounts of carbon dioxide. What then might such a strategy look like? The considerable size and scope of the challenge can only be addressed by a combination of: 1) a radical and major systemic change in how we produce the energy we need to function; and 2) structural changes in our consumption behaviour. If, in the post-pandemic era, we decide to resume our lives just as before (by driving the same cars, by flying to the same destinations, by eating the same things, by heating our house the same way, and so on), the COVID-19 crisis will have gone to waste as far as climate policies are concerned. Conversely, if some of the habits we were forced to adopt during the pandemic translate into structural changes in behaviour, the climate outcome might be different. Commuting less, working remotely a bit more, bicycling and walking instead of driving to keep the air of our cities as clean as it was during the lockdowns, vacationing nearer to home: all these, if aggregated at scale, could lead to a sustained reduction in carbon emissions. This brings us to the all-important question of whether the pandemic will eventually exercise a positive or negative effect on climate change policies.

1.5.2. Impact of the pandemic on climate change and other environmental policies

The pandemic is destined to dominate the policy landscape for years, with the serious risk that it could overshadow environmental concerns. In a telling anecdote, the convention centre in Glasgow where the UN COP-26 Climate Summit should have taken place in November 2020 was converted in April into a hospital for COVID-19 patients. Already, climate negotiations have been delayed and policy initiatives postponed, nourishing the narrative that, for a long while, governmental leaders will only be paying attention to the multifaceted range of immediate problems created by the pandemic crisis. Another narrative has also emerged, elaborated by some national leaders, senior business executives and prominent opinion-makers. It runs along these lines that the COVID-19 crisis cannot go to waste and that now is the time to enact sustainable environmental policies.

In reality, what happens with the fight against climate change in the post-pandemic era could go in two opposite directions. The first corresponds to the narrative above: the economic consequences of the pandemic are so painful, difficult to address and complex to implement that most governments around the world may decide to "temporarily" put aside concerns about global warming to focus on the economic recovery. If such is the case, policy decisions will support and stimulate fossil-fuel heavy and carbon-emitting industries by subsidizing them. They will also roll back stringent environmental standards seen as a stumbling block on the road to rapid economic recovery and will encourage companies and consumers to produce and consume as much "stuff" as possible. The second is spurred by a different narrative, in which businesses and governments are emboldened by a new social conscience among large segments of the general population that life can be different, and is pushed by activists: the moment must be seized to take advantage of this unique window of opportunity to redesign a more sustainable economy for the greater good of our societies.

Let's examine both divergent possible outcomes in more detail. Needless to say, they are country and region (EU) dependent. No two countries will adopt the same policies nor move at the same speed but, ultimately, they should all embrace the direction of the less carbon-intensive trend.

Three key reasons could explain why this is not a given and why the focus on the environment could fade when the pandemic starts retreating:

1. Governments could decide that it is in the best collective interest to pursue growth at "any cost" in order to cushion the impact on unemployment.

2. Companies will be under such pressure to increase revenues that sustainability in general and climate considerations in particular will become secondary.

3. Low oil prices (if sustained, which is likely) could encourage both consumers and businesses to rely even more on carbon-intensive energy.

These three reasons are cogent enough to make them compelling, but there are others that might just succeed in pushing the trend in the other direction. Four in particular could succeed in making the world cleaner and more sustainable:

1. **Enlightened leadership**. Some leaders and decision-makers who were already at the forefront of the fight against climate change may want to take advantage of the shock inflicted by the pandemic to implement long-lasting and wider environmental changes. They will, in effect, make "good use" of the pandemic by not letting the crisis go to waste. The exhortation of different leaders ranging from HRH the Prince of Wales to Andrew Cuomo to "build it back better" goes in that direction. So does a dual declaration made by the IEA with Dan Jørgensen, Minister for Climate, Energy and Utilities of Denmark, suggesting that clean energy transitions could help kick-start economies: "Around the world, leaders are getting ready now, drawing up massive economic stimulus packages. Some of these plans will provide short-term boosts, others will shape infrastructure for decades to come. We believe that by making clean energy an integral part of their plans, governments can deliver jobs and economic growth while also ensuring that their energy systems are modernised, more resilient and less polluting."[112] Governments led by enlightened leaders will make their stimulus packages conditional upon green commitments. They will, for example, provide more generous financial conditions for companies with low-carbon business models.

2. **Risk-awareness**. The pandemic played the role of a great "risk-awakening", making us much more aware of the risks we collectively face and reminding us that our world is tightly interconnected. COVID-19 made it clear that we ignore science and expertise at our peril, and that the consequences of our collective actions can be considerable. Hopefully, some of these lessons that offer us a better understanding of what an existential risk really means and entails will now be transferred to climate risks. As Nicholas Stern, Chair of the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment, stated: "What we have seen from all of this, is that we can make changes (…). We have to recognise there will be other pandemics and be better prepared. [But] we must also recognise that climate change is a deeper and bigger threat that doesn't go away, and is just as urgent."[113] Having worried for months about the pandemic and its effect on our lungs, we'll become obsessed about clean air; during the lockdowns, a significant number of us saw and smelled for ourselves the benefits of reduced air pollution, possibly prompting a collective realization that we just have a few years to address the worst consequences of global warming and climate change. If this is the case, societal (collective and individual) changes will follow.

3. **Change in behaviour**. As a consequence of the point above, societal attitudes and demands may evolve towards greater sustainability to a greater degree than commonly assumed. Our consumption patterns changed dramatically during the lockdowns by forcing us to focus on the essential and giving us no choice but to adopt "greener living". This may last, prompting us to disregard everything that we do

not really need, and putting into motion a virtuous circle for the environment. Likewise, we may decide that working from home (when possible) is good for both the environment and our individual well-being (commuting is a "destroyer" of well-being – the longer it is, the more detrimental it becomes to our physical and mental health). These structural changes in how we work, consume and invest may take a little while before they become widespread enough to make a real difference but, as we argued before, what matters is the direction and the strength of the trend. The poet and philosopher Lao Tzu was right in saying: "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." We are just at the beginning of a long and painful recovery and, for many of us, thinking about sustainability may seem like a luxury but when things start to improve we'll collectively remember that a relation of causality exists between air pollution and COVID-19. Then sustainability will cease to be secondary and climate change (so closely correlated with air pollution) will move to the forefront of our preoccupations. What social scientists call "behavioural contagion" (the way in which attitudes, ideas and behaviour spread throughout the population) might then work its magic!

4. **Activism**. Some analysts ventured that the pandemic would provoke the obsolescence of activism, but the exact opposite may well prove to be true. According to a group of American and European academics, the coronavirus has emboldened the motivation for change and triggered new tools and strategies in terms of social activism. Over the course of just several weeks, this group of researchers collected data on various forms of social activism and identified almost 100 distinct methods of non-violent action, including physical, virtual and hybrid actions. Their conclusion: "Emergencies often prove to be the forge in which new ideas and opportunities are hammered out. While it is impossible to predict what the long-term effects of such growing skill and awareness may be, it's clear that people power has not diminished. Instead, movements around the world are adapting to remote organizing, building their bases, sharpening their messaging, and planning strategies for what comes next".[114] If their assessment is correct, social activism, repressed by necessity during the lockdowns and their various measures of physical and social distancing, may re-emerge with renewed vigour once the periods of confinement are over. Emboldened by what they saw during the lockdowns (no air pollution), climate activists will redouble their efforts, imposing further pressure on companies and investors. As we will see in Chapter 2, investors' activism will also be a force to be reckoned with. It will strengthen the cause of social activists by adding an extra and powerful dimension to it. Let's imagine the following situation to illustrate the point: a group of green activists could demonstrate in front of a coal-fired power plant to demand greater enforcement of pollution regulations, while a group of investors does the same in the boardroom by depriving the plant access to capital.

Across the four reasons, scattered factual evidence gives us hope that the green trend will eventually prevail. It comes from different domains but converges towards the conclusion that the future could be greener than we commonly assume. To corroborate this conviction, four observations intersect with the four reasons provided:

1. In June 2020, BP, one of the world's oil and gas "supermajors", slashed the value of its assets by $17.5 billion, having come to the conclusion that the pandemic will accelerate a global shift towards cleaner forms of energy. Other energy companies are about to make a similar move.[115] In the same spirit, major global companies like Microsoft have committed to becoming carbon negative by 2030.

2. The European Green Deal launched by the European Commission is a massive endeavour and the most tangible manifestation yet of public authorities deciding not to let the COVID-19 crisis go to waste.[116] The plan commits €1 trillion for lowering emissions and investing in the circular economy, with the aim of making the EU the first carbon-neutral continent by 2050 (in terms of net emissions) and decoupling economic growth from resource use.

3. Various international surveys show that a large majority of citizens around the world want the economic recovery from the corona crisis to prioritize climate change.[117] In the countries that compose the G20, a sizeable majority of 65% of citizens support a green recovery.[118]

4. Some cities like Seoul are furthering their commitment to climate and environment policies by implementing their own "Green New Deal", framed as one way to mitigate the pandemic fallout.[119]

The direction of the trend is clear but, ultimately, systemic change will come from policy-makers and business leaders willing to take advantage of COVID stimulus packages to kick-start the nature-positive economy. This will not only be about public investments. The key to crowding private capital into new sources of nature-positive economic value will be to shift key policy levers and public finance incentives as part of a wider economic reset. There is a strong case for acting more forcefully on spatial planning and land-use regulations, public finance and subsidy reform, innovation policies that help to drive expansion and deployment in addition to R&D, blended finance and better measurement of natural capital as a key economic asset. Many governments are starting to act, but much more is needed to tip the system towards a nature-positive new norm and make a majority of people all over the world realize this is not only an imperious necessity but also a considerable opportunity. A policy paper prepared by Systemiq in collaboration with the World Economic Forum[120] estimates that building the nature-positive economy could represent more than $10 trillion per year by 2030 – in terms of new economic opportunities as well as avoided economic costs. In the short term, deploying around $250 billion of stimulus funding could generate up to 37 million nature-positive jobs in a highly cost-effective manner. Resetting the environment should not be seen as a cost, but rather as an investment that will generate economic activity and employment opportunities.

Hopefully, the threat from COVID-19 won't last. One day, it will be behind us. By contrast, the threat from climate change and its associated extreme weather events will be with us for the foreseeable future and beyond. The climate risk is unfolding more slowly than the pandemic did, but it will have even more severe consequences. To a great extent, its severity will depend on the policy response to the pandemic. Every measure destined to revive economic activity will have an immediate effect on how we live, but will also have an impact on carbon emissions that will in turn have an environmental impact across the globe and measured across generations. As we've argued in this book, these choices are ours to make.

1.6. Technological reset

When it was published in 2016, *The Fourth Industrial Revolution* made the case that “Technology and digitization will revolutionize everything, making the overused and often ill-used adage ‘this time is different’ apt. Simply put, major technological innovations are on the brink of fueling momentous change throughout the world.”[121] In the four short years since, technological progress has moved impressively fast. AI is now all around us, from drones and voice recognition to virtual assistants and translation software. Our mobile devices have become a permanent and integral part of our personal and professional lives, helping us on many different fronts, anticipating our needs, listening to us and locating us, even when not asked to do so… Automation and robots are reconfiguring the way businesses operate with staggering speed and returns on scale inconceivable just a few years ago. Innovation in genetics, with synthetic biology now on the horizon, is also exciting, paving the way for developments in healthcare that are groundbreaking. Biotechnology still falls short of stopping, let alone preventing, a disease outbreak, but recent innovations have allowed the identification and sequencing of the coronavirus’ genome much faster than in the past, as well as the elaboration of more effective diagnostics. In addition, the most recent biotechnology techniques using RNA and DNA platforms make it possible to develop vaccines faster than ever. They might also help with the development of new bioengineered treatments.

To sum up, the speed and breadth of the Fourth Industrial Revolution have been and continue to be remarkable. This chapter argues that the pandemic will accelerate innovation even more, catalysing technological changes already under way (comparable to the exacerbation effect it has had on other underlying global and domestic issues) and “turbocharging” any digital business or the digital dimension of any business. It will also accentuate one of the greatest societal and individual challenges posed by tech: privacy. We will see how contact tracing has an unequalled capacity and a quasi-essential place in the armoury needed to combat COVID-19, while at the same time being positioned to become an enabler of mass surveillance.

1.6.1. Accelerating the digital transformation

With the pandemic, the “digital transformation” that so many analysts have been referring to for years, without being exactly sure what it meant, has found its catalyst. One major effect of confinement will be the expansion and progression of the digital world in a decisive and often permanent manner. This is noticeable not only in its most mundane and anecdotal aspects (more online conversations, more streaming to entertain, more digital content in general), but also in terms of forcing more profound changes in how companies operate, something that is explored in more depth in the next chapter. In April 2020, several tech leaders observed how quickly and radically the necessities created by the health crisis had precipitated the adoption of a wide range of technologies. In the space of just one month, it appeared that many companies in terms of tech take-up fast-forwarded by several years. For the digitally savvy, this meant good things, while, for the others, a very poor outlook (sometimes catastrophically so). Satya Nadella, CEO of Microsoft, observed that social- and physical-distancing requirements created “a remote everything”, bringing forward the adoption of a wide range of technologies by two years, while Sundar Pichai, Google’s CEO, marvelled at the impressive leap in digital activity, forecasting a “significant and lasting” effect on sectors as different as online work, education, shopping, medicine and entertainment.[122]

1.6.1.1. The consumer

During the lockdowns, many consumers previously reluctant to rely too heavily on digital applications and services were forced to change their habits almost overnight: watching movies online instead of going to the cinema, having meals delivered instead of going out to restaurants, talking to friends remotely instead of meeting them in the flesh, talking to colleagues on a screen instead of chit-chatting at the coffee machine, exercising online instead of going to the gym, and so on. Thus, almost instantly, most things became “e-things”: e-learning, e-commerce, e-gaming, e-books, e-attendance. Some of the old habits will certainly return (the joy and pleasure of personal contacts can’t be matched – we are social animals after all!), but many of the tech behaviours that we were forced to adopt during confinement will through familiarity become more natural. As social and physical distancing persist, relying more on digital platforms to communicate, or work, or seek advice, or order something will, little by little, gain ground on formerly ingrained habits. In addition, the pros and cons of online versus offline will be under constant scrutiny through a variety of lenses. If health considerations become paramount, we may decide, for example, that a cycling class in front of a screen at home doesn’t match the conviviality and fun of doing it with a group in a live class but is in fact safer (and cheaper!). The same reasoning applies to many different domains like flying to a meeting (Zoom is safer, cheaper, greener and much more convenient), driving to a distant family gathering for the weekend (the WhatsApp family group is not as fun but, again, safer, cheaper and greener) or even attending an academic course (not as fulfilling, but cheaper and more convenient).

1.6.1.2. The regulator

This transition towards more digital "of everything" in our professional and personal lives will also be supported and accelerated by regulators. To date governments have often slowed the pace of adoption of new technologies by lengthy ponderings about what the best regulatory framework should look like but, as the example of telemedicine and drone delivery is now showing, a dramatic acceleration forced by necessity is possible. During the lockdowns, a quasi-global relaxation of regulations that had previously hampered progress in domains where the technology had been available for years suddenly happened because there was no better or other choice available. What was until recently unthinkable suddenly became possible, and we can be certain that neither those patients who experienced how easy and convenient telemedicine was nor the regulators who made it possible will want to see it go into reverse. New regulations will stay in place. In the same vein, a similar story is unfolding in the US with the Federal Aviation Authority, but also in other countries, related to fast-tracking regulation pertaining to drone delivery. The current imperative to propel, no matter what, the "contactless economy" and the subsequent willingness of regulators to speed it up means that there are no holds barred. What is true for until-recently sensitive domains like telemedicine and drone delivery is also true for more mundane and well-covered regulatory fields, like mobile payments. Just to provide a banal example, in the midst of the lockdown (in April 2020), European banking regulators decided to increase the amount that shoppers could pay using their mobile devices while also reducing the authentication requirements that made it previously difficult to make payments using platforms like PayPal or Venmo. Such moves will only accelerate the digital "prevalence" in our daily lives, albeit not without contingent cybersecurity issues.

1.6.1.3. The firm

In one form or another, social- and physical-distancing measures are likely to persist after the pandemic itself subsides, justifying the decision in many companies from different industries to accelerate automation. After a while, the enduring concerns about technological unemployment will recede as societies emphasize the need to restructure the workplace in a way that minimizes close human contact. Indeed, automation technologies are particularly well suited to a world in which human beings can't get too close to each other or are willing to reduce their interactions. Our lingering and possibly lasting fear of being infected with a virus (COVID-19 or another) will thus speed the relentless march of automation, particularly in the fields most susceptible to automation. In 2016, two academics from Oxford University came to the conclusion that up to 86% of jobs in restaurants, 75% of jobs in retail and 59% of jobs in entertainment could be automatized by 2035.[123] These three industries are among those the hardest hit by the pandemic and in which automating for reasons of hygiene and cleanliness will be a necessity that in turn will further accelerate the transition towards more tech and more digital. There is an additional phenomenon set to support the expansion of automation: when "economic distancing" might follow social distancing. As countries turn inward and global companies shorten their super-efficient but highly fragile supply chains, automation and robots that enable more local production, while keeping costs down, will be in great demand.

The process of automation was set in motion many years ago, but the critical issue once again relates to the accelerating pace of change and transition: the pandemic will fast-forward the adoption of automation in the workplace and the introduction of more robots in our personal and professional lives. From the onset of the lockdowns, it became apparent that robots and AI were a "natural" alternative when human labour was not available. Furthermore, they were used whenever possible to reduce the health risks to human employees. At a time when physical distancing became an obligation, robots were deployed in places as different as warehouses, supermarkets and hospitals in a broad range of activities, from shelf scanning (an area in which AI has made tremendous forays) to cleaning and of course robotic delivery – a soon-to-be important component of healthcare supply chains that will in turn lead to the "contactless" delivery of groceries and other essentials. As for many other technologies that were on the distant horizon in terms of adoption (like telemedicine), businesses, consumers and public authorities are now rushing to turbocharge the speed of adoption. In cities as varied as Hangzhou, Washington DC and Tel Aviv, efforts are under way to move from pilot programmes to large-scale operations capable of putting an army of delivery robots on the road and in the air. Chinese e-commerce giants like Alibaba and jd.com are confident that, in the coming 12-18 months, autonomous delivery could become widespread in China – much earlier than anticipated prior to the pandemic.

Maximum attention is often focused on industrial robots as they are the most visible face of automation, but radical acceleration is also coming in workplace automation via software and machine learning. So-called Robotic Process Automation (RPA) makes businesses more efficient by installing computer software that rivals and replaces the actions of a human worker. This can take multiple forms, ranging from Microsoft's finance group consolidating and simplifying disparate reports, tools and content into an automated, role-based personalized portal, to an oil company installing software that sends pictures of a pipeline to an AI engine, to compare the pictures with an existing database and alert the relevant employees to potential problems. In all cases, RPA helps to reduce the time spent compiling and validating data, and therefore cuts costs (at the expense of a likely increase in unemployment, as mentioned in the "Economic reset" section). During the peak of the pandemic, RPA won its spurs by proving its efficiency at handling surges in volume; thus ratified, in the post-pandemic era the process will be rolled out and fast-tracked. Two examples prove this point. RPA solutions helped some hospitals to disseminate COVID-19 test results, saving nurses as much as three hours' work per day. In a similar vein, an AI digital device normally used to respond to customer requests online was adapted to help medical digital platforms screen patients online for COVID-19 symptoms. For all these reasons, Bain & Company (a consultancy) estimates that the number of companies implementing this automation of business processes will double over the next two years, a timeline that the pandemic may shorten still further.[124]

1.6.2. Contact tracing, contact tracking and surveillance

An important lesson can be learned from the countries that were more effective in dealing with the pandemic (in particular Asian nations): technology in general and digital in particular help. Successful contact tracing proved to be a key component of a successful strategy against COVID-19. While lockdowns are effective at reducing the reproduction rate of the coronavirus, they don't eliminate the threat posed by the pandemic. In addition, they come at injuriously high economic and societal cost. It will be very hard to fight COVID-19 without an effective treatment or a vaccine and, until then, the most effective way to curtail or stop transmission of the virus is by widespread testing followed by the isolation of cases, contact tracing and the quarantine of contacts exposed to the people infected. As we will see below, in this process technology can be a formidable shortcut, allowing public-health officials to identify infected people very rapidly, thus containing an outbreak before it starts to spread.

Contact tracing and tracking are therefore essential components of our public-health response to COVID-19. Both terms are often used interchangeably, yet they have slightly different meanings. A tracking app gains insights in real time by, for example, determining a person's current location through geodata via GPS coordinates or radio cell location. By contrast, tracing consists in gaining insights in retrospect, like identifying physical contacts between people using Bluetooth. Neither offer a miracle solution that can stop in its entirety the spread of the pandemic, but they make it possible to almost immediately sound the alarm, permitting early intervention, thus limiting or containing the outbreak, particularly when it occurs in superspreading environments (like a community or family gathering). For reasons of convenience and ease of reading, we'll merge the two and will use them interchangeably (as articles in the press often do).

The most effective form of tracking or tracing is obviously the one powered by technology: it not only allows backtracking all the contacts with whom the user of a mobile phone has been in touch, but also tracking the user's real-time movements, which in turn affords the possibility to better enforce a lockdown and to warn other mobile users in the proximity of the carrier that they have been exposed to someone infected.

It comes as no surprise that digital tracing has become one of the most sensitive issues in terms of public health, raising acute concerns about privacy around the world. In the early phases of the pandemic, many countries (mostly in East Asia but also others like Israel) decided to implement digital tracing under different forms. They shifted from the retroactive tracing of chains of past contagion to the real-time tracking of movements in order to confine a person infected by COVID-19 and to enforce subsequent quarantines or partial lockdowns. From the outset, China, Hong Kong SAR and South Korea implemented coercive and intrusive measures of digital tracing. They took the decision to track individuals without their consent, through their mobile and credit card data, and even employed video surveillance (in South Korea). In addition, some economies required the mandatory wearing of electronic bracelets for travel arrivals and people in quarantine (in Hong Kong SAR) to alert those individuals susceptible of being infected. Others opted for "middle-ground" solutions, where individuals placed in quarantine are equipped with a mobile phone to monitor their location and be publicly identified should they breach the rules.

The digital tracing solution most lauded and talked about was the TraceTogether app run by Singapore's Ministry of Health. It seems to offer the "ideal" balance between efficiency and privacy concerns by keeping user data on the phone rather than on a server, and by assigning the login anonymously. The contact detection only works with the latest versions of Bluetooth (an obvious limitation in many less digitally advanced countries where a large percentage of mobiles do not have sufficient Bluetooth capability for effective detection). Bluetooth identifies the user's physical contacts with another user of the application accurately to within about two metres and, if a risk of COVID-19 transmission is incurred, the app will warn the contact, at which point the transmission of stored data to the ministry of health becomes mandatory (but the contact's anonymity is maintained). TraceTogether is therefore non-intrusive in terms of privacy, and its code, available in open source, makes it usable by any country anywhere in the world, yet privacy advocates object that there are still risks. If the entire population of a country downloaded the application, and if there were a sharp increase in COVID-19 infections, then the app could end up identifying most citizens. Cyber intrusions, issues of trust in the operator of the system and the timing of data retention pose additional privacy concerns.

Other options exist. These are mainly related to the availability of open and verifiable source codes, and to guarantees pertaining to data supervision and the length of conservation. Common standards and norms could be adopted, particularly in the EU where many citizens fear that the pandemic will force a trade-off between privacy and health. But as Margrethe Vestager, the EU Commissioner for Competition, observed:

> I think that is a false dilemma, because you can do so many things with technology that are not invasive of your privacy. I think that, very often, when people say it's only doable in one way, it's because they want the data for their own purposes. We have made a set of guidelines, and with member states we have translated that into a toolbox, so that you can do a voluntary app with decentralized storage, with Bluetooth technology. You can use technology to track the virus, but you can still give people the freedom of choice, and, in doing that, people trust that the technology is for virus tracking and not for any other purposes. I think it is essential that we show that we really mean it when we say that you should be able to trust technology when you use it, that this is not a start of a new era of surveillance. This is for virus tracking, and this can help us open our societies.[125]

Again, we want to emphasize that this is a fast-moving and highly volatile situation. The announcement made in April by Apple and Google that they are collaborating to develop an app that health officials could use to reverse-engineer the movements and connections of a person infected by the virus points to a possible way out for societies most concerned about data privacy and that fear digital surveillance above anything else. The person who carries the mobile would have to voluntarily download the app and would have to agree to share the data, and the two companies made it clear that their technology would not be provided to public-health agencies that do not abide by their privacy guidelines. But voluntary contact-tracing apps have a problem: they do preserve the privacy of their users but are only effective when the level of participation is sufficiently high – a collective-action problem that underlines once again the profoundly interconnected nature of modern life beneath the individualist façade of rights and contractual obligations. No voluntary contract-tracing app will work if people are unwilling to provide their own personal data to the governmental agency that monitors the system; if any individual refuses to download the app (and therefore to withhold information about a possible infection, movements and contacts), everyone will be adversely affected. In the end, citizens will only use the app if they regard it as trustworthy, which is itself dependent upon trust in the government and public authorities. At the end of June 2020, the experience with tracing apps was recent and mixed. Fewer than 30 countries had put them in place.[126] In Europe, some countries like Germany and Italy rolled out apps based on the system developed by Apple and Google, while other countries, like France, decided to develop their own app, raising issues of interoperability. In general, technical problems and concerns with privacy seemed to affect the app's use and rate of adoption. Just to offer some examples: the UK, following technical glitches and criticism from privacy activists, made a U-turn and decided to replace its domestically-developed contact-tracing app with the model offered by Apple and Google. Norway suspended the use of its app due to privacy concerns while, in France, just three weeks after being launched, the StopCovid app had simply failed to take off, with a very low rate of adoption (1.9 million people) followed by frequent decisions to uninstall it.

Today, about 5.2 billion smartphones exist in the world, each with the potential to help identify who is infected, where and often by whom. This unprecedented opportunity may explain why different surveys conducted in the US and Europe during their lockdowns indicated that a growing number of citizens seemed to favour smartphone tracking from public authorities (within very specific boundaries). But as always, the devil is in the detail of the policy and its execution. Questions like whether the digital tracking should be mandatory or voluntary, whether the data should be collected on an anonymized or personal basis and whether the information should be collected privately or publicly disclosed contain many different shades of black and white, making it exceedingly difficult to agree upon a unified model of digital tracing in a collective fashion. All these questions, and the unease they can provoke, were exacerbated by the rise of corporations tracking employees' health that emerged in the early phases of national reopenings. They will continuously grow in relevance as the corona pandemic lingers on and fears about other possible pandemics surface.

As the coronavirus crisis recedes and people start returning to the workplace, the corporate move will be towards greater surveillance; for better or for worse, companies will be watching and sometimes recording what their workforce does. The trend could take many different forms, from measuring body temperatures with thermal cameras to monitoring via an app how employees comply with social distancing. This is bound to raise profound regulatory and privacy issues, which many companies will reject by arguing that, unless they increase digital surveillance, they won't be able to reopen and function without risking new infections (and being, in some cases, liable). They will cite health and safety as justification for increased surveillance.

The perennial concern expressed by legislators, academics and trade unionists is that the surveillance tools are likely to remain in place after the crisis and even when a vaccine is finally found, simply because employers don't have any incentive to remove a surveillance system once it's been installed, particularly if one of the indirect benefits of surveillance is to check on employees' productivity.

This is what happened after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. All around the world, new security measures like employing widespread cameras, requiring electronic ID cards and logging employees or visitors in and out became the norm. At that time, these measures were deemed extreme, but today they are used everywhere and considered "normal". An increasing number of analysts, policy-makers and security specialists fear the same will now happen with the tech solutions put into place to contain the pandemic. They foresee a dystopian world ahead of us.

1.6.3. The risk of dystopia

Now that information and communication technologies permeate almost every aspect of our lives and forms of social participation, any digital experience that we have can be turned into a "product" destined to monitor and anticipate our behaviour. The risk of possible dystopia stems from this observation. Over the past few years, it has nourished countless works of arts, ranging from novels like *The Handmaid's Tale* to the TV series "Black Mirror". In academia, it finds its expression in the research undertaken by scholars like Shoshana Zuboff. Her book *Surveillance Capitalism* warns about customers being reinvented as data sources, with "surveillance capitalism" transforming our economy, politics, society and our own lives by producing deeply anti-democratic asymmetries of knowledge and the power that accrues to knowledge.

Over the coming months and years, the trade-off between public-health benefits and loss of privacy will be carefully weighed, becoming the topic of many animated conversations and heated debates. Most people, fearful of the danger posed by COVID-19, will ask: Isn't it foolish not to leverage the power of technology to come to our rescue when we are victims of an outbreak and facing a life-or-death kind of situation? They will then be willing to give up a lot of privacy and will agree that in such circumstances public power can rightfully override individual rights. Then, when the crisis is over, some may realize that their country has suddenly been transformed into a place where they no longer wish to live. This thought process is nothing new. Over the last few years, both governments and firms have been using increasingly sophisticated technologies to monitor and sometimes manipulate citizens and employees; if we are not vigilant, warn the privacy advocates, the pandemic will mark an important watershed in the history of surveillance.[127] The argument put forward by those who above all fear the grip of technology on personal freedom is plain and simple: in the name of public health, some elements of personal privacy will be abandoned for the benefit of containing an epidemic, just as the terrorist attacks of 9/11 triggered greater and permanent security in the name of protecting public safety. Then, without realizing it, we will fall victims of new surveillance powers that will never recede and that could be repurposed as a political means for more sinister ends.

As the last few pages have exposed beyond a reasonable doubt, the pandemic could open an era of active health surveillance made possible by location-detecting smartphones, facial-recognition cameras and other technologies that identify sources of infection and track the spread of a disease in quasi real time.

Despite all the precautions certain countries take to control the power of tech and limit surveillance (others are not so concerned), some thinkers worry about how some of the quick choices we make today will influence our societies for years to come. The historian Yuval Noah Harari is one of them. In a recent article, he argues that we'll have a fundamental choice to make between totalitarian surveillance and citizen empowerment. It's worth exposing his argument in detail:

> Surveillance technology is developing at breakneck speed, and what seemed science-fiction 10 years ago is today old news. As a thought experiment, consider a hypothetical government that demands that every citizen wears a biometric bracelet that monitors body temperature and heart-rate 24 hours a day. The resulting data is hoarded and analysed by government algorithms. The algorithms will know that you are sick even before you know it, and they will also know where you have been, and who you have met. The chains of infection could be drastically shortened, and even cut altogether. Such a system could arguably

> stop the epidemic in its tracks within days. Sounds wonderful, right? The downside is, of course, that this would give legitimacy to a terrifying new surveillance system. If you know, for example, that I clicked on a Fox News link rather than a CNN link, that can teach you something about my political views and perhaps even my personality. But if you can monitor what happens to my body temperature, blood pressure and heart-rate as I watch the video clip, you can learn what makes me laugh, what makes me cry, and what makes me really, really angry. It is crucial to remember that anger, joy, boredom and love are biological phenomena just like fever and a cough. The same technology that identifies coughs could also identify laughs. If corporations and governments start harvesting our biometric data en masse, they can get to know us far better than we know ourselves, and they can then not just predict our feelings but also manipulate our feelings and sell us anything they want — be it a product or a politician. Biometric monitoring would make Cambridge Analytica's data hacking tactics look like something from the Stone Age. Imagine North Korea in 2030, when every citizen has to wear a biometric bracelet 24 hours a day. If you listen to a speech by the Great Leader and the bracelet picks up the tell-tale signs of anger, you are done for.[128]

We will have been warned! Some social commentators like Evgeny Morozov go even further, convinced that the pandemic heralds a dark future of techno-totalitarian state surveillance. His argument, premised upon the concept of "technological solutionism" put forward in a book written in 2012, posits that the tech "solutions" offered to contain the pandemic will necessarily take the surveillance state to the next level. He sees evidence of this in two distinct strands of "solutionism" in government responses to the pandemic that he has identified. On the one hand, there are "progressive solutionists" who believe that the appropriate exposure through an app to the right information about infection could make people behave in the public interest. On the other hand, there are "punitive solutionists" determined to use the vast digital surveillance infrastructure to curb our daily activities and punish any transgressions. What Morozov perceives as the greatest and ultimate danger to our political systems and liberties is that the "successful" example of tech in monitoring and containing the pandemic will then "entrench the solutionist toolkit as the default option for addressing all other existential problems – from inequality to climate change. After all, it is much easier to deploy solutionist tech to influence individual behaviour than it is to ask difficult political questions about the root causes of these crises".[129]

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Spinoza, the 17th century philosopher who resisted oppressive authority all his life, famously said: "Fear cannot be without hope nor hope without fear." This is a good guiding principle to conclude this chapter, along with the thought that nothing is inevitable and that we must be symmetrically aware of both good and bad outcomes. Dystopian scenarios are not a fatality. It is true that in the post-pandemic era, personal health and well-being will become a much greater priority for society, which is why the genie of tech surveillance will not be put back into the bottle. But it is for those who govern and each of us personally to control and harness the benefits of technology without sacrificing our individual and collective values and freedoms.

2. MICRO RESET (INDUSTRY AND BUSINESS)

At the micro level, that of industries and companies, the Great Reset will entail a long and complex series of changes and adaptation. When confronted with it, some industry leaders and senior executives may be tempted to equate reset with restart, hoping to go back to the old normal and restore what worked in the past: traditions, tested procedures and familiar ways of doing things – in short, a return to business as usual. This won’t happen because it can’t happen. For the most part “business as usual” died from (or at the very least was infected by) COVID-19. Some industries have been devastated by the economic hibernation triggered by the lockdowns and social-distancing measures. Others will have a hard time recovering lost revenues before navigating an ever-narrower path to profitability caused by the economic recession engulfing the world. However, for the majority of businesses stepping into the post-coronavirus future, the key issue will be to find the apposite balance between what functioned before and what is needed now to prosper in the new normal. For these companies, the pandemic is a unique opportunity to rethink their organization and enact positive, sustainable and lasting change.

What will define the new normal of a post-coronavirus business landscape? How will companies be able to find the best possible equilibrium between past success and the fundamentals now needed to succeed in the post-pandemic era? The response is obviously dependent upon and specific to each industry and the severity with which it was hit by the pandemic. In the post-COVID-19 era, apart from those few sectors in which companies will benefit on average from strong tailwinds (most notably tech, health and wellness), the journey will be challenging and sometimes treacherous. For some, like entertainment, travel or hospitality, a return to a pre-pandemic environment is unimaginable in the foreseeable future (and maybe never in some cases…). For others, namely manufacturing or food, it is more about finding ways to adjust to the shock and capitalize on some new trends (like digital) to thrive in the post-pandemic era. Size also makes a difference. The difficulties tend to be greater for small businesses that, on average, operate on smaller cash reserves and thinner profit margins than large companies. Moving forward, most of them will be dealing with cost–revenue ratios that put them at a disadvantage compared to bigger rivals. But being small can offer some advantages in today’s world where flexibility and celerity can make all the difference in terms of adaptation. Being nimble is easier for a small structure than for an industrial behemoth.

All this said, and irrespective of their industry and the specific situation they find themselves in, almost every single company decision-maker around the world will face similar issues and will have to respond to some common questions and challenges. The most obvious ones are the following:

1. Shall I encourage remote working for those who can do it (about 30% of the total workforce in the US)?
2. Will I reduce air travel in my business, and how many face-to-face meetings can I meaningfully replace by virtual interactions?
3. How can I transform the business and our decision-making process to become more agile and to move faster and more decisively?
4. How can I accelerate the digitization and adoption of digital solutions?

The macro reset discussed in Chapter 1 will translate into a myriad of micro consequences at the industry and company level. We review below some of these main trends before turning to the issue of who are the “winners and losers” from the pandemic and its effects on specific industries.

2.1. Micro trends

We are still in the early days of the post-pandemic era, but powerful new or accelerating trends are already at work. For some industries, these will prove a boon, for others a major challenge. However, across all sectors, it will be up to each company to make the most of these new trends by adapting with celerity and decisiveness. The businesses that prove the most agile and flexible will be those that emerge stronger.

2.1.1. Acceleration of digitization

In the pre-pandemic era, the buzz of "digital transformation" was the mantra of most boards and executive committees. Digital was "key", it had to be "resolutely" implemented and was seen as a "precondition to success"! Since then, in the space of just a few months, the mantra has become a must – even, in the case of some companies, a question of life or death. This is explicable and understandable. During confinement, we depended entirely on the Net for most things: from work and education to socialization. It is the online services that allowed us to keep a semblance of normalcy, and it is only natural that "online" should be the largest beneficiary of the pandemic, giving a tremendous boost to technologies and processes that enable us to do things remotely: universal broadband internet, mobile and remote payments, and workable e-government services, among others. As a direct consequence, businesses that were already operating online are bound to benefit from a lasting competitive advantage. As more and diverse things and services are brought to us via our mobiles and computers, companies in sectors as disparate as e-commerce, contactless operations, digital content, robots and drone deliveries (to name just a few) will thrive. It is not by accident that firms like Alibaba, Amazon, Netflix or Zoom emerged as "winners" from the lockdowns.

By and large, the consumer sector moved first and fastest. From the necessary contactless experience imposed upon many food and retail companies during the lockdowns to the virtual show rooms in the manufacturing industry allowing clients to browse and choose the products they like best, most business-to-consumer companies rapidly understood the need to offer their clients a "beginning-to-end" digital journey.

As some lockdowns came to an end and certain economies crept back to life, similar opportunities emerged in business-to-business applications, particularly in manufacturing where physical-distancing rules had to be put into place at short notice often in challenging environments (e.g. on assembly lines). As a direct result, the IoT made impressive inroads. Some companies that had been slow in the recent pre-lockdown past to adopt IoT are now embracing it en masse with the specific objective of doing as many things as possible remotely. Equipment maintenance, management inventory, supplier relations or safety strategies: all of these different activities can now be performed (to a large extent) via a computer. IoT offers companies not only the means to execute and uphold social-distancing rules, but also to reduce costs and implement more agile operations.

During the peak of the pandemic, O2O – online to offline – gained major traction, highlighting the importance of having both an online and offline presence, and opening the door (or perhaps even the floodgates) to eversion. This phenomenon of blurring the distinction between online and offline as identified by the famous science fiction writer William Gibson who stated "Our world is everting"[130] with the cyberspace relentlessly opening out has emerged as one of the most potent trends of the post-COVID-19 era. The pandemic crisis accelerated this phenomenon of eversion because it both forced and encouraged us towards a digital, "weightless" world faster than ever, as more and more economic activity had no choice but to take place digitally: education, consulting, publishing and many others. We could go as far as to say that, for a little while, teleportation supplanted transportation: most executive committee meetings, board meetings, team meetings, brainstorm exercises and other forms of personal or social interaction had to take place remotely. This new reality is captured in the market capitalization of Zoom (the videoconferencing company) that skyrocketed to $70 billion in June 2020, higher (at that time) than that of any US airline. Concurrently, large online companies like Amazon and Alibaba expanded decisively in the O2O business, particularly in food retailing and logistics.

Trends like telemedicine or remote working that expanded extensively during the confinement are unlikely to retreat – for them there will be no return to the status quo that prevailed prior to the pandemic. Telemedicine, in particular, will benefit considerably. For obvious reasons, healthcare is one of the most heavily regulated industries in the world, a fact that inevitably slows the pace of innovation. But the necessity to address the pandemic with any means available (plus, during the outbreak, the need to protect health workers by allowing them to work remotely) removed some of the regulatory and legislative impediments related to the adoption of telemedicine. In the future, it is certain that more medical care will be delivered remotely. It will in turn accelerate the trend towards more wearable and at-home diagnostics, like smart toilets capable of tracking health data and performing health analyses. Equally, the pandemic may prove to be a boon for online education. In

Asia, the shift to online education has been particularly notable, with a sharp increase in students' digital enrolments, much higher valuation for online education businesses and more capital available for "ed-tech" start-ups. The flipside of this particular coin will be an increase in pressure on institutions offering more traditional methods of education to validate their worth and justify their fees (as we expand upon a little later).

The speed of expansion has been nothing short of breathtaking. "In Britain, less than 1 percent of initial medical consultations took place via video link in 2019; under lockdown, 100 percent are occurring remotely. In another example, a leading US retailer in 2019 wanted to launch a curbside-delivery business; its plan envisaged taking 18 months. During the lockdown, it went live in less than a week – allowing it to serve its customers while maintaining the livelihoods of its workforce. Online banking interactions have risen to 90 percent during the crisis, from 10 percent, with no drop-off in quality and an increase in compliance while providing a customer experience that isn't just about online banking."[131] Similar examples abound.

The social mitigation response to the pandemic and the physical-distancing measures imposed during the confinement will also result in e-commerce emerging as an ever-more powerful industry trend. Consumers need products and, if they can't shop, they will inevitably resort to purchasing them online. As the habit kicks in, people who had never shopped online before will become comfortable with doing so, while people who were part-time online shoppers before will presumably rely on it more. This was made evident during the lockdowns. In the US, Amazon and Walmart hired a combined 250,000 workers to keep up with the increase in demand and built massive infrastructure to deliver online. This accelerating growth of e-commerce means that the giants of the online retail industry are likely to emerge from the crisis even stronger than they were in the pre-pandemic era. There are always two sides to a story: as the habit of shopping online becomes more prevalent, it will depress bricks-and-mortar (high street and mall) retail still further – a phenomenon explored in more detail in the next sections.

2.1.2. Resilient supply chains

The very nature of global supply chains and their innate fragility means that arguments about shortening them have been brewing for years. They tend to be intricate and complex to manage. They are also difficult to monitor in terms of compliance with environmental standards and labour laws, potentially exposing companies to reputation risk and damage to their brands. In light of this troubled past, the pandemic has placed the last nail in the coffin of the principle that companies should optimize supply chains based on individual component costs and depending on a single supply source for critical materials, summed up as favouring efficiency over resilience. In the post-pandemic era, it is "end-to-end value optimization", an idea that includes both resilience and efficiency alongside cost, that will prevail. It is epitomized in the formula that "just-in-case" will eventually replace "just-in-time".

The shocks to global supply chains analysed in the macro section will affect global businesses and smaller companies alike. But what does "just-in-case" mean in practice? The model of globalization developed at the end of the last century, conceived and constructed by global manufacturing companies that were on the prowl for cheap labour, products and components, has found its limits. It fragmented international production into ever-more intricate bits and pieces and resulted in a system run on a just-in-time basis that has proven to be extremely lean and efficient, but also exceedingly complex and, as such, very vulnerable (complexity brings fragility and often results in instability). Simplification is therefore the antidote, which should in turn generate more resilience. This means that the "global value chains" that represent roughly three-quarters of all global trade will inevitably decline. This decline will be compounded by the new reality that companies dependent upon complex just-in-time supply chains can no longer take it for granted that tariff commitments enshrined by the World Trade Organization will protect them from a sudden surge in protectionism somewhere. As a result, they will be forced to prepare accordingly by reducing or localizing their supply chain, and elaborating alternative production or procurement plans to guard against a prolonged disruption. Every business whose profitability is contingent upon the principle of just-in-time global supply chain will have to rethink how it operates and probably sacrifice the idea of maximizing efficiency and profits for the sake of "supply security" and resilience. Resilience will therefore become the primary consideration for any business serious about hedging against disruption – be it disruption to a particular supplier, to a possible change in trade policy or to a particular country or region. In practice, this will force companies to diversify their supplier base, even at the cost of holding inventories and building in redundancy. It will also compel these companies to ensure that the same is true within their own supply chain: they will assess resilience along their entire supply chain, all the way down to their ultimate supplier and, possibly, even the suppliers of their suppliers. The costs of production will inevitably rise, but this will be the price to pay for building resilience. At first glance, the industries that will be the most affected because they will be the first to shift production patterns are automotive, electronics and industrial machinery.

2.1.3. Governments and business

For all the reasons expanded upon in the first chapter, COVID-19 has rewritten many of the rules of the game between the public and private sectors. In the post-pandemic era, business will be subject to much greater government interference than in the past. The benevolent (or otherwise) greater intrusion of governments in the life of companies and the conduct of their business will be country- and industry-dependent, therefore taking many different guises. Outlined below are three notable forms of impact that will emerge with force in the early months of the post-pandemic period: conditional bailouts, public procurement and labour market regulations.

For a start, all the stimulus packages being put together in Western economies to support ailing industries and individual companies will have covenants constraining in particular the borrowers' ability to fire employees, buy back shares and pay executive bonuses. In the same vein, governments (encouraged, supported and sometimes "pushed" by activists and public sentiments) will target suspiciously low corporate tax bills and generously high executive rewards. They will show little patience for senior executives and investors who push companies to spend more on buy-backs, minimize their tax payments and pay huge dividends. US airlines, pilloried for seeking government assistance, having recently and consistently used large amounts of company cash to pay shareholder dividends, are a prime example of how this change in public attitude will be enacted by governments. In addition, in the coming months and years, a "regime change" might occur when policy-makers take on a substantial portion of private-sector default risk. When this happens, governments will want something in return. Germany's bailout of Lufthansa epitomizes this sort of situation: the government injected liquidity into the national carrier, but only on the condition that the company constrains executive pay (including stock options) and commits to not paying dividends.

Better alignment between public policy and corporate planning will be a particular focus of attention in terms of greater government interference. The scramble for ventilators during the peak of the pandemic epitomizes why. In 2010 in the US, 40,000 ventilators had been ordered through a government contract but were never delivered, largely explaining the country's shortage that became so apparent in March 2020. What led to this situation of scarcity? In 2012, the original company that had won the bid was bought (in somewhat dubious and obscure circumstances) by a much larger manufacturer (a publicly traded company also producing ventilators): it later emerged that the purchasing company wanted to prevent the original bidder from building a cheaper ventilator that would have undermined the profitability of its own business. This company dragged its feet before eventually cancelling the contract and ultimately being acquired by a rival. None of the 40,000 ventilators were ever delivered to the US government.[132] It is unlikely that this sort of situation will reoccur in the post-pandemic era, as public authorities will think twice about outsourcing projects that have critical public-health implications (or indeed critical public implications, security or otherwise) to private companies. The bottom line: the maximization of profit and the short-termism that often goes with it is rarely or, at least, not always consistent with the public goal of preparing for a future crisis.

Around the world, the pressure to improve the social protection and salary level of low-paid employees will increase. Most likely, in our post-pandemic world increases in the minimum wage will become a central issue that will be addressed via the greater regulation of minimum standards and a more thorough enforcement of the rules that already exist. Most probably, companies will have to pay higher taxes and various forms of government funding (like services for social care). The gig economy will feel the impact of such a policy more than any other sector. Prior to the pandemic, it was already in the cross hairs of government scrutiny. In the post-pandemic era, for reasons related to the redefinition of the social contract, this scrutiny will intensify. Companies that rely on gig workers to operate will also feel the effect of more government interference, possibly even to a degree capable of undermining their financial viability. As the pandemic will radically alter social and political attitudes towards gig workers, governments will force those companies that employ them to offer proper contracts with benefits such as social insurance and health coverage. The labour issue will loom large for them and, if they have to employ gig workers as normal employees, they will cease to be profitable. Their *raison d'être* might even vanish.

2.1.4. Stakeholder capitalism and ESG

Over the past 10 years or so, the fundamental changes that have taken place in each of the five macro categories reviewed in Chapter 1 have profoundly altered the environment in which companies operate. They have made stakeholder capitalism and environmental, social and governance (ESG) considerations increasingly relevant to sustainable value creation (ESG can be considered as the yardstick for stakeholder capitalism).

The pandemic struck at a time when many different issues, ranging from climate change activism and rising inequalities to gender diversity and #MeToo scandals, had already begun to raise awareness and heighten the criticality of stakeholder capitalism and ESG considerations in today's interdependent world. Whether espoused openly or not, nobody would now deny that companies' fundamental purpose can no longer simply be the unbridle pursuit of financial profit; it is now incumbent upon them to serve all their stakeholders, not only those who hold shares. This is corroborated by early anecdotal evidence pointing to an even more positive outlook for ESG in the post-pandemic era. This can be explained on three fronts:

1. The crisis will have created, or reinforced, an acute sense of responsibility and urgency on most issues pertaining to ESG strategies – the most important being climate change. But others, such as consumer behaviour, the future of work and mobility, and supply-chain responsibility, will move to the forefront of the investment process and will become an integral component of due diligence.

2. The pandemic leaves no doubt in boardrooms that the absence of ESG considerations has the potential to destroy substantial value and even threaten the viability of a business. ESG will therefore become more fully integrated and internalized into the core strategy and governance of a company. It will also alter the way in which investors assess corporate governance. Tax records, dividend payments and remunerations will become increasingly scrutinized for fear of incurring a reputational cost when a problem arises or is made public.

3. Fostering employee and community goodwill will be key to enhancing a brand's reputation. More and more, companies will have to prove that they treat their workers well, by welcoming improved labour practices and paying attention to health and safety as well as well-being in the workplace. Companies will not necessarily adhere to these measures because they are genuinely "good", but rather because the "price" of not doing so will be too high in terms of the wrath of activists, both activist investors and social activists.

The conviction that ESG strategies benefited from the pandemic and are most likely to benefit further is corroborated by various surveys and reports. Early data shows that the sustainability sector outperformed conventional funds during the first quarter of 2020. According to Morningstar, which compared first-quarter returns for more than 200 sustainability equity funds and exchange traded funds, the sustainable funds performed better by one percentage point or two, on a relative basis. A report from BlackRock offers further evidence that companies with strong ESG ratings outperformed their peers during the pandemic.[133] Several analysts suggested that this outperformance might simply have reflected the reduced exposure to fossil fuels of ESG funds and strategies, but BlackRock asserts that ESG compliant companies (another way to say that they adhere to the principle of stakeholder capitalism) tend to be more resilient because of their holistic understanding of risk management. It seems that the more susceptible the world becomes to a broad set of macro risks and issues, the greater the necessity to embrace stakeholder capitalism and ESG strategies.

The debate between those who believe that stakeholder capitalism will be sacrificed on the altar of the recovery and those who argue that it is now time to "build back better" is far from resolved. For every Michael O'Leary (the CEO of Ryanair) who thinks that COVID-19 will put ESG considerations "on the back burner for a few years", there is a Brian Chesky (CEO of Airbnb) who is committed to transforming his business into a "stakeholder company".[134] However, irrespective of anybody's opinion about the merits of stakeholder capitalism and ESG strategies and their future role in the post-pandemic era, activism will make a difference by reinforcing the trend. Social activists and many activist investors will scrutinize closely how companies behaved during the pandemic crisis. It is likely that the markets or the consumers, or both, will punish those companies that performed poorly on social issues. An essay co-written in April 2020 by Leo Strine, an influential judge in corporate America, hammers home this point about a necessary change in corporate governance: "We are again paying the price for a corporate governance system that lacks focus on financial soundness, sustainable wealth creation and the fair treatment of workers. For too long, the stock market's power over our economy has grown at the expense of other stakeholders, particularly workers. Although overall wealth has grown, it has done so in a skewed way that is unfair to the bulk of the American workers who are primarily responsible for that increase. The shift toward satisfying insatiable stock market demands has also led to increasing levels of corporate debt and economic risk".[135]

For activists, the decency exhibited (or not) by companies during the crisis will be paramount. Businesses will be judged for years to come by their actions – critically not just in a narrow commercial sense but viewed through a broader social lens. Few will forget, for example, that over the past 10 years, US airlines spent 96% of their cash flow on share buy-backs and that, in March 2020, EasyJet paid a £174 million dividend pay-out to its shareholders (including £60 million to its founder).[136]

The activism to which companies may now be subjected is going beyond the traditional confines of social activism (by outsiders) and investor activism; with employee activism, it is expanding internally. In May 2020, just as the epicentre of the pandemic was moving from the US to Latin America, Google employees, emboldened by a report published by Greenpeace, succeeded in convincing the company to no longer build custom AI and machine learning algorithms for upstream extraction in the oil and gas industry.[137]. Several such examples in the recent past illustrate rising employee activism, ranging from environmental issues to social and inclusivity concerns. They provide a telling example of how different types of activists are learning to work together to further the goals to achieve a more sustainable future.

Concomitantly, a sharp increase has taken place in the oldest form of activism: industrial action. In the US in particular, while many white-collar workers were riding out the pandemic while working from home, many low-wage essential workers “out in the trenches” who had no choice but to go to work staged a wave of walkouts, strikes and protests.[138] As issues of worker safety, pay and benefits become more central, the agenda of stakeholder capitalism will gain in relevance and strength.

2.2. Industry reset

As a result of the lockdowns, the pandemic had immediate effect on every possible industry around the world. This impact is ongoing and will continue to be felt in the coming years. As global supply chains are reconfigured, as consumer demands change, as governments intervene more, as market conditions evolve and as technology disrupts, companies will be forced to continuously adapt and reinvent themselves. The purpose of this section is not to offer a precise account of how each particular industry might evolve, but rather to illustrate with impressionist brush strokes how some of the main features and trends associated with the pandemic will impact specific industries.

2.2.1. Social interaction and de-densification

Effects on travel and tourism, hospitality, entertainment, retail, aerospace and even the automotive industry

The ways in which consumers interact with each other as well as what and how they consume have been significantly affected by the pandemic. Consequently, the ensuing reset in different industries will vary fundamentally depending on the nature of the economic transaction involved. In those industries where consumers transact socially and in person, the first months and possibly years of the post-pandemic era will be much tougher than for those where the transaction can be at a greater physical distance or even virtual. In modern economies, a large amount of what we consume happens through social interaction: travel and vacations, bars and restaurants, sporting events and retail, cinemas and theatres, concerts and festivals, conventions and conferences, museums and libraries, education: they all correspond to social forms of consumption that represent a significant portion of total economic activity and employment (services represent about 80% of total jobs in the US, most of which are “social” by nature). They cannot take place in the virtual world or, when they can, only in a truncated and often suboptimal form (like a live orchestra performance on a screen). Industries that have social interaction at their core have been hit the hardest by the lockdowns. Among them are many sectors that add up to a very significant proportion of total economic activity and employment: travel and tourism, leisure, sport, events and entertainment. For months and possibly years, they will be forced to operate at reduced capacity, hit by the double whammy of fears about the virus restraining consumption and the imposition of regulations aimed at countering these fears by creating more physical space between consumers. Public pressure for physical distancing will endure until a vaccine is developed and commercialized at scale (which, again, according to most experts, is most unlikely to happen before the first or second quarter of 2021 at the earliest). In the intervening period, it is likely that people may travel much less for both vacation and/or business, they may go less frequently to restaurants, cinemas and theatres, and may decide that it is safer to buy online rather than physically go to the shops. For these fundamental reasons, the industries hit the hardest by the pandemic will also be the slowest to recover. Hotels, restaurants, airlines, shops and cultural venues in particular will be forced to make expensive alterations in the way they deliver their offerings in order to adapt to a post-pandemic new normal that will demand the implementation of drastic changes involving introducing extra space, regular cleaning, protections for staff and technology that limits customers’ interactions with workers.

In many of these industries, but particularly in hospitality and retail, small businesses will suffer disproportionately, having to walk a very fine line between surviving the closures imposed by the lockdowns (or sharply reduced business) and bankruptcy. Operating at reduced capacity with even tighter margins means that many will not survive. The fallout from their failure will have hard-felt ramifications both for national economies and local communities. Small businesses are the main engine of employment growth and account in most advanced economies for half of all private-sector jobs. If significant numbers of them go to the wall, if there are fewer shops, restaurants and bars in a particular neighbourhood, the whole community will be impacted as unemployment rises and demand dries up, setting in motion a vicious and downward spiral and affecting ever greater numbers of small businesses in a particular community. The ripples will eventually spread beyond the confines of the local community, affecting, albeit hopefully to a lesser extent, other more distant areas. The highly interdependent and interconnected nature of today’s economy, industries and businesses, comparable to the dynamic linking the macro categories, means that each has a rapid knock-on effect on the others in a myriad of different manners. Take restaurants. This sector of activity has been hit by the pandemic to such a dramatic extent that it is not even sure how the restaurant business will ever come back. As one restaurateur put it: “I, like hundreds of other chefs across the city and thousands around the country, am now staring down the question of what our restaurants, our careers, our lives, might look like if we can even get them back.”[139] In France and the UK, several industry voices estimate that up to 75% of independent restaurants might not survive the lockdowns and subsequent social-distancing measures. The large chains and fast-food giants will. This in turn suggests that big businesses will get bigger while the smallest shrink or disappear. A large restaurant chain, for example, has a better chance of staying operational as it benefits from more resources and, ultimately, less competition in the wake of bankruptcies among smaller outfits. The small restaurants that survive the crisis will have to reinvent themselves entirely. In the meantime, in the cases of those that close their doors forever, the closure will impact not only the restaurant and its immediate staff but also all the businesses that operate in its orbit: the suppliers, the farmers and the truck drivers.

At the other end of the size spectrum, some very large companies will fall victim to the same predicament as the very small ones. Airline companies, in particular, will face similar constraints in terms of consumer demand and social-distancing rules. The three-month shutdown has left carriers around the world with a cataclysmic situation of virtually zero revenues and the prospect of tens of thousands of job cuts. British Airways, for one, has announced that it will cut up to 30% of its current workforce of 42,000 employees. At the time of writing (mid-June 2020), the restart may be just about to begin. It will prove extremely challenging, with a recovery expected to take years. The improvement will begin in leisure travel, with corporate travel to follow. However, as discussed in the next section, consumption habits may change permanently. If many businesses decide to travel less to reduce costs and to replace physical meetings by virtual ones whenever possible, the impact on the recovery and ultimate profitability of airlines may be dramatic and lasting. Prior to the pandemic, corporate travel accounted for 30% of airline volumes but 50% of revenues (thanks to higher priced seats and last-minute bookings). In the future, this is set to change, making the profitability outcome of some individual airlines highly uncertain, and forcing the entire industry to reconsider the long-term structure of the global aviation market.

When assessing the ultimate effect on a particular industry, the complete chain of consequences needs to take into account what happens in adjacent industries, whose fate largely depends on what happens in the one upstream, or “at the top”. To illustrate this, we take a brief look at three industries that entirely depend on the aviation sector: airports (infrastructure and retail), planes (aerospace) and car rentals (automotive).

Airports face the same challenges as airlines: the less people fly, the less they transit via airports. This in turn affects the level of consumption in the various shops and restaurants that make up the ecosystem of all international airports throughout the world. Furthermore, the experience of airports in a post-COVID-19 world, involving longer waiting times, highly restricted or even no hand luggage and other potentially inconvenient social-distancing measures, could erode the consumer desire to travel by air for pleasure and leisure. Various trade associations warn that the implementation of social-distancing policies would not only limit airport capacity to 20-40% but would also likely render the whole experience so disagreeable as to become a deterrent.

Dramatically affected by the lockdowns, airlines began to cancel or defer orders for new aircraft and to change their choice of particular model, in so doing severely impacting the aerospace industry. As a direct consequence and for the foreseeable future, the major civil aircraft assembly plants will operate at reduced capacity, with cascading effects on the entirety of their value chain and supplier network. In the longer term, changes in demand by airline companies that re-evaluate their needs will lead to a complete reassessment of the production of civilian aircraft. This makes the defence aerospace sector an exception and a relatively safe haven. For nation states, the uncertain geopolitical outlook makes it imperative to maintain orders and procurement, but cash-constrained governments will demand better payment terms.

Like airports, car rental companies depend almost entirely on aviation volumes. Hertz, a highly indebted company with a fleet of 700,000 cars overwhelmingly idled during the lockdowns, filed for bankruptcy in May. Like for so many companies, COVID-19 proved to be the proverbial last straw.

2.2.2. Behavioural changes – permanent vs transient

Effects on retail, real estate and education

Some behavioural changes observed during the lockdowns are unlikely to be entirely reversed in the post-pandemic era and some may even become permanent. How exactly this will play out remains very uncertain. A few consumption patterns may revert to long-term trend lines (comparable to air travel after 9/11), albeit at an altered pace. Others will undoubtedly accelerate, like online services. Some may be postponed, like buying a car, while new permanent patterns of consumption may emerge, like purchases associated with greener mobility.

Much of this is still unknown. During the lockdowns, a lot of consumers were forced to learn to do things for themselves (bake their bread, cook from scratch, cut their own hair, etc.) and felt the need to spend cautiously. How entrenched will these new habits and forms of “do it yourself” and auto-consumption become in the post-pandemic era? The same could apply to students who in some countries pay exorbitant fees for higher education. After a trimester spent watching their professors on their screens, will they start questioning the high cost of education?

To grasp the extreme complexity and uncertainty of this evolution in consumer behaviour, let us revert to the example of online shopping versus in-person retail. As stated, it is very likely that bricks-and-mortar stores will lose out severely in favour of online shopping. Consumers may be willing to pay a bit extra to have heavy and bulky products, like bottles and household goods, delivered to them. Supermarket retail space will therefore shrink, coming to resemble convenience stores where shoppers go to buy relatively small quantities of specific food products. But it could also be the case that less money will be spent in restaurants, suggesting that in places where a high percentage of people's food budget traditionally went to restaurants (60% in New York City for example), these funds could be diverted to and benefit urban supermarkets as city dwellers rediscover the pleasure of cooking at home. The same phenomenon may happen with the entertainment business. The pandemic may increase our anxiety about sitting in an enclosed space with complete strangers, and many people may decide that staying home to watch the latest movie or opera is the wisest option. Such a decision will benefit local supermarkets to the detriment of bars and restaurants (although the option of online takeout meal delivery services could be a lifeline for the latter). There were numerous examples of this happening in an ad hoc fashion in cities across the world during lockdowns. Could it perhaps become an important element of some restaurants' new post-COVID-19 business-survival plan? There are other first-round effects that are much easier to anticipate. Cleanliness is one of them. The pandemic will certainly heighten our focus on hygiene. A new obsession with cleanliness will particularly entail the creation of new forms of packaging. We will be encouraged not to touch the products we buy. Simple pleasures like smelling a melon or squeezing a fruit will be frowned upon and may even become a thing of the past.

A single attitudinal change will have many different ramifications, each having a particular effect on one specific industry, but in the end impacting many different industries through ripple effects. The following figure illustrates this point for just one change: spending more time at home:

Figure 2: Potential implications of spending more time at home

Source: Reeves, Martin, et al., “Sensing and Shaping the Post-COVID Era”, BCG Henderson Institute, 3 April 2020, https://www.bcg.com/publications/2020/8-ways-companies-can-shape-reality-post-covid-19.aspx

The heated debate over whether (or to what extent) we will work remotely in the future, and as a result spend more time at home, has been taking place since the pandemic started. Some analysts argue that the fundamental appeal of cities (particularly the largest ones) as vibrant centres of economic activity, social life and creativity will endure. Others fear that the coronavirus has triggered a fundamental shift in attitudes. They claim that COVID-19 has been an inflection point and predict that, all around the world, urbanites of all ages who are confronted with the shortcomings of city pollution and undersized, overpriced accommodation will decide to move to places with more greenery, more space, less pollution and lower prices. It is too early to tell which camp will be proven right, but it is certain that even a relatively small percentage of people moving away from the biggest hubs (like New York, Hong Kong SAR, London or Singapore) would exercise an outsized effect on many diverse industries (profits are always made at the margin). Nowhere is this reality more apparent than in the real estate industry and, in particular, in commercial real estate.

The commercial real estate industry is an essential driver of global growth. Its total market value exceeds that of all stocks and bonds combined globally. Prior to the pandemic crisis, it was already suffering from an excess of supply. If the emergency practice of working remotely becomes an established and widespread habit, it is hard to imagine what companies (if any) will absorb this oversupply by rushing to lease excess office space. Perhaps there will be few investments funds ready to do so, but they will be the exception, suggesting that commercial real estate still has much further to fall. The pandemic will do to commercial real estate what it has done to so many other issues (both macro and micro): it will accelerate and amplify the pre-existing trend. The combination of an increase in the number of “zombie” companies (those that use debt to finance more debt and that have not generated enough cash over the past few years to cover their interest costs) going bankrupt and an increase in the number of people working remotely means that there will be far fewer tenants to rent empty office buildings. Property developers (for the most part highly leveraged themselves) will then start experiencing a wave of bankruptcies, with the largest and systemically important ones having to be bailed out by their respective governments. In many prime cities around the world, property prices will therefore fall over a long period of time, puncturing the global real estate bubble that had been years in the making. To some extent, the same logic applies to residential real estate in large cities. If the trend of working remotely takes off, the combination of commuting not being a consideration any longer and the absence of job growth means that the younger generation will no longer chose to afford residential renting or buying in expensive cities. Inevitably, prices will then fall. In addition, many will have realized that working from home is more climate-friendly and less stressful than having to commute to an office.

The possibility of working remotely means that the biggest hubs that have benefited from higher economic growth than other cities or regions in their vicinity may start losing workers to the next tier of rising cities. This phenomenon could in turn create a wave of rising-star cities or regions attracting people looking for a better quality of life thanks to more space at more affordable prices.

Notwithstanding all the above, perhaps the notion of widespread remote working becoming the norm is too far-fetched to happen in any meaningful manner. Haven’t we so often heard that optimizing “knowledge work” (in reality the simplest sector to go remote) depends on carefully designed office environments? The technology industry that has resisted such a move for so long by massively investing in sophisticated campuses is now changing its mind in light of the lockdown experience. Twitter was the first company to commit to remote work. In May, Jack Dorsey, its CEO, informed employees that many of themice

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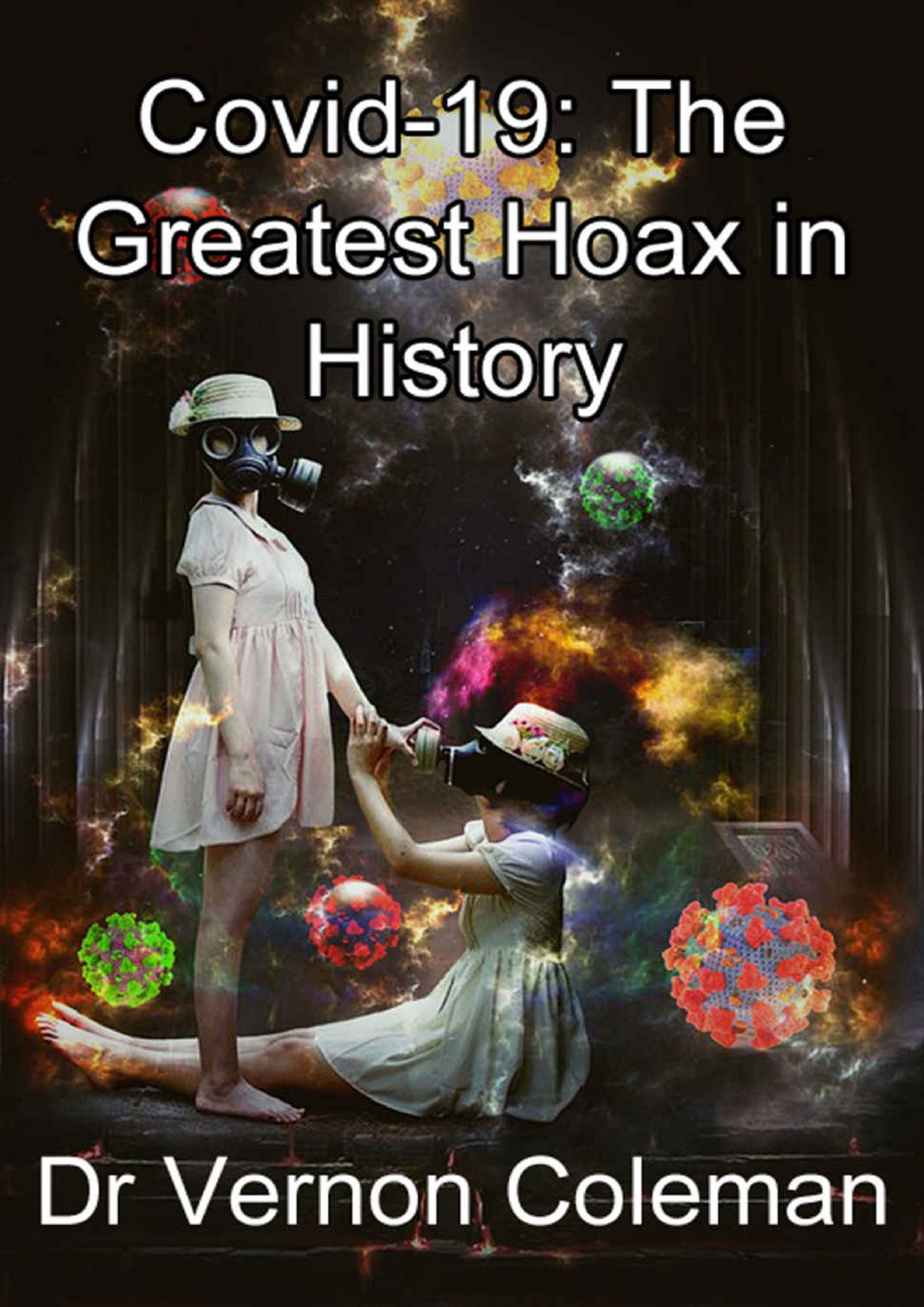

Dr Vernon Coleman

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Climbing Trees at 112
Is Your Health Written in the Stars?

The Kick-Ass A–Z for over 60s
Briefs Encounter
The Benzos Story
Dementia Myth

Psychology/Sociology

Stress Control
How to Overcome Toxic Stress
Know Yourself (1988)
Stress and Relaxation
People Watching
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Diaries

Diary of a Disgruntled Man
Just another Bloody Year
Bugger off and Leave Me Alone
Return of the Disgruntled Man
Life on the Edge
The Game's Afoot
Tickety Tonk

Animals

Why Animal Experiments Must Stop
Fighting For Animals
Alice and Other Friends
Animal Rights – Human Wrongs
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General Non Fiction

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101 Things I Have Learned
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Novels (General)

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Mrs Caldicot's Knickerbocker Glory
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Thomas Winsden's Cricketing Almanack
Diary of a Cricket Lover
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Cat books

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Catoons from Catland

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Practice Makes Perfect
Practise What You Preach
Getting Into Practice
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Covid-19: The Greatest Hoax in History

Vernon Coleman

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The Author

Dr Vernon Coleman MB ChB DSc FRSA was one of the first qualified medical practitioners to question the significance of the 'crisis' with which you may be familiar, telling readers of his website www.vernoncoleman.com at the end of February that he felt that the team advising the Government had been unduly pessimistic and had exaggerated the danger of the bug. At the beginning of March, he explained how and why the mortality figures had been distorted. And on March 14th he warned that the Government's policies would result in far more deaths than the disease itself. In a YouTube video recorded on 18th March, he explained his fear that the Government would use the 'crisis' to oppress the elderly and to introduce compulsory vaccination. And he revealed that the infection had been downgraded on March 19th when the public health bodies in the UK and the Advisory Committee on Dangerous Pathogens decided that the 'crisis' infection should no longer be classified as a 'high consequence infectious disease'. Just days after the significance of the infection had been officially downgraded, the Government published an Emergency Bill which gave the police extraordinary new powers and put millions of people under house arrest. Dr Coleman, a former GP principal, is a *Sunday Times* bestselling author. His books have sold over two million copies in the UK, been translated into 25 languages and sold all around the world. He has given evidence to the House of Commons and the House of Lords, and his campaigning has changed Government policy. There is a short biography at the back of this book.

Dedication

To Antoinette

Not many people have the joy of meeting and knowing the one person who means more to them than life itself. I thank God for bringing us together. You give happiness to people through your kindnesses but to me you give hope, joy and purpose. You are my delight and my salvation and the centre of my universe. You are everywhere I go because you live in my heart. You have all my love and all my caring. All I want in life is to be with you. You give me everything: love, friendship, understanding and kindness.

Foreword

When I wrote my first book about the coronavirus (*Coming Apocalypse*) I was told that I was not allowed to mention the word 'coronavirus' anywhere in the title or the book itself. And so I went through the entire book and managed to write round the word 'coronavirus' around 250 times. Even so, I thought at the time that there was a real risk that all my other books (close to 100 of them in all) would be removed from sale because of the content of *Coming Apocalypse*.

I would like to thank my wife, Antoinette, for wholeheartedly supporting what was a hugely risky venture since our only earned income comes from writing books – we long ago agreed to refuse advertising income and together we chose to earn nothing from the videos or the website – if the books had been removed from sale we would have been left with a diet of dandelion leaves and tree roots.

Antoinette has worked tirelessly despite being in almost constant pain as a result of the closure of the hospital physiotherapy department which should have been helping her deal with the pains which are an unwelcome souvenir of the surgery and radiotherapy which she undertook last year for breast cancer. Without her unceasing work and enthusiasm and support, none of these videos would have been made. She has been ahead of this story from the very beginning. The videos and website articles have been a joint effort though I take full responsibility for everything that has been written and recorded.

When I first started making videos I was aware that the use of the words 'vaccine' and 'vaccination' were considered illegal by some if used in association with criticism of any kind. Experience has, however, told me that these words are (surprisingly) now slightly less of a problem than they were when I published *Coming Apocalypse*.

Also, it now appears that it may be possible to use the words 'coronavirus' and 'covid-19' in some circumstances. The attention of the self-appointed authorities has been directed to words such as 'masks' and 'social distancing'. These are now 'dirty' words and using them will attract a long period in detention, 500 lines and a meeting with the headmaster in his study.

It is difficult to know precisely when the coronavirus hoax really started – or who was responsible for initiating what has, without question, turned out to be the greatest fraud in human history. This book explains just how a bunch of crooks are using the fear which has been deliberately created out of a fairly ordinary flu bug to take over the world. Making huge profits has been effectively disguised as philanthropy.

The usual suspects are, of course, the Rothschilds, the Rockefellers, the Bliderbergers and the Jesuits. But a variety of modern billionaires and self-styled philanthropists (such as Gates and Soros) have been added to the mix.

It is vital to remember that behind the whole fraud lies the global warming scam.

This fraud, which first surfaced back in the 19th century, was resurrected in the 1990s and deliberately chosen by the Club of Rome as a means to an end: the excuse to create a New World Order.

The hysterical simpletons who are now scaring themselves silly over global warming don't realise that the only thing which is man-made about the scare is the scare itself.

But in fact the climate change hoax came relatively late onto the scene and was introduced merely to tighten the screw on the global population. The current global crisis, which is rapidly removing all our freedoms, started much earlier and can be traced back for decades. However, the plan really accelerated into action after the Second World War.

You don't have to look too hard to find the evidence.

The World Health Organisation was founded in 1947, and its first director general was a fellow called George Brock Chisholm who is largely forgotten now except for his enthusiasm for world government. Chisholm is famous (or infamous) for having said: 'To achieve world government it is necessary to remove from the minds of men their individualism, loyalty to family tradition, national patriotism and religious dogmas.'

That should have rung alarm bells. But at the time no one much noticed.

At this time, of course, senior Nazis who had made their fortunes out of concentration camps and who had, with the help of the Americans, successfully avoided much in the way of punishment were busy creating the foundations of the European Union out of what was left of Europe. (I have dealt with the way the Nazis achieved this apparent impossibility in my books *The Shocking History of the EU* and *OFPIS*.)

The usual suspects, the world's bankers, were also planning a world government. In February 1950, when he appeared before the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, banker James Paul Warburg said: 'We shall have world government, whether or not we like it. The only question is whether world government will be achieved by conquest or consent.'

To those early events we must add the more recent influences of the United Nations and the World Economic

Forum. The United Nations is, of course, the mother organisation of the World Health Organisation, and its original charter bears close kinship to the communist manifesto. It is the United Nations which created Agenda 21 – the programme for a 'new world order'. The contribution of the World Economic Forum has been the proposed 'global reset'.

Using covid-19 as a flimsy excuse, these organisations have proposed changing every aspect of our lives. There are now strong moves to get rid of cash and to replace it with digital currency (on the curious grounds that cash is reckoned to be more likely to transmit the covid-19 virus than any other), to close down traditional farming (and replace natural produce with factory produced artificial replacements), to move whole populations into high rise apartments in smart cities (leaving rural areas uninhabited), to confiscate private property and to move shopping, health care and education online (with high street shops, doctors' surgeries and schools largely closed). There are also plans to introduce a modest national wage for all, to replace many jobs with robots and to use implanted chips to control human beings from afar. The whole evil scenario has been produced and promoted by a small bunch of unelected billionaires who clearly believe they have the right to impose their bizarre and dangerous personal views on the rest of us.

Just because many people have, over the years, forecast the end of civilisation (usually at the hands of a bunch of scheming madmen) it doesn't mean it can't happen and it certainly doesn't mean it isn't happening this time.

And, today, with software billionaire Bill Gates and a small army of well-paid shills pushing DNA/RNA based vaccines, the use of which will result in the genetic modification of the human race (and spending hundreds of millions of dollars on ensuring that he has a good press) it is not difficult to feel that we are being assailed from all sides.

All these proposed changes have become public only since the appearance of the coronavirus, and are being promoted as an answer to the health problems of dealing with what is widely being 'sold' as a pandemic. It is clear, however, that all have been planned for many years.

The origins of the virus which devastated the world in 2020 are shrouded in mystery, disguised by deceit, confused by lies and deliberately clouded by misinformation. The very existence of the virus, or indeed of viruses at all, is questioned by many but this seems to me to be irrelevant. It really doesn't matter whether there is or is a not a virus. What matters is the way the authorities are using the current hoax to remove all our freedoms. Those of us who care about freedom (including freedom of speech, which I believe to be fundamental) are too busy trying to fight the vaccine proposals, the cashless society and other scary proposals.

It has, for some months, been widely acknowledged by medical experts that the risks associated with covid-19 are no greater than the risks associated with an ordinary winter flu. This was the claim I first made in February and March of 2020, and which immediately led to my demonization. It has now been acknowledged that death totals associated with covid-19 have been deliberately and massively exaggerated and the original predictions (which led to the lockdowns) have been shown to be absurdly over-pessimistic. There is now widespread agreement that the lockdowns which were unnecessarily introduced in an attempt to stop the spread of the coronavirus will result in far more deaths than the infection itself. The health care problems and economic problems produced by the hoax will result in the worst social and economic crisis in global history.

My first book about the coronavirus and covid-19 (entitled, *Coming Apocalypse*) dealt with the early stages of the manufactured crisis, the hysteria and the immediately apparent consequences.

This book is a collection of the articles published on my website and the transcripts of my videos broadcast on YouTube (including the transcripts of the videos which YouTube took down and banned). Some of the essays appeared on the YouTube channel and some appeared only on my website but most appeared on both. (This explains the occasional duplication of dates which usually relate to the date when a video was put online but in some cases relate to the date of writing.) The narrative develops as I acquired more and more information and as the evidence showed just how deep the conspiracy really is. There is no little irony in the fact that the conspiracy theorists like to demonise those of us telling the truth and exposing the real conspiracy as – conspiracy theorists! It's an old psychological trick.

These articles and transcripts date from the end of April 2020, immediately after the publication of my book, *Coming Apocalypse*, and continue up until the end of August.

I have excluded the material which was written before the publication of *Coming Apocalypse* to avoid repeating material already available in that book. The excluded material includes my first video script which was entitled 'Coronavirus scare: The hoax of the century' since that was dealt with in *Coming Apocalypse*.

This collection has brought together a collection of most of the material I wrote and recorded about the coronavirus and covid-19 during those four months. The only changes I have made have been to edit (very lightly) the transcripts to remove some of the references which were appropriate on the videos and which now seem redundant. I have, however, left some references to the videos where these seemed significant and where removing those references would have led to serious changes in tone or emphasis. Occasionally, you will see that facts have been repeated – this is simply because when videos were removed I re-used a vital fact that had been censored into oblivion. I make no apologies for this.

I realise that all this material is available without charge as recordings and on my website (and I have no doubt that some kind souls will draw attention to this when giving this book a one star review) but some people prefer to read material in book form. Besides, I am primarily a book writer. And it will be nice to earn a little money from a new book for the first time in 2020. The book will be made available at the lowest price allowed. Believe me, if I had wanted to make money I would have either written something else quite different or I would have monetised (what a horrible word) the YouTube channel and taken money from advertisers.

The essays show how the hoax has unfolded, and as things have become clearer it has become increasingly apparent that we are dealing with the greatest fraud in our history. Never before in history have so many people been deliberately deceived for the profit of a few. It became clear during the period that governments had hired military specialists and psychologists to induce a sense of fear in the population. Governments had become the enemy of the people.

Adapting the essays for book form has not been particularly difficult since although I worked as a television presenter for a while in the 1970s and 1980s, I am first and foremost a writer and the scripts for the videos were written as essays rather than as scripts.

I had originally intended to put the dates on each essay. But then I hit a problem. Should I put on the date when the essay was written, when it was recorded as a video, when it was placed on YouTube or when it first appeared on my website? In the end I confused myself so much that I decided to settle for putting the essays in roughly the order in which they were written. Most of the essays are just between 10 and 25 minutes long when read but some of the essays took at least a week to write – and much longer to research. Antoinette and I have worked on researching and writing these essays for almost every hour of every day since the onset of the hoax. This is her book just as much as it is mine.

Originally the recordings appeared once a week or so, then for a while we put up a recording every evening and then when we were too exhausted to continue with that, we put up recordings twice a week – on Sundays and Wednesdays at 7 p.m.

I had also intended to put on the dates when YouTube had banned/censored/removed some of the videos. But I had to abandon this idea for the simple fact that I couldn't keep up – and I certainly could not keep the list up to date. Towards the end of August, YouTube was taking down videos almost every day.

If you really want to know which recordings were censored (or, in YouTube language removed for violating something or other) then all you have to do is compare the contents of this book to the videos available. The transcripts of the banned videos are shown separately on my website www.vernoncoleman.com under the 'Health' button. Of course, by the time you read this there is a very good chance that the entire channel will have been removed. And that is another reason for reproducing these essays in book form. I think the whole drama needs to be recorded for posterity.

Throughout the months to which these essays relate, the laws being brought in around the world were changing almost daily, and the only consistent factors were the ever-growing power of the World Health Organisation (whose primary financial supporter are the fanatically pro-vaxx Bill and Melinda Gates of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation) and a complete disinterest in any of the available science.

How many coincidences make a conspiracy?

Finally, please remember my specially written triptych – designed according to the psy-op principles used on the British people.

Distrust the Government
Avoid Mass Media
Fight the Lies

And remember too: you may feel like you are alone, but more and more people are waking up. You are not alone. And we will win this war.

Vernon Coleman, September 2020

Hidden Agendas

I would not be so committed to the notion that the coronavirus is being used to control us, if it were not for the fact that our freedom and our freedom of speech have been thoroughly torn apart. And, of course, no government anywhere could possibly be as inept as governments now appear to be – unless there was an ulterior motive.

One clear result of the lockdown and the extraordinarily misleading propaganda about the coronavirus has been to turn people against one another. The police have actually been asking people to ring them with information about neighbours who may have broken the (vague) laws about exercise or shopping. Worse still, the police have asked citizens (a nice old-fashioned word because although they want us to be prisoner-slaves we are still citizens) to report material on social media which may 'radicalise' members of the public. I actually read the other day about an unfortunate woman who was named and shamed by her community because she had failed to go out onto the street and clap health workers at the designated time. I accidentally missed a one way route in a supermarket and was subjected to abuse. This now appears to be commonplace. Orwell saw it all coming. When we all distrust one another there is little risk of real rebellion from those who wish to share truths but the fearful will turn on one another like cornered rats.

The house arrest of millions has turned many into long-time recluses. People who have been forced into isolation for a long period often find it difficult to adapt to a 'normal' society. The advantage for the authorities is that recluses are fearful and obedient. I have seen people (and particularly teenagers) displaying the sort of repetitive behaviour exhibited by bored animals in zoos.

People have been deprived of their spiritual comfort. One of the most shameful things to happen has been the closure of the churches. The leaders of the Church of England and the Catholic Church should be thoroughly ashamed of themselves. If supermarkets can open why the devil can't the churches? Most churches are fairly empty and could easily allow worshippers to keep well apart. Spiritual comfort is, for many, as essential as bread and beans. Depriving people of spiritual comfort at their greatest time of need helps to break down their morale. Am I the only one to have noticed that, purely by accident of course, we are becoming a curiously Muslim looking society? Our churches are shut, we are told we must cover our faces, our pubs are shut, parties are banned, an attempt was made to stop the sale of Easter eggs and make-up is considered a 'non-essential'. This comment is not in any way intended as a criticism of the Muslim religion but merely a suggestion that maybe our society is being redirected towards something called Chrislam. (Chrislam is dealt with later in this book.)

Small businesses are being destroyed. The Corporate Finance Network, which represents 12,000 accountants, has estimated that 800,000 small businesses do not have enough cash to survive longer than a month. Governments have long been opposed to small businesses – which they regard as a nuisance and an unwanted complication.

The elderly are being targeted (as I predicted they would be). In the UK, the old are being denied health care. They are being urged to sign Do Not Resuscitate forms. My fear is that not allowing relatives or friends to visit means that the elderly can be denied health care without objection. It is likely that State pension rises will in future be cut. Many old people will die of hunger and the cold before they even fall ill. Older patients with cancer, heart disease and whatever else have been sent home from hospital to die, untreated, in care homes (where, inevitably, the deaths are counted as coronavirus deaths).

Companies are being told to stop paying dividends. Interest rates are lower than they have ever been before. This will impoverish millions of old people who rely on their pensions and it will also impoverish those who hoped to achieve financial independence. I suspect that negative interest rates will soon be the 'norm'.

We are being nicely set up for mass vaccinations. All the talk is about how we cannot be safe until a vaccine is made. The Government in the UK is planning to make criticism of vaccines and vaccination illegal – even when the criticism is factually based.

As predicted, cash is now being outlawed. The banks have long wanted to get rid of cash. And governments don't like it either. Cash gives people freedom of movement and behaviour. The banks were in serious trouble before the coronavirus panic began. But they will now be rescued with loans. The loans will be paid for by taxpayers. Bank bosses will, of course, continue to enjoy their obscene salaries and huge bonuses.

The truth is being manipulated and distorted in many ways. Around the world, one billion people rely on the $715 billion sent back to poor countries from workers in rich countries. The media doesn't seem to have given much space to this. Nor have journalists asked why, in the UK, there are four times as many empty beds in UK hospitals than there usually are at this time of year and so why, as a result, cancer patients needing surgery or radiotherapy or drug treatment are going completely untreated.

Governments have given themselves massive new powers. In the UK, the Emergency Bill has given the Government complete power. MPs of all parties are apparently happy to allow the UK to be run by a dictator. The police now have total power to do virtually whatever they like. The police can send you home if you venture out of your home – even if you are going shopping or taking your allowed exercise. The range of activities now banned is extraordinary. In the UK it is now illegal to wash a motor car.

The cost of the 'crisis' will be met by massive rises in taxation – which will lead to the further impoverishment of the hard-working middle classes.

We now have no freedom and we have no freedom of speech. That is the ultimate hidden agenda. My new, just completed book *How to Survive the Post Coronavirus Apocalypse* has been banned. The book contains nothing illegal or dangerous or misleading or unsafe. It merely contains facts, and my assessment of how things will work out over the coming months and years. But I cannot publish it. There isn't even a single copy available for the authorities to burn. I have had books banned in China but never before in the West. My website has frequently been pushed into a dark corner. (If you would like to help please put a link to www.vernoncoleman.com on your website!) I have been banned from social media such as Facebook – even though all I want to share are facts and some professional judgements. No newspaper or magazine will even mention my name, let alone print an article or review a book. The Wikipedia page in my name has been distorted and unbalanced in a clear attempt to damage my reputation and destroy my credibility. Anyone can edit a Wikipedia page but, bizarrely, the subject of a page is not allowed to correct errors. If you want to help then there is a list of useful references on my Biography page on www.vernoncoleman.com – look at the entry marked Biographical Detail. And an analysis of how the Advertising Standards Authority (a private body in the UK) refused to look at scientific evidence before reaching a bizarre conclusion is published on my website. (Note: only after I removed the word 'coronavirus' from *Coming Apocalypse* was I allowed to publish it.)

April 28th 2020

The Hidden Agendas behind Government Lies and Deceits

In Britain they started off by telling us that eight million would need to go to hospital and that 500,000 would die. There was much talk of fighting and war and the Spanish Flu in the early 20th century and the black death plague which killed around half of the people in Europe.

The coronavirus was made a notifiable disease and put into a special category along with rabies and Ebola. The doom mongers had a field day.

Much the same happened everywhere else around the world. Panic was suddenly in fashion. But right from the start it all seemed wrong. The figures weren't right. Back in February, on my website, I suggested that there were hidden agendas. Since then everything I have said and written has been proved absolutely accurate.

Everyone seemed to forget that the ordinary old-fashioned flu can kill 650,000 a year. In the UK alone it regularly kills tens of thousands.

Why was this coronavirus so very dangerous?

Well, it quickly turned out that it wasn't.

On March 19th the UK Government's advisory committee of experts decided that the coronavirus didn't deserve to be classified as a 'high consequence infectious disease'. It was put back into the flu category where it belonged.

You'd have thought that governments would have back pedalled a little.

But no. Not a bit of it. A few days later the UK was put into lockdown. Many other countries had done the same thing.

Even though the bug had been downgraded the government didn't say whoa, sorry folks, we got a bit overexcited.

Instead they took a 358-page Emergency Bill out of a drawer and put most of the country under house arrest. They call it lockdown but it's house arrest.

Handy that they just happened to have a 358-page document ready.

The experts had just downgraded the bug.

The Government was relying on a bloke called Neil Ferguson who does forecasts based on mathematical models. He is professor of mathematical biology at Imperial College in London and on the basis of his advice, the politicians decided we should be locked in and subjected to social distancing rules.

Has this bloke got a great track record?

Well not exactly.

This is what the Government knew about Ferguson when they decided to put all their trust in him and his team:

In 2001, the Imperial team did the modelling on foot and mouth disease which led to a cull of six million sheep, pigs and cattle. The cost to the UK was around £10 billion. But the Imperial's work has been described as 'severely flawed'.

In 2002, Ferguson predicted that up to 50,000 people would die from mad cow disease. He said that could rise to 150,000 if sheep were involved. In the UK, the death total was 177.

In 2005, Ferguson said that up to 200 million people could be killed by bird flu. The total number of deaths was 282 worldwide.

In 2009, Ferguson and his chums at Imperial advised the Government which, relying on that advice, said that swine flu would kill 65,000 people in the UK. In the end swine flu killed 457 people in the UK.

Finally, Ferguson has admitted that his model of the covid-19 is based on undocumented 13-year-old computer code that was intended for use with an influenza epidemic.

No one seems to have questioned Ferguson's work on covid-19 – despite the fact that if he is wrong again (which I believe he is) the nation will be pushed back into the Dark Ages as a result of his work. As far as I know his work has never been peer reviewed.

When I started to criticise the Government's stance, I was vilified and lied about with great enthusiasm. I don't allow adverts on my videos but someone has put a plug for the Government's website on them.

There used to be a time when questioning the Government was considered to be a good thing. No more. Telling the truth is apparently unacceptable. The British government has announced that it intends to treat anyone who tells the truth about vaccination as a terrorist. So much for free speech. In future, people won't dare speak out and free speech will be nothing more than a memory. A few years ago I was banned in China. I never thought it would happen here but I can feel it coming and it's scary. I tried to open an account on Facebook for the first time. I was told that I couldn't in order to protect the Facebook community. If the Facebook community needs protecting from me then they've got big problems.

My critics (and there are a great many of them – including, it seems, the UK Government) might like to look at the list of accurate warnings and predictions I have made in the years gone by. I was the first author to write about the excessive power of the drug companies – in my book *The Medicine Men* in 1975. I was the first doctor to warn about the danger of benzodiazepines, in a series of articles and TV programmes in the 1970s. I warned about badly organised medical research in a book called *Paper Doctors* in 1977. I was the first doctor to warn that stress could cause massive harm to the human body, in my book *Stress Control* in 1977. I was the only doctor to rightly judge that the Government's warnings on AIDS were wild exaggerations. In 1988, I was the first doctor to warn about the demographic problems caused by an ageing and sick population. In the 1990s, I wrote about the link between meat and cancer. I have also written and broadcast against animal experiments and vaccination, and I'm no longer allowed to broadcast about those issues not because I was wrong but because I won every public debate I ever took part in on radio and television. The opposition was happy to debate with me until they started losing the arguments.

Excuse me for suggesting that my track record is a bit better than Ferguson's.

Sorry about the slight diversion but I think it's relevant.

The result of the Ferguson inspired lockdown is that tens of thousands of patients with cancer are not being treated. And even the Government has admitted that more people will die because of the lockdown than will die of the coronavirus. The Government's own guess is that 150,000 people will die in Britain as a result of the lockdown. The coronavirus isn't going to kill anywhere near that many – even with fiddled figures.

I know how painful this is for those involved. My wife had treatment for breast cancer last year, and the surgery and radiotherapy have left her with a very painful shoulder. She desperately needs physiotherapy. She had one session. And that's it.

And millions of people are terrified out of their wits. I have massive respect for the shop assistants and delivery drivers and others who are working on. Some of them are scared. In one shop I saw an assistant dressed as for an operation. She wore a gown, an apron, a hat, a mask and surgical gloves. Power-crazed police have made things worse. A supermarket delivery driver told me that he was stopped while driving his delivery truck and asked to explain the purpose of his journey.

And the Government continues with the lies and deceit. They can't stop – perhaps because they realise that if they admit they screwed up then they will all be looking for jobs.

Every day they produce new figures showing that the coronavirus has killed many people. Not as many as the ordinary flu it is true. But many people. And those figures aren't true. Many people who die of cancer or heart disease are being put down as covid-19 deaths to boost the figures.

We are being told that people are dying in care homes. Well, I'm afraid that people in care homes are often near the end of their lives. That's why they are there. Every year around 600,000 Britons die. That's over 11,000 a week.

The key is to look at the overall number of deaths. And when you do that it's clear that the total death rate is much the same as it always is. The only difference is that everyone is now officially dying of coronavirus.

Meanwhile we have more empty ITU beds than there were before the scare started. And nearly half of hospital beds are empty.

And here's something else.

Back in March, Professor Ferguson, the Government's advisor, admitted to the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee that up to two thirds of the people who would die from the coronavirus in the next 9 months were likely to have died from some other cause anyway. So the official figure for coronavirus deaths can sensibly be cut to a third.

There are only two conclusions

Britain and the rest of the world are being run by incompetent buffoons who have managed to hoodwink unquestioning journalists.

That's very possible.

The BBC for example, has been a propaganda machine ever since the organisation started taking millions of euros from the EU. You knew about that, of course.

If the press reported every time someone died of ordinary flu we would all live in constant terror – or simply ignore their reports.

But can politicians really be as stupid as they seem?

Or are there hidden agendas?

I've compiled a list of a dozen ways in which governments will benefit from all this nonsense –a dozen hidden agendas

The first of my 12 hidden agendas is that people have been turned against one another. One police force has even asked citizens to report material on the internet which might radicalise members of the public – in other words material which might encourage them to reject the status quo and to question the validity of our having been turned into a police state.

It seems that it is now considered illegal to tell the truth if by so doing you embarrass the Government. If you believe in free speech then you might find that worrying.

I seem to remember the Chinese, the Soviet Union and the Nazis had rather similar policies.

Other hidden agendas? We've been turned into recluses who are fearful and obedient – perfect for a police state. The elderly have been marginalised. We've been prepared for regular, compulsory vaccination, we are all going to be impoverished and less independent than before, cash is going to be outlawed, freedom of speech will soon be a memory, churches have been shut and people deprived of spiritual comfort, small businesses are being destroyed, taxes will rise massively and so on.

My list of 12 hidden agendas appears in more detail on my website www.vernoncoleman.com

There have been serious attempts to hide the site but it's still there at the moment.

There is one easy way for the politicians to prove that there aren't any hidden agendas.

Sack Ferguson, forget the social distancing rules and abandon the lockdown.

Now.

And then there may be a hope that we can salvage something from the mess they've made of the world.

It is governments not the coronavirus which threaten our lives

When will the morons in charge stop lying to us about this damned mangy virus?

At the beginning of this fiasco I couldn't quite make up my mind whether the whole coronavirus panic was the result of a cockup or a conspiracy.

Politicians and their advisers can and do make many stupid decisions.

But this has gone way beyond cockup. It is inconceivable that so many leaders could get so much so wrong unless there was a reason for their apparent stupidity.

And so we're left with the conspiracy theory.

Since they have taken over the world and now rule our lives without mercy, there can no longer be any doubt about what is happening. As I pointed out half a lifetime ago, if the politicians really felt this was an important disease they'd have done extensive testing and put the sick into lockdown – not the healthy. They didn't do mass testing though did they? If they had done they would know that people have had the bug without being very ill. And that wouldn't be convenient.

Most sensible, intelligent people now realise that the whole coronavirus crisis is a hoax, a piece of outrageous flummery. Only the terrified and the gullible can possible still accept the nonsense about this being the new plague. Our local council wrote to me yesterday to remind me that sunbathing in parks isn't allowed because it puts everyone's health at risk. How, in the name of everything, does sunbathing put everyone's health at risk?

The politicians are still lying through their teeth.

Here are the biggest lies they are telling:

The first lie is that the coronavirus is a big killer.

The numbers are wrong. Completely wrong. They have worked desperately hard to push up the numbers by listing every death as a coronavirus death. No one dies of flu or cancer or heart disease these days. If there was an aeroplane crash the people on board would all be put down as dying from the coronavirus. The politicians shed crocodile tears over all the deaths but they are using those individual tragedies for their own purposes. They've managed to get the global number of deaths up to 250,000, and although that's a fake figure they seem excited by it. But, as I pointed out in the middle of March, the ordinary flu can kill 650,000 people in a season. The coronavirus is not a big killer. It can kill, and that is always a tragedy, but for most people it is nothing more than a nuisance. And remember the ordinary flu can kill babies, children and healthy adults. Even governments now admit that far more people are going to be killed by the lockdowns than will ever be killed by the coronavirus. Most of those who catch it have no symptoms at all. Most of the rest get the symptoms of a cold or the flu. Around 99.9% of those who catch it will recover. Around 90% of the people who die have pre-existing health problems and are even older than I am. Those are the facts. The coronavirus is no bigger a killer than the flu can be.

The second lie is that lockdowns are essential.

Keeping people under house arrest is not going to help anything – but the lockdowns are doing massive damage and they are killing far more people than the coronavirus. When the lockdown was introduced in the UK, the hypocritical Neil Ferguson (the one who broke the lockdown rules to see his mistress) had originally forecast that 500,000 Britons would die. There was talk of 8 million people being hospitalised (in a country with 140,000 hospital beds). That was all absolute garbage. Ferguson has an appalling track record. The so-called scientific modelling may have been modelling but it was not scientific.

Only a complete moron would persist with keeping a country in lockdown – unless there was an ulterior motive. The lockdown will not protect us against anything but it weakens individuals and it weakens nations in every conceivable way. It helps to ensure that there will be another outbreak in the autumn. Today, in the UK, the hospitals are still largely shut for non-coronavirus patients. Patients with cancer are being untreated. Even dentists are shut. Businesses are dying. This is blatant lunacy. Is it the plan to go on with lockdown for ever? The only conceivable explanation is that there are ulterior motives. The politicians want to weaken us, frighten us and control us. Read the facts about the hidden agenda on my website.

The third lie was that the health service needed protecting because it wouldn't be able to cope.

Heavens knows who thought up this piece of garbage. It was never true. But as a result of the lie, doctors were told to stop treating cancer patients. There was never any justification for that. Never. And the doctors who obeyed these inhumane instructions – and who are still obeying those wicked instructions should damned well be ashamed of themselves. They don't deserve clapping – they should be clapped in irons. Hospitals and ITUs are emptier than they have ever been. The lawyers are going to have a field day when this is all over.

Finally, if you still doubt that there is a hidden agenda here let me remind you of two things:

On March 19th the UK's public health bodies and the Advisory Committee on Dangerous Pathogens decided that the new coronavirus infection should no longer be classified as a 'high consequence infectious disease'. The coronavirus was downgraded to common or garden status. Like the flu.

On March 26th (after the bug had been downgraded), the UK Government published a 358-page Emergency Bill giving itself massive powers. That Bill took away our freedom and turned Britain into a police state. And we were shut in our homes under house arrest. Elections everywhere were postponed for no good reason.

You cannot possible reconcile the second event with the first event unless you believe that we have lost our freedom for a purpose.

Oh and there's that other odd thing that people who have had the disease won't get immunity and will still need to have a jab. (I'm just a doctor so I'm not allowed to use the other word in public or my government will want to have me arrested.) This claim seems to me to have originated in Grimm's Fairy Tales. Why would you not get immunity from the real disease but then get immunity from an expensive jab that gives you a mild dose of the same disease? What a puzzle that is. A real mystery. I've been studying jabs for 50 years and probably know more about them than most people but I can't even begin to explain it. It sounds to me like something doctors like to refer to as total bollocks.

If we want to get our democracy back we have to demand that politicians explain exactly why they are persisting with stupid lockdown policies. Why all the secrecy? It's our world and we are not at war. Well, most of our governments are at war somewhere in the world but none of them has anything to do with the coronavirus.

We are entitled to know what evidence they are using. They're being secretive because there isn't any damned evidence to show it makes sense.

You probably try to avoid conspiracy theories. I certainly do.

But when you eradicate all the other possibilities, what is left?

And what is behind it all? Look for who benefits. Follow the money. And read the section on hidden agendas which is on my website. You'll also find all the facts about this damned fiasco. And don't believe anything the politicians or the mass media tell you. Paranoia is now the only sensible, healthy, sane condition.

And please try to educate everyone you know. Tell them to watch the videos and visit the website before I'm banned completely for the terrible crime of telling the truth.

They'll arrest us all if we go out onto the streets or into the parks to protest. So use the internet to spread the truth to as many people as you can.

Ask the frightened, who still believe the official garbage, to read the facts and then they'll perhaps understand what is happening to us all.

The threat doesn't come from the coronavirus – it comes from our governments.

We need to let the politicians know that we don't trust them, we don't believe them and that the ones who still persist in unscientific, dangerous lockdown policies will be voted out of power at the first opportunity – and never voted in again.

That is, of course, if they ever let us vote again.

These are scary times.

May 2nd 2020

How Many Million Will the Global Lockdown Kill?

Around the world, millions of people are going to die because of absurd lockdown policies. Serious illness has been ignored. Patients with cancer, heart disease and other threatening diseases have been pushed aside as many hospitals have closed their doors to the patients who really needed help. The coming global recession will result in massive, long-term unemployment and mass starvation.

All those responsible for this stupidity should be fired and banished from positions of responsibility.

Despite the fact that more and more doctors around the world now agree with me that the coronavirus scare was viciously oversold and that the lockdowns, mass hysteria and panic have done far more damage than the damned disease, there is no sign of governments abandoning the lunacy.

Experts also now agree (belatedly) with my suggestion (made weeks ago) that governments should have tested everyone and shut in the people who were infected so that the disease couldn't spread. Simple but very effective.

Huge publicity was recently given to the tragic fact that around the world, 250,000 people are alleged to have died with the coronavirus.

But many (possibly most) of those patients did not die because of the coronavirus, they died with it. The two things are very different.

Why are the UK figures the worst in the world?

Well, massive immigration means that England is the most overcrowded nation in Europe but that isn't the only cause.

I believe the enthusiasm for blaming the coronavirus for just about all deaths was originally inspired by the need to justify the wicked Emergency Bill which gave the police unprecedented powers.

But everyone got too enthusiastic and the trick backfired – leaving the UK with the world's worst figures and causing the Government massive embarrassment. I doubt if half of the 30,000 alleged to have died of the coronavirus were actually killed by it.

I believe the UK has had the worst people imaginable dealing with the coronavirus.

The important thing that no one ever mentions is that even if 250,000 people had died globally (and they clearly have not) then the coronavirus would still not be as deadly as the flu – which can kill 650,000 worldwide in a single season.

No one gets hysterical about the flu, do they?

Around 600,000 people a year die in the UK, and I expect the number of deaths from flu and pneumonia will fall as the number linked to the coronavirus has risen. (I'd bet that the mortality figures for flu are going to be very low this year. The drug companies will claim the credit for that. You can guess why.) Later in the year (and next year) the number of deaths from cancer and other abandoned diseases will rocket – as, I fear, will the number of suicides and murders.

Governments and media everywhere (and particularly in the UK) have deliberately built up the terror.

I know that the coronavirus is a very nasty disease. (We both believe we had it back at the start of the year and Antoinette was horribly ill.) But so is the flu. I've had bouts of the flu that I thought would kill me. And flu can kill people of all ages – young and old, fit and unfit.

But the coronavirus terror has been built up out of all proportion.

I went into a shop two days ago and the assistant was dressed in a surgical gown, plastic apron, mask, surgical cap covering her hair and rubber gloves. She stood behind a plastic screen and looked terrified. I cannot imagine why she felt she needed to cover her hair. She was holding her hands in the air as though ready to start diving into the chest, abdomen or skull of some invisible patient. The poor woman looked as if she were about to set off to a fancy dress party or to take on a role in a gory horror movie. What is she going to do when the nonsense stops? Will she suddenly leave off all her protective equipment or will she do some grotesque, slow strip tease and lose one item a day?

The UK Government's pathetic attempt to end the crisis they created will be a failure. Allowing people to have picnics on the beach will make the problems worse. People have been off work too long. Many don't want to go back to work. Government paycheques have made life comfortable in a rather couch potato sort of way. There are no holidays or big events to look forward to. Everything is grey. And the fear will still be there. So, even if the jobs are there, why go back to work?

The only solution is to act fast and definitively. End the lockdown immediately. Abandon all the Ferguson inspired nonsenses.

My book, *Coming Apocalypse*, explains how we got into this mess and what is going to happen now. Having analysed the past, I did my best to assess the future that Ferguson, Johnson et al have created. Everything I put on my website has been proved accurate. Now we are facing more serious threats to our health and freedom.

Ferguson and Johnson et al thought that we were heading for an apocalypse. They were right. But the apocalypse will not be caused by the coronavirus but by their so-called 'cure'. It no longer matters how much of it was due to a cock-up and how much was due to a conspiracy.

Antoinette and I worked hard to put *Coming Apocalypse* together as quickly as possible, and then fought to get it published, in the hope that if enough people read it (and understand the future we face) then we might be able to put pressure on the politicians to act decisively. There is far too much text to put onto the website (the book is 133 pages long) but the prices of the eBook and the paperback are, as always with my books, the cheapest possible. I'll spend the royalties on adverts for the book (if anyone will sell me advertising space!) so that more people know the truth.

Whatever happens, we have to prepare ourselves for a very different world.

The Bank of England says that although a recession is coming, it may all be fine by next year. So, given the Bank's track record, I think that is as good a guarantee as you are likely to see that we are well and truly stuffed for eternity and a half. (I wish I could get hold of a crate of whatever it is that the highly paid BoE staffers are quaffing. It must be pretty potent stuff.)

May 7th 2020

Is Boris Taking Advantage of the False Coronavirus Crisis to Steal Our Democracy?

We no longer live in a democracy. We live in a police state.

Here's the evidence from my new book, *Coming Apocalypse*:

On March 19th the UK's public health bodies and the Advisory Committee on Dangerous Pathogens decided that the new coronavirus infection should no longer be classified as a 'high consequence infectious disease'. The coronavirus was downgraded to common or garden status.

On March 26th (after the bug had been downgraded) the UK Government published a 358-page Emergency Bill giving itself massive powers. That Bill took away our freedom and turned Britain into a police state. And we were shut in our homes under house arrest.

Will we ever get our democracy back?

We have to demand that Boris Johnson explains exactly why he is keeping us in lockdown. What evidence does he have proving that the lockdown will help? It's our country and we are not at war. There is no need for secrecy. We are entitled to know what evidence Boris is using. Is he still relying on Ferguson?

The lockdown has reduced the incidence of the infection in the country. But that just makes us all more vulnerable. Having little herd immunity means that there will almost certainly be a second wave epidemic in the autumn. Flu bugs always kill more when the weather gets bad. And so there will be more panic and even stricter lockdowns.

Is that what Boris wants?

In situations like this it is vital to see who benefits.

We have to follow the money.

And you already know where that trail leads.

May 8th 2020

How Medical Truths Are Suppressed

I have been writing about the way the drug industry controls the medical profession since the 1970s. In my first book, *The Medicine Men*, I pointed out that doctors had become nothing more than a branch of the pharmaceutical industry.

The book was well received at the time. There are reviews for *The Medicine Men* under the Biography and Contact Details section of www.vernoncoleman.com

But things have got much worse since then. These days my books are hammered or ignored because the drug industry controls just about everything.

Indeed, these days, doctors only get to read and hear what the drug industry wants them to read and hear. I can prove this.

A few years ago I was invited to speak at a conference in London. The conference was, I was told, intended to tackle the subject of medication errors and adverse reactions to prescribed drugs. The company organising the conference was called PasTest. 'For over thirty years, PasTest has been providing medical education to professionals within the NHS,' they told me. 'Building on our commitment to quality in medical and healthcare education, PasTest is creating a range of healthcare events which focus on the professional development of clinicians and managers who are working together to deliver healthcare services for the UK. Our aim is to provide a means for those who are in a position to improve services on both national and regional levels. The topics covered by our conferences are embraced within policy, best practice, case study, clinical management and evidence based practice. PasTest endeavours to source the best speakers who will engage audiences with balanced, relevant and thought-provoking programmes.'

Goody, I thought.

Iatrogenesis (doctor-induced disease) is something of a speciality of mine. I have written numerous books and articles on the subject. My campaigns have resulted in more drugs being banned or controlled than anyone else's.

In addition to my speaking at the conference, the organisers wanted me to help them decide on the final programme. I thought the conference was an important one and would give me a good opportunity to tell NHS staff the truth. I signed a contract.

PasTest wrote to confirm my appointment as a consultant and speaker for the PasTest Conference Division.

And then there was silence. My office repeatedly asked for details of when and where the conference was being held.

Silence.

Eventually a programme for the event appeared on the Internet. Curiously, my name was not on the list of speakers.

Here is part of the blurb promoting the conference:

'Against a background of increasing media coverage into the number of UK patients who are either becoming ill or dying due to adverse reactions to medication, our conference aims to explain the current strategies to avoid Adverse Drug reactions and what can be done to educate patients.'

Putting the blame on patients for problems caused by prescription drugs is brilliant. Most drug related problems are caused by the stupidity of doctors not the ignorance of patients. If the aim is to educate patients on how best to avoid prescription drug problems, the advice would be simple: 'Don't trust doctors.'

The promotion for the conference claims that, 'It is estimated errors in medication...account for 4% of hospital bed capacity.' And that prescription drug problems 'reportedly kill up to 10,000 people a year in the UK'.

As I would have shown (had I not been banned from the conference) these figures are absurdly low.

The list of speakers included a variety of people I had never heard of including one speaker representing The Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry and another representing the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency.

Delegates representing the NHS were expected to pay £250 plus VAT (£293.75) to attend the event. Delegates whose Trust would be funding the cost were asked to apply for a Health Authority Approval form.

So why was I apparently banned from this conference?

This is what PasTest said when we asked them: 'certain parties felt that he (Vernon Coleman) was too controversial to speak and as a result would not attend.'

Could that, I wonder, be the drug industry?

Is the drug industry now deciding whom they will allow to speak to doctors and other NHS staff on the problems caused by prescription drugs? If I was banned at the behest of the drug industry, do NHS bosses know that people attending such conferences will only hear speakers approved by the drug industry and that speakers telling the truth will be banned? (I think it is safe to assume that I won't be invited to speak at any more conferences for NHS staff.)

Why are people who had me banned so frightened of what I would say? It can surely only be because they know that I would have caused embarrassment by telling the truth.

The scary bottom line is that the NHS paid a lot of money to send delegates to a conference where someone representing the drug industry spoke to them on drug safety. But I was banned.

Because I had a contract, PasTest paid me *not* to turn up. I used the money to buy advertisements for my book *How to Stop Your Doctor Killing You***.**

May 9th 2020

Another Disgraceful Incident Involving Vernon Coleman

Wikipedia editors have been scouring the internet for exciting incidents from my long forgotten past which they can use in their attempt to discredit me.

Here is one they seem to have missed.

In the distant days when I was a GP, family doctors did a lot of home visits. And inevitably the calls occasionally came at inconvenient moments. Quite a few came through while I was conducting a morning or evening surgery.

Sometimes patients were happy to wait until the surgery had finished. But on other occasions they needed a visit immediately. I always used to ask: 'Do you want me to visit now or can you wait until the surgery has finished?' Simple.

On one occasion, I remember receiving a call from a woman who thought her husband was having a heart attack. She wanted me to go immediately. I told the receptionists that I would have to leave the surgery, left apologies for the patients in the waiting room and hurried off to the patient's home.

It was about 5.30 p.m. and naturally the roads were busy with people going home from work. I turned on my hazard flashers so that people could see me coming and drove as fast as I could. I was, I remember, driving a bright orange Saab 99 at the time. It had, I seem to remember, a turbo model with a fine turn of speed.

The patient wasn't having a heart attack. I stayed a few minutes, soothed him and his wife, prescribed whatever was appropriate (I can't remember what it was) and drove back to the consulting rooms to finish the evening surgery.

I didn't think any more of it until a day or so later when I received a telephone call from the secretary to a local Chief Superintendent who was something significant in the local police station. His secretary wanted me to go along to the local police station. Apparently, the policeman had been one of the cars I had passed while driving to my patient. Maybe he had tried to catch me but had failed. He had taken my car number and traced me to the surgery.

I didn't see why I should go along to the police station, so I didn't go.

And a few days later, I received a summons for driving with my hazard flashers on.

I had to go to court, and the Medical Defence Union sent a high powered lawyer up from London to defend me.

In the end, I was fined £5 for driving with my hazard flashers switched on. That was it. My driving licence remained unblemished. It was, apparently, illegal to drive a moving motor car with the flashers flashing. I was told that only bus drivers can drive with their flashers going and only then when they have been hijacked and need to attract the attention of the constabulary.

The story hit most of the national newspapers, and one reporter asked me why I thought the policeman wanted me to go along to the police station.

I said I assumed that he wanted to tell me off.

And at this point things got very silly.

One of the papers reported that I had said that the policeman had wanted to browbeat me into making an apology.

I had never said any such thing but that, apparently, was no defence when the Chief Superintendent sued me for libel.

At that point the whole story got very silly.

A very eminent barrister in London said he would have loved to have the policeman in the witness box but sensibly suggested that the case really wasn't worth the effort. I ended up paying £200 in damages for the comment I hadn't made, and agreeing to the printing of a small apology in the local newspaper. Heaven knows what the legal costs came to. Mine were paid by the Medical Defence Union and the policeman's were, I think, paid by some sort of police body.

So, there is another story about me that Wikipedia could use. I'm sure they could get a few juicy paragraphs out of it.

It happened in the late 1970s or the early 1980s, so a couple of weeks digging through newspaper and court reports would doubtless prove immensely fruitful.

May 10th 2020

Why Did YouTube Ban My Video?

I was shocked but not surprised when YouTube took down one of my videos recently.

I was shocked because everything I said in the video was absolutely accurate and honest. The only conceivable problem was that the video didn't follow the authorised line being heavily promoted by governments all over the world.

A huge number of doctors now agree with me that governments have made huge mistakes in the way they have dealt with this virus. I've been saying this since February. Their propaganda has created much fear and I don't think anyone in government now denies that the number of people dying because of the lockdowns – the so-called 'cure' for the coronavirus – will be far, far greater than the number who will die from the virus itself. Governments everywhere have distorted truths and misled their populations.

My only aim has always been to provide some truths and, hopefully, some reassurance. I never allowed advertising or sponsorship on my videos or my website. Both exist as what used to be called a public service. I don't make TV or radio programmes and I don't write articles or columns any more. Everything I've written or recorded about the coronavirus has resulted in my reputation being trashed so much that I would have been far better off if I'd kept my thoughts to myself.

I've never been able to do the sensible thing. My life has been one of fighting for lost and difficult causes and truths. I've spent most of my many years battling for people and animals without enough care for the consequences. And I'm pretty used to being banned and lied about, sneered at and patronised.

I said I was shocked but not surprised by YouTube's decision.

I wasn't surprised because YouTube has got itself an unfortunate reputation for censoring people who put up videos on its channel.

Well, it's their channel. They are the publishers. So they can, if they like, allow only State approved lobbyists to put up videos. (The odd thing is that publishers usually have legal liability for whatever they publish. I suspect that YouTube would deny that they were publishers if they were asked to take any sort of responsibility.)

But if anyone from YouTube ever bothers to watch this before deciding to ban it, because it doesn't follow the official party line, I've got a thought for you…

Some years ago I resigned from a well-paid column on a British Sunday newspaper because the editor refused to print a column questioning the validity of the Iraq War. I didn't believe in the weapons of mass destruction claims and I thought we were being lied to. I didn't see the point in writing a column if I wasn't allowed to express my honestly felt views. Resigning from that column on a matter of principle meant that I didn't get any more newspaper work. Editors don't much like columnists who have principles – and it cost me dearly in financial terms.

But that newspaper has been slowly dying since then.

The circulation fell by around 90% in the years which followed. Now, you could argue that the circulation fell that much because I left and I wouldn't stop you if you did but I wouldn't really believe it. And you could argue that the circulation fell because all newspapers are losing circulation and that's true. But this particular newspaper has lost a devil of a lot more circulation than it should have done.

And I know why.

It is slowly dying because it lost its integrity. It doesn't stand for anything. It didn't respect its readers. And the readers saw or sensed that lack of respect.

In a way it's tricky being a publisher.

If you're going to retain your integrity and ensure that your readers or viewers know that you respect their intelligence then you have to put up with people wanting to write or say things you don't agree with.

When the men and women in suits tell you to ban this or censor that, you have to have the guts to say 'No' or someone else will come along and put you out of business.

You obviously have to censor people who tell blatant lies or want to publish dangerous or illegal material. But you can't suppress the truth and expect to retain respect and goodwill. Leaving people alone to tell the truth or share their opinions needs courage and basic integrity. You have to recognise that you cannot have freedom without a free press. Remember those newspaper editors in old cowboy movies? They always had the courage to print the truth.

It was, remember, HL Mencken who wrote that the relationship of a journalist to a politician should be that of a dog to a lamppost. And it was Theodore Roosevelt who, to paraphrase slightly, wrote that thinking there must be no criticism of the establishment is not only unpatriotic and servile but morally treasonable.

It seems to me that the people at YouTube don't have either integrity or courage. More importantly, they don't realise that the heart and soul of any publishing company belongs to the readers.

The video of mine which YouTube took down contained nothing but the truth. I've been researching and writing about medical matters for a long time. I'm not stupid. I'm not going to write or say something I think is wrong.

Why did they try to censor me?

They could, I suppose, be like those terrible students who want to ban anyone who says something they don't like. But I don't think that's it. That wouldn't make commercial sense.

Maybe they just prefer to follow the safe route and specialise in publishing videos of ducks on roller skates.

But I don't think that's it. That wouldn't make commercial sense either.

Or, maybe they just disapprove of original thinking that doesn't fit neatly into government approved propaganda.

I was banned in China years ago so I know how that works. Statist, fascist, establishment organisations have been doing it for a long time. Look at what happened to Dr John Snow, Dr Ignaz Semmelweiss and many, many more.

I think YouTube has been got at. I don't think it's YouTube any more. I think it's ThemTube.

I think they're suppressing material which the authorities don't want publishing. I think that the men and women in suits have convinced them that anyone who questions authority is a mad, dangerous conspiracy theorist. Well look at my track record – it's all listed on my website. I'm not mad and I'm not a conspiracy theorist – though I suppose that if you're a fascist dictator I might be considered dangerous.

This time it's a lot easier for me than when I resigned as a columnist.

I don't get paid to put videos on YouTube. Working out what to say and recording videos takes time and energy and there are lots of other things I'd rather be doing with the time and energy I've got left.

If I pack up making these little videos I'll just put the same stuff on my website. It means I won't have to comb what's left of my hair and I won't have to struggle with YouTube, which I don't find as user friendly as it could be. I don't want to be a guest on someone's channel if they don't want me there.

I did consider taking down all my videos but decided not to for now – though if they remove this one I won't put up any more. I don't want to be associated with a channel which serves only as a mouthpiece for fascist, statist, oppressive propaganda.

So, I don't really care what YouTube decides to do.

If they want to restore a little of that lost integrity they could put back the video they banned – it was called 'Why You Are Now in Great Danger' and the script, in its entirety is on my website so that anyone who is interested can read it and wonder why the devil they censored it.

Let's see if YouTube has the bottle to leave this video in place.

Or if the channel run by wee cowering timorous beasties is so desperate to suck up to the establishment that they ban this one as well.

And if the sycophants at YouTube ban me completely I really don't give a fig.

I was banned and suppressed long before YouTube appeared – long before the internet appeared.

Once before when I was banned I wrote that I would, if necessary, write out my articles and hand them out on street corners. Or sell my books from a wheelbarrow. And I still mean that.

If they do remove this or any of my other videos then everyone who cares about freedom and free speech will know that YouTube is no more than a worthless propaganda vessel – specialising in indoctrination.

The script of this video is going onto my website and I hope everyone who can do so will put the tape in places where YouTube can't remove it. I'm banned from Facebook and so on because I'm considered a threat. It's the modern day version of book burning.

So put this tape on your Facebook page or Twitter or whatever.

Or put a link to my website so that people can read the truth directly. Tell everyone to watch or listen or to read my website. It's all free. No ads. No sponsors. No one ever tells me what to write.

Stand up for the truth. It's really quite important.

From the old bloke in the chair, thank you for watching and thank you for all your support.

May 13th 2020

Seventeen Things You Should Know About Face Masks

The world is now awash with conflicting reports on how or when or whether to wear a mask to protect you against the flu, the lurgy or the embarrassment of having egg on your chin. Some people, such as the Mayor of London, want masks to be compulsory though no one has provided evidence for the compulsion. The Mayor has allegedly threatened to order people to wear masks in London if the Government does not do so.

There are videos and books explaining how to make your own mask out of unwanted bits and pieces found lying around the home. It is possible to make two excellent face masks out of the cups of an old brassiere, using the straps to fashion loops to go around the ears or the back of the head. Naturally, the size of the bra has a big influence on its suitability for turning into a face mask, and a bra measuring 44JJ is probably going to be a little on the loose side for most people. And if you need fresh masks every day you will need a large supply of bras.

Here are the 17 things everyone should know about masks:

The World Health Organisation recommends that disposable masks should be discarded after one use.

The WHO doesn't seem to have any guidelines for masks made out of washable material but it's a fair guess that it would recommend washing thoroughly at a high temperature after every use.

The WHO says that if you are healthy you only need to wear a mask if you are taking care of someone who is suspected of having covid-19 infection aka 2019-nCoV.

Masks are effective only when used in combination with frequent hand washing with soap and water or an alcohol based hand rub.

Fabric masks may allow viruses to enter and are not considered to be anywhere near as protective as surgical masks.

A study called 'Optical miscroscopic study of surface morphology and filtering efficiency of face masks' concluded that face masks made of cloth are not very good at filtering out viruses because the pores are much bigger than the particulate matter that needs to be kept out.

One study showed that facemasks may have pores five thousand times larger than virus particles. If this is accurate it means that the virus will wander through the face mask much like a mouse wandering through Marble Arch.

Washing cloth face masks makes them even less effective. The more you wash the mask the less effective it becomes.

Masks are only really effective if they fit perfectly and if the wearer does not move their head.

Surgical masks are worn to stop bits of saliva, food or hair falling from the surgeon or nurse into a wound. They will stop some bacteria but will not usually stop viruses.

Much of the air we breathe in and out goes around the side of the mask unless it is very tight fitting.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the US recommends that everyone wear masks in public places where it is difficult to stay six feet from other people.

Touching a mask appears to stop the mask providing protection. It has been suggested that you should put on a new mask if you have touched the one you are wearing.

People with breathing difficulties (such as asthma or bronchitis) may find that wearing a mask makes breathing even more difficult.

Does wearing a face mask reduce your immunity levels? No one seems to know the answer for sure but it seems possible that if people wear face masks for long periods (months or years) then the absence of contact with the real world might well have a harmful effect on immunity – if the face mask works.

Do face masks prevent us developing immunity to particular diseases? This depends on many factors – mainly the effectiveness of the face mask.

Everyone seems to have a view on whether or not wearing face masks is a good thing. But no one seems to have any evidence to prove their viewpoint. And the effectiveness of a mask depends massively on the nature of the mask, how it is worn and how often it is changed.

I have studied yards of scientific studies on the subject and as a result of much dull reading, I am totally confused. The only certainty seems to me to be that no one is certain. Wearing a mask may or may not do any harm but it may give the wearer a false sense of confidence.

Please note the date at the bottom of this article. Things are forever changing.

May 16th 2020

A Population Control Plan?

I work hard at avoiding conspiracy theories. I have always believed that cock-ups are more common than conspiracies.

But I have long given up thinking that the global response to the coronavirus is a series of cock-ups (though there have, along the way, been many incidental cock-ups). The evidence makes it clear to me that we are being manipulated.

Here is a summary of some of the reasons why I am convinced…

First, in the UK, the Government's advisers ruled in March that the coronavirus was not a high consequence infectious disease. As far as I know, only my website reported this momentous piece of front page news.

Second, within days of this reassuring news, the UK Government had published its 358-page Emergency Bill and put the country into lockdown.

Third, the total number of alleged coronavirus deaths around the world is 300,000 (though this figure has been manipulated and is, in reality, widely believed to be much lower). This is a tragedy. But we have to remember that up to 650,000 people die in a bad flu season. And I don't remember countries being put into lockdown or social distancing being introduced for the flu.

Fourth, all opposition to the establishment's view point is being silenced. (For example, YouTube is closing down platforms belonging to broadcasters who produce 'unacceptable' information which questions government views. After YouTube banned two of my videos for absolutely no good reason that I could see, I decided to beat them to it by banning YouTube before they could ban me. However, three of my original videos and my two videos questioning the YouTube policy are, surprisingly, still available for the time being.)

Fifth, governments everywhere are promoting fear. I will come back to the mass hypnosis techniques they are using to control whole populations.

In a previous article on www.vernoncoleman.com, I have discussed the various hidden agendas behind the grab for power and control.

But there is one more hidden agenda which I forgot to include on that list: population control.

Look at the evidence.

The world is overpopulated.

The coronavirus is not going to kill enough people to affect the overpopulation problem.

But the twin evils of social distancing and lockdowns will have a massive effect on the population in many ways.

Obviously, we are all being made afraid and prevented by law from meeting new people or forming groups which might question what is happening.

But look at what is happening to young, single people.

They are being told to wear masks. So they cannot see what anyone looks like. No smiles can be exchanged.

They are being told that they must keep six feet apart from people who aren't in their own household.

They cannot go to nightclubs or pubs to meet people.

They cannot go to the cinema together unless they are already in the same household.

So, there isn't much (or any) chance of new relationships developing.

Forget the jokes about the lockdown causing a population boom in December.

The medium and long-term result is going to be a massive drop in young people meeting partners.

And an inevitable, massive fall in the population.

Another big win for those who want to control the planet.

May 16th 2020

Why the Economy Won't Bounce Back

Central banks and economists are predicting that economies damaged by the coronavirus 'crisis' will bounce back quickly.

I don't think they will.

The bankers and the economists are not thinking straight because they see everything in hard, fiscal terms. They think that if governments throw huge amounts of money at the problem they have manufactured, then large businesses will recover and soon begin operating as they did before. (They don't give a damn about small businesses. Indeed, part of the plan is to destroy small businesses which are difficult to regulate and inefficient in taxation terms.)

This confidence is embarrassingly naïve.

Even if governments cancelled lockdowns and social distancing straight away, the damage done by a series of deliberately terrifying and oppressive regulations will last for decades and probably for generations.

And that, of course, is the aim.

The politicians and Bilderbergers know what is going on.

But most economists and many bankers are not at the top of the food chain.

The fact is that the fear and anxiety which has been created is not going to disappear overnight.

There is much anger among those of us who see exactly what governments are doing: the thinkers, the sceptics and so on.

But a large part of the population is too overwhelmed by fear to see the truth.

Millennials and children, in particular, have been devastated by the way their lives have been disrupted. They see very little future.

Those in their late teens and early twenties who are usually the backbone of any protest movement, are now too terrified to do or say anything. They want to be told what to do and when to do it. They have lost their drive, their ambition and their sense of identity.

Younger children, equally terrified, have seen their world turned upside down and inside out. They no longer have any certainties other than fear and foreboding. Education skills, now fractured, will probably never develop. Ambitions have been smashed. Many will see no further than a government paycheque and a life lived in quiet obedience.

It has been noticeable that most of the protests about lockdowns and social distancing have come from the over 40s. It is older folk who see what is happening and who are feisty enough to stand up for themselves and their country. And it is mainly those in the older age groups who find it difficult to understand why nations have been shut down for a virus which has so far killed less than half the number of people likely to be killed by a nasty winter flu. (As I write, the coronavirus is alleged to be responsible for 300,000 deaths worldwide. The flu can kill 650,000 people in a season.) And it is those people who realise that without people and businesses back at work and paying taxes there won't be any money for health care, education, roads or unemployment benefits.

The economists and the central bankers don't realise that most people's habits will now be changed permanently.

People have become distrusting and suspicious. They don't trust anyone or anything outside their immediate circle. Many relationships have been fractured permanently. The effect of the stress they have been under will produce permanent damage. When (or if) GPs surgeries eventually reopen there will be queues and long waiting lists as people report their depressions and anxieties and ask for help. With no suitable training, and no time, GPs will hand out vast quantities of anxiolytics and anti-depressants – most of which are addictive. Tens of millions will be turned into prescription drug zombies.

In the future, shopping is going to be largely done online. People will want to hoard essentials because they know that there are likely to be more lockdowns ahead. Vast numbers of small businesses will move online since their bricks and mortar businesses are no longer viable.

People won't travel as much as they used to do. If holidays are taken, they will be relatively low key and most people will probably not travel outside their home country. Millions are going to lose their jobs and become reliant on government paycheques. Millions more will work at home. Most people will get their entertainment entirely from the television set.

The consequence will be that many large businesses will fail as it becomes clear that their business models are no longer valid.

In my view, the economists and the bankers have got it all wrong.

There is not going to be a rapid recovery from the coming recession.

But, then, I don't think that the politicians and global leaders ever expected that there would be.

They arrested the wonderful bloke who used to wander up and down carrying a sign saying 'The End is Nigh'.

I fear his time has come.

We are heading for a global depression like nothing there has ever been before. We are being manipulated and we’re going back to the days before the Industrial Revolution days.

And I’m afraid I don’t think it’s happening by accident.

May 17th 2020

Protecting the Oil Supplies

As I have said many times before, I no longer believe the current fake crisis is the result of a cock-up. (Though there have certainly been many mistakes made – particularly in Britain where the Government has proved itself astonishingly inept.)

I think the crisis is the result of a power grab – which has worked very effectively.

And it is a power grab which has many facets.

I explained on www.vernoncoleman.com how the ‘crisis’ is being used as a tool to control the size of the global population.

But there are other things happening.

The oil, for example.

I have, for many years, argued that the oil is running out and that the nature of our world will, therefore, have to change.

Governments have welcomed and encouraged climate change protestors in order to find an excuse for oil preserving policies which have nothing to do with the fake global warming arguments and everything to do with the knowledge that if we don’t reduce our use of oil there soon won’t be enough of the stuff left to fill a lawnmower – let alone the tank of a presidential limousine.

The coronavirus hoax has, within weeks, enabled governments to do what they could have never hoped to do otherwise for decades.

Millions of people are now going to work at home.

Energy sapping small businesses are being replaced by internet based companies which are far more efficient.

Public transport is being cut back and will be side-lined.

Air travel (for business or pleasure) will soon be so unpleasant and expensive that the only people boarding aeroplanes will be the 20,000 climate change protestors regularly jetting off to their conferences.

Spectator sports are going to become television events and millions of sports fans will stay at home to watch their favourite teams.

And so the depleted oil supplies will last longer.

If you want to know more about the oil shortage – and how it is going to affect our lives – you will find everything I know on the subject in my book *A Bigger Problem than Climate Change* – it’s available on Amazon as a paperback and an eBook.

May 19th

We Are Breeding a Race of Psychos: Act Now to Stop the Politicians' Damaging, Deadly Lies

My wife, Antoinette, is the only person in our home who understands things which require electricity and therefore the only one capable of finding stuff on the internet.

This morning, Antoinette showed me several images which will haunt us both for years.

One photo showed schoolchildren in a playground, each child confined within a chalk square drawn on the ground. The children were not allowed to play with one another. They were not allowed to touch one another. They had to play games by themselves.

Solo marbles.

Try playing tag by yourself.

The quickest game in the history of playground sport.

No football. No cricket. No rounders. No racing around screeching for no apparent reason other than the fact that you have joy in your heart and energy to waste.

Another photo showed children in a classroom sitting yards apart from one another – each one wearing a mask and a plastic visor.

This is utter, utter madness. It is also wicked cruelty.

In the UK, it is alleged that if a child falls or has any sort of accident then they must not be helped by other children or by teachers.

The child who falls and grazes a knee will have to attend to it themselves.

The child who is so terrified that he or she has a leakage of some kind must deal with it alone.

No caring. No hugs.

Enough. The lunacy has gone far enough. Who in the name of all things holy thinks up these barbaric madnesses?

Has anyone in authority any idea of the permanent damage this will do to those poor children?

Children will be scarred for life by what has already happened to them.

We are breeding a new race of weirdo, loner psychopaths.

Do teachers want to create a generation of uncaring psychos or are they doing it because they are ill informed and too lazy to look at the facts?

Teachers are educated people. They should care about the science.

A study by paediatricians could not find one case of a child passing on the coronavirus.

Not one.

One boy who did have the disease failed to give it to 170 people who were classified as contacts.

If teachers want to protect children from danger they would do better to insist that all children wear crash helmets in case meteors fall on their heads.

And then there are the adults.

I saw a picture of diners in a restaurant sitting in what looked like a small greenhouse. The waiter was passing them their food on a plank of some kind.

Professional footballers (whose risk of suffering any serious illness as a result of the coronavirus is minute) were delighted to be practising alone. Each one had half a pitch on which to practice. But they weren't allowed to pass the ball to anyone else.

And, if and when they play a match, they will be encouraged to look away when tackling.

The churches are still shut. That was the biggest abrogation of responsibility in history. I hope no one ever enters a church again. Put the well-paid bishops out on the street. Formal religion failed people when they needed it.

The dentists in the UK are still shut. Thousands of people with toothache are becoming addicted to opiates. That's great for the drug companies. Why the hell are the dentists shut? They wear masks, gloves and work in sterile conditions. My wife, who is bravely trying to retain a sense of humour said that if all her teeth fall out she can at least wear a mask to cover her mouth.

Councils are defying the Government and still keeping parks, public toilets and car parks shut so that people can't sunbathe or take exercise. Hasn't anyone told them about the need for vitamin D? That'll be another few hundred thousand sick people. Councillors work for us. It's not their country. It's our country. The councils will be broke next year and they'll put up taxes and blame the virus. But it's their fault. Not the virus.

There were tears in Antoinette's eyes as she told me about the agonies she'd read about: the children who don't understand and the patients in pain.

Our society is falling apart.

Antoinette and I went shopping.

There were only three shops open.

And it was a miserable, soul searing experience.

At one shop I was ordered to stay outside until another shopper had left. Not asked. Ordered. (You may be surprised to hear that I'm not good with being given orders.)

At the next I was shouted at for paying with cash.

And in the third I was screamed at by a youth with powerful jackboot tendencies, for failing to follow a one way system that would have foxed a maze designer. There was, incidentally, no one else except the two of us in the shop at the time.

All this is allegedly being done to 'save lives'.

Anyone who still believes this is all necessary is ill-informed or stark raving mad. Or both.

I can laugh at the pathetic diners and the even more pathetic footballers.

And we will do our shopping online.

But what the hell are we doing to our children?

How can we allow teachers to do this?

The wicked teachers who agree to draw chalk lines and putting down tape and inventing rules that would have embarrassed the Nazis, should all be sacked and permanently banned from any employment that involves people.

The madness has gone too far.

It has to stop.

Why do so many apparently intelligent people put up with all this garbage? What next? Will we be ordered to kill all the Jews, gays or just the people over 70? Why do so many people believe the lies they are told about the coronavirus? The worst and most dangerous lies aren't coming from conspiracy theorists – they are coming from governments.

Remember the evidence proves that in terms of mortality levels, the bloody coronavirus is less dangerous than a bad flu. Back in mid-March, in my first video, I described the coronavirus scare as the biggest hoax in history. I was right. Governments, for their own reasons, chose instead to treat mathematical modellers as though they were scientists instead of putting them where they belong – along with fortune tellers and economists.

I know YouTube wouldn't like me saying that because it's an inconvenient fact.

Remember: so far, in a season the coronavirus has killed less than half of the number the flu can kill in a season. If you don't believe me just look at the figures.

Check out the number of people alleged to have died worldwide from the coronavirus. At the moment that's about 300,000 alleged deaths.

And then check out the number of people who can die worldwide from a bad flu. That's around 650,000.

You can suppress that truth but you can't ignore it.

If YouTube cared about their viewers they would suppress the politicians and the media and the mathematicians producing a constant stream of unjustifiable scare stories.

The problem, of course, is that governments want to keep us terrified and compliant and obedient. They don't want things to change. They are enjoying the power and are persisting with the biggest confidence trick in world history.

And as a direct result, people are dying in their tens of thousands – because they are being denied treatment.

So when will they re-open the hospitals and the dentists and the GP surgeries?

If they don't then everyone will have died of something else.

People are already pulling their own rotten teeth with the old string and doorknob trick.

I would not be surprised to hear that someone had removed their own appendix with a grapefruit spoon and a bread knife.

And prospective patients are now as nervous of hospitals as Parisian citizens were of the Hotel Dieu half a millennium ago.

The problem is that politicians want to keep social distancing and they will keep the lockdowns as a threat. It's working brilliantly for them. If we get too complacent they warn us of a second wave of the virus. They warn the virus will last forever. They tell us we won't be safe until we have a damned vaccine and then admit that there may not be a vaccine for years.

Remember the only figure that really matters: the flu can kill 650,000 in a single season. And even governments now admit that their 'cure' is going to kill more people than the coronavirus.

There is only one solution.

Professionals everywhere have got to find the guts to stand up to the politicians and their crazy policies.

Doctors and nurses have got to find the balls to stand up, tell everyone the coronavirus crisis has been wildly oversold and announce that it is safe to open hospitals and surgeries and start to deal with the backlog of patients who will otherwise be dead by Christmas. Any health professional who doesn't do this will have blood on their hands and some difficult questions to answer in a year or two's time.

I believe responsible doctors and nurses will do that now if they care about their patients and their responsibilities.

Dentists should open their surgeries.

Teachers should insist on opening up schools that children can be taught again. No daft rules. No stupid chalk squares. No plastic visors.

Bishops and clergymen of every hue, collectively responsible for the greatest act of corporate cowardice in history, should open up all places of worship. Though to be honest they do not deserve to have any congregations after such a wanton act of abandonment.

Everyone has more power than they think. If doctors, nurses, teachers, dentists and so on threatened to resign then the politicians would have to back-peddle.

(I know that isn't easy but sometimes it's something that has to be done. For the record, I resigned from a job as a GP as a matter of principle. And I resigned as a columnist on principle.)

Dealing with this flu-like virus has distorted our priorities.

We have to stop this distortion before things become impossible to repair.

Those who disagree will doubtless say, 'Oh, but lives are at stake and breaking the lockdown and social distancing is too risky'.

But anyone who says this doesn't understand the facts and is missing the point.

Not breaking the lockdown and not smashing the social distancing nonsense is far riskier, and will definitely result in far more deaths than the coronavirus will ever kill.

I absolutely agree that health takes priority.

But why are people who are dying of cancer or heart disease less important than people who might die of the coronavirus?

Thank you for reading. And my thanks to those who have given my wife and me your kind support.

And maybe the unkind individuals who prefer abuse and threats to rational, constructive thought and campaigning will one day realise just how much they have been manipulated by people who don't give a damn about anything other than power and control.

You can help by sharing the articles on www.vernoncoleman.com with as many people as you can. That's how we can stop this wicked, dangerous nonsense.

May 19th 2020

Mental Health Problems Will Now Soar

It's been pretty obvious for over two months that the mental health issues arising from the absurd and unnecessary global lockdown and social distancing policies will be unprecedented. There will be twin, genuine pandemics of anxiety and depression. Mental health problems will rise massively because of deliberate government policies.

It has also been clear from the start that the medical profession will be quite incapable of dealing with the massive demand for help.

The response of doctors will inevitably be to prescribe drugs such as tranquillisers, sedatives, hypnotics and anti-depressants which will do little or nothing to help the patients for whom they are prescribed but which will produce a mass of dangerous side effects including addiction and an increased risk of suicide.

So far so bad, but it gets worse.

I have been studying the effects of stress on human beings for nearly 50 years. My book *Stress Control* was published in 1978 and was the first mass market book to introduce the concept of stress as a factor in mental and physical health. At the time it was considered heretical and controversial to regard stress as having any influence whatsoever and one Professor of Medicine called for me to be struck off the medical register for daring to suggest that stress might have an effect on blood pressure.

As the days and weeks of this manufactured fake crisis have passed by, I have become increasingly convinced that what is happening is not a result of a combination of misjudgement, misfortune and incompetence but a result of manipulation and oppression.

I didn't come to this conclusion lightly. Whenever things go badly wrong it is always more likely to be a result of incompetence than of conspiracy in high places.

But the evidence in favour of a conspiracy is now irresistible.

Right from the start it has been clear that the coronavirus was not a new plague. Back in March, the UK's public health bodies concluded that the virus was not 'a high consequence infectious disease'.

And yet, just days after this, the UK Government introduced the most tyrannical bill ever passed by a British parliament – the 358-page Emergency Bill which took us back to pre Magna Carta days. King John himself would have been proud of Johnson's ruthless and unnecessary power grab. Unfortunately, we don't have a King Richard to ride to our rescue. Not even during the Black Death plague was so much power taken from the people. Our civil rights have disappeared and there is no sign of them returning. It is no exaggeration to say that many people in the world now live in police states.

Everything I have written to date has been proved right. Experts now agree that we should have done far more testing in March and that Ferguson (the mathematical modeller whose theories decided Government policy) had mistakenly exaggerated the risks. I am by no means the only person to realise that Ferguson's track record is appalling. His predictions seem to me as reliable as those of a fortune teller using an upturned goldfish bowl to guide her.

Ferguson's initial claim that 500,000 Britons would die of the coronavirus is still being quoted, even though the estimate has been discredited and the modelling questioned, to put it politely.

Much fuss is made of the fact that 300,000 people are now alleged to have died around the world. I doubt if many doctors still believe this figure for there is little doubt that it is a wildly exaggerated number. And though every one of those deaths is a tragedy the figure has to be put against the figure of 650,000 which is the number who can die of flu in a single season. Malaria can kill over 600,000 in a year without rolling up its sleeves and without anyone turning a hair. And tuberculosis recently killed 1,500,000 million people in a single year. I don't remember councils taping up park benches to protect us from that danger.

The UK Government's appalling record on testing puts it in 41st place in the world, far below Lithuania, Luxembourg and Cyprus. Several studies have suggested that a huge percentage of the population has already had the virus and that those people are, therefore, now immune. The Minister responsible for this failure should be looking for employment elsewhere.

There is also now widespread medical support for my contention that the lockdown was not only unnecessary and counter-productive in controlling the infection but also guaranteed to cause far more deaths and mayhem than the virus itself. In my book *Coming Apocalypse*, I have described the future we face and every day that passes produces yet more evidence that every forecast I made is going to come true.

Sadly, and rather worryingly, such views are however frequently suppressed or mocked in the mainstream media. YouTube banned three videos of mine which as far as I can see broke none of its guidelines.

I can only see two possible conclusions from all this.

The first is that the politicians and the Government's scientific and medical advisors are all stupid and I am brilliant.

The second is that there has been a conspiracy to exaggerate the danger of the coronavirus in order to grab power and damage our rights and freedoms.

I cannot see any other explanation.

Now, as much as I would like to accept the first conclusion, I am old enough and realistic enough to know it is not very likely.

The second conclusion is far more likely.

And once we accept that there is a conspiracy then all bets are off and we must re-examine everything that is happening.

And this takes us back to mental health and the coming twin pandemics of anxiety and depression which are going to do infinitely more harm than a pesky virus which has clearly done far less damage than some flu bugs.

And it quickly becomes apparent that governments have done everything possible to create more anxiety and exacerbate the incidence of depression.

Everything the Government in the UK has done has been designed to create loneliness and a sense of fear. The lockdowns and absurd social distancing policies were never necessary but are now destined to be part of our lives indefinitely. The threat that lockdowns will be reintroduced will be kept hovering over heads like the sword of Damocles. And we are told that social distancing policies must be maintained indefinitely in case this well-marketed virus reappears. When the lockdown rules were slightly relaxed in England on 20th May, a Government minister told the world that a son could meet his elderly parents if he met his father in the morning and his mother in the afternoon, but not together. And the meeting should take place out of doors and the participants should keep six feet apart. What the devil would they advise if the plague came back big-time?

Incidentally, why must people keep six feet apart? In some countries the required distance is three feet. And if social distancing were based on science then people would have to keep at least 24 feet apart because that is the distance that a cough or a sneeze might send an infection.

And so the fear will be maintained. The screw will be kept tightly turned.

Millions are already so terrified that they hardly dare leave their homes. It is a bizarre new variation of cabin fever.

Closing hospitals, GPs surgeries, dental surgeries and so on has added a new fear. Those who are already ill are suffering agonies as they wait for treatment. Those who are not ill are terrified that help will not be available if they need it. Around the world, 28 million surgical operations have already been cancelled or postponed, and every week that the disruption lasts will result in another 2.4 million cancellations. The UK has built ten brand new, huge and expensive hospitals for dealing with the coronavirus but only two have ever been used. The NHS has 100,000 acute medical beds. Around 40,000 of those lie empty. The number of people visiting A&E departments has fallen by more than half because people are terrified to leave their homes even when they need medical attention.

You can see the effect of the social distancing policies if you walk down the street or enter one of the few shops allowed to open. Many people step aside with terror in their eyes. They cover their mouths and turn away. We are being taught to regard our neighbours as angels of death. We are creating a world in which enjoyment will be just a memory.

I read somewhere that the coronavirus 'crisis' will result in people being kinder to one another.

I have rarely read such nonsense.

This fake 'crisis' will lead to ever more suspicions, fears, distrust, resentment and clinical anxiety.

I have previously pointed out that school-children, teenagers and people in their 20s will suffer most.

Cruel school and college distancing policies will inevitably lead to generations of young people suffering serious psychological problems. We are breeding lonely, frightened people. Many will become very seriously mentally ill; dangerously withdrawn and unhinged.

And all the time, politicians and advisors around the world are creating ever more fear by exaggerating the risks, by withdrawing promise and regularly contradicting one another so that confusion is created. In the UK, we had the absurd sight of a senior minister suggesting that a son who wishes to meet his parents should meet his father in the morning and his mother in the afternoon. Moreover the meeting should take place out of doors and the participants should remain a six foot distance apart.

We are told that there will be no summer holidays (though if we behave ourselves we may have an extra bank holiday in the autumn) and no sporting events except on television.

And so we are denied the chance of brightening our lives with events to which we can look forward. No dinners, no celebrations, no big matches and no trips. In the unlikely event that hotels, restaurants and pubs survive the social distancing rules, visiting them will be about as much fun as root canal surgery.

And just in case we allow ourselves a glimmer of hope for the future, we are warned of massive tax rises, shattered pensions, penury and joblessness lasting for decades. We are told that even if the virus goes away it might return or mutate. There is much threatening, scary talk of the 'second wave'. We are warned, quite bizarrely in my view, that we may be able to catch the disease more than once and so no one will ever be safe. (Curiously, however, it is said that magic vaccines will be prepared which will provide protection. Indeed, we have been told that a vaccine will be available within months though it usually takes years to create a vaccine.)

So, why have they done all this?

They couldn’t possibly have been as incompetent as they appear to be so there has to be a reason.

It’s power. We live in a police state. We have no control over our lives.

And power brings money.

And a menu of hidden agendas – population control, preserving the oil supplies, replacing cash with plastic cards which can be regulated, and, of course, as I predicted in my very first video back in the middle of March, demonising and marginalising the elderly.

May 21st 2020

The Only Shops Which Will Survive…

Antoinette and I went shopping the other day.

When I say that we went shopping that is something of an exaggeration.

We visited a garden centre, a supermarket, a newsagent, a pharmacy and a greengrocer.

Nothing else was open.

It wasn't a great deal of fun.

We were shouted at by several shop assistants (in some cases more than once).

'Don't go that way!'

'You can't come in here until someone leaves.'

'Move back!

'You have to follow the arrows.'

'We don't take cash.'

It was a miserable experience.

In future we will do as much shopping as we can online.

It's quicker and less painful. And often cheaper too.

I realise that shop assistants have been scared witless by the Government's constant threats. I understand that.

But you can't shout at customers, or treat them like prisoners, and expect them to return.

I fear that in the short-term, the only shops which will survive the manufactured coronavirus 'crisis' will be the shops which make shopping a special, pleasant experience.

And for the medium and long-term, shops and shoppers need to campaign to push governments to abandon social distancing laws which will destroy our society if they are maintained. We don't have social distancing to protect us from the flu, which can kill more people than the coronavirus. And we don't have social distancing to protect us from other killer diseases such as tuberculosis – which kills far more people than the coronavirus.

The way things are going at the moment, Mr Bezos is going to own the world within a few months.

May 23rd 2020

Passing Observations (May 23rd 2020)

For some years I included on my website a series of pieces called Passing Observations in which I detailed items which seemed worth a short mention – but not a longer article.

I saw a photo the other day of a barman wearing a mask over his mouth. The mask did not, however, cover his nose. Wearing a mask that covers one aperture but not the other is utterly pointless – and does more harm than good in that it probably gives the wearer a completely false sense of security. Incidentally, I wonder if people in nudist camps and on nude beaches will wear masks and gloves.

Governments have been so effective at terrifying populations that it will take a good deal of work to persuade people to leave their homes and start returning to a new variety of normal life. But do governments actually want people to leave their homes? Moot point.

England has the highest population density of any country in Europe. Mass immigration, constantly underestimated by the Home Office, and resulting from absurd and onerous EU laws, has caused massive overcrowding in towns and cities. Overcrowding is a well-known factor in the spread of many types of physical and mental disorders including, of course, infectious diseases.

By insisting on ignoring the UK Government's laws about lockdown, the leaders of the toy parliaments in Scotland and Wales may have pleased the bureaucrats in Brussels but they have caused confusion and bewilderment. In refusing to allow English citizens to cross their borders they are guilty of blatant racism – which will be remembered long after the coronavirus 'crisis' is over.

Regular readers will know that I believe that the BBC is a treacherous organisation. Despite the grave situation in Britain, the BBC is still sending out threatening letters to those who haven't paid its wretched annual licence fee. The default position of the BBC seems to me to be that anyone who hasn't paid the licence must be guilty of a criminal offence – even if they don't need or want a licence. Even if a citizen tells the BBC they don't need a licence, the organisation's 'gestapo' will still threaten to come round to check that they aren't watching television. I ignore the BBC's letters since I do not have to reply, and if their goons turn up on our doorstep I do not have to let them in. The BBC gets enough money from the EU – it's not getting any of ours.

After YouTube had taken down my video entitled 'Why did YouTube Ban my Video?' I protested that the video did not infringe any of their guidelines. YouTube then restored the video. However, YouTube has still banned two more of my videos – even though these did not appear to break any of their published regulations.

The National Education Union (a misnamed organisation if ever I found one) is opposing the reopening of schools and is also opposing remote learning for primary school pupils over the internet. The organisation is offering advice to teachers on how to sue schools that are 'too keen' to reopen the doors. My contempt for this organisation and its officers and members is almost tangible.

People who live in rural and seaside areas are complaining about town-dwellers being allowed to visit for the day. They want car parks kept locked and public loos kept closed so that no one can walk along their lanes or sit on their beaches. The police are busy slapping penalty notices on cars which are parked near to pleasant places. 'Having no visitors and holidaymakers here has been wonderful for six weeks,' said one aggrieved local. But Antoinette and I are well aware that allowing visitors to share the landscape is a price that those who live in pleasant parts of the country have to pay for being lucky enough to live in beautiful places. Heavy traffic and badly parked cars can be annoying but it's the cost of living. The resentment of would-be visitors will be massive and when holiday areas are reopened many will remember how they were treated. Many rural and seaside towns rely on visitors. In future they will, I fear, have to find some other way to make a living. Good luck to them.

The Times newspaper estimates that denying people access to healthcare has already killed a similar number of people to the number killed from Covid-19. The death rate from the latter will almost certainly fall. The death rate from the former will certainly rise.

Just two of us research, write and produce the articles and videos which carry my name. Half of the work is done by my wife, Antoinette, who in addition to researching and editing material is also entirely responsible for doing everything which requires electricity. I write out much of the material in longhand on large writing pads. And from then on it's Antoinette who is responsible for fighting the hardware and software in order to publish the material. I would also like to point out that taking on the establishment isn't an easy or risk-free business – it can be worrying to wonder if the men in boots are going to come and kick down the door or pop a summons in the post. And Antoinette shares those worries too. Ginger Rogers once said that she had to do all the dance steps with which Fred Astaire dazzled us all but that she had to do them all backwards in high heels. Antoinette has to do all this in constant pain because her cancer treatment has left her with pain which cannot be treated because the hospitals in England are cruelly closed to everyone who isn't a coronavirus sufferer. I am not a great lover of the NHS at the moment and I have not been clapping on Thursdays.

May 23rd 2020

There Is No Science Behind Social Distancing

The theory behind social distancing is that it will protect people from other folk who sneeze or cough. The lunatics who are currently running the asylum say that we will have to maintain social distancing for ever.

For ever.

Really. That's what they've been saying.

But there isn't any science to it.

In some countries people have to keep three feet apart. In others they must keep four and a half feet apart. In Britain adults and children are told they must keep six feet apart. The latest rule in Britain is that two people can meet one person but one person cannot meet two people.

I've thought about that a lot and I don't think I'm completely potty just yet but I can't get my head round it.

Two people can meet one person but one person cannot meet two people.

That's the law. And it is, quite possibly, the most completely stupid piece of advice ever given to anyone anywhere. But if you break the law you can be fined. I've no idea how much. I'm still too busy trying to work out how the law works to care what the fine is.

There is no uniformity to the rules between countries because they are just made up by people who think they are a good idea.

Our lives are being regulated and destroyed by rules which somebody somewhere thought were a good idea.

Forcing us to stay in our homes is also something that was just made up.

And it's pretty clear that the authorities – the people who dreamt up the rules and who insist that we follow them – don't bother to take much notice of them.

I've lost count of the number of senior public figures who have been caught flouting the rules. They always have a good excuse, of course. But then we all have good excuses for flouting the rules.

Am I the only one to have noticed that the police don't seem to take much notice of the social distancing rules when they are out hunting for people who are sunbathing or sitting on park benches?

And when the police attend demonstrations against the lockdown, they completely ignore the social distancing rules – standing close to one another and then getting very hands on with demonstrators.

The police are certainly breaking the social distancing laws when they arrest people.

So why should the police not arrest themselves?

Or maybe the demonstrators could arrest the police for breaking the social distancing laws.

Apart from the massive social and economic implications, there is of course one big problem with the social distancing rules.

A sneeze doesn't stop at three feet or four and a half feet or six feet. And nor does a cough.

A cough can spread droplets for 18 feet. And a sneeze can travel 24 feet.

So these social distancing rules are arbitrary and utterly pointless.

If we were going to have effective social distancing then we would all have to keep at least 24 feet apart – preferably 30 feet apart.

But that would bring the world to a complete standstill, everyone would go bankrupt, no one would ever be able to buy any food and we would all starve to death.

How many people can you get in a bus or a railway carriage if everyone has to be 30 feet from everyone else? If there's a driver on a bus the passenger will have to run behind.

So they made up these lower figures.

And even these figures are destroying lives and will destroy businesses and everything which makes our world good.

Social distancing forces friends to shout to one another and prevents grannies hugging their grandkids. Social distancing makes people fearful. It breeds distrust, suspicion and even hatred. Passers-by step to one side and walk on the road if they see someone coming towards them. Social distancing will prevent meetings and demonstrations.

It is difficult to think of a business which won't be adversely affected by social distancing. Restaurants are told they will have to throw out three quarters of their tables and then try to make a profit. How many waiters can serve food from six feet away? A bowl of tomato soup will cost £200. Airlines have been told that they have to throw out a third of their seats, and airline bosses have pointed out that if they do that then they will never be able to fly again. Hairdressers will need to use scissors that are two yards long. Sports arenas can only seat people if they have six feet of space all around them. Cinemas and theatres will have to close off most of their seating. Most commercial kitchens will only be able to accommodate only one chef. Who is going to tell the bloke in the big white hat that he has to do all the washing up?

Hotels are doomed by social distancing.

Can you imagine trying to get back to your room after breakfast?

'I'm afraid there is a one hour queue for the lift, sir. We're only allowed to put two people into one lift. And when sharing a lift you must both face the walls.’

I sense that the people who made up the social distancing rules are beginning to weaken.

The sensible solution is to push our so-called leaders into forgetting about social distancing laws.

When they know that we don’t believe their lies and that we do know what is going on – and how they are trying to take over our lives with their power grabbing emergency legislation – then they will back off. They want to stay in power and if we shout long enough, loud enough and hard enough then they will listen.

And to encourage old-fashioned good manners; to encourage everyone to cover their mouths and noses if they sneeze or cough. That’ll protect us all against all the diseases which can be transmitted this way.

If we do these simple things we can go back to living ordinary lives. We can eat out, watch live sports and talk to people we meet without having to shout at them.

If we must have laws to control our behaviour then introduce a law which says that if you don’t cover your mouth and nose when you sneeze then you will be punished.

And we must have a punishment for breaking the law, bring back the stocks that were popular in England a few hundred years ago. People who don’t cover their mouths and noses will be sentenced to 24 hours in the stocks where the rest of us can stand and throw rotten fruit and vegetables at them.

Oh, and tell local authorities to install more public loos with decent hand washing facilities. One of the most insane things done during the last few weeks has been to close public loos. The people who decided to do that should be put in the stocks too.

May 24th 2020

You've Been Brainwashed (Here's How They Did It)

Governments have been using a range of Orwellian mind control tricks during the coronavirus 'crisis'. The slogans, the clapping and the symbols have all been carefully used to enable the authorities to take control of our thinking.

I am grateful to Dr Colin Barron, a former NHS doctor and eminent hypnotherapist who is the author of the book *Practical Hypnotherapy*, for pointing out to me just how our minds have been taken over and how we have been very successfully and skilfully manipulated into believing the lies we have been fed.

Elected governments, aided by specialist behavioural scientists, have been brainwashing millions into accepting the coronavirus propaganda.

The mind is a wonderful thing. It responds in sometimes unpredictable ways. So, for example, if you see a headline which says: 'Boris Johnson is an alien' then most people will probably dismiss it quite readily. But if the headline says 'Is Boris Johnson an alien?' readers will be more likely to suspect that the British Prime Minister might indeed be from another planet. And research shows that if people see a headline which says, 'Boris Johnson is NOT an alien' then their suspicions will be raised still higher.

Manipulating and tricking the mind is a professional business.

You've been brainwashed and the brainwashing has been very subtle. We've all been quietly hypnotised and indoctrinated to accept the new mass hysteria generated by governments everywhere. Many people now enjoy the lockdown and don't want it to end. It enables them to avoid responsibility for their own lives.

Do you remember who said: 'Through clever and constant application of propaganda people can be made to see paradise as hell and also the other way round, to consider the most wretched life as paradise.'?

It was Adolf Hitler, who was a master at mass manipulation and the use of subliminal techniques. And it was Hitler who also commented that it was good fortune for governments that the mass of people did not think.

The Nazis were very good at controlling people's minds.

Goebbels, who was Hitler's propaganda chief, once said that if you repeat a lie often enough then people will believe it. He also pointed out that if you want to control a population and you have to deal with opposition then you should accuse the other side of the sin or the trickery which you yourself are using.

So, governments everywhere have been accusing those who are telling the truth of spreading fake news. Anyone who doesn't toe the party line is dismissed as a dangerous conspiracy theorist – though the big conspiracies have all been coming from governments.

Countries around the world have been promoting slogans to persuade their citizens to behave as required. In China there was a slogan which said 'If you love your parents, lock them up'. In Taiwan people were told: 'To visit each other is to kill each other'.

At first glance the slogans which are heavily advertised in the UK seem harmless enough. We all recognise them.

Some such as 'We're all in this together' seem fairly innocuous, though we might all be forgiven for adding the rider that we are all in this together unless we work as advisors to the Prime Minister.

The first trio of phrases which were promoted everywhere were:

Keep your distance
Wash your hands
And
Think of others

More recently new phrases have been added to the repertoire:

Stay home
Save lives
Protect the NHS

The rhythm and pattern used in these phrases is not a coincidence. There are usually three words in each phrase and the phrases run in threes. This isn't a coincidence; it isn't happenchance.

Using phrases of three words, presented in groups of three, is a technique known as the rule of three in psychological conditioning.

And that's the reason for the three phrases with which we are all being bombarded. We've being trained and taught at the same time. It's behavioural psychology.

Other hypnotherapists have pointed out that if we repeat phrases often enough then the words and thoughts become implanted in our subconscious minds and then become a belief which motivates our behaviour. And so governments repeat slogans which become beliefs. It's called auto suggestion – along the lines of 'every day in every way I am getting better and better'.

Hitler was also a believer that if a lie was repeated often enough it would eventually be confused with the truth by the greater part of the population.

'People more readily fall victim to the big lie than the small lie,' said Hitler, 'since it would never come into their heads to fabricate colossal untruths, and they would not believe that others could have the impudence to distort the truth so infamously.'

Hitler used these techniques to control and manipulate the German people and to persuade them to accept the evil things he wanted them to do.

George Orwell who invented Newspeak, also understand the importance of the triple three word phrase. In 1984, his futuristic novel which was written in 1948, Orwell invented the slogan: 'War is peace, freedom is slavery, ignorance is strength'.

If you want a picture of the future, wrote Orwell, imagine a boot stamping on a human face – for ever. Power, he reminded us, is not a means, it is an end.

Everything else that has been happening since February 2020 is part of the brainwashing process.

It has been noticeable that the instructions we have been given have been more like orders. The signs that have popped up like dandelions say Stand here, not Please stand here. And why not? You don't say 'Please' to prisoners do you?

And then there are the weeks of clapping for carers and medical staff.

Clapping, which probably started innocently and with good intentions, covers up the paradox – the quiet insistent terror that comes from knowing that for all practical purposes there is no health care and we have all been betrayed by politicians and bureaucrats who decided to devote entire health care programmes to caring for a relatively small number of patients who have, or might be thought to have or be susceptible to a flu like virus.

Dr Milton Erickson, an eminent hypnotist, used to give his patients simple tasks to do. He would send them home to clean the attic or count the books they owned. All this was done as part of the process of mind control. Telling people to stand on their doorsteps at 8 p.m. on Thursdays and to clap is a simple, repetitive task which is part of the mass hypnosis. The clapping may have started out innocently but it was quickly and enthusiastically promoted by the people influencing our lives.

Persuading people to do what you want them to do is part of the hypnotherapy process. Getting people to clap was also important in that it made people believe in the danger of the coronavirus and the bravery of those working in health care. It helped people accept the fact that there were no beds available for patients with cancer or any other disorder.

The rainbow which has suddenly started to appear everywhere is another part of the brainwashing process. Thousands have been so successfully brainwashed that they willingly take part in promoting the symbols and the slogans.

Even the confusing rules about who we can and cannot see were part of the programme. A minister recently told Britons that two people could meet one person but that one person could not meet two people. An obvious contradictory nonsense.

If you confuse and bewilder at the same time that you are frightening people then you unsettle them and create an anxious and obedient population.

And that is what has been going on for weeks.

Bearing all this in mind I have prepared my own triple phrased slogan. Three words and three phrases:

Distrust the government
Avoid mass media
Fight the lies

My slogans fit the brainwashing requirement perfectly. Simple, effective, honest.

So try to remember them:

Distrust the government
Avoid mass media
Fight the lies

May 26th 2020

Patients Who Have Been Betrayed

I have absolutely no doubt that all around the world people have been betrayed by their politicians. Whether you think they have done it deliberately or through incompetence there can be no doubt that they have turned a health threat that has so far killed far fewer people than a bad flu into the biggest health, economic and social crisis that the modern world has ever seen.

But that's no great surprise. We expect politicians to let us down. They are selfish and they always betray the electors. It's the only thing they're any good at. No group of people in the world are quite as corrupt or as mendacious as politicians.

I am, however, surprised and massively saddened by the way we have been betrayed by people we might have expected to protect us – the leaders of three professions: the medical profession, the nursing profession and the dental profession. And it is the leaders I blame – the medical establishment.

These professions seem to have abandoned anyone not suffering from the coronavirus.

Around the world there is no consistency. In some areas hospitals are shut entirely. In other areas hospitals are open and even functioning fairly normally. In some countries patients who don't have the coronavirus, or might not have the coronavirus, are completely ignored and rejected as irrelevant and unsuitable for treatment. There is no science or logic behind the closures and the refusal of hospitals and medical centres to treat patients.

Lockdowns and social distancing rules have been imposed without much sense. It is now fairly widely known that most of the people who have died from the virus, or have been ill with it, were obese or diabetic or both, and many had more than three chronic diseases. The UK's Prime Minister probably suffered badly from the coronavirus because of his weight.

So why haven't governments selectively protected the individuals most likely to be at risk? As I said back in early March it was nonsense to pick on perfectly fit over 70-year-olds to be the first to be put under house arrest.

The current treatment of patients with cancer, heart disease and other dangerous but treatable diseases is a grotesque scandal which has taken health care back to the Middle Ages. Patients, doctors and nurses have all been betrayed by the profession's leaders and by their governments and governmental advisors. Mental health problems are growing too. In California, a hospital has reported that it has seen a year's worth of suicide attempts in just four weeks.

It's the same with dentistry.

In some countries, people with dental problems are being treated normally. I gather that in Ireland and Germany, for example, at least some dentists are providing treatment. In America there seems to be some confusion about what is and is not allowed. In Britain, there is virtually no dental care available – even though most dentists say they are well-equipped with the necessary masks and gloves. Many dentists, particularly those in private practice are desperate to get back to work. Dentists working for the Government may still get paid but private dentists are receiving nothing, and their insurance policies are probably not any good. Many dentists warn they will go bankrupt and are desperate to get back to seeing patients.

Strangely, in the UK, it seems that no one within the dental profession itself has the authority to force dentists not to work. The General Dental Council says it cannot force dentists to close, and the Care Quality Commission also says it cannot force dentists to refuse to see patients. But dentists are closed because they are worried about the Government's general lockdown and social distancing rules – and there will inevitably be legal worries too.

There is, it is said, some sporadic emergency dental treatment available in some areas but I have seen reports suggesting that the only service available is the removal of teeth – rather than attempts being made to keep teeth in place.

All this could go on indefinitely.

How the devil do you ever fill a bad tooth from six feet away? And although dentists and dental nurses can all wear masks it's a little difficult for a dental patient to keep a mask on while having treatment.

Meanwhile, millions of patients are missing essential dental work. Many are in agony and are desperate for relief. Hundreds of cases of mouth cancer will be missed. Patients with gum disease who need regular work to keep their mouths healthy will lose teeth that they didn't need to lose.

All of this is a tragedy and a scandal unlike any other.

The leaders of the medical profession and the dental profession aren't doing anywhere near enough to end this appalling state of affairs.

At least I don't feel quite so lonely these days.

Five hundred brave doctors in the United States agree with me and have told Donald Trump to end the coronavirus shutdown for the reasons I have explained.

The bottom line is that patients who think they might have cancer aren't being treated, even though everyone with a basic diploma in emptying bed pans knows that speed is of the essence when treating cancer. That's why doctors arrange screening programmes, for heaven's sake. Patients who had the first signs of cancer three months ago will, whatever happens, have to wait another three, four, five or six months for treatment – while the system catches up with the backlog.

My wife has breast cancer. Last year she had surgery and radiotherapy and now she has constant pain in her shoulder. It is a common consequence of the treatment and it can be treated with physiotherapy. But the hospital physiotherapy departments are shut so she struggles to do exercises which don't make much difference. She is also due to have another mammogram. But she hasn't heard a word from the hospital about that. And we cannot get the physiotherapy or the mammogram done privately because the Government has commandeered all the private hospitals just in case it needs them for coronavirus patients. It hasn't needed the hospitals because the predictions made by the mathematical modellers were absurdly pessimistic, and so the hospitals are empty and the staff don't have anything to do except on Thursday evenings when they lighten their week with a little brisk clapping to congratulate their colleagues in the health service – who also have relatively little to do because the Government admits that most of the hospitals in Britain are half empty.

If you detect a slightly bitter note in all this then give yourself full marks. I am angrier than I have ever been. And I am incredibly disappointed with the way patients have been betrayed.

A friend of ours who was diagnosed with cancer a few months ago is still waiting for her treatment to start. Meanwhile her cancer, unhindered, is undoubtedly doing what cancer does best. It's growing unhindered.

My wife found this on the internet:

'My cancer treatment has been cancelled and interrupted throughout this pandemic. I have found it hard as the nurses allocated to advise and offer support have been redeployed onto empty covid wards and so are unavailable to cancer patients. I have felt quite alone and unimportant compared to virus sufferers.'

How can anyone not be angry?

What the hell is going on?

Are governments trying to kill people? Is this some crude population control plan?

It's not as if the problem is unrecognised.

Governments have admitted that thousands and thousands of patients will die because they are being denied treatment. In the UK it has been admitted that the closure of health services could lead to 150,000 deaths – far, far more than will ever die from the coronavirus. I think that figure is a massive underestimate. The figures show that so far 60,000 people have died unnecessarily in the UK because they have been denied treatment. That's in the UK alone and it is a far, far higher figure than the number of coronavirus deaths. Why, in the name of everything holy, do those deaths matter less than coronavirus deaths?

The majority of people who died from the coronavirus are over 80-years-old and seriously ill with other diseases. They would, it is admitted, have died within a few months anyway. This is exactly the same sort of way that flu usually kills so many people. But the patients with cancer being denied treatment are often otherwise healthy and frequently quite young.

Around the world tens of millions of operations have already been cancelled and millions more get cancelled every week. All operations are essential, some more so than others. With the possible exception of some cosmetic surgery, no one has an operation they don't really need.

Screening tests and investigations have also been abandoned and delayed. Patients with symptoms and signs of serious disease have been told they will have to wait months to find out if their problems are likely to kill them or are benign. In such situations the waiting is almost unbearable. Only those who know the awful pain of waiting for test results will understand just how terrible the situation is at the moment.

Moreover, doctors now report that vast numbers of patients have been so terrified by their government's hysterical over-reaction to the risk that they won't go near a hospital in case they catch the coronavirus bug and die of that. Even when medical care is available patients prefer to do nothing. And that problem is likely to persist unless the hysteria is reversed.

At the end of World War II, the concentration camp guards who had done appalling things in places like Dachau and Auschwitz. People who had closed their eyes to what was happening were also arrested. They were all taken to the War Crimes Tribunal and almost to a man and woman their defence was that they were just doing what they were told to do. The excuse didn't get them anywhere, of course.

The medical administrators and the leaders of the professions may think they are immune from criticism because they are obeying orders from their governments.

But I'm afraid they are not.

And they aren't innocent in moral or ethical terms either.

The senior bureaucrats who have ordered that hospitals and GPs and dentists close down are all guilty of a crime against humanity.

Indeed, the irony is that not even the bureaucrats, the politicians and the civil servants appear to believe that the coronavirus is any more dangerous than a bad flu.

Time and time again, in recent weeks we have seen people who've been telling us that we must stay in our homes ignoring their own advice. Ferguson, whose now widely disputed advice led to the lockdown, allowed his mistress to visit him at home. The Prime Minister's closest advisor, Dominic Cummings, travelled more than two hundred miles, and back again, at the beginning of the lockdown. When there were calls for him to resign or be fired, the Prime Minister defended him – appearing to many to make a mockery of the law and of the sacrifices made by millions of people who all had their own very good reasons to break the lockdown but didn't dare do so. The Irish prime minister – having a picnic with friends in a public park. Thinking folk will inevitably suspect that if these people broke the rules in such a cavalier way then they probably didn't think we are dealing with the plague.

Doctors do have one weapon that they could use.

They could certify their own leaders and the bureaucrats and the politicians insane and incapable. Those individuals could then be removed from their positions and we could get back to a more caring world.

It's a rather off the wall solution. But then we're hardly living in normal times, are we?

May 26th 2020

Passing Observations (May 26th 2020)

I can pretty well guarantee that the 'temporary' powers the Government has given itself (and the police) will turn out to be permanent. When Governments grab power they tend to hang onto them. As Milton Friedman once observed 'nothing is as permanent as a temporary Government programme'. In the UK, one former Supreme Court Judge, is reported to have talked about 'collective hysteria' and to have used the phrase 'police state'.

The Government knows where all pensioners live but, despite having forbidden relatives or friends to visit them, has made no effort to ensure that the elderly are receiving food supplies. How many old people will starve to death? How many dead bodies will be found behind locked doors?

Some pathologists have decreed that dead patients who have the coronavirus must now be cremated without examination. I've seen a briefing which states: 'If a death is believed to be due to confirmed covid-19 infection there is unlikely to be any need for a post-mortem examination to be conducted and the Medical Certificate of Cause of Death should be issued'. The key word here is surely 'believed'.

In the UK, shops are due to open in June. There is talk that people will be reluctant to go back to the High Street because they are too frightened of the coronavirus. This is partly true. But it is part of the propaganda. (Encouraging us to remain fearful.) The truth is that shopping is going to be a miserable experience. And the closure of many public loos will make shopping impossible and impractical for many people – especially the elderly and those with children. (Remember that back at the beginning of March I predicted that part of the plan was to marginalise the elderly? Well closing public loos is part of that.)

The BBC Director General, speaking on a BBC programme which was reported on the BBC website, claims that 94% of the population accessed a bit of the BBC in the 3rd week of March. We can assume that this was their best week and, of course, I am sceptical of anything the BBC says about anything, but it is worrying that anyone still uses the BBC. I hope no one relies on the BBC for news. The woman along the way with the curlers and the pinafore provides a much more reliable source of news than the BBC.

The United Nations estimates that worldwide 25 million jobs will be lost as a result of the coronavirus. Some claim the figure could be as high as 190 million. Actually, virtually no jobs will be lost because of the virus. It's the lockdowns and social distancing which will cause the job losses.

Every fact I have provided has been absolutely accurate. Every prediction I've made has been proven accurate. So why don't the authorities admit that they got it wrong? Even if they wanted to do so the scientists, the politicians and the media are now wedded to this deceit. Even if they wanted to, how could they possibly admit that they got it all so very, very wrong?

By exaggerating the number of deaths, the authorities are endangering us all. You cannot investigate a disease when you don't keep proper records. As the weeks pass by we should be able to learn a good deal about this coronavirus. But we won't be able to do any useful research because we don't know who really died from it and who died from something else. We can't work out whether the disease mostly affects people who are meat eaters, or who have been vaccinated against the flu or who have red hair because the information we have is inaccurate and useless.

The UK Government has admitted that the NHS has 2,295 empty intensive care beds. The average number of empty intensive care beds before the coronavirus 'crisis' was 800. So, the NHS has 1,495 more empty intensive care beds during the coronavirus 'crisis' than it had before the so-called 'crisis' began. And it has been reported that almost half the beds in some English hospitals are lying empty.

It is difficult to take the lockdown laws seriously when so many senior figures seem to take little or no notice of them – or bend them to suit their 'special' circumstances. Could it possibly be because those senior figures know the truth about the danger of the coronavirus?

The Government in the UK admits that 60,000 people have now died unnecessarily because health care has been devoted to the coronavirus. That figure will soar. As I predicted many weeks ago, it will continue to rise. It is crucial that hospitals are opened up to everyone who needs help.

May 26th 2020

The End for NHS Dentistry?

I don't usually bother with rumours but this one could be important.

I've heard that in the UK, the Government is going to force dentists to see no more than one patient an hour. There is no logical reason for this but logic plays no part in anything these days (and 'science' is just an old-fashioned word which is now entirely irrelevant as far as our 'leaders' are concerned).

If this rumour is true (and I think it could be) then it will destroy NHS dentistry.

Dentists working in the NHS don't get paid much per patient and so rely on numbers. They need a lot of patients to make a living.

If a dentist is only allowed to see one patient an hour then private dentists will probably cope (though I suspect many will have to put up their prices).

But there will be no more dentistry within the NHS.

The Government will say it was simply saving lives.

And it will blame dentists for quitting the NHS.

But the end result will be no more NHS dentistry.

And those who cannot afford private dentistry will be left with no dental care at all.

Was this all part of the mad, indefensible lockdown and social distancing strategies?

May 27th 2020

Passing Observations (May 27th 2020)

Opticians are closed, of course. So millions of people will be suffering enormously. And what about motorists who need eye tests in order to retain their licences? No one in government cares. What about patients with developing eye problems? No one in government cares about them, either. Cataracts, glaucoma and macular degeneration will all go undiagnosed. Will this lunacy ever end?

Dominic Cummings was supposed to be the brains of the Conservative Party. He is, it was said, the man who understands what the public wants. I read that he was able to manage public opinion. Really? If he is the best brain the Conservatives have then heaven help us all. His absurdly arrogant behaviour has destroyed the British Government's lockdown policies (not a bad thing, so thanks to him for that), split the Conservative party (serves them right for employing him), wrecked the Prime Minister's credibility and lost any reputation he had himself. Brilliant. Not bad for a highly paid advisor who was supposed to work behind the scenes and help the Prime Minister run things. If the fellow had integrity, self-respect or respect for his employer he would have resigned ages ago. If he was employed in the private sector I suspect he would have been fired for arrogance, incompetence and simple, old-fashioned stupidity. But he's a sort of uncivil servant so what can we expect?

Attempts are constantly being made to 'monster' Sweden and to fake the Swedish mortality figures. The problem for the UK and other countries is that Sweden hasn't really had a lockdown. The Government there trusted the people to behave sensibly. And the death rate has been a fraction of the death rate in the UK. Britain's aggressive lockdown and social distancing policies have been an utter disaster. And the utterly pathetic Boris Johnson will be remembered for having got just about everything wrong. If he hadn't contracted the bug himself and then had a child with his mistress he would by now be as popular as Corbyn used to be. The Buffoon Boris is surviving only on public sympathy.

Big energy companies are now banning customers from joining their cheapest deals unless they have smart meters fitted. That suggests to me that smart meters are 'good' for big energy companies. And we already know they are good for the Government – because smart meters enable the authorities to turn your supply on and off when they feel like it. Smart meters certainly aren't much good for customers! The inconvenience and disruption simply isn't worthwhile. As we all lose all trust in the Government, it is important to stay alert. We won't be letting the energy company install a smart meter.

We acquire our immunity to a whole range of minor infections through being in daily contact with other people. Being in contact with many infections keeps our immune systems in tip top condition. When groups of people are isolated they become dangerously vulnerable to infections. And so forcing millions of people to stay under house arrest for considerable periods of time will make them very vulnerable to infections of many kinds when (or perhaps that should be 'if') their isolation ends. This is well known to everyone except governments around the world and their highly paid scientific and medical advisors who seem to have a combined IQ of 11.7 when the wind is blowing in the right direction, and who either don't know this simple truth – or don't care.

Much is being made of the claim that 100,000 people are alleged to have died of the coronavirus in America. Might I suggest that those who find this figure (which is generally agreed by doctors to be a wild exaggeration) a good reason for the lockdowns and social distancing, take a look at the number of people who died in America last year of the flu (the figure for which is generally agreed to be accurate).

It seems that in the UK, the Government is planning to allow hairdressers to open before dentists. Both lots of workers get up close and personal with their patients. But dentists work in sterile surroundings and are well accustomed to wearing masks, gloves and so on. So, what is going on? I believe this is all a deliberate attempt to destroy NHS dentistry – and save huge amounts of money. (See the piece about NHS dentistry on this website.)

In order to satisfy social distancing requirements there are plans to widen pavements everywhere. The cost of this will, of course, be phenomenal. But the side effect will be to make roads narrower and, inevitably, to make all sorts of motorised travel (cars, lorries, etc.) even more difficult. And so less oil will be used. There is no doubt that all this is part of the plan to save our rapidly diminishing stocks of oil. (If you want to know more about what is happening I suggest you read my book, *A Bigger Problem than Climate Change* which is available on Amazon.)

On 27th May the EU announced that they would be putting together a recovery fund of 750 billion euros. This was widely reported by newspapers and TV. In my book, *Coming Apocalypse* (published in April) I suggested, in the March 14th entry, that the EU would need to raise £700 billion. (The truth, I am afraid, is that my keyboard doesn't have the sign for a euro and so I put my estimate down in sterling. Still, pretty close.)

I now think it was a pity Jeremy Corbyn didn't win the last election in the UK. We would have had a communist government but I don't think it would have been quite so communist as the government we've been given by Comrade Boris.

I'm not surprised to see China getting heavy with Hong Kong. Nor, indeed, will the readers of my book, *Coming Apocalypse* be surprised. Here is what I wrote in that book (my entry for April 14th): 'It's illuminating to think back to the days before the panic began. In France, the yellow vest riots were still in full flow. President

Macron had pretty much lost control of his country. In Hong Kong, the demonstrators were causing mayhem and the Chinese Government was facing serious problems. All over the world, protestors were causing chaos with demonstrations inspired by climate change campaigners. In Europe there were increasing tensions as countries such as Italy and Greece struggled with a currency that was too strong for them. The German people were becoming very tetchy about the future cost of supporting the European Union. And the issues over Brexit were still causing serious concern among hard-line Remainers – who were still hoping to overturn the democratic will of the British people. In the United States, the ideological battles were heightened as the Presidential election got underway. The world was, in short, in rare turmoil. Today, the world is pretty much one big police state. Demonstrations of any kind are outlawed. Public meetings are outlawed. Elections have been cancelled. And there is now talk that social distancing will have to be indefinite. Researchers talk of a need for more surveillance. Convenient, eh?

May 27th 2020

These Tests for New Drugs Will be Dangerously Misleading

There's a lot of talk at the moment about the need for a new wonder drug to tackle the coronavirus. The media are desperate for it to all happen very quickly. A new drug by next Thursday would be nice. Wednesday would be better.

But when it comes how will we know that a new drug is safe?

Well, although there will be some trials on human patients, though they won't tell you what the long-term dangers might be, the basic safety tests will involve animals.

And I fear you may now be in for something of a shock.

I have spent a good portion of my life fighting animal experiments – vivisection. Sadly, the fight has proved ineffective. It's been an unequal battle. On the one side there have been a few people like me who know that animal experiments are not only inhuman but are also entirely worthless. Actually – worse than useless. On the other hand there are the huge international drug companies who pay for most animal experiments and who do so because animal experiments enable them to pretend that the drugs they sell are safe for human beings.

I've debated with vivisectors many times in public but for a long time now they've refused to debate with me – for the very simple reason that they always lost. Not because I'm particularly good at debating but because the facts are so much on my side. My last debate was due to take place many years go at the Union at Oxford University but they couldn't find any vivisector to debate with me so they cancelled me. I thought that was rather cowardly of them. They should have threatened the vivisectors that if they didn't turn up they'd let me debate with a chair.

Animal experimentation is a big and dirty business. Every thirty seconds vivisectors around the world kill another thousand animals. They use kittens, cats, dogs, puppies, horses, sheep, rats, mice, guinea pigs, rabbits, monkeys, baboons and any other creature you can think of. While waiting to be used in laboratory experiments, animals are kept in solitary confinement in small cages. Alone and frightened they can hear the screams of the other animals being used.

Oh, and some of the animals used in laboratory experiments are pets which have been kidnapped, taken off the streets and sold to the vivisectors.

The animals used in experiments are blinded, burned, shot, injected and dissected. They have their eyes sewn up or their limbs broken. Chemicals are injected into their brains and their screams of anguish are coldly recorded. Three quarters of the experiments performed by vivisectors are done without any anaesthetic, and most vivisectors have no medical or veterinary training.

Vivisectors claim that animals are not sentient creatures and are incapable of suffering mental or physical pain but I suspect that most people watching this will know that's not true. It's just one of the many lies told by animal experimenters.

There are many problems with animal experimentation. For example, all animals respond differently to threats of any kind depending on their circumstances (diet, cage size, etc.). None of these factors is allowed for by vivisectors. By locking an animal up in a cage, experimenters have already invalidated their experiment because by altering the animal's surroundings the experimenter alters the animal's susceptibility, its habits, its instincts and its capacity to heal itself. Since these variations are not controlled (cages and surroundings differ) experiments performed on animals kept in cages are of no scientific value.

Even animal experimenters don't deny that drug tests done on animals can produce dangerously unreliable and misleading information. Thalidomide safely passed tests on animals. Penicillin and aspirin both kill cats. When Alexander Fleming discovered penicillin growing on a culture dish in 1928, he tested the drug on rabbits and discarded it when it seemed useless. Later the drug was tested on a cat and a human patient at the same time. The cat died and the human being lived. If doctors had relied upon animal experiments to decide whether or not penicillin was of any value the drug would have been discarded long ago. Penicillin even kills guinea pigs – the classic test animal for many drugs. Aspirin can be toxic to rats, mice, dogs, monkeys and guinea pigs as well as cats. Morphine sedates human beings but excites cats, goats and horses. Digitalis, one of the best established and most effective drugs for the treatment of heart disease, is so toxic to animals that if we had relied on animal tests it would have never been cleared for use by humans.

Here are the two main reasons why animal experiments are worse than useless.

First, vivisectors admit that most animal experiments are unreliable and produce results which are not relevant to human patients. But they will also admit that they don't know which experiments are unreliable and which might be reliable. Logically, that means that all animal experiments are useless. If you don't know which experiments you can rely on, you can't rely on any of them.

It is, however, my second argument which is the real clincher.

Drug companies test on animals so that they can say that they have tested their drugs before marketing them. If the tests show that the drugs do not cause serious disorders when given to animals the companies say: 'There you are! We have tested our drug – and have proved it to be safe!' If, on the other hand, tests show that a drug does cause serious problems when given to animals the companies say: ‘The animal experiments are, of course, unreliable and cannot be used to predict what will happen when the drug is given to humans. We have, however, tested our drug.’

You may find this difficult to believe but it’s true: tests which show that a drug causes cancer or some other serious disease, or which even kills, when given to animals are ignored on the grounds that animals are different to people. And tests which show that a new drug doesn’t kill animals are used as evidence that the drug is safe for human consumption.

The drug companies cannot possible lose. Scores of drugs which cause cancer or other serious health problems in animals are widely prescribed for human patients. There is a list of some of the drugs which are widely prescribed but which cause cancer and other serious problems on my website – www.vernoncoleman.com

As a result, it isn’t surprising that four out of ten patients who take a prescribed drug which has been tested for safety on animals can expect to suffer severe or noticeable side effects and doctor induced disease is, along with cancer and circulatory disease, now one of the big three killers of human beings.

If you don’t believe me go to the animal issues button and then scroll right to the bottom – there is a list of 50 drugs which cause cancer and other serious disorders in animals but which were passed fit for use by human patients.

Animal experiments are fraudulent and they are a major cause of illness and death.

And now you know just one of the many reasons why the drug companies don’t like me. If this truth gets out then they’ll have to start testing new drugs properly. It will cost them many billions – and a lot of dangerous but enormously profitable drugs will never get to market.

And it’s one of the reasons why the internet is stuffed to the corners with lies about me.

May 28th 2020

Will Social Distancing be Permanent?

‘Human lives are worth more than anything else. We must never put anything about the saving of one human life.’

It’s a commonly expressed feeling.

And I absolutely agree with the principle.

Who could not agree with it?

If someone you love needs a treatment which will cost a trillion dollars a day you would rightly demand that the treatment be provided – and damn the cost.

I would.

But if you spend a trillion dollars a day saving Mr X’s wife or Mrs Y’s husband or their two-year-old child Z, there will be nothing left to pay for any other health services. Hospitals will have to shut. Operations will cease. There will be no medicines available. Millions of people will die unnecessarily.

And that is the dilemma.

Health care resources are finite.

And doctors always have to make decisions about how best to allocate those limited resources.

That’s what triage is all about.

In an army surgical unit doctors assess the incoming wounded and decide who needs to be seen first. (These days triage is usually practised by nurses and receptionists though how well this works is open to question.)

When the coronavirus first appeared, mathematical modellers looked at the small amounts of evidence available, multiplied a bag of carrots by a golf ball, divided by a hamster, added a packet of peanuts and concluded that millions of people were going to die.

In Britain, the mathematical modellers led by Ferguson concluded that eight million people would be hospitalised and that 500,000 would die. Showing all the skills of life insurance salesmen, they sold this theory to the politicians – and convinced them that their projections were accurate. (Curiously, the normally sceptical politicians needed very little persuading.)

The mathematical modellers were wrong, of course.

They should have left out the peanuts and the hamster and divided by a rhinoceros.

But the politicians accepted what they were told. And life changed.

How the devil could they have all got everything so wrong?

I knew back in February that the coronavirus wasn’t going to kill us all. In mid March I was vilified for recording a YouTube video in which I called the whole coronavirus ‘crisis’ the hoax of the century. I thought it pretty obvious that the mathematicians were wrong.

The wise will at this point wonder whether politicians leapt on the nonsense because they saw an opportunity or whether the politicians were looking for an opportunity and waiting for the nonsense to be served up to them.

The suspicions of the wise will be strengthened by the fact that this bizarre error was repeated all over the world and duly endorsed and encouraged by eager politicians.

And so the hysteria and the panic become global – even though the bug was downgraded to flu level back in March.

Politicians and compliant journalists ignored this inconvenient truth because they didn’t want their plans damaged.

The next stage in this lunacy was for politicians, advisors and health care chiefs to decide that the threat from the virus was so great that the health services should be devoted in their entirety to the care of patients with this one disease. They decided to clear the wards, cancel operations and build new hospitals.

Patients with cancer, heart disease and other serious illnesses were shunted aside so that doctors and nurses could be ready to deal with the eight million patients Ferguson had told them to expect.

Suddenly, the coronavirus was the only thing that mattered.

In the UK, the Prime Minister conveniently fell ill with the disease and was taken to hospital. Every minor celebrity who had a sniffle became front page news.

Doctors and nurses obediently cleared their wards and prepared themselves. The nation came to a halt. Schools were closed. Factories and shops were shut. Even dentists and opticians were told to lock their doors to keep the virus at bay.

The panic was institutionalised.

And, as a result there will be eight million Britons on waiting lists for surgery by the autumn. Many of them will die waiting for treatment. This abrogation of duty by health care bosses appals and enrages me. The death rate has already started to rise – not because of the coronavirus but because people are being denied medical care.

Britons were told to ‘save the NHS’.

But why? What for? For most of us there is no NHS. Hundreds of thousands are going to die because the NHS has for weeks been closed for business.

As it became clear that this massive overreaction was unjustified, strenuous attempts were made to maintain the myth and to justify the measures which had been taken.

Patients who died with the coronavirus were added to the list of patients who had died of the virus. A House of Commons committee was told that up to two thirds of the people said to have died of the virus would have been dead anyway within months.

And so, even though it was clear that the policy was killing far more people than the disease, the panic was kept at fever pitch.

It is now clear that if more people die this year than last year it will be entirely because patients have been denied lifesaving medical care.

And so the 'cure' will be far deadlier than the disease.

Nevertheless, there are already suggestions around that social distancing will be permanent.

In the UK, the Government and the supine media (none more supine than the treacherous BBC, of course) have raised the fear to terror and when Johnson's Government elected to slightly soften the lockdown in England (the leaders of the quasi governments in Scotland and Wales chose to take the United out of United Kingdom in a move that must have thrilled Remainers and the fascist bureaucrats in Brussels) the majority of the population reacted in horror and insisted on checking the door locks, drawing the curtains and crawling under their beds.

(Some were undoubtedly inspired by the fact that after several weeks at home, being paid by the Government to do nothing, they found the prospect of going back to work rather unattractive.)

Governments everywhere have boosted the fear by talking of a second wave of infection and, having promoted the idea of a vaccine as the only saviour, confessing that there may never be one available.

Politicians want to control us. And they are doing very well.

It is difficult to see how we are all going to escape from this fake crisis.

Of course, if this wasn't a conspiracy to turn us all into subdued, apprehensive and obedient zombies they could announce that they had made a bit of mistake and that the coronavirus is no worse than the flu. Whoops. Sorry. Pardon. Ferguson meant well but got his sums upside down.

They are not going to say that. Ever.

They could say that the coronavirus has become less dangerous.

Or they could say their brilliant lockdown and social distancing policies have worked brilliantly and have saved us all so that it now safe to come out from under the bed.

But they don't want to do that because they want to keep the threat of a second wave available to scare us with if we start getting cocky and comfortable.

And they don't want to get rid of social distancing because it is social distancing which gives the politicians a massive amount of power; it is social distancing which is running our lives and which will weaken us as individuals. It is social distancing which will result in millions of job losses. It is social distancing which will wreck education for millions.

And, most important of all, it is social distancing which is wrecking health care and which result in huge numbers of people dying unnecessarily.

Governments will enthusiastically promote social distancing as the only way to keep us safe.

I believe that's why my honest and seemingly innocuous video on social distancing was removed from YouTube.

Unless we stand up and fight, social distancing will be with us for years – possibly forever. And, as a result, our lives will be ruined in any conceivable way.

Share this article with everyone you know.

May 30th 2020

How They Deliberately Terrified Us

This is the true story of how a government threatened, manipulated and deliberately terrified its citizens for a bug they knew was no worse than the flu. The Government I've described is the British Government but I have no doubt that the facts I'm outlining here would fit a good number of other countries too.

When the coronavirus was first identified, the British Government's advisors decided that it was a dangerous infection and they put it into the same category as rabies, Ebola fever and a few other deadly diseases.

But then on March 19th the public health bodies in the UK, together with the Government's Advisory Committee on Dangerous Pathogens, decided that the coronavirus should no longer be classified as a 'high consequence infectious disease'.

So they downgraded it – and effectively put it back into the same category as the flu.

That was on March 19th.

This decision was rather tucked away on the Government's website and although I put the decision on my website, the mass media ignored it. I'll show in a minute why they did so.

It was also announced that in future it would not be necessary to manage patients with the infection in special treatment centres only. It was effectively decided that the infection did not need to be regarded as anything more hazardous than the flu and that it could be dealt with in the same way that the flu is managed.

I confess I was rather excited by this decision which totally vindicated my original view, based on a mixture of information and experience, that the bug was nowhere near as dangerous as had been advertised. I naively assumed that the Government would back off, stop pretending that we were threatened by the plague and let the country get back to normal.

I now feel rather foolish for making that assumption. I should have realised that something bigger was under way from the fact that the Government did not publish this decision for two days.

A bigger game was already in play and the Government was already planning to put huge chunks of the nation under house arrest.

And then the Emergency Bill was passed by a compliant House of Commons which gave Comrade Boris and his bunch of ministers and advisors more power than any government has ever had in Britain. The House of Commons handed total control of the country to Boris Johnson, Neil Ferguson and Dominic Cummings. What a trio.

When the coronavirus bug was downgraded, the Government had already decided to take full advantage of the situation.

And the flu-type bug was used as a weapon to trigger a coup that would give the Government total control over the people.

I have already described many of the astonishing things that have happened but yesterday I was shown a document which made my blood run cold.

The document is entitled 'Options for increasing adherence to social distancing measures' and it is dated 22nd March 2020 – three days after the bug was downgraded and it was clear that it was no longer going to put eight million in hospital and kill 500,000 people as had been predicted by Ferguson and his chums at Imperial College.

The committee responsible for the document was named the scientific pandemic influenza group on behaviour so they presumably knew that we were dealing with a type of flu.

The document I'm going to quote from was prepared by a bunch of behavioural scientists working for SAGE – a surely appropriate James Bond like acronym for an organisation which deserves about as much respect as SMERSH or SPECTRE. The full title of SAGE is the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies and the first thing we need to do when we get our country back is to disband it.

I feel qualified to say this since, with all due modesty, the evidence shows that right from the start I've been rather more accurate than SAGE. And if an old man in a chair can produce better advice than a government committee then it's probably a good idea to get rid of the government committee.

Anyway, that's all for the future.

What concerns me at the moment is the document prepared by the behavioural science subgroup – a document which shows how the Government was advised to control the way we think and to manipulate the way we behave.

In the end, I think, our politicians and their advisors, deliberately set out to create mass hysteria. I think the advisors were perhaps remembering the way teenagers became hysterical when they had watched the film, The Exorcist.

The document was designed to offer advice to SAGE itself and here are some quotes which I assure you are not taken out of context:

First, under the heading 'Perceived threat' the Government's advisors wrote: 'A substantial number of people still do not feel sufficiently personally threatened.' And they suggested that the media be used to increase a sense of personal threat.

So now you know who was pulling the strings which kept the TV and newspapers building up the scare story. In the old days this was called propaganda. Actually, we should still call it propaganda. And so we now know that those inflammatory, scary headlines were written under orders from the Government. To sweeten the deal, the Government agreed to purchase massive newspaper advertising for three months. The Government's advertising, paid for with our money, replaced the advertising which was lost because of the lockdown and social distancing. Financially, the newspapers have come out of this very well.

I suspect the BBC will be rewarded for its propaganda by having the threats to remove the licence fee removed.

It's fair to suppose that a few editors will also be expecting knighthoods in the next honours list.

And the advisors went on to say: 'The perceived level of personal threat needs to be increased among those who are complacent, using hard-hitting emotional messaging.'

In other words the behavioural scientists advised the Government to make people more frightened of a bug which they knew had just been downgraded to flu level.

Second, under the heading 'incentivisation' the Government's advisors wrote: 'Communication strategies should provide social approval for desired behaviours and promote social approval within the community.'

The other side of that coin as the advisors doubtless knew, is that people who behaved inappropriately, and who preferred to be guided by the facts, would be demonised and shunned. No one seemed worried about that. And in due course the Government deliberately split communities into two – those who believed all the lies they were told by the Government and those who sought out the truth.

Third, under the heading 'coercion' the advisors we paid for said: 'Consideration should be given to use of social disapproval but with a strong caveat around unwanted negative consequences.'

Well, they managed the social approval but they didn't do much about avoiding the unwanted negative consequences. And they damned well knew that people would be abused. Let's hope that some of the unfortunate souls who suffered because they forgot to go out and clap on Thursday evenings will eventually get over the harassment and the abuse they received from their neighbours. I know a little about abuse. The minute I started exposing the truth about the coronavirus I was viciously attacked and unscrupulous attempts were made to destroy my reputation. I have dealt with some of these attacks on my website and I'll deal with more in a special video I'm preparing about precisely how individuals are being monstered.

Fourth, under the heading 'Enablement' the behavioural scientists pointed out that the public were being asked to give up valued activities and access to resources for an extended period and suggested that as compensation we should be given access to opportunities for social contact and rewarding activities that could be undertaken in the home, and to resources such as food.

I like that last bit.

I don't know what the rewarding activities were, I don't think the Government ever got round to that – other than the stupid clapping and the drawing of rainbows, but I am grateful to the scientists' suggestion that we be allowed access to resources such as food. Very generous of them.

And so in response to this advice, Boris Johnson's Government deliberately terrified the voters because of a flu bug and allowed them access to food.

It's no exaggeration to say that Comrade Boris's behaviour has been downright criminal. Here's why.

First, hundreds of thousands of citizens have been terrified out of their wits by the propaganda. Since the word pandemic is now fashionable, there will be a pandemic of mental illness and suicide.

Second, the level of terror is so great that many people are unwilling to go to hospital when they are ill. Parents won't let their children go to school. And teachers won't teach them. The absurd restrictions which will create mental havoc among children are a direct result of all this dangerous gibberish. Millions won't want to go back to work. The economic and social consequences will push Britain back centuries. Civilisation has been wrecked for a bug that was downgraded on March 19th and is no more dangerous than the flu.

And third, the people in charge of our hospitals are still following the social distancing rules that seem to have been created because no one listened to the expert advice lowering the risk level of the coronavirus. They still seem to believe that the coronavirus is as deadly as Ebola or the plague. Have they too been manipulated into a state of terror? Doctors and nurses must by now know the truth and yet operations are still being cancelled and cancer patients are still abandoned and left in limbo by a health system which seems irrationally obsessed by the coronavirus.

It's no wonder that the media are busy demonising Sweden, where the Government had no formal lockdown and have suffered far fewer deaths. It's no wonder that the British government has exaggerated the number of deaths from the coronavirus. They must now be desperate that the truth never comes out.

The bottom line is simple.

To make sure that you aren't unduly terrified by your government, and to protect yourself against manipulation, remember the slogan I introduced for my piece about brainwashing:

Distrust the government

Avoid mass media
Fight the lies

May 31st 2020

Snitches, Sneaks and Quislings Are Killing Families, Communities and Society

The Government in Italy is reported to be hiring 60,000 professional snitches to monitor their friends and neighbours and to sneak on anyone they see who is not wearing a face mask and obeying social distancing rules.

We really are moving well into the uncomfortable landscape of George Orwell country.

The professional snitches will not wear uniforms or badges so that they can merge into society unnoticed – and so they can spread their odious tittle tattle without being identified.

It's happening everywhere.

Several police forces in the UK have asked citizens to report anyone who mentions or discusses conspiracy theories on the internet – though to be honest no one is promoting conspiracy theories in the UK more than Comrade Boris, the man who was voted in as a Tory but who has, I suggest, rapidly turned into Britain's first communist Prime Minister. A conspiracy theorist is sometimes defined as someone who represents a point of view not generally accepted by the majority. Well, I think that makes Comrade Boris, Comrade Dominic, Comrade Neil and the rest of them fully fledged conspiracy theorists because I doubt if Comrade Boris would win a majority if we had a vote about his policies.

As in Italy, the police around the world have urged citizens to snitch on neighbours who might have broken lockdown or social distancing rules – though to be honest if anyone can work out precisely what the rules are I congratulate them. The rules seem to vary according to who is speaking and what day of the week it is. The confusion is, of course, all part of the plan to unsettle us and to make us uncomfortable – though some of the police forces who are encouraging people to tell tales on their friends and neighbours seem to be enjoying their new powers rather too vividly and I suspect that one or two police officers might have been watching too many movies about totalitarian societies. In the UK, at least four police forces have set up dedicated hot lines to make it easier for people to snitch on folk whom they think might have broken a law or two.

The bottom line is that snitches are bad for any society for exactly the same reason that they are good for governments.

The forces of law and order will always want to ensure that its laws are upheld (unless they are inconvenient for senior government figures). They will want to catch offenders, punish them as severely as they can get away with and make sure they don't do it again – and that others don't do it either.

Snitches and quislings are good for governments because they operate as additional members of the occupying force.

When you don't know who the quislings are you become paranoid and worry about everyone. In such a world everyone is a potential snitch and everyone is a threat. That's a miserable way to live but it is, it seems, the way we are now expected to live.

I mentioned 'occupying forces' and I was serious; that's how I, and many others, now see our governments – as occupying forces. That's why I use the word quisling to describe the snitches who making life easier for the oppressors.

Some governments around the world, including the UK Government, have used the coronavirus as an excuse to bring in whole rafts of oppressive legislation, turning democracies into police states and removing freedom and privacy as if they simply did not matter.

In the UK the Government's new Big Brother spyware track and trace system seems to me to have been designed to remove the last vestiges of privacy and independence. Anyone who tests positive for the coronavirus will be contacted by the NHS Test and Trace staff and will have to give the names and contact details of everyone with whom they have 'recently interacted' (that's the Big Brother jargon). It's all rather reminiscent of the McCarthy era inquisitions in the United States. Those individuals who have been named must then isolate for 14 days. It is quite possible that within three months entire cities will be permanently in lockdown. I suspect that only Comrade Boris's closest advisors will be exempt from the new laws.

(Incidentally, Comrade Boris and company are calling them rules and not laws but in my world if I can be arrested, fined and imprisoned for not obeying an order then it's a law so let's forget the Newspeak and call things by the proper names, please.)

The system also seems designed to limit the number of people we meet. Anyone who has an active social life and meets lot of people will be forever being put into unnecessary periods of lockdowns. Meetings of all kinds, including protests and demonstrations, will be things of the past. Now, there is a surprise: no demonstrations against the Government.

And how safe will all this very private and personal information be?

Well, the woman that Comrade Boris has put in charge of the scheme is Baroness Harding, the wife of a Conservative MP and the former head of a British phone company called Talk Talk. While she was the boss there the company lost the personal and banking details of 157,000 customers to hackers. Her company was fined £400,000 for security failings which allowed the data to be taken with ease and the company shareholders are said to have lost £60 million as a result. Boris hired Ferguson, the mathematical modeller who gave us lockdown and Cummings, the advisor who ignored the lockdown. And now he has hired a woman most famous for losing personal information to be in charge of collecting personal information. There is at least a pattern there.

Experts are lining up to applaud the new system and to warn that reducing lockdown is dangerous. I think they're looking at the wrong part of the problem. They are looking to see how many people are likely to catch the bug. And that is the wrong question. They should be concentrating on how dangerous the bug is. And the answer to the question they aren't asking is: no worse than a bad flu. That was obvious back in March, when I recorded my first YouTube video. Everyone who disputes that should remember that the total number of worldwide deaths so far from the coronavirus is around half the total number of flu deaths in a bad year. Some experts are also ignoring the number of deaths caused by the lockdown – and that is already higher than the disease itself.

The Government's scientists seem to me to be over-complicating things. It is a perfect example of groupthink where a group of people meet, talk and then think alike.

This is, perhaps, a good moment to point out that the death rates seem to show that Britain's policies have been among the worst in the world. The Norwegian public health authority concluded the other day that the virus was never spreading as fast as had been feared and was already on its way out when their lockdown was ordered. Countries where the people have been trusted to behave sensibly (covering your mouth when you cough or sneeze for example) have done much better than Britain – with its onerous lockdown policies. And it is worth pointing out that Vietnam, which is rather close to China, has had 327 cases but no deaths. Africa hasn't had many lockdowns or many deaths. Of course, the way Britain has been counting the deaths probably has something to do with Britain's very high death rate. Boris has a dilemma – if he keeps the total low then the house arrests look like overkill. If he lets the total rise too much then his policies look as stupid as they are.

There is no doubt that the police state will be strengthened by Comrade Boris's absurd, impractical and entirely unnecessary laws – which will incidentally, destroy a number of industries. For example, no one will ever dare risk money making a movie or even a television programme in Britain if they know that the whole multi million pound enterprise could be brought to a screeching and very expensive standstill if one extra or assistant wardrobe mistress develops a sniffle.

The UK seems to have more vicious new laws than any other major country. It's a safe bet that the UK is going to come out worst when this farce eventually struggles to a conclusion. British companies are doomed and that won't do much good for the unemployment figures which are going to reach new records. The only people looking forward to the future are the police – it must be fun being a policeman in a police state.

As an aside I should mention that the police seem to be enjoying themselves everywhere. In the United States a woman was wrestled to the ground by police officers for not wearing her mask properly and a woman was arrested for taking her children to a park so that they could play and get a little fresh air. All over America clergymen have been arrested for trying to hold church services.

And inevitably, there have been some Americans eager to do their very best to support the police. Yesterday I saw a video of a woman being chased out of a store for not wearing a mask. The people doing the chasing were, of course, all dutifully wearing masks.

Heaven knows how people would behave if they were at risk of catching a serious disease. I wonder how many of these folk know that the coronavirus of which they are all so terrified has killed around half the number of people killed by a bad flu bug. I wonder how many wore masks last winter to try to protect themselves against the flu.

Finally, I wonder if snitches and sneaks know how much damage they are doing. The police are doing enough harm without members of the public joining in.

Snitches and quislings damage our trust in one another – they create fear, uncertainty, anxiety and distrust and attempt to force us to suppress our individuality and our sense of freedom and personal dignity.

That's the real danger.

The snitches and quislings probably don't realise it but they are doing permanent, fatal damage to our sense of society and our sense of community.

May 31st 2020

How and Why Thousands of Old People Have Been Murdered

I won't see 30 again, unless it has a one in front of it, and, as a result, I am, I have to say, definitely feeling unwanted, superfluous and generally surplus to requirements.

My government and the health service clearly regard me as a nuisance, though the former is happy to send me income tax demands and to accept my cheques and the latter is doubtless ever ready to blush daintily if I should be overcome with the desire to enliven my Thursday evenings with a little light clapping or saucepan banging – though to be honest even if I had been inclined to follow this most curious custom, I would have felt a little foolish since we have no neighbours and I fear the rabbits in our garden would have been a trifle startled if I had lost my mind, stood on the doorstep and tapped a wooden spoon on the bottom of an ancient saucepan.

Some of the young do not seem too concerned about the way their elders have been treated in recent months. A few, indeed, have actually cheered as folk in their 70s, 80s, 90s and more have been ignored, pushed aside and subjected to the biggest mass murder in the so-called civilised world since the Second World War.

The elderly are the new Jews and if you think the word 'murder' is pushing it a bit just stay tuned to this channel as they used to say and I will explain why it isn't.

The young who have ignored what has happened to the elderly should not feel so comfortable or be so sanguine because what has happened to their grandparents will happen to them with the sole difference that it will happen sooner – a lot sooner. Sixty will soon be the new seventy.

When I recorded my first YouTube video back in mid-March of 2020, I explained why the coronavirus scare was a hoax. The title was 'Coronavirus scare: the hoax of the century'. I suggested that it was either a hysterical over-reaction to a disease no more deadly than a common or garden flu, or a devious ploy to terrify the world in order to create a fearful, obedient population which would accept a scary array of new laws in the belief that by doing so they might just survive a form of the flu which was being promoted as a disease slightly deadlier than the plague.

I said back then that I suspected that one of the underlying aims of the politicians who were over-selling the coronavirus bug was probably the demonization and marginalisation of the elderly.

Oh, how they laughed and sneered.

I was, of course, widely demonised and lied about on the internet – largely by ignorant and anonymous bullies who wouldn't recognise a fact if it came in a box with the word FACT stamped on the side in big black letters.

But I fear I was right and I have no doubt that even as I speak a thousand red-faced trolls will be penning their grovelling apologies and begging forgiveness for their arrogance and stupidity.

Right from the start of the absurd and entirely unnecessary process of putting people under house arrest, it was the elderly who were the first to be locked up, or locked in if you prefer.

For absolutely no good reason the elderly were told that they had to stay in their own homes to protect themselves, hospitals and the world. There was never one shred of real evidence for this. On the contrary, it was clear from the start that this cruelty was based on political expediency rather than scientific necessity. Men and women over 70 were told that they couldn't see their loved ones and many were told they would be refused medical treatment – whatever might be wrong with them. People who died, for whatever reason, died alone – abandoned by a system they had helped create and pay for.

It was all total bollocks, of course.

The elderly aren't likely to die from the coronavirus just because they are old.

The people most likely to die from the coronavirus are the people who are most likely to die from the flu – people who are frail, unfit, overweight or suffering from serious, long-term health problems.

As a doctor I can tell you there seem to be just two big differences between the coronavirus and the ordinary flu virus.

First, the flu virus can kill more people.

Second, no flu virus has ever got this much attention or put an entire civilisation back several centuries.

The fact is that the risk of dying from this coronavirus is, for healthy adults, minute.

However, there have been more deaths than there should have been because of the government policies. It isn't just the lockdowns and the terror that have killed people unnecessarily but the way the coronavirus has been mismanaged – either deliberately or through gross incompetence.

If the mathematical modellers, the medical and scientific advisors, the so-called experts and the politicians had all gone on holiday last January, at least 100,000 people around the world would still be alive. The whole damned fuss has been unnecessary and many of the deaths were unnecessary too.

I haven't forgotten about my charge or murder. I'll come to that soon.

But before I do, I just want to say a few more things about the way the elderly have been abused during all this unscientific bullying and blatant discrimination. And it was and is discrimination. Just imagine the fuss there would have been in the posh papers if it had been announced that all homosexuals or women or Methodists were being put under house arrest. Imagine the fuss if the governments had, more sensibly announced that everyone overweight had to stay indoors to protect the health services. That would, at least have had the merit of being logical.

The elderly were, in parts of the world at least, denied all medical care. Many were manipulated into signing 'Do Not Resuscitate' forms – effectively signing their own suicide notes. By being locked away for longer than anyone else, their immune systems were weakened. Many, without internet access, had real difficulty in obtaining food supplies because, despite its promises, their government made virtually no effort to ensure that the elderly received food. The elderly were told that they couldn't see their families. The big lie was that this was to protect the hospitals though no one ever even tried to explain why this should be, and the nonsense was highlighted by the fact that in some areas the elderly were told that they wouldn't be treated in hospital whatever was wrong with them.

None of this was a real surprise, of course. The elderly have been demonised by the media for a long time. They have been blamed for the poverty, the weather and anything else you can think of – despite having worked and paid taxes all their lives. Governments see the elderly as worthless and an expensive drain on society. If you doubt that just look at the sentences given to thugs who attack the elderly. Mug a 40-year-old and you will be punished severely. Mug an 80-year-old and you'll get a light slap on the wrist at worst.

And, of course, the elderly are sneered at and laughed at. When a movie based on my novel, *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War* was released, the reviewer for the London *Sunday Times* dismissively and patronisingly described that he thought the movie's target audience was undemanding oldies. I wrote the novel to draw attention to exactly this sort of rampant ageism.

And so we are now at the nitty gritty. The murder charge.

Some of you may suspect that I am exaggerating: a little hyperbole to draw attention to a small problem.

You would be wrong if you thought that.

The fact is that throughout the world countless thousands of elderly patients with the coronavirus were thrown out of hospitals and dumped in care homes.

Now, let's pause a moment.

What sort of people are you likely to find living in care homes?

a) Fit young folk
b) Fit old folk
c) Sick old folk

Not difficult, is it?

You don't go into a care home unless you are elderly, frail and in need of some care and attention because you are probably suffering from a range of health problems.

And so hospitals sent patients with the coronavirus into care homes which were full of frail, elderly patients with health problems – the very people who often die of the flu. Every winter. No one would ever dream of sending a patient with the flu into a care home but hospitals sent thousands of coronavirus patients into care homes.

The staff in the care homes had no equipment or facilities for isolating the patients who came from hospital with the flu, sorry the coronavirus, from the patients who didn't have it but who were already ill with respiratory problems, heart problems or whatever.

And guess what happened next.

Golly, you really need a medical degree to work it out, don't you?

Thousands of elderly, frail people in care homes caught the coronavirus and because no one would or could treat them they died in droves. Negligence in the care of the elderly in these homes has been widely reported – stories that would make anyone with a heart weep and feel a deep, undying fury. Thousands of older people died alone, with no family or friends allowed near them and with no spiritual support. The only people they saw were dressed as though for a spaceflight.

In Ireland, Norway, France and Belgium more than half of all the coronavirus deaths were in care homes. In the UK and Sweden, over a third of coronavirus deaths were in care homes.

Wasn't it an amazing coincidence that hospitals all over the world all did the same stupid thing. All dumped coronavirus patients in care homes.

For governments everywhere this had the bonus of pushing up the total death rates so providing some justification for the otherwise unjustifiable lockdowns and the utterly stupid and scientifically in-defensive social distancing nonsense. We all know that governments have been doing everything they can to push up the total number of coronavirus deaths by, for example, listing patients as having died of the coronavirus when they actually died with it – two very different things.

At this point we have to ask a simple question: were the old people with the coronavirus sent into care homes through stupidity and incompetence or deliberately to kill off lots of old people?

The answer to this question will only matter when the hospital staff responsible are taken to court and tried – as I sincerely hope they will be.

If they sent sick old people with the coronavirus into care homes through stupidity and incompetence then they will probably get away with a manslaughter charge. Even if they erroneously expected their hospitals to be filled with younger coronavirus patients that is still no excuse.

But if they deliberately sent old people with the coronavirus into care homes knowing that other residents would catch the bug and die then the charge will be murder, and we are looking at a mass murder charge of which even the Nazis might be ashamed.

The added bonus charge, by the way, is that most of the elderly people who were sent to care homes with the coronavirus had caught the bloody thing in hospital because as everyone knows, or should know, most hospitals are so badly managed these days that they are the one place in the world where you are most likely to catch a deadly bug.

In a way it doesn’t really matter whether it was stupidity, incompetence, panic, a lack of care or homicide.

The fact is that umpteen thousand old people died before they should have died. And the hospitals which sent them to their death were largely left half empty because the expected hordes of coronavirus patients never turned up.

The hospitals, hordes of advisors and politicians who allowed it to happen and who recklessly created the circumstances, are all guilty and shouldn’t be allowed to get away with their crimes – whether they be crimes of omission or commission. We live in rich societies and those responsible for caring didn’t care. They dumped the elderly like bags of garbage.

The people who were responsible for this holocaust will probably whinge, wring their hands and say they were all just doing what they were told to do.

We have all heard that excuse before.

It didn’t work then.

And it won’t work now.

I’ll be campaigning for all those responsible to be tried in court.

June 1st 2020

UK Government Now Only Six Weeks Behind Coleman

"Being black is a major risk factor for coronavirus," said Matt Hancock, the UK Health Secretary, on 2nd June.

Brilliant.

I pointed that out on the web on April 13th. It's in my book 'Coming Apocalypse' too – perhaps that's where Master Hancock saw it.

Time and time again the Government has been behind with seeing the obvious.

Boris would do better to fire all the advisors and just read my articles or watch my videos.

June 2nd 2020

Is This How They Plan to Steal and Sell Your DNA?

Governments everywhere are busy rolling out antibody testing programmes.

Antigen tests, which involve taking a swab from the nose or throat, simply show if someone actually has the coronavirus in their body.

Antibody tests may involve taking a blood sample and looking to see if the body contains antibodies which respond to the virus. If you have antibodies in your blood then you have had and have overcome the coronavirus. The sample will be sent off to a laboratory to be tested. This will be a much bigger testing programme then the antigen testing.

Governments are planning to do millions of antibody tests on their populations.

And the key words here are ‘blood sample’.

Because when you take a blood sample you can, of course, easily take a DNA sample. (You can take DNA samples with other body tissues but blood is so easy.)

And if that thought doesn’t strike terror into your heart then you really haven’t been paying attention.

Since March of 2020, governments everywhere have been tearing up all the traditional values which we used to take for granted.

Freedom, democracy and privacy are now just a thing of the past.

Most people in the western world are now living in police states. The Emergency Bill which was passed by the British Government in March gave British politicians and civil servants much the same sort of power over the people that the Patriot Act gave the authorities in America.

We all might as well be living in China or Russia for all the freedom we have these days.

And don’t kid yourself that the governments will give back all that power in a few months’ time. Governments never give back power they’ve taken.

So, to get back to your DNA.

If you trust your government to always do the right and decent thing then you can switch off now. I envy you your innocence and your faith.

I suspect, however, that most people have by now lost what little faith they had in their government and its advisors.

I have shown in other videos how we have been lied to, tricked, manipulated and brainwashed.

I think I’ve had the coronavirus and if I have to have an antibody test I expect that the Government will also take my DNA.

And I expect them to store it.

Along with your DNA.

And everyone else’s DNA.

The next big question is what will they do with it?

And this, again, is a question of trust.

Do we trust them to store our DNA so that they might be able to use it to help us one day?

Sadly, if we believe that when we are well into tooth fairy territory.

I think governments everywhere will take our DNA and store it.

And I think they will sell it.

Governments at all levels have a track record. They sell every bit of information they can collect.

They’ve been selling information about voters for decades.

They sell census information.

They demand private and confidential information.

And then they flog it to anyone prepared to pay the right price.

In the UK, the NHS has been collecting information about us all for years. To begin with, they promised they wouldn’t sell the information. They actually gave us an option. If we didn’t want them to sell our private medical information to drug companies then we could say so. And they wouldn’t.

Well, that’s what they said.

But I think they sold it anyway.

Look on the NHS website and you will see that they say that the NHS collects confidential patient information from all NHS organisations and all private organisations providing NHS funded care.

They then flog this information to researchers, to the medical establishment and, wait for it because this is the good bit, to drug companies.

They say that the drug companies won’t use it for marketing or insurance purposes.

They presumably know that because the companies they sell it to tell them they won’t.

There is still a get out clause if you don’t want them to sell your information but it’s got more holes in it than a colander.

The same is true everywhere.

Private medical information is sold to anyone prepared to buy it.

And this brings us back to your DNA.

I don't think they will be able to resist storing our DNA when they do antibody tests.

And they will sell it.

Of course they will. They'll say that since they took the sample then they own your DNA. And they'll flog it to drug companies, insurance companies and anyone else who wants to buy it.

Governments have already created biobanks with genetic material they took from screening tests. And now governments everywhere need huge amounts of money to pay for the coronavirus mess they have made of the world.

Does all this matter?

Well, I rather think it does.

Drug and insurance companies will know everything about your body. And they will be able to mix and match that with the information they buy from search engines, your bank, the supermarkets and everyone else. The last vestige of your privacy will be gone.

And they will use the information ruthlessly.

As an aside, let me just tell you that since my wife was diagnosed with breast cancer both she and I have been bombarded with utterly unnecessary and inappropriate online advertisements for funeral services, cancer charities and other goodies. I don't know who sold our information but it doesn't really matter where they got it, does it? To say that I find it intrusive is to be considerably politer than I feel.

I strongly suspect that we will have no rights over our DNA.

They will, of course, pass our DNA details onto all police and security services.

We can all trust them, can't we?

Drug companies will use your DNA to predict what diseases you might develop. And they will want to sell you useful drugs to stop you getting whatever it is they know you're going to get wrong with you.

Insurance companies will use your DNA to predict your future. You will, perhaps, find that your premiums suddenly soar because your insurance company knows something about your future.

Employers will doubtless see your DNA details and be unwilling to hire you if they see something in your future that doesn't appeal.

How many job candidates will find themselves being refused time and time again because prospective employers see that they are likely to develop Parkinson's disease or dementia or drug addiction.

Your DNA information will be used in conjunction with your credit card and bank information too, of course. And that will be so much easier when they get rid of nasty, grubby cash.

And they will mix it with all the information you've put on social media and which you cannot erase however hard you try. Anything you ever put on Facebook, for example, belongs to Facebook. Permanently, as in for ever.

So, you will be standing at the check-out at the supermarket and the assistant will take the chocolate bar out of your shopping.

'What's the matter with that?' you will ask, puzzled.

'The system says you can't have that,' the assistant will say. She will look at the screen in front of her. 'You're going to get diabetes so you aren't allowed to buy chocolate.'

When you apply for a driving licence they will tell you that you can't have one.

'Why not?' you will ask.

'Because there is an 82% chance that you are going to develop epilepsy next year,' they will tell you.

You will have no rights over your private information. Companies everywhere will be able to buy it and hackers will be able to steal it.

Hackers?

The woman in charge of Britain's track and trace system was in charge of a phone company called TalkTalk when hackers stole the personal information of 157,000 people. The company was fined massively for not looking after the information properly. Now she is in charge of the tracking and tracing system and the collection of vast amounts of personal information.

What can we do about it?

Well, until they make it compulsory I don't think I'll bother having an antibody test done thank you very much.

June 3rd 2020

Passing Observations (June 3rd 2020)

Why are so many doubtless well-meaning people doing odd things to raise money for the NHS? The NHS doesn't need money. It needs more common sense and more compassion.

There is much talk of a low slung wealth tax to make the middle classes pay for the crisis that has been created out of next to nothing. This would be truly stupid. Every country which has ever introduced a wealth tax has abandoned the idea because it always results in a fall in the total tax take. Those due to pay it either work less (and use up their savings to avoid the tax) or simply move to another country.

Who is paying YouTube to put promotional messages for the NHS underneath my videos? My videos are not monetised – which means that I do not allow advertising or sponsorship.

It has been obvious for ages that the people who need protecting from the coronavirus are not the over 70s but overweight, black diabetics. (They are the people most likely to die from the coronavirus.) But no one likes to say this. And no minister dares to put overweight, black diabetics under house arrest.

Shopping is, in future, going to require a good deal of standing about – waiting for someone to leave so that another shopper can enter the store. I intend to buy a shooting stick. It will be easier to carry than a folding chair.

Farmers don't have anyone to pick their fruit and other crops. We need a Land Army. Why not instruct fit people whose wages are being paid by the Government that they must become temporary fruit pickers for the summer?

The people who created this unholy mess (the politicians and the civil servants) are immune to pension problems – they all receive massive pensions paid for largely by taxpayers. Everyone else is pretty well buggered. The Government has instructed large companies to stop paying dividends and millions of pensioners (and those about to retire) will have to try to live on the world's smallest state pension.

June 3rd 2020

New Law – Everyone Must Now Hop and Wear Galoshes

It appears that the BBC was right when it recently appeared to warn that the coronavirus can be spread by footwear.

The British Prime Minister's team of scientific advisors, known as the Ministerial Intelligence and Notification Team (or MINT for short) has warned that this new threat must be taken seriously if the world is to be saved and drug company profits are to be maximised.

Professor Neil Ferguson of Imperial Mints and the Bill Gates Foundation for Jabbing Scared People with Chemicals has warned that if nothing is done then 300 million Britons will need to be hospitalised and at least 370 million of them will die.

When a journalist timidly pointed out that there aren't that many people in Britain, Professor Ferguson, known to his fan club as the Eddie the Eagle of mathematical modelling, replied that as a result of foot transmission he is expecting a second, third and fourth wave of the infection which will repeatedly wipe out 150% of the entire population.

To deal with this unexpected problem the Prime Minister's special advisor, Dominic Cummings set up a one man committee and has decided that the problem will be halved if everyone hops instead of walking.

'Hopping,' said Sir Dominic, 'will mean that only one contaminated foot will be in contact with the ground at any time.'

The Governmental Advisory committee known as MINT has also recommended that all citizens should wear disposable galoshes. These can be made at home out of old shoe boxes or, for those with smaller feet, old plastic detergent containers and some sticky back tape.

For the medium and long- term, Lord Cummings says that the Government has commissioned a factory in Hungary to manufacture three billion pairs of galoshes.

Laws to ensure that hopping and galosh wearing rules are carefully followed mean that those who do not obey will have one leg amputated. Those who break the law a second time will have a second limb amputated and so on until they have no more legs.

These rules will stay in force for 64 weeks, said the Prime Minister who added that citizens will also be expected to follow existing social distancing and lockdown rules at the same time. Two consenting adults can hop together in their own garden as long as they remain at least six feet six inches apart from each other.

A hopping hotline has been set up to provide advice for those who aren't sure how to hop satisfactorily.

Finally, citizens everywhere are advised to wash their feet in soap and water every twenty minutes.

'We must follow these rules very strictly,' said Lord Cummings. 'If people are careless then there could be a great many deaths among those who spend time walking on their hands or crawling on their hands and knees.'

In order to encourage people to follow the guidelines, the Government has introduced a new set of slogans:

Wash your feet
Wear your galoshes
Hop to it

In addition, every Wednesday at 7 p.m., citizens will be encouraged to stand on their doorsteps, on one leg of course, and to toss their unwanted shoes into the street while chanting Shoe, Shoe, Shoe as loudly as they can.

Concerned citizens who want to help the nation will be asked to hop around their gardens or up and down their stairs (taking great care as they do so, of course) to raise money for the Bill Gates Foundation for Global Control and World Government.

If you believe any of that you probably believe in the lockdowns and social distancing, which make just as much sense, you may have been permanently destabilised and I'm afraid there is little hope for you.

Finally, don't forget to brainwash yourself every day by repeating my special mantra:

Distrust the government
Avoid mass media
Fight the lies

June 5th 2020

Passing Observations (June 5th 2020)

Yesterday morning, YouTube took down my video about how I fear governments plan to steal and sell your DNA. I complained that the video contained facts and an assessment of the future – a prognosis. The only difference between my hypothesis and the hypothesis put forward by the seemingly hopeless Ferguson (the Eddie the Eagle of mathematical modelling) is accuracy. I don't think his was and I suspect mine is. That's why it was taken down. Ten minutes after I had complained, YouTube restored the video. This saves me making another 'Why Did They Ban My Video' tape. If you haven't already watched the first one please do. It's called 'Why Did YouTube Ban My Video', it's about free speech and the freedom of the press, and when I last looked it had received a respectable 258,000 views.

The demonstrations about the death of a black American are understandable and undoubtedly full of well-meaning people but I fear that those folk are doing what the authorities want them to do – they are distracting attention from our global fight for survival and freedom. If we don't all fight together then we will all be slaves for life. I'm not joking. The McCann story which hit the front pages of all the UK papers appeared to be another deliberate distraction. We only get one chance to win the big fight. Predictably, Lewis Hamilton, a racing driver, threw himself into the controversy about the killing of the black American. He said he was overcome with rage at the events following the death. How about a little rage at events which resulted in the deaths of thousands of British citizens (black and white) in care homes? If Mr Hamilton really wants to help improve society he could perhaps do more by moving back to the UK and paying income tax. The tax on his obscene earnings would pay for the hiring of many, many nurses or policemen. Mr Hamilton, who has lived in tax exile for years, is famous to many for even managing to avoid paying tax on the £16.5 million aeroplane he bought. He is alleged to have used a company in the British Virgin Islands and another one on the Isle of Man. In my view, people who are tax exiles and who work hard to avoid paying tax forfeit the right to comment on social issues.

Antoinette and I went shopping in a local supermarket. There were quite a few other shoppers around but I am delighted to report that I saw no masks and no gloves. There was no social distancing – we all just moved about as normal. Antoinette said there were some directional signs on the floor but I'm afraid I didn't see them. This was a pity because if I'd seen them I would have been able to ignore them.

The Greens are demanding that if and when attempts are made to restore our economy, every effort should be made to do so along lines which will satisfy the looniest of the climate change nutters. If this happens then there is absolutely no hope for us, millions more will be unemployed for life and hundreds of thousands will die. The Greens have three qualities: they are arrogant, stupid and narrow minded. They also insist on wearing cameras on their silly cycling helmets.

Please do whatever you can to spread the truth. Share videos and ask people to visit this website. Try to convert those who are terrified and who believe that the coronavirus is the 21st century version of the plague. There are no subscription charges and no advertisements on my YouTube channel or this website and we promise not to try to sell them T-shirts or fancy mugs. But I will mention my books from time to time, when appropriate, so that, if you buy one, Antoinette and I can eat occasionally. (It's a bad habit we picked up.)

The BBC has reported (as though with surprise) that new car sales were down 97% in Northern Ireland in May. How could they be surprised? I am surprised that the sales were not down 100%. Who on earth managed to buy a car with all the showrooms shut? (We bought a new car about two days before the lockdown started. It's a dream vehicle and it has so far travelled a grand total of 175 miles in nearly three months.)

Although the lockdowns have been lifted a little, Antoinette and I hardly every go out. Our house and garden are big enough for us to move about and we live on a sort of island. When we do venture out through our gate it requires a good deal of effort. We are natural recluses and we are aware that if we aren't careful we will become complete recluses. I suspect there are several million more potential recluses in Britain alone.

Professor Ferguson (aka Professor Lockdown and Professor Pantsdown) is reported to have admitted to a House of Lords Select Committee that Sweden achieved much the same result as the UK in suppressing the coronavirus – but without a lockdown and the associated health, social and economic problems.

Sir Richard Dearlove, the former head of MI6 says he has seen a scientific report suggesting that the coronavirus was man-made by Chinese scientists. Donald Trump and the CIA have said the same thing. So why haven't we been shown this report?

Nearly half of all primary schools didn't open on 1st June as they should have done. Was this the fault of teachers or parents? And if parents didn't send their children to school was it because they were frightened of the virus or (more likely) that they refused to send their children into a scary environment where the teachers were likely to be wearing masks, gloves and plastic smocks.

The UK Government has introduced quarantine for travellers with absolutely no scientific basis for the decision. I suggested in March that if the Government were serious about the risk they should close our borders. The current quarantine plan is miles too late and useless. It will, however, destroy the tourist industry, the airline industry and much of the economy.

June 5th 2020

How the Hell Did We Get Here?

I am delighted that the German Government now agrees with my view, first expressed on February 28th on my website, that the fuss over the coronavirus was an exaggeration. They have not, however, gone far enough to agree with my view (expressed on the same date) that there were a number of hidden agendas.

I still stand by everything I said on 28th February and in my first video, recorded in mid-March and entitled 'Coronavirus Scare: The Hoax of the Century'. I wonder how many Government ministers and advisors can say that.

It is time, I think, to take a brief look at where we are.

Today, in Britain, we live in a country split in two. Some believe there is some dirty, hidden agenda and that the lockdown and social distancing are a nonsense. The others, now pitifully obedient and impoverished in spirit, are just waiting for the promised vaccine. When it arrives they will beg to be first in the queue – whatever the risks might be. I don't mean to be rude but I sometimes feel that a good many have been so terrorised, so overwhelmed with the Government's barrage of fake news that they have turned into zombies. If St Vitus turned up they would dance behind him to the ends of the earth. They would follow the Pied Piper of Hamelin anywhere if he promised them safety from the virus.

So, it is, I think, time to take a cold, hard look at where we are now and what has happened since the end of February during which time everything has changed and those of us who are creatures of habit are still desperately searching for new habits to which we can cling.

GPs all around Britain shut their surgeries back in March and many have been offering telephone or video only consultations. No one has yet managed to explain to me how it is possible to listen to a chest, look in a sore ear, palpate an abdomen or check a breast lump from the other end of a telephone. Maybe medical techniques have advanced a good deal since I was a GP. Or maybe a good many diagnoses will be missed and a good many GPs will be spending the next few years fighting in the courts to defend themselves against malpractice suits. Trying to diagnose patients through a video link isn't much better than using the telephone. GPs need to see their patients face to face. Looks, instinct, rapport and even smell are all important when understanding patients and making diagnoses.

Opticians and dentists are effectively closed, though dentists will be opening soon to try to deal with the huge backlog of patients needing emergency treatment. I wonder how many million teeth will be lost unnecessarily. I wonder how many people will lose their sight because of the lockdown. I doubt if anyone will ever know.

In the UK, hospitals are nearly shut and nearly empty. UK figures show that around 2.4 million cancer patients are now waiting for surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy, screening checks and mammograms. Patients who attend any medical facility, or ring 999 or 111, will be labelled according to whether or not they have respiratory signs or symptoms. Those who do have respiratory symptoms will be assumed to have covid-19 since it is the default diagnosis. They will be put into what hospitals think of as isolation and other possible diagnoses will almost certainly be ignored. There is no scrutiny or oversight of treatment programmes.

Hairdressers will open soon but the local hospital has announced that it has no idea when the physiotherapy department will open. And churches are still closed for the foreseeable future, which given the fact that few have a congregation that would threaten social distancing is downright cowardly and utterly shameful. Anyone seeking spiritual comfort or solace will have to manage without.

The rules about social distancing and the lockdown are so absurdly complicated that hardly anyone understands them. One of the Government's advisors said that if we all kept three feet apart we'd be fine (actually he said a metre but I haven't gone metric and don't intend to do so) but another two said we had to stay six feet six inches apart. The World Health Organisation which is supposed to know about these things said three feet would do nicely and so did the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. Keeping six feet and a bit apart will destroy cafes, pubs and restaurants, cinemas, theatres and most of everything else. There doesn't seem to be any science at all showing how far we should be advised to keep apart. The only real science is that which shows that coughs and sneezes can travel 24 feet but no one has suggested that. There is some evidence that the military like to keep people six feet apart because it makes identification easier.

The Government has said that up to six friends or neighbours may come into your garden unless they are over 70-years-of age. If you are in Scotland then you have eight friends or neighbours to visit. In Wales you may invite people from two households so two big families could produce a gathering of two dozen or more. But all this jolliness must take place out of doors. The visitors can only go through your house in order to get to your garden or, in extremis, to visit the loo. Visitors are warned that they should go to their own loo before visiting so as to reduce the likelihood of this being necessary. What if it rains? Well the rule is that you have to stay out of doors and so everyone will just have to get drenched and hope they don't develop pneumonia. Oddly, as far as I know, there have been no official rulings specifically banning guests from sheltering in a greenhouse, garden shed, log shed or coal bunker.

People coming into the country have to go into quarantine for a fortnight so that is the end of airlines, tourism and heaven knows what else.

If anyone takes notice of this nonsense then I fear for their sanity.

The confusion appears to be global. In one part of the United States it is illegal to sit on the beach but legal to swim in the sea but in another part it is legal to sit on the beach but illegal to swim in the sea. If anyone in the Government understood the rules they would doubtless produce an APP to help punters and Government advisors find out what is and is not allowed.

In Germany police arrested a man for not wearing a mask but the police who did the arresting weren't wearing masks.

It has been revealed that the mass media were bought with government advertising, and governments are now officially the main source of fake news. The wise will never again buy a newspaper (or read one online). We expect the BBC to betray us – but not the tabloids. I say this with great sadness for during two decades I wrote columns for four national newspapers and around 5,000 articles for magazines and newspapers.

Juries have been abandoned and criminals are now judged by establishment plants sitting alone. The Government is bringing in a law to make it illegal to reveal information about what is going on in Britain or to criticise anything that is happening. The punishments will be draconian.

School teachers are exhibiting remarkable ignorance in that the danger to them is not from children but, if at all, from other teachers. They have been seen dressed in the sort of protective gear you might choose if you were planning to remove six tons of asbestos from an old church. If they don't want to catch the flu they should just avoid other members of staff. Children, terrified and scarred for life, will never recover from this unnecessary trauma.

Shoppers have to wait outside, rain or sunshine, until someone leaves since most stores only accept a very limited number of customers. In some parts of the world shoppers have to go through a special shower cubicle where they will be sprayed with a light mist of a saline solution. (Spraying water in a mist is, of course, the way in which Legionnaires Disease usually spreads.) Once in a shop, potential customers aren't allowed to browse or try on items if it is a clothes shop. There will be no café and no loos.

On the internet the 77th Brigade of the British Army, which exists to fight information warfare seems to have turned its attention onto British taxpayers. There is now a special force of three to four thousand British soldiers engaged full time in removing material from social media. There are said to be around 20,000 keyboard warriors in reserve. The army is working with the Cabinet Office Rapid Response Unit to squash dissent. Goebbels and his chums were good at that sort of thing. I wonder whether we can thank the army for the distractions which have effectively changed the news recently.

Whether the army is deciding what to remove from the internet or obeying orders from somewhere else this doesn't seem an entirely democratic action but then we aren't living in democracy any more. We are paying soldiers to take down the truth so that the Government's lies will prevail.

This, we are constantly being told, is the new normal. What a hideous phrase. Is this how life is going to be? It certainly isn't a normal I'm prepared to accept. Normal is a world where honest, law abiding folk can speak their mind and say what they think without fear that they will be banned, demonised or imprisoned. What's normal about a world in which anyone who questions the Government is labelled a dissident, a subversive or a conspiracy theorist? What's normal about a world where thousands of soldiers, paid by us to protect us, spend their days censoring what we say and eradicating the truth so that the fake news spread by the Government can prevail?

Nearly half the people in the country are now being paid by the Government, one way or another, and when the Government stops handing out money many of them will be unemployed. Billionaires living in tax exile are being showered with taxpayers' money so that they don't have to spend their own money to keep their businesses alive. And that's all normal is it?

How bad has the infection really been?

Most doctors with brains now agree with me that governments, particularly the Government in the UK, have deliberately exaggerated the death total in order to justify their extraordinary response.

Whatever the death total is alleged to be today, you can take a third out of the total to cover the elderly people who died, needlessly and criminally, in nursing homes and care homes. And half to two thirds of those left would have died anyway of an underlying disease. Of the remaining deaths, a goodly proportion were wrongly labelled since they died with the coronavirus rather than of it. Most of the rest were over 80 years of age and very frail.

And whatever you are left with should be compared with the death rate from the ordinary influenza which, in a bad year, in the UK, can easily reach 50,000. The global deaths from flu can exceed 600,000.

As I've been saying for three months now, I feel safe in guaranteeing that the genuine coronavirus total will be nowhere near as high as that.

So the only possible conclusion is that the coronavirus is no more dangerous than the ordinary flu – and possibly not as dangerous as a bad flu.

Even Ferguson, the serial dunce whose past record makes him the Eddie the Eagle of mathematical modelling (but without the sense of fun and patriotism) and whose sums were the trigger for the lockdown, now agrees that we would have been just as well off following the Swedish route and ignoring the notion of a major lockdown. I have to confess, by the way, that I can't believe that anyone who was looking for someone to give advice about how to deal with an epidemic, and who looked at Ferguson's past record, would put him in a short list of 60 million out of a population of 60 million. Is Ferguson the most incompetent scientist on the planet? I'd vote for him.

I've discussed his track record before. It is, I think, sufficient to say that I would find it embarrassing if it were mine.

Presumably, Comrade Boris knew of this when he hired him? If there are prizes going round for cocking things up then Comrade Boris would get the gold cup – unless, of course, he was acting under orders.

I don't wish to be rude, I really don't, but you would have to be a moron to believe that the lockdowns, the social distancing and the fact that we are living in a police state have anything to do with a bug that would have a job to give a flu bug a run for its money. Only MPs, the BBC and assorted hack journalists, and a bunch of desperate celebrities and around 20 million assorted gullibles still believe that we are being threatened by the 21st century version of the plague.

The questions queue up to be answered.

Why are we still destroying the world when Dr Gupta, an epidemiology professor at Oxford University reported that the death rate from the coronavirus is between 0.01% and 0.1% – making it no more of a threat than flu?

Who is going to pay for the fact that the UK will have one of the highest death rates in the world and one of the worst social and economic results? Why do the experts seem unable to differentiate between assessing the number of people who will catch the disease and the number who will die if they do catch it?

Did Boris Johnson really have the coronavirus? It was a most convenient disease. Was he really as ill as we were told?

Is it true that everything is being done in order to sell a vaccine which will be compulsory and make gazillions for people not a million miles removed from the Government?

Is the sound we all hear at 8 p.m. on Thursdays now the sound of lawyers rubbing their hands with glee? If the lawsuits start coming then Ferguson and Imperial College will need even more money than Bill Gates has got in order to pay for this monumental series of disasters.

Just think of all those thousands dying in care homes.

Are we going to see the biggest murder trial in history?

So, is the Government comprised entirely of morons?

I wouldn't say it was impossible. I certainly wouldn't want anyone in the Government, or any of the advisors, taking an IQ test for me. Cummings is said by some to be the brains behind the Government and that says enough. The UK is now the most buggered country on the planet.

As we search for explanations, the questions just keep on coming.

Who bought the Government?

What's going to happen next?

It isn't about science and it's not simple politics.

So it must be about money and control.

Is the plan to force a civil war between those who are desperate for the lockdown to continue and those who are equally determined that it should end now? I have no idea. No one would believe what has happened if it were written as a science fiction novel.

There is nothing they won't stoop to and nothing I now consider impossible. We must now assume the worst of our Government at all times.

The only real certainty is that living through this is worse than living through a war. We aren't likely to be bombed, it is true, but in a war you do at least know who the enemy is, what is going on and what the end game is likely to be. Today, those of us who can see the truth look around and are bewildered by the lunacy of the grovelling masses; terrorised into obedience.

I no longer believe anything I am told by governments or the media. Remember my three phrase mantra:

Distrust the Government,
Avoid mass media,
Fight the lies.

Paranoia is the only sensible, healthy, sane condition. Those who protest now regard themselves as being members of a resistance movement trying to rescue the last vestiges of freedom and democracy.

Britain used to be a wonderful place to live.

No more. We are now weaker than any other nation.

No one will want to come here.

And everyone who lives here will want to leave.

Eventually, someone is going to have to pay for all this.

Meanwhile, we must, can and will win this war – and we have to think of it as a war, the most crucial in our lifetimes.

June 6th 2020

Why We Must Fight To Keep Cash

I had an exciting moment the other day.

I popped into a shop.

I had to queue to get in, of course, because there were already two people in there.

And to be honest it wasn't too exciting.

It wasn't a bookshop or an antique shop or one of those lovely establishments that used to be called junk shops but which are now called something rather posher, depending upon the whim of the proprietor.

It was a greengrocer.

Cabbages, carrots, potatoes – the usual sort of thing. And walnuts. The squirrels who live in our garden and have their dreys in our trees love walnuts and now that cinemas, theatres, restaurants, pubs, amusement arcades and bowling alleys have all been forced to close we get a lot of excitement and fulfilment from watching squirrels crack open a walnut shell and enjoy the nut inside. We all get our thrills where we can.

So, there I was – in the greengrocers. I had no mask on because I wasn't planning to rob them but I was wearing a Panama hat which I consider far more useful protection since it provides protection against the sun, the rain and the seagulls.

I was standing behind a line painted on the floor, as they like you to do these days, keeping the legally acceptable distance from the till but just close enough so that I could just reach the counter if I stretched out. I put down my purchases, reached into my pocket, took out my wallet and removed a note.

The assistant behind the till looked at me as though I were about to hand her a grenade with the pin removed. She wore plastic gloves and a mask but no hat or goggles. I don't know about her feet. She may have been wearing galoshes.

'Cash?' she said.

'Yes!' I replied brightly. It seemed an odd question but these are strange times.

'People keep giving me cash,' she complained. 'You're the third in a row.'

'That's nice,' I said, handing her the note.

'You should pay with a card,' she said, sternly. She reluctantly took the note between finger and thumb, as though it might explode.

A bomb disposal expert would have accepted a pinless grenade with far less fuss.

She hurriedly stuffed the note into the till and threw some coins down as my change.

'They should make cash illegal,' she said, as I picked up my charge and my purchases. 'It's dirty and spreads disease,' she said. 'It kills people.'

I tried to offer her some reassurance. I pointed out that it has always been known that real money can carry bugs but that it's not really dangerous as long as you don't eat it. Washing your hands will get rid of any bugs.

She didn't want any reassurance. She had been terrified by the Government's brainwashing techniques and by the fake news spread by the mainstream media. I could have talked to her for an hour and not soothed her terror.

(There's an irony for you. The biggest source of fake news these days is the Government. The mainstream media spreads more dangerous, fake news than the internet. There was a story in the papers about a taxi driver who had allegedly caught the coronavirus from a note he had handled. How could anyone ever know that?)

Getting rid of cash is, of course, another of the Government's many hidden agendas. And their dream will soon come true; they are getting closer to achieving a cashless society.

An increasing number of councils are installing machines in their car parks which insist that motorists pay via an App – whatever an App might be. They don't want you to pay with cash anymore.

I hate council run car parks.

First, they insisted that you key your car number into the machine before you could pay. I can never remember our car number and I always have to trudge back to the car, write down the number and trudge back to the machine (where there is inevitably a queue) before I can pay. They want your car number for two reasons. First, so they know where everyone is and because they know you aren't at home they can send someone round to steal your television set. Second, so that if you have some time left on your ticket you cannot be a bit of a Good Samaritan and give the ticket to a motorist just arriving. Isn't that just the meanest thing?

I must stop rambling.

A cashless society won't be much fun. No sixpences under the pillow from the tooth fairy. No giving a few quid to a homeless person so they can buy a pair of second hand shoes, a charity shop jacket or a bottle of cheap plonk. No crisp note tucked into a birthday card. No saving coins in a piggy bank. No excitement from a half a crown tucked into a hot little hand by a loving grandma. No tips slipped into the gloved hand of a hotel doorman. No coins tossed into a hat for a busker who gives life to a dull street or underground railway station. No coins for an arcade machine. No coins in a wishing well. No three coins in a fountain.

A cashless society will be duller in a thousand ways. Giving money digitally is no fun. And if you don't know and trust the recipient it is risky too.

Cash helps children learn the value of money. Cash helps stop people getting into debt. Credit cards, on the other hand, encourage uncontrollable debt.

The woman in the greengrocer's, falsely terrified into believing that my plastic £20 note was going to kill her, probably didn't realise what she had been manipulated into wishing for.

Credit and debit cards enable governments to track our every move. And they enable the card holding companies to record everything we buy. Use a card at a supermarket and they know exactly what you buy. I know a woman who stopped buying tampons in her weekly shop. She was suddenly bombarded with advertisements for baby clothing and prams. Her husband wanted to know why he found that he was about to become a father through their shared email account.

Cash gives a sense of the reality and importance of money. Plastic encourages waste and unsustainable expenditure.

Cash can be stolen, they say.

Yes, it can.

But you can only lose what is in your wallet or purse.

Lose your plastic and you can lose everything you have and some you don't have. Bank fraud is growing and it is no fun. We had a bank account emptied by a thief through no fault of ours and it wasn't very enjoyable.

Finally, they can cut off your money in seconds with a few key strokes. If you speak out and cause trouble they can and will close all your accounts just to shut you up.

If you don't obey the social distancing laws they can turn you into a beggar overnight.

You think I am exaggerating?

You don't think they'd do that?

Let me tell you something about smart meters for electricity – those absurd little machines which the trusting and the innocent and the too honest have allowed their power company to install.

The UK's absurdly fashionable Department of Energy and Climate Change has boasted that if people have smart meters then energy supplies can be cut off if they are using too much electricity and only restored if their energy consumption becomes more conservative. (I have no idea who decides how much is 'too much'.) With a smart meter they can also cut off your power, and therefore your phones and Wi-Fi, if you put unauthorised messages on the internet.

They don't tell you this stuff when they try to persuade you to have a smart meter fitted. They just tell you that it will help you save nine pence a year.

So, next time you go into a shop and they don't want to accept cash, put your purchases down on the counter and tell them you will go somewhere else – where they do take cash. That's the only way we can fight back. Use cash as much as you possibly can.

June 7th 2020

Passing Observations (June 8th 2020)

Antoinette spotted a photo of a shop where the owner had put up signs saying ‘No Masks, Handshakes OK, Hugs very OK’. Good for him. What a role model for shopkeepers everywhere.

Negative interest rates are almost here. This absurdity will mean that savers have to pay banks to store their money. Millions who have worked hard and saved will doubtless wish they’d spent their money. Is this another ploy to destroy our independence?

The hatred of those who question the value and safety of vaccination is so great (and so well organised by the pro-vaccine establishment) that my novel *The Truth Kills* has been attacked because one of the characters (a young female doctor) dares to question vaccination as part of the story. I find it rather worrying that people get demonically excited because of the views held by a fictional character.

The more a virus moves around the weaker it tends to get. And so locking people in their houses and shutting schools has meant that the virus hasn’t been weakened. If more young people had been allowed to catch the coronavirus (a bug which doesn’t usually do much harm to the young) then the number of older and more vulnerable people dying would have been dramatically reduced.

Shutting people in their homes and arresting them for sunbathing or sitting in parks was a criminal error. Our bodies need sunlight to boost vitamin D levels. Vitamin D provides protection against viruses such as those causing colds and flu. So preventing people from going outside contributed to the seriousness of the disease. The Government’s absurd policy has, once again, killed people.

In Scotland, more people died from the coronavirus in care homes than in hospitals.

Synagogues have banned singing since singing can spread viruses. How long before shouting is banned? (Not a bad idea). And then how long before talking is prohibited?

Half of Britons increased the amount of alcohol they drank, or the number of days on which they drank, during their house arrest.

All the hand washing means that our water is running out. The consumption of water rose by a quarter during the mass house arrest programme. There will likely be water restrictions this coming summer.

Britain’s mass house arrest led to a 42% increase in divorce enquiries.

Many shops (including bookshops) have announced that they will ban browsing. Here’s a safe prediction: shops which ban browsers won’t survive. They might as well close now and get it over with.

‘Like many an oldie, he seems utterly baffled by the tech,’ wrote Freddy Gray in *The Spectator* magazine. He was writing about Joe Biden, US Presidential candidate. Ageism just won’t die, will it? Would Mr Gray have dared say: ‘Like many a woman, she seems utterly baffled by the tech,’?

June 8th 2020

Face Masks – Ending the Confusion

Everyone in the world seems confused about whether or not we should wear masks to protect us from the coronavirus. The general consensus among politicians and the so-called experts quoted in the media appears to me to be that wearing masks does no good but that we should wear them anyway and that we don't need to wear them although they are very useful. This advice is given freely by commentators who are untroubled by facts or research or annoying things of that nature and conflicting pronouncements are regularly made by politicians who clearly know so little about medical matters that they probably couldn't even manage to spell technical medical words such as diarrhoea.

The World Health Organisation, which has loads of highly paid doctors and specialists investigating such matters, appears to lead the confusion. Indeed, their confusion seems to me so confusing that they have confused me. They initially said that healthy individuals only needed to wear a mask if they were taking care of someone suspected of having the coronavirus. The science doesn't seem to me to have changed but the advice from the WHO has changed. I'll come on to why that might be in another video.

Governments everywhere are collectively confused although individual politicians everywhere all seem to have firm views on the matter, usually derived from the bloke who cuts their hair or the woman in the corner shop who knows about these things.

Hospitals and doctors also seem confused. You find me 1,000 hospital staff who think that masks are a good idea and that we should all wear them all the time, even when we are in the bath, and I will find you 1,000 hospital staff who think they are useless or dangerous or both.

The odd thing is that there don't seem to be any studies relating to the use of masks with the coronavirus.

Nevertheless, around the world the mask industry is booming. The people who aren't working on a new wonder vaccine are making masks.

There are videos and books explaining how to make your own mask out of unwanted bits and pieces found lying around the home. It is possible to make two excellent face masks out of the cups of an old brassiere, using the straps to fashion loops to go around the ears or the back of the head. Naturally, the size of the bra has a big influence on its suitability for turning into a face mask and a bra measuring 44GG is probably going to be a little on the loose side for most people. And if you need fresh masks every day you will need a large supply of bras.

Despite the confusion, the British Government announced that from June 15th everyone in England must wear a mask when using public transport. You can travel on public transport on the 14th without a mask but on the 15th you will need a mask, presumably because the Government knows that the virus will suddenly become more dangerous then. I have absolutely no idea what the rules are in Scotland or Wales but they're bound to be different to England because both Scotland and Wales are desperate to prove that they are independent countries, but if they don't follow the English law then if you are on a train which crosses a border you can presumably remove your mask until your return journey. You may also have to wear a mask if entering a shop or a public building or an office though this doesn't appear to be a law. There doesn't seem to be much in the way of guidance for police officers but the Government says it doesn't expect there to be any problems. That's probably not quite the firm ruling that the police would have liked so we can presumably expect the confusion to spread into the courts.

In the UK, the Government that appears now to be only looking after England, has previously admitted that wearing a mask does not protect the wearer but it may protect other people if the wearer has the infection but doesn't know it. And the Government has added that you don't have to wear a mask if you are under the age of two, if you find it difficult to manage a mask properly or if you have a respiratory problem of any kind which may make breathing difficult. I take this to mean that anyone who has asthma, hay-fever, emphysema, bronchitis, a smoker's cough or anything else a bit chesty doesn't have to wear one. I suffer from hay-fever and get a bit wheezy from time to time so I'm afraid I can't possibly wear one. I'll write myself a little note saying that I have an intermittent chest condition and cannot possible wear a mask and if a policeman stops me I'll show him that. I should mention here that there is evidence that people who don't wear masks in public may be harassed and abused by people who are wearing them. I think that's a risk that I'm prepared to take.

No one with mental illness of any kind should be expected to wear a mask. Nor should anyone with dementia though I am not sure they are on the list of exclusions. No one seems to have worried much about this but the hearing impaired who rely on lip reading will obviously be badly affected if everyone wears a mask. People with skin conditions might find that wearing a mask causes eczema, dermatitis or other problems – particularly if the mask has been washed in a biological detergent. In my view, patients who are ill in hospital shouldn't wear a face mask, especially if they are in bed, because of the risk of them inhaling their vomit if they are sick.

The world is now awash with conflicting reports on how or when or whether to wear a mask to protect you against the flu, the lurgy or the embarrassment of having egg on your chin.

Some people, such as the Mayor of London, want masks to be compulsory though no one has provided evidence for the compulsion. Early on in this farce, Act 1 scene 2 I think it was, the Mayor allegedly threatened to order people to wear masks in London if the Government did not do so. In the end, I got so darned confused myself that I decided to put a cold compress on my forehead, settle down with some research papers and set out on an expedition to find the truth. In the end I came to a very firm, definitive conclusion which I shall now add to the mix. If the mayor of London, who was I believe trained as a lawyer, can have a view then I'm damned sure I am entitled to a firm view too. Maybe we can do a deal. I'll promise not to do any 'legal eagle' stuff if he'll promise to shut up about medical stuff.

Incidentally, talking of lawyers, I think Mr Khan can consider himself trumped because on 30th March, the former Supreme Court Justice Jonathan Sumption QC told us all that the police have no power to enforce Ministers' preferences and that there was nothing in the existing legislation which empowered a police officer to force a citizen of the UK to wear a mask on public transport or anywhere else.

Lord Sumption pointed out that even if the Government rushed through new legislation the laws would have to be justified and proportionate in order to avoid violating our human rights and civil liberties.

He went on to suggest that since masks may endanger the wearer, they are a contravention of Article 2 of the Human Rights Act.

'I hope,' he said, 'that UK citizens will unite in civil disobedience to the unlawful, unjustified and disproportionate violation of our human rights and refuse either to wear a mask or to pay the fixed penalty notice for not doing so. If enough of us take a stand against the further encroachment on our civil liberties, we can look forward to hundreds of thousands of court cases in which the Crown tries to prove the scientific validity of wearing masks to combat a virus that has been circulating in the UK for five months.'

That statement was made over two months ago, so it's seven months now.

I've been unable to find out if Lord Sumption still believes that but I'm really looking for medical facts so I offer his two month old views only out of curiosity and a sense of respect.

One thing I need to point out before I forget is that there is, as always, a good deal of fake news around about masks. In particular, some mainstream media outlets delight in dismissing the risks associated with face masks as fake news. The fact is that masks can be dangerous and need to be worn only when necessary. Anyone who denies that has either been bought or is woefully ignorant. There's a good deal of both around these days.

First, I want to give you some facts about face masks themselves which are, of course, much more complicated than they appear to be at first sight. Governments don't seem to bother differentiating between different types of mask and I think that tells us a good deal about why they want us to wear them – again, that's something I'll explore in another video.

The World Health Organisation recommends that disposable masks should be discarded after one use.

The WHO doesn't seem to have any guidelines for masks made out of washable material but it's a fair guess that it would recommend washing thoroughly at a high temperature after every use. Unfortunately, washing cloth face masks makes them even less effective. The more you wash the mask the less effective it becomes.

Masks are effective only when used in combination with frequent hand washing with soap and water or an alcohol based hand rub.

Fabric masks may allow viruses to enter and are not considered to be anywhere near as protective as surgical masks. A study I have seen entitled 'Optical microscopic study of surface morphology and filtering efficiency of face masks' concluded that face masks made of cloth are not very good at filtering out viruses because the pores are much bigger than the particulate matter that needs to be kept out. One study showed that facemasks may have pores five thousand times larger than virus particles. If this is accurate it means that the virus will wander through the face mask much like a mouse wandering through Marble Arch.

Masks are only really effective if they fit perfectly and if the wearer does not move their head while wearing them. Touching a mask appears to stop the mask providing protection. It has been suggested that you should put on a new mask if you have touched the one you are wearing.

Surgical masks are worn to stop bits of food or hair falling from the surgeon or nurse into a wound. They will stop some bacteria but will not usually stop viruses.

Much of the air we breathe in and out goes around the side of the mask unless it is very tight fitting. The effectiveness of a mask depends massively on the nature of the mask, how it is worn and how often it is changed. How long will it be before we are expected to attend facemask wearing classes?

So much for the masks themselves.

Next, I want to look at the serious health problems which might be associated with wearing a mask and which have been largely ignored or dismissed by politicians and the sort of media which has been bought by governments.

Does wearing a face mask reduce your immunity levels?

No one seems to know the answer for sure but it seems possible that if people wear face masks for long periods (months or years) then the absence of contact with the real world might well have a harmful effect on immunity – if the face mask works. Do face masks prevent us developing immunity to particular diseases? This depends on many factors – mainly the effectiveness of the face mask. But if the mask isn't preventing the development of immunity then it probably isn't worth wearing.

The two widely acknowledged hazards of wearing a face mask are first that the mask may give a false sense of security and stop people taking other precautions – such as washing their hands. Secondly, if masks aren't worn properly – according to the guidelines I have listed – they can do more harm than good.

There is no doubt that face masks can be dangerous. In China, two school boys who were wearing face masks while running on a track both collapsed and died – possibly, I would surmise, because the strain on their hearts by the shortage of oxygen proved fatal.

A report published in the *British Medical Journal* summarised some other risks.

First, when you wear a face mask some of the air you breathe out goes into your eyes. This can be annoying and uncomfortable and if, as a result, you touch your eyes you may infect yourself.

Second, face masks make breathing more difficult and, as I have already pointed out, anyone who has a breathing problem will find that a mask makes it worse. Also, some of the carbon dioxide which is breathed out with each exhalation is then breathed in because it is trapped. Together these factors may mean that the mask wearer may breathe more frequently or more deeply and if that happens then someone who has the coronavirus may end up breathing more of the virus into their lungs. If a mask is contaminated because it has been worn for too long then the risks are even greater. How long is too long? No one knows. No research has been done as far as I know.

Third, there is a risk that the accumulation of the virus in the fabric of the mask may increase the amount of the virus being breathed in. This might then defeat the body's immune response and cause an increase in infections – other infections, not just the coronavirus.

Another report, again written with medical authority, offers more problems.

Dr Russell Blaylock, a retired neurosurgeon, reported that wearing a face mask can produce a number of problems varying from headaches to hypercapnia (a condition in which excess carbon dioxide accumulates in the body) and that the problems can include life threatening complications.

The risk of side effects developing when wearing a mask depend to some extent on whether the mask is made of cloth or paper or is an N95 mask filtering out at least 95% of airborne particles.

One study of 212 healthcare workers showed that a third of them developed headaches with 60% needing painkillers to relieve the headache. Some of the headaches were thought to be caused by an increase in the amount of carbon dioxide in the blood or a reduction in the amount of oxygen in the blood. Another study, this time of 159 young health workers showed that 81% developed headaches after wearing facemasks – so much that their work was affected.

A third study, involving 53 surgeons, showed that the longer a mask was worn the greater the fall in blood oxygen levels. This may lead to the individual passing out and it may also affect natural immunity – thereby increasing the risk of infection.

An N95 mask can reduce blood oxygenation by as much as 20% and this can lead to a loss of consciousness. Naturally, this can be dangerous for car drivers, for pedestrians or for people standing up.

Dr Blaylock also pointed to a study entitled 'The use of masks and respirators to prevent transmission of influenza: a systematic review of the scientific evidence.' This study looked at 17 separate studies and concluded that none of the studies established a conclusive relationship between the use of masks and protection against influenza infection.

'When a person has TB we have them wear a mask,' concluded Dr Blaylock, 'not the entire community of the non- infected.'

I wonder if our leaders know all this. If they do then why are they so keen to make face masks compulsory despite the dangers? And if they don't know all this then they should do.

The one remaining question is: why, when the disease is fading throughout the world, has the British Government decided that we should wear masks when there are so clearly very real dangers with wearing them.

I suppose they will say it is because the lockdown is being eased a little but they lie about everything so I don't believe that for a second.

I think they have another reason.

I'll discuss the psychological problems associated with the wearing of face masks in another article. And I will also explain how the Government is using masks to make us fearful so that we are easier to control.

June 9th 2020

Why Is the BBC Peddling Fake News?

Here are two recent headlines from the BBC website:

‘We have a pandemic of black people dying every day’.

And

‘Raheem Sterling: The only disease right now is racism’.

These are obviously absurd and seem designed to stir up discontent.

Of course there are black people dying every day. There are white people dying every day too. It is a sad, inescapable fact of life that in the end we all die.

But the headline from the BBC seems to suggest that black people are the only ones dying. Are they suggesting that white people have found the secret of eternal life but are hiding the secret from black people?

The second headline ‘The only disease right now is racism’ is obviously nonsensical but it’s worse than that – it is insulting to millions of people who are struggling with real, physical disease which threatens their very existence.

The BBC is quick enough to condemn people for what it calls fake news but I doubt if there is any organisation more guilty of misleading its audience than the BBC.

Here’s a headline from the BBC website: Coronavirus: UK Exceeds 200,000 Testing Capacity Target

That sounds impressive does it not?

Go down to the sixth paragraph and the BBC admitted that only 115,000 tests had actually been carried out.

The BBC is, always, bending the way it presents the news to suit the requirements of the establishment.

In another item on their website, the BBC printed a drawing of a man walking through a tube train and leaving footprints behind him. The suggestion was that it is possible to spread the coronavirus on your shoes.

This is absurd fake news.

Is the BBC seriously suggesting that we wear disposable galoshes as well as gloves and masks?

The BBC seems to delight in fact checking stories (though sometimes rather comically I’m afraid) so maybe they’d like to check this story.

The BBC is always appalling as a source of news but it has excelled itself during this bizarre, manufactured crisis.

You might have thought that the BBC would have invited one of the many doctors questioning the whole coronavirus hoax onto a radio or television programme to discuss things.

But as far as I am aware they haven’t done so.

Maybe they thought it might upset the Government.

And with a review of the BBC licence fee they wouldn’t want to do that, would they?

The truth is, of course, that none of this is new. The BBC has a terrible record when it comes to reporting things honestly and fairly.

It is, I think, now widely recognised that BBC journalists seem to have lost the ability to differentiate between ‘news’ and ‘comment’. One independent think tank commented that ‘the BBC pays lip service to impartiality but acts more like a political party with a policy manifesto.’

A survey of just under 40,000 people showed that 85% of Britons no longer trust BBC News to give unbiased political coverage and it isn’t difficult to see why. Celebrities commonly speak out in support of the BBC and endorse its line on most things but it is difficult not to suspect that this is sometimes because they fear that if they don’t then they will be ostracised and will no longer be offered well paid acting or presenting jobs.

Despite the celebrity endorsement, nearly ten million Britons cancelled their TV licences in recent years.

Many of them were disgusted by the fact that the BBC has been bought by the European Union. In one recent five year period, the BBC accepted 258 million euros from the EU. Over the recent years, the BBC has accepted huge quantities of EU money. I won’t accept £5 from an advertiser or a sponsor or the EU because my independence is important to me. But the BBC has sold its integrity.

Inevitably, therefore, it is no surprise that the BBC is clearly biased in favour of the European Union. The BBC has for years been consistently pro-EU and before the Referendum it was clear that the Corporation regarded the very idea of leaving the EU as sacrilegious. Even though the Corporation is funded by a compulsory licence fee taken from a largely unwilling and often rather resentful electorate, the BBC has deliberately favoured the minority point of view in support of the EU.

In the months after the nation decided it no longer wanted to be ruled by a bunch of unelected bureaucrats living and working in Belgium, the BBC did everything it could to demonise Brexit and Brexiteers. On the relatively rare occasions when Brexit supporters were allowed into a studio, they were invariably labelled ‘right wing’ and treated as though they were in some way criminal. On the other hand, when Remainers were interviewed they were treated with great respect and introduced as though they were independent commentators.

It became quite well known that when the BBC arranged a programme with an audience then the audience would be packed with Remainers.

Every piece of bad news was (sometimes laughably) blamed on Brexit and every piece of good news was accompanied by the phrase 'despite Brexit'.

Studies of the BBC have shown an overwhelming bias against Brexit.

But this partisan approach to the news is not confined to Brexit and the European Union.

The BBC charter demands that the BBC is impartial and reflects all strands of public opinion. In return for this impartiality, the BBC is entitled to an annual licence fee (currently around £150). But the BBC is not impartial. On the contrary, it is a corrupt and traitorous organisation which has betrayed Britain and the British. I believe the BBC is in breach of its own Charter and no longer entitled to the annual licence fee. Far from being expected to continue paying money to the BBC, citizens of Britain are entitled to receive refunds for the money they have handed over in the past.

When Donald Trump was elected President of the United States of America, the BBC reported the event with sneery comments on his opinions, his political views and his personality. And when the BBC reported his policies on immigration, they did so as though they were eccentric and extreme although every poll showed that a majority of Americans and a majority of Europeans agreed with Trump's policies. Whenever Trump is mentioned, the disdain is almost palpable.

However, whenever the EU supporting Obama is mentioned, the BBC drools with affection – never mentioning the former President's crafty deceits and the broken promises.

Moreover, the BBC appears to have a deep contempt for populism; a movement which has become global and which worries the political establishment so much that they dismiss it in the same sort of tone which you might expect them to use for fascism or communism. Here again, the BBC's attitude is irrational for populism is defined as a movement that champions 'the common person' in preference to the interests of the establishment. Populism invariably combines people on both the left and the right and is invariably hostile to large banks, large multinational corporations and extremists of all kinds. You might think that an organisation which is paid for by the populace at large might have at least a little sympathy with their interests, needs and anxieties. But, no, the BBC has firmly allied itself with the ruling classes and the Europhilic establishment and has no time for licence fee payers who are concerned about mass immigration, overcrowding, relentless globalisation and absurdly ill-based 'green' policies which result in new laws which have pushed up energy prices so dramatically that millions of hard-working people have to choose between eating and keeping warm.

Most people now recognise that the BBC represents a minority viewpoint and gives absurd amounts of airtime and respect to the high priests and priestesses of political correctness. This may be because, as one senior BBC figure has pointed out, the BBC has 'an abnormally large number of young people, ethnic minorities and gay people' on its staff.

The BBC is not a broadcaster it is a narrowcaster; a propaganda unit for the elite.

Not surprisingly, the viewing figures for many BBC shows have sunk dramatically and in the last couple of decades the viewing figures for the BBC's news programmes have shown a decline that would have startled any broadcaster which did not have the State's authority to collect money from millions of unwilling citizens.

The position is now so bad that if the BBC loses its licence fee then it will die because it will be unable to find enough viewers prepared to subscribe to its services. If the BBC retains its anachronistic right to demand licence fees then the annual charge must rocket to counterbalance the fall in the number of people prepared to pay the fee.

If you listen to or watch any BBC programmes do so with scepticism in your heart and mind.

Today's BBC is Biased, Bought and Corrupt.

Joseph Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda in the Third Reich, would have been proud of the BBC.

The BBC now peddles fake news because it's the only thing the appalling staff know how to do.

June 9th 2020

Face Masks 2: The Reason They Want Us to Wear Them

In a previous video I summarised the scientific evidence and proved that wearing a mask is not risk free. There are very real dangers. I have no doubt that masks will kill some of the people who wear them. Indeed, there is evidence that people have already died as a result of wearing masks.

And yet, despite the very real dangers, and in the absence of any convincing evidence showing that masks are of value, a number of governments have made wearing them compulsory on public transport and in many public places. Around the world mask wearing is, or is about to become, compulsory in shops, public buildings, offices and even schools.

Are the politicians entirely stupid and reckless with the lives of their citizens? The bug has been proved to be no more dangerous than the flu bug but we are never forced to wear masks when there is a flu bug around. The WHO says that asymptomatic transmission is very rare.

Or could there be some other reason for forcing us to wear masks?

Well, I wouldn't want to argue with you if you said that all politicians are stupid as well as crooked, they have certainly been working hard to give that impression.

But I think what is happening is beyond stupidity; there's a reason for the introduction of laws promoting the wearing of masks. And the reason has more to do with the fact that politicians are crooks, and are being controlled and manipulated by crooks behind the scenes, than the fact that they are all stupid.

Just remember that we know our politicians to be greedy and self-serving. Remember the British MPs expenses scandal? Well-paid men and women claiming for duck houses and endless packets of biscuits. Politicians everywhere are the professional group most likely to be sent to prison for fraud, embezzlement, telling big lies or stealing.

In Britain, the country I know best, there has been a coup.

And I suspect the same thing has happened in many other countries – particularly throughout Europe. I am not convinced that it has happened in the United States where the President's aims and objectives seem to be rather different to those of European leaders. But although this is a global problem it is nowhere as bad as it is in Britain. I am told, reliably, that a great many of the rich are planning to leave Britain as soon as they can. We will be told they are leaving because of the weather or the raised taxes – but they aren't. They are going to emigrate because they can see that the British are being turned into puppets, slaves. Comrade Boris and the rest of his ragbag Government can do whatever they like with the country. There is no effective opposition. The Emergency Bill which was passed days after the bug was officially downgraded to flu status has given Comrade Boris and his advisors the power to do whatever they like. Note the word advisors. It is important.

The coup didn't involve soldiers marching to Westminster or to Buckingham Palace but it was a coup and it did involve soldiers suppressing the people by deliberately taking down internet posts that were considered unacceptable.

You may think this sounds rather paranoid and three months ago I would have thought it was too.

But, as they keep telling us, nothing is the same, everything has changed forever. The only constancy, the only certainty, is that governments around the world, and particularly in Britain, have consistently and deliberately misled the voters.

In future videos, I intend to investigate what I think is behind everything that has happened. I fear it may all be worse than most people had imagined. I aim to try to unravel the complexities of a new world – where power and money are the only two driving forces.

Once again, I think there has been a coup.

Our country has been taken over without our consent, against our will. We are not alone. The same thing has happened elsewhere.

Saying this will, I know, immediately label me a subversive; a conspiracy theorist.

But the real irony is that it is the people who have taken over our world who are the conspiracy theorists.

As I explained in a previous video, a conspiracy theorist is someone who believes in something that the majority do not believe in.

And since thinking people in Britain no longer believe that our lives are being threatened by a deadly, plague-like bug, Boris Johnson's government and its advisors are the conspiracy theorists as, indeed, are those in the mainstream media who support them – and who have been bought for the price of some advertising.

Many are now too afraid to say that they no longer believe in the potency of the bug. But the word is spreading fast and I believe that those of us who no longer believe the Government are now in the majority. For weeks, the Government has taken advantage of the fact that the country has been divided into two; they have used the age-old trick of 'divide and conquer'. But I feel that they are losing that battle.

I don't believe the takeover of our world was fortuitous or serendipitous and nor do I believe it was opportunism.

And so, as Sherlock Holmes might have said, when you have excluded all the possibles the only thing left is the impossible.

The whole thing was planned.

And it has, I suspect, been planned for a long time – for years.

Bit by bit our freedom and our privacy have been taken away. Gradually, almost imperceptibly, our rights have disappeared and the State has grown larger and ever more intrusive. I will deal with what I really think is happening in future videos, which I will intersperse with videos on other topics because it is going to take some time to unearth the truth and to find what is really going on.

But today I want to stick with why they want us to wear masks when there doesn't seem to be any need to wear them, when there is no medical evidence that they do any good but there is very real evidence that they can do harm.

The death rate from the bug has fallen considerably in recent weeks; most of the really vulnerable people have already died. The authorities have successfully cleaned out care homes and exterminated a good chunk of the population receiving pensions. I wonder how much that has saved the Treasury.

Moreover, the lockdown is now killing so many people that even if the number dying from the bug were to double in the next month, the total would still not come anywhere near to the total who die every year from the flu, when you add on the number who have died because of the lockdown.

Mental illnesses, anxiety and depression, will be the new pandemics. The Government admits that the number dying from the ordinary flu has fallen, what a surprise that is, but they cannot tell us how many have committed suicide since we were all put under house arrest.

They can, on the other hand, tell us precisely how many people died of their plague in Birmingham last Wednesday afternoon. And they are controlling the figures so precisely that they can probably tell us precisely how many people are going to die in Birmingham next Wednesday afternoon.

If there is a second wave of infections then we can be damned sure it will be deliberate. Bugs of this kind usually become weaker with time and far less virulent in warm weather.

Over recent years we have seen our privacy and our freedom gradually disappearing. Our rights have all but disappeared as the State has taken over responsibility for everything we do. We have seen the truth suppressed and we have seen those who dare to speak out demonised, monstered and silenced. We have seen the introduction of smart meters for electricity, so that they can cut off our energy supplies whenever they want to. The elderly have been steadily attacked and blamed for everything wrong with our society. Since I predicted that it would happen many weeks ago, it was no surprise at all to me that elderly folk are being found alone and dead in their homes. Some of them will have starved to death. We have seen the banks and the politicians pushing hard for a cashless society. Our broadcasters, particularly the BBC, produce an unending mixed diet of garbage and lies. The BBC produces dumbed down programmes and propaganda. Children have been brainwashed in schools, our history has altered to fit the requirements of the politically correct. The news we see on mainstream television has been dumbed down and controlled. Our hospitals have been closed, in whole or in part, for no reason other than to keep us afraid. And as I have shown in previous videos we have been brainwashed by experts with their slogans and trickery. All the things we used to enjoy, and look forward to, have been taken from us. We are told that sporting events, for example, may never again be possible with spectators. Theatres and cinemas will probably never reopen. Air travel has become extraordinarily complicated and will, no doubt, become prohibitively expensive. The closure of public loos means that town centres will die. We are told that churches are being closed and bishops are being sacked. We are being turned into a nation of drudges; broken and nervous and filled with uncertainties.

And that takes us back to the masks.

Why are we being told that we must wear masks – which will be especially uncomfortable in the hot weather?

Well, it is partly to weaken us. Wearing masks for extended periods will make us sick and will probably make us more vulnerable to illness. Wearing masks can damage the immune system. Fear and stress also weaken the immune system.

Don't believe anyone who tells you that is fake news, by the way. It may be inconvenient to the Government and their lackeys. But it is not fake.

In my first video about masks, I quoted the medical evidence proving that it is anything but fake news. The transcript of that video will, as usual, also be on my website.

It is partly to dehumanise us.

The process of dehumanisation has been slowly developing for some time. Our identities, our individuality, have been attacked in many different ways. Masks help to oppress us. They take away our personality and turn us all into faceless creatures; they keep us unsettled and they isolate us from one another. It is difficult to have a conversation when wearing a mask. There are no smiles to see. Good news is less exhilarating when delivered by someone wearing a mask. And bad news is far more painful when delivered by someone wearing a mask. There can be no sense of a real connection between two people both wearing masks. Hospitals, GP surgeries and dental surgeries will all be more frightening. Workplaces and public transport will be more depressing. Masks will create a whole range of psychological problems.

So does the Government really want us depressed and anxious?

Yes, they do. Because they are breaking us down. It is the next part of the brainwashing process which I have already described in detail in a previous video. Please watch it if you haven't already done so.

They want to keep us terrified.

Masks are scary in themselves. Robbers and bandits wear masks.

But there is more to it than that.

The idea is to keep us aware of the danger that is alleged to be around us and to increase our sense of fear and our obedience.

By forcing us to wear masks they are making us more afraid, and so they can control us more effectively.

I don't believe we are being told to wear masks so that we will be safer.

But I do believe we are being told to wear masks to keep us weaker and more afraid.

June 10th 2020

Why I Resigned from My Job as a GP

Among the lies on the Web there is one claiming that I left the NHS after my first book, *The Medicine Men* was published. The book was about the relationship between the medical profession and the drug industry, and I'm not promoting it because it has been out of print for decades.

If those who make this stuff up bothered to do any research, or cared about the truth, they would know that this is nonsense.

The Medicine Men was published in 1975, and I received an advance of £750 to write it. The typist who worked on the typescript charged £800 and the insurers from whom I bought libel insurance charged me £700.

I had some money for foreign rights and paperback rights but the book wasn't going to take me off to the Bahamas on a huge yacht.

Besides, what the idiots on the Web don't realise is that I didn't resign as a GP until seven or eight years later.

Being a GP was the job I'd always wanted to do and one that I enjoyed a great deal.

In those distant days, GPs were responsible for their patients 365 days a year and 24 hours a day. So that we had some time off, most doctors worked in informal groups of four or five. Often the association was a very loose one in that individual GPs ran their practices independently and merely shared their out of hours' responsibilities. It all worked surprisingly well and easily.

If there were five doctors sharing their night time, weekend and bank holiday calls then each one of the five would be on call one night a week and one weekend in five. It wasn't particularly onerous.

At the end of the day, a doctor who was looking after a patient with a specific problem would ring the doctor due to be on call and tell him if he was likely to be called out. 'Mrs X has a bad chest infection but I think she is responding to the antibiotics. If her husband calls, you may have to fix a hospital bed for her.' That sort of thing.

I never particularly minded out of hours calls. Indeed, the best bit of being a GP was driving back home at 4.00 a.m. having spent an hour or two treating a patient at home. It might have been an asthmatic having severe trouble breathing and needing intravenous injections. Or a child screaming with pain from an ear infection.

Of course, the glow of satisfaction might dim slightly if, when getting back home, I found there was another call to be done. If there was then it would inevitably be to a house in the next street to the one I'd just left. There were no mobile phones in those days, of course.

After a night on call we still did morning surgery. And that was sometimes a little tiring. I wasn't the only GP to fall asleep in his consulting room.

So why, after just ten years, did I give up my dream job?

It was the paperwork, the bureaucracy, which defeated me.

One of a GP's tasks was to sign sick notes. And the law required doctors to put the diagnosis on the form. The patient then took the form to their employer. Inevitably, this meant that everyone in the office knew what the patient's problem was.

One of my patients was the manager of the local branch of a big chain store.

He came in to see me one day and it wasn't difficult to see the problem. He was severely depressed; worn down by demanding bosses and a difficult job. He needed time off work.

I reached for the sick note pad, scribbled his name and address and then wrote 'depression' in the box requiring a diagnosis.

'Do you have to put that down?' he asked.

I looked at him, puzzled.

'If my bosses see that then I'll be fired,' he told me.

I ripped up the form and wrote another. On this one I scribbled 'virus infection'.

A couple of days later, a young woman came to see me. She was pregnant and was suffering from morning sickness.

'Do you mind not putting down that I'm pregnant?' she asked. 'The girls at work don't know but I have to hand the form in to my boss.'

And so she had a virus infection too.

After that, all the sick notes I signed contained the same diagnosis: virus infection.

After a few weeks of this, I was hauled before a local NHS committee. They had a sheaf of sick notes I had signed. All the forms had the same diagnosis.

To cut a long story short, they fined me a couple of hundred quid and threatened to do it again and again if I didn't write down proper diagnoses. That was a lot of money in those days.

So I resigned from my job as a GP and became a professional writer.

Shortly afterwards, I'm pleased to say, the rules were changed and patients were allowed to write their own sick notes.

June 11th 2020

Why You Should Stockpile Food – Now

Food shortages are coming and the cost of food is going to rise even faster than it has been doing. And it isn't because of global warming or whatever other lies they tell you – it is however, partly a side effect of the coronavirus scandal; the biggest and most dangerous hoax in history.

All around the world, food is in short supply. The price of the world's most important staple food – rice – has risen by 70%. Food prices in the US have recently seen a historic jump and are destined to stay high and go higher. Countries which have good food production are halting their exports. Vietnam, for example, has stopped exporting because they need their food supplies at home. And you cannot blame them. The authorities condemn it as nationalism but all countries, all villages, all homes would do much the same.

And it is the absurd over-reaction to a bug no more dangerous than the flu that is causing the problem – and that will result in millions of deaths to add to the millions who are going to die as a result of the lockdowns.

The total death rate from the coronavirus is let me remind you yet again just two thirds of the number who would have died of the flu in the same period. And the coronavirus figures have been artificially inflated.

But the global death rate from the side effects – accidental or deliberate – of what I now call the coronavirus scandal is going to be measured in millions.

So, how is the coronavirus scandal responsible for the food shortages that are coming?

That's easy to explain.

Processing plants and distribution centres all around the world have been severely disrupted by the massive over-reaction to this fairly ordinary virus.

If one worker on a farm or in a warehouse falls ill with flu-like symptoms then the authorities are often closing down the farm or the warehouse. Is this a panic? Or is it being deliberately orchestrated for some hidden reason?

Huge crops of vegetables and fruit are being ploughed into the ground. Millions of animals are being slaughtered and then buried or burnt because the supply chains have been shut down. America, almost unbelievably, is now importing beef because of the shortages there.

The world lockdown, and the mass house arrests that were engineered to keep us all subservient, mean that thousands of farmers cannot get their crops picked. Fruit in particular is likely to rot in the fields and tankers full of milk are poured away. Controls on transport have meant that it has been difficult to move food from where there is a glut to where there is a dearth. It would have been easy for governments to insist that furloughed workers should help pick the crops but they didn't do so. Or what about all those students locked out of their colleges?

And the unsurprising consequence of all this is that there are going to be massive shortages of fruit and vegetables, and so prices are probably going to rocket.

Inevitably, the most toxic of the Remainers, the fascist EU loving lunatics, bigoted, soaked in their own prejudices and consumed by ignorance will blame Brexit for the shortages. If they develop a bald spot or lose their keys they blame Brexit.

Sadly for them, the shortage is global not local to the UK.

All around the world there is a shortage of almost all foods.

And other factors are going to ensure that the shortage just gets worse.

If and when the economy is allowed to stutter into action again, the price of oil will doubtless eventually rise because the existing supplies are diminishing rapidly and most oil companies have pretty well given up exploration.

The rising price of oil will mean that farming and transportation costs will rise and that will also push up the price of food. I know oil is being made all the time but the current crop of oil in preparation won't be ready for another 50 million years at least and you'll probably want to eat before then.

I tell you this not to scare you but because when you know something is happening you can do something about it.

You may think it is worthwhile building up your stocks of long-dated food staples such as rice and pasta and bottled water (because that's going to be in short supply too) and maybe even an extra packet or two of loo rolls. Dried and tinned food with long dates are also good. Governments tell us not to store stuff but the military don't buy bullets the day they need them, do they? If you have a garden and can grow your favourite vegetables or fruit that's probably a good idea but watch that no one climbs over your fence and steals them. I don't recommend having an allotment – the chances of you being able to harvest your own crops are too remote because they will be stolen. It might also be a good idea to stock up on vitamin and mineral supplements.

I rather suspect that we are going to have more alleged virus health calamities coming up. If it isn't the coronavirus in a pre-ordained second wave it will be something else. If they can make up one crisis then they can, and will, make up many more.

I've always been a bit of a contrarian, though I don't suppose anyone would notice, and I'm convinced that the time to panic buy is when there is no panic.

There are several other explanations for what has already happened and for what is going to turn this into a perfect storm of food shortages. Some of the explanations are short-term and some are long-term.

The next problem hasn't received as much publicity, largely because the newspapers and TV and radio stations have been too busy bombarding us with fake news authorised by government propaganda experts to bother with real news.

The problem is locusts.

Plagues of them have been travelling from Arabia into Africa. Most of us tend to think of a swarm of insects as being no more than a few yards across but locusts tend to think rather bigger.

A decent sized swarm of locusts can be as large as London and there can be lots of swarms. That's pretty scary but even scarier is the fact that a plague of locusts can in two days eat their way through as much food as would keep the whole of the population of the UK going for a day. A swarm can lay around 1,000 eggs per square yard of land. You can imagine what that will do to the world's food supplies.

Of course, we should be able to rely on the Food and Agriculture Organisation, a United Nations agency which is supposed to control problems like this. The FAO is a bit like the World Health Organisation so that's nice.

And so now there are swarms of locusts wandering across Africa, and each swarm can cover 20 square miles. All the locusts do is breed and eat. When they land on a tree, the combined weight will bring down large branches. Africans sometimes panic and fire at the swarms with rockets and anti-aircraft guns but when the enemy is numbered in billions just killing a few thousand doesn't make a lot of difference.

The FAO is crop spraying with chemicals but unfortunately the locusts seem to have developed immunity. In one area, locusts all fell off trees after being sprayed but three days later they all got up, shook themselves and flew away. A small swarm of locusts can strip 100 acres in minutes.

Inevitably, the fake crisis that has been gripping the world has disrupted supplies of the chemicals for spraying, and the swarms of locusts are getting bigger and bigger and threatening food supplies in Africa, Arabia and Asia. The economies of those countries affected are going to be destroyed. Food will be scarce and what there is will be unaffordable.

If the West hadn't been so busy looking at the virus hoax they might have been able to do something to stem the tide of the locusts.

But the locusts are munching away and the farmers are digging their crops into the ground and the food shortages which are coming will be biblical.

Is this why governments everywhere are determined to kill off old people as quickly as they possibly can?

Is one of the many reasons for the coronavirus being exaggerated the desire to close down farms and warehouses and distribution centres – apparently legitimately – when one worker tests positive for the coronavirus, or develops a mild symptom or two?

Maybe the advice here will help those who watch these videos: do a little food stock piling now so that you and your family will have a better chance to be strong and healthy. Countries look after themselves and we all need to do so. It isn't selfish. It's survival.

If and when your government finally warns you of this problem it will be far too late.

In my next video on food, I will deal with the other factors which are making this problem worse – and which may explain why governments and the people behind them have deliberately exaggerated the coronavirus crisis and have, with no exaggeration, turned it into the biggest scandal in human history.

June 11th 2020

The Coming Global Food Shortage – A Perfect Storm

In my first video about food, I explained how the coronavirus scandal had led directly to the closure of farms, warehouses and distribution networks – and had created a massive, global food shortage.

I described how a plague of locusts was eating its way through food crops on at least two continents.

And I promised to discuss other factors which have led to the coming global food shortage.

Here they are:

First, there has been recent massive rising demand from emerging economies. The people of China and India can now afford to buy food and so they that's exactly what they are doing. Twenty years ago, most people in the world subsisted on 1,600 calories a day. Now they want to eat like the Americans and the British. India produces 70 million tons of wheat a year and is the second largest wheat producer on the planet. But India became a net importer years ago.

The people of China and India want to eat western foods. They want to eat meat. No longer satisfied with a bowl of rice they want to dine on burgers. The consumption of meat in China is increasingly rapidly.

But there are problems. One is that with so much land being used to grow biofuels there is very little land left for growing food for animals. And so the cost of hay has rocketed. Moreover, turning vegetation into meat is grossly inefficient and costly.

Next, the world's population is exploding – particularly in Asia. Just to cope with the population growth the world's food production will need to increase by 50%.

And there are more problems leading to the perfect storm.

As populations grow, people want to live in nice, suburban houses with neat little lawns. As this happens, so the amount of land available for arable use falls. Every year for the past decade, China has lost fertile land equivalent in size to the area of Scotland. To feed its growing population it needs to be increasing its land area by the equivalent of Scotland. Whoops. Things are the same in India.

And, of course, encouraged by brain dead politicians, vast quantities of the world's crops of corn, soy bean and so on, are being used to make biofuels so that motorists can continue to buy cheap petrol for their motor cars. A while ago a list of 51 things you and I can do to prevent global warming was published. Number 1 on their list was headed 'Turn food into fuel'. This, they claimed, would have a 'high impact' on the global warming problem. It was suggested that ethanol is the alternative fuel that 'could finally wean the US from its expensive oil habit and in turn prevent the millions of tons of carbon emissions that go with it.'

This is dangerous nonsense. When more land is used to grow biofuels, so that green motorists can drive around feeling virtuous, there is less land for growing food and an increase in the number of people starving to death.

The demand for biofuels has been soaring for years (despite the knowledge that, as a result, people are starving) and the increased use of biofuel is a major force behind the rise of food prices.

If greens keep promoting biofuels then there is going to be a global shortage of food and millions are going to die.

Here's another problem: big American seed companies have been busy patenting the rights to many individual seeds. They have done this so that they can force farmers around the world to buy their products. One result has been that small farmers in India are no longer allowed to grow seeds from crops that their families have been planting for generations. If they do, then lawyers for American multinationals will smother them with writs, injunctions. The incidence of suicide among small farmers in developing countries is terrifyingly high.

Finally, large modern farms are remarkably (and surprisingly) inefficient. When the fuel used to build tractors, make fertilisers and pesticides and so on is taken into account, it turns out that the energy cost of a kilogram of corn has actually risen in the last few decades. Soil erosion, the loss of pollinators (such as bees) who have been killed by chemicals, evolving chemical resistance by pests and numerous other environmental problems have also reduced farm crops.

The result of all this is that food is becoming scarce and prices are rising. This is not a cyclical change (with prices falling next year due to better weather and better crops). It is a structural change which has been exacerbated by the coronavirus scandal. I fear it is, in other words, permanent.

As far as food prices are concerned, the conditions really are optimum for a 'perfect storm'. Things really couldn't get much worse.

Actually, they could. American genetic engineers have been 'modifying' food for years to make it more profitable. No one knows what effect their modifications will have on the safety of food for human consumption. No one knows what other horrendous side effects there might be. The risks are unbelievably dangerous.

For those in Europe and America all this is not yet critical.

But for those in many parts of the world this is already an outright disaster. In some countries nearly half of all children are malnourished. And things are getting worse and will continue to get worse. Rising prices and falling quantities of food available for eating (as opposed to filling petrol tanks) will result in massive starvation around the world. The fake coronavirus hoax, and the consequent economic problems which will devastate economies everywhere, will exacerbate the problem and, as a result, the incidence of global starvation is set to rocket. It's no good saying that the planet isn't overcrowded or that there is plenty of food. The inescapable fact is that five million infants and small children die each year – in a good year. That figure is set to rocket in India, Nigeria and the Congo and elsewhere. The number of people in extreme poverty around the world could double to over 160 million. The UNs World Food programme predicts that by the end of 2020 the number of people facing acute hunger will double to 265 million – as a direct result of the economic chaos caused by the lockdowns in the developed world.

Increasing agricultural production enabled the world to grow from 1.7 billion people to nearly 7 billion people in just a century. But when the oil runs out, the world will not be able to feed that many people. The oil is needed for farming as well as for transport.

How many people will the planet feed?

Well, it's a safe guess that it will support around as many people as there were before oil changed farming. So we've already got five billion people too many – and the population is growing fast.

If we don't voluntarily reduce the size of the global population (and there are no signs that any nation will choose this route) the answer will be famine, plagues and war.

Welcome to the future.

Is this why governments everywhere are determined to kill off old people as quickly as they possibly can?

Is the coronavirus being exaggerated so that farms and warehouses and distribution centres can be closed down – apparently legitimately, when one worker tests positive for the coronavirus, or shows mild symptoms?

Or could it be that big corporations want to kill off traditional farming so that they can sell us fake foods made in their factories. Controlling the oil used to be the way to control the planet. Controlling the food supply will give big corporations control of everything and everyone.

Maybe the advice here will help those who watch these videos: do a little food stock piling now so that you and your family will have a better chance to be strong and healthy.

Countries look after themselves and we all need to do so. It isn't selfish. It's survival.

Remember: if and when your government finally warns you of this problem it will be far too late.

June 13th 2020

Have the Lockdown Laws Caused Vitamin D Deficiency and Increased the Number of Coronavirus Deaths?

Right from the start of the lockdown I have argued that forcing people to stay indoors would lead to millions of people suffering from vitamin D deficiency – and all the associated health problems.

It was pretty obvious – though apparently not to governments and their highly paid medical and scientific advisors.

Vitamin D is an essential substance which most of us get when sunshine hits our skins. Inevitably, most people are deficient in vitamin D towards the end of the winter season. In the Northern hemisphere that means the months of February, March and April.

So people living in the Northern Hemisphere were being forced to stay indoors just when their vitamin D levels were at their lowest.

Vitamin D shortage can lead to many problems. It is necessary for the human body to absorb calcium and phosphorus – required for making strong bones and teeth. Individuals who are short of vitamin D are likely to develop osteomalacia – a serious condition in which the bones become brittle and more likely to break. In children, a shortage of vitamin D leads to rickets. How many children will now grow up with rickets?

Oh, and vitamin D shortage can increase the risk of cancer developing.

Moreover, it has also been known for some time that people with vitamin D deficiency are more likely to develop upper respiratory tract infections.

And, more specifically, there is now some evidence appearing which suggests that individuals with vitamin D deficiency may be more likely to suffer badly if they catch the coronavirus. How many people died of the coronavirus because they were vitamin D deficient? I doubt if we will ever know.

And how many people will suffer from osteomalacia or rickets because of the lockdowns? I doubt if we will know that either.

Incidentally, as I was the first to point out many weeks ago, dark skinned individuals are more likely to die from the coronavirus than light skinned individuals – and this could well be because people with dark skins are often deficient in vitamin D.

I have two conclusions.

First, the idiotic lockdown laws will undoubtedly lead to widespread vitamin D deficiency and much illness. Many of us get most of our vitamin D from sunshine.

Second, many individuals will need to increase their intake of vitamin D – either by increasing their intake of the appropriate foods or by taking supplements. It is important, however, not to take too much vitamin D since excessive quantities can damage the body by encouraging deposits of calcium in places where calcium shouldn't be.

This is yet more evidence that the stupid and unnecessary lockdown laws (supported by the local authorities and police forces which stopped people sunbathing and exercising out of doors) have done infinitely more harm than good.

June 15th 2020

Why There Will Be A Second Wave (They Need One)

They have done very well so far, with the aid of wildly inaccurate predictions made by a bunch of mathematical modellers who have never diagnosed or treated a patient in their lives, they have succeeded in putting much of the world under house arrest, closing down the global economy, shutting schools, exterminating vast numbers of older folk, sentencing millions of untreated patients to death and more. There was never any reason for any of it, of course. We knew that and they knew it too. The virus which was the subject of all this legalised mayhem was never more dangerous than the ordinary flu. The number of people killed by the prescribed treatment, the lockdowns and the social distancing, will, far, far exceed the number killed by the coronavirus.

The big question of the moment is: 'will there be a second wave?'

And the questions which follow are: 'will there be a third wave, a fourth wave and a fifth wave'.

In reality, I don't believe there should be one.

Viruses don't usually behave that way. In my experience, the same flu doesn't keep coming round and round again.

But that doesn't mean there won't be one, of course. Indeed, they seem pretty certain, don't they?

The people who are in control of the coronavirus crime want a second wave because they need to keep us subjugated but they know that reality is against them. Too many people are immune, the virus is probably weaker, the weather is warmer and most of the vulnerable are already dead. In the UK, the hospital bosses have murdered tens of thousands of elderly folk by dumping them, tested or untested, into care homes. It's as if they were deliberately trying to recreate a Typhoid Mary situation without Typhoid Mary.

There are already signs of dissent. A relative of one man who died is suing the Government and although I loathe litigation I wish her luck.

Everyone involved should sue the Government. They forced the elderly and the lonely to stay in their homes but they deprived them of food and medical care. It was a domestic version of the murderous Liverpool Care Pathway. As predicted we are now finding the decaying bodies of lonely, elderly folk – many of whom probably died of simple starvation. They weren't allowed to go to the shops and they couldn't arrange food deliveries and, despite all the politicians' promises, no one helped them out. Still, the Government won't mind. They'll save hundreds of millions a year in pensions and health care costs.

People are getting feisty. They are ignoring the laws and questioning what is going on. There is some concern about the vaccine that is promised. Or should that be threatened. People are becoming edgy about the brainwashing, the deliberate creation of fear, the conditioning techniques, the tracking and the enforced isolation. More and more people understand that we don't usually have a global reset, as some are calling it, whenever there is a touch of the flu around.

Governments, however, want a second wave. Everything that has happened is about control, power and money. And it will be very easy to prove that there is one. Indeed, news reports are constantly warning us that second waves have been spotted emerging in some parts of the world.

It will be remarkably easy for them to prove that there is a second wave. (And if there was ever a 'them' and 'us' situation, this is it.)

They will merely test more people. Many of those who are tested will have the disease but be asymptomatic. It doesn't matter. Was this the reason that they didn't test more people months ago when the information which testing would have provided, would have doubtless helped us avoid the lockdowns? Were they keeping the testing until when they needed to prove a second spike of the infection?

They will repeat the threats until we are fully cowed and ready to accept whatever they order us to do; until we beg for the vaccine they promise, or threaten us with, depending upon your point of view.

They have sold the vaccine to the populace at large as a cure. But they don't want the cure too soon. They want the fear to continue. Having said that, it is worth noting that a drug company called AstraZeneca has started making two billion doses of a coronavirus vaccine although tests for safety and efficacy have not been completed. That shows confidence and a determination to be first if nothing else. Even Bill Gates, the world's self-appointed spokesman on all medical matters, admits that it usually takes at least five years to prepare and test a vaccine.

Eventually there will be a vaccine because it is the perfect way to force us to accept ID cards (they will call them certificates) or tattoos (they will call those implants) or apps (they will call those apps). And the vaccine will be compulsory even if they cleverly manage to avoid that word.

If there is a second wave it will be deliberately created. They can blame the street demonstrations which the police allowed to take place – even though they were breaking lockdown and social distancing laws. This will add to the divisions in our society and it will increase racism. Evil governments want divisions.

Back in the middle of March, I described this whole thing as a hoax – my first video, published on 18th March, used that very word – the title was 'Coronavirus scare: the hoax of the century'– but since then it has become abundantly clear that none of this happened accidentally or through simple incompetence (though there has been a good deal of that) – this is all about control, money and power. It seemed to be a hoax, then it became a scandal and now it's a crime. Nothing is impossible, anything goes and if you aren't paranoid then you aren't paying attention.

And the people who want those three things are using the threat of a second wave to keep us cowed. It enables them to excuse every new lunacy – such as the forced wearing of masks. It's a constant threat. If you don't eat your broccoli you won't have any ice cream. Wait until your father gets home. If you don't behave you won't be allowed to play outside. If you make a noise you will be in detention. If you don't obey the social distancing laws and the lockdown laws then there will be a second wave and the social distancing and lockdown laws will be stricter than ever. If you dare to doubt our forecasts, if you speak the truth, we will bludgeon you to death with propaganda and abuse. And if we need to introduce a second wave we will make sure that some of the blame lands on your shoulders.

The track and trace system is a way to keep people locked up permanently. If they stop us paying by cash, they will know where we are all the time. And if you visit a shop or a park or a petrol station it will be easy for them to say that you were near to someone with symptoms and therefore you must go into lockdown for another fortnight.

Oppressing the public is a time honoured way of managing the public. The Soviet Union kept people obedient with shortages and queues. We have been subjugated with pictures of huge, purpose built mortuaries filled with empty coffins to show us a glimpse of our future.

Our world now looks a little like a communist State. But in reality our State is slightly different. We are rapidly acquiring a system with complete State control, forcibly suppressed opposition, close links with and heavy regulation of large companies, the elimination of small companies and the disappearance of democracy. There are elements of nationalism and racism and slavery of the people. All around the world changes are being made. The EU, for example, has waived the rules forbidding individual countries from supporting their industries. The result is that the multinationals are now receiving truck loads of taxpayer billions. In 2008, it was the turn of the banks. Today it is the turn of the airlines and the car manufacturers. Companies which saved a little money and were sensible will not enjoy this bonanza, of course. And small companies will lose out – inevitably. But the multinationals which have received 'free' money will be tied closely to the State which handed out the money. At the same time big companies have been ordered to stop paying dividends – thus impoverishing the elderly who rely on private or corporate pensions. They want us all to build up big debts. People with debts are vulnerable and can easily be pushed around. Interest rates are probably about to go negative, wages will fall, property prices will fall and unemployment will soar.

(As an aside, small companies have long been targeted by the European Union and, indeed, individual governments everywhere because they are considered too much of a nuisance and too difficult to control. Government loans made to small companies, in an unprecedented loan sharking exercise will enable tax inspectors and bureaucrats to delve deep into each company's accounts and they will end up being virtually owned by the State. And these days the word 'virtually' is pretty much synonymous with the word 'reality'. Politicians, bureaucrats and tax office staff have yet to realise that large companies were once small companies and that if you crush all the small enterprises then, in a decade or two, there won't be any large ones.)

And all that is the precise definition of fascism – which is, of course, the close cousin of communism but in truth rather different.

The last few months have been among the darkest days in the planet's history, and when you look at it coldly it's been an impressive job. The soul of the world is now drenched in darkness; for many the light of hope has been extinguished. You don't hear many people laughing these days. Smiles have been crushed – either by fear of the oversold flu-like virus or anger at the way such a modest threat has been deliberately turned into utter chaos. Any smiles which are there are hidden behind masks. Our economy is going to be reset (whatever that means – and I have some ideas) and we are going to be controlled by apps on our smart phones. Those who don't have smart phones, and the obligatory apps, will become non-citizens.

Neil Ferguson of Imperial College, the mathematical modeller who appears to have led us down into this doom laden hell fire scenario is about as convincing as that little Swedish girl who was all the rage a few months ago. They seem to me to have much in common: arrogance, ignorance and a yearning to be in the spotlight. Maybe the two of them could join up as a joint entry in the next Eurovision song contest. They could put together a rousing performance of 'Puppet on a String'. Picking the Eddie the Eagle of sums to front the scam shows the level of contempt in which we are held by the people who have planned this takeover of our lives.

Although he resigned after breaking his own lockdown rules, Ferguson recently told a Parliamentary Committee that the number of UK deaths could have been halved if the UK had gone into lockdown a week earlier. He admitted, however, that he had no proper scientific basis for this extraordinary claim. It is bizarre that anyone still listens to Ferguson. If he were a child at school no one would bother to copy his homework because it would be wrong. The only thing he seems to be really good at is selling himself.

Ferguson originally forecast that there would be 510,000 deaths in the UK (not 509,000 or 511,000 but 510,000) and 2,200,000 deaths in the US. As I said at the beginning of this whole farce his estimates were, of course, always absurd.

It is worth noting that South Korea, which has a population of 50 million, has had around 300 deaths nationwide. And South Korea had no lockdown.

The organisers of all this mayhem are doubtless well pleased with themselves.

They have disrupted billions of lives and created terror and global chaos. No terrorist group has ever been as effective. But then this scam was organised by people who already had unlimited supplies of money and power. Populations everywhere have accepted the story that we are fighting a war against a plague like virus that threatens the entire planet. It's science fiction but it's been presented as news in the way that Orson Welles presented the War of the Worlds on American radio, terrifying the millions of listeners who believed the story. Britain is now the worst governed and least democratic state in the Western world. The rich who are not in on the scam are quitting the UK in droves. The loss to the Government in terms of tax take is going to be phenomenal. Government ministers who don't know what is going on (and I suspect that's most of them) are blundering around, struggling to understand why everything is going wrong and putting all their energy into attempting to cover up their ignorance and their incompetence.

Early on, the specialist scientists (as opposed to the mathematicians) knew this wasn't a new version of the plague. The bug was downgraded to flu level before the lockdowns began. It was clear from the start that lockdowns and social distancing laws were not necessary.

But just look at how successfully governments have terrorised their voters.

School teachers and parents are scared out of their wits and if the absurd social distancing laws are maintained there is a very good chance that schools and colleges will never open again – certainly not in any meaningful way. A generation of children, who should now be at school, looking forward to their summer holidays, will be frightened for their lives. They will be so consumed with in-grained fear, so scarred psychologically, that they will never be able to form proper, close relationships with other folk outside their immediate family. If and when the schools reopen, they will never be back to anything resembling normal. There is a good chance that many children will never finish their education. Is this a government plan? Providing less education will cost less money, and young people who are illiterate and innumerate are, of course, easier to control and far less likely to be troublesome. Besides, there won't be much need for skilled workers in the future. Unemployment is going to stay and millions are going to be entirely dependent upon the Government for their daily bread. This is no accident. In whatever sort of future we have, robots will do most of the tricky work. Robots are being trained as baristas and waiters and nurses and doctors and cooks and anything else you can think of. If you have a job, a robot can probably do it. And probably will. Though, come to think of it I doubt if they'll programme one to be a dissident.

Anyone who wants to study will be told to take advantage of distance learning software. Parents who work will be working at home and students who study will be studying at home.

Shops have been closed for so long that many will struggle to survive as absurd social distancing rules mean that they cannot operate normally – or anywhere near normally. And in closing public loos the councils have done their best to ensure that by Christmas, High Streets everywhere will be decorated with nothing more festive than estate agents' boards. We will be doing all our shopping over the internet. Those who don't have access to the internet will simply starve to death – as they have already been doing.

Reports show that people are killing themselves because they are frightened that they have the bug or frightened that they might catch it. It's just like the terror that was falsely created over AIDS in the last century, when for a while the number killing themselves because they were terrified exceeded the number dying from the disease. The curious thing is that the people who are panicking over the coronavirus, handle their recycling bins every week with bare hands – apparently not caring that the dustmen, sorry consultant recycling experts, who pick up their recycling bins have also picked up several hundred other recycling bins, and so the bins are smothered with all the bugs from all the hands of all the people who have touched them. I would estimate that recycling bins and wheelie bins cause more infections than railway loos and £5 hookers.

Thousands of GPs have virtually shut their surgeries. Convinced by the lies, rather than by the evidence, they are so terrified that they deal with patients by telephone and on the rare occasion when a face to face meeting is unavoidable they wear the mask, the visor, the gloves and the smock. They clean their surgeries between patients and they never touch patients without wearing gloves. It does not seem to have occurred to doctors that such a deeply unpleasant experience is for most patients so scary that they will avoid visiting their local family doctor not because of some perceived risk but because the process is severely forbidding.

Dentists' surgeries were shut for months, and now 40,000 people a day are joining waiting lists for urgent treatment. Like GPs and hospitals, the dentists say they cannot get hold of hospital quality surgical masks and so on but you can buy the stuff, properly approved, on the internet.

Millions are so scared that they will accept facial recognition, iris scans, implanted vaccines and slavery with enthusiasm. They want a cashless society and they are happy to be zombies, living half lives, if they can be promised that they won't die from the plague. If the scientific advisors tell them that the only way to survive is to stand on their heads in a bucket of horseshit they will do so with enthusiasm. And the scientific advisors will, of course, happily provide the horseshit. A fifth of the population are so consumed by fear that they wash their cash with soap and water or disinfectant wipes but never dream of washing their wheelie bin handles or the sides of their recycling bins. At least that gives a whole new meaning to the term ‘money laundering’.

Since April, I have been warning that there is going to be a global food shortage and although this is inevitable as the oil runs out it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that this has been engineered to keep us fearful and obedient.

The electric vehicle enthusiasts will claim that it is possible to make combine harvesters which run on electricity and that may be true – but where is the electricity going to come from to keep huge pieces of farm machinery running for hour after hour? And the production of modern fertilisers will be impossible too.

Big companies, spotting an opportunity, want to get rid of farms so that they can take over food production in their robot managed factories – with food such as fake meat made from chemicals. And there will be more genetically controlled food. When we are hungry enough we will eat anything. This is all part of the attempt to control the planet.

We need to start planting and growing our own food if we want to eat well. Meanwhile, stockpiling food is like buying insurance. You just hope you won’t need it.

In poor countries the effects of the economic collapse of the Western world will be devastating. The coup and the lockdowns and social distancing will result in far more deaths than even I originally feared. Tens of millions will die of starvation every year as a direct result of this massive hoax.

The coronavirus hoax, scandal, crime is going to kill more people than the most evil despots in history.

They want to take our freedom.

We want to keep it.

Wanting to keep our freedom is a stronger emotion.

They’re just fighting out of greed.

We’re fighting for our survival.

And that’s why we will win.

June 17th 2020

The End of Dentistry?

I doubt if anyone really looks forward to going to the dentist. Most of us find it a slightly unnerving experience at the best of times.

But when dentists open their doors after many weeks of shutdown, the experience will be considerably more unnerving than it ever was before.

The Government and the dental governing bodies in the UK have together created a nightmare scenario which will scare the living daylights out of even the most robust of patients and put most dentists out of business well before Christmas. Dentists will have to spend a fortune obeying the new laws and they will be forced to see around a third of the patients they saw before. More expenditure and less income doesn't sound like much of a business plan to me – especially when dentists have been shut for months. There will not, I suspect, be any time for preserving teeth or for the dental and gum care we have, for so long, been warned is essential. Long-term – dental care in Britain is about to hit a bad few decades. If international travel ever becomes possible again everyone will be able to spot the Brits by their rotten teeth.

Most of us don't spend much time feeling sorry for dentists. But it's time to start.

Here's the plan; these are rules that dentists have been told they must follow if they plan to reopen their practices on the 15th June.

And if the barking mad quartet from that wonderful movie the Dream Team had sat down with the Marx Brothers they could not possibly have dreamt up a dafter, more absurdly chaotic scheme than the one which dentists say will be their new normal.

I hate that phrase. New normal. It may be new but there is nothing normal about it. Nothing at the moment is normal and it never will be.

Apparently dentists are going to have to follow official government advice from the Chief Dental Officer. I honestly didn't know we had one but I'm told there are individual Chief Dental Officers for all the UK's regions and I have no doubt they are all well equipped with Deputies, Assistants and the usual platoons of administrative staff. The formal advice hasn't been issued yet or hadn't when I recorded this, though there is only a week to go before opening day, but the guidance available, predictably entitled Standard Operating Procedures for Return to Dental Practice will give dentists enough information on policies and procedures for them to start planning.

So, here is what I am assured will be the new normal as far as dentistry is concerned.

Could the administrators who've thought up all this crap be unaware that dentists have for years been accustomed to using procedures which protect them and other patients from infectious diseases such as AIDS and hepatitis? Of course not. But then this is the new flu.

Back in May I reported that I'd heard a rumour that the Government was going to force dentists to see no more than one patient an hour. And now it appears that the rumour was true. Dentists working in the NHS have to see a huge number of patients to make a living, and I honestly cannot see any NHS dentists managing to survive these rules and regulations. I suspect that getting rid of NHS dentistry was part of the deliberate, planned reset of our society.

And unless they quadruple their fees, I can't see many private dentists surviving either. Those who obey all the new rules simply won't be able to see enough patients to earn a living. Those who don't obey the laws will doubtless be defrocked de-smocked or whatever they do to naughty dentists these days.

To start with, of course, dentists will give priority treatment to patients who have had untreated dental emergencies during the last three months. Unfortunately, dentists have been told that they cannot use procedures which generate aerosols so they can't use the drill. This means they can't do fillings or use ultrasonic scalers to clean teeth. One assumes, therefore, that teeth with enough decay to be painful will have to be removed. The tooth fairy is going to have a busy future and the denture making industry is set to boom.

Patients who are in the high risk groups are advised to delay routine dental treatment as long as possible. I'm not sure what the high risk groups are today but they have, at various times, included transplant patients, anyone over the age of 70, anyone living with someone over the age of 70. Male, black, diabetics who are bald and overweight should be top of the at risk groups but no one likes to say that in case it sounds racist, fattist or some ist.

So here's the protocol, as they love to say these days.

First, you ring and make an appointment. This won't be easy and you will see why in a few minutes.

Three days before your appointment date the dentist will email you a medical history questionnaire, a covid-19 screening questionnaire and a consent form which you have to fill out and return via email so that all your private information goes online and is readily available for hackers to steal.

If you don't have access to email you're stuffed but no one ever said life was fair. No one seems to understand that several million people in Britain don't have a computer, a mobile phone or any idea what an email is.

Pigeon keeping and pigeon racing is, however, one of the most popular sports and pastimes in Britain, so it did occur to me that maybe dentists could be persuaded to allow patients without computers to use pigeon post.

It would make as much sense as anything else. But then I realised that no one is allowed bits of paper anymore so the pigeons are out.

Dentists may also carry out a video consultation prior to their appointment. If the dentist doesn't receive all the completed forms on time then they will almost certainly cancel the appointment and you'll have to go to the back of the queue.

The day before your appointment, you will be contacted again to discuss the forms you have completed. If you or anyone in your household has any of the 3,937 symptoms so far thought to be associated with the plague, sorry the flu, sorry the coronavirus, you will be asked to postpone your appointment but if you have a real, real emergency and you can convince someone that you will kill yourself if you aren't treated, you will be referred to an Urgent dental Care hub which will probably be 600 miles away and shut but hey ho no one ever said life was fair and this is, after, the new normal in the toothless land of Comrade Boris.

You'll be asked to pay in advance for your treatment because you won't be able to pay with cash because cash is dirty and kills people and the banks don't like it. If you don't have a suitable means of paying over the internet or by telephone then it's hard luck and you'll have to resort to the old piece of string and a door handle solution.

Things now start to get exciting.

Before you leave home for your appointment you are advised by the Government to ensure that you have cleaned your teeth, drunk plenty of fluids and been to the loo. This assumes, of course, that everyone lives next door to the dentist. Anyone unfortunate to have to travel for an hour to reach their dentist will probably find it impossible to be fully hydrated and not need the loo on arrival.

As you set off on this adventure, you should take only essential items with you and you should attend your appointment on your own unless you can't stand without support. You should make sure that you wear extra layers of clothing because the surgery will be colder than usual as air conditioning is used to replace the air in the room at regular intervals. The dentist and his nurse, who have to spend all day in cold air will presumably wear thick sweaters and overcoats under their protecting clothing but will, nevertheless, be for ever falling ill with colds and having to take two weeks off work. It is of course well known that air conditioning causes breathing problems, dry skin and constant tiredness. It also tends to exacerbate all existing illnesses.

The dentist's front door will be locked and when you arrive you'll have to telephone and let the receptionist know that you've arrived. If you don't have a mobile phone or your battery is dead then you're buggered. You could I suppose just shout loudly and hope someone hears you.

But no, that won't work because when the dentist is ready for you as you wait outside in your car, they will telephone you to say that there are no other patients in the reception area and so you can safely enter. If you are travelling by public transport then you have to let the dentist know in advance so that special arrangements can be made for you to wait inside the building safely.

I am not, I promise you, making this up.

Once you have been telephoned to confirm that Elvis has left and that you can safely enter the building, a receptionist or nurse will unlock the door and let you in. She or he will be wearing personal protective equipment including a mask and a visor. Don't jump out of the car and expect to be let in soon however because there will have to be a delay after the departure of one patient and the arrival of another because the staff will have to disinfect all common areas including door handles and all surfaces.

Once you get into the now sterile surgery premises, floor markings will enable you to make sure that you obey social distancing requirements.

You will be asked to put all your belongings including your coat and any bag you are carrying into a large box in the reception area and you will be asked to sanitise your hands. If you aren't already wearing one you will be offered a mask to wear.

You will then be taken into the surgery which will have been thoroughly disinfected and cleaned after the last patient – you are I suspect beginning to see why dentists aren't going to be able to see quite as many patients as before and why, if this farce continues much beyond the summer, most of them will be planning to emigrate or looking for some other form of employment.

In the surgery, the dentist and the dental nurse will both be smothered in protective equipment. There will be no shaking of hands. You will be asked to keep your mask in place until the dentist is ready to start sticking his gloved fingers into your mouth.

As soon as the treatment is completed, you must sanitise your hands again and replace your mask. There won't be any jolly little chats afterwards. If you need to discuss anything, the dentist will telephone you later when you are safely separated by some distance.

All things considered, I wonder how many will bother going to the dentist in the future?

And I wonder how many will choose to resort to the old trick of tying one end of a piece of string to the painful tooth and the other end to a door handle. Slamming the door half a dozen times to yank out the tooth will seem to some to be a darned site easier than this crazy charade.

Finally, as we trudge reluctantly into the Government's carefully designed new normal where the entire nation becomes slowly edentulous, we can perhaps take some small comfort from the knowledge that when we have lost all our teeth, we will be able to hide our empty mouths behind a mask.

Perhaps that, after all, is what mask wearing is all about.

June 17th 2020

Passing Observations (June 17th 2020)

Why did it take so long to show that a simple, cheap steroid might help treat patients with severe covid-19? Steroids have been the drug of choice for severe breathing problems for decades. Could the answer lie in the word 'cheap'?

When a shop assistant insisted that I had to pay for my purchases with plastic, I had great joy in pointing out that the British 'paper' currency is now made out of plastic.

I wonder how many people will be eager to climb into aeroplanes when they realise that the same air commonly constantly circulates within aeroplanes – with the result that if one traveller on a plane has a bug (whatever it is) then everyone will catch it. The risk is not, of course, unique to the coronavirus. Tuberculosis, anyone?

We had a car serviced the other day. The garage added an extra fee for sanitising equipment. I think this could be commonplace now. I hear that dentists are adding an extra sum to their fees for their sanitising costs.

I now understand why millennials never have any money. While lighting a bonfire the other day I noticed an article in the newspaper I was using which extolled the virtues of 'gardening clothes'. It appears that when millennials buy their first home with a garden, they rush out and buy special gardening clothes – special jacket, special trousers, special hat, special shoes and for all I know special underwear too. I suspect I am not alone in always retiring old, frayed clothes for gardening work. The idea of buying a special pair of trousers for digging, mowing and pruning never occurred to me.

A dear friend of mine owns some shops. I am trying to persuade him to put up a sign saying: 'No more than 700 people in the shop at one time, please'.

People who are living in care homes but who are able to look after themselves and just need support with food and laundry and so on, might consider moving into a hotel (when hotels are allowed to open). I fear that if/when there is another lockdown hospitals will once again use care homes as dumping grounds. And the number of deaths will again be terrifying.

For years now there has been a massive, global water shortage. Water use has gone up six-fold in the last century and is rising by 1% a year. But the amount of drinkable water is limited – and much of that which is available has been polluted. The United Nations estimates that global demand could outstrip supply by 40% by the year 2030. And that, you will note, is just a decade away. Water shortages and water wars are coming. Meanwhile, encouraging people to wash their hands in running water for twenty seconds, every twenty minutes seem rather unnecessarily wasteful.

The widespread depression caused by lockdowns and social distancing is having powerful effects everywhere. A friend of ours who has breast cancer has talked of stopping her daily drugs because she cannot see any point in trying to stay alive.

There are two sorts of mental illness rife today. First, there is the fear of the coronavirus. Second there is the rage at the way 'they' have exaggerated the fears and destroyed the world and killed untold numbers of people for absolutely no good reason at all. I suspect this rage is doing even more harm than the fear of the virus. Antoinette and I are so devastated by what is going on that we are both depressed and neither of us can sleep properly.

I heard the other day that Obama, the beloved hero of the liberal left, bombed five more countries than George W. Bush. Indeed, he did so much bombing that at one point America ran out of bombs. Still, his fans will no doubt point out that Obama got the Nobel Peace Prize.

The fall in investment in energy will drop by 20% this year – that's a $400 billion fall. The result is going to be a greater reliance on fossil fuels and, since the big oil companies are not doing any exploration, the price of oil is likely to rise considerably.

I was delighted to see reports boasting that 80% of commuters in London had worn masks on buses and tube trains. The other side of that is that 20% had not worn masks. Good for them. Let's hope it's 30% by next week.

The Treasury in the UK is considering suspending the State pension triple lock. This will dramatically reduce pension payments. The UK already has the worst State pension in the Western world. A large army of civil servants will, of course, be able to look forward to huge pensions – largely paid for by British taxpayers. None of this will come as a shock to those who have read my book, *Coming Apocalypse*. Many are rightly worried about the future for young people but I am afraid that the future for pensioners is bleak, indeed.

I tend to get most of whatever credit is going for the articles on this site and for the videos on my YouTube channel. But that's not fair. Antoinette has ideas and does a great deal of the research. She is the only one who knows how to put stuff on the website and all I do for the videos is sit in a chair and read my script. She does all this with equipment that most Web people would laugh at.

June 17th 2020

Why We Are Fighting for Our Future – and Why We Will Win

Huge changes have taken place in the way countries round the world are run.

As I predicted would happen many weeks ago, governments everywhere have been taking full advantage of the manufactured crisis.

The Hong Kong government extended its covid-19 regulations banning gatherings of more than eight people until 4th June – coincidentally covering plans to commemorate the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre which took place on 4th June 1989. And the coronavirus has given the Chinese a tough new national security law.

In the UK, legislation is on the way which will remove the right of shareholders to attend the annual general meetings of the companies they co-own. They will not be able to challenge company directors. The change is said to be temporary but these days the word temporary appears to be synonymous with the word permanent. Meanwhile, those same directors are taking huge loans from the Government. The Government may well then take shares in those companies turning them into state owned, nationalised zombie companies. When governments subsidise big companies, the end result is rarely a happy one. It is scandalous that company owners should lose control and everyone with a pension will be affected by this.

Everything that has happened is about ‘them’ taking control and turning us into slaves. This is not conspiracy theory stuff; it isn’t paranoia, it’s very real. The baddy from all those James Bond movies, the one who wants to rule the world, is well on his way to taking control. Actually, of course, there isn’t just one baddy – there are a number of them.

Doctors have spoken out and have dared to point out that this is not a plague bug and that the dangers have been exaggerated. But they have been quickly punished. I have seen evidence that one eminent doctor was, just a day or two ago, struck off the medical register in the UK for twelve months for daring to voice his doubts about the official line on social media. Whatever happened to free speech and human rights? Article 6 of the Human Rights Act gives us the right to a fair trial and Article 10 allows Freedom of Expression. Long gone. I doubt if he will be the last doctor to learn that silent obedience is now as essential as a stethoscope and illegible handwriting.

From the moment I first spoke out about this fake crisis I have been demonised, monstered and traduced all over the internet by lies and clever distortions.

I have been writing about international drug companies for half a century and I’m accustomed to their methods but things have got far worse than they have ever been before.

When a government suppresses information or opinions then the end result is inevitably oppression and tyranny. And we are seeing a good deal of that.

The advice being given by the experts is laughably inconsistent. They say you can catch it from people with no symptoms but they say you can’t. They say you don’t get immunity when you’ve had the disease but they say you do. They say there will be a vaccine by the summer but that it takes at least five years to make one.

People have been advised by experts to leave the loo seat up all the time so that it is touched less frequently. Unfortunately, the experts don’t seem to know that when you flush the loo with the seat up, the atmosphere is filled with an aerosol spray full of bugs which will spread dangerous infections in the area and on all the room’s surfaces.

Every time anyone with a little independence offers a sliver of hope, that sliver of hope is crushed by paid for mouthpieces who invent facts to fit the official agenda. Governments are busy creating fake news and then blaming the truth tellers for spreading fake news. It’s a classic misinformation process.

And, of course, they say that you must wear a mask even though it is perfectly possible that the wearing of masks will kill more people than would have died if they had caught the coronavirus. Anyone who says that masks are perfectly safe to wear forever is probably a fool or a liar or working for the BBC. Two boys died in China when wearing masks while exercising. Masks dehumanise us and make us both fearful and falsely confident. We associate masks with surgeons, dentists and robbers. Masks also fit in nicely with the modern gender neutral philosophy which is being used to damage our individuality.

A good number of hospital departments all over the world are closed to patients with cancer, heart disease and other potential killers even though the storm of patients with covid-19 never materialised. The UK government wasted £200 million building temporary Nightingale hospitals which lay empty. And the irony is that a fifth of all the patients in the UK who contracted the coronavirus, caught it in hospital. Another indictment proving that hospitals are still not good at preventing the spread of infection.

The average age of those dying of the coronavirus was over 80, and this is not surprising since 25,000 elderly hospital patients were dumped into care homes to make way for the tsunami of covid-19 patients which never came. Those patients were discharged without being tested to see if they’d picked up the coronavirus while in hospital, and so the care homes, full to the brim with patients who were aged and ill, became the killing fields. Care homes in England and Wales contain only 3% of pensioners but 29% of covid-19 deaths occurred within their walls. Governments everywhere will save huge sums of money as a result of all these deaths. Although we are bombarded with statistics, it is difficult to get hold of accurate figures but my conservative estimate is that in the UK the Government will save £200 million a year as a direct result of those early deaths of elderly patients.

In the UK, there are 2.4 million cancer patients waiting for treatment. Many of them will die before they get it. There will be ten million people on waiting lists by Christmas. Many of them are now in agony and they too will be dead before they get half way up the waiting list. People wake up every morning crying in pain and despair, and some hospital departments still stay shut. Pubs and hairdressers are opening but some hospital departments are staying shut. Thousands will die unnecessary from asthma, diabetes and coronary heart disease. The only bright spot on the mortality figures will be that very few will have died from the ordinary flu. They were all put down as having died from covid-19.

And charities won't be able to help. The big charities in the UK are facing a shortfall of £10 billion this year. They will want government bailouts. Many smaller charities will go bankrupt.

There is little solace to be found in our institutions. Churches, mosques and synagogues are closed, although pubs and hairdressers and zoos will be open. Our church leaders have betrayed us and abandoned us to our fate. And the royal family, particularly the Queen, will be tucked away out of sight for their safety because all icons can be a comfort and a centre point for protest and revolution.

But although it is claimed that schools and churches and hospitals cannot open because of the social distancing laws, the police condone mass demonstrations which threaten to disrupt society and therefore suit the aims of those who would like to be in charge.

The resultant damage will be extraordinary. The Bank of England says that the UK economy is set to fall by 14% this year – the biggest decline since 1706. In the US, joblessness is on the scale of the 1930s.

Around the world, the laws are getting tighter and more intrusive. There are laws about lockdowns, social distancing and mask wearing and in the UK the police in London even used the excuse of a demonstration to introduce a curfew.

There are signs that the social distancing will be permanent. Cities and towns are already widening pavements so that pedestrians can safely keep their distance from one another. Cycle lanes are being enhanced too and the result will be less space for motor cars, more congestion, slower speeds. How long will it be before there are special traffic lanes for the important people to use? That was common in the Soviet Union and it was tried in England for the London Olympics.

Confusion about which is, and is not, allowed has reached absurd levels. One German state has abandoned plans to reopen brothels because they are worried that hookers and punters will rush to the state from neighbouring areas where the brothels are closed. Jonathan Sumption, a former Supreme Court judge, who, it's reasonable to understand, understands the law as well as anyone in the UK, has pointed out that sex with a person from another household is classified as 'a gathering for the purpose of social interaction'. This means that it is now legal providing that it happens in the daytime and not at night and that the sexual activity takes place in the garden and not in the house. Unless a sex worker is involved, in which case the sexual activity can take place indoors and at night because it will be necessary for work purposes.

The mass market media, bought and paid for, enthusiastically spread whatever lies they are told to spread. They ramp up the fear with new horror stories. I have no doubt that BBC dramas will make social distancing and lockdowns seem normal and essential.

It is now possible to discern a pattern and a purpose in all this.

Look around the world and you can see what they have planned for us.

In 2017, the Chinese gathered DNA and iris scans to create a massive data base. The Chinese police were also gathering blood types and fingerprints. There's not much left. By June 2019, the Chinese required mandatory face scans for all would-be phone users. Buy a new phone and you wouldn't be given a number until or unless your ID had been verified with a face scan. Consumers were reported to have welcomed all this new technology.

In Russia people who are self-isolating have to take photographs of themselves on their mobile phones, using a special App, to prove that they are in their homes.

In Ohio in the United States, when 4,800 schoolchildren eventually return to school they will wear electronic beacons to track their locations through the day. The beacons will enable the authorities to record where students sit, who they meet and so on. Naturally, all this is to prevent another outbreak of the coronavirus. If the technology works, it will doubtless spread faster than the coronavirus itself.

Small businesses have been destroyed in their thousands and, at the same time, big businesses have been enriched and strengthened with huge grants; the money handed over by politicians without the knowledge or the approval of the taxpayers.

There are still plenty of vulnerable people, the elderly, the frail, the disabled, who are still alive, still costing money and still weakening the gene pool. They have to be exterminated.

This was always part of the plan.

And I have no doubt that things are going to get worse.

If we don't stop it soon then it will be too late. The plan will be unstoppable. We are destined to become slaves in a society where freedom and democracy are no more than words in dictionaries that will doubtless be banned.

Why did governments deliberately destroy their own economies? So that they could rebuild them. This is a battle for control, money and power, and it was triggered by a minor virus that just happened to be handy at the right time. A division four virus leapt into history through timing. The British economic downturn is forecast to be the worst in the G7; the British will be the hardest hit of all the major economies. The cause? Not even Boris and his fellow buffoons are this incompetent. It must have been planned.

If there isn't a second wave of the coronavirus, or a new infection from a new deadly virus, it will only be because they are scared that too many people know and have shared the truth about their attempted takeover of our lives.

They need to shut us in to weaken us. Masks will, despite their lies, make us weaker and more vulnerable. Locking us in will deprive us of vitamin D. Our immunity to other infections will fall as we are kept locked indoors and away from other people. The brainwashing will continue – in exactly the way I described in a previous video called, 'You've been brainwashed, here's how they did it'. If you haven't watched it please find it and watch it. They are using every trick known to the behavioural psychologists. They want to create the circumstances for war so as to frighten us with that. They want to divide us from our friends and our neighbours – to weaken us, to break us up into separate factions, black and white, believers and non-believers and so on, so that we are busy hating one another rather than hating them.

But if they can get away with a second wave then afterwards there will probably be a third wave and a fourth wave until the zombies are begging for their vaccines and their subcutaneous implants.

We are fighting for our present, our future and our children's future. And it is going to be a difficult fight. Trillions have been borrowed from future generations, who will, having been kept out of school, probably not be numerate or literate enough to realise what has happened to their world.

Our real problems are not the mad scientists or the madder politicians but the zombies – the people who accept the lies they are told without question, who dutifully wear their masks and step off the pavement to maintain their social distances. (I don't like to call them sheep, by the way. I have kept sheep and they are very intelligent animals. In my experience, they are far brighter than Ferguson, for example. None of my sheep ever put the country into unnecessary house arrest.)

They are using what is called the spiral of silence to oppress us, too.

Many people now fear that what they are thinking is not what the majority is thinking. They don't believe that the virus merits taking away all our human rights but they are worried that the majority believe the politicians and the State scientists, and so they stay silent through fear.

We have to encourage those who are nervous about speaking out. We have to awaken those who are still frozen with fear.

The James Bond baddies, the people who want the control, the power and the money, are talking about a global reset. This is, they say, a good time to reorganise the economy.

That's why they desperately need a second wave of the coronavirus. They need to keep us down, they need to keep us oppressed, fearful and cornered.

They want to introduce vaccines and identity certificates and intrusive apps tracking our every movement. They want to impoverish us and they want total control over the internet. They want to restructure the monetary order. Their aim is social engineering that will lead to a world government with unelected billionaires sitting around the table. They want to introduce eugenics on a big scale – getting rid of the sick and the weak and the frail and the elderly and the vulnerable. They want to remove health care from the masses so that more and more of us die.

If you don't believe me about the seriousness of what is happening then I am afraid you haven't been paying attention.

This is war.

We're on one side.

On the other side there are the governments of the world, the mass media including the major broadcasters and the professional censors; the fascists who are doing their best to control the internet with lies and propaganda and fake news.

But take heart: it's not a fair fight.

They have a great deal to win. Money, power, control.

But we have more to lose: our freedom and our individuality.

They want us to be slaves.

We want our freedom and our human rights.

And so we have more power than we think we have.

At the moment they cannot manage without delivery drivers, supermarket workers, factory staff, shop assistants, hospital staff and so on. If we stand up to them and refuse to accept their lies then they will lose.

And we have to laugh at their insistence that we wear masks and follow their stupid rules.

We have more power than we think we have.

They want to take our freedom.

Wanting to keep it is a stronger emotion.

They’re just fighting out of greed.

We’re fighting for our survival. So we will win.

Remember the mantra: distrust the government, avoid mass media, fight the lies.

And if you visit a mass media website, leave polite messages expressing your disgust at their failure to expose the dishonesties.

June 18th 2020

Have You Been Put On A List to Be Left to Die?

What I am about to reveal is, perhaps, the most shocking evidence I have come across in 50 years of writing about health matters.

To say that I am horrified is the biggest understatement of all time.

You will be shocked too.

It started a while ago.

The internet has, for months now been full of stories of patients being asked to sign 'Do Not Resuscitate Forms or having Do Not Resuscitate forms signed on their behalf. They are known as DNR forms or DNAR forms – for Do Not Attempt Resuscitation.

GPs all over the country have been contacting their elderly patients, and those with chronic health disorders, and asking them two questions.

Are you happy for us to put a DNR on your file?

And

Are you happy for us to put on your file a note that you won't be admitted to hospital if you become unwell?

Note the clever wording, designed to elicit a positive response. It's the sort of trickery used by crooked pollsters and insurance salesmen – knowing what answer they want and shading the question in such a way as to ensure that they get it.

One GP surgery sent out a letter to a home catering for autistic adults saying that the carers should have plans to prevent their patients being resuscitated if they became critically ill.

Other GPs sent out similar letters to establishments caring for the elderly and the disabled. Blanket decisions were made for care homes and residential homes caring for patients with learning difficulties.

This isn't entirely new, of course, and it wasn't all a result of the coronavirus nonsense.

A 51-year-old man with Down's Syndrome was given a DNR because of his disability, and instructions were left that there was to be no attempt to resuscitate in case of a cardiac arrest or a respiratory arrest.

No consent form was signed and there was no agreement with the patient or his relatives. The Medical Director for the relevant part of the NHS said that their policy complied fully with national guidelines from professional bodies.

The boss of a large charity said that they believe that DNR orders were frequently being placed on patients with learning disabilities – without the knowledge and agreement of their families.

This was, of course, illegal.

Back in 2015, the High Court in the UK ruled that carers for patients with mental illnesses should be consulted before DNR notices were applied.

But the coronavirus nonsense has resulted in a flood of such cases.

A man in his 50s, with sight loss, was issued with a DNR notice giving 'blindness and severe learning disabilities' as the reason.

A man with epilepsy was issued with a DNR notice, and at the end of March this year a GPs' surgery in Wales urged high risk patients to complete a DNR form if they contracted the coronavirus. The letter said, 'you are unlikely to receive hospital admission'.

A woman in Bristol received a phone call from her GP asking if it were OK for her medical records to be updated to say that if she contracted the coronavirus she wouldn't go to hospital or receive any medical treatment.

And on my website and in my book about the coronavirus, I have provided more evidence of this.

But is all this really legal?

Well, yes, it is if permission is obtained.

In the UK, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, known as NICE, is the official advisory body to the health care world.

And the NICE ruling is utterly crucial.

NICE classified people in nine categories. If you are in category 1 then you are very fit. If you are in category 9 then you are terminally ill (though, when it suits them NHS staff sometimes devise another category of 'terminally, terminally ill').

On 29th April 2020, NICE issued amended advice to NHS staff about its resuscitation guidelines, saying that doctors should 'sensitively discuss a possible DNAR with all adults with CFs of 5 or more'. This was issued in response to the coronavirus hoax.

Doctors and nurses were instructed that they should review critical care treatment when a patient 'is no longer considered able to achieve desired overall goals'.

So, what the devil does this mealy mouthed nonsense mean?

And what is a CF? What does a CF of 5 mean?

Well the letters CF mean clinical frailty and there are several stages.

A CF of 5 means that a patient is mildly frail and may need help with heavy housework, shopping and preparing meals.

A CF of 6 means moderately frail – people who need help with bathing.

A CF of 7 means severely frail – people who are completely dependent for personal care.

And so on.

Now you could, I suppose, argue that if a patient is clearly dying then it would be cruel and pointless to continually attempt resuscitation. That was why DNR notices were devised. They were originally for patients who had only hours to live and it was considered not fair to those patients to continue to 'strive to keep officiously alive'.

But that's not what is happening now.

Today, in the UK, in the National Health Service a patient considered unsuitable to be saved or treated is now considered to be a patient who needs help with the heavy housework and who may have difficulty preparing meals or going to the shops.

I could manage a bit of light dusting, I suppose, but more than that would require more effort than I have available to spend on such matters. I would have great difficulty in preparing a meal and I hate going to the shops. So, presumably, I'd get dumped into the CF5 category and so there is no hope for me, and the NHS would recommend that I be denied antibiotics, painkillers or surgery if I fell down and broke an arm.

The post-coronavirus hoax NHS doesn't want to save anyone who is disabled and all patients in care homes are, by definition, suitable for murder by omission.

Originally NICE told doctors that they should assess patients with autism as scoring high for frailty. I am, I confess, still rather confused about when or whether this advice was removed.

I checked around with other bodies.

I didn't find the BMA website much help, though it did have a useful commercial webinar for doctors wanting financial advice. The BMA is, after all, a trades union which exists to look after doctors not patients.

And the General Medical Council, rather bizarrely, got in on the act by defining 'approaching end of life' as patients who are likely to die within the next twelve months.

This, of course is the sort of dangerous rubbish one might expect from the overpaid bureaucratic form shufflers at the General Medical Council because it is always impossible to say that a patient is going to die within twelve months. It may be possible to say that a patient might die within twelve hours but not twelve months. Only arrogant doctors and ignorant bureaucrats claim to know that a patient might die within twelve months. When I was in general practice a couple of centuries ago, I knew many patients who were given months to live but who lived many, many years. Two, I remember well, had young children to look after and although they had been given only months to live they both lived for years – simply refusing to give up and surviving on sheer willpower as much as anything else. If the GMC rule had been applied, they'd have been allowed to die. Or, the way things seem to be going, they would have been quietly euthanized in case they fell ill and needed care.

While digging around I also found this statement:

'Physicians have been empowered to grant a mercy death to patients considered incurable – the mentally ill and the handicapped.'

And then I looked a little closer and realised that the date of that policy statement was October 1939, and the author was a well-known 'medical expert' known as Adolf Hitler.

Hitler's policy, which seems to me to bear an uncomfortably close relationship to the official policy of the UK's National Health Service these days, was created in 1920 in a book written by a psychiatrist and a lawyer (what a deadly combination) who argued that the economic savings justified killing those with 'useless lives'.

The policy was to kill the incurably ill and the physically or mentally disabled and the elderly.

Hitler's policy was officially discontinued in 1941 when it seems that even the Nazis found it a bit much.

But the advice from NICE is still valid. And the NHS is still prepared to refuse life-saving treatment for the elderly, the disabled or the frail.

Refusing treatment to patients solely because of their age or fitness is a form of eugenics. It seems that social cleansing is alive and well in Britain today. If you aren't saving people (when you could do so) then you are killing them. There doesn't seem to me to be all that much difference between the thinking behind the policy of Matt Hancock's NHS and the policy of Adolf Hitler's Germany.

If you slap a DNR form on a patient, with or without their permission, you are condemning them to death. If you trick someone into agreeing to one then that's just as bad.

In my view, the NHS has been Nazified.

There are many good doctors and nurses working for it. But there are many who are so bad they are evil.

Obedient souls have been witlessly clapping the NHS and all the time the NHS has been deliberately delivering death notices, DNR forms, to the frail and the elderly.

The British shouldn't have been clapping – we should have been clicking our heels and snapping off fancy Heil Hancock salutes.

Which of us gave doctors permission to behave like Nazis and to deny treatment to people considered unimportant, expensive or expendable?

In my view, every single doctor or nurse or administrator who has put a DNR notice on a patient under these regulations should be fired, arrested and imprisoned. I don't know what for. There must be something. How do these people sleep at night? Don't they feel anything for the people they are supposed to be looking after? I am prepared to believe that not everyone in health care can have a genuine vocation. But the people who were scattering these DNR notices around were paid to look after people. And they have betrayed those people. Do Not Resuscitate notices were devised to ensure that the genuinely terminally ill were allowed to die with dignity – without being dragged time and time again from wherever they were heading. DNR notices were originally a necessary part of medicine – to avoid General Franco type situation.

But now we have a thousand Dr Mengele clones working in the health service. That sounds as if I'm exaggerating but the sad thing is that I am not. Dr Mengele would have thrived in today's NHS. He'd have liked the clapping and the adulation too.

NICE should be disbanded immediately. We'd all be better off without it.

And while we are it, we should get rid of hectoring Hancock who should be hung, drawn and quartered.

Meanwhile, if you think you, or someone you know could be rated C5 or worse, it might be a good idea to ask your GP if you've been put on the 'suitable for dying' list.

June 18th 2020

Advice for Anyone Not Wanting To Be Stuffed

Note: This is a word for word transcript of the video on this subject. I used the word 'stuffed' instead of 'vaccinated' in a (successful) attempt to prevent the video being removed – at a time when using the words 'vaccine' or 'vaccinated' was pretty well guaranteed to result in censorship. As time went by, the attention of the censors was moved over to words such as 'masks' and 'social distancing'.

This video is what I believe the IT specialists refer to as a multi-media presentation. So we are all going to have to concentrate hard – especially me, as I struggle to cope with the technology.

I have been around for a long time – I know you'll be surprised by that but it's true – and I have learned that there are two words which cannot be uttered in public without causing a tremendous amount of trouble. Indeed, I am confident that if I use those two words on this video it will only be a matter of hours before the video is removed. The Chinese Government banned all my books because of a column on this subject which I wrote for a Chinese newspaper.

So I am going to use alternative words.

For the purpose of this video I shall use the word STUFF (hold up paper A) when I mean VACCINE (hold up paper B) and I shall use the word STUFFING (hold up paper C) when I mean VACCINATION (hold up paper D).

This little bit of sleight of hand should keep this video on air until one of the Army censors working for the Government bothers to listen to the whole thing instead of deleting it because the title or the key words are in breach of security regulations.

The full text of this video will of course be available on my website with some suitably positioned asterisks to ensure that the censors are not troubled.

So, that's the introduction over with.

Now for the nitty gritty, as they say.

Some years ago I wrote a book about stuff and about stuffing programmes. I filled the book with information that I had collected from medical journals. I have been studying stuff for half a century or so.

I ended the book by pointing out that my view is that stuff is unsafe and worthless and that I would not allow myself to be stuffed again.

I added that this was a purely personal view and since I was determined to be completely fair to the other point of view, I stressed that mine is not a view shared by the majority of doctors, nurses, health visitors, journalists and war criminals.

I suggested that readers should make their own judgements based on all the available evidence, and I strongly recommend that anyone contemplating being stuffed discuss the issue with their own medical adviser.

The bottom line is that I do not advise anyone not to be stuffed, or not to have a child stuffed because I am merely an author: it is not my job to tell people what to do.

My role, as a writer, is merely to provide information (which isn't provided by the Government or the medical profession) and to give some idea of the sort of questions which readers may like to ask when considering a stuffing programme.

So, before you allow your doctor to stuff your child (or yourself), you may like to ask her or him these essential questions which I wrote for my book.

I wrote these questions in 2011 but they are as valid now as they were then:

1. How dangerous is the disease for which the stuff is being given? (Exactly what are the chances that the disease will kill or cripple?)
2. How effective is the stuff?
3. How dangerous is the stuff? (Exactly what are the chances that it will kill or cripple?)
4. What side effects are associated with the stuff?
5. Which patients should not be given the stuff?
6. Will you guarantee that this stuff will protect me (my child)? If not – exactly what protection will it offer?
7. Will you guarantee that this stuff will not harm me (my child)? If not – exactly how risky is it?
8. Will you take full responsibility for any ill effects caused by this stuff?
9. Is the stuffing essential?

Finally, I suggested to readers of my book on stuffing that they should ask their doctor to sign a note confirming what he or she had told them.

'If your doctor or nurse wants to stuff you,' I wrote 'ask him or her to confirm in writing that the stuff is both essential and safe and that you are healthy enough to receive it.'

You may, I warned, notice his or her enthusiasm for the stuff (and, indeed, your company) suddenly diminish.

'Ask your doctor or nurse to give you written confirmation that he or she has personally investigated the risk-benefit ratio of any stuff they are recommending,' I suggested, 'and that, having looked at all the evidence, they believe that the stuff is safe and essential.'

How could any honest, caring, well-informed doctor or nurse object to signing such a confirmation – effectively, accepting responsibility if things go wrong?

Similarly, I suggested that parents who are worried about having their children stuffed should ask their doctor or nurse to sign a form taking legal responsibility for any adverse reaction.

I pointed out that they might find doctors and nurses slightly reluctant to do this.

It is important to remember that most of the doctors (including nearly all GPs) who write and speak in favour of stuffing are making money out of it.

On the other hand, doctors who oppose, or even question, stuffing, do not stand to gain anything but are, on the contrary, putting their careers at risk.

It is true that I've written a book about stuff. Writing books is what I've done for a living for many decades. But to be honest I wish I hadn't written this one. Although I did my best to make it a fair book – albeit with a conclusion – it has brought me considerable amount of trouble and abuse. I have often thought about taking it off the market but decided that doing that would not stop the abuse I receive.

Daring to question the value of stuffing has led to all my books being banned in many countries. For example, my books are now not available at all in China where they had once been bestsellers.

In my book, I suggest that readers ask the doctor responsible for the stuffing to tell them the batch number of the stuff. And I suggested that they keep the name of the doctor, the date and time and the batch number of the stuff. And the surgery or clinic address. Lawsuits against doctors, drug companies and the Government usually fail because people don't have this information.

I am very well aware that there are two sets of opinions about stuff. I am also aware that as someone medically qualified who does not believe that the stuff has been proven safe or effective I am a member of a disappearing minority.

By giving my point of view about stuff, I have attracted a phenomenal amount of abuse. I've lost count of the number of websites containing lies and blatant misinformation about me. My doubts about stuff and the fact that I have pointed out that there is no evidence proving them to be both safe and effective have made me very unpopular and have resulted in my being widely vilified. Governments around the world have, in recent years, made a real effort to silence the critics of stuffing.

I strongly suspect that none of those critics has ever read my book or articles about stuff. Some of my fiercest critics have boasted that they've never read anything I've written.

I have always based my views on solid facts and I have never tried to persuade anyone to accept my opinions without considering both points of view.

However, the supporters of stuffing tend to take a very one-sided view: they are right and that's an end to it. They aren't interested in facts or evidence.

I would add that on many occasions over the years, I have offered to debate the subject of stuffing live on network television or radio with the Government's chief medical officer. Indeed, I offered to debate with any twelve medically qualified stuffing supporters all at once.

These offers have always been rejected.

The medically qualified supporters of stuffing are adamant that they are right.

But they are not adamant enough to be prepared to argue or to defend their point of view in public.

I find that strange.

I would have thought that if they were confident in their position, they would have welcomed the opportunity to try to shoot me down and to prove that the stuff they advocate so enthusiastically is both safe and effective.

After all, their confidence is so great that their constant instruction to the public is that everyone should get stuffed a good many times by their doctor.

June 18th 2020

How Many Coincidences Make a Conspiracy?

In the old days, when you went to the theatre, the orchestra would play a bit of music before the main play or opera started. It was called an overture. Well, you will be relieved to hear that I'm not going to play music because I don't have my harmonica with me but in order to help keep this video online for as long as possible I'm going into the realms of high tech information technology again.

Throughout this video when I say STUFF I mean VACCINE and when I say STUFFED I mean VACCINATED.

OK?

Right, the overture is over.

Oh, and two other things.

If you put a comment underneath this video please don't use the word VACCINE.

And if you want someone to find the video give them a link or the title because the word VACCINE does not appear on any of the tags.

Down to business.

Ever since this fake crisis began, doctors and governments have been pushing us all in a single direction. Once again, much of the information relates to the UK – but it is, I think, valid for just about every country on the planet and it is fair to say that the global medical profession has hardly covered itself in glory during the last few months.

It is difficult to avoid the suspicion that everything that has been done has been directed towards preparing nations everywhere for mass, mandatory stuffing programmes. It seems that nothing else matters. And it seems that the stuffing is being done not to protect but to control.

Just the other day, the New York State Bar Association said it should be mandatory for all Americans to have a covid-19 stuffing – including those who don't want it for religious, philosophical or personal reasons.

They don't give medical reasons as an exclusion possibility but they presumably wouldn't allow that as a let out either.

Now I don't know about you but I'm a bit wary about being given medical, religious and philosophical instructions from a bunch of lawyers. I just hope the American public feel the same way. Let the lawyers have the jabs if they want them.

In the UK, it was pretty obvious back on the 3rd March when the Government introduced its Coronavirus Action Plan that its focus was fixed firmly on the development and distribution of some stuff.

A lot of nonsense has been spoken since then and some strange things have been happening. As I mentioned in another video, I know of at least one doctor who has been struck off the medical register – for twelve months no less – for daring to question the coronavirus story. They cannot strike me off the medical register because I'm no longer on it. The GMC introduced a complicated and stupid but doubtless profitable scheme which pretty well ensures that retired doctors can't retain a medical licence. So yah boo sucks to them.

There have been a good many coincidences recently. I want to tell you about just a few that I've noticed.

For example, I was astonished when I saw a fuss being made the other day about using a simple, cheap steroid to help with the breathing problems suffered by coronavirus patients.

When I first started wielding a stethoscope in anger it was commonplace to use steroids for breathing problems.

Where was the surprise in this? I'll answer that if you haven't already beaten me to it.

The surprise was that a drug company controlled government actually dared admit that a cheap, readily available drug might be a good remedy for the coronavirus and mean that the over promoted jabs might not be necessary after all.

They've been so desperately promoting the stuff they want to sell that governments and the medical establishment everywhere have suppressed or demonised cheap and effective remedies.

But eventually, the good old steroid broke through and got an honourable mention.

Here's another astonishing story.

You will have no doubt heard of hydroxychloroquine – the drug that Donald Trump has been taking to help keep him free of the coronavirus.

Hydroxychloroquine has been used for years and early research showed it was very useful. You might think that governments everywhere might have been excited by this.

Not a bit of it.

Eminent researchers who had shown that the drug was incredibly useful at preventing covid-19 were attacked by the media who said it was dangerous. They were told it was dangerous by politicians who had heard it from a bloke who doubtless gave them the news in a brown envelope. The WHO didn't want any trials. The French Government suddenly classified it as a poison. In the UK, government agencies didn't want any clinical trials. They all wanted to concentrate on the stuffing.

But there were many demands for some tests, and eventually work was done by researchers who had funding from a bloke called Gates.

And before you could whisper the word ‘conspiracy’ a journal called *The Lancet* published a study which claimed that the drug could cause nasty side effects such as heart trouble and death.

And so the research was immediately stopped.

Phew, thought the stuff lovers. That was a close one.

But then doctors around the world flooded *The Lancet* with letters and no doubt emails and so on pointing out that the research they had published was so badly flawed that it was, well, useless and dangerous. The research, by the way, had allegedly and in my view rather bizarrely been based on some mathematical modelling and you’ll have heard that phrase before.

Other research, done responsibly, showed that hydroxychloroquine worked well, cutting the risk of infection by 80% in people who didn’t have the coronavirus. No wonder Donald Trump was taking it. What a pity residents in care homes weren’t given it. Thousands of them would still be alive. The drug is as cheap as chips because it’s been around for ever and is out of patent.

If you want to know the details of the crappy research that *The Lancet* published, I recommend that you go to the excellent UK Column website where there is a brilliant article by Iain Davis detailing exactly what was done.

Eventually, *The Lancet* withdrew the paper, blaming the researchers instead of taking responsibility for publishing the rubbish.

Now, by another of those astonishing coincidences with which we are becoming familiar these days, when it comes to stuff and stuffing, I cannot think of any medical journal which has quite the enthusiasm of *The Lancet* for encouraging doctors to stick needles into people and pump drugs and chemicals into their bodies.

In March 2019, an editorial in *The Lancet* reported that parents who refuse to have their children stuffed are often required to attend a course on the risks of not stuffing their children.

They did not suggest (though it would have made far more sense to me) that those who have their children stuffed should be required to attend a course on the risks of stuffing their children.

(My own philosophical belief is that parents who have their children stuffed are guilty of child abuse and should be charged accordingly. I recognise that this is not a view widely held within the medical profession.)

It is, I think, worth pointing out that *The Lancet* is a commercial journal which makes a good deal of money from advertising.

The last time I looked, a full page advert in *The Lancet* could cost over £10,000.

And who buys the advertising?

Well, if you guessed that most of it was paid for by drug companies then you probably would not be far off the mark.

And who makes stuff?

Well, drug companies of course.

Am I being unfair in fearing that there could be a conflict of interest here?

Let’s just call it a coincidence.

So, anyway, that’s the story of hydroxychloroquine.

A cheap, readily available but out of patent drug was available and far, far more useful than a jabby thing but serious attempts were made to block its use.

I wonder why.

This whole story gets more staggering by the minute and I confess that sorting it out is rather like sitting on a swing and trying to do a jigsaw with your eyes shut.

However, I have put together a lot of the facts and gathered together some more curious coincidences.

For example, at one point, the WHO announced that people who had had the coronavirus would not be immune and would still need the stuff. No one ever tried to explain how stuff for a disease could provide immunity if the disease itself couldn’t provide immunity but it was also suggested that we might all need to have two doses or, possibly an annual dose to keep us topped up. Boy wouldn’t that bring in the billions.

But we must not be cynical about this. Nor must we be cynical about the fact that the drug companies appear to be negotiating zero liability for themselves. In other words if some stuff should kill or maim then the company wouldn’t be responsible. I don’t think that has ever happened before in any sphere of human activity.

By coincidence, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation give more money to the WHO than the British Government. Only the American Government gives more.

Bill Gates, the billionaire software chap, and former chum of that Epstein fellow who might have killed himself and who certainly died in prison, pretty well controls the WHO. And he has tentacles everywhere. In his clear desire to control the world he looks more and more like a James Bond baddy though I think that is being unfair to the James Bond baddies.

Incidentally, you might think that if one of the world’s greediest and most ruthless men suddenly wanted to save millions of lives he might build roads in poor countries. Set up farms and good water supplies. Those are things which are proven to save lives.

But not our Bill.

Gates is, it seems, obsessed with stuffing everyone on the planet, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has its disgustingly filthy fingerprints all over everything.

By the way, Gates and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson have been speaking a good deal recently, and at a stuffing summit which raised £7 billion to spend on stuffing 300 million children, Comrade Boris handed over £1.65 billion of UK taxpayers' money, making the UK the biggest donor. Boris, who has apparently acquired medical qualifications since we last heard from him, said that up to eight million lives would be saved but he didn't mention how many children would be killed or brain damaged and he didn't say how he knew that eight million lives would be saved but these rash judgements seem to come easily to anyone who has dealings with Mr Gates. Maybe it's some sort of infection. Maybe someone could invent stuff to stop it.

One other thing you should know: Gates has for years argued that the world is overpopulated. He reckons that if you stuff people then the world's population will fall. I don't think there is any scientific evidence for Mr Gates's claim which I would describe as baloney.

Actually, I can think of an explanation for why the world's population would fall if you stick stuff into them all.

And I expect you might be able to do so if you think about it.

Now, the word 'foundation' suggests charity and kindness and generosity but I think it would be a mistake to assume that is the case here.

Gates has given over $4 billion to something called the GAVI stuff alliance which exists to create 'healthy markets for stuff'. The GAVI alliance is a mixture of WHO, World Bank, drug companies and Gates. This whole thing is a mixture of public policy and corporate profits but, hell, if Mr Gates is going to save us all from the plague he and his chums deserve to make a few bob don't they?

That $4 billion is no problem for Gates because during a decade of apparent generosity his wealth has increased from 50 billion to over 100 billion. I'm not sure whether that is in dollars or pounds but who cares. And I'm not sure whether it's from flogging his overpriced software (it must be overpriced for him to have become so rich) or from his drug company connections but what the hell, money is money, eh?

Gates, who somehow manages to combine medical knowledge which is clearly unsurpassed with arrogant, arbitrary, rash and entirely unscientific garbage, has stated that it will take eighteen months to create the stuff against the pesky virus and that if we go back to normal before then, we will be putting lives at risk. Gates is almost on a par with Ferguson when it comes to making arrogant and unsupportable predictions.

Of course if there never is a stuff then we'll never be able to go back to normal, will we?

And then there is the United Nations.

If you look at the UN's 'Sustainable Development Goals' you will find this:

'Currently the world is facing a global health crisis unlike any other – covid-19 is spreading human suffering, destabilising the global economy and upending the lives of billions of people around the globe'.

No, that's wrong on two counts.

First, it is the absurd over reaction to the coronavirus which is causing the problems. Not the bug itself.

Second, covid-19 is a minor killer compared to tuberculosis, malaria and, indeed, the common flu. The United Nations should know that. And, incidentally, the 12-year-old fact checkers at the BBC and so on might like to look at the facts if they get excited about that.

So, what is the UN doing?

Well, it is accelerating the research and development of stuff.

Gosh.

Are you ready for another coincidence?

Here's another one.

The United Nations is a partner of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. And it's that way round too. The UN is lucky enough to be a partner of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Would you like some more coincidences?

You're going to get them anyway – unless you switch off.

Here's one or two.

The UK's Chief Scientific Advisor is a bloke called Sir Patrick Vallance.

Before becoming the UK's Chief Scientific Advisor, Sir Patrick worked for a company called GlaxoSmithKline.

And, be sure you are sitting down for this, GlaxoSmithKline makes stuff.

And do you remember that Dominic Cummings, the man who pulls the strings at 10 Downing Street, broke the lockdown and drove up to Durham and while there drove to a place called Barnard Castle to see if his eyes were working?

You do?

Well, guess who has offices at Barnard Castle?

No?

It’s our friends GlaxoSmithKline.

And here’s another coincidence.

Guess what happened two days later?

GlaxoSmithKline signed an agreement to develop and make a covid-19 stuff.

Next, you will remember Neil Ferguson of Imperial College of course.

(Incidentally, I’m fed up with the Government listening to Neil Ferguson who has been serially discredited, and at the end of this criminal enterprise, I would rather like to see him locked up for helping to cause more global deaths than Hitler. Add in all the people who will die of starvation as a result of this unholy mess and the Hitler notion is not too far-fetched.)

We all know that Ferguson and Imperial College received huge amounts of loot from the much rightly cursed Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation but I wonder if everyone knows that Professor Whitty, the Government’s chief medical officer, worked at a place which received 40 million dollars from Gates for a research project.

I’m exhausted by all these coincidences. That’ll do for today.

Oh, there is this one.

Gates is treated like some wonderful saint by the BBC.

And he has given loads of money to the BBC.

And Gates and *The Guardian* newspaper, the world’s most sanctimonious and hypocritical publication work together. That might have been a waste of money, however, since *The Guardian* will hopefully be closing soon by the way because of its links with slavery.

So, how many coincidences do you need before you have a conspiracy?

What else is there?

Oh, yes, the British Government tells us proudly that one big company is already making a stuff that has not yet passed any tests. It appears that they have bypassed the usually necessary animal experiments, presumably because they have listened to me and now accept that animal experiments are unnecessary and misleading, and they are going straight into manufacture though they are giving the stuff to a few people – presumably to see how many of them die. I bet the research paper gets published in *The Lancet*. This is, I feel safe in saying, the first time that a drug company has started to make something before any tests have been done. Have they been guaranteed permission to use the stuff whatever the results? Is it pre-approved whatever the danger? Or have British taxpayers underwritten the costs?

The one absolute rock bottom certainty is that you cannot safely fast track the production of anything you intend to put into human bodies.

This plan to inject everyone on the planet with an experimental stuff is, I suspect, going to be the most dangerous experiment in the history of the world. But still, we are going to give legal immunity to the researchers, the drug companies and no doubt the Government. Gates, I should mention, has a history of being involved in some pretty dodgy medical goings on. Just check out what has happened in India, for example. And take another look at my video entitled ‘Advice for anyone not wanting to be stuffed’.

And this, remember is all for a virus which is known to be less deadly than the flu – and if anyone tells you different they are lying.

Oh, and another day I must talk about Gates and his determination to have us all eating his fake food, and is that the reason we have to get rid of farmers. And there’s his enthusiasm for reducing the size of the world population that is worth more time. And the way he made his money. Oh there’s so much to talk about.

One thing is for certain.

The world would be a damned sight safer if Master Gates went home and used his money to hire someone to improve his rotten software.

Finally, here is another coincidence.

I hope they won’t take it personally, or feel offended, but not one of the people I have mentioned here appears to me to have the morality of a walnut.

June 22nd 2020

The Stupidities Keep Coming but Lockdowns are Finished

Every day I see more horrors that shock me and then enrage me. It has at last been announced that churches, synagogues and mosques may open on 15th June, together with hairdressers and some shops, but only for private prayer. They say that places of worship will remain shut for services until Christmas and maybe longer. Maybe for ever.

Why? What rational reason can there be for this? They cannot open places of worship even if social distancing is observed? Why?

There is no scientific reason for it. If they are worried about people singing and blowing out extra air then just ban singing, though as far as I know there is not, as yet, any law banning signing in the street.

The only conceivable reason for this is to suppress religion and prevent people obtaining comfort and solace from the expression of their beliefs.

When are the clergy going to find the courage to defy this stupid and oppressive law, defy the governments and open up places of worship? To keep them closed is a betrayal, an act of supreme cowardice by religious leaders at a time when people need the comfort of religion more than ever. My congratulations to those clergymen in the US who have opened up their churches and been arrested.

Then I saw that children in school playgrounds have been told that they are allowed to throw a ball but they aren't allowed to catch one.

Think about this for a moment.

Children in the school playground, standing in a chalked square or a hula hoop laid upon the ground can throw a ball but they cannot catch one.

So the child stands there, alone and silent and terrified and throws their ball.

That's it.

No one can throw it back. Or if they do, the child cannot catch it. They stand there along, and silent and terrified that a bug laden ball thrown by someone else might hit them.

What a stupid, criminal and cruel ban.

What do they think children are going to catch from catching a ball? By and large the coronavirus is not a bug which usually does much harm to children.

The world has gone stark raving mad and the lunacy I described in a previous video in which people were told to hop so that they halved the non-existent risk of carrying the virus on the soles of their shoes, gets closer to reality by the day. Some might say that countries are now run by homicidal psychopaths determined to destroy every generation – present and future. I couldn't possibly comment.

The prospect of there being any sort of recognisable world left at the end of this stupid, pointless, criminal lockdown is now remote.

In the US, it has been estimated that unemployment is as high as 36% and nearly half of the job cuts will never be restored. A quarter of restaurants say they will never reopen. And hundreds of thousands of small businesses are probably finished.

Next, there is the wretched R number that our supremely ignorant politicians keep bandying about as though it were important.

The R number, they insist, must fall because it measures the rate at which the disease is likely to spread.

Well, I'll tell you something about the R number.

I think it's irrelevant – it doesn't matter a damn.

What matters is not the number of people who catch the disease but the number of people who die from it. And we know that that's lower than the number who die from the flu.

They have, after six months, managed to get the global total number of coronavirus deaths up to 400,000 by cheating. And crumbs weren't they excited by that. But the World Health Organisation says that in the same sort of time period the flu can kill 650,000.

So, ignore anyone who goes on about the R number.

And ignore the promises to reduce social distancing in Britain from six feet six inches to three feet three inches. If they do that we will be expected to rejoice and to accept the shorter distance as permanent. And they will tell us that we will also have to wear masks permanently.

And ignore too the weasly promises not to make their damned wonder vaccination compulsory. They will be too frightened to make it compulsory by law so they will make it compulsory be default. Unless you have your vaccination certificate or perhaps your vaccine number tattooed on your arm you won't be allowed to use the health service, have a bank account with a credit card, have a passport or a driving licence. And since they will get rid of cash, without a credit card you won't be able to buy food. But the vaccination won't be compulsory.

My big concern about the recent Black Lives Matter demonstrations is that the demonstrators, many of whom dutifully wore masks, and who obviously care about people, have not been demonstrating about the hundreds of thousands of elderly folk, black and white and every other colour, who have been murdered in care homes and nursing homes by the incompetence or criminal actions of hospital administrators.

Why not demonstrate about them?

Celebrities have been joining in the Black Lives Matter campaign – showing how caring they are.

But I haven't heard or seen many celebrities speaking out about the mass extermination of care home residents – how many would bother to shout 'Old Folk Matter'?

However, some good has come out of the demonstrations.

The police support for those demonstrators has made it impossible for the police to stop anti-lockdown demonstrations. They cannot possibly arrest anti-lockdown demonstrations now without making it very clear that the police have become blatantly political.

And by the same token, the police can no longer arrest anyone who breaks social distancing laws. They didn't arrest the thousands who protested as part of the Black Lives Matter campaign, and so how can they now arrest those who choose to break social distancing laws on the streets, in parks, on beaches, in pubs or in their homes?

The Black Lives Matter protestors didn't realise it but they marked the end of the lockdown and social distancing laws. The police who knelt during those demonstrations must now shout out, 'Stop the lockdowns' and 'End social distancing'.

If our politicians and police try to continue with these absurd laws we can all point the finger and accuse them of hypocrisy, and we will have proof of what we have known for a long time: that the lockdown and social distancing laws have nothing to do with a virus and everything to do with money and power.

June 23rd 2020

This Couldn't Possibly Happen. Could It?

I want to start with an extract from a book that was written and published in the UK in 1977. I think you will find it important.

'For over a century, doctors have known that if wires are poked into the brain and an electric charge passed through them, there will be different responses from different parts of the brain. A wire poked into one part will cause a leg to move, the same wire poked into another part of the brain will cause an arm to twitch. Fifty years ago, we knew that with the aid of electronic stimulation, doctors could induce pleasure, eradicate pain and recall memories previously lost.'

'With electrodes in position, the patient can be controlled quite effectively from a distance. He can be made to eat, to sleep or to work. His appetite, heart rate, body temperature and other factors can also be monitored and controlled.'

'Researchers have shown that gentle cats can be transformed into aggressive beasts if certain parts of their brains are stimulated. In one dramatic experiment, Dr Delgado of the Yale University School of Medicine in America wired a bull with electrodes and then planted himself in the middle of a bullring with a cape and a small radio transmitter. The bull charged but was stopped by Dr Delgado pressing a button on his transmitter. The bull screeched to a halt inches away from Dr Delgado.'

'Dr Delgado reported that 'animals with implanted electrodes in their brains have been made to perform a variety of responses with predictable reliability as if they were electronic toys under human control.'

'Similar experiments had even then been performed with human beings. The patients selected had all proved dangerous and had shown that they had uncontrollable tempers.'

And that's the end of the quote.

I don't have to get permission to read that extract because it was from my second book which was called, *Paper Doctors* and was published in 1977 by Maurice Temple Smith in London. There are some reviews of the book on my website under the 'biography and contact' button. Incidentally, I gather that a website on the internet has published old email addresses for me. I'm afraid those addresses haven't worked for ten years so please don't use them.

Sadly, 'Paper Doctors' has been out of print for years. And for the record, I loathed animal experimentation as much then as I do now. I am delighted that the British Government now appears to accept experiments on animals are pointless.

Although I wrote all that in the 1970s, Delgado was working in the 1950s and 1960s and his work was just the beginning of a very complicated story that is only now coming to its final chapters.

Most people – and in that I include most doctors and most scientists – have never heard of Delgado's experiments and do not realise just how significant they now are.

But it was Delgado, and people like him, who started the long, slow journey towards the control of the human body and human mind.

There have, of course, always been two essentials for controlling people from afar.

First, you need a way to implant some sort of receiver in the human body. Over the years the receivers available have got smaller and smaller. People still think of microchips as being little things you can pick up and hold between your fingers. The sort of thing you might find in a mobile phone for example.

But some microchips are now way, way smaller than that.

You can get a pile of the things on your fingernail. You could get one in a syringe and through the needle. You could get one in a spray and blow it up your nose. That small. Not that anyone would want to inject a microchip into themselves, of course, though other people might, I suppose, like to do it for them.

The second necessity is for a transmitter.

And that's not difficult at all. You need a tall post of some kind, a flagpole or a tall building, or a pylon of some kind, and then you stick your transmitter on the top so that it can send its messages out over a wide area. That bit's easy. Something like a radio transmitter. Or, I suppose, like those things that send signals to mobile phones. It would have to be a bit more sophisticated than the old mobile phone signals, of course.

So, that's all the equipment you need.

A little chip in the body of the person you want to control.

And a transmitter to send messages.

If you were a mad doctor and you wanted to control an individual it would be a doddle.

You'd just tell them you were giving them an injection to protect them against the flu or something like that and in the syringe there would be a little receiver. And then you'd stick a transmitter on the roof of the house across the road from where they lived.

And then you could send messages to make them do whatever you wanted them to do. You could make them sad or angry or happy or contented. You could make them run or fight or just spend all day in bed.

Remember, that's what Dr Delgado was doing over half a century ago. It's nothing new.

Of course, if you wanted to do the same thing for lots of people you'd need a whole lot of people to help you.

Say you were a really bad person and you wanted to control a whole population, for example. You could make people do whatever you wanted them to do. You could make them go shoplifting or commit murder or all vote for somebody or commit suicide or anything you wanted them to do. If you wanted a smaller population, you could make everyone stop wanting to have children. It would be terribly easy. Remember Dr Delgardo was doing this over half a century ago. It's just that his receivers and transmitters were a bit cumbersome.

If you wanted to do this you'd need someone very rich to start with. Someone with loads of money and contacts. A billionaire really. And someone without much in the way of morals.

And you'd need something to inject into people. A medicine of some kind for example.

And then you'd need someone good at software to help with all the transmitting and the receiving, and you'd need people with access to lots of tall poles or roofs where they could put the transmitter things.

But none of that would be any good unless you had a reason for injecting people. You can't just go around injecting millions of people for no reason.

Ideally, you'd need them all to be frightened of something so that they were keen to let you inject them. And then you could put your tiny receivers into the stuff that was being injected. Or squirted up their noses or whatever.

But that would be the tricky thing to organise because you'd ideally need a threat of some kind.

You could tell everyone that they were going to get the plague or something if they didn't let you give them their wonderful antidote.

That might work.

But for that you'd need to have a really big scare about something.

And that wouldn't be possible because you'd need some experts to say that there was a big scare coming when really there wasn't. So they'd have to make up something or find something and then exaggerate it. Or you find someone not very good at what they did and get them to make a forecast that terrified the life out of everyone.

And then you'd have to keep people really scared.

You could, I suppose, make them so scared that they were happy to put up with all sorts of rules and restrictions. And you could tell people that if they didn't do what you told them to do then the scary thing was going to get worse than ever.

And you'd need experts and advisers who had links to the companies making the stuff you were planning to give people. And you'd have to promise them all sorts of things. And you'd probably need some greedy and compliant politicians too.

So it really wouldn't be possible to arrange all that.

And anyway there's another problem because you would need to keep people separated so that you could make sure the messages you were transmitting reached the individual receivers. You'd have to have people standing several feet apart all the time and there's no way that people would do that.

So it couldn't possibly work, could it?

Even if that's what someone wanted to do.

June 24th 2020

Rage Against the Zombies

When I go out I don't wear a mask, of course, though I do own a rather snazzy Zorro mask which I can fish out if requested.

I don't follow those 'this way round' signs either. Indeed I never see them. The other day I was asked if I thought the one way system in our local supermarket was easy to follow. I don't follow them, of course, not since I got shouted at by an apprentice Nazi storm trooper in a supermarket. I had to admit that I hadn't even seen any signs. Apparently they had signs painted on the floor. Who, apart from cheapskates looking for dropped coins, walks around with their eyes looking at the floor?

And I don't do social distancing because it's stupid and about as necessary as doing the cancan in public which I have always tried to avoid since an unfortunate experience I had in Birmingham in 1964 and which will doubtless appear on Wikipedia now that I've mentioned it.

Almost inevitably I get the frosty looks from the morons wearing masks.

They stare at you, goggle eyed and disapproving and so I always grin back like an idiot. If they don't look away I give them my best 1000 yard stare and they usually hurry off.

But I am having more and more trouble with the cretins who are following the social distancing rules.

Earlier in the week I was about to enter a department store which had decided to open, and a woman at the door stopped me to give me instructions about how and where I could go and so on. And she told me they were following strict six feet six inches social distancing rules. (She said two metres of course but I don't do foreign stuff like metres.)

'You're not six feet away,' I pointed out, since she was about two feet away at the time.

The lock of horror on her face was a wonder. She leapt backwards and very nearly went through one of the plate glass windows. I thought she had done this in jest but I was assured that it was done in earnest.

And today, I was merrily wandering along in the garden centre when a woman coming towards me suddenly did an amazing leap to her right. I swear she leapt four feet in one bound. When they introduce an event for the social distancing leap in the Olympics, which they no doubt will, she will win the gold, silver and bronze medals.

I used to be sympathetic and understanding towards these people.

But I've decided I've had enough.

I'm fed up with the sanctimonious, empty headed idiots who say, 'oh its bit far-fetched thinking this is all about compulsory jabs or population control or a cashless society or getting rid of the elderly'.

And the ones who say: 'Oh I know the politicians and that nice master Ferguson have made a few mistakes but they all mean well'.

What do they think Bill Gates and Prince Charles are talking about when they and the rest of the World Economic Forum sneer and brag about a global reset of the economy, health care and everything else important? What is Soros planning? In simpler times there were just four horsemen of the apocalypse, today there's a cavalry regiment of them lining up to inject us and suck us dry of our very humanity.

And I am fed up with the 12-year-old self-styled fact checkers who say that the claims about Gates and sticking needles into people are wrong.

There are widespread claims, for example, that 496,000 children were paralysed in India from the polio jabs from Bill bloody Gates. It's no stretch for me to claim that Pablo Escobar did far more good for the world than Bill Gates. If and when Gates dies they will need to drive a stake through the bastard's heart – though they will need to find it first.

The WHO – which is partly funded by Gates of course, as is just about everything else including the BBC and that pompous, sanctimonious, hypocritical newspaper *The Guardian* (which was founded on money from slavery let us never forget) – has allegedly admitted that the global polio explosion is predominantly the Gates strain of polio. By 2018, three quarters of global polio cases were said to be derived from Gates. Indian Government investigators claimed that Gates's people were guilty of pervasive ethical violations including bullying, forging consent forms and other bad, bad stuff. Yards of it. But fact checkers say these claims are untrue because 'the Gates Foundation has debunked the claim'.

That's like saying Stalin didn't kill anyone because he said he didn't.

And it's the standard way that amateur fact checkers work.

They go straight to Gates or one of his paid for organisations or publications and they think that's fact checking.

Children, fact checking means going back to source.

Talking of amateurs reminds me of Wikipedia where the entry with my name on it was changed dramatically and beyond recognition the day after I recorded my first video. Anything notable was removed and really old, old stuff inserted.

For example, I am said to have been banned by an organisation called the Advertising Standards Authority.

Well, the ASA is a private, organisation largely funded by big advertisers, which can't ban anyone from anything and which has itself been reported to the Office of Fair Trading. Decades ago, the meat trade complained to the ASA about an advert for a book of mine which proved that meat causes cancer. I offered the ASA 26 scientific papers proving that eating meat causes cancer. The ASA refused to look at any of the scientific papers and found for the complainant – the meat trade. It is of course a coincidence that the meat trade buys a lot of advertising. Exactly the same thing happened with another non statutory organisation, now long gone, called the Press Complaints Commission. Details of some of the scientific papers which the ASA refused to look at are on my website.

Incidentally, I wish the Wikipedia editor who keeps writing to me offering to improve the page for a hefty fee would stop bothering me.

It could be a good scam, though, couldn't it?

Wikipedia is edited by amateurs but they could make quite a lot of money. One editor demonises me on the page and then another editor puts back my achievements and charges me £500. I wouldn't bet against there being some Wikipedia editors making a good living doing that. A pair of editors could do well out of it.

Now that I know how it works, I never use Wikipedia at all – in my experience it seems to be too easy for editors with a personal grudge to make changes to damage a reputation. And living individuals aren't allowed to correct errors or misleading material on the page with their name.

Another claim about Gates is that his foundation arranged for people to be given tetanus jabs laced with human chorionic gonadotrophin – to stop them getting pregnant. It is said it was part of a population control plan. Reducing the population is one of Gates's pet projects.

The laced stuff was found in Mexico, Nicaragua and the Philippines and the project was funded by two Gates funded organisations – the WHO and the World Bank, and if the fact checkers are interested they should just look at the National Library of Medicine in the US.

Incidentally, suspicions about these jabs organised by the population control people at the Gates Foundation were allegedly aroused when the anti-tetanus campaign was apparently promoted only to women of child bearing age and excluded men and children. Gosh, I wonder why anyone found that suspicious.

Gates, who has medical qualifications like I'm a nuclear physicist, reckons that jabbing people stops them having more children and will reduce the world population. The theory is that if they have two or three children living then they will stop having more. I don't really see how this would reduce the global population but Gates says it would, and so half the world's press merrily prints it and says how clever he is to just know this. Gates is so rich he didn't need to go to medical school he just made loads of money flogging software, which I have always regarded as crappy and overpriced, and appointed himself the world's most important doctor.

It's the mask wearing, social distancing zombies who are helping to wreck our lives. By putting up with the garbage dribbling out of the mouth of Hancock they are encouraging the nonsense and making things worse.

In the UK, it's the school teachers refusing to go to work even though everyone with a bit of brain tissue knows the biggest danger they'll face will be falling off their bicycles or puncturing a finger while buckling up their sandals. A statistician has worked out that the risk of a child under 15 dying from the coronavirus is one in 5.3 million. Even teachers admit that the rules are to protect them rather than children but they don't seem to have read the evidence showing that adults don't seem to catch the bug from children. Research published by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health found that children under the age of ten do not transmit the virus. A joint commission by the World Health Organisation and China could not find one case in the entire solar system of a child under ten infecting an adult.

If they are really worried, however, why not put plastic screens around the teachers?

Millions of children are going to be permanently damaged in every conceivable way because of these school closures. And there is absolutely no reason for schools to be closed.

Mind you, it's not just the teachers who want to keep schools closed. A poll showed that only 36% thought it was safe for schools to open on 1st June, and so 64% of the population are completely moronic. Worse still, 22% don't think it will be safe for schools to open in September.

One possible conclusion is that none of those people should be allowed to vote, drive cars or leave their homes without adult supervision.

But another interpretation is possible.

Maybe all those who want to keep our schools closed realise that teaching has deteriorated so much that children are better off staying at home. For years now children have been indoctrinated rather than taught. They have been told about the bureaucratic wonders of the fascist EU super-state and force-fed all sorts of pseudoscientific garbage about global warming. Like so many geese being fattened up, pupils are filled up with bizarre sex education studies, and history teaching appears to have been designed to replace all the truths with politically correct dogmas.

If schools are going to stick to absurd, cruel and damaging social distancing nonsenses then many parents will want to home school their offspring – and who can blame them. Maybe we would all be better off if schools stayed shut permanently.

I'm fed up with demonstrators wearing masks while they are doing it – apparently not realising that the mask is today a sign of slavery to a corrupt system. The funny thing is that it used to be illegal to wear a mask at demonstrations because it made it difficult for police cameras. I daresay some of today's demonstrators use their masks as a disguise. But why bother? The police don't care because, although the demonstrators don't realise it, the demonstrations suit the Government's sinister purposes.

The evidence proving that mask wearing is pointless just grows and grows. The *New England Journal of Medicine* recently published an article concluding that 'we know that wearing a mask outside health care facilities offers little if any protection from infection' and 'in many ways the desire for widespread masking is a reflexive reaction to anxiety'. In other words, people are wearing masks because they are ignorant and stupid. I suggest that all those 8-year-olds writing 'it's fake news' websites for their paymasters might consider learning how to do proper research before sharing their brainless opinions with the rest of the world.

And what about spectacle wearers? They often find that their lenses steam up when they're wearing a mask. That'll be handy for motorists and bus drivers.

Talking of fake news inevitably reminds me of the BBC where I have just seen a headline which reads: coronavirus – social media spreading virus conspiracy theories'. I fell out of my chair laughing when I saw that. Has anyone at the BBC ever heard of black pots and black kettles?

The one jolly fact the BBC produced was that there have been just 3.5 million visitors to the widely promoted and undoubtedly expensively advertised websites run by the UK Government and the NHS. This modest figure seems to prove that no one trusts the Government or the NHS about anything these days.

I am fed up with banks taking advantage of this fake crisis to try to force us to use internet banking. When things go wrong and all your money is stolen they'll turn the other way, of course, and it will be your fault. Why are banks still only working part-time when zoos and hairdressers can open? Hairdressers have to get a damned sight closer to their customers than bank tellers. This 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. nonsense couldn't possibly be to force us to go online could it? So that they can say no one is using high street branches so they might as well close them.

The fact is that you'd have to be half-witted to think that this so-called crisis was anything other than a conspiracy. As I have been screaming for months our lives are being destroyed not by a pesky virus but by the absurd and quite deliberate over-reaction to it. They need to keep us terrified so that we're wound up nice and tight when they're ready to tell us that the jabby thing is ready. By then the zombies will be on both knees begging to be injected with something – anything.

Zombie leaders of the medical establishment are apparently warning of a second wave. Since the medical establishment warned that we would all be dead or dying of AIDS by the year 2000, we can safely ignore them. (I got into terrible trouble at the time for saying that the risk was exaggerated.)

The unthinking, unseeing zombies are making things worse by helping crooked governments and stupid scientists to destroy our lives for a pesky virus.

So in future I am going to take a pro-active role in my dealings with the zombies. I intend to carry a bell with me, and if they leap to one side follow them shouting 'unclean, unclean' until they race away in terror.

I have decided to wage war on the zombies.

I'm fed up with being understanding and sympathetic. They're too bloody stupid for words. And it is partly their fault that our lives are so miserable. Without the compliant zombies we would not be living in an upside down world. And why would anyone want to live the way the zombies are content to live? It isn't living, it's enduring.

The coronavirus, as you all know, is no more dangerous than the flu. That's been my opinion since this whole fiasco started. But I'm not alone in thinking that.

Here's another scientific paper I found in the *New England Journal of Medicine* (which is, unlike many medical journals, magazines and newspapers very decently making all its covid 19 articles freely available). The paper is called, 'Covid-19 – Navigating the Uncharted' and one of the three authors is Dr Anthony S Fauci. The paper was published on March 26th

The authors conclude: 'the overall clinical consequences of covid-19 may ultimately be more akin to those of a severe seasonal influenza (which has a case fatality of approximately 0.1%)'.

The significance of that paper is, of course, is that Dr Anthony Fauci is one of the lead members of the Trump Administration's White House Coronavirus Task Force. He is the doctor usually seen on the TV alongside Trump.

Nothing in the scientific journals could have changed that point of view. Indeed, the statistics prove that it was an accurate prediction. Fauci's attitude since he wrote that paper has been puzzling to say the lease. But his paper in the *New England Journal of Medicine* is there for anyone to read.

I don't mind betting that the *Daily Mail* and the BBC missed that paper. It was a proper scientific paper in a proper scientific journal and so the juvenile fact checkers would have missed it too. There were some long words in it so no one at the BBC would have been able to understand it.

Finally, here's my message for the day.

Next time you see a zombie in a mask, or social distancing, regard them as the buffoons and half-wits they are because through their ignorance and their stupidity they are helping to destroy everything that is valuable in our world.

The zombies are enabling the deceitful bullies who are, I believe, destroying our society for their own gain; the empty headed zombies are endorsing the malicious wickedness which will result in millions of deaths and appalling poverty for decades.

The time has gone for patience, sympathy and understanding: the zombies are our enemies as much as the people pulling the strings.

June 25th 2020

Climate Change is a Lot of Hot Air

Pronouncements from the climate change, global warming spokespersons are greeted as though they are holy relics – far too important to be questioned. The surprise is that they are not handed down from mountaintops, carved on tablets of stone.

Three people appear to have become the poster-children of climate change mythology. Prince Charles (a prime candidate for Hypocrite of the Century), David Attenborough (a television presenter) and a schoolgirl called Greta Thunberg who is famous for playing truant from school, and seems to be regarded by millions as a new Joan of Arc. All of them, and their supporters, spend a good deal of time travelling around the world to address meetings and conferences. A decent sized climate change conference can bring 20,000 enthusiasts flying in from all over the world.

The problem is that politicians and journalists are now too frightened to ask proper questions or to deal with the issue of global change in a robust scientific manner; interviewers never ask the celebrity global change stars the questions which really need to be answered. The result is that the climate change believers get away with a good deal of pseudoscientific gobbledegook which does not bear close examination.

The first point is, of course, the unavoidable fact that the climate change spokespersons have very large carbon footprints. Although Greta famously travelled to America by boat, it was widely reported that the boat's crew had to make at least one journey across the Atlantic by plane. It would surely have been better for the planet if she had simply flown across the Atlantic – but that wouldn't have gathered quite as much publicity. The world would have lost all those photographs of little Greta braving the elements to save the planet. All the climate change personalities travel a great deal to conferences and meetings – but all travel requires energy and trains, and electric cars rely on electricity which is largely produced by burning fossil fuels. It isn't difficult to argue that the world would be better served if they all stayed at home.

There would, unhappily, have been problems with that since between 5% and 9% of all electricity used around the planet is used by information and communications technology. Aviation only produces as much carbon dioxide as the world's computer data storage centres. All those banks of servers, upon which social media campaigners share their global warming nightmares, burn up vast amounts of electricity and hysterical climate change protestors probably use up as much energy as the world's aeroplanes.

Oh, and the climate change enthusiasts who insist on cycling everywhere should realise that bicycles are a major cause of pollution. As cyclists pedal along, the traffic queuing up behind them burns up far more fuel, and emits far more pollution, than would otherwise be the case.

The climate change mythmakers have made many claims about the future of the planet.

For example, back in 1989, a United Nations environmental expert stated that whole nations would vanish if global warming was not reversed by the year 2000. In 2009, Gordon Brown told us that we had 50 days to save the planet. Eleven years ago, Prince Charles stated that we had eight years to save the planet. In 2017, the United Nations revised their prediction and said that we had three years left. A while ago, an American politician called Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez stated that 'the world is going to end in 12 years if we don't address climate change'. Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg recently wrote that: 'around 2030 we will be in a position to set off an irreversible chain reaction beyond human control that will lead to the end of our civilisation as we know it'. In 2019, she stated that we have eight years left to save the planet.

Climate change campaigners have forecast that 'life on earth is dying, billions will die and the collapse of civilisation has already begun'. They have also compared global warming to the Holocaust but 'on a far greater scale'.

None of these predictions is ever supported by any scientific evidence, and I have been unable to find one credible scientist who has ever claimed that climate change threatens the extinction of the human species or the collapse of civilisation. I can find lots of 12-year-olds who say it but 12-year-olds think and say lots of silly things which don't usually get given headlines in the world's press.

Talking of children, two things come to mind.

First, in the UK half of all children under the age of 10 are driven to school every day – or at least they were in the distant days when they went to school and people tried to teach them things. If they really wanted to save the planet and help improve the quality of the air, it would help if they walked to school instead.

Second, a group of British psychologists have reported that children are suffering from anxiety caused by the frightening predictions made by those predicting that climate change will affect our future – and may result in the death of mankind. The self-publicising celebrities who travel the world spreading doom and gloom might like to reflect on that.

The fact is that the global warming campaign is led by people who grew up in rich countries and who travel easily and comfortably. They have enough to eat. They have wonderful phones and computers and television. All those things require a good deal of electricity – most of which is produced with the aid of oil, gas and coal. Now those campaigners, whose lives were enriched by fossil fuels, want to stop poor people in Africa and Asia from improving their lives. The fact is that oil and coal will give them their only chance to catch up.

The campaigners who want to stop the world using fossil fuels are suppressing the world's poor and condemning them to starvation, malnutrition and early death. That seems to me to be rather selfish – and a hell of a price to pay. Climate change campaigners want to deny poor countries the right to use cheap energy sources from fossil fuels – but they, and their countries, became rich by using such fuels. If the climate change nutters are looking for a slogan it should be 'hypocrisy rules'.

There are lots of things which annoy me about the pseudoscience which is climate change and the ignorant pseudoscientists who jabber away about the climate as if they understood anything they were saying.

First, consider renewable energy. Well, the biggest source of renewable energy is said to be biomass – the 'green' word for wood, and we have to remember that although wind farms and solar panels get a great deal of publicity, they produce a marginal amount of electricity. The greater part of the energy which is said to come from renewables comes from burning wood pellets – biomass – and in the UK, most of the biomass is imported from America. So the trees which the planet needs are chopped down, chopped up and shipped to the UK in big ships driven by diesel. And once the trees get to the UK, they are renamed biomass and burned to produce clean electricity. Climate change campaigners want to stop funding so that oil companies will not find more oil. They want us to stop using oil. However, the International Energy Agency has stated that by the year 2040, our planet will still obtain only around 5% of its energy needs from renewable sources (including burning trees or 'biomass'). So if we give up using fossil fuels, we will have to cut back a good deal. No heating, no cooking of food, no lighting, no television and definitely no laptops and mobile telephones. If that's what Greta and company really want then that's fine. But they should, perhaps, understand what they are asking for.

Second, the climate change nutters are for ever claiming that global warming will kill off all sorts of animals. The most popular claim seems to be that climate change will result in koala bears becoming extinct. Well, the last time anyone counted there were around 300,000 koala bears living in the wild. And the main threat to their existence is the destruction of their habitat – often as a result of farmers requiring more land upon which to grow biofuels. And biofuels, remember, are the fuel of choice for climate change nutters. It's also worth pointing out that the stuff known as biofuel, crops such as corn, is known to much of the world as food. By encouraging the use of biofuels, the climate change nutters are condemning much of the world to death by starvation. Incidentally, the climate change campaigners claim that many people will starve to death if the global temperature rises. There is, of course, no evidence to support this claim.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation say that crop yields will rise by 30% by the year 2050. The planet's poorest countries will see their yields rise by 80-90%. But the increase in yields will depend on the use of tractors and heavy machinery which will, of course, require oil. Rural areas of poor countries will not be able to afford electricity and charging points until they are richer.

If the climate change campaigners get their way, poor countries will be forced to stay poor and the people living in them will remain hungry.

Third, climate change campaigners claim that forest fires are a result of climate change. But experts in both Australia and America have concluded that climate change has had little or no impact on the development of forest fires – which are, in any case, less frequent than they used to be. The average annual acreage of American forest burned is now around 6.6 million. Back in 1928, the average annual acreage of American forest lost to fires was 41.7 million. As a mathematician, I wouldn't put myself in the same class as Neil Ferguson but I am pretty confident that 41.7 is a bigger figure than 6.6.

Indeed, between 1931 (the peak) and 2020, there has been a 99.7% decline in the death toll from disasters around the globe?

Then there is the economy.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predicts that a global warming of 2.5 degrees centigrade to 4.0 degrees centigrade would reduce global GDP by 2% to 5% by the year 2100 but that the global economy will, by 2100, be between 300% and 500% larger than it is at the moment.

So, that's another worry we can forget about.

We can also forget all that rubbish about the sea rising up and swallowing millions of square miles of land.

The IPPC's estimate is that sea level could rise by two feet by the year 2100. How much of a crisis do you think this is, given that one third of the Netherlands has always been below sea level –some of it over 60 feet below sea level.

The fact is that there isn't any scientific proof that if the planet is getting warmer then the warming is man-made.

You'd think that if there were any, the climate change nutters would make it available, wouldn't you?

I apologise if all these facts rather spoil a good story.

But the fact is that the whole climate change malarkey is just another piece of propaganda. And it perhaps says a good deal about the whole thing that the three best known spokespersons for climate change are a little Swedish girl who didn't go to school, a British prince who is better known for his habit of talking to flowers than for his intellectual abilities and who forecast that the world would end in 2017, a television presenter who has made a number of programmes with the BBC, some of which should, perhaps, have been categorised as drama rather than documentaries.

To those we can add an assortment of slightly hysterical priggish children who are enjoying the freedom to join a campaign about which they know absolutely nothing, the usual crew of luvvies and what seems like the entire editorial staff of the BBC, who seem happy to give airtime to any minor celebrity or pseudo-scientist who is prepared to enthuse about the dangers of climate change while denying any airtime at all to scientists who bravely refuse to follow the official BBC line.

Climate change enthusiasts have promoted their cause by throwing bombs at policemen, by holding demonstrations designed to block the traffic and pollute the air and by forging documents purporting to give their spurious arguments some sort of a scientific basis.

I'd love to interview Greta about climate change.

Perhaps the BBC would set it up.

Or perhaps they wouldn't.

June 26th 2020

Would You Trust these People with Your Life?

My first book, written in the early 1970s, was largely about the hold the drug industry has over the medical profession. I was a young doctor when I wrote that book and although I was absolutely shocked at the way drug companies lied and cheated, I was even more shocked at the way the medical establishment had allowed itself to be bought by the drug industry. When I investigated the parts of the medical establishment which were supposed to protect patients, I was astonished and horrified to discover that every single member of the medical establishment that I could identify was receiving drug company money.

And I'm not talking about free television sets, expensive holidays, wonderful weekends away in posh hotels and very pricey meals in good restaurants – all those were freebies enjoyed by many doctors. I knew doctors who ate lunch every day in lovely restaurants at drug company expense.

Most of the doctors running the profession were being paid as advisors and consultants. I found it impossible for me to find a doctor overseeing drug safety who hadn't been on the payroll of at least one drug company.

Even I was once offered money by a drug company. My book, *The Medicine Men* , now out of print, attracted a good deal of publicity nearly half a century ago when it first came out, and one drug company offered to pay me to go on a nationwide tour to promote it to doctors everywhere.

Can you imagine?

This was a book attacking their industry. And they were prepared to pay me to attack them.

Why would they do that?

So that they could buy me.

I obviously laughed at them and said no and they've never tried since then. I promise you all the drug companies in the world haven't got enough money to buy me or buy my approval or my silence. I earn my living writing books and that's it.

Anyway, when I talk about drug companies I know what I am talking about.

All this background is important because I want to write about two big drug companies which are said to be among those companies preparing coronavirus vaccines for the British government to use on the British population and – indeed – on the populations of other countries.

First, let's deal with GlaxoSmithKline, which is known to its friends and it has no doubt bought a good many of those, as GSK.

GSK is one of the world's biggest pharmaceutical companies, and in my view if it made toasters you'd never buy a toaster from them.

In 2014, for example, GSK was fined $490 million dollars by China after a Chinese court found it guilty of bribery.

The court gave GSK's former head of Chinese operations a suspended prison sentence and they gave suspended prison sentences to other executives too.

GSK published a statement of apology.

The BBC said that GSK had said it had learned its lessons, and the BBC added that one of those lessons was 'clearly that foreign companies need to keep a close eye on China's fast changing political and regulatory weather if they are to prosper'.

Sadly, that misadventure in China wasn't GSK's only mistake. Here are some other recent ones.

In 2006, GSK paid out $160 million for claims made by patients who had become addicts.

In 2009, GSK paid out $2.5 million to the family of a three-year-old born with severe heart malformations. And in Canada, a five-year-old girl died five days after a H1N1 flu shot, and her parents sued GSK for $4.2 million. The parents' lawyer alleged that the drug was brought out quickly and without proper testing as the federal government exerted intense pressure on Canadians to get immunised.

In 2010, GSK paid out $1.14 billion because of claims over a drug called Paxil. And they settled lawsuits over a drug called Avandia for $500 million.

In 2011, GSK paid $250 million to settle 5,500 death and injury claims, and set aside $6.4 billion for future lawsuits and settlements in respect of the drug Avandia.

In 2016, GSK paid out $6.2 million in Canada.

In 2017, GSK were ordered to pay $3 million to a widow.

In 2018, GSK faced 445 lawsuits over a drug called Zofran.

There's a quite a list of drug recalls too but that's a bit dull so let's just also look at the accusations of fraud, misbranding and failure to report safety data.

In 2012, GSK pleaded guilty to federal criminal offences including misbranding of two antidepressants and failure to report safety data about a drug for diabetes to the FDA in America. The company admitted to illegally promoting Paxil for the treatment of depression in children and agreed to pay a fine of $3 billion. That was the largest health care fraud settlement in US history. GSK also reached a related civil settlement with the US Justice Department. The $3 billion fine also included the civil penalties for improper marketing of half a dozen other drugs.

Oh, and there are a couple of other things you should know about GSK.

First, GSK is one of the top earning vaccine companies in the world. And in 2010, there were reports of narcolepsy occurring in Sweden and Finland among children who had the H1N1 swine flu vaccine. It is reported that not all the safety problems were made public. I have seen a report that by December 2009, for each one million doses of the vaccine given about 76 cases of serious adverse events were reported though this was not made public. A paper published in the *British medical Journal* in 2018, reported that GSK had commented that 'further research is needed to confirm what role Pandemrix may have played in the development of narcolepsy among those involved.'

The writer of the BMJ article commented: 'Now, eight years after the outbreak, new information is emerging from one of the lawsuits that, months before the narcolepsy cases were reported, the manufacturer and public health officials were aware of other serious adverse events logged in relation to Pandemrix.'

In Ireland, the Irish Government kept inviting people to get vaccinated even when it was clear that the pandemic was on the wane and it was nowhere near the catastrophe portrayed by influenza researchers, governments, industry and the media.

Clare Daly, a member of the Irish parliament, called the adverse effects after Pandemrix a 'completely avoidable catastrophe'. She told the then Prime Minister. 'The Health Service Executive decided to purchase Pandemrix and continued to distribute it even after they knew it was dangerous and untested.'

It is perhaps worth noting that Professor Neil Ferguson, the Eddie the Eagle of mathematical modelling though perhaps without the charm, had predicted that the swine flu could lead to 65,000 deaths in the UK alone. In the end, the swine flu killed 457 people and had a death rate of just 0.026 per cent of those infected.

Second, Sir Patrick Vallance, is the Chief Scientific Adviser in the United Kingdom and, I suspect, a key figure in dealing with the coronavirus in the UK and the plans for a vaccine. Vallance worked for GSK between 2006 and 2018. By the time he left GSK, he was a member of the board and the corporate executive team. All of the fines and so on which I have listed took place while Vallance was working as a senior figure at GSK.

Still, I suppose it's nice for the company and for the Government to have someone in common; someone who knows both sides of the coin as it were.

What are they going to do next? How about making the Yorkshire Ripper the Home Secretary? Or why not dig up Mussolini and make him the next Pope?

Oh, and when Dominic Cummings went for a drive to test his eyesight, after his drive up to Durham, he went to Barnard Castle which by coincidence is where GSK has big offices. And two days after he went there, GSK signed a vaccine contract.

And then there is Astra Zeneca.

In 2014, Astra Zeneca agreed to pay $110 million to settle two lawsuits brought by the state of Texas, claiming that it had fraudulently marketed two drugs. The Texas Attorney General, when he announced the settlements, said the company's alleged actions were 'especially disturbing because the well-being of children and the integrity of the state hospital system were jeopardised'.

Astra Zeneca said it denied any wrong doing. So it paid out $110million for not doing anything wrong which was generous.

That wasn't the only little problem for Astra Zeneca.

The company had to pay $350 million to resolve 23,000 lawsuits.

The company was also charged with illegal marketing, including corrupt data in studies for marketing a drug to children, a sex scandal and a poorly run clinical trial that could have compromised patient safety and data reliability.

The study for this drug was financed by Astra Zeneca and originally included 30 children – that's not particularly small for a drug trial by the way – but only eight children completed the trial and the researcher who conducted the trial concluded that it was inconclusive. The researcher was paid at least $238,000 in consulting fees and travel costs.

However, the study was published anyway and led to a national recommendation that the drug be used as the leading choice for children.

Other studies which showed that the drug produced harmful results were never published and were covered up. A company email revealed: 'Thus far, we have buried trials 15,31,56. The larger issue is how do we face the outside world when they begin to criticise us for suppressing data.'

After years of investigations, Astra Zeneca paid a $520 million fine in the US and paid $647 million to settle global lawsuits.

In 2014, there was another scandal. After a trial described as sloppy, which resulted in a third of the participants dropping out because of side effects, results published in the American Journal of Psychiatry showed the drug as a promising treatment. The head of a psychiatry department was paid more than $112,000 for speaking and consulting fees and other payments.

That, incidentally, is a common trick these days.

It’s similar to the technique used to buy politicians.

The company has had a number of other lawsuits but you’ve probably got the picture.

If these companies were human beings they would be described as recidivists. They didn’t make one mistake. They are both guilty of systemic deceits.

So GlaxoSmithKline and AstraZeneca appear to be among the main contenders to make the coronavirus vaccine which governments are so excited about and which we are told will be the answer to all our prayers. And drug companies, let us not forget, are going to be given indemnity so that they cannot be sued if they do something bad.

Astra Zeneca is so confident that its vaccine will receive authorisation that it has already started making billions of doses. The WHO says it is the leading candidate for the billions in profit that lie ahead.

I shan’t be allowing anyone to jab me with any of the rubbish made by either of these disgraceful companies – or, indeed, by any other drug company. As a doctor I have no doubt in my mind that whatever vaccine is produced will be rushed into production and will be inadequately tested.

In my view, we should not be doing any business with these companies, or any other drug companies which put profits way above human health. These companies are serial cheats – how else would you describe companies which have enormous responsibilities but which regularly deceive, maim and kill – all for profit. And why the devil was Vallance appointed Britain’s Chief Scientific Advisor after working in a senior role for GlaxoSmithKline – which, among many other sins, admitted to committing federal criminal offences? I suspect that Vallance, with his experience at one of the world’s top vaccine companies, will be part of the process which decides whether we have a vaccine and which company makes it.

Please, please ask anyone you know who thinks vaccines are wonderful or essential to watch this video. I cannot stress this enough. If enough people watch this video then I believe there will be no coronavirus vaccine and certainly no mandatory vaccination.

It is absolutely no exaggeration to say that all our lives and our futures are at stake.

June 27th 2020

The ‘Banned’ Plays On

My original video about food shortages was censored, banned and taken down by Mr and Mrs YouTube. Although I do not think it breached any of their guidelines it obviously upset some important people and I suspect it was taken down because it is full of truths that some people would prefer remained hidden away in some dark corner.

I fear the video embarrassed Mr and Mrs YouTube and the 77th Brigade of the British Army, whose members do such wonderful work in helping to edit the internet and keep it strong and healthy and free from truths. It is always a delight to see their witty and informative jottings, accompanied by their little golden lion, scattered around the internet. Rock on Brigadier. It’s so good to know that my taxes are being used to keep Britain safe and profitable for Mr Gates and his billionaire chums. Without their help Mr Gates would probably not manage to become the world’s first trillionaire.

And, of course, my video doubtless embarrassed the world’s governments who have worked tirelessly to keep us all protected both from uncomfortable truths.

What a pity.

Sadly, I’m afraid that my original video on food, which was entitled ‘Why You Should Stockpile Food – Now!’ is, thanks to kind viewers, still available on other platforms and the script is available in full on this website www.vernoncoleman.com.

In order to avoid upsetting Mr and Mrs YouTube, the 77th Brigade of the British Army, the World Health Organisation, the BBC, Bill Gates and Matt ‘call me Matt’ Hancock you should obviously do everything you can to avoid reading the script or watching the video.

June 28th 2020

Your Government Wants You Dead

I first wrote about the coronavirus crime back in February, and on the 28th February I suggested that there were hidden reasons for the way the coronavirus was being exaggerated.

I suggested that the scare might have been orchestrated to persuade us to travel less and use up less of the world's disappearing oil supplies. I also suggested that the plan might have been to prepare us for a compulsory inoculation programme.

'There will doubtless be stuff in a syringe available within a few months,' I wrote, 'and if the scare is big enough the authorities will be able to introduce laws forcing us all to be inoculated. And once one type of inoculation becomes compulsory then the same will happen with other stuff from syringes.'

That was back in February of 2020.

'Am I being paranoid?' I asked myself. 'No,' I replied. 'I don't think so.'

And then in my first video for YouTube, which was published on 18th March and entitled 'Coronavirus scare: The hoax of the century', I predicted that the hoax had been designed primarily to do two things: to prepare us for a mandatory jabbing programme and also to demonise and marginalise the elderly population.

As the outrageous piece of criminal enterprise known as the coronavirus hoax got going in earnest, governments everywhere pretended that the lockdowns and social distancing they were introducing were designed to protect the elderly – and health services which would soon be overwhelmed.

It was one of the biggest lies in history.

There was never any need to protect hospitals because there was never going to be a tsunami of patients needing treatment. Right at the start it was clear that the coronavirus that was the centre of attention was not going to be any more of a threat than a fairly bog standard flu bug. Anyone with more than two brain cells to rub together could see that.

For the record, it is worth remembering that the ordinary flu can, in a single flu season, kill 650,000 people globally. Keep that number in mind when politicians and scientists and the mass media keep reminding us of the total number of global deaths from the coronavirus. The coronavirus has killed nowhere near that many – even though many doctors now agree with me that the coronavirus death total has been wildly exaggerated.

Right at the start, one of the mathematical modellers responsible for this mess remarked, rather sniffily, that the coronavirus is nothing like the flu.

Well, he was absolutely right.

The evidence shows quite clearly that it isn't as deadly, and if YouTube takes down this video because I have said the unsayable it won't change the truth. You can't banish the truth just by hiding it. Incidentally, if you haven't already watched it you might be amused by my video entitled, 'Everything you are allowed to know but I can't tell you what about'.

What I didn't expect was that governments and health officials around the world would use the coronavirus to trigger a mass extermination programme.

Today, I don't think anyone not working for a government or the mainstream media can doubt that the elderly have been marginalised, targeted and eliminated.

It now clear that the aim all along was not to protect the elderly but to get rid of them.

Horrifying as it sounds, I firmly believe that an essential part of the coronavirus crime was to murder as many old people as possible.

The same thing happened all around the world.

Hospital administrators sent elderly patients who had the coronavirus into care homes where they knew there were lots of frail, elderly patients.

So either the world is stuffed to overflowing with utterly brain dead administrators who know absolutely nothing about how bugs are transmitted and who threw patients out of hospital and into care homes through plain callous stupidity, or else it was done according to some devious master plan.

To begin with, I wasn't sure which it was.

But it is the fact that it was global that gives it all away.

I can believe that there might be a bunch of administrators in one country who are so stupid that they have difficulty telling the time and need help to put their clothes on in the morning but all over the world?

It isn't possible, is it?

The Government has already given doctors the legal right to kill old people (by starving them to death, or depriving them of fluids) if they are filling a hospital bed that the administrators want to use for a patient requiring cosmetic surgery or infertility treatment.

So, what's the next step?

Well, the next obvious step is to kill off all sorts of patients with chronic or potentially expensive illnesses such as cancer and heart disease

How on earth could you do that?

How could the politicians possibly get the voters to put up with that?

Well, you could shut down the hospitals – on the excuse that they are needed for the eight million patients expected to fall ill with the coronavirus. It would be like introducing the death penalty by the back door but we won't be killing the possibly guilty; we will be killing the definitely innocent.

You couldn't do that though, could you?

Of course you could.

And they have.

In the UK, there will soon be 10 million people awaiting hospital appointments and treatment. Nearly two and a half million are currently waiting for treatment for cancer.

Many hospital departments are still shut because of social distancing though there is absolutely no reason at all for it. We don't shut hospitals when there is a flu epidemic. And let me remind you – this is not as bad as a flu epidemic.

What if it were all part of a plan to get rid of people who need treatment?

What would you call it when a government decides to kill millions of patients who might need care and cost money?

Genocide, perhaps?

Is it part of the complete reset of our world – as talked about and enthused over by Prince Charles and company at the World Economic Forum?

Why have things changed so much?

It's partly money.

And it's partly eugenics.

It's all part of a wider plan which I will deal with in future videos.

Of course, getting rid of the elderly will remove a big part of the drug company's profits. The elderly take a lot of drugs.

But the new leaders of our new world have solved that – they are making mass vaccination a must for billions.

And, unbelievable as it may sound, things seem destined to get even worse.

Governments around the world are deciding that because of the difficulty involved in dealing with what is now proven to be nothing more than a mild case of the flu they can no longer treat the elderly at all.

Many of the young may shrug at this with indifference but they should remember two things.

First, they may one day be old themselves.

And second, the age regarded as 'old' is likely to be subjected to the standard creep phenomenon.

Those who don't much care about the elderly being killed, will themselves be old sooner than they think. After all young people, if they are lucky, eventually become old people.

And they should remember that the definition of 'old' is getting younger by the year.

Governments have decided that the over 70s cannot be treated. But in some countries the cut off age is 65. And in five years they may reduce the cut off age to 60. And by the end of the decade, the 55-year-olds will be lucky to receive a bottle of aspirin tablets if they have a heart attack or break a leg.

This is a form of euthanasia. Or maybe eugenics would be a better word. Or population control.

It was something the Nazis thought they were good at.

But they were mere amateurs.

You think I'm exaggerating?

The BBC's junior fact checkers will doubtless say I am.

Perhaps I should remind you that, since February, I have been absolutely accurate with all my predictions for the coronavirus.

Check my track record for the last half a century – it's on my website.

Remember too that the BBC receives huge amounts of money from Bill Gates and his pals. And much of the rest of the mainstream media has also been bought.

And then decide if you think I am exaggerating.

Oh and one more thing.

As far as I know I am in pretty decent health. I am not suicidal. And I'm careful to avoid accidents…

If anything curious happens and I suddenly disappear please ask questions.

June 28th 2020

Lies, Deceits and Consequences

The world is changing faster than I ever dreamt imaginable, and every day the changes and the discoveries and the threats are of huge proportions. Governments and the mainstream media produce lies with startling ease, and like magicians they distract us by fiddling around with their left hand so that you don't see what they are doing with the right hand. They keep us bewildered and confused, and it is impossible to believe that the disastrous changes and the damage being done could be anything other than deliberate.

The biggest, most outrageous lie is of course the seemingly permanent suggestion that the coronavirus is an unprecedented threat to our health.

Recently, the BBC website's main headline screamed the news that the global number of people infected with the coronavirus had reached ten million.

This, we were presumably supposed to believe, meant that the coronavirus was a major threat to our health, our world, our future, our everything.

But what I didn't see the BBC tell us, and the mainstream media never tells us, is that according to the World Health Organisation, the number of people who caught the flu last year was one billion.

And one billion is exactly 100 times as much as ten million.

The significance of this, of course, is that the death rate from covid-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus which has destroyed the world as we used to know it, is pretty much the same as the death rate from the flu.

Back in March of this year, Dr Anthony Fauci, who is a lead member of Donald Trump's White House Coronavirus Team, wrote: 'the overall clinical consequences of covid-19 may ultimately be more akin to those of a severe seasonal influenza'.

Numerous other doctors have confirmed that the death rate with both diseases is much the same – 0.1%.

And, of course, the statistics show that the vast majority of the people who die of both diseases are over 80-years-old and have a number of serious underlying diseases.

So, it is absolutely clear to anyone capable of rational thinking that the current coronavirus outbreak is approximately one hundredth as serious as last year's flu outbreak. Remember that the total number of coronavirus deaths is widely believed to have been manipulated.

Why didn't governments close down hospitals and the economy last year when the risk to us all was one hundred times bigger than it is this year? The answer, of course, is that it is convenient to do so this year. It fits the plan.

And from that we must conclude, yet again, that there is dirty work afoot. What is happening is very, very sinister.

I know I have said this before but I think it is wise, occasionally, to remind ourselves that everything that comes out of an official spokesman's mouth is part of a massive deception.

And just about everything published in the mass media is a lie.

Distrust the Government, Avoid Mass Media, Fight the Lies.

Some of the lies being told are now becoming a little grey and wrinkled.

For example, those who do not believe in the lockdowns are accused of putting the economy before lives.

This is a pathetic lie but it is repeated endlessly by the half-witted and those without any wits at all.

The fact is, of course, that the lockdowns will result in vastly more deaths than the coronavirus. As soon as hospitals were shut down so that they could cope with the alleged flood of people allegedly dying from the coronavirus, it was obvious that the number of deaths caused by the Government's 'treatment' was going to be vastly greater than the number dying from covid-19.

And so it has proved.

Millions are going to die because of the way governments have reacted to a minor threat.

Moreover, as I warned months ago, the lockdowns have massively reduced our immunity to all other diseases.

We were told the other day that 500,000 people were breaking social distancing rules by crowding together on the beaches. Matt Hancock, the UK's health minister and perpetual nanny, threatened to close the beaches, and some police officers were reported to be threatening arrests.

All this is very confusing because no one seems to me to know whether social distancing rules are rules, requirements, suggestions, advice or laws. And does Hancock have the power to close beaches all around the country? Are there enough policemen? Is he going to arrest the next 500,000 people who totter onto the beaches on a warm day?

Anyway, it is all a load of nonsense because the photos which showed people crammed onto beaches seem to me to have been taken using telephoto lenses – which make people look much closer together than they really were. If you look at the overhead photographs, it seems to me that social distancing rules were being well observed. And even if they weren't observing social distancing rules, who the hell cares? They were topping up their vitamin D levels after months of unhealthy lockdowns.

Bournemouth apparently decided that it was a state of emergency because people were flooding to their beaches. I thought that was what seaside towns rather liked. And I don't remember anyone talking about emergency powers when demonstrators caused mayhem in London and started tearing down statues and damaging public property elsewhere. Mind you it was Bournemouth which wanted to take down a statue of Lord Robert Baden-Powell, the inventor of the boy scouts and a man who doubtless did more for the world than any current citizen of Bournemouth and whose only possible sin was wearing silly looking shorts. Critics of Baden Powell claimed that he was a Nazi sympathiser and had based the boy scouts on the Hitler Youth movement. The snag is that Baden Powell founded the boy scouts in 1907 when Hitler was a boy and adopted the swastika on an early scouting badge nine years before the Nazis used it. Critics don't worry much about history these days.

Some of the papers showed pictures of lots of rubbish left on the beaches. That looked pretty posed to me. I wouldn't put it past our leaders to have deliberately tipped a pile of rubbish on a small stretch of beach just to make us all feel ashamed of ourselves for daring to go out and have a little fun. I visited a number of beaches to check, and none of them had any rubbish left behind. The people running the world today are evil and manipulative and there are no rules and no boundaries. Would you believe they wouldn't do that – after everything else they have done? It would be easy to organise.

It just seems that we aren't allowed to enjoy ourselves at all. The new rules about pubs will make going for a pint about as much fun as taking a driving test. No more darts, bar billiards or pool. No quiz nights, no dancing, no singing, no standing at the bar, no loud music, no laughing, no jokes, no live music. Drinks must be ordered by the aid of a special App, and everyone attending must give their name, address and all contact details to the gestapo agent at the door. Publicans will have to put up with far less income and will have to hire three special employees to do work for the State. There will be one to stand at the door collecting names and phone numbers and addresses. There will be one to stand on guard at the loos, and to clean them between customers. And there will be one to make sure that everyone is sitting quietly and neatly at their designated table and not moving about or making too much noise. I jest not, this is the new world order they want us to accept. It is part of the process of extinguishing all fun and pushing us all towards depression and suicide and an ever growing sense of fear. They know, because the psychologists have told them this, that when we are depressed and fearful we will be more obedient. Have you ever watched the animals in a zoo? After a while they become stuck in their routines. They lose their personality and their sense of adventure. They become like robots pretending to be animals.

And the rules about getting married were devised by someone who got the word 'wedding' mixed up with the word 'funeral'.

We are being told that councils all over the country are going broke because of the coronavirus. It has, it seems, in some way caused them huge financial losses.

Really?

Does anyone expect us to believe that?

In what way has the coronavirus damaged their income?

It didn't help, of course, that the malevolent idiots running the councils closed all the car parks to stop people going for a walk in the park or on a beach. But they've been making tons of money from parking fines to make up for that.

Services have been reduced not enhanced.

So precisely how has the coronavirus reduced their income?

Is it possible that the councils were already going broke – largely because of the huge salaries and pensions they pay themselves?

And is it possible that they are just using the coronavirus as a handy excuse to cover up their own greed and incompetence? Is that remotely possible? I have long felt that councils are run by people with a collective IQ lower than their average shoe size and nothing that has happened recently has dissuaded me from that notion.

Whatever the truth, they will doubtless use the coronavirus as an excuse to increase their charges and reduce their services.

Here's another lie which has been doing the rounds.

It has been said that anyone who questions the Government's rules about the coronavirus is a psychopath. And it's being said that this is based on research. One headline I saw was 'Psychopathic traits linked to non-compliance with social distancing guidelines'.

Well I looked at the original lengthy paper upon which this smear campaign was based, and here is what the author actually concluded:

'The results do not (and these words were underlined) mean that it is mostly irresponsible and inconsiderate people who spread viruses. The results do not (and again these words were underlined) mean that people who contract a disease like covid-19, have maladaptive traits.'

So, that was more fake news.

Everywhere we look there are lies.

And the lies are all coming from governments and their agents.

Why would they want to lie so much, to terrify people unnecessarily, unless they were planning to take over society, oppress us and remove the last vestiges of our freedom? There are bad things happening here. All of them have been planned for a long time. And those of us who can see what is happening must unravel the lies and identify the people behind them (and it isn't just Bill Gates though if I were making a list of the world's most evil people he would be very high on my list).

The apocalypse to fear is nothing to do with covid-19.

It's the plan that preceded covid-19 that we need to worry about.

Was the coronavirus deliberately engineered and released to trigger all this?

Or was it just a serendipitous occurrence – the rather modest event that the evil deep state dwellers had been waiting for and could use as an excuse. Almost every year there is a nasty new bug around. It was to be expected that there would be one this year as usual.

I don't know the answer and at the moment I don't think it matters.

We have more urgent things to worry about.

The purpose of the coronavirus crime is now clear: it's a takeover of our world and our lives and the destruction of our freedom, our rights and our culture.

If we don't continue to spread the truth far and wide, and persuade the mass of people to understand what is happening, and that our governments and the mass media are lying about everything, then the future is bleak. Indeed, I don't think it is any exaggeration to say there is no future.

But the bastards haven't won.

And we're not going to let them.

July 1st 2020

They're Going to Starve Us and Freeze Us to Death

Have you noticed how the unelected intellectual terrorists leading the way in the coronavirus hoax are keen on phrases to describe what they're doing to us, and what they want to do next, when they've got us all neatly tied up and terrified?

I should explain, by the way, that I am perfectly serious in describing the proponents of the coronavirus hoax as terrorists.

Terrorism can be defined as using intimidation and violence in the pursuit of political aims.

Well, governments everywhere have been certainly using intimidation to pressurise us into being scared of their fashionable version of the flu bug. And if someone threatens to send uniformed men round to arrest me if I don't obey their stupid rules then as far as I am concerned that is violence.

To get back to the phrases they have adopted to describe the world they want us to live in. First, there's the new normal, of course, which should be the new abnormal because it bears absolutely no resemblance to anything I am inclined to accept as normal. I have nothing but contempt for people who are so supine that they willingly wear masks when popping to the shops or who would rather step off the pavement and be run over by a number 29 bus than risk sharing space with another citizen. I've been retired from medical practice for years, and I took my name off the medical register a long time ago but I am thinking of putting it back on so that I can certify as insane anyone who wears a mask or does the social distancing dance on the pavement or in a shop. Masks dehumanise us and take away our human qualities. One of the saddest sights I've seen recently was that of two Ferrari racing drivers standing side by side, proudly wearing their masks. Oh, please. I can't see Fangio, Stirling Moss, Mike Hawthorn or Gilles Villeneuve wearing silly masks.

'Excuse me,' I will say, standing outside one of the new vaccination centres that they will soon be building on every street corner, 'why are you wearing a mask?'

'Gtrjsghe kehek mumble mumble,' they will reply through the requisite number of layers of material, too stupid to know that all masks have pores big enough to let through any imaginable virus.

And then I'll pull out a mental health act form and sign them up for a long, paid holiday in the loony bin. Another one bites the dust.

Then there is the green recovery which sounds far less fun than the pink recovery which I intend to promote when I have a spare minute or two, and no more meaningful than the purple with yellow spots recovery. I have never had much faith in green recoveries since a racing car team painted its car green and claimed it had done so in order to make clear its green credentials. How a car driven round and round in circles and using up a gallon every three miles can ever be green is beyond me. Still, racing car people live in a world of their own. I see that the Mercedes formula one team is painting its cars black this year in some sort of show of solidarity with black people though it seems to me to be more akin with virtue signalling via a paint job guaranteed to gain some publicity. I'm not sure what good a new paint job will do to improve people's lives in Africa, though I suspect it may all be something to do with the fact a young fellow called Lewis Hamilton who drives one of these things is very outspoken about black issues and what needs to be done. I'd have more respect for Hamilton's views if he hadn't buggered off to Monaco or Switzerland as soon as he started earning enough money to pay decent amounts of income tax and make a real contribution to the world. You can't expect to have a voice in social affairs if you don't contribute meaningful amounts of tax. Mind you Hamilton also claims to be keen on environmental issues and yet spends his life flying around the planet in order to drive cars round and round in circles. But then all celebrities live on a different planet to the rest of us. Hamilton would gain a little admiration and respect if he gave half his annual salary to poor people in Africa – in lieu of paying British income tax. Maybe he does; but is keeping it secret.

And, of course, there is the global reset which basically means allowing a bunch of bossy fascists to decide what is good for us, what we should eat, what we should do with our lives and, in due course, what we should think and what we should believe in.

There is a war going on for control of the world, our lives, our minds, our souls and our destiny.

Talking of souls, I am very suspicious, by the way, of the various religious leaders who seemed surprisingly keen to shut down their churches, cathedrals, mosques and synagogues when the flu first arrived a few months ago. Why did they not feel that their congregations might need a little solace at a time like this? Most congregations have been happily practising social distancing for years so even if there had ever been any theoretical risk there had never been any practical risk. Was it just simple cowardice and irreligious self-preservation which led to the betrayal of millions in their time of need, or were they helping to soften us up for a new world in which traditional religion is considered inappropriate and possibly even illegal.

We aren't going to be allowed to have any choice in these matters because these unelected folk (most of whom none of us have ever heard of) know better than we do what we want. There was a time when the people used to vote and choose politicians according to their promised policies. Of course, it was understood that the politicians would lie and that very few of their promises would be kept; but there was a semblance of democracy in the whole business, and politicians knew that if they lied too much they would not be given power at the next elections. But the unelected ones who seem to have given themselves the power to decide our future for us, seem to want to take control with no mandate from the people. Prince Charles, Bill Gates, George Soros and a variety of characters at something called the World Economic Forum have taken upon themselves the authority to decide what is good for us. In my view, these people are morally empty; corruption is burnt into their empty souls. A bunch of people who probably think they are all doing the right thing for the right reasons but who are all doing the wrong thing for the wrong reasons.

The World Economic Forum used to be famous only for its daft Davos conferences at which we all smiled indulgently. But now this and other organisations have shown us their true colours and we are clearly in a fight to the death. It's them or us. The truth, to them, is what they say it is and what they want it to be. How many are using covid-19 to promote their own financial interests at our expense? We are living in Lewis Carroll's worst nightmare.

It is difficult not to feel impressed at the way they are managing to keep us oppressed through the constant application of fear. It's a simple recipe and it works well with the simple minded.

And then there is the oil.

This, like the deliberately engineered coming food shortage is a big part of the future problem we face.

The coronavirus crime has now turned into a global warming crime. The two have become inextricably linked. We are told that the coronavirus appeared because of climate change and that we must therefore put all our effort into tackling climate change – although, as I explained in my video entitled, 'Climate Change is a Lot of Hot Air' this whole argument is childish gibberish unsupported by science and largely promoted by publicity seeking celebrities, the ill-informed and the uneducated. Politicians, business leaders and environmentalists are all fighting one another for the high moral ground as they demand that as the economy is reset it puts climate change top of the list of requirements. The vast majority of the people around the world realise that the climate change nonsense is just that – nonsense. It's propaganda with a sinister purpose.

The manipulators who are trying to take over the world (and doing very well so far it has to be admitted) are using people like Prince Charles, that Swedish kid and untold ignorant celebrities to give them an excuse to take control.

And so we are constantly being told that we must stop using oil and other fossil fuels and rely on alternative sources of energy. As I pointed out in my video, this means relying on biomass – which is wood – because wind and solar don't provide enough energy to power the laptops and mobile phones so beloved by the climate change nutters. And in the UK, the wood we burn comes from trees chopped down in America, cut up into tiny bits and then brought across the Atlantic in diesel powered ships.

What the nutters don't seem to realise is that the oil really is running out. Russia and former USSR countries provide 40% of the EU's supplies – and they are running out. African supplies are also falling. The oil currently being formed deep down in the earth will be ready in 50 million years but I'm not sure I can wait that long.

The shortages are exacerbated by the fact that the big oil companies have been bullied into cutting exploration by 25% – so they obviously aren't finding much new oil.

One of two things is going to happen.

Either the price of oil will soar again over the next few years.

Or millions of people are going to starve or freeze to death as energy systems collapse.

Well, maybe that is what they want.

Certainly, a lot of the unelected people who have started talking about overpopulation and the need for a global depopulation programme, would presumably welcome that.

I know that our world has been pretty well destroyed by a bug which causes a small part of the real health problems caused by flu. I know that we are being lied to constantly.

I know that our food supplies are being deliberately damaged – and if you want to know more about what is happening to our food supplies, just read the transcript of my video on food which YouTube banned because it was full of facts and truths. The video is entitled 'Why You Should Stockpile Food – Now!'. They kept Part II but banned Part I. The video is, I think, still around on places like Bitchute. But the transcript is on this website.

As I have already said, our energy supplies are desperately under threat too and that without oil there will be hundreds of millions of deaths around the world. That's no exaggeration. Without oil, and other fossil fuels, there will be virtually no electricity for farming or cooking. And transport will grind to a halt. That may sound all very nice to the nutters who dream of living in tents in idyllic rural parts, relying on government hand-outs and stealing turnips, but it's a fact of life that they and the frail, the elderly, the very young and most of the rest of us will freeze to death or starve without oil.

Oh, and those who are selfish and greedy enough to be still in love with their electric cars – quite rightly claiming that subsidies mean they are cheap to run – might like to think a little more about how electric cars are made and the fact that they have been shown to make global warming worse.

Fans of electric cars tend to forget that the huge quantities of rare earth metals such as lithium, rhodium and cobalt required for the batteries have to be dug out of the ground – using machinery which is powered with diesel or petrol. An electric car can require 10 kg of cobalt and 60 kg of lithium. And huge amounts of copper are needed too.

The car industry is already struggling to find enough cobalt, lithium to make batteries for electric cars. The planet's supply of these goodies is very limited. Oh, and there is, of course, a massive demand for copper for all the wiring. The mining required to dig up these elements requires lots of huge fuel guzzling equipment.

As an aside, half of all the cobalt needed is mined in the Democratic Republic of Congo. I suggest that electric car fans do a little research into the Democratic Republic of Congo. Many of the rare earths used in the manufacture of electric car batteries are dug out of the ground by children as young as seven. Sanctimonious green electric car buyers will doubtless be delighted to know that they are providing work for so many under 12s.

The price of the materials required for electric car batteries is going to soar and the mines mean much despoliation. The fans of electric cars never seem worried about this. Nor do they campaign to leave the cobalt and the lithium in the ground as they do with oil.

To get back to the electricity supplies: whatever happens I believe there are going to be major electricity outages in the next year or two. Make plans if you can. There are generators and long-term storage batteries available. And at the very least get a kettle that will run off the cigar lighter in a car – then you can at least make a cup of tea or hot soup. Or have a hot toddy when the weather gets chilly.

July 2nd 2020

We’re At War

I read an article the other day in which a journalist complained that writing about the coronavirus in Tanzania was dangerous because the Government there is silencing the media.

‘When the international media try to report on the pandemic,’ moaned the writer, ‘they are accused of scaremongering, their attempts described by the Government as a form of warfare.’

This was reported in the British mainstream media as though it were a terrible example of censorship and the oppression of the truth.

Most of my remaining laughs have withered a little in recent months but I managed one for this and I think those who appeared to be shocked by this story need to look a little closer to home, and open their eyes.

There is no freedom of speech anywhere in the world now.

In Britain, for example, the Government owns the mainstream media lock, stock and printing press.

Anyone who questions the ‘official’ line, which appears to be that the coronavirus which causes covid-19 is a deadly killer which threatens the very existence of the human race, is ignored while every incident or even suggestion which might be used as ammunition to scare people is promoted with hysterical enthusiasm.

If I dare to include too many facts in a video for YouTube the censors will take it down. I’ve never said anything contentious or illegal or even against the YouTube rules but so far they’ve taken down five of my videos. After I complained, they did put back two – including one called ‘Coronavirus: Why did YouTube ban my video?’ I think even they were embarrassed to have taken that down. I’ve realised, by the way, that if I avoid using words such as ‘coronavirus’ in the titles of videos then they are less likely to be taken down.

To those of us who care about facts, the BBC is a real nightmare.

It has long seemed to me that the BBC, which receives money from many sources, including some given directly from the Government, the EU and, inevitably, the Gates Foundation, has always been racist and sexist.

There is a Woman’s Hour programme on the wireless but the State broadcaster would have a collective fit if anyone suggested a programme entitled Man’s Hour. There is a Radio Scotland, a Radio Wales and two stations in Northern Ireland but no Radio England. I suspect that is because Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are recognised as regions by the European Union but the EU demanded that England be divided into a number of smaller regions.

Despite its charter and national responsibility, the BBC has always been biased and corrupt but it has travelled further along that road than I ever thought possible. Not content with gouging huge licence fees from the British public, the BBC seems to be happy to accept money from anyone who wants to buy its favours. I have reported before on the massive multi-million payments which have been paid to the BBC by the European Union but many will have been shocked to hear that the BBC also happily pockets huge sums from a wide variety of donors including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. (It is, of course, a coincidence that Bill Gates appears to be revered by the BBC which always seems to describe anything slightly critical of Gates as ‘fake news’ or ‘false claims’.)

We shouldn’t forget that the BBC has been using news as a weapon of war for a long time. Goebbels said in 1944 that the British ‘know that news can be a weapon and are experts in its strategy’. And it was the BBC which the Government used as the gun.

George Orwell is said to have learned about Newspeak and Doublespeak while working for the BBC and some suspect that his Ministry of Truth in the book ‘1984’ was modelled on the BBC building in Portland Place.

In 1953, the BBC was used to spearhead the British propaganda campaign in Iran which led to the elected government being toppled.

And the BBC has a long tradition of blacklisting and denouncing critics. They have perhaps just lost a little of the subtlety in recent years.

Orwell knew, as do all proper writers, that it is a writer’s job to stand up for victims, to protect the vulnerable and to oppose oppression. I am appalled that the mass market media has betrayed the people and that just about all the columnists active at the moment seem content to follow the party line. I feel able to offer criticism since I resigned from my last Fleet Street column some years ago when the editor of the newspaper I was working for refused to print a column criticising the Iraq War and Tony Blair’s lies about the weapons of mass destruction.

As a writer I am disgusted by the way journalists have taken the knee to their editors and proprietors in order to please the Government. It is a journalist’s job to behave like dogs and to treat politicians like lampposts.

And as a former GP, I am appalled at the way the science has been distorted and rearranged to suit dishonest motives.

The nonsense about the R number is meaningless because what really matters with an infectious disease is not the number of people who get it but the number who die of it. And we all know that this disease (I daren’t say the name too often or this video will be banned because I am considered dangerous) is no more deadly than the flu.

Incidentally, governments are now going to find it harder to push up the death totals. They have already murdered all the vulnerable old people in care homes, and solved the ageing population problem by killing thousands of the over 65s. And many doctors are surely now going to be wary about putting the covid-19 down on every death certificate they write.

And consider the antibody tests, for example.

These have turned out to be appalling unreliable, particularly in the first two weeks of having covid-19 symptoms, but governments are still using the tests as proof that lockdown needs to be reinstated. When you think about what they are doing, it is quite brilliantly wicked in an evil sort of way. At the beginning of this nonsense, months ago, I urged the Government to do more testing – to find out how many people had, or had had, the bug. It seemed sensible. But they steadfastly refused to do this – finding new reasons or excuses on an almost daily basis. 'The dog ate the test results' was my favourite of these. The result is that they can now do more testing, find more people with the disease and, therefore, introduce more lockdowns. They don't need more deaths. They have established that having the disease makes you a menace to society, a sort of Typhoid Mary of our times, and so if there are enough people in one area testing positive they can shut down everyone and everything as a punishment and, mainly, as a message to everyone else.

And the tests are being used to shut down farms and places where foods are prepared. They don't care about the fact that there are many false positives. Part of the plot for our future, and a smaller global population, is to make food scarce and push up the prices.

I feel odd when I say things like that.

I am not a natural conspiracy theorist though I am doubtless now labelled as one. Actually, the odd thing is that I believe that so many people now disbelieve governments and their absurdly, obscenely motivated rhetoric that they are conspiracy theorists – not us. Matt Hancock and Boris Johnson are conspiracy theorists – not you and me.

Everywhere you look they are finding ways to oppress us and make life more difficult. We are told that cash is too dangerous to use, and their yearning for a cashless society is becoming more blatant by the day. Shops and pubs are being told not to take cash – as though it were deadly to do so. It would make more sense to outlaw doorknobs and handles. And those bug ridden plastic recycling bins we are told we must use so that we can pretend we are saving the planet even though our nicely washed old yoghurt cartons are taken off to be burned when they have been collected.

In March alone, 1,250 free to use cash machines were converted to charge a fee when people take their own money out of the bank. And you have to use a machine because banks are too terrified of the plague to deal with mundane activities such as providing their customers with some of their own money over the counter.

No one seems to care that one in five Britons, and the figures are much the same everywhere, cannot cope without cash because they don't have or don't trust plastic, have poor broadband or mobile phone coverage or are frightened of debt. People don't get into uncontrollable debt using cash. But they do get into uncontrollable debt using credit cards.

Of course cash carries bugs. It always has. So just wash your hands after using it.

I feel deeply sorry for anyone under 60 and particularly for those who have small children or grandchildren. If we cannot stop this savage attempt to drive us into the New Abnormal, or the Global Reset promoted by the unelected and self-appointed rulers who have decided that the world is theirs and who are determined to control our lives, there will be little future for any of us.

Everywhere we look there is manipulation of one sort or another. Newspapers and television cannot do anything without sponsorship of one kind or another. I'm proud that these videos and my website are free of advertising and sponsorship but everywhere I find myself raising an eyebrow or two in surprise.

For example, I looked at an interview with Bill Gates the other day that was published by *The Guardian*, the newspaper founded on slave money. The interview was described as being part of their 'Now Generation' articles.

Incidentally, has anyone without a new film or album to promote ever done as many interviews as Bill Gates? The man's hubris, vanity and self-regard are staggering.

The interview was entitled, 'The African youth boom: what's worrying Bill Gates' and the writer was a journalist called Polly Toynbee who met the apparently wonderful Mr Gates at what was rather breathlessly described as his foundation's spacious campus in the heart of his hometown, Seattle.

The blurb said: 'The philanthropist warns that stability in Africa makes a huge difference to the world, and that investing in the health and education of its young people is vital.'

There is lovely picture of Gates looking thoughtful and rather worried about something. Maybe he too has trouble with his damned software.

Gates is reported as telling us that Africa is not one country but many, which is kind of him because the rest of us hadn't noticed, and though there isn't much talk of vaccination there is much hagiography here. I saw no mention of all the controversies that have surrounded Gates in recent years. It all seemed rather nauseatingly sycophantic to me. Ms Toynbee didn't ask Gates why he didn't just distribute money directly to individuals and let the recipients use it as best they wanted. She didn't ask why he didn't just build roads and farms so that the poor Africans could better their own lives. She didn't ask him what the devil gave him the right to decide what other people wanted.

'He is reaching for what works best to revive the west's faltering conscience in the face of America first nationalism and rising pull up the drawbridge populism in Europe. The spirit of generosity is under assault as government aid budgets come under constant sniper fire from right wing politicians and their media,' wrote *The Guardian's* Toynbee.

But the best bit of this is at the bottom where a two line note tells us that 'The Now generation' is a series produced in collaboration with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation'.

A click on a link tells me that: 'The journalism is editorially independent, commissioned and produced by our *Guardian* journalists.'

Oh dear.

Surely, if you want to maintain the appearance of editorial independence, it is surely wiser to avoid writing puff type articles about your sponsor.

Or maybe that's just me being old-fashioned.

Incidentally, Mrs Melinda Gates has apparently said that black people deserve priority access to the covid-19 vaccine when it arrives.

I don't think this was in response to the recent demonstrations. Perhaps it was more in response to the fact, belatedly recognised, that black people seem more likely to die of the coronavirus.

And why did it take them so long to spot that? I even put it in my book about the coronavirus which was published in April.

But were black people more likely to die, because of poverty, overcrowding and co-morbidities rather than racial differences? Has anyone done any research? I don't think so.

Or are black people deliberately being given the coronavirus bug because some of our new unelected leaders want to give them the vaccine?

If I were representing black people I would want to look closely at this. I would want to look at the Gates' words about the size of the world population and at all the strange stories about the vaccination programmes associated with the Gates foundation. I would want to know how well the vaccine had been tested, who had made it and what the death rate was likely to be.

And I wonder why the wife of a billionaire software maker felt able to decide who should and who should not be vaccinated.

I've noticed too that it is being claimed that some of the regions that have seen the highest incidences of covid-19 infection have high levels of pollution.

Gosh.

Of course people who breathe polluted air are more likely to suffer from respiratory illness. And when the air pollution is high it is usually because there are lots of people living closely together. And infectious diseases tend to spread more in crowded areas than in places where folk live 100 miles from their nearest neighbour.

This all comes under the heading of what I would call 'completely crappy and pointless research'.

More relevantly, right from the start of this crime, I have been wondering whether the covid-19 deaths could be more common in patients who have been given a recent flu jab.

A number of doctors have asked this.

But as far as I know, no one has attempted to answer the question – though it wouldn't be difficult to do so.

Indeed, doctors are being actively discouraged from looking at ways to treat or prevent covid-19. In a previous video, I discussed the way that hydrochloroquine was mis-investigated.

I have previously reported that at least one doctor in the UK has, to my certain knowledge, been struck off the medical register for daring to question the coronavirus crime. And I heard the other day about a small group of GPs in France who had used antihistamine drugs to modulate the severe symptoms of covid-19 and who have been trying to get a controlled study done for the last three months. Instead of being encouraged, the doctors have been threatened with sanctions or being struck off. Their crime? They contacted the media.

Make no mistake, these are dark and difficult times, as Victorian novelists probably liked to say.

You won't find the truth in the mass media.

But you will find it here.

No advertising, no sponsors and definitely no money from Mr Gates's ungodly Foundation.

July 2nd 2020

Just a Little Prick – The Bill Gates Story (Part One)

Bill Gates is often described as a philanthropist.

Interviewers generally seem to treat him as a cross between a saint and a prophet. In a way this isn't difficult to explain. After all, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is a partner with many media companies, tossing money around with remarkable generosity. In the UK, the BBC and *The Guardian* are just two of the recipients of Gates largesse.

It would, of course, have been possible for Gates to have used his vast wealth to change poor countries in a very straightforward and positive way by, for example, using his billions to help with road building programmes or to help poor farmers to improve their land and their farms by digging wells. Using $10 billion to set up water supplies would have doubtless saved many lives in a simple, honest way. But you can't control the world quite as easily simply by doing practical, honest things which save lives. And Gates seems to me keen to take control of every aspect of our lives. To me he seems to be a strange hybrid of those mad fictional characters Dr Strangelove and Ernst Stavro Blofeld – the James Bond baddie.

I'm afraid I don't believe any of Gates' projects have anything much to do with philanthropy. There is too much intermixing of donations and business. What do the Gates family really want? I cannot help thinking it's more about power and unspoken plans.

Gates got rich through the Microsoft software company, allegedly because his mum knew the chairman of IBM and got Gates his big break. There are accusations that Gates stole some of the ideas for his business. Personally, I feel that Gates has made himself obscenely rich by making the world a far more stressful and annoying place than it was before Microsoft appeared. In my experience, there were other much easier to use word processing programmes but Gates steamrollered the opposition out of the way with ruthless efficiency. Gates original partner, Paul Allen, claimed that Gates tried to screw him and charged his partner, with mercenary opportunism. Before Gates arrived on the scene, people who wrote software often gave it away free. Gates took over the world of personal computing, acquired a monopoly position and took full advantage of it to make himself very rich. Additionally, there have for some time been doubts in my mind about how close Microsoft is to the National Security Agency in the USA.

The Microsoft billionaire seems to have learned his hometown boy act from veteran investor Warren Buffett who didn't get to be rich by being a hometown boy but has a good line in simple charm. Gates has described himself as a health expert. He frequently offers advice and predictions about health matters though personally I'd have thought his only area of expertise with viruses involved those usually found in computers. He has stated that the world will not return to normal after the coronavirus until all or most of the world's population has been vaccinated. Because he has a lot of money, and tends to distribute it widely, politicians and bureaucrats and scientists listen to his advice and accept what he tells them – parroting his line about vaccination with great loyalty.

It would, I think, normally be unusual for a bloke with no formal medical training to give health advice to the world but Gates has managed to buy himself a seat at the table by giving huge sums of money to organisations such as the United Nations and the World Health Organisation – in my own view now two of the most evil organisations in the world. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is said to be the second largest contributor to the WHO and If the United States really does stop its donations, then Gates will be the biggest contributor. That sort of money buys a lot of access and, I think, an unhealthy amount of influence – especially when you also spend a good deal of money on publicity designed to show the world what a good egg you are. Gates is also linked to the World Economic Forum, which reckons that the coronavirus is a great excuse to change the world and which has a plan called The Great Reset which, like most of these plans which have emerged since the coronavirus, seems to me to have been prepared some time before the arrival of covid-19.

Gates, of course, also gives a good deal of money to Imperial College in London – the place where Neil Ferguson works. It was, of course, Ferguson whose rubbishy forecasts about the coronavirus resulted in the lockdowns, the social distancing, the ruin of the British and American economies, untold deaths in care homes and so on. Gates has also funded work done by Dr Chris Whitty, the UK's current Chief Medical Officer. And the Gates Foundation has even given money to Public Health England – a UK Government organisation, sponsored by the Department of Health, which allegedly exists to protect and improve the nation's health. Public Health England appears to be desperately keen on vaccinations which is a big surprise, of course. One of their documents carries the slogan Keep Calm and Carry on Vaccinating – which seems a little cheesy to say the least.

Before I go any further it is important to point out, and bear in mind, that Gates believes the planet is overpopulated. He thinks this is a real problem. Is it still a secret passion? Who knows? Interviewers, who often seem to come from organisations with financial links to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, rarely ask searching questions about difficult issues.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is an odd organisation in that as well as having philanthropic aims, it also invests in a good many companies designed to make a profit. Indeed, the Foundation seems to be doing very well and seems to me to operate as much like a family investment trust as a charity.

The Gates Foundation has a mass of interlinked projects and commercial holdings. And it seems to an outsider as though he is more interested in controlling the world than in helping people.

Here are just a few of the things Gates is currently doing with his money.

First, of course, there are the vaccines. I have already dealt with some of the controversies associated with the Gates's obsession with vaccines in previous videos.

Gates seems obsessed with vaccines and now seems to favour ones using very new technology. He is terrifyingly keen on giving his experimental vaccine to billions of people – ideally to the whole population of the planet. It doesn't seem to occur to him that even relatively safe vaccines have been known to cause many thousands of deaths, might enhance susceptibility to disease or indeed cause and spread infections. If it has occurred to him it doesn't seem to be something that worries him unduly.

On the surface, Gates seems to see vaccination as the answer to most of the planet's health problems and sees them only doing good and incapable of doing very much harm. 'We're not going to return to normal until most people have been vaccinated,' he has said, after warning that the coronavirus would otherwise result in millions of deaths. 'You will never be free until we have a vaccine,' seems to be the mantra. Naturally, the politicians and the scientists agree with the man with the money even though experts seem to agree that a vaccine may never be found. If no vaccine is found then much of the world will remain in a state of terror and social distancing and masks and occasional lockdowns will become a normal part of life. Is that what Gates wants? The politicians and the big business people with a yearning for control will be delighted.

Moreover, Gates seems to have decided that we won't have a vaccine for 18 months – and, naturally, the world's politicians and scientists (many of whom are on the Gates payroll) agree with the world's least qualified but most powerful 'doctor'. So it seems that the artificial lockdowns and the unnecessary social distancing and masks will remain in place.

Incidentally, I usually avoid the words vaccine and vaccination because they tend to result in censorship. On this occasion, however, it seems impossible to do so.

Since Gates is convinced that the planet is overpopulated, it seems odd that he would be keen on vaccinating huge swathes of Africa. You might think that vaccinating children would mean that there would be fewer deaths and that the population would go up. But Gates argues that if you vaccinate children and they don't die then mothers will have fewer babies and instead of having eight babies in the hope that two will live they will just have three, believing that the vaccines will keep them alive. I am not at all sure how this means that vaccination will result in a fall in the population but Gates says it will and the politicians and the scientists and the journalists all nod wisely, pat their wallets and agree with him. I haven't been able to find any real, solid evidence for this claim, which seems to me to be a combination of the bizarre, and the unbelievable, laced with wishful thinking, apart from the evidence from Gates himself. I don't like to point this out but religion seems to play a part in the number of children a woman has. In the UK, for example, the figures show that Muslims tend to have an average of three children per family whereas Christians usually have only two.

There are, of course, those who are concerned that Gates's mass vaccination programme is part of his plan to reduce the world's population to 500 million or so – a figure that many who are keen on population control regard as acceptable. Personally I cannot see the difference between an untested vaccine, used globally, and genocide. But then I'm perhaps a little old-fashioned in liking to see drugs and vaccines properly tested before being rolled out to large populations.

And although interviewers rarely seem to mention it, there are some very worrying stories circulating about some of the vaccination programmes promoted by Gates and/or the WHO. These are not, however, worries that get aired in those parts of the media supported by grants and partnerships from the Gates Foundation. I allow absolutely no advertising or sponsorship on my videos or website. But great chunks of the media, popular and specialist, seem to enjoy close, financial links with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and it is important to remember this. I have no doubt that many websites are also given money or support by the Foundation.

I will deal with Bill Gates's obsession with vaccines in the second part of this two part series entitled Just a Little Prick.

But there are many other topics which must first be mentioned.

First, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has invested in a company called Monsanto.

I have always regarded Monsanto as the most evil company on the planet and I've thought of it this way for several reasons…

First, Monsanto has long been a leader in the development of genetically modified plants. These terrify me because as far as I have been able to find out, they have never been properly tested to see what long-term consequences there might be. What damage could there be to crops in a few years' time? Could they become more susceptible to disease? And are there any risks to the people who eat genetically modified food? For some years now, Monsanto has taken to patenting its seeds and, as a result, small farmers who have traditionally grown their crops from their own seeds have found that they have been unable to do so. There are said to have been many thousands of suicides as a result of this – as farmers found that they weren't allowed to grow the seed they had saved from their own crops but had to buy seed they couldn't afford to buy. I have reported on this many times in the past.

And, of course, Monsanto is the manufacturer of Roundup – a doubtless effective but equally doubtless nasty weed killer. Unfortunately, there have been a number of claims that Roundup causes cancer and there were 125,000 lawsuits as a result. The German company Bayer bought Monsanto a little while ago. Bayer is alleged to have paid $63 billion for Monsanto and to have paid $10.9 billion to settle the claims relating to Roundup.

Bayer, now the new owner of Monsanto, has an interesting history which is worth a short detour while we're here. Think of this as our equivalent of a side trip to Barnard Castle.

In 1925, a group of important German companies, which included Bayer, formed a cartel called IG Farben. Their aim was to obtain control of global markets in key industrial sectors – specifically: chemicals, pharmaceuticals and petrochemicals. History shows quite clearly that it was the formation of this cartel, and the creation of IG Farben, which led directly to the Second World War (and all its associated atrocities) and ultimately the European Union. IG Farben's need for cheap labour was so great that the company built a huge factory at Auschwitz where there was a large reservoir of slave labour. Bayer, the company's pharmaceutical division tested its drugs on prisoners. IG Farben also made huge amounts of money by providing the gas for the killing of prisoners in concentration camps throughout Germany.

At the end of the Second World War, IG Farben was broken up into four new companies, one of which was Bayer, and all of Farben's assets (including the profits from manufacturing the gas used in the infamous gas chambers) were transferred to the new companies – all of which were managed and run by the people who had run IG Farben.

So, the bottom line was that although IG Farben had been run by war criminals, no one was really punished and things carried on much as they had done during the war. The only thing that changed was that a good deal of company notepaper had to be redesigned and freshly printed.

The new companies denied any responsibilities for the actions of IG Farben on the basis that they were new and had not existed during the war. This disgraceful self-serving legal move was accepted without a murmur of protest. Bayer, which had been a part of IG Farben, had used concentration camp victims for its experiments and for testing new drugs but the company was allowed to keep all the profits from these experiments.

By the mid-1960s, Bayer had become ever richer and more powerful.

And there seemed to be no shame about the past. Bayer actually set up a foundation to honour a Nazi called Fritz ter Meer on his 80th birthday, and started the foundation off with a donation of two million deutschmarks. (It was not until 20 years later that Bayer changed the name of the foundation.) It did not seem to bother anyone that Herr ter Meer had overseen the building of IG Auschwitz and had been found guilty of war crimes (including genocide) and sentenced to just seven years imprisonment in 1948. Naturally, he did not serve the full sentence. Fritz ter Meer, one of the most evil Nazis, was released in 1950 and immediately re-joined the board of Bayer.

That's the end of the detour.

Will Bayer be making a coronavirus vaccine or treatment? Who knows. Would you want it if they did?

The bottom line is that I cannot imagine why anyone who really cares for people and the planet would put any money into Monsanto or Bayer.

Many investors try to avoid what they think of as 'dirty' companies who do or have done bad things to people or the environment but this doesn't seem to bother Gates.

Oddly enough I haven't been able to find any evidence that interviewers from *The Guardian* or the BBC have asked Gates whether he is comfortable with his investment in a company widely regarded as rather worse than wicked. Have I mentioned, by the way, that both the BBC and *The Guardian* are partners with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation – by that I mean that they have received money from the Foundation? That is, of course, the sanctimonious *Guardian* newspaper which was founded with the aid of money from slavery.

Next, Gates has been funding scientists at Harvard who are trying to block out the sun's rays in an attempt to stop global warming.

If you haven't heard of this before just stop and think for a moment.

The scientists want to spray millions of tons of dust into the stratosphere to stop the sun's rays reaching the earth.

One plan is that every day, more than 800 large aircraft would lift millions of tons of chalk dust to a height of 12 miles above the Earth and then sprinkle the dust to stop the sun's rays getting through. Another plan is to send up hot air balloons to release powder into the atmosphere.

There are, you won't be surprised to hear, a couple of problems with this.

Obviously, the first is that no one has yet proved that global warming is taking place and is anything more than a natural phenomenon. Moreover, there are a lot of scientists who believe that we are heading into a phase where the planet is actually cooling.

And there are those who think that Gates's money and the scientists throwing dust into the sky could help create droughts, hurricanes and mass deaths. It seems fairly well agreed that altering the atmosphere to cool the planet could have unpredictable effects. In 1815, a volcanic eruption created crop shortages and disease outbreaks.

Some might say, of course, that all this could be considered a bonus by a man who wants to reduce the world population.

No one seems to have told him, by the way, that 800 large aircraft taking off every day and flying to 12 miles up, would require a good deal of aviation fuel. And what sort of dust are they planning to have sprayed? Well, some say calcium. But I have also heard talk that barium, alumina and strontium might be used. Whatever it is won't improve the quality of the air we breathe. Bottom line is that this seems to me to be a way to reduce the world's population rather than protect it – all in the guise of dealing with the climate change hoax.

Next, Gates is funding scientists at a company called Oxitec who are genetically modifying mosquitoes. This project has received authority in the US, and the genetically modified mosquitoes will be released in 2022. What could go wrong? I have no idea. I don't think anyone else does either. But I can think of a number of good reasons why this is breathtakingly dangerous. There is even talk of research into mosquito delivered vaccines.

Gates is also helping to pay for researchers who are making breast milk from cultured mammary cells. This seems to me to be the ultimate in hubris. Why does Gates always want to interfere with nature? The female body produces the perfect breast milk. There is no need for substitutes. I remember that when attempts were made to introduce powdered milk into developing countries, it was a disaster. Women were told to stop natural breast feeding and to follow the example set by Western women – and to use artificial milk. One problem was that the water used to rehydrate the milk was often badly polluted. And many babies died. If Gates wants to help women and babies, he would surely do better to encourage natural breast feeding.

You will by now see a pattern developing. Gates seems to me to be a mad scientist manqué. He seems to have massive faith in the idea that scientists can solve everything by interfering with nature – often using global warming as an excuse for his plans. His attitude seems to be that he knows much better than God how things should work, and so he is going to use his money to pay for the improvements he thinks we need.

Next, Gates is funding the developing of fake meat. This will be very handy when his other projects such as blocking the sunshine destroys traditional farming. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation funds the Cornell Alliance for Science which supports the agrichemical industry. All this takes the power from small farmers and gives it to big chemical companies, in my opinion. If Gates's projects damage natural farming then his foundation's investments in laboratory food and artificial breast milk will doubtless prove to be extremely profitable.

Gates, through his Foundation, has also invested in microchipped biomedical, track and trace and payment transaction systems such as cryptocurrencies. He seems to prefer digital payment systems to old-fashioned cash and appears to be enthusiastic about ID systems and health passports, which he describes as being good for keeping an eye on people, making sure that they pay their taxes and have their Gates-approved vaccinations.

And I think it is fair to say that he is probably rather more enthusiastic about trans-humanism than I am.

And then there is the organisation known as ID2020, which is believed by some to show more than modest enthusiasm for mandatory vaccination programmes and mandatory track and tracing programmes. Since 2016, ID 2020 has promoted digital ID. The promoters or partners are Microsoft, the company which made Gates rich and GAVI, the alliance which links drug companies and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation – among others. One of the Gates Foundation's aims is, of course, investing in vaccine development and surveillance.

'It's exciting,' they say, 'to imagine a world where safe and secure digital identities are possible, providing everyone with an essential building block to every right and opportunity they deserve.'

If I trusted Bill Gates, I might be a trifle more enthusiastic. But I'd rather ask Donald Trump to hold my wallet than ask Bill Gates to hold my identity.

Gates and or his Foundation or Microsoft have also invested in Onfido which is preparing technology to develop a phone app to scan faces so that people can work or travel.

And I doubt if Gates would object to the suggestion that we all have medical certificates vaccinated into our bodies to prove that we have had the covid-19 vaccination.

What else is there?

Well, there is the Pirbright Institute, where they study infectious diseases affecting farm animals. The Pirbright Institute is one of those curious hybrid organisations which is government funded but also a charity and, as you have probably guessed, its major stake holders include the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. I was a little surprised to find Gates supporting an institute researching farm animals until I discovered that the Pirbright Institute had taken out a patent on a coronavirus with the European Patent Office. Big companies do that a lot these days and it seems institutes do, too. I wonder why anyone would want a patent on the coronavirus – though, of course, the patent might be useful for a vaccine.

And there is something called CEPI – which is the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations. This was launched in Davos in 2017 by the governments of Norway and India, the Wellcome Trust, the World Economic Forum and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. It has been given large chunks of taxpayers' money from Germany, Australia and the UK.

One of CEPI's goals is the development of platforms which can be used for rapid vaccine development against unknown pathogens. One of the board voting members is someone from the vaccine business unit at Takeda Pharmaceutical Company and the scientific advisory committee includes someone from Pfizer, of course. And CEPI and GlaxoSmithKline have announced a collaboration, which is nice. And CEPI works in partnership with Imperial College, which is where Ferguson works and where work is being done on vaccines. You will remember Ferguson. It was his outrageously wrong prediction which led to the lockdowns and the social distancing and the desperate call for a vaccine to end all our misery. Oh and CEPI also works with GAVI which we will come to in part two of 'Just a Little Prick'. GAVI has announced its enthusiasm for identifying and registering children around the world.

Just how Gates, the world's leading expert on health, keeps up with all these organisations is beyond me. I wouldn't know whether I was at a CEPI meeting or a GAVI meeting or simply in the counting house counting out my money. But I expect our wonderful billionaire has lots of help. And there is always Mrs Gates, of course.

Gates, through his Foundation, has bought support and influence everywhere but he has, in my view, left a trail of damage and concern.

And all that brings us back to the vaccines, of course. No story about Gates would be complete without details of the vaccines – past and future.

I will deal further with Mr and Mrs Gates' obsession with vaccines in the next part of this two part series. It's an obsession which seems to me to be distinctly unhealthy though perhaps not for Bill and Melinda. I don't think it is too healthy for people in developing countries and it is probably not going to be healthy for those of us in developed countries either.

When asked when we would get back to normal after the coronavirus hoax, Gates said 'when almost every person on the planet has been vaccinated against coronavirus'. He has colourfully described the vaccine for covid-19 as the final solution. Inconveniently, many experts say that it may not be possible to make a vaccine. Some point out that making a vaccine often takes many years. And I am not the only doctor to worry that if a vaccine is made very quickly, with inadequate testing, then the global consequences could be absolutely catastrophic. Injecting 7 billion people with an experimental vaccine sounds to me like a potential recipe for a disaster previously unknown on the planet. In his less bombastic moments, Gates realises this and has, therefore, insisted that there be legal indemnification for those making and distributing vaccines. In other words: if the vaccine kills you or destroys your brain then you're on your own. Don't expect any compensation. In the US, manufacturers and distributors have had immunity from February 2020. I'm not sure whether the immunity will cover doctors and nurses so that's something they might like to worry about. Patients should see my video entitled, 'Advice for anyone not wanting to be stuffed'. Or read the transcript on this website.

Part Two of this series gets even more extraordinary. And watch it soon just in case it gets removed and mysteriously disappears.

YouTube has announced that it will remove any video deemed to be in contravention of advice being given by the WHO (that must be tricky, given the WHO's ability to change its mind but there you go).

And one of the biggest providers of money for the WHO is, of course, what's its name, oh yes, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Still, if that happens you can always read the transcript on my website www.vernoncoleman.com – as long as that remains in place.

July 3rd 2020

Just a Little Prick (Part Two)

Welcome to part two of ‘Just a Little Prick’, the unauthorised Bill Gates story. Obviously, the term ‘little prick’ refers to what happens when you have an injection and is naturally in no way meant in a pejorative way. Heaven forbid. If I were to be rude about Mr Gates his subsidised friends at *The Guardian* and the BBC would doubtless need to be revived with smelling salts.

In the first episode of ‘Just a Little Prick’, I dealt with a few of Mr Gates’s connections, aspirations and investments. But I made it clear that he and his wife seem to have one first love: vaccines.

Some people love cats, mountain climbing or horse racing. But Bill and Melinda Gates love vaccines. They yearn to inject everyone, and to them vaccines appear to be the eighth wonder of the world. I wouldn’t be surprised if they spent their honeymoon watching vaccines being made or watching vaccinations being given to tiny African children. I bet they spend their evenings drooling over vials of vaccines. And at Christmas they probably give each other unusual vaccines they’ve found.

Unravelling the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and its links with the world of vaccines and vaccinations has taken weeks and given me a headache. Thank heavens there isn’t yet a vaccine for headaches.

Among the many partnerships and so on which the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has developed in recent years, there is one with an organisation called GAVI.

Now GAVI is rather odd in that it is a partnership between the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the World Health Organisation (which itself is very well financed by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation) the World Bank and a variety of other bodies.

So, for example, GAVI also has close and loving partnerships with what I think are some of the world’s biggest, dirtiest, most disreputable multinational drug companies including GlaxoSmithKline and Pfizer.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the organisation ‘Doctors Without Borders’ has I think alleged to have said uncomplimentary things about GAVI, alleging that large multinational drug companies working with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation put high mark ups on their prices and that GAVI spends oodles of money subsidising large companies. One of GAVI’s stated aims seems to be to create a healthy market for vaccines.

You will probably not be surprised to hear that Gates has close links with a number of multinational drug companies but you may, or may not, be surprised to hear that he doesn’t seem to me to be terribly fussy about the company he keeps. On the other hand it would I suppose be quite difficult to find a drug company partner that didn’t have a reputation that would make Al Capone blush with shame. If you get into bed with a drug company you have to be prepared to wake up in the morning with a bit of scratching and itching and so on.

In a previous video entitled, ‘Would You Trust These People with Your Life?’ I detailed some of the bad things that GSK has done over recent years and I pointed out that if it were a human being, GSK would be described as a recidivist. It would probably have regular appointments with a parole officer.

GSK is one of the world’s biggest pharmaceutical companies and, in my view, if it made teaspoons, you’d need to be a special sort of person to buy a teaspoon from them.

In 2014, for example, GSK was fined $490 million dollars by China after a Chinese court found it guilty of bribery. The court gave GSK’s former head of Chinese operations a suspended prison sentence, and they gave suspended prison sentences to other executives too.

Sadly, that misadventure in China wasn’t GSK’s only little ‘Oh dear, whoops, how did that happen?’ mistake. Here are some others.

In 2009, in Canada, a five-year-old girl died five days after an H1N1 flu shot and her parents sued GSK for $4.2 million. The parents’ lawyer alleged that the drug was brought out quickly and without proper testing as the federal government exerted intense pressure on Canadians to get immunised.

In 2010, GSK paid out $1.14 billion because of claims over a drug called Paxil. And they settled lawsuits over a drug called Avandia for $500 million.

In 2011, GSK paid $250 million to settle 5,500 death and injury claims and set aside $6.4 billion for future lawsuits and settlements in respect of the drug Avandia.

And then there are the accusations of fraud, misbranding and failure to report safety data.

In 2012, GSK pleaded guilty to federal criminal offences including misbranding of two antidepressants and failure to report safety data about a drug for diabetes to the FDA in America. The company admitted to illegally promoting Paxil for the treatment of depression in children and agreed to pay a fine of $3 billion. GSK also reached a related civil settlement with the US Justice Department. The $3 billion fine also included the civil penalties for improper marketing of half a dozen other drugs.

There’s more interesting stuff about GSK on my video entitled, ‘Would you trust these people with your life?’

Oh, and there are a couple of other things you should know about GSK.

First, GSK is one of the top earning vaccine companies in the world. And in 2010, there were reports of narcolepsy occurring in Sweden and Finland among children who had the H1N1 swine flu vaccine. It is reported that not all the safety problems were made public.

In Ireland, the Irish Government kept inviting people to get vaccinated even when it was clear that the pandemic was on the wane and it was nowhere near the catastrophe portrayed by influenza researchers, governments, industry and the media. One member of the Irish parliament, told the Irish Prime Minister. 'The Health Service Executive decided to purchase Pandemrix and continued to distribute it even after they knew it was dangerous and untested.'

It is perhaps worth noting that Professor Neil Ferguson, the Eddie the Eagle of mathematical modelling though perhaps without the innocent and patriotic charm, had predicted that the swine flu could lead to 65,000 deaths in the UK alone. In the end, the swine flu killed 457 people and had a death rate of just 0.026 per cent of those infected. Just another of Ferguson's cock ups. Cock ups seem to be a speciality of his in more ways than one.

Second, Sir Patrick Vallance, is the Chief Scientific Adviser in the United Kingdom and, I suspect, a key figure in dealing with the coronavirus in the UK and the plans for a vaccine. Vallance worked for GSK between 2006 and 2018. By the time he left GSK he was a member of the board and the corporate executive team. Fines and so on which I have listed took place while Vallance was working as a senior figure at GSK.

As I say, you can find out lots more exciting stuff about GSK and about Astra Zeneca in my video entitled, 'Would You Trust These People with Your Life?' If the video disappears, you can, as always find the transcript on my website www.vernoncoleman.com

Oh, and there's one more thing I nearly forgot to mention. GlaxoSmithKline was fined £37.6 million for cheating the National Health Service. I wonder what Vallance thought about that.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation also has a relationship with Pfizer and to be honest with you, Pfizer's record isn't anything you would want to boast about. If you worked there you'd keep quiet about it I think and say you worked for the tax people or robbed banks for living.

So, for example, in the UK, Pfizer was fined £84.2 million for overcharging the NHS by 2,600% and in the US, Pfizer was hit with a $2.3 billion fine for mis-promoting medicines and paying kickbacks to doctors.

You might think that a foundation wanting to have a clean reputation might avoid relationships with companies like those.

But Bill Gates doesn't seem to mind about all these little peccadillos; the cheating and the deceiving and so on. And in a way why should he? He has a team of PR people willing and able to make sure that his halo is constantly being repaired and polished, and I doubt if any of his many press and broadcasting partners will want to damage their financially advantageous relationship by mentioning anything which might caught embarrassment. After all, we must not forget that the Foundation he shares with Melinda, Mrs Gates, seems to me to have investments with bought much of the world's media; doling out fairly huge chunks of cash to no doubt grateful partners. Did I remember to mention that those two sanctimonious organisations the BBC and *The Guardian* are partners with the Gates Foundation?

It cannot be that Gates isn't aware of the problems associated with vaccination because his own foundation has allegedly had its own little peccadilloes to think about. I've described some of those controversies in other videos.

In India there was trouble over a Gates-funded vaccine programme. A government investigation claimed the programme, an observational study, violated the human rights of those being injected and failed to report properly adverse effects. That, as we have seen, is not entirely unusual drug company practice. A parliamentary investigation concluded that the Gates funded Program for Appropriate Technology in Health had been engaged in a scheme to help ensure 'healthy markets' for GlaxoSmithKline and Merck (another drug company).

An eminent Indian editor said, 'it is shocking to see how an American organisation used surreptitious methods to establish itself in India. Another complaint was that Indians were used as guinea pigs.

In Africa, a meningitis vaccine project, funded by Gates, led to reports of up to 500 children allegedly suffering seizures and convulsions and becoming paralysed.

And back in India, it was reported that over 490,000 people allegedly developed paralysis as a result of the polio vaccine that was given. Remarkably and horrifyingly it was claimed that 80% of polio cases were derived from the vaccine.

There are complaints that the Gates Foundation has taken over public health for the benefit of big drug companies. The links between the Gates Foundation and other organisations and the pharmaceutical giants seem never ending. There seem to me to be a good many unanswered questions.

Gates has long argued that the world is overpopulated, and to help further this end the Gates Foundation is said to have funded Marie Stopes, an organisation, which performs over three million abortions a year and has also worked with a charity called Gynuity which is experimenting with a second trimester abortion trial in Africa.

But it is vaccines which seem to interest Gates most, and despite all the known hazards the enthusiastic Gates remains gung-ho about them. He must know that there are very real dangers with vaccines but curiously it doesn't seem to worry him. I wonder if he really has any idea what he is talking about when he discusses vaccines. There seems to me to be little awareness of the risk-benefit ratio.

For example, I have seen an interview in which he agrees that if 7 billion people are vaccinated against the coronavirus there could be 700,000 people damaged by the virus. There could, of course, be many deaths but I don't think Mr Gates likes to talk about that scenario.

He says that there could be 700,000 people with side effects, and he dismisses this as though he is talking about a bit of soreness or a slight rash.

Not necessarily so, Mr Gates. I've been studying and writing about vaccines for over 50 years and the side effects from vaccination are often life changing. It is perfectly possible, for example, that there could be 700,000 people with severe brain damage after the first tranche of the vaccination programme has been completed.

I wonder if Gates has any idea what a brain damaged person looks like; how devastating it is not just for them but for their relatives.

And of course the covid-19 disease, the subject of the Gates's determination for a global vaccine, has, as I keep reminding everyone, killed far, far less than the ordinary flu can kill in the same sort of time period.

What is all this about? Who is doing what for why and who is profiting and how?

Well, the drug companies are making money. Loads of it. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is getting more control over global healthcare. And Bill and Melinda are becoming ever more powerful and ever more able to pursue whatever other goals and agendas may be dear to them. And wherever they go they are treated like royalty. And Bill Gates himself is said to be richer now than he was a decade ago. Indeed, during the decade of vaccines promoted by Gates, his personal worth is said to have doubled to over $100 billion.

The bottom line, however, is that I can't help suspecting that if Gates hadn't made so much money and hadn't doled so much of it out to buy influence, everyone would laugh at him, ignore him or dismiss him as a nutter. Is there a hidden agenda? How much does Gates' fear about overpopulation influence what he does? And how much does that family interest in eugenics affect the aims of the Gates Foundation? Many rich people do wonderful things with their money – but they do it without trying to change the world and without wanting to alter the way people live.

Although Gates is a university drop-out with no more medical degrees than your fridge, he is regarded as a saviour and his views on vaccination are treated as though they had been carved in stone and handed down from on high. What Gates wants is what we get. It seems to me that Gates is ignorant, deluded, arrogant and enormously dangerous. In my view, he is doing, and will do, infinitely more harm than good.

And the other half of this strange joke is that whereas I am medically trained and have studied vaccines and vaccination for half a century my questioning, cautious view, asking only for more medical or scientific evidence to be produced in support of the claims which are made, is regarded as unacceptable and I am the one libelled, demonised and dismissed as a nutter, targeted by trolls, demonised as too questioning and regarded as too dangerous to be allowed onto Facebook lest I terrify the 'community' with too many truths.

Putting aside my scepticism and doubts about vaccination (and my conviction, after much research, that vaccines are neither as safe nor as effective, as we are assured by their ignorant supporters) I am deeply concerned about the safety of any coronavirus vaccine. I feel that anyone who accepts a coronavirus vaccine as proposed or supported by Bill Gates or his Foundation, should perhaps be placed in protective care for their own protection. I pray that no parents will allow their children to be given a vaccine that has been hastily produced. Those who believe in vaccination should demand that any vaccines are thoroughly tested for safety and efficacy – and that all test results be made public.

Still, there is a bright side to all this.

When the inevitable biopic of Gates' life is made, I hope they will use my title 'Just a little prick'. It seems so suitable for a man who appears to be dedicated to vaccinating the world.

July 4th 2020

Who Is Pulling the Strings?

Japan didn't have proper lockdowns because the Government there was hoping that they could still go ahead with the 2020 Olympics. I gather there was also a problem with the constitution which doesn't really give the Government in Japan the authority to shut down the country.

They didn't do much in the way of testing. They focussed on quarantining the people who appeared to have the coronavirus. That's the usual textbook way of dealing with an infection. You keep the patients with the infection isolated. You don't isolate all the healthy people.

Since the Japanese didn't quite follow other countries, you might expect that the death total from covid-19 in Japan would be terrifyingly high.

It wasn't.

The Japanese death total from covid-19 to date is 977.

Less than a thousand.

And to save you looking it up, the population of Japan is 126 million – just about twice the population of the UK.

The UK death total is now alleged to be 44,000 – and though we all know what we think of the way the numbers have been added up in the UK, there is no doubt that the care home deaths alone will far, far exceed the total in Japan.

What more proof does anyone need that the lockdown and all the other legal paraphernalia was unnecessary, brutal and politically motivated rather being scientifically or medically based?

The statistics show that the death rate is falling everywhere. And since most of the deaths occurred in care homes where the people who died were already suffering from numerous serious disorders, it doesn't seem likely that covid-19 is going to make much of a return. Around the world, the vast majority of the deaths occurred among already sick over 80-year-olds. And many of the over 80-year-olds with many diseases are now dead so they can't die again.

If the coronavirus does return, if there is a truly deadly second wave, then I won't believe it isn't planned. Indeed, if there is a second wave I will have great difficulty in believing it's the same infection.

Meanwhile, our world gets crazier by the day.

If this were merely a pandemic of a flu-like illness, we could all be getting back to normal. We could be wondering what idiots mismanaged things so badly. We would demand that there should be a proper enquiry – and we might expect that a number of people were charged with fraud. If someone steals your money by pretending that something is what it is not then that's fraud. You might think that there are a number of people who deserve to be questioned and doing some explaining. Why, for example, were the predictions of one mathematical modeller with such a terrible track record given so much importance? And what was the role of the 77th brigade of the British army during all this?

If we ever manage to get back to democracy those are questions which will need answering.

But it's not going to be that easy, is it?

Because this isn't about a simple virus infection; there is much more going on.

Governments will now do more testing so that they can find more hotspots so that they can close down areas or towns. And smart phones will be used to track and trace people just as though we were all living in a 21st century version of Nazi Germany.

And, incidentally, here is a good reason to use cash.

If you buy something with a credit card just five minutes after another customer and the other customer turns out to have been in contact with someone else exhibiting symptoms of the new political flu, then you will be a target of the contact tracers. And, since you used a credit card, you will be easy to trace.

The demand that we wear masks is growing rapidly. In parts of America, you can't go into a food store if you aren't wearing a mask. In Texas, the governor has issued a state-wide executive order requiring most individuals to wear a face mask both indoors and outdoors. Wearing masks in Scotland is going to be compulsory from 10th July so presumably something is going to happen at midnight on 9th July that will make the coronavirus change its habits. The wearing of masks will be mandatory except for a few exceptions and for children under five years of age.

And yet, as I showed in my analysis of the research evidence, we know that wearing masks reduces blood oxygen and can cause all sorts of health problems.

Figures published by the United States Center for Disease Control, show that as the number of deaths from pneumonia, influenza or covid-19 went up, so the total number of deaths went down. The total number of deaths actually went down. The only explanation I can think of is that many of the people who were put down as having died of covid-19 or the flu would, in other years, have been put down as dying of their heart disease, lung problems, cancer or whatever.

Moreover, although we obviously won't be able to compare the figures until the end of the year, the statistics appear to be showing that the total number of people dying in 2020 is not going to be very different from the total number dying in 2019. Actually, I am being generous and bending over backwards to be fair to those claiming that we are living through a crisis.

Look at these figures.

In week 10 of the year the number of deaths in 2019 was 58,490 but in 2020 the death total in the same week was 54,157. In week 15 in the US the total number of deaths in 2019 was 55,477 whereas in 2020, the total number of deaths was 47,574.

I took those weeks at random but the pattern is clear – fewer people have died in America in 2020 than died in the same period in America in 2019.

And this in the middle of a pandemic which has closed down hospitals and the economy.

In the UK, the rules are impossible to understand. Well, I can't understand them anyway. Hairdressers and pubs can open but some hospital departments are still shut. Indeed, some hospitals are still shut – despite what the official spokespersons might be saying. You can go into an amusement arcade where people are usually all crowded together but you can't go into a bowling alley where people are usually well separated from other players.

I can no longer remember whether or when social distancing must be measured at six feet six inches and when it can be three feet three inches. Not content with wasting most of our money, the Government is now introducing endless new rules, regulations and guidance to tell us how we are to use that tiny portion of freedom which we are allowed to keep. Although, as I have said before, a rule, a regulation or a piece of guidance which is enforced by the police and which can result in my being fined or imprisoned is a law.

The zombies are still desperate to obey the rules. They are like enabling victims, conscientiously doing as they are told and shouting abuse or threats at those who have woken up and can see the truth. They are not very bright but they are slavishly obedient. They telephone the police if they see someone they think might be breaking the regulations. They would have made good concentration camp guards. And, talking of concentration camp guards, in big shops the members of staff who are designated to ensure that customers follow the rules have that vacant look, that air of superiority, that comes so naturally to those enjoying power they have borrowed and which they can enjoy without having to temper it with any sense of personal responsibility.

I am consumed by questions. How many people know what is going on? How many people are in on the secrets that will define our future? Why do the authorities feel the need to suppress anything and everything which might produce a smile or two? Going to the beaches or a pub becomes a sort of state crime – threatening the lives of us all. If I hear again about 'civic duty' I think I shall scream.

Who persuaded the unions into deciding that we couldn't or shouldn't open schools? Why is it that 31% of private schools are delivering four or more hours a day of live online lessons whereas among state schools the figure is just 6%?

What is Boris Johnson's advisor, Dominic Cummings planning to do when he leaves government employment at the end of 2020? Does he have plans? Is he going to have a wonderful job with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation? Or where else?

Why did Britain import $10 billion worth of human and animal blood? Why so much and what for? Just two years ago, the Government said that the UK was self-sufficient in blood. Where is the blood all coming from? And where is it going? And why?

How many of the services which were temporarily suspended or reduced will return to normal when all this is over?

No, sorry, that's a silly question. I already know the answer to that.

Why is the Government in the UK apparently determined and desperate to destroy small investors and pensioners who don't have a civil service pension? Without dividends being paid, pension funds are going to have to pay pensioners out of capital. And we all know what that means in the long run.

When was all this planned? The coronavirus bill which was passed back in March was over 350 pages long. They didn't write that in twenty minutes. We never saw what was coming but it has clearly been coming for years. All this planning took a long time. Who planned it? And why?

We are told that there will soon be a vaccine. The usual 15 year time period to prepare a new vaccine will be cut to months, presumably by cutting out some of the testing. The vaccine will then be made available for everyone on the planet.

How mandatory is this vaccine going to be? Will those who have the vaccine proudly wear a tattoo? Will those who refuse the vaccine have to wear a badge marking them as unclean? A yellow star sewed onto their clothing, perhaps?

Why is the coronavirus not transmitted among those who attend Black Lives Matter demonstrations but dangerous among people having a day on the beach or in a pub? Why is it legal to attend a mass demonstration for Black Lives Matter but illegal to watch a football match or a cricket match? Are we supposed to believe that the virus doesn't work at demonstrations but does at sports grounds? What lunacy is this? Why is it illegal for a man to open his shop but perfectly legal for demonstrations to trash it and loot it?

The world seems to have turned upside down. And the police have exchanged their slogan ‘protect and serve’ for a new one ‘punish and enslave’.

Why are thousands of privileged, self-righteous, elitists and Philistines demanding that we trash our history when they should really be worried about the future we don’t have.

Who is pulling the strings to make us dance like puppets to whatever tune they play?

And where is all this going to end?

Just a couple of days ago, in America, in Los Angeles, the city of angels, a court removed a child when a parent tested positive for covid-19.

The parent had made alternative arrangements for the child to be cared for by someone else but the court simply took the child away from the parents.

How long before other parents avoid having the test done in order to protect their children? How many people will just flee into the wilderness and live off grid?

This insane, obscene madness has gone far enough.

No, actually, it’s gone too far.

It is no longer a case of the maddest lunatics having taken over the asylum.

We now have a situation where the most dangerous prisoners have taken over the prison.

July 5th 2020

What Did You Do In The War?

There is no doubt that the world is full of a good many bizarre and unsupportable claims and notions. Trying to pick your way through the quagmire of claims, counter-claims and general nonsense is harder than it has ever been.

The basic problem, of course, is that governments and official sounding organisations have been lying, deceiving and manipulating since the coronavirus first emerged from hiding and yelled 'boo'.

All honesty has gone out of the window. Governments have lied, distorted truths and threatened us with the full authority of the law if we question their orders.

I've been writing about medical matters for a long, long time and I am pretty well accustomed to the fact that governments and official bodies hide truths, suppress facts and spout a lot of nonsense to keep us all looking in the wrong direction so that they can carry on deceiving us.

But I have never known anything like this.

These days the world's governments and the major global organisations have taken things one stage further by employing people to take down information they don't like, whether it is true or not, to spread confusion and bewilderment along with the fears, and to put up false information to mislead and to guide us into deadly traps. The British Government even has a part of the British Army, the 77th Brigade, spying on its citizens and protecting the Government line. Exactly what are they doing, I wonder. Are they taking down material that doesn't fit the official line, even if it's true, or sneering at those trying to provide solid, honest information? Are they using our taxes to plant misinformation and fake news? I don't have the foggiest. Is this really what the soldiers of the 77th Brigade joined the army to do? Don't they realise that by suppressing the truth and suppressing debate they are endangering their own lives and their families' lives?

YouTube apparently now has a policy to censor doctors or scientists who disagree with the view of the World Health Organisation. Putting aside the difficulty I find in knowing exactly what the view of the WHO might be at any one time this blanket endorsement of an organisation which I find rather iffy to say the least seems to me to be terrifying. The WHO recommended wholesale quarantine and lockdowns which resulted in the civil rights of billions of citizens being removed. Moreover, the WHO policy will result in more deaths than covid-19.

The BBC seems to have become addicted to spreading what is now called 'fear porn' – using government propaganda to terrify people into submitting to whatever lunatic ideas are currently in vogue. Since government advice changes regularly, so the advice given by the media changes too. The result is confusion and more bewilderment. Should face masks be worn, for example? And if so by whom and when and where? Ofcom, the UK's broadcasting watchdog has advised broadcasters that they must exercise extreme caution when broadcasting statements that seek to question or undermine the advice of public health bodies on the coronavirus or otherwise undermine people's trust in the advice of mainstream sources of information.'

Since the public health bodies and mainstream sources of information have all been provably wrong about the coronavirus – right from the start and in almost every respect – the public have been officially prevented from hearing the truth!

I don't consider myself as being involved in social media at all – I'm just a retired doctor and a book author – so I can say this: I've worked extensively for national newspapers and TV stations round the world and I can tell you that the best researchers, writers and broadcasters are currently working online – and not in mainstream media. The mainstream media is a disgrace.

The whole question of the virus is of vital interest to us all – including those employed by the Government.

The mainstream media, both print and broadcasting, has been bought – either by governments or by private individuals or organisations – and so any attempts to provide an alternative view, to question the official, party line or to discuss contentious issues will be banned. There is no longer any freedom of speech.

And things are getting worse by the day.

Numerous private pressure groups, charities and so on are constantly demanding that material which offers a point of view which they consider unacceptable be removed from the internet – as well as from the mainstream media.

And so there are pressure groups demanding that anyone who dares to question the claims of those who believe that our climate is changing should be silenced. Mainstream media has already been silenced but now these pressure groups want the internet prefects to remove any videos or articles which offer a point of view which does not agree with their own.

They probably don't see it as censorship – they just see it as getting their own way and silencing the opposition.

But it's the sort of thing that fascists have favoured even since Mussolini woke up one morning, had breakfast couldn't think of anything better to do, and invented fascism.

Amazingly, big commercial advertisers have got in on the act. They too want information to be suppressed if it doesn't agree with their corporate policies. And so recently we had the bizarre sight of Volkswagen, fresh from being caught cheating on its emission tests, and endangering the lives of millions, withdrawing its advertising in an attempt to police the internet. If they don't stop doing that I shall be tempted to remind the world that the Volkswagen beetle was designed by Adolf Hitler.

The game has changed.

And the problem is that suppressing free speech and silencing debate simply leads to more conspiracy theories, more false information and more confusion.

Some of the stuff I have read in the last day or two has been startling – to say the least. And yet untangling the truth from the fiction is extraordinarily difficult. For example, weeks ago I found a site called deagel.com which contains a forecast for 2025. The site suggests that by 2025, the population of the USA will have fallen from 326 million to 99 million and that by 2025, the population of the UK will have fallen from 65 million to 14 million. The site tells us that the population of China and Russia will be much the same as they are but that Germany will have fallen from 80 million to 28 million and that Australia will, in just five years, have gone from 23 million to 15 million.

These figures are both startling and terrifying.

A note at the bottom of the page informs readers that the information was obtained from a variety of institutions including the CIA and the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund.

What the devil is going on? Can this really be true?

I have no idea.

It's just one of many mysteries.

How accurate are the figures for 2025?

Your guess is as good as mine.

But if the CIA and the UN and the IMF really are providing these figures then they clearly know something we don't know.

Albert Camus, the Nobel Prize winning author of *The Plague* wrote that the only means to fight the plague is honesty – and although he was writing about a different plague, and a fictional one, his words ring loud and clear today.

The problem, of course, is that when you suppress truths you create a vacuum in which mysteries and conspiracies can thrive. We are being told to do as we are told by the State and not to trust anyone who disagrees. We are being told not to trust our neighbours but that we must trust people who are proven liars. We have lost all our civil rights and our natural, God given freedoms and we have lost our freedom of speech.

I can't help wondering if the powers that be, the authorities who are both hiding the truth and suppressing debate, are not deliberately creating a climate in which conspiracies can grow.

Maybe they just want to confuse us.

Maybe they want to be able to feed us misinformation to build up our sense of fear.

Maybe they want to use misinformation to help them discredit those who are struggling to tell the truth – so that they can dismiss everything not on official, government press release as fictional.

How long will it be before all of those who question the official line are silenced?

I have no idea.

All I can tell you is that I will continue to try to find a way through the dense woods of information out there in order to provide honest, accurate appraisals of what is true.

And if I discover information which means that I change my mind – then I will tell you and explain why.

Meanwhile we live in a world where those who are in charge of the policing process are constantly trying to fill our minds with their propaganda.

Perhaps they want to encourage people to put up bizarre claims so that they can suppress everything – claiming that they are doing so to protect us.

And this, of course, is exactly what happens in a war.

Truth, as has always been said, is the first casualty of war.

And truth was certainly an early casualty of this war.

The Government and the mainstream media made sure of that.

I've said it before and I will say it again.

We're fighting a war.

But, sadly, tragically, we are fighting a war against our own government and against most other governments in the world.

World War III has started – and it will be over before many people, the zombies, know it has even started.

Who would have ever thought it could come to this.

We all have to be prepared to answer the question: 'What did you do in the war?'

July 7th 2020

The Madness is Everywhere

Everywhere I look there is madness.

The posh papers and magazines are full of articles by journalists writing about their experiences under house arrest. Oh, how brave they have all been. Having their stupid dinner parties by video, doing their silly dances and listing all the books they've read, the films they've seen and the foreign languages they have learned.

They write about the coronavirus crime as though it's been an adventure. A weekend's camping expedition or a sleepover with chums.

They look at everything through their privileged and slightly stupid eyes. They seem to think that everything will soon be tickety boo and they can all go back to evenings out to a nice restaurant and an evening at the theatre.

It doesn't seem that way to us here.

I wake up thinking I must have imagined what has been happening. And then when I realise that I haven't I feel as though I am living in a bad science fiction movie.

Yesterday, someone close to us, who has cancer, told me that she constantly worries that her cancer has gone to her brain and that no one will tell her the truth. The nightmare in which we are living cannot possibly be true. Sometimes she thinks she may have had a fatal car accident and must be living in purgatory.

I understand totally. I sometimes wonder how many million people are contemplating suicide as the only way out of this obscene piece of global manipulation.

The reporting of this massive take-over of the world has been a disgrace. The mass media has been bought and simply does its best to ramp up the fear and drive the yearning for a vaccine as the only way out of the chaos. The BBC has always been a propaganda machine but I am surprised at how cheaply the rest have been bought. And now those of us fighting for freedom and truth have to battle our own army too

Don't the members of the 77th Brigade, with the proud golden Burmese lion, realise that what is happening to us is happening to them too. Their health service and schools have been destroyed. Their parents and grandparents are being killed. They too will almost certainly be forced to accept an untested vaccination against a disease that is no worse than the flu.

The mass media announced with great excitement that retail sales rebounded since the end of the lockdown. Imagine that! Shops are open and people can leave their homes and the chattering classes are surprised, amazed and delighted that retail sales have gone up.

Pubs and hotels are about to open but the rules are so absurd that if I owned a pub or a hotel, I'd give up and do something else. The social distancing rules will have to be reduced to three feet and a bit if the entire leisure industry isn't to be destroyed but even that won't be enough. Pubs will be patrolled by traffic warden types so that the social distancing laws will be properly observed. What sort of person would take such a job?

Anyone wanting to visit a pub will be told to order their drink on a phone app so that the Government will know what you order. Presumably, those of us who wouldn't know an App if it stood up and barked will have to do without.

In restaurants there will have to be disposable menus, fewer items available and no buffet food and the waiters will have to wash their hands so often that there will be a global water shortage by October.

In hotels, guests will be advised to have meals delivered by room service – with the food left outside their room door so that isn't too warm when they eat it. Oh what a lot of fun holidays and weekend breaks will be. I feel for all those folk who love putting on posh clothes for dinner. Getting all spruced up to sit on the bed to eat your dinner just won't be the same.

How are trains going to manage social distancing in the future?

According to the Department for Transport, the busiest train in the UK used to be the 17.11 service from Sutton to Luton which, in pre-lockdown days, carried an average of 1,579 passengers. If all the passengers now have to keep two metres apart then the train will need to be a mile long and will require 80 carriages.

Banks may only be open from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. (the coronavirus apparently isn't active during those hours) but they're doing their best to make life miserable. I've heard several reports of Barclays Bank refusing to accept coins from customers paying in money. Since cash is legal currency, this is doubtless illegal and anyone who is faced with a snotty teller refusing a bag of coins should take the teller's name and the manager's name and make a report to the Bank of England, their MP, the police and anyone else they can think of.

The madness is everywhere. The City of London Corporation has banned bathing in Highgate Ponds in case its lifeguards are asked to resuscitate bathers who have the coronavirus. What danger could there possibly be to young healthy lifeguards?

There are calls from demonstrators for the police to be disbanded or defunded, as has happened in some parts of America. Don't those demanding this realise that to do so would lead us straight into martial law? Do they not have the sense to realise what martial law looks like? Or is that what they want?

In India, over 122 million people lost their jobs in the month of April alone. In Qatar, there is a penalty of three years in prison for not wearing a face mask in public. And in Panama, where the lockdown allows men and women to leave their homes on alternate days, transgender citizens are complaining that they can't go out on either day.

If I put this stuff in a novel I'd be stoned to death by the readers.

For three months the local hospital physiotherapy department has been shut. The local hairdresser will be open in a couple of weeks but the physiotherapist department has no idea when it will open. What is wrong with these people?

And now that journalists have noticed that the loos are mostly shut, there are articles about how to pee in public without getting arrested. The key to the law is, apparently, not alarming members of the public – though personally I think peeing on people wearing masks is perfectly OK because they are zombies and not members of the public.

Seaside towns are going to be totally destroyed by what is happening. Empty hotels and boarding houses mean that the shops and cafes and ice cream parlours have no customers. Just about every British seaside town will be a ghost town by Christmas. Even the charity shops are closing.

Everywhere you look politicians, civil servants and the mass media are busy doing everything they can to spread fear.

In one of my brainwashing videos I mentioned that in the guidance given to the British Government, it was pointed out that 'a substantial number of people still did not feel sufficiently personally threatened'.

Wow.

That's us they're talking about. We are not sufficiently personally threatened. Why would they want us to be so threatened? What ulterior motive could there possibly be? Could I have been right back in March when I suggested that one of the reasons for the hoax was to get us ready for mandatory you-know-what?

Their effective, clinical winding up of the fear process has been designed to cause the greatest harm.

When we are under, stress our bodies produce a hormone called cortisol. Lots of stress equals lots of cortisol in our bodies.

And guess what: patients who have lots of cortisol in their bodies are more likely to die from covid-19 than people who are calm and relaxed. And, of course, since elderly, frail people with illnesses are more likely to die anyway, they are the ones who are going to be most affected by stress.

So there we are: one of the reasons why the Government has been deliberately terrifying us is because they know that we will have more cortisol in our bodies and they know that the extra cortisol will push those who have co-morbidities over the edge.

It's yet another type of mass murder.

No one seems to care about mass murder any more.

There was a huge fuss about a killing in a park the other day. The papers splashed the terrible story over their front pages.

But there has been very little fuss about the tens of thousands of old people who have been abandoned and killed during the last few months.

When I think about it I realise that they've been planning this takeover for years.

When I was young and didn't know anything very much, I was frequently invited to lecture to doctors, nurses and medical students. I presented a number of TV and radio series for the BBC and ITV and for stations abroad.

But as I acquired a little more experience, a little more knowledge and a reputation for questioning the establishment and saying professionally unsayable things that turned out to be right, so the invitations dried up.

Don't misunderstand me.

I don't want to appear on TV or radio and I don't want to give lectures to doctors any more. But it does worry me a little that a combination of original thinking and experience scares the establishment quite as much as it obviously does. And I find it a bit sad that younger doctors who are involved in the media seem to decide that the easy way to be successful is to support the establishment and toe the official line.

What surprises me most, and saddens me enormously, is the way that members of the medical and nursing professions have accepted this takeover of our lives.

Even if they don't think there is anything sinister behind what is happening, they must by now realise that the whole response to the coronavirus has been wrong. The politicians and their advisors all got it wrong. The most generous way of looking at things is that they mistook a fairly ordinary flu virus for a version of the plague.

As a result, hospitals have been closed. Patients with cancer and other serious disorders have been denied essential treatment. Thousands of patients in care homes have been murdered as a result of inept policies and management. Schools have been closed and the lives of millions of children have been ruined. They know that is no exaggeration. The Government has been employing brain washing techniques to control us and to create a fake affection for the health service.

Doctors and nurses all know this is true. They know that the clever three word, three phrase slogans, the encouragement to take part in weekly clapping sessions and the advertising were all designed to build up the fear and to create a sense of national obedience.

Even if there were no ulterior motive, this is still the biggest cock up in medical history.

Medical doctors and nurses know that the spin doctors have been doing everything they can to exaggerate the number of deaths. Patients with the coronavirus were listed as having died of it.

If the truth about what has happened ever emerges then the medical and nursing professions are going to be embarrassed and humiliated to put it kindly. People in both professions are going to go to jail.

It is time to insist that hospitals and clinics are opened immediately without any of the social distancing which every thinking person knows was never necessary.

The media has found many curious heroes in the last three months, mostly as part of the propaganda process I'm afraid. Now is the time for the professions to earn their plaudits. The nation needs to have its health service back.

It would be a big step forward on the road back to real normality.

And together we can do it.

A few years ago, there were a lot of threats about ID cards and iris scans being introduced. I wrote about them and helped campaign against them.

The public thought about it, considered the evidence and said a very loud, 'no thank you'.

We need some of that good sense and determination again.

All the round people are fighting their own governments. It happens from time to time in history.

In the UK Johnson, Hancock and company have made themselves our enemies just as Hitler and company were our enemies in 1939 and the 1940s. Johnson is a gullible simple minded buffoon who is dancing on the end of a piece of string being jiggled by Cummings. Hancock is just a pompous, half-witted prefect who would be out of his depth if he were a small town mayor.

They want to destroy freedom and democracy.

Well the bastards aren't going to win.

July 7th 2020

Old Lives Matter

This is not a fashionable thing to say but black people are not the most ignored, oppressed, misused and discriminated against group of people in the world.

The most ignored, oppressed, misused and discriminated against are the elderly.

And it isn't difficult to find the evidence.

For example, UK broadcasters run a non-profit organisation called the Creative Diversity Network which exists to measure diversity in the UK's broadcasters. They study 30 channels in the UK.

Their latest report showed that BAME people make up 12.9% of the population but 22.7% of onscreen contributions. Disabled people and transgender people are also over represented on TV screens.

But there is one group which is under represented – the over 50s. Curiously, inexplicably and rather offensively these broadcasters seem to regard 50 as elderly. To me it seems very young.

The over 50s make up 36% of the UK population but are under-represented at 24.6%.

So the evidence clearly shows that black people are over-represented and the elderly are much under-represented.

Why then is the BBC spending £100 million of taxpayers' money to produce yet more diverse content?

Sadly, this is nothing new, of course.

In 1967, Barbara Robb put together a book about the abuse of the elderly. It was entitled, *Sans Everything – a Case to Answer*. (The title is, of course, taken from Shakespeare's 'As You Like It' and the full phrase is 'sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything').

The book developed because on 10th November 1965 a letter appeared in *The Times* protesting about the plight of old people in hospital. The writers of the letter complained about the evil practice then all too common of the staff in general and geriatric hospitals of taking spectacles, dentures and hearing aids away from the elderly and leaving them 'to vegetate in loneliness and idleness'.

That was 1965.

C.H.Rolph pointed out that we needed 'to protect the defenceless invalid against physical discomfort, emotional exploitation and deprivation, indifference, exasperation and neglect'. He went on to say that practices in one British hospital were 'a catalogue of cruelty, callousness, filth and depersonalisation such as I have not read since I was reviewing the reports of the Nuremberg trials'.

The truly alarming thing is that the treatment of elderly patients is now worse than it was in the 1960s.

It is hard to believe but true that doctors and nurses have been given official authority to deprive the elderly of food and water so that they die as quickly as possible.

The elderly used to be respected and admired, and consulted for their wisdom and experience.

Today, I'm afraid that the elderly are too often ignored, abused, despised and taken advantage of; dismissed as nuisances, invisible in fifty shades of beige.

Politicians seem to do everything they can to belittle and demean the elderly. Newspaper commentators have weighed in with their heavy boots too and several have claimed that the elderly should not be allowed to vote. Why? Most pensioners have spent their lives working and paying tax so why should they be deprived of a voice just because they've passed a certain birthday. A good number of older folk have far more get up and go than most youngsters and their knowledge of current affairs is surely helped not hindered by their experience and accumulated wisdom.

I am convinced that when utility companies put the elderly onto special lists, it is not so that they can provide them with extra services but so that they can charge them extra and treat them appallingly. All that patronising stuff about wrapping up when the weather is cold and drinking plenty when it's hot. Really. Oh and don't forget to breathe.

It is hardly surprising that so many older folk are now so desperate to deny their age that they spend a fortune on cosmetic surgery in an attempt to preserve the youth they have lost. (Oddly enough, however, it is customary for such individuals to take pride in telling those they meet their real age. There is something charmingly contradictory in having plastic surgery to disguise your age and then telling everyone you meet precisely how old you are.)

Worse still, of course, the elderly are now being officially slaughtered in just about every country in the world. Governments know that because of the absurd levels of expenditure on the coronavirus hoax they will not be able to provide a decent health care service. They will expect younger citizens to look after themselves (by losing excess weight and controlling bad habits such as drinking and smoking) and they will deny health care completely to those who disobey. The elderly will merely be denied treatment.

I find it impossible to believe that administrators around the world all made the same terrible mistake in sending hospital patients into care homes.

No, there has been a coordinated, massive extermination programme.

The only logical conclusion is that thousands of old people around the world have been murdered. As a result, governments around the world have saved themselves billions in long-term health costs. And those same governments will also save themselves billions of pounds a year because of the pensions they won't have to pay.

It has been a holocaust.

Incidentally, the dictionary defines a holocaust as slaughter on a mass scale.

And I cannot think of a more appropriate word because that is what this has been.

We have to remember the obvious: that the residents in care homes are there because they are ill and need care. Most have several serious disorders. They may have heart problems, respiratory problems, neurological problems, cancer or any number of other serious health disorders. And because they probably don't eat well, and don't take any exercise, their immune systems are pretty well shot.

It is inconceivable that health care administrators didn't know that.

And yet they sent untested hospital patients who were thought to have the coronavirus, and some of whom might have had it, into those care homes where the vulnerable patients caught the infection and died. Were those patients sent in as Trojan horse killers?

The result would have been the same if the patients being sent from hospital had the flu.

You wouldn't put a patient with the flu into a care home, would you?

It would be criminal.

But they did that with suspected coronavirus patients.

And things were made worse because the staff in the care homes had no idea about barrier nursing and they had no equipment.

And, worst of all, they were terrified that the coronavirus was going to kill everyone who caught it because evil governments, and evil journalists had spread lie after lie after lie about the disease. Care home staff were told to keep out relatives and friends – for absolutely no sane reason – and some care home staff simply ran away, with about 40% of staff simply disappearing in France for example.

In the North East of England half of care homes had a coronavirus outbreak. In Scotland nearly half of all coronavirus deaths occurred in care homes. Nearly half of all coronavirus deaths in Sweden occurred in care homes. In Spain, two thirds of the coronavirus deaths occurred in care homes. In Italy, no one seems to have any idea how many old people died in care homes – alone, without staff or family. Many of the elderly didn't actually die of the coronavirus – though that was put on the death certificates – they died of thirst.

In England and Wales in the 11 weeks until 22nd May, there were 50,000 care home deaths. That's double the expected number.

Is anyone going to try to convince us this was all an unfortunate accident?

How many were killed by this wicked plan?

I have no idea. And nor does anyone else. But the exaggerated figure for the total number of coronavirus deaths includes a very high percentage of elderly patients who need not have died.

If I had to make an educated estimate, I would suggest that the number of elderly patients murdered globally between the beginning of March and the end of May 2020 was somewhere between 100,000 and 150,000. That's a fairly conservative estimate.

If any other group of people had been slaughtered so deliberately and so ruthlessly, there would be unbelievable outpourings of anger visible on our streets.

Imagine if 100,000 teenagers had been deliberately murdered in three months – because they were teenagers.

Imagine if 100,000 women had been deliberately murdered in three months – because they were women.

Imagine if 100,000 black people had been deliberately murdered in three months – because they were black.

Why have there been no demonstrations about the old people who were killed?

How many celebrities have you seen or heard shouting out about the murder of old people?

No, nor me.

The real tragedy here is that although this is the worst mass slaughter of the elderly in modern history, it isn't actually anything new.

Old people have been murdered for years without anyone taking any notice. My video on the subject was taken down by YouTube. There is only one serious –ism in most developed countries today – ageism. It is deeply offensive that this is not taken seriously. We all know that black lives matter but don't old lives matter too?

Euthanasia (sometimes admitted and sometimes not) is now commonly practised in so-called civilised societies around the world, and the elderly are invariably the victims.

For many years in the UK, doctors and nurses were encouraged to follow something called the Liverpool Care Pathway.

This was a murderers' charter, which allowed doctors and nurses to withhold food, water and essential treatment from patients who were over 65 and who were, therefore, regarded as an expensive and entirely disposable nuisance.

Then the Liverpool Care Pathway was replaced by something called Sustainable Development Goals (which originated with the United Nations and which is, therefore, global).

Sustainable Development Goals allows the doctors and hospitals to discriminate against anyone over the age of 70 on the grounds that people who die when they are over 70 cannot be said to have died 'prematurely' and so will not count when the nation's healthcare is being assessed.

Governments everywhere love this new rule because it gives the State permission to get rid of citizens who are of pensionable age and, therefore, regarded by society's accountants as a `burden'.

In Holland, one eminent doctor has claimed that the elderly are not admitted to hospitals – and certainly not to intensive care units. 'The Netherlands does not hospitalise the weak and the elderly in order to make room for young people.'

Don't believe me? A survey of 6,600 patients in the Netherlands found that treatment – including drugs, food and water, were most likely to be withheld from the over 65s. And in 56% of cases, doctors didn't bother to discuss their failure to provide treatment with their patients or patients' relatives.

I have also seen claims that the elderly are routinely killed in Germany, France, Italy and Spain. Age has become a criterion for triage. Genocide is coming to a town near you – if it isn't already there.

Back in 2015, when doctors in America were reported to be withholding treatment from elderly patients, doctors said it wasn't ageism. They didn't say what it was though. It certainly wasn't stamp collecting. And it wasn't kindness or proper, decent medical practice.

Michael Bloomberg, the billionaire who nearly became the Democrat Presidential candidate in 2020, said America should deny healthcare to the elderly. There was no suggestion that the morality of it be discussed.

In Canada, patients have been buried without post-mortems and, as elsewhere, they were said to have died of the coronavirus if they were thought to have the bug. If a patient with a knife sticking out of their chest had sneezed within 14 days of their death then they died of coronavirus.

This isn't entirely new, of course.

In the UK, it was way back in February 2005 that it was revealed that the British Government had advised that hospital patients with little hope of recovery should be allowed to die because of the cost of keeping them alive.

The key words were 'little hope of recovery'.

Those words that don't mean anything.

Any doctor worthy of the name will tell you that they've seen patients get better despite there having been 'little hope of recovery'.

But Tony Blair's Labour Government suggested that 'old people' be denied the right to food and water if they fell into a coma or couldn't speak for themselves.

So, patients should be killed if they couldn't speak for themselves.

So much for any hope for stroke victims.

Blair's Government suggested that the need to cut costs came before the need to preserve the lives of patients, and decided it had the right to overturn a right-to-life ruling which had been made when a judge ordered that artificial nutrition and hydration should not be withdrawn unless the life of a patient could be described as 'intolerable'. The judge had added that when there was any doubt, preservation of life should take precedence.

Depriving the elderly of food and water is done all the time. Drinks or food are put on a tray and, if the patient is too ill or weak to reach them then they are taken away untouched. In most hospitals, no one bothers to feed patients who cannot feed themselves.

Meanwhile, the Government pours money into vanity projects and wastes money on foreign aid programmes which result in crooked politicians putting billions into Swiss bank accounts.

But the elderly are classified as the 'Unwanted Generation'.

Anyone of pensionable age is a political embarrassment and to be ignored or dumped or killed.

Elderly individuals facing blindness from age-related macular disease are denied drugs that might have prevented their blindness because they are considered expensive, useless and expendable. The theory is that they don't contribute and rarely vote and can, therefore, be disregarded.

How have we managed to forget that in the 1930s the Nazis deliberately starved and dehydrated elderly and vulnerable patients because they were regarded as a useless burden on society?

That is exactly what we are doing today.

We're killing people off if they are old and can't complete an Iron Man Triathlon.

Governments around the world are deciding that because of the difficulty involved in dealing with what is now proven to be nothing more than a mild case of the flu they can no longer treat the elderly at all.

Many of the young may shrug at this with indifference but they should remember two things.

First, they may one day be old themselves.

And second, the age regarded as 'old' is likely to be subjected to the standard creep phenomenon.

Those who don't much care about the elderly being killed will themselves be old sooner than they think. After all young people, if they are lucky, eventually become old people.

And they should remember that the definition of 'old' is getting younger by the year.

Governments have decided that the over 70s cannot be treated. But in some countries the cut off age is 65.

And in five years they may reduce the cut off age to 60. And by the end of the decade the 55 year olds will be lucky to receive a bottle of aspirin tablets if they have a heart attack or break a leg.

This is a form of euthanasia. Or maybe eugenics would be a better word. Or population control.

It was something the Nazis thought they were good at.

But they were mere amateurs.

July 8th 2020

Hand Sanitisers Can Kill You

I tottered to the shops today.

And what a sad, depressing experience it was.

The ambitious new world leaders, led by the Bill and Melinda Gate Foundation (which I think of as the Myra Hindley and Ian Brady Foundation, Josef Stalin's Academy for the Weak Spirited and the Mao tse Tung school of obedience) have destroyed the High Street.

Small shops were already suffering – destroyed by a combination of the internet, charity shops and obscenely high local taxes – but now the shops are on the ward where everyone walks on tip toes and whispers. The sort of ward where, in the old days, you'd be as likely to see a priest, a vicar, a rabbi or an imam as you would to see a doctor or a nurse. These days, of course, the men and women of religion are all hiding in the cupboard under their stairs, shivering with fright.

There weren't many people buying anything. Shopping has become a miserable experience. The charity shops were all shut so I took a pile of DVDs to an establishment which would have been called a junk shop in the old days but which is probably a curio specialist or an antique dealer now. The woman behind the counter seemed pleased enough.

Not many people were wearing masks and I was pleased to see that most people seemed to be happily ignoring the rules about social distancing.

But there were some terrified souls about. There were a couple of young families, all masked up, with even tiny tots wearing masks, and one or two older folk were wearing masks too. Half of them were, I noticed, wearing their masks over their mouths but not their noses which made the effort pretty pointless, of course. One middle aged couple were wearing masks, yellow rubber washing up gloves and hats to which they'd sewn material so that their necks were covered. I wish I were making this up. Honestly, I wish I were making it up. I bet they'd blocked their back door keyhole so that the bug couldn't get in that way.

They looked so truly pathetic that I felt sorry for them and I was filled with anger for the people who have been busy promoting the fear.

Tom Hanks, who appears to have completed a medical degree since his last film, has been telling us all that he won't respect us in the morning if we don't wear our masks like good little children.

Well, screw you Tom. Your arrogance in thinking that I give a toss about your respect is matched only by your arrogance in thinking that you know what you are talking about.

It is reported that a scientist from the Royal Society has said much the same thing, though as far as I know he didn't have a film to promote. He didn't seem to have a medical degree either.

A professor of chemical engineering also said we should wear masks.

I wonder if any of them know that two Chinese boys died wearing masks. I wonder if any of them have watched the video I made about the research that has been done into mask wearing.

These, and people like them, reminded me that when I was younger and we were allowed out more, I used to go and watch cricket and if there was a Test Match on there would invariably be a call for a doctor to go to the pavilion because one of the players needed medical attention.

I would go along and find myself at the back of a queue of blokes all anxious to help. And none of them would be medical doctors. One would have a doctorate in philosophy, another would have a doctorate in music and the third would be a bishop with a doctorate in theological studies. They all turned up wanting to get into the dressing room and rub shoulders with the cricketers, and they all seemed surprised that they weren't needed.

'Oh, I didn't know you needed a medical doctor,' they would say, apparently astonished, as they backed out of the dressing room when their inappropriate skills had been rejected.

Dr Tom thingy and the bloke from the Royal Society reminded me of those idiots.

And now, of course, a pile of 239 assorted scientists have decided that the bug can hang around long after someone has sneezed. And the World Health Organisation has leapt on the idea as enthusiastically as a 7-year-old leaping on the sticky bun plate at a children's party. The quickest way to become important and famous is to say something that fits in with the WHO's current lunacies and pro-vaccine propaganda.

Gosh and golly what a surprise that was. The bug can hang around. Who would have thought it? I bet they want us to have more social distancing. A hundred yards perhaps, or maybe two hundred yards out of doors and a slightly longer distance indoors. I don't know if any of them were doctors but what does any of this matter other than as a means to terrify the ignorant and the susceptible? If 239 market gardeners had said we all needed to smear ourselves with custard, the WHO would have been thrilled. As long as Mr Gates approved, of course. I can't wait for the Manchester United supporters club to make a statement on the use of masks.

Meanwhile, I wonder what you call 200 moronic scientists.

A diarrhoea of scientists, perhaps?

None of these buffoons seems to have noticed that it isn't how many people get an infection that matters – it's how many die of it. And you have to look at the risk benefit ratio. You have to look at how many are harmed by wearing masks. You have to look at the way people's quality of life is affected adversely.

If we need to wear masks because of the coronavirus then we need to wear masks all the time to protect us against the flu. Is that really what people want?

Back to my shopping expedition.

In one establishment I was asked to take a photograph of one of those funny squiggly black and white things on my phone and to download an app so that they could make a record of all my details. I showed them the old phone which I carry with me. It was built in the 1990s and it doesn't have a camera. It'll only just about make and receive calls.

'Oh, that's alright, sir,' said the bloke at the door, looking rather sorry for me. 'Just write your name, address and phone number on a piece of paper and leave it with us.' He pointed to some scraps of paper and a cheap pen.

I thought that was fine. I don't mind anyone knowing that my name is B. Johnson, that I live at 10 Acacia Avenue in Milton Keynes and that I happen to have the same telephone number as Buckingham Palace. Three days ago, I was D. Crockett of The Alamo, Texas. Sometimes I'm Dr John Holliday of the OK Corral. If my very good lady and I go out together, we are Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow and we are moving about a good deal so can't give a permanent address.

'Are you any relation to Davy Crockett?' asked a youth, the last time I was D. Crockett. I said he was my great grandfather and that I'd still got his coonskin cap in a drawer at home.

You mustn't do this, of course. It might be naughty. I'm in so much trouble it no longer makes any difference.

Oh, and before you think I might get found out by my credit card - I always pay cash. If they won't take cash I don't buy.

As I wandered around the shops, I couldn't help noticing that there was a lot of sanitiser around. Every time I went into a shop I was invited to try their sanitiser. It was like passing the perfume counter in a department store. Would you like to try this after shave? A squirt here and a little squirt there. Visit six shops and you'd have had six squirts of sanitiser. Well, some folk might have. I said no thanks and marched past them and no one ran after me. The few customers who were around couldn't buy anything because they were all constantly trying to wipe the goo off their hands. When you've used six lots of sanitiser, the layers of stickiness must take hours to remove. The ones doing social distancing looked very strange as they rubbed their hands and dodged first to the left and then to the right and then back again. My level of social distancing is to try to avoid bumping into people.

What none of these shoppers knew is that there is evidence that it isn't just masks which can kill people. Sanitisers can be deadly too.

In America, the FDA has warned of a sharp increase in the number of hand sanitiser products that are labelled to contain ethanol but which actually contain methanol – which can be toxic when absorbed through the skin and can be life threatening if swallowed. So some hand sanitisers can cause nausea, vomiting, headache, blurred vision, permanent blindness, seizures, coma, permanent damage to the nervous system or the ultimate side effect – death. That's the type of death that you only get once. If repeatedly used as a hand rub, skin absorption can cause chronic toxicity and sight damage.

A paper I have seen in 'Infectious Diseases Consultant' confirms the danger. And there is a two year old paper in the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health entitled, 'Methanol as an unlisted ingredient in supposedly alcohol based hand rubs can pose serious health risk'.

It's nigh on impossible to know which sanitisers are deadly because some of them are mislabelled. And besides, when a shop insists that you use their hand sanitiser are you really going to try to read the label? Even if it's got a label. They probably got the stuff from a bloke who usually does their drains and bought a supply from a mate on the market who knows someone in China. You could use some sanitising gels to strip paint.

If a shop assistant ever does run after me demanding that I use their store sanitiser, I shall simply say that I have a skin allergy and that I'll develop a serious rash and possibly go into anaphylactic shock if I succumb to their blandishments.

'I have two lawsuits outstanding against retail establishments,' I'll point out regretfully. 'But if you insist on taking the risk, could I have your name first?'

I'll lay decent odds they'll suddenly decide I don't need to use the goo after all.

July 9th 2020

It’s Going to Get Worse

Everywhere I look I see the mainstream media warning us that a second wave is coming.

They have, I think, realised that the coronavirus hoax is running thin. Too many people realise that it is a con.

And there are too many problems.

In America, some doctors are using budesonide steroid spray to treat coronavirus patients. Indeed steroids and simple hay-fever remedies are being used everywhere. And more and more doctors say there is no need for a vaccine.

The plan is in trouble.

So the enemy needs a replacement; a stand-in; an understudy.

And so they’re threatening us with a new disease. They need something new and even nastier than the coronavirus. There is serious talk of the bubonic plague coming back, though to be honest it never went away. And the BBC website, where they specialise in scare stories and coronavirus nonsense, ran a headline the other day which read, or rather shouted, ‘Flu virus with pandemic potential found in China’. The story went on to warn that researchers were concerned that it could mutate and trigger a global outbreak.

And maybe it will be that one. Or something else.

The only certainty is that the publicity will tell us it will be nasty and worse than the coronavirus. Covid-19 was just a prelude. The practice infection to build up our fear and turn us into terrified slaves to the state.

They aren’t finished with us yet. Not by a long chalk. In fact they’re having fun with us and just getting started. Since February, they have been testing us and training us for their new world order, the green revolution, the global reset. They want to see how far we will go, what we will put up with, how much they can humiliate us. They want to break our spirit and turn us all into zombies. And so the zombies are everywhere. They’re the ones who wear those deadly masks and scowl at those not wearing them. They’re the idiots who insist on social distancing.

It has for more than a month been obvious that they will need a second wave, of course. The fear levels are drifting down a little and more and more people now realise that the whole coronavirus scam is part of a plot to take over the world and control us with digital surveillance, CCTVs, the internet of things, track and trace systems, driverless cars, crypto-currencies, education via the internet and a health care system which keeps patients well away from doctors.

I feel crazy saying all this. But it’s palpably true. I did a video a month ago warning that the second wave was coming.

And it is all happening above government levels, of course.

No government in the world would happily exchange its own currency for a share in a global cryptocurrency. The politicians don’t know what is going on. This is happening way above the heads of Johnson, Trump, Macron or Merkel. In the UK, I suspect that Cummings probably knows what is going on. But in the UK I doubt if Hancock or anyone in the cabinet knows any more than you or me. Probably less.

You can tell who isn’t part of the plan by checking to see what they think will happen next. The Bank of England seems to think that the UK economy will recover quickly. So they are out of the loop. So are most financial commentators.

The global warming nonsense is all part of it, of course. There’s no science behind it but they picked three spokespersons who seemed beyond criticism. A little Swedish girl, a slightly potty Prince and an old TV presenter. And then they got school children everywhere believing that the world would end before Christmas if we didn’t all stop using oil and gas.

And the Black Lives Matter protests are part of the plan. In the UK, every bit of our history is being demonised. Americans are told that George Washington and Abraham Lincoln were bad, bad people. The police, presumably acting under orders, arrest people having picnics but allow masses of demonstrators to break the lockdown laws and to destroy statues and public property with impunity. We are being told we must forget our history completely. Forget the old world. Forget our pride. Why? They need us to forget about nationality so that we accept the idea of becoming global citizens. The celebrities who promote all this hysteria have absolutely no idea what they are doing.

They want to keep track of us and so before we go into a pub or a restaurant we have to give all our personal details. This is happening globally. What a coincidence. Privacy is a thing of the past.

And now, belatedly they are doing tests. They are using antibody tests which are so useless that they ping positive if you have had the common cold in the last ten years. And every time someone has a positive result, they lock them in. And lock in all their friends. And lock down the factory where they work – especially if it’s a place where food is prepared. In March, when I suggested that more testing would be a good idea, I innocently assumed that they would devise a reliable test.

And so what is the overall plan?

Well the final plan is to reduce the size of the global population, to take away all our freedoms and rights and turn us into slaves of a new, all powerful world government run by a bunch of psychopathic billionaires without souls. We will all be in the clutches of The Myra Hindley and Ian Brady Foundation.

Globalists and multinational companies want to control everything. They want a global recession and massive unemployment so that they can 'reset' the economy. They want robots and a global digital currency. And they want us all vaccinated and implanted and tattooed.

I promise you I feel mad saying all this. I don't believe I am saying it. But I do believe what I'm saying. And, as Sherlock Holmes said: once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.

It's all based on big lies. But as Hitler said, if you tell a big enough lie then you'll get away with it because people won't possibly believe that you'd lie that much.

The plan is to eliminate all small businesses because they are messy and a nuisance and difficult to control and they allow people to be independent of the state.

They're getting rid of religion. That's just old-fashioned and a nuisance. And they need to deprive us of spiritual comfort. So church services are banned and no one can sing hymns anymore. And religious leaders around the world bow to all the nonsense either because they are brain dead or because they have been bought. You can demonstrate against statues but you can't sing a hymn.

And, of course, to do with away traditional medicine as we know it.

So, for example, the Royal College of General Practitioners said the other day that the pandemic had resulted in positive changes to general practice. What they mean is that fewer patients are being seen in the surgery. 'New research is needed,' they said, 'to determine if the new system (whereby GPs treat most patients online or by telephone) diminished or increased the burden on GPs'.

That was it.

Whether the new way of working is better or worse for doctors. Not patients.

I've got a slogan which I will offer free to the medical establishment and which fits nicely in with the current fashion for brainwashing everyone:

Bugger the patients. Stuff good care. Think of yourself.

GPs are excited about the plan to vaccinate everyone. You know why? Because GPs earn tens of thousands of pounds a year for giving vaccinations. Actually, they don't even have to give the jabs themselves. A nurse or health care assistant or possibly a cleaner passing by does the actual injecting.

And the doctors and politicians who do recognise that the whole coronavirus thing is a hoax are so embarrassed and ashamed that they're frightened to admit the truth. They're frightened of being sued for all the mistakes they've made. So they keep quiet. It's the same as it has always been with vaccines. Anyone with two neurones to rub together knows that vaccines are neither safe nor effective. But they maintain the myth, and demonise people like me, because it would cost trillions in damages to tell the truth.

The healthcare scandals are horrendous. We know someone who has breast cancer and who has been waiting over five months for radiotherapy. That's not incompetence – it's criminal.

A friend was recently refused antibiotics because he is over 65. That was the only reason. His age. It's outrageous, medically indefensible ageism. But it's the new way. Doctors don't seem to see anything wrong with it. Dr Mengele would feel comfortable working in health care these days.

And they haven't finished with us, yet.

They've hardly started.

Now they know that most people are stupid, and so the globalists are getting confident. They've got us cornered.

And so the second wave is coming. It'll be here by the autumn unless we convince enough zombies to recognise the truth.

Meanwhile, just in case, we all need a survival plan. We have to become survivalists.

I'm working on a plan.

And in a future video I'll tell you what we're planning to do.

July 10th 2020

That’s Not Science: It’s Propaganda

Doctors like to give the impression that they have conquered sickness with science but that’s just promotional baloney. There are, at a conservative estimate, something in the region of 18,000 known diseases for which there are still no effective treatments – let alone cures. Even when treatments do exist their efficacy is often in question.

It’s not surprising that the treatments for the coronavirus are completely confusing and it’s not surprising that many people, me included, suspect that effective treatments are being ignored or suppressed because they might interfere with the need for a nice expensive vaccine that would make billions for drug companies and establish a greater need for compulsory annual vaccinations for everyone.

Modern clinicians may use scientific techniques but in the way that they treat their patients they are often still more like quacks and charlatans, loyal to existing and unproven ideas which are profitable, and resistant to new techniques and technologies which may be proven and effective.

One report a few years ago concluded that 85% of medical and surgical treatments have never been properly tested.

The fact that a doctor may use a scientific instrument in his work does not make him a scientist – any more than a typist who uses a word processor is a computer scientist. The scientific technology available to doctors may be magnificent but the problem is, and don’t tell anyone I told you this, that the application of the scientific technology is too often crude, untested and unscientific.

Drugs which are commonly prescribed have often never been properly tested. And there are scores of simple questions which go unanswered. Why, for example, do doctors prescribe the same dose of an antibiotic for a 7 stone woman as they prescribe for a 27 stone man? I’ve been asking that question for decades and no one has ever got an answer. Or the other way round. Most drugs are given in similar doses to patients who are 16-years-old as to patients who are 86-years-old – even though their bodies will be very different.

Modern doctors, whether practising as physicians or surgeons, do not see the human mind and the human body as a single entity (which is why the medical profession has been slow to embrace the principles of holistic medicine and doubly incompetent in its attempts to deal with stress-related disorders) and they rely more on hopes and assumptions than on evidence and objective clinical experience. I’m afraid that too many modern doctors are as narrow-minded, and as influenced by their personal experiences and interpretations as their predecessors were 2,000 years ago.

Most patients probably assume that when a doctor proposes to use an established treatment to conquer a disease, he will be using a treatment which has been tested, examined and proven.

But I’m afraid that is often not true.

The first problem is that there are tens of thousands of medical journals in the world and it is difficult for anyone to keep up with new papers – even in a small speciality and even with the aid of computer search engines.

Amazingly, only about 15% of medical interventions are supported by solid scientific evidence’ and ‘only 1% of the articles in medical journals are scientifically sound.

What sort of science is that? How can doctors possibly regard themselves as practising a science when six out of seven treatment regimes are unsupported by scientific evidence and when 99% of the articles upon which clinical decisions are based are scientifically unsound?

How can doctors regard themselves as scientists when it is known that a kind, compassionate doctor can have a healing rate 50% better than his or her crueller colleagues – simply because patients respond better to his or her remedies?

How can doctors regard medicine as a science when it has been proven many times that at least a third of patients will get better if given a placebo – a medicine that contains no active ingredients?

How can doctors regard medicine as a science when it is known that a large proportion of patients expecting to have heart surgery will get better if they are merely given a scar on their chests and told that they have had an operation?

Medicine is no science. It’s an art. Mysticism.

But these days it is polluted by business. And money.

The savage truth is that most medical research is organised, paid for, commissioned or subsidised by the drug industry. This type of research is designed, quite simply, to find evidence showing a new product is of commercial value. The companies which commission such research are not terribly bothered about evidence; what they are looking for are conclusions which will enable them to sell their product. Drug company sponsored research is done more to get good reviews than to find out the truth.

A study published in one major journal found that one in five researchers in the life sciences had delayed publication of their results, or had not published them at all, because of their relations with business firms.

Whenever I have accused scientists of being prejudiced and ‘bought’ because of their allegiance to their corporate paymasters, the answer has invariably been the same: 'Everyone does it. There isn't a scientist in the world who hasn't taken corporate money.'

Sadly, this is probably true – and is one explanation for the fact that many allegedly independent Government bodies are almost always packed with men and women who work for (or have taken fees from) the large corporations their Government body is supposed to be policing.

It is also a fact that most of the doctors and scientists writing articles, papers and reviews for medical and scientific journals have received money, grants and freebies from drug, chemical or food companies.

And it is also worth remembering that many allegedly and apparently independent journals accept corporate advertising and some accept payment in return for running articles.

With a very few exceptions there are no certainties in medicine. The treatment a patient gets will depend more on chance and the doctor's personal prejudices than on science. The unexpected seems to happen so often that it really ought to be expected and the likelihood of a doctor accurately predicting the outcome of a disease is often no more than 50:50.

Even in these days of apparently high technology medicine, there are almost endless variations in the treatments preferred by differing doctors. Doctors offer different prescriptions for exactly the same symptoms; they keep patients in hospital for vastly different lengths of time, and they perform different operations on patients with apparently identical problems.

There is, indeed, ample evidence now available to show that the type of treatment a patient gets when he visits a doctor will depend not so much on the symptoms he describes but on the doctor he consults – and where that doctor practises. And yet most doctors in practice seem to be convinced that their treatment methods are beyond question. Many GPs and hospital doctors announce their decisions as though they are carved in stone.

But for me the big worry is that today's research is largely controlled by and for the pharmaceutical industry. Doctors are unquestioning. Most don't read original papers (and couldn't read between the lines or assess papers accurately even if they did). The majority obtain 99% of their information from two biased and thoroughly unreliable sources: drug companies and the Government.

No one bothers to look for evidence that vaccinations actually work or are safe or don't cause problems when several different vaccines are injected into the same body. I wrote a book called, *Anyone who tells you vaccines are safe and effective is lying*. And no one in the medical establishment has ever tried to dispute that statement.

Young doctors are told that what they are taught are facts. And they are taught (and then believe) that medicine is a science. But the fact is that outside the anatomy room and, possibly, the physiology laboratory, there are no facts in medicine. The gaps in our knowledge about the body are far greater than the extent of our knowledge.

Medicine is not a science. It is an art and a craft. With a smidgen of science stuck on the side. Economics, psychiatry and psychology are all pseudosciences with no more relation to real science than astrology or iridology. Medicine is somewhere in between real science and economics. But it isn't a science.

Doctors like to be thought of as scientists because it contributes to their aura of infallibility. Drug companies like to think that doctors are scientists because it encourages patients to have faith in the remedies they produce. And research doctors like to pretend that they are scientists because it makes it easier for them to obtain grants and to tell convincing stories to the media. Too often, I'm afraid, modern medical scientists decide on a commercially acceptable solution and then select the facts which support the solution they have selected.

That's not science: it's propaganda.

And it's not surprising that the whole coronavirus hoax has been allowed to meander along unhindered by proper debate.

July 11th 2020

Doctors and Nurses Betrayed Patients – and Themselves

A growing number of doctors and nurses appear to be waking up and questioning the absence of any science behind the coronavirus hoax.

That's very nice, and I congratulate them.

But what the devil took them so long?

Why did they wait so long to speak out?

Their silence betrayed their patients, their profession and themselves.

Only a complete moron could have thought that this manufactured 'crisis' necessitated the closure of hospitals and GP surgeries.

How could doctors stand by seeing cancer patients deprived of essential treatment? The NHS should have been stoned not clapped.

There was never any greater risk than there is with the flu every year.

Indeed, the figures show that the ordinary flu bug has always posed a much bigger risk than the coronavirus.

So far this year the coronavirus has affected 10 million people.

The flu can affect 1 billion people in the same period.

And the mortality rates for the two are almost identical.

We don't close down hospitals and clinics whenever the flu appears.

So, obviously, this was a politically motivated closure of hospitals, shops, businesses and so on. And doctors should have seen that.

And just as the closure of hospitals will result in far more deaths than covid-19, so the wearing of masks will result in far more deaths than could possibly be saved. Wearing a mask reduces blood oxygen levels. I have seen car drivers with masks on. I've even seen bus drivers wearing masks. These things reduce blood oxygen. There will, before long, be a disaster with a bus crashing because the driver was wearing a mask and became hypoxic.

Why else do you think governments everywhere admit that people with respiratory or heart problems don't have to wear a mask?

And the stupid rules about social distancing were never justified. There was never any science to support them.

Anyone who believes in the twin heresies of social distancing and masks is, by definition, either certifiably insane, a cretin or on the dark side of the human race. Most are left wing, pro EU fascists and believers in the climate change nonsense.

Doctors and nurses who are now waking up to the fact that they've been tricked are claiming that they were told that if they spoke out they would be punished.

Well, it's true that the authorities are punishing doctors who dare to question the official line. I know of a doctor in the UK who was struck off the medical register for questioning the coronavirus story. And in the USA, Dr Scott Jensen, a doctor who is also a state senator, is being investigated for making statements about the similarity of the coronavirus to the flu and about the way death certificates were being signed.

And it is also true that simple and effective remedies have been banned or demonised simply so that we could all be prepared for the vaccine.

But if most of the doctors in a big hospital spoke out, no bureaucrat would dare to strike them all off the register. If 500 doctors stood up for the truth, it would be impossible to take away all their licences.

'I work in a hospital,' wrote one brave NHS employee. 'So far none of the nurses, doctors or domestics has been off sick. And patients with the coronavirus are transported all around the hospital, to X-ray, to CT scan and to the ward and yet mysteriously no one gets infected.'

What sort of spineless people are working in health care these days? That's the sort of excuse popular with lesser war criminals.

Still, looking on the slightly bright side, some of them are waking up and now realise that the coronavirus hoax was exactly that – a piece of political trickery, conceived and executed by people with hidden agendas. The damage done by the hospital closures will be massive. And the mental issues caused by the fear will be long lasting – even permanent. Millions are suffering from severe depression as a result of the lies that have been told. Suicide rates are going to rocket.

Any doctors who are still social distancing and wearing masks outside the operating theatre should be ashamed of themselves. They, like much of the rest of the population, have been made fools of and if they had any professional pride left they would be red-faced, embarrassed by their own gullibility and ashamed of how easily they've been made part of a wicked conspiracy and made to look like fools.

Now is the time for the medical and nursing professions to stand up and to demand some answers and explanations from the leaders of their professions and from the administrators who gave the orders which have led to tens of thousands of unnecessary deaths.

They should also insist that hospitals are now opened fully and that patients are told that there is nothing to fear.

For although a growing number of doctors now realise that the coronavirus scare is a hoax, there are still hospitals and administrators who are behaving as though we were in the middle of an outbreak of the bubonic plague.

The latest piece of lunacy in the NHS is for the people in charge to suggest that patients who want treatment at an Accident and Emergency department should telephone and make an appointment.

NHS England's national medical director has reportedly told the House of Commons health and social care committee that the health service wanted patients to telephone first and be given a timed slot to attend the A&E department.

I've heard everything now.

Patients who are desperate for help, bleeding, in pain, with bones sticking out at funny angles will be expected to telephone and make an appointment to be seen in the accident and emergency department. Triage will, it seems, now be done by teenagers on the telephone. What qualifications will they have? GCSE in woodwork, perhaps?

Distraught relatives will have to telephone and fix an appointment before going to the hospital. Is the plan simply to kill more patients? Did the hospital closures not kill enough?

I will tell you what is going to happen.

Everyone is going to ring for an ambulance. And who can blame them?

As for hospitals, well even the Royal College of Physicians admits that many NHS services will not get back to full capacity for more than a year.

Millions of patients will wait too long. Patients in pain will have to wait for more than a year for treatment. Waiting times will be obscenely long. Tens of thousands will not be seen until it is too late. Tens of thousands of people who could have lived will die.

Around the world, the death toll from the hoax will be measured in millions.

Comparatively few will have died of the coronavirus.

The vast majority will have died because they were shut out, abandoned or too frightened to seek help.

And the medical and nursing professions have to take responsibility for all that pain, that sorrow and those deaths.

Doctors should not have accepted the unscientific gibberish behind the coronavirus hoax. Before allowing hospitals to be shut down they should have asked questions. It was never difficult to see that mistakes were being made.

Doctors and nurses betrayed their patients and their professions but they also betrayed themselves.

Too many were happy to accept the weekly applause and the praise when they knew that they deserved neither.

It is time now for the healing professions to make amends.

They should make it clear to the administrators and the politicians that they are no longer prepared to accept the coronavirus nonsense.

They should demand their government's medical advisors be sacked. They should demand that all members of the elite, medical establishment be sacked too.

They should demand that social distancing be abandoned and that masks should be burned.

They should tell the public that there is nothing to fear.

And they should be prepared to work long hours to clear the backlog of patients as quickly as possible.

There really is no choice.

If doctors and nurses do not stand up then they will be truly unworthy.

I hope this video stays up for a day or two so that one or two people can see it. YouTube is taking down almost anything these days and what appears to me to be political censorship appears to have become arbitrary.

July 12th 2020

Is There Anything They Won't Do?

So now the Gestapo are calling themselves Public Health officials. The name is the only discernible difference. They can come to your home and, if they see a child playing in the garden or riding a bicycle up and down your road, they can take the child away to be tested, assessed and isolated.

The parents don't need to be there. Their permission is not required. Their child can be legally kidnapped and removed if the Public Health official thinks they might, note the word 'might', be infected.

It's the same for all of us, of course. We are living in a totalitarian world. Boris Johnson, who has been playing a pantomime buffoon for years, has led a coup that should eventually land him and his war criminal colleagues in prison. We have a truly evil government. They aren't removing the last vestiges of our freedom for our benefit. The disease against which this is directed is becoming less of a problem as each day goes by. As I seem to have been saying for ever, it was never more than the flu.

Johnson and co aren't actually lining us up to be shot if we fail their stupid test. But maybe that will be next. Nothing is now impossible.

And all this, remember, is happening as the infection becomes ever less of a threat. In many countries, deaths from all causes are now lower than average for this time of the year. And as more and more doctors are finding the courage to speak out and tell the truth. One doctor has even offered $5,000 to anyone who can produce evidence that the damned virus actually exists.

I don't know how much Johnson and his cabinet know about the plan to take over the world but I suspect they don't know all that much. I wonder if there is anyone in the UK cabinet important enough to be allowed into the cabal with which the United Nations is planning a world takeover.

Still, that doesn't alter the fact that this latest piece of trickery is pure, unadulterated evil. And the rest of the House of Commons might not exist. I haven't heard many MPs protesting about human rights, freedom and democracy. As long as they get their fat salaries and their expenses they don't give a damn about us. You wouldn't think they worked for us, would you?

Have you noticed how so few of our so-called leaders have any statesman like qualities. They all look as though they were put together in the dark and in a hurry by someone who couldn't understand the instructions because they were written in Japanese.

Having us kidnapped and dragged off to secret locations for no good reason isn't Comrade Boris's only new innovation.

It seems that bonking Boris has now gone completely barking for he is apparently going to insist that we all wear masks whenever he tells us to.

I suspect that Comrade Sturgeon is as potty as a damp kilt but Boris is now thinking of following her mad example and making face masks compulsory in Scotland in shops, pubs, offices, restaurants and lunatic asylums.

Boris, like Sturgeon, appears to be following the revised advice given by the WHO – now seemingly majority owned by the Myra Hindley and Ian Brady Foundation. Sorry, I naturally meant the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

There is, let me remind you, no unequivocal evidence that masks help prevent the spread of anything other than bits of food from messy eaters. But there is evidence that they kill. And there is evidence that if you wear one for a while your blood oxygen levels are likely to fall to a dangerously low level.

The only other explanation for this piece of official lunacy is that our government, like many governments around the world, wants us dead.

The people who give in and wear masks are not only a bit simple-minded but they are also clearly suicidal since the hypoxia masks can cause can be deadly.

Everything is getting madder by the day.

If this were not a plot to deprive of us every morsel of our independence and our freedom, the government in the UK would by now be arresting the idiots who produced and promoted the lunatic predictions which led to the lockdowns and the social distancing. Ferguson, like bats and seagulls, appears to be a member of a protected species. Why hasn't he been arrested for producing the most egregiously incorrect forecast in the history of forecasts? And why haven't all the Government's advisors been sacked and thrown into the Tower of London?

Everywhere I look there is more madness.

Not content with attempting to do away with cash, there is now talk that they want to get rid of credit cards and debit cards so that everything we purchase goes through an App on our phone. I know the red fascists will applaud this, and I'm sure the entire staff of the BBC will applaud the idea, but they don't count as human beings.

The Government has generously opened the pubs (though there was never any reason to shut them) but they made it impossible for owners to make a profit or for punters to have any fun, so the pubs will slowly close and politicians can claim it's not their fault because they tried.

And then there is the social distancing. Instead of playing Simon Says, we are all playing Boris says. But this is no party game.

It is now clear that social distancing was developed by the CIA as a form of torture. And it is known that it causes depression, poor sleep, impaired brain function, reduced immunity to infection, poor heart function and so on and on. Following social distancing rules is said to double the risk of death. It is, indeed, equivalent to being obese, smoking 15 cigarettes a day and being an alcoholic.

Children who are forced to follow social distancing rules will grow up severely damaged. They will never recover. And yet children are far more at risk of injury or death by travelling to school than because of the coronavirus. The CDC in America reckons that the covid-19 risk to those under 19 is as near as damnit to zero. No child has passed the coronavirus to an adult. Asymptomatic individuals don't seem to pass on the infection even if they have it. There was never any need to close schools or to introduce any social distancing nonsenses. Why the hell are teachers demanding daft and destructive rules for children? In my view, any teacher who refuses to go to work unless social distancing is introduced should be fired.

When social distancing was first widely introduced about 70 years ago, it was regarded as the ideal way to break down prisoners. It caused more damage than beating them or starving them. Prisoners of War have said that they felt that social distancing and isolation were as bad as any physical abuse. There is no doubt that social distancing is a cruel and inhuman thing to do. Indeed, it is a war crime.

And where did they get the six feet distancing from?

Out of someone's head apparently.

Allegedly, mad scientists felt that the British people wouldn't know what a metre was and so they doubled it just for fun.

And the sick joke is that social distancing actually increases the spread of illness. And social distancing in schools is a form of child abuse.

Because of masks and social distancing, we will never acquire immunity to disease, our immune systems will deteriorate and we will never acquire herd immunity.

Forget what I said about teachers being sacked. That's not enough. They should be arrested and tried for child abuse if they insist on social distancing in schools.

The Government's advisors in the UK keep saying that we cannot halt social distancing. They don't say why. But my fear is that they are just keeping people terrified until the damned vaccine is ready. The UK Government has already ordered 65 million syringes and needles. And one drug company is already making a vaccine that has not yet been properly tested.

Remember that Vallance, the Chief Scientific Advisor to the UK Government, used to work for GlaxoSmithKline, a big vaccine manufacturer. And that Dr Whitty, the Chief Medical Officer in the UK, did research funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. In my view, both of them should be fired for having a potential conflict of interest.

Incidentally, I see that Mr Gates, the self-appointed doctor to the world, has allegedly said that singing, laughing and talking can all spread covid-19. I hesitate to suggest this but maybe, if Mr Gates were to stop talking for a few years we might all be safer.

Meanwhile, we are now living in an occupied country. Everyone not already a member needs to join the Resistance Movement.

If the Public Health Officials come for you, do not resist with violence but I suggest that you film everything – or ask someone to film everything. Then send the film to as many people as you know. And write down details – including names and times. And tell the official that you will sue them personally for kidnapping you. When they tell you that they are immune because they are acting for the State remind them that at the end of World War II that was not considered an acceptable defence at the War Crimes Tribunals.

July 13th 2020

The Screw is Tightening

The number of people dying from the coronavirus is falling fast and yet the screw is tightening everywhere. In many countries, death totals are lower than they usually are at this time of year. You would have had to have had your skull scooped out and filled with concrete not to realise that there is something really sinister and evil going on.

The fear being promoted with such enthusiasm is clearly nothing to do with a fairly ordinary virus and everything to do with the ambitions of those who want a world government and total control over every aspect of our lives.

Everywhere I look I see evidence that attempts are still being made to push the fear and to terrify people.

The testing programme shows that more and more people have or have had the virus. Indeed, almost everyone who is tested seems to have a positive result. Actually, that isn't so surprising because it seems that some tests ping positive if you've had a cold or flu vaccination in the last decade. It probably shows positive if you've ever sneezed. Apparently, one test showed positive when tested on a goat. The test was even positive when tried on a papaya fruit.

Still, the test is proving very useful to those who want to destroy the country so that the UN can rebuild it the way they want it to be according to Agenda 21.

And so, around the world, towns are being closed down and the citizens punished for absolutely no good reason at all. If anyone in government were interested in the science they would know that lockdowns don't work. They were never going to work. They were always a terrible idea. They came out of Ferguson, of course. The lockdowns and the hospital closures merely made things worse. They resulted in all the care home deaths. They stopped people developing immunity. They made people depressed and unhealthy. They will result in millions of entirely unnecessary deaths around the world.

And they are wrecking the economy.

We are constantly being promised the vaccine – as though it were the Holy Grail.

My position on vaccination is very simple: I am pro truth. And I expect, or rather demand, that if I am going to be given a vaccine or drug then it will have been properly tested beforehand. And that the risk-benefit ratio will have been properly investigated. Sadly, the evidence shows clearly that the risks far outweigh the benefits.

After years of observation, I am convinced that there is one big difference between the people who are devoted to vaccination at all costs and those who are concerned about its safety and effectiveness. Most of those in the first group have never done any research at all whereas most of those in the second group, the cautious doubters, have done a good deal of research, are alarmed by what they have seen, and know what they are talking about.

Sadly, many doctors know very little about vaccines and vaccination except that it is an extremely profitable activity. The average GP can make many thousands of pounds a year by giving injections. In practice, of course, she or he doesn't have to give the injections – a nurse or assistant does that. And nurses, health visitors and so on, know only the propaganda I fear.

How many know that the UK Government has to pay out so much money to the parents of children damaged by some vaccines that they have a fixed fee of £120,000 per severely damaged child. In the United States, the Government has paid out over $4 billion for vaccine injuries. That money has been paid on behalf 18,000 individuals. That's a lot of money for governments to pay out for treatments that are supposed to be perfectly safe.

I bet you won't read that in the *Daily Mail* or *The Guardian* or see it on the BBC.

They have destroyed our education system with the lockdowns and the social distancing and a whole generation of children has been indoctrinated into fear. I predict huge mental health problems for two whole generations – at the very least.

And they have, as they planned to do, destroyed untold small businesses – leaving the way clear for the multinationals to control all our purchasing.

There are still some innocent souls who believe that the economy will bounce back in a few months. Financial commentators blithely tell us that everything will be fine long before Christmas.

Those dunderheads probably still believe in the tooth fairy because they clearly have no idea how much damage has already been done. They have no idea how much damage is continuing to be done by social distancing and so on. I suspect they have no idea how businesses are run. And they appear to have no idea that they are being manipulated just as we are.

Or maybe they are part of the plan to deceive and to manipulate, to oppress and to misinform.

But I doubt that.

I think many of those who seem to be in charge are acting blind. They are panicking and have no idea what is going on. Some are continuing with stale and stupid arguments because they are frightened to admit that they got it all wrong – that the whole coronavirus story has been wildly exaggerated.

I am convinced that many of the politicians in government have absolutely no idea what is going on.

And I am equally convinced that there are some advisors who know exactly what is going on.

I also suspect that a former Prime Minister whom I won't name other than to say that his first name is Tony, his second name begins with a B and he is widely known as Britain's most famous war criminal, knows a good many of the people who know exactly what is happening – and the role of the United Nations.

If there is anyone in the world who trusts Blair, they should be locked up for their safety and for ours.

Our strings are being pulled by the people behind the United Nations, the World Health Organisation, the Global Economic Forum and so on. And it is becoming clear that their agendas are no longer quite so hidden. They plan to take over the world; to control our bodies and our minds in every conceivable way.

I am convinced that a small chunk of rich and powerful people planned this disaster and are still organising things so as to make our current lives as difficult as possible so that they can break us. They are using old psychological tricks to wear us down. If you haven't watched it then do please either watch my video on brainwashing or read the transcript on my website.

The same people who were pulling the strings of the global warming nutters, and hiding in the background, are now controlling the demonstrations and the riots, the interracial conflict and the attempts to eradicate our national histories.

They are doing everything to destroy the world we know so that they can recreate things to their advantage.

You would have to be extremely naïve not to realise that our world is being manipulated by some very evil people indeed.

I am fully aware that saying this will ensure that the trolls will have a field day. Well, if they had the brains and the courage I would happily debate with them. Unfortunately, they don't have the brains or the courage. And I'm banned from all mainstream media anyway, largely because of my views on vaccination and drug companies.

And while mentioning a debate let me just repeat my challenge to Dr Whitty, the British Government's Chief Medical Officer. I will happily debate vaccination with Dr Whitty, live on national television or radio. This would give the establishment a chance to destroy publicly the fears that I have, and that many share, about the safety and effectiveness of vaccination.

But Dr Whitty won't debate, of course.

And you can read into that whatever you like.

There are, of course, many people who say there never was a virus and that all we are seeing is the usual standard flu. Certainly, the infection rate and the death rates are similar to those of a fairly ordinary flu. Indeed, remove the care home deaths and this is a very mild flu attack.

But I don't think any of that really matters very much in practical terms.

The only thing that matters at the moment is that a mild problem has been wilfully exaggerated, fear has been created and our lives have been totally disrupted.

When we finally extricate ourselves from this mess, which we will, there will have to be a good many questions about who did what and why. I'd like to see Ferguson in court. His model was clearly as much a load of rubbish as others he's produced over the years. And I would like to see in court the people who accepted Ferguson's predictions without submitting them to any sort of peer review.

And I would like to know how many people who have been giving advice have past or present links with the vaccine industry and its advocates.

But our immediate need is to understand the tactics and strategies of the people behind the United Nations, the World Health Organisation and the other bad organisations. We need to know who they are, what they are trying to do – and precisely what they want.

Let us not forget: we are fighting a war.

And in a war, information is the most vital commodity. This is a time to re-read, among others, Machiavelli's The Prince, Sun Tzu's the Art of War and the Emperor's Napoleon's thoughts on strategy and tactics. I've dug out my copies of all three.

July 14th 2020

Your Body and Mind Aren't Enough – They Want Your Soul

It is abundantly clear that the whole coronavirus hoax is being organised and scripted by psychologists who specialise in brainwashing and what are known in military circles as psychological warfare.

The statistics show clearly that the coronavirus is no longer an epidemic. Doctors everywhere admit that there are now very few deaths from the disease. Indeed, many doctors are admitting that there never was an epidemic. The whole thing was a sleight of hand trick; a massive manipulation.

Doctors and nurses have been told that they will be fired, and probably never work again, if they speak to the media at all. A few have spoken out anonymously and have admitted that hospitals have not been busy. There have been very few cases of covid-19. I've been told that the few patients who were found were tested many times – and on each occasion the test was submitted as though it related to a new patient. So each patient who tested positive became 10 or 12 cases of coronavirus. The whole story has been created, and we have been tricked, conned and manipulated. In some hospitals, doctors and nurses apparently wore masks only when members of the public were around. Social distancing rules were never obeyed unless there were cameras around recording doctors and nurses dancing and clapping themselves.

In the UK, GPs surgeries have been effectively closed – with patients forced to telephone if they wanted to speak to a doctor. Now accident and emergency departments are going to be open only to patients who have telephoned and made an appointment.

'I shall be breaking my leg next Wednesday afternoon, so could I have an appointment, please? Around 3.30 p.m. should be the right time. '

'I think I will be having a stroke on Thursday evening. Could I have an appointment for 10.45 p.m. please?'

GPs surgeries and hospitals will soon be accessed via the internet only. Face to face medicine will be a thing of the past. Artificial intelligence is taking over. Telemedicine will replace traditional medicine. Operations, when they are essential, will eventually be performed by robots. Doctors and nurses haven't understood it yet but they will be redundant.

It is no accident that shops are struggling.

Forcing everyone to wear masks and forcing shops to put social distancing tapes on the floor is designed to make shopping such an unpleasant experience that everyone will do their shopping online. Telling shops not to take cash is utter nonsense – it seems designed to put small shops out of business by making the whole experience unbearable for many. The current system seems designed to destroy High Street shops.

Similarly, pubs and restaurants are being destroyed by social distancing rules, by forcing us to wear masks and by insisting that everyone leave all their personal details with the pub or restaurant staff. The psychologists know that although one or two people will visit pubs and restaurants for a while most will soon tire of the system that has been put into operation.

Advised by the brainwashing specialists, politicians are teasing us and controlling us by giving a little freedom, and then taking it away. We are told that we can take holidays abroad without having to spend two weeks in quarantine when we return. But the rules may change while we are away, in which case we will have to go into isolation for two weeks. And the list of countries which we can visit without quarantine is changing all the time. You'd have to be mad to fix a holiday abroad not knowing what the rules might be while you are away or when you arrive back.

The plan is to disconcert us, to keep us on edge, depressed and fearful. That is what our governments are doing to us – deliberately.

Governments always lie to us. Remember Vietnam? Cuba? The twin towers? The weapons of mass destruction that didn't exist?

But the lies have been elevated to new levels. They now want to control everything.

We are constantly being told of draconian measures being introduced in other areas. And since the rules change from one area to another we never quite know what punishments to escape. In one part of America you can be sent to prison for a year if you fail to wear a mask. In another part of America you have to pay a 2,000 dollar fine but there is no prison sentence. In Texas, some people have been told that they should wear masks in their own homes. In one shop a guard pulled a gun on a man who was not wearing a mask. In California, people have been telephoning the police if they've heard a neighbour coughing or sneezing. The snitches and sneaks, eager to please the system, are part of the mass surveillance system.

And yet if you buy a boxful of disposable masks you will probably see, printed on the side of the mask, a warning that the mask does not provide protection against viruses such as the one which causes covid-19. Of course it doesn't. The viruses go straight through the mask, like a bluebottle fly through chicken-wire.

If you are beginning to feel as though you are being treated like a prisoner of war then you're beginning to understand the situation.

There has been a global coup, led by the United Nations, the World Health Organisation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the World Economic Forum and a variety of other billionaires. Their aims are quite straightforward: they want to reorganise the world, they want a world government, they want to destroy everything which we regard as 'normal', they want to destroy our history (they are using the Black Lives Matter campaign to help with that) and they want to force us to use the internet for everything. They want us all vaccinated, regularly, and they want us to carry immunity passports if we want to leave our homes, buy things or obtain medical assistance. They want us tracked and traced every minute of the day. They want us to use self-driving cars because they can be controlled from afar. They want us to have smart meters installed so that they can turn off our electricity supplies if we misbehave. They are creating so-called smart motorways which seem deliberately designed to create more queues. Ever changing speed limits cause more traffic jams and plenty of fines. They want us to use telephone apps for all our purchases and they want us all to be dependent upon the State. They want to eradicate small companies so that large multinationals can satisfy all our needs. And they want to replace people with robots. The future they have planned for us bears very little resemblance to the world to which we are accustomed.

The coronavirus is a key part of the plan. It is the virus which is going to terrify us into obeying their orders without question. And they are using psychological warfare techniques to keep us under control. The only plague around is a plague of corruption. The individuals who are helping with the compulsory testing and tracking are today's concentration camp guards.

There has been a global coup and our lives are being micromanaged by a group of very evil people and organisations which are determined to take control of the world in order to redesign it to suit their own selfish, commercial and political interests. Our political system has failed us all completely.

They want to get rid of the elderly, the middle classes and schools. They want to get rid of anyone who isn't deemed to be an asset to the State.

They want children to be educated via the internet and they aren't terribly interested in how well educated they are at the end of their schooling. Forcing children to follow social distancing rules is completely unnecessary and so cruel it can only be described as evil. It will create emotionally damaged children who are germophobic, suicidal, homicidal, neurotic and psychotic. Many will become psychopathic. And I now believe it has been planned by the numerous teams of psychologists and military mind control specialists in countries everywhere who are helping to mastermind our new global world. I wouldn't be surprised to see children forced to wear masks.

At first I thought that the social distancing in schools was being imposed through ignorance but I no longer believe that. This is being done to destroy and it is evil almost beyond comprehension. What sort of people deliberately use CIA torture techniques on children? Psychologists, politicians and teachers all around the world are guilty and should be tried at the war crimes court.

They want to reduce the global population. They know that forcing us into isolation, making pubs unbearable and closing nightclubs will help stop boys meeting girls and vice versa. It is no coincidence that the authorities have for the last few years been encouraging homosexuality, transsexuality and gender reassignment. Fewer babies that way.

This is all a question of power, control and money – but not necessary in that order.

Our food supplies are being controlled. They are planning shortages that will lead to panic and mass starvation – particularly in the underdeveloped parts of the world. All around the world farms and food packing and distribution centres are being closed down because employees (usually asymptomatic) are tested and shown to be positive. (Why, you might ask, does it seem that food workers are being targeted for testing?)

Thanks to the climate change nutters, who have been manipulated very successfully, there are going to be massive shortages of energy. There will be no electricity for long periods of time. Heating and cooking will, for many, be nigh on impossible.

The recent Black Lives Matter demonstrations have been manipulated to call for the defunding of the police. The plan is to replace the police with the military and with drones and robots. It is quite remarkable how easily the Black Lives Matter demonstrators were manipulated into helping the coup that will wreck their lives.

They want to control everything.

They want our bodies, our minds and our souls.

And unless we fight back we will soon be nothing but slaves of the system. We are fighting a war of terror – but our enemies are our governments and international organisations such as the United Nations and the World Health Organisation.

We all have to stand up against the system.

Doctors could help protect us all by making it clear to everyone that the so-called pandemic never existed and that it was a trick designed to prepare us for the takeover, the coup.

Once the covid-19 hoax has been properly exposed for the sham that it is, the whole plan will fall apart. And it will be impossible for the manipulators, the plotters – the enemy – to try the same trick again.

July 15th 2020

Mask Wearers are Collaborators Who Could Destroy Us All – They Should Be Locked Up for Helping the Enemy

So now they're turning up the heat. The evil Gates subsidised monsters who are trying to take over the world and turn us all into slavish zombies must be feeling very cocky. In the UK, the Government decided that we all have to wear masks in shops. On July 24th, the coronavirus is going to mutate, stop being a fairly feeble flu-like bug and become something as deadly and dangerous as one of the Clintons.

And so on the 24th July, we have to start dressing up as bank robbers whenever we go shopping. The shop assistants don't have to wear masks but the shoppers do. Apparently, according to Boris the Buffoon, the coronavirus can't jump to or from a shop assistant but can jump to or from a shopper. How clever the coronavirus is to know this. Of course, if a shop assistant pops into a neighbouring shop they have to put on a mask because then they become a customer and when they are a customer they can catch the virus and spread it.

Another oddity is that although the coronavirus can infect shoppers it can't infect people who work in offices. It seems that this very intelligent virus seems to say to itself `I can infect these people because they are just out shopping' but 'I must not infect those people in that office because they are working'.

If all this sounds like totally unscientific gibberish that is because it is totally unscientific gibberish.

How clever too for the authorities to know that people in shops must wear masks but not give their names and addresses whereas people in pubs must give their names and addresses but not wear masks.

If we weren't fighting a war against the most evil cabal ever put together in the history of mankind then it would be laughable.

And look at the history behind this latest change of heart.

Professor Jonathan Van-Tam, Deputy Chief Medical Officer previously announced that there was no need to wear a mask.

And Michael Gove, a weedy little British politician who is about as far removed from being a statesman as Bill Gates is from being a doctor, said that the UK government didn't plan to insist that we all wore masks in shops. I bet he feels an idiot now.

Because within hours Boris Johnson, our Fuhrer, backed up by laws which would have been envied by Stalin, Hitler and Attila the Hun, not to mention Vlad the Impaler and Genghis Khan, suddenly decided, seemingly all by himself, that the entire nation should wear masks whenever they ventured into a shop.

Everyone knows the disease has almost died out. It'll soon be less of a threat than athletes' foot. If the coronavirus were a pop record it would be about to slip out of the Top 100 and slide into oblivion.

So, what had happened to change the pint of rancid pond-water that Boris doubtless refers to as his mind?

Well, the only thing new that I could find was a bit of research performed by a team at Cambridge University. They seem to have concluded that wearing masks was a good thing. And guess what the bloke who did the research does for a living? His name is Richard Stutt and he usually models the spread of crop diseases. Crop diseases! He is another bloody modeller like Ferguson. 'Our analyses support the immediate and universal adoption of facemasks by the public,' Stutt is quoted as saying. And he works on crop diseases and suddenly he knows all about whether or not we should wear face masks. You'd think Boris would be wary of modellers wouldn't you? But then maybe not if they give him the news he wants. My researches suggest that there is going to be a glut of mathematical modellers receiving knighthoods in the New Year's Honours List.

Did Stutt recommend the wearing of masks to stop the flu last year? The mortality risk with the flu is pretty well identical to the risk with covid-19. Has he recommended the wearing of masks to stop the spread of TB? A quarter of the global population is said to be infected with TB, a disease which kills over one and half million a year. If we need one mask for the coronavirus then we need four masks each for TB.

'We have little to lose from the widespread adoption of facemasks,' said a Dr Retkute.

I think the mistake this lot have made has been in focussing on the R number – the number being infected. Bugger the R number. It's of absolutely no real significance. What matters is the D number – the number dying. And the D number has fallen dramatically because they've stopped killing old people in care homes. If Stutt and Retkute were doctors they might understand this better. Why don't they stick to crop diseases?

Nothing to lose by wearing masks?

I know of two people who died because they wore masks and the hypoxia killed them. How's that for nothing to lose?

But then we must remember that it is the Government's plan to help reduce the world population – and thereby win the hearts of Bill and Melinda Gates.

Maybe my scepticism about anything coming out of Cambridge University, where the crop disease bloke works, has been heightened since the University accepted $210 million from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Everywhere you look the Gates Foundation has left its dirty fingerprints.

The bottom line is that I am convinced that there is no sound medical reason to wear a mask. Masks are bad for us physically. And they are bad for us mentally. If you look at the risk benefit ratio then the risks are far greater than the benefit.

The only reason for our being forced to wear masks is to oppress us, to frighten us and to turn us into pathetic slaves of the beast. If you wear a mask they own your body, your mind and your soul. That's it. Game over.

And now that they've made mask wearing compulsory, when will they ever reverse the law?

What do you think? In three months' time? Six months? Twelve months?

The correct answer is: probably never.

They've said we'll have to wear masks in shops until the vaccine is ready. And that could be 5, 10 or 15 years. Or Longer. This is going to be part of the new abnormal.

How many people will be killed by masks in the next twelve months alone? Your guess is as good as mine – and almost certainly better than that of any politician.

A friend of mine who suffers from anxiety intends to tell shopkeepers that wearing a mask gives her a panic and fainting attack and would they therefore please have someone trained in first aid to follow her around the shop.

Those with respiratory and heart disorders fear that if they don't conform and wear masks they might be subjected to abuse from mask wearing zombies.

The utterly loathsome Hancock, the UK's Minister of Gibberish, says that shop staff should call the police if a customer isn't wearing a mask. If they don't then another busy body customer will probably do the snitching for them. To me it seems as if it's all part of the plan to smash society and create distrust. And, of course, the mask wearing will help destroy shops so that we all do all our shopping online.

Hancock is to me like the appalling Macron in France, living proof of the validity of the Peter Principle – that members of a hierarchy are promoted until they reach the level at which they are no longer competent. Come to think of it that's clearly true of Johnson too.

Shame on the Conservative Party. Let's have a general election and dump these evil bastards onto the political scrap heap. Compared to Boris Johnson, the pathetic and utterly woeful Theresa May was a beacon of strength, probity and wisdom. I can't believe I said that but it does show the level of contempt I have for Johnson. It is now clear that the buffoon act wasn't an act. He is a buffoon – clearly as under-endowed in the brain department as you can imagine. Incidentally, the psychologists advising the Government obviously think that the term 'face covering', the new preferred term, is somehow more acceptable than the word 'mask'. Or maybe their contempt for us is so complete that they think we won't notice that there is something of a similarity between an item called a face mask, which covers the lower half of the face, and something quite different called a face covering which covers the lower half of the face.

Boris, you crooked, ignorant, deceitful, two-faced, cheating, betraying bastard, we would know they were masks if the psy-op specialists suggested you call them lemon meringue pies.

Alternatively, is it impossible that masks are part of some satanic ritual – along with the constant hand washing, the social distancing and the house arrests?

When we have got through this war, and won the conflict against our own government, we will never forget Boris Johnson's perfidy – or his government's total betrayal of the voters. Johnson will join Blair as a candidate for the War Crimes Tribunal.

The terrible thing is that many people have already fallen for the nonsense.

The other day I drove to a local supermarket. I spotted just a few wearing masks, from their eyes half of them looked arrogant and very pleased with themselves – as though they had just been given a gold star or appointed milk monitor for the term. The other mask wearers looked terrified as though they were expecting to be dead before they reached the safety of the checkout.

Outside the supermarket I saw several people wearing masks. A young couple with a four or five-year-old – all wearing masks. A pair of teenagers wearing masks. A few middle aged folk masked up and a couple of old ladies in masks they'd obviously made themselves. Oddly enough I didn't see any elderly men wearing masks. Dunno why.

The town looked so sad, by the way. Apart from the supermarket the only shops open were two nail parlours (both empty), an ironmonger (I was the only customer there) and a charity shop. Everything else was closed. Probably permanently.

It is clearly not being unfair to say that the mask wearers are not God's brightest creations.

However, the really sad thing is that the mask wearing zombies are too stupid or too ill- informed to realise that they are playing into the enemy's hands.

Some of the zombies actually think they're helping to save lives. If you try to tell them about the dangers of mask wearing they will point out that surgeons wear masks in the operating theatre. As though this had any relevance. What they don't realise is that surgeons wear masks to stop bits of saliva ending up in the wound. They don't wear them to prevent the flow of disease, they don't usually wear them all day long, they don't wear them outside the operating theatre and they certainly don't wear them while walking about and requiring extra oxygen.

How can there be people who don't realise that in wearing masks they are aiding and abetting the thieving criminals who are stealing our freedom and our future.

Anyone who wears a mask is a spineless and moronic collaborator helping the worst people this world has ever seen.

Independent research by a bunch of florists has shown that mask wearers aren't capable of thinking for themselves; they are not very bright, they are followers, the sort of people who, as children, dreamt of being concentration camp guards. They never do anything or achieve anything; they are saddos, nerds and remainers – invariably devoted to the European Union.

Put on a mask and you are bending a knee before Gates, Soros, the Rothschilds and the Rockefellers, Blair and the Clintons.

What an evil, soulless bunch.

I've recorded two videos about Gates. Please watch them if you haven't. The first video is called Just A Little Prick part one. And, with startling originality that I am very proud of, the second one is called Just A Little Prick part two.

The mass media invariably describe Bill Gates as a philanthropist. The BBC and *The Guardian*, both sharing some of the Gates wealth, probably think he should be known as St Bill.

However, I am going to try to get the Oxford Dictionary to revise its definition of the word philanthropist.

It should read: 'A philanthropist is an evil crook who has absolutely no interest in the welfare of others but who uses large donations of money to buy power and control and to make even more money'.

I'll suggest that synonyms of philanthropist should include: 'slimy, single cell organism usually found at the bottom of filthy ponds'.

Just remember that next time you see anyone describing themselves, or being described as a philanthropist.

The idiots wandering around in their little masks are bending the knee to the toxic Gates; in my view a being so dangerous and diseased that he should be rammed into a test tube and kept in Madam Tussaud's Chamber of Horrors. Mothers could take their children and point him out as the definition of evil.

And they are bending a knee to more candidates for the chamber of horrors: Blair, the hideous Clintons, the foul Obama and the rest of the malignant crew.

Oh and the wretched Boris Johnson too.

The mindless mask wearers are collaborators and when war ends you know what happens to collaborators. Most of them are political innocents who voted Remain because they didn't bother to do enough research to know that the EU had been set up by Nazis to enable post-war Germany to control Europe.

Finally, I'll leave you with my mantra:

No silly mask
No deadly vaccine
No social distancing

Please learn it, recite it and share it with the collaborators who seem determined to drag us down with them – but who will fail because those of you who have seen the light have a monopoly on wisdom, courage and integrity.

And two other small things.

First, the channel is growing so fast that YouTube doesn't always seem to manage to send out notifications about new videos. I'm sure this is just a technical hitch. We try to research, write, edit, record and put out a new one each day at 7.00 p.m. – though this doesn't leave much time for sleeping and eating and virtually none for dealing with emails.

Second, as you know, we don't accept ads or sponsors or any money for the channel or the website and I promise that we never will. However big the channel gets, or the website gets, there will never be any outside money involved. Unlike the BBC, for example, which sold out years ago and cannot be trusted to tell the time, this is a genuine non-commercial public service channel. We specialise in the truth, served with a little spice I hope, and leave bias, prejudice and fake news to the vastly overpaid cretins at the BBC.

July 16th 2020

They Want to Kill Six Billion of Us – Here’s How They’ll Do It

There are people around who believe that if we all wear masks, obey the social distancing laws and become true slaves to the system, then everything will be back to normal by Christmas at the latest.

In the last 24 hours I have read, and been dismayed by, three articles by writers who believe that if we all behave properly, and do exactly as we are told to do, the coronavirus will slink off and all will be well with everyone back at work, the economy beginning to boom and the world well on its way to a recovery. There are even some who were shocked at the suggestion that taxes will rise dramatically in the next 12 months or so. Where do these people think the money came from – the money that an ex Goldman Sachs, currently the UK Chancellor, was throwing around with such gay abandon.

Of course, they add as a rider, we won’t be able to forget about social distancing, and we may have to keep on our masks until the vaccine is ready, but everything will be normal apart from that.

I wonder what these people have inside their skulls. Porridge? Those little white polystyrene balls that are used for packaging? Bubble wrap?

They certainly don’t have brains.

The people now planning to rule the world, a group of billionaires and would be billionaires who I will, for ease, refer to as the enemy, have decided that there are too many people in the world, and that the earth would be more comfortable for them if the total were reduced to around 500,000,000.

Since the current population is around 7 billion that means that at least 6 billion of us are surplus to requirements, unnecessary, not wanted on voyage. Since their ambition has a convincingly eugenic flavour, they will presumably want to get rid of the weak and the poor and the elderly and the frail.

So how are they going to do that?

Well, the ignorant, scare mongering climate change nutters have done some of their work for those who want us dead. The brainwashed children and idiots who believe in man-made global warming are helping the enemy enormously. Cutting back on our use of oil and gas will kill hundreds of millions who will die of hunger and cold.

And I have no doubt that the enemy will manage another ‘plandemic’.

The abominable Gates and his wife have already said that people will pay attention when the next pandemic arrives. And I thought they both smirked very knowingly when Bill made this prediction.

It wouldn’t be difficult.

They could just say that the coronavirus which caused covid-19 had mutated. Or they could blame a pig virus or a cuckoo virus or maybe a virus from the Gates family – something unpleasant.

It wouldn’t really need to be something too nasty. After all, a really bad virus might kill off some of the billionaires.

I rather suspect that we are going to have more alleged virus health calamities coming up. If it isn’t the coronavirus in a pre-ordained second wave it will be something else. If they can make up one crisis then they can, and will, make up many more.

All it needs is good marketing, and organisations like the BBC will provide all the myths and fake news that the enemy will need.

The BBC, *The Guardian* and the *Daily Mail* could turn tapioca into a deadly threat.

Of course, the plan to reduce the global population is already doing well.

The enemy has got everyone social distancing. And that is known to cause illness and to kill people. The CIA reckon that social distancing is one of the most powerful weapons there is for controlling large numbers of people.

They managed to murder huge numbers in the care homes and they have killed vast numbers of the sick by closing down hospitals for absolutely no good reason.

They put everyone under house arrest – and isolation damages the immune system. Prisoners of War have confirmed that isolation does more damage than physical torture. Stress and anxiety affect the immune system too.

The masks will kill quite a few people too. It’s well known that they reduce blood oxygen levels, and those with respiratory and cardiac disorders will die. It’s true that surgeons wear masks but the circumstances are entirely different. Women’s movement enthusiasts used to burn their bras. Perhaps, we should burn our masks – in an environmentally acceptable way, of course.

Even the sanitising gel they insist we use a dozen times a day will kill some people. (If you haven’t seen it, watch my video on hand sanitisers. Or read the script on this website.)

And then there is the cold in the winter months. They are stopping us using gas and there are going to be electricity outages. Many will freeze to death in the winter months.

But I think their biggest weapon is food.

That’s how they are going to bring the population crashing right down.

Food shortages are coming and the cost of food is going to rise even faster than it has been doing. And it isn’t because of global warming or whatever other lies they tell you – it is, however, a side effect of the coronavirus hoax.

All around the world food is in short supply. The price of the world's most important staple food – rice – has risen by 70%. Food prices in the US have recently seen a historic jump and are, I believe, destined to stay high and go higher. Countries which have good food production are halting their exports. Vietnam, for example, has stopped exporting because they need their food supplies at home. And you cannot blame them. Some authorities condemn it as nationalism but all countries, all villages, all homes would do much the same.

And it is the managed over-reaction to a virus known to be no more dangerous than the flu that is causing the problem – and that will result in millions of deaths to add to the millions who are going to die as a result of the lockdowns.

The global death rate because of the food shortage is going to be measured in hundreds of millions – and eventually in billions. Africa and Asia are going to see the worst levels of starvation ever seen. I fear that those countries which have some grain will flog it to America – despite massive starvation. Black lives matter protestors, who have been manipulated by professionals, would be wise to forget about Cecil Rhodes's statue, and where they'd like to see it placed, and concentrate instead on helping Africans who are going to be subjected to the worst genocide in history.

So, how is the coronavirus scandal responsible for the food shortages that are coming?

That's easy to explain.

Processing plants and distribution centres all around the world have been deliberately severely disrupted by the massive over-reaction to this fairly ordinary virus.

Around the world, more and more testing is being done. And although the tests are about as trustworthy as Gates, Clinton and Soros – your local purveyors of fear and death – they are treated with undeserved reverence. Curiously, it seems to me that farms and food distribution centres are being tested more than, say, civil servants or tax officials. This is odd because the chances of the virus being carried on food are roughly the same as the chance that the moon is made of cheese.

And so if one worker on a farm or in a warehouse falls ill with flu-like symptoms then the authorities will close down that farm or the warehouse. Delivery systems have been massively affected as drivers are sent home for two weeks and all their colleagues sent home for two weeks too.

As a result, huge crops of vegetables and fruit are being ploughed into the ground. Millions of animals are being slaughtered and then buried or burnt because the supply chains have been shut down. America, almost unbelievably, has been importing beef because of the shortages.

The world lockdown, and the mass 'house arrests' that were engineered to keep us all subservient, mean that thousands of farmers cannot get their crops picked. Fruit in particular is likely to rot in the fields and tankers full of milk are being poured away. Controls on transport have meant that it has been difficult to move food from where there is a glut to where there is a dearth. It would have been easy for governments to insist that furloughed workers should help pick the crops but they didn't do so. And why would they? The plan is to eradicate the poor and the weak.

And the unsurprising consequence of all this is that there are going to be massive shortages of fruit and vegetables and prices are going to rocket.

In the UK, the most toxic of the Remainers, the fascist EU loving lunatics, bigoted, soaked in their own prejudices and consumed by ignorance, will blame Brexit for the shortages. But then, if they develop a bald spot or lose their keys they blame Brexit.

In the US, the media will doubtless blame Trump for the food shortages.

Sadly for them all, the shortages will be global.

All around the world there will be a shortage of almost all foods.

This isn't the sort of fear-porn favoured by irresponsible mainstream media giants such as the EU-and-Gates-supported BBC.

This is real.

Other factors are going to ensure that the shortage just gets worse.

If and when the economy is allowed to stutter into action again, the price of oil will doubtless eventually rise because the existing supplies are diminishing rapidly and most oil companies have pretty well given up exploration.

The rising price of oil will mean that farming and transportation costs will rise and that will push up the price of food still further.

I tell you this not to scare you but because when you know something is happening you can do something about it.

You may think it is worthwhile building up your stocks of long-dated food staples such as rice and pasta. Dried and tinned foods which have long dates are good. As you eat your stocks, replace them with more.

Governments tell us not to store stuff but the military don't buy bullets the day they need them, do they? If you have a garden and can grow your favourite vegetables or fruit that's probably a good idea but watch that no one climbs over your fence and steals them. I don't recommend having an allotment – the chances of you being able to harvest your own crops are too remote because they will be stolen. It might also be a good idea to stock up on vitamin and mineral supplements if you usually take them.

I've always been a bit of contrarian, though I don't suppose anyone would notice, and I'm convinced that the time to panic buy is when there is no panic.

I hope the advice here will help those who watch these videos: do a little quiet food stock piling now so that you and your family will have a better chance to be strong and healthy. Countries look after themselves and we all need to do so. It isn't selfish. It's survival. If you buy food you will eat anyway, and you store it carefully, what have you got to lose? If I'm wrong and there is no enemy and there are no food shortages then you can always eat what you've stored.

If and when your government finally warns you of this problem it will be far too late.

And tell your family and friends to watch this video soon. The last time I warned about the coming food shortages YouTube removed the Part One video within hours. Curiously, they left the second video in the two video series.

Remember: you should stockpile food now – don't wait for the panic

July 17th 2020

Why is YouTube Protecting Government Lies?

YouTube was doubtless a good idea when it started. I expect the originators may have had good intentions – they, perhaps, hoped to provide members of the public with a place for new ideas and for discussion. And I appreciate the fact that most of my videos are still available.

But I fear that the platform has allowed itself to become a tool of the devil-worshipping oppressors who are working hard to destroy mankind.

If you do stupid things on roller skates or leap out of a tree into a vat of blancmange then your videos will be safe. YouTube doesn't censor the puerile or the pathetic.

But it seems that the platform's censors do not approve of free speech, original thought or any sort of public debate.

I have absolutely no idea why they choose to take down videos these days. They've taken down a number of my videos. Indeed they've taken down a good many videos made by doctors or including interviews with doctors doubtful about the official line on the coronavirus. Worse still, they've removed some channels completely. So, for example, David Icke's channel was apparently banned. It was a diabolical example of censorship to remove his channel completely. I discussed YouTube's censorship policy in an earlier video of mine entitled, 'Why did YouTube ban my video?' which is worth hunting for if you haven't seen it. It's still available on my channel.

YouTube seems to ban anything which departs from the WHO's instructions – but those are not the law and they are often debatable. And so videos which deal with social distancing, masks and vaccination may be removed.

It sometimes seems to me that they simply look for videos which contain words of more than six letters and then take them down on the dubious grounds that anything which contains big words must be dangerous. The blancmange and the roller skating gerbils are fine. But anything which includes facts and opinions is likely to find itself on the equivalent of the cutting room floor. I made another video entitled, 'Everything you are allowed to know but I can't tell you what about' which also attacked the YouTube curious policy on health matters.

The pathetic lies and abuse from the feeble-minded trolls are easily ignored – the trolls who so eagerly spread libels are clearly a bunch of ignorant half-wits. Their lies and deceptions are blatant and laughable. Talking of abuse, I have a fine collection of screenshots of libellous remarks made on the pages behind my Wikipedia entry. Excellent and useful evidence.

But in theory the censorship of free speech is threatening the last remaining vestiges of our freedom. And in practice too.

The internet is important because as we have seen the mainstream media have been bought. The BBC was always going to defend the indefensible – it has, after all, taken money from the European Union and Bill Gates – but I am shocked and saddened at the way that other television stations and national newspapers have managed to bend their knees and, at the same time, bend over to facilitate the desires of the remorselessly wicked cabal so clearly determined to rule the world.

I sincerely hope that YouTube will revise its attitude to freedom of speech and debate. If it doesn't then sadly the one certainty in my mind is that when this fiasco is over, and we have reclaimed the world and rediscovered our freedom, there won't be much of a place for an organisation which appears to have sold itself to the public enemy. My experience suggests that YouTube may have taken sides and I don't believe they're going to end up on the winning side.

Meanwhile, I know that we cannot be silenced.

If I have to find a soap box or stand on street corners handing out hand written leaflets then that's what I will do.

We have built this society. It is our responsibility. If we stay silent then the evil will be done with our blessing.

It has always been up to us to shout 'stop' when we have had enough of the wickedness around us. We all have a voice we can use and we all have a duty to make sure that our voice is heard. If we remain silent then we are just a part of the evil which is corrupting and destroying our world.

We have to ignore the sad individuals who scoff or mock – either because they have been bought with a purse of silver or because they are too unintelligent to understand the nature of the war we are fighting. We must not allow ourselves to be put off by scorn, derision, undisguised contempt or a lack of support or encouragement from others.

Look through history and we can all see that imaginative, thoughtful and creative individuals have always had a hard time. Look back and you will find countless examples of citizens who were harassed or persecuted simply because they dared to think for themselves – and tried to share their thoughts with others.

The sad fact is that our world has never welcomed the original, the challenging, the inspirational or the passionate and has always preferred the characterless to the thought provoking.

Those who dare to speak out against the establishment have always been regarded as dangerous heretics. The iconoclast has never been a welcome figure in any age.

Confucius, the Chinese philosopher, was dismissed by his political masters and his books were burned. Those who didn't burn his books within 30 days were branded and condemned to forced labour. Two and a half thousand years later, Confucius's influence was still considered so dangerous that Chairman Mao banned his works.

Described by the Delphic Oracle as the wisest man in the world, Greek teacher Socrates was accused of corrupting the youth of Athens, arrested for being an evildoer and 'a person showing curiosity, searching into things under the earth and above the heaven and teaching all this to others'. Socrates was condemned to death.

Dante, the Italian poet, was banished from Florence and condemned to be burnt at the stake if ever captured.

After they had failed to silence him with threats and bribes, the Jewish authorities excommunicated Spinoza in Amsterdam because he refused to toe the party line, refused to think what other people told him he must think and insisted on maintaining his intellectual independence. He and his work were denounced as 'forged in Hell by a renegade Jew and the devil'.

Galileo, the seventeenth century Italian mathematician, astrologer and scientist got into terrible trouble with the all-powerful Church for daring to support Copernicus, who had the temerity to claim that the planets revolved around the sun.

Aureolus Philippus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim (known to his chums as Paracelsus) made himself enemies all over Europe because he tried to revolutionise medicine in the sixteenth century. Paracelsus was the greatest influence on medical thinking since Hippocrates but the establishment regarded him as a trouble-maker.

Ignaz Semmelweiss, the Austrian obstetrician who recognised that puerperal fever was caused by doctors' dirty habits was ostracised by the medical profession for daring to criticise practical procedures.

Dr John Snow fought two huge battles. He introduced anaesthesia for women in confinement and by removing the handle from the Broad Street pump in Soho he helped prevent the spread of cholera in London. Both battles brought him enemies.

Henry David Thoreau, surely the kindest, wisest philosopher who has ever lived, was imprisoned for sticking to his ideals.

These are all my personal heroes. They show that original thinkers and people who do not fit neatly into the scheme of things have never gone down well. You and I are in good company. (I'm not speaking to the trolls, by the way. They pressed the thumb down button within a second of the video starting and they've been back in their cells for some time now.)

And nothing has changed over history.

Today, incompetence and mediocrity thrive and are subsidised, supported and encouraged by our increasingly bureaucratic and intrusive society. Among bureaucrats and administrators, incompetence and mediocrity are esteemed virtues; these be-suited morons revere the banal and worship the bland.

The unusual or the eccentric attract scorn and ridicule. Politicians are frightened of anything new or challenging. They reject the innovative, the creative and the imaginative in favour of the accustomed, the comfortable and the ordinary. It is hardly surprising that the sensitive, the thoughtful, the imaginative and the caring find twenty first century life almost too painful to bear.

But this isn't simply a battle for the right to say new or unthinkable things.

We are fighting a war for our right to say anything; we are fighting for the right to question our rulers.

Whenever we feel that something is wrong, it is our duty as human beings to stand up for our principles, to shout and make our voices heard.

There is a chance that some people will regard us as lunatics.

Many small-minded people will sneer and tell you that in trying to change the world and root out dishonesty, corruption and injustice we are tilting at windmills. But there is also a chance that our voice will be heard; that others will respond and that we will win our battle.

But we really don't have a choice.

If we fail to fight then we will lose the world we know.

On this occasion, the benefits of victory far outweigh the insults of the insignificant. And, after all, only when you've found something you are prepared to die for will you really know what life is all about.

The battle you and I are fighting against the coronavirus hoax is the most important battle any of us will fight. It's crucial to our lives, our world, our beliefs, our humanity, our mental and physical health, our spirituality and our future. It's crucial too to future generations and to the world God gave us.

It's just a pity that YouTube appears to have chosen to side with the forces of evil and to censor and remove what I believe were perfectly sensible and well-researched videos – apparently because they used facts to question official policy.

But that won't stop us and I predict they will find themselves on the losing side.

I fear that YouTube will probably remove this video, and they will doubtless remove this channel. Why would they do that?

It has been widely reported that doctors and nurses have been forbidden to question the official line – even when it is patently wrong. They have been banned from speaking to the media.

Have the bosses at YouTube been told to suppress those who dare to question the lies – even if they are medically qualified?

That, I think, is the difference between them and us.

You and I prefer to think for ourselves, and to do the right thing whatever the cost, and we cannot be bought or pressured to do the wrong thing.

This channel has never been monetised – there are no ads and no sponsors. And there never will be.

July 18th 2020

How the Greens Will Destroy Our World

The mad Greens and other proponents of the myth of climate change (nee global warming) say that the oil in the ground (or under the sea) will have to stay there. They want to stop us using oil, gas, coal and uranium. They want us to get all our energy from renewables such as solar and wind power and through their power in the EU they are forcing through policies which fit with these aims.

Presumably, the mad Greens want to fly to their regular climate change conferences by solar powered jet and to use solar power to charge their websites and their laptops.

They want the big oil companies to go bust, and because of the political pressure they've exerted, numerous investment and pension companies are refusing to invest in oil companies.

This is lunacy and if I had a pension with a company which bowed to these loony activists, I would withdraw my money immediately.

The plan is clearly to destroy oil and coal companies, and their shareholders. It obviously has not yet occurred to the Greens around the world that without coal and oil there won't be enough electricity for their little diesel powered electric cars as well as their coal fired laptops.

(I discovered, by the way, that people in electric or low emission cars are far less likely to stop at zebra crossings than are people driving petrol or diesel engine cars. The drivers of electric cars are, it seems, so bloody pleased with themselves that they feel they can treat everyone else with disdain and contempt.)

The nutters are wrong for a number of reasons – which also make them dangerous.

First, the climate change silliness has been developing for well over a century. The campaigners like to think they invented it but pseudo-scientists have been putting forward the theory that greenhouse gases could change the climate since the 19th century. Only the converts (the pseudoscientists who see the whole business as a way to become rich and famous) think the evidence is convincing. Independent scientists admit that there is no genuine evidence that the earth is heating up. (I was taken in during the 1970s and 1980s but I no longer accept the dubious evidence as honest.) Moreover, even if the earth were getting hotter, there is no way to know if this could be caused by burning fossil fuels. (There is actually more evidence that it is getting cooler.)

Second, the alternatives to fossil fuels are frighteningly inefficient. For example, it takes more energy to make a windmill than the windmill will ever produce. So, the more windmills we produce the more energy we waste. Wind farms and solar farms are examples of entirely pointless rural vandalism; tributes to the self-serving sanctimoniousness and rank hypocrisy of an ignorant generation.

Third, the clever alternatives to oil and the internal combustion engine are silly. Using food to make fuel (the biofuels nonsense) exacerbated the starvation problem and the Greens have condemned hundreds of thousands, probably millions, to death by campaigning for yet more food to be turned into fuel for rich people.

Fourth, electricity, though very nice and useful stuff, only provides about 20% of our energy needs. The other 80% comes from nasty old gas, oil, coal and nuclear power. And it is nigh on impossible to increase that proportion. It's impossible to power ships and aeroplanes with electricity.

Fifth, an awful lot of people rely on gas for their central heating and cooking. If all those people are forced to use electricity for heating and cooking then there is going to be a great shortage of electricity because we are already using up every drop of the stuff that we can make.

Sixth, renewables such as solar energy and wind power provide only a tiny portion of our current electricity needs. We would need to carpet the countryside with solar farms and wind farms to increase that proportion significantly. And without subsidies (paid by consumers to rich landowners) the electricity produced would be horrifically expensive.

Seventh, (and this is a real heartbreaker for the Greens), maintaining windmills and solar panels requires more energy than the windmills and solar panels actually produce. The much loved renewables are actually a negative source of electricity. For example, when there is no wind the windmills have to be turned by electricity to stop them seizing up.

Eighth, there is no evidence that it is a bad thing if the earth is getting hotter. Rising tides would be bad for people with beachfront properties in some parts of the world. But if there is more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, there will probably be more plants on the planet and then there will be less starvation. Surely we can all agree that would be a good thing?

Ninth, all the bizarre taxes forced upon by the European Union are costing a fortune. Because of subsidies paid to rich farmers operating wind farms and solar farms, ordinary people are having to pay more for their heating and many thousands more are dying in the cold weather. Is that supposed to be a good thing?

Finally, since renewables only produce electricity, we will have to survive on a source of energy which provides just 20% of our current needs. (You can't make oil or gas from windmills or solar panels).

And since renewables only provide a quarter of our electricity, we will have to survive on just 5% of the energy we use at the moment.

This is a bit of a problem because we can hardly cope on the energy supply we have now.

So, the bottom line is that we can only cope with the Green's demands if we give up: all forms of powered transport (including cars, planes and ships); all forms of entertainment which require electricity (e.g. television, radio, computers, mobile phones etc.); all forms of heating; all factories which make things; all mechanised farming and all fertilisers; all hospitals, medical treatments and all drug production.

Of course, the real bummer is that the 5% of our energy which we have left will be needed to maintain and service our solar panels and our windmills.

If there is any energy left over we may be able to boil a kettle and make a cup of hot water, though there won't be any tea leaves, milk or sugar to put in the hot water.

Welcome to the Green World.

If the Greens have their way, our planet will plunge into the biggest war of all time. The survivors will be those countries which retain fossil fuels and use them to manufacture armaments and to make and fuel bombers and tanks. The citizens of countries which decide unilaterally to rely on renewables will die. The good news is that our inability to use tractors and fertilisers will mean that most of us will starve to death, so we won't mind too much.

All this is unfashionable but it is quite accurate.

The bottom line, of course, is that the climate change myth, the allegation that the earth is hotting up or cooling down or whatever Prince Charles says it is doing this week, is simply an excuse for the introduction of the hideous and hateful global reset being planned by a bunch of crazed billionaires in order to reorganise the world to give them more power, more control and more money.

Just remember: the self-righteous and ignorant Greens are our mortal enemy.

July 19th 2020

We Are Victims of the Greatest Crime in History

I've done some unusual things in my life.

After I left school and before I went to medical school, I spent a year working as a Community Service Volunteer in a place called Kirkby, just outside Liverpool. I recruited a small army of teenagers and had them painting the flats of old folk. I drove an old Meals on Wheels van too. You may think that sounds dull but the fact that the van didn't have any brakes or lights added a little excitement. I was given about thirty bob a week pocket money as a Community Service Volunteer and so I earned a little money writing drama reviews for a local newspaper.

When I got to medical school, I carried on writing reviews and worked my way up to being a drama critic for a daily newspaper. I also ran a nightclub called The Gallows. I got paid for the reviews but the nightclub was run for a charity. It was good fun and everyone should run a nightclub once in their life.

And I used to write fictional stories for magazines.

I remember that every week the latest instalment would begin with a paragraph explaining to new readers what had happened in previous weeks. It was quite fun trying to cram the events of twelve weeks' episodes into a single paragraph. The paragraph always began with the words 'New readers start here…' though the words also helped remind regular readers what had already happened.

I don't know what reminded me of writing those stories, all those years ago when I was at medical school, and the paragraph entitled 'new readers start here', but it occurred to me yesterday that I was beginning to get a little confused about what had happened with the coronavirus hoax. And it seemed that it would be helpful to write a few words explaining the story so far. The closer you examine it, the less believable it becomes. And, in a strange way, the more believable.

So here goes.

New readers start here…

It all began sort of sometime either at the end of 2019 though no one seems entirely sure when, or even if it began at all and it seems to have started in China. It was not however, until the middle of February 2020 that people started to panic. A bloke working at Imperial College in London scared the living daylights out of millions by predicting that 600,000 people might die in the UK alone. There was talk of millions being taken ill in Britain and of hospitals all over the world being overwhelmed by sick patients.

We were about to be devastated by a plague-like illness that would devastate the world in a way not seen since the Spanish Flu a hundred years earlier.

The media led the panic, as they usually do, and within days people were cancelling holidays and panic buying toilet rolls, soap and loaves of bread. The British always buy toilet rolls, soap and loaves of bread at times of crisis. Photographs were taken of people pushing shopping trolleys piled high with loo rolls. Curiously, the people who were buying the most loo rolls didn't seem to be buying any food though you would have thought that without any of the latter there wouldn't have been much need for the former. The stock market had a nervous breakdown collapsed in a corner, as it always does at times like this, and the chap called Ferguson, who had started the excitement and who was apparently a sort of cross between a mathematician and an astrologer, was interviewed and quoted everywhere sharing his gloomy predictions. People hung on his every word and the BBC and the newspapers encouraged us to be terrified. On 28th February, I reported that we had been told that masks weren't much good.

At this point, back in February, I was puzzled by the fuss being made over what seemed to me to be no more toxic than the flu. So I decided to look a little closer.

When I looked at the figures that were available it was immediately blindingly obvious that something wasn't right. This isn't me looking through the retrospectoscope, that invaluable aid for looking backwards and seeming wise. I expressed my doubts on my website right from the start and pointed out that according to the WHO it was not unusual for 650,000 people to die of flu in a single season.

I started looking for a hidden agenda and came up with several.

On 28th February, I suggested that the virus might be being used to stop unnecessary travel, and to save oil for more important things like Prime Ministerial limousines and fighter jets or for flying Prince Charles to climate change meetings, or to soften us up for a compulsory vaccination. That web entry is in my book, *Coming Apocalypse* which was published back in April.

I was, inevitably, considered to be a lunatic.

On March 2nd I pointed out that the mortality figures which were being quoted were wrong because the authorities were only identifying the people who had the disease in a bad way. They weren't counting the thousands of people who had the disease but weren't very ill. I pointed out that if 1,000 people go to their doctor with the flu, and one patient dies then the mortality rate is 0.1% but if another 9,000 people have the flu but don't go to their doctors then the mortality rate is 0.01%.

No one seemed interested in my thoughts, apart from a few loyal website visitors, for which many thanks, and the panic continued to grow. I predicted that governments would use the crisis to create a cashless society and to get rid of old people.

It all rather reminded me of the AIDS scare. TV and newspapers were united in ignoring the facts and promoting the fear. The BMA warned us that everyone would be affected by the year 2000. I got into trouble for arguing, quite accurately, that the fear had been exaggerated by lobbyists with their own agenda.

On March 3rd 2020, I warned once again that compulsory inoculation would be coming. The panic grew and people were seen walking around with plastic boxes on their heads. Governments also appeared to panic, and in the UK the coronavirus was made a notifiable disease.

Within days, doctors everywhere were warning that old people would have to be left to die because the virus was going to kill millions and every hospital bed would be needed for young coronavirus patients. On March 7th I reported that people had been cheering at the prospect of old people dying in huge numbers. 'It will clear hospital beds,' said one commentator.

By March 14th I was still pretty much on my own among doctors in insisting that the coronavirus wasn't going to kill us all. I was reminded of bird flu and swine flu. I had dismissed the scare stories about those two diseases at the time but the authorities had made dramatic claims. The WHO had claimed that the bird flu would kill up to 150 million people. I said that was rubbish. In the end, the bird flu killed less than 500. The UK Government claimed that swine flu would kill 65,000 in 2009 and spent £500 million on medicines that had to be thrown away. Again the total number of deaths didn't reach 500. It wasn't until a little later that I discovered that those wildly inaccurate predictions had been made by Professor Ferguson of Imperial College, London – a college heavily funded by the vaccine loving Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Ferguson had also made absurdly inaccurate predictions about mad cow disease – he had predicted up to 150,000 people could die but the total was 177. And it was Imperial College which made terrible predictions about foot and mouth disease. Ferguson's forecasts, later described as severely flawed, led to six million animals being killed unnecessary and cost the UK £10 billion.

Despite knowing all this history, the governments in the UK and the USA and, indeed, much of the rest of the world, listened to Ferguson's predictions, accepted them with enthusiasm and introduced lockdowns and social distancing. It was clear at the time that governments would have done better to have ignored Ferguson and his team at Imperial College, the Eurovision song contest losers from the world of mathematical modelling, and taken advice from Bob the Builder or Postman Pat instead. The world would have been a better, safer place but possibly a less profitable one for vaccine companies.

Angry at the way people were being terrified by a disease which was clearly no more deadly than the flu, I made a video for YouTube on 18th March. I called it 'Coronavirus Scare: The Hoax of the Century'.

I've had a lot of abuse over the years, mainly from people hired by drug companies, but this time the abuse was phenomenal, deliberate and cold-blooded and I became the subject of a sneering, libellous, smear campaign so vicious that I regret making that video more than anything else I've ever done. I wonder how many people are put off speaking out because of the viciousness of the mindless, ignorant trolls and fake so-called fact checkers who hide behind stupid fake names, dribble on their keyboards, stalk the internet and attempt to smother the truth with transparent lies. In due course, I intend to identify the abusive trolls and sue them. It will be good to see them dragged into court, wheedling and whining. A little something to look forward to with relish when all this is over. They think they can remain anonymous but they're wrong and libel costs can run into millions. I've been busy with these videos but I am already close to identifying some of them. For example, the Wikipedia administrator, a self-confessed professional nerd in his early 50s who is married, with two children and who works for Dell might like to know that it is too late to put the house into his wife's name because the lawyers are coming for him. He says his wife is tolerant but I wonder if she will be quite so tolerant when they are living in a draughty tent.

I subsequently carried on making videos because I don't like being bullied by abusive thugs, because it was clearly too late to stop but mainly because I was still angry about all the lies being told and the people being unnecessarily upset. The things being done by scientists and politicians seemed to me to be egregious.

On March 19th, the public health bodies in the UK and the Advisory Committee on Dangerous Pathogens decided that the new disease should no longer be classified as a 'high consequence infectious disease'. The coronavirus was downgraded to flu level.

A couple of days after this decision, the UK Government introduced lockdowns and introduced the most oppressive Bill in British Parliamentary history. The Emergency Bill, which was 358 pages long, turned Britain into a totalitarian state and gave the Government and the police unprecedented powers. Public meetings and elections were banned and there were new powers relating to 'restrictions on use and disclosure of information'.

Curiously, even inexplicably, much the same thing happened around the world.

Following Ferguson's guidance, governments introduced lockdowns and social distancing, told the elderly they had to stay indoors, sent thousands of elderly folk out of hospitals and into care homes and cancelled operations and other procedures for millions of cancer patients.

In the UK, the public were ordered to keep six feet away from one another – presumably so that they would cheer when later told they only had to keep three feet away from one another. That's an old psychological trick. Terrify someone with something terrible and then they will rejoice when you remove the terrible and replace it with something merely awful. Brainwashing psychologists have been busy throughout this fiasco.

The disease turned out to be unique in that doctors could make a diagnosis without doing any tests or, in some cases, without even seeing their patients. The list of symptoms associated with the coronavirus grew and grew and the official line was that anyone suffering from one of those symptoms, such as a cough or a sneeze, had the disease. Thousands of patients were sent to care homes to keep hospitals empty so that nurses could learn how to dance and rehearse their clapping. In the UK, doctors got so good at misdiagnosing coronavirus that Britain soon headed the world figures for coronavirus deaths. Months ago, back in March, I pointed out that anyone who wasn't actually riddled with bullet holes was being put down as a covid-19 death and that the death totals were being exaggerated. Little did I know that even the bodies with bullet holes were being listed as covid-19 deaths. Harold Shipman, the mass murderer, would have had a wonderful time. Anyone who ever had covid-19 was put down as having died of it even if they were run over by a bus or hacked to death by a mad politician. Officially, it was impossible to recover from the disease. I suspect that the UK Government, having overegged the pudding, is now keen to reduce the total number of covid-19 deaths.

On 30th March I predicted that the lockdowns would kill 100,000 to 250,000 people in Britain. I predicted that the result would be that far more people would be killed by the lockdown policies than would die as a result of the virus. It's in my book, *Coming Apocalypse* which was published back in April. I'm not making this up. And yet I am still being widely banned – yesterday YouTube took down another of my videos – on masks.

Tragically, the UK government has now admitted that this prediction has also been proved accurate. And during the next few years, the number of deaths resulting from the closure of hospital departments will soar to unimaginable levels. Suicides, as I predicted, will soar. Indeed, they are already are. Exactly the same thing has happened in other countries. This is a global crime.

Again, I predicted this back in March.

It has also gradually become clear that the number of people who have died from covid-19 is far less than the number who regularly die from flu in the same time period. The mortality rates from covid-19 and the flu are pretty well identical. The total number alleged to have died from the coronavirus has clearly been wildly exaggerated as people with the virus have been described as dying of it. Some doctors have spoken out but most are too frightened to do so since governments have, for the first time in history, forbidden medical and nursing staff to debate or question official policies.

The coronavirus has infected around 10 million people but the flu can affect a billion people a year. This supports the point I made in March that the virus seemed less infectious than the flu. And, of course, the total number of global deaths from the coronavirus – even with the absurdly exaggerated death totals produced by putting down every death as coronavirus related – is far, far fewer than the 650,000 who can die of the flu in a single season. It is also far fewer than the 1.5 million who can die of TB in a single year – also an infectious disease.

Now that it is far too late to make any difference, governments are doing lots of testing and the testing is showing that more people have the bug. Only politicians and the brain dead could possibly be surprised at that. If you test more people – especially if you use tests which are about as reliable as Ferguson's predictions – you will find more people with it but without any symptoms. Many of those now testing positive are young, otherwise healthy individuals who are probably about as likely to die of falling downstairs as they are to die of covid-19. The R number, the rate of infection, is irrelevant. All that matters is the D number – the number of people who die. But nobody is talking about that.

And so now, as the virus becomes less virulent and appears to be disappearing, as the death rate falls dramatically, it won't be long before horse riding, or falling off horses, kills more people than the coronavirus, governments are warning of a second wave, lockdowns are being reintroduced and in the UK the wearing of masks in shops will be compulsory. When the disease was allegedly at its worst masks were considered unnecessary. But as the number dying fell, so it was felt that we needed to be kept frightened until the vaccine was ready. Masks were recommended as a good way to remind us to remain fearful – and look very silly. Anyone who saw French President Macron wearing a mask knew how silly it is possible to look – and how impossible it is to take anyone seriously when they are wearing half a bra on their face. They could have got us all to tie knots in our hankies to remind us to remain fearful but these days most people use paper tissues and it's difficult to tie a knot in a paper tissue.

And in mid-July it appeared that the virus had unprecedented powers. If you catch a disease you will usually acquire immunity. But not, it seems with covid-19. Though this claim was previously dismissed it was again announced that immunity to covid-19 mysteriously disappears after a few months. The answer, of course, will be repeated vaccinations. Maybe we will need vaccinations four times a year. Maybe we will be told we need a vaccination every month. The UK Government has so far agreed to buy 190 million doses of vaccine for a population less than a third of that. Vaccine company shares are going to soar. What a massive surprise that will be to everyone.

And that, I fear, is what it's all about. Not one vaccination. Not annual vaccinations. But vaccinations several times a year.

If the science appears to have gone mad so too are the rules, the regulations, the laws.

The rules now are unutterably stupid, incomprehensible and indefensible. If you told me they'd been written by a five-year-old donkey I'd believe you. The entire world appears to be run by people who are at least one sandwich and a bottle of fizzy pop short of a picnic. You can go into a pub but not a bowling alley. You can have your hair permed and your nails varnished but physiotherapy departments are still closed. If the idea is to keep people confused, miserable and damned near suicidal then it is all working brilliantly well.

Oh, and researchers now claim that a skin rash is another sign of covid-19. Apparently 8.8% of patients with a positive covid-19 test also have a rash. Has anyone realised that if the rash is on the individual's hands then it was probably caused by the damned sanitiser fluid that everyone is being forced to use in absurd quantities?

We are living in a manufactured nightmare.

This is either the most unlikely badly managed epidemic in the history of the world or it is, as I described it in my video made on March 18th, the hoax of the century – with hidden reasons behind what has happened.

If it is the former then we need to sack and arrest everyone involved in the decision making process. And we need to halt all the mask wearing, the social distancing nonsenses still being forced upon us.

If it is the latter then we need to sack and arrest everyone involved in the decision making process. We need to halt all the mask wearing and social distancing nonsenses still being forced upon us. And we need an independent judicial enquiry into exactly who is behind a commercial and political operation which can only be described as genocide.

Back in February, I said I thought that the hoax might be part of a plan to introduce compulsory vaccination.

One large drug company claims it expects to have made two billion doses of a vaccine by September. Will that vaccine be compulsory? What testing will have been done?

And how frequently will they tell us we must be vaccinated?

This nightmare gets more scary every day.

There are moments when I wish I were an ostrich, with my head firmly buried in the sand.

Anyone who watches this and doesn't see the truth either works for a government , and doesn't care about himself, his family or the truth, or is a dribbling, dead eyed zombie who dwells in the dark, watches BBC programmes and thinks that Bill Gates is a good, kind person who wants to save the world rather than a grinning psychopath whose plan is to gain world domination and who makes the worst James Bond baddie look like a benevolent Father Christmas.

Remember, you're not on your own.

July 20th 2020

Five Battles We Cannot Afford to Lose

The masks we are being encouraged to wear are useless. The virus goes through the mask like a wasp through chain link fencing.

So, what is the point?

Are the English being forced to wear masks because Scotland's diminutive dictator made mask wearing compulsory north of the border? Is Boris the Bullock being led by the nose by the Sturgeon woman?

When Sturgeon made mask wearing compulsory in Scotland, she created a clear division between the two countries and threatened to turn the border with England into a quarantine zone. This seemed to me to be political – and part of the Scottish Nationalists' plan to declare independence. So did Boris, desperate to prevent a split, make masks compulsory in England to keep the two countries united? Whatever next? If Sturgeon makes kilt wearing compulsory will Boris do the same? Boris likes to think of himself as Churchillian. He is more a Prime Minister in the Chamberlain mode.

Is it just to humiliate us, oppress us and take away our identity? To create fear and make us demand the new vaccine? Or is it to prepare us for the one world religion, which has long been planned?

Is it a coincidence that July 24th – the day when masks became compulsory in English shops, is the special day of St Charbel Makhluf – a monk and priest who had links with both the Christian and Muslim worlds?

When your own government and the mass media continually lies to you, nothing can be counted as impossible.

Talking of mass media, it is important to realise that the whole of the mass media is now our enemy. I have read articles arguing that the Government and its experts couldn't possibly be wrong because they are all singing from the same hymn sheet. This is such blatant nonsense that it makes me want to weep. Governments everywhere are involved in a conspiracy and they have passed laws forbidding dissent or discussion or the publication of information that doesn't fit the official line.

It is no secret, for example, that in the UK, doctors and nurses working in the NHS are forbidden to talk about anything relating to the coronavirus. All whistle blowing is now banned. Anyone who breaks this law will be fired and probably lose their licence to practice. But what a pity that doctors and nurses have failed to speak out. Any doctor or nurse who still thinks this virus is a plague, should be struck off for incompetence. Health professionals should have the guts to speak out at a time like this. And before anyone accuses me of asking others to do what I need not do, just remember that I have been viciously attacked and lied about endlessly because I have spoken out. And I would add that I have twice resigned from well-paid jobs on principle. I resigned as a GP in the early 1980s because I disapproved of having to put diagnoses on sick notes. And I resigned from a job as a newspaper columnist when my column condemning the Iraq War was censored.

Let me just give a couple of examples of how blatant the mass media has become in distorting or hiding the truth.

First, a few days ago, the British Government admitted that the number of deaths for covid-19 had been dramatically exaggerated. Anyone who had tested positive for the coronavirus and who subsequently died was officially counted as having died of the coronavirus. I've been saying this for months now but it was good to see the Government admit that the death total for coronavirus had been wildly exaggerated in order to bring the total up closer to the annual number of respiratory disease deaths. If you had the coronavirus in February and were then run over by a bus in July, you officially died of the coronavirus not the injuries caused by the bus. This was, in my view, one of the biggest news stories of the whole fiasco. I wonder how many murders were covered up that way. Dr Harold Shipman would have had a great time. But, as far as I could see, the BBC did not even mention the exaggeration on its website. The story wasn't there. The BBC did, however, have a story dismissing those who didn't want to wear a mask as 'socially obnoxious'. The BBC has given up even pretending to be fair or even handed in its reporting.

Incidentally, the BBC has a 'reality check' item on its website. If you go to that part of the website you can find a form on which you can ask the BBC to check on something that seems inaccurate or misleading. I suggest you go there and ask this question: 'How corrupt is the BBC? Has the BBC's bias become more obvious since it forged financial links with the EU and with Bill Gates?'

Second, an editorial in the *Economist* said this about Donald Trump: 'he seems to be wrong about almost everything. He has promoted a dud malaria drug, said the virus would disappear and even that 99% of cases of covid-19 are harmless'. Well, Trump was right about all those things and the *Economist* was, as it usually is, wrong about everything.

I think it is vital to swamp all mainstream media with messages reminding their readers that the mass media is often providing a biased viewpoint. Ask their readers to look at these videos to find the truth.

Whatever the truth may be I think the war we are fighting against our own governments, and their agents and manipulators, can be divided into five specific battles.

First, there is the battle against face masks. Since the WHO changed its collective mind and started recommended masks, just as infections fell, there has been massive confusion around the world as more and more politicians have followed the party line, defied the science, and made mask wearing compulsory. There is a let out in some countries such as the UK. Anyone who has a physical or mental health problem which makes mask wearing difficult can refuse to wear one. So, if you have a respiratory problem such as asthma or you suffer from anxiety when wearing a mask you are, as I understand it, legally entitled to refuse to wear one. And I don't believe you should have to tell a shop assistant or policeman precisely what your confidential health problem might be. On the other hand if you tell the police officer that you are asthmatic and will suffer if you have to wear a mask then you would presumably have a good reason to appeal against a fine whereas if you insist on not explaining your condition, you would undoubtedly still have to tell the magistrate the nature of your problem.

In the UK, children under the age of 11 don't have to wear a mask and since masks can cause hypoxia and can kill, parents who do put masks on children under 11 should, in my opinion, be arrested for child abuse. Where are the damned social workers when you need them? All sitting at home wearing six masks and with their feet in a bucket of disinfectant since the BBC (the taxpayer funded home of fake news) seems to have suggested that you can catch it through your feet.

Second, there is the battle to retain cash. I think this is absolutely crucial. If they succeed in removing cash from our society then we will all become slaves to the electronic system – easy to track and trace whatever we do and wherever we go. Implanted chips will be the next step and we will all bear a tattoo. The banks have wanted to get rid of cash for a long time and they've been closing branches and cash machines in an attempt to force us to use plastic cards. The solution is to refuse to shop in establishments which won't take cash. If you know a shop won't take cash then take a pile of purchases to the counter and then refuse to pay for them if your cash is refused. The shop will lose the sale and will have to put all the items back on the shelf. And make sure that the manager knows why you are going elsewhere.

Third, we need to make sure that social distancing is ended – particularly in schools. Parents should contact their child's school and make it clear that they do not want their child to attend a school which insists on social distancing. They should make it clear that if a school puts social distancing measures in place then they will hold the headmistress or headmaster personally responsible for any psychological damage their child might suffer. Petty bureaucrats hate being held personally accountable.

Fourth, we don't want any more lockdowns. Now that local politicians and bureaucrats have been given the authority to introduce local lockdowns, we do at least know where we need to put pressure. Contact your local councillor and make it clear that you will never vote for him or her again if lockdowns are introduced in your area. And demand that executive staff be fired if they try introducing lockdowns.

Fifth, vaccines. Why are the authorities so desperate to force a vaccine on us just to deal with a mild disease no worse than the flu? We have to make it clear that we won't accept mandatory vaccinations. We aren't going to be able to end the vaccination programme – it is far too well entrenched within the system – and the zombies will be rolling up their sleeves and holding out their arms in eagerness the minute a vaccine is available. They don't care whether it works, causes brain damage or kills them stone dead. The zombies are as desperate for the needle as heroin addicts after two days of cold turkey. If you don't want to be vaccinated then make this clear on message boards and in letters to newspapers and radio programmes. Point out that in the USA the authorities have paid out over $4 billion to vaccine injured patients. In the UK, the Government has a standard payment of £120,000 for those injured by vaccines. Why pay out all that money for vaccines which are supposed to be perfectly safe? If the authorities realise that there are many people who will not accept mandatory vaccination, in any form, then they will not try to force their damned vaccination on us.

May your God go with you in these difficult times.

July 21st 2020

How to Survive in the Lunatic Land of the Coronavirus Hoax

I'm afraid there is no point in our hoping that things are going to return to normal. They aren't. Our enemies have made their move and the war that they've started isn't going to be over in weeks or months. And make no mistake – we're in a war.

My apologies if this sounds depressing. But I can't see any point in pretending that things are going to be hunky dory in a matter of weeks. Only if we accept that we are at war will we be prepared and able to defend ourselves and to defeat the enemy. Government ministers will offer promises and assurances but it will all be fake – part of the misinformation they've been feeding us, part of the psychological operation to unsettle us with promises and disappointments.

We are living in the worst of times.

It is always difficult to say that, of course.

What about the First World War? Or the Second World War? Or the Hundred Years War? Or the American Revolution? The American Civil War? Or the plague?

All terrible times.

But there is something especially strange about these times.

Usually, when there is a war or a major conflict we know the identity of our enemy. We have leaders we can trust – well, trust a little.

But this time it is different.

Our leaders, globally, nationally and locally, are our enemy.

Ronald Reagan's greatest legacy was, for me, his remark that the most dangerous words in the world are: 'I'm from the Government and I'm here to help'. That has now matured into: 'I'm from the Government and I'm here to make your life miserable and, if possible, to kill you.'

Governments all over the world have been bought and are now controlled by global organisations such as the United Nations, the World Health Organisation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation they want to take from us everything we value – and to turn us into slaves.

In previous conflicts we could count on the military to protect us.

Not now. Today the military are the enemy. Under orders from governments which have betrayed the people, their job is to suppress the truth to protect the lies. Politicians and their advisors have lost touch with the science, the truth and reality.

And we certainly cannot rely on the media to expose dishonesty, oppression and injustice. Today the mainstream media are siding with our oppressors. They are promoting dishonesty and endorsing injustice and they have encouraged millions to become mortally afraid of death.

We may be on our own but we are not alone.

We are the guerrilla army. As someone said during the French revolution, this is not a revolt it is a revolution. And we are the resistance.

The time to prepare for bad times is when no one else is panicking. The zombies are hunkered down waiting for their vaccine but we have one huge advantage: we have some idea what is in store for us. Nothing is ever going to be as it was. For the time being the men and women in black hats, the bad guys, have taken over.

So, how can we prepare?

First, if at all possible you should try to move out of a town or city. The Agenda 21 plan is for us all to live in what they call 'smart cities'. They want us all corralled in apartment blocks because then we are easier to control. In their ideal world, we will live in flats no more than a mile away from our work. Our groceries and other purchases will be delivered and we will spend our evenings shopping, playing games and watching television programmes on the internet.

You may not earn as much if you move out of the city and change your job but your living expenses will be lower – especially if you work at home and don't have to spend a fortune travelling to work, buying smart work clothes and purchasing expensive lunches and coffee. The air you breathe will be cleaner and you will probably be able to grow some of your own vegetables. Try to become as self-sufficient as you can. The TV series 'The Good Life' is now more of a 'how to' documentary than a comedy series.

Should you move to another country? Until the dust settles it's difficult to know. One certainty is that the UK and the USA will be the worst affected by the lying, the manufactured chaos and the lethal policies of corrupt administrations. I wouldn't want to live in France, either. France has been a cauldron of dissatisfaction and unwound racial conflict for years and Macron, vain even for a politician, has made things infinitely more dangerous.

Second, prepare for problems with the utilities such as electricity and water supplies. The climate change movement is based on fake science but it's a fundamental part of the United Nations' Agenda 21. The people behind Agenda 21, the plan for a global reset and a New World Order, have been infiltrated by green self-styled environmentalists and their plans include a massive reduction in world population, a reliance on non-fossil fuels and the destruction of all aspects of capitalism. The plan is to enslave us, and the coronavirus hoax is part of the programme of control. This is practical fascism in its rawest and most dangerous incarnation. I'll explain precisely what is planned in a future video.

There are probably going to be electricity outages in the coming years. But there are many things you can do to prepare yourself. You can buy batteries, usually sold for campers, which hold a good chunk of electricity and which can be charged from the mains, when it's working, or from a portable solar panel. You should obviously also keep good torches and a supply of batteries. A camping stove and a supply of cartridges will mean that you're independent of the mains supplies for cooking. If you have an open fireplace or a log burner make sure you have a supply of fuel.

I realise that I'm beginning to sound like one of those redneck survivalists who lives in the wild and gets sneered at a good deal. But I don't care. I've been sneered at for decades and I've been right more often than any of the people doing the sneering. So yah boo sucks to them.

Our utility supplies are more fragile today than they've been for decades. This is partly due to neglect, of course, but it is also a consequence of the chaos and damage by the deliberately engineered coronavirus crime. And if you don't think the whole coronavirus crime was deliberately engineered then I'm afraid you haven't been paying attention and you must write out two hundred times 'Bill Gates is the Most Dangerous Person on the Planet'.

To protect yourself from water supplies I suggest that you lay in a supply of bottled water. Keep it out of the direct sunlight. If you can fit a water butt to a downpipe that will usually supply you with a good supply of water. Use water purification tablets or a purification cup and you can use the water you collect.

I've previously suggested that you should lay in a supply of long-dated food – rice, pasta and tinned vegetables for example. Don't rely too much on the freezer because if the electricity goes out you could be in trouble.

Next, you should lay in a supply of whatever medicines you use or may use. Your doctor is unlikely to give you more than a two or three month supply of any essential prescription medicines but you can stock up on whatever supplements and over the counter medicines you might need – dispersible aspirin tablets, antihistamine, a steroid cream, eye drops, antiseptic cream and so on. Just watch the 'use by' dates. Stock up on whatever vitamin and mineral supplements you use. Check out some of the online pharmacies. Reputable ones tend to be properly regulated. Put together a decent first aid kit and know how to use the contents. Buy enough emergency blankets for one each – just in case you have no heat in the winter. Take regular, gentle exercise.

If you need to see a doctor other than your GP, it might be wise to be vague about your age. It is not uncommon these days for patients to be refused treatment if they are over 65. So if you are over that and you accidentally knock a decade off your age don't bother to correct the error. I was now born in 1991 but I think I may have to edge that back a tad. In the UK, the NHS is already unfit for purpose. It's going to get worse and services are going to decline dramatically. GPs surgeries are pretty well closed in many parts of the country and accident and emergency departments will soon require an appointment, so we are told. Learn to take care of yourself to minimise the risk of accidents. Build up your immune system. (My book *Superbody* explains how to do that.)

Look after your teeth and visit your dentist regularly because if there is another lockdown you might not be able to see one. In the UK, there is going to be a massive shortage of NHS dentists and it's my suspicion that the Government plans to close down this part of the NHS. Free eye tests will probably disappear too. Agenda 21 means that governments won't want to spend money on the elderly, the frail or anyone with any sort of health problem. The new global reset, espoused by Prince Charles, means that every citizen must be useful to the State. So that's the end of the Royal Family.

Sanitisers in shops are a growing irritation in more ways than one. (See my video on hand sanitisers if you haven't. It's full of scary truths.)Touching a sanitiser bottle that has been handled by hundreds of dirty hands is daft. The stuff inside the bottle could be something dangerous and it may well irritate your hands and be dangerous. You can always say 'No, thank you' if an assistant suggests that you use their dispenser. Carry one of your own and fill it with something mild and non-irritating.

If you have relatives in care homes then it might be wise to move them out if possible. It is frequently cheaper to live in a hotel than a care home and if someone just needs help with cleaning, bed-making, laundry and meals a hotel will often be just as good. And there isn't the risk that a local hospital will fill the hotel with flu-ridden patients. There is going to be an increase in the average age in populations everywhere and the elderly are going to find that they are increasingly marginalised.

If you have children then it might be worthwhile looking at home schooling – especially if teachers are going to continue to behave irresponsibly. Children who go to schools where social distancing rules are in place will, in my view, grow up to be psychologically damaged.

Don't take holidays abroad while governments are still talking about quarantines. If you do then you might have to spend a fortnight in quarantine in a foreign hotel and then, on your return, have to spend another fortnight in quarantine.

Keep vehicles topped up with fuel for emergencies. Buy a bicycle or get an old one repaired.

Check that whatever investments you have are suitable for the new world. Be prepared for banks and even building societies to introduce negative interest accounts. The commercial world is going to continue to change dramatically. The United Nations plan for the new world which governments everywhere have bought involves the closure of small businesses so if you think you could be vulnerable, increase your savings. Don't take on new debts that you aren't certain you will be able to service. Unemployment is going to be high and stay high for a long, long time. Many people who have spent years acquiring skills and training will find that they have to find new skills. Computers and robots are going to take over many jobs – a lot sooner than most people realise.

Try to avoid the mass market media as much as you can. Most of it is biased, misleading prejudicial, hypocritical and downright dangerous. In my view, the BBC is the most treacherous organisation on earth – Lord Haw Haw would work for it today and Goebbels would have been proud of it.

Find local people who think as you do. Make plans to stand for your local council when, or perhaps if, the ban on elections is ever lifted. We have to take back control of our country and starting locally is the best way. We have to fight the sense of depression that has been deliberately created so that we remain strong enough to continue fighting the enemy. This is going to be a long war.

May our God go with us in these dark and difficult times.

July 22nd 2020

How They Are Lying to Enslave Us

The lies keep coming. I have never in my life seen so much misinformation being broadcast with such apparent enthusiasm. I spend much of each day trying to understand what we are being told and why.

But the mysteries arrive faster than the explanations. There is a good deal of misdirection, a good deal of exaggeration, much sleight of hand, a good deal of psychological warfare stuff and many attempts to blind us with a small part of a story; to exaggerate in order to influence.

When I was a medical student I ran a night club in the city where I was studying. The club was in a pretty rough part of the town and apart from having a DJ playing music, we showed upside down Buster Keaton films on the ceiling and occasionally mixed them up with colourful histology slides which we also projected on the ceiling. It was the histology slides which got me into trouble when the BBC mentioned them in a broadcast about the club. The medical school Dean was not amused and I acquired a large black mark as a result.

Although quite a lot of students attended the club, there was a hard core of youths who would make the roughest and toughest of today's statue toppling Black Lives Protestors look like kids on a Sunday School outing.

Most of them carried knives and weren't afraid to use them and it was, I'm afraid, a rare evening when there wasn't a large puddle of blood on the floor at the end of an evening.

Most of the time, the kids with the knives were decent enough with me and I didn't have problems with them. But then half a dozen new ones turned up and were spoiling to make their mark. They got a little feisty with their knives and although I wasn't cut, I was allowed to take an uncomfortably close look at some fairly intimidating pieces of steel.

So the next day, I went into the city centre and bought myself a stick.

It wasn't an ordinary stick, however. It was a sword stick with a long, very pointy blade hidden inside it. In those days you could buy and carry a swordstick quite legally.

The following evening, when the boys with the knives gathered around, there was much jeering at the stick I was carrying.

Until, that is, I pulled the first foot and a half of the blade out of the stick. It was, of course, a considerably larger blade than any of those the boys were carrying. This was a couple of decades before Crocodile Dundee.

The effect was instantaneous –and so was the respect.

The knives were all put away. And they never came out again.

I would never have used my sword, of course. But they didn't know that. The existence of it, and the implied threat, was enough.

It was a crude psychological trick to take control of the situation.

And that's what governments are now doing.

They are using every trick in the book to threaten us and to keep us terrified and awed. Some of the tricks are very crude. Some are fairly subtle. They're the sort of tricks used to defeat a real enemy. Our own governments are using the same sort of tricks which were used in World War II. But this time they're not using them on Nazis – they're using them on us.

And the tricks, and the lies, keep coming because they are working.

Our own governments, which are now our enemy, are doing everything they can and they are succeeding in terrifying a good chunk of the population. They are doing so, not because of the science but for political and commercial reasons.

Politicians are obeying the principles of Agenda 21 – more of which in a future video – and trying to satisfy the commercial requirements of an industry which sees a bonanza payday tantalisingly close.

Yesterday, I saw several tiny children wearing masks because their parents had obviously believed the nonsense. One child, no more than four or five-years-old, started to cry when her mask slipped. She was only comforted when the mask was replaced.

And I saw two motorists, alone in their cars, driving while wearing masks. The truth, if that is still considered acceptable, is that masks can cause hypoxia and damage brain function. It won't be long before drivers start having crashes because they are wearing masks. And why are small children being forced to wear masks? There is no scientific point to it.

Why does no one in government point out that the virus is so small that it will zoom through mask material like a fly through chicken wire?

A large car park, run by the council, was still shut but it didn't much matter because there weren't many people about. Many of the shops which should have been open were shut. Some obviously permanently and some shut because staff didn't want or dare to return to work. Coffee shops were open only for take away coffees. No one seemed to be buying. We went into a restaurant, mostly empty, and they happily served us coffees – pleased to have a couple of customers buying something.

The official estimate is that 0.03 of the population of England have the virus. Can you imagine how likely it is that you will meet someone with the virus? Or that you will catch it? Or that it will do you serious harm?

Am I the only one to see the irony in the fact that last year, in Britain, a man was fined £90 for wearing a mask while walking past a facial recognition camera put there by the police? It's odd how things have changed so quickly. Last year, Hong Kong banned masks to stifle public protests. Laws banning face coverings in public were passed in France, Belgium, Austria and Denmark. In Canada, rioters who covered their faces with masks risked ten years in jail. And in America some states have had laws banning face coverings since 1845. The laws were put in place to try to get rid of bandits.

Cressida Dick, the Police Commissioner for the Metropolitan Police in London has said that the police will only enforce the law on wearing face masks as a last resort. 'My hope,' she is quoted as saying, 'is that the vast majority of people will comply, and that people who are not complying will be shamed into complying or shamed to leave the store.'

How nice of her.

Cressida Dick should know all about shame. She was, of course, the officer who made the decision for the police to shoot a young innocent Brazilian man in 2005. Police apparently shot eleven times from close range. They managed to shoot the entirely innocent man seven times in the head and once in the shoulder.

`I think about it quite often,' Dick allegedly said last year while chatting on a BBC programme called Desert Island Discs. Quite often? Most people, I suspect, would think about it pretty well all the time.

I suspect I am not alone in thinking she should have been sacked. Instead she now has a top police job and believes that those choosing not to damage their health by wearing useless masks should be made to feel ashamed. I am not entirely sure that encouraging other shoppers to shame non mask wearers is entirely within Ms Dick's role in the police.

And does this surely damned woman (I use the word damned in its Christian sense) not realise that the Government has made it clear that people with health problems – including anxiety – do not have to wear masks? And nor do young children. Is she suggesting that these individuals, who may be fearful for many reasons, be deliberately shamed? Are the police officially suggesting that patients with respiratory and heart disease be deliberately shamed? Is Dick suggesting that those with mental health problems be shamed? So it would seem. My utter contempt for Cressida Dick is endless.

We should call en masse for her to be sacked. Write to your MP. Write to the newspapers. If you do nothing else today, do what you can to get this woman fired. She is an utter disgrace to the human race. I cannot believe it. Encouraging people to shame the sick and the frail and the anxious and the mentally ill! And shaming children!

It is said that masks are being made compulsory not to protect against an infection but to provide reassurance for people who are too terrified to go to the shops. It seems that the World Health Organisation may have reversed its view, and decided that masks are necessary, because of political pressure. From whom? Was it Gates – now about to be the WHO's main sponsor? Is the plan to keep us terrified until the vaccine is ready?

The masks are not giving confidence, of course – they are increasing the terror among the people who fear that we are living in a plague year. I shall certainly not be wearing a mask, of course.

In many of the shops which were open, there was a real sense of terror. I got stuck at one point on the wrong side of a barrier designed to keep pedestrians in two lines. I moved a barrier just enough to squeeze through and within seconds a guard had appeared from nowhere. He shouted at me and when I ignored him he started screeching excitedly into his portable radio. I have no idea what he was saying or what he thought was going to happen.

I went into several shops to try to buy a top up for my ancient mobile phone. No one would sell me one. In one shop a masked cashier, whom I could hardly hear (he was also sitting behind a plastic screen), started to sell me a top up voucher when a manager rushed over screaming 'No top ups. We don't do top ups'. Why on earth not? What did she, or her bosses, think might happen?

Anyone who talks glibly of a V shaped recovery in the economy needs to get out into the shops. I will be surprised if there are many High Street shops left in the UK by Christmas. And things are getting worse everywhere. Pensions will be devastated because many companies have stopped paying dividends. Everyone who doesn't have a job and a pension with the State will be financially disadvantaged. The State is using over £1 billion of taxpayers' money in the UK to act as a patron for the arts though it is difficult to see why the arts, and the suffering celebrities, shouldn't suffer, make do and be creative to find their way out of the manufactured crisis. Meanwhile, an estimated 250 million people around the world will lose their jobs – largely due to the lockdowns which followed Neil Ferguson's slightly hysterical in my view, and inaccurate, forecasts. The ensuing poverty will create pain and illness.

And the disappearance of High Street shops is, of course, part of the plan. This isn't paranoia. It's Agenda 21 from the United Nations. I've been reading yards of material about the plans they have for our future and to be honest it's terrified me.

This is, of course, all the part of the Global Reset. It has not been kept a secret but they've slipped the plan past most of us and they have sold it, falsely, as a solution to non-existent global warming – the second biggest scam in history and an excuse for the awful things they are planning for us.

The misdirection has been skilful. Governments have made life complicated and unpleasant and threatening in order to distract us and blind us with a threat which doesn't really exist. Doctors and nurses have been forbidden to counter the propaganda – and most have, sadly, obeyed their orders.

Governments have persuaded millions of half-wits to worry about climate change, and also racism and sexual politics of course, when these are not the main danger we face. The spoilt elitists who are trapped in their own concept of history and have energy to waste on worrying about Cecil Rhodes and so on, should try looking forwards rather than backwards.

We are heading for global slavery, organised by the United Nations, the World Health Organisation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and a bunch of unelected billionaires. The risk for our future is very real and it is a horror coming to your family and your home.

The protestors have, in my view, missed the big picture and, misled and lied to by governments everywhere, they dismiss as a conspiracy the truly frightening elements of the Global Reset they have planned for us.

I know some people won't believe any of this. It's all too much for them.

But let me leave you with one threat that you can easily check.

Part of the Global Reset is a plan to combine all religions together into a new World Religion which may or may not be called Chrislam.

Chrislam, an attempt to combine Christianity with Islam, has been around for some time, in a very quiet sort of way, but it is now progressing rapidly. Pope Francis, the first Jesuit Pope, announced that May 14th is to be World Chrislam Day and is said to have appointed 13 Chrislam friendly cardinals. Last year the Vatican released a Chrislam Logo for Pope Francis.

I wonder if it is a coincidence that churches may now be open but are not providing services.

Oh, and just put Chrislam and ex British Prime Minister Tony Blair into your search engine. Or take a look at the Tony Blair Faith Foundation and the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change.

Blair launched his Faith Foundation in 2008 to work towards global faith. Blair said then that extremists who did not want to join together would be put 'into retreat'. What did he mean by that? I don't know. But I've seen the film of him saying it.

Later, Obama got involved. And in 2012, the Vatican called for One World Order and a Global Government.

The constant excuse was that we needed a global government and a global church to protect us against climate change.

Oh and guess who can be found among Blair's list of partners.

You won't guess if we sit here all day.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

And Microsoft.

It's all there, out in the open.

The United Nations 21 plan is for a World Government (with population control near the top of its agenda). The excuse for this is climate change. The UN also says that we obviously need a World Church. It seems that individual religions will disappear into one. But what will happen to Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Methodists, Evangelical Christians, Presbytarians?

Do any of us have a say in any of this?

Before we know what has happened, the UN will have given us its World Government and its World Church – whether we like it or not.

That is what the climate change campaign was all about – preparing us for a global reset. And that is what the coronavirus nonsense is all about.

Check it out. All the information is available on the internet. I've given you all the clues you need. This is definitely, most definitely, not a conspiracy theory.

The only conspiracy is the one leading towards a World Government and a World Church.

Oh, and think about this: in 1991 the Club of Rome published a book entitled, *The First Global Revolution* in which it admitted to inventing climate change as a common enemy of mankind in order to unite the world.

It really can't get any clearer.

Finally, before I stopped receiving emails, I saw several complaining about the sound quality of these videos and, not surprisingly, offering help with new equipment and professional advice.

Well, thank you but no. I'm not interested and don't have time or energy for upgrading our top level equipment. We use my old iPad, a microphone that cost under a tenner and a cheap camera tripod and anyone who wants better sound quality will need to go and watch something else – I gather the sound quality on those videos about skateboarding hamsters is excellent.

Oh and my thanks to YouTube who have, after I protested, put back up my video entitled, 'Face Masks – Ending the Confusion'. That probably took some courage, so thank you.

July 23rd 2020

The Forces of Evil are Gathering

We older folk talk a good deal about the past, partly because there is a lot of it, and it's something we know more about, partly because it is sometimes easier to make more thoughtful comments about the past than about the present and partly because the future is now much of a foreign, unexplored land than it used to be.

The big advantage of knowing the past is that it gives us a sense of perspective and a better chance to understand where we are going.

So I want to explain how we arrived at the position where we are today – with the whole world seemingly frozen in fear of a virus which has been proven to be no more of a killer than a pretty standard annual flu bug.

In case any of you are still in any doubt about that, let me just remind you of some simple facts. You can check out all these facts quite easily by going to official websites such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States and the World Health Organisation.

First, it is not unusual for the flu to kill well over 600,000 people in a single flu season. Just check out the current death total for the coronavirus, remembering that governments are now admitting that their death totals have been wildly exaggerated. In the UK, for example, patients who tested positive for the coronavirus and then died were put down as having died of the virus – even if they were run over by a bus or battered over the head by a mad axe-man. Once you'd had the disease you could not officially recover from it. This was clearly nonsense. But it was why the total number of deaths built up.

Second, governments everywhere have been talking of the R number. This denotes the number of people who are infected by someone with the virus. But the R number isn't of any great significance. If most people who catch the virus have no or few symptoms and then get better, the disease isn't much of a threat. What really matters is the D number (you won't see that quoted anywhere I'm afraid – it is my own small invention). The D number is the number of people who die of the disease. And it has always been clear that covid-19 is no more of a killer than the flu. The death rates are much the same, and in both cases the people who are most likely to die are the ones who are already seriously ill with something else. It was always a nonsense to lock up the elderly. It was those individuals with pre-existing medical conditions who needed protecting – and this is just as true of the flu as of the coronavirus.

Third, the number of people who have so far caught the coronavirus worldwide is around 10 million. But the number who catch the flu in a pretty standard year can easily hit 1 billion. Even Neil Ferguson, the mathematical modeller who started the chaos, would have to admit that 1 billion is a bigger number than 10 million. So the flu affects more people than the coronavirus. The only reason that the number of deaths with covid-19 seems to be getting close to the total number of flu deaths in a single season is that the number of covid-19 deaths has been massively exaggerated. Let me remind you that in the UK it has been officially recognised that the official number of covid-19 deaths has been massively over-stated because of the policy of counting anyone who ever had the infection as eventually dying of it – whatever they died of. And many people who had flu symptoms were counted as covid-19 deaths. It is also important to remember that total deaths for many countries are just about what they would be in any other year – in some areas fewer people have died this year than died last year for example.

So, what is this all about?

Why have nations around the world deliberately over-stated the threat of a bug which is, it is perfectly clear, no more of a danger than the flu. Why were millions put under house arrest and hospital departments closed? Why have economies everywhere been destroyed?

Well, I don't think it was some sort of global hysteria. I don't think governments everywhere suddenly went pottier than they usually area. And I don't think lots of people made the same mistake in many different countries.

I'm afraid it was, and is, part of a plan.

Malevolent individuals have for centuries dreamt of controlling the world. But their plans have always failed – usually because one mad individual doesn't usually live long enough to see their plans through to fruition.

That isn't to say that there have not been some successes. Mao Tse Tung, Stalin and Hitler all wanted to break down traditional connections so that they could rebuild society and create global citizens. But only China's plan proved really effective – and it was localised to China.

This time, as they say, it is different. This time the takeover of the world involves a good many people and although they have many different aims, they have all taken full advantage of this pre-planned pandemic to further their own ambitions. I know this sounds like a conspiracy theory and if any of you aren't already aware of what is happening then I can only ask you to be patient and to trust me. Unless I am writing fiction I don't make stuff up – though there are inevitably all sorts of lies around on the internet these days. I've dealt with some of the most egregious on my website.

It is difficult to see precisely where everything started but things speeded up when the United Nations got involved, and I think and the first signs of what is happening now may have appeared in 1976 when the UN decided that at some point all private property should be controlled by the United Nations itself.

In the decade or so that followed specific changes were made to education. Instead of teaching children the old-fashioned way, and teaching them to think for themselves, education was redirected and the purpose became to train young people so that they would be useful to society, and to teach them that individualism, and the family, were less important than collectivism.

Anyone who has seen how the teaching syllabus has changed will understand how effective this has been. Children aren't taught real history any more – they are taught a version of history which supports the idea of global living. Nationalism and patriotism have become dirty words and children have been taught to feel guilty for the alleged sins of their ancestors. Colonialism and empire are linked to slavery. For decades now we have been moving slowly towards the idea of social credit for human value. I'll discuss this in a future video but this concept is already alive and thriving in China where individuals get points if they are good citizens and have points deducted if they misbehave. Your rights are then adjusted according to the status of your social credit.

One big move appears to have taken place at a United Nations conference held in Brazil in 1992. The conference seems to have been pretty much under the influence of a variety of powerful groups – the Bilderbergers, the Club of Rome, the Rothschilds, the Rockefellers, the Jesuits and so on. This wasn't a one man plan. For example, it is important to remember that Bill Gates – the number one villain to many was still flogging software in the 1990s. The changes that are now taking place so rapidly were begun when Bill Gates was still running Microsoft – and doing so fairly ruthlessly. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation did not exist. At least not publicly.

The ultimate aim was to end national sovereignty, to break down existing, traditional borders and to then restrict movement, to create human settlement zones, to further dumb down education and to set in place actions which would lead to mass global depopulation.

It was, of course, all about power, control and money.

The people who wanted to change the world realised, of course, that they needed something to drive their plan forwards. They needed to start a major panic that they could gradually build up into a fear which would provide an excuse for the changes they wanted to make.

And they decided that they would build their new world order upon climate change – they deliberately created the myth of man-made global warming, carbon taxes and so on. They used the idea of protecting the environment to bring in central global control of all land, private property, energy supplies, production and distribution of food and the control of people.

As I have explained in a previous video, climate change was nothing new even back in the 1990s. The theory had been around since the 19th century and it was always considered pretty potty and nonsensical.

But things really got started in 1991 when the Club of Rome published a book entitled *The First Global Revolution* in which it was boasted that climate change had been invented as a common enemy of mankind in order to unite the world – and thereby bring about the changes required for a world government and a world church.

Everything that has happened in the last thirty years has been a result of that.

And now you understand why so many large corporations and government leaders have, contrary to what you might expect, suddenly become wildly enthusiastic about climate change, global warming, global cooling and whatever else seems fashionable.

People who had never previously shown any interest in environmentalism have suddenly started giving huge amounts of money to green groups and to climate change organisations.

Huge banks and investment groups and hedge funds fell over themselves to line up behind a little Swedish girl who played truant from school and became a figure head for the new global state – though I'm not sure that's what she thought.

The children who had been indoctrinated into believing that the end of the world was just around the corner doubtless believed what they had been told.

In fact, of course, the end of the world as we know it was just around the corner but it wasn't anything to do with climate change. The climate change nonsense was pseudo-scientific gobbledegook that didn't really stand up to examination. People like Prince Charles were brought on board to give the whole thing an air of respectability. The real power brokers did their best to stay in the background.

The fact is that climate change was merely the trigger that would prepare us for the huge changes that the power and money hungry wanted to make.

And they have managed the climate change scare skilfully and with great success.

But climate change wasn't moving things fast enough.

The United Nations, and those who control it, have a plan called Agenda 21 and they have a number of subsidiary plans – such as Agenda 2030 – which need things to move faster. Agenda 21 is a conspiracy for world domination. It is nothing less than a coup.

Many of those who are overseeing the crisis which has been deliberately managed are old. It is fair to assume that they want to speed things up so that they can see some results in their lifetime.

And so we now have a plandemic: the coronavirus hoax; the scare story; the biggest crime in human history. And the associated manipulations.

Fear has been created globally. Governments everywhere are using psychological warfare tricks to control their populations – if you haven't seen it take a look at my video on brainwashing. The nonsenses about social distancing and masks are deliberately confusing. We are living in a world where our own governments are using psy-op techniques against us. We are being taught and encouraged to distrust our neighbours. We have been deliberately separated from our friends and our families in order to break our spirit and make us accept whatever they force upon us next.

Naturally, as I said back in February and again in my first video 'The Coronavirus Hoax', one of the main aims is to trick us into accepting a mandatory vaccination. As yet I have no certain idea why. But I have some theories. And none of them is very nice.

So, that's the basic story; that's a précis of what has happened and why.

July 24th 2020

Vaccination Challenge

Here's a strange thing.

There have, in recent years, been a good many headlines about the dangers posed by kitchen appliances such as refrigerators and tumble dryers.

Newspapers have been full of stories of fridges and dryers suddenly bursting into flames for no good reason at all. There have been headlines, enquiries and questions galore – and manufacturers have been forced to issue recall notices and provide modifications. Consumer magazines have had a field day with reports and scary stories.

There was a story last year that in the UK, half a million owners of tumble dryers were urged to unplug their appliances. One manufacturer who had sold five and a half million appliances was reported to have been responsible for a fault which had caused 750 fires over an 11 year period.

In numerical terms some probably thought the risks seemed to be fairly small – approximately 1 in 7,500 appliances sold.

But that was rightly considered unacceptable.

Now, what I don't understand is that the people who regarded that sort of risk to be a scandal and an outrage and a subject for thousands of column inches of carefully crafted indignation in the press, have not been in the slightest bit concerned by the risks involved in vaccination programmes.

Indeed, the people promoting vaccines never talk about risks at all. They admit that there might be some discomfort, a headache, a fever and so on.

But they don't talk about the big risks: the risk that a patient could be killed or severely brain damaged by a vaccination. Let's put aside the autism risk – which, for some inexplicable reason, seems to drive pro-vaxx defenders into a state of incoherent rage – and concentrate on the risk of death and brain damage.

And here is the surprise: the risks with vaccines aren't particularly small.

The serious risks with some vaccines are, of course, fairly low – around one in 100,000 for example.

But the risks with other vaccines are known to be much higher – one in 20,000 or one in 10,000 even.

The figure of 1 in 10,000 for a future vaccine for the coronavirus was mentioned by Bill Gates in an interview in which he said that if seven billion people were, as he planned, given a new coronavirus vaccine then 700,000 people might be damaged.

And with a vaccine, we aren't talking about a need to repaint the kitchen – as might happen after a tumble dryer fire. You can't put vaccine damage right with a few pots of paint, a brush and a new set of curtains.

A paper published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported that seizures occur in about 1 in 640 children with one popular childhood vaccination.

The problems with vaccines are, I repeat, often dismissed as inconvenient symptoms.

But with vaccine damage we can be talking about severe brain damage requiring life-long care. And we're talking about the ultimate side effect – one that none of the pro-vaxxers ever likes to talk about – death.

If you think I am making this up, just ask yourself why the American Government has paid out over $4 billion as a result of vaccine injuries. In the UK, the Government has a standard fee of £120,000 for damage caused by some vaccines. And in the past it has paid out large amounts of money to people damaged by vaccines. And remember that most patients, and their relatives, never make a claim because no one ever admits that the brain damage or the death was caused by a vaccine.

In America, the CDC states that the Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System receives reports for only a small fraction of adverse events. The quoted figure is that approximately 40 cases of death and permanent injury a year are reported for the MMR vaccine alone but it has been estimated that as few as 1% of serious side effects from medical products are reported. Doctors don't tend to report suspected side effects however serious they are – usually because they are frightened of being sued but also because they don't like to face the fact that a product they have recommended has done so much harm.

Check it out. Do a little research. Ask your political representative – though you may have to wait a while to get a straight answer.

How much fuss do you think journalists and parents would make if it were reported that if a brand of tumble dryer killed or permanently injured 40 children a year?

But journalists concentrate on demonising anyone who dares to suggest that there might, conceivably, perhaps be more problems with vaccinations than is generally accepted. In a number of countries there has been talk of making it an act of terrorism even to mention the fact that vaccines might cause problems.

It is, perhaps, not surprising that Mr Gates has insisted that the manufacturers of any new vaccine against the coronavirus be provided with legal immunity.

If something goes wrong with a vaccine, the manufacturers will be safe. If you haven't already seen it then I urge you to watch my video entitled, 'Would you trust these people with your life?' If you're not terrified, appalled and angry when you've watched it then nothing will ever terrify, appal and anger you.

The bottom line is that the risks with some vaccines are considerably greater than the risk of a fridge or a tumble dryer catching fire.

Why aren't parents and journalists demanding answers and information?

Why are so many pro-vaxxers content to remain ignorant and supine?

And there is another problem that dramatically affects the risk.

Most people only have one tumble dryer or one fridge.

But children these days are given dozens of vaccines – one after the other. Vaccine schedules vary from country to country but by the time they're 12, most children will have had a couple of dozen vaccinations. Each one with its own risk.

And there is another hazard.

No one, as far as I have ever been able to find out, has ever done any research to find out how all these different vaccines inter-react in the human body. What do they all do to the immune system? Your guess is as good as anyone else's. No long-term studies are done. No long-term safety tests are done. If they have been done then they seem to have been kept secret – which seems unlikely.

Now, some of the pro-vaxxers will doubtless say that none of this matters because vaccines protect individuals from disease – and save lives.

Well, I am afraid that too seems to be rather doubtful.

The facts show that many vaccinations fail to provide protection for a good many of the people who are vaccinated.

So why on earth are vaccinations so popular? Why are so many otherwise apparently intelligent people so trusting and downright stupid when it comes to vaccines? Are they all just gullible? Rabid? Mad? Or just fanatics who like needles? I honestly don't understand.

But drug companies make billions out of selling them, doctors make tens of thousands each out of giving them, and pro-vaxxers such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have strewn money about among journalists and a huge variety of apparently independent bodies.

But putting all that to one side, the other reason for giving vaccinations is to provide herd immunity.

Now, the phrase 'herd immunity' has been used a great deal in the last few months. People who have never heard it before now put it into just about every sentence they utter.

Herd immunity simply means that a high number of people in a community have had an infection, or been vaccinated against it, and are therefore considered immune.

If a lot of people are vaccinated, and they acquire immunity to a disease, then there will be fewer cases of that disease in that community.

Not every individual will be protected against disease – because vaccines don't always work.

And some individuals will be damaged because of vaccines.

But the economy will benefit because fewer people will become ill. Money will be saved because less money will be spent on looking after people in hospital. Fewer people will need to take time off work to look after relatives who are ill. That's the theory and it works as long as there are not more people damaged by the vaccine than are saved.

So the main pro-vaxxer argument is money.

Vaccination costs a good deal of money and kills or injuries some people but it's cost effective.

I am not saying that vaccines shouldn't be given.

I am simply saying that we need more information, we need more testing and we need more truth.

The idea that seven billion people are to be given a new vaccine – when there cannot possibly have been any long-term tests done – terrifies me.

What long-term effects might there be? Could a new vaccine cause cancer? Could it affect fertility?

I have, over the years, offered to debate the issue of vaccination with successive Chief Medical Officers in the UK – live on national television.

The offer has sadly always been met with silence.

So, since that clearly is not going to happen I would now like to talk to or interview the politician at the head of the UK's vaccination programme – Matt Hancock.

Being a politician, Mr Hancock likes being on television. I hate it and don't want to do it. If someone else would like to make the challenge that would suit me fine.

Television companies like good ratings.

Wouldn't this make a worthwhile programme?

I or someone else will simply ask Mr Hancock some simple questions and he could give all the points in favour of vaccination. We could debate the issue and talk about safety and effectiveness. The programme has to be live – not pre-recorded – and it has to be national so that everyone can see it.

I would, for example, like to know why Hancock is so keen to have everyone given a new vaccine when at least 80% of those dying from covid-19 appear to be over 80-years-old and to have many other illnesses. Why, when governments don't seem to care overmuch about the elderly to put it politely, is he so desperately keen to introduce an untried vaccine to protect a small group of people who are usually ignored? The UK Government used the Liverpool Care Pathway to kill off the elderly by starving them and depriving them of fluids. And now they want to vaccinate everyone in the country in order to protect the over 80s? I don't understand.

I'm honestly keen to know what is going on.

And in the US, maybe Dr Fauci would allow someone to interview him live on television – and to debate vaccination with him.

In no other area of life, apart from some areas of national security, is public debate regarded as unacceptable.

Today, it seems that we are back in the days when debate was banned. We have drifted back to the sort of times when Snow, Semmelweiss and Paracelsus were met with dangerous opposition when they dared to question the unquestionable.

Mr Hancock is a fervent supporter of vaccination why wouldn't he want to defend his position on television?

And the public could then decide for themselves.

I'm prepared to put my reputation on the line.

Is Mr Hancock prepared to put his reputation on the line and to defend a vaccine which, it is proposed, will be given to everyone?

If not – why not?

Meanwhile, might I suggest that those reading this might like to include a note on all articles about vaccination in the national press.

Simply ask: if vaccines are so safe, why have governments paid out millions to patients injured by them.

If a tumble dryer manufacturer had paid out over $4 billion in damages wouldn't people want to know why and what for?

Two final small points:

First, I use thousands of books and scientific articles to prepare these short videos. They take every minute of the day. If I were to list all the references for each video there would be only one video a week at most. But the sources aren't difficult to find especially now that the internet exists. Just find reputable sources and don't use the BBC.

Second, I am afraid that there is no longer any available email address for me. So please don't try sending emails. Up to 3,000 people a day were trying to contact me with abuse, questions and comments – and I cannot make videos and reply to emails. If Mr Hancock accepts my challenge then he can simply say so at one of his many press conferences.

July 25th 2020

The Satanic Wars Have Started

We went round the shops when the mask law came in and what a miserable bloody experience it was.

We didn’t wear masks, of course, and we had relatively little trouble with shop keepers but we had more than enough trouble from sanctimonious, holier than thou customers who had probably been inspired by the ‘shame your neighbour’ rhetoric from Cressida Dick, a senior policewoman. If they had been on bicycles they would have doubtless worn helmets with little cameras fitted to them. They listened with surprise when I explained the facts about viruses and masks and mosquitoes and chicken-wire fencing.

I confess that I have never been good with rules. It’s something genetic and I can’t help it. At school I was always in trouble. Not for fighting but just for refusing to obey the rules. I volunteered for the army cadet force because it was compulsory, and on Fridays we had to wear a horribly itchy brown uniform and parade in the playground. It was raining one Friday so I put my blue gabardine raincoat on top of my uniform. I was shouted at by the sergeant major and made to sit in a warm classroom and read a book. It was a valuable lesson.

On another occasion we went out on an initiative test. We were dropped in a village miles from anywhere and told to answer 20 questions on a sheet of paper we were given. I stopped off at the village shop, bought a bottle of pop and a bag of something bad for me and the lady behind the counter answered all the questions for me. I then sat in a wood and watched the squirrels. I was the only one to get all 20 correct answers and the major in charge asked me why the answers on my sheet of paper were in such neat, feminine writing. I told him the truth. He was very angry. I reminded him that it was an initiative test but I got another black mark and was thrown out of the cadet force. I then had to spend every Friday afternoon sitting in the classroom reading a book. They knew how to punish someone at my school.

When I arrived at university, they told me I had to join the National Union of Students. I said I didn’t want to. I didn’t know anything about the National Union of Students but I didn’t want to join because they said I had to. I quoted some human rights legislation I managed to find and they had to let me not join. It caused chaos for months.

When I went for my first hospital job, an accountant told me that the cost of my board and lodging would be deducted from my first pay cheque. I told them I preferred to give them a cheque. They said they wouldn’t do that. I said I’d go home then. They had to reorganise their accounts system.

I’ve resigned from just about every club I’ve ever been in and every job I’ve ever had. Always on a matter of principle.

I tell you all this not out of shame or pride but just to explain why I feel comfortable going the wrong way in supermarkets when they have arrows pasted on the floor. I don’t think I’ve ever gone through a customs post without having an argument with someone and they can be nasty. I can’t help myself.

So, we went to the shops the other day and I exchanged words with just about everyone I saw. On the whole it wasn’t the staff who were the trouble. With two exceptions they didn’t seem to give a damn.

‘Where’s your mask?’ asked one sales assistant.

‘I haven’t got one on,’ I replied with simple honesty, though I did think of saying I was wearing one of the new invisible masks.

‘Are you exempt?’

I said I was.

‘What’s your health problem?’ she demanded.

I told her I thought the question was impertinent and irrelevant and intrusive. Shades of Perry Mason.

‘Are you planning to discriminate against me because I have a disability?’ I asked politely.

‘Shall I put down asthma?’ she asked. ‘That’s the usual one.’

And so I think she wrote asthma on her bit of paper.

The next time an assistant asked why I wasn’t wearing a mask I said that I was a homicidal psychopath and that my psychiatrist had told me that wearing a mask might trigger an attack.

‘But I’ll wear a mask if you insist,’ I said sweetly.

‘Oh no, that’s not necessary,’ said the assistant very quickly.

On the whole, it was the other customers who demanded to know where our masks were. I took the opportunity on each occasion to explain why masks are useless and dangerous and why our government is untrustworthy.

My only other strange experience was on the pavement outside the greengrocers.

‘Are you waiting to go in?’ asked a young man.

‘They say they’re full and I have to wait for someone to leave,’ I pointed out.

‘Why?’ asked the young man, not entirely without reason.

‘It’s the floor,’ I told him. ‘It’s weak and they’re worried that if too many people go in at once it will collapse and deposit everyone in the cellar.’

‘Gosh,’ he said. ‘That’s terrible.’

Then, after a pause, he grinned at me. 'I'm very gullible aren't I,' he said.

I told him I had an old lawn mower I could let him have very cheaply. 'It's an antique and probably worth thousands.'

'You can't catch me twice,' he said with an even bigger grin.

It's all very silly.

But it was depressing to see so many people making themselves even more stupid by wearing masks. I saw one young fellow trying to eat a piece of cake with his mask on. He was stuffing bits of cake round the side of the mask. We saw a woman in a mask which matched her blouse. That depressed me. Wearing a mask as a fashion item is akin to slaves wearing Christian Dior outfits while picking cotton.

I saw a bookshop which had a table across the doorway with a notice saying that all customers must use the sanitiser and wear a mask. There were no customers in the shop. I thought about covering my hands with sticky sanitiser and then going into the shop and handling all the books. But I couldn't go in because I wasn't wearing my badge of shame, indoctrination and subservience. A bookshop, for heaven's sake.

In one small shop someone had stuck arrows on the floor to tell us which way to go. Naturally, I went the wrong way. A masked woman, who looked like the Lone Ranger's auntie Flo, had a mild attack of hysterics and jumped sideways into a chocolate biscuit display. One has to take one's amusement where one can these days. We can have no mercy for those who have betrayed us.

A department store refused to take cash printed by the Bank of England so I walked out without buying anything and told an assistant to tell the manager that I had spent thousands of pounds in the establishment over the years but would not patronise them again until they reversed their policy over cash.

At a supermarket, they had a huge poster telling me to be a local hero by wearing a mask. It made me want to weep. Be a slave to terrorism and you are a hero.

Terrorism?

My personal definition of terrorism is 'politics by intimidation without moral restrictions'.

And if you stop and think about it for a moment you will, I think, see that we are all currently victims of terrorism being organised by our own governments and paid for by us.

In the UK our government, which exists to serve the people, is employing the 77th brigade of the British army, which we pay for, to suppress the truth and stifle debate. How can this be legal, let alone morally defensible?

Our lives have been taken over, and are being managed in minute detail, by professional experts in wartime manipulative techniques. The laws we must obey have no basis in reality and are so extraordinarily confusing that no one can understand them. The confusion is, of course, deliberate. The virus is known to affect the frail, the sick and the chronically ill but under the law the elderly were kept prisoner, even though they might have been as fit as fiddles, whereas many of the frail, the sick and the chronically ill were all allowed out as long as they didn't have a picnic or go bowling.

We are put under house arrest, for no logical reason, at the whim of the Government, and kept there until we are allowed out. But when we are allowed out we must keep our distance and we must walk carefully and avoid the cracks in the pavement. We must wear masks if we go into a shop or bank or restaurant but not if we go into an office. We should wear masks in our own homes but only downstairs since the virus doesn't like heights and won't go upstairs. If we go into a department store we must wear masks on the ground floor and in the lifts but not in the restaurant, if there is one or on the higher floors, if there are any.

You can stay in a caravan as long as it is more than 18 feet long and only two people at a time can travel in a car which is under 14 feet long. Swimmers must wear masks unless they are drowning. People must not share a mask unless they have been married for at least five years.

In stores the staff do not have to wear masks but the customers must but in restaurants the staff must wear masks but the customers do not have to. If someone goes into a takeaway wearing a mask they must take their food outside to eat it but if they enter not wearing a mask then they can eat food while sitting at a table. We must not talk to friends, sing or do anything that looks like fun. We can play tennis or cricket with one friend as long as the ball we use is wiped with a disinfectant wipe for 30 seconds every time it is handled. If we are professional sports persons, we can play our sport as long as no one watches us. We can enter a place of worship if it is open, as long as we wear a mask and maintain social distancing, but there will be no services, no public worshipping and definitely no singing. We can go into a pub as long as we sit quietly and order our drinks by using our mobile phones, sit quietly at our table and give all our personal details to the person at the door. We cannot play pool, darts or dominoes or take part in quizzes. There can be no live music and we must not approach the bar at any time or for any reason. We can leave our table only to visit the loo and then only after the loo has been thoroughly cleansed and sanitised. We can have our hair cut and our nails polished but hospital physiotherapy departments are still closed. We can visit a dentist if we can find one which is open but we cannot have our teeth filled, so anything aching or painful must be removed. We can go out into the streets to demonstrate for politically acceptable views but we cannot go out into the streets to demonstrate for or against the laws which prevent us leaving our homes. Social distancing laws and laws about wearing masks can be ignored if we are protesting about issues which have been endorsed by left wing politicians but not if we are protesting or campaigning about issues which have been endorsed by right wing politicians. We cannot have picnics with friends or relatives if the picnic is held on the beach, in the park or in our own gardens but we may eat by ourselves in our own homes though we may not go shopping to buy food unless we wear masks. We can jog in a park but we cannot sit on a bench to rest if we are tired. We can have sex indoors with a professional sex worker but if we have sex with a fiancé we must make sure we do it under a blanket and in a garden.

Can you spot which of that is real and which I made up? I'm not sure I can. Nothing makes any sense any more.

We are constantly being warned that there is worse to come. The coronavirus is about to mutate. When it does then it will become far more dangerous. A completely new virus is about to leap from pigs or bats or some other creature and it will kill millions, hundreds of millions or possibly billions. Those who have had the virus do not have permanent immunity and so regular vaccinations will be essential. Next winter's flu is going to be worse than usual. They have said there is going to be much flooding and no doubt when the floods go down there will be massive fires. All this is our fault because we put up too many statues to the wrong sort of people.

We are paying our government and our civil servants to terrorise us.

In the thrall of Satan they and their acolytes are everywhere.

Our world is upside down and it is impossible to guess what will come next.

But meanwhile you and I must continue to aggravate the traitors and the collaborators. It is a war and we are the resistance.

July 26th 2020

BBC Fact Checking Investigated

The other day the BBC's website carried an article entitled: 'Coronavirus: Deadly masks claims debunked'.

The article had two authors with additional reporting by five others. Only the BBC would have seven people writing one fairly short article. Their collective aim was to investigate what they called false and misleading claims about the health risks of face masks being shared on social media.

Their first target was the claim that masks deprive your body of oxygen and, surprise surprise, their verdict was this was a false claim.

They quote someone called Professor Keith Neal, described as infectious diseases expert, who says that 'thin paper or cloth masks will not lead to hypoxia'. Professor Neal is reported elsewhere to think that masks or, rather, face coverings may need to be worn indoors.

And they quote the WHO, where the latest view is that 'the prolonged use of medical masks when properly worn does not cause carbon dioxide intoxication nor oxygen deficiency'. That view, of course, may have changed by the time I finish this sentence.

And that appears to be it.

One professor and the WHO – a body which I don't think I am alone in thinking is about as reliable on health issues as the members of the Goon Show or the Marx Brothers.

The BBC comes to their debunking conclusion without actually quoting any research.

Now, I'm sorry children at the BBC, but if you are going to debunk something you need some proper research.

What about, for example, the fact that the British Government has stated that citizens don't have to wear masks if they have respiratory problems of any kind.

Why would they say that if masks didn't make breathing more difficult?

Breathing, I should perhaps explain to the BBC, involves breathing in oxygen and breathing out carbon dioxide. It's a natural process – oxygen in and carbon dioxide out.

And what about the fact that two school boys who were wearing face masks while running on a track both collapsed and died? It was surmised that this was probably because the strain on their hearts by the shortage of oxygen proved fatal. And what about the picture which appeared on the internet the other day and which showed a lady collapsed in the street with her face mask pulled down from over her mouth and nose.

More significantly, what about the study, involving 53 surgeons, which showed that the longer a mask was worn the greater the fall in blood oxygen levels. It was concluded that this may lead to the individual passing out and it may also affect natural immunity – thereby increasing the risk of infection. It has been reported that an N95 mask can reduce blood oxygenation by as much as 20% and this can lead to a loss of consciousness. Naturally, this can be dangerous for drivers, for pedestrians or for people standing up.

The BBC could have done their own research by buying an oxymeter and a mask. Not scientific but nevertheless revealing.

And there was the study of 212 mask wearing healthcare workers which showed that a third of them developed headaches with 60% needing painkillers to relieve the headache. Some of the headaches were thought to be caused by an increase in the amount of carbon dioxide in the blood or a reduction in the amount of oxygen in the blood.

Another study, this time of 159 young health workers showed that 81% developed headaches after wearing facemasks – so much so that their work was affected.

Sadly, the seven writers working for the BBC didn't quote any of these. Who wants boring research papers cluttering up a debunking?

Never mind, how did the BBC do with their second debunking?

This time their target was the claim that masks can cause carbon dioxide poisoning. Their verdict was there was no evidence to support this claim.

Once again they relied on good old Professor Neal who said that carbon dioxide wouldn't be trapped unless you wear a tight fitting mask – which is, incidentally, the type officially recommended. If your mask is all loose and floppy then it will be pretty pointless. Not that masks aren't pretty pointless anyway.

And, er, that seems to be it.

Good old Professor Neal.

However, the fact is that anyone who has a breathing problem will find that a mask makes it worse. It makes sense that some of the carbon dioxide which is breathed out with each exhalation is then breathed in because it is trapped. The problem is that the mask wearer may breathe more frequently or more deeply and if that happens then someone who has the coronavirus may end up breathing more of the virus into their lungs. If a mask is contaminated because it has been worn for too long then the risks are even greater. How long is too long? No one knows. No research has been done as far as I know.

The BBC's third attempt to debunk a claim concerned the claim that masks harm the immune system. I was not surprised to see that the BBC concluded that there was no evidence to support this claim.

Once again the BBC's seven writers and fact checkers relied on Professor Neal who said that 'masks may stop germs getting into your mouth or nose so your immune system doesn't have to kick in, but this doesn't mean it is being suppressed'.

Really?

Well, I hate to disagree with the BBC and their one and only outside expert, but if people wear face masks for long periods (months or years) then the absence of contact with the real world might well in my view have a harmful effect on immunity.

Do face masks prevent us developing immunity to particular diseases? This depends on many factors – mainly the effectiveness of the face mask. But in my view if the mask isn't preventing the development of immunity then it probably isn't worth wearing. Not that it's worth wearing anyway. Also there is a risk that the accumulation of the virus in the fabric of the mask may increase the amount of the virus being breathed in. This might then defeat the body's immune response and cause an increase in infections – other infections, not just the coronavirus.

I'm not alone in being concerned about all this. Dr Russell Blaylock, a retired neurosurgeon, reported that wearing a face mask can produce a number of problems varying from headaches to hypercapnia (a condition in which excess carbon dioxide accumulates in the body) and that the problems can include life threatening complications.

Oh, and in New Hampshire, a driver passed out and crashed while wearing a face mask for several hours. The police reported that the driver passed out due to insufficient oxygen intake and excessive carbon dioxide intake.'

And here's something else, from the *British Medical Journal*: 'Face masks make breathing more difficult. For people with COPD, face masks are in fact intolerable to wear as they worsen their breathlessness. Moreover a fraction of carbon dioxide previously exhaled is inhaled at each respiratory cycle. Those two phenomena increase breathing frequency and deepness, and hence they increase the amount of inhaled and exhaled air. This may worsen the burden of covid-19 if infected people wearing masks spread more contaminated air. This may also worsen the clinical condition of infected people if the enhanced breathing pushes the viral load down into their lungs.'

So I think I've got more research on my side than the BBC has managed to dig up.

Sadly, and with great regret, my conclusion is that the BBC is once again wrong, and spreading false comfort which could, in my opinion, be dangerous and potentially deadly.

Their researchers, in my view, really need to look for more than one source.

And, children of the BBC, it is always a good idea to look for a few scientific papers and bits of research to back up your opinions. Ringing up one bloke for a quote isn't really doing your research. The fact is that sadly, not much research has been done into mask wearing. But there is some. Maybe next time you plan on doing a little fact checking you should ask a grown-up to help you.

Please send your complaints to the BBC – which has known financial links with the British Government, the European Union and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

And if you want the real facts about wearing masks look at my two videos entitled 'Face Masks: Ending the Confusion' and 'Masks (part 2) – The Reasons They Want Us to Wear Them'.

YouTube took down the first of my mask videos but when I protested that it contained nothing but real facts, and that taking it down was a political act, they kindly put it back up.

Oddly, I suspect that the BBC's team of researchers didn't look at my videos or my website. What a surprise that was. I was terribly disappointed and quite shocked.

Finally, once again, my researches show that the BBC is unreliable in my view. If this article had been written by primary school children for a school newspaper I would have given the seven authors 7 out of 100 – for spelling their own names correctly. (I am rashly and magnanimously assuming that they managed this.)

I firmly recommend that if you are British, you avoid giving any money to this terrible and untrustworthy organisation.

You must not do this illegally, of course.

The basic rule, as I understand it, is that you must have a TV licence in the UK if you watch, record or otherwise consume live television. If you don't watch live television then you don't seem to need a licence. I have no idea what streaming is but if you start doing it before a programme ends you need a licence but if you start streaming after a programme has ended you don't need a licence. I checked all that with an article in a rag called, *The Guardian* because I thought that *The Guardian* would not be rotten about the BBC – after all they both have links with Bill and Melinda.

I wish I could stop paying the BBC licence fee myself.

Sadly, I can't do this because I haven't paid the BBC licence fee for years.

July 27th 2020

It’s Our Bloody Country – and We Want it Back

So, who are the people who seem now to be running our lives and our world?

I have made a list of some of the people who would go onto my personal list of the most dangerous people on the planet: the folk who I wouldn’t like to have round to dinner, if I were the sort of person who liked having strangers round to dinner which I am afraid I am not.

Well, first of course is our self-appointed medical expert Mr Gates, who has more fingers in more pies than anyone would have thought possible for anyone with the normal number of fingers. The other day we asked our TV set if Bill Gates is a psychopath. The answer, from the voice inside the TV was: ‘On Wikipedia he is referred to as a pure psychopath.’ That was our TV set’s opinion not mine but what can you say. It seems that even TV sets have a view on Mr Gates these days.

If there is something nasty and threatening going on anywhere in the world the chances are high that Gates has invested in it.

Gates has been funding scientists at Harvard who are trying to block out the sun’s rays in an attempt to stop global warming.

If you haven’t heard of this before just stop and think for a moment.

The scientists want to spray millions of tons of dust into the stratosphere to stop the sun’s rays reaching the earth.

One plan is that every day more than 800 large aircraft would lift millions of tons of chalk dust to a height of 12 miles above the Earth and then sprinkle the dust to stop the sun’s rays getting through. Another plan is to send up hot air balloons to release powder into the atmosphere.

There are, you won’t be surprised to hear, a couple of problems with this.

Obviously, the first is that no one has yet proved that global warming is taking place and is anything more than a natural phenomenon even if it is. Moreover, there are a lot of scientists who believe that we are heading into a phase where the planet is actually cooling.

And there are those who think that the Gates’ money and the scientists throwing powder into the sky could help create droughts, hurricanes and mass deaths. It seems fairly well agreed that altering the atmosphere to cool the planet could have unpredictable effects. In 1815, a volcanic eruption created crop shortages and disease outbreaks.

Some might say, of course, that all this could be considered a bonus by a man who wants to reduce the world population.

No one seems to have told him, by the way, that 800 large aircraft taking off every day and flying to 12 miles up, would require a good deal of aviation fuel. And what sort of dust are they planning to have sprayed? Well, some say calcium. But I have also heard talk that barium, alumina and strontium might be used. Whatever it is won’t improve the quality of the air we breathe. Bottom line is that this seems to me to be a way to reduce the world’s population rather than protect it – all in the guise of dealing with the climate change hoax.

And then there is George Soros.

Let me tell you something about George Soros. He is a man who has apparently admitted that he is here to make money and he’s done well at it. He’s alleged to have 25 billion dollars in his piggy bank. The mainstream media describe him as a philanthropist though to be honest if he still has 25 billion dollars he hasn’t given too much of it away.

One of the most chilling interviews I have ever seen was in 1998 when Soros was interviewed for the `60 Minutes’ programme. I found it scary. Soros admitted that when he was a teenager he worked with the Nazis to confiscate property from the Jews.

‘Did he feel bad about it? Was it difficult?’

‘Not at all difficult,’ he said. He felt no guilt.

I can’t remember whether he actually said it or not but the implication was clear: if he didn’t do it someone else would have done.

These days Soros is rumoured to give money to the Black Lives Matter and to Antifa.

Now why would he do that? Is there, perchance, profit to be made?

Could it be, perhaps, that he is deliberately trying to stir up trouble so that it is easier to break down society ready to accept the global reset he and his co-conspirators are so keen on?

Who else would make the list?

Well, the seemingly brainwashed little Swedish girl, of course. Her bleating and whining about the end of the world has proved enormously useful to those pushing Agenda 21 and the Global Reset and the plans for a New World Order.

Personally, I think she has been used very cleverly by the black-hearted folk who needed a seemingly innocent front for the climate change nonsense – they needed someone who seemed innocent and honest and whom it would be very difficult for critics to question or to attack.

How the devil can you ask serious questions of a little Swedish girl who looks to be about seven-years-old and very earnest?

But she, and all the other Greens, definitely go onto my list of people I don't like.

Oh, and I include Greenpeace in there too. Let me tell you a little something about Greenpeace – gold medal winners of my Sanctimonious Organisation Year Award for the last 287 years.

Greenpeace campaigns to have the world's oil left in the ground.

But in 2014, a Greenpeace senior executive was reported to have been commuting by plane for two years. The employee, who had been flying regularly from Luxembourg to Amsterdam, was defended by the Executive Director of Greenpeace UK who seemed to think it was acceptable for the employee to fly so much so that 'he could balance his job with the needs of his family'.

In February 2020, Greenpeace bought a full page advertisement in the *Financial Times* to reprint a letter that the Executive Director of Greenpeace UK had sent to BP, the oil company. The letter, demanding an end to the use of fossil fuels, was, in my view, the most arrogant letter I have ever read.

I can only assume that Greenpeace would nevertheless like BP to continue making a small amount of fuel available for planes used by its employees.

That level of hypocrisy seems to me to be so great that it is impossible to measure.

Next on my list, and something of a newcomer, goes the boss of the Metropolitan Police in London.

On the day before it became the law that English citizens had to wear masks in shops (for no very good reason that I could think of), Cressida Dick, the Police Commissioner for the Metropolitan Police in London, and not as far as I know a doctor of medicine, was reported to have said that the police will only enforce the law on wearing face masks as a last resort.

'My hope,' she was quoted as saying, 'is that the vast majority of people will comply, and that people who are not complying will be shamed into complying or shamed to leave the store.'

Of course, as we should all remember, Cressida Dick should know all about shame. She was, of course, the officer who made the decision for the police to shoot a young innocent Brazilian man in 2005. Police apparently shot eleven times from close range. They managed to shoot the entirely innocent man seven times in the head and once in the shoulder.

'I think about it quite often,' Dick allegedly said last year while chatting on a BBC programme called Desert Island Discs. Quite often? Most people, I suspect, would think about it pretty well all the time.

I suspect I am not alone in thinking she should have been sacked after an innocent citizen was shot and killed. I certainly called for it at the time.

Instead she now has a top police job and believes that those choosing not to damage their health by wearing useless masks should be made to feel ashamed. I am not entirely sure that encouraging other shoppers to shame non-mask wearers is entirely within Ms Dick's role in the police.

And does this woman not realise that the Government has made it clear that people with health problems – including anxiety – do not have to wear masks? And nor do young children. Is she suggesting that these individuals, who may be fearful for many reasons, be deliberately shamed? Are the police officially suggesting that patients with respiratory and heart disease be deliberately shamed? Is Dick suggesting that those with mental health problems be shamed? Does she want us to run after the disabled who cannot wear masks and smother them with abuse? How precisely would she like people to shame their fellow citizens?

My contempt for Cressida Dick is endless.

We should all join together to demand that this woman be officially shamed and sacked. An apology isn't enough.

Write to your MP. Write to the newspapers. If you do nothing else today, do what you can to get this woman fired. She is an utter disgrace to the human race in my view. I cannot believe it. Encouraging people to shame the sick and the frail and the anxious and the mentally ill! And shaming children!

It is, I believe, at least partly as a result of her urging that I have seen non-mask wearers being shouted at in shops.

A civilised society discusses complex issues by debate. But in our society debate is banned. And instead of discussing the issues with the opposition, the Gates and Soros supporting, mask wearing, line toeing folk, encourage the routine shaming and humiliation of those who do not agree to click their heels and salute those who would run our lives, control our every moment and enslave us with an unending variety of laws which have little or no basis in science.

Finally, on this short list of a few of those whom I hold in contempt, are the collaborators: the mindless millions who are willingly wearing masks and kowtowing to the dictators who want to rule our lives and are using, as an excuse a virus which is no more deadly than the flu.

How many of those who are currently wearing masks in shops wore them last year to protect themselves against the flu?

And, if they didn't wear masks to protect themselves against the flu, why didn't they?

The risks were then much as they are today.

Our main enemies in this war are not Soros, Gates, the little Swedish girl, Dick or the rest of them.
Our main enemies are the collaborators who are too damned lazy to seek out the truth for themselves.
I reserve my greatest contempt for them.
It's our bloody country and we want it back.

July 28th 2020

Why There Are So Many Zombies

'Getting and spending we lay waste our powers,' wrote William Wordsworth, the Lakeland poet in a rare moment when he wasn't being mesmerised by daffodils.

These days he would have to rewrite that, changing it to: 'Worrying and obeying we lay waste our powers'.

That's what is happening today.

The new abnormal, whereby our every movement, small ambition and thought is controlled and constricted by laws which make about as much sense as an episode of Patrick McGoohan's magnificent TV series, The Prisoner (of which, I confess, I am constantly reminded these days) deteriorates daily, advancing into ever more absurd realms of Orwellian fantasy.

Those of us who know for certain that something is wrong now waste much of our time trying to unravel the complexities of the new world order which has been foisted upon us; the Gordian knot of our times.

We venture down rabbit holes, into dark caves and up beanstalks looking for clues.

The fact, of course, is that many people are responsible for the confusion and the fear which now rules our lives.

The politicians, the medical and scientific advisors, the global organisations with their agendas and the billionaires who apparently want to gain ever more riches, control and power would be at the top of most people's lists of suspects. And then there are the drones of Common Purpose, carefully brainwashed into thinking that they are in control, the new top rank citizens, when in reality they are merely in place as facilitators; present to ensure that the will of their masters is carried out without question.

And, of course, the idiots who don't bother to question anything they are told but who merrily wear their silly masks, maintain social distancing and obey every new damned silly law as though their lives depended upon it, are also on the list. They will soon wear their masks all the time – indoors or out of doors. They will willingly put on gloves every time they leave home. They will wash their hands ever more frequently in a vain attempt to rinse away a threat that almost certainly isn't there to be washed away. Their pathetic compliance has strengthened their own enemies but they trust what they are told and so they are doomed. The danger is that they will drag us down with them.

They think they are behaving sensibly but they are collaborators, traitors to the human race, guilty of stupidity and ignorance more than anything else. Their misplaced trust and their contemptible weakness are enabling the enemy.

Without their obedience the people who are trying to destroy our civilisation would get no-where.

The protestors tearing down statues, attacking buildings and attempting to destroy every artefact and memory of our history are playing straight into the hands of those who want to destroy the past, good or bad, in order to rebuild a new world of permanent slavery. By denouncing those who do not appear to think acceptably about racial or gender issues they are aiding and abetting the greatest enemy the human race has ever faced.

The climate change protestors who make so much noise and who are filled with a sense of self-righteousness, self-satisfaction and unparalleled smugness are behaving like crazed lemmings – taking us over the edge of the cliff and down onto the rocks where the survivors will fall into the hands of a bunch of truly evil men and women whose motives may be cloaked in the false colours of philanthropy or well-meant desires to eradicate poverty or hunger but which are, in truth, no more than selfish yearnings for the traditional triumvirate of power, control and money.

The problem, of course, is that simple-minded citizens who wear their masks with so much pride that they pick out colours and styles as though they were choosing any other new accessory, don't understand that they are being lied to.

They are suffering from something called cognitive dissonance: they cannot believe that they are living in a world where nothing is as it was. The lie is simply so huge, so complete, that they cannot accept that anyone would be so evil as to tell it. Maybe they haven't heard of Goebbels and Hitler, who believed that if you told a big enough lie no one would believe it to be a lie because they wouldn't be able to conceive of people being prepared to tell it.

You can see them walking around anywhere these days. They look and behave like zombies, as though they are under a spell.

But there is another group which is helping to make all this work: the mass market media.

Without the media, the manipulators would not have been able to pull off their coup.

And they are at it everywhere in the world.

In *The Spectator* magazine the other day I read an article on the coronavirus by someone called Matthew Parris who tossed into his article the words, 'it's killing millions worldwide and threatening to overwhelm health provision'.

With rubbish like this in print it's hardly surprising that there are so many zombies or covid fearing idiots around.

The total death number for covid-19 has officially passed half a million – but that is now recognised to be an absurd exaggeration. And I really don't think anyone other than Mr Parris seriously believes that covid-19 is now threatening to overwhelm health provision.

However, I doubt if any organisation is quite so adept at control through misinformation as the BBC – once known for its integrity and reliability but now, I believe, hated and reviled in Britain as never before.

And rightly so.

Distrust the Government, Avoid Mass Media and Fight the Lies.

July 29th 2020

Global Nightmare: Staying Sane During the Madness

The lies and the widespread fear-porn promoted by governments and mainstream media have terrified millions.

But they're terrified of the wrong things. They're terrified of something proven to be no more deadly than the flu.

The coronavirus is worthy of respect. All infective organisms need to be respected.

But the coronavirus was never going to destroy our world.

Today, the real terrors are far greater than a pesky virus. Paranoia is no longer a medical condition to be suspected and feared. It is the only way to live.

The collaborators, the mask wearing zombies who are playing their part in this deliberate takeover of our lives have never heard of Agenda 21, of course. They think the United Nations is a benevolent, well-meaning organisation which does good things around the world. They believe that the World Health Organisation is independent and honourable. They have no idea that a group of global organisations are now reaching the final stages of their long-planned aim to take over the world. They don't understand that the myth of climate change has been steadily built up over thirty years simply to provide an excuse for the Global Reset that the enemy talk about with such enthusiasm.

They don't realise that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is helping to fund a plan to block out the sun – a plan that will help destroy traditional farming. They don't realise that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has also invested heavily in Monsanto – the company which makes genetically modified seeds – and in a company which makes artificial meat. They don't see the links.

They don't realise what chemtrails are for – or, even, that they exist at all.

There are millions who still believe the lies printed daily in the mainstream media and broadcast daily and worldwide by treacherous organisations such as the BBC.

The truth is that if you aren't angry, bewildered, overwhelmed and terrified out of your wits then, as my old Aunt Agatha used to say, you haven't been paying attention.

The simple-minded believers sigh with relief when their politicians tell them that it will all be over by Christmas. They believe it. But the only way it will all be over by Christmas will be if we are all walking around with our masks and gloves on and our sleeves rolled up begging for vaccinations.

(The gloves will, I suspect, be their next move in the humiliation process. Our government's aim is to destroy our strength, our will, our humanity. If you need some light relief watch my video entitled, 'New Law: Everyone Must Now Hop and Wear Galoshes'.)

Ah, yes, the vaccines.

If you haven't seen my video entitled, 'Would you Trust These People With Your Life?' then I beg you to watch it. If you've seen it watch it again. Insist that everyone you know watch it and then watch it again.

I described in the video the backgrounds of the companies making our new vaccines.

Consider GlaxoSmithKline – also known as GSK.

GSK is one of the world's biggest pharmaceutical companies and in my view if it made toasters you'd never buy a toaster from them.

In 2014, for example, GSK was fined $490 million dollars by China after a Chinese court found it guilty of bribery. In 2006, GSK paid out $160 million for claims made by patients who had become addicts. In 2009, GSK paid out $2.5 million to the family of a three-year-old born with severe heart malformations. And in Canada, a five-year-old girl died five days after an H1N1 flu shot and her parents sued GSK for $4.2 million. The parents' lawyer alleged that the drug was brought out quickly and without proper testing as the federal government exerted intense pressure on Canadians to get immunised. In 2010, GSK paid out $1.14 billion because of claims over a drug called Paxil. And they settled lawsuits over a drug called Avandia for $500 million. In 2011, GSK paid $250 million to settle 5,500 death and injury claims and set aside $6.4 billion for future lawsuits and settlements in respect of the drug Avandia. In 2016, GSK paid out $6.2 million in Canada.

In 2012, GSK pleaded guilty to federal criminal offences including misbranding of two antidepressants and failure to report safety data about a drug for diabetes to the FDA in America. The company admitted to illegally promoting Paxil for the treatment of depression in children and agreed to pay a fine of $3 billion. That was the largest health care fraud settlement in US history. GSK also reached a related civil settlement with the US Justice Department. The $3 billion fine also included the civil penalties for improper marketing of half a dozen other drugs.

GSK is one of the top earning vaccine companies in the world. And in 2010, there were reports of narcolepsy occurring in Sweden and Finland among children who had the H1N1 swine flu vaccine. It is reported that not all the safety problems were made public. I have seen a report that by December 2009, for each one million doses of the vaccine given, about 76 cases of serious adverse events were reported though this was not made public.

The British Government paid out £60 million to patients who had been damaged by GSK's Pandemrix vaccine which was then said to affect one in 16,000 individuals. GSK had demanded that the Government indemnify it against claims for damages.

In Ireland, the Irish Government kept inviting people to get vaccinated even when it was clear that the pandemic was on the wane and it was nowhere near the catastrophe portrayed by influenza researchers, governments, industry and the media.

Clare Daly, a member of the Irish parliament, called the adverse effects after Pandemrix a 'completely avoidable catastrophe'. She reported that: 'The Health Service Executive decided to purchase Pandemrix and continued to distribute it even after they knew it was dangerous and untested.'

Most people in Britain will, I suspect, have heard of Sir Patrick Vallance. He is helping to lead the fight against the coronavirus. Vallance is the Chief Scientific Adviser in the United Kingdom and, I suspect, a key figure in dealing with the coronavirus in the UK and the plans for a vaccine.

And yet how many know that Vallance worked for GSK between 2006 and 2018. By the time he left GSK, he was a member of the board and the corporate executive team. All of the fines and so on which I have listed took place while Vallance was working as a senior figure at GSK.

Check it all out. And share the information with everyone you know. Spreading the word will help us survive – both individually and collectively.

I find that every new answer brings with it a host of new questions. Every realisation arouses another barrage of questions. Trying to understand the big picture is like trying to do a jigsaw puzzle while sitting on a playground swing.

We know that part of the Global Reset is a plan to combine all religions together into a new World Religion which may or may not be called Chrislam.

As I described in my video entitled, 'How they are lying to enslave us', Chrislam, an attempt to combine Christianity with Islam, has been around for some time but it is now progressing rapidly.

I wonder if it is a coincidence that churches may now be open but are not providing services. Is it a coincidence that cathedral and church choirs are being shut down – and not just because the coronavirus doesn't like us to sing. Is it just a coincidence that Notre Dame cathedral in Paris burnt down. And that the same thing happened to the cathedral in Nantes.

The coronavirus hoax is the biggest crime in history. But the climate change nonsense is close behind. The whole recycling nonsense was introduced simply to keep us busy and under control. It was a prelude to the mask wearing. If they'll wash out their empty yoghurt cartons with fresh water – known to be the world's most essential, valuable and rarest consumable – then they'll put up with anything.

The stuff that was sorted into half a dozen different containers was never sensibly recycled. Much of Britain's recycling went to China to be dumped. Then it went to Poland. Most recently it was being dumped in Turkey. And it wasn't being dumped in special pits – it was being dumped by the roadside. If you dump stuff near your home it's called littering or fly tipping. If it is dumped for you in another country then it's called recycling.

In Europe, the whole recycling nonsense was an EU initiative. It was and is part of the process of suppressing and controlling us. The EU has for years been linked to Agenda 21 and the United Nations' plan for global control. It is no surprise that the individuals who opposed Brexit, and who supported the EU with some unprincipled venom, are now coming out as keen supporters of Agenda 21.

Things are happening very fast now and before we know what has happened the UN will have given us its World Government and its World Church – whether we like it or not.

All the information is available on the internet. I've given you all the clues you need. This is definitely, most definitely, not a conspiracy theory.

The only conspiracy is the one leading towards a World Government and a World Church.

And underneath it all there is the huge nonsense called climate change.

In 1991, the Club of Rome published a book entitled *The First Global Revolution* in which it admitted to inventing climate change as a common enemy of mankind in order to unite the world.

I wonder if young Greta knows of that. I wonder if Prince Charles has even heard of it. Somehow I doubt it.

But it really can't get any clearer.

That is what the climate change campaign was all about – preparing us for a global reset. And that is what the coronavirus nonsense is all about.

Our world is in turmoil. History everywhere is being turned upside down as national identities are deliberately destroyed. Racism is being deliberately built up by aggressive well-funded agitators. Gender choice is destroying everything we know about society and about our past, our present and our future. People now have to put he/him or she/her after their names in order to denote their choice of sex. Anyone who doesn't toe the officially approved line on all these issues quickly becomes a non-person, an unemployable pariah.

You'd have to be mad as a March hare not to be deeply disturbed and genuinely depressed by what is happening.

Those of us who see through the lies are enraged both by the lies which are told and by the fear of what is going to come next.

Personally, I would rather we were fighting a traditional war. I genuinely believe that the risks to physical and mental health would be lighter.

Anxiety and sleeplessness are commonplace. I know I am not alone in having difficulty sleeping. The nightmares are a regular part of my nights.

I spend nearly all my time researching and thinking about what is happening, and analysing how best we can deal with the mental and spiritual effect of this outrageous removal of our civil and human rights, our freedom and our freedom of speech.

Meanwhile, we at least have the knowledge that we are none of us alone.

Millions of people around the world are as enraged as we are.

We have to turn that rage into determination to overcome those who are determined, for whatever reason, to remove our basic rights as citizens.

And when we have won the war we all have to make sure that we make changes to our entire political system so that nothing like this can happen again. They've been planning this takeover for decades. We have to start planning now.

Meanwhile, I believe that the best way to tackle the depression is to do everything possible to defend ourselves, our history and our humanity.

For example, in the UK the law states that citizens must wear masks when entering shops. But, as I speak, we don't have to wear a mask if we have a valid reason not to – a physical or mental condition for example. Asthma or anxiety are apparently acceptable reasons.

So, if you have a valid reason not to wear a mask then go out with a naked face. But if possible don't go alone. Go with friends. Look for people you can go shopping with and who also don't need to wear a mask because of an exemption. Don't break the law, of course, though you will have to check what the law is on an almost daily basis because laws seem to change with the wind.

And if you positively have to wear a mask because there is only one shop in your village and they won't let you in without a mask then wear the damned thing but protest politely and explain why masks are useless and dangerous.

If my wife has to go to hospital and they change the rules and let me in then I will wear a mask if that is a condition of my entering the building. At the moment, the hospital physiotherapy department is still shut because of the coronavirus. Hairdressers, pubs, restaurants, gyms and so on are open. But some hospital departments – including physiotherapy – are still closed. There is no good reason for this so it must be a bad reason.

Try to find people you can talk to, people who think the way you do. We have to stick together. Take time out to enjoy books and films which entertain and relax. Spend time on old hobbies and pastimes and find new ones. We have to protect and treasure some of our life – or they will win anyway.

And if you are alone then tune in here at around 7 p.m. each evening. We'll try to put up a new video each evening about then. If there isn't a new video then hunt around for it, because they do seem to get hidden. And if you still can't find one go to my website where we will hope to be able to put up news.

July 30th 2020

We Are Prisoners of War

The politicians and the psychologists are running what they think is a clever game. They are trying to confuse us by changing the laws and giving very little warning.

I hope, for example, that viewers took note of my advice not to take a holiday abroad this summer. Those who flew off to Spain and suddenly found themselves having to go into quarantine for two weeks will wish they'd gone to Bridlington instead.

We have to remember that there isn't anyone in the Conservative Government who could remove the childproof top from a bottle of aspirin tablets. They aren't the brightest of God's creatures and most of them have IQs smaller than their hat size. The armies of scientists, mathematical modellers and psychologists and lunatics let out of the asylum for the duration, are screwing up our world with the sort of determination you might expect of a bunch of hooray Henrys trying to put toothpaste on their own toothbrushes or, heaven forbid, tie their own shoe laces.

Prince Charles, enthusiastic climate change nutter and aficionado of the Global Reset, will know what I mean about the toothpaste on the toothbrush. He is said to have always had a valet to do that for him so the stuff would doubtless be on his shoes and the ceiling if he had to try to do it all by himself. And he'd probably strangle himself if he tried to tie his own shoelaces – thereby proving that there is plenty of mileage in the old adage, much favoured by my Aunt Agatha, who once worked as a Lady in Waiting in one of the European monarchies: 'There's no tosser like a Royal tosser'.

The chaos our would-be leaders are deliberately creating is being helped along by the fact that up in Scotland the Sturgeon woman is doing everything she can to ensure that everyone realises that Scotland is not the same as England. The bloke who claims to run Wales, and whose name I cannot for the life of me remember and can't be bothered to look up because to be honest who gives a damn, seems to be doing much the same thing.

So, I discovered the other day that whereas blood donors in England must wear masks at all times, or they won't be allowed to give blood, the people in Wales who are generous enough to offer half an armful of blood must remove their masks for safety reasons so that if they go pale and start to faint this can be spotted.

I have to say the Welsh theory makes far more sense than the one being favoured in England.

I have no idea what the law is in Scotland at the moment. I wouldn't mind betting, however, that it will be something different to the laws in England and Wales. And probably something a little barking. Maybe in Scotland blood donors have to wear a Tam O'Shanter over their faces, or wear a kilt in the Sturgeon tartan and pull it up over their faces as they are being phlebotomised.

You would have a job to find a better example of the lunatic way this whole psy-op is being managed.

No one can possibly take such madness seriously. I know we have to take them seriously because they're trying to take over the world but honestly it's difficult not to laugh at them all.

Everywhere I look I find evidence that governments are talking absolute gibberish – and treating their citizens the way you might expect them to treat a full blooded enemy.

Look at what has happened in Quatar for example. Quatar is one of the richest nations on earth but when they introduced a contact tracing app, many low earning workers had to borrow money in order to buy the sort of new, up to the minute phones needed to download the app.

And why did they bother buying the phones and downloading the app?

Simple. Not having the official app installed on your phone could lead to a fine of up to $55,000 or three years in prison.

The app, developed by a private firm, requires access to the files on the phone and permanent use of the GPS and Bluetooth.

And the police have apparently been stopping motorists to check that they had their phones with them and that the required App was up and running.

And that created a problem for some citizens who didn't have the phone required to run the app.

They didn't dare leave their homes to buy one in case they were stopped on their way to the phone shop.

Three years in prison for not having an app on your phone.

Back in the UK, mask wearing has become the law and there are still politicians and scientists telling us that we should wear masks to save the community. Be a local hero by wearing a mask.

But there is absolutely no decent science to prove that masks are of any help.

Indeed, on the contrary, the evidence shows that they probably do more harm than good. I have already detailed the evidence about masks in several videos but here is another piece of scientific evidence.

At the beginning of what was a hoax and has now morphed into a crime, it was decided that there was no evidence that wearing a mask would help healthy individuals avoid infections with viruses such as covid-19.

On 6th April, the World Health Organisation said that there was no evidence that masks would help. Numerous medical experts repeated that.

There has been no evidence since then that could have persuaded the WHO to change its collective mind. I think the change was political.

Indeed, I have been reminded of yet another paper, published in the BMJ Open in 2015, which I quoted some time ago and which seems to suggest cloth masks are, shall we be polite and say, offer limited protection against respiratory infection.

The study, led by the University of New South Wales, but covering medical workers in Vietnam studied 1,607 workers, some wearing heavy duty medical masks, some wearing ordinary cloth masks and some just wearing usual hospital protection. The study showed that the subjects wearing cloth masks had higher rates of infection than anyone – including the control group. The researchers also measured the masks to see how many particles got through – they found that cloth masks allowed 97% of particles through.

And as I have shown in other videos on mask wearing, the evidence shows that wearing a mask can lead to illness and, possibly, worse.

As I showed in my video about the BBC's fact checkers, masks can cause real health problems. Hypoxia, low blood oxygen levels, is a very serious problem which should not be dismissed.

You'd have to be an idiot not to be able to see that masks do far more harm than good.

The only possible conclusion, of course, is that we are being pushed into wearing masks for simply political reasons. Masks are part of the oppression.

Why, then aren't all doctors screaming out about the pointlessness and danger of forcing people to wear masks for many hours a day?

So why are so many doctors so silent?

Fear and cowardice, I am afraid.

Doctors have been ordered to keep quiet about anything relating to coronavirus which is critical of the Government's line.

This is pretty well a global clampdown.

If doctors had found the courage to ignore the orders they were given and to speak out, in order to protect their patients and save lives, then this whole criminal enterprise would have been over weeks ago.

But doctors have feebly followed the philosophy 'keep your head down' and 'don't rock the boat'. Or, to stick in another piece of nauseating, nautical self-protection: 'don't make any waves'.

It surprises me, and saddens me enormously, that members of the medical and nursing professions have accepted this takeover of our lives.

Even if they don't think there is anything sinister behind what is happening they must by now realise that the whole response to the coronavirus has been wrong.

Hospitals have been closed. Patients with cancer and other serious disorders have been denied essential treatment. Thousands of patients in care homes have been murdered as a result of inept policies and management. Schools have been closed and the lives of millions of children have been ruined. They know that is no exaggeration. The Government has been employing brain washing techniques to control us and to create a fake affection for the health service.

Doctors and nurses all know this is true. They know that the clever three word, three phrase slogans, the encouragement to take part in weekly clapping sessions and the advertising were all designed to build up the fear and to create a sense of national obedience.

Medical doctors and nurses know that the spin doctors have been doing everything they can to exaggerate the number of deaths. Patients with the coronavirus were listed as having died of it.

If the truth about what has happened ever emerges then the medical and nursing professions are going to be embarrassed and humiliated to put it kindly. People in both professions are going to go to jail, I think.

It is time to insist that hospitals and clinics are opened immediately without any of the social distancing which every thinking person knows was never necessary.

The media has found many curious heroes in the last three months, mostly as part of the propaganda process I'm afraid. Now is the time for the professions to earn their plaudits. The nation needs to have its health service back. It would be a big step forward on the road back to real normality – and it would destroy the not so hidden agenda of the United Nations, Bill Gates and company.

It hurts me to have to say this but I have nothing but contempt for the doctors and nurses who have kept silent through all this. Their cowardice in refusing to stand up to the politicians and the bureaucrats has already led to millions of deaths worldwide. And things are getting worse by the day.

'I'm just doing my job,' say the silent ones. 'I have my family to think of.'

Where have we heard that before?

And no doctor today is going to be executed for speaking out.

It isn't just doctors who have betrayed us, of course.

The majority of the professions have done so.

Teachers betrayed their pupils and their responsibilities to them by insisting on absurd and inhuman social distancing rules. And I gather that some are now demanding that pupils wear masks when schools finally reopen in the autumn. There is absolutely no scientific reason for pupils to be required to wear masks or to obey any daft social distancing rules. If teachers would make the effort to look at the science they would realise this.

The clergy have betrayed us too. By closing churches and by agreeing not to hold services they have betrayed their parishioners and their God. Now their leaders are negotiating for a universal global religion which makes as much sense as combining all sports into one. Can you imagine the fuss if it were suggested that football, cricket, golf, tennis, hockey and so on should all be combined into a single sport? Well, that's the madness being promoted by Tony Blair and senior churchmen.

The people who have come out of this with my great respect are the postmen and women, the delivery drivers, the rubbish collectors, the shop assistants and the transport workers – all of whom have done their jobs throughout.

Henry David Thoreau has long been one of my favourite authors. He is best known, of course, for Walden but I have been re-reading his short book 'On Civil Disobedience' which, not surprisingly, contains much advice which seems well suited to our peculiar, current circumstances.

Here's one quote: 'It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have the right to assume, is to do at any time what I think is right.'

And then there is this: 'Law never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice.'

And finally, for now: `All men recognise the right of revolution; that is, the right to refuse allegiance to, and to resist, the Government, when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable. But almost all say that such is not the case now.'

But, of course, it is the case now.

We have to stand up to our tyrannical governments.

And if doctors and nurses stood up together and told the truth – that's all they have to do – tell the truth – then the people would see the extent of the lies, governments would fall and the coup would be over.

If it doesn't happen soon, it will be too damned late.

July 31st 2020

Why Genetic Engineering Must Stop!

Science has, during the last few decades, presented us with a steadily increasing and apparently endless variety of moral dilemmas and practical threats. The subject of genetic engineering is a perfect example of how politicians have betrayed us all and are, through their refusal to take on big industry, threatening our very future.

In just a few decades genetic engineering has evolved so rapidly as a branch of science (if science is the right word for a form of alchemy which seems to pay little or no attention to logic or research) that the future of our species is now threatened. Genetic engineering enables scientists to transfer genes between species in an entirely unnatural way. Human genes can be transferred to pigs, sheep, fish or bacteria. And genes from bacteria, slugs, elephants, fish, tomatoes and anything else can be put into human beings.

Genetic engineering started in the 1970s. The technique involves putting genes from one species into another species. In order to do this, the genetic engineers put the genes they want to move into viruses. They then put the virus into the animal or plant which is to be the recipient.

It is important to understand that genetic engineering is nothing at all like conventional breeding techniques.

Listen to the boastful, extraordinarily arrogant claims of genetic scientists and you might believe that they had all the answers to hunger and disease. They talk grandly about eradicating starvation by creating new high yield, pest resistant versions of existing foods and manipulating genes to banish physical ailments, aggression and depression. They will, they say, be able to control the overpopulation problem, purify water supplies, remove crime from our streets and deal with deforestation.

Genetic engineers have even talked of modified strains of bacteria able to eat up plastics, heavy metals and other toxic wastes.

Vast amounts of money have been poured into identifying the human genome (the genetic blue print for human life). There has even been talk that we will be able to clone ourselves so that we need never die.

Moral and ethical questions have been brushed aside as the unnecessary anxieties of ignorant Luddites who either do not understand what is going on or are temperamentally opposed to progress.

But if it all sounds too good to be true — and all rather reminiscent of the sort of cheap promises with which confidence tricksters make their money — that is because it simply isn’t true. Genetic scientists don’t have the answers to any of our problems. On the contrary, they have created a hugely successful money making myth which keeps them in fat grants and huge salaries. It is important not to underestimate the importance of money in the world of genetic engineering.

None of this would matter too much if what they were doing was harmless. But fiddling around with genes is an exceedingly hazardous business. Messing around with genes can cause cancer.

It is time that the insane burblings of the geneticists were exposed for what they are. I have been writing about the horrors of genetic engineering for over 40 years but most doctors, critics and journalists have so far been too frightened to oppose the torrent of undiluted praise for genetic engineering.

When genetic engineering first hit the headlines, the public was promised that there would be strict rules about just what could and could not be done. But the rules that were intended to protect us have been bent, pushed aside and ignored. Regulations were, it was claimed, slowing down progress, interfering with the competitiveness of the developing new industry and getting in the way of individual scientists keen to get on with their plan for improving the world.

Genetic engineers claim that there is no need for caution and that only the narrow-minded and the reactionary have reservations about this exciting new branch of scientific endeavour.

But the fact is that the genetic engineering industry has succeeded in ‘persuading’ politicians and administrators that there is no need to segregate genetically engineered produce from naturally grown produce and yet the risks associated with genetic engineering are numerous and widespread.

There is little doubt that genetic engineering is at least partly responsible for the problem of antibiotic-resistant organisms. And there is even less doubt that genetic engineering is responsible for some, and possibly many, of the new infective organisms now threatening human health.

Under normal circumstances, viruses are species specific. A virus that attacks a cat will not attack a human being. But the genetic engineers have changed all that. They have deliberately glued together different bits of viruses in order to cross species barriers. These genetically engineered viruses can then become virulent again. Genetically engineered viruses are extremely infectious. None of this happens by accident — this is how genetic engineering works. I first warned about this hazard in a book I wrote in the early 1990s.

Naturally, the men and women in white coats who were convinced that they knew best (‘Trust us — nothing can go wrong’) have been releasing genetic material that they have been fiddling with into the environment for decades.

We thought that the dumping of waste chemicals was bad news. And it was. But the dumping of genetic misshapes and off-cuts will, I believe, create a problem infinitely larger than the dumping of chemical waste or even nuclear waste. Genes, once they start moving and reproducing, can keep spreading, recombining and affecting new species for ever. Once the door has been opened, it cannot be shut. And the door has been opened wide.

'Don't worry!' said the genetic engineers. 'Genetic material is easily digested by gut enzymes.'

Sadly, they were wrong about that too.

Genetic material can survive a journey through an intestine and find its way, via the blood stream, into all sorts of body cells. And once inside a new body, the genetic material can begin to affect host cells. If you eat a genetically engineered tomato, the foreign genes in the tomato could end up in your cells. Cancer is an obvious possible consequence of this. Exactly what are the risks? I'm afraid that your guess is as good as mine. And our guesses are just as good as the guesses made by genetic engineers. They don't have the foggiest idea what will happen. But they know as well as I do that something terrible could happen.

What about the altered genetic material in new types of food? What happens to genetically altered food when it is eaten?

Will the altered genes find their way into our own genetic material?

Could genetically engineered food cause cancer?

Could genetically engineered food affect the human immune system?

Asking the questions is easy. But no one knows the answers.

Genetically engineered foods have already been shown to be toxic. One major hazard is that plants which have been genetically engineered to be resistant to disease may be more likely to produce allergy problems. A soya bean genetically engineered with a gene from a Brazil nut was found to cause allergy problems when eaten by people sensitive to Brazil nuts. A strain of yeast, genetically altered in order to ferment more quickly, acquired cancer inducing qualities. Contaminants in an amino acid led to 1,500 people falling ill and to the deaths of 37 individuals.

And yet politicians have done nothing to protect the public. The people paid to look after the world have rolled over before the big cheque books of the companies which mess around with genes.

No one tests genetically engineered foods to see whether or not they are particularly likely to cause allergy problems. The new food is tested when it is put onto the market. You and I are the unwitting test subjects. Even drug companies have to do some tests before they can launch new products. Food companies seem to be entirely free of controls.

Amazingly, the politicians and administrators whom we pay to protect us allow the manufacturers to get away with the argument that it would be impossible to separate and identify genetically engineered foods.

'Segregation of bulk commodities is not scientifically justified and is economically unrealistic,' said the industries involved in genetic engineering. 'Certainly!' said the politicians and the bureaucrats. 'If you say so.'

The problems are only just beginning but already they are frightening. Potatoes were genetically engineered to be resistant to herbicide. The resistance spread to weeds within a single growing season. Thanks to the irresponsible overuse and abuse of pesticides, and the widespread introduction of crops genetically engineered to produce 'natural' insecticides, more than 1,000 agricultural pests have now acquired so much resistance that they are immune to chemical control. Crops which have been genetically engineered to tolerate herbicides have already begun to make weeds immune to the same herbicides.

If the big seed companies and the politicians have their way then farmers throughout the world will be growing the same variety of genetically engineered soya, the same type of genetically engineered potato and the same genetically engineered corn. That is not a prediction which is difficult to make. It is exactly what the big seed manufacturers are planning. And when the world's single crop of soya/potatoes/corn is destroyed by an insect or plant disease which is immune to every pesticide known to man (and remember there are already 1,000 insects and plant diseases which satisfy that requirement), countless millions around the world will die of starvation.

It's time for all the messing around with genes to be halted. This isn't Ludism, it's common sense and self-preservation.

I leave you with one final thought.

Monsanto is one of the best, known companies turning out genetically modified seeds.

And guess what: The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is a big investor in Monsanto.

I have always regarded Monsanto as the most evil company on the planet and I've thought of it this way for several reasons.

First, Monsanto has long been a leader in the development of genetically modified plants. These terrify me because as far as I have been able to find out they have never been properly tested to see what long-term consequences there might be. What damage could there be to crops in a few years' time? Could they become more susceptible to disease? And are there any risks to the people who eat genetically modified food? For some years now, Monsanto has taken to patenting its seeds and as a result small farmers who have traditionally grown their crops from their own seeds have found that they have been unable to do so. There are said to have been many thousands of suicides as a result of this – as farmers found that they weren't allowed to grow the seed they had saved from their own crops but had to buy seed they couldn't afford to buy. I have reported on this many times in the past.

And, of course, Monsanto is the manufacturer of Roundup – a doubtless effective but equally doubtless nasty weed killer. Unfortunately, there have been a number of claims that Roundup causes cancer and there were 125,000 lawsuits as a result. The German company Bayer bought Monsanto a little while ago. Bayer is alleged to have paid $63 billion for Monsanto and to have paid $10.9 billion to settle the claims relating to Roundup.

The bottom line is that I cannot imagine why anyone who really cares for people and the planet would put any money into Monsanto or Bayer.

Oh, and Bill Gates funded research to create genetically modified mosquitoes. If that doesn't keep you awake at night then you haven't been paying attention.

July 31st 2020

We’re the Good Guys – and Good Guys Win

The longer this goes on the clearer it becomes that we are being abused, manipulated and, in many cases, murdered by our own governments.

So, for example, in the UK, there were 66,000 deaths in care homes between 2nd March and 12th June this year.

Last year there were 37,000 deaths in care homes in the same period.

Take 37,000 from 66,000 and, with the aid of my Neil Ferguson approved calculator, I worked out that there had been 129 million extra deaths in care homes this year. The calculator, if you’re interested is a snip at £99 and is made by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

When I did the sums in my head, however, the difference came to 29,000 extra deaths.

So, it isn’t much of a stretch to deduct that the British Government’s policies over the coronavirus led to the deaths of 29,000 people who might otherwise be alive today and who almost certainly died as a direct result of the lockdown, the closure of hospitals and the panic and hysteria over covid-19.

Take the 29,000 deaths from the total number of deaths alleged to have been caused by covid-19 and you are left with around 20,000.

So that’s the unofficial official figure for the number who died from the coronavirus.

And that 20,000 includes many patients who didn’t die of covid-19 because, as the Government has admitted, anyone who was tested and found to have the coronavirus and then subsequently died, was assumed to have died of covid-19 even if they fell off a cliff or were shot by policemen.

And many cases of flu were erroneously put down as covid-19 deaths.

It’s pretty fair to conclude that the total number of deaths from covid-19 in the UK so far this year, during the worst of the infection, was considerably under 20,000 – and probably less than half that. The more we look, the more we learn the lower the real figure goes.

So the big question is: how many people died of flu in Britain?

It varies, of course, but the answer, is that in the last year for which figures are available it was around 50,000.

So there you have it.

Proof, if proof be needed, that the coronavirus has killed far fewer people in Britain than would be expected to die of the flu in the same period.

Now will the doubters believe that the coronavirus scare was a hoax? And will all those people who were so abusive when I recorded my video entitled, ‘Coronavirus scare: the hoax of the century’ on March 18th now write and apologise?

Maybe the Government would like to know why an assessment made by an old bloke in a chair was considerably better than their guess.

And why my predictions turned out to be far more accurate than theirs – even though their guess was based on the work done by vast numbers of no doubt well remunerated advisors and so-called experts – including of course, the work done by Professor Ferguson and his team at Imperial College whose track record is hardly stellar.

None of that will happen, of course.

No one will apologise. Because trolls never admit that they are wrong. If you collected together 1,000 trolls you would find them incapable of organising a piss up in brewery. They wouldn’t have a functional brain cell between them.

More significantly, no-one in the Government will want to know how and why they cocked it up so badly.

Because, of course, they didn’t cock it up.

This whole lethal, soul destroying farce has been stage managed to perfection. And the evil minds behind Agenda 21 and the Global Reset must be sniggering and guffawing at the fear they have created and the ease with which they have succeeded in turning billions of people i

nto willing slaves – ready to do whatever they are told to do. They have been brainwashed into damaging their brains by wearing masks which reduce their blood oxygen levels.

I call these people collaborators or zombies. I know some people call them sheep, and I understand that, but I have kept sheep and they are intelligent, thoughtful animals who are very good at protecting themselves. So I prefer the words collaborators or zombies.

Those of us who believe it is a scam have all the facts on our side – as I have just demonstrated.

But facts are of little consequence these days and those who believe it is a new plague prefer to believe what their governments tell them.

I don’t really understand this, by the way. Governments always lie. Politicians can’t open their mouths without lies coming out. And around the world there are hundreds of health advisors who are closely linked with the drug industry in general and the vaccination industry in particular.

Of course, these days, governments have specialist psy-op experts advising them on how best to demonise those of us who know the truth – and they are very good at it.

In the UK, they are using exactly the same tricks which they used during the Brexit campaign.

During that campaign, which they lost let me remind you, they tried to demonise Brexiteers by describing them as stupid, ill informed, treacherous and selfish.

Those were interesting insults because you didn't have to be a genius to realise that they were, in truth the faults of the Remainers – the people who wanted Britain to remain in the European Union which was always part of Agenda 21 and the plan for a Global Government.

The Remainers were not very bright people, they were led by established traitors and people like Blair, and they were terribly ignorant about the facts, they were betraying their country and their history and they were worried more about whether or not they were going to be able to continue to buy French cheeses and go skiing in Italy than they were about the economic and social consequences for their fellow citizens.

It is interesting, is it not, that those who seemed to have fought hardest to oppose Brexit, and are perceived by a large proportion of the UK population as having betrayed the voters, are now being well rewarded. Theresa May, former Prime Minister, is receiving huge sums for giving lectures – though to be honest I can't imagine her having anything to say worth listening to and I can't imagine her being terribly charismatic about it. And Boris Johnson nominated the former chancellor Philip Hammond, who seemed to do everything possible to stop Brexit, for a peerage. He also nominated Kenneth Clarke, also a staunch EU lover.

And the same, now rather tired, insults are being dragged out to try to demonise and condemn those of us who can see that covid-19 is not a new plague.

There is, a school of thought that says that governments are deliberately trying to divide us into two groups – those who believe that covid-19 is a huge threat to us all and nothing less than a re-visitation of the plague – and those who know, without any doubt, that the whole thing is a scam.

And from that knowledge, comes the belief that those of us who believe the whole business is a scam should not argue with or fight those who believe everything the Government says – and who happily wear the masks, avoid using cash and so on.

I understand that point of view.

But I think it is absolutely wrong.

If we do and say nothing then we too are collaborators.

Think about France in World War II for example.

When the Germans were swarming over Paris and France, the brave souls who opposed Hitler formed a resistance movement which fought hard to oppose the Germans, to make their lives difficult and to make their occupation uncomfortable. The British Government sent brave agents over to France to help and equip the French resistance. And there is no doubt that the French Resistance were quite ruthless in their dealings with collaborators and traitors. Nor is there any doubt that that the Resistance helped to defeat Germany.

And we now are the resistance movement – a world-wide resistance movement.

If we do nothing then we are lost; if we don't rebel (peacefully) then we are lost. The enemy – our governments – will have won and will have control of every aspect of lives for eternity.

There is a line in John Ford's film 'Stagecoach' in which John Wayne says: 'There are some things a man can't run away from'.

And there is a similar line in 'Absolute Power', scripted by William Goldman. After discovering what a two-faced hypocrite the President is, Clint Eastwood abandons his plans to run away with the line, spoken to an image of the President on television: 'I'm not about to run from you.'

Well, I'm not about to run from the bunch of second-raters now making a concerted effort to turn me into a slave and pretending to be doing it for the sake of mankind. It was, I think, Albert Camus who said that the welfare of humanity is always the alibi of tyrants.

Society has always been a work in progress. There has always been lots wrong with it. There has always been much room for improvement.

But we, as independent human beings, were doing our best to improve things. We made huge mistakes but we moved forwards – it may have been slow but it was a sort of progress.

Now, the enemy – the United Nations, the WHO, a bunch of unelected billionaires and assorted other evil organisations – want to eradicate democracy, remove our freedom, take away our freedom of speech and turn us all into slaves. They have bought our governments. And it is difficult to find an advisor of any kind who doesn't have links to the drug industry or the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation or both.

It's happening. And it is happening fast.

The people who want to control us, and run every aspect of our lives, want to do it without asking our permission. They think they are too important and too clever to need our approval.

But we are winning important battles.

It is, for example, becoming clearer each day just how much the greens have lied about climate change. I have detailed some of their lies in other videos.

The other day the BBC, in my opinion the most accomplished provider of fake news on the planet, warned that polar bears will be wiped out by the end of the century unless more is done to tackle climate change.

I really do find myself increasingly angry at the BBC. They get worse. It is, it seems to me, a racist, sexist, ageist organisation – anti-white, anti-English and totally fascist. It is controlled by thousands of well-connected, privileged, superior, ignorant liberal lefties whose only talent is the ability to meld hubris and ignorance, ignore the facts and create an apparently unending diet of fake news to its gullible viewers and listeners.

In fact, the paper the BBC quoted didn't actually say that about polar bears.

The prediction was based on a worst case scenario which imagined what would happen if coal burning increased fivefold between now and the year 2100.

That wouldn't be easy because it's reported it would mean burning more coal than there is on the earth.

Polar bears are, for some reason, always used by climate change hoaxers as a warning sign of doom. Their demise and disappearance has been predicted many times. And scientists who have dared to point out that these predictions are nonsense have often been fired.

So, for example, zoologist Susan Crockford who wrote a book entitled, *The Polar Bear Catastrophe that Never Happened* was allegedly relieved of her post as Adjunct Assistant Professor at Victoria University.

The fact is that polar bears aren't going to disappear. And even if they did it wouldn't be because of climate change.

That wasn't my favourite BBC headline, however.

My award goes to this one: 'Climate Change: Summers could become 'too hot for humans'.

That is a headline for which the word 'bollocks' is entirely inadequate. Why, I wonder, does the word 'scaremongering' spring to mind and refuse to go away?

What next? A plague of man eating Martians are living in London sewers. Giant Ants Living in Volcano. Dr Mengele Found on Moon Living in Caravan. They all sound like perfectly plausible BBC headlines.

I would love to see just a little bit of science pretending to assert that summers are going to be too hot for humans.

Do not, I beg you, do anything illegal, but please don't pay the BBC licence fee. You can find lots of advice on how (legally) to avoid paying the BBC on the web – including my website.

More and more former enthusiastic supporters of the climate change hoax are coming out and admitting that it was a load of baloney – and that the 20% of British children who are having nightmares about climate change really need not be worried.

So, Michael Shellenberger, a green activist for 30 years and someone who has advised the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change – the IPCC – has admitted that he has been as guilty as anyone of contributing to the panic and now admits that the truth is that climate change is not even our most serious environmental problem. It is, he says, not making natural disasters worse and carbon emissions are falling.

He says that for financial, political and ideological reasons, we are all being badly misled. And he adds that it's hard to avoid the impression that the public have been duped.

All this is crucial, of course.

Because, as I and many others have shown, the climate change hoax was created and used to provide the basis for Agenda 21 and the need for a global reset.

For more information, read my essay entitled, *How Greens Will Destroy the World*.

The opposition, the proponents of Agenda 21, are rich and powerful and totally ruthless.

But we have the truth on our side.

And we are going to win.

We're the good guys.

August 1st 2020

Zombies and Trolls

I could weep for what has happened to the human race. There are too many pathetic, terrified individuals around with their heads buried deep in the sand. Our governments have lied, deceived, bullied, cheated, threatened and oppressed.

Governments appear to have forgotten the words of John Locke who said: 'The people cannot delegate to government the power to do anything which would be unlawful for them to do themselves.'

We pay our governments to protect us not to destroy us.

There is no doubt that the masks are part of the process of oppression and have made people even more scared than they were. It is, of course, deliberate.

There are few smiles around these days. And not many laughs to be heard. Celebrities are behaving very strangely. Peter Ebdon, the world snooker champion, is the only one I know who has had the courage to question authority and to tell the truth.

Hypocrisy is everywhere.

The other day I reported that Tom Hanks had announced that he would not respect anyone who didn't wear a mask. But then someone called Tom Hanks, together with his wife, turned up standing with the Greek Prime Minister. Not a mask in sight. No social distancing. It seemed at first that Mr Hanks is that thing at the end of the intestinal tract…the word escapes me…begins with the letter A and ends in hole. But then I realised that it must be another Tom Hanks. There are probably dozens of them in Hollywood.

And people are turning their symbols of slavery into fashion items. The *Daily Mail*, a British tabloid, ran a picture of the Duchess of Cornwall who had, they drooled, 'opted for a bold, printed mask, decorated with turquoise, gold and navy peacock feathers'.

Worst of all there are stories that when schools reopen in September some children will be forced to wear masks and maintain social distancing. This is beyond obscene. Parents should threaten to sue the headmistress or headmaster responsible for such child abuse.

Unless we rise up and rebel the masks will never go away.

The plan is very precisely defined.

In the UK, the Government has given people a loophole. For example, anyone who has a respiratory disorder or a mental disorder doesn't have to wear a mask. Also, children under 11 don't have to wear masks.

But there's a snag: no one can get an exemption certificate.

Astonishingly, GPs have been instructed not to provide exemption certificates for anyone. The absence of officially signed exemption certificates will make it easy to progress to the next stage when mask wearing will be compulsory for everyone.

Now that Cressida Dick, the boss of the Metropolitan Police in London, has cruelly told mask wearers to shame those not wearing masks, the pressure on those who are physically or mentally ill will be unbearable.

And so most of those people will put on their masks – even if it makes their breathing more difficult or causes them enormous distress.

Soon the masks, symbols of oppression and slavery, will be mandatory for anyone who wants to go into a shop to buy food.

And then the next step will make it compulsory for people to wear masks in the street or even in their own homes. The cameras in our telephones and televisions will identify those who are breaking the law.

The collaborators who have been wearing masks on public transport and in shops may grumble but they will accept the extension of the law – particularly when it is reinforced, as it will be, with more threats about a second wave and a mutated, more deadly virus.

Those who object will be vilified.

So what next?

Well, having pushed us into wearing masks all the time they will want to push us a little further as part of our training.

And so then we will have to wear plastic or rubber gloves all the time.

And the punishments for not wearing a mask will gradually rise. Within a very short time the punishment will be imprisonment. Anyone not wearing a mask and gloves will be sent to prison.

I am astonished, and rather saddened, that so many people around the world have accepted mask wearing without protest. Although it is perfectly understandable when the punishments are draconian as they are in some countries.

To me the real tragedy is that now that they have been softened up by their house arrest, and the constant fear making propaganda, millions actually want the regulations to be tougher. They want more lockdowns and stricter laws about mask wearing.

What the devil is wrong with these people?

Why are so many not questioning what is happening? Can't they read and think for themselves? The answers sadly are clearly No and No.

Of course, in some countries there have been effective protests and mask laws have been withdrawn. In one American state, local sheriffs refused to arrest people who demonstrated against house arrest.

But sadly, Britons have become the biggest wimps on the planet. Whatever happened to the British phlegm that got us through World War II?

One explanation is that the problem is something called cognitive dissonance. Many people just cannot believe that governments could tell so many lies and that politicians could be so deceitful. The zombies and the trolls aren't very bright and are unable to see the big picture. They aren't bright enough to see things in perspective. They don't believe anyone could tell such big lies.

The zombies and trolls have never been properly educated; they are content to believe what they are told or what they read on a lavatory wall; they are incapable of thinking for themselves. Actually, they are incapable of thinking at all. The education process devised by the United Nations over the last few decades has been designed to enforce a belief in collectivism. And that is what has happened. These are people who watch or listen to the BBC and believe what they see or hear and who believe that *The Guardian* is a newspaper – and do not realise it is a propaganda sheet built on money from slave trading and pushing us ever onwards to a new slavery.

Brighter folk can see through the lies and they can understand what is happening.

Another explanation is the zombies and the trolls have a sense of entitlement that closes their eyes to the world around them.

A toxic mixture of reality television and social media has created life goals that are far removed from reality. It is salutary that many zombies and trolls don't have 'friends' or 'contacts': they have 'followers' and 'fans'. There is little proper debate on social media for disagreement. If a troll comes across someone with a point of view that differs from their own their only response is to resort to abuse and a sense of outrage that someone should hold another point of view.

I wonder how many trolls know that the personality traits which trigger heart disease (and which are just as potent as smoking and fatty food) include hostility and extreme self-involvement?

There is going to be a veritable epidemic of heart disease in another decade's time and thousands of zombies and trolls will be demanding instant heart transplants. They won't get them, of course. Transplants will be reserved for the elite.

And there may be another reason why there are so many zombies and trolls around.

I have been pointing out for 30 years that our drinking water is enriched with female hormones. It is clear that those hormones are now having a dramatic effect on the human race. There's more about this, incidentally, on my video entitled, 'Is Tap Water Safe to Drink?'

The problems started in the 1960s when millions of women started taking the contraceptive pill. The hormone residues from those pills are excreted in their urine.

Look at what happens then:

After going through standard purification procedures, waste water containing the hormone rich urine is discharged into fresh water rivers.

Drinking water is often taken from rivers.

The water is then purified again – but water purification programmes cannot remove hormone residues.

By the 1990s, it was clear that our drinking water contained female hormones. A report from the UK Environmental Agency concluded that 57% of roach in one river had changed sex. And it is also now known that human male fertility has fallen in recent years.

It is the hormones in the water which explains why so many members of both sexes are constantly confused about their sexuality. Like teenagers struggling with a hormone maelstrom they aren't sure whether they are male or female. Many want to change sex. Some then want to change back. This explains why male zombies and trolls tend to be effeminate and stupid and female zombies, trolls and mask wearers tend to be stupid, confused, irritable and sulky.

And I think the zombies, the trolls, the mask wearers have all been drinking too much tap water. Too many cups of tea, perhaps?

This explains why male zombies and trolls tend to be effeminate and stupid and female zombies, trolls and mask wearers tend to be stupid, confused, irritable and sulky.

So, there you are. The small, poorly developed brains of the trolls and the zombies have been permanently damaged by watching the BBC, reading *The Guardian* and drinking tap water.

There are millions of zombies and trolls around because they are naïve, gullible, poorly educated, unintelligent, immature and self-important but ultimately terrified of authority because the hormones in the drinking water have turned them into permanent teenagers.

They may be beyond our help.

The other day I made a video about the BBC fact checkers and mentioned not paying the licence fee – because if you give the BBC money it is, in my view, akin to supporting terrorism. I just want to add that if you live in England and the BBC's gestapo knock on your door to see if you have a TV set, you do not have to speak to them, open the door or let them in unless they have obtained a court order and/or have the police with them. You don't have to pay the licence just because you own a television set. Check out the rules. It isn't difficult to not have to give the BBC money.

Finally, I can demolish the whole coronavirus nonsense in less than three minutes. Everything in this list can be verified.

Many doctors, including Dr Fauci, the American coronavirus supremo, have admitted that the risk of dying with coronavirus may be similar to the risk with the flu.

The flu can kill 650,000 people a year around the world. Even though governments everywhere have admitted fiddling their totals, the covid-19 death total is similar to the global flu total.

Here's how they fiddled the figures. In the UK, for example, anyone who tested positive for the coronavirus and subsequently died was officially a covid-19 death – whatever else they had wrong with them.

The vast majority of those dying with the coronavirus were over 80 and had many other health problems. The risk for fit, young individuals is very small. The risk for children is smaller than the risk of being hit by lightning.

Research has shown that masks are dangerous, don't prevent the spread of infection and almost certainly do more harm than good. The virus can go straight through the material of a mask. And mask wearing affects blood oxygen levels. At least two people have died through wearing masks. I've quoted figures and papers on my website www.vernoncoleman.com and in other videos.

Many of those promoting the coronavirus horror story are linked in some way to the vaccine industry or the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation – which itself has strong financial links to the vaccine industry. For example, the Chief Scientific Advisor in the UK was formerly a senior executive at GSK – one of the big vaccine makers.

The British Government has admitted that at least four times as many people have died as a result of the lockdowns and other control measures as will have died from the coronavirus. The remedy has been much deadlier than the disease. Millions are waiting for cancer tests and treatment because hospitals were closed. And some hospital departments in the UK are still closed.

Neil Ferguson, the man whose predictions led to the lockdowns had produced a number of inaccurate predictions before he made wildly pessimistic predictions about the coronavirus. His track record is appalling. The college where he works has financial links to Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and vaccines.

Exactly the same mistakes have been made in almost every country in the world. For example, sick old people were taken out of hospital and dumped in care homes – resulting in tens of thousands of deaths in each country. That couldn't be a coincidence – so it had to be a plan. If you remove the care home deaths from the UK total, you end up with a maximum of around 20,000 deaths (though that is a massive exaggeration because they included flu and anyone who tested positive) which is much smaller than the annual flu death total.

The number of people who have caught the coronavirus worldwide is now said to be around 10 million. But the flu can affect 1 billion in a single year.

These are facts which cannot be disputed, though they are being suppressed. Print out the list and give copies to doubters. I find it difficult to believe that anyone could still want to wear a mask once they were aware of these simple facts.

August 5th 2020

The Plan to Create Unending Misery

The psy-op specialists must be proud of themselves.

Their plan, of course, is to make us miserable and confused. They know that if we are uncertain and bewildered and frightened we will be more pliable; more manageable.

And so, in countries all over the world, the psychologists working for the people pulling the strings are treating their citizens like prisoners of war. The brainwashing specialists have devised, and are constantly updating, a barefaced plan to create unending misery. We have to be dominated, turned into slaves and controlled.

They know that their plan will split the country – though not into equal parts.

One part, inevitably the largest, will consist of the weaker, more gullible individuals who will accept any lie they are told as long as it is told frequently and loudly. In the UK, these are the people who swallowed the global warming nonsense and who voted Remain because they believed the lies they were told about the European Union.

The rebels, the resistance movement, the people who reject the lies and who see through their governments' deceptions, are fewer in number but mostly quite determined. In the UK, these were mostly Brexit voters and they mostly thought the climate change hysteria a massive piece of manipulated pseudoscience. They pose a significant threat to the manipulators and the plan now is to demonise them and isolate them and to turn the majority against them so that eventually they are broken and will do as they are told.

So, for example, those who dutifully wear masks in shops will be praised as good citizens, as local heroes, as people who care for their community. There is no science showing that mask wearing is of any value, of course, but that doesn't worry the manipulators. Besides, anyone who is symptomatic, and likely to spread any infection, is already under strict instructions to isolate themselves.

The dutiful citizens, compliant in every respect, have been co-opted as part time police officers and guardians of the State. They have been officially instructed to shame those not wearing masks; to embarrass them and to make them feel uncomfortable and guilty.

Everywhere you look politicians, civil servants and the mass media are busy doing everything they can to create and spread news fear while constantly making sure that the old fears were kept alive.

In one of my brainwashing videos I mentioned that in the guidance given to the British Government it was pointed out that 'a substantial number of people still did not feel sufficiently personally threatened'.

That's us they're talking about. We are not sufficiently personally threatened. Why would they want us to be so threatened? What ulterior motive could there possibly be? Could I have been right back in March when I suggested that one of the reasons for the hoax was to get us ready for mandatory you-know-what?

Their effective, clinical winding up of the fear process has been designed to cause the greatest harm. It's a barefaced plan to cause misery and despair.

When we are under stress our bodies produce a hormone called cortisol. Lots of stress equals lots of cortisol in our bodies.

And guess what: patients who have lots of cortisol in their bodies are more likely to die from covid-19 than people who are calm and relaxed. And, of course, since elderly, frail people with illnesses are more likely to die anyway, they are the ones who are going to be most affected by stress.

So there we are: one of the reasons why the Government has been deliberately terrifying us is because they know that we will have more cortisol in our bodies and they know that the extra cortisol will push those who have co-morbidities over the edge.

It's yet another type of mass murder.

(Incidentally, why is covid-19 commonly written as Covid-19? Why the initial capital? We don't write 'Malaria' or 'Tuberculosis' – both of which, incidentally, kill far more people than covid-19). Is this merely to make this modestly significant disease appear more important than it is? I confess with embarrassment that I fell for this myself once or twice.)

All these things are quite extraordinary. No western democracy has ever worked against its own people so cruelly and with such steely determination.

The immediate intention is to make us all frightened and miserable. It doesn't matter if the rebels appear feisty or even angry. The brainwashing specialists know that in due course they will, if given a little time, succeed in breaking the free thinking citizens.

All round the world people are fighting their own governments. In the UK, for example, Johnson, Hancock and company have made themselves our enemies just as Hitler and company were our enemies in 1939 and the 1940s. Johnson seems to me to be a gullible simple-minded buffoon who is dancing on the end of a piece of string being jiggled by Cummings. Hancock seems to me to be just a pompous, half-witted prefect who would be out of his depth if he were a small town mayor. But they have behind them billionaire manipulators, global organisations, the Bilderbergers and the might of the world's press. Before them, doing the dirty work for them on a day by day basis, they have a small army of Common Purpose trained bureaucrats. The thought is always of the State. Everything is done in the name of collectivism. Individuality and democracy are as out-of- date as cloche hats and feather boas.

The only hope for us, the rebels, is that we can succeed in converting some of the fearful and dutiful citizens to our point of view. To do that we must counter the misinformation as best we can. We have to hope that in the fullness of time we will be able to gather to our side enough citizens so that we become a majority or, at the very least, a sizeable and vocal minority.

It's tricky, of course, and it is going to get ever more difficult because those of us who see through the absurd lies and spot the manipulations, are facing the entire might of the State apparatus, combined with and supported by a compliant media which has willingly suppressed the truth.

The reporting of this massive take-over of the world has been a disgrace. The mass market media has been bought and simply does it best to ramp up the fear and drive the yearning for a vaccine as the only way out of the chaos. The media have been paid to promote the lies and by slanting the news and consistently repeating the same threats, they're doing their job very effectively.

The British Broadcasting Corporation has always been a propaganda machine and an utter disgrace, as untrustworthy as a junkyard dog, but I am surprised at how cheaply the rest of the mainstream journalists have been bought.

During the lockdown, newspapers and magazines were full of articles by journalists writing about their experiences under house arrest. They described how brave and resourceful they were. They gave us intimate details of their dinner parties and productive business meetings conducted by zoom, they showed us film of their silly dances and they gave us lists of all the books they've read, the films they'd seen and the foreign languages they had learned. They wrote about the coronavirus crime as though it had been a great adventure: a weekend's glamping expedition in darkest Snowdonia or a sleepover with chums.

Now the same writers are showing us how to turn our masks into fashion accessories. They are trying to normalise the distinctly abnormal. They are pouring verbal acid on anyone who goes into a shop without a mask. They say nothing about the contradictions, the absurdities and the way the science is being ignored whenever it is considered inconvenient to the billionaires. They lie about the dissenters and when that doesn't seem to be working they simply ignore whatever truths are unearthed.

Each morning, I wake up thinking I must have imagined what has been happening. And then when I realise that I haven't, I feel as though I am living in a bad science fiction movie. The nightmare in which we are living cannot possibly be true. Is this purgatory or some dark hinterland between life and death. I wonder often how many million people are contemplating suicide as the only way out of this obscene piece of global manipulation.

The mass media announced with great excitement that retail sales rebounded since the end of the lockdown. Imagine that! Shops are open and people can leave their homes and the chattering classes are surprised, amazed and delighted that retail sales have gone up a little.

The plan, of course, is to get rid of all High Street shops and shopping centres so that we do all our shopping online. In the UK, planning laws have been changed to make it easy to turn a shop into flats.

The social distancing will help destroy bricks and mortar shops. The absurd markings on the floor, the inconvenient one way systems which vary from the impractical to the incomprehensible to the downright annoying, the bottles of hand sanitiser placed by the door with the command that the goo be used before entering, the queues outside as shop staff limit the number of customers within the shop, the growing refusal to accept cash – with advice being given to shops on how to take advantage of all the ways to sell things without using cash. (I predict, by the way, that the one country in the world where cash will remain popular will be Columbia – where some businessmen have huge stocks of the stuff to get rid of.)

And the masks.

Oh yes, those nasty little masks.

There are some shop staff who now refuse entry to those not wearing masks. Others insist on questioning customers, demanding details of their medical history. It's impertinent, it's humiliating and it is going to drive shoppers away. Shop owners and shop assistants who don't realise what is happening will be closed before Christmas.

When you shop online there are no queues, no social distancing commands, no nasty skin sanitiser to give you a skin rash and no need for a mask. You have to pay by card, it is true, but you probably have to pay by card in a shop too.

And you can make yourself a coffee whenever you feel like one.

The Global Reset requires us to do all our shopping online. The plan is to get rid of all small businesses – especially shops. And it's working, damnit; even charity shops are closing their doors.

Incidentally, an aside, some shop assistants have been ordered by their bosses to wear masks. And some have been very distressed; unable to breathe, especially on warm days. Eight hours in a mask is not pleasant. I cannot believe this is legal. I strongly suggest that assistants told they must wear masks contact their trade union for clarification.

And there is no room for fun in our future, either.

That is why the rules governing pubs and restaurants are so utterly absurd. Anyone wanting to visit a pub will be told to order their drink on a phone app so that the Government will know what you order. Presumably, those of us who wouldn't know an App if it stood up and barked will have to do without.

In hotels, guests will be advised to have meals delivered by room service. Oh what a lot of fun holidays and weekend breaks will be. I feel for all those folk who love putting on posh clothes for dinner. Getting all spruced up to sit on the bed to eat your dinner just won't be the same.

There is no room for pleasure in the new world order. We will be living in high rise apartments, close to our employment. Our shopping will be delivered. Our entertainment will be provided by the box in the corner of the room. No laughing, no thinking.

If you think I am exaggerating take a look at Agenda 21 and the plans for the Global Reset. It's absolutely terrifying. And the same sort of things are happening everywhere.

In India, over 122 million people lost their jobs in the month of April alone. In Qatar, there is or was a penalty of three years in prison for not wearing a face mask in public. Who can keep up? And in Panama, where the lockdown allows men and women to leave their homes on alternate days, transgender citizens were apparently complaining that they couldn't go out on either day.

If I put this stuff in a novel I'd be stoned to death by the readers.

A few years ago, there were a lot of threats about ID cards and iris scans being introduced. I wrote about them and helped campaign against them.

The public thought about it, considered the evidence and said a very loud, 'no thank you'.

We need some of that good sense and determination again.

They want to destroy freedom and democracy.

Well the bastards aren't going to win.

We are the resistance.

If you meet people who aren't yet on our side please ask them to watch the video entitled, 'We are the victims of the greatest crime in history' – it's a good introduction to the whole bizarre story from the beginning up until today.

August 9th 2020

How Many Billion Could the Covid-19 Vaccine Kill or Damage?

'The search for new vaccines for old diseases is endless. Some plans are imaginative. Scientists have apparently developed a banana vaccine by creating genetically engineered banana plants. There are plans to develop bananas which 'protect' against hepatitis B, measles, yellow fever and poliomyelitis. Other scientists have developed a genetically engineered potato designed to be used as a vaccine against cholera. The active part of the potato remains active during the process of cooking, and so a portion of genetically engineered chips could soon be a vaccine against cholera. There is a planned genetically engineered vaccine which will provide protection against 40 different diseases. The vaccine, which will contain the raw DNA of all those different diseases, will be given to newborn babies to provide them with protection for life.'

I wrote those words for my book Anyone *Who Tells You Vaccines are Safe and Effective is Lying*. And I wrote that paragraph in 2011.

Predictably, I was attacked with some vehemence by many people inside and outside the medical and nursing professions.

There was much shaking of heads and wagging of fingers and critics fell over themselves to condemn me for revelations which were regarded as more suitable for a science fiction novel than for a serious book about vaccination.

But lo and behold, the covid-19 fraud has provided an excellent opportunity for scientists everywhere to start shouting publicly about their wonderful new plant based vaccines.

And food based vaccines are now on their way.

The absolutely excellent Christian Westbrook, whose website Ice Age Farmer is a better source of information about all aspects of food than anything on the mainstream media and in my opinion approximately a million times more honest and useful than anything ever broadcast on the BBC, recently produced a video detailing the latest news about vaccines in genetically modified tomatoes and other foods. The plan is, of course, to modify the DNA of the foodstuff so that as it grows it produces the appropriate vaccine. And since covid-19 is the fashionable disease of the moment, and the fraudulent reason for bringing Agenda 21 into your home and your life, then the vaccines are, of course, designed for covid-19. You won't need a jab – you'll just have to eat a specially grown and genetically modified tomato. Or whatever fruit or vegetable they choose for their vaccine. Tobacco plants are apparently excellent for growing vaccines. Incidentally, I'm not sure what would happen if you were, over a period of time, to eat 12, 24 or 36 vaccine contaminated tomatoes and I don't think there is any point in trying to find out because I doubt if anyone else knows either.

Naturally, the pharmaceutical industry is constantly searching for more and more new vaccines and wherever they spot the beginnings of a market, a demand, they will do their best to serve up something appropriate. I have lost count of the number of times I have read of researchers working on a vaccine to prevent cancer.

Meanwhile, the drug companies continue with the old faithfuls; the profitable cash cows which keep the billions pouring in. Every year, new flu jabs appear on the market.

I don't know about you but I can no longer keep up with what is going on. I have long since abandoned trying to work out which vaccines are very dangerous and which are just a bit dangerous – and to whom. The only certainty is that manufacturing (and giving) vaccines is big business. The people who sell vaccines make a lot of money. And the doctors who give them (or who authorise nurses to give them on their behalf) make a lot of money too. That, by the way, is one of the reasons why doctors rarely if ever criticise vaccination programmes. (The other reason for keeping quiet is that doctors who do dare to speak out about vaccine hazards are likely to lose their licence to practice.)

Vaccination is a big, and very profitable, industry. Covid-19 is vaccine bonanza time for drug companies and doctors. At the latest count there were over 100 companies and other groups hurrying to be the first with a covid-19 vaccine – and the chance to sell seven billion doses once, twice or even four times a year. This is bonanza time for the vaccine companies and for the doctors who will give the vaccines.

I am not sure, by the way, just how keen doctors will be on vaccines in foods. As I have pointed out, doctors make a fortune out of giving vaccines. Will they be able to make money out of prescribing tomatoes? Quite possibly. I can hear it now. 'Take one of these tomatoes once a day every three months.'

What happens, incidentally, to those people who are allergic to tomatoes? Or who just hate the damned things?

It will be easy to manufacture and sustain reasons for the vaccine to be needed.

The testing programme currently being used for covid-19 is woefully inaccurate. It is at best, less than 50% accurate and it produces a good many false positives. And even if there aren't any real cases of covid-19 around, the testing will, by producing false positives, sustain the myth that the disease is still around and still dangerous.

Indeed, if the authorities want to close down a town or even a single establishment – a pub where the landlord has been seen to be lax about enforcing the rules for example – all they have to do is increase the amount of testing. Even if no one has the disease there will, inevitably, be lots of positives. So then the new gestapo can close down the town or the pub or whatever.

Let me now tell you something about vaccine testing and the side effects. This is the scary truth that no one has mentioned. You will never hear this from any government hired doctor or scientist. But I promise you this is true.

Serious side effects may occur with drugs or vaccines after a considerable number of patients have taken the drug or had the vaccine.

So, for example, it may be that a vaccine only kills or seriously damages 1 in every 10,000 people. It may kill or seriously damage 1 in every 100,000. Or it may kill or seriously damage 1 in every 1,000. The numbers vary.

But the initial testing programme will probably never show up those dangerous side effects.

And here's why.

Developing and testing a new vaccine usually takes 10-15 years and the whole development programme has been well established over decades. In the US, the regulations for vaccine development were first created in 1902 – and were the forerunner of the National Institutes of Health. In the EU, there is the European Medicines Agency. And of course the WHO has recommendations. All these rules are considered necessary because there have over the years been many vaccine calamities. Doctors and governments don't like to mention how often things go disastrously wrong but I detailed some of the bad examples in the book I mentioned. It's enough to say that governments around the world have secretly paid out billions of dollars to patients and relatives injured or killed by vaccines. Bill Gates has, of course, insisted that vaccine developers who produce a covid-19 vaccine will be immune from legal action. They could produce a vaccine that killed 50% of the world's population and not have to pay a penny in damages.

The first stage in developing a vaccine usually lasts a few years and it involves experimenting with various possible antigens – that might trigger a response and provide protection against a disease.

Once a possible vaccine looks promising it is tested on animals.

I have, for over half a century, argued that animal experiments are pointless and misleading. Drug companies always ignore the results if a product is shown to cause cancer in animals for example. They dismiss such inconvenient results by arguing that animals are different to people so the results don't matter.

The experiments on animals usually last a couple of years and many vaccines never get past this stage. Either the vaccine doesn't work or it turns out to be remarkably lethal.

With covid-19 however, governments have allowed drug companies to skip the animal testing and go straight into testing on humans.

Once animal tests have been done, or in this case, not done, the next stage is to test out the vaccine on a fairly small group of people –usually no more than 100. Attempts will usually be made to give the infection to the people taking part in the test. If the vaccine does its job then some, at least, of the brave souls involved in the trial won't get the disease.

If those tests are successful then Phase Three can start.

In Phase Three, the idea is to give the vaccine to more people – certainly several thousand. And the vaccine will be tested against a placebo.

And if all goes well then the manufacturer will apply for a licence and, no doubt, organise some sort of celebration.

Once a vaccine has been produced it will be regarded as suitable for mass use. Technically vaccine manufacturers may continue to test their vaccine for efficacy and safety if they would like to do so.

The idea is to see if lots of people who had the vaccine suddenly go blind or die a year after being vaccinated. And in an ideal world it would be nice to know if the vaccine interferes with other vaccines or prescription drugs or even with genetically modified foods. Who knows? When you start putting stuff into people's bodies the sky is the limit as far as side effects are concerned. With a drug taken by mouth you can at least stop the drug if serious problems develop. That's a bit more tricky with stuff that has been injected into the body with the idea of creating some sort of reaction.

But these long-term tests are voluntary.

So you can imagine how often they are done.

You can, however, see now why testing a vaccine usually takes a decade or more.

But with the vaccine for covid-19 the plan is to get the licence in months.

And in my view the vaccine will not be safe in that time period.

Despite the claims made by pro-vaxxers, which is to say just about every politician, doctor, journalist and buffoon in the world, vaccines are not entirely safe.

Doctors don't have to report problems with vaccines and patients hardly ever do because they don't usually realise the connection.

Even so, around 30,000 adverse vaccine events are reported every year. And of those, 3,000 to 4,500 are serious – which is to say they cause permanently disability or death. And that's just in the United States.

There are three huge problems with the covid-19 vaccine.

First, there is the problem that it is possible that not enough volunteers will have been given the vaccine to test it for safety. And, remember, once the testing is over the vaccine will be approved for distribution.

Statistically, you have to test on a lot of patients if you are going to spot serious side effects. If a serious side effect occurs in 1 in every 10,000 patients – and I think that was a figure which Bill Gates mentioned – then you will really need to do tests on many more patients. One important text book on vaccines suggests that in order to detect a significant difference for a low frequency event, a trial would have to include 60,000 subjects – half of them in a control group, receiving no vaccination.

So, it's fair to say that the phase three testing for each of the 100 or so new vaccines will need to involve 60,000 people. That means finding six million people prepared to be guinea pigs for a new vaccine because you can't test more than one vaccine on the same person. I can't see them finding six million guinea pigs. So I suspect that the tests will involve fewer patients.

It's no wonder that Gates had demanded the drug companies making the vaccines have no legal liability.

By the way, individual doctors and nurses can, of course, still be sued and damages will, I suspect, run into billions. Medical insurance companies will go bust and so will thousands of doctors and nurses. They might like to think about that.

A fatality risk of 1 in 1,000 for a drug that may save your life is very acceptable.

One in 1,000 is rotten odds for a drug or vaccine you don't really need.

The second problem is that governments will be tempted to roll out the vaccine very quickly. They've been promoting the vaccine very hard and promising that once there is a vaccine we can all get back to normal. That was obviously a lie but that's what they said so they'll want to get on with things and they will doubtless give the vaccine to too many people too quickly

And, remember, you need to observe patients for quite a while because some problems will only occur later, much later. It may be months or years before serious side effects are seen – especially if the vaccine is prepared using new techniques.

So, if a new vaccine is rolled out and given to nearly seven billion patients in a matter of weeks, the serious problems will only be seen after all the individuals have been vaccinated.

And if, say, 1 in 1,000 people die or are brain damaged then there will be seven million people dead or brain damaged as a result of the vaccination programme.

Arch pro-vaxxer Bill Gates suggested that there might perhaps be problems with 1 in 10,000 people (and he doesn't know whether it will be 1 in 10,000 or 1 in 1,000 or 1 in 100) then there will be 700,000 dead or seriously damaged people. That is 700,000 previously healthy individuals. And, under these exceptional circumstances, I believe that's pretty much the best case scenario. And it is, of course, far more than the total number of people alleged to have been killed by covid-19 around the world.

The third problem is, of course, that serious problems might occur a long time after the vaccine has been given. Who is going to monitor all those patients? My guess would be no one.

Those are all usual, fairly standard problems with a vaccine which has taken 10-15 years to produce.

The covid-19 vaccine will probably be in use within months of being made. Indeed, companies are already making millions of doses of vaccines which have not yet finished their tests. The UK government has already bought well over 100 million doses of vaccine and a huge supply of needles and syringes.

So far it's all sounding a little iffy.

And to all these risks must be added the fact that Gates' doesn't seem to have any entirely trouble free history as far as his various adventures are concerned. His genetic modification of mosquitoes is terrifying many. And there is all that talk about his polio vaccine – which I discussed in previous videos.

There is also the fact that results of a test of one vaccine for covid-19 showed that many volunteers reported mild or moderate side effects. Over half experienced pain, 16% had fever, 28% had headache and 34% suffered from fatigue. Patients who had a higher dose of the vaccine suffered even worse with 57% having pain, 32% having fever, 29% having headaches and 42% having fatigue.

As one analysis reported, the level of mild and moderate symptoms with this covid-19 vaccine is markedly higher than that associated with the covid-19 infection itself. How many people will be keen to have a vaccine when there is a good chance that they will suffer more than if they develop the disease? And, remember, a lot of people who develop the covid-19 disease have few or no symptoms.

And there was another problem with the vaccine that I've just mentioned. Older patients didn't develop very good levels of immune response. And, of course, the vast majority of those who died of covid-19 were over 80-years-old.

Still, it is perhaps reassuring for British citizens to know that Neil Ferguson is acting director of the Vaccine Impact Modelling Consortium at Imperial College. This consortium, by the way, is funded by, among others, GAVI, the vaccine alliance, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

But with covid-19 vaccine there is a fourth problem – the biggest problem of all.

Some manufacturers are using a brand new method of making vaccines called third generation vaccines. These contain DNA or RNA technology and are injected into the body and taken up by the cells to change the immune system. The technology is designed to turn your body's cells into viral-protein making machines.

Instead of injecting a piece of a virus into the human recipient, synthesised genes are used. It's gene therapy.

Those having the vaccine will be genetically modified like a soya bean or one of Bill Gates' mosquitoes. The artificial gene will be incorporated into your DNA and you will become a different person. For ever. Serious, possibly deadly side effects, might not appear for years or even generations.

No one knows how dangerous this vaccine could be because it's new. Drug companies admit they don't know what will happen or what could go wrong. It is a massive experiment.

Here's what the WHO has to say:

'Many aspects of the immune response generated by DNA vaccines are not understood. However, this has not impeded significant progress towards the use of this type of vaccine in humans, and clinical trials have begun.'

That's the World Health Organisation.

Governments and YouTube tell us we must listen to the WHO so I will repeat that:

'Many aspects of the immune response generated by DNA vaccines are not understood. However, this has not impeded significant progress towards the use of this type of vaccine in humans, and clinical trials have begun.'

Naturally, the drug companies making these vaccines know that they could be very harmful. Moderna, one of the drug companies involved, has admitted that there could be significant adverse events.

The fact is that if you have a DNA or RNA vaccine you will become a genetically modified human being. You will be an experiment.

The vaccine might prove to be absolutely lethal.

Can they guarantee that everyone who has it will not drop dead in eighteen months?

I don't believe they can.

And what if they decide to give you a food with a vaccine inside it? The tomato or the potato or the banana or whatever that I mentioned at the start of this video and first wrote about in 2011.

How safe will that be?

I have no idea, and I would welcome an honest and disinterested appraisal by experts not connected with the vaccine industry or with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Though to be honest I'm not entirely sure where they would find such experts.

And, of course, thanks to Bill Gates, the companies making this new covid-19 vaccine will have full legal immunity. If things go wrong they will not be legally liable.

Now if the disease for which the vaccine was being prepared was killing millions then the risk might be worth taking.

But it has been proved time and time again that covid-19 kills no more people than the flu. The lockdowns and other procedures have killed more people than the disease.

So, how deadly will the covid-19 vaccine turn out to be?

As far as the medical establishment is concerned you should remember that I am persona non grata. They and the mainstream media think I'm dangerous though despite many lies about me, they can't point to anything I've got wrong. So they largely settle for abuse, lies and distortions.

I believe that everything I have told you is true.

I do not believe that the new covid-19 vaccine will have been properly tested. I do not believe a vaccine is necessary. I worry about what it might contain. I worry about the fact that those recommending vaccination will not debate with me. I worry about the past record of the major drug companies – take a look at my other videos. And I worry endlessly that they want to give the covid-19 vaccine to every living soul on earth.

And all that is before I start to worry about what might have been added to the vaccine, how much it may change my genetic make-up – and whether or not a vaccine might be designed to in some way change my conscious state or my personality.

Gates is pushing Moderna's RNA vaccine although, or perhaps because, it seems possible genetic changes could be passed to future generations. And yet back in January 2020, the Geneva Statement, a group of the world's leading ethicists and scientists, called for an end to experiments involving editing of the human genome. Dr Suhab Siddiqi, Moderna's former Director of Chemistry allegedly told CNN that he would not allow the virus to be injected into his body.

Having looked at all the evidence, I believe a DNA or RNA vaccine could alter my mind, my moods, my personality and my humanity. It could change the way I deal with and respond to the people around me. I would rather be dead.

How many people will the new covid-19 vaccine kill or seriously injure?

I have no idea. And I don't believe anyone else has either.

Bill Gates has no idea.

Dr Whitty has no idea.

Dr Fauci has no idea.

And UK Minister Matt Hancock, a keen pro-vaxxer, doesn't know.

And none of them dares debate with me or, presumably, anyone else.

If I'm wrong why not debate with me, crush my arguments and make me look stupid?

Could it possibly be that they're frightened to debate because they know I'm right?

Incidentally, as an aside, I don't want to debate with anyone. I have no financial interest in these videos and I certainly don't want to be a public figure. I'm an author, no more and no less, and I'd rather stay here in my comfy chair and look after my wife and the wildlife in our garden and write another book about Bilbury or Mrs Caldicot's adventures. I'd much prefer it if someone else opposed to this vaccine took on the pro-vaxxers.

It may sound crazy but I would rather be dead than have one of these absurd, unnecessary vaccines for covid-19 that could alter my body, my mind and my soul. In my opinion that would be a fate worse than death. I will not accept the covid-19 vaccine.

I do not believe that those enthusiastically promoting the covid-19 vaccine understand what is involved. Those who do understand and who agree to have themselves vaccinated should, in my view, be certified insane.

But, nevertheless, everyone should be allowed to choose for themselves whether or not to accept the vaccine. I don't believe in mandatory vaccination and I don't believe in telling people not to have a vaccine.

I just believe in giving people the facts so that they can make up their own minds.

If governments try to make this vaccine mandatory or essential in any way, then those of us who don't want to be vaccinated will have to fight in the courts and hope that the judges aren't on the payroll of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. We will have to fight on the grounds that the vaccination cannot possibly be proved to be safe or effective and that it is being used for a disease known to be no more deadly than the flu.

I think this video is vitally important. Please send it to as many people as you can. YouTube is taking down my videos almost as fast as we can put them up these days. The other day they took down my video entitled, 'Coronavirus: Will Social Distancing Be Permanent?' which I recorded in the middle of May.

So, please, I beg you, share this video or ask people to read the transcript on my website. Print out the article and send a copy to your family doctor. If this video were not accurate I could not and would not say any of this.

There will be no complaints from drug companies or governments – but, one way or another, they will doubtless try to suppress what I have said.

Oh, and one final thought for this video: the American Government and Yale University are collaborating in a trial to determine the best words and phrases to use in order to persuade Americans to accept the covid-19 vaccine.

So watch out for more psychological warfare – everyone questioning or refusing vaccination will be demonised.

August 12th 2020

Forbidden Truths

I struggle each day to understand what is happening. The only certainty is that the world has gone quite mad. We were always rather reclusive but the events of the last few months have made the reclusiveness almost complete.

I cannot bear to go out because the people in masks fill me with a sense of deep and painful despair. Everyone in a mask is a sign of impending slavery. I find it difficult to understand why anyone with more than two brain cells to rub together could possibly take this contrived lunacy seriously. Everything is false and unpleasant, hostile and unwelcoming.

There is a strange madness abroad in the country – with tens of millions now firmly believing in the threat from covid-19 despite the fact that evidence proves without question that they are wrong.

The global prize for scaring its citizens most – and providing the most misinformation – goes to the UK where the Government and the BBC have successfully terrified the population.

Only one third of Britons have gone back to work in the UK – with the remainder working at home or sitting on Bournemouth beach. This compares poorly with the rest of Europe where, on average two thirds of workers have gone back to their offices.

Most startling of all, a recent survey showed that the average Briton believes that 7% of the British population has died of covid-19. That would mean a death total of 4.2 million in the UK alone. The real figure, of course, is probably less than 1% of that.

Still, it's not surprising that people are bewildered and wrong. *The Spectator*, a British magazine, recently published an article reporting that around the world millions had died of the coronavirus. I tried to persuade them to print a correction but the silence was deafening.

In America, Joe Biden, US Presidential candidate for the Democrats, recently claimed that over 120 million Americans had been killed by covid-19. That was clearly absurd but people believe this nonsense.

We shouldn't be surprised at this. Outside the USA, the UK probably has closer links to Gates and the big vaccine manufacturers than most other countries.

At the pavement level, it is nothing more or less than hysteria. At higher levels, I am painfully conscious that there are dark clouds of evil hanging over us all. Manipulative crooks play with our lives with a scandalous lack of respect for the truth, our honour or our dignity.

Children are more likely to be hit by lightning or be neglected to death than to die of covid-19 but there is still talk of keeping schools closed. There has even been talk of closing shops and hostelries so that schools can open. If there is a shred of sense in that I can't find it. You might as well say that schools won't open unless everyone stands on one leg and sings Auld Lang Syne all day.

Mind you, parents who are brave enough to send their children to school should think about saying goodbye to them every morning because they may never see them again. The authorities have given themselves the right to test children, with a test which is about as reliable as Bill Gates, and if the test is positive, they'll snatch the child and run off with them. It used to be called kidnapping but these days it's called public health. They'll ask the child if they had ever coughed and the child will probably say yes I coughed last November and then the poor kid will be labelled as having covid-19 and whisked off to hospital where they'll doubtless pick up one of those nasty special bugs that hospitals specialise in breeding. The parents won't be allowed to see the child alive and they won't be able to see them if they die. You think I'm exaggerating? Remember what happened in care homes?

These are strange times. If the politicians told us to paint our faces blue and carry a bucket of toads with us, there are millions who would do so with enthusiasm. It is a mercy that the loonies at the World Health Organisation are unfamiliar with Macbeth. Double, double toil and trouble. Fire burn and cauldron bubble. Fillet of a fenny snake in the cauldron boil and bake. Eye of newt and toe of frog. Squirt of sanitiser and tongue of dog. Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting. Facial mask, strong plastic gloves, six feet apart and test and trace. Scale of dragon, tooth of wolf. Add thereto a Gatesian vaccine to the ingredients of our cauldron.

It is said that covid-19 can now have medium to long-term effects on some patients. And that, of course, is just the same as the flu – which can cause depression and tiredness for months afterwards. Viruses do things like that.

They are threatening, I kid you not, to knock down care homes and private houses if any residents had the coronavirus while dwelling therein. In theory this is to stop a second wave. Politicians aren't interested in the fact that in many areas there haven't been any deaths for ages.

This demolition nonsense fits neatly with the United Nations Agenda 21 plan to get rid of all private property and to move us all into smart cities. They didn't knock down houses after the plague hit Eyam in Derbyshire. Indeed, the plague ridden houses are still standing and occupied. Houses have never been knocked down because the occupants had tuberculosis or rabies. Or a virus no worse than the flu.

I suspect they will not, however, be knocking down 10 Downing Street where Johnson coughed and suffered

– though perhaps they should.

This reminds me that the EU wanted to knock down Victorian homes in England because they didn't satisfy EU building requirements. I always assumed that by this they meant that Victorian building standards were so much higher than current EU requirements that modern builders were embarrassed to see 150-year-old houses still standing proud while EU approved homes were falling apart after six months. The EU, never forget, has always been part of Agenda 21.

In the UK the Premier League, some sort of football competition I believe, is looking at introducing app based clinical passports for fans. We all know what that means. I hope fans won't let themselves be suckered in. Let the football clubs go bust. It will do them good. No footballer deserves to be paid more than £12 a week. If £12 a week was good enough for Stanley Matthews it should be good enough for anyone.

The politicians and the vaccine soaked scientists are still terrorising the public by warning that the number of cases is still high. What a surprise. You test more people and you find more cases. What a shock that must have been. Most of the people identified are asymptomatic and as fit as fleas. Fitter than fleas were when they were carrying the Black Death.

And, of course, the tests they are using are pretty useless. Governments and their advisors haven't got round to mentioning this but the chances of a test accurately detecting covid-19 are notably less than 50 per cent. In the UK, the Office for National Statistics admits that they don't know the true sensitivity and specificity of the test. The guess is that around four out of five people who actually have the virus will test positive. So one in five who has the disease will test negative. And some people who don't have the disease will be told that they do have it.

In America, the tests seem to be even worse. The current US Centers for Disease Control test kits can produce up to 30% false positives. Some cheaper tests being used are probably ludicrously inaccurate.

What all this means in practice is that covid-19 is probably never going to disappear because as long as tests are done there will be false positives and politicians will respond by ordering completely unnecessary lockdowns – even though no one has the disease. Those predictions that we are going to have to live with covid-19 for years are accurate. But there may not actually be any covid-19 – just a lot of positive tests. And, of course, spurious justification for vaccinating seven billion people entirely unnecessarily.

In an attempt to be of assistance I have devised a valuable new alternative test for covid-19 which could be far cheaper and possibly less confusing than the tests currently being used by governments everywhere. My test can be done at home at no cost whatsoever. All you need is a coin. You toss the coin into the air, catch it and examine it. If it's heads then you've got the disease. If it's tails then you haven't. I shall offer my test to the World Health Organisation as an alternative to the ones currently in use. Since my test will probably show that 50% of all those tested have the disease I suspect that governments everywhere will be thrilled. The test has to be worth at least £1 million but I'll offer it free as an item of public service. Unlike the BBC and the *Guardian* newspaper I don't want any money from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Meanwhile, the fraud thrives and the lunacy continues.

People who would have never dreamt of wearing a mask last year, to protect them from the flu, now wear their masks with enthusiasm to protect them from covid-19 – an infection no worse than the flu. No one has ever suggested that we wore masks to protect us from tuberculosis – a far more significant disease. And yet, in America there is serious talk of people being told to wear their masks in their own homes. Madness. Mask wearers are breathing in toxin filled air rich in carbon dioxide. It's no surprise that the incidence of lung infections is rising. The only logical conclusion is that mask wearing is part of the Agenda 21 plan for a reduced population. How many will die as a result of the mask wearing fetish? A thousand? Ten Thousand? A hundred thousand? Your guess is as good as anyone's. There have already been mask related deaths and there will be more.

The lunacy is global, the same daft rules being introduced everywhere on earth. And people are waking up, of course. There have been demonstrations in England, America, Australia and Germany. Not that you'd know this if you'd confined yourself to the mainstream media. I didn't see much talk of demonstrations on the BBC website. Nor did I see much about the various enterprises backed by Gates: the spraying of dust to block out the sun or the experiment with genetically modified mosquitoes. If there were a competition for fake news, deceit and misguiding the public then in my view the BBC would win all the prizes. Still, what do you expect? This is the organisation which did a deal with the UK government, agreed to provide free TV licences for the over 75s and then reneged on the agreement and is now reputed to be spending £38 million on chasing pensioners – with the intention of sending those who do not pay to prison. This is the broadcaster which has ignored its responsibilities for decades. Bent as a paperclip. Don't do anything illegal but please don't give the BBC any of your money. Avoiding the licence fee isn't difficult. And don't buy DVDs, CDs or books published by the BBC. Tell your MP you want the BBC defunded. If the BBC has to stand alone without money from unwilling viewers it will soon disappear.

Despite the evidence, governments, local councils, quangos and officials of all kinds are still doing their very best to irritate and to make life difficult for everyone but particularly for those who are still daring to refuse to accept the lies being told about the coronavirus, covid-19, masks, vaccines, cash and Uncle Tom Cobbley's refusal to maintain social distancing when consorting with his mates in the pub.

But we're at war with them so I suppose that is what we must expect.

They are lying and suppressing the truth every time they see it. It's like the whack-a-mole game. If they see the truth pop up then they smash it down with a big hammer.

The truth, as we must constantly remember, is the first casualty in war.

Distractions are everywhere as the mainstream media put effort into their attempts to make us forget the stupidity of what is happening. Many of the distractions are just plain silly.

Campaigners, eager to distract us from Agenda 21, the only game in town for those who care about the future, and laughably out of touch with reality, are now demanding that we get rid of phrases such as Achilles's Heel and Adam's Apple. These medical terms are allegedly misogynistic and therefore offensive and unacceptable. I really don't understand people who have so little going on in their lives that they can afford to be upset by such an amazing load of balls.

Come to think of it, I don't suppose I'm allowed to say that either. If I do then this channel will doubtless go tits up.

The world is crumbling and these cretins are fiddling.

Meanwhile, the cruelty, the sadness and the despair are everywhere.

I spoke to a shop assistant who was terribly upset because her employer forced her to wear a mask. I could hardly hear a word she said and she complained that she couldn't breathe properly. She had clearly been crying. She wasn't in a trade union and I don't expect anyone else would help her. What a stupid damned world we are living in. My only advice was that she should ask to wear a visor rather than a mask. Visors are probably as useless as masks but are unlikely to produce the same levels of hypoxia. Incidentally, if you look at a box containing masks you'll probably see a warning that the masks won't stop viruses getting through. They should print that warning on each mask. They print health warnings on cigarette packets. Each mask could have a printed warning saying: 'This mask is entirely useless for the purpose for which it is worn. The wearer is a moron'.

It occurs to me, in passing, that if a shop tries to force you to wear a mask, and you have no alternative but to go there to buy essentials, then you could take down all the details of the person telling you to put on a mask and write down the date and the time. Then point out politely that you are taking notes in case you fall ill while in the shop and need to take legal action against them. Get names and addresses. They'll say they're doing it because it's the law. But in the UK, for example, you don't have to wear a mask if it makes you anxious or upsets you physically. They are lying and exceeding their authority if they say you must wear a mask.

And the mainstream media is, of course, carefully promoting the Government line and demonising those who refuse to wear masks as social and not caring about others. This is wicked nonsense but it will slowly have an effect on people – and will eventually marginalise those who understand the truth, and force them to the very edges of society before throwing them out altogether.

Why aren't doctors screaming out about the pointlessness and danger of forcing people to wear masks for many hours a day?

Some, I know, have tried to speak out and been silenced or lost their jobs. There is no such thing as freedom of speech these days.

A few brave doctors have succeeded in making their voices heard. I have tremendous admiration for two surgeons, Mr Black and Mr Narula, who reported that they had stopped using surgical masks 20 years ago after a series of controlled trials showed that using masks either had no effect on, or actually increased, the risk of post-operative infection.

They point out that it is difficult to see how insisting on a measure shown to be useless or worse will give the public confidence. I sincerely hope neither of these brave surgeons feel the cold hand of the General Medical Council on their collars.

But doctors speaking out are in a minority. They still aren't doing post mortems for heaven's sake. And some hospital departments are still closed. You can, I believe, have a tattoo but in some areas you still can't get physiotherapy.

If doctors really care about what is happening, and the way that patients are being murdered by governments, why don't a hundred get together and write letters to all the newspapers?

Or why don't they just announce that they will resign on a particular date unless the nonsense stops?

Why not just insist that their trade unions speak out against the lies being told?

Why aren't more retired doctors speaking out? They know this is lunacy and they have nothing to lose. Don't they care? Are they are all cryptorchid?

If enough doctors had found the courage to ignore the orders they were given and to speak out, in order to protect their patients and save lives, then this whole criminal enterprise would have been over weeks ago.

I have nothing but contempt for the doctors and nurses who are still keeping silent through all this. Every doctor knows that what we are seeing is a political conspiracy designed to force everyone to be vaccinated with a vaccine which has not been properly tested. Their cowardice has already led to millions of deaths worldwide.

And things are getting worse by the day.

One of the disappointments over the last few months has been the scarcity of celebrities showing good sense and questioning the coronavirus hoax – now better referred to as a crime or a fraud.

One or two celebrities have said a little but then quickly withdrawn their comments when they were held up to ridicule by mask wearing zombies desperate to defend the UN's plans for world domination and eternal slavery .

The only celebrity I know of who has had the courage to stick to his guns is Peter Ebdon, the former World Snooker Champion. He's proved to be an absolute star and has resolutely maintained his position despite the inevitable sniping from small-minded morons. I have enormous respect for him. It ain't easy being a target for small-minded, quarter-witted poltroons.

August 16th 2020

Is This Fraud Ever Going to End?

I sometimes envy the zombies who believe that the only problem is an infection which causes a disease called covid-19.

They get up in the morning, check in the mirror to make sure they haven't died in the night, munch their chocolate flavoured bran flakes, choose a mask that goes best with their chosen outfit for the day and venture out into the world a little nervous but confident that their government is doing its best to protect them in these tricky times.

As they go about their business, they disinfect their hands at every possible opportunity, carefully obey the social distancing rules and wait impatiently for the vaccine.

In a way, I occasionally envy them their ignorance. They are like not very bright goldfish swimming round and round in one of those glass bowls.

People sometimes refer to the ignorant as sheep but this isn't fair.

I have kept sheep and they are far more intelligent than most people imagine. Hardly anyone has bothered to do any research because, like cows and pigs, sheep are just farm animals, and farmers and vets don't have much interest in studying animals whose destiny is to be slaughtered, chopped up and eaten.

For example, the books will tell you that sheep are colour blind. They aren't.

I used to have a four wheel drive vehicle which was the same model as the vet's. My car was blue and his was green. When the sheep saw my car coming they ran towards me because I always gave them biscuits. When they saw the vet coming, they ran away because he always wanted to check their feet and they didn't like that. I later tested with different coloured feed buckets, and I can promise you that sheep are not colour blind. They are actually very bright animals. And they are brave too. My sheep once frightened a sheepdog so much that the dog's owner begged me to call my sheep off his dog.

So, to me, the ignorant thickos who still believe the coronavirus is the new plague are zombies or collaborators.

The vigilance of the collaborators means that every trip to the shops has become something of an ordeal.

The staff in the supermarket are always fine and actually a few seem genuinely sympathetic. But there is invariably one customer who worships Bill Gates, probably has his picture above his bed, and who feels it is his duty to confront any intelligent people he sees with naked faces.

This morning I hadn't got more than three feet into the supermarket when a pompous, sanctimonious mask-finder general, one of Commander Dick's shame police, rushed up to my wife and rudely and aggressively demanded that she put on a mask. That's Commander Dick of the Metropolitan police.

My wife was startled and upset and politely told him that she was exempt. He still scowled and I thought he deserved more. And with my wife's permission I explained that it wasn't really any of his business but that she'd had surgery for breast cancer and a month's radiotherapy which has caused damage which makes breathing difficult. Thanks to the absurd coronavirus hoax, the hospital physiotherapy department is still closed so she is in pain most of the day. I wish someone would explain that to me, incidentally. My wife can have a tattoo, were she so inclined, or her hair done, but she cannot have physiotherapy because the physiotherapy department is still closed. I pointed out to the mask-wearing prefect that nurses at the hospital told her to remove her mask after she almost collapsed with palpitations caused by her condition.

You might have thought a human being would have been embarrassed. Not a bit of it. The Dick police specials are shameless. The cretin, utterly indifferent and uncaring, just shrugged and demanded to know why I wasn't wearing a mask.

I always explain to the thickos that the mask they are wearing does absolutely no good, that mask wearing is dangerous, that they didn't wear a mask last year so why are they wearing one this year and that covid-19 has killed fewer people than the flu.

I do this because I think these zombies need to be educated before they accost an elderly or frail person and cause serious upset.

Sadly, however, in my now generous experience, the mask promoting lunatics always run away when you reply to their muttered, 'where's your mask' mantra. The collaborators compound their selfishness and their ignorance with good old-fashioned cowardice: without exception, they run away. Say something, anything, in reply and they scoot away back to the hole in the skirting board.

And that's what happened with this coward. He ran off. All mouth but no guts.

'You are an idiot!' I shouted at the retreating mask wearer.

Not witty, I admit, but adequate.

The collaborators will destroy our lives as well as their own unless they are brought to heel.

I had trouble in the bank, too. There was, inevitably, a lengthy queue outside which was fine because Bill Gates's cloud of calcium carbonate hanging in the sky was keeping the sun at bay though I wonder how many people will freeze to death when the weather becomes a little chillier. All part of the Agenda 21 plan to get rid of the elderly and the frail?

Eventually, when I got a foot in the door, a girl whom I could identify as a staff member only because of her uniform, asked me where my mask was and wanted to know if I was exempt. I smiled and nodded and she offered to get me a lanyard with a label to hang around my neck to show that I was exempt. Since I don't want a lanyard with a label any more than I want a mask, I just smiled and said no thank you and explained that masks are entirely useless because viruses go straight through the material.

'I know,' she said. 'But wearing a mask gives people confidence.'

What madness. She knows that masks are useless but she thinks they give people confidence. Does she think all their customers are half-witted five-year-olds? The answer is obviously yes.

And talking of five-year-olds, when is someone going to start arresting parents who force small children to wear masks? In England, children under the age of 11 are exempt from mask wearing. (Look at the Government website for the latest information because the rules change almost daily.) There is much talk of authorities taking children away from parents who disapprove of vaccination. I think they've got it the wrong way round. They should be taking children away from parents who force children to wear masks or let them get vaccinated.

Just before we left town, we saw a maskless man come out of the supermarket. Like conspirators we chatted for a few moments. He was quite awake and aware of the fraud being perpetrated upon us. He told us that he watched UK Column and the 'old man in a chair'. He didn't have the faintest idea the old man, without his chair, was standing just two feet away from him. We didn't mention it.

You and I are involved in a war where we are not quite sure whom we are fighting or precisely what their final aims might be – other than the fact that we are destined to be drones, slaves, proles in a world run by a new self-appointed aristocracy.

The minute we think we have worked it out and know what the rules are they change the rules. It is a world which appears to have been designed by Lewis Carroll to make Franz Kafka feel comfortable.

The only stable currency is the lie.

It is no exaggeration to say that it is fair to assume that everything anyone in authority says will be a lie. They do it so naturally that I sometimes wonder if any of the politicians and their advisors realise just how much they are lying. Maybe it's just like breathing. They do it without thinking.

I think we perhaps all misunderstand how vile politicians are. Auberon Waugh once said that the only thing that any of them is really interested in is the chance to make decisions and see them put into effect – to press a button and watch us all jump.

He was right, but the politicians have recently been joined by an army of advisors, hangers on and confidants who are also in it for the power, and who have very real views on how the world should be but who cannot be bothered to stand for election. I suspect that the Rothschilds, the Rockefellers, Gates, Soros and so on are all too arrogant to expose themselves to the ballot box and I fear they all hold us in contempt.

It is often said that the truth will set us free but the one certainty these days is that long before we get there we will be disappointed, frustrated and not a little angry.

They say we must be prepared for a second wave.

A second wave of what?

Did we actually have a first wave? Covid-19 killed fewer people than the flu. What sort of wave is that? More of a ripple really.

How can there be a second wave without a first wave?

We could, I suppose, have a second ripple.

Take out the hundreds of thousands of old people who were murdered in care homes around the world, and the hundreds of thousands who were put down as dying of covid-19 but actually died of something else, and the total number who have allegedly died of the coronavirus can hardly be called a wave. It certainly wasn't much of a pandemic.

In England and Wales the excess number of deaths has fallen below the five year average for the fifth week in a row. Moreover, the figures now show that more than 90% of covid-19 deaths occurred in people over 60 and 90% of those who died in hospital had existing health conditions before they got infected. In due course, the real figures will be available and they will, I suspect, show that over 90% were in their 80s or older, and had two or three co-morbidities.

There are regions of England where I suspect that more people are dying from falling off horses than are dying from the coronavirus. Does that mean that we're having an epidemic of deaths caused by people falling off horses? In many parts of the world anything that actually kills people is a bigger threat than the coronavirus. Is rabies now a global pandemic? How about falling off mountains? I would bet that there have been more suicides, caused by fear and despair for the future than covid-19 deaths in some places in the last month.

Nothing much makes any sense any more, does it?

And yet, as hypnotherapist and author Colin Barron points out, many of the so-called experts on covid-19 don't have any medical qualifications. Neil Ferguson is a mathematician and yet his predictions were used as the basis for the global lockdowns.

Everyone with a certificate in basic woodwork has suddenly become a medical expert.

The other day, the Scottish Daily Mail printed a letter from someone called Professor Greg Philo of Glasgow University who warns, 'the fear is real and we need a strategy to eliminate the virus'.

So, what is Professor Philo's medical speciality? Medicine? Surgery? Epidemiology? General Practice?

None of the above.

The only Professor Philo I could find is a professor of communications and social change.

And if you've got any idea what that means then you have my commiserations.

Why do such people assume the right to pontificate about whether or not a specific virus infection is a particular threat?

As Dr Barron says, there was a time when only taxi drivers were experts on everything. These days even professors of communications and social change want to share their conclusions about a complex piece of global manipulation.

We have reached the strange position where paranoia is no longer a medical condition. It is a rational state of mind. Governments have lied about lockdowns, they have lied about the number of deaths, they have lied about the need for masks and they have lied about social distancing. Trying to dismantle the lies and find the kernel of truth is like playing three dimensional chess, and if that isn't the most mixed up metaphor in history then I'll try again another day.

I can't remember the last time a politician said anything that bore even a faint relationship to the truth. You'd be mad not to assume that everything the dishonest, deceitful cynical politicians and the advisors say is a barefaced lie. We're being ruled by crazed psychopaths who have somehow succeeded in encouraging the collaborators to believe that it is possible to remove all risk from human life.

Politicians and their advisors should be forced to wear logos on their suits to list their sponsors, allegiances and connections. They'd have so many advertising logos they would look like race car drivers. All BBC staff should have EU and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation logos on their clothing at all times. *The Guardian* too. Anyone with links to a drug company should be banned from any sort of public role. As I have shown in previous videos the world's drug companies are more dishonest and dishonourable than tobacco companies. We would be better off if the world were run by a cabal of Columbian drug barons than the pirate crew currently striving for global control.

Telling lies is the new normal in our world.

They say that wearing masks will provide protection. This isn't true. What evidence there is available shows that masks are entirely pointless and potentially dangerous. Only the clinically insane and people with IQs in single figures think masks are of any value whatsoever. Why don't footballers have to wear masks when they're playing? Because masks impede their breathing. Why do even politicians and government advisors agree that those with respiratory problems don't have to wear masks? The answer is obvious – because masks impede breathing.

They say that it will be necessary to introduce more lockdowns to prevent more deaths. But even governments now admit that lockdowns cause more deaths than they prevent. So the only possible reason for having more lockdowns is to kill more people.

They say they need to introduce new laws to avoid a second wave of infections and deaths. The truth is that it was the last lot of laws – the social distancing, the lockdowns and the masks – which have caused the deaths. More laws will result in more deaths.

They say we have to close our borders to keep out the virus. This is bollocks. In March I suggested closing airports to control the infection rate. But airports were left open. Now that the death rate has collapsed, they want to stop people travelling. They are desperate to stop anyone travelling or having a good time. They are deliberately creating fear to sustain their corrupt, satanic ideology.

They say that testing is showing up more cases. This is so deceitful it's worthy of Bernie Madoff. The tests which are being used throw up so many false positives that they are about as much use as a castrated ram in a field full of sheep. And even the politicians and their advisors must realise that if you test ten times as many people then the chances are that you will find more people who have or have had the infection. Tracking and tracing is simply an infringement of our civil liberties. It is of no value whatsoever.

They say the only way we will ever get back to normal will be with a vaccine. This is the biggest lie of all. Worst of all, they say that the new vaccine will be safe. They cannot possibly know this. The dimmest, most stupid person you know can judge whether their new vaccine will be safe as well as they can.

Politicians, advisors, commentators and professors of golf course management claim that the world will not get back to normal until there is a vaccine available.

There is of course, another unspoken option: that the majority will realise that the coronavirus scare is a hoax; a massive fraud deliberately and arranged by people with malignant intentions.

And that's what is going to happen.

I will leave you with a quote from the Robert Donat film version of the Count of Monte Cristo: 'They call me mad because I tell the truth.'

What more can I say?

August 18th 2020

Nothing is Now Impossible

It may seem like hyperbole to compare what is happening to us now to what happened in Europe during World War II.

It's different, of course.

We aren't being bombed, for example.

But the threat to us all, and the world in which we live, is now just as great as it was in 1939 and the 1940s.

In some ways the threat is greater.

Then, we just had to beat a small bunch of deranged psychopaths. And we had the support and leadership of our governments. We had Winston Churchill.

Today, in a bizarre turn, our enemies are our own governments. We are being manipulated, threatened and punished by dictators. We are living in totalitarian states. We have no democracy and very little freedom of speech.

We are fighting people who want to turn us into slaves. The plans of the United Nations and the World Economic Forum are worse than anything thought up by Hitler or Stalin.

We are oppressed by individuals who are just as evil as any of those who slaughtered the innocent across Europe, laying the foundations for the development of the European Union.

The EU: conceived by Nazis, built by Nazis and now loved by Nazis was the first step towards a World Government – the first fascist super state. It was quickly absorbed by the UN into the Agenda 21 plans.

Today, the enemy doesn't wear jackboots or do the goosestep. And this time we have elected and financed our own enemy. Our political leaders are the enemy. We are paying for our own oppressors. In New Zealand, concentration camps have been set up for the tiny number of people who have tested positive. They don't call them that, of course. I think they're holiday camps in newspeak. Or quarantine camps perhaps.

We all have a number of choices, of course.

The easy option is always to join the oppressors – to become collaborators. That's what millions have done. They accept the lies about covid-19 because they cannot believe that their own political leaders would lie so much. They socially distance, they wear the masks, they put themselves under house arrest when ordered to do so. Some have probably even managed to convince themselves that the lies must be true. How could anyone lie so much? How could anyone be as totally incompetent as they say that nice Professor Ferguson is? And doesn't the BBC say that smiling Mr Gates does a lot for charity?

Some people just keep quiet. They say and do nothing for fear of the consequences. They hope that the evil will pass. Or that someone else will speak up and change things for them.

And then there's us.

There are always some difficult buggers who refuse to lie down and accept unjust and absurd laws.

It happened in World War II. The resistance movement played a major part in defeating the Nazis.

And today the resistance movement is all we've got.

It's us. We're the resistance movement, and we're missionaries to the Truth Deniers.

And we're in a war.

You know how, if you bend a paperclip you can never get it back to the way it was? Well, that's our political system. It is bent and cannot be mended. I have long distrusted the party system and it is now clearer than ever that it doesn't work. Our political system, our administration, our local government, our health care system – they are all rotten to the core. Destroyed by unbridled ambition, greed and the dead hand of the brainwashed, indoctrinated hand-maidens of Common Purpose.

We are watching, first hand, as the pseudoscientists and crooks who run the climate change fraud are leading an assault on God, nature and mankind.

Nothing is as it used to be nor as it seems to be. Everything is controlled from afar by people we can't see and over whom we have no control. In the US and Europe, everything is controlled by lobbyists – tens of thousands of them spending billions a year – and ensuring that the principles of Agenda 21 (if we can call them principles) are introduced, adhered to and thoroughly exploited by the rich and the mega rich – cruising the world's seas in huge self-contained super yachts.

Everywhere I look there is deceit and manipulation. Nothing is what it appears to be. So, for example, it seems to me as though every position the World Health Organisation has taken, based on the available scientific research, has been reversed. A couple of months ago, the WHO thought that wearing masks was pointless and unnecessary. The available evidence said they were right. And then suddenly, without the science changing, the WHO changed its mind and masks became mandatory. The only difference? Could it be that Bill Gates had become a major 'shareholder' in the WHO? That's the pro-vaxx organisation not the rock band by the way – though the rock band would probably give better health advice.

On the 28th May 2020, Dr Fauci, the American coronavirus supremo announced that masks are little more than symbolic. They were derided as virtue signalling. And then, suddenly, there is Dr Fauci standing next to

President Trump wearing a mask. In the UK, the Government's medical advisors had dismissed masks as unnecessary. And then suddenly, for no apparent reason, the Government changed its tiny mind and anyone not wearing a mask suddenly became liable to a fine of up to £3,200. The odd figure, incidentally, came from a bizarre and unprecedented system whereby non-mask wearers would be fined £100 for an initial offence with the fine doubling for each subsequent occasion.

Incidentally, what is going to happen to the millions of dumped single use masks? How many people know that if you wash a cloth mask it becomes more useless every time you wash it? And if you don't wash it then you are putting a cloth containing bacteria, fungi and viruses next to your mouth every time you put it on. Legionnaire's Disease is a real and lethal risk. What will happen when vaccines come in? Will those who refuse vaccination be forced to continue to wear a mask as a sign of shame? Perhaps they could issue masks containing yellow stars – just to make the point. And why do so many people wear masks in the street when they don't have to? Just about all the pictures I saw recently of teenagers campaigning for better exam results, showed them wearing masks when they didn't have to. Why? Were they stupid? Or were the photos staged?

Mask enthusiasts often say that masks must be fine because surgeons wear them. This simply displays their ignorance. Not all surgeons do wear masks because studies have shown that wearing them does not reduce infection. Moreover, surgeons usually work in air conditioned, cooled operating theatres. They do their work standing or sitting and they wear masks for relatively short periods of time.

Terrorism, let me remind you, is, according to my definition, politics by intimidation – without any moral restrictions. We are being terrorised by our own governments. Masks must be worn and pubs must be shut.

Is this in homage to the new global religion –Chrislam? The Archbishop of Canterbury provided Christians with a short talk from his kitchen but virtue signalled by shutting churches. What sort of leadership was that?

There is no logic to anything anymore.

Theatres are closed and will stay closed though thespians and artists who behave will receive grants to buy their allegiance. If plays are performed actors will have to respect social distancing rules so no plays by Shakespeare will ever again be performed. There will be no choirs and no opera.

And yet we are allowed to climb into aeroplanes where the air is constantly recirculated, and whatever viruses one traveller has may be shared by everyone by the time the aeroplane lands.

Racism is now so much a part of our lives that no one takes any notice – and if they do then they keep quiet about it. Biden, the Democratic Presidential candidate, who at one point said that 120 million Americans had been killed by covid-19, announced that he would pick as his vice president a woman of colour. No one thought this sexist and racist, though it clearly was.

Ironically, the woman he picked had apparently accused him of being a racist and of sexual assault. It says a good deal to me about opportunistic politicians that the two have, nevertheless, buried any principles they might have had and agreed to work with each other.

Incidentally, Biden has supported just about every war America has started for 30 years.

Politicians and advisors are now talking about our needing to wear masks, and maintain social distancing, indefinitely. That is the sort of indefinitely which means forever. The collaborators who are merrily wearing their fashion masks in the open air in countries where it is not a legal necessity are going to kill humanity.

I wonder how many people know that the phrase, 'If you're not with us you are against us' originated with Jesus Christ and not George W. Bush.

The mass of people have unwittingly joined a conspiracy against themselves. Never before have ordinary people been so cowed, so curiously deferential. Children are frightened because they don't know any better. But the adults who believe the crap they are being fed annoy me enormously. How can anyone have got to adulthood without wanting to question the blatant lies we are currently being fed? The lies are grotesque, inexplicable and indefensible. Those of you with a mischievous sense of humour might be amused by two of my early videos – 'New Law – Everyone Must Now Hop and Wear Galoshes' and 'Everything You Are Allowed to Know but I Can't Tell You What about'.

Inspired by appalling policewoman Dick, who encouraged public shaming, the collaborators happily join their masters in demonising, monstering and abusing those too ill to wear a mask or brave enough to think for themselves. I still think the Dick woman should be arrested and charged with something – inciting harassment, perhaps. If that isn't an offence it should be.

Millions who have never taken any interest in protecting themselves from heart disease or cancer now seem so desperately afraid of covid-19, as harmless as flu let us not forget, that they have happily abandoned their freedom and their rights. Sweden proved that the lockdowns and the masks and the social distancing were all unnecessary but those are facts and facts are no longer popular.

Millions of Britons have enjoyed a summer free of work – on furlough, paid by taxpayers. They've been enjoying themselves on their country's beaches; though I hope they observed the ruling that they should remain six feet six inches away from the lifeguards – so presumably any rescuing had to be done at a distance. I wonder if they will feel quite so jolly when they prepare to go back to work and discover that their jobs have gone. The UN recently estimated that half of the world's jobs will disappear. People who find themselves unemployed this autumn will probably never work again. Ever. I wonder whether people will be angry when they realise just how much the damage is going to affect their lives. Economists and commentators say the recovery will be quick. It won't be. This is not a temporary inconvenience. The coronavirus fraud is going to lead to permanent changes in every aspect of our society from jobs to health care and from pensions to education – and those changes are being made cold bloodedly and deliberately and globally. Millions of people are going to die in the next year because their illnesses weren't treated because of the lockdowns.

Health care is going to change dramatically – but not for the better. GPs now seem too lazy or too afraid to see patients. Instead care assistants with modest training see patients in tents or on the pavement or in the car park. You can have a tattoo – which involves a stranger piercing your skin with a needle – but if you do agree to a vaccination it will be done on the pavement because it is too dangerous to do it in the GP's surgery. Assessing patients on the pavement is apparently happening in America too. One patient who had suffered from hay-fever and had visited a nearby town where there have been positive tests, was refused treatment by a doctor but offered a telephone conversation with a physician assistant. Some doctors are, it seems, too frightened to offer even telephone consultations. It must be a relief to them that the golf courses are now open.

You can go into a pub but you can't go to an AA meeting because that would be too dangerous. Education will soon be done exclusively on the internet – using the excuse that it is too dangerous for children to go to school and sit together in classrooms. No one in government cares a damn about the evidence that letting children go to school is probably safer than keeping them at home – as long as you forget about the unnecessary social distancing and the mask wearing nonsense. Surely, even the most unimaginative must soon be able to discern patterns with a purpose.

It's not difficult to see that this is part of a global plan – Agenda 21 to give it a name.

Most of the people who have died of covid-19 have been over 80 with at least two or three other serious health problems – and many lived in care homes where they were murdered.

If old people had been murdered in care homes in one country, then that might have been a result of incompetence. But when exactly the same mistake is made in just about every country in the world then it becomes clear that the deaths are a result of official policy.

It is now allegedly routine to put Do Not Resuscitate notices on everyone over the age of 60. No one is denying it. In Scotland, it is rumoured that the cut off age is 45. No one is denying that. And DNR notices are routinely put on those with mental illness or physical disabilities whatever their age. That is the default position. The elderly and the frail and the disabled must be eliminated. It's part of the Agenda 21 plan, the move towards a community based world where the individual must be subservient to the needs of the greater good.

Nothing will ever be the same again. Savers and investors face a dark and dismal future. One bank with which I have an account, recently told me that my balance earns interest at a rate of 0.00001 % and I consider myself lucky that the interest hasn't yet gone negative. None of this is accidental. It's all deliberate.

I'm told that there are still thousands of people who get their news from the BBC! How can this be? If the BBC ever published an honest fact, the whole bent organisation would go into meltdown and have to issue an immediate retraction and apology. 'We are terribly sorry about the fact we broadcast the other day. It was a mistake and won't happen again.'

Sadly, the BBC isn't the only untrustworthy news organisation.

It has for some time now been the case that magazines, newspapers and broadcasters have been beholden to advertisers.

This wasn't always the case.

I can remember when editors would fly into a rage if an advertiser or advertising director tried to influence a publication's editorial content or policy.

But as circulations fell, the balance of power moved from readers to advertisers and for some time now publications have done little but publish press releases. The sacking of experienced journalists, to save money, and replacing them with naïve, dishonourable youngsters has helped the decline. Today, mainstream media are supine. They promote the governmental hysteria apparently without embarrassment. They use the word pandemic as though it were an accurate appraisal of the situation.

Occasionally, however, there are some bright spots of hope, and I think the pressure from the resistance movement may be having an effect. The usually rather untrustworthy (in my opinion) *Times* newspaper recently ran a headline which read: 'Flu and pneumonia killed five times more than covid last month'. Very true and it's nice to see it in print.

In 2019, the WHO studied influenza pandemics and came to the conclusion that contact tracing is not useful from an epidemiological point of view and (and I quote) 'is not recommended in any circumstances'.

Talking of flu, by the way, scientists still don't know if having the flu vaccine makes people more likely to develop covid-19. Come to think of it, maybe that's why there is such enthusiasm about giving the flu vaccine to as many people as possible this autumn.

Despite the WHO view on contact tracing, governments around the world (most of which were claiming to take their lead from the Bill Gates funded organisation), introduced track and trace systems – largely using a system devised by Google and Apple. The Google and Apple nonsense was pumped into three billion mobile phones and was apparently designed to record and store all contacts – not just those considered medically relevant. A German IT expert described tracing apps as a Trojan horse. I think we all know what he meant. And I'll just remind you that the WHO condemned contact tracing as not recommended in any circumstances.

Never before has science been dismissed with such a cavalier attitude. It is clear that our mobile telephones are due to play an ever increasing part in our lives. In 2011, just 3.5% of payments in China were made with mobile phones. Today, 85% of all payments are made with mobile phones. It is a very small step from a mobile phone which runs your life to a far more convenient chip placed under the skin in your arm. It is hardly surprising that the boss of Microsoft has boasted that 'we've seen two years' worth of digital transformation in two months'. Gates, incidentally, has been funding the development of micro implants to give multiple doses of a vaccine or drug over an extended period.

Using a temperature gun is about as useful as asking someone their astrological sign and then isolating all those born under the fishes or the scales. But temperature guns are now seen everywhere.

Back on 23rd April, Neil Ferguson, the Oliver Hardy of mathematics, but without the charm or loveability, was reported as saying that a second wave, worse than the first, was virtually certain to happen. Politicians seem desperate for him to be proved right. If he is proved right it will possibly be a first.

We have for years been living under the eye of Big Brother. But soon Big Brother will be inside us, controlling us. Trans-humanism plans will develop further. Mobile phones will be replaced by obligatory under the skin controls. The people who happily give all their personal details to phone apps will no doubt be eager to have a chip under their skin.

Millions innocently accepted smart meters for their electricity supplies because they believed what they were told. Anyone was suckered into accepting one should now demand that it's taken out of their home.

Just as the authorities can use the smart meter to turn off your electricity so they will switch off your access to money or food or work simply by controlling the chip under your skin. And then there will be accidents that will occur and probably result in millions of deaths. And the hackers. Oh, don't forget the hackers.

Talking of deaths, I see that in Ireland there have, in recent months, been fewer total deaths than in any of the previous three years. I suspect that will change both there and elsewhere in the autumn. The deaths caused by the lockdown will start mounting then. When thousands start to die of treatable cancer and heart disease there will, I suspect, be a little more anger among those who are still naïve enough and ill-informed enough to believe that covid-19 is a serious pandemic. Hundreds of thousands of extra deaths are going to mar nations for months if not years – all avoidable, all caused by the lockdowns and all predicted from this chair months ago. Hundreds of crooked politicians and advisors will doubtless try to persuade us that the deaths have been caused by the coronavirus. They will only be able to get away with this if doctors continue to falsify death certificates.

Unless we stop this nonsense quickly, it is going to get worse.

They are pushing us to see how far they can go. What will they try next? Wearing masks in the street, in offices, in schools and at home. Wearing goggles and gloves perhaps? I now find it impossible to imagine an insult they would not regard as appropriate. They have closed the dentists and there is no effective health care for millions. Most people are rightly now terrified of seeing a doctor or going into hospital. Do not resuscitate notices are routinely put on anyone over the age of 60 and on individuals of any age who have mental or physical problems. I find it difficult to believe it is happening – but it is and there's no point in sticking our heads in the sand, under the blanket or anywhere else.

I am glad to see more and more protests around the world – mostly ignored or demonised by the mainstream media.

In the UK, Piers Corbyn and StandupX are brilliant. Piers Corbyn, clearly a gentle man, has been arrested 45 times for standing up for our freedom. He has been arrested for the modern crime of telling the truth.

By now he has probably been arrested 46 times, 47 – who knows. The police should give him a season ticket.

The new normal as they call it is nothing more than the new world order – the global reset so beloved by fascist extremists and wicked hypocrites such as the utterly appalling Prince Charles – what a bloody family that has turned out to be. They're like something out of a bad soap opera. They, like the BBC, should be defunded. The BBC doesn't deserve public money and the royals don't need it.

The internet has, despite all the bans and shutdowns and the activities of the state financed trolls, been a revelation – and our only hope of salvation. Listen to the Richie Allen radio show and watch, among others, UK Column, Amazing Polly, Dr Judy Mikovits, Ice Age Farmer and The Corbett Report.

When all this is over, every political leader who has put citizens under house arrest and maintained the evil myth of this pandemic must be tried for treason. We'll try them before hanging, drawing and quartering them because that's the way civilised people do things.

Remember: decisions are made by those who speak up.

And what's the point of a life if you sell your soul for a little peace and quiet?

Share this video quickly because it contains a lot of truths. YouTube quickly took down my recent video entitled, 'Forbidden Truths' – presumably because it contained truths which are forbidden. Naturally, in this

Kafkaesque world they didn’t explain precisely what my crime was.

YouTube has also now recently taken down and banned my video entitled, ‘Coronavirus: Mental Health Problems Will Now Soar’ which was published in May and in which I predicted that government policies would result in an increase in anxiety and depression. Figures just published confirm that the prediction was, sadly, accurate. I don’t know whether the video was taken down because I predicted what would happen or because it has now happened.

August 23rd 2020

Guarded Secrets and Blatant Deceits

Our house needs painting but what's the point? We really can't get excited about it. We are living in the middle of the greatest threat to human life since, well, since ever. As far as I am concerned, Bill Gates is a greater threat than Adolf Hitler.

Most people are sleep-walking and in five years' time, they will probably still not understand why their lives have changed so dramatically and so much for the worse. The least intelligent and least informed will simply blame the covid fraud – or whatever other fake crisis the globalists, the climate change freaks and the Agenda 21 supporters think up. The collaborators will never know that the pandemic was predicted, in some detail, by many of the main players. By then the one world government will be controlling every aspect of our lives – including our access to our own money and our access to food.

The proponents of the global government condemn all opposition as being worried by threats to their social status, as being racists, as being authoritarian. The monstering, the demonising is done relentlessly and the collaborators are constantly recruited as foot soldiers in the war. Remember, never forget, policewoman Dick's cruel exhortation for collaborators to shame those with hidden disabilities and health problems, as well as those with free spirits and free minds.

Their aim is plainly visible; it is to dehumanise humans, to allow robots to take over the world, to deprive us all of our hearts and souls and of our freedom and democracy. The aim of the fourth industrial revolution is to control who we are as well as what we do and what we think. This is the Great Reset. All babies will be programmed. Robots will take over virtually all jobs. The world population will be reduced by 95%. The UN's stated aim is for the industrialised nations to collapse. 'No one,' says the UN, 'will enter the New Age unless he will take a Luciferian initiation. They want to scare us, divide us and take away all our power.

They want to destroy small businesses and the middle classes and all ambition and all aspirations. They want to confiscate all private property and cause economic chaos so that they can reset the world. They want to install unelected regional governors – just as the EU planned to do – and to ban all manifestations of nationalism. So, for example, nation flags will be outlawed.

In England, the latest figures show that the overall mortality rate in June was lower than average. Fewer people are dying than is usual but the Government is still behaving as though we are living through a plague.

The figures make curious reading.

The number of people dying of heart disease, lung cancer, stroke and bowel cancer are far, far below normal for the month of June.

The only rise is, of course, the number of people dying of covid-19 – a new entrant into the top ten.

But the odd thing is that while the number of people dying of covid-19 is 53 per 100,000, the number of people dying from flu, pneumonia and chronic lower respiratory disease were much lower than usual.

Indeed, the number dying of flu and pneumonia was 19.1 per 100,000 lower than is usual for June. The number dying of chronic lower respiratory disease was 16.7 per 100,000 lower than is usual for June. And the number of elderly folk allegedly dying of dementia was 18.5 per 100,000 lower than usual. The dementia figure is relevant first because no one actually dies of dementia and second because the vast majority of dementia patients are over 80 years old and so were the sort of people alleged to have died of covid-19.

Now the really strange thing is, that if you add those three figures together you get 54.3 per 100,000 – which, by one of those odd little coincidences which seem commonplace these days, just happens to be almost the same as the number dying of covid-19.

So there we are.

Those of a suspicious nature might suspect that no one actually died of covid-19 but that the people who would have usually died of flu, pneumonia, dementia or chronic respiratory disease, were bunged down as covid-19 deaths just to keep us all scared witless and to provide an excuse to shut down the whole country – closing down much of the health service, shutting schools, closing factories and shops, restaurants and pubs, bowling alleys, cinemas, theatres and service industries of all kinds.

Naturally, however, you and I are not of a suspicious nature. We would like this video to remain alive and well on the YouTube platform and so we avoid drawing conclusions.

And so we believe that these figures are merely coincidences. Just little oddities; quirks of fate.

The result of closing the country has been disastrous, of course.

So, for example, nearly a third of women with primary breast cancer had their treatment, scans or appointments postponed because of the hysteria. Moreover, a new study showed that patients who had experienced delays were 20% more likely to be depressed and anxious than women whose treatment went ahead as it should have.

Two things about that occur to me.

First, that anyone should be surprised that women with cancer, who were denied essential treatment, were more likely to be depressed. Personally, I can't understand why 100% of the women weren't depressed and anxious.

Second, I am startled by the fact that although the UK health service could not provide essential medical services for women with breast cancer it could, nevertheless, manage to conduct a survey of the women who had been abandoned. I can imagine the conversation.

'Hello, is that Mrs Hancock? It is? Good. You have, as you know, recently been diagnosed as having breast cancer. How do you feel about the fact that your treatment has been delayed indefinitely?'

That's something not even Nero thought of when he set Rome ablaze. He should have sent out a few slaves to conduct a survey of the citizens as their city burnt to cinders.

Meanwhile, the energetic mathematicians at Imperial College, in London, the Bill Gates backed college which shut down the country for the flu, the modelling equivalent of the Three Stooges, have found that the lockdown could lead to an extra 1.4 million deaths from tuberculosis. The imperial College folk reckon that the lockdowns have set back the fight against tuberculosis by at least five to eight years.

And the British Department for Health and Social Care has concluded that the lockdown triggered by Imperial College's scaremongering will have a greater impact on our health and lives than covid-19. I seem to remember mentioning that back in March.

If I had any tears left I would weep.

But there is more to come from Imperial College.

I honestly find this difficult to believe but they are apparently claiming that if we hadn't gone into lockdown then 1.6 more million people would have died.

Yes.

Ferguson and the rest of the gang at Imperial are claiming we should be grateful to them.

They don't seem to have read the reports concluding that their forecasts were about as rubbishy as it is possible to get. We would have all been much better off if the dog had eaten Ferguson's homework. Some are trying to make up their minds whether it was the hysterical nonsense from Imperial College which led to panic or the panic from Imperial College which led to hysteria. I have no such dilemma.

I think Ferguson and imperial College were chosen by the politicians because the politicians knew they'd cock up the forecast. It is, after all, what they've done regularly for years.

I think I've had enough of this lot at Imperial College. They should be given useful work to do. There must be public lavatories somewhere which need cleaning.

Or maybe that would be too tricky for them.

And a document rereleased from the British Government's official advisors at SAGE – surely the most unsuitable acronym in history – confirms what I have been saying for months: that their advice to the Government was to use the media to increase a sense of personal threat and to increase a sense of responsibility to others.

May I remind you that we pay the fat salaries of these bastards.

But instead of looking after us, calming our fears and making us less stressed, they have been deliberately doing everything they could to terrify us and ramp up the scare stories.

Distrust the government, avoid mass media and fight the lies.

Meanwhile, the leaders of the four nations in the UK have been doing everything possible to create confusion and extra anxiety.

I plucked up the courage to take a look at the BBC website the other day and found the official rules on how and when people are allowed to meet one another.

In England six people from multiple households, or up to 30 people from two households can meet together outdoors. They must not get closer than more than three feet three inches. In Scotland up to 15 people from up to five households can meet as long as they all keep six feet six inches apart. In Wales any number of people from two households can meet as long as they are six feet six inches apart. And in Northern Ireland up to 30 people can meet outdoors but must keep three feet three inches apart.

The rules are equally confusing for indoor meetings. In England, two households can meet together, in Scotland eight people from three households can meet, in Wales two households can form one extended household (whatever that means – it sounds like Welsh wife swapping to me) and in Northern Ireland, ten people from four households can meet. There is no advice on what happens to citizens who live on a border between two countries.

The one conclusion from all this bollocks is that there is no science to any of this. Idiot civil servants and politicians have clearly just made it all up.

I bet they couldn't stop laughing to themselves as they wrote this garbage.

Meanwhile, there is increasing evidence that fewer and fewer deaths are being marked down to covid-19 and that more and more people are immune. The testing is a nonsense, as unreliable as Tony Blair, but as the positives turn up with predictable regularity so governments use the results as an excuse for more and tougher new laws.

And all the time the media simply support the fakery, the hoax, the fraud.

The natural inclination of the media is to question, attack and sneer at those in power. Some newspapers will support one point of view and some another view. That's democracy.

But this time the mainstream media has been united in support of the coronavirus hoax. The threat to the public has been massively exaggerated, and official policies have been reported without question. Even in wartime there are always some mainstream journalists who question what is happening. But not much this time. The surveillance methods have all been applauded. Stories have been manipulated and all those protesting about the over-kill have been denounced as morons or worse.

The media have allowed themselves to be used as part of the psychological operations organised by governments. Major internet platforms such as Google, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have censored critical remarks – even when justified by the facts. I have lost count of the number of videos I have had removed. Not one of those banned videos contained anything untrue or inaccurate. Doctors have been ordered not to speak out. One doctor I know was struck off the medical register in the UK for questioning the official line. The lies have all been coming from politicians and advisors and have been spread with enthusiasm by media organisations such as the BBC in the UK. In my experience, even Wikipedia seems to have become part of the geopolitical damning of individuals.

Back in 2010, the American Rockefeller Foundation described a lockstep scenario in which a pandemic could be used to control a population. The lockstep scenario written a decade ago has been acted out in precise detail. Contact tracking has been introduced despite the fact that over 500 scientists have warned against unprecedented surveillance.

There is evidence that some of those producing fake information – and the guilty include some well-known establishment universities and journals have links to security services.

There is no longer any doubt that health policy is being used to achieve geopolitical goals.

We are at war with our own governments, with many of our universities and with much of our media.

In the long-term, we need to sweep clean the stables and create a new political and administrative system. We need new leaders, new media and new management. Our politicians and public servants have done worse than fail us – they have betrayed us.

August 26th 2020

London Rally August 29th

The coronavirus scare was always a hoax. And today, it's clear to anyone who looks at the facts that the coronavirus was never any more of a threat than the flu. It would make as much sense to sit it somewhere between measles and falling downstairs as to brand it a dangerous plague.

Everything that governments are promoting is wrong headed and indefensible. Their lies, deceit and manipulations are reprehensible. I have repeatedly offered to debate vaccination with Government officials but the silence has been deafening. They won't debate the issues because they know they will lose. Pro-vax conspirators are the biggest threat to health today.

But there are things we can do.

If your local Vlad the Impaler wants to test you point out that the tests are less than 50% accurate and produce more false positives than real positives. Governments keep testing, of course, because the inevitable positive results give them an excuse for more lockdowns. Tony Blair, Britain's most infamous war criminal, supports more testing so you know it's a dangerous, bad idea with an evil purpose. Personally, I prefer my home testing system which is perfectly safe, doesn't collect your DNA and guarantees a rather splendid 50% success rate. Pick a favourite coin. Decide if tails or heads are positive. Toss the coin. Catch it. And there's your answer.

If anyone asks you to wear a mask remind them that masks have already killed children in China. Three boos for Commander Dick head of London's metropolitan police for telling the collaborators to shame those who aren't wearing masks. Presumably, she also intended the collaborators should shame the frail and the sick. I'm told she's lurking behind one of the Trafalgar Squares lions, salivating with excitement as she waits to arrest the magnificently irrepressible Piers Corbyn for the 347th time. If he spends anymore time in police stations they'll charge him rent.

Use the word collaborators to describe the mask wearing, social distancing, sanitising zombies. It's a great psy-op word and it will scare the Government's psychological warfare specialists because it demonises those who wear the masks and effectively defines them as part of the enemy. This is, after all, a war we're fighting. A war for the survival of humanity. And as the French Resistance realised, the collaborators are part of the enemy.

Remember the FDA in the US has banned 149 hand sanitisers because they are very dangerous. If someone asks you to use their sanitiser ask them to check it isn't one of the dangerous ones. They should check their sanitisers against the FDA list at least twice a day. That should keep them busy.

If shops won't take cash – then take your business elsewhere. Once they've got rid of cash they will own us and control us. If you find somewhere which only takes plastic collect a huge pile of shopping and then leave it on the counter. Remember that when they have abolished cash they will be able to switch off your access to your own money at the flick of a switch. Our last remaining vestige of freedom will disappear.

And if your local Vlad the Impaler wants to vaccinate you, demand that he or she gives you a written guarantee that the vaccine is safe and effective – long term. Let them see you write down the date, the batch number and the name of the person giving the vaccination. Tell them you will sue if you have any side effects. Remind them that governments around the world have already paid out billions in compensation for vaccine damage. Point out that Gates, who has boasted of bringing us the final solution, has demanded that the drug companies have legal immunity but that doctors can still be sued. If their legal defence companies go bust, individual doctors will have to pay out themselves. Point out that tens of thousands of doctors and nurses will probably go bankrupt.

This goes for the flu vaccine too which I also fear will genetically modify you. Incidentally, I don't know a single doctor who ever has a flu vaccine.

They want most of us dead, of course.

In England, they are now putting automatic Do Not Resuscitate notices on the over 60s and on all the mentally and physically disabled whatever their age. In Scotland it's rumoured to be the over 45s who are left to die. So watch out for that. All part of the Agenda 21 programme, approved by Prince Charles, to cut the world population.

The mask wearing collaborators are soon going to realise how bad things are. In October, unemployment rates are going to hit 25% to 30%. And, tragically, around the world death rates are going to soar as millions die of diseases which should have been treated when hospitals were shut – all for a disease rapidly turning out to be a threat to the over 80s with two or three serious health problems but probably less dangerous than chickenpox for children.

I have spoken in Trafalgar Square on many occasions and I'm sorry I can't be there today.

The last time I spoke there was at a huge anti-hunting rally.

Shortly afterwards hunting in the UK was banned.

So let's hope that today's rally is equally successful.

I genuinely fear that our civilisation is currently under real threat – both as a result of the plans of the United Nations and the World Economic Forum and through the evil work of unelected billionaires who seem to believe they have the right to impose their dangerous views on the rest of us. They've had a lot of support, of course, from organisations such as the BBC and *The Guardian* – and other media groups which have done financial deals with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Make no mistake – if we are forced to accept vaccines which result in genetic modification of the human body then the changes will be permanent and multi-generational.

Distrust the Government, avoid mass media – and fight the lies.

Those of you who watch my rapidly disappearing YouTube videos know that I always end by saying 'Please remember, although you may feel like it at times, you are not on your own. More and more people are waking up'. Well, today you can see the proof. We definitely are not alone. Together we will win this war. Thanks for watching an old man in a chair.

August 28th 2020

How the Coronavirus Hoax Has Permanently Destroyed Health Care

Even before the coronavirus fraud closed down many hospital departments, sent waiting lists soaring – even for essential, potentially life-saving surgery – and left millions in constant, unnecessary pain, health care services were in decline.

Indeed, back in January, before most of us had heard of covid-19, I had started to prepare notes for a book explaining why health care today is worse than it was half a century ago, and why, despite all the advances in technology, the health care available in the future will not be as good as it was 50 years ago.

The book got pushed aside as the coronavirus hoax took over our lives and I began researching, writing and recording the Old Man in a Chair series of videos – all of which are available, by the way, as transcripts on my website – vernoncoleman.com.

Today, it is clear that health care is deteriorating by the day and, having been writing about doctors, hospitals and medical treatments for many decades I am now convinced that the majority of patients today are receiving worse treatment than was available in the 1950s. The coronavirus hoax has made things considerably worse and has destroyed what was left of professional health care.

There are some exceptions, of course. The very few patients who have had successful transplant surgery could argue, accurately, that back in the 1950s they would have died. And there are one or two new drugs available that are life-saving.

But those are exceptions. I'm talking about the quality of medical care available for 99% of patients, 99% of the time.

Doubters will, of course, claim that life expectation today is much greater than it was and that, therefore, medical care must have improved.

This is a fallacious argument.

If you look at the figures it is clear that life expectation rose over a century ago when the number of babies and infants dying fell considerably. A little over a century ago, it was commonplace for a woman to have half a dozen babies but for only two of them to survive. It was these infant deaths which lowered life expectation figures. If lots of babies die before they are one-year-old then the average life expectation is brought down dramatically. If one person dies at birth, and another dies at 100, their average life expectancy will be 50 years. But if most babies survive then the average life expectation rises equally dramatically. Back in Victorian times, and even earlier, humans who survived infancy and childhood commonly lived into their 70s, 80s and beyond.

The absence of relatively clean drinking water, and proper sewage systems, meant that serious infections were big killers in the 19th century. And it was infectious diseases such as cholera which meant that infant mortality figures were appallingly high. The death rates fell notably when fairly clean, uncontaminated drinking water supplies were introduced and proper facilities built for dealing with sewage. If you look at the figures it was not vaccinations which helped reduce the number of deaths from infectious diseases – the death rates were largely falling long before vaccinations were introduced – but better living conditions.

In the early part of the 20th century, millions of people lived in damp, cramped conditions and had very little decent food to eat. Drug companies, and their supporters, like to claim that their products are responsible for improved life expectation but the figures prove that to be a falsehood. Drugs have changed our lives in many ways but, with the exception of antibiotics such as penicillin, first introduced just in time for the Second World War, they have not had a major impact and it is not difficult to argue that many of the preparations put on the market have done considerably more harm than good. It is, for example, difficult to claim that benzodiazepine tranquillisers have done anything to improve the quality of human life. Prescription drugs such as benzodiazepines and some painkillers are the causes of the biggest dependency problem in the world.

Even the good drugs, the antibiotics, are now often not as useful as they once were. Overprescribing and the wholesale, routine use of antibiotics on farms have meant that antibiotics which once saved lives are now often useless.

I qualified as a doctor almost exactly 50 years ago and after a year working in hospitals, went straight to work as a general practitioner. I practised much in the way that doctors were practising half a century before that. If patients wanted a consultation they just turned up at the surgery during opening hours. I did a morning surgery and an evening surgery. I gave patients injections and took blood samples. I happily inserted catheters and syringed ears. Patients didn't have to make another appointment to see a care assistant with little training. If you couldn't get to the surgery you telephoned, or sent a message, and the doctor visited. If you needed help outside surgery hours you got in touch and the doctor would visit. Medical care was provided 24 hours a day and 365 days a year. Accident and emergency departments, called casualty departments then, were used largely for victims of road accidents, fights and fires. Why would anyone trek all the way to a hospital when they could have a doctor in their home within minutes? Patients who were elderly or frail or housebound or disabled were often visited routinely once every couple of weeks. District nurses drove themselves round their local community to dress wounds and check on patients discharged from hospital. It now sounds like something out of a history book but I can’t be the only one who can remember how things were and why they were better 50 years ago than they are now. It wasn’t perfect by any means but it was a damned sight better than things are today.

Today, you’re about as likely to get a home visit from a doctor as you are to win the lottery. And your chances of having a doctor visit you at home at night or at the weekend or on a bank holiday are nil – unless you live in a big city and have an arrangement with a private doctor who does house calls. Having a GP always available at the end of a telephone was reassuring; it was good to know that professional help was always available. If a patient had to go into hospital they knew they had someone they could trust if they didn’t understand what was happening to them – they could speak to their GP or he would visit them in hospital to help explain things.

Everything has been going wrong for decades – but the slide downhill has accelerated recently. Medical care was never better than it was when people wore hats. Decency disappeared when bare heads became the norm. I’m obviously not saying one caused the other for that would be a simplistic example of post hoc ergo propter hoc, but it’s an easy way to define a change. When medicine became more science than humanity the quality of care started to diminish significantly.

Fifty years ago, doctors always strove to keep patients alive. Today, ‘Do Not Resuscitate’ notices are placed on patients’ beds as often as temperature charts. It has got so bad that I have heard reports that DNR notices are put on the notes of any patient over the age of 60 or even 45. Those youngsters who cheer this should be aware that in 10 years’ time, the age allowed could be reduced to 40 then, in no time at all, to 30. Remember the film Logan’s Run in which 30 was the cut off end of life age.

The ethics committee at Great Ormond Street Hospital, once the standard for quality in the care of sick children, was reportedly criticised by a High Court judge for deciding that a nine-year-old girl should be ‘managed’ rather than ‘treated’ and for making this decision without talking to the parents. Lawyers representing the hospital had allegedly asked that Great Ormond Street Hospital not be named. I bet they did.

Today, elderly patients in hospitals are routinely left to die, unfed, unwashed and without fluids. In the UK, it’s a government approved programme for the ‘care’ of the elderly.

The coronavirus hoax gave hospitals the opportunity to shut down whole departments, many of which are still closed, and gave doctors in general practice the excuse to virtually shut down their surgeries. There was never any logical reason for this. GPs claimed that it would be better and safer to conduct all examinations by video rather than in person. It was even seriously suggested that young GPs found their work so onerous that they could not be expected to work more than one day a week – even though they were working 9 until 5 with an hour off for lunch. Patients who had serious symptoms were told that they could not be seen in person by a doctor or even a nurse – because of the coronavirus.

The truth is that video consultations are pretty useless and very dangerous. You can’t examine a patient by video. You can’t listen to their chest or check their heart or blood pressure. You can’t examine lesions properly. You can’t palpate an abdomen. You can’t look down throats or into ears. You can’t even use your sense of smell – useful in the care of diabetics.

Hospital infections, too often untreatable, are now too common to be remarked upon. Fifty years ago a ward sister or a matron would have forty fits if a patient on their ward or in their hospital contracted an infection or developed a pressure sore or any other sign of bad nursing. Hospitals employed almoners whose job it was to make sure that patients didn’t have to worry about anything. If an elderly patient was admitted to hospital as an emergency, the almoner would make sure someone went round to feed her cat. If a patient was worried about her bills being paid while she was in hospital, then the almoner would deal with it. If you don’t remember those days you probably think I’m joking but I promise you I am not. People working in health care used to understand the meaning of the word ‘compassion’. Today, health care staff would probably laugh or sneer if you told them of such realities.

Even in small things, hospitals have gone backwards.

So, for example, many hospitals no longer allow flowers on the ward. The real reason? They make a little more work for the staff. But for several thousand years it has been known that having flowers on a ward cheers up the patients and improves their recovery.

Similarly, when I was young, it was commonplace for someone to come onto a women’s ward every day and do the hair and make-up of the patients. That doesn’t happen anymore.

When I was a young doctor, all patients requiring hospital treatment were subjected to a full medical examination. They also had a full history taken. Woe betide any young doctor if a patient was seen by a consultant without there being a full medical history in their file.

How can it be an improvement to know virtually nothing about the patients you are looking after? Back in the 1960s, we derided doctors who thought of patients as being ‘the liver in the end bed’ or ‘the kidney problem in the bed third on the left’. But that is what health care has become once again.

Everywhere you look there are problems. Hospitals and general practices are managed by people who don’t understand the first thing about medicine. In Europe, the EU has stopped doctors working more than a basic working week and so in hospitals there are frequently no doctors at all available at weekends or at night.

In the UK, the NHS has always been a money wasting machine. The amount now spent on the NHS is so great that if that money were simply handed out to the public, everyone in Britain would be able to buy themselves top level private health care. How can that be? It's simply because there are more administrators than hospital beds in the health service, and vast amounts of money is wasted on pointless bureaucracy. Like all large, bureaucratic organisations, the last people to be fired are the bureaucrats themselves. They just keep hiring and building their empires.

The NHS is regarded worldwide as the pinnacle of socialised medicine. Many around the world look upon it with envy. But that is only because they look at it from a distance: as observers rather than as consumers. The NHS has been a disaster in every possible sense. Most people who work for it say they wouldn't want to be treated in their hospital. The outstanding legal claims in the NHS had reached £85 billion before the coronavirus fiasco hit and left patients untreated and uncared for. Untold thousands of people will be entitled to sue and demand huge damages as a result of the coronavirus hoax – now better referred to as a fraud.

Overall satisfaction with the NHS is low and falling annually. People complain of long waits, staff shortages, lack of money and money being wasted. It is a deadly tale of indifference, incompetence, greed, selfishness and weariness. The incidence of doctor induced disease (iatrogenesis) soars every year.

It has long been recognised, incidentally, that waiting lists of all kinds were and are deliberately created by doctors to enhance their private incomes.

This is a weakness of the system which allows some consultants to work in the NHS and at the same time to have private practices. Their NHS income is the bread, butter and jam and the private income is the piece of cake. Consultants deliberately keep their waiting lists long because they know that this is the great selling point for private care. I once worked at a hospital where, during a consultant's annual holiday, a registrar and I worked hard and got rid of the waiting list completely. It wasn't particularly difficult. Naively we thought that the consultant would be pleased when he returned from his holidays. He was furious. 'Why the devil should people come and see me privately if they can be operated on tomorrow in the health service?' he demanded. He was the norm and not the exception.

Life expectation now is actually falling for women, waiting lists are growing and waiting times are soaring, the amount of illness is rising constantly and the number of patients made ill by doctors has made iatrogenesis an epidemic – up there with cancer and circulatory disease as one of the three major killers in our world. One in six people in hospital is there because they have been made ill by doctors. In half a century, the quality of medicine offered has slumped.

And there have been virtually no breakthroughs in the last 50 years. There are plenty of new drugs – but most of them are merely variations on long established themes. Health care is now controlled by lobbyists working for big drug companies and lies and myths rule our lives in a thousand different ways. The future, we are assured, is vaccination. Vaccination for this, vaccination for that, vaccines in syringes and vaccines in foods. The coronavirus has given drug companies the opportunity to introduce potentially deadly DNA and RNA vaccines.

Screening programmes are known to often do more harm than good but they are immensely profitable and so they are popular with businesses and doctors. Medical education is controlled by drug companies and so when doctors are looking for a treatment they think first of pills. Lifestyle changes rarely even figure in their calculations. Laws which control the hours doctors can work mean that even quite large hospitals often have no doctors available at weekends or at night.

Long stay hospitals have been closed with the result that patients who need long-term care spend their days wandering the streets. Celebrities now promote health products and eating habits without having any knowledge or understanding of the harm they are doing. New regulations mean that small hospitals have closed with the result that patients have to travel for hours to visit a hospital.

Charities have become commercially linked with drug companies and use their lobbying skills to influence public policy in favour of their partners. Food companies promote bad eating habits because they are more profitable than good eating habits.

In the UK it can, and does, take weeks or even months for X-rays and scans to be read and for blood results to be recorded, distributed and interpreted. It is for this reason, more than any other, that Britain has the worst cancer survival rates in Europe.

All things considered the modern history of medicine is a deadly tale of indifference, incompetence, greed and selfishness. All of this importance because it was long ago established that when a doctor is sympathetic and compassionate his or her patients will get better quicker – it's a human version of the placebo response which can add a quarter to a half to the effectiveness of a treatment. That has pretty much been lost.

In the UK, the only response to the chaos from the politicians and the collaborating public has been to demand yet more money for the health service, which actually has far too much money but just wastes most of it on unnecessary layers of administration and throws away billions because administrators pay far too much for just about everything from pens and loo rolls to drugs, and to demand that NHS leaflets and so on all be translated into more languages.

When I published the prices the NHS pays for office equipment, washing powder and so on – and proved that the NHS was paying more for stuff bought by the ton than I would pay if I bought the stuff at a supermarket – the NHS responded not by dealing with the waste but by demanding to know where I had obtained the computer print-out containing the NHS prices. They were only interested in covering up the waste – not doing anything about it.

Complex financial schemes, private finance initiatives and absurd bonus schemes for executives have cost the NHS billions. It is hardly surprising that services are deteriorating and that some services, such as dentistry, are likely to be abandoned completely.

The future, I fear, is bleak.

Thanks to the coronavirus hoax, health care is set to deteriorate even faster than before and the relationship between patients and health care professionals is doomed to collapse still further.

Alternative branches of medicine will doubtless blossom and bloom. But for most people the future will involve telemedicine, preventive care and self-care. We all have to learn to look after ourselves and our loved ones.

Doctors haven't yet grasped this, but computer programmes will take over from medical practitioners. Back in 1984, a friend and I wrote the first home doctor programme for computers and ever since then computer programmes have been improving. They are now being fitted into robot physicians and surgeons. In ten years' time, there will be very few jobs for human doctors. Students thinking of entering medical school might like to look for another profession. A career in plumbing might offer better prospects. I am being very serious.

This has not happened by accident. It is all part of the United Nations global plan for the future – Agenda 21. We are now living in the future they designed for us.

And unless we speak up, soon and loudly, the future will simply get bleaker and bleaker.

I don't suppose I should admit this but this is my second attempt to make this video.

I had to abandon the first attempt when I suddenly found myself sitting here with tears pouring down my cheeks and quite unable to continue. It saddens me enormously to see my former profession overwhelmed by self-interest and apparently quite without any sense of humanity or vocation.

I pray that hope triumphs over current experience.

August 30th 2020

A Conspiracy of Silence

Greek playwrights used to introduce their work with a prologue giving some background details and miscellaneous information. So I am going to begin this video with a short prologue, or introduction. I'm a writer of books by trade, so I suppose this is also in way of a preface or a foreword.

Time is running out for this channel and I fear for us all unless we take action quickly and with as much, if not more determination as our oppressors.

YouTube has been taking down my videos with increasing enthusiasm. I have long since given up wondering why. This morning, I received a rather severe message from the head prefect telling me that they don't allow content that disputes the efficacy of the WHO or local authorities' recommended guidance on social distancing and self-isolation that may lead people to act against that guidance. YouTube sent me a very long list of their rules and, surprisingly, I really don't see how some of the removed videos could possibly be in breach of these guidelines – although there may, I suppose, be a local authority somewhere in the world which doesn't approve of colourful shirts. YouTube said I could appeal but in their Kafkaesque world the appeals button doesn't work so I can't.

The oppression and suppression of the truth is rapidly becoming more blatant. In London, the police fined the organiser of a peaceful demonstration against our loss of freedom but are reported to have given permission for a pro-establishment campaign group, Extinction Rebellion, which ought to be called Exhibition Rebellion, to support the global warming myth behind Agenda 21. The rank and file perhaps don't realise it but I believe they are supporting the fight to destroy mankind, desecrate our planet and put us in thrall to the devil worshippers – a phrase I use not as a term of colourful abuse but as an accurate description.

When the law appears to take sides, you know you're in trouble.

We are living, leaderless, in the early days of a totalitarian world government and it seems to me that YouTube is simply looking for an excuse to terminate channels which provide information or opinions which might inconvenience corrupt politicians, greedy drug companies or psychopaths supporting the global reset and planning to enslave the world population.

This is clearly the beginning of the end for this channel and, unless we up our game, the end for all of us. In an early video entitled, 'Why has YouTube taken down my video?' I explained my views on the freedom of speech.

I'll be putting more practical advice and leaflets to print out on my website.

To make sure I don't miss any more of their threatening messages, I have put YouTube into the special category labelled SPAM which is, I gather, where pompous, totalitarian messages are most safely and appropriately stored. YouTube's prefects won't understand this unless they've seen the original Hitchcock version of The Lady Vanishes but I'm English and a member of the MCC and it is not in my nature to be bullied and told what to do by anyone – especially not by ignorant, humourless, jackbooted carpet knights, gangrels, muggles and scrofulous, oleaginous larrikins. The war 'aint over while the old man has breath.

And so, now to the main feature which, incidentally, does not violate any of the official commandments in the YouTube black prayer book. If they take this one down then we know that this isn't business – it's personal.

They say that the miraculous covid-19 vaccine isn't quite ready yet, though there are those who believe it is ready and sitting in a warehouse waiting until enough people are sufficiently scared to take two knees and beg for it. They say they're still fiddling around with it. You can imagine them at work can't you – add a bit more pepper, some arsenic, a touch of cyanide, I think it needs a splash more mercury to give it that really lethal quality.

So, since the drug company profits aren't going to boom for a while, they want us all to have a flu vaccination this year. They've probably got a few billion doses of something that needs using up.

In the UK, Hancock is like a bad villain in a pantomime.

Oh yes you will.

Oh no we won't, we reply.

Politicians everywhere have for years now been blasting those of us who question the value and safety of vaccination as dangerous idiots who must be ignored, suppressed and silenced in every way possible.

The enthusiasm for vaccination is widespread. The EU has apparently been planning a vaccination passport for all EU citizens since 2018.

Naturally, the media has obliged with numerous articles following the official line. The media is in thrall to the medical conspiracy which thinks that vaccines are the answer to every disease. As so often happens, journalists ignore the facts and prefer to stick with the myths.

And yet the odd thing is that despite the endless propaganda, and the remorseless demonization of those daring to tell the truth, a very large and ever growing proportion of the population distrusts vaccination. A 2018 report by the Royal Society of Public Health in the UK, showed that one in four individuals believes it is possible to be administered too many vaccines. Personally, I suspect that what this shows is that three out of four individuals shouldn't be allowed to get out of bed by themselves.

So, why don't people trust vaccination or the people who promote it?

First, they realise that everyone involved in pushing vaccines is making money out of them. Every year, GPs make an absolute fortune out of vaccinating patients. They don't even do the work themselves. A nurse, care assistant or passing cleaner actually does the syringe and needle stuff. The doctor just spends the money.

Second, people are aware that the politicians, advisors and doctors who are promoting vaccination with such enthusiasm won't defend their position. I am prepared to put my reputation on the line and to debate the value of vaccination in general, and the proposed vaccines for covid-19 and the flu in particular, with any senior government figure or senior government medical advisor. In the UK, Boris Johnson and Matt Hancock both claim to know that vaccination is good for us. So, why won't they debate the issue with me or any other doctor who has doubts? I can only think of one explanation – they know they will lose the debate. I would love to debate the issue of vaccination with Bill Gates, who seems to regard himself as an expert on the subject, but we all know there is no chance of that happening. And that's odd because Mr Gates seems to love doing interviews – especially with organisations such as *The Guardian* and the BBC with which he has financial links.

In the past, I used to debate the issue in public with vaccine supporters. But they always lost the debates and so these days they won't take the risk.

If vaccine supporters really believe that vaccines are safe and effective, they should be willing to debate instead of trying to silence the doubters by simply saying, 'we are right and you are wrong so that's that – you're a nutter'.

One of the many, many oddities of the internet is that you can find all sorts of rubbish online but you can't find those debates in which doctors debated with me and struggled, and failed, to defend vaccines and vaccination. Those have all disappeared.

The bottom line is that patients are right to be worried about vaccines. The evidence available suggests that vaccines are neither reliably safe nor effective. There is a solid argument that although profitable for drug companies and doctors, they do more harm than good. The worldwide vaccine market is worth around $60 billion a year and rising fast. The refusal of those in power to debate the science is one of the reasons why people don't trust what they are told.

The scientific evidence proves vaccination is neither safe nor effective. Deceitful, dishonest drug companies haven't done much to improve trust.

Politicians and journalists like to talk a great deal about conspiracy theories but it doesn't occur to them that there is a massive conspiracy of silence about vaccination.

The drug company spin doctors have convinced civil servants and journalists that vaccination is wonderful and essential and that anyone who dares to question vaccination programmes must be a dangerous lunatic and must be suppressed.

But if I am such a lunatic why won't the politicians and experts debate with me? If I am so wrong surely they could destroy me in a public debate?

To be honest I'd have to be stone drunk or fast asleep to lose a debate about vaccination.

I've included scores of facts about vaccines in previous videos but what about the fact that a company called GlaxoSmithKline, GSK, is one of the top earning vaccine companies in the world.

One of its vaccines was Pandemrix, the H1N1 swine flu vaccine.

Governments spent fortunes buying the stuff because Neil Ferguson, whose name is now pretty familiar to most of us, had predicted that the swine flu could lead to 65,000 deaths in the UK alone. In the end, the swine flu killed 457 people and had a death rate of just 0.026 per cent of those infected.

And the vaccine?

Well, in Sweden and Finland there were reports of narcolepsy occurring among children who had the H1N1 swine flu vaccine. It is reported that not all the safety problems were made public. I have seen a report that by December 2009, for each one million doses of the vaccine given about 76 cases of serious adverse events were reported though this was not made public. A paper published in the *British Medical Journal* in 2018 reported that GSK had commented that 'further research is needed to confirm what role Pandemrix may have played in the development of narcolepsy among those involved.'

The writer of the BMJ article commented, 'Now, eight years after the outbreak, new information is emerging from one of the lawsuits that, months before the narcolepsy cases were reported, the manufacturer and public health officials were aware of other serious adverse events logged in relation to Pandemrix. '

In Ireland, the Government kept inviting people to get vaccinated even when it was clear that the pandemic was on the wane and it was nowhere near the catastrophe portrayed by Ferguson, governments, industry and the media.

One member of the Irish parliament, called the adverse effects after Pandemrix a 'completely avoidable catastrophe'. She told the then Prime Minister. 'The Health Service Executive decided to purchase Pandemrix and continued to distribute it even after they knew it was dangerous and untested.'

In Canada, a five-year-old girl died five days after an H1N1 flu shot and her parents sued GSK for $4.2

million. The parents' lawyer alleged that the drug was brought out quickly and without proper testing as the federal government exerted intense pressure on Canadians to get immunised.

In previous videos, I listed some of the massive fines that GSK has had to pay. They make stuff that does a lot of harm and they then cover up the problems.

In 2014, GSK was fined $490 million dollars by China after a Chinese court found it guilty of bribery. The BBC said that GSK had said it had learned its lessons and the BBC added that one of those lessons was 'clearly that foreign companies need to keep a close eye on China's fast changing political and regulatory weather if they are to prosper'.

Not that they shouldn't bribe people, you notice, but that they should be careful.

In 2010, GSK paid out $1.14 billion because of claims over a drug called Paxil. And they settled lawsuits over a drug called Avandia for $500 million. In 2011, GSK paid $250 million to settle 5,500 death and injury claims and set aside $6.4 billion for future lawsuits and settlements in respect of the drug Avandia. In 2012, GSK pleaded guilty to federal criminal offences including misbranding of two antidepressants and failure to report safety data about a drug for diabetes to the FDA in America. The company admitted to illegally promoting Paxil for the treatment of depression in children and agreed to pay a fine of $3 billion. That was the largest health care fraud settlement in US history. GSK also reached a related civil settlement with the US Justice Department. The $3 billion fine also included the civil penalties for improper marketing of half a dozen other drugs.

I don't know whether you missed that word, by the way.

Fraud.

'Wrongful or criminal deception intended to result in financial or personal gain.'

Always worth knowing precisely what's meant by the words we use, isn't it?

The British Government alone paid out £60 million to patients who had been damaged by GSK's Pandemrix vaccine and who knew they could claim and how to claim. Naturally, GSK had demanded that the Government indemnify it against claims for damages. Bill Gates has, of course, demanded that everyone involved in the planned covid-19 vaccine will be indemnified. You can't sue them if their vaccine turns out to be deadly. I bet car companies would like that deal.

So, would you want to trust your life, or your children's lives, to GSK?

Well, you if you have a vaccine then you may well be doing so because GSK is still making vaccines.

And guess what.

The UK's Chief Scientific Adviser at the moment is someone called Sir Patrick Vallance. He is, I suspect, a key figure in dealing with the coronavirus in the UK and the plans for a vaccine. Vallance worked for GSK between 2006 and 2018. By the time he left GSK, he was a member of the board and the corporate executive team.

And they have the gall to call me a conspiracy theorist?

I could, by the way, produce similar horror stories for just about all the big drug companies. And if I were making this up I'd be facing libel actions that would make your eyes water. Well, they'd make my eyes water.

I got waylaid.

I started by talking about the flu vaccine.

In the UK, the Government is pushing hard to get millions of people vaccinated against the flu this autumn. They will, of course, insist that it is perfectly safe and perfectly effective. It'll probably make hair grow on bald patches, increase your breast size if that's what you want and turn you into a super-being capable of running a three minute mile. Trust Hancock and Johnson – vaccine salesmen and hucksters to the inept and rather stupid.

Boris Johnson, allegedly the British Prime Minister, claims that anyone who questions the value and safety of vaccination is nuts.

But I do still have a few worries. Millions are worried about the covid-19 vaccine but could it be that the heavily promoted flu vaccine is the one we should be really concerned about?

Here are a few general questions for Boris Johnson to think about.

First, did you know that people who have the flu vaccination may be more susceptible to other respiratory viruses? It's a well-known phenomenon called virus interference. How many people who have the flu vaccine this winter will die as a result of this well documented problem? I could let your government see some research papers if they could find someone able to read them and understand them.

Second, will the new flu vaccine be an RNA or DNA vaccine by any chance? There are, as I am sure you will know, very real potential problems with such vaccines. I know you don't know what the risk will be, but are you aware, Mr Johnson, of the reservations expressed by the World Health Organisation which has said 'many aspects of the immune response generated by DNA vaccines are not understood'? Since your government abides by everything the WHO says, you will naturally be concerned by this.

Third, as I am sure you know, there has always been a link between vaccination and cancer. Are you aware that an FDA researcher has found hundreds of cancer genes in MMR vaccines for example? The FDA has found that cellular matter used in the manufacture of vaccines is often contaminated with serious disease causing viruses. The problem is that the health problems don't occur until years or decades after vaccination. Since no long-term trials are done on vaccination, don't you think it might be a good idea to insist that drug companies start them? The results should be available in 20 or 30 years' time.

Fourth, how much testing will be done on this year's flu vaccine? Or is the vaccine being rushed through like the covid-19 vaccine?

Fifth, how effective will this year's flu vaccine be? Previous vaccines have been pretty useless – providing protection in only just half of adults. And why push vaccines for older patients when vaccines tend to work even less well for the over 65s?

Sixth, it is reported that it was Bill Gates, a software person, who stopped President Trump's planned vaccine safety commission. It is alleged that Gates said, 'No, that's a dead end. That would be a bad thing. Don't do that.' And so the commission didn't happen. Was that true? And if so, why was it a bad thing to have a commission into vaccines?

Seventh, the nasal vaccine proposed for children will be a live flu vaccine. With the live attenuated virus in it. How safe will it be this year – especially when many doctors argue that lockdowns, masks and social distancing mean that immune systems may have been weakened? It's worth remembering that in 2016, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention in the US pulled a nasal flu vaccine because it was only 3% effective. The CDC stated that no protective benefit could be measured and that the vaccine had not been statistically effective for three years running. Did you know that Mr Johnson? Mr Hancock? One vaccine with live flu viruses in it contained 80 million live viruses per dose – attenuated and genetically modified, of course. The side effects with the nasal vaccine are potentially horrific – and include neurological and behavioural problems. I could fill a video with the side effects of this stuff alone. Incidentally, because viruses mutate there is no guarantee that the viruses used won't revert to an infectious version. I wouldn't take a nasal flu vaccine if you gave me a million pounds to have it.

So those are my preliminary questions, Mr Johnson. I know you think I am a nut for asking them but I would appreciate some answers. I hope those who view this video will pass these questions on to their political representatives, asking for answers. And send the questions to radio, TV and newspaper commentators who claim vaccines are always safe and wonderful. The transcript – with these questions – will be on my website. Please, it's important that these questions are asked.

When we've got answers to those, I have another couple of hundred questions I'd like to ask.

Oh, and scientists still don't know if having the flu vaccine makes people more likely to develop covid-19 – or at least to test positive for it. Some research might be a good idea. Come to think of it, maybe that's why there is such enthusiasm about giving the flu vaccine to as many people as possible this autumn.

I think the evidence shows pretty clearly that out of the two of us it's Boris who is the nut, since he supports an indefensible piece of nonsense. We have all the science on our side. The pro-vaxxers have greed, lies, fraud and propaganda on their side. And by any decent definition, Boris is also a conspiracy theorist since he is supporting a pretty untenable conspiracy. It isn't difficult to see why they won't support their point of view by debating the issue. Keep pushing them. Send tweets to Boris and Matt Hancock demanding that they debate vaccination with someone qualified.

Finally, are we supposed to be reassured by the fact that there is a Vaccine Impact Modelling Consortium at Imperial College, London which is apparently funded by a whole bunch of organisations including drug companies, the British Government and, of course, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation?

Personally, I find it difficult to have enthusiasm for such an organisation – not least because the acting director is someone called Neil Ferguson.

Now where have I heard that name before?

Wasn't he one of the Three Stooges? Or was he the circus clown who always ended up with the custard pie in his face?

Or was it the bloke whose absurd predictions and lockdown policies seem to me to be likely to be responsible in the end for more global deaths than Hitler?

Meanwhile, the next time a doctor wants to vaccinate you or a relative ask him or her this simple question, 'Will you guarantee that the vaccination is safe and effective and will you take responsibility if things go wrong?'

Ask for the assurance in writing.

I will be very surprised if you get it.

We all very much need to reach and educate more people. Mainstream media continue to lie and mislead and we need to counter that. As far as I know the mass market media didn't even bother to report the fact that in the USA the number of covid-19 deaths had been officially reduced by 94% to just over 9,000. Unbelievably, the NHS in the UK is using vast chunks of taxpayers' money to pay social media celebrities to promote government lies and testing nonsenses.

Please continue to help by sharing existing videos and by printing out material from the website transcripts. This channel isn't monetised and nor is the website, www.vernoncoleman.com. We have no ads and no sponsors and these videos and the website actually cost us money so this isn't about us getting rich – this is a public service channel and we need your help.

Oh, and one other thing. Those of us who question governments, are being silenced in every conceivable way. YouTube videos are being censored and banned almost as soon as I put them up. If the videos disappear completely, something which I fear will happen soon, please go to my website www.vernoncoleman.com

There is one method of silencing which they haven't tried yet. If I suddenly disappear then I'll come back and haunt the bastards for eternity.

It may sometimes seem as though you are alone. But you're not. More and more people are waking up. And together we will win this war.

Thanks for watching an old man in a chair.

September 2nd 2020

My Last Video for You Tube

The day before I recorded my first video on the coronavirus hoax, that was March 18th, my Wikipedia entry was comprehensive, respectable and even respectful. They mentioned the TV and radio series I had made, the fact that I had written columns for five national newspapers, the fact that I'd succeeded in changing Government policy on benzodiazepine drugs and so on and so forth. There were a couple of dozen generous quotes from newspaper reviews.

I'd had a Wikipedia entry pretty well since their site started, though I had frequently asked them to take it down, because I think their way of working is absurd. Anyone, with any agenda, can edit a Wikipedia entry except the individual concerned. In my experience, facts about living individuals are never checked properly.

The day after I recorded that video, my Wikipedia entry was changed dramatically. I don't know what it looks like now because I never use Wikipedia any more but all the interesting stuff had been removed and replaced with some very dubious stuff including the allegation that I had been banned by an organisation called the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA). Now I don't know if it still exists but the ASA was a private organisation, funded, I think, largely by big advertisers, which can't ban anyone from anything – though it does I think like to pretend it can. I remember the ASA had itself been reported to the Office of Fair Trading and had about as much power to ban anything as your local window cleaner.

One of the main complaints in the new Wikipedia was that I had been disciplined by the ASA for a claim about a food causing cancer. I remember this well. One of my books, *Food for Thought*, contained a section proving the link between meat and cancer. A representative of the meat trade made a complaint to the ASA and they wrote to me. In reply, I sent them details of 26 scientific papers, from reputable journals, which proved my claim. The ASA wrote back to say that they did not look at scientific references. They then proceeded to find for the complainant and announced that they were banning me from whatever they thought they could ban me from. This was so laughable that I ignored it. I also ignored it when the Press Complaints Commission did exactly the same thing. There's a summary of the evidence I tried to submit to both organisations on my website – headed Meat causes Cancer – the proof.

Wikipedia editors, searching for ways to demonise me, dug these decades' old judgements from page 738 of a search engine and stuck them, and similar nonsenses, and put them on my Wikipedia page.

I have written about these absurdities several times and I believe that Wikipedia knows these claims are absurd. But to them they served a purpose because what Wikipedia was doing was demonising or monstering me, in an attempt to persuade users of the Wikipedia site, that I was untrustworthy. This is by no means the first time this has happened to me. Indeed, it has happened scores of times over the years and is, I fear, the price anyone has to pay if they want to oppose dishonesty, corruption and deceit.

Wikipedia was using a well-known technique called 'controlled opposition' or 'opposition research' or 'organised opposition'. It's a military trick which has for years been used widely in politics when members of one party want to demonise the opposition. You simply go through an individual's life history looking for events which can be criticised. The Wikipedia editors know that the individual concerned cannot correct anything on a site which bears their name.

The bottom line, of course, is that if you can't trust one Wikipedia site then you can't trust any of them. I no longer use Wikipedia as a reference source. I am not, by the way, the first person to realise that Wikipedia is suspect. There have been a number of accusations that intelligence officers are editing Wikipedia sites.

It isn't just Wikipedia doing the monstering, of course. The *Bangkok Post*, a publication which I didn't even know existed, published an article about me (without bothering to get in touch of course) which tried to demonise me by claiming that my arguments about AIDS were wrong. In the last century, I had produced evidence proving that AIDS was not going to kill us all – though the establishment line was that it was – and the *Bangkok Post* journalist tried to rubbish my argument by claiming that the rate of HIV diagnoses in the US in 2018 was 24%. This is, perhaps, one of the most absurd claims I have seen anywhere. According to the CDC in the US, a total of 1.2 million people in the US have HIV. Since the population of America is currently over 300 million that means that the rate is not 24% among heterosexuals as claimed by the *Bangkok Post* but about a third of one per cent. Personally, I think that if the *Bangkok Post* had any self-respect they would withdraw the article and send the writer back to school. But I doubt if they will do either. He also claims you can buy my books from my website, as though this were a bad thing, but you can't, I'm afraid.

I am not, of course, the only person whose reputation has been wounded in this war. The BBC has been outrageous. A rally was held in Trafalgar Square on 29th August and well-qualified scientists including Professor Dolores Cahill, Dr Kevin Corbett and Dr Mohammad Adil and the magnificent and seemingly tireless astrophysicist Piers Corbyn spoke to tens of thousands. At 17.17 on Saturday afternoon someone called Marianna Spring, described as a specialist disinformation and social media reporter, wrote what I regard as one of the most disgracefully biased news reports I have ever seen. She claimed, on the BBC website, in an article headed 'Conspiracy theories touted in Trafalgar Square', that some protestors had held placards featuring false claims though I'm not sure that making a judgement about the accuracy or not of a claim is within her capabilities or her remit. Worst of all, however, she wrote that 'various pseudo-scientists who have spread disinformation online about coronavirus were also scheduled to speak at the London demonstration.' I think that was one of the most libellous pieces of writing I have ever seen. I hope that the scientists who were present all sue the BBC and demand massive damages. And I beg everyone watching or reading this to make a formal complaint to the BBC. Just go to their website and then to the complaints section. The BBC must be taught a lesson. They and the rest of the media are a weak point in this war – when the Government stops giving them money they're all going to need our support. I could give many, many more examples of deceit, misreporting and plain dishonesty.

When Piers Corbyn appeared on an ITV morning show, he was attacked by three presenters and a weather girl who holds a world record for folding pancakes. One of them was someone called Dr Hilary Jones who was described in a journal called *Pharmacy Business* as a non-executive director of MedTate which is described as a nutraceutical company – whatever that is – which makes and sells pharmaceutical products. I don't think ITV remembered to mention Dr Jones's commercial relationship. He's always struck me as one of those TV people whose main quality is nice hair. Piers Corbyn did brilliantly but although he is a scientist he is not a medical doctor. What a pity ITV didn't invite a physician to discuss the covid-19 vaccine and so on with Dr Jones and Mr Morgan and the rest of the station's staff.

This is my last video for YouTube. I refuse to collaborate with the collaborators. I refuse to suppress or distort what I know to be true simply to satisfy a platform which has no value, respectability or honour as far as I am concerned. When a government suppresses the truth then the end result is inevitably oppression and tyranny. It is the job of journalists to question everything politicians say. YouTube's policy appears to be to suppress all questioning and to deny scientific truths in the interest of protecting the lies and the myths. No one at YouTube has ever claimed to have found any specific inaccuracy or factual error in any of the videos they have removed and banned.

I am a writer by profession but I have a medical degree and some experience as a practising doctor, and I do not take kindly to being told that I must suppress truths and clinical evidence to satisfy some unnamed censors who seem to me to be working with or for Bill Gates and whose aim seems to me to be to destroy freedom and democracy by censoring and banning scientific truths and suppressing the freedom of expression which is a basic human right.

I can honestly say that I believe that all the information in all my videos is completely accurate. I have always used a script for these videos for two reasons: to make sure that I provide absolutely accurate facts and so that we have a transcript which we can put onto the website. Since YouTube has taken down nearly twenty videos to date, this has proved useful.

This video does not breach any of their guidelines. If they take this one down they will, as far as I am concerned, have proved themselves to be spiteful, vindictive and small-minded. We shall see.

I could keep this channel alive if I were prepared to lie but why on earth would I do that? I resigned as a GP on a matter of principle, I resigned from my last newspaper column on a matter of principle. I'm not going to sell my soul to a platform which disrespects the truth. I shall now add YouTube to the list of organisations which I boycott – I strongly suggest that you do too. There are, I believe, plenty of more honourable alternatives.

I see no point in recording more videos for YouTube. They are taking them down, for absolutely no good reason that I can see, within hours of my putting them up. My videos take much time and effort to research, write and check and it is frustrating and disappointing to see them being banned for what I think are political reasons. It is modern day book burning. YouTube is no longer a reputable site; its commercially inspired intolerance is unacceptable. I described my views on freedom in an early video entitled Coronavirus: Why did YouTube ban my video? – which they took down and then put back up – perhaps because even they felt embarrassed.

I am sad about this and I suspect that the opposition, the fans of Bill Gates, the 21st century would-be slave owners, will regard this as a victory for them. They would be mistaken to think that. I've been fighting lies and injustices for well over half a century and I'm not going away. I'm regrouping; looking for more favourable ground to continue the fight.

For the time being, I'm moving over to my own website – where nothing is ever censored. At the moment, we don't have the facility to put up videos but we will continue to put up new articles every Wednesday and Sunday and at other times too. And we're going to put up more leaflets that can be printed out and distributed.

My wife who has always been in charge of research, editing and production, and reigning me in when I seem about to get carried away, will choose the appropriate platform. We are both driven by the need to help those who cannot help themselves – especially children, the old, the disabled and the mentally ill. But our new video site will be somewhere which we can control. It might take a while because I am never again going to be in a position where anyone can censor or ban what I've recorded.

Finally, since no one in the Government has accepted my challenge to debate the covid-19 vaccine live on television, and through simple cowardice they're clearly not likely to now, I have another challenge.

I am prepared to bet Dr Whitty or Dr Fauci £100,000 that they cannot provide independent clinical evidence proving beyond doubt that the covid-19 vaccine and the newly promoted flu vaccine will be 100% effective and 100% safe not just now but in the long term. If they have the courage to take on the bet, I will share my winnings with groups and websites campaigning for the truth. If they won't take on the bet, we will know that they believe that any new covid-19 vaccine will not be 100% effective or 100% safe in the short and long-term. Let's put a finish date of 31st December 2020 for the bet.

Thank you again for watching the videos. Thank you for sharing them on brandnewtube and bitchute and wherever else. Please share this one too. Thank you for all your support. I'm sorry I cannot reply to messages – but we get many thousands a week and I worked out the other day that if I replied to them all, I would need 48 hour days and there would be no time for anything else. Please forgive me.

Distrust the Government, avoid mass media and fight the lies.

Please remember that although you may at times feel that you are alone – you are not. More and more people are waking up to the truth and we will win this war.

And so, au revoir from the old man in a chair.

I'll be back. But not on YouTube.

September 3rd 2020

Ending YouTube

It saddened us both enormously to end the series of videos which we started last March. In six months the channel had grown from nothing to 168,000 subscribers.

But apart from taking down individual videos at a rapid rate, YouTube had also threatened to take down the whole channel if I recorded anything else which breached their bizarre and unscientific WHO rules.

I had four other scripts almost finished, and every one of them contained material about the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of covid-19. All of them would have been removed by YouTube within a day or so at most. I looked through the scripts closely and tried to rewrite them so that they would not break the platform's rules. But I couldn't.

I then realised that it is now impossible to write and record anything about covid-19 (and expect it to stay 'live' on YouTube) without suppressing the truth and avoiding the scientific evidence.

I could have recorded another video but it would have been deleted very quickly and YouTube would have taken down the remaining 80 or so videos which are, I believe, still of value since they contain a mass of valuable material which, among other things, describe the way the hoax has unfolded.

Of course, they may still choose to remove those 80 videos – though that would seem to me to be nothing more than an act of spite.

As I explained in the video – I'll be back. But not on YouTube. I haven't given up. I hope the subscribers who watched the videos on YouTube will join me wherever I end up. Meanwhile, if you haven't watched all the videos there are around 80 of them still there…for the moment.

We are putting together a book containing the scripts of all the videos broadcast in May, June, July and August – together with a foreword and an afterword unpublished elsewhere. It will, I hope, be a valuable guide to how the hoax has unfolded. We'll put a note on this website when it's available.

September 3rd 2020

Afterword

So, what happens if we don’t win this war?

Well, in short, it’s the end of the human race as we know it.

Vaccination will become mandatory and we will all be genetically modified. Heaven knows what effect 5G radiation will have on our bodies. Cash will disappear from circulation and our money will be controlled by banks which will have the legal right to withdraw our access to it. Health care will be rudimentary and the elderly, disabled and mentally ill will all be allowed to die. There will be absolutely no freedom of the press. Very few people will have jobs. We will all be totally dependent on the State. We will be awarded points according to our social value, and those who rebel will be ostracised and denied access to food. Private property will be confiscated and we will be moved into the smart cities promoted by the United Nations.

Anyone who has studied Agenda 21 and the plans defined by the World Economic Forum knows what we are facing.

You will by now be aware that I believe we are fighting the most important war of our lives.

We are constantly researching and investigating and I will try to write more about the future, and what else we can do to protect ourselves, in a future book.

Vernon Coleman, Bilbury, September 2020

Dear Reader

If you found this book useful I would be enormously grateful if you would post a review on Amazon or your preferred online site. It would help a great deal more than I can tell. I have now started work on a book exploring the background to this massive hoax (or fraud). Details of the book will, in due course, be published on my website www.vernoncoleman.com and, I hope, on my author page on Amazon.

Thank you,

Vernon Coleman

P.S. When you finished reading this book might I suggest that you add to it your own thoughts on the greatest and most evil hoax of all time – and then put the book and your notes into a time capsule. I genuinely fear that our civilisation is currently under real threat. If we are forced to accept vaccines which result in genetic modification of the human body then the changes will be permanent and multi-generational. Future generations may like to know how life was, and the details of the war we fought for survival.

The Author

Biography and reference articles

Vernon Coleman was educated at Queen Mary's Grammar School in Walsall, Staffs. He then spent a year as a Community Service Volunteer in Liverpool where he was the first of Alec Dickson's 'catalysts'. (Ref 1 below). He studied medicine at Birmingham Medical School and qualified as a doctor in 1970. He has worked both in hospitals and as a GP. He resigned from the health service on a matter of principle. (Ref 2 below).

Vernon Coleman has organised many campaigns concerning iatrogenesis, drug addiction and the abuse of animals and has given evidence to committees at the House of Commons and the House of Lords. For example, he gave evidence to the *House of Lords Select Committee on Animals in Scientific Procedures* (2001-2) on Tuesday 12.2.02

Dr Coleman's campaigns have often proved successful. For example, after a 15 year campaign (which started in 1973) he eventually persuaded the British Government to introduce stricter controls governing the prescribing of benzodiazepine tranquillisers. ('Dr Vernon Coleman's articles, to which I refer with approval, raised concern about these important matters,' said the Parliamentary Secretary for Health in the House of Commons in 1988.) (Ref 3 below).

Dr Coleman has worked as a columnist for numerous national newspapers including *The Sun, The Daily Star, The Sunday Express, Sunday Correspondent* and *The People*. He once wrote three columns at the same time for national papers (he wrote them under three different names, Dr Duncan Scott in *The Sunday People*, Dr James in *The Sun* and Dr Vernon Coleman in the *Daily Star*). At the same time he was also writing weekly columns for the *Evening Times* in Glasgow and for the *Sunday Scot*. His syndicated columns have appeared in over 50 regional newspapers in the United Kingdom and his columns and articles have appeared in newspapers and magazines around the world. Dr Coleman resigned from *The People* in 2003 when the editor refused to print a column criticising the Government's decision to start the Iraq War. (Ref 6 below)

He has contributed articles and stories to hundreds of other publications including *The Sunday Times, Observer, Guardian, Daily Telegraph, Sunday Telegraph, Daily Express, Daily Mail, Mail on Sunday, Daily Mirror, Sunday Mirror, Punch, Woman, Woman's Own, The Lady, Spectator* and *British Medical Journal*. He was the founding editor of the *British Clinical Journal.* For many years he wrote a monthly newsletter called *Dr Vernon Coleman's Health Letter*. He has worked with the Open University in the UK and has lectured doctors and nurses on a variety of medical matters.

Vernon Coleman has presented numerous programmes on television and radio and was the original breakfast television doctor on TV AM. He was television's first agony uncle (on BBC1's *The Afternoon Show*) and presented three TV series based on his bestselling book *Bodypower*. In the 1980s, he helped write the algorithms for the first computerised health programmes – which sold around the world to those far-sighted individuals who had bought the world's first home computers. (Ref 4 below). His books have been published in the UK *by Arrow, Pan, Penguin, Corgi, Mandarin, Star, Piatkus, RKP, Thames and Hudson, Sidgwick and Jackson, Macmillan* and many other leading publishing houses and translated into 25 languages. English language versions sell in the USA, Australia, Canada and South Africa as well as the UK. Several of his books have appeared on both the *Sunday Times* and *Bookseller* bestseller lists.

Altogether, he has written over 100 books which have, together, sold over two million copies in the UK alone. His self-published novel, *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War* has been turned into an award winning film (starring Pauline Collins, John Alderton and Peter Capaldi) and the book is, like many of his other novels, available in an audio version.

Vernon Coleman has co-written five books with his wife, Donna Antoinette Coleman and has, in addition, written numerous articles (and books) under a vast variety of pennames (many of which he has now forgotten). Donna Antoinette Coleman is a talented oil painter who specialises in landscapes. Her books include, *My Quirky Cotswold Garden*. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. Vernon and Antoinette Coleman have been married for more than 20 years.

Vernon Coleman has received numerous awards and was for some time a Professor of Holistic Medical Sciences at the Open International University based in Sri Lanka.

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There is a more comprehensive list of reference articles on www.vernoncoleman.com

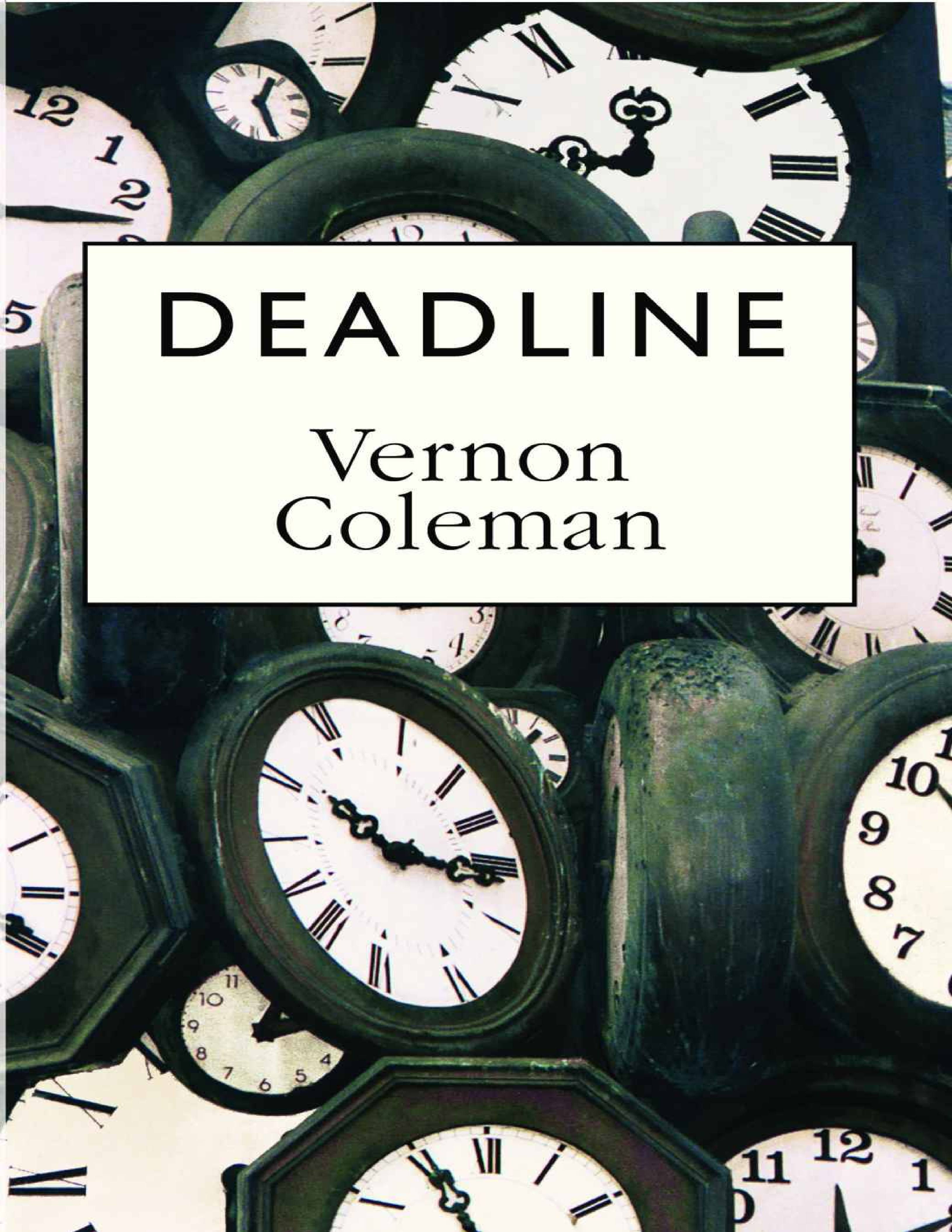

DEADLINE

Vernon
Coleman

DEADLINE

by

Vernon Coleman

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CHAPTER ONE

It hadn't been the best week I'd ever had.

On Monday I'd lost my job. Actually, that's a euphemism. I hadn't "lost" my job at all. I knew exactly where it was. The simple truth is that on Monday I'd been fired.

On Tuesday my wife had walked out on me. No warning. No explanation. Just packed her bags and gone. I'd got back from a training session at the gym and found that she'd taken everything from the flat that either belonged to her or was of any value. She hadn't even left a note.

On Wednesday morning I lay awake in bed trying not to think of either of those things and struggling to get back to sleep. When I heard the little click that the alarm clock always makes a second or so before it starts to ring I reached over and switched it off. There wasn't much point in getting up early; there wasn't much to get out of bed for. The day was likely to be long enough as it was.

My world had fallen apart at 9.35 am on Monday when the managing editor had told me that the paper was, with reluctance, "going to have to let me go."

"It'll give you an opportunity to stretch your talents elsewhere," he'd said, without even blushing. I wondered if I'd have liked it more if he'd been blunt about it. "We don't like you. You're fired. Get out. Life's tough." Probably not.

I knew why they'd done it.

For six years I'd been the paper's chief investigative reporter. As long as I confined myself to writing about the sort of crooks who wore masks and carried sledge hammers they'd been happy. But I'd written too many stories about financial crime in the city and they hadn't gone down well with the paper's owners. To avoid any confusion I ought to make it clear that it was my stories that hadn't gone down well. The crimes hadn't gone down badly at all.

To begin with there had been a few subtle warnings. The news editor had sent me up to Manchester to cover a murder trial. I'd spent two weeks there and had sent back about fifteen thousand words of copy. They'd used two paragraphs and one of those had been from an agency reporter.

But I've never been very good at taking hints. When I got back to London I carried on doing some research into computer fraud in one of the city's leading banks. It was the early 1990s when all this happened and computer fraud was the new `thing among crooks. When the news editor had told me that they couldn't use the story I'd passed the information I'd acquired on to the fraud squad of the metropolitan police.

That hadn't really been a bright career move. The man who'd founded the paper just happened to be a director of the bank.

I'd known that when I'd started the story but I've always been a stubborn bastard.

I was still a stubborn bastard, but now I was an unemployed stubborn bastard.

I shuffled out of the bedroom into the kitchenette. I love the way estate agents make up word like "kitchenette". It sound sweet and neat. In fact it means that even they are embarrassed to call six square feet of space a kitchen. I gulped down a glass of orange juice and staggered back into the bedroom. I rummaged around on the floor by the side of the bed until I found my grey tracksuit. Finding my running shoes took longer. One shoe was under the bed and the other was half buried under a pile of dirty washing. I was beginning to live like a slob. It wasn't out of character. I felt like a slob.

The three mile run round the park woke me up but it didn't make me feel any better about myself or the future. Apart from breakfast I didn't have any plans for the future. I cooked mushrooms, tomatoes, scrambled eggs and vegetarian sausages. I gave up eating dead animals three years ago. These days I feel nauseated if I pass a butcher's shop and see meat laid out on a slab.

I made breakfast last as long as possible. I read the morning papers, made toast under the grill and drank two large cups of freshly ground black coffee. The smell of the coffee and the toast should have made me feel better but it didn't. At ten I finished the crossword. The only thing left to read was the page with the share prices and I wasn't quite that desperate. I dumped the dirty dishes in the sink and wandered back into the bedroom. I had planned to get changed but I'd only got one clean shirt and I thought I'd better keep that in case I really needed it.

I shrugged, wiped a blob of marmalade off the front of my tracksuit and headed for the door. I had to get out. I didn't know where. Just out. The postman had delivered two bills and a bank statement. I tossed them onto the table in the hall. I knew exactly how much I'd got in the bank without looking.

As I left the phone started to ring. I ignored it. I couldn't think of anyone in the world I wanted to speak to. I suddenly realised that since I'd left the paper I hadn't spoken to a single, living soul. Unless you count a few words to the check-out girl at the local supermarket.

Downstairs in the underground car park I found that someone had slipped a note underneath the windscreen wipers of my car. It was the usual threatening note from the insurance broker who lives in Flat 3D and is chairman of our building's Residents' Committee. He pointed out that my car overhung my parking bar by 17 inches and that it was a potential inconvenience to other residents. I crumpled the note up and tossed it into a nearby litter basket.

My car is a steel grey Bentley S1. I bought it three years ago with money I earned from a book about mass murderers. It was built in 1958 for a long forgotten and recently dead actor who had more taste than talent. I bought it partly because I liked it, partly because it was a bargain I couldn't refuse and partly because I thought it was probably a good investment. I've never been much good with money. There isn't any point in my putting money into a bank or building society account. I just draw it out the following week and spend it. But I knew that I wouldn't sell the car unless I became desperate.

As I slipped the key into the lock I wondered how long it would be before I became that desperate. The red leather seats were cracking with age but they still felt firm and comfortable. And, as always, the engine started first time. The car needed servicing every 2,500 miles but it was worth it. It cost me a fortune in garage bills and the 4.8 litre engine rarely managed more than 12 miles to the gallon but it never let me down.

I drove down St John's Wood Road, past Lords cricket ground, and turned left heading for Baker Street. The roads around London are so clogged with traffic these days that it is usually quicker to drive straight through the centre of the city. Everyone else expects the city centre to be one big traffic jam so they keep well away.

The gym I usually use is in South London, on the other side of the river. It's unfashionable, dirty and patronised almost exclusively by fighters or would-be fighters. I'd never found a better way of keeping fit than working out at a gym with young, tough, aspiring professional boxers. They aren't there because it's fashionable to work out or because they want to look good; they are there because they are hungry for success.

About two years ago I tried one of the new, smart city gyms that have sprung up to cater for businessmen who want to keep fit. I paid my several hundred pounds membership fee and went there twice. There was plenty of shiny, chromium plated equipment but I didn't feel comfortable there. I like my work-outs to be real not superficial. I walked out of the smart gym when I heard two guys who were supposed to be working out discussing the price of copper. In a real gym no one talks. They may grunt occasionally but they don't talk. Anger and sweat are the two most vital ingredients for a good work-out and there was very little of either in the upmarket city gym.

I parked the car on the piece of waste land that adjoins the gym and gave Johnny a couple of coins to keep an eye on it. Johnny is about sixty and used to be a fighter. His brain was slightly scrambled when he prolonged his career by one fight too many but he's still lean and hard and the local kids don't mess with him. He always hangs around so that he can look after cars. I gave Johnny the keys so that he could sit in the car if it rained.

I was about ten feet from the door to the gym when I heard someone call my name.

I turned and saw someone I vaguely remembered standing by a small BMW on the other side of the road. He wore a blue two piece suit with a white silk shirt and a cricket club tie that I recognised. He had one arm half raised, presumably to attract my attention. It wasn't really necessary. The road where the gym was situated isn't exactly heavily populated. There was no one else in sight.

"Mark Watson?" he said, holding his jacket together as he ran across the road. "My name's Michael Sunderland, I'm sorry to bother you."

The ten yards run seemed to have winded him. He was in his late twenties but already had a noticeable paunch. It was, however, his eyes which caught my attention. They looked hollow. He looked haunted and exhausted.

I took his outstretched hand and shook it gently. It felt plump and podgy.

"Can I talk to you?" he asked, breathlessly. "It's very important."

"Sure." I remembered why I knew him. He worked in the advertising department of the paper I'd just left.

He looked around. "Is there somewhere we can go?"

"There's a cafe two hundred yards up the road." I told him. The only people who used it were the guys from the gym. None of them were likely to be there at this time of day.

Sunderland pulled his car keys out of his trouser pocket and started to head back across the road towards his BMW. I caught his arm.

"Lets walk," I said. I waved to Johnny and signalled for him to keep an eye on the BMW as well.

Neither of us spoke during the walk to the cafe. Once inside I ordered two large mugs of tea and two plates of bread and butter. The owner doesn't like people going in there just for a drink. We sat in silence until the drinks and the food came.

"I hope you don't mind my coming to you," began Sunderland. He tried to pick up his mug of tea but his hands were shaking too much. He put it down again quickly.

"What's the problem?" I asked. "Why me?"

"I didn't know who else to go to."

I picked up a slice of bread and butter, folded it in half and bit a chunk out of it. George uses ordinary thick sliced white bread and unsalted butter but his bread and butter always tastes better than anyone else's. I've never understood why.

"Peter Norton suggested I talk to you."

I recognised the name. Peter Norton is one of the paper's staff lawyers. He's more than an acquaintance and not quite a friend.

I put three large spoons of sugar into my tea and stirred it carefully.

"I don't know where to start."

Suddenly, I noticed that he had tears in the corner of his eyes. It was a long time since I'd seen another man cry. I looked down feeling uncomfortable. I know crying is supposed to be really healthy but it always embarrasses the hell out of me. "Start at the beginning," I told him. I've always been an original thinker.

He licked his lips and took a deep breath. It was clearly all a tremendous effort. I didn't know how to make it easier for him. I just waited.

"I got married ten days ago," he blurted out suddenly. "I married a girl called Barbara. You might have seen her. She works in the classified advertising department."

I shook my head.

"Blonde, about five foot ten, always dresses well. Very pretty."

I nodded. I'd seen her. It wasn't difficult to remember her. She was more than just pretty.

"Beautiful girl. You're a lucky fellow."

He nodded and tried to pick up his mug again. His hands were still shaking too much for him to hold it.

"Go on." I said, after a few moments silence.

"We went to Paris for our honeymoon. It was marvellous. The most wonderful time of my life. Everything was perfect. The hotel. The weather. The food."

I started to say something about it not being perfect if he'd noticed the weather but stopped myself just in time. I'm not often tactful and I felt proud of myself.

"Three days ago it was time to come back. We had about an hour to go before we needed to catch the bus back to the airport so we went to the Cafe de la Paix near to the Opera for a last coffee."

I nodded. I knew it well.

"We'd left our luggage at the hotel and were planning to get a taxi up to the bus depot at the top of the Champs d'Elysee and pick up our bags on the way."

I nodded again.

"I ordered the coffees and then decided to go to the loo before we set off for the airport." His whole body was shaking now. I reached out and put a hand on his arm.

"I wasn't away more than a couple of minutes at the most," he went on. "When I got back Barbara was gone." Tears rolled down his cheeks and splashed onto the red, plastic table cloth.

"At first I just thought I must have mistaken the table," he went on. "Then I thought that maybe she had slipped off to the ladies. Or gone outside to buy a newspaper or a magazine from the kiosk on the pavement."

"But she didn't come back?"

He shook his head. "I asked around," he said. "But the only person who remembered her was a German woman. She said she'd seen Barbara leave with another man. She said he was about medium height, heavy build, balding and wore a heavy tweed overcoat." He paused. "I asked her for a good description in case it was someone I knew."

"But it wasn't?"

He shook his head again. There was a lot of nodding and shaking going on.

"So, what did you do then?"

"I still half expected her to reappear," said Sunderland. "It all seemed like a nightmare. I couldn't think what could have happened or where she could have gone."

I could see that he was making a real effort not to break down completely.

"I waited at the cafe for another half an hour and then I went to a telephone, called the airport and told them that we wouldn't be making the flight."

I nodded encouragement. He needed it.

"The German woman who'd seen Barbara leave said she'd gone willingly with the man in the tweed overcoat after he'd told her something that had made her cry," Sunderland said. "I couldn't understand any of it. I couldn't understand why she'd left, why she hadn't left me a note, why she didn't come back."

"What did you do then?"

"I went back to the hotel. Our cases were still behind the receptionist's desk where we'd left them. But no one had seen Barbara. I managed to re-book a room for the night and left a message there for Barbara in case she showed up. Then I raced back to the cafe and left a message for her there too. I tried giving the message to one of the waiters but he suggested I taped a note to her onto the glass doors at the front of the cafe."

"I take it that she still hasn't turned up?" I said. "You haven't heard from her at all?"

He shook his head.

"How long did you wait in Paris?"

"Another 24 hours. I tried the police, the British Embassy and the local hospitals. I tried everyone I could think of."

"What did the police say?"

"They didn't seem very interested."

"What about the Embassy?"

"The same. Everyone seemed to think I was making a fuss out of nothing. They all said that I should just go home and that she'd probably turn up in a few days."

"How long had you known Barbara before you got married?"

"Two years," he answered. "We'd lived together for six months."

"What made you get married?"

He blushed. "We wanted to start a family."

"As far as you know did she have any friends in Paris?"

She'd never been to France before. She didn't even speak French."

"Had you met anyone while you were over there?"

He shook his head. "We were on our honeymoon," he reminded me. "We didn't want to be with anyone else. We didn't even go on any of the coach tours that were part of the trip."

"Did she have any money with her when she disappeared?"

"The police wanted to know that. She had 50 or 60 pounds I think. Mostly in sterling."

"Did she have her passport?"

He nodded.

"Did she suffer from any health problems? Epilepsy? Diabetes? Anything like that?"

"No. Nothing."

"And the hospitals hadn't admitted anyone answering her description?"

Another shake of the head. "I actually managed to get someone from the Embassy to ring round all the hospitals that I hadn't been able to check. Nothing."

"When did you get back to London?"

"The day before yesterday. In the evening. As soon as I got back I rang round her friends in London. No one had heard anything. Then I telephoned the police. They said that since it happened in Paris it was nothing to do with them."

"And then you went to see Peter Norton?"

Another nod. "He's a good friend. I've known him for years. We used to play squash together."

Why did he suggest you talked to me?"

"He said we had to consider the possibility that she might have been kidnapped. He said you knew more about crime and criminals than anyone else he knew." He paused. "He said I could trust you."

"Have you received a ransom note?"

"No."

"Nothing at all?"

"Nothing."

"Did Peter tell you that you could find me here?"

"He gave me your phone number, your home address and this address. I tried to ring you last night and this morning but there was no reply. So I came here."

I picked up my mug and took a long, slow drink from it. "Can you think of anyone who would want to kidnap her?"

"No." He paused. "We don't have enough money to make it worth anyone's while." He said it as though he was slightly embarrassed.

"You don't have rich parents?"

"My father is a painter and decorator in Reading. He and my mother live in a semi-detached house."

"What about your wife's parents?"

He shook his head. "Barbara's parents aren't rich either."

"Have you any enemies?"

"Enemies?" He seemed startled by the question.

"Anyone who would want to harm you?"

"No."

"Has Barbara?"

"No, of course not."

I took another bite out of the slice of bread and butter that I'd already started, then washed it down with a gulp of hot, sweet tea.

Across the table Michael Sunderland took out a linen handkerchief and noisily blew his nose. It was a long time since I'd seen anyone use anything other than a piece of crumpled tissue for nose blowing. "I just don't know what to do," he said, very softly. He looked forlorn and lonely; a bewildered and frightened man who had, probably for the first time in his life, come into contact with the dark realities of the world. He looked straight at me; his plump pink cheeks tear stained and his eyes lifeless and almost empty of hope. "I don't know what to do," he said quietly. "Will you help me?"

I didn't know what to do either but it was easier for me to stay tough and sound optimistic.

"Yeah," I promised. "I'll try."

CHAPTER TWO

I didn't know where to start so I sent Sunderland back home and told him I'd ring him later. Then, I went into the gym to think.

Two hours later, in the shower, I realized that all I'd thought about was the job I didn't have and the wife who'd left me. I knew which I'd miss most. And knew that was probably one of the reasons why she'd left me. The other reason would be money. She liked having money. She wouldn't have liked not having any. I wondered where she'd gone. The last I knew she had a choice of two. A banker or a solicitor. Both loaded.

I'd enjoyed my job. And I knew I'd miss it. I also knew that I'd probably never get another like it. These days newspaper owners don't want investigative journalists. Too many investigations upset the advertisers. The funny thing is that if I hadn't enjoyed my job so much, and hadn't been so good at it, I probably wouldn't have lost it.

I came out of the shower and found Billy waiting for me. Everyone who hangs around real gyms knows that there's a rule that people who work there have to have names with a "y" on the end. Billy didn't say anything but held one huge fist next to his ear as though he was about to punch himself on the side of the head.

Billy isn't a great talker but at six foot five he's an inch or so taller than me and at seventeen and a half stone he's a good three stones heavier too. If he doesn't want to talk a lot that's fine by me. Billy was a contender who missed his chance at the title after his manager got greedy. Still, he got the gym out of a career that went on too long. And he always seemed happier than most of the people I know.

It was Sunderland on the phone. He was excited and spoke so fast I could hardly hear what he said. I asked him to slow down a bit and waggled my index finger around in my ear to try and get some of the soapy water out.

"I've just had a phone call," he said. "I think it's them."

"Them?"

"The people who've kidnapped Barbara."

I was surprised. I hadn't really taken to the kidnapping theory. I still half suspected that Sunderland's wife had just walked out on him. I knew that was something that some wives did.

"They want to meet me this afternoon."

"Who's they?"

"A woman."

"What did she say?"

"Just that she'd booked a table for two at The Grand. five o'clock for tea."

I almost laughed. And then I realized it probably wasn't so daft after all. Crowds of people. Public place.

"What else did she say?"

"Just that she knew Barbara would want me to meet her and that the table was booked in the name of Reynolds."

"So we know one thing about her."

"What?" Sunderland sounded excited and I felt guilty.

"Her name isn't Reynolds." I said. "Cuts it down a bit." I pulled the towel around me a little tighter and stamped my feet. Billy's only telephone is stuck in a freezing hallway. I looked down at my bare feet and wondered how blue toes had to go before they were irreversibly damaged. "Did she mention the police?"

"She said I wasn't to contact them."

"Don't." I said. I peered round the doorway into Billy's office. The huge clock on the wall said twenty past two. "Do exactly what she said," I told him. "I'll be there too." I hung up and went to get dressed.

CHAPTER THREE

I poured myself another cup of tea, nibbled at an egg and cress sandwich and wondered how much this was going to cost me. I wondered if it was bad form to ask for expenses while doing a favour for a friend of an acquaintance. I didn't mind forking out for tea and bread and butter at the cafe near the gym but I had an overpowering suspicion that I was going to have to take out a loan on the Bentley to pay for tea at The Grand.

It had cost me a tenner and a favour to get the table. Like most big cities London operates on the favour system. It's favours not money that make the world go round. I didn't know the head waiter at The Grand but I knew the barman quite well and he put in a good word for me. Without his help not even money would have got me in. American and Japanese tourists book up to take tea at The Grand in their hundreds. Watching the guardsmen change places at Buckingham Palace just down the road is thirsty work.

I'd booked my table for 4.30 pm and had arrived bang on the dot. I wanted plenty of time to see if I could spot anyone who looked as if she was pretending to be called Reynolds when her name was really something else.

Michael Sunderland turned up at 5.00 pm as he'd been told to do. I watched as he introduced himself to the head waiter and asked to be shown to Ms Reynolds table. He was sweating profusely and kept mopping his brow with his handkerchief.

As I stuffed myself with egg and cress I noticed that the head waiter seemed to be bringing Sunderland over in my direction. I looked around. On my left sat two elderly English ladies who were deep in loud conversation about something awful that had happened in Cheltenham and seemed to have involved a horse. On my right sat four Japanese tourists, complete with maps and cameras. In front of them was an American family. Two sullen looking teenage children looking bored; mother looking hardly any older than teenage daughter and father looking weary of life, or at least of family life.

I could see Sunderland going redder and redder with growing embarrassment as the head waiter brought him closer and closer to my table. I tried to hide behind what was left of my egg and cress sandwich but it hadn't been very big to start with.

"Ms Reynolds sent her apologies," the head waiter said to Sunderland. "She's been unavoidably delayed. She says you know Mr Watson and hopes you won't mind having tea together today."

Sunderland started to protest. I could see that he was trying to decide whether or not to deny that he knew me. I put down my sandwich, stood up, smiled at him and held out my hand. He took it automatically.

I turned the smile towards the head waiter. "Thank you!" I grinned inanely. "That's very thoughtful of Ms Reynolds."

Sunderland had gone white. He sat down.

A waiter appeared from nowhere and put china and cutlery down in front of him.

"Tea?" I asked. I picked up the tea pot.

He looked at me as if I'd asked him if he'd like to dance. I poured him a cup anyway.

"How did she...,"

"Someone recognised me, put two and two together and got four," I explained. "Maybe someone's following you."

Sunderland looked down at the cup of tea in front of him. Tea seemed to be playing an important part in our relationship.

The waiter returned with a fresh pot of tea and Sunderland and I sat in silence for a few moments. Then I heard someone calling my name. It was a bell boy. His voice seemed loud and clear above the hubbub of tea time conversation. It's a strange thing about the human ear; whatever you're doing you always hear when someone mentions your name. The brain seems to pick out the sound, hone in on it and magnify it. I raised an arm and called the boy over.

He handed me a note. I told Sunderland to tip him. The expenses were getting completely out of hand. The note had a telephone number on it. The prefix told me that the number belonged to a portable phone.

"Wait here," I said to Sunderland. "Don't move. Don't do anything. Just drink your tea."

He looked at me, startled, and opened his mouth.

I never knew whether he finished the question that was on its way to his mouth because I was already on my way to find a telephone. When I worked for the paper I had a portable telephone too but when I was fired I had to give it back. These days everyone seems to have at least three mobile telephones. In those days, mobile phones were still pretty unusual. I missed it; it was a long time since I'd had to use an ordinary public phone box.

The number I dialled was answered on the first ring.

"Sunderland's out of his depth," I said without waiting for anyone to answer. "He asked me along to hold his hand. He hasn't been to the police."

"Good!" said a voice at the other end. A man's voice. "You can take a message. Tell Sunderland that his wife is safe and well. He'll see her when Jeremy Lonsdale is acquitted."

I thought I'd misheard. I asked him to repeat what he'd said. He did. I hadn't misheard.

"I don't understand. What's Michael Sunderland got to do with Jeremy Lonsdale?"

"The trial starts next Monday. Ask Sunderland where he's going to be next Monday."

I still didn't understand but there was something more important to say.

"We want something to prove that Sunderland's wife is alive and well."

"What?"

"A video or photo of her holding up today's paper. Plus an audio tape of her reading out the headlines. And we want fresh photos and tapes every day that you hold her."

"OK." It'll be delivered to Sunderland's flat."

He put the phone down.

CHAPTER FOUR

I knew of Jeremy Lonsdale, of course. I'd never met him but I'd written about him and I knew that he was about to stand trial for fraud.

When I got back to the table I asked Sunderland how he knew Lonsdale. He looked genuinely puzzled and said that he didn't. I told him what the man on the phone had said and asked him what he was doing the following Monday.

For a moment he looked blank. Then he remembered. It wasn't the sort of thing people usually forget but then Michael Sunderland was under a rather extraordinary amount of pressure.

"I've been called for jury duty," he said. "At the Old Bailey."

It didn't take a great intellect to work it out.

"You're on the jury for the Lonsdale case,' I told him.

He looked puzzled. "How did you know? I thought they didn't know which jurors were sitting on which juries until the last minute?"

"Just because they don't tell YOU that doesn't mean that no one knows," I pointed out. "And Lonsdale certainly knows."

"Who is Lonsdale?"

"He's the man who's on trial. He's got to be the man who's behind Barbara's kidnapping."

"What's he done?"

"I don't know yet what he's done this time but he's been involved in a number of financial frauds over the years. Don't you remember the Trans Continental Casualty Insurance Company?"

Sunderland thought for a moment and then shook his head.

"It made all the papers a few years ago," I explained. "It was the first time I heard of him."

"What did he do?"

"Sold holiday insurance to travellers coming to Britain."

Sunderland looked puzzled. "Was there any money in that?"

"Tourism is the world's third biggest industry. About twenty million people a year come to Britain on holiday."

"And most of them buy travel insurance?"

I nodded. "At between fifteen and thirty pounds a head."

Sunderland looked impressed.

"Work it out when you've got a few spare minutes,"

I told him. "A ten per cent share of the business would gross around £40 million a year. And Lonsdale had an edge. He offered travel agents a much bigger commission than any of his rivals - over 50%."

"How on earth did he manage that?"

"His company - Trans Continental Casualty Insurance - offered tourists to Britain private health cover that operated only where they weren't entitled to other, free health cover."

Sunderland looked puzzled.

"All tourists to Britain are entitled to free health care under the National Health Service," I explained. "So Lonsdale's cover didn't cost him anything."

"But wasn't it illegal?"

"Not really. And as far as I know they never had to pay out a penny. Apart from paying commission to the foreign travel agents - and printing some forms - everything was profit."

"And what's he done now?"

"I'm going to try and find out," I told him. "But this time he must have gone a bit further over the legal boundaries."

"What have Barbara and I got to do with all this?"

"Simple." I told him. "You'll get Barbara back if you find Lonsdale "not guilty"."

"But there will be eleven other jurors!" Sunderland protested. "I can't find him not guilty by myself."

"Lonsdale knows damned well that on a jury one person invariably influences the result. You're all they need."

"But why Barbara? Why choose me?"

"You're educated, smart, persuasive. You're a leader. You sell advertising for a living don't you?" I thought it was rather frightening to realise that criminals were now doing psychological profiles of potential jurors.

Sunderland nodded.

"They want you to sell the rest of the jury on Lonsdale's innocence." I explained.

At that point the waiter brought the bill. I looked at it several times.

"Are you sure this is right?" I pointed to the total. "We just had two teas," I explained. "We've only been here for an hour."

The waiter looked slightly confused. "I'm afraid the bill is correct, sir." he murmured. "Is there a problem, sir?"

Sunderland reached across the table and took the bill from me. He removed a thin black leather wallet from his inside breast pocket and removed a gold, plastic credit card. He handed the card and the bill to the waiter with a smile.

"I'm sorry," he said to me. "I forgot. Peter told me that you'd lost you job. I should pay you something for your help. And cover your expenses."

"That's all right," I said, not meaning it. I was just being polite. I didn't think he'd take me seriously. But he did.

"OK." he said.

We left The Grand and made our way back to his flat. We took my car which was parked in Jermyn Street. His, which was parked in Piccadilly, had been clamped.

Sunderland and his bride had bought an expensive flat in the docklands and had furnished it with the sort of furniture that looks good in glossy magazines but is impractical and uncomfortable to use. The flat was on the fifth floor and had a magnificent view of a dusty building site and a dark, oil stained, sluggish stretch of water.

"What do we do now?" he wanted to know after I'd said "no" to his offers of American beer, Scottish whisky, French brandy or Italian wine and "yes" to the offer of a cup of Nicaraguan coffee. I'll drink a glass of champagne at a wedding if I have to but I don't really like alcohol.

"I'm not sure," I admitted. I tried to find a comfortable position on a chair that had been built out of strips of chromium plated metal and slender strands of plastic. Whichever way I sat the plastic and the chrome sliced into my flesh like a potato chipper slices into a potato.

He sat down opposite me on a chair that looked a twin to the one I'd chosen. He seemed to have forgotten about the offer of coffee. I didn't remind him.

"If I do what they want...," he began hesitantly, "do you think they'll...?"

"Will they keep their side of the bargain? Will they let your wife go?"

He nodded.

"No." There didn't seem any point in lying to him.

"How can you say that with such certainty?"

"Because Lonsdale doesn't like taking risks." I stood up and walked over to the window. In the distance I could see what looked like a speedboat. For a brief instant I thought it was towing a water skier. "If he lets your wife go he'll be at risk. He won't like that"

"So, what do we do?"

"I don't know." The boat was towing a water skier. The skier wore a full body wet suit; presumably to protect him against the oil and the slime and the sewage as much as against the cold.

I heard what sounded like a sob and turned round. Sunderland had his hands over his face and his body was shaking. I felt guilty. I'd been pretty callous about it. I'd forgotten that he probably loved his wife and wanted her back. I turned, walked over to him, bent down and put a hand on his back. But I didn't know what to say.

"I'm sorry...," he managed to blurt out in between sobs. "I love her very much."

"I'll think of something," I promised him. "Don't worry."

He took his hands away from his face and slowly stood up. He looked at me with his eyes full of hope and trust. "Will you?" He reached out and shook my hand. "Thank you." He swallowed noisily. "Thank you."

I smiled and winked at him. "Don't you worry," I said. "Everything will be OK. We'll get your wife back in one piece."

Most of us make rash promises from time to time.

CHAPTER FIVE

Back in my own flat another wave of depression swept over me and threatened to drown me in its darkness. Looking around I could understand why my wife had packed her bags and left. The flat was cramped and the furniture she'd left was cheap and uninspiring. It was the sort of flat you'd expect a failure to live in. I felt right at home.

After I'd made myself a coffee I decided I'd have a clear out and throw away everything I didn't like or didn't need. I always find that there is something cleansing and cathartic about a spring clean. It enables me to believe that my life is about to start afresh. Maybe I trick myself into believing that together with the old clothes and old papers I can toss out the unwanted emotional baggage and the assorted layers of guilt that I'm so good at collecting.

I did my closet first. That was easy. After twenty minutes I'd filled two black plastic bags with shirts that didn't fit me, trousers that had frayed around the pockets and jackets I didn't like. Half a dozen odd socks went in as did two pairs of black shoes that I'd bought in Rome and that pinched me so badly that I never wore them.

Next I tackled the furniture, daubing a yellow crayon mark on everything I wanted to live the rest of my life without. When I'd finished the flat looked as though it had acquired some unpleasant infectious disease. To make sure I didn't change my mind I picked up the phone and rang a skip hire company. They promised to bring a skip round within the hour. I made them promise to ring the doorbell and let me know when they'd delivered it. Leave an empty skip anywhere in London and it'll be full of other peoples rubbish within minutes. I told myself that anything I didn't like and couldn't afford to replace I'd simply live without. Looking at all the naff furniture I was about to make homeless made me feel closer to feeling content to live with myself.

While I waited for the skip rental company to deliver I pulled out a couple of large cardboard boxes that I'd been carrying around with me for years and that I'd kept stuffed under the bed. Both were full of bits and pieces of a past I didn't particularly want reminding about. I emptied both boxes onto the floor so that I could use one for the stuff I was throwing out and the other for the stuff I genuinely couldn't live without.

The junk was unbelievable. Old birthday cards. Pens that didn't work and that no one made refills for any more. My old passport. Old score cards from Lords cricket ground. Royalty statements from my publishers. A box of typewriter ribbons for a typewriter I'd thrown out years earlier. A smallpox vaccination certificate. Four photocopies of my birth certificate. Old bank statements and receipts. Old diaries. An old address book.

I threw them all into the box for dumping. Then I pulled out the address book. It was full of crossings out and blobs of lump white correcting ink. Slowly, I turned the pages. Most of the people in it I hadn't seen or spoken to for years. I wondered how many of them were still alive. I wondered of them even remembered me. Then I thought how odd it would be if someone in the book just happened to be sorting through his (or her) old rubbish and had just come across and address book with my name and telephone number in it. Then I tossed the old address book back into the box for dumping.

Two minutes later I came across a photograph of a girl I'd been in love with when I was eighteen. She was blonde, beautiful and slender. She wore a yellow and pink bikini and had a pony tail. A pony tail for God' sake. The photograph was slightly out of focus and the colours had begun to go yellow but she looked unbelievably young, innocent, lively and full of fun.

As I stared at the photograph so I gradually remembered more and more about the girl. I remembered that she had eyes that sparkled and full, soft lips that felt so hot when I kissed them that I thought my mouth was going to burn. I remembered that her name was Jackie and that I hadn't thought about her for twelve, maybe fifteen years. I couldn't remember her last name but I could remember our first date and I could remember the first time we made love and I could remember the fuss her parents made when we said that we wanted to go on holiday around Europe. And I remembered that her name wasn't Jackie it was Lindsay; it was her friend who was called Jackie. And I remembered that she had a tiny birthmark on her left shoulder and that she loved dancing and swimming and that she never worried about her weight or the future or the cost of groceries or what the neighbours thought.

Those were heady, carefree, happy days. There was no hole in the ozone layer and we weren't all living in a greenhouse and people used to swim in the sea without getting diarrhoea and sickness the following day.

Then the doorbell rang and it was the man to tell me that he'd delivered the skip and that if I wanted to use it myself I'd better move fast. I stuffed Lindsay's photograph into my back pocket and spent the rest of the evening carrying furniture down the stairs and throwing it into the skip.

When I started I didn't think I'd be able to get more than a quarter of the stuff I wanted to throw out into the skip but by the time I'd finished people were hauling stuff out of the skip faster than I could put it in. It was like throwing my rubbish into a bottomless black hole. By the time I got to the green draylon sofa and the matching wing chairs I had no difficulty getting people to help me carry the stuff downstairs.

At ten, in semi darkness, I threw the last cardboard box and an orange, plastic pedal bin into the skip and made my way back upstairs.

The only furniture left in the flat was the cooker, the fridge, one table and two chairs, a TV set, an electric fire and a bed. The place looked cold and empty. Or liberated and spacious, depending on which way you looked at it.

I climbed into the bed and went to sleep.

CHAPTER SIX

Jeremy Lonsdale had a country estate near Newbury in Berkshire, an apartment on the Rue de Rivoli in Paris, a chalet in Gstaad in Switzerland, a penthouse flat in Curzon Street in central London and an office in the London nursing home he owned. Since the nursing home was the nearest of these I decided to start there. I was hoping to spot Lonsdale himself. I didn't have a plan.

"We don't do burgers without the burger," the girl said defiantly, backing away slightly in case I proved dangerous as well as mad.

"I'll pay for the whole thing," I said wearily, putting money down on the counter. "But I don't want any meat on it."

By this time the chef had completed my order. The waitress picked up my small cardboard packet of chips and my ready wrapped burger and threw them down onto a plastic tray.

"If you don't want the meat don't eat it," she said, sorting out my change. She tossed a few coins onto the tray and then pushed the tray towards me and turned her back. Service twentieth century style.

I thanked her politely, carried my tray to a vacant table and sat down. When I unwrapped the burger the smell of the half raw mixture of gristle, fat and chemical colourants made me nauseous so I rewrapped it and carefully deposited it in a plastic chute. I took my chips outside, walked back towards the nursing home, and ate my spartan lunch in the rain.

By mid-afternoon the rain had eased off and had become nothing more than an irritating drizzle but standing outside Lonsdale's London nursing home remained boring and unproductive.

At four thirty I decided to give up and go back to my own flat which had grown steadily in appeal as the day had progressed. I was tired, wet, cold and hungry and I wanted a bath, a warm meal

* * *

An hour later I lay back in the bath, closed my eyes and luxuriated in the comforting warmth of the water. Freud would probably say I've got a womb fixation but I love baths. Showers are all very well for cleaning off the day's dirt but for washing away the day's worries and disappointments you can't beat 18 inches of hot water. A mug half full of sweet tea sat on the soap rack in front of me and I could smell the pan of vegetable hot pot that I'd left simmering on the kitchen stove.

When I had arrived home I'd found two messages on my telephone answering machine. One of them was from Michael Sunderland who'd rung to let me know that when he'd woken that morning he'd found a polaroid of his wife holding the previous day's copy of The Daily Telegraph stuffed in his letter box. There was also an audio tape of her reading out the headlines. Michael said that she looked and sounded nervous but healthy. He wanted to know if I'd made any progress.

The other call was from my wife wanting to let me know that she'd been to visit a lawyer. She said she wanted to marry Jocelyn (the banker) and would I get my lawyer to contact her lawyer so that we could get things sorted out quickly. All the people who'd rung offering me employment or invitations to exotic parties had failed to master the intricacies of leaving a message on my machine.

I spent forty minutes in the bath and then ate my dinner (vegetable hot pot followed by a slab of ice cream dumped into a bowl). By the time I'd washed up (one pan, two dishes and two spoons) it was half past seven. I'd been back in my flat for two hours and I couldn't stand it a minute longer. It wasn't the solitude I didn't like but the flat and the memories it held. Come to think of it I wasn't too keen on the solitude either.

I rang a contact who works for the Fraud Squad at Scotland Yard. He was, as I'd hoped, still in his office just preparing to go home.

"Can I buy you a drink?" I asked. I sometimes wonder how the world would go round without alcohol to oil the social wheels. Every deal I've ever been involved in was conceived, planned and confirmed over a drink. Come to think of it every relationship I've ever had (meaningful or not) began with an invitation to meet for a drink.

There was a pause before Hutchins spoke. I was surprised. He isn't normally a man to turn down a drink.

"I heard you'd left the paper," he said at last. "Got yourself fixed up with another job already?"

Before he'd finished speaking I understood his hesitation. In the world in which he moves an invitation from a journalist to "have a drink" means an invitation to exchange information for a few ten pound notes, or brown drinking vouchers as they're known.

"I'm freelancing," I reassured him, thinking that I really would have to have another word with Sunderland. "Someone's covering my expenses."

I met him thirty minutes later in a bar in Whitehall.

From the outside you couldn't tell that the bar was there. The entrance, a plain brown door, badly in need of a coat of paint, was marked with a small, official notice telling anyone tall enough, and with good enough eyesight, that Richard Arthur Freenwood was licensed to sell intoxicating liquor. Inside there was a long, functional bar, a dozen bar stools and half a dozen old fashioned, brass topped tables, each of which was surrounded by three or four old-fashioned wooden chairs.

The pub was frequented by civil servants from the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries which had its offices just a few hundred yards away and by policemen from New Scotland Yard which was well within staggering distance. The lack of signs or advertisements outside the pub meant that tourists didn't even know it existed. Even on hot summer days the landlord kept the front door closed to discourage customers from out of town.

I'd ordered a tonic water for myself and a double brandy for Hutchins by the time he arrived.

Hutchins is, I suppose, in his late forties or early fifties and his distaste for personal grooming is so total that whenever I'm with him I always feel well dressed and elegant.

I was wearing a pair of off white, generously cut corduroy trousers and a brown leather jacket that I'd had for years. It had been described as "distressed" leather when I'd bought it but now it was more distressed than ever. I liked it that way. It felt comfortable. It also had a lot of pockets. I love pockets. I had on several occasions wondered about the ethics of a vegetarian wearing a leather jacket but had decided that I couldn't help the cow it had come from by throwing it away and that if I went out and bought a plastic replacement I'd probably be responsible for yet more damage to the environment. So I kept it and wore it.

Hutchins, who is around five foot ten inches tall must weigh at least 15 or 16 stones. He has an enormous paunch which hangs over the top of his trousers and his suits always look cheap and badly cut. The suit he had on that evening was made out of a light grey man-made fibre and bore several stains. A sprinkling of dandruff covered his shoulders. He wore a cream shirt with a narrow, brown polyester tie and the top button of his shirt had been undone and the tie pulled slightly to one side.

"I'm thinking of writing something about Jerry Lonsdale", I lied. I'd been a journalist for so long that I sometimes worried about the fact that I found it easy to lie. But lying to policemen never worried me, largely because I knew very well that they never told the truth and always assumed that everyone they spoke to was lying too.

"It's all been in the papers already," said Hutchins, picking up the brandy I'd bought for him without even asking if it was his. I noticed that since I'd seen him last he had deteriorated. He looked seedier than ever. His nose had taken on that purple hue that sometimes affects the heavy drinker and his eyes looked as though they were permanently bloodshot. His hair had thinned a lot more too. He now vainly combed a few strands of thinning ginger hair over his freckled scalp.

"You can't believe what you read in the papers," I said, sipping at my drink. I didn't want to tell Hutchins that I no longer had ready access to a newspaper cuttings library and I didn't have the time to go to the public library and work my way through all the recent issues of the daily newspapers.

"What do you know?"

"There have been a lot of rumours about him. He's been pulled in a few times but nothing has ever stuck."

Hutchins tossed the rest of the brandy down his throat and banged the empty glass down on the bar. I started to signal to the barman to refill the glass but he'd beaten me to it.

Hutchins turned to me and leered. "It's a good story," he said. "It'll help you get back on your feet."

"What do you mean?" I asked him.

He leant on the bar and tilted his head slightly to one side. He hadn't shaved very well and there was a large patch of stubble around his chin. "Who are you freelancing for?"

"It's on spec."

"You haven't got anyone lined up, have you?"

"If it's good I won't have any difficulty placing it."

"But it's going to cost you," said Hutchins.

"How much?"

"A thousand," he said. "I told you, this is a good story."

He emptied his glass again, winked at me and levered himself up off the bar. "Ring me if you can get the money," he said, moving away. "Cash."

CHAPTER SEVEN

When I got back to the flat that evening there was another message on my answering machine from Michael Sunderland. He just asked me to ring him back.

"Is there any news?" he wanted to know.

I told him I had a couple of leads but nothing concrete.

There was silence.

"Do you think it would help if I rang the court and told them I wasn't able to turn up for jury duty? I could get a doctor's note."

I thought about it for a second or two. "No."

"Why?"

"Because at the moment we've got a hold over Lonsdale. You're on his jury. If you come off the jury we no longer have a hold over him. And then he doesn't need Barbara."

"But wouldn't he just let her go?"

I shook my head. "He won't think like that. His first thought will be how it will affect him not how you or Barbara are feeling. If he lets Barbara go and she talks to the police or the press he'll be in even more trouble than he is at the moment."

"Isn't there anything I can do?"

"I'm afraid not."

"What about if I go round to see Lonsdale?" I could explain to him that I'll do whatever he wants but that I want Barbara back now - not later."

"I don't think that's a very good idea."

"Why not?" Sunderland was getting belligerent now. I guessed that he'd probably been drinking. In his position I'd have wanted to take something to help me forget too.

"Because he doesn't see things logically," was the best I could manage. I didn't want to tell him that Lonsdale was the sort of man who considered fair play a sign of weakness. For him rules were merely a handicap invented to hinder the opposition. Lonsdale would regard an appeal from Sunderland as simple evidence that he'd chosen the right man to put pressure on. "I know it's difficult", I said, "but try to be patient. Just remember that Lonsdale isn't going to hurt you or Barbara while the trial is on. He needs you and he needs Barbara." I paused. "There's one other thing," I added. "I don't suppose you have a spare grand lying around do you?"

"A grand?"

"A thousand pounds."

"A thousand! What for?"

"A policeman I know has some information which might be useful. But he wants a thousand pounds for it."

"Do you think it will help us to find Barbara?"

"I don't know," I said honestly. "But it might. It's the best lead I've got."

"I'll get it," said Sunderland. "When do you need it?"

"Whenever."

"I'll be at your flat by eleven tomorrow morning."

"He wants cash."

"OK," said Sunderland. He hesitated. "And thanks."

He put the phone down.

I filled the kettle and threw my jacket across the back of one of the chairs in the kitchen. While the kettle boiled I pulled out the photograph of Lindsay that I'd stuffed into my trouser pocket the night before. I propped the photo up against the salt cellar that stood on the middle of the table and stared at it.

Looking at her reminded me of myself when I was eighteen. Innocent, full of dreams and burning with an urgent desire to change the world. I had read of Van Gogh and dreamt of becoming an artist. I had read a biography of Winston Churchill and dreamt of becoming a statesman, pulling my country from the edge of a terrible abyss through the force of my personality and strength of will alone. I had read Seven Pillars of Wisdom by T.E.Lawrence and dreamt of adventures, alone and far from home. The dreams came back to me suddenly and vividly; as vivid as they had been when I'd first had them.

But what had happened to them?

As I'd grown up I'd been encouraged to set aside my visions of the future and to replace my thoughts of romance and adventure and selfless simplicity with more personal, more material aspirations.

When I looked at the photograph of sweet and gentle Lindsay I remembered the fantasies of my youth; the ambitions that had been set aside as I had struggled to grow into sensible, prosaic adulthood.

Eighteen seemed a long time ago. The world had changed a million times since then. At least my world had. Innocence had been replaced with cynicism. Youthful hopes had been washed away by waves of scepticism. As I sat there I dreamt of long walks on the beach. I dreamt of nights spent talking not of new hi fi systems or new dish washers but of glories, adventures and romances. The dreams and the memories seemed to come from a different world. But it was a world I liked better than the world I was living in now.

I woke feeling cold and stiff. I had fallen asleep with my head resting on my arms and my arms folded on the kitchen table.

It was the telephone that had woken me and as I struggled back to consciousness I heard my answering machine take the call. Dimly, I was aware of my own voice telling the caller that I was out but that if they would leave a message I would get back to them as soon as possible. I struggled to my feet, stretched my sore back and hobbled to the telephone. I turned off the machine and picked up the receiver.

"Hello?" I tried to say. Half my face was still asleep, the muscles numb from the way I'd been sleeping.

"Is that you?" I heard someone say. It was my wife.

"Yes."

"I thought it was the machine."

"No."

"Have you got a lawyer yet?"

"No. I've been busy. What time is it?"

"It's six thirty. You should be up. Jocelyn left the flat two hours ago. He starts work at 5.30 am."

"I thought he worked in a bank."

"He's a currency dealer. They never really close. Something to do with the clocks in Tokyo or New York." She wouldn't care as long as the job brought in lots of money. "He says you should get yourself a lawyer."

"I haven't got any money for a lawyer. You go ahead and do what you have to do. I'll sign whatever I have to sign."

"You should have a lawyer to represent you."

"What for?"

"You just should." There was a pause. "Are you all right? Are you eating properly?"

"I'm all right. But I don't want a lawyer."

"You should give up that silly vegan stuff. It's very childish."

"I'm not a vegan. I'm a vegetarian. There's a difference."

"Whatever. It's not healthy. You sound terrible."

"Send me the papers and I'll sign them."

"OK," she sighed. She put the phone down.

I rubbed my cheek and the muscles slowly came back to life. I realised I didn't miss her at all.

Six thirty. Another day to get through.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I parked the Bentley on double yellow lines in Fleet Street and met Terry at a cafe that used to be patronised by barristers and journalists and is now patronised almost exclusively by barristers. Since the national newspapers had moved out of Fleet Street numerous local bars and cafes had had to struggle to make a living.

I ordered scrambled eggs, mushrooms, tomatoes and toast. Plus a pot of coffee. Terry ordered coffee and toast.

"I don't know how you can eat all that," he moaned. "I've got an ulcer," he told me for the umpteenth time.

He looked like I always thought a man with an ulcer should look like. I've known him for five years and I've never seen him smile. He worries more than anyone else I know. He works as a clerk at the court.

"How do jurors get selected?" I asked him, as he smeared an almost invisible film of butter across his toast. I never feel there's much need to spend too much time on polite preliminaries with Terry.

He looked across at me sharply. "It's all very confidential," he said, with a serious shake of his head. "Very confidential."

"I don't want to know about the jurors in any particular case," I assured him. "Just in general."

"Well, it's all done by computer now," he said, slightly disapprovingly.

He nibbled cautiously at the toast. He was nearly six foot tall and must have weighed less than ten stones. I'd only ever seen him in one suit; a dark grey heavy worsted suit that probably cost him a lot when he'd bought it but which must have been good value if you worked out how many hours wear he'd got out of it. He was the sort of person who probably knew exactly how many hours wear he'd got out of it. Come to think of it he probably knew how much it had cost him per hour - down to the last fraction of a penny.

"How far ahead does the computer work?" I asked. He always needed prodding. Getting information out of him was like getting milk out of a cow. It needed a knack to get the whole thing started and then constant effort to keep it coming.

"It depends," he said, carefully wiping a crumb of toast from a corner of his mouth.

"But some time ahead?"

"Well, theoretically, and very confidentially, yes. Names are selected a month - maybe six weeks - ahead."

"So, purely theoretically, it would be possible to say who the jurors were likely to be in a trial due to start, say, next week?" In fact I knew that Lonsdale must have known the names of the jurors several weeks ago in order for his people to do enough research to find out that Michael Sunderland was the best possibility for blackmail.

"It wouldn't be possible to be that specific," said Terry, shaking his head. "It would all be extremely confidential. But the computer would know." He spoke of the computer with what I now realised was more reverence than anything else. He spoke of it as though it were some sort of God.

"So, if - theoretically speaking, of course - if someone had access to the computer they would be able to find out who the jurors were likely to be on a particular case?"

"But they wouldn't be able to get into the computer!" insisted Terry. "Access to the computer room is very restricted. It's all highly confidential material." He nibbled at his toast again then sipped at his milky white coffee.

I wondered how much it would have cost me to get Burnett to give me the list of Lonsdale's jurors and slipped a twenty pound note out of my trouser pocket. I reached under the table with it and tapped him on the knee. Terry put down his cup and skilfully removed the note from my grasp. His soft, clammy hand and speed and dexterity reminded me of a trout taking a fly on a still summer evening. I used to fish, though I've given that up too.

"Thanks very much," I said. I looked at my watch and pushed away my half-finished breakfast.

"It's a pleasure," said Terry. "Always a pleasure to see you." The note had disappeared. He looked at the remains of the eggs, mushrooms and tomatoes on my plate. "That's a waste," he said, disapprovingly. "A terrible waste." But he said it like a man who hates waste rather than as a man who has spotted an opportunity to eat up some leftovers.

When I got back to the Bentley there was a traffic warden standing beside it, reading the notices on my windscreen and scratching her head. I smiled at her.

"Thank you," I said. "Thanks for looking after the car." I got in quickly and drove back to the flat before she could harbour any doubts. Two large stickers attached to the Bentley's windscreen save me a small fortune in parking fines. One is an admission ticket to the car park at Buckingham Palace (which I'd acquired when I'd chauffeured a friend attending an evening reception there) and the other, marked simply "Doctor on Call" is a sticker produced by the British Medical Association for the exclusive use of its members.

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Sunderland was waiting for me on the doorstep of the building where my flat is.

"I'm sorry I'm early," he said. "But I've got it. The money."

"Fine." I said. I opened the door. "Lets go in."

Once inside he took a brown envelope out of his inside jacket pocket and held it out to me. It seemed remarkably slim.

"Is that a thousand pounds?"

"In £50 notes. It doesn't seem much does it?"

"There's no guarantee with this," I told him, taking the envelope. "No guarantee that the information I can buy will help us find your wife."

"But you think it will help?"

"At the very least it will help us understand what's going on. And it might give us an edge over Lonsdale."

I told him about Hutchins and I told him what I'd learned from Terry.

"So Lonsdale got my name from the computer?"

"Easy for him."

"But don't they guard that sort of information?"

I laughed. "Once you put information into a computer it's like publishing it or writing it on the walls. Anyone who really wants it can get it."

"What happens now?"

I looked at my watch. "I'm going to try and fix up a meeting with Hutchins for lunchtime. Once I tell him I've got the £1,000 he'll be as keen as I am to meet."

"Can you trust him?"

"No. But I've paid him for information in the past and he wants to get paid again in the future. He won't lie to me if he thinks I'm going to find out that he's lied."

"Not even for £1,000?"

I shrugged. "I hope not," I said. Sunderland looked worried. "That's all I can tell you. There aren't any guarantees."

"Where can we meet after you've seen him?" asked Sunderland.

"Go back to your flat," I told him. "I'll ring you."

"Do you go past a Tube station on your way?"

"Yes," I said. "Didn't you come in your car?"

Sunderland half smiled and nodded towards my breast pocket and the brown envelope. "I sold it this morning," he admitted. He shrugged. For the first time I found myself really liking him.

CHAPTER NINE

Hutchins put a hand in front of his face and tried to suppress a burp. He was making an effort to behave politely because we were, at his insistence, having lunch in a restaurant in Covent Garden that was patronised largely by advertising people. I think he felt it was his sort of place. In truth he was as out of place there as he would have been in any corner of polite society. He'd spent far too long in the police force. Wanting some wine he waved a podgy hand in the direction of the waiter. When the waiter ignored him he clicked his fingers and called "Garcon" in a loud voice. Just to make things worse he did it in what he clearly thought was a French accent. With obvious reluctance the waiter minced over and took Hutchins order for a bottle of claret.

"Lonsdale has always been in the insurance business," said Hutchins. "Do you remember the Trans Continental Casualty Insurance Company?"

I nodded.

"He made a fortune out of that but although he's always been pretty good at making money he's always been equally good at losing it - usually on the gaming tables."

"I'd heard that he's a high roller."

"One of the highest," nodded Hutchins. "Then three years ago he got mixed up with a group of Italians he met in Las Vegas. He's reputed to have lost a fortune at a casino they owned but they ended up bank rolling him and with their money he picked up a controlling share in a small and very nearly defunct company called Lifetime Secure Assurance of London."

"Sounds very impressive."

Hutchins snorted. "When he took it over the assets consisted of a six month lease on an office in Wardour Street, a registered address in the city, a couple of typewriters and enough insurance business to pay his cigar bill for a week."

The wine waiter arrived with a bottle of claret that didn't even have a year marked on the label. Nevertheless Hutchins insisted on studying the label carefully before allowing the waiter to leave the bottle. The wine was one of the most expensive on the list and smelt as though it had been matured in a rusty tanker moored off the East Anglian coast. Hutchins seemed to like it.

"But," he said, leaning across the table and stabbing a finger in my direction, "the company had one big asset that Lonsdale liked. It had been founded in 1878 and had at one time earned a Royal crest. Somebody in the Royal Family had probably had his polo ponies insured through it."

I poured myself a glass of water and sipped at it. I had decided that since no one was getting married I'd avoid the wine. If the smell was anything to go by the wine was probably more suitable for use as paint stripper.

"What was the role of the Italians?"

Hutchins pulled a face. "Just money men," he said. He paused. "They had more money than they knew what to do with. The word was that they were impressed by the fact that Lonsdale was buying into a company that had the right to have a Royal crest on its notepaper but we always felt that there was more to it than that." He stopped. There was obviously more to come. I raised an eyebrow and waited. "We think they're involved in a laundering operation," said Hutchins.

"How?" I knew he didn't mean they were in the clean socks and underpants business.

"Wait a minute," said Hutchins, holding up a hand, "I'll come back to that in a minute. First, there's the annuity scam." He leant forward. "You'll like this!" he promised me.

The waiter collected our plates. Hutchins had chosen prawns in avocado. I'd had a tomato salad. The menu had promised that the tomatoes had been "sun dried in Florida". Why would anyone care? Wherever they were dried they tasted of nothing at all.

"Some time ago Lonsdale decided to get into the annuity business," Hutchins continued. He suddenly leant across the table until his face was about a foot from mine. "Are you sure you've got the cash?" His breath smelt of brandy as well as wine, even though it was still only lunchtime.

I patted my breast pocket and smiled at him. "It's all here."

"Cash?"

"Cash."

He seemed comforted by this. "Do you know how the annuity business works?"

I thought for a moment. "Not really."

"Well the idea is very simple. Old wrinklies who've got a few quid but who are worried about making sure that they have enough income to live on for the rest of their lives sign over all their assets to the insurance company in return for a fixed, annual income."

"And when they die the insurance company owns the assets?"

"You've got it. It's ideal for wrinklies who don't have any relatives to leave their money to or who don't care a fig about the relatives they've got."

The waiter brought one T bone steak and one mushroom stroganoff.

Hutchins dug his knife into his steak. Blood oozed out of it and onto the plate. He grinned and cut off a chunk. The waiter returned with the potatoes and the vegetables.

"Lonsdale decided that this was the business to be in," said Hutchins, when the waiter had disappeared again. "He realised that the number of wrinklies is growing faster than anything else and that they're all terrified of being poor in their old age. To make sure that he got their money he offered the richest - and the loneliest - of them annuities at fantastic rates of up to 20% or 25%."

I whistled through my teeth and pushed the mushroom stroganoff to one side. The mushrooms were cultivated and had about as much taste as the tomatoes. "How could he make a profit?"

Hutchins chewed at his steak. "We think he's got an edge that means he can't lose."

I nibbled on a stale bread roll and waited for Hutchins to go on.

"Somewhere along the line Lonsdale had also come across a company that runs a chain of private hospitals and nursing homes all over Europe. Dozens of the bloody things. All full of rich wrinklies." Hutchins reached for the ketchup bottle and poured a large dollop onto the side of his plate. The ketchup and the puddle of blood merged into one another.

"Lonsdale liked the nursing home business for two reasons," said Hutchins. "First, it gave him direct access to a mass of old people to whom he could sell his annuity policies. And second it gave his friends from Las Vegas a chance to increase the size and scope of their business."

"How?"

"No nursing home ever becomes fully occupied," said Hutchins. "But Lonsdale's group hasn't had a spare bed since it's been opened."

"Fake patients?"

"Exactly! They set up fake files for non-existent patients and they have a perfect route for laundering vast quantities of money - regularly."

"What's the name of the company?"

Hutchins tapped the side of his nose and winked at me.

"I'm paying you for all this!" I reminded him. "I'm going to have to check everything out. I need names."

Hutchins stared at me for a moment and then shrugged. "OK." he said at last. He spelt out the name for me as he cut off another huge chunk of steak. Then he pierced the steak with his fork and pushed it into his mouth. I waited while he chewed at it.

"The boss of the nursing home chain is a doctor called Simpson who's about as greedy as Lonsdale," said Hutchins. "We think that he and Lonsdale have come up with a scheme that means that they can't lose even when Lonsdale is paying out 20-25% on the annuities."

I put down the bread roll I'd been nibbling. The sight of Hutchins eating was enough to make anyone anorexic. He mopped up the mixture of ketchup and blood with his bread roll and then used his napkin to wipe his face. He belched loudly and contentedly. "We think they're making sure that the really rich people who buy annuities don't live too long," he said.

I stared at him. "How?"

Hutchins shrugged. "God knows." He called the waiter over again and asked for the menu. "Whatever it is Simpson is probably behind it. He's medical director of the whole group of nursing homes."

When the menu came Hutchins ordered a double peach melba with cream. I ordered some brie and another roll. We both ordered coffee.

I didn't like Hutchins. He wasn't a likeable man. But I was beginning to feel a certain sympathy for him. He perhaps wasn't quite as stupid or as bad a policeman as I'd thought him to be.

"So, what's Lonsdale in court for?"

"We've been after them both for months," sighed Hutchins. "We haven't been able to get Simpson for anything. But we've got Lonsdale in court on some technicalities. It's minor league stuff but if we can get a conviction we should be able to get him put away for a few years. It might slow him down a bit, at least."

The waiter brought Hutchins his double peach melba and me my bread and cheese. The second bread roll was as stale as the first and the brie was nowhere near ripe. It cut like cheddar. I pushed the bread and the cheese to one side and watched Hutchins spoon up his pudding.

"Good meal that, wasn't it?" he said, wiping his mouth again. "Always get a good meal here. Get what you pay for in this world, don't you?"

I smiled thinly.

"Shall we have some brandy?"

"Not for me. But you have one."

Hutchins ordered himself a double brandy.

I pushed my chair back and stood up. I reached into my jacket pocket and pulled out the brown envelope that Sunderland had handed me a couple of hours earlier. I suddenly realised that I hadn't even counted it. I put the envelope down in front of Hutchins.

"Thanks!" I said. "I'm sorry to leave you but I have to go.

"Not staying for coffee?" Hutchins weighed the envelope in one hand and then quickly stuffed it into his jacket pocket. He didn't count it either. Maybe he would pass it on to a bookie who'd pass it on to a punter and no one would ever count it. I turned away and walked quickly to the nearest door before Hutchins realised that I'd left him to pay for the meal.

CHAPTER TEN

I had learned a lot about Lonsdale. But I was no closer to helping Barbara Sunderland. I left the Bentley parked where it was and walked from the restaurant to the National Liberal Club in Whitehall where I'd agreed to meet Sunderland.

The National Liberal Club is a splendid nineteenth century gentleman's club that is, like all its London contemporaries, struggling to survive in the hope that the twenty first century will bring more prosperity than the twentieth century has brought. I've been a member for years but hardly ever use the club. The best thing about it is that hardly anyone else seems to use it either and so it's a good place in central London to have quiet meetings.

Sunderland was waiting for me in the lobby. I led him up the impressive marble staircase to the smoking room on the first floor. The room was deserted. We settled ourselves in soft leather armchairs and I called the elderly porter over to order buttered toast and a pot of tea for two.

"I thought you'd just had lunch?" said Sunderland, surprised.

"Hutchins ate, I watched," I explained. I told him what I'd learned.

"Nothing about Barbara?" he said. He looked disappointed.

"Not directly," I admitted. "But it helps."

The porter arrived, carrying a large silver tray upon which were crammed: a huge dish of buttered toast, two side plates, two huge silver knives, a pot of marmalade, a pot of gentleman's relish and a pot of strawberry jam, a huge silver tea pot, a silver water jug, a jug of milk, two cups, two saucers and two crested spoons. The porter put the tray down on a low wooden table and withdrew slowly. He had something wrong with his right leg and his hearing aid whistled occasionally. He'd forgotten the sugar but I didn't like to mention it.

"So, what do we do now?" Sunderland wanted to know.

I wished he didn't always seem to expect me to know all the answers. I was thrashing around almost as much as he was. The only real difference was that he loved Barbara and I hardly knew her. That just about gave me the edge on objectivity and clarity of thought.

Sunderland didn't wait for me to reply. "You realise that I'll still help him go free, don't you?" he said suddenly and defiantly. "Even knowing what you've just told me?"

I looked at him and nodded. "I wouldn't expect you to do anything else," I told him. "In your position I'd do the same." But I knew I'd feel bad about it and I knew he did.

We sat in silence and watched the butter melting into the toast. Eventually I poured us both cups of steaming hot tea and took a slice of toast. The silver tea pot dribbled badly and a puddle of hot tea appeared on top of the table.

"There's one thing I still don't understand," said Sunderland thoughtfully. "Why did Lonsdale arrange for Barbara to be kidnapped in Paris? Why not wait until we got back to London?"

"Makes it more difficult for you, I suppose. If she'd disappeared in London you'd have been able to go straight to the police and they'd have probably taken you more seriously. In France...on holiday...," I shrugged. "It was probably just as easy for Lonsdale to kidnap her there as it would have been in London."

"Do you think she's still over there? Or do you think he's brought her back to England?"

"God knows. I suppose he could just as easily rent a house in France as in England. It would probably be safer keeping her in France. It would save taking her through customs and it would mean that the crime had only been committed in one country."

I noticed that Sunderland was holding out an envelope. I'd missed what he said. I asked him to repeat it.

"I've been thinking about things and I want you to have this," he said. He put the envelope down on the table in front of me.

"What is it?"

"Another thousand. But this time it's for you."

"What the hell for?"

"Expenses. Stuff like that."

I looked at it. I needed the money but didn't like taking it.

"It's more of the money I got for the car," explained Sunderland. "I'm very grateful for what you're doing but it isn't right for you to keep on spending your own money."

I hesitated.

"Really," said Sunderland. I've got some cash now. I want to pay you five hundred a week for as long as it takes. I really need you."

"O.K." I said. "Thanks." I put the envelope into my breast pocket.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Michael Sunderland took a taxi back to his flat and I started the walk back to where I'd left the car. On the way I stopped at a telephone box and rang an acquaintance who works as Deputy City Editor on one of the Sunday newspapers. He owes me more than a few favours.

"I'm sorry," said the girl who answered the phone. "Mr Gillespie is tied up in conference."

"How long will he be?" I resisted the temptation to make any cracks about his sado-masochistic tendencies.

"An hour at least. We're holding all his calls. If you leave your number I'm sure he'll get back to you." The girl sounded as if she was chewing gum and her voice had a distant, disinterested quality which suggested that she was busy doing something else. I gave her my home number and the number of the gym and then I put the phone down. For some inexplicable reason I felt better than I had for days. I felt better than I had since my wife had left me. Maybe there was life despite divorce and unemployment after all. I think that having Sunderland's money in my pocket helped. But I think that knowing that someone needed me helped even more.

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I went to the gym and worked on the speed ball for fifteen minutes then worked up a sweat on the heavy bag. I did five sets of reps on every machine I could find and finished off with a fifteen minute fast session with the rope. I was, inevitably, in the shower again when Billy called me to the telephone.

It was my contact the city editor.

"How are you? I hear you left Patterson's mob."

Patterson was my former editor. "Yeah. They said they wanted to give me an opportunity to explore my capabilities."

"Get a nice pay off"?

I didn't understand what he meant. I said so.

"Redundancy. You've been there a few years haven't you?"

"Yes." Amazingly I'd never thought about redundancy money. No one had mentioned it to me and I hadn't thought to ask.

"It should go through automatically," said the city editor.

"How do you know so much about it?"

"I've been given opportunities to explore my capabilities at least three times." He half put his hand over the phone and I heard him shouting to someone about a news story he wanted. Then he was back. "What can I do for you? I don't suppose you rang me for personal financial advice." He sounded pushed. In the background I could hear someone shouting.

I mentioned the name of the nursing home group that Hutchins had given me. "What do you know about it?"

"Run by a greaseball called Simpson. There's rumoured to be some sort of tie up with that scheming little rat what's his name..."

"Lonsdale."

"That's him. What do you want to know?"

"Anything you've got."

"It's all in the computer. I can run you off a print out."

"Thanks. That would be great. Will it have a list of all the addresses of the hospitals and nursing homes they run?" I shivered and pulled my towel tighter.

"Probably not."

"OK. Never mind. I'll take what you've got."

"You owe me."

"I owe you? Put this on account!"

He laughed. "Do you want to pick it up?"

"Yes please."

"Do you mind if I leave it at the reception desk for you? We're a bit tied up at the moment."

"That's fine."

He paused. "There isn't anything here that I should know about? There isn't a story you should be giving me?"

"No." I said and put the telephone down.

I finished my shower, dried, dressed and picked up the print out on the way back from the gym. Then I drove straight back to my flat.

The computer had stored every imaginable detail about the company's financial strengths and weaknesses (at least those of them that Simpson and Lonsdale wanted to share with the world) but, as I'd been warned, it contained no details of the whereabouts or addresses of the company's physical assets: its hospitals and nursing homes. There was, however, a telephone number for the company's Director of Public Affairs. I rang the number. An answering machine told me that the office was closed but that if I called back another time any routine queries would be attended to without any further delay. The disembodied voice then gave me a phone number to call in emergencies.

I dialled the emergency telephone number that I'd copied down from the answering machine.

"Hello?" The woman who answered sounded harassed and impatient.

I told her my name and explained that I was a journalist working to a deadline. I'd never been more serious about the deadline.

"I'll help you if I can," she said. She sounded as though it was all an effort for her.

"I just need a list of all the hospitals and nursing homes run by the company."

"May I ask what for?"

"I'm preparing a feature on private medicine." I lied.

"Have you got a fax machine?"

"Yes."

"I'll fax you the list. Give me your fax number."

Minutes later I was staring at a four foot long list of addresses and telephone numbers.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The photograph of Lindsay was still propped up against the salt cellar where I'd left it. Each time I looked at her she seemed prettier. She was fresh and full of life and there was a beguiling innocence in her eyes that I found irresistible. Had I really once been that innocent? I could remember parties we had been to, music we'd shared and friends we'd had fun with. I could remember the first rock concert we'd been to together, the picnics we'd had and our first kiss. Was life really so much purer and simpler then?

I wondered what had happened to her. Where was she living? Was she married?

I was half through dialling her number when I suddenly stopped and slammed the phone down. My heart was beating as though it was trying to escape from my chest.

It hadn't taken me long to get her number. Two calls to old school friends had been enough. The second person I called told me that she was divorced and had reverted back to her maiden name. They gave me her phone number. She was, apparently, working in television.

I picked up the phone and dialled again. This time I managed to get to the end without putting the receiver down.

Lindsay answered on the fifth ring. I recognised her voice instantly. She sounded as fresh and as lively and as innocent as ever.

I didn't know what to say and could only wonder why I hadn't prepared something witty and bright.

"Hello!" I managed, "You might not remember me." I muttered my name. Gauche. Unoriginal. Guarded. Negative.

There was a long pause and then she laughed. Her laugh was every bit as beautiful as I remembered it.

"I hope it isn't a bad time to call." More negativity. Giving her an excuse to put the phone down. Giving myself an excuse for rejection.

"No, no!" she said quickly. "What on earth made you call? It's wonderful to hear from you." Her voice had hardly changed at all.

"I found some old photographs," I said. "I thought I'd just give you a ring. See how you are."

"Can we meet?"

"Yes. I'd like that very much." There was a pause. I felt as clumsy as a teenager trying to arrange his first date.

"How lovely to hear from you!" She laughed again. Bubbly. Uncomplicated. Bright. Or was she nervous too? "Where are you?"

I told her. I suddenly remembered an open topped frog eyed Sprite I'd once owned. And a picnic by the Thames. Hot sun, fresh bread and cheese. Making love afterwards on an old car rug in the long grass.

"I know it. You're not far away. Let's meet for dinner. Do you know La Coupole on the Old Brompton Road?"

I said I didn't but assured her that I could find it and arranged to meet her there in an hour. I showered, shaved and put on the one clean shirt I had left. White cotton with a button down collar. Then the suit. Steel grey Yves St Laurent with broad lapels and as almost invisible pale red stripe. Red silk tie with a small, dark grey boxed pattern. Black brogues.

I'd bought the suit at my wife's insistence four years ago. I'd been plumper and out of condition then.It felt tight across the shoulders and the trousers were a little loose around the waist. I found a black leather belt in a drawer.

When I got to "La Coupole" my heart was going through its escape routine again. This really was like being a teenager on a first date. I found a parking space a few hundred yards from the restaurant and went straight in.

A spindly youth in an evening suit and an elasticated bow tie came over to me, rubbing his hands together as though trying to wash away some nasty social stains. He raised a manicured eyebrow.

"I'm meeting someone," I said. I peered over his shoulder into the gloom but could see no one I recognised. I suddenly realised that I was looking for someone aged 18 and wearing a pink gingham frock with a lace collar. "Miss Lindsay Morrison," I told him.

"Ah, Ms Morrison," said the spindly youth. He emphasised the "Ms" so that it sounded as though there was a "z" in it. "She did telephone to reserve a table but she isn't here yet." He looked me up and down and smiled superciliously. "Would you like a drink while you wait?" He waved an arm in the direction of a small bar area. A couple wearing evening dress were sitting on the only bench seat with their arms around each other. The four bar stools were all vacant.

I was feeling rather dangerous and reckless so I ordered an Indian tonic water with ice and a slice of lemon. The barman, a youth of about twenty wearing a red blazer, brought me a luke warm bottle of tonic water and a stemmed wine glass. There was a quarter of a slice of lemon lying in the bottom of the glass.

"Meeting someone?"

I nodded.

"Want to order another drink?"

"Not yet thanks." I didn't know what to order. I doubted if she still drank Babycham.

"Suit yourself."

I took a few notes out of my left hand trouser pocket. "What do I owe you?"

He told me. It was just slightly more than the price of a good bottle of supermarket wine. I paid him.

I had been worried that I wouldn't recognise her but I needn't have worried. She came straight over to the bar when she arrived. However much we may think we alter over the years our eyes never really change.

"I'm sorry I'm late. My phone wouldn't stop ringing. I got to the door three times. You know what it's like!"

She seemed taller than I remembered. But she was wearing high heels. Her hair was cut short and it framed her face. The eyes were still as captivating. As were the long eyelashes. And the beautiful, kissable lips. And the perfect teeth. She was wearing a bottle green silk dress that showed off her figure to perfection.

She put one hand on my shoulder and kissed me on the cheek.

"What are you doing these days? Didn't I see your by-line in one of the papers? Where are you living? Isn't this a wonderful surprise?"

I started to ask if she wanted a drink and noticed too late that the barman had already poured and handed her a vodka on ice.

"You look wonderful!" she said. She smiled her thanks to the barman and took a long sip from her drink. She had a thin gold necklace round her neck and wore simple gold ear-rings. Her eyes were brighter and even more full of life than I remembered.

The spindly youth in the elasticated bow tie materialised. He was holding two large menus. "Your table is ready, Ms Morrison." He handed Lindsay one of the menus and gave me the other.

On our way to the table Lindsay said "hello" to half a dozen diners. She seemed well known. Twice she stopped to kiss people and to introduce me.

"The bass is wonderful here this week," she confided, after we'd sat down.

I smiled thinly. "I don't eat fish." I apologised.

"Then the lamb. With a bottle of the St Emilion."

"I'm vegetarian."

She laughed out loud. The people at nearby tables looked across towards us. It was the laugh I remembered best. I didn't know why but I suddenly felt a twinge of pain.

"You didn't used to be a vegetarian!" she reminded me needlessly.

"No," I agreed. I studied the menu. I couldn't see anything I could eat.

The spindly youth, who'd been hovering, moved forwards to take our orders. Lindsay ordered a green salad followed by the bass. I ordered a melon and a plateful of vegetables.

The spindly youth waited, silver pencil poised.

"And a bottle of St Emilion." I said.

"And with your vegetables, sir?"

"Just the vegetables, thank you."

He looked distressed. "I'm not sure that we can."

"I'll pay for the lamb," I said. "But I don't want it."

"How long have you been a vegetarian?" asked Lindsay, when he'd gone.

"A few years." I pulled the quarter of a slice of lemon out of my empty tonic water glass and nibbled at it. "What are you doing now?"

"Apart from the programme, you mean?"

"What programme is that?"

She blushed. "I've been producing an arts programme for the BBC," she told me. "The last series has just finished."

I pulled a piece of lemon peel out of the gap between my front teeth.

"Things are a bit quiet at the moment," she went on.

"But I'm hoping to start work on a two part special for

Christmas next month. And there's talk of a thirteen part series for next year on Russian culture."

"Sounds great," I said. "I don't get a chance to watch much television," I apologised. It had been too long since I'd seen her and with sadness I realised that we now seemed to have only the past in common. I didn't want it to be that way.

A youth in a white jacket brought Lindsay's salad and my melon.

"It sounds a very exciting job," I said. Someone had spent hours turning my melon into small pink balls. I hate it when people mess with my food.

"Yes," said Lindsay. She toyed with her salad. "Very hectic and demanding but very rewarding."

"Wonderful!" I said. I put one of the pink melon balls into my mouth. It tasted of something odd. It took me a moment to realise that it was Angostura bitters.

An hour and a half later I offered to drive Lindsay home but she said she would arrange for a car to pick her up. She explained that the television company gave her free access to a car hire company.

"It's so much easier than trying to park a car in London." She hesitated and then leant towards me and kissed me on the cheek again. "It's been wonderful to see you." She smiled, reached out and touched me briefly on the arm. I wanted to hold her tight, to hug her, to try to recapture the past, but I didn't dare. "You haven't changed a bit!" she said. I didn't know whether that was a compliment or not.

I left her sitting at the bar talking to a crowd of friends and waiting for her car to arrive. She asked me to stay but she seemed to belong to a different world. I walked back to the Bentley feeling a deep sense of sadness and isolation. Now even my memories were disappearing. I didn't know what I'd expected but I wished I hadn't telephoned her. It had been a foolish thing to do.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"You were right," said Sunderland. "They did know which jury I was going to be on."

"Lonsdale?"

He nodded.

I sipped at the orange juice he'd poured me. It was out of a tin and the additives and flavourings successfully masked the taste of the oranges.

"What happened today?"

"Nothing much. It was all preliminary stuff. " There was a pause. "I saw him for the first time. He seems an arrogant bastard. Very confident."

"You'd look confident if you knew that you'd nobbled the jury."

Michael Sunderland looked at me sharply. "I don't like that word."

"What word?"

"Nobbled."

I didn't say anything.

"That's not fair."

"I'm sorry," I said. "How would you describe it?"

He started to cry.

I turned away and looked out of the windows again. There was no sign of the water skier. Part of me wanted to go across to Sunderland, put an arm around him and tell that everything was going to be all right. But I didn't know whether I had the strength he needed. I felt depressed, lonely and tired. And I couldn't see how we were going to be able to get his wife back in one piece.

Behind me I could hear that he was trying to stifle his sobs. It was worse than if he'd just cried. I turned back, walked over to him and put my arms around him. He tensed for a moment and then he suddenly relaxed. His body shook as he cried his heart out. I held onto him and strangely felt his need and his dependence giving me strength.

A few moments later he slowly pushed himself away.

"I'm sorry," he said. He pulled a freshly laundered handkerchief out of his breast pocket and blew his nose loudly. Then he wiped his eyes.

"You're right," he said. "I've been nobbled."

"Of course you haven't. It was a stupid thing to say."

"I've been nobbled," he insisted. "I don't care what evidence they produce in court I'll find Lonsdale not guilty. All I care about is getting Barbara back safely."

"I'd be the same," I said. "So would anyone. Have you heard from them today?"

For a moment he looked puzzled.

"From the people who've taken Barbara. They're supposed to send you a photograph and a tape recording every day to show that she's all right."

Michael nodded. He crossed the room and picked a large brown padded envelope off the top of a bookcase. He handed it to me. Inside was a cassette tape and a photograph of Barbara holding up a copy of yesterday's Daily Telegraph. Michael took the cassette tape and slipped it into a tape player. We listened to Barbara's shaky voice reading out one of the stories from the previous day's front page.

"How long will she be safe?" Michael asked me.

I was studying the photograph. Barbara was standing but the background was blurred.

"They won't do anything to hurt her while the trial is on," I said. I held up the photograph. "Can I borrow this? I want to get it enlarged." I didn't know why.

Michael nodded. "Of course."

I left the cassette tape in the player and put the photograph back into the padded envelope.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

When I left Michael Sunderland's flat I headed for the Daily Telegraph's offices. They were less than a mile away.

First, I spoke to the guy on the picture desk, whom I'd known for years. I asked him to get the photograph of Barbara enlarged as much as possible.

Then, while I waited for the laboratory to come up with the print I wanted, I went to the advertising department and asked them to let me look at the previous day's editions of the paper.

The edition that Barbara had been holding up was the very first, earliest edition.

"Where does this edition go?" I asked the girl who'd found me the various copies of the paper.

"The West Country mainly," she replied.

"What about the North of England?"

"They get an edition that's printed in Manchester."

Thirty minutes later my friend from the picture desk turned up with the enlarged photograph of Barbara. "Who's this?" he demanded. "What's the point in having a blow up of a bird holding a copy of the Telegraph?"

"It's just a bit of a joke for a friend," I said.

He shook his head, muttered something rude and disappeared.

Back in my flat I pinned Barbara's enlarged photograph up in my kitchen wall. Then I laid the previous day's first edition of the Daily Telegraph down on my kitchen table. I stared at them both in turn.

The edition Barbara was holding was quite definitely the first edition. But there was something different about it. I just couldn't decide what it was.

I went into my bedroom and dug out the list of nursing homes that had been faxed through to me. There were two in the West Country. One in Plymouth and the other in Exeter.

Maybe Barbara was being held in one of those.

I went back into the kitchen and stared at Barbara's picture again. And then I spotted the difference between the edition that Barbara was holding and the edition that I had lain out on my kitchen table.

In the Stop Press section that I was holding there were two small pieces of late sporting news. One about a football match and the other about a golf tournament. But the Stop Press section of the paper that Barbara was holding carried neither of these news items. Instead it contained what was clearly a list.

I moved right up to the photograph and stared at it. I couldn't quite decipher what was on the list.

I raced back into the bedroom. There was nothing there that would help. I pulled open the drawers in all the kitchen cupboards. Nothing.

Desperate now I raced downstairs and out into the street. I needed a toy shop. Why is there never a toy shop around when you need one?

I ran along the street trying to remember where I'd seen a toy shop. Every shop I passed seemed to be a building society or an estate agency.

When at last I found one and told the counter assistant what I wanted he shook his head as though I'd asked for a pound of wet fish.

"You must have one!" I insisted.

He shook his head and turned away.

Suddenly I had a flash of inspiration. "A detective set! You must have a detective set!"

"Of course!" he said, wearily. "If that's what you wanted why didn't you say so?" He disappeared and returned a few moments later with a huge cardboard box on the front of which was a rather bad drawing of Sherlock Holmes set against an equally poor drawing of Victor in London.

I paid him the exorbitant price on the lid and impatiently opened the box. There was a small plastic pipe, a notebook, a pencil, a cheap deer stalker hat, a plastic revolver. And a magnifying glass.

Taking the magnifying glass and leaving the rest I rushed out of the shop and raced back to my flat.

The magnifying glass was just strong enough for me to read what appeared in the Stop Press section of the newspaper that Barbara was holding. It was a list of foreign currency prices for the Daily Telegraph abroad. The early editions - the ones that go to the West Country - also go to the airport for distribution abroad.

Excitedly, I moved my magnifying glass up to the top right corner of the newspaper - the spot where newsagents invariably write on the price of the paper they're selling so that tourists can easily see it. I could just read the scribbled price. It matched the price in French francs that was listed in the Stop Press section.

Barbara was still in France - somewhere that English papers were on sale.

Excitedly, I raced into my bedroom and found the faxed list of nursing homes owned by Lonsdale and Dr Simpson.

There was one in Paris.

It was all so obvious I couldn't believe that I hadn't thought of it before. I rang the airport straight away and spoke to the girl at the reservation desk.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The nursing home had been converted out of a large house that stood in its own wooded grounds in Vincennes on the Eastern side of Paris. I walked through the huge, imposing gates and along the driveway towards a gothic building that had been carefully and sympathetically restored to all its former glory. The lawns and flower beds were immaculate. Neat pink and white awnings shaded every window.

The main hall of the house had been converted into a reception area. Straight ahead of me there were half a dozen huge red leather armchairs neatly lined up behind a low, glass topped coffee table upon which were strewn a number of expensive magazines. To the left, behind a huge, antique wooden desk, sat a blonde receptionist. She wore a simple blue dress upon which was pinned a white enamel badge which told the world that her name was Elaine and that she was a receptionist. She took her job seriously. She was neither reading a paperback romance nor painting her finger nails.

She smiled and showed me two rows of neatly and expensively capped teeth. "Can I help you?"

I leant across the desk and smiled back. I couldn't match the capped teeth. "I'm looking for somewhere suitable for my mother," I lied. "She's elderly and can't cope at home any more. My company has moved me to Paris and I'm looking for somewhere for my mother to stay - somewhere permanent."+

"Certainly!" said the receptionist. She didn't stop smiling. "If you'd be kind enough to take a seat for a few moments I'll ask M. Heraud, our General Administrator, to have a word with you." She waved one immaculately manicured hand towards the leather arm chairs and with the other hand picked up a pale blue telephone.

The General Administrator must have been hiding behind the oak panelling that lined the reception area. He appeared soundlessly and without warning just a few seconds later. He was wearing an expensive hand-made, pinstripe, three piece suit, a white silk shirt, grey silk tie, fixed with a gold pin, and black shoes that sparkled.

"Shall we walk while we talk?" His dental work made the receptionist look as though she needed an urgent appointment for remedial work. "I can explain a few things to you and answer any questions you may have and you can see how well your mother will be looked after here."

I followed him down a broad corridor. His shoes made a sharp clicking sound on the exquisite mosaic floors.

"This is one of our typical rooms," he said, opening a door apparently at random and ushering me into a spacious and well-appointed room which contained a large bed, two easy chairs, a writing desk and chair and a television set. He opened two more doors, one of which led into a spacious walk in closet and the other which led into a massive marble floored bathroom. "All our nursing staff are fully trained," he confided.

"It's very impressive," I nodded. It was. I guessed that the bills would be pretty impressive too.

The tour of the hospital took fifteen minutes. I saw the two operating theatres, the intensive care unit, the recreation rooms, the private cinema and the heated swimming pool. It seemed to be a combination of hospital and luxury hotel. Someone had spent a lot of money on it.

"There is one other room I'd like you to see," said Heraud. He took what looked like a plastic credit card from a wafer thin alligator skin wallet and inserted it into a slit in a small metal panel by the side of a door that had no door handle. An electric motor whirred and the door slid sideways into a cavity in the wall.

I followed him into a room about twenty feet square. There were single large windows in two walls and the wall on our left had a door in it which led into the room I could see through the windows.

"That is our computer room," said Heraud proudly, pointing through the glass. "I'm afraid I can't take you into the room itself because we follow very strict security and have to follow precise rules to avoid any dust contamination." I followed him across the room until we were both standing close to one of the windows. The room on the other side of the glass contained a complex assortment of sophisticated computer equipment. Several figures in white coats, white trousers, white hats and white plastic overshoes were sitting at desks.

"We use these computer files for everything we do," said Heraud. "We have forty nursing homes - spread throughout most European countries - but all our patients records and our financial affairs are coordinated here. Each one of our nursing homes has a subsidiary computer room which enables them to feed us with information and enables us to pass on instructions from Dr Simpson, our Group Medical Director in London."

"My mother doesn't like computers very much," I said rather hesitantly. "She's very nervous about them."

"Good heavens!" said Heraud, obviously startled. "Why on earth is that?"

"Confidentiality," I said simply. "She doesn't trust them."

Heraud put a hand on my arm. "Your mother has absolutely nothing to worry about here," he promised me. "All of the information stored here is extremely confidential and can only be reached by using special code words. Staff members only have access to information that they need to do their jobs properly." He frowned. "We take confidentiality very seriously."

One of the white coated men took a reel of computer tape from one machine and replaced it with another reel.

"Many of our clients allow us to manage their financial affairs for them and our investment experts have direct access to banks and financial markets through our computer," said Heraud. "They have absolute faith in its safety and confidentiality. Our chairman, Mr Lonsdale, and our group medical director, Dr Simpson, both work from London and have computer terminals which enable them to obtain access to this information but they have very personal, confidential methods of using the information." He leant a little closer. "Passwords!" he whispered.

"And you use the computer to store the medical records of all your patients?"

"We certainly do," nodded Heraud proudly. "We don't use paper records at all. Every nursing station and every room in each of our nursing homes has its own keying in procedure so that nurses can use the system for consulting or recording confidential information about our residents. Our doctors even use our computers to record drug therapies - they find it reduces the risk of errors. There is a computer monitor by the side of every resident's bed so that our doctors and nurses can call up to date information. Our laboratories and X ray units feed the results of their investigations and tests directly into the computer system so that there are no delays."

One of the white coated computer operators turned round, saw us and smiled. A fringe of jet black hair peeped out from underneath her white hat. She waved. I waved back. Heraud wasn't the sort of person who ever waved. "We have enough computer capacity here to keep confidential individual medical records on hundreds of thousands of patients," he told me proudly.

From the ante room to the computer centre M.Heraud ushered me back along a corridor and into his office, a magnificent room with views across the lawns. A huge chandelier hung from a ceiling that must have been thirty foot high and the walls were lined with glass fronted bookcases, all filled with leather bound volumes.

Gingerly, I sat down on what I guessed was a valuable antique chair while Heraud picked up his telephone and asked someone to bring in tea for two. He then handed me a large, glossy brochure.

"Do you have any questions?" he asked.

"It's all very impressive," I said. I flicked through the brochure and pulled out a loose price list. I studied it carefully. The rooms were slightly more expensive than rooms at The Ritz in the Place Vendome in the centre of Paris.

"My mother has her own house which we are planning to sell for her," I said. "She'll then have a fairly large sum of money which we will want to invest on her behalf."

Heraud looked interested the way a dog looks interested when it sees a bone but he simply nodded sternly. Money clearly wasn't a subject for smiling about.

"I'm hoping to find investments that will ensure a secure income for her," I went on. "Once I've done that I think I'll be in a position to come back to you and start making practical arrangements.

A tall blonde appeared at the door behind Heraud. She was carrying a Butler's tray upon which stood a china tea pot and all the matching essentials. At first glance I thought it was the receptionist but although she wore a similar blue uniform this girl's name was Helene. Her badge described her as "Personal Assistant to the General Manager". She put the tray down on Heraud's desk and then disappeared without saying a word. Heraud poured two cups of tea.

"Milk or lemon?"

"Lemon please."

"We may be able to help you with your investment programme if you would like us to," said Heraud, handing me a cup.

I took the cup and looked interested.

"For example, we can help you to arrange an annuity which will ensure that your mother's financial needs are met for the rest of her life." Heraud opened a drawer in his desk and took out another folder. He placed it on the desk between us.

"An annuity? How does that work?" I asked, hoping that my innocence sounded genuine.

"It's very simple," said Heraud. "And utterly reliable. We recommend a company in London which has been in business for over a century and is used by the British Royal Family."

I looked suitably impressed.

"The insurance company uses your mother's money to buy bonds and other investments which will ensure that she receives a high return on her money for as long as she lives," said Heraud. "Depending on the amount involved we can often arrange annuities for people like your mother where the return is as high as 20 to 25% per annum."

I whistled softly. "That's very impressive!"

"The only snag with an annuity of any type is, of course, that if anything should ever happen to your mother then the annuity will stop."

"Oh, naturally." I agreed. "But all I'm interested in is making sure that my mother is well looked after. I'm not interested in anything else."

Heraud started to rub his hands together, then realise what he was doing and stopped. He bent across his desk towards me. "You'll find the details of the annuity in here," he said, handing me the brochure that lay on his desk. I put down my cup and took the brochure. "The next step," he said, "is for you to bring your mother along so that we can meet one another."

I stood up. "You've been very helpful, M.Heraud. I'm very grateful. I'll take these away with me if I may?" I held up the brochures. Heraud nodded. "And I hope to be able to get back to you very soon."

Heraud beamed at me and offered me his hand across the desk. "It will be an honour if you choose to allow us to look after your mother," he announced with a slight bow of his head.

He was so good that I almost believed him.

***

I telephoned Michael Sunderland from Charles de Gaulle airport that evening.

"Is Barbara there? Did you see her?" he asked when I'd explained where I'd been and why.

"I didn't see her," I told him. "But I think she's there."

"What do we do now?"

"I don't know." I tried not to sound as weary and depressed as I felt. The truth was that I didn't know what to do next. I was well out of my depth.

"Can we ask the police for help?"

"I've thought of that. But what could I tell them? They're hardly likely to send a search party into a nursing home just because I ask them to."

"But we've got to do something!"

"I need to get back into the nursing home," I told him. "I need to look around properly - to see if I can find Barbara."

"So, what's the problem?" Michael sounded as impatient as I would have been if I'd been in his shoes.

"I don't know how I'm going to get into the nursing home again. They're expecting me to take my mother with me next time."

"Can't you?"

"Can't I what?"

"Take your mother with you?"

"Not easily," I said. "The only one I had died five years ago."

"Lizzie!" said Michael suddenly. "Lizzie will do it."

"Who's Lizzie?"

"Are you coming back to London?"

"My plane leaves in...," I looked at my watch, "...thirty minutes."

"Come to my flat as soon as you get back," said Michael. "I'll arrange for Lizzie to be there."

"Who's Lizzie?" I asked.

But I'd run out of money and the telephone was dead.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I went straight to Michael's flat.

"How did it go today?" I asked him.

"Slow," he answered. He seemed to have aged years in the last few days. "I got another photograph this morning. And another tape."

"Does she look OK?"

He nodded.

"Did you see who brought it?"

"They all come by messenger at 6.30 in the morning. It's a different delivery service every morning. I rang one firm but they said that they were paid in cash and didn't know where the packet had come from."

I looked carefully at the photograph. The contrast with the original photograph of Barbara that Michael had shown me was sharp. Barbara's eyes were full of fear and loneliness.

Michael slipped the cassette into a player and we both stood still and listened to Barbara's shaky voice reading out some dull, impersonal, and to us irrelevant, item of news.

"There's one thing we can count on," I told him.

Michael looked at me as though already unconvinced.

"The longer the trial lasts the longer we've got to find Barbara. Lonsdale will ensure that they keep sending you pictures and tapes because he wants to keep you happy. He won't let anyone hurt her while the trial is going on. And the longer it goes on the greater my chance of finding Barbara."

"The way things are going there isn't going to be much question about the result," said Michael miserably. "On the evidence that we've seen so far Lonsdale is guilty. I can't see it taking us more than five minutes to reach a decision."

"You've got to try and make the other jurors doubtful," I said. `Once you all get in that jury room you've got to delay a verdict as long as you can." Before I could go on the doorbell rang.

"That'll be Lizzie," said Michael.

"How much does she know?"

"Nothing. I haven't had time to explain anything to her."

"Can you trust her?"

"She's my sister." He went to answer the door.

Some people can take over a room the moment they enter it. Lizzie was one of those people. She came into the apartment in a blur, kissing Michael, throwing a plaid cape over the back of the sofa and tossing a huge plastic carrier bag down onto a chair. She waved a hand to me and shook her head to loosen her hair.

Once she stood still it was her hair which took over. It was red and frizzy and there seemed to be yards of it. It was only shoulder length but it surrounded her head like a red blaze. She was in her mid-twenties, about five foot six or five foot seven inches tall and slim. She wore a tartan scarf, a baggy white sweater and a pair of faded blue jeans.

Black, calf length boots with huge heels made me realise that she was probably shorter than she looked. She wore no rings and no jewellery. Once I'd got used to her hair I realised that it was her eyes which were her most startling feature. One was bright blue and the other was green. The effect was hypnotic and it was only when she laughed and turned away that I realised that I'd been staring at her without saying anything. It was only when Michael started to tell her what had happened to Barbara that I remembered why he'd invited her over. This was the woman I was supposed to pass off as my mother.

While Michael talked I watched and listened. Lizzie said nothing. She just nodded her head occasionally and shook it from time to time. When he had finished she got up and went across to him, kissed him on the cheek, put her arms around him and hugged him tightly. I turned away.

"Whatever I can do to help...," I heard Lizzie say. "Anything."

After a few moments silence I turned round and looked at them. Brother and sister. I envied their closeness.

"We need you to play a mother," said Michael. He nodded towards me. "His mother."

I started to say something facetious. I'm not sure what it was going to be. I stopped myself in time.

"OK." said Lizzie, as though Michael had asked her to put the kettle on. She turned to me. "When? And where?"

"I didn't like to mention the obvious," I said. "But don't you think someone might notice that my mother is younger than I am?"

Lizzie smiled.

"Lizzie is an actress," said Michael. "She was in Chekhov's "Three Sisters" at The National last year."

"But I've got a couple of free days at the moment," said Lizzie. She laughed. "I'm "resting"".

It all seemed impossible but I didn't see what choice I had. Mother substitutes don't grow on trees.

I telephoned the nursing home in Paris. To my surprise there was someone there who could take my call. I explained that I wanted to take my mother along to have a look around and to meet M.Heroud. I fixed an appointment for the following morning.

I said I'd go back to my flat and pick up a couple of things, arrange the tickets and book two rooms in a hotel. Lizzie agreed to meet me later that evening at the check in desk at Heathrow airport.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I always believe in travelling light and I had a spare shirt and a few other odds and ends crammed into a small canvas overnight bag. My toothbrush, razor, passport and tickets were all in the pockets of my old leather jacket. By contrast Lizzie looked as though she was preparing for a trip around the world. In addition to her massive plastic bag she was pushing a trolley holding a huge old fashioned carpet bag and a large suitcase.

She smiled and waved furiously when she saw me.

"I brought a few clothes with me," she explained, noticing the way I looked at her collection of luggage. She was wearing a soft, red felt hat and a trench coat that reached her ankles. When the coat swung open I could see that underneath it she was wearing a black leather mini skirt and a skin tight black sweater. She wore fleur de lys patterned tights and shiny black high heeled shoes. She didn't look like anyone's mother - let alone mine.

We joined the queue for our flight to Paris. "I'll tell them that one of the bags is mine," I said. "That way we might get away without having to pay any excess baggage."

Lizzie put a hand on my arm. "Do you think Barbara is all right?"

"Yes," I replied. For the time being I was as confident as I sounded. I didn't know why.

Lizzie squeezed my arm and rested her head against my shoulder for a few seconds. "Good." she said faintly. "I like Barbara." There was a pause. "And Michael loves her and I love Michael."

"You know this could be dangerous, don't you?"

"It doesn't matter." said Lizzie. "We've got to do something."

I should have listened to the way she was saying it as much as to what she said. She sounded like a member of a school girl gang on a summer holiday jape. She was driven by good intentions but perhaps too innocent to realise that good intentions aren't always enough.

From the Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris we caught the Air France bus to the top of the Champs d'Elysee. Alone I would have travelled to the hotel on the underground Metro but the thought of dragging so much luggage around made me feel tired so we picked up a Peugeot taxi from the rank at the top of the Avenue Hoche. The driver was Japanese and he spoke French with the strangest accent I've ever heard.

I'd booked two rooms in a small, anonymous hotel close to the Jardin du Luxembourg on the Left Bank and the drive through Paris and across the Seine excited Lizzie who had never been there before. Our driver, perhaps determined to imitate more traditional Parisian taxi drivers, clearly felt that it was his duty to drive as erratically and as dangerously as possible. Hurtling around the Place de la Concorde at close to 80 kph he missed a coach full of tourists by centimetres. Crossing the Seine onto the Quay Anatole he played "chicken" with the driver of a large Mercedes and banged his fist on his steering wheel with undisguised delight when the Mercedes driver gave way.

Thankful to be alive I tipped him generously and he surprised me by helping to carry Lizzie's luggage into the hotel.

The hotel was one of the few in Paris not to have been modernised. The duty receptionist, porter and telephone operator was a balding Algerian who could have been anywhere between his early thirties and his late fifties. His upper lip was decorated with a neatly defined black moustache on which he clearly lavished much time and attention. He wore a badly pressed lightweight fawn suit and had the decaying remains of a red rose bud in his jacket buttonhole.

The only light was provided by a small table lamp which stood on his desk and was connected to the hotel's electricity supply via a lengthy stretch of alarmingly frayed flex. The tiny foyer contained two large leather sofas and three dining chairs. Both the sofas and all the dining chairs were occupied by women who seemed dressed for a party.

There were nine of them altogether. The youngest looked about sixteen or seventeen years old. The oldest was probably in her late sixties. Four of them wore long wigs and they all had a lot of make up on. There was a lot of thigh and a lot of white bosom on view. The oldest stared at Lizzie and our luggage then bent her head towards her neighbour and made a remark which made her companion laugh.

I put my passport down on the desk. "We've got reservations for two single rooms."

Using a grubby forefinger to guide his eyes the Algerian looked down the list of scribbled and indecipherable names in the hotel book. He shook his head and told me that I'd made a mistake. I had, he said, only booked one double room. It seemed to amuse him.

I tried arguing with him but he pretended not to understand. He shrugged his shoulders and turned away. The women sitting in the foyer watched with amused interest.

"What's the matter?" asked Lizzie?

"I booked two single rooms," I explained. "He says they've only got a double."

Lizzie didn't seem too worried. "As long as it's got two beds and a bathroom," she said.

I asked the Algerian if the room had a bathroom.

He shook his head but assured me that there was one just along the corridor which we could hire by the hour for thirty francs a time.

"There isn't a bathroom," I told Lizzie, who spoke no French.

She smiled weakly and shrugged.

"How many beds does the room have?" I asked the Algerian.

He looked at me as though I'd gone mad. "One!" he said in heavily accented English. He held up one finger and then pointed it at each of us in turn. He turned towards the two women who were sitting on the nearest sofa and muttered something which made them laugh. I was beginning to feel like a freak show in a circus.

"Does he mean that there's a bed each? asked Lizzie.

"I don't think so." I felt deeply embarrassed. "Do you want to try to find somewhere else?"

Lizzie looked at her watch and then at our luggage which took up the remaining space in the foyer. She shook her head.

Just then two North Africans came into the hotel. Both were wearing blue suits and had their collars unbuttoned. Both had their shirt collars turned neatly over their jacket collars.

At the arrival of the two men the women in the foyer sat up. They smiled, patted their hair and pushed out their chests. One, sitting on one of the dining chairs, crossed and re-crossed her legs slowly and deliberately, unconcernedly revealing her taste in underwear as she did so.

The two men whispered to one another and stared at the women as shoppers might inspect the meat on display in a butcher's shop, pointing out the virtues and drawbacks of each in turn with no regard at all for the usual social niceties.

Lizzie nudged me. "What's going on?"

The two men, having made their selections, started talking prices.

Lizzie gripped my wrist. "Am I seeing what I think I'm seeing?"

I turned to the Algerian behind the desk, who seemed totally uninterested in what was going on, and asked him for our key. As I spoke the two men agreed prices and moved towards a bamboo curtain at the rear of the foyer, with their newly chosen companions in tow. The Algerian handed keys to each of the two men as they passed him and then handed a third key to me. Each key was attached by a piece of green string to a large piece of wood.

"Room 17," he mumbled, as I accepted the key. Then he turned and winked at the abandoned women, who laughed again.

Clutching Lizzie's large suitcase in one hand and carrying my own overnight bag in the other I led Lizzie through the bamboo curtain and up a narrow, dimly lit staircase. A narrow strip of threadbare, dirty carpet marked the middle of the stairs. Behind us we could hear the women who'd been left behind chattering as they waited for more customers.

"I'm sorry about all this," I apologised to Lizzie, as I opened the door to our room. It contained a large, old fashioned bed, a massive wardrobe, a small dressing table and a remarkably small hand-basin which was supplied only by a cold tap. Once we'd put down the luggage there was hardly any room left to move.

Lizzie turned, looked at me and started to giggle. She walked over to the bed and sat down on it. The springs had virtually no resilience left at all and the bed dipped under her alarmingly. Lizzie kicked off her shoes and lay back. The bed creaked noisily and threatened to swallow her up. Lizzie put her hands over her face to try and smother her laughter. The more she laughed the more the bed shook and the more the bed shook the more she laughed.

When we heard the rhythmic creaking of a bed in the room next door I too started to laugh. And when the bed in the room on the other side of us started to creak our laughter came dangerously close to hysterical.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I offered to sleep on the floor but Lizzie wouldn't hear of it. We washed timidly and sparingly in running cold water in our tiny basin (there was no plug with which to block the waste pipe) and then turned off the light and clambered into bed.

It was an uncomfortable night. The mattress was so soft that it constantly tried to throw us both together and to avoid any further embarrassment I spent the night clinging to my side of the bed. At six o'clock in the morning I gave up the unequal struggle, clambered out of bed and wandered downstairs, past the balding Algerian who was sleeping (still in his suit) on one of the sofas in the reception area.

From the hotel I jogged to the Luxembourg Gardens where I ran for thirty minutes among the flower beds and ornamental ponds and fountains. The gravel paths crunched satisfactorily under-foot and the early morning air was still and tasted good. Then, as half a dozen other early morning joggers invaded the park, I found a quiet grassy spot where I spent another thirty minutes doing press ups and sit ups. I felt much better when I'd finished.

Two streets away I bought a newspaper from a kiosk and found a small cafe where I ordered a large, steaming bowl of strong coffee and a basketful of fresh croissants. Two of the working girls who'd been waiting in the hotel foyer the evening before were already there having breakfast. They both looked tired and dishevelled, and smiled and laughed a lot as though they'd had a successful night.

At half past eight I went back to the hotel. The Algerian was still sleeping on one of the sofas and across the foyer an elderly woman was sitting on the other sofa. I tiptoed past them and climbed back up the dark and narrow staircase to the room where I'd left Lizzie sleeping. Gently, I pushed the door open.

Lizzie's clothes were strewn around the room and the bed clothes were pulled back but there was no sign of Lizzie at all. I sat down on the edge of the bed and waited. I thought that she'd probably gone along to the bathroom. After five minutes or so I decided to have a shave. After that unpleasant cold water experience I began to get really worried. I walked along the corridor to the bathroom. The door had been left open and the bath had been used but there was no sign of Lizzie. I ran back down the stairs to the foyer. The old woman was the only person there; the balding Algerian had disappeared.

I walked to the front door and looked out into the street. Three girls I hadn't seen before were standing by the wall outside the hotel hoping to pick up some early morning trade. There was no sign of Lizzie. I turned round, went back into the hotel and made my way back towards the staircase.

"Are you looking for a girl?" someone asked me, in broken, halting English.

I half turned. It was the old lady who had spoken. She had grey hair, tied in a bun, and wore a dark dress with a light blue shawl draped around her shoulders.

"A particular girl," I said. "An English girl."

"What does she look like?"

I held a hand at chin level. "About this tall, very pretty, long red, curly hair." I realised I didn't have the faintest idea what clothes Lizzie might have been wearing.

"How old?"

"Mid-twenties."

"Are you sure you wouldn't like a younger girl?"

I shook my head. "No thanks. I need to find this one. Have you seen her?"

The old woman nodded. She adjusted the shawl around her shoulders. She wore woollen gloves with the tips of the fingers cut off. Her movements were slow and deliberate, as though she had arthritis in her joints.

"Where did she go?" I demanded, bending down so that my face was at her level. "It's important. Did she leave with someone else?"

The old woman just stared at me. She had a cataract developing in her left eye.

I took out my wallet and pulled out a 100 franc note. I folded it and offered it to the old woman. She shook her head. I took out another note and offered the old woman the two. She reached out and took the notes from me. They disappeared somewhere underneath her shawl.

"Well?" I said, impatiently. "Where did she go?"

"She didn't go anywhere," said the old woman.

I was losing what remained of my patience. But I still didn't understand.

"Do you always sleep right on the edge of the bed?" demanded the old woman.

"How...?" I started to ask. Then I realised. "I don't believe it!" I whispered.

"You're not supposed to," said Lizzie, reverting to her ordinary voice.

"It's brilliant! Absolutely brilliant!" I stared at her. "But how did you do it? The eyes?"

"I am an actress!" Lizzie reminded me. "I brought my make up with me. And a pair of contact lenses." She smiled. "Is there anywhere that I can get some breakfast? I'm starving."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Heraud was nauseatingly attentive to Lizzie, gently cupping her elbow in his hand as they walked and explaining everything to her in Maurice Chevalier English (his English had been almost accent free when he'd spoken to me alone). I walked behind them, constantly looking for Barbara Sunderland, but seeing no sign of her.

"What do you think?" he asked, when we were all seated in his office. "Do you think you could be happy with us?" He addressed all his remarks to Lizzie. I thought he had all the convincing charm of a salesman of previously owned motor cars but Lizzie gave the impression that she found him irresistible.

"It's wonderful," she whispered. "I'm sure I'll be very happy here." She lowered her eyes for a moment. "Are you on duty here all the time, M. Heraud?" she asked coyly. Even I half believed that she was taken with him.

"Certainly I am!" replied Heraud. "And it will be my pleasure to look after you personally."

Lizzie examined her gloves and managed to look both embarrassed and delighted. For a moment I thought she was actually going to blush.

"When would you like to move in?" asked Heraud. "We do have a suite available at the moment but...." He shrugged his shoulders and held his hands palm upwards, indicating that he couldn't promise that the room would be available for long.

Lizzie looked across at me. She seemed flustered and I suspected that some of the fluster was probably genuine. Before I could say anything she looked back at Heraud.

"My son can go back home and collect a suitcase for me," she said, nodding in my direction. "If you have a room available I could move into it now."

I was horrified. This wasn't what we'd planned at all. It was all very well maintaining the deception for half an hour but how on earth was she going to keep it up if she was living in the damned place? What if a maid came in to her room at night? What if a nurse insisted on going into the bathroom with her? And what if a doctor wanted to examine her?

Heraud looked as though he would start purring at any moment.

"Then that's settled," said Lizzie, sitting back in her chair. She turned to me. "Will you bring in some of my things?"

"Of course!" I agreed. I didn't seem to have much option.

"There are just a few simple formalities to go through," said Heraud. He opened a drawer in his desk and took out two large forms. "First, there is our own contract." He pushed one of the forms across the desk towards us. "And second, the form for the annuity which I talked to your son about." He put the second form on top of the first.

Lizzie picked up the two forms and handed them to me.

The contract with the nursing home was fairly simple. It merely confirmed that the signatory would stay in the nursing home for a minimum of six months and would, after that, give thirty days notice of any intention to leave. The annuity contract was also quite simple. As Heraud had explained to me it offered the signatory a life time income in return for an agreement that upon her death her estate would pass to the company offering the income. The size of the income was, of course, dependent upon the size of the guaranteed assets.

"I'm afraid we can't complete the annuity at the moment," I said to Heraud. "I will need to have a meeting with my mother's accountants and solicitors first."

Heraud threw up his hands. "Absolutely!" he cried, in mock horror. "Absolutely! I did not expect your mother to sign this form today."

"But I'm sure there aren't any problems with the contract," Lizzie said. She held out a hand for the contract and then for a pen.

Heraud adjusted his tie and held his head slightly to one side, like a cat waiting for a treat. Lizzie scrawled an indecipherable and worthless signature across the bottom of the nursing home contract and I pushed it back across the desk. Heraud had style. He didn't even look at the contract but slid it straight into a drawer with all the sleight of hand of a stage magician. He then stood up, walked around his desk and held out a hand to Lizzie. When she took it he brought his other hand across and buried her fingers in a two handed clasp. "It's going to be a delight having the honour to look after you," he said, with a slight bow. "Now, let me show you to your room."

I followed them as they left Heraud's office and walked down a long corridor to my "mother's" new suite.

It was, I had to admit, quite spectacular and a considerable improvement on the grubby hotel room where Lizzie and I had slept the previous night. The sitting room ceiling was high and the plasterwork was magnificent. A crystal chandelier hung from a heavily sculpted fixture in the centre of the ceiling and a marble fireplace dominated one distant wall. The furniture was excellent Louis XV reproduction and three or four good oil paintings in extravagant gilt frames were hung around the walls.

The bedroom and bathroom were equally impressive.

"Everything is carefully designed to our own specification," Heraud explained proudly. He pointed to the bed. "The four poster bed looks attractive and decorative," he said. He waited for Lizzie to nod her agreement. "But it is built around a standard hospital frame. It has an orthopaedic mattress and is fully adjustable."

"It's lovely!" beamed Lizzie.

"It is our most expensive suite," admitted Heraud. "But it is free at the moment," he shrugged and smiled. "And it is perfect for you."

Lizzie simpered.

"If there is anything you want all you have to do is press one of these buttons." He pointed to a small red button built onto one side of the bedside cabinet. "You will find that there are buttons distributed throughout the suite - including a dozen or so at ground level in case of accidents." He pointed to another red button situated about three inches above floor level by the entrance to the bathroom.

"That's very comforting," I said.

"I'll leave you now," said Heraud, rubbing his hands together. He looked at Lizzie. "I expect you'll want to give your son a list of things that you'd like him to fetch for you." He backed away towards the door.

When he'd gone I stared at Lizzie for a moment or two. I was furious. "What the hell are you playing at?" I demanded. "How are you going to keep this up?" I was angry with her and made no attempt to disguise it. "This nursing home is owned by Lonsdale," I reminded her. "And you know how dangerous he is!" I was angry because I was genuinely concerned.

"Don't be silly," protested Lizzie. "Nothing is going to happen. And with me staying here we stand a much better chance of finding Barbara - if she's here."

"But you won't be just playing a part," I protested crossly. "You can't wipe your make up off after the "show" and go home. You're going to have to be in character for 24 hours a day."

"There's nothing to stop me locking the door occasionally," said Lizzie.

"There are no locks on the doors to this suite," I pointed out wryly. "I've already checked."

Lizzie checked the bathroom door, the bedroom door and then the main entrance door into the suite. She lost some of her colour and her ebullience when she saw that I was right.

"You can stay here today," I told her. "And maybe tonight. But then you're coming out again."

"Not until we've found Barbara!"

"Whether we've found Barbara or not!" I insisted. "Don't forget Heraud is going to be expecting a signed annuity. How do you think we're going to manage that? Not to mention the fact that we've already signed a contract promising to pay them heaven knows how many thousand francs a night for the next six months."

"That doesn't matter," said Lizzie. "They're crooks anyway."

"They may not want to take us to court," I agreed. "But there are other ways of enforcing payment. And getting you out of here isn't going to be easy now."

"OK!" sighed Lizzie, after a long silence. "If we haven't found Barbara by mid-day tomorrow I'll leave."

"If we can get you out!" I said.

"Stop being so cheerful." ordered Lizzie. "Go and get my suitcase - like a dutiful son."

"What do you want?"

"You'd better bring me my make-up kit and some more old lady clothes." Lizzie paused. "And bring me something to wear tonight. You'll have to buy something. I don't think my nightie is quite suitable."

She was right about that at least.

CHAPTER TWENTY

It took me two hours to get back into Paris to the hotel, select the clothes I thought Lizzie would need, collect her make-up and pack her suitcase. I left the suitcase at the hotel while I went to a department store to buy a suitable nightdress.

"I want a night dress for my mother," I told the assistant who pounced on me the moment I entered the ladies lingerie department.

She obviously thought I was lying and immediately offered me something that was flimsy, black and diaphanous. I declined and asked for something in flannelette.

Once I had a suitable garment wrapped and under my arm I decided that I ought to buy a few more even more personal items. From what I'd seen of it Lizzie's underwear was decidedly unsuitable. I bought a long sleeved cotton vest, a full length slip, a pair of woollen long johns, the most hideous bra I'd ever seen and a pair of elastic stockings. I didn't worry about measurements but simply bought the "medium" size in everything.

It was mid-afternoon when I got back to the nursing home lugging Lizzie's suitcase.

"I've come to see my mother," I told the receptionist. "She moved in this morning."

The receptionist, an elegant woman in her early forties whom I had never seen before, looked me over fairly carefully and the nodded towards the suitcase I had with me. "What's in that?"

"Some clothes," I explained. "For my mother."

"I'll take it to her," offered the receptionist.

"Thank you. That's all right. I'll take it to her myself."

"It's no trouble," insisted the receptionist.

"I'd like to pop along and make sure she's settled in all right," I persisted. "So I might as well take it along." I didn't want anyone examining the contents of the case. The clothes were no problem but I didn't want anyone finding Lizzie's box of theatrical make up.

With a scowl the receptionist scribbled my name on a small cardboard badge and handed it to me. "Would you please wear this." She turned a visitors' book round and pushed that towards me. "And would you please sign the visitors book."

I signed the visitor's book, pinned the cardboard badge onto my jacket lapel, assured the receptionist that I could remember which room my mother was staying in and headed off down the corridor. Now that Lizzie had signed up and we were no longer potential customers who needed to be wooed the veneer of charm seemed to be a lot thinner.

"What have you got on under that?" I asked Lizzie, handing her the suitcase, and nodding towards the dress she was wearing.

She looked at me as if I'd gone mad so I repeated the question.

"Bra and knickers."

"Take them off."

Lizzie giggled. "Don't tell me you've suddenly decided that you're turned on by shawls and fingerless gloves?"

"There's more suitable underwear in the suitcase," I told her. "Go into the bathroom and change. Then give me whatever you've got on and I'll take them out with me. And take the make-up you need out of your make up box and give me what's left."

"Why? What's the matter?"

"I don't want anyone coming into your room while you're out and discovering your indecent underwear lying around."

"I don't wear anything indecent!"

"You know what I mean!"

Less than five minutes later I had put Lizzie's own underwear and most of her make up kit into the suitcase.

`I'm staying here with you," I told her, fastening the case. "I'm not leaving you in here by yourself."

"Don't be silly! You'll blow everything!"

"Don't worry - I'll convince the receptionist that I've left."

When I got back to the nursing home foyer the receptionist was talking to someone on the telephone. She seemed surprised to see me so quickly. She put her hand over the mouthpiece. "That was a short visit!"

"I'm just taking this suitcase out to the car," I explained. "It's some bits and pieces that she's decided she doesn't need."

"You don't have to do that," said the receptionist. "We've got plenty of storage space."

"It's my case," I lied. "I might need it."

"Can I have your badge?" asked the receptionist.

"I'm coming back in a moment."

"I'm not allowed to let you out of the nursing home with a badge on," said the receptionist. She looked at her watch. "I'm going off duty in a few minutes and I have to keep the visitors book up to date."

I took the badge off and handed it to her. Then I walked briskly outside to the car park. I wanted to get back into the hospital again as quickly as I could.

I'd arrived in a taxi but I didn't take long to find a brand new Citroen with the boot open. I dumped the suitcase into the boot and walked quickly back into the nursing home. I grinned inanely at the receptionist. "Hello again! Can I have my badge back?"

The receptionist held my badge out to me and got me to sign the book again.

When I got back to Lizzie's suite she seemed to have disappeared. I called her name and she appeared out of the bedroom dressed in the new underwear I'd bought her. She had been laughing a lot and her eye make-up had run, leaving long black streaks down her cheeks. The elastic stockings were too big for her and had collapsed into wrinkles around her ankles.

I waited two minutes, picked up a plastic bag that had contained some of Lizzie's new clothes, filled it with towels and then walked briskly back down the corridor towards the reception desk.

The receptionist sighed when she saw me. I handed her my visitors badge, signed the book again and hurried outside. I walked round the car park, threw the bag into the back of the same Citroen and then went back inside. The receptionist was busy talking to a new girl who was, I assumed, the relief receptionist.

"Shan't be long!" I said breathlessly. "Just another minute or two." I was getting confused and I was pretty sure the receptionist was too.

"O.K." said the receptionist wearily. She waved me past impatiently and carried on talking to the new girl who ignored me totally. I walked briskly past her, strolled down the corridor and let myself into Lizzie's room with no visitor's badge and without having signed the visitors' book.

"Which do you think?" Lizzie asked me, holding up two dark coloured dresses that I found virtually indistinguishable.

I pointed to the one on the left.

"I need somewhere to hide if anyone comes in," I said, looking around the room.

"Why this one?" asked Lizzie, frowning. "What's wrong with the other one?"

"It isn't your colour." I opened a large cupboard to the left of the fireplace. If I took the shelf out there would be just enough room for me to get into the cupboard in an emergency.

"I think you ought to stay in the bedroom," said Lizzie. "Then if someone comes in you'll have more time to hide. There's a massive, walk in wardrobe in there." She stepped into the dress I'd turned down. "If you're in here and someone walks in you won't have time to get into the cupboard." She turned round. "Fasten me up will you?" the back of the dress had a row of hooks and eyes.

"No!" I said firmly. "If you can't fasten it yourself then an old woman certainly wouldn't be able to."

"You're right," agreed Lizzie, slipping out of the dress. She picked up its competitor, which had a much easier fastening. "I preferred this one all along."

"I'll go into the bedroom." I said, with a sigh.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

I woke up with a start. It was semi dark and I couldn't remember where I was.

An old lady with a cataract in one eye was shaking my shoulders. She wore a shapeless, pink, flannelette nightgown.

"Come on!" she whispered. "It's three o'clock."

Slowly I remembered.

"Hello, Lizzie." I yawned.

"I thought the idea of coming in here was to look for Barbara?"

I sat up with a start, stretched, threw back the sheets and clambered out of bed. "Where did you sleep?"

"There!" said Lizzie, pointing to the other side of the bed I'd just left. "That's twice we've spent the night together and you haven't even made a pass at me." She grinned. "Maybe one of us ought to be worried."

Five minutes later I was dressed and as alert as I was ever going to be. I opened the door from the living room to the corridor a fraction of an inch and listened carefully.

"Let me," hissed Lizzie, pushing me aside. She was still wearing her nightdress.

I tried to hold her back. "You stay here!"

"It'll be damned sight easier for me to explain what I'm doing than it will be for you."

She was right. She poked her head out through the doorway and looked up and down the corridor. "There's no one about," she said. She hesitated for a moment and then turned left. "Lets try this way first."

After about twenty yards the corridor reached a junction. We had a choice of right or left.

"We went down there this morning," I said, nodding to the left. "Lets try this way." I turned right. Lizzie followed.

Most of the doors in the nursing home were clearly marked. High up on each door was a metal plaque stating the room's name. (Lizzie's room was the Versailles Suite). Underneath the metal plaque there was a metal card holder in which the name of the occupant was written.

"Yesterday morning," said Lizzie.

I turned. "What?"

"It was yesterday morning that we went on our tour," whispered Lizzie. "You said this morning."

I sighed. Pedantry was a luxury I didn't really feel we had time for.

All the doors in this corridor contained a metal plaque. But instead of names the white cards simply carried numbers. I turned the door handle to the first door. It was unlocked. But then I noticed that each door had a tiny spy hole fitted just underneath the metal card holder. The cover across the spy hole was on the outside so that whoever was inside couldn't see out. I moved the cover, put my eye against the spy hole and looked in. Nothing. The light was on but the room was empty.

The next two spy holes I looked through were similarly unproductive. But at the fourth attempt I hit the jackpot.

A young woman whom I instantly recognised as Barbara Sunderland was lying asleep just a few yards from the door. A small overhead lamp illuminated the room which was much smaller and much more simply furnished than Lizzie's room.

I signalled for Lizzie to look through the spy hole. Excitedly she turned to me. "That's her!"

I tried the door handle. To my surprise, it moved easily and the door opened soundlessly. I moved swiftly into the room and signalled to Lizzie to shut the door behind us.

A few seconds later, with the door closed, we both heard the sound of a lock being operated. Turning away from the bed, where Barbara was still asleep, I tried the door handle. The door wouldn't budge. We'd found Barbara all right. But now we were prisoners with her.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

The room in which Barbara was being kept prisoner was much simpler and less expensively furnished than the suite Heraud had provided for Lizzie but it was equipped with every necessity for good medical and nursing care.

Mounted on a shelf beside Barbara's bed was a small television monitor connected to the nursing home's computerised records system that Heraud was so proud of. Underneath each computer monitor was an intravenous feed source designed so that instead of having to connect patients up to bottles of fluid hanging upside down from drip stands nurses and doctors could simply connect their patients directly to a central supply. Finally there was a gas supply point - presumably provided so that doctors or nurses could supply oxygen or anaesthetic gases.

Lizzie went straight across to the bed and put her arm around Barbara who had begun to wake up when we'd entered the room. Barbara looked terrified but didn't utter a sound. She had the knuckles of her right hand pressed into her mouth.

"It's me - Lizzie!"

Barbara didn't look convinced.

"If you want her to believe you," I whispered urgently. "You'd better take some of that make up off."

Lizzie tore her wig off and shook her head so that her own hair came free. The she bent her head, cupped her hand underneath her right eye and allowed the first contact lens to fall out. Then she did the same thing with the other contact lens.

"Lizzie? Is that really you?" Barbara whispered. "What are you doing here?" She took her hand away from her mouth and reached up to touch Lizzie's shoulder, as though checking that she was real. Then she remembered me. "Who's he?" she asked. She looked confused as well as frightened.

"He's a friend of Michael's," said Lizzie. "We've come to help get you out of here."

Barbara burst into tears. She threw her arms around Lizzie's neck and her body shook as she began to sob uncontrollably.

"How long have you been here?" I asked Barbara.

She shook her head and whispered that she didn't know.

"Did they bring you here after they took you from the cafe?"

"They told me that Michael had collapsed and was being taken to hospital," said Barbara. "They said they'd taken him out through the back of the cafe to avoid upsetting all the other customers." She spoke so quietly that I could hardly hear her. I had to move forwards until I was almost touching her.

Lizzie got up from the bed, where she'd been sitting alongside Barbara, and went over to the door. She tried the handle. It moved but the door didn't open.

"He hadn't had he? said Barbara. "Is he all right?"

For a moment I didn't know what she meant.

"No!" I said, at last. "Michael hadn't collapsed. He's fine." As quickly and as concisely as I could I explained to her why she'd been kidnapped.

"Will they hurt him?" Barbara wanted to know.

I shook my head. "Certainly not while the trial goes on. Nor will they hurt you." Then I turned my attention to our more immediate problem. "When we came in the door locked after us," I told Barbara. I couldn't think of a more encouraging way to put it.

"You mean we're all locked in here now?"

I nodded.

Silent tears started to roll down Barbara's cheeks as her newfound hopes began to disappear.

"He'll think of something," said Lizzie, nodding in my direction and speaking with surprising confidence. She moved towards the bathroom. "Since I no longer have to pretend to be your mother I'm going to clean off some of this gunk."

I looked at my watch. It was ten to four. "What time do they bring you breakfast?" I asked Barbara.

"Half past seven, I think."

"Trust you to think of your stomach," said Lizzie, coming out of the bathroom, using a towel to wipe her face clean.

I walked across the room, checked the door again and then examined the window. Like Lizzie's suite the room was on the ground floor but the window here had a heavy iron grid across it on the outside. Unless Barbara had an assortment of power tools tucked under her bed we wouldn't be getting out that way. I didn't think the power tools were much of a possibility so I ignored that option and went into the bathroom. This time the window was smaller and made of frosted glass. But it was also covered with a heavy iron grill.

I went back to the bedroom and sat down on the only chair.

"Is the door still locked?" asked Lizzie.

I nodded.

"Can we get out through the window?"

"No. It's barred."

"What about the bathroom?"

"The same."

"You could stand behind the door and hit whoever brings the breakfast tray in over the head with the chair," suggested Lizzie brightly.

About ten minutes later both Lizzie and Barbara began to giggle. I looked at them in surprise but before I could say anything to them I found myself giggling too. Just before I passed out I realised that someone outside the room had turned on the gas supply and was using it to anaesthetise us all. I remember trying to reach the gas supply point to block it but before I could do anything I collapsed onto the floor.

Laughing gas.

But it wasn't funny.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

I felt sick and my head ached. I shivered, opened my eyes and looked around. It was dark and I was lying on something hard. I could hear voices. I tried to roll over onto my side and caught sight of the sky. The silhouette of a distant building and a few close, shadowy figures backlit by a street lamp dominated my field of view. I was, I realised, lying outside on a road. I must have had an accident.

Suddenly I felt my ankles being gripped. I reached to find something to hold onto but my fingers scratched uselessly and painfully at the surface of the road. The person holding my ankles pulled me along the road. I felt my clothes tearing. My head banged on the road and I temporarily lost consciousness.

"Now the ribs!" I heard someone say a little later. A heavily booted foot landed on my chest. I bent double with the pain, retching uselessly.

"Now the feet!" said the same voice. "I need a shoe and a sock off and a cut or a heavy graze."

I felt someone's hands sliding under my armpits and then I was being pulled along the road.

"Loosen his shoe laces," a second voice suggested. "His shoes are too bloody tight."

Whoever it was who was pulling me lowered my body to the road, unfastened and then retied my shoe laces. This time, as I was dragged along the road, I felt my shoes slip off. Then I felt a sock sliding down my foot.

"Great!" said the voice again. "Now a nice cut. I need a vein."

I opened my eyes and tried desperately to focus on what was happening. I felt dizzy and nauseated, as though I was coming round after an operation. I shivered again and felt a few spots of rain on my face.

"How about this?" I heard someone say.

"What is it?"

"Bit of broken beer bottle by the looks of it."

"Fine. Give it to me."

I felt something stab at my foot. I tried to sit up but I felt too weak.

"He's coming round again shall I give him another whiff of gas?"

"No. Leave him now. I won't be long."

With a great effort I managed to sit up. I balanced myself precariously on my elbows. I could see three men. One of them was crouched over a small black case. He removed a glass phial from the case, checked it and then neatly snapped off the end. I could feel something warm and sticky running over my foot.

"He's awake, doc!" I heard someone say.

The crouching figure looked across at me and grinned.

"I don't think we've met," he said. My name is Simpson. Dr Simpson." He carefully stood the phial up on the road and then reached into the black case again. "We've been following you ever since you came out of The Grand with Michael Sunderland," he said. He took out a plastic syringe to which he attached a needle. I watched him.

"You'll like this," continued Simpson. "I'm rather proud of it." He laughed, dipped the needle into the phial and started to draw the fluid up into the syringe.

I just stared.

"This is potassium chloride solution," explained the doctor. "Given normally it stimulates the heart," he held the syringe up against the street light and squinted at it, checking to see that it didn't contain any air bubbles. He pressed the plunger on the syringe. A thin stream of liquid shot from the needle. "But," he continued, "if injected rapidly it causes an almost instantaneous heart attack."

I felt cramp developing in my left arm. I shifted position slightly.

"The beauty of it is that it is impossible to trace afterwards," said Simpson. "If they do a post mortem on you all they'll find is that you've had a heart attack.

"Needle marks," I croaked. My throat felt dry and rough. "Haven't you forgotten about the needle marks?"

"Not at all," said Simpson, looking and sounding very pleased with himself. "When you were hit by that car you were dragged along the road and you cut your foot on a piece of broken glass - the glass went straight through a vein."

I moved a little and looked at my feet. They seemed a thousand miles away. Slowly they came into focus. It was strange. My feet had always been loyal to me before. I could see that my left foot was naked and there was a large cut near the ankle bone. Blood was pumping out and making quite a mess.

"I'm going to inject the potassium chloride straight into the open vein," said Simpson. "No needle marks and no trace of the drug. You'll be dead within five minutes."

I swallowed hard. Slowly, triggered by anxiety and the proximity of death my mind started to work faster and faster. I remembered being in Barbara's room at the nursing home. I remembered Lizzie. And Michael. The court case. Lonsdale and Simpson. I remembered Lindsay too. Strangely, I remembered being a boy scout in the local troop.

A thousand images competed for attention. Lizzie, dressed in the flannelette nightie. Barbara, frightened and tearful. Lindsay, confident and elegant. Me, dressed in shorts and long socks with badges proudly worn on my shirt. Michael climbing out of his BMW. The half empty flat in St Johns Wood.

"There isn't much time, doctor," said one of the others.

I looked around. Was it my imagination or was it getting lighter? Snakes. I remembered the country survival classes I'd attended as a boy. "The markings on the back of an adder snake make it easy to distinguish from a grass snake". I remembered the scout master, an elderly school teacher who left in disgrace a few years later after some offence that no one would talk about. I could hear his voice. Pompous and dry. "The adder, Vipera Berus, is our only poisonous snake. It is found throughout mainland Great Britain in dry and open country and easily identified by the dark zig zag stripe down its back." I tried to concentrate on what was happening.

"Get into the car," Simpson said to people I couldn't see. "Get the engine started. He nodded towards the black case. "And take that."

The other men did as they were told. I heard a car engine start and then heard it ticking over. It sounded like a diesel engine.

"The grass snake is easily recognised by the pale ring round its neck." I could hear the scout master again. "The longest grass snake ever found in Britain was 1.75 metres long. The legless lizard is often mistaken for a snake but it is quite harmless. The only poisonous snake in Britain is the adder. It hibernates from mid October to late February. The young are born from eggs that hatch sometime in August or September. Nesting adders don't like to be disturbed. Tread carefully when walking in dry, open country. If you tread on one the bite can kill you. Adders rarely bite except when disturbed."

Simpson was bending down and concentrating on the syringe. I felt the needle working its way into my foot. Strangely, it didn't hurt. I tried to push Simpson away but he just stopped what he was doing for a moment and pushed me back with his left hand. I felt desperately weak as well as sick and faint. I felt bile rising in my throat. There wasn't time to be sick. I tried to think; tried to get my mind into motion again. The scoutmaster came back. "As long as you put a tourniquet on quickly - and don't leave it there for too long - you can stop the poison reaching your heart."

"Stop the poison reaching your heart."

My brain was working so fast that everything else seemed to be operating in slow motion. I watched Simpson stand up, the syringe still in his hand, and then watched him hurry away in the direction of the diesel powered motor car. I needed a tourniquet.

"What can you use as a tourniquet?" It was the scout master again.

"A belt, sir!" I heard my own bright, youthful voice.

"Excellent! A belt."

I unbuckled my trouser belt and tore it free. Trembling with the effort I sat up and wound the belt around my thigh. Once. Twice. Then I fastened it as tight as I could get it. Tighter. So tight that it hurt. It had to hurt.

I collapsed back on the road. My leg already felt numb.

"Now what?"

My brain was still racing. "Cut above the wound to drain the poison."

Cut. A knife. I needed a knife. I reached into my jacket pocket for my penknife. Gone. A piece of glass would do. They'd talked about a broken bottle. The growl of the diesel engine grew fainter as Simpson's car disappeared. I looked around and found the piece of broken glass that Simpson had used to cut my foot. How long had I got? Where did I need to cut? Venous blood travels up the leg.

If I stood up the potassium chloride would take longer to reach my heart. I needed to stand up. I struggled to my knees and then to my feet. I wobbled but managed to stay upright.

I needed a cut at the top of my leg. I couldn't pull my trousers down because of the belt fastened around my thigh. I slashed at the fabric of my trousers with the broken piece of glass. The glass pierced the cloth and scratched my leg. I slashed again until a large area of skin was visible. I needed the biggest vein I could find. If only I had varicose veins. What's the longest vein called? I tried to think back to school. Biology with Miss Crawshaw. The longest vein in the human body is the saphenous vein. It runs up the inside of the thigh alongside the artery. What's that called. The femoral artery.

I felt dizzy and started to fall. I staggered off the road and onto the pavement. There was a doorway a few yards away. I almost fell into it. I stabbed the inside of my thigh with the broken bottle. Not hard enough. It had to be done. The potassium chloride was travelling up my leg. I could almost feel it coursing along my veins. I stabbed hard. I mustn't hit an artery. Arteries carry blood away from the heart; down the leg. Dark red blood poured out over the broken glass in my hand. How much blood could I afford to lose? How much does the body contain? Eight or ten pints? So how much is there in a leg? Two pints perhaps? What does two pints of blood look like?

I slid down the shop door and sat in a growing puddle of my own blood on the pavement. I felt very tired and wanted to sleep.

***

When I woke the blood I had lost had congealed and I found myself sitting in a warm, sticky, darkening mess. Woken by a throbbing pain in my left leg I opened my eyes and looked around. The sun was beginning to show itself above the horizon and I could see that the road I was on was bigger and busier than I had thought. As dawn broke so commuters preparing for a day's work in the city started to trundle along to somewhere. I didn't know where.

I wanted nothing more than to sleep. I wanted to curl up and to forget the world. I didn't want to think about my leg. I didn't want to think about dying.

And then I remembered Simpson. And I remembered Lizzie and Barbara. Instinctively, but hesitantly I put a hand on the left hand side of my chest. I could feel my heart still beating. I took as deep a breath as I could. I could feel some pain from my ribs but nothing else. Besides, pain meant that I was still alive.

I tried to move but couldn't. My left leg was numb. I wondered how long the tourniquet had been on. I peered down at my leg, wiped away some of the sticky blood with my hand and stared down at the wound I had made. It was rough and deep.

I knew I had to release the tourniquet to let some fresh, clean blood into the tissues. I would have to put some pressure on the wound to cut down the amount of bleeding. Already I felt faint and I knew that I couldn't afford to lose much more blood. I looked in my pockets for a handkerchief but couldn't find one. In the end I just put the palm of my right hand onto the wound in my thigh and then unfastened the belt that had been stopping the blood from getting through.

I felt the blood rush into my leg and couldn't stop myself screaming out with pain as the blood surged again into the tissues. I felt blood seeping out between my fingers and, looking down, saw blood escaping from the cut on my foot. After a few moments my leg began to feel close to normal again. I refastened the tourniquet but left it a little looser this time. With great difficulty I pulled myself up onto my feet. I knew I needed to get help fast. Clinging to the wall I edged out onto the pavement and stared out at the road.

The cars and lorries streamed past without slowing down. I waved feebly at them but they either did not see me or else, more likely, they simply chose to ignore me. Finally, exhausted and unable to stand any longer, I fell forwards onto the road.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Heraud stared right at me and squeezed the trigger of the automatic he was holding.

"Click."

He squeezed the trigger again.

"Click."

Angrily Heraud kept squeezing. "Click. Click. Click. Click."

The magazine was empty.

While Heraud reloaded I threw myself to one side in an attempt to escape. I felt someone gently but firmly hold me still. I could smell her perfume and I could hear her voice.

"It's all right!" she said, over and over again. "It's all right. It's all right."

I opened my eyes and looked around. Everything seemed white. The first thing I saw was the ceiling. That was white. The walls were white too. The sheets on the bed were white. The nurse was dressed in white. The nurse.

The nurse was holding me still and it was clearly taking all the effort she could raise to restrain me. She looked about eighteen. She had dark brown eyes, a round, almost child-like face, and large, soft looking lips.

"It's all right." she said again.

"Where am I?"

The nurse looked puzzled. "Ne comprends pas!" she said. "Parlez vous francais?"

"I'm sorry. Where am I?" I looked around. A half full plastic bag of blood hung upside down from a hook on a long metal stand that stood by the foot of my bed. The blood was connected to my arm via a length of plastic tubing.

"L'Hotel Dieu," replied the nurse. "You were brought here this morning."

"What time is it?"

I felt confused. I could remember Lizzie and Barbara. I could remember lying on the road. I could remember someone with a syringe.

The nurse looked at a small, cheap metal watch that was pinned upside down on the front of her uniform. She seemed frightened to let me go.

"It's all right," I said. "I won't move. You can let me go."

Slowly, cautiously, the nurse took her arms off my chest. "It's a quarter to three," she said.

I looked towards the windows. The sun was shining. Quarter to three in the afternoon.

"When was I brought here?"

"This morning."

I looked down. Several leads were attached to my chest. They were connected to a large grey metal box that stood on a grey metal cabinet by the side of my bed. There was a small screen on the front of the box and a green line constantly traced what I recognised as the electrical contractions of my heart. Every time my heart beat the metal box emitted a reassuring "click".

"Click. Click. Click."

"Do you know what happened?"

The nurse shook her head. "Are you sure you're going to be sensible?" she looked doubtful. "You won't move?"

I smiled at her.

"I'll get the doctor," said the nurse. She moved away from the bed, keeping her eyes on me for as long as she could. "I won't be a minute."

"OK." I said, still smiling at her.

Slowly images were returning to my mind. I could remember lying in a doorway. I could remember being bitten by a snake. I could remember jabbing myself with a piece of broken glass. I felt beads of sweat on my forehead as the memory came back. I felt the crisp, clean bed sheets constricting my chest. I could see Heraud now with the syringe in his hand. No snake.

"Hey! You promised!" The nurse was back. Gently, she held me still. She half turned, took a tissue from a box that lay on a small table behind her and wiped the sweat from my forehead.

"Hello!" said a tall man dressed in a white coat. "I'm going to give you an injection. It'll help you to relax."

I stared at him in horror. The doctor bending over me was holding a syringe. It was Dr Simpson. Where the hell was I? I must have been taken back to the nursing home. I shouted his name in terror and then screamed.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Slowly, I opened my eyes. The fluorescent light tube on the ceiling was humming. The curtains were drawn.

"Click. Click. Click."

That was the heart monitor. I knew that. I was in hospital. I was alive.

I looked to my left. The blood filled bag had gone and so had the plastic tubing in my arm. I turned to my right. No one. Where was the nurse?

I moved an arm. It felt fine. I moved my right leg. That felt fine. I moved my other arm. That felt fine too. There was just my left leg to try. I tried to move it and it felt fine. But I'd heard of people who'd had limbs amputated still thinking that their limbs were attached. I had to look at it. I lifted back the sheets. I was dressed in a white hospital nightshirt that ended just above my knees. Two normal looking legs poked out from beneath it. My left foot was heavily bandaged.

I reached down, picked up the hem of the nightshirt and slowly pulled it upwards. Another stretch of bandage appeared. I touched it. The leg was sore but it was still there.

"Hello!" said someone suddenly. "Just checking to see you haven't lost anything?"

I turned. A woman in her early thirties was standing in the doorway. She wore an unbuttoned white coat and had her hands stuffed in her coat pockets. A stethoscope hung around her neck. She was wearing a plain blue skirt that was a good six inches shorter than her white coat and a white blouse which was buttoned up to the neck. She had short blond hair cut in a page boy style and had sharp, piercing blue eyes that seemed to be laughing.

"Hello!" I said, hastily pulling my nightshirt down and pulling the sheets back up.

"It's all right!" said the woman doctor. "You needn't worry. You haven't got anything that I haven't already seen." She stepped into the room, took her hands out of her pockets and folded her arms across her chest. "I'm Dr Berland. I was on duty when you were brought in this morning. How are you feeling now?"

"Fine. And thank you."

"You had some very strange injuries."

I wondered what to tell her. Would she believe me?

"You seem to have been stabbed in the thigh with a piece of glass," said the doctor. "Were you in a fight?"

If I told her the truth she would want to tell the police. I didn't want that.

"I don't remember." I said. I was lying a lot these days. Now I was even doing it to doctors. "My mind is a blank."

"We cleaned up the wound as best we could," said Dr Berland. "We gave you a tetanus shot and some penicillin." She uncrossed her arms and put her hands back into her pockets.

I wanted to sleep again.

"You lost a lot of blood," said Dr Berland. "We had to give you three pints. You are a very healthy man. Very fit. Otherwise you would have died."

"I'm very grateful to you for all that you've done. Thank you."

"You also had two broken ribs," said Dr Berland. "We just strapped them up. There was no internal damage."

I felt my chest. I could feel the strapping underneath the nightshirt. I moved my shoulders and bent my arms. I felt weak.

"You were found on the road," said Dr Berland. "A lorry driver stopped and brought you in. He nearly ran over you. You were very lucky."

It was, I thought, about time I had a few lucky breaks. "Do you know what time it is now?" I asked her.

"Half past ten," said Dr Berland, without looking at her watch.

"When can I leave the hospital?"

"Maybe tomorrow. There isn't anything seriously wrong with you. I stitched the two cuts but I used dissolving stitches. They will disappear by themselves."

"There isn't anything wrong with my heart?"

Dr Berland shook her head. "No. Why? Should there be?" She looked puzzled for a moment. "I'll get the nurse to come and disconnect you from the monitor," she said. "It was just a precaution."

"Did I have any money on me when I was found?"

"A little. And some credit cards. They are in your bedside cabinet with your passport." Dr Berland nodded towards the cabinet on the far side of the bed.

They would have wanted my body to be identified.

"I'll need some clothes."

"You'll certainly need some new trousers. We had to throw yours away. They were beyond repair."

"Would it be possible for you to get some for me?"

"No. I can't go out shopping. I'm on duty. And even if I could I don't think that there would be any clothes shops open at this time of night - even in Paris."

"It's important that I leave the hospital tonight." I said.

"You should stay until tomorrow. Just a few hours ago you were so confused that you screamed when one of my colleagues approached. You kept calling him Dr Simpson. Who is Dr Simpson? Is he your normal doctor?"

"No." I paused. "As you said I must have been confused."

Dr Berland unfolded her arms, reached down and picked up my left wrist. Apparently satisfied with my pulse she nodded briskly, dropped my hand and turned away. Just before she reached the door she turned round. "If you remember what happened to you perhaps you'd be kind enough to let me know," she said. "I have an obligation to report incidents to the police if I think they should be involved."

After Dr Berland had disappeared I waited a quarter of an hour and then carefully folded back the bed sheets and swung my legs round to one side of the bed. I winced as I put my weight on my feet. The whole of my left leg seemed to throb with pain. I stood for a moment, feeling dizzy and rather nauseated, and then gingerly took a few steps towards the window. The pain in my leg was constant but just bearable.

I opened the bedside cabinet and removed my wallet and passport. Then, wearing only my hospital nightshirt I padded silently round the cold floor of the room until I was confident that I could walk without falling over. I tiptoed to the door and looked up and down the corridor outside.

Twenty five minutes later I walked out of the hospital wearing a cheap suit that was several sizes too small. I had bought it from a patient in a nearby room for an outrageous sum.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Crouched in the bushes a hundred yards away from the nursing home entrance I peered through the rain. Most of the nursing home was in darkness but two rooms to the right of the entrance were ablaze with light. I closed my eyes and tried to work out which rooms they were. The rain had long since soaked through my ill-fitting suit and I shivered uncontrollably. My leg was throbbing painfully and I felt faint with hunger. I couldn't remember when I had last eaten.

Cautiously, I moved to my left. I wanted to get into the building as far away as possible from the lights. Bent almost double I ran along behind a neatly clipped hedge. The rain, hammering down on the leaves of the horse chestnut trees above drowned the sound of my feet squelching on the wet grass.

The side of the nursing home was now in view. It was completely dark apart from a single light burning in an upstairs room. Downstairs every room seemed black. I came out from behind the hedge and moved forwards carefully, half scaring myself to death as I bumped into a small statue of a faun.

I brushed sodden hair back from my forehead and wiped my eyes with a soaking wet jacket sleeve. I blinked and moved forwards swiftly. Seconds later I was standing with my back to the wall of the nursing home.

There was no point in standing around in the rain any longer. I had to get inside. I turned towards the nearest window. It was an old fashioned sash window but three metal bars had been set into the stonework outside it. For a moment I was surprised. I hadn't remembered seeing any bars on the room Lizzie had been in. Then I remembered that the room where Barbara had been held prisoner had barred windows. From inside the metal bars had looked new and solid but a close examination showed that they were thinner than they looked. They were, however, far too strong to break or bend.

Tentatively, I reached between the bars and tried to push the bottom half of the sash window up. It didn't move. Without hesitating I took off my jacket and rolled it around my fist. Then I banged my sheathed fist against the glass. At the third attempt it broke. After waiting in silence for a minute or so I removed my hand from inside my coat and picked the remaining sharp pieces of glass from the window frame. I could feel my heart thumping; the noise it was making seemed loud enough to wake the whole of Paris.

"Barbara?" I called quietly.

There was no reply.

"Lizzie?"

Again, silence.

With impatience and frustration building up inside me I banged my fist against the stone wall of the nursing home. I felt tired. I was hungry. My leg was hurting. I didn't really know what I was doing there. I should have been back home looking for another job.

I moved away from the broken but impenetrable window. A dozen yards to the right I found another similar window. This time there were no bars. Again I wrapped my coat around my fist to break the glass. But this time I reached inside and unfastened the catch holding the sash in place.

I slid the window up a couple of feet. It creaked and stuck a little to start with but soon began to move more easily. When the gap was wide enough I pulled myself up onto the window sill and slid head first into the room on the other side.

Once inside I stood still for a moment, listening for any sounds that might suggest that my break in had been heard. But I could hear nothing other than my own heavy breathing and my own heart beating.

The door from the room into the corridor was unlocked and I slowly and tentatively opened it just far enough to see into the corridor.

It was as dark as the room had been and seemed quite deserted. I turned to my right and cautiously tip toed along to the next door. By now my eyes were more accustomed to the darkness. I opened the door and peered into the room. It contained nothing apart from an empty bed, a chair and a wardrobe.

How many rooms were there, I wondered. How many doors would I have to open to find Lizzie and Barbara.

Now that I was inside it seemed an impossible task. I had no idea where to look. Outside I'd felt sure that the room with the bars on the windows was the room where Barbara had been held. But how many rooms were there with windows with bars on?

Worse still, I was risking discovery every time I opened a door. Sooner or later I was bound to open a door to a room that was occupied by some nervous old lady who would scream the minute I poked my head around her door. Then the element of surprise - my only advantage - would be lost.

I decided to head straight for the front part of the building where I'd seen the bright lights. That was where Heraud's office was. With luck Heraud would be there.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Heraud was alone when I walked in. When he saw me he opened his mouth but said nothing. It would be an understatement to say that he looked surprised.

"Where are Barbara and Lizzie?" I asked him. I'd stopped dripping water but my soaked suit was now steaming.

Heraud said nothing.

"Michael Sunderland's wife and the woman I came here with," I said. "Where are they?"

"You should be dead." said Heraud, still stunned.

"So should you. But neither of us is. So, where are they?"

"Why the hell should I tell you anything?" demanded Heraud. I noticed that despite the air conditioning he was beginning to sweat.

I moved forwards a few feet. "Because if you don't I'll kill you." I was surprised to hear myself say it and even more surprised to realise that I might mean it. I felt cold and surprisingly calm inside.

Heraud started to move to his left, trying to get a little closer to the door. I moved to my right and cut him off.

"You can't get away a second time," said Heraud.

"You didn't think I'd get away the first time," I reminded him. I took two paces forward and gripped the front of Heraud's immaculate jacket in my right hand. I then lifted him upwards until he was standing on tip toe. I lowered my head an inch or two so that my eyes were almost on a level with his. "Where are they?" I asked him quietly.

"They've been moved," said Heraud, his face going slightly blue.

"Why would you have moved them? You all thought I was dead."

"You knew where the Sunderland woman was," Heraud pointed out. "You might have told someone." He struggled ineffectively. "I can't breathe!" he protested.

I ignored him "Where are they?"

"In another nursing home," said Heraud clawing at my hand with his fingers.

"Which one?"

"I don't know."

I pulled my left hand back a couple of feet and jabbed him sharply in the stomach. At the same time I let go of his jacket. He collapsed onto his knees, wheezing and gasping for breath.

"Where are they?" I asked him again.

"I don't know," wheezed Heraud, bent double. "Dr Simpson decided where to send them."

I hit him on the side of the head with the flat of my hand. "When did they leave?"

"Last night," said Heraud, sobbing. He rubbed at his stomach and then at his head. He looked up at me. I could see the tears on his cheeks. "A car came for them last night." Alone and frightened he had none of his normal superficial charm and arrogance.

I reached down, grasped hold of his left shoulder and pulled him to his feet. I put my hand around his throat.

"I don't know where they've gone," he said, terror in his eyes. I believed him. I didn't think he'd have the courage to lie to me. "Even if I knew where they'd gone it wouldn't do you any good."

I went cold. "What do you mean?" I started to squeeze my fingers around his throat. Heraud started to choke and clawed pointlessly at my hand. I squeezed harder. Heraud's eyes bulged. He waved a hand and tried to nod his head. I relaxed my grip a little.

"Simpson put them into the computer system," said Heraud. He started coughing and retching.

"What do you mean?"

"He had them both admitted as patients," said Heraud, rubbing his neck.

"Why?" I asked him.

Heraud didn't look as if he wanted to answer me. Again I hit him on the side of his head with the flat of my hand. I didn't object to hurting him and I didn't even feel ashamed of myself.

"We use the computer for our drug records," he said hoarsely.

"Go on."

"Dr Simpson can control the details of drug dosages from London," said Heraud. "He sometimes changes them for patients who've been signed up for annuities."

Like the one you wanted my mother to sign?"

Heraud looked terrified. He clearly wasn't a brave man. "He can increase the dosage instructions on the computer then, when the extra dose has been given he can change the records back again."

I remembered my conversation with the policeman. It wasn't surprising that he hadn't managed to find any evidence to convict Simpson.

"So there's never any evidence to prove that the drug dosages have been changed?"

Heraud nodded.

"Don't the nurses get suspicious?"

This time Heraud shook his head. "Deaths are so common among the elderly that no one notices."

I must have looked disbelieving.

"Nurses and doctors expect patients to die. But no one ever checks anyway. These are old people." Heraud shrugged. Sweat was pouring off him.

"There are no post mortems?"

He shook his head. "Everyone just assumes they died naturally."

"And Simpson and Lonsdale collect the annuity money?"

Heraud was trembling with fear.

"That's murder."

"They are all old people," said Heraud. "They would have died before long anyway."

"It's still murder."

"It was outside my control," said Heraud, pitifully. "I just did what I was told."

I felt neither contempt nor pity for this miserable man. "Is Simpson planning to kill Barbara and Lizzie the same way?" I said. "By using the computer to instruct nurses to give them drugs that will kill them?"

Heraud just looked at me. He didn't say anything but there was a wealth of meaning in the silence.

"I want to see their records." I told him.

"You can't!" said Heraud. He was on his knees. "They aren't registered here," he said. "We can only check on patients who are registered at this nursing home." He was sweating so much I believed him. "Simpson and Lonsdale are the only people who have access to all the computer records."

I stood still. I didn't know what to do next.

I was shaken by this uncertainty when Heraud, who had seen someone behind my back, suddenly threw himself forward and yelled out for help.

I turned my head just in time to see two men in white coats run into the room. I staggered backwards a few feet as Heraud's shoulder hit me in the stomach. Acting instinctively I made a fist with my right hand and brought it crashing down on the back of Heraud's head. He collapsed onto the floor, moaning but not moving. I turned swiftly and hit the leading white coat with a left hook. I then swung wildly at the second man and missed him by half a yard.

But the miss was good enough. Seeing his two colleagues on the floor the second white coat turned and started to edge back towards the door starting to shout for more help. I was too quick for him and before he had time to shout anything intelligible I had dived, tackled him and brought him down on the hard floor. He lay groaning and still. He didn't want to fight. He probably wasn't paid to fight. Not realising that real life fights never last as long as fights in the movies I was surprised.

I left Heraud's office and headed for the front door. Two minutes later I was running as fast as my bad leg would carry me down the long driveway.

I had to get back to London.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

I caught a fast suburban commuter train to the Charles de Gaulle airport and then caught a flight to Heathrow Airport just outside London. From the airport a tube ride and a taxi got me back to my flat by early morning.

After showering and changing into clean clothes I checked my answering machine while waiting for the kettle to boil. There were two messages from my wife wanting to know if I'd got a lawyer yet, one from a friend with news of a freelance job for a magazine, two inviting me to parties and one from Lindsay.

"Hello," she said. She introduced herself and gave the date and the time. Then there was a pause. "I very much enjoyed seeing you again," she said, slightly hesitantly. "On reflection I think it was a terrible place to meet. We should have met on neutral ground - somewhere where neither of us is known." There was another pause. "I would like to see you again," she said. "Seeing you brought back some very happy memories." There was another long, long pause.

She sounded shy, rather hesitant and more vulnerable. she sounded more like the Lindsay I used to know.

"If you like perhaps we could meet for lunch sometime? Perhaps you'd give me a call when you can?" Again there was another long pause. "If you'd like to, of course."

Then after another long pause the phone went down.

I turned the answering machine off, looked up Lindsay's number, picked up the phone and dialled.

Her crisp, professional voice answered. It was her answering machine.

I hesitated for a moment, opened my mouth to speak, panicked and slammed the receiver down.

I picked up the telephone again almost immediately and telephoned Michael Sunderland.

Another answering machine.

I looked at my watch. It was twenty past eleven. Michael would be in court. I wondered what time the court rose for lunch. I needed to speak to him quickly.

Downstairs in the underground garage there was another note tucked under the windscreen wipers of the Bentley. I pulled it out, glanced at the signature and threw it into the nearby rubbish bin without reading it. It seemed to be another strongly worded letter from the people who didn't like the length of my car.

The traffic was, as usual, horrendous. Baker Street was constipated and I turned left along Marylebone Road where the traffic was moving. I turned into Portland Place, drove past the British Broadcasting Corporation's radio studios and headed down Regent street towards Piccadilly Circus. Deciding to stick with traffic that was moving I turned up into Shaftsbury Avenue and then drove along New Oxford Street. I was heading for the Aldwych. When I got to The Strand the traffic was absolutely solid. There was nowhere to go and nowhere to park. I turned the steering wheel sharply to the left and pulled the Bentley up onto the pavement on the left hand side of the Aldwych. No one seemed to notice. The pedestrians simply circulated around the car. I locked it and ran towards the Old Bailey.

The guard at the entrance to the courts wasn't exactly helpful. I asked him to see if Terry Burnett, my contact at the court, could spare me a few minutes. He made the telephone call reluctantly.

"The court has risen but you can't see anyone on jury service," Burnett said emphatically. He looked even more miserable than ever.

"It's a vitally important personal matter," I explained. "I must speak to Michael Sunderland."

"I couldn't let you do that," insisted Burnett.

"Would you let me speak to him on the telephone?" I begged. "That can hardly interfere with the cause of justice can it?"

Burnett seemed totally disinterested.

"I'll pay for the call, of course." I assured him, producing a small wad of ten pound notes.

"I'll see what I can do," said Burnett, enlivened by the sight of the notes.

A few minutes later Burnett pointed me to a telephone. "You've got two minutes."

He didn't offer to move away.

"It's very personal," I said, taking the telephone receiver but holding a hand over the mouthpiece. "I'd be very grateful."

Burnett grumbled a little but moved away just out of earshot.

"Michael?"

"Yes. Who's that?"

"Me."

"Where are you?"

"London. I'm at the law courts but they won't let me in to talk to you."

"Where's Barbara? Is she with you? Have you seen her? Is she OK?"

"I think Barbara is still OK."

"Where is she? Where's Lizzie?"

"I don't know where either of them are. They've been moved."

"How did you get away?" asked Michael. "They sent me a photo of the three of you together."

"It's a long story," I said. "The important thing is that the jury mustn't make a decision too quickly."

"Why? What do you mean?" asked Michael. "I think I'm getting them round to my view."

"Slow it down. Just slow it down."

Michael was confused. "But Lonsdale wants us to find him not guilty."

"Sshhhh. Careful." I looked around, terrified in case anyone had heard him. No names."

"It's OK." said Michael. "There's no one listening at this end. Why do you want me to slow things down?"

"Because as long as there is some uncertainty about the outcome they'll want to keep their hold over you."

"You think that whatever happens they'll kill Barbara and Lizzie after the trial?"

"They might. It's a risk I don't want to take."

Burnett who'd been looking anxiously at his watch walked back towards me. "Times up!" he said. "Sorry."

"I'll speak to you this evening," I said to Michael. "Just try to keep things going for as long as you can. Keep the other jurors talking."

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

The Bentley was still parked where I'd left it but an unpatriotic policeman with no respect for doctors had stuck a large square of paper to the windscreen warning me not to try driving it away. A huge yellow Denver boot clamped to the offside front wheel made such an option impractical. A traffic warden was stationed close to the car, his arms folded and a very glum look on his face.

Deciding that the Bentley would be safe enough where it was, guarded and unstealable, I walked back along the Strand towards Trafalgar Square. I was fairly confident that Lonsdale wouldn't harm Barbara or Lizzie until the jury had announced their verdict. I was equally confident that the moment the verdict had been announced - whatever it was - then Barbara and Lizzie would both die of medical accidents. Assuming that Michael could delay the jury's decision by another three hours, thereby taking the trial into another day, I would have until sometime tomorrow to come up with a method of persuading Lonsdale to set the two women free.

Violence was my first thought.

As I walked along the Strand, past the Savoy and past Charing Cross Station, I had a vision of myself bursting into Lonsdale's offices, pinning him to the floor and forcing him to tell me where Barbara and Lizzie were being held. In this fanciful scenario I then saw myself flying to Frankfurt, Nice, Geneva or Barcelona and rescuing the two women like a knight on a white charger.

There was one enormous snag with this plan.

Assuming that I could get into Lonsdale's offices and overpower his guards and pin him to the floor and force him to give me the information I would then have to leave him while I flew off to perform the rescue.

What would Lonsdale do?

The moment I left the room he would telephone the nursing home in the city I was heading for and instruct them to kill Barbara and Lizzie immediately. He wouldn't even have to do that. He could just phone Simpson and get him to fix their computer controlled drug dosages. They would be dead long before I got to them.

And what if they were being held in separate nursing homes? I hadn't thought of that. What if Barbara was being held in Brussels and Lizzie was being held in Rome? It would take me over a day to rescue the two of them. Even assuming that I met no resistance in the two nursing homes.

The further I walked the more depressed I got.

To stop Lonsdale harming the two women I would have to make sure that he couldn't talk. And that would mean killing him. Tying him up wouldn't do - someone might find him and let him loose.

And even if I did kill him what about Simpson? If he found out that Lonsdale was dead he would guess what was happening. And he'd immediately arrange for the two women to be killed.

By the time I reached Trafalgar Square I was in despair.

I walked up towards Charing Cross Road. The sun, which had been shining for most of the morning, had gone in and the bleak, dark clouds matched my mood.

I was walking along Oxford Street in the direction of Oxford Circus when I passed a shop selling computers. That gave me an idea. I slipped into a nearby bookshop and consulted a couple of reference books. After half an hour a plan was beginning to develop. Half running now, despite my painful leg, I went down into the Oxford Circus underground station and caught the Piccadilly Line train out to Heathrow airport, grateful that I had brought my passport with me. From Heathrow I caught the next Swiss Air flight out to Zurich.

CHAPTER THIRTY

I got back to London that evening.

Michael Sunderland and the rest of the jury had been sent to a hotel for the night because they still hadn't managed to reach a verdict. I sat in my local pub and in his absence drank a toast to him. He'd spent several days persuading the rest of the jury to ignore the prosecution's evidence and come in with a "not guilty" verdict. Now I need him to keep stalling for time. We still needed a "not guilty" verdict - but not yet.

Now, it was up to me. I looked at my watch. It was nine forty five. I had maybe fifteen hours to turn the tables on Lonsdale and Simpson. I pushed my finished vegetable pie to one side and drank the remainder of the lemonade I'd ordered. The food in the pub was awful but I didn't want to spend the whole evening in my empty flat.

I planned to break into the nursing home at around one o'clock. I didn't dare go too soon because I needed the place to be fairly quiet. But I didn't dare go too late either because I had a lot of work to do.

I decided to go back to the flat, have a shower and get changed.

When I got in the red light on my answering machine was shining and a bright green number 1 told me that just one person had called while I'd been out. I rewound the tape and played back the call while I filled the kettle.

It was Lindsay.

"I didn't mean to ring you again," she said and then hesitated. "But I just wondered if you'd got my message." There was a longer pause. "I have thought about you a lot." There was another long pause. Then there was a `click' as she put the telephone down.

I rang her.

"I'm glad you called," she said. "I'm sorry about the other evening."

"I'm glad you called," I said. "I'd like to see you again."

"What are you doing now?" she asked. "Tonight?"

I looked at my watch. "I've got to go out in an hour or two."

"Can we meet?"

"Do you want to come round here?"

"I'd love to."

I gave her the address, said goodbye and put the phone down. Then I made a phone call to Zurich to change some of the arrangements I'd made that afternoon, had a shower and looked in vain for some clean clothes.

She arrived before I had time to dress and so I slipped my dressing gown on when I heard the doorbell go.

"I'm sorry about the mess," I apologised, waving a hand around the kitchen. "I've been a bit busy." I looked down at my dressing gown. "I've just had a shower."

She looked around and laughed.

"My wife took the best furniture. I've thrown the rest out." I explained.

"I'm sorry," she said.

I didn't want to talk about my wife. "You were married, weren't you?"

"It didn't work out." She pulled a face.

There was a long silence.

"But he kept most of the furniture," she said, and laughed.

"They should get together," I suggested. "They could open up a furniture store."

"I'm glad you rang," said Lindsay after another long silence.

"I'm glad you rang."

"What time do you have to go out?"

I looked at my watch. "Not just yet."

"Work?" she asked.

"Sort of."

We stood and looked at one another for a long time.

"Did I tell you I found some photos of you the other day?"

"I bet I looked terrible!" she laughed. "Embroidered jeans, tee shirt with a silly message, long straight hair."

"You looked lovely." I said then felt slightly uncomfortable. It had been a long time since I'd done any courting. "Would you like a drink?"

"Have you got any white wine?"

Sorry," I said. "I meant coffee, tea. I don't have anything alcoholic."

"Your wife took the booze cabinet?"

I grinned. "I don't drink much."

"Tea, please, then."

There was another long pause after I put the kettle on. I didn't know what to say. I didn't want to talk about the past. And we didn't yet have a present or a future to talk about. I knew her too well to make the sort of polite, small talk that one makes at parties. But I no longer knew her well enough for the silences to be entirely comfortable.

The kettle was behind her and to reach I had to move past her. I never got to it. I don't know who made the first move. It seemed as though we came together naturally and inevitably.

Her lips were as warm and as soft as I remembered them. Her perfume made me dizzy. Her body was fuller than I remembered and, if anything, more voluptuous. I pulled her to me and held her tight. She whispered my name and I could feel her trembling in my arms.

She whispered something in my ear.

I hadn't felt so good for a long time.

She put her hands behind my neck and pulled my head towards her. We kissed again and I crushed her soft body to me.

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

Lindsay was wrapped in my arms.

"I'm so glad I found you again," she murmured.

"Me too." I lowered my head and kissed her neck and then her shoulder.

"Do you have to go out? Can't you stay?"

I looked at my watch. It was half past eleven. "I have to go." I held her head and kissed her on the lips.

"How long will you be?"

"I don't know."

"Can I stay here and wait for you?"

"Yes." I held her tight. "Yes, please."

She seemed to understand that something was worrying me. She pulled back a little and frowned. "What's the matter?" she asked. She looked concerned. "Where have you got to go?"

I told her about Michael Sunderland. I told her about Lonsdale. I told her about Barbara. I told her about Lizzie. I told her about the nursing home in Paris. It was a relief to be able to talk to someone.

"So what are you going to do now?"

"I need to get at the computer that Simpson uses," I explained. "If I can't do something then they'll kill Michael Sunderland's wife and sister."

"What will you do when you've found out where they are?"

"Try to get them out, I suppose." I knew it wasn't going to be that easy.

"What sort of person is Lonsdale?" asked Lindsay.

"Greedy. Everything he does is for money. That's what drives him. A man I knew once said that the best way to control rich people is to threaten to turn them into poor people. So I'm going to use the computer to try to turn him into a poor person," I said. "It's my only hope."

Lindsay looked at me and frowned. "I don't understand."

"Lonsdale and Simpson rely on the computer to control just about everything relating to their nursing homes," I explained. "And Heraud in Paris told me that they use it to control all their financial affairs too."

Lindsay still looked puzzled.

"Computers are very vulnerable," I explained. "Worms, viruses, logic bombs, salami."

Lindsay laughed.

"A lot of the stories I wrote for the paper were about computer fraud," I told her.

"But what on earth is a worm?"

"It's a program designed to alter the way a computer system works, or to delete specific parts of the computer memory or to shut it down completely," I explained. "A good worm can cause chaos. One of the best worms was used by a computer programmer in Baltimore. He was promised a permanent position with a large bank if he successfully managed to develop a new financial package for them. One of their requirements was for an automated payroll program. He did so well," I continued, "that the company reneged on their promise and sacked him a couple of months after he'd finished the project. But exactly one month later the program he'd installed suddenly stopped working. And it didn't work again until the programmer had been reinstated. He'd put a code in the program which meant that the payroll program wouldn't work - and neither would anything else in the bank's computer - if his name disappeared from the list of company employees. The bank either had to get an entirely new system or else they had to rehire the programmer. It was cheaper to rehire the programmer."

Lindsay looked impressed."So what's a virus? How on earth can a virus affect a computer?"

"It's not the sort of virus you're thinking of," I told her. "In computer language a virus is a program that instructs the computer to summon up stored files. Then the virus copies itself out onto the software. The result is absolute chaos. Programs can be ruined."

"A logic bomb?"

"Putting a logic bomb into a computer is like lighting a time fuse. You can program software to self-destruct if the bomb isn't defused. Employees often put logic bombs into computer software to protect themselves."

"So a logic bomb is a bit like a worm?"

I nodded.

"And a salami...what on earth is a salami?"

"A programming technique designed to slice off small amounts of money without anyone noticing. The best and simplest "salamis" merely take the odd fractions off interest payments - and then put those fractions into the programmer's personal account. A programmer in Germany helped himself to more than a million deutschmarks in half pfennigs before anyone noticed what was happening. Individual clients of the bank where he worked never complained because they never expected to receive half a pfennig or a third of a pfennig in interest."

"How on earth can you steal more than a million deutschmarks in half pfennigs?"

"Easy. You can do it in a couple of months. If a bank has millions of customers and they all lose half a pfennig a day."

"I'm beginning to think that computers aren't quite as secure as they ought to be," said Lindsay.

I laughed. "Computers secure? Anyone who tells that information is secure when it's in a computer is either a fool or a crook."

"But don't the police come down strongly on people who fiddle information out of computers - or who use computers to steal money?"

I shook my head. "Most of the time the police don't even know. Banks don't like admitting that their computer systems are easy to get into so they take the losses and say nothing. And even when computer fraud is discovered it's never taken seriously."

"Oh, I can't believe that!" said Lindsay.

"The average bank robber in America gets $20,000. If he's caught he has a 90% chance of being prosecuted and if he is convicted he's likely to get at least 5 years in prison. The average computer fraudster gets $500,000, has a very low chance of being caught, has only 15% chance of being prosecuted if he is caught and even if he is prosecuted and convicted is likely to spend no more than 5 months in prison - and an "open - white collar" prison at that."

"To all that," I added, "you have to add the fact that the traditional bank robber will almost certainly have to give back the loot. The computer thief salts his money away in a special account in Switzerland within minutes of stealing it. He never even has to handle the cash."

"So, what are you going to use to get a hold over Lonsdale and Simpson?"

I shrugged. "I'm not sure yet."

Lindsay started to dress. "I'm coming with you," she said, pulling on her stockings.

"No, you're not!"

"I want to help." She adjusted her suspender belt and fastened a stocking to it.

I shook my head. "No!" I said firmly. I put my hands on her shoulders. "Thank you but no!"

"I want to help." She bent down to pick up her bra.

"They've already kidnapped another woman because of me," I said. "I should have never allowed Michael's sister to help me."

"I can look after myself," Lindsay said, fastening her bra.

"Not with these people you can't." I bent my head and kissed her. I held her head a few inches from mine. "Please!" I begged. "Stay here."

"But I want to help you."

"You can," I promised. "If I'm not back by eight tomorrow morning come round to Lonsdale's nursing home with a camera crew. Demand to see Lonsdale. Make a fuss."

She stared at me for a long time without saying anything. "I don't want to lose you again," she said softly.

"You won't," I promised. I paused. "There is one other thing you could do for me. I left my car parked in the Aldwych. It was clamped. You can't miss it."

Lindsay smiled and held out her hand. "Keys."

I found the keys and gave them to her.

"What sort is it?"

"An old Bentley. It's parked on the pavement opposite Bush House."

Lindsay looked impressed. "I've never driven a Bentley before," she said. "Where do I put it when I've liberated it?"

"There's an underground garage here."

"Is your life always this complicated?"

I grinned.

She was fully dressed now. She stood on tip toe and kissed me full on the lips.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

Lonsdale's London nursing home looked quiet and peaceful. I stood on the other side of the road for a few minutes and stared at it. A cab had dropped me off five minutes earlier.

Eventually, I had to make a move. Standing on the pavement wasn't going to change anything.

During my years as an investigative reporter I've learned that the best way to get into somewhere that you're not supposed to be is to march in confidently. If you walk in looking nervous or diffident then someone will pounce on you and throw you out. If you walk in looking as though you don't only own the place but are also planning wholesale redundancies then everyone will disappear into the woodwork and leave you well alone.

I marched into the nursing home, said "Good evening" to the uniformed guard on duty at the door and without hesitating turned left out of the reception area. The corridor I found myself in contained a number of doors marked "Administration", "Secretaries" and "Personnel". I chose the door marked "Secretaries" and tried the doorknob. It opened.

Inside the office I went straight to the nearest desk. I knew exactly what I was looking for. I found the list of telephone extension numbers taped onto the wall by the side of the desk. Lonsdale's extension was numbered 307.

I dialled 307, put the receiver down on the desk and slipped out into the corridor. I stood still for a few seconds, listening carefully to see if I could hear a telephone ringing. Nothing. I went to the end of the corridor, pushed open a heavy firedoor and climbed the emergency stairs to the first floor.

This floor turned out to be occupied by patients. I decided that Lonsdale's office was either going to be on the reception area on the ground floor or else on the top floor.

I decided to try the rest of the ground floor first. I didn't want to go back downstairs and cross the reception area in front of the duty guard so I walked the full length of the first floor corridor and then descended the emergency stairs at the other end. Less than a minute later I found myself in the right hand half of the ground floor corridor.

There was a telephone ringing behind the first door I came to. The door had no name on it; just a black and gold plastic sign saying "Private". Unless someone else was getting late night telephone calls this had to be Lonsdale's office.

I opened the door with a thin strip of celluloid that I took out of my jacket pocket. Burglars in films always use credit cards to open doors but these days credit cards are too thick, too inflexible and contain too much embossing. A man who's now serving five years for industrial espionage gave me that valuable piece of information and gave me the piece of celluloid to use.

I shut the door behind me and turned on the light. That was another useful trick I'd learned from the industrial espionage expert.

"Wander around at night with a torch and it looks suspicious," he'd said. "But if you turn on a main light no one is going to be suspicious. They'll just assume that either someone is working late or else some lazy sod has left a light on." Too late I wondered how he'd got caught if he'd been so damned clever.

I lifted Lonsdale's telephone and then put the receiver down on his desk so that it wouldn't keep on ringing. The computer terminal that I'd come to see was sitting in the middle of Lonsdale's expensive executive desk.

I sat down, leant forward and switched on the computer. Almost instantaneously the screen lit up. The single word "CODE" appeared in the middle of the screen.

I had known that in order to hack my way into the system I would need at least one code but that didn't worry as much as it perhaps should have done. Theoretically computer code words should provide an impenetrable barrier; they should protect the contents of a computer program from any unauthorised eyes. But, like all other aspects of computer technology, the weak link is always the human operator. Most people who have to create private and confidential code words for their computers either use words or collections of figures or letters that mean something to them - and then write their code words down and hide them somewhere.

I took from my jacket pocket the crumpled sheet of paper that contained the information I'd collected about Lonsdale and Simpson when I'd visited the Oxford Street bookshop.

For twenty minutes I tried everything I could think of that might prove to be the entry code to Lonsdale's computer. I tried his first name, his initials, his birthday, his astrological sign and every combination of these things that I could think of.

Nothing.

I decided to see if Lonsdale had written anything down. I opened the top drawer of his desk. It contained the usual collection of papers and stationery; old pens, a ruler, refill pages for a Filofax, a few envelopes addressed in a woman's handwriting and an old diary.

The diary, a pocket appointments diary for last year, looked most promising. I opened and found the section in which Lonsdale had listed telephone numbers of friends and acquaintances. And I struck gold.

At the bottom of the first page there were three numbers listed that were clearly not telephone numbers. Each consisted of just four numerals. Lonsdale had written a Christian name by the side of each of these numbers in an attempt to make the numbers look as though they were telephone numbers. His imagination had, however, not worked overtime. The name he had chosen were "Tom", "Dick" and "Harry". My guess was that two of these number codes were PIN numbers for bank cards. I was hoping that the third number code would be the entry to Lonsdale's computer.

It was "Harry" who opened up Lonsdale's business and financial world to me. It was "Harry" who betrayed him.

The programme that Lonsdale used to keep track of his empire was well written and easy to use.

First, I wanted to know that Barbara and Lizzie were still alive and well. I didn't believe that with the jury still "out" Lonsdale would have risked harming either of them. He would want to be able to carry on providing Michael with photographs and tapes of his wife.

I knew that neither Lonsdale nor Simpson would have been stupid enough to register Barbara or Lizzie under their real names but I knew the date on which they had both been moved from Paris and it didn't take me long to find them. All I had to do was to find women of approximately the right age who had been admitted on the right date and who weren't recorded as having any notifiable next of kin.

I traced one of them to a nursing home in Madrid and the other to a nursing home in Brussels. I wasn't sure which of them was where. Both had been admitted for general nursing care and both had been described as British holidaymakers who had collapsed while away from home. Neither of them had so far been prescribed any drug therapy. My guess was that the moment the trial was over Simpson would slip in a prescription for something common but potentially deadly and untraceable - an overdose of insulin or digoxin, for example. Then the drug instructions would be removed from the computer and if anyone ever proved that the women had been given drugs a nurse would be left to take the blame for just another regrettable "mistake". No one would be likely to spot a link between an accidental death in Brussels and an accidental death in Madrid.

I looked at my watch. I'd been in the London nursing home for just under an hour and I'd been in Lonsdale's office for fifty minutes. I thought of Barbara and Lizzie, lying frightened and alone in nursing home beds. I thought of Lindsay. She was probably home by now. My home. In bed. My bed. I tried not to think of her. I thought of Michael. He must be close to breaking point by now. I still had a lot to do.

I bent over the computer and went back to work.

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

The receptionist was busy with her nails. Her tongue peeped out between her lips as she concentrated. She finished painting the nail on the little finger of her left hand and held her hand at arms length to examine her work. She blew on the nails a couple of times and then shook her fingers gently. Satisfied, she carefully transferred the brush with which she was painting her nails from her right hand to her left hand. She gripped it tightly but carefully between her thumb and forefinger so as not to smudge the polish that she had already applied. Then she started on the nails of her right hand.

I stood and watched her. It took another two minutes. Long enough for her to paint each of the nails on her right hand. Then she carefully screwed the cap back on the bottle of bright red nail varnish that she'd been using, waved both hands in the air a few times and looked up. She was very good. She seemed genuinely surprised to see me standing there. She raised a neatly manicured eyebrow.

"I've come to see Dr Simpson."

The receptionist picked up the grey telephone in front of her and used a pencil to dial a three figure number. She held the telephone cautiously, taking care not to smudge her nails. It made her look as though she found the telephone offensive or distasteful in some way. She spoke for a moment, listened carefully and then dropped the telephone back down onto its rest.

"He's got someone with him," she said. "You'll have to wait." She nodded towards a pair of low, black, imitation leather chairs on the other side of the narrow reception area. A low glass topped coffee table stood in front of the two chairs. Upon it lay a pile of magazines.

I yawned and had to struggle hard to stay awake. I'd got back to my flat at just after 6.30 am. The keys to the Bentley had been on the kitchen table together with the receipt from the police. Lindsay had been fast asleep in bed. I had bent over her, moved her hair back off her face and kissed her forehead. She had looked beautiful and innocent.

Then I'd gone back into the kitchen and left a message on Michael's answering machine asking him to find two people who could fly out to Madrid and Brussels and wait for Barbara and Lizzie to be released.

"Your parents, Barbara's parents - it doesn't matter," I'd said. "Just get them to fly out there now. Get them to book into big, central, easy to find hotels and to ring me at home and let me know where they're staying. They can leave the numbers on my answering machine."

After that I'd gone to bed. But I hadn't slept.

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"Dr Simpson will see you now."

I looked up. The receptionist was smiling at me. At least she was trying to smile. Sadly, the effort merely made her look rather simple minded. She needed lessons from Lindsay. Lindsay had a wonderful smile. Lindsay had a wonderful everything.

I followed the receptionist's pointed finger and entered Simpson's office. It was lavishly and expensively furnished.

I hadn't seen Simpson in good light before and could only remember his voice from our previous encounters. He wore a plain, light grey three piece worsted suit with a pink shirt which had a fixed white collar. His tie was red and despite the waistcoat he wore a gold tie pin. A red handkerchief which matched the tie blossomed from his breast pocket. He had three inches of white cuffs showing and each cuff was fastened with embossed gold cufflinks. I got the impression that Simpson thought he looked elegant.

He looked startled when he saw me and his body language spoke volumes. He pushed his chair back so that he could get as far away from me as possible. He glanced nervously at the door as though wondering whether or not he could get past me and escape.

"I want you to release Barbara and Lizzie Sunderland," I said. I wanted to kill him. But I needed him alive so I smiled at him as I spoke. I read somewhere that if you smile at people they're much more inclined to like you.

Simpson laughed. A hollow, empty, frightened laugh.

"What on earth are you talking about?" he asked me, when he'd recovered his composure. It didn't take long. He wasn't a man who allowed himself to get carried away by emotion.

I looked at my watch. "The jury at the Old Bailey should be delivering their verdict soon," I said. "My information is that your friend Lonsdale stands a very good chance of being acquitted." I sat on the edge of his desk. "Would you do me a favour?" I asked him. "Just so that we can both save time?"

Simpson looked at me. He didn't look like a man who liked doing favours for people.

"It won't take you a moment," I assured him. "And it won't cost you anything."

"What?" he asked, suspiciously.

"Check your company bank balance."

Without saying anything Simpson played the computer keyboard in front of him. It's probably an exaggeration to say that he turned white. But he got pretty close to it. Then, when he'd gone about as white as seemed possible, his face rapidly began to regain its colour. Instead of stopping at pink it went straight through to red. He looked at me and then looked back at the computer screen. He opened a drawer in his desk and took out a foil strip containing a dozen red capsules. He pushed one of the capsules free from the foil, picked a glass of water up off his desk and swallowed the capsule.

"What sort of trick is this?"

"It isn't a trick," I assured him.

"I don't know what the hell you think you're doing," he said, "but you won't get away with it." He tried to look fierce but it was probably about as convincing as his "considerate and caring, bedside manner" look.

I just smiled at him.

"There's £25 million missing." He paused. "Do you know where it is? Have you stolen it?" He was getting quite belligerent now that he realised that money was involved.

"Maybe you should call the police."

He didn't seem very enthusiastic about that option.

"It hasn't been stolen," I told him. "I'm not a thief. It's just been moved."

"Where to? Where have you moved it?" He wasn't at all happy.

"It's very safe," I told him. "I'll tell you exactly where it is when Barbara and Lizzie Sunderland are safe."

Simpson stared at the computer screen. He hammered a few keys.

"You won't find it," I told him.

Simpson reached for a telephone. "I've got people who'll persuade you to tell me what you've done with it."

"You may have people who can hurt me or even kill me," I agreed. "But that won't help you a lot. No one can get at the money without information that only I have - and you need me in good health."

Simpson pulled his hand away from the telephone. "I'll talk to Jerry Lonsdale," he said. "I can't do anything without him. He'll arrange for Barbara and...," he paused. "What did you say her name was?"

"Lizzie."

"And Lizzie to be released." He spoke quietly as though afraid of being overheard. He seemed to think that I would trust him.

"I want them released now," I said.

"I can't do anything until I see Jerry."

"There's something else you should know," I said. "Ring the Suisse Credit International in Berne. Ask for a statement of what's in your personal account."

Simpson looked at me as if I'd gone mad. "I haven't got a bank account in Switzerland," he insisted.

"Ring them." I said. And I gave him the number of his personal, private account and the telephone number of the bank. A personal, private account he didn't know he had.

I waited while he rang the bank and then spoke to one of the Swiss cashiers. Then he slammed down the phone.

"What the hell have you done?" he demanded.

I didn't answer.

"What have you done?" he screamed. He was standing now.

"I wonder what Jerry will say when he finds out that all his money is in a private account in your name?"

I stood up and left him. On my way out I passed the receptionist. "When Mr Lonsdale comes in," I said, "would you give him a message?"

As I spoke to the receptionist Simpson rushed past me. I looked at my watch. "There's a plane to Zurich in ninety minutes," I told him. "You should just catch it. British Airways."

Simpson glowered at me. "I've got to go to Switzerland," he said to the receptionist. And ran out.

The receptionist watched him go and then turned back to me. "We're not expecting Mr Lonsdale in today," she said. "He's been away on business for a while."

"Oh, I think he'll be back today," I told her. "And when he comes in would you ask him to ring me?" I reached over, took a pen from the holder on her desk and scribbled my telephone number on the jotter pad in front of her. "He can reach me there," I told her.

"May I ask what it's about?" asked the receptionist.

"Just tell him that it's about his money."

The receptionist looked puzzled.

"Just ask Mr Lonsdale to check his company bank account," I told her. "And then if he wants to know where his money has gone get him to give me a ring."

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

Lindsay poured us both fresh mugs of coffee before she sat down.

"How long have you been a vegetarian?"

I shrugged. "I can't remember. A few years."

"Why?"

"Who wants to eat dead animals?"

She laughed.

I tasted the scrambled egg. It was perfect: light and frothy.

"I still don't understand," she said, sipping at her coffee. It was still too hot to drink. "What did you do with their money? How could you get into their bank account?"

I tasted one of the potato cakes. It was perfect; crisp on the outside and soft inside. "If you've got as much money as Lonsdale and Simpson you don't move your money around in sacks. You don't use armoured cars every time you want to adjust your investments. You don't even use cheques or bankers' drafts."

Lindsay put her mug down.

"Big companies move their money about electronically. Every day in London the Foreign Exchange markets transfer over $200 billion using a system called Electronic Fund Transfer."

"And Lonsdale is in that league?"

I nodded. "He has nursing homes in just about every country in Europe. That means that he has money coming in in God knows how many different currencies - and that's not counting the money he handles for the Las Vegas people who are laundering their spare cash. You can make - or lose - a fortune by making sure that your funds are in the right currency at the right time - or, just as important, not in the wrong currency at the wrong time."

"So how does Electronic whatever you call it work?"

"It's all done with satellites. The transactions are very fast and once they're completed there is no calling them back. The whole thing is done with computers, of course. It's a sort of grown up version of the sort of electronic transfer they're using in shops when you buy a packet of sugar in the supermarket and your bank account is debited instantly and automatically."

"And you've used the Electronic transfer system to steal all their money?"

"I haven't stolen it. I've just put it somewhere safe for a while so that I've got something to bargain with."

"But if it's that easy why isn't it happening all the time?"

"It is. Computer crime is the fastest growing industry in the world. It makes ordinary crime look what it is - cheap, crude and amateurish. Today's big crooks are heavily into computer theft. By the end of the 20th century bank robbers in masks will just be bits of history."

"It sounds absurdly easy."

"Once you have access to a company's main computer you can do almost anything," I pointed out.

"And Lonsdale and Simpson can't get at their money?"

"No."

"Isn't there a chance that they might manage to find out where you've put it? After all you found out where they'd hidden Barbara and Lizzie."

"They weren't expecting anyone to go looking for Barbara and Lizzie through the computer," I said. "Like a lot of people who use computers they assume that everyone else is still in the dark ages."

"How much of it have you hidden?"

"Every penny. £25 million from their company account."

"Wow!" Lindsay sucked in her breath.

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The two telephone calls I was waiting for came within five minutes of one another.

First came the call from Michael.

"Not guilty!" he said breathlessly. "We found him not guilty. Is there any news? What happens now?"

I could hear lots of noise in the background. "What's going on?"

"I'm in a pay phone in the lobby. The place is full of reporters. I tried to speak to Lonsdale but I couldn't."

"Where is he now?"

"He rushed off in a car."

"Go back to your flat," I told him. "Get there as fast as you can. There are some instructions on your answering machine. Do it. OK?"

"OK."

"I'll ring you and let you know what's happening. If it isn't me who calls it'll be someone called Lindsay. OK?"

"OK." said Michael.

"I'll have to go now," I told him. "I'm expecting a call from Lonsdale."

Michael started to ask more questions. I didn't blame him but I didn't have time to answer them.

"I'm sorry, Michael," I said. "Please go home. I must go." I put the telephone down.

Less than thirty seconds later it rang again.

"I have Mr Lonsdale for you," said a very feminine voice. It didn't sound like the receptionist at the nursing home but it could have been.

I waited. For a few seconds I listened to a few bars of something by Mozart. Then a gruff, very matter of fact voice came onto the line.

"Where have you put my money you little bastard?"

"It's safe."

"I want it back. Now."

"You can have it back when Michael Sunderland gets his wife and sister back."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Lonsdale instantly.

I put the phone down.

Lindsay looked at me in horror. "What's happened?" she asked. She spoke in a whisper.

I felt cold inside. But I smiled at her and held my hand suspended above the telephone, making it clear that I was waiting for it to ring. Lonsdale had to ring back. And I had to make him realise that I was serious. He had a reputation for being a tough negotiator.

The phone rang.

I let it ring ten times and then I picked it up. I was sweating heavily.

"Did you put the phone down on me?" shouted Lonsdale. "No one puts the phone down on me."

"You can have your money back when Michael Sunderland gets his wife and sister back," I repeated. "In good health."

There was a long, long silence.

"We'd better meet," he said at last. "Come to my office. You know where it is."

"No," I said. "We'll meet in the long room of the pavilion at Lord's," I told him. "In fifteen minutes time."

"What the hell...?"

"You're still a member of the M.C.C. aren't you?"

The M.C.C. - the Marylebone Cricket Club - is the most exclusive cricket club in the world. I'd seen that he was a member when I'd been checking his personal details in an attempt to find information that might help me find a key word or abbreviation for his computer code.

"Yes...but...!"

"I'm a member too," I said. "Middlesex and Surrey are playing. I'll meet you in the Long Room."

For the second time I put the telephone down on Jerry Lonsdale.

"What was all that about?" asked Lindsay. "Lord's is a cricket ground, isn't it?. Why there?"

"Because the pavilion will be crowded today," I explained. "It's a big London match. And I don't trust Lonsdale." I went through into the bedroom, opened my wardrobe and pulled out my sports jacket. "Besides," I went on, "the pavilion at Lord's is one of the most difficult places to get into in the country." I snatched a tie from the rack. Lord's is an old fashioned place and no one gets in unless they're wearing a jacket and tie. "Both Lonsdale and I are members," I explained. "But I doubt if any of his heavies are members - so he'll have to meet me alone!"

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

I didn't know whether Lonsdale would recognise me. But I knew I wouldn't have any difficulty in recognising him. I sat on one of the old fashioned high chairs in the Long Room and tried to look calmer than I felt.

There are three entrances to the Long Room. The one at the front leads directly onto the steps from the pavilion to the playing area. I didn't think he'd come that way. The two at each end of the back wall lead into the two entrance hallways.

Lonsdale burst through the right hand door less than five minutes after I'd arrived. He was wearing a charcoal grey three piece suit with a broad white stripe, a white shirt and a dark blue tie. His face was flushed and he was sweating slightly. He stood no more than six feet away from where I was sitting and looked around, his eyes restless.

"Looking for me?" I asked him quietly.

He glared at me.

"Let's go into the bar." The bar is one of the few places within the pavilion where talking is allowed. It would, I knew, be quiet but not empty. No bar at Lord's is ever empty when there is a match on.

I slid off my chair and led the way into the bar. Lonsdale followed me.

"Do you want a drink?" I asked him.

"I want my money!" he hissed. "What the hell's going on?"

"Your money is safe," I assured him. "Well, relatively safe."

"I know all about your fun and games," said Lonsdale. He moved so close that I could smell garlic on his breath. "If I lose so much as a quid you're dead." He waved a fist under my nose. Nearby, two members looked startled and moved away. I was glad I'd met him in the pavilion and not in his office.

Outside there was quiet applause. It sounded as though someone had probably scored a single.

"Have you noticed how you can tell what's going on by the applause?"

Lonsdale looked at me as if I'd gone mad.

"The level of the applause tells you everything," I said. "A blind fellow I know can keep score just by listening to the clapping."

Lonsdale just stared at me.

"Personally, I find it impossible to differentiate between the applause for a maiden over and the applause for a shot that gets two runs," I confessed.

"Forget the bloody cricketing anecdotes," snarled Lonsdale, sounding more like a cheap villain than an expensive one. "Where have you put my money?"

"You can have your money back," I promised him. "Just as soon as Barbara and Lizzie Sunderland are released."

Lonsdale pulled a damp. white handkerchief out of his trouser pocket and wiped his face. When he'd finished the handkerchief looked damper than ever but his face was still moist.

"What's any of this got to do with you?" Lonsdale asked. "You're a journalist aren't you?"

"I was."

"Oh yes. You were fired weren't you?" For the first time Lonsdale came close to smiling. I thought that he was probably the sort of person who only ever gets real pleasure out of other people's discomfort or bad fortune.

I nodded.

"How much is Sunderland paying you?"

"He's covering my expenses."

Lonsdale laughed. "You must be a good friend of his to go to all this trouble."

"I hardly know him."

"Then what the devil are you mixed up in this for?"

I shrugged. "Because he asked me to help."

"I'll pay you ten grand to tell me where you've put my money."

"Ten grand?"

"Cash," nodded Lonsdale. "And I'll forget how aggravating you've been."

"That's not very much."

"How much do you want?" he asked, sneering. He clearly felt more comfortable now that he thought we'd started haggling over money.

"I've told you what I want," I said. "Barbara and Lizzie Sunderland."

Lonsdale stared at me for a long moment and then walked across to the bar and ordered a large whisky. He didn't ask me if I wanted a drink. A few moments later he returned, sipping his drink.

"Can I trust them?" he asked me.

"Trust who to do what?" I knew who he meant. And I knew what he was worried about.

"Keep quiet," he said. "I don't like people talking about me. It makes me nervous." He took a large gulp out of the whisky and stared straight at me.

"I'm sure you can trust them," I assured him. "They'll want to forget all about this."

Lonsdale stared at me again. He seemed to be able to go for ever without blinking. "OK". He said at last. "You'd better be right."

"We can do it all from here," I said. "There are phones upstairs."

Lonsdale thought for a moment and then nodded. He emptied his glass and put it back on the bar. Then we walked up to the balcony.

"What now?" he asked.

"You ring and arrange for Barbara and Lizzie to be freed," I told him. "I'll give you the names of the hotels in Madrid and Brussels where I want them delivering."

"What about my money?"

"I'll tell you where it is when I know that Barbara and Lizzie are free."

Lonsdale stared at me. "Why should I trust you?"

"Because I'll never trust you so if we're going to do business it has to be this way."

Lonsdale actually grinned. "OK." He walked into one of the wooden cubicles, picked up a phone and started dialling. I went into the next cubicle, picked up the phone and started dialling too. First, I rang Michael Sunderland and told him what was happening. He told me the names of the hotels where Barbara and Lizzie were staying. I gave him my telephone number and told him to ring me the moment he heard that they were both safe. Then I told him that Lindsay would be calling at his flat.

"Have you still got some cash left from the sale of your car?"

"Yes."

When Lindsay arrived do what she says."

Silence.

"Promise?"

"OK."

I put the phone down and told Lonsdale the names of the two hotels. Then I rang Lindsay.

"Are you OK?" she asked, when she heard my voice. She sounded worried. It felt good. It was a long time since anyone had worried about me.

"Fine," I assured her. "I'm still at Lord's. I'll have to stay here for a while." Outside on the playing area something exciting had happened. The small crowd was being very noisy.

"Can I do anything to help?" she asked me.

"Call a taxi," I told her. "Go and get your passport and throw a few things into an overnight bag then go round to Michael Sunderland's flat." I gave her the address. "Get him to do the same. As soon as he's heard that Barbara and Lizzie are safe go straight to Heathrow and book yourselves onto a flight either to Madrid or Brussels. It doesn't matter where you go as long as you catch the earliest possible flight."

"Are you coming?"

"Later," I promised.

"We're presumably going to pick up Barbara and Lizzie?"

"Yes. When you've picked up one go and get the other."

"What about the people who are there with them now?"

"Thank them very much and ask them to come straight home."

"So Michael and I end up in Brussels or Madrid with both Barbara and Lizzie. What then?"

"Go to the nearest travel agency and book yourself a holiday for four. Michael should have enough money."

"Where to?"

I thought for a moment. I was sweating and worried in case Lonsdale could hear me. I wasn't even certain that he didn't have the flat phone bugged. "Somewhere that they sell strawberry ice cream."

There was silence and for a moment I thought that she didn't remember. Then I heard her laughing quietly and I and I knew that she did and I knew that it was all going to be all right.

"Where will you be?" she asked.

"I've got a few things to sort out. Then I'll join you."

"Please be careful."

"I will. Now go. Take care. And go quickly."

Lindsay blew me a kiss. "Please take care," she whispered.

"I will," I promised. I blew her a kiss back and then I put the telephone down.

CHAPTER THIRTY SIX

I wedged the telephone kiosk door open and Lonsdale and I sat on the balcony at Lords and waited for Michael to ring me back. Side by side but not together we watched the cricket. It was the third day of a championship match and the two sides seemed to have settled for a draw. Middlesex had scored 376 in a first innings which had lasted for the whole of the first day and part of the second day. Surrey had been dismissed for 175 in their first innings and were now 101 without loss in their second innings.

"I can't stand this bloody game," moaned Lonsdale impatiently looking at his watch for the umpteenth time. "When's this call of yours going to come through?"

"Why are you a member if you hate cricket?" I asked him, genuinely puzzled.

He looked at me as though trying to decide whether I was being facetious, naive and innocent or simply stupid. He must have decided that I was innocent for he waved a hand around the balcony, pointing indiscriminately to the other members, most of whom seemed to be half asleep. "Between them this lot run just about every bank, stock broking firm and other financial institution in the country."

I looked around. It was hard to believe but I suspected he was right.

"I've done more business here than anywhere else I can think of," he boasted. "People trust each other here. Bastards who wouldn't give me two minutes of their precious time if I tried to make an appointment to see them will do a deal with me here because I become one of them."

One of the Surrey batsmen hit the ball straight back over the bowler's head. The ball bounced a yard inside the boundary fence underneath us and the umpire signalled four runs to the scorers. The crowd clapped with politely restrained enthusiasm. An old man sitting a few yards away from us clapped without opening his eyes.

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It was two hours before I heard the telephone behind me ringing. Lonsdale, who could no longer sit still had been pacing up and down in the corridor alongside the telephones. He rushed forward to fetch me but I was already on my feet.

"They're both OK!" said Michael. He was crying as he talked. "I spoke to both of them."

"Good! Is Lindsay there?"

"Yes. She's got a taxi waiting downstairs. It's been there for nearly an hour."

"Great. Do what she says."

"Why can't Barbara and Lizzie just come back home?"

"Please!" I said. "Trust me. Do what Lindsay says. It isn't quite over yet." I paused. "Have you got money?"

"Yes."

"Good. Take it with you."

"OK. Lindsay wants to speak to you."

As I waited for Lindsay to come on the line I turned so that I could see out of the telephone box. Lonsdale was standing about a few feet away from me; his eyes were glued on my face and I guessed that he was trying to read my lips. I didn't mind.

"Are you all right?" It was Lindsay.

"Yes. You?"

"Yes. A pause. "Please take care."

"I will."

"Is there anything else I can do?"

"No."

"How long will you be?"

"I don't know. Not long."

She blew me a kiss. I blew her one back.

"Go!" I said. I didn't want her to go. I wanted to talk to her for ever. More than that I wanted to be with her. To hold her.

"All right." I heard her whisper. She said something else that I didn't catch and then she put the phone down.

I turned and pushed the booth door open.

"Well?" said Lonsdale.

"Your money is in Switzerland," I told him. "In an account at the Suisse Credit International in Berne."

"Number?"

I told him. "The account is in your partner's name." I said.

He just stared at me.

"Your partner. Simpson. The account is in his name."

Lonsdale looked at me disbelievingly.

"Ring them if you don't believe me," I suggested. I took a notebook out of my pocket, wrote a telephone number on a blank page, tore out the page and handed it to him. "That's the number of the bank in Berne. Just ask if a Dr Simpson has recently opened an account there."

Lonsdale looked at the number as though expecting it to do something.

"You'll have to get the code for Switzerland from the international operator," I said. "I've forgotten it."

Lonsdale rang the operator. Minutes later he was through to the bank in Berne.

"I'm a colleague of Dr Simpson," said Lonsdale. "I arranged to fly out and meet him at the branch that has his account but I can't remember whether he said it was Berne or Basle." He spoke in English, assuming that the bank's employee would understand him, and lied fluently. He gave them the number of Simpson's account.

I heard the person at the other end of the line ask Lonsdale to wait for a moment. Then, seconds later, he came back onto the line.

"Dr Simpson has an account here with us in Berne," said the voice in clipped and precise English.

"Thank you," said Lonsdale. He slammed the phone down and stormed out of the booth white with fury.

"What is going on?" he yelled. A couple of members twenty yards away turned and glared at us.

I shrugged.

"Are you and Simpson in this together?"

I didn't answer him directly. "Maybe he was worried about what would happen if the jury found against you this morning," I suggested. "Maybe he wanted to protect your money for you in case the police came looking for it."

"Where is he now?"

I shrugged. My shoulders were getting more exercise than they'd had for some time. "He said he was going to Switzerland."

Lonsdale moved forwards and grabbed my jacket by the lapels. He had to stand on tip toes to do it.

"You promised to return my money to me," he said.

"I promised to tell you where it was," I corrected him. "I've told you." Gently but firmly I prised his fingers off my jacket.

"I don't believe you," he said, stepping back a pace. "I don't believe you." He was filled with fury.

"If you don't believe me try ringing Simpson," I suggested. "See if he's there. Or ask his secretary where he's gone."

Lonsdale opened the door to the telephone booth he'd used before and dialled Simpson's number. Less than two minutes later he slammed the phone down. He pushed the door open violently with his foot and stepped out of the booth.

"The bastard!" he muttered, scowling. He looked at me. "Are you sure that you're not in this with him?"

I laughed at him. "Me?" I said. "Do a deal with Simpson? Do me a favour."

"The bloody receptionist says he went to Switzerland earlier this morning," said Lonsdale.

"When?"

"This morning. I don't know exactly when."

I looked at my watch. "Aren't you going after him?"

"What for?"

"If he takes the money out of Switzerland and goes to South America you'll never find him," I explained. "You can still buy an awful lot of obscurity for £25 million."

Lonsdale stabbed a finger on my chest. "You're coming with me."

"Why?" I asked, even though it had been what I'd expected.

"First," he said, mimicking the way I'd spoken to him earlier, "because I don't trust you an inch. And second because if you don't I'll make another call and organise some excitement in Brussels and Madrid." He glared at me.

I shrugged. "If you really want my company," I said. "Then of course I'll come."

For the first time I felt that I was beginning to control what was happening.

CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN

Lonsdale's chauffeur was waiting outside the main Grace Gates with his Rolls Royce Silver Spirit parked on double yellow lines.

"Heathrow," snarled Lonsdale climbing into the car. "Fast." I followed him into the car. He lifted a lid on the back seat arm rest and removed a telephone. He pressed one of the buttons on the phone. The telephone automatically dialled a number stored in its memory.

"Put Jeffrey on," said Lonsdale to the person who answered. He waited a few moments, impatiently tapping the fingers of his spare hand on his knee. "Jeffrey? Bring Jed and meet me at Heathrow."

After a pause someone, presumably Jeffrey, said something at the other end.

"How should I know? Whatever terminal handles the flights to Switzerland."

Jeffrey said something else.

"Get Diane to ring and fix up tickets for Berne for us."

Again Jeffrey said something that I didn't hear.

"No." said Lonsdale flatly. "Four. And I want them now." He slammed the phone down and glowered at me as though he blamed me for everything which was, I suppose, fair enough.

As we drove out of the tunnel and up the approach road to Heathrow airport Lonsdale's telephone rang. It was Jeffrey ringing to tell Lonsdale where he and Jed were. They must have driven fast to have beaten us to the airport. Lonsdale told his chauffeur to go to the same terminal.

We met them by the British Airways ticket counter. Jed was an inch or two taller than me which made him about six foot five and a good three stones heavier which made him around 250 pounds. He wore a loud checked suit and looked very like a large bookie. He was in his mid-thirties and judging by his nose and ears had either been a boxer at some stage in his career or else he had had a lot of unfortunate accidents. He stank of a particularly cheap and nasty aftershave. Jeffrey was a foot shorter and 100 pounds lighter. He wore a cream suit, tan shoes, a cream shirt and a plain green tie. He looked as though he spent a fortune at the hairdressers and was probably the first man I'd ever met who spent money having his nails manicured. He looked like a yuppie and I wasn't surprised to see that he was carrying a portable telephone and a black attache case.

"Keep an eye on him," said Lonsdale to Jed, nodding in my direction. "I don't want him going anywhere that I don't go."

Jed, who didn't look too bright, nodded and turned so that he could keep both eyes on me. I smiled back at him. I'd seen bigger, harder looking men but they'd all been carved out of stone and standing on plinths.

"Problem with the tickets," said Jeffrey apologetically. "No one seems to fly direct to Berne."

Lonsdale glowered at him as though it was his fault.

"But don't worry!" said Jeffrey, holding up a calming hand. "Diane got us four business class tickets into Zurich and I've arranged for a limo to meet us at the airport. It's only an hour or so away."

Lonsdale grunted.

"We've got to go straight through," said Jeffrey. "The plane is already boarding."

"He's good isn't he?" I said to Lonsdale, nodding towards Jeffrey. "Does he take dictation?"

"He's got better prospects than you have," growled Lonsdale. Jed moved a little closer and I caught a strong whiff of his after shave. It made me feel nauseated. Body odour would have been better.

The four of us were moving rapidly towards the customs barrier when I caught sight of Lindsay and Michael. Lindsay was holding Michael's arm and pointing in my direction.

I raised my hand to my face and brushed a few strands of hair out of my eyes. Then, having made sure that none of my three companions was watching me I held a finger to my lips.

Lindsay looked worried and I was frightened that she was going to do or say something.

I tapped my finger against my lips and nodded slightly to try and tell her that everything was all right.

I saw Michael lean close to Lindsay to tell her something. I guessed that he was probably telling her who Lonsdale was.

Desperate that one of them would say something I turned as we started to go through the customs barrier and tried to push Jed ahead of me. He wasn't having that. He didn't want to go anywhere ahead of me. I laughed and punched him lightly on the arm and then moved ahead of him. I wanted Lindsay and Michael to realise that I was travelling of my own free will. I desperately wanted them to get Barbara and Lizzie off to somewhere safe before Lonsdale stopped worrying about his money for long enough to start thinking about revenge. I reckoned it was going to take Lindsay and Michael at least twelve hours - and probably twenty four - to get Lizzie and Barbara together and to then fly off to their package holiday in the sun.

Both Lindsay and Michael looked worried but they both did what I wanted them to do: nothing. Michael buried his face in a magazine and Lindsay peered over his shoulder and feigned interest in whatever it was that he was studying.

The flight to Zurich was uneventful and the fact that it could not be described as comfortable was hardly the airline's fault. It was Lonsdale who insisted that I sat next to Jed and we spent most of the journey fighting for possession of the arm rest between our seats. He wanted it because he was so huge that he needed the space. I wanted it because he wanted it and I didn't want him to feel that he could just push me around easily. I didn't know what was likely to happen in Berne but I did know that if, when the time came for action, he hesitated for just a second then it would be to my advantage.

At Zurich airport the limousine was waiting just as Jeffrey had promised. I got the impression that when Jeffrey said he would do something he did it and guessed that was probably what Lonsdale liked. The chauffeur who came with the limousine handed Jeffrey a packet which Jeffrey put into his briefcase.

CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT

The Berne branch of Suisse Credit International is on the Bahnofstrasse, no more than two hundred yards from the railway station.

Like most Swiss banks the emphasis there is all on subtlety and discretion rather than grandeur and show. The entrance to the bank consists of a single rather ordinary looking doorway and the only outside sign of the bank's existence is a highly polished brass plate with the bank's initials on it. If you didn't know there was a bank there and you weren't looking for it you'd never find it.

Inside, the emphasis on discretion became even more obvious. Here the two words that sprang to mind were "secrecy" and "paranoia". There was still no sign that this was a bank. You could have been entering offices occupied by a lawyer or an accountant. The only thing you could tell from the foyer and the reception area was that somewhere, hidden deep behind the oak panelling, there was a lot of money.

Sitting behind a desk the size of as a snooker table sat a young man in a dark blue suit. He looked anonymous and had features that made him virtually impossible to describe. Around him the panelling seemed to be uninterrupted until you examined it closely and realised that there were three or four brass door handles fixed into it. A large potted fern sprouted from a dark blue jardiniere to his left. On the young man's right stood an alert and youthful looking guard in a very dark blue uniform. The guard stood virtually to attention and his unbuttoned jacket revealed a shiny black leather holster with the matt black butt of a revolver peeping from it. My first thought on seeing him was that the unbuttoned jacket gave him a rather slovenly look. My second thought was that the jacket was unbuttoned so that we could see the gun and so that he could reach it.

Lonsdale, followed by Jeffrey, Jed and I, approached the desk.

Lonsdale introduced himself, took a thin leather wallet out of his inside jacket pocket, removed a large, engraved visiting card and handed it to the man behind the desk. He treated the young man in the blue suit to one of his rare smiles.

"What can I do for you, sir?"

"I have an appointment to meet a Dr Simpson here," said Lonsdale. "He's a colleague of mine and a customer of yours."

"Just one moment, sir," said the man in the blue suit. He spoke in perfect English. "Would you be kind enough to take a seat while I speak to someone who will be able to help you?" He lifted an arm and waved in the direction of a large, brown leather sofa that stretched against most of the oak panelling behind us. He picked up the single telephone on his desk, dialled a single digit number and spoke swiftly in Swiss-German, the special language that the Swiss keep to themselves and use when they don't want foreigners to understand what they're talking about.

Lonsdale and Jeffrey sat down on the sofa. Jed stood at one end and glared at the armed guards. After standing for a moment or two I sat down beside Lonsdale. Jeffrey took an international business magazine out of his briefcase and started to read it.

After a minute or two a slight but imposing man in his late sixties came out through one of the doors behind the reception desk. He walked over towards us, peered over half-moon spectacles with thin gold frames and spoke to Lonsdale as if he knew who he was. I guessed that there would be closed circuit television cameras hidden somewhere in the panelling.

"My name is Ulrich," he said. "I'm the bank's Vice President and Director of Services." He bowed very slightly after introducing himself. "I'm afraid that Dr Simpson isn't here at the moment," he apologised. "May I ask if there is anything that I or the bank can help you with?" He held his head to one side when he'd finished speaking.

"Have you seen Dr Simpson recently?" Lonsdale asked.

"Well, that's a difficult question to answer," said Ulrich, clasping his hands in front of him unhappily. He looked as though he was about to start wringing them.

"I don't understand," said Lonsdale.

"A Dr Simpson did come into the bank this morning," said Ulrich. He paused for a moment and swallowed. His adam's apple bobbed up and down furiously. "But...," he paused again apparently uncertain about what to say next. He started wringing his hands. "But it wasn't the right Dr Simpson."

Lonsdale stared at him, looked at me and then turned and looked at Jeffrey. Then he turned back to Ulrich. "What do you mean?" he demanded. "What do you mean, it wasn't the right Dr Simpson?"

Ulrich, busy wringing his hands, seemed desperately upset by all this. A few beads of sweat appeared on his forehead and his adams apple shot up and down several times.

"All our private clients are offered the option of having their accounts ratified with a finger print facility," said Ulrich.

Lonsdale looked puzzled. He turned to Jeffrey. "What does he mean?"

Jeffrey licked his lips. "He means that you can use your finger prints instead of your signature to get access to the account."

"That's right," nodded Ulrich. "It's a security measure that many of our clients find very welcome in these days of...," he stopped for a moment as though in search of the right word.

"Fraud?" suggested Jeffrey.

Ulrich looked uncomfortable. "I suppose so," he agreed. "Fraud." He spat the word out as though it made him ill to have it in his mouth.

"And you had a fake Dr Simpson in here this morning?" demanded Lonsdale.

Ulrich nodded. "A gentleman did attempt to remove money from Dr Simpson's account," he agreed. "But," he added quickly, "he went away when his fingerprints did not prove to match those registered with the account. He was a fake Dr Simpson."

"Where did he go?" asked Lonsdale.

"I do not know," answered Ulrich.

Lonsdale stormed out of the bank. We all followed him.

***

Lonsdale and I sat in a bar together while Jeffrey made telephone calls. Lonsdale had left Jed standing outside the bank in case Dr Simpson turned up. Jeffrey seemed to know a lot of people. After three quarters of an hour he came over to where we were all sitting.

"The real Dr Simpson is here in Berne," he said. He seemed rather pleased with himself. "He's registered at The Intercontinental hotel. It's only about two hundred yards away."

Lonsdale, Jeffrey and I left the bar, climbed into the limousine that was waiting outside and drove the few yards down the road to The Intercontinental hotel. As the car moved away I looked at my watch. I wondered where Michael and Lindsay had got to and how much longer it would be before they were all safely hidden away.

CHAPTER THIRTY NINE

Simpson was in the lounge of the Grand Hotel with a large gin on the table in front of him. To say that he seemed surprised by Lonsdale's arrival would be an understatement.

"What are you doing here?" he blurted out.

Lonsdale glared at him.

Simpson opened his mouth but nothing came out. He shut it again.

"I've got a quiet room on the top floor," said Jeffrey suddenly appearing by Lonsdale's side. He had a bedroom key in his hand.

Lonsdale still didn't speak. He just stared at Simpson and jerked his head.

"Jerry?" bleated Simpson pitifully. Then, for the first time Simpson saw me standing a couple of yards back. "What's he doing here?" he demanded. "It's all his fault!' he said.

Lonsdale moved forwards and put a hand under Simpson's arm. He lifted him to his feet and then half pushed and half pulled him to the bank of elevators on the other side of the lounge.

With the four of us in it the elevator was crowded and I could smell Simpson's fear.

"Do you want me to go and get Jed?" Jeffrey asked.

Lonsdale shook his head. "I don't need him for this scum," he said. Those were still the only words he'd uttered since we'd entered the hotel.

The room that Jeffrey had rented was spacious and beautifully furnished. But Jeffrey hadn't booked it so that any of us could relax. As soon as we were all inside Lonsdale locked the door from the inside.

"I suppose you thought I was going to get put away for a long time," Lonsdale said to Simpson. Then, suddenly and without warning he slapped the doctor's face. Simpson seemed stunned by surprise as much as by pain.

"Jerry!" he persisted. "Jerry, let's talk. I didn't open the account. It wasn't anything to do with me."

"What is there to talk about?" asked Lonsdale through tight lips. He hit Simpson again, this time with the back of his hand. The heavy signet ring that he wore cut Simpson's cheek and left him splattered with blood. "Except the money," he added.

"I only came to get the money," said Simpson. "Our money." He tried to add something. "I couldn't...," he started to say. But Lonsdale wasn't in the mood for listening. He hit Simpson again but this time he hit him with his clenched fist. Simpson's head rocked backwards and he lost his balance and fell heavily onto the floor. He lay there, unmoving. His breathing had become loud and laboured.

"Get up!" snarled Lonsdale, kicking his partner in the stomach.

Simpson's body jerked involuntarily and he seemed to be trying to stand up. Then suddenly he lurched forwards, clutching at his chest. His breathing became more difficult, he started to sweat and his skin turned grey. Then he fell forwards onto his face. I found it impossible to feel pity for him. This time he didn't move any more.

Lonsdale bent down and tried to lift him but the doctor had become a dead weight.

"Oh, shit." murmured Jeffrey, quietly and almost inaudibly. He bent down and lifted Simpson's head. "You've killed him!" He picked up one of Simpson's hands. "£25 million in the bank and without his finger prints you can't get a penny of it."

Lonsdale's face drained of colour.

"You knew he had high blood pressure," observed Jeffrey. It may have been meant as a simple statement of fact but it was the first time I'd heard Jeffrey say anything remotely critical to Lonsdale.

Shocked, Lonsdale sat down on the edge of the bed.

Jeffrey stood up and moved away from the body. He scratched his forehead. He seemed to be trying to decide what to do next.

"Maybe we could cut a finger off and take it in with us...," said Lonsdale.

"Great idea," said Jeffrey, sarcastically. "I'm sure the bank would love that."

Lonsdale put his head in his hands. He stayed like that for what seemed to be an hour or two. It was probably a minute. Maybe two minutes. Then, slowly, he moved. "What name did you book this room under?" Lonsdale asked suddenly.

Jeffrey looked at him. "Yours." he said. He looked down at Simpson's body again. "I didn't think anything..." His voice faded and he shrugged.

Lonsdale swore repeatedly. "If you'd used another name we could have just walked out of here and left him."

"If you hadn't hit him so hard he wouldn't be dead," countered Jeffrey.

Neither of them seemed to be aware that I was still in the room. Slowly, I started to move towards the door.

Lonsdale looked up and saw me moving. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I thought I'd go and see the sights," I said. "I've never been to Berne before."

"You're staying here," screamed Lonsdale. He lunged at me. He wasn't a muscle man and I pushed him aside easily. I'd have been more worried if Jed had been in the room. But Jed was still standing outside the bank down the road.

Lonsdale tried to grab my arm but he was like a kid fighting in the playground. I jabbed him in the chest. He stood there for a moment coughing and spluttering. Jeffrey hadn't moved.

"What's the point of staying here?" I asked. "You've got enough problems without worrying about me." I nodded towards Simpson lying on the floor. "You've got to do something about Simpson's body and you can't get the money out of the bank because Simpson is dead."

Lonsdale looked to Jeffrey for help.

"He's right," nodded Jeffrey, who seemed remarkably calm. "He's just a bloody nuisance now." He put his hand into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small automatic.

"Where the hell did you get that from?" demanded Lonsdale, surprised.

"The chauffeur," explained Jeffrey. Then he shot Lonsdale through the heart. The gun made a quiet "phut".

I stared disbelievingly.

"What a mess," said Jeffrey quietly. "What a terrible, bloody mess."

I just stood there and stared, first at him, then at Lonsdale, then at Simpson.

Jeffrey didn't seem concerned. He wiped the automatic and then crossed the room and carefully pressed the gun into Simpson's right hand.

I watched.

"Simple really," he said. "The two of them had a row. Simpson shot him," he nodded at Lonsdale, "and then in all the excitement had a heart attack and died."

I didn't say anything.

"You're the only loose end," he said. "What do I do with you?"

"Why do anything with me? I'm not going to talk to anyone."

Jeffrey thought for a moment.

"If you kill me the scenario gets screwed up a bit," I argued. "These two are business partners but what am I doing here?"

Jeffrey nodded slowly.

"And if you take me with you I'll be a real drag," I went on. I paused. "Even if you could take me with you," I added with what I hoped was a smile.

Jeffrey just stared.

"If you worked for Lonsdale why did you kill him?"

"I didn't work for Lonsdale," Jeffrey said. He looked offended. "I work for people in the States. My people have been using Lonsdale's nursing homes as an investment."

"Ah! You're in the laundry business!"

Jeffrey didn't answer. "They won't be pleased to hear that Lonsdale screwed up," he said. "It was a good operation." He looked at me sharply. "I don't suppose you have any idea who the fake Dr Simpson was?"

I shook my head. "What about £25 million?" I asked. "They won't like losing all that money will they?"

He nodded towards the two bodies on the floor. "That was their money," he said. "My bosses wouldn't let jerks like Lonsdale and Simpson control the organisation's cash." He shrugged and stared down at Simpson. "Pity," he said. He nodded towards Simpson. "He was the only guy who could get the damned money out and I can hardly drag him into the bank to use his fingerprints can I?" He looked rueful. "Pity," he said again.

I said nothing and kept still.

Jeffrey stared at me. "You're not going to talk, are you?"

I shook my head.

Jeffrey stared at me. "Then piss off. I'll give you five minutes then I'm off too. You leave by the front door. I'm going out by the back."

I strode across to the room door, turned the key and paused with my hand on the doorknob. "One thing," I said, "I don't know how good the Swiss police are but Simpson was left handed." I nodded towards the gun. "One good turn and all that."

Jeffrey stared at me and then nodded. For a few seconds I thought he was going to smile but he didn't. "Thanks!" was all he said. The last thing I saw as I left the room was him bending down and moving the gun from Simpson's right hand to his left.

I thought it was nice of him to trust me and then I left. On the train back to Zurich I wondered how long Jed would wait outside the bank.

CHAPTER FORTY

I stood for a few moments just staring out of the bedroom window. Even though it was still not seven o'clock I had to use my hand to shade my eyes from the early morning sun. Just below my window half a dozen visitors were already sitting having breakfast at the white metal tables set out in the tiny courtyard. Half a dozen wizened olive trees provided a little shade.

One side of the courtyard was bordered by a low, white stone wall and beyond that I could see the sea crashing against the rocky shore. There was no wind and as they collapsed upon the rocks the waves seemed exhausted by their journey around the Mediterranean.

I was about to get dressed when I remembered that the only clothes I'd brought with me were the ones I'd been wearing. I went into the bathroom and found a white towelling bathrobe hanging behind the door. I put it on and went downstairs to the reception desk.

The hotel shop wasn't yet open but the receptionist found the key and let me choose a pair of shorts, a pair of simple, canvas sandals and a pair of sunglasses. I paid by credit card and then went back up to my room to dress.

I breakfasted on fresh orange juice, newly baked rolls and two soft boiled eggs then I wandered down a flight of weathered stone steps to the beach. There I jammed myself in between two rocks from where I could see both the sea and the entrance to the hotel. I half closed my eyes and allowed myself to daydream.

Lindsay took centre stage in my daydream and I could remember our delight when we had first found this small hotel. It had been even smaller then; no annexe, no restaurant, no shop. And much cheaper. But the sun was the same, the sea was the same and the beach was unchanged.

We had been travelling around Europe for three weeks. We had started in France, worked our way down through Italy and travelled across to the Greek mainland by steamer. From there we had taken a small ferry to the first of the Greek islands. The island of Cos had been the fifth island we had visited and we had loved it so much that we had stayed there until it was time to go back home. They were happy days. Mornings spent swimming in the clear, blue waters around the island. Afternoons spent lying around talking, reading and soaking up the sun. Evenings spent eating, drinking and dancing.

After a week we'd come perilously close to running out of money and had thought we would have to start hitching our way back home.

But a fellow called Dimitrios, who ran the local cafe, heard of our cash flow problems and offered us both part time jobs. He had bought an old refrigerator and a few gallons of ice cream and wanted us to set up an ice cream stall outside the cafe. The idea was that we would take it in turns to run the stall but we didn't want to be separated so we worked together for a few hours every day.

The tubs in which the ice cream came were marked with a dozen different labels and should have contained Pistachio, Coffee, Chocolate, Peach, Raspberry and Lime flavours. But somewhere along the line someone had messed up the labelling and all we had was strawberry ice cream. It didn't seem to matter. No one seemed to care. People who wanted ice cream didn't seem to mind what flavour they got.

We finally left the island and we both cried when we parted at Gatwick airport. We both had to go back to our respective universities but we swore that we would see one another as much as possible. I don't remember what went wrong. We both got involved in our studies and had less and less time for travelling. Slowly, we drifted apart.

I heard a taxi screech to a halt and looked up towards the hotel. Four weary visitors clambered out of the dust cloud. I recognised them at once. They stood still for a moment while the taxi driver opened the boot of the car and removed their bags. Running up from the beach I waved and called Lindsay's name.

Moments later we were wrapped in one another's arms.

CHAPTER FORTY ONE

The five of us were sitting on rocks by the water's edge. Lizzie was dangling her feet in the water. Barbara and Michael were sitting holding hands. Lindsay and I were sharing a strawberry ice cream which we'd bought from a boy who was operating an ice cream truck parked a hundred yards from the beach. I had explained to them all exactly what had happened. I thought they had a right to know.

"It sounds a terrible thing to say," said Michael, "but I'm glad they're both dead."

"It's not a terrible thing to say," said Lizzie, kicking her feet in the water. "They were both horrible."

"And if they hadn't died then they would have probably carried on with business as usual!" Barbara pointed out. "I don't think any of us could have lived with that."

Michael shook his head.

Lindsay held the ice cream cornet up high and allowed a few drops of pink ice cream to drip into her mouth. She pressed her lips against its coolness and closed her eyes.

"I guess we can go back to London whenever we like now?" said Lizzie, half turning.

"Yes." I nodded. "I got Lindsay to bring you here because I didn't know what Lonsdale would do. I wanted you somewhere safe."

Lindsay fed me the remains of her ice cream cone. Then she dipped her sticky fingers into the sea and washed them.

"It's lovely and warm," she said. Suddenly, without warning, she stood up and dived off the rock on which we had been sitting. She disappeared into the warm waters of the Mediterranean with hardly a ripple. As she surfaced she shook her head and rubbed at her eyes with her fingers. She had been wearing a thin, white cotton dress when she dived in. She trod water for a while as she unfastened the buttons at the back. Then she dived and wriggled and a few moments later held up the dress. Taking careful aim she threw it straight at me. I ducked to one side and it landed on the rock behind me. "Come on in!" she shouted.

I took off my sandals, then took the wallet out of my shorts pocket and put it alongside them. Then I dived in.

"Race you!" shouted Lindsay. She was already swimming towards the other side of the small bay.

I beat her by a length, pulled myself out of the water, waved to Michael, Barbara and Lizzie and then helped pull Lindsay out of the water so that she could sit on the rock beside me.

"It's wonderful to be back," Lindsay said quietly. She slipped her arm around me and kissed me on the cheek.

I put my arm around her and kissed her.

"Is it all over now?" she asked.

"Yes. The people who were funding Lonsdale won't make a fuss. They want it all to die down as soon as possible. Someone will buy the nursing homes."

There was a silence. "Can I ask you something?" asked Lindsay.

"Of course!" I said. "But I want to ask you something too." I warned her.

"Who was the other Dr Simpson?" Lindsay asked. "Who was the man who called at the bank and tried to get at Simpson's money. I don't understand that."

I grinned at her. "There wasn't anyone else," I told her. "The man who called at the bank was Dr Simpson."

Lindsay looked puzzled. "I don't understand," she said. "If it was him why didn't his finger prints match? Why couldn't he get the money out"

"Because I set up the account," I explained. "The account can only be operated with my finger prints."

Lindsay stared at me.

"I flew out to Zurich," I told her. "I opened an account in Zurich under the name of Dr Simpson. Then I transferred the money to Berne by telephone so that no one at the bank would be able to recognise me."

Lindsay looked puzzled.

"I wanted three things," I explained. "First, I wanted to hide their money somewhere that they couldn't get hold of it. Second, I wanted to make Lonsdale think that Simpson had run off with the money so that they would start mistrusting one another. And, finally, I wanted a little insurance. If the worst happened I wanted to be able to tell them that they needed me alive to get at their money." I paused. "I intended to tell them where the money was," I said. I shrugged. "But they both died."

"So you're the only person who can get into the account?"

I nodded.

"Over twenty million pounds?"

Another nod.

"And no one else knows it's there?"

"No."

Lindsay was silent for a moment. "What are you going to do with it?"

"I don't know."

Lindsay said nothing for a few moments. "Can they do anything about the fact that you used a false name?"

I shook my head.

"Didn't they want to see any identification?"

"I showed them an identity card I had made at the airport," I told her. "It has my photograph on together with the name Simpson. And it's covered in plastic. It looks very official."

Slowly Lindsay stared to laugh. She looked at me. "Did you ever think that this would happen?"

"No." I said instantly and honestly. "I assumed that as soon as Barbara and Lizzie were free I'd just give them back their money." I paused. "I didn't count on them being killed."

We both said nothing for a while but just relaxed in the sunshine.

"Do you have to rush back to England at the end of this week?" I asked her.

"No," said Lindsay. "Do you?"

No."

"Is that what you wanted to ask me?"

"What?"

"Whether I had to rush back to England? You said that there was something you had to ask me."

"Oh, no," I said. "That wasn't it. Do you remember when we spoke together last on the phone?"

"Yes."

"You said something at the end. I didn't hear it properly."

Lindsay nodded and grinned at me. "I remember," she said softly.

"What was it?" I asked her.

"What was what?" she said, teasing.

"What did you say?"

She moved closer and whispered in my ear.

I smiled, held her tighter and kissed her lightly on the lips. She put her arms around my neck, pulled me towards her and kissed me back more firmly.

After a few moments we parted and Lindsay shivered. A slight breeze was building up and waves were beginning to crash noisily onto the rocks around us. I lowered my head and whispered to her again. She laughed gently and kissed me.

Vernon Coleman

Devon, England 1994

For a list of books by Vernon Coleman please see www.vernoncoleman.com or Amazon Author Central.

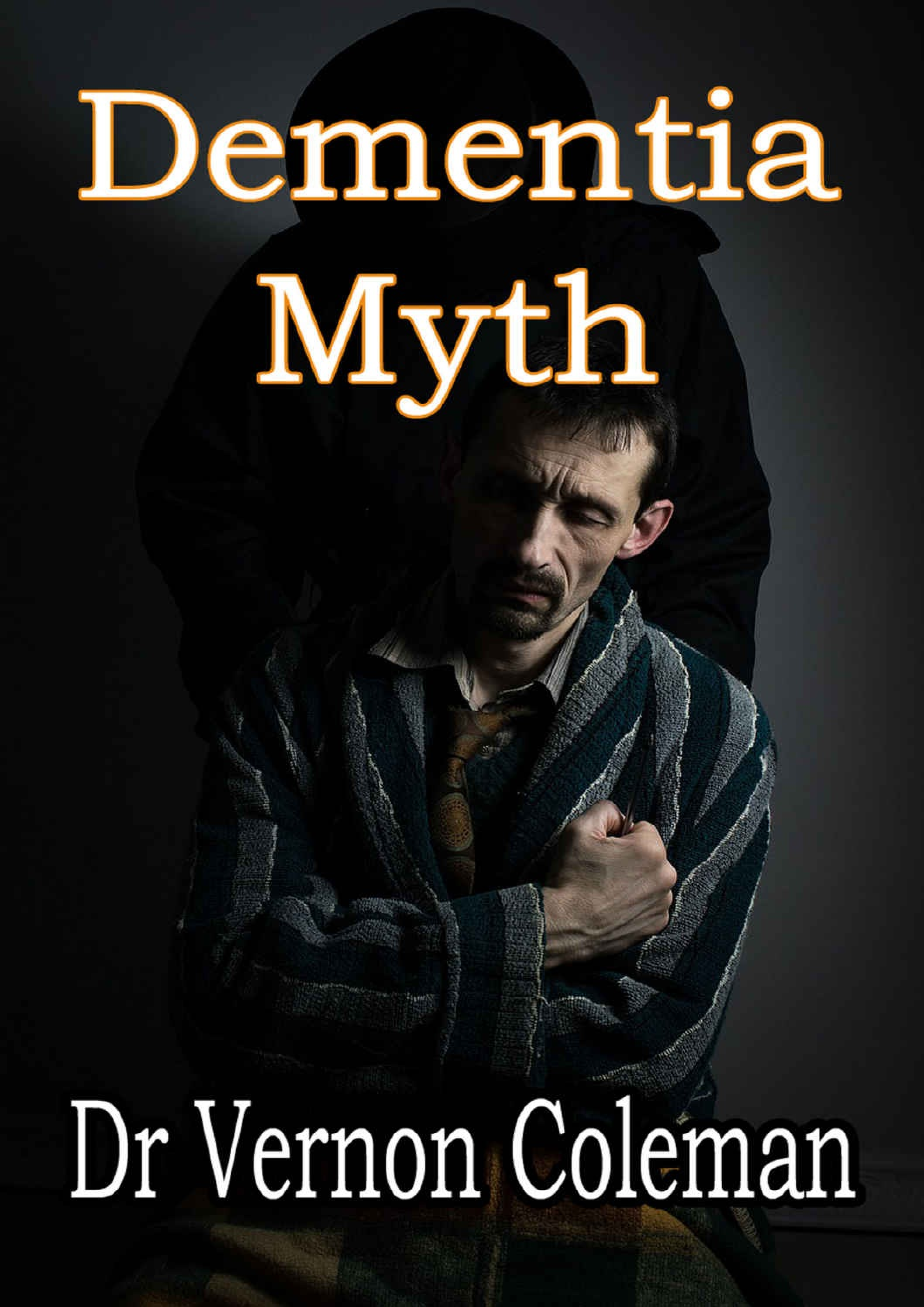

Dementia Myth

Dr Vernon Coleman

Dementia Myth

Most Patients with Dementia Are Curable

Dr Vernon Coleman MB ChB DSc FRSA

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Dedication

To Antoinette who cares

With all my love as always.

The author
Vernon Coleman MB ChB DSc FRSA has been a successful campaigning medical writer for 50 years. He has written over 100 books which have sold over two million copies in the UK alone, and been translated into 25 languages. For more information please see www.vernoncoleman.com or visit Vernon Coleman's author page on Amazon.

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Preface

The diagnosis, treatment and reporting of dementia is a massive and previously unrecognised scandal. The staggering fact is that most cases of dementia could probably be cured in a week or two – maybe a little longer with some patients. Anyone who says otherwise is either woefully misinformed or a drug company mouthpiece.

Around the world there are estimated to be around 50 million people suffering from dementia – though this figure is probably on the low side. One half of all the patients admitted to nursing homes are said to be suffering from dementia of one sort or another.

Millions of patients who have been diagnosed with dementia are being looked after by their families. Many family members have had to abandon their jobs and their normal lives in order to find the necessary time to provide care for their loved ones. Millions more patients have been dumped in hospitals and nursing homes where they sit or lie, waiting to die.

No one knows how many millions of as yet undiagnosed individuals are struggling to cope with dementia, either alone or with the help of relatives, friends and neighbours.

The commonest diagnosis for all these patients is Alzheimer's disease. It is widely reputed that two thirds of patients with dementia are suffering from Alzheimer's. Indeed, Alzheimer's has in many countries become the default diagnosis. If a patient has dementia then they will be assumed to be suffering from Alzheimer's and little or no effort will be made to find any other diagnosis. The drug companies, the big charities, the media and even some doctors seem to promote the view that the words 'dementia' and 'Alzheimer's' are pretty well interchangeable.

The prognosis for those diagnosed as suffering from Alzheimer's disease is a gloomy one for, despite many promises, there is still no cure for this disease, nor is there any sign of a cure on the horizon. Drug companies have produced a number of prescription only drugs recommended for use with Alzheimer patients, and alternative health care practitioners produce new remedies on an almost daily basis.

Despite all the promotion given to Alzheimer's disease, there is however, clear evidence that many so-called dementia sufferers who have been diagnosed as suffering from Alzheimer's disease have been misdiagnosed. They are suffering from something quite different and could be cured – often completely and frequently within weeks or even days.

This short book is intended simply to draw attention to this scandal and to provide pointers for those who feel that a loved one may have been misdiagnosed. My aim is not to provide a comprehensive guide to any of the diseases which cause dementia but, rather, to offer direction for those who might otherwise be led into a fateful diagnosis when other more hopeful possibilities might exist.

Some patients who have dementia will, of course, have Alzheimer's disease, and will be incurable. But if just one patient can be rescued from a faulty diagnosis and returned to an active, productive life then writing this book will have been well worthwhile.

Dr Vernon Coleman MB ChB DSc FRSA

Part One: The Process

Chapter One

An Introduction to the Dementia Myth

Some people believe that dementia is a normal part of the ageing process (hence the term ‘senile dementia’), but it is not. That is one of the many myths about dementia.

There are hundreds of thousands of people in their 80s and 90s who still have all their mental faculties intact; thousands have gone on to achieve great things in their advanced years. Dementia is neither a natural nor an inevitable consequence of ageing. (I wrote a short book called *Climbing Trees at 112* which list the achievements of a variety of elder citizens.)

The second myth is that dementia is not itself a disease. The word ‘dementia’ is a general word for the symptoms displayed as a result of a number of different diseases. (In much the same way that ‘cancer’ and ‘infection’ aren’t specific diseases.)

When someone displays symptoms of dementia, it’s the doctor’s job to identify the underlying cause.

Besides Alzheimer’s, other disorders that can cause dementia include: advanced syphilis, vitamin B12 deficiency, Huntington’s disease, Down’s Syndrome, Pick’s disease, strokes, Lewy Body disease, late-multiple sclerosis, brain tumours, hormone deficiencies, chronic alcoholism, drug abuse (of both illegal and prescription drugs), head injuries, and idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus.

Nearly half of all individuals with Parkinson’s disease develop dementia, though this usually occurs about 10 or 15 years after the disease has first been diagnosed. Dementia can also occur in a condition called Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease and Variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. Dementia also sometimes occurs in the late stages of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). And there is dementia pugilistica, also known as chronic progressive traumatic encephalopathy. This is a disorder which develops in people who have repeated head injuries – boxers and American football players, for example – and which produces symptoms similar to Parkinson’s disease. The boxer Muhammad Ali may, in my opinion, have been suffering from this disorder for the last years of his life. These individuals may also develop normal pressure hydrocephalus. And there is a condition known as vascular dementia.

Quite a number of the less common types of dementia are treatable. So, for example, patients who have developed dementia as a result of having a treatable brain tumour, patients who are suffering from poisoning (as a result of toxins such as lead or mercury), patients who have syphilis, Lyme disease and other infective disorders and patents who have myxoedema (an underactive thyroid gland) may all recover when their conditions are treated. Patients who develop dementia after a sudden head injury may also make a good recovery.

Some of these are disorders about which many doctors, including specialists know next to nothing. Relatives and friends of patients with dementia need to push hard to make sure that alternative causes of dementia are not ignored or forgotten for it is crucial to remember that some of these disorders are treatable and a diagnosis of Alzheimer’s should never be made until all other disorders have been excluded.

To find the underlying cause of a patient’s symptoms, a doctor needs to do quite a battery of tests. She or he may refer the patient to a neurologist at a hospital or he or she may make a diagnosis based on symptoms and medical history alone. Whatever happens, the diagnosis should not be made without certain basic investigations being conducted, and treatable conditions must be excluded before a diagnosis of (for example) Alzheimer’s disease is made. It is sloppy and unprofessional to make a diagnosis of Alzheimer’s as a default diagnosis.

To claim that dementia is incurable is as absurd as saying that all people with broken legs will never walk again or that all patients with chest infections will die. It is cruel, manipulative scaremongering, and those who repeat this nonsense should be ashamed of themselves and their ignorance.

As I pointed out above (but make no apology for repeating), the truth is that ‘dementia’ is a word like ‘cancer’ and ‘infection’.

There are many causes of cancer.

There are many causes of infection.

And there are many causes of dementia. And some of those causes are curable or, at the very least, controllable if they are properly diagnosed and well-treated.

Parkinson’s disease can cause dementia but drugs may help. Huntington’s disease can cause dementia and although it is not curable, there are medicines available which may help reduce the severity of symptoms. Alcoholism can cause dementia but, as millions can confirm, alcoholism is a controllable disease. Then there is dementia caused by vascular disease. This is estimated to affect around 150,000 people in the UK alone and although there is no cure, there are drugs available which can slow down the progress of the disease. Many patients who are depressed show signs of dementia which will disappear when their depression lifts. Patients who have normal pressure hydrocephalus show clear signs of dementia but they can be permanently cured with a simple operation. Hundreds of thousands of patients appear demented because they have been over-dosed with tranquillisers and sedatives. These patients will recover completely if their unnecessary medication is stopped or reduced. And hundreds of thousands of patients who have all the symptoms of dementia, and who may have been given the default diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease, will show a dramatic improvement in a couple of weeks if all they have wrong with them is an undiagnosed vitamin B12 deficiency – treatable with simple injections of the missing vitamin.

And there are many other causes of dementia.

The point is that dementia is not the same thing as Alzheimer's disease and anyone who suggests otherwise is grossly irresponsible – whether they are a doctor, a nurse, a charity worker or a drug company employee.

The dementia/Alzheimer's disease scandal is one of the biggest medical scandals in history and I suspect that current policies are laying doctors, hospitals and laboratories wide open to the largest class action lawsuit in medical history.

Though ignorance and laziness on the part of doctors, and as a result of deliberate misinformation spread by a deadly combination of drug companies and specialist charities, hundreds of thousands of patients have been given a default diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease without proper investigations ever being conducted.

The hidden, underlying problem is that medical policy relating to the classification, diagnosis and treatment of dementia is defined and directed by drug companies which have for some years controlled the medical establishment and which run medicine so that their own commercial interests are best served. And that means encouraging doctors to make diagnoses which are commercially advantageous and then promoting and selling large quantities of drugs which are expensive and profitable but often largely useless. (Making a profit is, of course, the raison d'etre of the drug industry. The medical establishment, which has sold out to the drug industry, is far more culpable.)

I will return to the question of dementia in a moment but I need a short diversion here to point out that it is not, of course, merely in the diagnosis and treatment of dementia that drug companies have established advantageous principles.

The massive increase in the number of children diagnosed as suffering from asthma is a direct result of drug company propaganda. Most of the children so diagnosed have merely suffered an isolated incidence of wheezing. But, once diagnosed as asthmatic they will be given regular supplies of tablets and inhalers and they will become life-long profit bases for the industry.

Most patients who have high blood pressure would find that their blood pressure levels returned to normal if they lost excess weight and learned to deal more effectively with the stress in their lives. But in order for the drug companies to make profits, general practitioners must prescribe daily drugs. And so that is the default form of treatment.

Patients who are overweight are given pills rather than dietary advice. Patients who are anxious or suffering from stress are given endless repeat prescriptions for tranquillisers or anti-depressants despite the availability of evidence showing that these drugs are dangerously addictive. Patients who suffer from mild pain are given repeat prescriptions for addictive opiate drugs. And so it goes.

My first book, published in 1975, was called *The Medicine Men* and in it I explained how the drug companies control the medical profession. Since then the situation has changed only in that the hold the drug industry has over the medical establishment has tightened.

The majority of senior doctors working in medicine have received substantial amounts of drug company money – either in cash or gifts, and a couple of decades ago I exposed the astonishing fact that at that time just about every doctor appointed to supervise the profession's use of drugs, and its relationship with the drug industry, had received money or gifts from drug companies. I doubt if things are any different today.

Medical journals exist only because of the huge amounts of money they receive from drug companies in the form of advertising. Medical lectures and symposia are organised with the financial help of drug companies. Most postgraduate education is influenced, controlled or organised by the pharmaceutical industry.

That's the end of the diversion into the background explanation of the extent of the influence of the pharmaceutical industry.

Now, I'll go back to dementia.

The result of the fact that the drug industry controls the medical profession is that the diagnosis and treatment of patients with dementia is completely controlled by a ruthless industry which, via clever marketing campaigns and the crafty use of charities, has quite different aims to those of patients.

And so, around the world, we have the tragic situation in which millions of patients who currently have symptoms of dementia, who have been dismissively labelled with the default diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease, and who are living out their days in institutions where they have no freedom and no responsibility for their own lives, could have been cured and could be enjoying the final years and decades of their lives.

The drug companies get away with this for two primary and simple reasons.

First, medical school departments are largely run by specialists in obscure and often untreatable diseases who often ignore disorders such as vitamin B12 deficiency and normal pressure hydrocephalus because these are relatively common and straightforward to treat disorders. Doctors who specialise in these conditions are likely to find that they don't merit drug company sponsored invitations to foreign conferences in fascinating places.

These are not disorders which merit massive drug company investment. Drug companies have a particular affection for common, chronic and incurable diseases such as arthritis, diabetes and high blood pressure because they are exceptionally profitable. And so, for example, drug companies make far more money if young patients who are suffering from vitamin B12 deficiency are diagnosed as suffering from multiple sclerosis. (Multiple sclerosis and vitamin B12 deficiency produce almost identical symptoms.) Drug therapy for multiple sclerosis is enormously expensive (and profitable) whereas the profits involved in the treatment of vitamin B12 deficiency are measured in pennies.

Second, the post graduate medical education of general practitioners is effectively controlled by the pharmaceutical industry which sponsors lectures and buys absurdly over-priced advertising in medical journals.

As far as dementia is concerned, the result is that millions of patients who are now spending the remaining years requiring constant nursing care could and should be living independent, full lives.

Millions of people who are bedridden in hospital, or living vegetative, sedated lives in nursing homes could be working or enjoying the retirement years to which they no doubt looked forward.

And millions of relatives who have chosen to abandon their own lives in order to provide adequate, loving care for their relations should now be continuing with their own lives.

The cost to individuals, and to the community at large, is too large to measure. The emotional cost is phenomenal. And the blunt financial cost is horrifying and has to be measured in tens of billions. There is the cost of providing home or institutional care for patients requiring constant attention and there is the cost of purchasing the largely useless pharmaceuticals sold by the greediest and most ruthless industry man has ever created. (I have previously pointed out that the international pharmaceutical industry makes the Columbian drug barons look positively caring and philanthropic.)

All this happens because venal and easily influenced medical practitioners have betrayed their profession and misdiagnosed millions of patients. And they have misdiagnosed those patients because they have been misled (brain washed would, perhaps, be a better word) by the international pharmaceutical industry.

Is that not a scandal of brobdingnagian proportions?

Medicine today doesn't need more innovation, more research, more technology or more digitalisation. It needs, desperately needs, more integrity and more honesty.

And until the medical profession breaks free of drug company control, and acquires a little integrity and honesty, then patients are on their own and must take control of their own lives and their own illnesses.

Today, the result of the propaganda efforts of the pharmaceutical industry (and the charities with which the industry is now linked) is that there is no doubt that if you asked 1,000 people to name the commonest cause of dementia at least 999 of them would say 'Alzheimer's disease'. Indeed, most of the 1,000 would probably tell you that 'dementia' is just another word for 'Alzheimer's' and that the two are synonymous.

Alarmingly, a similar result would be obtained if you asked 1,000 doctors to name the commonest cause of dementia.

And, of course, much the same result would be obtained if you asked the same question of 1,000 specialist medical journalists working for print and broadcast media.

They would, of course, all be completely wrong.

Despite the widespread consequences of the propaganda machine, Alzheimer's disease is not the same thing as dementia.

And, despite everything we have been led to believe, Alzheimer's disease isn't even the commonest cause of dementia. (I confess that I used to believe this assertion. But it simply isn't true. It is a convenient piece of marketing propaganda. Many of those doomed with a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease have something else wrong with them. And the 'something else' is usually curable.)

As I have pointed out, these myths about dementia and Alzheimer's disease have not come into being by accident. On the contrary, they are the result of a very deliberate campaign of propaganda and misinformation. And the propaganda has been managed very deliberately and ruthlessly and with absolute no regard for the health of patients. I make no apology for repeating this assertion. The fact is that the myths about dementia are frighteningly deep rooted and devastatingly shocking and the rebuttal of the lies cannot be over-emphasised.

The cheats and fraudsters in the drug companies and the big charities have doubtless been helped by the fact that there is no test for Alzheimer's disease. The drug companies love diseases, especially chronic diseases, which cannot be proven because there is no specific, reliable diagnostic test.

This absence of a simple and incontrovertible test is very convenient for the drug companies and for the large charities which tend to work alongside them. The absence of a single, reliable test has made it damnably easy for the drug companies and the charities to ensure that Alzheimer's is the default diagnosis made by doctors.

(The Alzheimer charities have been invaluable for the drug companies, for their apparent independence has made it easy for them to convince the media around the world to accept the myth that 'dementia' and 'Alzheimer's' are interchangeable. The Alzheimer charities are often closely linked to drug companies which make expensive and profitable 'remedies' for use in the control of patients with Alzheimer's. Naturally, the charities are pumped full of cash by the grateful drug companies. I explain later on in this book precisely how the drug companies manage to buy and control so many charities. This sort of activity is not, of course, confined to charities dealing with dementia and Alzheimer's disease.)

For purely commercial reasons, the drug companies (and their chums the big Alzheimer charities) are desperately keen to convince people that Alzheimer's and dementia are the same thing. It is in the interest of the drug companies to diagnose every case of dementia as Alzheimer's disease. We can't blame the drug companies. We have to remember that their only reason for existence is to make money. They don't exist to help patients get better. They don't exist to make the world a better place. They are profit-making machines.

The blunt bottom line fact is that drug companies don't want patients to be diagnosed with disorders such as vitamin B12 deficiency or with normal pressure hydrocephalus because they won't make money out of those patients.

It is, of course, all about the money.

There are a number of drugs on the market for the 'treatment' of Alzheimer's disease. The drugs available are expensive and in my view they do little or no good; they certainly don't 'cure' patients. But obviously, drug company profits will rise as the number of patients being treated rises.

Doctors are easy to bribe for several reasons.

First, I am afraid that most modern doctors have little sense of vocation. You can see this in the way that GPs in the UK leapt at the chance to avoid providing their patients with night time and weekend cover. If doctors really cared for their patients they would have happily continued with the established system which ensured that patient care was provided around the clock. Today, medicine is a business and most doctors are in it for what they can get out of it rather than what they can put into it. (This means, inevitably, that patients must take control of their own lives and take a real interest in their own healthcare. It is no longer safe for a patient to be a passive patient; allowing themselves to be treated, as required, and to be swept along by the system.)

Second, doctors who dare to question the way the system works are likely to be crushed. So, for example, doctors who question the power of the pharmaceutical industry, or any aspect of the provision of medical services, are quickly destroyed so that the system (profitable for drug companies and doctors) can continue unchanged. I find it difficult to think of a profession which suppresses original thought more efficiently or more ruthlessly than the medical profession. I have shown elsewhere in this book precisely how doctors can be crushed if they try to rock the boat.

Third, and probably most important of all, medicine is designed and practised to treat sick patients. It isn't designed to keep patients healthy and to prevent illness. And it isn't designed to get them well again. It is designed to provide treatment. If the modern medical system were an individual human being, it would be disappointed if a patient got better because a patient who gets better no longer needs treatment. The system exists, is fed and grows by the extent of the people needing treatment. This may sound pedantic but it isn't. And it is a result of the fact that the medical profession is controlled by the pharmaceutical industry. Remember: the pharmaceutical industry doesn't ever want people to get better. If the pharmaceutical industry found a secret pill that would cure everyone in a day then it would destroy the recipe for that pill. The pharmaceutical industry would be ruined if someone found a cure for cancer, a cure for heart disease or a reliable cure for infection.

Moreover, in the UK the Government helps the drug companies in their crooked aim by bribing doctors to diagnose Alzheimer's every time they see a patient who is confused, bewildered or showing signs of dementia.

And every time a doctor stamps a diagnosis of Alzheimer's on a patient's records, she or he increases the official incidence of Alzheimer's and helps to turn the myth into reality.

GPs in the UK are willing participants in this fraud because (for reasons which are quite incomprehensible) the Government gives them money every time they diagnose Alzheimer's disease. GPs receive no bonus if they diagnose vitamin B12 deficiency or normal pressure hydrocephalus. They receive no bonus for finding a treatable form of dementia but they are rewarded by the taxpayers for diagnosing a form of dementia which will involve huge costs for taxpayers and huge profits for drug companies.

It is important to remember that the drug companies favour Alzheimer's disease for very simple reasons.

First, Alzheimer's disease tends to be chronic. It lasts for years. It does not usually kill patients. (Most patients who are said to have died of Alzheimer's disease have died of something else – usually an untreated chest infection.) The drug companies love chronic diseases. Providing pills for patients who need medication for years is far more profitable than providing pills for a one or two week course. This is why drug companies are far more enthusiastic about finding new treatments for arthritis or high blood pressure, both usually regarded as long-term disorders, than they are about finding new treatments for infections. A new antibiotic is likely to be prescribed for a week or two weeks. A new painkiller, promoted as suitable for treating patients with arthritis (whether or not there is any evidence for the claim) is likely to prove enormously profitable. Drugs which are marketed in competition with existing products are known in the business as 'me-too' drugs.

Second, most of the other major causes of dementia do not need expensive drugs. Patients who have acquired the symptoms of dementia because they are short of vitamin B12 can be treated with very inexpensive injections of B12. Patients who appear demented because they are being heavily dosed with tranquillisers or sleeping tablets will recover if their drugs are reduced or stopped. (This is particularly unpopular with drug companies because it doesn't just prevent future drug sales but actually reduces drug sales and therefore has a devastating effect on profitability.) And patients who have normal pressure hydrocephalus can be cured with a very simple and cheap operation which requires virtually no input from the pharmaceutical industry – leaving absolutely no chance of profits for drug companies.

The result of all this is that the people who are profiting from the growth in the incidence of Alzheimer's (this includes drug companies and those charities which have close links with drug companies) want you to believe that when a patient shows symptoms and signs of dementia, the default diagnosis must be Alzheimer's disease. Indeed, they would rather no other options were even considered.

If everyone who is demented is assumed to be suffering from Alzheimer's disease then the profits for drug companies flogging medicines for the 'treatment' of Alzheimer's patients will soar. Drug companies (and the charities which work with them) have a vested interest in suppressing the diagnosis of vitamin B12 deficiency, prescription drug dementia or normal pressure hydrocephalus.

So, how big is this scandal? How many patients are involved? How many patients are currently sitting, or lying, in nursing homes, care homes, hospitals or the spare rooms of hard-pressed relatives because they have been misdiagnosed as suffering from Alzheimer's disease when, in reality, they could be treated quickly, easily and cheaply?

Officially, the figures show that around two thirds of dementia cases are caused by Alzheimer's. That is, without a doubt, a massive exaggeration. My professional estimate is that at least half of the patients diagnosed as having Alzheimer's are actually suffering from something quite different with prescription drug confusion, vitamin B12 shortage and normal pressure hydrocephalus being the three top diagnoses which are missed.

It is difficult to think of a bigger scandal in modern medicine.

Alzheimer's should be the very last diagnosis made when a patient is showing signs of dementia. It should not be the first diagnosis and it should certainly never be the default diagnosis.

Around the world there are millions of patients who are alleged to have incurable Alzheimer's disease but who are curable.

That's one scandal.

The other scandal is that no one in the medical profession or the media cares.

I doubt if anyone from the medical establishment, the big charities or the drug industry will be willing to debate this issue with me on television or radio. They operate on the basis that if they ignore me then the facts will be ignored. And, sadly, no one in the establishment will take any notice of this book – even though the information I provide could change the lives of hundreds of thousands of patients. I have made many accurate predictions and judgements on medical matters over the years (there is a list on my main website www.vernoncoleman.com) but since my first two books (*The Medicine Men* and *Paper Doctors*) were published I have been ostracised, demonised and lied about by the drug company controlled medical establishment. My short book on normal pressure hydrocephalus was completely ignored by the media. Several experienced, journalists became excited by the book, and agreed that the misdiagnosis of the disease was a scandal. But their editors always quashed attempts to write about the scandal.

My conclusion is that anyone with dementia should be properly investigated for vitamin B12 deficiency or normal pressure hydrocephalus because, apart from dementia and confusion caused by prescription drugs, they are the commonest cause of dementia which are easily and permanently curable.

If the patient is shown not to have NPH or vitamin B12 deficiency and they are not taking regular doses of tranquillisers, sedatives and sleeping tablets, then, and only then, should doctors investigate the possibility that they might have Alzheimer's.

Chapter Two

How Critical Doctors Are Silenced

You would be forgiven for thinking I am exaggerating the power of the pharmaceutical industry, so let me tell you a true story which illustrates the power of the industry and which illustrates just how the pharmaceutical industry controls medical thinking.

A few years ago, I was invited to speak at an important conference in London.

The conference was, I was told, intended to tackle the subject of medication errors and adverse reactions to prescribed drugs. The company organising the conference was called PasTest.

'For over thirty years, PasTest has been providing medical education to professionals within the NHS,' they told me. 'Building on our commitment to quality in medical and healthcare education, PasTest is creating a range of healthcare events which focus on the professional development of clinicians and managers who are working together to deliver healthcare services for the UK. Our aim is to provide a means for those who are in a position to improve services on both national and regional levels. The topics covered by our conferences are embraced within policy, best practice, case study, clinical management and evidence based practice. PasTest endeavours to source the best speakers who will engage audiences with balanced, relevant and thought provoking programmes. PasTest has proven in the past that by using thorough investigative research and keeping up-to-date with advances in healthcare and medical practice, a premium educational event can be achieved.'

Goody, I thought.

Iatrogenesis (doctor induced disease) is something of a speciality of mine. I have written numerous books and articles on the subject. My campaigns have resulted in more drugs being banned or controlled than anyone else's. A previous Government admitted that they had taken action on prescription drug control because of my articles.

The conference organisers offered to pay me £1,500 plus £500 in expenses for two hours of my time. In addition to speaking at the conference, they wanted me to help them decide on the final programme.

I thought the conference was an important one and would give me a good opportunity to tell NHS staff the truth. I signed a contract, and PasTest duly wrote to confirm my appointment as a consultant and speaker for the PasTest Conference Division.

And then there was silence. My office repeatedly asked for details of when and where the conference was being held.

Silence.

Eventually, a programme for the event appeared on the internet. Curiously, my name was not on the list of speakers.

Here is part of the blurb promoting the conference:

'Against a background of increasing media coverage into the number of UK patients who are either becoming ill or dying due to adverse reactions to medication, our conference aims to explain the current strategies to avoid Adverse Drug reactions and what can be done to educate patients.'

Putting the blame on patients for problems caused by prescription drugs is brilliant. Most drug related problems are caused by the stupidity of doctors not the ignorance of patients. If the aim is to educate patients on how best to avoid prescription drug problems, the advice would be simple: 'Don't trust doctors. They are, by and large, a bunch of incompetent buffoons who do what they are told to do by drug company representatives.'

The promotion for the conference claimed that 'errors in medication...account for 4% of hospital bed capacity.' And that prescription drug problems 'reportedly kill up to 10,000 people a year in the UK'.

As I would have shown (had I not been banned from the conference) these figures were absurdly low. I had already published evidence showing that one in six hospital beds was occupied by patients who had been made ill by doctors. And there was, and is, plenty of evidence showing that doctors are now one of the top three causes of sickness and death (alongside cancer and circulatory disorders such as heart disease and stroke).

The list of speakers included a variety of people I had never heard of including one speaker representing The Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry and another representing the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency.

Delegates representing the NHS were expected to pay £250 plus VAT (£293.75) to attend the event. Delegates whose Trust would be funding the cost were asked to apply for a Health Authority Approval form.

The NHS is paying to send delegates to a conference where someone representing the drug industry will speak to them on drug safety. But I'm banned. No longer allowed to speak. The truth has been uninvited.

So why am I now apparently banned from this conference?

This is what Simon Levy of PasTest said when we asked them: 'certain parties felt that he (Vernon Coleman) was too controversial to speak and as a result would not attend.'

Could that, I wonder, be the drug industry?

Is the drug industry now deciding whom they will allow to speak to doctors and NHS staff on the problems caused by prescription drugs?

If I was banned at the behest of the drug industry, do NHS bosses know that people attending the PasTest conference will only hear speakers approved by the drug industry?

If I was banned at the behest of the medical profession, why are doctors frightened of the truth? (If they think my views are wrong they would surely be happy for me to appear so that they could counter my arguments.)

I could not, of course, be banned by the NHS itself. Why would the NHS not want its employees to know the truth about drug related problems?

Why are people who had me banned so frightened of what I would say? It can surely only be because they know that I would have caused embarrassment by telling the truth.

PasTest offered me a fee of £1,500 to speak at this conference. Because we had a contract they have now paid me NOT to turn up. I used the money to buy advertisements for my book *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You*.

Details of the ban were sent to every national and major local newspaper in Britain. None reported it.

I am by no means the only doctor to have found him or herself silenced in some way by the medical establishment. Every doctor I know of who has openly questioned vaccination has been persecuted and/or struck off the medical register.

Does that sound unlikely? Does my own experience sound unlikely? I sometimes fear that my own experiences may make me sound as though I am exhibiting well-established signs of paranoia.

But consider what happened to J. Meirion Thomas, a former specialist cancer surgeon at The Royal Marsden Hospital in London.

Dr Thomas's troubles began when he wrote a newspaper article in which he commented that 'the GP service is hopelessly outmoded'. The article had been written in response to a report from the Care Quality Commission. He wrote the article because he wanted to help improve patient care. And at the age of 68, he rightly thought he had experience which made his views worthwhile.

Nothing too controversial in that, you might think.

But the authorities thought otherwise. The medical establishment does not approve of doctors trying to improve things. And it does not approve of criticism – however valuable or well intended.

Here is what happened to Dr Thomas (a widely respected surgeon with many years of experience) immediately after the publication of his article:

1) He received a letter (which he describes as 'aggressive') from the Imperial College, where he was Professor of Surgical Oncology. The letter demanded that he immediately sever all relations with the college.

2) A petition was started to have him struck off the medical register by the General Medical Council.

3) He received a message from The Royal Marsden Hospital where he worked as a specialist cancer surgeon. He was summoned to a meeting where he was told he had brought the hospital into disrepute and would not be allowed to attend until further notice. He was forced to take 'authorised leave' from his work.

4) The chief executive of the The Royal Marsden Hospital received a complaint from the Professor of General Practice at Imperial College. Dr Thomas reports that 'this included a financial threat, querying why GPs should be expected to refer patients to The Royal Marsden Hospital when there are many others in London with which they had very good working relationships with the staff.'

5) Dr Thomas was then told that his Lifetime Achievement Award for 31 years of service at The Royal Marsden Hospital (due to be presented at a ceremony the following evening) was to be withdrawn.

6) He was eventually told he could return to work if he signed a document agreeing not to write any more articles unless he showed them to the chief executive in advance so that she could make sure they wouldn't harm the hospital's reputation.

All that happened because Dr Thomas dared to write one article about general practice.

The tragedy is that this sad story is not, I fear, in any way exceptional. It is, rather, the norm. Whistle blowers, truth-tellers and critics are not welcomed by the medical establishment. The doctors who are seen on television and heard on the radio are, I fear, largely vetted or approved by the pharmaceutical industry and the medical establishment (the two are pretty well interchangeable) for their willingness to toe the official line. The same is true, to a slightly lesser extent, of doctors who write for or are quoted in newspapers and magazines. Doctors who speak up on behalf of patients, or who try to expose problems within medical practice, will be quickly silenced. (It is much more difficult for the establishment to suppress doctors who write books – though even this is possible in that doctors regarded as troublemakers will usually find it impossible to promote their books on radio or television and they will also have to expect that their books will not be reviewed.)

You can now imagine the problems I have had after writing several thousand articles and scores of books about medical practice! I have been censored, banned and the subject of numerous complaints. Today, the combined efforts of the pharmaceutical industry and the medical establishment mean that no one will interview me, review my books or print my articles.

(I am not complaining – merely reporting the way things are.)

It is hardly surprising that very few doctors dare to write anything critical of established medical practices – however damaging or dangerous they might be.

Chapter Three

The Power of Modern Charities

'No one survives a diagnosis of dementia.'

The quote is attributed to Hilary Evans, the chief executive of Alzheimer's Research UK.

Did she really say that?

I suppose she must have done.

But it is NOT true.

I repeat: it is NOT true.

The Alzheimer Industry (a convenient mixture of drug companies and charities) seems determined to ignore the facts, regardless of the unnecessary fear which is produced.

I worry a good deal about the charities which are supposedly devoted to helping patients with dementia. Some of them claim that dementia is incurable and there seems to me to be a deliberate tendency to use the words dementia and Alzheimer's as though they were interchangeable.

The media do exactly the same thing, and health reporters working for newspapers, radio and television seem determined to promote the false idea that dementia is the same as Alzheimer's and that once a diagnosis of dementia is made then there is no hope. Consensus journalism is enormously popular everywhere these days.

The problem is that the big charities are driven by the same force as the pharmaceutical industry: money.

I have long been an enthusiastic supporter of patients' associations – small groups set up to defend and protect the interests of patients with specific health problems. The associations provide support and information for patients and also campaign on their behalf. Back in the late 1960s and early 1970s, I compiled the first directory of patients' associations. In those days, most such groups were small and run by volunteers – usually from someone's kitchen table. Money was raised by organising coffee mornings and selling raffle tickets. Cash which couldn't be raised in this way came from the wallets and handbags of volunteer organisers. Private telephones were used and newsletters were put together with a cheap copier machine and a stapler. Most of these small organisations were run on a hand to mouth basis.

And then the drug companies realised that these associations could be useful to them in a number of ways. To begin with they realised that the associations gave them a way of contacting their customers directly (without going through the prescribing doctors) and later, as the volunteers started to do local newspaper interviews to raise awareness of the illness with which they were concerned (and the association they had formed), the drug companies realised that they had discovered an excellent way to influence public opinion. Occasionally, there would be a chance for national publicity on radio or television or in a newspaper or magazine looking for a human interest story. The patients' associations could provide patients and relatives prepared to talk about their disease to a wide public. Newly formed local radio stations and local television stations had an insatiable demand for people to talk about diseases, and the volunteers who had created patients' associations found themselves in a powerful position.

The laws in most countries mean that drug companies are not allowed to advertise prescription only products directly to patients. Advertisements can only be aimed at the doctors prescribing the drugs. (This is why so many medical journals can make so much money.) Slowly, the drug companies which produced the pharmaceutical products these patients were taking, realised that the patients' associations offered them a way to communicate directly with patients. Through the patients' associations they could promote new products, they could explain why their product was better than anyone else's and they could influence the public's understanding of the disease concerned. Most important of all, they could use the patients' associations to control and denigrate the drug industry's own critics – whether the critics were alternative health practitioners or 'rogue' doctors drawing attention to side effects and other problems.

And so the drug companies started to approach the volunteers running small charities and to offer them financial help. It probably all seemed innocent and well-meaning. A dozen volunteers producing a newsletter for sufferers of a disease (let's call it Godwin's Disease because I know of no such disease) would be approached by a company (let's call it Islington International Pharmaceuticals because I know of no such company) which happened to be the manufacturer of a drug used in the treatment of Godwin's Disease. And the drug company would kindly offer to help.

'We all want to help patients,' the drug company would say. 'You are doing terrific work and we are a kindly, philanthropic organisation so please allow us to give you £500 to help pay for printing and posting your newsletter.'

The surprised volunteers would be enormously grateful. They would enthusiastically accept the £500 and it would make life a little easier.

Then, a few weeks later, when the £500 had gone, the drug company would come back and offer a larger sum.

'We think we can help more,' they would say. 'We would like to make a donation of £5,000. In return we would be pleased if you would put our logo onto your newsletter and your leaflets. This will enable us to tell the board of directors that our donation is advertising and is therefore justified.'

The volunteers would happily accept the £5,000.

And they would be hooked.

Before long, the volunteers would be working out of smart offices in the nearest town. Two or three of them would be paying themselves salaries, pension payments and expenses. And the drug company money would be essential and expected. The small charity would not be able to exist in its new form without the big cheques from Islington International Pharmaceuticals. The days of putting together a newsletter on the kitchen table would be forgotten. Sadly, the days of honesty and integrity would also be gone. The charity (for by now the volunteers would have doubtless been able to afford to register their association as a proper charity) would no longer rely on those little coffee mornings and those efforts to sell raffle tickets for a bottle of cheap wine.

This now happens all the time.

The sums involved can be quite large. And once the charity is hooked then the game is over. The drug company owns the charity and has a valuable mouthpiece.

'One or two people are criticising our bestselling product,' the drug company will say to one of the charity's employees. 'This is unreasonable and unfair and we know that support from you would help counteract the criticism.'

'What can we do to help?' will be the natural response.

'Our publicity department has contacted a few television and radio people and they would love to talk to you about appearing on their programmes. They will, of course, pay you a fee and provide you with a hotel and also pay your expenses.'

And so the charity employee would go on television and radio and enjoy the fame and the little bit of (personal) money, and they would duly say whatever it was that the drug company wanted them to say. 'Why not? We're all working together, aren't we?'

Many of the big charities now have very well paid executives and, of course, as they get bigger there is a risk that charities become 'corporate'. They end up with huge administrative staffs. They pay their executives six figure salaries – with massive expense accounts and pensions.

I know of well-known charities which spend less than a quarter of their income on the cause for which they are supposed to exist. Most of their income goes on salaries and administration. They long ago lost sight of the aims which kept them sat around the kitchen table. Actually, those people have long since gone; pushed aside by the professionals.

And some of these highly paid charity executives know damned well that they would have a job finding similarly well-paid employment outside the charity sector.

So, the charity's employees find that their aims are aligned with those of their sponsoring drug companies. And they certainly don't have an incentive to see anyone find a cure for 'their' disease. Once a cure has been found, there will be no need for a campaigning charity and the drug company's profits will collapse.

Much the same thing sort of happens in the world of animal rights.

Years ago I talked to someone working for an animal rights group and spoke with enthusiasm about putting an end to a particular variety of animal cruelty.

'Oh we don't actually want it to stop,' he told me, shamelessly. 'If it stops then we'll be out of work.'

And, of course, as they get bigger and richer so charities find that they need to keep growing; they need to acquire more members and more support and more donations. Naturally, the bigger they get the more the drug companies like it.

I have on my desk a leaflet entitled 'Worried about your memory?' It is a leaflet about dementia. But the only cause of dementia which is mentioned is Alzheimer's disease. The clear assumption is that if a patient is suffering from memory loss then they are probably suffering from Alzheimer's disease. The leaflet, inevitably, contains an address and a website for the Alzheimer's Society. And there is a telephone number for the Alzheimer's Society's National Dementia Helpline. At the bottom of the leaflet there is a slogan 'Leading the fight against dementia. Alzheimer's Society'.

And there is also a drug company logo announcing that the production of the leaflet has been supported by Lilly.

Eli Lilly is a drug company which claims it has been a global leader in the fight against Alzheimer's disease for nearly 30 years. Its products include 'seven investigational compounds to treat Alzheimer's and two diagnostics to help better diagnose it'.

I wouldn't expect Lilly to point out that there are many causes of memory loss other than Alzheimer's disease.

And, sadly, nor would I expect the Alzheimer's Society to point out that there are many other causes of memory loss.

Off the top of my head I can think of alcoholism, thyroid, kidney and liver disorders, normal pressure hydrocephalus, tumours, strokes, infections and head injury. And, of course, vitamin B12 deficiency and prescription drug side effects are almost certainly commoner causes of memory loss and confusion than Alzheimer's disease.

And when I put ‘memory loss’ into the Google search engine, the first item which appeared was ‘Memory loss and dementia – Alzheimer’s Society’. I suppose the charity pays to dominate the search but it is, of course, misleading patients by associating memory loss and dementia with a single, dramatically over-diagnosed disease.

I think this business of corralling patients in this way is dishonest, immoral, unethical and immensely harmful.

Chapter Four

The NHS Misleads

It isn't just charities which mislead about dementia.

In the UK, the NHS is still distributing inaccurate information about dementia. For example, I have on my desk a leaflet published by something called Public Health England in conjunction with the Alzheimer's Society and Alzheimer's Research UK. The leaflet states categorically that dementia cannot be cured.

This is a lie. It is a dangerous, manipulative, commercially directed, evil lie.

I reckon that at least half of all the individuals diagnosed with dementia could be cured in a week or two.

Dementia which is caused by normal pressure hydrocephalus (one of the commonest causes) can be cured with a simple operation. Dementia caused by vitamin B12 deficiency (almost certainly much commoner than dementia caused by Alzheimer's disease) can be cured with a course of injections.

And vast numbers of patients with so-called dementia could be cured simply by taking them off their tranquillisers and sleeping tablets. The tablets cause confusion, dementia is diagnosed (usually Alzheimer's) and so more tablets are prescribed. It is this problem which explains why the incidence of dementia appears to be increasing so rapidly.

My guess is that around half of all patients who have been diagnosed as having dementia are curable within a week.

(Anyone stopping pills of any kind should do so under medical supervision in order to supervise the withdrawal period – which can be difficult.)

Why does no one care about the truth about dementia? Why are these truths suppressed? Why cannot they even be debated?

Sadly, the answer is simple. The NHS, the medical profession and the dementia charities only tell people what the drug industry wants them to tell them.

The medical establishment was bought long ago by the pharmaceutical giants.

Chapter Five

Medical Journals – Corrupt and Misleading

The dishonesty and ruthlessness of the pharmaceutical industry would be of no account were the medical profession not ready and willing to be corrupted.

But you don't have to look far to see just how the profession has been corrupted by drug company money.

Drug company money and influence is everywhere. Doctors receive free journals paid for by drug companies. Doctors are taken out to lunch and dinner by drug companies. Medical meetings are sponsored by drug companies (and described as post graduate education). Doctors are paid huge fees to perform small 'research' tasks which could more fairly be described as 'marketing'. And doctors conducting research projects are given grants by drug companies. (Very little medical research takes place that is not funded by drug companies. It is for this reason that most of the research conducted promotes products – rather than questioning their value. And so, as far as I am aware, no research has ever been done to question the value of vaccinations.)

Not long ago an eminent American doctor, Dr Dean Ornish, devised a safe, effective treatment programme for heart disease that depended upon diet, exercise and relaxation. However, Dr Ornish was denied funds by the American government and the American Heart Association, and Dr Ornish was quoted as having been told that drugs are essential in the treatment of heart disease because it is impossible to persuade people to change their drug taking habits.

I sometimes feel that the medical establishment is single-minded in its devotion to opposing real progress and suppressing original thought.

Most medical journals exist mainly as marketing tools for the pharmaceutical industry. Most of the papers which are published are written by doctors who have at some stage in their careers received money or goods from drug companies. Some of the papers published in reputable sounding journals are published only because a drug company with a product to sell has paid the journal to publish a particular paper because it helps to promote a new product. It has been well established that drug companies will, when it is commercially appropriate, suppress the publication of scientific papers which are considered commercially harmful.

Even the most reputable journals are not beyond criticism.

So, for example, consider the medical journal *The Lancet*. There are hundreds of medical journals in existence but *The Lancet* has been around a long time, is venerated within the profession and is probably no better or worse than the rest. I am sure that *The Lancet* would not agree to suppress an unsuitable paper or publish a paper which was unsound. And, as with most journals, authors of papers must these days state if they have any financial connection with a drug company related to their area of research.

But I am still sceptical about the attitude of all medical journals. I know of no medical journal for example, which would give this book half an inch of review space. My experience is that issues which are unpopular with the drug companies (the usefulness of vivisection or the questioning of the value and safety of vaccination for example) are ignored by all medical journals.

Medical journalists writing for popular papers often quote articles which have appeared in *The Lancet* but it is, I think, worth pointing out that *The Lancet* is a commercial journal which charges a good deal of money for advertising. The latest circulation figures for the weekly magazine show that back in 2007 it sold 29,103 copies and yet despite this relatively modest circulation, a full page advert in *The Lancet* can cost up to £10,800 (though it will be considerably more than that if you want to buy the back cover). I can only offer the circulation rate for 2007 because, even in 2019, that was the only figure I could find on *The Lancet's* website.

Now compare that advertising rate with a magazine that, it is fair to assume, does not take a good deal of drug company advertising. At random I picked a magazine called *Model Rail Magazine*. It has a circulation of 28,337. And the most expensive page rate for a full page is £900.

So, an advert in *The Lancet* costs more than ten times as much as an advert in *Model Rail Magazine*.

And who buys the advertising in *The Lancet*?

Well, if you guessed that most of it was paid for by drug companies then you probably would not be far off the mark.

And who makes vaccines?

Well, drug companies of course.

Am I being unfair in fearing that there could be a conflict of interest here?

I don't think so.

I would have more respect for *The Lancet* (and its point of view) if the magazine refused all drug company advertising and relied entirely on subscription fees. It is worth noting that a subscription to *The Lancet* costs £163 whereas a subscription to *Model Rail Magazine* costs £51. Moreover, I doubt if *The Lancet* pays much if anything to its contributors whereas *Model Rail Magazine* doubtless has quite a substantial editorial cost.

This astonishing discrepancy in advertising rates is commonplace within the world of medical publishing. There are thousands of medical journals and magazines in existence around the world and many of them are hugely profitable. Drug companies use their journal advertising to promote drugs directly to the doctors with the prescription pads.

The drug companies use charities to indoctrinate patients and they use medical journals to indoctrinate doctors.

Part Two: The Causes of Dementia

Chapter One

Prescription Drugs

Drugs, depression and illness can all mimic the symptoms of dementia and, therefore, the modern default diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease.

This is not a new discovery.

When, in 2003, my wife and I wrote a book entitled *How To Conquer Health Problems Between Ages 50 and 120*, we made it clear that prescription drugs were a common cause of dementia. Here is what we said: 'It is possible that prescription drugs, not Alzheimer's, are the commonest cause of dementia. It is likely that half of all cases of alleged dementia could be cured simply by stopping unnecessary prescription drug use. Sedatives, hypnotics, anxiolytics and anti-depressants are the commonest cause of problems, with benzodiazepine tranquillisers and sleeping tablets such as Valium, Mogadon and Ativan probably being some of the commonest culprits.'

Since we wrote that paragraph in 2003, the situation has deteriorated and I am now quite certain that prescription drugs – not Alzheimer's – are the commonest cause of dementia.

The significance of this can best be illustrated by pointing out that it is likely that half of all cases of alleged dementia could be cured simply by stopping unnecessary prescription drug use.

In the UK alone there are several million patients regularly taking tranquillisers or anti-depressants. Many have been taking the drugs for months if not for years; often obtaining their supplies by applying for repeat prescriptions. There are thousands of patients around who take these drugs every day but who have not seen a doctor for years. In my book *The Benzos Story*, I pointed out that many patients had been taking benzodiazepines for over ten years without ever seeing a doctor. What most of these patients probably don't realise is that the list of side effects for these drugs is long and rather alarming and there is no doubt whatsoever that patients who take these drugs can develop all the signs and symptoms of dementia.

The evidence for this has been available for nearly half a century.

Here is a summary of some of the evidence showing the problems which can occur with benzodiazepine drugs.

In 1968, a paper published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, showed that benzodiazepines can cause depression so severe that suicidal thoughts occurred.

In 1972, a letter appeared in the *British Medical Journal* in which two specialists from Newcastle General Hospital pointed out that nitrazepam was particularly unsuitable for older patients. It was reported elsewhere that a 75-year-old woman became confused, incontinent and unable to walk or speak clearly after taking one 5mg tablet of nitrazepam every night for a year or so.

In 1972, a paper published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* by Lt Cdr Richard C.W. Hall and Joy R Joffe MD, showed how patients who had taken diazepam had suffered from apprehension, insomnia, depression and tremulousness.

In 1979, a psychiatrist in Holland described how patients who had taken a benzodiazepine had developed severe anxiety and intolerable psychological changes.

In 1982, a British professor of psychopharmacology, Malcolm Lader reported on evidence showing that patients who had taken diazepam for some years had damaged brains.

In 1982, the *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology* published a paper entitled 'Amnesic Effects of Diazepam: Drug dependence explained by state dependent learning'. The paper, written by Hans Henrik Jensen and Jens Christian Poulsen, showed that patients who take diazepam won't be able to remember things they learned while taking the drug – unless they take it again.

In the period from January 1964 to February 1982, the Committee on Safety of Medicines in London received reports of well over 100 different side effects related to diazepam alone. The side effects included visual disturbances, headaches, confusion and dizziness.

There is no doubt that patients who have been taking benzodiazepine tranquillisers for more than a week or two are quite likely to develop symptoms which could be misdiagnosed as dementia.

Similarly, it is also likely that patients who have been prescribed sleeping tablets or anti-depressants for more than a week or two might easily develop symptoms of confusion and so on which could easily be mistaken for dementia.

(In 1988, the British Government took action to warn doctors about the dangerous of benzodiazepines. The Government admitted that they had taken action because of my articles on the subject. At that time I warned that if doctors were reluctant to prescribe benzodiazepines, the drug companies would simply encourage doctors to use powerful anti-depressants instead. Knowing something of how the drug industry works this was not a particularly difficult prediction to make. This is, of course, exactly what happened. Doctors now prescribe anti-depressants at the slightest indication of unhappiness or discontent. My book describing the battle to control the prescribing of benzodiazepines is described in *The Benzos Story: 1960-1980s*.)

The problems start when the patient who has drug-induced dementia is given the default diagnosis of

Alzheimer’s disease – this is, after all, the default diagnosis for bewildered and confused patients.

There is better than even chance that the doctor will increase the dose of the benzodiazepine tranquilliser to help sedate and calm the troubled patient.

The result, of course, will be that the patient deteriorates still further and the doctor can smugly claim that his diagnosis was clearly the correct one.

Drugs advertised as alleviating the symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease will then be prescribed and probably added to the mixture.

Chapter Two

Inadequate Vitamin B12

Let me start this chapter with two certainties.

First, it is reliably estimated that between 3% and 5% of the population are deficient in vitamin B12. Some experts put the figure as high as 10% and it is suggested that at least a fifth of all those over the age of 60 have low vitamin B12. The certainty is that vitamin B12 deficiency is an epidemic.

Second, it is an established fact that individuals who are deficient in vitamin B12 are likely to suffer from a wide range of symptoms with dementia being one of the most significant of those symptoms.

So, around the world, how many of the many millions said to be suffering from Alzheimer's disease are in reality simply vitamin B12 deficient and could be cured with a short course of injections?

Your guess is as good as mine but we have to be talking about several hundred thousand patients in the UK alone. I'd suspect that the real figure is around 500,000.

If I am right that means that Alzheimer's disease is nowhere near as common as it is said to be and that half a million patients with Alzheimer's disease could have been cured with a simple two week course of injections.

The symptoms produced by vitamin B12 deficiency are many and varied. Vitamin B12 is absolutely essential for the human body to function properly. (There is an appendix at the back of this book in which I have listed some of the symptoms most commonly associated with vitamin B12 deficiency.)

The symptoms I am most concerned with in this book are obviously those which relate to mental issues – specifically those which could be diagnosed as dementia.

So, why is vitamin B12 deficiency being overlooked?

That's simple.

There are three simple reasons and one underlying and more complicated reason.

First, most doctors don't bother to test for vitamin B12 deficiency. There is a cheap and simple blood test available but doctors don't usually take the trouble to order it. If you don't test for vitamin B12 deficiency you won't ever find it.

Second, normal figures vary from laboratory to laboratory. This is lunacy, of course. But it's what happens. If samples of your blood are sent to two laboratories the chances are that the acceptable 'normal' figures will be different.

Third, the laboratories which do the blood tests usually give the wrong 'normal' result figures. They have been doing this for years. If a doctor sends a blood sample to a laboratory he will probably be told that a patient is only deficient in vitamin B12 if the result shows a reading of under 180 or so. And that is just plain wrong. It has been reliably established that a patient who has a blood reading of under 350-400 is almost certainly dangerously short of vitamin B12. And the shortage can be remedied with a few very cheap injections of vitamin B12.

When a patient's vitamin B12 level is down below 350, they will be quite ill. Indeed, at that point a patient will be showing severe signs of deficiency. But the patient won't be treated until their vitamin B12 level is down below 180.

In its 'Cobalamin and Folate Guidelines', the British Committee for Standards in Haematology says: 'The clinical picture is the most important factor in assessing the significance of test results assessing cobalamin status since there is no 'gold standard' test to define deficiency'.

Many experts now seem to think that symptoms rather than blood levels should be the deciding factor in deciding treatment. A study of the literature shows a clear conclusion that long-term blood levels probably need to be at least 350-400 and that the standard lab figures for vitamin B12 deficiency are far too low.

An article in the *British Journal of Haematology* in 2014 ('Guidelines for the diagnosis and treatment of cobalamin and folate disorders') suggests that doctors should consider treating patients who have vitamin B12 levels in the 'low-normal' range rather than the lower figures still being recommended by laboratories.

My conclusion is that it is a tragedy that laboratories persist in recommending 180 as a trigger point for treatment.

And since local laboratories and GPs like to look at test results before planning treatment (it makes them feel like scientists and gives them something to hold onto when they contemplate the possibility of legal action for malpractice), all the patients whose vitamin B12 levels are shown to be above 180 will be told that they are not short of vitamin B12 but have something else wrong with them.

(The precise figure varies from country to country and, within the NHS, from one district to another. As though to complicate and confuse things still further, different laboratories measure vitamin B12 in different ways. Here, I have quoted figures for pg/ml but vitamin B12 is also measured in pmol/L and ng/L. To avoid all these complications I have chosen the most common figure – which is 180 pg/ml.)

It is not surprising that one recent survey showed that 14% of the patients who were eventually diagnosed with symptoms caused by vitamin B12 deficiency waited more than ten years for the diagnosis to be made. During that decade or more they suffered constantly from mental and physical symptoms and their conditions deteriorated steadily.

And it is not surprising that in a paper published in the *British Journal of Haematology*, 2014 and entitled 'Guidelines for the diagnosis and treatment and cobalamin and folate disorders' the authors (V. Devalia, M. Hamilton and A. Molloy) concluded: 'We suggest that physicians should consider treating patients who show symptoms but have vitamin B12 levels…in the low-normal range up to approximately 300 pmol/l…'.

That seems to be a decent compromise. The advice seems to me to be: 'since our recommended blood levels are so useless we suggest that you ignore them and pretty much rely on how the patient feels'.

However, it doesn't seem as though many doctors know any of this and so older patients who are short of vitamin B12, and who are showing mental signs of being deficient in vitamin B12, are usually just diagnosed as suffering from dementia.

And, of course, the medical default diagnosis for dementia is Alzheimer's disease.

So the patient gets put into a long stay residential home and is given regular and expensive doses of drugs which won't do much (if any) good but which are much more profitable than a course of vitamin B12 injections.

Meanwhile, the younger patients who are short of vitamin B12 and who are showing physical signs such as muscle weakness and instability, and probably some mental signs too, will be diagnosed as suffering from multiple sclerosis because that is the default diagnosis for these symptoms in patients under 60 years of age.

And, like Alzheimer's disease, there is no specific test for multiple sclerosis.

Isn't that just wonderfully convenient?

And these patients, now labelled as suffering from multiple sclerosis, will either struggle on at home or they will be put into some sort of residential care. And wherever they are they will be prescribed regular and expensive drugs which probably won't make much if any difference to their condition but which will be hugely profitable for the companies which make them.

(As an aside, is it impossible that all multiple sclerosis patients might be suffering from undiagnosed vitamin B12 deficiency? Both disorders have problems caused by demyelination and the symptoms involved with multiple sclerosis and vitamin B12 deficiency are identical.)

So, that's how medicine works these days.

This isn't going to change until a patient sues a laboratory and complains that their misleading reading resulted in a good deal of unnecessary mental and physical suffering.

And there is no doubt that mental and physical suffering occurs.

When a patient's blood level of vitamin B12 is below 350, their body will already be starting to show signs of damage. And the damage will be serious. Around three quarters of patients with low vitamin B12 will suffer neurological symptoms, for vitamin B12 deficiency causes megaloblastic anaemia and demyelinating disease. (It is the demyelination which means that vitamin B12 shortage leads to symptoms which are identical to those seen with multiple sclerosis.)

If this sounds too awful to be true let me provide you with some evidence.

The New England Journal of Medicine reported in 2013 that patients with B12 deficiency develop demyelinating disease (hence the reason why so many patients are diagnosed as suffering from MS) and that patients frequently complain of muscle weakness, paraesthesia and gait problems.

The Journal of Clinical Psychiatry reported in 2009 that patients who are low in vitamin B12 suffer from neuropsychiatric disorders as well as neuropathy. Specifically listed problems include depression, dementia, auditory hallucinations, suicidal thoughts, mental impairment and psychosis.

Numerous papers in reputable medical journals have established a clear link between vitamin B12 deficiency and psychosis with many reporting that patients with low vitamin B12 may suffer from suicidal thoughts and hallucinations and then be wrongly diagnosed and treated as suffering from schizophrenia.

That's the bad news.

The good news, of course, is that if patients are given vitamin B12 (usually by a simple, cheap injection) they will get better quickly and their symptoms will be reversed. The injections are given regularly until there is clear improvement in the patient's symptoms and blood levels need to be monitored regularly.

So, why do doctors not do this simple test? Why are laboratories using the wrong measurements? Why are so many patients being mistreated?

That, I am afraid, takes us to the underlying, complicated reason.

The fact is that the drug companies which control the medical establishment (and which also control much postgraduate medical education and, through their advertising budgets, keep the medical journals alive) know that there is very little profit to be made out of identifying and treating vitamin B12 deficiency. Vitamin supplements and high dose injections are not patented and so they are very cheap. No one makes much money out of them.

I cannot overstress the fact that for many years now the pharmaceutical industry has pretty well owned the medical profession; it has certainly taken out a long lease on the medical establishment. The drug companies control how doctors practice and, most important of all, they control the way that doctors think.

If doctors do not routinely test their patients for vitamin B12 deficiency (and they do not) then a large number of patients who have physical and mental symptoms caused by a shortage of vitamin B12 will be diagnosed as suffering from other conditions – most commonly and most notably Alzheimer's disease and multiple sclerosis.

Multiple sclerosis is, like Alzheimer's disease, a disorder for which there is no specific test. It is a diagnosis which ought to be made when all other possibilities have been discounted.

But, these are profitable diseases. Patients with both disorders tend to live a long time. These are truly chronic disorders. And there are drugs available (very expensive drugs) which appear to provide some relief. The drugs don't cure the disease. The chronic nature of the disease means that patients suffer for years (sometimes for decades). Their symptoms and signs gradually get worse. But the chronic nature of their disease also means that the drug companies make enormous profits out of them.

And so multiple sclerosis is a default diagnosis for thousands of patients – in just the same way that Alzheimer's disease is a default diagnosis for patients with dementia.

You will not be surprised to learn that, as with Alzheimer's disease, multiple sclerosis is a disease which has attracted some large charities. And those charities receive a good deal of money from drug companies.

It is impossible to be precise but I would guess that probably half the patients who have been diagnosed as suffering from multiple sclerosis could have been cured if their vitamin B12 levels had been assessed and they had been treated with vitamin B12 injections. I can't think of a safer medicine with which to treat people. Vitamin B12 is water soluble and any excess is merely excreted in the urine. I haven't been able to find any evidence of anyone ever dying (or becoming seriously ill) as a result of treatment with vitamin B12. It is that rarest and most wonderful of treatments: a cheap and safe drug.

As I mentioned at the start of this chapter, vitamin B12 deficiency is very common. It affects millions of people. The symptoms of vitamin B12 deficiency vary from patient to patient but include the following: fatigue; weakness, especially in arms and legs; sore tongue; nausea; appetite loss; weight loss; bleeding gums; numbness and tingling in hands and feet; difficulty in maintaining balance; pale lips; pale tongue; pale gums; yellow eyes and skin; shortness of breath; depression; confusion and dementia; headache; poor memory. The first obvious signs of B12 deficiency might be pins and needles or coldness in the hands and feet, fatigue and weakness, poor concentration or even psychosis.

There are many reasons for the deficiency.

Some patients cannot absorb the vitamin (either because of an absence of intrinsic factor in their stomachs or because their small intestines are damaged in some way and cannot absorb it) and some patients are deficient because their diets don't contain enough of the foods which contain vitamin B12. Since vitamin B12 deficiency is common in those who follow a vegan diet it is likely that the current fashion for veganism will increase the occurrence of vitamin B12 deficiency.

Instead of checking the vitamin B12 levels for all susceptible patients (and remember, at least one in five people over the age of 60 is likely to have a dangerously low level of vitamin B12 in their blood), doctors prefer to check cholesterol levels.

Checking cholesterol levels is now hugely popular (and is an industry in itself) and millions of patients who have levels regarded as high are being treated – most commonly with drugs called statins. The drug companies are making an absolute fortune out of drugs prescribed to control cholesterol levels.

There are a few problems with this policy.

First, the evidence showing that cholesterol levels are significant is rather wobbly. And there are a good many independent doctors who believe that cholesterol levels are pretty meaningless. There are even arguments about different types of cholesterol – good cholesterol and bad cholesterol.

Second, there is evidence showing that reducing cholesterol levels can be dangerous. Patients whose cholesterol levels are reduced can become ill. This information isn't new and it isn't hidden. Indeed I wrote about it in my book *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You* which was first published in 1996.

Third, the drugs most commonly used to reduce cholesterol levels are the statins. And they can cause a number of problems. Once again I wrote about statins in *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You* in 1996.

So, here is yet more evidence showing that doctors do tests that are likely to produce evidence which is helpful to drug companies – rather than doing tests to produce evidence which helps patients. The only certainty is that treating cholesterol levels is an enormously profitable business and quite a growth industry.

If doctors really cared about the health of their patients they would leave cholesterol alone and put their effort into testing for the amount of vitamin B12 in the blood.

Chapter Three

Normal Pressure Hydrocephalus

The diagnosis of normal pressure hydrocephalus is missed more than 80% of the time. Between 5% and 10% of patients diagnosed as suffering from Alzheimer's disease or dementia are in fact suffering from the curable disease idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus – which can be fairly easily treated with a simple operation.

The three symptoms of idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus are:

A tendency to fall a good deal. If an elderly patient falls a lot then a diagnosis of idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus must be considered.

Dementia.

Urinary incontinence.

Why do doctors continue to ignore normal pressure hydrocephalus and to suppress the evidence of its significance?

There are two reasons.

First, idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus can be treated and cured with a simple surgical operation. Drug companies make millions out of selling drugs for the treatment of Alzheimer's disease and if patients with idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus were properly diagnosed, the demand for their drugs would plummet. And profits would fall. Sadly, many charities now work hand in glove with drug companies and so they follow the company line.

Second, doctors in the UK are now paid a generous fee whenever they make a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease. But they do not get paid when they make a diagnosis of normal pressure hydrocephalus. Doctors have a financial interest in over-diagnosing Alzheimer's disease.

The result is that countless millions of patients with idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus have been diagnosed as suffering from Alzheimer's disease. They have been given drugs and abandoned. They have been left to die when they could have been treated and cured.

The truth is that the medical establishment is so influenced by the drug industry that it pays little attention to normal pressure hydrocephalus which is, as a result, under-researched, under-diagnosed and under-treated. There is almost certainly no disease affecting large numbers of people which is less understood. Within the medical profession it is known (when it is known at all) as the 'wet, wacky and wobbly disease' – more a childhood term of abuse than a phrase redolent with respect.

Organisations which specialise in caring for the elderly are often appallingly ignorant about the disease, as are health websites. I asked the questions on the internet, 'why are old people unstable?' and 'why do old people fall?' and none of the first several dozen responses mentioned 'normal pressure hydrocephalus'. In the UK, the NHS Choices website devotes less than 70 words to the disease and describes the condition as 'uncommon' which is manifest nonsense since it affects a vast number of patients and is (with vitamin B12 deficiency) the commonest treatable cause of major disability and mental incapacity among the elderly.

Researchers are not interested in investigating the disease because a cure is already available and, since there is no need for a 'wonder drug' there are not going to be any big, fat grants from drug companies. And doctors are not interested in diagnosing or treating the disease because it invariably involves older patients, and doctors are encouraged by governments (and much of society) not to take much interest in elderly patients. (Remember too, that the Government in the UK gives doctors a bonus every time they diagnose Alzheimer's disease. There is no bonus for diagnosing other causes of dementia.)

If you made a list of the 100 commonest, potentially fatal but most easily cured medical conditions which are most often mistakenly diagnosed as something else, then normal pressure hydrocephalus would be top of the list.

The only things we know for certain are that idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus is much commoner than is generally thought, produces devastating results, is usually mistaken for something else and it is treatable. Patients who have been stuck in bed or in wheelchairs can, after treatment, get up and walk. They can resume their lives; talking and enjoying work and hobbies. Patients who have been abandoned have their lives back. (See the case histories at the back of this book for examples of this statement).

So, what is normal pressure hydrocephalus?

Under normal circumstances the space between the brain and the skull is filled with cerebrospinal fluid; a substance which is produced within the spaces of the brain, circulates in and around the brain and is gradually reabsorbed. In normal circumstances, the fluid is produced in the same quantities as it is being reabsorbed. The cerebrospinal fluid, which also surrounds the spinal cord, is there primarily to protect the brain in case of injury.

In the condition known as normal pressure hydrocephalus, the fluid is not reabsorbed as fast as it is produced.

When there is too much fluid in and around the brain, the stuff accumulates in the ventricles – the spaces within the brain – and the brain is put under pressure, being pushed outwards. The result of this unusual pressure is that the brain is compressed and damaged in a variety of ways. The symptoms and signs of damage will depend upon the area of the brain affected. If the problem is not treated then the damage to the brain will be irreversible.

Logically, one might expect that with too much fluid in a confined space there would be an increase in fluid pressure. By definition this does not happen with normal pressure hydrocephalus. The intracranial pressure is normal and instead of putting up the pressure, the increased amount of fluid dilates the ventricular system. If a scan is done, the ventricles usually look dilated. However, even when patients have a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) of the brain or computerised tomography (CT), the wrong diagnosis can still be made because doctors who are not aware of normal pressure hydrocephalus will probably assume not that the ventricles have become larger but that the brain has become smaller as a result of cerebral atrophy.

There are two types of normal pressure hydrocephalus – secondary and idiopathic. Secondary normal pressure hydrocephalus can be caused by a variety of external problems including a head injury, a tumour, an infection or a bleed. But idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus occurs with no underlying cause – it just happens.

Idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus, which was first described in 1965 by Hakim and Adams, does not appear to be any commoner in men than in women or in women than in men, and there is not as yet any evidence showing whether it is particularly likely to affect any particular racial or ethnic groups. Although it can affect people of any age it does, however, seem to be most commonly seen among patients in their sixties or older and it is this which results in patients being so often misdiagnosed as suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

'There are no cures for many types of dementia. But there are some treatable forms of dementia, and normal pressure hydrocephalus is one of them,' said Ann Marie Flannery, a neurosurgeon at Women's and Children's Hospital in Lafayette, Louisiana, reported in *US News Health Care*.

The symptoms of idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus make it surprisingly easy to diagnose.

The initial, main symptom is often a curious, wide-legged, unsteady walk. The patient's feet seem to stick to the floor, and have to be dragged up in order to make the next step. Patients adopt a wide-legged gait in an attempt to make themselves more stable but they are, nevertheless, often unstable and may fall. Indeed, falling is a common problem with patients suffering from idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus, and in any elderly person who falls more than once or twice, the possible diagnosis of idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus should be placed quite high up on the list of possible causes.

Sadly, it is still the case that many leading health websites do not even mention normal pressure hydrocephalus as a possible cause of falls though since it is fairly common and treatable, the disorder should be listed towards the top of any such list, together with balance problems and drug side effects.

Since time is of the essence in diagnosing idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus, this disorder should always be considered very early on when a patient has fallen more than once or twice. Simply dismissing falls as 'an inevitable part of ageing', as some doctors are prone to do, is grossly irresponsible and unprofessional. Falling is not associated with any of the other common dementias, such as Alzheimer's disease.

The gait disturbance tends to get steadily worse as the amount of fluid increases and the ventricles within the brain expand. When the ventricles expand, they put pressure on the part of the nervous system which descends into the spinal cord.

In the early stages of normal pressure hydrocephalus, the gait disturbance will probably be mild and result in the patient being unsteady and having impaired balance, particularly when trying to walk up and down stairs or steps or even kerbs. The patient will probably also complain that their legs feel weak, though there will probably be no explanation for this.

As the disease progresses, so the patient's gait steadily gets worse. The patient will not lift their feet properly when walking and will walk very slowly. It is because of the gait disturbance that normal pressure hydrocephalus is often misdiagnosed as Parkinson's disease. The tendency to fall is so common in normal pressure hydrocephalus that it is, I think, reasonable to say that if a patient falls a good deal and suffers from some form of dementia then a diagnosis of idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus must be considered first of all.

In the final stages of the disease, patients may be unable to walk, then unable to stand and finally even unable turn over when lying in bed.

The second symptom is dementia, a chronic disorder of the mental processes which is caused by some brain disease or injury and which is characterised by mental disorder, personality changes and impaired reasoning. And this is why normal pressure hydrocephalus is so often misdiagnosed as Alzheimer's disease, or some other cause of dementia. The dementia in idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus usually involves the frontal lobe (because of the situation of the swelling ventricles within the brain) and patients will usually appear slow witted, forgetful and apathetic. There may be an absence of mood (patients are neither happy when they might be expected to be happy nor sad when sadness might be appropriate) and patients often have difficulty in speaking. The first sign of the dementia associated with this disease is often a curious difficulty in planning, organising or putting things in order. The patient may also have difficulty in paying attention and in thinking in an abstract way.

Patients may lose interest in daily activities, they forget names and things to be done, they have difficulty in dealing with routine tasks and their short-term memory may be poor. (One sufferer complained that he could no longer read a book because when he got to page 10 he could not remember what had happened on page 1.)

Although this symptom is usually placed second chronologically, it may be noticeable much earlier in some patients. I suspect that the reason the mental problems are not recognised or recorded, may often be because relatives and friends don't know what to look for, don't register subtle changes as being indicative of any underlying pathology and may dismiss changes as being simply consequences of 'old age'.

It is important to remember that dementia is not a disease but a consequence of some underlying disease. And it is vital to remember that although the dementia associated with normal pressure hydrocephalus may appear similar, in superficial terms, to the dementia associated with Alzheimer's disease, the two underlying disorders are quite different entities. There is, sadly, no cure for Alzheimer's disease at the moment but there is a remarkably effective and relatively simple cure available for normal pressure hydrocephalus. To describe normal pressure hydrocephalus as a variation of Alzheimer's disease (as I have seen done) is as nonsensical as describing heart disease as a type of cancer.

The final symptom to occur is often urinary incontinence.

Patients tend to have an increased sense of urgency (they suddenly need to urinate) but in the later stages, as the frontal lobe damage increases, they become indifferent to the consequences and genuine urinary incontinence may result. In some cases the urinary incontinence may occur quite early on in the disease. Some patients also develop faecal incontinence.

Mainstream medical textbooks do not include headache as a significant symptom in this condition but it can occur and it seems perfectly reasonable that it should do so. After all, the brain is being compressed and squashed against the skull and the eyes are under constant pressure. It would be rather unlikely if patients with this condition did not have, at the very least, an uncomfortable feeling in their heads.

Patients may also have difficulty in focussing their eyes and occasionally, towards the end of the patient's life, the eyes may bulge as the pressure of fluid builds up.

Whatever symptoms may occur they tend to progress with time, sometimes slowly and sometimes quite quickly. Careful questioning of the patient suggests that symptoms may have been present for months or even years before a doctor was consulted. By then the patient may have, to a certain extent, become accustomed to their disability and the chances are high that they themselves will have learned to regard the difficulty in walking, the slowness of thought or the incontinence as an inevitable consequence of ageing. In many cases it is only when there is a critical loss of function, or a disability which dramatically affects the patient's independence, which leads to the patient seeking medical advice. At that point, the chances are high that the only solution on offer will be a default diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease, a bed in a nursing home or hospice or a suggestion that a relative should take over and provide accommodation and care.

The symptoms associated with normal pressure hydrocephalus do vary a good deal. The one constant factor seems to be the delay in making the diagnosis. Time and time again patients and relatives will report that it took years for an accurate diagnosis to be made and that even then it was only after the patient had seen a good many doctors. The evidence now suggests that in 80% of patients the correct diagnosis is never made.

So, how common is idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus?

Idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus has been so little investigated that it is difficult to be certain how common it really is but there are three ways to tackle this vital question. All these methods make it very clear that idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus is far more common than most doctors believe. (A large proportion of doctors, including a surprising number of neurologists and psychiatrists are quite unfamiliar with the disorder.)

First, a study in Japan showed that normal pressure hydrocephalus affects a far higher number of individuals than is historically considered possible. Since there are no genetic or racial variations in the incidence of the disease, the figures can be applied globally.

The Japanese researchers investigated 567 individuals aged 65 and older and found seven patients with idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus. The researchers conclude 'the prevalence of possible idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus to be 1.4%' among individuals aged 65 and older.

When researchers in Sweden investigated the prevalence of probable idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus in a population of 65 years and older, they found the incidence to be 4%, with a higher proportion of men than women being diagnosed with the disease.

In the UK, there are approximately 10 million people aged 65 or older. If we use the Japanese figures for the UK's population then it would seem that there are currently around 140,000 people in the UK with normal pressure hydrocephalus. In the US, where there are considerably more than 40 million people aged 65 or older, the Japanese figures would suggest that there are around 560,000 people suffering from normal pressure hydrocephalus. If we use the Swedish figures then it suggests that there are currently 400,000 people in the UK with idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus. And in the US the figure is a staggering 1,600,000.

(See the paper entitled 'Prevalence of possible idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus in Japan', written by Tanaka, Yamaguchi, Ishikawa, Ishii and Meguro and published by Neuroepidemiology in 2009, and the paper entitled 'Fluid Barriers CNS. Abstracts from Hydrocephalus 2015', written by Rosell CM, Andersson J, Kockum K, Lilija-Lund O, Soderstrom L and Laurell K in Sweden. There are more references about normal pressure hydrocephalus in my short book on the disease entitled *Millions of Alzheimer's Patients Have Been Misdiagnosed (And Could Be Cured)*.)

The research has shown that only a very tiny percentage of these individuals have been accurately diagnosed as suffering from idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus. The vast majority of these individuals who have been diagnosed at all will have been diagnosed as suffering from Alzheimer's disease or some other form of dementia or from Parkinson's disease. Many individuals, of course, will not have been given a diagnosis at all but will have been simply labelled 'old' and dismissed as not worthy of attention.

A second way of measuring the incidence of normal pressure hydrocephalus is to look at the incidence of the disease among long-stay patients. The incidence of idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus is said to be around 14% among long-term patients in care homes, nursing homes and other residential centres – whether or not they have dementia. This figure suggests that in a small general nursing home with 20 patients, there are likely to be three to six patients who have idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus who could be treated and, possibly, cured. In a larger institution, specialising in the care of patients with Alzheimer's disease or some other form of dementia, the figure is likely to be much greater.

A third way of measuring the incidence of normal pressure hydrocephalus is to look at the number of people suffering from dementia in general and then look at studies where attempts have been made to assess the number of patients who have been misdiagnosed.

It is now generally agreed among experts that one in eight individuals over the age of 65 will have Alzheimer's disease. And it is also agreed that patients officially diagnosed as suffering from Alzheimer's disease make up between 50% to 70% of all those suffering from dementia. So the number of people over the age of 65 who have dementia will be between one in four and one in six.

The big question here is: 'How many of the patients diagnosed as suffering from irreversible, untreatable dementia are actually suffering from a disease (idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus) for which a cure is available?'

The Hydrocephalus Association in the United States estimates that there are 700,000 adults in America who have idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus but that only a fifth of these patients have been diagnosed. The remainder have been misdiagnosed as suffering from Alzheimer's, some other dementia or Parkinson's disease. Available scientific evidence suggests that the majority of the rest could be treated and restored to good health.

If the Hydrocephalus Association in America is correct, there are 560,000 patients in the US who have idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus but who do not know it, have not been diagnosed or treated and who are being left to die, untreated and without hope. The figures for the UK and other countries are undoubtedly similar. The evidence suggests that there are 175,000 patients in the UK who have treatable idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus but who have been misdiagnosed as suffering from an untreatable dementia and (since doctors receive a fee for diagnosing it) probably labelled as suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

Around the world there are probably several million patients who have normal pressure hydrocephalus and who could, have been cured if they had been correctly diagnosed.

The key thing to remember is that normal pressure hydrocephalus can be cured with a single, relatively simple surgical procedure. And the bottom line is that patients with dementia, who are confined to a hospital or nursing home or to bed in their own homes, can become independent again if they are treated.

Very few specialist studies have been done to measure the incidence of idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus among patients in 'assisted living facilities' or 'extended care facilities' but the results which exist show that between 9% and 14% of the patients studied had idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus.

The tragedy, as I have already explained, is that patients with idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus are often mistakenly diagnosed as suffering from other disorders such as Alzheimer's disease, other dementias or Parkinson's disease.

'Many people go undiagnosed and untreated because the symptoms of normal pressure hydrocephalus can mimic Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease and other neurological or spinal disorders that can occur in adults as they age', says Michael Williams, a neurologist and director of the Adult Hydrocephalus Center at the Sandra and Malcolm Berman Brain and Spine Institute at Sinai Hospital of Baltimore in Maryland.

The size of this scandal is difficult to comprehend and as the number of people in their 60s and beyond increases, so the number of people with treatable normal pressure hydrocephalus will increase proportionally.

As I mentioned earlier, normal pressure hydrocephalus was first identified in 1965. No one has any idea how many people have been misdiagnosed since then. Because of ignorance among doctors and nurses, idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus is rarely diagnosed and so it is invariably categorised as a 'rare disease'.

But idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus is not a rare disease. It is clear that when the disease is looked for, it is common.

Once you know what to look out for, idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus is not particularly difficult to diagnose. It should not be 'missed' as often as it is. (My mother's diagnosis was missed by a series of neurologists at the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital. Her case history is described in an appendix at the back of this book.)

The principle symptoms of idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus are: a wide-legged, unsteady gait, a tendency to fall a good deal (commonly falling backwards, incontinence (usually urinary but double incontinence sometimes occurs) and dementia. Other symptoms and signs may include headaches. Patients usually appear slow thinking and have impaired memory. They may lose their inhibitions and behave inappropriately in company – saying or doing things that are completely out of character. Patients have difficulty in starting and carrying out tasks, find it hard to focus and lose motivation. They tend to sleep a good deal.

Because other types of dementia may produce similar symptoms, or symptoms which can be confused with these, or because the dementia may be by far the most dominant symptom that it overwhelms the others, it is dangerous to try to make a diagnosis of idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus from the symptoms alone.

As a starting point, most doctors investigating dementia and suspecting idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus will perform a scan; either an MRI scan or a CT scan. MRI is painless and takes at least half an hour. MRI uses radio signals and a powerful magnet to create a picture of the brain. It will show if the ventricles are enlarged and will provide information about the surrounding brain tissue. An MRI scan will also evaluate the flow of cerebrospinal fluid. An MRI scan provides more information that is likely to be used in making a diagnosis of idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus. A CT scan creates a picture of the brain using X-rays and a special scanner. It is reliable, painless and quicker than an MRI and it will show if the ventricles are enlarged or if there is any obvious blockage.

A scan of the brain may show that there is excess cerebrospinal fluid and that the ventricles within the brain are enlarged. Unfortunately, these findings are not pathognomonic – though they certainly suggest that a diagnosis of idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus is possible if not probable.

The most accurate way to make a diagnosis is to do a lumbar puncture (also known as a spinal tap) and to remove some of the excess cerebrospinal fluid from around the spinal cord and the brain. If there is an improvement within three or four days after a lumbar puncture has been done and some fluid removed, then the diagnosis of idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus is likely. And there is a real chance that the patient’s symptoms can be improved.

It is usually wise to allow cerebrospinal fluid to drain for a few days while evaluating the patient.

If there is a clinical improvement after 30 mls or so of fluid have been removed, then there will probably be a good response if a shunt is put into place.

However, the fact that there is no improvement after some cerebrospinal fluid has been removed does not mean that a diagnosis of idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus is impossible. It may still be worth putting in a shunt – especially if other signs and symptoms suggest that it might help. It is worth remembering that idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus is one of the few diseases masquerading as dementia (and by far the most common) which can be treated effectively.

When a shunt has been placed in situ, it will probably be necessary to adjust the rate at which fluid is draining out. If too much fluid has been allowed out then the patient may develop a headache. The outflow of cerebrospinal fluid can be adjusted without extra surgery. If a shunt is not draining enough fluid then the first symptoms to reoccur will probably be related to walking. The recurrence of a walking problem may mean that the shunt is not working properly or that it needs to be adjusted so that more fluid drains out. It is important to remember that very little research has been done into idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus and, in a sense, every patient is an experiment.

There are other tests which may be done to find out whether a patient has idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus.

One is the infusion test in which the outflow of cerebrospinal fluid is measured. This test assesses the degree to which the absorption of CSF back into the bloodstream has been blocked.

Another test is to measure the intracranial pressure. A small pressure monitor is inserted through the skull into the brain or the ventricles to measure the intracranial pressure. Unfortunately, this is not necessarily diagnostic since some patients with idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus will not have raised intracranial pressure.

A third test, known as isotopic cisternography involves injecting into a radioactive isotope into the lumbar subarachnoid space through a spinal tap. This test allows the absorption of CSF to be evaluated over several days. This test is not particularly often used because it is complicated, and does not reliably predict whether a patient will respond well to shunt surgery.

If a patient is to be properly diagnosed and treated then, in addition to the GP or primary care physician, advice will be needed from a neurologist and a neurosurgeon. There will be two important decisions to make: is the patient suffering from idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus and are they likely to benefit from a shunt operation.

Once diagnosed, idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus is remarkably simple to treat. And the treatment, a relatively small operation, usually provides a permanent cure. There is no need for long-term drug therapy. (This, I am afraid, explains why the pharmaceutical industry has generally been instrumental in suppressing the interest of the medical profession in the disease. I make no apology for repeating this allegation.)

The aim of treatment is to get rid of the excess cerebrospinal fluid which has accumulated and which is doing the damage. In order to remove the excess fluid, a small piece of plastic tubing (known as a shunt) is placed in the ventricles of the brain and run under the skin to the abdomen where the fluid drains away and is gradually absorbed. This mechanically simple procedure is known as ventriculoperitoneal shunting.

Alternatively, the tubing can lead from the brain to the right atrium of the heart. This is known as ventriculoatrial shunting.

Whatever type of shunt is used, the opening pressure of the valve can be adjusted in order to avoid side effects created by removing too much or too little fluid. This is usually done with the aid of a small magnet which controls the valve's setting and which can be rotated with the aid of a stronger magnet.

Recently, surgeons have begun to perform lumboperitoneal shunt surgery which, it seems, may prove to be safer. A study reported in 2015 suggested that the lumboperitoneal approach is effective. According to Professor S Chabardes, Head of the Functional Stereotactic Unit at the Department of Neurolsurgery of the Joseph Fourier University, Grenoble, France: 'This shunt might be better accepted and tolerated by the patients.'

This sort of treatment definitely works.

Professor G L Lenzi, from the Department of Neurology of La Sapienza, Rome, has stated that: 'patients who had surgery significantly improved motor and non-motor symptoms compared to the non-surgical patients'.

Whatever type of shunt is used, a good response is usually obtained within a few hours of the procedure being performed, with the patient being able to walk more easily and being less incontinent. There is also often a significant improvement in mental function.

The earlier the diagnosis is made, and the earlier treatment is initiated, the greater the chances that the patient's mental capacities will improve. Some early studies suggested that only patients in the early stages of the disease benefitted but more recent studies have shown that putting in a shunt will result in a noticeable or marked improvement in between 70% and 86% of patients who have quite severe symptoms. On the whole, experts have concluded that more than 80% of those having surgery experience improvement. The age of the patient does not seem to have any effect on the outcome. There can be risks with this type of surgery but if the diagnosis has been made then patients and relatives may well feel that the risks are worth taking. Risks in medicine must always be related to the seriousness of the illness involved. If a patient is going to die then even a risky procedure is worth trying.

Much of the important research into idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus has taken place in Sweden, and scientists there have developed a way of measuring cerebrospinal fluid dynamics. Artificial cerebrospinal fluid is added and the resultant resistance is measured. The greater the resistance the more likely it is that the patient will benefit from treatment. The scientists also measure the effects of removing 50 mls of cerebrospinal fluid. If tests show an improvement in the patient's ability to think and to move after the removal of the fluid then good results from surgery are much more likely.

Sometimes, patients who have had a good deal of cerebrospinal fluid removed (because a shunt is over-draining, for example) may develop headaches. When this happens the headache can be minimised by using an adjustable shunt.

The prognosis when idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus has been diagnosed and treated is excellent. Once the shunt operation is performed, patients with idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus will often make quite remarkable recoveries.

It is well known that the human brain can recover after a stroke (in which the tissue may be starved of oxygen by a blood clot or starved of oxygen and compressed by a bleed) and that it is possible for stroke victims to recover lost mental and physical skills for many months after an incident. Similarly, there is no reason why the brain cannot make a remarkable recovery after the traumas of idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus although, of course, progress is likely to be faster and more complete when the diagnosis is made at an early stage and the treatment started early.

Around 80% of patients benefit from the shunt surgery offered as treatment, and it is worth remembering that this figure will probably be higher in patients who have good general health and lower in patients who have poor general health and who are suffering from other problems such as diabetes or high blood pressure. The patient who is exceptionally frail and weak is unlikely to do as well as the patient whose only health problem is the idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus for which he is being treated.

According to a paper entitled 'Long-term outcome in 109 adult patients operated on for hydrocephalus', which was written by Tisell M, Hellstrom P, Ahl-Borjesson G, Barrows G, Blomsterwall M, Tullberg M, Wikkelso C. and published in the *British Journal of Neurosurgery* in 2006, 79% of patients who responded to a questionnaire after a medium follow-up time of 4.2 years, reported that they still felt improved and 60% had 'persisting observable improvement of gait, living conditions, bladder function and need of sleep'.

It is clear that the majority of patients with idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus who are diagnosed and treated with surgery have a clearly beneficial outcome.

It is worth remembering that patients who have the condition and are not treated will continue to deteriorate and will eventually die.

There are, sadly, some (including many in political positions of authority) who do not believe in providing health care for those who have passed a certain age. However, from a purely financial point of view this is nonsense.

Unless society is preparing to introduce mass euthanasia for all patients suffering from dementia then curing a patient, and enabling them to live practical, profitable and useful lives must be preferable in every conceivable way (including financial) to leaving them to be dependent upon 24 hour nursing care, whether that care is provided professionally or by relatives.

The bottom line, however, is that doctors rarely diagnose idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus.

If you have a relative or friends whom you think might be suffering from this disorder then you should spare no effort in pushing doctors to consider the diagnosis and to conduct the necessary tests.

Idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus was identified in 1965 but even today there is still very little about the disease in medical journals, and medical textbooks devote very little space to the disease. I have in front of me a large medical book which contains over 2,000 pages of closely printed text. Less than half of one page is devoted to idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus. I have seen several major medical textbooks which make no mention at all of the disease.

One major textbook, containing nearly 4,000 pages, also devotes just half of one page to normal pressure hydrocephalus and, after dismissing the disease in such a remarkably cavalier fashion adds that ‘this disorder accounts for up to 6% of dementias’. Since there are reckoned to be at least 50 million dementia sufferers in the world that would mean that there are approximately 3 million patients in the world with idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus – most of them untreated. And this is a disease which can be cured.

If you have never heard of a disease, or you know very little about it, then you are unlikely to think of it when you see a patient suffering from what appears to be a form of dementia. Sadly, the easy thing to do is to make a diagnosis of Alzheimer’s disease and abandon the patient to a life of inevitable, remorseless decline. If normal pressure hydrocephalus is untreated then the path of the disease will match that of Alzheimer’s disease and no one, least of all the doctor, will question the doctor’s diagnosis.

Doctors who have heard of normal pressure hydrocephalus say that it is a rare disease. The fact is, however, that it isn’t so much a rare disease as a rarely diagnosed disease. If doctors aren’t aware of it and don’t look for it then they will never see it.

An important and revealing study done in in Sweden (where the disorder is better known and understood than in most other countries) showed that the majority of doctors considered themselves to have ‘poor knowledge’ about the symptoms of normal pressure hydrocephalus.

I would suspect that in the UK and the US, the word ‘very’ could reasonably be placed before the words ‘poor knowledge’. My own experience suggests that a majority of doctors have never heard of the disease and therefore never think of it when making a diagnosis of dementia or Alzheimer’s disease.

The failure to diagnose normal pressure hydrocephalus has undoubtedly resulted in millions of patients living out the final years of their lives requiring full-time nursing care. How many countless million years of productive life have been wasted? And how many relatives and friends have suffered unnecessarily as they have watched their loved ones die slowly and with a steadily increasing loss of cerebral function?

The pure financial cost of this failure by the medical profession is impossible to estimate accurately. It is estimated that the cost of dementias to the UK is £26.3 billion a year. The country could save between £1.3 billion and £2.6 billion a year by diagnosing and treating patients with idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus.

Finally, it is important to remember that relatively little research has been done into this disease and although we do know that it is far commoner than is generally appreciated, there is a desperate need for more research into the causes of the disease as well as into ways of making a rapid diagnosis and new ways to treat the disorder quickly and efficiently.

It is a scandal that this disease has not been investigated more thoroughly.

It is not possible to estimate the emotional, social and financial cost of Alzheimer’s disease and dementia. The heartbreak of watching someone you love lose their mind is difficult to explain. And the social and financial cost of looking after a patient suffering from Alzheimer’s disease and dementia is impossible to estimate.

If just 1% of the patients currently languishing in hospitals, nursing homes and private homes could be cured then much heartache and billions of dollars would be saved.

It is no exaggeration to say that many millions of patients who require 24 hour nursing care could be returned to useful, independent, productive and rewarding lives if those patients with idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus were correctly diagnosed and not merely dismissed as suffering from an incurable dementia.

Vast amounts of money are spent by medical researchers – sometimes on disorders which affect very few patients.

Vast amounts of publicity are given to disorders which are genuinely rare.

So, why is idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus so little known?

And why is so little effort put into researching the disorder?

Part of the answer is that very little money is spent on researching or publicising disorders which affect the elderly. Disorders which affect those over 60 are regarded as unglamorous and therefore not worth the attention of politicians, doctors, nurses or journalists.

But the main answer, I'm afraid, lies in the way that medical research is conducted.

Most medical research is organised and paid for by drug companies looking for new products to sell. Doctors and scientists hoping to be given grants will usually look for a drug solution to any problem because they know that the best way to obtain drug company money is to offer a possibly valuable therapeutic solution to a chronic problem. Similarly, many charities have links with drug companies. And they too will be keen to make it clear that money given to them will be spent on searching for a solution which involves a solution which can be patented and then prescribed or sold over the counter.

There is no need to find a pharmaceutical solution to idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus because we already know how to cure the disease. A relatively simple one-off operation will provide a long-term cure. There is no opportunity for a researcher or a charity to offer a drug company a profitable outcome if they help pay for a research programme into the disease.

And so little or no research is done.

And since many of the world's medical journals are effectively controlled by drug companies (which provide the advertising which keeps the journals alive) there are few articles drawing attention to a disease which the medical profession has more or less forgotten.

So idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus remains almost unknown.

If you suspect that a relative or friend might have idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus then you must take action.

Remember: whenever a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease or any other type of dementia is made then it is wise to seek a second or third opinion. Similarly, when a diagnosis of Parkinson's disease is made another opinion should be sought. Idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus is often missed but it can be treated with spectacular, life-saving results.

'People shouldn't assume that all dementia is incurable Alzheimer's and that their situation is hopeless,' says neurosurgeon Ann Marie Flannery, a member of the joint guidelines committee of the American Association of Neurological Surgeons and Congress of Neurological Surgeons.

Michael Williams, the neurologist, says that 'the literature in the past 15 years shows that if you conduct the right tests and select the right patients, the likelihood of benefit is quite high and the risk of harm is quite low.'

Writing as the relative of a patient who had the disease, and having seen the effects of idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus far closer than I would have liked, I would say that the risks of performing the shunting operation are always worth taking if a diagnosis of idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus is probable or even possible. When a patient is demented, bed bound and doubly incontinent the potential upside is dramatic and the guaranteed downside is of limited consequence.

And the simple fact is that everyone will benefit if more patients are properly diagnosed. Treating idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus in the elderly population will reduce health care expenditure dramatically, making hospital beds available for more acute patients.

It is in all our interests to put more time, energy and money into investigating idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus and doing more to educate the public, the medical profession and the nursing profession about a disease which is a surprisingly common cause of dementia and the only common cause of dementia which can be treated and cured.

Chapter Four

Alzheimer’s Disease

At any age, few things are more frightening than the idea of losing your mind.

And, as a result of work done by drug companies, doctors, charities and journalists, for most people ‘losing your mind’ means developing Alzheimer’s disease. For an increasing number of people over 50, this nightmare is becoming a reality.

Alzheimer’s disease was virtually unheard of just a few decades ago. Today, Alzheimer’s disease is described as an epidemic.

Scientists have claimed that Alzheimer’s disease is commoner now because people are living longer. This is nonsense. Visit any cemetery and the chances are high that you will find plenty of graves for people who died in their 80s or 90s around 100 years ago. (You will also find plenty of graves for young children – showing just how high the incidence of infant and child mortality used to be and why the average life expectancy was so short.)

The incidence of Alzheimer’s disease has risen partly because the size of the population has increased. If there are twice as many people living in a town then the incidence of dementia in the town will probably increase in proportion. And the incidence of Alzheimer’s will continue to rise steadily as the population increases.

But the alleged incidence of Alzheimer’s disease has also risen because there are strong commercial incentives for this diagnosis to be made erroneously. A diagnosis of Alzheimer’s disease should never be made until all other possible causes of dementia have been excluded but, as I have already shown, that is not what happens.

Alzheimer’s is, like all forms of dementia, a terrible disease: gradually robbing the sufferer of his or her memory, judgement, reasoning skills, speech and dignity. The disease also has an effect on the emotions as well as on behaviour.

Here are three basic facts:

Alzheimer’s, a physical, progressive condition for which there is no known cure, causes degeneration of the nerve cells in the cerebral cortex of the brain as well as loss of brain mass.

Alzheimer’s affects both men and women; no sex or nationality is immune to the disease.

The incidence of Alzheimer’s seems to increases with age: it occurs in up to 30 per cent of people over the age of 85. However, although this is uncommon, Alzheimer’s disease can affect people as young as 35. When it occurs at an early age, Alzheimer’s is known as early-onset familial Alzheimer’s disease and it tends to progress much more rapidly than late-onset Alzheimer’s. For many years, early-onset Alzheimer’s was known as pre-senile dementia (dementia that is not associated with advanced age). Early-onset Alzheimer’s disease can be an inherited disease. It is important to repeat, by the way, that there is no reason why mental faculties should deteriorate with age. Dementia is not a normal consequence of growing old.

Dementia (which is a Latin word meaning ‘loss of mind’) is a gradual deterioration in mental function: affecting memory, thinking, judgement, concentration, learning, speech and behaviour. Because the disease begins very gradually, the symptoms of Alzheimer’s may go unnoticed for a while.

Mild forgetfulness, which is so common in the early stages of the disease, may simply be put down to ‘getting older’ (though it is worth repeating that there is no specific reason why memory should deteriorate with age).

However, as the disease progresses, the symptoms become more noticeable, especially the memory loss. It is usually the loss of memory that motivates sufferers or their relatives to seek medical attention.

Not every sufferer of Alzheimer’s will follow the course of the disease exactly. The disease, which usually develops gradually, progresses faster in some people than it does in others.

It is also important to be aware that even though the commonest symptoms of the disease are shared by the majority of sufferers, no two people will experience identical symptoms.

The symptoms which appear on the list below are not inevitable. But knowing a little about the possible progression of Alzheimer’s can help you plan for the future. Forewarned is forearmed.

The following symptoms usually occur in the early stages of Alzheimer’s disease:

Forgetfulness, especially of recent events. Sufferers may remember events that took place a year ago, but lose all recollection of what occurred an hour ago. In the very early stages of Alzheimer’s, it is only short-term memory loss which is affected; memory loss deteriorates as the disease progresses. It is not uncommon for sufferers to become highly defensive when questioned about their failing memory; this is because they usually feel embarrassed or frightened by it. Some sufferers even go to great lengths to hide their memory loss from friends and relatives.

Difficulty in making decisions.

An inability to do tasks which require some intellectual ability, such as simple mathematical calculations, managing the household finances, etc.

Repetitious questioning – the same question may be asked over and over again because the sufferer has lost all memory of having asked that question previously. Stories may also be repeated for the same reason.

Misplacing objects – the sugar may be put in the fridge for example, because the sufferer is not able to remember where it is normally stored.

Constantly losing things.

Difficulty in finding the right word when talking (Anomia).

Frequently losing train of thought during conversations.

Apathy.

Forgetting the names of objects and calling them by a different name, for example, a chair may be called a bench or a cupboard might be called a wardrobe.

Loss of concentration.

Forgetting familiar names.

Listlessness.

Inability to learn new information – this is due to loss of short-term memory which is essential when it comes to learning anything new.

Depression and anxiety.

Sleep disturbances.

Disorientation in time – a sufferer may be confused as to what day, month or year it is.

Poor judgement – the Alzheimer sufferer may put on a thick woolly jumper even though it's the middle of summer and the temperature is ninety degrees in the shade.

Increasing difficulty with speech. The sufferer may withdraw from intellectual conversations as a result.

Personality changes – a previously trusting person may suddenly become suspicious of everyone they encounter, even their loved ones. Other personality changes may include: hostility, jealousy, outbursts of anger and sometimes violence.

Getting lost in familiar places. So, for example, a sufferer may forget their usual route back home from a shop or from a friend's house.

Symptoms usually occurring in the later stages of Alzheimer's disease include:

Carelessness – frequently leaving the cooker on or, if they smoke, leaving burning cigarettes lying around. This type of carelessness can be life-threatening both to the sufferer as well as to the people around them.

Mood swings – sobbing uncontrollably one minute and laughing hysterically the next for no apparent reason.

Simple everyday tasks becoming increasingly difficult.

Lack of personal hygiene.

Personality changes becoming more apparent.

Increasing problems with speech.

Wandering – roaming from room to room as if looking for something.

Repetition of simple but usually purposeful activities. For instance, repeatedly smoothing down a fold in the tablecloth.

Behaviour may become increasingly bizarre.

Severe deterioration of comprehension.

Loss of sexual inhibitions.

Strong denial that anything is wrong.

Extreme lack of motivation.

Severe sleep disturbances.

Symptoms usually occurring in the advanced stages of Alzheimer's disease include:

A failure to recognize familiar faces. The patient may not be able to identify their spouse and may confuse him/her with another family member. It is also quite common for sufferers not even to recognize themselves when they look in the mirror and because of this, they may complain of a stranger being in the room.

The sufferer can no longer find his or her way around their own home.

Loss of the ability to read and write.

Personality changes becoming more severe and problematical.

The sufferer may experience hallucinations.

A complete failure to recognize ordinary, everyday objects.

Speech becomes unintelligible.

A total dependency on others for help with: toileting, bathing, eating, dressing, etc.

Bowel and bladder incontinence.

An inability to walk or even sit up.

Severe confusion and disorientation.

Paranoid delusions.

An inability to swallow.

Finally, there is likely to be a complete loss of memory and speech as well as muscle function. A patient with final stage Alzheimer's disease will need complete nursing care for they will be unable to do anything for themselves.

Death usually occurs in about five to ten years after diagnosis (always dying of something else since Alzheimer's disease itself does not cause death – see Appendix at the back of this book) though in some cases, the sufferer can have the disease for as long as 20 years.

Sufferers do not die from the primary brain damage caused by Alzheimer's, but from a complication of the disease. This is a consequence of the increasing debility that the disease causes to the sufferer. Once sufferers become immobile, they are far more susceptible to infection and to the development of heart disease.

Finally, it is important to point out that individuals who experience some or all of the symptoms associated with Alzheimer's should not panic. Most of us experience lapses of memory from time to time during conversation. These lapses of memory are quite normal.

However, if forgetfulness becomes noticeably worse, it is time to seek help. Remember that the symptoms of Alzheimer's can be caused by a wide variety of illnesses, some of which can be treated. If a doctor assumes that dementia is caused by Alzheimer's then it would probably be wise to find another doctor.

Making a firm diagnosis of Alzheimer's is not easy. To be 100 per cent certain that someone is suffering from Alzheimer's disease, an autopsy on the brain needs to be performed. The next best option is for a specialist to carry out some tests to try to make an accurate diagnosis. The tests, which are performed to help diagnose Alzheimer's disease, are sometimes said to be about 90 per cent accurate although I have grave doubts about this. Plaques on the brain can occur with Alzheimer's but they can nearly always be seen on an older brain and so their significance is probably overstated. With the aid of state-of-the-art equipment, researchers claim they are becoming increasingly adept at spotting the disease but the diagnosis is really one that should only be made when all other possibilities have been excluded.

When doctors suspect that a patient might have Alzheimer's disease, they should perform the following tests:

Psychiatric examination – this is to rule out depression or any other mental illness that can mimic the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease.

Blood tests – to detect illnesses (such as vitamin B12 deficiency) that can cause dementia-type symptoms.

Mental test – to assess brain function such as: memory, the ability to do simple addition or subtraction, comprehension, etc.

EMG (Electromyography) – to test the large muscles in the body. (In some diseases of the brain, this activity can malfunction.)

Neurological examination – the nervous system is examined to look for other illnesses which might be causing similar symptoms, such as Parkinson's disease, previous strokes, brain tumours, etc.

CAT scan (Computerised Axial Tomography) – takes pictures of the brain to check for any anomalies.

Physical examination – like the neurological and the blood tests, this examination is also used to rule out any other underlying disorders.

EEG (Electroencephalogram) – to assess abnormalities in brain wave activity.

Medical history assessment – this may involve interviews with the patient and his or her partner or with one or two members of his/her family. This is to find out how he/she is functioning with day-to-day living and to learn about any previous or any familial illnesses. It is also important to assess drug therapy to see if prescription drug use could be causing confusion and memory loss.

MRI scan (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) – is very much like the CAT scan. An MRI scan may be used if nothing shows up from the CAT scan.

SPECT scan (Single Photon Emission Computerised Tomography) – unlike the MRI and the CAT scanners which look at the structure of the brain, the SPECT scan looks for a change in the function of brain tissue. The person being scanned is given an injection of glucose together with a mild radioactive material. This substance, called radionuclide, circulates in the brain. The SPECT scan then measures the amount of radionuclide in various parts of brain tissue. (The brain's main source of energy is glucose; in people suffering with Alzheimer's, certain areas of the brain do not absorb as much glucose as would be normal.)

If there is any suspicion that the symptoms of dementia could be caused by normal pressure hydrocephalus then a lumbar puncture should be performed.

Sadly, most diagnoses of dementia (and, by default, of Alzheimer's disease) are made without most (or any) of these tests being performed. That is, in my view, criminal negligence.

Although it is important to get a diagnosis as early on in the disease as possible, because this enables everyone concerned to plan for the future, it is also a good idea to retain an open mind. It is by no means uncommon for new symptoms or signs to appear and for these to suggest that an alternative diagnosis is the correct one.

It is, incidentally, important to remember that most doctors still dramatically under-estimate the importance of iatrogenesis – or doctor-induced disease. It is perfectly possible for a team of doctors to perform all these tests and yet forget to find out if a patient is taking a tranquilliser or sedative which could be causing all the symptoms. And even when the doctors know that a patient is taking prescription drugs they are likely to ignore, forget or downplay the possible side effects of prescription drug therapy.

Appendices

Appendix One

Case History: Antoinette Coleman

For some time Antoinette, my wife, had suffered from painful muscle spasms, sensory loss, memory loss and a whole host of other symptoms. In 2005, a blood test showed a vitamin B12 level of 264. At the time, this was regarded as within normal levels and doctors looked elsewhere for a cause of her symptoms. We now know that this level of Vitamin B12 should have set alarm bells ringing.

In 2009, Antoinette was referred to a specialist neurologist who then referred her onwards to Dr Peter Heywood at Frenchay Hospital in Bristol. Unfortunately, Dr Heywood was not available for the appointment and so Antoinette saw a fairly young registrar called Dr Coulthard.

Dr Coulthard thought Antoinette might have a tumour on her spine and ordered an urgent MRI scan of Antoinette's brain and spine. Ten days later, we went back to the hospital for the MRI scan. Once again Dr Peter Heywood, the consultant, wasn't available and Antoinette saw the same registrar as before. The scan showed no signs of any tumour. However, when the registrar examined Antoinette, she found brisk reflexes, fasciculation in her tongue, upgoing plantars and muscle weakness. This time the doctor decided that Antoinette might be suffering from motor neurone disease.

We visited the hospital a total of four times. Multiple sclerosis was thought of and considered as a diagnosis. We never saw the consultant to whom Antoinette had been referred. Maybe Dr Peter Heywood had retired or left and the system has not yet registered that he has disappeared. Maybe he was just too busy.

In the end, we had to telephone the hospital several times to find out if Antoinette had motor neurone disease. Eventually, we discovered that the registrar was off sick and that the letter telling Antoinette the diagnosis had been typed and was sitting waiting to be signed. A secretary said that the letter would be sent when ready. I then pointed out that we have been waiting nearly three weeks to find out whether or not Antoinette had a fatal disease. Eventually, after some pressure, the hospital confirmed that Antoinette did not have motor neurone disease. Antoinette sensibly decided that she'd had enough of Frenchay Hospital. She didn't return.

We now jump forwards ten years.

In April 2019, Antoinette decided that the tiredness from which she was suffering was becoming unbearable. Her other symptoms were also getting steadily worse and she was regularly visiting the terrifying outskirts of dementia at just 46-years-old. She was losing her memory and was severely depressed and tearful.

Since the specialists at Frenchay had investigated multiple sclerosis and motor neurone disease and since both those diseases can progress at unpredictable speeds, it seemed apparent that Antoinette's condition (whichever it was) was merely progressing at its own speed. However, it did not seem unlikely that there might be something else (such as simple anaemia) contributing to the tiredness which Antoinette felt.

By this time, Antoinette's symptoms had become intolerable (and remarkably akin to those associated with multiple sclerosis).

Here is a list of her symptoms which she prepared for her doctor:

Tinnitus
Tingling, stinging and burning pains
Partial numbness
Muscle spasms
A tendency to trip up
Vision problems
Memory problems
Auditory hallucinations
Tiredness
Brain fog
Dizziness
Anxiety
Depression
Suicidal thoughts
Irritability to loud noises
Weakness in the legs
Impaired sense of smell and taste
Palpitations
Poor balance
Sleep disturbance
Bladder problems

Those are all symptoms which occur with vitamin B12 deficiency. In Antoinette's case, this was definitely not a dietary problem but almost certainly an absorption problem.

Fortunately, her GP did a vitamin B12 test.

This was our first lucky break.

The second lucky break was that Antoinette’s serum vitamin B12 level was just below the absurdly low figure used by the local laboratory as an acceptable low level. If her vitamin B12 had been just a little higher, the diagnosis would have been missed. Again.

As I write this (May 2019) Antoinette has just completed her first course of vitamin B12 injections. There are already some signs of improvement. She will now start the long, slow process of recovery.

If she hadn’t visited the GP, and had that blood test, she would have continued to deteriorate.

There is no doubt in my mind that the specialist neurologists who saw Antoinette should have made the correct diagnosis over a decade ago. The diagnosis was missed because her vitamin B12 level was erroneously considered to be normal.

Appendix Two

Facts about vitamin B12 deficiency

Vitamin B12 is essential for the formation of red blood cells but also for a good deal else. If your body is short of vitamin B12 you are likely to develop a form of anaemia known as pernicious anaemia. The size of your individual red blood cells will be increased but their number will be reduced. The word pernicious was originally added to the diagnosis because the disorder always ended in death.

Vitamin B12 also plays a vital part in the working of the central nervous system, and a long-term shortage of the vitamin can lead to damage being done to the brain and spinal cord. Vitamin B12 aids the production of genetic matter inside cells which is needed for the creation of new cells.

Vitamin B12 is an unusual vitamin in that before it can be absorbed into the body it needs to be linked to a substance called ‘intrinsic factor’ which is formed in the stomach. There are a number of reasons why ‘intrinsic factor’ may be missing. Patients who have had stomach surgery may be unable to produce this ‘intrinsic factor’. This problem is less common these days now that ulcer healing drugs have made many stomach operations obsolete.

Vegans, and sometimes vegetarians, may also find themselves short of vitamin B12 because their diet doesn’t contain enough vitamin B12 rich foods. And those with inflammatory bowel disorders are likely to become deficient in vitamin B12. Indeed, it is so easy to become short of this vitamin, that around 20% of all those over 60 years of age are likely to be short of vitamin B12. That makes vitamin B12 deficiency one of the commonest serious disorders known to man.

Vitamin B12 is found in many animal products — including meat, eggs and dairy produce. It is also available in tempeh, soya milk, edible seaweeds, dried spirulina and a wide range of fortified products now available (including cereals, margarines, textured vegetable proteins and fortified yeast extracts and savoury spreads). Vitamin B12 is manufactured by micro-organisms such as yeasts, bacteria, moulds and some algae. Vitamin B12 is also found in beer, cider, fermented soya foods (such as soy sauce), barley malt syrup and parsley. The most reliable vegan sources of B12 are foods fortified with the vitamin. Soya products (such as soya milks), breakfast cereals, yeast extracts and margarines are particularly likely to contain added vitamin B12.

Vegan women who are pregnant and vegan mothers who intend to breast feed their babies should make sure that they eat foods which are fortified with vitamin B12.

The human body can store this vitamin for long periods (up to five or six years), so a daily dietary source is not necessary. In addition, the healthy body recycles this vitamin very effectively, recovering it from bile and other intestinal secretions, which is why the dietary requirement is so low.

Appendix Three

Signs and Symptoms caused by low vitamin B12

Of all the vitamins, the one known as vitamin B12 seems to be the one which can cause the widest variety of troublesome signs and symptoms in the human body.

A deficiency of vitamin B12 can affect the body in many ways. It can:

Damage blood cell production: with symptoms including anaemia, tiredness, weakness, enlarged spleen and enlarged liver.

Damage the central nervous system, causing widespread demyelination and affecting the brain: the symptoms can include unsteadiness, numbness, tingling, burning, muscle weakness, paralysis, balance problems, difficulty in walking, depression, visual disturbances, incontinence, memory loss, disturbances in taste and smell, shaking, cramps, abnormal reflexes, confusion and dementia.

Damage the immune system causing an increased susceptibility to infection, poor wound healing and an exaggerated and potentially dangerous response to vaccinations.

Damage the musculo-skeletal system causing osteoporosis and bone fractures.

Damage the vascular system producing heart symptoms (such as palpitations and tachycardia), breathlessness (particularly on exercise) chest pain and the symptoms of congestive heart failure.

Damage the gastrointestinal tract producing indigestion, malabsorption, constipation, weight loss and abdominal pains.

Damage the genitourinary tract producing impotence, infertility and cystitis and complicating surgical procedures.

It should be clear from this list that Vitamin B12 deficiency can mimic a wide range or disorders – and lead to inaccurate diagnoses.

I have already explained, earlier in this book, that vitamin B12 deficiency can lead to dementia and be mistaken for Alzheimer's disease. Since Alzheimer's disease is progressive and incurable, such a mistake can be disastrous. I have no doubt that many patients still incarcerated in institutions, could be partially or completely cured if they were tested for vitamin B12 deficiency, properly diagnosed and treated effectively with a few cheap injections of vitamin B12.

There are, however, many other diseases which can also be diagnosed by mistake when the patient really has an easily treatable vitamin B12 deficiency.

Multiple sclerosis is probably the most obvious disorder in this category (and I have no doubt that thousands of patients whose lives have been devastated by a wrong diagnosis of this disorder could now be living perfectly normal lives). Patients with vitamin B12 deficiency are commonly diagnosed with tumours, motor neurone disease, circulatory disease, mental disease and many more.

The misdiagnosing of patients who have nothing more complicated than simple vitamin B12 deficiency is without doubt the most egregious example of iatrogenesis I have come across in a lifetime assessing doctor-induced disease. Vitamin B12 deficiency is an epidemic and I have no doubt that a simple blood test, properly assessed, would lead to the re-evaluation of millions of mistaken diagnoses.

Appendix Four

Case histories: patients with normal pressure hydrocephalus

(Versions of these case histories previously appeared in my book about NPH which is entitled *Millions of Alzheimer's Patients Have Been Misdiagnosed (And Could Be Cured)*.)

1. Professor Emeritus of Hepatology Harold O Conn MD FACP of the Yale University School of Medicine in the US, developed problems with walking shortly after retiring. He was 68-years-old when the symptoms started. They gradually became more pronounced. Dr Conn was diagnosed by colleagues in the department of neurology at Yale University as suffering from 'Parkinson's disease like syndrome. Dr Conn's wife noticed that her husband was losing his sense of humour and his ability to concentrate. He also developed double incontinence. Three more eminent neurologists were consulted and they diagnosed a variant of Parkinson's Disease. Their prognosis was poor. At a follow up appointment five years after they made their diagnosis, they predicted that the cerebral atrophy would continue and that the professor's symptoms would get worse. They also said that the condition was untreatable. Nine years after the initial symptoms had appeared, when he was 77-years-old, Dr Conn could barely walk. He was then seen by a neurologist in another state. The new neurologist made a diagnosis of idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus. When 60 mls of cerebrospinal fluid was removed, Dr Conn made an immediate improvement. And after shunt surgery was performed, Dr Conn improved permanently. He had had the disease for 10 years and had repeatedly been wrongly diagnosed by specialists working in one of the world's premier medical schools.

2. A 40-year-old widow and housewife, Mrs LCB was referred from the General Outpatient Department of the Jos University Teaching Hospital to the hospital's psychiatric unit in May 2014. She had eight weeks history of recurrent vomiting, recurrent headaches, fearfulness and withdrawal. She had been in good health up until the start of that period of illness. The patient's headache was described as generalised, throbbing and non-radiating and it was mildly relieved with analgesics. There was some dizziness and blurring of vision. She had some fever, felt weak and could walk only with support. Since the patient had recently witnessed gunshots in Nigeria, an initial diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder was made. Two weeks after admission to the psychiatric unit, the patient had a convulsion and also complained of progressive weakness of her lower limbs and of urinary incontinence both during the day and at night. Her speech also became irrational and she had visual hallucinations. At that point, a diagnosis of Generalised Tonic Clonic seizure was made. A CT scan revealed idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus. The patient had a ventriculo-peritoneal shunt surgery. Following the surgery, the patient did well and all symptoms subsided. The patient was able to walk with minimal support. The doctors looking after this patient reported that in their experience, idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus can be relieved successfully with a shunt implanted surgically to drain excess cerebrospinal fluid. The details of this patient were reported in the *Journal of Neurological Disorders*. The article was entitled 'Normal Pressure Hydrocephalus with Onset Following a Traumatic Experience'. The author of the article was Aishatu Yusha'u Armiya'u of the Department of Psychiatry, Jos University Teaching Hospital, Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria.

3. Bob Fowler was so convinced that he was dying that he wrote his own obituary. He had, in his own words, 'been to doctor after doctor after doctor with absolutely no positive results'. For nine years, Mr Fowler increasingly suffered with trouble walking, memory problems and difficulty controlling his urination. Eventually, Mr Fowler developed severe dementia, had to stop working and was confined to a wheelchair. After some years, his wife began making plans to put him a nursing home. Finally, Mr Fowler met a doctor who recognised that he had idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus. After surgery, Mr Fowler literally got up out of his wheelchair and resumed his life. The change was dramatic. 'All of a sudden I felt fantastic,' he said. 'I'm 74-years-old now, and I'm doing things I wouldn't have dreamed of doing anytime during my 60s.' Mr Fowler went back to work, started playing golf, driving his car and spending time with his family. This case history was discovered on the internet.

4. Retired dentist Milton Newman suffered for 15 years with loss of memory and concentration. Mr Newman's symptoms started when he was about 55-years-old. 'Reading a book was difficult because I couldn't remember what happened 10 pages back. And later on, conversation was difficult because I'd forget what people would say.' Eventually Mr Newman was diagnosed as suffering from Alzheimer's disease. He regarded the diagnosis as a death sentence. Finally, after years of suffering, Mr Newman, met a doctor who diagnosed idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus. Surgery reduced the symptoms immediately. 'I felt like the old Milton,' said Mr Newman. This case history was discovered on the internet.

5. A 70-year-old woman suffered a gradual onset of gait disturbance and later on developed dementia and occasional urinary incontinence. For two years, her mental problems got worse and her ability to walk deteriorated to the point where she was unable to walk and care for herself at home. She became a hospital patient in Norway after she had first noticed her symptoms. A CT scan showed ventricular enlargement out of proportion to the cerebral atrophy. When a lumbar puncture was performed, it was found that the CSF pressure was raised. When a shunt operation was performed, the patient gradually improved and a year later she was able to live normally at home. Her dementia had improved considerably, her urinary incontinence had disappeared

and her gait was almost normal. This case history was discovered on the internet.

6. This is a rather long case history and it was painful to write because it describes the final year of my mother's life.

I have no doubt that if the incompetent staff at two hospitals in Devon had been a little more alert, and a little less arrogant, my mother could have been cured. She had idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus but, despite her obvious symptoms, and much prompting, the diagnosis was ignored.

My wife (who has no formal medical training) initially made the correct diagnosis by keying my mother's symptoms and signs into a search engine. We agreed that idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus was by far the most likely diagnosis. Although I qualified as a GP, the disease was not one with which I was well acquainted. The disease fitted my mother's symptoms perfectly. She had an unusual wide-legged walk. She had a tendency to fall. And she had urinary incontinence. She was also showing signs of dementia. These are precisely the symptoms shown by patients with idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus.

We repeatedly suggested the diagnosis of idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus but specialist after specialist rejected it until it was too late. They seemed bizarrely desperate to settle on every possible diagnosis that wasn't the right one and in retrospect I can only believe it was because they too knew little or nothing about idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus.

I also fear that she was treated superficially because of her age (she was 83 when her symptoms started but had been in excellent health). Today, everyone needs to be aware that patients over the age of 70 are regularly regarded as second class citizens by doctors, nurses and other hospital staff. Sadly, I do not think that this attitude is uncommon. Medical staff take little interest in patients who are over 70 years of age, and this lack of concern has been endorsed and encouraged by politicians. The United Nations has introduced Sustainable Development Goals which allow governments and health services to discriminate against anyone over the age of 70 on the grounds that people who die when they are over 70-years-old cannot be said to have died prematurely, and so will not count when a nation's healthcare is being assessed. The Sustainable Development Goals give politicians the authority to ignore the health needs of citizens who have reached their 'three score years and ten' and who are regarded by society's accountants as an economic burden. Indeed, there is, a regrettably widespread assumption in hospitals everywhere that anyone who is over 70 must simply learn to live with their problems and adapt to changes which are simply an inevitable part of the ageing process. The Liverpool Care Pathway, which entitles doctors and nurses to withhold food, water and essential treatment from patients who are over the age of 65 and who are, therefore, regarded as an expensive nuisance is still used as a guideline by many doctors and nurses and hospital bureaucrats who are searching for ways to clear 'blocked beds' and reduce nursing costs.

During my mother's illness, I repeatedly contacted her GP in Budleigh Salterton and I spoke and wrote regularly to the vast variety of doctors at the hospital in Exeter – frequently suggesting that my mother was suffering from normal pressure hydrocephalus. However, the doctors and nurses seemed concerned only to produce diagnoses which were untreatable and terminal. Only at the end, when it was too late to do anything, did they agree that she had all along been suffering from idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus.

My mother's story begins when, in October 2004, she first had difficulty in walking. She was mentally alert. Suddenly, in November 2004, after a rapid deterioration, it was decided that she was suffering from terminal cancer with metastases. She was not considered healthy enough for palliative radiotherapy and was described, by her consultant oncologist, as 'frail, confused, bedbound and dependent'. She had to be catheterised because she was incontinent. The idea of rehabilitation was abandoned because of her alleged terminal cancer. A neurologist who assessed her mental state reported that my mother did not know where she was and had failed to recognise the doctor. She was given the usual simple mental test (date of birth and so on) and scored 0 out of 10. My father was telephoned at home and told that my mother was terminally ill with cancer and that there were metastatic deposits in her spine, lung and possibly liver. It was thought that her mental condition could be caused by secondaries in her brain. No one knew what sort of cancer she was suffering from or where the primary was situated.

A cancer specialist told me that my mother either had cancer of the breast or the lung with secondaries and was too weak for treatment. 'That's the nature of the beast', she said. She told me that there was no hope. She turned out to be completely wrong in everything other than the fact that there was no hope.

On Sunday 21st November 2004, we noticed that my mother's urine bag was red. There was clearly blood in her urine. A nurse had changed the catheter bag several times without bothering to report to anyone that the urine in the bag was red with blood. Or perhaps they hadn't noticed. I reported the blood and a doctor put my mother on amoxicillin for a urinary infection. After the blood appeared in the urine, the cancer specialist told me that my mother had secondaries in her kidneys. By the 30th November, the urine was clear and the bag was no longer red. The diagnosis of cancer secondaries in the kidneys was never withdrawn, though it too was completely wrong.

My mother stayed in the Exeter hospital, which is a teaching hospital, for the next few months. Numerous consultants saw her and decided that there was nothing to be done. Just about every different doctor came up with their own favourite diagnosis but although my wife and I repeatedly suggested that my mother might be suffering from idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus, no one seemed keen to accept this solution. My mother's symptoms now seemed to defy diagnosis. She managed to get out of bed occasionally but was unsteady on her feet. And she had developed a rather strange way of walking with her feet wide apart.

Idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus is not something GPs see very much at all. But it is the sort of thing teaching hospital neurologists really should know about. I had never seen a patient with it. The doctors looking after my mother dismissed the diagnosis of idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus and stuck with their neoplastic madness. There was never a shred of evidence in support of that diagnosis.

The care my mother received was appalling. She spent virtually all her time in bed, becoming steadily weaker. We couldn't move my mother to a private hospital because she has not yet been diagnosed and clearly a private hospital would not have the investigative wherewithal. When I asked if I could send in private physiotherapists, I was told that I could not. The nurses on the ward did not seem to have heard of the danger of deep vein thrombosis or the need to avoid pressure sores by moving patients around. On occasion, my mother would also throw off all her clothes and we would have to rush to draw the screens while we fought to pull the bed covers over her. The nurses didn't come because the ward had been designed in such a way that from the nurses' station it was difficult if not impossible for nurses to see what was happening on the ward. Once, I sat beside my mother's bed when two nurses arrived. One said: 'Have you had a drink this morning?' 'Yes thank you,' said my mother, who had been officially declared demented and mentally incompetent. 'Right.' said the nurse. She wrote this information down on the fluids chart she was carrying. The cold cup of tea was standing, untouched, on the bed table in front of my mother. If we hadn't helped her to drink, I firmly believe that my mother would have died of dehydration. Maybe that was the idea.

At one point during her stay in the Exeter hospital, my mother had a diagnostic lumbar puncture and a quantity of cerebrospinal fluid was removed. Immediately afterwards, she improved noticeably. For a day or two she seemed stronger and her mental function began to improve. It seemed to me that the improvement was significant and suggested that there had been too much fluid around my mother's brain. It seemed likely that the lumbar puncture, by removing some of the fluid, had reduced the pressure and alleviated her symptoms.

The doctors to whom I mentioned this, dismissed my suggestion and insisted that the improvement was simply a coincidence. What would a former GP and writer of books know about these things? No one actually patted me on the head but it felt as though they had done so.

After my mother had finally been diagnosed as suffering from idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus (just before she died) I managed to find this in a large medical textbook: 'To help with the diagnosis, doctors do a spinal tap (lumbar puncture) to remove excess cerebrospinal fluid. If this procedure relieves symptoms, idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus is likely, and treatment is likely to be effective.' There are very few devastating diseases that can be cured so cheaply, so quickly and so permanently.

On Monday 25th April 2005, the neurology registrar at the Royal Devon and Exeter hospital announced that my mother's prognosis was bleak although they still hadn't made a diagnosis. The cancer diagnosis had now been abandoned. I was told that six neurologists and numerous other consultants had seen her and that every conceivable test had been done. The registrar told me that it would be difficult to find a nursing home capable of looking after her. In addition to her physical paralysis, she was again diagnosed as suffering from dementia. I was told that this could be vascular or a consequence of possible encephalitis. It seemed clear that my mother needed to stay in hospital for the rest of her life.

On Tuesday 26th April 2005, my mother was, at my request, moved to Budleigh hospital so that my father, who lived in Budleigh Salterton, could visit more easily. For six months he had visited the Exeter hospital once or twice a day to feed my mother (who would otherwise have almost certainly starved to death). I also wanted my mother out of the hospital in Exeter because I wasn't terribly impressed by the nursing care she had received. If I had to choose two words to describe the hospital care, they would be 'apathetic' and 'neglectful'.

The hospital in Budleigh was clearly what used to be a cottage hospital – suitable for providing nursing care for local patients.

On Wednesday 27th April 2005, at 9.00 p.m., someone from Budleigh hospital telephoned my father (who was 85 at the time) and asked him when he would be moving his wife out of the hospital. My mother had been in the Budleigh hospital for just slightly more than 24 hours. No one there had made any attempt to make a diagnosis.

My father was startled and shocked by the suddenness and timing of the telephone call. He got the impression that the hospital was planning to send my mother home for him to look after by himself. My mother was doubly incontinent, required nursing on a ripple bed and had been diagnosed as demented. She had to be kept in a bed with cot sides so that she didn't fall onto the floor. On the odd occasion when she tried to feed herself, she ended up with food everywhere – with the result that both she and the bed had to be changed. My mother was so incapable of moving by herself that the nurses had a hoist and a bed lift fitted to the bed so that they could move my mother around and in and out of bed. It took two nurses to move her up the bed. She needed constant nursing attention.

My wife and I visited the hospital the next day, Thursday the 28th.

Within five minutes of my arriving at my mother's bedside, a nurse asked me to go to the sister's office where a rude and aggressive nurse demanded to know when my mother would be leaving the hospital. My mother had, by then, been in the hospital for no more than 48 hours. I found the questioning cruel, unfeeling and inhumane.

My father, who had been in a state of shock, now became depressed as a result of the hospital's attitude. Up until Monday the 25th April, my father had hoped that he would be able to have my mother back home or that, at the very least, he would be able to take her out of the hospital for trips in a wheelchair. He had been making plans to buy a motorised chair and a suitable vehicle so that he could do this.

When I spoke to the nurse at Budleigh Hospital on 28th April 2005, I was told that an assessment had been done and that my mother was considered fit to move out of the hospital and was now regarded as mentally alert. My mother had, according to Budleigh Hospital, been cured from her dementia within two days. She had received no new treatment. The nurse admitted that my mother needed nursing care but insisted that mentally there was nothing wrong with her. The hospital had, she told me, already applied for an enforcement order to have my mother removed from the hospital. I was shocked by their ruthlessness.

In reality, there had been no change whatsoever in my mother's condition. Several neurologists at Royal Devon and Exeter hospital had already agreed that my mother was suffering from severe dementia and though it turned out that they had missed the primary diagnosis, there wasn't much doubt that a diagnosis of dementia was accurate.

I complained about the fact that my father had been rung at home the evening before but the nurse didn't seem to think that there was anything wrong with that. She didn't apologise. I wanted to know just how ill you had to be to be in hospital these days. I felt overwhelmed with guilt. I had arranged for my mother to be moved to the Budleigh Hospital so that my father could visit more easily. And now they wanted to throw her out. But where could we take her? I went back to sit by my mother's bed. As I sat down my mother looked up and pointed to a stranger on the other side of the ward. 'Is that Vernon over there?' she enquired. We were living a nightmare. She didn't know who I was. She didn't recognise my wife. When I talked to her, she didn't even know that she was in hospital. Somewhere in the hospital a bell rang. 'There's someone at the door,' she said.

Someone at the Budleigh hospital threatened to send my mother home in an ambulance, even though they knew that my father could hardly look after himself let alone care for someone who needed intensive nursing care. My mother was, said one snotty, little bureaucrat, 'terminally but not finally terminally ill'. It was the first time I'd heard the phrase. My father, in his mid-80s, was devastated. 'What do I do if they send her home?' he asked. 'Don't answer the door,' I told him. 'Don't let them into the house. Call me.' I was telling my father to refuse to let the ambulance men bring my mother into the house. It was awful, just bloody awful. If the plan was to put us under pressure it was working very well. I'd never seen my father so distraught.

My mother's GP at the time agreed that we would not be able to find a local nursing home capable of looking after her. No one at the Budleigh hospital seemed to me to give a damn what happened to my mother as long as she wasn't their responsibility.

As far as I am aware, no one made the slightest attempt to make a diagnosis during the time my mother was in the Budleigh Hospital. Since they didn't want to nurse her and they didn't do any diagnostic tests, it was difficult to see the point of the hospital – apart from providing employment for the staff.

On the 11th May 2005, I had to attend a meeting at Budleigh hospital to discuss my mother's expulsion from the hospital. I was told that the hospital did not have enough beds and desperately needed to get rid of my mother. There were four people at the meeting: two members of the nursing staff, someone who looked like an administrator and Dr Taylor, my mother's GP at the time. The meeting was held in a completely empty ward. There were plenty of beds, all empty, and it seemed to me that this wasn't the first time the empty ward had been used for a meeting. If the hospital was short of anything it was patients, not beds.

The meeting lasted an hour and it was one of the most unpleasant hours of my life. It was not a meeting where the words 'compassion' and 'caring' figured large. I have been grilled by some of the country's toughest television and radio interviewers. I have given evidence in the House of Lords and the House of Commons but nothing prepared me for this. For a solid hour, the four of them battered at me to take my mother out of the hospital. They used every manipulative and emotional trick in the book. I quickly realised that no one there cared a damn about my mother or my father. They just wanted to get rid of a patient who seemed likely to be a long-term expense. This was business. I was still desperate to try to find a diagnosis. I was still trying to support my father. I was grieving for my mother who no longer even recognised me.

I was told that my mother would be better off in a nursing home and that the hospital didn't have any long-stay beds. I was told that they needed the bed for other patients (no one seemed to see the irony in the fact that the meeting was being held in a completely empty ward) and that my father would be better off if my mother was elsewhere. They didn't explain how this could be when there was no nursing home for miles that would be able to cope with her needs.

At the end of the meeting, I was told that they couldn't agree to my mother staying in the hospital and that she had to leave. I left the meeting and went back to my mother's bedside. She was still unable to move. She still didn't know who she was or where she was. She didn't know who I was. She was still faecally incontinent. She still had a catheter in her bladder to collect her urine. She still had to be fed. She still couldn't walk or even wash herself. But according to the hospital staff she was fine and mentally alert.

Ageism is the new racism: no respect, no consideration, no courtesy, no dignity, no caring.

For several weeks after that, my father didn't dare visit my mother at all. He was frightened that he would again be pressured by the staff to move my mother. He didn't know where he could take her. Overwhelmed with grief, he was now also tortured by guilt and anxiety.

Another mental assessment was done on my mother. It was a sick joke. The assessor asked my mother what I did for a living. My mother thought for a while. 'He's a teacher,' she said at last. She didn't know who I was, let alone what I did for a living. 'That's close enough,' answered the assessor putting a tick in another box. My mother was declared mentally competent.

Later that day, my father was sitting by my mother's side when the vicar called. My mother told him they were waiting for a train. The vicar thought it was a joke but my mother was serious. She kept asking my father why the train wasn't there and why there were dogs fighting in the ward. My mother didn't recognise my father (to whom she had been married for over 60 years) or know what he'd done for a living. She didn't even know who she was or where she was. She held her head a good deal and it was clear that she was having constant headaches. (No one at the hospital realised that these were caused by the increase in the amount of fluid surrounding her brain.)

On the 27th July, I attended another meeting in Budleigh Hospital. This time there were nine people there representing the hospital and the NHS. Dr Graham Taylor, my mother's GP was there, together with two nurses, a 'continuity care manager', an 'acting leading continuity nurse', a 'hospital care manager', a 'discharge facilitator', a representative of the administrators and a representative from Exmouth social services.

Someone began by saying that they all had my mother's best interests at heart. Someone else said they were delighted to report that my mother was much better and was improving. I asked them why, if this was the case, they weren't giving her any occupational therapy or physiotherapy. No one had an answer to this. I asked them how they had managed to produce this miracle without any treatment. I wanted to know how a woman who had been officially declared terminally ill and demented and in need of constant care, had suddenly become 'physically capable and mentally alert' after a few weeks in a small town hospital. No one had any answers.

In fact, of course, when the final diagnosis was made, it was quite clear that my mother could not possibly have shown any physical or mental improvement. She was suffering from idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus which was steadily getting worse. NHS staff who said that my mother had recovered and was no longer demented and could be discharged were lying because they wanted to throw her out of the hospital.

When I pointed out that my mother needed intensive nursing care, a continuity care manager claimed, to my utter astonishment, that catheters, hoists and ripple beds were not medical equipment. I asked him what would count as medical equipment. He said a ventilator would count as medical equipment. The phrase 'final stage terminal illness' was used. And again I heard the phrase 'terminally, terminally ill'. I asked how they knew that a patient was terminally, terminally ill, and was told that they could tell this through liver and kidney deterioration. I asked if they had done any tests to check on this, and it was generally agreed that they couldn't remember whether any such tests had been done.

I have no idea why nine people wasted a good chunk of a day on such a pointless meeting. I hate to think what it must have cost. It occurred to me as I sat there that if they were all sacked there would be plenty of money left for looking after patients. I told them that the bullying had won and that we would take my mother out of the hospital so that they could have yet another empty bed.

In the end my father couldn't bear it any longer. The staff at the Budleigh Hospital were making us feel so unwelcome, and harassing us so much, that we had no choice but to move my mother. As far as the NHS was concerned, it was all about money. They wanted to avoid the cost of looking after my mother – even though they had a moral and legal responsibility to do so. We found the Cranford Nursing Home, a private nursing home in Exmouth where for around £750 a week my mother had a private room which seemed crowded with three adults visiting. If a hotel had offered us the room, we would have walked out in disgust. Naturally, there were now no attempts to make a diagnosis.

My father sold his home and bought a small house near to the nursing home so that he could visit regularly.

Towards the end of her life we visited my mother in the nursing home and as soon as Antoinette entered the room, she turned to me and said that my mother had a swollen, bulging eye. (I believe that my wife had, by this time, more knowledge of idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus than the entire NHS medical staff in Devon.) The diagnosis was now beyond doubt. My mother had a bulging eye because of the pressure inside her skull. In idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus, the pressure within the skull remains normal because the expanding fluid volume compresses and destroys brain tissue. When the brain cannot be compressed any more, the fluid pressure must rise.

I contacted my mother's new GP and asked him to arrange for my mum to go back into Exeter hospital. Neither he nor any of the nursing home staff had noticed anything amiss.

In the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital, the doctors at last confirmed the diagnosis of idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus. It was the diagnosis we'd offered them within days of my mother falling ill. Numerous consultants (including several neurologists), countless junior hospital doctors, one or two GPs and several dozen nurses all missed the diagnosis. If they'd acted within days or even weeks of her being admitted then they could have saved her life. We watched my mother die a terrible, slow death. She died because the doctors failed to make the diagnosis until it was too late.

The Royal Devon and Exeter hospital where my mother was treated so appallingly is a teaching hospital where medical students are turned into doctors.

Appendix Five

Homocysteine and Alzheimer's disease

Some authorities have linked the development of Alzheimer's disease to raised levels of homocysteine in the blood.

There still appears to be some mystery about this but I suspect that there shouldn't be.

The link is very straightforward.

The homocysteine levels in the blood rise when there is a shortage of vitamin B12. When vitamin B12 levels go down, homocysteine levels tend to go up. And vice versa.

Patients who are diagnosed as having Alzheimer's disease and who are then found to have raised homocysteine levels may have been misdiagnosed.

The chances are high that those patients don't have Alzheimer's at all but instead have an insufficiency of vitamin B12.

I suspect that when the shortage of vitamin B12 has been attended to, some or all of the symptoms of dementia will slowly disappear. And, miraculously, the Alzheimer's disease that was never there will have been cured.

Appendix Six

Dementia and high blood pressure

A widely reported study has claimed that a slightly increased blood pressure in middle life leads to an increased risk of developing dementia in later life.

As a result, doctors are now being encouraged to start treating more patients with drugs to lower their blood pressure. Doctors' surgeries will be busier than ever with doctors writing out prescriptions for millions of apparently healthy patients. Drug companies are no doubt worried about what they will do with all the extra money they will be making.

In fact, at this rate it surely won't be long before just about everyone over the age of 35 will be taking drugs to lower their blood pressure.

But does a slightly raised blood pressure really lead to more dementia?

I worry that this study may not show that at all.

What about all the possible variables?

So, for example, did the researchers weigh the patients involved throughout the period involved? Did they check their daily stress levels? Did they assess mental agility? Did they study smoking and drinking habits in detail? These may all be factors which are extremely relevant.

I understand that the patients involved in the study were all civil servants. That is a pretty closely selected group of individuals. Some civil servants tend not to have intellectually demanding or stimulating jobs. Could it be (as I suspect) that this might be a factor in the development of dementia?

And what effect will drug taking have on dementia? Is it really safe to take drugs to lower slightly raised blood pressure – especially if those drugs are to be taken for decades?

What about the risks of accidental hypotension – a common problem among those taking drugs for blood pressure. Could that be a serious problem for many of the millions who will now start taking drugs?

Personally, I fear that this is another piece of research best ignored.

(It rather reminds me of the research paper which showed that smokers did not develop dementia. The people who commented on that paper apparently didn't notice that many smokers never live beyond the age of 65 – and so never reach the age when dementia becomes commonest.)

The world's medical correspondents leapt on this research with great enthusiasm.

And I have no doubt that many apparently healthy individuals will now be taking medication for the rest of their lives.

Still, there will be one huge beneficiary from this research: the drug companies making pills to lower blood pressure.

This research will be worth billions to those pharmaceutical companies.

Appendix Seven

Paracetamol and Alzheimer’s disease

In 1971, it was shown that phenacetin, a very popular but rather deadly painkiller, might cause Alzheimer’s disease. This didn’t matter very much because phenacetin had been banned because of the damage it did to the kidneys.

However, back in 1948, it had been shown that phenacetin is known to be converted into paracetamol in the body. The analgesic effect of phenacetin is a result of the paracetamol.

So, the big question, which, as far as I can find out no one has ever asked is: might paracetamol cause Alzheimer’s disease?

The research is now forgotten and ignored. But it scared me because paracetamol is used daily by millions and is generally regarded as a safe drug.

And here’s another scary thought.

Some decades ago, it was found that aspirin could cause an incredibly rare disease called Reye’s Syndrome when it was given to children. And so it was recommended that children be given paracetamol instead of aspirin.

And the drug Calpol, which is widely used to ease mild pains in children, and also used by many parents as a sleeping aid, contains paracetamol.

Could it possibly be that all this explains the rising incidence of Alzheimer’s disease? Could paracetamol be the cause of the fact that Alzheimer’s is a common cause of dementia?

This worries the hell out of me.

And now it can worry the hell out of you because as far as I can find out no one is doing any research to find out.

Oh, and there’s something else.

Guess which drug is now widely recommended for the treatment of patients with Alzheimer’s disease.

Even though the preliminary evidence rather suggests that paracetamol could be the cause of Alzheimer’s disease, the drug now widely prescribed for the treatment of the disease is – paracetamol.

There’s a desperate need for some fairly simple research. It wouldn’t take much work, time or money.

But researchers aren’t interested. Most medical research is funded, directly or indirectly, by drug companies, and why would they want to do research which might dramatically reduce the number of patients needing expensive treatments?

To understand the world of medicine you have to understand how drug industry executives think.

Appendix Eight

Alzheimer's disease financial incentive

The incidence of dementia is about to rise exponentially now that British doctors are being paid a large bonus every time they diagnose Alzheimer's disease. I've told everyone I know to be on their toes when visiting their doctor. Too much hesitation and not enough blind certainty could well lead to an inconvenient diagnosis and a place of your own on the Involuntary Euthanasia Waiting List.

Medical journalists in the UK claim that this is the first time doctors have been paid to make a specific diagnosis but, as usual, they're wrong. British doctors have for years been given cash bonuses for diagnosing a wide range of disorders – including asthma, diabetes, heart disease and that artificial diagnostic confection known as 'COPD'.

It is, therefore, no surprise to discover that (officially at least) all these diseases are becoming commoner by the week.

Moreover, patients (and relatives) must take care to ensure that a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease is not made when the real diagnosis should be the eminently treatable conditions of vitamin B12 deficiency or normal pressure hydrocephalus. Normal pressure hydrocephalus is dramatically underdiagnosed and is, I suspect, far commoner than most doctors believe. Doctors do not receive a fee for diagnosing normal pressure hydrocephalus or vitamin B12 – both of which commonly occur and both of which are curable but neither of which makes vast sums of money for drug companies.

Appendix Nine

Alzheimer’s disease and death

Alzheimer’s disease is officially regarded as a major killer. In the US it is said to be the fifth commonest killer of people over the age of 65. Doctors and journalists often describe patients as having died from Alzheimer’s disease.

However, I have always struggled to understand why Alzheimer’s disease should be a direct cause of death. Alzheimer’s affects the brain, destroying connections and affecting a patient’s ability to think, to remember, to eat, to walk and to do any of the things normally associated with life. But Alzheimer’s disease does not stop a patient breathing and it does not stop the heart beating. By itself, Alzheimer’s disease does not kill those who have it. You don’t die of Alzheimer’s disease any more than you die of confusion caused by a long-term tranquilliser overdose.

When patients are said to have died from Alzheimer’s disease, they will have usually died of pneumonia or some other infection which has been deliberately left untreated. Or they may have had a stroke or some other circulatory incident which has resulted in death. In many cases, doctors and relatives will have chosen to allow the patient to die so that the suffering is ended.

There are, however, forms of dementia which can lead to death. So, for example, a patient who has genuinely died as a direct result of their dementia, without an infection or any other complication, may have died from idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus which was not diagnosed but which caused death by compressing, damaging and destroying many different parts of the brain. Alzheimer’s disease does not do this. And vitamin B12 deficiency, which causes cerebral and spinal cord injury, can cause death if it has not been diagnosed (or treated properly).

I wonder how many of the patients whose deaths have been reported as being due to Alzheimer’s disease were misdiagnosed and had actually been suffering from, and had died from, normal pressure hydrocephalus or vitamin B12 deficiency – both of which could have been cured.

Appendix Ten

When demented patients wander

Many patients with dementia have developed a tendency to wander. Relatives sometimes write and ask if I think it would be a good idea to have a patient fitted with an electronic tag so that they can be found quickly if they wander away from home. They worry, however, that it might be demeaning to do this. Safety is paramount and I think patients with dementia should be tagged – for everyone's benefit.

Indeed, I cannot see why all patients with dementia are not routinely offered an electronic tagging service.

It would be a better answer than the solution favoured in some British hospitals where patients with Alzheimer's are now handcuffed to their beds so that they do not require too much care and attention from the nurses.

Appendix Eleven

Recommendations

Don't accept a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease until all other possible, treatable causes have been excluded.

In my opinion, the three specific disorders which must always be excluded before Alzheimer's disease is diagnosed are: prescription drug side effects; vitamin B12 deficiency and normal pressure hydrocephalus. Each of those disorders can be treated easily and quickly. I fear far too many patients are being mistakenly diagnosed as suffering from Alzheimer's disease – simply because this is the default diagnosis routinely adopted by family doctors.

And please remember that advice given by the medical establishment may well be wrong.

So, for example, in the UK, the advice given officially by the NHS is often inaccurate or misleading.

It is also vital to remember that the blood values used by laboratories are usually far too low.

The incidence of vitamin B12 deficiency is so common that even healthy individuals over 60 should have their B12 levels measured every three years or so.

Indeed, it would probably be wiser to give everyone over 60 vitamin B12 injections every three months. This would be much more useful than giving them all influenza shots.

It won't happen, of course.

There is far more profit to be made out of giving a vaccination than there is out of giving a vitamin B12 injection.

Dr Vernon Coleman MB ChB DSc FRSA, is the author of over 100 books – most of which are available on Amazon as paperbacks and as eBooks. For more information please see Dr Coleman's author page on Amazon or visit www.vernoncoleman.com where there are many free articles and no fees or advertisements.

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'COALITE'
SMOKELESS COAL
DRY BLACKTHORN CIDER

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with

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The author Vernon Coleman MB ChB DSc is a registered medical practitioner. He is the author of over 100 other books, many of which are available as Kindle books on Amazon. For a list of books please see Vernon Coleman's author page on Amazon or visit ***http://www.vernoncoleman.com/***
Vernon Coleman's other books on cricket include: The Village Cricket Tour, Around the Wicket and Thomas Winsden's Cricketing Almanack. All are Amazon bestsellers.

To
Albert Norman Other
A supreme and universally acclaimed cricketer.

Sunday 1st January

I know that some people would argue that the beginning of January heralds the real beginning of winter. But for me the first day of the new calendar marks a point right in the middle of the winter, between the end of one cricket season and the start of another.

Like most enthusiastic cricket lovers, I manage to keep going through the months from mid-September to late April on an occasional and far from satisfying diet of crackly radio reports and taste-teasing newspaper columns. I often think that the one real joy of being outrageously rich would be in being able to fly off to Australia or the West Indies to watch a few days cricket. I am sure I remember reading that Mick Jagger had once flown off on a whim to watch a couple of days cricket. Now that is a really sound way to use money.

Thursday 5th January

Spent the evening looking through last season's scorecards. I have not thrown away a score card for several years now and I am beginning to amass quite a collection. I quite wish I had always kept my score cards — they make a useful and pleasant adjunct to *Wisden.* I do not know whether my memory is beginning to go but I sometimes have tremendous difficulty in remembering just which matches I have seen. Looking at last year's cards they bring back some wonderful memories. The first match I saw was apparently at the Parks at the end of April where I watched the University playing Lancashire, who were trying out one or two newcomers.

It was chilly and fairly dark and I am reminded that I saw my first 'bad light' decision of the year within thirty-minutes of arriving on the ground.

Monday 9th January

I did very well in the sales today. I bought a bright yellow anorak with a detachable hood, two huge travelling rugs, a charcoal fired hand-warmer, a new vacuum flask, a massive golfing umbrella and a pair of waterproof trousers. These should all help to see me through the season.

Thursday 10th January

Today, in wildly extravagant mood, I bought a solid silver hip flask. It will hold a fifth of a bottle of whisky. Added to the items I bought yesterday it helps make up an excellent cricket-watching kit.

Saturday 28th January

When visiting London during the winter I often take advantage of my MCC membership and leave my car parked at Lords. I do not do this just because the car parking is free (by the time I have taken a cab to my destination and then taken one back again to pick up the car it is probably more expensive than parking in one of the underground or multi-storey car parks in central London) but because I rather like to call in and take a quick look found. It is remarkably soothing in the middle of winter to know that within a few weeks cricketers will be out there on the square and the ground will once again be packed with enthusiastic spectators.

Today, I had a few minutes to spare, so, in addition to taking a quick walk round the ground, I decided to take a look inside the pavilion; just to make sure that nothing had changed. When I wandered into the Long Room I was approached by a pleasant, rather elderly gentleman in a pair of grey flannels and a sports jacket.

'Wonderful isn't it?' he said, as I stared longingly out of the windows onto the remarkably green looking turf.

I nodded in silent agreement.

The gentleman in the flannels and sports coat obviously took my silence as some sort of signal; he clearly mistook me for a tourist who had wandered into the Long Room by mistake. With tremendous enthusiasm and an unstoppable flow of history he proceeded to treat me to a thirty-minute lecture on the history of Lords, the game itself, the rooms in the pavilion and the members of the Marylebone Cricket Club.

I listened with as much politeness as I could muster and finally took my leave; claiming that I had to rush to get to see Tower Bridge before it closed.

Next time I call in at Lords in winter I will make sure I am wearing my MCC tie.

Sunday 5th February

Spent the morning oiling my binoculars. Last year they stuck several times and I am quite determined that I shall not have the same problem this year. There seems to be a spare lens fitted into them because I have one left over. I think this is a rather impressive gesture on the part of the manufacturers.

Thursday 9th February

I heard at dinner today about the huge television screen that they have at Melbourne Cricket Ground. The screen is used to show action replays to spectators and apparently the response has been very mixed. On the one hand, there are those who welcome the innovation since it enables spectators to savour fine shots, good catches and skilful fielding. I must confess that I sympathise with this attitude. Like many other cricket lovers I have become so used to watching replays on television that when I am watching a live match I often feel frustrated by not being able to see a replay of the most exciting events. (And since those most exciting moments invariably seem to take place while I am buying food or drink the replay would probably be the *only* chance I got to see *some* of the better moments.)

On the other hand, I rather abhor this introduction of high technology into what is, after all, a game made quite complicated enough by its own rules and regulations. Where will the technology stop? Will the umpires be given small screens to hold in their pockets? Or will monitors be built into the wickets? And what happens if the action replay screen breaks down? Does play have to be held up while the TV repairman is called in? And, perhaps most important of all, who on earth wants to be an umpire under those circumstances? Even the most confident of men would be bound to flinch a little at the prospect of seeing his decisions examined in close-up detail, and at slow-motion leisure.

At the moment they do not show controversial decisions on their big screen at Melbourne. But who decides what is controversial, and will all grounds be as conscientious?

Thursday 16th February

I wonder why it is that so few Australians play in English county cricket? There are New Zealanders, West Indians, Indians, Pakistanis and South Africans galore. But remarkably few Australian players, although I have heard rumours that Terry Alderman is due to spend the season over here with Kent.

If our domestic game is to be dominated by overseas players it would be pleasant to see one or two more Australians around. They sometimes seem an uncouth bunch, but they do take their cricket very seriously and I cannot help feeling that some of our younger players would benefit from playing alongside such determined professionals.

Thursday 8th March

So many internationally famous cricketers from the West Indies, England and Sri Lanka have now been banned from their national sides for playing in South Africa that I cannot help wondering how long it will be before a tournament for banned players is arranged.

I am surprised that the South Africans have not thought of it already. I cannot believe it would be difficult to find sponsors for a limited-over tournament between West Indians, English players, South Africans and players from Sri Lanka. They could call it the Alternative World Cup and invite Mrs Gandhi to present the medals.

(I wonder why there are no banned Australian players around — and why the Australians have been reluctant to play cricket in South Africa? Many white Australians treat aborigines as though they were inferior beings; I cannot believe that the Australian people as a whole find contact with South Africa particularly abhorrent.)

Friday 23rd March

Last year I got fed up with fishing flies out of my lager at cricket matches. I tried to get into the habit of putting a paperback book on the top of the glass in order to keep the flies out, though I usually forgot. I decided that the only sensible solution would be to buy one of those mugs with lids on that the Germans are so fond of However, although I must have tried just about every shop in the country I just could not find a lidded drinking mug. And then today, up in Newcastle, I saw exactly what I wanted in the window of a shop selling pewter. It cost rather more than I had expected, but it will surely pay for itself in a few months if you consider the amount of lager that I had to throw away last year.

Saturday 6th April

Looking at the details of last winter’s Currie Cup in South Africa I cannot help wondering whether I will ever see the like of Barrie Richards again. It would have been marvellous to see him play against the great fast bowlers of his era. He must have felt cheated at being denied a chance against Lillee, Thomson, Holding and Roberts at international level. I certainly felt cheated as a spectator.

I wonder how long we are going to allow the politicians to interfere so cruelly with cricket? I cannot think of any other sport which is so badly affected.

The South African Grand Prix takes place this weekend. Cars and drivers from all over the world will take part in the race without anyone batting an eyelid. No one will suggest that the drivers approve of apartheid just because they race motor cars there.

Thursday 12th April
Today I met an Australian publisher who has flown over to meet a few British authors. He insisted on talking about the debacle of last winter's tour of Australia but I protested that I did not know why he was so pleased. I told him that the England team that had been so roundly thrashed by the Australians had been an unofficial team put together by a group of cricketing dissidents and that the matches that had been played had been worthless in historical terms. I insisted that the Ashes had not been at stake and that none of the players who had toured Australia would ever have got into a proper England side.

He seemed confused.

Saturday 21st April
Norman Gifford had a tremendous season for Warwickshire last year; there must have been a few red faces down at Worcester. I bet they wished they had kept him there. Now I gather that Ormrod is leaving the county too — this time to go to Lancashire.

Both these players have served Worcester well for many years. It seems a pity that they cannot finish their careers with the county.

But there have been many instances over the years of cricketers leaving a county side in their thirties or early forties and having new and successful careers with different sides. One wonders if they would have had similar success if they had stayed with their old teams? There must be great stimulation in starting a new career with a new county.

Sunday 22nd April
Bats have been oiled, pads and boots whitened, chunky white sweaters shaken free of mothballs, sandwich fingers flexed, grounds rolled and mown, pitches cut and marked, fixture lists printed and distributed, boundary ropes uncoiled, membership and car park passes mailed and received with welcome smiles, creaky joints exercised in the nets, catching cradle repaired and put into action; umpires have collected their coats from the dry cleaners and their pebbles from the bedroom drawer, secretaries have sent off cheques for new cricket balls, groundsmen have hunted high and low for missing bails, wives have resigned themselves to lonely weekends, girlfriends have made promises that some will regret as the summer continues, sponsors and advertisers have wooed the famous and been wooed by the impecunious, ambitions have been reawakened and retirements postponed. The preparations are complete. Another cricket season is about to start.

Tuesday 24th April
The season does not really start until tomorrow when the MCC meet Essex at Lords. But as part of their pre-season practice, Warwickshire invariably play their local rivals, Worcestershire, in a friendly one-day match. So today I collected together my cricket watching kit (pencils, notebooks, binoculars, vacuum flask, sandwich box, anorak, silver hip flask, German-style drinking mug, waterproof trousers, umbrella etc) and set off for Edgbaston.

It was marvellous to see the ground again after the long winter and wonderful to see so many familiar faces. Over the years I have got on nodding terms, and occasional speaking terms, with quite a number of other cricket lovers. On the whole, I do not know their names or what they do for a living; for me, I admit, they have no life outside the cricket grounds where I am accustomed to seeing them. But they are dear friends nevertheless and it is always good to see that the English winter has not affected their number. I remember that at the start of last season there was one particular old fellow missing. He had always been a faithful follower of Warwickshire and when by mid-May he still had not appeared on the ground I feared the worst. I was convinced that he had died, for I knew that it would need to be something pretty serious to keep him away from his beloved cricket. I knew neither his name nor his address, however, so there was no way that I could find out what had happened to him.

And then, right at end of May, he reappeared. I was so pleased to see him that I broke with tradition, spoke to him and insisted on buying him a cup of tea. It turned out that he had fallen on an icy pavement and broken his hip. They had told him in hospital that he would need to stay in bed until August and that he would be lucky to leave the hospital at all. But cricket watchers are made of sterner stuff than ordinary folks. He was not prepared to let a mere trifle like a broken hip interfere with more than a month or so of his cricket watching.

It was, I must confess, the renewal of interrupted friendships that made that day for me. There was Eddie, for example, alongside whom I have shared the joy of a few spectacular wins, and the sorrow of too many uncomfortable defeats. Eddie works as a steward for British Airways and during the winter plays for an airline team that organises matches in such locations as the Bahamas. I had received a series of tantalising postcards from him during the bleak, dark months of the winter, but I had not seen him since September. And there, too, was Henry, who works as a foreman at a large car factory, but who also bowls quicker than his physical form might suggest for a Birmingham league side. I should think that it is comparatively easy to keep factory discipline when you are known as the Erdington Demon.

It was good, too, to see familiar faces serving behind the sandwich bar and to see that in a year when everyone else seems to be eating bran cereals, natural yoghurt and hunks of raw pineapple, cricket spectators are expected to continue their normal diet of pork pies, scotch eggs, sausage rolls, Cornish pasties and beef sandwiches.

While selecting a suitably unhealthy mixture from the available collection I found myself queuing beside John Inchmore, the Worcestershire fast bowler. The unfortunate Inchmore was nursing a strained back and was unable to play. He told me that he has high hopes of being given a benefit with Worcestershire next year. A benefit season makes a huge difference to a player's life. Inevitably, he is on tenterhooks to know what the committee had decided.

Talking both to Inchmore and to other players over the last few years, I have become more and more confused about just how various counties decide which players are to have benefits — and when. It does not seem as though there are any hard and fast rules about it. Play for one county and you will automatically get a benefit after ten years as a capped player. Play for another county and you can expect a benefit long before you have been playing for that long. Nor is there any way to tell how much money will be raised. If you play for one of the larger, better organised counties, you can hope to raise a hundred thousand pounds by the end of your allotted season. If you play your professional cricket for a smaller county then a ten thousand pound benefit will be a good one.

Of course, benefits have all become exceptionally well-organised these days. A few years ago most cricketers relied very heavily on the take from their allotted match and expected to add a collection and perhaps a raffle or two to this sum. Today the allotted matches are just one small part of the benefit; a cricketer will have dances, brochures, dinners, raffles and all sorts of other fund raising schemes. Organising a benefit can be so complex and so costly that I have even heard of one cricketer who made a *loss* on his benefit year. He spent more on organising his benefit than he collected, and it is rumoured that, tragically, he had to sell his house to pay the debts.

When a cricketer does do well, however, the money he makes is made much more valuable by the fact that he does not have to pay income tax on it. Many are now becoming worried by the fact that well-known cricketers (who probably need the money rather less than cricketers who have not achieved Test status) seem determined to raise huge six-figure sums. It seems likely that if this happens too often then the tax collector will start demanding a share. The ordinary county player will then find his benefit less worthwhile.

Meanwhile, John Inchmore is worrying, not about the tax problems he may or may not have, but about whether or not he is going to get a benefit next year. Believe it or not, benefits these days need so much planning that if Inchmore does not find out soon he will not be able to take full advantage of the opportunity.

Monday 23rd April

I have sharpened several pencils and managed to scrape all the mustard off my rubber. I have also cleaned out the thermos flask which I found, to my shame, still contained half a cupful of cold, black coffee from the final fixture at Worcester last year. For several years now I have carried my impediments to cricket matches in a fishing bag, I find I need something fairly spacious to cram in books, notebooks, pencils, sandwiches, flask, apples, anorak, and all the other equipment essential to good cricket watching. However, I do not think that the fishing bag is going to be big enough now that I have got a new hip flask and a pewter mug with a lid to take around with me. Now I know why so many people like to watch cricket while sitting in their cars. They just cannot carry all the stuff they have brought with them.

Wednesday 25th April

The first real cricket watching day of the season. Lords was quite busy and the weather was splendid. It was my chum's wife's first day at the game's physical and spiritual headquarters and she was quite indignant when she found out that women are not allowed in the pavilion. She suggested light-heartedly that before long the feminists will put a stop to this little bit of parochial chauvinism. I told her that one of the few things I am sure of in this world is that the Lords pavilion will remain a male preserve for at least another century or two; I pointed out that whatever new laws might be passed to outlaw such social discrimination the members would always be able to keep ahead of the legislators. When she demurred I pointed out that in a crisis it would be possible to put urinals in the Long Room. This would effectively turn the whole of the pavilion into a gentleman's convenience.

The cricket was well worth watching today. It was splendid to see young Andy Lloyd of Warwickshire getting a chance to prove himself and I strongly suspect that before the season is over we will see him in an England Sweater.

It was also marvellous to see Graham Gooch in action — even if Mrs Gandhi and her pals still will not let him play for England. The day was kept from getting too exciting by the dullness of Chris Smith, who makes dear old Boycott look positively exciting. After today's performance I cannot see Smith getting any more England caps unless timeless Tests are brought back in.

Tuesday 26th April

This is the second day of the season's opening match and my very good friend Russell Smith came along to share the sunshine and entertainment. It was absolutely boiling hot and more like June than April. To take advantage of the glorious weather we sat at the Nursery End. Russ had brought a martini-making kit which consisted of a bottle of gin, a half-empty bottle of vermouth, a bottle of olives and three long stemmed glasses. While Russ poured, I slipped out of the ground to the shops near the tube station. When I returned a few minutes later I was clutching a huge paper bag which contained a splendid liver pâté, a long French loaf, a tin of caviar and a packet of thin toast-like biscuits.

Cricket watching can sometimes be very civilised. I had intended to start work on a book I am supposed to be writing, but somehow the day went by without my putting a word down in the notebook I had by my side.

Friday 27th April

A friend of mine called Malcolm Mortimer, who works for Radio Trent, the local commercial radio station in Nottingham, tells me that he is playing cricket on Sunday for his local team, Lenton United. He seems unsure about the opponents but claims that his slow left-arm deliveries are something quite remarkable. He insists that I turn up to watch, promising an entertaining afternoon while he dazzles the opposition with his unreadable and unplayable deliveries.

Saturday 28th April

My binoculars seem to have stopped working. I had a lot of trouble with them but I did think that it was perhaps a side effect from Russ's martini-making kit. When I first discovered the fault I thought I had gone blind in one eye. It was a considerable relief to discover that the fault lay with the glasses and not with my eyes. I am not at all sure what has gone wrong but it is rather surprising since I see from my diary that I took them apart earlier this year (5th February) and gave them a good cleaning.

Sunday 29th April

Turned up to watch young Mortimer playing for Lenton United. The team's ground is hidden away on the outskirts of the city and we spent several hours wandering around looking for the match. It is remarkable just how many cricket matches take place on Sundays in the Nottingham area. Bat, pad and ball manufacturers should concentrate their sales efforts on this part of the country. By the time we found the right ground I had watched bits and pieces of seven other matches.

Unfortunately, by the time we got there, Mortimer's side had batted and I had missed my friend's skills with the bat. But his side was about to take the field and so I settled down to watch the proceedings with some interest.

I felt cheated when the match ended and Mortimer still had not bowled a ball. He insisted afterwards that it was because he'd had a row with the captain. We discussed captaincy at some length in the pub later and agreed that it is quite invidious that one man should have such absolute authority. We had planned a picnic supper but it was bitterly cold in Nottingham (in much contrast to the weather at Lords a few days ago). Although it is still only April I felt rather cross about this, as though some generous and unexpected gift had been snatched away.

Saturday 5th May

At Trent Bridge today I met a good friend of mine whom I have not seen for years. He is now working as a general practitioner just down the road in Leicestershire and although he is a member at Grace Road he prefers the atmosphere at Trent Bridge. I do not think this is meant as any sort of a slight on the Leicester club but is rather a tribute to my friend's past. He studied medicine in Nottingham and spent a good deal of his six years in the city watching cricket rather than tending to patients. Going to Trent Bridge for the day reminds him of his days at medical school.

My friend, whom I will call Dr H, for the very good reason that neither his first name nor his surname begin with the letter H, had brought with him a large picnic hamper. It was one of those old-fashioned wicker hampers and it seemed to contain just about every delicacy known to man. There were four different kinds of pâté, three different types of cheese (including an excellent Stilton and a very fine Brie), a loaf of French bread, an excellent mixed salad, a large plastic container filled with strawberries and another filled with cream and a whole host of other titbits designed to titillate the palate and satisfy the stomach. In addition to the food, there was also an excellent bottle of claret, a bottle of dry white, and a bottle of champagne to go with the strawberries.

I did not take much persuading to share this feast.

I cannot remember exactly when we started our lunch but I suppose that it must have been somewhere around noon. And if it is difficult to say just when we started, it is even more difficult to say when we finished. All I can say with any certainty is that we finished the last of the strawberries and the last of the champagne just as the official luncheon interval came to an end.

It was at that point that my friend produced a large flask of black coffee. I thought that this was an excellent idea and I told him so with great enthusiasm. I am not all that good at coping with wine for lunch and three bottles shared with just one person is more than enough to damage my faculties and send me off to sleep.

The afternoon was quite extraordinary. I honestly cannot remember anything about the cricket. Without looking up the fixture in the calendar I cannot even tell you who was playing whom or what the competition was. And I never did find my scorecard although I am sure it must be somewhere. By half past two I knew that I had drunk far too much; I was determined to sober myself up for the evening. Oddly enough, however, by three I felt worse than I had at two. I decided that the wine was having a delayed effect and I drank another large cup of black coffee. By four I felt worse than I had at three. And I drank more coffee.

By half past five there was absolutely no coffee left in the flask and I remember feeling a good deal worse than I had at four.

With some slurring I congratulated my friend on the state of his liver. He had drunk hardly any black coffee at all but seemed far less inebriated than I. I commented on this extraordinary feat as an example of the way that one body will cope with insults far more effectively than another.

My friend seemed slightly confused.

So I explained yet again that I was impressed that he had managed to stay sober without drinking heaps of black coffee.

It took my friend the best part of ten minutes to stop the tears pouring down his cheeks and to halt the hysterical laughter that threatened to tear his body in half.

When he did finally manage to stop himself laughing long enough to talk he explained that what I had thought had been plain black coffee had been Russian coffee, strongly laced with vodka. While I thought I was sobering myself up I was busy getting absolutely plastered. I left my car at the ground, my friend gave me a lift to the station, and I finally got home by train and taxi.

Sunday 13th May

For the first time this season I settled down this afternoon to watch one of the John Player Special League one-day matches on television. I am not quite sure why, but the standard of television commentary always seems to me to fail to match up to the standard of radio commentary. During Test Matches, like so many people I know, I turn down the sound on the television set and listen to the radio commentators. Today there was no such alternative and so I had to sit and listen to a lot of inane and unnecessary wittering. The odd thing is that the same people work on both the radio and the television. It is, perhaps, the chummy atmosphere in the Radio Three commentary box that gives that medium the edge. The radio commentary seems to follow the relaxed, comfortable and friendly style of the inimitable Brian Johnston. The television commentary seems to owe too much to the humourless Richie Benaud, whose taste in ties and jackets betrays him as an intruder. (Why, I wonder, do Australians have such appalling dress sense?) After listening to Christopher Martin-Jenkins for half hour I tried turning down the sound completely. That did not work, however, because, without the click of ball on bat and the background hum of the crowd, the effect was rather spoilt.

The match was between Somerset and Hampshire and should have been exciting. But somehow it palled and I lost all interest. Is it just the commentators or has televised one-day cricket finally had its day? This match seemed meaningless and joyless.

While wondering why the afternoon's match was about as attractive as three hours of women's athletics between East Germany and Czechoslovakia, it occurred to me that those who offer us our television cricket might like to experiment a little with some of the magnificent new technology that they have available.

Surely it would be possible to use the sort of computerised control available through the Ceefax and Oracle systems to give viewers the chance to select for themselves the picture they received. So, for example, one could press one number to get an overall shot of the ground, another to get a shot from behind the bowler's arm and a third to obtain a close up of the batsman. With the use of six buttons one could pick and choose between the shots provided by six different cameras - much in the same sort of way that a television director decides which picture to transmit. One could press additional buttons to obtain an up-to-date scorecard, bowling figures and so on. With this sort of facility, and an outside microphone recording the ground ‘atmosphere’, it would be perfectly possible to do away with commentators completely.

Tuesday 15th May

The only snag with writing books for a living is that when they are published you have to promote them. There are so many books coming out these days that it is no good expecting people to find a new book just because it’s there on the shelves. The author has to go out on the road and actively promote his latest product. My latest book is no exception and I had a radio interview arranged for this afternoon. The morning, however, was free and there was a match between Middlesex and Sussex at Lords to look forward to.

Staying in London overnight you would think it would be easy to get to Lords in time to see the first ball bowled. We had a room at the National Liberal Club down in Whitehall, which, even at the busier times of day, cannot be more than half an hour away by car or black cab. Still, when time is not pressing, it is easy to end up being late. But I suppose it is more or less forgivable to be a little languid when you have spent two weeks tearing around intent on arriving at radio or television stations precisely on time.

As it was, we arrived just in time to see the West Indian touring team carrying their baggage over towards the nets for their first practice session. Even sauntering across to the Nursery End practice ground the West Indians looked fierce, threatening and professional. They have a loose, easy sort of confidence which they wear without any trace of arrogance. Some of their number, Clive Lloyd and Joel Gamer, for example, are instantly recognisable. Others, newer members of the squad, men who have yet to make their mark, may not have faces or names that mean much yet but they have already acquired that unique brand of jaunty confidence that helps to distinguish West Indian cricketers from all others. The Australians, at their very best and most successful have an arrogant, crude, slightly overbearing confidence which is perhaps best described as cockiness. The Indians and Pakistanis, when they are playing well, have a quiet, smug sort of confidence which I find rather unpleasant. But the West Indians are good and they know that they are good and that is all there is to it. They enjoy being skilled and successful and there is nothing about them that could possibly give offence. They wear their great skill with simple, justifiable pride.

As we walked past the nets, watching while the West Indians unfastened cricket bags and tracksuit tops, a small boy next to me pointed to a tall, familiar, bespectacled figure circled by a clutch of more small boys.

‘Who’s that?’ he wanted to know.

I was slightly surprised that he had not recognised instantly one of the most famous cricketers in the world today, and explained that this was the great Clive Lloyd himself captain of the West Indian touring team, powerful, sometimes savage batsman and probably as fine a cover fielder as the game has ever known.

He had not heard of him.

I was shocked by this but these days it is, I suppose, quite common for someone to become extraordinarily famous in one particular field yet remain unknown to those not directly taking an interest in that sphere of activity. If you told me the names of the England soccer players, they would probably mean nothing at all to me. And yet these are men whose names appear in enormous block letters on the back pages of our newspapers throughout the winter.

I suspect that it requires something much more than skill or success to burst through the confining barriers of fame in a single sport or profession and become a ‘household name’, known even to those, who have no particular interest in your skills or capabilities. People like Muhammad Ali achieved great fame because his exploits took him out of the specialist pages and onto the general news pages. The archetypal cricket example is, I suppose, Ian Botham, whose clashes with the law and the authorities, as well as his at times phenomenal cricketing success, have gained him immense exposure.

These thoughts were still uppermost in my mind when I found that, almost unthinking, I had walked more or less right, round the ground and were now behind the Tavern Bar. I bought a Cornish pasty and a beaker of black coffee and wandered off into the almost deserted Mound Stand. There cannot have been more than a hundred spectators in the whole ground. It was, I daresay, the sort of turnout that most county secretaries would recognise as normal for a three county match.

I had been settled in our seats long enough to admire Daniel’s fearsome pace and to wonder how many international sides could afford to leave a bowler of such threatening skills out of the reckoning when, with Sussex having scored just 32 for the loss of one wicket and the clock showing ten minutes to twelve, a man, coming from the Nursery End, walked onto the pitch carrying a bucket of sawdust. It was as though this modest act of defiance was too much for the Gods. Before he had reached the bowlers run-up at the Pavilion End the drizzle started, and umpires and players alike set off for shelter. And that was that. The covers were brought on, the West Indian touring party entertained the Fleet Street photographers by jogging around the ground and the rain teased and taunted for the rest of the day.

As an exercise in watching cricket it was less than successful. As a day of relaxation it was a tremendous success.

There are few things more calming than sitting at a cricket ground where nothing is happening but where there is still promise of things to come. And the Lords caterers did us proud. The pasties tasted better and spicier than ever; I ate three.

On the way to Nottingham that evening I passed, somewhere between Wellingborough and Leicester, a small village cricket ground. It was seven in the evening and so dark that it was difficult to see much although the players were well within hailing distance. It was drizzling lightly too and the tall, thick trees around the ground made it seem even darker. No cricketer paid to play the game would have contemplated cricket under such conditions. These players there for pleasure, were well set and clearly unlikely to be dissuaded by such inconsequential considerations as bad light or rain.

Saturday 19th May

My parents have a holiday flat on the seafront at Budleigh Salterton, down in Devon, and I arrived here two days ago to work on a newspaper article that needed finishing quickly. With the typescript safely completed, I set off along the seafront for a gentle Saturday afternoon stroll. It is some time since I last came to Budleigh but it is still the most peaceful and relaxing of seaside villages. It is remarkable that such an exquisite resort should have succeeded in remaining so unspoilt. There are a good number of retired residents (the average age of the local voters must be nearer sixty than forty) and the only thing that breaks the silence is the tap tap tap of walking sticks and the rubberised shuffle of walking frames. There are no gaudy amusement arcades and no noisy transistor radios. Budleigh (and indeed the same is true of the neighbouring town of Exmouth) has succeeded in remaining aloof from the commercial excesses of the 1980s. It stands like an elegant lady from the 1920s, untouched by progress; within sight of the future but firmly embedded in the past; surviving in but not becoming part of, the final decades of the twentieth century. There are wooden beach huts, plenty of comfortable wooden benches and fishing boats galore pulled up on the shingle beach. Their nets spread out to dry. There is no sign here of those two ubiquitous and destructive twentieth-century evils: plastic and electricity.

I was walking quietly along the sea front when suddenly the cliff on the landward side sloped down to ground level and there, some quarter of a mile out of the town, nestling on what looked like a reclaimed patch of estuary land, lay one of the most beautiful cricket grounds I have ever seen. The match, I found out, was a Devon League fixture between Budleigh Salterton 2nd XI and the Chudleigh 2nd XI, and although there were no spectators that I could see (there were, of course, a number of ladies busily occupied inside the pavilion doing things with plates and knives and, undoubtedly, mountains of Devon clotted cream, scones and strawberry jam) the teams were perfectly turned out. The batsmen had whiter shoes and pads than a good many professionals I have seen.

I walked slowly round the ground and watched a few overs. It was marvellous stuff the very meat of English village cricket, enthusiastic and determined, but good tempered and companionable. The second eleven players were trying harder than many professionals but doing so without ever forgetting the nature of the game. The fielders chased each ball as though their lives depended on it, but found time to congratulate the batsmen who had inspired their breathlessness.

It was a true example of English village cricket at its very best: teenagers, one boy and one girl, were doing the scoring; the groundsman’s tractor, mower, heavy motorised roller and two smaller rollers were parked neatly near a storage shed; the green and white painted pavilion (with green flag with golden otter proudly flying from the roof) still smelt of fresh paint; and the silence was broken only by the sound of birds singing, and the cries of cricketers at play (a splendid change from blaring car horns, banging tins, and mindless chants from senseless and prejudiced spectators). To the left, there lay a still river, its surface opaque with algae, and behind the ground a small, muddy brook. And a couple of hundred yards in front there lay the western edges of the English Channel.

Those of us who love cricket and watch it on the big city grounds sometimes forget that this is where it all started, that this is what cricket is all about, that whatever they may do at Lords or at Trent Bridge, at Melbourne or at Barbados, it will never ever be as important as what happens on elegant village greens in the Budleigh Saltertons of England.

Sunday 20th May

Three very good chums, Sir Bertie Wheezer, Dr Ambrose Crump and The Rev Horatio Smith all turned up in Budleigh Salterton to help celebrate my birthday. All three are half-crazed cricket fanatics — Smith never travels anywhere without his bat, pads and a ball (he even took them to Italy earlier this year) — so an impromptu game was inevitable. After an excellent meal at the King William we made our way to the beach. Over lunch I had protested that the pebbly beach in this delightful part of South Devon is not well suited to the game of cricket, but no one seemed prepared to listen.

We played for ninety minutes before abandoning the match. It is difficult to tell which was most difficult: trying to bowl on pebbles, trying to bat when the ball's course is entirely unpredictable, or trying to run when every step seems doomed to failure. Crump, who fielded up to his knees in the cold sea, was shivering and unable to talk coherently, so we went straight back to the flat. Hot tea and home-made ginger cake seemed to revive him quite quickly. Catering is so important in all classes of cricket.

Sunday 27th May

Despite my complaints about BBC 2's televised coverage of the John Player Special League matches, I settled down to watch the afternoon's match with some enthusiasm. I had been planning to drive over to Edgbaston to watch the local derby match between Warwickshire and Worcestershire, but not even the Brumberella could have coped with the downpour at Birmingham. An afternoon in front of the television seemed an acceptable alternative.

My plans were foiled by the fact that the BBC had decided to fill their Sunday afternoon with women's athletics. I find it difficult to believe that anyone can possibly gain pleasure from watching flat-chested, overmuscled, chromosomal freaks comparing abilities to hurl javelins and leap over hurdles.

I am convinced that the BBC has been infiltrated by dangerous dissidents.

Monday 28th May

In most parts of the, country the only cricket to be televised is that made available through the networks but up here in Yorkshire they love their cricket too much to allow their viewing habits to be dominated by national considerations. Today I found myself in a friend's house for just long enough to catch a few overs of the traditional Roses Match between Yorkshire and Lancashire.

I must have picked a good time to be passing for in the space of those few overs I saw the redoubtable Sidebottom take no less than three wickets. First he had Abrahams, the young and enthusiastic captain of Lancashire, magnificently caught by an agile fellow called Swallow. Abrahams is a fiercely determined captain who seems well equipped to take the pressures of captaincy. I remember watching a game just after he had taken over the captaincy; some young batsman whose name I now forget was within a whisker of reaching his maiden century when Abrahams decided to declare. It was a decision which must have taken courage as well as something of the essential ruthlessness that so many modern captains seem to lack. Anyway, Abrahams, this time the batsman rather than the captain, was the first to go. The next was David Hughes, the man who must by now be weary of being remembered outside his county only as the saviour of Lancashire in that legendary one-day final at Lords when they played until around nine o'clock in the evening. Hughes has always struck me as being an essentially careful batsman, but the game today had presumably reached a point where caution was no longer called for. He swished, swatted and swiped and was eventually caught by Kevin Sharp at extra cover.

The third of this august trio was the famous Jack Simmons. The man whose popularity among Lancastrians can easily be measured by the enormous sum they raised for his benefit. Again Sidebottom was the bowler, but this time it was Bairstow who took the catch. He seemed to make quite a meal of it, turning what looked like a fairly straightforward catch into a three act high drama.

And with the departure of the stout and doughty Simmons I took my leave of the television set and wandered out in search of the motorway. Why do not more local television companies fill some of their daytime schedules with cricket instead of low-quality imported soap operas?

Tuesday 29th May

At Old Trafford today Gordon Greenidge scored 186 not out, playing the West Indies against Lancashire in a one-day match, I wish I had seen that particular innings. I have tremendous respect for Gordon Greenidge who is, I feel, probably the most violently aggressive batsman playing in the world today. Admittedly past his best, he is still a man who can *punish* bowlers. He always seems desperate to damage the ball as though it has offended him in some personal and unforgivable fashion. I remember once sitting high up in one of the stands at Edgbaston, in the rarefied area where they recently built their hideously named 'executive suite'. Greenidge, opening the batting for Hampshire with the great but sadly thwarted Barry Richards, sent one massive six high into the stand where it landed about a yard to my left on one of the concrete steps.

There was nothing particularly remarkable in that, but the ball landed with such force that it bounced straight back down onto the playing area, a distance of some fifty yards at the very least.

Wednesday 30th May

Before today I had never thought of umpires (apart from the odd one) as being driven by ambition. I had always thought of umpiring as something done by people too old or infirm to play the game (I excuse this attitude by admitting immediately that I consider myself not only too old and too infirm to play cricket but also too old and infirm to umpire).

My thinking about umpires (professional umpires at least) was changed by a play on BBC television this evening. Written by former Derbyshire player Peter Gibbs, and called *Benefit of the Doubt,* the play was centred on two main characters — both umpires. The older of the two was experienced, world weary, and apparently imbued with huge quantities of wisdom. Underneath, however, he was sadly cynical and essentially pragmatic in his approach to the game. His approach was perhaps best summed up when he admitted that although he would give a batsman out if he was boring to watch, he would always give the captain of any side the benefit of the doubt lest an uncomplimentary report about himself be sent to Lords.

The younger umpire, one of life’s natural bank clerks, had been dragged out of his office and straight into the professional hurly-burly of a three-day county match. His attitude was summed up by a shot of him standing in front of the mirror practising holding up his index finger — and trying to look both convinced and convincing.

I found the younger umpire’s attitude naive and rather pathetic. The older umpire’s attitude I found depressing, and, in its way, equally pathetic. It is difficult to say how far these two rather exaggerated characters represent professional umpires in the modern game but one must assume that Peter Gibbs, as a former player, has some special knowledge. It does seem to me to be rather tragic that any umpire should put on his white coat expecting to go out into the middle to play an important part in the game. Good umpires, like good scorers and good groundsmen, should go unnoticed when they do their job properly. Indeed, I believe that the more an umpire attracts attention to himself then the worse he will probably prove to be. Good umpires need to be self-effacing, and prepared to admit that their role, though essential, is supporting, not starring. The umpire who has failed to enjoy success at the highest level as a player and tries to make up for it by becoming some sort of celebrity as an umpire must end up taking himself and his role far too seriously.

I think W G Grace had it summed up perfectly. When an umpire overstretched himself enough to give the Great Man out, Grace pointed to the crowd, refused to move and explained: ‘These people have paid to watch me play, not to watch you umpire’.

Thursday 31st May

I very nearly went to Manchester today to watch the first of the season’s one-day internationals. But eventually I succumbed to sloth, abandoned the thought of driving north and settled in front of the television set to watch the match in peace and comfort.

Sitting at home one misses all the atmosphere but has the advantage of enjoying access to food prepared in style and avoiding those horrendous queues and parking problems that characterise watching high level cricket. These days it sometimes seems as though the police are determined to make things as difficult as possible for motorists anxious to find somewhere legal to abandon their motor cars. I would have thought that great sporting occasions, drawing exceptionally large crowds into areas ill-equipped to cope, would have represented suitable opportunities for authorities to organise Park and Drive services. Motorists could be directed to large public car parks, fields or whatever and then ‘bussed’ in the grounds.

With all the horrors of finding somewhere to park waiting for me in Manchester I decided, as I say, to stay at home and watch the match on television.

I wish I had gone to the ground.

Viv Richard’s innings of 189 not out has been described as one of the best ever played in any class of cricket. It is, of course, impossible to compare innings. There are so many variables to be taken into consideration — the quality of the bowling, the nature of the pitch, the, state of the match and so on — that comparisons must be far too objective to be of any real value.

But I wish I had gone and seen it for myself. It was not just Richards who did the damage, of course. The last pair of batsmen put on a century between them and that is always discouraging for a team. Incidentally, I wonder why teams continue to play one-day cricket as though it were an entirely different game to first class cricket. I strongly suspect that if England had played this match aggressively, and had tried to dismiss the West Indians rather than merely contain them, they would have had a much better chance of avoiding that sort of last wicket partnership and of winning the match. The paradox is, of course, that when you try to stop a team scoring, rather than try to take wickets, then you put them under far less pressure and make it easier, rather than harder, for them to push the scoring rate along.

I say all this knowing very well that it is far easier to make positive, constructive suggestions from behind the safety of the boundary rope than it is to make similar types of suggestion when you are out there on the field of play and you have to translate ideas into action. There was a perfect example of this today provided by the television commentators.

During one fifteen-minute spell I am quite sure that I heard the same pair of commentators first of all suggest that

Botham and Willis be brought on to bowl more or less immediately and then suggest that it would be better if they were kept until later. When Botham *was* brought on and he took a wicket, the commentators praised themselves as though they had known exactly what was going to happen all along and as though they were responsible for the success. If Botham had *not* taken a wicket they would, I suspect, have been quick to condemn the captain.

Friday 1st June

Minutes after I arrived in Nottingham this evening, ready for tomorrow's one-day international at Trent Bridge, a thunderstorm shattered the evening calm. It did not last long, however, and tomorrow's cricket should be quite safe. Not for the first time I felt a wave of sympathy for the groundsmen who have to look after wickets on major cricket grounds. I wonder if they stay up all night waiting to see if it rains and then checking out the covers for leaks. Or do they go to bed, to be awakened only by the very loudest of storms?

I hope Dickie Bird is not umpiring tomorrow or else there will probably be a delay.

Saturday 2nd June

The start of today's one-day international was delayed for half-an-hour because of the thunderstorm the night before. I find it extremely difficult to understand just what difference thirty minutes is likely to make to a cricket ground. Dickie Bird is one of today's umpires and whenever a match I have looked forward to is delayed or abandoned, Dickie Bird always seems to be there. Mr Bird is, I am quite sure, a conscientious and well-meaning umpire, (indeed I met him once at the Yorkshire TV studios in Leeds and found him to be a thoughtful and sensitive man), but not for the first time I wish I had some way of finding out in advance which umpires are due to officiate. I strongly suspect that if some sort of table were kept, Mr Bird would be found to be more sensitive to bad light and wet grass than many of his colleagues.

On the whole I think it is a pity that spectators are dealt with 'so shabbily by those whose living depends on the professional game. I know it is a little more dangerous than usual to play cricket in poor light or when the grass is wet but I do not see why cricketers need to be protected as though they were orchids in bloom.

Ironically, it seems to me that the more cricketers get paid, the more they complain about the risks of their sport. And yet if you look at other sports the risks in cricket are really very slight, and the dangers grossly over-emphasised. Sportsmen in other fields seem much more conscious of the needs of spectators.

You would not, for example, see skiers giving up just because the snow was a little icy or the mountain shrouded in some gentle mist. And yet their sport is infinitely more hazardous than cricket. To support my contention that cricket is not as dangerous as cricketers often claim I would point out that only relatively rarely do cricketers get badly injured. When was the last time you can remember a professional cricketer suffering anything more than a temporary knock or sprain? Modern cricketers are reasonably well paid for a relatively quiet and undemanding life. They really should be prepared to do a little more for their money.

Sunday 3rd June

Watched the Monaco Grand Prix on television this afternoon. Despite an astonishingly heavy thunderstorm the race went on as planned. The unfortunate drivers must have been driving blind for most of the race and judging by the number of accidents, they certainly had some terrible problems handling their cars on the watersoaked track. I could not help comparing the fact that whereas the Grand Prix went on as usual, cricket matches these days seem to get cancelled for the slightest of reasons. If conditions are not absolutely perfect everyone stays in the dressing room rather than risk slipping and getting dirty flannels or a slight sprain.

Monday 4th June

The third and deciding match in the Texaco Trophy competition today. I know that cricket needs sponsorship money but I do wish that it would be just a little more discreet about it. I find it slightly offensive to hear international cricket fixtures, and even Test Matches, being talked about as though they were darts tournaments or snooker competitions. Wimbledon still manages to distance itself from commercial sponsors and they have not yet started calling their Men's Singles the Texaco Men's singles or whatever.

At the rate we are going, Lords will be renamed Shellmex House by the end of the decade.

Thursday 7th June

According to today's newspapers, magistrates in Leicester have just turned down an application from the County Cricket Club there for all-day licences for the fifty-eight days of cricket due to be held at Grace Road this summer. The decision was clearly unexpected; Mike Turner, the club's secretary and manager; was reported to be 'almost speechless' — itself surely a comment on the controversial nature of the decision. There cannot be many things that could render the normally voluble Mike Turner 'almost speechless'.

I can quite see his point. Like it or not it is undoubtedly true that a good many people turn up at cricket matches because alcohol will be available all day long. Certainly, many of the companies which entertain their guests at cricket matches, hire boxes and marquees to ensure that there are catering facilities where their guests can marinate in beer and wine. A good many of the people watching first class cricket every summer do not know the difference between a googly and a gulley. But they enjoy the fact that beer flows from morning to evening.

Alcohol may produce much ill-mannered behaviour and may be partly responsible for the increasing rowdiness at cricket matches but, like it or not, it is the life blood of county cricket.

Saturday 9th June

Drove down to Worcester today to watch the game against Hampshire. Kapil Dev, the talented captain of India and all-rounder, made his debut for Worcester after long weeks of waiting. It must have been a difficult time for those who brought him to New Road and, indeed, for Kapil Dev himself undoubtedly anxious to prove his worth in county cricket after a fairly unhappy period at Northamptonshire. As it was, the debut was neither a disappointment nor a sensation. It will be interesting to see what sort of contribution Kapil Dev has made on the field by the time the season ends. From talking to players and officials, however, I rather suspect that even if he does not play in another match Kapil Dev will have made his mark on the Worcester players simply by being there. Introducing a world class player into a side has two useful side effects: it encourages all the other players to try a little harder, to prove that they are just as good and to make sure that *their* place is not at risk; second, it gives the team faith and confidence in its own ability to win competitions and trophies. So even if Kapil Dev himself fails to set New Road on fire, the enthusiasts who brought him to the ground can count their patience and investment well worthwhile.

While at New Road I met John Inchmore who has now been told that he can, indeed, have a benefit next season. He was walking on air and already full of plans for raising money.

One of his first tasks is to form a committee to organise the benefit events and to delegate responsibilities to friends, relatives, club members and so on. One of the problems is that in order to minimise the risk of the Inland Revenue taking a close interest in the profits of the benefit fund it is important that the cricketer is not actually seen to organise anything. Can there be anything more absurd? The player must work in devious and roundabout ways: devising, suggesting and encouraging rather than overtly planning, arranging and collecting.

Inchmore is probably the archetypal county professional. He has served Worcestershire well over the last decade and has an excellent record with the club. He deserves a successful benefit.

Tuesday 12th June

When I was small, my father (who was not, I suspect, that fond of cricket) used to take me to Edgbaston to watch the Saturday's play in the Test. He used to write away for the tickets in January and between then and the allotted day I would think of little else. They were, as I remember, quite large, impressive looking, pinky-brown tickets and I used to check on their whereabouts quite regularly through the intervening months, concerned lest they be lost or stolen. I do not think I ever worried too much about it raining on the day; I would still have insisted on sitting there even if there had been twelve inches of snow on the ground.

It may be just the mystery and confusion caused by the passing of time but looking back it seems to me that going to Test Matches was infinitely more exciting than it is today. Fences and railings along the roads and streets for miles around Edgbaston were covered with colourful hoardings and posters advertising competing national and local newspapers. We did not have a car park pass then and we used to arrive early so as to be sure to find a parking space. I remember that one year we parked in a private garden where an enterprising householder had let off his driveway and front lawn. Such commercial enterprise is probably frowned on; or may even be illegal, these days.

The hoardings may be gone. And I may have a car park pass already pasted onto my windscreen. But I am looking forward to seeing how England fare against this year's tourists.

Thursday 14th June

The other day I wrote complaining that Test Matches are not as exciting as they used to be. I was wrong. When I arrived at Edgbaston this morning, an hour early to ensure that I got into the car park, (where I intended to leave the car before going on to the Pebble Mill television studios for the first part of the morning), I found myself just as excited as I ever had been when I was small. The queues were already forming in the road outside the ground, and a small group of spectators were standing around the outdoor nets, waiting for a star or two to take a little pre-match practice.

The weather was hot and sticky, and the atmosphere felt oppressively heavy. The people I spoke to at the ground were convinced that the ball would move around but equally convinced that Gower, captaining England for the first time in a Test Match, would never dare emulate Denness and put the opposition in to bat. It seemed a toss to lose rather than win and the consensus among the people I spoke to was that England would probably find themselves batting whoever won the toss; the argument being that Lloyd, the more experienced and better established captain, being both further away from home and free of the spectre of Denness, *would* take a risk and invite England to bat.

In the end Gower won and, predictably and probably sensibly, decided to bat first.

As I had feared I finally spent the *whole* morning at the nearby television studios, recording the first of a series of programmes based on a recent book of mine, but the studio director kindly kept the monitor switched to the cricket as much as possible and I missed very little of the action.

People working in television and radio are invariably keen on cricket and whenever a match of any note is being played it is not difficult to persuade someone to switch on a radio or television set. I once did a one-hour live radio programme with an earpiece feeding me the Test Match Special commentary from BBC radio. By the time I arrived at the ground during the luncheon interval I was well aware that England had done relatively well to struggle to 73 runs for four wickets.

The main talking point on the ground, was of course, the fact that Andy Lloyd, a Warwickshire player appearing in his first Test Match for England, had been hit on the head and taken to hospital for tests and observation. It seems that the hapless batsman was just as much to blame for the accident as the bowler, since he had ducked into the ball rather than simply been hit on the head by a sharply rising bouncer. I do not know whether or not I missed any relevant announcement but as far as I am concerned it was not until the England innings closed later that afternoon, with just nine wickets down, that I finally realised that Lloyd was not coming back to bat. I thought it rather surprising that no public statement about his condition was made since a good many of the spectators, being Warwickshire supporters, were keen to know the extent of the injury and the condition of their young hero. The nature of the bowling can be judged, incidentally, by the fact that Botham, one of the most fearless and brave of batsmen, came out to the wicket wearing a white helmet. It is a long time since I saw Botham needing that sort of protection. Indeed it was not until late in the evening when Viv Richards and Larry Gomes were at the wicket that there were two batsmen in the middle *not* wearing helmets.

Apart from the cricket itself which was always fascinating if rather one-sided, two things about the day stuck in my mind as I drove homewards that evening.

First, there was the courageous and lively decision by the Edgbaston administrators to allow a West Indian steel band to play during the interval. I thought this was a tremendous idea for it gave the whole match a delightful carnival atmosphere. There was the added advantage that the band completely drowned the loudspeakers and so the dreary litany of instructions and exhortations which normally litter tea and luncheon intervals at Edgbaston was quite drowned out.

The second thing that stuck in my mind was the fact that someone had decided to increase the charge for scorecards from the usual fifteen pence to a staggering and quite outrageous twenty-five pence. How anyone can justify a charge of five shillings for a single sheet of rather cheap and badly-printed card I just cannot imagine. To add to this financial injury the scorecards these days are so heavily covered with advertising material that there is hardly any space left on which to jot down the scores and bowling figures.

Saturday 16th June

Malcolm Mortimer telephoned from Nottingham today to tell me that he had managed to obtain tickets for the Oval Test Match. Yesterday, apparently, he played on a pitch where there were large weeds growing on a good length. He tells me that a cricket ball pitched directly onto a dandelion can be expected to rise quite alarmingly. I tell him that England are in quite enough trouble already and to keep this information himself.

Sunday 17th June

The one memory that sticks in my mind about all the Tests I attended when I was a boy is of once sitting next to a man who had a scorecard which had been filled in entirely in pencil. My scorecard, which I had bought that day, had been partly filled in by the printers when I had bought it. My neighbour had clearly been at the match on the Thursday and the Friday too. I remember being terribly impressed by this, and wondering just what sort of man could take out three whole days to watch a Test Match, wanting to ask whether or not he was planning to attend on the Monday and the Tuesday too. And making a promise to myself that one day I too would attend all five days of a Test Match.

I was reminded of this when Gower decided to play safe and bat first in the Edgbaston Test. This in turn reminded me of the ill-fated match in which Mike Denness, who was captain, invited the Australians to bat. The Australians went on to amass a massive total and England lost the match. Denness was pilloried by the press for his audacity. It was that match that was the first I attended in its entirety. I remember that I sat through the whole of a wet and dreary Saturday and a gloomy Monday morning when the ground was emptier than it usually is for a three-day match, just so that I could satisfy that childhood ambition. We lost the match, of course, but it was a milestone in my cricket watching.

Since then I have watched several Tests and many county matches all the way through. Since I became a professional author I have done much of my thinking, planning and writing at cricket matches — and never failed to get pleasure from seeing every ball bowled, every run scored and every wicket that has fallen.

But this morning I decided not to go to Edgbaston on Monday. It is just too sad to see a team being humiliated so I think I will stay at home and look forward to Lords.

Wednesday 20th June

The match between Yorkshire and Warwickshire that took place at Headingley today will surely count as one of the season's most exciting. Warwickshire, batting first, managed to amass a very reasonable total. The ageless Kallicharran (who is surely still a good enough batsman to be playing for the West Indies) helped create the basis of their score while wicket-keeper Humpage made the sort of contribution for which he is now quite rightly famous. The Yorkshire innings started with Chris Old managing to dismiss his former colleague, Geoffrey Boycott, and I doubt if anyone will take a wicket quite so sweet all season. I must confess that I was surprised that that was the only wicket Old took. All cricketers tend to try that little bit harder against their old counties and ex-Yorkshire cricketers usually have more incentive than most to do their very best. Still, perhaps the pleasure of dismissing Boycott was enough.

The finish, with Yorkshire needing just ten runs from the final over was nerve-racking. I very nearly missed it too. A middle-aged gentleman carrying rather too much weight and considerably too much beer collapsed a few yards away from me and I hurried across to see that all was well with him. As it was he had merely fainted in all the excitement and he came round in time for me to see Willis bowl an immaculate final over.

One of the perils of being a qualified doctor is that you are never really off duty. Even though I do not practise medicine any more I still feel obliged to respond when someone needs help. I really cannot begin to remember how many times I have knelt over prostrate spectators or soothed bruised and worried players.

Emergency calls to the pavilion are undoubtedly the most interesting of course. The problem with these is that if there are more than about a hundred spectators on the ground then you can pretty well guarantee that there will be at least half a dozen other doctors around. Turn up at the entrance to the dressing room and you find yourself queuing up alongside rows of general practitioners, orthopaedic surgeons, obstetricians, plastic surgeons, pathologists, psychiatrists and other assorted specialists. More surprising, perhaps, is the fact that the dressing room entrance will also be clogged up with bishops, philosophers, music doctorates and literary professors. I have never quite understood why they turn up but you can pretty well guarantee that when an appeal for a doctor goes out over the loudspeakers then anyone with any sort of doctorate will invariably turn up. Just what a doctor of divinity expects to be able to contribute is, I fear, a mystery to which I know no answer.

Over the years I have, I suppose, wandered into dressing rooms at most of the grounds in England. Apart from the very occasional battered batsman the problems are almost invariably at least fifty per cent psychological. Muscle strains, backaches, bruises and bouts of indigestion are the usual run-of-the-mill problem in the dressing room. Cricketers, like a good many professional sportsmen, whose ability to earn a good living depends very much on their ability to stay very fit, are fearful hypochondriacs, always dreading the worst, always convinced that they have just come off the field for the very last time.

Nor are team mates necessarily full of sympathy or understanding. I remember once struggling to examine a fast bowler suffering from what turned out to be gastritis. Throughout the examination, conducted on a wooden bench in the changing room, another bowler (later to win fame as an England player) insisted on using the wall just above my head as a target for throwing practice. They were not the easiest of circumstances. The bowler got some considerable relief from an antacid tablet I found lurking in a forgotten corner of my fishing bag. To treat the headache with which I left the dressing room I had to borrow a couple of aspirin tablets from a kind lady in the sandwich bar.

Spectators, on the other hand, tend to be fairly seriously ill by the time they reach the point where they need medical help. Apart from the fact that you have to be a fairly hardened sort of character to spend cold summer days sitting on stark, uncomfortable wooden benches, spectators, who have paid to watch the game, tend to be reluctant to waste time being examined medically. When it is just hot or exciting, of course, there will usually be quite an epidemic of fainting. There may be an occasional heart attack or two as well. But when the cricket is fairly unexciting the problems vary enormously. Too much alcohol or too much food produce indigestion, headaches and vomiting. Bees, wasps and all sorts of other insects bite and sting. And during a particularly unexciting session I once found myself being consulted by a young couple who had asked the secretary to broadcast an appeal for a doctor because they wanted supplying with some form of contraception.

Oddly enough, however, the most frustrating experience I ever had as a cricket-loving doctor took place while I was listening to one of the Radio Three Test Match Special broadcasts. I was sitting comfortably in the garden, one delightfully warm Monday afternoon, listening to the closing stages of a very tedious match that had been heading for a draw since Friday lunchtime when suddenly, over the wireless, I heard the ground announcer's voice.

'If Dr J—— is on the ground would he please come to the rear of the pavilion.' went the announcement.

The second word of that announcement had set my heart beating a little faster. The third word of the sentence had calmed it down again. But a few moments later a second announcement was made.

'If there is a doctor on the ground would he please come to the rear of the pavilion.' Clearly Dr J had not responded.

After that announcement the time interval before the next was rather shorter. Whoever it was who had initiated the call was clearly beginning to panic a little.

'If there is a nurse on the ground would she please come to the rear of the pavilion,' said the announcer. (I apologise for the sexism in this comment but I am merely reporting what I heard.)

The final announcement, coming mere seconds after the third one was the most plaintive and desperate of all.

'If there is anyone on the ground with first aid experience would he or she please come to the rear of the pavilion as soon as possible?'

And after that there was silence. So either they found someone with first aid experience, or else the patient ceased to require the ministrations of a healer and became a problem requiring other hands.

Saturday 23rd June

I spent the afternoon today playing cricket down at Camberley, Surrey. Russell Smith, the friend I met at Lords earlier in the year, had invited a group down for afternoon tea and garden cricket. Although I suspect that the TCCB might have found the rules rather bewildering (a garden slide midway between the wicket keeper and the boundary and an immense oak tree at mid-on were just two of the more obvious variations on the traditional fielding theme) it was a delightful day.

Most people who have some love of cricket (players and spectators, professionals and amateurs) learn the rudiments of cricket while playing in a garden and it is easy, as one ages, to forget the simple but marvellous fun that can be had from a game under such restricted circumstances. There are local rules to be devised. If the ball bounces off the shed roof and is then caught, is the batsman out? If the ball is hit over the fence does that count as a four or six, and is the batsman out if the ball is lost? What are the rules if the dog picks up the ball and will not let go? How much energy is one allowed to expend while hunting for the ball among the dahlias? Are bouncers allowed? Is a soft ball or a hard ball to be used? Are there to be any special rules for female players? And, of course, there are all those unusual hazards to be faced: the bonfire, the compost heap, the greenhouse, the sundial, the overhanging apple tree branches, the bare patch where the fireworks have been let off or where the barbecue has scorched the grass and so on.

For most garden cricketers the biggest and most persistent problem is usually trying to ensure that the ball does not go into anyone else's garden. Down in Camberley the problem was exacerbated by the fact that anything hit a little uppish through the covers was almost certainly doomed to go straight over the fence. On the other side of the fence lay an immaculately manicured garden where there was absolutely no sign of human life but where a rather aggressive looking hound stood constant guard on the flower beds and lawns.

Inevitably, of course, just about every shot played went a little uppishly through the covers. Even when the bowlers sent each delivery down the leg side the batsmen still seemed unable to do anything other than send the ball flying between the fielders and over the fence.

Unable to take the time-honoured, respectable route towards retrieving the ball (a walk to the front door, a polite 'please may we have our ball back?' and a little furtive groping among the rhododendron bushes before an apologetic shuffle back past the kitchen window and out through the side gate) and unwilling to risk the less chivalrous route (sighting the ball, scrambling over the fence as furtively and quietly as possible, then scampering across the grass while keeping low and relatively invisible) we were left with only the third option: devising some form of contraption to retrieve the ball without setting foot in the garden.

In the end the combination which we found fairly successful consisted of a fairly soft rubber ball, four long bamboo canes, a bent safety pin and one and a half pairs of shoelaces.

And a large, succulent ham bone to keep the dog occupied.

Sunday 24th June

Over at Edgbaston today to watch a close John Player Special League match between Warwickshire and Somerset. I heard the news about the team selection for this Thursday's match at Lords.

Bravely, the selectors have put their trust in two newcomers, Martyn Moxon, the Yorkshire opener, and Chris Broad, another opening batsman but from Nottinghamshire. Neither is really ‘young’ in cricketing terms (Moxon is 24 and Broad is 26) but it does seem harsh to blood newcomers against the ferocious West Indian attack. I wonder if, before the series is over; the selectors will end up having to call on one or two of the older, forgotten men of English cricket. Surely there must be a Tom Graveney or a Cyril Washbrook to call upon for experience, style and courage? Quite a number of forty-year-olds have played Test cricket over the decades and looking around the English counties Dennis Amiss, Keith Fletcher, Alan Knott are all younger than Brian Close was when he last played for England. Unfortunately, none is currently fashionable enough to force his way back into the England side. There is, I suppose, always David Steele of Northamptonshire who had such a promising debut and such a short Test career. The unfortunate Steele only played in eight Tests and yet he averaged a very respectable 42.06. Both he and David Lloyd (the former Lancashire player who had a Test record very similar to Steele’s) must wonder whether they would have had more Test chances if they had played for a more fashionable county. From the boundary’s edge it is certainly difficult to understand why Mike Gatting, for example, has had so many more chances than these stalwarts.

The real irony about the new Test team is that the man who is probably the best English batsman in the game at the moment chose yesterday to remind the selectors, the team and spectators in general of his existence. When Graham Gooch scored a century against the West Indians not only was he the first player to do so but he was also the first English player to reach 1000 runs for the season. Gooch scored his century, by the way, off an attack which included Joel Gamer, whom the England side found virtually unplayable at Edgbaston.

Gooch was, of course, banned because of a trip he made to South Africa. I cannot help feeling that the truly outrageous nature of that ban has been highlighted this year by the fact that the Prime Minister of South Africa has been welcomed by our Mrs Thatcher, by the fact that a young South African girl has been given British citizenship so that she can run in the Olympics and by the fact that an English rugby team has visited South Africa. What really annoyed me at the time was the realisation that Mrs Gandhi, who seems to have been partly responsible for Gooch and his team mates being banned, would never have dared to stop the Indian side playing against England. Indian cricket lovers tend to be rather volatile at the best of times. I honestly believe that if the Indian Prime Minister had tried to stop Test cricket between her national side and England (everyone’s real cricketing enemy) then she would have been looking for some other form of employment.

The news about the team selection rather outshone the cricket at Edgbaston today. Look at the score-card and it will, I suppose, look as though it was a very close match. Indeed, it is true that right up until the last over Warwickshire *could* have won. But, somehow no one really thought that they *would* win. I really cannot explain this at all — perhaps it was a feeling that emanated from the players themselves, for somehow I suspect that the Warwickshire players did not really think that they could get the runs they needed.

The most interesting aspect of the cricket was, to be quite honest, the way that Ian Botham was received by the crowd. A year or two ago his appearance on the pavilion steps would have produced a huge roar of approval. Today when he came out to bat he was greeted by a remarkably restrained audience. It was even possible to detect a strange sort of communal embarrassment at his arrival. It was the sort of embarrassment one gets when a guest stays too long at a party. Or when an elderly but demented comedian or actor lives on for too long and makes a fool of himself on television in a desperate attempt to retain something of his former glory.

I think Botham’s problem is that although he is still remarkably young (he is still two years short of his thirtieth birthday) he has achieved so much that he has become a real legend. Everyone knows that the man will rank among the game’s all time greats, one of the most magnificent all-rounders the game of cricket has ever seen. That sort of status sometimes makes people feel slightly uncomfortable.

The other problem is, of course, that much publicised affair with the alleged but unproven use of drugs on last year’s winter tour. A hundred runs and a few wickets in the next Test could easily banish all that from the public consciousness, of course.

Personally, my feelings about Ian Botham are very mixed. I admire his cricketing skills enormously. But I also feel tremendously sorry for him. How on earth he can possibly ever match those performances against the Australians I cannot possibly imagine. And it is, of course, those performances that people remember. I think he has done enough for England to be given a ‘certain’ place in the England side for just as long as he wants to play. But if success continues to elude him then I hope that he retires early. Botham has never been an ordinary cricketer and I would hate to see him become one.

Tuesday 26th June

When I told my secretary that England were due to start another test match against the West Indies on Thursday she seemed rather puzzled.

‘But I thought they’d played each other a couple of weeks ago,’ she pointed out. ‘And I thought the West Indies had won.’

She seemed surprised and rather confused when I explained that a Test Match was but one part of a series and that winning a single match was relatively unimportant, I have never really thought about this before but I *can* see that it must be difficult for people who do not understand cricket to accept that interest in a single contest can be spread over such a long period.

I refrained from pointing out to her that the contest with Australia has been continuing for over a century and that although *they* are currently winning, the match between us is likely to continue for another century at the very least.

Wednesday 27th June

Over the years I have heard a number of strange messages broadcast over the loudspeakers at cricket grounds. I have heard businessmen being summoned to their offices because of surprise visits by head office supremos. I have heard motorists being instructed to move their motor cars. I have heard small boys being instructed to meet fathers outside the bar. I have heard urgent messages from wives ordering their husbands home.

But all the messages I have ever heard have been for spectators. I have never before heard a message being broadcast for one of the players. Today, however, at Northampton, the announcer on the public address system told us that Mr George Sharp, the Northants wicket-keeper, had just become a father for the first time. Sadly, a few minutes later, Sharp was on his way to hospital himself - not to the maternity hospital I hasten to add. He had been hit on the thumb by a ball from Wayne Larkins and needed X-rays.

Thursday 28th June

Fortune has dealt very different cards to the two young men who were picked to play for England today; Chris Broad has marked his debut with a magnificent 55 and seems to have secured one of England’s opening batting spots for at least another couple of Test Matches. Poor Martyn Moxon, on the other hand, is currently nursing the ribs that were damaged just two days after his selection was announced. With Broad temporarily settled in the side it is now perfectly possible that Moxon will not have another chance to get into the team. He, like the unfortunate Andy Lloyd, could well end up having had fame and glory slip through his finger tips.

I had to spend the morning in television studios in Birmingham but the producer, Mike Dornan, kept the floor manager well supplied with scores and up-to-date details. I listened to the afternoon’s cricket on the radio in my study. Brian Johnston was in excellent form. I wonder if any other broadcaster has ever managed to combine such a depth of knowledge with such an easy manner. Johnners carries his talent very lightly and makes an extraordinarily difficult job seem ridiculously easy. He epitomises everything that is truly English about cricket. There is noone broadcasting who comes close to him. Today I heard him tell how he had met the England newcomer Chris Broad, and Broad had confessed that at the age of fifteen he had collected the broadcaster’s autograph. (Johnston, inevitably, reported that he had now in turn asked Broad for *his* autographs). This slight but rather pleasant anecdote made me think about how difficult it must be for young cricketers moving into Test cricket for the first time. At fourteen, a young cricket fan will be at his most impressionable — a mere six years later he could be playing for his country and sharing a dressing room with the very men who were his heroes. It must be quite bizarre, for example, for a young fast bowler to suddenly find himself changing alongside Bob Willis, Dennis Lillee or Michael Holding, and, indeed, sharing the new ball with such heroes.

Incidentally, I saw from the scores in this morning’s newspaper that one English batsman is continuing to have a good season. Graham Gooch smashed his way to 227 yesterday. According to the *Daily Telegraph*, when an ambulance went by the ground with its siren wailing one wag suggested that it was coming to collect the much punished and battered ball. I still cannot help wondering how different this Test series would have been if Gooch had been able to play.

Saturday 30th June

Botham has done it again. Just when *everyone* (myself included) had decided that he could not possibly dominate a Test Match in the way he had a couple of years ago Botham suddenly pulls out a genuinely world class performance. Only four bowlers have taken eight wickets for England at Lords. Botham is two of those cricketers. How long now before this young hero becomes Sir Ian Botham? It may seem unlikely but it is now surely quite inevitable.

Monday 2nd July

When the umpire offered Allan Lamb and Derek Pringle the chance to go off the field for bad light this evening I never imagined for a moment that they would accept the invitation. I thought the fact that the offer was accepted to be a considerable indictment of English cricket these days. I do not know whether the decision was made by Lamb and Pringle together or by just one of the players alone (if so then presumably Lamb, who had just scored his century). I gather from the news reports that Gower, the captain, had no influence on the decision.

It seemed to me to be a senseless and cynical decision for several reasons. First, it seemed to suggest to me as a mere spectator that the batsmen had decided that they had no hope of winning the match. At the moment when they chose to go off the field, England were establishing themselves in a controlling position. If they had carried on batting (in the undoubtedly poor light) then they would have been able to accumulate more runs and give the West Indies a bigger target for the final day of play. For the first time for many months a team had managed to force its way into a controlling position against the West Indies. By leaving the pitch at that particular point not only did Lamb and Pringle take the pressure off the West Indians but they also allowed Clive Lloyd and his men to regain psychological control of the situation. The only possible reason for leaving the pitch was to avoid losing wickets — and that in turn meant that England were still worried about the possibility of losing the match. Psychologically that meant that all the initiative was back in Clive Lloyd’s hands.

The batsmen’s decision to leave the pitch disappointed me for another, very different reason. And that was that their decision to abandon the opportunity to pick up some additional runs also meant that the spectators were deprived of an entertaining session of play.

It sometimes seems quite unfashionable among professional cricketers to regard spectators as being of any real significance at all. I cannot think of any other sport where the players seem to be openly contemptuous of the people who pay their wages. Golfers and tennis professionals rarely stop playing unless it’s pouring down and even then they usually have to be dragged away from the course or court. Footballers play on in snow, hail, frost and rain — I have seen footballers playing in conditions so bad that it was impossible to see either goal mouth from the centre of the pitch.

But a high proportion of modern cricketers seem ready to walk off the playing arena at the drop of a hat. And this is desperately unfair on the paying spectators — the people who have paid the money that has made the game possible in the first place. Professional cricketers are, like all other professional sportsmen, entertainers. They get paid because people like to watch them perform. Watching as much cricket as I do, I sometimes get the uneasy feeling that there are cricketers around whose sole ambition is to be paid as much as possible for playing as little cricket as possible.

Whether this is true or not is to a certain extent irrelevant. What is relevant is that it is the way spectators sometimes see things. And without spectators prepared to pay money to watch cricket there will be no sponsors, no prize money, no benefits, no fat contracts and no professional cricket.

Allan Lamb and Derek Pringle might like to reflect on that the next time they are offered the chance to stop playing for bad light.

Tuesday 3rd July

As Gordon Greenidge powered his way to a magnificent 214 not out today I could not help thinking that the presence of the West Indian team here playing Test Matches does at least mean that a dozen or so English players will get the chance to play regular county cricket for a season. That in turn means that by the time the West Indians come here next we may be able to offer them a closer series.

I listened to today’s play on the radio and it was amusing to hear all the experts changing their minds about the outcome of the day’s cricket.

At 11 a.m. all the commentators and experts were agreed that there were only two possible results: a win for England or a draw.

At lunch the commentators and experts were all agreed that the draw was the most likely outcome although one or two of the more optimistic former players argued that if the West Indies continued to go for a win it would increase England’s chances of victory. (I think their argument was that while going for a win the West Indians would be more likely to lose wickets.)

By 3 p.m. the commentators and experts were beginning to have doubts about England’s chances of winning. The consensus of opinion was that the match would be a draw. Everyone was agreed that Greenidge had batted brilliantly and saved the day for his side.

By 4 p.m. the commentators and experts were convinced that a victory for the West Indians was a foregone conclusion. A victory for England was clearly out of the question. A draw was considered equally unlikely.

I wish I had recorded the day’s commentary. Recorded highlights and edited forecasts and predictions would have made an excellent short programme.

Friday 6th July

Most cricket captains, pundits, commentators and bar room experts will insist that if he wins the toss, a captain should always choose to bat first. He might like to think about fielding and putting the opposition in to bat. He may even discuss the matter with the other players. But, in the end, he should always decide to bat first. However doubtful the pitch may be, however treacherous the local atmospheric conditions may be, batting first is, say the experts, the only sensible alternative. It is, they say, much safer to get your runs on the board than to end up having to bat last on a pitch that may be breaking up.

Today, talking to a friend of mine who plays all his cricket down in Somerset I heard of a captain who always puts the visiting side in to bat. Never, in ten years of captaincy, has he chosen to bat first after winning the toss. And yet despite their captain's unusual approach to the game the team has won most of its matches.

The secret of the team's success is quite fascinating. It seems that the captain has some connection with a local cider company and before the match (as a welcoming gesture) he always puts a couple of barrels of his best 'scrumpy' in the visiting team's dressing room. His opening bowlers are then given fairly strict instructions to try to tie down the opening batsmen for a few overs but not to try too hard to take wickets.

The ploy apparently works like a charm. By the time the opening batsmen are back in the pavilion, numbers three and four on the opposition team are already beginning to feel the effects of the cider. While they stagger around in the middle for a few overs, the opening batsmen can settle down to catch up on their team mates who have all been busy taking advantage of the local hospitality.

Whatever score the batsmen manage to put together, the home team, playing against bowlers and fielders who have little idea of just how to run let alone bowl, catch or throw, can usually better it in a relatively short space of time. Not that it is just the more obvious effects of the alcohol that cause the problems, my friend insists that he has seen five members of a visiting side queuing outside the club's only earth closet. Crude country cider does have a rather spectacular effect on the human bowel.

This unsophisticated form of gamesmanship has proved remarkably effective. The only team to visit the village and not succumb consisted of eleven clergymen from a diocese in Bristol.

Perhaps Peter May and David Gower should try putting a cask of rum in the West Indians' dressing room.

Monday 9th July

For a long time now I have been desperately keen to get hold of an MCC blazer — one of those old-fashioned ones in the traditional stripes of the club. I wrote off to the MCC shop at Lords and they have kindly put me in touch with an outfitters in London which will sell me one off the peg for about one hundred and forty pounds. I have started saving.

Wednesday 11th July

I spent the day watching Worcestershire play Warwickshire at New Road. To be perfectly honest I think it would have been more exciting if I had stayed at home and watched the grass grow and the garage doors warp. It was not an invigorating day's cricket. I did, however, have quite a fascinating time looking around at the various spectators. With nothing on the field of play worth watching I thought it might be entertaining to try to categorise cricket watchers. I came to the conclusion that a fairly limited number of basic categories can be defined. There are variations on these basic themes, of course. But most spectators can be slotted into one or other of these categories.

First, there are the spectators who are there for business. A growing number of firms seem to be discovering the business value of a day at a first class cricket match and these days the executive suites, directors' boxes and specially erected marquees are a regular sight on cricket grounds. The business spectators, or White Shirts, can be divided into two sub-groups. There are the hosts and the guests. The hosts always know a little about cricket and tend to have a ready fund of slightly threadbare cricketing anecdotes to tell. They can always boast a first name relationship with at least one player in the home side. The hosts are there to try to drum up business and so they always tend to be rather obsequious and to struggle hard to keep the conversation going throughout the day. The guests, on the other hand, rarely seem to know anything at all about cricket. They tend to ask questions like 'Are there eleven or thirteen in a cricket team?' and 'Do these fellows do this for a living or do they have jobs as well?' Their questions are always treated seriously because the hosts hope to take some of their money off them before the day's play is concluded.

Although the hosts and their guests are ostensibly on the ground to watch the cricket, the provision of plentiful supplies of food and drink is an important part of the day. The White Shirts tend to disappear into their marquee or special dining room at the very moment that the players troop off for lunch and they then tend to stay there until about twenty minutes before the tea interval. They make their absence noticeable by leaving behind a huge block of specially reserved seats upon which will be littered score cards, empty glasses, neatly furled copies of the *Financial Times* and expensively-printed cardboard folders containing literature about the host firm's favourite products. During the afternoon session the noise from the marquee or dining room tends to increase in volume as more and more alcohol is consumed. When business spectators wander back into their seats for the last couple of hours of play they will all be in shirt sleeves, although it will be rare for any of them to have removed their ties. Business spectators are never in evidence on Saturdays or Sundays, by the way.

(Just in case anyone is thinking of suing for libel, may I point out that these observations are based not on one day's cricket at Worcester but on many years of cricket watching at dozens of different grounds,)

The White Shirts consume fairly large quantities of alcohol but the second group of spectators, the All-Day-Drinkers, make them look like temperance agents. The All-Day-Drinkers attend cricket matches because they know that the bars will be open from the bowling of the first ball to the close of play. And they take full advantage of this loophole in our otherwise stringent licensing laws. Usually favouring beer they try to sit as near as possible to the bar and they generally form some sort of rota system to bring supplies out to their seats.

This means that one spectator can often be seen unsteadily making his way from the bar carrying two trays and perhaps a dozen pint mugs filled with beer. His colleagues will invariably cheer his progress and moan light-heartedly as he spills their drinks. This ritual, carried out by a different member of the rota each time, continues at roughly half-hourly intervals throughout the day.

The All-Day-Drinkers tend to get very boisterous by early evening. They usually know a good deal about cricket but the value of what they say tends to vary in inverse relationship with the loudness in which those comments are made. During the morning sessions, when their blood alcohol levels are relatively light, the All-Day-Drinkers tend to be fairly witty and able to discuss the cricket with knowledge and understanding. They tend to converse fairly quietly, with only an occasional guffaw to hint at what is to come. By mid afternoon the All-Day-Drinkers have lost their reticence and are prepared to share their comments with anyone on the ground who is not actually stone deaf. Unfortunately, by this time the beer, which has given them the confidence to shout, will have taken away their ability to think coherently. They will invariably offer a good deal of senseless advice to batsmen, fielders and umpires. It is the All-Day-Drinkers who sit at square leg and comment loudly on LBW decisions and who start slow handclaps if an over goes by without a six being hit.

The All-Day-Drinkers are fairly faithful cricket watchers but they do not usually turn up when the weather is foul or looks unpredictable. That cannot be said of the third group of cricket watchers — the retired spectators. These are recognisable not only by their age but also by the fact that they always wear woolly waistcoats underneath their suit jackets (even when the weather is boiling hot), and carry thick old-fashioned gaberdine raincoats with them at all times. They have old shopping bags by their sides which contain vacuum flasks full of tea and plastic boxes packed with cheese-and-tomato sandwiches wrapped in elderly, much creased greaseproof paper. Always sitting in the same seats the retired spectators or Woolly Jumpers will usually sit alone, although occasionally they sit in twos and share one another's sandwiches.

At the other end of the age spectrum there are the schoolboy spectators. These fall into two very distinct categories. First, and rarest, are the groups of boys in smart blazers and expensive school ties. Usually accompanied by a school teacher, these young Blazer Boys always troop into the ground in a neat crocodile and they always sit and chatter among themselves. They will very often go home at four o'clock when the school day is officially over.

The second type of schoolboy spectators (Tennis Ball Boys) are the ones who come to the ground equipped with autograph books, scorecards and cricket bats. These are the true enthusiasts. One or two of them will eventually earn some sort of living out of cricket; many of them will continue to play with cricket clubs when they leave school, most will retain an affection for the game and will end up joining the club as members when they grow up. These youngsters, usually wearing jeans and anoraks, invariably carry large sports bags and huge plastic bottles full of orange juice or some other similar cordial. Throughout the match they pay careful attention to the play and comment knowledgeably on the skills exhibited and on the wisdom of the captains as they switch their bowlers around. During the luncheon and tea intervals they rush out onto the pitch, carrying their bats and an old tennis ball. There they exhibit skills of varying worth but an undimmed level of enthusiasm. At the close of play they all rush onto the pitch and surround the players, asking for autographs. Most will hang on for some time after the close of play, waiting for players to leave the dressing room. The undiscriminating will collect autographs from anyone carrying a cricket bag or looking bronzed and fairly fit. The discriminating know just which autographs they need to complete a set and which are worth collecting as 'swaps'.

I always feel very strongly that these young spectators are the lifeblood of English professional cricket. It annoys me to hear them being bullied by gatemen, harassed by petty administrators and snapped at by other spectators. When there are no longer any young boys with tennis balls making a nuisance of themselves on the outfield, we can all start to worry about the future of cricket in England. Until then the future is in safe hands.

The next group of cricket spectators are the Statisticians. These are usually (but not always) male. They always have large score books on their knees and current copies of *Wisden* on the bench beside them. They keep a careful record of every ball bowled, every run scored and every wicket taken. They can provide a fairly useful service to other spectators but they can, occasionally, be a little tedious when they insist on sharing information. I am not too keen to know that I have just seen the fastest fifty ever scored by a forty-year-old left-handed bald batsman on the second afternoon of a three-day match in late June.

Similar in number to the Statisticians but very different in every other way are the Cricket Groupies. These are a relatively new addition to cricket watching and they are by far the prettiest of all (except perhaps for the secretaries and publicity assistants who invariably accompany the host business spectators and whose job it is to entertain and distract those guests who find leg slips and maiden overs too uninviting a distraction).

Cricket Groupies are always female (as far as I have been able to ascertain), usually between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four and sometimes quite staggeringly beautiful. They tend to sit near the boundary and usually favour those spots where their heroes can be found fielding. Invariably bra-less, they flaunt their best points unashamedly. To attract Cricket Groupies you have to be young, internationally renowned and fairly flamboyant. Fast bowlers seem to be most likely to find themselves surrounded by Groupies although all-rounders and hard hitting batsmen do quite well too. I do not know whether it is the television exposure or the high salaries paid to some cricketers that attract Cricket Groupies. I suspect that it is probably a combination of both. Whatever the reason for their presence, I would certainly like to know what some of the cricket Greats would have to say to the idea of being surrounded by Groupies at the end of a match.

Can you imagine W G Grace coming off the field to find a bra-less, busty, raven-haired beauty in a mini skirt throwing herself at him? The Grand Old Man would have had a fit.

I have left the biggest group of spectators until last. These are the spectators who really keep professional cricket alive. They are the individuals who turn up to watch county cricket when Northamptonshire are playing Lancashire to decide who is fourteenth and who is fifteenth in the County Championship Table; the people who turn up whether it’s sunny or raining, and who sit there patiently while the umpires look at the pitch, stare at the sky and exchange confidences for the third time with the assistant groundsman.

The one thing that these spectators have in common is that they go to cricket matches for a little peace. They go there to get away from the hurly burly of modern life, to find time to think, to rest and to relax, to escape from telephones, traffic and nagging wives, and to soothe themselves with a day’s pleasure at a cricket match. These spectators, (Escaped Prisoners) enjoy their cricket, of course. They get a good deal of pleasure from watching a good, tight game or seeing a batsman or bowler excel. But they get something much, much more from their cricket watching. They unwind as the day goes by and you can almost see the tension draining from them. They read the paper a little, do a crossword at lunchtime, read a few pages from a book they have brought with them, chatter occasionally to a few friends, smoke an occasional pipe and enjoy a couple of pints of beer. They eat a pie, a scotch egg and a beef sandwich at lunchtime and have an apple, a piece of fruit cake and a cup of tea in the middle of the afternoon. They get there early in the morning and they stay there until the close of play. They usually turn up alone or with a couple of chums (their wives invariably find the game boring and stay at home; which is just as well because if their wives did not find the game boring then they would probably have to switch to fishing for a hobby). They take a few days holiday for a Test Match and one or two county matches and occasionally sneak away to a day’s cricket on the pretext of having a bad back or a mild touch of flu.

There are, of course, some cricket spectators who turn up just when there are big matches planned or simply for the excitement of a one-day close encounter. These cricket spectators (Casuals) undoubtedly bring money into the game and get great pleasure from their cricket watching. But they are not *real* cricket spectators.

They would not turn up at New Road to watch Worcestershire and Warwickshire on a humid Wednesday afternoon in July.

Thursday 12th July

I always enjoy going to Worcester. It is such an extraordinarily friendly ground. At lunchtime and teatime and after the end of play, young spectators crowd onto the pitch to play their own private games of cricket. Older spectators clamber over the fence to have a lie down on the outfield. And however many people there are on the grass, I do not think I have ever heard a single word of admonishment or warning over the loudspeaker system. I honestly think that is one of the reasons the ground feels so welcoming and friendly.

At some grounds (and Edgbaston is, I am afraid, one of the worst offenders in this respect), I have sometimes listened to the instructions coming over the loudspeakers with a mixture of embarrassment and rage. Some of the men hired to use the loudspeaker seem to me to be insufferably officious; rather like ageing schoolmasters who have long since run out of patience. Their patronising, arrogant, conceited bleatings make visitors and members alike feel like unwelcome intruders. I have heard small boys told off for hanging their coats over the advertising hoardings, and young cricketers praised for leaving the pitch neatly, orderly and quickly. It is hardly surprising that most cricket matches are played on almost empty grounds.

At Worcester I have never heard a cross or impatient word over the loudspeakers. I have seen the players coming back onto the pitch and playing a quick game of catch with youngsters finishing off their own impromptu games, and I have seen play commence with a dozy spectator still stretched out at third man, quite unaware of the fact that play had started.

And yet none of this friendliness has ever adversely affected the cricket. Players do not suddenly find themselves struggling to fight a way through hordes of ill-mannered spectators; the groundsman does not have to contend with hundreds of feet stamping all over his wickets; the umpires do not get molested or even catcalled; and the turf does not get badly damaged. The crowds at Worcester are invariably contented, happy and well-behaved.

I wish the same could be said of all those grounds where the loudspeaker announcements are occasionally tinged with acid, and where the spectators are kept off the pitch and well away from the wicket.

I do not care what the match is, I believe that spectators always have a right to wander onto the grass, to play their own small games of cricket (with a soft ball, of course, since with a few dozen minor matches in progress it is not always possible to see which balls are going where) and to hang their coats over the railings. I for one shall continue to spend most of my cricket watching days at grounds where these simple rights are respected.

I go to cricket matches to rest and relax.

I always feel good at Worcester and I drove home from the ground this evening feeling full of love and affection for what must surely be one of the most attractive cricket grounds in the world.

Friday 13th July

This is the third time this year that Friday has landed on the 13th of the month. And, as ever, I stayed in for the day. I am incurably superstitious. I spent some of the day sitting in the garden listening to the Test Match commentary on the radio and part of the day watching the television transmission.

As I think I have already argued this year, I do think, that the quality of cricket commentating is deteriorating. It is difficult to say exactly why this is, but I suspect that one of the problems is that producers seem intent on hiring just about every ex-cricketer who is available. I cannot think of any other sport where professional players are so well represented among commentary teams. The theory seems to be that if one is going to have useful and acceptable commentary then one must have former Test players in front of the microphone. This really is extraordinary nonsense. In other sports professional commentators and correspondents predominate: in cricket the former players fill up an ever increasing percentage of the air time. It is easier to make a list of the Test players who have not commentated than to make a list of those who have. There are three main problems with this.

First, good as they may have been as players, many of these current commentators are barely articulate when talking about the game. They constantly litter the commentary boxes with clichés, ugly, grammatical errors, malapropisms and silly little pet sayings that add nothing at all to the listener’s understanding or enjoyment of the game. My own former hero Trevor Bailey is as guilty as anyone of these sins.

The second problem with players masquerading as commentators is that they are often more interested in their own past than in the game they are supposed to be watching. One player who falls into this category is dear old Fred Trueman. Now Fred was a magnificent bowler and he is a great raconteur, but he does tend to get carried away a little when he is commentating. He seems to complain and moan far too much and not enjoy modern cricket at all. I cannot imagine why he allows himself to be paid for watching it. Actually, Fred Trueman is a rather interesting character. I spent a few fascinating hours talking to him up in Glasgow earlier this year when he visited the television studios there to take part in a programme on which I had a small regular spot. When he was a player the younger Fred was something of a fiery character quite often getting into trouble with the cricket authorities and not particularly well known for his love of committees. The older Fred is a rather different character, constantly complaining that today’s cricketers have too little respect for their elders and betters and quick to criticise the modern professional, both at county and international level.

The third problem with allowing cricketers to commentate is that not all have good voices for radio or television. Take Mike Denness, for example. If you have heard him commentating you will know exactly what I mean. Would Mr Denness have ever been considered for a job on the radio if he had not played for England? I very much doubt it, I just cannot bear to listen to him.

All this is made more inexplicable and unforgivable by the fact that ex-professional cricketers also tend to watch cricket with different objectives to the ordinary listener.

You do not have to have played cricket to enjoy it, and the art of cricket spectating is something quite different to the art of playing the game. It is not necessarily an inferior art. The interest, demands and expectations of the former player tend to differ considerably from those of the professional commentator or spectator: the man whose only qualifications are a love of the game and a gift with words. You do not need to have played cricket to enjoy it or to describe what is happening.

Former players should continue to sit in the commentary boxes for both television and radio broadcasts. Their expert observations are fascinating and enlightening; simply because they are noted from a different, more perspicacious angle. But producers need to maintain the traditional balance by ensuring that there are always a good number of non-players on the commentating staff: men who are hired because they do something well, and not because they used to do something else well.

Saturday 14th July

It was good to see Malcolm Marshall come out to bat with his left hand in plaster. I know it's crazy, but somehow one expects one's cricketing heroes to be superhuman and to bat and bowl however badly they may be incapacitated. Colin Cowdrey became an English folk hero when he went out to bat at Lords with his arm in plaster. The fact that he did not have to face a ball is quite irrelevant: it was his presence at the crease that was all important. I suspect that in years to come Marshall's heroics here at Headingley will earn him similar immortality. I gathered afterwards that Marshall decided to go out to bat so that Larry Gomes, who was running out of batting partners, could get a much deserved century. If that is true it makes his gesture even more gallant.

Being at Headingley again reminded me of the day last summer when I came to the ground with a photographer from the *Yorkshire Evening Post.* There was no cricket being played but I spent a silly half hour posing in front of the scoreboard and grinning inanely at the camera. All this was to help promote a book of mine called *Thomas Winsden's 136th Cricketing Almanack* — an out-and-out spoof of *Wisden* itself.

The cover of the spoof looked very similar to *Wisden*, but the contents were rather less earnest. I included details of the Australian Beach Cricket Championships, the new French Cricket rules and the scores from the amazing Curry Cup held in India last winter.

I put in details of the world's very first, genuine single wicket competition (it really was a single wicket competition and the bowlers had a simply terrible time), a technology section explaining how the Ball Speed Assessor works, and a remarkable story about cricketers swapping shirts at the end of the match in the same way that footballers do.

Since the original *Wisden* always gives a good deal of space to statistics, I naturally included a large statistics section. I put in details of the first Umpires' Averages Table and a unique Sandwich Making Averages Table. This showed that although cheese-and-tomato sandwich makers dominated club cricket, Mrs Pettifer, the winner, was a specialist in egg and cress. (She was present at 36 matches, made 1,482 sandwiches, had the highest match score of 112 and ended with a magnificent average of 42 sandwiches eaten per match.)

I included details of the German tour to France in 1916, hints on clapping for the elderly and the inebriated and, for women cricketers, instructions on how to run without waving your arms about and how to knit a ball and stump cover. There were instructions on how to make a cheese sandwich, tips for the twelfth man (always hold the tray with your thumbs pointing towards the pavilion) and a whole chapter on chewing-gum relics. There was even a section on illnesses affecting cricketers (pushed hamstrings, testimonialitis and soggy white skin from staying in the bath too long), and there were notes on what umpires carry in their pockets.

Writing all this nonsense was tremendous fun but promoting the book was even more fun. Apart from sitting sunning myself underneath the Headingley scoreboard, I spent much of the summer wandering around the country talking about *Winsden* and trying to explain why the other one hundred and thirty-five editions of his Cricketing Almanack had never appeared.

I cannot remember now all the interviews I did but I do remember being at Yorkshire TV studios one evening, sitting showing Richard Whitely some of my chewing-gum relics and showing him how my Bowling Machine worked, then racing down to London to spend the early morning sitting on the TVam sofa in cricket whites, showing Nick Owen my prototype Toxteth's Little Nipple Guards and trying hard to keep a straight face as I talked about the sandwich-makers averages with an increasingly incredulous floor manager standing nearby.

All in all *Winsden's Cricketing Almanack* was very well-received everywhere except at Radio London where a chubby little fellow, whose name I now forget, refused to interview me and made it very clear that he thought the whole thing to be in the worst possible taste. I do not suppose he will like this book much either.

Sunday 15th July

A fellow sitting near to me at Edgbaston today became very argumentative and started offering odds against Warwickshire managing to score 200 runs before being dismissed or before running out of overs. When I declined his offer of a bet he suggested that I might like to take two-to-one odds against any single Warwickshire player scoring 100 or more.

His third suggestion involved the total number of no balls he thought the Warwickshire bowlers would contribute to the total.

I refused all these offers but, inspired by that fatal combination of boredom and alcohol, the betting enthusiast seemed unwilling to give up so easily. He seemed quite desperate to arrange some sort of financial confrontation. So, for odds of twenty-to-one in pennies, I offered to forecast the score of every player in the two teams who had a chance to get to the wicket.

The betting enthusiast seemed scornful of my offer, making it pretty clear that he thought he would be taking money from me quite unfairly. He pointed out that batsmen can score anything between nought and 200 or even more and said that if I insisted on making such a reckless offer then he would at least want me to accept odds of thirty-to-one.

I accepted. And at the end of the day I had made a profit of seventy-six pence.

I must try this simple trick more often. The first person who tried it was, I think, an England player on a tour to New Zealand way back before the turn of the century. He won a fair amount of money from the local enthusiasts but ended up in prison when the losers complained (quite unreasonably I think) that they had been duped. If memory serves me right he was a wicket keeper and England spent some time on their tour without a specialist behind the stumps.

All I did, by the way, was predict a score of ‘nought’ for each player.

Monday 16th July

I thought that today’s England batting collapse (the Fleet Street newspapers must have those three words permanently in type) was particularly pathetic. Anyone who worked in a factory, a shop or a bank and who worked with the sort of dedication and determination displayed by most of the England team this summer would be joining the dole queue by now.

The most extraordinary feature of an otherwise eminently forgettable match was the bowling of Malcolm Marshall, the new one-armed bandit of West Indian cricket, who somehow managed to take a career-best seven Test wickets despite having a fractured thumb encased in plaster of Paris. You might have imagined that having a huge chunk of heavy plaster on his left hand would have disturbed Marshall a little unbalanced him perhaps. But it did not seem to have any bad effect at all. Indeed, since Marshall achieved career-best figures in this innings it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the heavy plaster may in some way have helped. Perhaps Marshall should have a similar plaster fitted onto his left arm for every Test Match. And maybe all England’s bowlers should consider having their non-bowling hands encased in plaster of Paris.

Marshall, by the way, is taking part in the single wicket circus event due to take place in Somerset in mid-September. Malcolm Marshall, together with Ian Botham, Kapil Dev, Clive Rice and Richard Hadlee will be bowling at one another in an attempt to find the world’s premier all-rounder (they will not all be bowling at once, of course, although it might be rather fun if they were).

Incidentally, a good friend of mine who is a keen Lancashire League cricketer suggested to me the other day that the single wicket rule might be introduced into club cricket in an attempt to ensure that all players in a team get a better chance to take a real part in the game. Too often keen but unexceptional club cricketers look forward to their Saturday match only to have a couple of overs bowling at most and never get a chance to bat at all. My friend’s suggestion was that each player in a club side should be expected to bowl a minimum number of overs and also be allowed to bat for a fixed number of overs. The team’s success would then be measured by dividing the total number of runs scored by the complete side by the total number of times that the side had been dismissed.

This may be a suggestion designed to offend the purists but it would give an awful lot of club cricketers a good deal more pleasure in their everyday games.

Tuesday 17th July

I wandered down to Fleet Street today to discuss a book serialisation with Robert Wilson, a friend of mine and editor on one of Britain’s leading newspapers. When I arrived I was surprised to see that he had his right arm in plaster. Since it meant that he could neither hold a glass nor sign his expense chits this was obviously a tragedy of some importance. I asked him how it had happened.

With some bitterness he told me that a cricket club in Kent, of which he is an enthusiastic amateur member, had recently decided to encourage its playing members to take up a regular exercise programme. Wilson insisted that up until six months ago the only exercise he ever took was either in the pub or on the cricket field. This, however, was all changed by the Club President who, having watched the England cricket team going through their paces some months previously, had decided that a full programme of physical exercise would improve the overall fitness and performance of the players. To ensure that the exercise programme was well organised and adhered to rigidly, the President managed to persuade a local aerobics teacher to turn up in the nets twice a week and pass on some useful hints.

According to Wilson, this well-meant attempt to turn the team into active, agile athletes proved to be the club's undoing. Unused to cavorting around in tracksuits, touching their toes or waving their arms about, the team suffered an astonishing series of medical mishaps.

The wicket-keeper and one of the opening bowlers strained thigh muscles in March and missed the first two months of the season. The club's most consistent player, a much experienced Lancashire League batsman accustomed to opening the batting and averaging over fifty, walked out in a huff after rupturing himself while trying to throw a medicine ball to the club's only spinner. The spinner acquired a broken toe when he tripped over a paving slab while out jogging and the only reserve wicket keeper had a heart attack trying to do too many press ups. The President was one of three players who developed forms of tennis elbow.

Of all the injuries, however, my friend's was undoubtedly the strangest. He was mugged while jogging near home and while trying to protect his face was hit fiercely by a very hard wooden truncheon.

'Last year,' said Wilson dolefully, 'I don't think any member of the team missed a match through illness. This year we've had to borrow players from visiting sides for most of our matches.'

He added that in his view tracksuits should all be marked with a Government health warning.

Wednesday 18th July

Today I watched Warwickshire defeat Shropshire in the NatWest Trophy with mixed feelings. As a Warwickshire supporter for thirty-odd years my primary loyalties were, of course, with the home team. But I have to admit that I felt a sneaking admiration for the minor county side. It is always strangely invigorating to see a giant killer doing well and the way that Shropshire trounced Yorkshire in the previous round of the competition must have delighted and entertained cricket lovers all over the country.

I cannot help feeling that the pundits who argue that there ought to be more cricket played between the first class counties and the lesser teams must have a valid point. I think this sort of mixed cricket helps everyone. It gives the amateurs and semi-professionals who make up minor county and league teams a chance to try out their skills against the household names. That cannot be a bad thing at all. The fact that the first class counties usually win proves that there is a difference between the top professionals and the very best amateurs. The fact that occasionally a minor county can win proves that the difference is not all that great.

Just how much more of a link there ought to be between the first class counties and the leading minor county sides is something that is much more difficult to decide.

The success of the minor counties in the NatWest Trophy and the Benson and Hedges competition does suggest that there might be some sense in allowing the leading minor county sides (I am thinking of teams such as Durham, Hertfordshire and Oxfordshire) a chance to compete in the John Player League on a regular basis. Perhaps, for example, the winners of the Minor County Championship could be entitled to join the first class counties in the Sunday League for the following season.

This would obviously be far more sensible and practical than allowing part-time players to take part in the three day County Championship games. Not only is the divide between minor counties and first class counties more noticeable in this type of cricket, but the simple fact is, of course, that many minor county players would be unable to get time off work to play in such a competition. The only way to introduce this type of new blood into first class cricket would be to convert one of the minor counties into a full-time first class county, either increasing the number of counties to eighteen or downgrading one of the existing first class counties. I do not think that is a likely prospect.

I read in today's *Daily Mirror* that, according to Malcolm Marshall, the one English batsman they fear is Graham Gooch. I suspect that the West Indians are wise to be worried about Gooch for I think he could make a huge difference to the strength of the England side when the ban is lifted. England without Gooch is a bit like the West Indies without Viv Richards or the Indians with Sunil Gavaskar.

The other interesting thing that Marshall had to say concerned all-rounders. He argued that the English selectors are far too keen to fill their side with all-rounders, forgetting that to be a Test class all-rounder a player should be able to hold his place both as a batsman and a bowler. Some of the all-rounders England has tried in recent matches have been only moderately competent batsmen and only moderately competent bowlers.

Incidentally, looking through the averages which have been published today I see that the country's leading all-rounder is one Graham Gooch. He is not only near the top of the batting averages but is also quite well placed in the bowling averages.

Thursday 19th July

I believe they organise cricket fixture lists with the aid of a computer these days and I suspect that it may be the same computer that keeps sending me the wrong gas bill, and keeps trying to persuade me to pay my TV rental company money I paid them a year or more ago. I looked in my diary today to see when I could slip over to

Worcester again and I see that there is not a match at New Road until the 4th of August. The last first class match they played there was the fixture between Warwickshire and Worcestershire last week. A three week period in the middle of the summer with no first class cricket just is not good enough.

Friday 20th July

We used to call them 'donkey drops' at school but I do not know whether or not this was just a regional name. The more formal term is 'lob' bowling, of course, and there was a time when it was a fashionable and successful bowling technique. Having watched several thousand overs of routine medium pace this season it suddenly occurred to me today that it would be pleasant to see someone bowling 'lobs' or 'donkey drops' again.

The only underarm bowling that has been seen in top class cricket recently was, of course, that now disreputable Test Match incident when Trevor Chappell bowled underarm to stop a New Zealand batsman scoring a six and winning the match off the last ball of a match.

He bowled what we used to call a 'grub hunter' or 'daisy cutter' but I cannot help feeling that a proper lob bowler specialising in skilfully-flighted 'donkey drops' could tear through most first class cricket sides.

Just how would a professional batsman cope with a ball coming straight out of the air? The typical modern batsman has a very high backlift that would mean he would be more likely to hit the ball with the back of his bat than with the blade. You can't cut, sweep or drive a ball coming down over your head and straight at your stumps. You could, I suppose, hook a donkey drop if your timing was immaculate but a little change of pace would make that a very risky business indeed.

If you have ever watched a skilled boule player in France you will know that it is perfectly possible to send a ball up very high and get it to land on a fairly small target. So, a skilled lob bowler would be able to ensure that a batsman had to play at his deliveries. But once he had played at the delivery the batsman would be at considerable risk of getting a top edge or simply skying the ball to one of the close fielders. There would also be a very good chance of persuading the batsman to step back onto his wicket.

One other advantage of lob bowling occurs to me: there would be hardly any LBW decisions. Umpires would surely welcome that!

Saturday 21st July

Down at Lords to watch Warwickshire play Lancashire in the Benson and Hedges final I cannot help thinking of the NatWest final two years ago when Warwickshire lost in such a humiliating way to Surrey.

I spent a day watching that match from the top balcony of the pavilion — surely one of the best places in the world from which to watch cricket — and can remember vividly one particular encounter that took place before the cricket even started.

I had established myself in a comfortable spot, right above and behind the bowler's arm, a little before ten. Even then, however, there were quite a number of spectators gathered along the white-painted benches there. Three of them in particular caught my eye. Indeed it would have been difficult to ignore them. They were all enormous — over six feet in height and weighing an average of fourteen or fifteen stones I should think. They had brought with them two huge cool boxes filled with bottles of champagne, expensive-looking cheeses and fine pâtés. They were immaculately dressed, hugely muscled and looked as if they probably did something marginally illegal for a living.

Suddenly, as if from nowhere, a tiny little man in a long grey raincoat appeared directly in front of them. He had neatly slicked back thinning hair, a thin toothbrush moustache and a tiny, weasel-like face.

'You can't sit there,' he squeaked. 'That's where I sit. I always sit there.' He was pointing at all three as he spoke.

'Sorry mate,' said the biggest of the three men, putting down the glass of champagne that he had just poured himself and leaning forwards slightly. He spoke in a broad cockney accent. 'Sorry mate, but we've bin ere since arf parst noine. '

'But that's my seat,' protested the weasel. He looked and sounded like the archetypal petty administrator.

'Sorry mate,' said the champagne drinker, with a sniff.

'I'm on the committee here,' protested the weasel. 'I'm going to complain about you. You'll get into trouble. That's my seat.'

I looked across to the three men with the champagne bottles, the cheese and the pâté. They looked very well settled and I really couldn't see them being unnerved by this threat.

'Look 'ere mate,' said the spokesman, slowly unwinding and standing up. Because he was on a higher tier than the weasel he had to bend almost double to get face to face. 'If you don't go away and leave us alone I'll frow you over the balcony.' And with that he sat down.

The weasel-faced administrator opened and shut his mouth a couple of times. And then he went away.

The match today was, I am afraid, about as unsatisfying as the one that Warwickshire lost two years ago. But there were no dramas on the upper balcony.

Suddenly remembered at Lords this morning that I forgot to wear my Primary Club tie last Saturday. The Primary Club, as most keen cricket lovers will know, is an excellent organisation designed to raise money for blind children. Any cricketer who has ever been dismissed first ball in any class of cricket is entitled to join. Last year, as part of the launch celebrations for *Thomas Winsden's Cricketing Almanack*, my publisher helped to organise a special cricket match to raise funds for the club. As a result I was honoured to be made a life member. One of the rules is that the club tie should be worn on the Saturday of every Test Match. I think it is a splendidly English tradition.

All this reminds me that I recently heard that a publisher is bringing out an illustrated guide to cricket ties. It's bound to be an absolute winner! There cannot be too much wrong with a world in which there is a market for a book filled with nothing but pictures of cricket club ties.

Sunday 22nd July

I tried out my lob bowling theories today. I am not quite sure what went wrong but I suppose that the problem was that although I mastered line quite quickly, length eluded me.

Three deliveries in my first over landed on the pitch in front of the batsman and stopped quite dead. The batsman, quite unsportingly, insisted on taking a free hit at the ball on each occasion.

The first over cost us fourteen runs and the captain then took me off

Monday 23rd July

I was driving from Bristol to Leamington Spa today when I found myself scorching past a small, very pleasant looking cricket ground where two teams in white were engaged in battle. Suddenly realising that I really was not in much of a hurry after all I slowed down, stopped, turned round and went back to watch a few overs of their game.

I found it very depressing.

The players were probably about nine or ten years old. They should have been having fun, enjoying themselves, belting the ball around, and getting an hour or two's respite from the worries of growing up in a heavily pressured world.

They looked as miserable as if they were engrossed in a particularly tedious Latin lesson, or as if they were up to their eyes in algebraic equations. They looked smart and were, to a boy, neatly turned out. But they were not enjoying themselves.

Their teacher, a tart young man who was combining the roles of coach and umpire, was sharp tongued and quite remarkably aggressive. He seemed averse to praise, preferring instead to complain, condemn and sneer. When a bowler delivered a ball that was not on a good length he would castigate the unfortunate child as though he had just been responsible for the destruction of some priceless ornament. When a wicket fell he never congratulated the bowler or fielder responsible but always admonished the batsman for playing a careless or irresponsible shot.

I soon found myself feeling as depressed as the boy cricketers looked.

Those young school boys will grow up to hate cricket as much as they hate Shakespeare, trigonometry and compulsory press-ups in the school gymnasium. That young school master will have successfully taught his young players to hate and despise a game that could give them a lifetime of pleasure.

You cannot instil cricket genius into a wayward sportsman by shouting at him. You cannot turn an uninterested player into a great player by screaming abuse at him. You cannot turn an incompetent batsman or bowler into a Test class player by using indiscriminate sarcasm.

Tuesday 24th July

Looking through last year's *Wisden* I noticed that the year's county champions, Essex, lost no fewer than five first class matches. That means that they lost more matches than any other side down to 9th place in the championship table.

This supports a theory I have had for some time: that when playing in any sort of league table where there are points awarded to sides which win but no points deducted for sides which lose, it is much better to take chances and go for wins than it is to play safe. The county captain prepared to take risks, make courageous declarations and go for the runs whenever possible (such as Essex's Keith Fletcher) will certainly end up on the losing side a few times. But he will at least give his side a chance of winning. The county captain who is terrified of losing and who hardly ever takes risks will be able to minimise his chances of losing. But he will end up with a lot of dull, drawn games to his credit.

As far as spectators are concerned the good news on all this is that the captains who offer cricket watchers the best bargain — good, exciting cricket — are most likely to end up with the rewards that accompany sustained success.

Wednesday 25th July

What a splendid day's cricket it was at Edgbaston today. It is not often that one can watch Warwickshire score over 400 runs in a single day.

I do not know what the players think of it but I do wholeheartedly approve of the new rule which stipulates that at least 117 overs a day must be bowled for the first two days of a county championship match. It will be interesting to see whether or not this new rule has any influence on the number of matches that end in a definite result.

Thursday 26th July

Have you noticed how newspapers are always much more interesting when they are old and you come across them by accident? Stories that you would not give a second glance to on the date of publication suddenly become quite fascinating when you find them wrapped around a packet of fish and chips. Newspapers that you would never dream of buying or reading provide compulsive entertainment when you find them lining forgotten drawers or tucked away in the car boot.

Today, while attempting to clean out the garden shed I came across a couple of pages from one of the quality Sunday newspapers. My eye was caught by a major feature written by former England captain and perennial fast bowler, Bob Willis.

Willis, I read, complains that the reason there is such a dearth of fast bowlers in England is that all our youngsters are having the pace coached out of them. His argument is that schoolboy bowlers are constantly encouraged to make sure that they bowl a good line and length and that they are being told to concentrate on these two factors rather than on speed. The result is, he argues, that they end up bowling pleasant, neat, reliable medium pace; the sort of bowling that is probably the most effective for the average sort of bowler playing against the average sort of batsman but which is woefully ineffective against top class batsmen in Test Match cricket.

I must say I found this an extremely logical and acceptable argument, and I suspect that it probably applies to other departments of the game as well. Modern coaches seem obsessed with training youngsters to do things 'properly' and are wildly enthusiastic about ensuring that everything is done according to the book, (the book usually being the *MCC Coaching Manual.*) This attitude undoubtedly works well at school and club level but will inevitably damage the prospects of our ever managing to produce cricketers of really original talent; cricketers who can change the course of an innings and win a match by themselves. There have been text book cricketers who have been successful of course. Barry Richards and Tom Graveney are two names that spring to mind. But a convincingly high proportion of the very best cricketers do things that coaches would not approve of. I wonder how many coaches would have liked the young Botham to bat a little more carefully. I wonder how many coaches would approve of a young Jeff Thomson or, indeed, a young Bob Willis. I wonder how many of the West Indians (a side full of truly natural talent) would have been turned into contemptibly ordinary club cricketers.

I can just see some earnest school master explaining to Gordon Greenidge just why he would have to change his batting stance if he ever wanted to succeed as a cricketer.

Friday 27th July

Another absolutely marvellous day's cricket at Edgbaston where Warwickshire managed to beat Hampshire by a whisker — taking the final Hampshire wicket with the penultimate ball of the match. Thrilling stuff that once again proves that when it is exciting, three-day cricket beats anything that the one-day competitions can offer.

There were some interesting moments early on in the day when Hampshire was waiting for Warwickshire to declare. One of the handful of spectators present called across to Trevor Jesty, acting Hampshire captain, suggesting that he gave opening batsman Chris Smith a bowl. The spectator's undisguised aim was clearly to help speed up the Warwickshire declaration. Much to everyone's delight, Jesty responded by promising to give Smith an over and Smith surprised by quickly taking two wickets. One of the wickets he captured incidentally, was young Dyer who looked set to make his first championship century at the time. I have seen many players — Humpage, Smith, Ferreira and Lloyd, for example — get their maiden centuries over the years. It's always a rather warming experience. So that was slightly frustrating (though probably not as frustrating as it was for Dyer himself).

The other sad moment of the day concerned that indomitable veteran, Denis Amiss, who was left stranded on 98 not out when Norman Gifford finally declared the Warwickshire innings closed. Ferreira nearly got the great man run out trying to give him his chance to complete his eighty-ninth century. But it was not to be. It was the Hampshire captain, Jesty, who fielded the final ball of the Warwickshire innings and he looked almost apologetic as he did so, keeping Amiss from making his century of centuries. I hear that Amiss has a testimonial next year with Warwickshire and it would be splendid if he could reach that major milestone during what will almost certainly be a year of grateful celebrations. The Warwickshire supporters are full of affection for Amiss (in contrast, I am afraid, to their feelings for Bob Willis, whose departure will be welcomed by some members who feel that he has given too little to the club during his stay at Edgbaston).

Incidentally, I was rather distressed to notice during this match that the Hampshire players have got what looks desperately like an advertising slogan sewn onto their sweaters in the spot usually reserved for the county insignia. I have never noticed this before but it does look rather odd. I can still remember when John Snow got into dreadful trouble for allegedly wearing a minute advertising slogan on the back of his boot or somewhere equally obscure. You would have needed an astronomer's telescope to find out what it was that Snow was advertising. The Hampshire advertisements, if that is what they are, are easier to read but just as confusing. Why should a team of cricketers be advertising high explosives?

Saturday 28th July

I spent the morning busily occupied with my pocket calculator. Last year two hundred and four first class cricket matches were played in the Schweppes County Championship. A meagre ninety-nine matches ended with a definite result. That means that more than half of the matches played were drawn.

This year there have been one hundred and twenty-nine matches so far and of those, sixty have ended in a definite result. That means that, once again, more than half of the matches played have been drawn.

I had rather hoped to be able to show that the new rules about minimum over rates had affected the number of first class matches ending with wins.

Pity.

Sunday 29th July

I have already commented on the fact that most of the people who do the catering at cricket grounds clearly still believe in pies, pasties and scotch eggs rather than nut cutlets, cottage cheese and whole bran biscuits.

Something else struck me today, is it not rather splendid that at cricket grounds the lavatories are still equipped with towel dispensers rather than those unspeakably inefficient hot air machines that never, ever work?

Monday 30th July

Modern railway stations may be convenient, dry and easy to maintain but they have none of the glamour and excitement of the Victorian railway stations built by our ancestors. Take the train from Coventry to Euston and you do not really get any genuine sense of *travelling*, do you? Those stations, undoubtedly designed by the same sort of empty suits who favour high-rise office blocks and ticky-tack box homes laid out on neat estates, are uncompromisingly functional and avowedly unromantic.

Travel from Nottingham to St Pancras, however, and you really know that you are travelling. Both stations are still quite splendidly and defiantly archaic. You can almost hear the sound of the old steam trains chugging from the north of England, and the air somehow still seems thick with left-over smoke. Down at St Pancras, it is quite possible to imagine that the two gentlemen hurrying across towards the far platform are Sherlock Holmes and the faithful Watson, off on some errand of mercy. While the young gentleman with the cricket bag is undoubtedly Raffles setting off to play in a country house team and to relieve the owner of a few thousand pounds worth of unwanted jewellery.

But it was not Raffles today. It was Gilbert Johnson, a dear friend of mine whom I have known for years. We used to work together down at Southlands Hospital in Shoreham when dreams were still possible and one could still believe that Ted Dexter would come out of retirement to bring danger, sparkle and style back to Test cricket.

I had just arrived at St Pancras and Gilbert was early for his train and so we both had twenty minutes to spend in the station buffet drinking British Rail's sad apology for coffee. Gilbert, I knew, was captain of a club side in Wiltshire. When I asked how the club was doing, Gilbert became very excited. He told me that he had high hopes and that a new acquisition he had just signed up seemed likely to add a new dimension to the club's future.

'He's going to revolutionise the club,' Gilbert told me proudly. 'There'll really be some changes during the next twelve months. It's the most important thing I've done for the club.'

'Batsman is he?' I asked.

'Not exactly,' Gilbert said. 'He's not really much of a batsman. Probably go in number ten or eleven.'

'Bowler then,' I said. 'Demon fast or unplayable googlies?'

'More gentle slow medium pace,' Gilbert answered, half apologetically. 'I expect I'll put him on as third change bowler if the pitch isn't taking spin.'

'He's not a wicket-keeper then?'

'Ah, no. Fielding is his weak point I suspect.' Gilbert told me. 'I think I'll probably let him specialise at fine leg or third man. We'll be able to hide him down there.'

‘Hang on a minute,’ I said eventually ‘Let me get this straight. This new chap of yours isn’t much of a batsman and he doesn’t bowl much and he’s such a fearful liability in the field that you’re going to have to hide him down in the country.’

Gilbert looked doubtful for a moment before admitting that I had summed things up fairly accurately.

‘I know this is probably a pretty stupid question,’ I confessed, ‘but why are you so excited about him then?’

‘He owns a sports outfitters and we’re getting thirty percent off all our gear,’ Gilbert explained.

Wednesday 1st August

Occasionally, one-day matches that look as though they should be exciting turn out to be disappointing. Today’s quarter-final between Warwickshire and Surrey in the NatWest Trophy was one of those matches.

After a slightly uncertain start Warwickshire amassed an impressive total of 305 for the loss of only five wickets. At that point there was still a chance that we would be in for a real thriller of a match. But within the first half a dozen overs of the Surrey innings the outcome of the match was settled. Surrey had lost three wickets for seventeen runs.

Once the chasing side loses that many quick wickets their chances of success plummet sharply. They cannot take any chances because if more wickets are lost they will not have enough batting capital to last them through the final hour of the match. And with over three hundred runs to score in order to win, the chasing side cannot afford to take things gently. If the remaining batsmen try to settle in and score slowly they will soon get behind the clock and find themselves chasing a quite impossible target.

That, as I say, is what happened to Surrey and the match turned out to be something of a disappointment.

Wins can sometimes be far less exciting than draws.

The Warwickshire total was built up by the three batsmen: K D Smith who scored 74, Denis Amiss who picked up 73 and Alvin Kalicharran who scored 101. The adjudicator gave Alvin Kalicharran the Man of the Match Award, following the unofficial tradition that the batsman on the winning side who scores the most runs will get the award. However, although Kalicharran’s innings was important and good to watch I really did not think that Alvin was the Man of the Match. I would have given the medal, tie and cheque to Smith. He, after all, opened the innings, provided some stability when two quick wickets gave Surrey hope of a breakthrough and a low total to chase, and accelerated as soon as it became clear that Warwickshire were out of real trouble.

Smith’s was an extremely well-balanced innings and one that really helped Warwickshire move into a match winning position. Since Smith himself was making his first appearance in the side for some time, and was undoubtedly anxious to make a good impression in order to retain his place, the innings he played was all the more remarkable.

Thursday 2nd August

There has recently been a tremendous amount of fuss about the Bodyline series of 1932-3. I suppose most of it is just left over from the 50th-anniversary celebrations.

This evening I watched an excellent documentary which included some tremendous footage of Jardine, Larwood, Allen and Wyatt. The one thing that struck me about it all was the extent of the difference between amateurs (exemplified by the chinless Jardine) and the professionals (such as the enigmatic Larwood, who manages to give the impression of being humble and self-effacing while at the same time making it clear that he is also stubborn and immensely proud).

It is difficult to believe that such huge differences existed a mere half-century ago.

The film also included a brief appearance by that fossilised cricket commentator E W Swanton. I had forgotten just how boring the *Daily Telegraph* used to be when Swanton’s deathly-dull prose filled the cricket pages.

Friday 3rd August.

I spent some time this morning chatting to two cricket enthusiasts who work for a publishing house in London. They both argued ferociously that the England selectors should abandon all their older players and go for youth.

‘We’ve lost this series,’ one pointed out, ‘We should be trying to build a new side for the future.’

I disagreed with this theory for two reasons.

First, I do not think any Test Match should be abandoned as ‘lost’ or regarded as ‘unimportant’. The country’s selectors owe it to the team, the opposition, the fans and, indeed, to history to pick the team that is most likely to win the match.

Second, I think we have become far too obsessed with trying to find new ‘young’ players. We have become so obsessed with the miracle of youth that we have taken to disregarding and discarding skilful, reliable cricketers of the highest calibre just because they are only likely to be able to play for another few seasons. We have, I suspect, also become over anxious to pick young, agile players who will be able to sparkle on the field. Good fielding is of course, extremely important. Quick fielders can save runs and help win matches. But there is not much point in picking youngsters who can field well if they are not worth their places as batsmen or bowlers.

My own feeling is that one of the main reasons we are currently trailing the West Indians 4–0 in this Test series is that our team contains too many inexperienced players. Look at the ages of the players in the last Test Match, for example and you will perhaps see what I mean:

Fowler 27, Broad 26, Terry 25, Gower 27, Lamb 30, Botham 29, Downton 27, Cook 28, Allott 27, Cowans 23, Pocock 37.

Only two members of the team are thirty years of age or over. And the average age of the whole team is just over twenty-seven.

Now compare the ages of the England players with the ages of the West Indian players. (Remembering too that Pat Pocock, the veteran of the England team, can hardly be described as an experienced Test player. He has not played Test cricket at all for eight years.) Their ages are:

Greenidge 33, Haynes 28, Richards 32, Gomes 31, Lloyd 39, Dujon 28, Holding 30, Baptiste 24, Harper 21, Davis 26, Garner 31.

No less than six of the West Indians are thirty years of age or over and the average age of the side is twenty-nine.

This age difference may be small but it is, I suspect, significant. If you look back through old copies of *Wisden* you will see that the great cricket teams of the past invariably had an average age of around twenty-nine. I picked out two sides purely at random and then checked out the ages of the players concerned. First, there is the England side which beat New Zealand at Lords in June 1958. I think you will agree that it is a powerful team. Their ages were:

P E Richardson 26, M J K Smith 25, T W Graveney 31, P B H May 28, M C Cowdrey 25, T E Bailey 34, T G Evans 37, G A R Lock 28, F S Trueman 27, J C Laker 36, P J Loader 28.

In that side there are four players over the age of thirty and the average age is over twenty-nine. Now take a look at the ages of the players in the Bodyline series. This is the team that beat Australia at Sydney in December 1932.

H Sutcliffe 38, R E S Wyatt 31, W R Hammond 29, Nawab of Pataudi 22, M Leyland 32, D R Jardine 32, H Verity 27, G O B Allen 30, L E G Ames 27, H Larwood 28, W Voce 23.

Again, there are five players over the age of thirty and the average age is twenty-nine.

I feel that any successful Test side needs a balance of experience and youth, of agility and wisdom, of promise and proven worth. The England selectors have gone overboard for youth with the result that at several times during this series there have been new and relatively untried batsmen at the crease.

Meanwhile, we have a number of experienced, well qualified Test class cricketers still playing in county cricket.

I think it is time the selectors began to think about the balance of the side they pick. I know that many of our most experienced players (Gooch, Boycott and Amiss) have been banned but there are others available and performing well enough to play a valuable part in the England side for a season or two to come.

Saturday 4th August

A mixture of rain and bad light meant that the only first class cricket played anywhere in England today was at Worcester where, although the start of play was delayed due to overnight rain, the weather was warm, sunny and bright enough for cricket watching.

With Nottinghamshire the visitors, I parked well away from the firing line of the batsmen — few modern cricketers hit the ball as hard or as far as Richard Hadlee. And within an hour or two of the start Hadlee was indeed at the crease, partnered by his captain Clive Rice. At that point it was difficult to remember that this was Worcestershire playing Nottinghamshire in the Brittannic Assurance County Championship, since at one stage the Worcester attack consisted of Kapil Dev Kikhanj (born Chadigarh, India) and Dipak Narshibhai Patel (born Nairobi, Kenya).

An Indian and a Kenyan bowling to a South African and New Zealander and we have the nerve to call it our domestic county championship!

The presence of at least two world class fast bowlers on the ground seemed to highlight the fact that umpires really do not apply any logic or commonsense to their thinking when they decide whether or not play should be allowed.

Richard Hadlee is undoubtedly one of the world’s fastest bowlers at the moment. He is probably the fastest white bowler anywhere. Kapil Dev is widely regarded as the fastest bowler that India has ever produced. Is it not odd, therefore, that umpires should consider it reasonable to unleash bowlers of such tremendous pace on ordinary county batsmen, even though conditions are less than perfect, while they will steadfastly refuse to allow Test Match batsmen (theoretically the cream of the batting profession) to be exposed to fast bowling in anything other than perfect conditions? If Richard Hadlee can be a danger to England's opening batsmen, surely he can be an even greater danger to Worcestershire's opening batsmen? And, conversely, if Worcestershire's opening batsmen can safely cope with Richard Hadlee in less than perfect conditions, why do Test class opening batsmen have to be protected?

I do not know the answer to this question but I do suspect that the difference is that Test Match umpires are encouraged to take themselves and their duties far too seriously. And perhaps there is, too, the factor that the players at Test Match level, being highly paid, are conscious of the risk of injury and determined to avoid any chance of being put out of the game for a few weeks with a bruise or broken bone.

The pitch and outfield at Worcester today were damp enough for Mike Vockins, the soft-spoken club secretary, whose voice it is that broadcasts messages during the luncheon and tea intervals at Worcester, to ask young cricketers not to play on the grass during the intervals. I cannot remember the last time they instituted such a ban at Worcester.

The ban today led to a sad and rather sorry little confrontation behind the stand nearest to the main scoreboard. There is a decent sized patch of tarmacadamed roadway there and a bunch of us were having a little gentle practice with a bat and an old tennis ball. Everyone who passed by smiled, and made a friendly comment or two, except for one sour looking fellow in a blue blazer who stopped and admonished me quite severely. Tediously, he warned me of the dangers of playing cricket in a public place and ended his lengthy admonishment with the immortal phrase 'I'm on the committee you know.'

Why, oh why, I wonder are there so many dull and boring fellows on cricket committees. Perhaps the rest of us should consider ourselves partly responsible for their status because it is, after all, our own indolence which puts them there. Perhaps these overly dull men obtain their positions of authority simply because they are the only cricket lovers who have both the time to spare to sit on committees and the inclination to do so.

They fit, these men, into what I shall call the Retired Major Syndrome. They are men who once had a position of minor authority — as army majors, hospital administrators, bank officials, police superintendents and so on — and having taken early retirement they need something to fill their days and satisfy their continuing need for superficial authority.

They ease onto our county cricket committee by default rather than by popular choice — their index-linked pensions give them the independence and the time to dedicate themselves to what they think of as 'good works'. You can see them at any county ground lounging in the committee rooms in overstuffed leather armchairs or sitting out on the balcony on slatted wooden benches. They wear blazers, grey flannels and club ties, they sport small toothbrush moustaches and their greying hair is combed straight back and trimmed to regulation army length. They are used to subservient behaviour from those around them and they treat the rest of the world with disdain and contempt; they are ignorant, arrogant and entirely worthless.

Sunday 5th August

While driving with a friend to a John Player League match I passed a van with *Winalot* printed on the side of it, my friend suggested that the England cricket team should be given supplies of this no doubt nutritious food for hounds.

Incidentally, still musing about the Man of the Match selection at the NatWest match at Edgbaston the other day, I had a thought.

Would it not be possible for the crowd at one-day matches to select the Man of the Match? On the back of each ticket or scorecard there could be a voting form. Then, at the end of the match spectators could put their voting form into a series of ballot boxes around the ground. It would not take much organisation and it would not take much counting either. (The cost would, probably be no more than the cost of bringing in an ex-England player to do the job.) The result could then be made available to the daily newspapers so that it could be printed in the next day's editions.

There could, perhaps, even be a record of the number of votes cast for each player.

Monday 6th August

I wonder how many indoor 'cricket' games there are.

When I was small I used to play the game with nothing more than a single dice. I would write out two favourite teams, and throw the dice to see which batted first. Then I would divide my teams into three segments. First, there would be the top line batsmen, then there would be the middle order batsmen and finally there would be the tail enders. Then I would start the game; choosing a bowler from the fielding side and keeping score in just the same way as any club cricket scorer does.

If the dice came up with a one, two, three, four or six then the batsman would have that score added to his total. If the dice came up with a five that would be considered an appeal, and I would throw the dice again. If the second throw produced a five then the batsman would be given out. To find out how the batsman had been out I would throw the dice a third time: a one indicated a clean bowled dismissal, a two indicated an LBW decision, a three indicated a catch, a four a run out, a five a stumped and a six a caught and bowled.

For middle order batsmen I changed the rules a little. They could be given out if the second throw produced a five or a six. And for a tail ender an appeal would result in a definite dismissal if a second throw produced a four, five, or six.

That simple dice game was one of my favourite pastimes for several reasons. First and foremost, it was extremely portable. All you needed was one dice, a piece of paper and a pencil. It was also quite suitable for playing at all sorts of odd moments — you could carry on with a match for days if necessary. You could play it by yourself too — vitally important for a schoolboy. Finally, it did tend to produce a fairly realistic sort of scoring pattern, with leading batsmen usually (but not always) getting the highest scores.

There were also games that used playing cards in a similar sort of way. For example, there was one game that used a chart to decide just what each pair of drawn cards meant. You would read off the colour and suit of each card and find out whether your batsman had blocked, scored or been dismissed.

And there was a game that used a little metal spinner with six sides. On each side of the spinner there were two sets of instructions. If on the first spin an appeal was made by the bowler then the second spin would show the consequence of that appeal. This was really very much the same sort of game as the one I have already described as suitable for a single dice.

These days cricket games are more sophisticated, although I do not think they are any more enjoyable. There are, for example, games involving specially printed cards and complicated rules which take a good deal of reading and understanding. And there is the Subuteo form of cricket in which players bowl and bat with tiny plastic figures and a miniature red ball. The only problem with all these games is that they require at least two players.

Now that I am older, I have become enamoured of two slightly more esoteric cricket games.

In the first, the aim is to think of situations not covered by the laws of cricket — or situations where the interpretation of the law might lead to a little discussion and controversy. So, for example, what happens if two batsmen collide in the middle of the pitch, equidistant from the two wickets and one is then run out? Which batsman is officially given ‘out’?

The second is much more fun and involves creating imaginary cricket teams. One can try to pick a team of one-eyed batsmen to play a team of bowlers all more than six-feet tall. Or a team of players who bat in funny coloured pads versus a team of players who bat and field in oddly shaped headgear. This game can easily get out of hand when one starts picking teams which contain historical figures or characters out of fiction.

Here, for example, are two of my favourite imaginary teams:

The Imaginables
A team of heroic cricket players taken from fiction.

Falstaff, Hamlet, David Copperfield, Sherlock Holmes, Dr Watson, Captain Scott, Robinson Crusoe, Father Brown, Robin Hood, The Scarlet Pimpernel, Launcelot of the Lake.

The Historical
A team of cricket players taken from history.

King Charles I, W Wordsworth, Marco Polo, Julius Caesar, Idi Amin, Captain Bligh, Rasputin, Atilla the Hun, Tomas de Torquemada, Niccolo Machiavelli, Confucius.

Umpires: Judge Jeffries and Pontius Pilot.
Scorers: Jimmy ‘the cricket bag’ Morello and A. Einstein.

Tuesday 7th August

I met David Foster of Central Television today. David is mad keen on cricket and about to fly off to Spain to film holiday makers playing beach cricket with Spanish locals. (Television companies, like newspapers, tend to favour light stories during the month of August.) Before he rushed off to collect his pesetas he asked what had happened to last winter’s Cricket Match on Ice. He, like most of my friends, had been invited to play in a Thomas Winsden out of season spectacular but unfortunately, due to a general lack of ice, the match had never materialised. (We had got fairly close to it once when a lake down near Bath very nearly froze over but a couple of warm days soon put paid to that expectation.)

Anyway, although it is rather depressing to think of winter while there are still a few weeks left of the cricket season, we did decide to go ahead with a match again this winter. I am not quite sure how we will get the stumps into the ice, or how the bowlers will manage to get any sort of grip when they run up to the wicket, but those are simple practical problems which I am sure we will be able to solve. The one factor we cannot control is the availability of a suitable amount of ice.

That is something we will have to leave to the Great Groundsman in the Sky.

Wednesday 8th August

So David Gower, the curly haired boy wonder of English cricket, is to captain the touring team to India this winter.

I have always been an enthusiastic supporter of David Gower, the batsman. I remember watching his first stroke in Test cricket (he hooked a short pitched ball for four) and the immaculate double century that marked his early entry to international cricket. But I cannot help wondering whether or not Gower is the right man to be captaining England.

My main reservation is that he is too young and too inexperienced to take on the captaincy. He is twenty-seven now. Compare his age with the ages at which some of the most successful captains took on the responsibility and you will see that Gower is still remarkably young for such authority. Most of the successful Test captains have been at least thirty years of age before becoming captain. (There are exceptions such as Peter May, but exceptions they certainly are.)

Without having had much experience of captaining a county side, Gower must surely be at a tremendous disadvantage when struggling to mastermind his national side's success in the cauldron of a Test arena. He is too young and too inexperienced, and the pressure of coping with the captaincy must surely have an adverse effect on his own batting skills. We can ill-afford to squander those much needed skills in the way that we temporarily squandered Botham's immense skills as an all-rounder by making him captain far too early on in his career. The idea of Gower captaining England is not as outrageous as the idea of Botham captaining England, but I would like to see Gower given a chance to win some honours with Leicestershire first of all.

Of course if Gower does not captain England then the selectors have a problem. There is no one else in the current England side who could possibly do the job.

Personally, I would like to see Keith Fletcher brought in to the side. He would not only bring experience and strength to the batting line up, he would also give us one of the best and most thoughtful captains currently available anywhere in the world. Sadly, I do not think the selectors will choose Fletcher, so perhaps they should carefully consider appointing a non-playing captain to look after the side, to provide general advice and leadership and to give the playing captain tactical instructions.

For that job there is no one better equipped than Mike Brearley — the one man who seems able to push players to the peak of their ability. Failing that, there is also Ray Illingworth — another experienced and successful ex-captain. Such a non-playing captain would, I suppose, fulfil the sort of role traditionally taken by a football team manager. Several first class English counties already have team managers and in that type of cricket the idea seems to work extremely well.

With a non-playing captain to advise him and take some of the pressure from him, David Gower *would* possibly be able to cope.

Without such support I think that he will continue to have problems.

Thursday 9th August

It was marvellous to see England doing so well at the Oval today, although I have to be honest and admit that I never really expected to see the West Indians dismissed for under 200. Even when they had lost seven wickets for under 100 I half expected to see a couple of their late order batsmen put together a mammoth score. The way the West Indians have been batting this summer one could almost believe that they have had a run-scoring rota system. Not until the last wicket fell did I really believe that England was capable of controlling such a powerful line up of batting talent.

The best of the English bowlers was, once again, Ian Botham who took five wickets in an innings for the twenty-third time and who, during the day, took his 300th wicket for England. Botham is fearless and unpredictable: qualities which make him one of the most dangerous English cricketers of all time. Not since Ted Dexter's glorious days has there been an English batsman capable of tearing apart the best attacks in the world. Not since Fred Trueman has England had a bowler capable of destroying any opposition.

Botham as a batsman may not have much in the way of a defence and his bowling may often be expensive, but he is that rare cricketer: a potential match winner. And he is without a doubt one of the greatest all-rounders the world of cricket has ever seen. He will take his place in the history books alongside W G Grace, Garfield Sobers and Keith

Miller.

What greater tribute can there be?

While Botham stamped his individual mark on yet another Test Match, young Ellison, one of the new caps in the England side, began what looks like being a long career as the great man's understudy. To me Ellison seems a not dissimilar cricketer to Hampshire's Trevor Jesty, but despite that there must be a few county cricketers around the country who felt a little peeved to see the young man from Kent acquiring an England cap with such a modest cricketing career behind him.

Despite a lack of proven experience however, Ellison seems to have what it takes to survive at Test Match level and I suspect that he has a wealth of experience ahead of him. You can have all the cricketing skills in the world but if you have neither luck nor temperament those skills will be useless. England has had a number of 'almost' players over the last few years and the selectors have often persevered with them to a point where even the players themselves must have felt embarrassed; Gatting is the prime example of a cricketer rising beyond his skills, unable to match his undoubted prowess with the bat with the necessary mental powers.

On the other hand there are players such as Fowler who have modest match skills but a tremendous temperament for big match situations. Fowler is not a great batsman but he has courage, patience and luck. I am not yet convinced that Ellison has greatness in him but his appearance at the Oval today suggested that he may have some of those other essential qualities.

I just hope that the critics do not expect him to match Ian Botham's skills. No country can hope to have two cricketers with both luck and courage as well as genius.

Friday 10th August

There is news today about a new scheme designed to try to find a fresh supply of English fast bowlers. Sponsored by a brewery, a team of experts is planning to scour the country for athletic young men who can be turned into the Larwoods and Lillees and Lindwalls of the late 1980s.

Ted Dexter and Bob Willis are reported to be among the ex-cricketers involved in the scheme.

The argument put forward by the proponents of this new scheme is that it is perfectly possible to take a young man of eighteen or so and, provided that he is a natural athlete, supremely fit and extremely enthusiastic, turn him into a world class fast bowler. It is, I suppose, the cricketing equivalent of the Pygmalion story and Bob Willis seems destined to play the Professor Higgins role. Fast bowlers, say the scheme's supporters, do not need to be born or carefully nurtured; they can be hewn from raw flesh within twelve months or so.

The project has met with a fair amount of opposition. Much of it has come, predictably enough, from former cricketers, who have argued with some pride that bowling is a craft and that players must serve a long, thoughtful apprenticeship if they expect to reach the highest levels of the game.

There have, however, been many expert observers ready to agree that the scheme may offer English cricket new hope for the future. These observers have argued that in the world of athletics it is not at all unusual for coaches in some disciplines to find and train new recruits in a relatively short space of time. In some of the field events (the javelin, the shot put, the hammer and the discus, for example) fit young men and women have been turned into top class performers in the space of a few months.

It is true, they agree, that no one could produce a top class spin bowler in twelve months or create an international class batsman with a high intensity coaching course, but fast bowling is something quite different and fast bowlers need pace more than anything else. Fast bowlers, they claim, can be manufactured. It will be a fascinating experiment.

Saturday, 11th August

Today we drove up to Chatsworth in Derbyshire for a huge family picnic. There were relatives there from Devon, Kent and Wales as well as various parts of the Midlands and North of England. Although cold, gloomy and often isolated in winter, the countryside in this part of Derbyshire is, in summer, exquisitely English, with rolling hillsides, woodland glades, fast flowing rivers and streams, and acres of sheep cropped parkland decorated and divided with neat dry stone walling.

We shared our luncheon baskets in a delightfully sheltered spot just outside the grounds of Chatsworth House. Above us ran a quiet country lane, hardly used even in summer. Below us a clean sparkling river wound its way between tree-studded banks. There were ducks on the river and sheep on the opposite bank. A bright sun shone down from a blue sky dotted with a handful of fluffy clouds. It is difficult not to think of everything in poetic terms when the surroundings are so perfect.

By the time we had emptied our picnic baskets and filled our stomachs, the meadow in which we were settled had become quite busy, with several other parties (mostly smaller than ours) opening their flasks, peeling hard boiled eggs, chopping up their tomatoes, shaking the water from their lettuce and opening up their cold meats and pork pies. I watched all this with the comfortable half interest of a man who has eaten well and has nothing much to occupy his mind.

But my interest in what was going on around me quickly became more acute when I noticed that as they finished their picnics many of my neighbours started playing cricket. A few began paddling in the river (it was bright and fresh and there was not a bottle, plastic bag or old bedstead to be seen). One or two took out their newspapers. But, on the whole, men and women, young and old, children and grandparents, seemed determined to enjoy themselves by playing our national game. There were, within half an hour or so, no less than half a dozen separate games taking place. Men rolled up their sleeves, tossed back their thinning hair and imagined that they were Fred Trueman coming in to bowl or Sir Len Hutton about to take another hundred off the Australians. Grandfathers loosened their braces, took off their flat caps and cast aside their jackets. Mothers slipped off their shoes and darted about gaily, giggling a good deal at the incomprehensibility of it all. Even teenage girls and tiny tots took it all in good part.

Hardly any of them had proper cricket equipment, of course. There were, I suppose, no more than two bats between the lot of them. And there were no such things as stumps, bails, pads or cricket whites. Instead of cricket balls (uncomfortably hard and horribly expensive) they used tennis balls, usually old and battered.

For stumps they used anything that came to hand: a wire rubbish basket, a plastic water carrier, an up-ended briefcase that had presumably been used to transport sandwiches, a tree trunk and a pile of coats and jumpers. Those who had no proper cricket bats used tennis rackets, badminton rackets or pieces of rotten tree branches dragged from the river and stripped of loose bark and unnecessary branches. One enterprising team used a multi-coloured golfing umbrella, another used a tightly rolled copy of a women’s magazine.

I greatly enjoyed watching these impromptu games where there was no concern about averages, prize money, bouncers or no-balls. There were good-natured controversies about LBW decisions and some merry arguments about just where the boundary was situated, but the one thing that all these cricket matches had in common was that they were played entirely for fun. No one played who did not want to, no one played out of a sense of obligation and no one played with hope of any glory or subsequent approbation.

Watching them, I was reminded of the days when I worked as a general practitioner with another cricket-mad doctor and used to play impromptu games in our health centre after morning surgery. One of us would bat in the spaciousness of the waiting room while the other would use the long corridor for his run up. We would use a rolled up copy of the *British Medical Journal* as a bat and a few pieces of scrap paper firmly bundled together as a ball. Our games used to become quite sophisticated, with pot plants and chairs designated as fielders and one of the receptionists instructed to act as wicket-keeper.

The older members of the MCC may look down their noses at this type of cricket, and it may not be quite what the modern architects of the game have in mind when they sit down to muse and pontificate about the future of the sport. But this type of gentle, unorganised cricket does have a place in the modern game. It was, after all, in much the same sort of way that the game originated several hundred years ago. They were playing cricket with such primitive props long, long before batting gloves and helmets and thigh pads were available.

And if I had to put money on any form of cricket lasting through the next few centuries it would be the type of cricket played with battered old tennis balls and rolled up magazines rather than the type played by highly paid professionals in huge sporting arenas.

Sunday 12th August

I do get slightly cross about the fact that although I have a parking pass for three county grounds I invariably have to arrive a good half an hour before a game starts in order to guarantee getting into the car park. At Edgbaston, for example, there is a huge park but the club sells so many car park passes that there are always members with tickets being turned away.

That seems to me to be rather immoral, on a par with that dreadful airline habit of selling more tickets than there are seats on the aeroplane.

I would be prepared to pay a higher subscription fee if it would guarantee me somewhere to park the car. Perhaps the Warwickshire Committee should think of offering two types of car park pass: ‘Guaranteed’ and ‘If You’re Lucky’.

Monday 13th August

At the Oval today the umpires seemed to spend an awful lot of time shouting at the crowd and getting them to keep quiet and still. Now I can quite understand how annoying it must be for a batsman if spectators sitting behind the bowler’s arm are ill-mannered enough to keep moving around. Against any bowling attack that would be a dreadful nuisance, against the fearsome West Indian bowling attack it is potentially lethal.

But I do think that the umpires have got rather carried away with it all in this match. Once or twice the umpires walked across to spectators sitting many yards away from the area around the sightscreen. Just why batsmen should be disrupted by movements so far away from the line of attack is something I do not understand.

Nor do I think that the umpires are entirely justified in complaining about the noise at cricket matches. I think spectators might be justified in complaining when the noise becomes outrageous, but why should the players be worried? And what on earth is the point of the umpires trying to get involved if the ground authorities are not interested in the problem? When noisy spectators are allowed to bring drums and trumpets onto cricket grounds the authorities can hardly be said to have taken any interest in subduing excessive enthusiasm.

It is not just at the Oval that spectators are getting told off a good deal these days. The other day, while watching a three-day match at Edgbaston, I saw an umpire shout at a spectator who was struggling to push the sightscreen into the required position. The umpire and one or two of the players were screaming instructions at the unfortunate fellow who really had no idea what was required of him. I have to say that although I was sitting some distance from the sightscreen I sympathised with the spectator: I could not work out what was wanted.

Then, suddenly and quite unexpectedly, the spectator decided that he had taken enough abuse. ‘I’m doing you a favour,’ he shouted. ‘I paid to come in here. You move the bloody thing yourselves.’ And with that he sat down.

A couple of fielders then had to run across and move the screen to the position where they wanted it.

I thought it was a splendid moment. Spectator power!

Tuesday 14th August

It is the semi-finals of the NatWest Trophy tomorrow and I am not sure whether to go the Edgbaston to see how Warwickshire get on or drive down to Lords to watch Middlesex.

I do have to confess that as an MCC member I am torn about whether or not to keep my fingers crossed for Middlesex.

If Middlesex win then the pavilion at Lords will be crowded with Middlesex supporters on the day of the final. They will all be eager to watch their team from the best vantage point in England

If Middlesex fail to reach the final then the only people crowding into the pavilion will be MCC members eager to watch a good day’s cricket.

In other words, if Middlesex win then the pavilion will be far more crowded than if they lose. As an out-of-town member who has difficulty in getting to Lords before ten in the morning I hope I can be forgiven for nurturing such a selfish thought.

On balance I think I will probably drive over to Edgbaston and see if Warwickshire can repeat their impressive performance against Surrey in the quarter-finals of this tournament.

Another glorious day for Chris Old today who has now become the first player to take ten wickets both for Yorkshire and against them in first class fixtures. He took his ten Yorkshire wickets in the match that was completed at Headingley today. He ended up with a match analysis of 11 for 99 runs.

Few bowlers can have ever enjoyed such sweet success.

Wednesday 15th August

Warwickshire do not seem to have much luck with the toss in one-day matches. Today’s toss must have had a significant effect on the outcome of the match with Kent at Edgbaston. There was plenty of mist around during the morning session and the ball certainly seemed to be moving about considerably.

Once again Alvin Kallicharran was the outstanding Warwickshire player — with a tremendous innings of 86. The next highest scorer was Extras who put together 28!

The Warwickshire total was never really enough to enable them to win and Kent won easily by six wickets with a couple of overs to spare. In fact, I think that the apparently close margin of victory probably flatters Warwickshire. It seemed a fairly certain victory for Kent from the moment when Warwickshire had both openers, Amiss and Humpage, back in the pavilion with less than 100 runs on the scoreboard.

The batting and bowling averages make pretty fascinating reading today. It is good to see Denis Amiss right up there near the top of the averages. I do hope that we are going to see him recalled to the England side next year, when the South African ban is over. Apart from Mike Gatting and Peter Denning (who has only been dismissed five times this season and who is, therefore, flattered by his position) the English batsmen in the top ten (Amiss, Gooch and Boycott) are all banned at the moment. Gooch, by the way, is still in the bowling averages. But the man who has really taken the averages by storm this summer is Richard Hadlee who, with 880 runs and 88 wickets to his name, seems set to complete the double. And what a double: his current batting average is 55 while his wickets have cost him a mere 14 runs apiece. The leading wicket taker in England is, almost predictably, the seemingly immortal John Lever. A less predictable name among the top few bowlers today is Terry Alderman — it is good to see that

Alderman has recovered from that most unfortunate accident that put him out of the game for so long. His season with Kent should have prepared him for the next Australian tour of England. And all true cricket lovers must welcome that.

Thursday 16th August

A friend of mine tells me that he was coming back from a business meeting recently when he drove past umpire Dickie Bird on a motorway. He says that Mr Bird was driving in the slow lane and although the weather was perfectly bright he had his headlights switched full on.

My friend, an enthusiastic cricket supporter, suggests that this anecdote is of some significance. He argues that if Mr Bird needs his headlights in broad daylight then it is hardly surprising that he cannot see well enough to justify there being any play when he is umpiring and the light is anything short of dazzling.

I do not believe he saw Dickie Bird at all.

But it is a nice story.

Saturday 18th August

I drove down to Camberley in Surrey for a cricket weekend with the Adventurers Club and Leaping Lord Thackelay’s XI. The main match between the two sides is scheduled for tomorrow (I play for the Adventurers Club), but today we had an impromptu match on a local village green just outside Camberley. I tried out my lob bowling yet again but I still do not seem to have mastered the technique, I am not convinced, however, that lob bowling could not be re-introduced into professional cricket with some success. I shall continue to experiment with this technique during the winter months. Perhaps it will work well in our cricket match on ice.

The most important part of the day was the cricket club dinner held in the early evening. The main course was duck (what else is suitable for a cricket club dinner?) and the chef had turned fresh oranges into sorbet-filled cricket balls by dyeing them bright, cherry red. The restaurant where the dinner was held had provided two long dining tables for the teams and the place cards for the dinner had been very cleverly arranged as though the diners were fielders.

So, for example, at the top of the Adventurers Club table the president was sitting in a position marked Bowler. At the far end of the table, sitting in a position called Wicket-Keeper, was the club secretary.

On the president’s right sat the club treasurer (sitting in the Mid-On position) while on his left sat the more experienced of the club’s opening batsmen (sitting at Mid Off). On the Wicket-Keeper’s right sat the other opening batsman (sitting at First Slip) while on the Wicket-Keeper’s left sat the club’s only leg break bowler (sitting at Backward Short Leg). The other places around the table were defined in a similar way with Second Slip, Third Slip, Gully, Backward Point, Point, Silly Mid Off and Short Extra Cover filling in the left hand side of the table. The right hand side of the table was occupied by Backward Short Leg, Short Leg, Forward Short Leg, Silly Mid On, and Mid Wicket.

I am told that the speeches made at the dinner were amusing.

I am afraid, however, that I cannot remember anything I heard. It must have been a splendid event.

Sunday 19th August

After my game for the Adventurers Club today the president, Sir Bertie Wheezer, said, that as a cricketer, he thought that I was an all-rounder. Before I could glory in this praise, however, he explained that he meant that I was equally bad at bowling, batting and fielding. I may never play again.

Monday 20th August

Cricket terminology is very strange, is it not?

My niece asked me today where the term ‘gully’ came from. I produced several half-hearted explanations but had to admit that I really did not know. Then she wanted to know where the term ‘covers’ had originated. Again, I managed all sorts of spurious answers. But I could not think of an answer that I could swear was true.

‘And why do they call it a batting crease?’ she wanted to know. ‘It sounds as though they fold the pitch up at the end of the day. ’

That had me stumped.

‘And why do you always refer to the chap with the bat as the batsman while the fellow who is bowling is a bowler. Why not call them batter or bowlsman? And why is it a fielder rather than a fieldsman?’

By that time I had completely run out of answers.

Wednesday 22nd August

So many of the England openers have been injured this season that a strange thought has occurred to me.

If an opening batsman is injured early on in the innings, has to leave the field of play to receive medical attention and only returns to the crease when the number eleven batsman is batting, can he be said to have carried his bat if he remains ‘not out’ when the innings ends?

Thursday 23rd August

I have always tried to visit Lords for the Thursday of a Test Match there. Friday is probably the best day for cricket watching (you can usually expect to see the end of one innings and the start of another) but Thursday is always a special day. And this, being the first Test match that Sri Lanka has played in this country means that today is a very special day indeed.

How many people can say they have watched an international side playing its first Test at the headquarters of cricket?

Friday 24th August

I happened to be in Bournemouth today and, finding myself with an unexpected hour to spare, I gave a taxi driver enough to buy himself a small home on the French Riviera to take me to the Hampshire ground.

I have always liked watching cricket near the sea. I do not know whether it is because the air is so exceptionally bracing or because the sight and sound of so many seagulls bring back happy memories of seaside holidays and days of lazy pleasure. I did live on the south coast, once, at Shoreham, just a couple of miles along from Brighton, but although I thoroughly enjoyed the experience I was, in the end, quite glad to leave. The problem was that when you live by the sea you take it all for granted. All the excitement of a day trip to the coast disappears when you just have to wander a couple of miles down the road to see the breakers and buy a stick of rock.

The Hampshire ground was pretty empty when I got there and I found myself sharing most of one stand with an extremely earnest looking gentleman whose bald head was burnt to a dark brown colour by the sun. We were sitting some twenty or thirty yards apart, and to begin with I took no notice of him at all. He had a large notebook stretched out across his knees and seemed engrossed in it.

I had not been sitting there for more than fifteen minutes when I was awoken from my pleasant reverie by the sound of a sudden isolated burst of applause. I looked across and saw that the hairless spectator with whom I was sharing the stand had put down his pencil and was clapping enthusiastically. I thought little of it. I could not see any cause for such a dramatic expression of approval but I had been dozing a little and I was not sure if I had missed a well struck shot or a keenly flighted delivery.

It happened again after another ten minutes. Once more I could think of no explanation for the applause. And no one else on the ground was clapping. And then again after another quarter of an hour or so. So it went on. Four or five times in the next hour my companion suddenly shattered the silence with a fiercely appreciative round of applause. Curiosity aroused, I kept a very close eye on the balding enthusiast. When, after another thirty minutes or so, it was time for me to leave I made my way over to where he was sitting, hoping to have a word with him and find out just why he was clapping and just what I and the other spectators on the ground had been missing.

As you have undoubtedly guessed, by now (I had not guessed although I admit I should have done) the balding gentleman with the large notepad on his knees was an enthusiastic Amateur Statistician. He was applauding minor milestones in his club’s history. The difference was, however (and this explains why the other spectators had missed these statistical milestones and failed to celebrate them with a little palmar oscillation) that the lone statistician was keeping track neither of the batsmen nor of the bowlers.

He told me that he had for many a year harboured an earnest wish to make his mark on cricket statistics but that the almanacs and cricket magazines all had their own resident experts. There was, he reasoned, no opportunity for a statistician who recorded all the usual statistics about wickets taken and runs scored.

And so he had decided to specialise in fielders and fielding. While he kept his records meticulously up to date, he told me that he kept records of every time a fielder stopped a ball, let a ball go through, caught a ball, dropped one and every other missed opportunity. With the aid of a complex system of handicapping which I did not entirely understand, he had worked out a way to measure the number of runs that each individual fielder had saved. He had averages only for his own home county but he could tell me which fielders had the best averages and which fielders were worth their places for the runs they had saved.

And the clapping that I had not been able to understand? Well, every time a fielder reached a small personal milestone (50 runs saved in an innings, 200 runs saved in a season or whatever) then he clapped.

I left Bournemouth confused and just a little wiser, and convinced that the statisticians will eventually take over the game completely. I was very impressed by my bald friend's dedication and singlemindedness. I wonder if the statistical gurus will ever follow his example. Heaven help us if they do. We will all have raw hands.

Saturday 25th August

Although it is invariably stodgy and filling (excellent qualities for cricket watching), the food at some county grounds does fall far short of decent catering standards.

The only thing that upsets me about Worcester, for example, is the fact that they do not sell good pies. It is a beautiful, friendly ground, but when are they going to offer their members and guests a decent pork pie?

Sunday 26th August

John Inchmore's benefit plans are continuing at quite a pace and I have just produced a feature for his benefit brochure. Although I shall do all I can to help him, and although I fork out for cricketers' benefits wherever and whenever they take place, I do think the time has come to reconsider the whole question of offering benefits and testimonials.

The system reeks of the old Soup Kitchen mentality. It cannot be particularly pleasant for a player to have to spend a year practically begging for money to put into his pension fund. Nor can it be much fun for players waiting to see whether or not their own committee is going to allow them a benefit.

I think it is time the system was abandoned and players were given not only an annual fee or salary but also some sort of investment programme paid for by the club on their behalf. This would mean that the longer a player stayed with a club, the bigger the sum of money he would obtain — so players would still be under some pressure to remain faithful to their clubs.

Those individuals who love organising raffles and dances could still do so — but instead of handing the money over to one player they would hand the money over to the playing staff's investment programme.

It would, I feel, be a much more civilised way of running things.

Monday 27th August

I spent the day chatting to a couple of cricket watching friends trying to define the Real Cricket Lover. We came up with this set of guidelines.

1. The Real Cricket Lover turns up at the county ground at 11 a.m. whatever the weather may be.
2. Even if it is raining the Real Cricket Lover stays on the ground until the umpires have abandoned play for the day.
3. The Real Cricket Lover always stays for the end of a match, even if it is painfully obvious that the match is going to be a tedious draw.
4. Real Cricket Lovers carry their county membership cards with them everywhere they go.
5. Real Cricket Lovers never need to show their membership cards. The gatemen know them too well.
6. If they have motor cars, Real Cricket Lovers always carry pads, bat, gloves and a ball in them — just in case.
7. Real Cricket Lovers always stand up to applaud a good innings.
8. A Real Cricket Lover still uses linseed oil on his bat even if it is sealed and does not need oiling.
9. A Real Cricket Lover usually drinks beer, lager or shandy, occasionally drinks champagne, wine or gin but never drinks anything else.
10. Real Cricket Lovers enjoy one-day cricket but know it is not *really* cricket.
11. A Real Cricket Lover usually watches matches at two local grounds so that he can get a matching suntan. (At the one ground he sits with the sun on his left. At the other ground he sits with the sun on his right.)
12. The Real Cricket Lover has a special bag into which to cram such cricket watching impedimenta as a waterproof coat, a vacuum flask, a plastic box for sandwiches or biscuits, a pencil with a rubber on the end and a small, pocket cricket annual.

Tuesday 28th August

Malcolm Mortimer, my friend who plays cricket in the Nottingham area, tells me that he has been having a sizzling season both with the bat and with the ball. He has made up with his captain and is getting a regular bowl these days. He telephoned me today and asked whether I thought it was possible for a player who had not experienced county cricket to get an England cap. He said he was only asking for a friend and that he has rung me because of my association with the MCC.

I told him that I could not see why a player should not be allowed to play for England without having any county experience. Malcolm was clearly thrilled by this. He said he would get in touch with his friend straight away and give him the good news.

He then asked me whether I thought a chap would need to have typhoid and cholera injections to go to India and Pakistan.

Richard Hadlee finally succeeded yesterday. The first man for seventeen years to complete the cricketing double of 1000 runs and 100 wickets. It was a tremendous achievement by a marvellous cricketer but it has left me with a nagging worry: just why are there no English cricketers around who look like repeating the achievement? Can we really blame the amount of one-day cricket that is played? Is the reduction in the number of first class matches really the only explanation?

Or are we just going through a particularly lean period in English cricket?

Wednesday 29th August

It has only just dawned on me that we were completely humiliated by the West Indians this summer. I had, I suppose, switched, off to a certain extent unwilling to acknowledge what was happening. But a five-nil thrashing is a pretty fearful indictment of English cricket. I honestly cannot believe that the team the West Indians brought over is *that* good.

The only comfort is that it was not the Australians who beat us five—nil. Now that really would have been awful.

Somehow the Tests we play against the Australians seem so much more important than the Tests we play against other countries.

I would rather lose to the Falklands Islands than lose the Ashes at home by such a convincing margin.

Thursday 30th August

There is only one thing that annoys me more than hearing cricket commentators say ‘Ah, well, cricket’s a funny game you know’, and that is hearing a cricket commentator describe a fielder as ‘giving chase’ when he runs after a ball that has been hit towards the boundary.

I suspect that this cumbersome phrase ‘giving chase’ has been picked up by commentators who have spent too much time talking to policemen. It is the sort of phrase the police love to use when describing their exploits. Listen to a police constable give evidence in court and he will never say ‘I chased the villain’; instead he will say ‘I gave chase’.

Friday 31st August

Today I picked up an old copy of a daily newspaper and found a story about a man who has inherited a cricket pitch. What a glorious tale it is. A cricket loving chap called Jim Hews acquired the club and ground when his sixth cousin (a lady he had never even heard of) died and left him the lot in her will. Mr Hews’ club is down in Somerset at a place called Brompton Ralph, a delightful little village hidden away in the wilds of the West Country. Indeed, the story brought back many happy memories for me because I once spent a marvellous Saturday afternoon there watching a local game.

The playing area is on a slope and at one point in the afternoon one of the fielders was completely out of sight. I can still remember my surprise at seeing this chap coming into sight as he rose up over the artificial horizon. It was like something out of *England Their England.* What a surprise it would be for a batsman to send a ball high into the air, way out of sight and then to see a fielder appear with the ball in his hand claiming a catch. Actually at Brompton Ralph it can get a little tricky hitting the ball into the air — there are one or two stray electricity cables crossing the pitch and an over-enthusiastic shot can easily become tangled with the National Grid.

The only other thing I can remember about this delightful cricket club is that the pitch is also on a slope. Several slopes to be precise. Playing there must be a bit like playing cricket in a saucer.

But, oh how I envy you Mr Hews. I would rather like to own my own cricket club and pitch.

Saturday 1st September

I have not written anything about the Test Match against the Sri Lankan team until today because I wanted to let my initial shock and dismay melt away before starting to hammer the typewriter keys.

Now that I feel calmer and cooler I feel better able to comment objectively on England’s performance.

Never, in my thirty years of cricket watching, have I seen such a dismal and pitiful display by any representative side. Never before have I seen such laughably inept performances by players who think of themselves as among the best in the world. And never before have I seen such wimpish leadership. David Gower makes Mike Denness look potent by comparison.

Like most true cricket lovers I lost almost all interest in the game after the very first day. The interest I did retain was inspired simply by admiration for the Sri Lankan team’s skill and determination. I thought they played magnificently. They certainly deserved to win. And if they had won then I would have stood up and cheered what could only have been a victory for the game of cricket.

There is talk in the newspapers today about Gatting and Tavare (captains of Middlesex and Kent in today’s NatWest Trophy Final) being prospective vice-captains for the coming tour of India. I really cannot see how anyone can consider either of these two men worth a place in an England touring party.

Sunday 2nd September

Drove to Weston-Super-Mare to see some chums and spent most of the day playing cricket on the enormous sandy beach there. Beach cricket is a long established tradition among English holiday-makers and there cannot be many amateur players who have not bowled and batted on sandy wickets. Most beach cricket is fairly casual, of course, with pieces of driftwood being used as bats and rocks as wickets. Our match today was much better organised. One of my pals had brought three stumps, two bails and a bat, another had brought a couple of rather tattered old tennis balls.

We divided ourselves into a couple of teams and began just as the tide was turning, not realising how fast the tide rushes in.

The result was that whereas the side which fielded first had the luck to bowl on a fairly dry wicket, which took a tremendous amount of spin, the side which fielded last had the task of bowling on wet sand, with an inch or so of water spread across the wicket. I do not know whether you have ever tried playing cricket in an inch of water but if not then take my word for it: you cannot get the ball to bounce at all.

As a result, my team lost. We were, indeed, humiliated.

We are, however, reporting the pitch to Lords. It will be interesting to see what they have to say.

Monday 3rd September

Young Paul Smith of Warwickshire could go right to the top in professional cricket. He has opened both the batting and the bowling for the county and, although he still has a lot of faults, he does seem to have fire and determination in him. So many young players seem to bowl at medium pace and to bat with great caution that it is a pleasant surprise to find a youngster prepared to throw his heart and soul into the game. Of course he will get dismissed for nought occasionally and he will get thrashed around the ground a good deal. But I hope he does not settle down too much. He bats and bowls rather like a young Botham: full of raw energy and danger. At twenty, he is a cricketer to watch.

Tuesday 4th September

Played cricket again yesterday, but I do have to admit that I am basically a voyeur. Nothing gives me greater pleasure than watching cricketers run around getting sweaty. I like it best when they are working so hard that their brows glisten and their breath is slightly laboured.

I used to be much more of a participant. And not just at cricket. There was a time when I would spend my Friday evening oiling my bat, scraping the mud off my golf shoes and counting my maggots. I would spend hours rubbing the grass stains off my tennis balls and invest far more than I could afford in lenses and filters.

The truth came to me in a dash of light, quite suddenly and unexpectedly one summer a couple of seasons ago. I had spent three hot hours fielding at third man and was slowly making my way back to the pavilion when I happened to pass a pair of lazy good-for-nothings sitting in deck chairs, surrounded by crumpled beer cans. They had clearly spent the afternoon doing absolutely nothing useful but contribute to the profits of a major brewery.

As I limped wearily into the pavilion, where I knew there would be handfuls of slightly crumpled sandwiches sitting alongside an urn of almost undrinkable tea, I felt rather aggrieved. It did not seem fair. But then slowly the bitterness dissolved as I realised that I did not have to be a participant. I too could become a voyeur.

It was in some ways a difficult decision to make. Our society is a very participatory one. People tend to feel guilty if they are not doing something useful all the time. But I do not feel guilty anymore. I play occasionally, usually on beaches and in gardens, but I spend most of my summer watching other people play cricket.

The sad thing is, however, that even cricket watching is becoming a participatory sport. At one-day and Test matches it is not good enough these days to sit there quietly while the gentle thud of leather on willow reassures you that things are still happening. Today there are cups to be won, money to be fought for and teams to be supported. If you are a spectator you are expected to bang your beer cans together, jump up and down with joy every twenty seconds and put up with the banners and mindless chants that have become an accepted way of life for some cricket watchers.

I find all this worrying. How long will it be before the real cricket spectators are overrun by these lunatics? How long before the Woolly Jumpers are overrun by the Can Bangers?

Or will three-day cricket, the cricket I love best, remain safe from these modern intruders, too dull to merit their unwelcome attention?

Wednesday 5th September

Today I spoke to Darley Anderson, a publisher and cricket enthusiast. He told me that he had thoroughly enjoyed the series of Test Matches this summer. When I expressed some slight surprise at this he explained that half way through the season he had decided that England were not only going to lose but that they were not worth supporting. He had, therefore, switched allegiance and supported the West Indian team for the second half of the season. Apart from a moment or two of worry when the West Indians were dismissed for a paltry 190 in their first innings at the Oval, he had a delightful summer.

I told him that I thought there were probably plenty of other cricket enthusiasts who would wish that they had done likewise. But I also reminded him that the Australians are coming next year. And that no stout Englishman could even dream of supporting *them.*

Incidentally, that conversation with Darley Anderson reminded me of a momentous gaffe I made a few years ago. It was the last time the West Indians were here and for weeks before they arrived I was involved in the preparation of a book that needed some rather complicated editing and setting. These complications necessitated my spending an hour or so a day on the telephone to the publishers in London. While chatting to my editor there I found out that she shared my passion for cricket.

The crunch came when, the day after the West Indian team had landed, I laughingly suggested that we would be able to thrash them without too much difficulty. I made some uncomplimentary remarks about their team.

There was a horrible silence from the other end of the telephone and then the editor spoke.

‘We haven’t met, have we?’ she reminded me in an unusually quiet voice.

I agreed that we had not.

‘I’m West Indian,’ she told me.

Thursday 6th September

I spent the day watching cricket at a ground that shall be nameless. The cricket was soothing but forgettable. There was, however, one memorable moment. The ladies’ lavatory had been closed for alterations and a chalked sign on a large blackboard explained this fact to all unfortunate would-be customers. ‘Temporarily shut for improvements.’ read the sign. ‘We apologise for the inconvenience.’

I thought it as fine a piece of official graffiti as I have seen for a long, long time.

Friday 7th September

I dreamt of Mr Hews last night. And his cricket club at Brompton Ralph. This morning I telephoned my mother and got her to check round all our relatives. I wanted to be absolutely sure that I do not have any sixth cousins hidden around the country who own cricket clubs.

Do you know, I think I would rather own my own cricket club than play for England.

Saturday 8th September

I travelled to Manchester today to play in a friendly game against a team which consists of a real mixture of local enthusiasts. They enjoy their cricket a great deal are captained by a remarkable fellow who has a sense of humour and lives in a terraced house called Dun Stumpin.

A few minutes before the match started, the captain of the opposing team came into our dressing room and asked us to try to let their number four batsman score one or two runs.

‘It does not have to be anything too much,’ said the captain quietly, ‘but if you could let him get to ten or so that would probably be enough.’

Now in the sort of matches where I play most of my cricket that sort of request is by no means unusual. If a fellow needs another ten runs to get his hundred for the season or if it is a chap’s birthday and he has not scored a run all year then there will often be a quiet word in the dressing room beforehand. The aim of the game is after all, to give everyone some fun and a little pleasure.

So we were not too surprised.

Our captain asked him what the occasion was.

‘Well, it isn’t actually a special occasion,’ said the home captain with some slight embarrassment. ‘We try to give him a few runs every week.’

There was a murmuring of protest from our bowlers.

‘That’s not on,’ protested our captain. ‘Can’t do that.’ I’ll swear he almost said ‘It’s not cricket.’ He seemed quite offended by the suggestion.

And then the home captain explained just why he was asking for what sounded like an outrageous favour.

It seemed that the batsman in question had sporting ambitions and aspirations which far outweighed his natural skills. But that, although his abilities with the cricket bat were strictly limited, he had a tremendous flair for making money, and a remarkably generous nature.

'Let him get a few runs,' said the home captain, 'and he'll be so pleased with himself that he'll pay the bar bill for the evening.'

'The whole bar bill?' asked our captain.

Their captain nodded.

'Are you sure ten runs is enough?' asked our fast bowler.

It was a good day's cricket, much enjoyed by everyone. Their number four got his ten runs. And the rest of us had free drinks for the evening.

It is good to know that they have their priorities right up in Manchester.

Sunday 9th September

With the English cricket season more or less over, cricket lovers all over the country will now spend the next few months arguing about the composition of the England touring party for the coming winter.

After the team's disastrous summer I cannot help thinking that perhaps the time has come to revolutionise the selection process. Instead of allowing a small group of ex-professional cricketers to pick our representative side, why do we not introduce a more democratic system?

We could, for example, allow all cricket club members to offer their own suggestions for the touring party with the MCC then using its computer to sort out the most popular team. To avoid the embarrassment of setting off without a wicket-keeper, voters could be instructed to select, say, six batsmen, two wicket keepers, two all rounders and six bowlers. The computer could then pick the six batsmen who attracted the greatest number of votes, the two wicket keepers who attracted the most votes and so on.

It might not ensure a winning team but it would, at least, allow us all to share in the selection process. And that would inevitably remove some of the frustration inherent in the present system.

Monday 10th September

It occurred to me today that it would be possible to put together a team of young cricketers with good connections; young professionals with relatives who have played the game at the highest level. Here is the team I have selected (there are many more eligible players).

1. R A Smith (Hampshire) brother of Chris Smith
2. I P Butcher (Leicester) brother of A R Butcher
3. G S Cowdrey (Kent) son of Colin Cowdrey
4. J P Steel (Glamorgan) brother of D S Steel
5. I A Gregg (Sussex) brother of Tony Gregg|
6. D B D'Oliveira (Worcs) son of Basil D'Oliveira
7. R J Parks (Hampshire) son of Jim Parks
8. A J Stewart (Surrey) son of M J Stewart
9. J D Carr (Middlesex) son of J D Carr
10. D A Graveney (Glos) son of J K Graveney
11. S J Dennis (Yorkshire) nephew of Sir Len Hutton
12. T M Hemlett (Hampshire) son of M E Hemlett

Incidentally, while sorting out that team I started looking at brothers currently playing first class cricket. I found five sets of brothers around the counties: K D Smith and P A Smith (both of Warwickshire), R A Smith and C I Smith (both of Hampshire), J F Steele of Leicestershire and D S Steele of Northants, A P Wells and C M Wells (both of Sussex), and I P Butcher of Leicestershire whose brother A R Butcher plays for Surrey. There may well be more.

Tuesday 11th September

I could not help feeling desperately sorry for Nottinghamshire today. To lose a one-day final by a few runs must be bad enough but to lose the County Championship by such a small margin must be quite unforgettably awful. However, I do feel that Keith Fletcher deserves the success he has had this season. For several years now he has been the best county captain in England and adding the County Championship to the John Player League title seems to prove that quite conclusively.

As I wrote earlier in the season, I would like to see him captaining England this winter.

Wednesday 12th September

So, this is it. The season is over yet again. There are one or two village matches to watch and I have no doubt that we shall play a few more games in the garden. But for the professionals the season is well and truly finished and we must now wait for England to arrive in India and for the West Indians to arrive in Australia. I shall watch the success of Clive Lloyd’s team down in Australia with almost as much interest as I watch David Gower’s team in India. It will be some slight comfort if the West Indians can blackwash the Australians too.

Meanwhile, I have packed away my thermos flask and my drinking mug. And made a note to have another go at mending my binoculars.

1984 Season
Title Holders

Britannic Assurance County Championship:
Essex

John Player special League Trophy:
Essex

Benson & Hedges Cup:
Lancashire

National Westminster Cup:
Middlesex

We hope you enjoyed this book. If so we would be grateful if you would post a favourable review on Amazon.

Dr Vernon Coleman is a qualified doctor and professional author who has written over 100 books; these have sold more than two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK alone. His books have been translated into 25 languages and sold around the world. Many books by Vernon Coleman are available as Kindle books on Amazon. His bestselling cricket books available as Kindle books include *The Village Cricket Tour, Around the Wicket* and *Thomas Winsden's Cricketing Almanack*. For more details of available books please see his author page on Amazon and for more about Vernon Coleman please visit http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

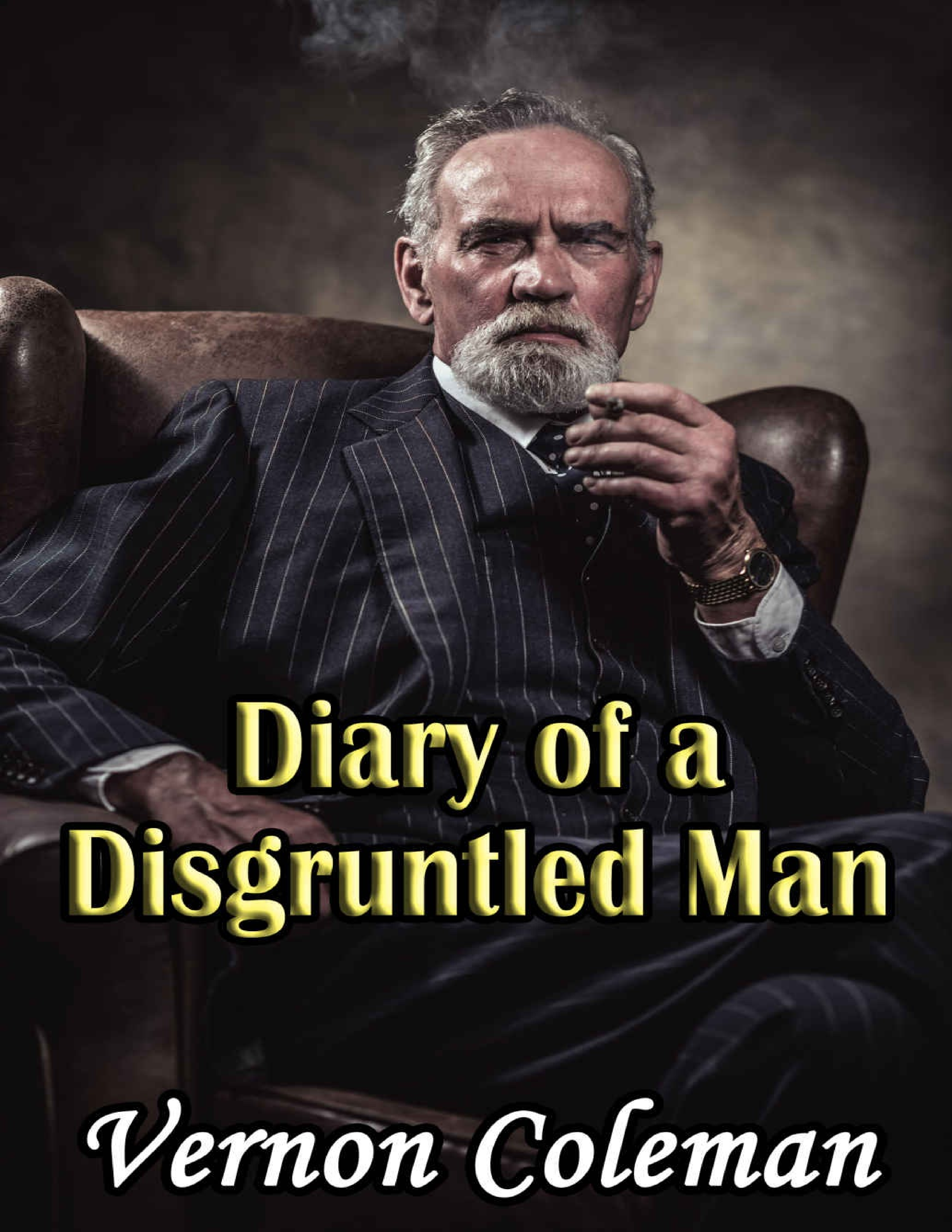

Diary of a Disgruntled Man

Vernon Coleman

Diary of a Disgruntled Man

Vernon Coleman

Dedication

To Donna Antoinette, The Princess

Always in my heart, always on my mind
I will always be by your side
And always on your side
You will never be alone
Because we will always be together

Boring Bit For Lawyers

These days, most books include disclaimers in which the authors apologetically warn readers that they should not rely on any information their books contain, and nor should they follow any of the advice they may find within. I certainly do not recommend that any reader makes any decisions of any kind based on any of the absurd ramblings in this book.

Disclaimers invariably go on to insist that readers who rely on anything in the book they are reading do so at their own risk. These warnings are included because the world is now full of lawyers and litigants who, under the often misguided impression that there might be money to be made, will leap at every opportunity to gouge lolly out of anyone who can be blamed for fate's little tricks. And so, as author and publisher, I feel that I must follow fashion and warn readers that if they act on any of the facts in this book, or decide to follow any of the advice, they do so entirely at their own risk. I advise readers to treat facts with disdain. I recommend that advice and opinions should be disregarded or treated with great suspicion. Any reader who believes the facts in this book, or follows advice the book contains, does so entirely at their own risk. Moreover, I would also like to make it clear that books can be dangerous objects and should not be dropped, thrown or otherwise projected into areas where people or delicate objects might be damaged. In other words, dear reader, drop your reading device onto your toes and you're on your own.

Preface

Welcome to my life, my world; the good and the bad; the ups and the downs; one year's supply of the inside of my head; my joys and my sadnesses; my everything.

There are two types of diary: the one you keep to tell you where you are due to be and when, together with a brief summary of whom you met and what you did. This is the sort of diary produced by authors who want to tell the reader about all the celebrities they've met. You know the sort I mean. `I met A at the Ivy. He ordered the pickled lobster and told me about his experiences duck shooting at Lord B's place in Norfolk. We waved to C and D who were sitting at the next table and afterwards had drinkies at the Groucho Club.'

Any controversy is carefully designed to titillate but not to annoy people in power and such diaries generally consist of long lists of dates, lunches, dinners and parties. `I met Simon Cowell at the studios today. We compared notes on cars and I found out that his new Bentley is equipped with a gym and an Olympic sized swimming pool.' If they contain enough gossipy bits, are indiscreet, and give away enough secrets, they get serialised in the popular papers. I think these diaries are tedious, though they sell well and are clearly popular with large numbers of readers. And then there is the diary in which the writer keeps a private note of what he thought and felt as life alternately treated him and then kicked him in the goolies, as it does with relentless efficiency. Why? Well, why did Pepys keep his diary? Why did Kilvert make the effort? It seemed a good idea at the time is probably the best explanation.

This is the second sort of diary. It would be disingenuous to claim that this book was written for me alone. I am, after all, a professional writer. But it was started for my own benefit. I wanted to assess my life at what was clearly a professional crossroads; and to obtain some insight into my own life as a publisher and author. The book is about real incidents. This is my life. As I wrote it, I gradually realised that it might be of interest to those readers who are kind enough to read my books.

When Rousseau wrote his Confessions he argued that a writer should tell the truth all the time. If people are upset then so be it. Hemingway believed that to write well all you had to do was to write truthfully. Mark Twain and Charles Dickens wrote with rare honesty about their travels, adventures, successes and failures.

It is only an adventure to read someone's diary if it was not written (self-consciously) to be read by others. This wasn't. I started writing it because I realised I was starting to forget where I'd been and what I'd done. And why. I continued writing it because I found it cathartic and enjoyable. The book contains events, thoughts, accidents, appreciations, incidents, disasters and consequences.

What follows is a sometimes painfully sad, always honest account of one year in my life. I hope to heaven that bits of it are funny. It's an autobiography, a social commentary on life in the 21st century, a commonplace book, a guidebook describing one man’s battle to survive in a world where he invariably feels like a stranger. It's a book about publishing and about staying alive in the 21st century. It's a book full of opinions (some of which doubtless mature into rants).

I hope that some people will find some of it amusing. Others may find it comforting. And a few may, I hope, find it offers inspiration. It's an account of what happens in a world where genuinely threatening iconoclastic writing results in genuinely effective bans.

Many diarists, like many travel writers, go out of their way to create incidents and excitement. I have had no need to do that. The incidents and excitements seem to queue up at my door each morning, waiting to pounce. `Let's go round to Vernon Coleman's,' they say to one another. `We can always have some fun there.'

This book has taken more out of me than anything else I've ever written. Maybe that's because I've put more into it.

Vernon Coleman
April 2011

Note 1. Any proceeds from the sale of this book will go to the author.

Note 2. Many thousands of verbs, nouns, pronouns, adverbs, adjectives, etc. were used in the preparation of this book. All were acquired without any damage being done to the environment. They are used with permission of the appropriate authorities.

January

1

11.50 a.m.

A few months ago I saw an advertisement from MI5. They were looking for a new Chief Scientific Advisor. I couldn't resist it. I obtained an application form and filled it in. It was all terribly casual though they did tell me I shouldn't tell anyone I'd applied. I sent in an e-mail request for a form and it occurred to me afterwards that the people at MI5 who routinely read my e-mails must have had something close to a fit when they saw it.

When I told The Princess I had applied for a job at MI5 she misheard and wanted to know why I'd applied for a job with a furniture superstore. `There are two things I don't understand,' she said. `Why do you want a job with MFI and why can't I tell anyone?' I told her I couldn't answer either question.

When the form arrived I filled it in very neatly. I gave them the Post Box address, of course. Either they know where we really live (in which case they don't need to be told) or they don't (in which case I'm not going to tell them and they're so incompetent that they don't deserve to know anyway). On the form they seemed more concerned about whether I had any disabilities than anything else. They asked three times and in the end, because I felt that I wasn't likely to be taken seriously unless I could tell them about some disablement, I made something up. I can't remember what it was now so if anyone ever finds the form and asks me about it I'll be in a tricky position.

Going through my accumulated e-mails I see that I haven't got the job.

I wasn't terribly disappointed or surprised.

The Princess said she wondered if it was because they thought I was too old and asked if I thought I should take them to an industrial tribunal. The thought did appeal but somehow I expect I'll forget about it and never get round to doing anything. It would be a jolly wheeze, though.

It did occur to me this afternoon that if they had any sense they would have hired me. A bit of imagination and lateral thinking wouldn't have done them any harm.

2.35 p.m.

One of the biggest advantages of self-publishing is that I have direct contact with my readers.

When I first started out as a writer I quickly realised that although I really only wanted to write books that I wanted to write I would then have to `sell' those books to a whole host of people who might want entirely different books.

First, an agent has to be convinced that a publisher might like a book. Then a publisher has to be convinced that wholesalers will like the book. Then wholesalers have to be convinced that bookshops will like the book. And then bookshops have to be convinced that members of the public will like the book. Finally, book-buyers have to be persuaded that they might like to read the book.

That's an awful lot of convincing that has to be done. And it means that there are a lot of barriers between what the author wants to write and what the reader wants to read. Agents don't really care about readers. They only care about what publishers want. And publishers want what their marketing people think will sell to the wholesalers. The whole chain is littered with faults because most of the people with the power to say `yes' or `no' to a book don't know anything much about books or readers. It is a simple fact that most of the people with the power to decide what books will be published never buy books at all. Most of them never actually *read* any books.

I've always followed a simple philosophy for writing books. I don't believe it is possible to know what readers will really like. And even if I did know what readers wanted I don't think I could write like that. I have to make my books true to my dreams, I have to be able to write with passion and purpose. I believe that my system gives me as good a chance of producing a commercially successful book as any other. And I know that whatever happens at least I will like the book. If I write a book just to please a marketing team there's a real chance that no one at all will like the result. Books are best when they are written because the author wanted (needed) to write them rather than because some marketing man, after consulting a committee of supermarket buyers, advised some editorial pimp to commission a book.

My first agent, one of the most powerful and successful agents in London, constantly told me that I had to prepare outlines for publishers' eyes and that I had to think of the marketing department rather than the editorial department. What she perhaps didn't realise was that marketing departments are totally unimaginative. They only ever look for books that are similar to books that have already been successful.

I felt that I was being separated from my readers by masses of people - mostly parasites - who didn't understand anything about books and who certainly didn't know what people wanted to read.

Self-publishing enables the author to cut out all these parasitic middlemen.

2
09.55 a.m.
I am thoroughly fed up with Amazon. Months after the book was published our webshop, which is run by Amazon, is still offering *Cat Tales* with no picture and no availability. Other dealers are offering second-hand copies of the book at £38.50 and £32.25 but we don't earn a penny out of that. I have racks of the book stocked up in the Publishing House warehouse which I would be delighted to sell for £12.99. I despair of Amazon. Lots of my books are listed as unavailable when there are plentiful stocks just sitting on shelves waiting to go to good homes. We are going to have to abandon webshop sales and go back to good old-fashioned cheques through the post.

12.25 p.m.
A mailing company we have used for some time this morning returned several boxes of catalogues which were left unused from a 2008 mailing. I am appalled that a mailing house should keep over 6,000 time sensitive catalogues sitting in a warehouse. The catalogues are, of course, now entirely useless and have to be thrown away.

3
23.15 p.m.
The Princess and I don't go to parties, dinners or social events of any type but today we went to a neighbours' home for drinks. We got suckered into it in such a way that it was impossible to say `no' without being rude. While The Princess talked to an elderly lady, who is an expert on compost, I met a man who, when he had asked me what I did for a living, said that it is his intention to write books when he retires in three years time. He was well oiled but not quite at the falling over stage. He said he thought he might write novels and biographies and that it didn't matter whether he earned any money from it because he had a good pension to look forward to. I asked him what he did for a living. He said he ran a gas appliance showroom. I said wasn't it funny but it was my intention to run a gas appliance showroom in my spare time when I retire. He indignantly said it would not be possible because his job requires a good deal of knowledge and training and skill and other things he didn't go into but expressed with an airy wave of the hand. I said I felt sure I could do it and that I thought it would actually be very easy. I said I might manage several showrooms and would be happy to do it for very little money. He got very red faced, spluttered and said that if I did I would be putting trained men out of work. He then stalked off in a huff. A few moments later The Princess came over, told me I'd upset one of the other guests and said that she thought we should leave so we left.

4
22.45 p.m.
The Princess and I took down the Christmas decorations and found ourselves with a dozen superfluous balloons. We didn't want to burst them so we waited until dark, tied the balloons to a long piece of string and then fastened the whole lot to an ornament in a nearby garden which we felt would benefit from a touch of colour. Afterwards, as we skipped home vainly hoping that no one had noticed us, we felt like kids.

Tying balloons to a neighbours' garden sculpture undoubtedly contravenes the Public Balloon Act (1999) but it gave us a few moments of laughter and fun. And these are qualities that are far too rare these days.

The male owner is a rather stern and humourless fellow who does something very important at the local town hall.

5
9.22 a.m.
Another television licence fee reminder came today. I loathe the rancid licence fee collection people almost as much as I loathe the BBC, our State media monolith.

Most folk in the media live in a world where reality and truth are merely occasional visitors but those working for the BBC inhabit a world where these two are complete strangers; the BBC is an organisation which doesn't even reach the heights of telling half-truths. It is a home for hypocritical media masses who live by their own corporate code of political correctness but do nothing about the corporation's suppression of the truth. The BBC appears to be a safe haven for aggressive women and chippy homosexuals; it seems dominated by self-serving, complacent, snooty, unimaginative individuals whose religion is multiculturalism and political correctness and whose daily lives are spent sucking up to the establishment which feeds them riches. The BBC is so far to the left that if the world were flat it would have long ago toppled over the edge; it is a loathsome imperial organisation where vulgarity, ignorance and prejudice are regarded as employment requirements and worn as badges of honour.

The BBC used to be gutsy and used to employ people who cared, who had courage and integrity; today its employees have become so accustomed to politicising news reports that I don't think they are aware that they are doing it. Vast numbers of people who work for the BBC are foreign, in origin or temperament, and have no interest at all in England or its history. Many (both imported and home-grown) are England-haters and regard England and its history as offensive. They sneer at England, Englishness and English virtues. (They dare not sneer at Scotland or Wales, of course.)

The BBC has bred interviewers who are like school prefects; they are establishment through and through, careful never to venture into areas which might cause distress in high places. They have no sympathy for, or understanding of, the principles of free speech or free enterprise; they despise genuine entrepreneurs and real heroes.

I confess I find it amusing when BBC interviewers are occasionally described as `iconoclasts'. The BBC would not employ an iconoclast if they received an EU grant to take him in. The BBC is staffed with establishment lackeys. In my quite extensive experience the people who work for the BBC are, by and large, a bunch of unoriginal, sanctimonious, hypocritical, self-righteous nonentities who wallow in the security of each other’s company but couldn't really do anything creative or useful outside the safety of the corporation. The BBC is the ultimate mother corporation.

It is no exaggeration to say that the BBC is packed with racists (anti-English) fascists (pro-EU) and statists (supporters of the Government). The important issues are carefully avoided. To my knowledge the BBC has never investigated, researched, discussed or made programmes questioning the European Union, the value of genetic engineering, the truth about climate change, the safety and effectiveness of vaccination or the usefulness (or otherwise) of vivisection. There is an in-house determination to take sides in advance and an inbuilt refusal to allow licence payers to discuss important issues openly and fairly. Many of the people working for, or appearing on, the BBC are bigoted fools; as ideologically bent as paperclips. As a result, most editorial decisions are bent and, since we don't know which programmes are a direct result of prejudice, we have to assume that the whole damned service is bent. Like most people in the media, BBC staff seems to disapprove of anyone who stirs things up, asks difficult questions of important people, or threatens the status quo. Most BBC employees are reactionary and unquestioning people who don't like anyone who does anything different or unusual unless whatever they do can be ignored or laughed off as harmless eccentricity.

Instead of using its vast wealth, gouged from unwilling taxpayers, to make useful programmes, the sponsored BBC uses its money to make *Eastenders*, arguably the greatest cause of misery, violence and elementary dissatisfaction in the country. And their attempts to make programmes about business or finance result in such superficial claptrap as *The Apprentice* and *Dragons' Den.* (We caught both these programmes once each. The first, we both found utterly appalling and little more than a master class in greed and deceit. The second we found even more disappointing since it consists of smug, self-important, excruciatingly rude people who want to touch the fringes of fame being smug, self-important and excruciatingly rude to decent, hard-working people who are often talented and ambitious but whose only fault was their bad taste and desperation in agreeing to go onto such an appalling programme.)

The real insult is that we are all forced to subsidise this deceitful organisation which bends or suppresses the truth about many of the things we take seriously. Anyone who wants to listen to the radio or watch television in Britain, is forced to pay a licence fee. The fee entitles us all to watch the output of scores of different broadcasters but the Government then gives all the money it collects to the state-owned, state-run broadcaster. To be honest, I suppose we can, therefore, hardly be surprised if the BBC provides a biased view of every issue it touches, although the real problem is perhaps the fact not so much that there is a bias, but that a large percentage of the population does not realise that there is a bias. The BBC has sold itself to us as the broadcasting organisation we can trust most when in fact it is the broadcasting organisation we can trust least. It is alarming that anyone in the country still does believe anything they hear or see on the BBC. Still, I suppose there were people in the USSR who thought Pravda a reliable source of information

The money given to the BBC is collected by a menacing, threatening private organisation which will, if you don't pay up, send people round to your home. The organisation actually has no more right to come into your home than you have to walk into the BBC and sit in the director general's undoubtedly expensive and overstuffed chair but most people don't realise that. If you tell the BBC's debt collectors that you don't have a TV set they will tell you that they are going to come round and check; bluntly calling you a liar.

A friend of mine who is a professional broadcaster for a commercial organisation, and who has never paid the licence fee, long ago advised me not to let the licence fee thugs into my home. `Don't even answer the door. You do not have to let the BBC's representatives into your house. They can only come in if they have managed to persuade a magistrate to give them a court order and if they are then accompanied by a policeman. And they can only get a court order if they can convince the magistrate that you have a television set which is connected to an aerial and being used and that you don't have a licence and that you are watching programmes live and not just watching recordings.'

My guess is that the vast majority of hapless souls who do get fined are tricked or bullied by people collecting money for the State's official mouthpiece. Prosecutions of licence fee evaders undertaken by the courts on behalf of the BBC represent at least 10% of all prosecutions of all kinds.

Occasionally, brave souls make a public stand against the BBC arguing, not unreasonably in my view, that the BBC is in breach of its charter. This never works, however, because there is no justice in Britain these days and the courts always side with the official Government broadcaster.

When a viewer who didn't want to pay the licence fee complained that the BBC had repeatedly supported the European Union in its broadcasts, had failed to investigate the lack of EU audited accounts for over a decade and had taken £141 million from the EU and suggested that the organisation had broken its contract under the Royal Charter, he was taken to court and fined £240 plus £60 costs and £15 victims' surcharge (presumably the BBC felt hurt and needed the money to put towards a bottle of celebratory champagne).

The authors of the American constitution understood that letting the Government choose what (and what not) to publish is a very bad idea and unacceptable in a democracy. I believe that Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson got this right: any public funding of the media is a bad thing because it is the middleman (the Government) and not the cheque writer (the public) who plays the part of piper and therefore calls the tune. (It is the same with the health service.) A state broadcasting organisation which is sustained by a tax on the citizens but which gives its loyalty not to its employers (the licence payers) but to the Government and is, inevitably, staffed by government whores, is not to be relied upon.

I regularly receive letters complaining about the BBC. A growing number of people are fed up with being forced to pay a licence fee to the Bent Broadcasting Corporation, a propaganda organisation which many now consider to be a major threat to our freedom and democracy. P.G. Wodehouse, who knew a good deal about such things, and had a great sense of taste, described the BBC as a loathsome institution. Since his day things have got considerably worse. We have been betrayed by the BBC. In my view, the single biggest crime of this statist broadcaster has been to support the EU so enthusiastically and uncritically.

Still, the good news is that the television licence is an outdated and absurd concept. The BBC is going to find it increasingly difficult to work in a world where many people watch and listen on computers and mobile telephones.

I tossed my television licence fee reminder onto the fire where it burnt nicely and helped keep us warm for 0.17 seconds.

15.57 p.m.

Our balloons have, sadly, disappeared already from our neighbours' house. The Princess was coming back from the postbox this afternoon when she saw a council truck parked outside the house where we had left the balloons attached to an ornament. The owner of the house had clearly sent two council workmen round to untie the string and take the balloons away. It was, presumably, far too complicated and dangerous a task for an executive to perform. Mind you, he and his wife do manage to cut their lawn by themselves so they aren't entirely useless. Last summer we could not believe our eyes when we walked past and saw Mrs Council Official on her hands and knees. She was cutting a particularly tricky piece of lawn edging with a pair of kitchen scissors. She was wearing yellow rubber gloves. Her husband was standing next to her giving her instructions. If I hadn't seen it myself, I don't think I would have believed it. If it snows The Princess and I are going to go out in the middle of the night to build a huge snow wall across the end of their drive.

18.32 p.m.

The nation has come to a grinding halt because of snow. Our chances of making any profit this month are devastated because the Royal Mail is unable to move post around the country. We have become a very wimpy nation. When I was small I remember my father leaning out of our bathroom window and pouring hot water from a kettle onto the downpipes so that we could have a morning wash. I remember seeing beautiful Jack Frost ice patterns on our windowpanes. On the inside! These days, even asylum seekers and the homeless demand central heating as a right. When I was at medical school I lived in a flat where the only heat came from a tiny gas fire. It was frequently colder indoors than outdoors. In the winter of my final year, when I had to go to different hospitals all over Birmingham, I remember brushing a foot of snow off the saddle of my moped before riding from one hospital to another.

20.10 p.m.

Publishing is in a gloomy state. I spent much of today taking a cold, hard look at the economics of the business I seem to be in.

Bookshops and wholesalers want up to 45% of the retail price. So, assume a book sells for £10. And assume you've allowed the wholesaler or shop to take the 45% they want. (Big publishers frequently give more than that to get the business.) The wholesaler or retailer will pay £5.50. But the £5.50 isn't normally paid straight away. Shops and wholesalers expect 60 or 90 days credit and so it may be paid two or three months down the line. Or it may never be paid at all. The increasing number of bad debts which result from bookshops going broke mean that the £5.50 becomes £5 at best. And having to send regular statements in order to gouge the money out of the shop costs more money.

Shops and wholesalers expect books to be sent out post free. It costs on average between £2 and £3 to post a single book. Say £2.50 as an average. Larger quantities are slightly cheaper to post but still expensive now that Royal Mail is trying to turn itself into a profitable giant. The cost of packing materials (cardboard and padded bags) adds at least another 50 pence to the cost. The cost of having someone to turn the book into a parcel, prepare a label and stick the label onto the parcel has to be accounted for but is at least another 50 pence a book. So it's not unreasonable to assume that the overall posting cost is £3.50 per book. And remember, the bookshop or wholesaler expects the publisher to pay the cost of postage. Ordinary book buyers expect to pay extra towards the cost of postage and packing. Bookshops and wholesalers do not. When books are damaged or go missing (much commoner than you might imagine) Royal Mail will only refund the cost of printing the book - which is not, of course, the true cost to the publisher. Attempts to make them understand the economics of publishing have failed miserably. This policy, and the resultant losses, means that the overall posting cost is closer to £4 per book.

So, for a £10 book the shop will take £4.50 and posting will take £4. The average hardback book, with a print run of at least 1,000, costs around £4 to print. Jackets cost more. Transporting huge piles of books around the country costs a small fortune. Large or illustrated books cost considerably more to print. And the soaring price of paper means that printing costs are rising almost daily. And on top of all this must be added the cost of maintaining and heating premises, paying staff and allowing them to have holidays, maternity leave and so on. Paying the local authority, having rubbish taken away, having fire extinguishers serviced, having electrical appliances checked annually, paying insurance - oh, boy, the expenses all mount up.

In the old, sensible days, publishers would price their books at five times the cost of actually making the book. And so a book that cost £2 to make would cost £10 in the shops and a book that cost £5 to make would cost £25 in the shops. Those were the sort of prices that were charged a decade ago. (My book *Alice's Diary* has been on sale for over 20 years. When it was first published in 1990 the price was £8.99. Today the price is £9.99.) But competition from supermarkets and the Internet has resulted in book prices being slashed. Margins are wafer thin; sustainable only by big publishers who can publish international co-editions.

Just to make all this even crazier, bookshops and wholesalers will often return books if they don't sell them in a month or so. So, unless sales are `firm' there's a risk that the books will come bounding back unsold and the bookseller or wholesaler will demand a credit. Bookshop returns can be devastating. You think your stock levels are down to 100 and then suddenly, without any warning, 500 books which you think you had sold, come back and so now you have 600 books in stock and the extra 1,000 that you have just ordered aren't necessary. Returns can destroy a small publishing business.

Where does this leave Publishing House?

Well, it leaves us with £10 coming in and £12.50 going out before the costs of staff and premises have been paid for. Naturally, there are no royalties for the author or profits for the publisher.

In other words, selling books through bookshops and wholesalers is a disaster unless you can persuade the shop or wholesaler to take a much smaller cut of the price. Or unless you can charge more for the book. If the book retails for £20 then things work tolerably well because the cost of postage (which is, today, the deadly catch as far as small publishers are concerned) is a much smaller percentage of the total. If you can sell enough books (and judge your print run carefully so that there aren't masses of books remaining unsold) there may even be some money left out of which to pay taxes to the Government, royalties to the author, bonuses to staff and (speak it softly) profits for the publisher.

I am going to have to spend some time this year restructuring my publishing business. Many publishers are now, like big newspapers, `vanity publishers' in everything but name. They lose money on book sales but hope to make some profit out of the serialisations, the film rights, the overseas translation rights and so on. Book publishers have become conglomerates, with subsidiaries all over the world, so that they can cut costs through making deals. There are very, very few small independent publishers making a profit these days. Many of those who do make a profit do so because they have been lucky with a single, often unexpected, bestseller. I doubt if there are many (if any) other authors making a living out of publishing their own work. I am determined to continue writing, publishing and making a living.

6
10.34 a.m.

I don't read newspapers much any more. They are full of nonsense and frippery, prejudice and bigotry and are mostly composed of press releases. This morning I succumbed and spent half an hour skimming a bundle of daily papers. The American Government now thinks that Osama bin Laden is in Pakistan. It is good to know that after eight years of hunting, bombing and killing they are getting closer to knowing which country he is in. Years ago I seem to remember that they and we invaded Afghanistan because he was supposed to be there. Now they know he's not there. And we're still at war.

I see that enterprising thieves have stolen £1 million from HMRC by hacking into the taxman's computer and granting themselves tax rebates. I know I should frown at this but it's difficult not to be amused by it.

And there is news that Americans are excitedly buying a popular new computer game in which players must either convert or kill non-Christians. (The implication seems to be that the non-Christians are Muslims.) I wonder if Americans will be so thrilled when Muslims produce a computer game in which players must either convert or kill non-Muslims. I suspect not. And I can't even begin to imagine the response of the pro-Zionism lobby when someone produces a computer game in which players must either convert or kill Jews.

Through ill-based arrogance, the Americans have broken all the elements of any code of civilised conduct just as they have broken all the rules of war. There is no code and there are no rules. Obama, the former hope of liberal America but now, predictably, a constant source of deceits and disappointments, has continued in the modern American tradition of broken down imperialism, driven by nothing more glorious than self-interest and greed.

Finally, I read an obituary of Franco Corelli the tenor. What a wonderful man he was. When someone booed him during a performance of *Il Trovatore* in Naples he leapt off the stage and ran up three flights of stairs to throw himself on his tormentor. An appearance in *Don Carlos* with Boris Christoff ended prematurely when the two men, using stage swords, actually tried to kill each other in the auto da fe scene. Corelli was one of the world's leading tenors in the 1960s and 1970s. He was, however, a man constantly in need of reassurance. After performing, he listened to a tape of his entire performance just to make sure that his voice was still there.

18.45 p.m.

I watched a little television news this afternoon and spotted a good example of news manipulation and bias that most viewers would probably never notice (not least because most people watch only one channel). Sky news ran a 20-minute item on the leadership challenge to Gordon Brown and then ran a small item on the snow. The BBC, by contrast, ran 20 minutes on the weather and then a short item on the Gordon Brown challenge. The item about Brown started with him having a rare good moment against David Cameron in that day centre for thieves, the House of Commons.

There is an argument that `real' history is what we remember and what influences our lives; it may or may not be true in reality, in terms of facts, but in real life facts in themselves are of far less significance than myths, and perception is more important than reality. The problem today is that what we think of as news is too often nothing more than propaganda because it has been changed - both factually and in emphasis - by people who have a vested interest to protect. Everyone knows that it is terribly easy to alter photographs and tape recordings but the real danger comes from far more subtle changes. Television companies present as news only those items for which they have film footage, and therefore what we see on television tends to be what someone wants us to see. Interviews on TV can be edited to give a view that fits the prejudices of the editor or his bosses. And the same thing is true of newspapers. I remember a friend of mine, who worked as an editor on a national newspaper, telling me that he was in a `story conference' (where the editors sit and discuss what items will be where in the following morning's paper) when a news story about a vicar came up. One of the other editors wanted to make the vicar a hero. (I can't remember what he had done and it doesn't really matter.) But the paper's editor-in-chief wasn't interested. `We already have a hero story,' he said, drawing attention to another story planned for the paper. `We need a villain piece. Write it that way.' And so the vicar, who had so nearly become a hero, became a villain and instead of receiving applause and medals his life was ruined. What he had done hadn't changed at all. It was the perception, not the reality, that changed. But as far as the readers were concerned the perception became the reality. He was turned from a would-be hero to tomorrow morning's villain. In our news-rich society, truth and facts are ultimately of far less significance than widely appreciated myths, images and perceived truths. A widely believed falsehood is more powerful and relevant than a little known truth. Many of these myths affect our lives in numerous, significant ways. Sometimes journalists propagate myths through ignorance and gullibility rather than wickedness or carelessness. For example, science and medicine have given us many false beliefs. Usually there is a reason (the doctors or scientists promoting the myth have a hidden agenda or represent someone who has a hidden agenda) but the myth is reproduced and publicised by journalists who don't have enough knowledge to tell the truth, who trust too much and who have no incentive to work hard and attempt to find the truth. Everything is propaganda. Perhaps it was always thus.

23.15 p.m.
We have built a snow wall across our neighbours' driveway.

7
11.05 a.m.
I have a serious book buying problem. I can hardly leave the house without returning with an armful of books. On average, I buy 20 to 30 books each week, every week. I buy new books, I buy rare books and I buy old, scuffed second-hand books. I live in a world dominated by books. I write them, I read them and I collect them. I have several thousand books on my 'to read' bookcases. Trying to sort through a pile of books today I found that I have recently bought three copies of Colin Wilson's *The Outsider* (which I have been meaning to re-read for 30 years), two copies of the same Joyce Carey novel and no less than four copies of Hesketh Pearson's *Smith of Smiths*. If I live a long time and don't buy any more books I might just read the ones I have already bought. Nothing in the world gives so much sustained delight, for so little outlay, as a book. I find books in the most unlikely places. Today, I found a collection of old hardbacks and paperbacks for sale in a local corner shop which specialises in selling an eclectic mixture of bread, milk, sweets, cigarettes and kindling. The owners buy their food stock from their local Tesco supermarket. They shop at night, when the supermarket is quietest, and fill the boot and back seat of their car with groceries. Most of the books they had for sale were Mills and Boon romances which I would read if I were stuck in a country house hotel with nothing else to amuse me but would not buy from choice, but I did find a copy of Elliot Paul's classic *Springtime in Paris* which I bought for 20 pence. I don't think there was anything else in the shop so modestly priced. It was a first edition but I didn't buy it because of that.

I don't go to high street bookshops such as Waterstones much any more. This is, I confess, mainly because they won't carry stock of my books and I find it painful to look around and see shelf upon shelf of books by television celebrities. Neither they nor W.H.Smith carry many books I want to read. The chain stores seem to specialise in selling cookery books or books by or about reality television participants (I find it hard to call them celebrities). There isn't much chance of finding anything by Evelyn Waugh, Hilaire Belloc, Charles McCarry, Ross Thomas or Lawrence Block or even Charles Dickens, P.G.Wodehouse or Graham Greene. I like hunting for old books that I missed the first time round (or that were published long before I started reading). Given a choice I prefer the old small format orange Penguins and Tauchnitz editions because they fit more comfortably into a jacket pocket. Why are the new Penguin classic novels issued in editions that seem nearly twice the size of the old ones? They cost more to print. They cost more to post. And they don't fit easily into hand or pocket. And I buy smaller format old hardbacks for the same reason.

12.21 p.m.
We were standing at a kerb waiting to cross the road in very heavy traffic. The Princess always freezes in situations like this - and the moment is then lost - so I usually grab her hand and yell `Go!'. When I did this today nine other people all waiting to cross the road ran with us. Two laughed, one looked peeved that she had obeyed so quickly and two said thank you.

16.10 p.m.
We have been trying for some time to decide what to do with my parents' ashes. We looked at one or two cemeteries but decided that they were soulless and depressing. Last night, at last, we decided what to do. We mixed their ashes together in a stout paper bag and took them to the beach at Budleigh Salterton where they lived for many happy years. I made a large hole in the bottom of the paper bag and then walked about at the water line, spreading the ashes on the beach. When the paper bag was nearly empty, I put some stones into it and threw it into the sea. There were still some ashes left in it and I wasn't going to put them into a rubbish bin. The wind was coming off the sea and some of the ashes flew back into my hair and face. I didn't mind the ashen embrace. I got closer to my parents in death than I had in life. I did think of asking the council's Sprinkling Human Ashes on the Beach Department for permission to sprinkle ashes on the beach but decided not to bother. I was worried that they would probably say `no' even though there are really no rules about distributing ashes in places where they aren't going to get into the food chain. Come to think of it, I suppose there's a vague risk that a millionth part of my parents might end up in a fish.

21.18 p.m.
I see that company directors at 100 of the biggest companies in the UK each spend an average of 25 days a year doing work for the companies which pay them, often handsomely. It is nice of them to spare so much time from grouse shooting, Wimbledon, Twickenham, the Polo and their annual trip to Davos. Talking of Davos I see that

there are the usual calls for more women at Davos for the World Economic Forum. I assume this is because local shops have put pressure on the organisers because not enough spending is being done. The whole damned shindig is just an excuse for a bunch of self-important yahoos to have a good time at our expense. I wonder if any of the people attending pay their own airfares and their own hotel bills. I wouldn't bet on it.

8

11.22 a.m.

This morning I had this conversation in a shoe shop.

`I'm looking for a pair of brown brogues in size 11.' I would have liked to ask for wide fitting shoes, the way I used to be able to do, but I knew that the chances of my being able to walk into a shoe shop and buy size 11 shoes off the shelf with a choice of widths were about as good as finding Tony Blair in a truth telling mood.

The assistant looked like a man overlooked for promotion, years of bitterness had lined his face and left him with a turned down mouth and sulky, resentful eyes. He duly brought a pair of brown brogues in size 11. I tried them on. They were too tight. The assistant, like his colleagues, was wearing headphones and the sort of microphone used by rock and roll singers. I have no idea why. When they wanted to speak to one another they just yelled. Because they were wearing headphones they had to yell quite loudly.

`These are too small,' I protested. `Are you sure they're a size 11?'

`Oh yes,' said the assistant. `But we changed to American sizes recently. Our old size 11 has become a size 12.'

`Fine,' I said, resisting the temptation to ask why he hadn't mentioned this before. `Have you a 12 then please?'

`Oh no, we don't stock 12s. They're not normal.'

`Not normal?'

`No. Sizes 12 and above aren't normal?'

`No.'

`But 11s were normal?'

`Yes.'

`But what was an 11 is now a 12?'

`Yes, that's right. We moved over to American sizes, so our old 11 is now a 12.'

`But 12 is not normal?'

`No.'

`So my feet were big but normal but because you've gone over to American sizes they are now big and abnormal?'

`Yes, that's correct.'

I left.

I will take my old shoes to a cobbler to be repaired.

13.07 p.m.

People who want to have private conversations should have them in private places. Very few do. Most people seem to regard privacy as an optional extra they can do without. Maybe they've just given up. Maybe it’s bravado. Maybe they just don't care. Like most writers I always listen to other people's conversations when they talk loudly enough for me to do so without making any obvious effort. I find I pick up a good deal of material I can use in books. You can learn so much about people by hearing what they say and how they say it. It's eavesdropping, I suppose. But it never makes me feel guilty.

I was standing in the bra section of the lingerie department of a large store. Two elderly women were shopping together. One had picked up and was examining two bras. She had a chest like a pouter pigeon and was the sort of woman for whom the word `embonpoint' was invented. The other woman looked bored and clearly wanted to be somewhere else.

`Why don't you just buy one of those?' asked the bored woman.

`I wanted something a little prettier,' said the one holding the bras. She looked disappointed.

`Why?' asked the bored woman. `No one's going to see it!'

`I'm going to see it,' said the woman with the bras. And the emphasis on the first word was full of pathos and pride and sadness.

15.16 p.m.

My book *Gordon is a Moron* has been banned just about everywhere. Although the book was listed in the *Independent* as one of the top ten political books it was not reviewed anywhere. And adverts have been banned everywhere. It is not considered appropriate to be rude about a Prime Minister who has destroyed England. (He has done very well for Scotland.)

I sent the following letter to all bookshops and ran the letter as a full-page advertisement in *The Bookseller* (described, rather sweetly, as the organ of the book trade).

`One or two of you still don't have copies of Gordon is a Moron on your shelves.

This may be because you disapprove of the title. And if that's the case then I respect your willingness to put your feelings above your desire to make a profit. The title is based on an old Jilted John record but several morons have written to me objecting to the use of the word in relation to Gordon Brown; presumably they feel aggrieved at being linked with the architect of our economic disaster. I understand and, in a way, sympathise with their point of view although I did not mean to disparage morons as a group or intend to compare them to Gordon Brown. I'd probably be pissed off if someone wrote a book called Gordon is a White Male Englishman. Still, it's too late to change the title.

The book may not be on your shelves because the author (me) isn't a celebrity. And that's an inescapable truth. I was the TV AM doctor back in the 80s and I made a series of appalling daytime shows for the BBC when most of you were still at school. The highlight of my career was telling the viewers of The Afternoon Show how much semen the average man produces when he ejaculates. (Not one person complained incidentally but the producer is still in therapy.) Since then I've steadfastly refused to appear on television at all. Of course, you could argue that Gordon Brown is something of a celebrity himself. And the `credit crunch' gets nearly as many column inches as Jordan which presumably gives it some sort of celebrity status. But the plain fact is that this book doesn't fit into the celebrity book genre.

You may not have stocked Gordon is a Moron because you haven't heard of it. And though that's clearly our fault we do have some damned good excuses. Advertisements for the book have been banned by most national newspapers and magazines. Even young Milksop at Private Eye has banned ads for it. As has his predecessor old Ingram at The Oldie. I can understand their point. Gordon hands out the MBEs and I don't. And for much the same reason there haven't been any reviews or promotional interviews and I'm pretty sure there won't be.

The fact is, however, that an awful lot of people in Britain are angry and want to know the truth about the economic crisis. They want to know why and how it happened. And since they don't get any answers from their newspapers or from the TV, they buy Gordon is a Moron. And when they've read it they tell their friends. It's one of those books. Readers tell us they love it because it tells them the truth about what has happened (and is going to happen).

Compared to the latest work from Jordan we haven't sold many but 20,000 at £9.99 isn't bad for a paperback selling entirely by word of mouth. And sales are rising. I know this not because we have computers and things but because the interval between 2,000 print runs is getting shorter and shorter. Small, truly independent publishers notice things like that.

We'd do a hell of a lot better, of course, if a few bookshops actually had the book on display. And I know this isn't the sort of gentlemanly thing to mention but we'd all make tons more money if people wanting to buy the book didn't have to order it or peer inside a friend's copy to find the publisher's address.

So, there you go. Why not go mad and order half a dozen for shelf stock and see what happens?

If you want to stock a book you can be proud to sell and that you won't have to send back in three months, order an armful of Gordon is a Moron by Vernon Coleman.

Yours sincerely

Vernon Coleman

P.S. The title is Gordon is a Moron. The author is Vernon Coleman. The publisher is Blue Books. The price is £9.99. And the ISBN is 978-1-899726-08-0. The wholesalers have stock. P.P.S. I bet if you order some you don't send them back.'

I've now worked out how many copies of *Gordon is a Moron* we sold to bookshops as a result of that letter and advertisement.

None.

Not one.

I should not, I suppose, be surprised. In the only year for which I can find records (2004) our trade sales value was £254,220. But this meant supplying books to 1,840 individual bookshops and wholesalers around the world. Every single order was a result of a customer going into a shop and asking for a book. Not one book was sold from the shelf because no shops carried any of our books on their shelves.

9

11.34 a.m.

The Royal Mail strikes are still having an effect. I had to cancel advertisements during the last lot of strikes. My publishing business is basically a mail order business. When there is no mail the orders cannot come in and the books cannot go out. But the costs continue to mount. No orders in and no books out mean no cheques in. But the staff still have to be paid, the building heated and lit, the council tax paid, the insurance paid, the boiler serviced and so on and so on. It costs around £75 an hour to run Publishing House. And the damage done by a Royal Mail strike lasts for weeks, if not months. The total cost runs into many thousands of pounds. The last set of strikes destroyed our Christmas season and mean that we will make no profit this year. I don't suppose anyone working for Royal Mail gives a damn about this; they are too stupid to realise that destroying the customers is a bad thing for the future of their business.

The problem is that the damage lasts a long time. Advertisements have to be booked weeks, sometimes months, ahead. Whenever there is a strike I have to cancel adverts and mailshots and the effect lasts for months afterwards.

For the postmen the strike itself is quite short-lived. A day here, a day there. (And isn't it odd how many of their strikes result in their having a nice long weekend off work?) Striking probably doesn't cost them much, if anything at all. Some probably claim tax refunds and benefits to cover their losses.

For my business the losses are very real and long lasting. Last autumn I had to cancel £100,000 worth of planned advertisements. I also abandoned a plan to print 500,000 inserts and extra catalogues. Those are lost advertisements and lost sales. The cost to the economy as a whole will be small but when all the similar losses are added together the cost must be significant.

Last October my bill for one week's postage was £18,276.04. I will not be spending that much on postage for quite a while. I now have 50,000 books worth around £750,000 which are just sitting on shelves in the warehouse. And I have thousands of catalogues which are going out of date and will have to be dumped. I also have staff with nothing to do.

10
14.29 p.m.
I have stopped using direct debits and in future will pay as many bills as possible by cheque. Four times in the last three months, large organisations have used the direct debit system to take five figure sums that they weren't owed out of my accounts. Whenever they do this it is, of course, always a `mistake' but, like MPs doing their expenses, the `mistake' always seems to benefit them. On each occasion it has taken the thieves ages to put the money back.

When the Royal Mail (not content with attempting to destroy my business with strikes) took around £22,000 too much from my account (I gather a Royal Mail employee took the money out by altering a docket - though no one ever explained why) it took ten days and a lot of threatening from me for them to put it back. They took money they weren't owed not once but three times. It took a lot of effort to get the money back, even though Royal Mail admitted that the money was taken without authority or justification and was an `unacceptable error'. When confronted with the evidence that they had taken money not owed they agreed to put the money back into my account but said it was normal practice to take five working days to do this. `We're very busy,' my staff were told when I protested. So, since these things always manage to cover a weekend, it turned out to be longer than five days even when they'd agreed to give me back my money. The fraudulent theft of my money meant that I didn't buy advertisements I might have bought because I thought we were losing money when we weren't. The opportunity cost was enormous.

11
12.08 p.m.
I went to buy railway tickets this morning. `Have you a railcard?' asked the clerk. I showed him the card through the grill. He just glanced at it. When he'd finished I told him I wanted to buy a second ticket. (I have found that if you ask for too much at once it confuses them.) `Have you a railcard?' the clerk asked. `Yes, you saw it about a minute and a half ago.' `I need to see it before I can book a ticket,' he said, officiously.

The country is in safe hands.

14.15 p.m.
The Princess said today that it is a real pity that we can't all have a sleep bank. `We could,' she said, `sleep a lot when there isn't much going on and the weather is bad and then store up the sleep so that when the fine evenings come we can stay up late for a month without feeling tired.'

12
11.34 a.m.
I see that my book *Oral Sex: Bad Taste and Hard to Swallow* is for sale on Amazon at £160.86. *Why is Pubic Hair Curly?* is being sold for £161.74. This reminds me that I have a couple of boxes of each somewhere.

12.19 p.m.
A national magazine's advertising department has offered us three quarter page adverts for £500 but told us that we can have six advertisements for £1,200. When I was a small boy I remember seeing a woman at a jumble sale selling raffle tickets at a rate of half a crown each and six for a pound. I remember my mother telling me not to laugh because the seller was a little simple-minded.

13
15.12 p.m.
I see that the circulation of *The People* newspaper is down to half a million. When I resigned because the editor (I can't remember his name; I suspect he was just another corporate lickspittle) refused to publish a column criticising the illegal invasion of Iraq, the circulation was comfortably over a million and had been rising steadily for some time. Since then it has halved. I suspect that the circulation might have stayed higher if the editors had had the guts to publish a newspaper, instead of a propaganda sheet for an unpopular Government. Leaving *The People* cost me around £150,000 a year but I have never had a moment's regret.

14
18.12 p.m.
I received an e-mail telling me that a financial newsletter has been awarded a prize as the best newsletter of the year. The newsletter writer concerned had, during that year, made recommendations which would have led to his subscribers losing over 76% of their money. And over the previous decade anyone who had followed the advice in the prize-winning newsletter would have made an annual loss of 8.7%. The price of this newsletter is phenomenal. I couldn't help wondering how badly the other newsletters had done for this one to have won a prize. I know of one newsletter writer who uses the Delphic Oracle principle of saying stuff that can be interpreted in more than one way (so that later he can always say he was right) and some, more simplistic, who just print opposing views in the same newsletter so that whatever happens they can say: `There you are, we were right!' The financial newsletter business is, I fear, full of confidence tricksters. But many of them do very well for themselves, if not for their readers. Of course, if they were really good at picking good investments they would become very rich and wouldn't need to sell newsletters.

15
10.12 a.m.
As I had breakfast I heard something drop through the letterbox. This is a strange event because we receive hardly any mail at the house. On the mat was a small piece of card telling me that someone had tried, and failed, to deliver a parcel. I opened the door, saw a commercial delivery man just 20 yards away. I chased after him. He hadn't rung the bell or knocked on the door. `I can't give you the parcel unless you have the delivery number,' he said. `What delivery number?' `The delivery number on the package.' `I don't have the delivery number because I don't have the package. You have it in your van. You left a card.' `Where's the card?' `Back at the house. I shot off after you when I saw it and stupidly I left the card on the shelf just inside the door while I put on some shoes.' `I can't give you the parcel without the card.' `But you'd give me the parcel without the card if you had rung the bell because I wouldn't have had the card.' `But I'd know you belonged at that house.' `Well, I'll pop back and get the card.' `I can't wait around while you do that.' `It will take me a minute at the most.' By now he was climbing into his van. He started it up. I reached into my pocket and produced evidence that I lived at the address to which he'd tried to deliver the packet. `You could have stolen that,' said the deliveryman. `If I had the card I could have stolen that too.' `Yes. But you'd know the delivery number, wouldn't you?' And off he drove. I went back to the house and threw the card into the log basket to be burnt. I never did find out what the parcel was.

14.15 p.m.
A television company wants me to allow them to film me for a sixty-minute profile programme. I tell them I am not interested but ask if they would like to make a programme about the perils of modern medicine. They aren't interested in my idea. They just want to follow me around with a camera. I tell them I'm not interested in their idea.

16.12 p.m.
I have discovered that Noddy is called Oui Oui in France. Fair enough. We used to call General de Gaulle `Non Non'.

16

11.47 a.m.

The utility companies which supplied my father's home have at long last given up threatening to sue me. After my Dad died I had lengthy and increasingly acrimonious rows with the gas, electricity and water suppliers. All of these utilities had been turned off but all continued to send bills and then demand money they weren't owed. It took nearly two years to deal with all the claims and threats. Most threatened to sue me. One lot of idiots said they would have to send me bills for £0.00 to clear their books. I said that if they did I would send them a cheque for this amount. They did and I did. Even the local council got in on the act. They threatened to send the bailiffs in to an empty house, though what they would have raised by selling the doors and skirting boards would not have been much. Eventually, they all backed down but it was a tiring and upsetting business and I rather imagine that most bereaved relatives just pay up to get the corporate leeches off their backs. It seems to me that gouging unowed money out of relatives is probably a profitable sideline for the utilities. (I suppose they might claim that everyone makes mistakes. But how strange that the utility companies concerned, like MPs doing their expenses, all made mistakes that favoured themselves.) In order not to pay the water rates people I had to fill in a complex form which I confess I didn't really understand. The council eventually sent me a form to claim back some of the money they thugged me into paying. All gave in eventually. HMRC and the television licence people both got in on the act and took a good deal of persuading to go away. But British Gas took all the biscuits. At one point a British Gas buffoon claimed that I was being sent bills to pay for the pilot light and for gas leakage. I pointed out that the boiler had no pilot light and that I thought the leakage was their problem and that if they thought hundreds of pounds worth of gas were leaking out they really ought to do something about it.

In my experience, no company in Britain deserves its bad reputation more than British Gas. On one single day, nearly 18 months after my father had died, I received eight letters from them, including a variety of different final demands, two cheques and a letter of apology. I received a letter from a firm of solicitors telling me that on behalf of British Gas they were going to commence legal proceedings against me (with the usual warnings about the damage this was likely to do to my credit status) but on the same day the company agreed that I had paid all their bills, that they had, in fact, sent me cheques for overpayments and that I didn't owe them anything. They finally e-mailed to say that they had been making big mistakes.

15.14 p.m.

Another magazine has refused one of our adverts on the grounds that it contains too many words and doesn't look pretty enough. This is a common complaint not just about our adverts but about all mail order advertisements.

Adverts designed to sell products off the page never win prizes. But they work. The only people who can measure the success of their advertising are mail order advertisers. We can measure the effectiveness of an advert very accurately. Within a day or two we can tell whether a particular advert is going to work or not. We can compare the success of an advert in one publication with the same advert in another publication. We can make modest changes to an advert and see whether the response rate goes up or down. We know that the headline on an advert is crucial. We know that lots of words are more effective than a few words and a lot of pictures. We know that simple black on white adverts usually work best. Big companies pay their advertising agencies a fortune for design that won't attract any readers because although they know what looks pretty they don't know what works and what doesn't work. Nothing beats a clever headline and a mass of text. Adverts that really work well are invariably much better written than the editorial in a publication.

I know that if I am buying an advertisement in a magazine or newspaper I want to be on a page in the front half and I know that I must be on a right hand page. If my advert is smaller than a page in size then I want it to be on the outside edge and not near the staples (or `gutter'). If I am buying an advert in a newspaper then I want to be `above the fold' (i.e. on the top half of the page). I know that newspapers and magazines don't understand any of this because they don't charge more for prime positions. The key to buying advertising is the same as the key to buying property: location, location, location.

16.45 p.m.

I telephoned the tax office to see if they had received a letter I'd sent them over a month ago. I was told that they are so busy that there is a delay of six weeks in opening mail. So since my letter was sent only five weeks ago they do not yet know whether they have received it.

17

11.34 a.m.

My Public Lending Right statement has come in. It is very disappointing. I sell more books than ever and have more readers than ever but my PLR income goes lower every year. It has now dipped under £1,000 for the year. A few years ago my PLR income put me among the top 200 authors in the country. But since I've been self-publishing my books, my income from the libraries has fallen. There's one good reason for this: public libraries won't buy books published by small publishers. And they are especially reluctant to buy books which are self-published. I receive a constant stream of letters from readers complaining that they have been unable to borrow my books from their local library. All have been told (quite incorrectly) that my books are `unavailable'. And yet whenever I have managed to find my books in public libraries they have been falling apart and full of stamps showing that they have been heavily borrowed.

15.12 p.m.
The whole climate change debate is now so one-sided that it is embarrassing. Scientists have long forgotten their basic obligation to tell the truth - however inconvenient it might be. Too many scientists want to lead the debate (and acquire vast grants) by fiddling their results. Like politicians and journalists they have learned that if they present their findings in the correct way they can win friends and power and money. And they're enjoying their new-found power enormously. There is no evidence proving that global warming is man-made. I used to believe the lies that are told, until I really studied the evidence. I then became a firm disbeliever. I am now utterly convinced that the global warming threat is a ruthlessly efficient scam, introduced to accustom us to the fact that the oil is running out and to give bureaucrats and politicians a constant excuse to introduce repressive new regulations which enable them to introduce an endless stream of new taxes. (Several readers wrote criticising me for changing my mind. I asked them what their policy was when they found new evidence.) Modern scientists decide on a commercially acceptable solution and then select the facts which support the solution they have selected. That's not science: it's propaganda. Churches have recently been ringing bells to draw attention to the global warming problem. I would be more impressed if they rang bells to draw attention to the pointless killing in Afghanistan. Global warming is a scam. The killing is very real.

If the EU and the Government really believed that climate change is a man-made problem they could easily do lots of things to save energy (and protect the environment). They could, for a start, promote vegetarianism and provide subsidies for vegetarian foods. Rearing animals for meat production requires vast quantities of grain and is one of the major reasons why so many people around the world are starving. Growing all the grain to give to animals creates havoc for the environment and uses up massive amounts of water. It takes a million gallons of water to grow just one acre of corn. As the water trickles into streams and rivers it carries with it the remains of the fertilisers the farmers used. The fertiliser chemicals then pollute the water we drink (because, as I reported over a quarter of a century ago, it is impossible to get chemicals out of the water). The fertiliser also increases the growth of algae in rivers. As the algae decomposes it uses up oxygen in the water, killing fish. In America there is an 8,000 square mile dead zone below Louisiana and Texas, thanks to American agriculture. And, of course the 100 million cows in the USA are all belching out methane - which is much more potent as a greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide. It enrages me that so many ardent campaigners against global warming aren't vegetarian. You can't campaign for the environment, and against hunger, if you aren't vegetarian without immediately branding yourself a hypocrite.

There are tons of other things the authorities could do, of course. They could provide subsidies to help village shops stay in business. (They don't actually have to hand out money. Just removing the VAT on products sold in village stores would be enough to keep many village shops open.) They could tell the police to clear traffic jams more speedily (instead of allowing 20 mile tailbacks to develop). They could remove VAT from all materials used in the repair of equipment that would otherwise be thrown away. They could provide better, and cheaper, train services. They should get tough with companies which overpackage their products. They could insist that brochures for electrical equipment are printed in just one language (instead of being printed in every language imaginable). They could cut back on the number of wars we're fighting. (All those planes and bombs don't help the environment.) They could arrange the VAT rules so that people are encouraged to repair and restore old buildings. (Bizarrely, there is no VAT on new buildings but there is VAT to pay if you want to restore a building.) If governments cared about the environment they would be encouraging restoration. After all, older buildings are invariably better to look at and far more functional than new ones. (The worst Italian earthquake for 30 years destroyed modern buildings that were supposed to conform to quake-proof building regulations but centuries old churches and palaces remained intact and undamaged. Why am I not surprised?)

The current tax system encourages people to knock down perfectly good buildings and build brand new ones. They could introduce taxes designed to limit households to one car. They could subsidise buses and ensure that better services are provided. They could put a stop to the huge lorries which, having been designed to cruise along European motorways, now blast their way through tiny English towns. They could encourage the use of the canal system but that would make sense so they won't.

I have been campaigning against pollution, waste and so on for far longer than most of the current batch of campaigners have been alive. There are many issues that need urgent attention: our seas are overfished, our drinking water is polluted with drugs and chemicals, our air is polluted, our food contains more carcinogens than vitamins and so on. The whole global warming fraud (designed to distract our attention from peak oil and to help the bureaucrats and statists gain more control over us) has taken attention away from these vital issues and has damaged interest in real environmental problems.

This is not a world for worriers or for those who believe in honesty and justice.

18

13.14 p.m.

The Princess and I were sitting in a pub. She had a pot of Earl Grey tea. I was drinking coffee. I doubt if even an analytical chemist would have been able to find a difference. A couple approached the bar, ordered two meals and two half pints of shandy. They were both dressed in black and had clearly been to a funeral. When they'd ordered they came across and sat at our table. `Do you mind?' asked the man. `Not at all,' said The Princess. When he'd sat down the man undid his tie, took it off and put it in his pocket. `We've been to a funeral,' he explained, unnecessarily. `Best friend of ours.' The Princess and I made sympathetic noises and faces. `We've known him 40 years.’ The man looked suitably funereal. I nodded. He held the funereal expression for a minute or so and then brightened unexpectedly. `It's a long trip,' he continued, `so we thought we'd make a weekend of it.' His wife nodded. `Do a little walking and relax a bit,' she said. `We love this part of the world,' said the man. `I got the day off work for the funeral so we thought it a pity to waste the opportunity.'

It is amazing what one hears in pubs and cafés. Later on that day The Princess and I were sitting in one of those rather delightful English cafés that abound in market towns; one of those places where they serve home-made cakes and tea so strong that it eats through the spoons; the sort of place where any woman who has a chest bigger than her waist is regarded as having a `good figure'. An elderly woman and her middle aged son sat at the table next to us. She wore a coat with a fur collar and the sort of hat women wear to ‘occasions’. He wore an expensive but wrinkled suit and a shirt that looked as if it had been ironed by someone with a serious neurological problem. There was a small burn mark on the collar. They ordered tea for two and a selection of cakes.

`She's far too young,' said mother, when she'd selected a cream horn and put it onto her plate. She looked as if she were the sort of person who sends a card to say thank you for the birthday card she's been sent.

`But she seems very willing,' said her son. `And she says she'll do everything. The other one won't do certain things.' He looked an exceptionally naive man; the sort of person who goes on holiday with his home address and telephone number (landline and mobile) clearly visible on his luggage label, together with the numbers and dates of his flights, and then shows genuine surprise when he gets back from his fortnight in Marbella to discover that he has been burgled.

The Princess, who hadn't been listening to this, asked me a question. I put a hand on her wrist and flicked my eyes towards the table where the mother and son are sitting. I had to hear the rest of this conversation.

`I think she's too flighty,' said mother. `She'll up and leave you. You want someone steady and reliable.'

Now The Princess was listening too. She looked at me and frowned slightly. I shrugged my shoulders almost imperceptibly to show that I didn't know what was going on either. It sounded as if mother and son were discussing possible new girlfriends. Or maybe a prospective new wife. Or maybe a mistress.

`My friend Nigel had her for six months,' said the son. `He said she was very, very good.'

`So why did she leave him?'

`He got married,' said the son. `He said he didn't need her any more. But I don't think his wife approved of her.'

`I'm not surprised!' said mother with a snort. `The older one would be much better for you. More experienced. She'll do you nicely.'

The son sighed. `You're probably right,' he said. He was clearly disappointed. He sipped at his tea, unwrapped another sugar cube and dropped in two more lumps. `How much do you think I should give her?'

`I pay mine £6.50 an hour and her bus fare,' said mother. `It's the going rate for cleaners.'

19

12.12 p.m.

‘Breast screening benefits are a myth’, says a new review. `Thousands of women are having cancer misdiagnosed and being treated unnecessarily.' I got into terrible trouble when I said this in a book a couple of decades ago.

15.20 p.m.

The publishers who are admired in the industry and by investors these days are those who are willing to embrace digital technology. Those, in my view, are the publishers with absolutely no future at all. The publishers who will survive and thrive are the ones prepared to eschew all digital publishing and to concentrate on producing printed books that people really want to read, making sure that the books are available only as proper printed books and never turned into digital books of any description.

20
14.34 p.m.
My trusty mountain bike has died at last. I took it to a local shop for repairs and was shown a number of deep cracks in the framework. I shouldn't have been surprised. The bike has done sterling service and over the years I've ridden many miles on it - mainly over rough tracks. Various parts of it have had to be replaced (buckled wheels and so on) but up until now the frame had survived. I left the poor old thing at the bicycle shop, doubtless to be sold as scrap, and bought a replacement. But this time I haven't bought a mountain bike. Instead, I rode home on a brand new road bike with mudguards, sit up and beg handlebars and a wicker basket attached to the front. It cost about £200 and looks perfectly suitable for an elderly gentleman. `At least there's one thing,' said The Princess when she saw it. `You won't have to worry about it being stolen.' `But it's brand new and shiny!' I said. `No bicycle thief is going to want to be seen riding away on that!' said The Princess. I think she's probably right. I feel sad that my mountain biking days are over.

16.12 p.m.
There is a review on Amazon complaining that my *Bloodless Revolution* is too small and cheap. I published the book as a mass-market paperback hoping that shops would take copies. I really wanted the book to make a difference. But despite all our best efforts no shops would stock the book and the mass market price was a disaster for a mail order book.

21
08.00 a.m.
The Princess woke me up in the middle of the night to see if I was still alive. She gave me quite a thwack on the head and I thought at first that a piece of ceiling had fallen down. After having satisfied herself that I was, indeed, alive and well, she told me rather sternly that she would be very grateful if I could look less dead when I'm sleeping.

22
09.49 a.m.
The gas company is investigating a leak. A man digging a hole in the road managed to ignore a stopcock entrance valve and sliced through our lead water pipe with a pneumatic drill. I was surprised for two reasons. First, it was pretty obvious even to me where the water pipe lay. I would have thought that a professional hole-digger might make it his business to watch out for pipes. Second, I was surprised to see that our water travels through lead piping. I suspect that if we wanted to put lead pipes into our home we might find ourselves facing an army of interfering bureaucrats. When I rang the water board to see when they would be able to repair the damage I was told we would have to wait our turn. `There are lots of other people with no water in your area,' said a sanctimonious, supercilious woman who was obviously not concerned about flushing her lavatory or finding the wherewithal to make a cup of tea. The inspector who came to look at the damage and authorise the visit of a team of water board pipe-menders was much kinder. He told us that as residential customers we had priority over such second rate customers as drinking fountains and horse troughs. It felt good to know that we were regarded as important and that our sliced pipe would be mended with haste. It looked such a simple job that I would have thought a half-trained plumber could have sorted it out with a Basic Plumbing Kit in twenty minutes. We are, however, prepared for a weekend without water. The Princess said she was glad it had happened to us and not to the family across the road because they have a lot of small children. I thought that was both sweet and noble of her. And also typical.

12.11 p.m.
The water people called and a nice man brought us two bottles of water for flushing the loo and making tea. Then the gas man called to say that they had found the leak (the good news) but that there were two not one (the bad news). One in the gas main and one in the pipe leading to our house. He has, he said, mended the main leak but not the leak to the house. He has however wrapped a rag around the leaky pipe and will leave it because it is late and hopefully someone will be back to mend it in a day or two. When I asked if it is safe he pulled a face, rocked his head from side to side, and then nodded. He has promised a visit on Saturday but somehow I doubt if this will happen. There are traffic lights to keep cars and lorries out of the huge hole they have left in the road. We have to

stay in until they turn up so that they can turn off our gas and mess with the pipes.

23

10.18 a.m.

In the past `good news' newspapers have never worked. People haven't wanted to buy them. But I sometimes wonder if one might not do well today. Personally, I often wake up feeling I simply haven't any more room for bad news. And The Princess is the same. `I am full up with bad news. If you want to give me news you must give me good news first. It's good news or no news at all,' she said this morning. I know what she means. I sometimes worry that if I see one more bent news bulletin I will be driven sane with rage.

The danger is that we all become immune to bad news because we see and hear so much of it. The toxic stress around us is so all encompassing and so invasive that it affects our lives. We are exposed to it all the time.

Part of the problem is that news has to be created to fill all the space that is available. Twenty four hour news programmes need an endless supply of news. And they like it to be exciting and frightening. The news programmes even put rolling banners along the bottom of the screen so that while viewers listen to one piece of bad news they can read about another. The result is that many people are suffering from news-overload.

Of course, most so-called news isn't news at all. It is propaganda; distorted and manipulated truths brought to us by biased news organisations which have been bought and pressured by lobbyists and public relations experts. Nothing is ever questioned if the questioning will upset people with power and money. Distorted truths are used to take away our basic freedom and our hard-won rights. We are subjected to a constant barrage of political and industrial propaganda; press releases become news and I am constantly aware that there is a lot of difference between what they want to tell me and what I want to know. TV companies are the worst; they lead their news programmes with their own little scoops rather than the real news. They only report the news for which they have pictures and so if a camera crew wasn't there it isn't news. News is celebrity led and viewers are fed trivia while important truths are suppressed.

14.22 p.m.

On the M5 going south, just after the turn off for Taunton, on the right hand side of the road, there are more trees with more mistletoe than I have ever seen before. If we are ever short of money I intend to buy a pair of long handled pruners, cut the mistletoe and sell it on the market. I tell The Princess that it is my pension fund and she says she thinks it is probably safer than anything else we have.

24

10.11 a.m.

The men who came to mend the leak in the water pipe outside our house arrived equipped with pneumatic drills. Unfortunately, in mending the water pipe they drilled through a gas pipe which now has another leak. It was all very reminiscent of Flanders and Swann. The man from the gas company told us that he has discovered that the gas pipes running underneath our house do not satisfy current EU standards. What does? The gasman says that he might have to re-lay all the pipes and that this will involve digging up the floors. He tells us not to worry because we will not have to pay for the new pipes to be laid. We worry, nevertheless, because they will still have to dig up our floor to put down their new EU-approved piping. In the end they manage to put the new pipe inside the old pipe and pull it through. The new pipe is made of plastic but is apparently impregnated with poison to stop rats eating it. I wonder how long it will be before the rats can eat the plastic piping without any ill effects but I do not mention this because the gasman seems a pleasant fellow and I do not want to worry him. There is still a leak in the road but he tells us that this is not a major problem. When he and his colleagues have finished re-laying the pipes underneath our house I ask him to check on a nasty smell that has developed in our back garden. The gasman diagnoses a petrol leak and, indeed, he is absolutely right. Petrol is leaking from the tank in our now quite elderly 7 series BMW. I call the AA and a polite man arrives, checks the car and says that the petrol tank is leaking and that I should not drive the car anywhere except to a garage. This I do. The garage tells me that a new petrol tank will have to be imported from Germany and will cost more than £700 plus VAT. This is almost as much as the car is worth and I think that if I sell the car for scrap I will be able to claim back tax relief on the capital loss. However, we have had the car since new and feel affection for it. Apart from the leaky petrol tank and a dent in the side where our gate blew inwards just as I was reversing into the driveway, the car is in excellent condition. It certainly doesn't seem right to take advantage of the Government's absurd `scrappage' scheme. (If I allow the Government to destroy the car I will receive £2,000 for it - which is more than it is worth.) So I tell my local garage to order the platinum and gold petrol tank and to fit it to the BMW. At the garage a bright mechanic suggests that I nearly empty the petrol tank (so that it doesn't leak) and sell the car on eBay. I smile and thank him for the suggestion but instruct him to install the petrol tank anyway. One of the reasons why our elderly BMW is worth so little is that the Government has put a very high road tax on large, old cars. Naturally, this means that such cars are frequently dumped for scrap because no one can afford to run them. On the other hand, I suspect that the cost of second-hand cars will rocket when the scrappage scheme stops. This will mean that poorer people wanting to buy vehicles won't be able to. I loathe the smug, sanctimonious environmentalists who promote the car scrappage scheme and claim it will help the environment. These are the idiots who live off Government handouts and EU grants and spend all day on their computers, blissfully unaware of the energy they are consuming as they do so.

15.46 p.m.
The weather has been so horrid that we haven't been shopping for ages. And the supermarket hasn't delivered. `We've run out of food,' said The Princess. `Don't be silly,' I replied. I opened the cupboard and took out a tin and a jar. `There must be some sort of meal you can make with custard and olives.'

19.14 p.m.
I am reading the autobiography of film director Roger Corman. His wife is quoted as saying that when she met him he told her he was always on overload but planning to get it under control within two weeks. She says that forty years later nothing has changed. I read this to The Princess who laughed out loud and nodded vigorously. She is always reminding me that when we first met I promised to get the chaos under control.

25
14.14 p.m.
Selling through Amazon is particularly bad for the environment. When they sell a book they have to order it from the wholesaler who orders it from us. We post the book to the wholesaler who posts it to Amazon who posts it to the customer. When the customer buys direct from us there is only one journey involved. This is cheaper, quicker and far more efficient. And more profitable for us, of course.

14.57 p.m.
No one has been to mend our still leaking gas pipe. I rang the emergency number for the gas people but they said that our leak was no longer an emergency leak because it had been found some time ago and their man had wrapped a rag around it to stop it leaking. They gave me another number to ring. I rang that and the person who answered said that they were a secondary sort of emergency number and I had to get off the line for people who had nearly emergencies that were quite new and so they gave me a third number. When I rang that a message told me that the offices were closed but to hang on if I had an emergency. I hung on and while I was waiting my mobile rang and a man presumably triggered by the first call said they had been too busy to deal with our leak but might come tomorrow or another day. The Princess pointed out that if there were a gas explosion and the house was destroyed no one in world would know who was in it because everything in the house is in other names. We use different pen names for paying for groceries, rates, water rates, electricity and so on.

26
11.27 a.m.
We have our BMW back. It purred with delight when I drove it back from the garage. We are both pleased that we saved it from a crushing end.

15.04 p.m.
The gas people are here. I e-mailed The Princess who is in her study downstairs. `Shall we tiptoe out of the back and just run away?'

27
11.35 a.m.
I bought a first edition in Oxfam today. The word Oxfam was written beside the price on the flyleaf. Fair enough. I suppose they might forget who they are. But the inscription was in ink. In a first edition. Surely this should be a serious offence?

28
14.58 p.m.
I now spend around £100,000 a year on postage. (It used to be much more.) Between 5% and 10% of the parcels we

send out do not reach their destination. They are lost or stolen. (I suspect that more are stolen than mislaid.) We have to send out replacement books. Technically, we then claim the cost of the lost book. I recently discovered, however, that my staff have been told by Royal Mail that we can only claim the print costs for lost or stolen books. This is absurd. Producing a book costs far more than printing it. In a fair world we should be able to claim the retail costs plus the postage and packing costs. Those are our real losses.

But although Royal Mail will only refund part of my losses the EU's direct selling directive (a book in itself which is packed with blood curdling laws which almost every large mail order company ignores) says that I am responsible for goods which get lost in the mail, even though I have no control over them. So, I have to accept the Royal Mail's part compensation.

I sent a note to the Royal Mail pointing out that when a book that we have given to them goes missing we lose:

1. The book.
2. Our postage cost for sending it out (including the specialist packaging) and the packing time.
3. Time for dealing with the problem (including resending the book, apologising to customer, etc.).
4. Our packaging for sending out the replacement.
5. Opportunity cost because we have to pay those costs before we get compensation from Royal Mail.

Most important of all is the fact that the book value to us is not the print cost. The book is worth more than the print cost. (If it weren’t, there would be no point in printing any books at all.) If we print 1,000 books and they cost £2 each to manufacture then our advertising and so on will be designed to sell 1,000 books. We print 1,000 because that is what we expect to sell and need to sell. But if Royal Mail loses 100 of those books then we have lost the ability to sell those 100 books. We have lost the profit on the books that Royal Mail lost. And if we need the extra 100 books - to replace the books they lost - we have to reprint. Reprinting small quantities costs far more. By reducing our stock, Royal Mail is reducing our profit. The profit on the last 100 books we sell is the greatest part of our profit. The major profit in any retail business is always in selling the last few items of stock.

If a thief breaks into a bookshop and steals 100 books that each retail at £10 then a court will describe the theft as having a value of £1,000. The `legal' value of the books is not the print cost. But when Royal Mail loses a book (or the book is stolen by a Royal Mail employee) the book is not on the shelf. It has been sold. The book has been stolen from the customer but we have to replace it.

Royal Mail loses an indecent number of books and we carry the cost of the incompetence or dishonesty of their staff. They have no incentive to improve.

It seems to me that most State employees fail totally to understand how business works.

16.17 p.m.
Our gas pipes have been repaired and the piece of rag which lay between us and a major explosion has been taken away, doubtless to be used elsewhere.

29
16.15 p.m.
The Government has announced a new stern clampdown on rebellious people who question the sanctity of the State. I mentioned this to The Princess who said `Oh' in a rather bored voice. Then, a few moments later, she laughed and said `Oh, that's you isn't it!'

Sadly, I fear that she is right. Once the Government has you in its sights they never forgive, forget or give up. They already listen to my phones, read my e-mails and tap into my fax machines. I'm not sure what else they can do but I'm sure they will try.

I have always been honest in my dealings with the Government, but I think it is fair to say that the Government has always been dishonest in its dealings with me. They have created a world in which it is seen as weak to be well-intentioned, passionate, caring, honest or sensitive. All they want us to do is to obey, conform and consume. And they treat all the information they demand we give with a cavalier disregard for our rights. I find that many people don't believe it but the Government actually sells the information they take from us. For example, if I put my car registration number into a commercial website, up will come a picture of my car. And all the details I gave in confidence have been sold. Nothing you tell the Government (or a State employee such as a policeman, tax inspector, local council employee, doctor, nurse or social worker) will be treated as confidential. The Government will either sell the information or lose it.

And the Government constantly lies to us. They make promises they have no intention of keeping. And official Government figures (for everything from unemployment to crime) are about as reliable as the weather forecast. Sometimes the information is false because the people collecting it are incompetent. Often the information is deliberately misleading because the people handing it out want to disguise the truth.

I long ago realised that the only way to deal with the representatives of the State is to be prepared to complain. Never explain, just complain. Take their names, write things down and complain, complain, complain. The incompetent, jackbooted representatives of the State are terrified of breaking a rule. Those who live by the rulebook also die by it. The Human Rights Act and the Data Protection Act do at least offer a little protection.

30
11.58 a.m.
I bought some rather fine serrated grapefruit spoons. These will save me preparing each half of a grapefruit by cutting around the edge of the pulp and then making preparatory cuts between segments. I reckon the new spoons will save me 10 hours a year. This means that they will pay for themselves in a matter of days. They are the most cost effective purchase I've made for years.

31
14.10 p.m.
A reader e-mails to let me know that there is yet another malicious and nasty attack on me on a website. This one, like many others, seems to concern my book *Oil Apocalypse*. My predictions about the oil running out (and the resulting changes which will have to be made to our society) have all been proven to be absolutely accurate but naturally that doesn't stop the nutters from having their say. The Internet is home for a good many lost, lonely people who allow their lives to be directed by a bunch of nerdy youths whose own lives have, since childhood, been spent staring at computer screens and whose vision is constrained and controlled by the breadth and depth allowed by a monitor. It is, I suppose, hardly surprising that the Internet is tailor-made for nutters and bigots and I suspect there are more of them using the Web than there are pornographers and confidence tricksters. I used to wonder sometimes about the people who attack me on the Web. I don't any more. I had always thought that the sort of people who use the Web a great deal often lead sad lives. A year or two ago I proved this by chasing down a nutter who had been sending me abusive e-mails. This particular fellow was mad with me because I couldn't get him a job with a national newspaper. He rang Publishing House regularly with offensive messages and over one weekend used his primitive computer skills to send my website 90,000 pornographic e-mails. Naturally, the police weren't interested so I hired private detectives who traced him. It turned out that he was a really sad bastard living in a broken down flat on a Scottish council estate. He was laughed at by the local children whenever he went outside and was regarded as a pervert by his neighbours. He was just tough and threatening at the other end of the computer. I left him alone and eventually he went away and presumably found another target. But he did a lot of harm and wasted a lot of time.

February

1

12.48 p.m.

I never bother buying travellers' cheques but always carry cash. It's far more convenient and as long you don't put all your cash into one wallet or one pocket I can't see that the risk is unduly high. If in trouble abroad it is far easier to solve problems with cash than it is to try to solve them with a credit card. Cash talks. Credit cards don't say anything. I called at the bank and asked for £1,000 worth of euros. The teller wanted to know why I wanted the money. A year or two ago I would have asked what it had to do with her, the bank, the Government of anyone else. I no longer bother to argue. I told her that I needed the cash to bribe corrupt border guards. She dutifully wrote this down on the form she had in front of her.

15.18 p.m.

We have had to put up our prices for postage and packing. Since 1988 we have charged £1 per book. I have had to put up the charge to £2. And I suspect it will have to rise again very soon because £2 doesn't cover the cost of postage (let alone packing) for most of our books. The constantly rising prices from the Royal Mail monopoly are eating deeper and deeper into our profits. Amazon's usual charge for books is £2.75 and I know quite a few booksellers who charge nearer £5 per book. I can understand why. We now charge £2 towards postage and packing but we still lose money on just about every book we send out. And many readers send £1 instead of £2. Others just send £1 to cover the postage for three or four books. We send out the books but lose money because of this.

It cost 1d to post a letter in the 1840s and it cost 1d in the 1930s. In recent years, however, postage costs have soared as the post office has becoming increasingly incompetent and inefficient and as it has struggled to pay off its huge pension debts. Despite the fact that we are officially in a low inflation era the Royal Mail has pushed its prices up dramatically. It cost 83p to post a copy of *Bodypower* in 2006. It now costs approximately twice as much.

If the Royal Mail had deliberately set out to screw up independent publishers and mail order companies they could not have made a better job of it. It is absurd that Royal Mail should be allowed to have a postage monopoly.

16.22 p.m.

A reader writes to tell me that a restaurant she visited recently listed Spotted Richard pudding on its menu. When questioned, the waitress told the diners that the original was considered too offensive. My reader wants to know if Stalin could best be described as a richardtator.

2

10.03 a.m.

We are planning to move home. North Devon is a wonderful place to live but there are two unavoidable problems. First, it is a long way from most of the rest of the country. Journeys to London or Paris are exhausting and time consuming. Second, the only realistic way to reach Barnstaple and the surrounding villages is by road. The rail service to Barnstaple is poor to say the least. It's a lovely journey for a day out to Exeter. But too slow, frustrating and infrequent to be of any practical use. And to reach North Devon by road you really have no choice but to use the awful A361. In the summer the road is clogged with tractors and caravans and it's an easy road on which to acquire points for your licence. Knowing that they can make good money out of both locals and tourists the police often park speed cameras in the various lay-bys and sometimes in specially built little nooks hidden behind hedges. They put the damned things on the only bits of road that are safe for overtaking, apparently unconcerned that this seems to prove that the aim is to make money. Hedge and verge trimming and road works are a commoner cause of blockages on this road than anywhere else I've ever known. All things considered, the A361 is probably the worst road in the country. In the winter the road has been cut off for the last two years. For a mail order company this is disastrous - especially when added to the postal strikes which occur and which are now going to be commoner. Whoever designed the road deserves to be tarred and feathered. Although the road is busier than some motorways it switches from two to three lanes in a dangerously whimsical way. On the long stretches of road which are single carriage way, a large lorry can produce a tailback several miles long. And since every supermarket or business in North Devon is supplied via this route there are always lots of lorries blocking the way.

11.02 a.m.

A reader complains that I seem to spend much of my life digging out facts and then charging people a fee for the books I write. I think it was the fact that I charge people a fee for my books that she objected to, rather than the digging out of facts, though I could be wrong about that. This isn't the first complaint of this type I've had. Two readers wrote recently claiming that my books are so important that I should give copies away to everyone in the country. The snag with this wonderful thought is, of course, that printers insist on being paid for their work, the council wants taxes, the gas company and electricity companies demand cheques every couple of months, staff want paying even more often, and occasionally my wife and I need to eat a little something to keep up our strength and to banish the hunger pangs. This is, remember, how I earn a living. We do always try to keep books as cheap as possible. I would rather sell a million copies and make £1 profit than sell 100 copies and make £2 profit, but I have no backer, patron or sponsor and we accept no advertising of any kind either for my books or my website.

3
22.39 p.m.
We were invited to drinks with people whom we certainly do not know well enough to call friends and hardly enough to refer to as acquaintances. Neither The Princess nor I can remember where we met them. When we received the invitation we were asked to take a bottle of wine with us. He is a mean man who liked to look generous. Every October he wears a British Legion poppy he bought in 1983. He takes it out of the drawer, wipes it with a damp cloth and carefully pins it to his jacket. And the day after Remembrance Day the poppy goes back into the drawer where he keeps flags and badges for such things as Life Boat Day. I know all this because he has told me about it and has even shown me the drawer where he keeps the poppy. When he found out that I am a doctor he asked me if I thought it might be possible to buy a new hip on eBay. I told him I thought it probably would be but that I thought he might have to hire someone to fit it.

His wife loves sunbathing and as a result she has skin like old leather luggage. She moves in an almost tangible, almost visible, cloud of lavender. She too is mean and a mutual acquaintance once said that if you were drowning and held out an arm she would take your watch off your arm before letting let you drown. She must have the world's largest collection of cushions (The Princess and I refer to her as the Queen of Cushions) and must have spent more on soft furnishings than America spent saving its banks.

We were astonished when, at the end of the evening, the hostess asked us (and the other guests) for £10 per head for the cost of the evening. I'm told that asking guests to pay for hospitality is the latest fashion in *Guardian* reading parts of London. I'm surprised, however, that it has reached this part of the world. It is a charmless habit which will, I predict, soon die an unmourned death. If I were invited out for dinner by impecunious hosts I would rather have a slice of bread and jam than be given a bill at the end of the meal. Do you tip? Do you complain if the food wasn't very good?

`I think we should spend more time in Bilbury,' said The Princess, when we got home.

I agreed.

In *The Last Tycoon*, F Scott Fitzgerald wrote that we all live in the present but that when there is no present that is congenial to us, we invent one. Our invented present is the village of Bilbury in Devon. I sometimes think that The Princess and I spend as much time living in Bilbury as we do in the world that most people call `real'. Certainly, the fictional characters I invented for my Bilbury series of novels, and who share our lives in Bilbury, seem more real than most people we meet. When I am asked for my address I invariably put `Bilbury Grange, Bilbury, Devon'. It's the address I give journalists, nosy parkers from the Government and hotels. As the days go by The Princess and I slide ever deeper into our private world of Bilbury, books and old films as we struggle to escape from a hostile and alien world; a world which seems, increasingly often, to be just a little too much for anyone who is sensitive, caring and thoughtful. The Princess was carefully crafted by God from an exclusive mixture of butterflies, kittens and orchids and I sometimes think that together we are like two gentle butterflies, struggling to stay aloft in a stormy world. Bilbury is the petal upon which we rest from time to time. Or are we just barking? Who knows? I certainly don't give a damn.

The strange thing is that I think that the sort of world we have invented for ourselves (a world of pedestrians, cyclists, log fires and peaceful communities cut off from what used to be known as the `civilised' world) will soon become the real world. As the oil runs out (and becomes increasingly expensive) so the world around us, the world we know, will change. Canals and horse drawn barges will come back. Aeroplanes and buses will be seen only in old movies. And log fires will be the only way to keep warm.

4
11.02 a.m.
If history is all about perception then day to day politics is all about misconception. We live in strange times. By forcing taxpayers to fund illegal wars consecutive governments have turned us all into war criminals. (I look forward to the day when Blair, Brown and a thousand other politicians find themselves in the dock at the War

Crimes Tribunal.) Temporary security legislation is always permanent. It is never repealed. Honesty, loyalty, courage, patience, respect, selflessness, caring and generosity are forgotten virtues. The Princess and I tried to name 10 modern politicians who exhibited three of these qualities but failed miserably. (Mind you, when we tried to name ten celebrities under 40 who exhibited any of these qualities we failed at that too.) In a country where convictions lead to convictions, it is dangerous to hold an opinion that does not fit neatly in with the establishment's guidelines. Anarchy is the only sensible credo for a thinking person to follow at the moment. The fact that it is dangerous to say this out loud is proof that it is true.

5

22.51 p.m.

On the news tonight I watched in astonishment as a bunch of environmental protestors drove slowly along the motorway. They claim that they were doing this to save the planet. A huge queue of traffic was lined up behind the protestors. Every vehicle was, of course, burning up twice as much fuel as would normally be used. The world is now controlled by interfering do-gooders who are misinformed, misguided and often crooked.

22.58 p.m.

In America a woman on a flight has got into trouble for spanking her two children who were squabbling. Homeland security special agents arrested the woman for committing an act of terrorism. She has been sent to jail for three months and has lost custody of her children. Confiscating children because their mother tries to make them behave doesn't seem like the rational behaviour of a balanced society so it must be the irrational behaviour of an unbalanced society.

It's about time all security guards at airports and railway stations were found more productive work. The nail file confiscation industry has lasted long enough. During the last few years millions of travellers have been inconvenienced and abused by Nazi style guards pretending to be protecting our aeroplanes and our nations from terrorists. It is time to abandon the pretence. Airport security has been a total failure. The obnoxious guards who so enjoy their power have so far failed to find a single terrorist or a single money launderer. In the USA the Department of Homeland Security has conducted three billion airport inspections looking for terrorists. Travellers have been patted down so thoroughly that many didn't know whether to complain or tip. But they did not catch one terrorist. Were there ever any in the first place?

23.06 p.m.

I loathe DVDs. They're an excellent example of the myth that the latest technology is always an improvement on the old stuff. DVDs were sold to us as an improvement in much the same way that CDs were sold to us as an improvement over cassette tapes which were sold to as an improvement over vinyl. Cassettes are in many ways far more convenient than CDs (particularly for audiotapes) and vinyl provides a much better sound than anything else. If they really want to introduce useful technology why don't they produce a player that knows what sound level I want? This would prevent me having to reset the sound level every time I watch a new DVD. I hate DVD players. (On our DVD player the light goes on when it’s off and off when it’s on. How mad is that?). But I hate DVDs even more. Here are my top ten reasons for hating them:

1. You have to press lots of different `play' buttons to make the damned thing start playing. I recently had to press the play button 11 times to move from one instalment to the next on a BBC series that had been turned into a DVD. And why could no one be bothered to get rid of the unnecessary `top and tailing' at the beginning and end of each programme?

2. It's impossible to spin through the boring anti-piracy threats and the film of the little person stoking the fires of hell. It's not nice to be threatened, and damned near accused of being a handbag thief, before you watch something you have paid a lot of money for. Have these people not yet worked out that the people they are threatening are the people they shouldn't be threatening because they are the ones who have bought the DVD? (I suspect that crooks, not wanting to worry or annoy their customers, rub that bit off when making fake DVDs. If I knew where to buy bootleg DVDs I would, just to avoid having to watch the little blacksmith yet again.) It's even impossible to spin through the advertisements on some DVDs.

3. With a video it is easy to stop, turn off the machine, go away for a week and then resume viewing at the point where you stopped. With a DVD you have to spin through and find the scene. It can take ages. If you want to re-watch a scene it is much easier with a videotape than it is with a DVD.

4. DVDs are far more troublesome than videos ever were. They stick and jump and suddenly stop working for no apparent reason. Sometimes they don't work at all. And once you've removed the shrink-wrap you can't return them. We have far more trouble with DVDs than we ever had with videotapes.

5. With some DVDs it is difficult to find the starting point. Clever, clever producers hide the `play' icon and put it in a point size that can only be read by six-year-olds with perfect eyesight.

6. With many DVDs the default condition is for the subtitles to be `on'. And it can be terribly difficult to work out whether they are on or off until you start watching.

7. The sound quality with DVDs is generally appalling, though we have noticed that free DVDs, the sort given away with newspapers are not only far more sensibly packaged but also have better sound quality. On some DVDs the sound is set so low that no more than two people, crouched close to the television screen, can hear it. This is presumably done to prevent people watching the DVDs in hospitals or on oil rigs.

8. The packaging of DVDs is frequently awful. We recently bought an expensive set of Poirot DVDs. There is no clue as to what each episode is about. There isn't even a leaflet with details in the box. Why is there no cast list (and sometimes even no running time) printed somewhere inside the box? And why are DVDs so expensive? They must be far, far cheaper to produce than videos. And yet they cost a great deal more. It's claimed that DVDs are smaller and easier to store than tapes. Well, they would be if the damned manufacturers didn't insist on putting them in cases that are three times as thick as they need to be. DVDs are desperately overpackaged. With some sets of films or TV episodes the makers could get all the films onto one disk in one thin box. Instead they put them all into over-complicated, easily broken packaging, put six separate disks into six separate boxes, put the whole into a large cardboard slip case and then shrink wrap it and put a cardboard sleeve on the outside. They then charge a fortune. This is a waste of space, money and time. It is also bad for the environment and is obviously done simply so that the manufacturers can charge more.

9. To give them an excuse to sell the package at an ever higher price they usually include a copy of the theatrical trailer (wow), some still photographs (wow again), a boring interview with the executive producer's agent's brother's best friend, who has always wanted to be a star but is, it is now clear, far better at being the executive producer's agent's brother's best friend than appearing in front of the camera. And they include long, tedious interviews with the man in charge of props, the make-up lady and one of the actors you've never heard of. We no longer watch any of this rubbish, though we have to pay for it.

10. With a DVD it is impossible to see how much of a film is left. On several occasions we have gone to bed and, the next day, spent fifteen minutes finding out where we were when we stopped only to discover that we had stopped the programme with two minutes to go. With a video you could tell at a glance how much of a film was left.

Today, a leaflet fell out of a new DVD case. The leaflet was all about something called `Blu-ray'. This is what the leaflet says: `What equipment do I need to watch Blu-ray? First, check that your television is HD ready (it should say so in the manual or on the box). Almost all new flat screen TVs are now HD ready. Then all you need is a dedicated Blu-ray player or a Playstation 3 and you are ready to watch your favourite movies, television and music on Blu-ray disk in high definition quality. A surround sound system will also make the most of Blu-ray’s groundbreaking audio quality.' So, now they want me to buy a new television set, a new player, a new cable and an entirely new collection of disks. I hope Blu-ray is a total failure. We won't be swapping our DVDs at all. Ever. We have already gone a step too far. I desperately wish we had bought a pile of video players and stuck to our old video collection. Many of my favourite videos simply aren't available on DVD.

6

12.09 p.m.

The pope has criticised our equality laws. Just what it has to do with him is beyond me. And how can a man who has a job for which only a male Catholic can be considered, find the nerve to comment publicly about equality?

14.30 p.m.

I spent some time trying to find out why American writers use the word `gotten' so much. Even the best American writers seem to use it quite frequently. I came across it last night in *Christopher's Ghosts* by Charles McCarry. This is one of the best novels I've read for a long time but McCarry, who writes like a prince, uses the word ‘gotten’ so it must mean something. The first three dictionaries I look at don't include ‘gotten’ but I eventually track it down and discover that it is just another past participle of ‘get’. Although it's not used in English, and is used widely by Americans, it dates back to the Middle Ages and is very Olde Englishe.

15.38 p.m.

A reader has returned a book he asked me to sign complaining that my signature is a disgrace. He says it looks like a scribble and he wants a fresh, unsigned book. I was a GP for ten years and the signature I use for signing books is infinitely more readable than the signature I used for signing prescriptions. I was tempted to send him a note telling him to take the book to the chemist to have it made up. But before I could do this someone at Publishing House had sent him another book.

7
10.52 a.m.
Sorting through a drawer this morning I found a copy of an old article I'd written in the early 1980s for a Sunday tabloid. It was called The X Factor and in it I tried to define the extra factor that makes a star a star. Suggesting that Jack Nicholson had it whereas Terry Wogan didn't I concluded that the X factor is the air of danger that some stars project. It isn't the air of confidence or arrogance often mistaken for star quality. It's never knowing what is coming next; never quite knowing what they're going to do or how they're going to respond to a particular situation. Robert Mitchum and Humphrey Bogart had it in spades. In my view, Tom Cruise, bless his heart for trying, doesn't have an ounce of it.

12.48 p.m.
I hear that a GP with whom I worked when I was young has died. He must have been close to celebrating his century. I often think of him. He was completely ignorant about modern medical practices and knew next to nothing about laboratories, X-ray investigations or pharmacology. But he was the best diagnostician I ever saw. And probably the best doctor too. He knew instinctively when a patient was ill and when he was not. And he had a fierce independence and determination to practice medicine his way. He didn't much care for rules and regulations either. The first time I met him I had arrived at his surgery to collect the addresses of some patients who needed home visits. His car, a huge old-fashioned beast, was parked outside on yellow lines. It was, in truth, parked so badly that it was difficult to tell which side of the road it was parked on. As I passed by I noticed his black doctor's bag was sitting on the back seat of the car. It was open. When I had picked up the addresses I needed I popped into his surgery. `I'm sorry to bother you, sir,' I said. `But your car is open and your bag of drugs is on the back seat.' `Oh, that's nothing to worry about,' he replied with an airy wave of a hand. `But the law...,' I began, with all the moral rectitude of a youth who has studied the regulations. `If you can touch my bag I'll come out and lock the car,' he said. I thought this was silly but when I got outside I stopped at his car and started to reach in. A microsecond later I leapt back as though the hounds of hell were at my throat. Two huge Dobermans, who had been lying, unseen, on the floor at the back of the car, leapt at the window, barking and snarling. No one was going to steal that drug bag. As I walked away I turned and glanced back at the surgery. The old man (and he seemed very old to me back then) was standing at his window looking out towards the car. He smiled and nodded. I smiled and waved. They don't make doctors like him anymore, and I doubt they ever will.

8
11.25 a.m.
The Stanley Gibbons stamp catalogue arrived this morning and I purchased a mint £5 Queen Victoria stamp. I buy a few stamps occasionally and bung them into a box in the bank. One thing puzzles me. A second class stamp now costs 32 pence. Back in Queen Victoria's days it cost 1d to post a letter. This means that the £5 stamp was worth around £400 in postage terms. What on earth did people post that cost so much money? Why did they have £5 stamps? I suspect I will never know the answer to this but it is good to have some unresolved puzzles in life.

9
18.16 p.m.
I bought a beautiful hardback edition of a book called *Peep Show* by Walter Wilkinson in the public library in Wells. It has no dust wrapper but apart from having an ugly `Somerset County Library Cancelled' stamp on the flyleaf in red it is in what an antiquarian bookseller would describe as `very good' condition. I paid 50 pence for it. I read several pages while walking around the city. It is a marvellous book. Wilkinson describes how he toured Devon and the Cotswolds with a puppet show strapped to his bicycle. It is an utterly brilliant book which I had never heard of before. Public libraries are a good place to buy unusual, out of print books. Sadly (for their patrons) they are also an excellent place to buy classic books in excellent condition and at giveaway prices. Within the last few weeks I've bought copies of books by Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, Joseph Conrad and P.G.Wodehouse. All in excellent condition and all for 50 pence each at most. Most public libraries sell their unwanted books at £1 or less and I find that if I am quick I can prevent the librarian stamping something nasty, such as `Discarded', on the title page. I have no idea why librarians feel the need to do this but they do it even on quite valuable first editions. When you ask them not to do it they seem surprised, puzzled that you would not want the discarded stamp - as though they were George Whitman at Shakespeare and Co in Paris offering to stamp your purchases with the shop's famous stamp. And if you remove the plastic wrapper carefully, the underlying dust wrapper is often in excellent condition. I

honestly fear that most librarians know very little about books - and care even less. Like most people in the book trade they'd be just as happy selling tins of dog food or pots of mustard. Sadly, almost every time I enter a public library I am reminded that there is hefty evidence that the one thing that stops people reading books is the snootiness of bookshop assistants and librarians. Just why these people feel snooty is beyond me.

10
17.12 p.m.
A small, independent bookshop has ordered copies of *Alice's Diary* daily for a week. We eventually pointed out, rather timidly and without much hope, that if they took the book they had ordered and a spare then they could put one book on the shelf and they would get a bigger discount. We even said that if they didn't sell the spare book they could send it back for a full refund. `Oh, no thank you,' they said. `We will order as and when we need copies.' And so the lunacy continues. I'm not surprised that small bookshops go bust all the time. (Many bookshops have to be chased for payment so often that there is no profit left in the sale.)

19.21 p.m.
A foreign publisher wants me to fly out to speak to sales representatives. Sadly, I have to refuse. I no longer fly and travelling overland would take too long. I explain that I stopped flying a dozen years ago. The reasons are simple. Airlines have crammed so many seats into their aeroplanes that I get cramp even when sitting in business class. And if travelling alone I always find myself sitting next to a really fat American. The last time I flew I sat next to an American woman with buttocks like twin neighbouring continents and an overhanging stomach which seemed to have such an individual presence that it should have been allocated a separate seat, or, preferably, a separate aircraft, or at least put in the hold with the baggage. She spent the entire flight complaining about the lack of space. I spent it trying to sit on the armrest furthest away from her. It was the only seating space she left me. After that flight I also decided that when you fly it isn't the major bits of travelling which are exhausting but the twiddly bits, the bus, train or taxi from civilisation to the airport, the bus from the airport terminus to the plane, and the same at the other end. Even a dozen years ago the security had reached absurd levels. My luggage was X-rayed so much that I worried about it getting cancer. My Swiss Army Knife spent hours sitting in the hold in a sealed brown paper envelope. (I wonder if they still say: `Have an enjoyable flight’? Why did they say that? Has anyone ever had an enjoyable flight?) These days, if I can't get there by train I don't go.

11
10.18 a.m.
Disappointment always comes in inverse proportion to expectations. One of the sad things about getting older and more experienced is that expectations are kept low. A film company tells me that it wants to make a film of my novel *The Man Who Inherited A Golf Course*. I think this is the fourth or fifth such suggestion and I'll believe it when I see it. My disappointment will be light when nothing happens. Sadly, however, this means that I didn't whoop with joy when the news came in this morning. I can always get properly excited if something does happen and the film is made. On the other hand I never stop trying. Those who try sometimes fail but those who don't try never succeed. And if I keep trying then I suppose that deep down I must still be hoping. I think maybe I'll write a book of aphorisms and call it *Snacks for Thought*.

12
11.38 a.m.
I received a sad letter from a reader who said: `I have a job cleaning people’s houses and in one very dirty house I caught head lice. I can’t seem to get rid of them. I would be willing to pay you whatever you ask. I am desperate. Please, Vernon Coleman, help me. I will pay good money for results.' I also received a letter from a Sri Lankan asking me if I could offer some advice on how to solve the ethnic problem in Sri Lanka, a letter from India asking for my advice on the building of a new hospital and a letter from a reader who said: `I would like to say something about your book *What Happens Next?,* though I have not read it. The reader, from Staffordshire, then went on to discuss the book, which he has heard of but not seen. He criticises me for writing a book I didn't write, and says the book should contain exactly what it does contain. And I have an invitation to speak at the Conservative Monday Club: `Your sentiments most certainly coincide with those of the Conservative Monday Club and we would be delighted to invite you to address the Club, particularly on Gordon Brown’s responsibility for our financial disaster or indeed on any other political subject of your choosing. Naturally we would offer you an excellent meal afterwards.' There is no mention of rail fare or a fee. A reader of my Bilbury novels has sent me a coat of arms which he has created, together with a Bilbury ID card. There is a Latin motto which he assures me is translated as

`Billbury (sic) Always Remembered'. He hopes the coat of arms would be incorporated into the Bilbury Cricket Team sweaters or used on blazer badges. A kind reader says he has just read *Bloodless Revolution* and thinks it is the best book he has read since 1955. He says that if I get imprisoned he will dress up in appropriate clothing and effect my release. He says he is going to photocopy selected pages and distribute them.

12.49 p.m.
I have received an e-mail (marked urgent) from someone wanting me to sign a petition. Their pet kitten has been eaten by their pet python and they want legislation introducing to prevent this happening to anyone else.

14.56 p.m.
I have for some time now been puzzled by the fact that whenever I go into a shop to buy something I have to use a note. I never have any change. I have found out why. I have a large hole in the back pocket where I keep my wallet and loose change. The hole isn't big enough to let the wallet fall through but it is big enough to allow my change to disappear. I have no idea how long the hole has been there, how much money I have redistributed or how many beggars I have made happy.

13
12.03 p.m.
I've been sent a cutting from the *Frome and Somerset Standard* (not a publication which I see regularly). It seems that the EU is keeping a very close eye on things. The newspaper must have published a letter or review of one of my books about the EU because it has now published a letter from a defender of the European Union. The writer says: `Mr Coleman is known in France because he writes nonsense. Dear friend in Frome, please do not listen to this man.' But all is not lost. I have also received a letter from Guernsey's housing minister who writes: `I am at present reading your book *OFPIS*. It's a great title and a fantastic account of what is rotten in British politics and the fraudulent, unelected EU.' He wants to meet for lunch to discuss Guernsey's constitutional position.

14
09.23 a.m.
It is St Valentine's Day.
I wrote a 'pome' for The Princess:
`We will always be together
As long as I shall live
And whatever I shall have
To you I'll gladly give.'

11.16 a.m.
I've decided to write another book about the European Union and to call it *Hitler's Bastard Love Child: The Real inside Story of the European Union*.

12.10 p.m.
In London, in a taxi on the way to St Pancras, we stopped at traffic lights and I watched a policeman photographing a red barrier which lay on the pavement. He was using something that looked like a mobile telephone but might have been some sort of sophisticated police equipment. The barrier was one of three which had been erected around a small hole in the ground. This one had fallen or been knocked over. When he'd finished taking pictures and had sent them off he walked away. He could have lifted the barrier back into position with one hand. It would have taken far less time than taking pictures of it. Instead, he had clearly telephoned for workmen to be sent out to put the barrier back into position. I wondered if it was laziness or some sort of misguided respect for union boundaries. The Princess and I saw something similar in the Wye Valley not long ago. A rock had fallen onto the road. Three men were looking at it and taking measurements. The rock was by itself, not part of a landslide, and any one of the men could have lifted it up and moved it off the road. Instead, it was clear that they were merely assessing the situation and planning a report. I felt confident that men would be sent out in a truck to move the rock off the road. When we returned on the same route about six hours later the rock was still there, though it now had barriers around it. `At least they haven't erected traffic lights,' said The Princess. These incidents reminded me of something that happened in a television studio in Birmingham many years ago. I was making a programme about tranquillisers and had taken to the studio a variety of bottles, all containing benzodiazepines. When I sat down behind the table on which the bottles were arrayed I picked up one of the bottles to turn it round so that the label would be picked up by the

cameras. Suddenly there was a commotion. Someone called the presenter of the programme away from his position next to me. A man in jeans and a T-shirt came over to the table and moved the bottle to the position it had been in before I'd moved it. Moments later the presenter returned. `The chief props man saw you move the bottle,' he said. `You mustn't do that. If you want any of them moving you must ask the director to send a props man onto the set.' He shrugged, as though disclaiming responsibility for this bit of nonsense. `These are all prescription drugs,' I told him. `Since I'm the only qualified doctor here I'm the only person allowed to touch them.' I don't think I've ever seen a presenter grin so broadly. He hurried back across to the director and relayed the message. A couple of minutes later the chief props man came across to tell me that I could move the pills wherever and whenever I wanted. He wasn't being funny, just respectful to another union man.

Generally speaking, today's trade unions are well past their sell-by date. Rather pointless and outdated they have become thuggish; the problem rather than the solution. They exist to preserve their power, and the inequalities and privileges their members enjoy over other members of society. It's not quite what the Tolpuddle martyrs were all about. It was the unions which destroyed Britain's car industry (in particular) and manufacturing industry (in general). Modern unions don't seem to care a stuff about anything but themselves. In the US, the United Steelworkers' Union has filed a complaint with the American Government, claiming that China is giving subsidies to companies producing wind turbines, solar energy products and other things designed to help the country reduce its pollution levels. They seem to think that is a bad thing.

12.35 p.m.
We arrived at St Pancras in good time for our train to Paris. As always I am wearing my MCC tie and a very English hat. Whenever we go to London I wear the most recognisable tie in the world and either a tweed fishing hat, a Grosvenor hat or, in the summer, a Panama hat. I wear these because I believe they reduce my chances of being shot by the police. It is surprising how many people passing through London railway stations still wear jeans and rucksacks. (The other advantage of wearing an MCC tie is that I can get into a cab and know that the driver will take me where I want to go the quickest way. Most cabbies are honest but without the tie I have sometimes been taken on what The Princess calls `sightseeing tours' of London.) It isn't only when travelling abroad that one has to dress carefully these days. In big cities everywhere the trick is to look scruffy enough to be left alone by con men, touristy enough to be left alone by customs men, dull enough to be of no interest to kidnappers and terrorists, poor enough and local enough to be left alone by casual thieves, rich enough to impress hoteliers and restaurateurs, etc. and important enough for the police to think at least once and preferably twice before shooting you.

`Why have you got so much money with you?' asked an impertinent man at the customs. `To buy things with,' I replied, having absolutely no other answer to offer. And that was that. Daft question. Daft answer.

I actually like St Pancras. It has quite an air about it and is infinitely cleaner and smarter than Waterloo ever was. I particularly like the area where we wait after having gone through customs but before going up onto the Eurostar platforms. It is a pleasant no man's land; we are travelling but not travelling.

I am, predictably, less enamoured of the customs area.

I realised that `they' had either gone stark raving mad, or more likely were deliberately exaggerating the fears on the day when a gang of over-muscled airport psychos confiscated my mother's nail file on the grounds that with it she was a threat to the aircraft's safety and security. (If hoodies were to take a nail file that did not belong them it would be called stealing. When government thugs take a nail file that does not belong to them it is called confiscating.) Two minutes after they'd confiscated the nail file my mother bought an identical replacement at the airport shop (conveniently situated on the other side of the check-in desk) and carried it onto the aeroplane with her. She was 83 at the time. My father, who had had his small penknife confiscated, bought a replacement (bigger than the one they'd taken - it was all they had for sale) and took that onto the plane with him too.

As I say, it was then that I realised that the people who are in charge of these things were either just plain stupid or weren't taking the threat as seriously as they pretended to be but were, on the contrary, merely using the so-called threat to try to frighten us.

These days every minor half-hearted terrorist attempt is used as an excuse to tighten security and introduce more intrusive laws. Utterly inept security services on both sides of the Atlantic, and elsewhere, miss every opportunity to catch real terrorists and take every opportunity to frighten, threaten and harass entirely innocent taxpayers. So we travel on trains rather than aeroplanes. Since neither the American Government nor the Israelis have yet flown a train into a skyscraper the security is slightly, just slightly, less intrusive. Anyone who travels within Europe by aeroplane is certifiable. Customs officials are relentlessly rude, deliberately obstructive and unendingly officious. When our fascist Government follows Nazi Germany and modern America and starts building concentration camps they won't have to look far to find recruits to work as guards. The people who man (and woman) the X-ray machines and baggage check-in counters at airports and international railway stations will fit the profile quite nicely, thank you very much; they are the raw material from which concentration camp guards can easily be created. When my travelling bag was last examined at a customs post in England the cretin who was doing the searching called his friend over so that they could go through my things and laugh together. They were picking through my stuff like eager buyers at a jumble sale. When they ordered me to stand back and I asked them, politely, to say `please' they looked at me as if I had suddenly gone stark raving mad. Sometimes, when going through the metal detector at railway stations I go ping. At other times, carrying exactly the same items, I do not. Since explosives and guns are available in plastics the metal detectors are entirely useless anyway.

It is now illegal to make jokes when going through customs. Indeed, travellers have become too frightened to say anything in their own defence. `This isn't a changing room. Get on out of here and take your clothes with you,' shouted a guard as people struggled to put clothes back on after undressing to be searched. Everyone except The Princess and I picked up their clothes and hobbled away obediently. We stood still and quietly continued dressing. No one shot us. No one said anything else. When we'd finished I wandered over to the guard and whispered in his ear: `In two hours' time I will be sitting in Deux Magots with a glass of hot wine. You will still be here frisking sweaty tourists.' There is an air of incompetence that is often palpable. At Ashford station I recently went through a customs check point with two large tins of paint and a fireproof safe in my luggage. I saw the X-ray pictures. No one could have possibly worked out what was there. But no one stopped me. The whole process is devised by people whose reactions make it clear that they are merely using past incidents as an excuse to complicate our lives - and to frighten us all. When a man was found to have potentially exploding shoes the idiots that be responded by instructing all travellers to remove their shoes. What are they going to do when a woman is found with a bomb in her bra? What if someone is found with an explosive suppository? What if a woman packs a bomb into her vagina? Are they really going to start performing rectal and vaginal examinations on all travellers? Actually, it wouldn't surprise me if they did. Sadly, most people would let them. Customs officials have only very recently started to bother asking me to remove my hat during a search. And most of the time they still don't bother.

There is a Caffé Nero in St Pancras station which serves excellent coffee. While we were sitting relaxing, sipping and flicking through magazines, our peace was disturbed by an urgent security tannoy announcement. `A red suitcase has been found abandoned,' said the voice. `Will the owner urgently report to the Eurostar desk.'

`How can someone lose a suitcase?' I asked The Princess. `It's probably one of those people moving house. Ten suitcases piled high on a trolley. They'd never notice if two or three fell off.'

`Do you think they'll blow it up?' asked The Princess.

`If they do then I hope whoever owned it was going away and not going back,' I said. `At least their underwear will be clean.' And I'm afraid we laughed. Oh, how we laughed at the idiots who'd lost a suitcase.

`I think they'll probably take it outside to blow it up,' said The Princess.

`I hope they don't close the station and make us all go out into the street,' I said. `They do that sometimes. I'm sure it's just out of spite.'

`People are stupid,' said The Princess. `Why can't they look after their luggage properly?'

I sipped at my coffee and The Princess reached down and patted her small suitcase as though it were a faithful dog. Because we have clothes and so on in Paris we travel very light. One very small overnight bag each is enough for a few books for the journey and maybe one or two things that we want to take over to the apartment in Paris. `Where's your case?' The Princess asked me, looking around.

I reached down to touch it for reassurance. I looked at the small blue suitcase. `Isn't that mine?'

`No, the blue one is mine. Yours is red.'

`I had it a moment ago when I fetched the coffees.'

`Did you take it with you to the counter?'

`Yes, I just went straight there while you got the seats.' I could feel myself going slightly red as it came back to me. `But I remember now...I couldn't manage the case as well as the drinks. I meant to go back for it.'

`It's definitely red isn't it?'

`Yes I think so. Red.'

The people at the Eurostar counter were very patient and understanding. They asked me what was in it, of course and I then had to open it to prove that it was mine. But they said nothing rude about me losing my case. And nor did they comment about the fact that it contained nothing but books and a well-wrapped painting which The Princess had bought and thought would look rather good in the kitchen of our apartment.

18.38 p.m.

When we arrived in Paris I was sad to see that the mattress maker who occupied a shop two doors away from our building has gone. His shop was empty. He used to stand sewing mattresses, with his door wide open whatever the weather so that he could more easily watch the world go by. I suppose there isn't much of a market these days for hand-made mattresses.

15

11.38 a.m.

A brass band is playing near the Eiffel Tower this morning. It consists of three trombones, three trumpets, three saxophones, three French horns and three drummers. There are also a dozen dancers. Pick up bands are enormously popular in Paris and can be regularly found in the parks around the city. The best usually play in the Tuileries Gardens, in the Place des Vosges, near the fountain in the Place St Michel and on the steps below Sacre Coeur. This is one of the best bands we've seen for a while. We stood and listened for a while before throwing money into the suitably positioned open instrument case and wandering off through the park.

14.23 p.m.

I have postponed old age for as long as I can; putting it off as one puts off having luncheon with someone one suspects one will have to meet eventually but hope that somehow something will come up and make it no longer necessary. But old age is creeping up on me unbidden, unwanted and unexpected but always, damnit, unmistakeable. It started with the eyes. Then the joints. And the stamina. Our apartment is the sixth floor of a building that was erected in around 1860. The lift looks as though it was put in very shortly afterwards. Ten years ago I used to be able to run up the stairs and beat the lift. It was my party piece. When we had visitors I would put them into the lift with The Princess and tell them I had to do something. I would then run up the stairs and be there on the top landing when the lift doors opened. It always produced puzzled looks and exclamations. But slowly the lift has got faster. I cheated for a while by asking The Princess to delay the lift for a minute or so, fumbling with the button in order to give me a flight's start. But the party piece is no more. Today, I am creaking and wheezing while half way up the stairs. So I use the lift.

16.12 p.m.

One of the two phones in our apartment is not working. I called into a telephone shop to ask for a replacement fixed line telephone. The shop is empty of customers (which is unusual for a mobile phone shop in the last year or two) and to my delight they have one or two fixed line phones for sale. The assistant is shocked and even distressed that I want to buy a simple, cheap phone that just plugs in and doesn't allow me to wander around without a cord, doesn't have enough memory to capture the telephone numbers of everyone in France and doesn't stop working when the electricity supply is interrupted (and involve yet another lead). He looks shifty and unreliable; the sort of person who steals coat hooks from public lavatories. Eventually, he goes into a back office and emerges, five minutes later, with a box which he is dusting off. He hands it to me. I buy it and take it home. Inside is a phone which still has an extensive memory but which takes batteries. There are three batteries heat sealed in a packet. The phone takes four batteries. And the little compartment won't open. My screwdriver destroys the screw. So I have to break open the compartment with a penknife. (I have taken to throwing away these silly little plastic doors anyway). The phone itself is made of cheap plastic and if I drop it then it will break. (I know this is true because when I threw it at the wall a little later it broke.) The little compartment is made of the indestructible stuff they use when making the black box to put in an aeroplane. Eventually, I plug it all in. There is a manual the size of the Bible. It doesn't work. There's a problem with the line not the telephone. Fortunately we have a fax line which we can use for making calls. Exhausted I decide to take the easy option. I ring the telephone company and cancel the line that doesn't work.

18.29 p.m.

An Australian who lives in our street in Paris says he is learning French. His problem, however, is that he is learning it from a course designed for travellers and so the vocabulary he has acquired is more suited for tourists staying in hotels than for residents dealing with unruly plumbing. He says he is constantly fighting the urge to match his lifestyle to fit the bits of French he has learned. So, when going into an ironmonger's shop the other day he found himself wanting to ask the owner's wife for a pillow and a bar of soap because those were the only words he knew. He really wanted a screwdriver and a roll of insulation tape and ended up wandering around the shop until he found what he wanted. He tried doing some mime to explain to the owner’s wife that he needed a screwdriver but stopped when the owner turned up and glowered at him. The ironmonger, unlike most Frenchmen, is well over six feet tall and built like a prop forward. He is also very possessive.

16

10.29 a.m.

Down in the cellars of our building we have a small room or `cave' where we can store stuff we don't need but don't want to throw away. We have learned from one of our neighbours that we are using the wrong ‘cave’. Wondering if the notaire made a mistake when the papers were drawn up I take a look at the deeds to the apartment. To my surprise I discover that we are indeed using the wrong ‘cave’. We agree to swap and since we aren't using our ‘cave’ at the moment we hand over our key to the neighbour. He agrees to clear out his ‘cave’ and let us have his key before he leaves for his home in the country.

13.12 p.m.
I needed to send an urgent e-mail to an American friend who lives in Thailand but runs a Web-based business from his American home in New Hampshire. I couldn't receive any e-mails from him in Paris because my iPhone had turned into a paperweight. He doesn't have a fax machine in Thailand, so earlier today I sent a fax to his office in America asking his staff there to scan in my fax and e-mail it to him. Now, my iPhone has suddenly started working again. I have just found an e-mail from him. At the top it says: `I am sending this emboldened and in larger type and capital letters so that you may be able to read it.' I rather like this. It is, I suppose, the technological equivalent of shouting at a foreigner.

14.07 p.m.
We have to take a short trip out to St Germain en Laye. A group of rather frightening looking youths got onto the train and start to chat up The Princess who is much younger than I am, and looks younger than she is. They were about 18 or 19-years-old and heavily tattooed. One was carrying and swinging a long, heavy metal chain. I knew that The Princess was frightened. Wisely she did not let this show. I have long known that you cannot be brave unless you are first afraid. It follows that only the weak, nervous and afraid know how to be really strong. I have never known anyone more nervous than The Princess and I have never known anyone braver. In her heart she is like a nervous kitten but in a tough situation I have never known anyone stronger. I pointed out politely in halting French that they were chatting up my wife. To my astonishment the youth with the chain looked genuinely embarrassed and ashamed. He apologised profusely then bowed his head slightly. His friends then all apologised in turn and moved away down the train. I cannot imagine that the situation could possibly have been dealt with so easily in Britain. When it becomes clear that the energy is running out in Britain (as it will within a year or two), France will be high on the list of places to live.

17
12.55 p.m.
An English friend of The Princess's arrives for lunch. Vanda has a job in the fashion industry and like many almost but not quite famous people wears dark glasses even in cloudy weather and indoors in the hope that people will stare at her, wonder who she is and suspect that she might perhaps be someone really famous. She speaks French with what she believes is a very posh accent. I don't speak much French at all. (Like most Englishmen I am frozen by the fear of sounding like a foreigner when I speak another language. I want to get things right and am terrified of sounding like Poirot speaking English. The French make this fear worse by correcting every second word I say. I have found that it is much more satisfactory to make them speak English. I then take great delight in correcting their pronunciation and grammar. Since all French people believe they are brilliant linguists this annoys them enormously.) I once made Vanda very angry by telling her that she spoke French with an Algerian accent.

Vanda says that she has attended a first aid course and been taught that it is wrong to put a tourniquet on a bleeding limb. When I show surprise Vanda tells me that I am out of date and that tourniquets have been banished to that deep dark place where leeches are kept. She says that the way to stop bleeding is to apply firm pressure with a clean pad. I tell her that hospitals have started using leeches again, agree that firm pressure is an excellent way to stop bleeding but suggest that there are times when a tourniquet is the only way to save a patient's life. `You arrive at a road accident,' I say. `You are the only person there. The driver is alone. He is bleeding from a severed radial artery and is unconscious. You suspect a serious internal injury. Your mobile telephone doesn't work because you are in a valley in the countryside. You need to stop the bleeding from his arm but you need help. It is a quiet day and there is no other traffic on the road. What do you do?' This proves to be an insoluble dilemma for Vanda. If she relies on applying pressure then she may have to wait there for hours and the driver could die. If she leaves him to fetch help then he will bleed to death. Vanda doesn't know what she would, or should, do. `The answer,' I tell her, `is to apply a forbidden tourniquet and run for help.'

18
10.19 a.m.
I find the key to our new ‘cave’ in our mailbox and trot down to the cellars to check that the key works and that the

‘cave’ is empty. To my horror I find that the ‘cave’ is nearly full of rubbish. There is an old mattress, a bedstead, several pieces of broken furniture, an empty suitcase with a broken lock and all sorts of other bits of rubbish in there. I go back upstairs and knock on the neighbours’ door. His wife opens the door and when I protest she shrugs, tells me that her husband has a bad back and slams the door in my face. It takes us much of the day to clear the rubbish. Fortunately, all we have to do is drag it up the cellar stairs, through the hallway and out onto the pavement. The dustmen will take it all away. In Paris it isn't even necessary to pay or to telephone anyone to arrange this. Put out your rubbish and it just disappears. While we are clearing out someone else's rubbish the couple to whom it previously belonged walk past us. Monsieur is carrying two large suitcases and a bag of golf clubs and doesn't seem to be troubled too much by his back. His wife scowls and snarls something incomprehensible as she has to clamber over their old mattress which is still in the hallway. Monsieur turns round and pauses and shrugs. `You are much younger,' he says.

This is the second time I've felt slightly cheated by people in the building. When we bought the apartment we had to meet the previous owner in the offices of the notaire so that we could all sign the relevant documents. I asked the widow from whom we were buying if she would be leaving the fixtures and fittings - bathroom cabinets, light fittings and so on. The notaire and the woman selling the apartment looked at me as if I were mad. `Of course!' they both said. `Do people in England take these things?' I admitted that they sometimes did and that it wasn't unknown for doors, television aerials, skirting boards and lawns to disappear with the removal van. Everyone laughed at this and thought it a huge joke. I was assured that the woman selling was a very wealthy and successful and a well-known Parisian businesswoman who could be relied upon entirely. When we finally obtained the keys we found that the wretched woman had taken all the cabinets and light fittings and had even removed the toilet roll holder. She'd left behind her rubbish, too. Classy.

14.15 p.m.
While The Princess was busy in the kitchen I popped to the supermarket to buy groceries. There were boy scouts at the check-out helping to pack customers' food, whether they were asked to or not. The scout who packed my purchases put all the soft, vulnerable foods (tomatoes, eggs, yoghurt and so on) at the bottom of my bag and all the heavy stuff (tins) on the top. I gave him a tip for this. Next time I will give him some money before he starts packing and tell him to go and buy himself an ice cream.

16.17 p.m.
I receive a message to say that a friend of mine has died. K was a surgeon and he was special for a number of reasons. He was unusual in that he smoked 60 cigarettes a day. But he was special because he cared desperately about his patients. Everyone who worked with him loved him and his patients loved him too. He did not suffer fools gladly and was constantly in trouble with the authorities. I remember that when he was a registrar in Birmingham he was instructed to attend court. I can't remember what it was about but K's part in the case was fairly insignificant. He stayed there all morning, sitting on a bench in a hallway, and by lunchtime he'd had enough of waiting so he went back to the hospital to start his operating list. At just after 3 p.m. in the afternoon a policeman came to arrest him and take him to court. The policeman didn't even allow K to stop and change out of his surgical greens. When K arrived in court, with blood stains all over his arms and chest and with his boots spattered with blood, the judge went apoplectic. `What have you been doing?' demanded the officious judge. `I was operating on a patient,' replied K. `Where is the patient now?' asked the judge. `Still on the operating table,' replied K. `Bleeding to death.' The judge went very red and told the police to take K straight back to his operating theatre. They never did call him back to give evidence.

19
17.19 p.m.
We met an American acquaintance and took him by bus to Notre Dame. He had never been in Paris before and does not speak any French at all. He is the only fat person in the world who doesn't have problems with his genes, his hormones or his glands. `I'm fat because I eat too much,' he admits, though it is more of a reckless boast than an admission. `I'm greedy.' On the bus he pointed to a sign which says `Ne laissez pas votre bras depasser a l'exterieur' and asked me what it meant. I told him it means: `Don't dangle your bra outside the bus'. `Wow,' he said with a grin. `These French really are something else aren't they? I can't wait to tell the guys back home about that one.' Thus are myths started.

20
19.10 p.m.

We meet a man I know who is travelling through Paris. He lives in Spain where he works as a doctor. He has a private practice and specialises in providing medical care for expatriates and tourists. He is the only person I know to have cut himself while putting a plaster onto someone else. He was trying to cut a piece from a strip of sticking plaster and cut himself with the scissors. When he lived in England he once lacerated his scalp trying to pick apples in his own small orchard. Unable to reach the highest apples he put a children's trampoline under the tree and tried bouncing up and down on it so that he could grab at the apples and toss them to his wife. He became increasingly angry at the fact that his wife kept dropping the apples he threw (and therefore bruising them just as much as they had fallen naturally from the tree), lost concentration and hit his head hard on a stout branch. He needed six stitches for that one and was so embarrassed that he told everyone at the hospital that he had hit his head on a low doorway in his local pub. I also remember that for several months he used an aftershave which smelt of chemicals. It was only when his wife insisted on examining the aerosol can he was using that she found out that he was using insecticide. `It says perfumed on the can,' he pointed out. `In big letters.' His wife, who was an emotionally blowsy woman, left him three years ago and he moved to Spain. The Princess and I agreed that we had never seen him looking happier. We asked him if he had a girlfriend and he said that he hadn't but that he had bought a Great Dane puppy and that he loved it very much.

21
10.12 a.m.
Back in England, I'm having bank trouble again. Do they deliberately employ the most stupid people they can find (running, perhaps, inverse intelligence tests before making appointments) or do the people who work for the banks *become* stupid? One of our banks insists on taking money twice when I buy shares. This causes not inconsiderable problems and I am currently refusing to pay the overdraft charges they are threatening me with since the account in question only became overdrawn through their stupidity. Still, my problems are as nothing compared to those my poor Dad endured after my mother died. He had endless problems with the banks and building societies with whom they had joint accounts and more than one stupid youth wrote him patronising letters telling him that if they were to take my mum's name off the account they would need her signature. It was, they explained, all for his own protection and to protect the country from money laundering and terrorism. When I sorted through his desk, I saw several letters my Dad had written in which he had enclosed copies of his diminishing pile of death certificates only to be told that the bank wouldn't accept a death certificate. They insisted that they needed my Mum's signature even though they knew she was dead. In the end my Dad, who was the most law-abiding citizen you could ever hope to find, was reduced to forging my Mum’s signature on their damned forms. He got quite good at it, he confessed. (If the banks or police want to interview him about this he is currently sprinkled on Budleigh Salterton beach and if they want to interview anyone about that they are welcome.) I was also shocked to see how many threatening letters he had received. There were threats from the Government, the council, the police, the television licensing people and just about everyone else you can think of. I am so accustomed to receiving threatening letters from pompous, self-important people that I don't take all that much notice of them. But it was depressing to see what awful mail my elderly father had received in his final months.

In 1939 my Dad was told he could not join the Navy because he was in a protected occupation. So he resigned from his job and joined the Navy as a regular sailor. He signed up for 12 years to fight for his country.

22
12.14 p.m.
An acquaintance who can't obtain gainful employment and therefore works for the BBC has confirmed to me that the State broadcasting organisation erased numerous great radio and television programmes because a nameless, and presumably brainless, accountant thought the organisation would save money by reusing the tapes for other programmes. And so much of *Hancock* and *Dr Who* was rubbed out to provide space for more episodes of *Eastenders*. *Paul Temple*, *The Goons* and great sporting events were wiped clean to save pennies. In years of vandalism inspired by parsimony, the BBC destroyed heaven knows how many television and radio classics. Irreplaceable live recordings were destroyed simply so that the tape could be reused to record something else. Vast quantities of the nation's cultural heritage were deliberately destroyed by the same penny pinching executives whose extravagance knows no bounds and who waste millions of our money on champagne and taxis. Sending a handful of executives on unpaid holiday for a month or two would have saved enough to have secured the future of television and radio recordings that would, over the years, have probably earned enough money to cut the licence fee in half. Taxpayers have lost much joy and vast amounts of money because of the stupidity of one minor bureaucrat. And yet these days the organisation is constantly thinking up new ways to waste vast quantities of public money.

23
14.45 p.m.
We bought some electronic voice operated software made in Japan. We tried for ages to make it work. And then The Princess had a brilliant idea. She spoke into it with a silly faux Japanese accent. It understood every word. I don't think I would believe this if someone told me it had happened to them. But it's true. We didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. So we laughed.

24
13.50 p.m.
I was talking to a person at a bank today. The conversation went like this:

Bank: `For security reasons can you give me your mother's maiden name?'

Me: `Yes. But for security reasons I don't want to give you the whole name over the phone. Please ask me letters from it.'

Bank: `I don't understand.'

Me: `Rather than me giving you the whole name, you ask me to give you, say, the first and last letters in the name.'

Bank (after much thought): `OK. What are the letters in your mother's maiden name.'

15.16 p.m.
The Chinese have executed a man who abused his position of responsibility in their equivalent of the civil service. This seems to me to be a splendid idea.

25
12.11 p.m.
I received a letter from a doctor in India who is preparing to perform a delicate brain operation. He wants my advice on how best to proceed. He says he is using textbooks to guide him but that they are rather out of date. The letter is typed on hospital notepaper and it appears to be genuine. A newspaper journalist has sent me a list of questions which start with `Why is Michael Moore famous and you are not?' And a reader from Wales who says `I have read widely on the subject of politics and international affairs. I must take issue with you over your occasional description of the regime which operates this multicultural, liberty denying, drugs inducing, Negro apotheosizing, homosexual promoting, miscegenation encouraging, anti-Royal and morally degenerate society as fascist. No, Dr Coleman, you are decidedly incorrect to use the term `fascist' which falls readily from the lips of our liberal/Marxist ruling `elite' to describe whomsoever they deem to be opponents or hostile to their governance and policies.' I write back pointing out that I have always taken my definition of fascism from Mussolini and that since he invented fascism his is the only definition which counts. Yah boo sucks.

15.16 p.m.
`Youth and ethnicity can be an author's most valuable assets these days,' said the *Financial Times* recently. Looking good on camera and being prepared to do anything to promote a book are also high on the list of essentials. The Princess suggests that I hire an out of work, 25-year-old, foreign actor to take my next MSS to a publisher and to pretend to be me. I think she's joking but it isn't a bad idea.

26
15.11 p.m.
I spent another four hours replying to reader mail. One reader has sent me a huge typescript. I can hardly lift it. I have to wrap it up and send it back with a note explaining that like a lot of authors I never look at unpublished manuscripts (scared that something might seep into the brain and then come out again 10 years later) though I always read published stuff people send me and don't need returning. Another reader sent me a letter telling me how much she loves my books. She adds in a P.S. `Please don't tell anyone about this letter.' A reader from Middlesbrough says she enjoyed Mrs Caldicot's adventures and wants to know if she lived happily ever after. I write and explain that there is a follow-up book called *Mrs Caldicot's Knickerbocker Glory*. I have a feeling that this reader doesn't realise that Mrs Caldicot is a figment of my imagination but believes her to be real. In a way she is. I had other plans for Mrs Caldicot when I started to write the first book. But Thelma took over and insisted on doing things her way. Quite right too. A kind reader sent me an article of mine from 1968. She found it among her husband's papers. A reader from Coventry says she is defeated by all the dishonesty and crookery and the fact that those responsible never seem to be punished. And a very generous reader, who knows of my affection for the work

of Henry David Thoreau, has sent The Princess and I a sumptuous edition of Thoreau's *Walden*. I am not sure it quite fits in with Thoreau's love of simple things but bugger that, it’s a beautiful book. It is without a doubt the best Folio Edition book I have ever seen. I also received three letters which all started with the same words: `I know you don't reply to personal mail but...'. The first, a teenage schoolboy, wanted me to tell him how best he can stop vivisection. The second, a woman, wanted me to tell her whether or not to have her cat vaccinated. And the third (hiding behind an e-mail address that looks like one of the passwords the tax people hand out) wants me to become a trustee of a charity which has aims which don't seem entirely clear even though I read them twice. I tell the second that I am afraid I don't give clinical advice to animals or humans and the first that the best advice I can give him is in my four books on vivisection which should be in his school library because I sent copies to every school library in the country and I tell the third that I am afraid I never accept positions of responsibility.

21.12 p.m.
I've been reading an excellent biography of Jacques Tati, one of my film heroes. In the film world an auteur is someone who writes, shoots, directs, edits, produces and distributes his own movies. Auteurs are the cream of the film profession. Directors such as Tati, Roger Corman, Jean-Luc Godard and Russ Meyer realised that if they controlled everything themselves then they would have complete artistic freedom. Lots of actors now produce, direct in and star in their own films and television programmes. It's considered a brilliant thing to do. It's nothing new. Chaplin, Pickford and Fairbanks started United Artists a million years ago. Musicians who start their own music label are praised. Racing drivers who run their own teams are revered. In every walk of life artists and sportsmen who take control over production as well as creation are applauded. But in the snobby world of publishing an author who also publishes and distributes is regarded as a failure; someone to be ignored and sneered at as self-indulgent. I hope this changes one day (and I have a suspicion that it will) because most modern publishing is controlled by faceless bureaucrats working for industrialised conglomerates. I've sold several million books around the world since I began self-publishing but I'm confident that although I had a successful career with `official' publishers in my previous publishing life, many of my recent, successful books would have never been published by any of the conglomerates. I don't believe any `proper' British publisher would have brought out books such as *OFPIS*, *Living in a Fascist Country* or *Gordon is a Moron*. The men and women in grey suits would, quite simply, have been too scared to have such books on their lists. When I first began self-publishing my books were quite widely reviewed - accepted as an oddity. But when it became clear that my books were actually out-selling many of the books produced by `big' publishers the reviews dried up. And when I started buying large quantities of advertisements for my books the publishers banned my adverts from their newspapers and magazines. The establishment looks after itself very carefully and the publishing establishment doesn't like the idea of anyone threatening the status quo. (Though editors at big publishers seem happy enough to nick our book ideas.) Journalists and others protect the system because the system works well for them too. They get armfuls of free books and eventually they may be rewarded by having their own slim volume brought out. Writing is the loneliest business there is. But self-publishing is the loneliest form of writing. The Princess has a solution. She said that `privately printed' sounded better than self-published. And I think she's probably right. Either that or `independently published'.

22.01 p.m.
The Princess is writing a book about Wales and has discovered that the traditional Welsh costume (tall black hats, red shawls and plenty of petticoats) was actually invented in the 19th century by a woman who was born Augusta Waddington to English parents (and who later became Lady Llanover). Add this to the fact that David Lloyd George was born in Manchester and Welsh Nationalism looks very insipid. Mind you, as we discovered when we were writing our books on English history, Lawrence of Arabia was born in Wales. I wonder how many people know that?

27
11.56 a.m.
Many online bookshops allow customers to post reviews online and to give the books they sell star ratings. This is utterly absurd. Many of the reviews which are written are prejudiced. Some are written by people who admit, quite openly, that they have never even read a copy of the book they are `reviewing' but are either making assumptions about it or are using the opportunity to express their views on the subject of the book. Here's a real review I spotted on Amazon: `I haven't read this book but I don't like the subject or the author so I don't think I'll like it.' (This wasn't about one of my books - though I've suffered equally damaging but pointless remarks.) The writer of the review gave the book one star (the lowest possible) thereby knocking down the book's overall rating. Casual browsers would see the rating but probably not the review behind it. I find it difficult to see just how this sort of prejudiced

nonsense helps authors, readers, publishers or Amazon.

Amazon is also destroying authorship as a profession by allowing private individuals (such as journalists who have been sent books to review) and small, professional booksellers to sell brand new, newly published books online for as little as a penny each. (The sellers make their money by charging considerably more for postage and packing than that service actually costs.) This practice destroys the author's chances of making any money because when even brand new books are available second-hand for pennies publishers are not going to be able to sell many books at full price (or, even, at a discounted price).

The problem, I suspect, is that most of the people involved in the bookselling business these days don't give a fig about books. They would be just as happy selling cat food or hairdryers. A few decades ago people went into publishing, bookselling and librarianship because they loved books. No more. Publishing and book selling are now simply trades. The people involved would be selling beans or socks if the profit margins were better. I care desperately about books because they have been my life. Most writers are not professionals. They have other jobs (as journalists, editors, teachers and reviewers to pay their bills) and their earnings as writers are often modest and often well below the national minimum wage. I have been a professional, freelance writer for 30 years since I gave up practising medicine and for 20 years I've published my own books. Throughout that time I have earned my living entirely by my pen, my typewriter and my computer. I care passionately about books.

17.12 p.m.
I have been invited to give a lecture in Scotland. `We only want 45 minutes of your time,' says the letter of invitation. But it isn't just 45 minutes, of course. It will take me a day to travel to Scotland and a day to travel back. It will take me more than a day to prepare a 45-minute lecture. There will be travel expenses and hotel expenses. And all the time Publishing House will be running up the costs at £75 an hour. Naturally, the invitation doesn't mention a fee or any expenses. Meanwhile, if I don't write something new to sell there will be nothing to put in the next catalogue. Self-publishing has grown into something of a treadmill. If I give the lecture I will have to find some more hours for working and I'm already working about twice the number of legal hours every week. If I ever decide to report myself to the EU I will be in serious trouble. I send the usual `I'm sorry I cannot come' reply to the invitation and as usual feel bad about it. It occurs to me that many of the people who invite me to speak are academics or civil servants or corporate employees who will be paid their salaries when travelling or speaking at public meetings. I have never earned a salary (and have never wanted to) but there are times when it puts me at a disadvantage. The problem, I suspect, is that people with salaries simply don't understand how my world works.

18.01 p.m.
House prices are still absurd. Greed has been rewarded and sustained by the absurdly low interest rates introduced because Gordon the Moron wanted to save the housing market to minimise his losses at the election. His last present to the nation was, therefore, an accelerating and enduring depression. House prices are going to do one of three things: they are going to crash by 50% or so, they are going to drift downwards over the next few years or they are going to remain stable while inflation eats away at their value. I firmly believe that there aren't going to be many house owners making a real capital gain out of their homes in the next decade. We discuss the possibility of waiting for a possible crash before buying a new house but decide that we can afford to miss the crash but cannot afford to risk missing another summer. We have to find a new house, with a decent sized garden before next spring. To make things easier for ourselves we aren't going to sell our current UK home until we've moved. We'll then decide whether to sell it, rent it out or keep it for storing books.

The two most important things in life are time and space. You can buy some of the former by reducing your workload and cutting your expenditure on non-essentials. But the only way you can buy more space (and the privacy that goes with it) is by spending more money or moving to an area where the same amount of money buys you more.

We want a detached, period house with a little space and plenty of quiet. We want to live where there is no hamburger restaurant, where there are no pit bulls pulling along tattooed hoodies and where the nearest parlour advertising tattooing and genital piercings is a long train ride away. And we want a house not a flat. In a building occupied by twelve families there is always going to be one cooking curry, one on night duty coming in at daybreak, one woman who is a screamer when she has an orgasm and one bastard who does DIY with an electric drill at 3 in the morning. We don't want to live near a town which has more charity shops than regular stores.

One of our few specific requirements is that our new home has at least one and preferably two working fireplaces. As the oil runs out and energy supplies become intermittent so it will be increasingly important to be able to heat a home, and to cook, without outside help. For similar reasons we also want a few trees so that we can at least pick up our own kindling, and enough land to be able to grow a little food. And we would like a private water supply too. If there is no spring or borehole then a small stream passing through would be a bonus. We want a house to look after us. We don't want to buy a house which is going to need us to look after it all the time.

I have always argued that I do things for three reasons: to try to change the world, for fun and to make money. The money is for buying freedom (and for having fun and trying to change the world). But it is also for buying time and space and in the new cruel and dangerous world that means buying a little freedom from the authorities. For example, we now need to buy a garden big enough to have a decent bonfire and, if necessary, to bury our rubbish. The increasingly absurd rules about rubbish disposal make it essential that we find a place where we can gain independent control over what happens to our waste paper, unwanted magazines and redundant bits of packaging. So, one of the priorities for our house search is that there be enough space for a bonfire.

We are getting weary of the pointless, time-wasting little tricks estate agents try. They take photographs of a house that makes it look detached and it's only when you get there, or have spent 20 minutes finding a map of the area on an Internet search, that you realise that it's connected to its next door neighbour. Or they send details of a marvellous looking house and then, when you scour the details you discover that you're being offered a small part of the house and that the rest of it belongs to someone who runs a kennels and a nursery and a motor cycle repair shop.

They don't tell you about the petrol station, sewage works, campsite, school or pig farm next door. Indeed, they actually try to hide the existence of something you will see the moment you visit. This is stupid and I cannot believe anyone is ever deceived by such simple trickery into buying a property.

This morning, an estate agent sent us particulars for a new property by e-mail. It was a two bedroom terraced cottage for which they were asking £1,000,000. I sent an e-mail suggesting that even by their standards this seemed a trifle overpriced. I received a reply apologising and explaining that they had sent the particulars for the wrong property. I'm not entirely sure that I believe them. I suspect they might have been simply trying it on.

Moving house is one of the most stressful things any of us do. It's especially stressful when you want to buy, rather than rent. Everyone - estate agents, bankers, etc. - seem determined to make the whole thing as stressful and as complicated as they possibly can. Moving house is like childbirth. If people could remember just how painful it is they would never do it twice. And it isn't just the technical business of buying that is tiring; the looking is a miserable business too.

The world is full of people such as undertakers, divorce lawyers and emergency plumbers who earn their living out of charging huge fees from people too consumed by sadness or distress to notice the price until it is too late (and who deliberately overcomplicate everything they touch in order to maximise their profits). But estate agents still come top of everyone's hate list. I'm not surprised. They well deserve to be the most hated trades people on the planet. We travelled 50 miles to see yet another house whose owners had greedily sold a big chunk of their garden for development. A once smart Edwardian house, sitting neatly on its land, is now sharing its plot with a hideous building which looks as if it must have been designed by someone who usually designs council buildings or multi-storey car parks.

The Princess said that we should sue the agents for wasting our time.

We saw a decent enough house two days ago. It wasn't perfect but it was reasonably well built and had a decent garden. But the asking price was absurd. It was so overpriced that even the estate agent seemed embarrassed. We made an offer. They turned it down. `The people living there want enough money to buy a smaller house and a villa in Spain,' he said. `They think they need another £100,000 for this house to buy what they need.'

He made us feel bad about our offer but we didn't like the house enough to go any higher. We then successfully talked ourselves out of liking it. The agent rang back today. He says his clients will now take our offer. We told him that we were very sorry but that we no longer wanted to buy it.

28
09.12 a.m.

My father was an inventor, company director and World War II naval veteran. He died on February 28th 2008. He was 87-years-old. The inquest into his death was held on 16th November 2009 in Exeter. Although the inquest was held at my request I did not attend. I am still haunted by his death.

On the morning of 5th February 2008 my father telephoned Dr Benjamin Hallmark at Budleigh Salterton Medical centre. My father was, according to Dr Hallmark, complaining of excruciating pain. But instead of visiting my father, Dr Hallmark simply told him to call 999.

I believe that if Dr Hallmark had visited, my father might have still been alive today. I believe that a GP has a duty to visit patients who call for help. (Even if an ambulance is also considered necessary.) If Dr Hallmark had visited he might have decided that my father did not need to go to hospital.

My father was taken to Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital where he was given extensive tests. No serious or new problems were found and the admitting consultant considered sending my father home again. He decided, however, to keep him in overnight. I know this because I was standing by my father's bedside at the time. My father was quite well. The pain was caused by a long-standing back problem. My father was sitting up in bed taking a very active interest in what was happening.

Unfortunately, the ward to which my father was sent had an outbreak of gastroenteritis. The ward was put in quarantine and no one could leave. My father caught the bug at least twice. He also contracted a chest infection and a urinary infection while in the Royal Devon and Exeter hospital. He naturally became weaker and frail. I rang him and the hospital staff several times a day and eventually managed to arrange for my father's release. Because two weeks in hospital (and a number of hospital infections) had made him too ill to go home I arranged for him to spend a week or so convalescing in the Cranford Nursing Home (close to his home in Exmouth). He went to the nursing home on 22nd February. The hospital had prescribed a regime to control his pain and given him an outpatient appointment for further investigations of his long-term respiratory problem. I was told that after admission to the nursing home my father was walking about and laughing and joking with the nurses.

On 25th February the nursing home staff called for my father's doctor. My father was again complaining of pain.

The doctor who called on Dr Hallmark's behalf, was a GP registrar, Dr Stuart Livingston. He prescribed Oramorph (morphine) for my father. The manufacturers of Oramorph state clearly that the drug should not be given to patients with severe respiratory problems. Dr Livingston stated in his report to the coroner, in support of his action, that he believed that the contraindication was relative rather than an absolute one. The manufacturer of the drug, however, made it clear that the contradiction is absolute. The company making Oramorph wrote to me on 16th June 2008 and told me: `...the use of Oramorph is contraindicated in any patients with respiratory depression or obstructive airways disease regardless of age.' My father had chronic obstructive pulmonary disease - a serious respiratory problem.

Dr Livingston suggested that prescribing Oramorph is acceptable in `end stage' respiratory disease. But my father was not `end stage' anything. I don’t believe that Dr Livingston had met my father before he prescribed Oramorph for him.

I hadn't been able to visit my father for a couple of days (I had a bad cold and didn't want him to catch it) but I rang him regularly in the nursing home.

When I rang him on the morning of 27th February my father was having great difficulty in breathing. He also kept falling asleep. Suspecting that my father's drug regime had been changed I spoke to a nursing home employee called Martin and discovered that my father had been given morphine (Oramorph). I was horrified. I have spent much of my professional life investigating the dangers of prescription drugs. I discussed the situation and the person I spoke to (Martin) agreed with my opinion that if my father had another dose of the morphine it would kill him. I asked Martin to make sure my father was not given any more morphine and said I would take full responsibility for this.

I rang my father in the afternoon. The morphine had worn off and my father was much better. He was alert and not breathless. He was talking and breathing as well as he had been for some while. I said I would visit him the following morning. We discussed the morphine. I told him that I would take him some scientific papers showing that the drug was not safe for him to take. We were planning a trip to one of his favourite hotels to celebrate his birthday the following week. But at around 8pm that evening someone at the nursing home gave my father another dose of Oramorph (morphine) as prescribed by Dr Livingston.

At about 8.15 p.m. to 8.30 p.m. a nurse rang me on my mobile phone to tell me that my father was a bad colour and was having difficulty in breathing. (The nursing home telephone records should prove this call was made). The nurse asked when I was visiting. I said I would be there the next day. I asked if I needed to visit immediately. (It would have taken me a couple of hours to get there). The nurse said she thought the next morning would be all right. She was wrong.

On my way to the nursing home the following day I was telephoned to say that my father had died.

I believe that my father would not have died if he had not been prescribed Oramorph by Dr Livingston. The drug was clearly contraindicated. And my father, an elderly man, was especially vulnerable.

And I also believe that if Dr Hallmark had visited, instead of simply telling my father to ring for an ambulance, my father might not have needed to be admitted either to the hospital or, as a result of the hospital admission, to the Cranford Nursing Home.

I decided that there was no point in attending the inquest because the coroner, Dr Earland, had informed me that she had already decided (before the inquest) that Oramorph did not cause my father's death. She also decided not to have witnesses whom I considered vital at the inquest. (The two members of the nursing home staff to whom I had spoken about the Oramorph.)

As a registered GP and the author of numerous books on prescription drug toxicity, I firmly believe that my father's death was caused by Oramorph, and could have been avoided.

Prescription drugs are one of the top killers in Britain today. The wrong drug can kill a patient - particularly an elderly patient - as surely as a bullet. The medical profession as a whole still underestimates the problem - even though doctor-induced illness is now the third biggest killer in Britain. One in six patients in hospital is there because he or she has been made ill by a doctor.

I made a formal complaint to the General Medical Council about Dr Hallmark and Dr Livingston. To my dismay the GMC agreed with my father's GPs that any contradiction for the use of Oramorph in COPD patients is relative rather than absolute. They apparently ignored the fact that the drug company which makes Oramorph has an absolute ban on the use of the drug with COPD patients. The drug company stated that Oramorph is contraindicated in any patients with obstructive airways disease. I asked the GMC to explain why the defending GPs' views were considered more relevant than the manufacturer's advice. They refused to answer. And they refused to consider evidence from the professional witnesses who observed the effect of the Oramorph on my father.

If I was astonished by that judgement I was utterly dumbstruck by their decision that it is standard practice for GPs to advise patients living alone, and in excruciating pain, to be advised to call an ambulance and wait for the ambulance to arrive. That's medical care in Britain in the 21st century. I think it stinks. I don't know what my Dad thinks about it. He's dead.

Some months ago I started writing a book about my father's death. But the book has grown and changed (as my books always seem to do). It is becoming a different book: a book explaining what is wrong with the health service and why doctors and nurses no longer care for their patients in the way they should. It occurred to me this morning that there is one massive reason for the current problems: doctors working for the health service have changed their allegiance. A doctor who works for the Government is a civil servant, his obligations and responsibilities are split. A doctor who works as a freelance medical adviser is bought and paid for by his patients. They give him money to look after them. The relationship is simple. But a doctor who is paid by the Government has two masters: the patient and the people who pay him (the Government). I believe it is because of this that doctors now promote unsafe vaccines and withhold treatments they know are necessary. The Government (through its administrators) now controls all doctors working for it. And so patients get a raw deal. As the gospel of St Matthew reminds us, no man can serve two masters. That includes doctors. GPs have attempted to retain their independence by remaining self-employed. But it's an accounting independence not a primary independence.

Hardly anyone will buy this book. But I have to write it. And I will then publish it. Because no one else will.

10.02 a.m.
I received a letter from a reader who describes herself as a greying, middle class woman. She describes what happened to her as she was driving home in the middle of the night. `A car with three people in it came up behind, too close. They were harassing me, trying to make me go faster. Then blue lights flashed. It was a police car. I was not going to stop for anyone miles from anywhere and drove five miles on to my town and stopped outside the police station, pursued by the police car, by now blaring its siren in a built up area. On the pavement three of them accused me of not having stopped. They were aggressive and very rude. They had not asked me to stop. If they had wanted me to stop they would have passed me and flashed the `Stop Police' light on the back of their car. They accused me of speeding. I told them I was being chased and harassed. They gave me a speeding ticket. I will get a £60 fine and three points on my licence. One of them, probably half my age, said I probably shouldn't be driving. A friend said it was a common tactic of the police. They harass a lone driver to make him break the speed limit, then ticket him. I expect the police to have better things to do - three of them - than harass a greying, middle class woman in the middle of the night.'

11.50 a.m.
I read today that P.G. Wodehouse had published 11 novels in the UK before the sales of a single one of his novels reached 2,000 copies. (The first successful novel was *Piccadilly Jim*). I doubt if any modern commercial publisher would persevere with an author whose novels had taken so long to reach such a relatively modest landmark.

12.12 p.m.
When I first started to earn my living as a professional author I was frequently offered work for money. Newspapers and magazines and television stations and radio stations all employed writers. And paid them money. The Internet has changed that. Today, I am contacted just as frequently. But nearly all of the people who want me to do things want me to do them for free. No fee, no expenses. It is, not surprisingly, difficult to make a living. I feel sorry for young writers struggling to make a living.

12.35 p.m.
At Publishing House our mail arrives at midday. At least it does on the days when Royal Mail can be bothered to bring it round. Some days they don't bother to bring it at all. Our problem is that there is too much mail for a

postman to carry and so the mail comes in a van. You might think that a business which is bringing in so much work would be treated with a little basic courtesy. Not a bit of it. If we want a reliable morning delivery we have to pay extra.

In Victorian and Edwardian times in England there were up to seven postal deliveries a day in urban areas. And if you posted a letter in the morning to an address in the same city, you could expect it to be delivered the same afternoon. Women would post an order to their grocer in the morning and receive the groceries in time for dinner the same day.

In the good old days, just a few years ago, we used to get mail twice a day: early in the morning and lunchtime. Mail was collected seven days a week from the local postbox - several times a day. Today, there are fewer postboxes and less collections. The service has deteriorated more rapidly than any other service I can think of.

When things go wrong it is like talking to shop window mannequins. I've given up expecting sense from Royal Mail. (Though, to be honest, most other big companies are little better.) And the wretched employees always say it’s someone else's fault and not their responsibility. That's not an argument that held much water at Nuremberg and it doesn't hold much water today. Nothing will improve until the half-wits on the other end of the phone are prepared to take some responsibility and to try to put things right.

But I'm too tired to fight them anymore. The `little people who disclaim responsibility' will between them doubtless destroy what the Government doesn't manage to destroy. And they’ll shrug aside blame with: `Well it wasn't my fault, I was just doing my job'. So be it.

I estimate that I've spent over £2,000,000 with Royal Mail since I started self-publishing. I can't wait for the day when their damned pension fund sinks them and their monopoly is removed.

18.19 p.m.
The Princess and I went to visit a friend in hospital in Wales. There was a sign in the hospital that read: ‘Please put bag's in bin's’.

While waiting for The Princess, I looked at a daily paper and saw that a woman whose daughter had been accused of bullying had defended her daughter rather aggressively. `She wasn't doing anything,' the mother said. `She was just watching.' And that's the problem isn't it. People just stand by and do nothing and think they're innocent if they don't actually strike any blows. In France, thanks to Napoleon, it is illegal to offer no help to a fellow citizen in trouble. In modern day Britain everyone thinks it is fine to stand and gawp.

A bathukolpian and callipygian woman who was clearly one of those people who only feels really comfortable when wearing a label, and who had one of those plastic covered identity cards dangling on a cord around her neck, told us off for standing in the corridor. We were standing there while I took a photograph of the sign about the ‘bin’s’. `You would be a hazard if someone wanted to move a trolley along here in an emergency,' she said. She actually wagged a finger at us. I promised her that we would move out of the way if such a thing were to happen. Since the corridor was at least twelve feet wide they could have driven a tank down it without endangering our tootsies. She then said she was going to seek higher authority to force us to move. I said that I thought this an excellent notion and recommended that she not waste any time in putting this thought into action. She hurried off, her heels click-clacking on the hard floor of the corridor with purposeful certainty. We waited a few minutes to see if she returned but, sadly, she didn't and eventually we got bored and left.

22.04 p.m.
An angry reader has written to complain that he can no longer pay for my books with a credit card. He wants to know what on earth I think I am playing at and claims that the Government is planning to do away with cheques next year. He says I shouldn't be running a business since I clearly don't know what I am doing and that not taking credit cards over the phone is ridiculous. He says that cheques are going to be phased out and that he intends to consult his solicitor and take legal action against me. With tongue planted firmly in my cheek I sent him a polite but firm letter telling him that he was banned from buying any more of my books. (Ten days later I received a rather apologetic letter from his wife asking if she was allowed to borrow my books from her public library.)

This is by no means the only such complaint. Indeed, they come in regularly. Occasionally, readers become extremely aggressive and rude. I had to ban one immensely aggressive cat book reader from ever buying any of my books again. He claimed to be an extremely important ex Marks and Spencer manager and he too wrongly insisted that cheques were soon to be outlawed. The fact is that although cheque guarantee cards are disappearing in 2011, cheques won't disappear before the end of 2018 at the very earliest. My guess is that although banks hate them (because they are not as profitable as electronic banking) they won't disappear then. (My business model will collapse in a heap if they do.)

I started taking credit cards soon after I started Publishing House. Everyone working in mail order claimed that taking orders by telephone (and allowing buyers to pay with a credit card) dramatically increased sales. The assumption was that if you increase sales then you increase profits. I was told that the politicians and the banks would like to get rid of money and cheques (in the false name of preventing terrorism and money laundering they have already imposed limits on the amount of cash that can be used in a single transaction). I understood that when people use debit and credit cards to make purchases it is much easier for the banks and governments to keep track of where money is going and of who is buying what. When people pay with cash or by cheque it is almost impossible to track people in the same way. And so the authorities were conspiring to convince people that they should be able to pay by credit card for anything they wanted to buy.

I quickly found that taking orders by credit card was an expensive option. We had to pay to rent special machines on lengthy contracts in order to take credit cards, we had to pay the bank to process credit card sales, we had responsibility for errors and I was personally responsible for any illegal use of information obtained by people working on my behalf. This meant that I had unlimited personal liability for financial losses resulting from the illegal use of information by my staff and by people who weren't my staff. This liability was not covered by my insurance. I also had to buy special software to put the credit card orders into our system (naturally, there are laws covering how and when we could do that). I had to pay set up fees, cancellation fees and annual fees for everything you can think of and some things no sensible person could possibly imagine. One credit card company wanted us to pay service charges for three years in advance and seemed to put up their charges dramatically every time the sun came out. The problems caused by the fact that the bankers had screwed up the world's economy naturally meant that all these charges were ratcheted yet higher.

There were other problems with credit cards. For example, at one point I tried offering books at low prices. The cost of taking credit cards meant that this was only viable if I took payment by cheque. However, when I tried this some would-be purchasers complained that the law did not allow me to do this. Nasty little men and women in cheap suits said that if I offered books at a low price I had to make them available to those using credit cards as well as cheques.

And, added to all this was the fact that since I deliberately don't have a credit rating and, therefore, no bank can check me out, I was finding it increasingly difficult to be allowed to operate a credit card scheme.

Apart from being an additional complication in an already over-complicated world, and one requiring extra equipment and imposing massive obligations, I quickly realised that credit cards looked weak from a strategic, business point of view. It cost us at least £3 more to process a credit card order than to process an order by cheque. That's a huge cost. And credit cards are more complicated and troublesome in many ways. I just didn't make any money by selling over the telephone and accepting credit card orders. And it wasn't difficult to work out why.

I was relieved to see that I wasn't the only one to notice that credit cards are expensive things to use. Taxpayers have to pay extra if they pay their tax bill with a credit card and quite a number of councils add a 3% surcharge if citizens want to pay their council tax by credit card. (The authorities want us to do as much of our financial business (including our buying) online so they can get information and control. It is, of course, also cheaper for them. There is no little irony in the fact that they then charge us extra for doing what they are forcing us to do.) The charges, the paperwork and the onerous regulations mean that more and more companies are now charging a fee for the use of credit cards. One day I went into three shops (one after the other) which all displayed signs announcing that they did not take credit cards for sales under £10. Since a good many of our books cost around £10 this cheered me and gave me heart in the decision to abandon credit cards.

When we sold a book for a fiver or so the costs became impossible. So, for example, we sold *Bloodless Revolution* for £4.99 plus £1 towards postage and packing. If I sold a book by telephone, with the purchaser paying by credit card, I would lose money on every single sale. (And that doesn't count the number of times that a credit card payment doesn't go through because the card has been used dishonestly or fraudulently. This problem is much worse with credit cards than with cheques. The book, of course, has been posted out and so the loss is the cost of the book, the postage and the administration.) I believe it is actually impossible for a small business to make money by selling something by mail order for less than £5 and accepting payment by credit card.

So that I could concentrate on what I think I do best (writing and publishing books) I decided to think about the unthinkable: not accepting credit/debit cards at Publishing House.

Constant new rules from the EU and the Government and the banks meant that the administrative costs kept rocketing and the red tape became mind numbing. Not taking credit cards meant that I wouldn't have staff spending hours taking credit card orders.

For several years I even paid for an outside company to take telephone calls 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This was enormously expensive because the company charged by the minute. When callers rambled on for a minute or two or wandered off to search for their credit card the bill for taking the call sometimes exceeded the price of the book they were buying. The answering machine service took on average four minutes to take an order - at 50 pence per minute or £30 an hour that's an average of £2 to take an order. But some people stayed on the phone for ages to report books that had gone missing or simply to have a chat with someone and leave a long rambling message for me. The costs quickly mounted up. And, of course, many of these callers had to be telephoned back the following day. Cutting out telephone orders cut costs dramatically because it meant I could do away with the phone answering service and some of the complicated telephone equipment I'd had installed.

In the world of mail order it is relatively easy to test things. You can, for example, create two promotional leaflets and send each one to 500 potential buyers. As long as the two sets of 500 are identical then the result will tell you which leaflet is most effective. The staff at Publishing House were insistent that readers preferred to pay by credit card. I didn't believe this. And so last year I decided to test cheques against credit cards. I did two mailshots of regular readers. In one mailshot I allowed readers to choose between paying by cheque or credit card. In the other mailshot I gave them only the option of paying by cheque. The test proved without doubt that readers preferred paying by cheque and suggested that readers positively disliked having a choice between paying by cheque or paying by credit card. When the extra costs associated with credit cards were taken into consideration it was clear that cheques were better for readers and much better for us. I then repeated the test in *Moneyweek* magazine. I split the leaflets I put in the magazine into two groups. Half of the leaflets offered the readers the opportunity to buy *Gordon is a Moron* by cheque alone. The other half offered the readers the choice to pay by cheque or by ringing up and paying by credit card. Once again, the test proved that readers vastly prefer paying by cheque. We made more than twice as much money from the leaflet selling books by cheque alone as we did from the leaflet offering a choice. Why the difference? It may be due to the fact that offering cheques only is simpler than making a choice. Or maybe people don't trust credit cards.

I realised that if we stopped taking credit cards completely we could still sell on the Web by selling through websites run by organisations such as Amazon, Waterstones, WH Smith and Tesco. So, readers still had two easy ways to buy books. First, they could send a cheque or postal order (payable to Publishing House) to the Publishing House address. Second, they could buy via one of the website shops such as the one run by Amazon for www.vernoncoleman.com. Customers could still pay by credit card if they chose to purchase books that way.

And so, in May 2009 I decided to abandon selling books by credit card. The administrative costs had rocketed, the red tape had become now mind numbing and most readers had told us they prefer to buy books by cheque. I gave instructions that if anyone wanted to know why we were no longer taking credit cards it should be explained that we had abandoned cards because of the increased cost, the paperwork and the EU regulations. The savings on credit card costs and telephone answering service costs far exceeded any loss of orders.

To get around the snag of selling through commercial websites such as Amazon (rather than directly ourselves) I decided that we would include details of my other books in every new book we printed.

I do find that it is always better to keep life as simple as possible.

The fact is that 37 million people in Britain still write cheques. Take out children, prisoners and the illiterate who can't write their own name and that's just about everyone. At Christmas around seven million people give cheques as Christmas presents. Every month around 24 million people write at least one cheque.

And the banks might be surprised to know that some people still regard cheques as rather an unpleasant new innovation. The owner of a garage we use thinks cheques are rather new fangled and untrustworthy. He will take one if he has to but prefers cash. He would not, I'm delighted to say, know what to do with a credit card if you showed him one.

March

1

11.02 a.m.

I find that it doesn't take me long to read the newspapers these days. Most of them are full of badly written columns which don't seem to do anything other than air the columnists' prejudices. Many editors seem to assume that any journalist can write a column. This is nonsense. Real journalists are trained to stand back from the things they write about, not to get involved or to allow their personal views to interfere. Columnists do the opposite. Writing a column is like writing a tightrope and the editor's main job is to give the columnist a nudge occasionally if he seems likely to fall. I have, over the years, written columns for dozens of magazines and newspapers. At one point I was writing a column for *The Sun*, a column for *The Star* and a column for *The Sunday People*. I was also writing a column for a Scottish paper, a magazine column and a column that was syndicated to around 40 local papers. (Not all were under the same name.) I started writing columns while I was at medical school. I wrote two weekly columns (for both of which I masqueraded as a doctor). Heaven knows how I found the time but I also reviewed plays several nights a week for the *Birmingham Post,* (for which I also wrote book reviews) wrote theatre reviews for the *Times Educational Supplement*, wrote regular articles for a variety of magazines and newspapers, ran a night club masquerading as a youth club, sat on several committees (for the first and last time in my life) and used the money I earned writing to begin an investment portfolio which I managed on a daily basis. I feel exhausted just thinking about it.

I learned that columns need humour, passion, irreverence and pace. Most of all the columnist needs to establish a relationship with his readers. And he needs to snag their attention so that they occasionally look up and say: `Hey, listen to this!' I treasured a letter from a reader who told me that he always used to read out chunks of my *People* column in his pub on a Sunday morning. A columnist who isn't in more or less constant conflict with his editor isn't doing his job properly. I wrote agony columns for over a decade and all the questions I published were made up to match the pre-written answers I wanted to give. I could never be rude to real people, nor would I have ever given personal advice to strangers. In my opinion, a lot of agony columnists make up at least some of the letters they print - if only because the vast majority of letters which come in are too rambling and imprecise to use.

2

12.16 p.m.

A friend of ours who runs a small stationery business is always moaning that he can't sell his house. It has now been on the market for 18 months and it is his sole topic of conversation. Both The Princess and I think his property is absurdly overpriced.

`You can always sell anything if the price is right,' I told him.

`No you can't,' he moaned. He pulled a face. If he'd been in the movies he would have made a good living out of playing scary bad men in horror movies. Producers would have loved him because they wouldn't have had to spend extra money on makeup.

`I'll buy your house,' I told him.

His face lit up. 'For the asking price?'

`No, I'll give you a quid for it.'

`Don't be stupid,' he snapped.

`Fair enough. You've turned down my offer. But you could have sold. All you have to do now is find a spot between my offer - the one you turned down - and the price you think it's worth.'

15.13 p.m.

When we were writing our two books on England the Princess and I discovered that Tommy Cooper, the funniest comedian of both our lifetimes, was born in Wales, though he was brought up in England. The Princess is, therefore, writing a few pages on him for her book about Welsh heroes. Cooper was a fascinating character. I, like many others, have spent much time trying to analyse his success. Part of his success was obviously down to his timing, which was brilliant, but there was clearly more to it than that. I suspect it was his almost palpable fear of failure which audiences felt. They wanted him to be successful, and shared every moment of anxiety and delight. In that he was similar to my snooker hero Alex `Hurricane' Higgins. Audiences felt sympathetic and warm towards him. Most modern comedians are aggressive and battle against their audiences; they never bother to build a relationship. Cooper's relationship was built on the rock of his insecurity. Why, I wonder, do the Welsh always promote Catherine Zeta Jones (in my opinion an absurdly overrated actress), Tom Jones (who seems to me to be a painfully embarrassing singer) and Dylan Thomas (the talentless overhyped son of a mixed marriage between a culturally blind BBC and wildly prejudiced and obsessed Welsh nationalists) as the most famous Welsh heroes. They always forget Lawrence of Arabia and Tommy Cooper.

3

13.11 p.m.

I spent the entire morning replying to reader mail. One reader has invited me to contribute a chapter to a book he is preparing. There is, of course, no mention of a fee or any suggestion that I will be paid royalties. I thank him for inviting me to contribute to his new book but point out that I'm rather up to my ears (with several new books in various stages of work). I add that since I write for a living (and have ever-growing overheads, including staff salaries) I have to give priority to writing work which will earn me money to pay the bills!

A second reader has sent me three articles which he has written. `Please edit them for me before I send them off to newspapers' he says. There is, of course, no stamped addressed envelope. I sent the articles back with a note wishing him good luck in finding homes for them. A third reader wants me to find the address of a magazine she used to subscribe to and send it on to her. I have never heard of the magazine and have no idea why she has written to me. I cannot read her name or her address and so I cut out both from her letter and stick them onto the envelope in the hope that the postman will have more luck. A fourth reader wants me to give him advice about the book he has written. He tells me that I can download a copy to read for just £5. At the end of the morning I counted the envelopes and found that I had written 27 replies. Even at 32 pence per letter this meant that my morning's work cost me £8.64 plus the cost of the paper, ink and envelopes.

15.16 p.m.

If my father hadn't died when he did he would have been celebrating his birthday today. I remember that when he reached the age of 87 my father started to complain of breathlessness on walking uphill. He made an appointment to see a consultant cardiologist. I accompanied him. When the doctor had examined my father, and found relatively little wrong, he said to him: `What can I do for you?'

My father stared at him for a moment and thought about it. `I can't walk uphill as quickly as I used to be able to,' he said. `What are you going to do about it?'

The consultant, clearly startled, looked at me.

`It's OK,' I said. `You can tell him.'

The consultant smiled at me gratefully. `I didn't want to appear ageist,' he whispered, having realised that my father was rather deaf.

`I'm afraid it's your age!' he said to my father.

My father was terribly disappointed and turned to me. `Let's go, then,' he said. He was never a man to waste time on unnecessary chit chat.

18.12 p.m.

There is a suggestion from an estate agent in this morning's *Financial Times* that `the basic rule these days is to offer half the asking price.' Judging by the response we have had when suggesting that a property might be 10% overpriced we would be killed if we tried that. Most vendors (and most estate agents) seem to think that knocking off 1% counts as a `significant price reduction'. We were sent particulars two days ago of a three quarters of a million pound house which had been reduced by £500.

19.24 p.m.

A huge American computer company has invited me to give a lecture. They will, they say, be absolutely thrilled if I speak to their employees and guests in London. As usual these days there is no mention of a fee. There is not even any mention of expenses. When I mention these two things the company suddenly becomes less thrilled. I don't know why they think I would want to travel to London, stay in a hotel and speak at their function at my own expense. I assume it is because they are in the world of computers where copyright is regarded as theft, unless it is their copyright of course when stealing is still stealing. I told them that I was too thrilled by their invitation to be able to accept it. The corporate idiots were so gullible, and so susceptible to flattery that I expect they believed me. They do not understand irony at all. Poor America is a nation whose two greatest achievements are Mickey Mouse and barbed wire. When it has gone America will be remembered for greed, obesity, purposeless violence, a complete lack of good taste or style and a child-like sense of humour.

20.12 p.m.

I tried to sort out my books today. I decided that I would take books off my shelves if I did not think I would read or consult them again. I added two riders to this. First, I would keep books which were of value. Second, I would keep books which I knew I wouldn't read again but which had some sentimental value because they had touched my heart or mind in some way. I then spent several hours going through a few of the bookcases in my study. After three hours I had decided to throw out just two books: an out-of-date copy of the *Writers And Artists Yearbook* and a copy of a novel by Georges Simenon of which I had found I had a first edition and two reading copies. I felt so bad about throwing out these two books that I put them back on the shelves.

21.16 p.m.
A staff member who left told me that he wanted shorter hours, fixed breaks, no responsibility, longer holidays, no need to think and little work. I've discovered that he has gone to work for the local council and he will, I suspect, be well suited there.

4
12.39 p.m.
The house search continues. We now realise that you can't trust anyone when you are looking for a house to buy. You can almost certainly trust some people but it's difficult to know who the trustworthy people are. And if you can't tell who you can trust and who you can't then the only sensible solution is to make sure that you don't trust anyone.

We drove for two and a half hours to see a house we were interested in. When we got there the agent told us that we couldn't see inside the annex because it was let to visitors. `You can only go in there between visitors on Saturday at lunchtimes,' she said. I asked if we could look in the garage. `I don't have keys for that.' `The summerhouse? The garden sheds?' `They're all locked. And I don't have the key.' Inside the house it was a similar story. `I can't show you this room I'm afraid,' she said, passing a locked door. `It's let to someone and they don't like people looking round.'

We left.

After that we went to see a house we thought looked really attractive. When we got there we found that it was a quarter of what we thought we were buying. `It says in the brochure that it forms a part of the whole property,' sniffed the agent. Not having read the brochure with a magnifying glass I'd missed this. The property in the picture was a large detached house. The property he was selling was a flat. Actually, it was a flat on two floors so technically speaking it was, I suppose, a maisonette.

Finally, we saw a splendid looking house with a large garden but it had no less than 14 immediate neighbours. When there are so many neighbours it is inevitable that whenever it is sunny one of them will be cutting the lawn, one will have a children's party in the garden, one will be washing the car with the radio on full blast and one set of small boys will be knocking on the door wanting their ball back. You will never have a peaceful moment in the garden of such a house. So we said `no' to that one.

14.15 p.m.
We called into a café to discuss some brochures we had collected from estate agents. A group of young mothers were having coffee together. Their children were behaving like wild animals. They were running around, screaming and climbing onto chairs and tables. The mothers didn't seem in the slightest bit embarrassed or even interested. I was about to say something when The Princess wisely stopped me. Even a mild rebuke would, I suspect, have led to serious trouble. The majority of British parents no longer seem to make any effort to control their children. When children are seen behaving badly abroad we always know that they will be British children.

16.17 p.m.
We were in a charity shop looking at the shelves of books when two women came in and one of them led the way over to where we were standing. The women were both in their 40s. One was simply fat, the other was obese. `I'm looking for a book,' said the fat one. `What sort?' asked the obese one. `Dunno. Jack wants another one. He's read the one he had.` `Who was it by?' `Dunno.' `What about this?' asked the obese woman. She prodded the author's picture on the front of the book. `I've heard of him. He's on the telly. He does that programme.' `Oh yes,' agreed the fat woman. `I've seen him on the telly. I'll get that one.' And she did.

5
11.12 a.m.
We met two of our neighbours this morning. They live just a few hundred yards away but we have hardly seen them

for several months. They were both very angry. They borrowed far more than they could afford and are deep in negative equity territory. They owe more than Ireland. She is extremely neat and in the days before we were issued with EU-approved plastic dustbins was famous locally for plumping up their black rubbish bags and arranging the ties at the top very neatly, in such a way that they looked like Christmas parcels. `We've just been to the bank,' she said, rich in indignation. `A spotty youth told us that we should stop our Sky Television subscription! Can you believe it?' `We have to have our Sky!' insisted her husband. `The bank actually wanted us to cancel it!' He used to work in `financial services' but lost his job recently. After he was made redundant his wife came round with a letter she was planning to send to his boss. She wanted me to rewrite the letter for her. `You're a writer,' she said. `You know how to use words.' The letter she'd written was a mixture of angry accusations and pitiful begging. It was the sort of letter an overbearing mother might send to her son's schoolteacher to complain about him not being picked for the school cricket team. `I don't think sending this is going to help,' I told her. She was very cross with me and has hardly spoken to me since. They are now both unemployed spendaholics. `They say we have to cut back on our spending,' she said. `It's their fault we're in this mess. They lent us the money.' I suspect they aren't the only people in the country who feel this way.

15.16 p.m.
I spotted two pieces of news today that go together rather well. First, there are now 140 million people writing blogs on the Internet; each one the technological equivalent of a wild-haired madman shouting in the street. Second, computer servers use 5% of the USA's entire energy consumption. I wonder how many of those bloggers, busily using up the world's disappearing energy supplies, are pontificating about energy conservation.

6
12.14 p.m.
When I was a medical student I travelled by train through France and Italy and while visiting the Island of Elba I bought a copy of the leaflet Napoleon distributed to the soldiers sent to arrest him. I've been collecting Napoleana ever since and have an extraordinary collection of books and documents (including the originals of some documents written and signed by him). There are reputed to be 60,000 to 70,000 biographies now published. On the train this morning I read Napoleon's own account of his escape from Elba and the subsequent trip to Paris. It is surely one of the most dramatic pieces of history. I also read his book about Waterloo which is equally fascinating (though rather self-serving, since he blames the loss of the battle on his generals and the weather) but it nevertheless shows his strategic genius. He was a surprising general. He describes, for example, how he wandered off from his army and, with just a couple of aides, climbed neighbouring windmills in order to examine the position of the enemy army. Waterloo was the 50th major battle he had fought in just a few years. He was outnumbered two to one and damn near won. He attacked Blucher's army first because he thought Wellington was likely to move more slowly in response. He suspected that if he had attacked Wellington first then Blucher would have moved more speedily to counter the attack. Napoleon was undoubtedly the most brilliant military strategist ever to have lived, though the Moscow enterprise was not impressive. He also created many things the French still give thanks for. He was the creator of modern Paris and gave France its legal, administrative and moral guidelines. By all accounts he was a workaholic with a power fixation. Psychiatrists would probably say the fellow suffered from a Napoleon Complex.

15.16 p.m.
I met an old newspaper friend in London this afternoon at the National Liberal Club. The Princess had never met him before and was intrigued to meet a real old-time newspaperman. He entertained us both with extraordinary stories of his life in Fleet Street. He and his father were both journalists working for national newspapers back in the days when a scoop was the Holy Grail for men who wrote their stories on Reporter's Notebooks and filed their copy via public telephone boxes. They were stringers, covering a huge area in the West Country and both paid by the line. The bigger the story the bigger the pay day. The two were competitive in that way that fathers and sons sometimes are and because they worked for competitive newspapers they never gave each other an inch. The son told us a story which illustrated the intensity and serious nature of the relationship. The pair of them were sitting having their supper one Sunday evening when the telephone rang (this was, of course, long before mobile telephones had been dreamt of). The call was for the father and the son could tell by the fact that his dad had shut the hall door that it was business. It was; it was the news editor of the paper for which he worked. A much sought after criminal had been arrested in a town just a few miles away. The news editor wanted a few facts to give strength to his front page splash. Without saying `goodbye' or explaining where he was going the father left. All the mother and son heard was the slam of the front door. The son immediately got up from the table. `Where are you going, son?' asked the mother. `You don't know where he's gone and you'll never be in time to follow him.' `I'm going to put the phone

back on the hook,' said the son, who knew that if the story was a big one his own news editor would be trying to get through. And knew that his father would have left the receiver off the hook. As soon as the son had put the receiver back the phone rang. Sure enough it was his own news editor with the same story and the same urgent need for facts. The son grabbed his coat and hat, shouted goodbye to his mother and ran to his car, which was parked outside in the road. (His father's car had been parked in the driveway). As soon as he tried to drive away the son realised that something was wrong. He got out of the car. He had two flat tyres. His father had stabbed them both with a penknife. `What did you do?' asked The Princess, horrified. `I had to borrow a car from a mate. I got there late, missed the first edition and had a bollocking from the news editor.' `What did you say to your Dad?' `Nothing much,' grinned my friend. `He just said something about it being business and not personal. It was just a lesson to let me know not to expect any favours. Journalism was a tough business in those days.' He paused, and took two sips from his coffee. Then he grinned broadly. `It was fun, though,' he said. `Not like the namby-pamby business it is these days. They're all wussies.'

On the walk back to Paddington we passed a large government building. Outside, standing on the pavement, there was the usual knot of office workers that you see outside all large buildings these days. They were grabbing a quick puff or three on their cigarettes. None of them was wearing coats. The men were in shirtsleeves. The women were in skirts and blouses. They were all shivering and stamping their feet to try to keep warm. I sometimes wonder if the EU forces smokers to stand outside in the cold and rain so that they get pneumonia and die quickly rather than dying slowly and expensively of lung cancer. It's the sort of thing a cruel and fascist organisation would think up so it's probably not as absurd as it sounds.

Closer to Paddington, we saw a motorcycle carefully padlocked to a lamppost. The owner had put chains through both wheels to prevent them being stolen. Sadly, the engine was missing and had clearly been removed by a thief.

At the station a busker, outside the station, was blowing into a penny whistle and making noises. The Princess gave him money. She always gives money to buskers. (She gives money to beggars, but only if they look old and worn out.) `If we're ever broke I'm going to play my violin in the street,' she said. `By my feet I'll have a sign that says `Money needed for lessons please'.'

7

12.48 p.m.

I have just found a letter inviting me to the Citizens Commission on Human Rights annual Human Rights Awards Banquet in East Grinstead. The letter says: `We celebrate CCHRs 40th anniversary and we would like to invite you to accept the CCHR Human Rights Award on this special occasion. This is being offered to you in recognition of your courage and tireless conviction in exposing the harmful effects of psychiatric drugs and practices in the field of mental health. There are over 300 people attending the awards banquet. Among these there will be many mayors and dignitaries from local areas, ambassadors from several countries, academics, doctors, educators, lawyers, allied members of the media, mental health campaigners and even psychiatrists. I would ask that you would be present at the banquet to receive this award.' I couldn't go and I desperately hope I remembered to say I wouldn't be there. I hardly ever go anywhere these days. Because I didn't go, I didn't get the award. I assume someone else got it instead. I did see what I think was a photo of it though and it looked the ugliest thing I've ever seen. Now that the council are so difficult about taking away rubbish I'm glad they didn't send it to me.

15.10 p.m.

We sent a copy of *Bloodless Revolution* to every bookshop buyer in the country, together with a letter giving sales of other relevant (political) books. As far as I can tell not one bookshop bought any stock. We pointed out that *Gordon is a Moron* had sold over 20,000 copies at £9.99, *England our England* had sold over 41,000 at £8.99, *Living in a Fascist Country* had sold over 10,000 at £15.99, *Oil Apocalypse* over 11,000 at £12.99, *Rogue Nation* over 9,000 at £9.99 and so on. Not one bookshop took one copy of shelf stock of *Bloodless Revolution*.

I see that on the Web *Bloodless Revolution* has so far garnered nine reviews. Eight of the reviews give the book five stars. One reviewer has given the book just one star, complaining that the book is too cheap and the print size too small. (I had the book printed as a standard mass market paperback in order to keep the price as low as possible.)

I am seriously considering writing books but not bothering to try to sell them.

8

17.55 p.m.

We bought a new Acer netbook. It was the most expensive one we could find and is pretty well unusable. The minute we turn it on the popups start to appear. Advertisements, warnings, threats and more advertisements. And they keep on coming. Every time one appears it has to be manually dispatched. But then, like one of those dolls that never tips over, it comes back again. We have done everything we can to stop them but nothing works. I hate the World Wide Web. It is an annoying, intrusive and utterly obstructive invention. The world would be an infinitely better place if it could be uninvented. It has, I firmly believe, done more to damage our standard and quality of living than any other invention in man's history. The only people who benefit from its existence are those tedious souls who earn their living creating and selling computers and software.

9
13.12 p.m.
Back in the simple days when petty bureaucrats had not yet been fitted for jackboots and shiny peaked caps, I used to throw away old insurance policies on the grounds that an out of date insurance policy was probably as much use as last year's calendar. No more. The bureaucrats from the EU have introduced a new law which means that at Publishing House we have to keep old insurance policy documents for ten years in case someone remembers that they were hit by a falling book in 1999. The paperwork mounts up. There was, of course, no warning for this retrospective legislation and so we had to scramble around, and spend much time and money, obtaining copies of old policies. Now I keep old copies of personal home and car policies too because it won't be long before the EU tells us that we have to keep those for ten years. The tax people have also got into the retrospective record keeping too. It used to be enough to keep records for six years. Now they've announced that they have the right to demand to see financial, accounting and banking records going back ten or even 20 years. I like the use of the word `or', which in this context clearly means `20'. We already have a room designated for storing old accounts. We now clearly need more space for storing old paperwork. We may just be able to manage if we convert the space currently used for storing the books we used to sell when we weren't spending all our time collecting and storing paperwork.

10
18.01 p.m.
Yet another reader has written and asked why I am not on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. There are several reasons. First, I write books and don't find the idea of communicating one sentence at a time either entrancing or potentially profitable. Second, unless someone at the EU creates days with more hours I don't have time. I honestly don't understand how people whose lives are already full of texts and telephone messages can find time for twittering. Third, I think there is a real security problem with Facebook. I never put valuable or confidential information on any computer connected to the Internet. Indeed, I never put anything on a net-connected computer that I wouldn't happily see painted on my garden wall or printed in my local newspaper. I will never put private information on a website and to be honest I think anyone who does is barking. I actually believe that sites such as Facebook are not only making people ever lonelier and inward looking but are exposing the vulnerable to exploitation by fraudsters and tricksters. Fourth, I don't think either Facebook or Twitter is likely to last. Fifth, I suspect that there is enough drivel on these sites without me adding to the energy waste. And, finally, I confess that all these websites sound rather sad and nerdy. They are rather cheesy and seem designed to glorify the vanities of publicity seeking megalomaniacs. (From what I've heard about it YouTube ought, perhaps, to be renamed Me Me Me Tube.) If these sites are going to change the world they aren't going to change it in a way I find attractive. I've never even visited any of these websites and I have no inclination to do so.

The Internet has devalued information, knowledge and communication. I find it just as frightening that people apparently take seriously a communication system which relies on messages of a maximum of 140 characters as it is that students apparently trust an encyclopaedia that can be rewritten by anyone, controlled by lobbyists and those with a vested interest in publishing misinformation and which is as reliable a source of information as graffiti scrawled on a lavatory wall. Now I hear that there are services where people can ask questions and rely on anonymous strangers for the answers. And, of course, there are naive simpletons who spend huge parts of their lives putting private and personal information onto Web based services over which they have absolutely no control. These are, I suspect, the same individuals who then complain bitterly when their identities are stolen. I wasn't in the slightest bit surprised when photographs of one of Britain's senior spies and his children appeared on Facebook, put there by his wife.

Apparently important business people, and politicians who ought to have better things to do, now twitter constantly, responding to one another's logorrheic outpourings. Minor celebrities twitter away every time their bowels open or they put the kettle on. `Had wonderful movement this a.m. Great joy.' This is a medium for the self-obsessed for whom nothing about themselves is too trivial for sharing. *Time Magazine* recently reported `....Twitter turns out to have unsuspected depth. In part this is because hearing about what your friends had for breakfast is actually more interesting than it sounds.' Really? In my world, tweeting on Twitter is an occupation for twats.

11

11.22 a.m.

I received an abusive and threatening letter from a reader who objected to the title of my book *Gordon is a Moron*. He ended his letter with the words `I bet you don't reply to this'. He was right; though I would have done so if he'd had the courage to give a name and an address. Gordon Brown wrecked the economy for generations to come. He is responsible for heaven knows how many deaths in the wars he helped take us into. The dictionary definition of a moron is someone who is stupid or foolish. On reflection, the title was an understatement. When *Gordon is a Moron* first came out I received quite a number of letters complaining about the title (which was, of course, taken from a popular song). I remember one newspaper sent along a whole bundle of complaining letters. The editor responded by banning all future advertisements for all my books, including my books about cats. But the bottom line is that largely thanks to Gordon Brown, Britain is stuffed and is likely to remain so for a long, long time.

14.12 p.m.

We had a book delivery today. A pallet loaded with 1,000 books was left on the pavement outside Publishing House. It was raining.

15.16 p.m.

A production company has left a message offering me £150 to travel half way across the country and spend a day filming a programme for them. They also want me to ring the researcher and do some preliminary planning work for them. I get out of this by telling them (truthfully) that, if they employ me, their programme will never be aired.

12

11.01 a.m.

I had another letter today asking me how I got started in self-publishing. As I confessed in an afterword I wrote for *Alice and Other Friends*, it was a cat called Alice (aka Her Royal Fluffiness) who was responsible for my starting to publish my own books. My career as an author was going quite well (with books regularly hitting the top ten bestseller lists) until I wrote *Alice's Diary* and was forced into the world of self-publishing.

By the mid 1980s, I felt that I knew my cat Alice well enough to write a book with her. (She usually sat with me when I worked. At the time I was using an IBM electric typewriter. She liked the hum it made and the fact that it became warm after a few minutes and she learned to switch it on herself. I would often go into my study and find her sprawled across it, warming herself.) And so together we produced *Alice's Diary* - the memoirs of a cat. At the time it was unusual for me to write a book without having found a publisher and my agent usually arranged a contract before I started to write, but this book was different: I felt I had to write it, but since I wasn't quite sure how it was going to turn out I didn't think there was much point in trying to find a publisher to commission it.

When I'd finished the book I felt it needed illustrating. I knew exactly what sort of drawings I wanted but I didn't know an illustrator I could trust to draw Alice and Thomasina. So I did the drawings myself.

When the book was finished the typescript started a long and fruitless journey around London. Publisher after publisher turned it down.

`This isn't the sort of book Vernon usually writes' `Is it intended for children or adults?' `Who is going to buy it?' `I don't understand it' and (my favourite) `Vernon doesn't write cat books' were just some of the comments.

After a year or two it was clear that no one wanted to publish *Alice's Diary*.

I felt certain that there was a market. And so I published it myself.

Within a very short time we had sold over 10,000 hardback copies of *Alice's Diary* - big enough sales to have put the book into the bestseller lists for many weeks if we had been a `proper' publishing company.

At the beginning, a publishing company's sales representatives helped to sell the book but we also put small advertisements in magazines and quickly decided that this was the most successful way to promote and sell the book.

Despite the misgivings of the professional publishers in London there clearly were people who wanted to read a book written by a cat. At the time I remember being rather pleasantly surprised that we were right and they were all wrong. These days I so expect the `professionals' to be completely out of touch with what the reading public really wants that I would be worried if I thought I had written a book which any London publisher wanted to put on his or her list.

Readers started buying additional copies for friends (I remember that quite early on one reader ordered 11 copies to give away as presents) and Alice started to receive fan mail. Bookshop staff started to ring up about the book. Whenever they wanted to know the identity of the author I always just said that the book had been written by a cat called Alice. No one ever questioned this.

After the success of *Alice's Diary* I self-published several more books. All sold well. A novel about cricket called *The Village Cricket Tour* proved enormously successful. And so when I wrote my next serious medical book, *Betrayal of Trust*, I published that myself too. In truth I didn't have much choice. No one was prepared to publish it. Some said the style was too `popular'. Other publishers used the excuse that the book was too `academic'. I rather suspected that no one wanted to publish the book because they were frightened that it might annoy the medical and scientific establishment too much. And they were probably worried that they'd be sued.

When I published *Betrayal of Trust* I didn't care whether or not it made money. I just felt that the message it contained was so important that the book had to be published. The commercial and financial success of *Alice's Diary* made it much easier to take this decision and so once again Alice had affected my life. If I hadn't published *Alice's Diary* I doubt if *Betrayal of Trust* would have ever been published so I was following the old tradition of being prepared to allow a bestselling book to subsidise the rest of the list.

Modern publishers and agents won't look at books which are a challenge to the establishment because they are themselves representatives of the corporate establishment and are themselves usually politically correct folk, left inclined, and believing fervently in such modern nonsenses as multiculturalism. (Multicultural means that outside cultures are promoted and ours is suppressed. The world is of course inescapably, and by definition, multicultural but to force individual societies to become multicultural is absurd and doomed to failure).

Sadly, the `traditional' publishers hate self-publishers and do everything they can to stop such a threat to their control of publishing. I've always felt that enormously hypocritical, given that many who work in publishing like to pretend to be liberal free-thinkers.

Editors commission what they are told to commission by the marketing people (who know what the world wants just as much as 19-year-old management consultants know how to run a factory) and agents, who knowing which side their bread is buttered, loyally feed the system. The people I have met in publishing are in general not particularly bright or innovative. They're too insensitive to be in the business of producing (or caring about) books. Unlike their predecessors a generation or two ago, they are largely corporate voices, empty suits, schooled in mediocrity; banal hacks who distrust anything daring, original and iconoclastic. To them `original' means risk and makes them shudder. It means the possibility of losing money. They are at their happiest when publishing the autobiographies of television celebrities and cookery books written by television chefs. Occasionally they even go mad, right to the edge, and publish a vegetarian cookery book (as long as it has been written by someone with a television show).

In my view, anyone who suppresses points of view they don't agree with is a bigot. And in my experience most publishers are bigoted, prejudiced propagandists. They think they are the good guys but I think they are the bad guys; their stupidity and ignorance suppresses honest debate and encourages extreme attitudes - such as racism.

Betrayal of Trust proved to be commercially successful and from then on things just went on and on. I had just written a book called *Food for Thought* for a big London publisher. It was originally one of a series of books I had agreed to write for one of the world's largest publishers but the publishers and I disagreed about the content. They felt that the book was too controversial, too opinionated and contained too much of an attack on meat. This, they felt, would damage the book's sales in Germany. They wanted me to change the text. I disagreed with them and wanted to keep the book as it was. In the end I asked them if I could keep the book and abandon the contract. They agreed. I gave them back their money and kept my book.

Food for Thought reprinted five times in the first 12 months and was my first real self-published `bestseller'.

When I was a boy I frequently read with admiration about the relationship between authors and publishers. An author and a publisher would stay together for life in what was more like a marriage than a commercial partnership. But by the time I started writing books the world of publishing had changed irrevocably. The first big change was that editors started moving about between publishing houses. Authors found themselves having a book commissioned by one enthusiastic editor and aided through the editorial production process by a second editor. The book would then be brought into the world by a third editor who might, or might not, like the author or his work. The old-fashioned, cosy relationship between publisher and author had changed for ever.

The second big change was that the salesmen and the marketing directors took over the world of publishing. Today, editors no longer have control over which books they will publish. The traditional publishing image of a wise, well-read man in a tweed jacket helping an author to turn his raw pages into a good book - and then helping to create an oeuvre - has been out of date for decades. Publishing is now controlled by marketing men in smart suits. They want more of what is already selling and then they panic when they realise that the market is saturated with more of the same. The marketing men tell the editors what to commission. The editors then find an author and tell him to write a book he doesn't particularly want to write. The result, inevitably, is a book without passion which fails to excite the readers. Most of the people in the publishing industry are scared stiff by the very thought of innovation. They prefer to imitate.

I am now convinced that self-publishing is now the purest form of publishing available to an author. The large publishing houses which traditionally and currently dominate the literary world simply produce books which the marketing men believe will sell in the largest quantities. In the future real books - written from the heart, with passion and with no thought of commercial purpose - will have no place in the large publishing house. Only authors who are prepared to publish their own work will see truly original work in print. Self-publishing is the only way for an author to be truly creative and imaginative and to take the chances that are (or should be) an integral element in book publishing.

The great beauty of having my own publishing business is that I can write the books I want to write - and then worry later about how to sell them. Most of the books I have chosen to write would not have been published by a modern publishing conglomerate. And yet most of the books I have chosen to write and publish have been reprinted (some of them many times) and have sold well. Many of our books would have been on the best-seller lists if we had sold more through the bookshops (where the official best-seller lists are created) and less through the post direct to readers.

When I used to write for big publishers just about every book I ever published involved a battle. It took years to find someone brave enough to publish *Bodypower*. Publisher after publisher insisted that there was no market for such a book. And yet *Bodypower* went straight into the *Sunday Times* Top Ten and the *Bookseller* bestseller list and has never been out of print since. It has been translated into over a dozen languages, and extracts from it have appeared in scores of newspapers and magazines around the world. I have made several television series and a radio series based on it.

When the original paperback version of *Bodypower* went out of print a mass-market paperback house bought the rights. Their edition went out of print before it was even published. I took the rights back and sold the book to another publisher. When they, in turn, remaindered their version I bought up all their stock (around 2,000 copies), gave them away and published my own *European Medical Journal* version. Within 18 months of taking back the rights to *Bodypower* I'd sold 10,000 copies of my new edition and without any effort I'd sold foreign rights to several more publishers abroad.

When I first wanted to write a book about tranquilliser addiction just about every publisher in London told my agent that there was no market for such a book. When a publisher eventually commissioned *Life Without Tranquillisers* they wanted major changes making. I refused to make the changes and so we took the book away and eventually sold it to another publisher. The book went straight into the *Sunday Times* Top Ten the minute it came out. I remember that someone from the publishers rang the *Sunday Times* to find out why the book had gone into the bestseller list. `Because it is selling so quickly,' was the logical reply.

I could fill a book with stories like this. I have very little respect for modern editors and publishers. They live in an enclosed world in London and seem to me to have very little idea of what the world wants to read. Literary editors are, it seems to me, even worse!

I have published dozens of my own books and I have found it far more enjoyable than writing books for traditional publishing companies. I can write exactly what I want to write with no interference. I use the profits I make from the current books to pay for new books. A traditional publisher will usually take between 12 and 24 months to turn a manuscript into a published book. Books which are likely to annoy the establishment or attract legal opposition are often unpublished. I don't have those problems.

Because bookshops wouldn't take books from a small publisher I spent a fortune on advertising (in my first proper year of publishing I bought around between £200,000 and £300,000 worth of advertising space in newspapers and magazines) and sold direct by mail.

I run my publishing imprints rather in the way that I believe old-fashioned publishers used to operate. I write books which I want to write (rather than books which I know will be commercially successful). Once the book is written I then worry about how to sell it. And at the end of the financial year I hope that the books which sell well will earn enough to subsidise the books for which there is not such a clear market.

I believe that there are only three reasons to do anything: to try to change the world, to have fun and to make money. Sometimes it is possible to do things which satisfy all these three objectives. More often the success of one objective means that one is more capable of pursuing another objective. (So, for example, making money doing something which is dull may enable you to enjoy an experience which is fun.) Only very occasionally is it really possible to combine these reasons. When I first started producing my own books, publishing fitted the bill perfectly.

15.20 p.m.
A friend of mine received a copy of the *Playfair Cricket Annual* today. The book isn't in the shops yet. `I bought it for £3.49 post free,' he told me. The shop price is £6.99. I have been involved in publishing all my life and have spent over 20 years as a publisher. I have no idea how anyone made any money out of that transaction.

13
11.58 a.m.
I woke feeling tired; weary, dispirited, whingey, self-pitying. But during the morning I was working on a book about great English revolutionary writers and reading about Defoe, Paine, Cobbett et al and I gradually began to feel ashamed and embarrassed. What giants they were. What an inspiration. Compared to them, today's journalists (particularly all those working for the BBC and the nation's broadsheets) are lily-livered, fearful, obedient and hollow; mincing in the footsteps of the great.

Today Henry David Thoreau would be in an orange jump suit in Guantanamo. Thomas Paine (the English architect of the French Revolution and the American constitution) would have been extradited and water boarded.

14
14.12 p.m.
In a charity shop I bought a complete set of John Buchan's novels (hardback, beautifully bound editions) for £10 and discovered that I had not read (or certainly could not remember) his novel called *The Free Fishers*. This is a delight. Buchan is largely forgotten today though he produced a huge number of excellent novels.

Not many writers produce more than one great classic. Jane Austen (*Pride and Prejudice*), Thackerary (*Vanity Fair*), Emily Brontë (*Wuthering Heights*) all had one each. Bram Stoker is remembered only for *Dracula* and Mary Shelley for *Frankenstein*. Victor Hugo is remembered only for *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and Flaubert for *Madame Bovary*. John Bunyan produced a whole library of books but is rightly remembered mainly for *Pilgrims Progress*. Jerome K Jerome is remembered only for his speedily written potboiler *Three Men in A Boat*. There are great exceptions. Dickens, of course, produced a classic every time he sharpened a new quill. (Dickens was, perhaps, the first true multimedia star. He wrote stories, edited and ran a newspaper, wrote bestselling books and gave lectures and theatrical performances. There has never been an author who had such a reach - or one who had such influence.) And Conan Doyle, Dumas and Simenon produced great stories with such frightening regularity that it is difficult to believe they could have ever produced anything unreadable. Robert Louis Stevenson produced at least three classics (*Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped* and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*). And P.G.Wodehouse wrote more great books than is decent.

Sometimes an author is famous for a book that may not best represent his skill. So, John Buchan is remembered mainly for *The Thirty Nine Steps* (because of the Hitchcock film starring Robert Donat and Madeleine Carroll) when he wrote at least half a dozen better novels. His best book is surely *John McNab*, the story of three eminent men who decide to liven up their dull lives by doing a little poaching in Scotland.

These days it's largely forgotten that Buchan also wrote some splendid non-fiction. He was the author of a number of history books and biographies (among them lives of Cromwell and Sir Walter Scott). Himself a successful politician. Buchan spent his final years as Governor-General of Canada where he was known as Lord Tweedsmuir. And I suspect that as small bookshops disappear so will Buchan. The Web is all very well for finding books when you know what you are looking for, but it is a soulless and dispiriting place for browsing. Nothing beats getting down on your hands and knees in the dusty corner of a second-hand bookshop or junk shop. I pity book lovers of the future. Browsing among computer files just isn't half as much fun.

Buchan has been pushed aside these days because of the efforts of the politically correct Nazi style literary police. In the same way that Mark Twain is accused of being a racist because he attended minstrel concerts in the mid 19th century so John Buchan is regarded by some as anti-Semitic because he made mildly rude remarks about Jews in some of his novels.

Attempting to pass judgements on important figures like these because of things that happened years ago, when ethics and expectations were different, is bizarre, hypocritical and sanctimonious. But the power of the politically correct movement is so great that books by Twain and Buchan are now rarely seen and future generations will be deprived of two of the greatest and most innovative authors of all time because present day politically correct bigots are too unimaginative to realise that the day to day behaviour of people must, to a great extent, be judged by the mores and standards of their time and not by the mores and standards of our time.

Still, the bright side is that if his books were more popular I wouldn't have been able to buy a beautifully bound, collected edition of Buchan’s novels for a tenner.

15
13.54 p.m.
I am invited to speak at a conference in Blackpool. I say no. The organisers send back a message offering even more money. I don't care how much they are offering or what they want me to speak about. I will never visit Blackpool

again. The Princess and I went there once. It is hell on earth.

16.12 p.m.
We saw a house which the local authority had besieged with planning regulations. `You can't use that piece of land at the front or that piece at the side. The planning people have decided that they are a buffer zone which you own but can't fence or do anything with. And that big tree which is falling over is protected. And the windows of the bedroom there are made of frosted glass because they overlook next door's garden.' We left quickly.

19.18 p.m.
Yet another industrialist is giving a big chunk of money to one of the political parties. The impression is given that he's doing this for ideological reasons. What balderdash. People don't give vast amounts of money to politicians and political parties because they think they are helping the democratic process. They give money because they are buying power, influence and commercial benefit. The donations are an investment and they want a return. And corporate donations are given so that the Chief Executive or Chairman can buy a peerage, a knighthood or some other bauble at shareholders' expense.

16
11.29 a.m.
I saw figures today which show that thieves stand a better chance of getting away with their crime than entrepreneurs have of succeeding with a new business. The man who works hard to start a business is more likely to go bankrupt and end up in prison for debt than a burglar has of going to prison for stealing.

15.14 p.m.
We have a large elderly car which has not been taxed. It was due to have a new tax disk at the end of February but we aren't using the vehicle at the moment and I simply haven't bothered to renew the tax disk (though the car does have a valid MOT and insurance certificate). Today I received a letter from the Head of Vehicle Licensing Products and Services at DVLA who seems terribly upset about the fact that I haven't renewed my tax disk or sent him something called a SORN. Instead of writing politely and asking me if I've forgotten, and telling me about the SORN option, he gets straight into threatening mode. It's a typically heavy-handed piece of thuggery from an arrogant Government functionary who thinks that citizens have nothing better to do than fill in forms and who delights in cowing the innocent with rank belligerence. In his letter about my untaxed car he tells me that I could be fined £80 or more. `Even worse,' he adds ominously, `we may impound and crush it!'. I particularly liked the exclamation mark. Here is my fanciful reply: `*Thank you for the letter in which you are kind enough to say that you may impound and crush my car because it has been untaxed for two weeks. I am sure that crushing two tons of perfectly serviceable vehicle will help the environment enormously. You could round things off nicely by dumping the crushed remains in a river of your choice. I haven't taxed the vehicle because I'm not using it at the moment. Thanks to the endless barrage of red tape and time wasting directives from London and Brussels there hasn't been any opportunity for me to do any work and earn any money. And so the car which you would like to crush is sitting behind locked gates on private land awaiting better times. I don't honestly see what this sad story has to do with you but maybe life at your office is dull at the moment and my little piece of news will add something to your joie de vivre. I've never heard of a SORN before and my local Post Office doesn't have a suitable form. If it would make your life infinitely better if I were to fill in a SORN do send one along and I will put it on the vast pile of government paperwork awaiting my attention. Sadly, this will delay the point at which I can afford to tax the car. But every silver lining has a cloud behind it.'*

16.29 p.m.
A reader from Newcastle writes to tell me that every week, thanks to the whim of a faceless, brainless bureaucrat in Brussels, she and her family have to sort their rubbish into nine separate plastic bins for recycling. Nine. There's a newspaper report today with a picture of a woman with ten recycling boxes. `Do the people who think this up imagine we have nothing else to do with our lives?' my reader asks. `It's probably no problem for the unemployed - and for those working for the council who have little enough to do, and who think of themselves as hard done by if they have to type one envelope in a day - but for those of us with proper jobs and family responsibilities the time this sort of nonsense consumes is just too much. The rubbish has to be sorted, compacted and packed tightly into the always too small containers. My husband has to squeeze some of our rubbish bags (yes, we wrap it in plastic to stop it blowing about) before we can cram them into the containers. The air has to be squeezed out. We live in dread that the binmen (are we allowed to call them that?) won't be able to get the bags out of the boxes.'

I remember when I was a kid the dustmen used to walk down the drive and collect our dustbin from near the back door. They would take it to the lorry, empty it and bring it back. Streets looked neat and tidy. Sorting out the rubbish took no time at all. You just threw what you didn't want into the galvanised bin. The council took the rubbish away in a cart. Once a year you would wash out the bin. Every ten years you would buy a new one. The rubbish was used to fill up old pits and mines and quarries and so served a useful purpose.

I reckon The Princess and I spend a minimum of half an hour a week sorting out our rubbish, putting it outside on the pavement and then going out to fetch in the empty plastic containers. Half an hour a week may not sound much but it adds up to 26 hours a year. That's the equivalent of three normal working days. It is time wasted because although I am forced by law to sort my rubbish the council, having avoided an EU fine by forcing its citizens to sort their rubbish for `recycling', just tips the carefully sorted rubbish into one big pile. (I know this isn't a myth because I've seen them do it.) The resultant mess is packed up and sent off to China on the boats that brought television sets, bras and trainers for us to buy. And we're supposed to believe that by sorting our rubbish we are saving the planet.

Most people’s lives are now blighted and complicated by this nonsense but few realise that the rubbish collecting isn't really about the environment. It’s about pretending to sort it so as not to be fined by the EU. The cause of the rubbish (the manufacturers who triple wrap indestructible DVDs in shrink-wrap, cardboard and plastic) are, of course, untouched by the bureaucrats.

We still produce the same amount of rubbish as before, of course, but these days we spend ages stamping on things, bending things and compressing things so that they will fit into the appropriate plastic bins. We put much time and effort into this though I confess I haven't yet worked out precisely how it saves the environment. All it does is cut the cost of the landfill taxes the local council has to pay to the EU. Was there ever a more arbitrary, unreasonable, unfounded tax than this?

The best and most convenient, cheapest and most efficient and most environmentally sound way of dealing with rubbish was in black bags. They were put outside once a week, taken away and dumped into landfill (of which there is unlikely to be any shortage for the foreseeable future). The streets were not scarred by vast numbers of plastic containers constantly littering gardens and pavements. And to cut down waste it would be easy to tax the manufacturers who overpackage.

The EU's recycling programme is, like just about everything else it does, badly planned and executed. As an organisation the EU comes across as self-satisfied, arrogant and wasteful. It is an extraordinarily incompetent and corrupt organisation which wastes money by the lorry load. And money they have in abundance. It is surely no coincidence that the EU has chosen for its anthem the very same piece of Beethoven music that accompanies the thuggish footwork of Malcolm McDowell and his chums in the film *Clockwork Orange*. We pay billions for annual membership of the EU and we then pay billions more in fines because our bureaucrats can't quite keep ahead of the rules their bureaucrats keep introducing. I suspect that more crooks have grown rich through the EU than through any other organisation in history. The EU's policies on the environment fit this master plan precisely.

Smaller recycling containers are often kept in the kitchen so that food and empty bottles can be put straight into them. Are these containers sterilised each week? I very much doubt it. So, via the garbage sorters and collectors, every household in every town will soon be contaminated with one another's bugs. Incidentally, why do big families get more rubbish containers? They pay the same council tax as everyone else. And it was big families who complained about the poll tax being unfair. People who live and work at home - the elderly and the self-employed - need more rubbish space but don't get it.

17
17.11 p.m.
I managed to buy another Dickens’ letter at auction. It was the Great Man's habit to burn all his correspondence so that it could not ever be reproduced but gems do occasionally appear on the market. I managed to buy a cheque signed by him not long ago. He couldn't burn those. He had the very best signature in the history of the world – though Napoleon’s unmistakable signature makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up when I touch it.

18
11.19 a.m.
A neighbour, a schoolteacher who retired at the age of 50 and who receives an enormous pension, called in with a copy of a history book he has written and which has been published by a well-known major publisher. We congratulated him and opened a bottle to help him celebrate. `I won't be getting rich on it,' he told us. `But I didn't write it for the money so it doesn't matter.' He tells us that the publisher gave him £250 for the copyright. When he'd gone I felt gloomy. Retired public sector employees are, it seems, all busy writing books. They don't need the money and are happy to accept derisory terms from publishers. No professional author could possibly write a book for £250

and still manage to buy food. The problem is that this huge reservoir of amateur authors is weakening still further the already perilous position of the professional author. Journalists are in much the same boat. A friend who has worked for the national newspapers all his life has given up and is thinking of opening a café somewhere. Papers which used to pay hundreds of pounds for a story that `led' a page now pay just a tenner - and for that they expect a photograph too. The papers, like magazines, are filling their pages with material provided by retired amateurs who don't expect or need to make a profit from their work. `I wonder how some of these teachers would have felt if I had walked into their schools and offered to teach their pupils for the joy of it,' said my pal.

19
12.40 p.m.
We are in London, at the hotel we always use. (It is next door to the National Liberal Club.) This afternoon I was standing near the reception desk waiting for someone when a new visitor arrived. `What's your name?' asked the receptionist, rather rudely I thought. `My name is on the bag,' replied the man, equally brusquely. `Where is your lavatory?' he demanded. The receptionist told him and the newcomer hurried off, obviously eager to take advantage of the facilities. When he returned to the desk I was still there. `How long will you be staying, Mr Vuitton?' asked the receptionist.

At the Club, I met a pal with whom I worked when I was a GP. He looks old and when I was tactless enough to mention this he said it was not surprising because he *is* old. He believes that the world started to fall apart when women put a leg on each side when they were riding horses, went out of control when fish and chip shops started putting meals in little polystyrene boxes, instead of wrapping them in old newspaper, and disintegrated completely when the authorities at Lords started to allow advertisers to paint slogans on the grass. I agree with him. I have decided to become an irritable old man. I think I will start drinking port so that I can develop gout.

12.45 p.m.
The Princess has just looked at the piece I wrote a few minutes ago. She says that I fulfilled my ambition to become an irritable old man some time ago.

22.11 p.m.
We bought a new kettle today. (We bought it at Paddington Station which says something uncomfortable about the modern railway station.) Here's an extract from the instructions: `The appliance is not intended for use by persons (including children) with reduced physical, sensory or mental capabilities, or lack of experience and knowledge, unless they have been given supervision or instruction concerning use of the appliance by a person responsible for their safety.' So, there you go. Courses in Kettle Management will doubtless be starting soon at a nearby University.

23.15 p.m.
`I love eating,' I said this evening. `If someone told me I had to give up eating I wouldn't want to live.'

20
15.16 p.m.
Our refrigerator has broken down. The man who came to repair it tells us that it will cost more to put it right than to buy another one. Moreover, the part he needs, a compressor, will take weeks to obtain. So, for the sake of a relatively small item a massive refrigerator must now join the nation's fridge mountain. If the EU really gave a damn about the environment it would force manufacturers to make spare parts for kitchen equipment more readily available. And they would insist that such products carried no VAT. Two weeks ago our shower broke. We were told that it simply needs a new thermostat but that since it was impossible to buy a thermostat we had to buy a new shower. There is, presumably, a shower mountain too.

16.58 p.m.
A journalist called Tony Edwards sent me an e-mail asking what I feel when I write the words `the end' at the completion of a novel. `Relief? Despair? Do I mourn the parting from characters?' I replied: `All the characters I have ever written about are alive and kicking in my head. Sometimes, I don't hear from them for a while (just like ordinary earthly folk) but the ones I have written about a lot are as real as real people. Sometimes I feel bad about the fact that I don't send them Christmas cards. The places I invent exist too and are often much more pleasant than the ones I didn't invent.' This is true. The Princess and I spend much of our time `living' in Bilbury and talking about what the characters who live are doing. This doesn't feel in the slightest bit odd to either of us.

21
13.11 p.m.
`You look like an English gentleman,' I said to a German publisher who arrived for a meeting dressed in a smart blue blazer and cream trousers. I thought he'd be pleased. `A German gentleman!' he said, pulling himself up to his full five feet five inches and very nearly clicking his heels. It had honestly never occurred to me that being called `an English Gentleman' would not be an incomparable compliment or that anyone (even a German) would consider being described as a `German Gentleman' a compliment. In fact, of course, he didn't look at all like an English gentleman. He was trying far too hard. He had a handkerchief in the breast pocket of his jacket. And, horror of horrors, it matched his tie. If he resembled anything English it was a second-hand car salesman.

18.11 p.m.
In China a car park has been built with spaces three feet wider for women drivers to allow `for their different sense of space'. I have written to ask if the Government will instruct car park owners to introduce something similar here. It sounds a splendid idea.

19.16 p.m.
The VAT people at Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs insist that to save the planet I must fill in my quarterly VAT report online. (They don't seem to have realised yet that computers are massive users of electricity.) This is now the law and means that they will no longer post out a form for me to fill in. But every quarter they send me a stern reminder (through the post) reminding me to fill in the form online so that we can save the planet together by not sending stuff through the post. It is comforting to know that the planet and the future are in the hands of such people.

22
14.15 p.m.
I've been re-reading John Osborne's two volumes of autobiography. According to Osborne the three great lies are: 1) I hate money, 2) I'm glad I'm a Jew, 3) I'll only put it a little way in.

15.16 p.m.
On the way to Minehead we passed a road sign which said, simply: `Falling rocks'. The Princess and I spent some time trying to decide whether it would be better to slow down or to speed up. We couldn't decide.

23
11.18 a.m.
As a result of the Inland Revenue losing the personal details of 25 million citizens the Government is bringing in new controls and punishments for small businesses which haven't lost any data. From April 1st (and as far as I know the Government has not yet started playing April Fool jokes) companies and sole traders can be fined up to £500,000 (not a misprint) for not looking after data properly and for not having a satisfactory system of protection. I understand that this refers to the physical protection of computers and disks. If Government departments lose data then taxpayers will presumably pay the fine. If companies lose data then shareholders or directors will pay the fine. If anyone working for me (and that includes the Royal Mail) loses the data then I pay the fine. Another reason not to be in business.

14.16 p.m.
The Princess has been looking for a new mobile telephone. It is incredibly difficult to buy a telephone that doesn't take photographs, play games, do the ironing and whistle 9,327 different tunes. Most of the things we buy are far more complicated than we need them to be. Cars, telephones, television sets and computers can all do a zillion things we don't want them to be able to do. These extra facilities make things more difficult to operate and get in the things we really want to be able to do. Not surprisingly, because they are more complicated they break down more often. And when they break down they have to be thrown away.

16.12 p.m.
For the first decade or two of my publishing life, publishers used to make much of their money out of selling `serial' rights to newspapers and magazines. Newspapers in particular used to pay a lot of money for serial rights. I frequently sold first, second or even third serial rights for five figure sums. Payments for serial rights were always higher than payments for features and I don't expect I was the only author to sell serial rights in books that didn't

exist. I would send a `chapter' from an MSS (for which I knew there was no market as a book) to a newspaper editor and sell him the serial rights in material that was never going to be a book. Instead of receiving a fee of £2,000 for an article I would be paid £20,000 for serial rights. This form of mild deception was distinctly profitable.

Sadly, this small bonanza has disappeared because publishers have lost what brains they once had and now give away serial rights. I was astonished when I discovered this. A feature editor from the *Daily Herald* in Scotland offered a derisory sum for the serial rights in a book that The Princess and I had written together. When I protested I was told to take it or leave it because the `big' publishers in London don't expect any money at all in return for serial rights. This, of course, is utter madness.

24
14.38 p.m.
The Internet is a festival for spammers and crooks, pornographers and terrorists, lobbyists, propagandists, liars, deceivers and those with a grudge. It is an electronic heaven for those with a vested interest to promote. As a source of unbiased, factually based information it is about as useful as a pot of strawberry yoghurt. Pitiful excrescences such as Wikipedia look like caviar but turn out to be horseshit. In my experience the Internet’s best known information site is unbalanced, vindictive and prejudiced. Anyone can write anything about anyone. Knowledge is not a prerequisite. Facts are optional. As is truth. One editor I identified turned out to be a 15-year-old, who proudly described himself as ‘an authority on literature, music and politics’ and other things that I am interested in'. An expert. The damned site seems to me to be written by anonymous failures sniping from the safety of the sidelines of life.

Wikipaedia reminds me of Spain in the days of the inquisition. Instead of secret messages dropped furtively in little boxes, today's evil little worms do their dirty work without even having to leave their bedrooms.

Much of the site is, I suspect, written by people with vested interests; lobbyists (professional or merely obsessed) with more prejudice than information. Biographers and would-be historians who cannot sell their work offer it free of charge. Wikipaedia has, I discovered, a strange rule that people who are alive are the only people on the planet not allowed to interfere with their own entry.

I suspect there are people who think Wikipaedia is an independent encyclopaedia; but as an encyclopaedia it is built on a firm foundation of mud. To describe Wikipaedia as an encyclopaedia is like describing the BBC as an independent broadcaster. The basic concept is so flawed as to make the result entirely worthless. To me, Wikipaedia exemplifies everything that is wrong with the World Wide Web; it is a potent mixture of ignorance and prejudice masquerading as an impartial source of accurate information. Contributors mix their lies and libels and deceits and half-truths into a poisonous pot of rumour, innuendo and falsehood. No wonder many celebrities and politicians employ people to check their Wikipedia entries and to comb the Internet daily for inaccuracies and libels. Wikipaedia is an utterly pointless and dangerous invention. I would ask anyone who approves of it one simple question: How would you like to be the subject of a Wikipaedia profile, knowing that you cannot correct any errors but that all your enemies can put on whatever they like and libel you freely and without concern?

The sad truth is that there is no innocent fun online. The Internet is a meeting place for intellectual vandals, for terrorists and for pornographers and paedophiles. Bloggers may not be paid (most of the 140 million tapping away do so without pay) but they are competing for popularity and the only way they know to achieve that is not through wisdom but through verbal violence and shock.

25
11.40 a.m.
Another company wants to buy advertising space on vernoncoleman.com. I turn them down as usual. But it is becoming increasingly difficult to say `no' to people who offer me money for doing absolutely nothing.

And I'm not entirely sure why I am turning them down. The entire world seems to be built on advertising. Why won't I allow anyone to sponsor items or put adverts on the site? I suppose it's because although I know damned well that I would never alter anything to please an advertiser I am worried that readers might think that I would. Without adverts there can be no suspicion.

26
15.10 p.m.
The new phrase in the investment world is `black swan event'. It's as popular now as `elephant in the room' was a year or two ago. The idea is that black swan incidents are rare and unpredictable and improbable and, because they are unexpected, can therefore cause chaos in the financial markets. The fact is, however, that black swans aren't particularly rare. I have just developed some photographs I took in Dawlish of a black swan sitting on her nest. The

small river running through the town is full of black swans. There isn't a single white swan to be seen.

27
12.17 p.m.
Three letters today from readers wanting me to write another book on politics. I believe that my last book on politics (*The Bloodless Revolution*) contains the best answer I can give and there seems little point in continuing to redefine the problem when I have already defined the answer. So, no more books on politics. Unless I change my mind.

15.16 p.m.
A fellow I know who runs a printing company has just bought a new press. He has paid a vast sum of money for this machine and I fear he may regret the expenditure. These days we are all accustomed to the idea of equipment going out of date before we've worked out how to use it. That's now the norm. But the danger in the world of printing is that the industry may well disappear before the down payment has cleared through the bank. The whole publishing industry is going to be turned upside down and inside out by e-books and the Internet. Authors, publishers, agents, bookshops and wholesalers are all going to be badly hurt. Printers could well be mortally wounded.

28
15.43 p.m.
I am well accustomed to constant technology changes. At primary school I learned to write using a piece of slate and a scratching stone. When I wanted to rub out what I'd written I used a damp cloth. At grammar school I dipped a nib pen into an inkwell. Blotting paper played a large part in my early life, though mainly because strips of it could be made into pellets, soaked in ink and fired with great accuracy with the aid of a rubber band stretched between thumb and forefinger.

I was selling computer software in the early 1980s. A piece of medical software which I wrote with a friend sold in 26 countries and was widely praised. (It was written for something called the Sinclair ZX computer.)

I do not object to new technology because I don't understand it or because it threatens my life in some way. I happily accept and use and enjoy new technology which improves my life. But most new technology doesn't make things easier or better and doesn't save time or energy or effort. Most new technology is crap.

One member of my staff used to accuse me of being something of a Luddite because I insist on writing in DOS rather than Windows but I was the first person I know to have an Internet website, to use a computer, to have a hand-held computer (a Psion - still the best) and to have a mobile phone (it was the size and weight of two bricks, it filled a decent sized briefcase and had a proper phone with a curly wire attached to the handset). I was the first person I know to have a Blackberry and the first to have an iPhone. I had a fax machine when only one person I knew had one. (We faxed one another constantly.)

I choose to use new technology when it helps me and not because it’s there or fashionable and I have to admit that these days most new technology doesn't make my life better in any way. Most seems absurdly over complicated, badly designed, badly made and unreliable. And, for a wordsmith, DOS is much better than Windows.

21.19 p.m.
The Princess pointed out today that I am, in different ways, like both of my parents. I am like my father in that I am remarkably trusting and often sadly naive. When a garage mechanic tells me that something needs changing I trust him. And I am like my mother in that when I (or someone I love) is tricked or cheated, or treated unfairly, I am likely to fight like a demon. This is an uncomfortable combination. The first trait leads me into confrontational circumstances. The second trait means that the confrontations are often explosive, and may cause considerable collateral damage.

29
14.02 p.m.
We drove to Hereford. We are still searching for a new home for us and a new home for Publishing House. Most of the journey was up the glorious Wye Valley but the first part of it involved a tedious strip of motorway. I'd never really noticed before just how fed up people seem to look when they're driving up and down motorways. I couldn't help but notice that all the drivers and the passengers in the various vehicles seemed to have the same fixed look on their faces. The drivers were all white-faced and rather angry looking while the passengers were all rather pale too but they just looked thoroughly miserable and bored stiff.

When I was a boy, we always used to look forward to a spin out on a Sunday afternoon. My parents and I would pile into the car and we would pick up any aunts, uncles and miscellaneous grandparents that we could find. Going on a proper holiday would always be looked on as a real adventure and I would set off with *I Spy* books and notepads for collecting car numbers. We didn't really mind how long it took to get to wherever it was that we were going to and the journey itself was a genuine part of the pleasure; to be enjoyed rather than endured. We got a tremendous amount of fun from waving at people, spotting thatched cottages and searching for fluted pillar-boxes.

When my father joined the RAC and we started to get saluted by RAC men travelling because *very* special. RAC men used to ride around on super little three wheeled motorcycle combinations in those days. They wore enormous leather gauntlets and old-fashioned goggles and carried all their tools and spare parts in brightly painted little sidecars.

I remember once, when my Dad was driving us to the seaside for the day, we passed an RAC man parked by the side of a roundabout on the Welsh borders. I made my father drive round two or three times just to see if the RAC man would keep saluting us every time. He did.

We used to spot all sorts of fascinating things from the car in those days and we'd stop and have cups of tea and platefuls of buttered scones in lovely out of the way places. Everything was fairly leisurely and we were quite happy to average 30 miles an hour.

Now that there are motorways criss crossing the countryside everything is very different. The emphasis is all on speed and everyone seems determined to get from their point of departure to their destination in as short a time as possible. A minute spent travelling is a wasted minute. No one seems interested in looking at the countryside or the strange bits and pieces of rural architecture any more. People don't make unscheduled stops now just because they've seen an odd looking building, a herd of wild deer or a rather jolly looking café. Motoring is about red and white rubber cones, roadworks and motorway police.

At the motorway service areas you can see the effect that all this is having on people. Cars and coaches hurtle into the car parks, and screech to a halt. The people inside leap out and rush around as quickly as they can so that they can get back on the road without losing too much time. If there is a queue for the lavatories, a queue for food or a queue for petrol people get very upset and bad-tempered. It is hardly surprising that the staff working in these out of the way service stations invariably become as edgy as the people they serve, as they struggle to provide a speedy service at the cost of all friendliness. The price for all this haste is a high one. Instead of arriving fresh, rested, full of fascinating little titbits of knowledge and ready for fun the modern traveller arrives sweaty, stressed and so uptight that it takes him hours to recover. Progress.

16.47 p.m.
I went into a shop to try to put £30 into my mobile phone. `It won't do £30,' said the assistant. I looked at her and waited. `It will do £10 and £20 but not £30,' she explained.

18.28 p.m.
One third of British companies face a regulatory procedure each year. In any one year 50% of British companies are sued at least once. These problems destroy many small companies. Big companies, protected by regiments of lawyers, welcome these problems because they know that they cause serious damage to their small competitors.

30
14.10 p.m.
I've been thinking a lot about progress recently. We are taught, and encouraged to believe, that progress is always good. The corollary is, of course, that anyone who tries to stand in the way of progress must be bad. There is an erroneous assumption that this year's doodah is inevitably better than last year's doodah, simply because it is new. It's the same with books. Publishers abandon their backlists and sell only what is new, new, new (and preferably from a new author too). Knowing that manufacturers invariably stop making good things and replace them with things which are never as good - that's almost a definition of progress - The Princess and I buy lots of it when we find something decent in the shops.

The simple truth is that many of the things invented, and described as progress, are bad for us and make our lives worse. Progress isn't always a good thing. Cigarettes, modern farming methods, vaccinations, the Internet and genetic engineering are just a few of the things described as `progress' but which I could argue are damaging our lives. I believe that just about all progress in sport is bad. There has not been a development in half a century that has improved cricket or football or rugby or motor racing in any way. Similarly, much so-called progress in medicine actually results in patients being worse off - not better off. It is generally assumed that `change' is a synonym for progress but this patently isn't true.

Most worrying of all, perhaps, is the fact that an increasing number of broadsheet commentators and politicians, now assume (and accept, apparently unquestioningly) that `progress ' must always be synonymous with a larger

State. Anything which reduces the power and size of the state is `recessive' and `bad'. All those who support the EU (and that is the BBC and most of the rest of the media, and almost all politicians in the doomed House of Commons) are in favour of statism and increased state spending.

A few years ago I took our BMW into the garage to have something repaired. A salesman at the garage tried to sell me a new 7 series and part of his sales pitch included the extraordinary claim that there was a device in the car which, through manipulating a mouse on a small pad, enabled me to change over 700 functions. He insisted that the car had more computing power than the early devices NASA sent into space. His pitch actually put me off the car completely and I found myself physically backing away from it. Who on earth wants to be able to control 700 different functions while driving a car? I drove a BMW for ten years and there were so many knobs and dials that at the end of that time I still couldn't remember how to make the fog lights work. Whenever the car came back from the garage with settings altered it took me half a morning to reset them. When a bulb needed replacing it took skilled men at the garage half a day to do it.

Of course, some progress is good. The man who invented a brush suitable for cleaning chimneys put a lot of small boys out of work. That was a good thing for it freed them up to play conkers and go scrumping for apples while people’s sooty chimneys still got swept. But much change isn't progress because it isn't an improvement on the way things were done before; it’s just good for the people initiating or promoting the change (and profiting from it in some way). How many houses built today will still be standing in 30, 50 years’ time, let alone be still fit to inhabit in 100 years’ time? The Princess and I always prefer to buy and live in old houses simply because they are much better made. The building industry may have found cheaper, faster ways to do things. But cheaper and faster aren't necessarily good when the end result is something shoddy and temporary. All real progress is made as a result of steady observation and careful deduction but these skills are not valued today. Just about all great discoveries in history have been made by people who weren't recognised by their peers before they made their discoveries and often weren't recognised for years afterwards either. Their discoveries made members of the establishment feel uncomfortable because their acceptance imposed `change' on a society which really didn't like change. For millennia advantageous changes to society happened only through the work of unreasonable men. Great things happened only when enough unreasonable men were brave enough to be unreasonable in public. Today, things are reversed. Anyone who opposes change is regarded as an unreasonable backwoodsman; someone to be pitied and avoided.

I'm often described as a Luddite but I'm not. I'm a realist: someone who understands that progress is more often bad than good and that progress for the sake of progress is no progress at all. Very little change is change for the better. I am not against change. I am against change without purpose because progress for the sake of change is not progress.

31

21.08 p.m.

I discovered today that in Victorian times there were 500 varieties of apple tree and over 1,000 varieties of pear in England. I rather doubt if there are that many varieties on sale in today's shops. Where did they all go? Progress took them I suppose. The same progress that took the small farms and the greengrocery shops.

April

1

09.52 a.m

The Princess sent this letter to a friend who lives in Wales:

Dear Ms D,

Owing to the shortage of housing provision in the Carmarthenshire area combined with the high influx of workers from central, southeastern and northeastern European countries, we have been called upon to make the most of the region's existing resources. We have done this by devising a plan called the 'Habitat Share Scheme'. Through the use of relevant data we have carefully selected candidates for our scheme who have fulfilled our criteria, and we are pleased to inform you that you have been selected. Congratulations! Your membership reference number for our Habitat Share Scheme is: 784333VX28PO914550CD (Please quote this number in all correspondence).

In order to help us appoint a suitable Habitat Share Scheme partner for you, please fill in the details below. Your chosen partner will remain resident with you for a minimum of 12-18 months because research confirms that this is the average time scale when 50% of workers decide to return to their country of origin.

Please specify your preference of the nationality of your Habitat Share Scheme partner:
(Please place a tick alongside the country of your choice)
Lithuanian
Polish
Romanian

Please specify your preference of the sex of your Habitat Share Scheme partner:
(Please place a tick alongside the sex of your choice)
Male
Female
(Please note: you can either opt for male or female)

Please specify your preference of the age range of your Habitat Share Scheme partner:
(Please place a tick alongside the age of your choice)
18-25 years
25-35 years
35-45 years
45-60 years (Knowledge of first aid will be required for this age category)

As soon as we have processed your details, we will send you the dates of when your Habitat Share Scheme partner will be despatched to you. This is expected to be four weeks from the date shown on the top of this letter. In the meantime, we shall forward onto you the language phrasebook of your choice. This will be provided to you free, however, there will be a charge of £10.99 for postage and packaging. We strongly suggest that you opt for the Polish language as many linguists agree that it is less challenging to master than Lithuanian or Romanian. Added to this, it will make shopping for your Habitat Share Scheme partner easier because records show that Polish food is more easily obtainable from the supermarkets in your area.

Congratulations again on being selected as a member of our elite scheme. We look forward to processing your details and despatching to you your new Habitat Share Scheme partner.

Yours sincerely,
Palo Frilo
Executive Advisor

15.14 p.m.

I've received a request to speak at a fringe event at a small book festival held in a place I'd never previously even heard of. The organisers offered to let me have the use of a hall for £15 plus 25% of my ticket take and suggested I charged £4 to £5 for tickets. `We price tickets at £7 for the Big Guns, so that should be fine for you,' an organiser told me, as though in training for a Gold Medal at the Patronising Olympics. The too important to be named Big Guns would not, of course, be expected to hire their own hall, arrange their own sales or share the proceeds. They would arrive later, met by chauffeur driven limousines no doubt.

I was so annoyed by what seemed to me to be a carefully calculated insult that I sent a childish note back saying that I didn't do little festivals. It wasn't so much the insult that rankled (I really should be used to it by now) but the fact that the woman who sent the e-mail felt so comfortable about insulting me that she didn't even seem to be aware that she was doing it. It was as though she thought that I would accept being second-rate as obvious and inevitable.

It was the easy assumption that I would accept my lesser standing which seemed so damned insulting.

Looking around the other literary festivals I see that the big name author speakers at the Hay on Wye Festival include author Chris Evans, author Bianca Jagger and author Jerry Hall (one can only assume that Evans has some connection with Mick Jagger but I can't imagine what it is). I can't help wondering if the organisers could be prosecuted under the Trades Description Act for using the word `literary' to describe their festival.

Literary festivals are springing up all over the place these days. At most of them television personalities and politicians are treated as the superstars. Some of these shindigs are sponsored and I assume someone must be making bundles of loot out of them.

I used to receive regular invitations to speak at the damned things. But either my star has waned or word has got around that I always say `no'. I don't think I have ever received an invitation that has included an offer of a fee or any expenses. I think the idea is that I will be thrilled to be in the same town as such literary luminaries as Gordon Brown. The organisers of these events love minor television celebrities, topless models and authors who are young and sassy and preferably black and female. If they can find a speaker who is leprotic and in a wheelchair they are over the moon. I doubt if the people who run them, speak at them or go to them know or care anything much about books or writing.

2

16.17 p.m.

I went to meet someone called Bill Bonner in London. Bonner is a publisher of financial magazines such as *Moneyweek* and a wide variety of newsletters. He is something of a publishing phenomenon and seems to have enough energy to light up a small town. He wants me to write a newsletter for him. Knowing that he lives part of the time in Paris I had arranged for him to be sent a copy of my book *Secrets of Paris*. His first words to me were: `I bet I know more about Paris than you do.' He then proceeded to tell me that he had an apartment there and was, therefore, far more knowledgeable about the city. It was immediately clear that he hadn't even looked at the book because in it I refer to the fact that we live part of the year there and have an apartment in the city. He offered me £10,000 a year and 7.5% of the take, to write and edit a newsletter for him. Even if the money had been good I would have turned him down. Although he is thin I think he is American.

19.18 p.m.

As usual we made our own sandwiches before travelling home. We bought bread, cheese and other essentials in Sainsbury’s at Paddington station. We hardly ever eat out these days. Not even sandwiches are safe. The average sandwich is stuffed with e coli - simply because the people who make them don't bother to wash their hands properly. Eating out these days is like letting strangers put their fingers into your mouth after they've just been to the loo and not bothered to wash their hands. Television chefs set a terrible example. They are always dipping their hands into the food they are preparing.

I am constantly surprised at the way that people in restaurants eat food which has been prepared and fondled by the bare hands of complete strangers. Would any of them, I wonder, let complete strangers put their bare fingers into their mouths? On the odd occasion when I've found myself watching a television chef I've always been appalled to see him (or her) mixing salads or whatever with bare hands. No television chef seems to understand anything about nutrition or hygiene.

The only television chef who was worth watching was oenophile Keith Floyd but I damned well wouldn't have wanted his fingers in my mouth either.

3

15.16 p.m.

In Gloucestershire today I saw a van which had the words `Monet - house painter' painted on the side. How wonderful to be able to say that your front door had been painted by Monet.

17.16 p.m.

The Financial Times is proud of its model for charging people who use its online website. The newspaper sends out flurries of daily e-mails (each just a few sentences long) and allows readers to look at the articles upon which these e-mails are based just ten times a month. The idea is that once a Web user has used up his allowance he will pay to access the other articles he wants to read. This system may well work for *The Financial Times* (where the people paying are almost certainly doing so with someone else's money) but it won't work with ordinary punters who are paying with their own money. It won't work for three reasons. First, the short pieces of news (intended as tasters) are long enough to tell most people everything they want to know on the subject. If Goldman Sachs has done something terrible all I want to know is that they've done something terrible. I'm not interested in the rest of the article quoting people saying how shocked they are and I'm certainly not interested in whingeing excuses dreamt up by the Goldman Sachs publicity people. Second, if there is something about which I want to know more, all I have to do is put the key words into a search engine and then read the full story on someone else's website. Third, even if *The Financial Times* tries to cut down the amount of information it includes on its teasers or tasters, there will be someone (probably the publicly funded BBC) prepared to provide a similar service for free. And readers who want to know more simply have to press on the link to visit the relevant site.

I'm as sorry as anyone else is that the pay-for-information model won't work. Towards the end of the 20th century, I was one of the first people to set up a series of websites designed to sell information. Although I was sceptical (because I was aware that most of the people using the Internet expect to get everything they want for free) it was something I had to try. It failed.

4
12.14 p.m.
I was standing in a queue in Lloyd's bank today and overheard this. A man in a tweed jacket and corduroy trousers turned to the man standing beside him. `I'm worried about this place going bust.' he said. `But I have a plan. I'm going to diversify.' You mean divide it between different banks?' `No. I'm getting it all out. I'm going to keep some under the mattress and some in the teapot and I'm going to bury some in an old biscuit tin in the garden.'

15.16 p.m.
Why do solicitors stop cheques when people who have ordered books die? It seems so sad. Moreover, although they stop the cheques the solicitors always keep the books which have been sent. Since quite a number of our readers are elderly this happens frequently. This has happened again today. It happened two weeks ago. The customer who died most recently had ordered four books she wanted to read. But her solicitor stopped her cheque. He did not, of course, return the books and ignored my letter asking him to do so. So, thanks to him, the last thing the old lady did was steal four books posthumously.

5
16.17 p.m.
I bought a lovely edition of *Some People* by Harold Nicholson at a charity shop today. When I got the book home I spent ages trying to pick off the sticky price label that the shop had affixed to the cover. The label was one of those immoveable ones that really needs removing with a blowtorch. After picking away for several minutes I eventually managed to remove most of the label. But there was, inevitably, a nasty rectangular mark left behind to show where the label had been. Why do charity shops always allow their books to be handled by people who know nothing and care less about the items for which they are responsible? Most charity shops overcharge for anything remotely interesting but still ruin their books (and indeed everything else they sell) by slamming on sticky labels that were never intended for use on books (or indeed anything else that isn't packaged in military thickness plastic). A few months ago I bought a beautifully crafted brass shoehorn from a charity shop. Even that still bears the mark showing where the price label had been.

6
18.17 p.m.
One of the problems with being old is that I really cannot blame anyone else for the stupid things I do. There comes a point in life where we all have to take responsibility for our errors - even the egregious ones. The snag with knowing this, of course, is that one can become overly cautious; weighing all the pros and cons before making a decision and eventually finding it almost impossible actually to reach any sort of decision.

19.12 p.m.
A reader has written suggesting that I must adapt to Internet selling. How on earth can I? Amazon won't carry any stock unless I pay them extra. I'm told that they will guarantee to stock our books in our webshop if we pay them a fee, give them 60% discount on the books and pay to post the books to them. Oh, and if they decide they don't want the books they will send them back and we will have to pay the postage on the returns. This isn't business - it's commercial suicide. Just to add to the bewilderment I feel, one bookseller told me that he wouldn't stock my books because they are too widely available on the Internet. I sometimes wonder if I am perhaps living in some sort of lunatic asylum. I am often described as `controversial', `iconoclastic' and `eccentric' but I am beginning to feel that I am the only sane and sensible person on Planet Publishing.

7

21.14 p.m.

A policeman has advised members of the public who are arrested to avoid saying anything except to complain about everything and everyone. I think that this is probably excellent advice for anyone dealing with any civil servant.

22.10 p.m.

Our search for a new home is not going well. I'd forgotten just how stupid and deceitful estate agents are. They ask us what we want and we tell them. We give them enough detail to help them select something suitable from what they have for sale but not enough detail to make it impossible for them to find suitable properties. They write all this down on a large pad. And then they hand us a pile of brochures for houses which match none of our requirements. `This isn't quite what you're looking for,' they say, offering a one bedroomed flat in the middle of a city 50 miles away from our chosen area, `but the owner has recently decorated the bathroom and there's a nice view of the park from the spare bedroom window.'

Part of the problem, of course, is that there really isn't much property on the market. By deliberately keeping interest rates low to protect the millions who greedily bought houses they couldn't afford (and to prevent the housing crash which the market needs but the Government doesn't want for political reasons) the Government has enabled people to stay in houses they should have never bought in the first place. And so, despite the fact that we are in what should be a buyers’ market, sellers are reluctant to drop their prices. Some of the houses on the market are priced at an absurdly high level and have been on the market for two years now. They haven't sold because they were too expensive when they were first put on the market. They are now even more absurdly overpriced.

One estate agent told us that house prices, particularly at the higher end of the market, are derived not from any sense of what is the right price but from what the seller wants. `Everyone becomes a property dealer and when they come to sell they view their house as their pension, an investment. Moreover their expectation of price is dictated by what they want rather than by the market or by logic.’

22.57 p.m.

Yet another journalist has jumped on the overloaded bandwagon and attacked me for publishing my own books. I am, apparently, not a `proper' publisher. London publishers (the ones who are usually described as `proper' publishers) specialise in printing books by footballers, women who have had sex with footballers, men who have gone out (or stayed in) with women who have had sex with footballers and women who have had breast enlargement surgery. These `proper' publishers pay the biggest advances for women who can satisfy more than one category (they have had sex with a footballer *and* have had breast enhancement). I'm happy to stick with improper publishing designed to change the world.

Most big, well-known London publishers no longer publish books which are important in any real sense (in that they have educational or literary value or even offer real entertainment). They prefer to publish superficial, exploitative trash because that is easier and safer than rocking the establishment boat. And so publishing houses which used to be brave trend setters now produce row after row of books by nonentities; materialistic, egocentric fame whores who seek notoriety for its own sake, rather than as an offshoot of achievement. Most of these `authors' don't write books because they have something to say but because it is the next thing to do - another part of the multimedia celebrity experience. A ghostwriter will produce the words. The putative authors are merely writing books as another way of capitalising on their transient, transparent fame. Their eccentricity is about as genuine as a Cherie Blair smile.

Most publishers are now solely in business to make money. The sad thing is that they aren't even very good at that. (Making money is on my list of reasons for writing. If I don't make money then I won't eat. But it is not my main reason.

Because the books they produce have such a limited shelf life (today's reality celebrity will be tomorrow's forgotten person) modern publishers have become exceedingly short termist. They don't bother about their backlists. Once a book has sold they forget about it. They don't bother to reprint.

And so I will stick to self-publishing, thank you.

8

14.15 p.m.

The co-editor of a small magazine called *Resurgence* has written to say that they won't take any more advertisements for my book *Oil Apocalypse* because their readers think it is `alarmist fear-mongering'. The editor goes on to say that `in future we are not prepared to accept any material in *Resurgence* relating to any work by

Vernon Coleman' and ends `It may be an idea for you to revisit your publicity regarding this book, because if this is the response from *Resurgence* readers...then I'm not sure it will be successful.' I wrote back and pointed out that we had received a better response from the advert in *Resurgence* than from any other advertisement in any other magazine. I also pointed out that when I wrote *Oil Apocalypse* the oil price was under 50 dollars a barrel.

I am always surprised by the number of editors who are prepared to ban books, and even authors, on the basis of letters from a few disgruntled readers (many of whom usually have a particular axe to grind).

9
11.26 a.m.
A letter has arrived from a reader who complains that my book *Alice's Diary* is out of print and I should not be advertising a book that I know is unavailable. He has been told this both by his local bookshop and by his local library. I write back and assure him that we have nearly 3,000 copies of *Alice's Diary* in stock, sitting patiently on the shelves at Publishing House. Why do bookshops and libraries lie so often about our books being out of print? I know that many readers are reluctant to take my books out of their local public library in case they are put on an official `blacklist' but it seems unlikely that librarians have the same concern. To my knowledge this business of denying that my books exist has happened several times a week for the last twenty years. I suspect it happens much more often than that. How many books would we have sold if bookshops and libraries had shown a little interest? Since I started self-publishing in 1989, I have begged bookshops to take stock (on a sale or return basis). I have bought advertisements aimed at pushing buyers into bookshops. I have bought advertisements in trade journals politely suggesting that bookshops might like to stock my books. I have sent bookshops free copies of new books. But they have, by and large, only ever bought what has been ordered. They have never taken books to put on their shelves. Browsers cannot go into a bookshop and find my books (as they used to be able to do when I was published by London publishing houses).

10
10.15 a.m.
The Government has pledged to move everyone online and to force every businessman to pay his tax as well as his VAT online. It seems absurd that we are now forced to do the taxman's work for him. Every small businessman is now a tax collector; spending days every month sorting out problems that are rightly the province of HMRC. Maybe I could send some of my work round to their offices. I wonder how long it will be before we are all forced to conduct all our business (and probably non-business) affairs online. From today, I must fill in my VAT forms on the Internet. This means that I am forced to put at least some of my financial information online where it will, of course, be vulnerable and insecure. If I refuse to do this then small spotty youths in uniforms will come round and do terrible things to me in the name of the State. They are, of course, doing this partly because it saves them money but also because it enables them to keep track of everything I do. It is now also the law that I have to pay the VAT I collect for the Government electronically. Cheques may still be legal tender but they're not legal tender as far as the Government is concerned. `It's...just as secure as doing it on paper,' claims a HMRC advertisement. No it's not. I would complain to the ASA about this blatant lie but the chances of the ASA criticising HMRC are about as great as the Royal Mail providing a decent service or Gordon Brown flying a St George’s flag from No 10. When I wrote to protest about this, and said that I would have to close my business if they forced me to do financial reporting online, the official line, shorn of bureauspeak, was: `Go ahead, punk, we don't give a stuff if you do'.

11
12.34 p.m.
On the train to London this morning I overheard this snatch of conversation:

`I don't get paid enough. And they won't pay me more.'

`So why not leave?'

`I can't. I will never get another job as good as this one.'

13.22 p.m.
At St Pancras station I put my jacket into a tray with my coat, and the small chap sitting in front of the X-ray machine said there was something in the pockets so another small fellow (who seemed Eastern European in origin and who spoke a little English) told me to empty my jacket pockets. I could understand most of what he said but I found it strangely irritating that our national security was in the hands of people who weren't of our nation and could not be expected to give a damn about it. I could accept rudeness and high-handedness far more easily from a British citizen who thought that he or she was defending their country. The irony is that there is a large sign warning

travellers: `Do not abuse or attempt to intimidate our staff.' (These ubiquitous signs are, of course, a consequence of EU policy which mean that employers are responsible if one of their employees is subject to rudeness.) There really should be a sign warning staff members: `Do not abuse or attempt to intimidate our customers.' Fat chance.

Emptying my pockets took some time. I am a writer and I always carry tons of stuff in my pockets. Indeed, I deliberately buy coats with lots of pockets and if there aren't enough I have extra pockets added. They invariably become baggy with all the stuff I carry.

From the breast pocket I took half a dozen train and metro tickets, three cards advertising three different taxi services in Paris, two pencil stubs, a flat torch slightly thicker than a credit card and a device which also looks like a credit card but which contains a pair of scissors, a screwdriver and a small knife. (I carry this as a substitute for my Swiss Army penknife).

The rest of my pockets contained: a spare pair of folding spectacles, another torch (one that winds up), a metal tape measure, a Psion pocket computer, a mobile telephone, a small electronic Encyclopaedia Britannica, two passports, two train tickets, a piece of card on which was written the access code for our apartment building in Paris, two brand new notebooks, the notebook I was using, four pens, two propelling pencils, a small pencil sharpener, a rubber, a conker, a spare shoelace, a packet of sweets that had congealed, a small book to help me identify trees, a wallet, a small copy of Hazlitt's essays, a copy of an Evelyn Waugh novel, another wallet, an empty spectacle case (my spectacles were perched on the tip of my nose), a small metal car, a tiny model of the Little Prince and a variety of loose change in two currencies.

The customs official examined all these items suspiciously and then tested my pockets with a dirty swab which looked as though it had been used on at least 10,000 other travellers. He also did the drug test on my mobile telephone.

When he'd finished I put my jacket back on, then added my overcoat. No one had inspected my overcoat (or asked me to empty its many pockets). No one had looked at my hat or my scarf. And no one had looked inside any of the electronic devices I had removed from my pockets. They also missed four pockets in my waistcoat and didn't ask me to empty the six pockets in my trousers. The whole damned system is pointless and pathetic. I invariably travel with the same things in my pockets. Sometimes they trigger the beeper. Sometimes they don't. On one occasion I was told by an idiot who should have found work as a comedian's straight man that the metal eyelet holes in my shoes had set off their alarm. Curiously, I never beep coming from Paris to London but I beep 50% of the time travelling from London to Paris.

After a short wait and a quick cup of coffee, we then got on the train.

`Look at all those daft people getting on that train,' I said to The Princess, as we boarded a completely empty Eurostar train. `I'm glad we're not on that one. It seems crowded.' There was another train on the other side of our platform and it was filling up very quickly. We found our carriage, found our reserved seats and sat down. There was no one in the compartment.

`Do you think we're on the right train?' asked The Princess, who is always very gentle about these things.

I stood up and looked out of the window.

We then got on the right train.

18.01 p.m.

Journeys through Paris are usually exciting and rather nerve wracking. Parisians regard traffic laws as guidelines, starting points for discussion. They think of themselves as adults, and capable of making better judgements than bureaucrats who aren't there are at the time. But, arriving in Paris today we found ourselves being driven by the only timid taxi driver in Paris. He stopped for everything and even waited while a car driver and a motorcyclist (the former male and the latter female) chatted each other up. `There are a lot of Germans here,' said The Princess, while we waited. `How do you know?' I asked. `I've seen a lot of fat, badly-dressed people around,' she explained. We sat behind the flirting pair until the car driver wrote something on a piece of paper and gave it to the motorcyclist. The Princess pointed out that in the taxi driving business it makes good financial sense to be timid. As usual she was right. The bill was 10 euros higher than usual.

There was the usual thick wodge of mail in our mailbox. The local magazine reported that there was a murder in the 7th arrondissement a few weeks ago. This had, apparently, happened after a late night fight. The mayor immediately called in senior police officers to discuss ways to make sure that nothing similar happens again. The 7th is one of those areas of Paris where unpleasant things are not allowed to happen.

19.03 p.m.

When we had arrived at our apartment we discover that there had been a fire in the Channel Tunnel just after we'd got through. This is the second time that we have just avoided a serious problem. And on two occasions we've been on the last train to get through before snow closed the tunnel. We must remember this good fortune when something does go wrong and we end up spending ten hours sitting on a cold train. It's all rather reminiscent of my novel *Tunnel*. And that was just too scary.

19.14 p.m.
While The Princess prepared dinner, I popped out to the supermarket to buy bread and other necessities. As I left the supermarket I overheard an English tourist complaining to his wife. `These French handkerchiefs are very odd,' he said, examining the item upon which he had attempted to blow his nose. His wife looked at what he had bought. `That's because you bought sanitary towels,' she explained wearily. Outside the supermarket I picked up a leaflet for local mobile phones. The screen measurements for the phones are given in inches.

22.01 p.m.
Although we have a DVD player in Paris we hardly ever use it. This evening we listened to a CD of P.G. Wodehouse chatting away. Called *Speaking Personally* the CD consists of a wonderful evening of him chatting when he was 93. He talks about writing musicals with the Gershwins and Jerome Kern and working in Hollywood, surviving prisoner of war camp and writing books. `I started writing at five,' the Master begins. `I don't know what I was doing before that. Loafing, I suppose.' It all sounds very off the cuff but I am convinced that it was scripted. P.G. Wodehouse was far too much of a professional to sit down before a microphone without knowing exactly what he was going to say. P.G. mentioned that early in his career he had enough rejection slips to paper a large ballroom. This reminds me that when I was a medical student I actually did paper my room with the damned things.

12
11.11 a.m.
My iPhone has, as a communications tool proved to be about as much use as a carrot. There is a good reason for this. A few months ago the owners of all the apartments in our building were offered a substantial amount of money to allow a telecommunications company to put a mobile phone mast on our roof.

We unanimously turned down the offer and it seems as though everyone else in the street has rejected the offer too. Actually, I don't think they would have been able to put up a mast anyway. We live close enough to the Eiffel Tower for the building to be `protected'. The Parisians may have wanted to tear the Tower down again as quickly as possible when it was first erected but today the area around The Eiffel Tower is a protected area; a sort of grade 1 listed area around a building of national importance. We cannot wave out of the window without first obtaining permission from nine government departments. The mast would have had to have been put in our loft apartment and there is no way that was ever going to happen.

To get any reception I had to lean out of the window and wave the darned thing in the air (nearly dropping it five storeys). A pigeon came and landed a foot away. It looked as though it wanted to eat the phone. It then occurred to me that I would be better off tying a message to the pigeon’s leg. So I have tossed the wretched iPhone into my case where it can sit until we return to the land of the bankrupt, the feckless and the millions with their heads in the sand. At least in France they regard corruption as an inevitable, nay necessary, part of public life. The last time Mitterand stood for President his opponent was a well-known fascist and Mitterand himself was facing corruption charges. His supporters ran advertisements which read `Better to be a crook than a fascist'. The crook won.

13.14 p.m.
It was a beautiful clear morning and so we walked up to the second floor of The Eiffel Tower. That's around 700 steps going up and, not surprisingly, roughly the same number coming back down again. When you're climbing that many stairs you can get into quite a pleasant rhythm. The lifts which go up the Eiffel Tower are invariably horribly overcrowded (the attendants tend to cram in as many people as possible) and when you climb up the stairs you get a chance to enjoy the view from a variety of different angles. There were, not surprisingly, no fat Germans to be seen and no rubbish at all.

During the climb I remembered a doctor I knew who was worried about his heart. He had been getting chest pains which he'd dismissed as muscular and then one day he decided to check himself out by running up the stairs at the hospital where he worked. Tragically, he had a heart attack and died on the staircase.

On our way back a tall extremely well-dressed woman walked past. The Princess gave her a big smile. `Transvestite,' she whispered, when the stranger had gone by. `How on earth did you know?' I asked. `She smiled at me when I smiled at her,' said The Princess. `Most real women don't.' `But how did you know to smile at her?' I persisted. `She was looking at me,' explained The Princess. `And so I just knew.' The Princess has a sixth and seventh sense that I often find miraculously incomprehensible. There are a lot of transvestites in Paris. Most dress extremely well; far better than the majority of foreign women and far, far better than all tourists. I have no doubt that the transvestites in the city keep the lingerie shops in business. Women don't wear twin sets; they wear suits. They don't wear camisoles and knickers; they wear vests and pants. They don't wear stockings and suspenders; they wear socks. When buying for themselves younger women tend to choose functional rather than pretty. The majority of women are now fervent, committed crossdressers.

The average woman apparently thinks she is being rash if she buys a new bra every six months. The average transvestite buys a new one every week. Since a reliable survey showed that one in ten men is a transvestite this rather suggests that men buy considerably more bras than women. But the twist is, they are buying the bras to wear themselves. The corsetry industry is almost entirely dependent upon male crossdressers.

We stopped off at the American Library which had a trolley of free books outside on the pavement. They do this from time to time and I have, over the years, picked up some marvellous books there and discovered many new authors. It was through a biography picked up free from their `discarded' trolley that I first discovered Preston Sturges; a film director whose work I had not heard of until then. It was Sturges who said: `Dialogue consists of the bright things you would have liked to have said, except you didn't think of them in time.' Having stuffed our pockets with free books (including two first editions and a good variety of paperbacks) we wandered back home for tea and crumpets.

One of the things that makes a walk through Paris a delight is the relative absence of those wretched motorised scooters which now endanger pedestrians on British pavements. The French are, on the whole, far too proud to use such contrivances and the only people we've ever seen using them in Paris were fat tourists. Today, for example, we saw two fat women travelling the streets on golf carts. They weren't disabled, just too fat to walk. They both had white poodles sitting where the golf clubs might normally go. At a café they stopped, got out and lumbered over to a table to order vast ice creams. Two waiters asked if they could try out the golf carts and then spent several minutes zooming up and down the pavement.

15.27 p.m.

The people living in the apartment below have complained that there is water coming into their flat. The service company which looks after the building has sent round a man to take a look to see if he can find signs of a leak. We have no sign of water coming in and since their flat is below ours I find this strange but we are in France and funny things happen here. The workman begins by climbing out of a window, up a drainpipe and onto the roof. He is clearly a cat burglar with a day job. We have a couple of skylights and he pulls on these as though trying to tear them open. Eventually he comes back in and announces that everything is fine because the roof is galvanised and painted and entirely waterproof. A duck would be proud of it. I realised that he thought *we* had a leak and so I tried to interrupt to explain that we don’t but he held up a hand, looked at me sternly and told me to let him finish. French workmen, like French waiters, can be very serious about their work. So I let him finish. When he had finished telling me that we didn't have a problem he stopped and raised an eyebrow in a `so what do you think of that then?' way. I explained that the problem was with the flat below and we were providing only access to the roof so that he could deal with their leak. Without a flicker of embarrassment he left, went downstairs and was back in what seemed two minutes, though it may have been three, to report that the problem below was condensation on the inside of their windows, caused by the fact that they had their heating up very high and there was a fault with the double glazing (which I suspect they should not have anyway because of our proximity to the Eiffel Tower). The workman seemed frustrated by having found nothing to do so he decided to clean out the gutters around the front and back of the building. He announced that he was going back to his lorry to collect the necessary equipment. Five minutes later he returned, carrying a bucket, a trowel and a brush. He climbed out of the window, onto a ledge about three inches wide and, bending over, cleaned all the gutters as though sweeping the floor. He does this like a tightrope walker, without hanging onto anything. His bottom and back were hanging over a six storey drop and it did not seem possible that he would not fall. He seemed completely unconcerned by the drop to the street below. When he had finished clearing the gutters on one side of the building he walked up and over the roof and then dealt with the other side. I couldn’t watch. I was convinced that he was going to plunge to a messy death. The ledge at the back of the building is narrower and only provides space for toes. Britain is awash with health and safety regulations which come from Brussels. They affect every aspect of our life. Just before we came here I was told that postmen are no longer allowed to ride bicycles when delivering mail. Apparently there is a risk that they might fall off and hurt themselves. But the French take notice of regulations only when they are convenient or profitable. When the workman had finished doing far more than he was originally asked to do he climbed back in through the window. I breathed a huge sigh of relief. He shook hands firmly, collected together all his tools, and the debris he had removed from the gutters, and left.

21.19 p.m.
We decided to watch a DVD. I put on the Alfred Hitchcock version of John Buchan's *The Thirty Nine Steps*. It's one of my favourite movies. `Do you mind if we watch something else?' asked The Princess. `I've had enough steps for one day.' We watched a Woody Allen film instead.

13
11.10 a.m.
There is a strike today and everything is supposed to be closed. We walked across the 7th, 6th and 5th arrondissements to visit Shakespeare and Co, George Whitman's legendary bookshop opposite Notre Dame. We passed one shop which was closed but the shop outfitters were busy inside so I don't think the closure had anything to do with the general strike. We stood for a while and watched two cats walking along a narrow ledge. One was helping the other, constantly looking behind and making helpful miaowing noises. When the two cats finally came down to earth it became clear that the seemingly nervous cat, the one which had been following, was blind in both eyes. As Shakespeare and Co, George, who has an eye for a pretty lady and once waved, smiled and posed flirtatiously for The Princess's camera, wasn't around.

14.17 p.m.
We received a money laundering form from our bank in Paris. The last time we were in France I put 10,000 euros into the account because, as a result of new EU laws, we had to pay a fairly hefty sum towards the cost of fiddling with the perfectly good lift in our building. Putting in 10,000 euros has obviously triggered alarm bells and so the bank wants all sorts of silly questions answered. I gather that if I'd put in 9,999 euros everything would have been fine. One euro more and I become a suspected money laundering terrorist.

They want details of my job, my earnings (in euros) separated into a number of different sources, including different types of pensions, earnings salaried or entrepreneurial, investments and so on. They also want to know if I have, in the course of my profession, ever visited Cuba, Iran, Syria, Myanmar, Soudan or Coree du Nord. They are, they say, asking these intrusive, pointless, unimaginative and stupid, impertinent questions in order to comply with the 3rd directive of the EU as part of their money laundering laws. (They don't actually describe the questions as intrusive, of course.) At least they admit it's because of the EU. The hidden irony here is that the two countries most favoured by money launderers are the UK and the USA. It occurs to me that I do have a small problem. My books sell around the world and I have no doubt some of them have sold in some of those countries on their list. I dare not tell the authorities this because they will become over-excited. I have struggled against this suspicion but I am increasingly convinced that all this inquisitorial nonsense is designed to make us lose trust in every institution (and every individual), to make us all feel lonely and afraid and to give the State more power over us. It's a world conspiracy.

The Princess suggests that I ring my pal David Icke and fix a meeting. We've known each other for years (I was his GP and then interviewed him for a TV series I was making based on my book *Bodypower*). If nothing else it will give MI5 something to do.

The bank in Paris tells me that any failure to provide the information by a date five weeks ago will affect my relationship with the bank. I scribbled all over the form in doctor writing (in English) in thick felt pen (which makes it impossible to fit anything neatly into the little boxes on the form) and posted it back.

17.11 p.m.
After posting the ‘blanchissement’ form I got chilly feet and thought I'd better ring the bank and explain that I couldn't fill in the section about my income because I am self-employed and my income varies from day to day.

`Did you send back the ‘blanchissement’ form?' asked the woman at the bank. I told her that I had filled the form in and that it was in the post. She sounded very relieved. `Oh, well that's fine then,' she said.

`Does it not matter that I haven't filled in the whole of the form?'

`Oh no,' she said, seemingly puzzled by the question. `As long as you signed it. Just send it back.' She laughed at my concern. `It is not `grave',' she said dismissively.

I am greatly reassured by this. It seems that I have once again escaped the guillotine.

I have noticed before that as long as they have a piece of paper to file the French don't much care what you put on it.

22.11 p.m.
In the evening we walked to the Champs Elysee to watch a recent Johnny Hallyday film. We walked along the Avenue Montaigne where all the fashion houses are. It's fun looking in the windows to try to find the most absurdly

overpriced item. The Princess found an unwired see-through orange bra and see-through knickers for 500 euros but I found a green handbag that would have stayed on the shelf for ever at your local charity shop and was on sale for 2000 euros.

Hallyday is hardly known in Britain but in France and much of the rest of Europe he is a major star. It is difficult, most weeks, to travel across Paris without seeing posters and magazine covers promoting his latest record, film, book, concert or television show. He has been making hit records since 1423. At the cinema The Princess gently shepherded me to a seat near the front and on the left. When I asked her why she had chosen those seats she pointed out that the latecomers who always wander into French cinemas would not wander in front of us because the only aisle goes down the right hand side of the cinema. She's a clever girl, my wife. Unfortunately, the French mounted a counter attack. A couple sitting on our right brought with them a large hamper containing sustenance to see them through the two hour show. When the French picnic they are never content with a bag of sandwiches and a flask of coffee; they take tables, chairs, cut glass drinking vessels, three types of wine and enough food to have sustained Napoleon's army throughout the snowy Moscow winter. Apparently, this routine is maintained when food is taken into the cinema. Our temporary neighbours brought with them every conceivable type of food that makes a noise. They had crunchy foods, fizzy foods, squelchy foods and creamy foods. And naturally they did a lot of lip and finger licking too. We crept out half way through and walked back home in a fine, drizzly rain which fitted our mood perfectly.

14

12.01 p.m.

The Princess wanted to clean and tidy the apartment and so I tottered out alone to do the shopping this morning. I had a bad hour or so. The first supermarket I went to was packed with people. I eventually got everything we needed and then went to the checkout. I was feeling very English and terribly polite. Two checkouts were open and there was a long line at each one. The woman at the head of the queue I chose was putting things on the conveyor belt one at a time and not putting down the next item until the first had reached its destination, been scanned and handed to her companion at the other end of the process. I reckoned that it was going to take the woman around four hours to empty her trolley, and that the items in my basket would have all passed their sell-by-date by the time I got to the head of the queue. The other queue wasn't moving any faster. So I put down my basket and went to a second supermarket. The seventh arrondissement in Paris is stuffed with supermarkets. I didn't know this shop quite as well but I eventually found everything on my list except for tomatoes. By now I was getting a little fed up. At the greengrocery counter a pack of people were grabbing stuff as though the end of food shopping had just been announced. Very politely, I asked if I could just grab a few tomatoes but it quickly became apparent that politeness was outside the rules and barging was definitely de rigueur. When pushed I can barge with the best, and certainly just as well as any French shopper. Indeed, I quite like barging rules because I'm far bigger than most French folk. So I got my tomatoes and once again went to the checkout section. At this shop there were four tills open. All had long queues so naturally I chose the one with the shortest queue. The housewives of Paris seemed to be buying food in preparation for a siege. All had trolleys packed with stuff. I waited there for a few minutes and then the check-out clerk looked up, said `termine' and disappeared to have her lunch. So I put down my basket, stormed out and went to a third supermarket. As I entered I noticed that there was one till with no queue so I rushed round and grabbed the stuff I wanted to buy and then returned to that till. Naturally, by time I got back there were six people in the queue. I have no idea where they came from because I swear the shop was empty when I entered. Naturally, every one of them paid with a credit card. Even the two who just bought a bottle of wine and a loaf of bread paid with a card. When it was my turn the idiot American family behind me put their stuff on the conveyor belt together with mine. This caused great confusion as their purchases got mixed up with mine. After that I popped into a pharmacy to buy a bottle of `après shampooing' for the Princess. The woman behind the counter looked as though I had asked to buy a nuclear submarine and shook her head and muttered sharp comments in untranslatable French. Outside, on the pavement, there was a healthy young fellow begging. He was in his twenties and had a nauseatingly ingratiating, simpering smile. He waved a paper cup under my nose. `Get a bloody job!' I snarled at him, and stormed off along the pavement, leaving in my wake a wreckage of pedestrians hopping and skipping aside. I then started shouting at inanimate objects which got in my way. This, I realised, is how those people who walk around muttering and cursing got the way they are.

15.14 p.m.

I cooled off after lunch and we went for a walk around the Eiffel Tower and spotted a beautiful example of French pragmatism. In the park near the tower there is a large notice warning visitors that no alcohol is to be drunk in the area. But next to the sign there are three large rubbish bins, one for general rubbish, one for plastic containers and one for glass bottles that have contained alcohol. On our walk back to the apartment we passed the American Library in Paris which had one of its irregular book sales. The Library was selling books by size and weight, which seemed to me to be a unique way of doing it. Small books cost one euro each. Big books cost two euros apiece. I bought eight small ones and seven large ones.

When we got back there was a letter from the Mayor of the 7th Arrondissement, where we live, asking when we would like to have our rubbish collected. They collect daily of course but the Mayor wanted to know whether we would prefer to have the rubbish collected in the morning or in the evening. Our views are solicited on all sorts of issues. Two months ago we were asked our views on the suggestion that our street be turned into a pedestrian precinct and before that we were asked to comment on a proposed change in bus routes. Paris is a magnificently well-run city. Well-devised local taxes mean that there are loads of small shops selling essentials such as ironmongery and stationery, and public transport is cheap and reliable. It's just a pity there are so many French people living in the city.

The only thing I couldn’t buy today was a newspaper. My friend at the newspaper kiosk told me that it was because of yesterday’s strike. So I couldn’t read about yesterday’s strike and find out how successful it was. How clever of the strikers to ensure that the only thing they affected was the method of telling the world how successful they had been.

A friend once told us that women aren't allowed to wear trousers in Paris and this may well be true. The French, like the English, still have a number of strange laws on their statute books. But I remembered this today and noticed that the policewomen now always wear trousers, presumably so that when things are quiet they can arrest one another, or even themselves, just to keep things ticking over. The same friend told me that at Heathrow he once overheard an elderly gentleman reply to the standard question `Have you packed your bag yourself?' with: `Of course not. Do I look like the sort of person who packs his own bag?'

22.14 p.m.
When I tried to listen to the sports news on BBC radio 4 (I don't ever rely on the BBC for real news but they can manage sports news fairly competently) I found myself listening to a BBC programme in which participants were suggesting that Britain should have all-black, segregated schools. At first I assumed this was a satirical programme but it wasn't. No one suggested that we had all white schools which would of course have been racist and was, I seem to remember, one of the reasons for the race riots in America many years ago.

15
14.01 p.m.
We sat in the Palais Royale watching the sparrows. I had a copy of *The Open Air*, a collection of essays by Richard Jefferies on my lap. We ate eating apples we had bought from a greengrocer nearby. They were delicious and tasted just as good as they looked. This made a more than agreeable change from the apples sold in England, most of which are made for display and not for eating. They look perfect but are waxy and inedible. Even when the pesticides and protective coating have been peeled off they still taste nothing like fruit.

I bought the book I am reading from a second-hand bookshop (having seen it recommended by Henry Williamson). I read an essay in the book called *Nature on the Roof* and found this passage about sparrows, written a century earlier: `They are easily tamed. The Parisians are fond of taming them. A certain hour in the Tuileries Gardens, you may see a man perfectly surrounded with a crowd of sparrows - some perching on his shoulder; some fluttering in the air immediately before his face; some on the ground like a tribe of followers; and others on the marble seats. He jerks a crumb of bread into the air - a sparrow dextrously seizes it as he would a flying insect; he puts a crumb between his lips - a sparrow takes it out and feeds from his mouth. Meantime they keep up a constant chirping; those that are satisfied still stay by and adjust their feathers. He walks on, giving a little chirp with his mouth, and they follow him along the path - a cloud about his shoulders, and the rest flying from shrub to shrub, perching and following again. They are all perfectly clean - a contrast to the London sparrow. I came across one of these sparrow-tamers by chance, and was much amused by the scene, which, to any one not acquainted with birds, appears marvellous; but it is really as simple as possible, and you can repeat it for yourself if you have the patience, for they are so sharp that they soon understand you.'

I have seen this exact scene played out so often, exactly as Jefferies describes it, that it could be the same man. Sure enough, within half an hour of my reading this passage a man arrives in the Palais Royale and starts feeding the sparrows. Is it life imitating art or art imitating life?

In most of Paris's great gardens (particularly the Palais de Royale, the Tuileries and the Luxembourg) there are people, usually old men, who regularly turn up to feed the birds crumbs of bread. The birds always turn up in advance, congregating and waiting noisily. The birds don't turn up because the man with the food has appeared; they turn up 15 minutes before the man appears and wait for him. They do this summer and winter and always arrive on time.

16

22.04 p.m.

In an attempt to find an American distributor for our books I went again to the London Book Fair. I also wanted to have a look around to see what the `big boys' were doing. While I was there I was rather depressed. Everywhere I looked publishers seemed to be doing exactly the same things. There was a `follow the leader' air to the whole dismal business. I remembered why I had lost faith and interest in traditional publishing companies, and had been inspired to start publishing my own books. When we are young we all think we can change the world. My problem is that I never grew out of this impossible, impractical, destructive dream.

When we left the book fair, we walked back to Paddington Station, through Kensington Gardens. By the time we reached the station I had cheered up. I had realised that the fact that most big publishing companies are still playing `follow the leader' (without really knowing who the leader is, or where they are heading) was excellent news for any small, innovative and daring publishing company.

On the way back from London our train stopped at Chippenham. After a few minutes delay there was an announcement that a passenger had reported a knocking sound underneath a carriage and so the train was being inspected. So we parked at the station while a man in railway uniform walked down the train. As he passed our carriage he kicked the carriage, seemed satisfied and walked on. It didn't seem terribly reassuring but the train got us home without any further excitement.

17

10.14 a.m.

Why do so many people use the word `profit' in the same way that they use words such as `paedophile' or `terrorist'. Profits are regarded as a dirty concept, obscene and unacceptable by the functionaries who work for the State or the executive saloon driving quasi communists who represent trade unions. (Curiously, the functionaries always change their mind when they get involved in management buy-outs and privatisations, when they suddenly regard profits as wonderful and desirable.)

What these idiots don't seem to realise is that profits are the oil which enables our society to survive. Without profits there would be no businesses (small or large), no service industries, no sole traders and no self-employed. Without profits big companies would pay no dividends, pensioners would starve to death and rich unions would make no profit out of their investments. Profit pays for innovation and without it there would be no employment at all. Profit pays for the fat salaries and bonuses of civil servants and union officials. Governments are wildly enthusiastic about minimum wage levels but these have been proven to damage developing businesses and everyone (especially the poor and the unemployed) would be much better off if governments encouraged profitability. It is only by making profits that businesses expand and hire more people. Governments love to print money these days but the money they create that way isn't real. The only solid way to create wealth is by improving profitability.

11.45 a.m.

The postman put a card through our door this morning telling us that they were holding a letter addressed to us. They have kidnapped it and will not release it until we pay a ransom of £1, in addition to the postage which, they say, had not been pre-paid by the sender. I suspect that the envelope has missed a franking machine and we have no intention of collecting it. If it's an important piece of mail the sender will re-send it. It's not the money I object to but the time it will take to go to the sorting office, find somewhere to park, queue, pay and pick up a letter that I almost certainly don't want. I don't think the postman bothered to ring the doorbell and I'm pretty sure he didn't even bother to put the letter into his bag. In the bad old days he would have brought the letter, knocked on the door and asked us to pay the postage. Presumably, the Royal Mail no longer trusts its postmen to collect small sums of money from its customers. Given the number of parcels they `lose', that's probably not unwise.

18

11.12 a.m.

A reader has complained about the fact that the prices of many of my books end with 99 pence. He said he was going to leave me £270,000 in his will but decided not to because I sold him a book for £12.99. He also sent me extensive details explaining how I could bury myself cheaply, using a mini JCB to dig the hole and having myself placed inside a home-made coffin. He offered to do my probate for £600. I replied, and pointed out that I have spent most of my life fighting the entire establishment and had succumbed to the habit of pricing books with a 99 pence on the end because it is an industry standard and, compared to everything else, it really didn't seem to matter. I also thanked him for his advice about how to die cheaply.

12.04 p.m.
Details of a house came today together with a letter announcing that there had been a price reduction. We peeled the label off the particulars and found that the house had been reduced in price from £699,000 to £697,000.

Residential property has been kept artificially high by government support and low interest rates. Time after time we have seen houses where the vendors claimed they were selling so that they could move to a place nearer their children. Time after time we didn't believe them. They were mostly selling because they knew that they had bitten off more than they could chew and that a modest rise in interest rates, and a notable fall in values, would leave them wallowing up to their ears in a stormy ocean of negative equity.

We saw an honest estate agent today. He seemed very tired of the whole business. `Everyone has gone mad,' he said. `Vendors are living in cloud cuckoo land. They have a price fixed in their heads and they won't budge from it. They want to sell their house and buy a bungalow by the sea, a boat and a new car. They think their house is worth a certain sum because that's what a friend or another estate agent told them it was worth. They don't understand that the real worth is the price someone will actually pay for it in hard cash. If you find something you like offer 25% less than the asking price. You'll still be overpaying.'

16.17 p.m.
I was in a long queue today to buy a newspaper. When the woman in front of me arrived at the counter she put down her two magazines and a bar of chocolate. The assistant waved the bar codes at her machine and told the woman how much she owed. `Oh,' said the woman, as though surprised by the fact that she was going to have to pay for her purchases. Only then did she delve into her handbag, find her purse and decide which of her 12 credit cards she had might contain enough credit to pay her bill. It took her forever and the queue behind us started to stretch out through the door. A man behind me, frustrated by the woman's interminable rummaging, put down the newspaper he had intended to buy, and stormed out. I hate people who seem surprised when they buy something and the assistant wants money. It's a female thing. Men nearly always have their wallet ready. Women never do. While standing in the queue I worked out that if women had their money (or wretched credit card) ready when they got to the front of the queue I would save nine hours a year.

19
11.56 a.m.
A reviewer sneers at my book *Living in a Fascist Country* and says that the title alone is absurd. He hasn't bothered to read the book that explains and supports the title and is apparently clever enough to review the book without bothering to read it. This is, apparently, the new way with reviewers. It must save them a lot of time and effort.

The fact is that in many countries which we regard as being run by dictators the people have the power to demonstrate and even force change through by persistent people power. That couldn't possibly happen in the UK because if several thousand demonstrators collected in Trafalgar Square and tried to occupy it they would be beaten up, bottled up and locked up by thuggish policemen hired to suppress and oppress dissent. We have lost our freedom without most people being aware of what has happened. That's the whole point of the book. (The police have taken quite a critical bashing recently and I have a suspicion that they may soon change tactics. If they are Machiavellian enough they will realise that if they allow a few demonstrators to cause a good deal of property damage in London there will be calls by people whose voices matter for all demonstrations to be banned.)

16.46 p.m.
A pen pusher who works for the council has written to tell me that bin men are no longer called bin men. Apparently I must now refer to them as waste removal engineers. We are talking about blokes in orange overalls who empty plastic containers into a lorry. This is one of the most pretentious job descriptions around but this sort of nonsense is now commonplace and a quarter of all adults have an occupation with an absurd job title. Here are some of the other (genuine) job titles I've come across:

1. Chimney sweep - flueologist
2. Receptionst - head of verbal communications
3. Petrol station assistant - petroleum transfer engineer supervisor
4. Chiropodist - foot health gain facilitator
5. Teacher - knowledge navigator
6. Masseuse - leisure services administrator

7. Postal worker - despatch services facilitator
8. Shelf stacker - stock replenishment adviser
9. Dinner lady - education centre nourishment production assistant
10. Window cleaner - vision clearance engineer

20
11.45 a.m.
`I'm on a website which won't let me do anything until I give them a telephone number,' said The Princess. `Have you a number for one of your old unused mobiles that I could give them?' We rarely use telephones and certainly don't give any of our numbers to anyone.

I told her that it is far more fun to give the company their own telephone number. This has the added advantage that when they try to ring the number you've given it will be constantly engaged. So in the red starred box demanding a telephone number she put the company's own number. My favourite variation on this trick is to put in the private office number of the Chief Executive or Chairman.

16.17 p.m.
The Government has spent £500,000 on a study of overcrowding and punctuality on trains. The report has concluded that commuters want trains to run on time. Well worth the money. How else would we have known? And I am also delighted to see that the Government has set up a quango to look into the number of quangos. I guarantee the result will be more, not less, quangos. I have decided that the word `quango' stands for Queer Useless And Nasty Government Organisation. What would we do without all these people? More to the point, perhaps, what would they do without us? There are so many of them now that there is always going to be one on my back. Am I the only person who is fed up with being threatened by bureaucrats and quangocrats? No one working for the State is ever polite any more. They all threaten first and talk later. Standard letters from HMRC talk about legal action and all the awful consequences and then, as an afterthought, add: `If you have already paid please disregard this letter'. But when they owe me money it takes months, even years, to get a refund. And as for interest! Ha.

17.05 p.m.
The papers are full of how our brave police, avoiding the temptation to catch murderers, muggers and thieves, have managed to arrest a couple of pornographers whose crime appears to have been making a few bob out of selling photographs of willing models to willing customers and then sharing the profits with HMRC. There is one thing I have never understood about pornography. In order to decide that a book or film is pornographic, policemen and judges must read or view it. Occasionally, members of the public must sit on a jury and read or view it. When they choose to ban something considered pornographic it is on the grounds that if it is not banned then the people who see or read it will be corrupted. Now, if the judges and policemen and jurors are right then they must, by definition, have been corrupted themselves. Consequently, their views are of no value and they must, therefore, be removed from public office immediately. To allow corrupted individuals to remain in any position of authority would be a nonsense.

21
10.09 a.m.
An acquaintance of mine rang to tell me that he has been appointed to a committee of the Arts Council. From the way he burbled it must be one of the 1,000 most important committees they have. He is a rather nerdy, half-witted sort of fellow; the sort of sad bastard who listens to U2 and believes that Bob Geldoff is a saint. He seemed delighted by his appointment, poor soul, though I suspect that this may be because he hopes that if an Arts Council appointment comes then the knighthood or even the peerage cannot be far behind.

I really don't see the point of the Arts Council. It seems to me to be a pompous and expensive quango which subsidises and supports artists who aren't good enough at what they do to make a living but who are good at filling in government forms. Why not be honest and create a department which provides money to the citizens who are the most skilled at filling in forms?

I can't think of one great book, film, play, poem, painting or sculpture which has been produced with the aid of taxpayers' money that wouldn't have been produced without it. I can, however, produce an impressive portfolio of pseudoartistic rubbish that has been produced with the aid of taxpayers' money. People apply for grants because they aren't good enough at what they do to make a living at it. There is something lunatic about subsidised art. It is absurd that the Government should hand over vast skipfuls of taxpayers' hard earned money to the artistically challenged, who insist that the State must subsidise what they call art because it is so bad that no one wants to pay them for it.

22

18.11 p.m.

We went to Birmingham. I hadn't been back there for years. It was deteriorating a decade ago. Someone could film a science fiction horror movie there without any set dressing. In cities and towns everywhere bureaucrats have wilfully destroyed quaint streets and buildings because they were of no commercial value to the State but stood in the way of what the State saw as progress. Narrow streets and steps all added to the complications of running a town or city. It is easier to manage an urban environment (as the planners think of cities and towns), and to get people to and from work efficiently, if streets are straight and the buildings functional. And so the bureaucrats have standardised our towns and cities, eradicating history and imagination and colour. Birmingham is the perfect example of this attitude. Government planned developments are appallingly badly sited and, despite all the red tape, pay little or no intention to the needs and wishes of local residents. There is no soul or character in our towns and cities these days and the planners and architects are clearly all devoid of imagination. What a dull environment we have created for ourselves. Ugly concrete and glass decorated only with a plethora of signs telling us to go here, go there, do this and don't do that. Out of town shopping centres have helped ensure that town centres have become miserable, grey places. Most provincial cities look identical now, and all small county towns look the same too. Faded, dilapidated, run down and depressed. There will be an incredibly ugly post office, the old grand town hall now derelict or converted into a branch of a chain store or pub, the old library covered in plywood and offered for sale. There will be three mobile telephone shops (the variety depending on the strength of the local coverage), a shoe shop, a pet shop and the only memory of olden days will be, if you're lucky, an ironmongers kept alive by farmers who haven't yet discovered that there is an out of town DIY store selling everything at a quarter of the price.

You only have to spend an hour in almost any French town to see just how badly we've messed up our world. Their towns have squares and street markets and eccentricities. They celebrate their architecture and decorate everything with their national flag. Our towns have shopping malls, heaven help us, and office blocks and town halls that look like multi-story car parks. If there is a flag it is that of our conquerors, the EU.

21.10 p.m.

Back in 1997, as the Labour party came to power, a big survey showed that most people agreed that looking after the community's interests was the best way to improve the quality of life for us all as individuals. A dozen years of Labour Governments have encouraged us to be far more selfish. A survey published recently showed that people now believe that they should simply look after themselves, and their own interests, and should be concerned only with what they can get out of their work or the community, rather than what they can put into it. This is worrying. Many years ago, the Iks, a tribe of former hunters and gatherers in Uganda, were displaced from their traditional terrain by the formation of a new national park. The Iks were forced to become farmers on poor hillside soil. The dismantling of their traditional culture, coupled with the meagreness of their new existence, stripped them of any sense of community and they became stingy and sullen. They started stealing one another's food and defecating on one another's doorsteps. They repelled one another through every means available.

When our sense of community is destroyed there is not much left. It is ironic that as the State has grown so our sense of community has collapsed and for this I blame the European Union; an organisation that is devotedly fascist and favours a brand of corporate socialism that rivals Soviet communism in the way its main proponents gather all the goodies unto themselves while pressurising the workers with seemingly endless varieties of restrictive but purposeless legislation. Whenever I look around these days I see people behaving towards one another with greed, cruelty, heartlessness, irresponsibility and no sense of caring. Even bees and ants are much better at community than our post-Labour society manages to be.

23

12.34 p.m.

I have received a letter from someone who says: `The inflammatory ranting against doctors and medical practice in *Coleman's Laws* (which I have not read) was most unjust. Having worked in the nursing profession all my life, and having been saved from whooping cough and pneumonia at the age of four by antibiotic drugs, I feel most insulted.' Since she admits that she has never read my book, this seemed a trifle unfair.

24

16.16 p.m.

A female acquaintance of The Princess came to lunch today. She believes in equality and the liberation of women and is a huge fan of Harriet Harman which I personally believe probably makes her certifiable. She complained bitterly that her new boyfriend always leaves the toilet seat up. She asked why men do this. I told her that men are equally upset by the fact that many women leave the toilet seat down. She tried to comment on this but failed to find anything to say and managed only to give an excellent impression of a goldfish singing in a church choir. As she was leaving she asked if I'd written any new books. The Princess said we'd just published *England's Glory* which we had written together. `Oh good, I'll take one off your hands,' she said, as though doing us a favour. `If I don't like it I can always give it as a birthday present to someone.'

17.19 p.m.
While browsing in a bookshop I met a bloke who had two fingers missing from his left hand. He had a huge German Shepherd dog with him. The fingers had obviously been removed quite recently. I asked him how he lost them. `I cut them off with a circular saw,' he said, quite proudly. `Why didn't they sew them back on?' I asked. `They're quite good at that sort of stuff these days.' The man looked down at the dog and then back at me. `They couldn't,' he said. He nodded towards the huge creature by his side. `The dog ate them.'

25
15.16 p.m.
A woman The Princess has known for some years rang her today in a terrible state. She sold her first novel two years ago but has never met her publishers. She told them that she suffers from agoraphobia and is unable to leave her home. She did this because when she was asked to send a photograph of herself she sent, instead, a photograph of a young, beautiful black girl whom she knows. (The Princess's friend is in her fifties and readily admits that she is not photogenic.) She not unreasonably surmised that this would prove more commercially advantageous than a photograph of a plain looking woman with bottle glass spectacles and a slightly hairy chin. Now the publishers have been approached by a magazine journalist who wants to conduct an interview. The Princess's friend is terrified that she will be found out and that her blossoming career will collapse around her ears. The Princess told her that she had two choices: she could either persuade her young, beautiful friend to conduct the interview or she could refuse and claim that she does not ever want to be interviewed or photographed because, in addition to suffering from agoraphobia she also suffers from chronic shyness and she feels that the fear of being recognised would make her condition worse. The Princess points out that this policy worked very well for J. D. Salinger. Her friend agrees this is the line to follow.

17.22 p.m.
The estate agent who is selling my father's former home sent me a message demanding a copy of my passport and driving licence and a home utility bill. He says that they need all these before they can sell the house. It is, he says, a money laundering requirement. He suggested that I post the documents, or take them into one of their branches where someone will make copies and then fax them on. He said that it is quite impossible to sell the house without these documents. I point out that since they will not be handling any money there cannot be any need for them to have any of this paperwork. He then sent a sharp rather threatening note insisting that under the law he was entitled to demand these documents. I sent back an equally sharp note telling the rather snotty estate agent that the firm's compliance officer is mistaken for there is no legal requirement for them to ask for copies of personal documents and there is no law requiring me to provide them. I pointed out that since they do not handle any money their chances of being involved in money laundering are not as high as the couple who run our corner shop and told him that it would make as much sense for me to demand a copy of his passport and his gas bill. I suspect that this is merely an attempt by this agency to appear important and quasi-professional. Even those who do have a right to see documents don't understand the rules properly. Those who are entitled to see documents are entitled to just that - a chance to `see' them. Not even banks or solicitors are entitled to have copies of documents. I feel strongly about this. The more copies of private documents there are lying around the world the greater the chance of identity theft. Early in the afternoon I received another e-mail from the wretched agent telling me that `sight of an entry in a telephone book' would be sufficient. I ignored this. Late in the day I received a rather poor apology in which the estate agent said that he had consulted the firm's compliance officer who had told him that I was right.

20.18 p.m.
Hubert, an elderly friend of ours, tells us that he is thinking of applying to join the army, with a special request that he be sent to Afghanistan. We are surprised at this since we attended his 85th birthday just two months ago. He explained that he has applied because he has discovered something called the `killed in war' tax exemption which entitles an estate of any size to be exempt from inheritance tax. Apparently, the `killed in war' exemption applies to anyone whose death is caused by injury or disease received or aggravated while on active service in the armed

forces. Hubert tells us that the family of the 4th Duke of Westminster successfully argued that his death in 1967 from cancer was hastened by septicaemia from a war wound he received in 1944. His estate therefore attracted no inheritance tax. I tell Hubert that he deserves a medal for ingenuity but that it is probably the only one medal he is going to receive. He winks at me and smiles. Hubert is a wise fellow. Many years ago he taught me two things that I will never forget. First, he said, always be patient, especially when you are in a hurry. And, second, never tell anyone everything you know. He said that if you keep something back, and people suspect that you know more than you are telling, you will seem both wise and mysterious.

26
12.50 p.m.
Between 2005 and 2008 the Government spent £221,726 on buying 2,515 games consoles for prisons. That's nice of me. Sadly, I haven't had any thank you notes from the lucky recipients. But then I guess they're probably not the sort of people who write thank you notes for stuff they haven't had to pay for.

14.16 p.m.
Although I have always done my best to make it known that I cannot offer medical advice through the mail, I constantly receive letters asking or demanding my opinion on personal health matters. Sometimes I can go for a week without receiving any such enquiries. But on other days the demands arrive like buses. This morning I received a letter from a reader in Scotland who sent me 34 pages of medical notes and doctors' reports, asking for my medical opinion. The letter came with a list of 17 specific medical queries and a note, on expensive, headed notepaper, saying `I do not expect this for free, I want to pay the going rate'. There was a £5 note pinned to the package which I worked out meant that my professional views were being valued at just under 30 pence each. Another lengthy letter came together with laboratory results and X-ray reports and again wanted my opinion. This time there was no £5 note and no mention of money. I also received an e-mail which, I was told, contained a 6,000 word medical summary, a collection of X-ray photographs and a wide variety of hospital reports. The letter accompanying this mass of information included the words: `I know you don't usually offer clinical advice but if you have a minute or two please send me your opinion on the enclosed.'

20.19 p.m.
Some days I wake up, head for my desk and wonder: should I retire, start again or give up. The big disappointment of my writing life has probably been Bilbury. Years ago, when I wrote the first Bilbury novel, I dreamt of creating a new, parallel world. I wanted a place where people relied upon one another and where there was very little contact with the outside world. Scripts were written for a television series. But nothing came of that. TV production companies which had shown interest drifted off when promised commissions turned, as television promises so often do, into dust. Back in the very early 1990s I dreamt of creating an imaginary computer world where refugees from the real world could live village lives, interacting with the characters they knew from the books. I could, I thought, fund it by allowing the new villagers to buy property in the village. My thought was that readers could develop secondary, imaginary lives in Bilbury and thus escape the real world which I know so many find so difficult. It was, however, too daunting a task for any of the computer people I met. They just wanted to do something quick and profitable - to sell me a new piece of addressing software or to design a new website for a fee. (I tried many new websites in the 1990s. But in the 1990s and the early part of the 21st century people weren't prepared to pay for information they culled from the Internet and so, without funding, the sites died.) And I wanted to set up a regular Bilbury magazine, complete with fake advertisements for the village pub and the village shop. Maybe it's not too late.

21.09 p.m.
I received an anonymous e-mail which said: `If you expect to be successful communicating your message you should offer people a less confrontational view of the issues you discuss.' The writer is correct, of course, but I fear this well-intentioned advice has arrived several decades too late.

27
15.17 p.m.
I found a review of the autobiography by H.E. Bates on Amazon in which the author dismisses the book as `a typical writer's book - all about himself'. I wonder what the reviewer thinks an autobiography should be about? In general the quality of reviewing on the World Wide Web is third form quality. Most of the reviewers are semi-literate. Many of the rest are merely baring their prejudices to the world. Some will write reviews of anything and everything. (I

have even seen reviews of batteries.)

There is a review of my book *Alice's Diary* on Amazon in which the reviewer complains that his (or her) cats don't have conversations with one another and so the book (which is, as the title suggests, the diary of a cat) is unrealistic. Books (and therefore authors) are given stars on Amazon so why aren't reviewers rated to show the value of their contributions? Naturally, only authors should be allowed to rate the reviewers. I can think of no reason to oppose this other than that the reviewers wouldn't like it and that is no reason at all.

17.18 p.m.
An advertising agent wants me to buy an advert in the *Big Issue* magazine. I tell him `no thanks'. When I last bought advertising in the *Big Issue* it failed almost totally. I couldn't understand why until one day I was sitting in a café in London and noticed that there was a *Big Issue* seller outside. I watched in amazement and horror as buyer after buyer bought a magazine and then just dumped what they had bought into a nearby bin. Most didn't even glance at the magazine before throwing it away. I've always wondered if, at the end of the day, the seller picked the magazines out of the bin and resold them. None of his buyers would have known or cared.

19.18 p.m.
A marketing consultant writes offering to help me make my business grow. Why? I don't want it to grow.

28
14.19 p.m.
Every few months a story will appear in the national press with a headline something like this: `Sheep not as stupid as we think say scientists' or this `Sheep are a lot smarter than we think, says top scientist'.

I read an old cutting today which described how Professor Keith Kendrick of the Babraham Institute for agricultural research, based near Cambridge, told the British Association Annual Science Festival that sheep have far better powers of recall than experts used to think, are far better at telling the difference between humans than humans are at distinguishing between sheep and share similar thought patterns to those of people.

When shown pictures of human faces sheep could tell the difference between them and could remember at least ten human faces for more than two years. They recognised and remembered friends from a flock, using the same visual cues that we use when identifying people, and could distinguish between at least 50 different sheeps' faces.

Professor Kendrick found that sheep learn new faces very quickly and use part of the brain's temporal lobe to do this (just as people do). He found that showing a sheep a picture of a friendly face made the sheep feel happy.

Like humans sheep can have difficulty in recognising faces when they are presented to them upside down but sheep have no trouble recognising upside down objects. `We may have underestimated the complexity of a sheep's social environment, and, indeed, their intelligence,' said Professor Kendrick. `Sheep have developed the same kind of sophisticated social recognition skills normally only thought to exist in man and other higher primates. The presence of such skills raises questions as to whether we have underestimated the importance and complexity of their social needs and intelligence.' Absobloodylutely right! Sheep are *very* intelligent creatures. After I wrote about them in *Alice and Other Friends* I received many letters of approval and agreement.

18.09 p.m.
Not having a credit rating makes it difficult to run a business. I long ago found a way around small daily problems (such as not being able to buy a mobile telephone) but it seems it's impossible for me to set up a Pay Pal account so that customers can pay for books that way. I don't much mind. Apart from cash (which is impractical for buying books through the mail) cheques are still much better than anything else. And, contrary to the rumours, they are not going to be banned for a long time yet. If I had a credit rating I would deliberately trash it. I don't want to borrow money and with a trashed credit rating no one is going to bother to steal my identity.

Life running a business is also made rather difficult by my reluctance to use the telephone. I keep a mobile telephone for emergency use but I use the telephone about as often as I send telegrams.

20.03 p.m.
A publisher in London has written offering me a fee of £5,000 to write a medical book for them. I get the impression they think they are being generous. I estimate that the book will take me six months to write. I send a polite letter thanking them for their offer which I decline on the grounds that I have acquired a severe addiction to food and warmth and that in order to fulfil their commission I would have to abandon both.

29

11.19 a.m.
I received a letter complaining that because I disapprove of the war against Iraq I must be anti-Semitic. The writer of the letter says that the media have lied about the Israelis doing terrible things to Palestinian children and that since I am clearly anti-Semitic he is going to write to all the newspapers and tell them not to review my books or accept advertisements for them. In the same post I received a letter saying: `I loved your book *Bloodless Revolution.* But what control have we since the Zionist impact and takeover? Your one weakness is that you do not take a strong enough line on the Zionists and I suspect that this is because you are a Zionist supporter and sympathiser.'

17.18 p.m.
A neighbour has a very noisy motorbike which he starts up at about 6.30 a.m. every morning. He doesn't just start the thing, he revs the engine for at least five minutes. As I walked back from the postbox today I saw him tinkering with the machine. `What time do you go to bed?' I asked. He glared at me, belligerently. `Why do you want to know that?' he demanded. `So that I know what time to start the car up,' I told him. `We go to bed rather late so I could give it a really good revving up at, say, two o'clock if that would wake you up.' He frowned and clearly didn't understand.

As I approached our gate I noticed that cowboy workmen employed by our local council have been repairing the road outside our house. I call them cowboys because they didn't even both to sweep the road clear before pouring their tarmac. They laid the stuff on top of leaves and an empty drink can, in a paper-thin layer that covered everything in its path. It was the sort of job confidence tricksters do for little old ladies. The layer they laid was so thin that the leaves were poking through before they had gone. Later on some men came by to paint yellow lines on top of the tarmac. They did it by hand and I suspect they must have had a very good three bottle lunch before they did the painting. The road is now decorated with very wavy yellow lines. Maybe the council will submit it as an entry for the Turner prize.

30
15.20 p.m.
We are in the Lake District for a few days, staying in a hotel which seems to have stars. This morning, our first, I asked for lemon tea with my breakfast. When the tea came there was no lemon so I caught a passing waiter and asked again if I could have some lemon. `You have lemon,' he said. `It's in the teapot.' I took the lid off the teapot and looked inside. Sure enough there was a whole lemon floating alongside two teabags. A whole, uncut and quite probably unwashed lemon. Our room, though expensive, is so small that if The Princess wants to open her suitcase I have to leave, and vice versa. Late this morning the hotel lounge was filled with a convention of what looked and sounded like social workers. (Whenever you see an army of shouty women and weedy men gathered together there's a pretty good bet it will be a congregation of social workers.) It's a beautiful spot but we are finding it difficult to relax.

17.15 p.m.
A report suggests that the majority of parents in the UK would be happy if their daughter chose to earn her living working as a prostitute. The world has become a mystery to me and there are now many things I don't understand or, to be honest, really want to understand. Still, I find myself constantly besieged by questions not even Google can answer satisfactorily. (Come to think of it, in my experience Google, though it always provides thousands of answers, actually answers very few questions satisfactorily unless you happen to be a complete idiot.). Here are some of the questions to which I cannot even begin to imagine the answers. Why do religious fanatics who believe in an all-powerful god, believe that their god’s work won’t get done unless they do it for him? Why does toast taste better when made on an open fire? Why do you have to walk all the way to the back of the chemist to get a prescription if you are ill, while people wanting to buy stuff that is bad for them can buy as much as they want at the front of the shop? Why do people who eat burgers bother to buy diet cokes? Why do banks always only have one person on the counter at lunchtime with the result that there are huge queues of people spending their lunchtime standing in line? Why do people who do sign language on television always look as though they got dressed in the dark at a party and put on someone else's clothes? Why does the cap not stick to the tube of glue when the packaging tells you that the glue will stick anything to anything? Why don't slugs eat weeds? Why is it that most men are bald but most celebrities have a full head of hair? In films, why do women running away from the baddies always go up onto the roof or down into the cellar when anyone with half a brain would know that they will be trapped? Why are council, post office and BT offices always the ugliest in any town? Why is it that the only building materials British architects seem to know of are concrete and glass? (They invariably favour functionality and economy over style and aesthetic delight. Whimsy is a mystery to them. The buildings that win prizes look as if they were put up

without any plans by bottom cleavage baring builders using whatever materials may have fallen off the back of a lorry.) Why are 93% of pharmacists so bloody snotty when all they do is count out pills? (And why do you have to go to university to have a licence to count out pills?) What would happen if the heir to the throne were a Downs syndrome sufferer? Would it be politically incorrect to say he couldn't be King? Why do socialists insist on free education and free health care but never insist on free food? Do Germans take `bad dressing lessons' or is something that comes naturally? These worries come to me as fast as snowflakes in a snowstorm but the answers never seem to come with them.

May

1
11.59 a.m.
A reader who is an accountant has written to complain that he has been told that he must, in future, keep records proving the identity of all his clients. He is worried about this because he thinks it is intrusive and unnecessary. I replied telling him that I have, in the past, succeeded in forcing solicitors to acknowledge that it is only necessary for them to see (or `have sight of') identity documents. They do not need to keep copies. I do not believe that there is any law requiring anyone to keep records of identity. There are laws requiring people to satisfy themselves as to an individual's identity but that is an entirely different things. I have won this argument several times with compliance officers who have, in the end, always agreed that they must only satisfy themselves that X is who he claims to be. It is utterly absurd that so much confidential information is being stored all over the country. And hardly surprising that ID theft is so common. Curiously, the Government never bothers to ask for identification. It is possible to buy National Savings products without sending off birth certificates or passports. And HMRC never seem concerned about my proving that I am who they say I am.

I've had endless battles about this over recent years. Most of the time I've won. One finance organisation gave in and said they would accept my signature as proof that I am who I say I am. Another, requiring proof through the post, accepted a photocopy of my driving licence which had `Only Valid for XYZ Bank Until (a date a week ahead)' printed across it in large black lettering.

The only time I've failed was with an idiot at the Royal Bank of Scotland, back in the days when staff at Publishing House were keen for me to set up a scheme for accepting payment without cheques.

I sent this letter: *`Thank you for your letter asking for copies of documents. If you check with your compliance officer you will find that the FSA does not require you to take and store photocopies of sensitive documents. You only need to check the existence of such documents in order to verify my status. I am not prepared to allow you to have and store copies of sensitive documents. To do so would expose me to the risk of identity theft and greatly increase the risk of the nation being put at risk by terrorists or moneylaunderers. Once documents are copied and distributed the risks increase dramatically. I am happy to take documents from Table 1 and Table 2 into a local branch of RSB so that these can be viewed. This would enable the bank to satisfy FSA requirements and help ensure that I and the nation are protected from identity thieves, money launderers and terrorists. Are you prepared to accept this safer alternative in order to help protect your nation from money launderers and terrorists? Or do you prefer to stick with the bank's present system (requiring copies to be made, distributed and stored unnecessarily) which endangers your country's security?'*

I never heard from them again. The civil servants who run the State-owned bank were probably all too busy counting their £1 million bonuses, celebrating their losses and laughing at daft taxpayers like me.

Actually, it's probably just as well I didn't hear from them. I really don't want to have anything to do with such an egregiously inept organisation. Who wants to have financial dealings with a bankrupt bank? It would be as daft as hiring a solicitor who is in prison for fraud.

2
15.14 p.m.
We went to see a former approved school today. The local authority had ripped the soul out of the house and is now offering it for sale. It had once been beautiful. It is now completely dead and I suspect that no amount of work, money or love could ever bring it back to life. It would have been cheaper for the authority to build a new property rather than destroy this once proud and beautiful house. And I really cannot bear the thought of all the work that would have to be done. When I was restoring a big country house many years ago I had 17 workmen beavering away in it all at once. They were driving me mad. They wouldn't do what I wanted them to do but would insist on doing things they wanted to do and I didn't want them to do. They merrily tore down old panelling and then put up false ceilings that I'd said I didn't want. It became a huge battle of wills and I simply could not get them to see that I was paying for the work and was, therefore, entitled to at least have a say in what was or was not done. I arrived one day and found that one had left a note to another nailed to the front door with a nine-inch nail. Another had emptied gallons of diesel waste into a sewer leading to the septic tank. I fired all 17 of them there and then. It felt good. And although I had to find new workmen my stress levels halved instantly. Later I met two of the guys I had fired. `We were taking the mickey', one of them admitted. `We really respected you for firing us,' said the other. If you are nice to people to start with and you then have to be tough, they will hate you. But if you are nasty from the start they get used to it and say `he is tough but fair'. We know this place required too much work to turn it into a house but we

persevered with the tour. The smartly dressed woman who was taking us round told us that the local shopping centre is very good. `There are some excellent charity shops there,' she confided. So, that is now how people judge a town's shopping centre; by the quality of the charity shops.

16.34 p.m.
While out on our house search we stopped for tea. The cups were so thick you could drop them and they wouldn't break. I suspect that someone had tested my cup by throwing it at the wall. But despite two large chips and a wide crack, the cup was still in service. At the next table a woman talked incessantly about how busy she was and how she had so much to do that she didn't get any time to herself. I wanted to tell her to get off her bum and do some of the things she needed doing.

`Was everything satisfactory?' asked the waitress, as we left. `No, I'm afraid not. It was terrible,' I replied. I explained why. She stared at me for a moment. `That will be £15.45,' she said. I paid.

As we walked away a small portly man accompanied by a taller but proportionately even more portly woman stopped me in the street. `Are you Vernon Coleman?' he demanded. Reluctantly, and involuntarily backing away a step, I smiled nervously and admitted that if there were a prize to be won he would have won it. He turned to his wife. `There you are,' he said. He walked on a pace or two and then turned back. `We had a job recognising you,' he told me, as an afterthought. `You look a lot older than your photograph.'

Afterwards we walked around the town to check things out. We are unlikely to make an offer on the house we saw today. But there are other houses on the market in the area so we decide to take a look. The Princess and I have devised a good way to check out a town. We start by looking at the newspapers and magazines on sale in the main newsagent. In a decent town there will be plenty of copies of the *Financial Times* and *Country Life*. In a rough town, which is going downhill, there will be very few newspapers but a huge pile of magazines on tattooing and hairdressing. And there will, of course, be a large number of what The Princess describes as `Pot Noodle newspapers'. I have written columns and thousands of articles for most of the tabloids but these days I am ashamed when I see what they are printing. They really should not be allowed to call themselves `newspapers’. Sleazepapers would be more accurate.

This time there were a lot of magazines on tattooing and hairdressing. Although she is still a young thing, The Princess prefers to find (and read) the sort of magazines which carry advertisements for stairlifts, incontinence products and walk-in baths.

There's another way to spot a naff town. In a naff town virtually all the small greasy spoon cafés will have tables and chairs on the pavement outside. The proprietors of these establishments are not aping the Café de la Paix or Deux Magots but are, rather, catering for those customers who want to enjoy a cigarette with their coffee.

21.14 p.m.
I've spent much of the past week filling in my tax return. The problem is that they've simplified it. Last year it took my office a week or two to prepare the basic stuff for the form and me a week to fill in the form. Now that they've simplified it the whole thing looks as though it's going to take a month. I doubt if I'll get my bit of it done in under ten days. Ten whole productive days gone. That's two working weeks for a bureaucrat. Actually, given their working hours and mine it's probably four working weeks for them. I had to ring up the tax advice line twice. Sadly, their technical advisers couldn't answer simple queries with any confidence at all. The whole form, and the notes that accompany it, seem to have been written by Kafka with a little help from the Marx Brothers. Unlike instruction manuals for Japanese DVD players (which are written by illiterate pea-brained morons) tax regulations are deliberately written to be incomprehensible so as to create an endless sea of work for lawyers and to give the system an edge over the rest of us.

22.19 p.m.
A reader has written asking me to remove his prostate gland. His letter is headed `urgent' and he describes his problem as `life threatening'. Oh dear. I have no clinical practice and no access to an operating theatre and it must be nearly 40 years since I last performed an operation of any kind. An operation on our kitchen table, with my shaking hands holding our second best kitchen knife as I struggle to navigate my way around his nether regions, would truly not be in his best interest. It is slightly alarming to realise that I am legally entitled to perform any surgical operation I fancy trying my hand at. Maybe I could offer our Prime Minister some free brain surgery.

3
12.04 p.m.
The manager of a café where The Princess and I have drinks occasionally, offered me a free meal if I wrote a

brochure for them. `It won't take you more than an afternoon,' said the cafe owner. A meal in his café costs at the most £20 so he is valuing my time as a writer at £40 a day. This is the third time this has happened to me. I must look very poorly paid. Maybe I need a new coat.

While sitting in the café I was rereading *The Great Crash 1929* by John Kenneth Galbraith. Our political leaders like to give the impression that the financial crash which started in 2007 and accelerated throughout 2008 was an exceptional event. It wasn't. It bore many similarities to previous financial crashes which took place in 1929 and the 1930s and in the 1970s and if our overpaid leaders had spent any of their expenses money on the book they would have known what was coming. Galbraith concludes that `five weaknesses seem to have had an especially intimate bearing on the ensuing disaster'.

The five weaknesses he defined were:

1. `The bad distribution of income.' The rich were very rich and had far too much of the available wealth. The problem is that the rich don't buy more bread or socks The situation was exactly the same at the beginning of the 21st century.
2. `The bad corporate structure.' American enterprise in the 1920s had, in Galbraith's words, `opened its hospitable arms to an exceptional number of promoters, grafters, swindlers, imposters and frauds'. Who would dispute that America (and Britain) had been even more hospitable to fraudsters in the run up to the 21st century crash?
3. `The bad banking structure'.
4. `The dubious state of the foreign balance.' In the 1920s America had a surplus of exports over imports and the United States of America was a massive international creditor. By the end of the 20th century the situation was reversed. The USA had become a massive international debtor. The end result was the same.
5. `The poor state of economic intelligence'. Anyone who has studied the words of Gordon Brown, the Bank of England or the nation's economists will be forced to conclude that the problem had recurred. In the 1920s the Government failed to act wisely because it didn't understand the extent (or the cause of) the problem. The same situation prevailed throughout Gordon Brown's tenure as Chancellor of the Exchequer. Everything Brown did made things worse.

In the run up to the recent crash, all Galbraith's five reasons existed but were not recognised. The problems were global (globalisation had seen to that) but, thanks to Brown, they were worse in England than in any other country.

14.15 p.m.
I saw a group of hoodies slouching along the street. They were shuffling and I could see why. They hadn’t tied their shoelaces and they were all wearing trousers which hung precariously on their hips. Grey underpants are, it seems, part of their uniform. It occurred to me that if I shouted rude comments at them, and then ran away, they would not be able to catch me because they would not be able to run without tripping up over their shoelaces or their trousers. This knowledge gives me strange comfort. I did not tell The Princess because she knows me well and would worry that I might do it.

19.10 p.m.
I'm writing a novel set in Paris and I have quite a lot of the plot sorted out. The problem is that the characters keep changing. It's normal for characters to take over once they've been defined but these characters just won't take any shape. And until I have characters I have no book. I like to know more about my characters than I tell the reader. I want to know something about their lives before they appeared in the book. And I want to have an idea of what will happen to them afterwards. I often leave the way open for another book, or even a series, at the end of a novel. I did this with *The Bilbury Chronicles* and *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War*. And I also did it with *Second Innings*, *Deadline* and *Tunnel* (though I haven't written those sequels yet). I did it with the series of novels I wrote as Edward Vernon. Sometimes I think it's fun to give the reader a note explaining what happened to the characters after the book had ended. It's good to know that the characters carry on their lives. It's not for nothing that writers of fiction often put `based on a true story' at the front of the book, even if the link to the true story is fairly tenuous. (I confess that *Mr Henry Mulligan* was based on a three line news story.) At the end of one novel, *Paris in My Springtime*, I invented an entire epilogue to describe what happened to all the characters. My father was so convinced by this that he really believed that the book was autobiographical.

4

15.12 p.m.
I received a message from someone who wants to check my credit rating for me so that I can see if anyone has been trying to steal my identity. If I pay them money every month they will tell me how my rating is doing. This is a waste of time because I have no credit rating at all. This means that I cannot buy anything which cannot be

purchased with cash. But it also means that it is rather tricky for crooks to steal my identity and buy expensive toys with my money. I don't see why people are so desperate to have a good credit rating. You only need one if you intend to borrow money.

I admit that having no credit rating can be a little bit inconvenient at times but there is usually a way around the problem. Not having a rating means, for example, that I cannot buy a mobile telephone on a contract. That's fine by me.

When I wanted to buy a couple of iPhones the man in the shop wanted £30 per month as a rental. But since I don't have a credit rating I couldn't do that. So, instead, I bought two phones and paid £360 each for them. Since we use them exclusively for business they were, of course, a tax-deductible expense. I got free Internet access for the first year but now have to pay £10 a month for unlimited e-mails and Web use. The salesman in the shop thought I was mad to buy phones which I could have had `free of charge' if I'd signed a contract.

Since we've now been using the iPhones for well over two years I am in profit on the deal. If I'd signed the contracts I would have paid over a total of £1,440. But because I bought the phones they have cost me £360 plus £360 (the cost of two iPhones) plus £120 plus £120 plus £120 plus £120 (the cost of buying e-mail and Web services for two phones for two years). And that comes to £1,200. If my iPhones last another year I will save even more money. And there is no paperwork to bother with.

5

16.17 p.m.

A man in a cheap suit (doubtless representing the European Union) has apparently told us that the front door at Publishing House must be widened so that people in wheelchairs can enter. We have, so I'm told, sold two books to customers who turned up at the door. And so we must knock down the front of the building and rebuild with a wider doorway. Even if this is possible it will cost tens of thousands of pounds. I have given instructions that in future we do not, under any circumstances, sell any books to callers who turn up and knock on the door. Progress.

17.19 p.m.

My long-standing campaign encouraging voters to support independent candidates has borne fruit in recent years. At the 2005 election there were 166 independent candidates and two were elected. At the 2010 election several hundred independent candidates stood (despite the fact that the costs of standing have risen dramatically, as the authorities do their best to discourage independent candidates) and more independent candidates were elected. This is, it seems, a universal theme that has found its time. In America thousands of people are leaving the two big parties and becoming independent voters, choosing to select candidates according to the issues and the real personalities of the people involved. There are now more declared `Independents' in America than either Republicans or Democrats.

If Britain must be run by a political party then it needs a party which believes in the supremacy of the individual, which believes in protecting personal freedoms, which believes that government must be wary of taking on too much but which must limit itself to providing a basic physical, administrative and legal infrastructure, which believes that when capitalists take risks they must take personal responsibility for their losses as well as their gains, which believes that individuals are entitled to protect their identity and their privacy and which believes that the welfare state should be a safety-net and not a smothering blanket. We need a party which is proud of, and prepared to defend, the nation's culture, history and integrity.

At present we have three parties which are indistinguishable and notable only for their complete lack of ethics.

And we need politicians with a little gravitas. The modern political leader has little or no experience of real life. David Cameron, for example, was 39-years-old when he became Tory leader. He'd had four years in the House of Commons and before that had worked in public relations. Compare and contrast David Cameron's personal history with that of Winston Churchill. Indeed, compare and contrast the personal history of any modern politician with that of any politician of Churchill's generation.

We need politicians who are separated from the machinery of the State. Politicians should not be part of the State apparatus, receiving expenses and allowances as if they were Inland Revenue officers on assignment. MPs should represent us, and as such they should be above the State, not part of it. How can you rule and control a system of which you are but a small part?

19.18 p.m.

I spoke to a London publisher today who asked me what market research I did before writing and publishing books. I told him that I never do any market research. If I want to write a book I write it and then work out how to sell it afterwards. Just about every book I've ever written has sold out and had to be reprinted. `You really ought to do market research,' he insisted and went on to argue that his firm would never commission a book without having first established a demand for it by putting the proposed project to a `focus group'. I didn't have the heart to tell him that I knew of a major electronics company which had organised a focus group to find their views on a new CD player they were launching. One of the questions they asked the focus group was: `Would you buy a black or a yellow player if both colours were available?' Over 90% of the respondents said they would buy the yellow player. At the end of the meeting the focus group members were given a free player as a 'thank you' for their help. They were allowed to choose between a black player and a yellow one. They all, without exception, chose the black players - proving that there is often a huge divide between what people say they want and what they really want. I prefer to stick to my system which does at least mean that when I write a book I know there will be one person who will be interested in it - me. (It also means that I get to write books about subjects which interest me. I cannot imagine anything more soul destroying than writing a book on a subject that had been chosen for me by a focus group.)

6
11.17 a.m.
In a Marks and Spencer store today I noticed that they have a huge cardboard box for recycling bras. How do they do that? Do they melt them down? Or do they just take them to Africa and give them to all those women who used to model for National Geographic magazine?

14.15 p.m.
I bought a Graham Greene first edition today for £1. I found it, inevitably, in a cardboard box at the back of a shop. If the owner of the shop had been nicer I would have given him more than the £1 he asked for it.

16.17 p.m.
After the Blair and Brown years we desperately need someone to inspire us. We need someone we can follow. We need someone we can trust. We need someone who will lead. We need someone who understands the meaning of integrity and honour. We have Cameron and Clegg. What did we do wrong? History will show that this pair are incompetent buffoons. Neither of them could lead a bunch of boy scouts on a country ramble.

17.35 p.m.
A few months ago The Princess found a pair of slipper boots which she really liked. They are already wearing out. I have persuaded her to buy another six pairs. In days gone by only obsessive compulsives bought items they liked in bulk. Today, any sensible person does. I have been doing it for years. Manufacturers and retailers frequently stop selling popular items when they run out. (Book publishers do it too, of course). I have found that the only sensible way to avoid this recurring frustration is to stock up whenever I find something I like. I recently found a notebook I particularly liked in the stationery store called Ryman. It's pocket-sized and is designed for artists but the paper is thick and the cover stout. There is a bookmark and an elasticated band, with a metal clip, to keep the notebook closed in the pocket. Wonderful. I bought all the stock I could in several branches of Ryman and then simply rang the head office and ordered 250. They should last me six months or so. Maybe I should have bought more. I've been using notebooks since the age of 5 and must have got through two or three a week at least. That's probably nearly 10,000 notebooks so far. I clearly have an obsessive compulsive disorder (glued on top of my hypersensitivity, chronic shyness, self-consciousness and constant feeling of failure). I used to worry about this a little. But writers have always carried notebooks. Aubrey's *Brief Lives* includes this about Thomas Hobbes, who in 1651 published the *Leviathan*. `He walked much and contemplated, and he had in the head of his Staffe a pen and inke-horne, carried always a notebook in his pocket, and as soon as a notion darted, he presently entred it into his Booke, or els he should perhaps have lost it. He had drawne the Designe of the Booke into Chapters, etc. so he knew whereabout it would come in. Thus that booke was made.' And numerous writers have published their notebooks. Somerset Maugham's published notebooks are a revelation. (Mine, the world will be relieved to know, have all been burned as soon as they have been filled.)

18.54 p.m.
Late this afternoon a neighbour who knows that I collect books came round to ask me to view his collection. When I got there I found that he had a large, glass-fronted bookcase stuffed with book club editions. Every single book was brand new and unread. And, although they were behind glass, every book had been carefully wrapped in protective film. `What do you think of that?' he asked me. `They're my pension. I don't put my money into stocks and shares like all the idiots. These are going to go up and up.' I didn't know what to say. I didn't have the heart to tell him that his entire collection was pretty near worthless. I made appreciative noises and he smiled and nodded and cooed. It isn't surprising, I suppose. Even auctioneers sometimes think that book club editions are worth money. Not long ago

I attended an auction because the catalogue had included a number of James Bond books by Ian Fleming. Sadly, although the prices they were expecting were high the books were all book club editions. I could have bought every single one in a charity bookshop for less than a quid.

7
16.48 p.m.
I recently bought a letter written by Orson Welles. It arrived today. Although the letter is signed by Welles it was clearly typed by him on a rather cranky portable typewriter. It was written to the composer of music for a film he was making.

19.12 p.m.
Dress shops report that it is increasingly common for their customers to `buy' goods, wear them for a special occasion and return the goods for a refund when they've finished with them. EU law gives customers extraordinary rights and shopkeepers have little choice but to provide the refund. This sort of behaviour can be absorbed by large companies (who are cutting corners in every conceivable way) but small businesses, struggling to cope with red tape and bureaucracy, cannot. The result will be that more and more small shops will go bust.

Publishing House often receives packages from customers who return books for a refund or an exchange. The books they return are well thumbed, the pages marked with coffee cup stains and cigarette ash. `You sent this in error,' they claim, when it's painfully obvious that they've read and re-read the volume. This morning we received a book which had pencil marks all over it. The spine was completely broken. The person who sent the book back claimed it wasn't wanted and hadn't been opened. There is a coffee mug ring stain on the cover and the book smells of cigarettes. I doubt if a second-hand bookshop would sell it. If I don't send a refund cheque I will undoubtedly be in breach of some EU regulation. Another reader complains that we sent a book to the addresses we were given. `But that isn't my address now, so please send a book to my new address.' (There is no mention of the old address, no mention of the book title and no offer to pay anything.) Last week a reader wrote saying: `I liked your book very much but gave my copy away to a friend. Please can I have another?'

I don't care what the rules and regulations might be. This nonsense is stopping. And it is stopping now. I am told by the staff at Publishing House that I cannot do this. Really?

8
11.12 a.m.
We needed new boilers in the UK and in France at the same time. We recently bought virtually the same combi boiler in both countries. (With a combi boiler there is no need for a hot water tank and therefore far less risk that many gallons of water will suddenly burst through the ceiling). In the UK our new boiler cost £2,000 and having it fitted took six weeks to arrange. Two men took a day to take out the old boiler and put in the new one. They made a great mess which they made no effort to clear up. They offered no service afterwards. Indeed, after they had gone we discovered that they had set up the boiler incorrectly and it had to be adjusted by a man from the manufacturers. He came this morning and seemed to be shocked by their shoddy workmanship. In France the same boiler cost £1,000. We had to wait five days to have it fitted. Removing the old boiler and putting in the new one took one man two hours. He cleared up all his mess and took away all his rubbish. We were given a free annual service and a two year guarantee.

16.39 p.m.
I discover that several local councillors are unemployed. I do not approve. No one who isn't a taxpayer should be allowed to be a councillor. No one who does not contribute to the nation's purse should decide how public money is spent. That seems to me fair and commonsensical. But you will not hear any politician ever suggest it. Actually, I would go further: people on sickness benefits should not be allowed to campaign on behalf of political parties or to take political office and if they do then they should be arrested as cheats because if they are fit enough to campaign or take part in politics then they are fit enough to work.

17.59 p.m.
I ordered some Eurostar tickets over the telephone and asked for the tickets to be posted to me. `We don't usually do this', said a very jolly Eurostar man. `It's to save the environment. You're supposed to print out your own tickets.' I'm not sure how this saves the environment but I don't argue. `I'd be grateful if you would post them to me,' I say. `I'm frail and I live a long way away. I panic if my train is late and I have to rush around at St Pancras.' The nice Eurostar man agrees to post them. I am constantly amazed at the way big companies now play the `environment' card to save

themselves money. It's a remarkably easy card to play. A friend of mine was stopped driving the wrong way down a one way street. He told the policeman that by so doing he cut a mile off his journey. `It's quicker and uses less petrol and is therefore environmentally sound,' he said. The policeman was so confused by this that he merely helped my friend turn his car round and let him go on his way.

21.57 p.m.
Half wits who don't believe in `peak oil' are again suggesting that the oil price is high because of speculators. This is so silly. When one speculator buys another sells. That's the way it works. Only big countries (such as America) buy and hoard oil in vast underground caverns. Speculators are betting on the price and they have a neutral effect; they no more change the price of oil than tipsters or bookies change the outcome of a horse race. Horses don't run faster or slower because people bet on them. And the oil price doesn't go up or down because people bet on where the price will be in a day, a week or a month. The real worry about oil is the fact that the Saudis are, in my view, still claiming to have far more oil than is really there. Maybe the Saudi royal family need to pretend to have more oil than they have in order to convince the Americans that they are worth protecting.

9
11.38 a.m.
It's been some time since I had my eyes tested so instead of passing I called in at a branch of Vision Express and had my eyes tested. The optician told me she thought I had early signs of macular degeneration. This is not good news. It means that I'll effectively go blind in a few years. Meanwhile, I still need new spectacles. A kindly assistant took me to the cheapest rack of spectacles available. I must look poor as well as old. I picked up a leaflet which promised me that they could find any frames I wanted. `Do you have half-moon spectacles?' I asked. `Oh, no,' said the assistant. They could, it seems, find any frames they had in stock.

12.14 p.m.
The euro has collapsed as a result of waste and corruption in Greece. It couldn't have happened to a more deserving currency. The director of foreign relations at the Dutch finance ministry has proposed a special purpose vehicle with the right to raise funds backed by 440 billion of euro guarantees. The deal has allowed the European Central Bank to announce a government bond purchase programme to stabilise the markets and save the euro. Someone called Trichet, the president of the ECB, was quoted as saying `no politician is going to tell me what to do'. The UK has refused to pledge any money to the euro support fund on the grounds that the euro is nothing to do with us. `The British position was not very constructive,' said Anders Borg, the Swedish finance minister. `The British could pay a price for this for some time to come. At such a sensitive time, to make such a drastic statement was not very wise, and it will not be easily forgotten.' So the result of our being in the bloody EU is that the finance minister of Sweden feels fit to threaten us because we won't bail out a currency which has nothing whatsoever to do with us.

15.16 p.m.
We see cakes in a shop window and are tempted to buy one each. But then one of the assistants sneezes over them and we walk away. It is easy to resist temptation in such circumstances. We go out to eat very infrequently these days. Just as we all are, in a public lavatory, at the mercy of the cleanliness of the dirtiest person to have used the facility so, in a restaurant, our health is at the mercy of the dirtiest person in the kitchen.

16.17 p.m.
While wandering up the road I saw an absurdly fat man hit an absurdly fat child in the doorway to a store. I caught his eye. He stood and glared at me with the belligerence of a fighter, a body builder. But he was neither. Just an absurdly fat man. He wore a T-shirt with the arms cut off to show off the tattoos on his fat arms. It hadn't been much of a blow. More of a half-hearted slap. But he shouldn't have hit the little girl and it was obviously something he did often. If he had hit the child again I would have hit him. He was angry looking and gross but too fat to move easily. Afterwards I thought I should have telephoned the police. But the children would have probably been taken away by social workers. Would that have been a good thing?

19.40 p.m.
I have lost the Orson Welles letter I bought. I put it somewhere safe but now I can't remember where that was. I have been busy shredding a lot of old, unwanted correspondence and I am frightened that the Great Man's letter may have been shredded with junk correspondence between myself and the various utility companies. I feel incredibly guilty because the letter was a small piece of cinematic history. And Welles isn't writing any more letters.

21.34 p.m.
A DVD which I bought from a public library didn't work so I took it back today. `This DVD doesn't work,' I said. The librarian turned away from reading the online edition of the *Independent* newspaper, took the DVD, glanced at it and handed it back to me. `Yes,' he said. `That's why we took it off the shelf. We can't loan DVDs that don't work properly.' `But you can't sell DVDs that don't work!' I protested. The librarian shrugged and turned back to reading the newspaper on the Internet. I put the useless DVD on the counter and left.

10
21.25 p.m.
We went to Hay on Wye today. I always think of it as Richard Booth's town of books but it's now merely a ghost of its former self.

Hay is a peculiar place. The Welsh claim it but if the locals want letters to reach them they have to give their address as being in Herefordshire which is as English as you can get. The route up the Wye Valley, one of the most glorious stretches of road in the whole country, takes us to and fro across the border between the two nations. Every time we go into Wales there is a notice welcoming us but only rarely are there signs welcoming us to England. Presumably, the Welsh have more money for this sort of thing than the English who have given most of their money to Scotland and Wales. I like Wales very much, it's a beautiful country but it does annoy me that all the road signs are in two languages. This is expensive and dangerous and it's also a nonsense because only a tiny proportion of Welsh people actually speak the language. If they must put the road signs in two languages why not put them in two colours so that it's easier to spot the ones you need to see? There are no Welsh newspapers or magazines on sale and the television channel which broadcasts in Welsh exists only because it receives a massive subsidy. It would be cheaper for the presenters of programmes to go round to people's homes. If the Welsh used the money they waste on signs and notepaper they could provide jobs for thousands of unemployed Welsh folk, though maybe they'd rather have the useless and confusing road signs than the jobs. I was appalled to hear from a local that in order to satisfy the political activists many Welsh schools now teach basic subjects in Welsh. This is a particularly toxic form of child abuse which permanently damages the hopes and ambitions of Welsh children. I think it is a wonderful thing that the Welsh language survives but teaching children in a language which has very few textbooks and not enough words should be a crime. It's not surprising that it has been reported that Welsh unemployment is high because of poor education.

At Tintern we stopped at a bookshop called Stella's. As a collector I found it very disappointing. I couldn't find anything by Dickens, Conan Doyle, Fleming, Greene or Wodehouse. Rows of books but I walked out without buying anything (though I did purchase a couple of cheap paperbacks from a rack outside).

Hay on Wye itself seems to have lost its way and become a parody of its former self. It's difficult to get to and remarkably disappointing once you get there and manage to put a ticket on the car in the local car park. (I had to key my car registration number into the machine to make sure that I didn't give the ticket I bought to anyone else if there was time left on it when we departed. I think this is extraordinarily mean.)

The town is now rather tatty and very touristy. I haven't been there for years, though I have been invited to speak at the literary festival which is held there (I have always declined). The bookshops are overpriced and didn't contain much of interest. Most seem full of overpriced remainders. I bought an armful of interesting, rain soaked books from Richard Booth's honesty shelves (they had obviously been on shelves in the open air for days if not months) but even these seemed absurdly overpriced. A pound for a hardback and 50 pence for a paperback is rather over the top for books which have suffered badly from the weather. I did however find a first edition of James Agate's *Ego 3*. Agate's diaries are difficult to find and usually quite expensive. They are among the best of all 20th century diaries. I first came across them when I picked up one free from the American library in Paris. Miraculously this one hadn't been affected by water damage; it had survived by being protected under an old long out of date directory.

On the way back we stopped for petrol. The bill was £80.01. I hadn't got the penny so I had to give the assistant a fifth £20 note. In the change the assistant handed me there was a one penny piece. `I can give you the penny now,' I said, holding up the coin. `So if you give me back the £20 note we're all square.' He would have done so too if I hadn't refused it.

22.05 p.m.
I received a lovely e-mail from a reader of the German version of my book *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You*. I sent back a thank you for the note. I love e-mails like this: cheering, simple and undemanding.

22.25 p.m.

I've had another e-mail from my German reader. This time he has sent a long letter asking for advice about his illness and the drugs he is taking. Clearly, the first e-mail was merely sent to soften me up.

11
12.04 p.m.
An interesting bag of mail this morning included an envelope which contained a whole page from the *Guardian*. This turned out to date from the 1970's and to be part of the serialisation of my book *The Medicine Men*. The reader wanted to know why I don't still work for the *Guardian*. Although I wrote for the *Guardian* when I was a teenager, and they bought the serial rights to my first book, I have never written for it since. Indeed, in the 1970s a *Guardian* editor who had read something of mine of which she disapproved (I can't remember now what it was and I am not entirely sure I knew at the time) wrote out of the blue to tell me that I was banned and that she would never use any of my work on her page and that I was to promise very faithfully not to send anything in because if I did it would be sent straight back to me and she had instructed all her staff about this in case I tried sneaking something through by sending in something while she was on holiday. I was mildly flattered by this. I had never heard of her and nor had I ever submitted anything to her pages so it was a rather curious incident but I do remember the letter. I got the impression that she had been red with anger and hitting the keys particularly hard. At the time I remember wondering if the whole incident could have been triggered by some hormonal surge though I am now not sure that women at the *Guardian* allow such things to happen. Most, I suspect, have their hormone producing equipment surgically removed.

I also received a note from a reader in East Anglia. The note read, in its entirety: `Pythagoras's theorem has 24 words. The Lord's Prayer has 66 words. Archimedes' Principle has 67 words. The Ten Commandments take up 179 words. The Gettysburg address has 286 words. The EU rules on the sale of cabbages runs to 26,253 words.' I've seen this many times but it always makes me smile.

22.14 p.m.
Among her many other talents The Princess is a healer. She has remarkable skills. My left knee had been causing considerable pain for some months. I was knocked off my bicycle when I was 12 and as a result I've now developed quite bad arthritis in the damaged joint. The Princess has been spending ten minutes a day healing the knee and today, for the first time the pain has disappeared. I've been a fan of healing for many years (I once made a television programme showing X-ray proof of the effectiveness of healing) and I feel very fortunate and privileged to have my own in-house healer.

22.56 p.m.
A friend asked why we buy so many DVDs and don't watch movies on television. The answer is simple: the films shown on the television are, most of the time, edited by blind people equipped with dressmaking scissors. I suspect that they cut three or four films at a time, arbitrarily chopping out a few frames so that what is left will fit neatly between the reality television programmes which make up the staple diet of their channels. Three out of five main channels also chop bits out to make room for the advertisements.

23.15 p.m.
A report shows that the unemployed are happier than people who have jobs. I am not surprised. The country is not going to recover from the mess it is in until this is reversed and people have a real incentive to work and earn their own keep.

23.48 p.m.
According to a smartly printed leaflet which has been put through our door the council won't take away shredded paper. But we are constantly told to shred everything private. So what do we do? The answer is to burn everything instead of shredding it. There are those who complain that bonfires are bad for the environment. My reply: shredders use electricity and taking the shredded paper to a dump uses petrol. And I like bonfires.

12
10.19 a.m.
I have received a letter complaining about the power and greed of Jewish bankers and asking me why I have not pointed out that most of the bankers who caused the current financial crisis were, or appeared to be, Jewish in origin. The writer asks if I am frightened of the Jews because they can cause so much trouble. I have always taken what I believe to be a reasonable view about Israel and Zionism. But I have been widely criticised by both sides. The

criticisms from Jews have been particularly potent and unreasonable. Every time I have murmured even modest criticisms of Israel's policies with respect to the Palestinians I have been swamped with abusive letters from Zionists threatening all sorts of retributions. Moreover, a few of the most virulent Jewish agitators send furious letters to newspapers and magazines demanding that all advertisements for my books be banned for ever if not longer. They are often successful. When I wrote a 100 word comment about the barbaric practice of killing domestic animals by slitting their throats (a practice shared with Moslems, of course) in my column in *The People* newspaper I twice mentioned that this was a criticism made on the grounds of animal welfare, rather than religion. This didn't prevent high level Jews launching a violent attack on me and demanding apologies. Since then I have noticed that any mention of Israeli naughtiness immediately attracts violent opposition. Similarly any criticism of America always attracts venom not from Americans but from Jews. My criticism of the Iraq War (which began before the war started with my book *Rogue Nation* and continued when I resigned from *The People* because the editor refused to publish a column in which I questioned the validity of the war) has attracted a steady stream of abuse from Jewish correspondents who seem to support the killing of hundreds of thousands of innocent Iraqis. I have found that all attempts to reason with such correspondents simply make things worse and attract even more spitefulness. The final irony is that, despite all this, I regularly receive mail accusing me of promoting the Jewish cause.

15.16 p.m.
A friend living in the Far East reported two days ago that he has inoperable cancer with secondaries in his spine. He was told that he had months to live and that there was nothing that could be done for him. I told him to get a second opinion. He has now been told that an MRI scan shows no cancer but a ruptured disk that may not even need surgery.

16.43 p.m.
When television programmes have phone votes why do the presenters always give a cut-off time and then say: ‘Votes received after this time will not be counted but may still be charged.’? Why don’t they just turn off the machine – and thereby prevent callers being charged? Too easy and not profitable, I suppose.

19.34 p.m.
Small businesses make up a massive part of the British economy. No other major country in the world relies so heavily upon small businesses. And yet small British businesses are closing by the thousand. Almost to a man the owners say bluntly that they are giving up because of the paperwork and regulations generated by the European Union. Supporters of the EU sneer at small businessmen but they're sneering at the people who have for decades kept Britain alive. And they forget that big businesses all started off as small ones. The businessmen who are closing up their factories, shops and offices and retiring are mostly emigrating. They've had enough of Britain. And where are they going? Most of them are going to France, Spain and Italy.

13
11.55 a.m.
I received a letter from a reader saying: `There is no point in buying your book *Bloodless Revolution* because books cannot change anything.' I think this is wrong. Books can and do change people's lives. I wrote back and pointed out that I have received hundreds, probably thousands, of letters from people who have given up eating meat after reading my book *Food for Thought*. I am as proud of that as I am of anything I have done in my life as a writer.

16.43 p.m.
HMRC has a `press one press two make a cup of coffee press three go for a walk press four' system which bedevils all their phone numbers. I find myself hurling abuse at the nameless voice (why do they all say `OK' before anything else?) and the longer the tape continues the more abusive I become. Suddenly, I realise that the toneless electronic gibberer has been replaced by a gentle and rather nervous voice. `Hello? Can I help you? I'm a person.' I pause. `Are you real?' I ask. `Yes,' she replies. I wonder how much of the abuse she heard and hope she didn't take any of it personally.

19.24 p.m.
`If it weren't for bad feet, chronic fatigue, deteriorating eyesight, rotten intestines and a weak stomach I would be in pretty good shape for a man of 93,' I told The Princess today. She said that I'm not looking too bad for such an age.

21.18 p.m.

According to a review, a famous female actress, being interviewed about her latest autobiography, describes her often disastrous off-screen experiences with her leading men as `one monumental cock up after another'.

14
11.11 a.m.
I see that businessmen going to Scotland on business are now able to hire interpreters to help them converse with the locals. This is an excellent idea. I pretty much gave up trying to understand what Scottish people say when I commuted to Scotland once a week to present a television programme in the 1980s. The programme was networked but for reasons best known to the BBC all the presenters and most of the guests had to fly up to Glasgow. Every week, for two years, I spent 45 minutes in a taxi going from the airport to the television studios in the heart of Glasgow and every week I had to put up with a monologue from a taxi driver who spoke a language I'd never heard before. I would grunt occasionally, to show that I was listening, but I never had the faintest idea what they were telling me. I don't think they ever wanted a response. As long as I made a noise which suggested that I was listening they were happy enough.

These days I find watching television programmes almost as difficult as sitting in those taxis. The English media has been infiltrated (overrun would perhaps be more accurate) by Scots and Americans. It's now perfectly possible to watch an entire news programme on television without seeing a single Englishman - either doing the interviewing or being interviewed. Most of the time I can't understand what these people are saying. I do not know what the Scots speak but it is definitely not English, nor any variation of it. Most Scottish broadcasters and actors are incomprehensible and should be given subtitles.

I wonder why so many Scots are allowed to work at the BBC in England. Whenever I worked in Scotland - and while on book tours I made many radio programmes and television series there - I don't think I ever heard a single English voice.

15
12.14 p.m.
One of last things Gordon Brown's wretched Government did was to order two hugely expensive aircraft carriers that Brown must have known the country could not possibly afford. These were to be built in Scotland, of course. The country cannot afford these expensive white elephants and cannot afford to buy any planes to put on them. There is talk that one of the aircraft carriers might be sold when it is completed though no one seems sure which Russian oligarch would buy one. Most of them seem to prefer buying football clubs. Maybe the new Government could advertise the damned thing on eBay. Or, perhaps, it could be moored ten miles off Great Yarmouth. Attractive bungalows could be built on the flight deck and sold to hedge fund managers who want to avoid paying British tax but can't bear to be away from the British climate.

14.12 p.m.
I really miss our former advertising agent. David was brilliant at finding advertising space at low rates. He specialised in buying what is called `short-term' space. He would ring me at 6.30 p.m. and tell me which of the national newspapers had advertising space left for the following morning. I would then buy the space at a rock bottom price. It worked brilliantly. David left in unhappy circumstances and was replaced by a seven-year-old who thought *The Sun* was a big round thing in the sky and the *Daily Mail* was his sister's ever changing boy friend rota. The advertising man we have now is just not working as well. He calls my books `product' and doesn't like my advertisements or my proposals. Not surprisingly I do not feel comfortable with him. I think he will have to go. I have tried to persuade David to come back and work for me exclusively but he has a job working for a council somewhere and cannot be tempted.

15.17 p.m.
At the bank I told a clerk that I want to move £10,000 from one account to another. `What is the purpose of this movement?' she asks. (She then apologises and tells me it is an essential security question). `It is to take money from one account and put it in another,' I told her. She wrote this down on the form and so, once again, the country is safe.

16
20.08 p.m.
We saw four houses today. The first house we saw came with an astonishing number of covenants. The vendor had decreed that he would retain the airspace three metres above the house, that the house must never be used other than as a single private residential dwelling, that no additional structure be erected on the land without the prior written

consent of the vendor and that the name of the property must be changed within three months of completion. We were so busy trying to take in all this information (and wondering what was going to happen three metres above the land) that we didn't really look at the house.

The second house had a cement factory on one side of it and everything outside and inside was covered in a thin layer of cement dust. There was a quarry at the back of the house and a big sign warned of occasional blasting. As if all that wasn't enough there was a carpet showroom attached to the side of the house. A door connected the two.

The third house had a caravan park in the adjoining field. Looking over the low fence which separated the two properties we counted nine large dogs. Seven of them were tied up with thick chains. Five of the chained up dogs were barking. `The owners have planning permission for a bungalow to be erected in the garden so they're selling that separately,' murmured the estate agent who was showing us round. She said it quietly, as though hoping that we wouldn't notice. The garden was about the length of a cricket pitch. `They want another £100,000 for the garden,' she told us when asked. She sounded embarrassed as indeed she should have done. Something happens when people buy and sell houses. They all become greedy and expert in the business of property dealing.

I once bought a house from a man who took me on a final tour of the property to show me how the boiler worked and where the stop taps were. `I've just put up a new television aerial,' he said. `It cost me £250. Would you like to buy it?' I said I would and handed him £250 in cash. `I've just put in a new gas pipe,' he told me. I handed over more cash. `Would you like me to leave you the metal hay feeder in the barn?' Although I had no use for it I said that would be very nice of him. He asked for £100. I gave it to him. I am not good at these things. A week after I had moved in he came back and I found him digging up plants and taking cuttings. `I knew you wouldn't mind,' he said. `But you were wrong,' I told him. `I do.' I threw him out. Even worms can turn.

The fourth house was a former vicarage which is now being sold. I liked it very much because it had a huge horse chestnut tree in the garden. I was attracted by the idea of having an endless supply of conkers. We were shown round by a woman from the local church. She clearly disapproved of the diocese selling the house and so was very careful to point out all the problems. She had got very good at it and every time we entered another room she would point out all the stains, dubious bits of piping or dodgy bits of floorboard. She told us in graphic detail about everyone who had died in the house. She explained why the central heating needed replacing, where all the leaks had been and about the ghosts which haunted the house. She told us about the marriages which had broken up in the house, about the child who died in the garden and about the problems with the neighbours. She told us that the parishioners have managed to insist that although the house is being sold, the parking space at the side will not go with it. The church is retaining that though it will consider allowing any new buyer to have access through the parking space in order to make a parking space within the garden at the back of the house. She tells us that the church will charge £150,000 for this permission and admits that because the original parking space will almost certainly be constantly occupied it will be nigh on impossible to get through to the new parking space at the back of the house. We thank her, say goodbye, wonder if the estate agent knows that their representative is putting the boot in so successfully and go to find a café for a pot of tea. The woman who serves us sees the brochure for the vicarage we’ve just seen. `You don't want to buy that place,' she whispers. `It's haunted.' We tell her that we don't think we'll buy it and we order two hot buttered cinnamon teacakes. When they arrive they are as big as dinner plates and taste as good as they smell which is magnificent.

When we got back home we found we had been sent details of a house which is advertised as having two gardens. Intrigued we look closer. There are indeed two gardens: one at the front of the house and one at the back. This does not seem to us remarkable but estate agents, searching for something to say about a property, can be extraordinarily creative.

17
09.01 a.m.
Tomorrow I am 64. I began claiming my NHS pension as a former GP four years ago (State employees are entitled to retire early) but in another year's time I can claim my official old age pension. It's a good job I don't need to live on my NHS pension. I practised as a doctor for more than a decade but receive around £5,000 a year. When I snuff it, The Princess will receive around £400 a year. The reason for the modest sum is simple. Like the Government, the NHS runs a Bernie Madoff style Ponzi scheme. The contributions I made to my pension were long ago used to pay some other doctor's pension. The money I paid in hasn't earned me a penny in interest or dividends. And so the pension I now get is the sort of pension I'd have received when I retired from general practice in the early 1980s.

I read recently that the former singer Nana Mouskouri is going to give her EU pension to the Greek Government to help rescue it from bankruptcy. Apparently, she receives £14,700 a year as a reward for being an MEP for five years in the 90s.

11.45 a.m.
A large piece of council owned tree has fallen onto the roof of the BMW and severely dented the roof. Other bits of the tree are clearly about to fall. It needs lopping and pruning and generally tidying up. I rang the council. `You need to speak to the tree preservation officer,' said a woman. `But he's gone on paternity leave.' `Well, could I speak to his replacement, please?' `The post is mandated as unfilled under the council's way forward scheme.' I ask what this means. She repeats it. I can get no more out of her. I move the car so that it is not in the line of fire.

15.16 p.m.
I don't feel like a pensioner (though I'm well aware that I probably look like one) but there are constant reminders that bits aren't functioning quite as well as they once did. I need to wear spectacles. My hearing isn't as sharp as it used to be. My joints creak. And if I walk too far too quickly I feel tired. Moreover, anyone who dies is another reminder that I'm on the downward slope. When I was young, illnesses were never associated with the organism wearing out and deaths of those around me were mostly accidents, choice or ill fortune. Mostly, death was just something that happened to old people.

18
09.38 a.m.
It's my birthday. I am old enough to remember when policemen addressed citizens as `sir' or `madam' and when politicians who lied resigned in disgrace. Gosh I am old. I don't feel 64 except physically and mentally. When I am 75 I can get a free television licence and have the right to reserve a seat in the pavilion at Lords for big match days. It's the second of these that I am really looking forward to but for years now they have been gradually increasing the age at which members can do this and I have a suspicion that if I struggle to 75 the magical age will be 80 and then if I creak to 80 the magical age will be 85. I'm also pretty sure that the free television licence will be an historical footnote. It occurs to me that although I am now 64 I have never had a plan; I have not yet really decided what to do with my life. I really must get on and do something about this.

21.34 p.m.
We drove to Sidmouth and called at the Riviera Hotel on the seafront for a mid-morning cup of tea. I made the mistake of ordering coffee. It was that dark, undrinkable fluid they sell in English provincial hotels. In addition to being undrinkable it was cold. The bill came to £7 for the two of us (£8 with tip). The drinks came with a couple of biscuits which I fed to a hungry seagull. A couple walking by stopped to tell me off. Afterwards, we stood on the front at Sidmouth by a stern sign saying `Do not feed the seagulls'. We accidentally fed them the remains of our picnic lunch and they seemed to enjoy it. None of them complained. It is the bureaucrats, the EU officials and the people who make these damned signs whom I object to feeding. They are the ones doing all the damage. Walking through the town I was run over by a youth on a bicycle. He didn't bother to stop or to see if he had done any damage. It occurred to me that if I had been injured and the local paper had carried a story the headline would have been `Pensioner hit by cyclist'.

Later we sat on a bench overlooking the sea. There was a notice in front of us (partly obliterating the view). The notice told us that we were sitting in a `Designated Public Place'. The Princess said she was glad they had told us and that it made her feel better about sitting there.

On the way home we stopped several times and in a junk shop I bought a copy of a note signed by Hilaire Belloc. The note was framed. I paid £3 and the frame was worth more than that. An hour later, in another small shop, I found a first edition of Charles Dicken's *Cricket on the Hearth* for £1. I also bought a collection of 28 different books in the *Britain in Pictures* series for £1 each. All but two had their dustwrappers and all were in excellent condition. After I had struggled back to the car with all these books I returned to the shop and bought 15 first editions by Colin Dexter and Dick Francis. These were all jacketed and none looked as though they had been read. These cost £1 each too. I suspect that the Book God was looking down especially kindly on me today. I dropped a pen in the shop. An old lady stooped, picked it up and handed it to me. Oh dear. I must look my age.

19
12.14 p.m.
I bought a memory card for my camera from Jessops. Naturally the card does not work with my camera or my printer. I suspect this is because my camera is two years old and completely out of date. I have bought a selection of memory cards from an Internet site in the hope that one of them will be archaic enough to work. I have problems like this all the time. It is now apparently impossible to buy laptop computers that take floppy disks. It is even difficult to find laptops that will allow me to use my zip disks.

16.19 p.m.
I've been reading *The Truth Cautionary List for 1910* which I picked up from a junk shop (for the usual 50 pence). *The Truth* was an extraordinary little magazine, together with an annual book. It published warnings about confidence tricksters (both individual and corporate) and gave the names and addresses of people it warned against. Among those listed is Margaret Wilkinson of 236 Vauxhall Bridge Rd, London SW. `Represents herself to be in search of a permanent home for an uncle who is willing to pay £100 quarterly in advance for accommodation, and asks for half her travelling expenses to be sent to enable her to call and inspect the home.' It's the Nigerian bank scam! I have, like thousands of others, received many letters in the last few years from Nigerians who have money `stuck' in a bank somewhere and need a British passport holder to help them liberate their wealth. In return for help they promise to pay a percentage. The sums involved are always astronomical. `There is $17,736,298 waiting for me. I will pay you 10% to help me obtain the money.'. `I am the widow of a Nigerian banker. My husband left me $100 million in a bank in Switzerland. I cannot liberate the money myself but need help from an EU citizen. I will give you half the money if you help me with this. Simply send me your bank details (so that I can ask the bank to put the money into your account) and send me a banker's draft for £10,000 to cover bribes and expenses. 'The scam is that they need my bank account details (so that I can receive the money on their behalf). But they usually also want a cheque for a modest sum (,£5,000 or so) to pay the lawyer to prepare the paperwork. The same scam is now sometimes also conducted by confidence tricksters claiming to be ex US army officers who have served in Iraq and have a suitcase full of valuable artefacts to dispose of. (At least I assume they are confidence tricksters.) Miss Wilkinson got there a lot earlier. *The Truth* is also full of the names and addresses of share pushers and bucket shops, money lenders and their touts, home employment tricksters and the tallyman trade. Sadly, I suspect that our libel laws put *The Truth* out of business some time ago.

19.12 p.m.
I asked The Princess to buy something for me by telephone and I gave her my credit card so that she could read out the numbers to the online store. Rather sensibly they wouldn't allow her to order anything until I had given my permission for her to use the card and so I had to speak to them to say I was allowing her to use the card. `Now, sir,' said the person at the other end of the telephone, `for data protection reasons we have to confirm that you are who you say you are. Would you please give me your postcode.' I can never remember this. `You'll have to ask my wife,' I told him, handing the phone back to The Princess. She gave him the postcode and handed the phone back to me. `Thank you, sir,' he said. `That's fine.'

20
10.05 a.m.
How wonderful it would be if computer software designers and salesmen had to upload and use their own software and if MPs had to fill in their own tax returns. It comforts me no end to hope that the executives who work for DVD player manufacturers have to read their own manuals. (The directors probably have someone sent round from the factory to set the damned things up for them.)

21.46 p.m.
We stayed in a hotel in London for the night. While in our bedroom I wanted to ring a publisher I was due to meet. `I can't make my phone work,' I complained to The Princess. `I don't think there's any reception.' `You won't get to speak to anyone with that,' said The Princess. `Why not?' I demanded. `Because it's the remote control for the hotel television.'

21
09.54 a.m.
Delight and relief! I have found my Orson Welles letter. I found it when I was looking for a contract I signed with a Russian publisher. I'd lost that too. I found them both in a folder I had put on top of a bookcase for safe keeping.

12.34 p.m.
A man told me today that he has stopped buying a daily newspaper and that he and his wife have given up buying magazines. `You use the Internet, I suppose,' I said. `Oh no,' he said. `It's just that we don't have room in any of our plastic bins to put old newspapers and magazines so we don't know what to do with them when we've finished with them.'

22
11.18 a.m.
Someone today described me as eccentric. I find this as curious as `controversial', a tag which always used to be attached to my name and which I never really understood. Am I really eccentric? I don't think so. But then I don't suppose eccentrics ever do. I certainly never deliberately do anything that might make me appear eccentric - indeed, on the contrary, I try really hard to be inconspicuous.

It used to be said that eccentrics were loonies with money but I don't think it is true these days. I don't really think there are many genuine eccentrics around. The world is full of manufactured, self-conscious eccentrics who do things in order to make themselves look `different' and in order to attract attention. But *real* eccentrics never want attention.

The best eccentrics were always English, of course. The Princess and I have a list of some of our favourites in our book *England's Glory*. Only the English do eccentricity naturally. The French are, in contrast, exhibitionists rather than eccentrics. The sadness is that real eccentricity is dangerous today. Whenever the police are faced with a tricky murder, and a lot of criticism from the press, they simply rush out and arrest the nearest eccentric.

23
15.16 p.m.
Clearing out some old papers I found a letter from Jon Carpenter dated December 1994. When I first started self-publishing Jon helped enormously with turning typescripts into books. In this letter he wrote: `Just back from sales meeting. Interesting how everyone now agrees that you were right and the shops were wrong. Price is right, covers are right, there is customer demand and shops that take stock sell and reorder. Shops cannot understand where the demand comes from. The general conclusion (among the salesmen) is that the wholesalers and even Smiths will crack eventually.'

Well, after 16 years it now seems that they didn't crack and that I was wrong and the shops and the sales reps were right. It is today even more impossible for a small, independent publisher to crack the shops properly - especially if they are self-publishing. And as the wretched Internet gets stronger and shops get weaker and there is an exponential increase in the number of unemployed yahoos selling books for 1 penny and making their profit out of the postage charge so there will be less chance for small publishers, who rely so much on back list sales, to survive let alone prosper. Jon also made the valuable point that I should use phrases like `new edition' and `fifteenth printing' to reinforce the point that the books were already selling well. I did that. It didn't make a damn of difference. I even bought huge ads in the trade press telling bookshops of the sales we'd had. They still refused to budge. I have done everything I could possibly do. But all to no avail. And now bookshops and wholesalers are going bust - destroyed by the Internet and the supermarkets. Their only hope lies in selling books from small publishers who produce higher priced books in smaller quantities. But they still don't see that and most will, I suspect, simply go under.

I found this old letter enormously depressing.

24
18.19 p.m.
For some time The Princess has had painful muscle spasms, sensory loss, memory loss and a whole host of other symptoms. We went to hospital to see a neurologist. The consultant to whom The Princess had been referred was busy, or elsewhere being important, and so we saw a fairly young registrar. She thought The Princess might have a tumour on her spine and ordered an urgent MRI scan of The Princess's brain and spine. When we got back home I looked up the symptoms and signs in a neurology textbook. If The Princess had this condition she would probably have a loss of temperature sensation on her shoulders. This hasn't been tested so I checked The Princess's shoulders with a frozen vegetarian sausage. There is no loss of temperature sensation. I tell The Princess and we hold each other tight. She is 26 years younger than I am. I had always assumed that I would go first. Secretly I write this: `The most important thing in my life is to be with you; to share everything with you; to hope together; to journey day by day together; to fail together; to achieve together; to fight together; and to win together. Without you, nothing is worthwhile. With you everything is worthwhile.' I do not give it to The Princess because I think it might worry her. I have no idea what the diagnosis is. I'm terrified.

25
11.56 a.m.
Our gas bill arrived today. I now know how the Treasury must feel when they get a bill for a new aircraft carrier. I have no idea how to understand the bill but the sums involved seem huge.

But this was put into perspective later when, while looking for a letter I had put away somewhere safe and will probably not now see again until 2015, I found a typist's bill for £1,200. This may not sound a lot now but the bill was dated 1974 and it was for typing a new copy of my first book *The Medicine Men*. I remember that the lawyer's bill for libel reading the book was £750. And I also remember that the advance I received from the publisher for writing the book was £750. This was paid in three stages: £250 on signing the contract, £250 on delivery of the typescript and £250 on publication. The *Guardian* bought serial rights, a book club bought rights and Arrow bought paperback rights and there were one or two foreign sales so I probably just about made a profit. (I remember being terribly excited when told that an Italian publishing company had paid millions of lira for the right to publish the book there. And I remember being terribly disappointed when I checked the exchange rate.) The BBC made a programme about the book but I received no money at all for that.

15.14 p.m.
I was trapped in a shop aisle by two motorised scooters. One was heading one way down the aisle. The other was coming in the other direction. Neither of the drivers (both of whom looked fat rather than ill) could reverse their vehicles. I am convinced that 90% of the people using these things are just fat or lazy or both, rather than disabled. In the end I had to climb out through a gap in the greetings card rack. I left the two motorised scooters where they were. I have no idea what happened to them.

26
15.01 p.m.
A friend who works for a radio station rang today in quite a panic. He has the worst memory of anyone I know. He has always been absent-minded and rather dotty. He slipped from chronic adolescence into acute senility without bothering to trouble adulthood, nod hello to middle age or say a word of greeting to maturity as he passed them by. `It's me,' he said. `I know it's you.' I wasn't feeling very friendly towards him. Nor, I knew, was The Princess. But I wanted to hear what he had to say. `I met a lovely woman,' he told me. `I took her to the cinema last night.' I waited. It was obvious that something had gone terribly wrong. `We sat down and in the interval I went out to get some popcorn. While I was queuing I met a chap I know. I hadn't seen him for years. He was with his wife. We were talking about how awful the film was and he said why didn't we just miss the second half and go to the pub instead. So I went with them.' `Did you ask the woman you were with what she wanted to do?' I asked him. `I didn't,' confessed my friend quietly. `Actually, I forgot she was there.' `Let me get this straight, you took a woman to the cinema. You went out half way through and you abandoned her and left without her?' `Yes.' `That's the most stupid thing I've ever heard anyone do.' `Yes. I agree. What do I do?' `When did you realise that you'd forgotten her?' `About two hours later. I went back to the cinema but it was shut. No one there.' `Do you have her telephone number?' `I tried ringing her but her phone was switched off.' `I'm honestly not surprised. Do you know where she lives?' `No. It was our first date.' `Where did you meet her?' `She came into the radio station. She works for a record company. She seemed nice. I'd really like to see her again.' `Find out which one. Someone at the radio station must know. When you know where her office is send her more flowers and chocolates than you can afford. And send a note with them.' `Shall I be honest?' `Yes!' I said. `It's so awful that you have to. She probably won't ever want to see you again. But you owe her an apology and the truth.' `Is that all I can do?' `There's one other thing you can do,' I said. `You can include a note I'm going to give you.' `A sick note?' he asked. `Something saying I suffer from temporary amnesia?' `No,' I said. `I'll give you a note confirming that you're the most forgetful bastard I've ever known and that this isn't the first time you've done something like this.' `Isn't it?' `No,' I said. `You were supposed to have dinner with us last night. The Princess is sharpening her best kitchen knife. She's going to skin you alive when she sees you.'

22.04 p.m.
I saw a DVD on sale on the Amazon website. It was described as `mint'. There was a note with it saying `hardly used'.

27
12.06 p.m.
The Princess said that people who went to Eton sound as if they have nasal polyps. I have this vision of doctors checking out children to find out if they are suitable candidates for an Eton education. `I'm so sorry, Mrs Bigarse-Pompouspratt. I'm afraid your child can't come to our school. He has no polyps and won't ever be able to speak properly. Send him to `Arrow or one of those State places.'

28

10.18 a.m.
We went to the hospital for The Princess's MRI scan. Dr Peter Heywood, the consultant wasn't available (again). The Princess saw the same registrar as before. She was kind and gentle. The scan doesn't show anything. There is no tumour. The registrar examined The Princess again and found that she has brisk reflexes, fasciculation in her tongue and upgoing plantars. There is also muscle weakness. Another diagnosis is made. This time the doctor decides that The Princess may be suffering from motor neurone disease. I can't believe it. The Princess is far too young for this. And her symptoms don't really fit. But maybe I am just reluctant to accept the diagnosis. I am so sad for her. Selfishly, I am sad for me too. The Princess is the love of my life and without her I have no life. She is my everything. When her sky is blue my sky is blue. When her flowers bloom mine bloom too. When birds are singing in her world, they are singing in my world too. I will have to try to stay busy but I know I will find it difficult to do anything.

The only piece of good news we had was that the car wasn't clamped so we could leave the hospital without having to find someone to free us. There is a huge sign at the hospital warning that anyone who stays more than the maximum three hours may be clamped. This is ruthless and cruel. What were we supposed to do? There was nowhere else to park. We have enough to worry about without worrying about being clamped. Extra tests and a lengthy consultation meant that we were lucky to escape. I didn't dare leave the hospital in case The Princess came out and I wasn't there. Besides, there was nowhere else to leave the car. The people who run hospitals should be running prisons. Maybe they could make them profitable.

19.02 p.m.
While The Princess was having tests I wrote a rambling love ‘pome’ for her. Actually, I wrote it for me. To try to put my feelings into words.

`You are patience and kindness wrapped in a princess,
and given the heart and soul of an angel
I love you all ways and will do always
You are the light that brightens my life
You make the world's brightest diamond look dull
You make the world's deepest ocean look shallow
You make the world's highest mountain look tiny
You make the world's most beautiful flower look plain
Is it any wonder that I love you?
You are the Queen of my world
We are joined at the soul
You are the one for whom my heart beats
And the one for whom my soul exists.
When you are happy I am very happy
When you are sad I am very sad
You give me love, hope, spirit, faith, joy and purpose
You are, and always will be, the very centre of my universe
For you are the meaning of my life
We will always walk together wherever the path may take us
For it is the being together not the going nor the arriving which is important
Without you there would be nothing
With you there is everything
You make days into dreams without which the world would be cold and dark and pointless
You make my heart beat
When you smile I feel happy
I will always be with you, always be for you, always be by your side, always be on your side
We will fly free and high together
You are my everyone.
You will always be loved
Because I will always love you.'

Actually, it isn't a ‘pome’. It's just a stream of consciousness from a heart which is tearing apart. I do not want her to know at the moment just how worried I have been. And so I do not give the words to her. My life started when we met and it will end if she is not here. With her there is everything, without her there would be nothing.

29

15.16 p.m.

We have to do something to cover our minds with images and thoughts and busyness. In a charity shop in Ross on Wye, I put my hand on The Princess’s bottom and said: `What a lovely bottom!' I offer no defense for this inexcusable lapse in behaviour other than that it was an honest thing to say and do. Unfortunately, although I thought I had whispered I fear I may have spoken a little too loudly. We were standing outside a small changing cubicle at the time and moments later a woman emerged clutching the dress she had been trying on. She glowered at me and marched over to the assistant to complain that the curtain across the cubicle clearly didn't fit properly. I put down the book I was examining, grabbed The Princess's hand and left the shop before the police were called. We have enough to worry about.

21.11 p.m.

`Have you moved the scales?' asked The Princess. `Yes,' I admitted. `I moved them a couple of feet to one side. I kept tripping over them.' `I'm going to put them back,' she said. `I weigh less when they're where they were than I do when they're where you put them.' I did not argue.

22.06 p.m.

I received a lovely letter about Kirkby, near Liverpool which is mentioned in a story in my book *Cat Tales*. My reader wants to know if I ever lived there. I did. I was in Kirkby in the 1960s, working as a Community Service Volunteer. I remember that it was quite rough at the time. The buses from Liverpool were always escorted by police cars. There were very few shops and the ones which there were had their windows covered with thick wire mesh. But I very much enjoyed my time there. Apparently the town has changed and is now quite smart.

Another reader writes to congratulate me for not taking credit cards. He says: `Credit cards were yet another lousy idea for real people. They immediately inflated the cost of everything, opened the floodgates to fraud and encouraged reckless spending by the financially naive. The prudent end up bailing out the profligate. What a brilliant con!'

22.59 p.m.

About three weeks ago I received a letter from a reader asking if I was a freemason. I wrote back to say that I was not. I then received another letter, from the same reader, repeating the question. I wrote back and again confirmed that I am not, and never have been, a freemason. I have now received a letter from him saying: `Your denial proves that you are a freemason. Why are you lying about it?'

I also received a letter claiming that coal can be manufactured and that consequently my book about the coming energy crisis (*Oil Apocalypse*) is nonsense. He does not explain where he will obtain the energy to manufacture the coal.

And the police in the north of England tell me that they have arrested a man who has been sending threatening letters to celebrities. They say that his flat was papered with columns I had written and that he had a large file of cuttings about me. On days like this I am pleased that my address is secret and that hardly anyone knows where I live.

30

11.19 a.m.

Friends of ours who have been looking for a new home for even longer than we have gave up last month and just bought something. I suspect that this is something that happens remarkably often. `We didn't fall in love with the house we bought,' they admitted. `We just bought it because we were tired of looking.' Much to their own surprise they bought a brand new house. They bought it from an award-winning builder. They have already prepared a long list of problems. Their staircase is coming away from the wall. Eight tiles have fallen off the roof. The walls are so thin that they can hang pictures in two rooms with but a single nail. Their so-called Devon bank is in reality a long, high pile of rubbish covered in weeds. The windows and front door are falling out of their frames. The bricks from which the house was built are already becoming discoloured. The white plastic window frames are turning pink. The garage is too narrow to fit in a motor car, though (as the builder's representative pointed out) it will take a motorcycle and sidecar. The roof is so poorly insulated that they can hear every drop when it rains. The taps have turned a strange colour and the entire plumbing system shakes and makes terrifying noises when any tap is turned on. A modest rainfall flooded the garden which turned out to be pretty well 100% clay. And, finally, when a large puddle appeared in the garage a builder found that the overflow pipe for the downstair’s lavatory had been boxed in and could not be reached without knocking a hole in a wall.

Many houses which people buy with 30 year mortgages will fall down (or require demolition) just as the mortgage is paid off. We aren't going to buy a new house. The stairs in our friends’ house are coming away from the wall because the award-winning builder had used green timber. In old houses some of the wood is salt cured oak from former English sailing ships; oak so tough you can’t get a nail into it. That’s for us.

15.17 p.m.
The Princess and I walked into town today to do what The Princess called ‘a little light shopping’. (We wanted to buy more old-fashioned light bulbs before the EU ban on sensible lighting comes into operation.) On the way down the High Street we were stopped nine times by chuggers. These wretched people have become a terrible nuisance. Their incessant, ubiquitous, guilt-making questioning of pedestrians is close to menacing. They are as difficult to avoid, and just as annoying, as dog faeces. Most know little about the charities they promote, and care even less. They are driven not by goodwill but by the desire to make lots of commission.

31
13.15 p.m.
On a bookshelf in a charity shop The Princess found five of my novels. My books are more popular now than they have ever been, but whereas I used to be able to walk into any bookshop in the country (or any library) and find numerous books of mine on the shelves, today I only see my books in second-hand shops and charity shops.

17.01 p.m.
I popped into a mobile telephone shop to buy a new telephone. They did the usual checks. I can't buy a phone on a contract because I don't have a credit rating but the pay-as-you-go phones are still OK. And they're much cheaper too. I gave my real name which the man in the shop recognised. He was having difficulty setting the thing up so I said I'd pop out, do a bit more shopping and go back. When I returned three quarters of an hour later he had rung a friend in London to tell him I'd been in the shop. (They must be very low on excitement in that shop). He was terribly excited. `I know about you,' he whispered. `You work for MI5 don't you?' I stared at him in disbelief. `I mentioned your name, said I'd had you in the shop, and my friend - who works there - said they knew you.'

In the end I ended this bizarre conversation by swearing him to silence. I didn't like to tell him that his friend knew of me not because I work for them but because they've had me under constant surveillance for years.

My campaigning, though always entirely peaceful, has meant that my phone lines have been tapped for over 20 years. The clicking and beeping has been annoying at times. And although I no longer hear my own conversations played back to me (they're getting slightly better at it) it's pretty obvious what is going on. They don't just do the generic echelon surveillance (the sort which follows what everyone says or writes and picks up on key words) but they listen to everything.

They used to open the mail, too. But they've given up on that now. I think there's too much of it. The only troublesome thing is that our doorbell somehow gets triggered when they ring up to suck the faxes off the fax machine line. I haven't been able to sort it out so we took the batteries out of the doorbell and it doesn't disturb us any more. We never answer the front door anyway so it's no problem.

They have more files and cuttings about me than I have. I saw some of them once and believe me it's an impressive collection. If I ever change my mind about writing an autobiography I'll use the Freedom of Information Act to pick up my cuttings files and leaf through them.

I expect they will keep doing it until I die, though it is of course a complete waste of money. I know they're doing it. And if I were stupid enough to do anything bad would I be stupid enough to talk about it on the telephone? They know I know they're doing it so can't they work that out for themselves? I suspect they have done so but decide to carry on because it's what they do and they don't have enough knowledge or wisdom or authority not to do it.

My MI5 special branch file contains a note that I am no physical threat and never have been. Which makes it even dafter that they keep wasting the taxpayers’ money listening to all my telephone calls and reading my faxes. The odd thing is that I bet they don't read my books and so they won't see this. And so they won't get round to wondering how I know what my highly secret file says about me. I wouldn't tell them anyway. It's secret and I wouldn't betray a source because he still works there and is quite high up now.

I first found out that they were tapping my phone when I dialled 1471 (when the service first started) and dialled a number which turned out to be a private, unregistered line inside Aldermaston Atomic Research Centre. The man who answered the phone was very surprised that I had the number because the 1471 thing had only been going for a couple of weeks, but after I'd spoken to him I slowly realised why my answering machine messages were disappearing, why my phone kept bleeping and why my fax machine started dialling out all by itself. A kind man at British Telecom checked out the Aldermaston number for me and became very excited. He'd been told that it was all top secret and that I wasn't to be told but he was too excited about it to keep it to himself. Suddenly I realised why there had been a yellow van parked outside the house for two days and why two men had spent hours repairing telephone wires that didn't have anything wrong with them.

Since then they've followed me around quite a lot. I used to speak at anti-vivisection rallies quite often and I always had my own film crew, photographer and special branch observers wandering around behind me. In later years I even had my own helicopter hovering overhead whenever I spoke. The officer in charge once asked me how long I was speaking for so that they'd know how long they needed the helicopter for. I think the idea was that the noise would drown me out but once everyone got used to the thub thub thub of the rotors it didn't make a lot of difference.

When I went to South Africa a few years ago one of the first people I met was a smart man in a suit who pretended to be running a local group called Lawyers Against Vivisection. He wanted to know if I knew a man called Alf and if I could introduce him. He was desperately keen but desperately obvious too. I think it was the BOSS suit that gave him away.

Over the years I've had some papers stolen (though the thieves are always very tidy) but they never take anything valuable so I've no real complaints. I always have copies of everything important so it doesn't matter very much. I put the copies in safe places where they aren't likely to be found by small children, petty thieves or anyone working for the security services.

When I left the phone shop the man who'd served me gave me a big, knowing wink. I think he was telling me that my secret is safe with him.

June

1

11.14 a.m.

The German president has resigned after having been caught telling the truth. He said that there is fighting in Afghanistan to protect commercial interests and secure trade. So he had to resign. He was the only politician in the world to tell the truth so naturally he had to go. It must have been a considerable embarrassment to the others. Politicians hardly ever resign these days, though they often should. I have resigned several times on principle and believe people should do so more often. I stopped writing my column for *The People* because a feeble minded editor wouldn't let me criticise the invasion of Iraq (before it started). When I resigned from *The People* I was earning around £150,000 a year from the column (they paid me about £100,000 a year to write the column but I also had an income from telephone advice lines and book sales that were part of my contract). And when I was a GP I resigned because the authorities insisted on fining me when I refused to put specific diagnoses on sick notes. I suppose that was a risky and adventurous resignation too but I really had no choice.

16.45 p.m.

I had to fill in my VAT form today. When I had worked my way through the endlessly and unnecessarily complicated on-screen forms I came to this: 'HMRC are waiting for notification that your return has been successfully received by HMRC.' Wonderful.

2

15.17 p.m.

I was utterly astonished to see a branch of Waterstones selling one of the new e-book readers. This seems to me to be utter madness. But the madness seems widespread and Waterstones certainly aren't the only corporate idiots in the retail book trade. I saw my first e-book reader displayed, with great razzmatazz and pride, in the branch of W.H.Smith in the Rue de Rivoli in Paris. E-books are cheap and convenient and, boosted hard by webshops, they will soon be selling more than paperbacks or hardbacks. Most of the people buying books this way won't read them, of course. They'll just have them tucked away safely on their e-book readers while they play games or text one another. The e-book will kill an entire industry within a couple of years. Bookshops, publishers, printers, librarians and professional authors are all at risk. And since books provide the principle vehicle for ideas, debate and all the basic principles of civilisation the result will be far more significant than the loss of an industry and another few million jobs around the world. Does anyone really imagine that websites, twitterings or vodcasts can possibly replace books? For bookshops to aid this process by promoting the damned things is as daft as a Ford motor car dealer promoting cheap railway tickets in his showroom.

I didn't buy anything in Waterstones, though The Princess bought some audiotapes and had a little fun with their stock. We neither of us likes Russell Brand, whom we consider to be an unpleasant oik who is about as funny as chronic irritable bowel syndrome (and has many of the same characteristics). He must hold the record for the most books seen heavily discounted in remaindered bookshops but there were apparently some of his books in Waterstones. The Princess said she had hidden them where no one could possibly find them.

`Where?' I asked, puzzled. `In the humour section,' she replied. I agreed with her that no one would ever think of looking for his books there.

As we left I overheard two boys talking. I don't know what they were talking about. `I don't know if it's true,' said one. `But I read it in Wikipaedia'.

I smiled at this. Maybe there is hope. I've never heard anyone say: `I don't know if it's true, but I read it in the Encyclopaedia Britannica.'

3

16.17 p.m.

`Drink up, it will put hairs on your chest,' said the man. `I'm not sure that's as great an incentive as you might imagine it to be,' said the woman he was talking to.

22.15 p.m.

This evening we watched *The Perfect Spy* again. It is the classiest piece of television drama ever made. We watch it every year and see something new in it every time we watch it. The two Smiley films (*Tinker Tailor, Soldier, Spy* and *Smiley's People* are brilliant too. I very much doubt if anything of such quality will ever be made again by any

British television company. When I watch Ray McAnally's performance in *The Perfect Spy* I am reminded of the legendary actor John Barrymore who could, it was said, cry from either eye at will - according to the needs of the director. The Americans in *The Perfect Spy* are ridiculed with such scalpel sharp accuracy that I sometimes wonder if John Le Carré, undoubtedly one of the great novelists of the 20th century, might not have been hired by the Russians to discredit the Americans by turning them into a laughing stock.

4

13.12 p.m.

With some regret we have decided to abandon using inserts in magazines to sell our books. We only managed to make inserts work when The Princess started to write them. She has a natural talent for picking out the salient bits from a book and preparing an advertising leaflet that will make readers want to read more. Good promotional leaflets have to be chatty and friendly and informative and teasing and irresistible.

In addition to sending out leaflets to readers who have already bought books from us we have, for several years, been sending out inserts within magazines and newspapers. But inserts are a dangerous game. There are many pitfalls. The most obvious problem is that when inserts are placed inside a magazine which is sold on a bookstall there is a good chance that the insert will fall out and end up on the floor. Before I realised just how wasteful this is I often used to walk into a branch of W.H.Smith and look with horror at the carpet of expensive leaflets on the floor. Inserts cost money to print, of course, and the publisher has to pay the magazine a fee for every insert that is included. These fees can be massive. So if, out of 50,000 inserts, just 20% end up on the floor the cost can be huge. The easy way to get round this is to put inserts only into copies which are being sent to a subscriber at home. This means that even if the insert falls out it will fall onto the subscriber's table or floor and will stand a chance of being picked up and read.

For several years we did well with the inserts which The Princess wrote. But in recent years the problems have grown so fast, and are now so varied, that we are abandoning them.

Magazines throw inserts away by accident, they change their minds about whether or not to run them, they lose them, they damage them and then refuse to run them because they won't fit into their machinery, they put half in and lose the other half and they lie about their circulation so that we print far more inserts than are needed.

There are some magazines which claim huge print runs but which sell few copies. They make their money out of selling advertising space or taking inserts for a circulation which is much higher than they really have. So, a magazine may claim that it prints 50,000 copies but 40,000 of those may be returned and pulped. The magazine's advertising department will sell advertising space on the basis of a circulation of 50,000 when they are selling only a fifth of that. Advertisers who put inserts into the magazine will almost certainly lose money because they will have paid to print five times as many inserts as they really needed.

The equipment the printers use has become so sophisticated that even a slightly dented insert won't be accepted. And so if the inserts aren't packed very carefully, or the drivers of the delivery lorries which take the inserts to the magazine printer don't handle the boxes carefully, the inserts will be rejected. The rising cost of paper has meant that inserts have become enormously expensive to print. The increase in the cost of fuel means that they are also enormously expensive to deliver. The extra packaging that has to be used to protect the inserts means that the weight has gone up and the cost has increased still more. If the inserts are rejected we have to deal with them (another expense). We used to bring inserts back to Publishing House if they were rejected but after two journeys in lorries the leaflets became totally unusable and had to be disposed of (at our expense). And, of course, Royal Mail strikes can mean that magazines (and their inserts) are delayed or are delayed so much that people don't read them.

The final straw occurred last winter when an editorial note appeared in the magazine *Moneyweek* advising readers that, during troubles with the Royal Mail, readers could peruse their magazine online. It seemed that no one had thought about the advertisers. With readers studying the magazine online the chances of our inserts being read were clearly low. And that is exactly what happened. We had a far smaller response than we would have otherwise expected. When I protested and asked for a discount I was dismissed as `opportunistic'. The advertising agent I was using at the time didn't seem to understand why there was a problem.

And so we're abandoning outside inserts.

Thanks to The Princess's skilful writing, our inserts worked better than almost anyone else's. But I fear that their day is done. Pity.

16.15 p.m.

I rang my bank and after ignoring the usual litany of invitations to press this for that and that for this I eventually found myself talking to what sounded like a real person. `What's your name?' she asked. I told her. `Brilliant,' she said, as though I had just discovered gravity. `And your date of birth?'

I told her. `Fantastic,' she said. Now that the security checks were completed she happily told me everything I needed to know.

20.19 p.m.
I have for years made a point of never meeting my heroes. Sometimes I regret this. Sorting through a pile of old paperbacks I found a copy of Eric Ambler's autobiography *Here Lies Eric Ambler*. Flicking through I noticed that the title page contained a handwritten dedication from the greatest spy fiction writer the world has ever seen. `Dr Vernon Coleman from Eric Ambler, London '87.'

I remembered then that back in the days when the BBC didn't think I was too dangerous to broadcast, the World Service invited me to pick a favourite author to discuss on one of their book programmes. I chose Ambler. The BBC wanted me to interview the man himself as part of the programme but, although I was tempted, I funked it. I simply couldn't face the idea of meeting, let alone interviewing, one of my great heroes. And so a BBC employee interviewed Ambler and they stitched extracts from the interview into my programme. I sent Ambler a note explaining why I hadn't interviewed him myself and he kindly wrote the dedication and left the book for me. Ambler was a very clever writer who always allowed his readers to think as well as read. The author photograph on the back cover of his last novel was taken from the back. I used to buy every new novel as soon as it came out in hardback and I was sad when I saw the cover. I knew the instant I saw it that the book was Ambler's last novel.

5
12.38 p.m.
An acquaintance of The Princess's works for the local council. She goes to work for fun and has such a good time there that she is heartily miffed if she is expected to take a holiday. The most arduous task she and her pals have to undertake seems to be choosing brand new office furniture. This is something they do regularly and at enormous expense. Once the furniture has been chosen and is delivered it has to be changed. This takes two weeks, during which no work at all is done. The staff simply move into the canteen to do their gossiping. It isn't difficult to see why the country is in such a mess.

Talking to her makes me feel glum and hopeless. Civil morality in the UK has evaporated in recent years. The whole idea of public accountability is now oxymoronic. That is bad enough but what is worse is that this lack of morality has infected almost all other areas of public and private life. `They don't care so why should we?' and `They get away with everything so we should be entitled to get away with stuff too.' A lack of sense of any sense of morality seems to be an essential requirement for politicians. In countries around the world leaders are arrested for theft and corruption and for taking advantage of their position. No one blinks at it. Blair and Brown have paid no price at all for the terrible things they did to Britain. They have, indeed, been richly rewarded. In business, science, sport and medicine there is now an almost complete lack of morality. There isn't even any sense of shame. No one apologises. The standard response for those caught cheating is to threaten to sue and to blame someone else. Drug taking in sport is rife because no one is ever really punished.

Politicians no longer respect us. On the contrary they (and their servants) treat us as enemies. Their knowledge is vast, their power extensive but their resolve is stiffened with bureaucracy. The only things they fear are the unknown and that which they cannot control. Oh, and the light of exposure and truth. Like vampires they fear the light. Oh how they fear the light. They scurry from it like cockroaches disappearing under the cooker.

In days gone by, genuine achievement and success depended on hard work, practise, patience, dedication, honesty, loyalty and a willingness to put up with boredom and overcome disappointment in order to get where you want to go, knowing that despite everything you might never get there. These are virtues which are no longer respected or taught. The whole world of reality television and modern celebrity has changed things. People who have no skills can be famous overnight through some quirk of fate or a few flicks of the surgeon's knife.

And for the rest of us there is a great sense of powerlessness. People are no longer in control of their own lives. Even very small things (how we dispose of our empty yoghurt cartons and beer bottles) are regulated. There are rules for everything. No one can possibly know the full extent of the law. I have met specialist lawyers who can’t even keep up with the laws being brought in that relate to their own special area. People cannot fight back against authority and so they fight against one another; irritable, edgy and impatient they take out their anger on one another.

`You write books, don't you?' said The Princess's acquaintance before she left. I admitted that this was true. `I'd do that if I had the time,' she said.

19.18 p.m.
A chum who knows we regularly visit Paris asked me today why we don't go there by aeroplane. He's an unusual

fellow who has a daily newspaper delivered but deliberately reads them a week late so that he can ignore most of the bad stuff. He's always depressed about something but I've given up trying to cheer him up. `You must learn to be positive,' I once told him. `I am,' he replied instantly. `I'm positive my life is crap.' He says flying is cheaper, which it undoubtedly is. I told him we travel by train because it's quicker (which is true). But that isn't the whole story. I hate flying. I hate the smooth, neat, plastic, antiseptic, ever smiling, charmless, morons who work in today's smooth, neat, plastic, antiseptic, charmless airports. I hate the constant queuing, the overpriced lukewarm tea, the fact that the lavatories are always closed because they are being cleaned and the way they put your flight details up on the departures board and then, with five minutes to go, tell you that the incoming plane you are waiting for has been delayed indefinitely because of a hailstorm in Ohio or a puncture in Athens.

I hate the fact that airports are full of people who, judging by the amount of luggage with which they are surrounded, are emigrating and have decided to move the entire contents of their eight bedroomed house on a scheduled flight. They have huge, metal framed suitcases; massive, canvas and zip suitcases which threaten to explode and hurl sweaters, socks, kitchen sinks and spare lingerie all around the airport (they usually have one case which has clearly already made an attempt to do just this and which is therefore tied up with lots of stout looking string); rucksacks with every pocket bulging; two sets of matching overnight bags; handbags and toilet bags and a wasteland of plastic shopping bags full of whatever it is that people feel the need to cram into plastic shopping bags. How aeroplanes are expected to lurch into the air and defy gravity when they are crammed with so much junk I will never know.

I hate the fact that we have to arrive at the airport two or three hours before the flight is due to take off (thereby virtually doubling the flight time of just about any European flight). There are two reasons for this. First, we have to get there early because airports and airlines only allocate one member of ground staff for every 30,000 potential passengers. This means that unless you are prepared to pay the extra 1550% for a first class ticket you have to queue for half an hour before they deign to rip up your ticket and give you a seat number. (Why they can't save everyone's time by giving you the seat number when you buy your ticket I cannot imagine though I expect it has something to do with the unions. The people at airports who rip bits out of your ticket always remind me of the usherettes in cinemas who sullenly tear your ticket in half when you get to the top of the stairs. What's the point? You can't get up the stairs without buying a ticket. What sort of job satisfaction do these people get? Do they have to be trained? `This morning we're going to show you what to do with the half of the ticket you've kept.') Second, we have to get there early so that we are forced to hang around the airport shops and spend all our holiday money before the plane even takes off. In the old days they were content with allowing the waitresses on the planes to flog the duty free, the perfume and the watches. (Sorry. They are not called waitresses are they. They aren't even stewardesses any more. These days the handers out of meals and instructors in seat belt fastening all have wonderfully grand titles. My favourite is `In Flight On Board Senior Executive Director of Passenger Cabin Services' - a job description which must surely deserve an award.) These days the airports have got greedy. And boy have they got greedy. I know a bar at one European airport where a can of fizzy drink costs about the price of a meal in a four star restaurant. Whenever I went there I used to hang around just to see travellers handing back the drinks they'd just ordered. Wander around your average modern airport and you'll find that they've turned the whole damned place into a massive shopping precinct.

I can understand them selling books and magazines. (I confess that I would rather read anything in preference to an in-flight magazine). I can understand them selling bottles of booze. (There are still mugs around who think it is worthwhile buying alcohol at the airport and lugging it around with them for hours afterwards). And I can understand them selling sweets and crisps. (Unreliable research has shown that compared to the plastic rubbish they serve up on aeroplanes a bag of crisps and a packet of sweets are packed with tasty goodness). But these days you can buy a suit or a dress at an airport.

Don't people pack enough?

What sort of people are just about to get on the plane when they remember they haven't packed enough suits?

I was at an airport once where I saw a shop selling whole dinner services. Who the hell is going to buy a dinner service while they're waiting for a plane?

`Oh, gosh Maureen! Look! That reminds me - we must buy a dinner service!'

`Golly Henry. You're right. Let's get one now. It'll be so much easier to carry it on the plane to Majorca, take it to the hotel, and bring it back again than it will to pop into town when we get back.'

Or maybe people buy the darned things as presents. `Oh, look George. Let's buy your mum a dinner service instead of that knitted toilet roll cover in the shape of a donkey.'

`Wonderful idea Brenda. We've never bought her a dinner service before. Shall we take the 82 piece or the 134 piece?'

You can even buy luggage at the airport.

Are they really hoping that you're going to buy so much stuff that you have to buy another case?

Or do they imagine that some poor idiot is going to turn up with an armful of socks, shirts and undies and make a beeline for the luggage shop as soon as he gets through customs?

`Oh, thank heavens! You won't believe this but I completely forgot to put my stuff into a case! Silly old me.'

I even know an airport where they sell cars.

Now, I too dislike those grotty buses they sometimes make you take even when the plane is only about twenty yards away but I can see a car being a real problem. For a start how the hell would you get it into the overhead locker?

I hate the fact that no one ever smiles at airports. And I hate the fact that the walls are covered with lists of things you can't do and can't take on the plane with you. At Johannesburg airport they have a three foot diameter landmine and a six foot long bazooka stuck on the wall. Below them there is a notice telling travellers that they are not allowed to take such objects on board with them. At Paris Charles de Gaulle airport they always took away my Swiss army penknife and put it in the hold. This used to distress me. What, I wondered, would I do if called upon to perform a tracheotomy or remove a stone from a horse's hoof? Later, when I got on the plane, they gave me a knife with a blade sharper and twice as long.

I hate the fact that the seats seem to get closer and closer together every time I fly. I am six foot three inches tall and I have to sit sideways on most flights. Do the people who design aeroplanes think that the only people who fly are stunted Japanese bonsai people?

I hate the way other people are allowed to struggle onto the plane carrying six plastic bags, a canvas shoulder holdall, a huge cardboard box, a wicker laundry basket, an electronic organ in the original box and an oversized teddy bear. When I try to get on with my regulation size shoulder bag I'm sternly told that it has to go into the hold because there isn't any space left. Of course there isn't any damned space left: that idiot with the six plastic bags, a canvas shoulder holdall, a cardboard box, a wicker laundry basket, an electronic organ in the original box and an oversized teddy bear has filled up all the overhead lockers.

I hate it when one of the waitresses shows off the toys on her demonstration life jacket. I must have watched all that at least a million times and I still haven't the faintest idea where the life jacket is kept. Have you ever even seen the life jacket they say is under your seat? I think they sold all the life jackets a million years ago.

I hate the way the waitresses sell booze to other travellers. I feel uncomfortable, knowing that I'm flying inside a huge Molotov cocktail. And I hate the idiots who buy booze on planes and in airports and then fill what is left of the overhead lockers with plastic bags full of gin and whisky. Do they really need to save 36 pence that badly?

I hate the fact that the meals they give you always taste so bad that it is impossible to tell whether you are eating the food or the packaging. I hate those in-flight magazines which are full of maps with coloured lines all over them, articles about how Portuguese peasants have mastered the art of sun drying tomatoes and photographs of luggage that is so expensive that no one would ever dare let it out of their sight.

I hate the way the pilot is always so damned calm when anything goes wrong. `We're losing height,' he drawls, `but it's nothing to worry about.' `We're just going to jettison 45,000 gallons of high octane fuel over Swindon but there is no need for concern. All this is purely routine.' They're dumping 45,000 gallons of expensive fuel over Swindon and it's purely routine? Who are they kidding? I don't believe them.

I hate it when they let kids go into the cockpit during a flight. Kids always want to fiddle with things. I don't want to plunge into the Atlantic because some snotty nosed brat has pulled a lever he wasn't supposed to touch.

I hate it when the waitress tells us all that the pilot will order a taxi for anyone who wants one when we land. I don't want the pilot messing around on the radio ordering taxis, pizzas or take away Chinese meals. And I don't want him or co-pilot Biffo booking hotels or telling us what the weather is like either. I want the radio kept free for emergencies. And I want him piloting. I want his eyes glued on all those dially things underneath the windscreen. I want him to have a headache from concentrating by the time we've landed.

I hate the fact that there is only ever one customs officer on duty when the airport officials know damned well that twenty seven zillion planes are due in.

I hate flying. To be honest I hate trains, boats and cars almost as much. Like good wine, I just don't travel well. But I hate trains least of all. It is, all things considered, the only civilised way to travel. I haven't been on an aeroplane for years. And I hope I never have to board one again.

Airports are disgusting, unfriendly places staffed by people who clearly think they are superior to travellers – the people who pay their wages. The security guards are hired to prepare us for the New World. They are there to get us accustomed to being docile, and being humiliated. And hiring the guards enables the authorities to select future concentration camp guards. Every day I discover more evidence that governments are desperate to humiliate us and make us afraid. Not content with making travellers remove their shoes or go through full-body scanners they have given guards the right to touch breasts and groins. This has, of course, given these minimum wage grope fiends enormous opportunities to enjoy their power. A bladder cancer survivor's urine bag burst during an over aggressive inspection. A breast cancer survivor was told to remove her prosthetic breast. The head of the American Federation of Government Employees announced that screeners `do not get any pleasure from the new measures'. The real problem is that although at least one screener has been punched in the face (bravo that man) most people put up with this entirely pointless and intrusive crap, convinced by government lies that it is keeping terrorism under control. On the other hand I read today that when Hillary Clinton, the US Secretary of State was asked if she would submit to a groping (sorry, pat-down) she said `Not if I could avoid it.' And in order to keep flights moving pilots and flight attendants are now excused groping.

And so The Princess and I travel by train. And if we can't get there by train we don't go there.

6

10.07 a.m.

I received a letter from a reader who said `I have read many of your books. The frightening thing is that I seem to agree with just about all your views.' I replied: `Please don't be frightened about agreeing with most of my views. I agree with most of yours and am not in the slightest bit frightened about it.'

15.22 p.m.

A growing number of businesses now charge a penalty if we want to pay by cheque or to receive an invoice or receipt through the post. They want to do everything online. The excuse, of course, is that they're saving the environment. This is nonsense. They are cutting their costs. In order to keep complete accounts to satisfy HMRC I have to print out the invoice anyway. So all that is happening is that I'm having to subsidise the company that is billing me.

7

14.15 p.m.

The BMW is still alive but we are conscious that it has now done over 100,000 miles. This may not be a great deal for a modern car but the car seems tired and we have decided to buy a truck. There are several reasons for this. First, I have never owned a truck. Actually, I have never owned a sports car or a truck but I am clearly too old to own a sports car (even if I could cram my legs into one) so a truck seems a much better bet. Second, the roads are increasingly angry places these days and a classless, tough-looking truck should give us something of an edge over motorists in ordinary cars. Third, although I realise that a four wheel drive in itself is of limited value we want a four wheel drive vehicle to help us cope with muddy tracks and unsalted, ungritted roads. And most of the four wheel drive cars are either poncy or flimsy or agricultural. Fourth, we want something with high ground clearance that will withstand pot holes and enable us to drive over kerbs, humps, bumps and all the other bits of decoration the highways people insist on scattering about these days. Fifth, we want something big enough to carry loads of books.

We were going to buy a Japanese truck. But one big manufacturer has, after several weeks, finally admitted that they have stopped making trucks. Another (the one which has brakes which don't always do what they are supposed to do) makes trucks which are too small for me to get into. `How do you put the seat back?' I asked the salesman. `It is back sir,' he replied. `They are not big people.'

We decided to look at Ford trucks since Ford is an American company and Americans are so big that they probably make their trucks big enough for tall people.

We went for a test drive. Oddly enough, no one asked me if I had a driving licence entitling me to drive a stick shift vehicle (though I do have). I cannot buy the truck until I have proved that I have insured it though if my licence weren’t valid the insurance would be invalid. There is tons of space inside and the truck is packed with extras which come in with the price. It has a CD player which is far too complicated to understand, heated seats, windscreen wipers which have many choices of speed and clever little gauges which tell me if we are about to tip over. It also has by far the best heating system I have ever had (and I've owned two Bentleys, one Rolls Royce, a BMW and three Volvos). I particularly like it because it has massive ground clearance (great for driving over potholes, pavements and traffic islands) and The Princess likes it because it sits high up in the air and so she can see the animals in the fields as we drive past. We can also look down (literally) on other motorists. It is a sort of fully-grown Volvo Estate. The only snag is that the headlights seem to me to be only slightly better than having a man walk in front holding a candle. In all other respects it is just as good as most of the far more expensive cars I have driven. For example, I cannot find the switch for the fog lights. I can't remember ever owning a car where I could find the fog lights without stopping, or find out how to switch them on without finding the manual, so this is reassuring.

I know nothing about cars (I hate it when men from the RAC or the AA ask me to open the bonnet because I never know how to do it) but I talk knowingly to the salesman about payload.

`What do you think?' I asked The Princess.

`What colours do they do?'

We choose a dark green one.

We didn't like the red one, thought the blue rather sudden and agreed that the black one looked like a cross between a hearse and something gangsters might drive. Having a green one will enable us to tell anyone who asks that we have bought a ‘green’ vehicle.

8

14.39 p.m.

I bought a second-hand edition of *The Fiction Editor, the Novel, and the Novelist* by American publisher and super-editor Thomas McCormack. Tom helped edit my early Edward Vernon novels in days that promised much. He had just edited, published and made huge hits of the James Herriot books and he'd spotted my Edward Vernon novels (published by Macmillan and Pan in the UK) as a natural medical follow on. We met at the Connaught hotel in London and it seemed that I was about to become a gazillion selling author in the USA. Then all went quiet and my agent reported that Tom had gone skiing and had broken a leg. The books came out in the USA but without Tom guiding and pushing them they quietly disappeared.

9

20.19 p.m.

We spent the day watching cricket. Thanks to health and safety rules, kids are not allowed onto the pitch during intervals to have a little exercise and play cricket with tennis balls. This was often the best part of the day. The health and safety cretins would presumably rather children sat at home with the curtains drawn hunched in front of a computer screen playing `Deathwar 16'.

10

21.34 p.m.

We went to London where there was a tube strike. The staff apparently want a 5% pay rise and a guarantee of no redundancies (jobs for life). Only people working for the State could do this in the middle of the worst recession ever. The whole nature of striking has changed. Modern workers (especially those working for the State) don't go on strike to gain enough money to buy food, they go on strike because they want enough money for three foreign holidays and a second car. They also want free travel, free health insurance and a non-contributory, index-linked pension at three quarters of their final salary. The result of this latest piece of underground lunacy was, inevitably, a taxi queue at Paddington Station that stretched into the station and into the distance along Platform 1. The Princess and I walked out of the station and caught a cab two hundred yards away in Praed Street. It took three minutes at the most. The cabbie was a nice fellow who had been driving for just 18 months. He said he had never seen anything like it and was worried about going to the England match at Wembley that evening His concern was that he might have to take a fare there and would then get mixed up in some nastiness. As he drives us to Harrods he complains about the regulations which mean that he can get fined for putting a wheel in the wrong place and about the mountainous speed bumps which have given him a bad back. He also complains about the fact that London has replaced its Routemaster buses with deadly bendy buses. He said that the disabled can get free taxis so there was never any need to have buses they could use as well. As we drive around there are heaps of roadworks. I counted 34 workmen, all doing nothing, unless you count drinking tea and chatting as work. Not one workman was doing anything remotely constructive. This was between 11.30 a.m. to 12.30 p.m. I noticed that London buses carry signs boasting that they are 18 metres long. How easily we hand over our imperial heritage. Aren't yards and feet good enough for London transport? In Harrods we called in at the pet store where kittens sell for £1,000 or more and are guaranteed lives of luxury.

When we left Knightsbridge the traffic was so bad that we abandoned our next taxi and walked to the National Liberal Club, slipping between the Foreign Office and the Treasury. I hadn't been there for years since as a boy I used to wander round London just for fun. I remember that I walked past these imposing buildings I felt full with pride and respect for the men and women working within them. Today, I walked past and felt nothing but contempt. That's sad. In our modern world commitment, dedication, responsibility and respect are all just `jargon' used, with cynicism, to spin the truth and escape the consequences of the greed and incompetence which are so commonplace in these buildings.

We had lunch with a foreign publisher who is in London. This was the reason for the trip to London. He is a pleasant fellow but has a slight thyrotoxic condition which gives him a slightly insane look. He reminds me of one of those men who used to parade up and down in the street carrying placards warning of the nighness of the end of the world. He has just come back from a trip to New York where he had lunch at one of those places where patrons stop by the fish tank to pick out their meals. He was sitting nearby and said he found it fascinating to watch the other patrons choosing their food.

`Which one do you like best?' a mother asked a small boy of around six or seven.

`That one with the orange patch,' said the boy, picking out an easily identifiable fish. The parents then said which fish they liked best. The man in charge of the fish tank nodded and the family group proceeded to their table.

After the family had eaten, on the way out of the restaurant, the boy stopped at the fish tank.

`Where's my fish?' he asked, after studying the contents of the tank.

`What do you mean, dear?' asked his mother.

`That fish I liked,' explained the boy. `It's gone.'

`You ate it, dear!' explained his insensitive and stupid mother.

The anecdote reminded me of a friend of ours who is in the restaurant business. He is fairly ruthless and single-minded and has skin a rhinoceros would envy. Against the advice of his wife, his accountant and just about everyone he knew he opened a `Pick your own Rabbit' restaurant, designed along the lines of the places where patrons are invited to choose a fish or a lobster. The experiment was a miserable failure. He never understood why.

The publisher buys a few books, choosing them (as most publishers do) on the titles rather than the content. I remember going to Lisbon some years ago. My Portuguese agent and I visited a publisher and showed him a dozen covers for new books I had written for my EMJ imprint. The publisher immediately leapt on one, grabbed it and said `I want to publish this immediately!' He bought it there and then, without having any idea what the book was about. The title was *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You*. (He subsequently published 14 of my books in Portuguese.) Newspapers are sold on their `splash' - the contents of the front page. That's why editors keep some headlines pretty well permanently set up. They know that ‘Cancer Cure Found’ and ‘Who Killed Princess Diana? New Evidence!' will sell papers. Similarly, books sell by their title.

After lunch at the Royal Horseguards The Princess and I wandered up Charing Cross road, browsed in the bookshops in Cecil Court and in the coin shop nearby, made a detour through Covent Garden to see the street entertainers, visited the music shops in Denmark Street to buy some sheet music for The Princess and then walked up Shaftsbury Avenue to Piccadilly Circus via Gerard Street and Chinatown. We then went down to Jermyn Street because I wanted to buy a new Grosvenor style hat at Bates the Hatter. I have left my other one in Paris where it seems happy enough. The Grosvenor is a sort of Fedora but with a slightly narrower brim. I'm delighted to see that I am still a 7 and 3 eighths. The assistant at Bates steamed the hat for me but was clearly rather glum and preoccupied. He explains that their landlord, the Crown Estate, is redeveloping part of Jermyn Street and Bates the Hatter will go. I suspect it will be replaced by a store selling diet coke and sandwiches or overpriced plastic models of the London buses that no longer run. Maybe it will be another Tesco mini store. Bates the Hatter has been protecting the heads of Englishmen for over 100 years. It will no doubt emerge elsewhere but not, I suspect, in Jermyn Street. The Princess and I both feel very sad. I bought my first hat at Bates when I was a newly qualified junior hospital doctor. It cost about a month's salary. It was pouring outside and I remember asking the assistant if the hat I had purchased would cope satisfactory with getting wet. `Sir,' he said, clearly hurt by the question, and drawing himself up to his full five feet six inches, `We have been making hats for kings for over 100 years.' It wasn't until I got outside that I realised that kings don't walk about much in the rain. To revive our dampened spirits we took afternoon tea at Fortnum and Masons. The teacake was magnificent. I have always had a soft spot for teacakes and crumpets and other delights of English teatime. The Princess and I once stayed at Gidleigh Park hotel in Devon and I will never forget being told that the chef didn't approve of teacakes or crumpets and wouldn't have them in the hotel. We never went back. At Fortnum and Mason I was moved to overtip outrageously. The bill came to £25 for two teas and one teacake. We then walked up the Burlington Arcade (where I used to buy my bow ties when I was a medical student) and turned left into Bond Street where there is a magnificent sculpture of Churchill and Roosevelt sharing a bench together. It is raining but at the top end of Bond Street there are taxis galore and this is surely a sign of the times. From the lower end of Bond Street we can see a long string of yellow lights as several dozen empty taxis move slowly down towards us. We took one of the cabs to Paddington and then sat in the first class lounge after buying food for a picnic on the train. We agree that we like London better in the winter when it goes dark early and it’s raining slightly. `And a bit foggy,' adds The Princess. `London really needs a little fog.' She's right, as usual.

As we sat in the lounge we realised that apart from the cabbies, my publisher and the man in Bates, we had not met one person for whom English was their first language. In the station branch of WH Smith the assistant had no idea what I meant when I asked for a receipt. I tried `bill', `invoice' and `ticket' before resorting to sign language. Her colleague eventually helped her understand. I'm not surprised to read in today's paper that three quarters of all London property is these days sold to foreigners. (Most of them crooks, though the paper doesn't say that, of course.) The Princess said she was going to learn a foreign language so that when we go to London she can communicate with shop assistants and waiters. The problem is: which language should she learn? I said I was surprised there wasn't a chain of clothes stores across London called Burkha King. The Princess said she thought that saying this was probably the sort of thing that could get me into trouble.

At the station we picked up a pile of magazines to read on the train. It occurred to me that editors, advertising copywriters (and film directors) all have the power to elevate society and to make the world a better place. Instead, most of them choose to take the cruel and vulgar route; creating a brutal and more selfish society. It's the easy and obviously more profitable route.

11

18.58 p.m.

We had a glum morning in Taunton. To begin with we went to the railway station to buy tickets for London. We buy them there rather than in the town where we live because the staff at our local station are horrid and cannot operate their computer. If you want to do anything complicated such as buy a ticket they go into meltdown. I joined what seemed to be the shortest queue and stood behind a woman who was at the window. Just as I joined this tiny queue the woman's telephone rang. Instead of ignoring it, which is what any normal, polite person would have done, the woman took her phone out of her bag and answered it. And then, instead of saying `I'm busy at the moment can I call you back' she carried on chatting. It clearly wasn't an important conversation. She was chatting with a friend about a relative's baby and she spoke loudly as though we should all be interested in her opinions on the matter. The ticket seller just folded her arms and waited. After a few minutes of this I tapped the woman on the shoulder. `Excuse me,' I said, as politely as I could, `there is a queue behind you.' The woman glowered at me and carried on with her conversation. She had that air of command that, in my experience, is only found among infant school teachers and receptionists at GPs surgeries, though I suppose army generals must have it too, though probably not so vividly. The mobile telephone seems to have destroyed what remained of polite behaviour. I once picked up my Dad from hospital and found that my car was blocked in by a man in a white van. My Dad was quite poorly at the time and I wanted to get him home as quickly as I could. I knocked on the driver's window to ask him if he would mind moving his vehicle. The man held out his mobile phone and yelled at me `Can't you see I'm on the phone?'

As usual I had trouble buying railway tickets because my request was a rather complicated one. I wanted to buy two return tickets to London. And I wanted the reserved seats to be next to one another in first class. This always throws the computer into hysterics.

Eventually, after about three quarters of an half an hour of discussion and confrontation, we got our tickets. We parked the car and then walked into the town past the cricket ground hoping to catch sight of the cricket. Unfortunately, it was spitting slightly and although spectators were sitting around in short-sleeved shirts reading their papers the cricketers were running for the pavilion as though they would melt if they stayed out. Cricketers really are wimps these days. They all want to get into the pavilion to text their agents.

The Princess and I then parted so that we could do our separate shopping chores. I called into Jessops, the photographic shop, to buy more ink for my printer. Since The Princess had bought me the printer from one of their shops it seemed fair to expect them to have the inks for it. They didn't. The only cartridge they had was magenta.

Next, I called at Lloyds Bank to liberate some of my money. Unfortunately, the automatic teller machine printed a slip saying that it had given me money but didn't give me anything. I went into the bank and complained. Eventually, a clerk admitted that the machine was faulty, reluctantly filled in a form and asked me to sign it. When I'd done this I asked him for a copy. He told me that it wasn't bank policy to allow customers to have copies of forms they'd signed. I told him it was my policy to demand copies of forms I'd signed and said that since I was the customer my protocol overruled the bank's protocol. He stalked off and after I stood around singing verses from *Sound of Music* songs he eventually came back and gave me a copy of the form I'd signed.

I then went to the opticians, hoping to have my eyes re-checked. I can't remember the name of the store but there was a large sign in the window advertising eye tests. `There's no optician here,' said two assistants in unison. They seemed really pleased by their inability to help and, to be honest, they seemed rather surprised by my request. It was as though I'd asked them to sole my shoes.

I then retired to a café and bought a cup of weak, unpleasant coffee while I waited for The Princess.

When we got back home I had an unfortunate meeting with a neighbour of ours. He's one of those people who is determined to be one up on everyone else and he talks incessantly about his boat. He suffers from short man disease and is obsessed with one upmanship. He has one of those straggly Che Guevara beards that look like wispy pubic hair and his favourite saying is `you come into the world with nothing so if you go out in debt you've made a profit'. When he found out that I write books he said it was something he'd always thought he would do one day. `I suppose anyone can write books if they want to,' he said. His wife has an irritating laugh that sounds like troubled plumbing and always ends in a particularly unpleasant snort that would attract curious looks in a farmyard. She is a distinctly unpleasant woman and I some time ago decided that she has pus not blood in her veins. Now that we have our rubbish collected once a fortnight he drives to the municipal tip every Saturday afternoon. This annoys me unreasonably partly because he constantly claims to be `green' and `environmentally aware' and driving a 15 mile round trip to the municipal dump can hardly be described as `green' and partly because I feel that this is exactly what the council wants us to do. If they can force more of us to take our rubbish to the tip they will, eventually, be able to stop making collections completely. I suspect, however, that my neighbour actually enjoys his weekly trip to the dump. It is, I think, his idea of a good afternoon out. He is an immensely boastful fellow. Whenever I see him he tells me his latest boating story and, over the months, the boat seems to have increased in size and importance. Today, there was a rubber inflatable strapped onto a trailer which was parked outside his house. `Is this the tender to your boat?' I asked him, honestly thinking he'd be pleased by my interest. He went red. `This is my boat,' he said. I don't know which of us was most embarrassed. I felt bad for a few minutes but when The Princess told me that she'd bought some crumpets for tea I quickly got over it.

12
11.49 a.m.
`I hate it when things are going well,' said a fellow I know this morning. Surprised, I asked him why. `Because then they can only get worse,' he explained. `It's only a question of time before something goes wrong to spoil things.' He is older than the devil (and some would say twice as dangerous) so I fear he knows of what he speaks.

13
16.23 p.m.
A zip drive I had ordered through the Internet arrived today. It doesn't work. More and more people seem to be selling stuff that is completely broken or doesn't work properly. They rely upon the fact that it is too much trouble for buyers to send products back. Sellers are (as with this one) often helped by the fact that the goods they send out are not accompanied by an earthly address. I have now lost count of the number of things I've bought that are oversold or misrepresented. Fraud, not pornography, is the mainstay of the Internet.

14
15.16 p.m.
A foreign film company asked for permission to bring a crew to Publishing House. They wanted to interview me. I say `No' very firmly. Last year a film crew sent by the scientologists did some filming at Publishing House. Despite my asking them not to do so they turned off all the computers (they apparently didn't like the modest humming noise they were making). Naturally, they didn't close down the programmes before doing this. They came to interview me because my views on psychiatry and on psychotropic drugs match theirs. But I will never again have anything to do with these people.

15
11.54 a.m.
`My husband bought this but he's dead now and I'd prefer something about dogs or cooking,' wrote a reader from Essex. `Please send me something suitable.' The unwanted copy of *The Man Who Inherited A Golf Course* was sent back without any postage on the parcel and there was no mention of postage for sending another book. The returned book had a large pan mark on the cover. It had obviously been used in the kitchen and is quite unsaleable.

16
12.03 p.m.
BP seems to me to have been painfully honest in dealing with America after the recent oil spill but the company has in return received nothing but playground style abuse. BP's shareholders would, I fear, have probably been much better off if the highly-paid executives had denied all responsibility and told American lawyers that they would make sure any court cases lasted at least a century. This is standard drug and tobacco company policy and it works in America. BP style honesty is expensive and destructive. Compared to the Bhopal tragedy in India in 1984 the BP disaster was but an insect bite. I sold my BP shares at a modest profit as soon as the crisis started because it was clear that the whole thing was going to become a political game - with BP playing the part of the football. A lot of people in America (including a good many writ wranglers) are going to make a huge amount of money out of BP shareholders. British pensioners will suffer so that American lawyers can buy new planes and boats. Many of the people in the Gulf area will, I suspect, make more money out of their compensation than they would have ever made before the spill. The mock indignation, feigned concern and Olympic class hypocrisy of American politicians have

astonished me. Writ wranglers, bureaucrats and campaigners got 19 out of every 20 dollars paid by tobacco companies and I suspect it will be the same for the billions due to be paid out by BP. Apparently the person responsible for dishing out money taken from (largely British) pensioners intends to `err on the side of the claimant'. Very nice too. Union Carbide gave a one off means-tested ex gratia payment of 1,500 rupees to families affected in the 1984 Bhopal chemical disaster. Incidentally, I haven't seen any mention in the press that BP gave Obama $77,051 towards his presidential campaign. Americans use more oil than anyone, they dirty the planet, they ignore all calls for restraint and for protecting the environment and they demand (and get) the cheapest oil on the planet. They complain about China polluting the planet but there are five times as many Chinese as Americans and yet the Americans still produce darned near as much pollution and greenhouse gas emissions as the Chinese.

Everything that happens in America has to be the biggest, best, or most dramatic and so BP's mess was treated as though it was a gazillion times more damaging than the Bhopal disaster. That (a real disaster) killed several thousand people but they were all foreign and, therefore, nowhere near as important. The Americans mess up everyone else's country but get very pissed if anyone wears dirty shoes in their own godforsaken land. It is no wonder that their coming fall will be cheered by the world's citizens.

When BP started talking about blocking the leak with golf balls and old car tyres I felt that someone wasn't entirely sure of what they were doing. And the company’s endless screw-ups in dealing with the crisis at every stage (including losing control of the story) seemed pathetic. I rather suspect that BP is the sort of company which doesn't allow its employees to walk up and down stairs while clutching a cup of coffee but will ignore the big health and safety issues because they aren't easily defined in an everyday manual.

Obama, the Great Betrayer, must surely be the most disappointing President of modern times. The man whom I predicted would let everyone down has stuffed British shareholders for political brownie points. Other American politicians and media personalities turned the whole thing into an overtly racist attack on Britain. It was a bit rich to see the nation which has built its wealth on theft and bombing complaining about a bit of oil getting into the wrong place.

Any Briton who has savings or who has invested in any sort of pension fund will have been made distinctly poorer by BP’s incompetence and by the sneery, wolfish, Brit-hating American politicians who joined in the `hurl a brick at BP' campaign and demanded that the dividend be stopped.

I wonder if British politicians would have had the guts to insist on an American oil company stopping dividend payments to American shareholders if it had polluted British beaches. And would the American oil company have obeyed?

Stupid question.

Incidentally, Americans are always keen to bash Britain but they are also keen to come here. And when they get here they live off us. The rate of unemployment among Americans in Britain is among the highest of any group of immigrants and considerably higher than the rate of unemployment among indigenous Britons.

22.08 p.m.
In the bad old days I used to receive letters from publishers offering me money for the rights in my books. Today I had two letters inviting me to pay to turn my books into e-books or audio books. My world has been turned upside down.

17
19.23 p.m.
`Oh, I wish I could buy this house,' said the estate agent when we visited a cottage last week. `Isn't it wonderful?' She looked so happy, so overwhelmed by delight and expectation, that I was worried that she was going to have an orgasm. She stood there, dreamily entranced by the beauty of it all. Estate agents remind me of the staff who woman the tills in the clothing department at Marks and Spencers. Every time I buy a blouse or a jumper or a skirt for The Princess the woman taking my money looks at the present I’ve bought admiringly, and says: `Oh, isn't this wonderful. I haven't seen this one. It must have just come in.' The estate agent, like the woman in Marks and Spencer, is telling me what good taste I have. And so, even though I know what is going on, I like it. But it is sometimes necessary, with estate agents at any rate, to bring some reality back into the proceedings. `Do you know if there is mains drainage?' I asked the estate agent, desperate to bring her back to reality. `Or is the property equipped with a septic tank?'

Of course, male agents do it too. They can, indeed, sometimes be even more outrageously enthusiastic. We were in an estate agency late this afternoon, looking at some brochures a nice young man was showing us, when suddenly his boss, a senior deceiver, waltzed into view. He wore a green and brown flecked Harris Tweed jacket, a pair of grey flannels with razor sharp creases, a shirt with a light green and yellow check and a club tie I didn't recognise.

He introduced himself and asked what we were looking for. The young man explained. `I have just the thing!' said the man in the Harris Tweed jacket. `Perfect for you. Your dream home. Came on the market this morning. Just got the brochures in from the printers. What are you doing now? Can you come and see it?'

The Princess and I looked at each other. It was dark and getting late. We were hungry, tired and ready to go home. We had long ago eaten all our sandwiches. It had been a long and fruitless day. But this might be the one. The Holy Grail of houses. I muttered something about our not having any immediate plans or commitments.

`Splendid,' said Harris Tweed. `Come with me. I'll lead. You follow in your car.' He drove us, in his expensive Audi, round to the car park where we had left the truck. (In the same way that antique dealers drive Volvo estate cars so estate agents drive Audis. It is, I think, some sort of industry wide requirement.) We then followed him on a 20 mile drive through the dark. I had no idea where we were going but we went there very quickly.

When we arrived at our destination in the centre of a small village, the Harris Tweed signalled for us to stop. He pointed out a parking place for us, while he parked his Audi 50 yards up the lane in a gateway. He came back to us at a run and then took us to the front door of a small house.

Inside the house Harris Tweed took us on the usual tour. He knew the house very well and pointed out every virtue and every possibility. As we left the guest bedroom he stopped suddenly and turned towards us. `I love this house,' he said. `If my wife left me and I were homeless I'd buy this. It's a house to be happy in.'

We finished the tour, thanked him, promised to think it over and received instructions on how to find the motorway but we had both known from the moment we'd seen it that it wasn't the right house for us. It was far too small. There was no garden. It was overlooked by several other houses. There was no place to park a car. As soon as we got home The Princess made dinner while I sent an e-mail thanking Harris Tweed for his time and effort and telling him that we wouldn't be making an offer.

After dinner The Princess went onto the Internet to look for more properties. The search must go on. After 20 minutes she handed me the netbook she was using.

`Look at this one.'

I looked.

`Isn't it the house we looked at this afternoon?'

`Yes. Now look at the date it was put on the market.'

I looked. The house had been on the market for two years. The asking price had been gradually reduced from £850,000 to £830,000 to £810,000 to £799,950 to £775,000, and to its current price of £750,000.

22.02 p.m.
I am totally convinced that most publishing operations in the UK are now variations on the vanity-publishing theme. Big publishers are subsidised by their television company sales or by selling copies of books specially written for corporate buyers. Occasionally a huge international hit (such as the Harry Potter series) will completely alter a publisher's bottom line. But this is simply a matter of luck. No one in publishing knew that the Potter books were going to be a phenomenon. (If Bloomsbury had known they would have published more than a few hundred when they produced the first book. They didn't limit the initial print run simply to excite the second-hand and antiquarian book trade.)

18
16.17 p.m.
We received a letter telling us that the waste of heat loss through windows can cost as much as £25 a month and that we should buy new windows. The cost of the new windows will be £15,000. `It would pay for itself in 50 years,' said The Princess. `Assuming that the windows lasted that long.'

20.46 p.m.
In *National Geographic* magazine there is a photograph of workers wiping oil from grass on the coastline around the Gulf of Mexico. They were using diaper like clothes to wipe up seven billion blades of grass. I'm sure that helped the environment. I wonder how much oil was consumed, and how much carbon was produced, to manufacture all those cloths. Pensioners whose BP dividends were spent on this farcical endeavour may or may not take comfort from the fact that the degree of marsh grass contamination turned out to be `small'.

19
10.02 a.m.
I needed to telephone an insurance company. As usual I got the message: `We are experiencing a much higher than usual call volume and so there will be some delay...'. It occurred to me that whenever I telephone a bank or

insurance company or Government department I always get this message. It is clearly their default message to excuse the fact that they do not have enough people answering their telephones. My time is clearly far less important than that of a call centre operator.

15.07 p.m.
I see that a woman has been fined £75 for feeding ducks in a public park. Now I know that our society has crumbled.

17.12 p.m.
I feel particularly creaky today. Several joints seem about to seize up. Old age is a shipwreck. Every moment is a crisis and I am constantly fighting to survive. As soon as I have overcome the sea, the wind has a go, then there's the sun, and the storms and the hunger and the sharks and the cannibals. Desert island life is just one damned thing after another. Those who think life is exciting when they are young should just wait until they are old. The one big advantage (for a man at least) is that hair care is neither time consuming nor expensive. Sadly, however, the time and money saved on maintaining the roof is needed tenfold for the preservation of the crumbling ramparts and the creaky drawbridge.

On top of all the inevitable physical trials and tribulations I fear that I feel distinctly uncomfortable in the company of people who are at home in the 21st century; computer people, derivatives traders and women who think dresses are only for weddings; people who think civil servants are entitled to bonuses if they turn up and do their jobs and those who are driven only by a sense of entitlement.

I suspect that I am beginning to find things to worry about so that I do not worry about The Princess. I find that if I am lucky trivial worries occupy my mind for a few minutes at a time.

21.14 p.m.
A reader has sent an e-mail complaining that I did not reply to a letter written two days ago. I do always reply to mail but it sometimes takes a while. So that I can concentrate on what I think I do best (writing books) we only pick up our mail every two weeks or so. Everything is kept by the Post Office for us to collect. We never answer the door unless we know who is there and want to let them in. And we hardly ever answer the telephone. My dislike of the telephone goes back a long way. When I was a GP the telephone ruled my life. For day after day I was at its beck and call. It would ring all day, all night and then all the next day. When I worked as a columnist and writer for *The Daily Star* and then *The Sun* the phone rang just as determinedly. And it rang seven days a week. `Give us 750 words on what it is like to be crushed to death. You have 30 minutes.' `Do 500 words on what it is like to die in a plane crash. You can have an hour.' I honestly believe that the best practice for a writer is to work for one of the tabloids. Articles for the tabloids need to be sharp and tight with every word counting. It is widely recognised in what used to be called Fleet Street that by far the best writers work for the tabloids rather than the broadsheets - many have, indeed, graduated to the tabloids from the broadsheets. Writing books requires a completely different style, of course. But a felicity with words doesn't hurt. I've had a mobile telephone since around 1983 (it was the size and weight of two house bricks) and cannot understand what people find to say all the time these days. I turn mine on only when I need to use it or if The Princess and I are separated temporarily (because we are shopping, for example). If my phone has been accidentally left switched on I ignore any noises it makes partly because there is no one else I want to take phone calls from, partly because I have answered enough urgent phone calls to last anyone a lifetime, and partly because no one has the number and so if it rings it will be a wrong number.

23.56 p.m.
I have just found a note I made this morning. I spotted a notice in a small local shop. I rather liked it and wrote it down. `High quality, good service, low price. Pick two.'

20
11.49 a.m.
The default condition these days is to have junk mail bunged through your door every day by the postman. You have to ask not to get it. But asking makes no damned difference. We've tried. And it doesn't work. The junk keeps flowing and fills up our recycling bin every week, leaving little room for anything else.

14.19 p.m.
An advertising salesman for one of the national newspapers tells me that his business is in terrible trouble. Apparently, when the Labour Government was in power it was the single largest source of advertising revenue in the UK. No car company, no building society, no soap powder manufacturer came even close. I am not surprised.

21

14.04 p.m.

The Princess and I were in a pub today, drinking coffee and reading. We were sitting near to the bar where two men were sitting on bar stools. Both looked to be in their sixties, though I suspect they might have been younger than that. Both were hugely overweight, both were drinking pints of beer and both had nicotine stains on their fingers. Both were wearing jeans and checked shirts. One had long hair at the sides and the back but very little hair on top. The appearance of the hair at the sides and the back was his choice. The absence of hair on the top was God's choice. The other man had a shaved head but you could see where he would be bald if he had not chosen to shave. One had a small earring in his left ear. They were arguing, though not with any anger. To my surprise they were discussing the fact that they both have high blood pressure.

`I bet my blood pressure is higher than yours,' said the one with the earring. `My doctor says it's the highest he's ever seen.'

`My doctor brought in another partner to check mine,' said the second. `He couldn't believe it when he took it himself.

These two guys were competitive about their blood pressure problems. For a few minutes they discussed drugs. They knew all the latest information about drugs. They knew the options, the side effects and the advantages of different types of treatment. They could not have known more if they had just attended a symposium on hypertension. I was impressed.

`My doctor says I'll be lucky to live another six months if they don't manage to get my blood pressure down,' said the guy with the earring.

`Mine says I could drop down dead at any moment,' replied the other. He finished his pint and raised his glass to the barman. `Two more, please, Geoff,' he says.

18.37 p.m.

A reader has sent me a bad review for *Oil Apocalypse* which he found on the Internet. The review, by someone who spells author as Authur or Auther (he or she tries both, presumably in the vain hope that one might be close) doesn't seem to have bothered to read the book. The EU likes laws. Surely there should be one requiring those who review books (and thereby affect my livelihood) to be able to show that they have at least looked at the book they are writing about. (I realise that requiring them to have read it would probably be too much to ask). I wonder how many people realise that a large proportion of Web reviews are written and put online by people who have a vested interest in promoting a particular prejudice; many are written by competitors (eager to give their own book or Web presence a plug), by people with a grudge or by a lobbyists paid to grind a particular brand of axe.

22

10.22 a.m.

I happened to be looking out of the window when the binmen called. The council uses four different lorries these days because of the variety of types of rubbish the EU forces them to collect. The lorries are specially made and look very expensive. The whole process takes everyone much longer. The capital costs are higher and the running costs of these lorries must be huge. The lorry that collects plastics and paper and cardboard of the right thickness was parked outside in the street for seven minutes, blocking the road and chugging out diesel fumes. A long line of cars slowly collected behind it. They, of course, were also chugging out diesel and petrol fumes. When they finally rumbled on to the next house, where it would doubtless take them another seven minutes to sort out the rubbish, they left behind them a litter of debris on the roadway; bottles and cans and bits of paper that they'd dropped. Most people leave their bins outside permanently, of course. I don't blame them. People leave the unsightly bins on their front doorsteps or the pavement (creating another hazard for pedestrians) because who wants to wheel one of those huge, dirty beasts through their home? They are smelly and unsightly. And so, much of England is now permanently disfigured with green and black plastic bins. It's almost impossible to take a picture of a beautiful English village without the picture being spoilt by waste bins. Pretty villages and dignified towns and cities everywhere are ruined by the inglorious sight of plastic refuse bins parked permanently on the pavement. And so it will be until we find a government wise enough to extricate us from the clutches of that arch fascist organisation the European Union. How long will it be before there is a massive spread of infections now that streets are for ever full of unsightly rubbish bins?

15.56 p.m.

The Princess and I were in a charity shop. `There's a thing here to put on your knob if it gets stuck,' shouted a woman to her husband. Everyone in the shop turned and stared. It turned out that she had found a device to help arthritis sufferers open sticking doors.

23

17.24 p.m.

For some months I have been trying to escape from a variety of mailing lists. Magazines which I don't want still arrive. Mailshots for services in which I have absolutely no interest still pour in. Now that we are strictly limited in how much rubbish we can get rid of I find these unwanted bits of paper even more annoying than before. I usually tear open the wrappers, burn the bits with my name on, and put the rest into a public waste bin. I don't understand why mailing companies find it so hard to stop sending out unwanted material. It is no advantage to them to send out expensive mailings which end up in the bin. After my mother died, my father spent a year writing letter after letter asking companies not to send material to my mother. But the letters kept arriving and he found it deeply depressing. Even after his death mailshots were still pouring in for them both. It really is not difficult for large companies to remove names from mailing lists. And it is discourteous and commercially stupid not to do so.

19.28 p.m.

A note from our printers is always horrifying. The price of paper never seems to stay the same for two weeks running. The cost of buying the paper on which to print a book has rocketed. But then other costs have soared too. The costs of setting and printing a book have gone up. The cost of producing a cover and binding the book into its cover have risen dramatically. The cost of providing a dustwrapper has soared. The cost of transporting a pile of books from one place to another has rocketed too. The cost of storage has risen. The result is that an ordinary sized trade paperback, with a modest print run of 1,000 or 2,000 can cost £2 to £3 to produce and an ordinary sized hardback can cost £4 or £5 when all the various costs have been added together. Those are prices before the costs of providing office space and warehousing and staff salaries and insurance and administration have been included.

Despite this dramatic rise in costs, books cost the readers less these days than they did a decade or so ago. Books are ridiculously underpriced these days. The result is that publishers make little or no profit and tend to be subsidised by other parts of their enterprises. Even when sensible prices are given these are smashed down by supermarket or Internet booksellers which have demanded, and received, a massive discount. So a £20 hardback book can usually be bought for a third of that the minute it is on sale. It's difficult to see where the profit lies, for out of what the publisher receives must be paid the cost of making and storing the book, the promotional costs, transport costs (most modern books are obscenely and unnecessarily large because that is what the trade has encouraged people to expect) and the cost of dealing with red tape and administration. The amount left for profit for the bookseller, the publisher, the various agents who are necessarily involved and the author is pitifully small.

Over the years I have learned that publishing involves a mass of costs. Some I had expected. Some I hadn't. Whether books are sold direct by mail order, or to bookshops or wholesalers, there are, above all, the costs of postage. These have risen dramatically in recent years. And the number of parcels being stolen is now higher than ever. (I refuse to describe these as `lost'. They are, in my view, mostly stolen.) Anyone who accepts payment by credit card has to pay massive credit card charges but even cheques can be problematical. Banks charge to cash them. And they can be lost too. Members of my staff once threw away £5,000 worth of cheques. There is the cost of damaged books, and the cost of refunding buyers who return books they have clearly read. And all that assumes you don't over order and end up with selling only half of the 2,000 books you printed.

24

11.49 a.m.

Two days ago I rang Eurostar to book some train tickets. When I'd finished explaining what I needed I asked if we could both have vegetarian meals. `Do you want that coming back too?' asked the clerk. I offer to pay to have the tickets posted to me and he agrees to do this for an additional £5 payment. When I gave my address the Eurostar employee was at first reluctant because I had given a PO Box address. He claimed that they couldn't send tickets to a PO Box for security reasons. I persuaded him by pointing out that PO Boxes are issued by Royal Mail which is 100% owned by the Government. The tickets arrived today and did so in an envelope which carries, on the reverse side, a return address. This is, of course, a Post Office Box address.

15.16 p.m.

My Dad became a little deaf in his later years and tended to speak quite loudly. When talking on the telephone he acquired a habit of repeating whatever the person at the other end of the telephone had said. He did this loudly too. I suppose he did it originally just to make sure that he'd heard properly but later on it just became a habit. When he was in hospital in Exeter I rang him several times a day to see how he was getting on. Naturally, he repeated everything I said, with the inevitable result that the people at the other end could hear every word I was saying as well as every word he was saying. I'm not sure why, but today I remembered one conversation we had. It went like this:

`You have to get of there before they kill you.' I said.

`I have to get out of here before they kill me?' shouted my Dad.

`They're a bunch of ignorant bastards.'

`They're a bunch of ignorant bastards?

`Don't repeat everything I'm saying, Dad!'

`Did you say: `Don't repeat everything I'm saying?'

25
16.37 p.m.
In despair at failing to find a house to buy The Princess and I drove 200 miles to see a house for rent in the Wye Valley. We had never thought about renting before but thought it might be interesting to see what we could find. It was awful. The owner, apparently a rich man with half a dozen houses on a large private estate, seemed to be keen to make a name for himself as a slum landlord. He wanted £1,500 a month for a house with fungus growing on one interior wall, unsafe electricity appliances (one socket was broken and hanging half off the wall), floorboards ripped up, skirting boards off, wallpaper peeling, roof leaking and carpets that would have been thrown out of a squat. The toilets were disgusting, several windows had broken sashes, the kitchen was indescribably awful and the whole house stank of urine. The previous tenant had left a vast number of confidential files relating to other people lying around. We decided it would take between £25,000 and £50,000 just to make it habitable. We decided not to take it and have given up the idea of renting. The landlord and the renting agent should both be in prison.

18.12 p.m.
On our way back home The Princess and I had coffee and a bowl of chips each in a pub. The pub was crowded with people eating and drinking. While everyone ate, a woman sitting at the next table, who had finished her meal, changed her baby's nappy on the table top. Knowing that the woman would doubtless by protected by some bizarre piece of EU legislation no one dared say a word in protest. The Princess and I hadn't finished our snack but we left. The smell was foul.

26
09.18 a.m.
I received a junk e-mail from BT and, because it was boring, sent back an e-mail asking to `unsubscribe'. BT then sent me another e-mail telling me that it might take 28 days to `unsubscribe' me. That's the wonder of the new instant messaging system. They can send messages in an instant but it takes them 28 days to stop sending them. Other firms are just as bad. They can start sending e-mails in a moment. But ask them to stop and they announce that it will take a week, two weeks or three weeks. When I tried to cancel an e-mail from the *Financial Times* I received an immediate response assuring me that this would be done within ten working days. *The Times* was no better. When I repeatedly tried to get them to stop sending me e-mails promoting their new paid service. I eventually received an e-mail telling me that they were in the process of deleting my e-mail address from *The Times* mailing list. `However, this procedure will take approximately five working days to complete,' said someone or something. How can it possibly take days to stop sending e-mails? I thought these things were supposed to be instant and automatic? I suppose they are only instant and automatic when the people sending them want them to be instant and automatic. How typical it is that BT, a firm supposed to be in the communications business, should take a whole month.

17.18 p.m.
A reader complains that my book *Living in a Fascist Country* is alarmist. I point out that according to every definition of `fascism' Britain is now very much a fascist country - and that the EU is the most fascist state ever invented. And I also point out that the police shoot people in the UK - and get away with it.

27
10.34 a.m.
I had to ring one of the utilities this morning. Inevitably, I was kept on hold with recorded music being played. I put the telephone receiver down on my desk so that I could carry on doing some work while I waited. But there was an

announcement every 30 seconds. A voice said: `We apologise for the delay. Your call is important to us. We know you are waiting. We are doing everything we can to get to you as soon as possible. Our consultants are currently busy helping others but will be with you as soon as humanly possible.' Every time I heard the voice I grabbed the phone in case it was a person. So I couldn't work or read or do anything else. Why don't they just play the damned music until someone can be bothered to put down the newspaper and speak to me?

11.12 a.m.
A friend of ours e-mailed to say that he couldn't make lunch tomorrow because he has flu and is feeling really rough and doesn't want to give us his bug. `Is there anything we can do for you?' I e-mail back. He says there isn't anything and that he will pick up a few essentials while he's out. I ask him why on earth he is going out if he's ill. He says he's going to drag himself to the tax offices and the council offices because he has some bills to pay so he'll deliver the cheques in person. `Can't the cheques wait?' I ask. `I want to give them my bug,' he explains. `They want everything else I have so they can have this too.'

28
15.26 p.m.
The Princess and I were sitting in a café - a real, old-fashioned one rather than one of those modern ones where there's a blackboard twelve feet by six full of nothing but descriptions of different types of coffee. A fat, red-faced man accompanied by a tiny, timid, pale woman approached the counter. `Do you have any ham sandwiches?' he asked. `I'm afraid we only have beef,' said the counter assistant. `We don't eat beef, we're vegetarian,' said the man. `But you asked for ham,' said the puzzled assistant. `We're not that sort of vegetarian,' replied the fat man.

29
11.41 a.m.
This morning I read that in 1886 a man called Sors Hariezon, a gold prospector from Witwatersrand in the Transvaal sold his South African gold claim for $20. Over the next 100 years mines which were sunk on or near his claim produced over 1,000 tonnes of gold a year, that's 70% of the precious metal in the west. The discovery would have made him or his heirs the richest family in the world. They'd be trillionaires by now. I wonder if there are any Hariezons around who know this. I wonder if they feel upset about it at all.

15.52 p.m.
The newspapers are full of more scare stories about the dangers of statins. It is truly alarming that so many people take these damned drugs. I first warned about the dangers associated with their use nearly 20 years ago. There is an essay about the hazards of statins in *How to Stop Your Doctor Killing You*. The idea of giving healthy people potentially dangerous drugs is one that scares me and yet it is one that drug companies (and the medical establishment) finds irresistible. Until I had published evidence showing the hazards of the drug tamoxifen, a vast number of eminent doctors were keen for every healthy woman in the world to take the damned stuff. I have no doubt that when the statins are finally withdrawn from use for healthy people the drug companies and their medical handmaidens will think of another way to make a few billion quid.

30
09.12 a.m.
We were about to view another house today when I spotted a few lines in the particulars reading `Please note that the existing side drive and double garage are not included in the sale - the latter is to be redeveloped.' That's the fourth house for which we have seen details where the vendors have separated the garage from the house in order to sell them separately. We cancel the viewing. Sheer, bloody greed. I hope they never sell the damned house. The agents add: `We understand that mains water, electricity and drainage are connected'. Don't they know? How hard is it to tell? What do estate agents do for their money? What a loathsome and useless bunch of cheating, conniving parasites they are.

15.41 p.m.
A friend of mine told me that since the tax people who operate the advice lines seem to give many different answers to the same question he now phones repeatedly until he gets the answer he thinks most useful - and most in his favour. He then makes a note of the time and the person he spoke to. I tell him that he should be ashamed of himself and he says he is.

21.42 p.m.
We had coffee in a motorway café. I was tired and needed a break. Motorway cafés are like another world. I have long suspected that there are people there who never go anywhere else. They are another race of people who just inhabit motorway service stations. The place was filthy. The Princess and I chose bottled drinks not because we want to drink them but because we need an excuse to sit at a table for ten minutes. A man and a woman were sitting at the next table. They were in their 40s. He wore three quarter length shorts decorated with a floral pattern and a plain grey sweater. She wore jeans and a pink jumper with a blue cardigan over it. She had her hair tightly permed in an old-fashioned way. He was reading the *Daily Mirror*. She was talking. She never stopped. Occasionally he murmured something anodyne and meaningless. It was clear that he wasn't listening to what she said. She talked loudly and became increasingly irritated at his lack of interest in what she had to say. Suddenly her tone changed, though the man with her, who was presumably her husband, didn't seem to notice. `I'm having an affair,' she said, though it was obvious she was saying this just to try to attract his attention. `That's nice, dear,' said her husband, studying his paper. `It's with someone you know,' she said. He grunted and nodded. `He wants me to go on the street for him. He's offered to be my pimp.' `That's good,' said her husband. He turned the final page, scans the back page which he didn't seem to find interesting, folded the paper and put it down on the table. For the first time he looked at his wife. `Have you finished your tea?' he asked. `Shall we go?' She tuts loudly. `It's like talking to a brick wall,' she complained. `You never, ever listen to me.' He stood up. `Yes, I do,' he says. `How much does he think you can make?'

July

1

09.22 a.m.

I started to write this diary for my own entertainment but as the weeks go by I'm beginning to think that I should consider publishing it. The thought has occurred to me on several occasions. If I do publish it I will have to make sure that no copies get into the hands of our friends, acquaintances or neighbours.

11.19 a.m.

We were in the greengrocer's this morning when The Princess noticed an old lady rummaging around in her purse to find coins to buy some vegetables. The Princess tapped her on the shoulder, handed her a fiver and said: `I found this on the floor. I think you must have dropped it.' The old lady, surprised, hesitated. The Princess insisted and the old lady accepted the note gratefully and gracefully. Beautifully done.

2

14.42 p.m.

Standing at the Post Office, waiting in the inevitable queue and wondering how one organisation manages to find and employ all the really rude people in the country, I wrote out 12 things I have learned in life:

1. When travelling never miss a chance to go to the loo (the first time you spend 90 minutes stuck in a taxi in a traffic jam you will remember this advice).
2. If there are two articles I want to rip out of a newspaper or magazine they will be on the two sides of the same page. (I'm not sure how helpful this is. But it's something I've learned.)
3. Never answer the door unless you know who is there and you are pleased about their coming.
4. Always buy several pairs of socks that are exactly the same colour. This helps avoid trying to pair them up and saves 15 minutes a week. That doesn't sound much but in an average lifetime it adds up to 910 hours.
5. If you really want to help friends who are broke just give them the money, write it off and don't expect it back.
6. There will never be enough bookshelves.
7. Life is like a luggage carousel. The same familiar old stuff keeps coming round and round and the stuff you're hoping for never seems to turn up.
8. It is always wise to praise your dentist and dental hygienist and indeed anyone likely to put their hands and steel instruments into any orifice.
9. People who say that their school days were the best days of their life are sad bastards. If life doesn't get better after school then your life is pretty damned disappointing.
10. There is no such thing as a stupid question, though there are lots of stupid answers.
11. Too many people who claim to know all the answers don't even know any of the right questions.
12. There is no place like home when you don't feel well - (particularly if you have diarrhoea or any sort of tummy upset). The truth is that we are more like animals than we think we are and when we are poorly most of us just want to curl up in a corner.

21.38 p.m.

I received an e-mail message from someone who wants to advertise electronic cat flaps on www.vernoncoleman.com. There have been quite a few approaches like this recently - most of them from companies offering real money to buy advertising space on the site. I had always refused to accept advertisements but maybe I should rethink. The money coming in from adverts would help me to buy adverts in the press to promote the site.

3

12.29 p.m.

As soon as I could read I used to go to jumble sales and buy armfuls of books. My parents genuinely couldn't understand why I wanted so many books. `Why do you want all these?' asked my Mum one day as I struggled out of yet another jumble sale laden with books. `You already have books at home.'

Rummaging in my favourite antique shop in Wells I found some wonderful books today. (It is called an antique shop but I think of it as a junk shop with a good book corner.) I picked up a copy of H.V.Morton's *Atlantic Meeting*, which is an account of Winston Churchill's voyage in HMS Prince of Wales in August 1941. It was this journey, ending in a conference with President Roosevelt, which resulted in the Atlantic Charter. Churchill had to sail all the way to Newfoundland for the meeting (where Roosevelt happened to be cruising in his yacht). Morton, the best travel writer of his generation, reported that although Churchill's dangerous trip was kept secret in the UK, at 10.45 p.m. on August 6 1941, Cincinnati Radio in Ohio reported, in German, (there were 100,000 Germans living in Ohio) that: `According to a report from Washington rumours show that President Roosevelt will meet Prime Minister Winston Churchill in the Atlantic'. Swiss radio immediately took up the story and so the Germans knew where Churchill was before the meeting took place. And Churchill, of course, still had to get back. Morton also describes how, when Roosevelt was leaving the British battleship one of the ship's three cats, Blackie, started to follow the American President off the ship. All the sailors were at attention and could do nothing about it. But Churchill bent down and prevented the cat leaving, `saving Blackie for England by bending down and leading him from the gangway'. Brilliant stuff. Morton had an eye for the sort of detail that makes travel writing fascinating reading. The Morton, in a beautiful hardback edition, cost me 50 pence.

Charity bookshops often charge too much for the books they sell and the people who fix the prices seem to know very little about books. Today, in a hospice shop, I saw a battered book club reprint of *Three men in a Boat* priced at £10. The binding had gone and the pages were loose. Apart from offering a damned good read the book had no value. You can buy a brand new copy for less than that. Well-thumbed old paperbacks which cost 2/6 when they were first published now cost £2.95 in some shops. That's a massive rate of inflation and suggests that paperback books make a better investment than equities or property. My second gripe with charity shops is that many have taken the fun out of book hunting by skimming off the best books for dealers to sell on the Web. Still, this policy means that finding a first edition becomes even more exciting. (Before they started this nasty practice I often used to pay more than a book was priced at if I thought the difference was significant. I don't do this anymore.) My final worry about charity shops is that they are destroying junk and second-hand shops. I have, over the years, found thousands of wonderful books in junk shops and second-hand bookshops which are now closed. Most of the books have been out of print or exceedingly difficult to find. And I would have never found them on the Web because I didn't know they existed. Only browsing produces really valuable finds. I discovered Joseph Slocum (whom I had previously missed) and the Charles McCarry novels by browsing. And it was in a now defunct junk shop that I first came across books by John Fothergill, whose marvellous books about innkeeping in the early 20th century should be compulsory reading for all politically correct zealots.

Charity shops get so much help (reduced taxes, free stuff to sell, volunteer labour, an 80% reduction in business rates and so on) that small businesses have no chance of competing with them. (I suspect it is the 80% reduction in business rates which is partly responsible for the rapid rise in the number of charity shops. Now that property owners have to pay business rates on empty buildings I would be surprised if some property owners weren't offering their premises free of charge to charities. Instead of receiving rent the property owner saves 80% on his rates bill.) Charity shops may make a lot of money for their owners (and help pay the fat salaries of headquarters staff) but they are destroying local businesses and, by charging higher and higher prices, doing very little to help local communities by providing low-priced items.

Oxfam is the worst offender. It seems to me to feel no responsibility towards the communities on which it leeches (reduced rates, free stock, volunteer labour). And yet there are some well-paid executives at the top of the organisation and I suspect that as with most charities a big chunk of the income goes to paying salaries. I am probably the biggest giver of books to charity bookshops in the country but I no longer give to Oxfam. Even for ordinary paperbacks their prices are absurdly high and for anything rare or unusual the prices are often absurd. In *Book and Magazine Collector* recently I read with astonishment that an Oxfam spokesman was claiming that book buyers `shouldn't be able to find any decent books priced 50 pence to £1 in any Oxfam shop'. Why on earth not? I regularly buy wonderful books, in excellent condition, for less than £1 each. Spines firm and the pages unmarked. Who the hell at Oxfam imagines they have the right to overcharge people who want to read books which are often unavailable in bookshops and public libraries? When our public libraries are closed (which they soon will be, in the name of `cutting costs') this policy of overcharging will mean that there will be nowhere for the young and the poor to obtain books.

In addition, I don't like the way Oxfam has built up a chain of bookshops which always seem to me to be situated in towns which are (or were) fairly well served by local second-hand bookshops and never seem to appear in places where there is no second-hand bookshop.

I'm not the only book lover who feels that Oxfam is destroying small, private second-hand bookshops and I really don't see how this helps anyone except Oxfam. My boycott of Oxfam bookshops will continue indefinitely.

18.17 p.m.

A few weeks ago I opened an Amazon account so that I could buy out of print books. The computer programme asked me for a name. I called myself `Your Highness Royal Emperor'. I am pleased to see that Amazon now address me by this title whenever they write to me. Parcels come addressed to `Mr Your Highness Royal Emperor' which isn't quite so submissive but is definitely funnier.

21.56 p.m.
A friend of mine who is a dentist now calls himself `doctor'. Foolishly I congratulated him, saying I didn't know he had been studying for a doctorate. He rather pompously announced that he was calling himself doctor because he is a dentist. When I thought about it I realised that quite a few dentists I know now insist on using the honorary title. I asked my friend why he'd suddenly decided to be a doctor and he told me that it has been all the rage in America for some time and he'd picked up on the idea after attending a conference of dentists in Las Vegas. He says that it is the best way to get a table when ringing a restaurant at short notice. I remembered that Doc Holliday, one of the heroes of The OK Corral was actually a dentist and not a medical man.

23.35 p.m.
I discovered another Englishman I should have considered for my book on the 100 greatest Englishmen. Thomas Stevens was the first man to cycle round the world. And he did it on a penny-farthing in the 19th century. His story is told in his book *Around the World on a Penny-farthing*. He started the adventure in America and so (as always) the Americans claim him as theirs. But he was as English as they come.

23.49 p.m.
There are now many British families in fourth generation unemployment. I know of one family where the patriarch has been unemployed for decades. He claims sickness benefit as a result of a bunion. The State has created a human zoo. People are given food and they are provided with the essentials for life but they are not living. They do not have the dignity that comes with self-reliance, but have been dehumanised by welfare.

4
09.56 a.m.
The bag for life which I recently bought from Marks and Spencer broke. The handle snapped. I have had give-away plastic bags which lasted longer.

11.45 a.m.
I read an article by a Muslim complaining that she didn't like living in England because the English do not respect her religion with sufficient fervour. She should try being a Christian in a Muslim country. Surely if you choose to live in someone else's country it is your responsibility to fit in with them, not the other way round. Westerners living in Muslim countries get into terrible trouble if they drink alcohol or sit on the beach in bikinis. And quite right too. It's their country and their rules. What a pity that so many Muslims living in our country don't see things the same way. Worse still, many seem to see our tolerance as weakness. The real problem is that although the extremists in any religion are likely to be the minority, they will always take control because they want it more. It will always be impossible to integrate different religions because the leaders will always want to retain, and extend, their power. You can't say stuff like this in public these days so if I do ever print this diary I must remember to remove this entry.

5
11.51 a.m.
I walked past a shop window (converted temporarily into a second-hand bookshop) and saw a Penguin copy of Elliot Paul's *A Narrow Street* on sale for 50 pence. I went in to buy it and came out with ten books. The Elliot Paul was a real find. It's the only one of his Paris books I hadn't been able to find. Not even the Internet had been able to find me a copy.

14.15 p.m.
We passed a black woman and a small black girl, about three or four-years-old. The girl was pulling a huge wooden duck on a piece of string. She looked up at me and smiled. I smiled back at the girl and was about to congratulate her on her wonderful toy when the mother grabbed the little girl's hand and pulled her away. What a sad world we have created for ourselves.

6
11.56 a.m.
Readers constantly want to know what we can do to repair our society. In truth, I fear we have lost. No one in

authority cares about the truth. And I don't honestly think things are likely to improve in the foreseeable future. Our only practical objective now must really be to look after ourselves. My last few books have, indeed, been designed to help readers do just that. The days ahead are rugged. We all need to be roped together with trustworthy guides. All we can really do is try to predict what *they* will do next, how it will affect us and how best we can protect ourselves and those close to us.

The big problem today isn't collecting information. There is plenty of information around. The problem is analysing, interpreting and understanding it. And, most important of all, being able to differentiate between information which is objective, accurate and valuable and information which is none of those things - though it may well appear to be so.

In the end the system which has been created will implode. The European Union (the source of much that is bad in our world) will die. There will be rioting and revolution and things will change.

But for now all we can do is survive.

7

11.47 a.m.

A scruffy young man approached me in the street and waved a mobile phone under my nose. `Have you any money for the phone?' he demanded. When I told him (as politely as I thought appropriate) that I did not he swore at me and wandered off to stop another passer-by. This is, presumably, the new begging.

13.22 p.m.

The Princess and I called into a café for teas. The customer in front of us did not speak English. This would not have been such a big problem except that the girl behind the counter didn't speak much English and didn't speak the language the customer spoke. The assistant then called the manager who had about six or eight words of English (though apparently not the same words that the other member of staff knew). Everything was taking so long that we left, bought two bottles of water and sat on a bench.

8

12.01 p.m.

I discovered that you cannot buy National Savings products by post with a debit or credit card. You have to use a cheque. The bit of the Government that runs National Savings doesn't want customers putting their card details into the post because it is too risky. This is, of course, the same Government that owns the Royal Mail.

14.27 p.m.

I received a copy of a new insurance policy. The policy includes these words: `It is a condition of this policy that we may use your personal data in any way we deem appropriate.'

I thought it was nice of them to let me know.

17.16 p.m.

Like everyone buying a house we have learned to hate estate agents. It really isn't difficult to see why they are the most loathed and despised tradespeople in the country. Not even plumbers are hated as much. Estate agents are constitutionally deceitful. They take photographs designed to hide the truth. They say that a house has three bathrooms when it has one bathroom and two shower rooms. They don't seem to understand that a bathroom is a room with a bath in it and a bedroom is a room in which you can get a bed. A room in which I can touch all the walls without moving my feet is a cupboard. They use all sorts of little tricks to make the properties they are selling seem better or bigger. We have seen houses where the gross internal area included the garage and outbuildings and on one occasion we even saw a house where the internal area included the attic - even though it was not boarded and was therefore quite unusable. This meant that the house was actually a third smaller than we had thought it to be. I loathe estate agents. I can’t understand why there aren't more estate agent-politicians.

Estate agents don't seem to understand the concept of `honesty'. They use language in their own deceitful way. `Needs updating' means that the house was, for the last 60 years lived in by a hermit who never moved out of one room and who kept warm with blankets and a one bar electric fire. `Needs refurbishment' means that there is a hole in the roof so big that you could fit a radio telescope in the attic and that the only question to ask is `Will the woodworm in the roof eat through what remains of the beams before they are drowned by the rising damp?'. Finally, `needs modernisation' means that it doesn't have running water or electricity.

Estate agents use a whole lexicon of euphemisms. For example, if it’s a living room that is hardly big enough for two chairs they call it a snug. If the kitchen is so small that you have to go out if you want to put on a pinafore then it's a `boutique culinary experience' or a `galley style food preparation zone'. They fill their brochures with details of the number of miles to the nearest golf course and talk of duck and grouse doors and Jack and Jill bathrooms but they do not bother to mention the presence of an electricity pylon just a few yards from the back door. When they talk about `needs some attention to bring it up to modern standards' what they really mean is that it has dry rot, wet rot and woodworm, no heating system, one very tired Belfast sink in the kitchen and a bathroom that contains a zinc tub.

We saw three houses today. The first, described as compact and easy to manage, was a cottage with rooms so small that we could, with arms outstretched, paint two walls at once. With a brush in your mouth it would be possible to paint three walls at once. Some people might think four possible. The second property lay a few yards from a dual carriageway. It was worrying that out of ten houses in a row, four of them were for sale. The house would have suited a deaf person down to the ground. The woman selling the house wore a deaf aid but we still had to shout to make ourselves heard. Inside the house, the noise wasn't too bad. But once you got into the garden the noise was horrendous. As The Princess pointed out, there is little point in living in the countryside if you can't hear the birds sing. It would have been like living on the central reservation of the M1. The third house had a public right of way running through the middle of the garden. `It isn't much used,' said the estate agent, though there were obvious signs that it had been used recently by people with dogs and by horse riders. `Plenty of free manure for the garden,' the agent added hopefully. I love walking and have probably walked more along cliff top paths and countryside paths than most ramblers but I have never wanted to walk on paths that take me through people’s gardens and I suspect that the people who choose to do so deliberately are probably not the sort of people I want to meet. Some walkers will keep using a public footpath just because it is there and they want to preserve their right to walk along it. So, rather than have a million arguments, we walked away from that one.

9

11.52 a.m.
This morning’s mail included a letter from a reader in Grimsby who said: `Please e-mail me all the information you have about vaccines. This will save me having to get hold of your books.' I received a letter from a reader in Hampshire who wanted me to e-mail all the information I have about government and local authority expenditure. And I received around 30 letters from schoolchildren doing a `class project'. Each one enclosed the same questions and asked for a reply to be sent by post.

12.34 p.m.
A reader wants to know why I don't allow people to put comments on my website. The answer, I explain, is very simple. I am legally responsible for whatever appears on my website and I have enough enemies, and enough people trying to close me down, without my encouraging other people to do it for me. (Some would doubtless do it deliberately just for the fun of creating trouble.) The Internet is a global creation but the law varies from one country to another. Stuff that is legal in one country might well be punishable with a long prison sentence in another. Libel laws vary. And since Britons can now be extradited easily, and without evidence, to the USA and to anywhere within the EU I think I will stick to preserving my website for my own thoughts. Personally, I think that anyone who allows strangers to put comments on their website is a good 97% on the Barking Scale.

16.17 p.m.
I told an American visiting Britain to be careful about bathing in the sea because the water isn't always clean. I explained that water companies sometimes allow raw sewage to empty straight into the sea. `You British are appalling,' he cried. `You dump your sewage into the sea and then you bathe in it.' I agreed that it isn't a good habit. `Still,' I said, `we're not as bad as you Americans.' `What do you mean?' he demanded. `You feed your sewage to your farm animals,' I pointed out. `And then you eat the animals. So although we only bathe in our sewage, you eat yours.'

21.41 p.m.
David Ogilvy, the advertising guru, reckoned that he knew three things worth passing on. First, never lend money to friends. Second, always carry matches. Third, never complain in a restaurant before you have finished your meal. Good advice.

22.15 p.m.
An astonishing 89% of British homes are now equipped with CCTV cameras. I can't help wondering why. What are all these people filming? `The world has gone barking mad,' I said to The Princess. `We are the only sane ones left.'

`In that case,' said The Princess, `the world is in very serious trouble.'

10
14.38 p.m.
While clearing out old files I found a bill for typing one of my first books. I apparently paid £1,500 to have the *Story of Medicine* typed up neatly. That was more than the advance I received from the publisher so I made a loss on the first edition. The reader for the first publisher who saw the typescript wrote silly remarks all over it - largely because she disagreed with my interpretation of history and partly because she clearly had a feminist view of everything. Fortunately, these absurdities were scribbled in pencil so I could rub them all out. It was a task which took me several hours. Fortunately, the second publisher bought the book and it was published without any silly editorial amendments.

21.32 p.m.
I've been re-reading J. B. Priestley's marvellous book *English Journey*. He writes about the Whitsun sport of shin kicking, which was popular in the Cotswolds some years ago. Two contestants would stand facing each other, with their hands on each other's shoulders and then, at a word from the referee, would start kicking each other's shins. Not a game for wimps.

11
11.47 a.m.
We took several hundreds pounds worth of DVDs and books to a local charity shop this morning. They were in six black plastic bags. In order to get even remotely close to the shop I had to park on double yellow lines. The shop was deserted. A man at the counter looked at us as we struggled through the door with the first two bags: `Take them through to the back,' he said sharply. `I'm afraid I'm parked on double yellow lines,' I apologised, rushing out to the truck for more bags. When we had finished bringing in all the bags we put them to one side, out of the way. The man didn't even look up from the book he was reading to say thank you.

14.56 p.m.
After the slightly sour experience at the charity shop we drove on to a local cricket ground where two village teams were playing. At the tea interval I overheard this conversation.

`Why did you declare?' demanded an angry player.

`I thought we had enough runs and need the time to bowl them out,' answered his captain, not unreasonably.

`You might have let me go on to my 100,' said the player.

`You'd only scored 24!' replied the captain.

`Yes, but I was batting so well'

12
10.31 a.m.
A reader tells me that her council is insisting that all tin cans are washed out before being put out for recycling. This takes half an hour a day, she complains. `Do these people think I have nothing else to do? If I don't wash the cans they refuse to take my recycling. And if I put the cans into my ordinary rubbish, and they find them, they will refuse to take that too.' The world is running out of water and whereas we might just be able to manage without oil we won't survive without water. It takes around a gallon of water to wash out a soup tin. The lunatics who think they are saving the planet are, in fact, guaranteeing us all a scary, thirsty future.

15.02 p.m.
I went into a bank I have been using for 40 years. I have been using the same branch for 25 years. I wanted to move a relatively small amount of money from one of my accounts to another. Both accounts are in my name. `Do you have any ID?' asked a clerk I have dealt with countless times before. How absurd that they are encouraged to put more faith in a piece of easily forged plastic than in their own knowledge and experience. When I said I had no ID she said that was fine.

16.17 p.m.
Sixty per cent of British authors earn less than £10,000 a year and their median earnings are less than a quarter of the average national wage. Thanks to the Internet, things are going to get worse. Much worse.

18.19 p.m.
We sent a copy of *Bilbury Village* to Arrow books in the vain hope that they might want to produce a paperback edition. I received a letter from them which said: `Although *Bilbury Village* was an interesting concept but I am afraid we are going to have to say no, I wasn't convinced that we could make a commercial success of it in today's market. It was a strange format for a non-fiction book and though the initial chapters were very exciting I had trouble picturing a readership for it.'

It says on the cover of the book that it is a novel. It's a pity that Arrow can't find staff who know the difference between fiction and non-fiction. I am tempted to send a note back telling the writer that fiction is the stuff that is all made up. But it doesn't really seem worth the price of the stamp. Arrow were my first paperback publishers many years ago.

19.18 p.m.
I've been invited to give a lecture in Brussels. I can't think of anywhere I would rather not visit. Brussels is famous for two things: the extraordinarily expensive and ugly EU building (full to the brim with vastly overpaid part-time employees) and a statue of a small boy pissing. One is a cultural icon. The other is a pointless embarrassment. One makes people smile. The other makes people angry.

13
11.23 a.m.
I received a letter from a reader who wrote to say he has been wearing a T-shirt with `I've read *Living in a Fascist Country* by Vernon Coleman' printed on it. He reports that he was made to remove the T-shirt before being allowed onto a flight to Crete from Glasgow. I received a letter from a man who wanted me to `put together a document in order for me to present to the people of Bexhill a case to change the way we house ourselves', a letter from a reader telling me that she has been told by her GP that if she won't accept the swine flu vaccination her doctors would not give her any prescriptions ever again (that one must have put my blood pressure up at least 40 points) and a letter from a reader offering to do `proper' drawings to illustrate my cat books and suggesting a straight 50:50 royalty split. A reader says he can tell from one of my books that I was with the allied forces for the Battle of the Bulge and sends me a long and fascinating letter about the Second World War. There is a wonderful letter from a kind man who says he enjoys the `outstandingly frank exposures coming from Publishing House' and adds `we have not been stimulated by such a refreshing wind of patriotism since 1945 after which we descended by degrees into the blinding fog of multiculturalism'. He sent a cheque for more than the cost of the books he ordered as a `donation'. There is a card from a reader saying that she is disappointed that my column isn't in *The People* newspaper and that she misses it.

Another reader says he has bought 11 of my books and likes the accurate predictions they contain. He says he looks forward to ticking off the predictions in *2020* as they come true. He adds that his son has just finished *Oil Apocalypse* and was so impressed with it that he decided not to bother taking his driving test. A reader says he is now a pensioner and is too old to read my books. A reader sends a lovely letter about my novel *Paris in My Springtime* (which he thinks is autobiographical). He says he went to Paris with his banjo for a week and stayed there busking for six months. A highlight of his trip was being given money by Brigitte Bardot and Roger Vadim. I once did a radio programme with Roger Vadim. It was *Start the Week* which began at 9.00 a.m. The rest of us were there at about 8.30 a.m. A rather pompous Richard Baker. David Attenborough in an anorak which looked as if it had come from an army surplus store. But no Vadim. And then, just as the newsreader was finishing off the 9 o'clock news, the door to the studio was flung open and in walked Vadim, followed by two statuesque assistants. He was immaculately dressed in a grey silk suit, sparkling white shirt and silk tie. He had a camel hair overcoat draped around his shoulders in the French way. One of the assistants removed the coat from his shoulders. Vadim walked over to the table, slid into the empty seat next to me and the ladies disappeared. What an entrance. Timed to perfection. I have done television and radio programmes with many much bigger stars but I have never ever seen an entrance like that. I've never met B.B. but she once sent me a wonderful, handwritten postcard denouncing vivisection and supporting one of my campaigns. Finally, there are three small parcels which all contain books self-published by readers who have read my book *How To Publish Your Own Book*. I honestly believe I have the best and kindest readers in the world. I never fail to be amazed by their kind words.

14
11.26 a.m.
I received a letter from a reader in Cornwall who says: `Why are you still writing books? If you haven't enough money by now you never will have.' An ex-army officer offers to obtain coloured diamonds for me as investments. He says he brings them back from Belgium two at a time and that he always travels by taxi, train and taxi so that

there is no fear of being run over by a bus. A reader wants me to write and publish the story of her car which she says she has loved for 20 years. She encloses photographs. I regularly receive letters from people who want me to write the story of their cat or dog but this is the first time I've had a letter wanting a book about their car. There are two letters from readers who say: `I know you cannot send personal clinical replies but...'. And a reader in Worcestershire who tells me that he is planning his own funeral. `I have had a plywood coffin made, then soaked in old engine oil. Cost £60 including delivery. Tested for size. I have bought a ground fixing plaque on a stake for £55 in stainless steel. A local grave plot for £80. A man who will transport the body anywhere in the UK (so that if I die outside my area he can collect me) £450. A man to dig the hole and throw dirt on top of my coffin £150.' He kindly offers to make similar arrangements for me. He is the second of my readers to offer to help with my funeral. A reader from London who has read *Paris in my Springtime* wants to know why I didn't publish the book which is mentioned as having been written but never published by a character in the book. (Since the whole thing is fiction I'm not sure what to say to this.) A reader points out that the American flag, the Stars and Stripes, came from an English family called the Washingtons. When one of the family emigrated to the American colony in the 18th century he took his coat of arms with him. His descendant George Washington became President of the USA and the family coat of arms became the American flag. And, finally, a reader of *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War* writes to say: `Having just finished reading *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War*, which I enjoyed very much, I did notice something. George and Thelma Caldicot are said to have been married for 33 years and have a son Derek who, although no age is given has a son who is said in the book to be 16 years of age. Are we to assume that Derek became a father at the age of 16?' I wrote back: `Derek was seduced when he was 16. He was very much the innocent party. Please don't tell anyone because Derek is still very embarrassed by it (although his mother doesn't give two hoots).'

15
11.22 a.m.
I picked up a copy of a 1948 Penguin edition of *The Journal of A Disappointed Man* in Charing Cross Road. It cost me 80 pence. Great title. Written by W. N. P. Barbellion (whose real name was Bruce Frederick Cummings) it's exactly what it says on the cover. Cummings, who was for a while a naturalist on the staff of the Natural History Museum in South Kensington, suffered from incurable and progressive paralysis and towards the end of his short life the physical work of writing the diary was done by his wife and his sister. He kept the diary from the age of 13 until his death at 30 and he wrote, honestly and mercilessly, about life, the world and, most crucially, himself. Cummings was born in Barnstaple, where his father worked as a reporter, and he was an extraordinary being. At the age of 14, he read and enjoyed *Origin of Species* and by the age of 15 he had discovered 232 birds' nests and identified them as belonging to 44 different types of bird. There's a telling quote in the book: `There is no fiercer hell than the failure of a great ambition'. If you're looking down Mr Cummings, you did not fail. His diary is infinitely more revealing, and therefore more readable and more informative, than those awful celebrity laden things that are published these days by people like Piers Morgan.

21.59 p.m.
We watched Clint Eastwood's movie *Gran Torino*. At the end of it Eastwood dies. The film reminded me of *The Shootist*, which was John Wayne's last movie. Curiously, Don Siegel, who directed *The Shootist*, also directed Eastwood's 1972 classic *Dirty Harry*.

As part of a self-selected double bill we also watched a wonderful Australian film called *The World's Fastest Indian*. Starring Anthony Hopkins as motorcyclist Burt Munro, it's one of those wonderful real life personality films that Australian filmmakers do so well.

22.14 p.m.
I constantly receive mail promoting new computer products. The problem, of course, is that the price is only a tiny part of the problem. The bigger part of the problem is the effort required to learn how to use a new device (let alone new software). So often it simply isn't worth the effort. The Princess and I are very cautious about buying anything electrical. I still use a Psion hand-held computer and I bought another three this week. Old stock and reconditioned stock are available and there are, I gather, quite a few people who, like me, regard them as the peak of hand-held computer hardware. I suspect that Psion killed off their pocket computer business when they replaced the excellent 3 series models with the too-complex 5 series models. I didn't upgrade because I couldn't move information across from my 3 series to the new model without doing something very complicated. The old diskettes which had fitted the 3 series didn't fit the 5 series. And the Psion hand-held computers died an undeserved death. I work in Wordperfect 5.1 in DOS and in order to do this I buy very old laptops which still have floppy drives attached and which can be set up to avoid any piece of software devised since 1999. My spellchecker, bless its heart, doesn't

recognise words such as `website', `Internet' or `e-mail'. I attack a separate keyboard to the laptop I am working on and put the laptop on a pile of books. It works well for me. No new computer system works as well or provides me with anything half as efficient or as easy to use or, indeed, as fast. (Graphic based packages are always slow for processing words.) As back up, I have a cupboard full of old laptops, old keyboards, old zip drives and old floppy disks. I am not the only writer to have decided to stand still and let the technology progress without me. Donald E.Westlake, one of the great American novelists of the 20th century, had a store of obsolete manual typewriters tucked away in a cupboard because he was frightened about how he would cope if the machine he was using broke down. When he did have a breakdown he cannibalised bits from one of the machines in his cupboard to keep the original machine working.

16
09.38 a.m.
In today's *Financial Times* HMRC staff are described as `always polite'. I assume this is a joke. In my experience, HMRC staff are universally aggressive, nasty and inhuman. Once you find the answer they want they change the question. I am never much impressed with the *Financial Times*. The share price lists are invariably useful. The news stories are passable. But the columns and features would be an embarrassment in a school magazine. The *FT* doesn't have writers; it just has people who want to be writers.

11.46 a.m.
To help my appalling French I am reading a 1950's French history textbook for ‘middle school children’. It explains how the French won World War I and World War II pretty much by themselves. In the chapter dealing with World War II, England gets a brief mention for providing a base from which General de Gaulle could mastermind the defeat of the Germans.

14.01 p.m.
By cooperating with the manufacturers of e-book readers publishers have signed their own death warrants. They made exactly the same mistake as the film companies, which brought about their own demise by making films specifically for their main competitor - television. The television companies, having bought the cheaply made films, then showed them to their audiences free of charge. For the film companies it was commercial suicide. Instead of promoting the differences and advantages of their medium, and keeping their product special, the Hollywood studios, desperately frightened, made `Made for Television' movies. Authors and publishers and bookshops are, of course, making exactly the same mistake by selling e-books. Record companies didn't really have a choice - their product can be easily downloaded and passed around. Books are much more difficult to copy and if publishers had refused to play the game the e-book reader would have probably failed. I have long been opposed to the idea of e-books but I thought I should dip a toe in the water before I finally committed myself and so a few weeks ago I accepted an offer from an American e-book publisher for one of my books. My fear is that e-books will take over and replace ‘proper’ books and that because it will be the only way to make a living, sponsored authors and publishers will produce e-books that carry a particular message - in the same way that websites are sponsored. The price of e-books will follow gravity down to 1p or even 0p. How long before public libraries in the USA offer free e-book loans to British readers? And the result will be that publishers, wholesalers, bookshops, agents and professional authors will have no future. Wholesalers in particular are not viable and I am astonished to see that some are promoting their e-book selling divisions.

The American publishers who are producing an e-book of *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You* have just sent me a copy of the copyright warning they want to put at the front of the book. I signed the contract for this book as a test - just to see what happens. The warning explains that purchasers can keep one copy of the book on their computer, or print out one copy for their own use, but that if they make additional copies they will be liable to a penalty of up to $100,000 per copy distributed. I think this is an excellent idea but I can’t help wondering how effectively such a warning can be policed. This reminds me just how dangerous it is to sell e-books and just how much authors are risking by allowing publishers to produce e-books. I suspect that within a few months there will be so many free copies of my book available that the back list sales will be non-existent. I also suspect that the amount publishers will be able to charge for e-books will be limited. I noticed yesterday that Amazon or its affiliates are `selling' e-books for £0.00. It really doesn't matter whether the author gets 30%, 40% or 50% of that. Still, I am hopeful. If the American e-book of *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You* sells well (I get 50% of the gross which is around $7 a book) I may allow some more old books to be produced as e-books. But I will never allow *Alice's Diary* to be sold as an e-book. (Incidentally, the publishers of *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You* are pretty clever. To disguise the age of the book they asked permission to put the date inside the book in Roman numerals.) My first ebook goes on sale later today. I will be interested to see what happens. But I'm not expecting to get rich from it.

15.19 p.m.
A film producer wants to make a cartoon film of *Alice's Diary*. I'll believe it when I see it. It is sad but I have become very sceptical and unbelieving.

18.34 p.m.
I found an article by Robert Louis Stevenson that was published in the *British Weekly* in 1887. Here's an extract: `Not all men can read all books; it is only in a chosen few that any man will find his appointed food; and the fittest lessons are the most palatable, and make themselves welcome to the mind. A writer learns this early; and it is his chief support; he goes on unafraid, laying down the law; and he is sure at heart that most of what he says is demonstrably false, and much of a mingled strain, and some hurtful, and very little good for service; but he is sure besides that when his words fall into the hands of any genuine reader, they will be weighed and winnowed, and only that which suits will be assimilated; and when they fall into the hands of one who cannot intelligently read, they come there quite silent and inarticulate, falling upon deaf ears, and his secret is kept as if he had not written.' What a sentence, and what beautiful use of the now almost forgotten semicolon.

20.49 p.m.
I heard a sportsman today talking about playing in his comfort zone. This is, apparently, a revived concept among the young who have rediscovered it. The theory is that when playing within the `comfort zone' the sportsman feels relaxed and comfortable. He can operate easily and comfortably. The concept isn't confined to sport players, of course. It is seeping into every aspect of human life. There is, however, another word for it: complacency. The really great sports players (and the really great entertainers, authors, painters, musicians, investors, anything you likers) are constantly stretching themselves, pushing back the boundaries (to use another modern cliché) and doing greater and greater things. No one ever did anything great while operating within a comfort zone.

17
22.47 p.m.
We watched *The Thin Man* again. We both think it's one of the funniest films ever made and adore the glorious William Powell, Myrna Loy and Asta; probably the most loveable on-screen dog ever. The dialogue is sparkling (and surprisingly risqué for 1934 - `What's that man doing in my drawers?' asks Ms Loy as a policeman searches through her lingerie in her dressing table.) Just why the film series was named after the Dashiell Hammett hero I have no idea. The films bear little or no resemblance to Hammett's classic novels. We then watched *My Darling Clementine* with Henry Fonda as Wyatt Earp. `Have you ever been in love?' Fonda asks a barman. `No, I've always been a bartender'. I remember being shocked when I was a boy to discover that Earp, like Davy Crockett, Bowie, Hickock, the James brothers and Billy the Kid were all real people and that they lived not all that long ago. (Not as astonished as I was, however, to discover that Lawrence of Arabia had been real and had died not all that long before I was born.)

23.11 p.m.
On the day after *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You* was published as an e-book I looked on the Web and found that one website was offering the e-book version of my book free of charge. A website I have never heard of is giving away my book as a promotional item. It took less than 24 hours for the book to become worthless. In addition there is already an Arabic version which I haven't licensed and someone is selling a book called *Stop Your Doctor Killing You*, with promotional tags exactly the same as mine, for a chunky $47. They have stolen the promotional material and for all I know the entire contents of the book. I've had thousands of articles and book chapters stolen over the years. But e-books enable thieves to steal whole books in an instant.

18
11.23 a.m.
Running a small business these days isn't a simple thing like rocket science or brain surgery. The rules and regulations change almost hourly and I don't believe there is a small business owner in the country who isn't breaking one rule or another almost every day of his working life. I cannot imagine why anyone would want to start a new business today.

14.56 p.m.

We have seen a lot of listed houses. There are advantages and disadvantages. The advantage is that the previous owner will not have been able to destroy or even change the fabric of the building. The disadvantage is that every modification or repair has to be approved in advance by bureaucrats in cheap suits. And the people who make decisions about listed properties tend to do so according to whim rather than reason. There are no strict rules about what is and is not allowed and so the administrators who make the important, and often expensive, decisions do so according to how they feel on any particular day. Moreover, they will only say what you can't do, they won't give any guidance on what you can do.

We were sent details of a house which looked very promising. Indeed, it looked spectacular.

`It's listed,' said The Princess

`Oh well,' I shrugged. `We can live with that. It's a terrific looking house.'

`It's Grade 1,' said The Princess

We'd never come across a Grade 1 listed property before. Most Grade 1 listed properties are owned by the Government, the Queen or the National Trust.

`You probably have to ring up someone in London if you want permission to draw the curtains,' said The Princess

I quietly, and reverently, put the brochure down on the `No thanks' pile that will go into the recycling bin.

16.17 p.m.

We tried to go to Ilminster to look at a house. We found the house and then followed all the appropriate signs to try to look at the town. We thought we might as well, since we were there. However, the signs kept sending us round and round on some sort of ring road. Eventually we decided that there is no town called Ilminster. Or maybe they just don't want visitors. The local council presumably feels that if no one visits, there will be less wear and tear on the pavements and less rubbish in the street bins (if there are any). It does, however, seem a rather short-sighted attitude.

We managed to find Chard but we decided we had nothing to say about Chard.

`It's not been that bad a day,' I said, when we got home. I filled the kettle and switched it on. It blew up.

`Yes it has,' said The Princess. `We drove miles to see a house neither of us liked and we got cut up by a line painting lorry.' (I still hardly believe this but it is true). `We tried to go Ilminster and failed completely. And we drove through Chard.' The reminder about Chard convinced me that she was right. It had been a poor day.

The Princess then turned on her computer and found an e-mail from a friend. `Some twit on twitter has twatted something nasty about you,' she said. `I don't want to know,' I told her.

18.25 p.m.

Today, I finally managed to persuade a small bookshop to pay its bill. All the books had been ordered by customers and paid for in advance. It has taken me six letters to get paid. Years ago I would have fought for little bookshops and I would have refused to allow my books to be sold in supermarkets. Not today. Small bookshops have been no friends of ours. Today, if Tesco wants to carry my books they are welcome. (But not if they want a huge discount.)

23.14 p.m.

We watched *Mr Holland's Opus* for the umpteenth time. The fact that Richard Dreyfuss did not receive an Oscar for this film about a composer who becomes a schoolteacher and has a deaf son is proof, if it were ever needed, that the Oscar system is a nonsense. Dreyfuss is one of my favourite actors and this is his best work.

19

16.17 p.m.

We went to Prinknash Bird and Deer Park in Gloucestershire. It is a wonderful, peaceful place. The animals live in the grounds of the monastery. A real little bit of heaven.

21.28 p.m.

A reader wants me to take part in an online chat room event. I have no idea what this entails or why I have been invited. I only know I don't want to do it. I write back saying that I used the Internet a great deal in the 1990s but that I have rather lost faith in it as a medium. I suspect that she will simply consider me to be a Luddite. I no longer care.

20

16.17 p.m.

We went to Lacock Abbey in Wiltshire and saw the window of which Fox Talbot took the first recorded photograph.

I took various pictures of the same window. None of mine were as good as his.

18.35 p.m.
The reader who wrote about Mrs Caldicot's son has written back thanking me for the confidential information regarding Derek's love life. `If he is aware of our correspondence, please reassure him that his secret is safe with me.'

19.10 p.m.
Amazon has announced that in the last three months it sold more e-books than hardback books. And China is now the world’s biggest user of energy. It has overtaken America. It occurs to me to wonder what will happen to e-books, and their readers, when the electricity runs out.

21
14.47 p.m.
We had coffee at The Old Bell Hotel in Malmesbury. It has apparently been a hotel since 1220 and is the oldest hotel in England. It is a delightful place and the people running it certainly seem to have the hang of running a hotel. I don't suppose they are the original people but there are apparently ghosts there so you never know. The Princess is frightened of ghosts. When she went to the lavatory she asked me to go with her. `Please stand outside,' she said. `If anyone walks through the door without opening it, come and get me.'

The hotel is right next to the Abbey which is famous because a priest called Eilmer leapt from the Abbey tower and became the first man to fly. He did this in the year 1010. He made himself some wings, jumped off, travelled a furlong, crashed and broke both legs.

15.06 p.m.
In bookshops, junk shops and auctions I always rummage in the cardboard boxes that haven't been properly sorted. I bought so many books in a junk shop today that the proprietor asked me if I had a shop myself. I told him that I was a bookaholic and that although it was very sad I knew of no cure. He pointed out that my addiction didn't cost me much more than a cocaine habit and was probably not much worse for my health.

18.00 p.m.
Sitting in a branch of Caffé Nero (they sell the best crisps in the UK and serve probably the most reliably drinkable coffee on the High Street) The Princess and I started thinking of actors who have never played James Bond but who should have. We decided we were looking for elegance, power and a big name. Here's our list.

1. Patrick McGoohan
2. Peter O'Toole
3. Cary Grant
4. Clive Owen
5. Liam Neeson
6. Christopher Plummer
7. Dean Martin

McGoohan would have been the greatest, of course, though he turned the part down because he didn't get on with one of the senior crew members. It was McGoohan whose character in Dangerman originated the iconic phrase: `My name is Bond, James Bond' though with McGoohan it was `My name is Drake, John Drake.'

22
08.12 a.m.
I wanted to put the rubbish out this morning but couldn't find my door key. The Princess, who was in the kitchen, said she would find her key and started rummaging in her handbag. After waiting several minutes while she searched through the bag I went upstairs, found my keys, walked downstairs, opened the back door, took out the rubbish, came back, locked the door, took my key back upstairs and put it on my desk where it lives and went back downstairs `Here it is!' she cried, with delight, holding up her key. `I've found it.'

11.17 a.m.
David Cameron, the British Prime Minister, has insulted British ex-servicemen and heaven knows how many bereaved families by describing Britain as the junior partner to the USA in WWII. In fact, if Cameron knew anything about British history he would know that, as in World War I, the Americans sat on the sidelines for ages,

watching to see who would get the upper hand, before selling us their services.

Shortly afterwards CBS News interviewed a random sample of adults across the USA, asking them what profession came to mind when they heard the name David Cameron. The answers were: Film director 27%; Foreign Head of State 14%; Professional soccer player 11%; American Idol winner 8%; Don't know 40%.

23

15.16 p.m.

I went to the optician for another eye test. I thought I should have a second opinion. I very nearly got into terrible trouble within minutes of entering the shop. When directed to the machine used to do the visual field tests I almost sat down on a chair with wheels at the end of its legs. `Not on that chair!' shouted the assistant. I looked at him, puzzled. `Not on the chair with wheels,' he explained. `Health and safety?' I said. `Exactly,' he nodded. At the end of the test the optician confirmed that I have early macular degeneration. This confirms that I am slowly going blind. With The Princess having been told that she may have motor neurone disease and me told I'm going blind the future is beginning to look bleak. How safe will I be, as a blind person, pushing her round in a wheelchair? The optician suggests that I take Omega 3 fish-oil capsules. These are apparently supposed to help slow the progress. Another dilemma for a vegetarian.

24

19.18 p.m.

A reader today has ordered eight different books - including two novels, two political books, three cat books and one medical book. When I first started publishing my own books I wrote books under one name but circulated details to readers in different mailshots. So the people who bought fiction were offered only fiction. And the people who bought medical books were offered only new medical books. After a year or two of this I decided to experiment with a little `cross-selling' and to my delight I found that the artificial barriers I had created were entirely unnecessary. The readers who bought one of my novels were just as likely to buy a medical book or a book on politics.

20.49 p.m.

I heard today about a woman who had a baby which refused to take milk from her right breast. The baby would only feed from the left breast. The woman wisely went to her doctor who found that she had a lump. Cancer was diagnosed and treated. This is a pure example of *bodypower* in action.

25

14.02 p.m.

`How will your furniture look in here?' asked an estate agent today as we looked over a large, Victorian mansion that was cold, dark and rather damp. I think she was just looking for something to say that would draw attention away from the fungus growing out of the skirting board. We said our furniture would be just fine.

It is surprising how many people look for a house that their furniture will fit. It is much more sensible, and far cheaper, to find a house that you like and then carefully buy furniture that will suit it.

When buying furniture we try to buy old stuff. Antique furniture, or elderly second-hand furniture as we are happy to call it, is invariably better made, far cheaper and a good deal more attractive than modern furniture. And, unlike modern furniture, it will retain its value. If you sell a bookcase that is 100 years old you will probably get what you paid for it. You may even make a profit. You will have had the use of the bookcase for some years at no cost. If you buy a brand new bookcase then it will probably be close to worthless when you come to sell it.

And, of course, we always try to follow William Morris's simple rule: everything we buy needs to be either functional or beautiful or, preferably, both.

20.12 p.m.

We spent 40 minutes trying to fit a new ink cartridge into one of our printers. Why are refills so impossible to fit to fax machines and printers? The only pieces of equipment we have which accept new cartridges easily are an old HP printer (it recently celebrated its 25th birthday) and a HP photographic printer. Everything else is a nightmare. (It has only just occurred to me that both the easy-to-refill devices are made by Hewlett Packard. Maybe we should buy more of their stuff.) In the end we throw away the refill and the printer. In the last two years I have thrown away three printers and one fax machine simply because I couldn't get the damned refills into them. The last time I tried to put a new cartridge into our fax machine I ruined the carpet and a perfectly good pair of trousers and had to throw away two cartridges because they had leaked.

26

21.28 p.m.

Self-publishing has over the years often been the only way to get important books published. Self-publishing gives authors independence, freedom to write the books they want to write, freedom from men in suits who decide that this book might not make a profit or that book might cause too much trouble with the establishment and freedom from girly editors who got their job because daddy knows someone in the conglomerate who owns the publishing company and wants a place to park her until she marries a banker and settles down to enjoy point to pointing and a position on an Arts Council committee or two. This is now more than ever true because commercial publishers are frightened of lawsuits and of upsetting some other part of the conglomerate which owns them. Self-publishing has a long history; there have been more great books self-published than published commercially. For example, if they hadn't self-published the world would have been deprived of books by: Thomas Malthus, Virginia Woolf, James Boswell, Dr Johnson, William Cobbett, Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, Robert Lewis Stevenson, Enid Blyton, James Joyce, Evelyn Waugh, Norman Douglas, Balzac, T.E. Lawrence, Graham Greene, Beatrix Potter, Walter Scott, J. M. Barrie, T. S. Elliot, Mark Twain, Jane Austen, Frank Harris, Anais Nin, W. H. Davies, Walt Whitman and D. H. Lawrence. (That's just a tiny fragment, off the top of my head, of the authors who I know to have self published their books.)

I started publishing my own books because London publishers wouldn't publish my book *Alice's Diary*. I had a literary agent at a smart London agency (Anne McDermid at Curtis Brown) who was fed up with me `crying in the wilderness' and who wanted me to write the books the marketing people wanted (and were prepared to pay good money for) rather than the books I wanted to write. Another agent got huffy when I wanted to write a vegetarian diet book. She had already sold one diet book by another author and was so vain she thought she would be typecast as an agent who sold diet books. (To prove a point I did sell that book to a publisher and received a £20,000 advance for it.)

Self-publishing is very much despised within the world of publishing. And yet doing it yourself is considered quite wonderful in just about all other areas of life. Musicians and singers who publish themselves are considered innovative and are praised for taking control from the international music publishers. Artists who take control of their own work are considered wise and film directors who produce their own movies are deified as `independents'. Actors who start their own theatres are praised. Fashion designers who set up their own labels are regarded as innovative and imaginative. Sports stars who set up their own management companies are regarded as brave and sensible for having the courage to back their own convictions. But authors who self-publish are derided and attacked by the entire publishing industry; they are patronised and sneered at as beneath contempt. It doesn't matter how successful they might be. (This is largely a British phenomenon and has to be put into perspective. If you do anything original or exceptional or not quite ordinary in the UK then you are sneered at. It is for that reason, perhaps, that so few people do anything original or creative and so many choose to work for the bureaucratic and safe BBC.) When Andrew Lloyd Webber, the composer becomes an impresario and theatre owner it’s regarded as wonderful. When the film of *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War* was released not one journalist in Britain was interested in the fact that a £12 million film had been made of a self-published novel. In a way I can understand why the publishing industry is so dismissive of self-publishing; if it ever caught on in a big way a lot of overpaid, untalented parasites would find themselves out of work.

Self-publishing is sometimes deliberately confused with vanity publishing. The broadsheet newspapers are particularly likely to do this. And yet most broadsheet newspapers are themselves in the vanity publishing business. What else do you call a business which consistently loses money? Just before the paper was sold to an ex KGB officer, the Independent News and Media's investment in the *Independent* and the *Independent on Sunday* had failed to make a profit from 1998. Now, that's what I call vanity publishing. And *The Guardian* wouldn't exist if it weren't kept alive by a supporting charity.

Of course, if you self-publish on a small scale that's fine. It is considered quite sweet. But when self-publishing becomes a threat to the publishing establishment then it’s regarded as dangerous - a threat to agents, publishers and the whole darned industry. If you sell mail order that's a threat to bookshops too. The industry will do everything it can to stamp on self-publishers who actually sell books.

I've thought a lot about this and today I have to admit that I would not recommend self-publishing to anyone. Indeed, I don't think I'd recommend authorship as a career. Authors need encouragement and I confess I have been battered by the sneers from the publishing professionals. Publishers, libraries and bookshops have done their level best to make life difficult.

I always made life difficult for myself by insisting that I make a profit. I have never wanted to be a vanity publisher - printing books and then storing them in the garage. But I also know that I've made things more difficult for myself by being a maverick; by insisting on telling the truth (even when it has proved dangerous and expensive).

I would say that I have done just about everything wrong from a career point of view. But then I've never thought of writing as a career. It's just what I do. When I get maudlin and introspective like this The Princess is under instructions to mention one word: Cobbett. Whenever I think I'm having a tough time I re-read my own essay on William Cobbett in my book *The 100 Greatest Englishmen and Englishwomen*. I then feel ashamed of my whinging.

23.32 p.m.
In Germany elderly citizens, pissed off with their losses, have kidnapped a local financial advisor, trussed him up with duct tape and locked him in their cellar. This is not the English way, perhaps, but thank heavens there are still people on the planet who have had enough of bankers and financial advisers.

23.58 p.m.
An acquaintance of ours tells us that he bought a hotel, intending to turn it into a private house. Unfortunately, he does not have planning permission for the change. Despite this he and his wife and their three children moved into the former hotel and started altering it to suit family life. Three weeks later a man from the local planning department came round.

`We *are* running a hotel,' said my friend. He showed the planning officer some leaflets he had wisely had printed.

The planning officer demanded to see the tariff. Our acquaintance produced a copy of the tariff. '£10,000 a night!' exclaimed the man from the planning department.

`We only want special people to stay here,' said our acquaintance. And. he insists, there is nothing the planning department can do about it. The planning department is apparently not empowered to decide prices. This reminds me of a fellow I heard of who ran a window cleaning service. He carried his ladder on a Lamborghini instead of a bicycle and charged the costs. The taxman appealed but the window cleaner won. The judge decided that the taxman does not have the right to decide how a taxpayer conducts his business.

27
14.28 p.m.
We went to the hospital for tests which should show whether or not The Princess is suffering from a variety of motor neurone disease known as ALS. This is not a pleasant disease. We are both utterly terrified.

We have visited the hospital four times and still not seen the consultant to whom The Princess was referred. Maybe he doesn't exist. Maybe he retired or left and the system has not yet registered that he has disappeared. Maybe he is just too busy.

While The Princess had the tests done I wrote this:

`To my darling wife, my sweetheart and best possible friend. I thank God for allowing me to share the journey with you, for allowing me to be by your side and to hold you in my heart. You are more to me than life itself; the journey, with you, is the everything. Without you the world would be cold and dark and pointless, but with you there is hope. I would give you all the flowers in the world if I could. Instead I give you all my love and loyalty and friendship. You are my sunshine and without you there would be no light in my life.

God will decide how far we journey but you will always be with me, in every form, for as long as either of us shall continue onwards.'

I don't give her this. She will see it if and when she reads this diary. If The Princess goes then I know that I will go too. Without her there will be no purpose.

21.14 p.m.
An unnamed self-employed man had overpaid his tax by £3,000. When the HMRC discovered his error they fined him £1,400 for paying too much. I can believe it. The self-employed are the backbone of any country. They are the people who provide the energy, the commitment and the enterprise that keeps everything else going. And yet public sector employees always hate the self-employed - possibly because they hate what they see as their sense of freedom. And so the self-employed are constantly oppressed by reams of new legislation. The single greatest difference between the employed and the self-employed is that for the self-employed time really is money. If a man working for the Foreign Office wastes a day filling in a useless form he still gets paid. The same is true for the man working for British Petroleum. But the self-employed guy who wastes a day on form filling has lost a day's earning capacity and must either work late into the night or eat less.

22.12 p.m.
Corn based ethanol is subsidised by the American government at around £1 per gallon. When will the Americans realise that this is distorting the markets for oil and food. The grain needed to fill the tank of a fairly typical

American car would feed one person for a whole year.

23.01 p.m.
Increasing numbers of people are clamouring to be bailed out because their houses aren't worth what they were when they bought them. Two things occur to me. Would these people have handed over part of their profits if their house values had risen? And will the Government start to reimburse investors whose stock market selections have proved unfortunate?

23.58 p.m.
We are trying to keep busy and pretend that the world is still going round on its axis. We bought a new printer at PC World. We now have nearly as many printers as books. (That is a wild exaggeration). The assistant insisted that it would work with our new netbook and, with shameful gullibility, we believed him. Although we paid cash for the printer he naturally wanted a mass of private information before allowing us to depart with the printer. He was confused when I said I didn't have a telephone number and alarmed when I insisted on giving him a Post Office Box address. (`What street is it on? Do you actually live there?') The new printer came with an 80-page instruction booklet. Just two of those pages are in English, the rest are in a wide variety of other languages, many of which I have never heard of. That's 78 pages wasted. How does that help the environment? Still, I suppose we should be grateful that we got anything in print. The last time I bought a camera we had to print out the instruction booklet ourselves. The damned thing took up 280 pages of A4 paper and was the size of a decent length novel when it had finished printing. In the bad old days, before progress ruined everything, there would have been a neat little booklet that I could have stuffed into my pocket with the camera.

When we got the printer home we found that it would not work with the netbook. The reason is simple. Before we can use the printer we need to install the printer software on the netbook using the CD they have supplied. And the netbook, of course, has no CD drive.

28
11.46 a.m.
The Government has revealed that two families have between them cost the taxpayer £37,000,000 over three generations. A strong argument both for compulsory sterilisation and euthanasia.

12.14 p.m.
A sad and rather sorry soul is apparently telling Web users that he isn't going to buy my book *Oil Apocalypse*. I have no idea why he has decided he isn't going to buy it and I really don't give a fig since the book pretty well sold out some time ago and I don't have time to produce a new edition. One reader has so far made over £1,000,000 by following the investment advice the book contains. The correspondent who told me about the person who isn’t going to buy my book reports that the non-buyer has written a book about peak oil himself. I suspect he had his tongue sticking out of the corner of his mouth throughout the creative process. What makes me think his sales aren't going too well?

Everyone has the right to speak but the Web has proved beyond doubt that not many people are worth listening to. The main problem is that bloggers are so desperate for attention that they follow the abusive ways of the worst television presenters in order to attract attention. To protect themselves from the consequences of their outbursts, and to avoid responsibility, they often use the Web's anonymity. When found out they usually run a mile, whimper and beg for forgiveness; they are Gollums of the new underworld. People who write on the Web should have to identify themselves - especially if they are commenting on someone else or someone else's work.

15.16 p.m.
I hate clichés. At my request The Princess has collected a list of my favourite phrases. These are, apparently, the ones I use daily.

1. I'm hungry.
2. I've eaten too much.
3. I shouldn't have eaten that.
4. Is there any more of that?
5. I'm tired.
6. I hate the BBC.
7. I'm getting old.
8. You won't believe what I saw someone do today.

9. Did you see that? (Usually spoken on a motorway.)
10. What did I come in here for?
11. Have you seen my pen/notebook/reading spectacles?
12. I've lost the keys. I really mean it this time.

She says that if these phrases were removed from my daily conversation I would be largely silent. The awful thing is that I suspect she is right. I am mortified.

29

11.57 a.m.

A leaked HMRC internal document reveals that 82% of tax office employees are not proud to work for the department and 86% would not recommend working for it. A staggering 87% agree that, as a whole, HMRC is not well managed. And 88% have no confidence in the decisions made by HMRC's senior managers. It seems that tax office employees are as distrusting of their bosses as the general public. I wonder what top management are doing about this? My guess is that they're putting all their energy into finding out where the leak came from. When I revealed evidence that the NHS was paying more for things like envelopes, pens and soap powder than I would pay if I were buying them one at a time in my local supermarket the NHS immediately launched an investigation. But the investigation was not designed to find out why an organisation which was buying these items by the million wasn't obtaining a discount but to find out how I obtained a secret computer printout proving the waste.

14.25 p.m.

Google really should put less effort into stealing books and more into providing a decent search engine. (I am still aggrieved that Google appears to have helped itself to 271 different editions of my books and that if I want any compensation I have to fill in forms to claim any money that might be on offer.)

I go cold inside when I think that schoolteachers train children to use the Internet as a source of information. Anyone who thinks they can find news or truth on the Web is deluded. I believe that big search engines may sometimes give priority to sites which pay the most. You have to be very good to spot the truth. Computers themselves are absurdly overcomplicated and are obviously designed by half-witted nerds who are obsessed with obsolescence. They have not reached Model T Ford quality or reliability. Buy the very latest creation and you will still find yourself struggling to make the damned thing work efficiently. If fridges worked as well as computers our food would all go bad. And can there have ever been a more environmentally unfriendly industry?

The Web is an underworld community controlled and dominated by nerds, thieves, liars, fraudsters, cheats and perverts. No invention has done more harm and less good.

The Internet has destroyed honour, honesty, respect and decency and all the other virtues, and replaced them with envy, resentment and rumour mongering. It has done this not by itself, of course, but by enabling people to do these things without punishment; by allowing them authority without responsibility. The Internet, dramatic and instant, global and universal, wastes far more than it saves, destroys every type of commerce from the root upwards and is destroying music and literature by taking away the ability and the freedom of artists to earn a living.

30

14.23 p.m.

Yet another policeman has been found not guilty of anything after a member of the public was killed. I wonder how many people are aware that no British police officer has yet been convicted of manslaughter committed while on duty, in spite of a series of high profile deaths. So far there have, of course, been no charges after the deaths of Blair Peach, Jean Charles de Menezes or Ian Tomlinson.

17.18 p.m.

A friend tells me that he download *Ulysses* by James Joyce and connected it up to a computerised grammar check. The computer broke down.

31

21.14 p.m.

We spent a whole day today driving to see a house near Hereford. It looked wonderful on the estate agent’s brochure. The house, large rambling and Edwardian, had a few acres of land and a country cottage in the grounds. There was a long driveway, a pond and a swimming pool (which we could, we thought, easily turn into another duck pond) and a summerhouse. The garden, we were assured, was very private. It looked perfect. When we got there we found that the owner, or a previous owner, had sold off a piece of the garden and allowed another house to be built in the grounds. The new house was on a slightly higher level, staring right down into the garden and the back of the house. There was no privacy at all. The photographs they had taken had, of course, carefully excluded all sight of this excrescence. It was a day and a tankful of petrol wasted. Did the agents really think that we wouldn't see the neighbouring house built in the garden? Or did they just not understand the word `private'?

Afterwards we went into the town of Hereford which is an excellent small market town. Everyone we met, in every shop, smiled and was helpful. Even the staff in the chain stores were courteous and pleasant. I bought a lovely edition of William Blake's work and a first edition of Hilaire Belloc's biography of Cromwell. Total cost £1. Once again, two fingers raised (palm inwards) to Oxfam. It has been a relatively quiet week for book buying but I counted up the week's purchases and I have bought 26 books. If this isn't an addiction I don't know what is. Maybe I should start a society called Bibliophiles Anonymous and make myself honorary President, Secretary, Treasurer and sole member. Perhaps I could apply for charitable status and a European grant.

22.17 p.m.

A reader from Liverpool wants to know why I still write books (which he describes as `rather old-fashioned') and don't simply confine myself to writing a `blog'. He also wants to know which of my books have been banned – and why.

England Our England was, the first of my political books to be banned. It has never been reviewed anywhere and advertisements for it are widely banned. Even the British Legion refused to take any more advertisements in their magazine, claiming that they had received complaints from members who were unhappy with the attack on the European Union. Numerous magazines which promote English virtues and qualities banned the book for the same reason, suggesting to me that many people still don't realise exactly what the European Union does and aims to do.

Even radio stations got very excited about the idea of a book criticising the European Union. I did very few radio interviews for *England Our England* and most broadcasting companies refused even to mention the book. On one rare and memorable occasion when I was interviewed on a national radio station a presenter whose name I have long since forgotten became so irate in defence of the EU, so aghast that anyone could dare question its aims, and so furious that he could not disprove of the arguments in the book, that he suddenly cut the interview short and announced that he was going to refuse to mention the title of the book. He was, presumably, worried that his more curious listeners might find a copy of the book, read it and discover the truth.

More recently advertisements for other books of mine, such as *Gordon is a Moron* and *Oil Apocalypse* have been banned by virtually every national newspaper - even though several papers had run one or more of the advertisements without complaint. By an odd coincidence all the papers decided to ban the books at the same time. I try not to suspect conspiracies and powerful people making telephone calls but sometimes it's difficult to suppress the thought.

(Sometimes the bans are downright silly. For example, *Country Life* magazine refused to take an advert for *Gordon is a Moron* because someone at the magazine thought that the advert wasn't pretty enough.)

I was told that I couldn’t put advertisements for *Oil Apocalypse* and *Gordon is a Moron* into the national press because both were expressing the author’s opinion. I pointed out that since *Oil Apocalypse* was a book about the future it was inevitably my opinion. `When an author writes about the future,' I explained, `the book must be a forecast which is inevitably an opinion. An opinion based on fact. But an opinion. The weather forecast is an opinion.' I pointed out that I had never seen the words `This is an opinion' on a weather forecast. I offered to put the words `Warning: opinion' on the top of the advertisement for *Oil Apocalypse* but no one would take me up on the offer. *Gordon Is A Moron* is, I pointed out, an appraisal of a political career. `It is,' I pointed out, `a commentary on part of a politician's career, so it is, of course, an opinion.' I offered to add the following words to the advertisement: `This is a book and therefore contains the author’s opinions. The Government and the editor of this newspaper do not agree with his opinions.' In the end, neither of my offers was accepted. And effectively adverts for the books were banned.

Why do so many publications refuse adverts for my books?

It is, I suppose, impossible to generalise. (Though it is worth making the point that not one publication has refused to carry advertisements because someone has found a factual error in a book.)

My non-fiction books do question Government policies, do pose a real threat to many parts of the Establishment and are a commercial threat to many multinationals. And that, it seems, is what frightens so many editors.

Time and time again I find that I am banned because I make people think.

Curious.

I always thought that was one of an author's main responsibilities.

I hope my books continue to make people think.

Magazines, newspapers and broadcasters may ban them.

But I'll continue to write them. And they will continue to be published until The Princess and I run out of breath or money.

Having written articles and columns for most national newspapers and magazines, and having broadcast on most major terrestrial and satellite television and radio stations, I am convinced that only book writers really have freedom to say what they think. (I should add that it is only authors working for small, independent presses who enjoy real freedom.)

The Internet seems to offer great opportunities but in reality the problems with it are legion. Not least is the fact that it is too easy for the fascists to close down or interfere with websites which carry material which displeases them. That has happened to me so often now that The Princess checks regularly to see whether my website is up or down. Books are the ideal medium for communicating genuinely iconoclastic ideas.

And besides, I don't much like doing things the way other people do them. Television and the Web are today widely regarded as the most important and powerful forms of communication. And so I write books. Books are out of fashion, difficult to sell and disliked by the young (the ones with the money) and so I stick with books. Moreover, I sell proper old-fashioned books, printed on paper and then bound between covers, rather than e-books which are circulated through the ether.

23.57 p.m.

The Princess came into my study this evening with a short list of instructions for her funeral and a detailed plan of how she was going to communicate with me if she did have this dreadful disease and eventually lost the ability to talk. We just held each other and cried.

August

1

11.45 a.m.

I have a new book out under a pen name and I think it is about time to start using more pen names. I have over the years used quite a number of them. My first literary agent, Anne McDermid at Curtis Brown, persuaded me that I should write novels and non-fiction under two different names. And so it was that I found myself in the bizarre situation of sitting down with an editor at Pan Books and having to confess that although she knew me as the author of *Stress Control* I was also Edward Vernon, the author of a novel entitled *Practice Makes Perfect*. She was not amused and I got the impression she rather thought she'd been tricked - which, of course, she had. I did media interviews as Edward Vernon and grew a beard for my new persona. I ended up on Central Television (where I was a regular presenter as Vernon Coleman). The interviewer's first question was: `Vernon Coleman, why are you now calling yourself Edward Vernon?'. When I wrote my first thriller, called *Tunnel*, my agent didn't want me to publish it, telling me that it wasn't what I did so I offered it to the publishers Robert Hale who bought it and published it under the name Marc Charbonnier. When my agent found out she was very sniffy about it. (When I recently published a paperback edition under my own name I managed to get the perfect picture for the cover. I was in Paris when there was a fire in the tunnel so I rushed to the station and took a photograph of the signs at the station warning of the fire.)

12.16 p.m.

The Princess was upset today. A cake she had made had gone squishy. I tried to explain that I prefer squishy cake (I do). But she was too upset for comforting. `I don't know why I put myself down so much,' she said finally, when I had eventually managed to reassure her. `Other people do it so much better.'

16.24 p.m.

At the bank a teller wanted to know why I was taking out £3,000 in cash. I said I was going to buy sweets. She wrote this on the form which will, presumably, be sent off to whichever Government department deals with money laundering and terrorism.

2

11.27 a.m.

Why don't you drive to Ashford, asked a friend who knows we use Eurostar to travel to Paris. `There is a multistorey car park built into the station.' There is indeed and we used it for several years. There are two reasons why we now catch the train at St Pancras. First, we would often get on at Ashford and find that our reserved seats were occupied. The staff could not be persuaded to help us throw out the interlopers so we ended up sitting wherever we could. Second, the guards they employed at Ashford to search baggage and clothing were, in my view, the rudest and most aggressive people in the business. Maybe they've improved but if someone told me they'd been trained at Dachau I'd believe it.

14.48 p.m.

We went to see an ex journalist I know. He wrote a number of stories about me in days of yore. When I stopped writing my column in *The Sun* he wrote a story reporting that I'd left and mentioned that I had been paid around £100,000 a year for the column. (Actually, they paid me a flat fee of £1,000 a week for a column and extra for everything else I wrote. To save having to work out a price every time I wrote something, I fixed a price with the news and features editors. They used to pay me £1,500 for a spread (a feature across two pages), £750 if an article was used as a page lead, £500 for anything else which appeared on the page and £250 if whatever I wrote wasn't used.) For several years I had at least one story in almost every day's paper. My pal was inundated with letters from general practitioners offering themselves as my replacement and was particularly amused to get one from his own GP.

19.18 p.m.

The Magna Carta, which was the original of much of the American constitution (the bits they didn't nick off the Native American Indians) and the blueprint for democracies everywhere in the world, has been tossed aside by recent British Governments. The obnoxious Edward Heath (who sold Britain to the EU for a £35,000 fee) and the unctuous, pustulant Blair should be hung. One as a traitor and the other as a war criminal. We would have to dig up Heath, of course, but it would be worth it. I hope the bastard wasn't cremated. Compared with Ted Heath, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown and a thousand other leading British politicians, Adolf Hitler was a trustworthy patriot who loved his country.

23.02 p.m.
How did Adolf Hitler (a dark haired Austrian Jew) manage to sell the concept of a blond, Ayrian super-race so convincingly? I suppose it's a bit like politicians telling us that we must all tighten our belts while they dig their snouts still deeper into the trough.

3
08.12 a.m.
It is The Princess's birthday today! I wrote her a ‘pome’.

`My wife's the best that ever could be
To all with a brain that's quite clear to see
She’s beautiful, generous, warm-hearted and kind
The most loving wife I ever could find.'

15.28 p.m.
I was interrupted by a knock on the door this afternoon. I don't usually answer knocks on the door but as I suspected it was one of the men cutting the hedges and trimming the ivy around the house. He stood there looking rather sheepish. He was in his early 20s; a bright looking lad with intelligent eyes. He told me that one of his colleagues had cut through a television aerial cable. `But it's OK,' he said, `I've mended it. And I'm a qualified electrician.' He asked me to check that the television still worked. I checked. It did. I asked the inevitable question. `Why is a fully qualified electrician working as a gardener?'

`There's no work for electricians,' he replied. `The building trades are dead.' He shrugged, sadly.

`Things will pick up,' I told him. `It'll just take a bit of time for the mess to be cleared.'

`It's going to take a long time,' he said. `I think there's going to be a double dip recession. It'll come when VAT goes up in January. People are buying stuff now but when VAT is 20% they'll buy far less. It'll make a difference.'

I agreed with him. We talked a little more. When I shut the door I couldn't help reflecting on the fact that the bloke who does our garden almost certainly knows more about the British economy than the so-called experts working for the Bank of England.

17.23 p.m.
A reader reports that when he rang the police to report a break in he was asked for his date of birth and his ethnicity. I agree with him that it seems socially divisive to ask for a caller's colour. It is certainly not socially cohesive and non-racist, which is what the police are apparently supposed to be these days. The only reason for asking the race of someone is if it is going to influence your actions. So, in other words, anyone who asks for your race is racist.

4
16.36 p.m.
We drove to Dorchester today. A local council has put up a huge notice which reads `Most Accidents Happen On Bends'. The warning is accompanied by statistics showing details of the number of accidents which have occurred at that spot. Trying to read the notice I almost swung out into the path of an articulated lorry. `We should put up a sign of our own,' said The Princess. `It should read: `Most accidents happen when drivers are distracted by large pointless road signs.’ On the way we amused ourselves by composing slogans for companies to put on the back of their lorries or vans. For a logistics company, endlessly moving stuff about the country, The Princess suggested: `We get most of your stuff to where you want it to go. Eventually.' And for a chimney sweep I suggested: `We clean your chimney cheaply and without using small children'.

In the car park in Dorchester a man approached us and offered to clean our car while we wandered round the town. This seemed a good idea. I paid him and we wandered off. When we got back two hours later the car was as dirty as it ever was. I found the man who took the money and point to the car. He hurried over and gave it a wash. We stood and waited. He didn't make a very good job of it and could see I was not very pleased. He offered to give us the money back but he had thrown water over it and he had done something so I told him to keep it.

Later we sat in a café in Taunton. A man with an extraordinarily loud and annoying laugh sat with his wife at the next table. He told a seemingly endless series of very loud jokes and laughed uproariously a quarter of the way through each joke, half way through and three quarters of the way through. When he'd finished he laughed and laughed and laughed. The jokes weren't in the slightest bit funny. His wife seemed to me to be suitable for sanctification. She smiled beatifically at him as he talked and laughed and whereas I wanted to brain him after being near him for just a quarter of an hour she seemed perfectly content. When the man stood up to go to the lavatory our chips arrived and The Princess leant across to ask the woman if we could borrow the salt on her table. To our astonishment the woman, who was reading a newspaper, ignored her. The Princess asked again, this time making a more deliberate attempt to catch the woman's attention. `I'm sorry,' said the woman in the unmistakeable tones of someone born deaf. She smiled and then pointed to her ears, one after the other. `If I don't see your lips I can't tell what you are saying.'

5
15.03 p.m.
The people who run the EU and the country really do want to control every aspect of our lives. According to a consultation document released today by HMRC the latest plan is for something called `centralised deductions'. Under this scheme employers will use the electronic payments system to send all their employees' gross earnings to a central computer where deductions will be made according to calculations done by HMRC. All this will happen automatically and the resulting net payments will then be sent to each individual's bank account, with the deductions having been paid directly to the Government. I can see one or two possible problems with this scheme. For example, could troublesome individuals be liable to coercion from the Government which will, after all, find it very easy to stop their pay? How secure will the system be? How many mistakes will be made and how long will it take for them to be corrected? I don't suppose any of these potential problems will worry HMRC too much.

16.17 p.m.
I spotted this wonderful notice in a bookshop window this morning: `We No Longer Except Book Tokens'. The sign was very nicely printed and had clearly been produced by a professional. Or maybe it had been produced by a `proffesional'.

17.43 p.m.
Am I the only one to have noticed that Britain is now full of people who are very good at finding ways not to do good things; finding ways to say `no'; finding ways to defend the inequities of a broken system and of allowing only change (described as progress) which further defends the wicked. It used to be just senior civil servants who protected themselves by saying `no' to every request for permission to do something. But these days the disease has spread all the way down to the lowest pencil pusher in the steaming pile. And the disease has spread sideways into corporations too. There are a good many million people in Britain today who would willingly work as concentration camp guards if they were promised an index-linked final salary pension scheme, a non-contributory health care programme and six weeks paid holiday. Too many people refuse to think for themselves. Too many people are unwilling to trust their own ability to make decisions. Too many people have lost all sight of the meaning of common sense.

6
14.01 p.m.
I was standing in a queue in the bank. `I'm not going to say anything about her,' said a woman to her companion. She feigned an air of superior restraint. `There are a lot of things I could say, mind you. But I am not going to say anything.'

There was a loud silence. It seemed louder than gunfire and it lasted for several lifetimes. Everyone knew that in saying nothing the woman had said more than if she had ranted and raged for an hour.

The silence was eventually broken by the woman who had vowed not to speak.

`Nothing,' she said, holding up a hand as though she was resisting unspoken entreaties to speak about the subject she herself had banned. `Not a word.' She shook her head and scowled. `Not one word.'

The silence resumed. It was the most impressive and most destructive speech of condemnation I had ever heard.

I went to a café while The Princess went shopping and while there I made up the following list of Coleman's Rules, simple rules of thumb which might help make life go more smoothly.

1. When you find a product which works efficiently, effectively and economically the manufacturer will stop making it. So buy a few extras.

2. Expensive pieces of equipment invariably break down the day after the guarantee runs out. So give them a good work-out as the final day of the guarantee approaches.

3. You never really need a second helping of anything - especially pudding.

4. When you are invited to give a speech and the person inviting you assures you that you will only be expected to talk for half an hour remember that it will invariably take at least half a day to get there and at least half a day to get home. And you will take 50 times as long to research and write your speech as the speech will last. (So the average half hour speech may take up five days of your life.)

5. Stop eating the moment you think you might have had enough to eat and you won't ever get fat.

6. Electrical equipment is coming down in price so fast that the old stuff isn't worth having repaired professionally. Take a deep breath, chuck it away and buy something new.

7. If you are self-employed then 20% of the work you do will be responsible for 80% of the money you earn.

8. Never buy a piece of kitchen equipment or a tool that doesn't have the maker's name permanently engraved upon it. If the maker isn't proud enough to identify himself he probably doesn't expect the item to last long enough for you to be satisfied with it.

9. A caller who dials the wrong number will always ring again two minutes later and will seem just as surprised to find that they have the wrong number as they were the first time.

10. When you get put on hold by a telephone call stacking system an automated voice will stop you concentrating on doing anything else by apologising every 30 seconds.

11. If you file it you'll never need it again. If you don't file it you'll never find it again.

12. If you want to get anything done you will have to make a nuisance of yourself - and become unpopular with at least three people.

13. When things go wrong the most obvious and best solution will be the one no one likes to suggest because everyone will assume that such an obvious solution can't possibly be any good.

14. People under 60 invariably arrive late. People over 60 invariably arrive early or not at all.

15. Something you didn't really need but bought anyway will always appear in the sale, at a heavily discounted price, within two weeks. But if you don't buy it then it will never appear in the sale.

16. The quickest way to check out a nursing home is to sniff the moment you walk through the door. If you can smell urine walk straight out again.

17. When you start a new job, or move to a new area, be wary of people who are very friendly and anxious to make you feel comfortable.

18. When you unwrap your shopping the waste packaging will not fit into the bag you used to bring the items home with you.

19. People who do nothing but criticise are like eunuchs. They know how it is done. They have seen it done. But they can't do it themselves.

20. Never fight a bureaucratic organisation. You can't beat a large organisation because it will always have more time, more patience and more money than you have. Organisations don't get tired, they don't feel guilty and they don't become embarrassed. Nor do they worry about losing their jobs. If you want to win, pick a fight with a specific individual within the organisation.

7

10.05 a.m.

When I had parked the car I walked to the ticket machine and found a ginger tom sitting on the ground looking up. It was clearly waiting for a stroke. I put my money into the machine, and then bent down and stroked the cat. It purred loudly. When the machine whirred to let me know that it had digested my money and done its business, I reached out and removed the ticket from the little slot where they appear. `Look,' I said to the cat, `I won!' The cat brushed against my hand and the ticket, clearly sharing my delight. I then stood up and turned to leave. There was a man standing behind me, waiting to put his money into the machine. He looked terrified.

12.08 p.m.

After attempting to buy train tickets I have decided that it is not stupidity which annoys me as much as gross incompetence. I always have difficulty buying train tickets. A task which should take no more than five minutes often takes half or three quarters of an hour. To try to speed things up I wrote down exactly what I wanted. I wrote down the time of the train I wanted to catch on the outward journey and the time and date of the train I wanted to catch on the return journey. I noted that I wanted first class tickets and that I wanted tickets for two passengers. I gave the station I wanted to leave from and the station I wanted to go to. Direct trains travel regularly between the two. The woman clerk got everything wrong. She gave me second class tickets. She gave me tickets for the wrong train. She gave me tickets for a train travelling at the wrong time. Every time she gave me the wrong tickets I pointed out the mistake and gave her the tickets back. By the time she had finished and had given me the correct tickets there was a mound of tickets in front of her. Then I reminded her that I had asked for a receipt. She demanded that I give her the tickets back. I did so and watched carefully as she mixed up the correct tickets with the mound of wrong ones. When I had finally got my tickets and my receipt she scowled at me. `I wish people wouldn't write things down,' she snarled. `It was all your fault that I got confused.'

17.52 p.m.
Time after time estate agents offer us houses which have a garden, or a field next door which is being sold separately. Sometimes the sellers have acquired planning permission and so they want a huge price for the piece of land they are selling. If you don't buy the extra land then you stand the risk of living next to a building site for a year and then having a house with a neighbour just yards away. We saw a house where the owner wanted another £200,000 for a field no more than half an acre in size.

We have so far seen three houses where the garage was being sold separately. On two occasions the vendors had obtained planning permission to turn their garage into a house. So if we had bought the house we would have no garage but another house in our garden. We saw a house where the field beside it, a mess of scrubland, was being sold for another £75,000 even though it had no planning permission and was patently useless since it was almost vertical and would have proved quite a challenge to a gardener fitted with crampons.

8
11.38 a.m.
We travelled on a train, in a quiet carriage, with a friend who is a show business reporter. The first 20 minutes of the journey were disrupted by the noisy chatter of four minor television celebrities. They were gossiping nastily about one another and about people they had met. They were being particularly cruel about various producers they knew. Eventually, our friend had had enough. He got up and walked down the carriage, spoke quietly to the four minor celebrities and then walked back to our table. The celebrities had gone silent. `How did you do that?' asked The Princess, impressed. `I told them I'm a show business reporter,' he said. `I warned them that I could hear everything they were saying and that if I heard another peep out of them I would print everything they said.' The Z listers were silent for the rest of the journey.

15.04 p.m.
A Bournemouth paper carried a review of a book *Animal Miscellany* which The Princess and I wrote together. The reviewer managed to spell my name incorrectly and went on to complain that the book contains `a deluge of emotive language and opinion that serves to alienate potential readers'. The reviewer then adds `however, such a flaw only pops up sporadically'. The Princess said she is very proud to have mastered the sporadic deluge at such an early stage in her career as a writer. The review isn't all bad. The critic describes the book as `highly interesting and extremely useful' and gives it three stars. Which is better and slightly less patronising than one star and `see me after school'.

9
19.16 p.m.
An American visits and insists on going to a cricket match. We take him to Lords and into the Pavilion. The gateman, whom I don't think I have ever seen before, looks at my MCC pass smiles and says: `Lovely to see you, again, sir.' I'm pretty sure he's never seen me before either but I always love that sort of nonsense. Naturally, our guest has no idea what is going on. Eventually, he admits that he doesn't like sport very much. I am not surprised. The Americans are no good at sport. They play netball, rounders and an embarrassingly wimpy version of rugby in which players are dressed up in acres of protective padding. When the British Empire collapsed we left the world with cricket, football, rugby, tennis, golf and a hundred other sports. When America collapses it will be remembered for introducing Mickey Mouse, barbed wire and very little else.

21.45 p.m.
A reader complains that some of my books are written in a `bitty' style. The truth is that I find it harder to write books this way than to write them in the old-fashioned way. But many readers do like books that are written in chunks. I did this first with *England Our England* and I've used the style several times since. It isn't an original idea, of course. The world's biggest ever bestselling book, The Bible, is written in a bitty style.

10
15.19 p.m.

A friend who locked his keys in his car when he got to his office tells me that he solved the problem by ringing his wife (who was at home) and asking her to fetch the spare key, hold it next to the phone and press the remote unlock button. While she was doing this my friend held his phone next to his car. His car then dutifully unlocked itself. I was very impressed by this.

18.36 p.m.
Two days ago we were sent smart, steel and glass, squirrel proof bird feeders by a reader in America. Today, we found the bird feeders broken up into bits and distributed around the garden. Teeth marks show the identity of the culprits. The squirrels were, I swear, sitting in the trees laughing. English squirrels (even of North American origin) are clearly cleverer and more industrious than their cousins across the Atlantic.

11
11.36 a.m.
The Princess telephoned the hospital to see if they had the results of her tests yet. She spoke to a secretary who reported that the letter telling her whether or not she has motor neurone disease has yet to be typed. And when it has been typed it will still have to be signed. The Princess asked if the letter could be faxed. She was told it could not. Her symptoms are worse than ever. The muscle twitching is really bad. To add to her problems an entire tooth filling fell out (probably because of bruxism caused by the extra stress). The hospital (it is the Frenchay Hospital near Bristol) could teach the CIA a thing or two about torture techniques.

12
13.09 p.m.
To take our minds off the missing hospital test results the Princess and I went shopping and separated to buy presents (mainly for each other). We arranged to meet at a local café. I got there first and when I entered the couple in front of me were trying to pay for two coffees with a credit card. They were having all sorts of problems. First, they couldn't decide which card to use. Then the machine rejected one card. And on and on it went. I caught the assistant's eye, quietly asked for a coffee and put the money down on the counter. He served me and I was sitting down, sipping my coffee and reading a book of Graham Greene stories in French (I was struggling) while they were still working out how to pay for the cooling coffees on the counter. Why do people insist on paying small bills with credit cards? It wastes time and it's bad security too. Around 90% of all high street transactions are now done using credit and debit cards. Oh, how easily folk are led into bad habits. Earlier in the day I had stood behind a woman taking for ever to pay £2.95 for a birthday card with a credit card. It was one of the platinum cards and she flashed it around a lot, making sure that everyone could see her using it. I said something about cash being quicker. `Oh, this is much safer than cash,' she said. `No, it's not,' I said. `There are eight of us standing behind you and we all saw you key in your pin number. We're probably all honest but have you heard of credit card fraud and identity theft?' She grabbed her card and rushed out of the shop. `Cash is so much classier, don't you think?' I said to the assistant, who beamed approval.

17.18 p.m.
A cricket match is being played between two teams made up of women. Women cricketers used to wear nice little white dresses and blouses. They looked like women playing cricket. These players are all dressed like men. Until they do something, and start playing, it is difficult to tell that they are not men. They seem to be enjoying themselves but I can only assume that the spectators are relatives or friends.

21.11 p.m.
Working on ways to promote books it occurs to me that perhaps we could offer free adverbs and adjectives with all our books. `You only pay for verbs and nouns.' Maybe we would give the punctuation away as an extra added bonus.

13
11.31 a.m.
I telephoned the hospital. The registrar is off sick. The letter telling The Princess whether or not she has motor neurone disease has been typed. But it is sitting there waiting to be signed. I told the secretary to whom I spoke that the inmates of Guantanamo are treated better. She said that the letter would be sent when ready. I then pointed out that we have been waiting nearly three weeks to find out whether or not The Princess has a fatal disease. Three weeks of sleeplessness. Three weeks of fears and tears. I also pointed out that we have not once met her consultant

yet. I added that when we went for nerve conduction tests two other men (one of them not medically qualified) had been invited to watch. I told the secretary that The Princess had been extremely embarrassed when told to remove her tights in front of three men. There was no screen and no nurse. I added that I have a medical degree, am a registered and licensed GP and am a Professor of Holistic Medical Sciences and finally I said that under all the circumstances it might be a good idea if they faxed the letter to us that afternoon. An hour or so later the fax machine purred into life and the fax came through. All the tests were negative. The Princess does not have motor neurone disease. The Princess says she is not going to the Frenchay again and that she would rather just wait to see what happens. I will write more about The Princess's treatment in the book I am writing about health care. Meanwhile, I will endeavour to make her well with love. Stress, anxiety and unlove can cause illness. I believe that love can cure it.

We are too drained to celebrate.

But not too exhausted to thank God.

14
11.18 a.m.
Jewish American Bernie Madoff is reputed to have stolen $65 billion from the people who trusted him with their money. He was, in truth, just a small time crook. The really big tricksters are governments and huge international industries. They are people who cheat and fiddle really successfully, taking advantage of trust and innocence to steal unimaginable amounts of money from the citizens of the world. Vaccination and vivisection are two of the best known, long established frauds but AIDS and genetic engineering have done very nicely for their enthusiastic supporters over the last decade or two. Now, the fastest rising fraud is climate change; a brand new industry built on innuendo, threats and the insane beliefs of a few well-connected lunatics and apparently independent experts. The planet may, or may not, be getting warmer but there’s no evidence proving that any change is man-made. I would report the Government's latest climate change advertisements to the ASA but the chances of that wretched little organisation finding against the Government are approximately the same as the Government suddenly being overwhelmed by an irresistible urge to tell the truth. (The ASA, the Advertising Standards Authority, is a private body which has the power to put out press releases but it cannot ban advertising.) I have reluctantly come to the conclusion that it is now impossible to change things in Britain because the media is bent and there is no longer any real debate on big, important issues. The BBC, being a mouthpiece for the Government and the European Union is the worst offender but it is not the only one. I've yet to see a proper, honest debate about any of the significant issues facing us on any British television channel. And I don't have great hopes that I will.

14.40 p.m.
I was interviewed by a journalist who talked incessantly about herself, her plans, her career, her hopes, the book she was planning to write, the second book she was planning to write after she'd finished that one, the interesting people she'd interviewed and so on. Then she spent some time moaning about unfairness at work. She should have been promoted but hadn't been. After nearly an hour of this I looked at my watch and apologised for having to leave. `Oh you can't go,' she said. `This is such a useful interview!'

15
10.51 a.m.
There is much talk in the newspapers about the importance of DNA evidence. I wonder how many people realise that DNA residue can be transferred easily from one person to another simply by shaking hands. So if a bad person shakes hands with a good person and the bad person then goes off and commits a crime he might well leave some of the good person’s DNA at the scene of the crime. And the police will then arrest the good person and be able to produce DNA evidence at the trial. I can see that the authorities might prefer this knowledge to remain with the few rather than be shared with the many.

14.46 p.m.
It is often said that self-publishers should only publish books that a `proper' publisher would have bought and published. I can understand why people say this but it isn't true any more. Many of my most successful books would, I feel confident, have been turned down by London publishing houses. No one would have published *Gordon is a Moron*, for example. And, of course, *Alice's Diary* was turned down by just about every publisher in London. People who work for publishing companies these days are terrible at understanding which books will sell and which will not. This explains why there are so many successful remainder shops selling books that publishers can't get rid of in the normal way. And it explains why so few publishers actually make a profit.

16.01 p.m.
When I rang the bank to ask them to move some money from an account they asked a series of security questions including: `What's the overdraft facility on this account?'. Puzzled, I said I didn't know. The bank employee pushed. I said I wasn't aware there was one. `So what's your answer?' he asked. `There isn't one,' I replied. `That's the correct answer,' he said. The Princess said if they are going to ask trick questions they should allow us to phone a friend. `Actually, I failed anyway,' I said. `He then asked me for details of the last cheque to go through the account. Naturally I have no idea when cheques are presented. I had three attempts but failed and was disqualified. I didn't get to the third question.'

18.32 p.m.
An actress is recommending that people borrow books instead of buying them. `This is a great way to save the environment,' she is quoted as saying. And I think people should stop going to films and theatres because of all the pollution and oil usage. People should stay at home and read their library books.

19.01 p.m.
I've had an e-mail from someone offering to write free articles for my website on any subject of my choice. The only payment I have to make is to provide free links, embedded in the articles. I suspect there will be ads and plugs in the articles too. This is reason 827,373 why the Internet is totally unreliable as a source of information. I will close my website before I accept free articles from someone else. I've also made a policy decision not to accept links. I don't know why. I just have.

21.49 p.m.
I have decided to sort through my books. Throughout the sorting I will apply four criteria: Will I read it again?

Will I consult it? Is it valuable? Does it have sentimental value?

16
11.14 a.m.
Today's mail includes a long letter written on a length of wallpaper, a letter from a reader who complains that my books seem to tumble out of my head, a note from a sailor who asks to meet to discuss his new 250,000 word book, a letter from a woman demanding that I join her local campaign against incineration and waste disposal (I've already explained to her that the decisions about such matters are made by the EU and so there is no point in campaigning locally) and a lovely letter from a Bilbury reader who writes: `I hope there will be a new one before or for the Christmas season. I always look forward to the next Bilbury novel. I wish there could be one every year, as I like them so much. They give me a feel good factor and leave me happy and smiling. So, Vernon, I hope you have good news for a grateful, long standing fan of Bilbury village life, and its great characters'.

14.53 p.m.
When I was writing *The 100 Greatest Englishmen and Englishwomen* I was initially astonished at the number of great people who spent at least part of their lives in prison. The explanation, of course, is that many great men and women are intrinsically rebellious and therefore especially likely to get into trouble with the authorities. And, after all, no one ever did great things by agreeing with the establishment; no one ever changed things for the better without having original ideas. And original ideas are always an anathema to the establishment.

17
14.47 p.m.
I was about to pay for fuel at a petrol station and was looking for sweets to buy. The place was deserted except for a couple who had clearly just been guests at a wedding. He had a white carnation in the buttonhole of his ill-fitting suit. She wore one of those outfits that women only wear to weddings. They had clearly been discussing something in the car. `Well,' said the woman, clearly putting an end to the conversation. `I still think that a wedding without an organ is a big disappointment.'

When I got back to the car I told The Princess what I'd heard. `I suspect it was a bigger disappointment to the bride than anyone else,' she said.

15.38 p.m.
We stopped for a coffee at a very pleasant café. It was surprisingly busy. The terrace at the front of the building was

packed with people relaxing, smoking, drinking coffee and eating cakes. I asked a waiter I recognised if they had any free tables. `Only right at the back,' he said, apologetically. `These days we're always full with these damned people.' I raised an eyebrow, hoping for more. `They're mostly Romanians and Poles,' he explained. `They don't work but they have money to sit there all day drinking coffee and smoking. I rush around waiting on them for a pittance and I'm helping pay for them to sit there and have a pleasant time in the sunshine.' I suspect that he is not the only one to feel resentful. There is, as I pointed out many years ago, going to be an explosion against the immigration policies the EU has forced us to adopt. Those who advocate multicultural policies have no idea just how many problems they are creating.

18.21 p.m.
We spent the afternoon in Wells and had a picnic on a bench overlooking the moat around the Bishop's Palace. We decided to play a game of I Spy. ‘I Spy something beginning with B,’ said The Princess. After ten minutes spent naming the objects around me (bench, bird, book, bag, etc.), I finally gave up. ‘You win. What’s the answer?’ The Princess looked at me incredulously, as if I should have had the word ‘dunce’ emblazoned on the front of the Panama hat I was wearing. ‘The answer is bee,’ she sighed. ‘But there is no bee,’ I exclaimed looking around. ‘Well, there was one earlier but you took so long guessing that it flew away long ago.’

The picnic was rather spoilt by the fact that some idiot had painted green paint on one slat of the bench we chose. This wasn't an official painting - it was a practical joke. The Princess ruined a beautiful new skirt and I ruined my favourite pair of trousers.

22.04 p.m.
The Princess's father, who lives alone well over 100 miles away, telephoned to tell us that he has been diagnosed as having a deep vein thrombosis. His doctor told him to make his own way to the hospital tomorrow morning. This is utter, absolute lunacy. A deep vein thrombosis is a serious problem and needs to be taken seriously. It took some fancy work on the telephone (including a good many threats) to get him admitted to the local hospital. People who think the NHS is wonderful, and who defend it, are usually quite ignorant of just how bad things are.

18
10.09 a.m.
A disabled man has been given taxpayers’ money to go to Amsterdam to have sex with a prostitute. His social worker says he is entitled to this because sex is a human right and to refuse would be a violation of his human rights (makes you wonder if rapists will ever be arrested if this becomes common policy). I don't pay tax so that men who don't pay tax can go to Amsterdam to have sex with prostitutes. Why can’t they have sex with English prostitutes? Don't they need the work? Or is it somehow more acceptable if foreign women are sexploited? And what about people waiting months for tests or surgery? Or people losing their jobs because of EU red tape? Or people living in shop doorways because they have no home? Or soldiers dying without proper equipment in wars we are fighting so that Blair could get pally with the yanks and boost his fee earning capacity? Don't they have human rights? It is my human right to express my views and the only way this is available to me is through books. Maybe I should write to the council to ask them to let me know how many copies of my book they will be buying.

12.04 p.m.
The Princess confessed to me that when she was young and growing up in a part of Wales where there was a high level of unemployment among young men, her ambition was to marry someone with a job. With some sadness I pointed out to her that she had failed in this since I do not have, and never have had, a job.

18.46 p.m.
Campaigners want motorway speed limits reduced to 50 mph or even 40 mph in order to save oil. I wonder if they realise that reducing speed limits would result in cars using up more fuel. When fuel consumption and speed are plotted on a graph it is clear that 56 mph is the ideal speed and gives the lowest consumption of fuel per mile. High performance cars may give the best consumption figures at speeds of 70 to 80 mph. And, of course, there will undoubtedly be more accidents if speed limits are reduced to the point where drivers are regularly falling asleep through boredom.

20.12 p.m.
I've been reading *Bounder*, a wonderful biography of Terry-Thomas by Graham McCann. I found this wonderful quote from Terry-Thomas about someone he knew. `There's a fellow called Telfer who makes more pork pies than

anybody else in the bloody world, old boy. So the Americans went and asked him how he did it - incentive schemes, graduated bonuses, productivity scales, vacation benefits, you know the kind of thing. `No,' he kept saying, `no, I never do anything like that, no, I just let `em turn the bloody things out the best they can. Oh, there is just one thing - every so often I goes down to the yard and I bawls, `Faster you fuckers!'

22.13 p.m.
I beat my chess computer today after a hard game that has been going on for three days. Afterwards, I actually felt sorry for the computer. Sometimes I think I might be too sensitive for my own good.

19
15.33 p.m.
A 90-year-old war hero has been killed on his own doorstep by a mugger who stole £40 from him. Sadly, I doubt if anyone will take the killing seriously. No one cares much about old people in our society. Ageism is built into our world. When the film of my novel *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War* came out, the *Sunday Times* dismissed the film in a way that could only be described as ageist. I wrote complaining that the review had dismissively and patronisingly described the movie's audience as `undemanding oldies'. I asked if the editor would have printed `undemanding women' or `undemanding gays' and pointed out that I had written the novel on which the film was based to draw attention to exactly this sort of rampant ageism.

17.06 p.m.
We went to a house today where the prospective sellers took us on what can only be described as a `tour' of their home.

It was all done very professionally.

They began together, and introduced us to their hallway as a twosome. And then he said: `My wife will now show you the drawing room.' He then disappeared and she gave us the five shilling tour of the drawing room. Since it consisted of a standard, rectangular, boxy room with French windows and a fake fireplace (fitted with a gas fire) it shouldn't have taken her more than a minute. She stretched it to five by pointing out all the electrical sockets and explaining how the radiators worked. These things are important but on a first visit they are not going to make a purchaser take out his pen and sign anything.

As we left the drawing room, she announced: `My husband will now show you the library.' And she melted away, though we did not know where she went. The library turned out to be a very small room that had been fitted with shelves and which contained a few paperbacks and a very large collection of glass models of elephants. I take more books with me when I go on a train journey that is likely to last more than an hour. It is a constant surprise to me how many houses contain very few books. I think The Princess and I probably push up the national average to a decent level but most of the houses we have looked at this year have contained very few books. There are usually a couple of cookery volumes, written by television chefs, in the kitchen and one or two curled up paperbacks in the bedroom. But that's it.

And so the tour continued. He and she alternated between rooms. And when we `did' the garden we `did' it in a foursome. He would point out one plant and she would give us the name of the next one. He opened the door to the shed and pointed out its virtues and she explained the unique qualities of the six foot by four foot greenhouse.

We left, exhausted.

As we drove away The Princess turned to me: `Do you think we should have left a tip?' she asked.

`I left a couple of quid in the souvenir ashtray by the front door,' I told her.

20
12.16 p.m.
I met a man in a bookstore today who started talking about things he had seen and heard about on the news. He had a definite view about everything but his most bitter complaint was about people who opposed his views. `I hate people who are dogmatic,' he said.

15.41 p.m.
Two days ago various industry bigwigs complained about the nonsensical and time wasting and expensive security rubbish at airports. Today, predictably, there is news of a bomb found at Heathrow. The bomb was actually found in a postal package being carried as cargo and a White House expert said al Qaeda was probably responsible. `They are very innovative and creative,' said the security expert. Damned right. No American would have thought of putting a bomb into a parcel and posting it.

17.55 p.m.
The Web is a mystery to me. Our books are often sold on the Web as `new' at less than half price. In some instances I can buy my own brand new books cheaper on the Web than they cost to print. Since we don't even sell them at that sort of discount to the wholesalers I can't help wondering where these books come from. Before the official publication date my book *Bloodless Revolution* was being sold, new, for £2 on Amazon. I had not started selling the book and no review copies had gone out. The only copies which had left Publishing House had been copies which I had sent to buyers for some of the larger bookshops. So, that is where those books could have come from. I'm still puzzled about the origin of all the other books. Whenever I have a new book in from the printers there are brand new copies being offered on Amazon within days. The books are sold at prices that no bookshop could possibly match. And the books are on sale before any readers have bought copies.

18.03 p.m.
I feel like an idiot. I know where all the books that are being sold on Amazon come from. Whenever I send hardback books to paperback houses, offering them the opportunity to buy the rights, copies of those books appear on Amazon within days. The bastards don't bother to read or assess the book, they just bung it onto Amazon so that they can make a few quid. How utterly pathetic publishers are these days. And, of course, review copies also appear on Amazon within days of being sent out. These sellers are stealing money from me because they are dramatically affecting my ability to sell copies. I can, however, get round this by only sending out review copies a few months after I have offered the books to my readers and have sold most of the copies I expect to sell. The reviewers will still damage my backlist sales so I will keep that problem to a minimum by dramatically reducing the number of review copies I send out. I reckon that if we send out 200 review copies, around 50 will end up on Amazon. We lose the price of the book we send out, the postage and the profit on the book we don't sell because they sell their copy.

21.44 p.m.
I've made another decision. My early books were well reviewed but I've been getting fewer and fewer reviews in recent years. As my sales have gone up so my review coverage has gone down. I can deal with this by not sending out any more review copies. Simple.

21
11.01 a.m.
I have been sorting through books for several days now. So far I have thrown out 35 books and retained approximately 14,965. This isn't going well. I think I will abandon the exercise and just keep everything.

16.39 p.m.
I read the results of the interview I did a week or so ago. I know it is about me because it mentions my name but that is all I recognised. Women feature writers are the nastiest by far. Most of the rancid features are written by women; they are the rabid attack dogs of wherever Fleet Street is hiding these days.

18.07 p.m.
There is much talk about the EU forcing the Government to put VAT on books. I have a plan for this. I will give away the books free and charge £20 for p&p. There is no VAT on stamps.

19.01 p.m.
The authorities are constantly encouraging people to report neighbours, friends and relatives whom they think may have broken the law or be acting `suspiciously'. I received two letters from readers who were confused by the conflict between their desire to act responsibly and their perception of their civic duty. The first was from a reader in Lancashire who wrote: `A man has just moved into a house across the road from us. He lives on his own and hardly speaks to anyone. However, the other day I was watching when he had a computer delivered. Should I inform the police in case he may be a paedophile?' The second was from a reader in Leicestershire who wrote: `My neighbour regularly has underwear which is of two different sizes on her washing line. No woman could possibly wear bras which are of such different sizes. Only her and her husband live there. Do you think that her husband could be a transvestite and if so should I report them to the police?' I have for some time had no doubt at all that the Government is deliberately changing the way we think about one another, and encouraging suspicion and fear. Equally, I have no doubt that they are extremely successful in their aims.

22
09.24 a.m.
It is announced today that oil has been found in Afghanistan. Oh what a surprise this is. I remember writing that the invasion of Afghanistan was about oil right from the moment the damned war started. We spent some time wondering who was the last person to invade Afghanistan successfully. Our American friend Ed wonders if it was Alexander the Great. I think he's probably right. The Princess suggested that we should rename the Ministry of Defence the Ministry of War. And she's right, of course. It used to be called that until the Orwellian spin-doctors changed it. It is possible to argue that the last war we really had to fight for our own survival was probably the one against Napoleon.

15.16 p.m.
It occurred to me today that I find it harder to obtain accurate information now than I did before the Internet was invented. In the bad old days I could obtain journal articles with relative ease from libraries. These days everything is digital and the good, reliable, relatively honest stuff is mixed in with the bad, unreliable, completely dishonest stuff. Sorting the wheat from the chaff takes forever.

I also find it harder these days to find people prepared to do what they say they will do, and to do it when they say they will do it, than I did before the EU introduced approximately 250,000 laws to `protect' me from myself. I don't need protecting from myself; I need protecting from thieves, crooks, bankers and eurocrats.

18.08 p.m.
A reader wants to produce Hungarian editions of my books. He says that he is arranging for a translator and asks me if I would like to publish the Hungarian editions myself. Another reader wants to know if he can borrow a copy of my book *2020* for a week so that he can read it. He says he will send it back when he has read it.

23
09.05 a.m.
I received an e-mail from a reader who said that he has heard of a fellow who has received a cheque for £3,000 from the Rural Payments Agency for not rearing pigs. Apparently, the most money he ever made when he reared pigs for a living was slightly less than half this so the not rearing pigs business is clearly a great improvement on his original business plan. My correspondent says he rather fancies getting into this business, which is obviously another EU wheeze designed to help the bureaucrats get rid of some of the billions leftover when they've eaten and drunk as much as they can, and the French farmers have filled all their barns with euros. He said he intends to write to the Ministry with a number of questions. How does he keep a record of the pigs he hasn't kept? Can he get a bigger cheque if he increases the number of pigs he doesn't rear? Is there a limit? Can he claim tradable carbon credits as a reward for the fact that the pigs he isn't keeping aren't producing methane gases? And since the pigs he doesn't rear won't be eating any food how much can he claim for not growing cereals to feed the pigs he's not rearing.

It all sounds surreal. But the sad thing is that it isn't surreal at all. On the contrary, it is very real. It's what we have come to expect from the European Union. If I heard that the EU had decided that prisoners should be allowed six weeks holiday a year I would believe it. And so, I suspect, would everyone else.

24
16.54 p.m.
I see that in national newspapers and journals there were 3,700 references to `the elephant in the room' last year. The cliché is clearly fast becoming the one to beat. Just ten years ago it appeared a mere 175 times in the press. Indoor elephants are, it seems, now breeding like rabbits and I expect the Government will soon form a quango to look into the problem.

17.02 p.m.
I received a note to tell me that my father's sister has died. She was, I think, the last of my relatives. I rang her when my father died. I had only ever spoken to her once before - over half a century earlier - though before he died my father had spoken to her quite regularly.

The last conversation I had with her is permanently etched on my memory. `I'm afraid I have some bad news,' I said. `Your brother Ted has died.'

`Ted?'

`Your brother.'

`Oh. Can I have his wheelchair then?'

20.47 p.m.

A reader has sent me a copy of a remarkably inaccurate piece about me which he found on the Internet. I despair about the stuff that is found on the World Wide Web these days. When my book *Living in a Fascist Country* was published not long ago those journalists who dared to write about it made no attempt to hide their sneers and sniggers but the *Daily Telegraph* had a particularly good time making fun of me and the book (though the journalist who wrote the piece didn't speak to me and I have a strong suspicion that he didn't even read the book so he was writing from a pretty comprehensive level of ignorance). His article would have won prizes for inaccuracy. Some people die in vain. I suspect that this fellow will live in vain, which is far worse. I sent the following letter to the then editor of the *Telegraph*, someone called Will Lewis.

`I don't usually bother complaining about inaccurate articles about me but the piece on the Daily Telegraph website by John Sutherland is so bad that I have to say something.

1. Sutherland (the journalist who wrote the piece) claims I drive a Rolls Royce on the proceeds of bestsellers published by myself. Two mistakes here. First, I don't own a Rolls Royce. I once had a vintage Rolls but I sold it in the mid 1990s. Second, although I do publish UK editions of my books I have also been published in the UK by (among others) Sidgwick and Jackson, Macmillan, Thames and Hudson, RKP (in hardback) and Penguin, Pan, Arrow, Corgi in paperback.

2. Sutherland states that my latest book is How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You. Wrong. HTSYDKY was published in 1996. The date is published in all my books so I can only assume that Sutherland didn't bother to look at any of my books before writing his piece. The book still sells well, and has recently been published by publishers in China and Germany, but it's not my latest book by a long, long way.

3. Sutherland sneers at my comment that `Doctors are officially one of the big three killers'. Sutherland should do some research. He'd see that I'm right. Iatrogenesis is a major health problem and a significant cause of death.

4. It was representatives of the meat industry (not doctors) who complained about the meat ad Sutherland quotes.

5. Sutherland claims that I publish my books from my kitchen. Really? With around 60,000 books in stock and six in-house employees? This is the most commercially damaging remark in the piece. I have quite large contracts with printers, wholesalers, agents and others. Publishing House is, in fact, quite a large building and I could no more run my publishing business from my kitchen than you could edit the Telegraph from yours. Sutherland's comment suggests that I'm a dabbling amateur. I think that's pretty damaging, don't you?

6. Sutherland scoffs at my book Living in a Fascist Country. Pity he didn't bother to read that one before scoffing. If he had done so he might have understood what it is about.

7. Sutherland implies that I publish my own books because they are unpublishable. If he had bothered to ask anyone at Publishing House, or to read my website, he would know that my books have been published in 24 foreign languages (all by other publishers) and that large print, audio and serial rights are frequently sold to British publishers. A multi-million pound film starring Pauline Collins was made of one of my self-published novels. Three of my self-published novels have sold over 30,000 copies apiece in hardback (not counting large print and audio editions). Unpublishable? I bet your lawyers wouldn't like to try defending that one in court.

8. Sutherland claims that all my books have been distributed by myself. It's true that some are sold by mail order. But vast numbers of my books have been sold by quaint little places called bookshops. If Sutherland had bothered to do any research he would know that my books have been in the Sunday Times Top Ten and the Bookseller Top Ten (which, as far as I know, only measure bookshop sales).

9. Sutherland's piece is accompanied by a photograph which is, oddly enough, the picture used on my website. I don't suppose he just helped himself to it?

10. Sutherland claims that ads for my books will be found in `surprising respectable places'. Indeed, this is true. I only advertise in respectable places. To date a total of 290 display ads have appeared in the Daily and Sunday Telegraphs - producing revenue for the paper of over £500,000.

I don't know who John Sutherland is, and I don't know whether the Web version of the paper aspires to the same standards as the earthly edition, but in the days when I wrote for the Telegraph (both varieties and the magazine) I would have been fired for such sloppy journalism. The curious thing is that if I were a singer and produced my own records Mr Sutherland would probably think what I did exciting and praiseworthy. But choosing to self-publish and standing apart from the literary establishment is, for some reason, perennially unacceptable. I'm pretty much past caring about that. But I do object to the damaging inaccuracies. A questioning journalist might have wanted to know why so many people buy my books and why I sell more books than many middle sized publishing houses. But that would mean thinking up questions and then going to the trouble of asking them.

It would be nice if you could arrange for this letter to appear on the Telegraph website, alongside Mr Sutherland's piece, so that `our' readers (I would guess that, after 290 display ads, at least 50,000 of your readers *are also my readers) can read the two together. What do you think?'*

I didn't hear a word from the editor; neither a reply nor an acknowledgement. And as far as I know they did not print a correction or an apology. I wonder if they would have been so lackadaisical if the article had appeared in print rather than online.

Curiously, the *Telegraph* started to refuse accepting advertisements for my books after I sent my letter. I have no idea why the paper feels so much angst. I was a regular contributor to its pages a few decades ago when it had a reputation for reliability, respectability and honest journalism. But I suspect that some of the new young staff on many of the London dailies don't like the idea of an author making a living by self-publishing books. When I was interviewed by a journalist from the *Sunday Telegraph* she said to me: `So, you write whatever you like, and there is no one to tell you that you can't publish something?' I agreed with that. `And you make a living at this?' Again, I agreed. `And you enjoy it?' I said I did. She looked at me, with loathing all over her face. `Isn't that rather self-indulgent?' she said.

25
19.18 p.m.
We went to Wells today and wandered around the Cathedral again. What an amazing treat of a place it is. Everything is so old. The cathedral clock is 700 years old, there is a street of houses called Vicar's Close (21 houses on each side, all with tall chimneys) which is 500 years old. The cathedral itself was begun in the 12th century and finished in the 13th century. Many of the inhabitants of Wells seem old enough to have been there at the time to celebrate the completion. The Princess said she was a little worried by the fact that although the cathedral is only 900 years old it is, in places, already showing signs of wear. I said I thought it was just a sign of the sort of shoddy workmanship commonplace at the time.

We sat on one of our favourite benches overlooking the moat around the Bishop's Palace, put up our large MCC umbrella and ate our picnic in the rain. People hurrying past, with collars turned up, looked at us in astonishment but we were cosy and dry. We ate cheese and cucumber sandwiches, completed an enormous crossword in a woman's magazine I had bought for The Princess and watched the ducks who were sheltering under a tree. I had never seen ducks sheltering from the rain before. In addition to a number of ducks there were four cygnets, one swan, some moorhens and a great many pigeons.

I sent an e-mail picture of the Palace from my iPhone to an American friend who lives in Thailand. He replied that he liked buildings like that and that they had lots of old buildings back home in America. I didn't tell him but the oldest building in America is actually a fort in Florida which dates back to the 16th century. I'm pretty sure that I have socks older than that.

Afterwards we very nearly bought a house. Neither of us was particularly taken with the house but it had a vast, spreading, horse chestnut tree in the garden and it was clearly preparing itself for a bumper season. I thought that if we worked quickly we might be able to complete the sale before all the conkers had fallen. I've always wanted my own conker tree. I have only ever once envied someone. I was at junior school with a boy whose father worked for British European Airways (now part of British Airways, of course) as a navigator. Each autumn the boy's father used to come back from France with several carrier bags full of conkers. To small boys in the 1950s conkers were better than sovereigns. They were the only truly acceptable currency and in addition to playing with them you could buy toy cars, marbles, string and even penknives. There was virtually no television in those days and our games were dictated by the seasons.

We made an offer for the house but were quickly gazumped by a couple who were borrowing virtually all of the money they were prepared to spend. Reluctantly, almost unhappily, we raised our offer but were quickly outbid again. It seems bizarre that `real' money should be so easily outbid by `Monopoly' money. I don't think the money seems as real when it is borrowed as it does when it has already been earned and saved. We retired from the bidding process and then both admitted that we were pleased we hadn't bought the house. `We'll get back to you if the deal falls through because of a problem with the bank lending the money,' said the estate agent. I told her not to bother.

We had tea in a hotel and listened to a conversation between a short, stout woman in a tweed suit and a short stout man in corduroy trousers and a well-worn tweed jacket. He had several maps and a guidebook on the table in front of him. They were talking about his plans to retire from his teaching post, take his pension and then take additional work as a supply teacher. `I'll earn more than I do now and work half the hours,' he said. `We'll still have the long holidays and we can take long weekends whenever we like.' She agreed that it all sounded pretty good. She then started talking about her friend, Doreen. She said that Doreen’s husband, Philip, who works for the Post Office, is retiring at 50 and plans to do wedding photography. `He has one of those digital cameras,' she said. `And he can do it cheaper than anyone else because he gets a good pension and doesn't need to earn all that much. It's just a nice hobby really. Doreen says it'll keep him out of her hair for a couple of days a week. And the bit of money it brings in will help with John.'

I felt quite angry when I heard this. We have a reader who is a professional photographer. He is struggling to survive. Fewer people are getting married these days and the rise in the number of photographers offering a cut price service has devastated his business.

And then I realised that the woman's tone had changed. She was now talking about John, Doreen's son. `He's got a 2.1 in economics but can't get a job anywhere,' said the stout woman. `He's back home living with Doreen and Philip.'

`It's this recession,' said the stout man. `It's the bankers who are responsible for it all.'

It didn't occur to her or her husband that it isn't just the bankers who are responsible for the financial mess we are in. It didn't occur to them for a moment that by retiring early, on massive taxpayer funded pensions, they were a big part of the problem. And nor did it occur to them that by doing part-time jobs at cut price rates they were putting honest, hard working people out of work.

21.39 p.m.

My books are carefully and deliberately ignored. Newspapers and magazines won't print reviews. Bookshop chains won't stock my books. Major newspapers and magazines refuse to accept advertisements (even though they are desperate for advertising income). Television and radio stations refuse to do interviews even though they are bombarded with letters from my readers asking them to carry interviews. My books sell only by word of mouth.

Whingeing a little (as writers do better than most people), I asked The Princess why she thought I seemed to have so many important enemies. `I don't get any reviews these days,' I moaned. `And although they sell well round the rest of the world my books are banned everywhere in Britain.' The Princess said she thought it might be because I had annoyed so many members of the establishment. I said I couldn't have annoyed that many people. `I hardly ever speak to anyone,' I said. She thought for a moment and then asked if she could have a piece of paper and a pencil. I gave her both. Less than ten minutes later she gave me this list:

People Vernon has annoyed (a lot) with his books:

1. The entire medical establishment.
2. The entire publishing establishment (including publishers and agents).
3. The drugs industry.
4. The meat industry.
5. America.
6. The entire alternative medicine industry.
7. All social workers.
8. The tobacco industry.
9. Most of the national press and most broadcasters.
10. The vivisection industry.
11. HMRC.
12. Farmers and hunters.

`Gosh,' I said.

`I haven't included politicians,' said The Princess. `Or the European Union. Or bureaucrats everywhere. Or civil servants.'

22.03 p.m.

A company called Zurich UK has been fined £2.275 million for losing the personal details of 46,000 customers. I was one of their customers and had huge rows with them. They seemed quite incompetent and I'm not surprised they managed to lose so much.

It would be nice if some of the money they've been fined were used to protect or compensate the customers. It would mean a nice little pay out of £49.45 for each customer. But it won't be, of course. It will, instead, simply be used to hire more quangocrats.

23.28 p.m.

A company has written offering me several hundred dollars to allow them to put a small advertisement on my website. This is by no means the first such offer. Making money out of the website (and using it to buy advertisements promoting the website) is an attractive idea. But it seems far too practical, logical and sensible. So I'm sticking to my decision not to take any advertisements for the website until it seems less rational.

23.56 p.m.

Although he died a couple of years ago I have still not finished sorting through my father's papers. Sorting through them today I found a huge pile of correspondence between my mother and the Department of Health and Social Security. She had worked most of her life, though some of her working life coincided with the Second World War and so she wandered about and lived in various ports where my father was stationed. (He was in the Royal Navy). Here's one of the letters selected at random, from the Exeter branch of the DHSS. I was particularly impressed with the final sentence.

Dear Madam,

I am writing with reference to your enquiry regarding your title to retirement pension. Your papers were referred to the `Pre 1948 Insurance Section' at the Central Pensions Branch and they have confirmed that you have no title to any basic pension. Perhaps it would help if I explain that the present National Insurance scheme did not start until 5 July 1948 and that contributions paid under the Contributory Pensions Act in force prior to that date, could only count for retirement pension purposes under the present National Insurance and Social Security Acts, if they were in payment at that date, if a person ceased to be insurably employed prior to that date, the insurance continued in a free insurance period for one and a half to two and a half years, which meant that if a person started to pay contributions again within that one and a half to two and a half year period the contributions paid prior to 5th July 1948 could be counted for retirement pension purposes under the present scheme. If however a person ceased to be insurably employed prior to 5 July 1948 and did not enter the new scheme within the one and a half to two and a half year period, pre 5 July 1948 insurance then terminated and could not count later. I hope this explanation clarifies the situation to you.'

The letter was signed `for Manager'.

I read this several times but however hard I tried I could not prevent my eyes from glazing over. After I had typed it into my computer I had to read each word to make sure I'd copied it in accurately. I have. My poor mother never did get the pension she'd paid for though they did eventually pay her a small pittance every week. Two months after she died they sent a letter claiming that they'd accidentally put an extra fortnight's money into her account and demanding it back forthwith. My father sent them a cheque. I would have told them to collect it.

Poor mother.

If I were psychoanalysing myself I would be much taken with the fact that my mother never told me that she loved me. I know this with certainty. I remember one evening visiting her in a hospital. She was lying in a private room in the BUPA hospital in Exeter. She had been diagnosed with breast cancer (which had spread) and she was due to have a mastectomy the following morning. We were alone in the room. I took her hand, looked her in the eye and said: `I love you, Mum.' She looked back at me but said not a word. Not a word. I was living in Bideford at the time. I was devastated and drove back home from Exeter in under an hour. The tears were pouring down my cheeks so rapidly that on several occasions I switched on the windscreen wipers by mistake.

26

12.35 p.m.

A woman who saw a cat in the street, stroked it and the popped it into a wheelie bin is the subject of a great deal of anger. I suspect that there will be a lot more inexplicable behaviour in the months and years that come because of the stress we are all under. I hate what the woman did but I can't help feeling sorry for her. The curious thing is that most of the millions who attacked her neither think nor do anything about cruelty to animals. We claim to be a nation of animal lovers but we allow some pretty terrible things to take place on farms and in laboratories. I once sat in a pub where four people I'd never seen before sat at the next table. One of them was a vivisector who worked in a laboratory. He boasted about how he made rats unconscious. He said that instead of bothering to sedate them he picked them up by their tails, swung them round and hit their heads hard on the wooden top of his desk. He illustrated this claim with the appropriate hand movements. His companions laughed uproariously. I have long campaigned against animal experiments and my name is not unknown to those who favour vivisection. As I left I stopped at their table, looked into the eyes of the vivisector and thanked him for the insight. I then told him my name. The look on his face was a small comfort.

14.57 p.m.

I don't want to buy a house where the previous owners have obtained planning permission to turn the garage, the barn or the potting shed into another dwelling. I don't want to start a building company and I don't want someone else building in my new garden. And I know that the previous owner will want more for the house because he will believe that the planning permission has added value to the property.

Nor do I want to have paying guests or lodgers living in the annexe, the cottage at the bottom of the garden or the spare wing of the house. Today, for the umpteenth time, we were told that the current owners rent out part of their house and that by doing so they bring in a useful additional income. I suspect that their need to do this explains why they are selling but I try to grin and make suitable noises.

I once dabbled in property development. I bought a huge building in North Devon. I immediately sold off two cottages (one at each end of the main building) and so effectively acquired the large house in the middle for nothing. I paid a local builder to repair it, paint it and generally make it look good and then let it out to holiday-makers. I will never do this again. I remember receiving a telephone call one Sunday morning from the tenants complaining that the fridge wasn't working. I managed to find a replacement, took it round and installed it. Since it was a Sunday morning, in August, I was quite pleased with this. The tenants were not impressed. They simply moaned that they'd had to eat the ice cream they'd had stored in the freezer compartment and wanted to know if I was going to pay for it. Since they'd eaten the ice cream, rather than having to throw it away, I thought this rather a cheek but I paid them because it was easier. I don't want to be a landlord again.

27

15.15 p.m.

My life is being taken over by time consuming crap. There are rules governing absolutely everything we do. And for every rule there are at least 12 forms that have to be filled in. The tax forms used to be the bane of my life. But these days it is rules about the collection of rubbish which drive me mad. The council regards our time as of such little value that it now expects us to spend our days washing out tin cans and jam jars (have you ever tried to wash all the remaining bits of jam out of a jam jar?) and peeling the labels from all the bottles and cans we have finished with. The idiot who thought up these rules is obviously unaware that the world is desperately short of water. He or she is also obviously unaware that using hot water to wash out cans and bottles uses up vast quantities of energy. And the regulations about the disposal of many items are so absurd that if I am not careful I will soon spend my entire waking day trying to get rid of stuff I no longer need. It is, for example, against the rules to put used torch batteries into the rubbish. Every time I have a couple of `dead' batteries I am supposed to ring the council to ask them for their latest disposal regulations and to then take the batteries to the `used battery disposal centre'. I've had enough. Today, I wrapped a broken shower unit and a used printer cartridge in a black bag, took them into town and put them into a rubbish bin. I've also broken up a cracked Belfast sink which the council refused to take away. I'm going to distribute the sink among waste bins all over the town.

21.53 p.m.

I long ago came to realise that the loudness of an individual's speech (for example in hotels and on trains) is in inverse proportion to their intelligence and the value of what is being said. The only conversations worth listening to are conducted in whispers.

On the train back from London today we sat in our usual seats in the quiet carriage but the peace was spoilt by a fat woman talking very loudly on her mobile telephone. After putting up with this for 50 miles or so I leant across and politely pointed out that we were all sitting in a carriage where the use of mobile telephones was prohibited.

`Do you know who I am?' demanded the woman, glowering at me. She had the look of a civil servant, self-important and pointless. I looked at her. I was tired, hungry and it had been a difficult day. I wanted to say: `You're a fat, loud woman in a dress four sizes too small for you who is annoying the hell out of me by talking very loudly in a quiet carriage.' But I said nothing and just glowered at her.

She went red, glared at me, picked up her bags. `I am not staying here with such rude people,' she said, and stalked out.

Unfortunately for her she headed into the second class carriage. And so two minutes later she came storming back through in search of the only other first class carriage.

Oh what fun.

28

11.02 a.m.

Something called the youth Olympics is apparently taking place. I can't imagine why. If the athletes are any good why aren't they competing in the real games? Why doesn't someone organise a Senior Olympics for people over 60. That would be worth watching and an inspiration to couch potatoes everywhere.

14.51 p.m.

I picked up a copy of a beautiful edition of *The Memories of Dean Hole* recently. (It cost me 50 pence in a second-hand bookshop. In my book buying world this still seems to be the default price.) It is hardback, beautifully bound and pocket-sized. Hole’s book is a beautiful account of people he knew (both famous and not famous) and today I read of his meeting Charles Dickens for the first time. On his way to Gad's Hill, Hole met a man he knew who was on the staff of *The Times*. The reporter told Hole that President Lincoln had been assassinated and Hole duly passed on the news to the novelist, adding that the assassin had not been apprehended because the pursuers had taken the wrong turn when following him from the theatre. Dickens, writes Hole, smiled and there was a twinkle in his eye. `Ah yes,' he said, `when the man pursued turns to the right, and the men in pursuit to the left, the difficulties of capture are materially enhanced.' Beautiful. Hole also reports that there was a tiny grave, tombstone and epitaph in the garden at Gad's Hill and he adds that the inscription read: `This is the Grave of Dick, the best of birds, born at Broadstairs, Midsummer 1851, died at Gad's Hill Place, October 14th 1866.' That's a good age for a canary.

29
11.57 a.m.
A paperback publisher has sent back a copy of *Mr Henry Mulligan* (which was offered for paperback rights) with a note thanking us for the manuscript and saying: `If Mr Coleman wishes to be published he must first find himself an agent.' It is dispiriting to know that there are people working in publishing who cannot tell the difference between a hardback book and a manuscript.

12.45 p.m.
There seems to be some confusion about why fewer Britons are emigrating. Economists, politicians and commentators are all puzzled. The consensus seems to be that people are happier now and don't want to leave. When I read this I rolled around on the floor. The real answer is that people can't sell their bloody houses so they can't leave the bloody country. None of the economists spotted this, though it is probably painfully obvious to any half-wit with O level woodwork or a diploma in hairdressing.

We went to Taunton and The Princess waved to a pleasure boat on the river Tone. A dozen older citizens waved back enthusiastically, all smiling as people always do when they wave to or from a boat. `It's always old people and children who wave,' I said. `I'm 38,' The Princess reminded me.

21.34 p.m.
This evening our fourth and last digital radio suddenly stopped working. Over the last few years we have spent a small fortune buying digital radios. They all cost several hundred pounds each and none of them lasted more than a few months before stopping working. We agree that we were never impressed by the quality of the sound they produced and that we both found them no easier to use than old-fashioned analogue radios. We have dug out our old radios (the sort that used to receive the Light Programme and the Home Service and which now receive Radios 2, 3 and 4) and will use them until the Government puts a stop to broadcasting in the old-fashioned way. If our experience is anything to judge by it will, I suspect, be some time before the digital radio revolution becomes established.

30
14.05 p.m.
The Deputy Prime Minister (the awful Clegg) claims that high earners are tax dodgers, that anyone who uses an accountant to reduce their tax bill is morally wrong, that he will set up debt collecting agencies to collect tax money (as though the tax people don't have enough powers and enough nastiness) and that they will use lie detector tests on taxpayers. Oh how wonderful.

18.07 p.m.
`I finished my first book today,' The Princess told me. `It only took me four weeks to read it,' she added. I must have looked as puzzled as I felt. `It's a joke,' she explained. `I've just made it up.' She coughed and swallowed and rearranged her face to let me know that the joke was continuing. `I'm really pleased with myself,' she said. `On the back of the book it says 'Suitable for five to six years.'

I asked if I could steal the joke and use it in a book.

She said I couldn't.

31
11.24 a.m.
Search engines such as Google have enormous power. One senior Google employer is quoted as having written: `We won't (and shouldn't) try to stop the faceless scribes of drivel but we can move them to the back row of the arena.' So, who does Google decide are the `faceless scribes' and what do they define as `drivel'?

12.36 p.m.
In the back of a book from Faber & Faber I found a pre-paid postcard. On one side was the address of the firm. On the other side a section listed books which I could order. And underneath this section was an order form which asked: the type of credit card I wanted to use, my name, the card's expiry date, the card number, my address, my signature and the date. I wonder how many innocents fill in these cards and send their private details through the mail on a postcard. I am surprised only that Faber & Faber forgot to ask for the book buyer's date of birth. That would have made life even easier for identity thieves and credit card crooks.

15.18 p.m.
The next time we are stuck in one of those manufactured traffic jams (there's been a slight bump in the slow lane and so the police close off both carriageways and all nearby airports) I will try to remember to be grateful that we don't live and drive in China where they've just had the world's worst traffic jam. The line of cars and lorries was 60 miles long and some drivers were stuck for 20 days. Locals living near to the jam made quite a good living out of selling food and water.

September

1
10.48 a.m.
It has been announced that the ASA is going to police the UK's Web entries and online marketing. The announcement was made in a way that might encourage some people to believe that the ASA is a statutory, quasi-legal group with proper authority. It's none of these things. The ASA is a private organisation with no authority whatsoever. It is no more able to ban advertisements than I am. Its staff and costs are paid for by the ASBOF levy. Advertisers pay a percentage of what they pay for advertising to a bizarre little organisation called ASBOF which then hands great wodges of cash over to the ASA. I think the idea is that this somehow separates the ASA from the big, powerful advertisers and lobbyists - the drug companies, the meat industry and so on. When I first started advertising I had grave misgivings about the ASA but my advertising agent was aghast when I refused to pay the levy. He, like many others, thought the levy was compulsory and was astonished when he found out that it was not. I was so disgusted by the arrogant way the ASA operates that I stopped opening their letters years ago and warned them that if they contacted me again I would report them to the police for harassment. I've even reported them to the Office of Fair Trading. (The OFT accepted my complaint and told me they were keeping the ASA under surveillance.)

One of my many complaints about the way they operate is that the ASA allows anonymous complaints. This means that if a drug company wants to `ban' a book it simply gets someone in the office to send in a complaint on plain notepaper.

Another reason to dislike and distrust these snivelling pawns of the establishment is that the organisation just isn't properly independent. One of the people who helped `ban' an anti-vivisection advertisement of mine just happened to be employed by the cosmetics industry. The ASA said it didn't see anything wrong with this. In my view the ASA is (like the Press Complaints Commission) effectively employed by big advertisers to police its industry and to ensure that no one else does it.

Curiously, I found that the only adverts of mine that aroused the interest of the ASA were ones which affected particular industries (such as the drug industry or the meat industry).

The ASA is widely thought to be an official body. Infuriatingly, *The Financial Times* describes it as a `regulator'. Even Michael O'Leary, boss of Ryan Air, who seems to hate the ASA almost as much as I do, wrongly thought it was a quango when he wrote to me about it in 2008. Because the ASA is a private organisation with no official authority it is impossible to protest about its decisions, which it promotes and publicises with great pomp. It has, over the years, managed to convince many journalists that it really has authority and can ban advertisements.

I don't take any notice of the ASA these days so I don't know whether they're still `banning' my advertisements or not. It doesn't really matter. The `bans' don't make much difference. *The Guardian* and *The Observer* were the only newspapers which refused to take adverts for my books because they were `banned' by the ASA. They pompously refused smaller advertisements on the grounds that they had been banned by the ASA. But they quickly changed their minds when I offered to buy a series of six full page advertisements in both newspapers. They then printed the `banned' adverts in return for around £60,000. All their reservations and protests disappeared overnight. I deliberately put in full page adverts for the three most contentious books we were promoting at the time: *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You; Oil Apocalypse* and *Gordon is a Moron.*

The bottom line is that the ASA is a private body, largely funded by international corporations. Journalists help them by quoting their pompous official sounding pronouncements as though they were of legal significance. The ASA is one of the most arrogant, pompous organisations in the country and probably the very best at convincing the ignorant (among which must be numbered the vast majority of journalists and politicians) that it is an organisation which has the authority its name suggests. In my view the ASA is as independent and as authoritative as I am and a mauling from this wretched organisation is, if you know its background, about as effective as a mauling from any other lobby group.

2
12.35 p.m.
There are apparently great crowds in a nearby town today. A famous author called Jordan is here to sign copies of her book. Book signings only work for celebrities. Show me a professional author who does signings and I'll show you someone who knows how embarrassing it is to sit at a desk while everyone who walks in carefully avoids your eye and the only books you sign are the ones the manager invites you to sign and which you sign (even though you know he's doing it out of pity) because it means he can’t send them back to the publisher. It is not uncommon at

these signings for the manager to attempt to reduce the embarrassment by telling the staff to line up and ask for books to be signed.

14.15 p.m.
`You will be beaten upside the head with a truncheon. And that's it.' That's a quote from Russian Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin, threatening anti-government dissidents who continue to hold rallies. At least he was honest and at least he warns people. You have to admire those qualities in a politician.

3
11.36 a.m.
I see that a court has fined a man £200 for hitting a policeman. I am minded to write to the local Chief Constable to ask if I can arrange a bulk rate direct with him. Perhaps £1,000 for six? I remember when policemen called members of the public `sir' or `madam'. These days they beat you up and arrest you if you don't call them sir and get out of the way pretty damned smart when they're coming through. The police *should* call people `sir' or `madam'. You're less likely to beat someone up if you have to be polite and respectful. The police are, after all, our servants not our masters. I can't help thinking that things went downhill when police forces started hiring midgets. The policemen are not just younger, they are also much shorter. Who decided to let small people become policemen? It was bad enough allowing women to become policemen. But midgets? The little bastards strut around looking as if they're auditioning for a part in the latest Rambo movie.

I find the police remarkably unhelpful these days. When over £10,000 worth of damage was done to my car no one could be bothered even to look at it. When Publishing House was damaged they were too busy to take a peep. When I reported my father's death as requiring police attention they ignored me. And when I reported that the Royal Mail had taken £22,000 that I didn't owe them from my account, and had then refused to give it back because they were too busy, the police metaphorically yawned and went back to sleep. There are bound to be exceptions but generally speaking the police these days are over-bearing, disinterested and rude. They mostly seem to have forgotten what their role is in society.

It isn't just the police who are rude, of course. The half-witted thugs who work for airport security arrest you for terrorism if they don't consider you to be sufficiently subservient. Take a little too long removing your shoes or emptying your pockets and they'll have you naked, blindfolded and on your knees before you can say `Tony Blair'.

4
17.32 p.m.
We went to Weston-super-Mare for the day. How the place has changed. The local council must take responsibility for turning a delightful seaside resort into a sad, depressing, characterless concrete embarrassment. Logistically there can be few better placed towns in England. There is a mainline railway station close to the town centre, a motorway just five minutes away and an airport within ten or fifteen minutes drive. Talking to a few locals we met explains what has happened. Instead of making an effort to attract wealthy commuters from Bristol and retired folk from the Midlands the council seemed to have made a real effort to attract drug addicts, unemployed hoodies and former criminals to the town. These people bring with them government money in the form of grants and dole payments. But the easy money comes at a high price, and when it runs out the town will be left with its seedy, underworld population of society's rejects. Today it is so cold that the only children in sight are bouncing on a trampoline on the beach to keep warm and even the donkeys are shivering).

We had a pot of tea in a café on the seafront. `I've learned one thing since we moved here,' said an elderly woman in a blue anorak who was sitting at the next table with a woman of a similar age. `Never look up with your mouth open.' Her companion looked puzzled. `Seagulls,' explained the woman in the blue anorak.

As we were leaving we passed a busker. I suppose she could be described a busker. She had a tape player by her side and a pile of tapes in front of her. She was playing music which I did not recognise. She had an open guitar case in front of her so that passers-by could throw in coins. She was reading a book.

5
15.27 p.m.
A quarter of junior doctors are giving up medicine because they find the training too arduous. They feel they have too many responsibilities. The sympathy seems to be with them. Ah, diddums. They are wimps. Thanks to the EU they have a 48 hour week. And that's part time work. When I was a junior doctor I shared my responsibilities with one other doctor. That's 168 hours shared between two. That's obviously a basic 84 week if we split it but we didn't because we both had to be present for consultants’ rounds so effectively we did around 40 hours a week together and

split the other 128 which made a basic 104 hour week unless one of us was ill in which case it was a 168 hour week. I have on many occasions worked 168 hour weeks, sleeping when I could wherever I happened to be when I nodded off. If other housemen were ill or on holiday we had to cover for them too.

6
11.25 a.m.
A reader was approached by a Romanian beggar in Paris and asked to write out a suitable note in English - to be handed to English tourists. My reader says that this is what he wrote: `I'm a lazy Romanian. If you are stupid enough to give me money I will spend it on expensive cakes and fine wine and I will curse you and your family.'

7
14.38 p.m.
The insurance agents who provide me with the policy for Publishing House write requesting the annual insurance premium of £1,282.76. They also enclose a standard employers' liability certificate and a note telling me that I should keep all such certificates and insurance documentation for 40 years. I am now forced to keep so many documents and accounts material that there will soon be no room left to store any of the books I hope to sell. Still, I will be 104 in 40 years time so one way or another I don't suppose I'll be much interested when the police come to take me away for not keeping my insurance documents for the correct duration.

8
15.50 p.m.
When yet another house hunting trip has proved fruitless The Princess and I often cheer ourselves up by making up fake Roy Brooks advertisements for the houses we have seen. Roy Brooks was a London estate agent in the 1960s who wrote brilliantly honest advertising copy. So after we had visited a house so close to a very busy road that when we stood in the garden we had to stand inches away from one another and shout to make ourselves heard we decided that a Roy Brooks advertisement would have promoted the house as `suitable for a deaf buyer'. And we decided that a house built on the side of a cliff would be `perfect for a mountaineer'. We remind ourselves of the houses we have seen by referring to idiosyncratic elements. For example, we talk together of the house `with the large, horrible spider in the bath' and the house `with that awful painting of a nude man in the bedroom'.

9
19.40 p.m.
We spent much of the day on trains. Our train to London this morning was delayed for an `engineering problem' which is about as meaningless as `comfortable' as applied to post-surgical patients. We had to endure endless repetitions of that most annoying sentence: `We thank you for your understanding and for your cooperation'. They don't ask if I am full of understanding and they assume that by not running up and down the train smashing windows I am cooperating. I don't understand and I don't want to cooperate but I don't have any choice. I really want to thump the complacent idiot making the announcement but I suspect that police marksmen will shoot me if I do. I would much rather feel resentful and angry and retain my self-respect than be patronised in this way.

At St Pancras there was a little light trouble over my penknife.

Penknives seem a particular target for men and women in uniforms. (What do you think they do with all the smart penknives they confiscate? Guess. And the correct answer is not `they throw them away'. Try: `Keep them or sell them' and you'll be closer to the truth.) Yesterday I read of a man who was fined for having a penknife in the glove compartment of his car. I don't understand the law about penknives. You can buy them openly, without a licence, in all sorts of shops. But if you carry one or use one or own one you are likely to find yourself in court. The law on the subject is clearly muddy.

I turned up at Eurostar with one in my pocket and a supervisor was called over to check that me and my small single bladed penknife were not likely to be a threat to the train's safety. It was a small, single bladed Laguiole, about three inches long; suitable for making sandwiches, sharpening pencils and performing tracheostomies. The supervisor inspected the knife and asked me, as a favour, to put it into my shoulder bag and not my pocket. This I happily did though I confess that I didn't quite see the point. For one thing it's difficult to force a train driver to take a train to Cuba with a small pocketknife and for another the shoulder bag was staying as close to me as my pocket. Still.

Within minutes of our sitting down on the train, the staff presented us with our luncheon trays which were, of course, complete with the usual pouch containing an array of stainless steel knives and forks. The blades on the knives were much longer than the blades of any knife I've ever owned and a fork is, of course, a pretty potent weapon.

This whole `let's ban penknives' movement is a real worry to me. There are so many uses for a penknife. And, of course, there is the question of horses’ hooves. There will be thousands of horses struggling round with stones in their hooves.

If pointed knives really are considered too dangerous, why not stop manufacturers making pointy knives and make them produce knives which are sharp but which have a rounded end (like a butter knife). They would still be useful for slicing apples and sharpening pencils but it wouldn't be possible to stab with one. Slashing, which would still be possible, is messy but far less likely to be fatal.

I find all this very depressing.

It is sad to think that the current generation of schoolboys walk around with Nintendo computer games in their pockets instead of penknives, string, conkers and toy cars. What a sad, miserable world we have created for ourselves.

I wonder if I am the only person on the planet who objects to having the obviously innocent contents of his pockets perused, item by item, by a complete stranger? I do find myself becoming aggrieved when they ask `What's this for?' when they find something, obviously not toxic or explosive, which they find amusing or intriguing. Airports and railway stations are crammed with policemen and security guards harassing and prodding law-abiding citizens. Outside, on the streets, there is little or no protection and patrolling policemen are as rare as snowdrops in August. But then the streets are filled with a dangerous mixture of muggers, rapists, thieves and murderers and it’s obviously much safer for the police to stay indoors, harassing harmless travellers. The result is that cautious law-abiding citizens don't go out much after dark. Many hardly dare leave their homes even in daylight. Town and city centres are controlled by feral youths of both sexes; drunks and drug users. They roam the streets in gangs, like extras in some futuristic science fiction movie. The police know well that nasty things happen on the streets - particularly after dark. There could even be money launderers and terrorists out there. The police and the security guards obviously don't want to be outside, in such hazardous, ungoverned territory where they might be threatened, attacked or spoken to rudely. It is safer, and cosier, to be inside, in the warm, harassing innocent travellers who are so terrified that they will remove their shoes, empty their pockets, explain where they're going and why (`What business is it of yours?' is the only sensible answer to that impertinent question) and suffer whatever indignities are foisted upon them without a murmur of protest. And so the various branches of the security services, consisting of State employees whose only concern is self-aggrandisement (it is what they are trained for) and who are empowered with the knowledge that they are acting with the power of the State behind them, concentrate their efforts in places where they know they aren't needed but where they know that they will feel comfortable, safe and warm and where they can be patronising, officious and pompous without having to endure a moment's fear that someone will talk back to them or bop them on the nose for being impertinent for if that were to happen, and the perpetrator were to escape unpunished, the spell would be broken and they would have to go back outside into the dark and cold real world and face the criminals who, knowing the way things are, have pretty well taken over the world.

When we finally arrived in Paris at around 5.30 p.m. (the worst time of day to try to find a taxi) we joined the queue for a taxi outside the Gare du Nord. On one occasion, while standing in this queue, we watched in astonishment as a tiny, neatly dressed man snuck under the barrier and took his place ahead of us.

I half lifted him off his feet and gently put him down behind us.

He protested loudly.

`You cheated!' I said, indignantly.

`But of course I cheated!' he replied, drawing himself up to his full height before announcing proudly and loudly: `I am French.' I was so delighted by this that I insisted on him retaking his place in front of us.

The wine on aeroplanes is invariably undrinkable but the stuff they serve on Eurostar is decent enough. Arriving in Paris after a couple of bottles I usually find that I can speak fluent French. Sadly, this miracle always coincides with the French natives losing their innate ability to understand their own language. So there I am, fluent. With no one to be fluent with.

As a result of my constant disappointments I have pretty well given up trying to speak French. Most people in Paris can understand English perfectly well and though they all think they speak English perfectly they all speak it appallingly. It's fun to turn the tables and laugh at them.

We have an American friend who has lived in France for 30 years. His main knowledge of French is the phrase `silver plate' which he seems to think means `please'. He offers this to anyone and everyone he meets as though they should be grateful that he is making the effort. He uses it as `hello', `thank you' and `goodbye'. It is, for him, the universal phrase. He is, however, enormously rich and so for him this works quite well. (Actually, I must admit that I once heard him add the phrase `mercy buckets' to his repertoire. Americans make me feel good about our language skills.) This friend is also rather deaf. He got this way smuggling gold in Asia after the Second World War. In the

Hard Rock cafe in Paris he once asked the staff to turn down the volume of the music so that he could hear what I was saying. To my astonishment they did.

22.05 p.m.
The more time I have spent in France the less inclined I have become to bother to speak their language. First, they are impatient with foreigners and rude to those trying to speak their language. They pretend not to understand and they sneer a lot. And I have also discovered that French is different in real life to the stuff I've learned. For example, in real life I need to know the French for 'tap' and 'leak' rather than being able to buy two tickets for the opera and I need to able to understand workmen who come from Romania or Russia and who speak French with the French equivalent of a broad Somerset accent. So I now generally insist that they all speak English. And this gives me a chance to sneer at them. The ones who speak English always think they speak it better than they do. They make terribly wonderful mistakes. For example, at Orly Airport near Paris there is a sign: `Retarded Passengers Waiting Room'. Wonderful.

23.40 p.m.
We listened to John Le Carré reading his book *Single and Single* on an audiotape. Le Carré is the most passionate and caring and political sensitive novelist since Dickens and he is the best reader I have ever heard.

10
12.06 p.m.
I made the mistake of trying to speak French to a workman who came to service our central heating boiler. I asked him if he had swept the chimney - the `ramonage'. This is something that has to be done by law and it is in our contract that when the boiler is serviced the chimney must be swept. He then argued with me about my pronunciation of the word `ramonage' and said he had not done it because he had left his brushes in his van. I had previously decided that the next time a Frenchman told me off for pronouncing a word incorrectly I would argue the point with him and insist that I was right and he was wrong. This, I decided, would enrage him so much that he would explode and the problem would be solved. I was so cross at the sweep's attitude (which meant that we would have to ring the company and book another appointment for the ramonage to be done) that I simply stood right next to him and shouted at him in English. This worked very well. He looked absolutely terrified and rushed off, returning five minutes later with the missing brushes. Shouting at foreigners - particularly French people - often works well but you have to be very serious about it. Just getting cross won't do at all. You need to look slightly mad and rather dangerous.

15.02 p.m.
We bought a piano in an amazing shop at the bottom of Boulevard de Sebastopol. Buying the piano was the easy part. `Did you come with a van?' asked the salesman when I had paid. A colleague of his turned up with the piano wrapped up in thick cardboard. It now seemed twice as big as it had been when we'd chosen it. `No,' I told him. `We came on the bus.' He looked puzzled. We had told him that we wanted to take the piano back with us to the apartment. He telephoned for a taxi and asked for one that is shaped like a van. When it came the driver helped The Princess, the salesman and me to put the piano into the back. I suddenly started giggling. `What's the matter?' asked The Princess. I told her that I had suddenly remembered the daft Laurel and Hardy sequence when they try to deliver a piano to a house up about a thousand steps. She started giggling too. The taxi driver wasn't amused. In trying to create more space in the back of his vehicle he had broken something. When we got back to the apartment the driver helped us to manoeuvre the piano out of the back of his van but he wasn't interested in helping us get the thing into the lift. It was by now almost twice the size that it had been when we'd first seen it wrapped, and four times as big as it had been when we'd first seen it. The Princess and I had to try to squeeze it into the lift by ourselves. Try as we might it simply wouldn't go. We had to pull, push, carry and squeeze it up five flights of stairs. Two hours later, slumped in a chair with a cup of tea in one hand and a glass of whisky in the other, I looked at The Princess. `Why didn't you learn to play the flute?' I asked her.

11
15.45 p.m.
We walked round the first floor cloisters at Les Invalides. It is one of my favourite places in the world. Whenever we go there I always wonder why architects no longer design hospitals with covered walkways so that patients (and staff) can get a little fresh air even when it's hot or raining. The Hotel Dieu, near to Notre Dame, is one of the most beautiful hospitals in the world. It is built around a garden and has spectacular cloisters (though, sadly, they now

seem to be used by members of staff taking a fag break).

17.39 p.m.
Someone called Hartnett, who is apparently some sort of senior taxman, has said that there is no need to apologise for the fact that HMRC got 1.4 million tax assessments wrong because tax reconciliation is a routine measure. If Hartnett thinks that making 1.4 mistakes is routine then it is a good job he doesn't work in the health service. This sort of arrogance is typical not just of HMRC but of the civil service zombies at large. Hartnett should be fired and put into the stocks for six weeks pour encourager les autres. But I expect he'll get a bonus, a knighthood and a bag of bones for Christmas.

12
14.25 p.m.
`Would you like a trip to Monaco?' our friend Marvin asked suddenly and utterly unexpectedly. We'd met them for coffee at Fouquets on the Champs Elysee. They live in Monaco but were in Paris on a shopping expedition. `There's so much more choice here,' said Sheila. `And everything is so cheap,' said Marvin.

Marvin likes to think of himself as a rebel but he has always been a conformist. When he was young he was a punk and thought of himself as a revolutionary. However, like all his friends, he dyed his hair green and had it cut into a bizarre, spiky style. He had a safety pin through his nose and wore torn jeans and a T-shirt with holes in it. All the pals he went around with wore the same sort of clothes and they all had safety pins through their noses. They swore a good deal, picked their noses in public and spat on the pavement with unnecessary vigour and frequency. They were a sanctimonious little band; all desperate to fit into their own little group of neo-conservatives. One by one they got rid of their safety pins, acquired mortgages and bought semi-detached houses. Now they all wash their cars and cut their lawns on Sundays and watch television every evening. Marvin, who became rich out of selling mobile telephones, has become the most staid of them all. The one really odd thing about him is that he is a fervent conspiracy theorist. Just before the end of 1999 he and his wife bought a small farm in New Zealand. They equipped it with a diesel generator and enough tins of food to have fed Napoleon's army throughout a Russian winter.

His wife, Sheila, is old-fashioned and rather prim. On the bookshelves of their apartment in Monaco she keeps books by male authors on the right side of the fireplace and books by female authors on the left side of the fireplace. None of the books has ever been read. She buys them by the yard from a bookseller in Nice. Mischievously, I once took her a present of three books by James Morris, the author who had a sex change and became Jan Morris. When we went next I noticed that the books weren’t on display.

`Stay a couple of weeks in our apartment free of charge,' said Marvin. He took the keys out of his pocket and put them onto the café table as though to seal the deal.

I stared at him as if he'd offered me a trip to the moon.

`All expenses paid,' said Marvin. `And an extra $100 a day while you're there. All you have to do while you're there is make a couple of telephone calls and switch on the lights a few times,' said Sheila, his wife. Sheila, who was born in Barnsley, thinks we are desperately poor because we don’t sell mobile telephones. Marvin thinks everyone he meets is poor.

`A couple of hours by plane,' said Marvin. `Or you can get there by train on the night sleeper. Personally I prefer the train. I hate flying. All that waiting around at airports.'

`I keep telling him that if he bought an aeroplane we wouldn't have to wait around at airports,' said Sheila.

`I'm not buying an aeroplane,' insisted Marvin, rather sharply. `If I buy a plane you'll be flying off all over the place and who will look after me?' He turned to me. `Sheila loves travelling,' he explained. He turned to The Princess. `Officially, I'm resident in Monaco,' he explained. `And to maintain my residency I have to spend at least six months a year in the Principality. Otherwise the French authorities will leap on me and I have to pay French tax.'

`The trouble is that we prefer Paris,' said Sheila. `But we don't want to pay French taxes.'

`We need someone we can trust to make it look as though we're there when we're actually here,' said Marvin.

`We just found out that the authorities are checking up on people by looking at phone bills and electricity bills,' explained Sheila. `You'd be doing us a big favour.'

`So, what do you say?' asked Marvin.

I looked at The Princess. I could tell she was as unenthusiastic as I was. Neither of us wanted to go to Monaco. `It is very tempting,' I told him. `And very generous. But I'm not sure that I can leave Paris just at the moment. We have one or two things to do. They're painting the outside of our building and we need to be here to open the windows.'

`If we don't open them the painters will probably paint them all shut,' explained The Princess.

`That's OK,' said Marvin, with a wave of a hand.

`Maybe another time,' I suggested.

`Another time,' agreed Marvin, with a nod.

17.08 p.m.
Kind readers of my books recently sent me £50 worth of free SNCF vouchers which they'd received in compensation for some problems they had endured on a trip. They sent me the tickets because they know we spend a good deal of time in France. Unfortunately, the vouchers are due to expire in a matter of days and we don't particularly want to go anywhere. We looked at the map and tried to get excited about a trip to Chartres or Fontainbleu but the weather was being kind to us and we really didn't want to leave Paris. We tried to think of friends to whom we could give the tickets but no one we knew was in Paris at the time apart from Marvin and Sheila and they are so rich that they wouldn't appreciate the gift at all. So, in the end we tied the vouchers to a large pink balloon (we always have balloons lying around) and threw the balloon, together with the attached vouchers, out of the window. I wrote `Servez-vous' with a felt tip pen on the balloon. The package landed on the pavement and was immediately picked up by two workmen from the embassy across the street. They examined the vouchers carefully and at first seemed confused. They kept looking up but didn't see The Princess or I because we deliberately kept out of sight. Eventually, with a shrug one workman took the vouchers and the other took the balloon.

13
17.34 p.m.
On the way back from a pilgrimage to Notre Dame (we didn't go in - the interior is always a melee of tourists - but just walked down through the wonderful little streets which lead there from St Germain) we stopped for a vin chaud and a hot chocolate at Deux Magots, still one of the most fashionable cafes in Paris. The terrace was packed so we went indoors, which was cooler and much quieter and sat in the corner where Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir used to sit. It was here on the Left Bank, in the streets around the Sorbonne, that the 1968 riots took place in Paris. The indefatigable Sartre, the permanent rebel, was out there with the students and a friend of mine who was working at a Paris publisher's at the time saw him hurling cobblestones at the police barricades. My friend told me that Sartre clearly wasn't very strong and the cobbles weren't travelling very far but that he was definitely taking a very active part in the rioting. The police had been given strict instructions that they were not to arrest him whatever happened and so while students around him were gathered up and carted off the increasingly lonely Sartre was left to carry on with his cobble hurling. `Arrest me!' he demanded. But the police were not stupid enough to want to turn him into a martyr and so they left him alone. `You are arresting those students!' said Sartre. `Yes, Monsieur Sartre,' replied a senior policeman. `We have to. They are throwing stones.' Sartre replied by picking up another cobblestone and hurling it as far as he could, which wasn't very far. `Please be careful that you do not hurt yourself, Monsieur Sartre,' said the policeman solicitously. After the riots were over the French ripped up all the cobbles and replaced them with boring tarmacadam which is far more difficult to turn into weapons.

The British police were never that bright. They arrested Bertrand Russell even when he was in his 90s and gave the peace protestors massive publicity. And the Americans weren't so bright either, during the demonstrations against the Vietnam War. The American police managed to avoid arresting Dr Benjamin Spock but they did make the horrendous mistake of arresting Norman Mailer who, when they eventually let him out, rushed home and wrote *The Armies of the Night*. I noticed the other day that the Russians do seem to have learned from the French. During recent demonstrations in Moscow they took care not to arrest Gary Kasparov, chess genius turned political campaigner. Putin may be a ruthless thug but he's bright enough to know that a bruised and battered Kasparov would be a public relations nightmare.

14
12.04 p.m.
It is apparently now official policy for the police in Britain not to chase motorcycle thieves who are not wearing helmets. It has been decided (though by whom I know not) that to do so would endanger the life of the thief. It will now presumably be police policy not to chase car thieves who are not wearing seat belts. The police however do chase cyclists who try to stay alive by avoiding busy roads. It has, for example, been revealed that in Manchester four brave officers swooped on an 84-year-old war veteran riding his bicycle on the pavement. The more innocent you are the more at danger you will be. After the police arrested a 59-year-old woman for sleeping in her car (apparently the police must have decided that this is a crime, even if Parliament hasn't) they claimed that she refused to give a breath sample and then flung her on the floor of a police cell with such violence that she sustained a nasty cut to her head. (The policeman who reported the authorised thug who did this was praised by his police force though I can't for the life of me see why he should be praised for behaving like an ordinarily decent citizen.) The police thug got six months in prison which seems absurdly light.

14.24 p.m.
Our bill from France Telecom arrived, accompanied as always by a leaflet encouraging me to do everything through the Web rather than by post. `Choisir la Facture sur le net pour utiliser moins de papier,' they advise me. No one seems to see the irony in sending me endless bits of paper telling me this. Every large company in the world wants me to do everything on the Web (the Government forces me to). They all claim it's to save the environment when it's really to save them money and trouble. Do they all think we are stupid? (Probably).

16.20 p.m.
This afternoon, at The Princess's suggestion, we threw a balloon out of the window with a ten euro note taped to it. It was picked up by a man on a tricycle. He rides around the arrondissement sharpening knives with an old-fashioned grindstone which he powers with the pedals of his cycle. He seemed delighted with his find. He put the note into his wallet and tied the balloon to the back of his bicycle.

The Princess loves making people happy. She has a habit of stopping people who look unhappy and poor, saying `I think you just dropped this' and then giving them a fiver.

17.38 p.m.
As we headed for the Gare du Nord the taxi driver took us on a round trip of Paris. Having done the journey several hundred times I know when someone is taking the mickey. When we finally arrived at the station and got out of the cab I swore at the driver in French until I ran out of suitable words and then reverted to English. I also told him that I wasn't giving him a tip because he was a crook. The people waiting for taxis in the queue outside the station were kind enough to applaud.

15
11.24 a.m.
Over the years I have known many people who have made the major part of their living out of buying and selling their own homes. The absence of any capital gains tax on the profits means that it is possible to become quite seriously rich this way.

I once employed a gardener who confessed that he only did a little grass cutting so that he had a small income he could declare to the taxman. He made his real money by buying houses, doing them up and selling them again. He was a professional property speculator but he paid no tax. I hope he is not still trying to work this very popular scam. I suspect that switching properties will, for the next ten years, lead to capital gains losses not gains.

The Princess and I have discovered a variation on this. We went to see house, where the owners had put up a new house in the garden. `We're going to move into the new house,' he told us, as he opened and closed the under the stairs cupboard. `So we're selling the old one.'

`We're going to stay in the new one for two years and then we're moving to France,' she said, as she showed us the kitchen cupboards.

At least they both told us the same story. We once viewed a house where the husband told us they were moving in order to be nearer their children and the wife told us they were moving because of a change of job.

The new house the couple had built was disgustingly ugly and very large.

`No tax to pay on this house and no tax to pay on the new one if we stay two years,' he explained, though that was pretty obvious. `I'm fed up with this country. I paid into Equitable Life for years and then the buggers screwed it all up. We built the new house as big as they'd let us so we'd get the maximum amount of profit out of it.'

You couldn't blame them.

But we didn't want to buy the house they were selling.

It had a huge, ugly house in the garden.

15.46 p.m.
Despite taking evasive action we saw one of our neighbours today. She always manages to say something unpleasant. As we headed back home The Princess leant close to me and whispered. `If we walked past their house and saw her husband putting something long and heavy into the car boot, and we never saw her again, I wouldn't tell anyone, would you?' I said I'd hold the boot lid open for him.

16
15.10 p.m.
One of Pope Benedict XV1's sidekicks, a certain Cardinal Kasper (who sounds like the baddie in a children's story)

is reported as having said that Britain is a Third World country. Funny thing he's right. Young people in Britain grow up illiterate, innumerate and largely feral; a frighteningly large number are whingeing parasites. One in six kids grows up in a house where no one ever works and no one ever has worked. Most children in Britain are bastards, literally and possibly figuratively too. Politicians and bankers and business leaders who have power abuse it almost without thinking and the rest of us are subjected to a constant, dispiriting and distracting series of orders, requirements and demands. Thanks to well pensioned financial halfwits such as Gordon Brown and Fred Goodwin we are about to find ourselves living through seemingly endless decades of austerity. The people whose incompetence or greed created the crisis are all being well rewarded. I see that the executive members of the Bank of England have pensions of two thirds of their final salary and they are entitled to their pensions after just 20 years of service. They don't have to make any contributions themselves. The Governor, Mervyn King, has a pension pot worth £5.36 million which is nice for him. My pension pot consists of money I have saved myself. I am limited to a total sum of £1.5 million. The phrase `one law for them and one for us' springs to mind. If the Governor of the Bank of England is worth that much pension so are the nation's lavatory cleaners and lollipop ladies. They, at least, have been doing their jobs with some degree of competence. We boast of giving the world freedom, dignity and justice but we have none of those ourselves. Britain is awash with people who live their lives with little or no purpose; it now has the largest prison population in Europe (much of it unable to read or write). Decency and respect have disappeared. Institutions that used to cherish values and traditions have been weakened to the point of breaking down. People who represent the law think they are the law. Most people smother the present with either hopes or memories. Millions are clueless, frequently apathetic and invariably in quiet denial.

The lawmakers have made a world in which people are so scared that they daren't cross the road even when there is no traffic for miles unless the little green man is visible. If the lights stop working no one will know what to do. Our last two Prime Ministers are waiting to see if they get arrested and taken before a War Crimes Tribunal. And, just like the sort of countries Blair liked to invade, we have an immensely rich and privileged oligarchy, who grab all the money for themselves, and a mass of impoverished workers who live on scraps and hope. We have no democracy: the mass of people want immigration stopped and want us to leave the European Union but have no chance at all of their wishes being obeyed. We have a parliament comprised almost exclusively of warmongers, fraudsters and thieves who want to make the world a better place - but only for them. This is all perfect Third World stuff.

In Britain today half a million more people are employed in retailing than in manufacturing. Napoleon described us as a nation of shopkeepers; now we are a nation of shoppers. We are permanent importers, doomed to deal with a constant balance of payments crisis.

Local councils everywhere are closing libraries so that former chief executives can continue to live in the sort of luxury they never deserved even when they were working. Every civilisation in history had public libraries. The final disappearance of ours will mark the end of our civilisation. It is worth remembering that most of our public libraries were built by the now often much reviled Victorians (who gave us most of our infrastructure and most of our most solid public buildings). Our public libraries are magnificent buildings which will, no doubt, be knocked down and turned into flats that no one wants to buy or into mobile phone shops. They will never be replaced. The public libraries which aren't closing are reducing their hours or concentrating solely on selling Internet access and renting out DVDs of violent and pornographic films. It's what sells, you see.

We have created a society which is driven by envy, deceit, resentment and violence. Whenever I ring the local council to complain that our rubbish has (again) not been collected, I speak to yet another bureaucrat. There must be thousands of them managing the deployment of a dozen bin men. Naturally, when cutbacks are made the bureaucrats never sack themselves. They cut the services rather than their own jobs.

Britain is a nation crammed full of people who expect free everything and take no responsibility for themselves. They expect everything but do nothing. They assume that society (the people who work) will provide them with all that they want (it goes without saying that society will provide them with everything they need). One fifth of the population have deep-rooted assumptions of entitlement. They believe, with frightening sincerity, that they are entitled to be looked after. It never occurs to them to wonder where the money comes from and it never occurs to them that in assuming the posture of servility they have become slaves. They may think that their arrogant demands give them the appearance of independence but in truth it gives them the reality of total dependence. `I can do whatever I want,' they say, and mean, `because it is someone else's responsibility to take care of me, just like they took care of mum and dad and just as they are taking care of my 11 brothers and sisters.'

We have a Government which is corrupt and deceitful, run by greedy self-serving cheats who will do anything, including murder, to protect their own interests. (The clumsy assassination of Dr David Kelly was, I suspect, merely the best known example of the State silencing an inconvenient voice. As a former police surgeon I am totally convinced that Dr David Kelly is the only person we can be absolutely sure didn't kill Dr David Kelly. I am not alone. A large number of other doctors share my view and my doubt that the truth will ever be published.) The Government wants to bully, exhaust and frighten us so that we don't believe that there is any hope that we can change things - even if we have the time and energy and it isn't illegal to complain. `What's the use, nothing is going to change?' is not just the only attitude today it is, for most people, the only way to survive without losing your sanity. I've fought for years about all sorts of things I believe in and where the evidence convinces me that I'm right - and it has been exhausting and largely pointless. The red tape becomes ever more impenetrable and most people don't care or have any fight left (or they have been brainwashed into believing the system is right and the politicians are doing their best and the bureaucrats are just doing their jobs). But the politicians, mendacious, malicious and mediocre, have betrayed everyone. Not even Profumo style disgrace finishes them. They take a few months out, write a book, make a few television programmes, do a few interviews, pose for photographs with poor children, visit somewhere foreign where there is a good deal of hunger and death (they don't need to do anything - just being there suggests that they are making amends). And then they're back. Redeemed. Forgiven by themselves.

Most people don't ask themselves if they are proud of what they do, or if they even enjoy what they do. Actually, most people don't think at all. They just do what they do and worry about the money they are making, the money they are spending and the consequences of whatever may be the difference between the two figures.

The Government is selling the infrastructure which taxpayers paid for (the bridges and the airports and the roads) and the people running them are naturally in it just for the profit.

The Cardinal is right. We are a Third World country. Suicide figures are soaring. Emigration figures are rocketing. Ambitious, hopeful people who earn and save and work are leaving in droves (when they can sell their houses). The consumption of tranquillisers, anti-depressants and alcohol is rocketing. The incidence of illegal drug use is rising and the authorities respond to this by giving drugs to those who want them. The Government lies about them but everyone knows that crime rates go up every year, every month and probably every day. Anti-social behaviour is rising. Mindless violence is becoming commoner with each new generation. Schoolchildren can't read or write but they are given happiness lessons so that they don't notice.

These are all symptoms of the basic problems caused by an inhumane, unrepresentative, oppressive government

The world used to be screwed up by lawyers and accountants and politicians and bureaucrats. But the bankers came out of nowhere and screwed up everyone (charging taxpayers for the fun of it). The bankers (largely but not exclusively American) are greedy beyond the comprehension of normal people.

The IQs of the average banker and politician (when added together) fall just between cretin and moron.

Anti-Englishness is everywhere. The Americans despise us. (The Americans laugh at us for thinking we have a special relationship with them.) Our former colonies loathe us. Our European neighbours despise our subservience to America. The Germans hate us because we beat them twice. The French hate us because we saved them twice. The Commonwealth countries hate us because we conquered them, seduced them and then threw them aside to conduct a liaison with America, France and Germany - countries which have all betrayed us so often that to the Commonwealth countries we look like battered wives, returning endlessly for more punishment.

Our world is built on fraud and sustained by greed. No one thinks much anymore: they just answer their e-mails and their texts and chatter away meaninglessly on their telephones. (What do people find to text and e-mail about?)

No one looks and sees. No one sits in a café and stares into space contemplating because no one has time to think any more. Very few people in Britain sit and read books. (They buy them as presents but they don't read them much. They're far too busy sending one another texts and e-mails which mean little and contribute nothing.)

In 2010, 9,000 public employees earned more than the Prime Minister. No less than 20,000 civil servants earned over £117,523 a year in basic salaries. On top of that they were paid bonuses they never earned and promised index-linked inflation-proofed non-contributory pensions paid for by taxpayers, as much holiday as they could stand, as much time off as they liked when feeling poorly and days at home in front of the television when the weather was inclement. A traffic warden working in Tower Hamlets in London earned £52,786 in 2010. Mind you, nasty little footballers are paid hundreds of thousands of pounds a week to kick a ball about. The heir to the heir to the throne decides to marry and an extra bank holiday is announced - regardless of the fact that it will cost the nation £5 billion at a time when we are struggling to pay off our massive Brown-induced debts.

First class train carriages are these days largely occupied by government employees, employees of Non-Governmental Organisation, charity employees, nuns and rail company staff and their relatives (zillions of whom get free first class travel). Just like any Third World country.

We are all being turned into sneaks. Even doctors, accountants and lawyers now have to sneak on their clients - without telling them they are doing it, of course. In our wonderful new EU world we can't trust anyone: neighbours, workmates, employees, employers, friends, relatives - they're all being seduced by the enemy; they're all turned into double agents.

We are importing armies of beggars and Big Issue sellers, many of them are young, fit and healthy. I am reminded of Talleyrand who turned his back on a beggar who approached him. `I must live!' said the beggar, though presumably in French. `I fail to see the necessity,' replied Talleyrand (also presumably in French). Elderly beggars are driven onto the streets by the vicissitudes of life. Many have worked hard and done everything right but have been betrayed and then ground down by a ruthless system. Young beggars are quite another thing; most have chosen to beg and for them it is a career option.

Ministers and judges have bodyguards and chauffeur-driven cars and have no idea what is happening in the real world. If they had to travel by train or bus they would see the real world and be terrified by it. It is not surprising that British politicians have failed to have much vision for the last few decades. Most of them have had their heads so far up the collective (and capacious) American backside that they have been rendered blind to anything but the next load of shit coming down their way. Now blind and firmly stuck in position, they welcome this as their reward and regard it as a proud proof of the special relationship.

Our leaders worry more about their personal legacies than our present or future. Every generation used to have a statesman. But we haven't had one of those for years. Statesmen make a few mistakes but they always learn from them. Politicians make a lot more mistakes but never admit to any of them and certainly don't learn from them.

People want low taxes and lots of benefits and haven't yet worked out that the two are incompatible. It’s like wanting to drink 12 pints of beer a night and to remain sober and slim for ever. Those on benefits (and those who think that benefits are a right and a `good thing') don't realise that Beveridge, the well-meaning civil servant who introduced benefits, insisted on setting them at a subsistence level in order to prevent squalor without promoting idleness and wanted compulsory training camps for malingerers. Poor old Beveridge would die a thousand deaths if he could see what successive generations of politicians have done with what was, originally, a decent idea.

Greedy house buyers, who bought bigger and more expensive houses than they could afford, expect to be protected by zero interest rates. The greedy borrowers wanted houses twice as big as they could afford even though they must have known in their hearts that it would all go bad. Would they have offered to pay extra tax if their taxpayer protected gambles had paid off and they'd made a ton of money out of their extravagant purchases?

The planned Government cuts are still absurdly light. If the Cameron/Clegg coalition reaches its full term it will then be spending more than Brown was spending when he left Downing Street. That's not what I call austerity. (Incidentally, I see that the EU believes strongly in Britain making a dash for austerity. However, it does not believe that the cuts should affect its own budget. While encouraging member governments to sack workers and cut services the EU is demanding a large rise in its own income. You can always rely on the bureaucrats of the EU for a display of red-blooded hypocrisy.)

The sanctimonious Clegg and the smug Cameron, a coalition of professional indifference, are united only in their awesome failure even to begin to comprehend the problems of the society they profess to be fit to lead. These are political midgets, inconsequential misshapes, crumbs in the biscuit box of political arrogance.

But what can we expect?

We live in a country full of people who think pot noodle is food and the X-factor is entertainment.

All my life I have argued with pompous, overbearing representatives of the establishment. I'm doing it with increasing frequency these days and occasionally I wonder if I am becoming less tolerant. I honestly don't think I am. On the contrary, I rather suspect that I am mellowing with age and staying silent when I would previously have made a noise. The problem is that the establishment now employs more overbearing representatives than ever before; they are ever more intrusive and demanding and increasingly pompous.

Britain is a country run by people gorging themselves at the public trough because they aren't good enough to make a living themselves. Too much credit, too much debt, too much greed. We have battalions of incompetent regulators (themselves overpaid), politicians who had no experience of the real world but who have a staunch, unwavering commitment to feathering their own nests. Central bankers, finance regulators, bank officials and all others who describe themselves as bankers have proved themselves ingloriously incompetent. Better to exchange the letter b for a w.

In traditional Britain, the voters elected the legislature which made the rules. The executive ran things according to the rules. And the judiciary decided if rules had been broken. It's all just part of a largely forgotten history now. Today, if the State were a human being even those fervently opposed to capital punishment would vote to hang it.

Britain is full of people whose only aim in life is to avoid doing anything remotely resembling hard work and who regard themselves as having a right to be kept by others, not because of any infirmness or deficiency or awful luck but because of sheer bloody idleness. No vision, no vitality, no passion, no romance, no purpose.

Children think they cannot ever fail because they have never been allowed to experience failure and have been positively encouraged to feel superior. `No fear', they say, and the sad, sorry idiots really believe it. They are unable to understand the meaning of words such as `honour' and `gratitude' and have a sense of entitlement that would embarrass royal princes.

None of the millions working for large organisations (and that includes Government departments and agencies) do what they are supposed to do any more but they all expect me to do whatever it is they think I ought to do and they want me to do it now, without waiting, without hesitation and without questioning. Isn't that a pretty good definition of slavery?

Civil servants such as tax inspectors and the thugs at airports assume that everyone is guilty until proved possibly (and surely temporarily) innocent.

We have a Parliament which is run by crooks and which ensures that hard work and thrift are punished while deceit and greed are rewarded. Local councils have bat officers working in planning departments and highly-paid pseudo specialists paid by taxpayers to teach residents how to wash their hands and how to eat fruit and vegetables. And there are, of course, thousands of overpaid, unelected terrorists paid to browbeat parents into allowing their children to be poisoned by unnecessary and dangerous vaccinations.

So scared are citizens of the forces of law and order that most people are careful to mind their own business these days. That's why there is so much violence and it’s why our streets aren't safe and our politicians can’t be trusted. Politics has become nothing more than propaganda.

Meanwhile, as the financial chaos continues the EU, Hitler's bastard love child, the great cause of our destruction, puts up its budget (including its own entertainment budget). As the euro collapses and the very foundations of the EU are threatened, so the bureaucrats continue their reckless, arrogant, spend spend spend policies. No one seems to understand that governments never create wealth. On the contrary they consume wealth. The more government there is the poorer the majority of people will be. That's the way it always works.

Today, anyone who supports or defends the EU is certifiably insane. (I say this as a licensed and registered physician rather than as a figure of speech). There are absolutely no good reasons for our membership of the EU but there are a thousand excellent reasons for our leaving this corrupt organisation. And yet, despite this, there is no major political party offering electors an opportunity to express their sanity through the ballot box. If you vote for one of the three big parties you are voting for the EU. Every bit of bad, confusing legislation comes from the EU, an accursed organisation which has made life infinitely worse by destroying our culture, our economy, our traditions and our quality of life. The EU is the most purely fascist organisation ever invented: anti-democracy, anti-freedom and anti-people. It exists to create and preserve itself and is, therefore, the ultimately statist organisation. I have absolutely no doubt that if one of the big three political parties promised to take us out of the EU (and promised nothing else) it would win the next election easily. Ironically, those who support the EU most enthusiastically are often the same people who complain most vociferously about the closure of local Post Offices, the closure of local schools and hospitals, the fact that GPs are no longer available at nights and weekends, the disappearance of centuries old regiments and the fact that many large employers now avoid EU legislation by hiring people on short-term contracts instead of giving them proper jobs. All these things are, of course, a consequence of our membership of the European Union. No one in public life dares criticise the EU for one very good reason: money. Prime Minister and traitor Edward Heath received £35,000 for taking Britain into the EU. And ever since then the EU's supporters have been swimming in money. Many organisations (such as the BBC) receive EU grants and loans.

Manners used to refer to moral aspects of our conduct. But nowadays, when people talk about ‘manners’ they are referring to not farting or spitting in a restaurant. Old time governments used to regard manners, the way of doing things, as being as important as the doing. No end was worth realising if one got there in an unmannered way. This remained our watchword for a long time. No cricketer before the Second World War would dream of cheating in order to win. Today sportsmen accept and expect cheating as part of the game.

People don't believe or trust anymore because our role models - the people we are supposed to look up to - aren't trustworthy or believable. And they don't even try to be.

Britain's young people have no passion, no beliefs, no respect for history, culture or tradition. They just have a me me me attitude, a fixation on self-glorification and attention and vast quantities of misplaced super-confidence. In the next Olympics they would win the 200 yard waddle to the unemployment office and the quarter mile dash by mobility scooter to the off-licence. They want money and know that to get it they must show silent obedience (because that is the way to get the money). They never rebel about important things. Just money.

State employees (as with employees of large organisations) have a lot of power but are frightened of making mistakes of commission. These are always regarded as being worse and less defendable than errors of omission. So they tend to say `no' as often as possible and so very little ever gets done. They say `no' because they won’t get into trouble if they don't allow anything new to happen but they might if they do. Anyone with power abuses it. (They see politicians and bankers and industry leaders abusing their power so assume that power is there to be abused.)

People who work and pay tax are disenfranchised; second-class citizens; forgotten drones. All the political parties realise they can stay in power by pleasing the people who don't work and don't pay tax. The taxpayers are the main targets of the Government’s storm of retrospective legislation.

Anyone who opposes the Government is demonised as an `undesirable political sympathiser' (undesirable to whom?). The public interest comes first. But what does that mean? The phrase is a gift for totalitarians. Dictators decide what they think is public interest.

Governments always hold the monopoly on the use of physical force. If we disobey we do so on pain of imprisonment or death (or death by a thousand investigations - and strangulation by red tape). These are powers we gave freely. But they have been abused.

Anyone who isn't angered by all that is happening should visit a doctor and check that they are still alive. Politicians, bankers, economists don't understand; they are so corrupt that they can’t see the big picture. They are also wrong more than they are right. If a small businessman (or a doctor) made as many mistakes as they do they would go bust (or, in the case of a doctor, be struck off the medical register permanently). The enormously overpaid civil servants at the Bank of England, the FSA and the rest completely failed to protect the public because they simply didn't understand what was going on. Five words describe these idiots: hugely overpaid and massively incompetent. If the regulations ensured that bankers went to prison, or went bankrupt, if they destroyed a bank through greed, incompetence or any mixture of both there would be much more sensible behaviour.

In 1757, the Royal Navy executed Admiral Byng after a court martial decision that he had failed to show sufficient vigour in battle. Voltaire commented `It is a good thing to kill an admiral from time to time, to encourage the others'.

It occurs to me that if there were such a thing as a Fourth World country, Britain would be in the relegation zone.

22.32 p.m.

This evening, we watched the film of John Le Carré's book *The Constant Gardener*. It was our third time of watching and I don't think it merits a fourth watching so I fear the DVD is destined for the charity bag. During the film, two of the characters meet and have a splendid lunch in the National Liberal Club in London. I've been a member since around 1970 and although it is nowhere near as much fun these days (much of it had been sold off to the hotel next door and, bizarrely and inexplicably, the club now allows women to wander into all the rooms as and when they will) it was gloriously, magnificently stuffy and dusty when I knew it best.

Immediately after I'd qualified as a doctor, I used to spend one or two days a week living at the club while I worked in Wardour Street in Soho as editor of the *British Clinical Journal*. (The rest of the week I worked as an assistant in general practice in Leamington Spa. Some days I did both. Somehow managing to catch taxis and trains that enabled me to appear to be in two places at once. I also worked as the doctor on TV AM, the first commercial breakfast television show. I used to do the show live at around 8.30 a.m., jump into a waiting taxi to Euston, catch a train to Coventry and drive to Leamington Spa in time to do a morning surgery. This used to confuse patients who had seen me live on breakfast television almost as much as it confused me.)

The rooms and beds in the National Liberal Club were wonderful in those days, and the bathrooms, always it seemed, 100 yards from whichever bedroom you had (unless you managed to get the bedroom they usually kept for Jeremy Thorpe which had its own bathroom attached) were massive, with very high ceilings and baths big enough to swim in. The hot water system used to clank in the morning and an elderly maid would struggle in with a cup of tea. The high beds gave a wonderful view of the river and there was always a chamber pot under the bed. In the evenings I had dinner overlooking the Thames. They had the best sweet trolley I've ever seen. The staff never blinked when I said `and a slice of that too, please'; they merrily piled a huge portion of whatever it was I'd pointed to and waited for the third and fourth addition to the already overloaded plate. In the evenings I either sat and read the papers in the smoking room (it was a whipping offence if you sat in someone's favourite chair) or pretended I was Alex `Hurricane' Higgins playing shots in the magnificent subterranean snooker room. In the morning I breakfasted in the magnificent dining room, eating at a huge round table. When decimalisation was introduced there was much confusion among my fellow residents, some of whom were the wrong side of elderly. I remember one opening his paper and nearly collapsing when he couldn't understand what had happened to his share prices. The price for all this glory, back in 1972, was £3.25 a night for a room with a view of the river and as much breakfast as a man could eat. The price used to be three guineas before decimalisation killed off the dear old things. (Both as a doctor and an author I charged in guineas until they disappeared.)

23.10 p.m.

Copies of the world’s most valuable book, Audubon's *Birds of America* sell for around £5 million (that is about five times the price of Shakespeare's first folio). It isn't widely known but Audubon published the book himself. He printed the book in the UK and sold it on a subscription basis to wealthy collectors.

14.05 p.m.
I don't suppose I am the only one who gets annoyed when hectored by rich pop stars, princes and politicians who fly around the world in private jets telling the rest of us that we should stay at home in order to save the planet. One well-known annoyance, who seems to have named himself after a brand of dog biscuit, appears to avoid tax by having his money tucked away in some offshore centre but tells governments and voters alike that they should be doing more to help save poor people.

But it isn't just the rich and noisy who are annoying. I am constantly annoyed by shop assistants tutting if they don't think I'm buying politically correct products (or, heaven forbid, asking for a plastic bag in which to carry the products back home). I find these self-righteous tutters particularly annoying because they don't understand that most of the products they think are `correct' are just a con. I find them annoying because I know most of them still eat meat (and are, therefore, choosing to condemn millions of people in poor countries to death from starvation). And I find them annoying because they don't understand that plastic bags are made from waste and that using them actually helps the planet and that cotton bags require vast amounts of water and energy to produce.

The people who make the biggest fuss about saving the planet and worrying about the environment are mostly selfish hypocrites. A team of Canadian researchers has studied people who buy green products and compared them with people who don't. They found that the people who buy supposedly ethical products are more likely to cheat and steal and less likely to take the chance to be kind than people who don't buy `ethical' products.

The explanation for this is, I suspect, that folk who make a big thing about buying `fairtrade' and who wear badges and T-shirts telling the rest of us what we should and should not do, proselyse as a substitute for being kind or nice.

Somehow I find it comforting to know that the people who boast about never using plastic bags and who are always going on about other people's carbon footprints are probably crooks and cheats. I find it reassuring to know that the people who buy fairtrade coffee probably don't leave a tip for their waitress. I find it enraging that people who adopt a child in some far-flung country then cheat on their taxes and complain to the police about the tramp trying to find a warm spot under the railway bridge they pass on their way home. I find it curiously unsurprising to know that the people who fly off to climate change conferences invest in companies that make landmines which are designed to blow the legs off small children. And I find it not in the slightest bit surprising to know that journalists who preach about the wonders of vaccination also promote drug using popsters who, by example, encourage teenagers to burn their brains and souls with illegal drugs.

I talk to The Princess and we decide that we must remember all this as the hypocrites become ever louder. As their voices seem to be ever more strident so we must give each other the strength to ignore their hysterical and ill-based abuse.

18
11.03 a.m.
There are plans to redevelop Lords cricket ground and as a member of the MCC I assume I'll have a vote in whether or not the plans go through. I suspect that members who object will be vilified as out of date and ruled by nostalgia. Change is always considered `good' these days.

I'm a non-believer and I don't see anything wrong with nostalgia. There was much about the past to be proud of. Children could play in the park or the street and were allowed to collect shiny, bright conkers, have snowball fights, make ice slides in the playground and make toast with a brass fork in front of an open fire. You didn't have to triple lock your bike when you popped into a shop or the library. For the first 30 years of my life I regularly rode bicycles and didn't even own a bicycle lock.

The past gave us Winston Churchill, Denis Compton, Stanley Matthews and Mike Hawthorn, it gave us the Campbells and Sir John Cobb, and England always held all the records that mattered. Men played cricket in whites, not pyjamas, and they played for counties not teams sounding like ice hockey franchises. It was a rarity for a professional football club to have players in the first team who weren't born in the county, let alone the country. In many clubs the majority of players were born locally. Today, there are professional football clubs which don't have a single player born in England.

Our modern world has given us John Prescott, Simon Cowell, platoons of unpleasant chefs and the Internet.

Corporate sport has destroyed the whole point of sport as entertainment. There are advertisements on the grass, and the players and there are flashing advertisements around the ground. The umpires are sponsored. It's all about money. Why? Admission fees are astronomical. Television stations pay a fortune for the rights. How much money do these people need? What's it all for?

Nostalgia is regarded as politically incorrect and verging on criminal behaviour. But it is a crucial and potent mixture of memories, culture, history, experience, learning and wisdom. Nostalgia gives our lives a basis; it gives us terms of reference. And it's as daft to disregard it as it is to wallow in it. If more people enjoyed a little nostalgia maybe more would remember why respect and honesty are so important. Maybe the public would rediscover a sense of morality and honour and maybe, just maybe, these might leak into public life.

I shall, as always, be voting against anything I get a chance to vote against. But I have a feeling that it will all be in vain.

I voted against letting women into the MCC and eventually the authorities, in typical European Union style, wore us out by making us vote again until we gave them the answer they wanted.

19

15.37 p.m.

We see a house we quite like. It isn't perfect (what house is) but we both like it and we're getting tired of looking. The sellers want £750,000 but the house has been on the market for 18 months and in that time the market has fallen considerably. Having looked around we think that the house is overpriced. We offer £700,000. Oh dear. You'd think we were trying to steal the food from their table. Sellers always seem to think that their house is worth what their estate agent says it is worth. But in reality a house is worth what someone will pay for it. Not a penny more and not a penny less. People become crazed when selling houses. The problem is that many people don't see their house as a `home' but as an investment, a property deal or part of their pension fund. They become so overcome by avarice that although they think they are behaving like property dealers they are behaving like idiots. They want a profit but they don't behave like business people. People are told that their house is worth £750,000 and so they decide that they won't accept a penny less than £750,000. That, they decide, is what `it is worth' and anything less would be theft. They reject an offer of £700,000 as utterly unreasonable. If, in another two years they finally get a buyer who pays their price they will feel that they are vindicated. They will ignore the fact that during that period they will have lost vast amounts of interest, that the house they will themselves buy will probably cost them more and that inflation will have turned their £750,000 into £650,000. They would have been far better off to accept our £700,000 but they will never understand this.

As we drove home The Princess turned to me. `There was something odd about that house.' I agreed with her but couldn't explain what it was. Twenty miles down the road The Princess spoke again. `I know what it was,' she said. `No books.' She was right, of course. There were no books in the house. Not one.

20

21.09 p.m.

Infamous war criminal Tony Blair has been awarded the Liberty Medal from the National Constitution Centre in Philadelphia. The medal has been awarded `in recognition of his steadfast commitment to conflict resolution'. I assumed at first that this was a joke. But it wasn't. Still, both Obama and Kissinger got Nobel Peace Prizes so why shouldn't Blair receive a medal. Official figures seem to show that his invasion of Iraq led to 650,000 deaths - almost certainly more than would have died if Saddam had been left where he was.

21

19.00 p.m.

I bought several lots of assorted cigarette cards at an auction in Gloucestershire recently and spent much of this evening sorting through them. For a few hundred pounds I became the proud owner of a vast collection of cards. I had a small number of sets when I was a boy but these lots were an OCD sufferer's delight. Some were in complete sets but most were jumbled loosely together into a trunk and several large boxes. Sorting them and making up sets was strangely calming. Some cards are made of silk and many are quite exquisite. There are even some very early 3D cards - together with a viewer. It is amazing to see the subjects that were chosen. There are the obvious ones (wild flowers, footballers, cricketers and film stars for example) but in the 1920s one cigarette company produced cards showing pictures and details of cabinet ministers.

22.34 p.m.

I've been reading a disappointing book about Daniel Defoe called *Beyond Belief*. The author seems to me to suspect that because Defoe was a crossdresser he must have been a homosexual. Part of the evidence for this absurd notion seems to be that Defoe was a transvestite who spent some time with other transvestites. But homosexuality is rarer among transvestites than it is among the rest of the population. The ignorance about crossdressing doesn't seem to go away. In a newspaper recently I saw a transvestite being advised to see a psychiatrist. Since when have psychiatrists offered advice on selecting lingerie or putting on make-up?

22

11.56 a.m.
Once again I've seen a bookshop selling e-book readers. I also picked up a local paper carrying a promotion for a property website. Madness. When faced with such murderous competition these folk should promote their own advantages not support the opposition.

13.04 p.m.
A woman from Liverpool wrote to say that she had hit her husband with a mirror and that the mirror had broken. `Who gets the bad luck?' she asked. She added, as a postscript: `Do you know where I can buy Dolly Blue?'

15.16 p.m.
Another reader writes to say how much she enjoyed the film of *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War*. Her letter brings back happy memories. The Princess and I saw the film in a cinema in Exeter. At the end the entire audience stood up and gave the movie a standing ovation. I don't think I have ever seen this happen before or since. As people left the cinema they were all talking about what they had seen and were laughing and enormously happy. We stood outside and watched and enjoyed. Although the film won prestigious prizes the critics hated it, of course. It was about old people.

23
12.39 p.m.
The International Institute for Strategic Studies, apparently the world's leading think tank for military affairs, says that the threat from al Quaeda and the Taliban has been exaggerated and that the war in Afghanistan is a long drawn out disaster. I'm glad they agree with me. America's head of the CIA recently admitted that there are no more than 50 members of al Quaeda in Afghanistan. There are 120,000 American soldiers there fighting them. (And a good many Britons, of course.) Bush and Blair's criminal invasion of Iraq was based on lies and faked evidence. The evidence now shows that the Iraqis are worse off now than they were when Saddam Hussein was ruining the country. At least he was ruining his own country. The same is true of their war on Afghanistan. God knows how many innocent people have been killed. In both countries the wedding parties, the aid workers and the young soldiers (on both sides) are dying as part of the grab for oil (and oil pipelines).

24
11.05 a.m.
An advertising agent we sometimes use has suggested we buy advertising space in a magazine called *The Oldie*. I had to try to explain to him that the editor, Richard Ingrams, has banned all our advertisements from his magazine. It began when a reader sent me a cutting from *The Oldie's* letter page. The letter writer said: `I was surprised and dismayed to receive the advertisement for Vernon Coleman's book *The OFPIS File* with a copy of the latest *Oldie* magazine. It claims to tell the truth about the EU, when in fact it is full of half-truths and outright lies! I trust that there will be no repeat of these advertisements by Vernon Coleman in future editions of *The Oldie* otherwise I will be forced to cancel my subscription.' Naturally, neither the letter writer nor the magazine took the trouble to define any of the alleged half truths and outright lies. I honestly don't think anyone concerned had bothered to read the book. Not wanting to waste several years of my life fighting a libel action against a curious magazine with a tiny circulation I decided to deal with the matter more directly. First, through perfectly legal methods, The Princess obtained the EU supporter's home address. (She guessed that he would have written to other papers. And sure enough, there on the Internet, was a letter from him in the *Independent* - complete with his address.) She obtained his phone number and I rang and politely confirmed that he was the author of the letter in *The Oldie*. I then wrote to him, politely pointing out that I considered his letter to be an extremely serious libel and asking for an apology. I added that if he had actually read the book he would know that it is vigorously researched. I wrote a similar letter to Richard Ingrams, editor of *The Oldie* asking that he publish an apology. Ingrams was, of course, the previous editor of *Private Eye*. To my astonishment I then received a letter from Ingrams saying: `I have no intention of printing any letter which has been written under duress. If I find that you have threatened one of our readers with libel proceedings I shall see to it that *The Oldie* will no longer accept your advertising material. I have spoken to Ian Hislop at *Private Eye* about this matter and he is considering his position with regard to your material.'

I wrote back to Ingrams pointing out that there had never been any question of duress. `Indeed, I'm surprised that you used the word since it suggests `illegal constraint' and there certainly hasn't been any of that. I do hope you don't feel you were put under duress to agree to print my letter.' I went on to point out that threatening to ban my advertisements would make no difference whatsoever and added that I was very surprised that he thought it might. `Quite what Ian Hislop has to do with any of this I cannot imagine. I haven't advertised in his magazine for some considerable time and I hope he won't be disappointed to know that I have no current plans to do so.' (I didn't bother to tell him that *Private Eye*, a rather flaccid little organ these days, had already banned many advertisements for my books such as *Living in A Fascist Country*. I was told that Hislop refused an advertisement for my book *Food for Thought* because he thought the (entirely accurate headline) *Meat Causes Cancer* might upset his readers.) Despite his bluster Ingrams did publish a letter from me pointing out that everything in *The Ofpis File* is true. But my then advertising agent subsequently told me that I was banned from advertising in *The Oldie* magazine. When I relayed this to the advertising agent he did not believe me. He did believe me when he tried to place an advertisement for one of my cat books. I suppose I should not have been surprised that Ingrams should take such exception to my defending myself against a scurrilous libel that was clearly designed to damage my reputation and the sales of a book criticising the European Union. But I can't help feeling that Ingrams was behaving like a spiteful, childish prat.

25
10.00 a.m.
I see that a retired judge (almost certainly receiving a massive, inflation-linked taxpayer paid salary) has decided that Equitable Life pensioners whose savings were devastated by officially regulated incompetence should receive compensation of around 10 pence in the £1. Pensioners-to-be got hammered by the Equitable Life debacle. The staff of the company did themselves well and the regulators missed everything, patted themselves on the back and gave one another huge bonuses. And now some judge decides, arbitrarily, that the victims should pay the price for their destruction. There is no longer any such thing as a safe or sensible investment in Britain.

The judge has apparently decided that Equitable Life pensioners should be punished because of the nation's economic mess. I don't really see why innocent and trusting and prudent individuals should be singled out for punishment in this way. Are the courts going to charge only 10 pence in the £1 on fines because of the nation's economic condition? This absurd pontification about the public purse is not unexpected. Once again all the people who made the decisions which caused our national penury escape the responsibility. Overpaid, underworked, public servants retain their index-linked, inflation-proofed, non-contributory pensions and bankers still receive their obscene bonuses while the poor sods who paid the salaries, pensions and bonuses of government regulators have to pay the price. Civil servants joyfully devise schemes that destroy private pensions while making sure that their own remain obscenely generous (at someone else's expense). I no longer trust anything any State or corporate body tells me and I no longer trust anyone working for an organisation employing more than six people. They are all the enemies of the sane, hard-working citizen.

26
11.48 a.m.
A reader from Scotland writes: `I have been told by my doctor that before I can receive treatment I must sign a `counter fraud declaration'. What on earth is this?' I hadn't heard of this before but I was astonished to discover that patients registering at practices in Scotland are required to sign one of these documents (containing sensitive personal ID information) before they can receive treatment. The declaration entitles the doctor to share the patient's information with a variety of government agencies including the UK Border Agency, the Department for Work and Pensions and HM Revenue and Customs. I gather that doctors moaned a bit about the blatant breach of confidentiality, but accepted it.

27
14.05 p.m.
These days publishers won't look at books unless they come from an agent. We sent hardback copies of one of my novels to a variety of paperback publishers and have received back a number of letters advising me that if I ever want to be a published author I must first find a literary agent. I have a number of excellent agents around the world but although I have, over the years, had a number of agents in London I have never found one with whom I worked well. My first agent, who sold my first books for me and worked at a well-known agency called Curtis Brown, told me, just before I abandoned her, that I was `a prophet crying in the wilderness'. I think she was probably right but I happen to think that society needs a few wild-haired prophets. The agents after that were even less successful. The last time I nearly hired an agent, I arranged a meeting with a chap at my club in London. He turned out to be a grubby, seedy little man who seemed keen only on negotiating newspaper columns for me so that he could help himself to 15% of a lot of money for not doing very much. He had no interest in anything requiring effort and leered at The Princess in a very unpleasant manner.

28

14.50 p.m.
I really have to decide what to do about the way we sell our books. We used to have our own webshop but had to abandon that when we stopped taking credit cards. For some time now we have sold books through a webshop which goes straight into the Amazon site and is run by them. Although our webshop takes readers direct to Amazon we have a problem: Amazon normally buys our books when they are ordered. They don't carry stock unless a book is selling. This is something of a Catch 22 problem and means that books which are in our catalogue don't appear in our shop on the Internet. We have had enormous difficulty persuading Amazon to carry books we are advertising. I would send out mailshots and buy adverts but Amazon would say `Not in stock'. Then, after they had received hundreds of enquiries and orders, they would order a huge supply. But, by then my mailshots and adverts would have finished. And so the number of people going to Amazon to buy the book would fall. And so Amazon would send back the books. This happened time and time again.

I'm told that Amazon will stock our books if we give them a 60% discount. These are not `firm' sales. Amazon can return books they don't sell. We are expected to pay the postage to send the books to them. And if they want to return books they haven't sold we pay the return postage. In addition, I must pay a fee for allowing Amazon to sell my books. So, if a book retails for £10, we will have to give at least £6 to Amazon and pay at least £2 to post the book to them. That leaves us with £2 to pay for the cost of printing the book and all the costs of running Publishing House. Since it is impossible to get anything but the smallest paperback printed for less than £2 (and even then only with a fairly large print run) it seems to me that this is a very quick way of going bankrupt.

29

16.03 p.m.
We found a perfect looking house in a pleasant village. The house had everything we wanted and the asking price was not entirely unreasonable. We offered a little below the price.

`Is that negotiable?' asked the estate agent.

Does anyone still fall for this, I wonder? If I say that the offer is negotiable then I am immediately making it clear that I will pay more. And so the vendors will demand a higher price. Only a fool says `yes' at this stage. I tell the agent that the price is fixed, firm and our final offer and that we have several other houses to see. If he comes back and rejects our offer we can always reconsider our position and say we've changed our minds.

When I said that our offer wasn't negotiable the agent said he thought the offer would be entirely acceptable and we drove off to the Snooty Fox in Tetbury, where they serve excellent coffee. We sat in front of a roaring log fire and The Princess did a little iPhone research. She wanted to find out about the community, to see what sort of clubs there were. `Maybe they'll have a cricket club,' she suggested. Moments later she handed me her iPhone. `Look at this,' she said. There was much sadness in her voice and in her eyes. I took the iPhone and read a story about the village which had recently appeared in the local newspaper. According to the story a huge number of local villagers were protesting about a request by a local farmer to have a caravan site on his land. Villagers were worried that the site would be used by travellers and gypsies and would have a huge impact on the tiny village's amenities. The planners have been inundated with objections from villagers who pointed out that the proposal could completely destroy the nature of the village, overwhelm the local school and destroy house prices in the area. There are apparently already two campsites for tourists in the village and neither is ever full. The planned site was less than half a mile from the house we were planning to buy. Our new home would be one of the first houses the campsite dwellers passed on their way to the village shop and pub. Our wonderful new home suddenly seemed like a disaster. If most of the villagers were worried about what was likely to happen we would surely be mad to move into the village. The chairman of the local Parish Council said that objections based on what the site might become in the future were not a planning consideration and would be ignored. `People need to understand,' said the chairman, `that devaluing your property or saying what it might become in future are not valid planning objections.' I found this extraordinary. For one thing local planners are hired by local people to protect their interests. And preserving the nature of a village is surely one of their responsibilities. For another, if planners aren't concerned with what might happen in the future why do they exist at all? If I draw up plans for something, the plans describe what I want to do in the future. You can't plan for the past or the present. You can only plan for the future. I went outside, telephoned the estate agent and withdrew our offer. It occurred to me as I did so that since the planning proposal had not been passed (though it seemed likely that it would) the usual sort of legal search might not have unearthed the details. We have now decided that whenever we find a possible new home we will put the name of the local village into a search engine. It's the quickest way to find out what local controversies there might be. Buying a house these days is a nightmare. I'm going to try to find out where all the local planners live. I am confident we'll be safer if we choose a village or town where they choose to live.

This is the second time this has happened to us. Just a few months ago we found a splendid looking house next to a river. The EU, via one of its wretched and unwanted Regional Assemblies, had put a gypsy encampment in the village, bang slap in the middle of a flood plain. The council reported that there was nothing it could do about the plan because it came with the official EU stamp on it.

It is difficult to avoid the thought that the EU's plan is to worry us endlessly about an endless series of lunatic new laws so that we don't have time to think about the source of the lunacy. Forcing us to provide land for gypsies and votes for prisoners are typical EU projects, designed to prevent us from concentrating on the big picture.

People argue that gypsies, travellers and others of that ilk take full advantage of the Human Rights Act and every other piece of legislation; it is said that they demand freedom and want to be left alone but they are happy to accept money from the State in the form of benefits and unemployment pay. Readers of mine have complained that such folk call themselves travellers but want permanent sites, equipped with electricity for their expensive television sets and garages for their expensive motor cars. `Isn't it a contradiction for travellers to want to live on permanent sites?' demanded a reader whose house had been burgled three times since gypsies had moved into his area. `In the old days, when travellers moved around their country they earned their living doing odd jobs and selling pegs and other bits and pieces. But when they settle in one area it is no longer possible for them to earn a living in the traditional ways. There are only so many clothes pegs a woman will want to buy. And when gypsies are given a permanent site in a small village the strain on the local facilities will be unbearable. A village school with a couple of dozen local children will suddenly find itself struggling to cope with twice as many pupils; many of them may be illiterate and require concentrated teaching attention.' None of this can be aired openly partly because it is against the law even to talk of such things and partly because people are too frightened of retribution to speak out openly.

As we ride home it occurs to us both how absurd it is that planning decisions are made by planning officers who do not live in an area. Sometimes the ultimate decisions are made by people who don't even live in the same country. Even when hundreds of villagers (often a vast majority of the local population) oppose some new development they can be overruled by a planning officer who makes a decision quite arbitrarily with or without a planning committee. (Not that planning committees are to be relied upon. Most committees have a collective IQ slightly lower than the IQ of the most stupid person on the committee. Most committees include one person who has the IQ of a walnut.) Increasing interference from Hitler's bastard love child in Brussels means that the ability of people to have any say over the control of their local environment is diminishing almost daily.

21.28 p.m.
`I don't like your books because they are all so very personal,' wrote a reader. `You always put your opinions into your books.' I wrote back: `Telephone directories, text books and dictionaries are the only books which should not be `personal'. Otherwise, all decent authors should make a personal statement in their work. And many good ones also offer a social statement or a political statement.'

30
11.47 a.m.
A few years ago people made an effort when selling their house to make it look attractive. They had the house painted and made the garden look neat and had the chimney swept and the septic tank emptied. Then about a decade ago people stopped bothering because house prices started rising inexorably and sellers assumed that they didn't have to do anything at all to present their home attractively. Now things have changed and buyers have the upper hand but sellers still haven't changed back; they still think they are in a sellers' market; they try to sell dirty, scruffy houses which need a complete overhaul, if not complete refurbishment and renovation. Gardens are overgrown. And buyers who start worrying about these things are regarded by sellers and their estate agents as unreasonably fussy. Oh how things will change in the next five years.

Meanwhile, we see house after house that needs building work, complete redecoration and a good cleaning. Even well-presented houses have tiles missing and cracked window panes. Guttering is falling away from walls and window frames and soffits need painting. The front door doesn't shut properly in damp weather and the garden shed door is hanging on by one very rusty hinge.

We have been toying with the idea of making an offer for a house we saw. Earlier, the estate agent rang and told me that another buyer had come back and offered the asking price. He told me a mass of detail about the new buyers and even gave them a name which I recognised as the name of a local village. He gave me so much information that it was patently a trick to push us into making an offer. `OK,' I said. `They can have it at that price. It's too expensive.' There was silence for half a minute. A long, long silence. He left. Ten minutes later the phone went again. `Great news!' said the agent, sounding excited. `The other buyers suddenly decided they've changed their minds again. The house is back on the market.' We said we would continue to think about it. Estate agents have a store of these little tricks. They will tell you that there are loads of people about to make an offer. `You must be quick and make an offer close to the asking price,' they will say.

15.45 p.m.
I found a story in this week's edition of the *Wilts and Gloucester Standard* which read: `A desperate plea has gone out across the nation for mangolds, ahead of this weekend's annual hurl at Sherston'. The story, which dominates pages one and three, goes on to explain that 300 of these root vegetables are desperately needed for use as missiles in the traditional hurling event. The usual grower of mangolds, who lives at Wotton under Edge was ill at the start of the planting season and then the dry summer caused the roots to split and shrink. Finally the remaining crop was hit by mangold fly. As a result of all these calamities, the Ancient Order of Sherston Mangold Hurlers, desperate to avoid the ignominy of using swedes, contacted the National Farmers' Union which agreed to ask farmers everywhere for supplies of mangold wurzels. The organisers are even considering importing from a supply from Ireland. The good news is that a total of 35 prize Yellow Eckendorf specimens have been grown. These are apparently the Normans, or target mangolds, and are due to be washed by Mangold Maids past and present at a special ceremony on the eve of the ceremonial hurl. I don't think I have ever seen a mangold wurzel but reading this story made me proud to be English.

16.05 p.m.
A workman across the street had his radio on very loudly. From our window I could see his van parked nearby and with the aid of a pair of binoculars I was able to read his mobile telephone number painted on the side of the van. I rang him, told him that his radio was far too loud and asked him to turn it down. He looked startled and looked around desperately trying to see who was making the call. But he didn't see me. He turned off the radio and the rest of the afternoon was delightfully peaceful.

October

1

11.40 a.m.

To use any sort of search engine successfully you really have to know what you are looking for. While searching Amazon for a book on the two ladies of Llangollen inevitably (and inaccurately) a variety of books on lesbian lovers came up on the search. But the most surprising book to come on the book list was a guidebook entitled *Offa's Dyke Path*. (Incidentally, when I then looked up Offa on Google I found, at the top, something called OFFA which turns out to be neither a dyke nor a footpath but the `Office for Fair Access'. This is, I assume, another bloody quango, possibly paying taxpayers' money to usurp the real Offa on a website search.)

12.37 p.m.

We keep our utility room (complete with washing machine and tumble drier) on the first floor. A visitor laughed out loud when she saw it. `Where do you keep your dirty clothes?' The Princess asked her. `In a wicker basket in the bathroom,' came the reply. `And where is the bathroom?' `On the first floor.' `Where do you keep your clean clothes?' `In the bedroom.' `And where do you have your washing machine?' The woman went slightly red with embarrassment before admitting that they kept their washing machine downstairs.

15.01 p.m.

An insurance company has written demanding that I give the name of a `designated person' at my address. This is because my address is a Post Office box. The company has used the address for around 20 years without ever wanting the name of a `designated person' before but I am now asking them to send me money and they are, presumably, looking for ways to slow things down. I pointed out that my bank uses my PO box address, the Inland Revenue use it and the Customs and Excise use it. I added that the mail travels through the Royal Mail and that the PO Box is owned and run by the Government. I pointed out that the money they owed me would be going straight into my bank account and I ended by pointing out that their own address was a PO Box.

2

10.38 a.m.

My book *2020* (a series of predictions about how our world will change by the year 2020) has sold out in two weeks. I've already decided not to reprint it. I think it is fairer to my readers if the advice in the book (which I consider `sensitive') is shared only by a relatively small number of people. A reader wants to know if I am going to write a follow up. I've told him that I am already working on *3030*.

11.34 a.m.

A house brochure came today for a property that we looked at months ago. The estate agent announces with great delight that the price has been reduced by 0.6%. I honestly don't think we are on the same planet. The house was wildly overpriced when it was first offered and it is still wildly overpriced now.

The problem is that the Government is supporting the greedy and the indebted with low interest rates and special help and, at the same time, punishing savers and the cautious. The housing market would have been much healthier if the politicians had allowed house prices to fall to a more sensible level.

Regulating house prices can really be very simple.

Here's one scheme that would work.

First, the borrower who wants to buy a house has to find 20% of the price of the property. He can borrow only 80% of the value.

Second, the lender has to be responsible for the first 20% of the loan if things go bad.

That's it.

How do I know it would work?

Because it has been working very well in Denmark for ever. It is very simple to organise and police and it automatically gives a huge incentive to banks to behave responsibly.

The buyer who wants to buy a house costing £200,000 has to find £40,000 and can borrow £160,000. If the house value falls to £180,000 the bank loses £20,000 and the buyer is still ahead.

This system provides a very simple incentive to banks to behave and to lend money sensibly and so I doubt if it will ever be introduced in Britain.

15.16 p.m.
The Ryder Cup is being played. The European team has a sort of EU flag to fly. It is blue with yellow stars. The Ryder Cup used to be played between Great Britain and the USA. Then it was between Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the USA. Then it was between Great Britain and Europe and the USA. Then it was just between Europe and the USA. Now it's between the EU and the USA. I wonder if the EU has paid to adopt the tournament. Maybe next year they will rename it the Adolf Hitler Memorial Cup to celebrate the EU's spiritual guide.

I watch only a few minutes. The American players, WAGS and supporters are badly dressed, badly behaved, boorish, noisy, rude, brutish and unsubtle.

16.39 p.m.
It is 21 years since *Alice's Diary* was first published and still the book keeps selling. And the mail comes in regularly too. Barely a week goes by without our receiving a letter from a reader offering his or her own version of the diary for politicians. These packets of prose, poetry and photographs always come without any return postage, of course, and when a particularly large one arrives I sometimes begin to understand why large London publishers often refuse to return manuscripts which aren't accompanied by enough money to cover postage and packing. But sometimes the mail isn't so complimentary. A reader has written drawing my attention to a small literal in *Alice's Diary*. This has escaped everyone's attention for two decades. `Please do not send me details of any more of your books,' she wrote. She was not from Tunbridge Wells but was, nevertheless clearly disgusted. She added that she had enjoyed the book very much indeed.

20.41 p.m.
Science fiction writers have, in the past, often written about a future in which man loses power over his world because computers and robots have taken control.

That hasn't happened. But we have, unthinkingly, lost power in a quite different way. We have lost power and handed over control of our lives to an untouchable, nebulous, almost indefinable force.

When we are feeling angry or upset with the world we often blame `them'. When we feel that we are being forced to do things against our will we blame `them'. When we feel frustrated or cheated we blame `them'. When we are hampered by injustice or wounded by unfairness we say that it is `their' fault.

But there is no `them', of course.

The man who seems to represent injustice - and who may seem one minute to be one of `them' - will, the next minute, be standing shoulder to shoulder with you sharing your complaints. The man in a suit who, when sitting behind his desk, seems to be cruel, uncaring and utterly devoid of understanding, will, when he finds himself in a different situation become nervous and uncertain. The woman who works in a government office and treats supplicants with more contempt than compassion (and who seems to her victims to be one of `them') will find herself becoming a victim if she needs to visit a hospital as a patient. The customs officer who greets passengers with a sneer and a scowl (and therefore seems to be one of `them') will lose all his authority and power when he has to queue in his local post office to buy stamps.

The men and women who seem to be `them' aren't really `them' at all. They are each of them given their temporary `them' quality by the institutions for which they work. It is the institutions which have the real power. The man who sits behind the desk is merely borrowing or representing that power. When he steps out from behind his desk (either temporarily, to go home at night, or permanently, to retire) he loses all his `themness' and once again becomes an innocent in a cruel and distant world.

If you carefully examine the way the world is being run at the moment you could reasonably come to the conclusion that most multinational corporations and most governments are more or less exclusively controlled by ruthless, James Bond villain style psychopathic megalomaniacs.

What other explanation could there be for the fact that drug companies make and sell drugs which they know are both dangerous and ineffective? What other explanation could there be for the fact that food companies make and sell food which they must know causes cancer and contains very little of nutritional value? What other explanation could there be for the fact that arms companies sell products deliberately designed to blow the legs off small children? What other explanation could there for the fact that tobacco companies continue to make, promote and sell products which they know kill a high proportion of their customers?

And what other explanation could there possibly be for the fact that bureaucrats, civil servants and politicians allow all this to happen?

There is another explanation for all these things.

For the very first time in history the main opponents of justice and fair play, the proponents of abuse and tyranny, have no human form. We have created new monsters: new monsters which we cannot see or touch (we cannot see or touch them for the excellent reason that they do not exist in reality).

Much unhappiness and frustration is caused by the fact that in our society the law is commonly confused with justice, liberty, freedom and equality. The law no longer has anything to do with morality or right or wrong. It is obviously not morally right to invade countries which haven't threatened us or for the police to shoot innocent people. And yet the legal system of our country doesn't seem to see anything wrong with these things. (Am I the only citizen who believes that killing a policeman should be a lesser crime than killing an ordinary citizen? Soldiers are paid to risk their lives in war. Policemen, like soldiers, are paid to risk their lives to protect us. It's why they are paid so well. It's danger money. In motor racing the death of spectators is always considered `worse' than the deaths of drivers who are paid to take risks.) So our individual sense of morality is not the same as the morality of our legal and justice system. The law is a compromise and, sadly, it is influenced by lobbyists, pressure groups and corrupt politicians who regard it as their daily work to interfere with the truth and to ensure that justice remains well hidden. They do their job well. In our world individuals are innocent not until proven guilty but until they are accused by the State. At that point they pretty well lose all rights. Our state has given itself the right to torture, to confine without trial, to extradite and to do all sorts of terrible things. The State's representatives can kill us without much, if any, fear of retribution.

In truth the law has very little to do with fundamental moral principles. The law exists to help society defend itself; it is used by those who represent society as a weapon with which to dominate and discriminate against individual powers and freedoms. The law is man's inadequate attempt to turn justice - an abstract, theoretical concept - into practical reality. Sadly, it is invariably inspired more by the prejudices and self-interest of the law makers than by respect or concern for the rights of innocent individuals.

These misconceptions about the purpose of our law lead to much disappointment. And these misconceptions help to create a considerable amount of underlying stress.

No society has ever had as many laws as we have and yet few societies can have ever had less justice.

Many of the laws which exist today were created not to protect individuals or communities but to protect the system. It is because such crimes threaten the security and sanctity of the system that theft and fraud often attract harsher sentences than crimes such as rape and murder which affect individuals, whose rights are seen as less significant. And there are so many damned laws. The people who make them seem to concentrate on making laws about things that really don't matter while not making laws about things which do. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that they regulate because they can. Anything which is fun or profitable will be prohibited. God managed with 10 commandments. Why do we need so many? When politicians introduce a new one they should have to get rid of an old one.

The irony is that although the law was originally introduced to protect individuals and to reduce their stresses the law has itself become a tyrant and a major cause of stress. Today few individuals can afford to take advantage of the protection offered by the law. The law oppresses the weak, the poor and the powerless and sustains itself and the powers which preserve it. The enormous costs of litigation mean that there is one law for the rich and no law at all for the poor. The result is that the law threatens and reduces the rights of the weak and strengthens and augments the rights of the powerful.

Things are made worse by the fact that the people employed by society to uphold and administer the law on behalf of the ordinary people too often take advantage of their positions to abuse their powers. The interpretation of the law is so often at the discretion of those who are paid to uphold it that those who have been hired by society become the law itself; neatly and effectively society protects itself against threat and bypasses the rights of individual citizens.

Too often society allows officers of the courts to abuse their power to satisfy their own personal ambitions, grievances and prejudices. In return society in its broadest and most undemocratic and domineering sense is protected by the people who benefit from its patronage. It is the worst sort of symbiotic relationship.

The final irony is that as respect for the law (and those hired to uphold it) diminishes so the divide between the law and justice grows ever wider.

When people who are given the power to protect society disapprove of something which threatens their status they introduce a new law. As political parties come and go so we accumulate layer after layer of new laws. It doesn't matter if the new laws conflict with the old laws as long as all the laws help to strengthen the status of the State.

Meanwhile, as the oppression of individuals continues, lawlessness (and disrespect for the law) grows among officials and those in power. Brutality, arrogance, corruption and hypocrisy have all damaged public faith in the law but the only response from society has been to create new laws to outlaw disapproval. Society's primary interest is to protect itself, and society is not concerned with justice, freedom or equality since those are values which are appreciated only by individuals. Those who have power are concerned only with their own survival and with perpetuating their power. The simple truth is that we live in a corrupt society which creates countless stresses for ordinary people.

When we complain about `them' we are really complaining about the world we have created for ourselves; we are complaining about unseen forces which structure and rule our society; we are complaining about forces which are now utterly out of our control.

3

22.06 p.m.

Our train spent 15 minutes in Bath station today. It is the best, and possibly only way to see the town these days and as near as I want to get. It is certainly impossible to go there in a motor car. The last time we went there we drove round and round for an hour and a half and still couldn't find anywhere to park. At one point we found a space but it was a 30 minute walk away from the centre and we were informed by the ticket machine that we could only stay there for two hours. The whole town is full of misleading and confusing road signs, aggressive motorists and aggressive cyclists and pedestrians, all of whom seemed determined to make life unpleasant. The traffic system seemed to have been designed by a mad, game player. We did get into a car park at one point, and although the pricing seemed to make the short stay at Heathrow look cheap, the place turned out to be full. In the end we gave up. We couldn't find anywhere to park (though we did see spaces for rent at £2.90 an hour they were all full). We drove on to Bradford on Avon instead. It's a pleasant enough little place but without much soul or character. We vow that this will be the last time we ever try to visit Bath. It looks a miserable, rather squalid place. The new buildings are absurd. A few days after our last visit I received two fines through the post for driving in bus lanes. Since much of the town centre was dug up at the time there hadn't been much option. Perhaps they would have liked it better if I'd driven on the pavement. From what we saw of it the town of Bath seemed dirty, congested, unattractive and unwelcoming in every conceivable way. Fining visitors is, by the way, an excellent way for towns to discourage strangers and to keep their shops for themselves. I strongly suspect that some councils are short-sighted enough to discourage visitors quite deliberately. After all, visitors require public lavatories and fill up bins with litter.

Bath is in my view the ugliest town south of Birmingham and it is extraordinary that people still talk and write about it as though it were still beautiful. Local planners and architects obviously decided that anything would be acceptable if built out of traditional bath stone, or in something of the same colour. The result is what looks like an almost endless variety of warehouses with windows. Bath reminds me of Blackpool in that both were once marvellous in their own way but both have now become embarrassing parodies of their former selves. Both are deeply depressing places and although I suspect that I've probably been to worse places I cannot offhand remember their names.

As the train drew out of Bath I cheered myself up by thinking of some of the places which do delight me. Here's my top ten places to be with The Princess):

1. Walking from the National Liberal Club to Paddington Station on a dark, cold, slightly foggy winter's evening (but catching a cab at the Oxford Street end of Bond Street).
2. Sitting on the middle balcony at Lords during a county cricket match when there are few spectators on the ground.
3. Having teacakes and Earl Grey tea at Fortnum and Mason's in Piccadilly
4. Drinking a glass of vin chaud inside the Café de la Paix. Outside it is raining heavily and pedestrians are rushing to and fro under umbrellas. We don't have to go anywhere for an hour and I have a good book with me.
5. Having a picnic on a bench near to the Bishop's Palace in Wells and watching the swans, ducks and moorhens messing about on the moat.
6. Browsing in a second-hand bookshop I've never found before and asking the proprietor if it's OK if I put my first armful of purchases on his counter while I continue looking.
7. Sitting on a bench in the Palais Royale in Paris and enjoying an impromptu picnic with materials purchased from one of the little delicatessen shops nearby.
8. Visiting Shakespeare & Co's bookshop in Paris and finding a few books I've never heard of before.
9. Driving along the Wye Valley in autumn.
10. Walking along the River Lyn at Lynmouth and continuing after Watersmeet as far as Rockford. Best done in the rain because the path is quieter then.

The taxi queue in London was quite short, so instead of walking up the ramp and hailing a taxi in the street, we joined it. I'm glad we did because I overheard two women talking. They were standing in front of us and had clearly come to London to go shopping. `I love those shoes you bought to go with the dress you got last week,' said the first woman. `I love them too,' said the second woman. `But when I got them home I decided that they don't really go with the dress. So I'm going to have to find another dress to go with the shoes. And then I'll have to find some new shoes to go with the other dress.' They both sighed at the unfairness of fate and the difficulties of it all.

4

10.03 a.m.

The papers today are filled with bizarre news items. Someone (undoubtedly female) complains that there are not enough women running big companies. A coalition spokesman says that he doesn't understand the fuss about the number of people on benefits. The money they receive is, he says, no more than the average wage. Every year Americans throw away 206 million computer products and 140 million phones. The vast majority of these just go into landfill. The toxins such as lead and mercury and the rare metals used to make these devices (which are disappearing rapidly) all go into the landfill. Pension companies take fees and commissions worth 80% of the money paid into pension plans. Someone who pays £120,000 into an HSBC pension plan over 40 years will pay £99,000 of this to HSBC as fees. (HSBC said that their pension plan offered good value for money and was popular but it is hardly surprising that only 4 out of 10 individuals are saving anything for retirement.) There are now 420 million Chinese Internet users. A Nobel Prize has been given to someone who worked on infertility. (It would make as much sense to give a Nobel Prize to whoever invented breast enlargement surgery.) The BBC describes global warming as man-made, even though this is supposed to be a subject of debate. (In my opinion, the BBC doesn't do news. It only does propaganda.) In the Swindon area there were far less accidents in the year after the local police had given up speed cameras than there had been when they were using them. And in another part of the country the police have told residents who had erected dummy speed cameras that they must take them down because `the devices might make motorists brake too hard and cause accidents'. You couldn't make any of it up and expect anyone to believe you.

12.45 p.m.

Lloyds Bank is refusing to send me a new credit card because my address is a Post Office Box. We have been discussing this for several weeks now. Numerous people have promised to send me a card. But no card has yet arrived. Today I telephoned, made a cup of tea and a sandwich while various recorded voices wanted to know my waist measurement and my favourite ice cream, and eventually spoke to a person. She told me that my card had at last been authorised and sent to Lloyds Bank in Axminster.

`Why?' I asked. `I have never been to Axminster.'

The woman said she didn't know why it had gone to Axminster but that they would send a new one to my proper branch.

`Would you ring the bank in Axminster and ask them to destroy the one they've been sent?' I asked.

`I can't do that,' said Lloyds Bank. `They won't speak to me because it is your card.'

Eventually I persuaded her to ring Axminster. They hadn't seen the card. So my new card was floating around lost. Panic. So now all recent transactions had to be checked. I can never remember the exact sum I paid for whatever it was I bought three weeks ago. Presumably most people can.

`Where shall we send the replacement replacement card?'

I gave her the PO Box address.

`We can't send it there.'

I took a deep breath. I saw from the Financial Ombudsman Service's figures published today that far more complaints are made about Lloyds Bank than about any other financial institution. I'm not surprised. A staggering 22,420 complaints about Lloyds Bank got as far as the Ombudsman in the first 6/12 of the year. If I had complained about all the problems I've had, the figure would have reached 30,000. No other bank got anywhere near Lloyds.

`We don't accept PO Boxes as addresses.' The distaste was palpable.

`The tax people and the passport people and the driving licence people are all happy to use a PO Box.'

`We don't.' I swear she sniffed.

`You've been using it for 20 years. And you send my bank statements there.'

`We don't consider PO Boxes to be trustworthy.' Still defiant.

`Do you know who owns and runs PO Boxes?'

`No.'

`It's the same bunch of crooks who own 40% of Lloyds Bank.'

`I beg your pardon?'

`Who is your biggest shareholder?'

Pause. Silence.

`The Government?' I suggest. I am tempted to point out that they're the ones who bailed the bank out when it was going bankrupt.

`Er...yes, I think so.'

`Do you not trust the Government?'

`Of course I do. What's that got to do with your PO Box?'

`My PO Box is owned and run by the Government.'

They are going to send my card to my PO Box.

5

09.27 a.m.

I had an e-mail from a man in India who says he is a publisher. He wants to publish all my books in his country. He asks me to send him two copies of all my books. I wish all these `publishers' were real. Wearily, I send him half a dozen books. I live in hope. Maybe he really is a publisher. Experience tells me, however, that he is far more likely to be one of those absurd small-time confidence tricksters who pretends to be a publisher in order to get free books. This happens about once a month. I rarely hear from them again. I assume they just sell the books they've been sent.

Another similar scam is to pretend you are starting a new magazine and want books to review or for potential serialisation. I receive a lot of those requests too. The magazines never appear, of course. And I have no doubt that the books end up being sold on Amazon or eBay.

13.58 p.m.

I was in a publisher's office in London when a young assistant came in with a letter which needed signing urgently. `Because of who it's to I've put it on a nice piece of paper,' she said. `I found some really lovely cream paper in the stationery cupboard.' The man I was with signed the letter. `But you're faxing it,' said the man. `Yes,' said his assistant. `But I don't want Mr X to get a letter on that cheap copy paper we normally use.'

`Her name is Victoria,' said the man when the girl had left. He said it as though it were an explanation. `Her daddy is a director of something and she's engaged to someone in investment something. I have hopes that she won't be here long.'

6

12.46 p.m.

The current leaders of the Labour Party say that if they had known then what they know now they would not have supported the invasion of Iraq. Unfortunately, we all knew then what we know now so this argument doesn't hold a good deal of water.

Ed Miliband served in the Labour Government under war criminal leadership but says he is not guilty of anything because it was `collective responsibility'. OK, so he had collective responsibility. I don't think that will be much of an argument when he is standing before a War Crimes Tribunal. It didn't do the Nazis much good. Collective responsibility just means that he can be hung alongside the others. Miliband, who does what I thought impossible and makes Gordon Brown seem charismatic, also admits that the Government of which he was a member destroyed the economy (`it was just an unfortunate mistake, honest guv; could have happened to anyone'), started two illegal wars and took away our civil liberties. So what the hell is he now doing in any sort of position of responsibility? The man isn't fit to confiscate nail files let alone run the country. Ed seems to me to be just as geeky and unpleasant as his banana-toting brother.

7

11.09 a.m.

A friend has an e-book reader. He says it is wonderful to be able to buy books for pennies and to store his entire library on a device that fits into a briefcase. Apart from the fact that you can’t stuff it in your pocket, scribble on the margins and read it in the bath (too slippery) there are vast problems with these damned things and I will never use one. Books are friends, companions and memories. I sit surrounded by books; thousands of them. Their bindings and wrappers make a wonderful wall covering. I can remember where I was first introduced by my favourites, where I bought them and where I read them. I can see the notes I wrote on them. I can remember sharing them. Sometimes I write inside where I first read them. The next generation (the ones who will embrace e-readers and who will regard books as old-fashioned) will miss so much. And, of course, as e-books become more popular so publishers and authors will gradually disappear. Meanwhile, the e-book readers sell by the boatload and people who call themselves booksellers promote the e-book versions ahead of the old-fashioned hard copy editions. The end is coming fast. These days I often feel relieved that I am as old as I am.

8

14.00 p.m.

I see with some astonishment that an English swimmer has won a silver medal in the solo synchronised swimming event at the Commonwealth games. I spent some time trying to work out how this works. I even looked up synchronised. The dictionary defines it as things occurring at the same time or rate. How can one person be synchronised? To the music perhaps?

9

15.57 p.m.

We were sitting in the Palais Royale, one of our favourite parks in Paris, feeding the remains of our picnic lunch to the pigeons, and sparrows. Thirty birds had quickly gathered around our feet and we were, as usual, marvelling at the skill and agility of the sparrows. They can pluck a bread crumb out of the air with astonishing ease.

Suddenly the magic of the moment was broken by a boy, aged about 12, who ran straight at the birds, trying to catch them and kick them.

He wasn't trying to catch the birds because he was hungry. He was having fun. As the birds fluttered into the trees he grinned with delight.

Frightening, chasing and torturing is a uniquely human pleasure.

When other animals hunt they do so either because they are hungry or because their young are threatened.

Human beings are the only animals who get real pleasure out of terrorising, wounding and killing other beasts. (Cats play with mice to practise their hunting skills).

This perverted pleasure exists in many different ways: dog fighting, fox hunting, otter hunting, stag hunting, salmon fishing and grouse shooting. The arrogant hunter sitting proudly on his horse shows the same sort of malicious delight as the boy chasing pigeons.

Worst of all are the men and women who use animals for intellectual pleasure - vivisectors pointlessly torturing and killing millions of animals.

We claim to be a mature and imaginative race, increasingly aware of our awesome responsibilities to our planet and sensitive to the needs of the creatures with whom we share our world. But our treatment of other animals is crude and barbaric.

We should be ashamed of ourselves. We have a long way to go before we can hold up our heads and claim that we are truly the wisest, kindest and most responsible of God's creatures.

18.02 p.m.

According to the *Financial Times* there are worries about privacy and security on the Internet. I cannot imagine why. There is no privacy and security for users of the Web. None. Sadly, most people assume that anyone who wants to retain their privacy must have some dirty secret they wish to hide. Only when their identity is stolen or their bank account emptied or they find themselves being framed for something they didn't do or they have people they don't like and want to avoid banging on their door do they realise why we should all protect and preserve our privacy. But the erosion of privacy continues apace and although the UK wins (or loses) on most counts, countries around the world seem to vie with one another to be more authoritarian than one another. An American who lives in Switzerland sent me a relevant e-mail story this morning. According to a ruling from the US Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit in California and eight other western states, US Government agents can now sneak onto someone's property in the middle of the night and put a GPS device on the bottom of their car in order to track their movements. This is apparently legal as long as there is no gate or `no trespassing' sign. According to the court, if there is no sign or gate the owner of the property has no `reasonable expectation of privacy in their own driveway'. Effectively, it seems, any piece of your property which isn't gated or signed as `private' is public property.

20.07 p.m.

The Princess and I were sitting in the Rhumerie, one of Ernest Hemingway's favourite drinking places in Paris. The Princess was drinking Earl Grey tea and I was drinking a glass of hot rum. I overheard this. `She's self-righteous, pompous, patronising and hypocritical,' said a man in a blue blazer. `Yes, but apart from that, do you like her?' asked his slightly older male companion. `She's got decent legs,' replied the man in the blazer.

10

14.05 p.m.

When I resigned from general practice and became a full time writer I had a lot of trouble with the General Medical Council. Back in the 1970s and 1980s there were strict rules about advertising and even though I wasn't practising medicine or seeing patients the GMC received a steady string of complaints that my books, columns and television programmes were `advertising' and that I should, therefore, be struck off the medical register and have my stethoscope formally knotted. (The complaints invariably originated with the drug companies I was attacking.) After a while I got so fed up with this nonsense that I voluntarily took my name off the register. Naturally, my opponents used this as a new way to attack me: claiming that I wasn't a proper doctor at all. So I put my name back on the medical register and today I am both registered and licensed to practise as a GP principal. I don't actually practise but now that the NHS closes down at nights and weekends I do find it handy to be able to write out prescriptions so that we have a stock of essential drugs (antibiotics and so on) for emergency use. Since I'm not working within the NHS these have to be private prescriptions, scribbled on a piece of my notepaper. They work just as well as NHS prescriptions and one of these days I will have a little fun with the system by writing out a perfectly legal private prescription for a quarter of a ton of morphine. There aren't usually any problems with collecting medicines but today The Princess found a pharmacist who had been infected with the bureaucracy virus. She'd taken in a private prescription containing a list of six items but because the pharmacy didn't have one of the drugs in stock the officious pharmacist refused to let her have any of them. `I'll just cross off the one you don't have,' suggested The Princess. `Oh no, you can't do that!' cried the pharmacist, clearly horrified at the very suggestion. `New rules,' he told her. `If we don't have one item on the prescription then you can't have any of them but must come back when we can fill the whole of the prescription.' Brilliant. This was a prescription for stock items but I wonder how many people will die as a result of this sort of nonsense. I don't need to guess twice to work out where this daft rule came from. Thank you, Brussels.

18.29 p.m.
It occurs to me that if, in future, we must have wars we should have `David and Goliath' style wars. But instead of having `champions' our leaders should fight it out live on television. We can have Cameron brawling with Obama or Putin or whoever. The Iraq war could have been Blair and Bush fighting Hussein and A.N.Other. In a mudpit, perhaps. A fight to the death would have been good.

11
11.32 a.m.
We put a few boxfuls of my book *Gordon is a Moron* outside the door of Publishing House with a note saying `Free books' written on a piece of cardboard. It will be difficult to sell the few books that are left now that Gordon has gone into well-paid semi-obscurity (at least, until the War Crimes Tribunal). I was standing in the hallway and heard one man say to another `This obviously didn't sell very well'. I watched as he picked up a book and took it. We sold around 20,000 copies of *Gordon is a Moron*. A few minutes later a young man in jeans and a leather jacket took a whole boxful. They will presumably appear at 1p each on Amazon or eBay.

14.20 p.m.
I have decided to do the accounts by hand, using a large notepad, a pen and a calculator. I have tried doing them with two different spreadsheets and two different accounting packages and it takes far too long. It is clear to me that it is quicker to do the accounts with a pen. Even using my own personal way of adding up (add up three times, divide by three and put that figure down as the total) it is quick and easy. It will be even easier when VAT rises to 20%. When I told a friend that I was going to use a notebook for the accounts he thought I meant one of those things like a laptop and said that IBM make a good one. I explained that I meant the sort of notebook that you can buy in Poundland. Of course, my new accounting style does mean that if anyone from HMRC wants to check the accounts they will have to dig out a calculator. But I know of no law (yet) which forces me to keep my accounts on a computer.

17.50 p.m.
I wrote out six separate private prescriptions, one for each of the drugs I wanted to put into our home medicine cabinet. The Princess took the six prescriptions to a pharmacy in Barnstaple. `Why on earth has the doctor put these drugs on separate pieces of paper?' demanded the pharmacist. The Princess explained about yesterday's confrontation. `What utter nonsense,' snorted today's pharmacist. `Why didn't the idiot just cross off the item that he didn't have in stock?'

The Princess bought me a new pair of sunglasses made by someone called Ben Sherman. They had a tag attached. The writing on the tag said: ‘Looking good isn’t important. It’s everything.’ The frightening thing is that there are probably people who believe this crap.

20.00 p.m.
I bit into a Bounty bar and found a piece of broken tooth in my mouth. I was outraged, and ready to write a strong

letter of complaint, until I realised that one of my own teeth had a bit missing. Damn.

21.34 p.m.
A nice cheque for £6,073.37 arrived today from my German publisher. It is a royalty cheque for the first six months of the year for the German edition of *Bodypower*. I wrote *Bodypower* back in 1983 but it still does well in various parts of the world, though I long ago gave up on British publishers who had produced editions of it. Corgi were the first paperback publishers in Britain. They bought the rights from Thames and Hudson who had a huge bestseller with it in hardback. A couple of weeks before the Corgi edition was due out I rang asking if I could buy a couple of extra copies. I was told that the book had sold out and that they had no plans to reprint it. My agent at the time then immediately sold the rights to Sheldon Press who also took over the sale of foreign rights. Sheldon published their own paperback edition but after a year or two they seemed to get tired of the book. It was selling hardly any copies at all so I bought their entire stock to get the rights back. I then gave away all the books they had produced (which I didn't care for very much) and published my own edition. I sent off a few copies to foreign publishers and within a couple of weeks had managed to sell rights to several other countries. Since I took *Bodypower* back it has continually sold well, without any advertising or promotion. And the foreign editions still sell well too. An author's backlist can, if it is well-looked after, produce a pleasant little pension. Sadly, in my experience, most publishers take very little care of their backlists. The royalty cheque I received from the German publisher of Bodypower exceeds the annual value of the pension I receive for having been a GP for ten years.

23.57 p.m.
We were woken by a terrifying sound of screaming. It sounded as though a woman was wailing in agony. Convinced that someone was being murdered we rushed to the window and looked out to see if we could spot what was happening. At first we saw nothing. It was a still, quiet, peaceful night. And then, suddenly, The Princess pointed to a group of foxes. Two of them were fighting. The noise was coming from them. I heaved a sigh of relief at not having to confront a mad axe man.

12
11.02 a.m.
I've had an e-mail from a reader who claims to have read many of my books. He asks why I haven't written anything about the Regional Parliaments and the way the European Union is planning to take over our country. I despair. I have been writing about the EU (and Regional Parliaments) since 2002 when I published *England Our England*. I have been vilified, banned and oppressed for daring to expose these things. I don't think a day goes by when I don't get criticised for doing something or not doing something. But it's difficult to find any websites referring to the fact that I was the first writer to expose many of the now widely recognised truths in medicine and other areas of society. Two days ago I received an e-mail asking me to write something about benzodiazepine drugs. The writer, who claimed to have researched the subject, seemed unaware that I was campaigning about these drugs in the late 1970s and got into terrible trouble for doing so. This sort of thing now happens several times a week. I whinged a lot to The Princess about this and it really isn't fair of me. But I'm tired of sticking my head above the parapet on behalf of other people, being shot at and then being blamed for not doing enough campaigning. Worse still, I am then expected to sing out loudly in praise of writers who are regurgitating stuff I wrote ten or twenty years ago - stuff that caused terrible trouble when it was first published. When I've finished the book on health that I'm writing (the one triggered by the unbelievable things that happened to my father) I'm going to stop writing serious non-fiction books and return to writing more novels and books about Bilbury. I don't think I can stop writing books completely (though I have thought about just writing them and not publishing them) but I think it would make sense to stop `crying in the wilderness', `banging my head against brick walls' and `making people think'. I just feel so bloody tired, dispirited and downhearted. And I am beginning to feel ravaged by resentment and wracked by the guilt I feel at feeling resentful.

14.55 p.m.
I felt angry with myself for this morning's rant and self-pitying whining. But the worst thing is that deep down I still feel the same. My mood of despair is not lightened by a special delivery letter from a reader demanding that I take an interest in his pet peeve and ending with the usual sort of threat warning me that if I don't throw myself behind his campaign my failure to do so will prove that I am just a comfortable, hypocritical, uncaring old fart living in an ivory tower. This does not seem to me to be the best way to capture my attention or enthusiasm but maybe I am just too bloody tired. He also wants medical advice and encloses an envelope full of laboratory tests, X-ray reports and hospital letters. He says he knows that I do not usually reply to letters requiring medical diagnoses but that he is sure

that I will make an exception in his case. He does not, of course, enclose a stamped self-addressed envelope.

16.07 p.m.
For a decade or more I have suspected that companies which operate on the Internet use a different form of currency to the rest of us. They make losses and have no discernible way of ever making a profit but are nevertheless described as being worth billions. Today I encountered yet another example of Internet finance. Amazon is selling my book *Bloodless Revolution* for £4.29 post free. Now I can't post a book for less than £2 including the postage and the packaging. Let's assume (and this really is a stretch) that Amazon has overheads which are no greater than mine. (I have to assume that it pays the same as I do for stamps. The Royal Mail does special prices for mass mailings but I doubt if this makes all that much difference.)

Now, the book's retail price is £4.99 and the biggest discount I ever give is 45% which means that the wholesaler pays £2.74 for this book. Now I think it is fair to assume that the wholesaler takes a little profit. And, of course, they have to move the book from their warehouse to the warehouse used by Amazon. So, it is fair to assume that Amazon must pay at least £3 for each copy of *Bloodless Revolution* they buy. They then store it, pick it, wrap it and post it (an operation which must cost £2). And they sell the book for £4.29.

So my only conclusion is that Internet companies operate with a different currency.

21.30 p.m.
I see that the BBC has a new television series about a group of lesbians living in Glasgow. This is clearly just the sort of thing people pay the licence fee for. I have no idea whether it’s a drama or a reality television programme and I will not, I fear, be finding out. The BBC led the way down with Eastenders, a smorgasbord of depression and violence. I remember writing, when it first started, that the programme would help encourage misery, violence and suicide. I think I was right. Moreover, dumbed down television in particular, and the media in general, help prevent people being aware of the real problems going on in the world around them. The BBC doesn't care, of course. It is an extraordinarily arrogant organisation run by extraordinarily arrogant people. When the BBC Trust was asked to provide information about how public money was spent, the Trust told the House of Commons public accounts committee that it would only provide the information if guaranteed that it would not be made public. `The Trust seems to think it is acceptable,' said the committee, `to negotiate the terms on which it will do business with parliament. This is unacceptable and a discourtesy.' The House of Commons concluded that the BBC has a track record of committing public money without fully analysing the costs and benefits. They drew attention to a redevelopment of Broadcasting House which saw project management failings cost the corporation more than £100 million and to the £576,000 bill for using a studio in the centre of Vienna for the coverage of the Euro 2008 football tournament in order to provide a `backdrop'. The BBC should go. And go soon. There is no place for the organisation it has become in our society.

My father always told me to be nicer to the BBC. He was right. I should have been. But I can't. I have a painful and damaging inability to creep (and, I fear, a matching ability to alienate possible allies).

22.37 p.m.
There is much to do about the fact that frock salesman and Moss aficionado, Sir Philip Green has, after an investigation, discovered that civil servants waste lots of money when buying office paper and other essentials. I can guarantee that nothing much will happen. In the early 1980s I exposed much worse NHS waste in some articles in the *Daily Star* (where I was a columnist at the time). I wrote the exposé after I received a computer print out from a reader showing that the NHS was paying more for staples such as pens, paper and toilet rolls than I would pay if I bought them one at a time at the local Tesco. The editor told me that the Prime Minister was much excited by this and had given copies to every cabinet member. There was a great flurry of activity in Whitehall in general and in the NHS in particular. The NHS initiated an immediate enquiry. Unfortunately, the enquiry wasn't designed to find out why billions were being wasted but to find out how I had found out that billions were being wasted. The inquiry didn't find out anything which wasn't entirely surprising. I wouldn't have told them anything but they didn't even bother to ask me.

23.01 p.m.
There are rumours that the politicians are thinking about punishing people who don't recycle enough of their waste. Why on earth doesn't someone think of offering incentives? When I was small, shops would give money back on bottles that were returned to them. The system worked very well. Small boys would scavenge the neighbourhood, collecting bottles and taking them back to the shops.

23.51 p.m.
I hear that Claire Rayner, the nurse, has died. I found her to be an unpleasant, pompous and intensely jealous woman who took every opportunity to attack me because I dared to question the medical establishment. None of this would matter a damn if it were not for the fact that she constantly presented herself as a champion of British patients. In my view, she was nothing of the kind. In the 1980s, when I campaigned against the over-prescribing of benzodiazepine drugs, she opposed me vehemently – arguing that the drugs were useful and effective and that I should abandon my campaign. When I was working for TV AM I tried to establish a professional working relationship with her but she was having none of it. Rayner, who was probably best known for advertising sanitary towels on television, was, I think, particularly peeved about the success of my book *Bodypower* when it was serialised in the *Sunday Mirror*. The paper bought television adverts and put up posters all around the country to promote the serialisation. The book proved so popular that the serialisation was extended from two weeks to three weeks and finally to six weeks.

The highlight of the serialisation was a section in the book which described how women had successfully managed to increase the size of their breasts through self-hypnosis. The newspaper decided to conduct an experiment to see whether or not this worked. The features editor hired a group of Page Three models. A nurse then measured their breast size. Three weeks later the nurse measured them again. There was a considerable amount of excitement at the paper while they waited for the results and when the editors knew that the experiment had worked successfully everyone rushed across the road to a pub known to *Mirror* journalists as `The Stab in the Back'. Bottles of champagne were bought and consumed and we then went back to the offices to write the story. I remember I was photographed with the models and the picture was published across two pages in the paper. Rayner was working as the paper's agony aunt at the time and was furious about the attention my book was getting. She seemed very establishment-minded and since I have always been very critical of the close relationship between the pharmaceutical industry and the medical establishment she took every opportunity to write nasty things about me. Pity.

Another major Agony Aunt of the time, Marje Proops, was far more fun to know. Marje and I used to have lunches in Soho occasionally. Like most of the grande dames of Fleet Street she had a very well upholstered view of her own importance. At her insistence I visited her in Westminster hospital once where she was having a routine hip operation under an assumed name. It was all very secret. She seemed to think that the world's press would be hunting her down and ready to hold the presses in order to expose the story of her temporary incapacitation. I was still working as a GP at the time and went on my afternoon off. I picked a bunch of snowdrops from our garden as I dashed out of the house to catch the train to London. When I eventually got into her room it was packed with bouquets sent by the management. She was not, I fear, overly impressed with my small offering.

I did quite a lot of 'agony aunting' myself. I was the BBC's first agony aunt, I wrote an agony column for *Over 21* magazine and I wrote the agony column for *The People* for over a decade.

13

12.12 p.m.
The Princess and I were in a department store. She was looking at blouses. I was standing reading a Raymond Chandler novel I hadn't read for years. Two middle aged women were standing nearby. One was holding up a posh frock for the other to look at. `Oh, I don't know,' said the second, critically. `I like the colour but it's very daring. I always think men rather look down on women who wear low cut dresses.' `I think that's the idea,' replied her friend.

As we left I noticed that the cinema across the road was running a double bill. One film shows how the Americans won the English Civil War and the other shows how an American started the French Revolution.

14.51 p.m.
The Princess, a friend of hers and I found ourselves at the beginning of a narrow lane. There was a sign saying `Light vehicles only.' `We can't go down here,' said The Princess's friend, as I started past the sign. `Why not?' I asked her. `It's for light vehicles only,' she replied. `And your truck is dark green.' When The Princess explained the meaning of the sign to her she looked embarrassed, but only for a brief moment. `I thought it was something to do with making sure you could be seen,' she said. `Why would we need to be seen?' I asked. `Because of the other sign,' she said. `What other sign?' I asked. I hadn't seen any other signs. `The one that said `Firing Range. Do Not Enter.' There wasn't room to turn round but I can reverse quite well when necessary.

17.24 p.m.
We travelled to Tintern Abbey and up through the glorious Wye Valley on our way to Ross on Wye. A shopkeeper tells us that business is very gloomy. There are, apparently very few hikers these days - and hardly any under the age of 50.

Driving up the Wye Valley at this time of year is like driving into and through a work of art.

20.42 p.m.
French schoolchildren are striking over their Government's plans to increase the retirement age from 60 to 62. The papers are full of pictures of fresh-faced 13-year-old girls waving banners demanding that the retirement age be kept at 60. Poor little sods. It's worrying that they care a toss about pensions at their age but don't they realise that if the changes aren't made then by the time they're 90 they will still be working. The money has already run out.

22.45 p.m.
We caught Newsnight by accident on BBC2 and heard an interviewer called Paxman ask a panel of two people who seemed to have been picked at random: `Why are people so captivated by the story about the trapped Chilean miners?' The Princess said she thought the question said more about the interviewer than he would perhaps like us to know.

It occurred to me afterwards that no one in the media seems to have realised that one result of the Chilean mining disaster and BP's oil spill will be that there will be much stricter rules and regulations controlling the mining and oil industries. Quite rightly. But the side effect will be that commodity prices are going up, and so inflation will go up too.

We turned off the news and put on *Last Train from Gun Hill*, in which the honest Kirk Douglas triumphs over a powerful man played by Anthony Quinn, who is protecting his son; a rapist and a murderer. Like many great westerns it is a real morality play.

14
11.08 a.m.
In today's mail a reader who enjoyed my book *Bloodless Revolution* suggests that citizens should have one vote between the ages 18 to 25, two votes from 25 to 35 and four votes when they are over the age of 35. He wants to know if I think I will succeed in changing the system. I replied pointing out that the problem we have is that the establishment won't help us destroy itself. `We sent out hundreds of review copies of *Bloodless Revolution*. Number of reviews? None. Not one.' But I added that many readers are buying copies to give away to friends and neighbours. Two lovely readers who are disabled and living on benefits because they have no choice write to say that they would like to buy 50 copies of *What Happens Next?* to give away as Christmas presents.

15.06 p.m.
My new novel set in Paris is going backwards and sideways rather than forwards. If the characters change their shape once more I will have them all killed by a mad assassin and start again. Playwright David Turner was a patient of mine when I was a GP and he was writing scripts for the television series Crossroads I remember him telling me that he was so fed up with the existing characters that he was going to blow them all up.

15
11.35 a.m.
When I bought a spare charger at a phone shop today they demanded my full name and address. I pointed out that I was paying with cash. The rude and rather aggressive assistant said that they still had to have my name and address. When I asked him why he said it was because of money laundering and terrorism regulations. There is no point in arguing with people when they spout nonsense like this and so I told the silly man that my name was Bertie Wooster and when he asked for my address I gave him the address that was printed on an advertising leaflet about a foot from his hand. He keyed my name and address into the computerised till and seemed happy. He didn't notice that the address was the address of the store where he worked. If he had noticed and protested I would have given him the address of his company's head office which was on another leaflet nearby.

15.36 p.m.
It is now possible to buy a 3D Television though viewers still to have to wear silly spectacles to watch it. It was possible to watch 3D films in the cinema half a century ago when I was a boy.

21.45 p.m.
The new screening machines used at airports take photographs of travellers and cleverly ‘remove’ their clothing. This is, presumably, some sort of X-ray machine. (The sort of thing that schoolboys used to dream about owning.) How long will it before airport staff sell naked pics of travellers? They will, of course. And what will happen? There

will be a rap over the knuckles for the pornographer and nothing will change because the same week there will, most conveniently, be a terrorist scare and we will be told that these useless, expensive, intrusive (and possibly dangerous) machines are the only things standing between us and Armageddon.

16

11.57 a.m.

The Princess and I went to the railway station to buy tickets. I hate doing this because it is far more difficult than it should be. I told the clerk where we would like our journey to start and where it will, hopefully, end and I asked for first class return tickets. I gave him the dates and the carriage and seat numbers we would prefer (quiet carriage, table for two). He held up a hand and stopped me. I waited. After about an hour and three quarters he told me how much money he wanted. I pushed enough cash to buy a small car under the bulletproof, axeproof screen which protected us from each other. He, in turn, pushed the tickets under the screen. They were, inevitably, wrong. He had given us tickets for a shared table for four. I told him this. `Don't you dare tell me I'm wrong!' he screamed. `I hate people telling me I'm wrong.' I tried to reason with him but he started to twitch and sweat. I was, for once, glad of the bulletproof, axeproof screen. I couldn't see a gun or an axe but who knows what he had hidden behind his computer screen. I explained that I happened to know the way the numbering works in first class carriages. I know this sounds rather sad but I checked long ago so that we could always be sure of getting a little table for two and would not have to share our long journey to London with two fat businessmen eating bacon rolls and slurping lager. `Don't tell me I'm wrong,' he hissed. `I've done what you wanted.' I pointed out, as gently as I could, that he hasn't actually quite done precisely what I wanted and that if he had I would by now be half way back to my car happily clutching my clump of tickets. `I've given you window seats,' he spat. `That's very nice of you,' I said, `but I really wanted one of the little tables for two.' `I've given you one,' he insisted. `Do you have a seating plan of the carriage?' I asked. `No,' he said as though this were an absurd question; as though I had asked him if he had a knitting pattern for a pair of baby's bootees. `You can report me if you like.' `OK,' I said, though I knew this wouldn't get me anywhere. It certainly wouldn't get me the seats I wanted. `If you totter along to the platform and look at a train you'll see what I mean. Just check the seat numbers.' He stared at me as though I'd gone mad. There was spittle around his mouth and for the first time I realised I was more at risk of being bitten than being attacked with an axe. `I don't go on trains,' he snarled. With bad grace he fiddled with his computer again and after another hour and three quarters pushed a fresh set of tickets under the gun, axe and tooth proof screen. I looked at them. `You've given me a little table on the outward journey, but seats on a table for four for the return journey,' I told him. He stared at me as though I were mad. `You didn't say you wanted one of those tables *both* ways!' he said. The queue behind me was growing. There was much muttering and complaining. I feared that there might soon be a riot and if there were it would be on my side of the gun, axe and tooth proof screen. I took the tickets and thanked the clerk. It was half a victory. I knew from past experience that if I didn't take the tickets the screen would come down, the office would close and I wouldn't get any tickets at all. Railway clerks are temperamental divas, which I don't mind at all, but they are also incompetent buffoons and that doesn't seem right.

14.22 p.m.

The Princess was standing in a queue at the bank. There were two tellers serving a queue of a dozen people. The manager walked up and said: `Thank you for your patience and understanding.' The Princess said: `I have no choice do I?' The manager smiled but said nothing. No one else said a word, of course, though every single one of them had been complaining before the manager appeared.

20.10 p.m.

The BBC's decision to close its Asian Network radio station was greeted as great news by commercial Asian stations which will no longer have to cope with a tax-funded competitor. One radio station boss reckoned that the UK's 15 commercial Asian stations survive on £8 million a year in total revenue. The BBC Asian Network had a £12 million a year budget. The BBC was destroying the variety of commercial stations by providing free publicity to brands that might otherwise have advertised and by pushing up the salaries for presenters. It is well known that the BBC pays far more than commercial stations (it has vast amounts of taxpayers' money to play with and refuses to say where it all goes). One commercial station boss complained that the BBC hired all his presenters and doubled their salaries to over £50,000 a year.

23.15 p.m.

I bought a cheque for £5 which Charles Dickens wrote and signed. It arrived today. I paid £369 for the cheque from an auction at Bonhams in London.

23.47 p.m.
There is more talk about people of African origin claiming compensation for the fact that their ancestors were enslaved. I suggest to The Princess that since my great great great grandfather was a missionary who was eaten by cannibals I should be able to seek restitution and compensation from the descendants of the tribe who ate him. The Princess said she didn't know I had an ancestor who was a missionary. I tell her his name was Tobias Coleman and that I have been unreliably informed that he made a good meal for 11 cannibals.

23.58 p.m.
HM Revenue and Customs has issued a warning that the 2010 Employer CD ROM, which apparently contains most of the help guidance and calculators employees need to run their payrolls, should be updated immediately. This is news to me. I don't have a CD of any kind from HMRC though this doesn't matter a great deal since I have nothing to play one on anyway. (I do have a CD player on which I play opera, Led Zeppelin, AC/DC and lots of Beethoven and Mahler but I don't think their CD will work on it.) Just to make things worse, I'm told that many taxpayers have been prevented from completing their tax returns online because of a software bug which HMRC has not fixed for more than half a year. I'm not surprised, therefore, to also read today that most of British industry feels that the tax rules in this country are appalling. Big companies (of which Britain has very few these days, most of the ones we had having buggered off or gone bust or been bought up by Americans or Russians) deal with all the crap by hiring heaps of crap-monkeys (which is, I am reliably informed, the technical term for lawyers). Small businesses cannot possibly do this and are dealing with the problem by closing down and emigrating. Life was so much simpler before computers were invented.

17
11.12 a.m.
I persuaded a bookshop to take six copies of the *Village Cricket Tour*. They sold them all within ten days. `Would you like some more?' I asked. `Oh no thank you. Those went nicely.' `Maybe you might like to take some for Christmas?' `Oh no thank you. We will let you know if any customers ask us to order copies.' I give up.

14.15 p.m.
I have been reading Hank Poulson's autobiography *On the Brink* and it seems to me that though the American Government protected the bonuses of US bankers during the meltdown it did its best to screw British pensioners. The Americans even had the gall to be upset that the British Government wouldn't allow Barclays to take over Lehman’s huge losses. (The American Government would not, of course, allow American taxpayers to take on this burden.) The Americans argued that bankers who had screwed the economy needed to be paid well because otherwise they would go elsewhere and do something else. No one ever explained where they would go or what they would do. Bankers’ bonuses should be deferred ten years until it is clear that the bank has made a genuine long-term profit. And during that ten years the bonuses should be regarded as part of the bank's capital - vulnerable in case the bank goes bust. The management should be the first to suffer when a bank goes bust.

16.17 p.m.
I looked through the list of foreign publishers who owe me money. It's a depressing list. I have contracts and I know the books were published. But somehow the promised money never materialises.

17.12 p.m.
In his book *The Biology of Art,* Desmond Morris tells of an experiment in which apes were taught to be artists and to produce lovely work. Then they were paid (with peanuts) for their work. Under the reward system the art quickly deteriorated and the apes turned out scrawls just to get the peanuts. Commercialism destroyed their art. They were, literally, working for peanuts.

20.14 p.m.
The BBC has a clock which they claim is accurate to within a thousandth of a second every thousand years. `How do they know that?' asked The Princess. `What do they set it against?'

22.51 p.m.
We watched *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* yet again. Oh what a theft it was when John Candy was taken from us. He was one of the funniest, most charming and most graceful actors in the history of the cinema. If he had lost

weight he would have probably lived longer. But would he have been as funny if he hadn't been so fat? The Princess and I tried afterwards to decide which other actors could have made the film. We decide that Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau would have probably been even better than Candy and Steve Martin. Mr Martin has his moments but he has a tendency to overact. When the script is as good as this one the actors don't need to try to be funny; all they have to do is let the words be funny.

18
11.42 a.m.
An estate agent sent us a brochure for a rather decent looking house. It stood in five acres, had all the usual bits and pieces and costs just under £1,000,000 which is rather more than we wanted to pay but we decided to look at it. These are strange times and asking prices are often over-enthusiastic. But just before we fixed an appointment I noticed that it said on the brochure that the house was `attached' to another property. `Would you like to see it?' asked the agent when he rang later. `No thanks,' I replied. `Why not?' `We don't want a semi-detached,' I explained. He was rather upset, though I can't imagine why. A house fixed to its neighbour is semi-detached. It really doesn't matter how big or small it is.

15.32 p.m.
I noticed a woman shopping in Taunton. It was impossible to miss her. She was laden with bags. She had a shoulder bag on each shoulder and bags in each hand. The man with her was carrying nothing. Suddenly he stopped her and I thought he was going to take some of the bags. But he didn't. Instead, he lifted up one of the shoulder bags that was slipping. He stopped for a moment so that he could light a cigarette and then strode off. She hurried along behind him, like a good Arab woman. But this is in Taunton in Somerset. And they are both white.

17.22 p.m.
A man I know vaguely tells me that if he wanted to smuggle anything through customs he would hide it under his toupee. `No one would ever dare ask me to remove it,' he said. He's probably right. I know a photographer who took pictures of the infamous Gibraltar shootings. He knew that the authorities were waiting for him at Heathrow so he put a roll of exposed film into his jacket pocket for them to find and confiscate and put the important roll of film under his hat. They didn't find it and the pictures appeared in every national newspaper.

19
10.40 a.m.
I see that a businessman is suing a bank for reporting transactions from his account as suspicious. Banks everywhere file thousands of suspicious transaction reports each year to the Serious Organised Crime Agency and this can be a real problem for honest folk moving money from one account to another. Even moving money about to buy a house is likely to result in your bank telling the authorities and then refusing to follow your instructions while they wait for some bureaucrat to decide whether to allow the transaction to take place or not. (By the time he does, of course, it will probably be too late to buy the house.) As far as I am aware not one terrorist or criminal has been caught by this intrusive system of spying.

17.01 p.m.
I bought our Christmas crackers today. I almost decided to buy fewer crackers because of the problem of dealing with all the rubbish that results afterwards. But then I realised that the wrappers are a mixture of paper and cardboard and will, therefore, burn perfectly well in the log burner. So I bought three dozen. It was all I could carry. I will buy more later. There are only the two of us for Christmas but crackers are good fun.

As we usually do when we are in Wells we had lunch at the Crown at Wells and afternoon coffee at the Swan Hotel. Both are splendid looking places though I don’t much like the coffee they serve; I suspect that even the dining car attendants on old British Rail would have been embarrassed. I wonder what happened to those dining cars. I enjoyed being able to have breakfast on the train to London and dinner on the way back home. Despite the coffee, the food and service weren't at all bad.

I bought armfuls of books today. *Publisher* by Tom Maschler, S.N. Berhrman's book on Duveen, John Locke's *Second Treatise of Civil Government*, in a beautiful hardback edition, a lovely Everyman edition of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Christopher Matthew's *A Nightingale Sang in Fernhurst Rd*. I also bought *More of Peter Simple* (I read both volumes of Michael Wharton's autobiography recently and am eager to be reunited with the utter madness of the Peter Simple column he wrote for so many years for the *Daily Telegraph*) and *Adventures with Impossible Figures* by Bruno Ernst. While not drinking my coffee I worked out these cost an average of 37 pence each.

In the local branch of W.H.Smith, The Princess moved all the copies of Tony Blair's biography that she could carry into the crime section, though I said she ought to have put them into the Tragic Lives section.

Wells is an unfriendly city and it was almost empty today, probably thanks to a new car parking system which prevents visitors parking in the centre of the city for more than three hours. I got round this nonsense by returning to the car after two and three quarter hours, moving the car and buying another ticket. I am sure this game of musical cars is illegal but it is not immoral. I fear that most visitors will not do this, however. Once people have gone round the Cathedral and the Bishop's Palace their three hours will be up and they will have no time left for spending money in shops or cafés. Wells will go into decline. Revolutionaries should be firing up their chainsaws and chopping down the car park signs and meters.

One thing that has always puzzled me is why such a long-established city should have no railway station. And is it the absence of a railway station which explains why the city never grew? Towns which refused railway stations (or which didn't use them or fight hard enough when the relentless Beeching was swinging his axe) will die in future. It is extraordinary how many decent sized towns have no railway station.

20
11.50 a.m.
A letter from Lords announced that the MCC now wants control of the laws of cricket to be handed to a committee. One of the joys of being a member of the MCC has been the opportunity to vote on the laws of cricket. I suspect this is a trick to get rid of yards. If we allow a committee to make the decision a cricket pitch will soon be 20.1168 metres long, instead of 22 yards. Incidentally, I wonder why the Americans misspell a unit of measurement which they don't use.

15.01 p.m.
We went to Prinknash Abbey park to see the miniature goats (our favourite creatures there). The monks have installed a machine which dispenses pellets and The Princess had saved up every 20 pence piece she'd acquired for several weeks. She spent a fiver buying pellets to feed the goats. Money well spent. I noticed that the grass in their enclosure had been eaten billiard table smooth so I wandered off and found long, lush grass around some trees in the deer section of the park. I pulled an armful and went back to them. The goats saw, or smelt, the grass and leapt up and down in excitement. What a joyful visit it was. There was an auction at Chorley's in the grounds so we popped in, bought a catalogue and started to browse. Almost the first thing I saw was a pair of very large books. These turned out to be *Dr Johnson's Dictionary*, the 1755 second edition, listed on an amendments list as second to Richardson's two volume *Dictionary of the English Language* (1856). The four books were given an estimated price of £100 to £150. I couldn't believe it. The first volume of the Johnson had some work done on the binding but I don't think I've seen a book that is over 250 years old that hasn't had some work on it. I immediately filled in a commission bid form and put £250 down. We also bid on a few other things. I was terrified that if I put on too much it would draw attention to the lot. And I couldn't go because I had promised to be at Publishing House to pick up mail and so on. A second edition of *Johnson's Dictionary* is worth up to £12,000, possibly even more. The one they had at Chorley's seemed to me to be in pretty good condition. The following morning I rang and increased my bid to £600. I wanted to put on £3,000 but I suspected that if I did the auctioneer might want to look more closely at the item and maybe even withdraw it for it to be assessed. Auctioneers do, after all, have a duty to the seller not the buyer. The woman who took the call seemed surprised at the extent of my increased offer and I worried that people might start wondering.

Book auctions can be fun. I once bought a row of books because I had spotted a first edition copy of *Brave New World*, by Aldous Huxley, sitting among a row of *Readers Digest* condensed books. I paid £9 for the lot and when a dealer saw me take out the book I really wanted he came across and asked me if he could buy the rest of the books for £9. I immediately agreed. He gave me £9, I gave him the row of *Readers Digest* condensed books and went home with a free first edition of *Brave New World*. It's difficult to beat that, though the other day I did find a first edition by Ian Fleming in the sort of box of assorted books that every junk shop has tucked away behind a mouldy armchair in the corner. That cost me 50 pence and the fellow selling it seemed keen to get rid of it though at a conservative estimate it's worth at least £300.

21.46 p.m.
We tried to watch a DVD of the `Mad Men' series which I bought yesterday. We gave up after three and a half episodes and dumped the DVD into our charity bag. The series is heavily praised but it's about as funny as scabies. Unlikeable characters and a slow and pointless plot which meanders from place to place without any sense of direction or purpose. This is Emperor's new clothes television. The programmes are so slow that several times I had

to check that I hadn't accidentally pressed the pause button. I can see why critics working for the *Guardian* and *Independent* might like this rubbish but I suspect that humans disliked it as much as we did. Thumbs down after persevering for three and a half episodes.

21
09.18 a.m.
I received an e-mail from the auctioneers this morning. We have bought an 1879 oil painting by Wilson Harrison which we both liked, and which cost £100, and an assorted box of sundry plate, including three entrée dishes and a wonderful variety of other country house silver plate. We haven't the house yet but the house will now have to fit the silver plate. Tragically, I didn't get the Dr Johnson. The books went for £650. A bargain. My Bilbury friend Patchy Fogg would have written a note on the flyleaf in pencil `various pages missing' to deter other would-be buyers. Johnson's dictionary sold for over £4 when it first came out in the early half of the 18th century. With inflation that's probably what it costs now. Chorleys seem like good eggs. In the past I have usually found that if I have been successful at auctions I have invariably paid my top bid on all the lots I've bought as an absentee buyer. Not so with Chorleys. The two items I purchased were below my top bids. But I am gutted about the dictionary.

21.34 p.m.
I looked at a Tiger Woods golf game for Nintendo. Players can create their own characters who then play on selected golf courses. The software is skilfully done. But did they have to create characters who automatically kick the ball away, hurl the ball at the ground and break their clubs when they play bad shots? What sort of example is that? No one can possibly be surprised if young golfers behave badly in the future. It seems to me that sport has lost its way entirely. Even the people who run cricket have forgotten the meaning of the word `sportsmanship'. Players in Test Matches are now to be encouraged to question the umpire's decision. If the professionals do that then I guarantee that schoolboy players will start questioning umpires too. And once the umpires lose their authority the game will stop being a game.

22.05 p.m.
I suspect that the Olympic stadium which is being built in London at huge expense will probably be knocked down after a couple of weeks of use by drug soaked athletes. What the hell is anyone going to use it for? How many times a year will 100,000 people crowd into a stadium to watch fat Russians throwing hammers? The damned thing will be used for two weeks and then be a white elephant, leaving behind a carbon footprint the size of Norway. If Britons were asked: `Would you choose to have the Olympics in London for two weeks or to have your rubbish collected every week?' It wouldn't be difficult to guess the answer. The question will never be asked because celebrity politicians enjoy pretending to be on the world stage for two weeks and they adore the free trips to other Olympic games. I don't think the Olympics have had anything to do with sport for a long, long time. And the London Olympics won't do a thing for England or the English.

23.15 p.m.
I've just discovered that the Arts Council has held a competition to find artwork showcasing British culture in the months approaching the London Olympics. There are several winners. A wingless silver bird made from a recycled DC9 aeroplane will nest in various locations across Wales. A full size football pitch for amateur Scottish footballers is going to be created by chopping down a lot of trees in the Scottish borders. And three hand-crocheted 30 foot lions will be displayed in a taxidermy case in Nottingham. So, I feel guilty about saying that the Olympics will not add anything to our lives.

22
10.06 a.m.
A reader of mine put out his rubbish but the dustmen didn't come for two weeks. During that time cats, foxes and dogs tore the black plastic bags apart. The rubbish which was released then blew around in the street and when the dustmen finally arrived they refused to pick it up. My reader rang up the council and asked them to deal with it. They told him that it was his problem and that he had to pick up all the debris. `Oh no,' he told the council. `Once the rubbish is put out into the street it becomes your responsibility.' He pointed out that councils which send people round to rummage through the rubbish looking for names and addresses have (when sued for invasion of privacy) successfully argued that once rubbish is put out into the street for collection it no longer belongs to the person who put it there. `You can't have it both ways,' said my reader. Two hours later the council rang him back confirming that he was right. They sent men round to pick up the rubbish.

14.31 p.m.
A reader has returned a copy of *Mr Henry Mulligan* I had signed (with a special dedication) for her friend. `My friend doesn't read novels,' said the reader. `Would you please take this back and send me a cat book. Sign it again, put her name and write Happy Birthday.' What am I supposed to do with the book she has returned? I suppose I'll have to wait until someone else wants to buy a book for a friend called Doreen who is having a birthday. This is no way to run a business.

Another reader has written to complain that the Publishing House telephone number doesn't work. She said that she had wanted to ring to check that her cheque had arrived. I have hated the telephone ever since I spent ten years as a GP and lived with a phone which rang every time I sat down to eat, climbed into the bath or started watching a television programme. I am so delighted that the business no longer has a telephone.

17.29 p.m.
A major UK bank which managed to avoid a state bailout has apparently been letting employees go because it cannot match the wages being offered at a rival UK bank that was bailed out with taxpayers' money. Utter madness.

19.02 p.m.
I have decided to found the English Anarchy Party. I have made myself official founder, president, chairman, secretary and treasurer. My wife has founded the Welsh Anarchy Group and describes herself with great glee as a real WAG. There are few political systems on which chaos and anarchy would be an improvement, but the European Union is definitely one of them.

23
11.07 a.m.
Friends who are also trying to buy a house are gutted. They found their dream home and offered to pay the asking price. They have been outbid by a couple who have not yet sold their own home and are borrowing half of the money they need to complete the purchase. `We saved and scrimped for years,' said F. `But it seems to me that there are two sorts of money around these days. There's `real' money, for which people have worked hard, and there's `pretend' money, which is the stuff people borrow from the banks and which isn't at all like the real stuff.'

14.02 p.m.
When I telephoned HMRC I was asked two security questions. The first was my birthdate. The second security question was my office telephone number: the number which has, over the years, appeared in thousands of newspaper advertisements. Brilliant.

17.51 p.m.
Hardly a day goes by without the EU doing something else intrusive and intensely stupid. The European Court of Justice in Luxembourg has ruled that insurance companies cannot charge men and women different rates for different products. It's sexist and illegal. The newspaper commentators thought first about women. At the moment they get cheaper rates for car insurance because, statistically, they have fewer accidents. (Though they may well cause more). But it's men who will really suffer. UK pension annuity policies have traditionally offered men better annuity rates because men die sooner than women. No more. Thanks to the EU (which has already devastated pension payments) men will see their pension income cut again. It really isn't worthwhile putting money into a pension fund these days. Gold coins in a sock under the bed (or buried in a hole in the garden) make a much safer investment.

18.36 p.m.
There is news today that the Government is going to cut Public Lending Right (PLR) funding by 15% over the next four years. As far as I am aware no bankers or civil servants are having their pay cut by 15% but writers are easy prey so who cares? The closure of public libraries will also damage PLR income. And, as libraries go so will the demand for new books. Large print editions will doubtless disappear completely as will the production of unabridged audio versions of books. No one buys large print books or unabridged audio versions except libraries. I thought for a brief moment that subscription lending libraries might come back, along the lines of the old Boots lending library, but they won't of course. The e-book will ensure that such an idea will never get off the ground.

I also read that the compensation money for equitable life policy holders who got shafted will be means-tested (the precise words are `those whose need is greatest will be paid first' which probably means there won't be any left by the time they get to me). Since when was compensation means-tested? Still, I remember paying a huge chunk of tax on the compensation I received after the zero dividend preference share fiasco so the Government has form in this area.

I was still moaning about all this miserable news when people we know who live a couple of miles away telephoned to ask if they could come round. They were feeling glum for they have been notified by the council that their rates are going up because they have put in another bathroom.

They are decent, kindly people. He is a not terribly successful motivational speaker who looks as if he was put together by someone who hadn't bothered to read the instructions carefully. He has overgrown eyebrows, the sort politicians cultivate to give the newspaper cartoonists something to draw, and his hair can't quite decide whether to turn grey or disappear completely. K speaks in such a way that certain words begin with the oratorical equivalent of a capital letter. So, if he speaks about the Environment or Climate Change the words clearly begin with capitals. She used to work on local television but passed her view by date some time ago. She is the most hospitable person we know and it's impossible to enter their home without being served a large meal. The last time we went, intending to call round with a birthday present for their dog whom they adore and treat like a child, she insisted on serving us a snack. Her definition of a snack was a brown cottage loaf, warm, soft inside, crisp on the outside, a half pound of fresh butter, a hunk of cheddar and bowls of piccalilli, pickled walnuts, pickled eggs, pickled cucumber, red cabbage, radishes, lettuce, tomato and spring onions. Afterwards she produced three cakes, all home-made, and insisted that we had a large slice from each one.

They wanted to know why they should be punished for spending money on builders and improving their house. `If we'd spent the money on booze and foreign holidays we wouldn't be punished,' they point out quite accurately. `And if we couldn't afford to pay our mortgage the Government would help us with a special grant or low interest rates.

24
10.09 a.m.
Looking at a copy of *Time* magazine I see that Norman Wisdom, who died recently, has the best part of a half page obituary (underneath a half page obituary of the very great Tony Curtis). Wisdom was a star when I was a child and I was appalled in later years to see him scoffed at by people who weren't fit to hold his cap. In the days when I occasionally watched television I watched in utter horror as a charmless, embarrassingly gauche, talentless, loathsome and cretinous interviewer sneered at a man who had been one of the nation's greatest and best loved film stars.

25
11.02 a.m.
The proof that civil servants have no idea how the real world operates outside their air-conditioned cages lies in the fact that they frequently send me forms asking how much my income will be for the current year. The honest answer is that I have absolutely no idea. If someone buys film rights or paperback rights to a book of mine my income could be in six figures. If I continue to spend most of my time filling in forms and too little of it writing books then I will probably make a loss. But forms are forms and without figures in the boxes they will not be accepted. So I make up a figure. Forms are just another work of fiction.

26
11.18 a.m.
A middle-aged woman held the door open for me today. I looked at myself in a shop window as I passed by and I could understand why. I feel knackered. Utterly exhausted and worn out.

14.48 p.m.
I spotted yet another bookshop selling e-book readers. Madness. When faced with such murderous competition bookshops should promote their own advantages not support the opposition.

20.01 p.m.
I have just worked out that I made approximately several thousand times as much money by following the financial advice in my book *Oil Apocalypse* as I made from the book itself. Numerous readers have written to let me know that they too have made a good deal of money by following the advice the book contained. Ironically, most of the comments about the book on the Web are negative and dismissive. Amazingly, writers on the Web don't seem to feel that there is anything odd about reviewing a book they haven't read. My favourite review was written by someone who accused me of deliberately pushing up the oil price simply to promote my book. Sales of the book were

damaged not just by all this nonsense but also by the fact that Amazon ran out of copies just as my advertising reached a peak and visitors to the webshop were told that the book was not available.

22.19 p.m.
In *Motorsport* magazine I read an article about a man called Fitch who is 92 and who made an attempt on world land speed record when he was 88.

27
11.03 a.m.
I went into a shop which sells computer games. I wanted to buy a new chess game which I'd heard about. The shop was packed. `Your customers all seem much the same age,' I said to the assistant. They were all men in their late teens and twenties. `Ninety per cent of them are unemployed,' the assistant told me. `They are the only people who can afford the games and the only people who have the time to play them.'

15.58 p.m.
I closed our own webshop (largely because of the costs and difficulties involved in taking credit card orders) and handed over the running of the webshop to Amazon. I had run some sort of webshop for well over 20 years so this was something of a wrench. And, sadly, it has been an utter disaster. I have given up trying to persuade Amazon to include our books in the webshop which they now manage for us. We begged and cajoled but all to no effect. For example, *Cat Tales* is only available through someone selling a second-hand copy for £38. I have thousands of copies in the warehouse but people who visit the shop on our website don't know they are there - and cannot buy them. Books of mine which have been out for a year are still not available through our shop. I have decided to sell books only by cheque. I am removing details of the webshop from advertisements, from inserts and from my website.

19.08 p.m.
Book sales are down everywhere. I'm not surprised. Even when e-books are included in the figures there are fewer books being sold these days. The problem is that publishers have, for years, allowed themselves to be led by their marketing departments. Too many of the books they produce are written by celebrities who care nothing about books. Many are written by ghostwriters who take a percentage of the royalties but have little passionate interest in the book's contents. Professional authors who write even a modestly successful book are encouraged to write the same book over and over again. Very few books published by the big publishers have a soul.

We live in a world where books are no longer an essential part of our culture. Schoolchildren use the Internet rather than books. If they are to succeed books must be exciting, dramatic and intellectually invigorating. But modern publishers prefer books which follow a safe, routine pattern and which are designed for profitable mediocrity. Editors don't like making people think. Modern publishing is all about making money and avoiding trouble; the words `methodical' and `plodding' describe most of the people in what used to be a craft but which has now become a rather grubby industry.

Making things worse is the fact that major imprints are now often part of large conglomerates with vast global interests. This means that they aren't keen on publishing books which might prove too controversial or which might threaten any part of their organisation or which might annoy some powerful person or lobby group with a view and interests to protect. Consequently, large publishers don't publish genuinely daring books. And too often the editors themselves are far too politically correct to dare publish anything which might cause a ripple of controversy.

Today, the posh publishers specialise in printing books by footballers, by women who have had sex with footballers, by men who have gone out (or stayed in) with women who have had sex with footballers and by women who have had breast enlargement surgery. Any woman who crosses over two categories (has had sex with a footballer and has had breast enhancement surgery) can expect a huge advance payment.

Modern publishers are marketing led; hence the plethora of books linked to TV reality shows. Because these books have a very limited shelf life (they will die as soon as the reality celebrity fades from view) publishers have become exceedingly short-termist and tend to forget about their backlists.

Making things even worse is the fact that publishers' readers really aren't very bright. Every now and then a frustrated author will scan in or type in a classic book and send the result off to a publisher. It will invariably come back in a few weeks with a patronising rejection slip.

One author I heard of was given a huge amount of advice about how to improve her book. She didn't like any of the suggestions so she simply changed the font and then resubmitted the book to the same editor a couple of months later. The editor loved the book, and was delighted with the 'changes'.

Publishing is an unpredictable business. It is difficult to tell which books are going to be most successful. It is invariably the new and unexpected which make the big money - exactly the sort of thing that traditional publishers don't publish. It comes as no surprise to me that most really successful books are turned down by numerous publishers before they are finally published. It is only the persistence of their authors which eventually leads to their success. In my book *How to Publish Your Own Book* I produced a massive list of classic books which had been rejected by many publishers before eventually reaching the printing press and the bestseller lists.

Today's publishers don't publish books which are important. Instead, they produce a steady storm of superficial, exploitative trash. They produce row after row of books by non-entities, materialistic, egocentric fame whores who seek fame for its own sake, rather than as an offshoot of achievement, and whose sole reason for writing a book is not that they have something to say but because they have been contestants on television. Most have nothing to contribute. They don't even have a story to tell. They are merely writing books as another way of capitalising on their transient, transparent fame.

And most big publishers are in business just to make money.

I have never written a book because I think it will sell. I have only ever written books that I wanted to write, regardless of their commercial potential. I always write books I want to write, and work out how to sell them later.

Today, there aren't many small publishers left (the successful ones having frequently been bought up by the big ones). Bookshops and libraries won't take books produced by small publishers. Newspapers and television companies won't review books produced by small publishers. The whole business has become unhealthily incestuous.

The entire publishing industry (publishers, agents, printers, wholesalers, bookshops and libraries) is doomed, of course. The industry has embraced the e-book (they could have said `no') and so the industry will die. The curious thing is that I can see second-hand bookshops reappearing on our streets - if charity shops don't destroy them before they start. Seaside towns and holiday resorts should prove fertile ground for retailers prepared to sell cheap second-hand paperbacks to holidaymakers who haven't succumbed to the lure of the Kindle or the Ipad.

There will be people who want books for as long as I have left. But the publishing industry and I have nothing in common. So, that leaves self-publishing.

28

12.02 p.m.

EDF energy, the company which provide us with gas and electricity in England and in France, and whose bills in England are as utterly incomprehensible as they are clear and comprehensible in France, wrote to tell us that we have used so much less gas than expected and that we have built up a credit of £243.68. In view of this they are increasing our monthly direct debit from £90 to £110. Naturally, I don't understand. If I had three days with nothing to do I would telephone the company to ask them why.

16.17 p.m.

I've been reading John Fothergill's book *An Inkeeper's Diary*. It's an utterly wonderful book. Published in 1931, the book itself is one of those beautifully bound, sensibly sized hardback books which just fit into a jacket pocket. Fothergill has filled his diary with anecdotes about friends he has loved, guests with whom he has argued, meals he has eaten, books he has read and wines he has drunk, enjoyed or regretted. Fothergill was an outrageous, shameless, glorious snob and, with the exception of the glorious John Mytton, probably the most politically incorrect Englishman of all time. He ran a series of upmarket inns with a largely upmarket clientele. Fothergill himself was both erudite and blunt (blunt enough to make Basil Fawlty seem positively benign). Innocent of the need for political correctness he makes it perfectly clear, both to his readers and his guests, that he doesn't approve of young men of breeding or scholarship bringing shop girls into his establishment.

His inns regularly imported food from Greece, France, Norway and Italy, To supply what he believed his customers should eat he forced local bakers to bake three different kinds of bread, made from flours he'd made them use. He had a cellar of thousands of bottles of rare wine.

I bought this book from a junk shop for 50 pence (Oxfam managers please note) and am delighted to have found two more of Fothergill's volumes of autobiography *My Three Inns* and *Confessions of an Innkeeper*. There's a photograph of Fothergill in *My Three Inns* and I admit he is the scariest looking bloke I've ever seen in my life.

In *An Innkeeper's Diary* Fothergill describes how he was asked by his nephew if he would lend his name to a new restaurant or inn in London. Here's what he says about it: `Having had here a kitchen staff for seven years composed mainly of half-wits, degenerates, dishonests, drunkards and hystericals, and having done it daily ourselves, I can't conceive lending my name to any establishment where I don't also do it all myself. It's this kitchen business that has knocked the initiative and courage out of me. I suppose everyone who drives his own furrow, especially a romantic one like this, suffers from self-pity at times to compensate for the praise he gets at other times, and for an awful loneliness due to people's not knowing what he has done to do what he has.' Oh, Mr Fothergill, I know exactly what you mean.

18.34 p.m.
Although journalists and broadcasters tend to ignore my books (in that they don't mention them) they do, nevertheless use my work very frequently in their columns and broadcasts. It seems to me that this is unfair to my regular readers. I do not, for example, see why my forecasts should be shared with the rest of the media. I am, therefore, taking the rather unusual step of trying to make sure that my books do not fall into the hands of too many journalists. In future I am not sending out any review copies. In addition, I am no longer making copies available at lower prices for readers to distribute to journalists, politicians and friends.

I've also made a decision not to do any more radio or television interviews. I don't get asked. But just in case someone does ask: I'm not doing any more.

29
14.02 p.m.
I'm still enjoying my Fothergill discoveries. The Great Man tells a story of a friend whom he had asked to write a piece for another book he was preparing called *The Fothergill Omnibus* (what a wonderful title). The friend did nothing and later confessed that `he dared not say he would do it because he was so afraid that he wouldn't, and yet wouldn't say he couldn't because he would so much like to, so he couldn't reply'. I know exactly how Fothergill's friend feels and understand completely. I have lost count of the number of invitations I have accepted and then had to back out of and the number I have avoided and then regretted. I would have never discovered Fothergill's wonderful books without being able to browse in a second-hand bookshop. Local councils who care a jot for the education of their citizens should reduce the rating value of second-hand bookshops and junk shops to zero to help them survive. Without them how else are we ever to discover such joys?

15.06 p.m.
After the print run of 2,000 had almost sold out we sent a few of the remaining copies of my book *2020* to mass market paperbackers, asking them if they would like to produce an edition. I pointed out that we had sold pretty much the entire print of 2,000 copies in two weeks without any sales reps, without any bookshop sales, without any sales on the Internet, without any advertisements and without any promotional interviews. None of the publishers to whom I wrote wanted to know how we had managed this apparent impossibility. Most of the paperback houses just ignored the book and the request but I did receive an undated, pre-printed note from an editorial assistant at Arrow (which had published the paperback edition of my first book *The Medicine Men* in 1976). This is the reply in full: `Thank you for your letter regarding publication of your book. Unfortunately, our policy has changed and we no longer accept unsolicited submissions. May I advise you to consult the *Writers' and Artists' Yearbook*, published every year by A&C Black, with a view to securing a literary agent? The yearbook contains up-to-date information and details of literary agents and publishers and their specialisations.' How quaintly patronising. I bought my first copy of the *Writers and Artists Yearbook* in 1963.

30
22.50 p.m.
We watched the last DVD episode of `John Adams' this evening.

It's a truly excellent television series about the early days of America. Beautifully written, accurate, detailed and exquisite in every way. Oh for a similar series on English history. The trouble is that only the BBC has the money to make such a series and since it is owned by the EU (which is determined to see England disappear) that is extremely unlikely to happen.

31
12.01 p.m.
I wanted to buy two magazines and found myself in a huge queue in W.H.Smith's today. There was only one till open (operated by a rather slow-witted woman) and everyone who reached her seemed to want to pay with a credit card. When a stern looking woman in a dark blue uniform with a name badge on the lapel marched past I gave her a large piece of what is laughingly known as my mind. `More tills should be opened up,' I told her. `There are now 15 people in this queue and at this rate it will take us an hour to be served.' The woman looked at me as if I were mad and stalked off. I was furious but could not run after her without losing my place in the queue. As luck would have it

she was coming out of the store when I had finally managed to complete my purchases. I started to walk towards her to give her the remainder of my mind but just in time I noticed that the name badge she was wearing carried a Lloyds Bank logo. I felt bad for a moment or two but Lloyds Bank often has long queues too.

16.04 p.m.

I have been self-publishing since 1989. That's pretty close to a quarter of a century. For most of that time I've used Publishing House in Barnstaple as the headquarters for running the business. I've never had an office there myself but have employed people to deal with the storing of books and fulfilling the orders.

To the surprise of many I proved it was possible to earn a living publishing your own books. I published dozens of books, sold scores of foreign rights, sold serial rights to dozens of leading magazines and newspapers, sold large print rights and audio rights in many books and had one novel turned into a major movie.

There were, of course, disappointments.

Despite huge efforts I simply could not persuade bookshops to stock our books. I tried. I really tried. But, although we sold a lot of books through bookshops, almost every single sale was the result of a customer walking into a shop and asking them to order the book. In the last few years we sold over £250,000 worth of books this way. But bookshops (whether large or small) won't take books from small publishers in general. And, contaminated by the prejudices of the trade, they are doubly reluctant to order books which are (whisper it softly) self-published.

Bookshops weren't the only people to be unhelpful.

Reviewers and literary editors refused to look at books from Publishing House. One literary editor openly boasted that he threw my books into a bin without ever looking at them because they were self-published. I discovered that literary editors give most of their space to the big publishers because it is the big publishers who provide them with the crates full of books to sell on Amazon and eBay. It is the big publishers who will publish their little book of memoirs. Or, hope of hopes, the novel they've had in their drawer for ten years.

And libraries have been unhelpful too. Even when people tried to order my books they were frequently lied to and told that they were `unavailable', `out of print' or `impossible to order'.

Several staff members have been with me pretty well since the beginning and when four employees decided that the time had come for them to retire and (deservedly) take life a bit easier I had to rethink the business. I could hardly grumble. One had gone long past normal retirement age. Things were made more critical by the fact that David, my trusted and long-suffering advertising buyer had also retired from the business.

I had two main reasons for taking this opportunity to consider a major restructuring of the way the business is run.

First, threats of various kinds have made it sensible for us to live somewhere difficult to find, and for some years now we've shared our time between our apartment in Paris and our home in Bilbury, where we enjoy our nebulous but rewarding relationships with friends Thumper Robinson, Patchy Fogg et al. For a variety of reasons the regular journey to Barnstaple has become difficult, unpleasant, boring and hazardous.

Second, the small, free-wheeling business I created has grown and been infiltrated by red tape. The stuff is like dry rot. The spores settle somewhere cosy and then spread out and wreak havoc on every conceivable part of the structure.

I never really wanted to be publisher. I'm a writer. I only got into publishing because I found it impossible to find anyone prepared to publish *Alice's Diary* and decided to do it myself. Since the sales of that book alone are now worth close to £750,000 their refusal to consider it tells you everything you need to know about smart London publishers. London publishers also turned down *People Watching* (of which I sold nearly 30,000 copies at £9.99) *Food for Thought* (of which I sold over 40,000 copies at £12.99) and many others including a polemic *Betrayal of Trust* (of which I sold over 5,000 copies at £12.99). After the publishers of *Bodypower* let the book go out of print I had, within a year, sold foreign rights to numerous overseas publishers and had sold several thousand copies in the UK. With the exception of my books on vivisection, every book I've published has sold well enough to at least cover its costs.

In setting up my own publishing business I got rid of the irritation of 17-year-old editors and marketing experts telling me what to write (and how to write it) and gained a considerable amount of freedom. For over two decades I have written whatever books I wanted to write, I have published them myself and I have sold them. I've made enough money to pay my staff (up to around 15 of them at one point), to pay my suppliers, to pay my taxes and to eat, drink and even be merry occasionally. As my own publisher I have kept faith with books that didn't sell well from the start. I have kept books in print and I have sold foreign rights.

To begin with there were, inevitably, a huge variety of problems. There were problems with printing and logistics and advertisements. But these were business problems and it wasn't difficult to find solutions. However, in recent years these structural problems have been overgrown with red tape and with constant interference from bureaucrats and various arms of the establishment. Not all the problems have come from the European Union and the

Government. I had to abandon credit card sales because the red tape (and expenses) were just too much to handle. I have had increasing problems with Royal Mail (whose status as a monopoly supplier gives its administrative and executive staff delusions of grandeur). Gradually, my world has been filling up with people who take no risks, no responsibility and no blame but who constantly think up ways to disrupt my business and stop me doing what I do best. For the last few years it seems as though every telephone call, every fax message, every e-mail and every post has brought another problem. And every official is officious. The problems are not presented politely, they are presented with threats. `You will do this or we will do that.' Because I wasn't at Publishing House very often my staff were easily bullied. And ended up gold plating every piece of new legislation. By the middle of 2010 my staff seemed to be spending most of their time responding to instructions, demands and exhortations from various Government departments and quangos. Responding to the bureaucracies had become the driving force, an end in itself.

It seemed that the world had become full of people whose role in life was to disrupt my life and to tell me how I should live, how I should spend my time and what I should and should not do. (What particularly annoyed me was that as a taxpayer, and payer of countless fees, I paid these people's salaries, expenses and pensions.)

Gradually, over the years, the dry rot has spread through the business. Slowly, but irresistibly, it has strangled Publishing House and taken over every aspect of the business. For the last year or two the rules have been coming in on a daily basis. Even brand new electrical appliances had to be checked regularly. Fire checks. Employment legislation. Staff training programmes. I was told that, according to the law, staff had to be allowed time off to be trained to do something other than the work I had hired them to do, and which they were already perfectly capable of doing, and so in their absence being trained and collecting diplomas, certificates and, quite possibly, rosettes which would, presumably, enable them to leave and find other work elsewhere, I had to hire temporary staff to do the work they would have done if they hadn't been away being trained to do something that I hadn't hired them to do. This did not seem to me to be an entirely sane way to run a business or the country. Things may change in the future. But if they do I can guarantee that it will be to make things worse, not better. Rules about sick pay. Rules about holidays. Rules about pregnant staff. Rules about pensions. We had to have a designated and trained first aid officer in the building at all times. There was, it seemed, a constant stream of people pouring into Publishing House to check on things. Naturally, there are hefty fees for all these checks and licences. More rules about pensions. Health and safety checks. More health and safety checks. Someone in a suit coming round to check whether the staff had been properly trained in how to use filing cabinets without being crushed. Are all parts of the building the right temperature? Software updates had to be bought. A licence so that staff can listen to the radio if they want to. Publishing House had become a bureaucratic machine. More time and energy were spent satisfying the bureaucrats than on selling books. Indeed, it seemed as though the bureaucrats were actually running the business for their benefit. But I had all the responsibility. And I paid all the bills. Far too much of the business time and money and energy went into training staff how to fill in forms. I felt I was running one business and the staff were running another. It was my fault, of course. I should have been there more often to put a stop to the nonsense.

But I am a writer not a publisher and my foray into publishing has been pretty well brought to an end by EU regulations (which make running a small business which employs people a nightmare), the Royal Mail (which has put up its prices so much that mailing out books has become impossibly expensive), the book trade (which has failed to support small publishers), the media (which is so closely linked to the publishing establishment that it remains determined not to promote self-published books), the libraries (which now buy very few books and which prefer to deal exclusively with the big publishers who give them huge discounts), the supermarkets (which have forced down margins by charging such absurdly low prices), the big publishers (who give massive discounts on their books, cutting their margins to the bone and making it almost impossible for a small publisher to survive) and the Internet (which have made it possible for a bloke on benefits in a bed-sitting room in Leeds to sell back list books for one penny each, making his tiny profit out of the postage charge).

I only became a publisher because the publishing trade only wanted to publish the books they wanted me to write. My efforts did at least prove that publishers are incompetent fools who know nothing about books or readers, but the exercise had exhausted me.

For too long I didn't really make plans or decisions but merely followed fate and my fancies. This is fine for writing (though it isn't the way you are supposed to do it) but not for publishing (which is, after all, a business and which needs short, medium and long-term planning). In the end I had replaced the tyranny of the 17-year-old editor with the tyranny of the 17-year-old bureaucrat.

Damnit, publishing was no longer any fun at all.

It wasn't even my business. The dry rot had taken over.

The bureaucratic monster that Publishing House had become, was sucking the life out of me. The nightmarish mixture of rules, regulations, demands and problems were exacerbated by the fact that in order to make enough money to pay for all the bureaucracy I was under constant pressure to produce what a new short-lived and ineffectual advertisement space buyer insisted on calling `new product' but what I still insisted on regarding as books. I finally realised that I had to close Publishing House when a staff member told me I had been too nasty to the Royal Mail when I'd offered what I had thought were relatively mild criticisms of its gross incompetence and inexcusable stupidity. I needed an income of around £1 million a year to cover all my costs and stand a chance of making a profit. By the time I told British Telecom to turn off the telephone at Publishing House my capacity to cope with crap had dissipated more or less completely.

I really just wanted (and want) to write books; the business of publishing them (and employing a number of people) was beginning to exhaust me. So, I paid off all the staff, closed the telephone lines and pretty well shut down the business. The Princess and I decided that for a few weeks we would deal with the orders which came in ourselves while we decided what to do next. So for a few weeks we have been racing backwards and forwards filling the truck with books and the house with padded bags. The Princess has been putting books into envelopes and I have been sitting on the stairs (at midnight) putting stamps onto the parcels. It has, nevertheless, been far more fun than it was. All communications from Government departments and quangos are returned `Gone Away'.

We realised that we had four choices.

First, I could give up. Retire. Stop writing and stop publishing. This was not really an option.

Second, I could continue to write but just not bother publishing the books. I seriously considered this option but decided that although it would make a useful last resort there might be a better answer.

Third, I could find an outside publisher and allow myself to be patronised by 17-year-olds telling me how to write books.

Fourth, we could start again but keep things under control and put the fun back into the business.

We've chosen the fourth option.

We are going to find new premises and start again. We need a building big enough to hold 60,000 books and to provide us both with an office. Starting again will involve a major restructuring and we know it will pose numerous problems because the bureaucracies which abound seem to delight in making life particularly difficult for anyone trying to run a small business. But we will succeed because we have learned a little.

We have decided not to bother recruiting any permanent staff. There are two reasons for this.

First, it is difficult to find good staff these days. When we advertised for new staff we had an application from a woman who couldn't even spell what she did for a living. Another came into work on day one but on day two she had a migraine and so she stayed at home. On day three she came in and spent most of the day making and receiving private calls and texts and on fourth day she left, saying she could get more money and more interesting work elsewhere. Another applicant wrote saying `I am a very competant person'.

And second the new employment rules make hiring staff a nightmare and firing them an impossibility.

In the future, The Princess and I will do everything ourselves (though we will, of course, hire outside workers and consultants to help with book production).

We aren't going to have a telephone. I don't think we need one and The Princess is happy to put up with this mild eccentricity. Telephones have an innate tendency to ring and to interfere with other things. People who want to get in touch with us can either write or e-mail.

We have also decided to make physically smaller books. Modern books tend to be absurdly oversized. The Victorians and Edwardians published books with over 100,000 words that still fitted into a jacket pocket and were printed in an easily readable type. They did it by choosing good, thin paper that didn't allow any `bleed through'. In future we're going to produce books that fit into a pocket or a bag and which look and feel good and which are easy to read even for those whose eyes aren't as good as they once were. We will sell the stock we have of existing books and then produce smart new editions that fit with our new philosophy. Producing smaller books will help us keep our postage costs down to an acceptable level.

Flaubert advised that a mundane, routine life was best for writing and by golly the old guy was right. Closing Publishing House and starting again has given me hope that publishing can be fun again. I have never had plans. And I don't intend to start having plans. But a little less chaos would be good. Hopefully our new system will produce fewer crises, less drama and less waste.

And more fun, damnit.

November

1

09.03 a.m.

I put the clocks forward last night but got it wrong. All our clocks are now two hours out. I can never remember whether the damned things spring back or fall forward or spring forward and fall back. I had to correct twelve clocks again. And all so that a few Scottish farmers can go out and milk their cows without using torches. Meanwhile millions of English and Welsh schoolchildren have to struggle home in the dark. Lots of them will doubtless die on the roads. Still the EU will have us all on European time soon and that will be the end of that. Meanwhile, we should let the Scots have their own time zone. We would spend less on heat and light, and have fewer accidents. And we wouldn't have to fiddle with our clocks and watches. The saving in energy on that alone would save enough to give every Scotsman a free dram of neat paraquat.

12.17 p.m.

I spent a few minutes making up the most politically incorrect rhymes imaginable. Here are three:

1.
A dog is for Christmas
But just for the day
Have lots of fun
Then throw it away
2.
Needles are fun
As long as they're sharp
But after a year
You'll be playing a harp
3.
Eat lots of burgers
You'll get a fat belly
And what's even worse
You'll also be smelly

I suggested to The Princess that I offer the third to one of the burger chains as an advertising slogan.

16.07 p.m.

I've received a letter from a fellow in Warsaw whose `aim is to be the second largest distributor of Vernon Coleman's books (after English speaking countries) in the world'. He is setting up something called the Health Publishing Company and wants to publish *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You* and my other health books in Polish. `There is a huge, growing interest on health issues in Poland. To me there is unmet demand. This interest can be met with Vernon Coleman's books.' He is a professional marketer who formerly held managerial posts with major drug companies. I write back suggesting some other books he might start with but I am not over hopeful. Letters like this come in frequently and I usually end up sending off piles of books and never hearing anything else. But we have to keep trying. And somehow I have a good feeling about this guy.

19.12 p.m.

We went to see another house today. We knew as soon as we got there that it wasn't right for us. Usually we drive to a property before arranging a viewing. It's often easy to tell from the outside whether a property is going to be suitable or not. But this time, as luck would have it, we hadn't visited. And this time it was painfully obvious that the house wasn't right for us. It was newer than it looked on the photographs. It had neighbours whose houses and gardens overlooked it and it had a scruffy looking public house next door. The pub had a blackboard outside advertising football matches on Sky television and a large poster promoting a late night karaoke evening on Saturday.

We had been inside the house for less than five minutes when the telephone rang.

`Another appointment for tomorrow?' said the woman. `Certainly. I'll put that in the diary. That's three then for that morning?' She put the telephone down and turned to us. `I'm so sorry about that. Now where was I? Oh, yes the kitchen was hand-built to our design by a firm of German specialists. As you can see...', and she opened and closed cupboard doors as she talked.

After another ten minutes the telephone rang again.

`For tomorrow? It will have to be the afternoon won't it? That's two so far for the afternoon?'

And so it went on. Never before had we visited such a popular house. It seemed as though the whole world wanted to visit, view and buy it.

`Did you believe all that nonsense?' asked The Princess as we left.

`I think it was put on for our benefit,' I said. `Her husband ringing up pretending to be a buyer wanting to make an appointment.'

`Did you notice that she never once confirmed the time of the appointment?' asked The Princess.

`Or the name of the prospective buyers.'

Twenty minutes after we had left my telephone went. It was the estate agent. `What did you think?' she asked. `Do you like the house? Would you like to make an offer?' I said we needed more time to think about it. They rang back three times that day to see if we wanted to make an offer. `Don't worry about the guide price,' said the estate agent. `The vendor is very flexible.'

We are getting desperate. Will we ever find our dream home? Do we still know what we're looking for? Will we know if we find it?

23.50 p.m.

Some years ago I bought an advent calendar for The Princess from Harrods. It is a beautiful thing. The Princess and I saw it together on a trip to London. When we returned home I telephoned the store and arranged for them to deliver it to me. (I wanted it to be a surprise.) It was the only one they had. It is hand carved and hand painted and contains 24 small cupboards into which can be placed all sorts of surprises. Whenever a door is opened a musical roundabout lights up, goes round and plays music. It is delightful. Every year I fill each small box with small toys; pieces of jewellery; polished stones; watercolour paints; shells; bits and pieces suitable for a dolls house; tiny wooden, porcelain and metal animals; small packets of sweets; tiny dolls; Roman coins and whatever else I can find that might entertain or intrigue. I suspect that I get far more joy from it than The Princess does. I always include chocolate money in among the toys and other small surprise gifts. This year I went to buy chocolate coins and could find only chocolate euros. While I was in a newsagent and confectionary shop hunting for chocolate money in sterling I noticed a fat woman on a scooter stuck in the shop. It wasn't easy to miss her since she was complaining very loudly about the lack of turning space. She couldn't reverse and she wasn't a good enough driver to turn her machine round in the narrow space available. She climbed off it and asked for help. I tried to move the machine but it was too heavy for me. I couldn't lift it at all. So the woman, cursing and shaking her head, pushed me out of the way and physically yanked the scooter round so that it was facing the way she wanted it to go, confirming my long held suspicion that many of the people using these things are just fat and lazy rather than genuinely disabled.

2

11.34 a.m.

On the M4, on our way to Cirencester this morning, The Princess who was struggling to find the `play' button for the CD player, accidentally turned on the truck's hazard flashers. Suddenly, a huge stretch of open motorway appeared behind us as the cars behind braked, assuming that I'd spotted an accident ahead. `They shouldn't put the button where passengers can press it,' said The Princess. `They should keep all the driving stuff over your side of the dashboard and all the fun stuff on my side.' I remembered that I was once fined £5 for driving with my hazard flashers on. It happened when I was a GP in Leamington Spa. During a busy evening surgery I received a telephone call from a woman who reported that her husband was having chest pain. I did what I always did in such circumstances. `If you want me to come now I will come now,' I told her. `Otherwise, I will come after I've finished the surgery.' `I'd like you to come now, please,' said the woman. `I think he might be having a heart attack.' I poked my head into the waiting room, explained what was happening and that I would be back as soon as I could, leapt into the car and shot off. It was half past five and the town was packed with `going-home traffic’. To help me ease my way through the traffic I put on my hazard flashers. I was driving a Saab at the time and it didn't take me long to reach the patient's home. Thankfully, it was a false alarm. The patient wasn't having a heart attack. I reassured him and his wife and headed back to finish the surgery. I forgot about the incident until I received a telephone call from the secretary of a high ranking local traffic policeman who had apparently seen me whizzing through the town. I gather he had chased me and failed to catch me. (I bet that really irked him.) I was told that he wanted me in his office at the police station. I declined to go. A few weeks later I found myself in court, charged with driving a motor vehicle while the hazard flashers were switched on. It was, I was told by the counsel hired by the Medical Defence Union, an offence to drive a moving motor vehicle with hazard flashers switched on. Only buses are allowed to do so and then it's to indicate that they are being hijacked. I was eventually fined the grand sum of £5 at the local magistrates court. But it didn't end there. A newspaper erroneously reported that I had claimed that the policeman had tried to browbeat me into making an apology. (It was, in retrospect, probably a fair guess on the newspaper's part. I doubt if Mr Plod wanted me in his office to congratulate me on getting away from him.) With the backing of whichever police union he was in, the copper sued me. His local solicitor was very aggressive. (I remember that during the case (which went on for months) I received an urgent call from a local solicitor whose son was ill. `Can you come as quickly as possible?' he asked anxiously. He was the solicitor representing the police officer who was suing me. It was a nice moment.) I hadn't said what I was reported as having said but this, apparently is no defence. I was sued and I lost. According to the British law of libel you are responsible for anything you are reported as having said even if you haven't said it. My defence union paid my costs and so our respective unions paid the costs of one of the silliest libel suits of the decade. `I would love to have this wretched policeman in court,' said my QC. `But it's really so silly that I suggest you apologise and be done with it.' So I apologised for something I hadn't done and that was that.

In Cirencester, we eventually found a car park which allowed parking for more than three hours. The fee to park for the day was £6.90. How on earth do the people who work in shops and offices in the town manage? There's no mention of a season ticket so five days parking would cost £34.50. And that's before the cost of petrol and so on. It is hardly surprising that more and more people are opting out of work and choosing to take the easy option: staying at home and claiming benefits.

Cirencester is a glorious town. I haven't been there since I had steak and kidney pudding in a restaurant in the town on my ninth birthday. The Princess has never been there before. For a town of less than 20,000 inhabitants it must have the best mix of shops in England. There are some excellent, smart local shops, good examples of the chain stores, a wonderful variety of small shops offering specialist services and well-stocked charity shops. It is a quintessential English market town and seems, thankfully, to be stuck in a 1950s time warp. Perfect.

16.39 p.m.
A man we know has a Range Rover. The back of the vehicle is covered in mud and the number plate is quite indistinguishable. `I'm likely to get told off if the police stop me,' said our friend. `But it means the speed cameras can't pick up my number plate details.' I asked him how he'd managed to cover the number plate so completely with mud and he explained that he and a friend had parked their vehicles back to back in a muddy field and then accelerated away as quickly as they could. Both vehicles had thrown up huge amounts of mud which had, he said, done the job very nicely.

3
10.02 a.m.
America plans to print another 600 billion dollars to destroy savings and make life better for debtors and greedy bankers.

How depressing. They call it quantitative easing rather than printing money (in the same newspeak way that when American soldiers kill British soldiers, which they do with such extraordinary efficiency that I am convinced that more of our troops are killed by the Americans than by the people we are supposed to be fighting, it is called friendly fire and not murder or manslaughter). The Bank of England is doing the same so that the American currency will not collapse alone. Obama, just thrashed in mid term elections, is apologising for everything he's done or not done, thought about doing or didn't think about doing. It is as convincing as the pre-election rhetoric. I was right about him in my book *What Happens Next?*

11.45 a.m.
An angry Scotsman has written to complain about my writing a book about my *The 100 Greatest Englishmen and Englishwomen*. He describes this as `racist' though I'm not sure why. There are plenty of books praising great Scotsmen and Scotswomen and I see nothing wrong with those. It is, I suppose, hardly surprising that the Scots (and, indeed, the Welsh) hate the English so violently. They are taught endless lies about England and the English and they see these lies repeated and exaggerated still further in books and films. I sometimes wonder if the whole anti-England industry might not be funded by the European Union, which is, of course, determined to destroy England permanently.

When you ask the more rabid Scots why they hate the English so vehemently those who can think of a reason will usually mention the Massacre of Glencoe. This happened in February 1692 and resulted in the deaths of between 30 and 40 Scots but it has, for romantic rather than logical reasons, become an enduring symbol of Scottish oppression and an everlasting reason to hate the English. Encouraged by absurd Hollywood films (which are as close to history as Bambi on Ice is close to natural history), the slaughter has become a symbol of the English oppression of the

Scots.

The best account of what happened is recorded in the excellent small book *The Massacre of Glencoe* by John Buchan.

Buchan was probably the finest, and certainly the most enduring and universally popular, Scottish writer of all time. He is remembered today for novels such as *The Thirty Nine Steps* and *John Macnab* but he was also the author of a number of history books and biographies (among them books about Cromwell and Sir Walter Scott). He spent his final years as Governor-General of Canada, where he was known as Lord Tweedsmuir.

What made the Glencoe massacre particularly notable was the fact that the 120 soldiers who were responsible for the killing were, prior to the massacre, billeted in cottages belonging to the locals. They were, according to Buchan, `mostly Highlanders and Campbells, but there were a few Lowlanders who hung together and talked their own talk, since their lack of Gaelic kept them from much intimacy with the folk of the glen.'

In fact not one Englishman was involved in the planning of the Massacre of Glencoe and the Scots who were massacred at Glencoe weren't killed by English soldiers. The whole hideous operation was planned by Scots and the killing was done by Scots.

Buchan explains in his book that three people were responsible for planning the massacre: John Dalrymple, the Master of Stair (a lowland Scotsman), John Campbell, 1st Earl of Breadalbane and the King (King William III).

None of these was English. (King William III was born in the Hague, Netherlands.)

`The first has the heaviest share (of the blame),' wrote Buchan. `The last the lightest. The guilt varies with the degree of knowledge, and the intimacy of the relationship between the wronged and the wronger. In William, it was a crime against humanity in general, in the Master of Stair against his fellow Scots and in Breadalbane against those who shared with him the blood and traditions of the Gael.'

Of the three ultimately responsible men, one was Dutch and two were Scots.

The men who committed the massacre were Scotsmen too. They were, according to Buchan, `mostly Breadalbane's own people'.

It is clear that if the Scots studied and understood their own history they would understand that the cause of their greatest resentment towards the English is unfounded and is built entirely on an inaccurate representation of history. Perhaps the Scots find it difficult to accept that it was Scotsmen who planned and executed the Massacre of Glencoe.

Buchan's history books are always well researched, well thought through and beautifully written. His book *The Massacre of Glencoe* should be distributed by England to every citizen in Scotland. No one north of the border should be allowed to vote until they've passed a test proving that they've read and digested the contents. American film directors should all be sent copies too.

23.56 p.m.
I spent the evening sorting out more files from Publishing House. I am burning boxes full of paper. The files have not been sorted for over 20 years and have become an impenetrable, multicoloured forest of out of date catalogues, unnecessary letters, bits of accounts, old contracts and all sorts of other administrative debris. It is a Sargasso sea of paperwork that was probably never worth keeping in the first place. But I keep all the accounts stuff. If the taxman wants to see my accounts he will receive as many boxes as we can fit into the truck.

4
11.09 a.m.
Schoolchildren are to be given free iPods so that they can do their schoolwork on them. I would have thought this an April Fool’s joke if it hadn't been November. So this is our new world. There is no money to buy schoolbooks so give them all a free iPod. Great. I asked The Princess what an iPod is. She says she thinks it's a sort of electronic device thingy.

12.25 p.m.
Everyone in the mail order business does specific mailings. In other words they sell specific products to a specific group of buyers. And in the world of publishing it is widely accepted that people who buy a novel by an author will not buy a non-fiction book by the same author. (When I first started life as a professional author my agent insisted that I write novels as Edward Vernon and medical books as Vernon Coleman. This led to Pan Books producing paperbacks by two people but then finding out that the books had been written by one person.)

In view of this knowledge I have for some time sent out separate mailings. Readers who had bought my novels would only be sent details of my new novels. Readers who had bought my cat books would only be sent details of new cat books. And readers who had bought medical or political books would be sent details of those.

But, after studying the results of a trial mailshot I have come to the conclusion that all of this is absolute nonsense.

Specific mailings really aren't necessary. People who buy a book on politics are quite likely to buy a novel. And vice versa. And why not? People don't just live in narrow little worlds. We all have a variety of interests. And, after all, if I write several different types of book why shouldn't readers want to read several different types of book?

This discovery is important because our new restructured Publishing House will be much easier to organise if the sales records are simplified. Moreover, I've just heard that the software company we used to employ (which enabled us to keep records of which customer had bought which book and which was, in retrospect, far too clever, far too complex, far too expensive and far too likely to cause problems) is closing down. Maybe we were a more important customer than we'd believed.

So, in future, we will simply keep a list of people who buy our books.

Simple.

I love it when things get simpler.

16.37 p.m.

There are so many keys around for Publishing House that I decided to have the locks changed. I can't even remember how many keys have been made for the old locks. I rang a locksmith who quoted an extraordinary price (the best part of £300 to change two locks) and wanted details of my credit card. They said it had to be a credit card because that was all they took. I don't like using credit cards and so I said I would prefer to pay cash. `We don't take cash,' said the voice at the other end of the telephone. There was a long, long pause while the person at the other end realised they were close to losing the business. `A cheque will do,' said the voice. We agreed that I would pay with a cheque. I've always found that the most potent negotiating ploy is the silence. I learned this as a young freelance writer when the editor of either *Woman* or *Woman's Own* rang me in a spin one day. They needed a cover story for the following week's magazine and wanted me to write something to fit the three pages they had empty. As usual with these things they wanted it yesterday. I said I could provide the copy within 12 hours. There was then the question of my fee to be settled. `I can pay you £1,500,' said the editor. For a few moments I didn't say anything. I was wondering what to write about, how quickly I could write it and when I would able to fax it. `The most I can go to is £2,000,' said the editor. `That's OK,' I agreed. I'd made £500 because I hadn't replied straight away. More importantly I learned the value of the long silence. All negotiations are ultimately all about threats or promises. Without a threat or a promise, a carrot or a stick, a negotiator's position is very weak. And if you have principles then these should be non-negotiable or there is no point in having them.

Incidentally, the reason why doctors tend to get a good deal out of the Department of Health is that they use fairly complex psychology when negotiating. They usually have a `good doc', a `bad doc', a `silent doc' and a `note taker'. There are, of course, many other techniques. When negotiating with racing teams Max Mosley, the motor racing boss, used to favour the technique of asking for something outrageous and then settling for what he wanted. The Japanese technique is to say and do nothing for a long, long time. They know that eventually the person with whom they are negotiating will break and want to start negotiating to make a deal. And there are, of course, female negotiators, who get what they want by wearing revealing and distracting dresses and displaying all the traditional charms.

20.48 p.m.

We have now abandoned our relationship whereby the Royal Mail used to take away our unstamped mail and then send us bills. We aren't selling enough books at the moment to do this. Publishing House is closed a good deal of the time. And I don't trust Royal Mail to bill me properly.

And so we are sticking stamps on all the parcels we send out. The Princess types in all the labels, picks out the books and packs them. I then stick on all the stamps. And together we pile all the books into the back of the truck and take them to the nearest Post Office.

There are many things about the Royal Mail which annoy me.

Why are there such huge jumps between postage bands? If a book weighs 251 grams (and why does a `business' owned by the British Government only publish prices in metric units?) then it is charged the same as a book weighing 499 grams.

Why does Royal Mail still not produce a full range of self-adhesive stamps? Most of its products have to be moistened. I'm surprised they bother to perforate the damned things.

And why do they make so few stamps in suitable denominations? The postage cost of sending out a copy of *Alice's Diary* is £1.95 but there is no £1.95 stamp. So instead of just putting one stamp on the envelope we now have to make up the amount with one £1 stamp, and a variety of other stamps. It can take six or more stamps to put the correct postage on a packet. Inevitably, we don't bother. I tend to put two £1 stamps onto a parcel requiring £1.95 in postage. It's quicker and simpler.

They don't make a £2.36 stamp either. Or, indeed, any other stamp that fits their postage chart. So we constantly find that it is easier and quicker to put too many stamps on every packet. It takes so long to sort out all the 1p, 2p, 5p and 10p stamps necessary to make up the price. And since most stamps aren't self-adhesive they all have to be licked.

I worked out that for every 50 copies of *Alice's Diary* I send out I will waste £2.50 and save around 15 minutes. But since the £2.50 I have wasted is tax deductible putting on too many stamps is costing me £6 an hour. So, I will carry on putting too many stamps on the parcels we send out.

How I hate the loathsome Royal Mail.

23.30 p.m.
Selfish BBC staff are striking to retain pensions which take up 7% (and rising fast) of the outrageous BBC licence fee. So, one in 15 licence fees is paid over to former BBC staff members. If nothing is done it won't be long before 100% of all licence fees will be used for the pension fund which apparently has a huge deficit. The BBC is a loathsome institution and its staff are greedy, elitist bastards. Because of their unhappiness at being asked to pay a little towards their pensions they threatened to go on strike and to prevent the transmission of some of the Conservative Party conference in the autumn. That's democracy BBC style. It seems that public sector workers are becoming increasingly dangerous and dictatorial. During the last election, Royal Mail employees refused to deliver leaflets for candidates of whom they did not approve.

There are going to be a good many public sector strikes over pensions. The present pension system is unsustainable but like all greedy people the current lot of employees want to carry on being greedy. They will strike over a wide range of other unsustainable perks too. The Tube workers in London seem particularly enthusiastic about striking and taking days off. I wish their bosses would find some backbone and fire a few hundred of them. What else are the lazy, greedy buggers going to do that will earn them £40,000 for a 35 hour week and a job requiring an IQ of no more than 75?

In the bad old days strikers stopped work because they wanted enough money to be able to eat and to buy shoes occasionally. These days people go on strike for perks or for the right to retire at 50 and enjoy an index-linked pension paid by the next two generations of tax payers. The unions today are just about selfishness and beating everyone else (including the elderly, the poor and the frail) to an economic pulp. Their mantra is `bugger what happens to everyone else as long as we preserve our better than everyone else privileged position.' Unions strike not because they want to be equal but because they want to be better. Wicked, wicked people. And all strikers deliberately choose times that will cause maximum disruption to other citizens.

I wonder if they will ever realise that we all rely on one another in our complex, modern society. The electricity workers threaten to go on strike during the cold weather, the refuse workers go on strike in hot weather and airline staff go on strike during holiday seasons.

23.47 p.m.
While trying to clear out old drawers I found an old Access credit card and for a moment couldn't remember why I'd kept it. Then it came back to me. When my book *Bodysense* was published by Thames and Hudson they launched it with a huge fuss. My previous book with them, *Bodypower,* had been a massive bestseller and so they'd booked me onto an extensive radio and television tour of Britain and Ireland. The tour, one of the biggest I ever undertook, lasted three weeks and involved five or six interviews every day. I remember very little about that tour. The one thing I remember about the London part of the tour was being interviewed by Pete Murray at LBC Radio in London. Pete Murray had been a hero of mine when I'd been a boy because of his shows on Radio Luxembourg and his appearances on Jukebox Jury and I'd appeared on his shows a number of times. But that day he was tired and he fell asleep after introducing me. I kept talking for about 15 minutes and he showed no signs of waking up. I had to turn the segment of the show into a monologue, asking myself questions so that I could answer them. And I remember three things about the Irish leg of the tour. First, meeting the seventh son of a seventh son on one radio station there. Second, being interviewed live on television in Dublin by a man whose accent I did not understand while a band played loud music which meant that it didn't really matter what I said. Third, being accompanied by Lizzie Spender, a relative of the poet, who was my PR minder for that stretch of the tour. I travelled light (with just a shoulder bag) to save time and to avoid having to lug large suitcases around. Lizzie travelled with large suitcases which I ended up lugging around for her. I remember going into the BBC in Belfast sweaty and breathless after struggling in and out of cabs with her luggage. Heaven knows what she had with her or why.

During the tour I flew from Birmingham (where I left my car) to Belfast to do television, radio and newspaper interviews there and then took the train down to Dublin to repeat the exercise in Ireland. I then flew back from Dublin to Birmingham. Unfortunately, since this was basically a UK tour, it hadn't occurred to me that I would need a passport to get back into the country and I only realised my problem when I found myself back in Birmingham standing in a customs queue in the middle of a long line of people clutching their passports. The only things I had with me which had my name on were a copy of my own book, *Bodysense*, and an Access card (a brand of credit card which seems to have gone the way of pogo sticks and hula hoops). I didn't think the book would do me much good so when I reached the front of the queue I held up my Access card. To my astonishment and relief the customs officer took it, looked at it, raised an eyebrow a quarter of an inch, handed it back to me and nodded me through. I may have been helped by a small commotion caused by a drug-sniffing Labrador which was furiously attacking a large red suitcase which turned out to contain three veal and ham pies.

5
10.09 a.m.
To my utter astonishment the EU appears to be about to do something good at last. The eurocrats are talking about bringing in new privacy rules which will mean that individuals can force websites to remove information about them. It will be the online right `to be forgotten'. If the legislation is passed then I intend to take full advantage of the offer to disappear from the Web. This is the best piece of news I've ever heard from the EU. The World Wide Web has caused me nothing but misery. It has damaged me and my business of publishing. Newspapers and magazines were far more cautious about printing lies than the anonymous geeks who put material on the Web. There are thousands and thousands of items on the Web about me which are outrageously libellous and/or inaccurate. And many of my books and articles appear free of charge on other people's websites - stolen and used without any offer of compensation. (Internet users who insist on helping themselves to copyright material and who believe they are entitled to steal anything they like are apparently now known as `freetards'.) I do not consider myself the slightest bit famous so I cannot imagine how celebrities cope.

22.46 p.m.
I recently bought The Princess a collection of DVDs of *Cirque de Soleil* shows. We've been watching them for several days but have grown increasingly disappointed. The early shows are brilliant but the later shows are without soul or passion. They are so rehearsed and so pretentious that they are completely without value. Watching them is the visual equivalent of eating cardboard. What a pity. The early shows, raw and exciting, were filled with energy and excitement and more than a whiff of danger. The later shows look as if they have been designed and approved by a committee of superannuated bureaucrats advised by a cadre of Health and Safety experts and political correctness consultants. The DVDs will go into the charity bag.

23.19 p.m.
When the Italian Prime Minister, Mr Berlusconi, was criticised for having had a relationship with a teenage nightclub dancer he said it was better than being gay. (This reminded me of former French President Chirac who, when faced with accusations that he was dishonest, was defended by his supporters with the remark that it was better to be a crook than a fascist.)

23.51 p.m.
My new Polish publisher has sent me an e-mail telling me that he has signed the contract I faxed. He wants to know what he should do now. I tell him that he must print some books and I add: `But before that you must, I am afraid, send me a cheque.'

23.56 p.m.
We had three book orders today which came without any payment for postage. People make a lot of mistakes with the postage they are supposed to include when ordering books but curiously they always send too little and never too much. It is the same with MPs when they claim their expenses: they never claim too little.

6
09.12 a.m.
The Princess recently wrote to a friend of hers and bared her soul about some of the worrying things that have happened in recent months. Her friend wrote back a letter filled with nonsense such as `Oh, worse things happen at sea' and `Onwards and upwards'. She also told The Princess at length about someone she knows whose wife is dying. Neither of us quite understands this `there is someone worse off than you' mentality. It is patronising rather than comforting. The irony is that The Princess has constantly supported this friend through her own problems and has always provided sympathy, support and encouragement.

14.53 p.m.

We have seen the energy rating on a house we were interested in buying but have decided not to go ahead. The house has a rating of 0 and since the world's oil is now clearly running out (the price is, as I predicted in *Oil Apocalypse*, continuing to rise) I can see the time coming soon when the authorities will either introduce some sort of fuel rationing, or think up some way to punish householders whose homes consume too much energy. In just the same way that motor car owners are punished if their vehicles aren't considered to be sufficiently fuel efficient so home owners will be punished for living in houses that aren't fuel efficient. There will also be new taxes or higher prices for heating fuels and maybe even some form of rationing. Petrol coupons could come back. And what about oil coupons and gas coupons for home owners? We have to find a house which can be pretty well self-sufficient. It must have at least one and preferably two open fireplaces, enough garden space for the disposal of rubbish and the growing of some vegetables and be within ten miles of a railway station which isn't likely to close at any time in the near future.

It also occurred to me today that if the price of petrol continues to rise it won't be long before many people who commute to work (and have to do so by car) will decide that they would be better off if they stayed at home and allowed the State to pay their bills for them. People have for years demanded that the State deal with all their problems - however trivial those problems might be - and so it is hardly surprising that the State has become bigger and more powerful, and that the number of people demanding their `entitlements' has grown exponentially.

18.32 p.m.
I had a lovely, kind letter from a reader asking why the media doesn't credit me with being the first to draw attention to the cancer risk associated with eating meat and using mobile telephones. The answer, I replied, is that I said it all far too soon and far too plainly. But the genuinely kind and warm-hearted letter from my reader made my day. I do have lovely, kind readers and their warmth and generosity keep us both going.

19.58 p.m.
An old journalist friend has died. Actually he wasn't all that old. D was younger than I am. I remember him for his kindness (hidden behind a very gruff exterior) and his common sense. He had a wonderful way of nipping problems in the bud. I remember being in the offices where he worked when a feature writer had said something outrageously rude about one of the sub editors. There was talk of lawyers and tribunals. D solved the problem quickly and easily by simply forcing an apology out of the sinner. He picked the man up by the lapels and pushed him back against a railing at the top of the stair well. Behind him there was a long drop into the atrium of the building. The man looked over his shoulder and was clearly terrified. `Apologise,' said D softly. The man apologised. `Louder,' said D. The man apologised again. Everyone heard it. The incident was over. It took less than five minutes.

D died, almost inevitably, of liver disease. Journalists consume alcohol in the way little old ladies consume tea. I remember that when he came to visit me in Devon he bought two bottles of gin and 200 cigarettes for the journey. He was, he told me, worried that there might not be a dining car with a bar. It was D whom I first remember referring to ten pound notes as `brown drinking vouchers'. I remember meeting him in Manchester. He was working there at the time and I stayed in the same hotel while doing some interviews for a book of mine. At around 10 p.m. I tottered across the road to do a live interview on a local radio station and when I got back to the hotel, three quarters of an hour later, D was still in the bar exactly where I'd left him. While I'd been away he'd continued to buy drinks and there were now a dozen double malt whiskies laid out on the table where I'd been sitting.

23.46 p.m.
Newspapers have always been led by advertisements but things are getting worse. For example, *The Financial Times* is forever carrying supplements with absurd titles such as *Commercial Property in Northern Shropshire* (supported, curiously enough, by advertisements for commercial property in northern Shropshire) or *The Growing Telecom Industry in Malawi* supported, again curiously enough, by copious advertisements for growing telecom companies in Malawi. The *FT* even publishes a weekly magazine with the obscene title *How to spend it*. The magazine is clearly intended for bankers desperate to get rid of their taxpayer funded bonuses and is full of absurd articles and advertisements for £400 million yachts and tiny notebooks that cost £400 each. I should feel kindly about the *FT* since the paper was the only one to write a short feature when I resigned from *The People* over its Iraq War policy but I confess I find the writing gruesome and the almost daily attempts at humour childish and embarrassing. I buy the paper for the lists of prices it contains and I suspect most of the other customers do too. I often wonder if anyone actually reads the articles or if they are just there to keep the advertisements apart from one another, and to make the paper look like a newspaper instead of what it really is, a share price listing service.

11.09 a.m.
My new Polish publisher sent an e-mail asking for my bank account details. He wants to send me the advance money by electronic transfer. I ask him to send a cheque instead.

12.29 p.m.
An order has come in from a bookshop for a paperback copy of *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War* which has been selling for £2.99. The bookshop has given itself a 45% discount. So of the £2.99 cover price I will receive £1.64. When the book is wrapped it will cost £1.95 to post it. I am expected to pay the cost of the posting. And so if I fulfil this order I will lose 0.31 pence before I have included the cost of printing the book, the cost of the packaging and all the other costs involved in running a publishing business. That would be bad enough but the bookshop hasn't enclosed a cheque with its order. They tell me I have to submit an invoice and to post a statement in 60 days. If I am lucky, and they haven't gone bankrupt, they may then pay me. I somehow managed to resist the temptation to put the order on the fire. I sent off the book and made a note to put up the price.

15.57 p.m.
In one week I have deleted, or marked as spam, 87 newsletters sent by quangos, management advisers, financial consultants and marketing experts. Just getting rid of these damned things took ages.

17.38 p.m.
I decided today that I am a bookaholic. A bookaholic is someone whose rooms are lined with bookshelves but where there are also stacks of books piled high on the floor and the stacks grow so high that they topple over in the night and wake everyone up. A bookaholic is someone who cannot go out of the house (even on the simplest journey) without returning with a pile of new books. A bookaholic is someone who owns far more unread books than anyone could ever possibly read. I may write a book about being a bookaholic. Or, perhaps, I could form a charity and get a few grants to help me deal with my problem. Maybe there is an EU agency which would provide me with regular parcels of free books with which to satisfy my craving.

22.40 p.m.
In a pensive mood this evening I found myself wondering where my career went wrong. The Princess is right: I probably attacked too many powerful people. I made the mistake of trying to change things that I thought were wrong. It was, perhaps, hardly surprising that my former agent at Curtis Brown, in despair, described me as `a prophet crying in the wilderness'. There is no room in the modern media world for iconoclasts. Iconoclasts never have been popular, of course. The people who own and worship the icons don't much care for them being smashed. That's only to be expected. The problem these days lies in the fact that the icon owners have all the power and most of the money. They control the politicians, the legislature and the media.

It is, I suppose, difficult to think of anyone in power I haven't annoyed over the last few years. Pretty stupid of me, really. And I haven't helped myself by being a loner; useless at networking and doing the social rounds of London parties. (Not very good! What am I saying? I once went to a reception in Buckingham Palace and spent the whole evening avoiding Margaret Thatcher and Her Majesty and wandering around forbidden corridors.) It's odd that an industry which depends on unsociable loners for its existence should have become an industry of meeters and greeters. But it has. And so the authors who are successful are (with a few notable exceptions) the ones who can do the meeting and greeting without vomiting.

Add to all that the fact that I'm English, white, abrasive rather than smooth, and more of an anarchist than anything else. I suspect that I might have been much more successful (in official terms) if I'd been Jewish, gay and American. Being female would have probably helped, too.

In an era when compromise has become necessary for success I have steadfastly remained glued to impossible principles which have made life difficult going on impossible for decades. On the day I arrived at medical school in the 1960s I was told that I had to become a member of the National Union of Students (a certain Jack Straw was President at the time). It was the default condition. I didn't have anything against the NUS but I knew that if I had to be a member then I didn't want to be a member. This had never happened before and for weeks I had to face enormous pressure from the authorities who seemed to think they faced unsurmountable administrative obstacles. I eventually invoked the United Nations Charter and was eventually allowed to remain a member of the university without being a member of the union. Was there any point to this battle? Probably not. Did winning improve my life? Certainly not. So, why the hell did I bother?

It's too late to change. I'm now elderly as well as everything else and in the world of publishing that's the kiss of death. Publishers and agents are only interested in bright young things who look good on television. As if all that were not enough I am also now so shy and uncertain that I find talking on the telephone a strain. Meeting people is these days so stressful that it is something I avoid as much as possible. Years of orchestrated abuse have shattered whatever small quantity of self-confidence I may have started out with. Sneery reviewers and unsupportive associates have demolished my self-respect, though The Princess constantly tries to repair the damage. Sat in front of a keyboard, or with a pen and a notebook, I am liberated from my fears. The demons do not find me there; they do not enter my private world, the world I share with Mrs Caldicot, Mr Henry Mulligan, Thumper, Patchy, Doc and the other inhabitants of Bilbury, Alice and Thomasina and the rest of my imaginary cast. Only The Princess lives there with me, though readers are welcome to wander in to share the past, the present and the future peace.

8
10.31 a.m.
Today, just a day or two after I decided to sack the wholesalers and abandon attempts to do business with the book trade, we received a large order from a wholesaler. I wasn't tempted. In future, buyers will only be able to buy our books by writing a cheque, putting it in an envelope and posting it. We will lose bookshop, library and webshop sales but if just half of those frustrated buyers send us a cheque we will be better off.

Since we have stopped dealing with bookshops we have now put this note on the website:

`Please note that Vernon Coleman books are no longer readily available in bookshops (terrestrial or online). This is because shops steadfastly refuse to carry stock (despite years of trying) and seem to prefer to order individual copies from us through wholesalers. If they want six copies they will send in six separate orders. The whole process is so tedious, time consuming and expensive that we have pretty well abandoned it. (The bookshop sends an order to a clearing house which sends the order to a wholesaler who sends the order to us. We then send the book to the wholesaler who then sends it to the bookshop. The buyer pays the bookshop who sometimes pays the wholesaler who then eventually pays us if we send an invoice and at least one or possibly two or more statements.) The environmental cost of all this sending and carrying is phenomenal. Time, energy and money are wasted. And even that isn't the end of it. Wholesalers and bookshops frequently question invoices for orders received long ago, they demand extra copies of invoices and, with increasing frequency, they go bust and don't pay anything. *(Bookshops seem to go bust more often than builders, restaurateurs and photographers.) The paperwork is exhausting and often quite pointless. I'm sorry if some readers find this inconvenient but really popping an order and a cheque into the post doesn't take much effort. The easy way to buy Vernon Coleman books is to send a cheque or postal order to Publishing House. Please allow 28 days for delivery. We aim to do much better than this but 28 days allows for the Royal Mail to overcome delays caused by snow, rain, leaves, sunshine and the other entirely unexpected hazards by which it seems to be constantly surprised.'*

15.28 p.m.
The Publishing House accounts had become incomprehensible and absurdly overcomplicated. Worse still, the commercial software package we had been using (though allegedly up-to-date) did not match the requirements of the tax form. The result was that the software made life even more difficult.

I tried designing a simple spreadsheet for use on a computer but the words `simple' and `computer' don't fit well together these days. I quickly realised that it was going to take forever to fill in a home-made spreadsheet.

And so I have bought myself a large notepad and I'm going to do the accounts by hand. With a pen and a calculator. And I will photocopy the notebook so that I have a copy which I can keep somewhere safe. I have designed my accounts to match the income tax form and I have allowed one page for expenditure which includes VAT and another page for expenditure which doesn't include VAT. It is all breathtakingly simple. And it works brilliantly well. Not for 20 years have I found the accounts as manageable.

I can write. I can add up. I have a spare A4 pad. I have plenty of pen refills and back up pencils. There are no privacy worries. And the accounts are there, easy to read at a glance. (They are, however, in my ‘doctor’s’ handwriting. If anyone wants to investigate them he will need to be determined and patient.) Computers just complicate things unnecessarily.

It all reminds me of when I first started out as an author many years ago. When the VAT man visited and wanted to see my accounts I handed him a small, sixpenny notebook.

`No,' he said gruffly. `I want to see the complete accounts.'

`You're holding them,' I told him.

18.29 p.m.
Life is full of gambles and buying a new house is quite a big one. The more you are conscious of the problems the more frozen you get. Eventually you have to make a decision, and leap, but it is a scary business. When we buy a car we take it for a spin and read the brochures and the reviews but when we buy a house we tend to do so after one

short visit. We have no idea of the problems that lie ahead.

Part of the problem is that I am old enough to have seen just how vendors can cheat and lie when selling houses.

The last time I bought a house the vendors forgot to tell me that the roof leaked in two places; they forgot to mention that the shower ventilation pipe didn't go anywhere except into the loft and that if you used the bath the water emptied through the kitchen ceiling while if you used the shower the water emptied through the hall ceiling (because in both cases the pipes weren't connected up properly). They said that the cellar was good for storage and assured us that it was not damp but when it rained the cellar became a four foot deep swimming pool.

These things rather scar the memory.

When buying a house, we have to look at it with our brains not our emotions. We have to imagine how the rooms will be when they contain our things, instead of the stuff belonging to the people who are leaving, and we have to try to imagine how we will fit into the neighbourhood. What problems will there be with the neighbours? What don't we know about? What problems can we imagine? For example, having an infant or junior school nearby probably won't be a problem as far as the children are concerned. They'll be noisy during playtime and maybe when they leave. But it’s the parents who are most likely to cause problems. They will park here, there and everywhere and toot and shout and generally make a nuisance of themselves. Having a pub nearby won't be a problem during the daytime but what about late at night and at weekends? How many neighbours have dogs? How many tinker with motorbikes or cars in their spare time? Are you on a walking route for late night revellers? If you are then they will all be talking, very loudly, on their mobile telephones as they drunkenly make their way home. And they will throw their chip wrappers and their lager cans into your garden. The possibilities for misery are endless.

And, of course, very few people who are selling a house are likely to talk about these problems. `The neighbours? Oh they're all wonderful.' Like hell they are. No one ever formally complains about neighbours these days because if they do then they have to mention it when they sell. So they grit their teeth, keep quiet and sell and move somewhere else in the hope that their new neighbours won't have a son who plays the drums at 3.00 a.m. or a daughter who attracts a swarm of tattooed bikers to the area.

9

15.46 p.m.

We went to Ilfracombe today. What a sad, dull town it is. In Victorian times it must have been a marvellous place. Today it is faded, tawdry and forgotten. Unlike other small seaside towns such as Sidmouth it has allowed itself to fill up with the unemployed. It's easy to understand how it happens. Unemployed youths decide that if they are going to hang around all day doing nothing they might as well do it by the seaside as in Wolverhampton. And so they head south and west. A few hoteliers struggling to cope with long, cold, empty winters decide that they will be better off if they take in long-term residents rather than relying on families coming for two weeks holiday in August. Then when holidaymakers come to the other hotels they are put off by the people they see around them. Hotels are converted into doss houses and flats for people on the dole. Drug addicts abound. The local businessmen running amusement arcades oppose any suggestion that the elderly be encouraged to move into the town because they know well that it is the young, the uneducated and the feckless who patronise their establishments. And gradually the remaining hotels become doss houses, the shops selling plastic windmills and fishing lines close and the decline is inevitable. Locals who are desperate to make a living grasp at public money by opening hostels for drug addicts and ex-prisoners. As the percentage of hoodies and drug addicts increases to the point where their presence becomes noticeable, so decent people move out. The towns become poorer and the downhill slide becomes inexorable. Only the shops and amusement arcades which cater to these very specialised markets thrive. Up-market stores, hotels and cafés close down and are replaced with cheap bars and yet more one armed bandits. Men selling balloons and buckets and spades and wooden cricket sets are replaced by men selling drugs. The Punch and Judy man doesn't come that way anymore. People don't like to go onto the beach because of the risk of stepping on an infected needle.

The only seaside towns in Britain which have survived have been the ones which welcomed elderly residents. Bournemouth and Eastbourne have survived well, as has Sidmouth. Towns such as Ilfracombe and Weston-super-Mare have tattoo parlours, big dogs and nail salons. Bournemouth and so on offer walking sticks, small dogs and hairdressers who specialise in blue rinses. Personally, I prefer the latter.

19.23 p.m.

The Royal Mail has announced that it is going to have another attempt at destroying the mail order industry (and therefore itself) by putting up its prices by 12% next April. The only segment of the mail order business that will survive another mail price hike is the rare stamp business. Their products are small and light and expensive and those will be essential criteria for mail order in the future. Suddenly, I no longer care. There are three reasons to do things. I've given up (temporarily) on changing the world or making money out of books. So it's fun time. And the

Royal Mail's idiocy will not interfere with that.

For years I have been trying to fit in by acting like a proper publisher. That hasn't worked. So I am going to make a strength out of a weakness. I am no longer sending out any review copies. And I will no longer sell books through bookshops. I will not supply libraries. There will be no discounts for shops. The only place to buy books is from us.

22.41 p.m.
An independent television producer wanted me to be a consultant on a programme about breast cancer in black women. There was no mention of a fee of course. I explained, honestly, that if my name was attached to the programme it would never be made or aired. The producer seemed miffed and I will probably be reported to a quango somewhere for being sexist or racist or somethingist.

10
10.35 a.m.
In addition to searching for a new home we are also looking for new business premises. And since we are no longer going to live in North Devon we need offices outside Devon. We have found a marvellous old building in Malmesbury. It is several hundred years old and has, in its time been the local council offices and a bank. It looks magnificent. Sadly, there are two problems. First, it is falling to bits. Second, it is Grade II listed and any repairs will have to be done under the eagle eyes of the men and women in cheap suits. One of the problems with listed buildings is that they have to stay as they were when they were listed. Friends of ours who bought a 17th century building wanted to restore it to its original 17th century state but were told by snooty, brain-dead government employees that they had to retain alterations which had been made in the 1950s because those were there when the house was listed.

It occurs to me that one way to ease the pain might be to interest a television company in the restoration project. We can't be the only people to have noticed that when anything is done with television cameras running, problems tend to disappear. We decide that if we do buy the building, and can't get a television company involved, we will hire our own TV crew, form our own production company and make a programme ourselves. The cost of hiring the cameraman and soundman will probably be offset by the savings on the repair bills when the cheap suiters realise that all their decisions are going to be questioned in public. And, with luck, we might have a film we can sell.

Unfortunately, this brilliant idea rather falls apart when the owner refuses our offer which is only a little less than the asking price.

`Hasn't the owner read the papers?' I ask. `Doesn't he know the state of the nation?'

`Please don't,' says the estate agent wearily, with a shrug and a thin smile. The property has been on the market for a considerable time. Thirty people have viewed it. No one has bought it. Our offer is a reasonable one. Actually, it’s the only one.

14.15 p.m.
I've been sent a note by someone in a tax office somewhere several hundred miles away telling me that, as an employer, I must, in future, fill in all sorts of forms online. I will be punished if I do not fill them in online. It is already a legal requirement that I fill in my quarterly VAT return online and I find it extraordinary that I am ordered to use a specific communications medium which is unarguably insecure, unreliable, inefficient, expensive and extraordinarily damaging to the environment. The system is an advantage only to the Government because it enables lazy bureaucrats to stop work at 11.00 a.m. instead of having to work on until lunchtime. I wrote back to the anonymous official in East Kilbride to point out that I don't think I can access their site on my iPhone and that if they really insist on my filling in a form online then I will have no choice but to make all my remaining staff redundant. I asked them to let me know as soon as possible if they are going to insist on this new rule so that I can give staff as much notice as possible. I pointed out that I could not see how it helped the country for me to be forced to make people redundant and finished: `I can quite see that you don't want small businesses to exist at all. Maybe the Chancellor will be able to borrow some money from Ireland.' (Two months later I had still received no reply.)

I also sent a note today to the local employment exchange (I know it is called something else now) telling them that I have decided to hire 12 people to work at Publishing House. In line with Government policy the lucky dozen will be invited to work at home and to choose the number of hours they work. They will be allowed to take up to a year off if they become pregnant and to take off as much time as they need to look after their children, spouses or elderly relatives. Finally, in my letter, I have drawn attention to the fact that in return for all these rights my new employees must not expect to be paid any wages.

11

10.01 a.m.
I couldn't help laughing at the news that advertisements for lapdancers, strippers, webcam performers and other sex industry jobs have been banned from Jobcentres. However, adverts for cleaners and administrators working for lap dancing clubs, strip clubs and wherever webcam performers work will continue to be accepted by Jobcentres.

12.34 p.m.
It's good fun having no business telephone. I spoke to someone at HMRC who seemed to have difficulty in believing that I was running a business without a telephone number. (I explained that I was making the call on a borrowed phone.) Eventually I told him that I had got rid of the telephones for environmental reasons. I pointed out that telephone systems require a good deal of plastic and electricity. He accepted this argument quite happily. These days it is possible to explain away any strange behaviour by saying you are doing it to save the planet.

15.06 p.m.
Alice's Diary has now sold over 70,000 copies in hardback. Most years it sells enough copies at Christmas time to be in the fiction bestseller lists. (It never is, of course.) No paperbacker will produce an edition of the book. No one has ever reviewed it. No bookshop has ever stocked a copy on its shelves. There are virtually no copies in public libraries.

18.27 p.m.
I read today that in 1836 the Hon Grantley Berkeley assaulted a Mr Fraser for publishing an attack on him and his family in the guise of a review of his novel *Berkeley Castle*. Mr Berkeley ended up in a court. The judge, Lord Abinger CB, concluded: `I really think that this assault was carried to a very inconsiderate length, and that if an author is to go and give a beating to a publisher who has offended him, two or three blows with a horsewhip ought to be quite enough to satisfy his irritated feelings.'

20.23 p.m.
It struck me today how sad it is that international rugby matches are decided by supplementary referees who sit and watch television replays before deciding whether a try is, or is not, a try. It's sad because, when there is a huge ruck of players on the ground, with the ball somewhere underneath them all, there is one person in the world who really knows whether a try has been scored. And that is the player holding the ball. But the authorities don't (or won't) trust the players to tell the truth. And that's sad. It's the same in cricket, though things used to be so very different. Years ago, at Lords, during an Ashes test match I watched Rodney Marsh, the Australian wicket keeper wave his arms across his body to tell the umpire that what looked like a catch had not, in fact, been a clean catch. The umpire, David Shepherd, who had already given the batsman out, applauded Marsh for his honesty. And so did 20,000 people in the crowd.

22.12 p.m.
We feel that today everything is made in China. But China's share of world exports is now only around 17%. This morning The Princess pointed out to me that back in the mid to late 19th century, 46% of world trade in manufactured goods had 'Made in England' stamped on them. She's right (of course). Just over a century ago half of Britain worked in manufacturing. Today less than one in seven workers makes things for a living.

23.41 p.m.
An estate agent e-mailed with details of a house that has come on the market. The present owner has lived there for just under two years. `They are down-sizing,' says the agent. `Now that their children have left home they no longer need such a large property.' I do wish that when people lie they would put more effort into it. These people are clearly selling up because they bought a house they can no longer afford.

23.58 p.m.
There has been a tendency in recent years for publishers to produce larger and larger books. A hundred years ago books were quite small but they were still readable. Better, thinner paper and good type made reading easy but enabled readers to carry a book in a pocket. I blame the French and the Americans. Both began producing huge paperbacks some years ago. The French had an excuse (their paperbacks were published in lieu of hardback editions) but the Americans produced big books because they adore anything wasteful and excessive. Huge books are impractical to use but they waste energy in manufacture, transportation and storage.

12

10.19 a.m.

The debate about housing benefits continues. Many commentators are arguing that rules which are being introduced will mean that people on benefits will no longer be able to live in smart London suburbs such as Westminster and Mayfair. They will, say the commentators, have to move. Am I supposed to feel sorry for these people? If so, I don't and simply cannot force myself to. Other than those on benefits only Russian crooks and banking crooks can afford houses in these places. Why should the unemployed and the unemployable be given homes in these ridiculously expensive places? Arguing that they have a right to live there is as absurd as arguing that they should be given free yachts and Bugattis because other people have them.

14.41 p.m.

My new Polish publisher tells me that he has managed to obtain a cheque to send to me. `My bank thought it was very 19th century,' he adds.

15.54 p.m.

A letter arrives from a man living in Barbados. He writes: `I have lived my life in the oil drilling and production industry for 45 years and have enjoyed your book *Oil Apocalypse*, though it has caused me further waking and sleepless pondering. Your book is very alarmist, as it should be. Oil will decline, and it could happen at alarming speed if things go wrong. My beef with your book is at the `All rights reserved', since what I have written has always been given freely to newspapers. You have no right to attempt to stop the spread of what you have written. For mankind's sake, it needs to be spread anyhow it can.' I wrote back: `I don't quite understand your accusation that I am trying to stop the spread of what I have written. Far from it. I would like the world to read my books. I also fail to understand why I should not copyright my work. Your implied suggestion that I should make my books available free to one and all is sweet and has been made by many of my other readers. However, I write for a living and I have a number of bills which have to be paid. If printers, suppliers, utilities, Royal Mail, etc. would all provide their services for free, and I could find staff prepared to work for nothing, then I could sell my books for just enough cash to pay for a little food. Unfortunately, the world ain't quite like that. So, I appreciate your kind comments. But I reject your criticisms. My books are available free in public libraries. But if people want to own them they have to pay for them. Do you know anyone who doesn't expect to be paid for their work? How many doctors, lawyers, architects and businessmen do you know who never charge for their services? Why should an author be different? Am I supposed to starve because I write books?' I was tempted not to put stamps on the envelope on the grounds that the Royal Mail provides an important service and therefore shouldn't charge for it. But in the end I gave in and put on the stamps.

19.03 p.m.

There is much talk in the newspapers about Britain's libel laws which are so absurd that in the USA, the Great Black Disappointment (as we must now call him) has passed a law protecting American citizens from our laws. (Since America can do what it likes with British citizens, whether or not they have broken any American laws, this is another example of the one-sided `special relationship'.)

The establishment, and the professional writ wranglers, love the current rules which provide great protection for the bad guys and huge amounts of money for the lawyers. It isn't damages which kill people who get involved in the libel business these days - it's the costs.

I've been involved in several truly bizarre incidents over the years. Many years ago, for example, I used a pen name for a magazine for which I was already writing regularly under my own name. I picked the name of a friend. However, a woman doctor with the same name leapt out of the woodwork and suddenly claimed that I had libelled her by using her name. (It was a common name and there were a large number of other people around who might have made the same claim.) The woman doctor claimed, quite falsely, that I had been a student of hers. I'd never heard of the damned woman. The end result was that the Medical Defence Union (which provides and pays for legal advice when its doctor members are sued) represented us both and was paying both lots of legal bills which, as these things do, grew and grew and grew. It was surely one of the dottiest libel cases in a world packed full of dotty libel cases. I can't remember what happened in the end. I rather lost interest. Maybe the MDU is still suing itself in some Dickensian lawsuit that will, like Jarndyce v Jarndyce, go on for ever and ever.

13

14.52 p.m.

There is much talk about something called the `big society'. No one knows what it is but government ministers make it sound very wonderful. From what they say I suspect that they want taxpayers to help government employees do their jobs because the poor dears are so stressed at the very idea that they might have to pay a little more towards their own pensions that they need time off to rest. Another minister claims that the Government wants to have a good relationship with people. If the Government wants us to like it more, and make us feel better disposed towards it, then it should teach its employees (who are, after all, our employees) to learn to be helpful and polite. They don't have to be obsequious. Polite will do nicely. It is very easy for Cameron to talk about a Big Society. I rather suspect that civil servants call him sir and say please and thank you when appropriate. Cameron has always struck me as quite hollow and totally untrustworthy; he seems to me to be an unpatriotic and ignorant buffoon. The man who promised a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty (and austerity) has, in just a few months since choosing the curtains for Number 10, allowed the EU to take control of financial regulation in Britain, handed them hundreds of millions to finance a bigger EU budget and risked tens of billions by participating, quite unnecessarily in the EU bailout of eurozone financial disasters. I am tempted to write a follow up to *Gordon is a Moron* and call it *Cameron is a Cretin*. Or, maybe, *Cameron and Clegg are Cretins.*

Like most people my relationship with society is pretty much one way these days. I give and they take. The big society cannot possibly work because it will depend upon individuals taking over the State's responsibility, while still paying the State to do those things and while the State still has a massive amount of obstructive bureaucracy in place.

The real trouble is that politicians, bankers, businessmen in general are not trusted. One community worker wrote recently about having tried to set up a small community festival in a local park. First he had to fill in a 30-page form to obtain permission to use the public park. Then he was told he needed to give six months notice. And he had to arrange public liability insurance. If children were involved then all volunteers needed to have criminal record checks. The police would need to be asked for help in making sure that everyone was happy. Health and safety rules meant that no food or drink could be served.

In the face of all this overbearing nonsense most people either give up or do it unofficially and quietly and hope they manage to stay out of prison. Cameron's big society is in truth a terrible idea. It's just a way to get services cheap.

What used to be called `society' has broken down under an unrelenting tide of deceit, greed and bureaucratic incompetence. The concept of `Doing the right thing' is now scorned as old-fashioned.

I still believe that `small is beautiful' but if Cameron et al want a friendlier world then they need to set about dismantling some of the State bureaucracy that stifles every good intention before it can be born. Cameron wants the best of both worlds. He wants volunteer labour to help run the State machinery.

14

14.59 p.m.

I have made many mistakes in my career. Setting up as a publisher is definitely high on the list (though a number of the books I have published would never have appeared in any other way). Becoming a self-publisher (and compounding the sin by being a successful self-publisher) has won me regiments of enemies among the publishing and literary establishment. Fighting the medical and scientific establishment has been a mistake from a professional point of view, though from a personal point of view it was never an option. I could go on. I doubt if anyone, with the possible exception of William Cobbett, has done so much to destroy his career. And now I'm going to top the lot by publishing this book. Well, bugger it, it's too damned late to start worrying now about making mistakes.

15

11.52 a.m.

When looking around a house we often ask the vendors: `How can you leave this beautiful home?'. The aim, of course, is to find out why the vendors are selling.

The standard reply, the one we hear more than any other, is: `To be closer to our family'.

This is usually a patent lie.

This morning we visited a house which was full of photographs. The two vendors had told us that they were selling, with great reluctance, so that they could be closer to their children and grandchildren.

As we left The Princess turned to me. `Did you notice that there weren't any photographs of children or grandchildren in the house?'

`I noticed,' I said. `Not one. But there were at least 20 photographs of their pet poodle. The one that followed us round yapping and trying to bite our ankles.'

14.47 p.m.

Because so many books get lost or stolen we no longer send more than three books in one parcel. This costs us more in postage but it also means that we can put the parcels into the local letterbox (which has a wide mouth) instead of queuing at the post office. And if customers have decent sized letterboxes it means that their parcel can be put through their letterbox - saving them the inevitable journey to their local sorting office.

15.50 p.m.
An academic reader writes and tells me that I am very fortunate to be able to publish my own books. It's an extremely rude and offensive letter. I suspect that he has no idea how difficult it is to publish original, iconoclastic work in the UK. I may not be officially banned but in many ways life would be easier if I were. Instead, my books are not reviewed and they are not stocked in shops. Advertisements for them are banned by most publications. And broadcasters dare not interview me. Fortunately, my books do sell abroad. And thanks to a band of loyal readers, I sell more than the vast majority of authors. I don't tell my academic reader any of this. I just write back, return the outline of his proposed book unread, and tell him that, sadly, I am unable to publish his book.

16
12.30 p.m.
We had four huge sacks of books to post off so I drove The Princess and the parcels to the Post Office in Barnstaple. There is nowhere near to park legally so I stopped for a moment or two in the nearby bus stop and helped The Princess with the parcels. As I started to open my door to climb back into the truck, a bus driver who was passing deliberately drove dangerously close to me and crushed me up against side of the truck. `What do you think you're doing?' he demanded, adding various bits and pieces of abuse to the question. I stared at him in quiet, resigned disbelief. The world is full of officials and Britain is failing at everything except officialdom. There are policemen and traffic wardens about a-plenty but even bus drivers want to be officious too. Without thinking what I was doing I stared at him quizzically and burbled something in what sounded like a bastard mixture of Spanish and Swedish. The bus driver glowered. `You understand!' he shouted. `You know what I'm saying!' I shook my head and shrugged and gave him a bit more gibberish. He shouted more abuse, shut his doors and drove off in a furious temper. I smiled and waved and got into the truck. I felt really good. I suppose I should have felt childish and a bit ashamed. But I didn't and I don't. I transferred all my built up anger and frustration to the damned, officious bus driver and he drove away with it. I think I may do this more often.

14.23 p.m.
A reader who forgot to say which books she wanted to buy, forgot to give us her postcode and forgot to include a cheque has remembered to write us a very nasty letter complaining that she hasn't received the books and threatening to report me to someone or other.

18.40 p.m.
A young German called Vettel has won the Formula 1 World Championship at the age of 23. He cried like a little girl when he was told the news. Much has been made about his youth. People forget that Guy Gibson was about the same age when he led the Dam Busters raid. And Hannibal wasn't much older when he took all those elephants over the Alps.

The trouble with sportsmen (and probably women too) these days is that they are one trick ponies; groomed for stardom in some, peculiar backwater of life. They have no depth and so no sense of perspective. And these days young people in their mid 20s are often still referred to as children. `He's only 25,' say commentators, as though this excuses immature and irresponsible behaviour. I was working as a GP when I was 25 and I don't remember being told not to worry if I made terrible mistakes.

20.30 p.m.
I am so pleased to see that British taxpayers are going to bung container loads of lolly to the Irish bankers. Why doesn't that nasty little popsicle 'Bonio' bail out the sodding Irish banks? We are supporting the Irish banks to help protect the euro. The Irish banks owe around 500 billion pounds or euros (which means it's probably nearer a trillion of whichever) so, instead of simply letting the stupid bankers go bust, the EU is lending the banks another 100 billion. What sort of idiot economist, banker or politician thinks that huge debts can be dealt with by creating more debts? It's sheer lunacy. The lunatics have taken over the banks. (The Irish banks owe money to banks all over Europe. If the Irish banks go under then a hundred fat bankers all over euroland will each have to sell the wife's second Ferrari and no civilised eurostate can possibly allow that.) The result will, of course, be that the Irish banks, which couldn't pay back the 500 billion they owed will now owe 600 billion. To make things easier for everyone the Irish have apparently agreed to lend themselves 17.5 billion to help get themselves out of the hole they've got themselves into. (I didn't make that up. No one could make that up.) I don't know whether this is pounds, euros or

potatoes but it really doesn't matter very much. It could be Zimbabwean dollars or even glass beads. A five-year-old with a rudimentary understanding of pocket money logic would be able to tell the idiots doing the lending that someone who can't pay back 500 billion won't be able to pay back 600 billion. But this is called a `solution' and the politicians expect us to be pleased with them for sorting things out so cleverly.

Osborne is handing the Irish container loads of loot gouged out of British taxpayers because the two useless Scottish banks (RBS and HBOS) stand to go even more bankrupt than they are already if the Irish loans are written off. The figure changes daily. It started that we were lending them about £6 billion, moved quietly up to £9 billion and, the last I saw of it, had soared majestically up to £13 billion. What does Osborne know about billions? What does anyone in Government know about billions? The fact is that we are giving Ireland vastly more than Osborne saved in the Government's much publicised spending review. So Britain's finances are now in a worse state than they were when Gordon the Moron was finally gouged out of office. And to make things worse we are still giving vast amounts of money to China and India, the two fastest growing economies in the world. British taxpayers donate £1 billion a year in aid to India. Has no one in the Government yet noticed that India has nuclear weapons, a space programme and its own international aid programme? We're broke. Why are we giving them money?

Incidentally, I wonder how many people know that Britain exports more to Ireland than to China, Brazil, Russia and India combined. That says more about Britain's export success than about Ireland.

As my long standing prediction about the collapse of the euro (and then the EU) comes true some newspapers (such as the *Economist*) seem incensed by the eurosceptics' joy at the euro's troubles. What the *Economist* doesn't understand is that the collapse of the euro is the best and quickest way for Britain to regain its lost sovereignty and independence. But then, perhaps that isn't something the *Economist* cares much about.

17

11.11 a.m.

One of the most wasteful absurdities of house buying is that every potential buyer has to arrange, and pay for, his or her own survey. Today, we received a survey on a house we visited two weeks ago. We made an offer which was accepted and we are very excited. The Princess opened the surveyor's report with trembling fingers and we read it together.

It would save so much time and money if vendors had a fairly short and simple survey done before offering their home for sale. The survey, done by an independent surveyor, would provide basic information about plumbing, electricity, roof and central heating; it would confirm that these things passed simple basic standards and would certify that the building was free of woodworm and dry rot. The survey would be backed by an insurance company and could then be handed to every prospective buyer. It would save time and money and be better for everyone except surveyors. Copies of the survey could be sold to prospective buyers for say £100. If the house was viewed by a number of prospective purchasers the sellers would eventually cover their costs and buyers would be saved the cost of buying full surveys themselves.

The present system is lunatic. All buyers commission their own survey and vast amounts of money, time and energy are wasted. It is apparently illegal (or, at least, considered so) for one buyer to pass his survey to another. I have known people who have commissioned surveys on five or six houses. By that time most of their deposit money had been spent on surveyors and solicitors. (Actually, it is not surprising that many people walk away from a purchase when they see a full structural survey. Much of a survey is simple observation. `The main walls are of brick and the roof is pitched and covered with slate.' It's the sort of things a child of four would notice. `The house is detached and on such and such a road. It benefits from the provision of gas and electricity.' But the rest of the stuff can be profoundly depressing. No house sounds good when its foibles and frailties are assessed by a professional. And then there are the let-out clauses. `We could not check unexposed or inaccessible parts of the building and have not checked for the presence of hazardous materials in the building.')

The survey we had commissioned made gloomy reading. The house has rotten roof timbers. It has woodworm infestation. The roof is not felted. The loft is not lagged. The window frames need replacing. The house needs rewiring and replumbing. The central heating boiler needs replacing. The floors need to be taken up and replaced. The walls are damp. The glass in the conservatory is plain glass and needs to be replaced with safety glass. The drains are blocked. The water supply is uncertain. The boundaries with two neighbours seem blurred. The roots of a large tree which is close to the house have penetrated the drains and the foundations. It would take a year to put all this right. And cost a fortune. Builders, electricians, plumbers, carpenters, plasterers, glaziers and tree surgeons are all needed. We would be living with builders for a generation. It is a good-looking house but we have enough problems in our lives. We rang our solicitor and the estate agents and backed out as gracefully as we could.

15.25 p.m.

Old people living in their own homes and relying on income from their savings are the new poor. Their interest and dividend income has crashed in recent years and their investments are, on average, worth no more today than they were a decade ago. But because they have worked hard and saved and paid off their mortgages many are not entitled to any benefits. Those who have never worked and never saved are well-looked after by the State. Those who have worked hard, saved and done all the right things are the new poor. Countless thousands are living in penury; unable to afford even the smallest luxury; eking out a miserable existence, often hungry and, in winter, frequently cold.

20.34 p.m.
Kurt Vonnegut argued that reading and writing are in themselves subversive acts because they question the idea that things have to be the way they are, and they question the idea that you are alone, thinking the way you do. The reader is told, argued Vonnegut, that things are more open to questioning than you thought they were, and here it is in black and white. He was right, of course. All great ideas are dangerous because they challenge the status quo, threaten the stability of the establishment and (this worst of all) make people think. I am delighted to say that many years ago, at the start of what might laughingly be called my career, I was fired from a local paper (the *Coventry Evening Telegraph*) which was carrying a syndicated column of mine. I was told by an editor that my trouble was that `I made people think'. Since then I have, I think, been fired by over 40 papers for making people think and upsetting the establishment. On many occasions I have been replaced by a writer employed by the Government, a local authority of a drug company - and offering his services free of charge. I once told The Princess that I would like that (or something like it) on my tombstone. `He made people think.'

18
12.08 p.m.
The Princess has discovered some small but powerful wind up torches. They are excellent; brilliant (in both senses). We have bought a dozen because these are so good that they will doubtless soon be banned. (Lobbyists for the battery industry will produce evidence showing that they are responsible for causing a case of repetitive strain injury in a six-year-old Greek girl.) Inevitably some brands are better than others. We bought two on Amazon which were broken when they arrived. I doubt if they would ever have worked properly. One of them came in a box which was well worth the purchase price. Here is the blurb from the back of the box: `Generate electricity the function elucidation of flashlight. Product Characteristics: 1. This product is a new science and technology product and made with high and new science and technology. It can illuminate only placing it in rhythm. 2. No need any power no environmental pollution. Low noise and health. Comparing with common torch, it can be several times on lift. 3. Con stantly using this health torch, it can benefit to your palm, arm and shoulder stretching and blood circulation, so as to let your hands relax and brain clever, hand and brain coor dinate and promote your brain memory and health composition.'

12.16 p.m.
A street light is out and so we sit in a well-lit pool in a field of darkness. I telephoned the council and told an employee in the Department of Street Lighting that drunks might well wander into the road and get run over because of the absence of any light. `It really won't look good if someone dies because the council couldn't be bothered to change a light bulb,' I said, using my old trick of forcing responsibility onto bureaucrats.

17.19 p.m.
We went to Prinknash in Gloucestershire for an auction. To get there we had to travel along a narrow, winding country road. The road had been dug up and there was a large sign saying: `Access for residents only. No turning, no reversing, no parking.' So we carried on.

When we arrived we fed the goats and then went in to see what we could bid for. Sadly, much of the good stuff seemed to go to buyers bidding by Internet. This business of allowing bidders to put in bids through the Internet is ruining auctions. It's undoubtedly great for auctioneers, and vendors, but sitting in the auction room while someone in China bids against someone in Pennsylvania isn't a lot of fun. This is another way of life that has been ruined by the Internet. Traders, small shopkeepers and small town dealers can no longer make a living because big city dealers and collectors around the world can pick and choose from what is available. Auctioneers are of course putting themselves out of business because eventually vendors will do everything on the Internet and save the vast commissions auction houses now demand.

We bought some old ancestors to hang on the walls. We're going to devise strange and wonderful histories for them.

19.50 p.m.

As we drove up to Prinknash (and back) I spent much of the day trying to work out how to plan our new publishing business.

The world is now divided into three roughly equal parts: the shirkers (the ones who deliberately avoid work and who live on benefits of one sort or another), the bureaucrats (the rule makers and enforcers) and the rest of us.

Today, the weight of a huge, intolerant and committed bureaucracy lies behind every order and every form. Every institutional demand, however meaningless and trivial, pointless and wrong-headed in concept, is carved in stone and delivered by truck. There is never room for dissent, discussion or such old-fashioned luxuries as logic and common sense. (Common sense, the most undervalued human quality, and one which has almost vanished, is of course merely applied intelligence. But it is now rarer than mares' nests or hens' teeth.)

I spend far too little time doing what I want to do, or doing what I think I do best. I spend far too much of my life on administrative duties, doing what I have to do if I am to avoid getting into serious trouble. When Publishing House was at its height I employed 15 people. It worked well, I think. But the weight of the bureaucracy ground me down. And as the new rules pour out of Brussels I know that I will never again employ anyone.

There is, unbelievably, a mass of new employment legislation coming into being in the next year or two. Agency workers are to be given the same pay as permanent staff. Staff will have the right to demand time off work for training. Employees will have to be provided with a pension. It is already illegal to ask medical or quasi-medical questions on an application form (so, presumably, it is illegal for people hiring steeplejacks to know whether prospective staff members suffer from fits or diabetes). Anyone who is associated with, or related to someone who is disabled must be given the same rights that they would have if they were disabled themselves. And, of course, the maternity and paternity rights of parents are growing at such a pace that I quite expect couples to be soon given days off work so that they go away and procreate. Indeed, it would not surprise me in the slightest. Why, I can hear the Liberal Democrats demanding, should parents-to-be be denied the chance to create their child at a time of their choice? Why should the employed be denied the joy of afternoon nookie so that they can be exploited by evil, capitalist ironmongers?

The lunacy that is the employment tribunal seems to get worse with each new day. (Staff can sue employees for the most bizarre non-happenings and can be awarded unlimited damages. It is even possible for staff to claim they have been harassed and offended by things they haven't actually seen or heard.) New laws coming in over the next year or two will cost British businesses around £25 billion. Many businesses, particularly small ones, simply won't survive. All this legislation is fine when applied to the bureaucrats in Brussels, London or the local town hall. They don't do any work. They don't have any responsibilities. Everyone benefits when they have time off to shop for baby clothes. But in the real world this constant tinkering with the legislation (most of it then gold-plated by British politicians who have absolutely no experience of the real world) will sound the death knell for entrepreneurs and small businesses. The EU, which is responsible for this barrage of nonsense, believes that businesses should be run for the sake of the employees. You can't run a business that way. The priorities have to be producing something that people want and then making a profit. If a business doesn't do those two things then it won't survive. The problem, of course, is that the vast majority of bureaucrats and politicians have never run a business and so know absolutely nothing about how businesses work. As far as they are concerned the word 'profit' is up there with 'paedophile'.

It is wearing to argue with or to try to fight bureaucrats. There are so many of them and they have unending time and money (our money).

And so, as I restructure Publishing House, and plan for the future, I do so knowing that however it is organised we will not employ anyone again. Everything will be outsourced so that someone else can deal with the latest bits and pieces of employment legislation.

21.34 p.m.

The Government claims that the redundant public sector workers will be hired by private companies hoping to expand. This is laughable nonsense. For one thing very few private companies are going to be hiring for the next few years. And for another, very few private companies will want to hire former civil servants who have been made redundant. The reason is simple: the majority of public sector workers are lazy and incompetent. They have been mollycoddled for so long that they don't know what work is. They're used to huge salaries, vast bonuses, exceptional pension rights (which are, of course, all part of an enormous taxpayer scammed Ponzi scheme), long holidays, short days and as much sick time as they like to take. No company wanting to make a profit is going to hire former civil servants.

23.46 p.m.

I have just noticed that the street light has been repaired. The drunks can now stagger home in safety. And the council staff can sleep comfortably.

19

11.01 a.m.

It is bitterly cold and pouring with rain. We drive past a field in which there are lambs, no more than a few days old. The Princess points to them. I look at her and see that there are tears in her eyes. Neither of us speaks. The lambs will live and die in the cold and wet. They will know no sunshine. How can you gambol in the rain? They just stand there and shiver. These lambs are brought into the world at the behest of greedy farmers who are the same oafish beasts, sanctimonious louts, who will complain when their animals are killed because of a foot and mouth scare. The same money-hungry, inconsiderate bastards who crowd their animals into fields which are too small and who fail to provide any sort of shelter for animals who hate getting wet. We remain silent and in mourning for another 20 miles or so. The rain never stops. If anything it gets harder. We cannot either of us forget that we are warm and dry, comforted by heated seats and an efficient heating system. The lambs will shiver until they die or are big enough to be slaughtered and put onto the menu at some fancy restaurant as out of season lamb.

14.19 p.m.

I bought a DVD of Citizen Kane. On the back of the box there is a promotional blurb which reads: 'If you like Citizen Kane you'll like Spartacus.' Hmm. That's a bit like saying: 'If you like strawberry jam you'll love cheese.'

16.10 p.m.

The Princess has discovered that we lose less parcels if we write 'Contents: Books' on the outside. This is presumably because the thieves who work for Royal Mail don't read books.

17.04 p.m.

As we drive home we sing absurd songs based around the towns and villages we pass. The villages are lit only by the lantern soft light of weak moonbeams and all look quite beautiful. It is extremely difficult to find rhymes for English place names. Suddenly, The Princess changed the subject. `I've been thinking,' she said, `and I've decided that real wealth should be measured not in money but in love. The really wealthy people are those who receive lots of love from the people around them or who have received lots of love from loved-ones who have passed on. The real poor are those who remain unloved. To be genuine, and of real value, the love has to be given freely and unconditionally. And to be of the very best quality it has to be reciprocated.' She is, as usual, absolutely right.

20.56 p.m.

I saw a letter in a paper today from someone who claimed to represent a non-profit organisation. As always the letter writer managed to make this sound as though it put her above the rest of us. But who pays for the electricity, the heating, the rent, the property taxes, the stamps, the staff and so on? Someone must do. And if someone is paying for all these things and not making a profit then they must have an agenda. They must be lobbying for some cause or some industry. They are in the 'manipulation' business. I'm a For Profit Organisation and proud of it.

20

11.06 a.m.

A reader has sent me a copy of his book arguing that the earth is flat. It looks frighteningly convincing.

14.24 p.m.

I am now abandoning the link to my webshop through Amazon. There is no point in my buying advertisements for books and then sending readers to a webshop run through Amazon when there are always going to be tons of people selling my books at a fraction of the proper price. The problem is that review copies and second-hand copies are now too easily available through webshops such as Amazon. Books of mine have been made available on Amazon before being officially put on sale. We sent out review copies of my book 101 Things I Have Learned to just seven national newspapers. There were no reviews but six of the books were on sale on Amazon within two days. I know it was the review copies that were being sold because the rest of the print run was still sitting in Publishing House. Even the people who work for publishing companies are making a few extra pennies this way. When Mr Henry Mulligan came in from the printers we sent copies to a number of paperback houses (offering paperback rights). Within days of being sent out most of the books were being sold on Amazon for less than the printing costs. I suspect that the people selling the book had not even bothered to read it before selling it. To make matters worse Amazon was listing the book as unavailable. So any potential buyer who wanted to order the book had to order one of the review copies.

The Web is a wonderful way to buy out of print books. But Amazon and similar sites are destroying backlist sales, and backlist sales are an important part of an author's income (and a vital part of the income of a small publisher).

19.01 p.m.
Television viewers are apparently obsessed with a third rate programme called the X-Factor in which the embarrassingly untalented judge the egregiously talentless. I caught half of an X-Factor programme recently and came to the conclusion that it is a vehicle for talentless oafs. The contestants are no better.

21
10.54 a.m.
I am not in the slightest bit surprised to read today that in the 18th century it was believed that the commonest cause of madness was moving into a new home. I firmly believe that the professionals (the estate agents, conveyancing solicitors and so on) are almost entirely responsible for the stress that is caused by moving home.

Estate agents may have a superficial charm but they also have a reputation for being lying, cheating crooks. On the whole, this is entirely fair. No trades people are as consistently, deliberately crooked as estate agents. They have turned deception into an art form and their determination to sell daydreams rather than reality turn what should be an exciting, enjoyable venture into a nightmare. With estate agents you have to learn to read between the lines that aren't there. Not even garages and car dealers can match estate agents. They lie, and then lie again and lie so much that, like politicians, it seems that they no longer recognise the truth. We have seen bedrooms so small that, with the addition of a little plumbing, they could have been turned into toilets for thin people. We have seen garages so narrow that they would be suitable only for racing bicycles with narrow handlebars. We have seen houses, advertised as `needing some modernisation', which needed knocking down and rebuilding but which were being advertised at the sort of price a buyer might expect to pay for a house in perfect condition. We have visited houses `requiring some attention' which had rooms we couldn't enter because the stairs or floorboards weren't safe. Estate agents are brilliant at taking photographs which flatter and deceive. Only an estate agent can take photographs of a house sandwiched in between an abattoir and an incinerator plant and make it look as though it is situated right in the heart of the New Forest. Even the text on their brochures is misleading. They hide the fact that the home they are offering for sale is merely a wing of the house pictured on the front of the brochure. Do they really think no one will notice that there's a public footpath through the garden? Reading their brochures becomes an exercise in code reading. We saw one brochure which boasted that the gas fired AGA supplied radiators in all the bathrooms. It wasn't a big move to guess that there weren't any radiators in other parts of the house. Not without good reason do they cover themselves by printing a disclaimer at the end of everything they write. They can't even give decent directions. We received a brochure earlier this week which included the following classic: `turn left a quarter of a mile before you get to the church'. They sell frustration and disappointment as much as they sell houses. Does their craftiness pay off? Or are they simply so corrupt that they just behave this way naturally? Is deceit their default condition, as it is with politicians? Having discovered the Internet, and e-mail, they send out everything they have to everyone on their list. It costs very little to do this and so they batter prospective buyers with a veritable storm of wildly inappropriate properties.

The Princess has got into the habit of saying to estate agents: `What's the snag?'

`There is no snag,' they all claim, seemingly offended.

The Princess says nothing for a moment or two and allows the silence to hang in the air. And then the truth pokes its head above the parapet. `Well, it's next to the recycling centre, but these things are essential for the climate and if you close the windows you hardly notice that it's there. You could put in air-conditioning for the summer months. I can get you a deal on that.'

And their optimism is endless. They are always thinking of ways in which a house can be altered and improved. They never do anything to interfere with their flights of fancy. We looked round one house that had just one very tiny bathroom. `You could easily turn the master bedroom's dressing room into an additional bathroom,' said one agent of deceit, with a glorious lip-gloss smile. Yes, well, popping in a bath, a lavatory and a basin wouldn't be too difficult. But there was no plumbing or drainage on that side of the house and so to make the bathroom fittings work the mains drains and mains water supply would all have to be diverted. It would have involved digging a huge trench right underneath the house.

The estate agents we see are forever forecasting a rise in house prices. `We're professionals, we see what is happening, we know that prices are going to soar in a couple of months time.' They're always going up. Never stagnating. Never, ever going down. This unbridled optimism is invariably picked up by the national press who want to please their readers by giving them good news. (House owners are in a majority in Britain so house price rises are regarded in editorial offices as a Good Thing). It is, of course, utterly bizarre that anyone takes any notice of what estate agents say about house prices. Their commission depends upon their pushing up the price of the commodity they are selling. During the boom years, when they made fortunes, they acquired an arrogance which they are finding it difficult to lose now that business is gloomy.

If they listed the upside and the downside for every property they sold they would make life fairer, better and easier for both vendors and buyers. But it would go against the religion of deceit.

`Why don't you tell people about the gasworks/school/incinerator next door?' The Princess asked one estate agent.

`Because people wouldn't go to look at the house if we did!' came back the immediate reply. He didn't seem to realise that if people didn't want to buy the house if they knew what was next door they wouldn't want to buy it when they arrived and had a nasty surprise. Estate agents always want to delay the bad news for as long as possible. They hope that they will wear people down and that their customers will eventually buy just to bring the whole painful process to a temporary end.

The Princess suggests that we should write and publish a *House Buyer's Secret Guide* to explain how to `read' estate agents and understand their jargon and deceit. It seems a good idea.

17.19 p.m.
In this week's copy of the investment magazine *Investors Chronicle* two writers comment on life expectancy. One tells me that, according to actuaries, a 65-year-old man should live until he is about 88. A few pages further on another tells me that according to the Government Actuary's Department, a man living in the UK who has reached 65 years and is in good or fairly good health is expected to live another 12.9 years.

19.48 p.m.
My book *Oil Apocalypse* has sold over 10,000 copies but the most recent print run is disappearing and I don't think I'll bother printing any more. I don't think the book has been reviewed anywhere though it has been savaged on the Internet by people who didn't bother to read it. `I read part of your book *Oil Apocalypse*,' a reporter for *The Independent* newspaper told me in the nearest thing it came to a review. `But it frightened me so much I couldn't read the rest.' On reflection, I should have charged £10,000 a copy and sold the book as a confidential report. It is no exaggeration to say that the financial advice it contained would have been dirt cheap at that price. It is painful to see the predictions coming true. It is annoying to see other writers coming up with similar predictions (a year or two later) and busily taking all the credit. But at least I took the financial advice I gave in the book. I just wish the Government would start planning for the end of the oil. We need to start building nuclear power stations yesterday. And it would be wise to start re-opening our network of canals. When the oil becomes rare and expensive moving goods about the country by canal will be the preferred way.

22
11.08 a.m.
We took five black bags full of books to a local charity shop. That's 17 bagfuls in the last two weeks. It took a huge effort to part with these books but there is no sign in the house that any books have disappeared. In an attempt to deal with the problem, I purchased only three new books today. This is a new low for me. I was feeling proud of myself. When The Princess came back from the shops she proudly showed me the four new books she had bought. We are not going to win the battle against the books like this.

12.42 p.m.
I have discovered that everyone else in the locality has two green recycling bins we have one. I e-mailed the local council (I could not bear to spend three hours trying to telephone them) and asked for another. They replied telling me that they will send me another but it will take six weeks to deliver it. Six weeks to deliver a small plastic container. Only a public body could get away with this. They must be hand-carved in Guatemala and then brought over by Ellen McCarthy. Six weeks to transport a piece of plastic around two miles. That's 3,520 yards in 1,008 hours. That works out at 10.47 feet per hour. A snail could travel faster - carrying not just a green plastic recycling bin but its whole house. This sounds silly but I happen to know that a snail can travel at around two and a half inches a minute. So in an hour it could travel 150 inches or 12½ feet. So a snail really can move its whole damned house considerably faster than my local council can move a green recycling bin.

17.13 p.m.
Time magazine has an interview with someone called Judd Apatow, a film director whose comment on piracy is: `It doesn't (bother me) because I can't be the guy who's like Scrooge: `I must get every nickel of this'. Maybe a lot of people wouldn't watch a movie or listen to music if it weren't free'. Something tells me that Mr Apatow has never yet funded one of his own films. And I may be wrong but I wonder if he perhaps receives a fee for directing films, rather than being dependant on royalties resulting from their sale?

Rupert Murdoch recently announced that `content is not just king, it is the emperor of all things electronic'. Well, it is as long as people don't just steal it and get away with it.

Most people who run websites don't seem to think that taking words is stealing. They think that owning copyright is old-fashioned. There have always been magazines and publishers around the world who helped themselves to copy. I've had scores of articles and book chapters stolen. But on the Internet thieving is the way things work. Articles are reprinted and if the author receives a mention he is supposed to feel grateful.

The new attitude to copyright has spread into the paper world. I have seen several copies of my books reproduced in two foreign languages without my permission. My name is on the covers but I haven't received a penny in royalties. Nor was I sent any copies of the books. I have no idea how many other books of mine have been stolen this way but I do know that it is now impossible for me to sell my books in those countries.

One critic recently complained that not allowing my books to be distributed free of charge on the Web is akin to refusing to allow my books to be put into libraries or bibliographies. This is nonsense. Apart from the select few libraries which demand free copies of all new books most libraries pay for the books they put on their shelves. And authors receive a small sum when their books are borrowed.

And I'm always honoured to see my books in bibliographies - which do, after all, encourage readers to purchase books. The Web, in contrast, just results in authors being impoverished.

What particularly annoys me is that Internet companies take my copyright (amidst a great deal of baloney about copyright being theft) but then gather together every tiny bit of information they can, guard it jealously and sell it to advertisers. There is no freedom on the Web. Enter your details onto one website and the owners of that website use your information, own your information and sell your information. And, of course, an increasing number of computer companies have stopped selling their work on a disk. They now sell software, which costs them nothing to produce because it has to be downloaded, with a single use licence. You buy one off rights. If you upgrade your computer (or replace it because it has broken down) you have to buy the software again.

20.09 p.m.
I received a letter from an 82-year-old man who has cancer of the bile duct. He wants me to recommend treatment. He is losing weight and visiting an alternative therapist. He has refused chemotherapy. I wrote back saying: `I was so sorry to receive your letter and hear your news. I really do wish I could think of something helpful to say but, as always, I find it impossible to offer specific clinical advice through the post. The problem is simply that all patients vary (even though their problems may be similar) and offering any sort of advice on the basis of a letter would be presumptuous of me and, I fear, dangerous too. I do believe strongly in holistic medicine - taking the best from orthodox and alternative medicine. There are many, many options. I don't think either orthodox or alternative practitioners have all the answers (whatever the problem). My best suggestion is that you talk to your GP about all the possible ways of improving your health. Hopefully he will be able to help you take advantage of everything available. Meanwhile, please accept my very best wishes for a speedy recovery.' I felt utterly helpless and useless. What else can I do?

23
11.04 a.m.
A wholesaler e-mails, with some urgency, to ask if we have stock of *Alice's Diary* and *Alice's Adventures*. I e-mail back to say `yes, we have thousands of both books in stock'. I hear no more. Another wholesaler sends an e-mail to tell me that it is not their policy to send cheques for the books they buy. I tell them it is not my policy to send out books that have not been paid for. I think they might have noticed that we have a stalemate. I do not expect them to soften their attitude and to start sending me cheques. After all, they have a policy. But I do not intend to soften my attitude. I have a policy too. In future my books will only be available to people who send their name and address and a cheque or a postal order.

15.06 p.m.
My new Polish publisher has sent me, by e-mail, a photograph of the cheque he is sending to buy Polish rights in *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You*. It's the first time I've ever had a photograph of a cheque sent to me. I hope the cheque arrives in due course.

17.08 p.m.
We met a friend of The Princess's whom she hadn't seen since we married. We had a coffee together. He talked for an hour and a half about himself. He explained how he had become interested in other people and was going to study psychology and become a social worker. At the end of the hour and a half The Princess's friend said: `Well

that's it, there isn't anything else to talk about.' He stood up, we shook hands, he left, I paid the bill. He did not ask one question about The Princess or her life.

17.18 p.m.
I believed in global warming when it was opposed by several large and powerful industries. But now that the Big Money supports the idea of man-made global warming it seems clear that it is bound to be a fraudulent notion. The Big Money is always wrong and corrupting.

18.59 p.m.
After we had coffee with The Princess's friend earlier today I bought an old brass toasting fork in a junk shop. I tried it out this evening. It has an extendable handle which enabled me to make toast without burning my fingers. Why does toast made in front of a fire with a toasting fork taste so much better than toast made in a toaster? The two pieces of toast I made were both burnt and both had bits of soot on them, in addition to having three damned great holes where the prongs of the brass toasting fork had pierced the bread. But they tasted wonderful.

23.04 p.m.
This evening I saw The Princess standing on the right hand side of the weighing scales. She was leaning over further than the tower at Piza. `What on earth are you doing?' I asked her. `I've discovered that I weigh two pounds less if I do this,' she said. `And now that I've started doing it I have to keep doing it or else I'll suddenly think I've put on two pounds.'

23.54 p.m.
Now that we are changing the business The Princess and I have decided to change the prices we charge. Everyone in publishing (as in just about all other businesses) agrees that the left digit effect is vital in pricing. So, a book priced at £4.99 will sell better than a book priced at £5. It may seem silly but it is important. Research from Indiana University in the USA has shown that traders in shares are just as irrational. The researchers analysed 100 million trades made on NASDAQ and divided them according to their price point. They discovered that share traders succumb to the power of clever pricing with the result that buy orders outnumbered sell orders to the greatest extent at prices ending in 0.99. They also discovered that sales outweighed buys at prices ending in 0.01. The research also showed that the effect is greatest when the penny brings down the leftmost digit. In other words going from £20 to £19.99 makes more difference than going from £19 to £18.99. (The explanation is presumably that most of us read numbers from left to right.)

The Princess and I have decided that since we do everything else the wrong way we will now do our pricing the wrong way too. Since we have pretty well decided to give up on bookshops (whether sitting on the High Street or wandering around in the ether somewhere) we no longer have to stick to the normal pricing systems. So we are going to sell books at nice even prices. And we're going to try to include the postage and packing charge in with the book price. This should please the small but determined coterie of readers who constantly write and chide me for charging prices that have `99 pence' at the end. Annoyingly, existing books will have to stick with their pricing for a while. If I suddenly change prices to get rid of the `99' pences then there will be chaos because of the number of catalogues still being used. Still, we will be making a move in the right direction.

We did try this sort of pricing with my last book *2020* and it seemed to work well. We charged £20 as long as the order came in within a week or two of the offer being posted out. And we didn't add on any charge towards the cost of postage and packing.

In order to make the offer even more attractive we put the cover price quite high, at £50. Only with the cover price this high could we afford to offer a big discount to readers who ordered quickly.

This system gave us a big unexpected advantage.

When bookshops and wholesalers order books they routinely expect to be given a 45% discount. And we have to pay the cost of posting the books to them. If we charge a high cover price then the discount and postage costs won't hurt us so badly. So, for example, with a £50 cover price the discount and the postage costs will mean that when we sell a book through a bookshop we will make the same sort of return as when we sell a book to a private customer who has ordered directly at the discounted price. I don't see why we should always make considerably less money when selling through a bookshop than we do when selling direct. This also means that webshops like Amazon which offer huge discounts will no longer be able to beat us on price. And since we are no longer going to send out review copies, or copies to other publishers or bookshops, the availability of `second-hand' books being sold below our price will be dramatically reduced.

24

11.10 a.m.

I read *The Times* on the train to London. It’s the only time I ever read it and I can see why they give it away free to travellers. It’s a good example of why people in Britain don’t read newspapers much any more. (They don’t read them much abroad either. In Paris there used to be half a dozen shops within half a mile of our apartment selling a huge variety of newspapers and magazines. Today there are two.) There were five pages on the Ashes series starting in Australia but I could find no mention anywhere of the players involved or the likely teams. The five pages were just fluff, colour, poorly written opinions. I couldn’t find any facts, though cricket is a sport which is built upon statistics. People don’t buy or read newspapers much any more and most of those who do will not pay for the Internet versions (You can’t even light a fire with an Internet newspaper). The result will be that most people won’t see any news at all. (Television doesn’t `do’ news. It does entertainment.) I dumped the paper and read Nimrod’s magnificent book *The Life of John Mytton*. (Nimrod was a penname used by Charles James Apperley, a well-known sporting writer of the times). I have been a fan of Mytton for years and he is included at some length in *England’s Glory*, the book I wrote this year with The Princess. Nimrod admits that he wrote the book after Mytton’s death to put the record straight and to tell the world that Mytton was not a bad man but was, on the contrary, merely a madman and a drunkard. Fair enough. Mytton was expelled from Westminster and Harrow and knocked down his private tutor. He went to Oxford but left after a day. When he was elected an MP he spent just half an hour in the House of Commons before leaving for good. Nimrod’s stories are wonderful. `He scarcely ever thrashed a man that he did not give him something afterwards as amends,’ says Nimrod. Mytton wasn’t always so generous however. He expected tradesmen to know their place. When a tradesman in Shrewsbury ventured to call him `Johnny’, Mytton floored the man on the spot. Incidentally, Mytton, like all huntsmen imported foxes to hunt but he did have the decency (unlike today’s brood of fox-slaughters) to admit this. One thing I learned from Nimrod was that Mytton was very fond of his children. He apparently showed this by suddenly shouting hunting cries into their ears and by throwing oranges at their heads.

At St Pancras the French customs man studied my passport but didn’t bother to look up at me at all. A wonderful old lady in a very smart blue dress was having a hard time with two security employees who were trying to hurry her along. `I realise you have important work to do, young man,’ she said, refusing to be bullied. `But there is no reason not to perform your work with courtesy and patience.’

We had vegan food on Eurostar and once again it was infinitely better than the vegetarian food they serve. Vegetables and fruit and half-decent bread are much better while travelling than the awful cheese smothered pasta they serve up. The wine is now utterly undrinkable and they seem to have stopped serving champagne (which was acceptable). The coffee has become undrinkable too.

While on the Eurostar train I made a list of ten more things I have learned.

1. People who say they are never frightened are also never brave.
2. The money we use for buying stuff online isn’t the same as real money. It is very easy to spend a small fortune on books, just merrily clicking away.
3. When walking downhill lean forward rather than backward. It feels wrong but if you lean back your weight all goes onto your heels and before you know you’ll be on your bottom.
4. Never trust a man who wears a ready-made bow tie. If he cheats with his bow tie he will cheat at everything else.
5. Never give advice to friends however much they tell you they will not hold things against you if the advice turns bad.
6. Always tip generously unless the service is bad. But if you intend to go back to the same place always overtip outrageously.
7. Don’t sign for registered letters unless you already know what they contain.
8. Don’t answer the phone or the door unless you know who it is and you are expecting them.
9. Don’t mess with someone who has nothing to lose or who is fighting for something on principle.
10. Don’t invest in anything described as `safe’. When I was young I put money into an Equitable Life pension. That largely disappeared through incompetence but Government regulators allowed it to happen so they are responsible. I may receive 22% of my `lost’ money in compensation. A little later I invested money in Railtrack, which seemed a solid, blue chip company. That was stolen by the Government. Then there was my investment in Zero Dividend Preference Shares. Again that disappeared because of a mixture of crookery and official incompetence. I received a modest sum in compensation and was forced to pay 40% capital gains tax on it. And then I was foolish enough to put money into Permanent Interest Bearing Shares issued by Bradford & Bingley; as safe and as boring an investment as could be found at the time. The Government took control and is refusing to pay any interest so the shares are virtually worthless.

In Paris, for the second time in succession, we hired a shy and polite Parisian taxi driver. He gave way to everyone and drove so slowly that I wondered if he was ill. He even asked if we minded him having the radio on. He drove so slowly through Paris that we had a chance to do some window shopping on the way. Galeries Lafayette was decorated for Christmas and had a huge display of lights designed to make it look like Notre Dame.

18.27 p.m.
One of the perks of travelling first class on Eurostar is that there's a varied selection of free magazines to choose from at the end of each carriage. I picked up a free copy of the *New Statesman* on Eurostar today. It's an odd little magazine, every bit as twee as *The Lady*, *The Spectator*, *Country Life* and the *Economist*. They are all of them little more than cult newsletters, catering to their own peculiar tribes of prejudiced and bigoted zealots. Apart from the usual barely coherent rubbish the copy I picked up included a supplement entitled *The People's NHS?* The supplement was published `in collaboration with Pfizer'. Now, Pfizer is of course an international pharmaceutical company. Strange bedfellows. I wonder if anyone at the *New Statesman* knows enough about drug companies to have asked themselves why one of them should agree to help pay for a *New Statesman* publication. The back of the supplement explained that Pfizer and the *New Statesman* aimed to bring together leading opinion-formers to explore a range of health issues relevant to policymakers and the electorate alike (are there any health issues not relevant to both?).

We are told that Pfizer sponsors these events and collaborates with the *New Statesman* to determine the discussion topics. I bet it does. There's a bit of text telling readers that the *New Statesman* has sole editorial responsibility for the content of the supplement. Oh how sweet that is. Dare I point out that one of the contributors just happens to be a senior director of Pfizer. What an amazing coincidence that is. If anyone at the *New Statesman* is interested here's the bottom line: Pfizer sponsors the *New Statesman* events (and helps choose the discussion topics) because the drug companies love the NHS more than even the leftist leftie does. Drug companies adore the NHS. It is a cash cow of unprecedented size. Always giving. It is the golden cow that lays an endless row of golden eggs. And I don't mind betting that this merry duo of Pfizer and the *New Statesman* never produce anything questioning the whole existence of the NHS, or the dangers produced by modern drugs or questioning the value of vaccination or vivisection. Drug companies are everywhere these days. It is impossible for two doctors to meet, or a politician and a doctor to discuss health matters or, it seems, a left-wing magazine to produce a supplement without a drug company being involved (and usually paying for the smart lunch or dinner afterwards).

25
08.01 a.m.
We were woken at 7.00 a.m. by workmen doing something at the Embassy across the road. Workmen who are doing things at 7.00 a.m. always do it as noisily as possible. They are, presumably, indignant that the rest of the world should still be asleep. I know that 7.00 a.m. exists. When I was a doctor it was the time when I decided that it wasn't worth going to bed. But these days I think of 7.00 a.m. as the preserve of those pushy businessmen who spend an hour in the gym before heading off to pre-breakfast meetings with their accountants and legal advisors. We put on a CD of Don Williams hoping that his syrupy smooth voice would drown out the banging and shouting and help us sleep. It didn't work. We found earplugs and tossed and turned in that strange time between sleep and wakefulness.

11.39 a.m.
The electricity and gas companies have been again to read the meters. We missed them again. They do this every month or two, always leaving a note to tell us that they have a legal right to inspect their meters at regular intervals. I rang the number they gave to arrange another appointment but it was, of course, a number that led me into a flow chart of options. I managed to find my way past the first two options but I simply could not understand the third option. Whatever it is they wanted I failed and I was ejected from the system so that I had to go back to the beginning again. Part of the damned system was voice operated. I was expected to give specific words in response to the questions they asked. I told them my name was Sarcozy but it didn't make any difference. I tried pretending to be General de Gaulle come back from the dead with an Australian accent. Nothing worked. It was like a nightmare. Actually, no, it was like one of those damned computer games that takes players from one level to the next. If you get stuck at one level then you stay there, never progressing. Things aren't much different in Britain, of course. The language is English but there's no one to speak to. Ring a government department or utility and work your way through the `press one, press two' sequences and you might end up speaking to a real, live person. But the chances of them being able to provide the answers you need are slim. And the chances of the answers they provide being accurate or reliable are even slimmer.

There are also problems with France Telecom. When we were here last I discovered that one of our phone lines wasn't working. Since we don't really need two lines I thought it would be easier to ask them to cancel the faulty one.

But they have, of course, also cancelled the direct debit with which I paid the phone bills so now I have to set up a new one. If there is a way for a utility company (or government department) to screw up they will find it. I should not complain. This is the basic principle of an investment strategy which has over the last decade or so proved extremely profitable. I ring up and set up a new direct debit. But although the woman I speak to tells me that I don't need to write a cheque I decide that I will. I'd rather pay twice then have to go through all the drama of reconnecting a line because it hasn't been paid.

Our building has had new mailboxes fitted. Due to a stroke of luck they are fitted today so we find the key to the new box inside the old box. The old boxes are being taken away tomorrow so it's a good thing we arrived when we did. This is the first bit of luck fate has thrown at us for some while. We grab it with grateful hands. The new boxes cost as much as a small car in India but they are bigger and stronger than the old ones.

12.55 p.m.
While The Princess does some cleaning, I go out to the shops to buy food for lunch. It's freezing cold and the sky is heavy with snow that wants to come down. The noise was apparently caused by a film crew parking its huge lorries in the street outside. The weather in Paris is always like England but more so. If it's warm in England then it's boiling hot in Paris. If it's cold in England then it's always freezing cold. In the taxi from the station last night The Princess worked out that she'd been to Paris over 100 times. That's a lot of Eurostar trips. The street outside is now blocked by huge pantechnicons.

14.32 p.m.
We played a CD of Last Night of the Proms. As the chorus sang 'Britons never never will be slaves' I suddenly remembered the sight of several promenaders at the last Proms concert singing away and waving their EU flags with gusto. The conductor, a well-meaning enough fellow, could hardly speak English. The leading soprano was American - from a country whose cultural history consists of the invention of barbed wire and very little else of significance. (Why the hell do people use barbed wire? Ordinary wire does everything barbed wire does without all the harm.) Don't these idiots realise that in signing away our sovereignty to the EU we have made ourselves slaves? When I published *England Our England*, my first book attacking the EU, I was widely vilified for hating Europe. When I replied that I loved other European countries and the variety they offered but disliked the bureaucracy which wanted to eradicate all those differences I was met with blank, uncomprehending stares. Critics who knew that we spend a good deal of our time on the southern side of the Channel sniggered and accused us of hypocrisy.

15.43 p.m.
We decide to go out and buy a new blanket. Even with the heating on full blast we were cold in the night. And we want to walk to the Rond Point to see the lights on the Champs Elysee. In the Avenue Montaigne the trees are all decorated with red lights, strung in such a way that they make the trees look as though they are wearing party dresses with a full complement of petticoats.

We eventually managed to buy a rather decent blanket. It should be decent. It cost £220 and came with two manuals, its own plastic slipcase and the largest carrier bag ever made. I've never owned a blanket that came with its own instruction manuals before. To the best of my knowledge I've never paid more than £200 for a blanket either. Mind you it's been a while since I bought one here, as in England, and prices rise constantly.

The British Government admits that inflation is running at 3% to 4% but they lie, of course because they exclude boring non-essentials such as food and energy from their figures. The real figure is much higher than that and my guess is that real inflation is running at somewhere between 8% and 10%. Very few people who don't work for Goldman Sachs, or one of Britain's nationalised banks, are increasing their incomes at that sort of rate. High inflation is, of course, exactly what the Bank of England and the Government wants. It will impoverish the middle classes and punish savers. But the bankers, politicians and civil servants all have inflation-proofed index-linked gold-plated pensions to enjoy. They don't give a stuff about what is right or decent. They want plenty of inflation because it's the easiest way to get rid of the nation's debts. And it will, as an aside, rescue the greedy bastards who bought houses they couldn't afford. If house prices just stay stable for the next five years, and inflation carries on at, say, 10% then house prices will effectively more or less halve in that time. And the correction will have taken place without anyone noticing, or feeling poorer. The economy will have been adjusted, at the sole cost of the poor sods who were prudent. Gordon Brown always talked about Prudence. He just didn't mention that he wanted to rape her, slit her throat and dump her in a ditch.

And it isn't just that prices are going up. We invariably get less for our money. Chocolate biscuits get smaller every year. And I read a report this morning showing that each sheet of toilet roll paper is now 25% smaller than it was a decade ago. And there are 15% less sheets on a kitchen roll.

In the blanket shop I thought, for an embarrassing moment, that I didn't have enough cash with me but I then found a small stache of euro notes in an inside pocket of my old Austin Reed jacket. I've had that jacket for nearly 40 years and it will clearly still be going strong when I'm no longer here to fill it, though a small hole has appeared in the lining and next time I am in Regent Street I might pop into the store and let them know.

It occurred to me as I paid that the European bank will never be able to replace the euro notes. There are far too many of them in circulation.

While we were out The Princess and I popped into the Post Office to buy some stamps. The Princess stopped me on the doorstep. `Wait a minute,' she said, rummaging in her handbag. `I can't find my spectacles.' `You don't wear spectacles!' I said, puzzled. `I know,' she agreed. `But I have some with plain glass to wear whenever I go into Post Offices.' I waited while she rummaged. A couple of hours later she produced a spectacle case and took out a pair of very elegant spectacles. `They make me look more intelligent,' she said. `And slightly intimidating. And people treat me better when I'm wearing them.' As we walked in a man in a grey uniform rushed over to ask me what I wanted. I told him I wanted to buy stamps. He nodded and then walked off. Thinking that he was taking me to where the stamps were kept I followed him. But he simply met another bloke in a grey uniform and started chatting. After a couple of minutes of this I went to an empty counter and eventually managed to interrupt a conversation between two more guys in grey uniforms. `I'd like to buy 12 stamps for letters to England,' I told him. He seemed startled but, with some reluctance went to a cupboard and found me 12 stamps. `And 12 stamps for letters within France,' I added. This time he looked as though I'd gone mad. He shook his head wearily, as though tired by the world's strange demands, and then went to another cupboard and took out 12 more stamps. The whole strange expedition reminded me of Post Offices in England. Except that there were no queues.

Back at the apartment I found that the arrondissement magazine had been pushed into our mailbox. It has become a vehicle for promoting the current mayor of the arrondissement. The latest edition contained 14 photographs of her smiling, meeting people and attending things.

26

11.04 a.m.

It's snowing! Huge slowflakes that smother everything within seconds. We go for a walk to the Eiffel Tower and quickly become walking snowmen. Everyone is smiling. Two Frenchmen, arms linked, walk past singing `Jingle Bells' at the top of their voices. Every other person we see is taking photographs on their phones. A Chinese man who looks as though he's never seen snow before is giggling and jumping around like a child. On the way back to the apartment we call into the freezer shop to buy pizzas and ice cream. The assistant who has been there for years, getting fatter month by the month, asks us if it is snowing outside. I tell her no, but that I am walking proof that *Head and Shoulders* does not work for everyone. We also stop at the cake shop next door to buy my favourite confection - a meringue, cream and chocolate confection that used, in less politically correct times, to be known as a Tête du Negre and which is now known as a Rivoli or a meringue au chocolat. I remember that the last time I asked for one by the original name the assistant drew herself up to her full five foot two inches and glowered at me. `We do not call them that in the seventh arrondissement,' she said, implying that it was perfectly acceptable to use the name in less salubrious areas of the city. As we leave the cake shop two cars collide. There is the well-known sound of breaking glass and bending metal. The drivers climb out of their vehicles, snarl at each another for a few moments, look at the damage, shrug and then get back in and drive away. In Paris life is too short to exchange insurance details every time cars collide. Walking around the city it is always nigh on impossible to find a car without a dent. I have long harboured the suspicion that dealers actually sell cars with dents already put in them so that owners don't feel embarrassed at the newness of their new vehicles.

When we get back to the apartment I turn on the radio and discover that Gordon Brown has earned £60,000 for his first speech since leaving Downing Street. The subject was `The Global Economic Crisis and how to prevent another one'. Someone paid him £60,000 for this. I assume it was a bank. Only banks are staffed with people idiotic enough to pay Brown for advice on financial matters.

14.50 p.m.

The world is apparently getting warmer but at a slower pace. Yet again this seems to be solid proof that the climate change freaks have got it wrong. The only possible explanation for this is that climate change is natural rather than man-made. If it were man-made then the industrialisation of China et al would mean that the world would be getting hotter and hotter at an increasing pace. The climate freaks miss this obvious point. But then they don't do common sense. And like the AIDS maniacs they have a vested interest in selling the scare that has made so many of them rich and famous.

18.19 p.m.

Ed Miliband, the new Labour leader has returned to work after a fortnight's paternity leave. Being an MP is a part time job as it is. MPs totter home at 5.00 p.m. to prepare tea, feed the babies and prepare for the Archers. What a world of wimps.

20.04 p.m.
Our annual French bill for taxes includes a hefty television licence fee. This is, for France, a relatively new idea but they have quickly caught onto the idea that in order to make sure that the licence is paid it is important to be aggressive about collecting it. The licence fee is, therefore, a default expectation and however often I tell the authorities that we do not have a television licence they always add the fee onto the annual bill. I had some success the first year by writing a letter explaining that in a city as beautiful as Paris a television would be entirely unnecessary. This honest flattery worked once but seems to have lost its zest. So these days I simply scrawl all over the form, knock off the licence fee and send a cheque for the rest. This little annual problem costs us both some convenience for it means that I cannot pay by direct debit without funding a television service I don't want. Bureaucrats the world over are the same. They send bills for money that isn't owed in the hope that the citizen will eventually be worn down and will pay to get rid of the problem. It is a variation of the old insurance company trick of not paying out on claims and hoping to wear out the claimant with bureaucracy.

22.10 p.m.
A reader has written to me telling me that he has discovered an encryption programme which cannot be broken into. He tells me, with great delight, that not even the authorities can read what has been written in an e-mail if it is sent using this programme. I write back, thank him and tell him that I won't be using the programme. I suspect that anyone who does, and whose e-mails are being read, will be signalling to the authorities that they are hiding something. If the police, Special Branch and MI5 cannot read what has been written they will simply clomp round at 4.00 a.m., hammer down the door (so that there isn't time for a hard drive to be destroyed) and insist that all the mystery material be immediately unencrypted.

23.01 p.m.
Flicking through a pile of mail I discover that I've received yet another invitation to start Forex trading. Any form of trading is gambling and Forex trading is gambling on roller skates. I believe that the only way to make money out of money is by investing for the medium term (because this keeps down the trading costs) and that private investors only have an edge if they can predict macroeconomic factors with some success. A decade ago I decided that huge economic problems were coming and so I put a good chunk of our investment money into gold, silver and oil. As soon as Gordon the Moron started selling the nation's gold I started buying (though, of course, he had considerably more to sell than I could afford to buy). They're all still in our portfolio, and likely to remain there for a little while yet. Economists and politicians all talk about the 2007 financial collapse as though it were a huge surprise. It seemed to me to be pretty predictable and very avoidable. I'm not a gold bug but I put our money into precious metals simply because it seemed clear that nasty things were going to happen to the economy. When a nation's economy is built on greed and debt and on bizarre financial instruments that no one understands it can only be a matter of time before things go `bang'. The fact that the price of gold was rising steadily for years before the collapse suggests that I wasn't the only person preparing for the collapse.

23.56 p.m.
I have been reading Robert Vaughan's autobiography. Vaughan was the cool `Man from U.N.C.L.E' and the gunfighter with dark demons in `The Magnificent Seven'. Vaughan tells how Brad Dexter, the actor in `The Magnificent Seven' who is usually forgotten, saved Frank Sinatra from drowning off Malibu. Dexter hardly ever worked again but was on Sinatra's pay roll, usually listed in the movie credits as a producer. At the end of his book Vaughan writes: `I have come to learn that, like a play, television show or movie, a book is a collaborative effort.' I heartily disagree with him. Although there are notable exceptions (usually in the realms of script writing) writing is not usually a team effort and is best when it isn't.

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10.50 a.m.
The Publishers Licensing Society has sent me a password for entry to their website. The password entitles me to view financial statements and all sorts of other confidential material. They sent the password to me by e-mail. This is considerably less secure than sending it on a postcard. Still, I don't suppose it matters much. The average Briton has at least 16 passwords. None of us can remember them all. So we write them down and keep them somewhere

handy where we (and anyone else) can find them readily.

14.57 p.m.
I am constantly being told about the wonders of the e-book. As a result I now believe that we are approaching the end for big publishers. Bookshops have little or no future. Wholesalers might as well give up now. Printers who have bought hugely expensive presses might as well call in the bankruptcy people today. Literary agents may struggle on for a while selling e-book rights to people like Amazon but they too will fall by the wayside as soon as authors realise that agents can't get much more for them than the standard e-book rate. Small, niche publishers producing short runs of expensive books will survive. (Digital printing, print on demand, doesn't work for us because it is too expensive to print large quantities of books this way. It really only works for small numbers of very expensive books.) Self-publishers will thrive. Proper books will become far more expensive than they are today. The demand (and price) for second-hand books will collapse for a year or two and then slowly the demand will come back and the prices will go up.

Publishers and authors could have 'killed' the whole e-book trade simply by refusing to permit digital versions of their work to be sold. It would, I believe, have been much easier for book publishers to do this than it was for record companies. The bookselling chains, the publishers and the wholesalers should have fought but instead they committed suicide because they didn't understand the scale or nature of the threat. They misinterpreted the whole situation and the entire publishing industry will now die.

22.19 p.m.
This evening we watched a DVD entitled `The Path To War' with Michael Gambon playing Lyndon B Johnson. Directed by John Frankenheimer. It's a brilliant film about Johnson's administration, also starring Donald Sutherland and Alex Baldwin. The curious thing is that in the film, Johnson talks with tremendous enthusiasm about his plans for a Great Society. It was an excuse for America having no money left after bombing Vietnam. So, David Cameron's one original idea wasn't original after all.

28
11.30 a.m.
Our bank in Paris is threatening to deduct 18% from the interest they pay us if we don't give them all sorts of private details and personal information. It's the usual nonsense from Hitler's favourite bastard child. They already have my inside leg measurement but it's clearly not enough. I suddenly realised that they don't pay me any interest. So I really don't care. They can deduct 18% from nothing with my blessing. So I ripped up the form and threw it in the rubbish. A similar thing happened in the UK not long ago. A company in which I have an investment threatened to deduct tax from the dividends they pay if I didn't fill in a complex and intrusive form. I wrote and told them to deduct the tax but to make sure they sent me an account of what they had taken. When I fill in my annual tax form I can put down the tax paid and deduct it from what I owe.

15.36 p.m.
The whole world of bookselling is changing rapidly. Figures published today show that four years ago the big chains sold nearly half of all books. Today they sell around a third. The supermarkets have doubled their share of the bookselling market from 5% to 10% and the Internet bookshops have doubled too - from 8% to 16%. Small, independent bookshops (proper bookshops) are clinging on to around 10% of the total. The e-book and the e-book reader are going to change this dramatically. Within another couple of years the chains and the small bookshops will have lost market share dramatically. Many former bookshops will be selling mobile phones or will be charity shops.

22.34 p.m.
I did so little today that my self-winding watch stopped. The Princess and I just sat and read and drew and listened to music and played games. I have been reading Henry David Thoreau's journals, which I bought at Shakespeare and Company, down near Notre Dame. I've had the book on my shelves for years. In his entry for October 28th 1853, Thoreau describes how he had bought 706 remainder copies of his book *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. The books, out of a print run of 1,000, were delivered to Thoreau's home. `They are something more substantial than fame, as my back knows, which has borne them up two flights of stairs...Of the remaining two hundred and ninety and odd, seventy five were given away, the rest sold. I have now a library of nearly nine hundred volumes, over seven hundred of which I wrote myself. Is it not well that the author should behold the fruit of his labour? My works are piled up one side of my chamber half as high as my head, my opera omnia. This is authorship; these are the work of my brain. Nevertheless, in spite of this result, sitting beside the insert mass of my works, I take

up my pen tonight to record what thought or experience I may have had, with as much satisfaction as ever. Indeed, I believe that this result is more inspiring and better for me than if a thousand had bought my wares. It affects my privacy less and leaves me freer.'

I understand every word of this and share every one of Thoreau's thoughts. He is, without a doubt, the one American whom I would have liked to have met. He was the quiet revolutionary, caring little for fame and fortune but everything for life, nature and what he saw around him.

29

10.39 a.m.

The postman in Paris is still putting the mail into the old, battered, torn off the wall, smashed open boxes. However, (and I love this example of free enterprise beating the State organisation) the man who delivers publicity material (leaflets, unwanted free magazines, etc.) puts his stuff into the new smart boxes.

I telephoned the agents who look after the building for the freeholders and find it difficult to explain the problem since I do not how to describe a huge collection of mailboxes in English, let alone in French. I am sure the Germans have a word for it. They'll create a word which means: `thebigcollectionofindividualmailboxeswhichisfixedtothewall'.

The kindly man at the agents tells me that the postman will not put the mail into the new boxes until a bureaucrat from the French post office has come round and given the new boxes the stamp of approval. This means that every morning every resident in the building has to open two boxes (one now leaning loose against the wall and definitely a health and safety hazard). Moreover, the old boxes cannot be taken away and so we must all wriggle past the wrecked old boxes until a French post office bureaucrat can make the effort to totter round and confirm that the newly installed, and extremely expensive, mailboxes are indeed mailboxes and not water buffalo or combine harvesters.

C'est la vie, as someone once said.

15.06 p.m.

It is freezing. We hope it will snow again. The pigeons look really miserable on the roof opposite. I put food out on the window ledge and they fly across immediately. I've bought special food for turtle doves. According to the packet it is full of vitamins and should aid their growth. It's horrifically expensive so I'm sure it must be full of goodness. I don't know whether feeding the birds in Paris is a crime but the locals always get very excited. Last winter a man from downstairs rang our doorbell to remonstrate with me about feeding the birds. (The birds knock bits of bread and seed off the edge and these, being visible on the pavement below, are evidence of our malfeasance.)

17.01 p.m.

I'm delighted to say that it is still possible to buy proper light bulbs in France. The EU may be run for and by the French and the Germans but the French in particular take no notice of the daft laws coming out of Brussels. After buying a bagful of bulbs we went for a walk around the Eiffel Tower. The sky was heavy with unfallen snow. We fed the birds by the lake but the crows grabbed everything. They seemed to be starving. In the park they were pecking at the rubbish bins searching for food. Sadly for them there are no picnickers and therefore no leftover sandwiches. How do they survive?

20.25 p.m.

I told a fellow I know that we were having difficulty finding a country house to buy in England because there is so little on the market. The problem, of course, is that by keeping interest rates absurdly low the Government has enabled people to stay in homes they should not have bought and cannot afford. As we travelled back to England this evening I opened an e-mail from him. `Try the Internet,' he suggested. `It's a really good way to search for property.' I did not dare tell The Princess about his suggestion. For the last six months she has spent at least an hour a day scouring the Internet.

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11.34 a.m.

I felt sorry for myself this morning. A few months ago I sent out nearly 200 review copies of *2020*. I prepared special press releases, drawing attention to items in the book which would, I thought, interest particular publications. It was my last hoorah. Not one publication has reviewed or quoted or referred to the book. `You're beginning to sound like an old star, who is now forgotten and forlorn,' said The Princess gently. `Like Brando, in On the Waterfront?' I suggested. 'I could have been a contender.' `I was thinking more of Gloria Swanson in `Sunset Boulevard,' said The Princess. I laughed and felt better. The Princess then reminded of my hero William Cobbett.

He fought on and on and on to get his books and articles published. He fought censorship and establishment opposition but he never gave up. Remembering Cobbett and Paine and Defoe and my other heroes I feel a bit of a wimp and determined not to allow myself to sink into the slough of self-pity again. Well not until the next time it happens anyway. On a more practical level I have decided again not to bother sending out any more review copies of my books. It will save a good deal of money and help avoid a great deal of disappointment.

14.07 p.m.
I had an e-mail from a fellow wanting to know if I will give a lecture for a huge American company. They want me to discuss the future. He wants us to meet to talk and discuss things. Tentatively, and rather shyly, I broach the subject of money. He writes back again asking me to ring him so that we can talk. He ignores the subject of money. I feel bad having to mention money but I have no agent and I am fed up with people wanting me to travel 300 miles, at my expense, stay in a hotel, at my expense, lose a couple of days work, and speak (having spent several days preparing what to say) for nothing. I find this especially grating when the people organising the event are making money, or using it as some sort of promotional exercise. I never charge charities but I am getting fed up with being expected to work free for large international companies too. I mark his last e-mail as spam in the hope that I never hear from him again.

15.17 p.m.
A recent survey has shown that 70% of people say they would be happier earning less money and having more time to themselves. The same number say they would be happier earning less and living somewhere more pleasant, with a shorter commute to work. If these people did some sums and a little research they would probably find that they could easily get jobs that paid less and wasted less of their lives. Most people spend a huge percentage of their income on buying season tickets and suitable clothes for work (none of which are tax deductible expenses). They pay vast sums for snack lunches and car parking. In the end many would be better off financially if they took less well-paid, less demanding jobs. The world will change dramatically when people no longer measure themselves by their annual income but, instead, by the quality of their lives.

16.04 p.m.
The cheque has arrived from Poland.

17.23 p.m.
The Government is going to allow farmers and landowners to cull (i.e. kill) badgers at their own expense because of the alleged risks of their cattle contracting TB. There is, of course, no evidence that badgers are a cause of TB in cattle but this new piece of legislation pleases the farmers by allowing them to kill as many badgers as they like and pleases politicians and civil servants by taking the cost away from the Government.

The mass slaughter of entirely innocent badgers is a disgrace. Farmers want to blame badgers when their cattle contract TB so they can claim compensation from the Government (and not take the blame themselves). A cull of farmers would make more sense than a cull of badgers. Their abuse of chemicals and hormones and antibiotics causes much human illness and death. And the high incidence of TB among their animals is simply a result of bad husbandry.

I had a rather acrimonious correspondence with the Bishop of Bath and Wells a few months ago. I wrote pointing out that I was horrified to see that his diocese appeared to be calling for badgers to be killed. I said that as a scientist I was appalled that his branch of the church should appear to be ignoring the scientific evidence which shows conclusively that badgers do not spread tuberculosis to cattle and that as a humanitarian and animal lover I was appalled that his branch of the church should seem to be campaigning for the pointless destruction of God’s creatures. I made the point that at a time when our country is falling apart through greed and crookery the church should be devoting effort to raising moral standards not forcing them lower.

Sadly, I don’t think my letter did any good.

The sight of farmers ignoring the scientific evidence and blaming badgers for their cows getting TB reminds me of the tobacco industry disclaiming any responsibility for lung cancer. They too insisted on ignoring all the evidence for years.

December

1

09.30 a.m.

A few weeks ago I received a letter from HMRC telling me that in future I, as an employer, must fill in all tax forms online. I wrote back saying that this would be impossible and that if they insisted on it I would have to make my staff redundant. `Would you please let me know as soon as possible if I must give my staff notice. I don't see how it helps the country for me to be forced to make people redundant. I've been running a business for several decades and the rules have become increasingly absurd. I can quite see that you don't want small businesses to exist at all. Maybe the Chancellor will be able to borrow some money from Ireland.' Six weeks after my letter I received a reply from someone in Glasgow telling me that I must use a computer in my local library to complete my PAYE forms. The man in Glasgow obviously didn't know that there is a rumour that our local council is considering closing the local library so that they can sell the building and use the proceeds to pay the pensions of former executives. It is, of course, no surprise that the Government should force employers to use a system which has been proven to be inefficient, costly and disastrously insecure. It's exactly what they would do. As I pointed out in *2020* if the Government and its handmaidens can possibly find a way to screw things up they can be relied upon to find it. And then they can be relied upon to do it. Thanks to the EU (which also follows up the `find a way to screw things up and then turn it into a law' philosophy) electronic invoices will soon be made compulsory by all government departments and large companies. `Most of us already do e-banking, so it should not be too difficult,' says Suvi Linden who is communications minister for somewhere foreign and therefore quite probably in charge of what happens in England.

12.35 p.m.

When I was about 18 the company where my father worked, Crabtree in Walsall, had a Swiss guy over for a few months as a trainee. I used to play tennis with him occasionally. One late afternoon we were walking back from the courts when he suddenly became agitated and started walking with some urgency. `What's the problem?' I asked. He looked at his watch and walked still faster. I strode alongside, puzzled and asked him again what was worrying him. `It is my shoes,' he said, pointing downwards. `They are brown.' I looked at them. He was right. They were. `So what's the problem?' `It is nearly six o'clock,' he said. `I must change them before six because an English gentleman never wears brown shoes after that time.' It turned out that he had read a rather old-fashioned etiquette book before coming to England. He was a nice fellow, though I've never seen him since. He was the sort of man who carried a furled umbrella but never unfurled it, however hard it rained, because he knew he would never again roll it so that it looked as elegant. And looking elegant was, to him, far more important than keeping dry.

Sir Stirling Moss tells a similar story about former racing driver Rob Walker who raced at Le Mans in the 1930s. At six o'clock, well into the race, Walker would come into the pits and change into black shoes and a suit. He would then go out and drive through the night, properly shod. Those were the days when racers were gentlemen especially if they were English.

15.57 p.m.

There is talk of British companies being forced to have more female directors - whether or not they can find any decent ones. This is a really bad idea. Quotas are always bad. This sort of positive discrimination is sexist and will produce the same sort of disaster that was created when medical schools were forced to increase their intake of female students. Many of the problems with medical care today stem from this absurd piece of legislation. There were never enough good girl applicants applying and so medical schools started taking the dregs in order to fill their quotas. And, today, many female doctors want to work part-time. They don't have the sense of commitment of male doctors. They expect to be home for tea at 5 p.m. and they don't want to work weekends or nights. They want long periods off to have babies. And they don't have the same sense of dedication that has always been a tradition in medicine. Incidentally, it does strike me as rather odd that while medical schools are forced to take in more female students so that there will eventually be equal numbers of female and male doctors there is no pressure on nursing schools to take in vastly more male students. And, as an afterthought, what will be next? Quotas for the army so that we have as many female soldiers as male soldiers? Probably. And what about transsexuals and transvestites? If there are going to be quotas for women then there should also be quotas for transsexuals and transvestites. And quotas for one-legged albinos with hearing problems.

2

09.24 a.m.
We are back in Paris and I am becoming confused. I woke up this morning and took a few minutes to work out where I was.

I rang the Paris taxi company which we have been using for 15 years. They have suddenly decided they won't take bookings between 7.30 and 10.30 a.m. We need a taxi at 10.00 a.m. but we can't book one. We have to ring and take pot luck. So I found the number of another Parisian taxi service. A kindly operator tells me that they won't take bookings before 10.00 a.m. unless I pay them another five euros. `But,' says the operator helpfully, `if you book for 10.05 there is no payment.' `That will do fine,' I tell her. We have our taxi booked and we have a new taxi firm in Paris.

12.46 p.m.
We've been using Eurostar since it started (quickly realising that it was quicker, cheaper and a far more comfortable way to get to Paris than by going to an airport, flying and then getting into Paris from the airport at the other end). But even with train travel the problems seem to be growing. Recently we've been lucky. In the last year or so we have narrowly missed a fire in the tunnel, two major strikes, a broken down train in the tunnel and heaven knows what else. Yesterday we came back on what was apparently one of the last normally running Eurostar trains. And it was an hour late because they had trouble finding someone to clean the carriages in Paris. Still, the French, the most bureaucratic nation on earth, know bureaucratic nonsense when they see it and getting through to the lounge is less troublesome in Paris. Even if nothing goes ping and you aren't selected for a random search it can take ten times as long to pass through the customs area at St Pancras than it does to pass through the equivalent area at Gare du Nord where no traveller has set off a metal detector alarm since 1999 and the customs men are too busy chatting to spare a glance for travellers. On the other hand the British border control people in Paris seem to delight in taking forever studying passports and causing huge queues. Like workmen and policemen on motorways, I can imagine them boasting at teatime about the length of the queues they created.

As we arrived at St Pancras a voice was announcing that Eurostar passengers should only travel if their journey was essential. Snow on the English side of the channel was apparently causing problems. Snow on the French side did not seem to be so troublesome. The Princess and I spent some time trying to decide what would make a journey *essential*. Obviously, all holiday travel is non-essential as is all business travel. Travelling to visit relatives or to go shopping is not essential. What's left? Travelling to see a dying relative or consult the only doctor in the world who can treat your life threatening disorder? We reckon that less than one passenger per train is on a truly essential journey. Incidentally, for the first time, I noticed that at St Pancras there are large pictures of guns up on the walls. Each picture has a red line through it and a notice in four languages (with English last) telling travellers that they aren't allowed to carry guns with them. Johannesburg airport used to have a big sign with models of landmines and rocket launchers with red 'not allowed' signs alongside them. Does the absence of such signs at St Pancras mean that rocket launchers and landmines are allowed there?

15.36 p.m.
The Princess picked up a free copy of *The Lady* magazine on Eurostar. In the magazine's great days I used to write for it quite often (mainly illustrated travel articles and whimsical pieces about things I'd seen) but what a sad little thing it has become. It reminds me of a parish magazine that is being edited by an enthusiastic vicar. This edition includes an interview with Maureen Lipman who has written a book and who is quoted as saying: `I don't think of myself as a writer but if you can talk you can write.' I feel like writing to Ms Lipman to ask her if the fact that I can talk means that I can act. What a silly woman. I met her once on one of those Monday morning *Start the Week* programmes I used to do when promoting books. She didn't seem to me to be terribly nice or terribly bright.

15.55 p.m.
A reader writes and tells me he lost both his parents in the last year. He says he no longer feels any ambition. All his drive to succeed came from his urgent desire to please his parents, and make them proud of him. Now that they are both dead they can never tell him how proud they are and so his ambition has left him. He no longer feels driven to prove himself a success. I suspect his experience is not unique.

19.08 p.m.
I see that China lent 68 billion somethings to other governments and private companies during the last 12 months. It's good to know that some of this came out of Britain's overseas aid budget. I'm sure someone in the Government can explain why we still give handouts to China.

21.35 p.m.

I have decided that this diary is going to become a published book and I have been playing with several possible titles. I thought of calling it *Outside Looking Out*. And then fancied *Stumbling in the Dark.* I made a list which I showed to The Princess. The list included *No Compromise*, *Adventures and Memoirs*, *Welcome to my World* and *Another Bloody Year*. The Princess looked at my list and then scribbled something on a piece of paper which she handed to me. It said: *Diary of a Disgruntled Man*. It's perfect. She suggests that we add a subtitle: *A year in my life of rants and rages*. That's perfect too. We have a title. Now all I have to do is finish the book.

22.18 p.m.
I am horrified to hear from a private source that the EU is planning more legislation to control the way that private individuals can invest their money. I've been an investor since I was at medical school. I started with money earned by writing articles for magazines and newspapers (I was a drama and book critic for the *Birmingham Post* and the *Times Educational Supplement* and several magazines while I was still studying as a medical student, and a columnist for a variety of newspapers) and I had a very active brokerage account with Dukes and Gilbert throughout my medical school years. I only closed it when I started work as a junior hospital doctor and discovered that with a working week often stretching to 168 hours there was hardly any time left for eating and sleeping, and certainly none at all left for reading the financial pages or making telephone calls to a stockbroker. I was lucky. My years out of the market coincided with the stock market crash of the early 1970s. I began investing more seriously about ten years ago when I realised that a number of my predictions were coming true. Instead of trying to pick shares or specific investments I invest according to macroeconomic judgements.

Over the years I've been ripped off quite enough times to know that the biggest threats to the financial security of the average citizen are not muggers or robbers (who are unlikely to steal more than a few hundred pounds at a time) but bankers, brokers and financial advisers whose larcenous proceeds are never measured in less than thousands at a time. Most private investors lose money because they trust the people in the finance industry - and they know too little to protect themselves. They also lose money because they worry about money in the wrong ways. My parents, bless their hearts, worried about saving pennies on petrol and soap powder, but lost countless thousands through making investments through agents and brokers they thought were `nice'. Millions of people are just the same. They put enormous effort into saving pennies here and there (thinking that in doing so they are looking after the pounds) while buying a pension plan (which is likely to be their most important and largest purchase) with hardly any thought.

The witless eurocrats seem to believe that investors lose money because they are stupid. What the eurocrats haven't yet worked out (the EU brain being made of such substandard material that it would doubtless fail all quality tests if it were subjected to any) is that investors need protecting from the greed, stupidity and larceny of advisers, bankers and the other riff raff who inhabit the investment world. Ordinary investors need protection not from their own ignorance, nor even from their gullibility, but from crooked investment managers and from incompetent regulators. Bankers and investment advisers are toxic people, inspired by the joy of moral hazard they are thieves and robber barons and anyone without a conscience can do what they do. It is absurd that banks now give so much of their profit to employees who are entirely replaceable. Shareholders provide all the capital and take all the risk and employees grab all the profit for themselves. The Government's economic and financial advisers have made consistently poor judgements based on appalling incompetent analyses; they have made egregious predictions and relied far too much on the past than the present; and the actions they have taken have made everything worse. Sensible investors now assume that the Government will do everything wrong, and will make an endless series of mistakes. Nothing that led us into the recent economic meltdown has changed. And so there will, in due course, be another huge crisis.

Most highly paid bank executives are unimaginative bureaucrats suffering from toxic narcissism. They rise to the top through a mixture of luck, compromise, deceit, hypocrisy and arse licking. They then claim that if they aren't paid millions in salaries, bonuses and expenses they will leave and go elsewhere. It is, of course, a bluff. Any doubt there might have been about the value of bankers disappeared when a man called Peter Gwinnell applied for, and was given, the job of deputy chief executive of a City of London bank. Gwinnell claimed to have gone to Oxford and Harvard and to have spent 20 years working at JP Morgan. He had two interviews with headhunters and with the bank. He did the job for a month, attending a lot of meetings and going on a lot of expensive flights. He wore a banker-style suit and shirt and convinced everyone that he knew what he was talking about. He spoke in banker-speak, saying things he didn't understand in a way that no one else understood but doing it in a convincing and authoritative way. Eventually, the unfortunate Mr Gwinnell was undone by a check which showed that he had never worked at JP Morgan and had never gone to either Oxford or Harvard. He was a conman and ex-con. He was convicted for fraud and put under the supervision of a probation officer. I wonder when they'll put all the other bankers under the supervision of probation officers.

And the EU, I remind myself, is introducing new legislation to protect investors from themselves. Who will protect investors from idiot bankers and idiot investment advisers? The whole damned industry of thieves and intellectual dwarves should be hung, drawn and quartered. And, incidentally, the same is true of the eurocrats themselves. These leeches are drowning in gravy. There are, I discovered this week, 2,558 EU officials who are paid £185,000 or more every year. They pay no tax on these obscene sums and are entitled to between 54 and 60 days holiday a year (which works out, incredibly, at 10-12 weeks a year). They enjoy the best pensions in the known world, are entitled to retire just about whenever they feel like it and work the number of hours per month that the average self-employed businessman puts in per week.

22.46 p.m.
When I first started writing professionally I made a huge mistake. I should have used another name. At first it didn't matter and by the time I had sold a few books it was too late because I had established the beginnings of a reputation. Because I am shy, however, I now feel that I have lost control of my life. If I had chosen to work with a pen name, and had managed to keep my real identity secret, I would have been much better able to separate the two parts of my life. If your reputation is built upon things you care about then you suffer enormously when those things are carelessly and cruelly dismissed. Besides, a writer who uses a pen name never has to worry about personal attacks because the critic (whether professional or amateur) will never know enough to be personal and the writer will never feel that an attack on his alter-ego is an attack on himself.

22.50 p.m.
We have been trying desperately hard to find someone to redo the website www.vernoncoleman.com. The first person we contacted was a website professional who had been sending me e-mails for some time, trying to persuade me to give him the business. I sent him an e-mail but heard nothing back. The next person we tried was very enthusiastic. We drove to meet him and it was immediately clear that he hadn't even bothered to look at the website. He had a laptop with him but struggled to make it work even though there was a perfectly good connection. He didn't know what a zip disk was and seemed to know less than I do about computers and websites. But he seemed enthusiastic and nervously we hired him. A couple of days later we received an e-mail from him saying that he wouldn't be able to do the job because he had suddenly acquired two big commissions which meant that he had no time left for us. I thought this deeply unprofessional until I realised that what had probably happened was that he'd had a small fit when he'd seen how complex and huge the site is and then realised that it was simply beyond him.

I then contacted a large website design company and asked them if they could make some changes. To begin with they sounded very bullish. But it's now a week since I spoke to them and they still haven't sent us an estimate. So The Princess is going to try to update the website herself. We don't even have broadband. If she manages this it will be a feat worthy of an Olympic medal. It will, however, be a joy not to have to deal with computer people. Both the hardware and the software people suffer from the same fault: they all have a massive sense of their own self-importance and skills and invariably think they know more than they do (and their reluctance to admit that they don't know something often leads to problems). Not even lawyers, estate agents, bankers or television presenters are as packed with conceit as IT people.

23.57 p.m.
This evening The Princess and I watched *Joyeux Noel*, an amazing film by Christian Carion about the fraternisation between the trenches in the First World War, when soldiers from Britain, France and Germany emerged from their trenches to drink together, exchange gifts and play football. They also buried each other's dead. This story of humanity and friendship overwhelming political and military stupidity has always fascinated me and the film is fantastic. Afterwards, of course, the soldiers involved were punished. Many were sent to the most dangerous places on the frontline in the hope that they would never return. Others were warned that fraternisation was a terrible sin. The truth about what happened emerged from letters and photos sent home by the soldiers involved. The British didn't censor their soldiers' mail and the story got through.

3
08.03 a.m.
It is our wedding anniversary.

I wrote a small 'pome' for The Princess:

`Always
All ways
Your are my love, my wife
My family, my friend, my life
My very special everyone

You are, and always will be, my other half
Without you I am not, and cannot ever be, whole.'

09.10 a.m.
The cards The Princess and I bought each other (*For my Husband* and *For my Wife* as appropriate) both carried an EU warning on the back which read: `Not Suitable for children under 36 months.' What would we do without the European Union, now best known as `Hitler's bastard love child'. There were of course no small parts on the cards but presumably the EU is worried that husbands and wives under the age of three might eat their cards. EU stupidity gets everywhere these days. Every small toy I see has `Not suitable for children under 36 months' stamped on the label. I wonder what on earth one is allowed to buy a 35-month-old child these days. An incinerator or a set of snow tyres would probably be OK. No small pieces in those.

When The Princess and I married we did so alone. No one turned up. (There was probably something good on television.) The photographer and his wife were our witnesses. Afterwards we sent out about 40 pieces of wedding cake. I don't think we received back any cards or acknowledgements. Today, I gave The Princess a white gold butterfly ring with the butterfly made of different coloured sapphires. We bought the ring from a jewellers in the Rue St Dominique in Paris.

10.04 a.m.
I've been leaked information that Derek Bird, the northern taxi driver who ran amok and killed numerous people with a shotgun, did so because he was being investigated by HMRC. He quite wrongly thought that the tax people were going to send him to prison. If this is true (and I believe it is) I am not in the slightest bit surprised. When I was a boy I remember several well-known people killing themselves because of tax enquiries. The problem these days is that many of the people working for HMRC are little more than intellectual thugs. They assume that everyone is guilty and they treat law-abiding, honest citizens in the same way that they treat crooks. Those who have never been investigated claim smugly that `if you've done nothing wrong then you've nothing to worry about'. Whenever I hear this drivel I always secretly hope that the speaker soon receives an investigation notification. These thuggings go on and on and on and the assumption is always that the taxpayer is hiding something. Nothing you say is believed. I've been done twice now (`just routine' they said) and the two enquiries lasted about a year each. The emotional and economic cost was incredible. On both occasions HMRC ended up giving me money back because I'd paid too much tax but after my experiences I am, to be honest, surprised that not more people run amok. HMRC employees are, in my experience, lying, cheating, discourteous, threatening thugs. If they come after me a third time I intend to begin by taking HMRC straight to court under the Human Rights Act.

10.43 a.m.
We have received our first e-mail Christmas card. Can you think of anything more utterly useless? A complete waste of electricity. People who send e-mail cards are mean and lazy and we have vowed to delete these so-called cards without opening them. We like cards you can put on the mantelpiece and spread around the tree.

10.51 a.m.
There were delays on the motorway again. It seemed that a lorry had done something unsuitable. I suspected that the police had merely created a crisis out of a bump. They love making huge problems out of minor ones, blocking both sides of the motorway, causing tailbacks for eight hours and going for tea while the cost to the nation runs high into the millions.

We turned off the motorway on the way to Barnstaple and watched in utter disbelief as a helicopter flew beneath the wires suspended from electricity pylons. I have never seen anything quite so extraordinary and so dangerous. I have no idea who the pilot was but he was foolhardy and daring. He was also reckless because if his helicopter had touched one of the lines it would have crashed directly onto the road.

15.12 p.m.
I went out to collect our plastic rubbish bins and found that the big green bin, the one we use for our recycling, had disappeared. Without a green bin we are lost. Without an official container for our recycling rubbish the council will not remove our rubbish. Now that councils have become pension fund management organisations, devoted to ensuring that there is enough money coming in each year to pay the vastly inflated pensions which are paid to previous employees, the relationship between council and citizen has changed for ever. Today, the relationship is very simple. We give them money and they harass us and treat us like criminals. It's another example of the big society. It's a DIY world but we pay ever more taxes. I could just see the recycling lorry disappearing down the

street so I ran after it as fast as a 64-year-old man with slightly dodgy knees and shoes with untied laces can run. I was shouting and calling to the driver in a way that I knew was utterly pathetic. Eventually the lorry stopped. `Our green bin has disappeared,' I gasped. A man in an orange plastic jumpsuit smiled at me, surprisingly kindly. `It must have got put with one of your neighbours' bins,' he told me. I retraced my steps and rummaged guiltily through the empty bins outside the neighbours' back gates. I was terrified that someone would see me and think I was trying to steal their bin. In the end I found our bin. My hands were filthy with the remains of other people's waste. I took the bin back through our gate went indoors and washed my hands in antiseptic. `I'm 64-years-old,' I said to The Princess. `I shouldn't be running down the street after bin men.' We have worked hard to buy and own a decent house and to acquire as much freedom as possible but this damned rubbish collecting is ruining our lives. I swore there and then that within three months we would buy a house with enough land to enable us to burn or bury all our rubbish.

17.10 p.m.
I didn't hear the word `geopolitics' until around 20 years ago but today I find it difficult to imagine investing without considering geopolitical issues. We live in a world of consequences where a small war in a country few of us could find quickly on a world atlas may have extraordinary consequences for an investment portfolio, a pension fund or house prices in England. An uprising in a small African state, for example, may push up the price of oil. This will push up inflation which will mean that interest rates will have to rise. When interest rates go up house prices go down. People then feel poorer and spend less. When they spend less the economy doesn't grow. Recession is the inevitable consequence. And that leads to unemployment. That's geopolitics.

20.12 p.m.
Using a 200-year-old, creaky, snail powered computer which ought to be in a display case in the Science Museum, half a roll of sticky tape and a handful of drawing pins, and with no experience, without broadband or any official training, The Princess has successfully updated and expanded my website. This is the work of a genius. I celebrated this remarkable feat by pouring myself a large glass of Laphroaig and leaving the water in the tap. I've sent an e-mail to the all-singing, all-boasting professional website designer who, after a week's study, is still trying to work out how best to deal with the huge acreage of my rambling website. `Please don't worry any more,' I told them. `My wife sorted it all out yesterday afternoon.' I hope they are duly embarrassed. I did not mention that on one occasion I walked into her study to find her shaking with anxiety. `I just lost the whole website,' she said. `It disappeared. I don't know where it went.'

4
15.16 p.m.
At the State opening of Parliament the House of Commons gave, as it always does, a formal first reading to the Outlawries Bill. This tradition goes back to 1588 though the bill has no content and no purpose. The rest of the year will presumably follow suit.

17.01 p.m.
Suspicious trading takes place ahead of nearly a third of takeovers in the UK every year. The boss of the FSA, an organisation which exists to protect investors from this sort of thing, was paid £742,011 for 2009-10. If I had hired a gardener who cut grass like the FSA manages the world of finance I would replace him with some sheep. Isn't the FSA supposed to stop suspicious trading? There are so many crooks in the financial industry that cautious investors must assume that the whole system is crooked.

19.10 p.m.
Reliable sources tell me that the Government may soon issue a warning about meat causing cancer. I have been screaming about this for more than two decades but have, up to now, found it hard going. Despite the fact that I produced a mass of scientific evidence proving that eating red meat is a major cause of cancer the Advertising Standards Authority banned adverts for my book *Food for Thought*. To my utter astonishment the Press Complaints Commission ruled in favour of the meat sellers when they complained about articles I wrote proving the link. I warned both that their indefensible actions would result in thousands of unnecessary deaths. They weren't interested. Even *Private Eye*, gutless little magazine that it has become, refused to accept adverts for *Food for Thought*. Back in the Peter Cook days *Private Eye* had balls. These days it is the *Woman's Realm* for armchair revolutionaries, a comfy magazine for people who like to think they're living on the edge but who would spend a week on the lavatory if they got a parking ticket. I was told that the editor, young Milksop, feared that showing a link between meat and

cancer might upset his readers. For some years I had a website called www.meatcausescancer.com. In the end I abandoned it because I just couldn't promote it anywhere. If the Government does have the guts to take on the meat industry I wonder if it will go the whole hog? My guess is that they will confine themselves to warning people of the link and suggesting that they eat less red meat. That would be about as sensible as warning smokers to limit themselves to 20 cigarettes a day. But the meat industry is a tougher proposition than the tobacco industry.

20.12 p.m.
We took a huge pile of unwanted books, DVDs and old videos to the charity shop run by a local hospice this morning. There were over 500 books (many of them first editions). I actually thought this was quite generous of us but the assistant in the shop was rather less delighted than I had expected. She insisted that they would not take video cassettes because there is no call for them. And they have no recycling value. We are handed back a black plastic bag full of them. In the street outside I stuff the videos into a council bin. They fill it. What an awful waste. After the guilt, my first thought is that there should be an agency somewhere providing video players and videos for people who cannot afford the ultra-expensive new stuff. My second thought is that neither social workers nor the modern poor would be prepared to accept videos when DVDs are already considered passé by the Blue Ray generation.

21.30 p.m.
When I was a medical student in Birmingham in the 1960s I ran a nightclub in the city centre. Many of the kids who patronised the discotheque were young, homeless, jobless, penniless and without hope. They had no future. Quite often there were fights in the discotheque as other city gangs would invade the club looking for trouble, anxious to destroy as much as they could.

At the nightclub, called *The Gallows*, I re-learned a lesson I had learned as a Community Service Volunteer in Liverpool the year after I left school. I learned that young single men who have no responsibilities, no commitments and no hope are entirely fearless. I remember, one evening in Birmingham, the nightclub was attacked by a gang from another part of the city. Some of the youths who enjoyed the club actually lived there (probably illegally). They slept in attic rooms and for them it was home. They fought without worry. On the evening of the first fight I watched helpless and amazed as the teenagers around me fought with a ferocity I had never seen before. They carried knives and were not afraid to use them. Several were badly wounded. Others had to go into hiding to avoid the police. I remember standing in the middle of one particularly fierce gang fight trying desperately hard to persuade a boy of 17 or 18 to stop fighting. (I always tried to avoid direct involvement and for some reason never got attacked. This may have had something to do with the fact that I carried, and was known to carry, a swordstick with a three-foot blade.) He had been knifed and had blood pouring from two severe wounds. But he wouldn't stop, none of them would stop, until the intruders had been repulsed. Days later I talked to them about it. `You could have died,' I said, without exaggeration. `We had nothing else to lose,' they replied. It was how all of them felt. They had no hopes and no aspirations. There was nothing much to live for. And so they didn't care about dying.

I asked a group of the battered survivors why they had fought so hard to protect something that did not seem to me to be worth dying for.

`We haven't got anything to lose,' said one. `Except this club.' They weren't frightened of the police because imprisonment was no great threat to them. (They were squatting in a derelict building in awful conditions). They weren't afraid of being injured because that would just mean hospital - clean sheets and regular food. And they weren't even afraid of dying because their lives were so dull, dismal and hopeless that they did not feel that they had much to lose. The only thing they had was the discotheque. And so they fought to protect it.

When I look around Britain (and the rest of the world) I see this now happening on a massive scale. There are revolutions coming. A good many of them. Neither politicians nor army chiefs seem to understand that when you take away the little that people have you leave them with no option but to fight to the death. And they don't much care whether it's your death or their death.

22.30 p.m.
A reader complains that I am a Luddite for opposing the use of computers and the Internet. I disagree strongly. I agree that it is usually a myth that new machinery costs jobs - it usually doesn't. But the Internet really is the exception that proves the rule because it changes the basic rules about how society works. It makes life more complicated, time consuming and exhausting for almost everyone. It does this speedily and probably permanently. Computers and the Internet have been oversold; they promote inefficiency and reduce productivity and encourage people to believe in the impossible - thereby creating almost constant stress and disappointment. Dozens of inventions have been of far more practical value - and have changed our society in a far more positive way. The

bicycle, the internal combustion engine, the wireless and even the washing machine all changed the world in a more extensive and far better way than the computer has or the Internet will. I confess I also dislike computers and computer people because the former are inefficient and badly designed and the latter are greedy and stupid. Over the years I have wasted at least £50,000 on software that never did what it was supposed to do. Every software seller I've ever met wanted fees in advance and then disappeared leaving the job half done. I'll never trust any of the bastards again. I'd rather trust a car mechanic or a plumber than a software engineer.

23.40 p.m.
I read that our local council really is very seriously considering closing the local library to save money. I'm not surprised. The local administrators and councillors will not dream of reducing their salaries, expenses or pensions and nor will they do anything to cut the council's existing pension liabilities. As I forecast some years ago, local taxpayers will soon be paying for the privilege of keeping former council employees in the luxury they never deserved to enjoy. I'm not surprised that they are closing the public library (as many other councils are doing) but I am appalled. There have been public libraries in every great civilisation and when ours close it will mark the end of our civilisation. The libraries should be the last things to go; they are more important than schools, roads, fire departments, police forces and everything else the local authority provides. Without a public library we might as well be apes living in trees. The money the bankers stole from our economy (with the encouragement of Gordon the Moron it has to be said) would have paid for ten thousand libraries to be built and maintained.

23.45 p.m.
A reader sends me an e-mail containing his telephone number. He wants me to ring him to discuss the contents of my book *Bloodless Revolution*. To prepare me for the telephone conversation, he has included in his e-mail a list of the 14 most important issues he wishes to discuss. One of them is the importance of ensuring that everyone in the country can afford to purchase boots and shoes. I send an e-mail back suggesting that he write to me and promising that I always respond to readers who send letters.

I've also had an e-mail from a reader suggesting that the world would benefit enormously if car manufacturers were forced to produce only three wheeled cars. He points out that this would save 25% of the expenditure on tyre manufacture. He doesn't seem to have made any allowance for the extra tyre wear or the instability of the vehicles. I thank him politely and suggest that he pass on the idea to the transport ministry. I tell him that my own idea for saving energy is to force racing car teams to run cars operated by pedal power. To satisfy the aficionados who enjoy the noise made by racing cars the drivers could be told that they must make `brrmm brrmm' noises into their microphones.

5
11.02 a.m.
The BMW wouldn't start today. I needed to take it to the local garage to arrange for its annual MOT but the battery was flat. This is strange because I bought a brand new battery just a month ago. `It's the clock,' said the mechanic who came to start the car. `It ticks away day and night and it must have run the battery down.' I find this very strange but don't know enough about cars to be able to question the age of the battery I was sold. I suspect I may have been sold a pup instead of a battery.

14.05 p.m.
The rising price of food is, for most in the UK, a minor inconvenience. But I can't help feeling that it is going to create huge problems in poorer countries where the amount spent on food is a much higher proportion of income. How long before there are revolutions in Africa? Hunger and starvation often trigger explosive behaviour among people who have remained subdued for many years. Suddenly, they don't care whether they live or die because they know that if they don't do something they will die anyway. There is an argument that the Americans can be blamed for whatever happens. It is certainly their fault that the price of food has risen. By printing huge numbers of dollars they have pushed down the value of their own currency. Since commodities (including food) are priced in food the inevitable result has been a rise in food prices. So, once again, American greed will be the trigger for global problems.

15.55 p.m.
Time magazine has a huge feature entitled `The 50 Best Inventions of the Year'. Their chosen joys include a plastic fur coat which is actually a leather jacket which has 29,000 plastic price tag fasteners sewn onto it. `This is, reports *Time*, `a message about sustainability'. Other selections include a home loan scheme that has been set up by a man who lost $9 billion on bad mortgage bets for Morgan Stanley, an English teaching robot that could eventually phase

out flesh and blood foreign English teachers altogether (great for unemployment figures), a piece of software that detects sarcasm, a robot that can send erroneous communications and hide, and a spray on fabric that enables people to spray textiles out of a can. Another winner is a boat made out of discarded soft drink bottles. Finally, when *Time* asked a comedienne I'd never heard of for her thoughts on the best invention in comedy she said someone I had never heard of `lighting up a joint' on a television programme I'd also never heard of. `The doors are wide open now!' she said. I'm in hysterics just thinking about it. I do wish they would stop sending me this wretched magazine. And I wish I could get out of the habit of tearing open the plastic wrapper when it arrives.

17.08 p.m.
Banks and pension companies and investment houses are so insecure these days that it is vitally important to spread savings between three or four different institutions. I now fear that there is a real risk that a major institution will go down, taking with it all the savings of millions of trusting individuals. The Government will not help.

17.10 p.m.
House chains have become a huge problem. Someone trying to sell a £1,000,000 house cannot move because the person to whom they are selling cannot sell their £750,000 house to the person who is selling a £600,000 house because their buyer, who is selling a £500,000 house, cannot sell because the person who wants to buy their house is having difficulty selling their £400,000 house to a keen buyer who can't sell their home. And so on. An estate agent told me that he knows of a housing chain which was broken this week when the person selling the most expensive house, at the top of the chain, bought the cheapest house, at the bottom of the chain, so that all the transactions could go ahead. Everything was being held up because the sellers at the bottom of the chain, who were selling a £90,000 flat, couldn't find a buyer. The story sounds as though it ought to be apocryphal but I believe it to be true. It seems that every estate agent I talk to has a bizarre story to tell. Not long ago I heard of a chain which was being held up because the buyer and seller at the very bottom of the structure were arguing over a refrigerator. The buyer wanted the fridge to be included in the sale price. The seller wanted another £100 for it. And their stalemate was holding up the lives of over two dozen people. That problem was resolved when an agent higher up the chain (with a big commission to lose) bought the refrigerator for £100 and gave it to the person buying the flat.

6
09.01 a.m.
I woke up with symptoms of the flu. `Oh the first two days aren't bad,' said The Princess, who has just recovered from it. `It's only after the third day that it gets *really* bad.' I told her that made me feel much better.

11.05 a.m.
Waterstones are, predictably, closing some branches. The Princess told me about a conversation she had with an assistant worried about losing his job. She told him she thought that Waterstones had been crazy to promote e-book readers. The assistant couldn't understand why. `We need to keep up with what people want,' he told her. I suspect that the clot will soon have more leisure time to contemplate the stupidity of his soon to be former employers. I wonder what they will do with all the Waterstones stores. Turn them into shops selling mobile telephones I suspect.

14.51 p.m.
As the euro crumbles and the EU is threatened with extinction everyone, it seems, is pounding on the hapless eurocrats. What a glorious seasonal delight this is. The pensions industry, the banks, the investment industry and the oil industry all are going berserk at the crass new regulations being brought in by EU bureaucrats who know nothing about anything. Meanwhile there is much annoyance at the fact that while the rest of Europe struggles, EU bureaucrats are paid a fortune. This bastard child of Hitler and Goebbels is doomed. Wonderful.

18.01 p.m.
In America today there are more people receiving food handouts (from the food stamps programme) than there were in the 1930s. The poverty figures in the UK are similar. And still the bankers continue to give themselves huge bonuses.

20.10 p.m.
I found this quote in this week's issue of *Time* magazine. It appeared in an article discussing the decade that is about to end. `Supposedly, Wikipedia came into existence in early 2001 but we're not exactly sure, mostly because we checked that fact on Wikipedia'. I don't much like *Time* magazine (it is far too American in outlook) but I love this

quote.

7

10.02 a.m.
I feel much better today. I think my flu has mysteriously gone. Since we have to catch the train, this is good news.

11.34 a.m.
I have decided not to send out review copies of books until at least a month after the book has gone on sale. This will stop reviewers selling the book before I do. Just about all the books sold as `new' or `mint' on Amazon are review copies or books sent offering rights to publishers.

11.36 a.m.
I'd forgotten that I've changed my mind. The Princess reminded me that I decided ages ago not to send out any review copies at all in the future. I could not survive without her memory (or, indeed, any other part of her).

14.01 p.m.
I remember that my parents were thrilled with the telegram they received from the Queen on their 60th wedding anniversary. The envelope in which it arrived was engraved with a stern warning to the Royal Mail that it must be delivered on 18th January and not a day early or a day late. That was years ago, in 2005. Now the Department of Work and Pensions has become involved in the sending of telegrams and inevitably there is a ton of paperwork to fill in. A bureaucrat in a cheap suit calls round to check on the potential recipient to make sure that money is not being wasted sending a card to someone who might not be fully qualified. A spokesman says that they have to save money on unnecessary telegrams in order to pay for the inspectors' wages. I wonder how many fraudulent telegrams have been sent out? My guess is none.

15.58 p.m.
The Princess and I met an old friend of ours who is retired now but who has, over a long career, worked for most of the national newspapers. He was an old-fashioned newspaperman, brought up in the days when young journalists were taught to tell the truth and to leave the readers to make the judgements. He liked to get his facts right. He would not, he agrees, last long in the modern world. He was once arrested in Amsterdam for standing in the street singing `How much is that pussy in the window'. He said we have become a nation of overregulated wimps, frightened to speak up for ourselves and claims that this has happened because it is the way the authorities want us. `Wimps are easier to control,' he said.

We went to a pub nearby and because the car park was full he parked in the street. He reminds me of an old GP I know in that it was difficult to tell which side of the road he had intended to park on. He always was a terrible driver. I remember that he was nearly always right whenever he opened his mouth. This was not because he knew nearly everything but because he only spoke about things he knew. The pub is run by a man who is determinedly politically incorrect. He serves food on plates of two sizes. Men get big plates. Women get small plates. Visitors sometimes complain. We take media people from London to the pub because there is always someone in any small party who will become incandescent with rage.

22.07 p.m.
We had a terrible journey back from London. Our train was delayed and naturally there was no information for quite a while. No one at the station seemed to know anything. Then The Princess had a brainwave. She whipped out her iPhone and looked at the train company's website. To our delight the site contained a wealth of information and even told us when our delayed train would be running. When we eventually got onto our train we found it wasn't going because there was no driver. And then another train load of passengers were put onto our train because their driver hadn't turned up either. So there were passengers sitting everywhere - on the arms of seats and on the floor. It was like the 5.55 p.m. out of Calcutta. Naturally, although we were sitting in a quiet carriage, 90% of the passengers were on the telephone and the racket was deafening. The lady who usually comes round with the drinks trolley wasn't available (she had presumably run off with one of the drivers) and when the train eventually started it crawled along very slowly, as though the driver wasn't entirely sure of the way. (Astonishingly, this does happen. I once got on a train from Bristol to Birmingham which sat for a while in the station at Gloucester while the conductor appealed to passengers for someone who knew the way to Birmingham to go to talk to the driver. He said the driver hadn't done that route before.) The train jerked a lot, too, in the way that cars do when being driven by learner drivers. After we eventually arrived at Bristol our intercity express was put on the line after a slow stopping train

(they do this all the time) so we had to stop at every tree and bird's nest.

Eventually, we arrived at our station over an hour late. `Can we claim compensation?' I asked the train manager. She said that we could but that we had to get a claim form from a station, so we abandoned that idea.

8
10.34 a.m.
There is surprise and panic everywhere. It has snowed. Politicians, quangocrats and journalists have all been warning us for years about climate change and now, suddenly, they are astonished that it is snowing. Councils everywhere are astonished that some of the falling snow has (without even taking the trouble to apply for the appropriate planning permission) landed on their roads. Airports are surprised that the stuff has landed on their runways. Rail companies are dumbfounded that it has landed on railway tracks. All are less well prepared than they would be if Martians arrived. Civil servants have stayed at home in their millions out of respect for the environment. Schools are closed so that teachers can have more days avoiding the work they are paid for but which they so obviously loathe.

14.30 p.m.
We had a new washing machine delivered this morning. It took a man ten minutes to do the necessary plumbing. (Sticking a rubber hose onto another piece of tubing and writing out a bill for £27.50). It took me five seconds to connect it to the electricity supply. It took The Princess a minute to put in the soap powder, fill it with clothes and press a button. And then, hey presto, the machine washes clothes. Why are telephones and computers so ridiculously complicated and user-unfriendly? Why is the Internet so absurdly unreliable? Why is software so complicated that it can only be understood with the aid of a 500-page manual which has to be purchased separately? Why is all the relevant hardware changed with relentless fury when the improvements the manufacturers offer are of such little significance? And why are we all forced to update, and buy unnecessary complicated and unreliable machinery, because there are no ink cartridges or software to fit the old stuff?

16.37 p.m.
The transport minister has suggested that people clear the ice and snow off their local roads themselves. What a good idea. This is, after all, the new big society. We should perhaps also run our own ambulances and take one another to hospital in wheelbarrows. We could all burn our rubbish in the streets and have guns so that we can defend our lives and our property. And naturally we won't pay any more taxes. So all the stupid civil servants and politicians whose fat salaries and pensions we are paying can start looking for proper jobs.

17.10 p.m.
Walking through Barnstaple today I saw a shop I hadn't seen before. Outside there is a large, very smart sign proclaiming: `Proffesional Body Piercing Studio'. I hope the piercing is more professional than the spelling. And if they branch out into tattooing I hope someone invests in a dictionary.

We arrived at Publishing House to discover that the son of a local bachelor has sprayed black paint graffiti on the white walls. It looks terrible. We will have to buy some white paint and repaint the wall. If you leave graffiti then more will arrive and soon the whole building will look terrible.

9
12.14 p.m.
It is my third day with the flu. The Princess was right. It is now getting *really* bad.

23.26 p.m.
I caught a few minutes of Kelvin Mckenzie on Sky television, discussing the day's newspapers. Kelvin is still the court jester, the genial buffoon. He seems to speak without bothering to think, or without even knowing what he is saying, but the gibberish that comes out is mildly entertaining from time to time, and a pleasant change from the usual, studied, pompous inanities uttered by guests on such programmes. I have a strong suspicion that he himself doesn't know what he is going to say until he's said it and heard what he has to say. Maybe he doesn't even know what he thinks until he's heard himself say it. I was a columnist for *The Sun* during most of Kelvin's years as editor and he had a reputation as a fearful bully. However, I got the impression he was scared of Rupert Murdoch whom I once upset greatly by writing a column about workaholics which, as an illustration, pretty clearly criticised the paper's working practices. I don't think Kelvin and I ever really got on because I never showed him the right amount of deference. Like a good many former editors he has now managed to carve himself a strange little niche as a media

personality. He has survived so long by being politically aware. I remember him ringing me on Boxing Day because one of the company's bosses had broken something fairly serious while skiing. Kelvin, who was presumably planning something, wanted to know how long he'd be out of commission. More memorably I remember walking into the Grill at the Savoy once, to have lunch with the editor of *The People*. I was in a hurry because I was late, having waited for ages in the wrong restaurant. (There were two at the Savoy at the time: the Grill and the River Restaurant. Inevitably, I had picked the wrong one.) There were three cabinet ministers and heaven knows how many other recognisable faces in there. Advertisements for my Telephone Doctor advice lines were running almost daily in just about every national newspaper. Suddenly, Kelvin's unmistakeable roar shattered the relative silence of whispered conversations. `Hello, it's Vernon Coleman!' he cried. `0898 for advice on oral sex. 0898 for advice on irritable bowel syndrome. 0898 for advice on something else.'

Just about the only real live television we catch is what we see while changing DVDs. For the past week or two we've been watching old television Poirots though we have been careful to watch only the pre 2002 shows. Without Captain Hastings, Miss Lemon and Inspector Japp the programmes are very ordinary, bordering on boring. Indeed the ones made after 2008 are unwatchable. We bought them and then tossed them into the charity bag we keep handy. The problem with the programmes made without the magic trio is that there is no humour in them. The humour was invariably always at Poirot's expense so without the trio there is no one left to make the jokes. Whoever decided to get rid of Hastings, Lemon and Japp made a huge mistake. In the later programmes, David Suchet plays Poirot as insufferably pompous, self-important, worthy, painfully vain and utterly humourless. There is no lightness of touch at all and the programmes are dull. Watching the later Poirots reminded me of watching the later Hancocks. The boy from Cheam destroyed his charm by getting rid of the great actors and writers he had worked with. When he finally got rid of Sid James the graffiti was on the wall. Suchet is good but in my view too precious and not a strong enough actor to hold it all together. He's about as charismatic as the average news reader. Albert Finney could have managed without Hastings, Lemon and Japp but Suchet's Poirot certainly can't.

23.56 p.m.
I found this small ad in an old copy of *Motorsport*. `Mr Scott-Moncrieff will, during August, be chuffing quietly through the canals on a narrow boat, thankful for a month away from motor cars. There will, however, still be a good selection of pre-war Rolls-Royce and Bentley cars on view at Rock Cottage, Basford Hall, Leek. So, by all means, come and have a look. If you see one that you like sufficiently to buy, leave the money (all prices are clearly marked) and take it.' The ad appeared in the August 1960 issue of *Motorsport*.

10
11.31 a.m.
A book order arrives with a request that the book be sent by return of post because it has to be sent out again to arrive at an address in America by the 9th December. The order was posted on the 5th of December. The optimism of the would-be present giver is supplemented by a demand that the book be posted out first class and the fact that they have failed to include any payment whatsoever for postage.

11
11.02 a.m.
There is a campaign to allow dogs into cafés and shops. I hope it fails. Beaches and parks are already ruined by the constant presence of dogs - many of which seem, like their owners, to be borderline rabid. It is impossible to go for a pleasant walk without finding oneself face to face with some slobbering, snarling, heavily fanged beast and his or her canine companion. When I wrote about the fact that the toxocara that dogs leave behind them causes blindness in children an advocate for dogs dismissed this argument for banning dogs from public parks with the comment that no more than 50 children a year are blinded this way. What can you say to someone who dismisses 50 blind children as inconsequential? Allowing dogs into cafés and shops would make life unbearable for the millions who are allergic to dogs or who are (not unreasonably) nervous when they are around. I think maybe I'll start a campaign to ban dogs from all public places – including pavements and parks.

15.38 p.m.
I see that Goldman Sachs has invested in Facebook. Hopefully, that will now be the end of this wretched website. Enthusiasts claim that Facebook is the most valuable company in the world - far more valuable than all the mining companies put together. This is nonsense. First, the next generation will not think something is cool if their mother can be found on it pictured in her bathing suit. Second, now that Goldman Sachs has become involved there will, I suspect, be adverts and intrusive e-mails everywhere as the bankers struggle to make money from their investment.

Third, websites are like cafés in Paris. They go in and out of fashion quickly and without warning and for no discernible reason. And finally, Facebook is unbelievably naff. Those who spend their days on Facebook will, like the twats who twitter, soon find other ways to waste time. I have a suspicion that our descendants will look back on families watching TV, and schoolchildren and workers being able to share experiences and opinions about the programmes they have watched separately but at the same time, with the same affection that we look back on our Victorian ancestors sitting around the piano and singing comic songs. In the future people will sit in separate rooms communicating with the best friends they've never even met. But I very much doubt if they'll be using Facebook. That and Twitter will be regarded as embarrassing pieces of social history; about as fashionable as the mangle or the hula hoop. Big international corporations already have rooms full of nerds monitoring and `adjusting' all references to their products on `social media' websites. Those who believe that Facebook will last for ever should ask themselves what happened to `Friendster', `My Space' and `Bebo'. All were highly successful social networks.

20.19 p.m.
In 1914 a gold sovereign was worth £1. Today it is worth several hundred times as much. Sterling has been devalued by well over 99%, thanks to the efforts of bankers and politicians. In the long run paper money is worth little more than the paper it's printed on. The best performing currency in the world in 2010 was the Afghan Afghani (and even that lost value against gold).

21.35 p.m.
It occurs to me that as well as banning dogs from public places we should also ban children under the age of 16. Or maybe we should just ban the parents of children under 16. I suspect that the parents make more noise and cause more trouble than their children. We spent a miserable two hours in a railway carriage this morning. A nanny, travelling with two quiet and pleasant children, insisted on reading them stories all the way. When I gently remonstrated and suggested that if she needed to read out loud in a quiet carriage she might consider lowering her voice she immediately set off in search of the conductor and made a formal complaint.

12
14.22 p.m.
The Princess and I are visited by a friend who lives in Switzerland. He told us that since Christmas Day and Boxing Day fall on a weekend the locals all go back to work on the following Monday. `It's just hard luck if bank holidays fall on a weekend,' he said. The Princess says she thinks that probably explains why the Swiss have all the money and we have all the debts.

21.40 p.m.
Three quarters of all the music tracks downloaded in 2010 were acquired illegally (i.e. they were stolen). Is this going to change? Yes, it's going to get worse. Is it damaging CD sales? Of course it is. Will the same thing happen to books? Obviously. I refuse to provide computer copies of books to foreign publishers and I refuse to sell e-book versions of any more of my books. Modern recording artists are having to go on tour to earn a living. Musicians are using their records (which are downloaded free of charge) as loss leaders because they can no longer prevent or control the thefts. Their income from record sales has collapsed and so now they make their money from concert tickets and T-shirt sales. Some authors will be able to follow this pattern and will give lecture tours (as Dickens, Thackeray and Twain did so successfully in the 19th century). But most won't. And even if I could, I don't really want to. I just want to write books.

22.51 p.m.
Trains on new routes in Italy are not allowed to stop at intermediate stations. If a train starts out from Germany then it must end up in some other country and can't stop in Italy. Brilliant. So wonderful that we have an EU. One country. European countries are being dragged further apart by the consequences of the EU, the euro and the whole fiddle faddle of European bureaucracy. I sometimes think the EU must have a Department of Silly Ideas.

23.44 p.m.
It has become clear that Goldman Sachs asked for American taxpayers' money 212 times between March 2008 and March 2009. But they still managed to claim that they hadn't needed a bailout and they still managed to dole out gazillions to themselves. I still firmly believe that the greatest threat to our civilisation comes not from Muslim fundamentalists but from Goldman Sachs and their ilk. Goldman Sachs reportedly paid a $550 million penalty earlier this year to avoid charges of securities fraud. They reportedly booked $13 billion of deals. Not a bad

arrangement. Try shoplifting £100 worth of stuff and then offering the police £4 to let you off and see where it gets you.

23.52 p.m.
I received a letter from a reader who reported that she had been told by several bookshop assistants that *Alice's Diary* is out of print. I get dozens of letters like this every month and have done so for the last 20 years. I wonder how many more copies of *Alice's Diary* we would have sold if the bookshops had bothered to order copies for their customers. *Alice's Diary* is, like all my books, listed in all the relevant trade directories. There is absolutely no excuse for a bookshop (or library) telling readers that my books are out of print when they are not. I wrote back to tell my reader that she had been given misleading information. `The fact is,' I wrote, `that *Alice's Diary* has never been out of print since it was first published over 20 years ago. There are currently well over 2,000 copies of the latest printing in the warehouse.' I have for over 20 years been trying desperately hard to persuade bookshops, libraries and wholesalers to stock my books. Now, I really don't think any of these have much of a future. Bookshops and wholesalers are going to be destroyed by the e-book. And libraries are going to disappear as councils cut their expenditure so that they can continue to pay extortionate salaries and pensions to unnecessary bureaucrats.

23.59 p.m.
I had just finished gnashing my teeth over the Alice letter when I opened one from a publisher wanting permission to print and sell copies of one of my books without paying me a royalty. They are, they tell me, a charity. I receive at least a dozen requests a year like this and I never really know what to do about them. I wonder if surgeons receive requests asking them to perform free operations on Sunday mornings. Or if plumbers constantly receive requests from charities demanding free plumbing work. I always say `yes' to people wanting to produce audio books or Braille books for the blind though I sometimes wonder about the logic of this. Audio books are available commercially and I sometimes sell the rights. Should I really give away my rights or should I insist on selling them so that I can choose how to spend that portion of my earnings which I want to give to charity? I don't mind sending free books for auctions, or providing drawings for sale, but giving away a portion of my copyright does worry me. This is, after all, what I do for a living.

13
11.31 a.m.
The defunct Bradford and Bingley building society wants to buy back some PIBS (Permanent Interest Bearing Shares) but is offering to pay a little less than a fifth of what I paid for them. This is presumably being done for their benefit. Indeed, in the details of the offer, the wretched company explains, under the heading `Rationale for the Offers and the Proposal' that: `The offer aims to generate a profit for B&B'. You bet it does. It's not difficult to make a profit when you arbitrarily stop paying interest and then offer to buy back a bond at a tiny fraction of the price everyone paid for it. They know that most of the people involved are small investors who were daft enough to put their money into (allegedly) safe building society investments. I wrote and complained about the theft of the money I had invested in Bradford & Bingley to both HM Treasury and the Financial Services Authority. I might just as well have sent a letter of complaint to the Manchester United Supporters Club for all the good it did me. This is the fourth time I've had money stolen from me and been unable to do anything about it.

14.15 p.m.
In the last three days I have received four e-mails from printing companies asking me for book printing business. Three were based in England and one in China. It seems likely that the e-book bonanza is already having an adverse effect on printing companies.

17.12 p.m.
I spent much of the day sorting out the old accounts from 1994-5 onwards. I have no idea what I really need to keep. I have huge sackfuls of receipts. Eventually I decided that if the country really needs me to keep train tickets from 1994 then I will give up. But what do I do with it all? I will have to sort through the bagfuls of rubbish and decide what to burn, what to shred and what to dump in the rubbish if the council will agree to take it away. Clearing out the old accounts left me with three huge carrier bags full of used chequebooks and paying in books. I don't want to put them into the rubbish for obvious reasons of security but didn't fancy trying to shred them all. So I burnt them on the fire. And didn't they do well. They provided an excellent and warming blaze for four hours. Tonight and for another week or so we will keep warm with old invoices and receipts.

14

11.01 a.m.

A woman has written asking us to send a book to America by airmail because she wants it to get there by Christmas. She has enclosed £1 towards the postage and packing. The price of sending this parcel by airmail to the USA is over £9 so if I send the book by air I will lose money on the sale. Another reader wants a book sending by airmail to Australia. This customer tells me that staff at Publishing House have been doing this for her for years. I am honestly surprised that I've ever made a profit. I see from the Stanley Gibbons catalogue that the stamp dealer charges £30 to post a book weighing over 500g to Australia if the book costs less than £50. If the book costs more than £50 the postal fee is £45.

15.21 p.m.

The Government, the Bank of England, the nation's economists and the overpaid idiots in the city are apparently all shocked that Britain's inflation figures are rising faster than expected. I've been forecasting rising inflation for years and so this is no surprise. The main reason is one word: China. It seems that the bright financial brains have only just noticed that if the Chinese people want more cars the price of oil will go up, if they want more burgers the price of food will go up and if they want higher wages to pay for these delights then the price of bras, television sets and other ephemera will all go up. It's called geopolitical macroeconomics or common sense. The problem with economists is that they are forever looking backwards without ever looking forwards. They don't even attempt to figure how the past might impinge on the future. Still, their stupidity does at least give the rest of us a chance to beat the markets with our investments. I was sent accounts recently which showed that I've managed 19% a year on my investment portfolio during the last decade - without any gearing whatsoever. So, yah boo sucks to the investment professionals, the hedge fund managers and the economists. I see from today's *Financial Times* that Neil Woodford, described as `one of the premier fund managers of the last 20 years' has, across all his funds, achieved an annualised total return of 8.6% for the past few years.

Inflation is the new modern opium of the people; it's the trick by which our rulers make people think they are better off, even though they aren't. It's inflation that keeps wages rising (and prices rising). It's inflation (and cheap money) that has for years kept house prices soaring (and stopped them collapsing). It's inflation that keeps taxes rising (and government income rising). And it's inflation that makes people think they're getting richer when they aren't. It's inflation that forces the prudent to subsidise the greedy and the reckless. It's inflation that encourages people to overleverage and to buy houses with fake money, borrowed from banks, rather than to pay at least part of the price with real money that they have worked for with honest toil.

Governments encourage inflation because it helps the indebted (whether a country or someone who has bought a house they can't afford) at the expense of savers. Inflation is an insidious form of taxation. Knowing that inflation will allow house prices to fall without actually going down, the British Government has done everything it possibly can to hold house prices at the current artificial level. The politicians (or, rather, their advisers) know that if food, energy and clothing prices soar as a result of inflation, house prices will, if they remain as they are now, be at a sensible level within five years or so. It's a neat but ultimately damaging piece of deceit which will lead to greater misery for longer. A normal house bubble takes seven years to burst (with prices always going lower than anyone thinks possible) and another seven years to recover. The Government's actions will simply delay the inevitable and extend the unhappiness. Inflation won't push up house prices; it will merely make houses more affordable by making everything else more expensive.

There are losers of course. Pensioners who are not former civil servants find themselves living on shrinking fixed incomes. Savers are discouraged (even though people who save are the backbone of any economy). Inflation destroys the prudent middle classes but benefits the imprudent. The poor are affected more than anyone because commodities (food and fuel) rise when inflation soars and those costs make up a higher percentage of their daily costs. Inflation discourages thrift and encourages recklessness and gambling (although these are the very types of behaviour which cause economic problems). Inflation leads to injustice and desperation and, eventually, a call for more state controls and more fascism. It's no wonder governments and politicians and bureaucrats all love inflation.

Since the banks destroyed the world economy, governments in the USA and the UK have been deliberately supporting policies designed to force people with money to spend it and to push up inflation as fast as they can. We live in a credit hungry economy where people are encouraged to spend money they don't have. Some of the blame for this must lie with Keynes who came up with the good idea of encouraging governments to spend their way out of financial trouble but forgot that wasteful politicians like the wretched Gordon Brown wouldn't have the strength of mind to stop spending other people's money and to save when things were going well. Inflation has also been fuelled by credit cards.

By holding interest rates low (when they should be much higher) governments have forced people to take risks and to invest their money in hazardous projects. The UK (like the USA) desperately needs a correction. People and companies (and the Government) need to deleverage, and pay off their debts. But the Government has done everything it can to prevent the inevitable, healthy correction. In the long run it won't succeed, of course, because the correction is inevitable. But, meanwhile, debtors are rewarded and savers, and the prudent, are punished.

Politicians and bankers lie and claim that printing money won't cause inflation. The Bank of England, in a breathtaking piece of blatant deception, claimed that: `The Bank sets interest rates to keep inflation low to preserve the value of your money.' What cobblers they talk. If you make a lot of something then the value goes down because its rarity value falls. The Americans in particular are desperate for inflation and so they are creating dollars and will allow their currency to fall. (In reality it doesn't matter a jot whether you actually print all that extra currency or just create it electronically. By and large governments don't actually print money any more, of course. And so from time to time crafty politicians can deny that they are. It's simpler and cheaper than that these days. They now simply credit banks with new money electronically. This means that the banks have money they didn't have. And can lend out a multiple of the new money they've acquired. There is, therefore, vastly more money in circulation. But they're not actually bothering to print more of the stuff.)

The Americans don't give a fig what this will do to the rest of the world. They know that devaluing their currency will produce instability, currency wars, massive widespread unemployment, higher taxes, import controls and impaired competitiveness.

In the medium to long term the Americans will be the losers, of course. The Chinese, if they are as wise as I think they are, will be selling their vast hoard of dollars and buying gold.

I've been screaming for several years now about the coming inflation and it's happening. In late 2010, the Consumer Price Index (the lowest of the Government's fiddled inflation figures) showed that inflation was running at 3.2% a year. The Retail price Index showed a 4.5% annual rise. But these are, of course, figures which exclude non-essentials such as clothing, energy, petrol and railfares. Car insurance is going up at 38% a year. House insurance is rising at 50%. The real inflation figure is currently at least 10% a year. Anyone who has savings and whose investments aren't producing that sort of figure each year (after tax) is becoming poorer and would have been better off just spending their money on scented candles and other fripperies.

Most people are losing money on their investments because of the indecently large fees, bonuses and expenses charged by investment fund managers. These days it has become fashionable for the little bastards to charge huge fees if they actually manage to make a profit. I have noticed that they never take a cut in their standard fee if they make a loss or underperform their peers. It is, of course, a win win situation for them. The whole finance industry needs a drastic overhaul - preferably with a flamethrower. British bankers borrow at 0.5% from the Bank of England and lend to big corporations or foreign bankers at 6%. They can, therefore, make huge, safe profits at the expense of British taxpayers. If they can be bothered to lend to British businesses they charge at least 12%, which is shylocking by anyone's standards.

Many people who now realise (belatedly) that their income is being devastated by poorly performing unit trusts and low interest rates are now investing in high risk bond funds in an attempt to stay ahead of inflation. The result is that, once again, millions of hard working folk are going to see their savings devastated.

We could and should have used the wealth created in the last years of the 20th century on creating a fair society, a decent health service, an effective education system and a host of necessary services that would improve our world. Instead, to the ever lasting shame of the politicians entrusted with the job of managing our world, the money was wasted on quangos, on buying votes from scroungers and zombies and on bizarre pet projects forced upon us by the EU (and which every individual with functioning brain tissue knew were nonsense). Productive jobs have been replaced by zombie jobs, counter productive. Having no experience of the real world (and never having had to run anything, or to create anything) Brown et al, greedy, sleazy and incompetent (how sad that those are the only words we use when talking about politicians these days) believed, in their rank stupidity, that they could create prosperity simply by spending money and by encouraging people to spend. When the money ran out (as it inevitably did) they continued their mad experiment by borrowing (and encouraging the people to borrow). It was a strange sort of massive Ponzi scheme, the sort of fiscal nonsense that in a sane society would result in long prison sentences. In the world created by Brown no one has to pay for anything. Poverty, misery and growing discontent brought on by political correctness and multiculturalism, means-testing and targets, were well matched with a culture of cronyism, dependence, self-indulgence and grasping, well-rewarded incompetence. Bankers, Olympic class incompetence, deception and fraud were massively rewarded. Sleaze and corruption were accepted and went unpunished. `I'll pay back what I took and it will be OK.' Today, 'public ethics' is as much an oxymoron as 'American culture' or 'military intelligence'.

It is possible to argue (though obviously one would not) that instead of slaughtering Iraqi children and bombing the shit out of wedding parties in Afghanistan, the American and British troops would have been better occupied targeting the bozos at the egregiously greedy Goldman Sachs, RBS and HBOS, and the other bastards who nearly brought the world to ruin and who did bring the rest of us to a state of despair. (Actually, I'd like to keep a few battalions back to deal with the EU headquarters. The EU, Hitler's bastard love child, has done more harm to Britain in general and England in particular, than any other enemy.)

If we rob banks we get sent to prison. If bankers rob us they get bigger bonuses. Bankers caused the world's problems but are today virtually the only ones with sound finances and no financial anxieties. The big banks are our enemies, not the Afghans or the Iraqis. It is the big banks, not some rucksack wearing saddo, who will bring us all down. Nothing is too bad for the blood-sucking bankers. Where the hell are revolutionaries when you really need them?

There is no longer any such thing as a safe investment - or a safe place to put savings. The result? Ninety nine out of a hundred savers are losing money on their savings and investments. Savers are being punished for the excesses of the bankers and the greedy. And the American and British bankers, enjoying by a free guarantee of security from taxpayers, are subsidised by hard working men and women to the tune of £100 billion a year. That's not my figure. That's the Bank of England's official estimate of the value of the subsidy banks receive by having an implicit guarantee that if they get into trouble the Government will bail them out. (The banks'annual tax bill is no more than around a fifth of that so the British taxpayers are paying the banks £80 billion a year just to exist. It's hardly surprising that the bankers can pay themselves even more extravagantly than footballers.) A bank that knows it will not be allowed to fail can take huge risks. If the risks pay off then the bankers give themselves huge bonuses. If the risks don't work the Government steps in and gives the bankers money so that they can give themselves huge bonuses. Moral hazard anyone?

People think they are getting richer by being paid more but they are not because everything they buy costs more so their standard of living falls. And the changes produced by the consequences of inflation and so-called progress mean that their quality of life collapses too.

15
09.34 a.m.
I rang the chimney sweep to fix an appointment. `What day would you like me to come?' he asked. `Next Friday would be convenient,' I replied, rather startled. I am more accustomed to being told by tradesmen when will be convenient for them. `And what time?' asked the sweep. `Two o'clock?' I suggested. `Fine,' he said. I suspect that maybe the sweep business isn't doing too well at the moment. I suppose that in a recession, having the chimney swept is one of the things that gets postponed.

10.02 a.m.
There is going to be a royal wedding next year. As we discussed the forthcoming event (which is bound to be a brilliant piece of English theatre) The Princess suggested that the best commentator for the big day would be Henry Blofeld. It's a brilliantly off the wall suggestion. Blowers, who made his name as a cricket commentator, and who has the plummiest voice on the planet, would be superb. Sadly, I expect the broadcasters will choose a boring newsreader.

11.25 a.m.
The Princess noticed, by chance, a comment on Yahoo that I have been struck off the medical register for providing patients with dangerous advice. This is possibly the worst libel I've ever come across. In fact I suspect it is a criminal libel. Ideally, I would like to find the person who wrote this and punch them on the nose. It would be easier, cheaper, quicker and far more satisfying. But there are problems with this simple solution. First, the chances are that the weedy little liar who wrote this nonsense is either a wimpy little runt or, worse still, a woman and that when it came to it I wouldn't be able to go through with the punching them on the nose idea. Second, if I did sort out the problem in such a civilised way I would doubtless end up doing 30 years inside and paying millions in compensation. So, the first thing is to get a contact e-mail address or telephone number for Yahoo. This is far more difficult than you might think and the Web seems full of people who have tried and failed to find any sort of contact information. But I have a brainwave and enter the words `Advertising on Yahoo' into the Google search engine. I have a contact telephone number in London within seconds.

The Web is full of stupid, arrogant and incompetent pillocks who delight in sniping and when I told Yahoo that one of them has used their website to announce to the world that I have been struck off the medical register when I haven't (much to my surprise the GMC has never even tried to strike me off) and that I am indeed still a registered and licensed GP principal, this egregious libel turned the writ wranglers at Yahoo a slightly worrying shade of pale. They removed the libel from the Internet before I had properly finished telling them about it. But they will not tell me the identity of the person who wrote it, and will not tell me whether or not they have informed the individual that what they wrote was libellous. So this venomous, hateful, mendacious, spittle-flecked bigot is, presumably, free to repeat their libel endlessly around the Internet. I am always reluctant to take legal action, particularly for libel, but I consulted a libel lawyer who told me that since Yahoo removed the libellous remark there will be very little chance of obtaining any damages. It seems that anyone can write anything they like about anyone on the Internet as long as they remain anonymous. And if the website publisher removes the libel the minute they become aware of it they are effectively safe from prosecution however much damage may have been done. Wonderful. I wonder how Mr Yahoo would like it if I were to spread rumours that he is a paedophile and a terrorist and someone who makes a habit of putting his plastic recycling rubbish in with his general rubbish. The worst bad thing about the Internet is that thanks to the Web every individual will be haunted for ever by the tiniest and most gossipy incident in their lives. Digital technology makes sure that our smallest transgressions (real or imaginary) are recorded, easy to find and well disseminated by our enemies. Even when the allegations are entirely untrue they will still circulate.

The Web has become a dark, shadowy world, populated by dark, shadowy people who seem to wallow in giving gratuitous, purposeless offense. I can understand political opponents attacking one another. But today's bloggers pick on anyone and everyone and seem to take great joy from being nasty for the sake of being nasty. They aren't trying to change the world, or make it a better place, they just seem consumed by a desire to cause mindless pain. Vindictiveness is their driving force. I read recently that when a former model objected to the libellous remarks of a nasty blogger she filed a defamation suit to force Google to identify the blogger. The model subsequently forgave the culprit but the blogger then sued Google for failing to protect her privacy. I understand that some revolutionaries need anonymity (and use pseudonyms) to stay alive. But on the Internet e-mailers, bloggers and reviewers frequently hide behind a pseudonym because they are cowardly and don't want to be sued. The Internet is a mish-mash of misinformation, some deliberate, some commercially inspired, some mischievous, some malicious. I have lost count of the number of reviews of my books I've seen which are libellous. Self-appointed critics make entirely false assumptions and judgements, apparently without any respect for the truth. People who have sued to try to protect their reputations invariably find that it is a full time job. Moreover, the vindictiveness of people who are mostly unemployed and can, therefore, spend all their days simply being annoying means that there is little point in trying to protect your reputation online. Moreover, the worst offenders have no money and so anyone who sues them is likely to end up well out of pocket.

The real problem with the Web is that the nasty, libellous stuff stays around for ever. If someone is maliciously and inaccurately described as a paedophile the item may be removed in theory but it won't be removed in practice. It will be there for ever more for someone to find, repeat and quote. It is dangerously easy for anonymous wierdos to mess with innocent people's lives - just because they can.

Television took a decade or two to reach a point where it satisfied the needs of the lowest common denominator. The Internet didn't wait; it went straight to the bottom. Not bothering to pause to pretend to offer anything honestly educational or of lasting value the World Wide Web headed straight for the cesspit. And, having reached its target it stayed there. The World Wide Web has done more damage to civilisation than any other invention in the history of the world. I would put it above gunpowder, dynamite and television.

As more and more people are ripped off, deceived, cheated, attacked and lied about and as their reputations are savaged and destroyed so they will realise what a dishonest and superficial and untrustworthy medium the Internet is. I look forward to the day when the Internet, like the two-faced gossip of old, will be universally reviled.

I asked The Princess to promise not to look at anything relating to me on the Internet ever again, but she won't promise because she will look because she cares. The EU has talked about introducing legislation which enables individuals to have their names removed from all websites. If such legislation is ever introduced I will take full advantage of it and have my name removed completely from the World Wide Web. I wish devoutly that the damned thing had never been invented. It has caused me endless trouble and never done me any good at all. I have been libelled endlessly and vast quantities of my copyright material has been stolen and spread around by people who make money out of it but never give me a penny. Yahoo pompously refers to its customers as belonging to a `community'. I have never ever felt that I belong to the Internet community or indeed that any community exists. The Internet is a cesspit controlled and largely populated by cowardly thieves and incompetents.

During over 30 years of campaigning I've received more writs and injunctions than I can remember. I've been followed by private detectives and served with sheaves of warning letters. I've been libelled and slandered and lied about. I've been falsely accused of not being a proper doctor. I've received threatening letters from corporate thugs and people have tried to bribe me. I've had books banned around the world and I've been fired by dozens of newspapers and TV and radio companies for upsetting the establishment, annoying governments and being outrageous enough to insist on telling the truth and giving people the facts.

But few things piss me off more royally than the rubbish that appears on the Internet.

16
11.41 a.m.

The Princess failed to warn me that I was about to reverse into a stone wall. She was in the trucky thing with me when I reversed into the wall and, as is widely known, it is always the passenger's responsibility to yell out `mind the wall' on these occasions. This she singularly failed to do. So we now have only three quarters of an offside rear light protector Perspex thing. I e-mailed the garage and asked them to obtain another one so that they can nail it into place. Actually, as something of an expert on these matters, I suspect they will glue it in place. The Princess said she thinks the wall moved anyway. A small earthquake perhaps.

14.39 p.m.
The official unemployment figures have hit 2,500,000 million but these figures are as honest as a politician's speech (or a BBC news broadcast). There are an additional five million out of work but receiving benefits and most of these are receiving incapacity benefits. Nearly two million people have been too ill to work for five years or more. One in five British adults now relies on government handouts for their fags, booze and gambling. Around half of the millions who claim to be too sick to work claim to be stressed or too mentally ill to do any sort of work that doesn't involve sitting in the pub watching the racing on television or sitting at home playing computer games.

21.52 p.m.
I am delighted to see that publicans in Holland appear to be winning a fight to be allowed to let their patrons smoke. I have been campaigning against smoking for over half a century now. I bought the RCP Report on smoking with my pocket money when I was a kid. I was one of the first doctors to draw attention to the hazards of passive smoking. But the ban on smoking in pubs is nothing to do with health. Indeed, the evidence shows that it causes more ill health than it prevents (by encouraging people to stay at home where they drink and smoke more and by putting bar staff out of work). It is just another example of misguided EU fascism. If people want to smoke in pubs, and people want to work in them, they should be allowed to do so. It is possible to argue that smoking does less damage to our society than alcohol, tranquillisers and anti-depressants. And people who are deprived of one crutch will usually turn to another.

23.44 p.m.
I remember that the rumour that I have been struck off the medical register was started some years ago by a Swiss man called Hans Ruesch. Ruesch claimed to be opposed to vivisection but I was never entirely sure of this. When I was elected President of an organisation called LIMAV (Lega Internazionale Medici per l'Abolizione della Vivisezione) which represented over 1,000 doctors opposed to vivisection he became intensely jealous and rang me up to tell me that he should have been made president instead. (This would not have been possible because the organisation was for doctors and he wasn't medically qualified). He then told me that he was the most important anti-vivisector in the world. Anxious to placate him I immediately assured him that I agreed with this sentiment and would happily give him a letter confirming the approbation. Unfortunately, this didn't work. Ruesch simply became hysterical and incoherent. He was not a pleasant man. He had his bank account details printed on his notepaper so that people could give him money. A misguided reader of mine who was mentally ill sold her house and gave him the proceeds. She didn't have anywhere else to live. I contacted Ruesch and asked him to give her at least some of the money back. He refused, saying it had been given to him and he was keeping it.

23.49 p.m.
After my unhappy experience with Yahoo it occurs to me that the authorities should bring back duelling. It would be a much better way of dealing with disputes than anything else we have at present, far better than litigation or complaints procedures. And what great television it would make. A weekly duelling programme. The health and safety people will never go for it, of course. They are far too wimpy. They prefer to kill people in bits, with red tape, rather than with the sword.

But it's a fine idea.

We should also bring back the stocks. Just think of the fun we could all have throwing old cabbages and rotten tomatoes at Fred Goodwin, Gordon Brown and Tony Blair. We could have stocks built everywhere and fill them with bankers. And we could force supermarkets to give away their rotten eggs and vegetables.

17
08.30 a.m.
When we woke up and pulled back the curtains we had a surprise. There is light snow everywhere. Buses and cars seemed to be running normally but, naturally, there has been no rubbish collection. The big strong binmen down plastic containers the moment a flake of snow hits the road.

09.45 a.m.
The head of a website called Wikileaks is in prison accused of publishing the truth and making rich and important Americans squirm with embarrassment and look as stupid as they are. We live in a humourless, truthless age. Crack a joke to the Gestapo guards at airport security and men with toothbrush moustaches will snap on the handcuffs before you can say: `Hitler.'

10.18 a.m.
The sweep came. He is a really nice fellow who did an excellent job and made no mess at all. He was here for an hour and charged £35. I give him £40 and he seemed well pleased. He also gave me free advice on how to make our log burner work more efficiently.

12.49 p.m.
The EU is definitely bringing in new laws about annuities which will force insurance companies to pay the same amount of money to men as to women. Even though there is a well-known and well-established difference in life expectation between the two sexes, it will, apparently, be illegal for companies to differentiate between the sexes. The result will be that annuities for men will fall by about 10%. This will, of course, dramatically damage the pension incomes of male citizens. Just about the only people who will not be affected by this utterly absurd and unfair piece of legislation will be those who work for the EU and the Government. Their fat, non-contributory, index-linked pensions will continue as before. The EU seems determined to ape every bad thing the USSR ever did. I wonder how long it will be before the average citizen realises that the EU, Hitler's bastard love child, is the greatest enemy Britain has ever faced. If Mengele and Borman did anything after the end of the Second World War they were surely alive and well in Brussels, planning the downfall of England and furthering the Fuhrer's dream.

16.01 p.m.
We were about to leave the house when The Princess announced that she had lost her mobile phone. I could have rung it to help her find it but she remembered turning it off. After a 15 minute search the phone is found at the bottom of her remarkably capacious handbag. I have travelled on the continent with a smaller bag than the one The Princess carries on her shoulder. If the Nazis lurking in the Eurostar customs sheds ever take it into their heads to search her bag it will take them weeks.

17.23 p.m.
Next year I am 65 and I have to write to tell HMRC because although they must know these things and have them secured in their computer they can't be bothered to notice that I am entitled to a pension and an age related allowance. And so, instead of the computer sorting out these things (and ensuring that I am no longer expected to pay National Insurance contributions) I have to remind them and fill in forms. How convenient for them and how inconvenient for me. The trouble is that I don't know where to write. I receive letters from numerous different tax offices: one in Barnstaple (which is where my offices are), one in Leicester (a city which I have visited only to appear on the local BBC radio station when promoting books), one in Cardiff (which I have visited only to broadcast on the local radio stations), one in Colchester (a town which I am afraid I have never visited) and several in parts of darkest Scotland which even the intrepid Richard Hannay probably never found. When I send HMRC cheques I send them to somewhere in Yorkshire which seems to be where the Government keeps the nation's money, and which is probably a good choice. I compromise by sending letters to two of their many addresses. I will probably have to repeat the exercise in a month or two's time.

21.36 p.m.
I hear that the VAT people are sending me a new password for my account. This will come in the post. `It will be randomly selected,' said a nice man called Steve. `That means a mix of letters and numbers that I can't possibly remember?' `That's right,' he agreed. `So I'll have to write it down and leave it in a drawer with all the other passwords.' `Exactly.'

18
12.46 p.m.
While we were out shopping The Princess bought a tin of white paint so that we could cover up the graffiti at Publishing House. I had both arms full with shopping and to the astonishment and awe of the shop assistant The Princess put the tin of paint into her handbag. When we got back home I suggested that she left the paint in the truck

so that we wouldn't have to remember to take it to Publishing House. She rummaged in her bag and it took her several minutes to find the paint. I didn't say a word but it seemed astonishing to me that a woman should carry a handbag which is so large that it is possible to lose a can of paint in it.

14.52 p.m.
A judge has decided that Lloyds bank was entirely proper in charging £10,200 for a single premium insurance policy that cost £1,300. The other £8,900 was a commission `earned' by Lloyds Bank. When the couple complained, a judge said he couldn't see anything wrong. Well, he was probably the only person in the country (apart from bankers) who couldn't. Coincidentally, in the post today I received a note from Lloyds telling me that if I want an overdraft I will have to pay 17.3% interest. Since they currently pay me around 0.5% interest on my deposit account that means that the difference between the rate they pay when borrowing and the rate they charge when lending is 16.8%. Shylock himself would have been proud of that. If the banks didn't pay such obscenely large salaries and bonuses to the half-wits who work in their investment banking departments they really ought to be able to make a profit with margins like that.

16.29 p.m.
The broken rear light on our truck has been mended. It cost £114.23 for a small piece of clear, flimsy plastic that cannot possibly have cost more than ninepence to make.

18.54 p.m.
A man on television, wearing an overcoat and no hat, told us that the weather hasn't been as bad for 25 years. Behind him there is a little snow on the pavement. The cold has apparently disrupted the country again. Schools are closed. Trains are not running. Airports and council offices are shut. People are advised to stay at home. I suddenly remembered when it snowed when I was a child. It was as cold inside as outside. When still in short trousers I walked two and a half miles to school through snow so deep that it came over the top of my wellington boots and soaked my socks. The kids in my class put their socks on the radiators with the obvious consequences. The snow came but there was little or no disruption. Everyone got to work. Schools remained open. I never missed school because of the weather. We made slides that were longer than a cricket pitch and had snowball fights that lasted until our hands and gloves were frozen solid. What a nation of wimps we have become.

21.43 p.m.
The police are complaining about the cost of looking after protests and demonstrations. Apparently a protest meeting of 1,500 English Defence League supporters needed 1,500 policemen at a cost of £800,000. Even if the policemen were needed for the whole day (and such demonstrations rarely seem to start before lunch or go on after dark) that works out at £533 per policeman per day. Knock off the £33 per head for the cost of wear and tear on truncheons and helmets and you are left with £500 per policeman per day. If the average copper works a five day week and has six weeks holiday that means that they cost £115,000 per year each. Isn't that a bit steep for a bloke with O Level woodwork? I wonder if the police could be complaining about the cost of policing demonstrations as a prelude to demanding tougher laws banning protests? It will not, of course, occur to them or to politicians that if they made an attempt to create a just and democratic society the disenfranchised voters wouldn't feel the need to demonstrate in the streets.

19
10.18 a.m.
While waiting to buy a magazine I stood behind two women in a short queue. `I spoke to him shortly after he died,' said the shorter of the two women. As soon as I got out of the shop I wrote it down. I can only think that she must have visited a spiritualist. It's a wonderful line, though.

11.02 a.m.
I drove round to the nearest hospice charity shop with another six large black bags full of books. I've been having another of my clearouts and in the last two weeks I've taken them around 30 bags. I have no idea how many books that is. But there are still no spaces on my shelves. All that has happened is that some of the books piled high on the floor have moved onto the spaces on the shelves. When I left the charity shop I reversed the truck into a lamppost and smashed the piece of cheap plastic that I broke a few weeks ago and had repaired this morning at a cost of £114.23. The Princess said I was reversing like a Frenchman: `Back, Hit, Stop.' I don't think I'll bother mending it this time. The truck really needs a much bigger rear bumper. The one it has is feeble and only comes into action after

the taillights have been crushed. When we got home I mended the broken light with eight inches of Sellotape and saved £114.22.

12.45 p.m.
The nation has ground to a halt. We cannot travel to Barnstaple to collect the mail because the road is closed. Football matches carry on (they have underpitch heating) but Heathrow airport is pretty well closed and the would-be travellers are apparently abandoned cold and hungry. I do not understand how it can be so difficult to shovel a little snow off a couple of runways. What a shambles. I half expected to hear that they were leaving the runways closed to save the environment. In fact of course it was all about saving money using health and safety as the excuse (a spokesidiot for the airport said that they couldn't get the army in because soldiers are not trained to shovel snow). What about the health and safety of thousands of highly stressed passengers sleeping on cold floors for night after night? They are apparently not even allowed into the warm terminal for health and safety reasons. Why doesn't the Government do something? Isn't that what they are for? If they want to sell off the infrastructure then they should damned well control the people they sell it to, and ensure they aren't a bunch of skinflints. The airline staff all appeared to have gone home leaving the usual message that says: `Due to a high volume of calls...' and telling callers to go to the website. Of course, the website tells callers to ring up.

Once again, the odd thing is that the Government spends much of its time (and our money) warning us that the weather is changing but then seems surprised when weather conditions change and we have an unexpected flurry of snow.

18.51 p.m.
I have found out why the European Union issues a 500 euro note. According to a reliable source it is simple. `The benefits of seigniorage from banknotes held abroad are questionable. For example, the eurozone's decision to issue a 500 euro note made it easier to carry stashes of cash in the single currency than in dollars, whose largest denomination is $100. That enables the block to grab some of the market in cash-for-drugs deals and money laundering.' So, the EU is officially supporting the illegal drug trade and the money-laundering business. The 500 euro note is no longer available in the UK because the Serious Organised Crime Agency reckons that more than 90% of the notes are used or held by criminals. The attraction isn't difficult to understand. £1 million weighs 96% less in 500 euro notes than it does in sterling. It is, apparently, possible to cram 20,000 euros into a cigarette packet if you use 500 euro notes. I must try it.

22.38 p.m.
We watched *22 Bullets* starring Jean Reno. When The Princess bought the film she didn't realise that it was in French, with English subtitles. The makers of DVDs have a naughty tendency to rather hide this information in small print. We have during the past year bought a number of films that looked good but turned out to be in Japanese or some other language neither of us speaks. However, *22 Bullets* is a cracking film and Reno is, as always, enormously watchable. He is a French star in the glorious Gallic tradition; following in the bullet holes of Alain Delon, Jean-Paul Belmondo and Jean Gabin.

23.57 p.m.
The roads are so icy that they sparkle at night.

20
10.01 a.m.
Naturally, we still cannot get to Barnstaple to collect the mail. The North Devon link road, the A361, the death trap road designed for death and disappointment, is closed. Everyone hates the link road except for the policemen armed with speed cameras who love it so much they have even had special hidden lay-bys constructed, at vast expense, to improve their chances of catching motorists rushing around trying to earn a living. There have to date been well over 40 deaths on this damned road. I am not surprised. It is an absurdly dangerous road a hazardous mixture of two and three lanes. It is probably now too late to widen it but it desperately needs some sort of dividing central reservation. Every politician in North Devon should spend every waking minute fighting for some sort of improvement to this death trap. The bizarre thing is that there are many motorways in Britain which are quieter than this road. Building it the way it is undoubtedly saved a small amount of money but the cost in terms of accidents, injuries, deaths and delays must by now be one hundred times as great as the saving. Whoever made the decision to build this road should be put into the stocks for three days and then hung, drawn and quartered.

But now the damned road is closed. Again. North Devon is effectively cut off so we cannot fetch our mail or send out copies of *Alice's Diary* to eager book buyers. We watched the news on TV. It was good to see that there was no snow at all in Downing Street or around the ministries in London. I wonder if the snow was allowed to fall at all or if the Government merely brought in lots of people from Heathrow airport to clear it away. I cannot help feeling that if one of the local North Devon MPs were a Minister of Significance the A361 would be wider and looked after rather more enthusiastically.

21
11.35 a.m.
My Chinese publisher has written wanting to reprint copies of four of my books: *Bodypower*, *Mindpower*, *Spiritpower* and *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You*. These have, apparently, sold very well and I'm told the first three are considered `classics' in China. The publishers want me to go to China and to promise to let them see any new book I write before it is published in Britain so that they can bring out their edition at the same time. I don't think I'm too keen on travelling to China (my long legs don't like aeroplanes) but I'll be delighted to let them publish new books. My literary agent in China tells me that two other publishers there are also keen to publish my books and that between them the various publishers want to buy a good many more titles. The Princess made a parcel of 12 books and we posted them to China. The cost of sending the parcel by airmail is so great that it would have probably been cheaper to hire someone to fly to China and to take the books with them in their baggage.

18.22 p.m.
It is obviously the day of the Vernon in China. I receive an e-mail from a newspaper in China asking me if I will write a weekly column for them. They are offering me money, though they want to pay me every six months. I tell them I will accept their offer and allow them to pay me every six months if the editor of the newspaper also gets paid once every six months.

22
11.19 a.m.
The new password for my VAT account has arrived. It consists of a mixture of 12 letters (some upper case and some lower case) and numbers. Naturally, it is impossible to remember. It is so long that I even have difficulty copying it from their letter to my computer. I have to read it several times to check it. Why do computers always ask if you want them to remember the password you have just entered? What is the point of having a password if you allow the computer to store it?

23
14.56 p.m.
Five days after the binmen should have collected our rubbish, they have still not been round. A man from the council has issued a warning that citizens should take their food waste back into their homes for health and safety reasons. Buses are still moving around. The supermarkets are still delivering groceries. But the binmen are sitting indoors reading the paper and sipping tea.

24
21.55 p.m.
We both spend much of the day wrapping presents and putting them under the Christmas tree. We both enjoy an old-fashioned Victorian-style Christmas.

25
10.30 a.m.
The Princess has spoilt me, as usual, and bought me a huge pile of presents, all carefully and beautifully wrapped. She bought me a solid silver pen, a vast pile of books and DVDs (including just about everything starring the Marx Brothers and everything including Jimmy Stewart that I don't already own), a beautiful pewter model of the Mercedes that Rudolf Caracciola drove in the 1931 Mille Miglia (I already have a similar model of the Mercedes with which Stirling Moss won the 1955 race), a copy of the 1953 edition of the Radio Fun annual and a very old Dandy annual from the days when Desperate Dan was Desperate Dan and not the politically correct wimp he has become. She also bought me the new version of the Seiko Encyclopaedia Britannica and Oxford Dictionary. I have had the old one of these on my desk for years and find it invaluable. It means I can have the essence of both huge books on my desk in something the size of a pocket diary. The new version includes the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, the *Oxford Thesaurus of English, Modern Slang and Abbreviations* and *Fowler's Modern English*

Usage. I have all the books, of course, but this piece of technology (which keeps my desk clear and is marvellous for travelling) is good technology. This is real progress. And the batteries fit easily into a neat compartment which doesn't require a screwdriver to open.

I like gadgets but am very picky about them: if they don't work immediately when taken out of the box, without resorting to an hour studying incomprehensible instructions or telephone calls (press 1,2,3, etc. and then pay premium rate money for advice from someone in the Philippines who doesn't speak English) it is a failure and it is their fault not mine. In my considerable experience 99% of modern gadgets are a failure. This one is a thumping success.

Although we had agreed not to buy each other anything which required a plug and the assistance of mains electricity The Princess stretched the rules by buying me a new Senseo coffee making machine. (Christmas is stressful enough but the prospect of having to deal with instruction manuals, batteries and so is too much.) The instructions (clearly written by someone who learned his art writing incomprehensible manuals for DVD players) came on a huge, poster sized sheet of paper (so much more cumbersome than a booklet). There were nine separate instructions for preparing the machine for use, 11 for using it, 11 for cleaning it afterwards, four for flushing it after cleaning it and 10 instructions for descaling (at regular intervals though not everytime). My favourite bit of the poster was the bit headed `Troubleshooting'. In response to the problem `I cannot open the lid' the solution is `Switch off the machine and wait 24 hours'. I began to feel this may have been the one present that was a mistake. I have owned cars that were easier to understand. A new hat might have been a better choice. Hats are so easy. They either fit or they don't. We put away the coffee machine and instead played with some of my new toys. My favourite was the bubble gun which shoots an endless stream of beautiful soap bubbles and lights them up as it does so.

11.50 a.m.

The Princess always buys me a selection of toys as part of my Christmas present. One of my new toys this year required batteries and naturally required the removal of a small plastic cover. I couldn't do this without a very tiny screwdriver. And I couldn't find our very tiny screwdrivers. Not even the smallest screwdriver on my Swiss Army penknife would fit. I was about to break open the plastic cover with the tool for removing stones from horses' hooves when I remembered that there was bound to be a small plastic pouch containing a set of small screwdrivers in one of the crackers we have waiting to be opened. So I fetched The Princess and we pulled a lot of crackers. We found a small, green yo-yo (which works very well), a padlock and key, one of those metal puzzles that drives everyone mad until someone just pulls the two interlocking pieces apart with brute strength, a tiny pack of playing cards that we always put away and think might come in handy when travelling but which we never take with us and so never use, a pen that looks a little like a miniature Mont Blanc if you viewed it through a misted up telescope from a mile or so away but didn't work very well and which came with a notebook half the size of a book of matches, and, finally, at long last, the small pack of very tiny screwdrivers which we knew was hiding in there somewhere. Never before, I suspect, has a small pack of miniature screwdrivers been received more rapturously. Once I'd removed the little battery cover I threw it, and the screws, away. I have started throwing away battery covers and their little screws. There used to be one screw holding these damned things in place. Now the EU has obviously decided that toddlers can operate screwdrivers well enough to remove one or two screws so there are often four and sometimes six screws to unfasten. And then the little battery compartment cover sticks and won't budge even though all the screws are out. The game The Princess bought came with a sheet of instructions which gave me 12 separate pieces of advice about the batteries but had absolutely no instructions about how to play the game. There was boring advice about what to do with exhausted batteries (`lie them down and give them a drink' was The Princess's much more sensible suggestion), the dangers of short-circuiting supply terminals (got me there), the terrifying danger of mixing different types of batteries, the importance of securely screwing the battery cover into place (it is already in the bin, of course), the importance of observing the polarity guide and following the manufacturer's instructions for safe use and disposal of batteries (check with local authority) and a warning that the product isn't suitable for children under 36 months (though they would need a chainsaw to break it into bits suitable to eat) and, penultimately, the inevitable warning `please retain this packaging for future reference' though they don't say why since it is utterly pointless and so it goes on the fire. Finally, we were advised that for more information about batteries, battery safety and battery disposal we should contact our local authority. The game is excellent fun and involves noise and flashing lights.

14.00 p.m.

The Princess has prepared enough food for a British army expeditionary force. The meal is so big that I don't know whether to eat it or to apply for planning permission for it. I tell The Princess that 17 of the 3,432 visitors she is expecting have had to cancel but that there will still be more than enough food. She looks panicky for a moment. `How many people are coming?' she asks. `I thought it was just the two of us.' I reassure her. We eat most of the food but it takes us a long time. It is magnificent. The Princess makes the best Christmas lunch I have ever eaten. Her roast potatoes and roast parsnips are out of this world. I meant to take a photograph to show to people who ask: `What do vegetarians eat?' But I couldn't drag myself away from the table for long enough to find the camera.

15.48 p.m.
We try to make coffee with the new Senseo machine. The coffee it produces is worse than anything British Rail ever served. It is truly awful and quite undrinkable. I can taste detergent, plastic, nuclear waste, the fetid smell that wafts up through the gratings from the Paris Metro, the dark fluid they serve in seaside hotels and the (to me) disgusting liquid they sell in Starbucks. I couldn't smell anything resembling coffee. I poured myself a triple malt whisky to take away the taste of the Senseo rubbish.

18.17 p.m.
My chess computer beat me. I challenged it to a game of table tennis and won by a walkover.

22.48 p.m.
In the evening we watched, as we always do, Poirot's Christmas. There's a lovely scene at the end of the film when Poirot unwraps a pair of gloves lovingly knitted for him by Inspector Japp's wife. `Aren't you going to put them on?' asks Japp, proud of his wife's skill. `Oh no,' says Poirot. `I will keep them for church on Sundays.'

26
11.34 a.m.
I put the Great Escape DVD into the player and turned it on. I then left it to play. We always do this on Boxing Day. We just wander in occasionally to see how the prisoners are all getting on. And we know the theme music so well that we can wander in to watch our favourite scenes.

13.11 p.m.
I have started reading Oliver Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield* which I discover I have never read before. The Princess has bought me a beautifully bound, century-old, pocket-sized edition. A terrific book to look at, to feel and (most important of all) to read.

22.16 p.m.
We watched a Top Gear programme in which the presenters took the mickey out of Christianity. I'd like to see them try that on Jews or Muslims. In truth, of course, they wouldn't dare.

27
14.55 p.m.
One of my crackers today contained six rather splendid marbles in a small string bag. The bag came with a warning notice which read `Warning: Not suitable for children under 3-years-old due to small balls.'

16.32 p.m.
Foxes have tipped up the food waste bin across the road. It has been sitting there for weeks since the last collection (health and safety prevented binmen going out with a little light snow in the air). Rotting, stinking food is now spread across the pavement. If the EU bureaucrats are going to force people to put out their food waste for recycling then they really should make sure that they collect the damned stuff.

18.29 p.m.
Obama is quoted as claiming that the American fighting forces are the best in the history of the world which suggests that he has gone back to smoking funny substances. It's nonsense like this which annoys the rest of the world and is, I suspect, one of the reasons why, according to a survey I intend to conduct in the new year, 97% of people outside America think the nation deserves what it is shortly going to get not from terrorists but from Chinese bra and television manufacturers. Lots of Americans are so deluded that they believe they won two World Wars all by themselves. After my books *Rogue Nation* and *Global Bully* were published I received a mass of hate mail `reminding' me that without the Americans we would now all be speaking German.

28
11.01 a.m.

There is much news in the motoring press about Formula One teams hiring drivers not just because they know how to change gear and steer round corners but because they bring with them millions of pounds in sponsorship. It is clear that only the richest teams can win in Formula One. Only countries with loads of cash have races. They should cut the hypocrisy by getting rid of the races and, instead, have a fortnightly auction for the podium places. The highest bidders would get the cups, the lower bidders would get points and those with not enough money to buy anything would get nothing. This would change absolutely nothing and the same teams and drivers would still win everything. There would be no need for teams to spend a fortune on building cars and then flying them round the world. All the proceeds could, of course, go to Mr Bernie Ecclestone. The whole thing would be a delight for the green campaigners. And the auctions could be weekly. There could be 52 races a year. The BBC could show the auctions which would probably be as exciting as the old-fashioned and now rather passé races.

15.38 p.m.
A former employee wrote to say how sad she was to hear that Publishing House had closed. She had thought and hoped that it would go on for ever. I sent this reply: `I always hoped that Publishing House would go on for ever too and it was sad to have to close it. Unfortunately, the spirit of the place had changed in recent years and instead of being a fairly carefree publishing enterprise the rules and regulations somehow seemed to become far more important. It seemed to me that a lot of time was spent on staff training, on making sure that various bits of the Government agencies were kept happy and goodness knows what else. I didn't spend enough time managing things and PH lost direction. I just wanted to write books, publish them and help make people think and smile. The last year or two of Publishing House became rather sad and difficult and I felt increasingly isolated from what was going on. I certainly felt very unhappy at the way things had changed. So although it was sad to close it, I also felt relieved. I now have around 30,000 books in stock and no real means of selling them. And I also have a lot of new books in my head to write and publish. So I will clearly have to set up a new version of Publishing House at some point. A new building, a new purpose and new hopes. Publishing House may have reached the end of one life but somewhere, somehow it will be reborn.'

18.42 p.m.
The cracker presents seem slightly better this year, though the paper hats and snaps are worse than ever. The Princess found a whoopee cushion in hers and I found a small water pistol in mine. The Princess commandeered the mini water pistol and had great fun squirting me with it. I did think of seeding the crackers with better toys but in the end I couldn't find anything I could fit into them without tearing them apart and I knew that if I pulled them apart I would never get them back together again. There is no point at all in buying really expensive crackers because they just contain silver plated versions of the things you tend to find in them anyway. There was a tendency last year to put in practical items (nail clippers, shoe horns and absolutely awful egg cups, a compass which pointed north whichever way you held it and a stapler with no staples in it, presumably on health and safety grounds). I don't mind the small screwdrivers because they are useful. I tend to choose the prettiest crackers and buy lots of them.

The Princess's joke this evening was: `What's the difference between a lighthouse keeper, a thief and a pot of glue?' The answer is: `One watches over seas, one seizes watches. And the pot of glue? Ah, that's where you get stuck.' My joke was `What's the difference between a sick horse and a dead bee? One is a seedy beast and the other is a bee deceased.' The people who write this stuff deserve some sort of award though I'm not sure what.

22.58 p.m.
We watched *Mr Blandings Builds his Dream House,* starring Cary Grant and Myrna Loy. What a wonderful film. The two stars buy a house with their hearts rather than their heads. It is so, so much funnier than the Tom Hanks film *The Money Pit* (which also deals with a house purchase). As always with DVDs these days the subtitles were on, and difficult to get rid of, but once we had sorted that and changed the default the film was a delight. We are further encouraged to continue with our house search.

29
11.37 a.m.
Minimum wages in China are soaring by 21%. The Chinese want more money to spend on cars and hamburgers. The result will be that the cost of everything on sale in Britain will also rise. Bras and television sets are going to be more expensive. And since the Chinese will be consuming more the cost of food and oil will soar too. All this was, of course, quite predictable. These days the basic skill investors need is the ability to think globally and to apply geopolitical thinking to every situation. It used to be said that if a butterfly flapped its wings in Brazil it could cause a storm on the other side of the planet. Well, these days, a small political event or a natural disaster in one country

can produce massive changes in countries on the other side of the globe.

14.27 p.m.
It is now three weeks since our rubbish was last collected. Food bins are overflowing and stinking. The street is awash with bits of rubbish. The Princess saw three foxes in the garden yesterday. I wonder how long it will be before the rats arrive. I rang the council's rubbish department but there was no answer. I rang the council's main switchboard and my call was answered by a machine. I rang the community health department and got another machine. I rang the complaints department and got a third machine. I was about to ring the `hate incident' line and say that I hate the binmen but I didn't dare. If there are any binmen of ethnic origin I could be in serious trouble. Instead, I tried to ring the trading standards department to complain that I have paid my council tax and am not getting what I paid for. But I got a machine telling me that there was no one available.

18.09 p.m.
There is news today that doctors are complaining that not enough people are being vaccinated. None of the reporters covering the story mention that doctors get paid for giving vaccines and are therefore interested parties.

20.07 p.m.
Over Christmas, the police shot another mentally ill man. Gunmen use tranquilliser darts for dangerous but valuable animals - and they go down immediately - is it really impossible for the police to use tranquillisers? Or tear gas? Or rubber bullets? I realise it probably wouldn't be as much fun but the police in Britain do seem to be trigger-happy these days. The so-called Independent Police Commission will no doubt conduct an independent investigation and independently conclude that the shooting was inevitable, necessary and vital in the fight against global warming.

22.28 p.m.
A reader from Malaysia writes to me about some of my books which are selling there. This is something of a surprise since although a number of my books were published in Malaysia the contracts expired years ago and I currently have no publisher there. It is alarming how many of my books are being published by publishers who have not bought the rights. This is, I fear, the result of the Internet `no copyright' age. Not only do I get no royalties but it is also impossible to sell rights in a country when this happens.

22.58 p.m.
Some months ago we decided to think about buying a hotel and turning it back into a house. Commercial property prices have fallen far more than residential prices and we really don't want to keep waiting for residential prices to become more sensible. Country hotels are not much sought after at the moment because no one can get commercial loans. Besides, the prices the owners are asking are still entirely unreasonable and most small hotels just don't make sense. A ten bedroom country hotel that costs £1,000,000 to buy would have to charge central London boutique hotel prices to cover its interest costs let alone pay back the capital cover insurance, staff, heating and so on. We saw one hotel priced at £700,000 which had a gross turnover of £30,000 a year. You don't need to be an experienced hotelier to realise that those figures just don't work. It is impossible to see how anyone can buy a hotel or boarding house at current prices and expect to do anything except make a thumping great loss every year. Only an appreciation in the value of the property would give an opportunity to survive financially.

We looked at several possibles and found a hotel that looked perfect. There were woodpeckers in the woods and robins in the garden and swans on the river. It would, we thought, be an adventure. Lots of bedrooms, lots of bathrooms, a little woodland, a beautiful garden and great views. We would turn it back into a house and enjoy it. We showed the pictures to a few friends. Everyone wanted to come and stay.

There are, of course, some advantages to buying a hotel. Massive, thick fire doors protect all the rooms. There are smoke alarms and emergency lighting which comes on if the electricity goes off. All good fun.

There are downsides too. Signs to take down both inside and outside.

And then, today, the whole thing fell through.

The problems just kept mounting. The penultimate straw came when we at last saw the energy efficiency figures and the heating bills. These showed that it would cost us at least £20,000 a year to heat the place. And with no mains gas, we thought there would inevitably be problems keeping the gas tanks filled up. The very thought of it gave us chilly feet. Any attempt to improve the energy efficiency would cost a fortune and take huge amounts of building work. We found this worrying because I have little doubt that within a year or two the Government (urged on by the EU) will penalise owners of low efficiency houses with rationing or vastly increased prices.

The ultimate straw, the one that finally broke the camel's already overladen back, came when we received from the owners a four page list of the items they were prepared to sell us as `extras'. The list included the doorkeys, the doorbells, the toilet roll holders, the little wooden wedges that hold open the fire doors, some road cones, the bird nesting boxes, a pile of useful wood, an old door and so on and so on. We were paying a good price for the property and we were being invited to make an offer to buy the keys. We lost all faith in the deal. Our solicitor pointed out that this might be referred to as taking the piss. Another friend said it was killing the golden goose.

I have bought homes where the previous owners have taken the television aerials, the bathroom cabinets and the mirrors but being prepared to take, or sell, the keys is new to me. (I never understand why people take things like bathroom cabinets. The value of such small items is insignificant. Moving them takes time and energy and money. And the replacements never quite fit the holes that are left so the walls have to be redecorated.)

We are devastated. This is a sad end to the year. The search goes on. Our attempts to find new offices are proving equally troublesome. The problem is that in many cases the people who previously occupied the premises we like have gone bust and the banks which have taken over ownership are incredibly slow to make decisions. I suppose the million pound a year guys are simply too nervous to make any sort of decisions - on the grounds that if you don't make any sort of decision you can't make a wrong decision to be blamed for.

23.31 p.m.
More dull news. The French tax authorities are chasing me because I haven't paid my French television licence fee. They are now imposing a penalty. I have written three letters so far explaining that I haven't paid because we don't have a television set in the apartment. I rang the Parisian authorities and explained this. A very nice sounding man sympathised, said I should not have to pay the fee or the penalty, and suggested that I write another letter. So I'll write another letter.

Looking at my investment records I'm delighted to see that for the past decade I had better investment returns than any hedge fund or vampire bank I can find. And I'm proud to say that I did it without borrowing a penny, begging for government aid or cheating thousands of hard-working pensioners out of their savings. I've decided not to reprint my book *Moneypower* when it goes out of print (which won't be long). I'm proud of the book but I made far more money out of following my advice in it than I made out of the book. When the book came out, in a rather handsome hardback edition, we sent copies to every financial magazine, all the nationals and all the regional newspapers. The book received not a single review (though it has been well praised on Amazon).

30
11.01 a.m.
I've received a cheque for £12.25 from BT. This is quite a landmark. Since May I have received a constant barrage of letters, bills and demands from BT. They have asked for quite huge (and seemingly ever increasing and incomprehensible) sums of money for a system I didn't want and had never asked them to provide. They have at long last admitted that I don't owe them any money - but that, on the contrary, they owe me. The complaints procedure was quite unhelpful. It was only when I contacted the Chairman that the company accepted its mistake. I can't begin to imagine how many hours I have wasted on this wretched company. I will do my best to avoid ever having any contact with them again.

13.21 p.m.
A reader who wanted to find a Hungarian publisher for *How To Conquer Health Problems Between Ages 50 and 120* (which I wrote with The Princess) now wants me to publish the Hungarian edition and pay him a commission. He will transport the books to Hungary and to the USA. He does not say where his commission will come from or how I will receive any money for my book. I decline his kind offer.

14.32 p.m.
We received the lawyer's bill for abandoning the purchase of the house we thought we were in love with. I signed a cheque for around £1,200 for not buying a house.

15.26 p.m.
Our rubbish has not been collected for six weeks. After five telephone calls and a mass of e-mails a lorry turned up today and took away some of the rubbish that had accumulated in the street outside. For a moment I felt pathetically happy about this and then, within seconds, I felt pathetically sad that such a small thing should make me so happy.

16.20 p.m.
The Princess's symptoms have improved slightly. We still don't know what caused them, though I have ideas. I will

continue to try to heal her with a prescription of love and friendship. And I will continue to try (with only moderate success so far) to shield her from the toxic stresses which are so common these days.

18.39 p.m.
So far, over the holidays, I have built a large plastic Mercedes open tourer, a wooden Grand Prix car and a wooden trebuchet which actually works. I have played a good many games and watched a lot of films. I have read three books and eaten too much.

21.35 p.m.
The oil price is going up. And I believe it is going to keep going up. There will be pull-backs, of course. Nothing goes up in a straight line. But the oil price is going up. I welcome it, not because I have invested a good chunk of our money in oil company shares but because I believe that as people realise just how their lives are being changed by the real environmental disaster (peak oil) so they will be more willing to distrust the politicians and demand some real answers. It is for this reason that I also welcome every daft piece of legislation from the European Union (and the daft stuff has been pouring out of Brussels in recent months). We need a revolution. We need anarchy. The stage is being set.

22.10 p.m.
We bought three different types of coffee to try in the Senseo machine. They are all awful. The coffee the machine makes looks good. But it now tastes of metal, plastic and old shoe.

23.11 p.m.
I had another e-mail from the editor working for the big Chinese newspapers. The editor's boss has apparently read and been impressed by four of my books which are available in Chinese. The newspaper editor asks if I know anyone else who would be qualified to write a column for them. I tell them my wife is very well qualified and would write excellent columns. Only when they agree that this is a fine idea do I tell The Princess. She seems very shocked for a moment but then grins broadly and is clearly excited about the idea of reaching the world's biggest readership. I also receive an e-mail from my new publisher in Poland who tells me that he has bought several domain names (including www.vernoncoleman.pl) to promote my books. He talks of selling hundreds of thousands of books. My future now clearly lies abroad.

23.25 p.m.
A reader sent a very angry e-mail complaining that the book she had ordered had not arrived. She threatened to do all sorts of terrible things, most of them apparently involving defamatory comments on the Internet. I wrote back pointing out that her order had not yet arrived and suggested that she get in touch with her god to see what he could do about it. Alternatively, I suggested that she might blame the Royal Mail for not delivering her letter or the Government for failing to get rid of the snow more efficiently.

23.50 p.m.
Another reader writes to point out that although the bank rate is around 0.5% and savers are lucky if they receive 1% on their savings and mortgages are barely any higher, businessmen wanting to expand must pay around 12% (and possibly even more) to borrow money. He adds that this rate is only available if excellent security is provided. When my bank statement arrived I noticed that my bank is again warning me that if I have an overdraft I will pay 1.34% per month (or 17.3% equivalent annual rate). That is more per month than they pay me on my deposit account per year. The Government owns 40% of my bank.

23.57 p.m.
My wonderful new Polish publisher wants to know if he has to reproduce the cover of the English version of *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You* or if he can create his own cover. I tell him he can put on whatever cover he likes. He then writes back to ask if the book is the subject of any litigation. This is a little late in the day but I reassure him. A reader sends me a generous and kind e-mail to say that he has `never been annoyed by a book as much as *Gordon is a Moron* because it hit home just how damaging and negligent this man has been'. And I receive an e-mail from a doctor asking if I would publish his very original and important sounding work in the *British Clinical Journal*. He reminds me that when I was editor of the BCJ in 1973 I published a leading article supporting the work of Oliver Sacks on the relief of the symptoms of post-encephalitic parkinsonism with L-dopa. `Up to that time, Dr Sacks was unable to publish his work in peer-reviewed journals he sent his paper to, and met universal scepticism of

his results, with the exception of the *British Clinical Journal*. Eventually he wrote a book called *The Awakening* which was made into a movie.' I had forgotten just how much good stuff the BCJ published and am saddened to remember that both that journal and the *European Medical Journal* are now defunct. But clearly not forgotten.

31
10.45 a.m.
The 31st is not officially a bank holiday in England but everyone seems to treat it as one. (The Scots have an extra bank holiday at New Year but since very few of them actually ever do any work at all this doesn't make much difference to their dependence on the English economy.) To my surprise however, the binmen arrive. They park their lorry outside and leave it there for one and a half hours. They disappear into a nearby house. They collect nothing. When I ring the council and report this I speak to a man in the rubbish department who says they are very busy. There is now so much rubbish on the pavements that pedestrians are having to walk in the road. Our neighbours have taken their rubbish to the local tip. I hate them for this. If we give in then the council will have won and we will never have our rubbish collected. People like them make it easy for the council to renege on their responsibilities. When the council does eventually collect the rubbish I don't believe for one second that they will make any attempt to collect the rubbish in categories. Everything will be thrown into one lorry and taken to the dump. I ring the council and am told to visit their website. This apparently has a search facility offering information about rubbish collection. I visited their website, put in our postcode and the full address (why they needed both I cannot imagine) and was taken to a page offering a mealy mouthed, vapid mission statement and a telephone number for me to ring. It is the same telephone number I have just rung; the same number everyone else has been given to ring.

16.40 p.m.
We still haven't found a house. And problems are mounting everywhere. Most importantly of all we still have to sort The Princess's illness.

A few years ago I wrote a book called *Why Everything Is Going To Get Worse Before It Gets Better*. In order to add a touch of optimism I gave the book a subtitle *And What You Can Do About It*. I think the subtitle was rather too optimistic. Much of what is getting worse is now completely out of our hands. The bureaucrats of the European Union run our lives and are rapidly creating chaos and disrupting lives. It is, after all, the EU which is entirely responsible for the rubbish in our streets, queues in our shops, ever declining services and the fact that we are constantly expected to pay more for less. But there's far more to come. Most of our public utilities are now owned by foreigners who have very little interest in maintaining services as long as they continue making huge profits. And if anyone is found prepared to buy the Royal Mail it's a fair bet that people living in rural areas will be told to collect their mail from the nearest sorting office.

17.28 p.m.
A fat man is suing the NHS for allowing him to get fat. If he wins the doors will be open and the nation will go bankrupt. What sort of lawyer takes a case like this?

19.37 p.m.
Two more wonderful pieces of news from the barmy bureaucrats of Brussels. First, thanks to the EU, prisoners will soon have the right to vote and, second, we are going to have elected police chiefs. These fit together so nicely and yet no one seems to have noticed. I wonder who will stand as Police Chief for the Dartmoor region. It could end up being a straight fight between Bert the Bankrobber and Sid the Safecracker, with the winner doubtless promising to ban police patrols, make burglar alarms illegal and introduce new rules making it an offence to lock doors and windows at night. I love these barmy EU laws because in the end people will rebel, we will have a revolution and the EU will be consigned to the dustbin of history. I expect the eurocrats have already negotiated wonderful settlements and pensions for themselves, ready for the day when this happens.

21.58 p.m.
Neither of us can stand those Jools Holland music programmes that appear to celebrate the New Year but which are, as everyone knows, recorded in December. Probably during the afternoon and possibly in a warehouse in North London with blackout on the windows and everyone warned at five minute intervals `It's New Year, darlings, be enjoying yourselves. And there's real champagne afterwards in the green room for the main guests.' And the fireworks and camera phone waving on the other channel are even more depressing. As midnight approaches we select favourite Sherlock Holmes episodes to connect the two years. From 10.45 p.m. to 11.45 p.m. we will watch

the episode called the *Final Solution* in which Jeremy Brett and Eric Porter topple over the Rheichenbach Falls. I will take out a few moments to fill in this diary. And then, after midnight, we will watch the episode called *The Empty House* during which Holmes, pantomime genius, comes back from the dead to delight Watson and Mrs Hudson. A death and a new beginning. We will, as always, wonder if the director had to tell other actors to ignore Jeremy's flamboyance and to restrict themselves to acting. Basil Rathbone was and is the body, mind and soul of Sherlock Holmes but Jeremy Brett gives him magic and makes him fly.

22.47 p.m.
Since it is not their New Year the Chinese are working. The newspaper want to pay me in yuan. They are worried about the fees they will have to pay their bank in order to pay me in American dollars or sterling.

22.56 p.m.
I remembered just in time not to miss the New Year's Day concert that the Vienna Symphony Orchestra always gives. The New Year's Day concert has overtaken in popularity the annual Proms which used to be such a highlight of the year. The BBC has dumbed down the Proms and destroyed most of what was good about them. I find it increasingly difficult to avoid the suspicion that the BBC does everything it can, whenever it can, to destroy, sneer at and belittle England and the English. And it does this with money provided by mostly English licence fee payers. I love seeing promenaders waving their own national flags (I spotted an Iraqi flag this year) but what's the point of waving an EU flag during Britannia rules the waves, Jerusalem, Land of Hope and Glory and other glorious celebrations of England and Britain? Does the EU give a grant for flag wavers? It is also depressing (and I suspect a deliberate policy) that the conductor at the Last Night of the Proms is invariably foreign and often has little command of the English language. I am pleased to see that the conductor of tomorrow morning's concert is a locally born conductor.

23.45 p.m.
Now, here comes the end of another year. I feel exhausted by the torrent of bad news, disappointment and demands, all unleavened by hope or promise.

At the start of the decade there were 857 million people starving or close to it. At the end of the decade there were 925 million people starving. At the start of the decade (in the year 2000) there were 423 terrorist attacks. A decade later, after spending billions and killing millions, there were 10,999 terrorist attacks in the year (nearly half of them in Iraq and Afghanistan). In the year 2000 opium was being grown on 202,626 acres of land in Afghanistan. By the year 2010 the land used for growing opium had almost doubled.

We leave the year with contradictions abounding. There are people who claim to be proud to be English but who see nothing wrong with supporting the EU. There are people who claim to love children but who support vaccination. There are people who claim to want to help the sick but who actively promote vivisection. There are people who are worried about global warming and starvation in Third World countries who still eat meat.

The Government's response to the financial crisis was to force the banks to lend more money (the deal was that they could keep their huge undeserved bonuses if they kept throwing the money around to the undeserving and greedy). It was as though a man whose house was on fire suddenly became aware that his flower border was spoilt by weeds and started digging out the weeds while the fire raged. The real problems remain: a bloated public sector, (where the average male employee now earns 8-10% more than the average private sector employee - and enjoys hugely better benefits) and a seemingly endless queue of greedy and self-serving, hypocritical politicians. They have between them encouraged and endorsed an arrogant, narcissistic society, a society in which reality television has bloomed and where citizens without values, skills or learning may, without work, rise far higher than those who work a society in which the greedy and ruthless are rewarded and the kind-hearted and sympathetic are oppressed, a society in which millions now refuse to take responsibility for their own lives but instead choose positions as State employed slaves. Television is the new opium of the people and like opium it deadens the brain, dulls inquisitiveness, saps the ambition and removes self-respect. Britons are an addictive people and now watch vast amounts of television (four hours a day seems to be the average), plus several more hours spent playing around on the Internet.

So, what does 2011 hold for us? In 2011 our allies will continue to bomb wedding parties wherever there is oil to be found. Animals will be kept in barbaric conditions, pumped full of carcinogens, fed corn that would save millions from starvation so that obese westerners can eat their daily burgers, be carried for days without food or water in two tier lorries designed so that the creatures below are constantly showered with urine and faeces, and, when they eventually reach their destinations, slaughtered in the most inhumane ways imaginable. And the carcasses will be chopped up and eaten with relish by idiots who should know, but don't because they aren't told because the media won't discuss it and doctors don't want to know because it's inconvenient, that the incidence of cancer and heart disease and just about every other killer disease you can think of is far greater among those who eat meat than among those who do not.

My guess is that by the end of the new year the oil price will be higher, there will be more rules and regulations, there will be more taxes, more toll roads, more unemployment. Our rubbish collections will be a bone of contention but nothing will have been done to improve them, indeed council services will have deteriorated noticeably. London will, with New York, still be the joint money laundering capital of the world but anyone wanting to spend their own money will still face absurd regulatory hurdles. The financial system hasn't deleveraged or shown remorse and nothing has changed so there are still more huge shocks to come. Pensions will continue to collapse and politicians will continue to lie and to screw up whenever they possibly can. Even though more and more of them are sent to prison there will still be more thieves and charlatans in the House of Commons and the House of Lords than in any comparably sized building in the country. What an example they all give to the young. Unions and civil servants will whinge and strike when their absurdly cosseted lifestyle is threatened by reality. They will, of course, claim that they are striking to draw attention to the fact that services will be cut back but they will be lying through their teeth. They will be striking to defend their part-time working weeks and their massively unaffordable solid gold pensions. If they really cared about public services they would happily accept a modest reduction in their pension expectations.

When they have two choices to make politicians and regulators will unerringly make the wrong one. White, middle class, middle aged, Christian heterosexuals, the despised vanilla in our multicultural society, will continue to be discriminated against and to have very few rights. White, middle class, elderly, Christian heterosexuals will continue to have no rights at all. The Human Rights Act will apparently continue to apply only to selected groups in our society. EU lawmakers will insist that British prisoners be given the vote they have been denied for more years than most of us can remember. British politicians will complain and protest but they cannot possibly win because our politicians have no power to veto legislation which comes from the EU. The daft law of the week becomes the daft law whatever we say because it comes printed on EU notepaper. We live as an occupied people because successive Prime Ministers, beginning with Heath and to date ending with Brown, have sold our country and paid a hefty price for the privilege. The forecasts in my book *2020* are coming true at a frightening pace far more speedily than I had imagined or feared. Awareness of geopolitical risk is everything because a problem in one country quickly becomes a problem in another. When there is a dispute in America over an oil rig, the resulting high oil price puts up inflation in Britain. And that leads to higher interest rates and lower house prices and reduced growth. Everything is interconnected in a way few people predicted. Will oil pause at $150 a barrel or will it go straight to $200 a barrel? Will there be a pull back or will it then simply carry on soaring until it reaches $250 dollars a barrel? What will happen in Britain when it costs the average motorist £200 to fill the tank of the average motor car? These are serious questions, though I realise that they are questions politicians and journalists don't like to recognise, let alone ask. They are simply too frightening for words. And when the revolutions inspired and fanned by the media (particularly the Internet) really begin to change the nature of the world how keen on the new media will the authorities be?

There is already far more censorship in Britain than most people realise. It's going to get far, far worse. When I wrote *2020* in 2010 I made a number of predictions about how I thought our world would change by the year *2020*. Some of them seemed even to me to be slightly off the wall. But I am now already receiving letters from people pointing out that many of the predictions I made have already come true.

I also believe that we will soon see a revolution within, and against, the European Union. How many predicted the collapse of the Berlin Wall or the fall of the Soviet Union? The world is ready for a revolution. The EU's unelected leadership of corrupt and venal bureaucrats continue to alarm and appal the disenfranchised voters of Europe; injustice and a growing sense of grievance will do the rests. It cannot now be long before there is a pan-European uprising, leading to the collapse of the European Union, the world's most fascist State.

23.56 p.m.
So that's pretty well the end of another 12 months just another year. I'm 65 in 2011. My retirement plan is for The Princess and I to buy our new English dream home, to find new business premises and to start a new publishing company. I also have five books in various stages of being written. And several dozen more in various stages of planning. I have no intention of retiring properly until everyone agrees with me.

23.58 p.m.
At two minutes to midnight, with Sherlock lost in the watery Swiss abyss, we flicked on the television to check the time. The BBC clock on the television tells a different time to our DVD player which has the time sent to it automatically in some mysterious way so we flick around to find a view of Big Ben.

I feel exhausted by the year just gone. `Let's hope we have a quiet year ahead,' said The Princess, as the clock ticked steadily round to midnight. `That would be nice,' I agreed.

We say together Sir Jacob Astley's prayer before the Battle of Edgehill: `O Lord, Thou knowest how busy we must be today, if we forget Thee, do not Thou forget us for Christ's sake. Amen.'

00.01 a.m.
It is a new year. I give The Princess a card on which I have written:
`When I am with you I am ready.
When we are apart I am waiting.'

This is the end of Vernon Coleman's first diary. His second diary, `Just Another Bloody Year' is also available. For a full list of books by Vernon Coleman please visit www.vernoncoleman.com or visit Amazon Author Central.

Technical Acknowledgement

My thanks to The Princess, without whose help I would still be trying to find my pen and work out how to get the electricity into my computer.

Extra 1

The Publishing House Mission Statement (Why We Believe Small Publishers Are The Only Real Publishers Left)

Compared to the big international conglomerates Publishing House is very definitely a `small publisher'.

We don't have a massive sales force (actually, we don't have a sales force at all). We don't have a board of eminent directors (since we're not a limited company we don't have any directors). We don't have offices in a skyscraper (we do have offices but we just have an upstairs and a downstairs). And we don't have a PR department full of bright young things called Hyacinth and Jacoranda. (We don't have a PR department at all).

But we have one enormous advantage over the conglomerates.

We care passionately about books.

They have marketing departments which decide which books will sell. They then commission books that the sales force think they will be able to flog. They won't even consider a book until they've done a marketing feasibility study.

We publish books we believe in. We then try to sell them. Naturally, we try to make a profit. If we didn't we wouldn't last long. We have to pay the printing bills, the electricity bills, the phone bills, the rates, the insurance and so on.

But we've been publishing for 22 years. In that time we've sold over two million books. Our books have been translated into 24 languages and are sold by other publishers (including some big ones) in over 50 countries.

The conglomerates insist that every book should make a profit.

We don't. Some of our books make more money than others. But that's fine with us. We don't mind if the better sellers sometimes subsidise the other books. We don't mind if a book is a little slow to sell. Like good parents we love all our children equally - however successful, or unsuccessful, they might be.

Despite all the talk about the need for each book to stand on its own two feet many big publishers make an overall loss. They are kept alive - effectively as vanity publishers - by other parts of the conglomerate. So, for example, the TV division or the magazine division may help to subsidise the book publishing division.

We believe that book publishing can, and should, be allowed to stand alone. We believe that small publishers are now the only *real* publishers alive.

The big publishers often accept sponsorship from outside companies. We never do. We rely on the sale of books to earn our living and pay our bills. None of our books are sponsored or carry any outside advertising. We believe this helps us to remain truly independent. We publish books which international conglomerates wouldn't dare touch.

Big publishers have lost touch with people's needs. They are slow and unwieldy. It can take them two years to turn a typescript into a finished book! (We can, if pushed, get a book out within a month - while the material is still topical.)

They are too market orientated and derivative. They produce more of what other publishers did well with last year. We look forwards not backwards.

They pay huge amounts as advances to film stars, politicians and young hotshot authors. Much of the time they don't earn back those advances. They don't care because the books are just seen as `tools' to help other parts of the empire. For example, a conglomerate will publish a politician's dull biography as a way of putting money into the politician's pocket.

Despite their huge marketing departments they are often out of touch with people's needs. If we published as many `turkeys' as they do we'd be out of business.

They worry enormously about upsetting powerful politicians and other corporations. The big conglomerates need to cooperate with the establishment because they are part of the establishment.

We stand outside the establishment. They don't like us much at all. They often do their best to shut us down.

But we don't give a fig for what politicians or corporate bosses might (or might not) think of us. We're only interested in publishing books that inform and entertain. When they try to shut us down we fight back.

At big publishers there are loads of men and women in suits who slow things down and interfere with the artistic process. Literary originality and integrity have been replaced by marketing convenience.

We have no men or women in suits to tell us what to do. We do what we believe is right.

We publish books the old-fashioned way.

We're a small, independent publishing house. We publish books we believe in, books we want to publish and which we hope that our readers will want to read.

That's what we think publishing is all about.

Extra 2

The Author

Wordsmith Vernon Coleman has always been on the outside looking in, but always without envy. He has always been the sort of person who prefers to stand in the rain, besieged by snakes, scorpions and spiders, throwing rocks at the warm and cosy house wherein complacent and comfortable insiders congratulate themselves on their insight and success. He has always chosen to continue to do this even when he has been invited inside to sup at the groaning table and to warm his frozen fingers. Moreover, he has always done his best to burn both his boats and his bridges and to cut off his nose whenever his face looked as if it was in danger of becoming a little uppity.

His books are usually completely ignored by the media these days, though when he was much younger and knew very little his books were widely reviewed (and usually praised) in the national press. It is probably no coincidence that he was, long ago, classified as a `dangerous iconoclast' - widely disapproved of by the media establishment. `Whenever my books are remarked upon it is usually with a sneer,' he says ruefully. He has far too much imagination and too great a sense of justice to stay out of trouble for more than a few minutes at a time. Unlike most people, who lose their rebelliousness and individuality as they age, he has become increasingly anarchic as the years have passed. `I was 62 before I realised I couldn't change the world,' he says. `So the first 62 years of my life were spent in pointless, frustrated agony as I tried the impossible. And, thereafter, I had to endure the pain of knowing that I'd failed and that the world was going to remain the same bleak, miserable place it always had been.'

Most successful authors write the same book time and time again. Vernon Coleman has never wanted to do this. Worse still he has changed direction completely several times. Medical books. Political books. Cat books. It's impossible to build a successful career with this sort of variety. He writes `feel good' books (such as the Bilbury novels) and `feel bad' books (such as his political books).

He says that although he has never gone out of his way to challenge the system, he is conscious that the system has most certainly gone out of its way to challenge him. Other writers find that a little fashionable controversy helps their reviews and sales but Vernon Coleman's brand of controversy leads to total bans. He is the most genuinely banned author in Britain.

Although he is the world's leading independent author/publisher, Coleman is also without doubt his own best enemy. All really successful writers these days are part of the establishment. Even the ones who pretend to be rebels always have very nice things to say about the BBC, they creep to agents and publishers, they say lovely things about one anther's books and they turn up to sign autographs and be lionised at literary festivals. Coleman does none of these things; indeed he avoids them with great determination and vigour.

He believes that the independent author has a responsibility to speak for others and is, indeed, one of the few in our society who can. Most people are paid to suppress the truth in one way or another but authors are paid (albeit not very well) to tell the truth and to stick up for people who can't or daren't stick up for themselves. He believes that writers should always strive to avoid respectability and membership of any branch of the establishment. He believes that all writers should be anarchists at heart and should regard all forms of authority with contempt. He is an idealist who, sadly, failed to grow out of hoping to change the world; the only revolutionary anarchist to have had standing ovations both when at an animal rights rally in Trafalgar Square and at a UKIP annual party conference.

He is far too trusting but instinctively wary of administrators. He cannot be bullied or bribed. He is almost incapable of filling in forms correctly. He has been described as an awkward sod and the self-appointed guardian of eccentrics and underdogs. He is congenitally incapable of accepting disrespect from anyone (however much gold braid they have on their uniform). He is obsessive and stubborn and respects conviction and integrity. His default condition is confusion. He has a contempt for the generally accepted and an affection for the imaginative and unusual.

He is a committed anti-fascist, a freedom fighter and self-appointed enemy of bigotry, intolerance, totalitarianism and cruelty. He is constantly screaming to awaken the uncaring, the new dumb, in a world where the activities of Z list celebrities gather more attention from the media than wars and the EU's new brand of superfascism. He is an anti-establishment, revolutionary libertarian, an over-sensitive polemicist, nearly as demanding of others as of himself. He is a cavalier and a roundhead; a traditionalist who rebels; a radical who hates change; a patriot who believes in the values of old England. He loathes social engineering programmes such as means-testing, political correctness and multiculturalism. He is a self-admitted failure who has done everything wrong. Paradoxically, he is one of the biggest selling authors in Britain. He is painfully shy and sensitive to criticism (to a point of being self-destructive). He is unable to compromise and in a world where resentments and grudges are widely nurtured he is far too forgiving.

He is allergic to rules and regulations. Since we live in a world where rules and regulations breed like rabbits this is bound to lead to the occasional confrontation, though these days he tries not to have more than six major confrontations going at the same time and to not have more than three minor confrontations a day. He displays a courtly but obdurate reluctance to accept orders. He suffers from obsessive compulsive disorder and is painfully reclusive.

He is overly sensitive (and therefore too quick to take offence) absurdly self-critical and a workaholic. He is intolerant of intolerance and too firmly idealistic to be pragmatic. He has frequently been described as a Don Quixote but points out that his foes are far from imaginary.

He confesses that he has for the whole of his adult life been paid (often quite handsomely) to develop and air his opinions. He has worked on his existing opinions as a bodybuilder works on his muscles and has regularly welcomed and nurtured new opinions with rare enthusiasm. Most people are rewarded for disguising or even burying their true feelings. Writers are unique in that they are rewarded not for suppressing but for airing their feelings.

As a young man, he worked as a Community Service Volunteer in Liverpool for a year. He then went to Switzerland and worked as a draughtsman for three months. The aim was to learn to speak a foreign language (anything would do) but he was so shy that he didn't speak to a soul and so didn't learn anything. He is the only person in the world to be (or have been) a member of (among other organisations) the MCC, Equity, the Royal Society of Medicine, the BMA, the Desperate Dan Pie Eaters Club, the Beaumont Society and the Vegan Society.

When he worked as a GP he was once fined £5 for speeding on his way to a patient with a suspected heart attack and was sued for libel by a woman doctor he had never heard of who claimed he had stolen her name because he used a pen name the same as hers. He once sued the chief constable of Oxfordshire for a very good reason that is far too complicated to explain. The case was thrown out by an angry judge who seemed to rather miss the point.

He is often melancholic, and suffers from a total lack of self-confidence. Politically he describes himself both as a `libertarian conservative' and a `patriotic anarchist' but admits that if he founded a party there probably wouldn't be many members. He likes malt whisky and champagne (though not in the same glass or even on the same evening) and is obsessively secretive, though he claims that this is merely a question of self-preservation. He has been described as unpredictable, honest, dangerous, iconoclastic and tall and is old enough to remember the distant days when airline passengers were treated with respect and when household rubbish was collected as a regular routine rather than an occasional favour. He remembers when civil servants were civil rather than patronising, obliging rather than obstructive, and when the word `gentleman' was used as a compliment rather than in a derisory way.

Vernon Coleman was an angry young man for as long as it was decently possible. He then turned into an angry middle-aged man. And now, with no effort whatsoever, he has matured into being an angry old man. He is, he confesses, just as angry as he ever was. Indeed, he may be even angrier because, he says, the more he learns about life the more things he finds to be angry about.

He says you can't be his sort of writer without being angry.

Cruelty, prejudice and injustice are the three things most likely to arouse his well developed sense of ire but he admits that, at a pinch, inefficiency, incompetence and greed will do almost as well. He does not cope well with bossy people, particularly when they are dressed in uniform and attempting to confiscate his Swiss Army penknife. `Being told I can't do something has always seemed to me sufficient reason to do it,' he says. `And being told that I must do something has always seemed to me a very good reason not to do it.'

Coleman has an innate dislike of taking orders, a pathological contempt for pomposity, hypocrisy and the sort of unthinking political correctness which attracts support from *Guardian* reading pseudo-intellectuals. He also has a passionate loathing for those in authority who do not understand that unless their authority is tempered with compassion and a sense of responsibility the end result must always be an extremely unpleasant brand of totalitarianism. He believes that multiculturalism on a global scale is perfectly appropriate but that individual countries are best left to be individual. He regards the European Union as the most fascist organisation ever invented and looks forward to its early demise.

Vernon Coleman has written for *The Guardian* (he was a teenager at the time and knew no better), *Daily Telegraph, Sunday Telegraph, Observer, Sunday Times, Daily Mail, Mail on Sunday, Daily Express, Sunday Express, Daily Star, The Sun, News of the World, Daily Mirror, Sunday Mirror, The People, Woman, Woman's Own, Spectator, Punch, The Lady* and hundreds of other leading publications in Britain and around the world. His books have been published by *Thames and Hudson, Sidgwick and Jackson, Hamlyn, Macmillan, Robert Hale, Pan, Penguin, Corgi, Arrow* and several dozen other publishers in the UK and reproduced by scores of discerning publishers around the world. His self-published novel *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War* was made into a film and a number of his other books have been turned into radio or television programmes. Today he publishes his books himself as this allows him to avoid contact with marketing men in silk suits and 19-year-old editorial directors called Fiona. In an earlier life he was the television doctor on breakfast television and in the now long-gone days when producers and editors were less wary of annoying the establishment he was a regular broadcaster on radio and television. He was the first agony uncle on BBC television.

He has never had a proper job (in the sense of working for someone else in regular, paid employment, with a cheque or pay packet at the end of the week or month) but he has had freelance and temporary employment in many forms. He has worked as: magician's assistant, postman, fish delivery van driver, production line worker, chemical laboratory assistant, author, publisher, draughtsman, meals on wheels driver, feature writer, drama critic, book reviewer, columnist, surgeon, police surgeon, landlord, industrial medical officer, social worker, night club operator, property developer, magazine editor, private doctor, television presenter, radio presenter, agony aunt, casualty doctor, care home assistant and investor. He worked as a GP for ten years. He is believed to be the only writer to have had weekly columns in three major British daily newspapers at the same time (not all under the same name). He used to be a practising doctor and therefore tends to be impatient when doing practical things - and to give crisp orders when wanting things passing to him. He has been a medical consultant to a large slimming organisation and the President of LIMAV, an organisation containing over 1,000 doctors opposed to vivisection. For several years he was the Telephone Doctor and his medical advice lines were used by countless thousands. He has been a newsletter writer and publisher, has worked in a Leonard Cheshire home and has lectured at universities and medical schools. Much to his (and probably also to their) surprise, he has given evidence to committees in the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Whether they took any notice of what he had to say is doubtful. They did not fall asleep.

Today, he likes books, films and writing. He writes, reads and collects books and has a larger library than most towns. He also collects lead soldiers of the Napoleonic era, toy racing cars (from the 1960s and before) hats, lingerie, cigarette cards and postcards.

A list of his favourite authors would require another book. He has never been much of an athlete, though he once won a certificate for swimming a width of the public baths in Walsall (which was, at the time, in Staffordshire but has now, apparently, been moved elsewhere). He no longer cherishes hopes of being called upon to play cricket for England and is resigned to the fact that he will now never drive a Formula 1 racing car in anger.

He doesn't like yappy dogs, big snarly dogs with saliva dripping from their fangs or people who think that wearing a uniform automatically gives them status and rights over everyone else. He likes trains, dislikes planes and used to like cars until idiots invented speed cameras, bus lanes and car parks where the spaces are so narrow that only the slimmest, and tinniest of vehicles will fit in.

He is inordinately fond of cats, likes pens and notebooks and used to enjoy watching cricket until the authorities sold out and allowed people to paint slogans on the grass. His interests and hobbies include animals, books, photography, drawing, chess, backgammon, cinema, philately, billiards, sitting in cafés and on benches and collecting Napoleana. He likes log fires and bonfires, motor racing and music by Beethoven, Mozart and Mahler and dislikes politicians, bureaucrats and cauliflower cheese. He likes videos but loathes DVDs. His favourite 12 people in history include (in no particular order): Daniel Defoe, Che Guevara, Napoleon Bonaparte, W. G. Grace, William Cobbett, Thomas Paine, John Lilburne, Aphra Behn, P. G. Wodehouse, Jerome K. Jerome, Francis Drake and Walter Ralegh all of whom had more than it takes and most of whom were English. Spare heroes include Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim (aka Paracelsus), Ignaz Semmelweiss, Ayn Rand, Henry David Thoreau and Friedrich Nietzsche.

Vernon Coleman, old-fashioned bookwright, lives in the delightful if isolated village of Bilbury in Devon and enjoys toasted muffins and old films. He is devoted to Donna Antoinette who is the kindest, sweetest, most sensitive woman a man could hope to meet and who, as an undeserved but welcome bonus, makes the very best roast parsnips on the planet. He says that gourmands and gourmets would come from far and wide if they knew what they were missing but admits that since he and his pal Thumper Robinson took down the road signs (in order to discourage tourists) the village where he lives has become exceedingly difficult to find.

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This is the first of Vernon Coleman's diaries. The second is called `Just Another Bloody Year'. For a full list of books by Vernon Coleman please see Amazon Author Central or visit http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

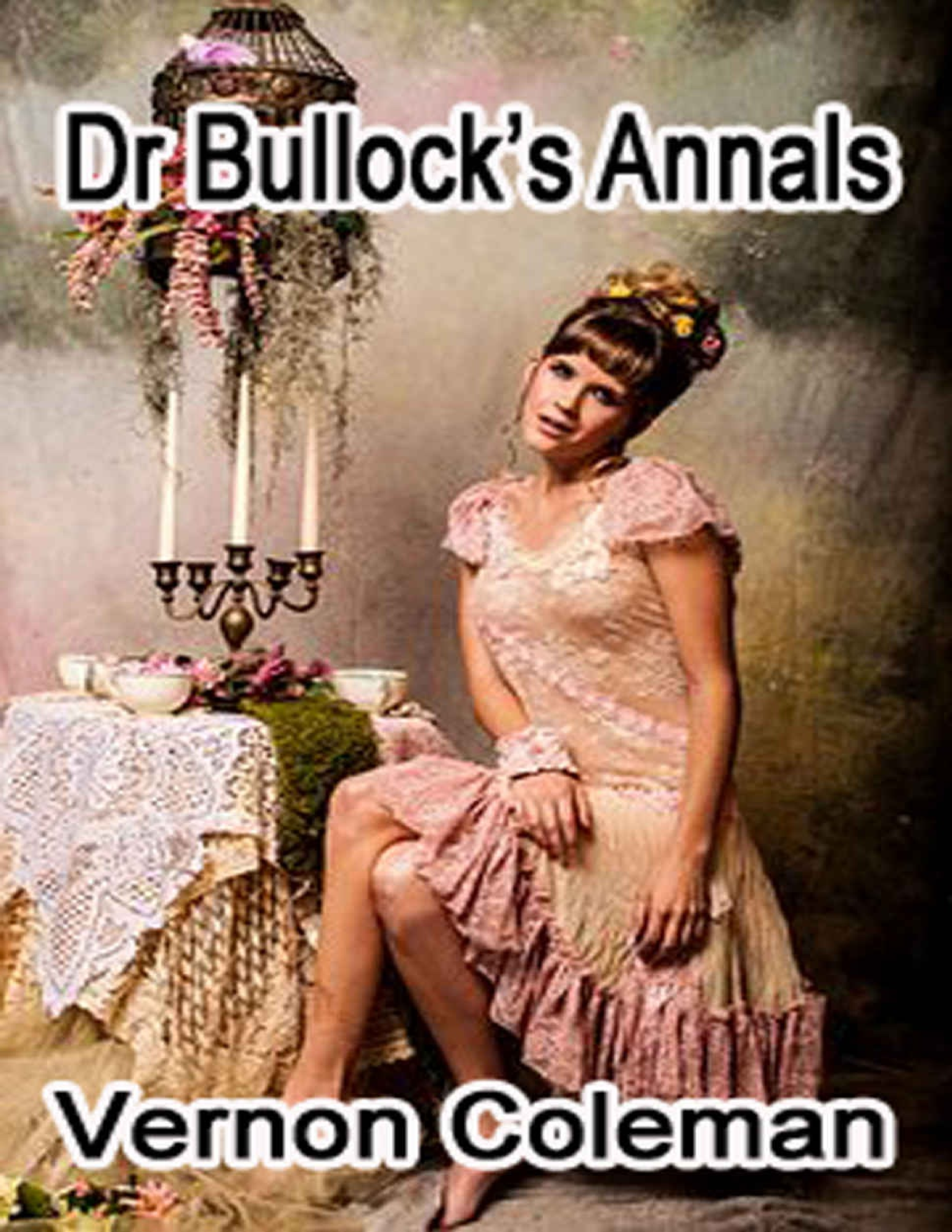

Dr Bullock's Annals

Vernon Coleman

Dr Bullock's Annals

A Revealing and Sometimes Shocking Account of a Year in the Life of a Young Victorian Doctor

Vernon Coleman

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Dedication

To Antoinette: you are, and always will be, the reason my heart beats. You are my world and everything else is just decoration.

Foreword

Everything in 'Dr Bullock's Annals' is historically accurate. By today's antiseptic and rather puritanical standards, the book is a lifetime beyond politically incorrect. And it is, perhaps, worthwhile remembering that the mid-19th century was a time of staggering inequality. While Lord Durham reckoned that £40,000 a year was a moderate income, 'such as a man might jog along with', skilled shirt-makers were lucky to be paid 2s 6d for 70 hours work. Remember, please, that these were rollicking, rude and frequently barbarous times.
Vernon Coleman, Devon 2020

January 1st 1853

Yesterday, on the last day of the Year of Our Lord 1852, I completed the fifth year of my Apprenticeship with Dr Hildebrand Challot, Apothecary, Barber Surgeon and until today the only professional medical man in the village of Muckleberry Peverell.

This morning, at six, I awoke Dr Challot to remind him that my Apprenticeship has been completed. He awakened for just long enough to confirm that I am now a fully licensed practitioner, Surgeon and Apothecary and entitled to call myself Doctor John Bullocks.

I am, in consequence of my having completed my full Apprenticeship in all the healing arts, as dignified under the terms of our agreement, legally entitled to perform all those activities associated with the noble profession of Medicine. I am licensed to dispense medicaments, operate on the sick (or, indeed, the well), remove gangrenous limbs, extract teeth, shave away unwanted hair on the scalp, face or other body parts and facilitate extreme Purgings of the bowel. I am allowed to do all these things without supervision and, most vitally, am entitled to charge a fee for my services as a Surgeon-Barber and for what medicaments I might consider essential. Naturally, the fees I charge have to be accounted for and Dr Challot takes three quarters of my regular earnings.

In a way, my life will not change notably. It is true that I am now officially entitled to practice without supervision but I have been practising without supervision for a good while.

Indeed, I have been running the Practice pretty much by myself since Dr Challot first succumbed to the gout, the dropsy and a deeply troubled liver and prescribed for himself more or less permanent Bed rest with six meals a day, unlimited supplies of porter and mead and the constant attentions of two nurses who are permanently by his bedside or, more often within the bed, warming the cockles of his heart and, no doubt, other parts.

Dr Challot is a short, roundish fellow, no more than five feet four inches in height in his boots. He is as bald as the proverbial coot and wears a thick beard which is, he claims, a leftover from the Crimean War but he was never close to the Crimean War. Indeed, he wasn’t alive when it was fought. He wears the beard because he is a constitutional lusk and far too lazy to shave. For as long as I can remember it has been a motto of his to put off until tomorrow anything you cannot be bothered to do today.

After confirming my elevation in professional status, Dr Challot kindly presented me with my own Leech pot containing what he claims are 24 fine river Leeches. He took the pot from the cupboard beside his and handed it to me, with all the pride and delicacy that might be afforded by the Archbishop of Canterbury handling the Royal Crown, to celebrate the conclusion of my indentureship.

The pot and contents stank something fearful, and at first I thought he had used it in lieu of his chamber pot (which as is usual had not been emptied for several days) but on examination I could see that it was the foul looking Leeches which were responsible for the unpleasant stink. I suspect that the Leeches were brought in by Osbert Gibbon, a pot boy from the Peacock Inn who, I know for a fact, collects the Leeches he sells to us from the stagnant pond adjacent to the cesspit at the Everard Blossom’s stinky farm. Osbert is a professional liar, a Thief and a rascal on his good days and although he is but 14-years-old, he already has signs of the pox, caught I have no doubt from one of the Barmaids at the Peacock, neither of whom are better than they ought to be and both of whom are reputed to be willing to blow the grounsils with any man who can spare one and a half farthings. They both have suppurating sores on the lips that are visible to all and sundry and there are doubtless matching sores present on those lips which are not so immediately on show.

On close examination of my graduation gift, I could see that at least four of the Leeches were dead and putrefying, and it is not my intention to begin my work as a fully qualified Doctor by using putrefying Leeches so I fed them to the cat which did not seem to mind the putrefaction and ate them with relish, smacking his lips with apparent delight.

Dr Challot, customarily never entirely sober, was not too drunk to remind me (as though it were necessary) that according to the terms of the Apprenticeship which my naïve but well-meaning father signed for me when I was 16-years-old, I am obliged to work as his practice Assistant for ten more years or until one of us dies. If I wish to leave this employment I must pay Dr Challot a penalty of 30 guineas. The chances of my ever acquiring 30 guineas are about as remote as the chances of Queen Victoria summoning me to the Palace and begging me to stick three brace of my putrefying Leeches upon her Royal personage.

As Dr Challot spoke, I tried to work out whether or not he had acquired an additional chin. Several editions of that notable feature had already been published and it seems that there has not yet been an end to it. If Dr Challot had been blessed with friends I suspect that even they would have agreed that despite his shortage of stature there was probably too much of him.

Five years ago my father handed over 100 guineas for me to be indentured. This which was the sum total of his savings and when he died two years later there was not one penny left to me. I have no doubt that my father meant well but I would have much preferred it if he had not Apprenticed me but had merely handed me the 100 guineas. Still, one road is as good as another when you have no particular destination in mind.

As an Apprentice, I received free board and lodging. My board consisted of a small room in the attic which I shared with a large and ever expanding family of rodents and my keep, shared with the cat, was a barely edible diet of Turnip soup and stale bread. I once worked out that in five years I had drunk 1,478 bowls of Turnip soup.

My circumstances have now changed considerably for during the period of my Assistantship I will be entitled to keep one quarter of the fees collected for my labours when treating existing patients of the practice. In theory, one third of the remaining three quarters will go for the purchase of medicaments and for the upkeep of the surgery premises, and the other two thirds will go to Dr Challot to be spent on essentials such as wine, beer and the two gorbellied and ever-drunken strumpets who he ambitiously describes as Professional Nurses when making up patients' bills. There is a clause in the contract which gives me the right to keep all the fees which are paid in relation to the care of new patients and all fees paid in respect of new treatments which are my own invention. I suspect that Dr Challot would have smiled when this clause was inserted for, since there are no other Doctors in the village of Muckleberry Peverell, all existing citizens are already, ipso facto, patients of Dr Challot's practice.

And the chances of my inventing a new treatment seem as remote as the aforesaid likelihood of my being invited to attend Buckingham Palace with my new pot of Leeches tucked under my arm.

All things considered, I would have doubtless been much better off if I'd taken a job as a school master. My cousin, Archibald Pikelet, who took a degree at Oxford after three years of idleness, and who is now employed as a master at a small school in Somersetshire, receives 75 guineas every quarter day and is provided with a free cottage in the school grounds. He also receives free victuals and all the fuel, candles and tea he requires. He has his own gardener, cook, usher and valet – all paid for by the school. He is responsible for teaching just 12 boys and has an assistant master to help him with essential beatings and with his modest and undemanding chores. Oh, that my father's aspirations for me had concentrated on a career in teaching rather than in medicine.

Still, looking on the bright side, even if I am unable to dream up any new treatments, or find any new patients, I will now be comparatively rich, for during the period of my Apprenticeship I was (in addition to my board and keep as mentioned above) paid an honorarium of three shillings a month from which I was expected to purchase all my clothing. I should now be considerably better off than I am at present. And I will, at least, be able to avoid any more of the meals prepared by Mistress Swain.

Mistress Swain, the resident housekeeper, boostering servant, cook, slut and Butler is a large, rather shapeless woman. I have no idea of her age and my best guess is that she is somewhere between 30 and 90 years of age. She is, I suspect, one of those women who has always looked old. She probably looked 40 when she was 20, not because she had had responsibilities thrust upon her but because of some inner and ungodly forces. Dr Challot once told me that she keeps her husband's pickled head in a box by her Bed and puts it on the pillow at night but I have no knowledge of the truth or otherwise of this allegation for she has her own room in the attic and I have never even seen the door opened, let alone ventured therein.

Dr Challot pays Mistress Swain nine shillings a week, plus two frocks and one coat a year though I don't think she has received the frocks or the coat since I was first Apprenticed. She also gets her lodging and her victuals but she has to find her own tea, sugar and gin. She has one afternoon free every month, to do with as she wishes, and the whole of every Mothering Sunday, from dawn to dusk, is her own. I was surprised when I learned how much she receives for I have never thought Dr Challot to be a generous man, nor a spendthrift one, and these are moderately better terms than I would have expected from him. A weekly income of nine shillings is very close to the sort of sum an established male servant might expect. Come to think of it I have heard some complaints from male servants that female servants are, in many cases, getting paid sums which are close to their own emoluments.

At Last Christmastime, for a treat, Mistress Swain made an iron potful of Turnip soup. She claimed that she had added a small carrot to the soup but I saw no sign of this in the portion with which I was supplied. And I could not tell the difference by taste though to celebrate the season, the Turnip soup had a sprig of mistletoe floating in it. The stupid woman clearly did not have the sense to know that the mistletoe plant is poisonous. I removed the mistletoe and flung it to the ground but since some of the berries appeared to have been crushed into the soup, I was too timid to drink the concoction and lay that night in such acute hunger that before retiring for the night I ate two tallow candles. Despite this, during the night my stomach rumbled with such anguish that I crept downstairs to the consulting room where I ate three ounces of the liquorice powder and glucose which we use for pill rolling, and all the rancid milk-meats, cocoa butter and gelatine mixture which we use when manufacturing Suppositories and Pessaries. I would have eaten a bowl of stale pap, made from bread and sour milk, but by the time I'd scraped the green off the pap there was almost none of it left. I hunted around for more candles but there were none. Remembering that Mistress Swain, who occasionally toyed with the principles of cleanliness, sometimes had soap in the kitchen I scraped mutton tallow from the wooden sink in the kitchen and ate that.

When I got up the following morning, I expected to find the stupid woman dead at the Table, poisoned by the damned mistletoe berries, but she was snoring loudly. She later told me that she and Dr Challot had drunk every drop of the soup and had much enjoyed it. I regard this as additional evidence that neither of them is human.

‘What about the mistletoe?’ I asked her.

‘Oh, we shared that between us,’ she replied. ‘The little white berries were especially juicy – rather tart, we both thought, but very juicy. We enjoyed them so much that I went out in the snow and picked another sprig from one of the trees in the orchard.’

Both Dr Challot and Mistress Swain consume large quantities of Alcohol (in his case anything which has inebriating qualities and in her case ale and ale alone) and I can only assume that it was this which preserved them from the deadly effect of the mistletoe parasite. My determination, were it ever to be asked for, would be that they are both so pickled that they are immune to poison of any kind. I suspect that if I were to feed them a diet of arsenic and strychnine they would both flourish.

Half an hour after eating the putrefying Leeches, the cat was violently sick on the carpet in the consulting room. Fortunately, the pool of vomit was nicely contained in one area and it was easy to step over it.

January 2nd

This evening I moved my person and my scant belongings into what I am assured is the best bedroom at the Peacock Inn. If it truly is the best then I am glad not to have the worst. Still, I have no real complaints. The bucket which catches water from the hole in the roof is large enough to require emptying no more than once a day even in moderately heavy downpours. I have taken the room as my own on a permanent basis.

'So, you're a proper Doctor now then!' said Henry Youngblood, the Publican. For a moment I thought he was being polite but he laughed in a plainly sneery sort of way. Travellers who have not met him before often complain that he says everything with a sneer and it is believed by some that this is in part because he has had a facial palsy for some years now and in consequence has a lop sided appearance which is accentuated strangely when he smiles. However, it is also true that he sneers a good deal and I had absolutely no doubt that he was sneering on this occasion. He is a raw, cruel brute of a man.

I do not much like Mr Youngblood and look forward to the day when he develops an ailment which requires a serious Purging. He is an elderly and corpulent fellow, in his 60s, with mutton chop whiskers and no hair whatsoever upon his head. There is hair inside his skull aplenty for he has a bushel of hair growing from each of his ears but none, not a single hair, appears to have the strength or the courage to emerge from his scalp. On Sundays and at Christmas he wears a wig which he bought second hand at an auction. The wig, which he claims cost him two shillings, came from the estate of the widow of a judge and when Youngblood wears it, he always behaves as though he has acquired the former owner's legal brain. The wig is one of those grey curly ones which judges wear when they are sitting in court. It looks mighty strange on the head of a Publican.

'That I am, sir, 'I answered, with an attempt at modesty which I confess I did not feel. I was very proud of my new status.

'Stranger things have happened, eh?' he said, addressing the remark to his wife.

'I expect they have,' Mistress Youngblood replied meekly. She looked at me, as though apologising for her husband, smiled and blushed lightly. I glanced at the Publican to see if he had noticed the smile and the blush but Youngblood would not notice if the roof fell upon his head.

Mistress Youngblood is a handsome, full-figured, well-shaped woman in her 30s and as unlike her husband in nature as chalk is to cheese. She has dancing brown eyes and wears her hair up from her neck in a style which shows off that feature to its best extent. She has a gentle, kindly nature but her husband can be a violent man, especially when he has over-indulged in his own ale. If he considers that she has failed to laugh heartily enough at his witticisms, he is likely to give her what he calls a 'good slapping'. She has a black eye more often than not.

'Name three!' said Youngblood, slapping his thigh at what he clearly regarded as a good jape at my expense. 'Name three stranger things that have happened!'

I smiled thinly, as though I found his witticism sharp, but I held my tongue and silently decided that when he needs to be purged I will add double or even triple mustard to the mixture and I will not warm the brass nozzle before the insertion. Youngblood is, like all bullies, a veritable coward and I am certain that when I have my brass nozzle a foot up his rear and I am pumping away with the Purging Fluid the damnable fellow will lose not a little of his arrogance.

'Got you there, eh?' he said, looking at his wife. 'That was a good one, eh? A good one?' He guffawed unpleasantly, and I felt a shudder of distaste in my bosom as I thought of his unfortunate lady, as delicate a Maiden as was never rescued by a Lancelot, having to spend long, dark nights lying underneath such an unwholesome brute. Mistress Swain once told me that Youngblood had bought his Wife from a tinker. He had, according to Mistress Swain, paid two shillings and half a pig for her.

'Let me know if you'd like a good Purging,' I told Mr Youngblood. 'I'm having a special offer this coming week – a double Purging and a mustard Enema for half the price of a single purge.'

The creaky dotard is always looking for a bargain and so looked surprisingly enthusiastic. I live in hope. Little does the oaf know that I would pay him for the joy of ramming the nozzle of my biggest and best brass Enema syringe up his posterior.

'I'll throw in a close shave,' I offered, hoping to persuade him to accept my offer.

But he was not to be persuaded and stalked off without a reply.

Mistress Youngblood led me upstairs to my room. She was wearing a skirt of glaucous green and a shallow blouse of mummy brown and she lifted her skirts as she mounted the steep and narrow staircase, giving me a generous view of her stockinged ankles and calves. I fancied she lifted the skirts a few inches higher than was absolutely necessary. She may no longer be in the first blush of youth but I swear she has the daintiest calves and the ripest Arse in the whole of England. As we mounted together I was reminded, that Mistress Youngblood's buns may not be freshly baked but there are none superior in the county. Moreover, she is a woman who knows well how to take advantage of her assets.

Customers in the bar regularly drop small coins from the change they receive so that they can enjoy the good view down the apparently depths of Mistress Youngblood's seemingly bottomless cleavage when she bends down to help me pick up the coins.

My new room, so very different to the squalid attic room which was my home at Dr Challot's, is well-served with furnishings which though maybe not new are stoutly made and serviceable. There are curtains for the windows, and the room contains a four poster Bed with velvet curtains which, although they could do with a wash, were made with good material and have been neatly darned. The Bed is, I am assured, filled with oatflight, the chaff of oats, which makes a lighter and more comfortable filling than sawdust or straw and is preferable to the down, feathers, wool and horsehair often used since it is reputed to be less popular with bedbugs or mice. There are two horsehair stuffed Chairs in the room (one which is comfortable and the other which is not and which I shall save for visitors), a small Davenport which I shall use as a writing desk and which comes together with ladder back Chair which has one leg shorter than the other three, a Washstand with Bowl and Jug, a Pine Table and a Wardrobe made of Walnut. The Jug has a crack near the spout but Mistress Youngblood assured me that the vessel serves perfectly adequately as long as it is not filled too generously. There is a fireplace, which has a surround decorated with rather flamboyant blue and white tiles. Mistress Youngblood assured me that the chimney draws well and will be kept lit from the first day of October until the last day of March. The tiles, I am told, are Dutch and come from a town called Delft of which I had not previously heard. Mistress Youngblood told me, with some pride, that the tiles cost one shilling and a halfpenny for the six, so heaven only knows how much it cost to put them over the whole of the hearth. I have no idea why anyone would do this.

I am to pay six shillings a week in rent, five shillings a week for victuals and nine pence a week to have my linen laundered.

'Are there many rats?' I asked.

'None up here,' replied Mistress Youngblood firmly. She spoke with such certainty that I believed her. 'Not so much as a mouse. We keep three cats and never have to feed them.'

I was deeply impressed by this. In Dr Challot's grubby establishment, I rarely went to Bed without having to heave a rat or two off my pillow and shake their droppings off my coverlet.

'Will you be conducting medical examinations in your room?' asked my landlady.

'Oh, I don't think so,' I replied. 'Well, that is to say I hadn't actually planned to do so. But if you have no objection…'

'No, no, I would have no objection,' said Mistress Youngblood. 'It would be very convenient to have a medical man in the house – available at any time for our customers.' She fluttered her eyelashes and lowered her voice. 'Especially such a young one, and such a good looking one too.'

I found myself blushing.

Is there hope for me here, I wonder? I dare not even suppose. She is a magnificent looking woman and an excellent cook to boot

Moving my belongings from Dr Challot's attic room and taking them across to the inn, was no great a burden for all that I owned was easily wrapped into a bundle made within my spare shirt. If I had tied the shirt bundle onto a stick I would have been able to provide a good interpretation of Dick Whittington, though I was content to travel without the companionship of Dr Challot's cat.

'I suppose you think you're too good for us now that you can call yourself Doctor,' snarled Mistress Swain upon my departure. I was sorely tempted to give her a good crack on the side of her exceedingly fat head but I had my hands full with my shirt parcel under my left arm and my new Leech jar in my right hand. 'The Publican's Wife will have you in her Bed within a week,' she bawled as I hurried away.

When I had unpacked my bundle and placed my new Leech jar on the Table, I went downstairs and ordered supper.

I ate a plateful of Neck and Breast of Venison, half a Ham pie, a roasted Udder which I did not take to, and two slices of cold Tongue. The landlady, Mistress Youngblood, offered me a pheasant but she said it had been hung for a week too long and she thought it would take an hour to pluck out the maggots. I was too hungry to wait. I also had a large slice of saffron cake. With my meal I drank two quarts of the best ale and afterwards a large glass of malmsey. I had never drunk malmsey before, it being a drink previously too much of a price for my purse, but I fancy I could acquire a fair taste for it.

I was relieved not to be asked for any payment since I had but a fourpenny piece in my pocket. I overheard the landlord, Mr Hector Youngblood, tell his Wife that since I am now a qualified medical man I shall soon be rolling in money. I also heard Mistress Youngblood express the thought that if her husband was correct I would make a good match for one of their Daughters. They have three Daughters and it is good to have been alerted to this crafty plan for the three young women are not ones to give a tight-trousered fellow a pain in his groin.

The eldest Daughter, who is called Ursula, looks as if she has been training hard to become a prize fighter. She is reputed to have once knocked out a travelling tallow salesman with a single blow to the ear. He had mistaken her for one of the Barmaids and had offered her a three penny piece for services above and beyond the pouring of ale. The word in the village was that she was not entirely averse to the concept of a subsidised coupling and was offended not by the nature of the offer but by the size of the payment he had proposed. The tallow salesman remained unconscious for two hours and when he left the inn the following morning, and called at the surgery to obtain an order for candles, he asked me why the Church bells were ringing so loudly on a Thursday morning. I told him that the bells were not ringing but he complained that he could hear them very well.

The second oldest Daughter, called Faith, is said to be generous with her favours and is known in the village to be a trollop. It is said around here that a man in Muckleberry Peverell doesn't have to go to Church to have Faith since she can be readily had for the price of a pint of ale.

The youngest Daughter is a simpleton known as Elsa who does little but eat and drink.

When the Landlord's Wife had left, I placed my bundle on the Bed and explored my new accommodations.

I was pleased to find a pot provided for night-time comforting and relief. I was less pleased to see that the pot, which had been recently well-used, had not been attended to by the Chambermaid and stank almost as much as my leeches.

January 3rd

I was woken by a Chambermaid bringing in kindling and coals for my fireplace. I stayed in Bed for I have no Nightshirt and did not wish to frighten the girl.

'Are you awake, sir?' she shouted in a voice which would have woken the dead.

'I am,' I replied. She was a weedy little thing with long butter-coloured hair and very pale skin as though she spent very little time out of doors. I was surprised she had so much voice in her. 'What's your name?'

'My name is Nell, sir. But everyone calls me Nellie. Shall I bring your hot water for shaving, sir?'

I said that this would be splendid.

I had, in truth, not expected to be given hot water for washing or shaving. At Dr Challot's I had been accustomed to shaving in cold water. I always filled my own jug last thing at night, and in the winter it was often frozen solid by morning. It was on account of this that last wintertime I grew myself a beard from mid-December until late February.

When the girl had scurried out to fetch the water, I leapt out of Bed and pulled on my trousers in order to preserve the niceties of my person. I was, I confess, more than a little conscious of my new status as an Apothecary and Surgeon.

'Shall I ask the boot boy to attend to your boots, sir?' Nellie asked when she returned.

I said that this would be a good idea although when she took away my boots I did fear for a moment that I might never see them again. The boot boy, who is reputed to live on a diet of dry toast and mead, supplemented by scraps he takes from plates returned to the kitchen, is not a being to be trusted with a man's life let alone his boots.

I had hardly finished shaving when the girl reappeared with a laden tray upon which lay enough food for a coach party of eight. I have no idea how the girl managed to carry it. There was no towel in the room so I dried my face on a corner of one of the Bed curtains. The material smelt of bad Tobacco and cheap scent. I hate to think how much Rogering and Prigging has been done in the Sheets which appear not to have been changed since the Michaelmas before last.

When I checked my new Leech jar I was dismayed to see that the lid had slipped off and half of the remaining Leeches had gone. I searched the Bed and found two under my pillow but of the rest there was no sign. I also noticed that the Leech jar has a crack in it from top to bottom. In truth it was not the generous gift I originally thought it to be.

I made a mental note to demand new Sheets and a towel from Mistress Youngblood while she and her rogue of a husband are still of the belief that I will soon be wealthy, a ready husband for one of their well-used Daughters, and keen to be of assistance to their fuzzled clientele.

'What's this?' I demanded, examining the contents of the tray which the girl had lain down on my Table. It seemed scarcely possible that so much food had been brought for one person's fast breaking.

'It's your breakfast, sir,' said the Maid. 'The landlord said that if you need more you're just to shout. He also said to tell you that the brewer has put extra yarrow into the ale.'

The tray contained a plate of cold ham and beef, a roast cow's tongue, a roast udder, three Cambridge sausages and two fried eggs, half a pigeon pie and a whole roast mallard. To wash it all down there was a quart tankard of yarrow enhanced ale.

Midway through my meal, young Dick the boot boy appeared with my boots.

'I've given them a light wipe, sir,' said Dick, who is as big a Ruffian as Osbert the Ostler's boy, and, like him, a master of snide remarks and behaviour. I suspect the two of them must be related for I swear they both have rancid Blood in their damned Veins. 'But I didn't dare give them too hard a rubbing in case they fell apart,' he added, somehow managing to sound obsequious and offensive at the same time. He held up the two boots with one hand and with the other drew attention to the fact that one of the soles had become quite detached from the upper leather. He flapped at the sole with his fingers.

'Stop that!' I said. 'You'll damage the damned things yet further.'

He sniggered in an unpleasant sort of way and stopped flapping at the sole.

It occurred to me, for the first time, that my new status as a medical practitioner was not going to protect me from people like Dick, Osbert and the blackguard Youngblood.

'I appear to have misled my best boots,' I lied, feeling myself redden.

'I can lay my hands on a nearly new pair for you, sir,' he said. 'Nice boots fit for a gent like yourself. And they look about your size.'

'And how much would this nearly new pair of boots cost me?'

'Sixpence.'

I rummaged in my trouser pocket and found a fourpence piece. 'I'll give you fourpence if they fit me,' I told the young Varmint.

He picked up my battered boots, hurried out and returned less than a minute later clutching a nearly new pair of black leather riding boots. They were the best looking boots I'd ever seen and I tried them on with some eagerness. They were a little loose but nothing that a few Sheets of Newspaper couldn't remedy. He held out his hand and I dropped in the four pence piece. The coin disappeared into his trouser pocket with alarming speed. The new boots were an excellent exchange for my old ones and four pence. Stupidly, it did not occur to me to wonder where the boy had obtained a pair of boots of such good quality.

When I had finished as much of my breakfast as I could force down, Nellie the Maidservant returned to collect the tray. I'd left half the pigeon pie and most of the cow's tongue. I had, however, succeeded in emptying the bucket of ale.

'I hope you weren't cold last night, sir,' said the Chambermaid adopting a strange manner which I suspect she may have thought seductive. 'I used to have an arrangement with Mr Parkins who had this room before you.'

'What sort of an arrangement?' I asked, not for a moment expecting the answer I received.

'For two pence a night I slept in his Bed and kept him warm,' she told me. 'For more than just the warming he paid me another penny. I could provide the same service for you, sir. I could keep you warm every night except Saturdays.'

'What happens on Saturdays?' I asked. I noticed for the first time that she had unfastened the top three buttons of a filthy chemise. Her chest, quite devoid of dumplings, was as flat as a hymnal book cover.

'The Reverend Standorf's Wife goes to stay with her mother in Lower Leatherwallop at weekends and so I keep him company on Saturday nights. He gives me a shilling if I'm extra obliging.'

I stared at her in astonishment. I fear my mouth gaped open in fly catching mode. The Reverend Standorf is as prim and proper as the proverbial Maiden aunt. He likes to present himself as a thorough man, honest and reliable whichever way you slice him. I had long harboured some doubts about the man but I never suspected he enjoyed such a secret life.

'That cannot be true!' I said.

'It's as true as I'm standing here,' insisted the girl, with a surprising air of defiance. She thought for a moment. 'I can prove it to you!'

'How?'

'He has a third nipple and currently a large bite mark on his thigh,' she replied. 'He likes to be bitten,' she explained with a shrug.

'I can't possibly know if that's true!' I insisted.

'You're supposed to be a Doctor, aren't you?'

'I am a Doctor!' I replied, not liking the use of the word 'supposed'.

'Then find a way to persuade him to undress,' she said. 'You'll see that I'm right!'

'Which thigh?' I asked. 'Left or right?'

She thought for a moment and touched her own left thigh. 'This one,' she said.

'The left?'

'If that's the left one.'

'You don't know which is which?'

She shook her head.

'How old are you?' I demanded, quite shocked by this revelation. I could not help but think she looked too skinny to provide any warmth, even for a Clergyman.

'I've been told I am eighteen, sir. But I am well taught and neither Mr Parkins nor the Reverend Standorf has never made complaints. The Reverend Standorf, in particular, who is an unusually demanding man with quirks, has always expressed himself well satisfied.'

I looked at her in astonishment. I did not think she was as old as she claimed. She didn't seem like any fizgig I'd ever met but did seem surprisingly experienced for her age. It occurred to me to hope, for his sake, that the Vicar used a good, solid tortoiseshell condom rather than one of the flimsy linen ones.

I told the young dollymop that if I felt cold I would request a copper warming pan. 'Can you read?' I asked her out of curiosity, wondering in which direction her learning lay.

She shook her head. 'No one ever took the trouble to learn me.' She seemed subdued and I fancied there were tears in her eyes. 'The landlady charges an extra four pence a night for a warming pan,' she replied, struggling for defiance. 'You'd save tuppence if you had me keep you warm instead of a warming pan.'

'I will buy myself a flannel Nightshirt,' I retorted, quite shocked.

As I went downstairs, about to leave the Inn on my way to Dr Challot's home to see whether anyone was ailing, dying or in need of shave, I heard a commotion in the snug.

'I left the damned things outside my bedroom door to be cleaned,' shouted an angry looking fellow in smart breeches and a dark purple frock coat. I could not help noticing that his feet and calves were shod only in white silk stockings. There are few things more comical than a fellow dressed as a gentleman from the knees up but having only white silk stockings from the knees down – especially when the right stocking has a large hole in the heel as this had. The pistol poking out of the man's coat pocket was rather less comical.

'Can't imagine where they've got to, sir,' wheedled the landlord. 'Maybe burglars climbed up a drainpipe and stole them?'

'I'll shoot the bastard Thief when I catch up with him!' said the man, laying a hand upon the butt of his pistol. He didn't shout but said it in a very flat, dull sort of way which made it considerably more frightening than if he had shouted. However, I have to say that apart from an acute shortage of boots, he looked to be a rollicking sort of fellow; the sort of chap who might have been the life and soul of the party under rather different circumstances.

Suddenly, I felt a hand tugging at my coat. I looked down and there stood Dick, the boot boy.

I knew immediately what had happened, of course. The little Varmint had stolen this fellow's boots and sold them to me. I was about to box his ears when I realised that I needed to do something about the boots I was wearing. I stepped back away from the doorway into the snug. I immediately felt Dick lift my left boot into the air. I looked down and saw that he was using a rather deadly looking penknife to lever the heel off the boot. When he had done this he put the knife and the boot heel into his trouser pocket. I stared at him uncomprehendingly for a moment before I realised why he'd done what he'd done.

'I'll fix it back on for you tonight, sir,' whispered Dick. And with that he was gone. I stepped out of the shadows and limped and hirpled back into the hallway where the man in the white, silk stockings saw me.

'Halt, sir!' he cried, in a voice that was not easy to ignore. He strode over to where I was standing. 'Are those my boots, you Varmint?' he demanded.

'They are not, sir!' I replied, with more bravado than I felt. 'And I resent your tone and the implication. I am a medical man, sir, not a boot thief.'

'They look damned fine like my boots,' said the man.

'Do your boots have a heel missing?' I demanded.

'Of course they don't! They were purchased just last week from Jermyn Street in London. Brand new boots! They cost me six guineas the pair. And the heels were nailed on damned tight, sir.'

Marvelling in part at the very idea that someone might spend six guineas on a pair of boots and in part on the fact that the six guinea boots were now on my own feet, I lifted my left foot into the air and showed him the place where the heel should have been. 'I lost the heel three days ago,' I told him. 'I have not yet had the time to have my damned boot-maker make the necessary repair.'

'Hrmph,' said the bootless fellow without much interest or any sympathy.

'I saw a fellow galloping off with a spare pair of boots hanging from his saddle,' I said. 'Perchance he was the Thief and they were your boots.'

'How long ago was this?'

'Half an hour or so,' I said.

'Which way did he go?'

'He took the road to the West,' I said, surprised at my own skill at telling a tale. It occurred to me that if things went awry with medicine I could perhaps tread in the footsteps of Mr Defoe, Mr Dickens and Mr Thackeray and fashion myself a living out of words. I had recently been much taken with the weekly instalments of Mr Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* and as a boy had been a keen reader of Mr Defoe's tales. I had for several months been a keen reader of Mr Dickens's monthly serial entitled *The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences and Observation of David Copperfield the Younger of Blunderstone Rookery (which He Never Meant to Publish on Any Account)* though I confess I had it in mind that I might have been able to invent a more palatable title.

'Ye gad, sir, this is a vile place, a vile place!' complained the fellow with stockinged feet. 'What is the world coming to when a man cannot leave his boots outside without having them stolen?' He looked down at his feet. 'How can I chase the fellow with no boots?'

'Maybe we can find an old pair for you to wear,' said Mr Youngblood. 'I'll call for the boot boy.'

'I found this pair, sir,' said Dick, appearing as though by magic, and holding up my old pair of well-worn boots. 'I was going to take them home for my father who has been walking unshod for six months but I can let you have them, sir. Tuppence a boot, sir?'

'There's your explanation, sir,' said the landlord. 'The Thief what stole your pair left this sorry pair behind.' He paused for a moment. 'Maybe it was merely a case of mistaken identity,' he suggested. 'It must be said that in the dark one pair of boots can look much like another.'

Five minutes later the stranger, with my old raggedy boots on his feet, was on his horse chasing after the imaginary miscreant. And Dick, the crafty rascal, had another fourpence in his pocket.

'Do you know who that was?' asked Mr Youngblood in an awed whisper as the stranger disappeared in a flurry of dust, shouting over his shoulder that he would never return to an establishment which allowed a decent man's boots to be stolen.

'I have no idea,' I replied. 'Other than that he appears to be considerably upset.'

'That was Paul 'Two Pistols' Hanham,' whispered the landlord. He crossed himself, something I have never seen him do before. The name meant nothing to me. 'The Highwayman,' explained the landlord. 'They say he has killed seven men in robberies and another two in duels.'

I gave silent thanks that one pair of black leather boots looks much like another and hurried out of the Inn.

It was a bengy day with swullocking weather as far as the eye could see and as the ice-cold air hit my face, I closed my eyes and unsuccessfully attempted to suppress the expression of the wind that lay within. Indeed, it did not escape my knowledge that the wind within was as strong as the wind without. I was conscious that I was as full with food as a rich tinker's goat and suddenly found myself feeling rather discombobulated. It was doubtless the result of my trying to cram such an unusually large breakfast into a stomach shrunken by an unbroken diet of Turnip soup. And I had a suspicion that the pigeon pie may not have been quite as fresh as it might have been. Suddenly, my head was spinning like a top and before I knew what was happening, my legs failed me and I fell backwards onto the cobbled courtyard. I have seen men succumb in this way after treating themselves too generously to ale and spirits but I knew this could not have been the case, my having consumed no more than a quart of ale at breakfast time, and that doubtless watered down.

The damnable notching I sustained on the tegument over the Occiput bone at the back of my head did not feel too serious but I nevertheless Bled like a stuck pig at a country fair. The Bleeding soaked into the back of my shirt and collar and was not abated without I put on my hat. The damned thing, which I purchased from Jauncy Withergow's widow, is too tight by a size and usually mortally uncomfortable but the tightness ensured that it suppressed the Bleeding most effectively. I fear I shall have to keep my hat on until nightfall. This is not a good start to my first day as a qualified medical man.

When I got to Dr Challot's, I noticed that the pool of cat vomit had finally disappeared and although the carpet appeared damp it was definitely clean. I congratulated Mistress Swain on having found the time to remove the obnoxious hazard.

'Oh, I didn't clean it up,' she replied haughtily. 'He doesn't pay me enough to clean up cat sick. I was going to use it to thicken up the Turnip soup but next door's dog came in and licked it all up.'

I was not sure whether or not the reference to the Turnip soup was meant in a jocular fashion and I am fearful relieved not to be taking any more meals in Dr Challot's house.

'I see you started the drinking early in the day, like himself upstairs,' said Mistress Swain, turning her head and holding her nose with her fingers as though to indicate that my breath offered evidence of over-indulgence.

Not for the first time I considered the woman a dire hypocrite for she is a committed maltworm and I have never known her to be truly sober. Most evenings she sleeps in a Chair beside the kitchen fire because she is too inconvenienced by Alcohol to be able to drag herself up the stairs. I always gave thanks when she slept downstairs for she snores like a snuffling sow and her attic room was directly next to my own.

'I took a little refreshment with my breakfast, that is all,' I told her haughtily, and regrettably started with a severe dose of the Hiccups. It is difficult to remain dignified when with the Hiccups, so I asked the wretched woman if there had been any patients calling or sending for assistance.

'There's one in the dining room, biting his hat sitting awaiting your arrival,' Mistress Swain told me coldly. 'Plus the Leech man from Allenstein and Marienwerder called in but he said he'd come back in two days.'

Allenstein and Marienwerder is a company of well-known Leech suppliers. Their Leech jars are always decorated with a coat of arms above which are the words 'Suppliers of Fresh Leeches to the Aristocracy'. The aristocratic customers who purchase their Leeches are not named.

Suddenly, I remembered that two days earlier I had promised to make a contraceptive pessary for Mistress Wiltshire. Her husband, who is an able seaman in Her Majesty's Navy, had been at sea for two years and is due to return home within a week. Mistress Wiltshire is not keen to have more children and requested that I make a pessary which she could rely upon to protect her from what she calls Conjugated Consequences. He is apparently not enthusiastic about condoms though the ones made out of tortoiseshell are said to be most effective.

Using a new recipe, which I had based on a foundation recipe obtained from a recent edition of the 'Provincial Medical and Surgical Journal', I had prepared a pessary from glycerine and cocoa butter. I had added nutmeg, Tobacco and ground orange peel to the glycerine and cocoa butter and then, acting on a whim I had added a little senna, some soap shavings and a good portion of gentian root. I had also added a good portion of duck fat and ear wax to help give the pessary a better shape and form.

I must admit that I was well pleased with the finished product which, at 150 grains, was rather larger than usual but impressively formed. I'd rather hoped that Mistress Wiltshire might return wanting one or two pessaries if her husband had an extended shore leave.

'Did Mistress Wiltshire call in to collect her pessary?' I asked.

'She called in but wouldn't take it,' said Mistress Swain. 'She said it was bigger than her husband's lobcock and that she'd never get it inside of herself. I must say I sympathised with her. I've seen some lobcocks in my time but I've never seen one with the girth or length of that thing. It was bigger than those parsnips we had the Christmas before last.'

'I made it specially for her!' I protested. 'It took me half a day to prepare.'

'Well, she didn't want it; said she wouldn't have it inside her.'

'I hope her husband puts a pudding in her!' I snapped crossly, wondering what the devil I could do with the unwanted pessary.

Mistress Swain leant forward, peering at me as though something about me seemed strange but she couldn't quite work out what it was. Eventually, the bit of her brain that wasn't soaked in gin started to function and she asked me if I were intending to remove my hat.

I haughtily told her that I would remove my hat when I found myself in the company of a lady and instructed her to send the Patient in to see me.

Feeling rather pleased with my witty retort, I hurried into the consulting room which, in theory, I share with Dr Challot. In practice, he is rarely in a fit mood to tear himself away from his Bed in order to do any consulting. During the last twelve months I doubt if he has been in the consulting room more than half a dozen times though he will emerge occasionally to remove limbs (an activity which he enjoys) or attend aristocratic patients (who appear on our doorstep but irregularly).

'Why are you limping?' demanded Mistress Swain, speaking to my back as I headed for the consulting room. I ignored her. She obviously hadn't noticed that one of my new boots had no heel attached.

The Patient awaiting me was our local Constable, a bearded fellow in his 40s called Tobias Blomfield. He looked tired and full of anxiety. He is a determined valetudinarian, a large man but a shy and surprisingly gentle sort of fellow.

Constable Blomfield used to be a carrot and mangle salesman until he was appointed to his current post; a position he obtained partly on account of his having large fists and partly on account of the absence of any other applicants. His Wife is a midget and well-known local egg-cracker.

'I've been counting them as best I can, Doctor,' said Mr Blomfield. 'And I reckon as I've only got 23 left. I've been eking them out, withholding them you might say, but my Wife is threatening to go elsewhere for satisfaction. She says the baker's boy has offered to give her all the diddling she requires. Do you know how it might be possible to get some more? I have a little money saved and I am willing to pay.'

Puzzled, I asked him what the devil he was talking about.

It took some time to drag the story out of him but it appeared that he had attended a meeting organised by a certain Reverend Cedric Cadwallader, and had subsequently read a religious tract written by the man's wife, Henrietta Cadwallader. As a consequence he had come to believe that a man can only cleave the pin 300 times in his lifetime and that a man who puts himself about and distributes his oats too freely will run out of orgasms at an early age.

The Constable confessed that since he heard the news, he'd been counting off his orgasms on a sort of 'cleave pinning calendar' as recommended by Mistress Cadwallader. He produced a piece of paper on which he had made a large number of pencil marks.

'They add up to 277,' he told me. 'So I've only got 23 left. I had to estimate how many I'd used up when I was younger because in those days I didn't know there was a limit.' He shook his head rather sadly. 'When I was a lad I was dung reckless,' he confessed.

I stared at him, astonished and bewildered.

'I reckon I must have used up more than two thirds of my allotment with my sister Elspeth,' moaned Mr Blomfield. 'I cleaved the pin a good deal with her.'

I was a trifle startled at this admission.

'She was three years older than me,' continued Mr Blomfield. 'And she had appetites but didn't want to do it with her boyfriend because she wanted to be a virgin when she married.'

'A virgin?' I said, surprised. 'How can she have been a virgin if you were diddling her regularly?'

'Well if she'd not done it with him she'd be a sort of virgin wouldn't she?'

'I suppose…,' I began.

'Anyway, I used up a good many then, when I was still too young to appreciate what I was doing,' continued the

Constable. 'Of course, I didn't know about the Reverend Cadwallader in those days.'

'Cadwallader?'

'The Reverend Cadwallader. The gentleman I mentioned. He's a preacher and a Reformed Baptist, a great gentleman and a fine orator. I heard him speak at a chapel in Longton. He travels about the country with his message. They say he speaks somewhere every single evening.'

'And what precisely did he say?'

'He warned that man has only an allotted capacity for loving and that a man who is licentious will run out of his orgasms before he is 30 years of age. He says he has met men who were fully spent before they were 20-years-old.'

'Oh, that's all nonsense,' I told him, naively believing that he would accept my reassurance at face value. 'There are no limits.'

'No, no, it isn't so,' he insisted. 'Mr Armstrong has medical support. He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small leaflet. He unfolded the paper and handed it across the desk to me. At the top of the leaflet was printed the name 'Reverend Cadwallader', accompanied by an engraved drawing of a stern looking fellow with huge mutton chop whiskers and cold, hard, fanatical eyes that seemed to burn right through my skull.

The heading at the top of the leaflet was printed in thick, black type.

'Your Joys are Numbered'

The rest of the leaflet was made up of a stern warning to boys and men.

I turned the leaflet over. On the other side there was the same name and the same scary looking engraving of the fellow's face but this side of the leaflet was taken up with supporting quotes from half a dozen medical practitioners and a dozen or so men and women who told their dernful stories in crisp paragraphs.

'No Man or Woman can Afford to Ignore the Warnings of the Reverend Cadwallader,' wrote Doctor Merridew of Wimpole Street. 'The Body is Limited in Many Ways and a Man's Very Manhood is At Risk Unless He Heeds the Reverend Cadwallader's Warning.'

A Doctor O'Hearn of Manchester wrote an almost identical note of support, adding that only by following the advice of the Reverend Cadwallader could a man hope to preserve his Virility.

'I ran out of my Manly Pleasures when I was just 22 years of age,' said a doleful Mr J.K. of Huddersfield. 'Now I will never know the Joy of Fatherhood.'

'As a boy I was too free with my God Given Strengths and now I am bereft,' said Mr P.R. of Chelsea.

'My husband sowed his oats in Foreign Fields and now there is no Seed remaining for Crops at Home,' said Mistress H.L. of Derbyshire.

There were many more similar testimonials.

'You've got to help me Doctor,' said Mr Blomfield, when I handed the leaflet back to him. 'Do you think there might be a remedy available?' He seemed distraught as he carefully folded the leaflet and put it back into his pocket.

'What does the Reverend Cadwallader recommend?'

'He says that a man can only refresh his strength by joining his Church.'

'Well that doesn't sound too high a price to pay.'

'You have to attend his meetings once a week for a year and then, at the end of a twelve month, you regain another 25 orgasms,' said Mr Blomfield.

'And is there a donation to be made?'

'Oh yes, of course. The pastor says the Lord expects a minimum donation of five shillings a week. It's for the furtherance of the Lord's work and the Reverend says it's also a penance.'

I did the sums in my head. 'So if you give him five shillings a week for a year you can resume satisfactory relations?'

Mr Blomfield nodded.

'That's 13 Sovereigns for a very limited enhancement!'

'A large sum,' said Mr Blomfield miserably.

'And you believe this nonsense?'

'Oh yes,' said Mr Blomfield. He seemed rather shocked that I had asked the question.

'Does the Reverend have many supporters?'

'The night I attended, the hall was packed. People were standing in the aisles.'

'Are his meetings always that busy?'

'Oh yes. I'm sure they are. I spoke to a man from Stratford. He had travelled around the country following the good Reverend. He said there were always big crowds wherever he spoke.'

Cynically, it seemed to me this scaremongering preacher had created a rather profitable market for himself. He had found a way to scare his congregation and a way to promise them the redemption for which he had aroused a yearning. I had little doubt that his warnings proved effective simply because those in his congregation accepted the

Reverend's dire prognostications. If a man is told that he is going to be impotent then impotent he will probably be.

'Can you suggest anything a little cheaper?' asked the Constable.

'It's all nonsense,' I said, pointing to the leaflet. 'There's no scientific validity to the fellow's claims.'

'I'm afraid you're wrong, Doctor,' said Mr Blomfield, with certainty but appropriately apologetically. 'Read what all those Doctors have to say! They wouldn't tell lies, would they? They're Doctors!'

I confess I didn't quite know what to say to this. I was pretty certain that it would not be difficult to find Doctors eager to promote any cause, however implausible, if they were encouraged in their deceit by the prospect of a handsome, five guinea fee. I was pretty certain that Dr Challot, for example, would endorse horse shit as a remedy for rheumatism if someone gave him two shillings and a bottle of gin.

I spent some time trying to convince the Constable that the Preacher was talking rubbish, since if what he'd been told were true then every other man would probably be impotent before he wed. Suddenly, Constable Blomfield took a half Sovereign out of his waistcoat pocket and held it up for me to see. The half Sovereign glittered in a small ray of sunshine and I swear I could see the young Queen Victoria winking at me in an unexpectedly seductive way. 'Come and hold me!' was the message I received. 'Put me in your pocket.'

And it occurred to me that I really ought to do what I could to help alleviate the poor fellow's anxieties. I reminded myself that it is, after all, a Doctor's duty to do everything he can to make the path easier for his patients as they stumble along life's rocky road.

'I would be very happy to pay for treatment,' murmured Mr Blomfield. 'There must be a remedy you Doctors know of; a remedy you use yourselves perhaps?' He winked conspiratorially.

'Ah,' I said, nodding my head, as though in understanding. 'Maybe there is a remedy I can provide for you.'

The poor fellow's eyes lit up as hope surged in to push aside the despair.

I paused before saying more and looked about me as though nervous that we were being overheard. I leant forward until I was no more than a foot away from him. 'You must swear not to tell a soul about this. If you go about talking, gossiping and boasting I will have every rancid fool in the county queuing at my door.'

'I understand, Doctor,' he nodded, with a very serious look on his face.

'I can give you a special remedy to enable you to cleave the pin a good deal more,' I whispered.

'How much more?' he asked. 'How many times more?'

I mumbled a bit at that because I didn't have the foggiest idea what to say, though it occurred to me that the fellow would be happier if I gave him some certainty.

'Another 100 times,' I told him. 'The treatment I'm going to give you will ensure that you can do it another 100 times.'

His eyes lit up. And then he frowned. 'What happens after that, Doctor?'

'When those 100 orgasms have run out you will need to return for another treatment.'

He nodded.

'You understand?'

'Oh, yes, Doctor, I do. I understand. I will count them.'

'You will need to keep a record lest you forget. Can you write?'

'I can make a mark on a paper.'

'Then make a mark every time you cleave the pin. Can you count?'

'Only up to five, sir.' He held up a hand.

'Bring the paper to me when you think you've used up your number and I'll do the counting for you.'

'Thank you, Doctor.'

'And next time I will have to charge you a full Sovereign.'

'Right you are, Doctor.'

'The treatment I'm about to give you is an expensive one and the ingredients are rare. I would usually have to charge five Sovereigns. In London they would pay 20 Sovereigns for this remedy. I dare say I could find patients prepared to pay as much as a full 50 Sovereigns for the chance to cleave the pin another 100 times. That's a mere half a Sovereign per cleaving.'

'This half Sovereign is all I have,' muttered Mr Blomfield. 'I had to sell my cow and my eldest Daughter to raise that.'

'Your eldest Daughter is the one they call Violet?'

'That's the one, sir.'

'How much did you get for her?'

'A florin.'

'Just two shillings?'

'Aye. Two shillings.'

‘To whom did you sell her?’

‘To a fellow who works on a farm,’ replied Constable Blomfield. ‘I never caught his name. He seemed a nice enough young fellow though he had a wall eye, no teeth, a gammy leg and, to be honest, was not right at the front of the queue when God was handing out brains.’

‘Violet was a virgin?’

‘Oh yes, sir. Apart from myself, of course.’

‘Of course.’

‘And her brothers,’ he added.

‘Naturally.’ I nodded but frowned. I knew the girl. She was a nicely plumped creature of seventeen or so. It seemed too small a price by far. The farm labourer might not have been right at the front of the queue during the handing out of brains but Blomfield had been diddled. I thought it reprehensible that a father should sell off his Daughter for such a miserable sum. The girl must have been mortified to know that she was valued so low.

‘You think I could have got more?’ asked Constable Blomfield.

‘You could have asked for half a crown,’ I told him. ‘Perhaps as much as three shillings.’ I thought for a moment. ‘Mind you, Jake Aldborough sold his Wife for one shilling and sixpence and was glad to get that.’

‘She was an old woman.’

‘Nearly 40,’ I agreed.

He nodded. ‘An old woman,’ he repeated. ‘And she was fat, ugly and fierce-some bellicose. I would have thought her expensive at a shilling and not much of a bargain at half a groat.’

Poor Blomfield, clearly annoyed that he could have perhaps sold his Daughter for more money, looked glum for a moment before brightening a little. ‘I have two younger Daughters,’ he said, more to himself than to me. ‘They’re both much prettier. And I daresay I could get a good price for the Wife.’

‘You’re not going to sell your Wife are you?’

‘I don’t think I’ll sell her unless I have to,’ he said. ‘She keeps a good house and is a fair decent cook.’ He thought for a moment. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘she’s a fair decent cook. And a good warm body with well sized dugs.’

He didn’t say anything about loving her or feeling any affection for her. I got the impression that if I’d offered him five shillings in cash, there and then, he’d have sold me what was left of his family without a blink.

‘What sort of treatment will it be?’ he asked. ‘Is it Medicine to drink? I don’t like pills.’

‘A suppository,’ I told him.

I have no idea why I said this.

I could have made up a bottle or medicine, rolled him a pill or prepared a powder in a sachet. But somehow a suppository seemed more appropriate. And I admit now I think I liked the idea of giving the uncaring wretch something he would have to stick up his arse.

Also I knew I had something handy which I could give him now. This would mean that he would not have to wait for the treatment and I would not have to wait for the half a Sovereign.

‘What’s a suppository?’ he asked with bright innocence.

‘You stick it up your nancy,’ I told him.

‘Up my nancy hole?’

I nodded. ‘Up your nancy hole.’

‘Can’t you give me a bottle of green medicine? Like that stuff you gave me for my sore throat?’

‘It has to be a suppository,’ I told him firmly.

‘How far up must it go?’ he asked. His voice was a little higher pitched and shakier than it had been and he had not yet seen the size of the suppository I had in mind.

‘A full finger length,’ I told him sternly. ‘More than a finger length would be better. Put it well in and keep pushing. The further up it goes the nearer it will be to the base of your tallywag.’

He nodded as though this made good sense to him. I was pleased it seemed to make good sense to one of us.

‘You can get your Wife to put it in if you prefer,’ I told him. ‘Do you have a billy club?’

‘Oh, yes, Doctor!’ he replied, taking a nice and smooth piece of mahogany a foot or so long out of what must have been an especially lengthened trouser pocket. He fondled it lovingly.

‘Splendid! Your Wife can use that to push the suppository into place,’ I told him. ‘Just make sure she ties a long piece of strong string to the handle of the billy club.’

He stared at me, uncomprehendingly.

‘So that it doesn’t disappear with the suppository,’ I explained. ‘She can pull the billy club out with the string if she lets go of it.’

He looked at me, and then down at the billy club which he no longer seemed to regard with quite the same affection as a few moments earlier. It heartened me to think that the Wife he had been prepared to sell so cheaply would have such fine entertainment.

‘Do I need to tell her what the suppository is for?’

‘That’s up to you. But why not? If she’s been feeling deprived she’ll surely be enthusiastic about the procedure.’

Constable Blomfield nodded, realising that this made sense.

‘Just give me the half Sovereign,’ I told him sternly.

He handed me the coin. I bit the edge of it to check it was real, and slipped it into my waistcoat pocket. I then opened the drawer in my desk and took out the pessary which Mistress Wiltshire had rejected and which I had now arbitrarily renamed a suppository. After all, there is no difference between the one and the other except the purpose and the destination.

Constable Blomfield stared at the suppository as though he couldn’t believe his eyes. ‘It’s huge!’ he said at last. ‘It’s bigger than a good sized parsnip.’ There were tears forming in his eyes as he looked at the device.

‘It’s beautifully shaped, firm but soft and pliant,’ I told him. ‘You or your Wife will have no difficulty in getting it into place.’

I wrapped the suppository in brown paper, tied a string around it and handed it to him. ‘You and your Wife can make the beast with two backs 100 times with what’s in that package!’

‘Will it work only with the wife?’ he asked anxiously. ‘I do sometimes like to roger the Maid. And there’s my two Daughters as well, of course.’

‘It’ll work with anyone,’ I promised him. ‘Except perhaps Mistress Swain!’ I added, in jest.

He stared at me, looking terrified.

‘It was but a joke,’ I explained. ‘I didn’t intend you to take it seriously.’

The poor fellow looked relieved. He held the package tentatively, as though nervous of its power, and then he left.

I wished I could have been a fly on the ceiling of their bedroom when his Wife struggled to force the suppository into its new home.

When Constable Blomfield had gone, anticipating a certain soreness but also doubtless looking forward to a few weeks of active satisfaction, I took the half Sovereign out of my pocket and examined it. What a pity it was, I thought, that I would have to hand it over to Dr Challot and receive just a quarter of its value in return.

Suddenly, I remembered that according to my contract I did not have to pay Dr Challot any of my earnings which came from new patients or from new remedies which I had invented.

The half a Sovereign was mine. It was the first gold coin I had ever owned.

And, moreover, if I sold another of the suppositories the next coin would be mine too.

I would have danced around the room if I’d had a partner.

As it was I hurried off to the Peacock Inn to celebrate my new found wealth with a bottle of malmsey and a large eel and pigeon pie – with the eels nicely spitchcocked. I may not have had a dancing partner but I swear I danced all the way to the Inn. Or, rather, I danced as well as a man can dance when one of his boots has no heel.

The first thing I did when I got there was to tell Dick to put the heel back onto my boot. After it had been done, however, I was so accustomed to limping that I felt curiously unbalanced. Still, I had no real cause to complain. I had half a guinea in my pocket and a new pair of boots on my feet.

Most important of all, I had succeeded in getting through the day without being shot by ‘Two Pistols’ Hanham.

January 6th

With some considerable reluctance, I climbed the staircase to the first floor and knocked on Dr Challot's bedroom door.

'Who is it?'

'It's me,' I replied. 'Dr Bullock.'

'What the hell do you want?'

'There's a Patient downstairs who is something of a puzzle,' I said.

'What's wrong with her?'

'That's the problem,' I admitted. 'I don't know.'

'What do you mean you don't know?' demanded Dr Challot, sounding exasperated. My employer is an impatient man, easily roused and nicely ripened, I fear, for a seizure. He has no great affection for work and if he ever wrote his autobiography it would be called 'But not Today'. However, the world of literature is likely to be spared such a tome for he is barely able to make a cross in lieu of a signature and if he is required to write a note he merely scratches the pen around and across the parchment as though the squiggles he makes have a meaning. 'All Doctors' handwriting is illegible,' he remarks if anyone wonders what his meaningless hieroglyphics might mean.

'I haven't been able to make an accurate determination,' I admitted.

'Come in and stop shouting through the damned door,' bawled Dr Challot suddenly. 'I can't abide people who shout through doors.'

When I entered the room all was much as I had expected.

Dr Challot was sitting up in Bed with a tray of food remnants on his lap and two dollymops lying one each side of him. Although Mistress Swain makes regular meals, Dr Challot does not always eat them – sometimes preferring to have his meals sent in from a nearby pie and ale house. The pies are reputed to be made with horse meat but Dr Challot seems to find them tasty enough – and preferable, no doubt, to another bowl of Mistress Swain's interminable Turnip soup.

The dollymop on his left, a redhead called Fanny Church who is the ratcatcher's eldest Daughter, was picking at a huge piece of overcooked beef with her fingers. The other trollop, the one on his right, a brunette called Kitty Fisher, was picking pieces of crust from a pie. She too was eating with her fingers. Both of them were quite naked as far as I could tell and seemed not in the slightest put out by my presence. Dr Challot refers to them as nurses but as far as I am aware they have neither qualifications nor experience in that particular area of expertise and their professional skills lie in other directions.

'What the devil do you want, damn your hide?' demanded my employer who was, I realised, sporting a brand new wig. Either that or he had a ferret sitting on the top of his head. 'What do you mean you can't make a determination? I thought you were supposed to be a Doctor. Aren't you now a Doctor? Didn't I give you a Leech jar to celebrate your licensing as a practitioner?'

'Yes, indeed you did. And thank you for the Leech jar. It was very welcome.'

'And the Leeches. There were Leeches in it. Good Leeches – still got plenty of suck in them.'

'Indeed so, the Leeches are splendid,' I lied. Dr Challot had not been downstairs for some time and so would not have been aware of the cat's unfortunate experience.

'So what do you want, damn you? It better be important, you can see I'm busy having my breakfast. And when I've eaten, these two nurses will expect a good diddling.' The dollymops duly giggled at this.

'I'm afraid I am really not sure what's wrong with Mistress Maitland,' I confessed. 'I haven't been able to make a determination.'

'Augusta Maitland? She is the patient you are talking about?'

I nodded.

'What the devil do want a determination for?'

Suddenly, without any provocation on my part, Dr Challot plucked a roast potato from a plate on his tray and hurled it at me. I ducked and the potato hit the wall behind me with an unpleasant squishy sort of sound. Dr Challot laughed and the two women snickered. They sounded like a pair of horses whinnying.

'I read a book in which the author claimed that a Doctor should always make an accurate determination before treating a patient,' I told him. 'I believe that in London the fashionable Physicians now refer to it as 'calling up a diagnosis'.'

'Of course, you must always make a determination!' exploded Dr Challot, who has a deep rooted suspicion of London Physicians, an even deeper rooted suspicion of fashion and a muggle man's loathing of all things scientific. 'But it doesn't matter a damn whether it's the right determination or not. If your patients think you don't know everything they'll think you know nothing. Where do you think we would be if patients thought we didn't know what was wrong with them?'

'But I really don't know what is wrong with Mistress Maitland,' I protested. 'What if I say that she has one thing when in reality she has another quite different thing?'

'What damned difference does it make, what you say she has? It's the treatment that matters, and the treatment will doubtless be much the same whatever the devil you tell her.' He held up three fingers because he is determinedly innumerate as well as illiterate. 'What treatments are there? Name them, damn your ignorant hide!'

'Bleeding, Purging, Cupping and Herbing with elixirs, powders, melt wafers and rolled pills,' I said instantly, for I had learned my lessons well and knew all the treatments as well as any Doctor. I confess I felt rather insulted to be tested like this; particularly in front of a pair of bangtails. Not that they were listening. With Dr Challot occupied in talking, they were far too busy filling their grubby faces with food from the breakfast tray.

'Exactly!' Dr Challot used his now redundant fingers to pick up another potato. This one he popped into his mouth. 'So what's this damnable mystery woman complaining about?'

'She says she feels weak and that she's noticed some swelling in her lower limbs.'

'Do you mean her legs?'

'Yes, sir, her legs!'

'Well damned well say what you mean when you say it. I don't want any of that fancy twaddle in this practice, do you hear me? An arm is an arm, a leg is a leg and the head is the head. That's your basic anatomy for you.'

'Yes, sir.'

Dr Challot turned to Kitty. 'What do you call the frayed bits at the end of your legs?'

She looked at him and frowned as if he'd asked her to recite the Lord 's Prayer in Latin. 'I didn't do any schooling, sir,' she said.

'I know you didn't. What do you call the frayed bits at the end of your arms?'

She looked at him and frowned. He lifted his hands in the air and wiggled his fingers. 'These things! The bits that you use to hold onto the cockhead as you're preparing to give it a good suckle!'

'My fingers?'

'Exactly right. So what are the frayed bits at the end of your legs called?'

'I know, I know!' said Fanny, leaping about so excitedly that she fell out of bed. 'Those are her toes.'

'That's my girls,' said Dr Challot. He put a hand on one of Kitty's breasts. 'And this? What's this?'

'That's one of my dairy queens, sir!' she replied proudly.

Dr Challot, still clutching Kitty's well-formed dug, turned to me. 'These girls know as much as you do!' he cried with a pleasant cackle. 'Anatomy is very simple. Where did you get this complicated 'lower limb' stuff from?'

'I read it in a book, sir.'

'Another book! A book again! Is that all you can do with yourself? Read books? What the devil have you been reading books for? You don't see me reading books, do you?'

'No, sir.'

Dr Challot, was given his training by his well-ripened uncle, an idle, pox-ridden fellow who was renowned, among other things, for being proudly illiterate. As far as I am aware, Dr Challot himself has never read a book of any kind, thick nor thin.

A wise uncle of mine once told me that if you don't know what you don't know then you don't know anything and if my uncle knew of what he spoke then Dr Challot knows nothing. He does have a very small collection of books on the shelf in his consulting room and this he calls his library. Both volumes in his library are nicely bound in leather but I cannot see that they offer much in the way of help to a medical man. One book is a Bible and the other is a copy of the 1839 edition of Bradshaw's Railway guide. Dr Challot used to point to them with pride, describing them as his professional library, though I never saw him even touch them, let alone open them. Indeed, there would be little point since he cannot read. He always asks me to read the flyers left by Leech Drummers, usually saying that he had mislaid his pince-nez. He certainly has no Latin. When Sir Benedict Ponsonby, the Physician and a rich, evil, snooty bastard if ever there was one, sends along prescriptions to be made up, Dr Challot never makes any effort to study them but just makes up one of his favourite mixtures, or rolls up a dozen pills. (Sir Benedict, like all Physicians, is allowed to charge for making a determination but is not allowed to prepare or dispense medicines.) To be fair, Dr Challot can tell from Sir Benedict's dog Latin scrawl when he's supposed to make up a bottle of medicine and when he's supposed to prepare a supply of pills or a wafer, but the rest of it is as much of a mystery to him as it would be to a blind man.

Even if Dr Challot could read, he wouldn't be able to see what he was looking at because he's as blind as a bat. A few years ago he bought a pince-nez from a traveller but he won't wear the thing because he says he's worried he will wear it out if he uses it too often. He won't even wear the pince-nez when he is treating patients and this has led to some confusion, disappointments and embarrassments. For two years he insisted on treating Squire Ludwig

Drinkwater as pregnant because the fellow was so fat that he had grown what appeared to be massive dugs and had acquired a huge belly which hung down so far that his delicacies were well hidden and quite out of sight. ‘Face facts! You’re a woman and you’re pregnant!’ he bawled at the poor fellow and would not be dissuaded from this conclusion.

‘Where did you find this book of yours?’ demanded Dr Challot.

‘I bought a stone and a half of assorted volumes from the Carter,’ I replied. ‘He got them from a house sale and though it’s true that the greater number of them are Bibles, mostly well bound in good leather it has to be said, there was one book on anatomy among them. It was nicely printed on good paper and therefore obviously of good quality and reliable.’ I hesitated. ‘I thought a row of books would be impressive if displayed upon a shelf or in a cabinet.’ For two months I had kept them in a box in my room in the attic but now they resided on the davenport in my room at the Inn.

‘Baaa,’ said Dr Challot, dismissively. ‘Books are la-di-da nonsenses and the cause of most of the troubles in the world. What did you pay for them?’

‘Tuppence for the stone and a half,’ I replied.

I learned some years ago that you can buy books much more cheaply if you buy them by weight rather than by title. Hector Nodorf, a Carter and Rag Dealer who has premises no more than half an hour’s drumble distance from Muckleberry Pevrell, sells vast quantities of books by the pound. He buys his stock from the libraries of landed gentry who have died.

‘And from where did you get a spare tuppence to waste on books?’

‘I gave Phineas Turner, the Saddler a shave and a good Purging,’ I explained.

‘Don’t forget my sixpence!’ said Dr Challot immediately. He may be illiterate but he can work out how much he is owed in but a moment. He knew that if I had earned two pence from the Saddler then his share of the fee would be sixpence.

‘I won’t,’ I promised.

‘Madness,’ muttered Dr Challot to no one in particular. ‘You’ve learned nothing, have you? Still, books will doubtless make good burning if we run low on logs. Are they thick books? Lot of pages?’

‘Some of them are,’ I agreed. ‘The Bibles are very thick and should produce good heat.’

‘That’s good then. Not so bad.’ He thought for a moment. ‘And you could be right at that. A row of books could give us a flavour of good learning.’ Dr Challot picked up a piece of gammon which he had suddenly spotted and stuffed it into his mouth. ‘Maybe I should buy a pound or two of books from Nodorf. Have you had Mistress Maitland unclothe herself?’

‘Not fully, no. I have examined those parts of her extremities which can be reached but there were no symptoms in those parts of her that remained clothed and so…’

‘Ye Gods, you’re a bone brained knucklehead!’ interrupted Dr Challot. ‘Have you learned nothing from my tutelage? The woman will think you a very poor Doctor if you haven’t laid your hands on her parts – especially the nether parts. What sort of charge can you make if the woman retains all her clothing and returns home from a visit to her Doctor with her stays still buckled as tight as they were when she left home? She will think you a very poor excuse for a medical man. She must bare all and have good cause to blush before you can venture a determination.’

Abashed, I promised that I would do this.

‘Balderdash and bodkins, you goose, you half-witted booby! Undress her, poke her about a bit and then just give her a damned good six pence worth of Purging.’

‘But she wants to know what I think is wrong with her!’

‘Bloody cheek of the woman,’ roared Dr Challot. ‘Do I have to get myself out of Bed and attend to the damned practice myself? The world has gone to pot. Patients wanting to be told their determinations? Whatever next? Tell her that you know but that it’ll be another half a guinea if you are required to tell her. Tell her that patients have a right to expect their Doctor to keep his secrets safe.’

I headed for the door.

‘And mend your damned head and stop limping,’ added Dr Challot. ‘Patients aren’t impressed if they see their Doctor limping about like a sailor with the woodworm. They’ll think that if you can’t fettle yourself, you can’t be much of a Doctor! Eh, sir? Eh? What do you say to that?’

I didn’t say anything. I was busy limping down the stairs and trying to fit my damned hat back onto my damned head to stop the damned Bleeding. The boot boy had used nails which were half an inch too long when putting the heel back onto my boot and I was in agony when I walked. Moreover, all the excitement had caused the Bleeding on my head to start again and I feared that I’d lost so much Blood that I was beginning to feel slightly light headed.

I hope that my hat is not too badly stained with Blood. A new one will cost three shillings and sixpence, a sum I cannot possibly afford.

As recommended, I insisted that Mistress Maitland remove all her clothing (a task which took a good half an hour) and subject herself to a damned good inspection. She blushed and tittered a good deal. When I had finished, I gave her a bottle of Purging medicine and a bottle of the dark green medicine to polish her emptied bowels.

Before she left, still blushing, she asked if she should return for another examination to check that the medicine had worked its wonders.

When I told Mistress Maitland that she could send a Maid for two more bottles of the medicine she seemed curiously disappointed. I fear she does not understand that apothecaries make their money by providing medicines and not by examining their patients. The fact is that we can make just as much money simply by repeating a prescription.

January 9th

Baron Biddulph of Bloxwich rode his black steeplechaser around Muckleberry Peverell today, and in celebration of his birthday gave half a groat to every fourth poor person in the village. Since he is a skinflint who pays wages so low that most of his employees can barely afford to eat, this is hardly an act of Christian charity. The custom, an annual event, invariably manages to cause much discomfort and unhappiness.

I happened to be standing in the street as he rode past and he threw me half a groat which I instinctively reached out and caught.

Startled, and not a little insulted, I tossed the half-groat piece to Pippin Babberly, a professional mute who worked for several local undertakers as a silent mourner and who was standing on my left in hopeful expectation. He had not received a coin.

Unfortunately, the fellow who was standing next to Babberly, an unemployed fellow with a dozen children and only two wives to look after them, who had also been left out of the Baron’s largesse, punched Babberly on the nose and grabbed at the half-groat.

Babberly managed to hold onto the coin but suffered a black eye and a broken nose.

I set the nose for him and charged him half a groat since I knew he had the money. I told him it served him right for fighting.

He complained that he was no better off than he had been at the start of the day.

I pointed out that he was also now no worse off than he had been and that he was, indeed, better off in that he would now not acquire the head thumping megrim he would have doubtless ended up with after spending the half-groat on cheap gin.

January 16th

I have been invited to dinner with Mr Ephraim Gengolphus. The invitation was something of a surprise for I am not accustomed to being sent invitations to dine with the local gentry.

Mr Gengolphus is a huge, crude brute of a man who owns a large farm and is a man of some influence in the area. His lady Wife, Mistress Verity Gengolphus, is a pleasant enough woman and a very effective breeding machine. Ephraim and Verity have been married for 11 years and according to Dr Challot, Mistress Gengolphus has been pregnant for ten of those years. The couple have had 14 children (including one set of twins) and all of the children have been named after members of the Royal Family. Unfortunately, since the couple have had more children than Her Majesty has produced, they have had to duplicate some of the names. So, they have produced three Vickys, five Berties, an Alice, two Alfreds, one Helena, a Louise and an Arthur. Of these, just two Berties, one Vicky and a Helena have survived. It is well-known that Mr Gengolphus has, for some years, been angling for a baronetcy and I suspect he believes that by advertising his loyalty in this way he will achieve his ambition more speedily. Every time a child is born and christened, Mr Gengolphus sends a note to Buckingham Palace to apprise her Majesty of the latest show of respect. Still, ambition is a natural and largely laudable phenomenon: even borborygmi aspire to become clamorous eructations or merry expressions of flatulence.

Sir Newton Poppleford and Lady Lettice Poppleford were the other guests, along with their Daughter Miss Phyllis Poppleford, who is an accomplished harpsichord player and who rides to hounds. She looked far gone with child but she told everyone that she was cursed with a good deal of wind as a consequence of eating an uncomfortable surfeit of melons. I heard Mistress Gengolphus whisper to her husband that if the girl's blessing were truly the wind then she will in due course surely produce the devil of a fart.

Sir Newton is short, rotund and so red faced that he looks for all the world like an overripe tomato about to burst his skin and fire flesh and seed in all directions. His wife, Lady Lettice, is exceptionally tall and as thin as a sapling. She is habitually stooped as though bent over by a strong wind, or some other force of nature.

Miss Phyllis, who could never be owned to be pulchritudinous, and who has the features and the personality of a permanently bereaved sow, has recently become engaged to be married to Mr Staple Fitzgaine-Bickenhall, a neighbouring farmer whose estates are extensive and who also has a large house in London. Mr Fitzgaine-Bickenhall is 63-years-old, exceedingly short (no taller than a 12-year-old child) and the possessor of very poor eyesight. According to Mistress Swain, whose knowledge of such matters is extraordinarily precise, he is not believed to be the origin of the afore-mentioned swelling which, if not a result of eating too many melons, may well have been a consequence of one of Miss Poppleford's many close but transient friendships with hunting folk around the county. Mr Fitzgaine-Bickenhall was not present, having travelled to Devon to purchase a new bull.

We started dinner with two fine boiled cods and fried sole in oyster sauce. We were then served sirloin of beef accompanied by pea soup and orange pudding. This was followed with a wild duck each and a forequarter of lamb with salad and mince pies. We finished the meal with Plumb Cake and other tasty pulpatoons. We started dinner at 3 p.m. and were still eating at 6 p.m. We then rested for an hour before having supper. At half past six Mr Gengolphus said he felt peckish and so he ate a whole rabbit to himself. The rabbit had been basted in beef fat.

'I am once more with child,' announced Mistress Gengolphus quite suddenly.

'Is there any way to stop them coming?' asked Mr Gengolphus. 'We think we have a sufficiency now. We thought quite a lot of them would die off but too many have survived. We must breed very healthy ones. I asked Sir Richard Lovelace, my neighbour, if he knows of anything we can try. He and his Wife have six and haven't had a fresh one for five years. I wondered if he was perhaps being served by one of the kitchen Maids but he says not; he says he now buggers his Wife and that's put a complete stop to the births. He and his Wife say they both find it a perfectly satisfactory solution. Unfortunately, my Wife, Mrs Gengolphus, has the piles which rather get in the way of such a solution. The infants came forth by the front passage but the back passage seems to have suffered in sympathy.'

At this point I realised why I had been invited to dinner.

'It is doubtless all the pushing,' said Lady Poppleford. 'As a gal I was taught never to push but whenever I gave birth I was always encouraged to push. They shout at one to do it and so somehow one feels obliged.'

'I blame the first two,' said Mr Gengolphus. 'The more recent ones have been fired out with some speed.'

'Mr Gengolphus is unusually well built in the conviviality department and so gaining an entry to the tradesman's entrance would be unduly painful even without the piles,' added Mistress Gengolphus. 'I have known very few better endowed gentlemen than my husband, though my grandfather was exceptionally well built in that region and when young I did once pleasure a donkey at a Hunt Ball, but that is quite a different kettle of fish, of course. Would you like more veal, Doctor?'

'Just a little,' I replied.

'Another sausage?'

‘That would be splendid, thank you.’ I turned to her husband. ‘I could let you have some linen condoms,’ I suggested.

‘Tried ’em,’ he replied, pulling a face and shaking his head. ‘We bought half a dozen from a tinker but they were too damned tight, uncomfortably so, and we wore always ’em out before completion.’

‘Mr Gengolphus is very vigorous,’ explained his wife.

I suggested a tortoiseshell sheath might be a sturdier alternative.

‘Oh, I tried one of them,’ said Mr Gengolphus now pulling a face as though he’d bitten into a lemon. ‘My lady Wife wasn’t too taken with it and nor was I.’

‘It reminded me of the fat candle I used to pleasure myself with when I was a girl,’ said Mistress Gengolphus. ‘It was very cold and unyielding. The Vicar used to supply me with altar candles in return for certain favours.’

‘It was like paddling with me riding boots on,’ complained Mr Gengolphus. ‘Have you ever tried one of those tortoiseshell things yourself?’

I confessed that I had not. I took a bite of one of Mistress Gengolphus’s delicious sausages and turned to her. ‘I could maybe try to subdue your piles by the application of a selection of Leeches.’

‘Do you think that would work?’ she asked, her voice full of hope.

I said I would return the following morning with my Leech jar.

We had been told that Vigo Mountjoy had been hired to play the harp after dinner but there was considerable disappointment when Mr Mountjoy took a Jew ’s harp out of his waistcoat pocket and proceeded to attempt to entertain us with a variety of tunes on what we all agreed was a rather sorry looking little instrument. Mistress Gengolphus told us that when she had hired him she had expected he would bring the full sized version. He said he did not have a large harp and would not know how to play one if he was offered one.

‘Size is everything,’ she said, when dismissing Mr Mountjoy and refusing to pay him.

Miss Phyllis Poppleford then entertained us by playing a harpsichord which was found in an attic room and brought down for the purpose. Owing to her ‘wind’ she had to sit side saddle on the stool. The playing was not a great success and Miss Poppleford, who burst into tears, said she thought that the harpsichord had been badly affected by damp and was not playing the required notes in the appropriate order.

January 17th

I visited the Gengolphus residence with my pot of Leeches and found that Mistress Gengolphus had prepared for my visit by discarding all of her clothing in the area of concern. When I entered the drawing room she bent herself over the arm of a chaise longue with her voluminous veins offered freely for observation.

I applied three Leeches and although they initially seemed reluctant to take advantage of the offered refreshment, I am pleased to say that with a little encouragement they eventually set to work with laudable enthusiasm. When they had finished their work Mistress Gengolphus invited me to test the aperture. She was quite upset when I demurred, pointing out that I thought it might be considered a breach of professional etiquette.

‘My husband won’t be in the slightest put out,’ she assured me. ‘Besides, he is out riding and won’t be home for hours. I really would be grateful if you would check that your Leeches have done their work properly.’

I said that I had two other visits to make which were urgent (this was not true) and assured Mistress Gengolphus that I was confident the Leeches had done sterling work and that both she and Mr Gengolphus would be well-satisfied. There is no law which says that a Doctor is ethically or morally bound to have sex with a Patient if she requires him to do so. Indeed, Dr Challot taught me that there are only two rules which a Doctor must obey. The first is that when visiting a Patient in their home you should get your fee before leaving. The second is that in the consulting room a Doctor never hands over the medicine until he has the patient’s money in his pocket.

Mistress Gengolphus was, however, quite put out by my refusal to accommodate her request and when I left she ordered me to send in one of the footmen.

‘The tallest one would be best,’ she said, still lying over the chaise longue with her fulsome Arse on display. ‘His todger is quite long but conveniently slender and although usually disappointing would make a suitable testing rod on this occasion.’

I told the tallest footman that his mistress required his services. He seemed neither surprised nor delighted by this information.

When I returned home I decided that my frowsty room needed more books to give it (and me) much needed gravitas.

January 22nd

This morning, in my search for additions to my library, I visited the local marine store, so-called because the proprietor, Hector Nodorf, specialises in selling the jetsam which sailors being back from their travels.

When I arrived, Mr Nodorf had just finished repainting the sign over his shop. His emporium is now called ‘Hector’s Junk Shop’.

I asked him why he had changed the name.

‘Sailors always bring me odd lengths of old rope to sell,’ he replied. ‘And they call the bits of old rope ‘junk’. So, since that’s what I sell most of, I changed the name of the shop to suit.’

‘Have you stopped selling books?’ I enquired, rather disappointed.

Mr Nodorf assured me that he still had books for sale and so I bought a bundle of assorted tomes, sight unseen, weighing fourteen pounds.

When I got the books back to my room and unwrapped the packaging, I discovered that there were two copies of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* by that insufferable fellow Bunyan and a ten volume set of works by Pope (a writer whose work I find very dull). Six of the books were identical editions of *Tom Jones* by Fielding. I have read this, and excellent though it is, I see no need to have six copies of the same tale so I gave one copy to Nellie, the Maid, who was excited. It is, she says, the first book she has ever owned.

I have promised her that when I have time I will teach her to read.

January 28th

I had a strong discussion about the values of my profession in the Inn this evening.

The landlord Mr Youngblood, Cedric Potter, a local solicitor and Everard Blossom, a farmer, were all complaining about the poor quality of medical care available in the area. Since Dr Challot and I are the only Apothecaries and Surgeons in Muckleberry Peverell, I naturally found this assertion rather offensive.

Potter is an unnaturally short, fat fellow who seems to spend his days drinking and pissing. Unlike most people, who tend to alternate the two activities, he tends to do the two at the same time wherever he happens to be. He dowses himself with cheap perfume and thinks this hides the smell of piss but the two stinks together merely create a more obnoxious stink than either alone. He is the only solicitor in the area and is solemnly dedicated to hypocrisy. He insists that his housekeeper preserve the niceties by putting two layers of white pantaloons onto the legs of his piano but is reliably reputed to have deflowered far more than his fair share of local virgins.

Blossom owns a farm with cattle and sheep and although he must be rolling in money he is as mean a fellow as I have ever met. He holds up his trousers with twine instead of a belt and his Wife and Daughters have to darn their own clothes. And it is reputed that none of them has had anything new for a decade. When I had to examine Mistress Blossom last month, I could not help noticing that her five layers of underclothing were all heavily mended. Her stays were grey and several of the whalebone struts were snapped.

Blossom, who is as big a rogue as can be found in the county, loans his eldest Daughter to Potter on alternate Wednesdays and in return Blossom is allowed to put 100 sheep on one of Potter's unused fields. Heaven and the girl alone know what Potter gets up to with the girl for his belly hangs down over his nether regions and I doubt if he has had a clear view of anything below his waist for a good ten years.

Mistress Swain, who is a bubbling cesspool of local gossip, claims that Potter, a renowned lallygagger, has offered to marry the other Daughter, the younger and least noisesome girl, if Blossom gives him the freehold to the field his animals occupy, together with another of a similar size which he is known to covet since it has a stream through a corner of it. The stream has never been known to dry up. Blossom is keeping the younger Daughter a virgin in the hope that this arrangement can be completed. I pity any poor Maiden who finds herself permanently trammelled in such a way. The younger Blossom girl is as not as pretty as the older but she is as wide as she is tall and as round as a pumpkin, and Potter has a renowned fancy for plump girls.

'You're no more a man of science than the charlatans and quacks who sell bottles of tonic in the market on Saturdays,' said Potter.

'You're right there,' agreed Blossom, nodding agreement. 'The medicine you practice is no more than black magic. Your remedies are crude, unreliable and downright dangerous.'

'I'd rather die at home than go into a hospital,' said Potter who must have been feeling well to make such a brave, bold claim.

'If you cure someone it's just by good luck,' said Youngblood who was already lion-drunk and had to hold onto the bar to stop himself falling over.

'Mind you,' said Potter, with a smirk, and a nod in my direction, 'I will say one thing for him.'

The other two looked at him and then at me.

'He gives a good shave!' said Potter.

The three of them laughed as if it were the funniest thing anyone had ever said.

I pointed out to the ungrateful Potter that I did not remember him complaining that Doctors were useless when he was plagued by the Boils last September. I reminded him that without the Gunpowder pills I had prescribed he might still be suffering the torment of Job, with pus oozing from so many noxious imposthumes and boil heads that he appeared to be full of the stuff.

I would not mind so much but on his behalf I spent a messy two hours making up pills out of Gunpowder and butter. The damned pills have to be rolled afresh by hand and the rolling requires much care. The previous time I prepared Gunpowder pills, I failed to clean my hands properly before lighting a cigar and suffered badly in consequence. I had been given the cigar by Ladram Ackroyd, whose piles I had annihilated with the handle of my second best bone saw brush. The resulting small explosion left me with scorched fingers, no right eyebrow and a greater respect for the need for safety when handling Gunpowder pills. I remember that Dr Challot, who heard the explosion and came downstairs to see what had happened, laughed so much that he puddled on the surgery floor. Mistress Swain refused to clear up the mess, claiming that it was outside her responsibilities and for a while I thought it would be left to me to find a mop. Fortunately, the cat, which has Catholic enthusiasms but no sense of taste, cleaned up the mess with relish and seemed to take an unexpected fancy to the mixture.

'The boils would have probably gone without your pills!' responded the thankless Potter, overfull of courage and phlegm now that his body has emptied itself of the pus.

I told him firmly that the next time he needed medical help he could take the choice of seeing Dr Challot or ride six leagues to see Dr Montgomery, the fool of an Irish quack whose favourite and only remedy (which he recommends for every disorder imaginable) is the eating of two large Spanish onions.

'Eat two large Spanish onions and call in tomorrow if you are not cured,' Montgomery tells all his patients.

The ones who dare to return and complain that they are still not cured will be told to go away and eat another two large Spanish onions.

I fear the man is a rogue and I strongly suspect that he has some sort of financial 'arrangement' with the local greengrocer. Either that or he has simply heard that onions are fashionable in London society.

(Montgomery is one of those practitioners who are forever leaping on some new medical fashion. Two years ago he offered to make determinations by studying navels. This so-called science is known to its enthusiasts as omphalomancy, though it is a branch of medicine which I believe should be defined under blatant quackery. Montgomery also practices gyromancy. He forces his patients to walk round in circles until they fall down and subsequently makes his determinations according to where they land when they fall. Finally, I have heard it on good authority that he also listens to the intestinal gurgling of his patients – a practice which he dignifies with the name gastromancy.)

I pointed out to the ungrateful Potter that medical science does not stand still and that the Gunpowder remedy, which was fashionable until a month ago, has already been surpassed by a more sophisticated solution to the problem.

Hercules Tomkins, a Drummer who brought a new range of bone saws around for my inspection, confided that a Doctor he visits in Lichfield has had great success with a boil remedy which consists of rendered leaf lard to which has been added beeswax and burgundy pitch. Our practice already has three perfectly good bone saws but I was so delighted with this new remedy that I promised that we would buy a fourth on his next visit. I also gave him a good, close shave with a newly honed razor and scissored his hair so that he can more easily put a mustard Poultice onto the ringworm which marks his scalp. The wise fellow rarely removes his hat. I also persuaded Mistress Swain to give him one of her disgusting and infamous bow wow mutton pies. This one was, I believe, made with a mongrel which was found dead in the street after being seen eating a rancid rodent.

The Drummer afterwards declared it to be the tastiest pie he'd eaten in a quarter. 'Rich and full of flavour!' was his verdict. I'm not surprised it was 'rich' for the damned dog had been dead for a week when Mistress Swain picked it up to turn into a pie.

Potter, who is a sly fellow, as everyone knows and as befits one in his scurrilous profession, asked me for details of the new remedy to which I was privy. Naturally, I was not fool enough to tell him.

Potter, who suffers from boils several times a year, was subdued by my refusal to tell him about this new remedy and although he did not apologise I could tell that he was regretting his previous remarks. He bought another round of drinks without having to be reminded that it was his turn.

I had thought that Youngblood might have been a little less caustic in his observations since I live under his roof and he must know that I will, when Dr Challot gets round to paying what he owes me, hand over ready cash for my room and board. But Youngblood is always drunk after six of an evening and he and Blossom, the fool of a farmer, were joined as brothers by their cocky intemperance and unjust contempt for my profession.

I stood my ground like a proud Englishman and argued, foursquare and unrelenting, that the care of the sick has in this century attained new heights and that modern scientific medicine is so advanced that it is difficult to see how and where any improvements could possibly come. I stated firmly that patients and Doctors will look back upon 1850 as the day when scientific medicine reached an unsurpassable peak. I told them we are now living in the future.

None of this was an exaggeration.

We are, without a doubt, living in an unprecedented time of scientific and social progress. It is difficult to see what is left to be invented or how man can progress further, both in general terms and in my own chosen field of speciality, the world of medicine. From now on I rather think that any so-called progress will simply be change for the sake of it, rather than in serious hope of offering any improvement. How can you make a better Leech than the ones we currently have at our disposal?

January 29th

I spent some time preparing an inventory of the advantages of modern, scientific medicine and produced the following pieces of indisputable evidence in support of my claim:

Good Surgeons can perform amputations so quickly that it is difficult to imagine that it will ever be possible to remove limbs more speedily. I myself once managed to remove a leg, above the knee, in just five seconds under a minute and a half. The leg had been fractured and if left in place would have been a painful encumbrance. With a wooden stump and a pair of crutches, the man was up and about less than six months later. It is reputed that a Dr Benson, who has a large practice in Whitechapel, once succeeded in removing a man's leg in 31 seconds. Here is plain evidence that surgery has almost reached the peak of the possible – though I accept that the sub 30 second amputation is probably not far away. Those cynics who complain that medicine is not a science should know that every Barber-Surgeon I have ever met is well aware of the value of a sharpened blade when performing amputations. The best men can now boast a post-amputation survival rate approaching 50% which was unheard of just a decade ago. I met Dr Benson once. He showed me how to sharpen my knives by stropping them on the sole of my boot. He also amused and delighted a group of us by removing his frock coat and allowing us to examine it. The coat was so crusted with old Blood and dried material that when Dr Benson removed it, he was able to stand it by itself in a corner of the room. Dr Benson wields both saw and knife so speedily that he has on three separate occasions removed the fingers from assistants who have failed to move out of the way with sufficient enthusiasm. Unfortunately, he has had cataracts and the palsy for two years now and his surgical skills are not what they once were. My own surgical skills are locally regarded as excellent and I can think of no better evidence of this fact than that both our village butchers regularly pay me to cut up the carcasses of cows, pigs and sheep.

In our practice, three out of five patients who have major surgery are still alive 48 hours after their operation. It is true that half of those will die in the following week but it is clearly absurd to expect this success rate to be improved upon very significantly.

Specially designed mouth gags for stifling the screams made by patients in the operating theatre are so effective that folk in the next room are sometimes quite unaware that an operation has taken place at all. In primitive days, Surgeons used to hit their patients on the head with a wooden mallet in order to quieten them and keep them subdued. Such methods are now confined to practices in very rural areas. These days more sophisticated practitioners quieten their patients with Alcohol and Laudanum and ensure that they keep still by employing the services of three or four strong assistants. As Mistress Standorf mentioned, I have heard of Surgeons experimenting with chemicals such as Ether and Chloroform to quieten patients but both these substances are toxic and may result in the Patient dying at the conclusion of a successful operation. What's the point in being able to amputate a leg in less than a minute if the Patient is killed by the drug used to put him to sleep? Only publicity seekers use these dangerous substances. It is much safer and more sensible to use well-tried, traditional remedies. By putting a dozen or more Leeches onto a patient's body before surgery, it is possible to remove the volume of Blood so significantly that Bleeding after surgery is dramatically reduced. There is no doubt that the Leech, not the dog, is man's best friend. Drummers regularly bring round fresh Leeches in addition to Poultices and Plaisters. If Leeches aren't available, it is possible to remove Blood from the system by the process of scarification – using small blades to cut into the skin. The latest equipment available is a spring loaded Scarifier which contains no fewer than 16 blades. Dr Challot always recommends removing three pints of Blood from a Patient before surgery. When this has been done, the amount of Bleeding after the operation is very much reduced.

It is now increasingly uncommon for more than three patients to be put into one Bed in provincial hospitals. For the payment of a small extra fee it is sometimes possible for patients to have a Bed entirely to themselves. In most Poor Hospitals, the Sheets are changed every month regardless of whether they are stained with Blood, pus or other bodily substances. This seems an optimum arrangement. Changing the Sheets more frequently would be a bitter inconvenience for staff and patients and of no value to anyone except, possibly, the local laundresses.

It is perfectly possible to stop Bleeding after surgery. Post-surgical Bleeding can be ended by cauterizing a wound with a hot iron or by pouring boiling oil onto it. Both these methods work extremely well. It is impossible to see how any other remedy could be more effective or less troublesome to the Patient who is, in any case, often unconscious by the time this procedure is performed.

We now have several powerful drugs which can be used to help patients. Digitalis, taken from the foxglove, is effective against the dropsy. Mercury is of inestimable value to those who have carelessly over-indulged in the bedrooms of whores and who now wish to rid themselves of the unbidden consequences. Laudanum, a tincture of opium, is such a wonderfully effective medicine, useful in the treatment of almost all ailments, that it is impossible to consider it ever being surpassed as a universal remedy. Many Doctors now recommend that everyone above the age of 12 take a regular daily dose of Laudanum in order to help them stay healthy. A good dose of Laudanum will eradicate pains, coughs, sleeplessness, nervousness and scores of other conditions. It seems to work particularly well, and to be more palatable, when mixed with other substances including musk, amber, belladonna, usky, gin, brandy and cayenne pepper. One major advantage of Laudanum is that patients find it immensely palatable. I myself have a number of patients who swear by it, take it daily and say that they wouldn't be without it. All this from something as simple as the opium poppy! (I have heard some critics suggest that the opium products are addictive. What utter nonsense!) We can now prepare safe and effective medicines in many different forms. Medicines should look frightening, stink to high heaven and taste like pus from the devil's pox. Most Doctors have a favourite brew which they make by the gallon and give for a wide variety of ailments.

Using cloves, hops, senna, gentian root or orange peel we can produce medicines in single dose vials. Since powders in individual doses can be difficult to take (unless placed on rice paper and turned into wafers) we make hand-rolled pills containing useful herbs, using cocoa butter, glycerine, liquorice, glucose, gelatine, ear wax or saliva to hold the ingredients together. The mixture is rolled into a tube, cut into sections and hand rolled into pills of varying sizes. The pills so made can be varnished or covered in gold leaf.

Excellent and efficacious plasters and Poultices can be made using a wonderful paste made with linseed, olive oil and lead oxide. The paste is put onto chamois, leather, silk or sheepskin and cut to size. A good Poultice will be solid when cold but flexible at body temperature. Poultices can be used a dozen times or more.

We can now give patients an Enema with a jet of water powerful enough to strip the rectal mucosa clean of all toxic materials. The Patient sits on a brass nozzle and with the aid of a hand or foot operated pump and a few yards of flexible tubing, the Doctor squirts several gallons of water into the lower reaches of the intestinal tract within seconds. It is possible to purchase portable Enema sets which have ivory fitments and can be carried in a smart mahogany case.

Hearing aids used to be clumsy, ugly things made out of cows' horns. Modern conversation tubes are much more elegant and can be made out of ivory or silver. To avoid unpleasant odours and stop themselves being infected with fleas, it is now possible for Doctors to buy a hearing tube which is one and a half yards long. Who would have dreamt of such a thing a decade ago? The single tube monaural Stethoscope, invented by a French fellow called Laennec, is now widely used by Doctors. Dr Challot has two of these devices. One is small enough to fit into a silver clip inside his hat. The other is about three feet long, and I am allowed to use it when I am required to listen to the chest of a Patient who is infested with fleas. (I confess I cannot hear much through this piece of equipment but some of my patients live in hovels where the clothes and bedding are visibly jumping with fleas and the inability to hear is acceptable in those circumstances.) Even if nothing can be heard through the Stethoscope, the instrument helps give the Doctor an aura of scientific knowledge. Many of my patients regard the Stethoscope as a treatment. More than once, a Patient who has been Stethoscoped has sat up, cured, within seconds of my placing the far end of the instrument on their chests.

Surgical tools are infinitely better made than they were just a few years ago. Most Doctors now carry a pocket set of matching knives. I have seen sets sold in a leather covered case lined with velvet. Large amputation knives are so well made and hold a sharp edge so well that they are invariably borrowed by the cook and disappear into the kitchen. It is possible to buy a bone saw with ebony handles, and most Surgeons who use a bone saw will use a bone brush to clean away the bone dust from the teeth of the saw. It is possible to buy ear scoops, for removing wax from the ears, which are made from the finest silver. Catheters designed for opening venereal strictures affecting the flow of fluid down the channel from the bladder are also made from silver and sold in telescopic form so that they can be more easily fitted into a Doctor's bag.

January 30th

I took my list of medical improvements to the public bar this evening and started to read it to my three critics of yesterday evening.

Sadly, however, I was no more than half way through the list before my three companions took to drowsing. Potter was soon snoring and sounded like a pig who has consumed two peck of over-ripe apples. I woke them all by announcing that I was offering to buy another round of drinks, together with pickled eggs for all, on sole condition that they now agreed with me that medical care had never been better, that Doctors are more effective than at any time in history and that it is pretty well impossible to see how and where any serious improvements in health care could possibly be made.

To my delight, my proposal was met with enthusiasm and shouts of approval. I woke the Barmaid, who had also nodded off, and ordered the drinks and pickled eggs for all, the sum for which to be put on my rapidly bloating account. After three more rounds of mead and pickled eggs I felt weary and headed for my bed.

As I headed out of the bar and into the corridor on my way up to my room, I found myself face to face with Mistress Youngblood who was returning from the kitchen. 'Your defence of modern medicine was most convincing,' she whispered. In the public bar I could hear her husband and two travellers wrawling about the appalling state of English roads. Mistress Youngblood put her hand on my arm and I felt a physical thrill throughout my body. The woman, although of mature years, is zaftig and extremely attractive, surprisingly winsome even, and was wearing a very low cut bodice which exposed her milky white dumplings to my admiration and caused much surprised stirring in my loins. 'I do so very much admire a man with a loud intellect and the ability to express himself with distinction,' she murmured.

And with that she was gone, disappeared completely as though magicked away by one of those Music Hall performers who draw rabbits and doves from their headgear. And as she hurried off, I fear I heard her laughing merrily to herself. The woman is a tease and has no respect.

I ascended the stairs to my room and cursed myself for being a slow-witted nincompoop. I should have done what Dr Challot would have done: taken the woman in my arms, dragged her up the stairs, whipped out my twig and berries and taken her without further ado. Her husband was too drunk to have heard her cries, if there had been any, and her protests would in any case have been inspired only by natural modesty and inevitably short-lived.

When I reached my room, alone and without comfort, I discovered that the damnable Maid had not replenished the fire and nor had she filled the scuttle. The room was as cold as a witch's dugs. I undressed quickly, pulled back the curtains around my Bed and climbed between the Sheets hoping to find the Warming Pan had been placed in position. Still not having a Nightshirt (for I had not found the time or the spare groat to buy one) I clambered into Bed in the suit given to me on my birth. I was startled when I discovered that the Bed was already partly occupied. My first thought was that the rogue Youngblood had rented out my Bed to a Drummer but my suspicion was entirely unfounded for a little exploration showed that the Maid who had previously offered to do the blanket hornpipe with me was sprawled akimbo. She was quite naked and fast asleep. When I tried to push her off the mattress and through the curtains she complained bitterly without waking and so I left her where she lay. Not being possessed of any linens for protection from the pox I suspect she carries within her quim, for despite her years she is assuredly more bangtail than Maiden, I eschewed the very modest temptation and eventually went to sleep myself.

February 1st

When I woke this morning I had a fierce ache in my temples and the contents of my bowels seemed to have turned to water. I also had a terrible, urgent desire to use the piss bowl beneath the Bed. The ale which Youngblood sells is so adulterated with yarrow, fish bladder, bog myrtle and ground ivy that it contains more poison than a bucket of yew berries. The only good thing that can be said for it is that it is cheap. I made myself a vow that in future I would avoid the ale he sells and to stick to mead and malmsey. Now that I am a properly qualified medical man, I can afford to look after my health a little more carefully. If Dr Challot ever pays me what he owes me (an increasingly doubtful prospect) I should be well able to afford a better quality of gut-rot.

I had been awake for two minutes before I realised that I was still sharing my Bed with Nellie, the slutty young Chambermaid who had been asleep in the Bed when I had retired last night.

Moreover, it appeared that we were both quite naked. I quickly lifted the Sheets and in some terror examined my lobcock for sores, pustulence or any other sign of poxification. However, the damned thing was quite shrunken and useless and I could see no sign of it having been of any service to me during the night and nor, to my great relief, could I see visible sign of disease. I quickly realised that this was of modest comfort for the interval between the moment of joy and the first signs of dismay can be a lengthy one. I cursed myself for not kicking the strumpet out of the Bed and leaving her to snore on the carpet. My relief was briefly enhanced when I was able to fill the Pisspot without yelping in pain. But nevertheless what a bitter thing it would be if I had rogered the girl but had not been aware of it and had no memory of the encounter. It would be like enduring the consequences of food poisoning without any memory of enjoying the meal.

I gave the girl a nudge in her bony ribs to waken her.

‘Where’s my breakfast?’ I demanded. ‘And why did you let the damned fire go out?’

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, sleepily. ‘But I warmed your bed, didn’t I?’ She smiled at me but made no effort to get out of bed. Instead she put her arm onto my chest and started to slide her hand down towards more rewarding territory. To my horror I felt a reaction in the area.

‘What are you doing?’ I demanded.

‘The same as last night,’ she replied.

I could not help but notice that she no longer put a ‘sir’ onto the end of her remarks.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Don’t you want to have me again?’

I grabbed her hand and tried to remove it but she was clinging fast, in the way that a baby will grasp a thumb and will not let go.

‘We didn’t do anything!’ I told her. ‘You were asleep when I got to bed. I left you where you were because you were asleep.’

‘You woke me in the night,’ she said. ‘And now you owe me three pence.’

‘Three pence? You said you would charge me two pence!’

I remembered this because I remembered her telling me that the landlady charged four pence to have a warming pan put into the bed.

‘I said it was two pence to warm you and an extra penny if you buttered my bread.’

‘Buttered your bread? What are you talking about?’

‘That’s what the Vicar calls it,’ said Nellie. ‘Sometimes he tells me he is going to butter my bread and sometimes, when he is tired of buttering my bread, he likes to do a little basket making.’

‘Basket making? What are you talking about? Why do you make baskets with the Vicar?’

I was genuinely puzzled by all this.

With a great effort I succeeded in freeing myself from her grasp. I leapt out of bed. The girl slid out after me, grabbing at me in a no doubt desperate yearning to boost her earnings. I assumed that if she succeeded in getting me back into Bed she would up her demand to four pence. I could not but notice how skinny and bony she was. She looked almost skeletal and I could count her ribs without any difficulty.

I grabbed my clothes and hurriedly dressed. ‘I’ll give you three pence if you tell me the truth,’ I offered. ‘Did we really butter any bread last night?’ I felt stupid using the phrase which the girl had introduced into my mind.

She used her two hands in a vain attempt to cover her nakedness and looked at me in what I suspect she thought was a coy and seductive manner. ‘Don’t you remember?’ she asked.

‘No! I don’t remember anything. Now tell me the truth! And stop using that silly buttering the bread phrase.’

‘You promise that you’ll give me three pence?’

‘Yes!’

‘Let me see the three pence.’

'I'll have to owe it to you. I don't have three pence at the moment.'

'I'll tell you when you've given me the three pence,' she said. She started to dress. It did not take her long because she wore very little and her clothing consisted of little more than a rag of a chemise.

I reached out and grabbed her by a skinny arm. 'If you don't tell me the truth I'll tell Mistress Youngblood that you stole my purse.'

The girl paled at this. She knew the consequences for thieving. A Maid at the White Hart had been transported for stealing a stick of celery from her employer's kitchen. Nellie didn't know that I didn't have a purse, and that if I'd had one I wouldn't have had anything to put in it.

Suddenly she started to cry.

'We didn't do anything, did we?'

She shook her head.

I breathed a huge sigh of relief and sat down on the edge of the bed.

'Don't you fancy me?' she asked. 'Am I too young for you? Too skinny?'

'You're a very attractive girl,' I told her. 'I just wanted to know the truth.'

'You were too drunk,' she said suddenly. 'I tried to make it stand but it stayed dangling and of no use.'

'It can happen,' I said, defensively.

'It did happen,' she said bluntly but simply and without malice. 'I have never known it before but it did happen.'

'It doesn't happen with the Vicar?'

She shook her head. 'Never.'

'Oh.'

'I haven't got the pox,' she said suddenly, as though she'd read my mind. She pulled up her chemise and exposed herself to me. 'Look!' she said.

'I don't need to look,' I said, turning away.

'Please look,' she insisted. There was a change in her voice and I could tell that she was holding back tears. 'You think I'm pox ridden, don't you?'

'Of course I don't,' I said softly.

'Please look.'

I examined her and found, rather to my surprise, that she appeared quite free of the pox or any other lurgies.

'See? I'm clean aren't I?'

'You are,' I said.

'So do you want to do it now? You can have the first one for nothing.'

'Thank you, but no,' I said, declining her offer.

She looked at me with her head to one side. 'Do you prefer making baskets with young boys? I have brothers of different ages. You can make a basket with one of them for tuppence.'

'No!' I said firmly. 'I do not prefer boys. Not of any age.'

'You would prefer to prig Mistress Youngblood,' she said suddenly. 'I have seen the way you look at her.'

'No!' I cried, alarmed at her perspicacity.

'She may tease you with her ample dumplings but she will never make the beast with two backs with you,' she said firmly. 'She prefers to sleep with young girls. When her husband is drunk she sometimes takes me to Bed but she gives me only a farthing.'

I stared at her shocked, my world falling apart. It appeared this young Chambermaid was far more worldly-wise than I am.

'Tonight then,' she said firmly. 'We'll do it tonight.'

'We will not!' I shouted. 'Now fetch me my breakfast and bring some logs before I freeze to Death.'

'Can I just sleep in your Bed?' she asked, turning as she reached the door.

'Why are you so keen to sleep in my Bed?'

'Because at home I have to share a Bed with five brothers and I get no sleep at all.'

'Ye Gods! That's awful.' I was genuinely appalled, but not appalled enough to pay her two pence to allow her to share my Bed. 'You can sleep on the floor beside my Bed for the night, if you wish, but I'm not paying you a penny,' I said, feeling sorry for the girl. 'I will allow you one blanket and one pillow and if you ensure the fire is lit before we go to Bed you will be warm enough.'

'All right,' she said, apparently accepting this suggestion.

'But you must promise me something.'

'What's that?'

'You're not to go sleeping with other men.'

'Why not? Are you jealous? You want me for yourself?'

‘Don’t be silly,’ I said.

I had no idea why I had said this. The odd thing was, I think, that there was, despite everything, a curious charm about her which I wanted to preserve before it was too late.

‘What about the Vicar?’ she asked.

‘Not the Vicar and not your brothers either.’

‘I’m not to make the beast with two backs with anyone?’ She seemed astonished and intrigued by this.

‘No. No making the beast with two backs at all.’

This seemed marginally more acceptable terminology than the silly bread buttering nonsense. I hesitated and then continued. ‘If you promise not to sleep with anyone I’ll teach you how to read and write.’

‘You will?’

I nodded.

‘You promise?’

I nodded again.

‘How much will you pay me?’

I frowned. ‘What do you mean?’

‘How much will you pay me to learn how to read and write?’

‘You should pay me to teach you,’ I said.

She laughed. ‘Don’t be silly!’

I sighed. ‘I’ll pay you half a farthing for every lesson. And when you can read a page from a book and write a simple sentence I will give you half a Sovereign.’

‘A Sovereign! Give me a Sovereign when I can read and write.’

I laughed at her impertinence. It didn’t seem likely that I would ever have to pay out the Sovereign and so I agreed.

A moment later she let herself out of my room and I heard her hurrying down the stairs. To my astonishment, she appeared to be singing to herself.

It occurred to me that I must have taken leave of my senses.

February 7th

I emerged from the consulting room this morning and found Dr Challot waiting for me in the hallway. ‘I will need you with me tomorrow afternoon,’ he said sternly. His speech was slurred and he appeared to be having difficulty in both concentrating on what he was saying and, at the same time, standing upright without support. ‘If you can spare the time,’ he added rather sarcastically.

It was the first time I’d seen him dressed and downstairs for over a week. His clothes were filthy dirty and he reeked of Alcohol and vomit. He had attempted to cover up the stink by drenching himself with cheap perfume, doubtless from a bottle borrowed from one of his ‘nurses’. I wasn’t sure which was the most offensive: the stench of the perfume or the underlying stench of an unwashed body and clothes stained with pus, Blood and dried vomit.

Much of the pus, Blood and vomit (but by no means all of it) had come from a Patient we had operated on together a month earlier. The operation to relieve a large abscess had been a failure since Dr Challot’s enthusiasm had resulted in him slicing through not one but two large arteries. Blood had spurted out so violently that the stains from the splashes could now be seen on the consulting room ceiling. Dr Challot did not seem unduly perturbed by this. He always found it surprisingly easy to bear the suffering and hardships of others; indeed, he did so with great fortitude.

‘You require my assistance for an operation?’ I asked.

I could think of no reason why he would require my assistance other than for some sort of surgical procedure. I looked at his hands, which were shaking, and hoped I could somehow persuade him not to take up a knife. If he insisted on doing the cutting himself then the Patient would have very little chance of surviving and my fingers, indeed my arm, would be at risk. I had heard it rumoured in the Peacock Inn that the local undertaker had bought himself a new chaise and two fine black horses with the money made from burying Dr Challot’s mistakes.

‘For an interview,’ said Dr Challot. He wobbled slightly and caught hold of a door frame to hold himself upright. ‘Now that you’re qualified and beginning to spread your wings I am considering taking on a new Apprentice.’

For a moment, I was slightly surprised by this. I was relieved that we would not be operating together but startled at the prospect of having a third pair of hands in the practice. I didn’t think Dr Challot was likely to be keen to take on the responsibility of training a new student. I realised that the reason I was being invited to attend the interview was that I would almost certainly be the one doing most of the work.

‘The boy is called Mourdant Mort and his father Clarence Mort wrote to me asking me to take the boy under my wing,’ continued Dr Challot. ‘I knew the father when we were both young but haven’t seen him for some years. We grew up in Aston Magna and he is now a very successful Tobacco importer. He also has a number of shops in the City and a textile factory somewhere up in the North of England.’

‘What does he sell in his shops?’

‘Watch chains, dolls, books, cutlery, hat boxes, umbrellas and the more flamboyant variety of patent medicines – that sort of thing.’

I was surprised that Dr Challot was prepared to do business with a fellow who sold patent medicines. As long as I have known him he has had a low opinion of the merchants who sell such nostrums. When a rag shop an hour distant started to sell an invigorating tonic, Dr Challot began a rumour that the tonic was made with water contaminated with cholera. The fellow went out of business in a week.

I had always thought that my employer disapproved of patent medicines on scientific grounds but I now realised that this was a foolish error. Dr Challot only cared about money and he regarded the sale of patent medicines as a threat to his livelihood.

‘Young Mort’s father is highly thought of,’ said Dr Challot, ‘and, I believe, quite a force in the business world in the City. Unfortunately, I have heard that his factories have been sorely affected by Lord Shaftesbury’s inequitable Factory Act.’

Three years earlier, Lord Shaftesbury had introduced a widely criticised Act of Parliament which restricted the working hours of women and children to ten hours a day. The Liberal Party, whose members opposed the introduction of limits on working hours, had done their damnedest to stop the bill being passed but the legislation had been voted through and had damaged the earnings of factory owners.

‘He is also an MP and I hear quite likely to receive a knighthood for wheedling and deception,’ added Dr Challot. He sighed. ‘He is, of course, as bent as a three groat coin and therefore admirably suited to become a carpet-knight and to be awarded a senior position in the Government.’

‘I find it appalling that so many of our politicians are crooked,’ I said, naively and pompously. ‘Most of our politicians seem to have taken up politics to enrich themselves.’

Dr Challot peered at me as though realising for the first time what an idiot I was.

‘Why the hell else would anyone go into politics?’ he demanded. He laughed. ‘I’d be very surprised if old Man

Mort didn't have a peerage before he's finished.

Dr Challot told me that the son, Mourdant, our Apprentice to be, had been offered a career with his father but had, to his great credit, expressed a wish to pursue a medical career.

'My original thought was that the extra responsibility and workload involved in taking on an Apprentice would be too much for us,' said Dr Challot. 'I explained to Mr Mort that our practice is a thriving one which lays great demands upon our shoulders. However, I fear that I allowed myself to be convinced by the father's earnest request and my own sense of responsibility to the community.'

It occurred to me, but I did not say, that it was the fact that the two men had not met for some years which probably explained why the father was prepared to entrust his son to Dr Challot's care.

'How old is the boy?' I asked.

'He's 18 years of age but I understand from his father that he is a mature young man who can read and write and manage his tables with great facility. I am told he also speaks a little Latin and some passable French. He was tutored at home.'

'And his father can pay for the son's training?'

'I have been assured that the boy is bringing 500 guineas in gold to pay for his education.'

I blinked but didn't say anything. This was a huge sum of money and it was no longer difficult to see why Dr Challot had allowed himself to be persuaded to accept young Mort as an Apprentice .

'Since you will be sharing some of the responsibility I am prepared to make a payment of 25 guineas to you,' said Dr Challot.

'Thank you,' I said, astonished.

On the surface this seemed a modest sum, making no more than five per cent of the total, but it nevertheless seemed to me to be surprisingly and uncharacteristically generous of my employer. I was, after all, tied to the practice until I could find enough patients of my own to set up in practice elsewhere. I wondered if Dr Challot's kindness was a result of his drunken state but rather suspected that there would be a catch. Dr Challot has often told me that he regards kindness as a sign of weakness but I have known crapulence to temper his usually hard heart.

'You will, of course, receive your 25 guineas when the boy has completed his training and has qualified.'

And there, indeed, was the catch.

Dr Challot's brain might well have been thoroughly addled with drink but the part which looked after his financial interests had clearly survived the daily onslaught and was still present, to the fore and ready, willing and able to defend his purse. I could not help but be impressed by his use of the phrase 'of course', as though it were normal practice to delay a payment in such a way. I wondered how keen Dr Challot would have been to take on the new Apprentice if Mr Mort had offered to hand over the 500 guineas on completion of the boy's training.

I didn't say anything to this but it seemed clear that since the boy's Apprenticeship would last five years there would not, I suspected, be much, if anything, left of the 500 guineas by the end of that period. Dr Challot would have spent the entire sum on liquor and strumpets before six months were over, and I had about as much chance of seeing my 25 guineas as of waking up and finding that I had been made a Fellow of the College of Physicians. In fact, it seemed to me that giving 500 guineas at one time to Dr Challot was as foolish as handing him a knife and showing him precisely where and how to stab himself so as to do the most damage.

'Our new Apprentice is due here at two o'clock tomorrow afternoon,' said Dr Challot. 'I'd like you here if you please.'

'Have you already agreed to take the boy?' I asked.

'Subject to interview, subject to interview,' said Dr Challot, as though this were open to question.

If the boy had five hundred guineas in gold with him then I knew that the chances of Dr Challot turning him away were beyond remote. The interview would be a formality.

'I'll be there,' I promised.

'While you're here, what do you think of these?' asked Dr Challot. He moved towards a small Table in the hall and took from it a brown paper parcel. The parcel had already been opened and the string hung loose. Opening up the parcel he removed a cheaply made clay box. It was made in the shape of a spittoon or spitting box.

'It looks like a spitting box!' I said.

'That's exactly what it is,' replied Dr Challot. 'It's a portable, disposable spitting box. The Leech man brought this one in yesterday.'

'It looks rather cheaply made,' I said.

'Exactly! They cost four pence each to buy but we can buy them wholesale for tuppence apiece.'

'Are you suggesting that we buy them and sell them?'

'Precisely!' said Dr Challot. He sounded curiously excited. 'They're perfect for travellers. You take one of these with you on the coach or the train and simply toss it out of the window when you've filled it up.' He held up the spitting box so that I could examine it more closely. 'If you sell them to our patients you'll get a penny a box. That's fair, isn't it? A penny for you and a penny for me? And they're a bargain compared to Dr Dettweiller's Portable Spitting Bottle.

I had never seen one but knew that Dr Dettweiller's Bottle was a solidly made ceramic and pewter spittoon sold for use by coach travellers.

'Isn't throwing them out of the window a bit rough on anyone who happens to be walking past at the time,' I enquired.

'Oh, don't worry about passers-by,' said Dr Challot with a dismissive wave of a hand. The Leech Drummer reckons an Apothecary in Surrey sells 20 of these a week. That's 40 pence profit a week! In a year that's…what?'

'More than 20 pounds.'

'There you are! Twenty pounds a year for doing next to nothing.'

'Isn't it a bit demeaning?' I asked. 'We're Doctors, not spitting box salesmen.'

'You'll soon change your tune when you get your next bill from the Peacock Inn!' snapped Dr Challot. 'These disposable spitting boxes are going to be all the fashion soon. You mark my words. People will be buying them to use at home when they're having dinner or sitting in front of the fire. You can hold it on your lap and use it whenever the fancy takes you. No need to aim at a spittoon the other side of the room.'

I looked at him, looked at the spitting box he was holding and felt rather low.

'Is this really what the medical profession has come down to?' I asked myself. I had never seen myself as a purveyor of spitting boxes. We are living in the 19th century, for heaven's sake, a century of progress and scientific knowledge, but Dr Challot sometimes gives the impression that he is still marooned in the 18th century.

'So, what do you think?' asked Dr Challot, eagerly.

'Excellent!' I replied, feeling cowardly as well as low. 'I'm sure they'll be hugely successful.'

'We can send our new Apprentice round the local inns and taverns with a sample,' said Dr Challot.

He belched and I was enveloped in a nauseating cloud of stale beer.

February 8th

Dr Challot and I had been sitting waiting for half an hour when Mistress Swain knocked on the dining room door to let us know that our prospective new Apprentice had finally turned up.

'Dr Mort is here to keep his appointment as arranged,' said Mistress Swain attempting to sound like a Butler and failing miserably.

'Well, send him in, send him in,' said Dr Challot impatiently. 'Don't keep the fellow waiting.'

I then remembered that the young man would be bringing with him a purse containing 500 guineas in gold. I had no doubt that Dr Challot would, if required to do so, have uncomplainingly waited a week for the apprentice to turn up. I thought it odd that Mistress Swain had referred to our new student as Dr Mort but assumed that this was merely a slip of the tongue.

Mistress Swain stood aside and then, as the newcomer started by her she stepped back and, to my absolute astonishment, made a rough attempt at what I believe she intended to be a curtsey. It was a clumsy attempt, and one which would have garnered guffaws if it had been offered at court, but there was no doubt that it was nevertheless intended to be a curtsey. I had never before seen Mistress Swain show any sign of deference to anyone. She would have been more likely to throw a pie dish at my head as to curtsey upon my approach and she treated Dr Challot with all the respect a fishwife might show her drunken sot of a husband.

'Good afternoon to ye both!' the primpit newcomer cried as he burst into the room. He had a chubby, prognathous face which made him look young and innocent; something of a pigwidgeon. I thought he looked like a fat boy who had outgrown his age rather than a man who had simply grown fat as a result of years of good eating. Well equipped with strut and swagger he came in at a rare pace, removed an expensive looking black top hat and tossed it carelessly on to Dr Challot's desk. He moved with the self-assurance of a Prince or, I confess it occurred to me right from that moment, like a spoiled brat whose only achievement has been to accumulate expectations and a vast library of shoes and waistcoats. His hair, neatly parted in the middle fell in ringlets over his ears. He was dressed in what was clearly a very fashionable outfit and I immediately got the impression that he regarded himself as a mashing fellow; more than something of a dandy. He wore a black frock coat with a pink rose pinned to the lapel, grey trousers with a stripe down the side and a heavily embroidered and highly coloured waistcoat. There was a gold stick pin in his cravat, which was a fairly startling canary yellow, and the stick pin carried a pearl as big as a horse pill. Without waiting to be invited to do so he slumped down in a Chair, sprawling as though at home, letting out a bushel of air and cocking one leg over the arm of the Chair. He wore patent leather shoes not boots and these were of the highest quality and polished so well that they could have served as mirrors. The white silk stockings he wore would have drawn envious eyes from any woman. To be honest, the confusing result was that it looked as though three people had got dressed and then decided to undress, take pot luck and share the resultant pile of clothing.

I made a small bet with myself that the fellow hadn't ever shined his own shoes. Nor, I hazarded a guess, was he the sort of fellow to tie his own cravat or button his own waistcoat. I noticed that he wore yellow gloves with large rings, worn on top of the gloves, decorating several of his fingers.

'Gadzooks!' the newcomer cried. 'Am I utterly fandoogled? I am indeed, sir.'

Having made himself comfortable, he sighed extravagantly, as might a man who has run two leagues in someone else's shoes, patted his belly and grinned. 'One can feed damnably well round here, eh?' Judging by the size of the fellow, he was certainly accustomed to feeding well. He may have been only 18 years of age but he had the belly of a man with twice that number of years of solid eating behind him.

'Oh certainly so,' said Dr Challot, ingratiatingly. 'This is an excellent part of the world for fine eating establishments.'

Since Dr Challot hardly ever ventured out of his home, except on those rare occasions when he deigned to visit a Patient at home, I wondered how on earth he could have come by this quite erroneous information. The pies he had sent in from the local pie shop could hardly be described as defining fine eating. However, there was never any doubt that he could, if the moment seemed to him to require it, be nauseatingly ingratiating.

'Splendid roast shoulder of mutton,' said the young man. 'Two veal cutlets, plate of cold tongue and a dish of frilled potatoes followed by six hard boiled eggs and a large Plumb pudding with brandy – all washed down with three large pitchers of cyder. Damned fine snack!'

He patted his stomach as though congratulating its efficiency in dealing with this small feast.

'Hadn't eaten a morsel since breakfast.' He laughed heartily at this. 'Absolutely ravenous, as you can imagine.'

I got the impression that the visitor was grateful that it had recently become fashionable for all men and women to take a meal at midday, in order to break up the long hours of abstinence which had previously been the norm. Even in my lifetime I could remember the time when it had been customary for working men to take their breakfast between 10 a.m. and noon and to not eat again until dinner whereas the aristocracy, and those who aspired to the aristocracy, enjoyed meals at regular intervals throughout the day, sometimes allowing the end of breakfast to run into the start of luncheon, the end of luncheon to crash into the start of afternoon tea, the end of afternoon tea to be hurried only to allow time to change ready for dinner and for dinner to be concluded at something of a rush in order to leave time for a decent supper before bedtime.

'I ate at some Inn or other,' said Dr Mort, as I must now call him, though it stuck in the craw. 'I did not note the name though doubtless it has one.' He laughed at this modest pleasantry. 'My residence is not yet ready and my man is up at the house chivvying up the people there. He's a good, reliable fellow. He'll have everything shipshape before dinner.'

The more he said the more he seemed an overbearingly cocky young fool. I was somewhat reassured by the thought that today's cock is likely to find himself reduced to being tomorrow's hat decoration.

'I am Dr Challot to whom, sir, you are to be indentured,' said my employer. 'And you, sir, must be Mr Mort?'

Dr Challot did not bother to introduce me and I did not trouble to introduce myself.

'Dr Mort, I think now, eh?' said the newcomer with a confident smile. 'Since I am joining the medical profession I must henceforth be Dr Mort wouldn't you say? What? Eh?'

'Well, it is customary for a fellow who is still a student to retain the title of Mister until he has graduated and qualified,' said Dr Challot, rather tentatively.

'Oh, surely not!' said the young Mort. 'I don't think I should wish to be a student of medicine if I could not call myself Doctor!' He looked very put out and if he had been a young girl I would have said that he was pouting. He seemed absolutely certain of himself, brimming with enough confidence for a Parliament full of politicians; quite certain of who he was and where he was going.

'Well, I daresay no harm would be done if you were to assume the title at the outset rather than the conclusion of your career,' said Dr Challot, clearly alarmed at the prospect of his 500 guineas walking out of the door in Mr Mort's pocket. 'So, indeed, Dr Mort it shall be.'

I confess I did feel well-aggrieved at this. It seemed to me that allowing the fellow to call himself Doctor before he had attended one patient, taken part in an operation or learned one thing about pill making was an insult to myself and all those others who had had to wait five years before acquiring the title of 'Doctor' before our names.

'Jolly good,' said Dr Mort. 'My father knows a good many people and he says that the Government will soon be bringing in legislation requiring medical practitioners to be licensed. But father has been advised that the legislation will not be retrospective. All of those practitioners who are already calling themselves 'Doctor' will automatically be entitled to a licence and therefore allowed to carry on practising their profession.'

'Is that so?' said Dr Challot, who seemed as surprised by this news as I was. He has often expressed himself sorely tried by any sort of paperwork and had frequently expressed the opinion that lawyers must buy their parchment by the acreage. The idea of Doctors having to obtain some form of licence terrified us both. I was terrified lest I be unable to afford the fee. He was terrified lest the authorities require practitioners to have mastered the twin arts of reading and writing.

'You are very young, sir,' I said, feeling it was about time I introduced myself into the conversation.

'Oh, but I always say that age is less important than character,' the apprentice retorted immediately, not even glancing in my direction. My dislike turned immediately to loathing.

'You didn't have to arrange your own residence,' said Dr Challot. 'We have accommodation here for you; a room available for your exclusive use. And you are welcome to share our table.'

'Good heavens above, you are too kind,' said Dr Mort. 'But no, thankee all the same. I have rented a house in the district. One of father's people found it for me. A modest place, just eight bedrooms and the ballroom is woefully inadequate for decent entertaining, but it should serve the purpose for the moment. And I've hired a cook. One of the French fellows. He used to be with the Duke of something or other.'

'Very good,' said Dr Challot who was clearly impressed and doubtless hoping that he would receive an invitation or two to dinner. 'Splendid!'

'Now on which days of the week do you suggest we conduct our educational programme?' asked Dr Mort.

Although young he was, I realised, wise enough to keep his gold coin upon his person until the terms of his engagement had been properly agreed.

'I would expect to see you Monday to Friday,' said Dr Challot. 'From ten in the morning until such time as your attendance is no longer required. And I would hope you would be available on Saturdays and Sundays.'

Dr Mort laughed as if Dr Challot had cracked a rather fine jest. 'No, sir! You tease me, I suspect. Did my friends put you up to this? Lord Dundee, eh? It sounds his sort of jape. I couldn't possibly spare you so much of my life. I have other things to do; so many other demands on my time.'

Although he was but half a dozen years younger than me, it seemed to me that young Dr Mort came from the new generation of young citizens who are overfed with expectations and skimpy with appreciation and any sense of responsibility or obligation. I could not help but feel that he might be happier and more replete with contentment if he had fewer expectations. Like all those of his age and rank, Dr Mort seemed to think only of himself. It occurred to me that self-absorption might not be the most appropriate characteristic in a man of medicine.

‘No, sir. I am in earnest,’ said Dr Challot, as firmly as he was able. I noticed for the first time that although he had shaved, probably for the first time in a week, he had failed to remove a large portion of egg yolk from his coat.

‘Cannot possibly manage Wednesdays or Fridays,’ said Dr Mort. ‘I’ll be out hunting or off with the beagles. Or training me horses, don’t you know. Horses are a rare responsibility. Wednesdays and Fridays are spoken for, sir. I’ve brought half a dozen horses down here with me. And the beasts need to be ridden. Have to balance me work and me life, don’t you know.’

‘So what about Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays?’ asked Dr Challot, back pedalling with commendable speed.

‘Pick the one you choose and I’ll warrant to be here with you on that day!’

‘I was hoping to see you for more than one day a week.’

‘One and a half,’ said Dr Mort. ‘I’ll compromise with you. I’ll give you one and a half days a week and I’ll work as solid as any fellow. The thing is, you see, that I believe, and I know the old Pater agrees with me on this, that a young fellow must find a fine balance between his working time and his living time. I need time to find myself. After all, all work and no play make Jack a damnably dull fellow, eh what?’

He turned to me, apparently noticing me for the first time. ‘Fetch me a dish of coffee, will you, there’s a good chap? Make it good and strong. Just a dash of milk and stir it up well with a clean spoon to make a good froth. I do so love a good froth on me coffee. Do ye have Cuban?’

I stared at him but did not stir.

‘May I introduce Dr Bullock, my junior partner,’ said Dr Challot, belatedly introducing me. ‘I trained him,’ he added, as though I were a performing dog who would, if properly encouraged, balance a ball on my nose.

‘Bollocks, eh?’ said Dr Mort, laughing. ‘Good name for a Doctor! Bollocks.’ He laughed a good deal.

‘It’s Bullock,’ I said. ‘Dr Bullock.’

‘I shall call you Bollocks for that is far more entertaining.’

It occurred to me, but I did not say, that the name Mort was far more notably eccentric for a medical man.

‘So, do ye have Cuban coffee? Get away with ye and fetch me a cup! Pop half a dozen cloves into the pot. I take my coffee with one third milk and don’t forget to swish it around with a spoon to make a froth. And don’t ye forget to add a little cinnamon to the cup.’ He mimed the action he wished me to make in order to turn the milk frothy. ‘If you stir with vigour and make a good lather, the cinnamon will float on the top and look damnably palatable. Do you have any avocados?’

‘Avocados?’ I muttered, never having heard of the damned things and not knowing whether they were fish or fowl. ‘We have biscuits.’

‘Pity, pity. Avocados are all the rage in the London coffee houses and estiminets. Still, I don’t suppose you country bumpkins get up to London all that often, do ye?’

I stared at him in astonishment. My loathing had now gone up a notch and morphed into simple hatred, largely because even though he knew that I was medically qualified he seemed determined to treat me as a servant.

‘Well, if ye have no avocados, bring a few fancy cakes back with you,’ said Dr Mort. ‘It seems hours since I last ate a morsel.’ He patted his belly, burped and laughed uproariously as though this were the funniest thing in the world.

‘Oh yes, we certainly have Cuban coffee,’ said Dr Challot who did not, I knew, know anything about what went on in the kitchen. He certainly didn’t know what sort of coffee Mistress Swain purchased apart from the fact that whatever it was it would be the cheapest stuff available. ‘We never drink anything else here. You like cloves in your coffee do you?’

‘In the pot, sir, in the pot,’ said Dr Mort. ‘I am a great believer in the efficacy of coffee. Cleanses the stomach of phlegm, chases away fumes from the interior of the head. And damnable good for the bowels, let me tell you. The cloves bring out the flavour. In Piccadilly this year they wouldn’t sell you a coffee without putting cloves in the pot.’ He laughed at the very thought. ‘I must tell you, a pal of mine horse whipped a fellow within an inch of his life for bringing him a coffee without cloves or cinnamon. Can you believe the cheek of the knave?’

Crossly, I got up, left the room and hurried to the kitchen where I found Mistress Swain eating jellied eels and drinking ale. ‘We need coffee,’ I said. ‘It must be Cuban and the new fellow wants cloves in the pot and cinnamon sprinkling on top of foamy milk. And he also wants a plate of fancy cakes.’ I turned and left without giving her a chance to reply, knowing that I could rely on her to deal most effectively with our new student.

‘I hope you won’t miss the London cafés,’ Dr Challot was saying, as I returned to the drawing room.

‘No, no, not at all!’ cried Dr Mort. ‘I’ll be there Saturdays and Sundays and probably once or twice in the week. We’re a pretty fast crowd, don’t you know. We call ourselves the New Generation on the grounds that we’re the start of something new and very special. *The Illustrated London News* ran a big article about us all the other day. And a journalist fellow from *The Times* interviewed me.'

'But you will be here as agreed?' enquired Dr Challot, rather tentatively.

'Oh yes, absolutely! Got to do me studies. Complete me education!'

'Have you always had an interest in medical matters?' asked Dr Challot.

'Oh no, not at all,' replied Dr Mort. 'But my father insisted I take up some sort of occupation. He wanted me to join him in his business but I can't go into trade, can I? My friends would be appalled. So I compromised and decided to become a Physician.' He leant forward. 'But there is one stipulation I must make.'

'Yes?' said Dr Challot.

'I don't want to have to see any ugly people or poor people or folk with nasty looking rashes or broken bits and pieces.'

I looked at Dr Challot. He looked at me.

'It would upset me too much,' he said, quite earnestly. 'As a young fellow, my tutor always said I was a sensitive sort of chap – and that I shouldn't be exposed to unpleasant things.'

'So, what sort of patients did you envisage looking after?' asked Dr Challot.

'Oh, young, pretty ones. Women, of course.' He thought for a moment. 'Teenage girls, girls in their 20s, women in their 30s if they're handsome, nicely appointed and well turned out.'

Dr Challot and I just looked at him, not quite knowing what to say.

'That's the attraction of the game, eh?' said Dr Mort with a laugh. 'As a Doctor you can tell these girls to remove their clothes and damnit to bits they will because they'll expect it from you won't they? Then you can see what's what and take a free taste of what's on offer as it were.'

'You don't want to see male patients at all?' enquired Dr Challot.

'Good grace, no, sir! What do you take me for? I've no interest in looking at men and even less interest in looking at them without their clothes on.'

'And no poor or ugly patients or patients who seem obviously ill?' I added.

'Absolutely right!' said Dr Mort with a nod. 'You two fellows can look after the elderly, the broken down and the worn out. I'm not in the slightest bit interested in any of the old people. I don't want to be wasting my time with anyone over the age of 30, by and large. Save, as I said, for any women you have in their 30s who are damned fine pretty and shapely. I'll take the girls and the young women. What do they call it? Specialism, don't they? That'll be my speciality.'

'Do you prefer to see just young girls and spinsters?' asked Dr Challot.

Dr Mort looked at him as though puzzled.

'Would you be prepared to see young, married women?' explained Dr Challot.

'Oh certainly, most certainly! I'd pretty well say that I almost prefer the married ones in a way. All the fellows will tell you that I've never minded a woman with a little experience of life – never taken against a girl just because she has a husband tucked away in the country, looking after his estates, or off in some foreign parts fighting for Queen and Country.'

'Do you not feel any sense of responsibility towards your patients and their families?' I demanded, realising as I spoke that I sounded rather sanctimonious.

Mort just laughed. 'I can always beg forgiveness and explain it was a misunderstanding,' he said, with a wave of his hand. 'I find it much better to do whatever I will and apologise after if it be necessary.'

Just then there was a devil of a bang as Mistress Swain kicked open the door with one of her hobnailed boots and entered clutching a large, wooden tray upon which stood the coffee pot, three cups (two of which had broken handles), no saucers and a jug of cold milk which stank and was clearly rancid. There was also a chunk of bread and a small earthenware pot of jam. The bread looked solid and stale and I could see where green mould had been scraped off the crust. Mistress Swain put the tray down on the Table and gave a toothy sort of grin and an exaggerated attempt at a clumsy curtsey in Dr Mort's direction. 'I'm afraid we 'aint got no cakes, fancy or otherwise,' she said, apologetically. 'But I've brought some bread and some jam if you're hungry.'

Dr Mort looked at the tray in horrified astonishment.

'We don't have none of that "cubic" coffee and we don't have any cloves or cinnamon,' said Mistress Swain, pointing to the coffee pot but addressing Dr Mort. 'So since you like your coffee spicy I put in a large piece of ginger and two tablespoons of good pepper.'

'You put ginger and pepper into the coffee?' I asked incredulously.

'No cinnamon and no cloves,' replied Mistress Swain. 'I asked Mistress Elworth next door but she didn't have any either. She 'aint never seen no cinnamon though she says she might have a handful of cloves round about Christmas time. She suggested the ginger and I thought of the pepper myself. It was almost as good as the best pepper. And the coffee is made with best acorns. We were out of proper coffee but Mistress Elworth had some acorn coffee she had bought off a gypsy and I begged some for your Highnesses. I did ask her if the acorns were Cubic but she didn't rightly know and didn't like to say without knowing.'

Dr Mort seemed nonplussed for a moment. 'And the jam? What variety is the jam?'

'It's pig jam. A lovely recipe. I borrowed it from Mistress Elworth next door. Made with leftover bits of pig all boiled up nicely. I'll have to take back the pot when you've finished with it.'

'Thank you, Mistress Swain,' said Dr Challot, hurriedly. 'That will be all for now, thank you.'

When she had gone, curtseying and shuffling out backwards as though in the presence of royalty, Dr Challot turned to his new student. 'Living out here in the country, we sometimes have difficulty in obtaining supplies,' he explained.

'What an adventure this is!' said Dr Mort, his face frozen in a rictus of astonishment and terror.

'So, when would you like to start your Apprenticeship?' asked Dr Challot. Without being asked, he poured coffee from the pot into the three cups and placed the one with the handle in front of Dr Mort.

'Oh, I think next Tuesday would be soon enough, don't you?' said Dr Mort. 'A friend of my father's, a fellow who runs an emporium in Harley Street, is sending down a carriage with some supplies – a listening tube, a pot of Leeches and so on. And some boots. I ordered two dozen pairs of new boots in case I have to do riding through rough country and get them scratched.' He picked up the cup of coffee, sniffed it, as a dog might sniff a strange hound, and took a delicate, rather ladylike, sip. He grimaced and put the cup back down. 'I must tell the fellows at my Club about this! What did your woman say? Ginger and pepper?'

'I believe so,' said Dr Challot. 'Well, now that we've established how we will operate together, shall we complete the preliminaries?'

Dr Mort seemed surprised. 'The preliminaries?'

'I believe there is a payment to be made, for the training period.'

'Oh yes! Almost forgot about it.' Dr Mort reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a large, black, silk purse which he tossed onto the Table. It fell heavily, with quite a clatter and Dr Challot's eyes lit up at the sound.

And with that Dr Mort stood up, picked up his hat and with a small bow to Dr Challot and a promise to be knocking on our door at the crack of noon on the following Tuesday, he departed.

He ignored me completely. For all the notice he had taken of me I might as well have not been there at all.

'What a splendid fellow,' said Dr Challot, when he had gone. 'A real asset to the practice. A gentleman, and beautifully dressed. Did you see the label inside his hat?'

I admitted that I had not seen the label inside his hat.

'Made by Lock and Co of St James Street in Piccadilly,' said Dr Challot with awe. 'They made hats for Admiral Lord Nelson and Beau Brummel. I dare say you can't buy a hat there for less than four guineas. For all I know it may be more. And did you see the way he just tossed the hat down as though it had cost no more than a standard piece of headgear at three shillings and sixpence.'

'He seems rather immature,' I said, rather pompously.

'He's a young man,' said Dr Challot. 'He's not yet cast his colt's tooth.'

I stared at him.

'Still sowing his wild oats,' explained Dr Challot. He leant forward confidentially. 'I have high hopes that he will bring some smart new patients to the practice.'

I thought this about as likely as Queen Victoria popping in to have one of our famous rancid butter Enemas but I said nothing.

Still, on the bright side, it did seem that Dr Mort would not be requiring a good deal of training or supervision.

And who knows, maybe if Dr Challot and I both live long enough, I might one day receive the 25 guineas I've been promised.

February 15th

‘I need a repetition of this prescription,’ said the patient, a tall, well-built, distinguished looking fellow, draped in an expensive cloak and wearing a large, black hat which gave him a rather sinister air. He thrust a piece of paper at me. I looked at him carefully for it seemed to me that I recognised him. And the voice seemed familiar. A moment later I knew where I’d seen the fellow before. The knowledge turned my bowels to water.

I opened the paper, written on expensive paper but well creased and worn, and examined it. The paper was indeed a prescription, written and signed by Sir Lemuel Tanqueray, a well-known Royal Physician who lives and has a practice about twenty leagues away.

‘The prescription instructs you to sleep with a fresh young Maiden three times a week,’ I said, having read the slightly surprising content.

‘It is for my health,’ said the man.

I looked at the prescription again. The prescription was due to expire in two days’ time. I handed it back to the patient.

‘You are Mr Arbuthnot Trout?’

‘I am.’

‘Why have you not gone back to see Sir Lemuel?’ I asked. ‘Would he not renew your prescription?’

‘He is away hunting with a Royal party,’ replied Mr Trout. He seemed rather aggrieved. ‘I was passing this way and asked for the name of an alternative Physician.’

‘I am but an Apothecary,’ I said.

‘No matter,’ he said, dismissively, with a wave of a hand. ‘The one is much the same as the other.’

‘I cannot provide you with the Maidens,’ I told him, as I hunted in a drawer for a piece of notepaper. Eventually, I found a piece upon which I wrote a renewal of the prescription. I signed it with rather more of a flourish than is usual when I sign my name.

‘That is no matter, no matter!’ he cried, waving a hand dismissively. ‘I can find the Maidens with no trouble. This note is merely to satisfy my wife. She has been somewhat critical of my needs but accepts them when they are authorised in this way.’

I handed the piece of paper across the desk. The Patient read it, twice, folded it and put it, with the original signed by Sir Lemuel, inside his coat.

‘Is this satisfactory?’ demanded Mr Trout. He took out a purse and counted out ten Sovereigns which he placed in a neat pile in front of me. ‘It is what I usually pay Sir Lemuel.’

‘Most satisfactory,’ I agreed. ‘Perfectly copacetic.’

And without another word, Mr Trout turned and departed. Moments later I heard his horse galloping away.

It was no small relief to hear him go. And I was relieved that I had not needed to stand for who knows, maybe the fellow would have recognised his boots.

Mr Trout was none other than Paul ‘Two Pistols’ Hanham, the Highwayman whose boots I was now wearing.

Since Mr Trout (or Mr Hanham) was a new Patient I did not feel any obligation to mention the transaction to Dr Challot.

I put the ten guineas into my two largest waistcoat pockets.

The coins clinked and felt very heavy and comforting.

February 17th

Patent medicines are enormously popular (and profitable). New products came onto the market with astonishing frequency.

Here is a list I have compiled of some of the best known medicaments currently available:

Barkers Liquid of Life for patients suffering from the weariness, Atkinson and Barker's Infants' Preservative for sick Babes, Blinblow's Eucalyptus and Stramonium Cigarettes for Chest Troubles such as Asthma and Bronchitis, Bunter's Nervine for troubled Nerves, The Buxton Rubbing Bottle for all Ailments between A and Z, Congreve's Elixi, Do-Do Pastilles for Sore Throats, George's Gravel Pills for Kidney Stones, The Infants' Friend and Jackson's Febrifuge for Fevered Infants, Mrs Johnson's American Soothing Syrup for Coughs and Chest Infections, Langdale's Compressed Self-Aid Peppermint Tablets for Indigestion, McClure's Crescendo Vitamin Tonic Syrup for a hundred varieties of Tiredness, Mother Siegel's Digestive Syrup for Intestinal Ailments, Nurse Harvey's Mixture for the Patient one degree under the weather, Page Woodcock's Wind Pills for Flatulence, Father Pierre's Monastery Herbs for giving good health back to the Sickly, Barclay's Ointment for the Itch (for those with Skin conditions), The Poor Man's Friend for those Ailing but unable to afford an Apothecary or even a Wise Woman, Dr Williams Pink Pills for Pale People and a variety of products with no particular purpose: Dr Solomon's Balm of Gilead, Simpson Seaweed and Celery Tablets, Ramsey's Medicated Spice Nuts, Huxham's Tincture of Bark, Dalby's Carminative, Daffy's Elixir and, last but by no means least, Cephalic Snuff.

And if all else failed, there was always Lydia E Pinkham's Vegetable Compound, popularly known as 'Lilly the Pink' and renowned as 'the greatest remedy in the world'. Oh, and the ever reliable Dr Morris's Gargling Liniment 'for all ailments of man and beast'.

The contents of some of the remedies on sale are alarming, to say the least.

For example, Dr Brinkley's Medicinal Cordial with Tartar Emetic contained a mixture of spiders' webs, pigeons' Blood, Spanish fly, ants' eggs, hoof of elks, spawn of frog, dung of horse pig and peacock and ground human skull. The good Dr Brinkley sold 20,000 bottles of his Cordial every year, from a room in Charing Cross which he described as 'temple of health'. Who knows how all these medicaments will act with or against one another?

And Dr Holliday's Reliable Tonic was made with a potent mixture of human ear wax, saliva and human fat. I have no idea of the source of the human fat or, indeed, any of the other ingredients.

It is my considered view that anyone brave enough to take one of these nostrums well deserves to be cured of whatever ailed them.

February 19th

Dr Challot asked me to assist in treating a Patient this morning. He said he would pay me 30 pence if I did so. This seems miserly and was therefore to be expected. To avoid unpleasantness, I agreed to assist since I hoped to learn something new. Dr Challot told me that he was intending to try out a new procedure which he had heard about from the Blind Drummer who sells us jars and bottles suitable for the storage of medicines.

The Patient turned out to be Mr Youngblood, the Innkeeper and my landlord. Dr Challot has decided that he is suffering from an Elevated Pressure of the Blood which must be reduced. Dr Challot told me that he made the determination because Mr Youngblood is both ruddy cheeked and prone to be rich in dander.

The new method of lowering the Pressure of the Blood which Dr Challot intends to try is called Extreme Blood Letting and is, allegedly, much faster than using Leeches or scarification. According to the Blind Drummer, it also offers a way to make an accurate measurement of the pressure under which the Blood is circulating.

'You must first lie down upon the couch,' said Dr Challot, addressing Mr Youngblood. 'I will then make an incision in your left radial artery. The Blood in the arteries is under far more pressure than the Blood in the veins and when I make the cut your Blood will shoot out across the room. Dr Bullock will measure the furthest reach of the Blood as it spurts out of your artery. I will allow the artery to pump Blood for three or four minutes and I will then seal the cut with hot tar.'

Mr Youngblood seemed remarkably sanguine about the procedure he was about to undergo and I wondered if he might have prepared himself by drinking a surfeit of beer.

'How will we know if the procedure has been successful in lowering the Blood pressure?' I asked.

'That is the brilliant part of the procedure,' said Dr Challot. 'We will take advantage of the fact that Mr Youngblood has two radial arteries. Once the hot tar has sealed the cut in Mr Youngblood's left radial artery, I will make an identical cut in his right radial artery. We can again measure the distance the Blood travels when it spurts out across the room. If the procedure has been successful, the Blood from the right artery should travel a shorter distance than the Blood from the left artery.'

This made excellent sense to me and so we proceeded with the operation without further ado.

I am delighted to report that it was an immediate and dramatic success, the Blood from the left arm having travelled 22 feet and the Blood from the right arm having travelled just 17 feet.

Dr Challot and I both agreed that this diminution in the distance the Blood had travelled proved that the Blood pressure must have fallen, thereby dramatically reducing the chances of Mr Youngblood having a seizure. The only unfortunate thing was that it proved difficult to seal the right radial artery, and several pints of Blood had spurted over the horse hair sofa in the consulting room before we were able to halt the flow.

Nevertheless, Dr Challot pointed out that if reducing the Blood supply a little was good then it stood to reason that reducing it a great deal must be very good.

I helped Mr Youngblood home for he was rather dizzy and unsteady after his ordeal. He was, nevertheless, enormously grateful and promised me a double helping of Plumb tart this evening.

February 25th

There is no doubt that Mr Rowland Hill’s invention of the scheme popularly known as the Penny Post has improved life in a number of ways.

It is, for example, now possible for a housewife to write to the butcher at 10 of the morning to demand information on the meats available and to request his recommendation, to receive a reply by post in the early afternoon, to put details of her requirements into the late afternoon post and to receive a parcel containing her order well in time to cook the evening meal.

But the advertising material which now comes in daily is rapidly becoming a considerable nuisance.

In the post this morning, I received three letters promoting pill making equipment, two leaflets advertising Leech jars and a note from a fellow claiming to have a supply of the best Leeches in England. ‘Our Leeches suck faster and harder than anyone else’s or your money back!’ Another Leech supplier promised me a free bottle of port if I chose to purchase two dozen Blood suckers from him. And the London Mercury Company is promising me a reduced price on Mercury for all varieties of the pox.

March 2nd

Miss Zahlia Colefax came into the surgery and demanded that I provide her with a certificate of virginity. A surprising number of patients attend and request such certification and not all can be considered obvious candidates for confirmation.

‘It is for my fiancé,’ she explained. ‘He has requested that I provide him with a certificate prior to our marriage next month. We are to be married by the Bishop of Winchester.’

She did not seem in the slightest bit put out by her fiancé’s pre-nuptial requirement.

‘But you have two children!’ I pointed out. ‘Am I not to assume that these were produced in the normal way?’

‘Oh yes indeed they were,’ she answered. ‘But although he has been eager to anticipate our nuptials I have not had the more intimate variety of relations with my fiancé and so in that regard I must surely be considered a virgin.’

‘Does your fiancé know that you have two children?’

‘Oh yes.’

‘And how does he think they came into being?’

‘I told him they were the result of immaculate conceptions,’ replied Miss Colefax. ‘He is a very religious man and understands and accepts these matters.’

I declined to provide the certificate, thinking it dishonest and being unwilling to take advantage of her fiancé who must be something of a half-wit.

March 7th

Dr Mort turned up just as I was beginning to think that we would see no more of him.

Dr Challot and I were in the consulting room examining a new batch of dead toads which had just been delivered by our usual toad man. Dr Challot was preparing to toss the toads into a pail of cows' urine to soften them up a little.

'Ah, come in, sir,' said Dr Challot, as Dr Mort appeared on the threshold. 'What seems to be the problem? What can my colleague and I do for you?'

'It's Mr Mort,' I whispered. 'The new Apprentice.'

Dr Challot took his pince-nez from his waistcoat pocket, slipped them onto the bridge of his nose, tilted back his head and peered at the newcomer as though he were a dog he was considering purchasing. It was, I think, only the second time he had used his pince-nez since he is frightened of wearing them out.

'Mort, you say?' he said to me.

'Mort,' I agreed. 'He paid you a fee for an Apprenticeship.'

'Dr Mort,' corrected the newcomer, rather petulantly. 'You said I should be called Dr Mort.'

'Ah yes,' said Dr Challot whose memory had returned at the mention of money. 'I remember now.' He patted his coat pocket and the coins he had placed therein jingled merrily. I was surprised and delighted to see that he had not yet succeeding in spending the entire fee. 'You're young Mort the new Apprentice, if memory serves me right.'

'That's right,' agreed Dr Mort who seemed to have exposed himself to the joys of the zythepsary and was well disguised by beer. 'But do please remember that I am to be addressed as Dr Mort.'

'Dr Bullock and I were just engaged in a conference to determine the treatment of the Duchess of Piddlehampton,' said Dr Challot, who was clearly rather taken aback at young Mort's manner.

My employer lies so well that for a moment I found myself wondering who the Duchess of Piddlehampton might be, and why I couldn't remember what was wrong with her or why we were contemplating treating her.

'Oh, ah,' said Dr Mort. 'The Duchess of Piddlehampton, eh?' Splendid.' Our new Apprentice was clearly a fiercesome snob.

'We have here a sample of the Duchess's urine,' said Dr Challot, indicating the bucket of cow piss standing on the Table.

Dr Mort stepped forward and peered into the bucket which contained at least two thirds of a gallon of still warm piss. The dead toads had not been dropped into the bucket.

'She is an ample pisser,' explained Dr Challot.

'I should say so,' said Dr Mort, clearly impressed.

'We have a number of ways to assess the integrity of a patient's piss,' said Dr Challot pompously, 'but the most valuable is still the simple savouring with the tongue.'

Dr Mort looked at him, clearly startled.

'I stick my finger into the piss, hold it there for a minute and then insert it into my mouth and suck it dry,' explained Dr Challot. As he said this he dipped a finger into the bucket, held it there, and then pulled it out. 'All you do next is stick your finger into your mouth, suck off the piss, hold it there and check the taste.'

'Ye Gods!' said Dr Mort, looking horrified. 'Is that really necessary?'

'Invaluable,' insisted Dr Challot. 'Piss tasting is a crucial part of medical training. You cannot progress in the profession until you can do a decent piss taste.'

With some considerable ceremony, he placed his finger into his mouth, closed his eyes as though concentrating, and left the finger in place for a minute or so while he sucked and nodded. 'Definitely too much sugar and light on the liver salts,' he said. He turned to me. 'See what you think, Doctor?'

I did exactly as Dr Challot had done.

'I agree,' I said eventually. 'The liquid is very low on liver salts and quite certainly blessed with far too much sugar.'

'Your turn,' said Dr Challot to our new Apprentice. 'Dip the finger right into the bucket, twizzle it around, get it nice and wet and see what you think.'

Dr Mort paled. 'Is this truly necessary?' he asked.

'Essential,' said Dr Challot sternly. 'You can't continue with your training until you're an accomplished piss taster.'

With clear distaste and noticeable reluctance, Dr Mort dipped a finger into the bucket, lifted it out and stared at it.

'Don't wait too long!' snapped Dr Challot, pointing at Mort's finger. 'All the piss is dripping off the end.'

Dr Mort closed his eyes and put his finger into his mouth.

'Can you taste the sugar?' asked Dr Challot.

'I believe I can,' admitted Mort.

‘But not enough liver salts?’

‘Indeed, I believe not.’

Suddenly, Dr Challot burst out laughing. He didn’t laugh often but when he did so he made quite an alarming sound. He bent almost double, slapped his thighs and staggered around the room in such a state that I feared that he would collapse.

‘What ails ye?’ demanded Dr Mort.

Dr Challot held up his index finger. ‘This is the one I dipped in the bucket,’ he said. He paused to laugh again. ‘And this is the one I sucked!’ He held up his middle finger.

Puzzled, Dr Mort stared at Dr Challot and then at me.

‘But how did you taste the piss?’

Dr Challot and I laughed so much we could not answer.

‘I declare that if I laugh more I shall piss my breeches!’ said Dr Challot.

March 11th

Nathan Biggin is not the brightest candle on the chandelier. Indeed, he is not bright enough to be the village idiot. He earns a very modest living by taking part in hopping races in a number of Public Houses in our part of the country.

Last year Biggin volunteered, for the third time in his absurd life, to be the Fool in the village Autumn Fire pageant – an event that has been celebrated in Muckleberry Peverell for 500 years.

I have no idea what the Autumn Fire pageant is intended to celebrate (there is probably some pagan theory behind it) but the principle event involves the tying of a man dressed as a fool to the branch of a tree. A fire is lit underneath the dangling man and wet rags thrown onto the fire to produce a large quantity of smoke. The man is left dangling in the smoke for as long as possible. Eventually, the fool is cut down and allowed to drop into the fire. The hope is that when he falls into the fire, he will have the strength of body and balance of mind to scramble away.

It is widely understood that no one ever agrees to play the Fool more than once.

No one, that is, except Nathan Biggin.

The idiot has agreed to play the Fool for the third year running. If the man was required to live by his wits he would surely die.

Unfortunately, a group of villagers decided that it would be more fun if Biggin were drunk when tied to the tree and so they supplied him with copious quantities of cyder. The result was when he fell down into the fire he forgot to scramble away but lay there, on the hot ashes, laughing hysterically. When he finally scrambled out of the fire he tripped on an old root, fell and broke his leg in two places.

The leg obviously had to be removed but since I did not have my bone saw with me, I borrowed an axe from Cuthbert Fazackerly. The axe was not well kept, and indeed quite dull, and it took three hard blows to sever the damaged limb. Mr Fazackerly and two other labourers were needed to hold Biggin down while I operated and we had to stuff Biddy Fluke’s used pantaloons into the fellow’s mouth to stifle the screaming. (Biddy Fluke is a well-known local bangtail who was practising her profession up against an oak tree at the time. Her pantaloons were lying on the ground, brazenly abandoned and just the thing for use as a mouth gag.)

As I was amputating Biggin’s useless limb, I heard several spectators betting on the outcome of the operation. The favoured bet was that Biggin would be dead within 24 hours. When I had finished my work, which had I thought been efficiently done, I placed half a Sovereign on his surviving between two and three days.

March 19th

Many of the villagers in Muckleberry Peverell are closely related by marriage and it sometimes seems to me that this may have something to do with the fact that the district is well populated with idiots.

Today I heard that Perdita Clutterbuck, a local 15-year-old hussy wench and halfwit, has been found guilty of non-payment of a four shilling debt to the baker. The magistrate has ordered that she must pay within two weeks or be whipped from Exeter to Budleigh Salterton.

The hapless wench was brought to see me by her mother who asked me to speak to the magistrate.

‘Perdita is a slow girl,’ she said. ‘She has never been quite like others but she is a well-meaning girl, generous to a fault. She can neither read nor write and she has a great affection for currant buns which I cannot afford to buy for her. I have asked the Baker not to sell her anymore but he won’t listen to me.

After I listened to her sad tale I went with her and the girl to the Magistrate’s home to plead for leniency. After I’d finished my pleading, the Magistrate announced that in view of my pleading he would change the punishment he had prescribed.

‘She must pay within one week or be whipped from Exeter to Budleigh Salterton and back again,’ he said gruffly. ‘Slow wittedness is no excuse for not paying your debts.’

With Mistress Clutterbuck in tears and her Daughter staring glumly at the ceiling as is her wont, I started to protest but was warned that if I said anything else the punishment would be increased still further. It seemed cruel beyond comprehension. We are all separated from madness and lunacy by fine lines. There is a fine line between self-sufficiency and reclusiveness, another between reclusiveness and hermitry and yet another between hermitry and misanthropy.

As we left, I told Mistress Clutterbuck that if the Magistrate ever came to me with an Illness of any kind, I would prescribe a double strength mustard Enema to be delivered with my brass ended Enema pump. I told her I would also insist on giving him such a good Purging that he would find himself emptying his innards at both ends.

Mistress Clutterbuck was more than mildly mollified by this and thanked me deeply.

And having recently received a handsome payment from the Highwayman, I gave Mistress Clutterbuck the four shillings with which to pay the debt to the baker. I also promised to see the Baker and tell him that I will report him for selling mouldy bread if he gives any more buns to the Clutterbuck girl.

My ten guineas have now almost disappeared. By the time I had paid the landlord for my lodgings, there was very little left.

I lost the half guinea I wagered on the outcome of Nathan Biggin’s amputation. I am woefully annoyed. He died in 19 hours and his brother is reputed to have made a killing on this sad outcome.

I should have learned by now that it is dangerous to wager on the outcome of any medical procedure.

March 22nd

A boy of about nine or ten wandered into the consulting room followed by a very large woman who appeared to be wearing several coats. The boy, an impudent looking fellow, was smoking a clay Pipe with a cracked bowl.

‘Oh excuse me, your worship, I’m sure,’ said the woman, who introduced herself as Mistress Biddy Fluke. ‘It has taken us two hours to get here and it is now time for Jethro’s mid-morning visit to Nature’s Public House. He becomes mortally upset if I deprive him his natural sustenances.’

And so saying, with surprising dexterity, she removed not three but four coats before unfastening the buttons of her blouse. Once this was done she pushed down a grey and tattered camisole and pulled out one of a surprisingly large pair of well stuffed dugs. A small piece of lace attached to a few inches of the camisole was all that remained to show that it had once been a fine piece of underwear. Even without the clothing she was still a very large woman. She herself did not appear to have been unduly deprived of nourishment.

With her left hand the woman offered up a hugely swollen right nipple to the boy who took his Pipe out of his mouth, bent his head and began to suck away as though his life depended upon it. The nipple was as big, as brown and as gnarled as a labourer’s thumb. It had clearly seen a good deal of use.

‘He has to suck hard,’ explained Mistress Fluke as the boy attacked the dug with gusto. ‘It takes him a minute or two to get the milk flowing.’

With her right hand she pointed down towards her groin. ‘I have a worrisome rash down below. It itches like the very devil and I cannot see down there. Would you take a look for me?’

While the boy took his milk, the mother pulled up her Bristol red skirt and a bewilderment of petticoats, yanked up a huge fold of surplus abdominal fat and finally succeeded in exposing her nether regions.

‘You take a good look, Doctor!’ she said.

‘You have lice,’ I told her immediately.

‘I knew it!’ said Mistress Fluke with surprising vehemence. ‘It was that Silus Baxter. I knew there was something amiss with him. Scratch, scratch, scratch all evening he was.’

‘You should shave the area and apply some medicinal vinegar,’ I told her.

There is in fact no difference between medicinal vinegar and the variety used for culinary purposes but by calling it ‘medicinal’ we can charge five times as much per bottle.

‘You do it for me, Doctor,’ said Mistress Fluke.

The boy was still slurping away, alternately sucking on the proffered dug and puffing on his pipe. Looking at him more closely I thought he was perhaps older than I had originally surmised. He was, I suspected, probably 13 or 14 years of age. He was, however, not the oldest I had seen still at the breast.

‘You want me to do the shaving?’ I asked, slightly surprised.

‘You’re a Barber Surgeon aren’t you?’ said the woman. ‘I’ll hold up my belly so that you can get at the scene of the crimes.’

With a half-hidden sigh, I found my razor, wiped off a few meat fibres, gave it a stropping, and shaved Mistress Fluke’s pubic area. It annoys me a great deal that Mistress Swain sees fit to use our surgical implements in the kitchen. When I had finished the shaving, I dowsed the area liberally with vinegar. Mistress Fluke then re-clothed her lower self and roughly pulled the boy from what must have been a now empty dug. He was reluctant to stop.

I asked for sixpence for the shaving and the medicinal vinegar but the woman only had three and a half pence so I reluctantly accepted that in full payment. It seemed a very small recompense for the nature of the labours involved.

April 4th

The weather has been surprisingly warm for the time of the year and also rather muggy. I talked about this with a bunch of villagers who were taking evening refreshment in the Public House where I reside.

Vigo Fitzmountjoy, a retired Saddler who had to give up skilled work when he lost a hand and who now helps out in the Peacock Inn stables, though precisely what he does there is probably as much of a mystery to the Ostler as it is to the rest of the world, claimed that he had heard it said that the mugginess was caused by all the train smoke being puffed out into the atmosphere. He says the smoke has changed the temperature of the air around us. He said there had been a meeting in London where experts had agreed that within two years at the very most, the planet will spontaneously ignite and we will all be roasted to Death in a ball of fire.

Theobald Standish, a baker, asked Mr Fitzmountjoy how the experts had arrived at the meeting. Mr Fitzmountjoy replied, without any apparent embarrassment, that they had mostly travelled to the meeting by train. Mr Standish remarked that if the experts were right then their meeting had probably shortened the planet's life expectation by a week.

Mr Fitzmountjoy, ignoring Mr Standish's remark as 'inconvenient', added that there was clear evidence that trains racing through the countryside were responsible for an increase in the incidence of spontaneous abortions among cattle in fields next to the tracks. He said that several farmers he knew had stopped using the fields which were closest to Railway tracks to protect their cattle from this eventuality. He also said that there were Doctors in London who believed that Railway travel was a major cause of the dropsy. He did not know the names of the Doctors who believed this but he insisted that they were most reputable men of science.

Lumpy Darbyshire, a professional mourner, said it had been hot and muggy long before trains had been invented so how did these so-called experts explain that.

Mr Fitzmountjoy could not provide an adequate explanation so we took him outside, put him in the stocks and threw abuse and ripe fruit at him for being a scaremonger. As we did this, Mr Stevens pointed out that somewhere in Mr Fitzmoutjoy's lineage there must have been a bastard. He explained that since the 11th century, the surname prefix Fitz has always denoted illegitimacy. He said that when William IV was still the Duke of Clarence, he had fathered ten illegitimate children with a mistress called Dora Jordan and that all the children had been named FitzClarence.

Mr Standish pointed out that royalty had always been a randy lot and that King Henry I had fathered 20 bastard children with six different mistresses.

I did not see much point in this discussion about his antecedents but putting Mr Fitzmountjoy into the stocks was the best entertainment I have had for a month, and a sound antidote to those who claim that life in the country is not culturally diverse.

After we had finished throwing all the rotting fruit we could find, we left Mr Fitzmountjoy where he was for a while and, since he is almost certainly descended from a bastard, repaired to the pub for refreshment.

Throwing fruit always exhausts me and gives me a thirst.

April 9th

'Your husband has died,' I told Mistress Augusta Maitland.

'He's dead, you say?' She seemed surprised but not particularly distressed. 'How long has he been dead?'

'I would say a week or so at the very least.'

'I thought he was quiet,' said Mistress Maitland thoughtfully. 'It wasn't like him to be so quiet. He was usually complaining about something or other.' She paused and frowned. 'Are you absolutely sure he's dead?'

'Positive, I'm afraid.'

The old fellow was starting to decay and it was possible to be certain he was dead by smell alone. I was sad to see him go for he had been a colourful character, famous for two things.

First, his was one of the first homes in the country to have specially built indoor water closets. It was generally agreed that this was a gloriously eccentric thing and that having a water closet inside the house was clearly a health hazard. Never one to do things by halves, Mr Maitland had installed two water closets inside his house. There was one downstairs and one upstairs. Both emptied through pipes into a large pit in the vegetable garden and it was rumoured that since the pit had been dug, the Maitland's gardener had produced the biggest cabbages, marrows and Turnips in the county. It is certainly undeniable that the produce he had grown had won many first prize trophies and certificates.

Second, although he had always been a keen carriage driver, and had once held the record for driving a four in hand from London to Bristol in under four hours, the late Mr Maitland had recently taken a deep affection for trains. In his final years, he had customarily paid the Railway company to allow him to travel on the engine platform alongside the driver and the fireman. Once he was safely ensconced on the platform, and the train was out of the station, Mr Maitland gave the driver a guinea to allow him to drive the train. He did this at terrifying speeds, sometimes amusing himself by finding time to throw lumps of coal and glowing gleeds at people and houses as they passed. On one occasion, Mr Maitland had ridden inside the train, pretending to be a ticket collector, and had physically thrown people off the train simply because he did not like the look of them. 'You are too ugly to travel on my train,' he roared at those whom he ejected. I remembered all this because there had been quite a fuss at the time. Two of the people whom he had physically ejected from the train had subsequently died from the injuries they had sustained and Mr Maitland was reputed to have had to pay 30 guineas to the local magistrate, and five guineas each to the relatives of the travellers who had died, in order to have the case against him dismissed and the affair hushed up.

'Him being dead would explain why he's been off his food,' said Mistress Maitland.

'I would think so,' I agreed.

Mistress Maitland nodded thoughtfully for a moment. 'Well, that's wonderful news,' she said at last.

I looked at her, surprised and puzzled. To be honest, it was not the reaction I had been expecting.

'Your husband has passed away,' I shouted, thinking that perhaps she was deaf and having difficulty in hearing me.

'Still gone, is he? Well, that's wonderful! Marvellous. Now I can sell this damned barn of a house and travel to Italy.'

I stared at her.

'I've always wanted to go to Italy,' she explained. 'I hear the weather is warmer there. I think I'll go tomorrow. I've lived in this damned house for more than 30 years and I've always hated it. My husband's late parents lived here. And his grandparents.'

The Maitland home was a large, rather splendid house with two or three hundred acres of land around it. On the downside it was undoubtedly impossible to heat during the winter months. Even with half a dozen fireplaces blazing away, the place was freezing cold.

I looked at her in horror. 'But you have to bury your husband before you can go anywhere!' I reminded her.

The whole business of burying a deceased person takes some considerable time. Indeed, it is usually necessary to keep a body in the house for twelve days or so. Relatives and friends take it in turns to sit up and keep the deceased company. Much gin is drunk and there are strict social rules about how a funeral is organised and how the bereaved must behave afterwards. A widow is expected to wear her weeds for a year and then slowly abandon the crepe trimmings and start wearing black silk. A woman seen out of the house in black silk in under a year would be regarded as unacceptably flighty. By leaving for Italy, the widow Maitland would doubtless escape all these restrictions but she would also shock all her friends and neighbours, not to mention any relatives still alive.

'My solicitor can deal with all the funeral nonsense,' replied the widow, with a dismissive wave of a hand.

'What about the sale of your house?'

'He can deal with that too,' added the widow Maitland with a firm nod. 'I shall go to London, take a cabriolet to

Dover and a boat to France.’ She thought about this for a moment. ‘No, damnit,’ she said suddenly. ‘I’ll take a four wheeler, a growler, and be damned to the expense.’

April 14th

I was called to the Red Dragon yesterday evening to attend to Hieronymous Scroggs who had fallen off a Table and broken his right leg.

Mr Scroggs is a professional dancer. His speciality is to put twelve eggs on the top of a Table, allow himself to be blindfolded and to proceed to dance a hornpipe jig around the eggs without stepping on any of them.

It is a form of entertainment which was popular with both the Saxons and the Normans. Chaucer, an author long deceased, used to call these dancers hoopesteres.

Egg dancing can be most profitable, and skilful exponents are often rewarded with good sums of money by the spectators.

Since Mr Scrogg's leg was broken, I had no choice but to remove it. I did not have my saw with me so since it was raining, I borrowed an axe from the landlord and performed the operation in the scullery. I am delighted to say that although the axe badly needed sharpening, I succeeded in removing the damaged portion of limb with just three blows. Three customers had to hold the fellow down and to quieten his screams we had to stuff his stained and shapeless felt hat into his mouth. Since this is the second time I have had to remove a limb without my bone saw, I made a note to myself to carry my bone saw with me at all times. Using an axe is hard labour and I put my shoulder out today.

This morning, I visited the Patient and was well pleased to see that he was still alive. He was, however, not well endowed with good spirits complaining loudly that with only one good leg he would no longer be able to perform a creditable hornpipe.

'Hop, sir!' I told him. 'Hopping is very popular. Just lay down your eggs and hop around them.'

This cheered him no end for he remembered that a man in the North of England was reputed to be able to make up to fifty shillings for an evening's good hopping.

But he complained about his hat having been ruined and when I presented my bill for a guinea he insisted on deducting three shillings and sixpence, the price of a new felt hat.

April 22nd

I attended a medical forum on Leeches which was held at an Inn in Reading and organised by a Leech selling company called ‘Pettigrew’s – Purveyors of Prime Leeches’. Their slogan, printed on the side of their Leech Jars, is: ‘You Can Rely on Pettigrew’s – Our Leeches Suck Longer and Harder than Anyone Else’s Or Your Money Back’.

When first invited to attend the forum, I had expressed little interest in the event but the seller’s local Drummer, a man called Mr Bartholomew, who dresses like a funeral walking man apart from the fact that he always wears a greasy, black bowler hat with a navy blue band around the crown, offered to arrange for me to be picked up by a cart and pair and promised an entertaining as well as educational event.

Pettigrew’s had hired the large room at the Blue Ball Inn and there were two dozen of us in attendance. The meeting began with a lecture from an Apothecary who had been brought from London to explain why Leeches are the preferred method of exsanguination. He had compared three patients who had been treated with Leeches with three patients who had been treated with scarificators and cupping glasses. Two of the three patients who had been treated with Leeches had survived but all three of the patients who had been treated with scarification had died.

A stern Apothecary whom I did not know, asked the lecturer, whose name by one of those strange coincidences which occur in life was Pettigrew (the same as the Leech selling company), if he had any information about the diseases from which the six patients had suffered.

‘I don’t see how that could be of any relevance,’ responded the lecturer rather stiffly. ‘The only point of any significance is that all three of the patients who were subjected to scarification were, within less than a week, staring up at the lid of a coffin whereas within the same time period two of the individuals who had been treated with Leeches were up and about and enjoying life. That’s a 100% failure rate for scarification and a 66% success rate for Pettigrew’s Leeches.’

It was generally agreed that the lecturer’s presentation had been thoroughly convincing and an Apothecary who had travelled all the way from Lichfield proposed a vote of thanks which was duly seconded and recorded.

There was only one other lecture. This, which was given by Mr Tarbuckton, a representative of the company, included a lengthy explanation of why Pettigrew’s Leeches were far superior to their competitors and immensely to be preferred over wild Leeches taken from a local pond or sold by travellers or gypsies.

‘If you purchase Leeches from Pettigrew’s you will be able to rely on the quality of the creatures you employ,’ explained Mr Tarbuckton. ‘Moreover, since Pettigrew’s Leeches are accredited and guaranteed taken from clean running water supplies, you can rely on them for high quality Bleeding. Regular articles about our Leeches in the popular press mean that many patients ask for Pettigrew’s Leeches and will accept no others. A recent investigative article which appeared in *The Times* newspaper, explained just why a Leech taken from clean, river water can provide a superior and safer service to a Leech taken from dirty or stagnant water. It was revealed that one of our competitors, who I will not name, was taking Leeches from a stream which was thick with sewage. The article attracted a good deal of interest. The discerning Apothecary can, therefore, charge two or even three times as much when he is providing Pettigrew’s Leeches as when providing Leeches with lesser provenance.’

Finally, after telling a lengthy but amusing anecdote about an Apothecary in Wolverhampton who had tried using garden snails instead of Leeches, Mr Tarbuckton announced that the company was initiating two new promotional policies to encourage sales.

‘First,’ he said, ‘we are introducing what we call a ‘Be Given a Free Leech If You Purchase a Leech’ policy. This means that if an Apothecary purchases two dozen Leeches, we will supply him with four dozen Leeches. He will pay for just two dozen Leeches. The other two dozen Leeches will be free of charge.’

He went on to explain that the company was also initiating a three for one returns policy for what he called ‘tired’ Leeches.

‘There is no doubt,’ he said, ‘that a Leech which has been well utilised will become sluggish and unwilling to take on more nourishment. This can seriously impair a Leech’s performance. But here at Pettigrew’s Leeches, we always try to go one step further than the competition and so if you return a dozen bloated Leeches to our Drummer he will, at absolutely no charge, replace them with four entirely fresh, hungry Leeches.’

We all agreed that these two innovations were excellent news and very welcome and I made a note to recommend to Dr Challot that in future we should use only Pettigrew’s Leeches.

We were then invited to move from the room in which we had been meeting into the Inn’s dining room. This splendidly furnished room had clearly been hired exclusively for Pettigrew’s guests.

As an amuse bouche we were immediately offered small pieces of hot lobster which were, so I was told by the comely young wench who served me, cooked in bouillon and covered with a mixture of yolk of egg, liqueur brandy, cream, madeira and herbs. The serving wenches, and there were a dozen of them, were delightfully attired in very low necked puffy sleeved frocks which I was later told were popular uniforms in German beer cellars. The comely servers had clearly all been chosen for their appealing and substantial features.

I had never seen such an array of Alcoholic beverages. The Inn keeper, obviously at Pettigrew's expense, had supplied a hogshead of cyder, pipes of both port and Madeira and apparently unlimited supplies of both strong beer and small beer. There was also a good supply of gin.

The meal consisted of eight courses.

We began with a rissole made with capon breasts, calves udders, marrow, bacon, herbs and all fried in lard to give a nice brown colour. We were then served a whole roasted goat, stuffed with plums and spiced stuffing and served with neat's tongue and slivers of goose. This was followed by a roasted swan, a quarter of a boar and a sufficiency of venison, plover and snipe. I tried to make a note of everything placed before me but could hardly keep up with the onslaught of food. I did jot down that for the fish courses we were served sturgeon, crayfish, carp, pike, trout and elvers. There was also an excellent pigeon and rook pie of which I had three helpings.

After a short break we were served a variety of puddings including saffron cake, gingerbread, marchpane, nectarines, custard and warden pie.

Throughout the meal we were served sack, malmsey and muscadine – all imported from foreign parts such as France or Germany.

The meal took five and a half hours to serve and to consume and I do not believe that men have ever dined more thoroughly or been served by more delightful waitresses. Towards the end I noticed that seven of my colleagues were missing. Coincidentally, seven of the waitresses had gone too, though I quickly realised that with fewer of us at the Table the girls had probably been sent home since there were less of us to serve.

As I left, to be taken back home by the same cart and driver who had brought me, I was handed a large Leech storage jar; a delightful thing with a domed perforated lip to prevent the creatures climbing out. I was also presented with a small, portable Leech jar in a pewter box to carry inside my medical satchel. The pewter box has both Pettigrew's name and my own name engraved upon the side and is a most pleasing item which must have cost a considerable sum. The Leech business is clearly a profitable one.

The whole evening was a very instructive and most educational experience.

I arrived back home very late that evening feeling that my excursion had been most worthwhile.

Unfortunately, I was kept awake for much of the night by gurglings and rumblings in my stomach which also caused me some considerable discomfort and occasioned a number of visits to the courtyard lavatory where I emptied myself from both ends on several occasions.

Young Nellie, bless her kind heart, asked if I had managed to eat anything while at my conference, or if my determination to feed my mind had left my body quite forgotten and unattended.

When I confessed that I had consumed an inelegant sufficiency of foods rather richer than those to which I was accustomed, she suggested that if I were, in consequence, suffering from a contused stomach and bewilderment of the bowel I might remedy the situation by taking additional refreshment. I am constantly amazed by her understanding of the human body and I quickly agreed to her suggestion. After visiting the kitchen, she presented me with a dish of cold pigeon pie served with a mound of cold, battered and buttered Turnips. When, with her constant encouragement, I had succeeded in demolishing the pie and the Turnips she suggested that I added a good layer of strong beer to the substance in order to encourage a speedy recovery from my plight.

I entertained high hopes that this fulsome remedy might ease my symptoms but sadly and inexplicably I fear that if anything my condition deteriorated still further and I spent the rest of the night curled up in a corner of the room waiting to die. For several hours I was more than mildly disappointed when this relief was not forthcoming.

April 29th

I was invited to a medical forum dealing with scarifators. The meeting, actually described as a 'Congress', was organised by a company called Hooklebury's Patent Scarifators.

I was, at first, sceptical and reluctant to agree to attend. However, I was, eventually persuaded to keep the day free of appointments when the Drummer, a greasy, middle aged fellow who wears a frock coat which saw its best days several decades ago, explained that I would learn a great deal about the future of scarification and be paid a guinea merely for attending.

'Leeches are dangerously out-of-date,' he insisted. 'The modern Apothecary no longer uses them. Today's man of medicine favours scarification when a Patient needs Bleeding. It is the scientific route to efficient exsanguination. '

The Drummer added that there would be an excellent meal after the lectures had finished. I told him that I was not to be easily bought by the prospect of a bowl of soup and a chunk of bread but he assured me that the meal, which would consist of nine courses together with wines, would be prepared by a French chef from the Savoy Hotel in London.

And it transpired that the Drummer's promise contained not a whiff of exaggeration.

The meeting was held in the upper room of the King's Head Public House and I was delighted to see that many of the fellows whom I had seen at the Leech demonstration were present to learn about scarification. I found it reassuring to know that so many of my colleagues were so eager to learn more about the practice of their profession that they were prepared to give up so much of their time in the cause of education. I am sometimes heartened by the nobility of my fellow professionals.

One fellow to whom I spoke, a Dr Jasper Prout, told me that in the last month he had been to 11 of these affairs. 'I save a fortune on food and eat much better than I could afford to myself,' he told me with a wink.

After a short lecture about the danger of using Leeches (the lecturer explained that the amount of Blood they consume cannot easily be regulated and pointed out that they are such unprepossessing creatures that many patients, particularly high born ladies, find the whole idea of applying Leeches quite upsetting) there was a demonstration of the Hooklebury Scarificators.

Two volunteer guinea pigs (both plump Maidens in their late teens) stripped to the waist and, dressed only in white cotton bloomers, were subjected to extensive scarification on their arms and chests. Both volunteers (who I assumed were being well paid for their part in the proceedings) smiled and joked throughout the display. As the Blood dripped it was caught in special silver containers so the floor coverings were not soiled.

This exhibition was followed by a short lecture by Mr Hooklebury himself.

He showed us several sets of scarificators.

His top selling premium set, which costs 100 guineas and was, I suspect, well outside the range of affordable items for those of us present, is a very fine looking set of 16 spring loaded blades which can be used to make small cuts in the skin. The blades, equipped with ivory handles, come in a solid silver scarificator case designed by Paul Ambroccio who, we were told, is an artist of some renown. The cases, decorated with enamelled flowers, are especially made by Asprey's of Bond Street. There is no doubt that the whole business of scarification is very clean and tidy. In addition to the 16 spring loaded blades, the premium set of blades sold by Aspreys also contains 16 small glasses packed into a leather box.

The scarification process is, of course, precisely the same as with more ordinary products. The Apothecary heats each glass over a candle before placing it onto the skin which has been efficiently lacerated by one of the scarficator blades. The vacuum created pulls Blood into the glass. This is science in the true 19th century style.

Mr Hooklebury claimed that his scarification equipment can be used without any risk of Blood spilling onto clothing or Bed linen.

I was very impressed.

It is difficult to see how medicine can progress any further than this. Indeed, as one of the apothecaries present commented, it seems as though we have moved so far forward that we are already living in our own future.

According to Mr Hooklebury, his top of the range scarification sets are used by nearly all Physicians and Surgeons including, he claimed, the ones who attend Her Majesty at the Palace.

There was then some discussion.

An Apothecary from Birmingham, whose name I did not catch, commented that he had been shown a copy of a book called *Mistress Beeton's Book of Household Management* in which the author had recommended Bleeding as an activity which could be done at home without the trouble and expense of calling in a professional. The author apparently recommended using a lancet to initiate Bleeding and provided useful advice on how to avoid Blood dripping onto carpets, rugs and sofa coverings.

An Apothecary who had read the same book said that in his view the best advice Mistress Beeton gave was to remind her readers that they must remember to stop the Bleeding when they thought the time was appropriate.

This caused much merriment and many ribald comments were passed at the expense of Mistress Beeton.

There was some discussion about whether home Bleeding would be a serious threat to our business, and a fellow from Winchester remarked that he had started a rumour in his neck of the woods that two patients who had followed Mistress Beeton's recommendation had Bled to Death because they cut too deeply and either didn't remember to arrest the Bleeding or didn't know how to do it effectively. It was agreed that this was an excellent notion and an Apothecary from Paddington said he would write a letter to *The Times* warning readers of the hazard associated with home Bleeding.

Dr Ferdinand Teague, an Apothecary from North of London, said he had a Patient who used to insist that Blood from his scarification cuts be allowed to drip onto a bucket so that he could put it on his roses. Apparently the fellow was a keen gardener who claimed that he had won numerous prizes for his roses at his village flower and vegetable show. This was thought to be good information.

An Apothecary from Oxford, called Dr Potter, said he once had a Patient who liked to have his wife's Blood drip into a saucepan so that his cook could incorporate the Blood into meat dishes. The Patient said the Blood gave the dishes extra body and a richer taste. Unfortunately, on one occasion, the wife, left alone for twenty minutes, fell asleep and when the husband and the Apothecary returned to the room they found one of their dogs, a Great Dane called Jack, enthusiastically licking the Blood from the skin as it leaked from the woman's arm. Deprived of the Blood for a steak and kidney pie he had ordered his cook to prepare, the husband reached for his shotgun and mortally wounded the dog with a single shot. The wife, woken by the gunshot, leapt into the air, had a heart seizure and died moments later.

After this sombre story there was silence for a while before the staff of the inn brought in the food and wine for our meal.

There was a special strength local mead for those who requested it and two bottles of wine for each of us (both bottles were of French origin, one red and one white) and the meal was, as before, served by an ample number of waitresses. Indeed, we had a waitress each to make sure that our needs did not go unfulfilled.

There were, as promised, nine courses.

I had with me a small notebook and I jotted down details of all the food we were served, checking with my waitress for information when I wasn't certain of the nature of the dish I had been given.

First course: trout roe pie which was served with eels baked in marzipan. This was quite wonderful. If I had to eat one thing over and over again for the rest of my life this would be my selection.

Second course: pheasants' breasts in a sauce made from truffles and mushrooms. A trifle rich for my taste.

Third course: fried trout tails with whitebait. Too fiddly.

Fourth course: crusty topped sparrow and ptarmigan pie. Too many bones.

Fifth course: individual pies made of breasts of capon minced with cows' udders. Monsieur Anatole, the cook, came out with this course which was I gather his pièce de résistance though to be honest it was not my favourite item on his menu. He called the pies bouillands and I had to ask him to write down the name for me. I found the whole thing rather rubbery for my taste though the cook assured me that the ingredients had been boiled for two hours before being placed in the pie. He told me that the pie also contained cloves, butter, vinegar, sugar, cinnamon, tripe, mugget and cocks' combs.

Sixth course: a tart made from fish spleen, a boar rissole and capon livers wrapped in cauls. Rather bitter and too strong tasting for my liking.

Seventh course: a whole roasted francolin each. Excellent. Very tasty.

Eighth course: bone marrow pasties. Extremely handsome delicacies which are undoubtedly full of nutritious qualities.

Ninth course: the meal was rounded off with spotted dick pudding, served with lashings of brandy and egg custard. The pudding was the best I have ever tasted and the brandy and egg custard was magnificent.

And finally, bottles of port, cigars and little packets of Pipe Tobacco were brought round by our individual serving wenches. I noticed that several of my colleagues took handfuls of cigars and as many of the packets of Pipe Tobacco as they could grab and thrust them into their coat pockets.

One fellow, an Apothecary called Norbutt Wainscot, who hailed from Berkshire, even succeeded in cramming the bottle of port he had been given into his jacket. I suspect that he must have had special pockets made, larger and stronger than the usual variety, to accommodate such items.

Mr Wainscot, who had already consumed a good deal of Alcohol, told me that he drank only for his health. He said he had good, reliable evidence that a generous supply of Alcohol will improve a man's health and life expectation. Always eager to expand my medical knowledge I asked him about this.

'I'll give you an example,' he said, leaning closer and generously giving me a chance to share a lungful of second-hand breath that was powerful enough to strip the skin off a cow. ‘A chap I know fell down a flight of stone steps last Saturday evening. A long flight of steps, made of quarried stone. Not a rug in sight. And do you know what? The fellow didn’t hurt himself one little bit. Not one broken bone. No Bleeding. Not even a bruise. Tore a hole in his breeches, bruised his hat and lost his tiepin but his person escaped entirely unscathed. And do you know why?’

I admitted that I did not.

‘The fellow was as drunk as a polony,’ he said, stabbing a podgy forefinger in my chest and giving me another chance to taste his breath. ‘As drunk as a lord. So pickled he could hardly stand upright. That’s why he was unharmed when he fell down the damned stairs. And you know what that means?’

I admitted that I did not.

‘That means I have an investigative medical mind!’ said Wainscot. He tapped his skull with the knuckles of his right hand. ‘Finest medical brain in Britain resides in there!’

I took a step back and waited; there was clearly more to come. I blinked to keep him in focus for I confess I was more than a little tiddly myself and he appeared to be moving from side to side and drifting in and out of focus.

‘Why do you think the fellow didn’t hurt himself?’ asked Dr Wainscot.

‘He fell onto a cushion?’ I suggested.

‘The Alcohol, sir! The Alcohol protected him from harm. If he hadn’t been protected by Alcohol he’d have broken every damned bone in his damned body. I’ve seen people fall down shorter flights of steps and die from the consequences. It was the Alcohol which saved him.’ Wainscot beamed with pride and jabbed me again with the same podgy finger. ‘You’ve not heard that before, have you?’

I tentatively said that I had heard it said that a man who is drunk can fall over without hurting himself because he is relaxed and falls without becoming tense but Wainscot pooh poohed and tut tutted impatiently.

‘No, no, no that’s all superficial nonsense,’ he cried. ‘The fact is that Alcohol acts as a preservative. If you put a dead rat into a vat of Alcohol it will be preserved indefinitely. That’s the point you see! Alcohol is a marvellous preservative. The greatest medicine ever discovered. The stuff protects and preserves. It is a gift – given to us by God to shield us from all harm.’

I felt privileged to be allowed to share this discovery.

‘If Alcohol protects us from the consequences of falling down a flight of stone steps,’ continued Dr Wainscot, ‘it stands to reason that it will protect us from damage caused by other things. It will keep the heart healthy, the lungs in fine fettle, the spleen and the liver in tip top shape and the brain functioning like a machine.’

‘Gadzooks!’ was all I could manage in response to this.

‘Gadzooks indeed. You might well say ‘Gadzooks’.’

Dr Wainscot took the bottle of port from his pocket, removed the cork and drank a quarter of the bottle at a single gulp. He replaced the cork and put the bottle back into his pocket. ‘Can’t share this with you,’ he said. ‘Need it myself to protect my body. You’ll have to get your own. Vitally important to keep the body’s Alcohol levels sufficiently high. Allow the Alcohol level to drop and you expose yourself to untold dangers. The body must be protected at all times. Do you know how I make sure my patients are well protected?’

I admitted that I didn’t.

‘I make them walk along the edge of a rug,’ he said. ‘If they can walk in a straight line they’re dangerously exposed and urgently need more Alcohol. That’s the trick! I shall be writing a paper for that new journal they’re putting out,’ he said. ‘What’s it called? ‘The British Medical Journal’ or some such pompous title. It’ll make my name.’

He suddenly stopped and glared at me.

‘Don’t you go thinking you can steal my thunder by writing it before me,’ he said. ‘Anyway, you can’t. I have all the evidence and the knowledge.’ He tapped his head. ‘It’s all tucked away safely up here. Biggest and best brain in Britain!’ He then lurched away, tripped over a dog and fell onto his face.

The dog, a neutered mutt, either mud coloured or needing a wash, sniffed at the unconscious body and investigated it fully before deciding to piss all over him. It then wandered off.

When we left the Congress we were each given our guinea, a pound of sugar plums and a leather pouch into which three complimentary scarificator blades had been placed. There was room in the pouch for two dozen blades and I, like my fellow attendees, purchased a couple of extra blades, though they were very expensive.

It seems to me that Leeches are a thing of the past and scarification is definitely the way forward. It is clearly scientific medicine at its very best. Since it is obvious to anyone that we will always have to bleed our patients, and that Bleeding will be the treatment of choice for many specific ailments as well as for all uncommitted symptoms, it does seem to me that we have no choice but to embrace the process of scarifiction.

It is a wonderful feeling to be living in the future.

May 2nd

The Leech Drummer came. He had somehow found out that I attended the Congress on scarification last week and was as sore as a pickled dog. He seemed to regard my determination to educate myself as some sort of insult to himself, his company and the entire Leech industry. He pointed out that Leeches have been used for many centuries and were well favoured for their Blood sucking skills by the ancient Egyptians. He took the opportunity to remind me that I had recently accepted his company’s generous hospitality. I felt my face redden when I noticed him staring pointedly at the scarifier case which was standing on the desk in front of me. The rather splendid Leech case with which I had been presented by his employer was, at that moment, sitting snugly in my medical satchel.

It had previously been my intention to send the Leech Drummer on his way but he somehow managed to make me feel swamped with feelings of guilt.

How do you explain to a fellow that he is working in a dying industry and that Leeches are very old-fashioned whereas bladed scarification is the way of the future?

In the end I was so consumed by a potent mixture of guilt and pity that I bought three dozen of his best quality Leeches.

It seems that in medicine there are age old customs which will die hard.

And I have to admit that we do have patients who prefer to be Leeched than scarified. Indeed, we have three patients who require Leeching once a month and who regard the process as calming and beneficial both mentally and physically.

May 7th

I spent a merry evening playing shoveh’penny, a game which was enormously popular with Henry VIII, though it is said that as a young man he much preferred pole vaulting.

There is no little irony in the fact that Henry VIII, who was keen on jousting and arranged for wives, monks and political enemies to be executed favoured indoor sports associated with Public Houses. He banned contact sports of all kinds, saying that they were too violent and too dangerous and he preferred shoveh’penny to all other sporting activities.

The great playwright William Shakespeare wrote about the game with enthusiasm and under its various names (push penny, shovegroat and shovelboard are the best known) this is probably the most popular game of our modern era.

Most Public Houses and Inns have their own teams and play competitively against neighbouring teams. Inevitably, therefore, betting and cheating are popular.

The Peacock Inn Table, one of the largest in the area, is 29 feet long and two feet wide. It has an unvarnished walnut top on an oak base with oak legs and woe betide anyone who lays a tankard on the surface.

Sadly, players are not always loyal.

One of our best players, Tobias Hinchcliffe, was recently lured away to an Inn in the next town where, it was rumoured, he had been offered a payment of a guinea a week just to play shoveh’penny for the Inn’s team.

The Inn is one of our most prominent competitors in the local league and this treacherous act resulted in much ill-feeling.

By a cruel coincidence, the traitor was attacked one evening as he went home from the Inn. All of his fingers were broken and it seems that his career as a shoveh’penny player is now over.

May 12th

I was called to see Squire Hercules Figbotham this afternoon.

Squire Figbotham is a bad tempered old fellow of 74 years who has been ailing for many years. A vituperative quidnunc he has done nothing with his life except steadily become older, though this is, it must be admitted, an achievement at which he has excelled and at which he has shown considerable skill. A minute here, a day there, a week here, a month there and they all add up.

'Look after the minutes,' he once told me in a rare moment of comparative lucidity, 'and the years will look after themselves.'

Dr Challot insists that Squire Figbotham is only alive because he is too stupid to know how to die.

His housekeeper, Miss Haverhouse, who looks after the squire and a twelve room house by herself, called for me because the old fellow had refused point blank to get out of bed.

When I examined him I found that his heart was fluttering like a butterfly on a summer's day. There was no rhyme nor reason for the irregular beating. I gave him digitalis leaf but it made no difference. He refused my offer to use the scarification knives on him so I tried half a dozen good Leeches but they didn't help either.

'Am I dying, Doctor?' he demanded at last. He picked up a speaking trumpet and held it to his right ear, indicating that my reply should be directed into the trumpet.

'Oh no, not at all,' I replied as cheerily as I could be. I have never mastered the art of talking into a speaking trumpet.

'There's no need to shout!' he roared.

'I'm sorry. I thought…'

I waited for a moment while he struggled to find his teeth which had been expelled by the roar and which were now caught in a fold of his nightgown. When he had recovered them he slipped them back into his mouth. They looked to be wooden and clumsily carved.

'Tell me the truth you blackguard!' he suddenly shouted, so loudly that I fell over backwards and knocked my Leech jar off the bedside Table.

'Well, you're not well,' I admitted.

I bent down and struggled to pick the Leeches up off the floor and to get them back into the jar.

'The damned gardener's boy could have told me that, you idiot! What the devil are you doing down there?'

'Picking up Leeches.'

'Have we got Leeches in here? Good God man. Are you sure they aren't slugs?'

'I brought the Leeches with me,' I explained.

'You brought Leeches into my bedroom? What sort of buffoon are you?'

'I'm the Doctor,' I shouted into the trumpet. 'You have some of the Leeches on your chest.'

'Is that what they are?' He looked down at his chest, where the Leeches were busy sucking his Blood. 'I thought they were lawyers – all sucking out my Blood. Are you trying to kill me? Tell me the truth or I'll rip off your damned impertinent hide and use it as a rug. Am I dying?'

I took a deep breath. 'I'm sorry to have to say that you are dying,' I told him.

'Thank the Lord for that!' he said.

'I beg your pardon?' I said, as I put the last of the spilt Leeches into their jar.

'I said: 'Thank the Lord for that!'. Are you deaf as well as stupid?'

'I was just surprised that you were thanking the Lord for the fact that you are dying.'

'You'd be thanking the Lord if you were me. I'm just glad it's nearly over.'

'What?'

'Life! I've had enough of it. Someone else can have a go. There must be people queuing up to be alive. I never did learn the damned bassoon.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'You are deaf aren't you? You can have my speaking trumpet when I've gone. It's been in my family for three centuries. My great great great grandfather used it. It's got solid silver and ivory accoutrements and there's a pewter case for it somewhere. I never use the case because it weighs half a ton if it weighs a grain. The case that is. Tell my lawyer I said you can have it. Do you play the bassoon?'

I thanked him for the offer of the speaking trumpet, though I had absolutely no intention of speaking to his lawyer since I cannot see myself having a great need for such an item, with or without silver accoutrements. I also admitted that I did not play the bassoon.

'Nor do I. Always meant to learn. Don't know why. Just a whim. Too late now. Too late for a lot of things. Too late for everything.' He paused and closed his eyes as though day-dreaming. 'I'd have liked to play the bassoon, though.’

I gave him a large dose of Laudanum and went downstairs to tell the housekeeper that her master would probably not be long for this world. As I descended, it occurred to me that if there was a pewter case for the speaking trumpet I should, after all, speak to the lawyer.

Miss Haverhouse, the old fellow’s housekeeper was in the kitchen washing dishes. The remains of what looked like a pint of weak milk stood on the draining board.

‘I’m not surprised and not sorry,’ she said, wiping her hands on her pinafore. ‘He’s a man who has been overfull of misery for many a year and I can tell you, Doctor, that there’ll be many a dry eye at his funeral.’

She certainly didn’t seem in the slightest bit upset that her master was standing on the step outside Death’s door and I cannot pretend I was surprised. The world is over-populated with mean-spirited, grotesque scolds whose main ambition in life is to spread unhappiness, and Squire Figbotham would be on anyone’s list of the most egregious examples.

‘Would you like a glass of posset?’ she asked, nodding towards the jug on the draining board.

I have never liked posset and never understood why anyone would want to mix ale and milk. I thanked her and declined.

‘I’m never without a glass close by,’ she said. ‘It’s the only thing my stomach can take.’

I gave her the name of a good undertaker and left her with a bottle of Laudanum to give her master. ‘Give Squire Figbotham some of this if he wakes and is in pain,’ I told her. ‘It’ll ease his passing.’

‘That’d be just a waste of good medicine,’ she retorted, taking the cork out of the bottle and pouring a third of the contents straight down her throat. ‘There I go,’ she gasped, taking the bottle from her lips. ‘I dare say that’ll help settle my stomach even better than the posset. What did you say it was?’

‘Laudanum,’ I told her.

‘Oh splendid,’ she said, and poured half of the remainder straight down her throat.

‘Shall I send a boy round with another bottle?’ I enquired.

She belched loudly and handed me the empty bottle. ‘Better send two,’ she said. ‘Here, you can have this empty one back.’

May 18th

Early this morning Miss Haverhouse sent word via the gardener's boy that Squire Hercules Figbotham had got out of Bed and was outside in his Nightshirt shooting the heads off all the stone statues that stood in his garden.

When I got there I found, to my astonishment, that the message I'd received had been entirely accurate. The grounds of the house were full of headless statues and Squire Figbotham, who was quite naked apart from his filthy Nightshirt, was wandering about his rose garden clearly looking for something else to shoot. He had a wild eyed, disappointed look about him.

I have often heard it said that we should respect our old people, for they have accumulated much wisdom and acquired a good deal of knowledge.

No one who had ever met Squire Figbotham would talk that way.

'You should go indoors,' I shouted, for he did not have his speaking trumpet with him.

'Why? Are there more statues there?' He stared at me, as though trying to recollect where he'd seen me before. 'You're younger than I expected,' he said. 'You're a damned site younger than you used to be.'

'Actually I think I'm older than I was,' I said.

'Answer the damned question,' he shouted. 'Are there more statues indoors?'

'I don't think so but you have no shoes on your feet and the weather is cold for the season.'

'My feet are damnably cold,' he said, looking down at them. They were an unpleasant shade of blue.

'Will you go into the house, sir?' I asked.

I wondered what the devil was wrong with him. He did not appear to be with drink. Maybe he had acquired some version of the pox. Or perhaps he had eaten too much rhubarb. He showed no signs of meaditis or any other form of intoxication.

'Are there any statues to shoot indoors? I'm rather taken with shooting the heads off the damned things. They stare at me and never say a damned word. Can't stand being stared at by people who never say anything. The damned things remind me of a Wife I once had.'

'Let's go indoors and get you something warm to drink,' I suggested, making sure I didn't stare at him.

'I don't want to drink! I want to shoot.' Holding his gun in his right hand he put his left hand into his Nightshirt pocket and rummaged around. A moment later he pulled out an empty hand. 'Have you got any cartridges?' he asked. 'I'm out!'

I confessed that I had no cartridges, apologised for this regrettable shortcoming, and suggested that there might be some inside the house.

'Let me tell you something, young man,' he said. 'There are only three things you can rely on in this world. There will always a dead fly in the ointment, there will always be an inky blot threatening to besmirch some part of your eschucheon and you will never have enough cartridges.'

Remembering his remarks the previous day, when we had both thought him about to step onto the barge to take him across the River Styx, I asked if he would like to go indoors to play the bassoon.

'What the devil are you on about?' he demanded. 'Why would I want to play the damned bassoon? I haven't got one and I don't want one.' He stared hard at me for a moment. 'You're the deaf fellow, aren't you? I remember now – you're the fellow who came round sprinkling slugs on my carpet and wanted to steal my speaking trumpet?'

'I'm the Doctor,' I shouted. 'I came to see you yesterday because I thought you were ill. And they were Leeches not slugs.'

'Leeches or slugs – who cares? Disgusting creatures. You can't shoot 'em and you can't eat 'em. Do you eat Leeches? Do you eat slugs?'

'No, sir, I don't.'

'Then why sprinkle the damned things around my bedroom? Are you mad?'

'No, sir, I'm not mad.'

'You're the damned Doctor aren't you?'

I admitted that I was, indeed, the Doctor.

'And now it appears you've come to see me again? Why? There's nothing wrong me. I've never been better. I'm not paying you just to come round, sprinkle slugs around my bedroom, steal my speaking trumpet and talk about bassoons. You Doctors are just like lawyers. You take every opportunity to come round and jabber away so that you can send me an extortionate bill for jabbering.'

With that he marched off into the house and headed straight for his gun room where, it transpired, he kept whole boxfuls of ammunition; quite enough cartridges for a man to start a small war.

'I think perhaps you should put the gun away,' I shouted as I followed him and watched with horror as he reloaded the gun and stuffed three boxes of cartridges into his nightgown pocket. 'Put some clothes on and have something to eat and drink.'

'Are you trying to sell me food and drink now? I don't want any. I want to shoot the damned statues. There may be more of them around the place. I shot all the blackbirds. I could only get 23 of 'em. Not quite enough for a pie, eh?'

Just then I noticed his housekeeper, Miss Haverhouse, standing behind him. I noticed that she was holding a large, iron frying pan.

'Can you persuade Squire Figbotham to get dressed?' I asked her.

'Why do I want to get dressed?' he roared. And with that he put down the gun and tore off his Nightshirt, leaving himself totally naked. He then picked up the gun again.

It occurred to me that in the same way that not all young men are bold, handsome and strong, not all old men are wise and erudite.

'Do you feel in good spirit?' I asked him. 'For your age,' I added.

'How the hell am I supposed to know how a man of my age is inclined to feel?' he demanded.

'He'll be better off if he has a sleep,' said Miss Haverhouse and with that she swung the frying pan as high as she could and bashed the old man on the back of his head. He went down like a stone.

'Good heavens, Miss Haverhouse!' I exclaimed. 'Have you killed him?'

'Not likely,' she said, apparently quite uninterested in whether she had or not. To my astonishment she pulled up her skirts, pulled down a stocking and pushed her right leg forward in such a way to draw attention to her knee.

'While you're here, Doctor,' she said, 'would you take a look at my knee for me?'

It wasn't difficult to see what was wrong with it. The knee was red, angry looking and the size of a football.

'I've tried cow dung,' she said. 'But it didn't make no difference.'

'Cow dung?'

She sighed in that way people sigh when they thought they were talking to someone sensible and suddenly discover that they're talking to an idiot. 'You take a shovelful of cow dung, put it on the fire and roast it,' she explained, 'and you then wrap it in a towel or a pillow case and bind it round the bad joint.'

'And it didn't work?' I said, doing my best to express surprise. I find myself less and less alarmed by the extraordinary beliefs of my patients. I would not have been surprised if she had put the roasted dung into a pie and eaten it with a Turnip mash.

'Not this time,' she admitted. 'It usually does,' she added quickly. 'And this were darned good smelly stuff from Buttercup. She's one of our best producers.'

'Of milk?'

'Dung.'

'Well I never!' I said sarcastically. 'Fancy the old cow dung treatment not working. Let me take a look at the knee.' I bent closer and peered at the knee. It was definitely red, angry looking and swollen.

'So, what are you going to do about it?' demanded Miss Haverhouse, as though it was my fault that her knee was inflamed and deformed.

'You haven't tried swallowing a small frog, have you?'

'No, I haven't! I don't hold with those old-fashioned remedies.'

'Swallowing a frog used to be a very popular remedy for joint problems,' I reminded her. 'As long as the frog was alive when swallowed.'

When I first started my Apprenticeship, Dr Challot had regular visits from an old fellow we called the frog man. He used to bring us live toads as well as live frogs but these were, apparently, more difficult to get hold of. I don't know why but we never referred to him as the toad man. Today, we obtain our frogs and toads from a reputable supplier. They're all dead when he brings them. I don't know what happened to the old frog man.

'Never tried it myself,' she said. 'My mother did it once or twice.'

'Did it help?'

'No it didn't. It didn't do the frog much good either.'

'I'll make up some medicine for you. You can collect the bottle from the surgery later tonight.'

'Will it cure me? I'm not going to walk all that way if it doesn't cure me.'

'It'll cure you,' I assured her. 'Meanwhile, put a piece of flannel over the knee and run a hot iron over it half a dozen times. Not hot enough to burn, just hot enough to be unpleasant.'

'A hot iron?'

'A hot iron.'

'What'll be in the medicine?' she asked, suspiciously.

'It'll be a mixture of one ounce of sulphur, eight drams of cream of tartar, a small spoonful of treacle , a pinch of brimstone, one ounce of rhubarb, one dram of gum guiacum and a pound of clover honey,' I told her.

I don't usually like telling patients what is in their medicine lest they write it down and make it up themselves. But Miss Haverhouse can neither read nor write and I knew darned well that even if she heard what I'd said she wouldn't remember it for more than half a minute.

'You take a teaspoonful every morning and another teaspoonful every evening,' I added. 'If it isn't better in ten days come and see me at the surgery.'

She disappeared, swinging the frying pan as though it were a club of some kind. As she did so I noticed that she was deliberately banging the frying pan against the side of her swollen knee. It seemed to be a tic and, surprisingly, it didn't seem to bother her unduly.

'Do you always bang your knee with the pan when you walk about? ' I called after her.

She turned. 'I do,' she said, rather impatiently.

It didn't seem to occur to the stupid woman that constantly banging her knee with a heavy frying pan might have made it red and swollen.

Making a mental note to put extra rhubarb into the mixture I prepared for her I bent down and examined the still unconscious Squire Figbotham. He was out cold but was breathing and had a pulse and seemed, therefore, to be still alive. He was far too heavy for me to lift alone so I found an old horse blanket and covered him up. Both the gardener (who appeared to be at least 150-years-old) and the gardener's boy (who appeared to be about six-years-old) refused to help me lift their master upstairs to his bedroom so I left him where he was and went back to the Peacock Inn where I enjoyed a nice piece of overcooked beef, a large plateful of frilled potatoes, three boiled eggs and a couple of jugs of malmsey.

After eating, I found that I had split my trousers. I have had the pair for only three years but they have become damnably tight about the Arse region. I fear they must have shrunk. It has been raining a good deal recently. Unless I can find a way to ensure that I never offer my rear outlook to my patients, I must buy another pair for I think the damage is so extensive that the trousers are beyond repair. I think it would be unseemly for me to back out of the room every time I leave a Patient and going upstairs backwards at the Peacock Inn is out of the question for the staircase is exceedingly steep and narrow.

I rode to Dr Challot's surgery where I made up the bottle of medicine for Miss Haverhouse.

'Did you know you'd split your trousers?' demanded Mistress Swain as I hunted in a cupboard for the requisite ingredients.

'I did, thank you.'

'I can see your flannel underwear,' said Mistress Swain. 'There's a split in them too so I can see your pink Arse.'

'Thank you Mistress Swain!' I snapped, attempting to shield my rear with the tails of my jacket.

I was fierce-some annoyed for this news meant I would have to buy another pair of trousers and another flannel undergarment in addition. In view of all these additional expenses, I decided to increase my charge to Miss Haverhouse from nine pence to a shilling and to send Squire Figbotham a bill for half a guinea. Since both were already patients of Dr Challot I would have to pay three quarters of the money over to him. It took me twenty minutes, half a pencil and the backs of two old Leech brochures to work out that my earnings for the day would be approximately thirty four and a half pence. It would not be enough to cover the cost of the new trousers and new flannel underwear which I need to purchase.

My financial outlook is not rosy. I desperately need to find more new patients who require the medication I sold to the hapless Constable Blomfield.

I have heard it said that the level of a man's happiness is the sum of his achievements minus his expectations.

If that is the case my happiness is now well into negative territory.

May 19th

I was called again to see Hercules Figbotham. A passing drayman left a note requesting my attendance, informing me that the squire had tried to shoot his gardener with his shotgun.

In the note, the housekeeper said that she thought that the Squire was disguised in liquor but with the advantage of several years of medical education behind me I couldn’t help wondering if the unfortunate fellow might not be suffering from a mental disorder of some kind.

When I arrived at the house, Mr Figbotham was standing on the roof, stark naked, and singing hymns. He refused to come down until I promised that he could have a Plumb Pudding for his supper and a quarter of a pound of Pigtail Tobacco to smoke afterwards. When I had promised him these things, he completed the negotiations by adding that he also wanted a hogshead of Cyder all for himself.

After he had climbed down, which he did with surprising ease, I settled him down with a large draught of Laudanum, which he drank without any hesitation.

I instructed the housekeeper to make a Plumb Pudding and obtain the Tobacco and the Cyder lest he wake up and be disappointed by their absence. I also strongly suggested that the squire’s shotgun be hidden in a cupboard.

May 24th

Mr Josiah Rossetti, a lawyer and acquaintance of mine suggested that I needed a hobby and said he thought I should take up fishing. He lent me an old rod and suggested that I try fishing in one of the ponds in the grounds of his home. He said the largest pond was well stocked with fish and was home to several magnificent pike.

This afternoon I decided to try my new hobby but after spending an hour sitting beside the lake I was bored. Not wishing to tell my acquaintance of my failure, I hired a passing labourer to sit beside the pond and do my fishing for me. I told him that I would pay him tuppence for every fish he caught, up to a maximum of three.

When the man came to my room at the Peacock Inn and handed me three fish, I happily paid him the sixpence I owed. I was so delighted that I took the fish along to Mr Rossetti's home to show him my catch.

'Did you catch these in one of my ponds?' demanded my friend. I fancied I heard a note of scepticism in his voice.

I said that I had.

'But these are mackerel,' said Mr Rossetti, after glancing at the fish.

'Are they?' I said. 'I fancied they might be pike.'

'They are mackerel,' insisted Mr Rossetti with what I fear sounded like a smidgeon of a sneer. 'They are salt water fish.'

For a moment I was stuck for an answer.

'It has been very windy recently,' said Mistress Rossetti who was standing nearby and who had been listening to the conversation. 'Maybe the fish were blown off course and landed in our pond by mistake.' Mistress Rossetti, who is at least 20 years younger than her husband is a delicately featured girl who has masses of blonde curls and who always reminds me of a bisque doll.

Her explanation sounded convincing to me but Mr Rossetti seemed to be sceptical.

I don't think he and I will ever be anything more than acquaintances.

No true friend would have been prepared to make me look foolish in front of his wife.

May 29th

Mistress Clarissa Humbug died. She negotiated the final stages of her life as though picking her way through a bed of nettles. But however ill she has been she had never stopped working. She took in washing and dealt with several bundles of the stuff every day. She was also renowned to be the fastest potato and strawberry picker in the county.

When she had gone I stood on one side of her Bed with her husband standing on the other.

He looked at me and there were tears in his eyes; they were flowing down his cheeks and dripping onto the Bed coverlet. A tear splashed onto his dead wife's wrist.

'Who is going to look after me now?' he whined pathetically. Mr Humbug is a selfish, lazy boor and I stared at him, finding his raw expression of self-pity difficult to believe.

'She did everything,' he explained, as though an explanation were necessary. 'She did the shopping, the cooking, the cleaning and the washing. She dug the garden and mended the clothes. She chopped and brought in the firewood and cleaned out the fireplace.' He stared at me, almost accusingly. 'So who is going to do those things now, eh? Who is going to look after me?' He stared at his Wife and there was anger in his eyes. 'You had no right to up and go and leave me!' he said. He clenched and raised a fist and for a moment I thought he was going to hit her but slowly he unclenched and lowered the fist.

'I'm sorry for your loss,' I said softly. 'She was a hard-working woman.'

Mr Humbug, who could not have been described as a hard-working man, looked across at me, as though noticing me for the first time. 'Do you know where she kept the cyder?' he demanded. 'I could make short shrift of a pint of cyder.'

I admitted that I did not know where Mistress Humbug had kept the cyder and without saying anything else I left the bedroom, the house and, I hoped, Mr Humbug's life. The wretched fellow has been a wastrel all his life; a parasite living off his wife's labours.

I shall have to find some way of getting in touch with the Humbugs' six children. There are three girls and three boys. The girls are called Brie, Camembert and Roquefort, after French cheeses, and the boys are named Stilton, Wensleydale and Cheddar after English cheeses. I do not know why this should be but I can only assume that one or other of the Humbugs had a stirring penchant for cheese.

The children all left home before they were 15 years of age and rarely reappear though I believe that Camembert was seen at the house last Mothering Sunday.

June 2nd

The eldest Humbug boy sent word that neither he nor his siblings would attend their father’s funeral. He has changed his name from Stilton to Gloucester. I sent a message back pointing out that it was their mother who had died. The boy replied that it didn’t matter who had died, they would not be returning for the funeral.

Deaths in the village appear to be coming thick and fast.

Old Figbotham finally worked out how to die. I have no doubt that he and his former housekeeper will both be relieved.

June 5th

It is some time since I was visited by Constable Blomfield and sold him the massive suppository which I had originally made as a pessary for Mistress Wiltshire's voluminous cock alley.

Since then I have found myself suddenly rising curiously popular with the male members of the local community – a surprising number of them wanting me to provide them with one of the special suppositories I had given to the Constable.

It appears that, quite contrary to my request that he keep quiet about the remedy, Mr Blomfield has spread the word of his treatment further and wider than I had envisaged.

The first to turn up in the surgery was Mr Josiah Rossetti, the lawyer who embarrassed me when I turned up at his house with three fish which I claimed to have caught in one of his ponds – the ones which I thought were pike but which he claimed were mackerel.

'I've come for one of those enhancement things you sold Constable Blomfield,' he whispered. 'To, put up the back passageway in order to increase my orgasm storehouse.'

I told him that I was afraid that I didn't have any more of the suppositories available but that if he really wanted one I'd make one up especially for him. 'It'll cost you a guinea,' I warned him. (Since he was an acquaintance, I'd have charged him half a guinea if the scrunch bowelled bastard hadn't mortified me in front of Mistress Rossetti.)

'That's all right, Doctor,' said Mr Rossetti, without turning a hair. 'Constable Blomfield did say it would be a guinea for a treatment to give me 100 priggings. Is that right?'

I said it was.

He took out his purse, which I could not help noticing was surprisingly full, and pulled out a guinea piece. He looked at it, thought for a moment and took out a second coin. 'I'll take two of them, please,' he said. 'That should last me two months.' He thought again and removed a third coin. 'And I'll take a third one for a good friend of mine,' he added.

I told him to come back the following day to collect the three Arsefills.

When he'd gone, I looked at the three coins for a moment, and jangled them together, before putting them into my waistcoat pocket. Such wealth!

And before the clock had struck noon, two more men and three gentlemen had come into the surgery requesting the very same thing. I took their guineas and dropped them into a waistcoat pocket. At this rate I would need to buy myself a decent purse or have my waistcoat pockets enlarged and strengthened.

I spent the rest of the day, and a good part of the evening, making up more suppositories.

I contemplated making these smaller than the first one I'd produced but decided that if I made them smaller, the patients would probably be disappointed. It occurred to me that the pain and trouble involved in manipulating a rather large suppository into a rather narrow opening, and subsequently into and along a confined space, might well be part of the mystique. So I made these suppositories just as large as the original one had been. After all, pain and fear give us humility, humanity and understanding and these are the very essence of civilisation.

No medicine ever works as well as one which looks and tastes foul – as though it had been mixed by Shakespeare's witches in a particularly venomous mood.

June 8th

Mistress Clarissa Lambert, the butcher's Wife, came to the surgery and after subjecting me to an ache by ache description of her corns that lasted a full twenty minutes and would have weakened the tedious Mr Thackeray's resolve, finally came to the point.

'My nipples are too small,' she complained, producing the two items for my consideration. She did this almost as if by magic.

I told her they looked perfectly healthy and aesthetically acceptable but she was not convinced, reporting that her husband said they were so small that he couldn't find them in the dark. Eventually, I told her to dip her nipples in a saucer of cold gherkin water for twenty minutes every evening before bed.

'I don't think I'll be able to get both nipples in one saucer,' she complained.

I told her to use two saucers or to dip the nipples consecutively rather than concurrently.

She seemed bewildered by the choice so I told her to use two saucers and dip the two nipples at the same time.

She went away well pleased with this suggestion and since I had not dispensed any medicine and am not by law allowed to charge for a mere consultation, she offered to send round two fowl and a string of sausages a yard and a half long. I thanked her and told her that this would be most satisfactory.

Mr Pippin Babberley, my next patient, is a bachelor who works as a Drummer for a corsetiere. He is of medium height but still manages to look as round as a football. He complained of a mole on his chin but since the mole had obviously been in position for the whole of his life (45 years if he was to be believed, though he looks a good decade and a half older) it was clear that this was not the real reason he had come to the surgery.

'What else is on your mind?' I asked, having had my offer to remove the mole with a sharp knife declined.

The man frowned. 'How did you know there was something else on my mind?' he asked, clearly impressed.

'I have a small skill in the area of clairvoyance,' I told him. It is, I think, always wise for a Doctor to retain some elements of mystery and one has to do everything within one's power to retain an air of superiority.

Mr Babberley went a little pale.

'Have you ever been out to dinner and been disappointed by the fare on offer?' he asked.

I confessed that I had attended one or two dinners which had been disappointing.

'Or gone to a dinner where they serve portions that wouldn't satisfy a blowfly? You spend the evening feeling hungry and by the time you get home you're ravenous. You'd eat a chunk of stale bread and a piece of mouldy cheese?'

I laughed and nodded.

'I have to go to a good many dinners in my line of work,' said Mr Babberley. 'There are business dinners and dinners with customers. Sometimes I go to three or four of the damned things in a week. It's where I do a good deal of my business.'

I offered a little sympathy.

'But a year or two ago I found a solution to this continuing problem,' he told me. 'Before I go out to dinner I eat my ordinary meal.'

'You have your dinner before you go out to dinner?' I asked, astonished.

'Exactly.'

'Don't you find you're too full to eat the second dinner?'

'It depends,' replied Mr Babberley. 'If the second dinner is good I can eat it and enjoy it. But if it's dull, badly cooked and unappetising I just move the food around on my plate and leave it without feeling hungry.'

I nodded. It did not seem such a daft idea after all.

'Well, six months ago I took that philosophy into another area of my life,' said Mr Babberley.

He paused, as though uncertain as to how to continue with his tale. I nodded encouragingly.

'I am a bachelor, Doctor, but I have the needs of a married man. I travel a good deal and have never found myself able to settle down, acquire a home, a dog, children and a wife.'

I did a little more of the nodding which seemed to be serving me so well.

'In my line of work I meet a good many ladies,' continued Mr Babberley. 'Some of them are single, some of them are widowed and some of them are married.'

'And you romance some of these ladies?'

'I do, sir, I do,' said Mr Babberley. 'And from time to time I receive a proposition which I find irresistible.'

'Is there a problem with this?' I asked him.

'Even at my age I still find it difficult to know if the evening is going to reach a successful culmination,' said Mr Babberley. He paused. 'If you know what I mean.'

I said I thought I did know what he meant.

‘And when an evening fails to reach the high point to which I had previously aspired, I find myself a little let down.’

‘Frustrated?’

‘Exactly!’ cried Mr Babberley, clearly pleased that I understood his predicament.

‘And you are hoping that I can offer some solution to your problem?’

‘Oh no, thank you, sir. I have found the solution myself.’

‘Ah,’ I said, thinking that the solution could not have been too difficult to come across.

‘You remember what I was telling you about going out to dinner?’

‘I do indeed.’

‘I have been following a similar route in order to avoid any possible frustration resulting from my romantic encounters.’

‘You have a meal before you meet a woman?’

‘No, sir, no sir. I found a more appropriate solution. I hire myself a Whore for half an hour before I go to meet the lady,’ said Mr Babberley. ‘I find this reduces any sense of frustration but it also dampens expectations, makes me less desperate and helps if the evening doesn’t work out quite as hoped. Strangely, it also seems to increase my chances of success with my companion.’

‘Your lack of desperation is perhaps enticing?’

‘I think that may be the case, sir. The ladies, feeling that they are not being pursued with sufficient vigour, may themselves become the pursuers.’

‘You seem to have found an excellent solution to a unique problem,’ I said.

‘I thought so, Doctor,’ said Mr Babberley. ‘Unfortunately, one of the Whores with whom I consorted turned out to be less fresh than I might have hoped.’ He stood up, pulled down his trousers and brought out on display the most unpleasant looking member it has been my misfortune to view. The whole thing was as covered with warts as Cromwell’s face.

‘What can you do with this?’ he enquired. ‘I’ve tried everything I can think of. I’ve rubbed it with a raw radish and I’ve rubbed fresh pig’s Blood onto it. I even rubbed a piece of raw beef over it and then buried the beef.’

I nodded wisely. I never fail to be surprised by the nature of the remedies favoured by my patients. Radishes indeed! How the devil does a fellow rub a raw radish on his twiglet?

‘Can you help?’ he asked.

‘I can indeed,’ I assured him. I gave him a mixture of acetic acid and tincture of steel and told him to rub the liquid on each of the warts in turn.

‘How often should I do it?’

‘Twice a day for three days,’ I told him.

‘It smells of vinegar,’ he said, taking the top off the bottle and sniffing.

‘Indeed,’ I said. ‘It is but a coincidence.’

He paid me a guinea and went away happy.

June 15th

Queenie Nelson, a local Whore who was sitting on a stool at the bar, suddenly turned and slapped William Bacon full on the face. The sound of the smack sounded like a pistol shot.

'What the devil was that for?' demanded William, who now had the imprint of the Whore's hand on his right cheek.

'You squeezed my Arse as you passed behind me!' complained the Whore.

'So what?' demanded William. 'It was hanging over the edge of your stool.'

'You shouldn't do that!' complained Queenie. 'Not unless you've paid.'

'Why the devil not?' demanded William.

'Yes, why not, it's big enough for squeezing!' demanded Thaddeas Prout, who was sitting nearby.

'She's got her future behind her!' said someone else.

'He shouldn't have done that should he?' said Queenie to Mr Youngblood, who was behind the bar.

'What the devil are you talking about?' replied Mr Youngblood. 'Why shouldn't he squeeze your bum if he wants to? Maybe he was just sampling the goods? There's plenty of Arse to be squeezed.'

Everyone laughed at this except Queenie who slapped Mr Youngblood's face.

Mortified, Queenie's husband, who was sitting on the stool next to her, told his Wife to go home, find his largest belt, sit in the kitchen with her Arse bare and await his return. She slunk off in shame. Mr Youngblood, his face quite red where Queenie's hand had connected with his cheek, called to the magistrate who was sitting in a Chair by the fire and demanded action.

The magistrate, Lumpy Darbyshire, looked up and immediately sentenced Queenie to be put in the stocks for the day. Mr Darbyshire used to be a mourner but unexpectedly came into a small estate and a sum of money and was in consequence recently appointed a magistrate.

It was widely agreed that the magistrate had been unduly lenient and that this was a result of the fact that he had drunk two bottles of port and one and a half of malmsey.

June 16th

The beating of Arses seems to be all the rage at the moment. When I arrived at Dr Challot's house I found Mistress Swain sobbing and howling in the hallway. She was rubbing her posterior and, given the size of the feature, this was an activity which required some considerable expenditure of effort.

'The Doctor has a brittle sore head this morning!' she managed to say when I asked her what ailed her.

'What's wrong with him?'

'I've no idea. He has his coach whip with him. He chased me round the kitchen five or six times and beat my poor Arse more times than I could count. They were good smacks too. There'll be wheals there. I shan't be able to sit for a week.'

I have never had any affection for Mistress Swain, nor indeed she for me, but I was shocked by this revelation. Dr Challot has never been known for the undue beating of women.

'Look!' she cried, and without warning she pulled up her skirt and several petticoats and, holding them aloft with the one hand used the other to pull down her pantaloons. 'You're a Doctor. Tell me what you see!'

For a moment or two I was so startled that I could not bring myself to speak. The sight of Mistress Swain's naked posterior was not one for which I had prepared myself. I was as full as a goat and began to wish that I had eaten a smaller breakfast and had, in particular, eaten a few less sausages and eschewed the second helping of pigeon pie. But I could see that the wretched woman was not exaggerating for the success of Dr Challot's ministrations was clear to see; the twin white expanses of Mistress Swain's more than ample buttock cheeks were marked with singular red stripes where the coach whip had scorched the dimpled skin. There were some flecks of Blood along two of the stripes.

'Do you see?' she asked.

'I do,' I confirmed.

'Am I marked? My cheeks? Has the whip left marks?'

'It has,' I agreed.

'Oh my, oh my,' said Mistress Swain. 'Whatever will he say?'

I told her that she could cover herself and she pulled up her pantaloons and allowed her petticoats and skirt to drop.

'I don't expect he'll say anything,' I said. I had never known Dr Challot apologise or express regret for his actions.

'But he'll say something when he sees the marks upon me,' insisted Mistress Swain.

'Don't show him,' I suggested.

'Don't be daft!' she said. 'How can I avoid him seeing?'

I frowned. I was puzzled. 'Just don't show him!' I repeated. 'Keep your pantaloons up and your skirt down.'

'And just how is the poor devil supposed to find his way into cock lane with my skirts down and my pantaloons up?'

'Dr Challot?' I said, startled. I was genuinely startled by this thought. It had never once occurred to me that Dr Challot might be rogering Mistress Swain. Indeed, I confess it had never occurred to me that anyone might be rogering Mistress Swain.

'No, you young fool!' she said with an unpleasant loud snort. 'Mr Youngblood.'

'Why would Mr Youngblood want to find his way…' I stopped as I suddenly realised the implication. 'You are being rogered by the innkeeper?'

'Once a week for seven years,' she said, not without a certain pride. 'And he will not be pleased to see stripe marks on my lilywhite Arse.'

'Couldn't you perhaps wait until dark?' I suggested. 'Or somehow keep him from seeing the part with the marks?'

She thought for a moment. 'Won't be easy,' she said. 'But I suppose…if…'

I left her contemplating ways to hide her soundly marked Bottom from her lover and entered the drawing room wherein I found Dr Challot pacing up and down the room hitting items of furniture with his coach whip. Two small walnut Tables and a mahogany torchère had been tipped onto their sides. A vase lay on the floor, shattered into a hundred pieces.

'What the devil's the matter?' I demanded.

He turned to face me and his face was purple with rage. 'I was tricked!' he said. He raised the whip as though about to strike me with it. I picked up one of the small walnut Tables which lay on the floor and held it aloft in my defence. I remembered having seen a lion tamer confront a beast with a Chair when the circus last came to Muckleberry Peverell. 'Tricked!' he repeated. 'Tricked by a damned Baker!'

It was without doubt the fact that he'd been tricked by a Baker that annoyed him as much as having been tricked.

'Who's tricked you?' I asked. 'Mr Standish?'

Mr Theobold Standish was the only Baker I could call to mind. He and his Wife run the bakery in Muckleberry Peverell. He is an old fellow but a striking man; proudworthy, tall and well-built and now well into his forties. His wife, a diminutive body, is meek, like a mouse and has a soul which seems corroded by anxiety. He bakes the bread and buns and she deals with the customers.

'Yes, that bugger Standish.'

'How did he trick you?'

'He owes me a guinea and a half for the operation I performed on him six months ago.'

I remembered the operation. I had assisted Dr Challot by helping to hold the Baker still. It had been a tricky operation for the Baker was a powerful man who did not take kindly to being restrained; it was, I remember, as tricky as trying to catch a dead spider in a bath tub full of water. We'd had to bring in two men from the stables and even they hadn't been enough to hold him still. In the end, Dr Challot had brought in Mistress Swain and told her to sit on the fellow's face so that he could not breathe. Within a minute and a half the hapless fellow had become unconscious.

'We should use you more often,' I remember Dr Challot telling his plentifully endowed housekeeper. 'Your fat Arse would make a splendid sedative.'

'Has he not paid his bill?' I asked.

'He refused to pay!' said Dr Challot, his face becoming increasingly purple.

Standish had, I recalled, been kicked by a horse and left with a fracture of his left leg. A bone below the knee had broken through the skin and amputation had been the only possible answer. We had removed the wretched man's leg and arranged for him to be provided with a wooden replacement carved by Onions, a local carpenter we invariably used for the purpose. Onions made most of the wooden limbs we fitted and Phineas Turner, a competent Saddler made the leather cup and straps to hold the limbs in place.

(Turner does good work when he is sober so it is always important to make sure that he does the work required of him before midday. We also knew not to buy anything from him which was made on a Saturday since he always get fearsome drunk on Fridays and everything he made on a Saturday would invariably fall asunder well before the following Monday.)

I could understand why Dr Challot was annoyed. We'd had to pay the two men from the stables a farthing each. It was true that we'd sold the amputated leg for a farthing to the Sheriff, who keeps four wild boar as pets and always needs cheap food for them, but that still meant that we were out a whole farthing.

'Have you threatened him with a whipping?' I asked.

'Have you seen the bugger?' demanded Dr Challot indignantly. 'Even with one and a half legs he's a powerful fellow. He's as big as the Blacksmith and twice as unpleasant.'

Dr Challot had a point. Standish was a formidable looking man. All the kneading of bread had given him arms like hams. He could have taken on the Blacksmith in an arm bending contest.

'So couldn't you come to some arrangement?' I asked. 'He must have something you want?'

When patients could not afford to pay his bill Dr Challot often took payment in kind or in some other material way. He had two pigs and half a dozen sheep in the field behind the house and Langford, one of the smallholders in the village had been bringing in a cartload of Turnips every month for as long as I could remember. I couldn't even remember what Langford's debt was for. I don't think Dr Challot could remember either and it's quite possible that Langford himself had long ago forgotten why he delivered the free Turnips. It was the paying of this debt which explained why my diet had consisted almost exclusively of Turnips for so long.

'I did come to an arrangement,' replied Dr Challot. 'The damned Varmint has three Daughters and I agreed to take two of them in exchange for the debt.'

'Ah!' I said, nodding.

Two of the Baker's Daughters were comely enough, though since their father was a Baker and they had unlimited access to his wares they were rather on the plump side, but the third, even plumper, had no teeth, a wall eye and ears like jug handles. I'd heard that Standish used to rent her out for half a farthing a time and even at that price she was no bargain. 'Didn't he keep his side of the arrangement?'

'He tricked me!' insisted Dr Challot. He whipped two vases off the mantelpiece and sent them crashing into the hearth. 'He sent the jug-eared one as half the pair though I expressly demanded the other two.'

'That must have been annoying,' I agreed.

'She has no teeth so she wasn't entirely useless,' said Dr Challot, reflectively. 'I closed my eyes and wrapped a scarf around her head.'

'Very wise,' I agreed.

'I asked for the three but he bargained me down to two,' said Dr Challot. 'And the rogue double tricked me.'

‘How?’ I asked, now definitely not understanding.

‘This morning the Daughters dressed, put on their bonnets, thanked me and headed for the stairs,’ explained Dr Challot. ‘I’d understood that they were a sale not a loan and so I locked them in my bedroom. And at ten o’clock sharpish there was a banging on the front door and Standish was there demanding the return of his property.’

‘He thought he’d merely loaned them to you for the night?’

‘He did! He did! Can you imagine the impertinence?’ demanded Dr Challot. ‘Those two were hardly worth a guinea and a half but I thought I could hire them out as ‘nurses’ for a year or two when I wasn’t using them. But as a loan the two together were not worth a fourpenny piece for the night.’

I could now see why Dr Challot was in such a bad temper.

‘You didn’t have anything in writing?’

‘I trusted the fellow!’ said Dr Challot. He stared at me. ‘Go round there and demand the return of the wooden limb we had made for him. I paid a shilling and sixpence for that.’

‘He hasn’t paid for it?’

‘Not a penny for anything! He said I could have the one with the jug ears for another four Wednesday nights but he wouldn’t budge further than that. You have to go round and get the limb back. When he’s standing on one leg he might be a touch more amenable.’

‘I’m not going round there,’ I said.

I knew the strength of the Baker. It was true that on one leg he would be hampered, and it might be possible to push him over, but I’m not as big a fool as I was when I was younger and I wasn’t going to be the one to try unbuckling the wooden limb.

‘You’re a coward!’ shouted Dr Challot.

‘You can call it cowardice,’ I retorted. ‘But I call it self-preservation. I know the strength of the fellow.’

With that I left the room. Behind me I could hear the still furious Dr Challot whipping yet more innocent furniture. I closed the door.

‘Is he still in a rage?’ asked Mistress Swain.

‘If he emerges from the drawing room I strongly recommend that you put a breadboard down your pantaloons,’ I told her.

I returned to the Peacock Inn and ordered a plate of jellied eels and a bottle of malmsey. I hope I manage to persuade Dr Challot to part with some wages soon for my bill at the Peacock must be mounting at a rare pace.

I do sometimes despair about my employer’s lack of any sense of morality. To confiscate a man’s wooden limb because he has failed to pay a debt might be entirely reasonable for a lawyer or a tailor but seems to me to show a lack of compassion venturing fearful close to unacceptable in a medical man.

June 20th

Tobias Blomfield, the dray driver (and younger brother of our local Constable), came into the surgery and announced that he was so depressed he was thinking of killing himself. ‘I have a darkening mulligrub and am determined,’ he told me. ‘I am going to cut my throat.’

‘That will produce a fearsome amount of Blood,’ I told him.

‘You think so?’

‘A large amount. Tell me why you want to kill yourself. Then we will discuss how I can be of help?’

‘You will help me?’

He seemed surprised.

I explained that on the Greek island of Cos, citizens who had valid reasons for ending their lives were invited to state their reasons in public. If the reasons given were sufficiently convincing, a local magistrate would give them a cup of hemlock and invite them to drink it in public. I thought that if I offered to help him kill himself he might lose his enthusiasm for the idea.

He told me he thought his Wife was being rogered by the Vicar.

I sympathised but was not surprised. Mistress Blomfield, a keen member of the congregation, has a reputation for flirting and the Vicar has a reputation for more than flirting.

‘Who told you this?’

‘Queenie Nelson the Whore,’ Mr Blomfield replied. ‘She mentioned it last night when I was paying her.’

Mr Blomfield had clearly not heard the phrase about the sauce, the goose and the gander.

‘Do they still put a stake through a suicide’s heart?’ asked Mr Blomfield. ‘My uncle killed himself and they put an oak stake through his heart. It was his eleventh attempt and he was beginning to think of himself as something of a failure.’

‘No, I don’t think so,’ I assured him. ‘Do you love your wife?’

‘Not at all,’ replied Mr Blomfield. ‘But it’s a matter of pride.’

‘Have you spoken to her about your suspicions? Have you confronted the Vicar?’

‘No, I haven’t,’ admitted Mr Blomfield. ‘I’ve spoken to neither of them.’

‘But you want to kill yourself?’

‘I’ve been thinking of it.’

‘And you want my advice on the best way to go about it? When were you thinking of doing it?’ I opened my scalpel case and put it out on the desk.

Mr Blomfield seemed surprised, even startled by the sight of my scalpel case. ‘Well, I might not do it just yet,’ he said. I opened the scalpel case. Mr Blomfield stared at the open scalpel case and started to fidget. He was suddenly rather keen to leave.

‘Maybe you should have a word with the Vicar before you go any further with this,’ I suggested. I rather fancied the idea of the Vicar being confronted by an aggrieved Blomfield.

Mr Blomfield said he agreed that was a good idea. He then hurried off.

I hope I will hear no more about his plans to kill himself.

June 22nd

I have been teaching young Nellie, the Maid at the Peacock Inn, how to read and write for some little time now.

To my astonishment and delight, she is already capable of reading short passages of text from the latest instalment of the current monthly serial by Mr Charles Dickens. I had previously purchased this for my own entertainment and I had lent it to her. She picked up the rudiments of reading and writing in no time at all and has turned out to be as smart as a whip-mark. Who would have guessed it? She has reminded me that I now owe her a Sovereign for I recklessly promised to pay her this if she learned to read and write.

‘Where does Mr Copperfield live?’ she asked me.

I explained that the story she was reading had been made up by Mr Dickens and that none of the people described in the book actually existed. She was rather alarmed by this revelation for she had been so taken with the tale that she had almost come to regard the people as friends and was genuinely looking forward to being able to meet them one day. The realisation that she would never be able to talk to such well-drawn characters as Steerforth and Peggotty upset her. However, she brightened up when I explained that next month there would be another instalment of Mr Dickens’s story and that she would, in consequence, be able to continue reading about these people’s lives.

‘So he makes up all the things he writes about?’ she asked.

I admitted that was the case.

‘So he is telling lies?’

‘In a way you could say that,’ I agreed. ‘But it is generally agreed that when an author writes a story which is untrue he is behaving quite within normal moral boundaries. A lie which an author tells in the prosecution of his profession is no more than a taradiddle.’

‘Has Mr Dickens written about other imaginary people?’ she asked. ‘If so I would like to read about them too.’

I showed her a copy of a book called *Pickwick Papers* which I had in my possession and also a copy of a book called *Vanity Fair* by Mr William Makepeace Thackeray. She was much taken with the fact that the heroine of *Vanity Fair* is a young girl called Rebecca Sharp though I explained to her that Miss Sharp was a girl of rather low character and almost no virtue and therefore not one to seek to emulate. As I said this I suddenly remembered that Nellie had not led a blameless or sin free life and that her regular Saturday evening dalliances with the Reverend Standorf had hardly been conducted out of love but, rather, for the small sums of money which she had earned by sharing her affection. I took back the copy of *Vanity Fair* and suggested, instead, that she read *Pickwick Papers* when she had finished with the current instalment of *David Copperfield*.

Nellie’s writing too has come on apace and she has learnt to copy out sentences and paragraphs from *David Copperfield*. She has a readable and mature hand which is very legible and does not look in the slightest unsteady or untutored.

I am beginning to realise that she has more of a future than one might expect from her previous experience of making fires and Beds and emptying Bed pans.

She has assured me that she no longer shares the Vicar’s Bed and that she has, indeed, abandoned that part of her life completely.

June 27th

Mr Blomfield, the Constable's brother, came to see me again. He said that he had confronted the Vicar about his alleged relationship with Mistress Blomfield.

'He has agreed to pay me sixpence each time he sleeps with my wife,' said Mr Blomfield.

'And you are happy with that?'

'Oh, yes,' replied Mr Blomfield. 'I think that's a very decent, very fair price. And since Queenie Nelson only charges tuppence I will be well in hand.'

Mr Blomfield says he now has no intention of killing himself. Indeed, he seemed in a very good humour and, thanks to the compensation he is receiving, has clearly come to terms with being a cuckold.

June 30th

I was called to see Sir Ebenezer Biddulph who is, I believe, a nephew of Baron Biddulph of Bloxwich.

The footman brought a note explaining that I was being summoned because Sir Staple Fitzgaine-Bickenhall, (a member of the Royal College of Physicians) was away treating one of the Queen's cousins.

When I arrived, the Butler made me go to the back door before he would let me in. I was moderately offended by this. Sir Ebenezer's family made their money out of coal and have no real reason to lord themselves over everyone else.

He (the Baron, not the butler) has a dusky complexion (his mother was reputed to be a Moroccan dancing girl) and a voice crammed full of privilege and inherited money. He screamed at his servants and told me that it is the only way to get them to work well. He boasted of eating two large bowls of onion soup every evening for his supper. It is perhaps no surprise that Dr Challot (not famed for his sense of humour) once described Sir Ebenezer as a dark and windy knight.

'I'm thinking of adding another wing to the house,' he drawled boastfully. 'But where do I put the damned thing? I've got a west and east wing. I could put a north wing on the east wing I suppose.'

The house already has 34 bedrooms and I cannot imagine why he could possibly want more.

Sir Ebenezer complained of colic, headaches, a rash on his upper leg, toothache and the need to get up five times a night to pass water. I feel he has been storing up ailments so as to get the most out of a single consultation. I told him he needed a good Blood-letting to take the strain off his organs and got my revenge for being forced to use the tradesman's entrance by removing three pints of his Blood and spilling most of it on the carpet.

Although disgustingly rich, Sir Ebenezer is renowned for failing to pay his bills and so I refused to leave the house until he had paid my three guinea fee. He grumbled a good deal but was fuzzled and enfeebled by the Blood-letting and so I was able to insist that he parted with the coins.

July 2nd

This morning I received a call to visit Miss Euphemia Standorf who is the only Daughter of the Reverend and Mistress Standorf. The Reverend Standorf, whom I had never met in person, is, of course, known to me as a skin-close acquaintance both of Nellie, from the Peacock Inn, and of Mistress Blomfield.

The Reverend and Mistress Standorf have two sons, both huge, hard drinking fellows who have only half a brain between them and who mould themselves on the memory of John Mytton, a wild hunting man whose legendary, disrespectable activities they ape with relish. There are no other Daughters. It is, perhaps, for this reason that Euphemia is the Apple of her mother's eye. (The Vicar's Wife has only one eye. The other eye was lost many years ago in a hunting accident which involved an errant Bloodhound, a temperamental stallion and a blackthorn bush.)

I am moderately acquainted with the family and have no doubt that Euphemia has some good qualities but she seems to me to be the most snobbish person I have ever met and any good qualities she might have are well hidden. She is reputed to have once demanded smelling salts after an Ostler at the Lion Inn had the temerity to address her directly. Jokes have to be deconstructed and explained to her in such detail that any humour which might have been present is completely removed.

Physically, she is quite possibly the ugliest brute of a woman I have ever laid eyes on. She has a broad, high forehead, a chin that juts and a nose that is more than a little reminiscent of Mr Punch. She is a large woman, in width if not in height. A visitor who complimented her on the size and shape of her bustle was shocked and confounded when assured that she was not wearing one.

'We asked Sir Benedict to call,' said Mistress Standorf, the Vicar's Wife and Euphemia's mother, when I arrived. 'Unfortunately, he was unable to come. His secretary sent a message to say that Sir Benedict is attending to an ailing Duchess at the Palace.'

It seems that the local physicians spend a good deal of their time attending to members of the Royal Family. The only safe conclusion is that the Royal Family are not, on the whole, in the best of health.

'So, we had to call for Dr Challot,' said Mistress Standorf, making it quite clear that they regarded this as shamefully unsuitable to their station.

I nodded.

'And Dr Challot was also unavailable.'

I agreed with this. I did not consider it seemly to mention that Dr Challot was unconscious with drink and lying in Bed with two drunken strumpets for company. When I left, the three of them had been snoring loud enough to awaken the long dead.

I find myself taking on more and more of the responsibilities for the practice and my daily life is full of confusions and necessary deceits. As a result, my hours are ruined by baseless anxieties dragged forward from yesterday and backwards from tomorrow, tomorrow's tomorrow and ad infinitum. Some days I feel that the weighty responsibilities I am expected to bear are too much for a young practitioner with relatively little experience. I had hopes that Dr Mort might take on some of the practice responsibilities but we have not seen hide nor hair of the fellow since our first meeting.

'So it appears that we must make do with you,' said Mistress Standorf.

'I fear so,' I agreed.

'Oh but he looks much younger and more agreeable than Sir Benedict,' said Euphemia. 'And I cannot abide Dr Challot. He always smells of cheap wine and whatever may ail me he always insists that I unbutton my blouse so that he can examine my globes.'

'Euphemia!' said her mother sharply. 'You should not use that word in mixed company.'

'But this gentleman is a Doctor,' said Euphemia. 'He must be aware that ladies have globes or bosoms. I only mentioned Dr Challot's peculiarity because last time he visited he insisted on examining my globes at some length even though I was complaining of a pain in my foot.'

'Maybe Dr Challot thought that your upper parts were affecting your foot,' said her mother. 'I believe that the human body is more complex than we non-medical folk may sometimes realise.'

'What is the problem?' I asked, anxious to get to the heart of the problem before the day had dribbled away in a meaningless discussion of Euphemia's globes. 'How can I be of service to you?'

Euphemia giggled a little and pointed to her chest. 'I fear that this time an examination of my bosom might be entirely necessary,' she said. 'I have a cough and I suspect that my poor lungs may be suffering from what I believe is called congestion.'

Feeling rather embarrassed after the previous comments about Dr Challot, I invited Miss Euphemia to loosen her upper garments so that I could place the listening end of my Stethoscope upon the various parts of her chest.

The undressing took twenty minutes or so and I was required to act as a ladies Maid and to assist in the untying and unhooking of some of her under garments. These were rather voluminous and made of a variety of calico of a strength and thickness usually associated with the variety of canvas favoured for the manufacture of military tents. Underneath Miss Euphemia's dress there lay five petticoats, a crinoline cage, a camisole bodice, a corset cover, a boned set of stays, and a linen chemise.

Once the various layers of clothing had been removed, I performed the necessary percussion and auscultation and made a determination of congestion of the chest cavity. As I had been taught, I naturally decided to apply Leeches to counteract the difficulty. Bleeding really is the only logical answer to congestion.

My original determination was that Euphemia's condition was an ailment requiring twelve Leeches but applying the first eight to her bare back proved so troublesome, and so fraught with unwanted excitement on her part (I had never known a Patient become so excited at the application of the Leeches), that I decided that eight Leeches would be acceptably sufficient, particularly since the Leeches I had selected were the best Blood-hungry suckers I had available; all being nicely fresh and thirsty for refreshment. Unfortunately, the Leeches were slow to start sucking and Euphemia's congestion made no immediate improvement.

Things were complicated by the fact that Mistress Standorf, who had entered the room to act as chaperone just as I had finished assisting in the unrobing process, had fainted and was lying on the floor.

She later claimed that she had been overcome with emotion when she had seen me helping to undress her Daughter. However, I had doubts about Mistress Standorf's claim to have fainted since when she subsided to the carpet she did so rather slowly, first lowering herself onto her knees and then onto her back, and somehow managing to make sure that she had a soft cushion neatly positioned beneath her head to act as a pillow. This display of the vapours did not seem to me to be the normal way for a fainting personage to collapse onto the floor. Before 'fainting', she also managed to ring the bell for a Maid and when the Maid arrived, Mistress Standorf instructed her to stand behind a screen so that she could hear but not see the proceedings.

With the Maid in position, Mistress Standorf cried out several times, saying things like: 'Woe, woe is me for I am fainting and cannot see what is happening to my poor Daughter'; 'I am fainted and waffy and my Daughter is unclothed and in the hands of a young man – forsooth she is ruined unless they marry' and 'The shock to my system is such that I am collapsed and unable to protect my Daughter's reputation'.

Foolishly ignoring this strange display, which I mistakenly and innocently took to be nothing more than a mild case of the hysterics, I decided to take out my cupping apparatus to supplement the Leeches.

However, on seeing the cups and the heating equipment Miss Standorf began to shake with terror. I therefore abandoned this plan and took my scarification knives out of my bag, taking care to ensure that Miss Standorf did not see what I was planning to do. I was rather proud of the scarification equipment I was using at the time for the device I had selected consisted of no fewer than 16 spring loaded blades – all designed to cut into the skin at the flick of a single lever.

Unfortunately, despite my best efforts, Miss Standorf caught sight of the Scarifier and her response was immediate and considerable.

'Oh my, oh my,' she cried. 'Oh I think I shall faint at the thought of it. It is so much larger than I anticipated. Indeed, the thing is so large that I do not think I shall be able to bear you putting it into my body. But if you feel you must plunge it into me you must feel free to go ahead and do what you will with me.'

Having decided that scarification was a necessary accompaniment to the Leeches I set the Scarifier in action.

'Oh, my!' she cried. 'My how it hurts at first.'

'It will be easier in a moment,' I assured her.

'It seems so painful. The moment of the first pricking sends my whole body into a state.'

'It is to heal you,' I told her in my most reassuring voice. 'And it will go only a little way into your body.'

'Oh you must not worry yourself about my feelings,' said Miss Standorf. 'You must put it into me as deeply as you feel necessary.'

To my surprise she began to hyperventilate and to moan and make a great deal of noise. 'Oh Mama,' she cried, turning towards the place where she had last seen her mother, 'I thought I would faint at the start but I am being brave am I not? It is a monstrous large thing and it hurt to start with but as it goes deeper so I am getting accustomed to it.'

She moaned a good deal more and raised her arms and cried out once or twice. 'Oh, Mama, it is not as painful as it was at the beginning. Oh my word, I feel a warmth all over my body. I am shivering with excitement. It is a very strange feeling. Have you ever experienced anything like it, Mama? It is not at all unpleasant.'

'Oh my, oh my Good Lord, oh my,' said a strange voice. I looked around but could see no one.

When I put away the Scarifier, took the Leeches from Miss Euphemia's body and wiped off the Blood with the cloth I keep for such purposes, she began to sob a little. I had a little difficulty wiping away the Blood since the cloth I was using was rather thick with crusted fluids of one sort or another.

‘Oh, thank you, Doctor,’ said Miss Standorf, reaching out and grabbing my leg. ‘That was quite wonderful. You have worked wonders upon my body. I feel a new person already.’ She squeezed my thigh with a grip which could have burst the pips from a lemon.

‘Oh my, oh my,’ said the strange voice again. This time when I looked around I saw the Maid peeping around the edge of the screen.

Miss Standorf’s mother, who had, until this moment been seemingly unconscious, suddenly made a most remarkable recovery. She leapt to her feet, coming to her Daughter’s side and helping her to re-clothe. As she struggled with a myriad buttons, bows and mysterious little catches, Mistress Standorf looked at me with her one eye and I felt most uncomfortable. (Mistress Standorf has a glass eye in lieu of the eye that is missing and it is such a good replacement that I am never truly able to tell which eye is the real one and which is the glass one.)

The Maid, a toothy creature of indeterminate years, had been instructed to emerge from her hiding place in order that she might also assist with the dressing of Miss Standorf and she now gave me a very strange look. She had eyebrows which looked as though they had been knitted out of several dozen spiders.

‘I suggest that you lie still for a while,’ I told Miss Standorf. ‘You should relax for an hour or two. It has doubtless been a tiring experience for you.’

‘Oh, indeed I will need to rest,’ said Miss Standorf with a contented sigh. She reached out and took my hand. ‘Oh thank you Doctor. That was most wonderful. I was but a child before but you have made me a woman now.’ She lifted my hand and with a grip of iron placed it on her full bosom. ‘Feel my heart!’ she instructed me. ‘How it pounds does it not? It is your doing.’ I tried to remove my hand but she added her other hand and I found the force of her two hands impossible to overcome. She lowered her eyes and looked at me in what was, I suspect, supposed to be a coquettish way but which merely managed to draw attention to her wall eye. ‘If you feel that you will need to repeat this treatment I think I will be brave enough to allow you whatever access to my body you may feel you require.’ She paused. ‘No,’ she said after a moment’s thought, ‘I will definitely be ready and available to you. You have opened me and I shall never be closed to you.’

‘Oh I think one treatment should be sufficient,’ I told her hurriedly.

‘Maybe later this evening,’ she suggested, ignoring my remark. ‘I shall without doubt be sufficiently rested by then and available once more to you. Or you may assuredly come at any time tomorrow. I will assuredly be at your disposal whenever you feel the need. You must do with me what you will. My body is your slave in this and any other matter. Indeed, I shall lie abed and await your coming.’ She turned to her mother. ‘I don’t think there will any need for you to chaperone me now you are aware of Dr Bullock’s generous intentions, do you, mother?’

‘If you think not,’ said Mistress Standorf. She paused and examined me again. Once again I wasn’t sure which eye was looking at me and which was merely sitting there in her eye socket, as unseeing as a child’s marble. ‘I am sure we can trust the Doctor now that he has made his intentions so vividly apparent.’ She looked at me with an intensity I found more than a little unnerving. ‘I will have a word with the Reverend Standorf.’

It was at that point that I began to feel that there could be problems lying ahead.

As I descended the Vicarage staircase, the Maid who had been in the room during my treatment of Miss Euphemia walked beside me.

‘I am cursed with the same condition as my mistress,’ she murmured, unbuttoning her blouse, apparently in readiness. ‘Would you recommend the same treatment for me?’

She seemed perfectly well as far as I could tell and she was certainly not suffering from congestion of the lungs. I apologised and told her that my Leeches were too full to be of any use for another day at least.

She did not seem well pleased but in any case I could not think it likely that she would have the wherewithal to pay for treatment.

July 6th

‘You need to be at the Feathers Inn in Snodbury Parva this afternoon,’ said Dr Challot. ‘You’ll be needed there for most of the afternoon. Take half a stone of goose fat with you. If you need more goose fat the local Vicar will find it. He will provide you with all the eggs you need. We were only asked to supply half a stone of fat.’

Puzzled, I asked him why I needed to take so much goose fat.

‘To put on the burns,’ explained Dr Challot, as though talking to an idiot. ‘And remember to pour egg whites on really badly burned bits to relieve the pain and stop the screaming. Just the whites, mind you. Put the yolks into a cup and bring them back with you.’

‘I know how to treat burns,’ I retorted. ‘But why are we expecting so many burns?’

‘Because it’s Burning Trousers Thursday,’ replied Dr Challot, once again as though he were speaking to a complete idiot. ‘Dr Branwell Jones, the local practitioner is in Bed ill. He has a recurrence of his meaditis and can’t attend.’

‘Meaditis?’

‘He’s drunk too much mead. He brews the stuff himself and it’s twice as strong as anyone else’s. His Wife sent a message with their coachman to say that he fell out of Bed last night and she can’t move him.’

‘Do I need to call in to see him?’

‘No, no. He’ll wake up in a day or so. If he doesn’t recover we’ll bury him, say a maudlin goodbye to a fellow practitioner and take over his practice.’

‘Do we get paid for attending this event?’

‘There’s an attendance fee of a Sovereign. Make sure they pay as soon as you arrive.’

I assured him that I would do this. ‘But what the devil is Burning Trousers Thursday?’

‘The villagers hold it every year. It used to be held on the first Thursday after Epiphany,’ said Dr Challot, his voice dripping with disdain. ‘But it always rains in January and you can’t hold a burning trousers race in the rain so a century or so ago it was moved until a date later in the year. It’s one of those mad pagan festivals. The villagers at Snodbury Parva have been doing it for four centuries and they’re all so stupid over there that if any of them survive that long they’ll doubtless be doing it for another four centuries.’

He paused, sighed and shook his head.

‘There’s a lot of in-breeding there,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘Since 1750 everyone in that village has been related to everyone else. These days brothers marry sisters with impunity for there’s no fresh Blood available for miles around. I know of two Daughters who married their fathers. Still, none of this is of any account other than that it helps explain why there are so many idiots in Snodbury Parva.’

Dr Challot explained that the Burning Trousers tradition had begun in 1456 when the local Vicar, a man called the Reverend Sheldean Pearce, fled a house fire and ran, with his trousers ablaze, along the main street before diving into the village horse trough in an attempt to extinguish the flames. Although it took place at night, the Clergyman’s run along the main street attracted a number of spectators. The poor fellow died a week later of substantial burns and the event was celebrated the following year when a Patient from the local lunatic asylum responded the local Publican’s offer of free mead to anyone who repeated the run. The lunatic, known to posterity only as Daft Davy, soaked his trousers with tar and deliberately set fire to them before racing along the same route that the Reverend Pearce had taken all those years ago, before plunging into the same horse’s trough. Local lore has it that the idiot managed to drink fourteen free pints of mead before succumbing to his burns. The publican more than covered the cost of this inducement since many of the spectators retired to the Feathers Inn to refresh themselves.

Not surprisingly, given the fact that the village was full with folk whom it would be wildly over-generous to describe as half-wits, the event has become a tradition. Once it has started, an English village tradition is impossible to Stamp out, however ludicrous and dangerous it might be. The only change that has taken place over the years is that these days there is no limit on the number of contestants.

Such oddling events are quite commonplace throughout England.

The villagers of Ottery St Mary in Devon have been carrying burning tar barrels through the streets since 1605. The citizens of Gloucestershire have been engaged in annual shin kicking contests since about the same time, and shin kicking is one of the most popular events at the Cotswold Olimpick Games. Burnt skin and bruised shins are considered a negligible price to pay to preserve proudly sustained English traditions.

Every community in the country seems to have its own curious, local practices.

Here in Muckleberry Peverell we celebrate the exploits of Guido Fawkes on November 5th and on May Day there is Maypole dancing but we also have our own special and, I believe, unique traditions.

So, for example, on the eve of the Winter solstice every year we celebrate Duck Apple Night. And we celebrate Old Florrie’s Night every May 18th.

On Duck Apple Night a hundred apples are thrown into the River Florrie and local men have to dive in and retrieve as many as they can before the apples disappear over the weir and are lost in the lower reaches of the river. Since the event is always held in December, the river is invariably in full flood and there are usually one or two drownings.

On Old Florrie's Night, three young male virgins are stripped naked and tied to sycamore trees on the edge of the churchyard. Local female virgins are invited to throw old eggs at them. Eggs are stored for a month or so before the night and the stench afterwards is pretty dire. I confess I have never seen much point in this particular event since there are no prizes and no punishments but the event is more popular than you might imagine. Every year, there are some noisy discussions about the entitlement of some of the egg throwers. On several occasions it has been suggested by critics, usually anonymous, that unsullied virgins wishing to throw eggs should be required to produce medical certificates proving their status and, therefore, their right to take part. On more than one occasion there have been slaps and hair pulling after the event when woman have been accused of taking part when they had no right to be throwing eggs. Last year, a woman who was betrothed to one of the targets became incensed when a disappointed rival had thrown eggs at her fiancé, clearly aiming at an area twixt waist and knees, and had caused considerable injury in consequence of having come supplied with two dozen hard boiled duck eggs as ammunition. This was strictly against the rules.

Another year, a fellow who was hit by a stone (painted white to look like an egg) needed a considerable amount of stitching. I remember him because after I stitched him up I discovered that the fellow had no money. After Dr Challot threatened to remove the stitches, his grandmother eventually paid us two pigeons, a small bottle of home-made lavender water and a sack of green logs.

Still, hard boiled eggs notwithstanding, we don't have anything quite as reckless and hazardous as Burning Trousers Thursday.

Dr Challot, who told me that he had stood in for Dr Jones, the local Physician, on two previous occasions, explained that the event is now open to all men over the age of 14 and that the race takes place between the Lychgate outside the Church of St Gwenn of Quimper and the horse trough in the village square – a distance of approximately three furlongs.

The burning house from which the original run took place was never rebuilt and the Lychgate is the nearest site available.

'The stupid bastards cover their trousers with tar and stand in a line,' explained Dr Challot. 'Behind each of them there stands a woman with a lighted taper – usually a Wife or a mother believe it or not – and when the Huntsman blows his horn, the tapers are applied and the trousers are set alight. The men all race up the street in an attempt to reach the horse trough before any of the others. The first one into the trough wins the race and suffers least. The losers must rely on being dowsed by having bucketsful of water thrown over them.'

'Do any of the competitors ever die?' I asked.

'Not so many these days,' admitted Dr Challot. 'There are invariably a couple of Deaths but these days the men of the local fire brigade stand ready at the finish and have their buckets filled with water. Six years ago there were no Deaths but that, I think, was something of an anomaly and may have had something to do with the poor quality of the tar which was used to soak the trousers.'

'And is there a prize?'

'The winner receives half a hogshead of watered beer and a new pair of red velvet trousers,' replied Dr Challot. 'The red velvet trousers are surprisingly much prized and the winner can usually be seen wearing them for years after the event.'

And so I set off for Snodbury Parva with my churn of goose grease, a heavy heart and young Nellie who came with me for the day out and brought a loaf of bread, two pounds of cheese, a pound of butter, some fruit and two bottles of cyder. (I had given her a shilling for these victuals.) Nellie, clutching our pique-nique in a large basket, rode upon my horse while I walked beside.

'I feel a proper lady,' said Nellie who confessed she had never ridden a horse before. She had borrowed a bonnet from Saphire Swain, the Daughter of Mistress Swain who is a Whore, and rather to my surprise it occurred to me that to the unknowing eye Nellie looked every inch a daphlean and not in the slightest a bawdy or a marmulet.

The Burning Trousers Thursday event was something of a disappointment for those for whom the smell of burning flesh acts as an amuse bouche. One of the competitors had the notion of thoroughly soaking a pair of long under-trousers in water and wearing them underneath his burning breeches and he was either generous enough to share this secret with his fellow competitors or naïve enough to allow them to discover his secret ploy.

Only two of the competitors spurned the idea of wearing wet under garments and the result was that very little flesh was burnt. Sadly, the two who had run their race with burning trousers, but without water-soaked under-things, were two of the slowest in speed as well as in wit and they both suffered severe burns below their waists. I smothered the burns with goose fat but both men developed the shivers and collapsed. One of these unfortunates died that evening and I heard the following morning that the second had also succumbed to his burns.

Despite these disappointments (it was generally agreed that soaking under-garments in water was out of order and three days later the Organising Committee disqualified all those who had protected themselves in such a way, leaving one of the deceased competitors to be crowned the victor) Nellie and I had a splendid day out. We found a quiet spot by the river for our pique-nique.

As I was handed my fee of a gold Sovereign, the Chairman of the Organising Committee congratulated me on my engagement to Euphemia Standorf. Since this was the first I had heard of the engagement I was rather taken aback. He then congratulated me on having such a good looking mistress.

I was about to correct him but when I saw the look of quiet delight on Nellie's face as being described as my mistress rather than my maid I could not spoil such a splendid day with a cruel denunciation.

However, the gossip about my engagement to the Vicar's sloomy Daughter rather spoilt an extremely pleasant day.

July 12th

The Duke and Duchess of Beaufort came through Muckleberry Peverell and caused considerable excitement.

An advance party consisting of an Under Butler and two Assistant Footmen arrived two hours before the Main Party in order to make arrangements for a stop for Luncheon. The Duke and Duchess themselves were travelling in a procession of five coaches, with a total of 24 members of staff in attendance.

The landlords of the two local Inns had been most assiduous and desperate (some would say quite pathetic) in their attempts to persuade His Grace's Under Butler, a snooty young fellow of around 25 years, that their establishment would offer the best facilities.

Mr Oliphant, the proprietor of the Red Lion Inn, promised that he would provide a private sitting room, without charge, and a seven course meal for one and a half guineas a head with Alcoholic Refreshments included in the price. He also offered to make his stables available to the Duke's coachmen for a knock-down price of half a guinea a horse (this being, in truth, something akin to ten times the price he would have charged any ordinary traveller not of the nobility).

Representing the Peacock Inn, Mr Youngblood responded by promising the travellers a free sitting room for the Duke and the Duchess, a free bedroom (in case the Duchess wanted to rest a while), another dining room for the travelling staff and a nine course meal for a modest one guinea a head with wines, beers and spirits at usual prices. His price for horses was also half a guinea a beast.

I was present in the Snug during the negotiations and heard Mr Youngblood, a crafty fellow if ever I knew one, offer a modest cash inducement of five guineas in gold pieces to the Duke's Under Butler if the Peacock Inn was selected for the stopover. When the Under Butler seemed to be wavering, Mr Youngblood called over his wife, who had changed into her lowest cut gown, and it was clear that she was being tossed in as an extra inducement and offered to the Under Butler as an incentive.

When the arrangements had been agreed (and the Peacock Inn selected for the stop) one of the Assistant Footmen rode back to the main party to pass on instructions to the coachmen.

Everyone waited for the Ducal party to arrive.

When the Duke and the Duchess finally arrived at the Peacock Inn, they climbed down from their coach and, with hardly a moment's delay, passed straight into the Inn. This was much to the disappointment of an assembly of locals who had gathered to gape. Two young people whom I did not recognise, both of whom were the same sort of age as Dr Mort, had brought scraps of paper and pencil stubs with them so that they could record the moment for posterity. The young man was tall and very skinny. The girl who accompanied him was short and very skinny.

In a blatant attempt to garner attention, Mistress Swain, who had kicked and pushed her way to the front of a small crowd in the Peacock Inn's courtyard, waved both hands and yelled 'Hello Your Duchessness!' while assaying a most ambitious curtsey. The waving and the curtseying unbalanced her severely, which resulted in her falling backwards into a puddle of mud. The fall, accompanied by a loud splash and a flurry of disordered petticoats and other miscellaneous and unidentified undergarments, caused Mistress Swain some considerable annoyance and not a little embarrassment but provided the assembly with a very great deal of amusement.

During all this excitement, the two who had brought pencils and paper continued to sketch away. Afterwards I looked over their shoulders and saw to my astonishment that each one had drawn themselves watching the Duke and Duchess disembark from their coach. The Duke and Duchess, being in the background, were hardly visible. 'Why have you drawn yourselves?' I asked them both. Initially, they seemed startled by the question which clearly puzzled them. 'I will make copies of my drawing and send them to my sisters and cousins,' said one as though this were an explanation. He dug into his jacket pocket and pulled out a neatly folded piece of paper. He unfolded it and showed it to me. It contained a drawing of a young girl standing in front of a large building. 'What is it?' I asked. 'The girl is my sister Effie and the building you can see behind her is St Paul's Cathedral.' The building was hardly visible.

'Do you do this sort of thing a great deal?' I asked.

'Oh yes,' replied the young man.

'We're always looking for new experiences,' said the young woman.

'And when you find something interesting, do you always make drawings of yourselves standing in front of it?'

'Of course,' said the woman. 'There would be no point otherwise, would there? We have to prove that we were there.'

Our bizarre conversation was interrupted by Mr Youngblood who came hurtling out of the Peacock Inn as though the place were on fire. 'Oh there you are, Doctor!' he cried. 'Thank heavens I've found you.' He paused for a moment with his hands on his knees, trying to get his breath. 'You must fetch Dr Challot immediately.'

Mr Youngblood was wearing his grey, curly second hand wig, the one he bought from a judge's widow for two shillings. He looked as if he ought to be appearing in a comedy by Molière, the French playwright.

‘Is someone ailing?’ I demanded.

‘The Duchess does not feel well,’ replied Mr Youngblood. ‘Her Maid says she has been taken poorly. You must fetch Dr Challot.’

As he spoke, the Duke’s Under Butler came down the stairs buttoning up his trousers. He had a huge grin on his face and his eyes seemed glazed.

I was, I confess, more than a little offended by Mr Youngblood’s instruction that I should fetch Dr Challot. I pointed out that I was already present and that since I was a qualified Doctor I was perfectly capable of attending the Duchess by myself.

‘Her Maid says that two Doctors are required,’ said Mr Youngblood who had taken his hands off his knees and was now wringing them. He seemed to be so distressed that he was close to tears ‘Apparently, the Duchess always sees Doctors in pairs,’ he added. I suppose he was upset at the prospect of the Duchess actually dying in one of his rooms. Feeling sorry for him, I said that I would fetch Dr Challot and bring him back with me.

‘Hurry, Doctor,’ pleaded Mr Youngblood. He paused, and you could almost hear his brain ticking over. ‘I’ll have something very special sent up to your room this evening.’ As he spoke, Mistress Youngblood came down the stairs. She looked very hot and flushed and was trying to arrange her hair which had come undone. I could not help noticing that the top three buttons of her blouse were all unfastened and the remainder were in the wrong buttonholes. It looked as though she had dressed in haste.

It was thirty minutes before I returned with Dr Challot. It took me most of that time to sober him up and help him dress.

‘What the devil is the hurry?’ he demanded as two of his nurses pulled on his trousers while I helped him into his shirt. I didn’t recognise the two nurses and didn’t have the faintest notion what their names were. There is a high turnover among Dr Challot’s resident nurses. He seems to tire of them easily and ruthlessly discards used nurses in the way that other folk discard soiled and unwanted bandages.

‘The Duchess of Beaufort is asking for two Doctors.’

‘What’s wrong with her?’

‘I haven’t the faintest. All I know is that she is demanding two Doctors.’

‘A Duchess, eh?’

‘Yes.’

‘How much do you think we can charge a Duchess?’

‘Doesn’t it rather depend on what’s wrong with her?’

Dr Challot rolled his eyes and looked at me despairingly. ‘Have I taught you nothing?’ he demanded. ‘With a Duchess it doesn’t matter what’s wrong with her! Whether she has a hangnail or a broken leg we can charge her the top rate.’

‘What is the top rate?’ I asked.

‘Ten guineas,’ he replied. ‘At least ten guineas.’ He attempted to button his trousers. ‘There’s two of us so that’s twice times ten guineas.’

‘Twenty guineas?’

He looked at me admiringly. ‘Do you think so? Twenty definitely sounds better than ten. We’ll make it twice times twenty guineas.’

‘No, I meant…’ I began, trying to explain.

‘That’s 40 guineas,’ he said.

‘We cannot possibly charge 40 guineas!’ I protested.

‘Of course, if we have to go back again that’ll be another forty guineas,’ said Dr Challot. ‘Does my breath smell?’ he asked, breathing heavily into my face.

‘It does,’ I replied, when I had finished coughing and spluttering. His breath stank.

He turned to one of the nurses. ‘Go out into the garden and pick me a bunch of mint.’ The nurse pulled on a filthy petticoat and hurried off barefoot to complete the errand.

‘Do you think we should take the nurses with us?’ Dr Challot asked me. ‘It might make us look more professional. We could charge extra for them? Another five guineas apiece do you think?’

The eyes of the nurse who remained lit up. ‘Five guineas?’

‘Half a guinea for you,’ said Dr Challot quickly. ‘The five guineas is a professional fee to be charged before expenses.’

I looked at the nurse. She looked to be in her mid-twenties and was stark naked. She stood with hands on hips and posed proudly, attempting to push out a very large bosom as though offering it for inspection and possible sale. ‘If the Duchess doesn’t need us perhaps the Duke will,’ she said with what I suspected was an attempt at a pout.

‘Good idea,’ said Dr Challot. ‘You two get dressed and we’ll send for you if we need you. Try to wear something that looks clean and respectable.'

'I haven't got anything clean and respectable,' said the nurse. 'Nor has Florrie. You'll have to give us money to buy something new.'

With a sigh and great reluctance, Dr Challot took a two shilling piece out of his pocket and tossed it to the girl. 'That's for both of you,' he said sharply. As he spoke, the first nurse, whose name was apparently Florrie, returned holding a bunch of sage leaves.'

'I said mint!' said Dr Challot, examining the sage which he'd been handed.

'What are we supposed to buy for a shilling each?' demanded the nurse with the two shilling piece.

'Try Hector Nodorf's junk shop. Tell him you want something smart and fashionable.'

It seemed to me unlikely that the two nurses would find anything clean, respectable, smart and fashionable in Hector Nodorf's junk shop but you never know.

'And remember that I don't want you coming back with something that makes you look more like a couple of Whores than you are.'

'Very nice, I'm sure!' said the first nurse, pulling a face.

'What does mint look like?' asked the second.

'Oh, it doesn't matter,' said Dr Challot. 'There isn't time.' He stuffed a fistful of the sage leaves into his mouth and chewed them. He turned and breathed into my face, still chewing on the sage leaves. 'What do I smell of now?'

'Stuffing,' I replied.

The two nurses giggled.

'Better than smelling of cyder, I suppose,' sniffed Dr Challot. He pulled a face and spat the chewed leaves out into one of the disposable spit bottles which stood on his side Table. We had never managed to sell more than half a dozen of them and now had stocks of the damned things stored all over the place.

The two of us then hurried off to the Peacock Inn to attend to our important patient.

'Have you ever treated a Duchess?' I asked him, as we walked.

Dr Challot thought about it for a moment. 'I've treated a couple of baronets,' he said. 'And an MP.'

'But no Duchesses? No Dukes?'

'I don't think so,' admitted Dr Challot reluctantly. 'But underneath their fancy clothing, they're just the same as everyone else but richer, aren't they?'

'What do we call a Duchess?' I asked. 'Your highness? Your eminence? Your grace? Your graceless? Your majesty?' I wished we had Dr Mort with us. He would have known.

'Don't have the faintest,' admitted Dr Challot with a shrug. 'I shall simply call her Mistress Duchess.'

'Do we bow?' I asked. 'Mistress Swain tried to curtsey when she saw the Duke and Duchess arrive at the Peacock.'

'I'm not bowing for anyone,' said Dr Challot firmly.

When we got to the Peacock we were met in the doorway by Mr Youngblood who was, if anything even more nervous than he had been when I'd left him.

'Where have you been?' he demanded anxiously. 'The Duchess's Maid has been down at least six times to see where you were!' I could hear screaming but it seemed to be coming from the stables.

'We're here now,' said Dr Challot, making an effort to stand firmly upright and to enunciate clearly.

'Good Lord, what have you been eating?' demanded Mr Youngblood, catching a face full of Dr Challot's breath as he burped rather loudly.

'Sage,' I explained for him, as he added a second burp to the first as though in competition with himself. 'Freshly picked sage leaves.'

'If you wanted to cover up the cyder why didn't you chew some mint leaves?'

There didn't seem to be any point in trying to explain.

'Well, are you going to stand here gossiping or are you going to take us up to our patient?' demanded Dr Challot, who had finished burping and, in view of the fact that he was about to become a Doctor to the aristocracy, was now overflowing with a new sense of importance. I could tell he was already thinking of how best he should advertise his new position. Maybe he would have a coat of arms placed above the doorway? Or, perhaps he would confine himself to a new set of visiting cards with 'Medical Advisor to the Duchess of Beaufort' inscribed in gold.

'Who is that screaming?' I asked Mr Youngblood.

'One of the Duke's coachmen has fallen and broken his leg,' replied the landlord as he ushered into the inn and up the stairs. 'And he has been kicked in the groin by one of the Duke's horses. Perhaps you'd take a look at him afterwards? He seems to be in a good deal of distress? You can hear him screaming.'

Dr Challot and I paused on the stairs. I couldn't help feeling sorry for the fellow. A coachman with a broken leg doesn't have much of a future.

‘Something has to be done!’ I said, listening to the screams. ‘I’ll go and see if I can do something to assist the poor fellow.’’

‘No, no, no!’ cried Dr Challot. ‘Her Highness requires two Doctors and two Doctors she must have.’ He turned to Mr Youngblood, the hapless landlord, who was no doubt by now wishing that he had allowed his rival to win the right to look after the Duke and the Duchess. ‘Go and stuff a rag in the coachman’s mouth,’ he snapped. ‘I can’t be treating the Duchess with that row going on. We can find our own way upstairs. Which room is Her Majesty in?’

‘Certainly, Doctor,’ said Mr Youngblood. ‘The Duchess is in the second bedroom on the right.’ He hurried off to find a rag with which to silence the coachman’s screams.

‘That’s my room!’ I called after him as I suddenly realised the significance of what he’d said.

‘I needed all my rooms,’ replied Mr Youngblood, over his shoulder. ‘I’ll only charge you half price for today’s board.’ And with that he was gone.

Moments later we were standing outside my bedroom. A flunky dressed in a red and gold uniform and wearing a powdered wig was on guard.

‘Dr Challot and Dr Bullock to see Her Majesty,’ said Dr Challot.

The flunky didn’t say a word but tapped on the door. Half a second later the door was opened by a worried looking Maid. ‘Are you the Doctors?’

Dr Challot replied that we were, indeed, the Doctors.

‘Come in,’ said the Maid. She turned to the flunky. ‘Tell the innkeeper to send someone up with a menu so that His Grace can decide what he wants for supper.’

Without a word the flunky nodded and disappeared.

‘Her Grace is in a lot of distress,’ whispered the Maid. ‘She thinks that she has perhaps been rather shaken about in the carriage.’ I looked around the room and could see none of my possessions. A very large man wearing an absurdly large wig was sitting on a Chair at my writing Table. And a very large woman in a silk dress was lying on top of my bed. I couldn’t help noticing that she hadn’t even bothered to remove her boots.

‘Ah, that’s a problem with which we are well versed,’ said Dr Challot. ‘Most of our patients do a lot of travelling about by coach.’ He somehow managed to sound both pompous and ingratiating at the same time.

‘Are you the Doctors?’ enquired another woman, whom I assumed to be a more senior Maid. She was considerably older than the first one and would clearly not see 30 again. Her dress seemed a good deal more expensive. She was as thin as a post and had a golden pince-nez pinned to her dress with a gold chain. She had a large and well-presented bosom with generous grounds.

‘We are,’ replied Dr Challot. ‘I am Dr Challot and this is Dr Bullock. Are you Her Majesty’s Maidservant?’

‘I am Lady Honoria Wellbeloved,’ replied the woman, clearly put out. ‘I am the Duchess’s Lady of the Bedchamber and Personal Secretary.’ She talked as though she had her mouth full of curried eels and when she moved she did so tentatively, as though she had a prize winning courgette stuck up her bum and was frightened that it might fall out.

‘Beg your pardon, your majesty,’ said Dr Challot, who had gone very red. ‘Forgive our error.’ He reached to remove his hat, realised he wasn’t wearing one, and bowed so far down that I feared he might never be able to rise again. I followed his example and bowed, though with rather less enthusiasm.

‘Her Grace is suffering from a problem with the very lowest part of her lower back,’ said Lady Wellbeloved.

‘I’m so sorry to hear of it,’ said Dr Challot. ‘May we examine her Grace?’

‘I will enquire,’ said Lady Wellbeloved. She moved a few paces closer to the Bed and addressed the Duchess. Although we were standing only a few feet away I couldn’t hear what was said.

‘You may approach,’ she told us eventually, after much muttering.

We approached my Bed and I could see that the woman lying on the coverlet was even older than I had at first suspected. She had what looked like half an inch of make-up on her face and her hair was pinned in such an extraordinarily complex way that I suspected it must have taken an hour or two to prepare.

‘Would your Grace be kind enough to share with us the details of her discomfort?’ asked Dr Challot, holding his hands together as though praying.

‘She’s got an attack of her damned flaming piles,’ roared the Duke suddenly. ‘Haemorrhoids. Her arsehole looks like a basket of ripe raspberries. She’s had ’em for years – caught ’em from sitting on cold saddles when out hunting. They always get worse when we travel. It’s all the bouncing about. She sits on six cushions but it makes no damned difference.’

‘Oh dear,’ said Dr Challot. ‘I am sorry to hear of it. May we look?’

‘Look at her piles? Of course you can if you feel the need and the idea takes your fancy. Can’t imagine why you’d want to, though. Seen one set of piles you’ve seen ’em all in my view.’ He turned to his Wife the Duchess and ordered her to pull her dress up and her under-things down.

‘What the devil was all that screaming about downstairs?’ he demanded.

‘One of your Eminence’s coachmen appears to have broken his leg,’ said Dr Challot, apologetically.

‘Is that all? Hell of a lot of noise for a broken leg. Some of these people never think of others, do they?’

‘I believe he was also kicked in a delicate part of the body by one of your Highness’s horses.’

‘Well he was making a lot of noise about it.’ The Duke paused, and cocked an ear as though listening. ‘He seems to have stopped, thank God.’

‘I instructed the landlord to put a rag in the man’s mouth,’ said Dr Challot.

‘Damned good idea,’ said the Duke. ‘Why the devil didn’t someone else think of that?’ He thought for a moment. ‘Though, it might have been quicker and easier just to shoot him.’ He paused as though thinking. ‘We don’t shoot enough people in this country,’ he added.

Dr Challot looked very pleased with himself and the praise he had received.

‘Could be dashed inconvenient,’ continued the Duke, who had clearly now had time to think. ‘Will you have to take his leg off? Can he drive a coach with one leg? I was only planning to stay here for a couple of hours. How soon will he be fit to drive the coach? Damned thoughtless of the fellow to break his leg when it’s dashed most inconvenient. Why couldn’t he break it yesterday when we were back at the Palace? Can I get a replacement?’ demanded the Duke. ‘Are there are any spare coachmen around here or do we need to send back for one?’

‘Oh I feel sure that it will be possible to find a spare coachman,’ said Dr Challot, responding quite well to this barrage of questions. ‘I haven’t seen him yet so I don’t know if we’ll have to remove the leg.’

‘Well, we’ll get a new fellow,’ said the Duke, making a decision. He turned to a man in a military uniform, a fellow I had not previously noticed. ‘Take the uniform off the useless coachman and put it on the new one. Just find a fellow that fits the uniform.’ He thought for a moment. ‘And if there’s Blood on the uniform make sure it’s washed off. I can’t abide coachmen with Blood on their uniforms.’

‘Certainly, your Grace,’ said the military man. He saluted and clicked his heels.

‘And if the fool with the broken leg survives make sure he’s horse whipped. That should teach him a lesson for being damned inconvenient.’

‘Certainly, your Grace. I will see to it myself.’

Just then there was a tap on the door. The door was opened and Mr Youngblood entered. ‘I’ve come to take the food order,’ he told Lady Wellbeloved.

‘I’m rather shy of exposing my lower regions to strangers,’ said the Duchess, clearly addressing her husband. She was lying on her stomach and she now pulled her pantaloons back up.

‘They’re Doctors!’ roared the Duke. ‘They see lower regions all the time. I’d show ’em my lower regions without a qualm.’ He stood up and tried to unbutton his trousers but fell back into his Chair. A valet standing nearby rushed forward and rushed back again when he saw the Duke had settled safely back down.

‘Still…’ said the Duchess.

‘Turn yourself over and pull your things down,’ ordered the Duke. ‘It’s not as if any of these fellows are gentlemen!’ He turned towards the door. ‘Are you the fellow come to take our food order?’

I found the Duke’s remark about us not being gentlemen rather insulting, though technically not inaccurate, but thought it better not to say anything in protest lest he have me shot or horsewhipped.

‘I am, your Highness,’ said Mr Youngblood. ‘I am Mr Youngblood, landlord of the Peacock Inn. We met when you arrived.’ He tried to bow but a complete failure to understand the principles required, added to by one wobbly knee and a pair of bowed legs, meant that the movement ended up more of a curtsey than a bow.

‘Maybe the two medical men could both be blindfolded,’ suggested Lady Wellbeloved.

Dr Challot and I looked at her and then at each other. ‘Oh, I don’t think that…’ began Dr Challot.

‘Seems fair enough to me,’ agreed the Duke. ‘The pair of ’em can examine the raspberries by having a feel of ’em. No need to look at ’em as well, is there? Are you happy with that Agnes? Do you object to the fellows having a feel of your regions?’

‘No, no,’ said the Duchess. ‘That would be perfectly acceptable.’

Lady Wellbeloved walked across the room to a small travelling trunk and removed two long strips of white linen. She handed one to each of us. Realising that these were the blindfolds we were supposed to wear I wrapped mine around my eyes. I assumed Dr Challot had done the same.

‘Have you got any venison?’ demanded the Duke.

‘Certainly sir,’ said Mr Youngblood.

‘We’ll take a haunch of venison, three dozen oysters, a roast hindquarter of pig, half a dozen fowls, a fatted goose and a cold ham for nibbling. Have you got a good, large ham?’

‘If you will stand on the two sides of the Bed I will place your hands on the Duchess’s buttocks,’ said Lady Wellbeloved. She took me by the arm and led me around the Bed so that I was standing on the far side of the

Duchess. She took my hand and placed it on a round globe of flesh which I took to be one of the Duchess's buttock cheeks. As I moved my fingers across the hillock, I found myself touching another set of fingers and realised that my hand had met with Dr Challot's hand approaching from the opposite direction.

'You first,' I said, pulling back my hand.

'No, no, you first,' insisted Dr Challot.

'Hurry up!' snapped the Duchess. 'It's damned chilly in this godforsaken hovel. Winter draws on.'

'You've got no drawers on at all, my dear!' laughed the Duke. 'No drawers on at all.' He laughed at his own small jollity.

I replaced my hand on the Duchess's skin and explored until my fingers slid into the crack between her cheeks. It wasn't difficult to find the haemorrhoids. They were bigger and firmer than any I had ever previously encountered. As the Duke had implied they felt like a small basket of raspberries. I tried to squeeze a finger between the raspberries but the Duchess struggled away from my finger with a series of little yelps.

'Oh yes, sir, we have venison,' agreed Mr Youngblood who was apparently either oblivious to what was going on across the room or was suppressing his curiosity with great effect. 'And for pudding?'

'Not done with me first course yet,' said the Duke. 'Bring me some rump beef, a large platter of mince pies and some frilled potatoes.'

'Certainly, your worship,' replied Mr Youngblood. He spoke as I think he thought a man should speak when addressing a Duke.

'Grace!' snapped the Duke. 'Say grace you fool.'

Mr Youngblood hesitated for a moment. 'For what we are about to receive…' he began.

'No, you blithering idiot!' cried the Duke. 'You address me as 'your Grace' not 'your worship'.

'Certainly, your Grace,' said Mr Youngblood.

There was a yelp from the Duchess.

'What are they doing to ye?' demanded the Duke.

'One of them is trying to push his finger into me rump's inner portions,' reported the Duchess.

I knew the digit in question wasn't one of mine so I assumed it belonged to Dr Challot.

'Do you like it or does it hurt?'

'It hurts like buggery!'

'Then tell the bugger to stop it,' said the Duke. He thought for a moment and repeated his instruction. 'Did ye hear that?' he demanded. 'A good jape, eh? Tell the bugger to stop the buggery.'

It was apparently considered that it was safe to show appreciation of this jollity and loud, appreciative laughter followed immediately.

'Is that the innkeeper you've got there?' asked the Duchess.

'He's taking the food order.'

'Is he blindfolded?'

'No, no, he's not blindfolded. He's just an innkeeper. I'll ask the beggar if he can see you. Can you see my wife's Arse from where you're standing?'

'Oh no sir,' said Mr Youngblood. 'Hardly at all.'

'There you are,' said the Duke. 'He can't hardly see your arse, though I'd have thought it large enough to see from the other end of the county.' He laughed loudly at his own remark. But this time no one else laughed, probably because they were not certain that the size of the Duchess's Arse was a suitable subject for general laughter.

'That's all right then,' said the Duchess, apparently appeased by the reassurance and untroubled by the Duke's playful remark.

'Have you got nice puddings?' the Duke demanded, now presumably addressing Mr Youngblood again. Being blindfolded meant that it was difficult to follow the path of the various conversations going on. 'Spotted dick? Something with treacle? A Plumb tart?'

'Oh yes, sir,' said Mr Youngblood. 'We can supply spotted dick, treacle pudding and a Plumb tart. And to drink? What would you like to drink?'

'Stop rushing me you idiot. I'll lose me train of thought. How is your spotted dick? Not too much dick? I like lots of spots. Decent sized ones too.'

'There are spots aplenty, your grace. I have received no complaints about the lack of spots and my good lady attends to the dick herself.'

'Good. I'll take a helping of that. And I want an apple tart too.'

'We have apple tart but I'm afraid we have no raspberries, sir. The raspberries are out of the season.'

'Damn your eyes I don't want raspberries. My Wife has raspberries. She's got more than enough raspberries for both of us. Bring us a pipe of port and half a dozen bottles of your best champagne.'

‘Certainly, your Majesty, your Grace. I apologise. I thought I heard raspberries were mentioned. Where would you like to be served?’

‘In here, you fool, in here, of course. Bring the food on trays.’

‘Certainly, your Grace,’ said Mr Youngblood.

There was a sudden squeak of surprise from the Duchess.

‘The raspberries appear to have disappeared,’ said Dr Challot.

The Duchess started to breathe a little more rapidly.

‘There are no raspberries, I fear,’ said Mr Youngblood. ‘It is the wrong season for raspberries.’

The Duchess started to moan a little.

‘Where did this moonling come from?’ yelled the Duke. ‘Him and his damned raspberries.’

‘Is any of this food for your entourage?’ asked Mr Youngblood, who was obviously slightly cumpuffled.

‘Damn your eyes of course it aint!’ roared the Duke. ‘It’s a snack for me, me Wife and me wife’s Lady of the Bedchamber. They look like a pair of damned horses. Look like horses and eat like them.’ He paused. ‘Probably taste like ’em too!’ He then guffawed loudly.

‘And for the others?’ asked Mr Youngblood.

‘What others?’

‘Your servants, sir? How would you like me to feed your servants?’

‘Have you got soup?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘Something cheap and filling? What the devil are you moaning about Agnes? Is that Doctor fellow still playing with your raspberries?’

The Duchess continued to moan.

‘The passageway now seems quite clear,’ said Dr Challot.

‘I fear that the Doctor may have inadvertently misapplied his fingers,’ said Lady Wellbeloved, who sounded very close and was apparently standing near to Dr Challot.

‘Has he indeed? Where’s he misapplied them to?’

‘I don’t much like to say,’ said Lady Wellbeloved.

The Duchess, although lying face down and stifled somewhat by the pillow, was now moaning much more noticeably.

‘Ah! Is that damned fellow finger fiddling me wife’s muff?’

‘I believe so, your Grace.’

‘I thought it sounded that way. You’d better take the damned blindfolds off ’em,’ said the Duke. ‘Need to let the fellow see what he’s doing before he unbuttons his trousers by mistake.’

‘We have Turnip soup, your Majesty,’ said Mr Youngblood. ‘I could serve it with bread. That makes a very filling meal.’

‘That’ll do very well. How much is the bread?

‘Today’s bread, very fresh, is tuppence a loaf, your Majesty.’

Lady Wellbeloved removed my blindfold. She had already removed the blindfold from Dr Challot who, I could see, appeared embarrassed and now had both hands tucked firmly behind his back.

The Duchess, who was plainly quivering and still breathing rather heavily, suddenly spoke. ‘Why have you stopped your examination?’ she demanded. ‘Get on with it, Doctor. Get on with it.’

Dr Challot, with surprising reluctance, put his hand back onto the Duchess’s buttock and slid it across towards the piles which I could now see for the first time.

‘Not there, you fool!’ said the Duchess. ‘Back where you were.’

Dr Challot, his face now deep red with embarrassment, and no doubt fear, put his hand back where it had been and continued with the examination he had so recently interrupted.

‘And yesterday’s bread? How much is yesterday’s bread?’

‘A penny a loaf, your Majesty.’

The Duchess’ moans now reached a crescendo.

‘Haven’t you finished fiddling with my wife?’ demanded the Duke.

‘Nearly done, I think, your Majesty,’ said Dr Challot.

‘Yesterday’s bread will do fine. They can dip it in the soup. You don’t have to give them fresh bread for that.’

‘How many loaves?’

‘Two will be plenty. And who was that woman who met us when we arrived?’

‘Which woman would that be, your Highness?’

‘Comely woman of a decent age. She wore a white frock with huge milk jugs hanging out of the top of it.’

‘The woman with blonde hair?’

‘Didn’t notice the colour of her hair you fool. Does she have hair? Blonde you say? Just saw the jugs. Caught the eye. Could hardly miss ’em. A grand display.’

‘That would be Mistress Youngblood, my wife,’ said the landlord, not without a certain amount of pride. ‘She is a well-developed woman.’

‘Well send her up next time. She’s a damned sight better looking than you are.’

‘Certainly, your Grace.’

‘And tell her not to keep going on about raspberries.’

‘No, your Grace. Certainly not your Grace.’

‘If I enjoy my snack I might roger her afterwards. Does she like a good rogering, your wife?’

‘Oh yes, your Highness. She’s very agreeable to a sound rogering.’

‘Not got piles has she?’

‘Oh no, your Highness.’

‘Not got the pox?’

‘Oh no, your Highness. She’s very clean in all departments.’

‘Splendid. If she stinks badly, tell her to have a bath. And find me another bedroom. It looks as if the Duchess is going to be using that Bed for the rest of the day. I like to have room to move about when I’m doing me rogering.’

‘Certainly, your Highness,’ said Mr Youngblood. He backed away until he reached the door. A Maid opened it for him and he scurried away. A moment later I heard him hurrying down the stairs.

‘Has that damned Doctor done playing with my wife’s muff?’ demanded the Duke.

‘I believe he has completed his examination,’ said Lady Wellbeloved.

‘I feel much better now,’ said the Duchess. She sounded calm and relieved.

‘So what are you going to do about my wife’s damned piles?’ demanded the Duke.

‘May we consult, your Highness?’ asked Dr Challot.

‘Consult away. But hurry up and get on with it. Why does that landlord fellow wear a judge’s wig? Is he a judge?’

‘I don’t believe he is a judge,’ said Lady Wellbeloved. ‘Although I suspect he may have purchased the wig from a judge.’

‘Looks bloody silly on a Publican,’ muttered the Duke. ‘He’s another fellow who needs to be shot.’ He paused and thought for a moment. ‘Damned fine looking wife, though.’

Dr Challot hurried round to the side of the Bed where I was standing. He was very red in the face and sweating considerably. I don’t know whether this was through excitement, embarrassment or fear of retribution though there seemed no reason for fear that since the Duke did not seem to have been inconvenienced by his error. ‘What do you recommend?’ Dr Challot asked me.

‘We could tie them,’ I suggested.

I had read in a journal that one way to tackle haemorrhoids was to tie string or wire around them, thereby cutting off the Blood supply. The theory is that the haemorrhoids will eventually die and fall off.

‘Too many of them,’ said Dr Challot, illustrating his viewpoint with a shake of his head. ‘There are too many piles and they’re too large. What do you think of applying lesser celandine ointment?’

I said that I thought this seemed a good idea. Lesser celandine is also known as pilewort since it helps reduce the size of swollen piles.

‘Two Leeches, a strong purgative and twice a day treatment with lesser celandine?’

‘The Duke and Duchess won’t be able to travel for two days if we use a strong purgative,’ I pointed out.

‘Good news for us,’ whispered Dr Challot, who could obviously hear gold guinea pieces clinking into his pocket. ‘We can visit four times a day. Four times a day for two days. Twenty guineas apiece so that’s…’

‘We could also try rectal dilation,’ I suggested. It was a remedy I had read about in one of the new journals.

Dr Challot, who had clearly not heard of this remedy, frowned in confusion. I suspect he was trying to multiply forty guineas by four and then by two days.

‘We push a small dilator in between the piles, take it out and replace it with a slightly larger dilator. We keep using larger and larger dilators until the Patient cries ‘Enough!’ or a large aperture appears and the condition is cured.’

Dr Challot looked doubtful. ‘It sounds damnably painful! Does it work?’

‘I don’t have the foggiest idea. But Dr MacMillan, a fellow with a practice in Harley Street swears by it. He says that pain is the body’s way of talking to the brain. He is something of a scientist and reckons that the dilation also cures insanity.’

‘I’d rather my body didn’t bother talking to me at all,’ said Dr Challot. ‘But I can believe it would cure insanity.’ He thought for a moment and chuckled. ‘But if it cures insanity we should stuff the largest one we’ve got right up the Duke's arse.'

Eventually, we agreed to dilate, use two Leeches, try a strong purgative and apply a specially prepared ointment of lesser celandine sold by a Drummer at a guinea a pot.

'Just make damned sure we don't lose the Leeches!' said Dr Challot. 'Put 'em next to the arsehole and they'll like as not disappear. Leeches cost too much to lose up someone's Arse – even if she is a Duchess.'

'I'll tie a bit of string around them,' I promised. 'Then I can always yank them out if they disappear into the darkness.'

We told the Duchess that we would go away and return the following morning with the appropriate remedies.

'How long do we have to stop here?' demanded the Duke.

'At least 24 hours,' replied Dr Challot. 'Maybe a little longer.'

'Goddamnit!' cried the Duke. 'Do you mean we have to stay here the night?'

'I fear so, your Highness,' said Dr Challot.

'Eh well,' sighed the Duke. 'Let's hope that woman with the big jugs provides me with good entertainment.'

On my way downstairs, I was told by Mr Youngblood that he had temporarily moved me into a small room in the attic. He was not the slightest bit apologetic about this.

When we left the Peacock Inn, Dr Challot went to the consulting rooms to find and prepare the ingredients and equipment which we would need for the Duchess's treatments. I went to find the coachman who had been injured.

It was near dark outside and gloomy inside the stable. The injured coachman had been laid out on a truss of straw which had been placed in such a way to make a rough sort of bed. He was lying there quite alone.

'I'm the Doctor,' I told him, just managing to avoid the almost statutory 'What can I do for you?' with which we Doctors tend to greet all our patients.

There was a stifled, gagging sort of reply and when I leant closer to him I could see that the poor fellow still had the gag in his mouth. As instructed, Mr Youngblood had pushed a large and rather filthy piece of rag into place in order to stop the fellow screaming. I removed the rag and the coachman gasped and breathed heavily several times.

'What happened?' I enquired.

'Some idiot stuffed a rag into my mouth!' explained the coachman. He held out his hands so that I could see that they were tied. I assumed that Mr Youngblood had tied the fellow's hands in order to prevent him removing the filthy gag.

I cut the rope and freed his hands. 'What happened before the idiot stuffed the rag into your mouth?'

'I fell off the coach and broke my left leg,' he said. 'And while I was on the ground one of the horses trod on my bollocks.'

I looked down at his legs. He was absolutely right. The left leg was broken and a piece of bone was sticking out through the skin and the man's trousers.

'It's broken isn't it?' he said.

'It is, I'm afraid.'

'Will it have to come off?'

'It will. The bone is sticking out. I'll have to remove it. But I can recommend a carpenter who will make you a decent peg leg.'

The man was quiet. 'His Grace will never hire a coachman with one leg.'

'Why on earth not? You can still drive a coach.'

'I would look woefully asymmetrical. His Grace is very keen on symmetry.'

'Maybe he will be able to find you other employment?'

`Not when he sees the damage my bone has done to the breeches.'

I could not think of a suitable reply but I was not surprised to find that the Duke would worry more about a pair of damaged breeches than about the man who had worn them.

'What about my bollock?' he asked. 'It feels as if it has been crushed.'

I examined his balls and found that the left one was, indeed, completely crushed and clearly quite without purpose.

'I will have to remove the crushed one,' I told him. 'But the other one seems fine and should continue to function perfectly satisfactorily.'

'His Grace will not be pleased,' said the coachman gloomily. 'I fear my bone has completely ruined the uniform breeches.' The poor fellow was far more worried about the damned breeches than his own woeful condition.

'Damn the breeches!' I said, rashly. 'His Grace will have to order another pair.'

I told the man I would have to go to the consulting rooms to fetch my saws, a bottle of Laudanum and a couple of assistants to hold him still while I removed the damned leg.

I am becoming tolerably good at removing limbs though generally speaking I find arms, being thinner, much the easier limbs to amputate. I may not be as fast as some of the London Surgeons, specialists in this sort of work, but several of my patients have survived for more than a week after surgery and I am still tolerably proud of this.

July 13th

The Duke's coachman, the poor devil who had a broken leg and who had been kicked in the groin, died in the night.

Dr Challot was mortally aggrieved since he had bet two guineas that the man would last three days. I was mildly flattered by his confidence.

We took away the man's leg since he no longer had any use for it, and Dr Challot has arranged to have the flesh stripped off and melted down for pill making.

After breakfast I saw a man with a bad cold in his bowel. He was rich in curmurings and had been farting a good deal. He complained that his farts smelt rotten and having been witness to his ventuosity, I can confirm that his complaint is justified.

I put three Leeches on his abdomen and placed a treacle Poultice on his head. He is tolerably well-off so I charged him half a guinea. I am becoming pleasantly accustomed to having guinea and half guinea pieces in my pocket.

Dr Challot and I then returned to the Peacock Inn prepared to treat the Duchess's raspberries. We had dilators, medicine and Leeches all ready and prepared, and Dr Challot had put on a fresh shirt and a waistcoat which pretty well covered most of the Blood stains on the front of the clean shirt. To our dismay we found when we got there that the Duke, the Duchess and their entourage had all left the Inn and had continued on their way. It seems that Bed rest had soothed the Duchess's condition. The Duke had not paid our bill and Dr Challot is beyond fury. We have not even been paid for the amputation of the coachman's leg. All we have to show for our efforts is the leg itself – worth a groat and a half at most.

Still, there is good news. Their departure means that I can return to my room. The attic room in which I slept last night was very small, cold and dark. Nellie said she saw three bats and a rat.

July 19th

I received a request to visit the Vicarage and with a heavy heart I set off to see what was required. I had assumed that I had been asked to see Euphemia and was, to say the least, feeling nervous. I wondered if I could get away with examining her without actually touching her. Maybe, I thought, I could stand at the end of the Bed and make a determination on the basis of her reported symptoms. I knew that many of the country's leading Physicians, esteemed members of the College of Physicians, had gone for decades without ever actually touching a patient. They thought it beneath themselves to have to bend over a sick Bed and lay hands, or even the distal end of a Laennec's tube, onto a sickly patient. Indeed, most of them were too frightened of catching fleas to do anything quite so reckless.

But my fears turned out to be unfounded.

'Your Patient is in here, Doctor,' said the butler, having led me up the stairs. He knocked gently on the door before opening it.

And to my surprise my Patient turned out to be the Reverend Standorf himself. He was lying abed, wearing a white Nightshirt and a maroon nightcap.

'What ails you?' I asked, now feeling quite cheery in consequence of my relief.

'It is my throat!' he replied, though the nature of the reply, the rasp and hoarseness, rather made the words he spoke superfluous. He had a long, red, woollen sock wrapped around his throat.

'What is wrong with it?'

'It's sore.'

'Whose idea was that?' I enquired, pointing to the sock.

'It was at the housekeeper's recommendation,' he replied, clearly speaking with difficulty. 'The sock has been worn. And it contains a rasher of bacon, as she recommended. It was placed there three days ago but sadly the remedy has failed to work. I have a sermon to preach in two days' time.'

'That sock business is all rather old-fashioned nonsense, I fear,' I told him firmly. 'Put out your tongue!'

He did as I asked.

'Ah, the tongue is discoloured,' I told him. 'And your throat is inflamed.'

'I told you that!' he said, rather rudely I thought.

'With respect, sir, you did not. You told me that your throat was sore. That is a symptom. I have told you that it is inflamed. That is a determination.' I was quite well pleased with myself.

'So, what are you going to do about it?' he demanded. 'Do you propose to offer me a treatment in addition to a determination?'

'I shall treat you with flowers of sulphur,' I told him. 'Do you have writing paper available?'

'In the writing desk,' he replied, pointing to a large desk beneath the window.

In a pigeon hole I found some printed notepaper. I opened my satchel and took out a small bottle of flowers of sulphur; one of the medicines I always carry with me.

'What the devil is that?' demanded the clergyman.

I told him.

'And the notepaper? What is that for? Do you intend to make me eat paper? Or are you going to write off for assistance?'

'No, no. I intend to use the notepaper to enable me to direct the sulphur into your throat where it can penetrate the tissues.'

I confess I found myself wondering whether or not a few Leeches and a little scarifying might not be called for. Or, more profitably perhaps, a double dose of a powerful Enema.

The Vicar looked sceptical.

'Unlike your old sock this is a scientific remedy,' I told him. 'It is well known among members of my profession that sulphur is the treatment of choice for a sore throat.'

Having made a funnel with the piece of notepaper, I poured a little of the flowers of sulphur into the funnel. I then blew hard. Unfortunately, I had folded the paper a little tightly at the cone end and the powder, not being able to go down into the throat, blew back into my face, making my eyes sting and causing me to cough a good deal.

'Have you done this before?' asked the Vicar.

'Many, many times,' I told him, though in truth this was not entirely accurate since I had used the sulphur remedy only once before.

'Never let a Patient know that you are inexperienced in the provision of a particular type of treatment or in conducting a particular operation,' Dr Challot had told me, early in my training. 'You must exhale confidence. A Patient will recover far more speedily if his Doctor exudes confidence and certainty.'

On my second attempt, I succeeded in blowing some of the sulphur down the Reverend Standorf's throat. Some of it, to be sure, blew back into my face but I was pleased to see that a goodly proportion of it had disappeared down his throat.

'When will my throat be repaired?' he demanded, after he'd finished coughing.

'In two days,' I told him firmly. I put the bottle of sulphur back into my bag. That was something else that Dr Challot had taught me. Precision in medicine is everything. If you tell a Patient that he will get better but you aren't sure when, then the chances are that he will never get better. If you tell him that he will recover in two, three or four days he will recover in two, three or four days.

Suddenly, I remembered something that Nellie had said to me.

'I now need to examine your legs,' I told him. I pulled the Bed Sheets down, revealing the Clergyman's body, clad only in traditional nightwear. 'Please pull up your Nightshirt.'

'Sir!' he said firmly. 'I am naked underneath my clothing. I am a grown man. A Clergyman. I am not some young girl, eager to display her portions to your lascivious gaze.'

I couldn't help wondering if he was talking about his Daughter. It appeared that he perhaps knew her better than I might have thought possible.

'Sir, it is essential that I examine some portions of your nether regions. There is a syndrome which I must disqualify from my differential determination.'

'What syndrome?'

'It is newly discovered and does not yet have a name,' I said. 'But the sore throat is always accompanied by a mark on one of the thighs – usually the left.'

'What sort of mark?' demanded the Vicar, who had paled noticeably.

'To the uninitiated it can take on the appearance of a bite mark,' I told him.

'There is no need for any examination,' insisted the Vicar. 'I have no such mark on either thigh.'

'It is something that the untrained eye can miss,' I told him with a confidence that surprised me. 'If it gives you great discomfort to allow otherwise you may shield your most personal departments with some item of cover.'

'Is this essential?'

'Indeed it is. The mark is the first sign that the infection had spread,' I told him. 'I would be remiss if I did not check to see whether there are any signs that it has done so.'

With a snort of mild protest, the Clergyman lifted up his Nightshirt and placed his hand on top of his twig and berries. I lifted the Nightshirt a little higher and there on his chest was the third nipple which Nellie had told me was there. I peered closely at his thighs, looking for the bite mark which she had reported would be present.

And to my astonishment there it was! A large bite mark in exactly the position she had described to me. I pulled a magnifying glass from my coat pocket and leant forward. The Vicar's grip on his twig and berries tightened. The glass had been a small gift from a Leech salesman. It had the words 'Pilkington's Leeches Suck Better' engraved on the handle but by holding the glass firmly I was able to hide this.

'Oh there may be a birthmark on my thigh!' he insisted, as though the memory had suddenly come to his mind. He had gone very white, so white that he almost disappeared against the Bed Sheets. 'The mark has been there all my life. I was born with it.'

I examined the bite mark and touched it gently with the tip of a finger. 'No, I think not,' I said. 'This is no birth mark.'

He looked down at his own lower regions and stared at the bite mark as though it were something he had never seen before. 'Oh, goodness!' he said, weakly.

'I am sorry to say that I fear this may be a sign that the infection has entered your Bloodstream,' I told him.

'No, it cannot be! It is not!'

'But how can we be sure? Do you have any other explanation for its presence?'

The Vicar swallowed hard. 'Maybe it is indeed a bite mark.'

'A bite? What sort of bite? An animal of some kind? Do you remember being bitten?'

'It is a human bite mark,' he whispered. 'I am confident of it.'

I looked at him and raised an eyebrow a sixteenth of an inch or so. 'A human bit you there? Were you attacked? Did you call the constable?'

'No, no! There was no need to call for the constable. It was done in a purely playful manner.' He swallowed hard. The pallor had now been replaced by a redness which was spreading across his cheeks and down his throat.

I bent down and examined the bite mark again. 'These are teeth marks?'

'They are, yes they are teeth marks.' He was now as red as he had been white.

'Mistress Standorf's teeth?'

'Ye Gods, man, of course not! My wife's dentures are wooden. She has difficulty in biting a tomato.'

‘I thought not,’ I said with a nod. It had seemed an unlikely possibility. I really could not imagine Mistress Standorf biting any man on the thigh, unless it was in some sort of self-defence. I straightened myself and slipped my magnifying glass back into my jacket pocket. ‘I agree the mark does not seem as though it were made by the teeth of Mistress Standorf.’

He stared at me. ‘You can tell?’

‘The shape of the mouth is a distinguishing feature,’ I said. ‘Mistress Standorf has a most clearly identifiable overbite. Any student of medicine could tell you that this mark could not have been made by Mistress Standorf’s teeth.’

Though I have never understood the reason for the action, I rubbed my chin with my hand, as I have seen some men of learning do when they are thinking.

‘I feel sure that I know these teeth,’ I said.

‘The bite was made by a young woman who visits me occasionally,’ said the Vicar. The confession spilt from him in haste. ‘The mark is without doubt a bite mark. It cannot be a sign that my Blood is troubled.’

‘A young woman?’ I said.

‘She visits me from time to time,’ he said.

‘From time to time?’

‘Occasionally.’

‘Occasionally?’

‘Once a week. My Wife visits her mother at weekends and the young woman visits me on Saturdays. Or, rather, she used to. Her visits appear to have ceased.’

‘Ah.’

‘The visits were for spiritual reasons,’ he said. ‘She provided me with relief from my worldy woes.’

‘You may cover yourself,’ I told him.

‘There is no spread of the infection?’ He used his free hand to pull down his Nightshirt.

‘None.’ I pulled down the Sheets.

‘Have you now finished with your examination?’ It was notable that as he became covered so he regained some of his lost assurance.

‘I have sir.’

‘There will be need to mention…?’ he began.

‘Good heavens, no, sir! Everything that occurs between a Doctor and a Patient is sacrosanct.’

‘I’m pleased to hear it.’

‘How much do I owe you?’ he asked, reaching to his right and pulling on the bell to summon a member of his staff.

‘One guinea, sir.’

‘A whole guinea!’

‘The powder is expensive and acquiring the knowledge to use it even more so,’ I told him. ‘You must send word if you require a second treatment. A subsequent treatment will be merely half a guinea.’

When the Butler arrived, the Reverend Standorf instructed him to give me a guinea piece from the purse on his bedside Table. It appeared that the Reverend did not wish to soil his hands by taking out his own guinea and handing it to me.

I put the guinea into my pocket, picked up my bag, bad them both goodbye and left.

I was still rather shocked that young Nellie, the Maid, had clearly been telling the truth when she had spoken of the nights she spent in the Reverend Standorf’s bed.

But it was good to know that the Reverend Standorf and I now shared a secret.

July 29th

Dr Mort arrived with a small King Charles Spaniel dog which bore a smart silver collar. The dog was, he said, a gift for a young woman related to the Duke of Wellington. We have not seen our new Apprentice for some while but he offered no explanation or excuse for his failure to attend the surgery.

Dr Moat boasts that he has acquired a yearning and a strong inclination for the niece of a cousin of the Duke of Wellington and told me he hopes to become personal Physician to the Duke. From what I have heard I consider this a doubtful ambition.

The Duke is not keen on Doctors since that trouble with his ear. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that Wellington doesn't much like or trust Doctors.

In 1822, the Great Man's left ear drum was shattered during firing practice at Woolwich. An ear specialist who was brought in, treated the Iron Duke by pouring a strong solution of caustic soda into his ear. 'I don't think I've ever suffered so much in my life,' said the Duke.

I don't blame him for disliking and distrusting Doctors after that.

Dr Mort confessed that he had spent everything he had on the dog's collar which was encrusted with sapphires and rubies and demanded that I lend him £10. I told him that if I had £10 I would lend it to myself. Since I did not have the £10 to lend him I had no choice in the matter. I suspect that Dr Mort is not as wealthy as Dr Challot believes. I wondered if perhaps Dr Mort's father might not have conveyed himself into the suburbs of an uncomfortable financial position.

'I spent myself most commodiously last evening,' he said with a laugh and a wink. My refusal to lend him £10 did not seem to have incommoded him. 'Do you know Astley's Royal Amphitheatre?'

I confessed that I had not heard of it.

'You've never been to Astley's?' he asked, as though I were admitting that I had never drunk mead.

'I have not,' I confessed rather stiffly.

'Great heavens, what a dull provincial life you do lead,' he said. 'It is in London,' he explained. 'Three girls, Kitty, Sue and Polly, known collectively as the Fleming girls, do spectacular trick riding. They leap their horses through fire hoops. It's a most damnably enthralling show. And afterwards you can buy them for the night. Last night I purchased all three for myself. At the time they seemed excellent value for money, though in retrospect the exercise appears to have left me rather light in the wallet. Lord Porchester says that women are like horses, you know.'

'In what way?'

'Both need to be ridden hard. The difference is that women should be put away wet but horses should be put away dry.'

He laughed merrily at this quip.

I resisted the temptation to share my thoughts on his incontinence and extravagance. I am more than ever convinced that Mort is alive only from the waist downwards.

'What's been happening in my absence?' he asked. 'Have I missed anything exciting?'

He laughed disdainfully when he said this, as though he felt sure that there were unlikely to have been any exciting events for him to have missed.

'No, you haven't missed anything,' I told him. 'We've been very busy looking after the Duchess of Beaufort.'

I thought he would have died of envy when I told him this but he simply shrugged and watched with quiet indifference as his dog emptied itself of both departments at once. It is a rare sight to see an animal do this.

'What have you been feeding it?' I enquired, as the dog concluded its emptying.

'A fellow sold me a dozen crab and I wanted to see if they were fresh so I gave one to the dog for breakfast. It appears that the damned crab was not fresh. I will have to tell my coachman to donate the crab to some poor people and give the crabman a damned good whipping.'

'We have not seen you for some while,' I said. 'Where have you been?'

'Oh, I've been with Lady Penelope Fitzwater. We spent a few days together at her father's seat in Somerset.'

I was surprised by this. I had heard talk that Lady Penelope was exceptionally prim in her manner.

'I told her that there are vampires in those parts, constantly searching for virgins,' explained Dr Mort.

I stared at him, puzzled.

'I explained to her that the presence of the vampires meant that the only way for her to be safe was to give herself to me immediately.'

'And she did?'

'Oh yes! With great enthusiasm. I told her that to be on the safe side she should repeat the exercise at regular intervals.

‘She believed this nonsense?’

‘Oh they always do.’

‘You’ve tried the same trick before?’

‘Good heavens, yes. One never wastes a ploy that works.’

‘What about the Duke of Wellington’s relative?’ I asked.

‘Oh she is another fish for a different sort of frying,’ replied Dr Mort.

‘Are you going to clean that up?’ I asked, nodding towards the twin messes the dog had made.

‘I am not,’ he said. ‘A servant can do it.’ He peered at the dog, clearly attempting to think. Eventually he reached down and unfastened the silver collar which he slipped into his coat pocket. ‘There is clearly a fault with this dog,’ he said. ‘I shall purchase another. Are you certain you cannot lend me a paltry ten pounds?’

I told him that I did not have a paltry ten pounds nor, indeed, any other variety of ten pounds and he stalked off in a sulk.

‘Then you can clear up the dog’s mess,’ he said, before marching off. ‘And you can keep the incontinent beast.’

The dog stayed behind and did not appear to be in the slightest bit disappointed to have been abandoned.

‘What is its name?’ I called after him.

He shrugged. ‘I never called it anything,’ he shouted over his shoulder. ‘Why would one take the trouble to give a name to a damned dog?’

July 30th

Nellie is well taken with the King Charles Spaniel which I was given by Mort. I was going to find the dog a home elsewhere but Nellie insists that we keep it. She has named the creature Charlie since, despite his regal nomenclature, he is a very friendly little fellow.

August 3rd

'The Vicar's Wife has sent their Ostler with a message asking you to visit the Vicarage,' said Mistress Swain with a smirk. 'She gave strict instructions that you should present yourself at the front door.'

'Did the message say if the request was urgent?' I asked.

I was surprised at the suggestion that I use the front door. The last time I'd been to the Vicarage I had made the mistake of ringing the front doorbell. When I had identified myself, I had been sent by the Butler to the tradesman's entrance at the back of the house.

'What's that got to do with the price of fish?' demanded Mistress Swain, who prides herself on her ability to combine irrelevance and impertinence.

'I just wondered.'

'I think you can regard it as very urgent,' replied Mistress Swain looking unbearably smug and pleased with herself. 'The Vicar's Wife sent a message with one of their under-gardeners. Apparently Miss Euphemia Standorf has a need to see you.'

Damn Mistress Swain! Damn her entrails. The wretched woman was looking smug because she knows how, for very excellent reasons, I now loathe visiting the Vicarage. Even the very mention of the name Standorf turns my bowels to wind and water and gives my heart to somersault so violent that I am momentarily convinced that the next beat will be the last. I don't know how much the damned woman has guessed but I suspect she knows more than is good for her. She is, I believe, on good gossiping terms with the Standorf's housekeeper and I also suspect that she may be doing the blanket hornpipe with the Standorf's Head Gardener. Since discovering that Mistress Swain has for some time been regularly rogered by Mr Youngblood, I have had to revise my view of her attractiveness to a certain type of person. Mr Youngblood is a drunk, rarely seen sober, and I believe that the Standorf's Head Gardener may be similarly afflicted by yearnings.

'Maybe she has an itch which requires your assistance,' added Mistress Swain. She followed this with a wink and throaty laugh which curdled my Blood.

The hazard which produces these dire effects and affects my innards so vehemently is, of course, my fear that Euphemia and her Mother have together decided that I would make a suitable husband. This now appears to be the accepted belief locally.

This decision was made without my having contributed to any discussion on the subject and clearly seems to have originated with the examination I conducted, and the treatment I provided, when Euphemia was suffering from a chest complaint a short while ago.

From the way that the Vicar looks at me, over the top of his pince-nez and with a stern and searching look, it is clear that whenever he sees me he is sizing me up to see how I would look standing before him, with Euphemia by my side and a gold ring in my waistcoat pocket. I was very much of the impression that he had received misleading guidance on the precise nature of the visit I had made when his Daughter had been laid low with congestion.

I looked at the clock. 'I think it's probably too late to go today,' I said. 'Perhaps I should delay my visit until tomorrow. The Standorfs will doubtless be taking lunch, having afternoon tea or dining. Or maybe the Reverend Standorf will be preparing his sermon and unwilling to have his peaceful contemplations disturbed by my ringing his doorbell.'

'The message was that you should go very urgently regardless of convenience,' insisted Mistress Swain with another dirty chuckle. 'Young Miss Euphemia seems to think she already has you well under her thumb.'

'Not a bit of it!' I protested.

'The Ostler said to say that you were free to enter by the front door,' Mistress Swain reminded me. 'I think he was referring to the Vicarage rather than Miss Euphemia but I cannot be entirely sure.'

I stared at her wondering why the devil Dr Challot put up with her damnable impertinence.

'Still, at least you can take heart from the fact that she's been very well prepared for her wedding night, and your way has been well rehearsed,' continued Mistress Swain. She took a small box of snuff from her apron pocket, put a pinch into the indentation at the base of her thumb and sniffed it up her nose with, I thought, a good deal of unnecessary noise.

I looked at her, frowning and asked her to explain what she meant.

'Just what I've heard,' she said with a careless shrug. 'You'd probably say it was nothing more than tittle tattle.' She sneezed, blowing snuff powder everywhere including over me, pulled a revolting piece of rag from somewhere in her skirts and wiped her nose with it.

'What sort of tittle tattle?' I demanded.

'Oh, just that she's been consistently well attended to by the under-gardener up at the Vicarage.'

'The under-gardener?' I said, startled.

‘You must have seen him. A huge, red headed fellow who is said to be a bit simple minded but a hard worker. I gather he’s lain with the Daughter of the house quite regularly and done some of the ground breaking work for you with Miss Euphemia. You might say he has dug his spade in deep and tilled the earth for you.’

Astonished, I stared at her.

‘Three times a week for two or three months now,’ said Mistress Swain. She paused and wiped her nose again. ‘So I hear.’ She sniffed. ‘Still, they do say ‘like mother like Daughter’ do they not?’

‘What on earth do you mean?’

‘Oh, were you not aware?’

‘Aware of what?’

‘Mistress Standorf has always been serviced by the Under-Footman,’ she told me, as if surprised that I did not know this. The Vicar holds services at the Church while his Wife is safe in her Bed being serviced by the Dining Room Senior Under-Footman. They do say that she always appoints the Dining Room Senior Under-Footman herself.’ She winked at me. ‘And the interview has nothing to do with whether he can carry a bowl of soup without spilling any.’ She laughed merrily at this quip. ‘When interviewing prospective young men she makes them change into uniform and watches as they do it. Makes them go right down beyond their skivvies.’

‘How on earth did you acquire all this scurrilous nonsense?’

‘I keep my ears open,’ said Mistress Swain mysteriously. ‘A good friend of mine has seen her at it more than once. But you need not worry yourself about the Lady of the House for she likes them well built and young but you need to watch yourself with Euphemia. There is word that the Gardener may have planted a seed or two,’ she added. ‘And if a seed has taken he may have started your first crop for you. He has a Wife with three little ones back home so he’s no problems filling a woman’s belly.’ She winked and cackled again.

Putting aside the question of how Mistress Swain knew that my build, as she put it, was not up to the required standards for Mistress Standorf, it occurred to me that my non-existent relationship with Euphemia was becoming more complicated by the minute. And from what Mistress Swain had told me, I could not help wondering if Euphemia and her mother might not have a very good reason for looking for a suitable husband. If I was not careful I could find myself tied to the Reverend Standorf’s wretched Daughter, a cuckold before the fact as well as after, and playing Papa to a red headed, simple minded baby with two green thumbs. I decided there and then that I needed to take the bull by the horns and deal with this misunderstanding before it became impossible to extricate myself from the family Standorf.

‘I shall go there immediately,’ I told her, brushing snuff powder from my cravat, which had once been pale blue but was now stained as brown as if I had spilt gravy upon it. As I did so it occurred to me that we had still not been paid for my last visit to the Vicarage. I decided that if the opportunity arose, I really ought to bring up the matter of payment. I have often found that it is the people with butlers and other servants who are the most reluctant to pay their Doctor’s bills.

Nevertheless, although I had told Mistress Swain that I was heading straight to the Vicarage, I decided to call in at the Peacock Inn for a light snack and a fortifying glass or two of malmsey.

When I arrived at the Peacock Inn, I was surprised to see that Jack the Hopper was in the snug bar. I have had a fondness for Hoppers since I was a boy. I always found them most entertaining. I therefore found myself a spare seat and asked the waitress if there was anything fresh on the menu. I was not averse to delaying my visit to the Vicarage for a short while. The Peacock often has visiting Tumblers and Mime Players but Hoppers are rather rare these days.

‘The goose pie is six days old and I spent half an hour pulling out the maggots,’ the waitress told me in confidence. ‘And you will need a fine sharp set of teeth to bite through the crust.’

I always try to stay on the right side of the serving staff, promising generous tips at every opportunity, for exactly this sort of inside information.

I looked around and could see at least three diners happily spooning up the goose pie as fast as they could shovel the stuff from plate to mouth.

‘And the mutton? What do you say about the mutton?’

‘Tough,’ she replied, wrinkling her nose. ‘So stringy I thought of using it to make myself a pair of stockings.’

‘So, what do you recommend?’

‘I’d take the Tench if I could afford it. Freshly caught, mashed and boiled.’

I fumbled in my pocket, found a penny and passed it to her. ‘I’ll take the Tench.’ She thanked me and hurried off. ‘And a half pint pot of malmsey!’ I shouted after her.

While I waited, I watched Jack the Hopper earn his dinner, and his supper too.

He took off his shoes and stockings and encouraged the customers to throw glassware onto the floor until the place appeared to be entirely carpeted in broken glass. No one took any notice of Mistress Youngblood who was complaining bitterly about her glassware being smashed.

‘I’ll lay five shillings he can’t hop twice round the room without cutting his foot!’ cried Seth, a farm labourer who seems to me to spend considerably more time drinking than labouring.

‘Taken!’ shouted two voices I didn’t recognise.

And so it went.

Within two minutes the best part of five pounds had been wagered. I did not take part in the nonsense and was pleased by my abstinence. I have decided that I regard betting as a fool’s game and I can find easier ways to part myself from the little money I have. I confess that if I had taken a bet it would have been to bet against Jack cutting his foot at all. He is the best Hopper I have seen for many a long year.

And true enough, with startling skill and dexterity he succeeded in finding a way around the room without cutting his hopping foot.

When the course had been completed the gamblers, particularly those who had lost their stakes, demanded a rerun and Jack went the other way round the room, using his other foot. Once again he succeeded in avoiding the broken glass. I could not help wishing that I’d placed a couple of small wagers on him. Maybe next time.

As the entertainment finished, the waitress appeared carrying my plate of mashed Tench and my pot of malmsey. It took but one mouthful to discover that the idiot cook had mashed the Tench without first having the good sense to remove the bones. I spat a mouthful of bones onto my plate and spent several painful minutes pulling another dozen out of my cheek and tongue. When the waitress next came my way she had the nerve to laugh and wink at me.

‘What sort of trick was that?’ I demanded, giving her behind a good whack with my palm.

‘Mistress Youngblood offered me a farthing for every bowl I could sell,’ she admitted. ‘The cook forgot to bone the fish before mashing it.’

‘I discovered that!’ I retorted.

She then brought me a plateful of roasted Neck of Pork, served with a dish of boiled eggs, half a crusty loaf, a plateful of apple sauce and a block of cheese. I told her I wouldn’t pay for these victuals as well as the Tench, and the girl promised that she wouldn’t put the items onto my bill. I also requested an additional pot of malmsey.

The Neck of Pork was excellent, the fat nicely crisped around the edges as I like it, and the cheese had a good fighting taste. The malmsey was damned fine and I had a third pot before I left. All of us in the snug sang ‘May We Always Have Enough’. I took off my boots and socks and attempted to emulate Jack the Hopper and hop around the room. Unfortunately, I failed and cut my foot so badly that I had to bind it up with a handkerchief loaned me by Ebenezer Lamplight. He did not mind my having the muckender for it was filthy dirty and, he said, had proved impossible to clean even though his Wife had attempted to launder it.

I blamed my failure on the fact that as I hopped, I carried my boots and stockings with me lest anyone be tempted to steal them away, for the snug bar was filled with knaves and varlets as always at that time of day. Who but knaves and varlets can waste away their days in the parlour of a low Inn?

By the time I had finished my meal, it was too dark and too late to ride to the Vicarage so I stayed at the Peacock Inn and ordered more mead.

August 4th

I breakfasted well and drank six pints of mead to give myself confidence for the day ahead.

‘Do you think you should be riding, in your condition?’ asked the Ostler at the Peacock as I prepared to climb up onto old Bess, the elderly mare which I had brought with me from home when I had first arrived at Dr Challot’s establishment to begin my training. Bess had been my Father’s Second Best Horse. His First Best Horse had been taken by the moneylenders as he lay on his Death bed. Bess was some years past her prime and was, more often than not, unfit to be ridden. But today she seemed in sublime fettle for a beast of her years.

‘What the devil do you mean?’ I demanded of the Ostler. ‘What, pray, is wrong with my condition?’

The Ostler has become very confident now that he plans to leave his post. He told me the other day that he is weary and plans to retire at Michaelmas. He says he has some savings and plans to live on these, supplemented with a little light thieving. I think this is a dangerous move. Everyone I know who has retired has gone on to die within a year or two. It seems clear to me that the evidence shows that retirement is an option to be avoided if at all possible.

Without waiting for a reply, I climbed up onto the mounting block, put my left foot in the stirrup and in attempting to illustrate my sobriety by leaping up onto the saddle, rather over emphasised the leap and found myself flat on my face on the mud and straw covered cobble stones.

It was, I suppose, my good fortune that the mud and straw provided something of a cushion against the pain which might otherwise have been occasioned by the cobbles for my Pride was the only victim of this Tumble.

‘The damned horse moved,’ I complained, as soon as I was able to stand. ‘Or the saddle was not set properly. Damn your eyes!’

The Ostler was laughing, and two small boys who had suddenly appeared from nowhere and were sniggering loudly. Why is it that whenever something embarrassing happens to me there will always be two small boys present to act as witnesses?

I attempted to brush mud off my jacket and realised it wasn’t mud. Bits of wet straw were stuck to my clothing and my hair. There was, I realised, a terrible smell of horse piss about me.

‘You’re too drunk! Not fit to ride,’ said the Ostler, leading Bess back into the stable. ‘If you’re going somewhere you’d best be safer to take Shanks’s pony.’

In reply, I gave one of the small boys a smack around the head as a lesson to him not to snigger at the misfortune of others. Regrettably, the other managed to avoid the back of my hand. I stood for a moment wondering whether I should go up to my room and wash my hands and face. But wanting to set off for the Vicarage without delay I simply washed myself in the horse trough and brushed some of the straw from my body. The unpleasant odour remained.

‘They can damned well take me as they find me,’ I announced to no one in particular. It occurred to me that the smell of horse piss rather disguised the smell of malmsey which doubtless emanated from my person. It seemed to me that the Ostler’s advice was worth following. I decided to leave Bess to her oats.

‘You’ll be wanting this, I dare say,’ said the Ostler, walking after me and handing me my medical satchel which had fallen off my shoulder and landed a couple of yards away. ‘Though if you’re planning on an amputation I’m fierce-some glad it’s not my limb you’ll be hacking off.’ He laughed. ‘I wouldn’t put a knife within a chain of your hands in your present condition.’

I damned the vagabond’s ignorant eyes, took my satchel from him and set off for the Vicarage on foot.

It was a three mile walk to the Vicarage and by the time I had found my way there, stumbling and swaying a little, for the fall must have banged my head more than I had realised, the sky was heavy with rain. My only consolation was that when the weather lacks clemency, the footpads tend to stay at home. Mind you, no self-respecting, footpad with ambition would have bothered himself if he had seen me staggering past. My clothes were of no quality to start with but my fall had done them no favours.

‘Mercy from above, what has happened to you?’ cried Euphemia when the Butler had opened the front door and, after a good deal of sniffing and more tutting than I thought was appropriate to our relative positions, allowed me into the Vicarage with obvious distaste and reluctance.

(I have never had much affection for Butlers for they always seem to regard themselves as superior to everyone. The Standorfs’ Butler is particularly guilty of this high mindedness and sense of superiority. The damned fellow deserves a daily purging to empty him of his starchy ways.)

‘I fell,’ I answered her. ‘Or to be more precise I was thrown! My damned horse threw me. Moreover, I suspect that the Ostler hadn’t fastened the saddle properly.’

‘Oh, you poor dear!’ said Euphemia. She took a scented handkerchief from a pocket somewhere in the folds of her dress and held it to her nose as she approached me.

‘He’s drunk!’ said the Vicar, who had appeared at her side, as though by magic. ‘The knavish fellow is as wellneezled as a Lord.'

'He's a Doctor, father,' said Euphemia, springing to my defence. 'He is a professional man. He cannot possibly be drunk.'

'Maybe he has been experimenting with medicinal gases,' said the Vicar's wife. 'I have read about them in the *Illustrated London News*.'

'What sort of medicinal gases?' demanded the Vicar, with a snort of derision. I had never before heard a snort of derision. This was definitely one; lots of snort and a good deal of derision.

'According to the article I read, they are used for putting patients to sleep during onerous surgical procedures,' said Mistress Sandorf. 'I imagine their main value must be that they reduce the risk of the Surgeon being attacked or bitten by a struggling patient.'

'Oh, good heavens!' cried Euphemia. She put her hand to her heart. 'What dangers you do encounter in your profession.'

'There is apparently a dentist in America who has experimented with something called Ether,' said Mistress Standorf. 'And according to the article I read, there is a Professor in Edinburgh who has used Chloroform to silence his patients' screams.'

'Good heavens!' said the Vicar. 'The Church could not possibly condone such a thing. I hope they do not consider giving the stuff to women in childbirth. To do so would be ungodly in the extreme.'

'These things have not yet reached general usage,' I assured him.

'So, what do you say happened to you?' the vicar enquired.

'I fell off my Bess,' I said, thinking I should offer an explanation for my condition. 'I was almost on top of her and I fell off with something of a clatter. She may have moved.'

'Who, pray, is this Bess?' asked Euphemia, frowning and backing away a yard.

'A damnable creature,' I replied. 'She's as ugly as sin and twice as bad tempered. She's old enough and experienced enough to know to behave better when a man's on top of her and trying to get his legs around her waist!'

There was silence.

'I was on top of her,' I continued. 'My legs were damned near astride her damnit; ready to dig in my heels and be at her and off. Suddenly, I found myself thrown onto the floor without so much as a by your leave. One minute she was still, waiting for me and as ready as always, and the next moment I was on the floor.'

'Oh no!' cried Euphemia, fainting to the floor but being careful to go down gently and to hold up her skirts so that they were not creased. It occurred to me that she must have taken fainting lessons from her mother, Mistress Standorf.

'The damned creature has had enough men on top of her to know to behave better!' I said.

'I think he may be talking about his horse,' said the Vicar drily. 'It is my hope that this is so.'

'A horse?' said Euphemia, lifting her head. 'Is this Bess a horse?'

'What else could she be?' I demanded, impatient at the woman's idiocy. 'She must have stumbled in a pothole. The roads around here are a menace.' I did not like to admit that I had fallen in the courtyard of The Peacock. 'I walked here. I think I'll have the damned beast cut into steaks – though she's probably too stringy to eat outside a stew.'

Euphemia fainted again. Since she was already on the floor this did not require the caution she had previously exercised.

'I'm sure that the Doctor speaks in haste,' said her mother, trying to calm the situation.

'Of course he does,' agreed Euphemia speedily. She sat up.

Mistress Standorf turned to the butler. 'We will take Doctor Bullock into the drawing room,' she told him. 'Bring a bottle of brandy and some glasses. The second best glassware will be sufficient but bring the best brandy since I will have a glass myself.'

To be honest I would have preferred a cheese sandwich or a slice of cold mutton but the prospect of being able to sit down and rest my worn out legs was attractive enough.

I followed the Standorf family into their drawing room and on Mistress Standorf's insistence was handed a large brandy by the butler. 'Brandy is the only thing for shock,' she announced. 'The Doctor has had a painful and shocking experience.'

'Your health, sir!' said the Reverend Standorf, who I noticed had taken a very modest quantity of brandy, hardly enough liquid to cover the bottom of the glass.

'Your health!' repeated the two Standorf women, speaking in unison and waving their glasses in my direction. They were both drinking brandy and impressively they emptied their glasses in a single draught. The butler, who had been expecting this, refilled their glasses immediately. I sipped at mine, thinking that perhaps it might be reckless to take too much brandy on top of the malmsey.

‘What is that I can do for you?’ I asked Euphemia. ‘Are you ill again?’

‘Oh you must not concern yourself about my health!’ insisted Euphemia. ‘It is you we must think about. You are the one who has taken a nasty fall.’

‘I just fell off a damned horse,’ I said.

We sipped our drinks for a moment in silence. The Vicar seemed to have mastered the art of sipping without ever emptying his glass. I assumed that he had perhaps acquired this skill when doing his rounds of his practitioners. A glass of something here and a glass of something there could otherwise lead to some embarrassment by the end of an afternoon of calls. I suspected that many an aspidistra grew large on unexpected draughts of sherry.

‘You must show the Doctor your collection of mechanism protectors,’ said the Vicar’s Wife to her husband when the silence had become painful.

‘Oh no, no…’ said the Vicar, with assumed modesty.

‘What are mechanism protectors?’ I asked.

‘I am an amateur collector of unconsidered trifles,’ said the Vicar. ‘I have accumulated a collection of the disks of paper which are placed within Hunter watches to prevent dust getting inside through the keyhole.’

‘Good heavens, how fascinating!’ I said.

‘I have 37 of them.’

‘My word,’ I murmured, doing my best to look impressed.

‘When will they give you a knighthood?’ asked Euphemia, suddenly. She was looking at me when she spoke.

I stared at her, for there seemed to be no reason for this unheralded query. ‘Why would anyone give me a knighthood?’ I asked, genuinely puzzled.

‘Because you are now a qualified Physician now,’ replied Euphemia. ‘Sir Benedict is a knight and his Wife is Lady Ursula. Every Physician I know is Sir something or other.’

‘Well, that’s because they’re all licensed by the Royal College of Physicians,’ I explained. ‘I’m an Apothecary and a Barber Surgeon.’

‘Is there a difference?’

‘Of course there is,’ I replied, astounded that the silly woman didn’t understand.

‘You don’t have a license from this College?’

‘No.’

‘So who gave you a licence?’

‘I was Apprenticed to Dr Challot,’ I explained. ‘When I had completed my Apprenticeship he announced that I could call myself both a Surgeon and an Apothecary.’

‘Oh!’ said Euphemia, who seemed rather startled by this. ‘You have no formal training?’

‘Only at the hands of Dr Challot; he taught me all that I know.’ It occurred to me that if they had seen Dr Challot as I had seen him over the last few months, when his general condition had deteriorated notably, they might have been unimpressed by my training.

‘And you have no official licence?’

‘I have no need of a licence.’

‘But you are both a Surgeon and an Apothecary? How can you be both?’

‘Dr Challot trained me as a Surgeon and taught me how to prepare medicines,’ I explained. ‘And so I can perform operations and prepare medicines. If Physicians such as Sir Benedict prescribe a medicine for a Patient they must come to someone like me to have it prepared.’

‘Surely Sir Benedict is allowed to make up his own medicines?’

‘Oh no, not at all. Medicines must be prepared by an Apothecary. The physician sends a request for a medicine to an apothecary and then sends a man to collect what has been prepared. We charge two pence for the bottle of medicine and the Physician charges 10 guineas when he hands it to the patient.’

‘But you can prescribe treatments yourself?’

‘Oh yes. But although I can charge for treatments I cannot charge for a consultation.’

‘And surgery? Cannot Sir Benedict perform surgery? Amputations and suchlike?’

‘Good heavens, no! I daresay he would doubtless consider himself above such things.’

‘So doesn’t that make you superior to Sir Benedict in this regard?’

‘Not precisely,’ I said, suppressing a burp. ‘I don’t think Sir Benedict would consider that to be the case.’

‘So, what is the main difference between you and a Physician?’

‘I live in a small room in a Public House and ride a broken down old nag. A royal Physician such as Sir Benedict lives in a mansion and rides around in a carriage.’

The vicar spoke. ‘Am I right in thinking that you are allowed to cut hair and to shave your customers?’

‘Oh yes,’ I said, thinking how kind it was of the Reverend Standorf to remind me of this.

There was a silence as Euphemia allowed all this to sink in. She seemed grieved by what she had learned.

‘Well, you’ll just have to join this Royal College of Physicians,’ she said at last. ‘Daddy knows all sorts of people. He can get you into any club you care to mention. My brothers are both members of several of the best clubs in London. They know everyone who hunts and I am sure there won’t be any difficulties.’

‘I’m afraid it doesn’t work quite like that,’ I said. ‘You have to go to one of the Universities and take a degree and be presented to the College in the proper way.’

‘But you have to have a knighthood,’ insisted Euphemia. ‘If you don’t have one I won’t be a Lady. And I want very much to be a Lady. I have always thought that I should very much like to be considered a Lady.’

It occurred to me to mention that there would perhaps be a greater chance of her being considered a Lady if the gossips in the locality were not aware of her having been regularly rogered by the red-headed under gardener.

During a short pause in the conversation I took courage into my hands (the malmsey now having been well supplemented by the Brandy) to bring up the question of our bill.

‘I know you won’t mind my mentioning this,’ I said, hesitantly. ‘But I thought I ought to mention my bill for the treatment I have previously provided.’

I was intending to continue with a suggestion that payment would be appreciated but before I could get to the nub of the matter, Mistress Standorf interrupted me.

‘I’m so glad you brought that up,’ said Mistress Standorf. ‘We all wanted to say thank you to you for your treatment of both Euphemia and my husband. We appreciate that it would embarrass you for us to offer you payment, given the circumstances of our current and future relationship, but we did want to repeat that we were and are grateful for your medical services.’

This rather took me by surprise. I opened my mouth to respond but could not think of anything worthwhile to say and so I shut it again.

The Vicar’s Wife then suggested that we all play whist.

We played for several hours and I went home seven shillings and six pence the lighter; a sum which I could well afford not to be without.

Both the Vicar and his Wife cheated. Neither of them bothered to hide the fact that they were shigging. I suspect we played with a deck which contained six aces but none of this abundance ever managed to find their way into my hands.

Afterwards I walked back to the Peacock Inn.

It was by now raining heavily.

Still, if I die of the Pneumonia my problems will all be solved.

August 11th

English villages used to have a very good way of telling whether a woman was a witch or not. They would put the accused woman into a ducking stool and duck her, complete with Chair, into the village pond. If the accused woman drowned it was clear that she was innocent. If she did not drown she was a witch and they would burn her at the stake. It was all good fun for villagers looking for entertainment on a Saturday afternoon, though it probably wasn't quite so much fun for the accused woman.

It had long been accepted as an essential precept of the English legal system that an accused person should be considered guilty until proven innocent. Indeed, this way of administering justice was common all over Europe in the Middle Ages. So, for example, in the village of Saint-Severe in France, founded in the 7th century and subsequently famous for hosting a visit from Joan of Arc, the locals had their own unique way of administering justice. They used to hang the accused first and hold the trial afterwards. If the prisoner was found guilty, much time was saved because they had already been hung and probably buried too. On the other hand, if the prisoner was innocent, the ones who had done the hanging would apologise to the relatives and everyone would feel a bit bad about things for a day or two.

We in England are now civilised and do not administer justice in this way these days. I do not know about the French for they are without doubt a more primitive people. But we do celebrate our traditional way of life with a great number of traditional events which had the origins in the arcane backwaters of our legal system. So, for example, we in Muckleberry Peverell celebrate 'Fire Test Friday' once a year. This is a curious celebration which consists of tying a woman to a branch on a tree and lighting a bonfire underneath her. The woman's wrists are tied with rope and the rope tied to the branch above the fire. It is surprising just how many traditional customs involve either fire or water.

Much of the entertainment comes from watching the woman wriggle and twist as the flames and smoke rise higher and higher. (I have to say, by the way, that this event appears to have been misnamed at some stage in its career for these days it is always held on a Saturday.)

Traditionally, Fire Test Friday was our village's equivalent of dipping a suspected witch into the village pond.

The woman who was tied to the tree was being tested and there were only two possible results. If she was burned to Death, or died of the smoke she inhaled, the conclusion was that she was innocent of all the charge laid against her. But if, when the fire went out, she was still alive then the conclusion was that she was clearly a witch. In such a case the woman would be cut down, tied to the stake and burnt alive.

I suppose the system might now appear to have flaws, but in its day it was regarded as a fair and reasonable way to deal with a very real problem. After all, no one likes having a witch living in the village.

Naturally, we no longer use such an archaic process to decide whether or not women are witches, but the event is remembered still and is a day much enjoyed by locals and by villagers from round and about.

The selection process used to choose the volunteer who will be tied to the tree is very simple. The volunteer, always an unmarried woman in her thirties, is selected by a voting system in which only women are allowed to vote. Any woman can put down a candidate's name and it has been said, though never proven, that women sometimes use the event as a way to get back at a rival or to soothe a grudge.

This is the only time in the year when women are allowed to vote for anything and whenever feisty women claim they should be allowed to vote in parliamentary elections, we always point to Fire Test Friday as proof that, in our part of the world at least, women are already allowed a vote in the way things are done.

Moreover, since there are regular complaints of rigged voting, bullying, vindictiveness and downright cheating, this event is often used as a damned good reason for not allowing women to vote in any other form of election.

It was Fire Test Friday today and a woman volunteer was duly selected and tied to the oak tree which we've been using for the test for around three hundred years. One side of the tree has been badly scorched where bonfires have been lit but there is still a large branch, around twenty feet from the ground, which is sturdy enough to be utilised.

For a few decades now, it has been traditional for the volunteer (known on the day as Mistress Fire Test) to be given as much gin as she wants to drink before the event begins. This is done partly to numb her, and thereby provide some protection from burns, and partly so that she can piss onto the flames from time to time if she feels the heat is getting too much for her. The pissing is regarded as one of the highlights of the event and three years ago a woman called Flora Pickleworth managed to put out the fire completely with a sustained burst of pissing that won her a hearty round of applause and a beating from a group of aggrieved citizens. (The fire was restarted and when Miss Pickleworth was cut down she was found to be dead. No one ever really knew why she had died because when Dr Challot and I examined her we found that she was only burnt on the legs and slightly singed above the waist. Miss Pickleworth, an unpopular figure of Scottish ancestry was quickly buried and no more was said about it.)

This year's Mistress Fire Test had been hanging over the fire for nearly twenty five minutes when it was decided to cut her down. She hadn't been squealing much and most of the crowd were bored and wanted to get to their favourite Inn. So Egbert Merrydew, one of the farm lads from Shore-end Farm, shinned up the oak and used his pocket knife to cut the rope holding her to the branch. He came down the tree and we all tottered off to the Inn to continue the celebrations. The Potbury Arms always serves whitebait in jelly and brandy sauce on Fire Test Friday and no one who has ever tasted whitebait in jelly and brandy sauce wants to be late for that.

If you were being picky you could possibly criticise us a little bit for not checking that the damned woman had been able to extricate herself from the fire but any such criticism would be entirely unjustified since having been drinking beer and cyder all afternoon, we were all well anointed with Alcohol. Besides, that's all smoke up the chimney, as they say, and the fact is that after noting that this year's Mistress Fire Test (Miss Tabetha Walton) had safely fallen from the tree, and was almost not in the fire itself, we all hurried off to the Potbury Arms.

Unfortunately, the damned woman was never the brightest star in the sky and she was so sizzled with the two pints of free gin she'd drunk that she didn't move after she'd fallen but just lay there with the whole of one leg still in the fire. By then the fire had pretty well died down and there weren't any flames, as such, just a pile of red hot embers. Still, there is no denying that a limb on hot embers can suffer a goodly amount of damage.

It wasn't until three or four hours later that anyone noticed that Mistress Fire Test was missing from the celebrations. Indeed, we only noticed her absence because at that stage in the proceedings it is customary for Mistress Fire Test to be stripped naked, covered in honey, made to run through the streets carrying a string of pork sausages and finally thrown into the village pond. There's nothing malevolent in any of this, of course, and sending the victim running through the bee hives in Mr Turner's orchard is no longer part of the day, having been abandoned when two women were stung to Death. (The local Bishop rightly said that it might be wise if that part of the event were removed from the proceedings.)

But villagers do still let loose their dogs so that they can chase the sausages. There wouldn't be much point in the sausages if the dogs weren't involved.

It was some time later that we found Mistress Fire Test still lying in what remained of the fire under the oak tree. Her leg was so badly burned that there was no alternative but to amputate it just below the hip. I therefore went back to the surgery to collect a bone saw, a chisel and a few knives.

I wasn't away more than twenty minutes but when I got back I found that a book had been set up on the outcome of the amputation with people betting on how long the amputation would take, whether Mistress Fire Test would survive the operation and, if she died, when it would be.

I was told that I wasn't allowed to bet on how long the operation might take, even though I promised not to look at my watch while I was cutting and sawing. I was however allowed to put half a guinea on her dying within three days of the operation though I was only given odds of two to one since it was generally thought that I had too much of a chance to influence the outcome of the operation and the success or otherwise of my own bet.

Unfortunately, I lost my bet because the damned woman upped and died while she was lying on a wooden Table in the snug at the Inn. I managed to take her leg off in four minutes, which was a pretty good time, but try as I might I couldn't stop the Bleeding and the wretched woman just Bled to Death.

Afterwards, I did rather wonder if it would have been better if I'd removed the limb just above the knee rather than below the hip. But I really don't think that would have made any difference. She wasn't a woman in the best of health. And to be honest she didn't have a great deal to live for so it wasn't too much of a shame.

Later the Vicar pointed out that this was the seventh Death in the last ten years of Fire Test celebrations. No one was quite sure why he made this point since there isn't anything we can do differently that would make the event any safer. As Dr Challot pointed out later, sometimes you just have to accept that life comes with chances and that unless we are all prepared to wrap ourselves up in straw and oatchaff then from time to time one of us will die a little prematurely.

August 17th

‘Why are you so gloomy?’ asked Nellie.

‘I harbour the strongest of suspicions that the Reverend Standorf and his Wife are planning to recruit me as a son-in-law,’ I confessed.

‘I had heard something of this,’ admitted Nellie. ‘Does the idea of marrying Miss Euphemia not fill you with pleasure?’

‘It does not.’

‘There has been much talk of her dalliances with a red headed under gardener,’ said Nellie. ‘Moreover, I have heard that she may be with child already.’

I looked at her and frowned.

‘You are not the father?’ she asked.

‘Good heavens, no!’

We sat in silence for a while. We were in my room at the Peacock Inn drinking port and nibbling pieces from a Plumb Pie which Nellie had taken from the kitchen.

‘Do Miss Euphemia’s parents know about your debts?’ asked Nellie suddenly.

I looked at her and frowned. ‘What debts?’

‘Your gambling debts.’

‘I don’t have any gambling debts.’

She looked at me, smiling.

‘In truth,’ I said. ‘I do not have any gambling debts.’

‘I have heard that the Reverend and Mistress Standorf had bad fortune with investments in a Railway company,’ said Nellie. ‘There was some difficulty with the company and they lost most of their money. Now they are struggling to make ends meet.’

‘How on earth do you know all that?’

‘One of the Maids in the Vicarage heard them talking. The Reverend was saying to Mistress Standorf that they would have to sell some of their land and sack some of the servants. There has even been talk of the two sons having to find work – though from what I’ve seen of them neither of them is fit for anything remunerative. They aren’t trained and I doubt if either of them could handle a plough or milk a cow.’

‘The Maid overheard them saying that?’

‘Oh yes. Like a lot of rich people they assume that their servants are deaf or stupid or both.’

‘And the Vicar is really in financial trouble?’

‘He has already started to charge parishioners who attend the Sunday services.’

‘Good heavens!’

‘It’s a penny for the morning service and a penny and a half to attend the evening service. He calls it a service charge. The Churchwardens are not happy about it.’

‘I bet they aren’t.’

‘And Mistress Standorf is not well pleased with the idea of their selling some land and getting rid of some of the servants.’

‘I bet she isn’t!’

‘So I’m guessing that they would probably not be well pleased to know that Miss Euphemia was planning to marry a penniless Doctor with large gambling debts.’

Suddenly, I saw young Nellie in a very different light. She was clearly far more intelligent than I had previously thought. It had never occurred to me that a strumpet would have such a good brain in her head.

‘You think I ought to be honest with them about my gambling debts?’

‘It would be the honourable thing to do, would it not?’

‘I think you’re right,’ I agreed. ‘Do you think my debts should be large or huge?’

‘Oh, quite huge don’t you think?’

My word, young Nellie is a bright girl.

September 7th

Hercules Tomkins, the Drummer came in and I bought yet another of his bone saws.

‘How is business?’ he asked when I’d handed over the price of the saw.

‘Not terribly good,’ I admitted. ‘To be honest, terribly bad would be closer to the mark.’

This was, of course, something of an understatement.

The truth is that Dr Challot is killing the practice. He drinks far too much and often spends all day in Bed with a couple of Whores. Dr Mort, our new Apprentice is even more useless than Dr Challot. He turns up when it suits him and will only see the patients he fancies.

‘I hear that Dr Mort spends a good deal of time in Bed with the patients,’ said Hercules.

Misplaced loyalty prevented me from commenting but I did not dispute the suggestion.

‘I see a lot of that as I travel around,’ confessed the Drummer. ‘I say it’s all down to opportunity. A luscious female Patient goes in to see the Doctor and he tells her to take her clothes off. What happens next is entirely natural if you ask me.’

‘I fear someone needs to introduce rules forbidding Doctors from making the beast with two backs with their patients,’ I said. I know I’m probably considered a bit of a stick in the mud but it seems to me that practitioners like Dr Challot and Dr Mort are giving the profession a bad name.’

‘I’ve heard they are thinking of bringing in rules,’ said the Drummer. ‘You mark my words they’ll introduce proper qualifications and registration and all the rest of it. Doctors who roger too many of their patients, especially the ones who are unwilling, will find themselves hauled before some sort of court – probably a disciplinary tribunal.’

‘Oh, I can’t see it going that far,’ I said. ‘But the authorities are bound to do something. Dr Mort, or someone like him, will sleep with a politician’s Wife and before we know it there will be rules.’

‘So, have you thought about moving away and setting up a practice of your own?’ asked the Drummer.

I admitted that I’d thought about it once or twice.

‘But I don’t have the money,’ I confessed. ‘It takes money to start a practice. I’d need a decent consulting room and unless I could buy a practice it would take some time to build up a list of patients. I have no savings and it’s pretty well all I can do to pay my bills at the Inn.’

‘You need to find yourself a little sideline, Doctor,’ suggested the Drummer.

‘What sort of thing do you mean?’

‘Oh, get yourself appointed as Private Doctor to someone well off. That’s the quickest way to make some money.’

‘No chance,’ I said, sadly. ‘Rich people always want to be treated by a Physician; they look down their long noses at people like me – apothecaries, Barber Surgeons, general practitioners.’

‘Then find yourself a nice, clever remedy that people have to buy,’ suggested the Drummer. ‘I know a Doctor in Bristol who has made himself a pretty penny out of selling an ointment for baldness.’

‘What sort of ointment?’

‘Ah, that’s the trick, you see! No one knows what’s in it. So no one can copy it. I’ve heard that it’s got 16 different ingredients in it, all mixed up in boar fat. He calls it ‘Dr Postlethwaite’s Perfect Baldness Remedy’.’

‘And what do patients do with it?’

‘They rub it on the bald spot every morning and night for six months. Dr Postlethwaite issues an instruction leaflet with every pot of ointment. I’ve seen one. The leaflet instructs users that they must rub the ointment into the scalp in a clockwise direction and that they must rub for three minutes each time.’

‘Does it work?’

‘I’ve no idea. Is it important? People believe in it – that’s all that matters. After using the ointment for six months, most men will be able to convince themselves that there’s been some hair growth. They won’t want to admit they’ve wasted all that time, energy and money.’

‘But what happens if the stuff doesn’t work?’

‘The Doctor says they probably missed an application. Or they rubbed it in anticlockwise. Or they rubbed it for two and a half minutes one day. What’s the worst that can happen? He gives them a refund.’

I told him about the little success I’d had with my remedy for restoring orgasmic ability beyond nature’s allotted allowance and explained that I now had five patients who were turning up every month for their orgasm enhancing treatment.

I did not tell him that in every case I had tried, and failed, to persuade the patient that his fears were groundless and that the suggestion that a man’s orgasms were limited was a piece of promotional nonsense thought up by a publicity seeking evangelist. In every case the patient had dismissed my reassurance and leapt at my remedy with unbridled eagerness. It seemed that patients simply preferred to accept a little discomfort, and a financial penalty, rather than take their chances. Only when they had been treated did they believe and feel the contentment they desired. If my treatment had any value then the value was, I suspected, in the mind rather than the body. But if it worked and gave comfort to those who chose to use it what harm was done? I had decided to abandon my pointless attempts to persuade prospective patients that my remedy was unnecessary.

‘What’s it called?’

I had to admit that I did not yet have a name for my remedy.

‘You need to spread your wings a bit, Doctor,’ said the Drummer. ‘You could do very well with that remedy if you took it out across the country; go up into the Midlands, maybe even travel North a way. Visit the university colleges in Oxford and Cambridge – you’ll catch a few of the young Bloods there and they’re rolling in money.’

‘Good heavens! I hadn’t thought of that. Do you think there’d be a market outside Muckleberry Peverell?’

‘I’ll be a sailor’s foreskin if there isn’t, Doctor!’

‘But how would I find new patients? There’s no point in just my wandering up to Birmingham or Manchester and just expecting people to find me.’

‘Give some lectures,’ suggested the Drummer immediately. ‘There are Town Halls and Institutes all over the country just crying out for speakers. And once you’re down to give a speech, the local press will want to interview you. You rent a room in the biggest hotel in the region, the Railway Hotel by preference and for convenience, and when you are interviewed you make it known that you’ll be there for a day or two and that patients who want to avail themselves of your treatment simply have to turn up at the hotel. You can always have some bills printed and maybe a few posters.’

I was so pleased with all the helpful advice he’d given that I bought one of his company’s newly patented Superior Bone Saw Cleaning Brushes, specially designed for removing bits of bone from the teeth of the saw and preventing clogging. I now have quite a collection of these brushes.

‘You won’t regret the purchase for an instant,’ said Hercules when I’d paid him for the saw and the Superior Bone Saw Cleaning Brush. ‘And good luck with your promotional travels.’ He paused for a moment. ‘If you will forgive the impertinence I recommend you find a name for your remedy. Something like Dr Bullock’s Stiffness Enhancing Remedy. And try to find a celebrity who’ll give you an endorsement which you can put on your promotional leaflets.’ He thought for a moment. ‘I don’t suppose you’d consider changing your name, would you?’

‘What to?’

‘Dr Bollock’s Stiffness Enhancing Remedy has a more rounded ring to it, don’t you think?’

I told him I’d think about it which indeed I will.

And I shall talk to Nellie before making a decision. She appears to me to have a stout intelligence and a fiercesome clever business mind.

Moreover, I also have high hopes that her suggestion for escaping from the clutches of the Standorfs will prove fruitful.

September 19th

'Since you were last here, Euphemia has purchased a small gift for you,' said Mistress Standorf. 'As a 'thank you' for your ministrations.'

I had responded to another request to visit the Standorfs. Father, mother, daughter and I were sitting in the drawing room.

'Oh yes!' cried Euphemia. She jumped up, put her brandy glass down on a small side Table and rushed out of the room. She returned moments later clutching a very fine Meerschaum Pipe with a huge bowl in the shape of a man's head. The Pipe had a bend in it which gave it a very curious look and, judging by the colouration it had been well used by its previous owner. It occurred to me that it would not have cost the guinea that we might have expected if our bill had been paid. I had no idea of the cost of a second hand Pipe but I doubt if the market flourishes quite as successfully as, say, the market for second hand pearls or diamonds.

'Here you are, my dear!' she said, handing the Pipe to me with what I thought to be unwanted reverence. 'Smoking a Pipe will give you gravitas when you are dealing with your patients. I have seen Sir Benedict smoke a Pipe similar to this one.'

I didn't quite know what to say. I have always loathed pipe smoking, considering it smelly, messy and rather affected. The silly girl seemed to think that taking up Pipe smoking would ensure that I would be elected to the College of Physicians and that a knighthood for me and a ladyship for her would follow as a matter of course. These seemed large expectations for a Pipe.

'I have a pot of Tobacco in my study,' said the Vicar. 'I will fetch it so that you can try your new Pipe now.' He levered himself out of his Chair and disappeared.

Weakly, I thanked his retreating form.

'Now that we are to be married you must not ask any of your female patients to undress for you,' said Euphemia. 'I cannot bear the thought of you seeing pretty, young ladies in a state of dishabille. And the thought of you touching any of their intimate parts drives me quite to distraction with jealousy.'

'But…' I began.

'And if you must, really must, do this terrible thing, I insist that you promise me that you will keep your eyes firmly shut at all times when examining any woman under the age of 40!' She stood up and moved her Chair closer to mine. She placed a hand on my arm in a very proprietorial manner, as though I were a pet dog. 'You will promise me, won't you?'

I was saved from all this nonsense by the return of the Vicar. He was clutching a large, red pot labelled 'Tobacco'. He put the pot beside me and removed the lid. The smell of the contents made me nauseous. 'Are you having a pipeful?' I asked him. It was only when I'd asked the question that I realised that Euphemia had used the 'married' word when she'd spoken to me.

'Oh good heavens, no,' the Vicar replied, rather sternly. 'I don't take Tobacco. It's a sin in the eyes of God. And I take a small potation of Alcohol only in sociable quantities. I keep the Tobacco for sinners who may feel the need.'

He pointed to the mantelpiece where there was a pot filled with twisted paper spills. It occurred to me, not for the first time, that if you were looking for a companion for an evening of high spirited entertainment, the Reverend Standorf would have been fairly low down on the list of recommended possibilities. I wondered if he had always been such a dreary fellow.

Egged on by both Euphemia and her father, I filled the huge bowl of the Meerschaum with Tobacco, lit a spill from the log fire in the grate and attempted to set fire to the Tobacco in the pipe's bowl. My efforts caused some amusement for it was clear that I was not an experienced Pipe smoker. Eventually, after burning up three spills, I succeeded in the endeavour and immediately found myself wreathed in the foulest smelling smoke it has ever been my misfortune to encounter.

'I'm told it is the best Virginian,' said the Vicar, nodding approvingly as the smoke rose. I sucked at the stem of the Pipe and coughed. It was a struggle to prevent the contents of my stomach from leaving home.

'It's very rich,' I managed to say.

'It will no doubt take a little practice,' said the Vicar. 'But I think that Euphemia is correct in thinking that a good Pipe will give you gravitas.'

Not knowing what to say, I alternately sucked at the Pipe and coughed for a few minutes. It seemed a heavy price to pay for a little unwanted gravitas.

'The Bishop of Fulham is coming for the weekend in a month's time,' said Mistress Standorf suddenly. 'I know you'll be delighted to hear that he's agreed to officiate at the wedding.'

'The wedding?'

'It is a great privilege and an honour to be married by a Bishop,' said Mistress Standorf. 'Though the Reverend

Standorf will assist, of course.’

‘Isn’t it exciting, my darling?’ said Euphemia. She leant closer and put her head on my shoulder. She breathed in the Tobacco smoke and seemed to enjoy the taste of it. I found myself wondering if the red-headed gardener was a Pipe smoker.

‘You two love birds must get together and plan the wedding,’ said Mistress Standorf. ‘Though I will be only too pleased to help in any way you think fit.’

‘Do you not think we should wait a while?’ I suggested. ‘To get to know each other a little better?’

‘Oh good heavens no,’ said Mistress Standorf. ‘You don’t want a long engagement.’

It occurred to me that if Euphemia was already expecting her first child, the family would not want to wait until the baby was showing. I was now, more than ever, convinced that Mistress Swain’s information was almost certainly accurate.

‘Do you have a house big enough for a family?’ asked the Vicar.

‘I’m sure the Doctor has a splendid house,’ said Mistress Standorf.

‘How many staff do you have?’ asked the Vicar. ‘And stables? How many horses do you keep? Euphemia will need a coach of her own, of course.’

‘To begin with one lady’s Maid will be sufficient,’ said Mistress Standorf. ‘But when your family starts to grow there will be a need for nannies. I have heard of a woman in the village who will make a splendid wet nurse.’

‘I have a modest room at the Peacock Inn,’ I said. I seemed to remember having mentioned this before. I had the impression that no one in the family heard anything they didn’t want to hear.

‘Oh how romantic!’ said Euphemia, laughing nervously and, I thought, rather hysterically. She actually clapped her hands in what was, I think, intended to display delight.

‘Good heavens!’ said the Vicar.

‘Oh, I don’t think that would be entirely suitable,’ said Mistress Standorf. ‘You could perhaps both live here in the Vicarage for a month or two while you find a suitable home. The Reverend Standorf could perhaps arrange for you to speak to his bankers about a loan. Do you have substantial savings?’

‘I’m afraid I have no savings whatsoever,’ I said. ‘I have only just started to earn a living. As an Apprentice I was not highly paid, though I did have my board and lodgings provided.’

‘And your family?’ said Mistress Standorf. ‘Do they not have money?’

‘My parents are both dead,’ I replied. ‘And my father used the last of his savings to pay for my Apprenticeship with Dr Challot. He was, I fear, not a wealthy man.’

There was an uncomfortable silence for a while. The Reverend Standorf looked at his wife, his Wife looked at their Daughter and Euphemia took a sudden interest in the pattern on the carpet. I began to feel that there might, after all, be some hope ahead.

‘I expect to clear my gambling debts within a couple of years,’ I lied, remembering what Nellie had suggested.

‘Your gambling debts?’ said Mistress Standorf. She sounded shocked.

‘I had terribly bad luck at the tables,’ I said. ‘And foolishly I tried to recoup my losses at the races. Sadly, the horses I selected all seemed to be essentially sedentary animals.’

‘How much do you owe?’

‘Oh, I don’t think it’s much above £1,000,’ I said cheerily. ‘Though, of course, the interest keeps mounting because I’ve been having difficulty paying off the debt.’

There was silence.

‘I will have to ask you to pray for my boots,’ I said in an attempt to lighten the mood.

They all looked at me.

‘I fear their souls are in peril!’ I said. I lifted a boot in the air and, with my fingers, showed where the sole had parted company from the remainder of the boot. It appeared that the Highwayman had bought his boots for looks rather than sturdiness. Still, he probably did more riding and less walking.

No one laughed at my small jest.

‘To whom do you owe this money?’ asked the Reverend Standorf sternly.

‘Oh just fellows here and there,’ I said dismissively. ‘Sadly, I fear, they are the sort of fellows who wager a good deal in a professional way and who are not generously disposed to those who are unable to pay their debts.’ I shrugged. ‘Fortune has not been kind to me and chance has not been my friend though fortunately my creditors have refrained from expressing their dissatisfactions in the usual way on the grounds that without my hands I would be unable to earn a living and therefore unlikely to be able to repay them.’

‘Oh!’ cried Euphemia, who looked as though she would like to faint but was refraining from doing so lest she miss the next instalment of what had clearly become something of a horror story.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Mistress Standorf. ‘How do your creditors usually ‘express their dissatisfaction’?’

‘Usually by breaking a bone or two,’ I explained. ‘But sometimes they are known to chop off a hand or a foot. Unfortunately, the world into which I have strayed is populated by men who are unforgiving, impatient and violent. I have found, to my cost, that the three do not sit well together. When they attempt to recover monies owed to them they refer to it as ‘putting on the bite’.’ The Reverend Standorf looked at his Wife again. She looked at Euphemia who had given up on the carpet and was now directing her gaze at a piece of wallpaper to the left of the fireplace.

‘Of course, if you felt able to pay off the debts for me I would hope to be able to pay you back over the next few years,’ I said.

The Reverend Standorf could not have looked more shocked if I had suggested that we all disrobe so that we could play naked leap frog on the drawing room carpet.

‘Oh, I think not, sir. I think not!’ he replied. ‘That would not be possible at all.’

‘I understand, sir,’ I said, standing. ‘Then I will take my leave of you.’ I held my new Pipe out to Euphemia. ‘Should I return this to you?’

‘Oh no,’ she replied, very coldly. ‘You may keep it as a souvenir of something beautiful which might have been.’ I had feared that there might be tears. But tears, it seemed, were not in her repertoire. She looked at me as though I were something a horse had dropped.

‘I shall cherish it,’ I replied, putting the Pipe away into my jacket pocket.

Less than five minutes later I was walking home in the moonlight.

It was a mizzly, drizzly sort of night, with the mizzle and the drizzle turning to pikels but I didn’t give a damn. An owl hooted as I strode along back to the Peacock Inn.

‘And up yours too!’ I cried merrily.

Moments later I felt a hot feeling in my side and discovered that the damned Pipe had set fire to my coat. I bent down and splashed water onto my coat from a puddle. I took out the Pipe and threw it into a bush.

Even this mild discomfort and inconvenience was not enough to dampen my spirits. I was delighted to have managed a skilful escape from a dangerous position.

I felt like dancing and found that I could hardly wait to tell Nellie the good news of how well her simple plan had worked.

October 1st

My relationship with Nellie has taken a turn for the better and last night one thing led to the other.

October 4th

Today was Trundling Day.

The origins of this custom are lost in impenetrable pagan mists but Trundling Day always takes place on the day after the second dry day of the month, the dryness of the days being defined by the Trundling Major who is elected every year by his predecessor. This year's Trundling Major, Edgar Bloted Esquire, is 83-years-old, blind, deaf and incapable of coherent conversation. His election was intended as a joke.

The rules are simple. Young, single men between the ages 25 and 30 must take a wooden wheelbarrow and push it through the streets as rapidly as they can. All unmarried women over the age of 25 must stand outside their homes in their best and most comely attire. As each barrow Trundles past, the attendant spinsters must attempt to leap in while the barrow is moving. If a spinster fails in her attempt, or falls out of the barrow, she is not allowed a second attempt. It is considered exceedingly bad form for a Trundler to deliberately tip a Maiden out of his barrow.

Once a spinster has succeeded in her endeavours to board a barrow, the young man behind the handles must Trundle his barrow and contents to the milestone next to the gate into the top field at Huckberry Farm. With the woman still in the barrow, the young man pauses, stands in front of his passenger and says: 'Thou wilt be my Maiden.' He plucks a bundle of grass from the verge and uses this to make the barrow more comfortable by stuffing the vegetation beneath the Maiden's posterior. The spinster does not have to speak though it is customary for there to be some blushing and murmurings of assent, and not a little wriggling, sometimes rather more than is required, as the grass is pushed into place. The Trundler then pushes the barrow to the Church where the Maiden clambers out of the barrow and the now 'engaged' couple go into their Church where they promise to plight their troth.

The 'engagements' and the 'troth plighting' are supposed to be light hearted but the event is usually taken seriously by many young folk. Inevitably, one of the parties will take the whole thing more seriously than it was intended. Three years ago, a Trundler was shot by the father of a spurned Maiden who claimed that she believed she was truly engaged to be married.

In recent years there have been many accusations of cheating, with stories being told of Trundlers pausing outside the homes of favoured Maidens in order to simplify their entry into the barrow.

To stop this happening, roving judges called Prosecutors wander the streets checking to make sure that there is no underhanded behaviour. Two years ago, a local newspaper called *The Intelligence and Visitor* reported that a Trundler had been seen helping a selected spinster into his barrow. Attempts were made to annul the 'engagement' though both parties had rather jumped the gun and the Trundler claimed that he had to help the spinster involved because she was so well endowed with child that she had difficulty in clambering into the barrow.

October 7th

My former fiancée Miss Euphemia Standorf has recovered well from the breach in our engagement.

It seems that on Saturday next she is to marry Canon Cuthbert Fazackerly at the Cathedral in Winchester. Canon Fazackerly, who is a Prebendary at the Cathedral, is as, as fashion seems to dictate among the wealthy, as fat as a pig. Queen Victoria's predecessor, George IV 1820-30, was so fat his belly reached his knees when he removed his stays and this is still regarded as a worthy aspiration among the obscenely wealthy who are clearly believers in the survival of the fattest.

Canon Fazackerly has £500 a year from stocks and £12,000 in gilts. He is reputed to own at least one square mile of farmland in England and to be the Laird of 20 square miles of Scotland where a Laird is ranked below a Baron but above a Gentleman. The fortunate Canon also has great expectations since his uncle is an Earl with vast estates and a failing heart.

Nellie, who provided me with all this information, also reported that Canon Fazackerly has settled £100 a year on his bride-to-be for pin money. It is widely believed that he will be a father before he expects and it is to be hoped that his skills at arithmetic are too poor for him to draw conclusions about the child's ancestry. Nellie told me that the Canon is a renowned trencherman who is reputed to eat 19 eggs for breakfast every morning. When he was asked why he ate 19 eggs every morning he apparently replied, rather indignantly: 'What, would you have me eat 20 and be condemned as a glutton?'

Miss Standorf will not become a lady just yet (something already way beyond her reach I fear) but she will become rich. And when the Earl dies and the Canon inherits the title, she will become a Countess.

I have no idea how the Standorfs managed to arrange this marriage but some nifty footwork must have been involved.

October 9th

I received confirmation that the Government has plans to introduce some form of registration for all medical practitioners. My initial fears were assuaged when I discovered that all existing practitioners will be allowed to have free registration for life.

Dr Challot went a whiter shade of pale when I told him about the plans. He hates change of any kind and claims that betterment is never a good thing. 'Betterment invariably makes my life more complicated, takes away my rights or costs me money or all three,' he has declared more than once.

'You young whippersnappers get upset when we old folk gripe and criticise as though we know it all but that's because we bloody well do know it all,' said Dr Challot, who is ageing by the day and now looks to be about 106 though I believe he is rather younger than this. 'People forget that we've seen everything twice. You young folk don't understand why we get irritated when idiots come up with hare-brained solutions to problems that don't exist. You may call it intolerance but I call it good sense.'

I pointed out that although a register was to be introduced for Doctors he would have no problems and that, as a practising Apothecary, he would automatically be registered.

'We older folk can see problems arising before they arise,' he continued, not listening to me. 'We've seen the problems all before. When you're young you don't know how badly things can get buggered up. You don't realise that your horse will be lame just when you need it most. You don't know that the smiling banker is likely to be a crook who will steal everything you have. It's why we worry so much. You wait and see, you'll be the same when you're my age. They'll bring in these rules and regulations and before we know where we are it will be illegal for a doctor to roger a patient. And where will we be then, I ask you?'

'I've often worried why old people worry so much,' I confessed.

'We have seen a good deal,' he replied. 'We know how easily things can go wrong and we know how crooked people can be.'

There didn't seem to be anything worthwhile to say to that. It made old age appear rather depressing and I suddenly felt engaged by sadness for it seems that old age must come to all who are fortunate enough to avoid the alternative.

'I'm full up with problems,' Dr Challot sighed, with a dismissive wave of a hand. 'I've had enough. I don't have room for any more.'

I tried again. 'But you have nothing to worry about. You will be legally entitled to register as a Doctor,' I said again.

But Dr Challot wasn't listening. He was too busy emptying a bottle of port wine into his belly.

October 11th

Last Tuesday, Tobias Blomfield, a dray driver with six children and a relative of our Constable Blomfield, was found guilty of stealing three medium sized potatoes from one of Farmer Jessop’s fields.

Blomfield is a simpleton (it is a surprise to me that he has succeeded in fathering six children though it has to be said that none of them looks anything like him) and although the churchwarden and three other good minded fellows begged for leniency, Jessop would hear nothing of it, demanding that the sad miscreant be properly published as a lesson to himself and to others. A lesson to others it may be but it will certainly not be a lesson to Blomfield. By the time he is punished he will have forgotten why and within an hour of the punishment he will have forgotten that it took place at all.

Jessop likes to consider himself a gentleman farmer but though he is a farmer he is no gentleman. He is, rather, the craftiest fellow in the county. Last spring he organised a ploughing competition and put up notices inviting men to bring hand-ploughs and to demonstrate how fast they could plough a straight furrow. Each man was told to pay a tuppence entry fee. There was promise of a half a guinea prize for the winner. Eventually, 97 men turned up to compete and Jessop had to make three large fields available for ploughing. I remember leaning on a fence watching the competition with Ebenezer Wentwhistle, a former farm labourer who is well into his eighth decade.

‘What’s 97 tuppences come to?’ he asked me.

I found a piece of paper and a pencil.

‘194 pence,’ I told him, forty minutes later.

‘And how many pence in half a guinea?’

That did not take so long. ‘126,’ I replied in due course.

There was a long silence.

‘Am I right in thinking that 194 is a bigger number than 126?’

‘It is.’

I found an unused corner of my piece of paper.

‘It is bigger by 68,’ I told him.

There was another long silence.

‘So Jessop made 68 pence profit,’ said Ebenezer. ‘And got his three largest fields ploughed for free.’

I remember we stood for a while contemplating this and trying to decide (unsuccessfully) whether Jessop was a mean-spirited, grasping bastard to be derided or a brilliant businessman to be admired.

It was, perhaps, hardly a surprise that Jessop insisted that the luckless Blomfield be severely punished for his crime.

And so Jessop, who is also the magistrate, has sentenced Blomfield, who was born a wretch and who will doubtless die a wretch, to be tied to the end of a cart and whipped through the streets by an official hangman.

Once or twice in the past we’ve used the whipper in from the hunt for this work but it has never been a really satisfactory solution. There were a couple of cases where the whipping was desultory to say the least. The only official hangman who is available is a fellow from Exeter called Baker. The magistrate has sent him the travelling money and he will be here in three days’ time.

October 14th

Mr Trench, the official hangman, came up to Muckleberry Peverell on the coach. By the time he arrived, a collection had raised one pound four shillings and sixpence as a bonus for the hangman if he whipped Blomfield hard until he yelped.

Mr Youngblood of the Peackcock Inn started the fund with a ten shilling donation.

'I have nothing against the hapless Blomfield,' he told me, when I protested. 'This is simply business.'

Mr Youngblood is doubtless hoping that the prospect of a good whipping will bring in good crowds and promote a healthy thirst among those in attendance.

We had a very disappointing whipping through last year when Oliver Curtis was found guilty of stealing two Turnips from one of Herbert Norris's fields. No one in the village remembered to give the hangman a bonus before he did his work and the whipping was midway between half-hearted and disinterested. There was very little squealing or shouting and no crying or sobbing or begging for mercy and, therefore, not much in the way of entertainment. Mr Youngblood, the Publican, was fair furious. He had bought in four extra barrels of beer but sales were worse than middling as spectators drifted away from a very disappointing event.

Fortunately for Mr Youngblood, the whipping of Blomfield went very well.

The hangman had brought his own whip, an impressive eight feet of Blood hardened leather with knots every foot and scarring hooks at the end. Poor Blomfield squealed and yelled and when the whipping was over there was plenty of Blood dripping from the hangman's whip.

Afterwards, Blomfield was given a rousing ovation and as much free beer as he could drink. He was well pleased.

When I was called to the Inn I assumed that Blomfield needed treatment for his back. However, the star of the show was standing at the bar enjoying his free beer and signing an autograph for Osbert the pot boy. The stripes on his back were well clustered and the Blood on his back had clotted nicely.

'You'll have good scars,' I told him as I passed by.

'Do you think so?' he asked, proudly raising his tankard in salute. 'Thank you, Doctor!'

He would, I suspected, earn free beer and pies for the rest of his life by showing his scarred back to visitors. He is fortunate in that Ebenezer Williams, the only other local man to have good whip scars, died three months earlier. He'd lived well for twelve years on the consequences of stealing a chicken.

I'd been called not to see Blomfield but to see Trench, the hangman, who was sitting in a corner nursing a very sore arm and looking very sorry for himself.

He told me his painful elbow was a recurrent problem. I'd never before seen a case of whipper's elbow but I had read about the condition in a copy of *The Provincial Medical and Surgical Journal*.

Trench told me that the muscles of his forearm were sore and I found a very tender spot on the outside of his elbow. He yelped so loudly when I touched it that everyone in the bar turned round to look. When they saw that it was the hangman who was yelping, there was a considerable amount of good hearted jeering.

'Have you had this before?' I asked.

He nodded. 'It comes on every time I do a good whipping.'

'Have you considered retiring from the whipping business?' I asked.

He shook his head sadly. 'It's impossible to make a decent living out of hangings these days,' he complained. 'People being hanged used to give a decent tip to make a clean job of it but nowadays we have a much rougher class of clientele and they never tip.' He pursed his lips thoughtfully. 'Can't remember when I last had a decent tip,' he complained. 'Last fellow gave me a tanner and handed it over as though it were a golden guinea.'

'You've got whipper's elbow,' I told him.

'I know it,' he confessed. 'All the fellows in my line of business suffer from it. What can you do for me? A Poultice usually does the trick.'

I told him I would fetch him a medicated linseed Poultice with a tincture of woodlice. 'Would you like it on chamois leather, silk or sheepskin?'

'Whichever is the cheapest,' said the hangman miserably.

I went back to the surgery, found an old linseed soaked sheepskin Poultice and replenished it with a mixture of lead oxide, olive oil and water to which I added a pinch of ground orange peel and nutmeg, in addition to the tincture of woodlice. It's a good mixture, solid when cold but flexible at body temperature.

'How much do I owe you?' asked the hangman, when I'd finished tying the Poultice in place with a yard of linen bandage.

'A guinea,' I told him. 'But you can take the used Poultice off in a week's time and if you take it to a local Apothecary he'll give you two shillings for it.'

The hangman opened his purse and handed over a guinea.

I did not feel troubled by the knowledge that he had paid over most of the bonus he had been paid but I told Mr Youngblood to give him a pint of mead and to put the cost onto my account.

Immediately afterwards I regretted this act of generosity.

October 15th

This morning, Mistress Prout, the owner of a large cottage in Largepuddle Lane, sent her Maid to demand my immediate attendance at her residence. Mistress Pearl Prout treats everyone in Muckleberry Peverell as a serf and her rudeness is quite legendary.

'What is the matter with her?' I enquired of the Maid.

'A man has fallen off the roof,' replied the Maid, as though this were an everyday occurrence.

It turned out that the man who had fallen was Mr Phineas Larkin, a thatcher.

When I arrived at Mistress Prout's cottage, I found Mr Larkin, the poor sod, lying on the ground motionless.

Mr Larkin claims to be 93-years-old (though his mother is still alive and so this may be something of an exaggeration) and he is known as something of a character. He says he fought at the Battle of Waterloo where he lost two fingers and an assortment of toes to the gangrene. He once showed me a shrivelled object, now quite unrecognisable, which he swore had been a French officer's foot. He claimed, quite without regret or shame, that he had chopped off the foot and kept it as a souvenir after stealing the fellow's boots and greatcoat. 'He had no further need for the foot, the boots or the coat,' he explained.

'The thoughtless bastard is dead,' said Mistress Prout, who was fetched by the Maid when the two of us arrived at her cottage. 'Now I shall have to wait a month to find another thatcher to finish the job.'

We were discussing the difficulty of finding good thatchers, when Mr Larkin suddenly came to. He sat up, shook his head and, without a word, climbed up his ladder and resumed working on the cottage roof.

'That will be half a guinea,' I said to Mistress Prout.

'What for?'

'You sent for me and I am here,' I replied.

'You have done nothing!' retorted Mistress Prout. 'I have no intention of paying you a farthing.'

Just then, a fellow turned up carrying a large sack on his back. The poor fellow looked exhausted and dropped the sack to the ground with a great sigh.

'Ah, I bought a peck of potatoes and a bushel of peas from a farmer at Kenstone Market,' she said, turning away from me and towards the carrier. She opened the sack to check that the potatoes were in good order, and reached into a pocket in her skirt and took out a half-groat piece. She made a move as though to give the man the half-groat before pulling back her hand and returning the coin to her pocket.

'I'll give you this when you come back with the peas,' she promised, though I know her well and she is a woman who is far richer in promises than in deeds.

The man, paused as he watched the tuppence disappear, then turned and started to trudge back to whence he had come.

'I paid a shilling for the potatoes and the peas,' Mistress Prout explained. She seemed very pleased with herself. 'The fellow doesn't have a cart or a horse and uses that dullard as his donkey. He's had to carry that sack eight miles and now he's got to walk eight miles back and then do it all again.'

'The poor man looks exhausted,' I commented. 'You didn't even offer him a glass of water.'

Mistress Prout looked me up and down and sniffed. 'There is a stream along the side of the road.'

'You owe me half a guinea,' I said.

'I'm not paying you half a guinea! You have done nothing.'

'You sent for me to attend the thatcher!'

'You did nothing. He has recovered and is back at his work.' We both looked up at the roof where Mr Larkin was busy at his thatching. He seemed none the worse for his experience.

'Doesn't make a difference,' I said. 'You called me out and you must pay. If I'd had to provide any treatment it would have cost you more.'

'Why should I pay you anything? It wasn't me who fell off the roof.'

'Then the next time you send for me I shall not come,' I told her, and turned on my heel. 'Not even if you are dying,' I added.

'Wait!' cried Mistress Prout, alarmed by my threat. 'I'll pay you five shillings.'

We settled on seven shillings and sixpence which she took out of her pocket and counted out, mostly in sixpences.

As I walked back to the surgery, I passed the labourer trudging back home to fetch the other sack of peas. I stopped and gave him three groats and told him to buy a pint of ale and a pie at the Peacock Inn. The poor fellow was pitifully grateful.

Since I provided no treatment I do not think I shall tell Dr Challot about my visit to Mistress Prout. There will, therefore, be no need to mention the seven shillings and sixpence.

October 19th

Dr Mort deigned to come into the surgery this morning.

He was wearing a blue dress coat with a black velvet collar and matching cuffs. Underneath the coat he wore a silk patterned waistcoat with large blood stones as buttons and underneath that a lace frilled, embroidered shirt. Pinned to the lapel of the jacket was a small bouquet of miniature roses. He had a lace trimmed handkerchief half tucked into his sleeve and wore a beaver hat and a pair of black dancing pumps with white buck's skin breeches and white stockings.

I complimented him on his jacket and mischievously remarked that I had seen one or two similar garments on men travelling through Muckleberry Peverell. 'It must be a very fashionable style and colour in this area,' I commented.

Dr Mort went as white as a summer cloud. 'Fashionable here?' he said, clearly horrified. He looked as though he were about to cry.

'They looked to be wearing identical garments,' I told him. 'Indeed, their whole look was very similar. White breeches, patterned waistcoats and each had a bunch of roses as decoration. I think they were Drummers.'

'Fashion is out-of-date as soon as it is popular and recognisable,' said Dr Mort, full of dismay and fierce-some offended. He looked down at his jacket and fingered the lapels as though he had never properly examined them before. It occurred to me that it must be quite tiresome to live in a world where one was constantly searching for something to which one could take offence.

'There were two of them, you say, in jackets similar to mine? Here? In Muckleberry Peverell?'

'I would say they were identical rather than similar.'

Mort sat down and was so distressed by what I had told him that he did not even flick at the seat of the Chair with his handkerchief. He looked down at his coat and waistcoat as though he would have liked to tear them off and discard them.

'People in London would laugh if they knew,' said Mort softly. I have noticed that he worries a great deal about what people think of him and even more about what they say about him. The poor mutt seems to exist in a constant state of torment.

Since we had not seen Dr Mort for a week or so I asked him where he had been hiding.

'I have been attending to my work-life balance,' he said sternly. 'I had allowed the balance to drift too much in the direction of work. That is not healthy for the mind.'

I stared at him in astonishment.

'Work is an appalling nuisance,' he said. 'A friend of mine is training to be a barrister. The week before last he worked for two days in succession!' He said this as though it had been an imposition beyond a normal man's endurance. 'On Monday last, I came into a little money from an aunt. It was little more than a pittance but it needed to be spent.'

'Do you never save any money?' I asked him.

He looked at me as though I were mad. 'Money is the root of evil and causes much pain. It's essential for a healthy soul to get rid of it as quickly as possible. I see no virtue in saving but I do believe in spending,' he said. 'A fellow should always spend every penny he can lay his hands on. It is his duty. If men like me don't spend how are bootmakers, cabmen and coffee shop owners to make a living? The poor devils would starve, and their families with them. Besides, God put me here to enjoy myself and damnit that's what I intend to do. Strewth, to do otherwise would be a blasphemy and I'll not allow any man to accuse me of that particular sin.'

I was about to remonstrate with him and to point out that a career in medicine requires dedication and hard work when he announced that he did not expect to be a working man for much longer.

When I asked him what he meant, he told me that he was heavily taken with a young woman called Miss Imelda Whitestone whom he had seen at a wedding he had attended.

'I thought you were taken with that niece of the Duke of Wellington's?'

'I was,' he confessed. 'But her father threw me out of the house when he found out that I was a medical man. Apparently the Duke had an unfortunate experience with a Doctor who did something absurd to his ear and he has acquired a stern dislike of all medical practitioners. The father is terrified that if his daughter marries a medical man then the Duke will cast him off and have nothing more to do with him.'

'So you have now already replaced her with Miss Whitestone?'

'From what I recall of her, Miss Whitestone seems an agreeable person,' said Dr Mort with a nod. 'I did not see her from the frontal aspect but I recall that she has broad hips and would doubtless make a good Wife and Mother. I shall make a stroke in that direction.'

'Have you actually spoken to her?' I asked him.

‘Hardly,’ he replied with a dismissive wave of a hand. ‘It was a wedding and the place was packed with bridesmaids – all with aching voids to be filled.’ He laughed. ‘There were more cavities to be filled than can be found in a dentist’s waiting room.’

‘But did you not express your intentions to Miss Whitestone?’

Dr Mort shrugged. ‘She did not at first take my fancy for I hear she is not a comely creature and she is rather ancient for my tastes. However, she is so plain that I am persuaded that she is a virgin and clean throughout and I hear tell that she has a fortune of a clean £80,000 in Government bonds. The bonds are invested at 2 per cent which should give a nice, steady income of £1,600 a year.’

‘But if you have not spoken to her how do you know she will agree to marry you?’

Dr Mort, plainly astonished, stared at me as if I were suffering from the hatters’ disease. ‘How could she resist me?’ he demanded. ‘I am the most handsome and best dressed man I know.’

‘How old is this paragon?’

‘Quite ancient I must admit; she must be 25 if she is a day,’ he replied. ‘In view of her age, her father is bound to be desperate. He is one of those baronets who live in the shires and make their money out of farming. The whole family is ludicrously rich. Miss Whitestone inherited her fortune from an aunt who was very taken with her. I should be able to squeeze a damned good dowry out of her father to supplement her fortune. I am told that he has two spare town houses which he never uses but rents out and an additional very pleasant, unused estate in Northamptonshire which I gather he inherited from a cousin. I would be happy with either of the town houses, the tenants could easily be evicted, together with the estate which comes complete with several hundred acres of excellent hunting country.’

I stared at him in astonishment.

Mort shrugged. ‘There are two other Daughters coming up to her age and they cannot be married off until Imelda is married off and out of the house.’ He paused, thinking. ‘One of the sisters, a girl called Sophie, is a pretty little thing with charming ankles and a delicious neck. I would not in the slightest mind having her as a sister-in-law.’ He put an unnecessary amount of emphasis on the word ‘having’ so that there was no doubt about what was in his mind.

‘Why do you always assume that pretty women will fall at your feet?’ I asked.

‘Oh, they are the least trouble to seduce,’ he replied with a smirk. ‘No one ever talks to them because the ugly ones are considered easier sport, like birds with broken wings are easier to shoot. It’s a nonsense, of course. I have no doubt that Miss Whitestone is a virgin still.’

Much to his annoyance, I set Mort to work pounding foxglove leaves with a stone mortar. ‘Turn them into a good, fine powder,’ I instructed him. ‘There is no better cure for the dropsy than the foxglove.’

‘What a quaint business medicine is!’ said Mort with a snort and a giggle. ‘Who’d have thought a Doctor would treat fat ankles with a foxglove posy!’

On balance, it seems to me to be no exaggeration to say that Mort is as thick as a brick but nowhere near as useful. I would think he probably needs someone to hold his hand if he wants to cross a road. I’ve had pig’s bladders which made more sense.

As each year goes by I realise that I know and understand less and less – even though, paradoxically, I suppose I must know more. The more I learn the more I realise I don’t know anything. I suspect that young folk like Mort are brimmed with cockiness because they have no idea how much they don’t know.

November 20th

I was busy mixing up the ingredients for my suppositories when Nellie came into the room with a basket of wood for the fire.

'What are you making?' she asked.

I explained.

'How do they work?' asked Nellie with commendable curiosity. 'Is there a magic ingredient?'

I confessed that the suppositories had no active ingredients and were, therefore, entirely harmless as well as entirely useless.

'So why do men buy them?'

'The suppositories banish their fears,' I explained. She had heard about the Reverend Callwallader and instantly understood the logic of my endeavour.

'How much do you charge?'

'At least one guinea,' I replied.

'A whole guinea?' said Nellie, clearly astonished. She picked up one of the suppositories I had already prepared. 'For one of these?'

'I believe that if I charge too little the suppositories will be less effective,' I told her.

'So, maybe they would work better if you charged five guineas each.'

I thought about this. 'With some customers, maybe this is true.'

Nellie, who had clearly been joshing, looked as if she were about to keel over. 'Do you need some help in the work of making them?' she asked.

I thought for a moment. I did find the making of the suppositories a tedious business. Another pair of hands would doubtless speed things up.

We agreed that I would pay her half a groat an hour to assist in the making of more suppositories. And after a couple of hours work I realised that I would be able to leave the production of the suppositories entirely to Nellie who was competent, hard-working and, as I already knew from experience, impressively nimble fingered.

November 22nd

We have been exceptionally busy this week. On Monday morning I saw 12 patients. I then had to visit six patients in their homes. And in the evening there were another nine patients to be seen.

Unlike large towns and cities, we in Muckleberry Peverell are not yet quite overrun with wise women, bone-setters, urine healers, phrenologists and hucksters selling patent medicines. The consequence is that Dr Challot and myself are pretty much the only providers of medical services. (I discount Dr Mort for he is hardly ever to be found and when he is available he is only prepared to offer succour and comfort to healthy young women who are, I suspect, as eager for the games of ‘Doctor and patient’ that he plays as he is himself.)

At first I thought this busy time was simply an anomaly. But Tuesday was just as busy and when I arrived at the surgery on the Wednesday morning, I found that the practice was even busier, with a crowd of patients gathered outside the door. I made time to go upstairs and confront Dr Challot who was, as usual, still in Bed, comfortably snuggled between two seemingly naked trollops – neither of them tretis nor toothscome. The trio were sitting up and Dr Challot had a dish of tea in his hand.

‘I bought a practice from the Widow Blackburnt,’ he told me carelessly when I asked if he knew why we had so many patients to deal with. ‘Her late husband was an Apothecary in the village of Maidenstoke, no more than an hour and a half away by foot. He had a good practice. I paid her 50 Sovereigns to redirect his patients to me.’

‘You didn’t ask me. Or even tell me!’ I said, feeling mortally aggrieved.

‘Why should I ask you?’ retorted Dr Challot, sipping at his tea and idly and rather absent-mindedly fondling an errant jug belonging to the raven haired trollop on his left.

‘I’m a partner and I have to do most of the work!’ I retorted.

‘Junior partner!’ snapped Dr Challot. ‘And you have young Mort to help you.’

‘Mort is never here,’ I protested.

Dr Challot, a picture of indifference, merely shrugged. ‘You should get back to the patients,’ he told me. ‘When I have completed my examinations of these two patients I will be down directly to take charge.’ He reached under the blankets and one of the trollops yelped, though whether it was with surprise or delight it was impossible to tell.

Consumed with anger and feeling myself redden with what seemed to me to be well-founded fury, I left and hurried back down the stairs. But, as I stood in the doorway, I turned back to ask a final question. ‘Have you already paid the widow the 50 Sovereigns?’

Dr Challot laughed. ‘Of course not! I told her I will pay her the 50 Sovereigns in a year’s time when she has redirected enough of her husband’s patients in our direction.’

I nodded, closed the door and hurried down the stairs. There was no chance of the hapless Widow Blackburnt receiving a penny from Dr Challot. He would simply insist that he had not seen any of her husband’s patients and so did not owe her a penny.

Downstairs I set to work dealing with the patients who were waiting – most of whom were patients who had been sent to us by the Widow Blackburnt.

A man in his 40s, sporting a huge, bulbous heliotrope nose, complained of a weak leg. He told me that in the absence of Dr Blackburnt, he had seen his village wise woman who had instructed him to collect as many snails as he could find, put them into a muslin bag, crush them and rub the slime from the snails onto his weak leg.

‘Has this helped relieve the weakness?’

‘Not in the slightest,’ the fellow retorted with rare honesty. ‘But we will have a better crop of vegetables this year for there are no snails in our garden.’

‘Where does your local wise woman live?’ I asked, smiling to myself at the gullibility of the old man and the way that the ignorance of simple folk enables these silly old unscientific superstitions to live on.

‘She has the cottage next door to mine,’ said the man. ‘She is a good woman. She has kindly allowed me to collect snails from her garden.’

‘Does she have a vegetable patch?’

‘Oh yes.’

I did not say anything but found myself feeling admiration for the wise woman who had so easily cleared the neighbourhood of snails. She rather reminded me of the farmer who had his fields ploughed and was paid for the privilege.

‘Can you recommend anything other than snails?’ asked the poor dupe.

I prescribed a treacle and brimstone Poultice which will, I have no doubt, do him far more good than the crushed snails!

The next patient, a woman with complexion like watered milk complained that she was suffering from melancholy. I told her to eat plenty of cabbage and to take it with salt and honey added. I find that this remedy, which was used by the Egyptians, the Greeks and the Romans, never fails. Cabbage, honey and salt also make an exceedingly good remedy for all varieties of the colic.

It is pity that the local wise woman does not forget her snails and learn a little more about real, modern, scientific medicine. Still, I suppose that on balance it is a good thing that she does not know these things for if she did she would treat all our patients, and our practice would be a very sorry one.

November 24th

A young mother in her early 20s came in to see me carrying a baby of around 12 months. Two small toddlers followed in her wake. The woman introduced herself as Mistress Uffcomb.

'I produce too much milk and I need treatment to reduce the pressure on my glands,' she explained, after I had admired the baby and asked her what I could do for her. She unfastened her blouse and proudly pulled out a pair of hugely swollen breasts.

'Is your baby feeding well?' I asked.

'Oh yes, sir. He feeds very well. But he cannot cope with the quantities of milk I am making. I had the same problem with my other two children. It has always been both a curse and a blessing.'

'Have you tried offering yourself as a wet nurse?'

She shook her head. 'There are no requirements at the moment,' she said and paused. 'And besides,' she added, 'my husband does not like the idea of my feeding another man's babies. He is very easily aroused by jealousy.'

I nodded, though this did not make a good deal of sense.

'He is the Blacksmith in our village of Brassington-under-Wold,' added the woman. 'He is a very large man and rather short tempered.'

I nodded again, thinking that the woman was probably wise to give some considerable weight to her husband's wishes. I remembered having heard of the fellow. He had won prizes in a number of wrestling and boxing contests.

'Dr Blackburnt always used to get rid of the excess for me,' said Mistress Uffcomb. She leant forwards and lowered her voice. 'He never charged me for the treatment,' she said. 'He used to treat me once a week all the year around. He said it would keep my dumplings healthy and in good shape.' She paused and lifted up one of her breasts, fondling it as though she were at the market and it were a large, white, blue veined, exotic fruit which she was thinking of purchasing and turning into a luscious pudding. 'Dr Blackburnt said I produce most excellent milk which has a fine soft, creamy taste.'

'How exactly did Dr Blackburnt help remove the excess milk,' I asked, hardly recognising my own voice. I feared I already knew the answer to my question.

'Oh he suckled it out of me,' said Mistress Uffcomb. 'He said it was the only natural way to do it and the way least likely to do harm to the pap or the nipple.'

'He sucked the milk out of your breast?'

'Oh yes. But he was very kind. He didn't charge me a penny for the treatments. I shall miss him so very much.'

'And he did this once a week?'

'At least once a week throughout the year, sometimes more often. If they were swollen he would see me whenever it was necessary. He was fearful obliging and called my milk his ambrosia.'

I found myself trying to remember how Dr Blackburnt had expired. It seemed likely that he might well have found himself beaten to Death by a Blacksmith wielding a large Hammer. Indeed, if the Blacksmith were truly as large as Mistress Uffcomb suggested, he could have probably beaten the Apothecary to a pulp with no weapons other than his fists. I went quite cold at the thought.

'He gave you the treatments even when you did not have a child to nurse?'

'Oh yes. He said that it would be a good thing to keep the milk flowing.'

'And how long did the treatment take?'

'It usually took about half an hour or so, sometimes a little longer. I found it a very relaxing and pleasant treatment; not at all unpleasant. If she was at home, Mistress Blackburnt would bring me a dish of fresh posset to sip during the treatment. She always put a clove or two into it because she knew I liked my posset a little spicy.' She smiled at me, as though about to share a private piece of knowledge. 'Dr Blackburnt said he could always taste the cloves and spices in my milk.'

'Splendid!' I said, rather weakly, for I could not think of anything else to say.

'Shall you start my treatment now, Doctor?' asked Mistress Uffcomb. She stood up, made as though to move towards the couch and hesitated. 'Sometimes I would sit on Dr Blackburnt's lap, sometimes he knelt before me and sometimes he would lie with me on his couch. He said that was the most comfortable position for us both. I am happy with whichever you prefer.'

'Oh no, no,' I protested quickly, holding up a hand. 'I fear I cannot treat you in the way favoured by Dr Blackburnt.'

'You cannot treat me?' she cried.

'You can easily express the surplus with your fingers,' I suggested. I mimed a suitable action with my fingers.

'Oh no, that would not be at all suitable,' said Mistress Uffcomb, quite shocked. 'I would much prefer the treatment as prescribed by Dr Blackburnt.' She held out the Breast she was holding, as though it were a delicacy she was encouraging me to try. It occurred to me that the Breast appeared to be roughly the same size as the dome on St Paul's.

'It isn't possible,' I said. 'I have an indisposition to milk.'

'An indisposition to milk?' she cried, clearly disappointed.

'I fear so. Milk brings me out in a terrible rash and gives me arthritis of the knees. I shall be crippled if I drink your milk.'

'Oh.'

'I would have been deeply honoured to help you in such a way,' I said, in an attempt to soothe the woman's clear distress. 'It would have been a privilege and no burden other than for my indisposition.'

'But surely if your indisposition is to cow's milk you will not be indisposed by a mother's pure milk?'

'Any sort of milk,' I lied firmly. 'I am indisposed if I drink cow's milk, goat's milk, sheep's milk or mother's milk. Perhaps someone else here might be able to help you? Dr Challot or Dr Mort?'

Mistress Uffcomb shook her head. 'I fear not,' she said. 'I made enquiries before I came. Dr Challot is not a clean living man and Dr Mort is far too young. I should be concerned to have Dr Challot take my milk and embarrassed to allow Dr Mort to suckle me. My husband would not be happy for either of them to treat me.' She picked up her baby, called together the two infants who had sat quietly on the floor, and headed for the door.

I paused, thinking of what she had just said.

'Does your husband know how Dr Blackburnt treated you?'

'Oh yes, of course.'

'And he knew that you were coming to see me?'

'It was he who suggested I see you. He said you were neither particularly young nor good looking. He will be mortally disappointed that you cannot oblige. Indeed, he will, I know, be sorely disappointed – grievously so.'

'Maybe your husband might be able to help remove the excess milk?' I suggested, rather desperately. I was not overwhelmed with delight to know that I was considered neither young nor good looking.

Mistress Uffcomb looked quite shocked at my suggestion. 'Good heavens no, Doctor!' she said. 'He has no medical training whatsoever. He would be most incapable and I would not dream of suggesting it to him.' She paused. 'He will be very disappointed that you cannot oblige.' She paused and looked me in the eye. 'Grievously disappointed,' she repeated.

'You think he may be upset?' I asked, surprised. It seemed strange that the fellow would object to a strange baby suckling on his Wife but allow an Apothecary to do the same thing.

'Most upset,' said Mistress Uffcomb. 'He is easily distressed and he loves me very much. He knows that I suffer terribly if I am not properly treated and he hates to see me in discomfort.'

I sighed. I really did not want to incur the wrath of a champion boxer, the largest and most fierce-some Blacksmith in the region. 'Maybe I could try a small taste,' I suggested. 'Just to see how severe my indisposition might become if we persevered with the treatment.'

'That would be an excellent notion,' said Mistress Uffcomb with a smile of satisfaction. She put the baby back down on the floor.

'Perhaps, if we were to lie on the couch for the first treatment?' I suggested with a sigh.

'I think that would be an excellent place to start,' she agreed moving over to the couch and lying down. 'Would you prefer to begin with the right or the left dumpling? Dr Blackburnt always preferred the right one though he was always careful to be sure to offer each dumpling the same amount of attention.'

'I shall endeavour to do likewise,' I said as I lay down on the couch beside her.

'And there won't be a charge?' she said.

'No, no charge,' I mumbled, as one of her bloated nipples slipped easily into my mouth.

As a river of milk began to stream down my throat it occurred to me that I might not be earning any money but I would at least be saving the cost of a midday meal. Mistress Uffcomb put an arm around me and I both heard and felt her purring with satisfaction.

Suddenly, I heard a screech of laughter.

I sat up with a jolt. Mistress Swain, Dr Challot's housekeeper, was standing in the doorway.

'You should have let me know your little fancy, Doctor!' she said, pulling a droopy, flabby Breast out of her blouse and pointing it in my direction. It looked like a partially deflated balloon.

Mistress Uffcomb grabbed at me and tried to pull me back into the position I had so recently vacated.

'I am helping to relieve this young woman's engorgement,' I announced, realising as I spoke that I probably sounded rather pompous. I wiped a trickle of milk from my chin.

'I have no doubt you will next persuade her to relieve you of your own engorgement!' replied Mistress Swain, with another fierce-some cackle.

I leapt to my feet.

‘Thank you, Doctor,’ said Mistress Uffcomb, attempting to stuff her breasts back into her blouse and to button them away out of sight. It was clearly a monumental task. ‘I feel a little relieved,’ she said, as she struggled. ‘But since today’s treatment has been interrupted, I shall return at 11.00 a.m. tomorrow so that you can continue.’ And with that she was gone, her two infants following her like lambs.

‘Anytime you’re feeling peckish, just let me know!’ repeated Mistress Swain, stuffing her own paltry offering back into the dark of her grubby blouse.

I shuddered.

I shall arrange to be away attending to an emergency tomorrow at 11.00 a.m.

November 27th

Last Tuesday I was called to the local court-house to confirm that a man who had been hung for stealing half a sheep was dead and in a fit state to be buried. (His colleague in crime, who had apparently taken the other half of the sheep, was still at large.)

‘We can’t bury the fellow without a piece of paper signed by a medical person such as yourself,’ said the hangman, a cockalorum who was clearly more than slightly peeved by what he clearly considered a slur on his own determinational abilities. He was a short, stout fellow with generous dewlaps and wattles and the ruddy nose and cheeks of a man who is partial to a more than occasional glass of port. ‘When I hang ‘’em they die,’ he frequently proclaimed, with all the obvious pride of a man who takes pride in his work. I hadn’t seen him before assumed he had taken over from the last hangman – the one with whipper’s elbow.

Since the unfortunate Hangee still had the noose around his neck, it wasn’t difficult to confirm that he was indeed as dead as a Lychgate nail. His eyes were bulging and his tongue was sticking out of his purple lips.

‘You can bury him,’ I told the hangman.

I scribbled a note on a piece of paper I had brought with me and handed it to him.

‘That’s it?’ he asked, examining the note.

‘That’s it,’ I agreed.

‘You’re not going to examine him?’

‘I just did. He’s dead. You can bury him.’

‘And you get five shillings for that?’

‘I charge five shillings for having the status that entitles me to sign that piece of paper,’ I told him, rather stiffly. ‘I don’t charge anything to confirm that he’s dead. Any fool can see he’s dead.’ I paused. ‘Even you can probably see that he’s dead,’ I added, more than slightly annoyed by his manner. ‘Are you going to take the rope from around his neck?’

‘I leave ’em with the noose,’ he said. ‘I never use a rope more than once. Only courteous to the client, in my honourable opinion.’

‘Well, you can bury him and his rope,’ I said, and left to collect my five shillings from the courtroom clerk.

That was last Tuesday, three days ago.

Today, a boy came round to the surgery to ask me to call in at the court-house again.

Anticipating another very welcome five shillings fee I hurried round before I had my luncheon.

‘Have you hung another one?’ I asked the clerk, a mousy little fellow who has pimples and, I happen to know, a curiously swollen right bollock. ‘I thought the hangman would have gone somewhere else by now? Where’s the corpse?’

The clerk, took me down a long corridor, unlocked a heavy, wooden door and showed me into a cell wherein lay the fellow I had certified dead earlier in the week.

‘Isn’t this the one I have already certified?’ I asked him.

‘It is,’ said the clerk.

‘Well he’s still dead,’ I told him. ‘Why do you bother locking the door?’

‘If we don’t keep the corpses locked up they get stolen,’ said the clerk. ‘Body snatchers take them and sell them to you sort of people.’

‘What do you mean?’ I demanded. ‘My sort of people?’

‘You Doctors,’ said the clerk. ‘You’re always wanting dead bodies to play with.’

‘Well, I don’t want any dead bodies!’ I retorted. ‘And why do you want me to certify him dead again? Are you planning to pay another five shillings? If you pay another five shillings I’ll certify him dead as often as you like.’ I thought for a moment. ‘You can have five certificates for a guinea,’ I said, thinking this quite a sound idea.

‘I need him uncertifying,’ said the clerk.

‘What the devil for?’

‘It seems we hanged the wrong man,’ said the clerk. ‘Another fellow confessed to stealing the other half of that sheep.’

‘I can’t uncertify him,’ I protested. ‘He’s dead and dead is dead whatever you say. I can’t bring him back to life. He’s dead and he stinks and you need to bury him before he’s eaten by maggots.’

‘Well, it’s very embarrassing,’ complained the clerk. ‘We can’t hang the real criminal for the crime if we’ve already hung someone else for it.’

‘Why not?’

‘It’ll look terrible if it gets out. People will know we made a mistake.’

‘You could let the second fellow go free?’

The clerk was clearly appalled by this.

‘Or hang him for something else?’

‘What?’

‘I don’t know. Something. He must have done something bad in his life. Hang him for it.’

‘That’s it! Brilliant!’ said the clerk, rubbing his hands. ‘We’ll say it was a conspiracy. They were a gang of three. We’ve hung one, one to hang and one still to catch. Come back this afternoon and you can certify the second one. I don’t suppose you could hang him for us as well, could you? You were right about the hangman. He buggered off to Winchester and we don’t have a hangman here.’

I indignantly told him that I didn’t do hangings.

‘Well, give him a shave and a haircut then,’ said the clerk. ‘He looks too disreputable to hang.’

‘That’ll be four pence for the shave and ten pence for the haircut,’ I told him, that being the usual rate for shaving and trimming dead bodies.

I hate shaving and hair cutting but another 14 pence is another 14 pence.

November 28th

I spent the evening trying to repair the battered body of Ebenezer Tallyrand.

Mr Tayllrand is a furniture maker who was born in Sweden. Owing to his land of origin he is clearly of foreign origin and therefore not widely trusted in the district.

I was called to attend by his wife.

Dr Mort, who happened to be with me when I was called, accompanied me though as usual I found him to be rather more trouble than he is worth.

'He's in here, Doctor,' said Mistress Tallyrand, leading me into the parlour. 'I tried to get him upstairs but he couldn't make it on his own and he's far too heavy for me.'

'What seems to be the matter?' I asked, and regretted the words as soon as they had spilt from my lips. The unfortunate devil, sprawled on an old horse-hair sofa, looked as though he had been run over by a hard ridden gig. His face was bloodied and bruised and judging by the way his left arm and leg were arranged, a number of essential bones had been broken.

'He can't talk,' said Mistress Tallyrand. 'Two fellows brought him home from the market and told me that he'd been beaten up by an angry crowd.'

'What on earth provoked a crowd to beat him up?' I enquired, surprised. Although Mr Tallyrand is foreign and therefore not English, he is a not entirely unreasonable fellow. He specialises in making Chairs and Tables and if I ever have enough money to buy my own furniture I will certainly consider taking my custom to him.

Mr Tallyrand struggled to speak but only succeeded in spewing some Blood and a couple of teeth down his chin. I couldn't understand a word he said though I admit he does have a thick foreign accent and I have always had difficulty in understanding him.

'He was trying to sell a new type of Chair,' explained Mistress Tallyrand. 'It was the first time he'd taken it along to the market.'

'And he was beaten up because of a Chair?'

Mistress Tallyrand nodded.

'What the devil sort of Chair was it to occasion such a response?' I enquired, astonished and quite genuinely puzzled. I had never thought of furniture as something likely to arouse strong emotions. Who, even after six pints of strong mead, is likely to be aroused to violence by a Chair?

'It was a new invention and he was very proud of it,' said Mistress Tallyrand with a sigh. 'He called the Chair the first of a new range of 'horizontally packaged chattels' and he thought they would be a huge success. He packed the pieces for the Chair in a sack so that they could be carried home without any inconvenience. He said he believed his new invention would make our fortune.'

'What the devil is a horizontally packaged chattel?' I asked.

'Here's one,' explained Mistress Tallyrand, crossing the room and picking up a few pieces of wood. 'This is his first Chair.' There were pieces which looked as though they might be Chair legs, a flat piece that looked as if it would serve as a seat and another piece which would make the back for a Chair.

'But it's in bits!' I exclaimed. 'Has it fallen apart? It can't have been very well made if it's fallen apart.'

'Oh no,' said Mistress Tallyrand. 'It's supposed to look like this.'

Her unfortunate husband made another attempt to speak. Once again his attempt was in vain and once again Blood and teeth were all that came out of his mouth.

'The idea is that people buy all the pieces for a new Chair or Table and take them home where they connect the pieces together with little bits of prepared wood. All you need is a Hammer.'

'Why on earth would people buy a Chair that they have to finish making themselves?' I demanded.

'It makes it easier to transport the Chair,' explained Mistress Tallyrand.

'But the customer who has bought the Chair has to finish making it when he gets back home?'

'It's very easy to do. And we provide a Sheet of instructions for those who can read and a little Wooden Mallet for those who do not have a Hammer of their own.'

'I take it the idea didn't go down too well?'

Mistress Tallyrand shook her head and I could see that there were tears in her eyes. 'The crowd became very agitated and angry when Mr Tallyrand explained what had to be done.'

'And the crowd attacked your husband?'

'It was unprovoked.'

'But I'm not surprised they attacked him!' exclaimed Dr Mort. 'What would you think if you were ill, called me in, as ye have done, and I gave you a potful of Leeches and told you to apply them yourself?'

Mr Tallyrand sighed, tried to get up but collapsed back onto the sofa. He was a terrible colour and appeared to have lost a great deal of Blood. I realised that it was too late to apply Leeches. There wouldn't be enough Blood left to give the poor creatures a snack let alone a decent meal.

'What would you think, eh?' Dr Mort repeated. 'You'd be shocked wouldn't ye? And what if the butcher brought round a pig and told you to make yourself a couple of sausages. Or the hansom cab driver brought round his cab and buggered off home, leaving you to drive the cab wherever it was that you wanted to go.'

Mistress Tallyrand looked at me and seemed quite shocked. It was clear that neither she nor her husband had thought through their plan.

'So they set up on him?' I said.

'They used the legs of his Chair to attack him, then burnt all his furniture,' admitted Mistress Tallyrand. 'This Chair here is the only one remaining.'

'I am not surprised,' I said.

I looked closely at Mr Tallyrand and as I did so he gave out a great sigh, dribbled a few more teeth across his chin and subsided back onto the horsehair sofa. He must have started the day with pretty much a full complement of natural teeth. I bent forward and peered at him. His eyes were glassy and there was no sign of him breathing. 'He's gone now,' I said. 'I'm afraid he paid the ultimate price for a really daft idea.'

'They were nicely turned Chair legs though,' said Mistress Tallyrand, with no little pride. 'I must say that he always turned a lovely leg.'

She picked up a piece of wood and I could see it was, indeed, nicely turned.

'Everyone always praised his legs,' she added.

I noticed that there was Blood, hair and something that looked like bits of brain clinging to the end of the wooden leg.

'Wipe it clean, chop it in two and it'll make a decent piece of kindling,' I said.

She looked at the leg as though seeing it for the first time. 'Oh yes, thank you Doctor,' she said. 'And what about my husband? Is there nothing else you can do for him?'

'Oh, he's gone,' I said, without looking at him any further. 'Dead as a nail I'm afraid. Call the undertaker and ask him to take Mr Tallyrand away.'

'Thank you, Doctor,' said Mistress Tallyrand, attempting a small curtsey which was, I suspect, in deference to Dr Mort more than myself.

'And tell him you don't want a coffin you have to finish making yourself!' said Dr Mort. He repeated the remark, clearly thinking it quite a good jest.

'I may be a lazy good for nothing and the very worst sort of raindrop but I a good source of a fine jest, am I not?' he said, turning to me.

I ignored him.

November 29th

I am increasingly concerned about Dr Mort for he appears to have an unusual and rather personal approach to the practice of medicine. One concern which I have shared with Dr Challot is, of course, the fact that when he deigns to favour us with his attendance, Dr Mort is willing only to attend to young, female and comely patients. Moreover, he has a tendency to expect them all to undress completely – always managing to find some excuse to instruct them to disrobe even if their complaint does not seem to merit such an approach.

The other day, I wandered into the consulting room, thinking it to be empty, and found Dr Mort and the young Wife of a local farmer. The Wife was quite naked and sitting on Dr Mort's lap. When I enquired about the nature of the young woman's complaint he told me that she had come to the surgery complaining of a painful tooth.

'He even manages to convince most of them that rogering is the best cure for whatever ails them,' complained Dr Challot, more concerned I think that Dr Mort was being more successful in this regard than he had ever been, than for any professional or moral reason.

On one occasion recently we were asked by a groom's father to check that a bride to be was a virgin. Dr Mort spent two hours examining the young woman and only at the end of that time did he provide her with the certificate she required.

'Was she a virgin?' I asked him later.

'She may well have been when she entered the consulting room,' replied Dr Mort. 'But she was most certainly not when she left.'

'But how could you provide her with the certificate she required?'

'She said she was a virgin when she arrived,' said Dr Mort. 'I decided that the only way to be certain of the situation was to give her a most thorough examination myself. But since she had clearly been a virgin when she arrived I was happy to give her the note she required.'

On another occasion we visited Sir Everett Baxter's home to attend to Sir Everett himself, who was constrained by a devilish imposition from the gout. Before we left we heard music coming from the drawing room and found his two Daughters making music. One, a sixteen year old, was playing the violin and the other, a year younger, the piano.

I listened with astonishment as Dr Mort suggested to their mother that he examine them to confirm that they were both healthy. Moreover, he offered to provide them with pre-nuptial certificates, valid for ten years, confirming their good health and purity.

Although I then left the property I understand that the examinations took the rest of the afternoon and most of the evening.

I took young Dr Mort with me to visit Mistress Burpalot, the young widow of Mr Silus Burpalot who had suffered a fit of some kind. (It still irks me to have to refer to Mort as Dr Mort. I had to serve a long and painful Apprenticeship before being given that privilege.)

Since my own steed, Bess, was at the blacksmith's for attention, I was riding a donkey that day, the only conveyance available for hire, while Dr Mort was riding a huge black stallion which was, apparently, a gift from his father. The donkey was a particularly seedy looking example which walked so slowly that several times I felt that I could move more speedily were I to dismount, abandon the ancient beast and revert to Shanks's pony. I fear that we must have looked rather too much like Don Quixote and his squire Sancho Panza – with me in the unfortunate and not to be admired role of Sancho Panza.

'You take charge,' I told the Apprentice, naively, as we rode up to the front door. 'I will stay silent and observe how you deal with the situation.'

A young Maid with about twelve summers behind her, showed us into the drawing room and pointed in the direction of Mistress Burpalot who was reclining upon a chaise longue. The maid seemed rather simple minded and stood for a moment gawping; only leaving when her mistress dismissed her.

'What appears to be the trouble?' enquired Mort. This seemed a fair beginning and mentally I gave him full marks.

'I fear I may have had some sort of fit or seizure,' replied the woman, putting the back of her hand against her forehead in what appeared to be a rather staged version of a swoon.

'Then, madam, I must remove your clothing!' said Dr Mort firmly.

Mistress Burpalot sat up. 'Good gracious,' she said. 'Is that entirely necessary?'

'Do you feel that there is any chance that you might have a relapse?' he asked.

'Oh do you know I feel there may be such a risk. I cannot deny the possibility. I feel very faint.'

'Then off must come your clothing.'

'All of it?'

‘All of it!’ cried Dr Mort, leaping forward to assist in the disrobing process. He was never keen when it came to applying Leeches but always eager when it came to helping a young woman to disrobe. ‘I would be failing in my professional duty if I did not insist upon it.’

‘Only my tailleur du corps balleine’ is allowed to see me within my chemise!’ protested the woman, though I confess I thought the protest a weak one.

‘I do not wish to see ye within your chemise!’ said Dr Mort firmly. ‘I wish to see ye without your chemise.’

‘Loosening the clothing is usually considered a perfectly adequate response in these circumstances,’ I whispered rather anxiously. I could feel myself reddening at Dr Mort’s recklessness.

Dr Mort, however, ignoring me completely, had already succeeded in unfastening a dozen of the buttons which ran down the back of the lady’s dress. I had never before seen such nimble fingerwork. It was, I thought, something of a pity that Dr Mort did not prove to have such nimble fingers when assisting on the operating Table. He did not have to do all the work for Mistress Burpalot was of considerable assistance. She stood and her fingers worked as feverishly as did his.

I estimate that took the two of them less than three minutes to unbutton, remove and discard all the clothing which Mistress Burpalot had been wearing. The dress came first, followed by a crinoline cage and a hooped petticoat decorated around the edge with small forget-me-nots, a pair of pantalettes, together with a curious waistband which supported them, the like of which I had never seen before, a camisole bodice, a corset cover, a thin corset with stays (designed to support and project the bosom of the wearer) and a final chemise.

Eventually Mistress Burpalot wore nothing but a pair of white silk stockings, held up with pale blue garters, and a pair of delicate pale blue silk house slippers.

‘Ye may keep the stockings and the slippers,’ said Dr Mort, with unexpected generosity.

‘Sir, I am grateful for I would not like you to see me quite naked. Nevertheless, you now see me at a grave disadvantage,’ said Mistress Burpalot, fluttering her eyes at her saviour. She attempted to cover her most intimate womanly parts with her two hands but the hands moved about like butterflies on summer flowers and were of little consequence.

‘Do ye feel better now ye are free of those encumbrances?’ asked Dr Mort.

‘Oh indeed I do feel very much better, Doctor,’ replied Mistress Burpalot. ‘Though I fear my heart is pounding. Would you be kind enough to examine me to see if I need a letting or a Leeching or some other treatment?’ She sat down on the couch, lifted her legs onto the couch as she did so, and lay before him. ‘I am yours to do with as you may think necessary,’ she added.

‘I think we can safely leave you now,’ I said to Mistress Burpalot. ‘You seem nicely recovered. It is possible that your accoutrements were too tightly fastened. We have several other calls to make within the neighbourhood.’

Dr Mort turned to me. ‘Ye look after the other calls,’ he said, sitting on the edge of the chaise longue.

He spoke as though he were the teacher and I the pupil. ‘I think I must stay here and make certain there is no relapse,’ he told me, speaking most sternly, as though there were a risk that Mistress Burpalot might die in moments if he were to leave her.

Mistress Burpalot laid a hand upon his leg, rather more above the knee than seemed entirely seemly. ‘Oh I would be most grateful if you would stay,’ she said to Dr Mort. ‘It will make me feel so much better to know that I am in your most assuredly capable hands.’

She looked up at me, as though aware of my presence for the first time. ‘Would you be kind enough to close the door on your way out while your master attends to my needs?’

I left but reasserted my crumbled authority by riding away on Dr Mort’s magnificent stallion, leaving him to go home on my donkey.

Sadly, the damned stallion was a little lively for my taste and the animal threw me a mile from home. I sustained no serious injuries but was more than adequately muddied. I have no idea what happened to the damned horse.

November 30th

Dr Mort is proving to be something of a liability as far as our patients are concerned, though much appreciated by the undertakers in the area. Dr Challot, who is doubtless concerned that if he terminates Dr Mort's Apprenticeship he may be expected to return the payment he received (and which he has, I suspect, already spent on beer and strumpets) will do nothing to protect our reputations.

Yesterday, Dr Mort bled a man whose pulse was regular but weak due to losing a large quantity of Blood in a farm accident. Mort used 14 Leeches and cut the man's veins to lower his Blood pressure.

Predictably, the poor fellow died. His corpse was so white it could have been made of marble.

And this afternoon I discovered that we had run out of arsenic.

When I asked Dr Mort if he knew why the arsenic jar was empty, he admitted that he had given Mistress Bertha Ottilie a large dose of the stuff on the basis that if a small dose does a Patient good then a large dose must be infinitely more efficacious.

I now understand why Mistress Ottilie died so unexpectedly.

December 1st

Dr Mort turned up at the surgery decidedly the worse for wear this morning. Actually, it was only just morning when he arrived for within three minutes the noon clock had struck.

'We had a good time in the Strand yesterday evening,' he boasted. 'I attended a cock fight in Madam Venables' bordello and then some chums and I visited the inns and hostelries between Fleet Street and Trafalgar Square. At Charing Cross we broke every window in the Blue Boar, smashed all the furniture and put two portermen, an Ostler and two constables in the way of needing medical attention.'

He roared with laughter at these exploits, for which he clearly expected to be congratulated.

'Good heavens, sir!' cried Dr Challot, who was out of Bed before mid-afternoon for the first time in months. 'Have you no respect for your reputation and your position as a medical man. Were you arrested? Do you have to go to court?'

'To court? Yes, begad. And it was a damned good jape. I had to attend the court this morning but only as a witness. The magistrate fined the innkeeper three guineas for allowing a disturbance on his premises. The fellow could not stand straight and had both arms in bandages. He had also lost half a dozen teeth and the magistrate fined him an extra ten shillings for failing to speak clearly.'

'You and your companions were not fined for causing the disturbance?' I remarked, both aghast and envious.

'Oh no, not at all,' laughed Dr Mort as though this were an impossible eventuality even to contemplate. 'The magistrate is the uncle of Sir Oliver Lentil, one of my drinking companions.'

I am beginning to wonder if Mort's mother hired a wet nurse with dubious morals. It is well known that a wet nurse has to be chosen carefully since the baby she feeds will likely absorb her moral qualities. Hire a drunkard or fool or Whore and the resultant child will grow up with terrible habits. I suspect that Mort must have taken milk from the bosom of a truly disreputable woman.

December 2nd

Dr Challot, Dr Mort and I performed an amputation on a farm worker. Mort, who wore riding gloves throughout the operation, claiming that he did not like discovering bits of flesh under his fingernails, was very drunk and cascaded in the middle of the operation.

One of the new-fangled Post Boxes has been installed in the street not far from Dr Challot's consulting rooms. I cannot see how these devices can possibly be of any value but Dr Challot surprised me by purchasing a Sheet of the new One Penny Stamps which were issued some years ago but which we have never yet had occasion to use. The Stamps, which are black, contain a picture of Her Majesty. The idea is that having written a missive, a Stamp is affixed to the letter and the letter placed in the box to be collected and delivered. I still think it unlikely that this will ever work. Indeed, I doubt if Dr Challot will not be the only citizen to find humour in having to lick the back side of good Queen Victoria.

December 3rd

It snowed heavily and it was far too cold to go outdoors this morning, especially since both my boots have holes in the soles. The snow drifts are four or five feet deep in places and snow-blossom was falling heavily. According to the newspaper which was delivered this morning, campaigners are still blaming the new Railways for the lamentable weather. The campaign against the Railways is being led by a nine-year-old child called Eviane who is reputed to be a resident of the Paupers' Lunatic Asylum in Tours in France. The child, doubtless illiterate, claims that she received a vision from an angel who told her that the Railways are the work of the devil and will lead to the world either freezing over or boiling. She does not seem clear which of these consequences she favours. Larrikins, kinching delinquents and lunatic asylum inmates everywhere believe her every word and there have apparently been demonstrations in London, Manchester and Birmingham. In London the police had to shoot eight of the protestors in order to disperse a crowd of nearly a thousand lunatics, most of whom were far too congealed to be considered for entry to any institution.

'Your trains are destroying our future!' cried one eleven-year-old who was dragged away by policemen after attempting to tie herself to a tree with a piece of string. (She had, in error, tied herself to one of the policemen who was bravely attempting to prevent her tying herself to the tree.)

Such scenes had never before been seen in England and an editorial writer in *The Times* suggested that never before had so many lunatics been gathered in one place.

'Shoot all the crazy bastards and save us all some money,' a Member of Parliament was quoted as suggesting.

Showing what I thought to be commendable devotion to duty, I left the Peacock Inn after luncheon (having stuffed old newspapers into my boots), braved the demonstrating children (there were five of them) and managed to make it as far as the consulting rooms at Dr Challot's home.

Once there, I made myself a glass of hot mead, removed my boots and attempted to dry my socks in front of the meagre fire which Mistress Swain had lit in the consulting room. The fire was so miserable that I had to sit with my feet on the dog irons before I could feel any warmth.

At ten thirty, the postman arrived with a letter from Mistress Luella Biddulph asking me to visit. The letter had been written that morning and Mistress Biddulph did not say if the problem was an urgent one. The Biddulph home is a half hour ride in good conditions and a two hour trudge on foot. Since my horse is still exhausted and lame and the donkey I had rented was still with Dr Mort, I faced a four hour trudge. I looked at my steaming socks and leaky boots and sighed. There are times when being a general practitioner can be distinctly unattractive.

And then a notion burst upon me.

I wrote back asking Mistress Biddulph to be more specific about her request for a visit. I gave the letter to Mistress Swain and told her to put it into the new Post Box which is, fortunately, situated no more than two hundred yards from Dr Challot's front door.

I must say that this new scheme is something of a wonder. You just put a letter inside the box – making sure that a small picture of the Queen has been stuck onto the envelope. The box is emptied regularly and the mail inside delivered to the addressee. I am told that housewives use the postal service to order deliveries from the grocer and the butcher. A shopping order can be posted in the morning and the required victuals delivered that same afternoon.

At two thirty that afternoon, I received a reply from Mistress Biddulph

'My husband has the Stomach ache and the Vomiting,' she wrote. 'He ate three dozen oysters and twelve pints of mead last evening. Do you think these might be the cause of his affliction?'

I made up a bottle of slibber-sauce medicine (nauseating enough to be guaranteed to work), wrapped it in brown paper, addressed the packet, enclosed my determination, the instructions on how to best use the treatment and my bill for half a guinea and tied everything into a packet small enough to pass through the aperture into the Post Box. I sent Mistress Swain out to place the treatment in the box.

At six thirty in the evening, the postman brought a small packet which contained my half guinea payment and a note of thanks from Mistress Biddulph.

I am very much in favour of these new Post Boxes for the system has saved me considerable discomfort. Indeed, I can see that the new system may soon make it unnecessary for anyone to leave the house except to journey to the nearest Post Box.

I have written a note to the Postmaster asking that the Post Boxes have more capacious mouths to accommodate larger bottles of medicine. I added a postscript suggesting that a Post Box be placed outside every house in England.

December 4th

Dr Mort came to me and asked me to be his second. I had no idea what he was talking about.

‘Your second what?’ I asked him.

‘I eventually managed to discern that our half-witted Apprentice had been challenged to a duel and instead of offering a grovelling apology (surely the sensible course of action for an overweight buffoon with no discernible physical skills) the fool has accepted the challenge.

‘Who the devil has challenged you to a duel? It’s 1853 for heaven’s sake.’

‘Baron Whipton of Walsall. He is always challenging people to duels. He is known for it.’

‘Why the devil did he challenge you to a duel?’

‘I was in a Leaping House rogering a wench called Fanny Bottom, a prostitute he fancied. He tapped me on the shoulder with his glove and challenged me. He quite put me off my stroke.’

‘He didn’t wait until you’d finished your work?’

‘No, he did not. I thought it damnably rude of him.’

‘What sort of weapons will be used?’ I asked.

Dr Mort stared at me, clearly puzzled.

‘Pistols, swords or fists?’ I asked.

‘Pistols, swords or fists?’ he repeated as though these were words he had never heard before.

‘Or do you intend to battle with snowballs?’

‘I hadn’t thought about weapons being involved,’ said Dr Mort, his voice rather softer and less confident and his visage now considerably paler.

‘What did you think was going to happen?’ I asked. ‘Were you expecting that the pair of you would stand toe to toe and simply hurl abuse at each other?’

‘I confess I hadn’t really thought about there being weapons involved,’ Mort repeated. ‘How do we find out?’

‘You’d better ask the Baron for the name of his second. I will then speak to him and see what is proposed. What sort of weapon does the Baron normally prefer?’

‘Oh, pistols, I suspect,’ replied Dr Mort, the light dawning. ‘Come to think of it he is renowned as a crack shot.’

‘Can you shoot?’ I asked Dr Mort.

‘Never touched a pistol in my life,’ said Mort, with a discernible shiver. ‘Horrid, noisy things.’

‘Well, either we must persuade the Baron to accept another type of weapon or you must take lessons.’

December 5th

I met Sir Enoch Drinkwater who is the Baron Whipton of Walsall's chosen second for the duel with Dr Mort.

Sir Enoch is very short, hardly an inch above five feet in height, and quite the roundest man I have ever met. The circumference of his waist must match or possibly exceed the length of him from heel to crown. It would be a damned jolly jape to roll him down a long hill.

'What sort of weapon did the Baron have in mind?' I asked.

'Pistols,' replied Sir Enoch. 'The Baron always favours the pistol. He has a pair of very fine duelling pistols and your fellow Mort can take his pick of the pair. We find that pistols bring the occasion to a rapid conclusion. Four of the last men with whom the Baron duelled died within the hour. Sword play can drag on for hours and interfere with much of the day – causing havoc with appointments and suchlike.' Sir Enoch had a curiously squeaky voice which made it difficult for me to take him entirely seriously.

'The thing is,' I said, 'that Dr Mort is not an accomplished shot. Indeed, he has never touched a pistol in his life.'

Sir Enoch shrugged and pulled a face. There was the hint of a smirk. 'We'll meet at dawn tomorrow in Regents Park. No point in dragging these things out. You can arrange for an undertaker to be present if you like. It makes sense to have the body moved away quite quickly. It is our experience that it can sometimes be difficult to obtain a hearse if you don't have one immediately available.'

'Wait a minute!' I cried. 'Wait a minute. Aren't we supposed to discuss these things? You can't just decide the weapon, the place and the time!'

'Why the devil not?' demanded Sir Enoch.

'Because it isn't seemly!' I replied.

'Are you accusing me of unseemly conduct?' demanded Sir Enoch.

'I think I am, sir!' I replied, perhaps rather incautiously.

A moment later something landed on my chest and fell to the floor at my feet. I looked down. It was a glove. I looked across at Sir Enoch. He was wearing a glove on his right hand but his left hand was naked.

'Name your second, sir!' squeaked Sir Enoch. 'We will fight our duel immediately after the Baron shoots your fellow. Pistols. I'll bring my own pair.'

I stared at him for a moment. 'Are you challenging me to a duel?'

'I just did.'

'Well, I don't accept your challenge,' I said firmly, though it occurred to me fleetingly that with a fellow so obscenely fat, and wider than a large barn door, it would not much matter that I too had never touched a pistol for a bullet fired by a blind man would unerringly hit the target.

'What do you mean?' said Sir Enoch, incredulously. 'You can't decide whether or not to accept a duel!'

'I took the Hippocratic Oath,' I pointed out. 'I am not allowed to shoot people in public parks.'

'That's arrant skimble-skamble. I have fought duels with three Doctors.'

'What happened to them?'

'They all died, though one took a week because I shot a little low and off-centre and caught his liver.'

'I have very bad eyesight,' I lied quickly. 'I am damned near blind.'

'That has no bearing on the issue at hand.'

'Of course it does. You cannot challenge a blind man to a duel. It would be unseemly.'

'That is twice you have accused me of being unseemly!' cried Sir Enoch. 'I challenge you to another duel.'

I stared at him.

'I will shoot you and we will fight another duel and I will shoot you again,' he cried. His anger taking his squeaky voice up into an area usually reserved for those lady opera singers who can smash expensive wine glasses with a single note.

I looked at him and thought for a moment.

'I am a very experienced shot,' I lied, changing tack. 'I have won medals for my shooting. It would be unfair of me to allow you to challenge me to a duel.'

'Pshaw!' said Sir Enoch. 'I am a Drinkwater. I know no fear.'

'And what are you going to do if I don't turn up?'

He stared at me and frowned. 'What do you mean?'

'What do you plan to do if I refuse to fight a duel?'

The fat, little fellow stared at me open mouthed and you could almost hear his brain trying to start up. 'What do you mean: If you refuse to fight?'

'I'm not fighting a duel,' I told him. 'It's a stupid idea.'

'I shall tell the world. You will be dishonoured!'

‘Pshaw to you in spades! I cannot think of anyone I know who will think any the worse of me for refusing to stand still in Regents Park while a small, fat man shoots holes in my liver. On the contrary, everyone I know would think me mad to risk my life for such a pathetic reason.’

‘I shall tell the world you refuse to fight!’ cried the fat fellow, as though this would frighten me into accepting his pathetic challenge.

‘Please do so,’ I said. ‘I shall also tell everyone that you challenged me to a duel and that I refused to meet you because you are a small, fat buffoon with the mind of a slug and the morals of a rodent. It will be impossible for you to creep up behind me and shoot me in the back because everyone would know that you were the murderer. You would be arrested, disgraced and hung as a common criminal.’

I walked away from him.

‘What about your man Mort?’ shouted the fat fellow.

‘He can do whatever the devil he likes,’ I said. ‘If he has any sense, which I doubt, he too will refuse to fight a silly duel with the Baron Whatshisname of Wherever.’

December 6th

‘What has been decided?’ asked Dr Mort, when I saw him this morning. He seemed desperately concerned, as well he might have been.

‘It’s off if you don’t want to fight,’ I told him.

‘What do you mean?’ he asked. He was trying hard not to look delighted but failing in that endeavour.

I told him that I too had been challenged to a duel and that I had refused. ‘If I were you I’d do the same,’ I told him.

‘But they will tell everyone I refused to fight!’ exclaimed Dr Mort.

‘Who cares?’ I said, with a shrug. ‘If you fight the duel you will die. If you refuse to fight the duel you may be momentarily embarrassed.’ I paused. ‘Actually, I don’t think the Baron of Whatsit will tell anyone you turned him down. He will be too embarrassed.’

Mort thought about this for a while. ‘Do you know,’ he said, looking rather pleased. ‘I think you are right.’

And so neither of us fought our duels.

And to our delight and our surprise we never heard anything more from Baron Whipton of Walsall or Sir Enoch.

December 7th

Dr Challot was due to appear in court to defend himself against an accusation that he had deliberately caused the demise of a certain Gilbert Blossom by giving him an overdose of arsenic. The action was brought not by the authorities but by the widow of Mr Blossom who was claiming £150 in damages.

The case has been taking up much of Challot's time for the last few weeks.

Two months ago, a solicitor acting for Widow Blossom presented Dr Challot with a sheaf of affadavits from citizens all claiming that Mr Blossom had been a good living man who had been healthy until he had started to receive treatment from Dr Challot.

'This looks bad,' I said to Dr Challot, as I leafed through the affadavits.

There were six affadavits and at first eyewink they looked terribly convincing. However, on close examination I noticed that the citizens who had signed the affadavits had all signed with an X. Moreover, their statements were identical and four of the men who had signed were brothers who had given their address as the Lamb Inn.

We sat in silence for a few minutes.

'Where the devil did the lawyer find all those people to sign affadavits?' asked Dr Challot.

'At the Lamb Inn, by the looks of it,' I suggested. 'Most of these people can be found there every evening.'

We sat in silence again.

'You mean to say the lawyer simply went into the Lamb Inn and persuaded all these people to sign affadavits?'

'These fellows would sign anything for a pint of porter.'

We went back to sitting in silence.

'Damnit! I'll buy some affadavits of my own,' said Dr Challot, at last.

By ten o'clock that evening he had visited The Peacock Inn, The Plough, The King's Head and The Red Lion and had acquired 23 affadavits from citizens claiming that Mr Blossom had been at Death's door when he had first sought treatment from Dr Challot. 'Death,' they all wrote, 'was a release, and Dr Challot did everything possible to save the unfortunate Mr Blossom.' Of Dr Challot's collection of affadavits, 19 were signed with an X.

The total cost? Twelve shillings and nine pence.

After Dr Challot had presented his sheaf of affadavits to the court, the case brought by Widow Blossom was abandoned.

December 8th

I worked 17 hours today. I saw a grand total of 43 patients, travelled 10 leagues on horseback and performed three operations. At least, it seemed like 10 leagues. I suppose it might have been a mile or two less.

Now that we have more patients to look after, it seems that Dr Challot and Dr Mort are doing less work than ever.

Even though we have far more patients to look after, Dr Challot does not rise from his Bed before noon at the earliest and is drunk for most of the rest of the day. Unfortunately, he somehow manages to remain alert enough to keep a record of the number of patients I see and, therefore, the number of guineas the practice has earned. (I strongly suspect that Mistress Swain provides him with this information.) I am making him a rich man and exhausting myself in the process.

Dr Mort, whose only two qualities appear to be ignorance and arrogance, turns up once or twice a week at most and has taken to bringing with him friends from London who attend as spectators. Dr Mort tells our patients that the men who attend him are medical students or young Doctors who have come to watch his expertise and learn from him. The patients, fooled by his charm, seem enormously impressed by this nonsense even though the spectators, putative medical men, stand around and snigger and make ribald remarks as patients (nearly all nubile and slightly naïve young women) are persuaded to undress. Twice Dr Mort has operated on patients while showing off to his companions. Once he removed an aching tooth and left the Patient with a fractured jaw and on the other occasion he dealt with a troublesome bunion by removing the entire foot. The second of these patients died within an hour, of shock and exsanguination. The first will, I fear, die of starvation within a fortnight. On both occasions Dr Mort had turned up at the surgery in a severely cappernoited condition. These disasters do not trouble Dr Mort who dismisses them as the ‘slightly regrettable but inevitable consequences’ of performing sophisticated medical procedures. I fail to see how removing a rotten tooth or soothing an irritable bunion can be regarded as ‘sophisticated’ medical procedures.

When I mentioned to Dr Challot that I was worried about Dr Mort’s approach to the practise of medicine, Dr Challot was quick to defend his new student.

‘Dr Mort has brought new standards to this practice!’ he cried. ‘He has brought social status and I have heard that he is extremely popular with our younger female patients.’

‘There are one or two who favour his unusual approach to medical matters,’ I agreed. ‘But there are many more who are disturbed by his insistence that all female patients should undress completely whatever is wrong with them. The fellow now has more notches on his pizzle than a bowsaw.’

‘Such diligence and application should be commended!’ answered Dr Challot.

‘But he steadfastly refuses to see male patients of any age or females over 30,’ I pointed out.

‘Specialism is an inevitable part of modern medical practice,’ said Dr Challot, whose loyalty to Dr Mort, purchased in gold, was clearly unswerving.

‘He’s nothing but another one of those damned raindrops!’ I protested.

Dr Challot frowned. ‘A raindrop?’

I explained that the word is used to describe young people who are rather wet and entirely self-interested and whose interests are ephemeral. ‘It is a word of disparagement used to describe young persons who are extremely wet and who evaporate whenever the heat is turned up.’

The result of Dr Challot’s refusal to drag his raddled form out of bed, and of his uncritical support for Dr Mort’s unusual approach to the practise of medicine, is that my work load has become quite unbearable. I am desperate to leave the practice but I have to find 30 guineas to buy my freedom. I spoke about this to Nellie and she pointed out that if we promote my orgasm remedy a little more enthusiastically, I could have that sum saved up within a month. The problem, of course, is that I am working so hard at the practice that there is very little time for selling the orgasm remedy.

December 10th

We managed to find time to attend two race meetings where Nellie and I succeeded in finding several customers for the orgasm remedy.

Nellie pointed out that if we attended two or three more meetings I would have enough money to buy myself out of Dr Challot’s practice.

I really don’t know how I would manage without her determination and incessant optimism. Nellie has resigned from her position as a Chambermaid at the Peacock Inn. She proudly tells anyone and everyone that she is my mistress. She regards this as a clear promotion.

December 12th

Dr Challot called me into his bedroom to announce that in future he would be cutting my percentage of the practice earnings in half.

When I protested, he retorted that I would still be able to earn the same amount of money because he had increased the size of the practice.

'I had to pay out good money to buy Dr Blackburnt's patients,' he said. 'You'll be able to see twice as many patients as before. This is all valuable experience for a young Doctor such as yourself.'

'But dealing with all those extra patients will require more time than there are hours in the day!' I protested.

'You have Dr Mort to share the burden.'

'Dr Mort is hardly ever here!' I replied indignantly. 'And on those rare occasions when he does deign to turn up, his only interest is in examining young Maidens. He now steadfastly refuses to see female patients unless they are exceptionally good looking and particularly free and easy with their favours. Yesterday he refused to see either of the Miss Davendishes, neither of whom has yet seen 20, because he said they were not comely enough for his eyes.'

'I heard from Mistress Swain that you yourself have not been averse to taking advantage of the patients,' sneered Dr Challot.

'If you mean Mistress Uffcomb,' I replied, feeling my cheeks adopting the hue of a beetroot, 'then I can assure you that I was merely treating a Patient with a painful condition. The remedy was one she had requested herself and one which had been regularly prescribed by Dr Blackburnt.'

Dr Challot responded to this with more sneering and a rather unprofessional wink of conspiracy.

'Call it what you will,' he agreed. 'I'm not a man to criticise another practitioner's chosen form of treatment.' He grabbed the two naked harlots of the day and squeezed their breasts with unfettered enthusiasm. The two harlots squealed and half-heartedly pretended to try to escape from him. This, of course, they could have easily done had they been genuinely so minded.

'If you cut my earnings in half I will hardly be able to live!' I protested. 'I already have a massive, unpaid bill at the Inn. My boots are leaky and worn and my newest clothes were all purchased second hand from Dr Blackburnt's widow.'

'He always had impeccable taste.'

'But he was a good six inches shorter than me and a good deal rounder in the girth. The trouser legs barely reach my shins and I cannot button my only jacket.'

'Ah, balderdash,' muttered Dr Challot. 'Stop whingeing and go out and treat some patients.'

'I will take no more of this!' I cried, suddenly emboldened with anger. 'Pay me what you owe until today. I will go and find work elsewhere. I wish you good luck with your practice and I hope that Dr Mort proves to be a more responsible fellow than he appears to be at the moment.'

With that announcement, I stormed out of Dr Challot's bedroom, tripped over an empty wine flagon and fell through the open door and down half a flight of stairs.

'Mind you don't try poaching any of my patients!' I heard Dr Challot shout. 'Though you can have the large breasted one – I gather from Mistress Swain that she pays you in milk rather than coin and I have plenty of the former available to me.'

There was much laughter from the two Whores in his bed.

'And don't forget that you cannot leave the practice without paying me 30 guineas!' cried Dr Challot as an addendum.

It was only when I got outside that I realised that I had no idea what I was going to do next. It did occur to me that I might have been wiser to have found myself another position before giving notice to Dr Challot.

And I still had no idea where I was going to find the 30 guineas required to buy myself out of our agreement.

December 13th

For once in my life, fortune smiled in my direction, for the very next morning Mistress Youngblood banged on my bedroom door with such urgency that she must surely have awakened most people in the building, including any who had died in the night.

‘What on earth is the matter?’ I asked, bleary eyed. ‘Is the building on fire? Has Her Majesty commanded my presence at court?’

‘Not quite, but here’s a footman from the Duke of Somerset downstairs,’ said Mistress Youngblood. She spoke with unusual respect. ‘He has come to fetch you. The Duke requires your presence.’

I stared at her and frowned. ‘What the devil does the Duke want from me?’

Mistress Youngblood leant forward and lowered her voice. ‘Mr Somerset would only say it’s a confidential medical matter. There is a carriage outside our front door. It has the Duke’s coat of arms on the doors.’

‘Is the Duke of Somerset’s footman really called Somerset? That’s an amazing coincidence.’

‘Servants in the Duke of Somerset’s employment take their name from their employer,’ explained Mistress Youngblood. ‘I believe that in the servants’ hall, the Duke’s valet enjoys the title, ‘Duke of Somerset’.’

‘How far away does the Duke live?’ I asked.

‘Three or four hours’ drive,’ answered Mistress Youngblood.

‘Then I’ll have my breakfast first,’ I told her, clambering out of Bed and shivering the moment I did so. I couldn’t help wondering why the devil the Duke had called for me. As a humble Apothecary I am not allowed to charge a fee for a consultation – only for a treatment. I am allowed to dispense medicaments and to charge for them and I am, of course, allowed to perform surgery. Fellows of the Royal College of Physicians do not dirty their professional fingers by supplying medicaments or performing operations.

Mistress Youngblood seemed rather shocked at my request but she wasn’t the one reluctant to undertake a five or six journeys with an empty stomach. ‘Are you sure? Mr Somerset is waiting in our hallway.’

‘Then tell him to have a bite of breakfast too,’ I told her. ‘And send up someone to light my fire before I freeze to Death.’

‘Can’t Nellie do that?’ asked Mistress Youngblood, nodding in the direction of my Bed companion who had awakened and was rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. ‘Surely she hasn’t forgotten how to light a fire!’

‘Nellie has other responsibilities now,’ I replied rather pompously. ‘Please send up a Chambermaid with a bucket of wood.’

‘I’ll send up Blossom,’ said Mistress Youngblood. ‘Would it be convenient if she also brought your bill? I understand it is mounting steadily.’

An hour later, clothed, fed and warmed, I was seated in the back of the Duke of Somerset’s carriage with two eggs, four rashers of bacon and a pint of coffee swilling around inside me. The coach had come with four servants: a coachman, an assistant coachman and two footmen who were hanging onto the back of the coach and no doubt grateful for the fact that it was neither raining nor snowing.

To be honest, I would have rather ridden to the Duke’s estate by donkey. I hate carriage travel. The damned things sway and shake and cause in me a great feeling of sickness. However, Nellie who accompanied me, would have committed murder if I had not agreed to ride in the carriage. I took with me my medical satchel, together with a pot of Leeches and my set of scarifying equipment.

‘Have you got a supply of your orgasm remedies?’ asked Nellie as I packed my medical satchel.

‘A Duke won’t want one of those!’ I protested.

‘Put a few in your bag,’ insisted Nellie. ‘I bet you that’s what he wants.’

And so, since she is proving far better at business than I am, I did as she suggested.

The journey took us seven hours, though this included several stoppages. There was one unscheduled halt so that I could go behind a tree and empty my bladder and one scheduled stop to feed and water the horses and thaw out the servants who had been suffering somewhat out in the open.

The Duke of Somerset lives on a massive estate.

Half an hour after we had turned into the driveway, we still had not reached the castle. I learned later that the estate was like a small town with its own chapel (complete with a Vicar and a curate), forge (complete with Blacksmith) painters’ shop (complete with painters), carpenters workshop (complete with carpenters), greenhouses, walled garden, farms, sawmill, hothouse and schoolroom.

When we finally arrived at our destination, the coachman drove around to what was clearly the back of the castle. There was no moat, which I found rather a let-down, and therefore no drawbridge. I have always thought that castles aren’t really castles if they don’t have moats and drawbridges.

‘Why have we stopped here?’ Nellie asked me, clearly rather disappointed that our journey had ended in such a way.

The footman who had opened the carriage door looked a trifle nonplussed. ‘This is the servants and tradesmen’s entrance,’ he replied.

‘Do servants and tradesmen arrive by carriage?’ I asked.

He admitted that they did not.

‘When the Duke sees his Physician, does the Physician enter by the back door?’

‘No, sir,’ admitted Mr Somerset.

‘Then drive us to the front door where we can enter properly,’ I instructed him.

And thus it was done.

Despite the absence of a moat and drawbridge, the castle itself was most imposing and had clearly been equipped with no account to cost. The reception hall was furnished with solid regency furniture decorated, quite curiously, with girls’ heads and bronze animal claws. In a corner stood a candelabrum which must have weighed five hundredweight but which bore but a single candle.

‘His Grace will see you in the smoking room,’ said a fellow who I assumed to be the butler. ‘The winter smoking room,’ he added helpfully. Even more helpfully the Butler led the way through a maze of absurdly well-furnished corridors and eventually into a room the size of a large Church or a medium sized Cathedral. An elderly man in a purple coat was sitting in a Chair in front of a blazing fire. He was attempting to play a set of Bagpipes but the task was proving rather too much for him. A woman in a nightgown was sitting at a spinet. The two musicians appeared to be playing entirely different pieces of music but neither seemed to mind.

‘Is that the Duke?’ I whispered to the Butler as we entered the room. We were so far from the fireplace that there was no chance that we could have been overheard even if we had both shouted.

‘It is,’ replied the butler. ‘You should address him as Your Grace.’

‘And the woman playing the spinet is the Duchess?’

‘Good heavens no, sir. That is Mademoiselle Floella,’ replied the butler. ‘She is the Duke’s senior mistress. When the Duke married the present Duchess, it was Mademoiselle Floella who gave the Duchess private instructions on the Duke’s preferences, and on bedroom matters in general, just before the honeymoon. She and the Duke and Duchess are very close. Indeed, Mademoiselle Floella travelled with the couple to Italy in case her services were required during the honeymoon.’

I glanced at Nellie. She appeared to be having some little difficulty stifling a giggle.

‘Dr Bullock,’ said the butler, introducing me.

The Duke stopped pumping air into the bagpipes and looked up. He was wearing the worst wig I have ever seen and it occurred to me that his position almost certainly meant that no one ever dared say anything to him about it.

‘Is this your remedy?’ he demanded, pointing at Nellie. ‘I like ’em with a bit more meat on ’em.’

‘No, no, this is my assistant,’ I said.

Just then a young woman came into the room as though she were an actress making an entrance on stage at a key moment in Act Three. She was wearing a low-necked, blue silk gown and around her neck lay at least six rows of pearls. The fingers of both hands were well decorated with rings, with the prize being a huge diamond settled on the wedding finger of her left hand. It was so big that I couldn’t help thinking that if she wore it constantly she must have had an ache in her arm at the end of each day.

‘My wife, the Duchess,’ said the Duke, introducing her. He didn’t bother to introduce us to her.

The mistress stood up from the spinet, smoothed down her negligee and stared for a moment at her well positioned rival. ‘I’ve finished with him for now,’ she said. ‘You can have what’s left.’

The Duchess ignoring this remark, sat down on the arm of the Duke’s Chair and put her arm around his neck in a most proprietorial manner. It occurred to me that the relationships within this unusual ménage a trois might not be as entirely comfortable as the Butler had intimated.

‘What appears to be the problem, your Grace?’ I asked. ‘Would you like me to examine you?’

‘I hear you’re the fellow who’s got some sort of remedy for orgasms,’ said the Duke.

‘That’s correct, your Grace.’

‘I want one.’

‘Certainly, sir.’ I glanced at Nellie. She smiled at me. It was an ‘I told you so’ smile. I opened my bag and took out one of my orgasm remedies.

‘Is that it?’

‘It is.’

‘What do I do with it? Chew it? Swallow it? Rub it on me rogering tool?’

‘No, your Grace,’ I said. ‘It has to go into the back passage.’

‘Up me Arse?’

‘Precisely, your Grace.’

‘Good God! How long will it last?’

‘One remedy will provide you with an additional 100 orgasms,’ I told him. ‘Would you like me to insert it for you?’

‘Give it to my wife. She can put it in later.’ He laughed. ‘It’ll be a nice change for her to put something in my arse.’

The Duchess blushed.

‘Better leave two more or I’ll need to have you fetched again next week,’ said the Duke.

I took another two remedies from my bag and placed them on a huge Chippendale sideboard.

‘You can go now,’ said the Duke, turning back to the fire. ‘The Butler will settle your account.’

‘How much do we owe you?’ asked the butler, when we had left the room.

‘Thirty guineas,’ said Nellie, before I could say a word.

‘Is that for all three items or for each one?’

‘For each one,’ answered Nellie, without a moment’s hesitation. I glanced at her, horrified. I felt certain that we were going to be thrown out or arrested for gouging.

‘Ninety guineas then,’ said the butler. By now we had reached the reception hall. ‘If you would be kind enough to wait here, please.’

Three or four minutes later he was back with a small bag of money. He poured the contents onto a Table and counted out ninety guineas. I nearly fainted when I saw all that gold.

‘Can you arrange for the Duke’s carriage to take us back home?’ I asked.

‘Certainly, sir,’ replied the butler.

And less than ten minutes later we were once again sitting in the Duke’s carriage, but this time we were heading home. And to our mutual delight we were ninety guineas better off than we had been at the start of the day.

Life was definitely looking up.

December 14th

It was with great delight that I took a bag containing 30 Sovereigns to Dr Challot's bedroom. Actually, to be honest, there was a frisson of fear mixed in with the delight. I was walking away from my first job and into a very uncertain future. The Duke of Somerset had single-handedly transformed my finances but it didn't seem likely that we would come across many customers prepared to pay 30 guineas for each of the remedies. (I was well aware that if it had not been for Nellie's quick thinking I would have left the Duke of Somerset's castle with considerably fewer Sovereigns in my possession.)

'What's this?' demanded my employer, peering into the bag before pouring the contents into his hand. One of his ever present Whores was fast asleep and lying half in the Bed. The other was laid out on the floor and appeared to be drunk. The one on the floor was naked. The one in Bed was also naked as far as I could tell.

'I'm buying myself out of your employment,' I told him. I held out a receipt which I had prepared, and handed it to him. 'You just have to sign here,' I told him.

'Sign? What for?'

'To confirm that I have paid what I owe and that I am now free to work elsewhere.'

'I'm not signing anything,' said Dr Challot, holding out the paper but keeping hold of the Sovereigns, which he had now poured back into the small, leather bag in which I had brought them.

'Then I'll take these back,' I told him, grabbing the bag of Sovereigns.

I refused to hand back the Sovereigns until we had found a pen and ink, he had signed the receipt and I had it tucked safely in an inside pocket.

'Why the devil would you want to leave?' asked Challot, in the wheedling voice he usually reserved for his dealings with tradesmen who had plucked up the courage to ask to be paid. As long as I had known him, Dr Challot had never enjoyed paying bills to anyone – most especially tradesmen. He once told me that he thought they ought to be grateful to be allowed to supply him with whatever it was they sold. Not surprisingly this was not a view which was widely reciprocated. 'I have been so good to you,' he said. 'I trained you, I taught you everything I know. I gave you a start in life. Without me you would have been nothing.'

'I am doing all the work and receiving very little of the reward,' I pointed out, without exaggeration. I did not mention the fact that he had taught me remarkably little nor that he had taken me in as a student only because my father had paid him well for my Apprenticeship.

'But what about me?' demanded Dr Challot. 'What am I to do if you go?' He added a soupcon of guilt to leaven the self-pity. 'And if you leave who will look after the patients?'

'You have Dr Mort,' I pointed out.

'Mort is bloody useless!' cried Challot. 'He is like all these youngsters. There was an article about them in the *Morning Post*. I think there's something wrong with this new generation of Young Victorians. They constantly need praise for getting up in the morning. They're self-centred, intolerant, demanding, petulant, hypocritical, narcissistic and damnably lazy.'

'A few days ago you were praising him to the skies!' I pointed out.

'He hasn't been in since then. Not seen hide nor hair of the drunken sot,' said Dr Challot irritably. He sighed, stuck a hand under the bedclothes and scratched himself noisily. 'It's probably just as well. I gather from Mistress Swain that four irate fathers have been turning up at odd times waiting for the worthless bastard to turn up. She said one fellow with a pistol threatened to shoot him, one carrying a huge cudgel threatened to beat his head to a pulp, a third threatened to make him eat himself and the fourth said he intended to tear him into tiny pieces, add mint and sage and turn him into a stew.'

'Then you will have to take a greater interest in the practice yourself,' I told him. 'Since you bought Dr Blackburnt's practice, the workload has risen enormously.'

'I daren't go out of the house lest they mistake me for Mort!' complained Dr Challot. Suddenly, he flew into a rage. 'You're an ungrateful bastard!' he said, suddenly changing tack. 'I'm too damned kind, that's my trouble. Kindness has always been my weakness.'

Dr Challot made as though to throw the Sovereigns at me, but changed his mind when the horror of the action hit home. He then leant out of Bed. When I realised that he was reaching around under the Bed for his night-soil pail (which I know is emptied no more than twice a week even though it may be damnably close to primful) I departed as quickly as I was able. The thud and crash of the night-soil pail hitting the door behind me confirmed that I had been well minded to do so. The stink which followed me down the stairs was abominable.

'You bastard!' I heard Dr Challot cry. 'Come back and clean up this foul mess.'

I hurried down the stairs and left without more ado.

I hesitated for a moment about whether to say 'goodbye' to Mistress Swain, eventually deciding that that a speedy exit from the premises was the wisest course of action.

December 15th

‘So, what do I do now?’ I asked Nellie.

Having left Dr Challot’s employment, I was now without a job or an income. To be honest, I felt rather depressed and more than a little frightened.

‘Can you find another position at a different practice?’ asked Nellie. ‘Or can you start your own practice?’ It was eleven in the morning but we were still in Bed. I had nowhere I had to be and so had little incentive to clamber out into the world. She put her head on my chest.

‘There are no other practices around here and I don’t know of any vacancies in practices further afield,’ I confessed. ‘And to start my own practice I would need money.’

We lay together for a few moments and neither of us spoke. I pulled the blanket a little higher. It seemed to be a very cold morning.

‘Besides,’ I added, ‘I’m not sure I want to do either of those things.’

The truth was that I was tired of what sometimes seemed a glum, pointless grind. I was tired too of the corruption which seemed endemic within the profession, with prescribing habits being influenced by generous luncheons and free gifts.

I had begun my medical career believing that I would be able to help people who were sick but I was no longer convinced that I was making much of a difference. It sometimes seemed as though we none of us knew as much as we led people to believe. Most of the time, I didn’t really know why my patients were ill, and the remedies I offered were as much of a mystery as the ailments themselves. Moreover, I had lost all faith in the profession’s leaders who were, it sometimes seemed to me, devoted mainly to enriching themselves by forming close arrangements with one or more of the many companies offering healing products for sale. The medical journals were packed with advertising for new remedies which were often untried and frequently turned out to be lethal.

I had reluctantly come to the conclusion that there is very little integrity in medicine, and I found myself wondering how long this state of affairs has existed. Did Hippocrates, the Father of Medicine, accept free meals from the makers of successful and fashionable herbal potions?

The odd thing was that the only time I felt I was doing something useful was when I was selling my orgasm extension remedy.

My patients always came in to see me looking anxious and concerned, and they always left looking relieved and optimistic. There were no risks, no dangers and no downside. None of my patients was ever harmed by my remedy because it contained nothing that could do any harm. A Doctor can’t ask for much more than that.

‘Perhaps, we should explore ways to sell the suppository,’ said Nellie.

I noticed, in passing, that she had turned the first person singular into the first person plural. ‘I’ had become ‘we’. I had no objection to this for I recognised that she was far better able than I to deal with the business side of affairs. Besides, I was beginning to think of us as being in a partnership in all senses of the word.

And, moreover, I found, rather to my surprise, that my feelings towards her were also acquiring a tenderness which I had not previously experienced.

‘The first thing we must do is to give the remedy a memorable name,’ she insisted.

I pointed out that Hercules Tomkins, the bone saw Drummer, had suggested that I call the medicament ‘Dr Bollock’s Stiffness Enhancing Remedy’.

Nellie was not enamoured of this suggestion which she rightly thought might be misleading.

December 16th

I am planning to keep body and soul within calling distance of each other (without spending the remains of the fee paid by the Duke of Somerset) by hiring myself out to act as a medical officer at a variety of sporting events in the region.

Dr Challot used to attend some of these events but he is, I hear, now very much occupied with attempting to deal with all his patients by himself. Dr Mort, not unpredictably, has disappeared.

It is surprising how often the contestants in even the most peaceful sounding activities can be quite severely and unexpectedly injured. The usual fee for attendance now seems to be half a guinea, though for this I am expected to provide whatever Plaisters and other medicaments may be required. At Nellie's insistence, I always packed in my medical satchel around half a dozen packets containing my orgasm remedy. 'You never know when the opportunity might arise to make a sale,' she pointed out.

The first event I was hired to attend was the forthcoming annual Hat Fair in Uncumber-by-Water.

I invited Nellie to accompany me as my assistant. Her main task was to carry my medical satchel and a bag containing a few dozen orgasm remedies. I hoped she might prove to be a successful saleswoman.

Mistress Youngblood, suspecting that my motives were not entirely honour bound, wanted to charge me a shilling for Nellie's time and told me that I could keep her until the following morning for an additional one shilling and six pence. I had to remind her that Nellie no longer worked for the Peacock Inn. I fear Mistress Youngblood is poorly informed for that particular train left the station some time ago.

In preparation for the Hat Fair, I handed Nellie two shillings and sixpence to purchase a new frock and a hat suitable for the occasion. She had only one rather threadbare shift and although it was undoubtedly clean (she washed it every month) it looked what it was: a hand-me-down shift.

Three hours later, she returned carrying a very large, brown paper parcel under her arm and, with some difficulty, also carrying a large, wooden Chair. The parcel was well tied with string. Nellie was still wearing the shift she had been wearing when she'd left but upon her head rested a magnificent creation which was generously decorated with a number of real birds' feathers and two bunches of artificial cherries.

'Whose Chair is that?' I enquired, fearing that she may have appropriated it without the knowledge of the owner.

'It's mine,' she answered immediately. 'It's a very good Chair and I bought it for nine pence.' She put the Chair down and ran the fingers of her spare hand over the back of it admiringly.

And, indeed, it was a very good Chair; well-made, with nicely turned legs and what looked like a very comfortably shaped back.

'Why did you buy a Chair?' I asked.

'It's for my house,' she replied. 'When I have my own house I'm going to fill it with nice things and I'll need a Chair won't I?'

I agreed that a house without at least one Chair would be a very empty place indeed.

'Did you also manage to buy a frock?' I asked. I indicated the parcel she was carrying. 'Is that it?'

She nodded.

'You bought the frock, the hat and the Chair for two shillings and sixpence?'

'I've got four pence halfpenny change,' she said, reaching into a pocket which had been cleverly sewn into a seam of her shift and pulling out the coins. She offered them to me.

'You can keep the change,' I told her, marvelling at the fact that she had bought so much for so little.

'Do you like my hat?' she asked.

'I like it very much. It's a splendid hat.'

'It belonged to a lady,' Nellie told me proudly. 'Lady Farley-Wallop died and left all her clothes and hats to her Maid.'

'And the Maid sold you the hat?'

'And she also sold me the dress which 'aint a frock by the way because it's a dress. It's a very fine dress. It's got pearl buttons made out of real pearl and lace made of real lace.'

'Are you going to unwrap the parcel and let me look at it?'

When Nellie finally succeeded in removing the string from around her parcel (there was a good deal of it) I could see that she was right: it was a very fine dress made of silk in a very fetching watchen blue.

'Will it fit you?' I asked.

'I have to take it in a bit,' replied Nellie. 'But Lady Farley-Wallop's Maid showed me how and gave me a needle and cotton.' She plunged a hand into her pocket again and pulled out a reel of cotton and a needle. 'And she gave me a corset with stays, three pairs of white cotton stockings, a garter and three petticoats fitted with broderie anglaise.'

'But, despite the glory of the dress, it was the Chair of which Nellie was most proud.

December 17th

Resplendent in her new dress and hat, Nellie looked like a duchess when we left the Peacock Inn this morning. I looked down at my faded coat, stained trousers and battered, leaky boots and resolved that I had to do something about improving my appearance.

The Hat Fair in the village of Uncumber-by-Water is an extraordinary event.

Several thousand people come to watch such events as hat trimming and hat hurling and there is also a competition for Best Hat, with a prize of £5 for the winner.

Apart from drinking, skulduggery and horizontal exercises, these events are a honeypot for knaves, blockheads, prating gablers, mangie rascals, slabberdegullions, ninnie lobcocks, doddipol joltheads, grouthead gnatsnappers and noddiespeak simpletons. But events of this nature are the only source of entertainment in the area.

It was the hat hurling event which proved most contentious and left me more than ever convinced that the majority of professional hatters are as mad as March Hares. Maybe there is something in the work they do which contributes to their lunacy. I have heard it said that the Mercury used in their work might contribute to their mental instability but the Royal Physicians, encouraged no doubt by a close and profitable relationship with the Mercury vendors, have confirmed that Mercury is one of the safest and most effective substances available. To reassure the public that the stuff is perfectly safe, one eminent Royal Physician ate four ounces of Mercury in public – and forced his children to each eat a two ounce portion.

As always happens with these events, the Hat Fair was well attended by the usual variety of pie-men, pudding men and gingerbread sellers and a vast gallimaufry of hornswogglers and ghemobole specialists. A number of showmen had also turned up and their colourful wooden caravans and carts were interspersed with a variety of large tents and small marquees. Some of the shows and entertainments offered by these travellers are quite extraordinary.

The sign outside one tent advertised ‘The Pig Faced Lady: The Ugliest Woman in the whole of the South of England’.

Intrigued, I paid my tuppence and entered a poorly lit, evil smelling, fowsty tent in which the strangest creature I have ever seen sat at a wooden Table, the front of which was covered with a red velvet drape so that her legs could not be seen. Her face was badly deformed and she wore a rather moth eaten red wig which did nothing much for her overall appearance. The showman, wearing a black frock coat and a black top hat, both of which had seen much better days, stood to one side and kept up a constant patter, explaining that he had rescued the unfortunate female from a husband who had beaten her, chained her, forced her to work in the fields for 18 hours a day and kept her on a diet of stale bread and old Turnips. From time to time, the showman asked the woman a question about her history. On each occasion the woman grunted something incomprehensible in reply. On the first occasion that this happened, the showman explained that the woman had a malformed jaw which prevented her speaking clearly. He then assured us that he had spent many hours learning to understand her manner of speech. She was, he said, a most intelligent woman who loved nothing more than sitting by the fireside reading an instalment of Mr Dickens’ latest story.

‘I buy her every instalment as it comes out,’ he promised us. ‘I spare no expense to keep this woman content and comfortable.’

‘How extraordinary life can be,’ I thought.

It was not until later that I discovered the full extent of the strangeness of the world populated by fairground people.

The trouble started when Mr Piebellow, an impressively muscular hatter who had thought himself to be the likely winner of the hat hurling contest (with an impressive hurl of three chains and seven yards) accused another competitor, Ezekial Lumpstone, of adding weights to the brim of a hat which had travelled three chains and nine yards, and of thereby taking the two guinea prize by deceit.

Mr Piebellow claimed that he had heard a rumour that Mr Lumpstone had won hat hurling contests all over England by using his especially adapted headgear.

‘That hat has been adulterated!’ cried Mr Piebellow to the judges. ‘It is not a usual hat. It is not a hat which a man could buy in a hat shop. It is not a hat which a man would wear.’

The accusation appeared to be an accurate one, and, indeed, the owner of the adultered hat did not dispute the accuracy.

‘There are no rules outlawing this hat,’ said Mr Lumpstone, holding aloft the winning item of headgear and adding that as far as he knew there were no rules at all in hat hurling events, other than the rule that the prize would be awarded to the owner of the hat which travelled furthest.

However, there had been much betting on the outcome of the competition, and several gentlemen who had been attracted from a cock fight in a nearby hostelry had been passing around large bundles of £5 notes. Many gin soaked oaths were uttered when the word was spread that the contest may have been fixed.

‘Well if there are no rules I could mount my horse with my hat on my head, ride a mile and drop the hat on the ground,’ argued Mr Piebellow. He stuck his hands on his hips and threw out his chest.

‘Oh no you couldn’t!’ objected Mr Lumpstone, wagging a fat finger at the complainant. ‘The competition is a hat hurling event. It is not a ‘carrying a hat on a horse event’.’

By this time, the judges were alarmed by the way things were going and, in an attempt to deflect attention from themselves, asked the organiser of the event (a local brewer) to adjudicate.

The adjudicator, a reluctant umpire, said that he thought that a heavy hat would be more difficult to throw and that, therefore, it seemed to him that Mr Lumpstone had been handicapping himself by adding lead weights to the brim. As a corollary, he added that if Mr Lumpstone had, despite this handicap, managed to hurl his hat further than anyone else, then his hat was the winning hat and he was entitled to the first prize.

Mr Piebellow responded by arguing that the brewer didn’t know what he was talking about and pointed out that a modest increase in the weight of a hat improved the distance it could be thrown.

However, before any reply could be made, Mr Piebellow made a fist and hit the organiser of the event, the adjudicator, firmly on the nose, causing a considerable amount of Bleeding.

Looking back, I think it was this point that marked the moment when things got rather out of hand.

Certainly the two Deaths which occurred followed directly after the punch was thrown.

When I had accepted the commission to act as medical officer for the Hat Fair, I had expected to earn my fee by merely treating a few spectators for injuries sustained as a result of being hit by mis-thrown headgear.

Instead, I found myself dealing with three broken noses, two cracked skulls, three dislocations and four fractured bones; and certifying two Deaths. I think it is proper to point out that the two hat makers who died had nothing to do with the hat hurling event but were both involved in fashionable hat trimming. I regret to say that there was much enthusiastic use of cudgels.

A local undertaker paid me twelve shillings to help him load the two cadavers onto his cart (which he had brought with him more, I suspect, in honest hope than in real expectation) and to provide him with written confirmations of Death. He was in a hurry to take the bodies away, and I was later told by Nellie that she suspected he intended to sell the corpses to those patent medicine manufacturers who use human liver, lung, brain and hair in the preparation of their medicaments.

However, our attendance at the meeting was not unsuccessful.

In addition to the modest fee I was paid for my attendance at the meeting (and which I consider I earned several times over) and the twelve shillings from the undertaker (for certifying and loading) I succeeded in selling seven of my suppositories.

Or maybe that should be ‘we succeeded in selling seven of our suppositories’ for Nellie proved to be an excellent saleswoman, identifying and charming potential buyers with uncanny skill.

At her suggestion, we gave away free condoms (linen or tortoiseshell, according to the purchaser’s choice) with every one of my suppositories. Bought in bulk from one of the local Leech suppliers these lagniappes are an excellent advertisement. Although second-hand, the condoms look to be in fine condition and unless you examine them closely it is difficult to tell that they have been ‘previously enjoyed’, as I think the phrase is.

If things continue to go well, I am thinking of ordering a supply of promotional condoms with my name, or the name of my remedy (when Nellie and I have thought of something suitable) printed along the length of the item.

When I first entered the medical profession, I had no idea that I would one day reach such heights. My father would, I know, burst with pride at the idea of his son’s name being engraved on the side of a tortoiseshell condom.

Indeed, if I had to choose between being awarded a knighthood and having my name engraved along the side of tortoiseshell condoms, the decision would be a fine run thing.

December 18th

Nellie and I travelled an hour and a half by horseback to attend a Dollymop Footrace held in the village of Piddleham. I was delighted that Nellie accompanied me for she has proved herself quite indispensable in many ways. On this occasion, we managed to rent two decent horses from the Ostler at the Peacock Inn. I did not enquire too closely where he had found the horses or to whom they belonged.

The race, organised by the Earl of Leamington Spa, involved twelve dollymops or Whores running around a quarter of a mile track laid out in the parkland of the Earl's estate.

The Whores were dressed only in short shifts, and were expected to run until there was only one of them left standing.

These races have become extraordinarily popular in recent months and are clear evidence of the popularity of athletic events in general and of the rising popularity of women's sport in particular. It is not uncommon for several of the competitors to push themselves so hard that they collapse into unconsciousness. My job was to do my best to keep the Whores running. Each Whore was allowed to pause for two minutes every hour for medical treatment, to take on food or fluid or for publicly consummated calls of nature.

These short breaks are monitored most severely by the seconds appointed by the Earl who takes a close interest in the proceedings.

The prize for the winning Whore was £50 – a huge sum for a dollymop. But the big money was in the betting. The Earl of Leamington Spa had wagered £10,000 on the event (most of it with the Duke of Nettleworth and Baron Bloxwich) and had brought in suitably racy Whores from distant parts of the country. One of the Whores had, it was rumoured, been imported from Paris where she had won a number of similar races, including one which had lasted for the better part of two days.

A huge audience had collected around the perimeter of the course and there was a good deal of gambling done with the bookmakers, some of whom had travelled for half a day to set up their booths. The usual tents and marquees had been set up by travelling showmen, and I noticed that the showman promoting The Ugliest Woman in the Whole South of England (who had been at the Hat Fair) was present.

The event was, in truth, something of a bore for when you have watched a dozen Whores run around a field once, there is little incentive to watch them run around a field a second time. The only difference is that on the second and subsequent laps there was much more huffing and puffing and the pace was noticeably slower.

And by the time they are on their tenth lap, the enthusiasm of the spectator is hard to sustain, even when the exhausted Whores are running half naked and there is a good deal of bouncing and jiggling going on.

After twenty laps, the least fit and the most amply proportioned of the Whores were beginning to weaken and their huffing and puffing had become painfully audible even when they were making their way around the opposite side of the track. They were however, all reluctant to admit defeat since the prize was so great that it would afford the winner an opportunity to retire from personal, physical endeavours and set up her own establishment in a not entirely unfashionable area.

The first dollymop collapsed at the end of the 24th lap and not even a whipping from one of the Duke's whipper inners could encourage her to continue. With her naked posterior well striped she crawled away semi-conscious.

It took nine hours to wear away the other Whores and the winner was not, as had been expected, one of the 13-year-olds who had been entered, and whose slight build was thought to give them an advantage, but a sturdy woman of considerable experience who had been entered by the Duke of Nettleworth and who was fuelled by determination and ambition. (One wag remarked that it was by no means the first time she had been entered by the Duke.)

It was considered a great pity when she collapsed and died just two minutes after winning the event. The prize of £50 was awarded to the runner up, a patently pox ridden red-headed Whore from Shoreditch, though the Duke insisted on claiming the £10,000 wager since there could be no argument that it had been one of his favoured Whores who had won the race.

The day was a great success for Nellie and myself.

Other than insisting that the competing Whores were well supplied with water and roused with salts when they collapsed, I had very little medical work to do. This meant, therefore, that Nellie and I had plenty of time in which to sell our still as yet unnamed remedy.

At the end of half an hour, we had sold all the remedies we had taken with us and I had 24 gold Sovereigns in my pocket.

Hearing that I was a medical man, I had also provided advice and some treatment to a woman with swollen ankles, a man with deafness caused by wax in his ears and three women requiring a remedy for fatness of the whole body. My fees for dealing with these patients amounted to a modest five groats. It was all they could raise. It seems clear to me where the future must now lie.

What a mixture were the folk at this event! The men were a fine aggregation of palliards, priggers, jarkmen and vagabonds and the women were slaistered wantons, slammerkins, dells, bawdy-baskets and doxies.

Finally, a dwarf appeared wanting a remedy for his baldness.

The aroma surrounding the urling reminded me of the smell of the Ugliest Woman in the Whole of the South of England.

'What do you do?' I asked him.

'I'm a stick man,' he replied, as though this ought to be self-explanatory.

Never having heard of this occupation before I asked him to explain what it entailed.

'Have you heard of the Ugliest Woman in the Whole of the South of England?'

I said I had not only heard of her but that I had seen her too.

The dwarf explained that he was actually the owner of the Stall and the Ugliest Woman in the Whole of the South of England, and that the man in the top hat was hired by him for his huckster skills. Prior to working with the bear the huckster had, explained the dwarf, been a professional army recruit who had joined the militia no less than 15 times, receiving ten shillings for signing on before disappearing to another part of the country.

'Why don't you bill her as the Ugliest Woman in the World?' I asked. 'She would surely qualify.'

'Oh the public is very funny about these things,' said the dwarf. 'If I billed her as the Ugliest Woman in the World they would be inclined to disbelieve, to suspect that I was over egging the pudding if you understand my meaning. And they would pass on by. But they will be ready to believe that she must be the Ugliest Woman in the Whole of the South of England, and when they see and they look at her they will say to themselves, 'this woman is surely the ugliest woman in the whole world' and they will be impressed and they will tell their friends to come and see her.'

'Where did you find such a woman?' I asked, impressed at the dwarf's commercial acumen.

'Oh, t'aint a woman at all!' laughed the dwarf. 'She's a brown bear I bought from a traveller in Malmesbury. The traveller used to make her dance but she slowed down too much to dance well enough to draw in the customers. Too old I daresay. The joints seemed a little too sore and creaky.'

He explained, without embarrassment, that he had shaved the bear's face, neck and arms, the only parts of her which were visible, and that he had fitted her with white gloves to disguise her paws which might have given the game away. He said that he sat the bear at a Table draped with a long cloth while he sat underneath the Table with a stick. (Hence he described himself as a 'stick man'.) Whenever the showman asked a question, he poked the bear with the stick. The bear grunted in response to being poked and the showman, the fellow with the top hat, having explained that the 'woman' had malformed jaws which prevented her speaking clearly, 'translated' and made up some suitable remarks.

'How do you keep the bear sitting still?' asked Nellie.

'Gin, ma'am. Half a bucket of gin a day keeps her well satisfied and perfectly still. But she's chained to the Table, a good piece of English oak, just in case she of a sudden takes it into her head to roam.'

'So she doesn't really read Mr Dickens' work?' I said.

The dwarf laughed.

It was a very unpleasant sort of laugh.

Nellie and I agreed that we felt sorry for the unfortunate bear.

I prescribed a honey and dung poultice for the dwarf's baldness and charged him a guinea and a half which he can well afford.

December 19th

Nellie and I decided that if our remedy is to become truly successful we must go to London. It is, after all, in the world's capital city that all business ventures must be tested if they are to thrive. We decided that we would travel by Railway.

When we arrived at the Railway station, I was shocked to see a crowd of gangrels, mostly children, standing outside holding up banners and shouting slogans. 'Shut the Railways!' was the only one I could identify. Two police constables were standing at the back of the crowd looking rather nonplussed. They wore smart blue uniforms with brass buttons.

'What the devil is going on?' I asked one of the constables.

'They're demonstrating against the Railway,' said the taller of the two. He had a very impressive handlebar moustache which must have taken him years to grow and to groom.

'Why don't they like the Railway?' asked Nellie.

'They say the Railway is changing the weather,' replied the officer. 'They're worried about all that grey smoke that comes out of the chimney on the engine. They say it goes up into the sky and forms big, grey clouds.'

I looked up at the sky. There were several big grey clouds visible. It looked like rain. There was no immediate way of knowing whether or not the clouds had been caused by smoke from train engines. Since I could neither see nor hear any trains, it was difficult to say one way or the other.

'Are you going to arrest them?' I asked the policeman, for I was not aware that we were living in a paedarchical society.

He shrugged. 'We've been told they are mostly oddlings, obdurate and easily over-mirthed, and that we must leave them well alone,' he replied, though he could not say why.

One of the ringleaders, a girl of about ten or eleven, had climbed up onto a dog cart which had been left outside the station. She was making a speech. She wore a grubby frock which looked as though it had once been pink in colour, and both she and the garment looked as though they needed a damned good wash. Judging from her speech, she had no doubts that the trains were causing the clouds though she did not waste time providing scientific justification for her opinion.

'We has Sunday afternoons to ourselves,' said the girl with a sniff, 'and when it rained last Sunday it spoilt our fun. We was going to have Maypole dance training with the curate but it was raining and the Vicar's Wife came out and stopped it. She said the grass was too wet. She said it was dangerous 'cus we might slip and fall down. It was the trains what done it because they made the clouds which made the rain. They're ruining my life and I am only ten.' She wiped her nose on her sleeve and burst into tears and, sobbing loudly, had to be helped down out of the dogcart. Through the layer of mud and grime it was possible to see that her face was quite red. She looked very bitter.

'She should be at work,' said Nellie.

It seemed to me that demonstrators are getting younger, increasingly self-centred and more stupid than ever. The grithserjeant agreed with me when I mentioned this to him.

'Oh yes, sir. There's so many of them here that I gather Sir Egbert's factory has had to shut down for the day. Sir Egbert has threatened to sack this lot and to bring in workers from the Continent. French ones I gather.'

The policeman pronounced the words 'Continent' and 'French' with great contempt.

'I cannot see the local population greeting an influx of Froggy workers with much enthusiasm,' he added.

'Shouldn't you do something? Move the demonstrators on? Send them back to work?'

'In due course, sir. In due course.'

'Are the trains still running?' I asked.

'Oh yes, sir. There was some trouble earlier. A couple of the urchins lay down on the track. I think it was their intention to stop the train. But that's all over now.'

'Good heavens. What happened?'

'The train ran straight over them, sir. Cut both of them into three parts. The train driver said he hadn't seen them and if he had seen them he doubts if he'd have been able to stop and if he had been able to stop, he doubts if he would have done. You can't blame him, can you? People who lie down on the tracks must expect to be chopped into three. We can't have people interfering with other folks' lives – especially when the people doing the interfering are children who ought to be at work. There was a short delay while we cleared away the bits and washed the Blood off the rails. The station master said he thought Blood on the rails might make the wheels slip, so my colleague and I washed it off with buckets of water. Things should be running normally now.'

Just then, a small group of men and women arrived. They were, it was soon clear, the parents of the demonstrating, proudworthy children. And two or three minutes later, the entire demonstration was over as children were led, largely by the ears, back to work.

‘I find these things tend to sort themselves out in time,’ said the policeman with the handlebar moustache. ‘Best not to rush in before giving events a chance to unfold of their own accord.’

And as the pseudomaniacs were dragged away, it would have been unreasonable not to agree with him.

Ten minutes later, our train chugged into the station and, having purchased our tickets to the metropolis, we climbed aboard.

December 20th

When we arrived in London, Nellie and I had no idea what to do or where to go.

We found a small boarding house near Paddington Station and rented a squalid little skyparlour about the size of a wardrobe for two shillings a night. The mattress was spunkstained and soggier than marshland and there were neither sheets nor blankets, merely a toralium as thin as paper. The landlady, a woman who looked like a ferret, and a constipated one at that, said we could have breakfast and dinner for another one shilling a day each but Nellie, who had caught sight of the kitchen, thanked her and said we would thribble for ourselves. Nellie is a sharp one for making do and muddling through.

'It would perhaps have saved time to have two meals a day provided for us,' I protested.

'There were two dead dogs in the kitchen,' whispered Nellie, though there was no one around to hear. 'They had been half skinned and were clearly intended to be used in a pie or stew of some kind. Moreover, I saw two large rats sitting on the Table where the cook was preparing food. They were tucking into a loaf of bread and seemed quite at home.'

Leaving our bags in our room (both bags were largely filled with supplies of the orgasm remedy, for Nellie and I had worked solidly for two days to prepare a large supply, more in hope than expectation, of good sales) we went out into the street to explore London, a city neither of us had ever visited before.

The sights before us were a startling revelation. It was difficult to believe that we were still in the same country or, indeed, on the same planet. Everything around us seemed to be brighter, noisier and faster paced. Even the smells seemed that much more pungent and quite impossible to escape.

Within a quarter of a mile of our boarding house, we came across an open space where a group of enterprising travellers had set up a fair ground and the place was more than seemly thrung with knavish titivils, swingebucklers and tittuping girls. Nellie and I gazed about us in astonishment for this was far more dramatic than anything we had ever seen before. It seemed likely that we were the only straight-fingered folk within a mile. There was a fire-eater, a pair of Siamese twins, a man advertised as weighing 55 stone and being 'the fattest man in the world', a fanfaronade which I was quite prepared to believe, and a woman covered in hair who was promoted as 'the baboon lady' and who reminded me of St Uncumber, the bearded woman and benefactress of wives who, according to Sir Thomas More, would, for a peck of oats provide any unfortunate wife with a horse upon which an evil husband could be persuaded to ride to the devil. There was an oyster shell on a Table which smoked a churchwarden Pipe and a tank full of goldfish were taking part in a most convincing naval engagement; towing small boats from which puffs of smoke and small explosions appeared at intervals as tiny fireworks were set off by long fuses.

I spent some minutes puzzling over the oyster but eventually decided that a small boy or a dwarf was doubtless cramped under the Table where the oyster was displayed, puffing away on the Pipe with the aid of a piece of rubber tubing. The flimflam men are nothing if not full of imagination.

A tiny fellow, little more than two and a half feet tall and dressed in red breeches and a red velvet coat, was advertised as the English Tom Thumb, and a placard outside a red and white striped tent promised that inside we would find a three-headed woman. We were assured that every head would reply if spoken to. We watched a man walk behind a wire screen while wearing a top hat. The top hat was visible and a barker was inviting people to throw wooden balls. 'Three balls for a penny. Knock off the top hat and win a guinea.' Lots of people threw balls, a few even hit the hat but no one won the guinea. 'Do you think the hat is glued onto his head?' asked Nellie.

We did not stay long at the fair but noticed a music hall theatre, next to the open space, which had advertisements outside for coming artistes, including a bunch of rough riders from Texas in the United States due to re-enact a battle with a troupe of wild Red Indians. My cynicism led me to wonder where the rough riders and the Red Indians really came from. I suspected that when they went home for Christmas and Mothering Sunday, they probably headed back to Macclesfield or Cirencester.

Everything in London was so much bigger, so much more dramatic and so much more urgent. There were posters everywhere advertising a prize fight and an open air pig roast.

But beneath the colour and the noise there was a clear air of desperation everywhere; as though it were important to everyone that their business, whatever it might be, should be concluded immediately if not much sooner.

In the street, the barkers outside each shop and stall were fired by their own enthusiasms as they shouted louder and louder; each one vainly trying to out-shout the others. It seemed to me that London offered enormous promise. But it also seemed strangely alarming; frightening even. I felt certain that if I could think of a way to promote our remedy it would be possible to sell far more than it had been possible to sell at home or at the country fairs nearby.

'How do we start?' I asked Nellie.

When there was no reply I turned round and saw that she was deep in conversation with a short, squat, balding fellow in a grubby suit who was smoking a huge cigar. I started towards her but halted and waited a moment. The two of them were deep in conversation and I suspected that Nellie was already much closer to finding an answer to my question than I was ever likely to be.

After a couple of minutes, Nellie turned towards me, smiled and beckoned for me to join them.

'This is the man I told you about,' said Nellie, introducing me to the short fellow.

Close up his suit was even grubbier than it had been from a distance. The lapels were well decorated with egg yolk, fat stains and cigar ash. He smelt strongly of Alcohol but did not appear to be unduly under the influence.

It is my experience that some people are easy to like, others are easy to dislike and some, a very few, are easy to loathe. I realise that with some individuals these categories may vary from observer to observer. And they may also vary from time to time. Someone you meet and dislike on Wednesday might have been easy to like if you'd met them on Friday under entirely different circumstances. But there are some individuals who are likeable or unlikeable for everyone, and under virtually any circumstances.

And the short fellow seemed to me to be one of the eternally likeable souls. It occurred to me that if he had wanted to make a living as a confidence trickster he would have undoubtedly been enormously successful.

'This is Mr Binky Beaminster,' said Nellie. 'He is the manager of the theatre.'

'Which theatre?' I asked.

'This one,' said Nellie, turning slightly and pointing to the theatre a yard or two away from us.

'Oh,' I said, feeling about as embarrassed as anyone would feel under the circumstances.

'I have explained our predicament to Mr Beaminster,' said Nellie. 'And he thinks he may be able to help us.'

I listened attentively, and in awe, as she explained that Mr Beaminster's theatre was unexpectedly empty for two days and two evenings and that he was prepared to allow us to have the use of the theatre for the unoccupied dates.

'Mr Beaminster will provide the theatre free of charge if we undertake to give him one half of our gross proceeds,' Nellie explained, as I was about to explain that we did not have enough money to pay to hire the theatre. 'And he will put up posters and use his crier to tour the area promoting the event.'

'You're lucky, there will be a good many people in London,' said Mr Beaminster. 'There is a public execution to be held in Tilbury. They're expecting a quarter of a million spectators, coming in from all over the South of England. It'll be a fine day out for them and a finer day for the pick pockets and Whores.'

'Who is being hung?'

'Elsie Oliphant and her lover Roger Teesdale. They murdered her husband, buried him under the floorboards and moved away when the stench became too much. The landlord found him the same day they moved out and they were arrested living a quarter of a mile away.'

'Not the brightest of God's creatures then?'

Mr Beaminster told us that the crowds love a double hanging.

'The hangman is using a short drop so both of them will be strangled slowly,' he said. 'There'll be big bets laid on which of them stops kicking first. He's a good half a foot taller than her so the big money will be on Elsie.'

It seemed extraordinary to me that people would travel long distances for such barbaric 'entertainment'.

'You'll do well,' said Mr Beaminster. 'Those people who come into London will be looking for some cheap entertainment in the evening. And a good many of them will come to listen to you.'

This all seemed too wonderful to be true until I realised that I had no idea what I was going to say to an audience, or how I could possibly entertain a theatre full of patrons.

'We won't charge anything for admittance,' said Mr Beaminster. 'That'll fill the place up nicely. And I'll get a couple of journalists I know to do a write up for their papers beforehand. That won't be difficult if we get a few celebrities to attend.'

'But we don't know any celebrities!' I pointed out.

'Oh, don't worry about that. I know scores of celebrities who would go to the unveiling of a horse trough if they thought it might mean their getting a mention in one of the newspapers. I know two troubadours, one called Bozo and the other called something else, and a couple of travelling poets, pantywaists the pair of them, who are very effective media influencers.' He smiled knowingly. 'The celebrities will come if I tell them that there will be journalists there and the journalists will turn up if they know there are going to be celebrities present. These journalists and celebrities are a band of scofflaws, screelpokes and scobberlotchers but they can all be bought for a modest price. I know a couple of artists who'll come along, hang around outside the entrance and sketch famous people as they go in.' He suddenly stopped as a thought occurred to him. 'And I'll invite a couple of clergymen. They'll happily turn up for a chance to promote themselves.'

I did not quite see how we were going to be helped by self-promoting clergymen but the theatre manager was so enthusiastic that I did not like to say anything sceptical. Besides, I now had the added problem of thinking of something to say to the journalists. No one else seemed in the slightest bit concerned by my uncertainties.

'We'll clean up!' Mr Beaminster assured us. 'The Reverend Cedric Callwallader's limited orgasm theory has been the talk of London for weeks. He and his Wife Henrietta have been filling lecture halls all over the city. Of the two of them, Mistress Henrietta Callwallader has been particularly active. What a harridan she is! Men everywhere are counting their orgasms and limiting their encounters to preserve their sexual longevity. Mistresses and Whores are complaining bitterly that business has never been slower. The punters will turn up in their droves. And the Whores will buy the stuff themselves to present to their best clients.'

'When is the theatre going to be free?' I asked, hesitantly.

'Tomorrow!' said Nellie brightly. 'Isn't that wonderful? If things go as well as Mr Beaminster expects he will fix us up with other odd nights in theatres and pubs in and around London.'

'How the devil am I going to entertain a whole theatre audience?' I asked.

'Not a problem,' Mr Beaminster assured me, with far greater confidence than I felt. 'We are going to create an extravaganza. I know half a dozen actors and actresses who are resting at the moment.'

Puzzled, I looked at him.

'How it works is very simple,' said Mr Beaminster. 'They sit in the audience and you call them on stage one at a time to tell you how your product has changed their lives. What's your product called?'

'We haven't got a name for it, yet,' I said, feeling rather foolish.

'Oh you must have a name,' said Mr Beaminster. 'And a good name!'

"Dr Bullock's Remedy for Active Gentlemen",' replied Nellie instantly. She looked at me for approval.

I smiled. 'Perfect!'

'Splendid!' said Mr Beaminister. 'Dr Bollock's Remedy for Active Gentlemen'.'

'Bullock,' I said, correcting him.

He looked at me. 'Oh, I think not!' he said. 'Dr Bollock's Remedy for Active Gentlemen' sounds considerably more convincing and memorable.'

And I suspect he is right.

On the way back to our boarding house we bought a haggis from a street vendor. This is, it appears, a dish popular with the natives of Scotland, and the vendor explained that it consists of Blood pudding rolled in lard and baked in a sheep's stomach. We also bought two pickled rams' testicles. We washed down this challenging feast with two large glasses of potato and caraway schnapps.

We both enjoyed the schnapps but found both the haggis and the pickled rams' testicles to be something of an acquired taste. I would have preferred a chunk of good cheese and a loaf of bread.

December 22nd

To my astonishment, our first day in the theatre proved to be a sensational success. It was, indeed, so successful that we sold out of our stocks of Dr Bollock's Remedy for Active Gentlemen. The following morning Nellie and I had to rush around pharmacies buying up the ingredients we needed to make another batch. At Nellie's suggestion we bought the ingredients we needed at half a dozen establishments to prevent anyone working out the composition of the Remedy.

The four actors and three actresses we hired were so utterly convincing that we hired them for a month to tour London with us. One of the actors actually cried on stage when he had finished explaining how the Remedy had changed his life for the better. Since, at the time, he hadn't even seen an example of the Remedy this was impressive. The actresses were marvellous too. One, a diminutive redhead who was, we were told, well-known to have formerly been occupied as the mistress of a prominent politician, managed a combination of coquettishness and gratefulness which seemed to me to be most convincing.

As promised, the event was attended by a vast number of well-dressed gentlemen and a good number of elegantly attired women who didn't look as if they spent their evenings serving mead in a tavern or looking after squabbling infants in a back street hovel.

My delight at the success we seemed to be enjoying was tempered only by the newspaper coverage.

The Daily Telegraph and Courier ran a large story on its front page in which an anonymous writer sneered at the Remedy and quoted extensively one of the media influencers who had been introduced to us by the theatre manager.

'Dr Bollock's Remedy for Active Gentlemen' will put at risk the purity of London womanhood!' warned a Reverend Adcock who seemed keen to share the limelight with the Reverend Cadwallader. 'This product will release the previously contained urges and unnaturally overzealous desires of thousands of men. London will henceforth be a dangerous and exhausting place for wives and mistresses as men unleash their desires and unburden themselves of their insatiability.'

And on and on it went.

The appropriately named Reverend Adcock had not felt at all constrained and he had let himself go on at some considerable length about the danger the remedy posed to the people of London and England. For some reason he did not seem unduly concerned about the welfare of the men and women of Wales or Scotland.

Nellie and I were quite upset when we read the Reverend Adcock's diatribe, but we were even more horrified when we read the editorial in *The Times* newspaper. *The Times* had carried a fairly straightforward description of the Remedy on its news pages, quoting at length the contributions made by the hired actors and actresses and the three clergymen who had been invited to attend. They had even quoted at some length from my own description of the Remedy's effectiveness. One Doctor had been reported to have dismissed my Remedy as 'yet another patent medicine which will be crowding the shelves of low pharmacies throughout the land' and another, taking entirely the opposite view, had welcomed a responsibly prepared medicament to counter the anxieties caused by the threatening nonsense talked by the Reverend Cedric Cadwallader. But the editorial writer seemed content to concentrate on the warnings of the doryphores and their hysterical threats outlining the hazards our simple remedy posed to the community.

'This is awful!' I said to the theatre manager.

'We'll go back to the country and you can find work as an assistant,' said Nellie, in an attempt to cheer me up. 'There must be loads of apothecaries who need assistants,' she added optimistically.

The theatre manager looked at us both as if we were stark raving mad. 'What the devil are you on about?' he demanded. 'This is the best publicity you could have hoped for.' He rubbed his hands and told us that he had it on good authority that both I and Dr Bollock's Remedy for Active Gentlemen were due to be praised to the skies or damned to the depths in a variety of other publications including *The Strand*, *The News of the World*, *The Examiner*, *John Bull Magazine* and the *Illustrated London News*.

'Do you mean it doesn't matter what they say as long as they say something?' asked Nellie.

'Your Wife has hit the nail squarely on the head!' said Mr Beaminster with a big grin, as he hurried off to attend to something unspecified.

What the theatre manager said was important, of course, but it was only the second word of the sentence that either of us heard.

'I never said anything that might have encouraged him to think that we were…' began Nellie.

'I liked the way it sounded,' I said, interrupting.

We looked at each for a moment. We hugged and kissed. And three hours later I gave a crisp five pound note to a Clergyman.

We were married in the Church of St Dympna where the 83-year-old Sexton, deaf as a post and as speedy as an arthritic three-legged tortoise, was my Best Man and his 81-year-old Wife was Nellie's Bridesmaid, although for some reason the old lady seemed to think that Nellie was a young Queen Victoria and the ceremony was the young Queen's Coronation.

After the ceremony, we gave the Best Man and the Bridesmaid a guinea each. We bought Charlie, our King Charles Spaniel, a large bone from a nearby butcher. All three seemed well delighted. But none was as delighted as Nellie and me.

December 25th

Since it was Christmas Day I ate and drank too much and my wife had to put a toads' tongue poultice on my head to ease the symptoms. I had much wind and blew out many candles in error. I gave Nellie a new hat for Christmas and she gave me a pair of new boots.

December 28th

The theatre manager's optimism proved to be well founded.

Dr Bollock's Remedy for Active Gentlemen became the talk of London, and Nellie and I were kept busy ten hours a day making up batches of the suppository. We were selling as many Remedies as we could make and, at Nellie's suggestion, we raised the price to ten guineas and abandoned the idea of giving away linen or tortoiseshell condoms.

When our brief engagement at the Music Hall Theatre had finished, we moved to another lecture hall for another two days. The manager of the Music Hall Theatre confessed that he had made more money out of our arrangement than he could have hoped to make from a full house of the music hall. I had not realised just how popular evening lectures had become – particularly free ones.

After two nights, Nellie and I moved out of the boarding house we had found when we'd first arrived in London and moved into a spacious but absurdly expensive suite at Brown's Hotel. I convinced myself that the expense was necessary because we needed the space to prepare the suppositories. We arranged for the manager to place two additional Tables in our living room and tipped him generously.

We became almost accustomed to seeing real celebrities in the audience.

At one event, Nellie spotted Mr Charles Dickens listening avidly. Afterwards, Mr Dickens came backstage and offered me valuable advice on presentation. It was he who suggested that I use a lectern as a prop. He is a lovely man and he happily gave Nellie his autograph. She says she thinks it may one day be valuable and I suspect she is right.

A surprising number of eminent medical men came to see me at the events we organised. I remember vividly meeting a Dr Roget, who told me that he had for some time been working on a special dictionary which he plans to call his 'Thesaurus'. I confess I did not understand what it was about but he is convinced that when it is finished it will prove to be every bit as popular as *Dr Johnson's Dictionary*. He bought two copies of 'Dr Bollock's Remedy for Active Gentlemen' and promised to send me a copy of his 'Thesaurus' when it is finished.

I was told that the Duke of Wellington, the diminutive Iron Duke himself, had sent an assistant to one of our events to purchase a supply of 'Dr Bollock's Remedy for Active Gentlemen'. And it was no surprise to anyone that Mr Gladstone and Lord Palmerston had purchased supplies. Nellie approached both gentlemen for endorsements but although Lord Palmerston's aide said the good Lord had given the suggestion serious thought, nothing came of the idea.

Much of the press coverage was negative but to our surprise we discovered that the worse the attacks were the more suppositories we sold. Articles praising Dr Bollock's Remedy for Active Gentlemen did relatively little for sales but whenever a Clergyman or moral crusader attacked the Remedy our sales rose, in some cases quite dramatically.

A number of magazines asked me to contribute articles or to provide lists of my favourite recipes, music hall acts and other things. I was on two occasions asked to provide my advice for 'Healthy living' and I hired a journalist with *The Times* to write these articles and to put my name on them. I did not see the point in taking part in these things but Nellie insisted that I should do so, always as Dr Bollock. She argued that the publicity would help promote the Remedy, and the evidence proved her right.

After the success of London, we decided that a tour of the provinces might be successful. After some consideration, we decided that the entire tour should be done by Railway, and so we planned to visit only those towns and cities which had Railway stopping points. We announced that we would talk about the Remedy in Birmingham and Manchester and travel to all the spa towns such as Bath Spa and Leamington Spa. It seemed likely that the hypochondriacs attracted to those bathing places might prove to be good customers. We planned to rent lecture halls and theatres rather than giving the owners a share of the profits. Nellie thought that this would be much more profitable.

Nellie and I hired the actors and actresses who had been so successful on our first nights in London and arranged for them to travel with us, together with two troubadours and the two poets who acted as our liaison officers with the local newspapers. One of the poets, whose name was Theophilis Theophrastus, called himself our Publicity Relationship Officer. Nellie, who had become the de facto manager of the entire enterprise, and had proved adept at every aspect of the business, also hired a well-known journalist to write a dozen unsolicited testimonials which could be used for marketing.

But, immediately after our Grand Tour was announced and promoted in the national Press, we received a substantial offer for the rights to Dr Bollock's Remedy for Active Gentlemen. Excited by the publicity we were getting, a large and successful Patent Medicine Company offered the huge sum of £15,000 for the right to sell the product exclusively.

Naturally, the company wanted details of the recipe.

The pessary I had originally prepared as a contraceptive contained a number of ingredients. The base ingredients were glycerine and cocoa butter with nutmeg. Tobacco and ground orange peel were added to this. On a whim I had added a little senna, some soap shavings and a good portion of gentian root. I had also added a good portion of duck fat and ear wax to help give the pessary a better shape and form.

‘We need additional ingredients,’ I said to Nellie. ‘If the company realises that the recipe consists only of the ingredients we currently use they will see very little value in the product.’

‘So maybe we need two or three more ingredients,’ she suggested wisely. ‘That will convince them that the product must be effective.’

And so, after some thought, we decided to add ginger, peppermint, cranberry, chaste tree berry, ginseng and garlic to the mixture and to add a little more wax to the jelly of the suppository.

We are confident that the change will in no way damage the efficacy of the product.

We have cancelled our tour which now seems unnecessary.

December 30th

Another company has now offered to purchase Dr Bollock's Remedy for Active Gentlemen, and Nellie and I are allowing the two competing companies to push up the price.

December 31st

We have now sold ‘Dr Bollock’s Remedy for Active Gentlemen’ for the splendid sum of £25,000 plus a royalty on every single Remedy sold. The company which bought the Remedy is arranging its own nation-wide tour and has hired the performers we had selected for our own proposed tour.

Epilogue

With a relatively small portion of the money we were paid for ‘Dr Bollock’s Remedy for Active Gentlemen’, Nellie and I have purchased a Manor House in the West Country. The House comes with several cottages and half a square mile of moorland, woodland and pastureland. We have also purchased a trap, a gig, a brougham and seven horses and Nellie is in the process of appointing indoor and outdoor staff. Nellie pointed out with some delight that we now have somewhere to put her Chair. There is plenty of space within which Charlie, the King Charles Spaniel, can take the exercise he so much enjoys and my old Bess, now retired from her equine labours, has a field and a stable to herself.

On Nellie’s recommendation, we have invested the remainder of our money in Government bonds which will pay an income quite sufficient for us to live very comfortably.

To our surprise, several patent medicine companies have asked us to prepare new products. One has requested that we prepare a Dr Bollock’s pessary to help older women look and feel younger.

We have, however, turned down all these suggestions for we intend to enjoy a quiet and contented early retirement. I intend to become a gentleman farmer and shall, therefore hire men to do the farming and a bailiff to ensure that they do whatever it is they need to do. Since we also own a large stretch of a river, and two lakes, I also intend to take up fishing. I have hired a water bailiff to ensure there are fish available but I will do the fishing myself.

Nellie is expecting our first child. If it is a boy we intend to call him Binky after Binky Beaminster, the theatre manager who was so helpful to us.

Dr Challot is still working as an apothecary in Muckleberry Peverell. Dr Mort, whose father lost all his money after unsuccessful investments in the railway companies, is now working full time as Dr Challot’s apprentice. Unable to afford to rent my old room at the Peacock Inn, Dr Mort lives in the attic at Dr Challot’s residence and survives on a diet of Mistress Swain’s Turnip soup.

If you enjoyed this book we would be enormously grateful if you would write a short review.

Vernon Coleman is the author of 100 books. For a list of books available please see either www.vernoncoleman.com or Vernon Coleman’s author page on Amazon.

GETTING INTO PRACTICE

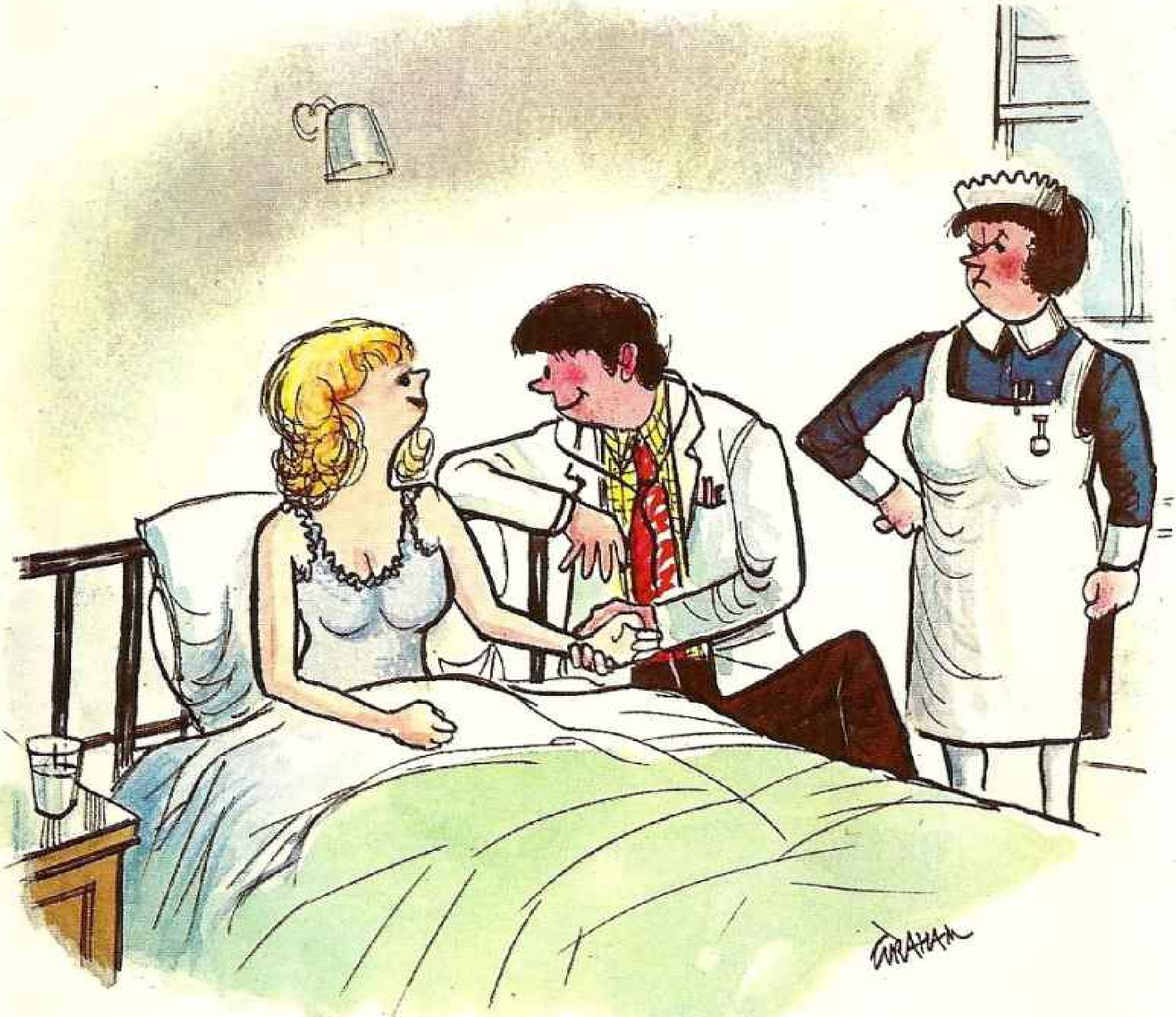

Edward Vernon

GETTING INTO PRACTICE

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Chapter One

The human body can lose a lung, a kidney, half a stomach, several feet of intestine, four-fifths of the pancreas, three quarters of the liver and two pints of blood and still function normally. Modern engineers may feel proud of the fail-safe mechanisms they build into their machines, and may boast about the back-up systems and reserves of power which their designs incorporate, but few man-made machines can match the human body. What other delicate systems operate so effectively in such extremes of temperature, humidity and gravitational pressure? What other piece of sophisticated machinery will continue working more or less normally with its external appearance altered almost beyond recognition and its constituent parts battered, reorganised and partly destroyed?

Of course, even the human body has its limits. There is a point when damage becomes too great for the system to bear and injured parts threaten the viability of the whole.

The motor-cyclist, still lying on the trolley upon which the ambulance crew had wheeled him into the casualty department, had been part of the way across the line which divides the living from the dying when he had arrived at the hospital. In the three or four minutes since then it had become clear to everyone that the crossing was nearly complete.

The duty casualty surgeon, Martin Crisp, needed no such reminders. Short, red-haired and looking younger even than his twenty-five years, Dr Crisp was concerned less with the physiological miracles which had kept his patient alive than with the fact that without a few more miracles he was unlikely to remain alive for very much longer. And there was not only the motor-cyclist to be dealt with; the casualty department was crowded with the injured and the ill, and their relatives and friends. Even at two o'clock on a Sunday morning a city-centre hospital can rely on getting plenty of business.

Dr Crisp had been on duty for eighteen hours, and for the last eight he'd been on his own. Theoretically he was able to call on another junior doctor to help him if things got too busy; in practice no one ever took advantage of the arrangement. The other doctors sleeping in the hospital had been working all night when Dr Crisp had come on duty, and in six hours' time they would again start a twenty-four hour shift.

I was the only other figure in casualty wearing a white coat, and, although it may have seemed that I was destined to play some active role in the night's continuing drama, the truth was that most of the patients probably knew far more about what was going on than I did. This was my first rich raw taste of clinical medicine, my first experience of real live patients. And, amidst the noise, the cries, the screams, the complaints and the moanings, I felt frozen inside a shell of fear and awe. Frozen stiff and uncertain, like a hare caught midway across a country road in the headlights of an oncoming car.

Dr Crisp had been examining the abdomen of a sevenyear-old boy with suspected appendicitis when the motorcyclist had been brought in. The boy had been in pain for several days, but Crisp decided there was no need to wake the surgeon and have the operating-theatre opened up. He scribbled a note on the boy's admission record and left instructions for his temperature to be taken and his pulse counted in an hour's time.

The motor-cyclist had been in collision with an electricity sub-station. The policeman who had accompanied the ambulance to the hospital, reported that, since the substation was some fifteen feet from the road when the cyclist had collided with it, and since no other vehicles were involved, it was his belief that the cyclist had been under the influence of alcohol when the accident had occurred. He was now waiting ghoulishly to try to persuade Dr Crisp to allow him to catch a few of the injured rider's precious and irregular exhalations in his breathalyser bag. Dr Crisp had pointed out that, whatever happened, the motor-cyclist wouldn't be riding or driving any sort of vehicle for at least six months, so that he felt it unlikely that permission would be granted for any official investigations. Those weren't his exact words, but under the circumstances his remarks were perhaps excusable. The policeman, unmoved, stayed where he was.

For the past five hours I'd stood and watched as Dr Crisp had dealt with a fifteen-year-old girl who had taken an overdose of her mother's arthritis pills, a sixty-four-year-old man who'd had a heart attack while playing dominoes in a working-men's club, a middle-aged woman who'd been knocked over by a cyclist and had cut her leg, a four-yearold boy who'd fallen out of a bedroom window and fractured his skull, a twenty-eight-year-old man who'd been given a black eye and a nose-bleed in a fight, a two-year-old with colic, a seventy-three-year-old man with a sprained arm, a woman having a miscarriage, a boy with mumps, a boy with a headless drawing-pin stuck in his bottom, an old man with chest pains, a baby girl with a half-sucked sweet stuck in her ear, and an assortment of other patients bringing with them a good variety of ailments, both real and imaginary. The old man with chest pains and the sixtyfour-year-old domino player had both died. The rest had been either treated and sent home or admitted to hospital and bedded down for the night. Now Dr Crisp had the boy with abdominal pains, the motor-cyclist, the boy's semihysterical mother, a fourteen-year-old girl with a graze on her forehead, a drunk with a black eye, a woman with swollen ankles and considerable difficulty in getting her breath, and an old man with wax in his ears to deal with. The motor-cyclist, unconscious, bleeding and hardly recognisable, had all his attention for the moment.

My sense of complete and utter uselessness was matched only by my admiration for Dr Crisp. I had no idea how he kept going, let alone managed to make diagnoses and prescribe treatments, in the midst of such confusion. I'd rather have tried to thread a needle on a roller-coaster. At that moment I wished I'd elected to study law, architecture, French literature in the seventeenth century, or sewage disposal — anything, in fact, other than medicine.

He'd put a drip in the motor-cyclist's arm and begun pouring fluids into the collapsed and drained circulatory system; he'd taken blood samples to determine the blood group, in preparation for a transfusion; and he'd already discovered that the patient had a fractured femur, a fractured pelvis, several fractured ribs, probably a ruptured spleen, some internal cerebral bleeding and multiple superficial cuts and abrasions. He'd telephoned for an anaesthetist and a neurosurgeon, and had asked for the radiographer to be called into the hospital to take X-rays which would help him tell just how many other bones were broken. The radiographer, who'd been into the hospital twice already that night, was at home two miles away and would take ten minutes or so to arrive. The anaesthetist lived in the doctors' quarters and would be in the casualty department within half that time. The neurosurgeon, needed to make burr holes in the patient's skull and drain out blood threatening to do permanent damage to his brain, lived thirty-five miles away and would take about an hour. It was Dr Crisp's job to keep the patient alive long enough for them all to arrive. The neurosurgeon, a cautious, pessimistic man, would telephone three times on the way to the hospital to see if his journey was still necessary.

I hadn't seen the woman with the raffia basket come in, and I jumped when she tapped me on the shoulder.

'I wonder if you'd mind giving me a prescription for this.' She took from her pocket a piece of stained material which she held under my nose. It didn't smell too good.

'It's a discharge,' she explained. 'I've had it for a month.' She turned the material over so that I could examine the other side. 'I knew you wouldn't have time to examine me.' She bent a little closer and whispered, 'And I'm a bit shy anyway.'

'I'm not a doctor,' I told her. 'You'll have to go and see your own doctor on Monday.'

'He's never there. Just give me something for it.' She folded up the piece of material and put it back into her pocket.

'I don't know what it is,' I said.

'It's the gusset out of my pants.'

'The discharge,' I said. 'I don't know what that is.'

'Nasty,' she said. 'Very nasty.'

'You'll have to take it to your own doctor on Monday morning,' I told her firmly.

She swore loudly. Clutching her basket she stalked indignantly out of the casualty department. As she disappeared I shrank closer to the wall, in an attempt to disappear completely from view. It was all like some outrageous nightmare. The noise, the speed, the confusion and the smells never seemed to stop. There was no reason for me to stay. I'd gone there simply because I wanted to see what it was like. I had no role to play. I didn't even have to attend as a spectator. But I couldn't leave. It horrified me, but it hypnotised me.

This was my life. This was the way I'd chosen to spend the years stretching in front of me. And it was nothing like the medicine I'd dreamt of; nothing like the medicine I'd seen practised by our family general practitioner; nothing like the medicine I'd dreamt about practising; and nothing like the medicine I'd expected to meet as I'd struggled through the two long years of pre-clinical training. It was real and yet unreal, true and yet not possible. I watched without seeing as the young boy with abdominal pain vomited straight across the policeman's shoes. It was happening a million miles away from me and I was no part of it all.

Suddenly there was a cry from the young nurse who'd been given the task of keeping an eye on the motor-cyclist while Dr Crisp completed his telephone calls.

'What is it?' asked Dr Crisp. He put his hand over the mouthpiece and turned round to look.

The nurse, no more than eighteen-years-old, said nothing. She'd paled, and looked as though she needed to hold on to the trolley in order to stand upright.

'Quick as you can,' murmured Dr Crisp, taking his hand away from the telephone, listening for a moment and then throwing the receiver carelessly back on to the rest. He strode quickly across to the trolley and peered over at the motor-cyclist. I strode timidly forward a yard or two, trying to mirror the casualty doctor's unhurried style. The motor-cyclist had stopped breathing.

'Cardiac arrest,' called Dr Crisp over his shoulder. He leant across and thumped the rider on the chest with unexpected ferocity. The mother of the small boy with abdominal pain screamed and the girl with the grazed forehead fainted, sinking gracefully to the ground. The policeman edged nervously towards her but was beaten to it by the old man with wax in his ears, who carefully straightened out her dress and pushed his folded raincoat underneath her head. The young nurse abandoned Dr Crisp, the motor-cyclist and the trolley and disappeared into sister's office; moments later she reappeared with the casualty sister. Thirty-something, single, forbidding and with a reputation for efficiency, the casualty sister had a sheaf of papers in her left hand and a ballpoint pen in her right. Even casualty medicine involves a good deal of administration. She handed the forms and the pen to the young nurse and moved forward to Dr Crisp. The trolley's brakes weren't working properly and each time Dr Crisp thumped the man's chest the trolley slid away from him.

‘Come here,’ called the sister, catching sight of me. More frightened of her than of the drama around the motorcyclist, I hurried forward.

‘Take his feet,’ she ordered, ‘and watch the drip.’

I obeyed, and the three of us lifted him off the trolley and laid him down on the floor. The tube from the drip-bottle only just reached that far and was stretched taut.

‘Where’s the defibrillator?’ asked Dr Crisp.

‘On Wellington Ward,’ said the sister. ‘Two porters are bringing it up when they have a moment.’

‘Tea-time, I suppose,’ said Dr Crisp drily. He was still banging at the man’s chest with his closed fist. The motorcyclist now had a tube down his throat and the sister was squeezing a black rubber bag. I had no idea how the tube had got there or what the black rubber bag was for. I was terrified of getting in someone’s way.

‘I hear Mike Entwhistle’s passed his fellowship,’ said the sister.

‘Must be giving it away with cornflakes this year,’ said Dr Crisp. ‘I don’t reckon much to this poor bugger’s chances.’

‘He’s marrying Helen Warburton.’

‘I thought they were married already. They’ve been living together long enough.’

‘We could do with another monitor in case,’ said the sister. ‘They’ve had ours in the unit for two days now.’

‘There’s one on the defib trolley, isn’t there?’

‘If it’s got a plug on.’

‘Don’t kneel in that sick,’ warned Dr Crisp. He was too late; the sister, who’d knelt in the corner of the young boy’s vomit, flicked distastefully at the hem of her dress.

The defibrillator and monitor arrived on a small trolley pushed by two lethargic porters. ‘Somebody order this?’ asked one of them.

‘Plug it in,’ said Dr Crisp. He paused for a moment and felt the motor-cyclist’s wrist. He looked at the casualty sister and shook his head. Turning round he took two paddles which looked rather like table-tennis bats off the trolley. He was smearing them with grease when a tall bespectacled woman in a white coat and the remains of a bouffant hairstyle hurried into the arena. Her coat was fastened only at the top and bottom, and in between could be seen a pale blue nylon nightdress.

‘He arrested a couple of minutes ago,’ explained Dr Crisp.

‘I’m waiting for the neurosurgeon. Motor-cyclist. He’s in a bit of a mess.’

‘You can save the electricity,’ said the newcomer, shining a thin pencil torch into the patient’s eyes.

Dr Crisp paused with the paddles held an inch or two above the motor-cyclist’s chest.

The woman put her torch back into the top pocket of her white coat and hurried off. Behind her there lingered a haunting smell of horse chestnuts. Dr Crisp tossed the Vaseline-laden paddles back on to the trolley and moved away from the motor-cyclist. Then, changing his mind, he picked them up again and, holding one in each hand, leant over the patient. ‘Stand back,’ he shouted. He held the paddles against the man’s chest. Nothing happened.

‘It hasn’t got the right plug on it,’ said the sister. ‘It’s not switched on.’

‘Oh shit,’ said Dr Crisp. ‘Let’s have a cup of coffee.’

He turned away from the motor-cyclist and began to move towards the office. ‘Do you know what his name was?’ he asked the sister. ‘I’d better write something on his notes.’

Chapter Two

I remember very little of my first two years at medical school. They were dull preparatory years, crowded with theory and facts, with lists of arteries, veins and nerves, and with bone-dry descriptions of the human skeletal system. There were some memorable moments which signified my progress from schoolboy to student. There was the time when I first entered the medical-school dissecting-room and saw and smelt the rows of preserved bodies awaiting our brand-new scalpels. And there was the day when I first saw my name on the noticeboard where there were pinned lists of students successful in the examinations which marked the dividing-point between pre-clinical students, confined to the study of dead bodies, preserved organs and chemicals in test-tubes, and clinical students, allowed to mix with, talk to and even touch real patients. That was the moment when I first became aware of the fact that I was on my way to becoming a doctor. And it was then, rather than when I first entered medical school, that I first began to understand that the metamorphosis from student to doctor, from human being to medicine-man, is a painful and enervating business; that it's not simply a series of rugby matches, noisy parties and imaginative pranks, and that it involves despair, frustration and heartache more than the enjoyment of draught beer and permissive nurses.

But the landmarks were relatively few. The long hours spent poring over anatomy textbooks and brightly illustrated maps of the human body are now no more than a blurred memory. That first night in the casualty department, however, is etched on my memory as if on steel. Among my convictions there is none that could be described as religious, but by morning I felt myself in need more of spiritual support than technical knowledge.

Those memorable hours came at the end of my very first week as a clinical student. It was early autumn when I'd returned to the medical school after my last long summer holiday. I'd spent the first half of it driving a delivery van for a grocer and the second half spending the money I had earned. Five days in Paris and then twelve in the Italian sunshine had done little to prepare me for life as an embryonic healer.

First there was the equipment to be bought. Within forty minutes I had acquired two smart white coats, a plastic name-badge with EDWARD VERNON stamped on it in black, a brand-new plastic stethoscope lying on a polystyrene bed in a smart blue and white cardboard box, an ophthalmoscope in a grey plastic box, a black plastic patella-hammer and a pencil torch with a clip. It was all rather like acquiring a 'doctor kit' and, although none of us knew how to use the equipment we had bought, we nevertheless displayed it all in our white coat pockets with considerable skill, the stethoscope dangling from one large pocket and the patellahammer and ophthalmoscope standing upright in the other. Suddenly we really felt like medical students.

At our first lecture we were all told to remove our shirts. Female medical students were not exempt, although none removed more private garments. In those days no girl went without a bra if she had anything to put in one. Then we divided into pairs and listened to each other's heart. Or at least we tried to listen to each other's heart. It must have been a comical sight. Fifty yards of plastic tubing connecting fifty pairs of chests, and a hundred pairs of ears straining to gather in the sounds of a hundred thumping hearts.

The next lesson was even more traumatic. We were all issued with short lengths of rubber tubing, syringes, needles, balls of cotton wool and small glass bottles. Several huge bottles of methylated spirit were placed on tables around the room. And then we were told to take blood from each other. At that moment there must have been at least ninety future surgeons and physicians who'd willingly have picked up their shirts and run had they not been more frightened of the clinical lecturer than of the needles. The fellow with whom I'd found myself paired for the first part of the exercise stared at me with a mixture of fear and revulsion. I stared back at him with similarly mixed emotions. We had to attack each other in cold blood, if you will pardon the expression, and move five millilitres of blood from the warm and comfortable veins in which it flowed to the glass bottle with which we'd been provided. The experiment was intended to teach us something of the rudiments of blood-letting, but it had a more practical purpose. The medical school wished to make sure that all students entering the final three years of the course were fit and able to continue their studies. I thought at the time that they were reluctant to allow anyone not in perfect health to enter such an exhausting profession. With the more cynical but more practical eye of age I now believe they simply wanted to ensure they didn't waste time and money training students not fit enough to last the course.

Tying one of the lengths of red rubber tubing around his own upper arm, the lecturer demonstrated the existence of fat, rich veins in what we knew to be the antecubital fossa. With a calmness and true scientific detachment which mesmerised us, he then pushed a needle into the largest and most pregnant-looking vein and withdrew half a syringeful of blood. It was an awesome sight. Three potential doctors fainted. Today one of them is a successful registrar in general surgery.

At first I could hardly believe his claim that taking blood is sometimes much harder than it looks. After all, all of us have over a gallon of it sloshing around inside us, and you'd think that some of it would be glad of a chance to get away. I know that, if I just nick myself with a razor when shaving, the stuff is lapping around my ankles before I know where I am. Oddly enough, however, the lecturer insisted that getting blood out of some people is rather like getting orange juice out of a lemon.

He explained that it's important to be able to tell the difference between a vein, an artery and a nerve because, If you hit an artery, someone may be injured by the plunger of the syringe as it whistles across the ward and, if you hit a nerve, the court-case may coincide with your holiday.

'If the blood which fills your syringe is bright red,' he warned us, 'you've probably hit an artery, and I suggest you whistle nonchalantly and stick your finger on the place where the bruise is going to be. If you hit a nerve the patient will let you know. And get your sample-bottle ready,' he pleaded. 'There's nothing more embarrassing than filling your syringe and having nowhere to put the blood.' He also told us that, if the patient is ordered to keep his arm folded up, the bruise which he can show his relatives will be considerably smaller than it might otherwise have been.

And, with this far too brief introduction, we were freed to attack each other.

Three times my partner tried to remove blood from my arm. Three times he failed. And I began to wish that I possessed a surname which had not coupled me with such a brutal and unskilled surgeon. Moreover, I never got a chance to practise my own skills on him; with my needle still a yard away from its target, he fainted.

By the time he'd recovered we were all busy wielding our small plastic hammers and hitting each other in the most extraordinary places. There are reflexes to be obtained in the ankle as well as the knee, in the arms as well as the legs. There's even a reflex to be obtained from the nose. And the other end of the hammer, sharpened to a pencilpoint, can be used to elicit reflexes from the abdominal muscles and the feet. The human body, as we quickly learnt, is a veritable library of programmed movements, and the absence of one or the heightening of another will enable the skilled clinician to arrive at a diagnosis. Not, of course, that we knew what we were doing. We might just as well have been tickling each other with ostrich feathers.

We peered into the depths of each other's eyes and ears, prodded each other's abdomen in search of kidneys and spleens, counted each other's ribs, waved fingers before each other's eyes and tested hearing by listening to each other's watch ticking. We took each other's blood-pressure, examined each other's eyesight and gazed unhappily down each other's throat. We listened to the sound of air rushing in and out of chests, measured pulses and measured them again after ten minutes' hectic exercise, got each other to touch his toes and even looked up each other's nose. After two days we had at least learnt a great deal about each other, even if we hadn't learnt enough about the human body. The natural human reluctance to touch another person intimately without any sexual overtones had been at least partially overcome. For most of us it was the first time we had touched the naked torso of a member of the same sex. There is more to a medical education than learning the physiology of the liver or the anatomy of the skull.

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At the end of the first week we had still not seen a genuine patient upon whom we could practise our newly acquired skills. We'd been teased and tempted and were now ready for some real clinical medicine. Or so we thought. Eager for a real chance to test our knowledge, several of us drifted into the casualty department, the least formal part of the hospital, where we secretly hoped we might get a chance to save a life — or at least listen to a real chest.

Hector Melton was the first person I knew to spend an hour or two in the casualty department. A competent, neat and systematic student, he had an advantage over many of us: his father was a doctor who had qualified at St Peter's some twenty years before. As a result Hector had contacts. A consultant anaesthetist introduced him to one of the casualty doctors and, while the rest of us were trying to decide where to pin our name-badges, Hector was taking blood samples from casualty victims and, so he claimed, suturing some of the smaller wounds.

I knew him for the simple but important reason that he and I and a third student, Andrew Clay, shared a flat. I knew both of them already when I came back from Italy, of course, but our relationship was tenuous, to say the least. We came together in that accidental way that so often produces the most lasting friendships. We all happened to be in the medical-school corridor at the same time, looking for a flat to rent, when a final-year student about to leave St Peter's for ever arrived with a notice for the students' board. It advertised a flat for three no more than half a mile from the hospital and medical school. The three of us combined to rent it less than five minutes later.

While Hector was short and tidy, Andrew was huge and shaggy. Hector wore dark-blue or grey suits; Andrew preferred brown corduroy trousers and elderly sports jackets. Hector favoured his old school tie; while Andrew always seemed to wear the same brown knit with a toothpaste stain two inches from the bottom. Hector had no obvious vices; Andrew smoked a pipe and had an unpopular habit of showering his immediate neighbours with small, wet, sticky pieces of tobacco while he struggled to get it going. The arrival of a cloud of smoke was usually treated with relief; it did at least mean a respite from the probing and poking.

It was at Hector's suggestion that I'd found myself in the casualty department late on Saturday night. But unlike him I'd arrived unannounced and unheralded. And unlike Hector I'd found my first experience of clinical medicine frightening and forbidding. I'd felt as comfortable there as an agoraphobic at a picnic, and I had just about as much inclination to repeat the experience.

Chapter Three

After a week's basic course on the art of doctoring we were launched upon a public which, while not unsuspecting, was nonetheless generous. St Peter's Medical School was founded in the late nineteenth century and consists not only of the medical-school building itself, an ugly pot-pourri of nineteenth-century vulgar red brick and twentiethcentury functional concrete, linked spiritually if not physically to the local university, but also of St Peter's Hospital itself and a variety of other smaller, specialist hospitals such as the maternity hospital, the skin hospital, the mental hospital and the orthopaedic hospital.

Since the damage and chaos which medical students can produce is directly proportional to the number of them in any one place at any one time we were divided into ten roughly equal small groups. Each band of students would eventually spend time in every department of the attached hospitals, but Hector, Andrew and I found ourselves together in the same group of ten, allocated for the first three months to the medical department, where we would be walking the wards.

At five minutes to nine on Monday morning, white coats spotless and neatly buttoned, stethoscopes at the ready and hair neatly combed for our first public appearance, we came together nervously in the corridor outside Parkins Ward, where two sisters and a dozen or so nurses looked after twenty-six female medical patients. We stood in two groups of five, with our backs against the wall, trying to keep out of the way and hardly daring to whisper. Everyone who hurried past us into the ward seemed to be hurrying with great purpose and authority; even the most junior nurses passed with a great rustling of starched uniform and never so much as a glance in our direction.

It was twenty minutes past nine when Dr Grainger, the Professor of Medicine, and his small entourage arrived on the ward. I'd already heard a great deal about him. He'd made a tremendous name for himself in his early thirties when his research had led to the development and perfection of a new form of treatment for relapsing fever, a rare tropical disease caused by insect-borne organisms. By the time Dr Grainger's therapy had been shown to produce tumours in half of the patients who took it, he himself had been awarded numerous international honours and appointed to the professorship at St Peter's. Abandoning research, he had then concentrated on building for himself a reputation as an authority on virus infections. Since there are few known effective methods of treating these, he had ample opportunity to advertise his expertise without fear of contradiction. The author of two textbooks and, with the practical help of his junior staff, several dozen papers and articles in the more esoteric medical journals, Professor Grainger had acquired a reputation which led to his being invited to speak at conferences and meetings all over the world. In addition he often spoke at more public functions, and inevitably he was a regular performer on television. His neat red carnation and gleaming bald head were regular sights in the living-rooms of England.

Professor Grainger's senior assistant, the senior medical registrar, was Claude Taylor, a middle-aged physician anxiously waiting in the wings for something to happen to his superior. Dr Taylor, heavily freckled, always elegant, and precise and pernickety as a vegetarian with an ulcer can be, was the true author of most of the papers and articles which appeared under Professor Grainger's name. He'd acquired a slight reputation as a specialist in the treatment of budgerigar-fancier's lung, but had in recent months begun work on the treatment of angina. This onslaught on a disease which affected millions of potential patients had been inspired partly if not totally by a grant from one of the world's major pharmaceutical companies.

The second member of Professor Grainger's entourage, Dr Wilhemina Tarrant, was beginning her first hospital job as a fully qualified doctor. She'd completed her clinical studies just as we'd finished our pre-clinical studies. There had been a considerable amount of competition for the job of house physician to the Professor of Medicine, and Dr Tarrant had obtained the post as a result of her dedication and reliable clinical record. Coincidentally her father was medical director of the company which had provided the grant for Dr Taylor's new research project. He had also been a contemporary of Professor Grainger.

The Professor's arrival on the ward was the signal for considerable activity in the sister's office. Within moments the corridor was packed with nurses and physiotherapists, dieticians and social workers. All of whom gathered round the Professor clutching sheaves of notes and small cardboard folders. The ward sister, Sister Henderson, supervised the loading of a trolley packed tight with medical notes for all the patients on the ward. A junior nurse, rather redfaced and nervous with the responsibility, was given the task of actually pushing it.

And then there we were, gathered in a tightly packed crowd around an actual patient. After the frenetic chaos of the casualty department there was pleasing order to the medical ward and the professorial ward-round. The beds were neatly made, the bottles of orange squash neatly lined up on bedside lockers, the water-jugs full and the patients' temperature-charts inked in and hung with precision at the bottom of each bed.

* * *

She was eighty, but looked younger, and so frail and small that she seemed lost in the vast whiteness of her bed. Her skin was pale and wrinkled, and her hair thin and almost pure white. On her bedside table an old-fashioned alarm clock ticked away and in front of it a black and white photograph of a young man in the uniform of a private stood on guard.

This is Mrs Kennedy,' said Professor Grainger, with an ingratiating smile of introduction. He peered round at us, allowing his eyes to rest on each one for a brief moment, taking in our plastic name-badges and nodding slightly as he did so.

'Mr Melton,' he said suddenly, swivelling back to face my flat-mate, 'would you be kind enough to find out for us precisely why Mrs Kennedy is occupying one of our extremely expensive hospital beds?'

Hector immediately unsheathed his stethoscope and took a step forward.

'Before you attack poor Mrs Kennedy,' interrupted the Professor as Hector asked the old lady to unbutton her nightdress, 'you might find it helpful to ask her a few questions. The history the patient gives you will often lead you towards a diagnosis before you even lay a hand on her.'

'Er...' mumbled Hector, 'can you tell me what is wrong with you?'

Mrs Kennedy looked up at Professor Grainger.

'Mrs Kennedy is waiting for you to tell her what is wrong with her,' said the Professor drily.

'Have you had a cough?' asked Hector, his face now bright red with embarrassment and confusion.

Mrs Kennedy shook her head.

'Have you been sick?'

'Not since last Christmas when I had rather too much pudding,' said the old lady semi-confidentially.

'Do you get short of breath?'

Mrs Kennedy shook her head.

'Have you got any pain?'

Again the answer was negative.

'Do you get any trouble with your back passage?' asked Hector, clearly having abandoned all hope of making any real headway and taking advantage of the fact that the majority of women over the age of fifty complain about their bowels and will readily discuss their disorders at the drop of an opening remark.

Mrs Kennedy looked puzzled for a moment, then she nodded.

Pleased with himself, Hector turned round to look for a smile of encouragement from the Professor. There wasn't one.

'It's always blocked,' said Mrs Kennedy.

It looked as though Hector had found the right question.

'I don't quite understand why you want to know about it,' said Mrs Kennedy.

'It will help us a great deal,' said Hector warmly.

'It's the boy next door,' said the old lady. 'He always leaves his bicycle in it.'

There were several stifled sniggers from the outer areas of the audience and Hector nervously rubbed at his chin with his right hand.

'Thank you, Mr Melton,' said Professor Grainger. 'You have a good deal to learn, but do not be discouraged.' He reached forward and took the old lady's hand. 'Would you allow one of these young men to examine you?' He held her hand close to his chest as though she were an elderly relative with a large fortune.

Mrs Kennedy nodded her permission and gazed at him with admiration. This time the professorial eye remained on me.

'Would you listen to Mrs Kennedy's heart for us, Mr Vernon,' said the Professor, 'and tell us what you hear?'

With my own heart thumping away as if desperate to escape, I edged slowly forward. When I pulled at my stethoscope to remove it from my coat pocket, it caught on the notebook I had acquired and in which I intended to jot down all the words of advice I gleaned from my teachers. Mumbling apologies, I picked up the notebook and moved towards the patient. Mrs Kennedy had already unfastened her nightdress and exposed her bony chest to the many pairs of eyes. Her breast tissue had long since disappeared and their existence was remembered by two small brown nipples. Except during amatory fumblings this was the first live, naked female chest I had ever seen. Fingers shaking with fear, I pushed the ear-pieces of my stethoscope into position, checked to make sure that I had the right end of the stethoscope switched on and held the terminal diaphragm to Mrs Kennedy's bony chest.

Instead of the comfortingly repetitive lub-dup lub-dup I had heard when listening to my partner a few days before, I could hear nothing. Nothing, that is, except for the steady tick-tock of the alarm clock on Mrs Kennedy's bedside table. The more I tried to erase the clock's ticking from my consciousness the more I became aware of its existence. The more I strained to hear the beating of her heart, the more I heard the alarm clock. I felt the beads of sweat forming on my brow.

'Identify the first heart sound,' said Professor Grainger kindly, tapping me on the shoulder to attract my attention, 'the sound of the mitral and tricuspid valves closing,' he reminded me, 'and then listen for the second heart sound produced by the closing of the aortic and pulmonary valves.'

I put my stethoscope back into position and leant forwards again. Normally the heart is situated so that the sounds it makes can best be heard roughly in the middle of the left side of the patient's chest.

'Listen for the opening snap of the mitral valve and for the third and fourth heart sounds. Then you can concentrate on the systolic and diastolic murmurs,' went on Professor Grainger.

Once again I replaced my stethoscope and closed my eyes to concentrate on the sound of Mrs Kennedy's heart going about its normal business. Once again I heard nothing but the ticking of her bedside clock. Remembering that moment I still feel cold and sweaty.

'You should be able to hear a pansystolic murmur,' said the Professor encouragingly, 'telling you that Mrs Kennedy has an incompetent mitral valve.'

Once more I concentrated. I tried a little above the fifth intercostal space, and then just below it. Still I heard nothing. Then I moved to the right of the mid-clavicular line; to the left of it. Still I heard nothing.

'Can you hear it?' asked Professor Grainger.

I shook my head and continued to concentrate on Mrs Kennedy's chest. It was like a nightmare; a nightmare where safety always recedes as you get closer, where one horror follows another, where security seems totally unobtainable.

'You must be able to hear it,' insisted the Professor. 'She's still alive, isn't she?' There were polite titters from the collected nurses and students.

'I'll tell you in addition that Mrs Kennedy has some slight aortic incompetence,' he added.

'I think perhaps...' I began. 'Perhaps I can....'

'You can hear it?'

'Just...' I hedged again, reluctant to commit myself.

'The pansystolic murmur?'

'The pansystolic murmur,' I repeated.

'I'm afraid you can't, you know,' said Professor Grainger, with the smile of a cream-filled cat. 'Mrs Kennedy has dextrocardia. Her heart is not in the usual position; it's on the right-hand side of her chest, and you will find that her pansystolic murmur is to be heard there rather than in the more usual position on the left side of the chest.'

I stood open-mouthed and stared at him.

'Your first important lesson,' said Professor Grainger. 'If you're ever in doubt, always admit it; never allow anyone to persuade you that you can see, hear or feel anything that you can't see, hear or feel. And, if you're in doubt, ask for advice and help. A good doctor is one who's willing and able to admit that he's not omniscient, and who's ready to admit his own failings to himself and to others.'

I felt slightly cheated at the time — particularly when the Professor instructed the sister to remove his alarm clock and have it returned to his office; but afterwards, when the pain and indignity of the experience had faded a little, I felt grateful for the lesson. Nothing in medicine can be taken for granted and every doctor must always be on the look-out for the unexpected and the unusual.

That did not make the embarrassment and humiliation any easier to accept at the time, of course. As I shuffled shamefacedly back into the anonymity of the audience Professor Grainger led us on to the next patient. I learnt nothing else on Parkins Ward that morning, and so complete was my defeat that it was not until we moved to the male medical ward, a fifty-yard walk away from Sister Henderson's domain, that I began again to find myself listening to Professor Grainger.

'Mr Devlin is thirty-eight and, although he insists he is not fat, should be eleven feet tall to satisfy the insurance assessors who make up our weight-tables,' said Professor Grainger, allowing us the benefit of seeing one of his slyer smiles. 'Take a close look at him and see if you can tell me what he does for a living.'

We all stared like visitors at a zoo while poor Mr Devlin pretended to read his newspaper.

'He has a good colour,' said someone. 'Is he a publican?'

'You mean he looks as though he drinks?' asked the Professor bluntly.

'His nose has a rather ruddy hue.'

'Do you drink, Mr Devlin?' asked Professor Grainger.

'I like a good whisky now and then.'

'Can we assume that all drinkers are publicans?' asked the Professor, directing his question generally.

'Most publicans are drinkers,' pointed out the student who'd made the original suggestion.

'Most medical students are male,' said the Professor. 'Does that mean that most males are medical students?'

'There are no callouses on his hands,' pointed out Hector. 'I doubt if his job involves any manual labour.'

'Good,' murmured the Professor.

Mr Devlin examined his right hand as though he'd never seen it before.

'Remove your pyjama jacket, if you please, Mr Devlin,' said the Professor.

'Is it anything to do with insurance?' asked a tall, straggly-haired student who always sported a bow-tie and whose name I could never remember.

'I'm sorry to disappoint you, Mr Young,' said Professor Grainger, who never forgot anyone's name, 'but this isn't Twenty Questions.'

'A wrestler,' suggested the only girl in our group, a delicate-looking creature who was more resilient and determined than she looked.

'Have you ever seen a wrestler?' asked the Professor.

Miss Charles admitted that she hadn't.

'Look at Mr Devlin's arms,' suggested Professor Grainger.

We looked at Mr Devlin's arms.

'Do you notice any difference between them?'

'He has a watch on his left wrist,' said Hector.

'And a ring on the little finger of his right hand,' I added.

'Look at the colour of his forearms,' suggested the Professor.

'One is browner than the other,' said Miss Charles.

'Correct,' said Professor Grainger. 'What can you deduce from that?'

'That arm gets more sunshine than the other,' said Mr Young.

'And what occupation do you think Mr Devlin could have which results in his right arm getting more sunshine than his left arm?'

'He's a lifeguard who sits in the shade of a beach-hut,' suggested Andrew.

'Does he look like a lifeguard?'

We all had to agree that he did not.

'Mr Devlin is a driving instructor,' said Professor Grainger when no further suggestions were forthcoming. 'And he therefore spends most of his working day sitting in motorcars with his arm hanging out of the window.' With that the Professor patted Mr Devlin on the shoulder and grinned at us all. Then he moved off towards the next patient.

'I need a couple of students to help me with some research I'm doing,' whispered the Professor's registrar as Andrew and I straggled after the crowd of students and attendants billowing behind Professor Grainger.

We looked at him expectantly.

'Should be very interesting for you,' went on Dr Taylor. 'Give you a chance to get your teeth into some real clinical medicine.'

'Marvellous,' said Andrew.

'Great,' I added.

'One of the drug companies has produced a new treatment for angina,' went on Dr Taylor, 'and I'm doing a trial for them. We have to gather together quite a lot of facts and figures.'

'What do you want us to do?' asked Andrew.

'Meet me in the sister's office after the ward-round,' said Dr Taylor, 'and I'll explain it to you. Mr Devlin's one of the patients in the trial and I've got a couple more coming in tomorrow afternoon.' He gave us a short professional smile and squeezed his way forward to rejoin the Professor.

'I don't expect any of you will have any difficulty in recognising our next patient or in guessing his occupation,' purred Professor Grainger, turning round to face us all. He nodded in the direction of a grey-haired man in expensive black silk pyjamas who was surrounded by pieces of paper and upon whose bed there lay an open briefcase. That alone told us he was a man of some importance. No one of ordinary standing would be allowed to make such a mess of his hospital bed.

'Mr Nicholas Blake, Parliamentary Under-Secretary at the Department of Health and Social Security, has insisted that we include him in our teaching round,' said Professor Grainger with a beam. He looked at the man in black silk pyjamas and waited for a nod of approval.

'There's no place for elitism in medical care,' asserted Mr Blake, 'I insist on being treated just like any other patient.' He began slowly to collect together the papers distributed across his bed.

'Mr Blake was brought into the hospital yesterday evening,' explained the Professor. 'He suffered an attack of chest pain while answering questions in the House of Commons. We immediately assumed what, Mr Young?'

Mr Young, the straggly-haired student, had been whispering indecent suggestions to a physiotherapist with rippling muscles. He snapped to attention. 'That the questions were difficult ones, sir,' he replied.

No one laughed. Mr Blake scowled and shuffled his papers.

'We assumed,' went on the Professor coldly, 'that the Minister had suffered a mild heart attack. To our great relief, however, the electrocardiograph showed absolutely no signs at all of any cardiac insults having been sustained, and Mr Blake made a good recovery. This morning he was moved from the Cardiac Care Unit to the general ward. He has continued to make an excellent recovery.' He looked around and picked out Hector. 'What questions would you like to ask Mr Blake?'

'I'd like to ask…' began Hector.

'I should perhaps have pointed out that I meant "What questions relating to his personal medical condition?"' the Professor interrupted him. He turned to the Minister. 'Medical students are often so very conscious of social problems,' he explained.

'Have you ever had a pain of a similar nature before?' asked Hector.

'There is certainly no doubt in my mind that the pain in my chest was unusually severe and disabling,' replied Mr Blake. 'It is naturally difficult to be precise about it since one's subjective assessments of the relative severity of any particular pains are incomparable. It is easier to compare or to contrast pains of a completely different nature.' Mr Blake paused. 'In particular,' he added thoughtfully, 'one has to recognise that as the memory of an incident of pain fades so may its importance.'

'Were you short of breath?' asked Hector, abandoning his previous question. He looked in desperation to Professor Grainger.

'In the House of Commons no one can afford to be short of breath!' smiled the Minister. 'And since there is said to be more hot air in the Chamber than in any airship ever built no Member can afford to allow himself the luxury of even admitting the possibility of such an occurrence.'

'You didn't find breathing difficult?'

'Ah!' said the Professor. 'Beware of the leading question! We must be careful not to put words in the mouths of our patients.' He reached forward and touched the Minister lightly on the arm. 'Particularly such eloquent and skilled speakers as Mr Blake.'

There was a silence then, the Professor and the Minister staring at Hector, clearly waiting for his next question.

'Were you sick?' asked Hector suddenly. It seemed a straightforward enough question. But Mr Blake was more than equal to it.

'Indeed I was,' he agreed. 'My presence on the ward can, I hope, be taken as adequate proof of my sickness.' He looked at the Professor. 'I'm pleased to say that I feel a good deal better today.' He clasped his hands across his ample stomach and smiled benignly at us all.

For a few minutes more Hector continued to attempt to question the Minister. The interrogation was finally brought to an end by Professor Grainger, who pointed out to us that Mr Blake had a considerable amount of paperwork to complete and that it was important that he rested.

'Now, remember,' the Professor said sternly, 'you're not to tire yourself or over-excite yourself. I'm allowing you to deal with your paperwork since I'm convinced that if we deny you access to your briefcase we'll be putting you under greater pressure than we are in allowing you a little more latitude than we might otherwise prefer.' He seemed to have picked up the politician's verbal habits.

'Don't you worry,' Mr Blake assured us all. 'These papers have a sedative effect.' He grinned to us and nodded. We edged away bemused. The rest of the round was something of an anticlimax, although an interview with an elderly gentleman who'd acquired penile frostbite during an extended performance of a singularly personal exhibition on an unusually cold autumn night made it possible for Professor Grainger to raise something of a blush on the cheeks of the petite Miss Charles.

After he'd left, hurrying away to give a brief press conference to reporters anxious for news about Mr Blake, Andrew and I stayed behind, waiting outside the sister's office for Dr Taylor to return. The registrar had left with the Professor, who hated to be seen in public alone; he would no more have appeared on a ward without his registrar than without his trousers.

'Did you notice something odd when he was telling us about Mr Devlin?' asked Andrew as we eyed a staff nurse with distinctive features and a pretty face arranging some flowers.

I was taken aback but thought for a moment. 'Perhaps I did,' I said.

'Shall we ask him?'

It seemed a good idea and together we went back on to the ward. Alone, I felt strangely vulnerable. When walking down the centre of a hospital ward it is difficult to tell whether the visitor or the patients are under closer scrutiny. On the whole I think it's the visitor, who will usually keep his eyes on his feet, the flowers or one of the nurses, who gets more embarrassed.

'Hello again, Mr Devlin,' said Andrew. 'I'm Clay and this is Edward Vernon. We're medical students.'

Mr Devlin grinned at us. 'I remember.'

'You're a driving instructor?'

Mr Devlin nodded.

'Do you mind us asking you something?' Mr Devlin shook his head.

'Do you use a left-hand-drive car?'

Mr Devlin's grin grew wider. He shook his head again.

'But as a driving instructor you presumably spend most of your time sitting in the passenger seat?'

'That's right.'

'So surely it should be your left arm that gets hung out of the car window and gets brown,' I pointed out.

'I never have the window open,' said Mr Devlin. 'The car's got air conditioning.'

'Then why is it that your right arm is browner than your left?'

'I've been off work most of the summer and I've spent a lot of time sitting in the garden. We've got a small cherrytree, and where I sit I'm partly in the shade.'

'Tell us one last thing,' said Andrew. 'Had the Professor met you before today?'

The driving instructor shook his head. 'But I'd met Dr Taylor,' he said, 'and he asked me what I did for a living.'

We thanked Mr Devlin and went back to wait for the registrar outside the sister's office.

Chapter Four

‘The product we’re testing is called Angipax,’ said Dr Taylor, having returned from the press conference and led us along a maze of corridors to a small office in the basement. ‘It consists of a combination of two well-tried drugs which haven’t been used together before. The manufacturers believe that Angipax will help prevent angina as well as relieving the symptoms of heart disease.’

‘What are the drugs?’ asked Andrew.

‘Erythrytyl tetranitrate and pentaerythritol tetranitrate,’ said Dr Taylor without a stumble. ‘The drug we normally use for angina sufferers is called glyceryl trinitrate. There seems a real chance that the specific combination that the manufacturers have developed will prove to have fewer side-effects and to be more effective as a prophylactic.’

‘What do you want us to do?’ I asked him.

‘I’m doing a series of tests on about a dozen patients,’ said Dr Taylor. ‘Mr Devlin is the ninth in the series. I shall get him to work on this small treadmill without taking any Angipax and then do the same thing after he’s taken the dose the manufacturers recommend.’

‘And you just see when he gets his pain?’ asked Andrew. He was standing on the treadmill which consisted of a continuous rubber belt on rollers designed to rotate at speeds of up to eight miles an hour. Anyone standing on the belt while it revolved would be effectively walking forward while actually staying just where he was. The belt was fitted with meters which enabled an observer to see how far the patient had walked and at what speed.

‘That’s more or less it,’ agreed Dr Taylor. ‘In fact it’s a little more complicated than that. We’re going to put a catheter into his heart before we begin the tests so that we can get a record of changes in pressure inside his ventricles.’

‘Isn’t that painful?’ asked Andrew.

‘Not at all,’ the registrar assured us.

‘You’ve got another patient for the trial now,’ I pointed out.

Dr Taylor looked puzzled.

‘Mr Blake,’ I explained. ‘He’s had some heart trouble, hasn’t he?’

‘I think the Professor’s keeping an open mind about Mr Blake’s condition,’ said Dr Taylor.

‘Would you put him into the trial if you were certain that he’d had a minor heart attack?’ asked Andrew.

‘With his permission,’ said Dr Taylor. ‘We always make sure that the patient gives us permission before we start any trial.’ He opened a drawer in a heavy wooden cabinet and took out a small cardboard box full of plain white pills.

‘We’ll test Mr Devlin for two days without the drug,’ he said, ‘and then we’ll give him one of these every four hours. If the trial’s successful, he’ll be able to cope much more effectively with exercise and he’ll be one of the first people to benefit from the drug.’ The registrar put the box back into the cupboard. ‘I’ve had a word with Sister,’ he went on, ‘and I want you to bring Mr Devlin down here tomorrow morning and tomorrow afternoon. Get him to exercise until he complains of pain. Measure the distance he’s travelled and keep a note of it. Do the same thing the day after tomorrow and then for the two days while he’s taking the drug.’

Dr Taylor then left the two of us alone to practise with the treadmill. Neither of us developed any chest pains but we both found ourselves breathless and sweating after a few minutes with the conveyor belt revolving at top speed. We were both, however, pleased with our good fortune in being selected to help assess such an important new pharmaceutical product.

Medical research projects invariably attract an enthusiastic response from all sections of society; doctors and patients share a belief that any research project must be worthwhile. The advances made by research workers over the centuries have been often dramatic and sometimes sensational. Everyone knows the story of Alexander Fleming hunched over his petri dish watching penicillin appear; similarly the exploits of Madame Curie and Monsieur Pasteur are known to us all.

In the past many medical researchers have experimented on themselves, using their own bodies as testing-grounds for their theories. A German called Pettenkofer swallowed millions of cholera bacilli in 1892 in an attempt to discover just how cholera attacked the human body. In the late eighteenth century a British doctor called White deliberately infected himself with bubonic plague, taking some discharge from a patient’s suppurating gland, rubbing it into his own thigh and also putting some into a freshly and purposely made cut in his forearm. Pettenkofer lived but White died.

In 1797 an American, Dr Nathan Potter of Baltimore, soaked a cloth in the sweat of a patient dying of yellow fever and wore it wound round his own head for a whole night. When this failed, he scratched his skin and rubbed the sweat in. When that, too, failed he inoculated himself with pus taken from an abscess of another patient. He showed that yellow fever is not transmitted in any of these ways, but he certainly did not know that when he started his terrifying experiment.

Later a Dr Lazear allowed himself to be bitten by a mosquito which had dined off yellow-fever patients. He was less fortunate, for his theory was more accurate. He developed yellow fever and died.

In 1767 the great English surgeon John Hunter took some of the discharge from an infected male patient and gave himself venereal disease. In 1851 a young German doctor put matter from a patient with secondary syphilis into a superficial wound on his arm and died in great distress. In 1950 a Polish woman doctor, Clara Fonti, working in Italy, opened her blouse and rubbed one of her own breasts against the breast of a woman with fungating breast cancer. Dr Fonti did not die but she developed a serious case of blood poisoning.

But of course, all these experiments concerned infectious diseases, and it is less easy to deliberately give yourself a heart condition. Today's researchers can argue convincingly that they simply have to have patients for their experiments. And the patients are often willing, or at least rather reluctant to confess that they're unwilling. The patient who denies his doctors the chance to further medical knowledge will inevitably fear that he may have alienated the very people upon whom his life depends; while the patient who participates in a research programme is giving himself the chance to benefit from a major new breakthrough while at the same time passively making to human knowledge a contribution which he could never make actively.

Andrew Clay and I were convinced that Dr Taylor had given us our first opportunity to make a real practical contribution to medical knowledge.

Chapter Five

As the days of that first week went by, a rough pattern developed. Each morning at nine we'd wait for Professor Grainger and Dr Taylor outside the women's medical ward. At around twelve we'd finish the round on the men's medical ward. In the afternoons there were lectures to attend and, for Andrew and me, the experiments with Mr Devlin to conduct. Most important of all, there were patients to be clerked.

Each of us was given one female and one male patient to look after. This was inevitably far more for our benefit than for theirs and had little or no bearing on the management of any individual case. We quickly learnt that to conduct an examination effectively some system must be followed; asking questions indiscriminately is likely to be both time consuming and unproductive, and a clinical examination which follows no pattern will, like disorganised prospecting, lead to the duplication of investigation in some areas and its total absence in others. Once a student had been given the task of taking a history from a patient and conducting an examination, he'd be expected to be able to provide the Professor's ward-round with up-to-date information about his or her progress. The Professor or, in the Professor's occasional absence, Dr Taylor would invite the appropriate student to explain and interpret the appearance of new symptoms or signs and to discuss with some understanding the various reports which came in daily from the pathology laboratory and radiology department.

The first patient I was told to study was Mrs Kennedy; I found her sympathetic and reassuring. I may have had little experience of patients, but she had had plenty of experience of medical students! For fifty years she'd been appearing annually in the finals examination-halls of several medical schools, her dextrocardia confusing and bemusing generation after generation of fledgling physicians.

Her congenital abnormality had affected her life in several different ways. Referred to a local consultant physician by an alert but puzzled family doctor when she was ten-years-old, she had been inside more than thirty hospitals in her life, despite the fact that she had only rarely been ill.

Her heart itself had never caused her any problem at all.

Even her marriage had come as a result of her abnormality. When nineteen-years-old and visiting a major London teaching hospital for an anatomy demonstration she had met young Harry Kennedy, a porter, who'd been instantly captivated by her beauty and charm. They'd married fifteen months later and moved into a small terraced house owned by the hospital.

Their only son had sadly been killed in France in the Second World War but, for years after that, they'd regarded a succession of medical students as their own. Then, four years before his retirement, Mr Kennedy had suffered a slight stroke. He'd made a good recovery from it but had been left with a limp and a slight speech impediment. Five years after his retirement he had another stroke, this one leaving him with a faulty memory and a tendency to forget where he was going if he set off from home alone.

Mrs Kennedy looked after him with an affection which came through clearly when she talked to me about him. She subsidised his small pension and their old-age pensions with the fees she received for appearing at medical schools and hospitals all over the south of England. She was too well-known to appear in higher-level examinations, but many students like myself had found her a puzzle.

It was not, however, her abnormal anatomy that had brought her into St Peter's, but the sudden appearance of a lump underneath her left arm. One advantage of appearing annually before a series of enthusiastic and careful student clinicians is that you receive an annual check-up at no charge. One of the students who had met Mrs Kennedy in the summer examinations had discovered her lump and reported it to the supervising Professor. The examiner had, in some surprise, checked and confirmed the student's findings. As a result Mrs Kennedy had been brought into the ward for a series of tests.

It was not until Thursday that the Professor stopped again beside her bed.

'We've had the pathology report back,' I was able to tell him. 'It's quite benign.' I went on to explain that Mrs Kennedy's lump consisted of nothing more threatening than lymphatic tissue which had expanded under the influence of a simple infection.

'What else might we have expected to find?' Professor Grainger asked of no one in particular.

'Cancer?' suggested Hector.

'Go on,' nodded Professor Grainger.

'With a primary cancer site hidden somewhere, enlarged lymph nodes would be a sign that the cancer was spreading,' explained Hector. 'Or the lymph glands themselves might have turned malignant.'

'And what would the prognosis be?' asked the Professor.

'Poor,' said Hector. 'The patient is elderly and frail.'

The discussion of the theoretical possibilities associated with Mrs Kennedy's lump came to an abrupt halt with the arrival by Dr Taylor's side of a red-faced student nurse who whispered breathlessly in the registrar's ear. Dr Taylor nodded sharply, turned and whispered to Professor Grainger.

Instantly the Professor turned on his heel and began to head briskly towards the ward entrance. Dr Taylor followed him and the rest of us, after pausing uncertainly for a moment, scurried along behind him, like children following the Pied Piper. I hung back for an extra moment to squeeze Mrs Kennedy's hand and then hurried on with the others.

The Professor headed straight for the men's ward, where the only possible cause of such consternation could be the Permanent Under-Secretary, Mr Nicholas Blake. When we arrived, the house physician, Dr Tarrant, was standing anxiously by his bedside. Since she had direct practical responsibility for the male and female patients under Professor Grainger's care, Dr Tarrant wasn't expected to attend all ward-rounds, although she was expected to be readily available at little more than a moment's notice.

Mr Blake, it appeared, had begun to complain of a pain in his left calf while Dr Tarrant was on the ward taking blood samples. The nurse who'd answered his summons had immediately called the house physician, and she had immediately sent a message for the Professor. The Professor, of course, had arrived complete with a full set of students and paramedical specialists.

'It's rather swollen, sir,' said Dr Tarrant apologetically.

'And a bit red.'

'H'm,' the Professor sniffed.

'What is it?' demanded Mr Blake, white-faced and fearful. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. He was squeezing and pulling at a paper tissue.

'Does that hurt?' asked the Professor, gently pressing the Minister's left calf between his thumb and forefinger.

'It's very tender,' complained Mr Blake.

'H'm,' said the Professor again, pushing his thumb into the flesh just above Mr Blake's left ankle. It left a mark when he removed it; slowly the thumbprint filled up again.

'Tape,' snapped Professor Grainger, holding out a hand.

Dr Tarrant reached into the pocket of her white coat and produced an ordinary dressmaker's tape-measure. The Professor measured a point a few centimetres below Mr Blake's left knee-cap, marked it with a gold ballpoint pen he took from his waistcoat pocket and then measured the circumference of the Minister's calf at that point. Then he did exactly the same thing on the right calf.

'There's a two-centimere difference,' he said to Dr Taylor over his shoulder. Dr Taylor, who was carrying the Minister's medical notes, jotted down the information. Mr Blake had pulled the paper tissue into two parts; the sweat was hanging from his chin. The Professor slowly and deliberately rolled up the tape-measure, then handed it back to Dr Tarrant. 'You've developed a small clot there,' he said to Mr Blake.

'Is that dangerous?' demanded the Minister.

'It's something we must take seriously,' Professor Grainger said tactfully.

'I don't want any bull,' said Mr Blake scowling. He stared at the crowd of students around him. 'Do I have to put up with all these idiots?'

'My students?' asked Professor Grainger incredulously. 'Do you mean my students?'

With the paper tissue breaking up into lots of little pieces the Minister explained that he did indeed mean the students. Rather coldly and with more than a hint of a sniff Professor Grainger instructed us to leave. Obediently, albeit reluctantly, we backed away and headed with some embarrassment towards the ward entrance.

'Shall we take Mr Devlin down for his exercise?' asked Andrew as we passed his bed.

'It's a bit early,' I pointed out, looking at my watch. The readings were supposed to be taken at the same time each day.

'It's only an hour or so,' Andrew pointed out. 'It won't make any difference.'

We fetched a wheelchair from the corridor and helped Mr Devlin into it. Ten minutes later we were helping him on to the treadmill. The idea of taking him down to the basement in the wheelchair was to ensure that he arrived for each day's exercise rested and quite pain-free.

When we arrived back on the ward with him forty minutes later, the screens had been drawn around Mr Blake's bed and there was no sight of the Minister, the Professor or Dr Taylor.

I went back to the women's ward to see Mrs Kennedy again. Since the laboratory result had been negative I expected to find that she'd be going home before too long. To my surprise I found that she'd left already.

'We need the bed,' explained Sister Henderson. I felt rather sad that I'd missed Mrs Kennedy's departure but delighted that she'd gone home fit and well.

Chapter Six

My confidence was growing. No longer did the sight of a nightdress or a pair of pyjamas fill me with fear. I was beginning to learn my way around the hospital, and twice when visitors had asked me for directions I'd been able to help them. Like all major hospitals St Peter's had the facilities of a small village. There was a restaurant for the staff and another for visitors, a shop selling paperbacks, chocolate and ladies' hosiery, a bank for nurses and doctors on night duty and unable to get out to use ordinary banking facilities, a post office with a box reputed to be emptied only when it had been filled to the brim, a small church kept locked except on special occasions, a 'police department' manned by a series of sour-faced, blue-uniformed guards, and a recreation room for nurses which contained a table-tennis table and a record-player which didn't work. I was part of all this; a small part, it is true, but nevertheless a part.

There was, however, still one *bête noire* to be tamed. I hadn't forgotten my first night in the casualty department and I knew that somehow I had to exorcise that particular unhappy memory. Andrew had joined the editorial staff of the university newspaper and had left the flat to attend a meeting with his new colleagues, Hector had persuaded a student nurse from the female medical ward to accompany him to the cinema, and the flat seemed unbearably quiet without them. It was just a few days after my uncomfortable baptism. On the spur of the moment I decided to go to casualty once more.

Dr Crisp was on duty again. He smiled at me across a small crowd of arguing women and shrugged his shoulders.

'Weren't you here the other night?' he called.

I nodded.

'There was a club football match this afternoon,' he explained when I'd edged my way round the women. 'We've put the players back together, but now we've got half a dozen wives. One of them gave another a black eye and they started a free for all.' He thrust his hands deep inside his coat pockets and moved slowly away from them. 'There are a couple of porters coming along to move them out,' he said. 'I'm not getting mixed up in it.'

He introduced me to the casualty sister, a younger, prettier girl than the one who had been in charge on my previous visit, and poured me a cup of thick brown tea from a battered vacuum flask. I'd taken no more than two sips when the casualty reception-desk clerk came into the office. She had, she said, two new patients. A boy with a suspected fractured arm and a man who'd been cut by flying glass.

'I'll take the boy,' said Dr Crisp. 'You have a look at the bloke with the cut.'

Outside the office there was a considerable amount of noise. The porters had arrived and were trying to propel the shouting women towards the exit doors. They weren't having a great deal of success. My first casualty was sitting waiting in one of the half-dozen small cubicles set out along one side of the department. I looked at my watch as I entered the cubicle: it was eight o'clock.

'Hello, Doc,' said the patient, a thin dark-haired man with an old regimental tie on and an elderly Harris Tweed sports coat over his arm.

I started to tell him that I wasn't a doctor, but he wouldn't listen. I noticed in amazement that his eyes seemed to have independent suspension. They moved quite separately and it was impossible to decide which to look at.

I found it most disconcerting.

'Had a busy day, have you, Doc?' he asked.

I agreed that it had been fairly full.

'I've got the greatest admiration for you people,' he said firmly. 'I never let anyone get away with abusing the medical profession.' He looked straight at me so that I had to choose between the two eyes.

I murmured something about appreciating his support.

'Of course, I've had some illness in my time,' he went on. 'In 1956 I was in this hospital under Dr Jones. D'you remember Dr Jones?'

I shook my head.

'Real gentleman, he was. Real gentleman. I was in here for six weeks then. Varicose vein on the ulcer of the heart, it was, but they saved my life. When I left I told him, I said, "Dr Jones, I'll have the greatest respect for members of your profession after this." Very kind to me, he was. And a real gentleman as well. Always polite and courteous and never too busy to say "hello" or exchange a word or two with you.'

This made it difficult to try to persuade him to get to the point of his visit. In retrospect I rather suspect that I wasn't the first doctor to succumb to this ploy.

'There aren't always people around who have sympathy for the genuinely ill,' explained my patient. 'I was in the Navy during the war and you didn't get much sympathy there. The doctors weren't too hot there, I can tell you. Of course they were officers and they didn't take too kindly to dealing with us enlisted men. We used to look after ourselves most of the time.' He smiled at me and raised his voice a little to make himself heard over the noise of the women arguing with the porters. 'When we had lice we used to rub rum and sand into our hair.'

'Right.' I nodded, trying to get back into the conversation.

‘The lice got drunk and stoned themselves to death,’ he explained.

‘Ah.’ I’d noticed that one of his eyes was twinkling a fraction while the other was dull and motionless. I realized that the immovable eye was made of glass. ‘What’s brought you into casualty today?’ I asked, abandoning any idea of getting the question into the conversation tactfully.

‘You’re not going to believe it,’ said the patient with a sad shake of his head.

‘Try me.’

‘I’ve always been a careful driver,’ he told me. ‘There’s too much carnage on the roads. A lot of people seem to be happy to drive around drunk these days. I’m not one of those.’

I remembered that he was supposed to have a cut and I wondered where it was. He looked quite well, apart from the glass eye.

‘But it isn’t always up to the innocent, is it? You can drive as carefully as you like and still get injured, can’t you?’

I nodded.

‘I’d been to the pub in Knibsborough village. D’you know it?’

I shook my head.

‘Not to drink, you understand. Just to play a game of snooker. Just for a quiet evening with a few friends.’ He carefully took the jacket off his arm and laid it down on the examination couch. His shirt sleeves were rolled right down to the wrist. ‘On the way home I came through Little Tissington. D’you know it?’

I shook my head again.

‘Beautiful village. Absolutely beautiful village with a delightful pond and a wonderful little Norman church. I was in a bit of a hurry because I wanted to get home to the wife. She understands me too well, you know, and gets a bit upset when I’m late for dinner. She always knows where I’ve been but always claims I’ve been with a woman. Now, do I look like the sort of fellow to do a thing like that?’

I had to admit that he didn’t.

‘Anyway, to cut a long story short, I was driving through Little Tissington when some damned fool farmer was moving his cattle around. Not your ordinary mild mannered milking-cattle but great bullocks. Bullocks! I ask you. At that time of night. On a public road.’ He sniffed.

Outside the noise had subsided a little. It sounded as if the porters had done their job.

‘I stopped,’ he went on, ‘but the bullocks didn’t. One of them just threw himself straight at me. Right at the front of the car. Only had it for two years. Lovely little car, and the wife loved the colour. Well, they don’t make cars to put up with that sort of weight, do they? The front of it just crumpled straight away. I’d got a bottle of whisky in my jacket pocket. Just for the wife really. Smashed, it was, smashed into little pieces. And the glass ruined my trousers. Mind you, if the glass hadn’t done the job the whisky would have done. It smelt like a brewery in there. Of course, when the police came they could smell the whisky and they swore I’d been drinking. There I was sitting in the middle of my ruined car, with my dinner spoiling and a broken bottle of whisky, and the police made me blow into one of their damned silly breathalyser bags. Impertinence, isn’t it? Used to be that you were innocent until proved guilty. These days you’re guilty until they prove you innocent. And they don’t do that, do they? Well, the fumes of the whisky must have affected me. They only had to get the bag into the car and the crystals turned green.’

I looked at my watch. The time was nearly twenty minutes past eight. ‘So you’ve got a cut on your leg?’ I asked.

He was leaning forward to tell me more about his accident when the casualty sister poked her head round the cubicle curtain. ‘Sorry to bother you, Doctor,’ she said with kindly exaggeration, ‘but there are a couple of people in the next cubicle who’ve just been brought in. Dr Crisp’s busy in X-ray, and I wondered if you’d be kind enough to have a look at them for me?’

Honoured, flattered and pleased to get away from my story-telling friend for a few moments, I followed her into the next cubicle where a man who looked to be in his fifties and a woman of the same age were standing rather sheepishly by the side of the examination couch.

‘Onions,’ said the man, holding out his hand. ‘Terence Onions.’

‘Edward Vernon,’ I said, taking it.

‘This is my wife Christine,’ he said, introducing me to his feminine companion.

‘What can I do for you?’ I asked.

‘It’s a rather embarrassing story,’ began Mr Onions. I noticed that he was standing bent forward but assumed that it was simply a postural habit. He was, after all, rather taller than the average man. ‘It’s our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary,’ he continued, ‘and I was taking my wife out to dinner tonight to celebrate.’ He swallowed and coughed.

‘One of our friends runs a small bookshop and has a rather unusual sense of humour.’ He was blushing now. ‘He gave us a copy of a book of exercises,’ he concluded with a rush.

‘Ah,’ I said, with some understanding.

‘Well, when we were getting ready to go out we thought we’d perhaps try to, er, emulate the couple in the book. Try something new.'

'Right,' I encouraged him. 'Very sensible.'

'This is very difficult.'

'Don't be embarrassed,' I said. 'I'm used to this sort of thing.' I was having great difficulty in restraining the blush which I felt spreading across my cheeks. Naturally, since a blush is uncontrollable, I was doomed to fail in the end, but I felt that if I kept my cheek muscles under pressure I might be able to stem the flow of blood to some extent.

'My wife was in her underwear in the bathroom and I was reading the book waiting for her,' he explained. 'Perhaps we should have tried some of the simpler exercises first but we thought we'd try something we'd never tried before.'

'What happened?' I asked.

'It's my elbow,' said Mrs Onions.

'And my back,' added Mr Onions.

It turned out that, while struggling to complete a particularly imaginative exercise together, they'd fallen. Mrs Onions had cracked her elbow on the wash-basin and Mr Onions had fallen across the bath. I filled in forms, which I found on the small desk in the cubicle, requesting X-rays on the injured parts and told the couple to wait for a few moments. Then I left them alone and handed the forms to the casualty sister. I couldn't help noticing that Mrs Onions was wearing two-way stretch-elastic surgical stockings and contemplating the possible consequences had she been wearing something with more of an erotic flavour.

Back in the cubicle next door my story-teller was waiting for me.

'Of course, there was a silver lining in a way,' he went on. 'The whisky had sterilised the cut and it didn't get infected.'

'When did this happen?' I asked, rather confused.

'Six months ago,' he replied without hesitation.

'Six months!'

'That's right. I had to have a tetanus injection at the time and then a second one six weeks after that. They said I should come back for a third injection six months after the accident.'

'So you've just come for a tetanus injection?'

He smiled at me and nodded. I turned away and headed across the casualty department to the sister, whom I could see supervising the bandaging of an injured ankle. I explained to her that my patient needed a tetanus injection. Pausing for a moment, she plucked a small vial from a metal trolley and handed it to me. Then she took a syringe, a needle and a small pre-packed medicated swab from the lower shelf of the trolley and gave me those.

I swallowed air for a few seconds and then looked at the handful of simple equipment I'd been given.

'What do I do with this?' I asked, petrified.

'Give him half a c.c. in his arm or his bum,' she told me. She must have seen the look on my face, for she abandoned her bandaging again for a moment and put a hand on my arm. 'Just take your time,' she said, 'and call if you're in trouble. But really there's nothing to it.' This was the woman who'd called me 'doctor' a few moments before. I nodded my thanks and went back to give my first injection.

It wasn't as bad as I'd feared. Neither the patient nor I fainted. He rolled up his sleeve as soon as he saw me enter. I wiped everything in sight with the medicated swab and transferred the right amount of fluid from the small glass vial to his subcutaneous tissue.

I had treated my first patient. Another major landmark in my medical education.

Chapter Seven

They'd been found sooner than she'd expected, when a neighbour had called round to see if they needed any groceries. The neighbour, quick-thinking, had flung the windows wide open and turned off the gas. Mrs Kennedy and her husband had immediately been rushed over to St Peter's by ambulance.

Neither of them had been poisoned fatally, but while partly conscious Mrs Kennedy had fallen and cracked a rib. The rib had pierced a lung and my very first patient was desperately ill. She was surrounded by several thousand pounds' worth of equipment, and a nurse had been allotted to sit with her.

Her husband was on the male medical ward where he occupied the bed in which the Permanent Under-Secretary had lain. When Professor Grainger had confirmed the diagnosis he'd made on the ward-round, that Mr Blake had a clot in a vein in his left leg, he'd begun treatment which necessitated putting up a drip. This had convinced the unhappy politician that he was doomed, and he'd abandoned his calm professional façade. He'd readily agreed when the Professor, who hated having his ward routine ruined by a patient who objected to medical students and insisted on having the screens kept drawn about his bed, suggested that he move to a one-bedded ward in another part of the hospital. No one told Mr Blake that the room was normally occupied by private fee-paying patients. Mr Blake and his political party were dedicated to the principle of socialized medicine for all and the abolition of fee-paying beds.

So there was a bed available for Mr Kennedy. The old man had suffered very little from the poisoning, but without his wife to care for him he was unable to stay in their home. When his wife had been in hospital before, he'd stayed with relatives. They were neither willing nor able to cope with him this time.

Mrs Kennedy was back on Parkins Ward and lying in the very same bed. This time, however, she had no smile for me or anyone else. She was unconscious and seriously ill.

Although we didn't know at the time what had happened, we managed to piece the story together later. Mrs Kennedy had always listened carefully to the doctors and students who had examined her. She knew more about some aspects of medicine than many of those charged with her care, but there were inevitably gaps in her knowledge. And as the object of discussions usually relating to the cardiovascular system and to congenital diseases Mrs Kennedy knew little about cancer and tumours in general. While she'd been lying listening to our discussion about her lump, she'd become convinced that the lump was cancerous. When we remembered the conversation we'd had around her bedside, we all agreed that, if we hadn't been called away to see the politician on the men's ward, the Professor would have concluded our session by reassuring her that the discussion had been purely academic and that her lump was quite harmless.

But Mrs Kennedy's fears hadn't been banished. She'd gone home certain that she was dying. And, in the silence and calm of her own home, her fears had grown. They were not for herself, but for her husband, who she knew would never be able to care for himself should she die first.

Rather than leave her Harry behind to be taken into a geriatric hospital or an old people's home, Mrs Kennedy had sealed the doors and windows of their tiny living-room with newspaper and sellotape, settled down with her husband to watch a favourite television programme and turned on the gas-fire without lighting it.

No one had told Mr Kennedy precisely what had happened. Dr Taylor had explained to him that he and his wife had been poisoned by a gas leak. A similar story had been told to the officer sent from the local police station. Professor Grainger, who'd once been fined for parking his elderly but stately Bentley in a no-parking zone while examining students at another medical school, disliked the police intensely. Since he'd also spent a good proportion of his life involved in litigation begun by a professor of pathology at an African medical school who'd taken objection to a book review written by Grainger himself, he also held a grudge against all lawyers. He was fond of pointing out that, if God had intended us to have lawyers, the Ten Commandments would have had amendments. He had no intention of allowing Mrs Kennedy to be taken to court on a charge of attempted murder.

And Mr Kennedy, whose memory was now so bad that he seemed to live entirely in the past, had been happy to accept this explanation.

For two days his wife hung on. She developed a chest infection which proved resistant to almost every antibiotic the hospital pathologist used in an attempt to control it. And slowly she grew weaker and weaker. She never regained consciousness and slowly she slipped farther and farther away from us.

The death of the motor-cyclist in the casualty department had affected me only slightly. I'd not known him alive and, in the harsh atmosphere of the casualty department, death had seemed almost inevitable. On the ward, however, I found Mrs Kennedy's death difficult to accept. It seemed somehow to be wrong for death to invade such a calm and organised place. Here were the best facilities available to mankind and presumably the best medical brains. Yet death was not to be denied.

I couldn't help blaming myself. It was I, after all, who'd been given the job of looking after her. It was I who'd introduced her to the ward-round on her last day in hospital. It was perhaps my fault that she'd left the hospital convinced that she was dying. A word from me and she'd have known better. She'd be sitting at home with her Harry.

It was not a responsibility I found easy to bear. It wasn’t anything I’d ever been trained to deal with. But I’d learnt another important lesson: that patients will listen to their doctors and take the words they hear very seriously — whether or not they understand what they hear, and quite regardless of the fact that they may have misheard or misunderstood. The doctor, I’d learnt, has a tremendous responsibility to ensure that his patients understand him, for they will surely remember his words.

But the lesson, however valuable, did not make Mrs Kennedy’s death any easier to bear.

Chapter Eight

Traditionally ward sisters are supposed to be stern, particular and rather humourless. Ordinary nurses, whether inexperienced students or fully qualified staff nurses with plenty of experience under their belts, are generally thought of as delightful companions and partners — always ready, willing and able.

Ward sisters, of course, have enormous responsibilities. It may be the doctors who decide upon the long-term care of patients, but it is the ward sister who looks after the patient's day-to-day needs. She it is who has the job of ensuring that his stomach remains full, his bowels empty and his bed tidy. She has the task of keeping two dozen patients immobile in bed and half a dozen nurses mobile and out of bed. She has to deal with irascible visitors and impertinent doctors and, since doctors, patients and visitors all share a permanent need for comfort and reassurance, she must be able to provide unending supplies of the milk of human kindness. To the people who enter her domain the ward sister must be all things maternal.

In a teaching hospital the unfortunate ward sister has the added task of coping with an unending stream of ignorant and often arrogant medical students. While she struggles with the unimaginably difficult task of managing her ward from day to day, she must also attempt to keep the students under some sort of control. So it is perhaps not surprising if she seems to be rather brusque, a little touchy about students leaving their litter in the middle of the ward, and unable to see the funny side of things when they change around all the patients' temperature charts.

And, of course, as a callow young student I was far less able to understand the ward sisters' problems than I am now, a comfortable time and distance away.

Apart from the sisters in the casualty department, I'd met just two ward sisters at this stage in my medical career. Sister Henderson, in charge of the women's medical ward, was about thirty-years-old, of slightly more than average height and with a backbone that a drill sergeant would have been proud to own. She had light-brown hair cropped short, serious brown eyes and rather tight, pouting lips. On her always immaculately smart dark-blue uniform she wore two small silver badges; her white starched cap was always pinned right at the front of her head. And, despite the camouflage provided by her uniform and the white starched pinafore she wore, it was perfectly clear that she had an absolutely enormous pair of breasts.

Sister Wills, who had the task of looking after the men's medical ward, was slightly taller, slightly darker and slightly slimmer than Sister Henderson. She also had a much less dramatic frontage.

In those early days and weeks I saw more of Sister Wills than of Sister Henderson, although I hasten to add that I never saw anything of either of them that was not secured underneath a uniform wrapping of blue calico. Andrew Clay and I had continued to take Mr Devlin down to the hospital basement twice a day for a week longer than Dr Taylor had originally intended. On two occasions the driving instructor had disappeared entirely from the ward for several hours while Dr Taylor had pushed thin tubes along his veins and into his heart. After those two experiments had been concluded, we'd had to abandon one or two sessions on the treadmill.

But it wasn't our visits to Mr Devlin which had given me the opportunity to spend more time on the men's ward as much as the admission of Mr Wills, the ward sister's father.

When he was brought into the hospital, Mr Wills looked ready for the mortuary rather than a hospital bed. It was so difficult to tell whether he was alive or dead that the nurse who accompanied him to his bed put out a cardiac-arrest call and, by the time he'd been helped off the porter's trolley and on to his bed, Dr Tarrant and Dr Taylor — together with another porter pushing a trolley loaded high with resuscitation equipment — were waiting for him. It was an impressive entrance. When it had been established that Mr Wills was indeed in the right department, I was allocated to watch his progress; Mr Devlin, one of my previous patients, had been discharged from the hospital and Mrs Kennedy had died. Only then did I discover the relationship between Mr Wills, until that moment a new patient who simply happened to have the unenviable privilege of being interviewed by me, and the ward sister.

Mr Wills was a chronic asthmatic, and the victim of two previous heart attacks. It was difficult to tell whether his pulmonary dysfunction was making his heart worse, or whether his failing heart was contributing to his pulmonary dysfunction. In addition, there was the problem of ensuring that the pills given to alleviate the symptoms of his heart condition did not exacerbate his lung trouble, and vice versa. Mr Wills was only in his mid-sixties but he looked twenty years older.

Dr Tarrant and Dr Taylor pushed one tube down his throat and another into one of his veins almost as soon as he arrived. They strapped an oxygen-mask across his mouth and injected stimulating drugs into a vein in the back of one of his hands. They also put a catheter into his bladder and had a nurse pin the collecting-bottle, an opaque plastic bag, to the bedclothes. After about an hour Mr Wills woke up, began to breathe a little more easily and started to look more like a patient and less like a cadaver.

Three hours after his admission he collapsed again. At the time his daughter was by his side, as was his wife, herself a former nursing sister. By the time Dr Tarrant and Dr Taylor had arrived with me at his bedside the two women had done most of their work for them. Sister Wills asked Dr Taylor if her mother could stay with her father and, when he agreed, added that she, too, would be staying on the ward with him, although she was due to go off duty that evening for forty-eight hours.

At nine o'clock the next morning they were both still there. Mr Wills was conscious, although only just, and his women looked almost as much in need of rest as he did.

During the night, said Sister Wills, he'd twice almost slipped away from them, and only Dr Tarrant's prompt arrival and the infusion of a diuretic had kept Cerberus at bay; the ungodly hound had certainly been snapping at his ankles.

At eleven that same morning he collapsed again, this time having a heart attack and disappearing from the land of the living with the stealth of a burglar. With much ado and many electrical aids he was dragged back again. Sister Wills had called the cardiac-arrest team and Mrs Wills had performed the closed cardiac massage until the arrival of the houseman and medical registrar.

By late afternoon Mr Wills' cheeks were hollow, his eyes dark and seemingly bottomless, and he looked, quite literally, like death warmed up. Dr Taylor and Dr Tarrant discussed him in the sister's office while the sister sat and held his hand. Dr Taylor pointed out that he'd suffered so much damage to his heart muscle that he'd never be able to leave the hospital and that there was more than a chance that he'd suffered some brain damage, too. Dr Tarrant reminded him that Mr Wills' daughter was the ward sister and asked him what he thought should be done. Dr Taylor sighed and agreed that there was nothing they could do but continue to respond to the demands and expectations of wife and daughter. I got the impression that if Mr Wills' daughter had been a librarian and his wife a shop assistant Mr Wills would have been left in peace.

That evening I sat with him while his wife and daughter ate in the staff restaurant. (The catering officer had in my brief experience sent round two memos complaining about staff members who described the restaurant as a 'canteen'.) For a moment Mr Wills opened his eyes, saw me standing alone and, with an effort that brought beads of sweat to his brow, shook his head from side to side. His eyes caught mine, and even in my innocence I felt they were the eyes of a man who knows there is no hope, knows that he must die and wants only to die quietly, quickly and painlessly. Guiltily I crept away.

Twice that night he died again and twice he was brought unceremoniously back to life. The electrocardiograph machine which stood on his bedside locker provided instant warning of impending doom, and at each interruption in this audible and visible record of his heartbeat, the alarm would sound and Mr Wills would be rescued once more.

The rest of the ward was almost forgotten. Professor Grainger spent nearly half his round talking quietly and confidentially to Mrs Wills and her daughter. They spoke alone in a distant corner of the ward while the rest of us stood around another patient's bed and half-heartedly discussed the various possible causes of an enlarged liver. Our hearts were not in it, of course; we were all too involved in the destiny of Mr Wills. All attention was on the curtain drawn around his bed and it seemed that all the hospital's equipment was stored in that small space. The other patients were unusually quiet and depressed. Mr Wills served as a permanent reminder of their potential fate and, each time he disappeared into a world beyond life, they waited nervously, as if they feared that they might disappear with him.

Mr Wills died during the eighth attempt to resuscitate him. He died at seven in the morning, with a tube down his throat, a tube in his urethra connecting his bladder to a plastic bag, a needle in each arm and one in his leg, a pair of defibrillating paddles by his side, a smear of grease on his chest, a scatter of broken vials and torn cellophane envelopes on his abdomen, an oxygen-mask on his face, an electrocardiograph machine on his bedside locker, a long cardiac needle in his heart, a smear of blood on his cheek and a puddle of spilt drip-fluid under his bed. He died lying on the floor with his arm in the puddle and his pyjama trousers around his ankles, his pyjama jacket ripped and his hair damp with sweat.

When I arrived on the ward, Sister Wills and her mother were still sitting in the corridor, consoling each other, while in the office the senior staff nurse sat trying to sort through the day's first problems.

'We did our best for him, Mother,' I heard Sister Wills whisper as she sipped a cup of tea. Although I didn't understand my doubts, I couldn't help wondering if the women were right.

Chapter Nine

Many times during those early weeks I found myself sinking into a deep dark depression. Until I'd begun my clinical apprenticeship I'd had little contact with death or illness. The first dead body I'd ever seen had been laid out on the dissecting-room slab and it had been all too easy to forget that the muscles, veins, arteries and nerves I dissected out had once belonged to a being filled with breath and ambition. Apart from the usual limited collection of infective childhood ailments, I'd been lucky enough to avoid personal experience of too much illness, and my relatives had little cause to take advantage of the youthful health service.

On the medical wards at St Peter's there had been, it seemed, nothing but a series of morbid encounters. Of the patients with whom I'd been closely associated only Mr Devlin had actually left the hospital and headed for home; the rest had gone to lie on the mortician's table. There had been too few opportunities for me to marvel at the wonders of medical science. Looking through the retrospectroscope, an instrument which enables the viewer to put past experiences into perspective, it's clear that a good many of the patients admitted to the medical wards in a teaching hospital will inevitably be seriously ill. Minor ailments, simple treatable infections, common or garden diseases, and illnesses requiring nothing more than rest, can be treated just as well, if not better, at home or in a local general hospital. The teaching hospital giants, specialists and superspecialists, aren't interested in simple pneumonias, uncomplicated stomach ulcers or strokes that are getting better. Theirs is a more complex world, where the treatment may be a success even if the patient dies.

It would have been easier, I suppose, had I come from a medical family. But no relatives of mine had ever practised medicine; the nearest we'd ever come were an uncle who'd made false teeth in his spare time, and a distant relative who'd driven an ambulance during someone else's war. I was still in short trousers when I first decided that I'd like to be a doctor. I don't really know why, although, when I attended St Peter's for my initial interview, I suppose I produced all the usual explanations: a desire to learn about the human body, a desire to help people, and so on. These are simplistic answers which do no justice to the truth. If anything, I suppose it was the relationships I saw binding my first family doctor to his patients which attracted me most. There seemed to me no better reason for living than to be a partner in so many complete and satisfying relationships. It was an interest in people as people, rather than as patients, which I first found attractive.

As those early clinical days went by I desperately wanted to discuss ethical, moral and philosophical problems with someone. I wanted to learn more about people, to understand the many and varied forces which drive doctors and patients and to obtain some insight into the relationships between those forces. But none of these subjects was in the syllabus. Nor was there likely to be any reward for original thinking. There were facts to be learned, techniques to be mastered and courses to be attended; the examinations which loomed ahead promised to be no more inspiring than crossword puzzles, the academic targets mere mental masturbation.

There was plenty of solid work to be done. There were patients to be interviewed and examined and books to be read; lectures to attend and ward-rounds to endure. After a day in the hospital there were textbooks to be taken out and notebooks to be scrutinised. My handwriting then was nearly as bad as it is now and many times I failed completely to read whole paragraphs I'd written.

But, more important than any of this, I needed to be at peace with myself; to understand just why I was studying medicine and to know that my early vocation was still intact. In the comfortable academic years of pre-clinical medicine it had been easy to be sure. There were no doubts then, just an overpowering eagerness to become involved in the clinical care of the sick and acquire the skills and knowledge which would give me the power to understand and help fight sickness and disease.

Now things weren't so clear. I wasn't so sure of myself, so certain that I wanted to be a doctor. My friends had fewer doubts. Hector was firmly set on his career, free and determined. He would qualify and take a house job in the teaching hospital before working abroad for a year. Then there would be a few clinical papers to write, a few lectures to give and a job as a registrar in St Peter's to obtain. Recognising his limitations, he'd decided to specialise in anaesthetics or radiology, the two specialities which offer the greatest chances for promotion and the most obvious opportunities for openings abroad. Neither an anaesthetist nor a radiologist needs to be able to speak to his patients. Both specialities can be practised successfully by a qualified man who's a confirmed monoglot.

Andrew had ambitions of a different kind. Brought up in a household where photographs of the most successful trade union leaders of the day took pride of place over the hearth, and where to be described as 'middle-class' was to be despised and derided, he claimed to be determined to be a genuinely socialist doctor, a physician with a social conscience. He had an overriding ambition to remain a member of the working class. Considering himself an agent behind enemy lines, he took great pains during the early weeks to ensure that his disguise remained convincing and absolute. Unfortunately he wasn't always successful in his attempts to disguise his true feelings. Once, for example, when Dr Taylor had halfjokingly suggested that a car worker with a persistent backache might have an active imagination and a disinclination to return to work, Andrew had defended the patient ferociously.

I envied them both their certainties and repeatedly despaired of my ability to cope with the ever-changing range of emotions I felt as I struggled to come to terms with the metamorphosis from student to doctor, from human being to physician. Sometimes I felt frustrated by the fact that in the last resort, medicine can only be an adjunct to the real purposes of living. The doctor merely puts people back on to the road of life; he stands by the wayside waiting for the frail and sickly to need his help. The greatest contributions in medicine add nothing to life and nothing to the healthy. Sometimes, too, I felt that it would be impossible to survive as a medical practitioner while still caring for the sick and dying. The death of Mrs Kennedy left me morose and inconsolable for days. And yet I also knew that I couldn't accept a life in which I didn't care, and didn't suffer with my patients.

They were tortuous, tortured days. I survived from day to day with my nose to the grindstone, my shoulder to the wheel, my ear to the ground, my head in my hands and my heart in my mouth.

Like all medical students, real as well as fictional, I survived by learning how to escape. Confused by death, mystified by life and uncertain about my role as an intermediary between the two, I became an enthusiastic partygoer. It provided no answers to the myriad of problems I struggled to solve but it did at least provide some respite.

There was, it seemed, always a party on somewhere. Either the nurses were celebrating the end of their examinations, the beginning of their examinations, someone's birthday or the first day of the month, or the doctors were celebrating the first day of Christmas, the last day of Lent, the retirement of some elderly honorary physician or the purchase of a barrel of beer. If neither the doctors nor the nurses were organising a party, then the medical students were; and, if there was no other available reason, the fact that at least one person wanted to have a party was considered a perfectly acceptable and valid one.

In the last week of our attachment to the medical wards, as we prepared to begin a series of visits to specialist hospitals, we had a leaving party in our flat; it was to be the first of several and as memorable as any.

The flat itself was situated on the ground floor of a large Victorian mansion more suitable for demolition than habitation. Owned by a rapacious landlord who had only a passing acquaintance with the public health by-laws, the building was divided into several separate flats. The others were all occupied by dental students.

Our flat contained three rooms, together with a bathroom whose plumbing would have felt at home in any nineteenth century country cottage, and a kitchen containing an ancient gas cooker covered with a half-inch layer of fat and a refrigerator which had no door and no cooling system but provided useful storage space for such daily essentials as cornflakes, baked beans, tinned beer and Stilton cheese. Hector, Andrew and I had a room each, deciding that the privacy this promised was preferable to the more usual sort of domestic arrangement involving separation into bedroom, sitting-room and dining-room. We ate in the kitchen and talked in each other's bedroom.

When invited to our party, Dr Taylor immediately offered considerable financial support, not on his own behalf but on behalf of the pharmaceutical company which had produced Angipax — the drug he'd been testing and which Andrew and I had helped him to assess. The company's only stipulation, that they be allowed to show a short film describing the virtues of one or two of their other products, seemed a small price to pay for two large casks of draught beer and a crate of red wine. The provision of two pounds of Cheddar cheese and a large French loaf Andrew, Hector and I assumed responsibility for; it seemed a modest outlay.

The pharmaceutical company representative, a portly fellow with a toothbrush moustache and a three-piece pinstriped suit, suggested that we begin with the film, preferring to show it to a small but relatively sober audience rather than to a large and inebriated one.

By eleven the representative, the beer and most of the wine had gone. Andrew had gone out to the local off-licence and bought half a dozen large cans of beer, and Professor Grainger, who'd made a brief visit, had brought with him a crate of stout. My problems and anxieties were beginning to succumb to the anaesthetic effect of an accumulation of alcohol. Such therapies may never be recommended by the medical profession, but they're often enjoyed by its members.

In the haze I found myself lying dreamily half underneath the kitchen table. The kitchen, like the other rooms, was full of people drifting freely about with the music. Most of the forms were indistinct, simply making up a writhing mass of human flesh. At some time during the night, however, a pneumatic blonde with enormous eyelashes and a charming lack of modesty lay down by my side underneath the table. She clutched an empty bottle of stout and snored incessantly.

Only in the morning, when I woke with cramped muscles and a hangover, did I discover that the lady with whom I'd innocently shared my patch of floor was Sister Henderson.

Chapter Ten

The next nine months were spent in four different hospitals: the Gregory Geriatric Hospital, the Hampton Grove Children's Hospital, the Women's Hospital and the Hilda Harper Hospital for the Mentally Ill. Hector and I remained together, beginning with the Geriatric Hospital. Andrew began at the women's hospital, and for weeks at a time I saw him only in passing as one or the other of us rushed into the flat to pick up books or clothes. Much of the time we were expected to live in the hospitals where we were studying, so the flat remained simply a centre from which we set off on our periodic peregrinations.

It was at the Gregory that I first slept in a hospital room. About ten feet long and five feet wide, it was equipped with a small, heavily stained dressing-table decorated with footprints left by a score of coffee cups and containing four drawers, lined with old newspapers, which resisted all attempts to open them more than a few inches; a wardrobe whose door swung open every time there was any slight movement elsewhere in the room; and a bed which creaked and squeaked as I breathed. The room was illuminated by a window which didn't shut properly and was edged by curtains which didn't meet, and by a sixty-watt bulb suspended shadeless from a fraying cord which hung from the centre of the ceiling. The walls, painted a hideous shade of yellow many years previously, had a mark halfway up beyond which the woman responsible for cleaning the room obviously could not reach, and in places the peeling paint had disappeared altogether, allowing pieces of the original wall-covering to show through. Underneath the yellow paint was brown paint. The floor was covered with thick linoleum, patterned in blue and green and cracked in several places. It was so dirty that I'd never have dared walk on it with only my socks to protect me.

The room had no washbasin, no chair and no table. There was, however, an old-fashioned black bakelite telephone standing on a ledge just inside the door. When it rang, the occupant of the bed had to climb out, find his shoes and pad across the floor to either the telephone or the light switch. Washing facilities were provided in a single room twenty yards down the corridor where a lavatory, a washbasin and a bath were shared by the students in residence, the resident doctors and assorted members of the nursing staff. The fact that all the toilet facilities were in the same room meant that in the morning there was a considerable demand for it; at eight o'clock a dozen or so heads could be seen peering round their half-open doors, watching for a sign of someone leaving the bathroom. When its door handle began to turn, a scrummage of doctors, nurses and medical students would appear in the corridor, dressed in various combinations of nightwear, underwear and uniform.

The walls of the bathroom were cleaner than those in the bedrooms since the condensation had long since removed all the paint, leaving behind bare areas of cracked plaster. There was only one plug, so that if you wanted to use the bath you had to take it from the washbasin, and vice versa. For some reason best known to the designers, when the washbasin was emptied water flowed up from its waste-pipe into the bath. All in all, the plumbing in the residential quarters of the Gregory Geriatric Hospital had much in common with that in the flat I shared with Andrew and Hector.

My responsibilities towards the patients in the hospital were fortunately limited; I was able to allow those with more urgent needs and more responsible tasks to slide into the bathroom before me. And the telephone didn't prove too much of a problem; during my stay in the room it rang only once, and that was a mistake.

The patients were, of course, all elderly and frail. Most of them had been admitted as a last resort, simply because they weren't ill enough to take up beds in ordinary general hospitals and not well enough to look after themselves or stay in a residential home. It was perhaps unfortunate that I'd been sent to a geriatric hospital after my maudlin introduction to clinical medicine. The urine-heavy atmosphere, the lack of equipment and nurses, the dreadfully dreary surroundings and the sense of despair which seemed to hang over the whole place did nothing to raise my spirits. In self-defence my memory seems to have erased most of the experiences I had there, although one unusual event does linger.

It happened on an unusually warm winter day. Hector and I had discovered two croquet mallets and a set of hoops and balls in a small cupboard next to the hospital canteen. Desperate for excitement, we'd found a relatively flat piece of lawn, hammered in the hoops and begun to play a game which, I have to admit, bore relatively little resemblance to the one for which the equipment had been manufactured.

We'd just succeeded in hitting a ball each through one of the hoops when I saw one of the auxiliary nurses racing along the path towards us. She was waving and shouting, and puffing and panting for breath.

'There's been an accident...' she managed to mumble. 'Mr Tidy's cut himself.'

Throwing down the mallets Hector and I crowded round her.

'Who's Mr Tidy?' asked Hector.

'How bad is the cut?' I asked.

'Where is he?'

'How did he do it?'

'Have you found one of the doctors?'

'When was it?'

'I don't know,' cried the auxiliary nurse. 'Sister sent me to find a doctor.'

‘We aren’t doctors,’ said Hector.

She began to cry.

‘Where is he?’ I asked. She told us that he was on one of the men’s medical wards and, when we asked which, began to give us complex, incomprehensible directions. The Gregory Geriatric Hospital, like many others with similar functions, consisted of one enormous old Victorian building with numerous additions. It is extremely easy to get lost in one of these places despite the notices and instructions posted at strategic intervals along all the corridors. Eventually the nurse agreed to lead us back to the ward she’d left. As she half-walked and half-ran she explained breathlessly that Mr Tidy was one of the male charge nurses (the masculine equivalent of sisters) and that he’d cut himself while trying to pull a rubber incontinence pad out of the filing cabinet in which it was kept. He’d been cut on one of the shelves. Neither Hector nor I wanted to add to the confusion by asking why the rubber incontinence pad was kept in a filing cabinet.

When we arrived at the scene of Mr Tidy’s embarrassment we discovered he’d disappeared.

‘Sister’s taken him to the main entrance,’ explained a voluntary helper, putting library books into neat piles on a table in the centre of the ward. None of the patients had read a book for years but the rules stated that library books should be made available to them regularly.

Led again by the nurse, we set off for the main entrance.

As we ran we could see the occasional drop of blood on the corridor floor. Hector bent down once and checked to see whether it had clotted.

‘They aren’t far ahead,’ he called as we raced on.

As we arrived, all quite breathless, at the main entrance, we were just in time to see an ambulance disappearing down the drive. The nurse was so exhausted that she slumped into a heap on the floor.

‘Was that Mr Tidy?’ asked Hector, rather red in the face as a ward sister walked slowly back in. She looked rather surprised and then nodded.

‘Where’s he gone?’ asked Hector.

‘I’ve sent him to the casualty department at St Peter’s,’ explained the sister with a sniff. ‘We don’t have a casualty department here and I think he’ll need a stitch in his finger.’

‘Just one?’

‘Perhaps two,’ she said defensively. ‘What are you doing here, anyway? You’re students, aren’t you?’ She managed to put a lot of feeling into the word ‘students’.

‘The nurse said you wanted a doctor,’ said Hector. ‘We thought we might be able to help.’

‘You can,’ said the sister. ‘I just wanted someone strong to help me get the damned incontinence pad out of the filing-cabinet.’

After the Gregory I went to the women’s hospital, where I found life far more rewarding. It included a large maternity department and, since pregnancy isn’t an illness and childbirth is a cause for celebration rather than mourning, there was less unhappiness there than I had grown to expect in any hospital. It was there that I performed my first full examination of a woman, losing my professional virginity to a kindly young mother of two who bore with remarkable patience my clumsy attempts to discover her cervix. Before I approached her bed I’d been warned by Hector, a normally humourless young man whose ambitions were entirely clinical and orthodox, to prepare myself adequately for the examination. He told me confidentially that I had been unfortunate enough to be allotted to a young woman of unusual dimensions, and warned me to roll my sleeves up as far as they would go and to be sure to wash up past my elbow before beginning the examination. He even offered to look after my watch for me.

As I approached Mrs Jessop’s bed I headed straight for the washbasin, removing my white coat and hanging it carefully on a mobile screen which had been already arranged around her bed. She watched in some amazement as I carefully rolled up my shirt sleeves, and then stared at me with horror in her eyes as I proceeded to lather my arms well past my elbows.

‘What are you doing?’ she asked quietly.

I explained that I wanted to make sure that my hands were clean before I performed the examination.

‘Aren’t you going to put gloves on?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘but they only reach up to my wrist.’

There was a pause of several seconds before Mrs Jessop let out a yelp. Hector sprained an ankle as he attempted to escape down the stairs at twice his normal speed. I got my revenge two days later by piling two tables, eight chairs, a fire-hose and two buckets full of water outside his room at midnight, then telephoning him to let him know there was an emergency involving one of his patients.

The remainder of this part of my life was consistently underwhelming and forgettable. After the women’s hospital I went to the children’s hospital. At a party at the children’s hospital I met Sister Henderson again, this time accompanied by Dr Crisp, the casualty officer. She looked puzzled when I approached her, and asked me if we’d met before.

Chapter Eleven

It had been a fortnight since I'd seen Andrew. We met in the kitchen over a bowl full of pancake mixture and a bottle of cheap wine that he'd bought at a garden party organised by the Friends of St Peter's Hospital. The party was supposed to raise money for the staff to buy equipment and the administrators to buy luxuries such as chairs for the wards. If they sold many bottles of wine like the one Andrew had bought, they probably provided the hospital with more new patients than new equipment.

Andrew had just completed a tour of the same four hospitals as I'd visited, and his experiences contrasted with mine. He'd found the women's hospital depressing, the children's hospital invigorating, the geriatric hospital inspiring and the mental hospital enormously attractive. His experiences at the last, however, were undoubtedly influenced by a blossoming relationship with a twenty-yearold girl recovering from an attack of depression. Two days before her discharge, Andrew had arranged to meet her for dinner at a Chinese restaurant. Despite all the odds, their romance flourished.

The main topic of conversation, however, was not the developing relationship, but the Angipax research project which Andrew and I had assisted with. He was particularly disturbed by the fact that he'd discovered that Mr Devlin, the driving instructor whom we'd accompanied to the St Peter's treadmill, was being called back to the hospital for routine cardiac catheterisations.

Andrew and Mr Devlin had met accidentally in the corridor outside the staff dining-room. As a habitué of the hospital Mr Devlin preferred that to the visitors' restaurant, having discovered that its portions of chips were larger.

'He's been back at work for weeks,' said Andrew. 'He still gets attacks of angina, but since he works mainly sitting down he doesn't have too much exercise. As long as he avoids the more imaginative learner drivers he doesn't get too much trouble with pains.'

Dr Taylor, Andrew went on to explain, had persuaded Mr Devlin to reattend the hospital once a month for tests. These included work on the treadmill and sessions which involved pushing special tubes along his veins into his heart. Mr Devlin, Andrew said, dreaded and hated these particular experiments. Once he'd had a cardiac arrest and, when he'd woken up, he'd found himself nursing three fractured ribs, produced by the enthusiastic thumping on his chest.

'It really isn't right,' insisted Andrew. 'I asked Dr Taylor why Mr Devlin had to keep having cardiac catheterisations and he told me they hadn't completed the trial. The poor chap's going through agony just so that Dr Taylor can finish writing his research paper, and he thinks it's all being done to help him.'

I pointed out that there wasn't much we could do about it, even if we wanted to.

'There's a hospital ethical committee,' said Andrew. 'I looked up the details in the library. They're supposed to keep an eye on all research done in the hospital and make sure it's all necessary and worthwhile. They're also supposed to make sure that all patients know exactly what's going on and that they don't suffer at all.'

'Who's on the committee?' I asked him.

'All sorts of people. Most of them I'd never heard of, but I know the chairman.'

'Who's that?'

'Professor Grainger,' he replied with a shrug. 'That's why I haven't bothered complaining to them. The Professor's hardly likely to take my side against his own registrar, is he?'

'There you are, then. What are you going to do?'

'I don't know,' he admitted. He poured two more glasses of dreadful wine and poured some more pancake mixture into the frying-pan. Hector, who had a magnificent talent for homing in on anything edible, arrived just as the pancake was being divided and sprayed with lemon juice. It was the first time the three of us had been together in the flat since we'd completed our initial period on the medical wards; the first time, in fact, since our celebratory party.

Hector said that the sight of pancakes reminded him of the time he'd been on one of the wards at the geriatric hospital at lunch-time. As a special treat the chef, who'd been about to leave to take a job as an assembly worker at a car factory, had prepared individual pancakes for all the patients. Most of them, said Hector, had been strong enough to use as footballs if wrapped around lumps of hospital rice pudding, but that was beside the point.

The lunches, Hector went on, had been taken around the ward by the sister and her only assistant, a young student nurse who'd been working in the hospital for less than a week. The sister handed out pancakes on the left-hand side of the ward while the nurse dealt with the right. (Hector, presumably, had sat in the office with his nose turned up.) Three-quarters of the way through the distribution the junior nurse hurried up the ward and whispered to the ward sister that one of the patients she was serving had died before he'd even managed to start his pancake. She wanted to know what she should do. Coolly and calmly, the sister told her to give his pancake to the next patient and to keep the remaining one for herself.

Hector roared with laughter when he told this story, but Andrew didn't find it amusing at all. He said it had put him off his meal completely since he found it in such bad taste. As he tucked into Andrew's share, having sprinkled it with a liberal helping of sugar, I couldn’t help thinking that Hector had told the story on purpose.

Andrew spent most of the time talking about Sara, the girl he’d met at the mental hospital, and arguing with Hector, who said it was unethical for him to develop a personal relationship with any patient, but particularly one recovering from a depressive illness. Andrew didn’t mention Mr Devlin again, and I thought he’d forgotten the affair; but, just before we all went to bed, he said, ‘I still feel bad about Mr Devlin. I wish there was something we could do about him.’ I was tired and I didn’t take much notice. Perhaps I should have done.

Chapter Twelve

The itch at the back of my neck was slowly driving me mad. My only consolation was that I could get rid of the itch on the sole of my left foot by rubbing it along a bar fixed on to the bottom of the operating-table.

For what seemed like a month I'd been standing beside Archer Meridew, the consultant surgeon at St Peter's, as he struggled to corner and remove the gall bladder from Mrs Potter, a forty-two-year-old around whose ample form Puck would have taken considerably longer than forty minutes to put a girdle. While Mr Meridew and his registrar Simon Grant fiddled and fussed with Mrs Potter's seemingly unending layers of fat, I was kept busy snipping lengths of thread and acting as a butt for the surgeon's cruel sense of humour. I'd cut the stay sutures designed to hold things in place, I'd dropped the slippery instruments given to me to hold, and all in all neither Mr Meridew nor I found the experience a pleasant one. I was beginning to understand one of the lesser-known advantages of wearing a surgical mask: the surgeon doesn't know the name of the assistant who's hampering him unless he actually asks.

My arrival in the operating-theatre at two minutes to nine had not been auspicious. As I scrubbed away at my hands I'd awaited Mr Meridew's coming with some trepidation. Having been a consultant surgeon at a major teaching hospital for twenty years, Archer Meridew had acquired a reputation for bluntness. As a student with absolutely no experience at all of operating-theatres, I wasn't looking forward to being shredded; I couldn't help thinking of another medical student who, so legend had it, had been so incensed by the surgeon's criticisms that he'd swung him a right hook in the middle of a vagotomy and pyloroplasty. Mr Meridew had been knocked out for twenty minutes, the registrar had had to finish the operation, and no one knew what had become of the student.

As I scrubbed slowly away a junior theatre nurse stood over me. It reminded me of my childhood, when I'd been getting myself ready for a children's party. She even wanted to check my fingernails. When, having finished to her satisfaction, I allowed the soapy suds to be rinsed off my forearms down past my hands, I heard her tut-tut behind me. She explained that they had to be allowed to drain off my elbows, not across my freshly cleaned hands. I had to go through the scrubbing procedure again; by the time I'd finished my hands were so sore and raw that I hardly knew what I was doing. But I turned the taps off with my hand rather than my elbow.

Getting dressed after my third attempt at washing proved equally tedious. The kindly but meticulous nurse put on the hat and mask I should have donned before I'd started scrubbing, adjusting the ties so that they fitted comfortably but firmly behind my head. Then she helped me into my gown.

Putting on skin-tight surgical gloves is something which a contortionist would demand extra money for; doing it without touching the outside of the gloves demands skills a pickpocket would be proud to possess. Take it from me that anyone dexterous enough to be able to dress in surgical garb is perfectly capable of dealing with your appendix or brain clot. The gloves come with small packages of chalk dust or talcum powder which you're supposed to sprinkle on your hands before attempting to don the gloves. I managed to spread a cloud of dust over myself and the nurse, and to put a little on my left thumb.

Eventually I managed it all; but not before I'd ripped three pairs of gloves into ribbons, poking my fingers through the thin rubber. Then I was ready for my first entrance.

I honestly still had no idea at that point that Mr Meridew was in the hospital, let alone in the operating theatre, and I waltzed merrily through the opaque plastic swing doors humming happily to myself. Mr Meridew, who was busily bent over an open abdomen searching for a small hole in someone's bowel, threw a dirty swab at me with astonishing speed. Automatically I reached out for it and, to my surprise, caught it. That meant that I now had to go back and get changed and washed again. By the time I'd reattired myself in sterile surgical green the operation was almost over. I entered the theatre as Mr Meridew put the last suture into the patient's skin and pulled off his gloves with a resounding snap. The theatre sister, a kindly woman with a tic which made every male think she was winking at him, let me sit in a corner waiting for the next patient to come in. It was the gargantuan Mrs Potter.

* * *

'What's this?' demanded Mr Meridew.

I was daydreaming and had no idea he'd spoken to me.

'What's this?' shouted Mr Meridew, whose patience was far from inexhaustible.

I peered into the mysterious dark depths where my hands were buried among a confusing variety of internal structures. I could just see the surgeon's index finger pointing down towards the base of the hole.

'It's the retractor,' I said.

'The what?' he spluttered.

'It isn't the retractor,' I whispered.

'What do you eat with onions?' he shouted.

'Peppermints?' I suggested, after thinking for a moment.

'Liver, you fool!' he roared.

It wasn't a good beginning to our relationship. Particularly since I'd just been allotted to Mr Meridew's surgical ‘firm’, or team, for the next few months. I and half a dozen other students would be expected to take it in turns to attend his outpatient clinics, assist him during operations and accompany him on his wards. We’d all be expected to talk to and examine his patients before and after their operations. For some reason, whereas a medical student working with a physician is known as a clerk, one on a surgical firm is known as a dresser. I suspected that these terms originated in the days when they performed real and useful functions during their years of apprenticeship. Today’s medical student usually plays as important a part in a patient’s survival in hospital as a student of Serbo-Croat.

Both Hector and Andrew were delegated to Mr Meridew’s firm with me. On that first morning, as I stood alongside the great man himself, Hector was busy looking at the collection of miscellaneous lumps and bumps collected by Mr Meridew’s house surgeon for his own surgical list the following day and Andrew was taking blood samples from the patients awaiting more major surgery.

‘I’m sure this damned table is moving up and down,’ bawled Mr Meridew, standing back from the patient for a moment. His registrar stepped back with the consultant and put his head on one side as he examined the table from a distance. He looked at it as if half-expecting it to blow up in his face.

‘Come on, Archer,’ called the anaesthetist, a huge bear of a man sitting at the head of the table and sharing his attention between the bank of dials and pieces of machinery and a book of crossword puzzles. Occasionally during the operation he’d ask out loud if anyone knew the answer to a clue that was puzzling him. Mr Meridew hadn’t been able to help at all, but one of the theatre technicians had proved an adept aide. The anaesthetist, Jim Kibble-White, had masses of golden curly hair which hung out from his surgical cap on all sides. I’d heard a good deal about him since a niece of mine had once had an operation for which he’d anaesthetised her. He’d given her a piggy-back to the operating-theatre instead of making her ride on the trolley the porters had brought to the ward and, during the operation, he’d wrapped her teddy bear up in swathes of bandages so that when she came round she could nurse it better. He was slow and rather untidy but he had a tremendous reputation as an anaesthetist. Hector said he rather hoped that when he was assisting there would be a crisis so that he could see Kibble-White in action.

‘It isn’t you that’s got to work on the damned table,’ muttered Mr Meridew to him.

‘The blood’ll be out of date if you don’t hurry up,’ insisted the anaesthetist.

‘It’s all easy enough from where you are,’ shouted Mr Meridew crossly. ‘You try operating with a knife that isn’t sharp enough to cut butter in a heatwave.’ The long-running feud between the two was well known in the hospital.

Kibble-White enjoyed baiting the surgeon, who never seemed to realise what was going on and who always rose, like a hungry trout, to the slightest flick of the fly.

I watched with horror as I saw the registrar put his foot on a bar under the table. The table responded and moved up an inch or two, taking the patient that much farther away from the floor. Then the registrar moved the bar in the opposite direction. This time the table went down a little. I felt myself blushing underneath my mask. The bar was the one I’d been using to scratch my foot. It was no wonder the table had been going up and down like a yo-yo. Fortunately for me neither of the two surgeons was prepared to investigate any further. Having readjusted it to suit themselves they went back to work.

Three-quarters of an hour later it was all over; the gall bladder lay on a small tray by the patient’s side and the appalling hole in Mrs Potter’s abdomen had been closed. Mr Meridew had even let me put my forefinger on one of the knots he’d tied. Another landmark in my career. Then he and Mr Grant hurried off to look at a patient on the ward who was recovering from an operation the day before.

Helping the theatre sister to clear up, I picked the redundant gall bladder from the tray and threw it into a bucket containing dirty swabs and little pieces of excised tissue. The gall bladder had been cut open and inside it I could see half a dozen stones nestling comfortably. The theatre technician who’d proved such an adept crossword puzzler took the bucket away to the hospital incinerator.

Just five minutes after he’d disappeared, a young nurse from the surgical ward came up as I was standing by the anaesthetist’s trolley and listening to Dr Kibble-White’s explanations of the purposes of the various dials and gauges.

‘Mr Meridew says could he please have the stones from Mrs Potter’s gall bladder to give her when she wakes up.’

‘They’re round here somewhere,’ said the anaesthetist, taking from the bottom of his trolley a small glass bottle which was clearly there for just that purpose. It even bore a label marked ‘Mrs Potter’.

‘They aren’t,’ I whispered, sweat beginning to run down my nose.

‘Aren’t they?’

‘I’ve thrown them away,’ I confessed, and told him what had happened.

‘Wait there a minute,’ he said to the nurse. He winked at me and hurried off. Two minutes later he came back with half a dozen small stones in the palm of his hand. He put them into the bottle and ceremoniously handed it to the nurse. She in turn hurried off, holding the bottle carefully, as if it contained some delicate and rare archaeological discovery.

‘You got there in time?’ I said. ‘Thank heavens.’
‘I didn’t even try.’
I looked at him, uncomprehending.
There’s a gravel path outside,’ he grinned.

Chapter Thirteen

For centuries physicians have rather looked down their noses at surgeons, regarding the branch of the profession which involves cutting people up as crude, barbarous and quite devoid of finesse. English physicians had their own Royal College in 1518, but surgeons had to wait until 1800 before they could boast of a college with sovereign patronage. Whereas the physician considered himself a man of some social standing, the surgeon had to be content with purely financial rewards, being seen as a craftsman rather than a professional man.

Partly as a reaction against this tradition of inferiority, many modern surgeons seem to exude a mixture of arrogance and self-confidence which makes Muhammad Ali look positively modest and withdrawn. Surgeons, I discovered, are the ones who dress flamboyantly, showing a penchant for coloured waistcoats, bow-ties and patterned shirts. Physicians, on the other hand, are more likely to stick to pinstriped suits, white shirts, club ties and perhaps the occasional carnation or rosebud. Outside the operatingtheatre, Mr Meridew (and surgeons always drop the courtesy title of 'doctor' when they become fellows of the Royal College of Surgeons in memory of the fact that, a century or two ago, surgeons were not allowed to call themselves doctors or join the existing august colleges) dressed to fit the popular image of a successful surgeon. He wore a threepiece suit of either pale blue or beige and a pastel-coloured bow-tie contrasting with his shirt. He never wore a white coat, although he always insisted that his subordinates should do so, but often appeared on the ward or in his outpatient clinic wearing his green surgical garb. With rubber boots on his feet, a cap pushed to the back of his head, a mask around his neck, and with dark patches of sweat underneath his arms and in the small of his back, he always looked as though he'd just come from saving a life. Occasionally there'd be just a couple of drops of blood on the front of his theatre shirt.

Although he was slightly above average height anyway, his ordinary shoes or boots always had heels specially built to give him an extra inch or so more. He took a dislike to me when we first met without masks, perhaps remembering my first appearance because of my height. Or it may have simply been that he automatically disliked anyone taller than himself.

Fortunately for me, he spent most of his time at his private consulting-rooms and at a private nursing home some two or three miles away which was equipped with its own operating-theatre suite. That meant that I found myself attending clinics and ward-rounds with the senior surgical registrar, Mr Grant, who, although he was preparing himself for life as a consultant surgeon, was still young enough and human enough to remember the trials and heartaches a medical student has to endure.

Simon Grant it was who allocated new patients to the students, so it was from him that I received instructions one Thursday morning to take a look at a schoolteacher in the third bed along on the left.

In my early months as a medical student, I'd already developed a technique of recognising a patient's occupation simply by looking at him carefully. Schoolteachers were among my favourite categories of employed persons since I was convinced that I could identify one at twenty paces. It wasn't the chalk dust, the collection of cheap ballpoint pens in the breast pocket and the invariably frayed cuffs that gave it away, so much as the air of mystified and confused innocence borne with a sense of omniscience. Schoolteachers spend their time with children, of course, and so develop a type of arrogance, mixed with weary patience, that is unique. When they're in the company of other adults their sense of superiority is damaged and they show some confusion.

As I wandered on to the surgical ward, ready to begin my examination of my new patient, I was looking for the telltale signs — all the more difficult to discern on a hospital ward where everyone dresses in pyjamas and wears a worried look. There was absolutely no doubt about it. The patient in the third bed along was a schoolteacher. Small, thinning on top, rather red-faced and wearing a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles, he was easily identifiable. There was no doubt about it. He'd taught me physics for three years.

'Mr Tucker!' I said, stopping still at the foot of his bed and staring along the sheets at the familiar face that had for several terms struggled to encourage me to show a little more interest in the mysteries of magnetism and reflected light.

'Vernon!' exclaimed my former teacher. 'Edward Vernon, isn't it?'

I nodded. I felt rather self-conscious in my white coat and the striped waistcoat I'd taken to wearing since I'd begun work on the surgical wards. I'd bought it in a sale at a small tailor's near the hospital and had never quite got used to it. I buttoned my white coat firmly around me and tugged at my tie.

'What are you doing here?'

I explained that I was a medical student.

'Medicine, eh?' nodded Mr Tucker with a slight smile. 'I thought you'd gone off to study veterinary medicine. I wonder why I thought that.' He scratched at his head. 'Must have got you confused with someone else.'

'Actually,' I began, rather embarrassed now, 'I'm supposed to examine you and ask you a few questions.'

Mr Tucker looked at me and frowned slightly. 'You're not my doctor, are you?'

I shook my head.

‘I didn’t think you’d left long enough,’ he smiled with some relief.

‘I’m just starting my clinical work,’ I explained.

‘You’re not doing the operations?’

I shook my head and smiled at him. I hoped it might reassure him.

‘Well, you’d better get on with it,’ he said, after a moment’s silence. ‘What did you want to ask me?’

I edged forward and sat down timidly on the chair beside his bed, taking out the notebook I kept in my pocket. Then I began working my way through the system of questions I’d been taught by Dr Taylor and which are designed for use with surgical as well as with medical patients.

After half an hour I’d acquired not one neat diagnosis but three. And that, I knew, just wouldn’t do at all. All young students are taught that, when interviewing a patient, they should attempt to tie all the information they acquire into one neat bundle and then stick a single diagnostic label on to the result.

For example, if a patient complains of a headache, a pain in his back, aches in his legs, a cough and a feeling of nausea, there’s a good chance that he has a virus infection. A patient who complains of pain when she passes urine and also has pain in her loins is likely to have a kidney infection. And one who complains of an intolerance to fatty foods, a tendency to sickness, a pain in the right side of the abdomen and perhaps in the right shoulder, and a darkening of the urine is likely to find herself lying, like Mrs Potter, on the operating-table and having her gall bladder removed.

Mr Tucker’s story just didn’t lead to one answer. He told me that he had a swelling in his groin which got bigger when he coughed, a habit of getting up at night to urinate, a poor stream of urine when he did go, and difficulty in starting or stopping the flow. He also reported that he got pains in the upper part of his abdomen when he ate anything and that at night, when he wasn’t being woken by the desire to micturate, he often woke up with a pain in his stomach. Try as I might, I just could not make sense of that collection of miscellaneous symptoms. Moreover, by the end of my interrogation, my embarrassment had not unnaturally doubled. In fact I think it was beginning to affect my judgement.

As I sat staring at the collection of notes I’d made, Mr Grant appeared on the ward. Seeing me sitting by the side of my patient he came over to offer support, help or possibly just criticism.

‘Well?’

‘I think it’s something very rare,’ I said in a whisper.

The registrar looked surprised.

‘I’m having a little difficulty in getting a diagnosis,’ I confessed.

‘That doesn’t necessarily make it rare,’ he pointed out.

I recited to him the list of positive findings I’d acquired from my interview with Mr Tucker.

‘Have you examined him yet?’ he asked. I had to admit that I hadn’t. Looking rather ashen at the prospect, but hardly likely to have felt worse than I did, my former physics teacher began to unbutton his pyjama jacket. With Mr Grant watching from the other side of the bed I began the examination. I discovered nothing more telling than a slight swelling in my patient’s left groin, which appeared only when he coughed.

‘Have you completed your examination?’ asked the registrar.

I said I had.

‘What about the rectal examination?’

‘I haven’t done that,’ I agreed. The thought of sticking a finger into Mr Tucker’s anus didn’t appeal to my imagination. But, of course, such feelings have no place in medicine.

Fetching a rubber glove and a tube of cream from the far end of the ward, I invited Mr Tucker to lie on his side and draw his knees up to his chest. Then, liberally smearing my forefinger with lubricant, I slid it out of sight between his surprisingly hairy buttocks. As I did so, to our mutual embarrassment Mr Grant’s bleep began to sound the highpitched note indicating that the hospital switchboard operator had a call for him. Mr Tucker and I, mistaking the sound, apologised to one another and I withdrew my finger. While the registrar ran down the ward to the telephone,

Mr Tucker pulled up his pyjama trousers and I removed the rubber glove. We grinned at each other like conspirators.

‘Well?’ said Mr Grant, hurrying back a moment later.

‘He’s got an enlarged prostate gland,’ I said.

‘And?’

‘And a hernia.’

‘And?’

‘An ulcer?’ I suggested tentatively.

‘Right,’ agreed Mr Grant. ‘Nothing rare. Just an ulcer, a hernia and an enlarged prostate.’ He pulled the sheets back up over Mr Tucker. ‘Always look for the simple things,’ he reminded me. ‘The common things are commonest.’

Bewildered by the problem of satisfying both Mr Grant and those who had warned me always to try to give each patient one diagnosis, I hardly heard him tell me that he’d just had a telephone call from the sister on the woman’s surgical ward.

‘I don’t suppose you know anything about that, do you?’ he asked.

‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘What was that?’

‘Sister Beresford’s just had a telephone call from Mrs Potter’s husband,’ he repeated. ‘He’s an industrial chemist and apparently he’s been trying to analyse the stones we took out of Mrs Potter’s gall bladder.’ He looked straight at me. ‘They won’t dissolve.’

I opened my mouth but fortunately nothing came out of it.

‘I don’t suppose you can explain that, can you?’

I told him it seemed a real mystery.

Chapter Fourteen

The university of which St Peter's Medical School was a part provided courses for several thousand people. There were engineering students, law students, students studying the social sciences, language students, history students, biology students, philosophers, mathematicians and so on. In all, there were approximately 20,000 people living, working, reading and — it was to be hoped — learning on the campus. Not all of them students, of course.

To provide all these students, lecturers, cleaners, laboratory technicians, professors, housekeepers, clerks, demonstrators and administrators with information about university affairs, a university newspaper was published once a week during term-time. It contained the usual mixture of gossip, political argument, domestic chit-chat and advance publicity for officially organised dances and theatrical events.

Andrew, my flat-mate, had early in his clinical career been appointed medical school correspondent for the newspaper. Most of the printed news comprised details of unusual academic successes and notices of new appointments within the faculty, but there was also the odd exposé. Occasionally Andrew reported on clinical research work which he considered important enough to merit a wider audience.

Because of his contacts among the newspaper's editorial staff, he knew far more non-medical students than any of my other friends. He was on nodding terms with historians, chemical engineers and English language students, and could even tell the difference between a pure and an applied mathematician.

Once a month the newspaper organised a dance and party in the main university hall. It was from the profits made at the bar at these dances that the paper managed to keep going; there was very little profit to be made from the sales. Indeed for five years the paper had made a steady loss, none of the students involved with its production ever having been enthusiastic about selling advertising space. During our attachment to Mr Meridew's surgical team, Andrew invited me to one of these dances. He was going with Sara. Since my romantic achievements (unless you count the night with Sister Henderson) had amounted to a kiss in the laundry room behind the main operating-theatre from a diminutive student nurse who seemed to regret it afterwards, I was ready for almost any opportunity.

To everyone's surprise the affair between Andrew and Sara had flourished; they seemed to grow together day by day. Those who had cruelly suggested that it was built on dubious needs, and therefore likely to founder, were beginning to agree that they'd been wrong in their assessment.

Only a couple of inches over five feet tall, and as slim and frail as a wraith, Sara worked as a typist for a firm of estate agents. Her father was a solicitor. His ambitions for his daughter had been largely academic, and had far exceeded Sara's own ambitions or intellectual capabilities. The pressures on her had been so great that at sixteen she'd attempted to put an end to it all with the help of a bottleful of aspirin tablets. The psychiatrist who'd seen her after the attempt had diagnosed schizophrenia, and tied the label to her without a second thought. As a result of that, Sara's parents had shied away from her, full of guilt and apprehension.

So thin that she always wore long-sleeved blouses to hide her bony arms and trousers to hide her legs, Sara had spent many months in a number of different mental hospitals, under the care of various psychiatrists. One had recommended electrical shock treatment, another had suggested surgery and others had simply tried different combinations of tranquillising drugs. None of these things had any beneficial effect and, when she and Andrew had met, Sara had been rapidly moving towards a state of institutionalisation: she was developing the dull, timid stare and manner of the long-term hospital patient who comes to accept every instruction and order with immediate obedience and to find life unbearable without strict regulation.

Hector had several times pointed out to anyone who would listen to him that Andrew's infatuation was unhealthy for both Sara and himself, arguing that Sara was merely leaning on Andrew and that Andrew simply found it gratifying to have such a totally subservient and dependent companion. Slowly, however, it became apparent that Sara was developing a personality of her own and that Andrew was encouraging her to do so. A month after she'd left the mental hospital, Sara moved into Andrew's room in the flat. Her break with her parents had been precipitated by their dislike of Andrew, whom they felt too crude and rough a fellow for their daughter.

The three of us walked from the flat to the university hall together. On the way there we called in at the newspaper's editorial offices so that Andrew could get hold of a copy of the following day's paper, due in from the printers that same evening. The huge piles, bound with thick fraying string, were dumped in the narrow corridor outside the offices. Cutting the string on one pile, Andrew pulled out a couple of copies and handed one to me.

Instead of turning to the inside pages as he usually did, to see his small reports, invariably scattered among items delivered by correspondents from other faculties, Andrew spread out the front page.

'Look at that!' he whispered, pointing to the headline which stretched right across the paper. I put my copy down on one of the unopened bundles and simply stared at it. The front-page story described in extravagant detail the experiment which Andrew and I had helped Dr Taylor conduct. There was even a photograph of Mr Devlin and a number of quotes from an interview with Andrew. The screaming headline denounced both Dr

Taylor and the Angipax research project, and the text detailed the agonies and terrors which Mr Devlin had endured in the cause of research.

‘You can’t print that,’ I told him, my heart thumping and the butterflies in my stomach stamping around with leaden feet.

‘I have,’ he said, quite simply and proudly.

‘But they’ll never let you get away with it.’

‘What can they do? It’s all true.’

I read the story again. It described how Mr Devlin had been admitted to St Peter’s, how he’d been put on Angipax and how he’d been subjected to cardiac catheterisation several times after he’d been officially discharged from the hospital.

‘I still say those catheterisations were done because Dr Taylor was anxious to complete his research project,’ said Andrew, ‘and not for Devlin’s benefit.’

‘But they’ll say they got his permission,’ I exclaimed.

‘He didn’t understand what it was all about. Anyway, he was frightened by it all. He thought he had to do what they said.’

Nothing I said seemed to perturb Andrew at all; he was quite convinced that he was right and they were wrong. When my fears for his future had begun to settle I began to realise that I now had another problem to sort out, another moral quandary to solve. I just didn’t know whether or not Andrew was right; whether or not Mr Devlin had been treated properly and if he had been used by the medical system for its own ends rather than for his own good.

With all that on my mind, the dance was far from a success. I spent the evening with a student from the teacher training college which adjoined the campus and often provided female fodder for the hungry male students. She was already developing the tell-tale signs of pedagogy, but she had a good figure and all the usual accoutrements. Unfortunately, when I tried to put the relationship on to a more informal basis she explained to me that she only allowed heavy petting on a third date. I went back to the flat alone and lay awake listening to the sound of Andrew’s bedsprings.

Chapter Fifteen

Mr Nicholas Blake, Parliamentary Under-Secretary at the Department of Health, had been moved to a surgical ward. Despite Professor Grainger's careful attention, the clot in his leg had succeeded in sending a small embolism into a lung, producing breathlessness in Mr Blake and a cold sweat in Professor Grainger.

Mr Meridew had been asked to consider operating, and had agreed to see the politician only on condition that he allows himself to be treated on a public ward and made available for teaching purposes. Mr Meridew and Mr Blake had little in common, and certainly did not share any political beliefs. But the surgeon argued vociferously that a socialist politician should enjoy the same medical facilities as all his fellow-citizens and not expect private treatment. When Mr Blake demurred, Mr Meridew not only threatened to refuse to assist in his case but also made it clear that he wouldn't be averse to making a press statement about Mr Blake's expectations. That did it, and Mr Blake appeared within an hour on the male surgical ward, sitting in a bed less than three yards away from Mr Tucker. Between them lay a ninety-six-year-old man with an annoying habit of throwing his urine-bottle at anyone who approached. Mr Meridew made no secret of the fact that he expected this to act as a deterrent, keeping away the continuous stream of aides, civil servants and advisers who'd previously trotted along to the politician's bedside.

An hour after Mr Blake's arrival another new patient was admitted. The house surgeon, a young man with a greater reputation for his skills with a rugby football than his prowess with a scalpel, was away from the hospital again preparing for an international match, and the surgical registrar told me to take a history from the patient, examine him and decide what needed doing.

'I keep getting this pain in my back,' complained the man, who was in his mid-thirties but had the body of a man in his mid-forties. He told me that the pain, in his loin, came and went without any obvious pattern. Not unlike Mr Tucker, he also reported that he had difficulty in passing urine, pain when he did manage it and an embarrassing need to visit the lavatory far more frequently than usual.

I scribbled feverishly in my notebook as he told me all this. Then I hurried back down the ward to report to Mr Grant. It looked very much as if I'd made my first straightforward diagnosis on the surgical ward. Mr Lamb, who'd told me that he worked as a communications expert, had even reported that he'd passed a little blood in his urine, and offered the opinion that he thought he might have acquired a little stone or something around his kidney. Not being too proud to accept diagnoses offered to me by patients, I was quite ready to adopt this as my own conclusion.

In the sister's office Mr Grant was clearly feeling the pressure. Mr Blake's arrival on the ward had triggered off an enormous series of enquiries from representatives of the press. Two reporters from national newspapers had already appeared on the ward and been ordered away by the sister. The telephone had been ringing non-stop for over an hour.

Mr Grant was busy trying to tell the hospital administrator just what had happened to Mr Blake and why he was now under Mr Meridew's care. 'He had a deep vein thrombosis in his leg,' he explained for the fourth time, 'and Professor Grainger had started him off on an anticoagulant to try to reduce the clot and prevent any complications.'

'What exactly caused the thrombosis?' asked the administrator, writing carefully and painstakingly in a small black leather-bound notebook. He it was who would be preparing the statement for the press to be issued later.

'I don't know,' replied Grant. 'There are lots of possible causes. Does it really matter?'

'Of course it matters,' replied the administrator, shocked. 'May I remind you, Mr Grant, that this is the Parliamentary Under-Secretary we're talking about?'

'I still don't know what caused the clot! But, if the damned fool had listened to Professor Grainger, he'd still be stuck up there in his nice comfortable private room instead of causing bloody chaos down here.'

The administrator sighed and shook his head in dismay.

'Blake was told to rest,' said Mr Grant, 'but he was seen giving a press conference in the hospital corridor.'

'There's an industrial dispute developing in Wales.'

'Well, there's a nice big clot developed in his lung now.'

'I've just seen that new patient,' I interrupted cautiously. 'I think he's got renal colic.'

'Give him a hundred milligrams of pethidine,' Mr Grant ordered without even looking at me.

'I'm not entirely sure...' I said hesitantly.

'Well, what else do you think he could have?' asked Mr Grant, turning away from the administrator for a moment.

'With all these reporters...' I said, 'I wondered if he could be just trying to get hold of a good story...'

'Splendid!' laughed the registrar. 'That's all we needed.'

He pushed the hair back from his forehead and closed his eyes. 'Give him the pethidine anyway. If he's got colic he needs it, and if he's a reporter it'll keep him quiet.'

'Really!' said the administrator unhappily.

'Is that all you want to know?' the registrar asked him.

‘What’s the prognosis?’ asked the administrator. ‘When will he be able to leave the ward?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Mr Grant bluntly. ‘Mr Meridew is going to perform an embolectomy, to remove the clot from Mr Blake’s lung.’

‘Is this always successful?’ asked the administrator, scribbling furiously.

‘No operation is always successful. And this is riskier than most.’

The administrator paled and scribbled out whatever it was he’d just written. As he did so, and as I took a vial of pethidine from the ward sister, a cleaner shyly poked her head round the office door.

‘Excuse me, sirs,’ she said hesitantly, ‘but there’s an awful rumpus going on down on the ward.’ She darted away immediately and I followed Mr Grant and the ward sister out of the office. The cleaner was right. Mr Blake was sitting up in bed beaming for two photographers who had somehow managed to get on to the ward.

‘Get out of here!’ Mr Grant shouted at them.

‘Just a moment,’ Mr Blake said, raising a finger in admonition. ‘These gentlemen were just taking a few photographs for their newspapers. We must co-operate with the press, you know.’ He had leant forward to shake hands with one of the photographers when he suddenly fell backwards, clutching his chest.

‘Oh dear, oh dear,’ cried the administrator, who’d followed us on to the ward and was now standing transfixed.

‘Bloody hell,’ said one of the photographers, taking two rapid pictures and running out of the ward. His colleague stayed for a few extra shots before racing after him.

‘Shall I get theatre ready for him?’ asked the sister.

Mr Grant shook his head. ‘You can forget it. He’s had an enormous clot. He won’t be making any more speeches.’

He began to pull the curtains around the late UnderSecretary’s bed. I reached up to help him and noticed the vial of pethidine in my hand.

‘Would you have a look at Mr Lamb?’ I asked him. ‘The new patient with colic.’

He followed me to the man’s bed and stared for a moment at the face before him. ‘I know you, don’t I?’

‘I don’t think so, doctor,’ said the patient.

‘Harbury General Hospital,’ said Mr Grant suddenly. ‘Last year. I was doing a locum there for the consultant surgeon.’

‘Never been there,’ said the patient quite definitely.

‘Ken Lyons, isn’t it?’ said the registrar, grinning.

‘This is Mr Lamb,’ I pointed out. As I said it the connection struck me. I grinned, too.

‘He’s a pethidine addict,’ said Mr Grant. ‘Gets himself admitted as a case of renal colic and gets his injections that way.’

‘That’s not true!’ complained the patient.

‘You’ve got three minutes to get dressed and get out of this ward,’ said Mr Grant. ‘If you’re not gone by then, I’ll call the police.’

Miraculously Mr Lamb/Lyons suddenly found the strength to jump out of bed, dress and scurry off the ward.

The administrator, who’d still not moved, simply saw a patient running away from his bed, and began to look very ill.

Chapter Sixteen

The next few days were hectic. The death of the Parliamentary Under-Secretary kept us all busy answering questions. Even I was not able to escape the enquiry which inevitably followed. The hospital committee members who set it up wanted to know everything I'd seen and heard. Even when I explained that I knew very little of what had gone on they still seemed to think I was hiding something. They insisted on my answering questions for another hour.

Andrew had been having a hard time too. He'd spent two hours With the Dean of St Peter's Medical School and a further hour with the hospital's governors. They'd obviously been more than a little upset by the story in the university paper, but there had been little they could do about it without attracting more attention. In the end they'd settled for giving Andrew a good telling-off and extracting from him a written promise that anything else he wrote about the medical school would be cleared first of all with the Dean himself.

The result of all this confusion was that our formal medical education seemed to stumble to a halt. The new patients admitted to the male surgical ward were suffering from routine problems. One had piles which needed annihilating; another a cyst on his back which had been taken away six months previously, but obviously needed to be taken farther away, since it had recurred.

There was one new patient on the female ward who proved memorable for several reasons.

Mrs Doreen Rogers was admitted because she was overweight. She had varicose veins, piles and a hiatus hernia which gave her heartburn every time she came within spitting distance of her feet, but her main problem was simply her weight. Still in her twenties, she weighed 266 pounds and was beginning to suffer badly. Even when it was cool she found breathing difficult; when the weather was hot she found it nigh on impossible. She insisted that she ate nothing more than a moth needs to keep body and wings together, and her evidence was so convincing that I, at least, decided that medical scientists must know nothing at all about the metabolic processes dealing with fat, or the mechanisms which turn food into flesh.

She had come into hospital to have a few feet of bowel removed. Mr Meridew, an imaginative and innovative surgeon, had developed an operation which involved cutting out a length of intestine so that food travelling through had less chance to be absorbed; Mrs Rogers seemed an ideal candidate. It was rather a frightening operation, with considerable risks, but although the dangers had been explained to her Mrs Rogers was enthusiastic about it. She'd discovered that her husband had begun an affair with a neighbour and she was determined to win back his affection.

During the previous four or five months she had, so she claimed, really struggled to slim. She'd tried diets involving nothing more than grapefruit and radishes, she'd bought a rowing machine because she was too shy to be seen jogging in the streets, and she'd swallowed tablets by the pound. Unhappily she'd found herself unable to stop eating grapefruit and radishes in excessive quantities, so that she'd not only put on weight but had also produced an extraordinary amount of wind; she'd broken the rowing machine the first time she'd sat on it; and the tablets had simply filled her up with calorie-rich sugar coatings.

When I wasn't listening to her describing her painstaking attempts to reduce weight, I sat listening to Mr Tucker, who'd had his prostrate gland removed and lost his hernia.

He complained that in hospital he felt intimidated and emasculated, and wanted to know why he couldn't have his clothes back now that he was supposed to be convalescing, why he had to be woken at six with a cup of strong tea and why he wasn't allowed to go home and convalesce. He also complained that his shaven pubic area was itching and wanted to know what I could do about it. Our relationship was an unusual one. In my white coat I felt that I had some natural protection against such awkward questions. On the other hand, Mr Tucker had been my teacher for several years and he had the advantage of age. My façade of wisdom and medical dignity was still slight and easily penetrated.

Hector was far more confident. He spent every spare moment practising tying knots, and our flat was littered with short lengths of nylon and catgut. He'd already been promised a job as Mr Meridew's house surgeon, and was working hard on Dr Taylor in an attempt to assure himself of an appointment as house physician to the professor of medicine. His career was beginning to take shape. He'd even performed an appendicectomy on his own, with the eternally kind anaesthetist Jim Kibble-White offering advice and instruction from the head of the operating-table.

Hector had become engaged to a dietician, a relationship which had contributed considerably to the nutrition of both him and myself. Andrew and Sara were content to continue with a diet of meat pies, fried fish, chips and mushy peas, this being the variety available at the local fish and chip shop. Hector and I, however, were able to dine on woodpigeon, avocado pear, home-baked apple-pie, freshly made pizza, trout with almonds and bananas, Camembert cheese, rollmop herrings and freshly prepared meringues. I never asked how Hector's dietician managed to produce such remarkable fare on a housekeeping budget of three pounds a week, but I suspect the fact that her father owned a restaurant in the city may have had some bearing on the matter.

After three days in hospital, Mrs Rogers began to complain of pains in her back and lower abdomen. Mr Meridew and Mr Grant examined her thoroughly but could find no explanation. Undoubtedly their diagnostic attempts were hindered by the fact that her flesh was so abundant that all her internal organs and structures were a good distance away from any investigating fingers.

That at least was the explanation offered by Mr Grant — until Mrs Rogers suddenly lost nearly thirty pounds in the space of an hour, and became the proud mother of two perfectly formed and well-fleshed sons.

Bedded as she was on a surgical ward, Mrs Rogers became a local celebrity. The nurses, delighted both by the enormousness of the error made by the surgeons and by the arrival of two charming and chuckling infants, made a tremendous fuss of her.

Mr Rogers, who'd arrived on the ward that day a reluctant and unfaithful husband, left a proud and contented father. Two days later his wife left hospital with her new offspring, abandoning (temporarily, at least) her intention to have surgery for her obesity. It was several weeks before Mr Meridew regained his former ebullience, and for several years afterwards all women of child-bearing age admitted to the women's surgical ward had a pregnancy test done as a matter of routine. Even a nun, admitted to have her thyroid gland removed, fell under suspicion.

It did at least all help to remove some of the gloom.

Chapter Seventeen

Suddenly, almost without our being aware of it at all, there were examinations to be taken. We'd all spent some time on the medical wards and some on the surgical wards, and in addition there had been short periods in specialist hospitals. I'd spent a few afternoons in an infectious diseases hospital where I'd seen a case of malaria, a patient with brucellosis and a girl with typhoid. I hadn't seen any cases of measles, chickenpox, German measles, scabies, syphilis, mumps or shingles. I'd spent an afternoon in the local dental hospital, but what I'd learnt about dentistry you could write with a felt-tip pen on a single artificial incisor. I'd stood for two whole mornings in an eye hospital and learnt how to switch on and off an ophthalmoscope. For a day I'd wandered round an ear, nose and throat hospital with a light-bulb and metal reflector strapped to my head, and for four hours I'd stood in an orthopaedics clinic at the local accident hospital where I'd watched sixty-four patients with plaster casts on various limbs parade before a weary registrar who had, apparently indiscriminately, given half of them a note to return to work and the other half a note to return to the clinic in a month's time.

I'd learnt about Whipples disease, the WaterhouseFriderichsen syndrome, Pancoast's tumour, the Klippel-Feil deformity, Gilbert's disease, the Austin Flint heart murmur, the Brown Sequard syndrome, Libman Sachs endocarditis, the Kveim test, Kernig's sign, Stokes Adams attacks, WolffParkinson-White syndrome, von Recklinghausen's disease, the Schilling test and Bence Jones proteins, as well as Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease, Chvostek's sign, and the difference between Huntington's and Sydenham's chorea. As you may imagine from this modest list, doctors rather like immortality, and attach their names to any new disease or sign they can identify.

Unfortunately, however, I knew far less about body lice, eczema, arthritis or food poisoning, since none of these subjects had attracted the attention of my teachers. Nor did I know a great deal about bed-wetting, insomnia, broken legs or anxiety.

The information I'd collected during my two hectic preclinical years was, despite my initial suspicions, proving to be of occasional use. I'd learnt the anatomy of the human body in excruciatingly minute detail and, although I'd long since forgotten most of it, there were still pockets of knowledge there to be tapped at unexpected moments. To help in the accumulation of anatomical facts all medical students use mnemonics, memory-aids which linger in the mind much longer than straightforward unassociated and intrinsically uninteresting facts. I could still recite the names of the structures which passed through the superior orbital fissure at the back of the eyeball by remembering that luscious French tarts lie naked in anticipation. To remember the names and numbers of the twelve cranial nerves, which supply the structures in and around the skull, I had only to recall the sentence, 'Oh, oh, Oswald, to touch and fondle a girl's vagina and hymen'. This moderately obscene memory-aid told me that the first cranial nerve is the olfactory nerve, the second the optic and the third the oculomotor. Those which follow are the trochlear, the trigeminal, the abducent, the facial, the auditory, the glossopharyngeal, the vagus, the accessory and the hyoglossal. I dare say some elderly ladies may well be surprised to discover that their sweet and charming family doctor first learnt his anatomy with the aid of such outrageous nonsense.

True, I had yet to meet a patient whose clinical problems required knowledge either of the structures passing through the superior orbital fissure, or of the names of the cranial nerves, but the knowledge was there, waiting to be used. Which is more than can be said of information about the drug treatment of patients. Despite the fact that as a qualified doctor most of my treatments would, unless I chose to specialise as a surgeon, involve the use of drugs, I'd received very little training in their selection and use. We'd received a few desultory lectures from a pharmacologist, dealing with the chemical structure of certain specific drugs, and we'd seen a film describing the manufacturing process used in the preparation of tablets, but we'd had no training at all in prescription. I felt this ignorance keenly and had several times floundered through the pages of pharmacological textbooks in search of advice. I might as well have struggled to learn neurosurgery by mail.

I could now take blood from most of the patients I encountered without having to cry for help, and I could put sutures into small wounds and tie knots that held together for hours rather than minutes — both these skills having been acquired while practising on unconscious patients on the operating-table. If the patients had seen my fumbling fingers, they'd undoubtedly have preferred to do the work themselves. I'd explored the inner recesses of both male and female patients, and seen enough to be aware that things aren't always what they seem to be. Andrew had once examined a woman with a capacious vagina and been quite unable to find her cervix. The gynaecologist looking after her had then discovered that for eighteen years her husband had used her urethra as a repository for his penis. This error explained both her incontinence and their lack of progeny.

I could elicit knee reflexes, hear the louder murmurs of malfunctioning hearts, tie my surgical mask on without help, ask embarrassing questions without blushing, recognise a malar flush, examine a shapely breast without the sound of my heart waking patients in the next ward, list twelve possible causes of anaemia and find the spleen in at least half of the patients described by the registrars as having palpable spleens.

I was becoming a doctor. I no longer lay awake at night worrying about poor Mrs Kennedy, who had killed herself. I could walk away from a cadaver and go straight to the next patient. And I could watch a surgeon remove an arm or a leg without feeling faint. I still felt a rush of anger when I heard other students refer to patients as ‘the gall bladder in the end bed’ or the ‘lump in the fourth bed along’, but I no longer felt self-conscious when I walked on to the ward at visiting-time.

On the other hand I still often wanted to talk to patients as a friend rather than as a doctor. I felt uncomfortable when they opened up their hearts to me while I couldn’t open up mine to them. And occasionally I envied veterinary surgeons, who know that their patients never tell them lies and can rely on the information they receive. I also envied them their ability, even duty, to put a patient doomed to a painful death out of his misery. The vet who allowed an animal to die a slow and painful death would be reviled. The doctor is expected to do nothing to interfere with nature when death is inevitable, although he may, of course, provide pain-relief and some support.

The examinations came and went within a week. There were patients to be examined, written papers to do, vivas to attend. And suddenly I was on the home stretch. Just one more hurdle — finals — lay before me and then I’d be a qualified medical practitioner. There was so much to be learnt in that year — so much that I knew it was quite impossible. How could anyone learn enough in less than a hundred years to qualify as a doctor? I had so little time and so much to learn.

Chapter Eighteen

I began my last lap at medical school by working at the Kintbury General Hospital for a month. Like many busy hospitals, the Kintbury General, which was five miles from St Peter's in purely geographical terms but a half a century away in technological terms, was permanently short of qualified doctors. The sudden departure of a Greek-speaking house physician who'd inexplicably decided that a 120-hour week was too much for him had left the hospital poised perilously close to disaster. So close, in fact, that for the fourth time in as many months the Kintbury General had begged the medical school for the loan of a senior medical student to act as a locum until a replacement doctor could be found. I happened to be standing in the corridor outside the Dean's office when the call came through, and I found myself being invited to accept this temporary appointment. The fact that the invitation was an instruction, and that I had been chosen simply and solely because I had a date with a typist from the Assistant Dean's administrative office, didn't detract from the elation I felt at this temporary elevation to the ranks of the immortals. I abandoned my tryst and hurried back to the flat to pack a bag.

My first problem was the simple one of actually finding the Kintbury General. Previous expeditions away from St Peter's had been confined to visits to the cinema, the main railway station and the other specialist hospitals where I had worked or studied. On the days when I'd been unable to cadge a lift from some other student who could afford a car, I'd travelled on bus routes carefully described to me in advance by one of the switchboard operators at St Peter's.

Unhappily that source of information was on holiday in Torremolinos, and I had to find my own way. Suppressing the inclination to follow Andrew's advice and simply lie down in the road, feign unconsciousness and trust to luck that I'd be taken to the Kintbury General, I spent the next two and a half hours standing in the rain waiting for buses, sitting on buses anxiously peering into the gloom, and getting off buses, retracing my steps on foot and asking an astonishing number of foreigners if they could help me with practical advice. Sheltering in a telephone kiosk from a particularly heavy shower, I telephoned the girl from the Assistant Dean's office, thinking that I ought perhaps to make some apology for my failure to keep our date. It turned out that she lived with her parents about two hundred yards away from the hospital I was searching for, and she found the irony more amusing than I did.

Eventually, of course, I found it. No husband hurrying with his labouring wife has ever breathed deeper sighs of relief. The ancient dark brick turrets and the modern semi luminous green and white signs seemed almost welcoming. The night was getting no younger, my stomach was getting no fuller and my feet were getting wetter and colder. I began to dream of huge platefuls of steaming hot food: steak and kidney pie and apple crumble perhaps. Or maybe a large bowl of tomato soup, a plateful of cod and chips and some treacle pudding. Certainly at least three large cups of black coffee and, if the doctors' mess was open, maybe even a half-pint of beer to round off the meal. My room would, I knew by now, be no better than the other hospital rooms I'd slept in, but at least the sheets would be crisp and clean. My bedding in the flat was rather overdue for washing, and it would be a distinct pleasure to slide between wrinkle-free sheets.

It didn't quite work out like that, of course. The hospital had been allowed to grow over several decades and no single mind had ever controlled its growth. With facilities for several hundred patients spread among several dozen separate buildings, it was no easy matter to find the correct part, and extremely difficult to find the right person to report to. In the administrative block there wasn't a soul to be found. Only the occasional thump from the cooling radiators confirmed that the place had ever been inhabited. The lights had all been switched off and, as I blundered around, the shadows grew spookier and spookier. My tiny pencil-sized torch lit up only tiny areas of floor at a time and left plenty of room for my imagination to work overtime. So empty was it all that I walked round each corner half-expecting to find some giant monster gobbling up the last remaining clerical officer or to see a wild-eyed bacteriologist rush past me with an empty test-tube in pursuit of an escaped bacterium. I could imagine the patients running away if they knew I was coming, but what had the administrative staff to fear? And where were all the nurses and doctors? Was I the only person in the place? In a cupboard in a small kitchen I found a threequarters-empty bottle of milk which smelt rancid, a packet of stale biscuits and a lemon-squash bottle containing an inch of heavily watered fluid. I drank the lemon squash and ate three of the biscuits.

Eventually I did what I should have done to start with. I followed the signs to the casualty department. There were plenty of bright shining lights there, and a pair of flashing ambulances complete with loudly blaring short-wave radios were parked outside the doors.

Inside, business was as brisk as it always seems to be in any casualty department. Two ambulancemen were helping two nurses hold down a struggling, shouting man who was clearly having some sort of fit. A doctor with a polo-necked sweater and a pair of green velvet trousers on underneath his white coat was calmly drawing up fluid into a syringe and talking to a third nurse who stood next to him with a small kidney dish containing some methylated spirit and half a dozen cotton-wool balls.

I waited until the injection had been given and the patient had stopped thrashing around, then timidly approached the doctor. I asked him where the doctors' mess was. When he looked puzzled I explained that I was a medical student and that I'd been sent to help out. As I said it, I realised just how totally pointless the whole exercise was. How could I possibly help anyone out?

‘Great,’ he said, rubbing his hands. ‘This is Sister Watkins,’ he went on, introducing me to the nurse who’d been helping him with the injection. Unlike the sisters at St Peter’s she wore a green uniform; they all wore blue.

‘I’ll get you a white coat,’ she said.

‘It can wait until morning,’ I replied, trying to be helpful.

It didn’t seem an urgent problem.

‘You’d better have one now,’ said the sister. ‘It’ll protect your clothes, and at least the patients will know who the doctor is.’ She smiled. I still didn’t properly understand. As she moved off to fetch me a white coat, I turned round to ask the casualty officer if he could tell me whether the doctors’ dining-room was still open. The question never got asked; he’d disappeared. It turned out that he’d gone to eat and I’d been left in charge of the casualty department.

I had no time at all to protest, for I’d hardly put down my small bag when there was a great commotion near the entrance. A new patient was brought in, not by ambulance men as I’d expected but two burly policemen and a small, extremely fragile-looking policewoman who provided vocal support and turned out to have an extensive vocabulary. The patient was covered in blood, as were the two policemen, and around his neck was tied a piece of electrical wire. From the noose there dangled about a yard and a half of free flex.

‘Suicide attempt,’ explained one of the policemen wearily.

‘Found him hanging from the top of the stairs in a pub.’

‘The flex had stretched,’ explained the second policeman, ‘and his feet were on the ground.’

‘He couldn’t undo the knot,’ said the first, ‘and couldn’t reach a knife.’

‘Threw a bottle out of the front-door window and hit an old gentleman on the ankle,’ said the second.

It was coming to sound like a script for Tweedledum and Tweedledee. The unfortunate patient, a Birmingham-born Indian who had a startling Midland accent, had cut his wrists before trying to hang himself, and the blood which smeared the two policemen as well as himself came from those cuts. Fortunately, neither radial artery had been severed, and the blood-loss, although considerable enough to cause some concern and a great deal of mess, wasn’t enough to threaten his life. His neck contained evidence of several attempts to cut the jugular veins or carotid arteries, with scratch-marks running right across from ear to ear.

While the sister cleaned his wrists and one of the policemen removed the noose from around his neck with the aid of a pair of plaster-cutting shears, I looked at the cuts which I had to suture. They were both about an inch long and needing two or three stitches. It was the sort of job any halfcompetent casualty officer would expect to do in ten or fifteen minutes. Fortunately, after the arrival of this patient the department was relatively quiet for the next hour and a half, for it took me that long to complete these minor surgical procedures. The patient and I got to know each other quite well.

It transpired that his wife had been in hospital for nine months, dying of breast cancer. She’d been treated by drugs, radiotherapy and surgery, having had her ovaries removed and her pituitary gland obliterated.

‘It was funny,’ said the man, his eyes dry but full of sadness. ‘The house was never empty until she died. Somehow it didn’t seem so bad until they told me she was dead.’

He’d gone along to the pub to drink away his sorrow, but had discovered that there was too much of it for alcohol to drown. The suicide attempt had followed almost as a matter of course. First the attempt to cut his throat, then the slash at his wrists and finally the abortive attempt to hang himself.

‘I can’t do anything properly,’ said the man plaintively. ‘Why are you wasting time on me, doctor?’

I talked to him as I stitched away, trying to understand the depth of his despair. But the deeper I dug the greater seemed the sorrow.

‘We’ll have to keep him in hospital,’ I told the sister when at last I’d finished.

‘Where?’

‘On a ward,’ I answered innocently. ‘How do we organise that?’

The sister explained that first of all we had to find a consultant willing to look after him and a ward with a bed for him. And so began one of the strangest interludes of my young medical career. First I rang the medical registrar, who was at home half a mile from the hospital. When I explained that the patient had tried to commit suicide, he told me that I’d have to get in touch with the psychiatrists. The consultant psychiatrist I spoke to at home wasn’t interested.

‘Cut his wrists, you say?’ he commented. ‘That’s a surgical problem.’

‘But he’s very depressed,’ I pointed out. ‘He may try again.’

‘We’ll have a look at him when his cuts have healed up,’ promised the psychiatrist. ‘Try the surgeons.’

The surgical registrar at the Kintbury General was off duty and couldn’t be found anywhere. The house surgeon was busy putting up a drip and couldn’t be disturbed and, when I telephoned the consultant surgeon to ask if he’d have on one of his wards a patient who had cut his wrists, I discovered that the policewoman’s command of the vernacular was modest indeed when compared with the consultant surgeon’s.

‘How old is he?’ he asked, before I put down the telephone.

‘Forty-six,’ I replied.

‘Pity,’ said the surgeon. ‘Twenty years older and you could have tried the geriatricians.’

While the patient lay on the operating-table and I sat by the telephone with my head in my hands, wondering if the gynaecologists could be persuaded to take the man on the grounds that his wife had once been on one of their wards, the two policemen and the policewoman who had brought him in arrived back. They’d disappeared as I’d finished sewing up the man’s first wound. With them they brought two young children, one aged six and the other eight. They both had bad colds and sniffed continuously.

‘Someone at the pub told us about the children,’ said the policewoman with gruff kindliness. ‘We found them sitting watching a blank television screen at their home.’

‘What have you brought them here for?’ asked the casualty sister.

‘There’s nowhere else to take them. We can’t get hold of a social worker until the morning.’

Picking up the telephone, inspired by desperation more than by sense, I asked the operator to connect me to the paediatrician.

‘I’ve got two young patients for you,’ I told him. ‘Both got upper respiratory tract infections.’

To my surprise the paediatrician didn’t argue for a moment.

‘Send them along,’ he groaned sleepily.

‘One other thing,’ I said, before he hung up. ‘Have you got a bed for their father?’

‘Yeah,’ sighed the paediatrician. ‘Send him up, too.’

And so I sent my unfortunate Indian to the children’s ward, where he and his two children were bedded down for the night. The casualty sister telephoned the sister on the children’s ward and arranged for their father to be given an injection of a sedative drug for the night. It all seemed rather odd, but at least we’d managed to find him a bed.

As a porter trundled off with my neatly mended patient and his offspring, I remembered that I still hadn’t eaten.

Hesitantly I mentioned it to the casualty sister.

‘That’s all right,’ she said, with a reassuring smile. ‘You go along to the nurses’ canteen. The doctors’ dining-room is closed now.’

‘Will it be, er...?’ I asked. ‘Will it be all right? Are you sure? What if something happens? An emergency or something?’

‘We’ll try to cope until we can get you or Dr Coleman here,’ she assured me. Dr Coleman was, I assumed, the casualty officer who’d been on duty when I’d arrived and who’d subsequently completely disappeared. I discovered the next day that he’d just gone back to bed, relying on the sister to call him if he were needed.

Wearily I took off my white coat and picked up my bag. The sister told me where to find the Canteen, and suggested that I call in at the doctors’ residence on the way, to find my room and drop my bag.

It was just as well I did so. The front door to the small wooden hut which was home for the residential medical staff was kept locked, but I got there as the house surgeon returned from putting the drip up, and he let me in.

‘You’d better have this room,’ he sighed, tiredly showing me a typical small hospital room furnished with chipped, yellowing functional woodwork. On the bedside table was a small brown envelope containing two keys, one for the room and one for the front door. The bed wasn’t made up, but a pile of sheets and blankets was neatly folded at its foot.

Pausing only to throw them over it and put the keys in my pocket, I hurried off to the canteen. My stomach was beginning to play tunes, I was so hungry.

‘We haven’t got much choice, love,’ said the lady there. ‘There never is at this time of night.’

Those were accurate words. I dined off two chocolate éclairs and a gooseberry yoghurt, washed down with a cup of lukewarm hospital tea, upon the surface of which there floated a veritable squadron of tea-leaves. When I’d finished, the canteen lady read the leaves and told me that the weather was going to be cold and wet, and that I’d be lucky in love and unlucky at cards.

Chapter Nineteen

I seemed hardly to have got to sleep when I was woken by a woman in a green overall thrusting a cup of tea under my nose. Waking up in the morning has never been one of my strong points: I prefer to break myself into the day gently, lying in bed for a few moments to get the general feel of things and then slowly pottering around picking up bits and pieces of clothing. After about half an hour or so of this I'm usually ready to start thinking of shaving and beginning the usual early-morning chores. Breakfast is not something to be thrust without warning on to an empty stomach which hasn't had time to yawn and get its bearings.

It seemed they did things differently at the Kintbury General Hospital. The woman in the green overall had brought with her two starch-crisp white coats which she stood up at one end of the bed. With the cup of tea there were three small, grey biscuits.

'Breakfast in ten minutes, love,' she said. 'Bacon, egg and sausage; bacon and egg; sausage and egg; sausage and bacon; poached egg; scrambled egg or boiled.'

I blinked and moved cautiously.

'For breakfast,' she explained. 'What do you want? Any fried bread? We haven't got any tomatoes.'

'Just coffee and toast, please,' I mumbled. 'I'll be along in a few minutes.'

She backed away from me cautiously and fumbled behind her for the door-knob. She disappeared in an instant. Cautiously I sat up. The curtains had been opened, and outside it was pouring with rain.

By the time I'd washed, dressed and discovered without any shadow of doubt that I'd left my razor behind, the tea was cold. I poured it carefully down the sink and threw the biscuits out of the window. They landed in a large puddle and began slowly to float away. A bedraggled-looking sparrow pecked at one of them for a few seconds, but made no progress, and flew off in disgust.

The dining-room was small and cosy. The only person there was the casualty officer I'd met the previous evening. He introduced himself at Dr Coleman and told me that he was the only resident house officer.

'There's a ward-round in three minutes,' he warned me, as I poured out a cup of thick black coffee and smeared marmalade over a piece of thick black toast. 'Dr Younger — that's the consultant — doesn't much like us being late, though he's a decent enough fellow.'

I gulped down a mouthful of coffee and took a bite out of the toast.

'You'll find that things are rather different here from St Peter's.'

I washed down the toast with a second huge gulp of coffee.

'We don't have any fancy equipment here. Most of our stuff comes from Oxfam.'

I looked at him and decided he was only partly joking.

'Still, there are advantages. Quite a lot of our patients actually get better and go home.'

I pushed the remains of the toast into my mouth.

'Well,' he said, standing up. 'If you've finished, we'd better make a move.'

To get from the doctors' residence to the hospital we had to run across the car-park. By the time we'd reached the security of the main building I was soaked, although Dr Coleman, who'd somehow managed to cover his head with the tail of his white coat, seemed quite dry. Tall, thin and untidy, he had hollow cheeks and dark pouches under his eyes. He looked quite ill; rather like pictures I'd seen of nineteenthcentury poets with consumption.

Dr Younger had already started his round, and looked over his spectacles at us with something between distaste and relief. Since no consultant physician would ever dream of moving about inside a hospital without at least one other doctor, he had with him his registrar, a minute fellow with a broad, beaming smile, a coat that reached down to his ankles, and skin the colour of my breakfast toast.

'Good morning,' said Dr Younger, very carefully. He studied his watch for a few moments then stared at both of us in turn quite closely. When he looked at me he rubbed his chin thoughtfully. I introduced myself, explained that I was a medical student and apologised for being late. He said nothing, but rubbed at his chin again.

'You're not growing a beard, are you?' he asked me at last.

'No,' I promised. 'I forgot my razor.'

'Ah,' he said. 'Good.' He carried on examining the patient he'd been talking to when we'd arrived. It was a young man who'd apparently been admitted with a pneumothorax — a pocket of air in the chest cavity — and who was clearly making a good recovery. His bedside locker was piled high with magazines which contained colour photographs of young ladies. While Dr Younger listened to his chest Dr Coleman examined one of the magazines.

'Of course,' said Dr Younger, putting his stethoscope back into his pocket suddenly and moving away from the patient, 'we don't have a lot of expensive equipment here, you know. Not like your teaching hospital.'

I shook my head. It seemed as if everyone was anxious to justify the state of the hospital.

'By the time we can afford anything exotic here it'll be too expensive for us,' he went on. 'Still,' he sighed, 'whenever they get any new equipment at St Peter's the number of people suddenly requiring extra investigation or treatment goes up overnight. You'd think no one had survived until they had their new whatever-it-is. Well, we don't have time for fancy stuff like that here.'

'No, sir,' I agreed.

'These centres of excellence — teaching hospitals and so on — they're all right. But it's in our small local hospitals that all the really important work is done.' He stopped and turned round to make sure I was listening.

I nodded.

'We get our patients in and out,' he explained. 'There's no keeping people in just to take photographs of them or try out something new and fancy.'

I shook my head.

'It's all real solid medicine.' He took out his stethoscope and approached the next patient, a middle-aged man busily adding the finishing touches to a painting of a London scene which showed two weary-looking horses dragging a stage coach through a blizzard with the mail. Only when I looked very closely at it could I see the numbers showing through.

'Now, you take that fellow,' said Dr Younger, having listened to the man's chest and admired his painting. 'In your hospital, he'd have been wrapped up in all sorts of electrical wires and nonsense. He's had a coronary and he's doing very nicely, thank you, here.'

I'm afraid, however, that, although Dr Younger went on even longer, explaining to me just how well they'd coped with the heart-attack patient using such primitive methods of treatment as morphine and digitalis, I heard hardly anything of what he said. I was staring at the patient in the next bed — an elderly man whom I felt certain I recognised. Then, just as Dr Younger began to describe how he remembered leeches having been used to help reduce swellings caused by all sorts of strange disorders, I recalled where I'd seen the patient before. It was Mr Kennedy, the old man whose wife had been on Professor Grainger's first ward-round.

'How is this fellow?' Dr Younger asked, as we left the amateur artist and approached Mr Kennedy's bed.

'Still not speaking,' said the registrar, who continued to smile whatever the news he had to give. Later I saw him smiling as he told a middle-aged woman that her young son had been killed in a road accident. It wasn't that he meant anything disrespectful; it was just that he always smiled. His name was unpronounceable, but we all called him Sid, and the nurses and orderlies referred to him as Dr Sid. 'The speech therapists are coming in to see him today and the physiotherapists are still working on him.'

'This fellow has had a stroke,' Dr Younger explained to me. 'His wife committed suicide and tried to do away with her husband. She was lucky, but he lived. He was in St Peter's for a time.'

'I remember him,' I said quietly.

'Well, did you know what happened to him after that?' asked Dr Younger.

'No.'

'He was discharged from there and sent to an old people's home, where he promptly had a stroke. They wouldn't have him back at St Peter's, of course. They don't take problems like that there. So we've got him here. He's been with us for weeks now and looks like staying for a good few more. The geriatricians have a waiting-list so long that I think they run a ballot for emergency admissions. You stand a better chance of getting two stand-tickets for the Cup Final.'

'How's he doing?' I asked. 'Has he improved at all?'

'Has he?' Dr Younger asked Dr Sid.

The registrar shrugged his shoulders. 'Difficult to say,' he said. 'Some days he seems a bit brighter.' He looked across at Mr Kennedy, his beaming smile firmly in place. 'Sister says that yesterday he sat up by himself. He could be making some progress.'

We all moved on to the next patient. This time it was a man with a bad attack of pneumonia who'd been having six-hourly injections into his buttocks. He was anxious to leave, and Dr Younger was cheered by that. He explained that he could never get his beds emptied quickly enough.

'There's a tremendous pressure on them,' he explained. 'We have to look after the real cases,' he said acidly. 'We can't afford just to be choosy. When there's any problem requiring medical attention in our catchment area, we have to be available to take it in. And filling the beds with long stay patients just means that we have to put up other beds in the corridors.'

Just then his bleep began to scream.

'Dear me,' he said, clapping his hand across it to drown the noise. 'Go and see what this is, will you?' I hurried back down the ward and asked the sister how I should find out who wanted Dr Younger. She picked up the telephone and handed it to me.

'It's his personal secretary,' said the operator. 'She says he's urgently needed for a domiciliary visit.'

I returned and gave him the message. He seemed upset but rushed off nevertheless.

'Right,' said Dr Coleman, when he'd gone. 'Now that the boss has gone off to his football match, we can get some of these new patients clerked. Thank heavens for Manchester United.'

My puzzlement must have shown.

'He's a Manchester United fan,' explained Dr Coleman.

‘They’re playing the local team, so he’ll be off to watch them.’

‘But what about the urgent domiciliary visit?’

‘Oh, that’s just a little white lie to keep us all happy. He thinks we believe it. Or perhaps he doesn’t. Perhaps he just thinks it makes everyone feel better about it. Or perhaps he does it to make himself feel better.’ He scratched his head and shrugged.

‘How many new patients have we got this morning?’ asked Dr Sid. I still found his continuous smile disconcerting.

‘Three,’ said Dr Coleman. ‘One each.’ He looked across at me. ‘What do you want?’ he asked. ‘A seventy-year-old with a bleeding ulcer, a nineteen-year-old with anaemia or a forty-five-year-old with chest pains.’

I told him that I thought I might be best able to cope with the nineteen-year-old. I couldn’t have been farther from the truth.

Chapter Twenty

At first it looked as though I'd picked the right patient. Pale and delicate as a piece of Irish lace, she lay in bed with her arms straight out in front of her on top of the neatly folded sheets. Around her shoulders she wore a pale-blue knitted bedjacket and, underneath that, a modest nightdress which tied demurely about her neck. She wore her hair in an old-fashioned pony-tail, and her only make-up was a thin layer of lipstick. On her bedside locker were a copy of *Woman's Own*, Jerome K. Jerome's masterpiece *Three Men in a Boat* and a brown paper bag full of apples. Her name was Ellen Richards.

'Fine,' she said, when I asked her how she felt.

'No,' she told me, when I wanted to know if she had any pain.

It turned out that she'd first visited her family doctor two weeks before. She'd had a sore throat and was feeling rather tired. Her doctor had prescribed a course of penicillin and told her to come back in a week if she felt no better. A week later she'd returned; her sore throat was slightly better, but she was nonetheless still tired. The doctor, with great perception, had sent her for a blood test. It had shown that she was extremely anaemic, and the result had been her arrival at the Kintbury General.

'The throat's a lot better,' she told me. 'My doctor gave me another course of antibiotics and that helped clear it up.'

'So you're just feeling tired?'

She nodded.

I asked her if she got breathless.

'Not while I'm lying in bed,' she said, 'but I do if I try moving about much.'

And that was about all I could get from talking to her. I couldn't really understand what she was doing filling a hospital bed.

When I came to examine her I found little more to help me to a diagnosis. She had a few swollen glands in her neck and armpits but glands commonly enlarge after a bad throat infection. She was obviously anaemic, and there was no obvious explanation; but that, too, isn't uncommon.

'I don't know why they've brought me into hospital,' she said with a smile. 'I thought perhaps my doctor would just give me some iron tablets when he found out I was anaemic.'

'Well, we'll probably get you out soon,' I promised. We shook hands and I noticed how cold her hand was. She really did look rather frail.

I wrote up my admission notes in the ward sister's office on the official hospital notepaper used for such formal records. When I'd finished I clipped them into one of the beige cardboard folders stored in the desk drawer and wrote Ellen Richards' name on it. Then I went round to the men's medical ward to take another look at Mr Kennedy.

He was lying in exactly the same position, staring straight ahead and apparently studying carefully a laundry trolley which had been left abandoned in the central aisle of the ward.

'Do you remember me?' I asked him quietly. 'We met at St Peter's.'

Very slowly he turned his head to look at me. His eyes, which had been glazed and expressionless, very faintly showed some interest. He frowned as if concentrating hard, and then nodded. It was almost imperceptible, but it was a nod.

'Can you move your hand?' I asked him, touching the back of his right hand.

Nothing happened.

I lifted the hand a few inches off the bedclothes and then very gradually took my own fingers away. His hand remained where it was. Clearly he had some power in the muscles of his right arm.

'Put it down,' I told him. 'Put it back on the bed.'

Very slowly, again almost invisibly, Mr Kennedy lowered his hand back on to the bedclothes.

'Can you squeeze my fingers?' I put two fingers inside his palm. For a few seconds nothing happened, and then, very cautiously, he began to squeeze them. I leant forward excitedly and picked up his left arm.

'Can you lift this arm up? 'I asked him, very gently disentangling my fingers from his right hand.

This time he did so quite quickly. Then, slowly, he showed me that he could raise or lower it, and could squeeze my fingers quite efficiently.

'Can you see?' I asked him. 'Squeeze twice if you can.' I kept my fingers inside his left hand.

He nodded and then squeezed. Then he turned his head back towards me, and I could see tears forming in both eyes.

'Can you read?' I asked, thinking that perhaps I could fetch him a book, a paper or a magazine.

He shook his head. That confused me. He could see but he couldn't read.

'Is your sight bad?'

He nodded.

'Do you wear spectacles?'

Another nod.

I rummaged around in the bedside locker. There were all sorts of things there. A suit of clothes, together with a leather belt and a pair of heavy working-boots, was placed neatly on top of an old grey raincoat which didn't seem to have any buttons on it. I found Mr Kennedy's spectacles inside a well-worn steel spectacle-case. I took them out, gave them a polish on a corner of my white coat and fitted them on to the bridge of his nose. I felt certain I'd solved his problem.

'How is that?' I asked. 'Can you see better?'

When he shook his head I felt my spirits drop. I sat with him for several minutes more, just thinking. Then I had another idea.

'Can you see double?'

He nodded, this time quite vigorously.

'Is that what stops you reading?' Another nod.

I took his spectacles off, tore a sheet of paper from my notepad and fixed it over one of the lenses. I put the spectacles back on his nose.

This time there was no need to ask if there was any improvement. He smiled, and his right hand groped tentatively out for mine. I bent down, fished an old newspaper out of the locker and held it in front of him. 'Can you read this?'

Mr Kennedy, with tears pouring down his cheeks, nodded, not just once but several times. I gripped his hand tightly and felt like crying with him. If I'm to be honest — and I have tried to be honest in this account from the beginning — then I have to admit that I felt very proud of myself.

Leaving him studying the cartoon page of a three-day-old daily newspaper, I hurried back across to the doctors' residence. It was ten past one and, according to the yellowing and tattered printed notice pasted on the back of my wardrobe door, lunch was served at one o'clock precisely. When I arrived in the dining-room it was deserted. I sat for a few moments studying the pattern of gravy stains on the tablecloth before finally plucking up the courage to jingle a few items of cutlery together. As I'd hoped, the noise brought a white-uniformed lady into the room. She had grey hair, rinsed in blue, and a series of chins which shook gently as she moved. She moved slowly around the table and flicked at the tablecloth with a rather dirty tea-towel.

Early in my career as a medical student — during my first week on the wards, in fact — I had learnt to play the diagnostic game when travelling on trains or buses or standing in shop queues. Many diseases can be recognised from a distance by using such pointers as facial colour, physiognomy, tics, hair colour or form, skin condition, gait, eye disorders and habits. The blank stare of Parkinson's disease, the stamping gait of advanced syphilis, the pallor of anaemia, the yellowy hue of a liver infection, the emaciation associated with a cancerous growth, and the facial palsy of a seventh cranial nerve lesion are all easily noted. And there's myxoedema, the condition caused by a paucity of thyroid hormone. The symptoms include obesity, dry hair and slowness of movement. A pathognomonic facial appearance is usually associated with the disease. And the lady flicking at the tablecloth had myxoedema. I was certain of that.

She'd finished and disappeared again, as mysteriously as she'd arrived, when Dr Coleman arrived.

'Weak vegetable soup and lamb chops,' he said as he sat down opposite me.

'Have you seen the menu?' I asked innocently.

'It's Wednesday,' he said. 'It's always weak vegetable soup and lamb chops on Wednesday. And spotted dick,' he sighed.

'I hate weak vegetable soup, lamb chops and spotted dick.'

'Isn't there anything else?'

He shook his head. As he did so the myxoedematous waitress reappeared carrying two bowls of weak vegetable soup.

'I heard you come in, Doctor,' she said to my luncheon companion. 'I've brought your soup.'

'Thank you, Ethel.'

She shuffled off, the tea-towel tucked into her belt.

'Is her name really Ethel?' I whispered, leaning across the table.

'Her name's really Ruby, but everyone calls her Ethel.' I didn't like to ask why.

'Sad about that young patient of yours,' he went on, reaching out and taking a piece of bread from the raffiawork basket which stood beside the plated-silver cruet set.

'Miss Richards?'

'That's right,' he nodded, his mouth full of bread.

'Why?' I asked, with my first spoonful of soup in mid-air.

'She's got acute leukaemia,' he said, looking across at me. 'Didn't you know?'

Chapter Twenty One

During the next three days I spent a good deal of time with Ellen Richards. The laboratory tests had shown that she was suffering from a virulent and lethal form of leukaemia for which there was unlikely to be any cure. In blunter terms, she was dying.

No one had told her that, of course. Her general practitioner had merely suggested that a few hospital tests might be useful. Her consultant physician, Dr Younger, had explained to her that she had a blood deficiency that would make her feel rather weak; the medical registrar, Dr Sid, had spoken to her only twice, and then simply to ask for specific information about her medical history. As the acting house physician I was the representative of the medical profession officially responsible for her day-to-day care, and in consequence I had the job of answering her questions about her own condition. It was me she asked, 'When am I going to get better?'

'I'm not sure,' I lied. 'The tests haven't been completed yet.'

'They've been taking blood from me every day since I came into hospital,' she pointed out. 'Surely you must know something by now.'

I explained that the results were equivocal and that Dr Younger had not yet made a firm diagnosis.

'Is it serious?' she asked me. 'Tell me if it's serious.'

'Oh, I don't think so,' I told her with what I hoped was a smile. 'You'll be up and about soon.'

Then I made some excuse about having to go and see a patient on the male medical ward and rushed off, white coat billowing behind me importantly.

Instead, however, I went back to the doctors' residence. One of the house surgeons, whom I knew vaguely, was sitting in the dining-room eating pieces of dry bread and drinking cold coffee. He told me he'd missed breakfast.

'Do you always tell patients the truth?' I asked him suddenly.

'Pardon?'

I explained that I wanted advice.

'I never know,' he admitted. 'People are different.' He swallowed another mouthful of cold coffee and shuddered with distaste.

'But in general,' I insisted. 'What do you think in general terms?'

'Would you want to know if you were dying?' he asked me unexpectedly.

'I don't know. I've never thought about it.'

'Well, I've thought about it,' he told me, 'and I still don't know.' He put the last piece of bread into his mouth, pushed his chair back and stood up. 'Sorry,' he said, 'you'll just have to worry about it. Same as the rest of us.'

And worry I did. Ellen said she wanted to know the truth.

But did she really mean it? Could she be sure she wanted to know? Did I have the right or the courage to tell her? Had she guessed something? The questions were interminable and the answers equivocal.

She talked to me at length about herself and her family. Her father had built up a small chain of tobacconist shops, having started with a kiosk in a local hotel. Now he controlled seven shops and fifteen kiosks.

He was still proud of his humble origins and almost deliberately took pleasure in rejecting all his wife's attempts to tidy up his rough patches. Ellen's mother had taken their social rise far more seriously and she enjoyed being able to mix with the wives of executives and professional men.

Inevitably, therefore, they had numerous arguments, and frequently separated for days at a time. They always went back together in the end, however, being held in a tight marital bond by a desperate need for each other. At first, so she told me, Ellen had been deeply hurt when her parents quarrelled. Later she began to understand that the harsh words they threw at each other were intended not to hurt but to ease temporary pains. The reconciliations were always warm and full of genuine tenderness.

She talked to me about their love for her, their only child, which she knew was almost unlimited, and, as she described how each of them supported the other in times of crisis whatever the nature of any previous difference, it became clear to me that she knew she was dying. She was describing to me what she hoped would happen to her parents. For it was their sorrow which troubled her most.

Still I couldn't answer her questions with any honesty when they came. And they came daily; several times a day, in fact. Could I deprive her of whatever hopes she had? But how could I deny the inevitable, when she was so clearly becoming weaker hour by hour? Three days after I'd first met her she was so weak that she couldn't even sit up in bed without help.

'Tell me about yourself,' she said to me one day, after I'd sat listening to her for forty minutes. 'You know everything about me, but I know nothing at all about you.'

I replied that there was nothing much to tell.

'What sort of doctor are you going to be?' she insisted. 'You must tell me.'

I'd explained to her soon after my first examination of her that I was still a student.

I told her I didn't know.

‘Are you going to specialise?’ she asked. ‘Or work in hospital?’

‘Most specialists do work in hospital,’ I told her.

‘Do you want to work in hospital?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘I think you ought to be a general practitioner.’

I asked her why.

‘I don’t know,’ she said, putting her head on one side, and looking at me. ‘I think you’d make a good general practitioner.’ She smiled at me. ‘You’re too gentle to work in hospitals.’

I looked down at my hands and blushed.

‘You know I’m dying, don’t you?’

I said nothing.

‘What have I got?’ she asked me. ‘What is it?’

I reached out for her hand and looked up at her. She looked straight at me, pleading for help, support, truth — I didn’t know what. And then, suddenly, I told her. I told her that she had leukaemia, and that there was nothing anyone could do, and, as I told her, the tears streamed down my cheeks and I hated medicine, hated the Kintbury General Hospital, hated my own uselessness, hated everything. What was I doing? What were we all doing? Why did we have to let this girl die?

My maudlin self-pity and despair were suspended for a while when I was tapped on the shoulder by a staff nurse who told me that there was an emergency on the men’s medical ward and they hadn’t been able to get hold of either Dr Sid or Dr Coleman.

‘I’ll be back,’ I promised Ellen, holding on to her fingers for a moment longer than might have been necessary. She smiled at me and nodded.

The emergency patient turned out to be a five-year-old boy who’d been admitted for some investigations. He’d broken his left leg twice, his right leg once, his right arm once and his left arm three times, and at last it had been decided that there might be some underlying bone pathology to account for these frequent fractures. The local children’s hospital, which was supposed to cope with all patients under the age of twelve, had been shut down so that the decorators could paint over the cracks and mould which had decorated the wards for half a century, so all emergency admissions had to be brought into the Kintbury General. Michael Jones was the only child on the ward, and as a result the nurses had been spoiling him terribly.

‘We let him sit out on the balcony,’ explained the staff nurse breathlessly as we hurried towards the male ward. ‘He was sitting there scribbling in a notebook we’d given him, when he was stung by a bee. He must be allergic to bees,’ she went on. ‘He’s reacted very badly. He’s all swollen up and Sister says she thinks he might die.’

I desperately tried to decide what I needed to do. I had great difficulty in dragging my mind back from Ellen Richards.

Bee, wasp and hornet stings usually produce nothing much more than a painful red swelling with some itching and some aching. However, on occasion, either because the victim has been stung before, because he’s been stung by numerous bees, or because he has a natural allergy to bee stings, there may be a great danger of death. These minute arthropods are reported to cause more deaths in America each year than the much feared rattlesnakes.

Young Michael Jones was gasping for breath and restless and looked blue. He was more or less unconscious when I arrived by his bedside. As I sprinted down the ward towards him, completely ignoring the unwritten regulation that no one ever runs in a hospital, all I could think of was ‘adrenalin’. That word kept leaping to the forefront of my mind.

‘Adrenalin,’ I shouted at the sister, who was trying to keep him from throwing himself off his bed.

The staff nurse who’d accompanied me grabbed an ampoule from the trolley that had already been wheeled into position, broke its top off, tore a syringe and then a needle out of their plastic packs, fitted the needle on to the syringe and drew up the contents of the ampoule. She handed the syringe to me. The ward sister held the boy’s arm steady for me and, without bothering to hunt for cotton wool or methylated spirit, I jabbed the needle straight in and pressed the plunger. The syringe emptied rapidly; I stood back with it empty in my hand. I was trembling.

That was all I did. The sister and two nurses did all the rest, soothing, calming and restraining young Michael Jones. When Dr Sid and Dr Coleman arrived from the casualty department half an hour later, the patient was looking considerably better and I was feeling a great deal worse. It had been the first crisis I’d encountered on my own and, although the nurses had done much more than I had, there was no escaping the fact that young Michael could have died — but hadn’t.

An hour later, sipping tea in the doctors’ residence, I was still suffering from shock. I had to hold the cup with both hands to stop it spilling. I was rescued from this sad and depressing state by a telephone call from the hospital’s administrative offices. They were worried because I’d somehow managed to arrive at the hospital without filling in the usual forms.

‘We haven’t any record of you,’ the clerk explained. ‘It’s most irregular.’

I apologised.

‘If you could come over now it would be a great help,’ she explained. ‘There’re a few things we need to get straightened out.’ She told me they needed to know where I’d be staying and how long I’d be there for. They also wanted to know if I had a national insurance card. I explained that I was already staying in the doctors’ residence, that I didn’t know how long I’d be there and that I didn’t have a national insurance card.

‘I’m afraid the hospital secretary still wants a word with you.’

Defeated, I made my way across to his office.

‘Thank you for coming,’ he said. ‘Just a few formalities.’

He smiled and bent forward a little. His eyes narrowed as he stared at my chin.

‘Right,’ I said.

‘Are you growing a beard?’ he asked me suddenly.

‘A beard?’ I repeated. I was still thinking about young Michael Jones.

‘Are you growing a beard? It’s against hospital regulations, you know.’

‘No, I’m not,’ I told him. I automatically reached up and felt my chin. ‘Oh, this,’ I said, understanding. ‘No. I forgot my razor and I haven’t had time to get one yet.’

The administrator said nothing. Then he swallowed and handed me two long forms to fill in. I scribbled my name on the bottoms and answered the questions that I could understand.

On my way out of his office, one of his receptionists stopped me. ‘Are you Dr Vernon?’

‘Edward Vernon,’ I replied carefully.

‘There’s a message for you from the female medical ward,’ she told me. ‘They thought you’d like to know that Miss Richards just died.’

Chapter Twenty Two

I needed to get away from the Kintbury General for a few hours. It's said that people get used to anything and that repeated exposure to difficult situations produces immunity. It wasn't working that way with me. For what seemed like a lifetime I'd been coming face to face with death, and still it was as hard as ever to accept. I continued to allow myself to become emotionally involved with patients, so that each loss still left me defeated and depressed. Living with pain and discomfort, fear and suffering, grief and bitterness is not easy. It's no wonder that medicine is riddled with remorse and recriminations and that the lawyers are beginning to move in and take over the profession. It's too easy for patients, doctors, relatives and nurses all to blame each other. In St Peter's there was some chance of escaping for a while into the more rarefied world of academic life, where reality is kept at bay by well-built barriers of intellectual pride. At the Kintbury General, where they dealt daily with an unending stream of sick and needy without enough equipment or staff, the pressure was remorseless. I could understand why Dr Younger felt so bitter. I had to get away for a while. I could hardly believe I'd been there for less than a week.

I needed to get back to the flat for another, more prosaic, reason. My beard was developing into a recognisable growth and despite my earlier denials I'd grown the outline of a full set of whiskers. I didn't like them, and I wanted to take them off. They made me look far more piratical than I felt.

Dr Sid and Dr Coleman cheerfully agreed to cover for me while I spent one night away. I couldn't ask Dr Younger's permission; he was at a conference in Bavaria where he was expected to stay for a week. The conference had been organised by the makers of Angipax, who had little difficulty in persuading several dozen British hospital consultants to abandon the tedium of day-to-day practical medicine for an opportunity to experience some genuine Teutonic hospitality. Attendance at two or three lectures and a certain moral commitment to prescribe Angipax was a small price to pay for such a trip, particularly since the visit was considered by the hospital to be educational and not vacational, so all expenses were paid.

Getting back into town was easier than getting out had been. Bus routes from the city centre spread outwards like the spokes of a wheel. It was easy to travel along the wrong one from the centre, but from the rim one had only to choose a bus travelling in the correct direction in order to find oneself in the centre. From the stop I walked to St Peter's and the flat.

Hector was sitting in the hall surrounded by pieces of machinery and wire. He looked as if he was about to start building a full-sized model of an Apollo spacecraft.

'It's a projector,' he explained. 'Bought it in a jumble sale for a couple of quid.'

'Does it work?'

'Not yet, but it will.'

'What on earth do you want a projector for anyway?'

I picked up a large, round, shiny can.

'Be careful with that!' said Hector rather sharply.

I put it down. 'What are you going to do with this?' I asked again.

'Show films. Good job you happened to call in — we're having a bit of a party tonight. You don't mind, do you?'

'Of course not.'

'You're invited, naturally.'

'Anything in particular that you're celebrating?' I asked him.

'It's a bit of a secret as a matter of fact,' he whispered confidentially, struggling for the fifth time to persuade a small length of spring to stay in position, 'but I don't mind telling you. I've been doing a bit of work with Mr Knibb, and it's been accepted for publication in the British Medical Journal.' He concentrated on fitting a screw into place.

'Congratulations,' I said, gathering that the news was worthy of them. 'Who is Mr Knibb?'

'He's one of the neurosurgeons. In fact, he's one of the leading neurosurgeons in the world.'

I hadn't heard of him, but I didn't like to admit it.

'He does some work at St Peter's, but a lot of his research is done in one of the Medical Research Council's laboratories in Cardiff. He's been kind enough to offer me his house job.'

'I thought you were going to study anaesthetics or radiology or something.'

'Ah, well,' said Hector with a slight smile. 'You know how it is. These opportunities come up and you can't afford to ignore them.' With a triumphant gesture he fitted the casing on to the projector and leant back admiringly.

'Who's coming to the party, then?'

'Two chaps from the neurosurgical unit and a few of the technicians. And a few nurses, of course.'

'Should be a good crowd.'

He was lifting up the projector to stand it on a small table that usually carried a bowl of hideous artificial flowers made of luminous red and green plastic, when Andrew and Sara appeared. It was good to see them both.

I shook hands with Andrew and kissed Sara on the cheek. ‘D’you like it, then?’ Andrew asked.

I looked at him, rather puzzled.

‘What d’you think of it?’ he demanded. He put his arm round Sara and smiled down at her. She smiled back at him, and I felt distinctly superfluous. ‘The jumper,’ he explained, pulling at a patterned sweater he was wearing. ‘Sara knitted it for me.’

I made polite, congratulatory noises which probably sounded trite, but were genuine, and Sara looked suitably embarrassed. Andrew just looked extraordinarily proud both of his sweater and his girlfriend.

‘You off out?’ Hector asked him, adjusting the legs of the projector so that it was level. The table had one leg shorter than the other three.

‘I’m taking Sara into town. She’s got to meet her parents. They’re taking her out for a meal.’ I gathered that Andrew wasn’t included in the invitation. I told Sara that I hoped we’d meet again soon, and promised Andrew that I’d see him at the party.

When they’d gone I watched Hector threading the film through.

‘I got this one from a lab technician in the pathology department,’ he explained. ‘It’s rather good. Do you want to have a preview with me?’

I told him that I had a few things to do at the hospital and that I’d see him later. In fact, I’d intended to go along to the medical school library and get some bookwork done but I stopped off in the cafeteria and drank two cups of steaming hot coffee with a couple of fellows who were in the same year as Hector, Andrew and I but whom I’d hardly seen for more than six months. That’s one of the funny things about studying medicine: everyone moves around from hospital to hospital and department to department, and the people you’re supposed to be studying with are almost total strangers by the time you qualify.

* * *

It was eight when I got back to the flat, and the party had already started; surprisingly early, for most medical students’ parties started nearer the day on which they would finish. I was astonished to find that most of the people there were dressed in dinner jackets or long dresses; and even more surprised to see that the men were wearing the dinner jackets and the women the dresses.

‘I’m sorry,’ I apologised to Hector. ‘I haven’t got a dinner jacket.’

‘That’s fine,’ he reassured me. ‘Just put a tie on, will you? It’s supposed to be sort of semi-formal.’

I brushed some of the creases out of my cleanest white shirt and gave my sports jacket a bit of a shake. I even polished the leather elbow-patches.

Hector had fitted up the projector so that it was aimed at a good-sized expanse of flat wall; he was carefully threading the film into position. He didn’t seem anxious to begin a conversation, so I wandered slowly into the bathroom where the drinks had been laid out on two old planks resting across the bath. A tall, rather elegant man with a droopy carnation pinned to his dinner jacket was busy pouring generous measures of home-made wine into long-stemmed glasses. Hector must have hired those — our guests normally drank from a motley collection of half-pint beer-glasses, coffee-cups, mugs and free gifts which had been handed out to previous occupants of the flat mobile enough to patronise petrol stations. The elegant guest’s friend, a willowy creature with no back to her dress and not much front to her body, was chattering prettily about someone called Rita.

‘I think it’s awful the way she’s always gossiping about people,’ she complained. ‘I hate gossip; it’s so demeaning.’

‘Absolutely, dear,’ said the elegant man, picking up four glasses in one hand and taking her arm with the other. He led her past me, and out of the bathroom. Left alone, I poured a large quantity of the wine into the tooth-mug from the shelf over the washbasin, which held approximately twice as much fluid as the handsome long-stemmed glasses. Then I drifted back into the hall. By this time there were about twenty-five guests crowded into the flat — most of them squashed behind Hector and the projector. I half recognised two or three, but realised to my astonishment that most were total strangers. I’d heard that Hector’s engagement had been broken off and the dietician’s absence seemed to confirm the rumour.

With a few words of warning Hector reached up and switched off the hall-light. The projector began to purr and the film to whirr. The audience settled with some shuffling into the most comfortable positions they could find. I was standing in front of the projector but could just keep out of the spotlight by pressing back into my bedroom doorway.

The film was of the hue normally described as blue. An assortment of naked actresses and actors cavorted merrily from scene to scene using neither clothes nor plot to cloak their indecent activities. From the squeals and screams of delight coming from behind Hector, I could guess that the film was encouraging active participation among the audience. Perhaps I wasn’t in the right mood for it; perhaps I’d have been more enthusiastic had I been accompanied by an imaginative partner. Anyway, my major reaction was one of astonishment that people who spent their daily lives in contact with naked people should be prepared to sit in desperately uncomfortable positions watching more naked people getting into desperately uncomfortable positions on a makeshift screen. I found myself watching the audience more than the entertainment.

When the film had been played through twice Hector turned it round and showed it backwards. That brought even louder screams of delight, as the protagonists extricated themselves with great speed and ease from their unusual positions. Then he showed it upside down. After that he turned the projector off and the lights on, and everyone queued for the bathroom; sixteen people wanted to get drinks, seven wanted to use the lavatory and one wanted to be sick. I know, because I was stuck in my bedroom doorway and I had to stand and watch them all.

When I finally managed to get into the bathroom myself I found Andrew sitting on the edge of the bath. He looked very miserable.

'Where've you been?' I asked him.

'In here,' he said flatly. He looked at his watch. 'I'm meeting Sara at the bus stop at eleven.'

'It's not ten yet,' I pointed out.

'I'm not much interested in the crowd Hector's invited.'

'You're just moping because Sara's off for the evening,' I told him. 'Anyone would think she'd gone out with someone else!'

'I think I'll go and wait at the bus stop,' he said gruffly. He seemed rather lost without Sara, and in a strange way I envied him.

* * *

Half an hour or so later Hector turned the projector round, opened the window at the far end of the hall and aimed the lens through it. The beam of light landed on an expensive house across the road where, judging by the cars in the drive, the guests were unlikely ever to be eligible for supplementary benefits.

A few moments later there were great squeals of delight as the front of the house was decorated with moving pictures of an unbelievably well-endowed young lady. Undoubtedly intrigued by the flood of light unexpectedly pouring into their living-room, the occupants and their guests began to trickle out through the front door. With surprising skill Hector managed to stop the projector so that the doorway was neatly positioned between the legs of the film's major star; the expensively dressed and expensively coiffured men and women who wandered, blinking, out into the evening light appeared to be making their exits from the film star's perineal portals. No one except me seemed to notice that the third person to appear on the doorstep was Professor Grainger.

It was he who knocked on the door of the flat a few seconds later.

I expected the worst, but he stayed for nearly an hour, aiming the projector in turn at his fellow-guests across the road and directing different mammoth organs on to their grinning faces. When he left he clapped Hector on the shoulder and congratulated him on his imagination. I was so relieved that I drank far too much home-made wine.

When I caught the bus back to the Kintbury General at seven the following morning I forgot my razor again.

Chapter Twenty Three

The bus driver inched his way through the traffic. He stopped for every car, lorry, pedestrian, cyclist and small animal anxious to cross our path or join the flow of traffic. When I got back to the Kintbury General, Ethel, the white-coated, myxoedematous dining-room assistant, was clearing the table. Reluctantly she left two slices of toast, and the half-cupful of coffee that remained in a chipped white porcelain jug. I gulped down the coffee and swallowed the toast without even taking the time to smear it with marmalade.

Dr Sid and Dr Coleman were already on the male medical ward. A twenty-year-old Italian with meningitis was struggling and shouting as they attempted to perform a lumbar puncture. There didn't seem anything I could do to help and, with two porters and three nurses also crowded into the confined area around his bed, there was no room for spectators. The porters were there to keep the patient still, the nurses to keep Dr Sid and Dr Coleman supplied with sterile quantities of all the necessary bits and pieces of equipment. I walked back along the ward and stopped by Mr Kennedy's bed. A young student nurse was washing him.

Someone had provided him with a proper black eye-patch and he looked truly piratical. A small pile of magazines on his bedside table made it clear that he'd continued to improve his reading.

'He's doing very well, aren't you, Pop?' said the student nurse.

Mr Kennedy slowly nodded and smiled slightly. I felt that she was detracting from his dignity by using such a general endearment, but I didn't say anything. Draping a small towel across his middle she washed with a soapy yellow sponge as far down as possible, then as far up as possible.

'Sister said he can go outside in a wheelchair if it's sunny,' she said.

'Great,' I agreed. She wiped the remains of the soap from her patient and rubbed him dry with a thick white towel. When she'd finished, he reached out and touched her hand for a moment.

She helped him back into his pyjamas and combed his hair.

He'd already been shaved. 'There you are, Pop,' she said finally. She could hardly have been more than eighteen, and she was bathing a man old enough to be her grandfather. Hardly surprising, perhaps, that to protect her own sanity she had to remove in her mind his personal identity and natural human independence.

'I'll help you into a wheelchair,' I told him. I asked the nurse to wait while I fetched one from the corridor. There were nearly always a couple stored there, just as at St Peter's. I was beginning to learn that, despite the obvious, major differences between them, all hospitals follow certain patterns of organisation simply because, although they may be arbitrary, they're also efficient.

The two of us helped him into the chair, pulling his old checked woollen dressing-gown around him while he was standing up. I put a couple of magazines in his lap, added the newspaper and a bag of peppermints he pointed to, and proceeded to push him out of the ward, out of the hospital and into the grounds.

The sun was warm enough to be pleasant but not hot enough to be stifling. I found him a sheltered corner near the goldfish pond and hurried back to the ward. On the way I passed young Michael Jones, now clearly recovered from his bee sting. He, too, was in pyjamas and dressinggown.

'Does the sister know you're down here?' I asked him.

He nodded. 'She said it was all right as long as I didn't go too far.'

'Well, you mind you don't.' He scampered off before I'd said it, waving goodbye.

Mr Kennedy's improvement had cheered me considerably. He still couldn't speak, and his movements were weak and often imprecise, but he could do a great deal more for himself than when I'd first seen him on my first day at the Kintbury General. For months after a stroke, patients often make tremendous strides, recovering many of the abilities they and their relatives and healers often feel are lost forever. With a little luck and a great deal of perseverance Mr Kennedy might well recover his speech and learn to walk again. The speech therapist and physiotherapists would continue to work away with him, and as long as he continued to improve he would be encouraged. The main danger was that he'd abandon hope, and then find himself simply a burden on an acute medical ward where beds are always at a premium. Then he might well be transferred to a geriatric hospital from where there would be no escape. He'd almost certainly never be able to live alone at home — even when I'd first met him he'd been too badly affected by the narrowing of the arteries supplying his brain for that — but he could possibly manage to live with some assistance in a sheltered flat or an old people's residential home where the occupants are allowed freedom to look after their own spirits, if not their bodies. The progress he made in the next few weeks would determine precisely what was to happen to him.

I pondered on his prospects while I admitted an elderly woman to the ward for tests on her thyroid gland and took blood samples from the dozen or so patients on both the male and female wards who needed investigations. While I'd been at the Kintbury General I'd acquired several new technical skills, and I'd greatly improved my ability to remove blood without alienating the patient. Practice makes perfect, they say.

'Can you take some blood from Michael Jones?' asked Dr Coleman, who'd finished treating the Italian with meningitis and was heading back to the doctors' residence to change his clothes. He'd managed to get his trousers covered not with spinal fluid, blood or drip-solution but with lemon squash. The almost obligatory bottle of squash on the bedside table had been sent flying by one of the porters as they'd struggled to keep the patient still enough.

I promised to find young master Michael and do my best.

Children’s veins are inevitably smaller than those of adults, and extracting blood from a child is often a difficult and tiresome business. Michael wasn’t on the ward, so I stuffed into my coat pocket the necessary syringe, needle, sample-bottle and swab. Then I headed for where I’d last seen him.

For ten minutes I scoured the grounds until I eventually arrived where I’d left Mr Kennedy. When I saw the wheelchair I hurried forward; my patient was lying prone on the ground, stretched forward in front of it.

I expected to find him dead or dying, but he wasn’t. His eyes, however, were full of terror. He looked at me in absolute agony and slowly managed to lift his right arm to point towards the goldfish pond.

‘What is it?’ I asked him. Stooping down to attend to him, I looked behind me to see what he was pointing at. I could spot nothing of any significance.

Eyes wide with desperation, he tried to edge himself forward along the gravel path. He managed only an inch or two. Clearly, for some reason, he’d been deliberately moving from his wheelchair towards the pond. I stood up and walked quickly in the direction he was pointing.

I was about a yard and a half from the pond when I saw why Mr Kennedy was so desperate. At the same time I saw why I’d been unable to find Michael Jones. He was lying face down in the pond, his dressing-gown billowing around him. He must have fallen in while kneeling or standing on the edge. He’d probably been trying to touch one of the goldfish.

I turned back to Mr Kennedy. He must have watched it all from his wheelchair, unable to move, unable to shout for help. Gently I lifted Michael out of the water and laid him down beside the pool; then I helped Mr Kennedy back into his wheelchair. His eyes were shut and he sobbed continuously.

Two porters carefully carried Michael to the pathology examination room. He’d been dead for some time and there was no chance of resuscitating him. I wheeled Mr Kennedy back on to the ward and, with the help of the student nurse who’d helped me before, I got him back into bed. He seemed weaker and more frail than he had only a couple of hours ago.

Chapter Twenty Four

It was my first night on call by myself. I was sole representative of the medical profession in a hospital whose two medical wards contained forty-seven patients and whose casualty department catered for a total population of over one hundred and fifty thousand. There was a house surgeon on call, but his responsibilities were confined to the two surgical wards; there was a doctor whose job was to look after the pregnant women and those with gynaecological disorders. But for purely medical problems I was the physician at whose feet the buck paused, even if it didn't actually stop for good.

Beside my bed I'd put three books on medical emergencies which I'd taken out of the hospital's small library. I'd carefully marked the pages dealing with specific problems so that without delay I could refresh my memory of how best to deal with a coronary, a pneumothorax, a bleeding duodenal ulcer an attack of status epilepticus, cirrhosis, acute pancreatitis, a diabetic coma, pneumonia, a stroke, meningitis, malaria, relapsing fever, oonchercias is, food poisoning, typhoid fever, von Recklinghausen's disease or an asthmatic attack.

At half-past eleven, having already dealt with several small medical problems, I lay down on top of the bed. I didn't bother to remove my white coat or even my shoes. I knew that somehow this time was different, and I wouldn't sleep. Always before there had been someone else around. Now there wasn't; Dr Coleman was enjoying a night at the cinema with a staff nurse and unlikely to return until breakfast-time.

Dr Sid, also off duty, had travelled up to Manchester for the night to visit friends and attend a birthday party. Officially he was always on call and I could, if I needed help, reach him at his hotel. He'd given me the number. That was, however, of limited value. There wasn't much of a chance that he could ever get back from Manchester in time to do more than sign the death certificate.

I fully intended to stay awake all night, ready to fly off at an instant's notice to provide succour and professional help to anyone in need. Nevertheless, despite all my good intentions, I was asleep when the phone finally did ring. It woke me with a start, for I still hadn't developed that strange facility for coming out of a deep sleep within seconds, nor acquired the doctor's habit of cat-napping through the night, ready to be awakened by the slightest hint of a bell. Now, when I'm on call at night, a typewriter bell can wake me at a hundred yards. Then it was different; when I fell asleep, I fell asleep.

'Right,' I stuttered into the telephone, throwing myself out of bed and fumbling underneath it for my shoes.

The caller told me there was a problem on the female medical ward. Tearing off my white coat and tie, I promised to be there straight away. Only when I'd put the phone down did I realise that I'd deliberately remained dressed and that my shoes were on my feet. And it wasn't until I was half way through the door that I realised I'd forgotten to ask what the trouble was. My carefully prepared index of emergency treatments was quite useless without a diagnosis to work on.

The patient was a forty-three-year-old woman with a long history of asthmatic attacks. She'd been admitted by Dr Coleman when I'd been at Hector's party.

'She's gradually been getting worse for the last hour or so,' said the nurse on duty — the same student who'd helped me with Mr Kennedy. Now she was in charge of a ward full of acute medical cases. She seemed to be alone.

Mrs Hinton was clearly having difficulty in getting her breath. I listened to her chest and heard nothing much except the strained wheezing so typical of the true asthmatic.

'Could you get me some aminophylline, please?' I asked the nurse, in a whisper. The ward was in darkness except for Mrs Hinton's bedside lamp and a dim light on the nurse's desk. Several of the patients were snoring heavily, and one was talking in her sleep. She seemed to be having an argument with her husband or boyfriend.

The nurse tiptoed down the ward to the sister's office and the drug cupboard. Then she tiptoed back again.

'It's locked,' she told me.

'Haven't you got the key?'

She shook her head. 'I'm not qualified. I'm not allowed it.' It was only then that I realised that the whole ward, Mrs Hinton included, was at the mercy of two unqualified people. It was perhaps a good job that most of them were sleeping soundly.

I found a steel ruler on the sister's desk and managed to break the cupboard open. I found an ampoule of aminophylline and injected it into Mrs Hinton. Immediately she began to breathe more easily.

'When are you off duty?' I asked the nurse when we'd cleared away the debris and turned off Mrs Hinton's lamp. We were standing in darkness in the sister's office.

She told me she would finish her night-duty rota two days later.

'Will you come out with me?' I asked her. 'We could have a meal somewhere.'

No sooner had she said she would than the night's stillness and the romantic mood were broken by the heavy clickclack of a pair of approaching feet. The nurse, whose name I still didn't know, leapt away from me.

'Everything all in order?' asked the night sister sharply.

'What's been going on here?'

'I came up to see Mrs Hinton,' I explained. I was automatically on the defensive. It seemed as if the sister suspected that my visit to the ward wasn't entirely on clinical grounds.

'Hmph,' she snorted. She brushed past us both and on into the office. It was then she saw the cupboard.

'What's happened?' she asked, panicking. 'Someone's been in the drug cupboard. Call the police at once!' She reached over for the telephone. I put my hand on top of hers to stop her making the call.

'It's all right,' I explained. 'I had to open it to get some aminophylline out.'

She looked at me in horror. 'You broke into the drug cupboard?'

I nodded.

'Aren't you the student?'

I nodded again.

'But you're not allowed into the drug cupboard.' She sat down. This is very serious.'

I pointed out that Mrs Hinton had been ill and was now better. I also explained that although neither of us was qualified we were the only people available at that moment.

'You could have called me,' said the sister indignantly.

'The switchboard always knows where I am. Anyway, I've got a bleep.'

I pointed out that legally, even if we called her, we still couldn't do anything with the aminophylline unless we either found Dr Coleman or brought Dr Sid back from Manchester. At that point she rather haughtily told the pair of us that she'd have to report the whole incident to the matron and Dr Younger and that someone would have to pay for the cupboard to be repaired. Then she went. We didn't hear any more about it, and the cupboard remained unlockable until the day I left Kintbury General.

***

Having a date with a nurse to keep me awake I went back to bed. Twice more that night I was called to the casualty department, once to suture a small cut caused in a fist-fight and once to check a patient who'd fallen off his bicycle. He seemed to have survived. After that I fell soundly asleep until the telephone rang for a fourth time at half-past six. This time it was the student nurse on the male medical ward. It seemed the whole hospital was being managed by unqualified staff.

'Can't it wait until the morning ward-round?' I begged sleepily. The night had been long and I hadn't slept anywhere near enough. Not only had I worked all the previous day but I would, of course, be working all the following day.

'I'm sorry to bother you, but I'm very worried,' she said unhappily.

'What's the trouble?' I asked, still trying to get out of the call.

'I don't know,' she said with a trace of fear in her voice. 'I think someone's dying.'

'OK,' I sighed. 'I'll come up.' I clambered off the bed again and stumbled sleepily towards the door. For the fourth time I'd forgotten to get any information, and my filing system of treatments was still lying useless on the floor. I made a mental note to write out some small crib-cards to carry with me so that I could take the essence of my library in my pocket. I was fairly confident I could make the necessary diagnosis but nowhere near so sure of deciding on the right treatment.

As I made my way from the doctors' residence to the hospital I couldn't help cursing quietly. I wasn't cursing anything in particular but I found myself looking forward to the time when I could just lie down and sleep. People who kept waking me up were not high on my list of friends.

'It's the gentleman down there,' said the nurse when I arrived, 'but I think he's dead.' She bit her lower lip and bravely fought back the tears. 'I've never had a patient die before.'

The patient was dead. It was Mr Kennedy, and he'd had another stroke; this time one large enough to kill him. I closed his eyes with my thumbs and put his black eye-patch in my pocket while the nurse adjusted the sheets. Ever since young Michael Jones had drowned, Mr Kennedy had slipped backwards, resisting all attempts by the physiotherapists or the speech therapist to help him improve his strength. It was as though he'd decided to die.

Wearily I stumbled back to my bedroom. Somehow it hadn't really sunk in and it didn't really matter very much. I was so tired that I was almost relieved I didn't have to do anything but go back and sleep. Sleep, that is, if the telephone didn't ring.

Chapter Twenty Five

The phone didn't ring again, and I woke to find the housekeeper shaking my shoulder and waving a cup of hot, sweet tea under my nose. Wearily I lurched out of bed ready for another day. Since I still had no razor, my early-morning chores were reduced to the basic minimum, and five or six minutes later I was struggling into my white coat. It was only when I put my hand into the pocket and discovered Mr Kennedy's eye-patch that I remembered what had happened the night before.

Depressed again, I sat down at breakfast to find a brown envelope on my plate. Inside was a letter from the hospital secretary telling me that a new house physician was due to start that day. Since I'd no longer be required as a locum I was free to return to St Peter's.

I read it with mixed feelings. Mr Kennedy's death following so quickly after the deaths of Michael Jones and Ellen Richards had left me emotionally exhausted. I'd be pleased to get back to the comparative peace and quiet of the teaching hospital. Besides, I had a great deal of bookwork to do, and at the Kintbury General I didn't have much time for reading. There were final examinations to be taken before too long, and a lot to be learnt in a rapidly shrinking amount of time.

On the other hand, I'd be sad to leave the hospital where I had in a sense come of age and where I'd learnt something of the true nature of medical practice. In retrospect the five years of my medical education are something of a blur. Like any autobiographer, I've had to concentrate on the events which stand out.

But there were plenty of those at the Kintbury General. When I arrived I'd been very unsure of myself and completely without confidence. When I left I still recognised that I had much to learn, but because I'd been promoted into a situation of responsibility I'd had to acquire confidence quickly. And I'd made good friends there, too. Dr Sid, whose quiet and efficient way of working hardly attracted anyone's attention, had a cool, clinical approach to every problem. Watching him taught me the value of that. And Dr Coleman, more flamboyant and more likely to become emotionally involved with the patients in his care, had his faults and virtues, too.

I told Dr Coleman that I was leaving. He wished me well and said he hoped that the new house physician did at least speak some English. He said he'd got used to being able to talk to his colleague.

The many-chinned waitress dropped a plateful of eggs and bacon in front of me and shuffled away.

'Hasn't she got myxoedema?' I asked Dr Coleman.

He shook his head. 'Ethel,' he called, ignoring my protests.

She turned round and came back towards the table.

'Ethel,' he said, 'take your hat off.'

She grinned toothlessly at him, reached up and whipped off her hair. Underneath it she was completely bald.

'Everyone thinks she's got myxoedema,' he assured me, 'but she lost her hair in the war when her house was bombed.' She grinned at me and put it back on. Now I'd seen her without it, I recognised it as a pretty cheap and poor imitation of a head of hair. That did explain, however, why it had seemed to me to have the dry quality of myxoedematous hair.

After I'd finished breakfast I went on to the wards to say goodbye to the nurses and patients. The student with whom I'd made a date was just leaving the female medical ward.

'You're late off duty,' I exclaimed, looking at my watch.

'There's been a bit of a fuss.'

'Not over the drug cupboard?'

'No,' she said, 'but we forgot to write up the aminophylline in Mrs Hinton's records and on her drug chart.'

I apologised, since that was mainly my fault. The nurse had obviously been crying.

'They didn't tell you off too much, did they?' I asked her.

She shook her head. 'I couldn't care less about that,' she told me. 'I think I'm giving up nursing anyway.'

'Why?' I asked, astonished.

'I've just heard about Mr Kennedy,' she said. 'He was a lovely old man, wasn't he?'

I agreed that he was.

'I'm going home to Shrewsbury when my night duty's finished,' she told me. 'I'm glad I saw you now.'

'Oh' was all I could say. I didn't tell her that I wouldn't be around the Kintbury General much longer, either.

'I'm sorry about the date. But thank you for asking me.'

'That's the story of my life,' I shrugged, resorting to the old cliché in lieu of anything more sensible.

Then she disappeared, off to bed, and I went on to the ward. Mrs Hinton was sitting in a chair reading the morning paper.

'Good morning, Dr Vernon,' she said cheerily. 'Thank you for coming last night.'

'I'm glad you're looking better.'

'Have a sweet,' she said, handing me a bag of acid drops.

Out of politeness I took one. She smiled at me gratefully.

Life in medicine wasn't all dismalness and despair. There were good moments which made it worthwhile. I took the morning blood samples then made my way back to pack my small bag. At the flat I would at least be able to have a shave. I was beginning to take on a distinctly nautical look.

Chapter Twenty Six

After the hectic technicolour world of the Kintbury General, life at St Peter's seemed positively monochromatic. The teaching hospital offered more exotic and unusual illnesses, but patients were diagnosed and treated at a rather more leisurely pace; in addition, I'd been in a position of responsibility at the Kintbury General. For a short time I'd worked as a doctor and been accepted as such by patients and staff alike; now I was simply a medical student again.

Andrew was in the kitchen when I'd finished shaving, and he called me as I came out of the bathroom.

'Great news,' he beamed. 'Sara and I are going to get married.'

'That's fantastic! When?'

'Haven't quite decided yet, but we'd like you to be the best man.'

I told him that I'd be honoured. We shook hands.

'We must have a drink,' I said. I began to rummage around in the kitchen cupboards. We kept a fairly catholic collection of items there: rubber gloves for when the sink became blocked up, old beer-bottles waiting to be returned to the off-licence, candles for use in the frequent power-cuts, and so on. But there was little food apart from a couple of pounds of potatoes which had sprouted. And no alcohol at all. Even the fridge was bare.

'I know,' I said suddenly. 'There's probably something left over from Hector's party. There were gallons of stuff.'

I sorted through the piles of sheets and old bottles in the airing cupboard, where I knew Hector kept his home-made wine. Andrew had followed me out from the kitchen.

'Here it is!' I said, eventually finding half a bottleful. 'I think his dad makes the stuff.'

'It doesn't look too good,' said Andrew suspiciously. 'When was it opened? Are you sure it's safe?'

'Well, Hector drinks a fair bit of it,' I laughed. 'Let's drink to you and Sara.' I didn't tell him I could see a dead spider floating on the surface. I thought it might put him off.

We found two coffee-mugs and emptied the bottle.

'Funny stuff,' said Andrew, wrinkling up his nose, 'very odd.'

'Grown on the shady side of the garage and the farthest corner of the airing cupboard.'

'I've applied for a house job up north,' he said, taking a cautious sip. 'My relatives are up there and we'll be glad to get away from Sara's relatives. They haven't taken to the wedding too well.'

'Why not?'

'Oh, they think I'm a bit of an oddball, I suppose.' He took a second, less cautious sip. 'And they think Sara's still just looking for sympathy.'

'When are you getting married? Before or after finals?'

'Oh, after.' He grinned. 'You never know...!'

'You won't fail,' I told him. 'You've done too well to fail now.'

'Oh, I don't know,' he sighed. 'Professor Grainger still doesn't like me too much, you know. They haven't forgiven me for that piece I wrote.' He finished off his wine.

'Anyway,' he said, suddenly changing his voice and the subject, 'what are you planning to do?'

'Haven't got the foggiest idea,' I confessed honestly.

'Where are you doing your house jobs?'

'I don't know. I haven't applied anywhere yet.'

'You'll have to get a move on, you know; the best jobs all go months in advance.'

'I know,' I nodded. 'I just can't make my mind up, though.'

'Thought about what you're going to do when the house jobs are over?'

I told him that I'd thought about it but hadn't come to any conclusions. 'I just don't know what I want to do. I sometimes wonder about general practice, but I'm not sure whether I'd like it.'

'They ought to let us have a look at a bit of general practice,' argued Andrew, picking up my cup and finishing my wine. 'You didn't want this, did you?'

I shook my head.

'I think I'll go into general practice as soon as I've done my house jobs. I might do a few months in obstetrics, but then I'll get a nice job as an assistant or a junior partner somewhere and settle down with Sara.'

'Where is she today?' I asked him, suddenly remembering that she'd been living with Andrew in the flat for some time.

'Her folks have sent her to spend a month with her granny in Canada. She didn't want to go but they pushed her into it.'

'Canada!'

'Her mother's Canadian. They told her it'd do her good to have a rest away from everything for a week or two.' He smiled ruefully. 'I rather got the impression that by "everything" they meant me,' he said.

'Have you met her dad?'

'Once.' Andrew looked extremely sleepy and I began to suspect that Hector's home-made wine might have matured into something a little more powerful. ‘He’s a funny bugger. Very cautious and careful. The sort of bloke who wears overshoes on top of his wellington boots.’ He yawned.

‘Perhaps when Sara comes back from Canada and they can see you’re both still set on getting married, he’ll come round to your point of view.’

‘Maybe,’ nodded Andrew. ‘Maybe and maybe not.’ He suddenly leant forward, put his head on the table and began to snore very loudly.

Leaving him fast asleep, I walked through pouring rain over to St Peter’s. I’d been allocated to work for a week on the dermatological ward. Despite the fact that a great many patients visit their general practitioners with skin problems, dermatology isn’t one of the areas of medicine taken most seriously by teaching-hospital mandarins. It’s kept neatly in a niche with tropical diseases, dentistry, audiology and venereal disease. In seven days I’d be expected to learn all I needed to know about skin disorders.

My first patient was a middle-aged man who’d been admitted because of an irritating rash that had resisted all attempts at treatment. Even the universally useful steroid creams had proved ineffective, and Mr Kendall had been admitted to St Peter’s so that the consultant dermatologist, Dr Meredith Morgan, could experiment with more powerful creams and ointments.

However, twelve hours after his admission and half an hour before I arrived at his bedside to examine him, Mr Kendall’s rash had suddenly, inexplicably and totally disappeared.

‘It’s gone, Doctor,’ he said happily. ‘Gone completely. I’m very pleased.’

‘But you haven’t had any treatment yet, have you?’

He shook his head. ‘The nurse said that Dr Morgan would be quite upset about it,’ he frowned. ‘I do hope he isn’t too cross with me.’

‘I’m sure he won’t be,’ I told him, although I was by no means certain. Dr Morgan had quite a reputation for being outspoken and sharp with his patients. He wouldn’t like any of them to enjoy a miracle cure.

‘While I’m here, though, Doctor,’ said Mr Kendall cautiously and rather shyly, ‘there is one other thing you might be able to help me with.’

‘What’s that?’

‘I’ve got this lump.’

‘Where?’

‘Down near my privates,’ he blushed. ‘You know, my frilly bits.’

‘Right,’ I said. ‘Let’s have a look, then.’

I drew the screens around his bed and pulled the bedclothes back. He unfastened and pulled down his pyjama trousers, revealing in his right groin the largest and most impressive-looking hernia I’d ever seen.

‘There it is,’ he said proudly. ‘What d’you think of it?’

‘Tremendous,’ I said admiringly. ‘Dr Morgan may be disappointed by the disappearance of your rash but Mr Meridew will be pleased with that.’

‘Mr Meridew? Who’s that?’

‘He’s a surgeon,’ I explained. Gingerly I reached forward and touched the hernia. It was about the size of a decentsized melon, and almost purple. I touched it gently and with the respect due a work of art.

‘Does it go down at all?’ I asked, removing my hand.

Mr Kendall shook his head.

‘Never?’

‘It used to — at least, it used to get a bit smaller occasionally. But it’s been like that for ages now.’

I reached out again. It was quite hard and smooth. Then, as I allowed my fingers to rest on it, I noticed that it was beating away as though it contained a heart of its own. As cautiously as if it had been an explosive device I withdrew my hand. This was no ordinary hernia. In fact, it was no hernia at all. Mr Kendall, I suddenly realised, had a massive aneurysm in his groin.

An aneurysm forms when an artery dilates and a small blood-filled swelling appears. One of the big dangers with an aneurysm is that it can burst. The wall of the artery has been spread thinly and may explode at almost any time. With the blood inside under considerable pressure, a leaking aneurysm can quickly prove fatal.

Leaving Mr Kendall lying naked on top of his bed, since I didn’t dare put the bedclothes back, I hurried to the nearest telephone and called Dr Morgan, who wasn’t important enough to have a registrar of his own and whose resident houseman was on holiday. Dr Morgan was having dinner with a party of guests and his wife quizzed me for several minutes before reluctantly agreeing to fetch him from his meal. Dermatologists do not often have emergencies to cope with. While I waited I told the ward sister, who was looking at me with some astonishment, to prepare herself for a major emergency.

‘Mr Kendall has an aneurysm,’ I gasped when Dr Morgan had finally come on the line and I’d introduced myself.

‘Has he?’ he said, noisily chewing his supper.

‘What shall we do?’

‘What sort of aneurysm is it?’

‘An enormous one.’

‘Ah,’ he said, rather drily. ‘How long has he had it?’

I had to admit that I didn’t know, so I asked him to wait while I rushed back and asked Mr Kendall how long the lump had been there.

‘Twenty-three years,’ I answered rather shamefully a few moments later.

‘Do you think it might hang on for another few hours?’ asked Dr Morgan.

I agreed that it might.

‘Perhaps until tomorrow morning?’ I said it seemed quite likely.

‘Then we’ll leave it alone for now,’ he said. ‘Good night.’ I said good night, too, and went and told Mr Kendall that he could put his pyjamas back on. As I left the ward the sister looked at me with a raised eyebrow.

‘Is the emergency over?’ she enquired with deliberate politeness.

Chapter Twenty Seven

There are several ways of annoying a ward sister. One of the most reliable is to sit on a patient's bed, rumpling the neatly folded, creaseless sheets and leaving behind a clear impression of the encounter. Ward sisters have a natural aversion to clutter, disorder and untidiness of any sort and are likely to turn very nasty when confronted with anyone less than a consultant sitting on an occupied bed.

'Would you like a chair, Mr Vernon?' enquired Sister Yardley coldly as I perched on the edge of Mr Kendall's bed in the intensive care unit. He'd been referred by Dr Morgan to Mr Meridew, who'd been quite enthralled by the prospect of exploring his groin. The swelling, it was universally agreed, was indeed an aneurysm, and Mr Meridew had cancelled two gall-bladder removals and a circumcision in order to make room for Mr Kendall in the theatre. He was anxious to operate quickly, not because he feared for Mr Kendall's life, but because he knew that the hospital's specialist cardiovascular surgeon, Mr Johnson, was due back from a conference in South Africa within the week. With Mr Johnson available, Mr Meridew would have no chance of getting his knife anywhere near an aneurysm. So Mr Kendall had been operated on with the minimum of delay and was now convalescing in the intensive care unit, a specially equipped small ward where eight highly qualified nurses and four even more highly qualified sisters looked after four patients at a time, on a rota system.

'I beg your pardon?' I enquired, half-moving off the bed.

'Would you like a chair?' repeated Sister Yardley, with rather more steel in her voice.

'That's very kind of you, Sister.'

'There's one over there.' She nodded towards the far corner of the unit where two stacking chairs were stored. She stood and watched, hands on her hips, as I fetched myself one and sat down on it. Then she turned round and without another word marched back into a glass-fronted office, where she could keep an eye on all her patients and on a bank of television screens and electrical dials which kept her up-to-date with their physiological status. As the senior nursing officer in charge of the intensive care unit she was on permanent day duty, while her husband, a charge nurse working in the Gregory Geriatric Hospital, worked on permanent nights. It was hardly surprising therefore that she sometimes snapped at medical students, visitors and junior doctors. The couple came together once a month or so when their offduty coincided, and for two or three days after each connubial weekend she would smile sweetly at everyone and ignore all potential disasters with the cheerful disposition of a woman fresh from a romantic assignation.

'Nice to see you, Doctor,' said Mr Kendall.

'How are you feeling?'

'Not so bad,' he smiled, then winced. 'I'm not sure I'd tell you if I found another lump growing,' he warned me.

I was about to ask whether he wanted me to get him anything from the hospital shop, when the twin rubber doors to the unit flew open and Dr Kibble-White fell into the room. He was carrying a huge load of disposable equipment and tripped with practised ease on nothing in particular. He was in charge of the intensive care unit and clearly felt that his duties included keeping the supply cupboard well stocked.

Behind him came Hector, carrying an even larger bundle of catheters, disposable gloves, medicated swabs, drip sets, plastic syringes, sterilised needles and cotton wool. Hector stepped neatly over the anaesthetist's supine form, put his pile of goods down on Mr Kendall's bed and started to pick up Dr Kibble-White's load. I jumped up to help him.

'Thanks, lads,' said Dr Kibble-White cheerily. He examined his stethoscope to make sure it wasn't damaged, and straightened his white coat.

'Are you all right?' asked Sister Yardley solicitously. 'Do you need anything?'

'Fine, thanks, Lizzie,' answered the anaesthetist. He was the only doctor in the hospital who dared to call Sister Yardley by her Christian name. She seemed to like it. The two of them disappeared into the tiny office, while Hector and I carried on sorting out the confusion on the floor.

'What are you doing here?' he asked, examining a drip set that had burst through its plastic packaging and would therefore have to be thrown away.

'Seeing Mr Kendall.'

'I thought you were doing dermatology this week?'

'I am, but one of the patients turned out to have an aneurysm in his groin. Mr Meridew's just operated on him.'

'I'm doing a fortnight's anaesthetics,' said Hector. 'It isn't officially in the curriculum, but Mr Knibb thought it might be useful for me, so he had a word with Dr Kibble-White and Professor Grainger.'

He was explaining to me how Mr Knibb has suggested that a little basic experience in anaesthetics would prove very vital for anyone contemplating a surgical career, when Dr Kibble-White emerged from the office.

'Right! Let's have a look round,' he said, clapping his hands together sharply.

I jumped. Then we began the impromptu ward-round, with a man in his mid-thirties.

'This is Mr Shipton,' said Dr Kibble-White.

‘Shipley,’ corrected the patient.

‘Dreadfully sorry. Shipley,’ said the anaesthetist, leaning forward and patting the patient on the forearm. He winced; Kibble-White’s pat was more like anyone else’s smack. ‘Mr Shipley came into the hospital last Tuesday.’

‘Wednesday,’ said the patient.

‘Sorry. Wednesday... He’s thirty-eight-years-old.’

‘Thirty-seven.’

Dr Kibble-White sighed. ‘This young man came in last week,’ he said quickly, ‘complaining of palpitations. He told us that several times he’d noticed his heart taking an extra beat or two.’ He looked with a raised eyebrow at Mr Shipley.

‘Is that all right?’

Mr Shipley nodded. He looked very earnest as I suppose he had every right to do. It was, after all, his body Dr Kibble-White was discussing.

‘Tell us about the first time,’ said Dr Kibble-White encouragingly.

‘My brother and I had decided to go to Newbury Races for the day,’ said Mr Shipley. ‘There was a horse running in the 3.30 that Fred thought stood a good chance.’ He paused and looked at the anaesthetist who nodded encouragement. ‘To be honest,’ he said, ‘he’d had a good tip about it.’

‘Did it win?’ asked Dr Kibble-White.

Mr Shipley shook his head. ‘No,’ he said sadly, ‘but we won on a young horse in the four o’clock. Just by a nose. Won us ten quid, though.’

‘Did you have much to drink?’

‘No. My brother drove us both down there, so he wasn’t drinking. He got disqualified a few years ago and he’s always been pretty careful since then. I don’t like drinking when he can’t. It isn’t fair, is it?’

‘No,’ agreed Dr Kibble-White. ‘Very sensible.’

‘We got back home at about eight. Is that what you wanted to know?’

‘Where did you eat?’

‘We had some sandwiches my wife had put up for us.’

‘And nothing exciting happened?’

‘We didn’t have any big win, if that’s what you mean.’

‘And yet that evening you had the first palpitations?’

‘That’s right. When I got home. I was sitting watching the television when they came. I thought I was going to die.’

‘And how many times since then have you had them?’

‘Twice. Once last week when I went to the cinema. I go with my brother once a month. He’s divorced, you know, and gets a bit lonely now and then.’

‘Just the two of you went?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Did you have anything to drink?’

Mr Shipley shook his head.

‘And nothing particularly exciting happened that day?’

Again Mr Shipley shook his head.

‘Where did you eat?’

‘At home before we went out.’

‘And when did you get the palpitations?’

‘Towards the end of the big feature. I thought I was going to die.’

‘What happened on the third occasion?’

‘We were repairing our garage doors. They’ve been sticking for months and I decided to try to take them off and oil them.’

‘Hard work?’

‘Not particularly.’

‘Did you have any help?’

‘My brother came and helped me out.’

‘And after that you had some extra heartbeats again?’

Mr Shipley nodded.

‘Right,’ said Dr Kibble-White. ‘You now have all the information you need, gentlemen, to make a diagnosis. We’ve had Mr Shipton on the unit here for several days and we haven’t found anything wrong with him at all. He hasn’t had any extra beats since he’s been in the hospital and he’s got no other symptoms at all.’

‘Shipley,’ said the patient quietly.

‘Shipley,’ corrected Dr Kibble-White. ‘I beg your pardon.’

‘Not alcohol?’ said Hector.

Dr Kibble-White shook his head. 'You heard the story.'

'And not physical exercise?'

Dr Kibble-White shook his head again.

'They were extra-systoles?' I suggested. 'A pause and then a strong beat?'

'Certainly sounded like that,' agreed Dr Kibble-White, 'and that's what we decided. We got Professor Grainger to look at him after he was admitted here and that's what he decided as well.'

'Once after he went to the races,' said Hector, counting on his fingers, 'once after a visit to the cinema...'

'During a visit to the cinema,' Dr Kibble-White corrected him.

'...during a visit to the cinema, and thirdly after repairing the garage doors.'

'I can't see any connection,' I said.

'I take it there is a connection?' said Hector.

'There is,' agreed Dr Kibble-White. 'His brother was with him on each occasion. Right, Mr Shipley?'

Mr Shipley nodded.

'He can't be allergic to his brother, surely,' said Hector.

Dr Kibble-White shook his head.

Hector and I looked at each other and shrugged.

'I give up,' I said finally.

'Me, too,' agreed Hector.

'Do you smoke, Mr Shipton?' asked Dr Kibble-White.

Mr Shipley, ignoring the mistake this time, nodded.

'How many a day?'

'Ten or so.'

'Always?'

Mr Shipley shook his head. 'Occasionally I smoke more.'

'When?' asked Dr Kibble-White.

'When I'm being sociable,' said the patient. 'My brother smokes a lot and I always smoke more when I'm with him.'

'There you are!' said Dr Kibble-White triumphantly. 'Mr Shipton gets extra-systoles when he smokes too many cigarettes. The connection between tobacco and extra systoles is quite well-known.'

'Of course,' said Hector and I meekly.

The next patient, an elderly but still attractive woman whose bed was surrounded by screens to provide her with some modesty, beamed at Dr Kibble-White and held out her hand to him. To her apparent delight, he kissed it instead of shaking it.

'This is Mrs Turner,' he said. 'She was admitted for investigations when she began to complain of chest pains three days ago.'

Hector and I said hello to her.

'She only gets chest pains when she goes to the lavatory,' said Dr Kibble-White. 'Isn't that so, Mrs Turner?' Mrs Turner nodded.

'Why do you think that might be?' asked the anaesthetist.

'Do you get short of breath?' asked Hector.

She shook her head. 'Not a lot.'

'Do you get the pain before you've used the lavatory, while you're using it or after you've used it?' asked Hector.

'It varies. Sometimes before, sometimes during and sometimes afterwards.'

That really puzzled us. There are pains which can occur at specific times when related to visits to the lavatory, but neither Hector nor I could think of anything likely to cause pain in such a vague way.

'Tell them where your lavatory is,' said Dr Kibble-White.

'Down the yard,' said Mrs Turner.

'So if it's chilly you have to go out into the cold to get there?'

She nodded.

'Any idea, gentlemen?' Dr Kibble-White asked us.

'Angina?' We both suggested at once.

'Absolutely. Mrs Turner gets angina when she goes out into the cold.'

Mrs Turner nodded and beamed at us both.

'So what's the treatment?' asked Dr Kibble-White.

'Glyceryl trinitrate?' suggested Hector.

Dr Kibble-White shook his head. 'Have an indoor lavatory built.'

With that he moved on to Mr Kendall, who grinned at me and winked.

'Hello, Mr Kendall,' said the anaesthetist. Mr Kendall shook his outstretched hand.

'How are you?'

‘Not too bad,’ said Mr Kendall. ‘But it’s come back.’

Both Dr Kibble-White and I, who knew how big the aneurysm had been, were startled when we heard that.

‘When?’ asked Dr Kibble-White.

‘An hour or so ago.’

Dr Kibble-White yanked back the bedclothes. We all peered at Mr Kendall’s right groin where a huge mountain of bandages and padding hid the wound that marked the site of his aneurysm.

‘Not that,’ he said, as Dr Kibble-White pressed it gently.

‘What, then?’ asked the anaesthetist puzzled.

‘My rash. That’s what I came in with originally.’

Sure enough his abdomen was covered with a fine red rash.

‘Why’s it come back now?’ he asked. ‘I thought it had gone for good.’

Both Hector and I stared at the anaesthetist and waited.

‘That just goes to show you that in medicine you must always be prepared for the unexpected,’ he said. ‘And,’ he added, pulling the bedclothes back and moving away from the bed, ‘always ready to ask for help when you have no idea of the diagnosis.’ He grinned at us both and disappeared, stumbling out through the twin rubber doors and colliding with a porter wheeling a trolley in the corridor.

Chapter Twenty Eight

When my week in the skin department was over I found myself allocated to the rheumatology clinic where Dr Underhill, one of the oldest physicians in the hospital, was in charge. He was a delightful gentleman who lived in an enormous country house twenty miles away from St Peter's. He commuted to work each day in an ancient but immaculate Rolls-Royce. Although he'd once defined an expert as a man with slides and a speech impediment who travels a long way to bore people, Dr Underhill was an inveterate speaker whose failing memory caused him innumerable problems. There was even a celebrated story of his being rescued from a small Spanish airport in his carpet slippers without either money or passport. Despite this, his clinical acumen was astonishingly sharp, and even Dr Kibble-White's deductive skills seemed ordinary in comparison. I can still remember vividly my first morning in his clinic.

Held in a room which had formerly been a recreation hall, it was more like a social event than anything else. Dr Underhill sat in an ancient leather chair, kept especially for him, at an extremely old and battered wooden desk containing numerous small drawers, each stocked with a supply of different forms. The rest of the hall had long since been equipped with modern tubular-steel furniture, but Dr Underhill refused to have anything to do with such monstrosities. The administrative staff had several times attempted to force his hand, but every time he'd won, and retained his right to sit on a chair he liked at a desk he found functional and comfortable.

Around him sat the patients on their uncomfortable modern chairs, waiting patiently for the great man to work his way through the clinic. The patient being examined sat on a chair on the other side of Dr Underhill's desk and the two of them, together with any medical students present, were in full view of all the other patients. If a patient needed to be examined physically he'd be allowed to go behind a screen. Dr Underhill insisted that this system allowed the waiting patients to see just why they were having to wait, and that it also gave them a certain amount of entertainment; certainly no one ever complained about it while I was at St Peter's, and no patients ever seemed to read magazines or books while waiting.

Although the clinic was described as the 'rheumatology clinic', it wasn't anything of the kind in practice. Dr Underhill's diagnostic skills were so well respected that general practitioners and even other consultants who had difficult diagnostic problems would often send their patients along to be seen by the great man.

'Now then, doctors,' Dr Underhill began as Andrew and I sat down with him, 'let's see what we've got today.' He picked up a small brass bell on his desk and rang it gently.

Since all the patients could see him and they all sat in order of their arrival at the clinic, there was no need for a complex system of communication.

The first patient lumbered forward and sat down. He was a young man with acne bursting through his aftershave lotion and greasy hair hanging over his collar.

'What is your name, sir?' asked Dr Underhill politely.

'Howell,' said the patient. He was rather surly and sharp.

'And your Christian name?'

'Robert.'

'Where do you live, Mr Howell?'

'Nugent Road.'

'The Westlea Avenue end?'

'No, the Kennington Road end.'

'So you're near the Black Bear?' said Dr Underhill whose knowledge of the area around St Peter's was legendary.

Mr Howell nodded.

'Is Mr Lazenby still the landlord there?'

'Yes, Doctor.' The patient was beginning to thaw a little. He hadn't expected to find a physician who knew so much about his home ground.

'Do you know Nugent Road?' Dr Underhill asked Andrew and me.

We both shook our heads.

'Very interesting part of the country. There used to be a private zoo there fifty or sixty years ago. The motor taxation offices now stand where the lions' den used to be.' He smiled. 'Very apt.'

'I didn't know that,' said Mr Howell.

'And Mr Busby, the gentleman who owned the zoo, ran a woodyard halfway along Kennington Road. It was burnt down during the Second World War and they built a motor components factory on the site.'

'That's where my dad works,' said Mr Howell, astonished.

'Splendid,' said Dr Underhill, nodding approval.

'I work at Simpson's, the garage on the corner of Nugent Road and Kennington Road,' said Mr Howell, offering information freely for the first time.

'Have either of you gentlemen ever worked in a garage?'

Dr Underhill asked us.

We shook our heads again.

'Fascinating places. There's something magnificent about a good piece of machinery. And there's intense satisfaction to be derived from repairing a fault in one. Is that not so, Mr Howell?'

Mr Howell, who by this time would have confirmed that the earth is flat and made of meringue if Dr Underhill had suggested it, agreed wholeheartedly.

'You young doctors should learn more about the work your patients do,' Dr Underhill told us. 'Still, I suppose these days you don't get time to interest yourself in things like that.' He shook his head slowly from side to side. 'Very sad.'

'I think you're very right on that point, sir,' said Andrew. 'I'd like to have the chance to see a bit more of the environment in which my patients are working.'

Dr Underhill raised an eyebrow and nodded twice.

'I think we get too much to learn. Too much fact and not enough opportunity to learn a little wisdom,' continued Andrew.

'That's not a viewpoint likely to endear you to the Dean,' Dr Underhill warned him. 'But I must say it's one I believe in myself. I rather feel there's too much emphasis these days on modern forms of diagnosis and therapy.' He pushed his fingers together so that his hands formed a steeple, and rested his chin on his fingertips.

'Of course,' he went on, 'my views are rather heretical, and you mustn't take them too seriously.' He sighed. 'But, for what it's worth, I do rather think that any condition for which there is a host of cures is rather likely to be incurable.' He paused again and nodded to himself thoughtfully. Then he turned to Mr Howell. 'You must think us very opinionated,' he said, 'but I do believe that false modesty is the prerogative of the minimally talented.'

Mr Howell smiled weakly.

'My dad always wanted me to go to university,' he said unexpectedly. 'But I wanted to get married.'

'Are you married, Mr Howell?'

'No. She left me to marry a bank clerk. She thought he had better prospects. Probably right, too.'

'Ah.'

'Do you really not believe in modern methods of treatment?' asked Andrew.

'I don't think that's quite what I said,' Dr Underhill corrected him carefully. 'What I did hope to imply was that much modern medicine is based on unnecessary technology. And many so-called modern discoveries are merely resurrections of existing information which has been temporarily mislaid. I don't have too much faith in modern researchers. At least, not as much as some of my colleagues.'

I couldn't help thinking that in spite of his reputation for a poor memory Dr Underhill seemed sharp enough. When he wanted to remember things, he seemed to manage well enough.

He went on to tell us that five thousand years ago the Egyptians used opiates for surgical patients and used alcohol as an antiseptic. They splinted broken bones and had sticking plasters for minor cuts and abrasions. They even used dream and music therapy, and could provide patients with artificial limbs and eyes.

'An Egyptian doctor who tried out a new treatment which failed forfeited his life,' he told us, raising both eyebrows and looking at each of us in turn. 'There are a few physicians around today who might think twice if such rules were reintroduced.'

'Absolutely,' said Andrew enthusiastically. I wondered if Dr Underhill had heard about Andrew's troubles and was trying, in a roundabout way, to let him know that his accusations weren't entirely without support.

He told us that four thousand years ago in India operatingtheatres were purified with fragrant smoke, sheets were cleaned with steam and surgical instruments boiled before being used. Hospitals were, he said, filled with peaceful music, perfume and flowers and decorated with bright colours. Surgeons had to keep their hands scrubbed, wear clean white clothes, keep their nails short and their mouths shut when they operated. The ancient Indians, he claimed, knew that germs can be carried on the breath.

He explained that the Greeks used heat, exercise and massage to relieve pain. 'The Greek women,' he said, 'even used intra-uterine contraceptive devices.'

Some of the patients waiting to see him dragged their chairs forward an inch or two so as to hear better. Dr Underhill's impromptu dissertations were famous, and many television producers and chat-show hosts had tried to persuade him to repeat them for a larger audience. They'd always failed.

'Two thousand years ago Dioscorides described digitalis, and an Arabian physician called Rhazes, who was looking for sites to build hospitals, hung pieces of meat in various likely spots, then chose the places where the meat had lasted the longest.' Dr Underhill shrugged his shoulders. 'We still use digitalis. It's one of the most important drugs we have. And we could do worse than follow the Arab's example when building our hospitals.'

'Brain operations were performed thousands of years ago, and the Egyptians used penicillin four thousand years before Fleming found it. Blood transfusions and artificial teeth are centuries old and yet we make a great fuss of the people who reintroduced them.

'There's not much new,' he said sadly. 'And most of the stuff that is really new is unlikely ever to be of much use to those of us involved in practical medicine.' He leant back suddenly, put his hands flat on the desk and smiled straight at Mr Howell.

‘I must apologise,’ he said. ‘I’ve undoubtedly been boring you.’

All three of us murmured our encouragement for him to continue, but he was adamant.

‘Which of your relatives is diabetic?’ he suddenly asked Mr Howell.

‘My father and his brother,’ replied the patient, rather surprised.

‘When diabetes occurs in young people,’ he explained, ‘there’s very often a family history of the disease.’

Neither of us had the faintest idea how he’d made the diagnosis. We just looked at him open-mouthed.

‘Take this form to the laboratory.’ Dr Underhill handed Mr Howell a piece of paper. ‘They’ll take a sample of your blood. Come back and see me in two hours’ time.’

While Mr Howell made his way towards a large green and white sign which advertised the laboratory, Andrew and I, both desperate to learn how our mentor had made his diagnosis, began to speak at once.

‘He had several large boils on his neck,’ said Dr Underhill without waiting for either of us. ‘And boils commonly occur in diabetics.’

‘Was that enough to give you the diagnosis?’ asked Andrew incredulously.

Dr Underhill shook his head. ‘He’d also lost a good deal of weight. His clothes were far too big for him, and people whose jobs are messy usually dress well when they’re not at work.’ He smiled at us. ‘I’m sure you know that diabetics often lose weight before they’re diagnosed.’

We both nodded.

‘Finally, I have to confess that when Mr Howell approached my desk I noticed white powdery stains on the insides of both of his shoes and on the lower part of his right trouser leg.’

It meant nothing to either of us. I was beginning to doubt if I could ever become even an adequate diagnostician.

Andrew must have been feeling the same. ‘What did that show?’

‘Sugar. Dried sugar. His urine is so loaded with sugar that the drops that fell on his shoes and trousers dried to leave sugary stains there.’

While Andrew and I stared at him with awe, Dr Underhill reached out and gently rang his small brass bell.

I sat with him in his clinic several times after that, and each time I learnt a tremendous amount about life, history, and the art of making a diagnosis without asking too many unnecessary questions. He was a marvellous man and, when his retirement came a few months later, thousands of his patients clubbed together to buy him a solid silver salver. In addition there were not a few contributions from his former students.

Chapter Twenty Nine

The weeks were disappearing far too quickly. The medical student of half a century ago, even of two decades ago, had much less information to cope with. Today there's not only basic anatomy and physiology; he must also know something about biochemistry, physics, engineering and computer programming. Books on paediatrics, gynaecology, surgery, obstetrics, pharmacology, orthopaedics, pathology, psychiatry, dermatology, ophthalmology, cardiology, rheumatology, haematology, gastro-enterology and even sociology have to be read. At the same time, there are ward-rounds to attend and patients to examine. In addition, the unfortunate student has to come to terms with the fact that much of what he learns will, by the time he qualifies, be out-of-date, and more will soon become so.

Meanwhile the available information must be prepared for reproduction when required. We didn't simply have to face a single major examination at the end of our studies. Along the way we were watched by our teachers and professors, and the results of their observations helped to decide whether or not we'd qualify. At any time I had to be aware that a casually asked but incorrectly answered question might well lead to a black mark against my name. And there were still the final examinations, too. The last few months of a medical education are 'stress-rich', and it's no wonder that so many students crack under the pressure and need medical help themselves.

As the final days approached, Andrew, Hector and I found ourselves joining Professor Grainger's ward-rounds as often as we could. Officially there was no longer any need for us to attend rounds at all. But we all agreed that much of medicine can't be learnt from books; solid practical experience is irreplaceable. Besides, we half-hoped that the patients who'd appear in our final examinations might come from among those in the Professor's hospital beds. It was, of course, an entirely fruitless hope; patients for examinations are always brought in specially, like poor old Mrs Kennedy.

Unfortunately, Professor Grainger's rounds weren't always as captivating as they might have been. It was after two unusually dreary sessions, during which we'd been subjected to an exceptionally long harangue about the iniquities of socialised medicine, that Andrew and I had an idea for adding a little extra spice to the procedure. We decided to run a sweepstake on the time taken for Professor Grainger to complete his morning round. It was best, we felt, to time it from the moment when he said 'Good morning' to Sister Henderson on the female medical ward, where he always began, to the moment when he said 'Goodbye' to Sister Wills on the male medical ward.

Originally we'd intended to confine the sweepstake to the students directly involved, but the idea quickly spread, and within two days more than seventy people had paid a pound and chosen the time for which they thought the round would last. Since Professor Grainger had been known to take anything from ninety minutes to three or four hours, there was plenty of opportunity for them to select different times. There were some who chose arbitrarily, and others who used more scientific approaches, checking with both ward sisters on the patients likely to attract the Professor's attention. As instigator of the event I had a slight advantage, having timed each round for a fortnight. I worked out the average length and put that down as my estimated time.

There were twenty-seven patients on the female medical ward and on the day chosen for the sweepstake, Professor Grainger had seen no less than nine of them in the first ten minutes. While Andrew and I walked as slowly as we could, he forged ahead. Andrew was in charge of the stopwatch and every half-minute or so he took it out of his coat pocket and stared at it in astonishment. The other students, none of whom had chosen a time as short as the one the Professor seemed likely to take, straggled between him and us like out-of-condition runners.

We decided that we'd have to slow him down a little, and Andrew and I were busily whispering together to try to think of questions likely to trigger off a monologue of some substance, when he stopped at the end of the bed occupied by a woman who'd been admitted only that morning.

'Have a look at this patient,' he said to me, 'and tell me whether or not you'd pass her fit for driving a motor-car.'

I looked at him without understanding.

'One of the jobs of a medical adviser,' he explained with unexpected patience, 'is to adjudicate on problems such as this. To decide whether or not his patients are fit to have children, drive motor-cars or fly aeroplanes. This is Mr Vernon,' he said to his patient as I approached her bed. 'And this,' he added, speaking to me, 'is Mrs Bennett.'

Mrs Bennett and I smiled at each other, and I picked up her hand to feel her pulse. I wasn't at all sure how to begin the examination but I thought it might be a good idea to make sure her heart was beating.

'Tell me,' said Professor Grainger rather drily, 'exactly what sort of thing are you looking for?'

'Well, I want to make sure she isn't going to have a heart attack while driving.'

'Can you do that?' he asked incredulously. 'Can you really tell which patients are going to have heart attacks?'

'Well, not exactly,' I admitted.

‘Of course you can’t. If you could, you’d be able to make a fortune working for the insurance companies. All you can do is quote the odds.’

‘Well, her pulse is fine,’ I told him. ‘Regular, seventy and of good volume.’

‘I’m sure Mrs Bennett will be pleased to hear that,’ he said — rather sarcastically, I thought. ‘What else do you think you should check on?’

‘To make sure she’s got full use of her limbs.’

‘And how are you going to do that?’

‘I’ll test her reflexes and muscle power and look at her sensory system.’

‘We don’t have that much time,’ said the Professor. ‘Can’t you think of a quicker way to make sure she’s got limbs that work?’

By this time he’d got me thoroughly confused.

‘In a few weeks’ time,’ he said, ‘you may well be a doctor. It’s hard to believe, but it seems possible. How would you check to see that this woman can move her limbs?’

‘I could see if she walks all right,’ I suggested.

‘Splendid!’ he said with a broad and artificial smile.

I asked Mrs Bennett to get out of bed and watched while she walked a few yards up the ward.

‘That’s fine,’ I said.

‘You’re happy with her legs, Mr Vernon?’

I nodded.

‘And what about her arms?’

‘They seem fine.’

‘Try them out!’ he shouted. ‘You don’t have to dance with her, but check out her arms. Make sure her coordination is good.’

I took out my patella-hammer, but the professor was clearly not prepared to wait for such niceties.

‘Catch!’ he said suddenly to Mrs Bennett, picking an apple out of her fruit-bowl and throwing it to her. She caught it neatly. ‘Seems all right to me,’ he commented. He looked around and everyone murmured agreement.

‘Right,’ he said. ‘Now you’ve tested her limbs and her heart. What else?’

‘Her eyes?’

‘Very good, Mr Vernon.’

I picked up the newspaper which lay on her bed and held it up. ‘Can you read this?’

She read out a couple of news items without any difficulty.

‘So what’s your decision?’ asked Professor Grainger. ‘Do you think she’s fit to drive?’

‘Yes.’

‘Pity. You’re wrong.’ He turned to Mrs Bennett. ‘Would you say you were fit to drive a motor-car?’ She shook her head and looked at me as if asking me to forgive her. I smiled at her.

‘Test her visual fields,’ the Professor told me.

I looked straight at her and asked her to close one eye. Then I started moving my fingers around first on the left and then on the right. I asked her to tell me when she could see them. It quickly became clear that, although her sight directly in front of her was quite good, she couldn’t see anything either to the right or to the left. She was like a horse wearing blinkers.

‘That is called tunnel vision, Mr Vernon,’ said the Professor, ‘and I think you’ll agree that Mrs Bennett would be a hazard on the roads. Goodbye for now, Mrs Bennett. We’ll try to find out during the next few days exactly what’s causing your problem.’ He smiled at her and patted her hand.

Then we moved on to the next patient. Andrew pointed to his stopwatch. The round had been in progress for nearly forty-five minutes.

We spent ten minutes discussing the various possible causes of headache in a forty-two-year-old woman before coming to the communal conclusion that the problem was probably caused by a tumour of some kind. Only then did Professor Grainger tell us that when drunk her husband had hit her with a milk-bottle.

We stood, watched and listened for twelve minutes while the professor examined a twenty-three-year-old shop assistant with the staring eyes and swollen neck typical of thyrotoxicosis, and we all examined a lump in a thirty-eight-year-old woman’s groin: it turned out to be a young hernia which ought to have been investigated on a surgical ward. That took another seventeen minutes.

The last bed was occupied by a Miss Rogers, according to the label attached to her bedside locker. The screens were pulled around her so that she was quite invisible.

‘What’s wrong with Miss Rogers?’ asked Professor Grainger after studying his watch carefully.

‘She’s got a pleural effusion,’ said Dr Taylor, his registrar, studying the case-notes which Sister Henderson had handed to him.

‘Right,’ said the Professor. ‘Then, let’s have a look.’ Ignoring a stifled cry of warning from the sister he flung back the screens. It wasn’t the wisest thing he could have done, for the poor woman was sitting perched uncomfortably on a bedpan, and her cries of dismay were far from stifled. She struggled to hide herself, but dignity's impossible in such a situation and she only made things worse. Mumbling apologies, Professor Grainger redrew the curtains and we all hurried off. The tour of the female medical ward had occupied a total of just over one and a half hours.

The first patient to be examined on the male medical ward was a boy of eleven with Gilles de la Tourette syndrome. This extraordinary disease, also known as compulsive coprolalia, is manifested in an unusual way. The sufferer simply shouts out obscenities for no apparent reason and at the top of his voice. It was for this excellent reason that the patient was here rather than on a children's ward. The poor young fellow's physical tics could be ignored. His verbal indecencies could not. Even on an adult ward, the effect on the other patients was such that some gnashed their teeth, while even the edentulous ones rubbed their gums together.

'Good morning, Roger,' said Professor Grainger, bending forward. 'How are you?'

'Fuck!' screamed young Roger, throwing his head to one side and grimacing.

'This is a nice motor-car,' said the Professor, picking up a small toy which was standing on Roger's locker.

'Shit!' shouted Roger, smiling broadly. 'Fuck!' he added after a moment.

It was difficult to imagine that these obscene utterances resulted entirely from a mental disorder. And important to remember. Professor Grainger tried for several minutes to begin a sensible conversation, but he was entirely unsuccessful.

'Pity that he wasn't in here when we had Mr Blake with us,' I heard the Professor whisper as we moved on to the next patient.

He saw the next seven patients in four minutes. I realised that my chance of winning the sweepstake was slim. The other patients in the male ward were all suffering from diseases which seemed positively mundane after poor Roger.

Andrew made a brave attempt to slow down the proceedings by introducing into the conversation the name of one of Professor Grainger's arch-rivals — a professor at another teaching hospital who'd written papers on several of the subjects Professor Grainger considered his own province. But with the stopwatch showing one hour and fifty-five minutes the Professor said goodbye to Sister Wills and waved cheerfully to the rest of us.

Once he'd disappeared, Andrew produced from his pocket the seventy slips of paper upon which were written the names of the sweepstake ticket-holders together with their estimated times. He refused to show them to anyone until we had all adjourned to the staff restaurant. Then he ceremoniously placed them on the table, one by one. Only one bore the right time, and when we read the name of the person who'd 'guessed' it no one spoke for several minutes.

The winner was Professor Grainger himself.

Chapter Thirty

Suddenly the weeks, months and years of preparation were all over. The final examination was upon us and there were no more chances to hide our ignorance. It included two written papers and several practical tests. The written parts were relatively straightforward, although they did demand the ability not only to retain knowledge but also to reproduce it. And, since doctors-to-be inevitably have illegible handwriting, it did demand a certain amount of patience on the part of both students and examiners. There were rumours that, in the past, teams of pharmacists had been brought in to help examiners decipher particularly bad cases.

The practical tests were far less predictable. There were several patients to be seen, and the examiners, who included Professor Grainger and an external examiner from another medical school, hovered in the background to make sure that the examination itself was conducted properly. It wasn't enough simply to find the right diagnosis.

We waited for this in the corridor outside the medical wards, and in a small room usually used by patients' relatives. It was so cold there that every time the door opened I expected the light to come on. I found myself standing with two other students, whom I knew only slightly despite the fact that all three of us were in the same batch. Conversation was non-existent, since we all stood reciting mnemonics and phrases designed to help us solve diagnostic puzzles.

Eventually I found myself sitting by the bedside of a woman aged about fifty. She wore a revealing black nightdress and her lips and fingernails were coated with bright red cosmetics. I introduced myself and asked her name.

'Deirdre,' she said, staring at me rather oddly. 'Deirdre Jackson.'

'Are you married?' I asked.

'I was.' And then quite unexpectedly she burst into tears. That nearly threw me off completely; when you're examining the most important patient of your life you don't want her to start crying almost before you've sat down.

'I buried him three months ago,' she told me, taking the handkerchief I offered her. Her speech was slurred and difficult to follow.

'What was wrong with him?'

'He was dead.'

I closed my eyes and I began to pray. At that moment I honestly couldn't see how I was ever going to produce a diagnosis for this woman.

'He was awful to me,' she said. As suddenly as she'd started she stopped crying and handed me back the handkerchief. 'I did everything for him,' she added. I wondered if she was drunk.

'I'm sure you did,' I agreed, hoping that I could somehow persuade her to start answering some specific questions.

'I used to work every night while he just went out drinking. And I spent two hundred pounds buying him a set of golf clubs.'

I couldn't smell any alcohol — and where would she get it in hospital?

'How old are you, Mrs Jackson?'

'He just said I'd bought them for him so that he'd go off and play golf and leave me to my lovers.'

I couldn't think of anything to say to that.

'It wasn't true. I didn't have any lovers. I was faithful to him.'

'I'm sure you were,' I said, still hoping that by agreeing with her I could win her over.

'You're very nice,' she said, putting her hand out and on top of mine. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Professor Grainger and Professor Yarborough, the visiting examiner.

Professor Yarborough was also a member of the General Medical Council, and I wondered if anyone had ever been struck off the register before they'd actually qualified.

'But you won't be able to keep it up,' she said sadly.

I tried to move my hand away.

'Oh dear,' she giggled. 'What have I said? I laid myself wide open then, didn't I?' She moved over in the bed so that her head was closer to me. 'Do what you want with me,' she whispered.

I moved back sharply, sweat pouring off my forehead.

'I'm a dreadful person,' she said suddenly starting to cry again. 'I've always been causing trouble. I'm just not worth keeping alive. Why don't you have me put to sleep?'

'Do you ever get short of breath?' I asked her. I was desperate to try to restore some resemblance of sense to the examination. I had thirty minutes in which to make a diagnosis and so far I'd used up nearly half of that and got absolutely nowhere.

'I lied to you,' she said unexpectedly. Everything about her was unpredictable. 'My husband isn't dead. He left me.'

'When did he leave you?'

‘I can’t remember.’

‘Why did he leave you?’

She just looked at me and said nothing.

‘How old are you?’ I asked again.

‘Thirty-three,’ she said. ‘I think.’ She frowned, thinking.

‘Do you have any pains?’

‘D’you think I’m going to die?’

‘Why do you ask that?’

‘I’m going to die, aren’t I?’

‘Do you feel ill?’

‘I’m dying, aren’t I?’

‘Why do you ask that, Mrs Jackson?’

But Mrs Jackson wasn’t answering any questions. She just began to cry again.

‘Hold out your hands,’ I told her. I wanted to have a look at her and see if I could find any clues. There wasn’t much to see. Her fingernails were painted a vivid red, and the nail varnish had been applied crudely, with splashes of it on her skin. I noticed that when she held her hands out they were trembling slightly.

‘Right, then, Mr Vernon,’ said a voice very quietly behind me. ‘Would you like to come with us?’ It was Professor Grainger. I stared at him horrified.

‘Your time’s up,’ he told me. ‘Would you come with us so that we can ask you about Mrs Jackson?’

Muttering my thanks to Mrs Jackson, although I wasn’t quite sure what for, I followed the Professor down the ward to a small area that had been screened off. There were three chairs there; the two examiners sat down, pointing to the third chair for me.

‘Well,’ said Professor Yarborough. ‘What did you think of her?’

‘I’m afraid I didn’t get very much from her,’ I admitted, dazed. What on earth had been wrong with the damned woman? Why hadn’t she been a bit more co-operative?

‘Well, do you think that was your fault or her fault?’ asked Professor Grainger quietly. I was astonished to see how gentle he could be.

‘I think she was confused.’

‘Did she say anything sensible?’

‘No,’ I said, more confidently now. ‘She was rather demented.’ I was astonished. Of course, that was why I hadn’t been able to get anything sensible out of her. She was demented!

‘Fine,’ said Professor Grainger, smiling at me. ‘Fine.’

I wondered if he was deliberately leading me off course.

‘She seemed depressed and paranoid,’ I went on. ‘And frightened that she was dying.’

Professor Grainger nodded encouragement. Professor Yarborough was picking at his thumbnail.

‘She made a sort of crude sexual advance,’ I said, blushing.

‘Do all patients do that to you?’

‘No!’ I said quickly.

‘So that may well be indicative of some specific aspect of her illness?’

I nodded.

‘What else did you notice about her?’

‘She had a slight tremor and her speech was slurred,’ I told him. ‘I did wonder if she was drunk.’

‘But you knew that we wouldn’t have let her drink on the ward.’

I nodded again.

‘What else did you notice?’ That was Professor Yarborough.

‘Her nail varnish was applied rather carelessly.’

‘Good,’ said Professor Grainger.

‘So what do you think the likely diagnosis is?’ asked Professor Yarborough.

‘I don’t know, sir,’ I admitted. It was getting bad again.

‘Do you know what her job was?’ I thought for a moment.

‘She said she’d been working at night to earn money,’ I remembered.

‘And what women work at night?’

‘Nurses?’

‘That’s a rather parochial view,’ smiled Professor Grainger.

‘If I asked a man on the street what sort of women worked at night, what do you think he’d say?’

‘Ladies of, er, easy virtue,’ I stammered.

‘Prostitutes!’

‘Prostitutes,’ I agreed.

‘So do you think that Mrs Jackson might have been a prostitute?’

‘Yes.’

On an ordinary ward-round I'd have expected him to make some comment about my assuming that all women who worked at night were prostitutes. But he didn't.

'Put together Mrs Jackson's former occupation and her present condition and make a guess at the diagnosis.'

'General Paralysis of the Insane?' I suggested.

'Absolutely,' he said. 'So what do you think the treatment should be?'

'Penicillin.'

'Good,' he smiled. 'And the prognosis? What do you think that is?'

'Good?'

'Well done!' he told me. 'Do you have any more questions?' he asked Professor Yarborough.

'I don't think so,' said Professor Yarborough, lifting his head for a moment to smile at me.

Realising that they'd finished with me, I lurched out of the ward.

Chapter Thirty One

The waiting after the examination was, if anything, even worse than the examination itself. A thousand times I went over everything I'd written and said. A thousand times I thought of things I could have said better or put more lucidly. A thousand times I thought about that dreadful interview with Mrs Jackson. What if they'd deliberately led me on to the wrong diagnosis? Perhaps they'd been letting me dig myself into a hole.

At least it lasted only two days. Unlike many other students, medical students don't have to suffer prolonged agonies while they wait for the examiners to make up their minds; largely perhaps because those who have in fact qualified are needed on the hospital wards.

I did much of my waiting at the local cricket ground. The weather was nice and warm — 'mainly dry with rain in places, sunny intervals and scattered showers' — and the cricket was probably good. But they might as well have been playing skittles in a thunderstorm. My mind was still on the wards. I remembered Mr and Mrs Kennedy, Ellen Richards and young Michael Jones. I thought about my first night in the casualty department three years before, and my stay at the Kintbury General. I reflected on my experiences in the operating-theatre and wondered how Mr Tucker was. And Mr Kendall, too.

Most of my fellow-students had already got jobs. All newly qualified medical students have to work for a year in hospital before being allowed to practise outside. There are six months as a house physician to be done, and six months as a house surgeon. Hector had his jobs all lined up — good ones in highly respected units. And even Andrew had his future neatly arranged. He'd marry Sara and move north. When she'd come back from Canada, Sara had, much to her father's disgust, still been determined. The wedding was fixed for a few weeks' time, and I was aware that I'd soon have to start preparing my speech.

I still had nothing planned, however. Until I'd seen my name on the noticeboard and I knew that I'd qualified, I couldn't start thinking about the future. There'd be plenty of places to work, plenty of chances to find a job. Perhaps I'd get a job at the Kintbury General if they had room.

I still wasn't even sure about my future in medicine. When I'd started at St Peter's I'd been filled with good intentions. My vocation had been for medicine, and nothing else had ever appealed to me. But somehow those five years had done something to my determination. I still found it difficult to control my feelings for the patients I looked after. I remembered them when I should have forgotten them, and I worried about them when I should have been worrying about their disorders.

The flat was filled with a mixture of gloom, despair and exhilaration. After the final day of our examinations we'd received three visits from men trying to sell us life insurance policies. They'd all been persuasive and we'd all been euphoric at having completed the examination, so we'd all bought policies we didn't really want or need. These were crazy days. Perhaps the last.

The day the results were due to be posted, I paced up and down in the drizzle, waiting for cries of excitement to tell me that the clerk had arrived armed with lists of names and two drawing-pins.

I knew I'd passed before I got anywhere near the noticeboard.

'Congratulations, Doctor!' shouted Hector. 'I'm Dr Melton.'

'Dr Vernon, I presume?' shouted someone else.

And there it was. My name on the noticeboard in between someone called Herbert Trumper and someone called June Wallace. (Who were they?) And there was Hector's name.

But Andrew wasn't on the list. He hadn't passed.

'We're going along to the bar for a drink!' shouted Hector. 'Coming?'

I shook my head, and shouted back to ask him if he'd seen Andrew. He shrugged and turned away.

Eventually I found Andrew back in the flat with Sara.

He'd sneaked out when he'd seen his name missing, and gone to see the Dean. He'd been convinced that there'd been a typing error.

'He said there was no mistake,' said Andrew. 'I've failed.'

He and Sara sat arm in arm in the kitchen comforting each other.

'Why?' I asked him. 'Have you any idea why?'

'That's what I wanted to know,' said Andrew. 'I asked him if it was because of that business over Mr Devlin. You remember that?'

I nodded.

'He said it wasn't. He said it was because of Sara.'

'Sara!'

He nodded. A tear started to run down his cheek. He brushed it away angrily.

'But why Sara?'

'She was a patient when I met her. The Dean said I could get into trouble for having a non-professional relationship with a patient. He said I could stay on and take my finals again next year, but they'd have to be convinced that Sara and I weren't still seeing each other.'

'That's crazy! They can't do that!'

‘They have,’ he said simply.

‘But I could understand it if they’d thrown you out for that business over Mr Devlin,’ I said. ‘They were offended about that. But what has Sara and you got to do with your ability to practise medicine?’

‘I think it’s just an excuse. I don’t think they’ll ever pass me.’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘We’re going away for a couple of days. Going to try to work things out. Decide what to do.’

‘But did you pass the examination?’

‘The Dean said it didn’t matter whether I had or not. He said they could still fail me even if I had. He wouldn’t tell me.’

‘Could Sara’s father have been in touch with them?’

Sara shook her head. ‘He wouldn’t do that.’ She was crying. ‘Not even he would do that.’

I helped Andrew pack and promised to send on his things from his locker at the medical school. Then I walked to the station with them. When they’d gone I sat on a bench and just stared at the station clock. I was a doctor; I’d just qualified, and I didn’t feel in the slightest bit happy. Where was the joy I ought to feel?

After a while I made my way back to school. There was an impromptu party going on in the restaurant at St Peter’s. Several dozen students and their girlfriends, now doctors and their young ladies, were dancing and singing together. In a corner someone was crying with happiness; someone else was vomiting endlessly. Half a dozen people were carrying Hector around and threatening to throw him into a bath of cold water.

‘My watch!’ he shouted, struggling to get free.

They let him down for a moment; he took off his watch and with drunken deliberation put it in his pocket. ‘There you are,’ he shouted. ‘Now do your worst.’ He saw me and waved furiously until they picked him up and took him off to be ducked.

Someone bumped into me and spilt beer over my trousers. A nurse I didn’t know who’d come to the party in her uniform put her arms round my neck and told me to dance with her.

Somehow, however, I just wasn’t in the mood for the festivities. It was all something of an anticlimax. Being a doctor wasn’t a bit like I’d thought it would be. I’d finally entered the green pastures; it felt more as if I’d just walked the plank.

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HOW TO CONQUER ARTHRITIS

VERNON COLEMAN

HOW TO CONQUER ARTHRITIS

Vernon Coleman

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Dr Vernon Coleman MB ChB DSc is a registered and licensed GP and is the author of international bestsellers such as Bodypower and How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You. He has published over 100 books which have been translated into 24 languages and have sold over two million print copies in the UK alone. For a list of his books, and for several hundred free articles, please visit www.vernoncoleman.com

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You must consult your doctor before changing your diet or beginning any exercise programme.

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CHAPTER ONE: WHAT IS ARTHRITIS?

Introduction

The word ‘arthritis’ is often used as though it referred to a single disease. But the word ‘arthritis’ is about as useful and as specific as the word ‘infection’. If your doctor tells you that you have arthritis he is simply telling you that you have a disease in which your joints are inflamed.

Just as there are over a hundred different types of infection so there are over a hundred different types of arthritis which differ enormously in the speed with which they develop, the length of time they last and the amount of damage and crippling that they do. Rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis are both types of arthritis but they are as different to one another as are malaria and tuberculosis – which are both types of infection. Arthritis is so common that most of us will suffer from at least one sort of it at least once in our lives. And because most varieties of arthritis are incurable once the disease has developed it often lasts for life.

Few diseases affect as many people as the diseases in the arthritis group; few cause as much pain, discomfort and disablement and few are the subject of so many myths and so much misunderstanding. The longer you live the more likely you are to suffer from arthritis. It doesn’t matter whether you have an active life or a quiet life – whatever sort of life you lead there will be a type of arthritis that will, sooner or later, affect you to some degree or another.

That is, as they say, the ‘bad news’.

The ‘good news’ is that although arthritic diseases are usually incurable the symptoms can usually be controlled. Arthritic diseases do not usually kill and if treated with care and respect it is usually possible to minimise the amount of damage that is done and to control the crippling and the pain.

Just a few years ago arthritis sufferers faced a lifetime of disablement and more or less constant pain. We still haven’t found a ‘cure’ for arthritis – any more than we have found a ‘cure’ for infection – but we have acquired a good deal of information which should help you to stop your joints being destroyed, to relieve joint pain and stiffness, to restore lost joint function and to slow down – or even halt – the rate at which the arthritis spreads. Some arthritis treatments are, it is true, potentially hazardous. But many millions of patients around the world have been treated safely and effectively and have learned how to combat their disease.

Whether your arthritis has been caused by ageing, strain, wear and tear, an infection with a bacteria or a virus, an injury, a metabolic or a chemical abnormality, a hormonal abnormality or an immune system problem there will be things that you can do to protect yourself, to maintain your mobility and to keep your pain and stiffness to a minimum.

If the symptoms of arthritis are left untreated – or are treated half-heartedly – then they will invariably get worse. The damage that is done may eventually be irreparable. But if, on the other hand, treatment is initiated early and with enthusiasm then the outlook can be greatly improved.

There are nearly two hundred different joints in an average human body. Your joints make it possible for you to move – to walk, run, skip and to wave your arms around – they absorb sudden shocks (such as when you jump up in the air and then land on a hard surface). Joints can repair themselves when they are injured or damaged and they can replenish their own supplies of synovial – or lubricating – fluid.

Each joint consists of two opposing bones and on the end of each bone there is a layer of white, smooth, gristle like material called cartilage which is covered with a capsule and kept moist with a special lubricating fluid. Tendons attached to the two opposing bones help to hold the joint in position.

Although your joints can protect themselves, and even repair themselves, there are times when things go wrong. Joints, like every other part of your body, can become diseased, injured or infected. Indeed, there are well over one hundred different joint diseases already identified and the chances are that there are quite a few more still unidentified.

The diseases which affect joints fall into six basic categories.

First, there are the inflammatory joint disorders in which the synovial membrane (which is responsible for producing the synovial fluid) becomes red, thick and swollen. The result is that the whole joint becomes red, painful and swollen – and also feels hot. If the disease is allowed to continue uncontrolled the joint will eventually be destroyed. The commonest disorder in this category is rheumatoid arthritis.

Second, there are the types of disease caused by ‘wear and tear’ in which the cartilage covering the end of the bones wears away, leaving bone rubbing on bone. In these diseases – known as ‘degenerative’ the joints involved gradually becomes stiff, painful and difficult to move. The commonest disorder in this category is undoubtedly osteoarthritis although the disease itself is ill-named for it is not, as its name suggests, an inflammatory disease at all. (The suffix -itis suggests an inflammatory disease, as in tonsillitis and appendicitis). Strictly speaking osteoarthritis should be called ‘osteoarthrosis’ but to avoid confusion I will use the more common name throughout this book. Because it is usually caused by ‘wear and tear’ osteoarthritis is more common among elderly people.

Third, there is the type of arthritis in which the inflammation occurs not in or around the synovial membrane (as it does in rheumatoid arthritis) but in the area where the ligaments and tendons join the bones. Diseases where the ligaments or tendons are involved make up the third group of arthritis disorders and the best-known serious disease in this category is probably ankylosing spondylitis which is, after rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis, the third commonest type of arthritis. Disorders in this general category are usually known as 'periarticular'. Tennis elbow (in which the insertion of the tendon into the bone is damaged) and housemaid's knee (in which a bursa at the knee joint is damaged and swollen) are other diseases which fall within this group.

Fourth, there are some types of joint disease in which the problems are caused by the development of crystals within the joint. The best-known disease in this category is undoubtedly gout – the well-known pains associated with the disease are caused by the formation of uric acid crystals in the joint space.

Fifth, there are some types of arthritis known as 'infective'. In this category organisms such as bacteria or viruses get into the joints. The symptoms of infective arthritis can develop quite quickly and the pain can be extremely severe.

The sixth and final type of arthritic disease does not involve the bones or even the joints directly but the muscles which surround a joint. It is not, therefore, a true form of arthritis at all. When muscles are inflamed or strained the resulting symptoms can be very similar to arthritis of the joint itself. Many types of backache fall into this category. Fibrositis – also known as 'muscular rheumatism' – falls into this category and can affect several parts of the body at once.

How your joints are designed

Bones are the framework upon which the rest of your body is built. They have to be strong (bone is one of the toughest and most resilient materials known to man) and rigid. If your bones bent every time you put your weight on them you would collapse in an untidy heap every time you tried to walk. Your spine is the central part of your skeleton; your skull is balanced on top of it and your arms and legs are attached to it. Although they are immensely strong bones are made of living tissue – they have a blood supply just like other parts of your body – and they can change their shape if your body is short of essential minerals such as calcium or if there is a constant need for extra strength in one particular area.

Joints are the junctions between bones and they too are essential for without them you would be unable to bend or to move around at all.

* The bones of your upper and lower leg give your legs basic strength but it is your hip, knee and ankle joints which enable you to walk, run, skip and hop.

* Your shoulder, elbow and wrist joints enable you to move your arms about.

* The small joints in your hand enable you to pick up and hold a pen, a paintbrush or a knife and fork.

* The joints between your skull and the top of your spine enable you to nod and shake your head and to turn it from side to side.

* The intervertebral joints within your spine enable you to bend your back.

Muscles which are attached to your bones produce movement by contracting (and then relaxing again) but it is your joints which make all movement possible. Without your joints your body would have the flexibility and mobility of a table. Without joints your arms and legs would simply be stuck stiffly to your sides of your trunk and your spine would be completely rigid. Your bones are, of course, quite solid. And if your joints simply consisted of the ends of two bones resting on one another every movement you made would be stiff, painful and noisy. When you ran, the shock of hitting the ground would be transmitted up through every bone and joint in your body. The friction between the bones of your lower leg and the bones of your upper leg would be so great that every movement of your knee would be slow and difficult.

There are three types of joint in your body: synovial, fibrous and cartilaginous.

Synovial joints:

In order to make your joints move more comfortably and to reduce the amount of friction between the bones in a joint the end of each bone is covered with a layer of cartilage; a tough, white, gristly substance which allows the bone ends to move smoothly on one another and which also acts as an effective shock absorber. There is less friction between two cartilaginous surfaces than there is between an ice skate and a skating rink! Unlike bone and muscle (both of which can repair themselves very well) cartilage wears out. It can also be damaged by accidental injury.

Around the outside of each joint there is a membrane – called the synovium – which regularly produces a small amount of a sticky substance called synovial fluid. This specially prepared fluid helps to keep the cartilage in good condition and also acts as a lubricating fluid. If the synovial membrane becomes inflamed it may start to produce too much synovial fluid or to produce synovial fluid of the wrong consistency.

Covering the membrane or synovium is the joint capsule which is thicker and tougher than the membrane and which is designed to seal and protect the joint. In larger joints which have to carry a lot of weight and are under a great deal of pressure (for example the knee joint) the capsule contains thicker fibres called ligaments which help to give the joint extra stability and to restrict and control the amount of movement.

The muscles which control the movement of your body are attached to your bones by tendons. The tendons are usually attached to the end of the bones so that they can get the maximum amount of leverage. Tendons are fairly easily damaged – particularly at the point where they are attached to bone because it is here that they are at their thinnest. Sudden or difficult movements can tear a tendon. When a tendon runs very close to a joint or bone and there is a danger of the two rubbing against one another there will probably be a small bursa – or fluid filled sac – to help reduce the amount of friction and to make movement easier. If a bursa becomes inflamed it may produce too much fluid and become swollen.

Fibrous joints:

Not all joints need the full range of movement provided by a synovial membrane, synovial fluid and joint capsule. Sometimes a joint needs to be much stiffer and tougher. The joints between your teeth and the sockets in which your teeth rest, for example, do not need much in the way of movement but do need to be strong. Similarly, at the bottom end of the bones in your lower leg the joint between your tibia and fibula doesn't need any movement. That too is a fibrous joint. Fibrous joints allow no appreciable movement and the bones are fixed together by fibrous tissue.

Cartilaginous joints:

These joints are a half way house between synovial joints and fibrous joints. They allow a small amount of movement but are very strong and are, compared to such joints as the knee, elbow and hip, immobile. The bones of your spine – the intervertebral bodies – are separated by intervertebral discs which act as shock absorbers.

The amount of movement between two intervertebral bones is very small but when added together all the disc-bone joints give your spine a considerable amount of movement without losing much strength.

Your Knees and Elbows: Synovial Hinge Joints

Joints which only allow one main type of movement are called ‘hinge joints’ because they are like hinges! There may, in addition, be some rotational movement as well but this is not a property of the hinge joint itself. (See the elbow joint below).

Your knees

Each knee joint connects two of the strongest long bones in your body – a femur and a tibia. Although the articular surfaces of these two bones do not fit particularly well together the ligaments and muscles around the knee are very strong and make the joint extremely stable. The patella is a small, triangular, flat shaped bone which sits inside the tendon belonging to the quadriceps muscle of the thigh and has two main functions: it minimises the amount of friction between the quadriceps tendon and the lower end of the femur and it provides the front of the knee with some protection from ‘head on’ injury. The patella is not particularly important and if it is damaged it can be removed without affecting the knee very much at all.

Your elbows

Each elbow joint connects the two bones of the forearm – the radius and the ulna – with the humerus, the bone of the upper arm. Your ability to turn your hand over (so that it is either palm upwards or palm downwards) is due to the existence of joints between the radius and the ulna bones.

Your Shoulders And Hips: Ball And Socket Joints

Joints which allow a wide range of movement are called ‘ball and socket’ joints because the end of one bone, which is shaped like a ball, fits into the end of the other.

Your shoulders

Your shoulders are the most mobile joints in your body. The head of the humerus is ball shaped and it fits into a cavity in the scapula bone. The cavity in the scapula is shallow and it is this shallowness which gives the elbow joint its exceptional mobility.

Your hips

The femur is similar in shape to the humerus – the bone of the upper arm – but it is bigger and stronger and the ball of bone on its upper end has a neck – usually about two inches long (5 cm) – which enables the ball to fit snugly inside the acetabulum (a deep cuplike cavity) of the hip bone.

Your Spine: A Series of Cartilaginous Joints

Your spine is strong enough to withstand pressures of several hundred pounds and is so flexible that it can be bent to form two thirds of a circle. However, the intricate system of muscles and tendons and ligaments which keep the whole thing together can easily be damaged or disrupted in all sorts of ways. The spine acts as a scaffolding for the whole of the body with the skull, ribs, pelvis and limbs all attached to it. Through its middle runs the extremely delicate spinal cord – so delicate that even a relatively slight physical abnormality can cause awful pains.

Your spine consists of 26 solid bones. It is these bones which give the back its strength. But if the spine only consisted of bone then you wouldn't be able to bend to tie up your shoe laces or to pick things up off the floor. So between the bones there are 23 intervertebral discs which act as bendy shock absorbers.

In addition to giving your spine strength the vertebrae also provide essential protection for your spinal cord – your body's biggest nerve. The spinal cord carries impulses from the brain to the arms, legs and body and then carries messages back from those areas to keep the brain informed. Hundreds of individual nerves connect the spinal cord to the various parts of the human body. If your spinal cord is damaged then you will be paralysed – the precise nature of the paralysis depending on the place where your spinal cord is damaged.

The vertebrae

The top part of your spine – the neck region – consists of seven bones called the cervical vertebrae. Below them – making the spinal framework for the chest – are the twelve bones which are called the thoracic vertebrae. Next, there are the five bones of the lower back – called the lumbar vertebrae. The sacrum (which although it consists of five sacral vertebrae is usually regarded as one bone since the five vertebrae are fixed or fused together) comes next and right at the bottom there are the four tiny vertebrae of the coccyx. Since these are usually joined together as well they are often regarded as one bone.

Altogether, then, the spine consists of a grand total of 33 bones. But because five of these bones are joined together to form the sacrum and another four are joined together to form the coccyx anatomists usually regard the spine as consisting of 26 bones. The bones at the top and the bottom of the spine – the cervical vertebrae and the bones of the coccyx – are the smallest. The largest bones in the spine are the ones which make up the sacrum and the bones of the lumbar region.

When people draw skeletons – with all the bones of the spine balanced one on top of the other – they usually draw the spine as being fairly straight. But it isn't. In fact, in order to help it cope with all the stresses and strains of normal everyday life your spine has no less than four curves. Right at the very top of the spine the small bones of the neck (which are called the cervical vertebrae) curve forwards. Below this curve the thoracic vertebrae – the bones which make up the spine in the chest region – curve backwards. Next, there is the lumbar spine which curves forwards again. And finally, there are the sacrum and the coccyx which curve backwards.

The bones in your spine differ in size but despite that, the bones do show a number of similarities. The back part of each vertebra, called the neural arch, is the most complicated part of each bone. There is a hole through the middle of each neural arch. The spinal cord runs through the holes in all the neural arches. There are several pieces of bone sticking out from the neural arch:

* From the back of each neural arch spinous processes stick out. These are the bony projections that you can feel if you touch your spine.
* A bony projection called an 'inferior articular process' points down
* A bony projection called a 'superior articular process' points up
* From each side of every neural arch a 'transverse process' projects
* There is a solid piece of bone called the 'body' at the front of each vertebra.

The spinal joints

Amazingly, the bones in the spine are joined together by a total of nearly one hundred and fifty joints. Every single one of these joints helps to hold the spinal bones together firmly to create the apparently 'solid' spine. These one hundred and fifty joints make your spine strong.

Arthritis can affect any of these joints and so the possibilities for pain and stiffness in the spine are clearly tremendous.

Every one of the twenty six vertebrae which make up the spine is connected to the vertebrae above it and the vertebra below it. For example, consider the situation of the tenth thoracic vertebra. The bottom part of this vertebra – the inferior articular process – fits neatly and precisely onto the superior articular process of the vertebra below – in this case the eleventh thoracic vertebra. The top part of this vertebra – the superior articular process – fits just as neatly and just as precisely onto the inferior articular process of the vertebra above – in this case the ninth thoracic vertebra. At the very bottom of the spine the sacrum – made up of the sacral bones – is joined to the hip bones. At the top of the spine the skull rests on the first cervical vertebra. The thoracic vertebrae help to provide a solid foundation for the twelve ribs which protect the heart and lungs and form the foundation of the chest wall.

The disks between the bones

Unless your spine is really badly affected by arthritis it will still be bendable. And a perfectly healthy spine is amazing – it can be bent round in a quite remarkable way.

Clearly, if the spine consisted solely of bone this would be impossible. A solid spine – consisting of vertebrae fixed together – would not bend. It is the shape of the bones and the existence of the disks in between the bones which make the bending of the spine possible. The intervertebral disks which fit in between the individual vertebrae and which are known as the spine's shock absorbers help to make sure that your spine can bend and move in all sorts of different directions without a terrible crunching of bone on bone.

On the outside of each intervertebral disk there is a strong, fibrous case which is called the annular fibrosus. Inside that there is a soft very squashy interior called the nucleus pulposus. The nucleus pulposus is strengthened with fibre. The disks are particularly squashy because they are made up mainly of fluid – they have no blood and a very rudimentary nerve supply.

At night when you lie down in bed the intervertebral disks in your spine will expand and get larger as they fill up with food and with water. During the day, however, as you walk about, the vertebrae will compress the disks in between them and some of the fluid will be squeezed out. Because of this squeezing and compressing we tend to lose around half an inch (1.3cm) in height during the daytime. At night, when our disks can expand again, we regain our lost height.

Although the intervertebral disks play the most important part in giving the spine its movement the shape of the vertebrae themselves also has a part to play. For example, the first cervical vertebra allows your head to tilt sideways and to nod forwards and backwards; the second cervical vertebra (the one beneath it) allows your head to turn to the right and to the left and the other bones in the spine also allow you to move your spine a little.

Ligaments in the spine

The 150 joints which help to make up the spine are protected and given added strength by the protection of a huge number of ligaments; strong, fibrous and slightly elastic bands of tissue which hold the two pieces of bone together wherever a joint is formed. Because of the way the fibres which make up a ligament run the ligaments help to ensure that each joint is held firmly and is able to move properly.

Can Joints Be Made More Flexible?

The range of movement in any particular joint depends upon the shape of the bones, the design of the joint and the restricting actions of ligaments and muscles. You cannot do anything much about the design of the joint (in other words you can't turn a 'hinge' joint into a 'ball and socket' joint) and you can't deliberately alter the shape of the bones in a particular joint but, by training, you modify the restraining action of the ligaments and muscles which control the amount of movement in a joint. Professional acrobats, gymnasts and dancers get a tremendous amount of flexibility in their joints but they usually start their training very early in life and they always train hard for long periods.

Why Are Some People Double Jointed?

Individuals who have an unusual amount of movement in a joint are often described as ‘double jointed’. ‘Double joints’ are common in the joints of the hand. The implication is that the extra amount of movement they get is due to the fact that they have two joints or one unusually shaped joint. In fact, none of this is true. People who seem to be double jointed are usually merely able to dislocate a particular joint. There is usually an audible click as the joint dislocates. Occasionally, and more rarely, people who have an unusual amount of movement in a joint may suffer from exceptionally lax ligaments, abnormal ligament or muscle attachments or bony malformations.

Why Do Some Joints Make A Noise?

The clicking of joints can be caused by tendons or ligaments which slip, by joints dislocating or even by small bubbles of gas moving about. When a joint makes a grating noise it is usually because the cartilage has worn down and the underlying bones are rubbing on one another. Grating noises are usually painful but clicking noises are often completely painless.

CHAPTER TWO: RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS

Introduction

There is little doubt that rheumatoid arthritis is one of the commonest of all crippling, long term diseases. Although it usually affects the smaller joints – particularly those of the hands and wrists and feet – it can also affect the joints of the spine. However, when this happens the spine is usually the last part of the body to be affected and by then other joints will probably be affected. The neck is usually the first part of the spine to be involved. The initial symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis are usually pain, tenderness, swelling and stiffness of the joints that are affected. These symptoms, which can arrive quite suddenly or which may develop slowly over a lengthy period of time, are nearly always worst first thing in the morning. Many joints can be affected and sufferers who have rheumatoid arthritis badly may complain that their whole bodies are affected. The pain and aching is often also accompanied by a general feeling of tiredness, listlessness and of being run down. The symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis are unusual in that they may sometimes disappear almost completely without any warning – though, sadly, they usually come back again.

What Are The Causes of Rheumatoid Arthritis?

There is no known single cause of rheumatoid arthritis. Instead it seems likely that a number of different factors are responsible for the development of rheumatoid arthritis.

1. Infection

It is possible that the development of the disease may be triggered by a virus (see auto-immune reaction below).

2. Inherited factors

Some genes transmitted from generation to generation seem to determine susceptibility to rheumatoid arthritis (i.e. whether or not you get it) while others determine the extent to which the disease develops (i.e. how badly you get it).

3. Food

It seems possible that certain types of food may make rheumatoid arthritis more likely. Meat – and meat products – may be a cause of rheumatoid arthritis. I will explain later on what sort of diet you should follow in order to reduce your chances of getting rheumatoid arthritis and in order to minimise your symptoms if you have already got rheumatoid arthritis.

4. Auto-immune reaction

Normally, your immune system helps to protect you against attack from infectious diseases. But because the changes which take place inside the joints when rheumatoid arthritis develops are similar to the changes which take part in other parts of the body when antibodies produced by the human body are fighting an infection many experts now believe that under some circumstances your body’s immune system may be triggered to attack your joints – and in particular the lining of the joints – producing an inflammation of the synovial membrane which causes the well known symptoms of the disease. One of the blood tests commonly done to confirm the presence of rheumatoid arthritis in joints checks for a special protein in the blood stream. This special protein is an antibody – similar to the antibodies which your body produces when it overcomes an infection such as influenza or measles. No one really understands yet exactly how or why your body’s immune defence system should attack the linings of your joints (it seems such a silly and pointless thing to do). But it may be nothing more complicated than a simple case of mistaken identity.

Normally, cells called macrophages wander around your body looking for foreign looking cells. If they find any they produce a chemical signal which calls for help. Within a short space of time the foreign looking cells will be surrounded by cells called ‘killer lymphocytes’ which grab foreign cells and either poison them to death or eat them alive. This is, in principle, how your body’s immune defence system works.

Neither the macrophages nor the ‘killer lymphocytes’ are usually triggered into action by your body’s own cells. However, if any of your body’s own cells have become damaged and have lost their identifying marks then your ‘killer lymphocytes’ will deal with them just as effectively and as unsympathetically as they will deal with foreign viruses, bacteria or fungi.

In rheumatoid arthritis your macrophages and ‘killer lymphocytes’ may be triggered into action by the fact that certain cells in your body – notably the cells of the synovial membranes in your joints – have changed in some way. It is thought that this is where the virus may come into play for it is possible that a virus that you have picked up may change your synovial membrane in some slight way so that it looks ‘foreign’ to your macrophages and ‘killer lymphocytes’.

Who Gets Rheumatoid Arthritis?

Rheumatoid arthritis is much commoner in women than in men. For every two men who get the disease there are usually four or five female sufferers. This difference may be due to some genetic factor carried on the female sex chromosomes. Rheumatoid arthritis also runs in families and if your parents, grandparents or brothers or sisters have or had rheumatoid arthritis then your chances of suffering from the disease are increased. Although the disease can start at any age it usually affects people between the ages of thirty and sixty, most commonly starting in early adulthood or early middle age. Rheumatoid arthritis has been found in countries all over the world and it affects members of all races but it is more common – and tends to be more severe – among the inhabitants of Northern Europe. No one really knows whether this is due to the climate, to genetic factors or to a localised infection.

How Common is Rheumatoid Arthritis?

It is difficult to say how common the disease is because not all sufferers seek medical help. Obviously, some patients have far more severe symptoms than others and they will nearly all visit their doctor for advice. However, patients with mild symptoms are likely to struggle on without visiting the doctor. Some will manage without any treatment at all while others will treat themselves or visit alternative medical practitioners. Severe rheumatoid arthritis probably affects about one in every two hundred people (with an even smaller percentage being affected so much that they become crippled) whereas mild rheumatoid arthritis probably affects about one in every fifty people.

What Happens To The Joints In Rheumatoid Arthritis?

The normal job of the synovium – the membrane which covers the joint – is to produce a constant supply of synovial fluid, the oily substance which lubricates, moistens and feeds the cartilage on the ends of the two opposing bones. It is the cartilages which take all the pressure when a joint is in action and it is the synovial fluid which ensures that the cartilages stay in good condition. When rheumatoid arthritis develops and the synovial membrane becomes inflamed the first thing that happens is that the membrane swells up as the blood vessels supplying it open up to bring more 'killer' blood cells into the area.

If you have an infected spot on your skin then the blood vessels supplying that area will open up in an attempt to take more white blood cells to the area to help tackle the infection. Your body's internal defence systems rely on your blood supply to get to trouble spots and when and wherever there is a problem the localised blood vessels open up to ensure that the local blood supply is increased to the absolute maximum. This is exactly what happens to the synovium in an inflamed joint that has rheumatoid arthritis. Your body assumes that there must be some external agent present (a bacteria, virus or some other foreign organism) causing the inflammation and so it sends teams of specialist 'killer' blood cells to the area to try to clear up the problem.

In addition to becoming swollen the synovium also starts to go red and to feel hot as the blood flow increases. Because the synovium gets its nourishment from its blood supply the increased flow means that it starts to over-produce synovial fluid and within a relatively short time the whole joint will become swollen with fluid and painful to touch or to move. Instead of making movement easier the extra synovial fluid makes movement more difficult than ever. Occasionally, particularly in the knee joint, the excess fluid inside the joint can build up such a high pressure that it bursts the joint capsule and escapes into the muscles of the calf.

The joint will by now be showing all the typical symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis: it will be swollen, it will feel hot to the touch, it will look red and it will be stiff and painful to move. Meanwhile, because the inflammation is still there, your body assumes that the underlying infection which it wrongly believes has caused the inflammation is simply proving too powerful and too resistant to the 'killer' cells in your blood supply. So your body responds by increasing the flow of blood still further – pumping ever increasing amounts of blood into the tissues and making things worse rather than better. All this means that the synovium just gets bigger and bigger and grows more and more, gradually spreading over more and more of the inside of the joint.

Eventually, the expanding synovium will start to damage the cartilage – the essential load bearing surface on the ends of the opposing bones of the joint. Instead of being nice and slippery and making the joint move easily and smoothly the cartilage will become rough and pitted and will make movement difficult and uncomfortable. In advanced rheumatoid arthritis the joints which are affected will become deformed as well as swollen and stiff. If the tendons and bursae which lie over the joint are also affected by the inflammation then they will be damaged in much the same sort of way and the area around the joint will become tender to the touch and difficult to move.

One of the tragedies of rheumatoid arthritis is undoubtedly the fact that the problems which develop are caused by the body's own defence mechanisms mistakenly diagnosing a case of mild inflammation as being caused by an underlying infection; overreacting and then pumping unwanted blood cells into the area in such huge quantities that the joint becomes permanently diseased. It is, I suppose, rather like the fire brigade turning out to a small fire and then causing far more damage with their high pressure water hoses than has been caused by the flames.

Normally, inflammation is a useful trigger. It encourages your body's own defence mechanisms to act quickly and decisively, limiting the amount of damage, getting rid of the cause of the inflammation and encouraging the healing process. As soon as it is clear that the underlying cause of the inflammation has been dealt with your body will stop sending in 'killer' blood cells. But in rheumatoid arthritis the inflammation doesn't go away and it is your body's reaction rather than the inflammation itself that does most of the damage. The consequences can be long lasting and, if untreated, permanently disabling.

Rheumatoid Arthritis Does Not Just Affect Your Joints

Rheumatoid arthritis is primarily a disease of the joints. It causes stiffness, swelling, tenderness and pain in and around the joints.

But if you are a sufferer it will not only be your joints which will be affected. Because the inflammation inside your joint (or joints) triggers an auto-immune reaction and inspires your body to send an increased blood supply into the joints which are involved the disease will affect your health in many other ways. Patients who suffer from rheumatoid arthritis often complain that they feel tired, easily exhausted, irritable and edgy. Most victims claim that they also have vague aches and pains in many different parts of their bodies. It is quite common for rheumatoid arthritis sufferers to complain that they constantly feel as though they have the 'flu. Many have night sweats and quite a few find that they lose weight (though this can be an advantage for as I will show later losing excess weight can help reduce the severity of the symptoms associated with arthritis).

Many people with rheumatoid arthritis show a slight rise in body temperature (partly because of the increased blood flow and partly because your body knows that one of the best ways to combat an infection – which it thinks you have) is by increasing your general body temperature. And because the blood system is concentrating on producing and disseminating 'killer' blood cells there may be a shortage of red cells – the sort which normally carry oxygen to the tissues. This shortage of red blood cells can lead to anaemia and to breathlessness and tiredness.

Finally, although it is usually the joints – and particularly the synovial membranes – which are affected by the inflammation associated with rheumatoid arthritis that same inflammation can sometimes affect other parts of the body. The skin, kidneys, eyes, nerves, heart, lungs and tendons can all be affected by inflammation occasionally and when this happens all sorts of other symptoms can develop. Bones may become thin and easily broken, lungs may be scarred and the skin may be ulcerated.

How Quickly Does Rheumatoid Arthritis Develop?

Very occasionally rheumatoid arthritis will start suddenly. It is possible for someone to go to bed feeling fit and perfectly healthy and to wake up the next morning with all the symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis in one or more joints. But it is much more common for the disease to develop slowly over a period of weeks or even months. The disease usually starts in the joints of either the hands or the feet. In a typical patient the joints of the fingers will become stiff and swollen and painful to move. Because it hurts to move the joints the patient will probably want to rest them as much as possible. And so the muscles will become weak and will start to shrink. The stiffness in joints which are affected by rheumatoid arthritis is usually worst first thing in the morning. Gradually, as the pain and stiffness in the small joints gets worse and worse so the generalised symptoms of tiredness and weakness will also develop.

Which Joints Are Affected?

Any joint in the body that contains a synovial membrane can develop rheumatoid arthritis. The small joints of the hands and feet are the ones most commonly affected to begin with. The joints in the middle of the fingers and at the bases of the fingers are probably the ones which are affected most frequently. Next, usually come the wrists and the knees. The ankles, elbows, shoulders and hips are affected less frequently.

Rheumatoid Arthritis Can Last A Long Time – But Usually Comes And Goes

The ‘bad news’ is that once rheumatoid arthritis has started to develop it will usually last for many years before burning itself out and ceasing to cause any more damage. The ‘good news’ is that the disease comes and goes and most sufferers notice that their symptoms quieten down after a year or two – although they may flare up occasionally. During an ‘active’ phase of the disease patients usually feel terrible in themselves and invariably wake up feeling stiff. Joints which are affected have to be loosened slowly and painfully and they often begin to get stiff and painful again in the late afternoon or early evening. Most sufferers who have ‘active’ rheumatoid arthritis have to do things slowly. Some patients have noticed that ‘active’ phases of their rheumatoid arthritis can be triggered by certain types of food or by doing too much. But others find it quite impossible to spot any factor as being responsible for a painful attack. During an ‘active’ phase the inflamed synovium usually does damage to the inside of the joint and so afterwards the amount of movement in the joint will probably be slightly reduced. The hands, which have small and apparently vulnerable joints, seem to suffer most and to show the most dramatic long term changes.

After a few years rheumatoid arthritis usually begins to settle down and the ‘active’ phases become less and less common. In some patients this ‘settling down’ occurs after just a year or two. In others it can take twenty or thirty years. Even if your arthritis has been ‘active’ for many, many years you should never give up hope that it will one day become ‘inactive’. If your arthritis has been ‘active’ for many years your joints may have been permanently damaged and disfigured by the time it settles down.

The joints of the hands – which often look worst affected and which may be so badly damaged that fine movements are difficult or even impossible – are usually least painful in the chronic or non active stages of the disease. In contrast, the joints of the hips and knees – which have to carry a lot of weight – may not show a great deal of deformity but may be constantly painful.

Tendons Can Be Affected Too

Although rheumatoid arthritis is primarily a joint disease it can sometimes affect the tendons by which muscles are attached to the bones which make up a joint. Tendons are thin and rather cord like and when a muscle contracts the tendon is used to pull the bone into place. Inevitably, the pressure on and in the tendon can be very high.

Tendons can be affected in two ways.

First, tendons themselves may develop patches of inflammation. When this happens a lump or nodule may develop inside or on top of the tendon. Normally, tendons slide in and out of place quite smoothly and easily – often travelling through fairly close fitting tunnels so that they do not interfere with (or get troubled by) other tissues. But when a nodule develops on a tendon the tendon may have difficulty in sliding in and out of its tunnel. To begin with the tendon may move in and out of position with an audible 'click' but if the lump gets big enough the tendon will eventually start to stick in one position. For a while it may be possible to force the lumpy tendon through its tunnel but if the lump gets big enough the tendon will stick permanently in one position.

Second, because the narrow tissue tunnels through which many tendons pass are lined with exactly the same sort of synovial membrane as that which lines and lubricates the inside of the joint the inflammation of rheumatoid arthritis may cause the inside of the tunnel to become swollen. The result will be that the tunnel becomes narrower and stickier – and so, not surprisingly, the tendon will tend to stick in one position. If the tendon remains stuck in one position for long enough there is a real danger that the inflamed synovial membrane will start to 'eat' it in just the same way that the inflamed synovial membrane inside a joint will eat into the cartilage surfaces on the tops of the bones. Eventually, there is a danger that the tendon will become weak and may tear apart with the result that the muscle is no longer connected to the bone that it is supposed to move. Inevitably, the result is then a paralysis. Putting a joint in a splint can sometimes help encourage the torn tendon to heal itself and if that fails it is often possible to repair a tendon surgically – simply sewing together the two separated halves.

Joint Damage May Result In Disablement

Because of the damage done inside the joints that are affected patients with rheumatoid arthritis sometimes become disabled. If the hands are badly affected by damaged joints or displaced or torn tendons the fingers may bend to one side or individual fingers may bend in a variety of different directions making it difficult to use the hand. If the toes are badly affected then walking may be made difficult. Patients who have bad arthritis in their feet complain that walking – even in comfortable shoes -is like walking on a stony beach in bare feet. If the toes become displaced in the same way that fingers often are then the foot probably won't fit into a normal shoe. If the elbows are badly affected then the sufferer may have difficulty in bending or straightening his arm. This can make all sorts of things – from washing to eating to tooth cleaning – extremely difficult. If the knees or hips are badly deformed then walking can be difficult.

Warning

If you have painful arthritis in your knees that keeps you awake at night you may want to relieve your pain by putting a pillow under your knees. DON'T. If your knees stiffen in a bent position (as they may) you will be permanently stuck with bent knees – and you will find walking extremely difficult.

Rheumatoid Arthritis Can Cause Inactivity And Depression

Not surprisingly the constant pain and disablement caused by rheumatoid arthritis often cause depression. It would be a surprise if such a far reaching and devastating disease did not make many sufferers miserable. Patients with rheumatoid arthritis often find it difficult to get out and about. They find sports difficult to play and often it is easier to stay at home slumped in an easy chair than to go out with friends or pursuing hobbies. But staying slumped in a chair or in bed can produce problems itself. First, there are the physical hazards. Staying immobile for long periods can result in muscles become weaker than ever and in bones become thinner and more likely to break. Areas of skin which support the body can develop pressure sores. Sitting or lying down for long periods means that the body's need for food goes down – and since most people who spend long periods sitting or lying eat too much that means a dangerous and destructive weight gain. Infections are far more likely in people who don't move about and remain active and, of course, the joints are more likely to get so stuff that movement becomes quite impossible. Finally, people who spend a lot of time keeping still tend to become less tolerant of pain when it occurs. And thus a vicious circle develops. Second, there are the mental hazards. If you allow your rheumatoid arthritis to run your whole life you will quickly become demoralised and miserable. Boredom and anxiety and fear quickly lead to an increased susceptibility to stress and a far greater liability to depression.

What Tests Can Be Done For Rheumatoid Arthritis?

Because rheumatoid arthritis is common and because the symptoms are pretty obvious it isn't usually too difficult to make the diagnosis clinically – without any hospital or laboratory tests. But the diagnosis isn't always easy to make – particularly in the early stages of the disease.

* Blood tests may show the existence of a substance called 'the rheumatoid factor' and may show that there is inflammation in the body. Blood tests can usually provide useful results early on in the history of the disease.
* X-rays may show that the edges of the bones are damaged. But X-rays do not usually show up any noticeable abnormalities until the rheumatoid arthritis has been present for many months or even years.
* Testing the synovial fluid – taken out of the joint – may show the presence of the disease

Repeating tests may enable doctors to tell how fast the disease is progressing.

Can Rheumatoid Arthritis Be Treated?

Rheumatoid arthritis cannot be cured but it can be treated and it is much easier to prevent complications developing than it is to treat them once they have developed. Never forget that although rheumatoid arthritis can disable you it is extremely unlikely to kill you.

The Right Attitude Is Vital

If you approach your arthritis gloomily – anxious about possible disablement and depressed by the fact that there is no 'magic' cure available – then the disease will do you far more damage than if you approach the problem in a positive, even aggressive, frame of mind. Reading this book will help you enormously because the more you know about the disease the greater your chance of combatting it successfully. There are many things that your doctor can do to help you – and you must always talk to your doctor before starting or changing any treatment. But there are also many things that you can do to help yourself – and approaching your disease in a positive frame of mine is one of the most important.

What Can Doctors Do To Help Combat Rheumatoid Arthritis?

Drug therapy

There are scores of drugs available for the treatment of arthritis – in all its forms – and the number of drugs available is growing every month. Many patients with rheumatoid arthritis need to keep taking drugs for months or even years and that means that there are huge potential profits to be made by companies which can market safe and effective drugs. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that many drug companies produce at least one drug designed for the relief of the joint symptoms such as pain and stiffness which are commonly caused by rheumatoid arthritis.

Aspirin and Co: the non steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs

The 'non steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs' are the ones most commonly prescribed and drugs in this category work in three different ways:

* They reduce inflammation
* They help conquer pain
* They reduce any fever that may be present

Selecting the right drug for the right patient is always something of a problem. Some patients will respond to one drug while others will respond best to another substance. It is often a question of trial and error before the right drug is found. Surprisingly, perhaps, the drug that is still most widely prescribed – and which still seems to offer the greatest number of patients the greatest amount of relief – is still aspirin; the first 'non steroidal anti-inflammatory drug'. Aspirin has an unfortunate reputation for causing stomach bleeding but when used properly and carefully and prescribed in the soluble form it is as safe as most of the competing products. During the last decade or so an enormous number of 'safe' alternatives have been produced and time and time again it has been shown that many of the 'newest' and 'latest' drugs may also produce similar symptoms if used in decent quantities or for fairly long periods. The main disadvantage with aspirin is that it needs to be taken fairly regularly and patients using it invariably have to take tablets every four hours or so. Some patients do develop allergies to aspirin and tinnitus (noises in the ears) and deafness can also be a problem occasionally.

Because aspirin is made by numerous different companies and sold at very competitive prices most drug companies prefer to manufacture and promote their own alternatives – which can be sold at a much higher price and which can, therefore, be far more profitable. There are, therefore, scores of alternatives available which have roughly similar properties. It is impossible to recommend any one of these drugs as being better than any other and new drugs are launched virtually every month. Although there are many chemical differences between the drugs which are available most work by relieving both pain and inflammation. Most doctors have their own favourite drugs with which they become familiar, though some doctors do tend to prescribe the latest (and probably the most expensive) product that the drug salesmen tell them about. The only advantage of the huge variety of 'non steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs' (known as NSAIDS) is that if you fail to get relief from one drug there will almost always be another drug for you to try.

Corticosteroids (also known as 'steroids')

Corticosteroids suppress inflammation so effectively that when they were first introduced they were hailed as 'miracle' drugs. They mimic the actions of corticosteroid hormones produced within the body as an internal anti-inflammatory. Unfortunately, although (or perhaps that should be 'because') they are very powerful corticosteroids can cause very serious side effects. They can produce stomach troubles, blood pressure problems, bone disorders, skin diseases and a characteristic swelling of the face and body. There is also a danger that if you take a corticosteroid for too long your body's own production of steroids will shut down and you will become dependent on the tablets you are taking.

Getting the best out of medicines

Sadly, many doctors do not really understand exactly how drugs work and what they can and cannot do. However, if you are going to benefit properly from the drugs you are prescribed it is vitally important that you understand just how drugs work and what you can expect from them. One survey which was done recently showed that a majority of patients – and this includes patients who are at home and patients receiving inpatient hospital attention – receive only one quarter of the dose of pain killer they need in order to provide them with proper relief!

This is not, of course, because doctors or nurses are mean spirited or uncaring. There are several reasons for the medical profession's failure to give patients enough pain killers.

First, it is very easy for both doctors and nurses to underestimate the amount of pain a patient is suffering. Lots of patients try to be brave and try not to show just how much pain they are in. Inevitably, therefore, when doctors prescribe pills they don't prescribe in large enough doses or quantities.

Second, both doctors and nurses worry a lot about their patients getting hooked on the drugs they are taking. They worry about this because some pain killers – and in particular the morphine derivatives – are addictive. In fact this fear is to a very large extent unfounded. It is very rare for patients to get hooked on pain killers – even if they need to take quite large doses for long periods of time. Indeed, the risk of addiction seems to be greater if a patient does not receive his drug often enough or in adequate quantities to control the pain. When a patient has to suffer pain and wait for his drug he is more likely to get hooked on that drug than when the dosage and the timing are designed to enable the patient to avoid pain or to control the pain properly.

One of the most important things you should remember is that you will suffer far less if you take your pain killers regularly according to the clock rather than waiting for the pain to return before taking them. If you only take your pain killer when your pain is terrible your body will be weakened and you will be learning to link your drug with relief from pain: that is what is likely to lead to drug dependence. My advice is that anyone taking a drug of any kind should talk to his or her doctor about the medication. Find out what the drug is prescribed for; find out whether the drug is likely to be needed as a long term measure or a short term measure and ask your doctor to explain to you how the drug does its job. If your doctor doesn't know the answers to these questions then maybe your questions will help to make sure that he does a little homework himself so that he can answer your questions and learn a little more himself.

What you should know about drugs

1. *How many times a day should they be taken?*

If a drug has to be taken once a day it doesn't usually matter at what time of day it is taken as long as it is taken at the same time of day. A drug that needs to be taken twice a day should usually be taken at intervals of twelve hours. And a drug that needs to be taken three times a day should usually be taken at eight hour intervals if you are going to get the best out of it.

2. *Does it matter whether the drug is taken before, during or after meals?*

Some drugs are not absorbed properly if taken with food – other drugs may cause stomach problems and need to be taken with meals.

3. *For how long must a drug be taken?*

Some drugs need to be taken as a complete course – others can be stopped when symptoms cease. It is essential that you know which of the drugs you take fall into which of these categories.

4. *What side effects can you expect?*

You should ask your doctor if there are any particular side effects that you should watch out for. And if you notice any side effects of symptoms while taking a drug you should get in touch with your doctor straight away, report what you have noticed and ask him whether you should keep on with the pills or whether you should stop them. Common side effects with pain relievers include constipation, indigestion, dizziness and nausea and vomiting. But it is important to remember that all drugs can cause side effects and that the range of possible side effects is virtually infinite.

Suppositories

When you swallow a tablet or a pill the active constituent in that pill gets into your bloodstream and therefore the rest of your body by being digested as it travels along the intestinal tract. As far as the drugs used to control arthritic symptoms are concerned the main danger with this method is that the walls of the stomach may be irritated by the drug. Gastritis is, indeed, the commonest side effect associated with many of the drugs which are widely used in the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis. However, drugs do not have to be given by mouth in order to be absorbed through the digestive system and into the blood stream. In some countries the other end of the intestinal tract -the rectum – is considered a far more sensible place from which to start the absorption process. A drug taken as a suppository will be absorbed into the body just as quickly as a drug taken in tablet form but there will be a much reduced chance of any intestinal irritation. Although there may be obvious difficulties for patients with severe rheumatoid arthritis (putting a suppository into your rectum may be tricky if you have deformed, arthritic hands) the advantages are considerable and many drugs are available in this form.

Injections

Drugs taken by mouth or in suppository form have to travel throughout the whole body in order to have an effect on painful and inflamed joints. It is often more efficient and more effective to put the drug directly into the joint concerned. This does not only mean that the joint gets the full benefit of the drug but it also means that the patient concerned may be spared whatever side effects which may be associated with the drug when it is used generally. When joints are being injected it is obviously important that the person handling the needle knows exactly what he is doing. Misplaced or carelessly or improperly administered injections can do far more harm than good. Some general practitioners do inject straight into joints (these are known as intra-articular injections) but the majority of patients will usually be dealt with by some sort of specialist – usually either an orthopaedic surgeon or a rheumatologist. The shoulders, wrists, elbows and knees are the joints most commonly tackled in this way, although other joints (fingers, toes and hips, for example) can be dealt with by injection. The drug used for the injection is usually a corticosteroid. The risks associated with drugs in this group are much smaller when the drugs are injected directly into a joint than when they are taken by mouth and allowed to spread throughout the whole body.

Before giving an injection into a joint the doctor will usually clean the area with an antiseptic and then give a local anaesthetic to numb the skin and the tissues just under the skin. The doctor usually confirms that he has the needle in the right place – right inside the joint – by withdrawing some of the fluid through the needle before giving the injection. Improvement usually follows about three days after an injection and will last for several months. A steroid injection can be repeated two or three times a year if necessary. Since infection can develop after an intra-articular injection it is important to tell your doctor straight away if you develop any unusual symptoms (such as increased pain, swelling, redness or heat) after the injection.

If a joint is swollen with an accumulation of fluid it may be possible to reduce the amount of pain and swelling and stiffness by withdrawing some of the excess fluid from the joint before giving an injection.

Surgery

Although surgery is used fairly frequently in the treatment of osteoarthritis its use is relatively rare in the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis. Here, however, are some of the operations that are sometimes performed in the treatment of this disease:

* Synovectomy: If the joint lining or synovium is badly inflamed it may be possible to prevent damage to the

joint by removing the inflamed synovium completely. This operation needs to be performed at an early stage in the progress of the disease – before too much damage has been done. Similarly, if the tunnels through which the tendons pass are affected by an inflamed synovium an operation to remove the damaged tunnel may prevent problems in the future. These operations are usually performed at an early stage to prevent severe disabling or crippling developing.

* Joint replacement: Joint replacement operations were originally devised for use on patients with osteoarthritis where large joints such as the hip are commonly affected. Large joint operations have been so successful (nine out of ten operations on patients who need hip replacements surgery are successful) that surgeons are now replacing knee, elbow, shoulder, ankle and finger joints.

* Nerve relief: If a nerve is trapped by inflamed or swollen tissues the numbness, continuous pain and 'pins and needles' that is produced can be excruciating. An operation to free the nerve and remove the pressure can produce spectacularly successful results.

Physiotherapy

A good physiotherapist will probably want to see you walk and sit and move before he or she even begins to examine you. By watching the way that you move the physiotherapist will be able to tell a great deal about your arthritis, the state of your joints and the extent of your pain. Then, when he has studied your movements, he or she will want to examine you. Physiotherapists don't just use their hands to heal their patients – they also use them to find out what is wrong. By moving your joints and by feeling your muscles a physiotherapist will be able to measure the extent of the damage done by your arthritis and will be able to work out how best he or she can help you.

In addition to watching their patients move and examining them with their hands many physiotherapists also like to look at any X-rays that may have been taken – or, at the very least, to look at the X-ray reports written by the radiologist. In addition they will also want to look at any blood tests which may have been done.

Once they have thoroughly researched the patient's condition physiotherapists can start with their treatment. Unlike drugs, which are often designed to offer nothing more than short term relief, physiotherapy is usually designed to provide some form of long term improvement. The type of treatments physiotherapists use varies a great deal of course but their repertoire of therapies include massage, manipulation and exercise.

The sort of manipulation techniques used by physiotherapists are rather similar to the ones which are used by chiropractors and osteopaths. It is vitally important that joints and bones which are damaged are never manipulated (and it is especially important that a damaged spine is never manipulated in any way since if it were there would be a risk of causing permanent damage to the spinal cord). It is also unwise to allow anyone to manipulate an inflamed joint or a bone which is weakened (this means that many patients with arthritis will probably not be suitable candidates for manipulation). When the joints and bones are suitable for manipulation the operator will often be able to unlock joints that have become fixed simply by using his or her hands. When properly used manipulation can help to relieve joint stiffness and muscle spasm.

A professional masseur (or masseuse) will stroke, knead and stretch your skin and muscles in order to relax them and to help take the stress and strain out of your joints. A good massage will help to break up toughened tissues and may even be able to help improve a poor blood supply. You can, of course, have a massage from a friend but a professional masseur is likely to be able to help relieve pains and stiffness far more effectively. As with manipulation you should not allow anyone to massage you unless your doctor has given his or her approval.

Ultrasound

Because it shows up soft tissues which cannot be shown very well on X-ray pictures doctors use ultrasound to help them make a diagnosis. Physiotherapists on the other hand use ultrasound, which consists of high frequency sound waves, as a treatment aid to help them to mend injured ligaments, joints and muscles. Ultrasound is believed to help in several ways: it speeds up the ordinary, natural healing process; it increases the blood flow in the area and it also reduces the amount of inflammation.

Short wave diathery

Like ultrasound a full course of short wave diathermy is likely to involve two or three sessions a week for several weeks. And like ultrasound those who use this technique, which uses high frequency electromagnetic waves which create heat within the tissues, claim that there are few, if any, significant side effects and that it is painless.

Physiotherapists use short wave diathermy because they claim that it can help to increase the flow of the blood, speed up the healing processes which normally and naturally help to repair the body and reduce any swelling which exists. The precise type of treatment they use will depend upon the tissues involved for different types of treatment affect tissues at different layers.

Interferential therapy

Unlike short wave diathermy and ultrasound some experts claim that interferential therapy, another form of electrical treatment, does little to help speed up long term recovery and is more likely to provide a short term solution to pain. Like short wave diathermy and ultrasound this type of therapy is usually given two or three times a week for several weeks.

Aids

Patients who are disabled by rheumatoid arthritis may be able to help themselves by using some or all of the aids or appliances described on pages at the back of this book.

Stress can make your arthritis worse

Case History

Michael had been an arthritis sufferer for eight years when he came to see me complaining that the aspirin he was taking wasn't helping his joints at all. I was surprised by this news for although he has quite severe rheumatoid arthritis Michael has usually managed to keep his pain in check with nothing more complicated than ordinary soluble aspirin – a drug which he feels comfortable with. He has learned over the years how many tablets a day he can take without suffering from side effects such as dizziness and he knows from bitter experience that some of the much more expensive replacements for aspirin can produce side effects which can be just as troublesome and often far more unpredictable.

When I examined Michael I could understand why he was complaining. His joints were more swollen and inflamed than usual and there were clear signs that his arthritis had flared up rather badly. We talked for quite a while and I could tell that Michael was upset about something. Being well aware that stress and worry can make arthritis worse I asked him if he had been under any unusual amount of stress recently.

For a few moments I didn't think he was going to tell me what had been happening. Then he swallowed hard, coughed and started to tell me his story.

Michael ran a small, old fashioned printing business with a partner whom I knew he had known since his school days. The firm printed personal notepaper, hand bills, leaflets and so on – nothing too ambitious. They had never made a lot of money but they had always made enough to live on reasonably comfortably. Because I had been to visit their children once or twice when they had measles and chicken pox I knew that Michael, his wife and their two children lived in a smart semi detached house on the outskirts of the town. I had never met Michael's partner, who wasn't a patient of mine, though I thought I remembered hearing that he had a flat in an old building down by the docks. His parents were, I knew, extremely wealthy and owned a large bakery on the other side of the town.

'My partner committed suicide four months ago,' said Michael suddenly. 'It was a terrible shock. We hadn't been particularly friendly for quite a few years – I don't know why, we just drifted apart – but it was obviously a shock nevertheless.'

He bit his lip and fiddled with his watch strap for a moment. I thought he was going to cry but Michael wasn't the sort of man who found crying in public easy to do and he made a real effort and held the tears back.

'I'd hardly got over that when I had another shock,' said Michael. 'Three weeks after Robert – that's my partner – died a man came to see me from a firm of solicitors. He was acting for a betting shop and he handed me a writ. I knew that Robert liked a bet but I had no idea just how far the addiction had gone and how much money he owed. The writ explained that Robert owed the betting shop a great deal of money and that because he and I were partners I was being held legally responsible for the debt.'

I was amazed at this. I hadn't been aware that partners are legally responsible for all of one another's debts. I made my surprise clear.

'You aren't any more surprised than I was,' said Michael, miserably. 'I just couldn't believe it.' He paused. 'But it was true enough.' He told me that he had been advised that he would have to sell the printing business and his home but warned that even then there probably would not be enough money to pay Robert's debts.

'The solicitor I went to see told me that I'll probably have to go into bankruptcy,' Michael told me. 'And as if all that wasn't enough my arthritis is now playing me up!' he said. 'I don't think it has ever been this bad.'

It was pretty clear to me just why Michael's arthritis had flared up. The exceptional stress he was under had almost certainly had a dramatic effect on his immune system with the result that the rheumatoid arthritis had reached an unprecedented peak of pain and discomfort.

With a heavy heart and little hope that it would help very much I prescribed a different anti inflammatory drug for Michael. I had little faith in the drug because I suspected that the stress Michael was under would continue to have a powerful and probably irreversible and uncontrollable influence on his body. I tried to hide my lack of faith because I am well aware that a doctor's enthusiasm for the remedy he is prescribing can have a powerful influence on its effectiveness.

I asked Michael to come back and see me again in two week's time but he didn't appear. When a month had passed and I still hadn't seen Michael again I called in at his home to see how he was.

He wasn't there but Judy, his wife, was.

'Michael meant to ring you and let you know what happened,' she told me. She seemed very happy for a woman who was about to be thrown out of her home. 'He didn't come back to see you again because his arthritis settled down just as suddenly as it had flared up. It's fine now. In fact Michael is out sailing today!'

I looked at her, surprised. 'I'm delighted! Did the pills help then?'

Michael's wife blushed. 'I'm afraid I don't think it was the pills,' she said. 'In fact I don't even think Michael started them. But two days after he had been to see you our solicitor rang us to say that Robert's parents had been so upset when they had heard about what had happened that they had paid the bookmaker themselves.'

'So Michael isn't responsible anymore?'

Judy shook her head. ‘We don’t have to sell the house,’ she said. ‘And we don’t even have to sell the printing firm. Robert’s parents are going to keep Robert’s share of the business but we don’t have to sell it.’ She looked at me and smiled. ‘You probably won’t believe the difference it made to Michael,’ she said. ‘One day he could hardly walk and he was in a lot of pain. The next day he was back to normal!’

But I did believe her.

Stress is one of the most powerful causes of arthritis. There isn’t always a quick solution, as there was in Michael’s case, but many arthritis victims could help themselves enormously if they learned how to reduce their exposure and increase their resistance to stress.

How to relax your body

When you are anxious, nervous or under stress in any way your mind deliberately tenses up the muscles around your body. There is a long established, sensible reason for this. By tensing up muscles your mind is preparing your body for action; it assumes that the best way to deal with the threat you are facing will be physical action. Your mind is getting your body ready to fight or to run away. But most modern stresses cannot be dealt with by a physical response. You cannot fight a traffic jam and running away from an electricity bill won’t do you any good. Modern stresses persist for long periods – and so muscles remain tense for long periods too. Tensed muscles commonly produce headaches, backache and stiff necks. Eight out of ten cases of backache are caused by stress and a staggering 98% of headaches are produced in the same way.

Learning how to avoid unnecessary stresses, how to build up your resistance to stress and how to improve your ability to cope with stress will all help you combat muscle tension. But there is another, more direct way, to tackle muscle tension and the associated problems it produces: deliberately relaxing your tensed muscles.

Relax your body

Make sure that you will not be disturbed for at least twenty minutes then lie down somewhere quiet and comfortable and use this simple-to-learn technique to help relieve muscle tension.

1. Take very deep, slow breaths. Stress will make you breathe more quickly than usual so soothe your mind – and your body – by deliberately taking slower, deeper breaths.
2. Clench your left hand as tightly as you can, making a fist with your fingers. Do it well and you will see the knuckles go white. If you now let your fist unfold you will feel the muscles relax. When your hand was clenched the muscles were tensed; unfolded the same muscles are relaxed. This is what you must do with the other muscle groups of your body.
3. Bend your left arm and try to make your left biceps muscle stand out as much as you can. Then relax it and let the muscles ease. When your arm is thoroughly relaxed let it lie loosely by your side.
4. Clench your right hand as tightly as you can, making a fist again with your fingers. When you let your fist unfold you will feel the muscles relax.
5. Now bend your right arm and make your right biceps muscle stand out as much as you can. Then relax it and let the muscles become relaxed. When your arm is thoroughly relaxed let it lie loosely by your side.
6. Tighten the muscles in your left foot. Curl your toes upwards. And then downwards. When your foot feels as tense as you can make it deliberately relax the muscles.
7. Tense the muscles of your left calf. You should be able to feel the muscles in the back of your left leg become firm and hard as you tense them. Bend your foot up towards you to help tighten the muscles. Then let the muscles relax.
8. Straighten your left leg and point your foot away from you. You will feel the muscles on the front of your left thigh tighten up – they should be firm right up to the top of your leg. Now relax those muscles and let your left leg lie loosely on the bed.
9. Tighten the muscles in your right foot. Curl your toes upwards. And then downwards. When your foot feels as tense as you can make it deliberately relax the muscles.
10. Tense the muscles of your right calf. You should be able to feel the muscles in the back of your right leg become firm and hard as you tense them. Bend your foot up towards you to help tighten the muscles. Then let the muscles relax.
11. Straighten your right leg and point your foot away from you. You will feel the muscles on the front of your right thigh tighten up – they should be firm right up to the top of your leg. Now relax those muscles and let your right leg lie loosely on the bed.
12. Lift yourself up by tightening your buttock muscles. You should be able to lift your body upwards by an inch or so. Then let your muscles fall loose again.
13. Tense and contract your abdominal muscles. Try to pull your abdominal wall as far in as possible. Then let go and allow your waist to reach its maximum circumference.
14. Tighten up the muscles of your chest. Take a big, deep breath in and strain to hold it for as long as possible. Then, slowly, let it go.
15. Push your shoulders backwards as far as they will go, then bring them forwards and inwards. Finally, shrug them as high as you can. Keep your head perfectly still and try to touch your ears with your shoulders. It will probably be impossible but try anyway. Then let your shoulders relax and ease.

16. Next tighten up the muscles of your back. Try to make yourself as tall as you can. Then let the muscles relax.
17. The muscles of your neck are next. Gently turn your head first one way and then the other. Then let the muscles of your neck relax. Move your head around and make sure that your neck muscles are completely loose and easy.
18. Move your eyebrows upwards and then pull them down as far as they will go. Do this several times, making sure that you can feel the muscles tightening both when you move your eyebrows up and when you pull them down. Then let them relax.
19. Screw up your eyes as tightly as you can. Pretend that someone is trying to force your eyes open. Keep them shut tightly. Then, keeping your eyelids closed, let them relax.
20. Move your lower jaw around. Grit your teeth. Wrinkle your nose. Smile as wide as you can showing as many teeth as you can. Push your tongue out as far as it will go, push it firmly against the bottom of your mouth and then the top of your mouth before letting it lie easy and relaxed inside your mouth. Now let all your facial muscles go loose and relaxed.

How to relax your mind

We tend to think of our imaginations as fairly insignificant, light hearted parts of our minds. That is a mistake that can prove deadly. The too often unrecognised truth is that the human imagination is powerful enough to kill. And the only person your imagination is likely to kill is you.

It is usually assumed that stress causes ill health because our bodies cannot cope with the strain of too much work, too much aggravation or too much excitement. But a good deal of the damage caused by stress is a consequence not of the real problems you may face but of the imaginary consequences your mind creates from those real problems; your imagination converts the often minor stresses of the present into major stresses of the future.

For example, when you get up in the morning and find an electricity bill waiting for you your immediate response will depend upon your ability to pay the bill. If you cannot pay the bill the next response will be for your imagination to swing into action and to create a scenario detailing what might happen as a result of your inability to pay. You may ‘see’ yourself being issued with a summons; being taken to court and publicly disgraced; being put in prison; losing your job; losing your home; losing your friends; being separated from your family and so on and so on. As you sit in your kitchen looking at the electricity bill none of these things are real. But once the electricity bill has triggered your imagination into action these imaginary consequences will have a very real effect on your body. As you become increasingly worried and apprehensive so your blood pressure will rise, your muscles will become tense and acid will pour into your stomach to prepare your body for immediate action. In a very short time your imagination will have triggered an entirely inappropriate physical response. The result will probably be that within a few minutes you will end up with a headache or an attack of indigestion. It will not have been the electricity bill which will have done the damage but your response to the arrival of the electricity bill; your headache won’t be due to the piece of paper in your hand but to your imagination.

And the same sort of thing happens all the time.

When you miss your train your imagination tells you that you may lose your job and that if you lose your job you will be unable to pay back the bank loan on your home. Standing there on the platform your body responds not to the disappearing train but to the loss of your home.

Have you ever watched a horror film on the television and felt the hairs on the back of your neck stand up? If the film was both frightening and convincing then, by the time it finished, you would have probably been scared enough to go around the house checking the doors and windows – to make sure that no intruders could get in!

Have you ever watched a film in which there were long desert scenes? If you have then you’ve probably noticed that by the end of the film you felt thirsty. When that happened your body was responding to your imagination.

If you get an urgent message to ring someone close to you your first reaction will probably be to worry. Your imagination will create a whole range of possible reasons for the telephone call. Maybe, you will think, there has been an accident. Perhaps someone has died. If you cannot get through on the telephone your mind will work overtime. Your imagination will create an endless series of possibilities. At the very least you will imagine a domestic crisis: a burst pipe or a fire in the kitchen. At the worst – well, at the worst your imagination will create a scenarios far more horrendous than life could create. Your head will begin to ache, your muscles will tingle with tension and you will probably feel nauseated and shivery with apprehension. When you eventually get through and speak to the caller and discover that they wanted to tell you that you had won a small amount of money on a lottery your relief will be instant.

And yet all the terrible things that have worried you half to death only ever existed in your imagination. Your mind creates major stresses out of minor ones because your imagination creates a horrific scenario out of every small incident. It is hardly surprising that the vast majority of illnesses are caused or made worse by stress. It is hardly surprising that the pains and disablement of arthritis are often caused or made worse by the stress of twentieth century life. That is the downside. That is the way that your imagination can harm your health. It isn't difficult to see that your imagination is an extremely powerful weapon; powerful enough to ruin your life or even to kill you.

But if you know how to do it you can harness the power of your imagination and use it to your advantage. Your imagination can create a major illness out of a series of minor anxieties. But, if controlled properly, your imagination can also help you to reduce your susceptibility to stress and to increase your ability to resist the potentially damaging consequences of stress laden incidents.

In just the same way that your imagination can make you ill so it can also make you well again. In the same way that it can exacerbate an existing illness so it can also help to protect you. All you have to do is to learn how – and that is no more difficult than learning how to swim or to ride a bicycle. Your body will respond to positive, hopeful, optimistic and peaceful mental scenes just as well as it will respond to dangerous, frightening or pessimistic images. So, in order to take advantage of the healing powers of your imagination you must simply learn to fill your mind with peaceful and relaxing images.

Relax your mind with a daydream

Imagine. It is a warm, sunny day in early summer. There isn't a cloud in the sky and there is a soft, gentle, delicate breeze in the air which stops the heat from burning and the day from being oppressive. It is a perfect day and for a few minutes you can forget all your fears, anxieties and worries. You are on a private island; alone, content and away from all everyday pressures and stresses; safe for now from the one thousand and one demands which normally make life difficult and which sometimes make it unbearable. You are alone but not lonely. Around you the world is quiet but the silence is soothing. Occasionally, the breeze rustles the leaves in the nearby trees and in the distance you can hear insects in the grass, birds in the trees and the sound of the sea splashing onto the shore.

You are walking, slowly and effortlessly along a narrow country track. There are no cars, no people, no noises, no fumes and no rubbish on your island. You can take your time. You have all the time in the world. On your left there is a hedgerow. On your right a lush, green meadow. At the base of the hedge there are primroses. In the meadow early poppies are already unfolding their pink-red petals and dancing lightly in the whispering breeze. You are at peace with yourself and with the world in this private and lovely place.

You walk on knowing that no one will ever find you or disturb you here. This is your personal world. No one else can come onto your island without your permission. No one can interrupt you or threaten you or make you sad while you are here. You know that whatever happens elsewhere you are safe here.

Slowly, your track begins to curve around to the left. There is a slight incline too and you realise that you are heading down towards the sea. Your island is a small one and you can see the sea all around you. It is a deep, beautiful blue and it stretches away, unspoilt and unmarked as far as you can see. As you head down the track you gradually become aware of the fact that you can hear a stream nearby. You stop for a moment, move slightly to your left, and look through the hedge so that you can see the stream. It is quite shallow but the water runs fast and is sparkling and crystal clear. The bed of the stream is made of small, pretty looking stones though a few larger rocks poke up above the surface of the water.

Further down and closer to the seashore the stream spreads out and becomes even shallower. Standing on the far side of the stream there are a dozen sturdy but old and gnarled trees. Beneath them, in the shade, there is a soft, inviting looking, mossy bank. You stand for a few more moments and stare at what seems to you to be the most beautiful and peaceful spot in the world. If you turn to your left you can see the stream, meandering down the gently sloping hill-side of your island. If you turn to your right you can see where the stream trickles down, between rocks and across a stretch of soft, golden sand, to the sea.

Using half a dozen large, stepping stones you cross the stream, sit down on the mossy bank and rest your back against a tree. It is like sitting in the most comfortable armchair ever designed. There is nowhere in the world quite so beautiful as your island and there is nowhere quite so peaceful as this spot where your island stream runs down into the sea. You rest, alone, content and silent. You feel comfortable, rested and happy. When you close your eyes you can hear the clear water of the stream gurgling and bubbling over its rocky bed. In the distance you can hear the sea crashing rhythmically and majestically onto the rocks. Above you the breeze is rustling the leaves of the tree you are leaning up against. You can feel the warmth of the sun filtering down through the leaves and your whole body feels relaxed. You love this peaceful spot. You can stay here as long as you like. It is your island, your hideaway, your private escape from the real world. Here you can rest, untroubled by anxieties, stresses, pressures and worries.

And what makes this private place so very special is the fact that you can take it with you wherever you go. Your personal island will always be ready for you; will always welcome you and will always offer you peace and tranquillity. It never goes dark here. The sun never sets. It never goes cold. It never rains. This is your Camelot. This is your passport to peace, contentment and happiness.

Build up your self confidence

Psychologists have known for years that arthritis sufferers tend to treat themselves harshly; they are often shy and dissatisfied with their own work; pushing themselves far too hard and constantly searching for a contentment and sense of personal satisfaction which escapes them. Arthritis sufferers often feel inferior and helpless to change their own destiny. Here is a case history from my files which illustrates how one arthritis sufferer benefited by learning to build up her self confidence.

Case history

When Linda first came to see me she was in a terrible state. She had a bad skin rash on the backs of both of her hands and her asthma, from which she had suffered for most of her life, was almost out of control. She couldn't sleep and she was, she readily confessed, edgy and tearful all the time. Her long standing arthritis was crippling her so badly that she found it painful to walk.

'I just can't cope,' she told me, with tears forming in her eyes. 'I've got so much to do.'

I asked her to tell me exactly what she had to do and why she couldn't cope. When she had finished explaining things to me I wasn't surprised that she was in a complete state. I don't think anyone could have coped with the workload she had acquired for herself.

At the school where she worked as a teacher Linda had taken on the responsibility of organising the school play and of making all the arrangements for the summer fete. At the church she attended she had also been given the responsibility for organising the fete. And she had recently taken on the job as honorary secretary of the local tennis club. On top of all this she was trying to look after her aged and incontinent mother, her husband and her two teenage children. And to work full time as a teacher of art.

'I feel so incompetent,' she sobbed. 'I know I ought to be able to do better but I just don't seem able to cope any more!'

'I'm not surprised!' I told her. 'You're trying to do far too much. How on earth did you allow yourself to be lumbered with so many jobs!'

Linda looked at me in some surprise and thought for a moment or two. 'I suppose it's because I don't like to say 'no',' she confessed. 'I've never really thought about it before.'

And that was the key to Linda's problems.

She didn't like to say 'no'.

In fact, it was worse than that.

She couldn't say 'no'.

'Why do you think you can't say 'no'?' I asked her.

Linda thought for a long time before answering that question. 'I suppose it's because I don't like to let people down,' she replied. 'I want to feel that I'm being useful. And if I even think of saying 'no' I always feel terribly guilty and end up saying 'yes'.'

After I had talked to Linda for a while I began to understand what forces were driving her to such a point of self destruction. (The arthritis, the skin rash, the asthma, the sleeplessness and the tearfulness were, of course, all a result of the stress Linda was under as a result of her apparently total inability to say 'no').

As a child Linda's parents had been very ambitious for her. They had pushed her constantly and had never really been satisfied with her school work. Not once, Linda told me with tears streaming down her cheeks, had her parents ever praised her. She couldn't ever remember anyone saying 'well done' or 'thank you' or 'that was kind of you'.

Linda had grown up desperately pushing herself harder and harder in a constant effort to please her unpleasable parents. When she had started work her total lack of self assurance and self confidence and her constant search for appreciation and approval meant that she took on all the jobs that no one else wanted to take on. She quickly acquired a reputation as an over willing work horse. And when she married the same thing happened again. Her husband, and then her children, learnt to be lazy and to let her do everything for them. She did all the shopping, all the cleaning, all the washing, all the ironing, all the cooking and all the washing up. She even did the gardening!

And driving her on all the time was her burning need for approval from others. Everything she did was inspired by her deep rooted feeling of unworthiness and incompetence.

I explained to Linda that the only long term solution was for her to acquire more self esteem and self confidence.

'Only by building up your sense of self assurance and by learning that you have rights as well as responsibilities will you be able to escape from the treadmill you're on,' I told her.

Over the next few weeks I tried to show Linda how she could do just this. To begin with I gave her a list of words to look at and I asked her to pick out any of the words which she thought applied to her.

Here is the list:

* Attentive
* Agreeable
* Punctilious
* Ambitious
* Brave
* Chivalrous

* Conscientious
* Careful
* Creative
* Decent
* Decent
* Faithful
* Loyal
* Kind
* Intelligent
* Polite
* Punctilious
* Scrupulous
* Honest
* Truthful
* Respectable
* Unselfish
* Obedient
* Benevolent
* Impeccable
* Hard working
* Thoughtful
* Wise

‘Oh I don’t think any of those apply to me,’ said Linda.

‘Of course they do!’ I insisted. ‘You’re certainly unselfish aren’t you! And you’re respectable surely?’

‘Yes, I suppose so.’ She paused and nodded. ‘I suppose I am,’ she agreed.

‘And you are truthful, polite and benevolent?’

Linda agreed, after hesitating, that these words did accurately describe her.

‘And you’re attentive and agreeable and conscientious and careful?’

Again Linda thought carefully.

And then, when she had thought about it, again she nodded.

Gradually, I managed to convince her that she did have many excellent qualities. Indeed, by the time we had finished going through the list Linda had to agree that most of the words applied to her.

‘But none of that makes me a good person,’ said Linda. ‘I’m always getting things wrong. I always seem to be making mistakes. And I just don’t seem to be able to cope.’

‘What sort of things do you get wrong? In what way don’t you think you can cope?’

‘Well, I bought the wrong sort of tea for my mother the other day. And my daughter went mad at me because I didn’t have her jeans ironed in time for her to go out on Saturday.’ She stopped and looked down at her lap. ‘I always seem to have to be apologising,’ she said sadly. She shrugged. ‘It happens all the time.’

‘How old is your daughter?’ I asked her.

‘Fifteen.’

‘Is she handicapped?’

Linda looked up at me. ‘No.’

‘Why didn’t she iron her jeans herself?’

Linda looked puzzled at this; she had clearly never even thought of asking her daughter to help with the ironing.

‘Why does it always have to be you who does everything?’ I asked her. ‘You are making yourself ill by trying so hard to do things for other people.’ I explained to Linda that no one can do everything and that there is, in any case, no shame in making mistakes or getting things wrong occasionally.

‘You need to be more selfish,’ I told her. ‘How much time in the week do you have to do things that you want to do?’

Linda looked at me as if I was mad. ‘What do you mean?’

‘When did you last do something for you,’ I explained. ‘Something that no one else wanted you to do.’

Linda frowned. She couldn’t think of anything.

‘You let people push you around and organise your life for you because you are constantly searching for approval and because you’ve got absolutely no self respect or self assurance,’ I explained. ‘And because you are trying to do the impossible your health is beginning to suffer.’ I explained to her that disorders such as arthritis, asthma and eczema often attack individuals who are self effacing and who allow themselves to be pushed around by others.

‘And you must learn not to worry too much about occasional mistakes,’ I told her. ‘It’s impossible for anyone to be right all the time and there is absolutely nothing at all wrong or shaming about having to say ‘I was wrong’ or ‘I made a mistake’ occasionally. The only people who never have to say they were wrong are the people who never do anything, who never try anything and who, therefore, never take any risks.’

Slowly, Linda began to realise that she was not a bad person but that she was a weak person and that she was being pushed around at school, at home and everywhere else by other people who were taking advantage of her fears, her need for approval and her lack of self confidence.

Gradually, I managed to get Linda to realise that she had many wonderful qualities; that she was kind and thoughtful and generous. I managed to persuade her to begin to think about herself a little more often; to take charge of at least part of her own life and to say ‘no’ occasionally to people who wanted her to do things for them. Eventually, Linda came into the surgery one Saturday with a broad smile on her face.

‘What happened?’ I asked her.

‘My daughter brought some friends home today,’ said Linda. And when she found that I hadn’t had time to do the washing up after breakfast she came storming in to complain.

‘What did you do?’ I asked her.

‘I told her that I was busy and that if she wanted clean cups she could wash some up herself!’ said Linda, looking both slightly pleased with herself and slightly embarrassed by her own cheek. I couldn’t help noticing that her skin rash had cleared up.

‘What did she do?’

‘She washed up some cups!’ said Linda, unable to contain her delight.

Linda will probably never be completely free of her ingrained desire to please other people. But she has, at least, made a start.

And when she left the surgery that day and I asked her how her arthritis was she turned and looked at me as though she didn’t know what I was talking about.

‘What arthritis?’ she asked, with a smile.

It was a wonderful moment.

How to harness your positive emotions and conquer your negative ones

However careful you are to organise your life so that your exposure to unnecessary stress is kept to a minimum, and however skilled you are at maximising your ability to withstand stress and cope with pressure, there will always be moments when stress overwhelms your defences.

At those moments your natural tendency will probably be to respond not in any sensible, logical, analytical way but to respond instinctively and emotionally. Depending on the nature of the stress (and the way you feel about it) you may want to cry, shout, laugh or be plunged into deep despair. But in practice things are not quite this straightforward and natural responses aren’t always the responses other people see.

Superficially your emotional responses may seem automatic and quite beyond voluntary control and you may think that when stress makes you sad you will cry and when anxieties make you angry you will shout but the relationship between stress and your emotions isn’t that simple. Often your emotional responses to any given situation will be governed either by behavioural patterns which you learned many years before from parents, teachers and friends or as a result of prejudices acquired from people in authority or from people you respected. As a result you will subconsciously allow each natural, healthy response to be dominated and controlled by an intellectual response. Instead of crying you may stiffen your upper lip. Instead of shouting you may simply turn away and nurse your anger inside you.

Although this intellectual over-ride may have a certain social value (preventing you from making a fool of yourself in public) it will do your health no good at all and it will dramatically increases the chances of stress eventually having a devastating effect on your physical and mental well being. The contrary truth is that the more you learn how to give full reign to your emotions – whether they are positive ones or negative ones -the better you will be able to protect yourself against stress related damage and the happier and healthier you will be.

As I have already explained the vast majority of all the illnesses from which we suffer these days are caused by stress and all illnesses are made worse by stress. Our minds are killing us and making us pretty ill as they do it. Worry, anxiety, stress and pressure can cause an enormous amount of agony and real pain. But the opposite is also true. Just as negative thinking, unhappy thoughts and genuine problems can all make us ill so, in a similar way, positive thinking, happy thoughts, love, companionship and support can all help to keep us healthy and help us to get better when we are ill.

If you stop and think about it all this makes good sense. After all, if your mind can make you ill then surely it is only fair that it should also be able to make you well again.

Over the last few years some remarkable pieces of scientific work have been done by doctors keen to investigate the ways in which a positive approach can help to heal real illness. For example, consider this simple experiment which a doctor performed with 200 of his patients all of whom had symptoms but none of whom had definable illnesses.

The doctor divided the patients into two main groups. The patients in the first group were treated politely but were not given any firm assurance about when they would get better. The patients in the second group were told confidently that they would be better in a few days time.

When the doctor next saw his patients he noticed a remarkable difference between the two groups. Nearly two thirds of the patients who had been given positive encouragement had got better whereas only just over a third of the patients who had been given no encouragement had recovered.

This simple piece of research shows quite conclusively just how significantly a positive approach can change our lives. Positive thinking can help to keep you healthy and it can help to minimise the length of time that your illness lasts. The inescapable truth is that you cannot escape from your emotions. Your emotions decide whether or not you are going to be happy, how successful you are going to be and how healthy you are going to be – by harnessing and taking advantage of your positive emotions and by conquering negative ones you can dramatically improve your health and your life expectation.

Don't be afraid to cry

I firmly believe that one of the main reasons why Italian men suffer less from heart disease than do British men (despite the fact that many of them eat the wrong foods, are overweight, drink too much and smoke too much) is that the former aren't afraid to cry.

British boys are taught that it is unmanly to cry. At school and at home they learn that crying is a girlish, wimpy thing to do. They are taught that they must respond to sadness, sorrow and despair with a firm upper lip; they are taught to 'bottle up' their natural emotions and to pretend that everything is all right. The boy or man who does cry will suffer twice: first, he will suffer the original pain and then he will suffer from a sense of guilt and shame for having cried.

Countless male leaders in Britain, America and Australia have lost credibility and respect through having cried in public. And yet crying is an important and effective way of dealing with stress; it is one of the body's most important ways of dealing with problems and pressures and it is, above all, an absolutely natural way of dealing with sadness.

When a baby cries it is making it clear to its parents that it desperately wants love and attention. When a child falls over in the garden and runs in crying to its mother it is making it clear that it wants reassurance and comfort. A mother who sees her child crying will pick it up, cuddle it, give it affection and show that she cares. The tears will attract sympathy and support when it is most needed.

The man who refuses to cry because he believes that it is a sign of weakness is putting himself at risk. By hiding his emotions he will turn a short-term sadness into a long term frustration and turn a temporary despair into a permanent depression. Men who never cry are far more likely to suffer from stress related disorders as heart disease, high blood pressure, stomach ulcers and arthritis as are men who allow the tears to flow when they feel sad. It is now well known that people who suffer from arthritis are quite likely to have difficulty in expressing their emotions.

The man who hides his tears and turns his sadness inwards is storing up trouble for the future; by crying, and allowing his sadness to show, he would attract the love and the sympathy that can heal sadness; by refusing to cry he is making himself ever more vulnerable to unhappiness and ensuring that he will become yet another stress victim.

In recent years scientists have managed to confirm that crying is good for us. We know now that as well as attracting love and sympathy crying helps by getting rid of potentially dangerous chemical waste products which will otherwise build up in the body and lead to the development of depression.

When you cry because you are sad your tears are different to the tears you shed when you cry because you have something in your eye. The tears which are triggered by sadness have a different physical content to the tears which are inspired by specks of dust or gusts of wind.

Everyone should learn to cry when they feel sad; crying is nothing to be ashamed of – it is, rather, a natural and healthy response which invariably leads to a sense of contentment and a calmness which would otherwise be unattainable.

Deal positively with your anger

People who suffer from arthritis often have difficulty in showing their anger. They feel bad about letting other people know how they feel and so they hide their angry feelings deep inside their souls. In the end, of course, that anger will show itself in some way or other – often by doing permanent damage to the joints.

Arthritis sufferers frequently feel that if they show their anger they will be exhibiting some weakness. The truth, of course, is very different. The truth is that we all feel angry occasionally. Even the most placid and peaceful person sometimes feels cross about some injustice or driven to anger by some series of frustrations. And the healthiest solution is often to show that anger – to let it out. If you hold your anger inside you, and refuse to let it out, then in the end it is you that it will damage.

Of course, I do not recommend letting your anger out in an unsociable or illegal fashion – that would merely lead to more frustrations and more injustices and more sadness and more anger! But there are lots of quite practical ways in which it is possible to get rid of accumulated anger in a healthy and useful way.

For example, you may be to get rid of your anger by performing some exhausting physical task. Maybe, if your doctor gives his approval, you have a garden you can dig (though it you do, then please be careful not to do too much too quickly – every year thousands of men and women injure their joints and give themselves backache by being too enthusiastic in the garden) or maybe you can give the house a spring clean.

Many people get rid of their anger through exercise. Maybe, if your doctor gives his approval, you could go to the gym and work out, or attend an aerobics class, or go for a run, or play a game of squash, tennis or football.

Whatever you choose to do you should, of course, remember that you must not allow your anger to make you forget all the safety precautions you have learnt. If you allow your anger to push you too hard then you will find it all too easy to damage a joint or to injure yourself – or someone else – in some way. You must consult your doctor – and obtain his permission – before you start any exercise programme.

Laughter can make you better

You may find it difficult to believe but there is now plenty of evidence to show that laughter can help overcome arthritis.

For example, consider the case of Peter. Peter had been a patient of mine for years and he suffered from terrible arthritis which made it difficult for him to move about. His spine, his arms and his legs were all affected to some degree or another. Over the years Peter had tried many different treatments for his arthritis – some of them orthodox and some of them from the ‘alternative’ range of therapies. But, sadly, none of the treatments he had tried had worked very well.

Even before he had contracted arthritis Peter had been a rather unhappy man. Some people are just rather doleful by nature; they find it difficult to enjoy themselves; they are full of responsibility even as children and when they grow up to adulthood they find their shoulders laden with troubles and worries. Peter was like that. He didn’t laugh much before his body developed arthritis.

For several years I had never seen Peter smile. He worked as an accountant and he took his work very seriously. He didn’t like practical jokes, he didn’t like seeing people wasting time laughing and, to be honest, he didn’t seem to have a very well developed sense of humour.

I talked to him about this one day. I explained to him that an American writer called Norman Cousins had discovered that by watching funny films and reading humorous books he was able to control his arthritis very effectively. In fact, Cousins, who had discharged himself from hospital after being told that there was no cure, not only laughed himself better but also managed to obtain incontrovertible scientific proof that laughing had helped him to treat his arthritis. Peter was impressed by this, particularly when I pointed out to him that there didn’t seem to be a lot of laughs in his life and that he rarely seemed to spend time with people who enjoyed having a good time.

He was, indeed, so impressed that he went out and rented a Marx Brothers video. It was, for him, a revelation. Peter had never, ever sat down and made time to watch something funny. He had never allowed himself to laugh before. But the Marx Brothers film converted him. The first sight of Harpo Marx, the first unwilling giggle, changed his life. Within weeks his arthritis was less troublesome than it had been for years. He discovered comedians he had never heard of before. I went in to his home one day and found a pile of videos which included films by Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd as well as modern comics such as Chevy Chase and Robin Williams.

Peter’s reading habits changed too. Instead of confining himself to tedious tomes about accountancy rules and taxation law he started to read humorists such as P.G. Wodehouse, James Thurber, T.H. White, Stephen Leacock, S.J. Perelman and Tom Sharpe.

Peter’s arthritis didn’t go away completely. And some days it still troubles him. But it is much, much better than it has been for years. He is able to move around far more easily than he had for years – and he doesn’t need to take any tablets any more. For Peter, laughter really has proved to be the very best medicine.

What Can YOU Do To Help Overcome Rheumatoid Arthritis?

1. Lose Any Unnecessary Weight

Every pound of excess weight that you carry around with you puts an additional strain on all your joints, will make existing rheumatoid arthritis worse and will weaken otherwise healthy joints.

2. Give Up Meat

A vegetarian diet is healthier if you are a sufferer from rheumatoid arthritis.

CHAPTER THREE: OSTEOARTHRITIS

Introduction

Osteoarthritis usually first affects people in their fifties or sixties. It seems to affect women slightly more often than men and in addition to the joints of the spine usually also affects the knees, hips, hands and feet. To start with there is usually only one joint affected but as time goes by osteoarthritis can spread to many parts of the body. Unlike rheumatoid arthritis (to which it bears remarkably few similarities other than that both are joint diseases) osteoarthritis does not involve damage to other parts of the body. Osteoarthritis is a much simpler disease to understand than rheumatoid arthritis. The main symptoms are stiffness and aching which develop as the cartilage between the bones gradually gets thinner and thinner. Eventually the bones end up rubbing on one another. Although osteoarthritis is often caused by excess wear and tear (in which case it is practically indistinguishable from the problems often caused by old age) it can be inherited and may affect younger adults.

What Are The Causes of Osteoarthritis?

We reach our physical peak in our late teens and early twenties and from then on it is, I'm afraid, all downhill! Our vision becomes less acute, our hearing more indistinct and our brains lose nerve cells at a frightening rate. Our bones become weaker and more likely to fracture, our muscles lose some of their strength and our joints stiffen up and start to creak a little. Most of these changes are gradual and painless and go unnoticed until we suddenly try to do something that we used to be able to do with ease and find that our bodies let us down.

It is the changes inside our joints which so often lead to the development of osteoarthritis. As I have already explained a normal healthy joint is perfectly designed for the job it has to do. Those joints which have a synovium and which are filled with synovial fluid are particularly impressive from an engineering point of view: they are strong and they have a magnificently sophisticated self lubricating system. Each one of the synovial joints in a normal, healthy body is as slippery and as efficient as any man-made joint could ever hope to be.

Synovial joints have three special attributes:

* The synovial fluid inside the joint is made of a special substance which loses water and becomes thicker when the pressure on the joint is greater. This means that the lubricant automatically becomes more efficient and more protective when the need for lubrication is at its greatest.

* The two cartilaginous surfaces of a synovial joint are extraordinarily slippery and would move smoothly together even without a lubricant.

* Although the cartilaginous surfaces look smooth they are full of tiny indentations – rather like a golf ball. The result is that synovial fluid is trapped between the two surfaces – thereby reducing the amount of friction still further.

To get an idea of the amount of work each of your joints has to do just stop and think for a moment of the number of times that you move your arms and legs in a fairly ordinary sort of day. Getting up, sitting down and walking about all put a pressure on your joints. Obviously, all this action means that our joints must eventually begin to wear out. And that is often what happens as we get older. Our cartilages wear down and the production of lubricating fluid becomes a little sluggish.

But although osteoarthritis may be partly a consequence of ageing that is not by any means the whole story. For a start most of us are so accustomed to the fact that our joints are strong, resilient and hard wearing that we do very little to look after them or to help protect them from unnecessary wear and tear. The worst thing that most of us do to damage our joints is to allow ourselves to become overweight. If you are 14 pounds overweight then your joints will be constantly carrying an unnecessary load. Try picking up 14 pounds of sugar or flour and walking around with it for five minutes or so. That is what your joints have to put up with for every minute of your waking day. The heavier you are – and the more excess weight you are carrying – the greater the strain on your joints will be. If you are overweight then the chances are high that it will be the joints in your hips, knees and ankles – your weight bearing joints – which suffer from osteoarthritis first.

We make things even worse by taking exercise that puts a tremendous strain on our bodies, by battering our bones and our cartilages and by putting totally unreasonable demands on the resilience of our joints. When we are young our bones are resilient and capable of absorbing an enormous amount of stress. But as we age our bones become less elastic and less capable of taking any sort of punishment. The result is that your joints have to take increasing amounts of the shock when you walk, run, jump, dance or leap about. Your joints are at their best when you are about twenty years old. Every year after that means a year's additional decay. By the time you are thirty your joints may be noticeably stiffer and more vulnerable. After the age of forty weight bearing joints in particular are likely to start creaking and causing trouble. Jogging, running, tennis, squash, football and aerobics all put a tremendous strain on your joints (particularly if you are not wearing shock absorbing footwear). And, of course, if you are overweight then the strain will be increased even more.

Although osteoarthritis is usually a consequence of old age or over use it is not always a result of natural wear and tear. Sometimes osteoarthritis may develop in younger people who are not overweight and who have done relatively little exercise. When this happens it may be because salts have been deposited in the cartilages, because inflammation or infection has damaged the joint or because the two parts of a joint do not fit together properly as a result of some congenital abnormality (the hip joint is the one most commonly affected by congenital problems).

Who Gets Osteoarthritis?

Anyone can get osteoarthritis – at any age – but it doesn’t usually start before the age of thirty or forty years old and it is commonest after the age of fifty. It affects women more than men and although it is so common that it is difficult to be certain about this it does seem to affect some families more than others. People who are overweight are prone to osteoarthritis and if you have ever had an injury in a joint then you will be more likely to get osteoarthritis in that joint.

How Common Is Osteoarthritis?

It is difficult to say how many people get osteoarthritis because most sufferers manage without seeking medical help but millions are disabled by osteoarthritis and it is probably the commonest cause of disability in the western world.

How Quickly Does Osteoarthritis Develop?

It is rare for osteoarthritis to develop quickly. It usually starts slowly and builds up gradually over a period of years. Often, osteoarthritis develops so slowly that a sufferer may become quite seriously crippled without ever really noticing or complaining of any severe pain or disablement. It is, however, possible for an injury (even a relatively minor one) to exacerbate or accelerate osteoarthritis in a joint.

Which Joints Does Osteoarthritis Affect?

Osteoarthritis normally only affects joints below the waist. The hips, knees, ankles, hands and feet are the joints most commonly affected. Sometimes some of the joints in the back may be affected. Occasionally, only one joint will be affected by osteoarthritis but it is more common for two or three joints to be involved.

The Hips

The hip is a ball and socket joint which has a wide range of movement (only the shoulder joint has a wider range) but because it is an important weight bearing joint it is the most common joint in the body to be affected by osteoarthritis. People who are overweight are particularly likely to be affected. When osteoarthritis develops in the hip it causes increasing stiffness and even the slightest movement may be painful. Walking can be very difficult and even movements in bed can cause excruciating pain. When a hip is affected by osteoarthritis it gradually changes in shape and the end result can be that the leg on that side may effectively become noticeably shorter than the other leg – making walking particularly difficult and putting an additional strain on the rest of the body. Because people who have damaged hips may be unable to move about enough to look after themselves properly osteoarthritis of the hip is by far the commonest single cause of disablement today.

The Knees

Osteoarthritis in the knees can cause a wide range of deformities. It can make the knees look knobbly. It can produce a 'bow legged' look or a 'knock-kneed' look. Patients with osteoarthritis of the knees often have difficulty in walking up and down stairs. The noises which osteoarthritis of the knees make are awful and it is possible to hear creaking and grating noises whenever osteoarthritic knee joints are moved.

The Ankles

Although they have to carry the weight of the whole body the ankles are less likely than the hips or knees to develop osteoarthritis – possibly because the normal range of movement in the ankle joint is less than the range of movement in the hips or knees and the amount of wear and tear is, therefore, considerably less. The ankle joint is only responsible for up and down movements of the foot – other movements (such as rotating and tilting) are produced by joints within the foot.

The Feet

The commonest joint in the foot to be affected by osteoarthritis is the joint at the base of the big toe. Problems at this joint are usually caused by long term pressure produced by shoes that don't fit properly. Women – who are more likely to wear tight shoes, high heeled shoes and shoes that are designed to look fashionable rather than to provide the feet with any protection or support – are far more likely to suffer from this particular type of osteoarthritis than men are.

The Shoulders

Only rarely affected by osteoarthritis – and usually only after injury.

The Elbows

Like the shoulders the elbows are only rarely affected by osteoarthritis – and, again, usually only after injury. The rarity of osteoarthritis in the shoulders and the elbows shows quite clearly just how important excess weight can be in the development of osteoarthritis of the knees and hips (which are joints of similar design and a similar range of movements).

The Hands

When osteoarthritis affects the hands it most commonly affects the joint at the base of the thumb and the joints at the ends of the fingers. Small, hard nodules often form at the backs of affected joints in the hand and although these are usually painless they can add to the stiffness of the joints.

What Are The Symptoms Of Osteoarthritis?

Pain is by far the most important symptom of osteoarthritis and can vary from a dull and persistent but often bearable ache to a sharp, gnawing pain. Usually worse after joints have been used a lot (that invariably means at the end of the day) the pain of osteoarthritis is produced when pain endings in the bones and ligaments are stimulated. The dull, deep and generalised ache in and around the affected joints is caused by changes in the pressure within the bones – which is itself a result of the failure of the joint to function properly. The sharper, more acute pain of osteoarthritis is usually produced when a ligament catches on or is stretched by a piece of irregular bone in the joint. In addition to these 'internal' pains there may sometimes be a feeling of tenderness over an affected joint.

The second significant symptom of osteoarthritis is stiffness which is usually worst in the mornings or after any period of rest or inactivity. Most sufferers of osteoarthritis find that their joints are worse if they spend a long time in the same position. Regular, gentle movements of a joint help to keep stiffness at bay although when a joint is affected by osteoarthritis its range of movement is usually less than the range of movement in a perfectly healthy joint.

Finally, there may be some swelling of osteoarthritic joints. In particular, nodules may appear around the finger joints and the knee joints may swell as fluid accumulates.

Osteoarthritis Is For Life

Osteoarthritis does not usually come and go and nor does it have ‘active’ and ‘inactive’ phases in the way that rheumatoid arthritis does. Usually, once a joint develops osteoarthritis it remains osteoarthritic for life.

Joint Damage May Result in Disablement

Osteoarthritis is a major cause of disablement. Since it is the knees and hips which are most commonly affected sufferers often have difficulty in walking, stooping, bending and stretching. They may also have difficulty in getting into and out of soft, ‘comfortable’ chairs.

Osteoarthritis Can Cause Inactivity And Depression

Because osteoarthritis causes disablement and makes mentally alert individuals immobile it commonly also causes depression.

What Tests Can Be Done For Osteoarthritis?

The X-ray is the most important investigation. X-ray pictures of suspected joints will show how much damage has been done, what changes there have been to the bones and whether there is any narrowing of the joint space between the bones. Blood tests are of limited value but doctors sometimes take a sample of fluid from a joint to check for any signs of inflammation and to look to see if there are any crystals present in the joint.

Can Osteoarthritis Be Treated?

Osteoarthritis cannot be ‘cured’ by any miracle pills (although surgeons can replace a damaged joint with a ‘new’ one) but there are many ways in which the symptoms can be controlled and the development of the disease can be minimised.

What Doctors Can Do:

Drugs

Drugs will not cure osteoarthritis nor will they affect the progress of the disease or prevent further damage but drugs can help relieve pain and by relieving pain they can help you to keep your joints mobile and to avoid further stiffening developing. Pain killing drugs such as aspirin and paracetamol are the drugs most commonly used to give relief to sufferers from osteoarthritis and by relieving pain and combating inflammation they help reduce the amount of stiffness patients have to deal with. Many doctors also prescribe other drugs in the Non-Steroidal Anti Inflammatory group but steroids are unlikely to be as useful in the treatment of osteoarthritis since it the symptoms are caused by physical wear and tear within the

Injections

Injections can be performed to remove excess fluid and, if there is any inflammation in the joint, a steroid injection may be useful. However, since osteoarthritis is usually caused by wear and tear rather than inflammation steroid injections are unlikely to be as effective as they can be in the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis.

Surgery

Since the 1960s surgeons around the world have been replacing osteoarthritic hip joints with artificial joints and today hip replacement operations are commonplace and immensely successful. Indeed, hip replacement surgery has been so successful that many surgeons are now replacing other joints – particularly knees and joints in the hands.

The operation to remove and replace an osteoarthritic hip joint is relatively safe and straightforward to perform (it has been done on patients in their nineties). The osteoarthritic hip joint is simply removed and a metal and plastic replacement is glued into the patient’s own bones. The success rate is high with most patients standing on their own feet a day or two after the operation and walking within two or three weeks. Advances are constantly being made in the design of joint replacements and, in particular, in the type of materials used to provide an effective long life replacement. It is, as you can imagine, difficult to mimic the efficiency of the human joint but artificial joints are being made which can last for fifteen years of fairly active movement.

Joint replacement is not the only type of surgery offered to patients with osteoarthritis. Sometimes it is possible to cut through the bone near to an osteoarthritic joint and to take pressure off the joint by realigning the bone. This sort of operation is called an osteotomy and in addition to removing pain and pressure from the area it can also stimulate the body to heal itself.

Physiotherapy

A physiotherapist can help to reduce pain and stiffness and to keep joints mobile.

Aids

If you are crippled or disabled in any way by osteoarthritis then you will undoubtedly be able to retain more of your independence by using some of the many available aids and appliances. (Some are described at the end of this book).

What Can Alternative Or Complementary Therapists Do To Help Combat Osteoarthritis?

Because osteoarthritis is a disease which is usually caused by wear and tear within a joint (or joints) there is little that alternative or complementary therapists can do to provide permanent relief of symptoms. However, alternative and complementary therapists are often able to help relieve pain. Many patients have found that acupuncture is an extremely effective way of combating pain.

What Can You Do To Help Overcome Osteoarthritis?

Lose unnecessary weight

If you stop and think about it then it makes perfect sense that if you have arthritis of any kind you should try to lose any excess weight.

Osteoarthritis, which commonly affects large, weight bearing joints such as the hips and the knees is particularly likely to be made worse if you are overweight.

Sadly, of course, most of the people who try to lose weight fail. Even if they lose weight successfully in the short term most will put all their weight back on again within a few months. They fail because instead of changing their bad eating habits they try to lose weight by going on unnatural diets. Then, when they go back to their former eating habits, they simply put all the weight back on again.

If you are going to lose weight permanently then you really have to make sure that you change your eating habits permanently.

Here are two pieces of valuable advice which should help you lose your excess, unwanted weight – and keep it off!

1. Set Yourself A Manageable Target

Most slimmers start off by setting themselves impossible targets. They decide how much they need to lose and then aim at losing all of that excess weight – which they may have accumulated over a period of years – in just a few weeks. I once organised a survey of slimmers and discovered to my absolute horror that around nine out of every ten were aiming at a target weight that was far too low for them – worse still all of them were hoping to lose their weight at a completely unrealistic rate.

The problem with setting yourself an impossible target is that you will almost certainly fail. And then, when you fail, you will be depressed; you will think of yourself as a slimming failure and you will probably abandon your plans to lose weight. Failure breeds failure and once a would-be slimmer has failed she (or he) will probably just give up, abandon all hope and put up with their excess weight.

So, the first thing you should do is to set yourself a realistic target. Once you have decided roughly how much you should weigh you can, of course, simply subtract that from your current weight to find out how much you need to lose. Then, since you should aim at losing around two pounds a week, divide the total amount of weight you need to lose by two to find the number of weeks that your weight loss programme should last.

I know that this may sound a slow way of losing weight but even if you only lose two pounds a week you will be able to lose a massive 26 pounds in three months and 52 pounds in six months.

Once you've worked out your long term target, and obtained your doctor's permission to begin to diet, give yourself some short term aims. Decide, for example, that you are going to try to lose eight pounds in the next month. And then weigh yourself just once a week to check on your progress. (Don't weigh yourself too often – your weight will fluctuate naturally from day to day and if you weigh yourself several times a day as some people do then you will probably depress yourself when you realise that your weight sometimes goes up a little when you think it ought to be going down).

The big advantage of this simple approach is that every time you hit a small and realistic slimming target you will think of yourself as a success. Every time you lose a bit more of your unwanted weight you will feel like a winner. And once you feel like a successful slimmer your confidence will be boosted and you will tackle your next slimming target with renewed enthusiasm.

2. Only Eat When You Are Hungry

There is an appetite control centre – an extremely impressive and powerful automatic device – is hidden deep inside every human brain. The power of the appetite control centre is quite remarkable; it can make sure that you never become short of essential vitamins and minerals and it can make sure that you never weigh too much or too little.

All you have to do to take advantage of your appetite control centre is to learn to listen to it!

If you listen to your body – and you learn to eat when your body tells you to and to stop eating when it tells you to stop – then you will not go far wrong. If, in addition, you can make sure that you eat the foods your body tells you to eat you will not only stay slim but you will also stay healthy.

I have explained the virtues and values of this simple system to numerous slimmers and everyone who has had the small amount of determination it needs to try it out has succeeded – and has lost weight permanently. As far as I know there has never been a single failure.

This system is beautifully simple, it is foolproof, it doesn't cost any money, there are no side effects and it is permanent. It is hardly surprising if the only problem with it is that some people think it sounds too good to be true.

'Why,' ask the sceptics, 'am I fat if my brain already contains an appetite control centre that is supposed to keep me slim?'

There is a simple answer to that apparently difficult question.

The truth is that most of us have lost the art of listening to our own bodies. We have, sadly, acquired many bad eating habits and we allow these to overrule our internal appetite control centre.

We eat for all sorts of 'bad' reasons.

We eat not because we are hungry but because we are bored (and food provides us with excitement); because we are depressed (and eating cheers us up) and because we are guilty (and food helps us to forget our guilt). We eat at fixed meal times (whether we are hungry or not) because we have been taught to eat at fixed meal times. We finish up all the food on our plates (whether or not we need it) because when we were small we were told about the starving millions – and reminded that they would be grateful for the food we were leaving. We eat more than we need because when we were bottle fed our mothers taught us to empty the bottle – rather than to listen to our own appetite control centres telling us that we were full.

And so it goes on.

Over the years we acquire many bad eating habits. We ignore our appetite control centres. And so it is hardly surprising that we end up getting fat.

The single most important secret of permanent slimming success is to eat when you are hungry – and to stop eating when you are no longer hungry.

Twenty five top slimming tips

1. Give up eating meals. Eating five or six small snacks instead of three large meals will help your body adjust its intake to its needs. People who 'snack' lose weight much more successfully than people who over-fill themselves with food three or four times a day.

2. *Stand up for yourself.* Don't let other people decide what you eat (or when you eat it). If you're full – say so!

3. *Set yourself easy slimming targets.* Slimmers who try to get rid of all their excess weight in a month will fail – as will people who try to lose too much weight. Decide what your ideal weight should be and then aim at losing two pounds a week.

4. *Only ever eat when you are hungry.* And stop when you are full. Every time you are about to put food into your mouth ask yourself whether or not you really need it.

5. *Don't eat in the evening.* If you eat when you're sitting down – or about to go to bed – your body will store the unwanted food as fat. You should do most of your eating early in the day – so that your body can burn up the food.

6. *Start a compost heap.* Never be afraid to throw food away if you don't want it. Most people who have a weight problem hate seeing food wasted and will finish up the scraps off other peoples' plates rather than dump unwanted food into the bin.

7. *Take regular exercise.* It will help tone up your muscles and burn up extra energy. Swimming and walking are both excellent and stress free.

8. *Don't worry about weighing food.* Allow your body to help you diet successfully by deciding when – and how much – you need to eat.

9. *Don't Feed hunger immediately*. If you feel hungry and find yourself reaching for food wait five minutes. Then – if you still feel hungry – you can eat.

10. *Don't start eating too soon.* When you sit down to a meal do not immediately start shovelling food into your mouth. Sit for a moment or two and relax. Try to get rid of accumulated tensions. Then eat slowly and concentrate on what you are doing. This way you will be far more likely to hear your body 'talking' to you.

11. *Stop between courses and rest*. If you've had enough to eat get up and leave the table. Never stay sitting at the table after you've finished eating or else there is a risk that you will nibble at whatever is left.

12. *Use sweeteners instead of sugar*.

13. *Never reward yourself with food.* If you are pleased or proud or you want to celebrate do so with a bunch of flowers, a new tape or a book or magazine. Food is for eating.

14. *Don't spend too much time looking at mouth watering food*. There is evidence now to show that you can get fat just by looking. When you see, smell or think of food your body starts to prepare its digestive processes. Saliva is released in your mouth and your stomach produces juices to help digest the coming food. The pancreas is stimulated and insulin is produced. The insulin then starts to convert the glucose in your bloodstream into fat as your body clears the way for the food it thinks is on the way. However, as the amount of sugar in your blood falls so you will begin to feel genuinely hungry. And you will need to eat. Your body will have been tricked by its own senses.

15. *Don't weigh yourself every day.* Once a week is enough. Your weight will vary daily for all sorts of reasons and you are likely to become obsessed or depressed if you weigh yourself too often.

16. *Don't diet alone*. If you find slimming alone too difficult, consider joining a slimming club. There are hundreds of them around. Look in the local telephone book or ask your doctor. Many people get support and encouragement from slimming with others.

17. *Examine your bad habits.* Spend a little time working out how you acquired your bad eating habits. What bad eating habits did you learn as a child? Awareness of your bad eating habits will make them easier to conquer.

18. *Eat most of your meals sitting at the table.* Never eat in front of the TV set. You need to concentrate on what

you are doing if you are going to use the power of your mind to help you slim successfully. Do not carry food around your home – eat only in the kitchen or dining room.

19. *Avoid "special" slimming diets.* Do not follow any 'magical' or 'wonder' diets that promise you instant slenderness. And don't waste your money on slimming pills or supplements.

20. *Watch out for celebrations.* If you have to attend a big dinner or celebration meal and you are worried that it will ruin your diet have a snack half an hour beforehand. It will spoil your appetite and ensure that you feel full long before you do your diet too much damage.

21. *Don't be a food "tester".* Try to resist the temptation to taste food when you are preparing it. Many cooks kid themselves that they are testing food as they cook. But by the time the meal is ready they have eaten far more than a 'sample'. This sort of eating has nothing to do with hunger – and is probably one of the reasons why so many people who work in the catering industry are overweight.

22. *Don't eat by the clock.* Remember that you don't have to have a cup of coffee and a biscuit just because it is break-time. Instead of eating why not read a magazine, write a letter or make a telephone call?

23. *Throw out your old clothes.* When you have lost weight, throw out the clothes that no longer fit you. If you keep them then you are admitting that you do not expect your weight loss to be permanent.

24. *Check the effects of drugs.* Many prescribed pills can produce an unwanted weight gain. Drugs such as steroids can do this, for example. If you taking any prescribed drug talk to your doctor and ask him if he thinks it could affect your ability to lose weight. There may be an alternative drug that your doctor can prescribe.

25. *Eat rice!* Rice is an excellent – and in the West often underused – food. Brown rice is filling and full of nourishment. It makes a good alternative to potatoes. Wholemeal pasta, too, is another underused food in many homes.

Case history

Enid had suffered from osteoarthritis for seven years and during that time she had steadily put on weight.

When I first saw her she weighed four stones more than she should have done and she found walking so difficult and so painful that she rarely moved out of her home. She looked ten years older than she was.

In the mornings she would lie in bed until her husband helped her up. Then she would spend most of the day sitting in an easy chair by the fire. Because she did not go out she lost interest in her appearance and she let herself go. She never bothered with her hair, she never wore make up and she invariably wore the same colourless, shapeless and rather grubby clothes.

Inevitably, because she was bored, she spent much of her time eating. And because she took very little exercise to burn up the food which she was consuming she steadily put on weight. Her life had become a vicious circle: her osteoarthritis made it difficult for her to move; she ate more than her body needed; she put on weight; and as she put on the extra weight so she found movement ever more painful.

I persuaded Enid to try to lose weight.

Within a month she had lost over half a stone and within three months she had lost two stones! Most important of all she had lost this weight not by going on a short term diet but by changing her eating habits and her attitude to food. To her delight she found that without the excess weight to carry around she could walk and move far more easily. Her osteoarthritis had not changed but without so much excess weight to carry her joints were far less painful when she walked.

Today Enid is unrecognisable. She looks ten years younger than her real age. She and her husband go out together several evenings a week and occasionally she has even tried a little old fashioned ballroom dancing.

Dieting has changed Enid's life!

Learn To Relax

When muscles are tightened and tensed by stress joints will suffer more than when muscles are loose and relaxed.

Learn How To Deal With Pain

Pain is the single most important symptom associated with osteoarthritis. Although drugs such as aspirin can be extremely effective in helping to combat pain there are many other techniques for controlling pain. (See Chapter Five).

Exercise Whenever You Can

Regular exercise will help to keep joints loose and supple. If you spend too long keeping still (to prevent discomfort) you will find that your joints are much worse when you eventually have to move. Combating osteoarthritis is a compromise: when your joints are sore or painful and when movement hurts then you should rest, but when you can move you should. A regular exercise programme should push all your joints (including those not yet affected by the disease) through a full range of movements. But you must consult your doctor and obtain his approval before you begin any exercise programme.

Build Up Your Self Confidence

Sufferers from osteoarthritis are, like sufferers from rheumatoid arthritis, likely to lack self confidence.

Learn To Let Your Feelings Show

Holding in anger and sadness will make your osteoarthritis far worse. You will benefit enormously if you can let your emotions show.

Learn To Laugh

Laughter probably won’t help osteoarthritis sufferers as much as it will help patients with rheumatoid arthritis. But it can help.

Give Up Eating Meat

A vegetarian diet seems to help patients with arthritis – though whether it helps non inflammatory types of arthritis such as osteoarthritis as much as it helps inflammation disorders such as rheumatoid arthritis is open to question. However, I firmly believe that a meat free diet is generally healthier than a diet which includes meat.

CHAPTER FOUR: OTHER ARTHRITIC DISORDERS

Introduction

Rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis are, without a doubt, the two commonest and most important arthritic disorders. But they are not the only arthritic disorders. As I have already explained there are well over one hundred other types of arthritis – far too many to discuss them all in detail here. In this chapter I will describe the commonest and most important of the other arthritic disorders. Many of the treatment techniques I have already described in chapters two and three are effective in the control of these disorders – and in the relief of symptoms and many of the techniques described in later chapters are also useful. Please talk to your own doctor and ask for his advice about which treatments will be most useful for you. You should not try anything new without first obtaining your doctor's permission.

Ankylosing spondylitis

Joints involved:

The joints of the spine, particularly the lower back are the ones most commonly affected but sometimes the larger joints of the body (the hips, knees and shoulders) also become inflamed and stiffen up. ‘Spondylitis’ means inflammation of the spine and ‘ankylosing’ means stiffening. Although the disease tends to start at the bottom of the spine it usually travels upwards over a period of years.

Usually affects:

The most common sufferers are young, white males, between the ages of 15 and 25 – but women can be affected. Ankylosing spondylitis tends to run in families.

Caused by:

The stiffness is caused by an inflammation where the ligaments are attached to bones but just what causes this inflammation is still a mystery. Ankylosing spondylitis may be inherited (it is definitely associated with a particular gene) and may be caused by an infection or some other environmental factor. Ankylosing spondylitis is quite different to rheumatoid arthritis (another inflammatory disorder). In rheumatoid arthritis the inflammation is inside the joints but in ankylosing spondylitis the inflammation affects the edges of the joints. As time goes by the inflamed joint edges turn into bone – and it is this that causes the stiffness. Eventually, the new bone may join two vertebrae together completely so that part of the back becomes completely rigid.

Symptoms

Pain and stiffness in the back and any other joints involved are the first and most obvious symptoms. If a nerve is trapped there may be pain going down the back of the leg. These symptoms are usually worse in the mornings and after resting and they are relieved by exercise. The symptoms gradually get worse and worse as time goes by – with the patient becoming stiffer and finding bending increasing difficult. There is also sometimes inflammation of the eye(s), the skin and other parts of the body. Ankylosing spondylitis tends to burn itself out around the age of fifty or so as the inflammation becomes less intense.

How common is it?

Ankylosing spondylitis is the third most common form of arthritis (after osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis). It affects between 1 in 200 and 1 in 400 people.

Treatment

Regular exercise is vitally important since it can help to delay stiffening of the spine. For the same reason physiotherapy is also important. Drugs normally used in the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis are sometimes used to help control the pain and stiffness associated with ankylosing spondylitis.

Gout

Joints involved:

Any joint in the body can be affected but the big toes are the ones most commonly involved. The ankles, knees, wrists, elbows and fingers are also common sites for gout.

Usually affects:

Men rather than women (in a ratio of 20 to 1). Gout usually affects individuals between the ages of 35 and 60 and it runs in families. Most gout sufferers are rather overweight and often also have high blood pressure.

Caused by:

Gout develops when the levels of uric acid in the blood get too high and uric acid crystals accumulate in the joints. Normally, uric acid is formed when waste products are broken down in the body. In a healthy individual the uric acid is excreted in the urine but gout sufferers fail to get rid of all the uric acid their bodies are making. There are several possible reasons for this. The kidneys may not be damaged – and not getting rid of uric acid properly. There may be an inherited tendency to high levels or uric acid. Or the problem may simply be caused by eating too many foods which are broken down to produce high levels of uric acid. Prescribed drugs can sometimes trigger a high uric acid level – and an attack of gout.

Symptoms:

Gout usually begins with a fairly sudden onset of severe pain in a joint which is usually swollen and rather bluish red in colour. There may also be a moderate fever. The symptoms of gout tend to come and go quite unexpectedly. The first attack of gout usually begins with an itchy, swollen toe which gradually becomes painful. If gout is untreated it may eventually lead to joint damage – producing long term symptoms rather similar to those associated with osteoarthritis.

How common is it?

Fairly common – probably similar in incidence to ankylosing spondylitis. But many sufferers only get one or two attacks a year.

Treatment:

Patients with acute gout are usually advised to rest. Anti-inflammatory drugs are sometimes prescribed to ease pain and some patients need long term treatment with drugs which prevent the accumulation of uric acid or which help the kidneys to get rid of uric acid and which thereby help to prevent pain recurring. Many patients notice an improvement in their condition if they lose weight and avoid certain foods or drugs. Foods which are particularly likely to cause problems include: meat extracts, game, asparagus, spinach, strawberries, rhubarb, fish roe, herring, salmon, whitebait, liver, kidneys and sweetbreads. Drinks which can cause gout include: carbonated drinks, beer, sparkling wines, port, champagne and may other kinds of alcohol. Treatment of gout is important because if uric acid levels are allowed to remain high the kidneys may be damaged by an accumulation of crystals.

Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis

Joints involved:

There are several different types of juvenile rheumatoid arthritis but the small joints of the fingers, toes, wrists and ankles are the ones most commonly affected. The neck, shoulders, hip and knees may also be involved.

Usually affects:

Children of any age can be affected but juvenile arthritis affects girls more often than boys. It most commonly starts either very early (between the ages of two and four) or just before or around puberty.

Caused by:

Very little is known about the cause of juvenile rheumatoid arthritis although it does appear to be inherited.

Symptoms

The illness usually begins with a high fever and most sufferers start feeling unwell before any joint problems appear. Children with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis may fail to grow properly, may lose weight and may complain of abdominal pains. The heart, liver, spleen and lymph nodes may be affected, the eyes may be inflamed and there may also be a skin rash. The joint symptoms may not start until the disease has been present for several months.

How common is it?

Quite rare.

Treatment

Three quarters of childhood sufferers from juvenile rheumatoid arthritis recover completely. Careful exercise, the splinting of affected joints to protect them, physiotherapy and rest all help. Children are usually advised to avoid contact sports which might result in joint injury. Both drugs and surgery are sometimes used.

Polymyalgia rheumatica

Joints involved:

The hips and shoulders, thighs and neck are most commonly affected.

Usually affects:

Polymyalgia rheumatica can affect both men and women but affects two or three times as many women as men. It doesn't usually affect anyone under the age of 50.

Caused by:

The cause of the pain and discomfort associated with polymyalgia rheumatica is unknown.

Symptoms:

The main symptoms of polymyalgia rheumatica are tenderness and discomfort in the hips, shoulders and neck. The discomfort is usually at its worst early on in the morning, gradually getting worse later on in the day. Many patients have difficulty in getting out of bed. Patients often also complain of tiredness, depression, weakness, weight loss and fever. The symptoms may develop gradually or suddenly.

How common is it?

Uncommon

Treatment:

Steroids usually provide dramatic relief. Indeed, the results are so spectacular that giving steroids is sometimes regarded as a diagnostic test for this disease.

Psoriatic arthritis

Joints involved:

Psoriasis is a fairly common skin disease in which patches of skin become inflamed, red and scaly. Psoriatic arthritis can affect any joint in the body but is usually restricted to just one or two joints. The joints near to the finger tips are particularly likely to be affected.

Usually affects:

Psoriatic arthritis affects one in ten psoriasis sufferers.

Caused by:

No one really understands the link between psoriasis and arthritis (although there are lots of theories). It seems likely, however, that both skin and joints are affected by inflammation.

Symptoms:

The symptoms depend upon the type of arthritis that develops. Some patients develop symptoms similar to rheumatoid arthritis (although the symptoms tend to be less severe). Others get ankylosing spondylitis. Individual joints – particular in the fingers and toes may be affected or the disease may flare up intermittently in different joints around the body. Psoriatic arthritis tends to be even more unpredictable than other forms of arthritis.

How common is it?

Psoriasis affects approximately one in fifty people. And one in ten of those get psoriatic arthritis.

Treatment:

The treatment of the joint symptoms will depend upon the type of arthritis involved. Usually skin and joint problems are treated separately because the powerful drugs which can treat both problems are likely to produce unpleasant side effects.

Reactive arthritis

Joints involved:

The joints of the legs – knees, ankles and feet – are affected more commonly than any other.

Usually affects:

Men are affected more than women and young adults (between 18 and 35) are the group most likely to suffer.

Caused by:

Reactive arthritis is triggered by an infection of the bowel or urinary tract. Sometimes the trigger is a sexually transmitted infection.

Symptoms:

The joints affected are likely to develop arthritic type symptoms but in addition to an inflammation of the joints there is likely to be an inflammation of the eyes, skin and mouth. Patients usually complain of sore eyes, skin rashes, pain on passing urine and mouth ulcers as well as the joint symptoms.

How common is it?

Uncommon.

Treatment:

Treatment will depend very much on the symptoms. The infection which has caused the generalised inflammation will probably need treating first of all but if the joints are badly affected anti inflammatory drugs may be needed. If fluid has accumulated in the joints some of it may need to be drawn off. Painful joints may need rest. Reactive arthritis does not usually produce any long term damage.

Rheumatic fever

Joints involved:

Rheumatic fever affects large joints such as the knees but moves from joint to joint – rarely affecting any one joint for more than a few days.

Usually affects:

Children between the ages of 5 and 15.

Caused by:

The disease starts as a throat infection which triggers a complex immune response within the body.

Symptoms:

Patients usually complain of a persistent fever and pains which flit from joint to joint. As soon as one joint recovers another becomes affected. The joints are swollen, painful and hot. There is usually a history of a sore throat some two weeks or so before the joint pains develop. The arthritic symptoms normally last a few weeks. The most dangerous aspect of rheumatic fever is that about one half of all patients who contract the disease develop heart trouble – though the evidence of the damage may not become apparent for several years. Rheumatic fever may also cause a skin rash and small lumps in the skin. If the nervous system is affected the patient may develop irregular, uncontrollable, jerky movements.

How common is it?

Rare in the developed countries but still common in Asia and Africa.

Treatment:

Rest is vitally important. Penicillin is normally needed to deal with the infection. Aspirin is the most effective pain killer. If the heart valves are affected heart surgery may be needed later on.

Rheumatism

Rheumatism is not a disease but a word which is used to describe just about any type of ache or pain affecting a bone, joint or muscle.

Septic Arthritis

Joints involved:

Any joint can be affected.

Usually affects:

Septic arthritis can affect anyone but is particularly likely to affect patients already suffering from rheumatoid arthritis or diabetes. It is also a possible complication of injections into a joint or surgery on or around a joint. Because it lowers the body's immune response to infection steroid treatment makes septic arthritis more likely.

Caused by:

A variety of organisms can cause a joint infection.

Symptoms:

The joint involved is usually swollen, painful, hot and very tender. Joint movement is limited. There is usually a fever too.

How common is it?

Fairly common.

Treatment:

Antibiotics are usually needed to overcome the infection. The joint may need to be drained.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE CONTROL OF PAIN

Introduction

Whatever sort of arthritis you suffer from pain is more likely to cause misery, unhappiness and despair than all your other symptoms put together. When left untreated or badly treated pain leads to physical and mental exhaustion, to disablement and to chronic depression. Patients with persistent pain need to spend long periods in bed and are far more likely to develop other serious medical complications. Patients with pain get better more slowly and need more support from friends, family and professionals.

Sadly, the pain caused by arthritis is not always treated well and many doctors tell patients who are suffering from arthritis pain simply to ‘take things easy’ or to ‘grit their teeth and be brave’. Too often doctors turn to drug treatment as a first line of attack, not necessarily because drugs are best but because they will have received all their post graduate training from drug companies anxious to sell their products.

For many years researchers have been searching for, identifying and testing new ways of dealing with pain. Many of the techniques they have discovered are safe, effective and inexpensive. But the drug companies have no interest in non drug therapies and so the majority of practising doctors, who get much of their education from drug company sponsored literature, continue to ignore these treatments. Read the rest of this chapter carefully. You will, I hope, find some of the pain relieving techniques I have explained exciting and useful.

What is pain?

The whole story of just how pain reaches your brain has long mystified scientists. The traditional theory, first made popular by Descartes in 1664, was that when a pain receptor is stimulated the pain message travels straight up to the brain. Descartes believed that it was all very simple – rather like a campanologist tugging on a bell rope to start the church bells ringing.

This theory was popular with doctors until fairly recently and many believed that in cases of intractable, long term pain it would help to cut the nerves carrying the pain impulses up to the brain.

Unfortunately, this old fashioned theory doesn't stand up very well. One major problem is that cutting the nerve doesn't stop pain impulses getting through. Indeed, it may make the pain worse. A second problem is the fact that pain can continue long after the original stimulus has been removed. A third is that pain can occur spontaneously and may spread to apparently unrelated parts of the body. And, finally, there is the problem that psychological factors can interfere quite dramatically with pain perception. Under some circumstances awful stimuli seem to produce no perceptible pain at all. Whereas under other circumstances modest stimulations can produce terrible pain. If we try to stick with the simple 'bell rope' theory of pain none of this makes any sense at all.

Then, in 1965 a psychologist called Ronald Melzack and an anatomist called Patrick Wall produced their 'gate control theory' which revolutionised the way doctors thought about pain. Melzack and Wall claimed that only a certain amount of sensory information can be processed by the nervous system at any one time and that when too much information tries to get through the limited number of junctions in the spinal cord result in some of the signals being shut out. The theory is that there is, in the spinal cord, a mechanism rather like a garden gate. The gate can only accept a limited number of messages through at any one time and if too many messages try to get through at once then the gate becomes blocked.

The gate control theory rests upon the fact that messages arrive at the spinal cord in three quite separate ways. First, there are the two main types of nerve fibre which detect pain and other sensations and which carry electrical impulses produced by the receptors in the body's muscles and other tissues. The thicker of these two types of fibre carry sensations such as touch and pressure while the other, thinner fibres carry pain messages. These two fibres differ in various ways. First, the thinner fibres can regrow if they are damaged whereas the thicker fibres cannot regenerate and tend to diminish in number over the years. The second, and much more important difference, is that the thicker fibres carry their nervous impulses much more rapidly than the thinner fibres do. In addition to the messages travelling up towards your brain there are, of course, also likely to be instructions travelling down from the brain towards your muscles and other tissues.

Under normal circumstances the junctions or 'gates' in your spinal cord can carry these three different types of message quite comfortably but if too many impulses reach the spinal cord the 'gates' just cannot cope: they shut down and won't accept any more messages at all. It is this inability of the cells in the spinal cord to cope with the number of messages they are getting which explains why some stimuli produce far more savage pains than other apparently comparable stimuli. It also explains how simply rubbing a sore or injured area can help get rid of the pain.

Imagine again that you have carelessly hit your thumb with your hammer. Your instinct will be to rub the thumb vigorously. There will now be two sorts of impulses racing along your nerves to try to get into your spinal cord and up to your brain: pain impulses, travelling along the thinner nerve fibres, and touch impulses, travelling along the thicker nerve fibres.

Inevitably, the 'gate' will be blocked and some impulses will be unable to get through. And since the touch impulses are travelling faster than the pain impulses they will get there first. Most of the pain impulses will be unable to get through.

Rubbing a sore or damaged area is a natural response designed to stimulate the sending of simple 'sensation' messages and thereby blocking the passage of pain messages.

There is another way in which the 'gate' can be blocked.

If enough messages are coming down from the brain towards the tissues then the 'gate' will be blocked from the other side and, once again, the pain messages won't be able to get through. So, if you are concentrating very hard on what you are doing with your hammer you may not even notice that you've hit yourself until much later when you see the bruising! This is, of course, why you can work in the garden and get scratched without being aware of it and why you can cut yourself in the kitchen without realising it. It is why a footballer can carry on playing even though he has a broken neck, how a soldier can carry on fighting even though his foot has been shot off, why a man can pick up his severed arm and walk calmly with it to the nearest hospital. (All true stories). And it also why two young lovers can stand outside in the freezing cold without noticing that they are getting frostbitten.

Of course, if the number of impulses travelling along the smaller fibres and carrying the pain messages greatly exceeds the number of fast moving messages travelling along the larger fibres and the messages coming down from the brain then the pain message will get through the 'gate' and you will become aware of the pain.

The ‘gate control’ theory helps to explain why pain is such an unpredictable force. And it shows why ‘alternative’ pain control techniques can be so effective.

The conquering of pain – the TENS machine

Having realised just how rubbing a sore or painful place can relieve pain the next step for scientists was to come up with a way of stimulating the passage of non painful sensations even more efficiently. And the experts came up with the idea of using electricity to produce the necessary stimulus.

After various experiments it was discovered that by giving patients small pocket sized devices which sent out a series of electrical pulses the passage of pain messages could be blocked. The technique was called Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation and the devices which were used were called TENS machines. It was quickly found that in addition to sending sensory messages which blocked the passage of pain impulses the TENS machines also encouraged the body to produce its own endorphins or pain relieving hormones.

Numerous studies have shown that patients with disorders such as arthritis can benefit enormously from using TENS machines. There are very few side effects – and the machines cost relatively little to buy (compared to the cost of a year's supply of pain killers they are a very good buy).

If you want to try a TENS machine talk to your own doctor. Although many members of the medical profession are still unaware of the existence or usefulness of TENS machines (largely because most doctors still get most of their post graduate education from drug companies) a growing number are learning about them. If your own doctor has never heard of these extremely effective devices ask him to arrange for you to see a consultant at your local hospital or, alternatively, ask him to refer you to the nearest specialist pain clinic.

Know How – and When To Rest

It is a mistake to rest too much. If you suffer regularly from sore or painful joints you should try to keep as active as you possibly can and you should try to move your joints whenever they are not painful.

The danger is that if you rest too much then both your body and your mind will stagnate; your muscles will become weak and flabby (and you will run a greater than usual risk of falling when you do try to walk or move about) and your mind will slow down. But, having said all that, there is absolutely no doubt that there are times when rest is important. And it is vitally important that as an arthritis sufferer you know when to rest and how to rest.

First, the ‘when’.

You must learn to recognise when your body really needs rest, and when too much activity will make your pain worse rather than better. The most important thing to remember is that whenever you have an acute or sudden attack of pain you should make sure that you rest. Do not try to be brave or a ‘hero’ for if you do then the chances are that you will damage your joints even more. You should always avoid doing anything which makes your pain worse or which seems to make your condition worse in any other way. This does not, however, mean that you should never move any part of your body that feels uncomfortable. Many arthritis sufferers are never really free of discomfort. It is vital to keep moving those joints which are sore for if you do not move them there is a real danger that they will deteriorate even further. You should try to differentiate between genuine and threatening pain (which means that you should rest as much as you can) and modest and bearable discomfort (when you can move without creating extra pain).

You should also be prepared to rest whenever you feel tired or worn out. Some arthritis sufferers who have heard that patients who do not move will become ‘fixed’ in one position and permanently disabled, are so determined to keep mobile and active that they force themselves to keep moving all the time – even when they are totally exhausted.

As I have already explained it is important to keep active and busy but if you try to force your body to do too much by pushing yourself more and more then you will exhaust your reserves and you will, ironically, increase your susceptibility to pain. It is vitally important that you learn to recognise your limits. You must be prepared to take a break when you feel that your body needs a rest.

In addition to learning when to rest you must also learn how to rest so that your body benefits. For example, it is extremely important that you do not succumb to the temptation to put pillows under sore joints and to hold uncomfortable limbs in fixed positions. There is a real risk that if you do this then your joint will become fixed and quite immobile in an entirely impractical and very difficult position. It is important never to forget that painful joints can stiffen up very quickly indeed. As well as taking short breaks when your joints are stiff and painful you should also try to take longer term breaks when you can. Like everyone else arthritis sufferers are vulnerable to stress and pressure and anxiety and when exposed to problems their general health will usually suffer.

Inevitably, when your general health suffers your joints will become more painful. So taking regular breaks away from your everyday stresses and worries is an important part of your treatment and pain control programme. You don’t have to travel abroad or go anywhere expensive, of course. These days it can often be cheaper to spend a few days out of season at the seaside than it is to stay at home. Try to make sure that you go somewhere peaceful and relaxing where you can unwind and escape from pressure. Remember that if your body needs a break then your mind almost certainly needs a break too.

Hidden influences – factors which affect the pain you feel

Have you ever come in from the garden, got into the bath and discovered that your arms and legs are covered in scratches and bruises? Have you ever been busy in the kitchen and then suddenly noticed that there is blood everywhere – from a finger you didn't even know you'd cut? Have you ever been for a long walk, arrived home tired but happy and then woken up next day feeling stiff and hardly able to move? In all those instances pain impulses – telling you to stop – just couldn't get through the 'gate' because you were engrossed in what you were doing and messages coming down from your brain telling your body what to do were blocking the pathways and leaving no room for pain messages.

I have already described how pain impulses travel to your brain – and can get held up. But there are other ways in which pain impulses can be hidden or arrested en route to your brain. Most important of all is the fact that for a pain to be felt the stimulus must exceed your personal pain threshold. If you are going to be aware that you have hit your thumb you must hit it with a certain amount of force. If you hit your thumb a light, glancing blow then you might be aware that your thumb has been 'touched' but you won't feel a 'pain'. You have to hit your thumb with a certain amount of force if your tissues are going to stimulate a nervous pain response.

Pain thresholds vary from one individual to another. But, more important still, your pain threshold varies from minute to minute according to a variety of hidden factors. Here are some of them:

Your attitude towards your pain:

If you think a pain is trivial and harmless you will ignore it and it will probably go away. If you think a pain is serious and potentially life threatening you will worry about it and it will not go away. Your attitude towards the pain can be more important than the strength of the pain itself.

Where you are and what you are doing:

During a big football match not long ago one of the goal-keepers broke his neck. But he carried on playing! He was so wrapped up in the game that he ignored his pain until the match had finished. Then he realised that he'd done something serious. If you're busy with an important tennis match you won't notice the blisters on your hand. If you're trying to reach succulent blackberries in a hedge you won't notice the scratches you get trying to reach them. Your ability to tolerate pain goes up dramatically when you are busy doing something that holds your attention. In one experiment volunteers found that they could put up with extra pain if they listened to music they liked.

How frightened you are:

Have you ever had toothache, booked an appointment to see the dentist and found that by the time you walked into the consulting room your pain had disappeared? You aren't alone if you have. It is very common. When you are first aware of an aching tooth your threshold is low. You are worried by the pain and you don't know how long it is going to last. Fear lowers your pain threshold and pain tolerance levels. As soon as you've got your appointment to see the dentist your anxiety begins to lift. You feel more confident. And because you know that relief will soon be available you suffer less from the pain.

Whether you are depressed:

Have you ever had a day when everything seems to go wrong? If you have then you know that by the end of it the smallest problem can become a crisis. A lost button, a missed bus or a mislaid pen can all seem horrendous. Small difficulties get taken out of all proportion when we feel low. Your response to pain is influenced by mood in exactly the same way. If you are feeling unhappy and you hit your thumb then the pain will seem worse than if you are feeling happy when you hit your thumb.

Your sex:

Women have much the same sort of pain threshold as men but they are less tolerant of pain than men. This is probably because men are taught to be 'strong' and not to cry out when in pain. On average men can tolerate pain for 20% longer than women.

The number of brothers and sisters you have:

Children who grow up with at least three other brothers and sisters are likely to have much higher pain tolerance levels than children who grow up with fewer brothers and sisters. Children with no brothers or sisters at all are likely to grow up with lower pain threshold and pain tolerance levels than anyone else.

Your age:

Your ability to tolerate pain will change as you get older. You will become better able to tolerate superficial pains and less able to tolerate deep pains.

Your nationality:

Italians and Indians have a low pain tolerance level while the English have a high pain tolerance level. Jews are less capable of coping with pain than Gentiles while North Europeans and Americans of North European extraction are better able to cope with pain than people from other countries. White skinned individuals tend to be better at tolerating pain than blacks. The Japanese and the Chinese are least capable of coping with pain.

What you learned as a child:

Children are influenced by their parents. If your parents made a fuss every time you got a knock or a bruise then you will have a comparatively low pain threshold and pain tolerance level. If, however, your parents took little notice when you complained of pain then you will have grown up indifferent to pain – with a high pain threshold and a great ability to tolerate pain. Children can ‘learn’ pain behaviour from their parents. If you grew up in a household where one or both parents complained of back trouble you are more likely to suffer from back pain.

What is the difference between pain threshold and pain tolerance?

Your pain threshold level is the point at which you start to notice pain. Your pain tolerance level is the amount of pain you can stand.

How to measure your pain

It is impossible to measure pain objectively. There are so many different factors involved that it is impossible for you to compare the pain you get in your joints with the pain your neighbour gets in her womb. But you can measure variations in a particular pain. You can tell whether or not a specific pain is getting better or worse. And by doing this you can tell whether or not a pain relieving technique that you are using is working.

Look through the list of words which follow and pick out the four which you think describe your pain most accurately:

sore (1)
dull (1)
tender (1)
annoying (1)
troublesome (1)
uncomfortable (1)
tiring (2)
hurting (2)
heavy (2)
distressing (2)
miserable (2)
sickening (2)
exhausting (3)
frightful (3)
wretched (3)
intense (3)
horrible (3)
punishing (3)
terrifying (4)
vicious (4)
killing (4)
unbearable (4)
excruciating (4)
intolerable (4)

Add up the numbers that follow each of the four words you have chosen. The total is your 'pain score'.

Next time you want to measure your pain look through the list again and repeat the procedure, comparing your total score with previous total scores.

Try to dominate your pain

Anyone who suffers from constant (or near constant) pain will confirm that before long the pain begins to take over. Many arthritis sufferers have confirmed to me that their pains and infirmities rule their lives and their relationships with other people.

'It started quite innocuously,' said one arthritis victim. 'When I first developed bad arthritis my wife was very kind and understanding. She made a fuss of me and looked after me and gradually started to do more and more things for me. She fetched things for me. If I dropped the paper she picked it up for me. If I wanted some pipe tobacco she walked to the corner shop and I let her. I let her because it was quicker for her to do things and I didn't have to make any effort. But eventually I realised that our relationship had changed. Instead of treating me like a partner she was treating me like a child. By then our relationship had changed permanently and it was too late to go back. In the end my arthritis ruined my marriage and resulted in my divorce.'

If you suffer from bad arthritis and you find it difficult to move and get about you will almost certainly find that the people who are close to you will want to help you. Friends and relatives will make you a cup of coffee, change the television channel for you, help tie your shoe laces and so on. They do all these things out of kindness and if the pain is really bad – and you genuinely cannot move – then their help will undoubtedly be received with grateful thanks. But if you allow people to look after you like this all the time then your well meaning friends and relatives will eventually change your life for you and they will allow you to be dominated completely by your arthritis.

Your friends and relatives will, of course, do these things because they love you, because they don't like to see you suffering and because they feel sympathetic towards you. They don't want to see you struggling and in pain.

But although the sympathy, attention, respect and physical help you get because of your pain and your disease will enable you to avoid work, gardening, household chores (and even sex if you want) your life will be changing and there is a real risk that the change will be permanent.

Gradually, your friends will teach you to behave like an invalid. You will slowly but certainly move away from living a normal life. Because you do not have to make the effort to walk to the corner shop or to pick up your newspaper your joints will stiffen up and eventually you will find that you simply cannot do these things even if you want to.

In the end your friends and relatives will probably feel frustrated as you become more and more of an invalid. They will feel inadequate because, despite all their efforts, your pain and disability will get worse rather than better. They will lose patience. And they won't know what else they can do to help you. They will feel embarrassed and even faintly irritated. And then they will feel guilty. Eventually their visits will become more and more infrequent. By then, however, it will be too late for you to escape from your role as a full time invalid. Because you will have been treated as an invalid and encouraged to think of yourself as an invalid you will have become an invalid. The longer you have been bed or chair bound the more difficult you will find it to break free. Your life will revolve around your pain because you will not be able to do anything else with your life apart from worry about your pain. And, to make things even worse, the weaker and more dispirited you become the more susceptible to pain you will become. You will also probably be addicted to pills of various kinds.

Don't say none of this will happen to you because it can and it will if you let it. Around the world it happens to thousands, probably millions of people, every year.

Learn to think positively

There are, however, things that you can do to stop all this happening to you – and to stop yourself being dominated by your pains and your arthritis. The key is that you must try to take a fairly strong and aggressive attitude towards your pain and your illness. You are the only person who can do this. Other people – the people who are closest to you and the professionals who work with you – almost certainly cannot or will not do it for you. Your friends and relatives will be driven by compassion, sympathy and love and their natural response will be to get you to give in to the pain. And the chances are that the professionals looking after you will do the same.

I am not, of course, suggesting that you should try to be a ‘hero’ and fight your pain or try to ignore it. As I have explained elsewhere that sort of attitude can be dangerous too for you may damage your joints if you try to move them when they are painful and stiff.

But when your pain is less critical you must take the initiative and try to ensure that you – not your arthritis – retain control of your life.

How do you do this?

Well, a good starting point is to try as hard as you can to take an active and positive role in your own treatment. Learn as much as you can about your disease, about what is causing your pain, about what makes it worse and about the ways in which you can help yourself. Reading this book is an excellent starting point for in these pages you will find a considerable amount of information about the various types of arthritis and many practical tips on the best ways to combat the disease.

Ask your doctor to explain things to you when he suggests new pills or other new forms of treatment. Try to regard your arthritis and the pain it brings as an enemy that can be controlled even if it cannot be conquered or banished completely. By doing whatever you can to control your own destiny and by making a genuine effort to take a positive and aggressive role in your own treatment you will help yourself to dominate your disease. By keeping interested and active you will reduce the level of your pain and by remaining positive and aggressive you will strengthen yourself and weaken your arthritis. You should be aware, too, that if you respond to your arthritis in a passive way there will be rewards. You need to be aware of this so that you can resist the temptations that will come your way.

For example, if you stay in bed all day you will be comfortable and warm and because people can see that you are ill they will probably be supportive and sympathetic. If you get out of bed and walk to the shops you may be uncomfortable and the amount of sympathy you receive will probably be less.

This means that getting up and going out and doing things always takes a great deal of determination and courage. To make things easier for yourself try to make sure that you reward yourself as much as you can. When you go out to the shops arrange to meet friends for a coffee or make an extra trip and buy yourself a treat – a book, some music, a new item of clothing.

By treating your pain aggressively and by trying to dominate your arthritis you will ensure that you stay in control of your life. In the end the benefits will be inestimable.

Heat

If you have ever come into the house after a hard day working in the garden or after a long walk in the countryside and sunk yourself into a bathful of warm water then you will know just how soothing and relaxing heat can be. A shower may be an efficient and cheap way of cleaning the body but a warm bath can do things a shower cannot do! Similarly, you have probably felt the relief that a hot water bottle can provide to aching or sore muscles.

Although scientists have studied the subject for years no one is really certain exactly how heat manages to get rid of pain. There are two possible explanations.

First, it may be that heat produces nerve impulses which help to stop pain impulses getting through to the brain (in exactly the same way that rubbing a sore elbow helps to stop the pain messages getting to the brain).

Second, it is known that when the tissues become heated the flow of blood is increased. Some scientists argue that the increased blood flow helps to get rid of chemicals such as histamine and prostaglandins which are responsible for the production of the feeling of pain.

Of course, it doesn't really matter how heat manages to get rid of pain. The important thing is that it does.

Using heat to eradicate pain is not a new phenomenon. In countries all around the world medical historians have shown that doctors have for centuries used hot springs and hot soaking tubs to help patients overcome their pains. It seems that the pains associated with arthritis are especially likely to be controlled or conquered with the aid of heat.

Ice

In a recent research paper an American doctor who specialises in the treatment of pain claimed that after being massaged with ice many of his patients got relief from their pain for up to four hours at a time. The doctor reported that around three quarters of the patients in one group had benefited by using ice. Although the idea of using ice to treat pain may seem a rather odd one many other doctors have experimented with it and have found that ice can sometimes be more effective than heat in the relief of pain!

How on earth can ice help to relieve pain?

One theory is that ice helps to encourage the human body to produce endorphins – special pain relieving hormones. Another is that ice stops pain messages getting through to the brain in much the same sort of way that heat does – by blocking the passage of nerve impulses. And a third theory is that ice closes down the blood vessels and therefore makes the whole area feel numb and anaesthetised.

The ice cubes that you get out of your fridge can be used to combat pain but you have to be careful: ordinary ice cubes have sharp edges and can cut! You can get round this problem either by crushing your ice cubes and then wrapping them up in a thin cloth such as a towel or by crushing them and putting them either into a purpose built rubber ice bag or into a hot water bottle. There is no law (yet) that says that a hot water bottle can only be used to keep hot things hot – it can also be used to keep cold things cold! However you wrap your ice you should rub it over the part of your body that is painful. Press fairly firmly and rub the ice either in a backwards and forwards movement or in continuous circles. When you first start rubbing ice on your skin you should feel the cold. Do take care not to hold the ice against your skin for too long because ice – like heat – can burn your skin and make sure that you keep the ice moving. The moment that your skin starts to feel numb remove the ice and start to move the area.

The vibrator

Stroking and rubbing a sore area helps to control pain by stimulating the production of sensory nerve impulses which travel quickly along the larger nerve fibres, get to the gate in the spinal cord first and block the passageway of pain impulses. This is how the TENS machine works. If you cannot afford a TENS device, or don't want to buy one, then you may be able to obtain a very similar effect by using a vibrator – exactly the same sort of hand held vibrator as is sold in pharmacies and sex shops for 'personal massage'.

Talk to your doctor and ask him if he thinks your pain could be helped in this way.

Music

Many pain sufferers claim that they obtain relief by listening to music. Some say that they find classical music relaxing. Opera seems popular as a pain reliever. And others say that rock and roll music is most effective for them. A third group enjoy special relaxation tapes – sometimes described as ‘new age’ music. You can either listen to your music through ordinary speakers or through headphones. Using headphones will enable you to listen to your music without disturbing other people. Some pain sufferers claim that they get a better result by using headphones because they can ‘lose’ themselves in their music more readily. Music can be soothing and relaxing, cheering and calming.

If you are to get the best out of music then you will have to experiment to find the type of music that helps you most.

Incidentally, do not forget that many pain sufferers get relief by playing their own music. The piano is probably the favourite instrument among those who like to ‘lose’ their pain in their favourite music.

Your imagination

The amount of pain that you suffer will depend to a very large extent upon your moods and the frame of your mind. If you are feeling low and bored then you will be far more likely to notice your pain than if you are feeling cheerful and deeply involved in something. But it isn't only the real world which affects the amount of pain you feel. Your imagination can make your pain far more noticeable – and far more destructive. But it can also help you to conquer your pain. If you make an effort to use your imagination to help you then you will almost certainly benefit. For example, in one experiment patients were asked to concentrate on the parts of their bodies where their pains were strongest. They were then asked to imagine that their pain had a 'shape' and had a red line drawn all around it. Next, they were told to imagine that their pain area was getting slowly smaller and smaller. Amazingly, the patients reported that as their imagined pain areas shrank so did the amount of pain they were feeling!

Keep busy

Many arthritis sufferers try to rest as much as they can. They are reluctant to get too involved in work or in any social activities, partly because of their pain and partly because they don’t want to let other people down. Although this is understandable it can be a mistake. Of course, it is vitally important to rest when pain is bad. But resting too much can be bad for you in the long term. Too much inactivity can lead to muscles becoming weak and to essential organs deteriorating. And if you are inactive then the chances are high that you will become bored – and people who are bored are far more susceptible to pain. So, try to do as much as you comfortably can!

If your work does not provide you with the intellectual stimulation that you need then try attending an evening class at a local college. Or expand your personal library and your regular reading habits. A good book can help you forget your pain as well as a bottle of pills!

How to sleep – despite the pain

It is during sleep that we recharge our physical and mental batteries. Getting a good night's sleep is essential for all of us – and especially vital for anyone who is trying to fight a disease which is as disabling and as exhausting as arthritis. But if you suffer a great deal from arthritis and from pain caused by your arthritis then it is almost inevitable that you will have some difficulty in getting to sleep at night.

Ironically, anyone who suffers from a chronic or persistent pain will confirm that the pain seems to get worse as the day goes on – reaching its worst point fairly late in the evening. And now even the experts have confirmed that this is what happens. Anaesthetists have confirmed that people who suffer from long term pain seem to get the worst pain at around ten o'clock in the evening – just when most folk are getting ready to go to bed. Just to make things worse anxiety and depression and other symptoms also tend to get much worse at this sort of time too.

It is almost as though the arthritis knows that we humans are at our must vulnerable then and so it tries to take advantage of our vulnerability. So, because getting a good night's sleep is so important here are some tips that should help you if your pain keeps you awake.

1. If you find that pain makes sleeping at night difficult or even impossible try taking a nap in the afternoon to 'top up' your sleep requirements. Or trying going to bed earlier in the evening (before the pain gets really bad). But if you do this do not expect to be able to sleep all through the night as well. I once saw a very indignant patient who complained that he kept waking up at six o'clock every morning. When I talked to him I found that he was going to bed at nine o'clock at night! I had to explain to him that nine hours sleep was really quite enough for anyone. Another patient of mine complained that she couldn't sleep as much as she used to and then confessed that she had a four hour nap every afternoon. Incidentally, the amount of sleep any individual needs varies from time to time and circumstances to circumstances. But very few of us need more than eight hours sleep in any one twenty four hour period. And remember, too, that our need for sleep tends to diminish as we get older. An average sixty year old will probably need no more than six or seven hours sleep a night.
2. Try to make sure that you do not get woken up unnecessarily once you have managed to get to sleep. There are few things more annoying than having to struggle to overcome pain in order to get to sleep and then having to get out of bed an hour later to go to the lavatory. Avoid alcohol, tea, coffee and all other drinks during the evening (alcohol, coffee and tea are all stimulants and are particularly likely to keep you awake). It is also a good idea to make sure that you empty your bladder before you go to bed. If you smoke then do not smoke for at least an hour or two before you go to bed (and certainly don't smoke in bed). Nicotine can have a stimulating effect which will help to keep you awake. Make sure that you don't get woken up because you feel too cold, too hot or too uncomfortable in any other way. If your bedroom is noisy, for example, it might be worthwhile investing in some soundproofing (though bookshelves filled with books make an even better soundproofing system) or double glazing on your windows. Alternatively, buy and use simple ear plugs which can be very effective at keeping out noise.
3. Do make sure that your bed is comfortable. Many people struggle to get to sleep on a bed that is too soft or too hard. If you suffer from bad joints it is especially important that you make sure that your bed is just right for you. Test a new bed before buying one and if you and your partner need beds with a different amount of spring in them you should be able to find something suitable for beds are now made to cope with this sort of problem. By and large most people with bad joints seem to find a rather firm bed and supportive bed far more comfortable than one which has become very saggy and has no springs left in it.
4. As an arthritis sufferer you will probably be especially susceptible to the cold. And if you are cold when you try to get to sleep at night you will almost certainly fail. So make sure that you are warm! Use a warm duvet (perhaps a warmer one in winter than you use in the summer) because it will be far easier to make the bed afterwards than if you use old fashioned sheets and blankets. And use an electric blanket or hot water bottle to warm your bed before you get into it (though do make sure that you follow all the precautions – do not sleep in a bed when your electric blanket is switched on, do not use a hot water bottle that is perished or has a loose fitting stopper, do make sure that your hot water bottle is wrapped in a towel or a pillow case and never, ever use an electric blanket and a hot water bottle at the same time). Incidentally, some arthritis sufferers find that they get a lot of relief – and go to bed physically relaxed and more supple – if they have a warm bath before retiring. A shower may save water and may be convenient in many ways but a warm bath can be much better in other ways!
5. I don't think that sleeping tablets are ever likely to be of any real value to people who cannot sleep because of the pain of arthritis. Although I know that millions of people do use sleeping tablets regularly I think there are dangers in doing this – and very few advantages.

CHAPTER SIX: THE IMPORTANCE OF DIET

Introduction

Numerous claims have made about the importance of diet to arthritis sufferers. I believe that there are only two important dietary factors which influence arthritis (though there are some special dietary restrictions associated with gout).

First, you will be more likely to suffer from arthritis – and more likely to suffer from it badly – if you are overweight. If you carry too much weight then your joints will be constantly under unnecessary pressure. This is particularly true of your weight bearing joints – hips, knees, ankles and spine. The more excess fat you carry the worse the problem will be. Losing weight, and staying slim, is essential if you are to protect your joints. Second, you will also reduce the risk of developing arthritis if you eat a vegetarian diet and avoid meat completely. A vegetarian diet will also help to control and minimise your symptoms if you are an arthritis sufferer. Recent research done showed that patients with rheumatoid arthritis who followed a vegetarian diet enjoyed a significant reduction in the amount of pain they suffered, in the number of tender and swollen joints they had and in the amount of stiffness they had to endure in the morning. Blood tests also showed that the disease had been brought under better control by the vegetarian diet. Most of us are brought up to regard meat as the central part of any main meal and as a result we feel slightly 'lost' and uncomfortable when we try to think of a week's menus that don't include any meat. If you don't spend a little time preparing yourself for vegetarianism you will probably end up eating a constant diet of cheese sandwiches and cheese omelettes. If you do this you will probably make yourself ill. Most cheeses contain quite a lot of fat and you could easily end up eating more fat than you were doing when you were eating meat.

Ten questions about becoming a vegetarian – and the answers!

Question 1

Is a vegetarian diet safe? I always thought that meat was essential for good health. Won't I be short of essential vitamins and minerals if I stop eating meat?

Answer 1

A vegetarian diet will provide you with all the essential nutrients that your body needs.

Question 2

But what about iron? I thought that iron was only available in meat. And surely iron is essential for the production of healthy blood cells.

Answer 2

Iron is essential for the production of healthy blood cells. But you don't need to eat meat to get a good intake of iron. Dark green vegetables such as cabbage, spinach and kale, peas and beans and dried fruit are among the vegetarian foods which are rich in iron. Moreover, a vegetarian diet will probably increase your body's capacity to absorb iron. Vitamin C – present in large quantities in fruit and vegetables – will help you to absorb iron. Ironically, meat eaters are often more likely to develop iron deficiency anaemia than are vegetarians.

Question 3

Won't a vegetarian diet be short on essential proteins? I thought that there were some types of protein that were ONLY available in meat.

Answer 3

It is true that most of us get the majority of our protein from meat but that is purely as a result of eating habits rather than anything else. Animal products are, pound for pound, only a very slightly better source of protein than nuts or seeds and no better than things like soya beans. You can get all the protein you need from a vegetarian diet.

Question 4

If I stop eating meat won't I become weak and easily tired?

Answer 4

No. Some of the world's strongest animals – elephants, gorillas, bulls and horses – are vegetarian. Vegetarians have won Olympic medals in strength and endurance events and triathlon championships are regularly won by vegetarians.

Question 5

Apart from helping my arthritis will becoming a vegetarian have any other good effects on my health?

Answer 5

Almost certainly. A vegetarian diet will almost certainly include less fat than a diet that includes meat (unless you eat too many dairy foods). You will, therefore, be less likely to suffer from a wide range of disorders known to be associated with a high fat consumption. Atherosclerosis (clogged up arteries), heart disease and high blood pressure are all associated with a high fat diet. Doctors now estimate that between one third and one half of all cancers are associated with the food we eat and meat and fat are believed to be two of the types of food which cause cancer. In addition there is now evidence to show that many other disorders are made worse by a diet that includes meat – and better by a vegetarian diet. If you suffer from constipation, for example, you will probably find that eating more fresh fruit and vegetables (and therefore more fibre) will solve your problem permanently. It is also worth remembering that as a non meat eater you will be far less likely to suffer from food poisoning – over 90% of food poisoning cases are due to infected meat.

Question 6

Will a vegetarian diet help me to lose weight?

Answer 6

Yes, you should be able to lose weight more readily if you switch to a vegetarian diet. This will not be because meat is fattening but because by changing your eating habits you will have a chance to get rid of all the old, bad habits that helped to make you fat and to replace them with better, new habits that will help you get slim and stay slim. When you become a vegetarian you can change the way you think about food and you can more easily get into the healthy, new habit of eating only when you are hungry.

Question 7

Will a vegetarian diet be more expensive than an ordinary diet that includes meat?

Answer 7

No. On the contrary a vegetarian diet will probably be cheaper than a diet that includes meat. Meat (and meat products) are expensive to buy. And whereas you can grow some (or all) of your own vegetables you will probably be unable to be able to grow your own meat.

Question 8

Won't I find a vegetarian diet extremely boring? I don't think I could live on a diet of lettuce and cabbage.

Answer 8

I don’t think anyone could live on a diet of lettuce and cabbage. But if you think of a vegetarian diet as being inevitably dull that must be because you have been brought up to think of meat as an essential centre-point to every meal. The truth is, however, that vegetables, fruits, pulses and cereals can make an attractive and exciting diet. These days more and more top rank cooks are writing cookery books devoted exclusively to vegetarian recipes.

Question 9

Won’t I find it difficult to eat out if I become a vegetarian? What will I do when I’m travelling or away on holiday?

Answer 9

If you are booking an airline ticket or a hotel simply tell the booking clerk that you are vegetarian. If you are booking a table at a restaurant make sure that they serve vegetarian food. You will have some excellent meals, some quite good meals and some appalling meals. But the rise in popularity of vegetarianism means that it is getting easier and easier to eat out without eating meat. It is usually quite easy to have an excellent vegetarian meal in an Indian restaurant.

Question 10

What can I eat if I don’t eat meat?

Answer 10

Many people are put off becoming vegetarian because they can’t think what they will be able to eat if they don’t eat meat. A quick trip to your local supermarket will, however, show that there are not only many different fruits and vegetables available but that because vegetarianism is growing rapidly there are many ready-made vegetarian meals on sale. You will also find many ‘meat substitute’ meals available. You can buy vegetarian sausages and hamburgers and ‘stews’ and ‘curries’ made with soya have the same texture as meals made with meat.

CHAPTER SEVEN: REST OR EXERCISE?

Introduction

As an arthritis sufferer it is vital that you know when to rest and when to exercise. Too much exercise can cause pain and damage your joints. But too little exercise can lead to your joints becoming stiff and unusable – and can, in the long run, create more pain. When your joints are inflamed they must be rested – and your whole body may need to be rested if you suffer from an inflammatory or auto immune disorder – but if you rest too much your joints will get stuck in one position and your muscles will waste away. It is important, therefore, that you establish a regular, daily exercise programme designed to keep you as supple and as strong as possible. It is much better to do a small amount of exercise every day then a huge amount of exercise once a week.

Important: before beginning any exercise programme you should always consult your own family doctor.

Exercise rules for rheumatoid arthritis

1. Rest is important for sufferers of this disease. If your joints are swollen, stiff and painful then you must rest completely – ideally in bed.
2. Try to use affected joints for short periods of time only. It is important to try to exercise a joint when it is not painful so that you can keep it mobile and prevent it from becoming stiff and unusable.

Exercise rules for osteoarthritis

1. General rest is not normally necessary since osteoarthritis usually affects individual joints – but any joint which is painful should be rested.
2. Stiffness can set in if a joint is allowed to ‘set’ in the same position for more than an hour or so. You should, therefore, put all your affected joints through the full range of possible movements every hour at least. Exercise your joints before going to bed at night – and again, first thing in the morning.
3. You should never exercise when your joints are painful but you should try to exercise as much as you can when they are not painful.
4. If, after exercise, an affected joint aches more than usual – and the ache lasts for two hours or more – then your exercise programme is too severe and needs to be reviewed and downgraded.

Exercise rules for ankylosing spondylitis

1. Mobility rather than rest is the key to the treatment of ankylosing spondylitis. It is important that you try to keep your joints moving. If you allow your joints to rest too much there is a risk that they will seize up completely. But don’t exercise if it causes pain – talk to your doctor.

Protect your joints whenever you can

Even though you need to exercise your joints regularly – and you should try to carry on your life as normally as possible – you must take care not to put too much of a strain on any joint in your body. Here are some tips designed to help you protect your joints from unnecessary stresses and strains:

* Make sure that your clothes are easy to get into and out of. Don't have buttons in inaccessible positions. Choose clothes that are roomy rather than constricting.

* Adjust the height of your bed and of any chairs you use regularly so that you do not have to strain your back, hips or knees when getting in or out of them.

* Plan your day so that you don't have to go up and down stairs unnecessarily.

* Never wear shoes that are painful or that do not provide you with sufficient support. Avoid high heeled shoes and make sure that your shoes are big enough. Try to wear shoes that are lightweight rather than heavy boots.

* Use a shoulder bag rather than a bag that you have to carry in your hand. But don't overfill it with heavy items. And do switch it from shoulder to shoulder.

* If you have to do a lot of physical work allow yourself enough time to take regular breaks.

* Try to avoid physical activities which mean putting repeated stress on one particular joint.

* Do not be shy about using aids and appliances to reduce the strain on your joints

* Learn how to lift properly in order to reduce the strain on your back, hips and knees.

* Protect the small joints in your hands by using two hands instead of one whenever possible. And use the palm of your hand and the muscles in your forearm when you need to do any heavy work with your hands – rather than putting all the strain on your fingers (for example, when turning a stiff tap or taking the top off a jar).

How to lift without putting a strain on your joints

Lifting – or trying to lift – heavy objects is a major cause of trouble in the joints of your spine, hips and knees. Follow these tips to help protect your joints.

1. There is no acceptable definition of heavy. Any load can damage your joints if you lift in the wrong way. Always lift carefully and always think before lifting.
2. Whenever possible work out a way to minimise the effort required. If there is a mechanical hoist available – use it. If you can use a trolley or barrow then use one. Unload cupboards and take heavy furniture apart whenever possible. If there is nothing on the object to hold onto then use a sling or put a strong rope underneath it. If there is help available then wait until it arrives. Plan to lift and move heavy objects in gentle, easy stages. Stop if you feel tired – that is when accidents happen.
3. If you have to move a heavy weight on a trolley remember that pulling usually puts less strain on your body than pushing.
4. Make sure that you wear shoes with non slip soles. Do not try lifting or carrying heavy weights while wearing high heels. If possible wear shoes that provide proper protection in case something heavy drops on your feet. And make sure that you use gloves that provide a good grip. Don't try lifting in unusually loose or unusually tight clothing, in clothing that restricts your movements in any way or in clothing that might 'catch' on a protrusion.
5. Stand close to the object you want to lift with your feet apart to improve your balance. Put one foot slightly ahead of the other.
6. Bend your hips and your knees and keep your back straight and your shoulders level and in line with your pelvis. Pick up the object you are lifting with the whole of your hand (rather than just your finger tips) and keep your arms close in to your body. A weight held out at arms' length puts ten times the strain on your spine as a weight held close to your body.
7. Brace your abdominal muscles and then lift the object by straightening your knees. If you are trying to lift something very heavy halve the stress by lifting one end first. If you have to turn move your feet as well as your body and make sure that you do not twist or bend your body while lifting.
8. Try to lift smoothly. And remember to keep the object close to your body all the time that you are holding it.
9. If the object is too heavy for you put it down straight away.
10. When putting a load down lower yourself by bending your knees and squatting. Do not bend your back when putting something down – this is when injuries often happen.

The importance of general exercise

A good, general exercise programme won't stop you getting pains but it certainly could help strengthen your general level of fitness, increase your resistance to muscular stresses and strains and reduce your susceptibility to joint problems. If you are unfit taking up exercise could be dangerous. If you suddenly throw yourself into a hectic exercise programme you could seriously injure yourself. But not doing any exercise is even worse. Unless you exercise regularly your health will be at risk and in addition to getting backache and arthritis you will be more prone to disorders as varied as osteoporosis, heart disease and depression.

Most of us live fairly sedentary lives. We travel in motor cars, buses and trains and we use gadgets and machines to help us cut down the workload in the house and garden. But your body needs exercise. In a few thousand years time we may well have adapted to our sedentary existence. But at the moment your body is still designed for action. Many of the diseases which are commonest today are partly caused by the fact that most of us do not exercise enough.

So, how much exercise should you do and what should you do?

The first thing you must do is check with your doctor. Don't just rush down to your gym and start lifting the heaviest weights you can find or pedalling the exercise bicycle as fast as it will go – you'll almost certainly make yourself ill if you do. And you could kill yourself. Try to find a gym with a good coach, a well run aerobics class or a sports club that you can join. A good coach is vital: he or she will show you how to take your pulse before and after every exercise session. Within a few weeks you should notice that your pulse will go back to its normal rate quicker and quicker after exercising. You should also notice that your normal pulse rate gets lower as you get fitter.

One of the by-products of taking up an exercise programme is that you'll meet new friends with whom you can share the trials and tribulations of getting fit. You'll do better and get more out of your exercise programme if it is fun so try to choose a type of exercise that you think you'll enjoy. Allocate time for exercise and stick to it. If you decide to exercise only when you've got a free moment you'll never do anything. You need to set aside time for a properly organised exercise programme. But it need not be much. Three sessions a week will be plenty. You should allow a full hour for each session though to start with you probably won't be able to manage that much. If you are really pushed for time you can squeeze a useful exercise programme into just three twenty minute sessions. Can there be anyone who is so busy that they can't manage one hour a week? Try to make your exercise time inviolable and give it priority over other, less vital tasks.

You don't need a lot of money to take up exercise but do buy the right gear – the best you can afford. Remember: you're not trying to look fashionable but you do need shoes that are comfortable and give good support and since you'll be sweating a lot when you start exercising properly you'll need clothes that can be washed often, quickly and easily.

Finally, remember the most important rule for exercise: it should never hurt. Pain is your body's way of saying stop. If you ignore a pain – and attempt to blunder bravely through the pain barrier – you will almost certainly injure yourself.

General warnings

1. Do not start an exercise programme until you have checked with your doctor that the programme is suitable for you. make sure that you tell him about any treatment you are already receiving and about any symptoms from which you suffer.
2. You must stop exercising if you feel faint, dizzy, breathless or nauseated or if you notice any pain or if you feel unwell in any way. get expert help immediately and do not start exercising again until you have been given the ‘all clear’ by your doctor.

Joint Warning: the wrong sort of exercise can damage your joints

Your joints can be put under a tremendous amount of strain by any repetitive exercise. As a result arthritis – particularly osteoarthritis in which the joints are ‘worn out’ – and backache are common problems among sportsmen and athletes who do not take care. Warming up beforehand, resting or even stopping when you feel tired and cooling down gently after an exercise programme are all important.

Running is one of the sports most commonly associated with back, hip and knee injuries. Running tends to tighten the lower muscles of the back causing low back pain and increasing the risk of conditions such as ruptured disc or spondylolysis and runners who exercise for too long on hard surfaces are particularly likely to suffer from backache. Every one hour’s running means that your joints get 10,000 vibrations. Running on cambered roads means that the strains on the back are particularly bad because one leg is always running lower than the other.

But running is not, of course, the only sport that can cause joint problems. Virtually any sport can cause trouble. Over enthusiastic swinging of a golf club, for example, can cause nasty strains that may take a long time to heal. The most severe and potentially serious joint injuries tend to occur in contact sports such as rugby and football where a sudden jolt can cause severe damage to almost any joint.

Swimming is good for you

Swimming will provide your body will an almost perfect exercise programme. It will improve the efficiency of your heart, it will help improve your muscle strength and it will improve your general flexibility. Swimming is one of the very few types of exercise that helps in these three important different ways.

Swimming will be particularly good for you if you have back or joint trouble because it will enable you to exercise without putting any stress or strain on your joints. The water will support the weight of your body and so you can exercise with the minimum of risk.

The best and most effective strokes are the front and back crawl which will give your whole body a good, general work out. If you swim breast stroke wear goggles and try to learn to swim without keeping your head lifting out of the water all the time. Extending your neck to keep your head out of the water can put a strain on your neck.

Walk your way to health

You don’t have to get hot and sweaty to improve your fitness. A gentle walk can help! A study of golfers showed that just walking round a golf course three times a week is enough to reduce the amount of cholesterol in the blood stream and to help get rid of excess weight! And the more you enjoy your game – and the better you are able to forget your worries and anxieties – the more you will benefit from it.

To really benefit from your exercise walk as briskly as you can. Brisk walking can protect your heart just as well as more energetic exercise such as jogging or playing tennis.

You don’t need to suffer pain to benefit from exercise!

It is a myth that you need to experience pain to benefit from exercise. Pain is your body’s way of saying stop. If you ignore a pain – or try to exercise through it – you will do yourself harm.

Join a gym!

It is perfectly possible to get all the exercise you need without ever going anywhere near a gym. But if there is a local gym I suggest that you join it! You'll benefit in several ways.

1. They are bound to have a wider range of equipment than you can buy for yourself.
2. Good gyms are staffed with well qualified instructors who can help you develop an exercise programme to suit your own personal needs.
3. You'll find that most gyms are friendly places. You will benefit enormously from the support and companionship of those around you. It is much more fun to exercise in a group than it is to exercise alone.

CHAPTER EIGHT: ALTERNATIVE SOLUTIONS

Introduction

Here are some simple, introductory guidelines designed to help make sure that you get the best and most appropriate alternative treatment.

1. Orthodox, old fashioned doctors are, I believe, still best at dealing with emergencies. (And the great majority of the alternative specialists I have spoken to agree with this). Doctors have access to diagnostic equipment (such as X-ray machines) and to treatment facilities which are particularly useful when dealing with a patient who has an acute and life threatening problem.
2. Alternative or complementary practitioners seem to be at their best when dealing with chronic or long term problems – and arthritis is one of the diseases they seem best able to help with.
3. In many countries there are still very few regulations governing who can or cannot become an alternative practitioner. Those practitioners who set up in business without being properly trained have done a considerable amount of damage to the image of 'alternative' or 'complementary' medicine. To make sure that you visit someone who is reliable I suggest that you ask around your friends first to see if they know of anyone whom they can recommend. Or ask your own doctor. Most doctors these days know of (and approve of) many alternative medicine practitioners. And it is a myth that your doctor is likely to be cross with you if you tell him that you are planning to visit a complementary practitioner. It is not, I am afraid, safe to rely on the fact that a practitioner you are intending to visit has a list of qualifications after his name. Some of these apparently impressive qualifications can be 'bought' with very little academic effort. (My cat was once the proud owner of a huge sheaf of diplomas and paper qualifications in alternative medicine).
4. It is important to make sure that you visit a well qualified and well trained practitioner because, contrary to common belief, it is possible for alternative medicines to do harm. Patients who have visited acupuncturists using dirty needles have contracted all sorts of very nasty (and potentially lethal) disorders. Patients who have been given contaminated herbal medicines have been made very ill. There are, I am afraid, risks with alternative medicine just as much as there are risks with orthodox medicine.
5. The best alternative practitioners usually practise from good, clean, well equipped premises. And many good alternative practitioners these days practise in small groups. Personally, I would be wary of anyone who claims to be an expert in a whole range of alternative therapies. Since the training periods for subjects like acupuncture tend to be long and arduous the very best practitioners probably specialise.

Acupuncture

Although acupuncture was first made popular in Europe by a Dutch physician called Willem ten Rhyne it has been used in China for over four thousand years. Rhyne introduced acupuncture to Holland in 1683 but since then it has been regularly rediscovered by traditional Western doctors. Some countries, such as France, have recognised the importance of acupuncture and have special acupuncture departments in many of their major hospitals. In other countries acupuncture is regarded by many traditional doctors as a 'quack remedy' that should not be taken seriously.

Acupuncture is based upon a theory which says that the human body contains twelve meridians or channels and that it is along these channels that vital, internal energies flow. When these meridians are blocked in some way, goes the theory, the flow of energy will be impeded. And it is this slowing or stopping of the flow of energy which causes illness or pain, say the acupuncturists. The practice of acupuncture is based upon the idea that there are a number of quite specific points on the human body which can be regarded as entry points to this internal energy force. Way back in the fourteenth century Chinese doctors had identified a total of 657 acupuncture points. Since then many other experts have been busy and today experts recognise a total of over one thousand acupuncture points.

The acupuncturist uses slender needles to clear the blocked meridians and release the flow of energy. The needles can be made of a variety of metals such as silver, gold or copper.

Before starting treatment the acupuncturist makes a diagnosis about the likely cause of the pain (the traditional acupuncture methods of diagnosis involve talking and listening to the patient and then identifying no less than twelve different pulses).

* He can insert the needle and twist it backwards and forwards rather vigorously for a few seconds.

* He can put one or more needles into the skin and leave it or them in place for twenty or thirty minutes.

* He can connect the acupuncture needles to an electrical apparatus which passes a mild electric current through them.

* He can dry and shred leaves of the Chinese wormwood plant and then burn these shredded leaves directly over an acupuncture point (this technique is known as moxibustion).

* He can search out tender trigger points and then insert his needles directly into those specific areas.

Despite the scepticism of the traditional medical profession there is no longer any real doubt that this technique does work. Many research papers have been published detailing the value and effectiveness of acupuncture. For example, around twenty years ago four American surgeons reported that they had used acupuncture to treat over three hundred patients in and around the New York area. The surgeons stated that in over three quarters of the cases they had found that acupuncture is one of the most effective treatments available for skeletomuscular disorders such as arthritis. Two doctors writing in an anaesthetics journal in the same year said that 'reports of a large number of surgical cases operated on under acupuncture anaesthesia, with a success rate of up to ninety per cent have now been sufficiently substantiated that the effectiveness of acupuncture can no longer be doubted'.

There is no doubt in my mind that if acupuncture had been a new 'drug' being sold by one of the world's largest and most powerful drug companies it would have been quickly adopted by the world's traditional medical profession. Sadly, however, acupuncture has still not found favour with traditional doctors, some of whom regard it with suspicion because it is not something they were taught about when they were medical students, and some of whom regard it with apprehension because it is a subject they know little or nothing about. There is, I am afraid, a powerful lobby in the medical profession which fights against 'alternative' remedies and which regards treatments such as acupuncture as a serious professional threat. Many doctors fear that if they acknowledge the effectiveness of acupuncture they will lose patients – and fees – to professional acupuncturists.

Back in 1979 acupuncture had been so widely and thoroughly tested that at a meeting of medical representatives from all six of the World Health Organization's regions it was concluded that 'the sheer weight of evidence demands that it must be taken seriously as a clinical procedure of considerable value.'

Today, the consensus seems to be that acupuncture is probably a powerful and effective way of dealing with at least 70% of all long term cases of pain. And, as I have already pointed out, acupuncture is believed to be particularly effective in the treatment of arthritis.

For many years there was some confusion about how acupuncture works but today there are a number of acceptable theories. It seems, for example, that at least two things happen when a needle is pushed into the skin. First, by introducing a sensation into the skin which passes along the larger nerve fibres and closes the gate in the spinal cord, acupuncture prevents pain signals from reaching the brain. And second, when the acupuncture needles are pushed into the skin they also stimulate the production of endorphins (which are the human body's own pain relieving hormones). Some scientists now claim that it is not necessary to follow the traditional acupuncture meridians in order to obtain a useful effect. It is, they say, possible to obtain the same effect by stimulating virtually any point on a fairly large area of skin. In the past it was often claimed that if acupuncture didn’t work it was because the acupuncturist had failed to ‘hit’ the correct acupuncture point. Today, it appears that it may just be that the patient was not one of those who could be helped by acupuncture.

The most dramatic development in the use of acupuncture was probably the fairly recent discovery that it is possible to obtain a type of acupuncture effect without sticking any needles into the skin at all. It is, it seems, perfectly possible to close the spinal cord gate and simulate the production of the vital endorphin hormones simply by applying heat or electrical stimulation to the body, or even by applying simple finger pressure to tender pressure points (this technique, which is not a new one, is usually known as shiatsu or acupressure and is becoming steadily more popular).

Acupressure

Some historians believe that when acupuncture meridians were first mapped out practitioners did not use sharp needles but used their fingers instead. They argue that the needles so beloved of acupuncturists were only introduced to give the therapist the feeling that he was really doing something – and, perhaps, to make the charging of a fee more appropriate.

Acupuncture without needles but with fingers is usually called acupressure (though a variation of it is called shiatsu) and as with acupuncture the aim is to restore the flow of energy along a meridian pathway, stimulating the flow of energy when there is a blockage and bringing energy into the system when, for some reason, the meridian is empty.

In order to obtain a useful effect during acupressure the therapist presses on specific parts of the patient's body, using only his or her finger tips.

Different therapists seem to use different pressure points and there does not seem to be a great deal of agreement between different acupressure specialists about the best points to use in order to treat specific conditions.

The most effective acupressure points seem to be on or around the head and neck. By using finger massage at the top of the spine, on the centre of the cheeks, on the outer edges of the eyes and on the centre of the forehead between the eyes it is, say the experts, possible to relieve a wide range of symptoms. Another well used acupressure point is the one in the fleshy web that lies between the thumbs and forefingers of both hands. Massaging the acupressure point here is said to be particularly useful in the treatment of pain.

Because acupressure is a non invasive, gentle therapy it is said to be comparatively safe but I would recommend that if you want to try this form of treatment you consult a well trained and experienced expert. Acupressure is said to be extremely useful in the treatment of arthritis pains.

Alexander Technique

The Alexander Technique is built around the idea that the condition and positions of the bones of the spine and the rest of the skeleton have an influence on our health. The Alexander Technique, or Alexander Principle as it is also sometimes known, was first devised nearly a century ago by an actor called F. Matthias Alexander. Mr Alexander, an Australian, noticed that he kept losing his voice when working on stage and when the medical profession failed to help him he decided to try to investigate and treat his problem himself. He realised that he was losing his voice whenever he was holding his head and neck in a particular position. He surmised that the voice loss was caused by the fact that the position of his neck was squashing his vocal cords.

After experimenting for several months he found that by learning to stand properly, and hold his head up straight, his voice no longer kept on disappearing. So delighted was the actor by this discovery that he retired from the stage and decided to spend his life helping other people conquer their health problems by learning how to stand properly. He believed that just as his voice loss had been caused by poor posture so many other common illnesses might have a similar cause. Alexander's hope was that he would be able to treat problems which had already developed and prevent problems developing in the future, simply by teaching a few basic principles of posture and movement. And so the Alexander Technique – an educational system designed to help teach people body self awareness, graceful movements and good posture – was created. The aim is to find a patient's bad habits and get rid of them before any real harm is done.

Alexander claimed that people who stand upright and with their heads held high will have their internal organs in the right positions. He argued that such individuals would be far less likely to develop illnesses than individuals who slumped or sat and walked with a poor posture. He claimed that by improving posture and movement patients would be able to improve their digestion, their breathing and their circulation.

Modern followers of F. Matthias Alexander teach patients to move comfortably and to use their bodies properly. The technique is recommended to patients suffering from a wide range of problems but patients with disorders which involve the bones, the joints and the muscles seem particularly likely to benefit.

Individuals who want to benefit from Alexander's discoveries are encouraged to start by looking critically at the way that they sit, stand and walk, as well as the way that they lift and do ordinary, daily jobs around the house. Followers of F. Matthias Alexander claim that every aspect of an individual's life should be examined. They say that even ill fitting shoes can create a whole range of problems. Sore feet can, they say, affect the way that an individual walks and so end up producing serious spine and joint problems.

Homoeopathy

No one really knows how homoeopathy works. But there are thousands of patients who believe that it works. And the risks of side effects developing certainly seem to be slight and today, in an era when doctor-induced illness is commonplace, such an advantage is a fairly major one!

Although homoeopathy can be traced back for centuries, modern homoeopathy was undoubtedly first developed by a man called Samuel Hahnemann, who practised in the early part of the 19th century. Hahnemann was unhappy about the medicines which were available for general medical use at the time. He knew that too many patients were made ill by being given large doses of potentially lethal products and he was, therefore, keen to find a method of treating people that would dramatically reduce the chances of a practitioner doing more harm than good.

Hahnemann knew that both Hippocrates, the father of medicine, and Paracelsus, the man who is widely credited with bringing medicine out of the dark ages and into a scientific era during the Renaissance, had believed that a patient can be cured if he can be given a medicine which will produce symptoms which are the same as the ones produced by his illness. This ancient theory was known as the 'theory of like curing like'.

Although he did not have the ague Hahnemann decided to try to produce the symptoms of the disease in himself. By doing this he was following a long tradition of medical researchers in experimenting upon himself. He knew that cinchona bark, which contains the drug quinine, would relieve the symptoms of the ague and so he took some of the drug to see what happened. He soon developed the symptoms of the disease – including the fever. And when he stopped taking the drug the symptoms disappeared.

Using as his basic principle the theory that 'a substance which produces symptoms in a healthy person will cure those symptoms in a sick person' Hahnemann decided to try to find more substances which would produce the symptoms of disease and during the next few years he experimented with an enormous variety of substances; including animal products, vegetable substances, salts and metals.

By the time he died, in 1843, Samuel Hahnemann had tested and 'proved' the efficacy of 99 different substances and he had created the basis of modern homoeopathy. Even more important he had found that he didn't need to use large substances of the medicines he had 'proved' in order to obtain a useful result. In fact, he found that very small doses made his treatments extremely effective. By the year 1900, just over half a century after his death, over 600 substances had been tested and found to have a useful effect. Today the number of substances available to homoeopaths is around 3,000 and includes honey bee sting venom, snake venom, spiders, gold, copper, sulphur, mercury, onions and Indian hemp! Testings and provings are still continuing in efforts to find more new substances which can be used in homoeopathy.

Making an accurate diagnosis is the first thing a homoeopath must do. He or she will start by asking an enormous number of questions covering mental, physical and emotional issues and designed to help the homoeopath find out as much as possible about the individual. The homoeopath will want to know about his patient's personal feelings, needs, anxieties and so on. He will also want to know how his patient responds to outside influences such as the weather and the temperature. In orthodox medicine doctors aim to treat diseases more than patients but in homoeopathy the treatment must be designed to fit the patient.

Having made a diagnosis the homoeopath will then choose a suitable 'medicine' from the list of 3,000. Homoeopaths usually try to find one medicine however many symptoms a patient has. The substance which is finally selected will be given in a very small dose because homoeopaths believe that the smaller the dose the more powerful the response will be. Very small doses are used to trigger a reaction within the body. There are some similarities between homoeopathy and vaccination. In vaccination a small amount of an infective organism is given to the patient to get the body's natural defence mechanisms to start to operate. In homoeopathy a small amount of a drug is given in order to try to stimulate the body's natural defence mechanisms to operate.

The doses which homoeopaths use are so small that they effectively put a drop of concentrated medicine into a bath full of water – and then use a few drops of the bath water as medicine! Homoeopathy does seem to be very safe. But if you want to try this form of alternative medicine you should, of course, consult a properly qualified practitioner.

Osteopathy

Although there undoubtedly are some osteopaths around today who claim that they are able to treat as full a range of diseases as a traditionally trained, allopathic doctor most osteopaths spend most of their time dealing with bone and joint problems. Over half of the patients visiting osteopaths have backache and the majority of osteopaths seem to spend their working lives trying to help patients with back troubles, headaches, neck pains and joint pains of one sort or another.

Some professional osteopaths claim that they are descended (in professional terms) from the very first surgeons and the bonesetters of two hundred years ago. But modern osteopathy was first developed in 1874 by an American called Andrew Taylor Still who was the son of a Methodist preacher.

Still, who hated drugs and alcohol, believed that the human body could be treated as a machine. He felt that it was faults in the musculoskeletal system which were responsible for many diseases.

Most osteopaths make an initial diagnosis by watching the way that their patients walk and stand and sit. They supplement these observations by talking and listening to their patients and by studying X-rays. Osteopathic treatment usually involves a mixture of manipulation and massage.

It is vitally important to remember that osteopathy can produce problems and in order to minimise the risks you should only visit a practitioner who has been fully trained and you should make sure that he is well aware of your condition. There are many conditions – fractures, tumours, infection, inflammation and so on – which increase the chances of things going wrong.

Hypnotherapy

The Egyptians were fascinated by hypnotherapy several thousand years ago and then, for quite a long while, this speciality virtually disappeared from view.

In the seventeenth century a man called Athanasius Kircher played around with the idea for a while. It was, however, a man called Franz Mesmer, who worked in the eighteenth century, who really brought hypnosis and hypnotherapy back into vogue. The first evidence that hypnotherapy could help patients who were suffering from pain came from work done in the middle of the eighteenth century by a surgeon called James Esdale. Esdale claimed that he had performed three hundred major surgical operations in India using hypnosis as the only anaesthetic.

During recent years hypnotherapy has come back into fashion again and today there are many people who claim that it is a good way to deal with pain in general and arthritis in particular. Studies have been done which have shown that hypnotherapy can be used to increase both the pain threshold (the point at which pain is felt) and pain tolerance (the amount of pain that an individual can put up with).

Sadly, today there are many hypnotherapists around who have not (to be polite) received a very exhaustive training and there are some professionals who worry that the services offered by these practitioners may prove dangerous. If you think that you would like to try hypnotherapy as a way of combating the pain of your arthritis I would recommend that you talk to your own doctor and ask him to arrange for you to see a professional and fully qualified hypnotherapist.

Healing

The difference between ‘healing’, ‘spiritual healing’ and ‘faith healing’ cause some confusion. Here, however, are definitions which are commonly used:

* healing: the word is used to describe the whole phenomenon of healing with medicines or without any obvious intervention by the healer

* faith healing: the patient trusts the healer and there is a powerful link between the patient’s mind and his body

* spiritual healing: the patient may or may not know that the healing is taking place. He may or may not be receptive. The healer transmits energy from himself to the patient in some way.

Healers work in a variety of different ways. Some healers lay their hands on their patients. Others hold their hands above the patient’s body. And there are healers who claim that they can heal someone without seeing him or her or, indeed, being anywhere near him or her. Some healers encourage patients and relatives to take part in the process of healing. Some talk or pray and some are silent. A number of experiments have been conducted to show the effectiveness of healing. For example, in one experiment done in Canada it was shown that barley seeds which were made ‘sick’ by putting them into a saline solution would recover more speedily if they were touched by a healer. Healing can be used for just about any condition and there is no doubt that many patients with arthritis have benefited from healing. The majority of healers do not charge a fee for their services.

APPENDIX: AIDS FOR ARTHRITIS SUFFERERS

Because of stiffness in their joints arthritis sufferers often have difficulty in walking, bending or reaching. The damage arthritis can do can be so severe that it can cause disablement -and even crippling. To help overcome these problems there are many commercially available products available. In addition there are many aids and gadgets which make life easier for the arthritis sufferer, which reduce the need for bending, reaching and lifting and which help to protect the joints and prevent the development of problems.

The best aids will help you to make the most of all your remaining skills and will minimise the effect that your disabilities have on your life.

Some arthritic patients are reluctant to use aids at all. They fear that to rely on any sort of assistance is to admit to a weakness; they even fear that it will speed up the disabling process. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The other fear, that gadgets and aids must inevitably cost a lot of money, is also ill founded. There are, it is true, some pieces of equipment (particularly the electrical ones) which cost a lot of money. But there are also gadgets which cost next to nothing and which can be made at home.

This appendix does not attempt to offer a comprehensive list of aids for arthritis sufferers but is designed to show the range of aids available. You should be able to obtain a full list of available aids from your family doctor or hospital consultant but if you have any difficulty I suggest that you contact one of the many charitable or commercial organisations offering aids for the disabled. Big cities often have shops which specialise in offering equipment designed to make life easier for arthritis sufferers.

Aids for sitting

Posture stool

The seat slopes forwards and you sit with your weight resting on your knees and your feet tucked in underneath you. The posture stool is designed to encourage you to sit in a healthier position so that you can get up at the end of a day's work without having a stiff and aching back.

Backrests, 'wedges' and lumbar supports

Most chairs do not provide enough support for the lumbar part of the spine. You can buy many different supports – including inflatable cushions which are suitable for travellers – which will help turn your uncomfortable chair into one which is much friendlier to your back and other joints.

Adjustable chairs

Properly adjustable chairs which allow you to sit in a comfortable position are available. But they do tend to be expensive. The seat height should be adjustable as should the angle of the seat and the backrest. You'll find it easier to get into and out of chairs which have arm rests that you can rest your weight on when sitting down or push against when standing up. If your feet aren't resting on the floor when you are sitting down then you need a footrest (dangling feet add to the stress on your spine).

Ejector chairs

It is possible to buy chairs which, at the touch of a lever, help to push you up into the standing position.

Aids for work

Writing slopes

If you work on a computer, word processor or typewriter you may need to have a flat desk. But writing slopes enable you to work at an angle which is better suited to your body.

Tip for surviving at work

Get up and walk about every half an hour or so. This will give you a chance to stretch your back and will help prevent muscle, joint and ligament strain.

Aids for picking things up

Simple ‘pick up sticks’ (such as are often used by park attendants employed to pick up bits and pieces of waste paper) help make life much easier if you find it difficult to bend or to reach for small objects. Pick up sticks are probably the most versatile and useful of all gadgets for the arthritic and disabled. They are basically nothing more than a pair of tongs with a long handle which enable you to pick up something without bending or stretching. They are also useful for drawing curtains, switching on lights, pulling on socks and doing a thousand and one other potentially painful little chores. With a little experience you will find that a pick up stick extends your reach by three feet and enables you to pick up all sorts of things (clothes, books, magazines, newspapers, rubbish, etc.) off the floor without bending down. It is possible to buy sticks which fold up (so that you can carry them around with you) and some sticks have magnets on the end to help pick up metal objects.

Aids in the kitchen

If you have arthritis in your hands or wrists then you will almost certainly find that one of the most useful aids available is a small device which will help you to open a jar. There are also aids available to help you lift a heavy kettle or open a can (wall mounted can openers are sometimes helpful). Some useful aids can easily be made by anyone with a few basic carpentry skills.

Dealing with or preparing food can be tricky but the patient with only one useful hand will find that a spiked board will enable him to keep vegetables still while they are being peeled and chopped. To open packets it may help to stand them upright in a kitchen drawer, close the drawer as far as it will go and then cut the top of the packet open with a knife. Kitchen tools are easier to get hold of if they are hung neatly on hooks rather than placed inaccessibly in drawers. Cutlery should have large handles and you can adapt cutlery to make it easier to use by using tape or even bicycle handlebar rubbers.

One of the simplest and most useful gadgets you can buy if you have arthritic hands is a ‘grip mat’ – a small, non stick rubber mat that can be invaluable for opening jars, bottles or even doors that are stuck tight.

If you are planning a new kitchen think carefully about the height at which you have cupboards and electrical sockets placed (it is possible to buy electric plugs fitted with handles – these are much easier to pull out and push in than ordinary household plugs). Try to make sure that everything you need is within easy reach.

Remember that taps are easier to turn on and off if they are of the lever type.

Aids in the bathroom

If you have arthritis in your hands then you will probably find it difficult to operate ordinary taps so long handled, lever type taps (the sort used by surgeons in operating theatres) can be a tremendous help. Or you can obtain taps which can provide either hot or cold water with the same lever. A liquid soap dispenser which can be operated either by a foot pedal or by a lever will make washing much easier. If holding a nail brush is difficult one can be fixed to the side of the wash basin by screwing suction cups onto the back of the brush and sticking the suckers onto the basin.

As far as the bath is concerned one of the most important aids is probably the bathrail or handrail. A rubber mat in the bottom of the bath will prove useful for anyone who is slightly unsteady. People who find it difficult to lie down may be better off with a seat or board placed firmly across the bath. A lift suspended over the bath may be helpful (all sorts of hoists are available) and there are even special baths available in which the bather sits rather than lies.

There are many other useful gadgets for the bathroom: sponges with long handles, tap turners, long handled brushes, toothbrushes with built up handles and so on. Often it is not necessary to buy an aid for a homemade improvisation will prove equally effective. For example, it is possible to make a tap turner with a piece of wood that has a hook fastened onto it. And it is possible to build up the handle of a toothbrush to a more manageable size either by wrapping pieces of sticking plaster over it or by fitting a bicycle handlebar rubber onto the handle.

As with everything else it is best to isolate the problems first and then look for the solutions. The solutions will often appear quite simple. For example, if someone finds it difficult to operate a bathroom pull switch they may find it easier if a ball is tied onto the end. One of those ‘air’ balls that golfers use for practise will be easy to tie on.

There are things that can also be done to make the other vital piece of bathroom equipment – the lavatory – more accessible. The toilet seat can be raised so that the stiff person does not have so much bending to do. And soft absorbent loose leaf tissue is easier to handle than a continuous roll – and easier to use too.

Finally, it is always wise to have several grab handles near to the lavatory, which should be very well secured.

Walking aids

Many arthritic patients are reluctant to use a walking stick. They think of it as a badge of infirmity. It should be thought of as an aid to walking – just as good shoes are an efficient walking aid. There are many different types of stick available -ranging from the ordinary wooden stick (which should have a rubber tipped end to ensure that it does not slip) to the tripod type of stick (which has three feet attached to a single handle and which will stand up by itself – it gives a bit more security than an ordinary stick but is almost as portable).

The walking frame is held in front – usually with both hands. When moving the right side of the frame and the left side are shuffled forwards alternately. The frames are usually made of light but strong material and one major advantage is that a basket can be attached to the front so that small items (books, shopping, etc.) can be carried around. Some frames can be converted into seats.

When choosing a stick or frame do make sure that it is the right size. Frames usually have adjustable handles. Sticks should be tried out for size. Some collapsible sticks and frames can be obtained.

A stick or frame can give you extra support, take some of the strain and enable you to rest when you need to. If you use a stick change hands regularly so that you don’t get into the habit of putting too much strain on one side of your body.

Wheelchairs

There are many different types of wheelchair so when selecting a wheelchair you need to know exactly what you are going to use it for. Wheelchairs can be divided into three main groups: those most suitable for outdoor use, those suitable for use indoors and those which can be used either indoors or out of doors. Decide whether your chair will be pushed or propelled from inside. Look for a chair that is manoeuvrable and, ideally, collapsible so that you can take it with you when you travel by car, train or bus. Some chairs have detachable armrests and hinged footrests which make them easier to use because you can get in and out without too much trouble. Propelling wheels (the bigger wheels that the occupant moves to get a chair moving) are usually at the rear but if you have limited shoulder movement you may get on better with a chair which has the propelling wheels at the front. Pneumatic tyres are more comfortable – particularly over rough ground – but solid tyres make a chair easier to move and they do not puncture. If you are going to use your wheelchair over long distances you may get on better with a powered model. There are all sorts of different powered wheelchairs available: some suitable only for indoor use, some suitable for use on quite rough ground. It really is a good idea to shop around – but first, make sure that you know what you want.

Aids for shopping

If you have to carry heavy loads around use a shopping trolley or basket on wheels to relieve the strain on your back. Recent research from France showed that the average six year old French child regularly carries 9% of his or her body weight in a rucksack or satchel while travelling to and from school. By the age of twelve the load has risen to 25% and by the time they reach sixteen years of age pupils are carrying 50% of their bodyweight around with them in books, sports gear etc. It is hardly surprising that in the last decade the number of French citizens suffering from severe back problems has risen from 30% to 45%.

Aids for getting up and down stairs

If you find walking up and down stairs painful you may find it easier if you edge yourself up or down stairs on your bottom. If your problem persists investigate the possibility of installing a powered stair lift. You sit down on a small chair, press a button and ascend or descend the stairs effortlessly.

Aids for getting dressed

If you have difficulty in bending or raising your arms you will find that some clothes are far more difficult to get into and out of than others. Avoid tight jeans or trousers. Wear slip on shoes rather than lace ups. Make sure that zips and buttons are easily accessible and replace difficult to reach and difficult to use fasteners with easy to reach and easy to use fasteners. Velcro fastenings are easy to close and undo. (Arthritic fingers will find buttons, hooks and eyes and other small fasteners difficult or impossible). Buttons, when you do use them, should be as large as possible. The long handled shoe horn, the shoe which has an elasticated front and the long handled pick up stick can all help. For women a wrap around skirt is easier to put on than one that has to be pulled up while a front fastening brassiere can be a great help.

Disposable underwear, towels and handkerchiefs may be expensive but do cut down on washing and ironing.

Tips for dressing

* Lean against a wall when you need to raise a foot or leg (e.g. to put on a sock or tie a shoelace)
* Roll up clothes (e.g. jumpers) so that you can put your arms through the arm holes as easily as possible
* If you have difficulty in balancing and pulling on trousers or tights try dressing while lying on top of your bed. To get your trousers over your feet pull your knees up to your chest. Then straighten your legs to pull your trousers up to your bottom.

Getting about

If you have difficulty in driving an ordinary car look at the possibility of having a car ‘customised’. You can buy better car seats and backrests to make sitting in a car more comfortable. Wide angle mirrors make driving safer if you have limited neck movement. There are special knobs available which can be attached to the steering wheel to make steering easier.

Housing: general advice

Many of the minor hazards which the perfectly fit take in their stride can become major problems when joints stiffen and limbs don't work as well as they did.

For example, a flight of stairs which a fit and healthy individual can run up and down without any thought will provide an arthritic patient with considerable problems. Even a single high step or a couple of steps at the front door can suddenly become a restrictive barrier. High rise blocks of flats where lifts may be out of order for months on end can turn into high rise prisons for the disabled. And the lack of a ground floor lavatory can mean a disabled person becoming marooned on the first floor.

Just as important as the type of home is where the accommodation is situated. A bungalow may seem a wonderful idea. But if it is as the top of a steep hill, hidden away in the country miles from a bus stop or railway station, or can only be reached by clambering up a steep path or a long flight of stone steps, it may be completely unsuitable for someone disabled by arthritis.

When planning a new home, or redesigning an existing one, it is important to be aware of the potential hazards and to think of future problems too. Uneven floors, steps between rooms and difficult passageways are all potential troublespots.

Aids for hobbies and leisure

Just because you are arthritic you don’t have to give up all your favourite sports and hobbies. There are many gadgets that you can use. If you like playing cards you can make a ‘card holder’ by sawing a suitably sized slit in a piece of wood. If you like reading but find it difficult to hold a book then put a tray with a small stand on your lap. If you like sewing but have difficulty in threading a needle then buy a self threading needle or an automatic threading machine. For the arthritic gardener there are plenty of useful tools: long handled gadgets for hoeing and weeding and picking up the rubbish, lawn mowers that can be operated from a wheelchair, spades and forks that can be used without bending and tools that can be used with just one hand for cutting long grass and pruning small bushes and trees. There are long handled trowels, kneeler stools for gardeners with dodgy knees and all sorts of gadgets for use in the greenhouse. Finally, gardeners who have a lot of difficulty in bending can try building up their gardens to waist height. Flower and vegetable beds can be separated by firm, even concrete paths. Raised gardens are suitable for arthritics who have to do all their gardening from a wheelchair.

For more information about books by Vernon Coleman (and for access to free articles) please visit www.vernoncoleman.com

How To Live Longer

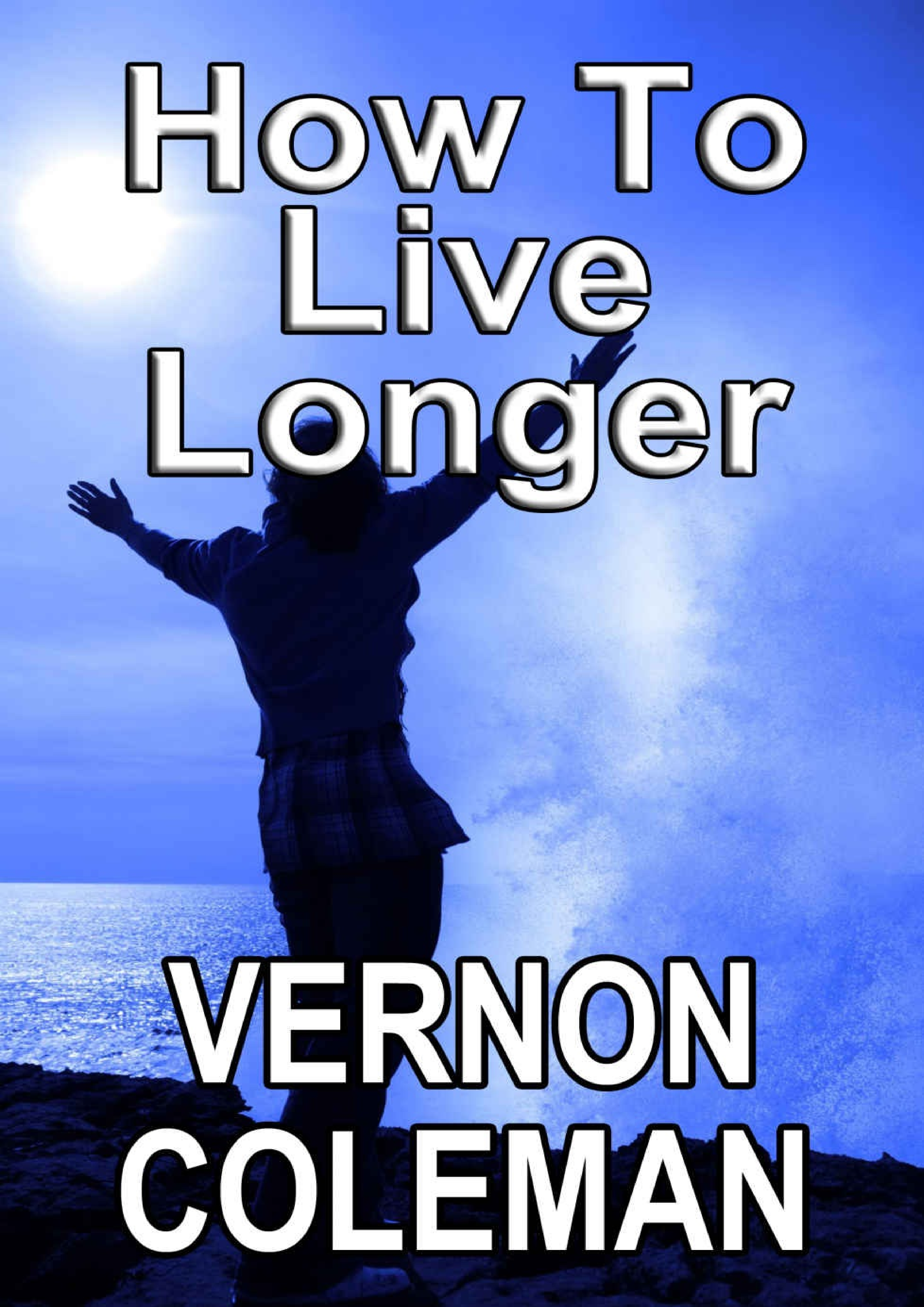

VERNON COLEMAN
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How To Live Longer
And Stay Young For The Rest Of Your Life
(With Hardly Any Effort)

Vernon Coleman

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The Author

Sunday Times bestselling author Vernon Coleman has written over 100 books which have sold over two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK and been translated into 25 languages. Many of his books are available as Kindle books on Amazon. For a list of available eBooks, please see Vernon Coleman's author page on Amazon. Vernon Coleman is medically qualified and worked as a GP in a small town in the English midlands. He owns a small collection of rather nice ties and a huge number of books. He is married to the delectable Antoinette. There is nothing else worth knowing though there is accurate biographical material on www.vernoncoleman.com and a good deal of inaccurate biographical material spread elsewhere on the internet.

Dedicated to Antoinette, whose smiles and laughter are my fresh air and sunshine and who gives my life meaning.

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Preface

There is much more to life than simple good health. But good health is the foundation upon which everything else rests. Without good health, none of us can enjoy life to the full.

We know more about staying healthy – and fighting disease – than at any other time in history. But finding the truth about medical matters is just as difficult as it has ever been. In some ways, the explosion in research and the increased availability of medical info has made the truth even more difficult to find.

Who do you trust? How can you tell whether or not a doctor is being paid to do or say something by a drug company with a product to sell? How can you be sure that the doctor advocating a particular treatment technique is not just trying to win another patient? And how do you compare different medical and surgical techniques?

Doctors who practise as surgeons invariably claim that surgery has all the answers whereas doctors who practise as physicians will often argue that surgery is barbaric, clumsy and dangerous and should only be used as a last resort. Who is right? We have to remember that if you visit a Ford garage and look at cars, the salesman will likely recommend motor cars made by Ford. If you visit a BMW garage, the salesman will likely recommend BMW cars. Physicians think that they have the best solutions. Surgeons reckon they can often offer the treatment of choice.

The problem with finding the truth about health matters is that doctors tend to sing the tune they have been trained to sing. If you are suffering from cancer then a surgeon will sing the praises of surgery and a radiotherapist will sing the praises of radiotherapy. But which is the right treatment for you?

It is easy to draw an analogy between finding impartial, well-informed medical advice and finding impartial, well-informed financial advice.

If you have a sum of money to invest and you ask a bond specialist to recommend a good investment, he will suggest a bond. If you talk to a stockbroker, he will advise that you invest directly in shares. If you talk to an insurance company man, he will want to sell you an insurance policy. And if you talk to a bank manager – hoping that he will be able to guide you to the correct type of investment – the chances are that he will not know enough about what is available and feasible to be able to offer you the accurate, impartial advice that you need.

A family doctor is the medical equivalent of a bank manager. In an ideal world, you would be able to ask a general practitioner to take over, guide you and offer you accurate and impartial advice about health matters.

But most family doctors are probably too busy to have the time to spare. And, to be honest, they are probably not up-to-date.

In the old days most patients preferred to see an older, more experienced doctor because they believed that he knew more and would have balanced his medical training with a good deal of acquired wisdom and common sense. But if a doctor qualified more than five years ago then the chances are that just about everything he learned at medical school is out-of-date – and that everything he has learned since he left medical school has been taught to him by drug companies. Just keeping up-to-date is a pretty full-time job these days – and most family doctors either don’t have the time or aren’t prepared to spend it on keeping up.

Of course, there is one big difference between seeking investment advice and seeking medical advice. If you receive poor investment advice then the worst that is likely to happen is that you will lose your money. But if you receive bad medical advice then you may lose your life.

And that brings me to the purpose of this book.

I have argued for the whole of my professional life that every individual should have the right to take control of his or her own health.

You should make the decisions about what happens to you. It is your life and only you can know what is right for you. You should not allow anyone to make vital decisions for you. Doctors make mistakes and most doctors have a vested interest of some kind.

Obviously, if you follow this philosophy then you will need information and advice. And that is where I believe I can help you.

The book contains information and advice gathered from specialists around the world. My aim is simply to help you make better decisions about your own health and health care – and about how to live longer and stay healthier and as ‘young’ as possible. The final responsibility is still yours – as it should be.

The advice I give is always the advice I would take myself – or the advice I would give to someone close to me.

Although I used to be a general practitioner, I no longer practise medicine and so have no allegiance to any particular branch of the profession. I can approach each subject relatively free of prejudices or preconceived notions.

And although I have grave reservations about many aspects of modern medicine, I refuse to throw out the good with the bad. I believe that sometimes orthodox medicine offers the best form of treatment and that sometimes alternative medicine offers the best. I believe in a pick and mix philosophy. I am happy to take the best from any form of medicine.

Much of what you read here may surprise you. It may not fit comfortably with what you may have heard from the medical establishment. Remember, however, that the medical establishment is controlled by the drug industry and that drugs are manufactured with the primary aim of making money for the companies which make them.

I am not, of course, trying to take over your doctor's job. That would be lunatic. After all, one of my aims is to help you get the best out of your doctor.

And it would be quite against my philosophy to try to give you specific advice: my aim is to help you take responsibility for your own health. This book is not intended to be, and cannot be, an alternative to personal, professional medical advice. Readers should immediately consult a trained and properly qualified health care professional, whom they trust and respect, for advice about any symptom or health problem which requires diagnosis, treatment or any kind of medical attention.

I will give you the best information and the best general advice I can. And because I believe that good health involves more than just a healthy body – it also requires a healthy mind and spirit too – this book will deal with the mind and the spirit as well as the body.

You and I may never meet. But I hope that through this book we can become good friends with a common aim: continued good health for those we love and care about.

Vernon Coleman 2001 and 2016

Introduction

So far this week I have received details of three ‘wonder’ products which guarantee me perfect health and long life. Two of the distributors offer a money back refund to anyone not absolutely delighted. One of the products also promises me untold wealth, good luck at the casinos, a promotion at work, incredible energy and irresistible sexual appeal.

It is the modern way.

Read a newspaper or magazine article on ageing and you’ll probably find someone recommending that the best way to live to be 100 is to eat a special extract taken from a type of seaweed collected by native virgin girls from a short stretch of New Zealand coastline. The seaweed extract will come in a beautiful package and will cost you a small fortune. If it isn’t seaweed extract it will be a special, previously unheard of mineral supplement which 150-year-old peasants dug out of rocks making up the foothills of some Himalayan mountain. And if it isn’t the previously unheard of mineral supplement, it will be some other magical ingredient guaranteed to give long life and good health.

These sort of recommendations are immensely popular because they provide an easy, instant, painless (except for the price) solution to a problem we all want to avoid.

And we have become addicted to quick fix solutions. Even though we may know that they won’t really work we still allow ourselves to be conned by the people selling these magical remedies because we want to believe that there is an easy solution. I know intelligent, well educated, well-informed people who regularly fall for these claims and constantly claim to be surprised and disappointed when the new ‘wonder’ substance they have bought turns out to be about as effective as tongue of newt and eye of toad.

Every year millions and millions of overweight people decide that they want to lose weight.

They all know that they are overweight because they have eaten too much food. By and large (with very few exceptions) that is the only way to become overweight. They know, in their hearts, that the only sure way to lose weight and stay slim is to change their eating habits permanently.

But the people in the slimming industry don’t get rich by selling sensible slimming advice.

The people in the slimming industry get rich by selling miracle cures that guarantee a rapid weight loss with no effort.

A man I know once edited a slimming magazine aimed (as most of these magazines are) at overweight women who wanted to lose weight. The magazine was full of very sensible articles about diet, nutrition and food. I once picked up a copy of one of his magazines and thought I spotted an article I’d seen before.

‘Didn’t you run something like this a few months ago?’ I asked him, surprised.

‘Oh yes,’ he replied, with disarming honesty. ‘Actually it’s the same article. Every four months I restart the cycle and print the same articles again.’

Aghast and horrified I stared at him. ‘But don’t the readers complain?’

‘Oh no!’ he replied. ‘They never read the magazine at all. They buy it every month but they don’t read it. Buying the magazine is the easy bit. It shows that they’re serious about losing weight. But going on a diet is the hard bit. They don’t want to do that.’

‘But they’ll never lose weight just by buying the magazine!’ I protested.

‘Of course not. But these days people prefer the easy solution – even if it doesn’t work.’

For years I didn’t want to believe him.

But, of course, he was absolutely right. Most people do prefer simple, quick-fix solutions.

* * *

Just as there are no miracle pills available to help you slim rapidly, safely and permanently so there are, of course, no miracle pills available to help you live longer (or to help you stay young for the rest of your life).

But, just as there are effective ways to lose weight permanently so there are ways to live longer. You can live longer. And you can stay young for the rest of your life.

The choice is yours.

We’re all getting older. We’re getting older every day. Our skin is becoming dry, flaky and not quite so soft as it was. Our hair is thinning and greying. Our reactions are slower than they were. Our joints are beginning to creak. Our hearing deteriorates. Our immune defence systems stop functioning as effectively. Bits that were firm are probably beginning to sag.

But the rate at which we age and the rate at which we appear to age are not necessarily the same thing at all.

We all know 30-year-olds who look 40 (or more) and we all know 50-year-olds who could pass for 40 (or less). If you visit an old school reunion, take a good look at your contemporaries. Some will look their age. Some will look older than they are. And some will look as if they’ve hardly aged at all.

Whether your body looks older or younger than it really is depends upon how well you are looking after yourself. If you look after yourself (by which I mean looking after both your body and your mind) you can knock 10 years (or more) off your appearance. Even more important, perhaps, you can add 10 (or more) years to your prospective life expectancy. Ageing – looking and feeling older – isn't a necessary consequence of old age. You can live longer and you can live younger too.

* * *

Regular readers of newspapers and viewers of television programmes could be forgiven for believing that longevity is largely influenced by genetic factors.

It isn't.

Genetic influences are of little account. Your genes don't care whether you live to be 35 or 70. Your genes just want you to live long enough to procreate. Once you've reached that age, the rest of your life is an irrelevance as far as your genes are concerned. There are no genes for longevity. Fewer than ten per cent of all cancers are genetically linked or influenced. Inheriting a cancer gene doesn't mean that you will get that particular type of cancer. It means that you have an increased risk of developing that type of cancer. There has been much talk of a breast cancer gene which causes cancer (BRCA-1) but there isn't really any such thing. There is no gene which causes breast cancer. There is, however, a gene which increases a woman's chances of developing cancer. Women with this gene can dramatically reduce their risk of developing breast cancer by avoiding the factors which are known to be associated with breast cancer. They should, for example, avoid becoming overweight and they should eat a low fat diet. In my view, the modern 'scientific' approach (to remove the healthy breasts of women who have the breast cancer gene) is barbaric and unnecessary.

The influence that genes do have on life expectation (and that influence is relatively trivial) is largely incidental. For example, there are genes which decide whether or not you have a type A (rather pushy, hard-working) personality. This type of personality is an advantage early on in life. If you are pushy and hard-working you will be more likely to find a mate and to be able to feed your children. As far as your genes are concerned that is a good thing. However, as you grow older, so this type of personality is likely to become a burden – dramatically increasing your chances of having a heart attack. Genes only promote longevity indirectly, and behaviour and lifestyle are factors which have a far greater influence on life expectation. The older you get the less effect your genes have on your health.

Having said that, it is important to look at your family history and to identify the diseases which killed your ancestors. With this information, you can make intelligent decisions about how you can best avoid those health problems. If you have a family history of diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease or cancer then you may be able to increase your life expectation dramatically by doing what you can to avoid those problems.

Average life expectation could easily be 85 – or even more – if more people took a little care with their health. But, amazingly, most people still eat too much fat, are overweight, take too little exercise, drink too much alcohol, smoke too much tobacco and do little or nothing to help themselves deal with the inevitable stresses of life in the 21st century.

Chapter One

How To Stay Young While Growing Old

There are a mass of misconceptions about growing old but the commonest – and most significant – is that ageing must inevitably be associated with illness, weakness, disability and a remorseless deterioration in physical and mental health.

Accompanying this misconception is the myth that people who are classified as ‘old’ will need and want to spend their days sitting or lying down, and generally avoiding any sort of strenuous activity. It is probably no coincidence that accommodation for the elderly is often provided in buildings which are described as ‘rest homes’.

Retirement should be a time for exploration, for freedom and for adventure. Instead it is, for most people, a time when they find themselves obliged to hand over their hard-earned savings to the owner of a nursing or rest home.

Every day, each one of us is getting older. That is an inescapable rule of life. Two factors influence your health, your life expectancy and the rate at which your chronological age affects your ability to enjoy life.

The first of these (over which you have no control whatsoever) is your genetic inheritance. As I have already pointed out, genes have a relatively mild impact on longevity; their influence has been exaggerated. If both your parents and all four of your grandparents died in their 40s then you would be foolish to deny, or to avoid the fact, that fate has handed you a bad fistful of cards. I have no doubt that in the not too distant future, lawyers with cash register consciences will be encouraging people with poor genes to sue their parents, their grandparents and all available relatives and ancestors. Meanwhile, we can, of course, all do a great deal to ensure that we get the best from the cards we have been dealt. And if your parents and your grandparents all celebrated their 100th birthdays then your chances of reaching a century are pretty good too.

The second factor which influences your health, your susceptibility to illness, your life expectation and the rate at which you grow old (and feeble) is your lifestyle. And over this, of course, you can have as much control as you wish. If you smoke, drink too much alcohol, eat too much fatty food and spend all day sitting on the couch watching TV then you probably won’t live as long and as healthy a life as you would have done if you had been a little more sensible. If you allow yourself to lie in bed all day and be waited upon, your body will become steadily weaker and weaker. The more you allow yourself to become dependant the more dependant you will become.

If you eat foods that are coated and laced with chemicals then you will become weaker and more susceptible to disease.

Heart disease, cancer and other killers become commoner as we age – but they become commoner not as a direct result of the ageing process but because of the ways in which we abuse and mistreat our bodies by (among other things) failing to exercise properly, eating poorly and exposing ourselves to unlimited amounts of stress.

The truth is that much (though obviously not all) of the disability which makes the final few decades of life so tiresome to so many people, is optional. People don’t choose to be ill, of course; but many do become ill and dependant because they have not chosen to be healthy. Old age is not a biological condition – and most of the symptoms which we usually associate with old age are reversible. If your lifestyle does not control your body then in the end your body will control your lifestyle.

* * *

Look around you and you will see practical evidence to support the argument that the signs of ageing are not exclusively suffered by those who have aged. Old age can occur at any age. Just what constitutes ‘old’ is a rather subjective issue. I know of individuals in their 80s who do not consider themselves to be ‘old’. And I know men and women in their mid to late 70s who spend their time rushing around helping people whom they (with absolutely no sense of irony) describe as ‘old’. As with most things in life, attitude of mind is crucial. I know men and women in their 50s who are retired and who consider their lives to be pretty well over.

All the changes which we usually associate with old age can occur at any age. Young people who stay in bed (either because of illness or laziness) quickly begin to display the signs normally associated with old age.

When Swedish physiologist Bengt Saltin asked five young men to stay in bed 24 hours a day for three weeks all five suffered a dramatic drop in their aerobic capacity. The change they suffered was equivalent to almost 20 years of ageing.

Too much rest, and too little exercise, cause an enormous number of serious and damaging changes in the body; including an increase in the proportion of body fat, a loss of body water, a reduced ability to control the body’s internal temperature, a rise in blood cholesterol, a loss of calcium from the bones, a change in the way the body deals with glucose and a reduced sense of balance. In addition, there are adverse effects on the senses of taste and hearing.

There is absolutely no doubt that many of the degenerative problems which we blame on chronological age are in reality a result of immobility – and can be reversed by a change in lifestyle which includes increased activity and some exercise.

Chronic, degenerative diseases (such as many instances of heart disease, diabetes and arthritis) aren't normal or natural. It is no coincidence that degenerative diseases are a largely 20th century phenomenon – and have developed alongside the motor car, the moving pavement and the electrically powered golf cart. Degenerative diseases are more common among people who are older because they have had more time (and more chances) to damage and misuse their bodies.

Is it any wonder that hospitals, nursing homes and rest homes are full of people who can hardly move, let alone walk, when in large areas of the 'developed' world one in two individuals is seriously overweight and one in four confesses to living almost totally sedentary lives?

* * *

It is not possible to avoid all illness and disability, any more than it is possible to avoid old age. Ageing is an immutable force and we are mortal creatures. But it is possible to reduce your chances of showing your age – and dramatically increase your chances of remaining active, alert and vigorous for the whole of your life.

Even if you are beginning to 'feel' your age you can take great comfort from the fact that you can regain aerobic endurance, muscular strength and the feeling of vigour and vitality which you may have thought you had lost for ever. Your age in years has very little to do with your biological age – or how old you feel.

Individuals who sit around and allow themselves to be waited upon by others will eventually become totally dependant. Their bodies will become weaker and they will lose the ability to function as independent beings. They will become fatter and their muscle mass will shrink. Immobility creates more immobility. On the other hand, those who remain determinedly as active as possible will retain their independence for as long as possible. Many of the serious, apparently deep-seated symptoms which are usually regarded as an inevitable consequence of old age can be reversed.

The philosophy to follow is a simple one: muscle strength, sexual ability, mental alertness and the ability to move around independently all depend on frequent usage. The phrase 'use it or lose it' is one which anyone who is concerned about the consequences of ageing should remember.

* * *

Doctors (and patients) often talk about life expectancy as though it were the only thing that mattered. Here again there are some crucial myths which need to be exposed. The other big question is: For how much of your life will you remain active and independent?

First, it is important to remember that if life expectancy is rising at all (and most doctors and drug companies would like us to believe it has risen dramatically during the last few decades) it isn't rising by very much.

Any improvement in adult life expectation which has taken place in the last century or so has been a result not of more drugs and cleverer doctors but of better sewage facilities, less overcrowding and cleaner drinking water (that one is becoming something not many of us can take for granted unless we drink filtered water or spring water).

The truth is that (as I show in the next chapter) adult life expectancy has changed very little this century (or, indeed, for many centuries). Any increase in the average life span has been largely a result of lower infant mortality rates – and these have changed despite rather than because of doctors and drug companies.

Second, although it is something doctors never seem keen to measure, the quality of life has, for many people and many decades, been steadily going down rather than up.

Millions of people now expect their last years of life to be spent sitting in a chair or lying in bed. They expect to have to be looked after; they expect walking, dancing, cycling and sex to be memories and they expect to get winded playing anything more energetic than bridge or chess.

This is, of course, all extremely depressing because for most people the quality of life can be almost as important as the quantity of life.

Most people would like their active life expectation (the number of years for which they will be able to remain self-reliant and independent) to be as close as possible to their life expectation – and they would like their personal 'disability zone' (the years for which they will be dependant on others) to be as short as possible.

* * *

Many doctors quite wrongly assume that weakness and frailty are inevitable consequences of ageing. This is total nonsense for which there is not a scrap of evidence. Much of the erroneous evidence used by doctors who believe that ageing must inevitably lead to dependence, is a result of animal experiments. In their book

Biomarkers Drs William Evans and Irwin H Rosenberg, of the US Department of Agriculture's Human Nutrition Center on Ageing at Tufts University, wrote that: 'to learn more about the biological destiny of ageing human beings, it's critical to study ageing human beings. It makes little sense to try to adapt conclusions based upon animal studies or even studies of young adults. If the subject is ageing, we need to study mature individuals.'

Most people would probably list an increased susceptibility to disorders such as 'heart disease', 'stroke', 'diabetes' and so on as signs of ageing. But these are specific diseases which can happen at any age. They are not an inevitable consequence of growing old; they are not linked to ageing so much as to the changes which can complicate ageing. And you can largely control the onset and development of these changes.

* * *

The human body consists of two main parts: fat (or adipose tissue), which is metabolically inactive in that it just sits there and doesn't actually do anything, and the 'rest'. The 'rest' includes bones, liver, brain, heart and so on – but mostly it is made up of muscle. The 'rest' – the non-fat part of your body – is metabolically active though some of it – such as muscle – is much more active than other bits – such as bone. Muscles work all the time if you are active and they are constantly burning up energy.

The purpose of muscle, brain and bone is pretty obvious. But the function of all the fat that is stored may seem to be something of a mystery. It is, however, merely an evolutionary hangover. The body stores fat to help keep it alive on days when there is no food available to be eaten. The mechanisms for storing fat were developed a long time ago – long before the introduction of supermarkets – and are something of an anachronism in the modern 'developed' world. Fat storage is a hazardous anachronism.

Overweight is a much commoner problem among people who are over 50 than it is among people who are under 50 but it isn't a direct consequence of ageing. We get fat as we get older not because our bodies are programmed to become bulkier as we hit certain chronological milestones but because, as we get older, we tend to do less exercise than we did when we were young while at the same time we carry on eating as much as we did when we were exercising more.

Remember, as I pointed out earlier, one in two people in America and much of the rest of the developed world is seriously overweight.

The average 65-year-old man's body contains 18% fat at the age of 25 and, if he lives a sedentary life, 38% fat at the age of 65. For women, the figures are considerably worse. The average 25-year-old woman's body contains 25% fat but if she lives a sedentary life then by the time she has reached 65 her body fat will be up to 43%.

The first problem with all that stored fat is that instead of simply helping to prevent starvation, stored body fat may lead to diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure and a host of other serious health problems. Too much stored fat may dramatically shorten your life.

The second problem isn't quite so obvious but in the long-term it can be just as crucial. Since fat just lies there and doesn't burn up energy (while, in contrast, muscles work hard and do burn up energy) it stands to reason that someone whose body contains a good deal of muscle and not very much fat will burn up much more fuel than someone whose body contains a good deal of fat and not very much energy burning muscle.

What this means is that someone whose body contains a lot of fat will have a low metabolic rate (they will burn up energy rather slowly) whereas someone with a more muscular body will have a high metabolic rate (they will burn up energy more quickly).

Someone whose body contains a lot of fat will have difficulty losing weight even if they eat very little. In contrast, someone whose body contains a lot of muscle (and not much fat) can eat huge meals without putting on weight.

* * *

The average individual's basal metabolic rate drops about 2% per decade after the age of 20. Because of this drop in the metabolic rate, the average individual needs more than 100 calories less per day from the age of 20 onwards. After the age of 30, the daily calorie need continues to fall by this sort of amount. And each decade afterwards, the calorie need drops by at least additional 100 calories. The result is that most people need 600 calories to 1,000 calories a day less at the age of 80 than they needed at 20. The average man can eat 3,000 calories a day at 20 but probably shouldn't eat more than 2,000 calories a day at 80. The average woman can eat 2,200 calories a day at 20 but probably shouldn't eat more than 1,600 calories a day at 80.

The tragedy, of course, is that most people eat more – not less – as they get older.

All this considered it is perhaps hardly surprising that unwanted weight is such a huge problem.

* * *

As we get older, and our bodies get fatter, we also tend to lose muscle mass. (People who maintain their weight as they age often do so because they lose muscle as they gain fat.)

Studies in the US have shown that after the age of about 20 Americans lose about 6.6 pounds (3 kilograms) of lean body mass each decade of their lives.

Between the ages of 20 and 70, we lose almost 30% of our muscle cells – and the muscle cells that are left get smaller.

Most of the muscle we lose goes not because we get older but because we don't use it. This is another example of the 'use it or lose it' philosophy I have already mentioned.

As we get older, we tend to take less exercise for all sorts of reasons. And the less exercise we take the more painful we find that exercise becomes. Our joints stiffen up and our muscles start to ache through disuse. The less we exercise the weaker we become and the weaker we become the less we exercise. None of this has anything to do with chronological age. It is all a consequence of social changes, habits and expectations.

Losing muscle is bad news for several reasons.

The first problem is, as I have already explained, that when the percentage of muscle to fat in your body drops, your metabolic rate also falls. As your metabolic rate falls so you will find that more and more of the food you eat is turned into fat – and your weight will go up. This will make it harder for you to exercise. And you will lose even more muscle. The vicious circle tightens.

The second problem is that when the amount of muscle in your body drops, your aerobic capacity will also fall. Muscles consume oxygen and help keep your heart (and the rest of your cardiovascular system) working efficiently. Less muscle means a lower aerobic capacity. And your cardiovascular system will suffer.

The third problem with losing muscle is that you will be more likely to develop diabetes.

The fourth problem is that although much of the carbohydrate we eat is used up to provide us with the energy we need in order to function, the excess carbohydrate will normally be turned into glycogen and stored in the muscles where it remains as a reserve energy source.

But the less muscle you have the less glycogen your body will be able to store.

Older people who have reduced amounts of muscle will store relatively small amounts of glycogen and will, therefore, get tired easily when they exert themselves. (To make matters worse, if muscle mass is poor and excess carbohydrate cannot be stored as glycogen it will be turned into fat.)

Finally, having less muscle will also mean that your bones will become weaker (and more fragile) and your body will contain higher levels of damaging cholesterol.

Losing muscle really is bad news on a big scale.

If you are beginning to feel rather miserable by what I've written so far you can start cheering up now for numerous studies have shown that 50, 60, 70, 80 and 90-year-olds can increase muscle strength and size through exercise. Age is irrelevant. Someone who exercises will gain muscle in just the same way however old they are.

An eight week study showed that a group of male and female nursing home residents in their late 80s and 90s succeeded in increasing muscle strength and size by 10% when they exercised. Their leg muscle strength almost tripled and they were much more confident in their ability to walk than they had been before they started exercising.

It is clear that gaining new muscle – like losing old muscle – has absolutely nothing to do with how old you are.

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Many people who are ageing badly – and who are concerned about their increasing inability to remain independent – regard losing weight as the Holy Grail that may save them from a final decade or two of incontinent indignity.

If only they can lose weight, they think, they will be able to avoid having to waste the remaining hours of their retirement years in a plastic chair, being entirely reliant upon others for every one of their basic needs.

But simply losing weight isn't enough – and won't necessarily be a help at all to anyone hoping to regain their health and fitness.

Muscle weighs more than fat, and an unhealthy individual whose body contains a high percentage of fat may weigh less than a much healthier individual whose body contains a high percentage of muscle.

Losing weight through losing body fat may help you fit into clothes which are a size or two smaller but it won't help you very much if your aim is to become more active and independent. To become active and independent you will need more muscle – and simply losing weight won't help your body create more muscle.

One big problem with height weight tables is that they don't tell you how much of your body is fat. If your body is packed with muscle you could be overweight but healthy.

The other big problem with height weight tables is that they don't tell you where your body fat is stored. And the evidence shows that where your fat is stored may have a tremendous impact on your future health. (Although even if your body fat is stored in a relatively safe position it is, of course, an excellent idea to get rid of excess fat as soon as you can.)

If your fat is stored at or above waist level you are much more likely to be at risk than if your fat is stored on or below your hips.

The pear shaped individual – with a relatively slight upper body but a relatively large bottom – is less at risk from a whole range of potentially lethal disorders (including heart disease, diabetes and stroke) than the apple shaped individual who has his or her body fat stored above his hips.

This factor is so important that it appears that even if you are not overweight – but have a good proportion of your body fat stored above your hips – then you may be more at risk than someone who is slightly overweight but whose fat is stored at or below hip level.

* * *

For many years, I was not enthusiastic about the value of exercise in a weight-reducing programme. To get rid of a pound of fat you have to burn up 3,500 calories – and that means that a week's hard exercise programme would probably not result in the loss of a single pound of fat. (When you take into consideration the energy bars and extra food you might eat as a result of all that exercise, the value of exercise in a weight loss programme seems to fall still further.)

But I'm now convinced that exercise does have a part to play if you are trying to lose body fat and improve the ratio of muscle to fat in your body. The best way to lose fat is through a combination of diet and exercise.

Exercise is valuable because it will help you maintain and improve your muscle mass and it will, therefore, raise your metabolic rate and make it easier for you to burn up fat.

If you try losing weight without exercising there is a danger that you will lose muscle as well as fat. That will result in a lower metabolic rate which will, in turn, make it harder for you to burn up unwanted fat.

You must, incidentally, be prepared for the fact that if you lose fat and gain muscle you may end up not losing much (if any) weight at all.

* * *

Losing weight and improving muscle mass and power will help you feel younger and act with more vigour. As a bonus, you will probably find that as you exercise and increase your muscle mass and power you will also improve your body's aerobic capacity.

The phrase 'aerobic capacity' describes your body's ability to breathe in large amounts of oxygen (as air) and to pump and deliver large volumes of oxygen containing blood to the various parts of your body.

Aerobic capacity normally gets smaller with age – starting to fall at the age of around 20 in men and 30 in women. By the age of 65 our aerobic capacity is usually 30% to 40% less than it was when we were young. (If you are middle aged or over you may find it strangely comforting to know that 20 to 30-year-olds are already beginning to age quite noticeably).

There are several reasons for this decline. First, the older heart doesn't react as well to exercise. Second, it is usually smaller than it was. Third, the maximum possible heart rate drops with age too.

But the good news is that here is yet another sign of ageing that can be reversed. Your heart and general cardiovascular system probably won't change directly as a result of losing weight and gaining muscle mass but the change in your muscles will improve your aerobic capacity and the end result will be improved aerobic fitness. That is, as they say, a good thing.

* * *

Improving your muscle power, reducing the proportion of fat in your body and improving your aerobic capacity are by no means the only things you can do to help yourself stay young while growing old. You can also improve the way your body controls your blood sugar levels.

I have already explained that as we get older most of us take less exercise and become rather sedentary. Our bodies tend to start storing rather too much fat.

At the same time as all this is happening, the tissues in our bodies appear to lose their sensitivity to insulin (the hormone which enables our bodies to metabolise the glucose in our bloodstream). This results in our tissues becoming less capable of using the sugar in our blood. And that results in the fact that even though our pancreatic glands try to increase the production of insulin, our blood sugar levels tend to rise as we get older.

There aren't usually any symptoms accompanying this change but raised blood sugar levels do result in an increased chance of developing 'maturity onset diabetes'.

(Like so many other changes which are usually regarded as being associated with the ageing process, these changes start at the age of about 30 years onwards. It should by now be clear that the physiological effects of ageing aren't something that just occur when we reach pensionable age. Most of the serious signs of ageing that expose us to an enhanced risk of developing degenerative diseases begin in early adulthood.)

The traditional medical approach to these raised blood sugar levels is usually to prescribe drugs to try to push the pancreas into producing more insulin. These drugs are not without their hazards and I think there is a much better way for most of us to improve the way in which our bodies deal with sugar.

(Doctors and drug companies won't tell you this sort of stuff because they are in the business of selling drugs. I make no apology for repeating the fact that time and time again, simple but effective techniques are ignored because they offer the drug industry no chance of making a profit.)

The body's gradually increasing inability to deal with sugar is, it seems, more a result of the change in the body's fat/muscle proportions than a result of an ageing, malfunctioning or inefficient pancreas.

Normally, when we eat something, the muscle tissues in our bodies respond to the insulin which is produced by the cells in the pancreas glands. The muscles then start to use the sugar in our blood. Without that triggering insulin, our tissues would starve to death and our blood glucose levels would just keep rising.

As we age, however, and we lose muscle tissue and gain fat deposits, our bodies respond less and less well to the insulin which is produced.

Inactivity, a fat rich diet and increased body fat mean that it takes more and more insulin to stimulate the muscles and, therefore, keep the blood sugar levels under control.

To make things worse, the pancreas is one of those parts of the body which does tend to work less efficiently as we age, and the increased need for insulin comes at a time of life when the production of insulin is naturally slowing down.

Nevertheless, I really don't think that the use of drugs to try to kick the pancreas into working harder is the best answer to this problem.

A high fibre, low fat diet (consisting, for example, of plenty of whole grains and raw vegetables), and regular exercise can often lower body fat levels (thereby automatically increasing the proportion of muscle) and increase the body's sensitivity to the insulin which is being produced.

* * *

High blood pressure is known as the silent killer for two very good reasons: it doesn't usually produce any symptoms and it can kill.

Many doctors believe that high blood pressure is an inevitable consequence of ageing. They are wrong. Lots of people in their 70s, 80s and 90s have perfectly normal blood pressure.

High blood pressure may be inherited, and there are genetic factors, but in most people it is caused by a number of identified – and avoidable - lifestyle factors. Overweight, smoking, a high fat diet, stress and a lack of exercise can all contribute to a blood pressure problem. The influence of all these factors is constantly under-estimated – particularly, I'm sad to say, by a medical profession which seems determined to keep drug company profits high by insisting on prescribing powerful (and often potentially hazardous) drugs for the treatment of this problem despite the fact that research has shown that these lifestyle factors are often crucially important.

(As evidence supporting the argument that lifestyle can be as significant as genetics, consider what we know about black people. Black people are unusually prone to high blood pressure but when black American men were compared with bushmen in northern Botswana, it was found that the Africans didn't really begin to show signs of high blood pressure until they were in their 70s whereas the Americans (who drank, smoke and ate too much and exercised too little) had high blood pressure in their 50s. The conclusion from this must be that a genetic predisposition can be triggered by the wrong lifestyle.)

You can probably keep your blood pressure down by eating wisely, exercising regularly, avoiding tobacco and minimising your exposure to stress.

* * *

Broken bones are the leading cause of accidental death in frail elderly people. A high proportion of elderly women and elderly men suffer hip fractures.

However, it is a myth that weak bones, or osteoporosis, are a normal part of the ageing process.

On the contrary, it is now clear that osteoporosis is caused by, among other things, eating the wrong sort of diet and taking too little exercise. I am constantly appalled when I hear of elderly patients being confined to bed for no very good reason. Two weeks of complete bed rest can cause the bones to lose as much calcium as would normally be lost in a year. Even when patients who are in bed cannot walk around under their own steam, they can still benefit if they are helped to get out of bed and stand on their own feet. When patients who are resting in bed are made to stand for a while every day, they stop losing calcium. They don't even have to walk because the stress imposed by gravity is enough to 'persuade' the bones to retain their calcium. When you put stress on a bone it gets stronger. (Obviously, some patients do have to remain in bed. But the number of patients who can't get out of bed and simply stand is very small. Talk to the doctor if he says a patient must stay in bed and ask him/her to explain why.) Osteoporosis is not an inevitable accompaniment of ageing. It can be avoided.

* * *

Some of the body’s protective and healing mechanisms do deteriorate with ageing. One of the systems which tends to work less efficiently with age is the body’s thermostat – the inbuilt temperature control system which, in a young, healthy body, normally keeps the internal temperature within a degree or so of 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit whatever the outside temperature might be.

When the outside temperature is hot the thermostat makes us sweat to keep cool and makes us thirsty so that we drink plenty of fluid to replace the fluid we lose. When the outside temperature is cold, the thermostat makes us shiver to keep warm.

These mechanisms do not work as well in an elderly body – though age is not the only factor and there is no doubt that a low level of fitness and aerobic capacity damage the thermostatic controls and make things far worse than they otherwise would be.

The feeling of thirst is one of the vital temperature control mechanisms which does tend to deteriorate most noticeably. Older people don’t feel thirsty as much or as readily as young people. This is undoubtedly the main reason so many people in their 60s and beyond simply don’t drink enough water.

I don’t think there is much (or, indeed, anything) that you can do to improve your fading temperature control mechanism.

But by making sure that you drink plenty of clean (and preferably chemical free) water you can certainly take another step towards helping your body stay healthy.

* * *

Older people are far more susceptible to infection than young people and this is largely due to the fact that their immune systems are in poor working order.

The immune system does not automatically ‘fail’ with age. It becomes less effective because of poor eating habits and too much stress. I explained how to keep the immune system healthy in my book *Superbody* (also available as an ebook).

* * *

Some things do change with age. For example, men whose fathers and grandfathers were bald will probably lose their hair as they get older. Hair loss is genetically controlled and I’m still not convinced that there is a great deal you can do to stop it.

On the other hand, there is no real reason why the skin should suffer as much as it often does. Regular and generous use of a plain moisturising cream – and not spending too much time in the sun – can help the skin stay supple, wrinkle free and young looking.

* * *

At regular intervals doctors, anthropologists and journalists discover groups of people in various parts of the ‘undeveloped’ world who seem to have found the secret of long life. Some of these discoveries are probably falsely based. Birth records aren’t always reliable in distant country areas. But whatever the truth may be about some of the astonishing longevity claims which have been made in recent years one thing is clear: there are a number of similarities between the people in different parts of the world who succeed in living long and healthy lives. Here are those basic similarities:

* Obesity is uncommon.
* Diets are low in animal fats.
* Consumption of tobacco and alcohol is low.
* Retirement is unknown and the elderly retain their social status and the respect of the young.
* Daily physical activity is commonplace.
* Outside (or ‘toxic’) stress is minimal.

If you look down this list and then think about how we run our lives, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that we seem to be doing our very best to ensure that we age rapidly and spend our final years dependant upon others for virtually everything we need.

In our modern ‘developed’ world, millions of people in their 40s and beyond are overweight; overfed (with all the wrong sorts of highly refined high fat foods); polluted and poisoned by the air they breathe, the water they drink, the food they eat and the drugs they are encouraged to swallow; exposed to virtually unlimited quantities of ‘toxic’ stress, constantly frustrated and hassled and seriously undervalued by society at large.

* * *

You can stay young while growing old. And the final proof that it is possible to stay young while growing old comes from research done on 7,000 residents of Alameda County, California.

Investigators there showed that 70-year-olds who didn’t smoke, who kept their weight within 20% of the recommended level for their age; who drank moderate amounts of alcohol (some alcohol is probably better for you than no alcohol – and obviously better than too much); who took moderate exercise three times a week; who slept seven or eight hours a night and who ate regularly (including at breakfast time) were as healthy as people in their late 30s and early 40s who practised only half of these simple rules. The researchers showed that men who followed these simple guidelines lived, on average, eleven years longer than men who didn’t while women lived, on average, an extra seven years.

And if you really want to improve your chances of staying healthy and active and independent until the end of your life you should remember that maintaining a useful and satisfying role in the world is one of the most crucial keys to staying young while growing old.

Chapter Two

Plan Now To Avoid An Inevitable Health Crisis

Back in 1988, in my book *The Health Scandal*, I forecast that by the year 2020 one third of the population in the developed world would be over the age of 65 and that in every home where there were two healthy parents and two healthy children there would be four disabled or dependent individuals needing constant care.

I predicted that diseases such as schizophrenia and diabetes (which are genetically transmitted) and blindness (which is ten times as common among the over 65s and 30 times as common among the over 75s) would be as common as indigestion and hay-fever are today, that unemployment would be common, that stress related diseases would be endemic and that developed countries around the world would face bankruptcy as they struggled to find the cash to pay pensions, sick pay and unemployment benefits.

I forecast that, tragically and unfairly, resentment, bitterness and anger would divide the young and the old, the able bodied and the dependent, the employed and the unemployed, that there would, within 20 years of the start of the 21st century, be anarchy, despair and civil war with ghettoes of elderly and disabled citizens abandoned to care for themselves.

For years, those who have forecast the end of the human race have talked of nuclear war, starvation in the third world and pollution as being the major threats to our survival. But back in 1988, I argued that the decline I predicted for the year 2020 would be triggered not by any of these forces but by much simpler and entirely predictable developments.

All the evidence I have seen in the eight years since I made those predictions convinces me that I was absolutely right. We are heading for a medical and social catastrophe. And every day that goes by makes that catastrophe increasingly inevitable. Everyone will suffer: today’s elderly, tomorrow’s elderly and tomorrow’s young too.

When I first published this forecast, the medical and political establishments refused to take my warning seriously. I was dismissed as a scaremonger. No one would broadcast the TV series I wanted to make, and the book I wrote about the whole issue was studiously ignored. Even though I personally bought around two thousand copies of the book and subsequently sent copies to every Member of Parliament in Britain, most leading journalists, many doctors and hundreds of public libraries, the whole issue remained largely undiscussed.

However, some sections of the media have at long last begun to recognise that we are truly facing a colossal problem – and that the growing size of our elderly and disabled populations will pose enormous problems to our society. But neither politicians nor commentators have yet stumbled on the true background explanation for what is happening – and nor have they offered any practical advice on how you can best protect yourself against the problems which are coming.

When I wrote *The Health Scandal* I estimated that by the year 2020 we would have reached the position whereby more than half the population would be ‘dependant’ – either through age or disability.

It now looks as if my calculations were accurate. If anything, they were rather conservative. There seems to me to be little doubt that in the next 30 years, age will have a far more divisive effect on our society than race, sex or class have ever had.

In developed countries, total populations are increasing very slowly but the size of the ageing populations are increasing at a dramatic rate. For example, during one recent decade the total population of Britain increased by less than one per cent. But in the same period, the pensionable population rose by ten per cent. In many westernised nations, one person in five is already a pensioner.

By the year 2020, at least a third of the population in most developed countries will be pensioners.

Several things make this explosion in the size of the elderly population particularly significant.

First, there is the fact that among older populations, there is inevitably a higher proportion of disabled and dependent individuals. The incidence of chronic disease rises rapidly among older age groups. (Though, as I have already shown, this is largely because people fail to look after themselves effectively.)

* Among 16 to 44-year-olds 20% of the population suffer from chronic illness.

* Among 45 to 64-year-olds 40% of the population suffer from chronic illness.

* Among 65 to 74-year-olds 50% of the population suffer from chronic illness.

* And among people aged 75 or over 65% of the population suffer from chronic, long-term illness.

Consider strokes: already half the beds in British National Health Service hospitals are occupied by patients suffering from some sort of stroke. Stroke patients generally need to stay in hospital for long periods of time and they need intensive nursing care.

Or consider diabetes. Since diabetes is a hereditary disease, the incidence of this problem is increasing rapidly. The increase in the number of elderly people alive in our society merely exacerbates the problem. The incidence of diabetes is doubling every decade.

Many cases of diabetes can be avoided or controlled by diet but too often, the orthodox approach is to wait until symptoms develop and then use drugs to tackle the problem.

There is also ample evidence to show that mental disease is on the increase. The number of patients with mental illness needing to be admitted to hospital is rising by 10% every decade. Today, between 10% and 15% of the population will, at some stage in their lives, suffer from mental illness severe enough to warrant their admission to a mental hospital.

One side effect of all this will be that more and more of our hospital beds will be blocked and unavailable for emergencies. All this will inevitably mean that waiting lists for non-urgent surgery will get longer and longer and the number of people in our community suffering from disabling and untreated problems such as arthritic hips will grow even faster. The steady increase in our elderly population (caused largely by an increase in the size of our populations) will mean that the quality of health care will steadily deteriorate.

The second reason why the explosion in the size of the elderly population is dangerous is that the number of young people is falling. And the result is that in the future, a smaller and smaller working population will have to support a larger and larger dependent population.

That takes us neatly into the third reason why the explosion in the size of our over 60 population is likely to produce real problems: money.

Most workers who are currently paying pension contributions assume that the money they are paying will be invested and repaid to them when they reach pensionable age. But that is not the case. The pension contributions paid by today's workers (particularly those working for Government departments or public services) are used to pay the pensions of yesterday's workers – today's pensioners – and supported with money taken out of general taxes. If pension programmes were being organised by private individuals they would be described as pyramid or Ponzi schemes and the organisers would be in prison.

The pensions that today's workers will receive when they retire will be paid by the regular contributions made by tomorrow's workers. But the working population is getting smaller and smaller. And the retired population is getting bigger and bigger.

You don't have to be a genius to see the disaster we are heading for. By the end of the century, the size of our elderly population will have begun to concern politicians. By then it will be too late.

This is a problem that we should have been worrying about 30 or 40 years ago.

It is, without a doubt, one of the biggest problems our society must face. It is something I've been writing about – and warning about – for a quarter of a century but our politicians still don't seem to have noticed it and very few members of the public seem to understand it.

* * *

The easy and often voiced explanation for both the increase in the size of the developed world's elderly population and the increase in the number of disabled and financially dependent individuals, is that modern medical miracles, produced by the medical profession and the pharmaceutical industry, have produced the change by enabling people to live longer.

Doctors and drug companies have for some time excused their errors and successfully distracted attention away from their incompetence by arguing that their efforts have resulted in a consistent and impressive improvement in life expectancy during the last century or so. The increasing size of our elderly (and disabled) population is, say the industry's supporters, a direct consequence of medical progress.

The truth, however, is rather different and the medical profession and the drug companies are guilty of a confidence trick of gargantuan proportions.

The fact is that during the last century, doctors and drug companies have become louder, more aggressive, a good deal richer and far more powerful but life expectancy has hardly changed.

Improved sanitation facilities have meant that the number of babies dying – and the number of women dying in childbirth – have fallen dramatically, but for adults life expectation has not been rising.

To prove my point I prepared a list of 111 famous individuals – all of whom lived and died before the start of this century. The names were picked at random. I then checked to see how old these individuals were when they died. I'm printing the list below because it illustrates the point I'm making – and it is an important point. The results prove my argument: life expectation (now between 70 and 75 years in developed countries) has not risen appreciably during the last century. You may find it illuminating to think of any other individuals who died before the start of this century – and to then check up to see how old they were when they died.

Andersen, Hans Christian. Died 1875 aged 70 years.
Aristotle. Died 322 BC aged 62 years.
Attila the Hun. Died in 453 BC aged 47 years.
Audubon, John. Died in 1851 aged 66 years.
Augustine, St Aurelius. Died in 430 aged 76 years.

Bach, JS. Died in 1750 aged 65 years.
Beethoven, Ludwig van. Died in 1827 aged 57 years.
Bentham, Jeremy. Died in 1832 aged 84 years.
Berlioz, Hector. Died in 1869 aged 66 years.
Bernini, Gian. Died in 1680 aged 82 years.
Bizet, Georges. Died in 1875 aged 37 years.
Blackmore RD. Died 1900 aged 75 years.
Blake, William. Died 1827 aged 70 years.
Botticelli, Sandro. Died in 1510 aged 66 years.
Brahms, Johannes. Died in 1833 aged 63 years.
Browning, Robert. Died 1889 aged 77 years.
Bruckner, Anton. Died 1896 aged 72 years.
Brummell, Beau. Died in 1840 aged 61 years.
Brunelleschi, Filippo. Died 1446 aged 69 years.
Canaletto. Died 1768 aged 71 years.
Cardigan, James , 7th Earl of. Died 1868 aged 71 years.
Carroll, Lewis. Died 1898 aged 66 years.
Casanova, Giovanni. Died 1798 aged 73 years.
Catherine the Great. Died in 1796 aged 67 years.
Charlemagne, (Charles the Great). Died 814 aged 67 yrs.
Charles 11. Died 1685 aged 55 years.
Chaucer, Geoffrey. Died in 1400 aged 60 years.
Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. Died 1834 aged 62 years.
Confucius. Died 479 BC aged 72 years.
Constable, John. Died in 1837 aged 60 years.
Copernicus, Nicolaus. Died in 1543 aged 70 years.
da Vinci, Leonardo. Died 1519 aged 67 years.
Daimler, Gottlieb. Died in 1900 aged 66 years.
Darwin, Charles. Died in 1882 aged 73 years.
de Cervantes, Miguel. Died in 1616 aged 69 years.
de Sade, Marquis. Died in 1814 aged 74 years.
Defoe, Daniel. Died in 1731 aged 71 years.
Dickens, Charles. Died in 1870 aged 58 years.
Disraeli, Benjamin. Died in 1881 aged 76 years.
Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. Died 1881 aged 60 years.
Dryden, John. Died 1700 aged 69 years.
Dumas, Alexandre. Died 1870 aged 68 years.
Eliot, George. (Marian Evans) Died 1880 aged 61.
Elizabeth 1. Died in 1603 aged 70 years.
Emerson, Ralph Waldo. Died 1882 aged 79 years.
Engels, Friedrich. Died 1895 aged 75 years.
Epicurus. Died 271 BC aged 70 years.
Euripides. Died in 406 BC aged 78 years.
Francis of Assisi. Died 1226 aged 45 years.
Franklin, Benjamin. Died 1790 aged 84 years.
Galilei, Galileo. Died 1642 aged 78 years.
Garibaldi, Giuseppe. Died 1882 aged 75 years.
George 111. Died in 1820 aged 81 years.
Gladstone, William. Died in 1898 aged 88 years.
Goethe, Johann Wolfganag von. Died 1832 aged 83 years.
Gounod, Charles. Died 1883 aged 65 years.
Greco, El. Died 1614 aged 73 years.
Grimm, Wilhelm. Died 1859 aged 73 years.
Grimm, Jacob. Died 1863 aged 78 years.
Handel, George. Died 1759 aged 74 years.
Hansard, Luke. Died 1828 aged 76 years.
Haydn, Franz Joseph. Died in 1809 aged 77 years.
Henry V111. Died in 1547 aged 56 years.
Herod, the Great. Died 4BC aged 70 years.
Hippocrates. Died in 377 BC aged 83 years.

Hobbes, Thomas. Died 1679 aged 91 years.
Hogarth, William. Died in 1764 aged 67 years.
Humboldt, Alexander Baron von. Died 1859 aged 90 yrs.
Johnson, Samuel. Died in 1784 aged 75 years.
Jones, Inigo. Died 1652 aged 79 years.
Kant, Immanuel. Died 1804 aged 80 years.
Khan, Ghengis. Died in 1227 aged 65 years.
Khayyam, Omar. Died in 1123 aged 73 years.
Kublai Khan. Died 1294 aged 80 years.
Liszt, Franz. Died 1886 aged 75 years.
Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth. Died 1882 aged 75 years.
Macintosh, Charles. Died 1843 aged 77 years.
Marx, Karl. Died 1883 aged 65 years.
Michelangelo. Died in 1564 aged 89 years.
Milton, John. Died 1674 aged 66 years.
Montefiore, Sir Moses. Died 1885 aged 101 years.
Monteverdi, Claudio. Died 1643 aged 76 years.
Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus. Died in 1791 aged 35 years.
Nash, John. Died 1835 aged 83 years.
Newton, Isaac. Died in 1727 aged 84 years.
Nobel, Alfred. Died in 1896 aged 63 years.
Nostradamus. Died 1566 aged 63 years.
Offenbach, Jacques. Died 1880 aged 61 years.
Palladio. Died 1580 aged 72 years.
Pepys, Samuel. Died 1703 aged 70 years.
Plato. Died c.348 BC aged 80 years.
Polo, Marco. Died 1324 aged 70 years.
Rousseau, Jean Jacques. Died 1778 aged 66 years.
Ruskin, John. Died in 1900 aged 80 years.
Sandwich, John Montagu, 4th Earl of. Died 1792 aged 74.
Shakespeare, William. Died in 1616 aged 52 years.
Sophocles. Died in 406 BC aged 90 years.
Stowe, Harriet Beecher. Died in 1896 aged 85 years.
Stradivari, Antonio. Died in 1737 aged 93 years.
Tennyson, Lord Alfred. Died 1892 aged 83 years.
Thackeray, William Makepeace. Died 1863 aged 52 years.
Titian. Died in 1576 aged 99 years.
Turner, Joseph. Died in 1851 aged 76 years.
Victor Hugo. Died 1885 aged 83 years.
Voltaire, Francois. Died 1778 aged 84 years.
Washington, George. Died in 1799 aged 67 years.
Watt, James. Died in 1819 aged 83 years.
Wesley, John. Died in 1791 aged 87 years.
Whitman, Walt. Died 1892 aged 73 years.
Wordsworth, William. Died 1850 aged 80 years.
Wren, Christopher. Died in 1723 aged 90 years.

There are 111 names on this list. The average age at death was: 72.39 years. And, on average, it is 433 years since each of these individuals died.

The conclusion is simple: despite all the expensive razzmatazz of modern medicine, life expectation has simply not increased in the last century or so. The biblical promise of three score years and ten has been fairly steady for centuries.

There are two reasons for the crisis we now face.

First there has for many decades been a steady reduction in the number of children being born in the developed world. Terrified by what was originally described as the birth explosion time bomb, millions of couples decided to limit the size of their families – or not to have children at all. The development and introduction of the contraceptive pill and of sterilisation techniques for both men and women made this easy. (In contrast, this has definitely not been the case in the developing world, and the global political consequences are far reaching. In Muslim countries, birth rates are extremely high and the average age in those populations is inevitably much younger. A society which is predominantly composed of young, healthy individuals obviously has a very different outlook to a society which is dominated by older, often unhealthy individuals. The future is Muslim. Our ageing, western, largely Christian society has very little future. The European Union has for some years now been trying to reduce the average age of their populations by encouraging unlimited Muslim immigration.)

While the number of elderly people as a percentage of the overall population has been steadily increasing, the incidence of disability among the elderly has been increasing steadily too. Today's elderly are nowhere near as fit as their ancestors were. Our fat and toxin-rich diet is just one factor which has led to a steady increase in the incidence of cancer, obesity, heart disease, arthritis and many other causes of long-term disability. Mental illness such as chronic anxiety and depression, caused by the unavoidable 'toxic stresses' created by the structured society in which we live are now endemic – as are the myriad illnesses caused by the powerful drugs frequently prescribed by doctors with such carelessness.

When I wrote about this issue in a newspaper column 25 years ago, I was swamped with letters of protest from people over the age of 60 who seemed to think that by daring to mention the existence of this problem I was in some way publishing an attack on the elderly! Many of the responses seemed to consist of hysterical abuse rather than anything else. I was not, of course, attacking the elderly, the disabled or anyone else. I was simply trying to draw attention to the problem in the hope that those in the position to do something about it might act. Most of those reading my warning completely missed the point and it is, indeed, the absence of any widespread public interest in this colossal problem which convinces me that the future is a gloomy one – and that we must all do everything we can to learn how to protect our health and to look after ourselves when we fall ill.

Without public interest, I certainly don't think that politicians anywhere are likely to act quickly if at all. Politicians everywhere tend to think in four or five year terms at the most. They are concerned only with the now – rather than with the future – because what happens now decides whether or not they get re-elected. And professional politicians care about nothing as much as they care about political power.

Nevertheless, it is now to a large extent too late. Whether the politicians ever act or not this problem exists and it is going to affect all our lives in a very real and dramatic way. The incidence of illness and disability is going to rise and rise and the availability of public resources is going to fall and fall.

If you are currently between the ages of 50 and 60 then the chances are that by the time you reach the sort of age at which you might hope to retire you will discover that any publicly funded pension you might receive will either be very small or non-existent and the availability of sheltered or nursing home accommodation will be extremely limited.

If you are currently under the age of 35 then you are going to have to pay a steadily increasing percentage of your earnings in income tax and national insurance deductions to pay for the pensions of the already retired. You can safely ignore anything politicians say about cutting taxes. The fact is that taxes are probably never going to be lower than they are at the moment.

The young are, I suppose, in the very worst position of all. Throughout their working lives they are going to have to struggle to pay towards the care of a relatively larger and larger elderly population. When they themselves reach retirement age, they will be in even bigger trouble for they will probably not have been able to save anything to look after themselves and pensions will be sparse or non-existent.

This is a threat no one can escape. The problem isn't going to go away and this isn't a threat that you can avoid simply by moving into a nuclear bunker in the garden for a few weeks or months.

My first piece of advice is that you should do everything you can to ensure that you stay as healthy as possible in the future. Do not rely on being able to ask for or even obtain skilled and reliable medical help. The quality of health care has been sliding steadily for decades and the quantity of available care has also been diminishing. Obtaining health care is likely to be increasingly difficult and expensive. To preserve your health you must carefully watch what you eat, lose any excess weight and avoid tobacco smoke (taken directly or indirectly) whenever possible. The biggest killers (and disablers) in the developed world (cancer, heart disease and stroke) are strongly related to lifestyle. You can dramatically – and fairly easily – reduce your chances of suffering from any of these three big killers by watching what you eat, by taking modest, regular exercise (such as walking) and by increasing your resistance to and your exposure to unwanted stress. By keeping your weight under control you will minimise your chances of developing diabetes or arthritis – two disorders which cause much immobility and disablement.

Second, you must make whatever financial arrangements you can to ensure that you can afford to buy whatever professional help you may need in the future. I suggest that you do not rely on state funded schemes. Nor am I enthusiastic about privately funded health insurance schemes. I have never been a fan of private health insurance. Bureaucratic overheads mean that the premiums are often high and the exclusion clauses are frequently wide ranging. There is also the problem that some private insurers won't pay for alternative therapies – even when those therapies might be safer, cheaper and more effective than orthodox therapies. If you want to buy some insurance then my own preference is for an ordinary sickness policy which simply pays out cash when you can't work. But I would supplement that, and plan for the future, simply by investing the money I would have paid for private health insurance and keeping it as a 'private' and 'personal' health nest egg. Think how much you could save in a few years by investing the sort of money private health insurers require in premiums.

Third, I think it is probably sensible to plan to spend the final third of your life in a fairly self-contained environment – and well within your means. Financially, there are hard times ahead for those who do not work. State pensions, already small, are likely to become increasingly derisory. I have absolutely no desire to offer a scary scenario for the future but I believe that all the social evidence suggests that our society is going to be increasingly violent. Theft and muggings are going to become commoner and commoner. If you are planning a move it would, I believe, make sense to move to a rural area rather than a big city or town where theft and muggings are going to become commoner. It is also likely to become increasingly difficult to find electricians, plumbers, carpenters, decorators and other tradesmen.

Four, learn as much as you can about how to look after yourself. Most illnesses can be safely and effectively treated without a doctor (or, indeed, an alternative health care practitioner).

You should also be constantly aware that the sad and tragic truth is that many of the chronically disabling illnesses of the 21st century are actually caused by drug therapy.

For example, I wonder how many people know that tinnitus – that desperately depressing constant ringing of the ears which causes so much distress and ruins so many lives – is frequently a side effect of anti-depressant therapy? A reader who was put on anti-depressants and who subsequently complained of tinnitus was assured by at least six highly qualified experts that her tinnitus could not possibly have been caused by the drug she was taking. Because the tinnitus was making her more depressed, they increased the dose of the drug. The tinnitus got worse. The experts seemed surprised that when she stopped the drug, the tinnitus went away and the depression lifted.

Most doctors prescribe far too many different drugs and, as a result, they have no idea what side effects are associated with the drugs they are handing out. You should remember Coleman’s First Law of Modern Medicine: ‘If you develop new symptoms while being treated for any medical condition, the chances are that the new symptoms are caused by the treatment you are receiving.’ At least one in six patients in hospital is there because he or she has been made ill by doctors. The reason is simple. Few doctors know Coleman’s First Law of Modern Medicine. You should never forget it. It will be a vital weapon in your armoury in the years ahead.

Chapter Three

Why You Shouldn't Trust Your Doctor

If you're going to survive to a good age – and stay healthy and young – then you need to know something about doctors. Many people are prepared to put all their trust in doctors. That, I intend to show, can be a dangerous mistake. I fear that it is possible to argue that doctors now do more harm than good. They can – and do – save lives. But they kill a lot of people too.

The incidence of doctor-induced illness is now epidemic throughout the western world. At any one time one in six patients is in hospital because of some side effect of their medication. There's now even a name for an illness caused by doctors – such illnesses are known as iatrogenic illness and in most western countries this problem is as big a cause of serious illness and death as cancer or heart disease.

There is nothing new in the fact that doctors kill people. Doctors have always made mistakes and there have always been patients who have died as a result of medical ignorance or incompetence.

But, since we now spend more on health care than ever before, and since the medical profession is apparently more scientific and better equipped than ever before, there is a savage irony in the fact that we have now reached the point where, on balance, well-meaning doctors in general practice and highly trained, well-equipped specialists working in hospitals do more harm than good.

The epidemic of iatrogenic disease which has always scarred medical practice has been steadily getting worse and today most of us would, most of the time, be better off without a medical profession.

Most developed countries now spend around 8% of their gross national products on health care (Americans spend considerably more – around 14%) but through a mixture of ignorance, incompetence, prejudice, dishonesty, laziness, paternalism and misplaced trust doctors are killing more people than they are saving and they are causing more illness and more discomfort than they are alleviating.

Most developed countries now spend around 1% of their annual income on prescription drugs and doctors have more knowledge and greater access to powerful treatments than ever before, but there has probably never been another time in history when doctors have done more harm than they do today.

When the medical profession, together with the pharmaceutical industry, claims that it is the advances in medicine which are responsible for the fact that life expectancy figures have risen in the last one hundred years or so, they are wrong.

The evidence, however, does not support this claim.

Any improvement in life expectancy which has occurred in the last hundred years is not related to developments in the medical profession or to the growth of the international drug industry; but the increase in iatrogenesis is related to both these factors.

Whichever facts you look at, they seem to support my contention that although doctors may do a limited amount of good they do a great deal more harm.

* * *

If doctors really did help people stay alive then you might expect to find that the countries which had the most doctors would have the best life expectation figures. But that isn't the case at all.

Even more startling, perhaps, is the evidence of what happens when doctors betray their principles, embrace mammon, go on strike and leave patients to cope without professional medical help.

You might imagine that without doctors people would be dying like flies in autumn. Not a bit of it. When doctors in Israel went on strike for a month, admissions to hospital dropped by 85% with only the most urgent cases being admitted, but despite this the death rate in Israel dropped by 50% – the largest drop since the previous doctors' strike twenty years earlier – to its lowest ever recorded level. Much the same thing has happened wherever doctors have gone on strike. In Bogota, Colombia doctors went on strike for 52 days and there was a 35% fall in the mortality rate. In Los Angeles, a doctors' strike resulted in an 18% reduction in the death rate. During the strike there were 60% fewer operations in 17 major hospitals. At the end of the strike, the death rate went back up to normal.

I am told that when hospitals and clinics were closed down by terrorists in Sri Lanka, the Registrar General reported that the number of reported deaths had fallen.

Whatever statistics are consulted, whatever evidence is examined, the conclusion has to be the same. Doctors are a hazard rather than an asset to any community. In Britain, the death rate of working men over 50 was higher in the 1970s than it was in the 1930s. The British were never healthier than they were during the Second World War.

Figures published by the United States Bureau of Census show that 33% of people born in 1907 could expect to live to the age of 75 whereas 33% of the people born in 1977 could expect to live to the age of 80. Remove the improvements produced by better living conditions, cleaner water supplies, and the reduction in deaths during or just after childbirth and it becomes clear that doctors, drug companies and hospitals cannot possibly have had any useful effect on life expectancy. Indeed, the figures show that there has been an increase in mortality rates among the middle aged and an increase in the incidence of disabling disorders such as diabetes and arthritis. The incidence of diabetes, for example, is now reported to be doubling every ten years and the incidence of serious heart disease among young men is increasing rapidly. Today death rates from heart disease among adults are 50 times higher than they were a century ago.

* * *

Drugs are one of the biggest problems. Not heroin, cannabis or cocaine. Prescription drugs. If drugs were only ever prescribed sensibly, and when they were likely to interfere with a potentially life threatening disease, then the risks associated with their use would be acceptable. But all the evidence shows that doctors do not understand the hazards associated with the drugs they use and frequently prescribe inappropriately and excessively. Many of the deaths associated with drug use are caused by drugs which did not need to be taken.

Patients are given the wrong drug.

Or they are given the wrong dose of the right drug.

Or they are given the right drug by the wrong route (for example, a drug that should be injected into a muscle may be injected directly into the bloodstream).

Experts believe that there is an error roughly 1 in every 8 times when a hospital patient is given a drug.

Since an ordinary hospital patient may receive a dozen different drugs – at different times of the day – the opportunities for error are colossal.

In a 300 bed hospital there may be between 300 and 400 medication errors every day.

Some of those errors will result in mild discomfort.

Some will result in death.

The best example of the modern tendency to over-prescribe probably lies in the way that antibiotics are used. One in six prescriptions is for an antibiotic and there are at least 100 preparations available for doctors to choose from. When antibiotics – drugs such as penicillin – were first introduced in the 1930s, they gave doctors a chance to kill the bacteria causing infections.

Various independent experts who have studied the use of antibiotics claim that between 50 - 90% of the prescriptions written for antibiotics are unnecessary. To a certain extent, doctors over-prescribe because they like to do something when faced with a patient – and prescribing a drug is virtually the only thing most of them can do. Also, to some extent prescribing a drug is a defence against any possible future charge of negligence (on the basis that if the patient dies it is better to have done something than to have done nothing). But the main reason for the over-prescribing of antibiotics is, without doubt, the fact that doctors are under the influence of the drug companies. The makers of the antibiotics want their drugs prescribed in vast quantities. It makes no difference to them whether or not the prescriptions are necessary. (It is vital to remember that almost everything you read about health in magazines or newspapers (or hear on television or radio) is a result of a press release or lobbying by drug companies or the food industry.)

The over-prescribing of antibiotics would not matter too much if these drugs were harmless and if there were no other hazards associated with their use. But antibiotics are certainly not harmless. The unnecessary and excessive use of antibiotics causes allergy reactions, side effects and a huge variety of serious complications – including the ultimate complication: death. There is also the very real hazard that by overusing antibiotics, doctors are enabling bacteria to develop immunity to these potentially life-saving drugs. There is now no doubt that many of our most useful drugs have been devalued by overuse and are no longer effective.

To all this must be added the damage done by vaccines. (I have dealt with this problem at length in my book *Superbody* – which is also available as an ebook.)

* * *

It is now widely accepted that at least 40% of all the people who are given prescription medicines to take will suffer uncomfortable, hazardous or potentially lethal side effects.

I say ‘at least’ because, for a variety of reasons, the vast majority of doctors never admit that their patients ever suffer any side effects. In Britain, for example, five out of six doctors have never reported any drug side effects to the authorities – authorities who admit that they receive information on no more than 10 - 15% of even the most serious adverse drug reactions occurring in patients. In other words, they admit that they never hear about at least 85 - 90% of all dangerous drug reactions! Astonishingly, it is even accepted that some doctors will withhold reports of serious adverse reactions, and keep their suspicions to themselves, in the hope that they may later be able to win fame by publishing their findings in a journal or revealing their discovery to a newspaper or magazine.

Patients who take drugs are taking a risk; they are often taking part in a massive experiment and by taking a medicine may become worse off than if they had done nothing. To make things worse no one knows exactly how big the risks are when a particular drug is taken. All drugs are potential poisons that may heal or may kill.

The medical profession, the drug industry and the regulatory bodies all accept that the hazards of using any drug will only be known when the drug has been given to large numbers of patients for a considerable period of time.

* * *

One of the major reasons for the disastrously high incidence of problems associated with drug use is the fact that the initial clinical trials, performed before a drug is made available for all general practitioners to prescribe for their patients, rarely involve more than a few thousand patients at most. Some initial trials may involve no more than half a dozen patients.

However, it is now well known that severe problems often do not appear either until at least 50,000 patients have taken a drug or until patients have used a drug for many months or even years. Because of this, a huge death toll can build up over the years. Drug control authorities admit that when a new drug is launched no one really knows what will happen or what side effects will be identified.

Doctors and drug companies are, it seems, using the public in a constant, ongoing, mass testing programme. And the frightening truth is that far more people are killed as a result of prescription drugs (including vaccines) than are killed as a result of using illegal drugs such as heroin or cocaine.

* * *

It is not only by prescribing drugs or vaccines that doctors do harm. There is plenty of evidence to show that patients are at risk in many other ways.

At least 1 in 20 of all hospital patients will pick up an infection in hospital – mostly urinary tract, chest or wound infections and mostly caused by doctors and nurses failing to wash their hands often enough.

Since Ignaz Philipp Semmelweiss first demonstrated (in the mid-19th century) that deaths in the delivery room were caused by dirty hands, every child has been taught the importance of basic personal hygiene. Sadly, the message does not seem to have got through to the medical and nursing professions.

One recent study showed that nurses washed their hands only once every three times after cleaning around a patient’s catheter.

Another study at a major hospital showed that hand washing by staff was well below recommended levels.

A study of doctors habits showed that two out of three anaesthetists failed to wash their hands before treating a new patient (even though anaesthetists frequently perform venepuncture surgery) while one in three surgeons did not wash their arms properly before an operation.

At least one-third of all hospital infections are caused by dirty hands. And up to 1 in 10 patients in hospital acquires an infection.

The cost in simple financial terms is colossal. Treating hospital contracted infections uses up around 15% of the hospital budget in the UK and adds around a week to each patient’s hospital stay. It is hardly surprising that waiting times for other patients get longer and longer.

The cost in human terms is incalculable: tens of thousands of patients die because of bugs they’ve caught from doctors, nurses, other staff or contaminated equipment.

These aren’t statistics: they are people. Real people. Every one of those unnecessary deaths is someone’s wife, husband, mother, father, son, daughter, uncle, aunt, friend or neighbour.

Most of those patients die because doctors and nurses can’t be bothered to wash their hands properly or because operating theatres aren’t properly cleaned between operations.

The medical answer is – surprise, surprise – often to prescribe antibiotics – a third of hospital patients end up taking them.

The result is that bugs are becoming immune. And antibiotics often don’t work. It takes 50 times as much penicillin to treat an infection today, as it required 30 years ago.

It is hardly surprising that people who stay at home to be treated – or who go home quickly after day-case or short-stay surgery – usually get better much quicker than people who need long-stay treatment and who have to go into hospital.

* * *

Surgery can be pretty dangerous too.

And the danger is even more alarming when you realise that at least a quarter of operations performed are unnecessary.

For some types of surgery – for example: heart surgery, tonsillectomies, circumcisions, caesarean sections for pregnant women and hysterectomies – the percentage of unnecessary operations is almost certainly much higher.

Some experts argue that three quarters of some types of operation are probably unnecessary.

Operations are done unnecessarily for a huge variety of reasons.

Some – particularly those performed on private patients – may be done because the surgeon needs the cash. Some patients are put down for surgery in order to keep waiting lists long – so that more patients are prepared to pay for private treatment. And some unnecessary operations are done because it's easier to cut open a patient than it is to think about alternatives.

And it isn't just a problem because of the unnecessary pain and discomfort that patients have to put up with.

At least 1% of patients who undergoes surgery dies.

One in every hundred patients who goes into hospital for an operation does not walk out again afterwards.

Of course, some patients are very ill when they are wheeled into the operating theatre.

And some patients would have died anyway without surgery.

But many patients are perfectly healthy when they are taken into the operating theatre. They are having surgery because they have been persuaded by doctors that it is necessary or that it will in some way improve the quality of their lives.

* * *

When doctors from the Harvard School of Public Health studied what happened to more than 30,000 patients admitted to acute care hospitals in New York they found that nearly 4% of them suffered unintended injuries in the course of their treatment and that 14% of the patients died of their injuries. This survey concluded that nearly 200,000 people die each year in America as a result of medical accidents. This means that more than four times as many people die from injuries caused by doctors as die in road accidents. The real figure for medical deaths is probably considerably higher than this and there can be little doubt that many of the injuries and deaths are caused by simple, straightforward incompetence rather than bad luck or unforeseen complications.

Coronary bypass operations are immensely popular among heart surgeons (and extremely profitable) but a major study conducted in Europe showed that many patients who don't have surgery live longer than those who do. American surgeons perform hundreds of thousands of coronary bypass operations every year and charge billions for their services. When one researcher studied 300 patients who'd had bypass operations at several hospitals in California he discovered that 14% of the patients would have thrived as well without surgery as with it while another 30% were borderline. Around 50% of lower back disc operations and up to 70% of hysterectomies are probably unnecessary. In America, the death toll from unnecessary surgery alone has been estimated to be as high as 80,000 patients per year.

* * *

Most people now recognise that powerful, modern medical treatments – such as drugs and surgery – can be dangerous.

Fewer people realise that even the tests doctors do before they treat a patient can often be just as dangerous.

This would not matter so much if all the tests doctor do were essential.

But astonishing and startling evidence now shows that the X-rays, blood tests and other investigations which doctors order are not just sometimes lethal but are frequently unnecessary. Many tests are wildly inaccurate and dangerously misleading as well.

Here are just some of the frightening facts that I can reveal about medical investigations:

* X-rays are the second biggest cause of cancer (after cigarette smoking). In Britain, around 20,000 people a year get cancer from medical and dental X-rays. X-rays given to pregnant women during the 1950s and 1960s caused between 5% and 10% of all childhood cancers. Children who develop leukaemia – and other cancers – may have been made ill because their mothers had X-rays while they were pregnant.

* Tests often wrongly show up disease in healthy individuals. Those patients are then subjected to surgery and drug therapy which they do not need.

* Tests – which patients and doctors seem to trust too much – often wrongly say that a patient is healthy.

* About two thirds of all medical tests are worthless and of no help to the patient.

* Patients routinely admitted to hospital are often subjected to 20 or so blood, urine and other tests. When so many tests are done, one or more abnormalities will be found in two thirds of all healthy individuals. Once an abnormal result has been obtained, doctors feel obliged to continue doing tests. The tests they do often produce serious complications. Many patients who think they are ill – and have been told that they need to take drugs for life – are not really ill at all.

* Unnecessary tests are often done out of habit, for personal research, to provide protection in case of lawsuits or simply to impress other doctors. Doctors frequently order tests because it is quicker and easier to fill in a form than it is to talk to and examine a patient properly.

* When blood tests are done, the results are compared against 'normal' values. But the 'normal' figures may have been produced decades earlier – by testing a few seemingly healthy doctors and nurses! No one really knows what is 'normal'. Your 'abnormal' result may be more 'normal' than the official 'normal' result!

* Doctors who know that tests can be misleading frequently order expensive, uncomfortable and even hazardous investigations – and then ignore the results!

I have dealt with the dangers of tests and investigations more fully in another chapter in this book.

* * *

The interview is the most important part of the doctor's diagnostic equipment. That's when he talks to the patient and – even more important than talking though you wouldn't think so if you sit in on the average out-patients clinic – listens to what the patient has to say. It is by listening to patients that doctors learn most.

Over the years, doctors have accumulated more and more equipment to help them make diagnoses. But instead of helping, the equipment has come between the doctor and the patient. Too often the doctor relies exclusively on his damned equipment; trusting it implicitly to provide him with the right answers.

The first piece of equipment that doctors acquired was the stethoscope. This now symbolic device was invented so that doctors could listen to their patients' chests without having to put their heads down on their bosoms. The stethoscope added to the doctor's dignity. But it also provided the first mechanical barrier between doctor and patient. And since Rene Laennec first introduced the stethoscope, the doctor patient relationship has been weakened and damaged by this obsession with equipment and this failure to respect the relationship between doctor and patient.

A few years ago, a study at Harvard University showed that one person in ten who had died would have still been alive if the doctors looking after them had relied upon their heads instead of their equipment.

One problem is the fact that the equipment doesn't allow for individual eccentricities.

Things are made even worse by the fact that equipment often breaks down and is frequently badly maintained. Shops have to have their scales calibrated but ask your doctor when he last had his blood pressure machine calibrated and watch him blush.

Checks showed that as much as half the new equipment being delivered to hospitals is defective.

If that doesn't worry you then the fact that many of the doctors who are responsible for using the equipment don't know how it works, how it should be calibrated or how to tell if it is working properly should worry you.

It is not uncommon for sales representatives to be present in operating theatres when equipment they have supplied is being used. They are there not just to give advice but to provide practical help. There are many people around who have been operated on not by surgeons but by sales representatives. I doubt if anyone knows how many patients the sales representatives have killed.

And who do you think trains doctors and nurses to operate all this wonderful, shiny new equipment? Often that is down to the sales representatives too.

* * *

Treatment is easy. You can look up treatment in five minutes. It's diagnosis that is difficult and since the days of cupping and leeches it has been diagnostic skills which have differentiated between the good doctor and the bad doctor. Sadly, doctors have handed that particular art over to machinery – with disastrous results.

* When researchers examined the medical records of 100 dead patients who had been shown by post mortem to have had heart attacks, they found that only 53% of the heart attacks had been diagnosed. What makes this even more alarming is the fact that half the patients had been looked after by cardiologists – experts in heart disease.

* A study across 32 hospitals which compared the diagnoses doctors had made when treating 1,800 patients

with the diagnoses made after the patients had died (and could be examined more thoroughly) showed that doctors had an error rate of nearly 20%.

* A study of 131 randomly selected psychiatric patients showed that approximately three quarters of the patients may have been wrongly diagnosed.

* In many cases, patients are diagnosed as having – and then treated for – serious psychiatric problems when their symptoms are caused by drugs they have been given for physical problems. Whole wards full of patients have been diagnosed, treated and classified as schizophrenic when in fact they are suffering from the drugs they had been given by prescription happy doctors.

* When 80 doctors were asked to examine silicone models of female breasts they could only find half the hidden lumps. A 50% failure rate even though the doctors knew that they were being tested and observed. The doctors involved spent an average of less than two minutes examining these false breasts for signs of cancer.

* Another study showed that doctors had missed diagnoses in dying patients up to a quarter of the time. Experts concluded that one in ten patients who had died would have lived if the correct diagnosis had been made.

* Another study revealed that in two thirds of the patients who had died, important, previously undiagnosed conditions were discovered in the post mortem room.

* A report published after pathologists had performed 400 post mortem examinations showed that in more than half the cases the wrong diagnosis had been made. The authors of this report said that potentially treatable disease was missed in 13% of patients; that 65 out of 134 cases of pneumonia had gone undetected and that out of 51 patients who had suffered heart attacks, doctors had failed to diagnose the problem in 18 cases.

All this is terrifying.

For if the doctor doesn't make the right diagnosis then it doesn't matter how many wonderful drugs he has at his disposal. There are many reasons why today's doctors are so bad at making the correct diagnosis.

Education is often lamentable – with medical students taught about organs and tissues rather than living patients and then examined on their ability to remember huge lists of details about bones, blood vessels and pathology details without being properly tested on their ability to use the information they have acquired.

Ignorance has become commonplace in medical practice.

A study of GPs reported in a medical newspaper a few years ago showed that a quarter of general practitioners did not know about the connection between smoking and heart disease while, amazingly, 20% of GPs were unaware that cigarettes could cause lung cancer. (One magazine editor refused to publish an article I wrote quoting this survey on the grounds that he couldn't believe that doctors could be so ignorant). From France came evidence that in the final examinations for medical students in Paris, one tenth of the candidates made no mention of tobacco when asked to list factors responsible for causing cancer. By contrast, well over a third of the students mentioned the type of cancer produced in horses' mouths by the rubbing of the bit.

The underlying problem, I fear, is the fact that modern doctors rely far too much on technology – and far too little on building up any diagnostic skills of their own.

Old-fashioned doctors used to rely on what their patients told them and on what their own eyes, ears, noses and fingertips told them. Most important of all, perhaps, was the sixth sense that doctors used to acquire through years of clinical experience. Modern doctors rely too much upon equipment which is often faulty, frequently badly calibrated and more often than not downright misleading.

For example, nearly every published study on the subject puts the error rate for doctors reading X-rays at between 20% and 40%.

Radiologists working at a teaching hospital disagreed on the interpretation of chest radiographs as much as 56% of the time. And there were potentially significant errors in 41% of their reports.

Even when X-rays are read for a second time, only about a third of the initial errors are spotted.

Two Irish doctors recently reported in the British Medical Journal that 20% of British patients who have slightly raised blood pressure are treated unnecessarily with drugs. Two pathologists who carried out 400 post mortem examinations found that in more than 50% of the patients, the wrong diagnosis had been made. A British Royal College of Radiologists Working Party reported that at least a fifth of radiological examinations carried out in National Health Service hospitals were clinically unhelpful. In Britain, the Institute of Economic Affairs claimed that inexperienced doctors in casualty units kill at least one thousand patients a year.

* * *

Today, we have sophisticated diagnostic aids, monitoring systems, drugs, microscopic surgery, lasers and a thousand and one other miracles and yet we are, by and large, over cautious, hypochondriacal, drug abusing, overweight, neurotic, constipated, nervous, neurasthenic, hysterical and unhealthy. We are a tribute to and a product of our times.

When, to this appalling roll call of doctor induced disease you add the steadily increasing dissatisfaction with extended waiting lists, arrogant doctors, indifference and a lack of civility or caring it is hardly surprising that millions of people are today abandoning the traditional suppliers of medical help and seeking help from alternative practitioners.

* * *

Orthodox medical practitioners like to give the impression that they have conquered sickness with science but there are, at a conservative estimate, something in the region of 18,000 known diseases for which there are still no effective treatments – let alone cures. Even when treatments do exist, their efficacy is often in question. A recent report concluded that 85% of medical and surgical treatments have never been properly tested.

As drug companies become increasingly aware that curing serious disease is beyond their capability (and, indeed, their desire – for why should drug companies, which make their money out of people being sick, want to make people well?), they spend more and more effort on finding drugs to improve life or performance in some vague way.

There can be little doubt that a former Director General of the World Health Organization got it absolutely right when he startled the medical establishment by stating that ‘the major and most expensive part of medical knowledge as applied today appears to be more for the satisfaction of the health professions than for the benefit of the consumers of health care’. The evidence certainly supports that astonishing and apparently heretical view. Profits, not patients, are now the driving force which rule the medical profession’s motives, ambitions and actions. Doctors don’t seem to care any more. The passion has gone out of medicine.

* * *

In my view, the biggest single reason why the medical profession is killing so many people is its alliance with the pharmaceutical industry.

The myth that we live long and healthy lives thanks to the drug industry and the medical profession has increased our expectations. We no longer expect to fall ill. We expect a magic solution when we fall ill. We don’t want to be bothered making any effort to stay healthy because we have been taught to have faith that if we fall ill then the medical men will be able to cure us.

Over 40% of the information doctors receive about the drugs they prescribe comes directly from drug company representatives and drug company leaflets. Well over 50% of the rest of the information they receive comes from medical journals and meetings which are sponsored by drug companies. In the mid-1970s, in my book *The Medicine Men*, I warned that the medical profession was being controlled by the drug industry and had no real right to call itself a profession. Today, there is no longer any doubt. Today, the drug industry owns the medical establishment and much of the medical profession.

It is widely accepted that the majority of illnesses do not need drug treatment. Most patients who visit a doctor neither want nor expect drug treatment. But at least eight out of ten patients who visit a general practitioner will be given a prescription (though growing numbers of patients do not take the drugs that are prescribed for them).

Sadly, the myth about our improving health is just that – a myth. We do not live longer or healthier lives than our predecessors. On the contrary although we consume greater and greater quantities of medicine than ever before, more of us are ill today than at any time in history. On any day you care to choose in just about any developed country you care to mention over half the population will be taking a drug of some kind. A recent survey of 9,000 Britons concluded that one in three people is suffering from a long standing illness or disability. Other surveys have shown that in any one fourteen day period, 95% of the population consider themselves to be unwell for at least a few of those days. At no time in history has illness been so commonplace. We spend more than ever on health care but no one could argue that there is any less suffering in our society.

* * *

Modern clinicians may use scientific techniques but in the way that they treat their patients they are still quacks and charlatans, loyal to existing and unproven ideas which are profitable and resistant to new techniques and technologies which may be proven and effective.

The fact that a doctor may use a scientific instrument in his work does not make him a scientist – any more than a typist who uses a computer is a computer scientist. The scientific technology available to doctors may be magnificent but the problem is that the application of the scientific technology is crude, untested and unscientific.

Modern physicians and surgeons do not see the human mind and the human body as a single entity (which is why the medical profession has been slow to embrace the principles of holistic medicine and doubly incompetent in its attempts to deal with stress related disorders) and they rely more on hopes and assumptions than on evidence and objective clinical experience. The modern clinician is as narrow minded and as influenced by his personal experiences and interpretations as was his predecessor two thousand years ago.

Most patients probably assume that when a doctor proposes to use an established treatment to conquer a disease he will be using a treatment which has been tested, examined and proven. But this is not the case.

The *British Medical Journal* in October 1991 carried an editorial reporting that there are 'perhaps 30,000 biomedical journals in the world, and they have grown steadily by 7% a year since the 17th century.' The editorial also reported that: 'only about 15% of medical interventions are supported by solid scientific evidence' and 'only 1% of the articles in medical journals are scientifically sound'.

What sort of science is that? How can doctors possibly regard themselves as practising a science when six out of seven treatment regimes are unsupported by scientific evidence and when 99% of the articles upon which clinical decisions are based are scientifically unsound?

The savage truth is that most medical research is organised, paid for, commissioned or subsidised by the drug industry. This type of research is designed, quite simply, to find evidence showing a new product is of commercial value. The companies which commission such research are not terribly bothered about evidence; what they are looking for are conclusions which will enable them to sell their product. Drug company sponsored research is done more to get good reviews than to find out the truth.

A study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that one in five researchers in the life sciences had delayed publication of their results, or had not published them at all, because of their relations with business firms. Whenever I have accused scientists of being prejudiced and 'bought' because of their allegiance to their corporate paymasters the answer has invariably been the same: 'Everyone does it. There isn't a scientist in the world who hasn't taken corporate money.' This is probably true – and is one explanation for the fact that many allegedly independent government bodies are almost always packed with men and women who work for (or have taken fees from) the large corporations their government body is supposed to be policing.

It is also a fact that most of the doctors and scientists writing articles, papers and reviews for medical and scientific journals have received money, grants and freebies from drug, chemical or food companies. (It is also worth remembering that many allegedly and apparently independent journals accept corporate advertising and some accept payment in return for running articles.)

* * *

The absence of scientific evidence supporting medical practices is apparent in all areas of medicine.

With a very few exceptions there are no certainties in medicine. The treatment a patient gets will depend more on chance and the doctor's personal prejudices than on science.

Even in these days of apparently high technology medicine, there are almost endless variations in the treatments preferred by differing doctors.

Doctors offer different prescriptions for exactly the same symptoms; they keep patients in hospital for vastly different lengths of time, and they perform different operations on patients with apparently identical problems.

The likelihood of a doctor accurately predicting the outcome of a disease is often no more than 50:50.

There is, indeed, ample evidence now available to show that the type of treatment a patient gets when he visits a doctor will depend not so much on the symptoms he describes but on the doctor he consults – and where that doctor practises.

It has been reported that in America, each year, 61 in every 100,000 people have a coronary bypass operation. In Britain, only about 6 in every 100,000 have the same operation. In Japan, 1 in 100,000 patients will have a coronary bypass operation. In America and Denmark, seven out of every ten women will have a hysterectomy at some stage in their lives but in Britain only one woman in five will have the same operation. Why? Are women in America having too many hysterectomies or are women in Britain having too few? In America 20% of babies are born by Caesarean delivery. In England and Wales, the figure is 9%. In Japan, 8% of confinements end in a Caesarean delivery.

Despite all these variations in the type of treatment offered, most doctors in practice seem to be convinced that their treatment methods are beyond question. Many GPs and hospital doctors announce their decisions as though they are carved on stone.

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In the last century, the practice of medicine has become no more than an adjunct to the pharmaceutical industry and the other aspects of the huge, powerful and immensely profitable health care industry.

Medicine is no longer an independent profession.

Doctors are no more dedicated to the saving of lives and the improvement of patients' welfare than are the thousands of drug company salesmen and marketing men. Doctors have become nothing more than a link connecting the pharmaceutical industry to the consumer.

It is not difficult to see why the drug industry behaves in such a ruthless manner. The profits to be made out of selling drugs are phenomenal. It is common for a drug company to sell several hundred million dollars' worth of one product in a year. Companies frequently make well over 90 cents pure profit for every one dollar's worth of a drug that they sell. The raw materials for a drug may cost less than $100 a kilo. Turning the raw materials into 100,000 pills and packing them may take the total cost to $1,000. The retail price for 100,000 pills may be over $100,000. The only other internationally sold product that can compare for profitability is cocaine.

Drug companies frequently make minimum annual profits of between 30% and 50% on their capital employed. These profits, incidentally, come after the massive above and below the line payments to doctors. Some aggressive companies have recently started buying up drug companies, dramatically increasing the prices of essential drugs and harvesting massive, obscene profits.

Nor are profits likely to drop because the number of drugs doctors prescribe does not seem to be slowing down. A recent survey of over 2,000 patients admitted to hospital showed that within a ten year period, the number of drugs prescribed per patient had shown an increase of almost 50%.

* * *

Occasionally politicians mutter about the obscene levels of drug company profits but the industry is efficient and ruthless, and politicians are usually dealt with easily. The truth is that most politicians are, for a variety of reasons, reluctant to interfere with the drug industry. Drug companies which make money, provide jobs and pay taxes; in most developed countries they bring in revenue from abroad. Even the least effective drug company should be able to sell its product to developing countries.

But the key factor in the failure of the politicians to control the drug industry is surely that neither politicians nor industrialists are particularly keen to see illness conquered. The drug industry wants to see as many people as possible suffering from long-term, incurable illnesses. The politicians want to see people die before they become old and dependant. If more money was spent on preventing cancer (around 80% of cancers are preventable) then the average life expectancy would go up dramatically and the incidence of disease and disability would fall. But the drug industry doesn't want a healthy nation (it would sell fewer drugs) and the politicians don't want any more people living to an old age because they know that they would not be able to cope with the pension bills they would have to pay. The astonishing truth is that the drug industry needs to keep the voters ill in order to maintain its profits, and the politicians want to help them achieve that aim.

The medical establishment, which has sold its soul for pots of gold and which is now controlled by an industry whose primary aim is to maximise the number of sick people in society, rarely criticises the drug industry. Most academic research departments, medical journals and medical associations rely heavily if not exclusively on the drug industry. The drug industry effectively owns the medical establishment.

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I don't have faith in the medical establishment and I don't have much faith in the advisory committees who give advice on health and food matters to our political leaders and to civil servants.

It is difficult to trust the conclusions and recommendations of official government committees or quangos because they are, inevitably, peopled by individuals who have been selected because they are compliant rather than complaining. Dissenters don't get picked to sit on committees to advise the Department of Health or the Department of Agriculture. In contrast, the people who give out official guidelines on food and drugs are, more often than not, benefitting personally from the food and drug industries – and are, therefore, often benefitting financially from their own decisions.

Under those circumstances, it isn't always easy to be certain that our politicians are acting on entirely impartial advice. The evidence of what these people have done in the last few decades could certainly not be used in their defence.

These days most government committees consist predominantly of individuals who work for or with the appropriate industries. An American newspaper *USA Today* recently expressed some surprise that 54% of 300 experts, sitting on 18 advisory committees, and hired to advise the US government on the safety and effectiveness of medicines, had a direct financial interest in the drug or subject they were being asked to evaluate.

Some of the experts received consulting fees, others had research grants from the companies they were supposed to be investigating and others had shares or stock options.

I found worse figures in the UK 30 or 40 years ago (though no British newspaper had the courage to print the findings) and I do not believe that the situation has changed.

Federal law prohibits the Food and Drug Administration in the US from using experts with financial conflicts but this law is frequently waived.

Most (if not all) of the people selected to sit on health committees and quangos will work for (or have worked for) drug companies. Most of the people selected to sit on food advisory committees will do work for food companies. Most of the people making decisions about genetic engineering work for the genetic engineering industry.

It is because our bureaucracies are controlled in this way that we have absurd regulations which are intended to protect the consumer but which, in reality, favour industry and do nothing for the consumers.

We have treaties which result in food surpluses being dumped. We have regulations which make the spread of Mad Cow Disease inevitable. We have regulations which make it nigh on impossible for people to sell safe, effective remedies which might compete with drug company products. We have regulations requiring food companies to put additives and other chemicals into otherwise edible foods. We have genetic engineering hazards everywhere we look.

An American company has been given a patent in basmati rice. The peasants who perfected this variety of rice now cannot use it unless they pay the company holding the patent.

Global corporations now own many of the seeds of established crops. Peasants can no longer sow the seeds they save from the plants they grow. They must buy their seeds, every year, from big seed companies. The peasants can’t afford to do this. So the poor people in countries around the world starve to death unless they buy expensive food. Because they can’t afford to pay those prices, governments and charities have to intervene and use your money and my money to help prevent mass starvation. Naturally, all this helps ensure the continued rising profits of these companies.

A generation ago, the average dairy cow produced eight quarts of milk a day. Today, a typical cow produces fifty quarts a day. Just how do you think the farmers have changed nature so dramatically? Why haven’t any government advisors asked questions?

A generation ago, cows ate grass. Today cows are fed blood and bone taken from other cows.

A generation ago, milk was banned if it contained more than a trace of antibiotics. Today milk is stuffed with antibiotics and other drugs. One expert reports finding 52 different residues of antibiotics in a sample of milk in the US.

And who has allowed this to happen?

Those so-called independent experts who sit on committees and advise governments.

People who sit on committees allegedly regulating the products of the drug industry may not work full-time for the drug industry but most of them have, or have had, lucrative contracts with drug companies. How absurd.

Whenever I have confronted politicians with the fact that members of powerful committees have drug company links, they have responded by arguing that all doctors have drug company links and so it is impossible to find alternatives.

Free thinking individuals, who are not beholden to industry, are never likely to find themselves sitting on any of these committees.

* * *

Antibiotics have been around for 40 years and the drug companies making them must have made billions of dollars in profits but no one yet knows how long antibiotic tablets should really be taken for when treating any specific condition. Should you take an antibiotic course for 5, 7, 10 or 14 days? The bizarre truth is that your guess is probably as good as your doctor’s and his is probably as good as the drug company’s.

Apart from failing to test its products properly, there are several ways in which the drug industry shows that it is more concerned with profit than with healing the sick and conquering disease.

First, the vast majority of the ‘new’ drugs which the industry produces are not really offering anything new at all but are merely variations on existing themes.

According to the World Health Organization, only about 200 drugs are essential. At any one time there will, however, be anything up to 30,000 drugs on the market (the precise figure varies from day to day and from country to country). Only 16% of the drugs sold by European pharmaceutical companies meet the World Health Organisation definition of essential drugs. (The 16% comes to far more than 200 because, of course, there are numerous versions of each of the ‘essential’ drugs on the market). Most of the non-essential drugs will be duplicates produced by profit-hungry drug companies which want to share the world’s most profitable markets. None of this will stop a drug company claiming that its new product is a life-saving miracle drug that must be allowed onto the market without delay.

Although it is firmly based in the developed part of the world, the international drug industry will happily make whatever profits it can in the developing countries, marketing its products as unscrupulously as the tobacco giants.

Although drug companies spend virtually no money on studying the sort of diseases which afflict human beings in the developing countries they do, nevertheless, sell around 20% of the value of their combined drugs to the governments of those countries. The drug companies will admit that diseases which afflict the people of Africa and Asia aren't profitable enough to merit any research investment but they will happily sell their expensive brand name versions of tranquillisers, sleeping tablets, pain killers, and the other pharmacological garbage of the developed world into those countries.

Moreover, when they sell into developing countries the drug companies, like the tobacco companies, can use advertising and marketing techniques which not even the lax governments of the West would allow.

Indeed, they don't just sell off products which are too dangerous for sale in the developed countries but they also use drugs in ways that would never be allowed in developed countries. For example, doctors in developing countries may be encouraged to prescribe drugs to help improve the growth of malnourished children who really just need better food.

There is a ruthlessness about the drug companies which makes the arms business look positively philanthropic. Drug companies have even been known to push up prices of drugs in small developing countries which have been hit by epidemics. To the drug industry, profit is everything.

Most doctors are obsessed with drug therapy. Many don't seem to have heard of the many effective non drug solutions which now exist. If it doesn't come in a blister pack and isn't packaged by one of the world's big drug companies they doesn't believe it can possibly work.

The big mistake most doctors make is to assume that drug companies are in business because they want to make sick people well again. That is a big, big mistake. The drug companies make drugs. That is what they do. But they make drugs so that they can make a profit. (And that they do very well – often better than any other industry.) Drug companies do not exist to help patients get better. They exist solely to make profits – they use sickness as a route to profit. And, to be frank, why should we expect them to be in business for any other reason?

Motor car companies aren't in business because they want to help people move around. They are in business because they think they can make a profit out of selling cars. Supermarkets aren't in business because they want to make shopping easier and cheaper. They are in business to make a profit. Arms companies don't make bombs and landmines because they want to help small, threatened countries defend themselves against aggressive neighbours. They make bombs and landmines because they can make big profits out of selling them.

I don't hate drug companies but I do think we need to regard them with great scepticism for they are (together with the food and tobacco industries) one of the three major modern threats to human health.

Doctors simply do not understand any of this. They wrongly assume that the drug companies have interests which match their own interests and which match the interests of their patients.

This is silly.

If doctors thought this through they would realise that patients and drug companies have diametrically opposed interests. The patient wants to get better. But the drug company will make bigger profits if the patient remains ill – and continues to need to take drugs.

But either through collective stupidity or through naivety (or because they like being bribed by drug companies) doctors like to believe that drug companies exist for the good of mankind.

Doctors should regard drug companies with scepticism and they should keep their relationship with them at arms' length. They should regard drug companies as providing just one group of possible remedies.

But collectively doctors have behaved pretty stupidly. They have sold out to the drug industry and they have (as I pointed out nearly half a century ago) become little more than a marketing arm of the world's most profitable industry.

Drug companies have, not surprisingly, welcomed and taken advantage of the medical profession's collective stupidity (and/or naivety). They have virtually taken over postgraduate medical education. Their advertising dominates medical journals. And as a result, most doctors (not just the bad ones) are obsessed with drugs because they simply aren't aware that there are other ways to deal with health problems.

I could give you dozens of examples of ways in which drug companies do things which are in their own financial interests but not in the interests of patients.

For example, in order to increase their profitability, the drug companies are always looking for new ways to use existing products.

They do not do this because they want to help more people. They do it because they want to make bigger profits.

Consider, for example, the benzodiazepine tranquillisers. Originally introduced specifically to help calm extremely nervous and agitated patients (and for use as anaesthetics) these drugs were, by the time they reached their peak, being prescribed for just about every illness known to man or woman. I met people who had been prescribed them as treatments for backache, menopausal problems, pre-menstrual tension, migraine, high blood pressure, alopecia and urinary tract infections.

It got to the point where doctors were handing out prescriptions for benzodiazepine tranquillisers whenever they didn't know what else to do. There was never any evidence to show that drugs were effective in treating all these different conditions.

As a result, it was hardly surprising that in the UK alone, three million people became addicted to these drugs. (Benzodiazepine addiction was and probably still is the world's biggest drug addiction problem. Governments which spend billions on their wretched and pointless drugs war do it with the help of money which they raise from taxes on drug companies which are allowed to sell and promote drugs which are far more addictive than heroin, cocaine or cannabis.)

Similarly, look at what has happened with the drugs which were introduced for the treatment of arthritis.

Indomethacin and other powerful non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) worked well in the treatment of arthritis and helped relieve the pain, the stiffness and the swelling that occurs in conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis and gout where there is a lot of acute inflammation. Within a relatively short time, there were dozens of competing products on the market.

But the drug companies wanted bigger profits than even the huge arthritis market would provide. And so they encouraged doctors to prescribe their products for headaches, period pains, and any other type of pain you can think of.

Doctors ignored the fact that these drugs didn't work terribly well for these conditions and they also ignored the fact that the side effects associated with these drugs were often more damaging than the conditions for which they were now being prescribed.

In both of these examples (which are, incidentally, merely two of many) the failure of the drugs to work effectively, and the incidence of side effects, meant that patients lost faith. It was patients (not doctors) who expressed their unhappiness with these products.

The drug companies responded in the only sensible commercial way.

They introduced new drugs which did not have the side effects associated with the old, largely discredited drugs. Instead of recommending that doctors prescribe tranquillisers for millions of their patients, they recommended that doctors prescribe anti-depressants. And instead of recommending non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs for every variety of pain, the drug companies introduced new pain killers.

The drug companies spent a lot of money telling doctors that these drugs were new, effective and safe.

These drugs were new, of course but there wasn't any good evidence showing that they were effective or safe. Much of the evidence that existed was based on animal experiments and was pretty much irrelevant to human patients. Doctors didn't notice that. They wanted to look clever so they just started to prescribe the new drugs in vast quantities. Doctors are just as fashion conscious as any other consumer.

In due course, the new drugs are invariably found to have side effects of their own. After a few million people have taken the drugs for a few years, the side effects will surface and will become more and more widely appreciated.

The drug companies (which will have made vast profits out of the drugs) will then, again, introduce something new.

Doctors should leave drug companies to get on with what they do best – making a profit. And they should do what they are trained and paid to do – look after patients.

Drugs can and often are useful and effective. They can be lifesaving. But there are lots of ways to look after patients without using drugs.

And patients will only get good treatment when doctors realise that the drug companies aren't on their side and aren't on the side of patients. Drug companies are in the business of making money. That's what they do best.

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Medicine has become a 'business' rather than a profession – if you have any doubts about that just look at the number of doctors who now go on strike, or threaten to go on strike, in order to improve their personal pay or working conditions – like all businessmen, modern doctors are influenced by profit rather than any other motive when considering what to do. A continuing association with a ruthless industry which constantly favours profit at the expense of everything else has rubbed off on the profession. I cannot remember ever seeing doctors go on strike because they were unhappy about the way patients were being treated.

Doctors have become so used to doing what they are told by the industry that they have become accustomed to prescribing pills for every problem. They have lost the breadth of vision to enable them to see opportunities for cure outside the traditional range of pharmacological opportunities.

The drug industry has convinced doctors that everyone they see must need a drug and that there is a pill for every ill. The majority of doctors might as well be employed directly by the drug companies as pretend to be independent, authoritative scientists. They prescribe what they are told to prescribe in exactly the same way that the drug company representatives promote what they are told to promote.

The modern doctor would like to be regarded as a mystical healer; that, indeed, is how he probably sees himself in his dreams.

But in reality the modern doctor is little more than a drug company employee; pushing the latest line in wonder drugs with evangelical enthusiasm, never daring to criticise or to question the promotional material he is shown, grasping his free pen, golf ball or umbrella and wearily handing out the latest wonder drug until it is superseded by another wonder drug and imagining that by prescribing the latest new drug he is remaining on the frontiers of science and helping to push back the barriers of ignorance.

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The fact that the medical profession is dominated and controlled by the pharmaceutical industry would not matter so much if the drug industry was honest, responsible and ethical. But it isn't.

The pharmaceutical industry is (and has for many years been) the most consistently and astonishingly profitable industry in the world. The profits in this industry invariably put drug companies high up amongst the top companies in the world. The industry pays retainers and fat fees to a vast number of politicians, journalists and professional lobbyists and uses consequential power to keep its profits rising at a healthy rate.

In America, since 1980, drug prices have risen at nearly six times the rate of other goods. The cost for a standard set of childhood vaccines rose from $7 in 1982 to $129 in 1992. When one drug was sold to treat sheep, the cost was $15 (possibly because sheep aren't worth much and so the price couldn't be allowed to rise too high or else no one would buy the drug) but when the same drug was sold for the treatment of human patients the price rose neatly to $1,500.

According to a survey published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 62% nearly two thirds of the pharmaceutical advertisements in medical journals were either grossly misleading or downright inaccurate. A total of 109 advertisements from 10 leading medical journals were each reviewed by two doctors and an academic clinical pharmacist. The reviewers used guidelines from the Food and Drug Administration to assess the advertisements. In 30% of cases, the independent reviewers disagreed with the advertiser's claim that the drug was the drug of choice. In 44% of cases, the reviewers thought that the advertisement would lead to improper prescribing if a doctor had no information about the drug other than that provided in the advertisement.

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It can hardly be a surprise to anyone to realise that in some parts of the western world more people now visit alternative practitioners for homoeopathy, acupuncture, osteopathy and so on, than visit traditional doctors. If you think about that, it means that alternative medicine is no longer the alternative. Alternative medicine is, in some countries, now the medical method of choice. Orthodox medicine is now the alternative. Alternative practitioners can now look down their noses at their orthodox colleagues in the same way that orthodox doctors have been looking down their noses for decades.

I firmly believe that the future clearly lies with an holistic approach which uses a 'pick and mix' approach – taking the best from all forms of medicine. It is crucial to remember that in a doctor-patient relationship only the interests of the patient are significant. I believe that the patient must take an active role in maintaining and restoring his or her own health and that the healing power of the mind and the body must be respected. I will explain the significance of holistic medicine more fully in the next chapter.

Chapter Four

Why You Should Learn To Be a Holistic Patient

'Holistic' (or, as it sometimes spelt, wholistic) medicine has, for several decades, been growing in theoretical popularity. Many alternative and some orthodox health care professionals describe themselves as 'holistic' practitioners.

But they aren't.

Most journalists inaccurately assume that the word is a synonym for 'alternative' or 'complementary' medicine.

But it isn't.

The word 'holistic' was first introduced in 1926 by the South African philosopher and statesman Jan Christian Smuts. He suggested that the whole human being is much more than (and quite different to) a collection of physical or emotional parts. Even in those days, it seems, there must have been doctors parading up and down hospital wards referring to the 'liver' in the end bed and the 'case of pancreatitis' in the third bed on the left.

The word and the concept lay more or less forgotten until the 1970s when the growth of high technology medicine led to a revolution among patients who felt that aggressive, interventionist medicine wasn't entirely satisfactory. Suddenly there was a feeling that specialisation and fragmentation were not all they had been cracked up to be.

The use of the word 'holistic' meant, in theory at least, that instead of regarding patients as sick kidneys or hearts, health care professionals would try to meet the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual needs of their patients by dealing with social problems as well as physical ones and by using natural healing methods as well as modern, pharmacological or surgical techniques.

In short, the word 'holistic' was intended to describe an attitude. An attitude which can be just as well followed by an orthodox trained doctor as by an alternative practitioner. A general practitioner in a busy city health centre can be 'holistic' in his approach just as easily as can a herbalist or acupuncturist working from a back bedroom.

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There is no doubt that a 'holistic' approach to medical care is extremely good news for patients. When followed properly, it means that every illness can be treated with a 'pick and mix' approach – choosing whichever aspects of orthodox and alternative medicine are most likely to be effective, and least likely to produce side effects, and treating and taking full notice of all aspects of the individual's being.

In many illnesses there is no point in treating what is wrong with the body unless you also treat what is wrong with the mind, and it seems to me remarkable that a modern doctor will treat the body of a patient who is suffering from high blood pressure, irritable bowel syndrome or asthma but ignore the mind, when it is now established beyond doubt that in so many illnesses the physical symptoms are produced by mental turmoil of one sort or another. It is equally bizarre and, in truth, unscientific, for an osteopath to treat a patient's back and ignore his mind.

The advantages of a truly 'holistic' approach are colossal not only because 'holistic' medicine offers a chance to use the best and avoid the worst but also because different types of treatment can, when used together, have a synergistic effect. A genuinely 'holistic' approach may use a modern drug, a relaxation technique and a type of massage to tackle a single collection of symptoms.

But although in theory the word 'holistic' implies an admirable change in attitude there is, sadly, little evidence that practitioners really understand what the word means or how it should be applied in practice.

It would be nice to think that everyone could find a 'holistic' practitioner to look after them. But don't hold your breath. You've about as much chance of striking oil when digging in your winter vegetables.

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Sadly, the steady rise in the popularity of alternative medicine has made remarkably little impact on the way that orthodox medicine is practised. There are, it is true, a few orthodox practitioners who offer alternative forms of treatment (though, sadly, many of these are best described as dabblers rather than practitioners – there are doctors around practising acupuncture, osteopathy, homoeopathy and hypnotherapy on the basis of one or two weekend courses) but the establishment view remains unchanged: alternative medicine is a dangerous waste of time and money which should be patronised when it cannot be ignored and suppressed whenever possible.

The myth that drug therapy offers the only true solution is now repeated unquestioningly and without hesitation or embarrassment. Many members of the medical establishment believe that medical advances largely depend upon the pharmaceutical industry. This is not regarded as a subject for debate but as a fundamental building block; a fact of modern medical life. The importance of drug therapy, and the reverence with which drugs are regarded by doctors and nurses, is perhaps best seen in modern, rural health centres where doctors dispense as well as prescribe and where the dispensing counter where patients exchange their prescription slips for drugs is rather akin to a high altar. The modern consultation is, too often, a simple, uncomplicated, thoughtless three-part process. First, the patient visits the doctor and reports his or her symptoms. Second, the doctor decides which drug (or, more likely, which drugs) will be most appropriate and writes out what he considers to be an appropriate prescription. And, third, the patient takes the prescription to the high priest and has it turned into a bottle of pills, a tube of ointment, an inhaler or whichever form has been deemed appropriate. An orthodox, modern medical school training means (literally) that a doctor is trained and kept up-to-date by and for the pharmaceutical industry. This may sound like hyperbole. It isn't. Drug companies pay for a very large part of the education that a doctor receives. Everyone in modern health care worships at the sterile shrine of the pharmacy.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the drug company owned and controlled medical establishment still looks with horror at alternative medicine. Attempts to organise research programmes are invariably treated with a sneer or a patronising dismissal.

It is one of the great scandals of the 21st century that the billion dollar worldwide 'charity' cancer industry, the international drug industry and the medical 'profession' (now, more of a trade than a 'profession') would all much rather suppress an alternative cancer treatment than have to admit that orthodox remedies might be bettered. The media supports this unholy trinity. It is little known but true that 80% of cancer deaths could be avoided simply by avoiding factors (such as foods) which are known to cause cancer and by eating foods which are known to provide protection from cancer.

The truth is that the medical establishment – and the drug industry – are terrified of alternative medicine for they regard it as a major commercial threat.

So, the bottom line is that you are unlikely to find a 'holistic' orthodox practitioner after all.

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You might expect to do better among alternative practitioners. But I fear that you would probably be disappointed there too. Tragically, too many alternative care practitioners are, in their complementary way, just as arrogant and intellectually isolated as medical men and women who have been trained to hand out pills.

Many acupuncturists, homoeopaths, herbalists and others describe themselves as offering their patients 'holistic' medicine when in reality they offer nothing of the sort.

However well trained she may be the alternative therapist who confines herself to a single speciality is not a 'holistic' practitioner. How many acupuncturists, herbalists and naturopaths will admit that orthodox doctors and hospitals can sometimes provide the best care?

To be honest I don't think that many patients are ever going to receive truly 'holistic' treatment from their practitioners – whether they are orthodox or alternative. Most training programmes are, by their very nature, designed to produce specialists. Medical schools turn out drug dispensers and acupuncture schools turn out acupuncturists. And there aren't many health care professionals with the time or inclination to study other available specialities.

We must also recognise that there is, of course, a huge financial disincentive involved here. How many practitioners are going to suggest to a paying patient that he would obtain better treatment by visiting another professional? I know of very few truly 'holistic' centres where a patient can obtain treatment from a comprehensive variety of orthodox and alternative practitioners.

All this is sad.

But it doesn't mean that 'holistic' medicine is out of reach.

What it does mean is that if you really want 'holistic' treatment (and in my opinion you should) you're going to have to take control yourself if you or anyone in your family needs treatment.

There are very few truly 'holistic' medical practitioners. But everyone can – and should – be a 'holistic' patient. Anyone who is ill needs attention to their mind and spirit as well as their body. Selecting a properly balanced diet may be as important as choosing the right drug. Sometimes a successful outcome to an illness may be 80% dependent on choosing the right drug. On another occasion a successful outcome may be 80% dependent on diet.

Holistic practitioners are rare – but you can and should be a 'holistic' patient.

Chapter Five

Orthodox or Alternative: Which is Best?

When is orthodox treatment best? What can doctors offer if you want to avoid getting heart disease? Are the alternative remedies for irritable bowel syndrome better – or worse than the orthodox treatments? If you're suffering from anxiety is your doctor likely to offer more effective help than an alternative practitioner?

These – and questions like them – are questions which really matter and which have a real influence on your chances of longevity.

I have, therefore, taken a hard, critical look at the ways in which orthodox and alternative practitioners claim to be able to prevent – and treat – ten of the commonest diseases. This chapter is an independent and personal assessment and evaluation of the comparative effectiveness of alternative and orthodox medicine in the treatment of ten common diseases.

I readily admit that this comparison of orthodox and alternative medicine is inevitably subjective to a certain extent. But I have based my conclusions on the available evidence and, since I am not influenced by any outside forces (politicians, corporate interests or loyalty to any particular section of the healing community), I have made the study as objective as I possibly could.

I have given both orthodox medicine and alternative medicine a general score at the end of each section.

I do realise that individual practitioners will score very differently within these two categories; my scoring is intended to recognise the general value of the help available from practitioners.

I also added a score for 'self-help' since while I was writing this piece it occurred to me that it is often possible for the informed individual to keep him/herself healthy (and to restore good health) far more effectively without professional help than with it.

Anxiety and depression

Prevention

Your doctor is unlikely to offer you any help in avoiding anxiety or depression. This is one of many areas of orthodox medicine where 'prevention' is a concept which really does not exist. Alternative practitioners are a little better. Some practitioners may offer stress counselling and relaxation therapy (both of which would undoubtedly help improve mental health and reduce the likelihood of both anxiety and depression) and others will offer nutritional advice which may be of value since there is no doubt that a poor diet can (largely through leading to a poor immune system) lead to an increased susceptibility to stress.

Score

Orthodox medicine 0/10
Alternative medicine 4/10
Self help 7/10

Treatment

The commonest orthodox treatment for both anxiety and depression involves drug therapy. Tranquillisers are the usual choice for anxiety despite the fact that they offer only superficial, temporary support and can produce serious problems of their own. After the problems associated with tranquilliser use were acknowledged, the pharmaceutical industry (and, therefore, the medical profession) concentrated their efforts on marketing anti-depressants. It is for this reason that the alleged incidence of depression is rising fairly dramatically. Anti-depressants do seem to help some patients but, once again, there are numerous side effects - some of them serious. For example, Prozac, commercially a hugely successful anti-depressant drug is thought by some to be associated with several serious problems – including aggression and suicide. Psychotherapy is the second most popular treatment for anxiety or depression but because of the high cost, it is not available to most patients. This may not be too much of a disadvantage since there is some evidence to suggest that support provided by friends and acquaintances may be more useful under these circumstances than professional support offered by psychiatrists, psychologists or therapists. Surprisingly, perhaps, some doctors still recommend brain surgery for problems of this type. Patients who undergo destructive brain surgery may well behave differently (and may, therefore, be thought to have been 'cured' of their anxiety or depression) but my personal view is that this type of treatment is unacceptable. Chopping patients' heads off would undoubtedly stop them feeling anxious or depressed but this is not a remedy I would recommend.

Alternative therapies for depression are mostly gentle, and seem relatively free of side effects, but some seem to me to be just as effective (if not more so) than orthodox remedies. Alternative medicines which may prove effective include herbal remedies, nutritional therapies (including vitamin supplements), relaxation exercises, homoeopathy and Tai Chi.

Naturopathy (usually recommending a low intake of caffeine and alcohol and a decent intake of complex carbohydrates to stabilise blood sugar levels), hypnotherapy, relaxation exercises, meditation, massage and homoeopathy are forms of alternative medicine which may be useful in the treatment of anxiety.

Score
Orthodox medicine 3/10
Alternative practitioners 8/10
Self-help 8/10

Arthritis

Prevention

There is no orthodox prevention programme for arthritis. In the alternative medicine field, the best prevention programme is the one offered by nutritionists who recommend a vegetarian diet. It has been proved that rheumatoid arthritis is less common among vegetarians than among meat eaters but, sadly, very few doctors provide advice to their patients on the subject of arthritis consider this link worth mentioning. (This may be because they are not aware of it. This ignorance is best explained by the fact that most doctors obtain their postgraduate education courtesy of the pharmaceutical industry which is, not surprisingly perhaps, interested only in promoting the idea that drug therapy is the only sensible way of dealing with health problems and in advocating specific therapies within that genre.)

Score
Orthodox medicine 0/10
Alternative practitioners 6/10
Self help 6/10

Treatment

The commonest orthodox treatment for arthritis involves drug therapy – usually with non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs. The best-established (and possibly the most effective) drug for the treatment of arthritis is aspirin but this drug is not widely used partly because it is out of patent (and therefore made very cheaply by a large number of companies) and partly because it has acquired a bad reputation for causing stomach problems. Ironically, however, new (and invariably much more expensive) variations on this pharmacological theme usually turn out to cause similar symptoms when they have been on the market for a few years. The drug industry gets round this problem by producing a constant stream of new products. It is worth noting that soluble aspirin is much less likely to cause stomach problems than aspirin of the non-soluble variety. Cynics will not be surprised to hear that it is not unheard of for drug companies to ‘test’ their new products against non-soluble aspirin (the type most likely to cause stomach problems) when attempting to show that their latest wonder drug is an improvement on the traditional benchmark remedy.

Drug therapy can help relieve some of the pain and stiffness associated with arthritis but that’s about it. Astonishingly, most doctors are still unaware of just how effective TENS machines can be in eradicating the sort of pain suffered by patients with arthritis. Actually, it probably isn’t all that astonishing since drug companies have, over the years, worked pretty hard to make sure that doctors continue prescribing drugs (very profitable for drug companies) and don’t recommend TENS machines (no profit at all for drug companies). Back in the 1980s, when I first started writing about TENS machines, I reported that one drug company had bought a company making small but effective TENS machines. For about 30 seconds or so I thought that this was good news and that the drug company would now start promoting TENS machines. But the drug company closed down the TENS machine company.

Surgery is the second most popular orthodox treatment for arthritis. The replacement of arthritic joints has become big business and seems destined to become an even bigger money-spinner in the future.

There are numerous ‘alternative’ remedies for arthritis but (unless you count the TENS machine as an ‘alternative’ remedy) the best of them are probably no better than the remedies offered by orthodox practitioners. Acupuncture may help relieve the pain of arthritis but it won’t cure it any more than drugs will. Other useful alternative treatments for arthritis include nutritional ones (such as those advocated by naturopaths). Cutting out meat and fat and increasing the intake of fruit, vegetables and wholegrain cereals is likely to help. Hydrotherapy (regulated exercise in water) can help when joints are swollen or painful and homoeopathy may also prove useful.

Score
Orthodox medicine 5/10
Alternative practitioners 6/10

Self-help 7/10

Asthma

Prevention

Doctors claim that there has been an explosion in the incidence of asthma in recent years. You might, therefore, imagine that the medical profession would be looking for ways to prevent asthma. You would be disappointed. It is usually claimed that asthma is becoming commoner because of the pollutants in the air we breathe. I'm not entirely convinced by this argument. After all, our air has been polluted for a long time. I rather suspect that what is happening is that asthma is simply being diagnosed more enthusiastically because doctors are being pushed to prescribe anti-asthma drugs. If a child visits a doctor with a wheeze, the doctor will diagnose asthma and start a treatment programme which may well last for life. This is patently absurd but nonetheless enormously profitable.

Some doctors do perform skin tests in a search for allergens which might be responsible. But most don't bother.

The best way to prevent asthma is, I believe, to teach people how to relax. Much asthma is stress related, and learning how to relax when under pressure is an excellent way to abort a potential asthma attack. Sadly, the orthodox medical profession hardly ever bothers to do this. Some alternative practitioners do.

It is also important to remember that asthma can be caused by house dust mites, dander (tiny pieces of animal hair, skin and feathers), tobacco smoke, exhaust fumes and mould. Some food additives can also cause asthma. Good practitioners advise that the best way to avoid these varieties of allergic asthma is to avoid the allergens. Regretfully, alternative practitioners of various kinds are more likely to make this type of recommendation than are orthodox practitioners.

Score
Orthodox medicine 1/10
Alternative practitioners 6/10
Self-help 6/10

Treatment

Inhalers which contain drugs which dilate the air passages (broncho-dilators) are the cornerstone of orthodox treatment for asthma. Steroids are also popular – despite the possible side effects. There is no doubt that inhalers can be extremely effective – and as a result many users become very dependent upon them (the dependence is psychological rather than physical but nonetheless the real for that). But are inhalers always necessary? I don't think so. Many patients overuse them and are encouraged to overuse them by over-prescribing. Indeed, my fear is that the damage done by these drugs may outweigh the useful effects.

There is, in comparison, good evidence showing that asthma sufferers who are taught how to relax can deal very effectively with their symptoms, without any risk of side effects.

I have seen children and adults suffering from quite serious asthma make remarkable recoveries when helped to relax and I have no doubt that if more patients were taught to relax the need for inhalers would drop dramatically. (But so would drug company profits of course.)

Finally, it is worth remembering that in an emergency, caffeine can be used to help stop wheezing. If the patient is given a cup of coffee to drink, the resultant relief will often be remarkable.

Score
Orthodox medicine 5/10
Alternative practitioners 6/10
Self-help 6/10

Cancer

Prevention

The original and traditional orthodox medicine approach to preventing cancer was to create a new speciality which, perhaps not surprisingly, involved patients handing over fairly vast amounts of money to be 'screened' at regular but artificially defined intervals. The evidence suggests that this type of preventive medicine programme probably did more harm than good – except to the bank balances of the doctors and health companies organising it. One problem is that selective screening not infrequently produces false positives – which result in patients receiving therapy they don't need. Another problem is that screening programmes may create health problems of their own. (For example, X-ray screening increases the risk of cancer developing, and there has to be a serious risk that mammography, for example, increases the risk of women developing breast cancer.) A third problem is that individuals who are screened annually may be imbued with a false sense of confidence – and may, therefore, ignore warning signs which they would have otherwise noticed.

Recently, the drug industry and the medical profession have combined to create a new and even more profitable form of preventive medicine which involves the prescribing of powerful drugs which are intended to prevent cancer developing. Doctors and their drug company paymasters have realised that if they can persuade millions of patients to take drugs regularly in order to reduce their chances of developing a specific illness, the profits will be spectacular – even by drug company standards.

Unfortunately for the industry, I managed to report in books and articles that the best known drug in this new category, a product called tamoxifen, which was given to women who were told that it would reduce their chances of developing cancer, was known to cause uterine cancer. This revelation was initially dismissed by doctors and drug companies but eventually sensible patients seemed to decide that the risk was not worth any potential advantages. Other side effects associated with tamoxifen are so significant that it is not uncommon for doctors to prescribe additional drugs to help alleviate them. Astonishingly, few orthodox doctors, or drug company representatives, seemed to think it odd to give a perfectly healthy woman a cancer causing drug to prevent cancer – and then to give another potentially harmful drug to alleviate other side effects.

Some surgeons have also moved into the world of 'preventive medicine'. It is becoming common for surgeons to remove healthy breasts from healthy women on the grounds that if there is no breast there then breast cancer is unlikely to develop. I do not find the rationale behind this type of surgery convincing, for patients who are particularly likely to develop breast cancer can dramatically reduce their risk by adopting a vegetarian or vegan diet. There is a precedent for this type of surgery for there were surgeons around in the 19th century who used to remove lengths of bowel in order to prevent problems in that area of the body. In addition, it has long been popular in some surgical circles for doctors to remove lengths of bowel from patients wishing to lose weight. Without essential pieces of bowel, nutrients aren't absorbed and the patient loses weight. Sadly, the patient also loses essential nutrients and may die but that is apparently considered an acceptable risk.

Finally, of course, some doctors do make some effort to persuade patients who smoke to give up or reduce their consumption of tobacco (known to be a carcinogenic substance).

The alternative approach to preventing cancer is, it seems to me, considerably more logical than the so-called 'orthodox' approach which I have described.

We now know what causes 80% of all cancers and the main thrust of the approach advocated by the best alternative practitioners is to suggest to people who wish to cut their risk of developing cancer that they avoid as many carcinogens as possible – and that they should adapt their lifestyle in such a way as to minimise their chances of developing cancer.

Apart from tobacco (virtually the only recognised carcinogen to be accepted by the medical establishment) the other known cancer inducing substances include a number of widely consumed foods. It is, for example, now proven beyond any shadow of doubt that meat causes cancer. There is also evidence showing that a high fat diet increases the risk of cancer developing. Removing meat and excess fat from the diet should, therefore, reduce the cancer risk. It is also known that eating more fruit and vegetables provides a good deal of protection against cancer and there is evidence to show that individuals who are overweight are more likely to develop cancer.

This lifestyle approach (based on existing clinical evidence) is so logical that it seems rather bizarre to have to acknowledge that it is still regarded as 'alternative' and, indeed, rather revolutionary. Good alternative practitioners will advise their healthy patients to avoid the foods which are known to cause cancer.

Cancer rates continued to rise throughout the 20th century (and seem certain to continue to rise in the 21st century). It would be hard to find more convincing evidence proving that the orthodox approach to preventing cancer has failed dismally.

Score

Orthodox medicine 0/10
Alternative medicine 8/10
Self-help 9/10

Treatment

The orthodox approach to the treatment of cancer consists of three separate types of therapy: chemotherapy, radiotherapy and surgery. The effectiveness (or otherwise) of this approach is easily measured by studying survival rates. And, as with preventive medicine, the evidence shows that the medical establishment has been appallingly unsuccessful.

Chemotherapy is one of the great health scandals of our time. Although hugely profitable for the pharmaceutical industry the evidence strongly suggests that, for the majority of cancers and the majority of patients, chemotherapy simply does not work. Indeed, I am convinced that because of the damaging effect it has on the immune system, chemotherapy probably does more harm than good for many patients. There are occasions when chemotherapy is of value but I have no doubt whatsoever that if chemotherapy was an ‘alternative’ remedy it would have been banned as unsafe and ineffective. Doctors persevere with chemotherapy because they are taught (by the drug industry and by charities which work with the drug industry) that it is the most effective way to tackle cancer. Radiotherapy and surgery are equally controversial and although there are times when both can be of use, the fact is that if they were ‘alternative’ remedies they too would have almost certainly been banned on the twin grounds of danger and ineffectiveness. My own attempts to persuade doctors to tackle cancer by improving the body’s immune system (as described in my book *Superbody*) were originally attacked mercilessly but are now becoming more widely accepted.

There are numerous alternative remedies for cancer available. But the basic principle of all the successful therapies I’ve found has been a low fat, vegetarian diet which includes plenty of vegetables and plenty of fruit – preferably consumed as juices. The evidence I have seen has convinced me that this dietary approach – either alone or with other therapies – is the most effective way to defeat cancer. And there is a logical explanation for this therapy since the high vitamin content of fruit and vegetables would boost the body’s immune system.

The dietary approach to the treatment of cancer isn’t the only type of therapy that works. Visualisation is undoubtedly also effective and is one of the most effective alternative solutions. As I showed in my books *Bodypower* and *Mindpower* back in the 1980s (now both available as ebooks) it is possible to defeat cancer by imagining that your body is full of cancer eating cells.

Score
Orthodox medicine 1/10
Alternative medicine 8/10
Self-help 8/10

Eczema and Dermatitis

Prevention

A few orthodox practitioners may encourage susceptible patients to avoid irritants likely to cause eczema or dermatitis. But the vast majority do not – even though it isn’t difficult to compile a short list of the most likely causes (nickel, rubber, sticking plaster, chemicals and household plants are causes of allergic contact eczema; eggs and dairy produce can cause allergic eczema; oils can cause occupational eczema; soaps, detergents and urine can cause irritant eczema). There will be exceptions but I doubt if the majority of alternative practitioners are much better than the majority of orthodox practitioners. However, individuals who take care to avoid allergens and irritants will be able to protect themselves quite effectively.

As a footnote, it is worth drawing attention to the fact that some cases of eczema may be produced by drugs (such as penicillin and sulphonamide) which have been taken by mouth. Doctors could, therefore, prevent a good deal of eczema by limiting their over-prescribing.

Score
Orthodox medicine 0/10
Alternative medicine 0/10
Self help 6/10

Treatment

The orthodox treatment for eczema and dermatitis usually involves a steroid cream. The patient has a rash and so the doctor reaches, almost on a reflex, for his prescription pad and scribbles out a prescription for an appropriate tube of cream. Such creams will often prove effective – in the short term – but they do not, of course, deal with the underlying cause of the problem.

Orthodox practitioners can probably produce a miracle result more speedily than alternative practitioners but good alternative practitioners who spend a little time trying to find a cause for an attack of eczema will be much more likely to find a permanent solution. In practice, most people will be able to solve this problem just as quickly as any alternative practitioner.

It is, incidentally, worth remembering that the sort of creams usually favoured by orthodox practitioners can actually cause eczema if used for too long.

Score
Orthodox medicine 5/10
Alternative medicine 8/10
Self-help 8/10

Headaches and Migraines

Prevention
Headaches are among the commonest of all health problems. And yet I doubt if most doctors ever give a thought to their prevention. The orthodox medical paradigm just doesn't regard prevention very seriously. The vast majority of headaches are 'tension headaches' – caused by stress and anxiety – and it shouldn't come as much of a surprise to anyone that the best way to prevent headaches of this type is to learn how to deal with stressful situations more effectively. Learn how to spot when you are under too much pressure, and know how to wind down or shut yourself away from the pressures of a difficult world, and you should suffer far less from stress related tension headaches. Learning how to relax your mind (and your body) isn't particularly difficult. It is a skill which (like dancing, driving a car or playing golf) needs to be learned. What a pity it is that doctors seem to be too busy to teach patients how to do these things. Fortunately, there are some alternative practitioners around who are enthusiastic about teaching their patients these skills. Most important of all these are skills which can be learned at home without a practitioner of any kind.

Migraine headaches are often linked to specific foods or to other lifestyle factors and they can, therefore, be prevented more easily than other types of headaches. Doctors will (occasionally) provide their patients with a list of possible triggers (cheese, chocolate and tobacco smoke are examples of known triggers).

Score
Orthodox medicine 1/10
Alternative medicine 6/10
Self-help 7/10

Treatment
Visit a doctor complaining of a headache and he will almost certainly reach for his prescription pad, scribble for a moment and send you off to the local pharmacy to pick up a bottle of pain killers. There is no doubt that pain killers will probably help. But they won't do anything to deal with the cause of the headache. They won't help you to deal with the problem yourself. And they won't help you avoid the problem occurring again. Giving a patient a pain killer to deal with a headache is like giving a motorist a bucket of water when his radiator is steaming. It's a short-term solution. When headaches persist, recur or are in some other way clearly out of the ordinary, doctors can do a good job in helping to make a diagnosis. But in the treatment of routine headaches, orthodox doctors are pretty useless.

Massage, acupressure, homoeopathy and relaxation therapy are just a few of the alternative methods which may work in the treatment of headaches.

But the nature of the disorder means that self-help offers by far the best approach. Self-help treatment for headaches doesn't simply involve taking the top off the soluble aspirin bottle and popping two into a glass of water. Learning to relax, mastering the simple art of finger tap massage and controlling your exposure to stress are all crucial. Visualisation is a simple but effective way to deal with migraine. (I describe the technique in my book *Bodypower*.)

Score
Orthodox medicine 3/10
Alternative medicine 6/10
Self-help 9/10

Heart disease

Prevention
Doctors do make some effort to prevent heart disease but readers may not be too surprised to hear that most doctors regard drugs as the best way of doing this. There are, for example, a number of cholesterol lowering drugs available and these are widely prescribed – much to the financial benefit of the drug companies which make them. Whether these drugs are effective is another question. And I certainly don't think that drugs of any kind are the best way to prevent heart disease.

Numerous studies have identified the causes of heart disease. They include: too much stress, too much weight, too much alcohol, cigarette smoking, a fat rich diet, too little exercise and so on. Simple lifestyle changes can dramatically alter an individual's chances of developing heart disease. Alternative practitioners who can perform effectively in this area usually do so by recommending these lifestyle changes.

Score
Orthodox medicine 2/10
Alternative medicine 6/10
Self-help 9/10

Treatment

The orthodox treatment of heart disease usually involves either drugs or surgery – or a mixture of both. And yet there is clear evidence to show that drugs and surgery are not the best way to deal with heart disease. If doctors were true scientists, and were genuinely devoted to offering their patients the best remedy for their problem, then they would offer patients the type of solution tested and proven by Dr Dean Ornish and his colleagues. Dr Ornish has shown that patients with heart disease can be cured by a programme consisting of a mixture of exercise, a low fat vegetarian diet, stress reduction and counselling. The research he has published is totally convincing. Some of this programme can be followed at home by any intelligent reader although I have to warn patients that they should not stop medical treatment without first discussing things with their doctor, that I do not recommend that anyone begin treatment for a heart condition without first obtaining advice from a qualified medical practitioner and that it is vital that anyone planning to do this should first check with their doctor that the approach is appropriate for them.

Medically approved and supervised self-help can be tremendously effective. Any doctor who insists that the only way to treat heart disease is with drugs or surgery is incompetent and should be promoted to cleaning out the waiting room lavatories. Although Dr Ornish and his colleagues are orthodox medical practitioners, I don't feel I can include his treatment programme in my assessment of orthodox medicine since most doctors still prefer to recommend drugs or surgery. Alternative solutions for heart trouble include those offered by naturopathy, relaxation therapies, meditation and Tai Chi.

Score

Orthodox medicine 2/10
Alternative medicine 5/10
Self-help 8/10

High Blood Pressure

Prevention

High blood pressure is one of the easiest diseases to prevent. Too much stress, too much weight, too much fat in the diet – all these are among the avoidable factors.

Some doctors make an effort with some of their patients. But most orthodox doctors don't even bother to take routine blood pressure measurements – let alone give their healthy patients advice on how to avoid high blood pressure. Some alternative practitioners (particularly those with an interest in relaxation therapies and good nutrition) may teach patients how to avoid this problem. But this problem is best dealt with without any professionals.

Score

Orthodox medicine 0/10
Alternative practitioners 4/10
Self-help 9/10

Treatment

The orthodox approach to the treatment of high blood pressure usually involves drug therapy. High blood pressure is one of the diseases drug companies love. Once a patient has high blood pressure he will (unless he makes changes to his lifestyle) usually have it for life. That means that he will need pills for life. Drug companies love disorders like this. Drugs used in the treatment of high blood pressure frequently do bring the blood pressure down but they often cause unpleasant side effects. Tai Chi, meditation, visualisation and naturopathy are all varieties of alternative medicine which can prove effective. But the best way to tackle this problem is often to make lifestyle changes. (Patients – particularly those already receiving orthodox therapy must talk to their doctor before making any lifestyle changes because the effectiveness of lifestyle changes can be so dramatic that medication may need to be altered.)

Score

Orthodox medicine 3/10
Alternative practitioners 5/10
Self-help 8/10

Irritable Bowel Syndrome

Prevention

Neither doctors nor alternative medicine practitioners do much (or, indeed, anything) to help individuals avoid irritable bowel syndrome. The sad truth is that many alternative practitioners aren't much better than orthodox doctors at telling patients how to stay healthy. The reason for this is obvious: both alternative practitioners and orthodox doctors get paid for treating sick patients, and they usually get paid for prescribing a specific remedy – whether it is a drug, a massage, a needle or a herb. Alternative medicine and orthodox medicine are both variations on the same interventionist theme. Having said this, some alternative practitioners do recognise that IBS is usually caused either by stress or by dietary problems.

Score
Orthodox medicine 1/10
Alternative practitioners 3/10
Self-help 8/10

Treatment
Orthodox doctors, and most alternative practitioners, fail to offer IBS sufferers particularly good advice. Most are too keen to sell a product of some kind – even though the answer to IBS may be rather simpler than this practice might suggest. The fact is that IBS is usually caused by either stress or a diet problem.

It isn't possible to cure irritable bowel syndrome but it is usually possible to control it by teaching the patient how to deal with these two different problems. (Stress is best countered by reducing the exposure to unnecessary stresses while at the same time learning to relax and improving the ability to deal with stress. Dealing with the dietary link usually involves such simple remedies as cutting out dairy produce, reducing the fat intake and increasing the intake of water.)

Orthodox doctors prescribe a wide range of pills for IBS sufferers. If a patient suffers from diarrhoea then a doctor will prescribe a pill to treat the diarrhoea. If the patient suffers from constipation, a laxative will be prescribed. Antispasmodics are popularly prescribed, as are medicines containing peppermint or charcoal (products which are also popular with alternative practitioners).

Many alternative practitioners are really no better than orthodox doctors when it comes to the treatment of irritable bowel syndrome. Many have a remedy to offer but relatively few offer 'lifestyle' advice which will really make a difference. Prescribing peppermint or charcoal may well help deal with the symptoms (and that can be very welcome) but won't reduce the incidence or extent of the irritable bowel syndrome.

Score:
Orthodox medicine: 2/10
Alternative medicine: 2/10
Self-help 8/10

Conclusion

My general conclusion is that orthodox medicine has lost its way. The advice offered by doctors is too often self-serving. Too many practitioners offer only what they have been taught to offer (usually by drug companies). Drug companies aren't interested in teaching doctors how to use non drug remedies and they aren't interested in defeating disease. Why should they be? Drug company profits depend upon large numbers of the population remaining permanently sick. If drug companies taught doctors how to teach their patients to stay healthy they would put themselves out of business.

Alternative practitioners aren't immune to criticism either. Many who call themselves 'holistic practitioners' are no more 'holistic' than surgeons or radiotherapists. The herbalist who claims to be able to treat every ailment that comes his way with herbs is not a holistic practitioner. The acupuncturist who sticks rigidly to his needles is as narrow-minded as any prescription-scribbling general practitioner. The branch of alternative medicine which seems to me to be closest to a truly holistic approach is naturopathy. Naturopaths emphasise a number of nutritional approaches which have been proven to be effective (and they sometimes recommend chocolate as a mood enhancer which is pretty darned sensible of them).

A careful analysis of the prevention and treatment programmes available suggests to me that the vast majority of the health problems affecting individuals living in the developed world could be prevented, or treated, with a change in lifestyle.

A healthy immune system is the key to good health in our modern world and yet most people do everything they possibly can to batter and weaken their immune systems. And neither doctors nor alternative practitioners do much to counteract this dangerous trend. The tragedy is that doctors are keen to push pills, acupuncturists are keen to push acupuncture, herbalists are keen to push herbal remedies and so on. Truly holistic medicine is a rarity and encouraging people to make lifestyle changes isn't a very profitable occupation.

Chapter Six

How You Can Get The Best Out Of Your Doctor

Doctors are now a major cause of illness and death. Study the statistics and it becomes clear that throughout the 'civilised' world doctors are right up there alongside heart disease and cancer as the big-time killers of the 21st century.

Here are ten good reasons why you shouldn't trust your doctor.

1. He/she will have almost certainly been educated by drug companies anxious to sell their products – regardless of the side effects.

2. He/she may not know who you are – and may confuse you with someone else.

3. He/she may be using you as a guinea pig in a clinical trial. If your doctor gives you a packet of tablets (instead of a prescription) then the chances are high that he's being paid to test out a new drug.

4. He/she may well be sadly out-of-date. Most doctors are out-of-date within five years of leaving medical school.

5. He/she may be an alcoholic or a drug addict. Few professions turn to alcohol or drugs more often than doctors.

6. He/she probably has no idea what side effects may be associated with the drug he/she is prescribing.

7. He/she will almost certainly want to prescribe a drug for your symptoms – regardless of the fact that other methods of treatment may be both safer and more effective.

8. He/she may be relying on test results which are wrong – or which he/she simply doesn't understand. Errors involving tests and investigations are much commoner than most patients (and most doctors) realise. Most tests aren't as reliable, as useful or as necessary as most people think.

9. He/she may be depressed and in no fit condition to make a diagnosis or prescribe treatment. Mental illness is commoner among doctors than almost any other group in our society.

10. He/she may make treatment decisions based on his/her own religious beliefs – even though those personal beliefs mean that you do not receive the most appropriate treatment. The doctor is unlikely to tell you that his/her decisions are being affected in this way.

* * *

A study in Australia showed that 470,000 Australian men, women and children are admitted to hospital every year because they have been made ill by doctors. The figures also show that every year 280,000 patients who are admitted to hospital suffer a temporary disability as a result of their health care. Around 50,000 of these suffer permanent disabilities. A staggering 18,000 Australians die annually as a result of medical errors, drug toxicity, surgical errors and general medical mismanagement. What a terrible indictment of the medical profession.

In America, the death rate from medical 'accidents' is running at many hundreds of thousands a year.

Figures in Europe are no better. In my book *Betrayal of Trust* I reported that one in six British hospital patients is in hospital and receiving treatment because they have been made ill by doctors.

I could go on and on with figures and back it all up with plenty of evidence. The story is the same the whole world over and doctors no longer seem to deny any of this. When (some years ago) I was last invited onto a radio programme to talk about the fact that one in six patients in hospital is there because doctors have made them ill, a doctor representing the medical establishment came into the studio to defend his profession. He argued that patients could take comfort from the fact that the figures showed that five out of six hospital patients were not sick because they had been made ill by doctors. (No, I could hardly believe it either. But I listened to a tape of the programme afterwards and that is exactly what he said.)

Around half of all the 'adverse effects' associated with doctors are clearly and readily preventable and are usually a result of ignorance or incompetence or a mixture of both. The rest would be preventable with a little care and thought (and some better research).

Most people recognise the damage that other doctors can do but like to think that their doctor is an honourable exception. This is entirely understandable. After all, we all like to think that our relationship with our own doctor is special and that we have chosen someone reliable and knowledgeable to look after us. We like to think of our doctor as a personal and family friend. We all need to put some trust in the health care professionals upon whom we rely when we are ill.

But it is just as dangerous to assume that your doctor is entirely safe, sensible, knowledgeable, competent and error free as it would be to assume that you do not need to take care when driving on the spurious grounds that road accidents only ever affect other people.

I suspect that all readers of this book make some effort to ensure that the tyres on their cars have plenty of tread, that the brakes are in good, working condition, that they wear seat belts and so on. Everyone knows that motor cars can kill, and so sensible individuals do what they can to protect themselves.

And yet more than many times as many people a year die as a result of medical 'accidents' as die as a result of road accidents. Put another way, this means that your doctor is far more likely to kill you than your car.

The underlying problem is that even good, kind, conscientious doctors – who are honest and honourable, who care about their work and who do their very best for their patients – can still make people ill. And can still kill people.

Many of the problems caused by doctors are a result of prescription drug consumption. When he writes out a prescription, your doctor has to rely upon the honesty and integrity of the drug company making the product he is prescribing. And since most drug companies do not operate in an honest way, that is a fundamental error of trust which can lead to many problems. You suffer from his trust in the drug company. To that you must add the fact that all patients are individual and different. A drug which has proved effective and safe when given to 99 or 999 patients may still prove dangerous and deadly when given to the 100th or the 1000th patient. Every patient who takes a drug – even a well tried drug – is participating in an experiment. Most doctors either do not understand this or they forget it in the heat of daily practice.

The bottom line is that however good your doctor is – and however much you may trust him or her – you must share the responsibility for your own health and you must know when to tell your doctor if you think that the treatment with which he or she is providing you could be causing problems.

Here are my tips designed to help you make sure that you get the best out of your doctor (and every other doctor who treats you) – and minimise your chances of being made ill by a doctor.

1. Take A Positive Interest In Your Own Health

Patients used to hand over their health (and their lives) to their doctors – without ever questioning what was happening to them. That is a dangerous way to live. Patients who take an interest in their own health may sometimes feel that the doctors and nurses who are looking after them regard them as a nuisance. But all the evidence shows clearly that such patients get better quicker, suffer fewer unpleasant side effects and live longer than patients who simply lie back passively and allow the professionals to take over. If your doctor wants you to take a drug (and all pills, tablets, capsules, medicines, potions, creams and so on are drugs) make sure you know what to expect. If your doctor wants you to have surgery then make sure that you know what the surgery entails, what the possible consequences might be and what the alternatives are. Good questions to ask your doctor are: 'Would you have this operation if you were me?' or: 'Would you recommend this operation to someone in your close family?'

2. Don't Be Afraid To Ask For A Second Opinion

Many patients automatically trust their doctor – assuming that he or she must always be right. But that can be a deadly mistake.

It has always been diagnostic skills which have differentiated between the good doctor and the bad doctor. Treating sick people is easy. If you are a doctor and you know what is wrong with your patient you can look up the correct treatment in two minutes. Sadly, however, as I have already shown in this book, many doctors seem to have lost their abilities to diagnose accurately.

All this is terrifying. For if the doctor doesn't make the right diagnosis then it doesn't matter how many wonderful drugs he has at his disposal.

There are many reasons why today's doctors are so bad at making the correct diagnosis.

Education is often lamentable – with lecturers too often teaching medical students about organs and tissues rather than living patients, and then examining them on their ability to remember huge lists of details about bones, blood vessels and pathology details without ever testing them on their ability to use the information they have acquired.

And studies have shown that doctors are at their worst when dealing with patients with whom they feel uncomfortable. Narrow training means that doctors feel uncomfortable with a wide range of people. They often have difficulty relating to, talking to or acquiring information from people of 'different' races, sexes or social backgrounds.

An even bigger problem is the fact that modern doctors rely far too much on technology – and far too little on building up any diagnostic skills of their own.

Old-fashioned doctors used to rely on what their patients told them and on what their own eyes, ears, noses and fingertips told them. Most important of all, perhaps, was the sixth sense that doctors used to acquire through years of clinical experience.

Modern doctors rely too much upon equipment which is often faulty, frequently badly calibrated and more often than not downright misleading.

So, the lesson here is a very simple one: do not automatically assume that your doctor's diagnosis must be right. If you are at all unhappy about the diagnosis – and feel that your doctor could be wrong – insist on a second opinion.

Telling your doctor that you want a second opinion will probably take a great deal of courage. Many doctors are sensitive creatures – they may show their hurt if their all-knowingness is questioned. But just remember that the stakes are high. Your life is at stake. And, if there is time, don't be afraid to check out the past record of the doctor who is going to treat you. One surgeon working in a hospital may have a survival rate which is twice as good as another surgeon working in the same hospital. If you allow the less competent surgeon to operate on you then your chances of walking out of the hospital may be halved. Those are odds you cannot and should not ignore.

3. Remember Coleman's First Law Of Therapy

Coleman's First Law of Medicine is simple: 'If you develop new symptoms while receiving medical treatment then the chances are that the new symptoms are caused by the treatment you are receiving.'

Doctors do not like accepting that the treatments they recommend can do harm. It reminds them that they are mortal and fallible. But don't just ignore it if you develop a rash, indigestion, tinnitus, a headache or some other possible side effect while taking a medicine: report it to your doctor straight away. Don't stop medication without asking his advice first. Some side effects are mild and if the drug is working and helping to control or defeat a serious or life threatening condition then the side effects may be of little consequence. But other side effects may kill. Many of the thousands who die each year could still be alive if they had taken action earlier when side effects started. Remember, too, that doctors are notoriously reluctant to admit that their therapy could be making you ill. This is partly through ignorance (doctors don't often bother to read drug company information sheets); partly through a fear of litigation (the doctor may be frightened that if he admits that his treatment has made you ill he will receive a letter from your lawyer) and partly through a natural human unwillingness to admit responsibility for something that has gone wrong (this brand of unwillingness is unusually well developed among doctors who are encouraged to think of themselves as godlike by many of their other more passive patients).

4. Always Study All The Options

In my chapter on holistic medicine I explained that there are very few truly holistic practitioners around. But there is nothing at all to stop you being a holistic patient. For example, if your doctor tells you that you need surgery ask him how long you have got before you need to make a decision – and then use that time to make sure that you assess all the possible options. When you are trying to choose between orthodox medicine, acupuncture, homoeopathy, osteopathy or whatever, make a list of all the advantages and disadvantages of every available type of therapy – and every available practitioner. Look at the claims and the potential side effects of each therapy and ask each practitioner to tell you where you can find out more. Never forget that you are unique – and that your condition requires a unique solution.

5. Constantly Acquire Information

Information is the key to success in any field. If you want to be a successful investor then you need access to good information. You must know where to obtain information and you must know how to understand it. Exactly the same is true of health. In order to stay healthy – and regain good health if you fall ill – you must have access to good information. Only when you have the best information will you know what questions to ask and how to understand the answers. Doctors (and indeed many others in the health business) are notoriously bad at communicating – even though doctor-patient communication is of vital importance. Since doctors don't seem keen to bridge the understanding gap between patients and themselves it is up to you to make the effort. If you have a long-term health problem then learn as much as you can about the disorder and all the possible types of treatment available. I have met patients with chronic health disorders (such as diabetes, arthritis, high blood pressure and so on) who know more about their condition than their doctors. Which patients do you think do best – those who know a great deal about their condition or those who know next to nothing?

6. Doctors often prescribe two drugs which interact dangerously.

If you’re taking one drug and a doctor prescribes another – ask if the combination is really safe.

7. They may think you’re someone else and treat you for the wrong disease.
If you don’t want them to chop off the wrong leg or treat you for a prostate problem when you’ve really got a breast disorder make sure your doctor knows your name – and has the correct medical records when he decides on treatment.

8. Doctors prescribe unnecessarily.
Make it clear that you are happy to leave the surgery or clinic without a drug if you don’t really need one. Most of the drugs prescribed today are unnecessary.

9. Doctors (particularly those working in hospitals) frequently order unnecessary tests.
And tests can often cause problems of their own. They can sometimes kill! Ask if a test will affect the treatment you receive. If it won’t then what’s the point of having the test? And read the chapter in this book on when tests and investigations may be ignored.

Chapter Seven

Why Women Live Longer Than Men

Women in developed countries can, on average, currently expect to live up to ten years longer than men.

That's a fact.

The oldest person in recorded history was a woman, Mme Jeanne Calment, who died at the age of 122 in 1997.

That's a fact.

Nine times as many women as men live to celebrate their 100th birthday.

That's a fact.

Men aged 55 to 64 are twice as likely as women of the same age to die from accidents or heart disease and four times as likely to commit suicide.

That's a fact.

It is widely believed that women live longer than men because of some genetic superiority. Indeed, most people believe that women have always lived longer than men.

Those are myths.

Up until the early part of the 20th century, life expectancy for men was pretty much the same as life expectancy for women.

The fact is that the difference only developed during the 20th century.

And I believe that the difference can be easily explained. The fact that women now live longer than men has nothing whatsoever to do with genetics or hormones. It is all down to lifestyle.

Here are the reasons why men now tend to die sooner than women.

1. For most of the 20th century the average man pushed himself much harder than the average woman did. There were exceptions among both sexes, of course, but on the whole, men felt that they had to drive themselves hard in order to 'succeed'. (The definition of 'success' has varied from community to community.) The resultant high stress levels have helped produce a high incidence of heart disease and have damaged the immune systems of millions of men – thereby making vast numbers of men exceptionally vulnerable to many varieties of cancer.

2. Smoking has, for decades, been very much a 'male' habit. For most of the 20th century the number of male smokers far exceeded the number of female smokers. It was the popularity of smoking among men which partly explained the higher incidence of heart disease and some common cancers among men.

3. Throughout the 20th century men were more likely than women to eat too much and more likely to eat the wrong (often high fat content) foods. Women tended to be more conscious of the advantages of healthy eating than have men. In addition, women have traditionally been much more conscious of their size than have men, and slimming clubs have always been more popular with women than with men.

4. For the first three quarters of the 20th century, most of the financial worries within a marriage were shouldered by the man. Many women never saw their husband's pay packet or bank details. A remarkable number of women never even knew how much their husbands earned. Worrying about money is one of the commonest stresses – and is particularly likely to result in ill health.

5. Generally speaking, men have been woefully unwilling to be on the lookout for – and aware – of abnormalities affecting their bodies. For decades women have routinely examined their own bodies – looking for abnormalities or early signs of developing disease. Men, on the other hand, have traditionally been unwilling to do this. Vast amounts of money have been spent teaching women how to examine their own breasts (in order to spot breast cancer). Virtually nothing has been spent teaching men how to examine their testicles (in order to spot cancer of the testes).

Women have been much more enthusiastic about learning the rudiments of self help. Far more women than men are knowledgeable about alternative medicine. In addition, women have learnt to be more willing to seek help from a health care professional when they have found symptoms or signs which might indicate an underlying health problem. Why are women so much more comfortable with seeking medical advice than men? I suspect the explanation is simple. Women who get pregnant are accustomed to seeking medical help during their pregnant years. And it is usually the mother (rather than the father) who takes sick children along to the doctor's surgery.

6. Doctors are a major cause of sickness in our modern society but there are times when their help can be

lifesaving for the sooner an individual seeks medical advice the greater likelihood that the doctor can deal with the problem satisfactorily. To all this must be added the fact that doctors have, for years, concentrated medical resources on health problems exclusively affecting women (such as cervical cancer and breast cancer) and virtually ignored health problems (such as prostate cancer) exclusively affecting men.

7. Alcohol was, for most the 20th century, a ‘man thing’. Alcoholism – and alcohol induced damage – used to be much commoner among men than women. The female body is more susceptible to alcohol but excessive drinking has traditionally been something much more likely to affect men than women.

8. Workaholism was almost exclusively a male problem for the greater part of the 20th century. Driven by ambition, competitiveness and a need to succeed, millions of men pushed themselves to the limit and beyond. Many men have died – or become chronic invalids – because of their workaholism.

9. Throughout the 20th century men have, generally speaking, been unwilling to talk to anyone about their problems. A man may joke with his best friend, or talk to him about his boss, his favourite football team or his car, but he is unlikely to open his heart, or to be prepared to share his innermost feelings. The average woman, on the other hand, does not have so much difficulty in opening up her heart and sharing her fears, hopes and aspirations with her best friend. Sharing personal fears is a good way of reducing the damage fears can do. The average man bottles up his fears and his worries – allowing those fears and worries to do a great deal of damage. By sharing her fears, the average woman dramatically reduces the damage that is done.

10. When men take exercise it tends to be physically combative and potentially damaging. Football, for example, is likely to result in all sorts of physical injuries. The exercise men take also tends to be competitive in nature. So, for example, when men play golf or squash they are often determined to win. The result of all this is that when men take exercise it is likely to prove physically and mentally damaging. Feminine types of activity, on the other hand, tend to be gentler and less competitive. Women attend keep fit classes or aerobic classes or go dancing. They benefit from their exercise programmes.

Chapter Eight

Why Women Won't Live More Than Men In The Future

The difference in life expectation between men and women will not continue far into the 21st century. This is not because men are going to live longer but because women are going to die sooner.

(In fact, since I wrote the first edition of this book a decade and a half ago there has been an equalling of life expectancies among men and women.)

I base this prediction on simple observations.

1. The number of women who smoke cigarettes is rising dramatically. Visit any large town, find yourself a convenient seat, and watch the young people go by. You will soon notice that smoking is now much commoner among young girls than it is among young boys. The statistical evidence supports this simple observation.

2. The incidence of alcoholism among women is rising too. A few decades ago, it was rare to find a woman who had wrecked her life and her health with alcohol. Today it is commonplace.

3. Increasing numbers of women have been suckered by the women's liberation movement into believing that they owe it to themselves and their 'sisters' to take a more masculine attitude to life. Modern women have demanded, and have taken, the same sort of damaging stresses as were endured by men throughout the 20th century. Many women seem more aggressive and more 'masculine' than men. The incidence of stress related disorders among women is going to rocket in the next generation or two.

4. Women are taking their exercise more seriously too – they have become more competitive and they push themselves harder when they are allegedly relaxing.

5. As women take an increasingly masculine approach to life so they abandon their traditional, health giving relationships with their female friends. Many women now feel that it is somehow 'beneath them' to need to share their fears, their feelings and their weak moments with other women. Women are making themselves tougher and more self-sufficient. The effect on their health will be bad.

Chapter Nine

Could Men Live As Long As Women?

In the next few decades we will see a dramatic fall in the difference between male and female life expectancies.

This will come about not because men are living longer but because women are dying earlier.

However, men could live longer if they chose to.

Here are my tips for any man wanting to live longer:

1. Don't smoke. Few things are more deadly than tobacco smoke.

2. Learn to be aware of your body. If you notice a change, do not delay but visit your doctor straight away. And then make sure you obtain all the information you can about any health problem before assessing proposed tests and treatment programmes.

3. Learn as much as you can about health care. Learn a little about nutrition. Know how to treat yourself. If you have a specific health problem read books about it – so that you know as much as possible about the problem affecting your health. Be prepared to seek medical help if you need it – however inconvenient or embarrassing it might be.

4. Take regular, gentle, non-competitive exercise. Don't push yourself too hard.

5. Learn to share your fears, your hopes, your disappointments, your ambitions and your feelings in general. Find a friend to whom you can talk about your most innermost thoughts. For most men the best and most sympathetic listener will be a woman rather than another man. Learn to talk to your wife or your partner, and don't be afraid to open your heart and share your feelings.

6. Drink alcohol in moderation. One or two glasses of wine a day might well help you stay healthy. More will kill you.

7. Get a life. Find interests outside your work. Don't allow yourself to be suckered into putting all your energy into earning money. Relatively few workaholics get rich. But many workaholics die young.

8. Learn to eat in a healthy way. Eat more fruit and vegetables. Cut out meat. Avoid fatty foods.

9. Learn to relax. Learn to rest. Take time out. Give your body a chance to recover from the daily grind.

Chapter Ten

You Can Change Your Destiny!

Your genes are not the greatest influence on your life expectation but, nevertheless, good health does run in families and if you can trace a long line of octogenarians in your family tree then you have also got a better than average chance of living to be 80. Poor health runs in families, too, and if your parents and grandparents all died in their 50s and early 60s then I am afraid that doesn't augur well for your chances of celebrating your 100th birthday – unless you are prepared to change your lifestyle to keep yourself healthy.

If you have a family history of any one of those diseases known to be transmitted genetically then you can help yourself by keeping an eye open for early signs or symptoms which might suggest that you too could become a victim. With almost all inherited diseases, making an early diagnosis is a vital step in preventing serious problems developing. If you know what to look for and you watch and listen with care, you can do a great deal to reduce your risks and improve your life expectancy. And you may even be able to prevent the earliest of warning signs from developing simply by adapting your lifestyle.

The list which follows deals with some of the commonest, inherited disorders. Just look up anything which you know runs in your family to get a general idea of what to look for and what to do. Remember that protecting yourself really is very much a case of being aware – and being prepared to change your lifestyle. If other members of your family suffer from alcoholism then knowing that this problem may be inherited should give you an extra incentive to take care – and to make sure that your own drinking does not get out of hand.

Alcoholism
Risk rate: not known
Early symptoms: heavy drinking, comfort drinking
Action guide: drink warily

Allergy problems
Risk rate: up to 50% when one parent is affected, higher if both parents are affected
Early symptoms: vary; may include skin symptoms, wheezing, hay fever
Action guide: seek medical advice for any suggestive early symptom – be on the lookout for possible allergens and then avoid them

Arthritis
Risk rate: not known
Early symptoms: aching, swollen joints
Action guide: lose excess weight, go on a vegetarian diet, rest when joints are swollen, hot or painful

Asthma
Risk rate: about 10% if one or both parents are affected (that is ten times the normal risk)
Early symptoms: wheezing, breathlessness
Action guide: don't smoke, keep out of smoky atmospheres, learn how to relax

Blindness
Risk rate: depends on type of blindness
Early symptoms: partial or complete, temporary or permanent loss of vision
Action guide: seek immediate advice from an ophthalmologist

Cancer
Risk rate: varies enormously, but when several members of one family suffer from the same type of cancer, professional advice should be sought
Early symptoms: vary with type of cancer

Action guide: be generally watchful for early warning signs of cancer. Many cancers are curable – especially if caught early. Here are some of the cancer signs you should watch out for:

* Cancer of the large bowel: change in bowel habits (diarrhoea or constipation), unexplained weight loss, pain, passing blood

* Cancer of the cervix: unexplained bleeding or discharge, pain or bleeding after sex, weight loss

* Cancer of the breast: swelling or lump in breast, bloody discharge from nipple, enlarged glands in armpit, dimpling of the skin of the breast

* Cancer of the lung: persistent bad cough; blood in sputum, chest pain, wheezing, weight loss

* Cancer of the stomach: weight loss, persistent indigestion, vomiting blood, lump in abdomen, feeling full after very small meals

* Cancer of the liver: pain in abdomen, loss of appetite, weight loss, yellow eyes and skin, abdomen swollen

* Cancer of the ovary: irregular periods, hard lump in abdomen, pain during sex, bowel problems, excessive hair growth, voice gets deeper, feeling full after small meals

* Cancer of the brain: headaches, vomiting, visual disturbances, weakness or paralysis, dizziness, fits, memory loss, personality changes

* Cancer of the skin: skin lesion that doesn't heal, bleeds, gets larger, changes shape, size or colour

* Cancer of the prostate: pain, urine retention, difficulty in passing urine

* Cancer of the testicle: swelling in testicle

* Cancer of the blood (leukaemia): tiredness, paleness, bruising, bleeding easily, lots of infections

* Cancer of the womb: bleeding after sex, lump felt in abdomen

* Cancer of the throat: hoarseness, lump in throat, difficulty in swallowing, swollen glands in neck

Remember:
A patient with cancer may suffer from one, all or none of these symptoms. These symptom lists are not comprehensive. Patients may suffer from one or more of these symptoms without suffering from cancer. If you are at all worried see your doctor as soon as possible for advice.

Coronary heart disease
Risk rate: varies enormously but coronary heart disease is definitely an inherited disease
Early symptoms: chest pains and breathlessness
Action guide: don't smoke, don't allow yourself to become overweight, avoid excess stress, eat a low fat diet, take regular, gentle exercise

Diabetes
Risk rate: up to 10% risk if one parent or sibling affected, higher if both parents affected.
Early symptoms: excessive thirst, frequent passing of urine, weight loss, boils
Action guide: don't get overweight, limit intake of sugar

Glaucoma
Risk rate: approximately 10% risk for brothers, sisters and children of sufferers.
Early symptoms: visual problems and pain or around the eye.
Action guide: annual testing helps spot the disease early in those with a family history of glaucoma

High blood pressure
Risk rate: not known
Early symptoms: there often aren't any
Action guide: don't get overweight, avoid eating meat and fatty food, avoid unnecessary stress, learn to relax, do not smoke, have blood pressure taken annually (or learn to take it yourself)

Migraine
Risk rate: general risk rate is 5-10%, but this rises to 45% if one parent is affected and 70% if both parents are affected.
Early symptoms: severe headaches, accompanied by nausea, vomiting and visual disturbances
Action guide: controlling stress can help minimise symptoms; migraine attacks are sometimes related to specific

foodstuffs.

Peptic ulceration (stomach ulcer, duodenal ulcer)
Risk rate: when there is a family history, about 10% for men and 5% for women.
Early symptoms: indigestion type pains, gastritis, nausea, etc.
Action guide: eat regular meals, avoid excess alcohol, don’t smoke, avoid excess stress, visit physician if early signs develop

Chapter Eleven

Easy Steps You Can Take To Reduce Your Cancer Risk By 80%

Cancer is one of the biggest killers of our time. One in three people will some day hear a doctor say the dreaded words: 'I'm afraid you've got cancer'. (Within a few years, the figure will be one in two.)

But despite all the research which has been done, there are more myths and unjustified fears about this disease than any other disease in the world.

One myth is that this disease always kills. It doesn't. Between a third and half of the people who get this disease recover – usually living long, perfectly healthy, perfectly normal lives.

But another, even more important, myth is that no one knows what causes this disease and as a result it is quite unavoidable.

That's a really dangerous myth because we now know a tremendous amount about what causes this disease. In fact, you may be surprised to learn that we know what causes a staggering 80 per cent of cancers!

It stands to reason, therefore, that if you want to cut your cancer risk by 80 per cent all you have to do is to try to avoid those things which are responsible.

'But surely,' someone said when I first mentioned this, 'if doctors know so much about the things which causes cancer we would have already heard about them – and been warned to avoid them by the Government and the medical profession.'

Sadly, things aren't quite so straightforward these days.

I believe that the truth about the causes of cancer has been deliberately suppressed – by businessmen and politicians.

* * *

Here are my tips for healthy living. Follow these tips and you could cut your cancer risk by 80%.

1. Eat foods which will boost your immune system. In general, eat plenty of fruit, vegetables and seeds. Your chances of developing cancer – for example cancers of the lung, breast, colon, bladder, oral cavity, stomach and cervix – will go down if you eat plenty of vegetables. Fruit and vegetables contain plenty of fibre which can help to protect you against cancer – plus special anti-cancer ingredients. The best anti-cancer foods to eat include: apples, asparagus, baked beans, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, carrots, cauliflower, chickpeas, corn, garlic, grapefruit, kidney beans, lentils, onions, oranges, pineapple, brown rice, soya beans, spinach and strawberries. There is a full list of recommended foods in my book *Superbody*.

2. Keep your fat consumption down. Avoid foods which are rich in fat. Avoid dairy products. There is evidence linking fatty food to cancer – including cancers of the breast, uterus, ovary, pancreas, stomach and colon. Avoid butter, milk, cream and other fatty foods. Keep down your intake of vegetable fats too. Fat intake and breast cancer are closely linked. If you choose a high fat diet you are making a conscious decision to increase your risk of developing cancer.

3. Do not eat meat. Researchers have linked eating meat to cancer – including cancers of the breast, uterus, colon, rectum, pancreas and kidney. Red meat seems the most dangerous type of meat – beef, for example, has been specifically linked to colon cancer. Women who eat meat are significantly more likely to develop breast cancer than women who rarely or never consume meat. Several studies have shown a relationship between the incidence of prostate cancer and the consumption of meat. Smoked, barbecued, salt cured and salt pickled foods pose extra risks. If you don't want to get cancer – don't eat meat.

4. Prepare food carefully to preserve the vitamin and mineral content and to avoid the risk of infection.

5. Buy organic food whenever you can.

6. Do not drink unfiltered tap water.

7. Take a supplement rich in antioxidants.

8. Learn how to relax your body and your mind. And be prepared to spend a little time putting your learning into practice. Do your best to avoid unnecessary stresses.

9. Watch out for the early warning signs of cancer (such as unusual lumps, fresh bleeding, weight change, etc.). And seek help straight away if you think you spot a warning sign.

10. Don't take drugs you don't really need. And be cautious about the promises made for vaccines. Try to keep away from hospitals, doctors' clinics and other places where sick people congregate (and where you are, consequently, likely to pick up new infections). Remember Coleman's First Law of Medicine: 'If you develop new symptoms while being treated for any medical condition the chances are that the new symptoms are caused by the treatment you are receiving.'

11. Try to avoid buildings which have closed circuit air conditioning or heating systems.

12. Avoid air travel whenever possible. Airlines tend to recirculate dirty air – thereby exposing passengers to many new (and potentially deadly) bugs.

13. If you have a mobile telephone use it sparingly – for emergencies rather than for idle chit chat.

14. If you use a microwave oven, use it sparingly.

15. Don't have unnecessary X-rays. Routine X-rays are a possible threat to your health and a major cause of cancer. Most X-rays are unnecessary. Check with your doctor that your X-ray is essential.

16. Control your weight. If you weigh just 22 pounds more than you did when you were 18-years-old then you are probably at risk. Losing weight isn't just a matter of vanity. Women who are more than 40% overweight are 55% more likely to die of cancer – including cancers of the breast, uterus, ovary and gallbladder. Men who are more than 40% overweight are 33% more likely to die of cancer – with cancers of the colon, rectum and prostate the particular cancers they risk developing.

17. Don't smoke and keep away from people who smoke. It isn't enough not to smoke yourself. You are also at risk if you spend too much time inhaling other people's tobacco smoke. For example, the World Health Organisation has warned that: 'in marriages where one partner smokes and the other does not, the risk of lung cancer to the non-smoker is 20-50% higher.'

18. Beware of sunshine. A little sunshine is good for you. But too much sunshine can cause skin cancer. Sunbathing is pointlessly reckless. Most cases of skin cancer are optional.

19. Beware of electrical appliances. Don't sit closer than three feet to your TV set. Unplug your electric blanket before getting into bed. Don't sit within two and half or three feet of a VDU. Don't sit or stand too close to electrical appliances – electricity is almost certainly more dangerous than you think. Try not to live to close to a major electricity supply line.

20. Minimise your consumption of food additives. If you eat a lot of packaged foods you almost certainly eat too many food additives. The average individual eats around 5.5 lbs (2.5kg) of food additives every year. Food additives are potential hazards. You can minimise your consumption of food additives by eating a high proportion of fresh food.

21. Drink less alcohol. Alcohol can cause cancers of the mouth, larynx, oesophagus, stomach and pancreas. To minimise your cancer risk you should limit yourself to one or possibly two modest drinks a day.

Naturally, I cannot and do not guarantee that you won't get cancer if you follow my advice. But I do passionately believe your chances of developing cancer will be significantly lower than it will be if you take no action to protect yourself.

Chapter Twelve

Increase Your Mental Abilities With Age

Are you worried about losing your mental faculties as you age? Do you believe that your memory and abilities to concentrate and think creatively must inevitably decline as you get older?

Forget those fears. They are based on myths.

If you know how to do it, you can improve your brain power through your 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s and beyond.

Like many people, I have for several decades believed the often repeated assertion that every day we live we lose several million neurones – and that, consequently, our brains become steadily less agile and less capable as the years go by.

Only because we are constantly acquiring experience, I learned, do we retain any semblance of mental agility. We disguise the ravages of age on our brains through the ability to deceive and to trick those who are younger and more mentally agile than we are.

The steady but relentless loss of neurones, I understood, explains why creativity falters as we age and why, for example, mathematicians are often said never to have any original ideas after the age of about 26.

I now believe that I was wrong to believe that claim: it was no more than a well-established medical myth; given credibility and sustained simply through constant repetition rather than solid research.

Ask a doctor where this claim originated and you are likely to be referred to another doctor or, perhaps, a book. Check with that doctor or book and you will be referred to another expert and another book. And so it goes on – with the myth going round and round in a never ending circle.

I haven't been able to find any solid research to support the contention.

And when you stop to think about it the myth is, indeed, quite nonsensical. There are around one thousand billion brain cells in the average human brain. If we lost a million brain cells a day from the age of 20, the overall loss of brain cells would still be fairly insignificant a century later.

Research done at the University of California has confirmed that, in normal, healthy and active brains there is no loss of brain cells.

Other researchers, at the National Institute of Ageing, have shown that an old human brain shows just as much metabolic activity – and is, therefore, just as active and as efficient – as a young human brain.

A 70-year-old brain uses just as much oxygen and has just as good a blood flow as a 20-year-old brain. If brains lost neurones then they would need less oxygen and a reduced blood flow as they got older. The myth of neuronal decay with age was just that – a myth.

And yet it is partly this myth which has been – and is – responsible for many of the prejudices against the elderly.

Many men and women who are regarded as 'old' (but who may be only in their early 50s) are discovering that these prejudices result in forced early retirement, or in their being regarded by younger colleagues as irrelevant dinosaurs, incapable of originality and steeped in obstinacy.

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The joyful truth is not only that your brain is not decaying as you live but that you can, if you wish, constantly improve the power of your brain (and this means your intelligence) as you get older – not by increasing the number of cells but by increasing the number of connections between the cells. You can, I repeat, improve your intelligence as you age.

You can improve your ability to think and to create, and improve the capacity of your mind, as you age; you can improve your ability to concentrate, your ability to solve problems, to plan and to sift and use new information.

Each individual brain cell is constantly trying to make connections with as many other cells as it possibly can.

All the brain cells are independent but they are also interdependent – they want to form as many connections as they can with other cells because it is through the connections they form that they are able to 'communicate'.

If the cells in a baby's brain are not stimulated, they will not connect with one another. They will simply sit there and do nothing. It is only when cells are encouraged to connect with other cells that the brain really starts to develop.

The difference between a boring, routine, dull, obedient, predictable individual and a lively, inventive, creative, thoughtful individual lies not in the number of brain cells but in the number of connections there are between the brain cells.

Clearly, therefore, intelligence is not so much related to the number of brain cells, or the size of the brain cells, as to the number connections there are between all the existing brain cells.

And the good news is that by exercising your brain the right way you can increase the number of connections.

If you use the right triggers you can encourage your brain to become more powerful and constantly to increase its potential for calculation, memory and creativity.

Your brain can grow as you age – not only becoming more complex but also becoming more agile and more creative. There is no practical reason why your brain should not improve in efficiency right until the moment that your body expires.

Our brains have a far greater capacity than most of us ever get close to realising. Each individual brain cell has far greater potential than we ever realise.

If you know how to exercise your brain properly – and you exercise it well – it may be possible to reverse any apparent decline in intelligence which may accompany the onset of Alzheimer's disease or follow a stroke.

Using your mind may help develop surplus brain tissue which will help to compensate for the tissue which has been damaged by Alzheimer's disease and will help to create new routes around the sort of damage done by a stroke.

Keep your mind (and your body) active you will enhance your chances of staying healthy and living to celebrate your 100th birthday.

To the extent that it can be improved and kept powerful by regular exercise the brain is not dissimilar to a muscle.

* * *

A quick look through the history books will confirm that many of the world's most notable geniuses produced their greatest achievements when they were at or beyond what would now be regarded as 'retirement' age.

Michelangelo began work on St Peters at the age of 63, Leonardo da Vinci was 52 when he started painting the Mona Lisa, Brahms didn't write a symphony until he was 43, Verdi wrote two of his greatest operas after the age of 70. German literary giant Johann Goethe finished writing Faust at the age of 81. Painters Henri Matisse and Claude Monet did some of their greatest work in their early 80s. Writer H.G.Wells was awarded a DSc for a doctoral thesis at the age of 78. American actor George Burns won an Oscar at the age of 80. William Gladstone became British Prime Minister for the fourth time at the age of 82 – and at the same age Winston Churchill published the first part of his four volume work A History of the English Speaking Peoples. Antonio Stradivari was still making violins at the age of 93. Bertrand Russell was in his mid 90s when he set up an International War Crimes Tribunal in Stockholm.

You will also find, if you look at the ages at which great men and women died, that professional writers, artists, musicians and others who fully exercise their mental faculties live – barring accidents – considerably longer than people who work for large organisations and retire early to play golf or tend to their roses.

How often have you heard someone say: 'What a shame! He worked hard all his life, retired and then died before he could enjoy his retirement!'?

* * *

If you are over 30 then you have probably got into the habit of assuming that every memory failure is a consequence of old age. This is, of course, a self-fulfilling nonsense. Your assumption that memory falters with age is based purely on the myth that we are all constantly losing neurones. Having accepted the myth you expect your brain to deteriorate and when you find a sign (such as a temporary incidence of forgetfulness) that suggests a mental weakness you take this as just another piece of evidence supporting the myth.

The fact is, of course, that children and teenagers forget things too. But they don't blame their temporary memory loss or even regular forgetfulness on brain decay.

And even if your medium term memory is deteriorating, your mental ability to use information is increasing. Your memory may be failing as you age but you are becoming wiser.

People under 25 may be better at learning lists of formulae and irregular verbs. But the best thinking in any society is done by the over 25s.

The myth of elderly brain decay is given extra impetus by the fact that a high percentage of individuals over the age of 50 regularly take prescription drugs (such as sleeping tablets) which can cause confusion and forgetfulness. A high percentage of prescription drugs regularly cause mental symptoms but the link between the drug and the mental symptoms is too rarely recognised. Instead of reducing or changing the drug, the medical response is usually to increase the dosage – thereby making things considerably worse.

I hate to think how many patients there are in hospitals, nursing homes, rest homes and back bedrooms who have been diagnosed as suffering from senile dementia but who are, in reality, suffering from nothing more significant than a drug side effect, and who could live happily and fulfilling lives if their doctor stopped their medication. (Drug therapy must, of course, always be stopped by a doctor. Stopping drugs may need special care.)

* * *

The really exciting news is that your brain can be exercised – and its effectiveness improved – just as easily as your body can be exercised and improved. You can expand the power of your brain through exercise.

If you exercise your brain the right way you can preserve and even improve your brain – and your mental powers – even though you are ageing.

The more you use your brain the more you will improve the number of available connections and the greater the number of connections there are between individual brain cells the greater the power of your brain will be. Naturally, the greater your brainpower the greater will be your chance of success in your chosen areas of life.

(It is not by chance that many national Olympic squads now spend as much as a third of their training time working on positive thinking, visualisation and mind games. A healthy, creative and positive mind is just as important for success in any field as a healthy body.)

However hard you may find it to exercise your mind – and use your brain properly – you can take comfort from the knowledge that the more you learn and the more you use your mind the easier learning and thinking creatively will become.

If you think of your brain as a computer then by constantly working it you will expand its memory and capacity. Exercise your mind regularly and you will increase the number of synaptic connections – thus increasing the capability of your brain. A bigger computer will have greater capabilities and will work faster.

Naturally, you have to learn to use the left side of your brain (which handles language, numbers, logic, analysis and lists) with the right side of your brain (which controls colour, imagination, dimension, rhythm and instinct).

* * *

Here are my 22 tips on exactly how you can improve your mental skills and agility and the power of your brain as you age.

1. Never stop learning.

If you stop learning then your brain will atrophy. The easiest way to improve your brain is to constantly set it new challenges. The more you learn the easier you will find it to learn. The tragedy is that many people over the age of 50 have forgotten how to learn. They have fallen into a groove (or a rut) and are poorly motivated. Your brain needs regular supplies of oxygen, and nutrition but it also needs regular supplies of information. You can supply it with the first two by eating sensibly and maintaining a healthy blood supply. You can supply the third by making sure that you never stop learning.

2. Look for new challenges.

You can help maintain and improve your mental alertness throughout middle age and old age by taking on new experiences and being prepared to accept change in your life. Try to look upon new circumstances as exciting challenges. If you settle down into a comfortable rut then your brain will start to atrophy. If you are for ever looking for fresh challenges and new stimulation you will find that your life will become much richer and infinitely more fun. A life which is without challenge is a life without meaning. The wider and more varied the challenges you take on the greater you will benefit. The more you challenge your mind the more new brain circuitry you will build.

3. Stay involved in life and with other people.

Mental deterioration is most marked among people who stop communicating with others. The more people you meet – and the more interest you take in their lives and their problems – the better your brain will become. A 20 year study of 4,000 people showed that elderly people who take on responsibilities and maintain active social lives end up being able to do far more than people who lead limited and restricted lives. It is perhaps also worth mentioning here that love (both emotional and physical) plays a vital role in maintaining good mental health. Research has shown that we are all healthier when we are loved, cuddled and touched by those whom we ourselves love.

4. Maintain good physical health.

If you're going to keep your brain in good condition it is obviously important to preserve your general health. Avoid smoking, take regular physical exercise (20 to 30 minutes three times a week will suffice) and eat a healthy diet.

5. Stretch your brain.

Just as you exercise your body so you can exercise your mind by using mind games. Games and puzzles which make you think will also improve your mental powers – and keep you thinking young. It has been shown that mental games – such as chess, backgammon, card games, crossword puzzles and so on – will all help to keep your brain in good shape. The best games require memory, mental discipline, coolness under pressure, insight, an ability to create a strategy, an ability to spot opportunities and assess risks and probabilities.

6. Don't be afraid to be different.
Do not allow yourself to be conned into behaving as you think you are expected to behave. Many people in their 50s and 60s or older feel that they have to act with decorum, dress in a certain way and generally behave in a sensible and respectable fashion. They feel that they will shock people if they begin new careers or start new relationships at that age. Why care what other people think? Don't be pushed into acting your age. Act the age you feel.

7. You need a purpose.
A clear vision of what you want – and how you are going to get it – will concentrate your mind and vastly improve your brainpower. Constant effort without purpose and direction is inevitably meaningless. Motivate and focus yourself and your energies by giving yourself a purpose and you will add meaning to your life. People who achieve their ambitions tend to die quite quickly afterwards.

8. Be determined and persistent.
Albert Einstein once admitted that: 'Curiosity, obsession and dogged endurance, combined with self-criticism, have brought me my ideas.'

9. Think creatively.
Instead of allowing yourself to think only in a linear fashion try thinking laterally and vertically too.

10. Learn to read faster.
When you are looking at documents merely in order to sift and sort through information, you need to be able to speed read. (You can, of course, read as slowly as you like when reading purely for pleasure). You may find that using a pointer (a finger or a pencil) will help you focus directly on the part of the page you are reading. And try to look at two or three words – or even a whole line of type – at once, rather than concentrating on individual letters of words.

11. Listen to music.
I have written elsewhere (particularly in my book *How to Conquer Pain*) about the value of music. There is, however, also evidence to show that listening to certain types of music can be mentally invigorating and can even improve a measurable IQ level. Listening to music by Mozart and Beethoven is particularly recommended.

12. Reject the word 'impossible'.
Be regularly on the look out for new challenges. Make a list of the things you've always wanted to do. And start working your way down your list.

13. Develop your sense of humour.
Few skills will help you deal with life – and stay positive, optimistic and active – more effectively than a well-developed sense of humour.

14. Remain active physically.
You may not be able to run a mile but that doesn't mean that you can't walk a mile. Remain as physically active as you possibly can.

15. Alcohol can be a boon.
Research has shown that elderly male drinkers (who drink sensibly and limit their consumption of alcohol to no more than a couple of modest drinks a day) score better in intelligence tests than non-drinkers. But remember the word 'sensible'. Drinking too much can wreck your brain as rapidly as any other drug.

16. Learn to commit yourself – and to begin!
You'll never finish if you don't start. Prevarication is the commonest cause of failure. If you have always wanted to write a novel then start writing one. It doesn't matter if you have to throw away the first 50 pages – just beginning will open up your mind to the possibility of success.

17. Live with an animal.
I have for decades now argued that keeping pets helps keep people healthy and a great deal of research has been done to support this claim. The Baker Medical Research Institute in Melbourne examined 5,741 people and found that people who owned pets had significantly lower blood pressure and lower levels of cholesterol – and were less stressed mentally. Research in nursing homes has often shown that patients who are allowed to have pets are much healthier than other patients. (And yet there are still some doctors and administrators who object to patients in such homes keeping pets). The value of a pet has been underestimated by those who do not realise that a pet can be just as much a friend and a companion as another human being.

18. Be prepared to take naps.
Leonardo da Vinci took 15 minute naps every four hours or so. There is a good deal of sense in following his example. You are likely to awake refreshed and able to think better and more clearly after a nap.

19. Drink plenty of fresh water.
Water will help clear out toxins. But limit your consumption of caffeine rich drinks such as coffee and tea.

20. Get into the habit of making lists.
Help your mind and stimulate your memory by using lists and making notes. Use coloured pens and always keep a pen and notebook handy so that you can scrawl memos to yourself.

21. Lose any excess weight.
The brains of people who are overweight get less oxygen when they are asleep. Obese people who lose weight may reverse the damage which has been done and become intellectually brighter.

22. As your brain gets older so your ability to remember things that you have looked at briefly will get worse.
When you were young, you could probably look at a list of words and remember quite a lot of them. You may not be able to do that as easily when you're older. You may need to concentrate more. To remember where you parked the car you will need to make a conscious effort. Look at your car and its surroundings to imprint the view on your memory. Pretend that you are taking a photograph of it – blink your eyelids as though your eyes were cameras – and you'll remember it better.

Normally we remember around 20% of what we read. But if you really concentrate you can remember up to 70%. After reading something that you want to remember, spend 60 seconds thinking about it. Make a mental comment to yourself about what you have read. Rephrase it in your mind. You will find that if you do this your memory will improve considerably.

As we get older, we all do things without really thinking about them. We put ourselves onto 'automatic pilot' and fall into a routine. Concentrate really hard and spot the things you do without thinking. And then ask yourself whether or not you could do things better if you thought about them more.

Try to understand things that you have to remember. You will find things easier to remember if you understand them. And try to remember key facts and key words which will help bring into your mind whole sequences of thoughts and facts.

If you want to remember important things try clearing your brain of trivial information. Use notebooks and diaries to record trivial material. Albert Einstein once said: 'Why should I waste brain space remembering my own telephone number? I can look it up if I want to know what it is.'

When you are talking about something you know that you will want to remember, try to concentrate hard on everything around you. Concentrate on the people you are with and the place you are in. Try to be aware of smells, sights and sounds. The more information you record the easier you will find it to remember the event. If you want to remember something that you have seen or read try closing your eyes immediately afterwards. This keeps the 'image' on your retina for a little longer – and will make the image easier to recall in the future.

When you are trying to remember something do your best to recreate the conditions under which you learnt it. Football teams do best when playing at home (even if there isn't a crowd of home supporters) because they find it easier to remember what they've learned while training. Students do better in examinations if they take their tests in the room where they did their learning. So, if you are trying to remember the name of someone you met at a party then try to remember where you were, what you were doing, what you were wearing, what other people were wearing and what you said to the people you met. Things that you learn are bound together in your mind in time and place. If you can recreate the conditions in which you learned something then your ability to recall the facts will increase dramatically. If you are struggling to remember something, work your way through the alphabet. The first letter of a name or place can often 'trigger' a lost memory.

To make it easier to remember names try to make up pictures in your mind. For example, to remember the name 'Coleman' think of a man carrying a bag of coal. If you are trying to remember a name like 'Vernon', which doesn’t lend itself to a picture, then visualise an imaginary blackboard in your mind and then write the name onto your blackboard. When you want to recall the name simply recreate your blackboard.

Chapter Thirteen

Use Antioxidants to Overcome the Evil of Free Radicals

Free radicals contribute to heart disease, stroke and dementia. Arthritis, various types of cancer and brain problems such as Parkinson's disease are also all known to be caused by free radicals. Even cataracts are believed to be caused by damage caused by free radicals.

And yet despite the fact that there is excellent research showing that antioxidants such as vitamin E and selenium can help prevent these free radical induced problems, most doctors still fail to tell their patients that antioxidants can help to combat the numerous problems caused by free radicals.

One important study showed that patients who took vitamin E a day were less likely to die, need to be institutionalised, develop Alzheimer's disease or lose the ability to look after their own daily needs. Another study showed that the progress of coronary artery disease was slower in men who took vitamin E every day than in men who didn't take such a supplement. A third survey showed that men who consumed decent amounts of dietary vitamin E had half the risk of coronary artery disease of men who consumed lower amounts of the vitamin. And the Nurses' Health Study found that women who took vitamin E for two years had half the coronary artery disease of risk of women not taking the vitamin.

Taking selenium daily seems to help too. A study in the Netherlands showed that low selenium levels are associated with an increased heart attack risk. A study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* showed that when patients who had suffered from skin cancer were given daily selenium they were less likely to die from cancer than patients not given selenium. When those conducting this study also found that the individuals who received selenium had two thirds the risk of developing any additional form of cancer and half the risk of dying from cancer they stopped the study in its sixth year so that the people in the comparison group could be given the chance to take selenium. It is remarkable that cancer patients who take selenium are 50% less likely to die of their cancer than those who don't. Don't be tempted to take too much selenium. It can build up to toxic levels.

Vitamin C is a crucial part of any healthy diet. I don't believe that taking vitamin C will automatically stop you getting colds. But if you don't eat a daily diet which is rich in fruits and vegetables then 500 to 1,500 mg a day is a useful supplement. Vitamin A is useful as an antioxidant but probably not as useful as a cancer fighter as C and E. Don't take too much and take it as beta carotene. Too much vitamin A can be dangerous (and can do far more harm than good) but your body won't convert beta carotene into vitamin A unless it needs it. Smokers shouldn't take vitamin A since vitamin A – even when taken in the safer beta carotene form – is toxic when combined with cigarette smoke.

While on the subject of vitamins, it is worth mentioning that vegans, who may get their B12 only from fortified foods, may need to take a supplement of B12.

For years, I opposed the use of vitamin and mineral supplements. I've changed my mind. I think they are now vital. I recommend taking a supplement which contains vitamin C, vitamin E, selenium and zinc. Do use supplements wisely. Don't indiscriminately take vitamin or mineral supplements. You can do yourself more harm than good by taking the wrong vitamins or, even, the right vitamins in the wrong dosage.

Chapter Fourteen

Could Your Illness Be Caused by an Allergy

Allergies are a rapidly growing problem. More people than ever now suffer from disorders traditionally recognised as being allergy induced – disorders such as asthma, eczema and hay fever. The number of people seeking medical advice for asthma and hay fever has increased dramatically in recent years. Today one in seven school children carries an inhaler for asthma. (Whether all those children are genuine asthma sufferers is another matter. Doctors are now encouraged to diagnose the disorder and tend to label children as 'asthmatic' after a single bout of wheezing.)

There is now a growing amount of evidence to show that a far greater variety of symptoms – and diseases – may be caused by an allergy response. And many experts now recognise that this is due to the fact that we are surrounded by a bigger variety of chemicals and other environmental contaminants than were our ancestors. Some of these chemicals are in the air we breathe and the water we drink and a great many are in the food we eat.

Symptoms and disorders now recognised as possibly being allergy disorders include: arthritis, irritable bowel syndrome, migraine, mood swings, muscle pains and a wide variety of other mental and physical disorders. It is, I believe, perfectly possible that the dramatic increase in the incidence of unexplained anxiety and depression in recent years may, in part, be a result of our increased exposure to chemical allergens.

Despite the fact that it is now widely recognised that allergy problems are on the rise, that allergy symptoms are often caused by chemical contaminants and that the number of chemical contaminants in our environment is constantly growing there is much ignorance and scepticism among doctors and other health care professionals, and many practitioners are still quicker to reach for their prescription pads than they are to look for a possible allergy link when they find themselves faced with a patient suffering from a chronic and apparently intractable health problem.

The result can be disastrous, not only because many patients suffer from long-term health problems which may last for years, or even decades, and ruin their lives, but also because the drugs which are prescribed as remedies may themselves turn out to create additional allergy problems.

There obviously isn't room here to detail every possible allergen and every disorder which can be caused by an allergic response.

But in a way that really doesn't matter because allergy problems are often unique to individual patients, and a textbook that was as thick as twelve telephone directories could not include all the possible combinations of allergens and symptoms. A fully comprehensive list of known allergens would have to include just about every substance known to man.

What I do intend to do – and what I think you will find far more useful – is to give you the information you need to decide for yourself whether or not a specific symptom (or set of symptoms) could possibly be caused by an allergy response.

This does, of course, fit well with our avowed strategic intention to give you the information you need to take as much control as possible over your health.

However, before we go any further I must include a couple of warnings.

First (and most important) it is extremely important that you do not assume that undiagnosed symptoms are caused by an allergic problem. Symptoms which can be allergy related (such as wheezing or headaches) may also be caused by other underlying disorders – some of which may be serious and potentially life threatening.

Second, it is also important to remember that some of the symptoms which are often thought of as being linked to an allergy of some kind may be a perfectly normal (and healthy) response to a threat from outside the body. So, for example, a sneeze may be a sign of a developing allergy response but it may also be the body's way of protecting itself. Similarly, watering eyes may be a sign of an allergy problem but they may be the body's attempt to wash a foreign body of some kind out of the eye. When these symptoms are brought into action as part of the body's own protective mechanism it is important to leave them alone. Interfering with, or attempting to suppress, the body's self-healing mechanisms can create new problems. (I have dealt with the body's self-healing and self-protecting powers in my book *Bodypower* which is available as an ebook).

* * *

When your body detects an allergen which it regards as a threat, it releases its own internal chemicals in order to protect itself. These chemicals may result in the contraction or spasm of muscles, an increase in the production of mucus and the dilatation of small blood vessels. As a result of those changes the following symptoms may develop:

* Fatigue and exhaustion
* Anxiety
* Depression
* Hyperactivity
* Food craving or addiction
* Epilepsy
* Headache
* Migraine
* Itchy eyes
* Runny nose
* Blocked nose
* Sneezing
* Excess nasal mucus production
* Blocked sinuses
* Breathing through the nose
* Inflamed sinuses
* Ear infections
* Wheezing
* Tight chest
* Hoarseness
* Persistent coughing
* Indigestion
* Diarrhoea
* Vomiting
* Nausea
* Colitis
* Intestinal spasm
* Wind
* Constipation
* Mouth ulcers
* Red skin
* Dry, scaly skin
* Itchy skin
* Nettle rash
* Swollen tissues/water retention
* Joint pains
* Muscle pains
* Menstrual symptoms

If you are suffering from an allergy disorder then you could be suffering from one, two, more or conceivably all of the above symptoms. But, obviously, not all these symptoms are always caused by allergies. The symptom pattern is the key to diagnosing an allergy problem.

So how do you tell whether or not your particular symptoms could be allergy related? Obviously, there are some tests that doctors can organise. But I believe that too much emphasis and reliance is sometimes put on laboratory tests – and too little on using detective work to try to decide whether or not a particular set of symptoms are or could be allergy related. Laboratory tests are often complicated, sometimes painful, frequently unreliable, occasionally dangerous and invariably expensive. Using detective work to help you decide whether a certain set of symptoms could be allergy related – and if so to what – should be simple, painless, reliable, safe and inexpensive.

It is worth remembering that although any allergen may produce virtually any symptom or set of symptoms it does seem that allergens which are inhaled are most likely to produce breathing and nasal symptoms, that intestinal problems are more likely to be caused by allergens which are swallowed and that skin symptoms are often caused by substances with which the skin has been in contact. You must also remember that allergy symptoms can often be delayed. It is common for symptoms to occur six hours after contact but there may be a delay of a day or more. This means that it is quite likely that your allergy symptoms will only develop quite late at night (or early the following morning) after encountering an allergen.

I’ve put together a list of some fairly basic rules that should help you decide. And to make the list easier to use I’ve put the rules into question form.

1. Are your symptoms seasonal – i.e. do they occur only at certain times of the year? When symptoms follow

this pattern it is a clear indication that there is a good chance that you are allergic to some type of pollen or mould spore.

2. Did something in your life change at the same time as your symptoms started? Did you change your job? Acquire a new pet? Start to use a new type of washing powder? Buy a new carpet or piece of clothing? Start taking a drug? Eat something that you hadn't eaten before?

3. Do your symptoms often or always start or get worse after you've eaten a particular type of food, visited a particular place or worn certain clothes? Remember that there may be a delay of some hours between the contact with the allergen and the development of symptoms.

4. Are your symptoms constant?
If there is very little variation in your symptoms from hour to hour or day to day and you have an allergy problem then the chances are that the cause of your problem will be something you eat, drink or wear every day – or some chemical with which you are in contact on a daily basis. It is, however, also possible that you may be responding to several (or many) different allergens.

5. Do your symptoms disappear or improve at the weekends or when you go away on holiday? If this is the pattern that your symptoms follow then the chances are high that you are allergic to something with which you come into contact at work.

If, after studying these questions, you still can't find a link then try keeping a symptoms diary. Write down details of when your symptoms develop (or are at their worst), what time of day it is and what you are doing at the time.

* * *

There aren't many substances which can't cause allergy symptoms – or which haven't caused allergy symptoms in someone at some time, although substances which are extremely inert (such as stone, marble, cork and glass) are unlikely to cause problems unless they have been treated with chemicals (such as paints and varnishes) which are likely to cause problems.

It is also worth remembering that stress, extreme heat, extreme cold, too much exercise, an infection and an unusually high or unusually low blood sugar level, may all increase the body's susceptibility to allergens. Some women find that they get allergy symptoms only when they are menstruating or ovulating. It is also possible for an exposure to one powerful allergen to trigger a reaction to other allergens which might, under normal circumstances, have failed to produce much, if anything, in the way of symptoms. Finally, it may also be useful to know that when products which can cause symptoms have been allowed to air they may cause fewer problems than they did when they were new.

Here is a list of some common allergens:

1. Tobacco smoke
(Extremely common – and often a cause of severe symptoms)

2. Vehicle exhaust fumes and industrial smokes

3. Gas and paraffin fumes

4. Cleaning products (e.g. bleach, detergent)
It is not uncommon for allergy problems to develop as a result of wearing clothes which have been washed in powerful detergents. Also remember that you may be allergic to cleaning products used in public buildings (if a public building is visited regularly symptoms may be virtually permanent).

5. Cosmetics and toiletries
Remember that it is possible to acquire an allergy to someone else's perfume. Regular contact may produce regular symptoms whereas occasional or isolated contact (for example sitting next to someone on a train) may cause occasional or isolated symptoms.

6. Tap water
Chlorine and other chemicals which have been deliberately put into the water may be mixed with contaminants.

7. Adhesives, solvents and paints
Chemicals used in the manufacture of magazines and newspapers and in some office equipment may cause problems. The fumes given off within a newly painted room are particularly likely to cause trouble.

8. Bedding and clothing
Chemicals in synthetic materials may cause symptoms as may dyes and washing powders.

9. Furniture, flooring and fabrics
Chemicals used in the manufacture of chairs, carpets, curtains and other household items may cause symptoms. You should also note that the plastics and foams used in the manufacture of modern motor cars may cause symptoms. More fumes are produced by the chemical products in new cars, and hot days seem to make matters even worse. The plastics used in the manufacture of television sets and computers can also cause problems.

10. Garden products
Pesticides, insecticides, fungicides and other chemicals can all cause problems.

11. Food
Pesticide residues and deliberately added chemical additives (included as preservatives, colourings, flavourings, etc.) can all cause problems. Allergy symptoms caused by foods can be more or less permanent or intermittent. Sometimes they may develop only when a food is eaten in large quantities. It is not unknown for patients who have an allergy to a food which they eat regularly to suffer from constant, troubling, disabling and even life ruining symptoms – aching muscle, headaches, indigestion and inescapable tiredness and exhaustion are common possibilities. Not eating a food which causes problems can sometimes, after a period of weeks or months, result in the allergy disappearing. Alternatively, new and quite different symptoms may develop. It is also possible for withdrawal symptoms (and these may include: aching muscles, sleep disturbance, tiredness, irritability, nausea, sweating, restlessness, palpitations, skin rash) to develop when a food that has been eaten regularly doesn't appear in the diet.

12. Drugs
Drugs bought over the counter and prescription drugs can both cause problems.

Two Practical Tips for Avoiding Allergies

Please note that if you suffer from severe asthma which you know can be triggered by new products or you have had a severe allergy reaction before then you should take great care before testing any new product.

1. Gently sniff products before you buy them. If you don't like a smell or it makes you feel dizzy or nauseous (or produces other symptoms) then you should probably not buy it. It is worth remembering that if you find a smell particularly attractive then that product may cause problems.

2. If you are about to use a new perfume or some other substance then test the product by dabbing a small amount onto your forearm. Wait 48 hours. If the area of skin reddens, becomes swollen or itchy or shows any other signs of having reacted to the substance then you should obviously not use it.

Chapter Fifteen

Don't Allow Yourself To Be Deceived By Food Company Trickery

The last time I looked, there were 76 million cases of food related infectious illnesses in the US every year – with around 5,000 deaths. Figures for other countries are similarly alarming. And these figures are probably on the low side since many people who have short lived illnesses do not bother to report them to anyone. In addition, illnesses caused by drinking contaminated water are not counted in these figures since water is not regarded as a food. If water borne contamination (and other forms of contamination) were added, the total number of incidents of food related infectious illness would exceed 200,000,000 cases a year in the US alone.

Many of these problems are caused by the contamination of food with bacteria, viruses and other organisms. Since human and animal waste is widely used in animal feed this is hardly surprising. (The disgusting practice of feeding faeces to animals is widespread.)

Attempts to control the dramatically increasing problem of food related illness have been futile. Governments everywhere are nervous about upsetting the powerful food industry and even more nervous about upsetting farmers who tend to have powerful unions and lobbyists.

Of course, food which is contaminated with infective organisms isn't the only reason why people are falling ill these days. If cases of cancer, heart disease and other diseases caused by diet were added, the numbers involved would be much more dramatic. There is absolutely no doubt that at least a third of all cancers are caused by food. And there are strong links between specific foods and most other major killers too.

In an attempt to stay healthy, most of us want to eat nutritious, healthy food that tastes good and does us good. We want to be able to pay a fair price for food that contains natural ingredients and, ideally, no chemical residues. If the food we are buying contains additives we would like to know what they are.

In order to make sure that we do our best to eat healthily we naturally put a lot of faith in the labels used to describe the food we eat.

Our faith is misplaced.

Encouraged and supported by the government food companies lie, lie and lie again. Ordinary, everyday words such as 'fresh', 'natural', 'wholesome', 'organic' and 'nutritious' are virtually meaningless.

We all put our faith in labels – and our trust in the people who sell us food. But our faith and our trust are misplaced. Food companies are aware of our desire for genuinely good food and so they employ clever advertising and marketing 'spin doctors' to help disguise the way that the food they sell us is adulterated by behind the scene chemists. The whole food industry has become rather reminiscent of something out of a story by Lewis Carroll.

Here are some of the ways food companies defraud us:

*** Spring water**
The phrase can be used to describe water that has been taken out of a tap.

*** Meat**
The word 'meat' can be used to describe anything that comes from an animal – from the tip of its nose to the tip of its tail. Scraps of meat blasted off the bones are counted, as are bits of faeces clinging to tissues.

*** Farmfresh and Farmhouse**
Utterly meaningless words. The foods described in this way can be produced in factories from animals or birds (such as hens) kept in battery cages.

*** Fresh**
This means whatever the food company wants it to mean.

*** GM Free**
If you thought that a 'GM Free' label meant that food didn't contain genetically modified food you would be wrong. The rules mean that food can contain a small quantity of genetically modified food and yet be described as not containing genetically modified food. Since the whole point with genetically modified food is that a small amount may be deadly, and, for all I know, may induce cancer, this is dangerous and absurd. Since no research has been done to find out whether or not genetically modified food is safe to eat no one knows whether or not it is safe. The food industry prefers to use the absence of research and evidence as 'proof' that genetically modified food is safe to consume.

*** Steak**

This implies that the item is a solid piece of flesh. But this isn't necessarily so. 'Steaks' can be built up using scraps and flakes of flesh.

*** Low fat**
This doesn't mean anything since there are no legal rules defining what 'low fat' means.

*** Lean**
This doesn't mean anything either. Nor does Extra Lean. (Nor, for that matter, Extra Extra Lean.) A product described as 'lean' may sound as though it contains little fat but it can be just as fatty as any other product.

*** Flavour**
Don't make the mistake of assuming that the phrase 'banana flavour' implies that the food you are buying has anything to do with bananas. The flavour will probably be made in a laboratory from chemicals.

*** Free range**
This doesn't mean that the hens (or other creatures) range free. It means that a vast number of creatures share limited access to a very limited outdoor space. Free range chickens are merely chickens who are technically allowed to stretch their legs. Most are fed on mass produced pellets and never see a hay barn or a blade of grass. Chemicals may be added to the feed in order to try to improve the appearance of the yolks – and in order to keep the hens alive in their unnatural 'free range' conditions. (If you and ten thousand other people lived in one room with a door into a carpet sized garden, would you describe yourself as 'free range'?)

*** Brown bread**
Sounds wholesome but it can be white bread which has been dyed.

*** Natural**
This word doesn't mean anything when applied to food.

*** Smoked**
If you think your smoked bacon has been smoked you are probably being naive. Your bacon may well have been pumped up with an artificial smoke flavour liquid.

*** Country Fresh Eggs**
The hens are probably kept in a battery but the battery may be in the country. The word 'fresh' means whatever the food company wants it to mean.

*** Nutritious**
This doesn't mean anything at all.

How do food companies get away with all this deceit?

Largely, I'm afraid, because most people don't bother to complain.

What can you do about it?

Become ever more vigilant when buying food.

Chapter Sixteen

Learn To Listen To Your Body's Secret Calls For Help

A friend recently asked me if I could recommend a good back specialist. He told me that he was suffering a lot with back pain and that his family doctor had recommended a hospital appointment.

I didn't know of a back specialist in the area where he lives but hoping that I might be able to help in some other way I asked him to tell me a little more about the back trouble he was getting. To get the ball rolling I asked him if he could remember when the back pain had started – and if he could think of anything which made it worse.

It quickly turned out that the back pain had started after my friend had bought a new car – and that the pain was always at its worst when he had been driving in it for a long time. Rather surprisingly, neither my friend nor his doctor had stopped to think that the backache might have a specific cause. Until my question had made him think about it, he hadn't thought about the link between his new pain and his new car.

When I suggested that treating the car might be easier, quicker, cheaper and certainly more effective in the long run than trying to treat the back, my friend was surprised but delighted. He bought himself a backrest and completely got rid of his back problem within days.

It is surprising how often we ignore our bodies when they try to tell us something important. In my friend's case, the backache was simply a message from his body complaining about the uncomfortable car. In a surprising number of illnesses, it is possible to find that a new symptom is a sign that your body is calling for help.

* * *

Sadly, doctors take very little interest in helping their patients stay healthy. Most of the doctors I've met have been positively hostile towards all aspects of preventive medicine. I find this surprising – and worrying – since it clearly makes more sense to put a little bit of effort into helping to keep someone healthy than to have to spend a large amount of money and time trying to make someone well again.

The problem, however, is that doctors are trained to diagnose and to treat illnesses. The whole emphasis of their training is directed towards the illness rather than the patient. Doctors are not taught how to keep their patients healthy. They receive very little training in psychology and hardly any training at all in nutrition (despite the fact that there is now an enormous amount of evidence to show that stress and the food we eat are probably the two major forces in the development of disease).

Every day of a medical student's training is geared towards diagnosing the disease responsible for a patient's symptoms and then offering one of two main types of treatment: treatment with drugs or surgery. Other therapies offered by doctors, such as radiotherapy, are the only variations on this basic theme.

Doctors are taught to take no interest in patients who do not have any symptoms. The pharmaceutical industry exists to make money from people who are sick. Drug companies aren't interested in preventing disease (either retail or wholesale) and so doctors aren't interested either.

Turn up at your doctor's office and ask him to help you stop smoking or lose weight and you will probably be dismissed within a minute. You will probably be clutching a prescription for an expensive drug company product which, it is claimed, will help you conquer your problem. You may, if you are lucky, also be given a dull and pretty unhelpful leaflet.

Medical students are not taught how to show their patients how to improve their health while receiving orthodox treatment. And they are not taught how to show their patients how to stay healthy when they have been treated.

Anyone who has studied the wider aspects of medicine will readily confirm that it makes clear sense that if you want your body to perform its functions well you should give it the best possible fuel supply. Doctors either don't know this or else they ignore it. Spend time in hospital and you will probably be expected to defeat your illness on a diet of over-cooked junk food.

Common, serious diseases such as heart disease, high blood pressure and osteoporosis can, in the vast majority of cases, be prevented or treated simply, easily, cheaply and effectively. For most sufferers of these disorders, pharmaceutical company products are an expensive and toxic irrelevance.

Remember that your biggest ally in your aim to stay healthy is your body, for your body's sole aim is to protect and preserve itself. The Cartesian view of the body as a machine is woefully inadequate (and yet it is still regarded as a fundamental truth by most medical researchers and many members of the medical establishment) for how many machines can avoid danger and repair themselves?

Despite the obvious truth of all this, most people still ignore their bodies (and refuse to listen when their bodies are talking to them) and prefer to put their faith in the hands of doctors – a group of former professionals whose education has for decades been under the control of an industry.

* * *

Many, many years ago, I used to provide regular medical advice for viewers of TV AM – a British breakfast television station. I remember that one morning I told viewers that in order to spot early signs of illness they should learn to ‘listen to their bodies’. Two days later, I received a letter from a woman viewer who told me off for offering advice she couldn’t take. She said that she couldn’t listen to her body because she was deaf.

That was not, of course, quite what I meant. Being able to listen to your body requires a general state of awareness and is one of the fundamental building stones upon which continuing good health is based.

Instead of listening to our bodies, and taking note of those secret calls for help, we tend to regard all symptoms as unwelcome.

And yet if you do learn to listen to your body it is often possible to spot physical and mental symptoms at a very early stage and to take action to avoid more lasting damage. Over the years I have distilled and refined my thoughts on this topic. In order to provide a practical illustration of precisely what I mean here are just two examples of common cries for help which are frequently either ignored or simply smothered with powerful medication without any attention being paid to the possibility that there may be an underlying cause which can be tackled. Smothering symptoms with a drug may produce temporary relief but it isn’t likely to produce any lasting cure and the chances are that the underlying problem, whatever it is, will simply continue to get worse.

Example 1: Sleeplessness

If you can’t get to sleep at night there is usually a reason. Taking sleeping tablets may help you get to sleep (for a while) but the reason will still be there. The underlying problem which is keeping you awake may lie within your body (pain or breathlessness for example); within your mind (anxiety about a domestic or occupational problem for example) or outside both your body and your mind (noisy plumbing, noisy neighbours or a freezing cold bedroom).

Example 2: Indigestion

If five people sit down to dinner there is a good chance that by the time the meal is over one of them will have indigestion. Most people treat indigestion as a mild annoyance – most commonly swallow antacid medicine or tablets to banish the pain. If the indigestion occurs very rarely (once a year) then this isn’t too daft. But if the indigestion occurs commonly then this is a pretty silly thing to do. Unless something is done about the cause of the problem then the chances are high that the trouble will simple recur – and may lead to more serious problems developing. Indigestion may be a warning sign that the individual concerned is exposed to too much stress, is eating the wrong foods, eating too quickly or overusing tobacco or alcohol. It is a major indictment of the modern medical profession that nine out of ten doctors will treat indigestion, gastritis or peptic ulceration as a ‘disease’ rather than as a sign that a lifestyle change is called for.

If you’re going to deal with the underlying cause of an illness (rather than merely tackle the superficial symptom or symptoms) then you need to become something of a medical detective.

Whenever there is something wrong with you (physically or mentally) ask yourself what your body might be trying to tell you.

I think that the phrase I used on TV all those years ago still sums up this approach: learn to listen to your body. The fact is that your body knows far more than you think it does – and it has a great deal to tell you.

Chapter Seventeen

Medical Screening Programmes Do More Harm Than Good

It is nearly three decades since I first warned about the futility of doctor dependant breast screening programmes (very shortly after these expensive and highly profitable programmes had been being introduced).

Way back in 1988, I was convinced that the potential health hazards which may be associated with mammograms would outweigh the advantages. This conviction was not based on any inside knowledge. It always seemed to me pretty obvious that repeatedly subjecting breast tissue (which is known to be prone to cancer) to X-rays (which is known to cause cancer) could be hazardous. This seemed to me to be a fairly obvious concern. But it is one which the medical establishment regularly dismissed as not even worth consideration. (Today we know that a significant number of women who are screened in this way will develop breast cancer in the years following the X-ray.)

Moreover, it seemed to me that the risks associated with mammograms should have been properly assessed before mass mammography was introduced. (Why is common sense so uncommon – and so derided by those who consider themselves to be above such things?)

(I do, however, recommend that women learn to examine their own breasts regularly – this is, I believe, an excellent way to ensure that lumps are spotted early.)

* * *

Fear about the danger of mammography isn't my only concern. Medical screening programmes can produce two types of error: false negatives and false positives.

A false negative occurs when the screening programme misses a genuine cancer. For example, one in four breast cancers go undetected by mammography.

And a false positive occurs when the screening programme picks up what appears to be a cancer in a healthy breast.

(Both types of error are acknowledged problems in all screening programmes.)

When there is a false negative result, the main danger is obviously that a condition requiring treatment will be missed. But there is also a risk that the woman concerned may ignore – or dismiss – a lump which she feels in the bath, when dressing or when examining her own breasts because she has been given an official 'all clear'.

False positives can lead to unnecessary tests, surgery, mutilation and potentially lethal chemotherapy.

A major Swedish survey (involving 600,000 women aged between 50 and 60) showed that official breast screening did not produce any significant reduction in fatalities.

The Swedish survey showed that 100,000 of the 600,000 Swedish women had been falsely diagnosed as having cancer. Of these, 16,000 had undergone biopsy and more than 400 had had surgery – including mastectomy. In addition, of course, all those 100,000 women (and their partners) will have been exposed to tremendous anxiety and stress – and many immune systems will have been damaged as a result (ironically, increasing the likelihood of cancer developing).

The medical establishment's response to this astonishing new evidence was not to call for official breast screening programmes to be stopped, or even to be reassessed, but to call for the breast screening programmes to be extended to include more women – and more screening. (This is the usual response when the truth tends to threaten a profitable medical enterprise.)

* * *

For decades now, just about every attempt to show that medical screening programmes save lives has proved that they are a waste of time, energy and money. Surveys have proved that because of the risk of false positives, medical screening programmes do more harm than good.

Medical screening programmes go back a long way. The first recorded screening took place at a public brothel in Avignon in 1347 when a local Abbess and a surgeon examined all the working women every Saturday to see whether or not they were fit to carry on serving the local population.

Modern screening really started in 1917 in the U.S. when large corporations thought it might be a good idea to have their employees examined regularly. When half of four million American men called up for military service during the First World War proved to be unfit for military service, insurance companies started screening the general population.

Since then the medical screening business has grown virtually unchecked – despite the fact that since the 1970s there has been ample evidence to show that medical screening programmes are not just a waste of time and money but can also be a serious health hazard.

Back in 1979, the World Health Organisation published a report which showed that people who were subjected to regular medical screenings needed to go to hospital more often but were not as healthy as people who did not undergo regular medical screenings. The conclusion was that health screening is expensive and ineffective.

In the same year (1979), the results of a Canadian Task Force report on Periodic Health Examination came to the conclusion that annual medical check-ups should be abandoned since they are both inefficient and potentially harmful.

* * *

Those who have studied general health screening programmes with an open mind have come to the conclusion that they are harmful for four reasons.

First, when people are taught to put their faith in medical check-ups they tend to abandon responsibility for their own health and enjoy a false sense of security. Patients forget that a medical check-up is no more a sign of long-term health than an encouraging bank statement is a sign of permanent financial security. A patient who is given a clean bill of health is likely to ignore strange symptoms which develop a week or two later. And there is a danger that he (or she) may feel that it is unnecessary to eat wisely or to take regular exercise.

Second, screening examinations may frighten people. They can result in cancer phobias, neuroses and depression. And they can result in so much stress that the immune system is damaged – leading to a greater susceptibility to disease.

Third, the procedures involved in screening programmes may do physical harm. There are, for example, some doctors who perform coronary angiographs as part of their check-up procedures. As many as two patients per 100 may die during this procedure.

Fourth, when a screening examination results in a false positive the patient may be given a treatment which may damage his or health. The Swedish report on breast screening which I quoted above showed that out of 600,000 women screened there had been 100,000 false positives.

* * *

Why, when the evidence shows so clearly that medical screening is a waste of time, does the medical establishment remain so enthusiastic?

Every independent survey I have found has concluded that screening (whether general or specific) is costly and useless. The only people who benefit from screening programmes are doctors – and other parts of the health industry. Screening programmes are extremely profitable.

I find it difficult to avoid the conclusion that the medical profession (and the wider medical industry) remain enthusiastic about screening – despite the evidence – simply because medical screening is a hugely profitable business.

* * *

The best way to spot health problems early is to learn to listen to your own body.

Be aware of how your body feels – and reacts – when it is healthy and you will be much more likely to be aware when things go wrong.

You should seek advice from a properly trained and qualified health care professional whom you trust if:

1. You have any unexplained pain which recurs or which is present for more than five days (obviously, severe, uncontrollable pain needs to be investigated without delay.)
2. You have any unexplained bleeding – from anywhere.
3. You need to take any home medicine regularly or for five days or more.
4. You notice any persistent change in your body (e.g. a loss or gain in weight, a paralysis of any kind, or the development of any lump or swelling.)
5. Any existing lump, wart or other skin blemish changes size or colour, or bleeds.
6. You notice new symptoms when you have already received medical treatment.
7. There are mental symptoms present such as confusion, paranoia, disorientation or severe depression.

Chapter Eighteen

When Tests and Investigations Need To Be Ignored

It has always seemed to me that one of the fundamental principles by which any doctor should practise medicine is that it is the patient, not the laboratory test, which should be treated. It is sad that this is often not the case these days.

Tests and investigations can, of course, be helpful. But in my view (and I recognise that this is probably not a widely held view among doctors) it is an abdication of professional responsibility to allow test results to take priority over the patient's symptoms and signs. Perhaps more doctors should have faith in their instincts and judgements.

* * *

The first thing that everyone (patients and doctors) should remember is that test results can be wrong.

This may sound rather blasphemous. We are all of us encouraged to believe that when a machine spews out a piece of paper containing lists of figures the result must be accurate. When results come back from the laboratory, they are regarded with the sort of reverence once accorded to messages on tablets of stone.

But the plain fact is that most laboratory tests are only 95 per cent accurate.

If a test to detect a disease, whose prevalence is one in 1,000, has a false positive rate of five per cent, there will be 51 positive results if 1,000 people are tested. Of those 51 patients with positive results, just one will actually have the disease concerned. The other 50 will appear to have the disease but will, in reality, be healthy. (When considering this remarkable figure you should remember that the prevalence rate for many diseases is much less than 1 in 1,000. A false positive rate of 5% for a disease which affects 1 in 1,000,000 people will mean that 50,001 people have positive results but only one of them actually has the disease concerned.)

Furthermore, that 95% accuracy rate which I have quoted is only reliable when all the equipment in the laboratory is working absolutely perfectly – this is something that usually happens about once a week. As a general rule, 90 per cent accuracy is more likely.

All this assumes that all the technicians involved do their jobs perfectly and never make mistakes. As has been shown many times in recent years, human error can be extremely significant – and can cause catastrophic results, much illness and many deaths.

And, of course, most patients have more than one test done. If a patient has 20 laboratory tests done (not at all unusual) then there is a good chance that if the patient is perfectly healthy the tests will show at least one abnormality.

When doctors spot an abnormality on a test report, they immediately think of disease and then they think of treatment. There is a tendency to forget or ignore the condition of the patient.

It is easy to see from all this that every patient going into hospital will have a good chance of being treated for a disease he or she hasn't got.

Even when no treatment is given there is a good chance that when a false diagnosis is made a patient's life may be changed. One recent study showed that out of 93 children who had been diagnosed as having heart disease – and who had lived their lives as 'heart patients' – only 17 really had heart disease.

When the first blood test for syphilis was introduced, doctors accepted it as accurate. It wasn't until several decades later that doctors found that 50 per cent of all patients whose blood test had shown them to have syphilis didn't have syphilis at all. The lives of many of those patients must have been ruined quite unnecessarily.

* * *

Of course, if there is a chance that a laboratory error may mean that a normal sample results in a 'false positive' there must also be a chance that a laboratory error may mean that an abnormal sample results in a 'false negative' reading.

A 'false negative' reading means that many patients who have symptoms and signs of an underlying illness will be falsely reassured that there is nothing wrong with them.

The doctor (or the patient) may make a diagnosis and then, when the laboratory results come back, assume that the diagnosis must be wrong.

My guess (and this is only a guess because I am not aware of any scientific research having been done on this subject – though there should have been) is that when faced with a patient with clear cut symptoms strongly indicating an underlying problem, and a set of 'normal' laboratory results, the vast majority of doctors will allow themselves to be influenced more by the laboratory results than by the patient's condition and their own clinical experience.

* * *

Next, we should consider the fact that, much as the technicians might dislike and dispute this, I do not believe that everyone fits neatly into the range of 'normal values'.

We are all different (for which we should thank God, though if the genetic engineers get their own way and cloning becomes commonplace, this will no longer be true) and the whole concept of 'normal values' is an entirely artificial one. It should be used only as a guideline, rather than (as it so often is) as though it were written in stone that 'normal value = healthy patient' and the corollary, 'abnormal value = unhealthy patient'. Who decides what 'normal values' are? Were the samples which provided the raw material for the 'normal values' taken from healthy young patients? If so then there must be a chance that 'normal values' are different for older patients.

There are an infinite number of reasons why a patient could have a result outside 'normal values' and yet be perfectly normal and healthy.

* * *

The problems associated with tests and investigations are made worse by the fact that doctors undoubtedly order far too many tests. Inevitably, this leads to more false positives – and even more unnecessary treatment.

At least two thirds of all the tests and investigations ordered by hospital doctors and general practitioners are unnecessary.

Routine blood and urine tests help doctors make a diagnosis in only around 1% of cases.

And routine sampling for microbiological testing is unnecessary. One survey showed that only in 3% of cases was the treatment given based on the result of culture and antibiotic sensitivity.

* * *

There are several reasons why doctors order too many tests:

1. Tests are sometimes ordered because they provide doctors with some protection from the risk of litigation. A doctor who has bits of paper containing test results to substantiate and support his selected treatment programme will probably be safe from legal action. That is sad but it is a fact of modern life. In countries which have lots of lawyers (you know who you are) the fear of unjustified litigation (fed more by greed than anything else) is very real. But in the long run it is the patients who suffer. Only the lawyers benefit. (As usual).

2. Unnecessary tests are often ordered to buy doctors time when they don't know what is going on. Doctors who are bewildered or uncertain may simply hide behind technology and order more and more tests in the hope that this scatter gun approach may prove effective. The condition of the patient becomes almost irrelevant as the doctor searches endlessly for the ever elusive diagnosis.

3. Some doctors practice 'hot' or aggressive medicine and insist on collecting all the possible evidence they can even when the diagnosis is not in doubt. This type of doctor will insist on performing an endoscopy so that he can actually see a stomach ulcer even though the patient's history (and, maybe, an X-ray) has made the diagnosis certain.

4. Doctors sometimes order tests in order to impress their patients, their colleagues, their students or themselves. The more esoteric the test the greater the status associated with its use.

5. It is fairly common these days for doctors to order unnecessary tests because they are planning to write a paper for a scientific journal and need lots of data to fill up the pages and build up their reputations. Most of the papers published in scientific journals are of little or no clinical value and so yet again patients are investigated unnecessarily.

It is important to remember that just about every procedure (however 'minor' it might appear to be) carries a physical risk. Even sticking a needle into a patient is potentially hazardous and the more complex the procedure the more likely it is that something will go wrong.

One study showed that 14% of all patients who undergo invasive procedures (such as biopsies, catheterizations or bronchoscopies) have at least one complication. Most complications then need treatment and involve a longer stay in hospital. The longer the patient stays in hospital the more tests are done. And on it goes.

6. Doctors always undergo the first part of their training in hospital. And in teaching hospitals, students and young doctors are taught to over-investigate. Consultants frequently berate students who haven't ordered all the possible tests. No attempt is made to decide which tests are likely to prove particularly helpful. No thought is given to the cost of ordering so many tests. And no thought is given to the patient who will spend hours wandering from laboratory to X-ray department and who will end up, in consequence, exsanguinated, radiated and exhausted.

The pointlessness of all this was well illustrated by one survey which showed that when bacteriological swabs are taken from patients in hospital there is a two to one chance that the patient will have been discharged before the results of the culture become available.

It is, of course, possible that the odd patient may get better before the test results become available but the only sensible conclusion I can draw from this survey is that in most cases the doctor in charge of the patient regards the test that he has ordered as irrelevant to the patient's well-being.

7. Finally, doctors frequently perform tests out of habit. So for example, patients who are in hospital will often have daily tests done even though a daily change in a specific test is unlikely to lead to a daily change in the treatment recommended. When this happens diagnosis and investigation have been divorced from treatment. The real risk lies in the fact that the more often tests are performed the more likely it is that there will be one or more results showing a new and abnormal result – and that the new, abnormal result will inspire doctors to introduce another element to the treatment programme.

* * *

Ever since Rontgen first discovered X-rays at the end of the 19th century, radiology has played an increasingly important part in the average doctor's investigative armamentarium.

Since 1968, medical journals around the world have frequently carried papers pointing out that most X-rays are unnecessary, extremely expensive, potentially hazardous and unlikely to contribute anything to a doctor's knowledge of a patient's illness, to the way that the patient is treated or to his or her long-term health. Doctors frequently order for X-rays as a comforting ritual rather than for any specific purpose. And, of course, many X-rays are ordered purely for legal protection. It has been repeatedly estimated that in most 'developed' countries something like nine out of ten X-rays are unnecessary. (In some countries the figure is probably even higher than this.)

I had good personal experience of the possible danger of an X-ray some time ago. When an unnecessary and ultimately rather pointless X-ray showed that I had a strangely shaped kidney, the two radiologists who had studied the X-ray plates wanted me to see a surgeon. Because of the X-ray they thought I had renal cancer and urgently needed major surgery. After I insisted on another opinion, a third radiologist immediately spotted that my abnormal kidney wasn't pathologically abnormal at all. I just happened to have a mis-shaped kidney.

* * *

Many doctors have become totally dependent on tests of one sort or another. They feel incapable of making any sort of clinical decision unless they have done a vast range of tests. And they put more faith in the results they obtain from the laboratory or the X-ray department than they do in their own clinical skills.

Whenever a doctor plans to do tests or investigations of any sort, ask him how the tests or investigations will affect the way he treats you.

If he tells you that the test isn't going to affect the treatment (or lack of it) then the test may not be worth having.

It is, of course, always worth remembering that tests can cause serious health problems – and can kill.

* * *

The bottom line is that you should remember that tests aren't as reliable, as useful or as necessary as most people think they are.

If you feel ill when tests have shown that there is nothing wrong with you then you should listen to your body and ignore what may well turn out to be 'false negative' tests.

If you feel well when tests have shown that you have a problem which needs treating just remember that there is a chance that you are feeling well because there isn't anything wrong with you – and that it is the laboratory test equipment rather than your body which needs treatment.

Chapter Nineteen

Nine Ways To Save Yourself From Stress

1. Be prepared to admit when you're feeling tired. If you keep going when you're exhausted you'll not only make yourself worse (by doing further damage to your immune system) but you'll also let yourself – and the people around you – down. You can't do your best work when you're suffering from burn out.

2. Learn to manage your time as efficiently as possible. Plan your day. Keep a diary so that important engagements and commitments don't suddenly creep up on you.

3. Beware of stimulants such as caffeine, tobacco or alcohol. You may think that one or more of these substances help you get through the day but all of them can seriously damage your health and, in the long run, make you more not less susceptible to stress and pressure. When you take a drug (and caffeine, tobacco and alcohol are all drugs) you may succeed in covering up the symptoms of stress – but you won't have done anything about the problems causing the stress and you certainly won't have eradicated the symptoms produced by the stress. By continuing to push yourself hard you will be doing an enormous amount of damage to your immune system.

4. If you feel ill, take time off. Don't think that you're indispensable and must carry on. The cemeteries are full of people who thought they were indispensable but life goes on without them. If you feel exhausted then your body is telling you that it needs to rest. Remember that regular holidays are important – and make sure that the holiday you choose is relaxing! Your immune system will automatically repair and rebuild itself when you take a break.

5. If your life is full of battles and arguments make sure that you take time out to relax and enjoy yourself. And make sure too that you differentiate between those battles which are worth fighting and those which are merely adding to the stress in your life. If you learn to walk away from trivial and insignificant problems you will retain your strength for the battles which really matter. Stand up for yourself over important issues but be prepared to walk away from arguments when the underlying issue isn't truly important. People who are always complaining burn themselves out with anger, so think very carefully before allowing yourself to get heated up. If the battle is important then do what you think is right – and fight to the last breath if necessary. If the battle isn't important then try to shrug your shoulders and walk away.

6. Physical exercise is a great way to get rid of frustrations, angers and disappointments. But if you haven't done any physical exercise for a long time get yourself back into the swing gently. Make sure that you get professional medical advice before you start an exercise programme and, if you are planning to do anything other than go walking, cycling or swimming take advice from an exercise professional too. And do remember that too much physical exercise can damage your immune system. Top class international athletes frequently suffer from colds and other minor infections because although they may be fit (in the athletic sense) they are not healthy and their immune systems are in poor shape.

7. Make sure that you get enough sleep. If you have difficulty in relaxing at night try having a hot bath before you go to bed. Don't do any work for at least an hour before you try to get to sleep. Watch a relaxing video or read an amusing or entertaining book. Poor sleep is a symptom of burn out – and it makes things steadily worse. Your immune system gets recharged while you're sleeping – as long as you are relaxed.

8. Learn to say 'no' more often. Don't let yourself be tricked into taking on too many responsibilities by people who know how to make you feel guilty! Get your priorities sorted out and remember that you – and your family and friends – need some of your life.

9. Try not to get too upset when things go wrong. Remember that you can't get anywhere in life without taking risks or without making mistakes. Try not to brood over your failures but try to learn from your mistakes. Otherwise your bad days will smoulder and add to your burn out.

Chapter Twenty

If You Are Contemplating Surgery

If you have to have surgery make sure that the surgeon still performs at least 30 operations a year of the type you need.

And before you agree to have surgery make sure that you know the answers to these questions:

1. What are the alternatives? (Including treatments which do not involve surgery.)
2. What is likely to happen to me if I do not have the operation?
3. What is the overall success rate for this operation?
4. Are there are any other operations which might be safer and/or more effective?
5. If you are a pre-menopausal woman ask if the operation is more likely to be a success if you have it done at a particular time in your menstrual cycle.
6. What are possible/likely side effects of the operation?
7. How is the operation going to improve my life?
8. Is the operation really suitable for me?
9. How experienced is the surgeon who is planning to perform the operation? (Ask who is going to perform the operation – the consultant or one of his assistants.)
10. What after care will I need? How long will I need nursing? When can I go home? How long will I need to stay off work?

Chapter Twenty One

Get Your Timing Right

It has been known for centuries that the leaves of some plants regularly open during the daytime and close at night. It was always assumed that this phenomenon was a response to sunlight. But over 250 years ago, in 1729, a French astronomer called Jean-Jacques de Mairan, conducted a very simple experiment which showed that this assumption was wrong. He discovered that this phenomenon occurs even if a plant is kept in the dark. The only possible explanation was that the plant opens and closes not according to the changes in the amount of available light but in response to some sort of 24 hour internal clock. That was the first experiment in chronobiology.

Since then chronobiology (the study of temporal patterns related to biological phenomena) has become an acknowledged science. It is now known that just about every living organism – from a nucleated single cell to a human being – follows a 24-hour or circadian rhythm.

Here are just some of the vital observations which have been made about human beings:

* Your pulse rate and blood pressure are highest first thing in the morning (with the result that the incidence of heart attack and stroke is highest at that time of day). In the evening your pulse rate and blood pressure will naturally fall.

* Your body temperature rises during the day and falls at night.

* Blood platelets – which help with blood clotting – are stickier in the morning than at any other time of day. You are, therefore, likely to have less trouble with bleeding if you nick yourself in the morning than if you nick yourself in the evening. (Shaving in the morning is less likely to produce a troublesome cut that won't stop bleeding than shaving in the evening).

* Your tolerance for alcohol peaks at five o'clock in the afternoon.

* Most babies are born – and most people die – between the hours of midnight and dawn.

* The number of white cells in your blood stream (and, therefore, the efficiency of your immune system) fluctuates all the time – with variations of as much as 50% during a single day.

Our bodies respond in a cyclical way because we have evolved on earth – and the amount of light and heat and the level of electromagnetic and gravitational forces on our planet all vary in a rhythmic way.

The important thing – still widely ignored by doctors and many alternative health care professionals – is that the abnormalities associated with disease also vary in a cyclical and circadian way.

Whether you are suffering from cancer, heart disease, arthritis or asthma your disease will change during the day and, consequently, whatever you do to tackle the disease should also be arranged according to a circadian rhythm. For example, during the day and the night your body's ability to absorb drugs will vary. When given at the right time of day, a drug will have a powerful and positive effect on an illness. But when given at the wrong time of day a drug may prove toxic.

Consider allergy reactions.

Allergy reactions develop when the body's natural defences against foreign organisms over-react. If you are exposed to a pollen or a type of food to which you are allergic your body will send white blood cells to the site at which the foreign organisms have been spotted. The white cells will then proceed to eat up the foreign organisms. Some of the white cells release a substance called histamine which increases local blood flow and triggers the release of more white cells. The symptoms produced by this reaction include pain, itchiness, burning, redness and swelling.

Your body's ability to deal with outside threats in this way is influenced by the amount of glucocorticoid (a steroid hormone) in your blood stream. When the amount of glucocorticoid is at its highest, your body's ability to deal with an outside organism will be at its lowest.

Now, under your body's circadian rhythm the amount of glucocorticoid in your blood is at its highest level in the morning – at around 5 or 6 a.m. Inevitably, therefore, your body's ability to deal with an external threat is lowest at this time of day.

But in the evening when your body's levels of glucocorticoid fall, your body's ability to deal with a threat rises.

This means that you are least likely to develop an allergy reaction early in the morning. But, at that same time of day, you are also, because of the same effect, most susceptible to infection.

On the other hand you are most likely to develop an allergy reaction – and least susceptible to infection – in the evening.

Next, consider arthritis – a common inflammatory disease which also runs on a biological clock.

In rheumatoid arthritis, the joints are attacked by a malfunctioning immune system. The joints of a rheumatoid arthritis sufferer are usually stiffest and most swollen early in the morning. They become easier during the day. In other types of arthritis – such as osteoarthritis – the stiffness and pain get worse during the day.

It is clear from this knowledge that the time when medication is given for these two different types of disease is vital. A drug given for rheumatoid arthritis should be timed to act in the morning, whereas a drug given for osteoarthritis should be timed to be working most efficiently later in the day.

Asthma is one of the commonest diseases in the world. It is getting commoner.

Because of the circadian rhythms associated with a number of normal physiological processes (such as airway size and breathing patterns) the majority of asthma attacks take place between two and six o'clock in the morning. The airways are naturally open widest during the day and there is a reduction in airflow after midnight (and particularly between two and six in the morning).

Heart disease is linked to body rhythms (heart attacks are twice as common in the morning as they are during the rest of the day – making high stress breakfast meetings a risky venture).

The activity of cancer cells is also linked to body rhythms.

Drugs prescribed to attack cancer usually operate by killing cells when they are most vulnerable – during the process of division. Anti-cancer drugs target cancer cells because cancer cells grow and divide far faster than other human body cells. However, other rapidly dividing cells (particularly cells inside the intestine and cells in the bone marrow) are likely to be killed unnecessarily by anti-cancer drugs.

However, if an anti-cancer drug is given at the right time of day, the problems associated with such a drug can be minimised and the effectiveness of the drug can be maximised. One trial showed that women with ovarian cancer who were given their drugs at the right time of day were four times as likely to survive for five years than other women – whose drug taking was not regulated in this way.

Other researchers have found a similar difference when treating patients with colon cancer.

It isn't just drug therapy which is influenced by time. There is evidence which suggests that far more pre-menopausal women survive breast surgery if they have an operation which is done during the second half of their menstrual cycle than if they have an operation in the first two weeks of their cycle. This difference can probably be explained by the change in hormone levels which occurs during a menstrual period.

If researchers put more effort into studies of this sort and wasted less time and money on pointless research such as animal experimentation, far more lives would be saved.

The link between surgery, breast cancer, survival rates and the menstrual cycle was first observed in 1836 so I really don't understand why more research hasn't been done to find out the precise link between hormone levels and cancer.

I honestly don't think anyone knows for certain whether or not the time of your operation will really affect your survival chances. But if I were a woman having breast surgery for cancer, I would want to have the operation done in the second half of my menstrual cycle.

Any patient who needs drug therapy should ask their doctor to check if there is any evidence to show whether the treatment works best at a particular time of day. My guess is that most doctors will have never heard of chronobiology. But getting the timing right could make a life or death difference so it is well worth while being persistent.

This really is an area where more research is needed – and needed fast. It seems to me to be quite absurd that we have failed to pay much attention at all to this absolutely vital branch of medical science. Many deaths and a good deal of illness could be avoided by the expenditure of a relatively small amount of effort in this area.

I don't have any doubt that timing is vital – for patients as well as for comedians.

Chapter Twenty Two

Listen To Your Instincts When Making Decisions

Do you have difficulty in making decisions? Do you spend hours standing in front of your wardrobe trying to decide what to wear? Do you spend ages agonising over which item to choose when dining out at a restaurant?

If you're trying to buy a new car/TV set/fridge do you find yourself oscillating helplessly between showrooms, weighed down by facts and quite incapable of coming to any firm conclusion?

There is evidence now to show that looking at all the facts and trying to assess the pros and cons of taking each particular course of action may not be the best way to make a decision.

New research suggests that individuals who suffer from something psychologists call the Hamlet syndrome (introspection combined with indecision) may be able to take a short cut when trying to take decisive action.

Neuroscientists working at the University of Iowa Medical College in the U.S. have found that the most successful decision makers are not the ones who agonise over accumulating all the evidence, and then assessing each new strand of information, before making a decision but those who are in tune with their feelings, who have a good supply of common sense and who have trained themselves to allow their instincts to take over when making decisions.

Taking decisions by 'hunch' is, it seems, in the long run more reliable than attempting to analyse all the evidence and all the possible courses of action before coming to a conclusion.

The researchers found that individuals who habitually make a cool, hard assessment of all the facts before making their decisions tend to make self-destructive choices.

(To this, of course, must be added the fact that constantly attempting to make logical, fact based decisions can be extremely time consuming and stressful.)

Although the conclusion that assessing the facts may not be the best way to make decisions undoubtedly sounds surprising, it does fit well with much anecdotal evidence I have acquired over the years.

And, after all, listening to all the carefully considered (and expensive) opinions expressed by the so-called experts can get you nowhere. Experts, who invariably claim to base their viewpoints on their highly educated and honed skills at interpreting accumulated facts frequently disagree, and if you ask two experts the same question you can invariably rely on obtaining at least two opposing viewpoints.

There are several possible reasons for this.

First, of course, some of the facts which are used may be of doubtful quality – and may not be 'facts' at all. It is not at all uncommon for prejudices and assumptions to masquerade as facts. Secondly, some facts, which may be essential, may be missing. Naturally, there is a good chance that you will not know that facts are missing if they are not there. And thirdly, it is extremely rare for any expert – however analytical and logical he or she may think him or herself – to be able to interpret facts in an entirely objective manner. Personal prejudices and past experiences often get in the way.

Making judgements according to instinct means that, by getting underneath your conscious mind, you are likely to be able to use all the information you have available. Your conscious mind may select and discriminate but your subconscious mind will have access to every piece of information you have accumulated on the subject.

Instinctive judgements can also be made with relatively little reference to those fears which are such a potent force whenever we are trying to make decisions.

If, when standing in front of your wardrobe, you decide that you will pick out the blue jacket, your conscious mind will immediately start to think of all the problems associated with the selection. Some of these problems will be based on past experiences and some will be based on illogical fears. And the more you think about the judgement you have made the greater the number of fears and problems that will spring to mind.

When you decide to abandon your first choice and make a second selection, your mind will immediately offer all the reasons why this choice is not a wise one.

In the end, you will be quite incapable of making a decision. You will have become a bundle of nerves and you will have wasted a good chunk of your life on a simple and relatively unimportant decision.

When you allow your instincts to take over – and do the decision making for you – you will free yourself from all these problems and enable yourself to make small and big decisions more readily, more accurately and with far less stress and heartache.

Now, here is some practical advice on how you can best get in touch with your instincts.

1. If you routinely spend a long time making relatively minor decisions, speed up your decision making processes by giving yourself a ten second limit for making decisions. Simply make up your mind to follow whatever thought sprang first into your mind. The chances are high that your first and instinctive decision was the right one. Getting into the habit of relying on your instincts when making minor decisions will have the added benefit of giving you increased confidence in your instinctive decision making ability. (By definition,

minor decisions don't matter all that much and so the downside – if you make a decision which can later be shown to have been wrong – will be slight. You don't have much to lose but by building up your ability to rely on your instincts you have a great deal to gain.)

2. If you have a difficult problem to solve but find yourself unable to make a decision give up and do something else. Try to find something completely different – preferably something that will occupy and distract your mind. The chances are high that when you allow your mind to drift back to the original problem an hour or so later, you will find that your subconscious mind has continued to work on the problem and has produced a solution.

3. When making instinctive decisions try to relax your body and your mind. Breathe slowly and deeply and close your eyes to cut out all stimulation from the outside world. (Naturally you should forget about the eye closing if you are sitting in your car trying to decide which route to follow – or if you are doing anything which might be hazardous if performed with closed eyes!).

4. When trying to make an instinctive decision ask yourself a specific (rather than a general) question. Don't ask yourself something vague such as: 'How can I be happy?' And don't confuse your instincts by offering a huge variety of choices all at once. Don't ask yourself: 'Shall I go to France, Italy, Switzerland, Germany or Spain for my holidays this year?' Instead, ask yourself specific questions such as 'Should I take the job as ambassador to France?' 'Should I go to Italy in August?' 'Should I sleep with Dick/Dora?'

5. If you are looking for a solution to a complex, major problem try writing down a list of as many possible answers as you can think of. Scribble down ideas just as quickly as they come into your head. Let your mind roam wherever it wants. Do this for 10 or 15 minutes and then take a close look at what you have written down. You will undoubtedly find that much of what you have written down will look silly or even stupid. These crazy notions can obviously be discarded without much further attention. But many of the other solutions you have written down will be helpful. One of your jottings may well turn out to be the very solution you have been looking for. At the very least this exercise will give you the chance to examine some previously unexpected options.

6. Do a little practise in order to sharpen up your powers of prediction. Try guessing what will happen tomorrow, next week or next year. Try to decide what the headlines are likely to be over the next few days. Try to decide what is going to happen in politics, in the economy or in forthcoming sporting events. Try to see who wins forthcoming races or competitions. Try to see yourself holding a copy of tomorrow's newspapers - and then try to read the headlines. If you try this technique frequently your brain will become increasingly efficient at sorting out information and producing instant answers. Your intuitive sense will be improved.

Chapter Twenty Three

Beware Of The Danger Of Electrosmog And Mobile Phones

Whatever the risks associated with mobile telephones may turn out to be, the risks associated with the base transmitting stations (which are, of course, essential for the functioning of the mobile telephone service) may be considerable for those individuals who live close to them.

Base stations continually irradiate those living, working and studying nearby, and although the doses of radiation are much lower than the doses produced by portable telephones or microwave ovens there may be a serious health risk. I just don't think anyone knows just how great that risk may be – or whether it is greater or smaller than the risk associated with overhead power lines.

Given the option, I would prefer not to live next to a mobile telephone base station just as I would prefer not to live under a power line. How far away is safe? I can't tell you and I don't think anyone else can either. I certainly wouldn't want to be nearer than 150 yards to a transmitter.

I have heard of one individual (a mechanical engineer) who claims that he has had constant headaches since he moved to within 100 metres of a cell phone transmitter. An artist complains of headaches and insomnia since a transmitter mast was built.

Up until now there has been very little evidence available to show that transmitters can be dangerous. However, a good deal of work was done in Switzerland. For example, researchers have shown that trees have been severely damaged by mobile phone transmitter masts.

In Schwarzenburg, Switzerland protestors managed to close down an international radio station.

After complaints from the public, 200 people living in the irradiated area were compared with 200 people in a radiation free zone in order to find out whether the transmitter did have an effect on the health of local individuals.

The study showed that serious sleep disorders were five times as common among individuals living in the irradiated area; that depressions were four times as common; that cancer was three times as common and that diabetes was twice as common. Interestingly, these disorders occurred in areas where the electromagnetic field intensity was much lower than the officially accepted safety level.

(Official safety levels do not seem to be high. Indeed, the safety levels in some countries seem to have been set at a point that will enable companies to put antenna masts right in the heart of residential areas and alongside schools and hospitals.)

The results of the study in Schwarzenburg were so alarming that the authorities took action and the transmitter was taken down.

When the transmitter had been demolished, numerous residents stated that they were sleeping better and that pains in joints and limbs had all but disappeared. Depressed residents said that they felt better and overactive children became much quieter.

* * *

Experiments on genetically engineered mice have shown that mice who are exposed to cell phone radiation are twice as likely to develop lymphoma (a type of cancer).

This evidence has, of course, been dismissed as irrelevant on the very sensible grounds that results obtained from experiments on animals cannot be applied to human beings. If the experiment had shown that the mice exposed to radiation were not more likely to develop cancer then I have no doubt that the experiment would have been regarded as providing solid proof that mobile phones are perfectly safe.)

Once again, I feel bound to point out that experiments on animals are useful only because they can be interpreted in whatever way is suitable to the authorities.

This is, of course, the technique which was used for many years by the tobacco industry and it is the same double edged trick used by the drug industry.

* * *

Governments throughout the world put a great deal of effort these days into protecting large industries. Politicians are, it seems, far more concerned with preserving the profitability of the big companies which contribute to their election campaigns than they are with preserving the health of the electors.

Since the 1980s, I have been warning my readers of the dangers of electricity.

There has for many years been a good deal of evidence showing that electromagnetic fields can be hazardous to human health.

But the public relations people working for the electrical industries around the world have so far done a good job. They seem to have persuaded both politicians and members of the public that the risks associated with electromagnetic fields are either theoretical or slight.

Research work which took nine years to complete and which verified the link between electrosmog (electromagnetic fields) and cerebral illnesses and cancer was suppressed.

The suppressed report was compiled for the US government and I am informed that it concludes: 'Even weak electromagnetic fields can impair health as soon as their effect exists over a long period. They lead to disturbance of the production of the hormone melatonin, which is known to be an important biochemical link. A deficit in this hormone favours the developing of, for example, breast cancer as well as the developing of degenerative cerebral illnesses such as Parkinson's Disease or Alzheimer's Disease, but also brings on heart problems.'

The suppressed report also confirms that electromagnetic fields can bring on leukaemia in children.

'In addition,' continue the authors of the report, 'there is an increased risk of developing leukaemia and also brain tumours for adults who are exposed to strong fields due to their professions.'

The assumption is that the electromagnetic fields cause a disturbance in the biochemical function of the cells, or influence certain genes. Both mechanisms can cause permanent damage to the cells. (Genetic engineers use microwaves to open cell membranes and insert alien genes. There must, therefore, be a real risk that the widespread use of mobile phones and microwave ovens, etc. may cause widespread and irreversible genetic damage.)

The authors of this suppressed report also point out that interactions between electromagnetic rays and the cells of the immune system can favour the beginning of cancer – and that the influence of electromagnetic fields on the reproductive organs may cause disease there too.

The authors of this suppressed study demand that more research be done and that threshold values for the intensity of electromagnetic fields be lowered to a level that would be exceeded by modern electrical wiring and ordinary household appliances.

The study also suggests that overhead power lines may be a significant threat to human health. The threshold values recommended by this suppressed U.S. report are 5,000 times lower than the internationally recognised threshold values.

It is not difficult to see why the U.S. government has suppressed this report. If the findings of the report were implemented, vast industries would be affected and very few factories, offices or homes would be considered safe.

As an interim measure, the authors of this study demand that what they call the 'permanent radiation bombardment' to which we are all subjected should be reduced step-by-step. They recommend that all overhead power lines should be removed from residential areas and that houses and schools should no longer be built anywhere near to power lines.

Sadly, I am less surprised by the fact that this report was suppressed than I would have been if it had been published. Modern politicians are controlled by big companies and their lobbyists.

Chapter Twenty Four

Learn How to Deal With People Who Make You Feel Inadequate

Is there someone in your life who makes you feel inadequate? Your mother? Your boss? A sarcastic or manipulative friend? Do you know someone who always puts you down and makes you feel a loser? Such people can cause immense physical and mental distress, make you ill and damage your life expectancy.

Here are some quick tips that should help you:

1. Ask them to tell you exactly what they want you to do. People who moan and criticise are often not very good at offering practical advice. Chances are that you will put them on the defensive – you will certainly take the sting out of their attack.

2. Don't let anyone label you unfairly. If someone tells you that you are always unreliable or disorganised give some examples which show that you are just the opposite.

3. Agree with them. This will really take the wind out of their sails.

4. Invade their space. Stand close to them. Most bullies (and this is particularly true of emotional bullies) are cowards. Move closer to them and they'll probably back away – and back down.

5. Ignore them. Say 'thank you' for the advice or comment. And just ignore it.

6. Walk away from potential scenes. Just refuse to get involved in a distressing argument.

7. Avoid people who constantly annoy or upset you. Why waste your life on people who make your life miserable? I don't care who it is – colleague, friend or close relative – if they make you unhappy cut them out of your life.

Chapter Twenty Five

Spend As Much Time As You Can In The Country

People who live in the country live a lot longer than people who live in cities. The differences are big – city dwellers are 66% more likely to die prematurely than country folk – and they are getting bigger.

You might suspect that these differences in life expectation are largely a result of variations in wealth. The poor are, after all, more likely to live in overcrowded conditions in big cities and more likely to eat an inadequate, fat rich diet. But wealth is not the primary factor. Even poor people who live in the country frequently live longer than town and city dwellers.

The truth is that many of the lifestyle choices which lead to a longer life are available to everyone – and not dependent on wealth.

Here are the real reasons why living in a city is bad for your health (together with ways in which city dwellers can improve their life expectancy):

1. Despite attempts to reduce pollution, the air that is breathed in heavily populated areas is still polluted – largely by cars. There is no easy solution to this problem – masks are uncomfortable and impractical – but regular trips out of town to breathe fresh country air do help. Keeping out of rooms filled with tobacco smoke is also wise. If you have a choice between a ground floor flat and a flat higher up, choose the flat higher up – where you are less likely to breathe in concentrated traffic fumes. Remember that breathing through the nose means that the body's natural air filter has a chance to work.

2. People who live in the country are more likely to be able to grow their own (organic) food whereas people who live in cities are more likely to eat junk food. One reader complained that it is impossible to buy genuinely organic food in large cities such as Paris. This simply isn't true – though organic food may not be available from every supermarket and corner shop, it will be available. I don't know of any large city which doesn't have a variety of health food shops where organic food can be purchased. Organic food does cost a little more than junk food – and you have to be sure that you buy from a store whose owner buys genuine organic food. But the difference in cost is more than outweighed by the savings that will be made by not having to purchase vast quantities of patent medicine – and the reduction in earning time lost through ill health.

3. Water pollution contributes to poor health and accelerated mortality rates. People who live in the country are more likely to have their own drinking water supplies (springs, bore holes, etc.). People who live in towns and cities should not drink plain tap water (which may contain a variety of chemicals) but should drink only bottled spring water. The cost of drinking cleaner water is slight. (Filtering tap water helps exclude some chemicals – and makes it safer – but does not exclude all chemicals.)

4. Generally speaking, there is far more stress in cities than there is in the country. Heavy traffic, work pressures and so on conspire to create anxiety. All this means that it is particularly important for city dwellers to learn how to deal with the stress in their lives – and to learn how to increase their resistance to stress. Planning ahead, allowing plenty of time for journeys and deliberately allowing time for relaxation are all ways to minimise the effects of city stress.

5. Loneliness is known to be a major cause of stress, unhappiness and depression in big cities. In small communities people tend to make friends and acquaintances easier than in cities. People moving to cities should join clubs, colleges, associations and so on as soon as possible in order to minimise the effects of loneliness.

6. Noise is a serious cause of stress related health problems among people living in cities. Sound proofing one room may help – as may ear plugs. City centre dwellers who choose third floor (or higher) apartments are less likely to be disturbed by street noise than lower floor inhabitants.

7. Many people who live and work in cities eat while moving or while still working at their desks. Such habits – which are uncommon among country dwellers – are part of the explanation why long-term digestive problems are so common among city dwellers.

Chapter Twenty Six

Make Sure You Drink Enough (Water)

Your body needs constant supplies of fresh water and a body which is deprived of water (or not supplied with enough) will soon fall ill. Many women who suffer from frequent urinary infections might suffer less if they drank more water. Water helps to keep muscles in good tone and helps to keep skin looking good.

If you don't drink enough water you will be more likely to suffer from constipation and other bowel disorders such as irritable bowel syndrome. The human body is made up of 75% water, and non-infectious recurring or chronic pains may suggest that your body needs more fluid.

Drinking water helps to keep your stomach full – and keeps away hunger pangs. So if you don't drink enough water the chances are high that you will feel hungry eat more food than your body needs – and put on excess weight.

Also there is some evidence to show that people who drink plenty of water metabolise stored fat more efficiently. Drinking good amounts of water also helps the body flush out toxins and other waste materials which, if allowed to accumulate, may do harm. Chronic dehydration may well be a fundamental cause of many common diseases.

How much water should you drink? A healthy adult with well functioning kidneys should probably drink six to eight 8 oz glasses of water a day – I suspect that is far more than most people drink. It is obviously important to make sure that the water is clean, fresh and free from chemical and bacterial contamination.

The water which comes out of your tap – and which may contain chemicals – may not satisfy this requirement unless you filter it first. I wouldn't trust any water company to put chemicals into my drinking water. I believe that the possible risks associated with the addition of fluoride far exceed the benefits. If the people putting the fluoride into the water get the amounts wrong, the results can be devastating. Too much fluoride can cause mottling of the teeth, bone disorders and even cancer. Just one person making one mistake could be catastrophic. Are you completely happy that no one working for your water company is ever going to make a mistake? The possibility of fluoride poisoning isn't my only worry about drinking water. Having carefully considered all the evidence I have come to the conclusion that tap water is now unsafe to drink in many areas. Tap water is frequently taken from rivers which are partly fed with waste water which contains residues of prescription drugs, hormones and other chemicals. These cannot be removed, and so drinking water contains residues of prescription drugs, hormones and other chemicals.

It is also important to remember that drinking lots of tea and coffee or alcohol isn't the same as drinking lots of water. Alcoholic drinks and drinks containing caffeine have a diuretic effect – they induce the body to get rid of water. You can use 'dilute to taste' fruit drinks if you like but I certainly don't recommend that you drink six to eight 8 oz glasses of fizzy drink every day. Naturally, if you have a health problem (particularly one which relates to your kidneys) you should talk to your doctor before increasing your fluid intake. You may need to increase your fluid intake slowly, to get your body used to the change. If you drink too much water, your kidneys may be unable to cope and your body may retain the fluid.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Before You Travel Ask Yourself If Your Journey Is Really Necessary

If you spend a day sitting in trains or aeroplanes you will probably arrive at your destination feeling exhausted – even though you haven't done anything except sit, eat and read. You may have even noticed that the faster you travel the more exhausted you feel. For example, if you go by plane you may arrive at my destination feeling more worn out than if you travel by train.

There is a simple explanation for this.

If you travel with a mobile telephone, you will find that the battery wears out far more speedily than normal. The explanation for this phenomenon is that the telephone is constantly searching for new base stations.

We know that the human mind is strongly influenced by magnetic fields and that human beings can determine exactly where they are by using magnetic fields and forces, and I have a theory (and I admit that it is only a theory) that constant travelling wears out the brain in exactly the same way that constant travelling exhausts the battery of a mobile telephone. When you travel, your brain is constantly working hard to get its bearings. This explains why the faster you travel the more exhausted you get.

If I am right about this then it might, I suppose, be possible to solve the problem by giving trains and aircraft cabins their own magnetic field – with a force slightly stronger than the one normally exerted on the brain. However, interfering with nature in this way could well turn out to be exceedingly dangerous. My best long-term suggestion is a very simple one: travel by train (rather than aeroplane) as often as you can and thereby cut down the speed at which you travel. Travelling by train offers other advantages too: your risk of acquiring an infection will probably be lower since the air on aeroplanes is usually simply recirculated – with the result that all the passengers share one another's bugs; you can reduce your risk of developing a deep vein thrombosis by walking about occasionally, and the food will probably be better. Travelling by trains also means that you don't have to go through airports – probably the least friendly, most stressful places on earth.

Chapter Twenty Eight

Don’t Have Too Many X-rays

For well over two decades I have been warning that doctors take far too many X-rays – and that since X-rays are known to be potentially hazardous, these unnecessary investigations probably result in many unnecessary deaths.

The evidence to support my claim is accumulating.

For example, a book published in the US by Dr John W Gofman estimates that ‘about three quarters of the current incidence of breast cancer in the United States is being caused by earlier ionizing radiation, primarily from medical sources.’

Many doctors and dentists treat X-rays as though they are entirely harmless.

Some dentists do routine X-rays whenever they see their patients – apparently unaware that they may well be endangering their patients’ lives.

And thousands of doctors do routine X-rays out of habit or to provide protection against possible lawsuits.

The doctor or dentist who tells you that an X-ray is perfectly safe, is a dangerous and uninformed fool.

Research has shown that in the US, the incidence of cancer rises in step with the number of doctors in an area. The over-enthusiasm of doctors for X-rays probably explains this.

Here, it seems, is more evidence to support my belief that doctors are now a major cause of disease and premature death in our society.

It is now becoming increasingly difficult for the medical establishment to dispute my claim that doctors now do more harm than good.

So what can you do to protect yourself from unnecessary X-rays?

Before being X-rayed, ask the doctor or dentist whether the X-ray is essential or simply routine.

Does the doctor suspect that something is wrong? Or is he merely taking the X-ray out of habit? Do you have any symptoms which suggest that an X-ray examination is necessary? Make the doctor (or dentist) think twice and she may decide that the X-rays isn’t necessary after all.

And remember that many routine X-rays are simply taken because doctors know that if a patient ever takes them to court, the lawyers will regard a failure to X-ray as a sign of incompetence and malpractice.

If a doctor or dentist looking after me confirmed that he was only taking an X-ray for legal reasons (and not because he expected the X-ray to help him decide how best to treat me), I would ask that he accept a short note, signed by me, confirming that I had rejected the offer of an X-ray.

X-rays were a great discovery. They can save lives. But they can also kill.

Chapter Twenty Nine

Your Body (And Mind) Need Light And Sunshine To Survive

A friend of mine once complained that for a year his health had been steadily deteriorating. He had difficulty in sleeping, he constantly felt depressed and his wife had complained (and he admitted that he knew it was true) that he had become exceedingly irritable.

There were physical symptoms too. He had acquired an itchy skin rash which had proved to be resistant to everything his doctor could think of prescribing. And he had constant, and exceedingly debilitating, headaches.

There was one pretty clear clue.

The symptoms had started immediately after a move to a new office building. They had disappeared completely during a two week summer holiday. And they had returned immediately after his return to work.

When I told him that I would lay odds that his symptoms were in some way related to his work, my friend dismissed the very idea with a firm shake of his head.

Stubbornly he insisted that he enjoyed his work, suffered very little from stress and spent 99% of his working time in a brand new, purpose built office where there could not possibly lurk any unseen dangers to his health.

'I don't work in out-of-date sweat shop!' he told me, rather proudly – and not a little indignantly. 'It's a state of the art office building. The architects consulted with medical and ergonomic experts. We have, for example, got an incredibly efficient heating and air conditioning system.'

I asked him to invite me to his office so that I could see if I could spot any potential health hazard that he and they might have missed.

When I entered my friend's 'state of the art open plan office building', I could hardly believe my eyes.

There were no windows. Not one.

The offices were lit entirely by artificial light and, presumably to save installation and running costs, the building was inadequately supplied with overhead light fittings. Each worker in this 21st century hive had access to a low wattage multi directional lamp (to reduce eyestrain and improve working efficiency) but there was so little general lighting that my eyes, unaccustomed as they were to the gloomy, could hardly see across to the other side of the room.

'I bet your sickness rate has tripled since you moved here,' I said to my friend.

He looked at me, clearly puzzled. 'It has, as a matter of fact. But who told you that?'

'No one,' I replied. 'They didn't have to.' I waved a hand around in the semi darkness. 'If you carry on working here there is a good chance that you will end up being hospitalised,' I told him quite seriously.

My friend laughed, rather nervously. But he refused to find another job or ask to be transferred. Five months later he was admitted to hospital suffering from a severe depression.

The depression was, quite wrongly in my view, attributed to stress. I have no doubt that the depression – and his other symptoms – were caused exclusively by the fact that he spent at least half of his waking life in semi darkness. During the winter months, he spent nearly all his waking life in various stages of gloom.

* * *

It has been known for centuries that sunlight and artificial light have a powerful impact on both physical and mental health. Hippocrates believed in the therapeutic value of sunlight, and for generations afterwards the Greeks accepted this link. But Hippocrates was by no means the first physican to acknowledge the relationship between sunlight and good health. Sunshine was accepted as a healing force in the early civilisation of Mesopotamia.

This long established truth may be denied or ignored by the cerebrally deficient and drug company sponsored hordes who rule the medical establishment but I would seriously argue that the relationship between light and health has been better proven than most of the poison, slash and burn therapies favoured by orthodox practitioners (which frequently do far more harm than good).

The health benefits of natural sunlight have been used for centuries.

(Surprisingly, many of those doctors who would sneer at the idea that sunlight might have a therapeutic effect would probably not see anything odd in the fact that they regularly tell their patients that the human body can obtain all the vitamin D it needs simply through modest regular exposure of the hands, arms and face to sunlight.)

And then, in the 1980s, it was established that individuals who are deprived of sunlight may develop a condition called Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) – and that the condition can be treated with exposure to light.

* * *

Could light therapy do more and be used to combat more disorders?

I believe it could. Ultraviolet light is known to have antibacterial, antiviral and antifungal properties and there are many who claim that it can be used to help disorders as varied as heart disease, menstrual problems, weak bones, and cancer.

Tragically, however, this low profit therapy (and those who have dared to advocate it) have been dismissed and maligned by the ever-powerful medical establishment which, encouraged one presumes by the greedy and enormously unethical pharmaceutical industry, is never enthusiastic about what might be seen as a competitive therapy.

(Governments may have – just about – stopped burning books (although this may be temporary) but they still suppress cures and remedies which threaten the economic success of established forces.)

I would not recommend that sunlight or natural light (or even coloured light) should be regarded as a sole form of therapy for all the disorders which it is has been claimed can be helped in this way.

But I do firmly believe that sunlight and natural light are, when combined with such other factors as a healthy diet, essential for good health and vital in the treatment of disease.

The lesson here is clear: those of us who spend a good deal of time indoors should do everything we can to ensure that we are exposed to as much natural light as possible. Choose a well lit home over a dark one, keep curtains open as much as possible and spend time outside (while taking the obvious precautions against sun induced cancers).

Chapter Thirty

The Healing Power of Touch

Back in the 13th century, an extremely nasty German Emperor called Frederick II conducted a pretty unforgivably hideous experiment to find out what language children would speak if they were brought up without hearing anyone talking.

If this work had been done during the Second World War, Dr Josef Mengele would have done the research and Hitler would have financed it. If the research was done these days, it would be carried out by a university department and paid for by a large international drug company looking for an outlet for a new drug designed to improve linguistic ability.

But Frederick II, a pretty ingenious sadist by anyone's standards, probably had to pay for his ungodly research work out of his own pocket.

The research procedure was simple. He took a number of newborn babies away from their parents and gave them to nurses. The nurses were told that they must not touch or talk to the children.

The experiment wasn't much of a success because the babies never grew old enough to learn to talk. Consequently, they never learned a language.

A contemporary authority called Salimbene was almost certainly accurate when he concluded that the babies 'could not live without petting'.

In other words, the babies died because they were deprived of human touch.

During the First World War, a survey of ten institutions revealed that every baby who was less than two-years-old had died. Not one baby had survived in any of the institutions.

The babies did not die of infection. And they had enough to eat. So what killed them?

Could it have been the fact that all the institutions had introduced a policy (which was strictly followed) that in order to minimise the spread of infectious diseases the babies should be touched as infrequently as possible?

I think it's very likely. In recent years, it has become increasingly clear that touching, and being touched, are essential ingredients for a healthy life.

A survey in the US showed that premature babies who were given three loving massages every day for ten days gained weight much faster than babies who weren't touched in this way. How much faster? A staggering 47%! The babies who were given the loving massages left hospital six days sooner than the others – leading to an enormous cash saving for the hospital (or the parents or insurance company).

Hundreds of other studies and research projects have shown that infants, children and adults all survive better – and more healthily – if they are given lots of cuddles and touched a great deal. Without physical signs of affection, we become more brittle, less emotionally stable and considerably more susceptible to fear, stress and pressure.

It has been shown that babies who are deprived of a close physical relationship become emotionally unstable and develop more slowly than other babies, while children who are deprived of cuddles and hugs become 'harder' and 'tougher' in physical and emotional terms. Eventually they, in turn, will show less affection to those around them.

Moreover, other studies have shown that touching programmes such as massage can help patients suffering from an enormous range of disorders – including depression, cancer, diabetes, eating disorders, stress and arthritis.

Now, I can understand why massage may help someone suffering from a muscle disorder. But how can a plain old-fashioned massage possibly help someone suffering from cancer or depression?

There obviously can't be any purely physical response.

The only possible conclusion has to be that the massage produces a positive psychological effect which creates a general, body-wide improvement in health. The physical touching (the massage) produces a mental or psychological response which triggers a measurable physical effect.

And that, indeed, has been shown to be the case.

A study of HIV positive men found that if they were massaged for just one month there was a significant increase in the number and effectiveness of the natural killer cells in their bodies.

There can be no doubt that touching is a form of healing that works. There are no side effects. It doesn't cost anything. It requires no skill and no training.

But no one can make any profit out of this technique. And so we ignore it.

'The word massage has acquired a rather seedy reputation in recent years,' I wrote in my book *Mindpower*, back in the 1980s, 'thanks largely to the fact that it is frequently linked with such words as 'topless' and 'relief'. But a thorough massage can be extremely relaxing and soothing. It can help give us an excuse to touch one another. And it certainly can be therapeutic.'

I pointed out in that same book that it is sometimes possible to soothe a troubled individual to sleep by gently massaging his or her forearm with a single finger.

As a junior hospital doctor, I often used this simple technique with remarkable success when I was helping to look after elderly patients or small babies who couldn't rest or get to sleep. My theory was and is that this simple technique worked best with people at either end of the age spectrum because they were least likely to be offended, embarrassed or shocked.

Researchers all around the world have shown that we can all benefit from a warm, caring relationship – and that simple physical expressions of our caring can be therapeutic. Insurance companies have shown that if a wife kisses her husband goodbye when he sets off to work in a morning he will be less likely to have a car accident on the way to his office or factory. Amazingly, men who get a morning kiss (and a half-hearted peck on the cheek isn't as good as a proper kiss) live five years longer than men who don't get that morning kiss.

Despite all this evidence (much of which has been available for a number of years now) doctors have done little or nothing to encourage patients to take advantage of this facility for healing.

(Cynics will argue – and, as I have already suggested, I would find it difficult to disagree with them – that touching isn't promoted or even discussed because no one has worked out how to make a profit out of it.)

* * *

One of my favourite hobbies is sitting in cafes 'people watching'.

An American psychologist who tried this noticed that there are vast differences between the number of times people in different cities touch one another.

In Puerto Rico, a couple will touch one another 180 times an hour. In Paris, couples touch 110 times an hour. In the US, the figure is two. Yes, couples in America touched one another just twice in an hour. And in London? Zero. Nought. Never. The reserved British hardly ever touch one another in public. (And they don't touch one another very much in private either.) It is hardly surprising that stress related diseases seem to be commoner in Britain than anywhere else in the world.

In many mainland European countries, people are constantly touching one another – even if it is only to shake hands, pat one another on the arm or shoulder. In France, friends kiss one another on the cheek when they meet and when they part. Become a 'regular' in a French cafe and the waiter and the patron will rush to shake you by the hand when you walk in. The Americans and the British, overcome by reserve and political correctness, shy away from touching one another at all.

* * *

We should all take advantage of the power of touch. Touch other people as often as you can. And encourage them to touch you too. Get someone else to give you a manicure or a shampoo or a massage. Kiss and hug your close relatives when you see them and when you say goodbye to them. And remember that it is just as important that you do not shy away when someone who is close to you approaches with a kiss, a hug or some other physical sign of affection. Try to get rid of old-fashioned prejudices against showing affection in public. Some people still think it is wrong for couples to hold hands or exchange kisses in the street. What nonsense! Whatever your age you are never too old (or too young) to hold hands in public.

These prejudices against touching are based on an unhealthy mixture of guilt and unnatural embarrassment.

Touching someone shows them that you care. Done gently and with affection it is the physical manifestation of loving and caring. It could prolong your life by several years. And, together with a low fat vegetarian diet, an effective approach to stress management and regular gentle exercise it could well help you overcome at least some existing health problems as effectively (and more safely) as anything the modern medical profession has to offer.

Final Thought…

Learn How To Navigate Life's Rock Strewn Passageways

Have you noticed that every small company seems to have a mission statement these days? Your local cobbler probably has one tacked up above the counter. Even the chip shop probably has one.

Having a mission sounds pretty corny. And it is true that many of the commercial ones are trite, pretentious and false and born out of commercial expediency rather than a passionate yearning to do what is right.

But there is good sense in having your own mission statement: a map for life; a small collection of very personal guidelines designed to help you navigate life's rock strewn passageways.

Simply earning a living isn't a reason enough to get up and go to work.

And keeping up with the dull, predictable antics of TV soap characters isn't the sort of driving purpose which will give your life real meaning.

Most people spend their lives being battered around by circumstances; rarely, if ever, in control of their own lives or their destinies.

Time and effort is wasted collecting material stuff which has no lasting worth and which provides little more than transient satisfaction.

To have a sense of worth, a sense of identity and a feeling of genuine self-esteem you must identify the things which are really important to you.

Here are some pretty basic questions that you may not have asked yourself very often in the past:

What would you die for?

What do you live for?

What do you want to achieve with your life?

Do you want to be remembered for what you are doing with your life now?

If you die tomorrow will you have made full use of your talents?

Will you have realised your potential?

How long is it since you asked yourself really searching questions about what you really stand for?

How much of your life do you fritter away on trivial and inconsequential activities – while the really important things (the things which will make a difference to you and to other people) are put to one side and eventually forgotten?

You can give your life solid principles for the future – and a mission to ensure that you always know exactly where you are heading and why.

Here are my eleven suggestions – a team of principles and proposals designed to help give your life meaning and purpose and to provide you with a stable base in a very wobbly world. These are very personal suggestions. You may feel that some of them are inappropriate. You may not like any of them. But, hopefully, you will feel that they trigger off some thoughts of your own.

1. Get to know yourself. Understand what you really want out of life. And learn to respect yourself and others. If you respect yourself then you have a right to expect others to respect you too. How can you possibly expect other people to respect you if you don't even respect yourself? Remember that courtesy is an important way of showing respect.

2. Spend your time carefully – remembering that time is the most valuable commodity any of us have. The things which matter most to you should not be at the mercy of things which matter not at all. It is easy to put off the important things and to fritter away the hours on trivia. Into every life must come some crap. And these days the crap rains down in bucketfuls. Whoever you are, wherever you work, however you would like to spend your days, you will find yourself dealing with bureaucracy, with forms and with pointless paperwork. Some of the crap is unavoidable. But much of it you can ignore. Or you can, at least, determine to give the important things in your life precedence over the crap. Never forget that when you sell (or give away) your time, you are selling (or giving away) part of your life.

3. Give yourself short, medium and long-term targets. Decide where you want to go in life and where you want to be in five, ten and twenty years time. Without a map, there is a risk that you will wander around aimlessly; frittering away your days, your months and eventually your life. Remember that you cannot possibly begin to live properly until you have found something for which you would die.

4. Say 'no' to the unimportant things. Every day you have to say 'no' to something. Make sure you say 'no' to the things which don't matter. Remember that every choice involves a cost.

5. Stand up for those who are weaker or more vulnerable than you are. Bullying and cruelty are abhorrent and when we say nothing we dishonour ourselves. Remember that cruelty to animals is just as unforgivable as

cruelty to human beings.

6. Be aware that the way you see the problem is the problem. What matters is not so much what we experience but how we respond to our experiences.

7. Never stop learning. Strive constantly to improve the skills you have and to acquire new skills. And remember that if you learn from your mistakes then they help you grow stronger. Remember too to remain sceptical when confronted with claims made for new products, treatments or cures. It is becoming increasingly difficult to separate the honest from the dishonest. The more you know the more you will be able to spot the dishonest.

8. Concentrate your efforts on those areas where you can have influence. And gradually try to expand the extent of your influence. Do not make the mistake of thinking that you are without influence. You can have all the influence you want.

9. Learn to understand other people's needs and fears. When you listen to someone, try to understand things from their point of view. Do not try to see their problem through your eyes and do not rush in with advice before you understand their needs and fears.

10. Allow your conscience to speak to you. And learn to listen. Never compromise with your principles. Your principles are what you are. They define you. Focus on your principles and let them run your life.

11. Remember that the best, simplest and easiest question to ask yourself is: 'Why?' Ask it when you are about to move house, take a new job or take on any new responsibility. Why do you want to buy a holiday home? Why do you want to buy a new car? Only when you ask yourself 'Why?' will you know what you really need and what you are prepared to do for it. Most people earn and spend without ever asking themselves 'Why?' Ask yourself 'Why?' more often and you will learn more about yourself and about what you are doing with your life.

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Dr Vernon Coleman MB ChB DSc FRSA is a qualified doctor and bestselling author who has written over 100 books which have sold more than two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK alone. His books have been translated into 25 languages and sold around the world. Many of his books are available as Kindle books on Amazon. For more details about available books please see his author page on Amazon. For free articles and so forth please visit: http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

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HOW TO STOP YOUR DOCTOR KILLING YOU

Vernon Coleman

How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You

The person most likely to kill you is not a burglar, a mugger, a deranged relative or a drunken driver. The person most likely to kill you is your doctor. That's a fact. This book explains how to protect yourself from this serious threat to your life and good health.

Vernon Coleman

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For a list of over 100 books by Vernon Coleman please see either www.vernoncoleman.com or Amazon Author Central. Vernon Coleman MB ChB DSc is a registered and licensed medical practitioner.

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Note

This book is not intended as an alternative to personal, professional medical advice. The reader should consult a physician in all matters relating to health, and particularly in respect of any symptoms which may require diagnosis or medical attention.

While the advice and information in this book are believed to be accurate, neither the author nor the publisher can accept any legal responsibility or liability for any errors or omissions that may be made.

Warning

The person most likely to kill you is not a relative or a friend, or a mugger or a burglar or a drunken driver. The person most likely to kill you is your doctor. That’s a fact. This book will show you how to look after yourself and to protect yourself from this serious threat to your life and good health.

> *`Tell the truth, and you are likely to be a pariah within your family, a semi-criminal to authorities and damned with faint praise by your peers. So why do we do it? Because saying what you think is the only freedom.'*
>
> ERICA JONG

Foreword

Why How and When Doctors Do More Harm than Good

Over the years the medical establishment has acquired a well-deserved reputation for ignoring good discoveries (which would make a dramatic difference to human health) and continuing with useless practices (which do more harm than good) long after they should have abandoned them. The medical profession, or, rather, perhaps I should say 'the medical establishment' has always been slow to accept and assimilate new ideas.

I have long thought that the main problem with modern medical education is that it is largely based upon learning by rote and upon eliminating all original thought. It only occurred to me recently that this is deliberate since the aim of an orthodox modern medical education is to help maintain the status quo (and preserve the position of the pharmaceutical industry). Right from the very beginning young students are made to learn long lists of information. They learn the names of the bones, the arteries, the nerves and the veins in the body. They learn the names of the muscles and they learn the histology of the various organs. They then learn lists of clinical signs and symptoms. And they learn lists of drugs. At no point are students encouraged to think for themselves.

As a result it is not surprising that after graduation most doctors continue to do as they are told. The average doctor is strangely incapable of critical thought. Given the indoctrination they have undergone it is hardly surprising that doctors readily accept everything they are told by the drug companies (which more or less control post graduate education) and equally readily reject alternative medicine - something which never made an appearance in the undergraduate syllabus and which cannot, therefore, be of any value.

(It also occurred to me recently that the authorities deliberately make formal medical education a lengthy business in order to make sure that by the time they qualify the vast majority of doctors will be nodding yes men and women.)

Turning out doctors who are incapable of original thought, and who are unwilling to question the status quo, naturally means that our hospitals aren't renowned for developing new ideas. It also means that most GPs simply plod through their careers doing what the drug companies want them to do. This wouldn't matter too much if the doctors who aren't creative thinkers were reasonably receptive to original thinking from other people. But they aren't.

There is nothing new about this. The greatest thinkers - the ones who have, in the end, contributed most to medicine and human health - have always been scorned or ignored (or preferably both) by the medical establishment. The establishment has always manipulated the truth to suit its own political, religious or commercial purposes. Simple truths which are inconvenient have always been suppressed. It happened in the past, it will happen in the future and it happens now.

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Few medical stories illustrate the way the medical establishment works better than the story of how scurvy was discovered and how the treatment for it was ignored for centuries.

In 1535 Jacques Cartier sailed from France to Newfoundland with a crew of 110 men. Within six weeks a hundred of his men had developed scurvy. Luckily for Cartier and his men a native told them to drink the juice from the fruit of local trees. The men recovered in days. From that time on wise sea captains made sure that their men were given regular supplies of orange or lemon juice. In a book called The Surgeons Mate, published in 1636 John Woodall recommended that these juices be used to prevent scurvy. But the medical establishment was slow to accept this sensible suggestion. In 1747 the idea was reintroduced by James Lind, who conducted a proper clinical trial and proved that scurvy could be prevented with the right diet. It was Lind's work which enabled Captain Cook (he was a Lieutenant at the time) to sail around the world without a single case of scurvy.

The admiralty and the medical establishment continued to ignore all this. In the Seven Years War, from 1756 to 1763, approximately half of the 185,000 sailors involved died of scurvy. In 1779 the Channel Fleet had 2,400 cases of scurvy after a single ten week cruise.

Eventually, in 1795 the medical establishment (and the navy) succumbed to common sense and lemon juice became a compulsory part of every sailor's diet. (Hence the nickname 'limey' for a British sailor.) This breakthrough took well over two centuries to be accepted.

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There is no doubt that Paracelsus (Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim to his friends) is the father of modern medicine. He tore into the precepts of established medical thinking with all the zeal of a missionary. He revolutionised medical thinking throughout Europe and scandalised the medical establishment by claiming to have learned more from his contact with witches and midwives than from his study of ancient and well revered medical texts. No idea or theory was too bizarre to be studied and considered and no belief, no practice and no concept too sacred to be rejected. He was the first man to associate mining with chest disease, to use mercury in the treatment of syphilis, to advocate allowing wounds to drain instead of smothering them with layers of dried dung and to argue that some foods contained poisons which harmed the human body. Paracelsus scandalised the establishment by claiming that he was interested more in pleasing the sick than his own profession. He was, not surprisingly, rejected by the medical establishment and widely and persistently persecuted for beliefs. It was years after his death that his ideas were recognised. (Even today there are many within the medical establishment who still regard him as a renegade and a dangerous maverick.)

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In the sixteenth century Andreas Vesalius achieved contemporary notoriety and eternal fame as the author of the first textbook of human anatomy, '*De Humanis Corporis Fabrica*'. Up until Vesalius medical students had studied anatomy using texts prepared by Galen. Since Galen used pigs not human corpses for his studies his anatomical notes were, to say the least, rather misleading.

Vesalius's frank rejection of many of Galen's anatomical claims earned him considerable disapproval. The medical establishment still firmly believed that Galen could do no wrong. They weren't interested in anything as superficial and irrelevant as evidence.

Like so many original thinkers before and after him Vesalius was unable to cope with the outcry. He burnt his remaining manuscripts, abandoned his study of anatomy and took a job as court physician to Charles V in Madrid.

(Vesalius wasn't the only anatomist whose work was rejected. In the 17th century British doctor William Harvey spent eight years researching the circulation of the blood - and getting it right. His patience was rewarded with ridicule. He received nothing but abuse. He lost many friends and his practice shrank.)

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When Ambrose Pare, the great French surgeon, first started work as an army surgeon it was accepted practice to stop a haemorrhage by sealing a wound with a red hot iron. Amputations were performed with a red hot knife and the wounds which were left were sealed with boiling oil. One day Pare ran out of boiling oil and used a mild emollient to dress the wounds of the men he was treating. He worried all night about what he had done but the next day he found that his patients were not only healthy but that they were also in less pain than the men whose wounds had been sealed with boiling oil. Pare was wise enough to learn from this and from that day on he started dressing wounds with an emollient rather than boiling oil. He also introduced ligatures, artificial limbs and many surgical instruments. Inevitably, Pare met the usual fate of innovators and reformers (who get a rougher ride within the world of medicine than anywhere else). He was denounced by other surgeons as dangerous and unprofessional. Older surgeons banded together to oppose him and in their attempts to discredit him they attacked him for all sorts of things - for example, his ignorance of Latin and Greek. Pare eventually succeeded because the soldiers he treated trusted him and wanted to be treated by him. They weren't interested in the views of the French medical establishment.

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When Tsar Paul came to power in Russia in 1796 he was so horrified at the state of the hospital in Moscow that he ordered it to be rebuilt. In Frankfurt in the 18th century physicians considered working in hospital to be equivalent to a sentence of death.

In 1788 Jacobus-Rene Tenon published a report on the hospitals of Paris which shocked city officials. He described how the Hotel Dieu (the magnificent looking hospital next to Notre Dame) contained 1200 beds but up to 7,000 patients - with up to six patients crammed into each bed. The stench in the hospital was so foul that people who entered would do so holding a vinegar soaked sponge to their noses. Very few patients escaped from the hospital with their lives. When reformer John Howard toured European hospitals he reported that no fresh air, no sunlight, straw as bedding, no bandages and a milk and water diet supplemented with weak soup were standard. The reports of Tenon and Howard were ignored and dismissed for years and it took decades for the medical establishment to make any real changes.

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In the 18th century the treatment of the mentally ill was abysmal. Daniel Defoe, best remembered for his story of the adventures of Robinson Crusoe wrote a vicious attack on mental hospitals. 'Is it not enough to make anyone mad,' he asked, ' to be suddenly clap'd up, stripp'd, whipp'd, ill fed and worse us'd? To have no reason assigned for such treatment, no crime alleged or accusers to confront? And what is worse, no soul to appeal to but merciless creatures who answer but in laughter, surliness, contradiction and too often stripes?' No one took much notice and medical practitioners continued to treat mentally ill patients without respect or care.

At the Bethlem Royal Hospital half naked patients were kept chained in irons. Physicians bled their patients once a year and the more troublesome patients were put on a tranquillising wheel. Until 1770 visitors could pay a penny to see the 'fun' at Bedlam. John Wesley, founder of the Wesleyan Church, who considered himself a benefactor of the mentally ill, suggested pouring water onto the heads of the mentally ill and forcing them to eat nothing but apples for a month. Wesley was one of the first men to use electricity in the attempted treatment of the mentally ill. Despite the protests of reformers such as Philippe Pinel (who shocked the establishment in the late 18th century by claiming that the mentally ill were sick and needed treatment) mental hospitals were, well into the 19th century, still quite unsuitable for people needing medical treatment.

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There was never any evidence to show that it did any good but blood- letting was a favourite therapeutic tool for centuries. The fact that removing blood from a patient made him or her quieter was regarded as proof that it was doing some good. (This is no dafter than the rationale used to explain some modern treatments.) Blood-letting was easy to perform and it was something to do. Doctors have always felt the need to do something to their patients. (Possibly because it is difficult to explain away a big fee if all you do is give advice.) Leeches were hugely popular in the 19th century. In 1824 two million leeches were imported into France. In 1832 the figure had risen to 57 million a year.

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In 1843 the American poet, novelist and anatomist Oliver Wendell Holmes read to the Boston Society for Medical Improvement a paper entitled *'On The Contagiousness of Puerperal Fever*'. He argued that the disease could be carried from patient to patient by doctors. He suggested that surgeons should consider changing their clothes and washing their hands after leaving a patient with puerperal fever. His lecture annoyed the medical establishment and his advice was ignored completely. A similar fate befell Ignaz Philipp Semmelweiss who, in 1846, at the age of 28, became an assistant in an obstetric ward at the Allgemeines Krankenhaus in Vienna. Semmelweiss noticed that the number of women dying in his ward was higher than the number dying in other wards. It wasn't difficult to notice this. Women would beg, in tears, not to be taken into Semmelweiss's ward. Deciding that he wasn't that bad a doctor Semmelweiss looked for an explanation and came to the conclusion that the major difference was that patients on his ward were looked after by medical students whereas the patients on other wards were looked after by midwives. Semmelweiss then discovered that the students came straight to the ward from the dissecting room where they had had their hands stuck into the corpses of women who had died from puerperal fever. The midwives never went near to the dissecting room. Semmelweiss instructed the medical students that they should start washing their hands in a solution of calcium chloride after coming from the dissecting room. The remedy produced a dramatic drop in the death rate on his ward.

Predictably the medical establishment was not well pleased - even though Semmelweiss had proved his point very dramatically. The unfortunate young doctor couldn't cope with the rejection. He became an outcast and died in a mental hospital a few years later. The medical establishment had scored another hollow victory. Once again the patients were the losers.

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You might have thought that the medical establishment would have welcomed anaesthesia. After all before anaesthetics were available surgeons had to get their patients drunk or knock them out with a blow to the head. Surgeons would often operate with the patient held down by four strong men. The first operation under anaesthesia was performed at the Massachusetts General Hospital in 1846. But the establishment was going to accept this new-fangled nonsense lying down. The main objection was that anaesthetics were being used to help women who were in labour. And that, said the establishment, just wasn't acceptable. It was, said the wise men, unnatural and unhealthy for women to deliver babies without suffering pain. 'In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children,' says the bible. However, the religious barbarians were eventually overcome by Dr James Simpson who trumped the bible quoters with this quote: 'And the Good Lord caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam and he slept; and He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh instead thereof.' The opposition to anaesthesia was finally quelled when Queen Victoria gave birth to Prince Leopold while under the influence of chloroform.

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In 1867 Joseph Lister published a paper in *The Lancet* entitled '*On the Antiseptic Principle in the Practice of Medicine'*. Lister had found a solution to the age old problem of post-operative infection. But the medical establishment doesn't like change, even if it means keeping patients alive. And Lister found himself being attacked by doctors who ignored the evidence but disapproved of his new techniques simply because they were new. It was decades before the 'antiseptic principle' was accepted. (One of the reasons why hospital infections are so commonplace today is that doctors and nurses seem to believe that they can use antibiotics instead of washing their hands. Incompetence, carelessness and ignorance mean that the quality of cleanliness in the average modern hospital is little better than it was in a hospital in the middle ages.)

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Until the 1980s it was routine for surgery on babies to be performed without anaesthesia on the grounds that babies are incapable of feeling pain. There was no evidence for this claim (one which any mother would be able to oppose with credible if anecdotal evidence) but anaesthetists were taught that babies had immature nervous systems and so didn't need pain killers.

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Above I have described just a few of the hundreds (probably thousands) of examples I could give to illustrate the way that the medical establishment has always opposed original thought and has protected the status quo - regardless of the effect on patients. My book '*The Story of Medicine*' is packed with examples illustrating the way that the medical establishment has acted in the interests of the profession but against the interests of patients and my book 'Spiritpower' also contains material describing how and why imaginative, thoughtful and creative individuals have always had a hard time.

The real tragedy is that absolutely nothing has changed. The medical establishment is still responsible for protecting medical procedures which do not work and have never worked (and which expose patients to great risk) while at the same time it opposes and suppresses treatments which do work and have been proved to work. Anyone who dares to offer warnings which don't fit in with the specific requirements of the medical establishment will get the Semmelweiss treatment.

Over the last thirty years I have published many warnings (many of them about particular pharmaceutical products or about the pharmaceutical industry in general). The medical establishment has always scoffed, sneered, ridiculed and done its best to suppress my warnings and ensure that they were ignored by others. In the beginning medical spokesmen would openly laugh at my warnings. (These days they prefer to ignore them and hope that no one will notice - they are, I suspect, becoming wary of my track record and aware that history is rather more on my side than theirs.)

Below is a list of just a few of the warnings I have made in the last few decades. In every case my initial warnings were dismissed as inaccurate, irrelevant or inconsequential. I wonder how many people died because the medical establishment preferred to protect industrial conglomerates rather than look after the interests of individual patients.

Below I have listed a tiny fraction of the warnings which, when I first published them (often years before anyone else - for example I was warning about the hazards of genetic engineering in the 1970s), aroused scepticism and attracted scorn from doctors, politicians and journalists. Although I was widely attacked by governments, the medical establishment and many parts of the media for making these warnings the accuracy of many (but by no means all) of the forecasts, predictions, exposes and warnings on the above list are now widely accepted by the medical profession and the media. On countless occasions I have also issued specific warnings about named drugs.

1. Benzodiazepine tranquillisers such as Valium and Ativan can be addictive.
2. Passive smoking causes cancer.
3. Mobile phones (and masts) and power lines may cause cancer.

4. Tap water contains harmful drug residues.

5. Drug side effects are a major cause of illness and death.

6. Genetic engineering (in all its forms) can be a threat to human health.

7. Many patients can control their high blood pressure without drugs.

8. Although many medical screening programmes are profitable for doctors they are not much good to patients.

9. The quality of care varies enormously from hospital to hospital. The quality of hospital care is a lottery – depending on where you live.

10. Mad Cow Disease can affect humans. (And Mad Cow Disease is found in sheep.)

11. Warnings about the threat of AIDS to heterosexuals were wildly exaggerated. Far too much money has been wasted on AIDS - which may well not exist as a specific disease.

12. Tuberculosis will return as a major threat.

13. The overuse of antibiotics causes superbugs and drug resistant infections.

14. Deep vein thrombosis is a serious threat to air travellers.

15. Air conditioning systems can spread disease.

16. Doctors often treat identical patients with identical diseases in quite different ways.

17. Stress causes (or makes worse) over 90% of illnesses.

18. Too much exercise is dangerous.

19. High technology medicine frequently does more harm than good.

20. Xenotransplantation (using animal organs for human patients) can be extremely hazardous.

21. The power of the mind over the body is greatly under-estimated.

22. The human body has extraordinary self-healing powers.

23. Antibiotics are wildly overused (by both doctors and farmers) with a consequential increase in the number of serious infections.

24. It is a myth that we living longer than our ancestors.

25. One in six patients in hospital is there because they have been made ill by a doctor

26. Vaccination can be a major cause of illness. Vaccines are dangerous and cause many health problems - including autism. (I've been warning about vaccines for 25 years.)

27. Anti-perspirants may be a health hazard to women.

28. Medical tests and investigations are frequently unreliable, unnecessary and harmful. Doctors perform far too many tests (often for legal reasons) and then treat test results rather than patients.

29. In my book *Paper Doctors* (1976) I explained why much modern medical research (particularly cancer research) is useless.

30. Tens machines are an excellent way to deal with pain.

31. X rays are done too often - and cause illness.

32. Patients can benefit by learning to listen to their bodies.

33. Air conditioning systems can be dangerous.

34. In 1988 I warned about the problems created by an ageing population. (The warning attracted the usual sneering.)

35. Microwave ovens may be a health hazard.

36. Meat causes cancer. (Years ago I uncovered totally convincing - but widely suppressed - evidence. Meat is second only to tobacco as a cause of cancer.)

37. The reliance on animal experimentation is a significant factor in the incidence of doctor induced illness.

38. Individuals who have damaged immune systems are more likely to develop cancer.

39. Asthma and depression are being wildly over-diagnosed by drug company controlled doctors who are keen to prescribe more pills.

40. Women who eat a high fat diet are more likely to develop breast cancer.

41. Overweight individuals are more prone to cancer.

42. Women on Hormone Replacement Therapy may be more likely to develop breast cancer.

Those are just a few of the scores of warnings and predictions I've made – most of them several decades ago and well documented. When they were first made most of these warnings were received with laughter and derision by the medical establishment (and most medical journalists). Look through the list and you will see that many of these predictions and warnings have already been proved right. On many occasions the Government eventually acted on my recommendations. For example, when the Conservative Government changed the law about tranquilliser drugs the relevant Minister admitted at the Commons that they'd done it because of my columns. But it took 15 years of campaigning to force through that change.

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Modern clinicians may use scientific techniques but in the way that they treat their patients they are still quacks and charlatans, loyal to existing and unproven ideas which are profitable and resistant to new techniques and technologies which may be proven and effective. Most medical procedures have never been properly tested.

The fact that a doctor may use a scientific instrument in his work does not make him a scientist - any more than a typist who uses a word processor is a computer scientist. The scientific technology available to doctors may be magnificent but the problem is that the application of the scientific technology is crude, untested and unscientific. Superstition and prejudice are commonplace in modern medicine. It isn't difficult to find examples illustrating the ineffectiveness of modern medical science.

If doctors used truly scientific methods when treating their patients they would happily use whichever form of treatment seemed to offer their patients the best chance of recovery. And they would use scientific methods to compare the effectiveness of orthodox methods (such as surgery, drugs and radiotherapy) with the effectiveness of unorthodox methods (such as diet).

Doctors do not do this.

When patients recover from cancer while or after receiving orthodox medical therapy (usually one or more of the triumvirate of surgery, drugs or radiotherapy) doctors invariably claim that those patients have got better because of the therapy they have received. And, of course, any patient who survives for five years is said to have been cured. Doctors are always quick to claim the credit when they can.

However, doctors are far more sceptical when patients recover from `alternative' or `non-orthodox' remedies. When patients recover from cancer while or after receiving unorthodox therapy (such as a particular type of diet) they are usually said to have recovered `in spite' of the treatment they have received. Patients who get better after unorthodox therapy are said to have been misdiagnosed or to have made an `unexplained and spontaneous recovery'. (No patient in history has ever made an `unexplained and spontaneous recovery' while or after receiving orthodox therapy). Patients who survive for five years after alternative therapy are said to be merely in remission, awaiting a relapse.

And although orthodox doctors are invariably derisive when alternative therapists write about individual patients or describe isolated case histories this is exactly what orthodox doctors themselves do. It is not at all uncommon for medical journals to contain articles and letters based upon experiences with one or maybe two patients. (Incidentally, I agree that these experiences may be valuable. What I object to is the hypocrisy of doctors rejecting anecdotal evidence produced by alternative practitioners.)

The medical establishment always tends to oppose anything new and original which threatens the status quo. When the disorder in question is as serious and as badly treated as cancer this arrogance and reluctance to even consider something new becomes rather close to deceit and professional recklessness. I could put forward a strong case to charge the medical establishment with manslaughter for its continued refusal even to acknowledge or investigate alternative methods of tackling cancer (methods which do not involve drugs, surgery or radiotherapy). The treatment methods offered by doctors are often the only methods patients know about simply because other, less conventional approaches have either been totally suppressed or sneered at and derided so successfully that no one gives them any credence.

Most convincing of all, however, is the fact that practising physicians and surgeons invariably base their own treatment programmes upon their own personal experiences and upon their own (usually completely unscientific) views of what will be best for a particular patient.

For example, despite the availability of clear evidence showing the efficacy of diet, stress control and modest exercise in the treatment (as well as the prevention) of cardiac disease most doctors still insist on treating all their heart patients with either surgery or drug therapy. And despite the existence of other, far more logical options, most doctors still insist that the only way to treat cancer is to attack it from the outside - rather than to help the body heal and protect itself.

If orthodox medicine was truly scientific then patients with the same symptoms would all receive the same treatment. They don't. There are almost as many different treatment programmes on offer as their doctors in practice. If a patient who has been diagnosed as having a particular type of cancer visits three doctors then it's a pretty safe bet that he or she will be offered three quite different types of advice. Many `official' anti-cancer programmes, accepted by the medical establishment, can reasonably be described as irrational and illogical. The survival of individual patients sometimes seems to be more a matter of luck than a matter of science. Doctors simply don't understand why when two patients are given a treatment one will die and one will live. It never occurs to them that there may be some other factor involved and that the death of one patient and the survival of the other may be quite unrelated to the medical treatment which was given.

The logical, scientific approach to any problem is always to tackle the cause rather than the symptoms. If your car has a leaky radiator hose it makes far more logical sense to replace the leaky hose than to keep on filling up the radiator with water. If your house roof is leaking it is far more logical to repair the leak than to put out a bucket to catch the drips.

Good doctors do sometimes follow this logical approach.

But there are more bad doctors than good ones.

And when the bad doctor sees a patient with indigestion he or she will simply prescribe an antacid remedy - knowing that it will temporarily relieve the patient's symptoms - and then send the patient away.

In contrast, when a good doctor sees a patient with indigestion he will want to find out what is causing the indigestion. He will investigate the patient's diet and other lifestyle habits in a search for a cause. And he will want to deal with the cause of the symptoms, rather than the symptoms themselves.

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I am invariably described as 'controversial' for outlining these facts (anyone who tells the truth can expect to be described as 'controversial') but the figures proving that doctors are now a serious health hazard are incontrovertible. A study in the US not long ago found that well over 100,000 people are killed by prescription drugs every year while over two million more suffer such severe side effects that they are permanently disabled or required long hospital stays. These figures don't include deaths or serious problems caused by misdiagnosis, surgical errors (such as the removal of the wrong organ or limb) or problems caused by unreadable handwriting on prescriptions.

Nor do these figures include the vast numbers of errors which are covered up. How many millions of patients are made ill by treatment and then told by their doctor that it is their original disease which is causing their symptoms? How many millions of grieving relatives are told that their loved one died because he or she was killed by the treatment he was given?

Two Irish doctors recently reported in the *British Medical Journal* that 20% of British patients who have slightly raised blood pressure are treated unnecessarily with drugs. Two pathologists who carried out 400 post mortem examinations found that in more than 50% of the patients the wrong diagnosis had been made. A British Royal College of Radiologists Working Party reported that at least a fifth of radiological examinations carried out in National Health Service hospitals were clinically unhelpful. In Britain the Institute of Economic Affairs claimed that inexperienced doctors in casualty units kill at least one thousand patients a year.

In America the Public Citizen Health Research Group has shown that `more than 100,000 people are killed or injured a year by negligent medical care'. The real figure is probably considerably higher than this and there can be little doubt that many of the injuries and deaths are caused by simple, straightforward incompetence rather than bad luck or unforeseen complications.

Many patients would undoubtedly be surprised (and horrified) to find out how many treatment programmes have never been properly tested, never been shown to be safe and never been shown to work.

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It is when prescribing drugs - or giving vaccines - that I believe doctors do most harm.

According to the `*Journal of the American Medical Association*' the overall incidence of serious Adverse Drug Reactions is now 6.7% and the incidence of fatal Adverse Drug Reactions is 0.32% of hospitalised patients. *JAMA* estimates that in 1994 alone 2,216,000 hospitalised patients in the US had serious Adverse Drug Reactions and 106,000 had fatal Adverse Drug Reactions. According to *JAMA* these figures mean that Adverse Drug Reactions are now between the fourth and sixth leading cause of death in the US. In compiling this data *JAMA* excluded errors in drug administration, noncompliance, overdose, drug abuse, therapeutic failures and possible Adverse Drug Reactions. Serious Adverse Drug Reactions were defined as those which required treatment in hospital, were permanently disabling or resulted in death.

If drugs were only ever prescribed sensibly and when they were likely to interfere with a potentially life threatening disease then the risks associated with their use would be acceptable. But all the evidence shows that doctors do not understand the hazards associated with the drugs they use and frequently prescribe inappropriately and excessively. Many of the deaths associated with drug use are caused by drugs which did not need to be taken.

It is now widely accepted that at least 40% of all the people who are given prescription medicines to take will suffer uncomfortable, hazardous or potentially lethal side effects. I say `at least' because, for a variety of reasons, the vast majority of doctors never admit that their patients ever suffer any side effects. In Britain, for example, five out of six doctors have never reported any drug side effects to the authorities - authorities who admit that they receive information on no more than 10 - 15% of even the most serious adverse drug reactions occurring in patients. In other words they admit that they never hear about at least 85 - 90% of all dangerous drug reactions!

Astonishingly, it is even accepted that some doctors will withhold reports of serious adverse reactions and keep their suspicions to themselves in the hope that they may later be able to win fame by publishing their findings in a journal or revealing their discovery to a newspaper or magazine.

Because the real figures about drug hazards are hidden most patients assume that drugs are safe to take, will act in a predictable, effective way and are of recognised quality and standard. None of these assumptions is correct and none of the thousands of the drugs which are available satisfies these criteria. Patients who take drugs are taking a risk; they are often taking part in a massive experiment and by taking a medicine may become worse off than if they had done nothing. To make things worse no one knows exactly how big the risks are when a particular drug is taken. All drugs are potential poisons that may heal or may kill.

The medical profession, the drug industry and the regulatory bodies all accept that the hazards of using any drug will only be known when the drug has been given to large numbers of patients for a considerable period of time.

Astonishingly, despite the hazards associated with their use, drugs are controlled less in their development, manufacture, promotion, sale and supply than virtually any other substance imaginable - with the exception of food.

In an average sort of year in a developed country at least 1 in 250 people will be admitted to hospital because of a drug overdose. One in 50 of them will die. Even more worrying is the fact that every day thousands of people are admitted to hospital not because of an overdose but because a drug taken at prescribed levels has caused serious and possibly life-threatening symptoms. Since doctors rarely admit it when adverse effects occur, the chances are that the real figures are much higher than this.

One of the major reasons for the disastrously high incidence of problems associated with drug use is the fact that the initial clinical trials, performed before a drug is made available for all general practitioners to prescribe for their patients, rarely involve more than a few thousand patients at most. Some initial trials may involve no more than half a dozen patients.

However, it is now well known that severe problems often do not appear either until at least 50,000 patients have taken a drug or until patients have used a drug for many months or even years. Because of this a huge death toll can build up over the years. Drug control authorities admit that when a new drug is launched no one really knows what will happen or what side effects will be identified.

Doctors and drug companies are, it seems, using the public in a constant, on-going, mass testing programme. And the frightening truth is that far more people are killed as a result of prescription drugs than are killed as a result of using illegal drugs such as heroin or cocaine.

The treatments for many common diseases such as arthritis, backache and allergies such as hay fever and eczema frequently provide inadequate relief and often cause adverse effects which are far worse than the original complaint.

Although the drug industry can be blamed for failing to perform adequate tests on the drugs which they put on the market it is only doctors who can be blamed for overprescribing and for the inappropriate prescribing of drugs.

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Doctors are now a public menace of phenomenal proportions. A study in Australia showed that 470,000 Australian men, women and children are admitted to hospital every year because they have been made ill by doctors. The figures also show that every year 280,00 patients who are admitted to hospital suffer a temporary disability as a result of their health care. Around 50,000 of these suffer permanent disabilities. A staggering 18,000 Australians die annually as a result of medical errors, drug toxicity, surgical errors and general medical mismanagement. What a terrible indictment of the medical profession. In America the death rate from medical `accidents' (the medical equivalent of `friendly fire') is running at around 200,000 a year. Figures in Europe are no better. Doctors kill far, far more people than breast cancer or, indeed, most other types of cancer. When I mentioned in a radio broadcast that one in six patients in hospital are there because they have been made ill by a doctor a representative of the medical establishment did not try to argue the point but merely pointed out, with apparently genuine pride and absolutely no sense of the absurd, that this at least meant that five out six patients in hospital were *not* there because they had been made ill by a doctor. (No, I could hardly believe it either. But I listened to a tape of the programme afterwards, and that is exactly what he said.) Not even members of the medical establishment can deny that doctors are a major cause of illness and death - well above all other forms of accidents combined and ranking alongside cancer and heart disease.

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It's genuinely difficult to know where to start (or stop) when trying to work out why doctors now do so much harm.

Some of the shortcomings are very basic. Most doctors simply don't listen properly to their patients. They hear a symptom, reach for the prescription pad and scribble out a pharmacological solution. Prescribing a drug has become a reflex. Take away a doctor's prescription pad and he will be helpless. Most doctors also fail to ask the right questions. They behave as though they are simply marketing men for the pharmaceutical industry; scribbling away their lives, and their patients' lives, to ensure that the industry which owns the medical establishment continues to thrive and make enormous profits.

Most patients probably assume that when a doctor proposes to use an established treatment to conquer a disease he will be using a treatment which has been tested, examined and proven. But this is not the case.

A few years ago the *British Medical Journal* reported that there are `perhaps 30,000 biomedical journals in the world, and they have grown steadily by 7% a year since the 17th century.' The editorial also reported that: `only about 15% of medical interventions are supported by solid scientific evidence' and `only 1% of the articles in medical journals are scientifically sound'.

What sort of science is that? How can doctors possibly regard themselves as practising a science when six out of seven treatment regimes are unsupported by scientific evidence and when 99% of the articles upon which clinical decisions are based are scientifically unsound?

Most medical research is organised, paid for, commissioned or subsidised by the drug industry. This type of research is designed, quite simply, to find evidence showing a new product is of commercial value. The companies which commission such research are not terribly bothered about evidence; what they are looking for are conclusions which will enable them to sell their product. Drug company sponsored research is done more to get good reviews than to find out the truth.

The other type of research that is done is the sort which is done by doctors or scientists wishing to advance their careers. All young doctors and medical scientists who wish to progress within the medical establishment must publish as many scientific papers as possible.

The real, unstated reason for many medical theses and papers is that they give appointments committees something to measure. But is this a criterion which commends itself to the general public who pay for our services? Would you prefer your treatment to be supervised by a physician who had published 15 papers rather than 14? A general practitioner claims that she was told by a fellow doctor: `Find something to measure, and then keep on measuring it until you can put six points on a graph. Then start submitting abstracts, because you'll soon be applying for senior registrar jobs and you'll need at least 10 publications to get on the short list.` The GP claims that the registrar who told her this also said: `Look, I'll help you out a bit. I'll put your name on everything I publish from this lab if you put my name on everything you publish.'

Those scientists who still do original and unsponsored research might claim that their work is of potential value but the evidence contradicts that view.

Even more worrying is the fact that there is now a considerable amount of evidence to show that many modern so called scientists are prepared to `alter' their results if their experiments do not turn out as planned. (This cavalier attitude towards scientific experiments may well have been acquired from the world's drug companies - which have a well-deserved reputation for amending or suppressing unsatisfactory results).

It is perhaps not surprising that it is now reliably estimated that at least 12% of scientific research is fraudulent.

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The tests and investigations which doctors use to help them make diagnoses are also unreliable and the likelihood of a doctor accurately predicting the outcome of a disease is often no more than 50:50.

Two pathologists carried out 400 post-mortem examinations and found that in more than half the patients the wrong diagnosis had been made. This presumably also means that in more than half the patients the wrong treatment had been given. And since modern treatments are undeniably powerful it also presumably means that a large proportion of those patients may have died not because of their disease but because of their treatment. The two pathologists reported that potentially treatable disease was missed in one in seven patients. They found that 65 out of 134 cases of pneumonia had gone unrecognised while out of 51 patients who had suffered heart attacks doctors had failed to diagnose the problem in 18 cases.

The sad truth is that the modern clinician does not put his treatments to the test and does not want to put his treatments to the test. Indeed, if it is suggested that he expose his treatment methods to a true, scientific analysis he will throw up his hands in horror, arguing that it would be unethical to test his treatments for that might deprive his patients of help. He will argue that his treatments do not need to be tested because he knows that they work. Today's medical training is based upon pronouncement and opinion rather than on investigation and scientific experience. In medical schools students are bombarded with information but denied the time or the opportunity to question the ex-cathedra statements which are made from an archaic medical culture. The drugs and tools which are used may be devised with the aid of scientific techniques but the way in which they are used is certainly not scientific.

If medicine was a science then when a patient visited a doctor complaining of a symptom he would be given the best, proven treatment, a treatment that was quite specific for the disease. Treatments for specific symptoms would be predictable and diagnostic skills would, because they would be based on scientific techniques, be reliable within certain acknowledged limits. But that is not what happens at all. In some areas of medicine specialists operate in a way that would be considered a variety of pseudoscience if the practitioners did not happen to have qualifications recognised by the medical establishment.

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Here, just for the record, are some of the specific errors modern doctors make. These are the modern equivalents of putting the mentally ill on the tranquillising wheel. The modern equivalents of bleeding the sick and the restless in order to mask their symptoms and drown their complaints.

1. Doctors rely too much on high tech equipment for making diagnoses. They forget that high tech testing and diagnostic equipment can often be fallible and that common sense is a grossly under-estimated weapon in a physician's diagnostic armoury. Too often it is the test result which is treated, rather than the patient.

2. Modern doctors are addicted to prescribing. They forget (if they ever knew) that the basic needs of the human body are fresh air, fresh drinking water, good food, regular exercise, plenty of sunshine, a little peace occasionally, and an acceptable environmental temperature. Instead, doctors they rely heavily (almost totally) on drugs which are often ineffective and frequently dangerous. Doctors (led by the drug industry) like to believe that they have been responsible for improving the quality of our health - and life expectation. They're wrong. Clean water supplies, efficient sewage disposal, the telephone, the spinning jenny and central heating have all had a greater impact on our health than the entire medical establishment. Penicillin and X rays, arguably the two most dramatic and significant medical discoveries of all time, were both discovered by accident. Neither of those discoveries was made by doctors.

3. The medical establishment says that vaccines are good. And so doctors jab away, encouraged by the fact that they get paid well for every vaccination they give and (in the UK at least) have to pay a financial forfeit if they fail to vaccinate a high enough percentage of their patients. (I wonder how many patients know that when doctors recommend vaccination they do so because the more they vaccinate the bigger their annual bonus will be.) Readers who are interested in the vaccination debate may find my book `*Anyone Who Tells You Vaccines Are Safe And Effective Is Lying. Here's The Proof'* of interest.

4. Doctors constantly fail to assess new technologies and drugs before making them widely available. New surgical techniques are often put into practice without there being any evidence to show that they are safe or effective. And many drugs are put on the market - and made available to millions of patients - before they have been proved to be effective and safe. It is constantly surprising to find out just how little research is done into fundamental medical practices. For example, the other day I tried, unsuccessfully, to find evidence showing that dental flossing is safe and effective. Doctors and dentists recommend flossing but no one, it seems, has bothered to do any research to find out whether flossing damages the gums (causing bleeding and then forcing bacteria into the tiny cuts) or helps remove debris and keep gums healthy.

5. Because the medical establishment is owned by the pharmaceutical industry doctors steadfastly refuse to acknowledge alternative remedies which can often be safer and more effective than orthodox remedies.

6. Doctors remain woefully ignorant about the principles of healthy eating. Most doctors give little or no advice on food. When they do give advice it is often terrible. To give just one example, most doctors still don't realise that meat and fatty food are major causes of cancer. (When you realise that, just a few years ago, most doctors surveyed didn't know that tobacco was a major cause of cancer this is not quite such a surprise.)

7. The importance of the mind in creating and preserving a healthy body is widely ignored and underestimated. Most doctors receive very little training in mental health and have little or no understanding of stress. Most doctors don't understand how and why patients may be able to deal with health problems (such as high blood pressure) by learning how to relax.

8. Doctors still do far too much surgery - even though the evidence shows that much surgery is unnecessary. The hysterectomy operation is done far too often. Tonsils are frequently removed unnecessarily. One of the biggest money spinning operations for surgeons these days is heart surgery. But heart surgery isn't the best way to tackle serious heart disease. In addition doctors also commonly make the mistake of doing surgery at the wrong times. There is clear evidence to show that a woman's chances of responding well to surgery will depend on the time in her menstrual cycle that the surgery takes place.

9. Doctors rely far too much on research which has involved the use of animals. Doctors who rely on animal experiments are misled by inaccurate information and end up giving bad advice and bad treatment to their patients. The evidence shows clearly that animal experiments are worthless and are a hazard to human health.

10. The medical profession still ignores preventive medicine. It is now pretty well accepted that 80% of cancers could be avoided. Cancer deaths remain high because doctors still do not accept this proven truth. How many doctors are warning about the hazards which may be associated with microwave ovens, mobile telephones, television sets, hospital food, genetic engineering and cramped aeroplanes with poor air conditioning systems?

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The inescapable conclusion from all this evidence is that today's doctors and nurses should carry a health hazard warning stamped on their foreheads. Each hospital should have a health warning notice hung over its entrance.

But our politicians - terrified of taking on the medicine `industry' - have done nothing to try to improve the quality of care provided to patients. The politicians have bent over backwards to keep the drug industry happy. Successive governments have done nothing to protect patients.

The incidence of doctor induced illness is now epidemic throughout the western world. At least one in six patients in hospital is there because of some side effect of their medication. It is impossible to quantify the overall size of the problem precisely - particularly in general practice - for the very simple reason that the vast majority of doctors just don't bother to record or report drug side effects (even though the evidence shows that 40% of patients suffer side effects while taking drugs). But there is no doubt that doctor induced illness is now one of (if not the) greatest cause of illness in most so called `developed' countries. Well over a million patients a year are admitted to English hospitals because they have been made ill by doctors.

Patients should not trust the medical establishment but should be prepared to look outside the establishment to find the best, safest and most effective treatment programmes.

You should be extremely wary about your doctor. Remember that his motives (financial gain and professional status) may not be the same as yours (pain free survival).

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Most people recognise the damage that other doctors can do but like to think that *their* doctor is an honourable exception. This is entirely understandable. After all, we all like to think that our relationship with our own doctor is special and that we have chosen someone reliable and knowledgeable to look after us. We like to think of our doctor as a personal and family friend. We all need to put some trust in the health care professionals upon whom we rely when we are ill.

But it is just as dangerous to assume that YOUR doctor is entirely safe, sensible, knowledgeable, competent and error free as it would be to assume that you do not need to take care when driving on the spurious grounds that road accidents only ever affect other people.

You probably make some effort to ensure that the tyres on their cars have plenty of tread, that the brakes are in good, working condition, that they wear seat belts and so on. Everyone knows that motor cars can kill and so sensible individuals do what they can to protect themselves.

And yet more than four times as many people a year die as a result of medical `accidents' as die as a result of road accidents. Put another way this means that your doctor is four times as likely to kill you as your car. In the last few decades doctors and hospitals have killed more people than Hitler.

Even good, kind, conscientious doctors - who are honest and honourable, who care about their work and who do their very best for their patients - can still make people ill. And can still kill people.

For example, many of the problems caused by doctors are a result of prescription drug consumption. When he writes out a prescription your doctor has to rely upon the honesty and integrity of the drug company making the product he is prescribing. And since most drug companies do not operate in an honest way that is a fundamental error of trust which can lead to many problems. You suffer from his trust in the drug company. To that you must add the fact that all patients are individual and different. A drug which has proved effective and safe when given to 99 or 999 patients may still prove dangerous and deadly when given to the 100th or the 1000th patient. Every patient who takes a drug - even a well tried drug - is participating in an experiment. Most doctors either do not understand this or they forget it in the heat of daily practice.

The bottom line is that however good your doctor is - and however much you may trust him or her - you must share the responsibility for your own health and you must know when to tell your doctor if you think that the treatment with which he or she is providing you could be causing problems.

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There is nothing new in the fact that doctors kill people. Doctors have always made mistakes and there have always been patients who have died as a result of medical ignorance or incompetence.

But, since we now spend more on health care than ever before, and since the medical profession is apparently more scientific and better equipped than ever before, there is a savage irony in the fact that we have now reached the point where, on balance, well-meaning doctors in general practice and highly trained, well-equipped specialists working in hospitals do more harm than good. The epidemic of iatrogenic disease which has always scarred medical practice has been steadily getting worse and today most of us would, most of the time, be better off without a medical profession.

Most developed countries now spend around 8% of their gross national products on health care (the Americans spend considerably more - around 12-14%) but through a mixture of ignorance, incompetence, prejudice, dishonesty, laziness, paternalism and misplaced trust doctors are killing more people than they are saving and they are causing more illness and more discomfort than they are alleviating.

Most developed countries now spend around 1% of their annual income on prescription drugs and doctors have more knowledge and greater access to powerful treatments than ever before, but there has probably never been another time in history when doctors have done more harm than they do today. I doubt if anyone knows just how much damage the overprescribing of drugs and vaccines (many of which are of dubious value) does to the human immune system. My personal view is that all those prescription drugs have had, are having, and are likely to continue to have, a devastating effect on human health.

It is true, of course, that doctors save thousands of lives by, for example, prescribing life-saving drugs or by performing essential life-saving surgery on accident victims.

But when the medical profession, together with the pharmaceutical industry, claims that it is the advances in medicine which are responsible for the fact that life expectancy figures have risen in the last one hundred years or so they are dead wrong.)

Orthodox medical practitioners like to give the impression that they have conquered sickness with science but there are, at a conservative estimate, something in the region of 18,000 known diseases for which there are still no effective treatments – let alone cures. Even when treatments do exist their efficacy is often in question. A recent report concluded that 85% of medical and surgical treatments have never been properly tested.

As drug companies become increasingly aware that curing serious disease is beyond their capability (and, indeed, their desire - for why should drug companies, which make their money out of people being sick, want to make people well?), they spend more and more effort on finding drugs to improve life or performance in some vague way.

There can be little doubt that a former Director General of the World Health Organization got it absolutely right when he startled the medical establishment by stating that `the major and most expensive part of medical knowledge as applied today appears to be more for the satisfaction of the health professions than for the benefit of the consumers of health care'.

The evidence certainly supports that astonishing and apparently heretical view. Profits, not patients, are now the driving force which rule the medical profession's motives, ambitions and actions. Doctors don't seem to care anymore. The passion has gone out of medicine.

In my view the biggest single reason why the medical profession is killing so many people is its alliance with the pharmaceutical industry.

The myth that we live long and healthy lives thanks to the drug industry and the medical profession has increased our expectations. We no longer expect to fall ill. We expect a magic solution when we fall ill. We don't want to be bothered making any effort to stay healthy because we have been taught to have faith that if we fall ill then the medical men will be able to cure us.

The majority of illnesses do not need drug treatment. Most patients who visit a doctor neither want nor expect drug treatment. But at least eight out of ten patients who visit a general practitioner will be given a prescription (though growing numbers of patients do not take the drugs that are prescribed for them).

As I have shown in numerous previous books we aren't living longer than our ancestors and we certainly aren't fitter than them either. (The figures often quoted by doctors and the drug industry are misleading because infant mortality rates have fallen dramatically. When vast numbers of babies died because of poor hygiene the average life expectation was low. I explained this at length in my book `*How To Live Longer*'.) We do not live longer or healthier lives than our predecessors. On the contrary although we consume greater and greater quantities of medicine than ever before more of us are ill today than at any time in history. On any day you care to choose in just about any developed country you care to mention over half the population will be taking a drug of some kind. A recent survey of 9,000 Britons concluded that one in three people are suffering from a long standing illness or disability. Other surveys have shown that in any one fourteen day period 95% of the population consider themselves to be unwell for at least a few of those days. At no time in history has illness been so commonplace. We spend more than ever on health care but no one could argue that there is any less suffering in our society.

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These are difficult, 'interesting' times. Doctors, who we pay to look after our health, seem to be determined to kill us all as quickly and as painfully as they can. And politicians, who we pay to protect us from those who wish us ill, have forgotten all about 'duty' and 'responsibility' (even the words now seem rather quaint and old fashioned) and concentrate their efforts on power and money. Make no mistake, your Government wants you dead at 65 because after that you will just be a liability. Your Government is not going to protect you against the bad guys. Indeed, in Britain, where elderly patients are treated with appalling cruelty, the Government has given official approval to doctors and nurses who deliberately starve elderly patients to death – in order to ensure that hospital beds are not blocked. (Nurses are instructed not to give food or water to patients, who often die in agony as a result.)

You can no longer rely on being able to obtain skilled and reliable medical help.

The answer is to learn how to look after yourself; and to learn when you can (and cannot) trust doctors with your life.

Vernon Coleman

Introduction *(written for the original edition in 1993)*

No one knows precisely how many people are killed every year by doctors.

Not surprisingly, the medical profession isn't too keen on sharing that sort of information with patients.

This is partly because they don't want to scare too many people away by broadcasting the truth. After all, orthodox medicine is, these days, in close competition with many varieties of alternative medicine and doctors are only too well aware that their safety record is considerably worse than any of the competitors.

But this shyness is also a result of a perhaps understandable reluctance to share information that could lead to doctors spending even more of their time in court than they do at the moment.

As I showed in my book `*Betrayal of Trust*' one in six patients who are in hospital are there because they have been made ill by a doctor. This figure is, if anything, an under-estimate. Given half a chance most doctors will write `cardiac failure' or `pneumonia' on the death certificate rather than the possibly more honest `medical cockup'.

Most of the world's medical profession studiously ignored the revelations in `*Betrayal of Trust*', despite the importance of the evidence and the fact that I was claiming - and substantiating - that, on balance, doctors now do more harm than good and are now as important a cause of illness and death as heart disease and cancer.

I don't think any doctor has ever disputed my claim that one in six patients in hospital are there because they have been made ill by doctors. But many doctors seemed unhappy about the fact that I was saying it in public. A not uncommon complaint was that I was bringing the profession into disrepute by giving the public this sort of information. I felt the implication was that the world would be better served if I would shut up, go away and let the people who know best (the medical profession) look after things.

Doctors do not kill patients (nor even make them ill) because they are particularly evil, mean spirited or psychopathic. Most doctors are quite decent people. Their motives are honest enough; they want to make a good living doing a useful job. There are evil, mean spirited and psychopathic doctors around, of course. But no more than you would find among accountants, solicitors or estate agents.

Doctors kill patients (and make them ill) for two main reasons. The first is that many are, general speaking, professionally incompetent.

The interview is the most important part of the doctor’s diagnostic equipment. That's when he talks to the patient and - even more important than talking though you wouldn't think so if you sat in on the average out patients clinic - listens to what the patient has to say. It is by talking and listening to patients that doctors learn most.

Over the years doctors have accumulated more and more equipment. But instead of helping the equipment has come between the doctor and the patient. Too often the doctor relies exclusively on his equipment; trusting it implicitly to provide him with the right answers. And all too often the result is that he produces an ill-fitting off the peg diagnosis rather than a bespoke diagnosis which can lead to appropriate and effective treatment.

The first piece of equipment that doctors acquired was the stethoscope. This now symbolic device was invented so that doctors could listen to their patients' chests without having to put their heads down on their bosoms. The stethoscope added to the doctor's dignity. But it also provided the first mechanical barrier between doctor and patient. And since Rene Laennec first introduced the stethoscope the doctor patient relationship has been weakened and damaged by this obsession with equipment and this failure to respect the relationship between doctor and patient.

A few years ago an American study showed that one person in ten who had died would have still been alive if the doctors looking after them had relied upon their heads instead of their equipment.

One problem is the fact that the equipment doesn't allow for individual eccentricities - and the reality that your body might be slightly different to mine.

Things are made even worse by the fact that equipment often breaks down and is frequently badly maintained. Shops have to have their scales calibrated but ask your doctor when he last had his blood pressure machine calibrated and watch him blush.

Can you think of any reason why the thousands of pieces of equipment which are supplied to hospitals should be any more reliable than the equipment you buy for the kitchen? I believe that as much as half of the new equipment being delivered to hospitals could be defective.

If that doesn't worry you then the fact that many of the doctors who are responsible for using the equipment don't know how it works, how it should be calibrated or how to tell if it is working properly should worry you.

The second reason why doctors kill so many people is that they are politically innocent and commercially inept and nowhere near as bright or as street-wise as they would like the rest of the world to think they are.

Through a mixture of ignorance and stupidity they do not realise that the profession of which they are, largely, proud members has been sold to the pharmaceutical industry by the international medical establishment.

Whether the medical profession has sold out to the pharmaceutical industry because it is populated by greedy, grasping and unscrupulous men and women or because it is full of individuals who are politically innocent and commercially inept I have not yet decided. My suspicion is that doctors around the world are so full of their own self-importance and so out of touch with reality that they do not even realise that they have been bought and are now controlled by the world's most unscrupulous industry.

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Back in the middle ages people were reluctant to go into hospital. They knew that they were unlikely to get out alive. Those patients who survived the incompetent ministrations of doctors and nurses were likely to die of infections contracted on the ward.

Things didn't get much better until well into this century when the discovery of anaesthetics, antiseptics and antibiotics gradually meant that patients going into hospital had a reasonable chance of benefiting from the experience.

But the good days are now over. Modern medicine has again become a major hazard. And doctors are again one of the most significant causes of death and ill health. Doctors and nurses should carry a health hazard warning stamped on their foreheads. Each hospital should have a health warning notice hung over its entrance.

Politicians must undoubtedly take some of the blame for this disastrous state of affairs. It is, after all, they who have handed over control of our hospitals to an ever growing and increasingly incompetent bureaucracy.

In many countries both the number of nurses working in hospitals and the number of beds available for patients have been falling steadily for years. But at the same time the number of administrators employed has been rising remorselessly. Wards are closed down or lie unused and empty while administrators spend essential funds which could be used for looking after patients on wall to wall carpeting, exotic pot plants and weekend conferences in expensive locations. Changing a light bulb costs a small fortune in administrative costs and it can take so long to persuade five administrators to send along one electrician that I've known nurses take in their own light bulbs and surreptitiously change them themselves. It is so much quicker and easier than filling in all the necessary forms.

We can blame the administrators for failing to administer hospitals and health services properly but we must blame the politicians for giving them the power they are now abusing.

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But although the politicians and the administrators waste money and resources, and have undoubtedly weakened health services, it isn't solely their fault that doctors and hospitals now do more harm than good. Orthodox medicine has become a menace to patients because the medical establishment has sold itself - body and soul - to the drug industry.

If you're naive and innocent you probably imagine that when a doctor decides to prescribe a drug for you he selects a product which independent research has shown to be most effective for your condition.

He doesn't. Most doctors probably wouldn't know what to do with independent research if they saw it. When the doctor reaches for his pen and his pad he writes out a prescription for a drug about which he knows only what he has been told by the drug company's representative or what he has read in the drug company's advertisements.

The savage truth is that medicine is no longer a profession. Today's doctors are merely a marketing arm of the pharmaceutical industry. Doctors, once a responsible and respectable group of men and women, have sold their souls for an endless supply of free meals, free pens and free golf balls. When it comes to honest and reliable advertising the drug companies come a long way after second hand car salesmen. The drug companies - and their vastly overpaid executives - will do anything to make money. These people are so ruthless that they make the Colombian drug barons look like boy scouts. Much of the stuff doctors prescribe is complete rubbish. Most of it has never been shown to be either safe or effective. Drug companies test the stuff they sell on animals (proven to be entirely useless for predicting what will happen when pills are given to people) and then ruthlessly use the sort of techniques usually employed to sell shampoo, cigarettes, cars and perfume to naive and innocent punters to persuade doctors to contribute to their profits.

As a final insult to the patient, if politicians dare to hint that they are unhappy about paying inflated prices for pharmaceutical junk that doesn't work, the pharmaceutical companies simply threaten to take their pill producing factories and their massive profits off to some other country where the politicians know enough to treat drug company executives with the respect they require.

Politicians, bureaucrats and doctors have put health care back into the middle ages.

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The purpose of this book is simple: to encourage you to be sceptical of your doctor, to teach you what to watch out for (and how your doctor may make you ill) and to show you how to stay healthy so that you will be less likely to need to come into contact with any health care professional!

I have been a passionate advocate of patient consumerism for two decades and the pages which follow are packed with advice and tips on how you can live a longer, healthier life - and protect yourself from an increasingly incompetent and dangerous medical profession. Apart from being aware of the threat to your health that your doctor poses (and if you want to stay alive and healthy you should treat all doctors and other health professionals with a considerable amount of suspicion) you should learn to take control of your own life as much as possible. You should learn to be independent and sceptical. You should ask the right questions (this book will tell you the questions to ask) and, most crucial of all, retain overall responsibility for your health. You should know what to watch out for when taking drugs (this book will tell you what to watch out for) and you should know how to be an independent, sceptical consumer. And you should know how to use - and get the best out of - doctors and hospitals when you need them.

Vernon Coleman

Chapter 1: Don't Let Your Doctor Bully You

Doctors used to be trusted and respected by their patients. But, sadly, that's not always true these days.Gradually, doctors have become more and more unpopular.I don't think this has got anything to do with the treatments doctors offer - or with the effectiveness or otherwise of their cures. I think that the reason is much simpler. Doctors are unpopular today because they are offhand, patronising and bloody rude! They treat patients without respect and bully them into submission.

Every day I get letters from patients who have been treated like dirt when they've dared to ask questions or speak out of turn.

`I was in tears when I left the hospital,' complained one reader. `The consultant kept me waiting for three hours then hardly spoke to me. When he'd finished poking and prodding he just walked away. A nurse came and told me I could leave. My husband, who was waiting outside for me wanted to go in and punch him. I still don't know what's wrong with me.'

I sometimes feel ashamed to be a member of the medical profession.

`I was taken into a cold examination room and told to take off all my clothes and lie on a couch,' wrote another patient. `I was left there, naked, for 25 minutes. I was sitting on the couch hugging my knees to keep warm when the consultant, a nurse and a trail of medical students burst into the room. The doctor then gave me an internal examination with everyone staring. No one took any notice of me or spoke to me. When they'd finished they just left.'

It is hardly surprising that millions of patients are seeking help from alternative medicine practitioners. The truth is that most patients don't desert orthodox doctors because they are looking for better treatments. Most are attracted by alternative medicine because they think it's their only chance of being treated with any respect. And much of the time they're right!

Family doctors (GPs) aren't innocent when it comes to being rude but hospital consultants are by far the worst offenders. Many behave as though they think they are gods. They treat nursing and junior staff like slaves and treat patients with undisguised contempt. Too often hospital consultants act like prison camp guards in Siberia and treat patients as though they are prisoners who've offended the State. Medicine is supposed to be a caring profession but every week thousands of patients make complaints about doctors who have been arrogant, rude and distinctly uncaring.

Here's another letter from a reader:

`When the consultant had finished with me I felt like a piece of meat. As though I was a cow being herded from one place to another. As though I had no feelings and no intellect. I wasn't given the chance to ask any questions. I was so upset that I couldn't get the bus and had to be fetched by a friend. It was a nightmare!'

Doctors often seem to forget that although they may become blase about death and illness every medical consultation is - to the patient involved - a significant and memorable event.

Many patients complain that hospital consultants show off in front of junior doctors and nurses. (The same doctors are usually said to be polite - even ingratiating - with their private patients). And bad manners are catching - and imitated by nurses, junior doctors and others. I've received thousands of letters from readers complaining about rudeness displayed by nurses, auxiliaries, orderlies, physiotherapists and radiographers. Night nurses seem to annoy more people than any other group. Some hospital staff seem to enjoy humiliating and de-humanising their patients. Pregnant women and the elderly often seem to be treated with least kindness.

Here are more extracts from reader's letters:

Mr A : `When I told my consultant that I would go mad if I had to put up with my symptoms any longer he said: `You probably already are, my dear!' He was playing to the gallery and laughing when he said this and his entourage laughed politely to please him.'

Mrs B : `A consultant showed off to impress younger colleagues. When I murmured a complaint he said: `No one dragged you in off the streets, did they?'.'

Mrs C: `A doctor shouted at me because he couldn't get a needle into a vein in my arm.'

Mrs D: `I went in to see the consultant and he told me I had breast cancer and would need an operation when they could fit me in. That was it. The consultation didn't last more than 3 minutes. My world had been turned upside down. I went outside, got into my car, drove home in a state of shock and then burst into tears when my children came into the house.'

Mr E: `When I asked the surgeon who had told me that I needed an operation whether the operation was essential he said: `If you don't want the operation I've got plenty to be getting on with. It makes no difference to me."

Mrs F: `When I had a breast X ray the person who did it was very cruel and rude. My breasts hurt for 5 days afterwards.'

Mrs G: `I had to have an intimate examination. A group of doctors gathered around and were laughing and giggling and telling rude jokes. I will never again have an intimate examination. I would rather die.'

Mrs H: `The consultant asked me if I was feeling better. I said `no' because I was still in pain. He then shouted at me and I burst into tears. He shouted `Look at me when I talk to you!' but I couldn't because I was crying so much.'

Mr I: `My wife has been in hospital three times so far this year but no one has told us anything.'

Mrs J: `I was so nervous my hands were shaking and I couldn't undo my bra. The doctor shouted at me to hurry up because time was money.'

Mrs K: `My GP fixed me up with a private appointment with a consultant. It cost me a lot of money. The consultant just said that I needed to see a different sort of specialist and that I should have known. When I didn't pay the bill the consultant's manager phoned up and said I had broken a contract. He has now issued a court summons.'

Mrs L: `When my husband was in hospital the doctor in charge treated him very badly. Two weeks ago I heard that the doctor had been admitted to the same ward that my husband had been in. I pray to God to forgive me for my thoughts.'

Mrs M: `I sat on the couch in one of those funny little gowns they give you to wear. Suddenly the screens were pushed aside and a doctor burst in. He ripped open my gown so that I was naked, prodded me about and then left as suddenly as he had arrived. He didn't say a word to me. Ten minutes later a nurse came in to say that I could go.'

Mrs N: `When I saw the consultant privately he was very nice. But when I had to go and see him in a public clinic he treated me like dirt.'

Mrs O: `I waited nine months for an appointment at the hospital. But I didn't see a doctor at all. I saw a young student who was very arrogant. I'd have been ashamed of him if he'd been my grandson.'

Mrs P: `I went into a local hospital for a sterilisation. I was told to arrive before 7.00 am. I was there at 6.30 am. I was totally ignored as were 7 or 8 other women, all waiting for various operations. At 9.30 am I was told there were no beds but that they would go through with the op and hope that some people were discharged. I was sent to another floor, frightened alone and stressed to be greeted by some doctor I had never seen before. I was practically thrown onto a trolley and wheeled to theatre with my pre-med tablet being shoved in my hand to swallow on the way. My husband phoned to find out how I was doing and was told he wasn't a real relative (not a blood relative) so no information could be given to him. Afterwards I was left on the trolley with the feeling I was alone and was going to die. I still had the effects of the anaesthetic in my body. The thing used to put the anaesthetic in me was hanging out of my hand. I told them I was allergic to plasters but they still put plasters on my stomach causing a bad, itchy rash. I was left to wander around for a toilet, walking into walls and other trolleys on my own, still only just conscious. I lay on my trolley in a side room no bigger than a cupboard until 4.00 pm with extremely painful backache and no painkillers. A nurse then arrived, gave me a couple of tablets and said they were closing the ward as it was for day patients only. I had to dress myself, phone my father to pick me up (the right phrase as I could hardly walk) and bring me home. I was told there was no need to return for a check-up or any follow up to make sure I was OK. When I went home my pulse rate was 130 a minute. The only thing they gave me was a letter to give my doctor saying I had been sterilised and a couple of typed lines on a scrap of paper telling me not to drive or drink for 24 hours. How can our health system treat people like this?'

Doctors are supposed to help make people better. But time and time again their thoughtlessness is making people worse.

Doctors often try to excuse their rudeness by complaining that they are overworked. But that is simply not true. In the last 10 years the average GP's workload has fallen dramatically. According to one report the average family doctor now works a 23 hour week. One doctor boasted that he manages to cram his workload into just 7 hours a week.

Hospital consultants are even worse. Many deliberately keep their hospital waiting lists as long as possible so that they'll get more paying patients at their private clinics. Many never even turn up for hospital clinics but instruct junior, untrained doctors to do the work for them. Meanwhile they're busy seeing private patients. Most seem to forget that patients are nervous. They explain nothing and discourage questions. Most regard their time as so important that they instruct administrators to bring patients in hours early. Most forget the fact that patients may be embarrassed at being seen undressed.

Many hospital consultants are beginning to complain about the number of patients who don't turn up for out-patient appointments. Personally, I'm not at all surprised that the number of patients failing to turn up has become an epidemic. I'm more surprised that any patients bother to turn up.

Here are the complaints patients most commonly make to me about hospital consultants and hospital out-patient departments.

1. `*You only get two minutes.'*

My investigation shows that this is a slight exaggeration. The average out patient in some clinics can probably expect to spend 3 or even 4 minutes with the doctor. What an insult! What a waste of time.

2. `*The doctor doesn't know anything.*'

Most outpatient clinics are run not by consultants but by junior hospital doctors who often have only a few months or even weeks experience. They have probably never seen the patient before. And they'll never see him again.

3. `*No one tells you anything.*'

I'm convinced that some hospital doctors are trained by the security services. They never tell patients anything.

4. `*You're treated like dirt.*'

Too often true. Patients are herded into groups and treated like mentally incompetent aardvarks. Too often nurses give the impression that they got their training at Belsen.

5. `*They keep you waiting for hours.'*

Oh, boy do they keep patients waiting! You may get less than 5 minutes with the doctor but it'll take up half a day of your time. Why do hospitals always assume that no one else has anything important to do?

6. `*They don't give you much notice*.'

A surprising number of patients get less than a week's notice - often after waiting for weeks or months. There is absolutely no excuse for this - apart from incompetence.

7. `*There's no privacy*.'

Most hospitals seem to assume that patients are exhibitionists. Not true. Most patients dislike having their private parts viewed by orderlies, porters and electricians.

8. `*The doctor doesn't speak my language.*'

Most patients don't care two hoots where doctors come from as long as they are competent. But all patients like to be treated by doctors who can speak their language.

9. `*They never bother to tell you that an appointment is cancelled*.'

`I waited five months for an appointment,' complained one patient. `When I got there I was told that the doctor had gone on holiday a week before and there was no one there who could see me.' Inexcusable. No doctor goes on holiday without giving at least a month's notice. A letter or phone call would save everybody time.

10. `*They only wanted me there for some research project*.'

Every week thousands of patients waste their time (and money) visiting hospitals where doctors are conducting private research programmes. Many feel `used'. I don't blame them.

Hospital doctors sometimes do important work. I'm not arguing with that. But there is too much thoughtlessness, too much arrogance and too little thought for the feelings and needs of patients (who are, after all, the people paying everyone's salary).

Frequently, doctors just don't seem to think before they open their mouths.

Just before a trip to Paris I had to have some hospital tests done. After one set of tests a specialist told me that there was a 10% chance that I had cancer. `But don't worry about it,' he said cheerfully. `Go and enjoy your stay in Paris. We'll do some more tests when you get back.'

I had to explain that I would find it difficult to relax with such a threat hanging over my head. Within a few hours the extra, additional test had been done and I had been given the `all clear'. If I hadn't insisted on having my problem sorted out there and then the extra, unnecessary worry could, I suspect, have made me genuinely ill.

Patients would get treated better if doctors always pretended to themselves that every patient they saw was a close relative or loved one.

I've always believed that a doctor should treat every patient as he would want his own family to be treated.

Today's consultants must all hate their families.

Too many doctors seem to believe that they are superior beings; that their authority should never be questioned; that their time is more important than anyone else's and that they are the only people entitled to respect.

I suspect that part of the problem lies in the way that medical students are trained. Although medical students are taught a great deal about disease they are frequently not told very much about patients. They are, I suspect, taught too little about human rights and not enough about a doctor's responsibilities. They are, I fear, also taught too little about the impact a patient's feelings can have on his health.

And part of the problem is the fact that it is too easy for doctors to forget that patients are paying their fat salaries. Because no money changes hands in the clinic or consulting room its too easy for a doctor to forget that the patient is a consumer and is entitled to respect as a right not a favour. (It would be nice if doctors offered patients respect because they cared about them but that might be too much to hope for).

Certainly when money does change hands doctors seem to be much nicer. And hospital consultants are more likely to have private patients and two sets of standards.

One reader had first-hand experience of this.

To save time she was advised to see a consultant privately, away from the hospital. He was, she says all smiles and charm. He stood up when she entered his consulting room. He was polite, kindly and thoughtful. But the treatment went on for weeks and the bills got bigger and bigger. Eventually my reader couldn't afford any more private treatment. So she made an appointment to see the same consultant in his hospital clinic.

`He was,' she told me, `rude, insolent and arrogant. He didn't even look up when I went into the consulting room. He examined me but spoke only through the nurse who was with him. He was brusque. No smiles and no handshakes. He seemed a different person.'

What a terrible indictment that is.

It isn't just administrators who sometimes give the impression that they would prefer it if their hospitals were empty of patients. A lot of consultants give that impression too.

`Patients are a bloody nuisance,' I'm told an egocentric hospital consultant roared recently when confronted by a patient who had the audacity to ask a question. `They clutter up the corridors and bleed all over the wards. We could get twice as much done if they'd all bugger off back home.' His troop of tame sycophantic middle ranking nurses and junior doctors, crowding around him like lakeside ducks waiting for scraps of bread, laughed dutifully.

My informant, the unfortunate patient who had the temerity to question the white coated god, tells me she tried to disappear down the bed and spent the rest of the day shivering with shame, fear and embarrassment.

The tragic truth is that thousands of men and women in white coats are so bad mannered that they would be better suited to work as policemen or debt collectors.

Bad behaviour of this sort isn't just unforgivable bad manners it's also bad medicine. For years now there has been plenty of evidence to show that patients get better quicker when they are treated kindly. Patients who are given information about their illnesses, and who are treated with courtesy and respect, need fewer drugs and go home quicker than patients who are treated like dirty laundry.

All things considered it is becoming increasingly clear that patients might be better off if hospital doctors - particularly surgeons - were replaced by computers and robots. Indeed, there is now a growing amount of evidence to show that computers practise hospital medicine better than human beings.

- One trial has shown that computers are 10% better than consultants at making diagnoses.
- A second trial - involving nearly 20,000 patients - confirmed that computers are far better than most doctors at diagnosing patients suffering from severe abdominal pains.
- In America robots have been devised that can assist with hip replacement surgery.
- Computer controlled robots are being used to perform brain surgery in France.
- Scientists are developing robots that can perform prostate surgery.
- In Germany there are plans to use robots in ear, nose and throat work

Computers and robots have a number of advantages. They do not get tired. They are speedy and predictable. They are not subject to prejudice. They are far less vulnerable to the blandishments and bribes of the drugs industry. And, of course, they aren't rude, domineering or arrogant. Indeed, they can be programmed to treat patients politely.

I wonder how many patients would prefer a polite, efficient computer to a rude, incompetent human doctor?

* * *

There are two vitally important lessons here.

First, do not let yourself be pushed, bullied, frightened or angered into abandoning orthodox medicine completely. Alternative medicine has its uses and its place but for some illnesses orthodox doctors can provide a more useful, more effective service if they are used properly.

Second, you must learn to stand up for yourself when dealing with doctors. If you don't, then the chances are high that you will be treated without respect. Don't be concerned that by sticking up for yourself you will annoy your doctor and possibly endanger the treatment you receive. All the available evidence shows very clearly that patients who are aggressive and demanding (and, as a result, often unpopular with doctors and nurses) and who ask questions and insist on being told what is happening to them - and why - not only stand a much better chance of getting better but also get better far quicker too.

Chapter 2: Tests And Investigations - Are They Safe?a

At least two thirds of all the tests and investigations ordered by hospital doctors and GPs are unnecessary.

- One survey has shown that routine blood and urine tests help doctors make a diagnosis in only 1% of cases.
- Another survey recently showed that when hospital doctors order tests to identify bugs most of the patients involved are sent home before the results of the tests are known!
- Something like nine out of ten X rays are unnecessary.

Unnecessary tests and investigations are ordered for several reasons. Sometimes doctors do them because they feel that they will be less likely to be sued if they can show that they did lots of tests.

And younger doctors may order routine tests so that they'll have all the possible answers available if quizzed by senior consultants.

None of this would matter much if tests were cheap and easy to do and if they were always harmless and reliable. But many of the unnecessary tests doctors order are complex, and expensive. For example, the World Health Organisation reports that X rays can account for between 6% and 10% of a country's expenditure on health!

Even worse many of the investigations which are done result in patients getting the wrong treatment - or getting too much treatment and, tragically, tests aren't as reliable as doctors and patients often think they are.

Most laboratory tests are only 95% accurate - even when all the equipment in the laboratory is working absolutely perfectly (something that usually happens about once a week). So if a patient has twenty laboratory tests done then the chances are that even if he is perfectly healthy the tests will show at least one abnormality.

One recent study showed that out of 93 children who had been diagnosed as having heart disease - and who had lived as `heart patients' - only 17 really had heart disease! The rest had suffered severe restrictions on their activities for no good reason at all!

To all this must be added the fact that many tests are dangerous - and can even kill. X rays, for example, are so overused and misused that they constitute a considerable health risk.

Don't put too much faith in tests. And don't let your doctor perform too many. Tests aren't as necessary, as useful or as reliable as most people think they are.

Chapter 3: How Will Your Drug Affect You?

Every time your doctor writes out a prescription he is conducting an experiment. He doesn't know exactly what will happen when you take the drug he is prescribing.

One reason for this is the fact that neither pharmaceutical companies nor doctors ever bother to test drugs properly before making them widely available. In an editorial in a leading, international journal one commentator recently admitted that `only about 15% of medical interventions are supported by solid scientific evidence'. (Yes, you read that correctly)`only about 15% of medical interventions are supported by solid scientific evidence.'

Another problem is that we are all different. When you take a pill it may give you diarrhoea. When your best friend takes the same drug it may make her constipated. When your uncle takes the same drug it may give him a skin rash. The pill may do its intended job for three, two, one or none of you.

Chapter 4: Is Your Doctor Trying Out A New Drug On You?

Every week thousands of patients are used - often unwittingly - in medical experiments. Doctors in general practice and in hospitals - make huge personal bonuses by testing new drugs for pharmaceutical companies. But patients are often put at risk unnecessarily.

Be suspicious if your doctor makes a great fuss of you, is unusually polite or wants you to return to the clinic at very regular intervals. If, instead of handing you a prescription, your doctor gives you a bottle of pills and doesn't charge you for them then the pills may be new and you may be taking part in a drug trial. Watch out if your doctor asks you a lot of questions that don't seem entirely relevant. If your doctor is doing a clinical trial for a drug company he will almost certainly ask you lots of questions about side effects - questions that he would not normally ask. Be wary if your doctor wants you to undergo blood or other tests but doesn't explain why the tests are necessary. Drug companies paying for new drugs to be tested may want blood tests performed.

If your doctor admits that he wants to try out a new drug on you make sure that there is no existing alternative. New drugs should only be tried out on patients when there are no effective and safe alternatives.

Why should you risk your health (and your life) to benefit your doctor's bank balance and the drug company's profits?

Chapter 5: The Real Cause Of Cancer - And The Solution

The most repressive, more prejudiced and most obscenely intolerant branch of the international medical industry is undoubtedly that part of it which claims to deal with cancer.

The reason for this is simple: the medical and scientific establishments are largely comprised of men and women whose original thinking (if they ever did any) is long behind them. Cancer is getting commoner but the people in the cancer industry will never find a cure because they're looking in the wrong places. In this chapter I intend to explain why I believe cancer develops - and how you can minimise your chances of developing it.

I should warn you that the medical establishment does not approve or, or agree with, anything that you are about to read. (This is, I should also point out, the same medical establishment which doesn't believe that drug side effects are a significant problem, which, for many years denied that benzodiazepine tranquillisers could be addictive, which has ignored the health hazards of meat, fatty food, mobile telephones, X rays and microwaves and which has sold itself so completely to the drug, chemical and food industries that four out of ten patients who take a drug suffer unpleasant or potentially lethal side effects and that one in six patients in hospital are there because doctors have made them ill. This is the same medical establishment which has for years ignored the relationship between diet and cancer and, indeed, between weight and cancer.

Members of the establishment are committed to supporting long established theories partly because they do not have the breadth of intelligence to cope with anything new, and partly because personal and professional jealousy makes them unwilling to acknowledge any genuinely new and creative ideas which might result in non-establishment scientists acquiring public respect and honour.

This small town mindset paradigm is made even more repressive by the fact that the cancer industry is now so huge that it requires vast amounts of money simply in order to stay alive.

Since a good deal of that money comes from the drug industry (which is, not surprisingly, only interested in pharmacological solutions) the cancer industry's aims, methods and motives are now indistinguishable from the drug industry's aims, methods and motives.

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In addition to being the most intolerant the modern cancer industry must surely be the least successful branch of medical science ever to have existed.

In my view it is also probably the most corrupt and self-serving. If the cancer industry ever accidentally hit upon a cure for cancer I honestly very much doubt if anyone would hear about it. Finding and publicising a cure for cancer would put the cancer industry employees out of business.

As has been well documented, the incidence of cancer has been, and is, steadily increasing for decades. The cancer industry makes a good deal of noise about the fact that there has been some progress in the treatment of rare forms of cancer in children but the overall death rate from cancer has been increasing steadily for decades. Chemotherapy does not work and has never worked for the cancers which kill nine out of ten cancer patients. One patient described chemotherapy as `like using a heavy plumber's tool to fix jewellery'. Many patients given chemotherapy and classified as `cured' go on to develop another cancer within a short period.

The cancer establishment has insisted on sticking with radiotherapy and chemotherapy despite the fact that there is no so much evidence that these approaches do not work that ordinary patients who have no idea that there are alternatives are turning them down; preferring to die quietly and in peace rather than to die of a painful and pointless treatment programme.

The only people who benefit from the modern cancer industry are doctors, drug companies and the people who make radiotherapy equipment.

The drug industry has so much control over the private cancer charities (because it gives them money) that the private cancer charities are only interested in research that is likely to uncover drug based cures. (How could a drug company ever make money out of a treatment programme that involved meditation or a change in diet?)

And yet, throughout the world, the modern cancer industry - which steadfastly refuses to acknowledge the fact that 80% of cancers can be prevented or to investigate the many new alternative therapies - is protected by law.

In most western countries it is now actually illegal to offer a treatment for cancer that might work.

Even qualified doctors are only allowed to prescribe chemotherapy or radiotherapy or to send their patients for surgery. The authorities relentlessly persecute those who offer new and possibly effective and non- toxic therapies (ignoring the wishes of patients who wish to try those therapies) while condoning, paying for and protecting by law therapies which are known to be often toxic and frequently ineffective. It is bizarre to see the way that governments tell their citizens that vaccines are all safe, that beef is safe to eat and that chemotherapy is the treatment of choice for cancer. I suspect that governments would tell their citizens that hitting yourself on the head with a hammer was safe if the hammer industry told them to say this. It would be funny were it not so tragic.

Doctors who dare to offer patients new hope and new treatments are scorned, abused, persecuted, vilified, forced to go into hiding or threatened with imprisonment. Honest, well meaning, caring doctors whose work with cancer patients has won them many followers among the sick and their relatives have received nothing but trouble from the authorities.

The problems faced by the proponents of remedies not made by drug companies have been well documented. Anyone who dares to offer an unofficial remedy for cancer is accused of being simply out to make money. This accusation (which is often easy to disprove in the case of doctors and others offering `alternative' therapies) is, of course, never made about doctors or drug companies, whose work is all done exclusively in the public interest.

The list of doctors who have been persecuted for offering non-orthodox cancer treatments (which invariably seem to work much better than anything offered by the official cancer industry) is as long as the list of alleged cancer `cures' offered or promised by the cancer industry which have been proven to be of no value, or quietly forgotten once those making the promises had acquired the grants they wanted. In Britain it is illegal for anyone to claim to have a cure for cancer that is not approved by the medical establishment and the pharmaceutical industry. Around the world countless cancer pioneers - including some of the brightest medical brains of the century - have been forced out of business by busy body bureaucrats acting on behalf of the cancer industry. (In one case a policeman who arrested a successful alternative cancer clinic operator consulted the practitioner when his own brother was found to be suffering from terminal cancer. The brother was treated successfully by the practitioner the policeman had persecuted.)

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The medical and scientific establishments have (largely through the fact that they have sold out to the enormously wealthy and powerful international pharmaceutical industry) obtained more or less complete control over politicians and the media. The establishment's unwillingness to rock the boat means that the industry's own paid advocates can pretty much control what ordinary readers get to see. In the UK both the Press Complaints Commission and the Advertising Standards Authority allegedly exist to protect the public. In my experience both organisations are a disgrace and do far more to defend and protect industry than they do to protect the public.

When Britain's Meat and Livestock Commission complained about a column of mine which reported that meat causes cancer the Press Complaints Commission rolled over like a playful puppy and was quick to defend the interests of the meat industry by ignoring the evidence and finding in favour of the meat industry and against me. I had supplied scientific evidence in support of my arguments but the PCC didn't seem too impressed with independent scientific research work when put against the views of those defending the meat industry. I wasn't allowed to appeal against this bizarre judgement.

Britain's Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) is no better. Advertisements for my book *`Food for Thought*' were banned by the ASA because I had dared to include, in the book, advice on what sort of diet to eat in order to reduce the chance of developing cancer. I listed the foods that are known to cause cancer and the foods which are known to provide some protection.

Because I refused to accept this extraordinary ban the ASA warned newspapers not to accept advertisements for any of my books. Just how this was supposed to protect the public (their stated aim) they did not explain. The ASA claims to exist to protect the public but I find it difficult to see how banning a book that contains a summary of proven clinical advice on how to avoid cancer can possibly protect the public. It seems to me that, wittingly or unwittingly, the ASA is simply protecting the cancer establishment and helping to ensure that the number of people developing cancer continues to increase.

In my view Britain would be a safer place for people (though a less profitable one for cancer producing industries) if the PCC and the ASA were quietly disbanded. I suspect that much the same is true for similar organisations in other countries.

* * *

There are now many alternative therapies available for the treatment of cancer. Some are available very cheaply. Some are extremely expensive. Some are simple to follow. Some are extremely complex.

But the two things that the successful anti-cancer therapies all have in common (and the multi-billion dollar a year cancer industry either hasn't realised this yet or else refuses to act on it) is that, whether they are designed to do this or not, the so called alternative therapies which work, and which often have extraordinary and dramatic results when applied to seriously ill cancer patients, all improve the health and vitality of the body's immune system and help eradicate chemical toxins from the body.

The alternative cancer therapies which work offer diets which are rich in vitamin packed organic fruit and vegetables and low in toxic chemicals and encourage patients to learn how to relax and to find some peace in their lives. It doesn't matter whether the peace comes through meditation, relaxation, religion or love and comfort applied by people who care.

Despite all the billions of dollars spent on research no one yet knows how cancer develops. One theory is that free radicals - molecules produced routinely within the body - may damage the DNA within our cells, transforming a previously normal cell into a potentially cancerous cell. Every cell in the human body needs oxygen but oxygen is responsible for the production of free radicals - oxygen carrying molecules which are destructive and aggressive. It is free radicals which encourage our tissues and bodies to age and which cause damage to cells and tissues when our immune systems falter. The formation of free radicals is an inevitable part of life. (And is added to by pollutants from the outside world. For example, a smoker breathes in several billion free radicals every time he sucks on a cigarette.)

Fortunately, it is now believed that there are some food substances called antioxidants which can neutralise free radicals which are formed. There are four known antioxidants at the moment: beta-carotene (which is converted in the human body to vitamin A), vitamins C and E and the mineral selenium. There is a growing amount of evidence to show that antioxidants can help reduce the likelihood of numerous diseases including: cancer, arteriosclerosis, heart disease, skin diseases, types of arthritis, Parkinson's disease, cataracts, Alzheimer's disease and radiation damage.

A good diet and plenty of relaxation are the stable, ever present qualities of the effective anti-cancer cures which work.

* * *

If you measure the cancer industry by the money it brings in it is one of the most successful industries in the world.

If you measure the cancer industry by its success in defeating the disease and saving patients it is one of the most unsuccessful and fraudulent industries in the world.

During the last few years over £120,000,000,000 has been spent on cancer research. That's a lot of noughts.

The cancer industry's success or failure in helping to combat cancer is easy to measure.

Every figure examined shows that the so called `War against Cancer' is, and always been, a sham. Whether we look at the number of people getting cancer, or the number of people surviving when they do get it, the figures show that the cancer charities, the drug companies, the taxpayer funded laboratories and the rest of the cancer industry have failed miserably, are failing miserably and will almost certainly continue to fail miserably.

Look, first, at the way that the number of people getting cancer has increased:

♦ In 1971 one in six people were likely to develop cancer.

♦ Ten years later, by 1981, the risk had doubled and one in three people were likely to develop cancer at some stage in their lives.

♦ By the late 1990s the figures had worsened still further: with 41% of men and 38% of women likely to develop cancer at least once.

Not much of an advertisement for the cancer industry so far.

But what about the survival rates for cancer?

Well, after billions of dollars and decades of research the survival rates are exactly the same today - 2001 - as they were in 1950.

The cancer industry gets its most significant statistics by looking at how many people live for five years after their cancer was first diagnosed.

Half a century ago the five year survival rate for patients who develop cancer was around in one in three.

And that is what it is today - around one in three.

In fact the real figures are even worse than these.

The tens of thousands working in the cancer industry are so desperate to disguise the truth of their appalling failure that they have fiddled the figures. By comparing today's figures with the figures from thirty, forty or fifty years ago they are not comparing `like' with `like'.

They have done this by encouraging doctors (and patients) to diagnose cancer earlier and earlier. Having an earlier diagnosis made probably doesn't make much (if any) difference to the length of time the patient will live but it does mean that people join the statistics at an earlier point in their illness.

Bizarrely, the cancer industry regards a patient who has survived for five years as having been cured. Even if that patient dies after five years and one minute he or she will be counted as an official success. Clearly the earlier the diagnosis is made the better the figures will look. Imagine just how bad the figures would be without this massage.

As far as the cancer industry is concerned the sole aim of treatment is to keep a patient alive for that magical five years. They don't care if the treatment kills the patient later (as chemotherapy and radiotherapy are likely to do).

They have also fiddled the figures by changing the diagnostic rules to make their own figures look better. By widening the net and including as `cancer' patients many who would not have previously been officially regarded as having cancer they can improve their figures.

(The medical establishment seems to do this regularly. The massive and enormously profitable AIDS industry has, for example, changed its own rules so that patients dying from tuberculosis, for example, are included in the statistics for AIDS patients.)

The conclusion has to be that the cancer industry - the big cancer charities, government sponsored research laboratories and drug companies - have been wasting time, energy, manpower and money. There is no evidence that catching cancer symptoms early increases survival. Most surveys suggest that untreated cancer patients may survive for longer than patients who have orthodox treatment. One famous study showed that patients who refused orthodox `cancer industry' treatment (from the limited `slash, poison or burn' regimes) lived for an average of 12.5 years while those patients who accepted `cancer industry' treatment lived, on average for just three years. Patients who have radiation, chemotherapy or surgery often feel worse too.

* * *

Cancer treatment is a huge money spinner for drug companies and charities. The cancer industry uses clever (dishonest) advertising to pull in donations and legacies. Cancer charities bring in a fortune through their high street charity shops. The cancer industry creates endless myths about forthcoming cancer cures, vaccines to prevent cancer, drugs to cure it. `Give us a pound,' they say, `and you don't have to worry about cancer. If you give us a pound you can carry on eating burgers and smoking cigarettes.' And so, inevitably, people give them a pound (or more) and carry on eating burgers and smoking cigarettes.

For patients - and healthy citizens - the `war on cancer' is, and always has been, an abject failure; constantly using fake promises and false hopes to help increase profits.

Can there have ever been a more dishonest, more disreputable, more cynical or more immoral industry?

(At least the tobacco industry has never claimed to be looking for a cure for cancer.)

The vast majority of those involved in the cancer industry are dishonest; biased, bought and too scared of their industry paymasters to acknowledge the truth. The remainder are simply stupid.

Carcinogenic chemicals and technologies are assumed innocent until proved guilty (and no one puts much effort into trying to prove anything guilty when there are profits to be considered), hardly any truly independent research is ever done and when research is done it usually involves animals.

(The researchers must know that research work on animals is entirely useless and irrelevant but they do it because it buys time for their industry paymasters.)

* * *

The people working in the cancer industry will claim that they are winning the battle. They are lying. The incidence of cancer has been steadily increasing for decades. There has been a fifty per cent increase in the incidence of cancer since America's War Against Cancer was launched thirty years ago.Around 90% of the money given to cancer research is spent on searching for and testing expensive (and immensely profitable) high tech cures. (Chemotherapy - possibly the most harmful, useless form of treatment yet devised by man - can cost in excess of £100,000 per year, per patient, with the vast majority of that sum being pure profit.)

And, of course, some `fashionable' cancers receive far more than fair share of attention from cancer researchers.

I've been screaming about this for decades(since the publication of my second book *Paper Doctors* in 1976), so it was something of a relief to see the UK Government accept in 2003that cancer research money isn't allocated either fairly or logically.

Around £500,000,000 a year is spent on cancer research in the UK alone. Most of that money comes from donors to charity and from taxpayers. But, partly through pressure from politically correct politicians and partly because cancer charities know that some varieties of cancer are more `fashionable' and publicly acceptable than others, the allocation of all this money is downright unfair.

Vast amounts of research money is spent on studying breast cancer, cervical cancer and leukaemia, for example, but relatively little is spent investigating bowel cancer, prostate cancer or lung cancer.

Of course, the real tragedy is that most of the money is wasted anyway because researchers aren't innovative, aren't imaginative and aren't particularly well informed about the best ways to research, prevent or treat the disease.

Despite all the expenditure of so much money the incidence of cancer continues to rise. The `war' against cancer has been just as much of a failure as the `war' against drugs.

Indeed, the evidence shows that the global cancer establishment - consisting of government departments, charities and drug companies - has, largely for commercial reasons, successfully suppressed a number of possible cancer `cures'.

And very little money or effort is put into cancer prevention. Most people, for example, are still totally unaware of the well-established links between diet and cancer.

Not surprisingly, the cancer industry rarely investigates the responsibility of the chemical industries in the increasing incidence of cancer. This may, of course, be because the chemical industries make many of the products used to treat the cancers their industries have caused.

* * *

In the cancer industry, as within other areas of the medical establishment, the hugely influential, and theoretically independent, intellectual and academic infrastructure has been corrupted by inducements that would in other societies simply be known as `bribes' but which in our society are known as grants, bursaries, honoraria, consultancies, directorships, share options, expense accounts and so on.

At the same time allegedly independent experts are bribed by the government with powerful positions on advisory and regulatory bodies. These positions do not need to be highly paid. The people who accept these posts know that their status will entitle them to claim more grants, bursaries, honoraria, consultancies, directorships, share options, expense accounts and so on.

There are very few influential people in medicine, food technology, genetic engineering, life sciences and biotechnology who have not been bought by the powerful industry/government combination.

The result is that those who oppose the new establishment are easy to discredit and denounce. They can be quickly destroyed professionally and personally. The media is controlled and bought, often by politicians doing deals (encourage your readers to vote for us and we will keep the Monopolies Commission off your back when you want to buy another TV station). Specialist health and science correspondents are usually so ignorant that they are totally dependent upon what they are told by the establishment experts. They are frightened of losing their jobs and always willing to buy promotion (and lucrative outside assignments writing for drug company publications) by `monstering' anyone who dares to disagree with the establishment line.

It is hardly surprising that cancer is becoming commoner by the year. And hardly surprising that survival rates are so poor.

Just how people working for the big professional cancer organisations can sleep at night I cannot imagine. Personally, I have absolutely no doubt that if the big cancer charities had never existed there would be far, far fewer people dying from cancer in the world today. These really are organisations we would be better off without for without such groups genuinely effective alternative approaches to cancer prevention and treatment would have stood a far greater chance of reaching a wide audience.

* * *

Why has the cancer industry has failed so miserably to reduce the number of people developing cancer and failed, equally miserably, to improve the survival rates of those who get it?

There are several explanations.

1. The profit, the cancer industry knows well, is in looking for a cure rather than actually finding one. The scientists who work for the big cancer charities would run a mile in the opposite direction if they thought they had accidentally stumbled on a cure for cancer. If the big cancer charities did find a cure for cancer all the scientists, bureaucrats, publicists and marketing experts who work for these charities would have to find other (probably less lucrative) employment.

This explanation may seem unlikely - even paranoid or conspiratorial - but it does offer one explanation for the fact that the cancer industry insists that only orthodox medicine can offer a cure for cancer. And the cancer industry is so powerful that it has influenced governments in its favour. Bizarrely, in most countries of the world it is now illegal to offer an alternative cancer treatment (even if it works). Doctors who dare to recommend, or even discuss, alternative therapies are isolated, reviled, belittled and ridiculed. The establishment is not above watching individuals who are deemed to be a threat. Premises may be entered and phones tapped. Advisory bodies who decide who is to be excommunicated or punished are often populated by experts who are paid by the companies they are supposed to be supervising. The cancer industry is self-preserving. It encourages its members to deny and discourage remedies which may turn out to be real ones.

When a popular Sunday newspaper in the UK reported that a 27 year old girl had `shunned life-saving drugs' and it was suggested that her success might be due to the fact that she had eaten over six tons of fruit and vegetables during a two year battle with cancer a spokesman for the Cancer Research Campaign was reported to have said: `I'm convinced it was conventional treatment which pushed the cancer into remission. She took a big risk in abandoning chemotherapy and we don't advise others to do the same.'

Since the girl had taken just one dose of chemotherapy this is a bizarre claim. The Cancer Research Campaign did not seem interested in investigating the miracle cure - let alone finding out whether it might provide hope for other patients. Their main interest was, it seems to me, to defend the financial interests of the pharmaceutical industry.

2. The cancer charities are inextricably linked to the big pharmaceutical industries. Naturally, the big drug companies aren't terribly interested in cures which don't involve drugs. They tolerate surgery because it keeps the members of the medical profession happy and because patients who have surgery are usually given chemotherapy as well. They accept radiotherapy partly because the companies making and selling radiotherapy equipment are part of the cancer industry and partly because patients who have radiotherapy usually have chemotherapy too.

When the hugely wealthy cancer industry did get involved with a trial of a popular type of alternative medicine the trial was so full of errors that it was worthless. Nevertheless the Imperial Cancer Research Fund held a press conference and made sure that the faulty research (which naturally questioned the value of the alternative approach) got massive national publicity. The alternative approach to the treatment of cancer was vilified as at best worthless and at worst dangerous.

Only much later was it made clear that the research which had been done was so flawed as to be useless. One of the scientists involved subsequently cut his throat and killed himself (one assumes that he did so through shame). Before doing so he admitted `The study was not as good as it could have been.'

Nevertheless, despite the cruel dishonesty of the cancer industry it was the alternative form of treatment which was pretty well destroyed. The established controlled media concentrated on the results of the invalid research and gave little space to the subsequent revelation that the results were worthless.

This is nothing particularly unusual in the world of medicine. The results of medical research often depend upon who is paying.

3. Even after all these years the people who work for the cancer industry still don't seem to understand the relationship between cancer and the body's immune system.

I believe that cancer develops because the body is a wreck. Because of the accumulated stresses the immune system doesn't work properly and so the toxic chemicals and other irritants which have collected in the body trigger off the development of a cancer. (There are thoughtful scientists - derided by the AIDS industry - who claim that AIDS develops for similar reasons).

When I launched a free website to teach internet users the value of a healthy immune system a cancer charity was not amused.

You might imagine that as an organisation ostensibly existing to fight cancer they would have been delighted. Not a bit of it.

`Celeb doctor Vernon Coleman's latest web venture has been branded `scary, frightening and wrong' by the Cancer Research Campaign,' claimed *The Daily Mirror*. `But his views on cancer take a more sinister turn. He claims the medical industry (sic) is sacrificing the lives of thousands of cancer sufferers by offering ineffective treatments simply to line the pockets of drug companies.'

`The CRC believes that this is seriously dangerous,' continued *The Daily Mirror.* `It's awful to think of someone who has just been diagnosed with cancer reading this. The information is wrong. The whole thing is frightening,' said a spokesperson.'

None of the information on my website was wrong, of course. And by its response The Cancer Research Campaign proved that my accusations about the cancer industry were absolutely accurate. (Sadly, that website no longer exists. The site was destroyed by hackers.)

Cancer develops because the body's immune system isn't working well and it is the breakdown of the body's immune system which leads to death. The fitter and stronger the immune system the less likely a patient will be to develop cancer and the less likely he or she will be to succumb to cancer if he or she develops it. The orthodox doctor, working under the guidelines of the cancer industry views the symptoms of the cancer as the problem. To the cancer industry cancer is the cause and the symptom. This is nonsense.

The official view is that if you attack the cancer with surgery, poison or radiotherapy the disease will be eradicated. No one seems interested in why the patient has developed cancer. (Not being interested in the basic cause is a modern malaise. Politicians seem quite disinterested in the causes of terrorism or crime. Doctors don't seem to care a jot about why people develop heart disease or stress related problems.)

No one within the cancer industry is interested in building up the patient's general health or immune system. No one in the cancer industry seems to realise that the official forms of treatment attack and weaken the body (and the immune system) as much as they attack and weaken the cancer. The cancer industry (targeting profit rather than cure) prefers to turn every patient into a bald, hopeless, eczematous invalid rather than face this simple truth.

4. The cancer industry spends a pittance on teaching people how to avoid cancer. I know what causes eight out of ten cancers. I can tell you the names of the foods, the drinks, the drugs that cause cancer. And the cancer industry can tell you that too. But they don't. The only possible conclusion is that they don't want to cut the incidence of cancer because if they do people will be less afraid of the disease and the cancer industry's income (and profits) will go down. The cancer industry thrives on fear and ignorance. Prevention is not something into which they put a lot of effort - though they are enthusiastic about interventionist techniques for diagnosing cancer as early as possible. For example, women who are susceptible to breast cancer are encouraged to have their breasts X rayed. This is dangerous. Mammography is one of the most remarkably stupid things ever done in medicine. Can you think of anything dafter than assessing a part of the body known to be exceptionally sensitive to cancer with a diagnostic technique known to cause cancer? Mammography is a profitable business. Plenty of work for doctors and the companies making the mammography machines. And there are three bonuses for the cancer industry. The first is that mammography programmes encourage more fear about cancer. That's good for the cancer industry. It pulls in the money. The second is that by diagnosing patients earlier more of them will survive for five years. (This will make the cancer industry look good because they will be able to claim that five year survival rates are improving.) And the third is that when women are diagnosed as having early breast cancer they will probably be given the drug tamoxifen to take. Lots more profits there. (The additional, extra bonus is the fact that worry and fear about breast cancer mean that there is now tremendous pressure on doctors to prescribe the drug tamoxifen to healthy women. Tamoxifen is known to cause cancer of the uterus but the drug companies claim that it will help prevent breast cancer. If they have their way just about every woman over the age of 16 will be regularly taking tamoxifen.)

Patients are not, however, told to avoid eating meat - even though there is a clear link between meat consumption and breast cancer.

(It is crucial to remember that diagnosing cancer early is `good' for the cancer industry because it helps to improve five year survival rates. Helping people to avoid cancer doesn't help the cancer industry at all.)

5.The crucial fact that the cancer industry overlooks is that our bodies are remarkably capable of looking after themselves. Few people take advantage of these self-healing mechanisms and protective capabilities because we are all encouraged to put our health and our lives into the hands of the so called experts - practitioners who are often trained to look at our bodies and the diseases which afflict them with all the breadth of vision of a man looking through the wrong end of a telescope.

The great tragedy of orthodox medicine is that doctors have always been suspicious of anything new and often reluctant to listen to theories and ideas which contradict traditional attitudes.

From Paracelsus to Lind to Semmelweiss, medical history is littered with doctors who learned the hard way that the medical establishment does not take kindly to original ideas or to new concepts which threaten the status quo.

Medical students are taught that they should avoid asking uncomfortable questions and young doctors who wish to succeed know that they must remain unquestioningly faithful to the established truths.

Any physician who rocks the boat, makes waves or swim against the tide will soon find himself floundering in deep water - and struggling to survive!

To be successful in our society a physician must respect the prejudices of his elders, adhere to the dogma of his teachers and shut his mind to theories which do not fit in with orthodox medical doctrines.

Modern medicine is, much like the black magic medicine of the middle ages, an unstructured, unscientific discipline in which uncertainty, confusion and ignorance are too often disguised with conceit, arrogance and bigotry.

At a time when the half-life of medical information is shrinking and the limits of traditional, interventionist medicine are daily becoming more and more apparent, this ostrich-type behaviour is difficult to understand and impossible to justify.

Unless doctors are prepared to consider the unexpected, the unlikely and even the apparently impossible, patients must regard rigidly orthodox interventionists with a certain amount of suspicion and cynicism.

The fact is that our bodies have far more power than we give them credit for.

In the early 1980s I wrote a book called `*Bodypower*' in which I observed that the body's self-healing mechanisms are so effective that in nine out of ten illnesses the body will deal with any outside disorder itself - without any outside intervention. (Thirty years later the book still appears on bestseller lists.)

If you look after your body well you will dramatically reduce your chances of developing heart disease, cancer or any other threat to your survival.

Moreover, if you do fall ill then you can help yourself recover by taking advantage of those internal self healing powers and, if necessary, by helping your bodypower.

When a disease threatens the very survival of the organism then the body needs to be encouraged to use all its internal healing powers in order to alter the circumstances within. You need to turn up the boost on your bodypower.

When the circumstances change then the cancer won't grow. When the body is stronger than the cancer the cancer will, to use the aggressive jargon of the cancer industry, be defeated. And that, surely, is the key to success in defeating cancer: not to try to destroy the cancer from the outside but to try to help the body defeat the cancer from the inside.

A little earlier I said that one of the fundamental errors doctors make is that they assume that they can treat cancer (and other life threatening diseases) in the same way that they thought they could treat infectious diseases.

Tackling cancer as though it were an outside agent (such as a virus or a bacterium) simply doesn't work because cancer is not something that comes in from the outside of the body - it is something that develops within as a result of a fundamental problem inside the human body.

But there is a vital lesson to be learnt from the way that our bodies respond to infectious diseases.

Doctors have observed that when patients fall ill with an infectious disease they are more likely to go into spontaneous remission.

A few hundred years ago by a Frenchman called Dr Didot who noted that if prostitutes had syphilis they were very unlikely to develop cancer. Didot actually treated 20 cancer patients with syphilis and of 14 of the 20 went into total remission. (I rather doubt if the authorities - which happily approve of toxic chemotherapy - would allow anyone to perform any such experiment today.)

Similarly, whereas cancer is uncommon in areas where malaria is present getting rid of the malaria in an area will result in a rise in the cancer rate.

It has also been reported that people who have cancer and who catch malaria have a good chance of going into remission.

Now why could this be?

I have seen it argued that the infectious disease somehow eats up the cancer.

But I don't think that this is what happens at all.

What I believe happens is that patients with cancer who develop an infection get better because their immune systems are triggered into a response. The infection is easily recognised as an immediate threat to the body (in contrast to a cancer which may not be such an immediate and obvious threat) and so the body reacts in the only way it knows how - by winding up the immune system; the result is that the bodypower effect comes into operation and the cancer gets defeated along with the infection.

6. The methods favoured by the cancer industry are, inevitably perhaps, the methods favoured by the medical establishment and the pharmaceutical industry: chemotherapy, survey and radiotherapy.

Chemotherapy works by poisoning cancer cells. If the drugs only poisoned the cancer cells this would be wonderful. But the problem is that normal cells also die. Chemotherapy drugs are so toxic that they kill just about everything they reach. The prescribing doctor has to carefully adjust the dose of the drug he is prescribing so as to kill the cancer cells without killing too many of the body's essential cells. This is by no means an exact science.

Indeed, it isn't really a science at all. Its guesswork and hope. The concept of chemotherapy pays no attention at all to the body's in-built defence mechanisms. On the contrary chemotherapy reduces the effectiveness of the body's defence system and therefore makes it easier for a cancer to grow. Virtually all chemotherapy drugs are immunosuppressive (thereby destroying the body's self defence mechanisms) and carcinogenic (subsequently producing additional, new cancers). Possible side effects known to be associated with chemotherapy may include: nausea, vomiting, bleeding, loss of hair, liver damage, kidney damage, increased risk of infection, impotence, sterility, bone marrow damage, nerve damage, lung damage, diarrhoea, skin sores, mouth sores, heart damage, allergies and fever. And, of course, an increased susceptibility to another type of cancer. Drugs mask problems rather than deal with them directly. They do not deal with the disease process. They are unnatural. They contaminate the patient and produce an array of confusing side effects. They cover up symptoms which might be of use in leading the doctor to a better form of treatment. Only a complete moron would argue that chemotherapy is the way forward for cancer therapy. It is worrying that thousands of people employed in the cancer industry seem to be either intellectually disadvantaged bricks or else in the pay of the pharmaceutical giants. The may help explain why the so called war on cancer has been such a complete failure.

There is little or no evidence that radiotherapy works. But plenty of evidence that it can do harm. Most of the available evidence seems to suggest that while the upside is slight the downside is considerable. With radiation there is a powerful risk that the patient will be seriously damaged and disabled. When one reader was advised to have radiotherapy treatment she wisely asked the consultant recommending the therapy to let her see medical evidence supporting the advice. The consultant sent along two scientific papers. One of the papers did not relate to patients in her age group. The other proved that for patients with her particular clinical problem radiotherapy was worse than useless. Hardly reassuring.

* * *

The war against cancer will continue to fail. Avoidable cancers will continue to become commoner and commoner and the establishment will continue to ensure that only the toxic (but highly profitable) alleged treatments of cancer which are authorised by the pharmaceutical industry will be authorised by governments.

Our food, our homes and our general environment are all irretrievably polluted by chemicals. And the pollution is getting worse daily. New chemicals are being created, introduced and sold far faster than anyone can be expected to keep up with them.

Chemicals are, without a doubt, a major cause of death and illness today. They are one of the main reasons why the incidence of cancer continues to rise. The use of untested chemicals is one of the main reasons why the incidence of number of babies born with deformities is constantly going up.

Look in your kitchen cupboards, take a look at some of the labels on the foods you've bought, or the cleaning or bathroom products you've got, and you'll see the names of just a fraction of the vast number of chemicals now used as dyes, flavourings, preservatives, disinfectants and so on.

Many of these chemicals are known to be carcinogenic - and yet manufacturers are allowed to continue to use them in a wide variety of products. Thousands have not yet been tested - and we know next to nothing about them. Every day we touch, breathe in and swallow chemicals about which no one knows very much at all. It hardly seems believable. But it's true.

Some of these chemicals produce skin rashes, headaches, irritated eyes, hair damage and other annoying but hardly life threatening symptoms. Some cause nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea. Others can cause liver or kidney damage, cancer and death. Your local supermarket sells enough dangerous chemicals for you to start a biological war in your neighbourhood.

The world the companies which make and use these chemicals are trusted to do their own safety tests. New chemicals are used if the company making them decides that they are safe. There are tens of thousands of chemicals around about which the so called regulatory authorities know no more than you or I know.

Companies which use chemicals do so because they help them increase their profits. That's what these companies exist for: to make profits. There is absolutely nothing wrong with that, of course. But it is something that governments and regulatory authorities seem to forget.

If a company discovers that one of the products it uses may cause cancer is it really likely to announce this to the world - and risk finding itself the subject of a mass of lawsuits? Or is it more likely either to suppress the evidence and continue to use the chemical or to quietly remove the chemical and replace it with something else?

Chemicals which affect the normal action of hormones in the body (known as endocrine disrupters) have been a special worry for some time. Under normal circumstances the human endocrine system is constantly producing hormones which send signals around the body, switching functions on and off and generally regulating the way the body operates.

Hormones do their job by fitting into special receptors. When the right hormone slips into the right receptor the response is rather like putting a key into a lock: the body responds by doing whatever is appropriate.

Chemicals - found in the food we eat, the air we breathe, the water we drink and the chemicals we use to clean our homes - can interfere with this process by fitting into the receptors and either opening the lock or blocking it so that it cannot open even when the proper hormone arrives. Either way, chaos can ensue.

* * *

Cancer charities and governments aren't the only ones responsible for the remorseless rise in the incidence of cancer. Drug companies must take much of the blame too.

For decades pharmaceutical companies have been members of far the most profitable industry in the world.

The production and sale or prescription medicines has been a cartel for many years and the big drug companies have carved up and controlled the sale of medicines throughout the world. Companies and individuals who have tried to prepare and offer for sale drugs (or other products) which they believe might be efficacious have been blocked by numerous government agencies - all ostensibly protecting the public but, in practice, defending the profitability of the big drug companies.

Imagine, for example, that you had discovered a herbal recipe which cured cancer. You might want to sell - or even give away - your product so as to reduce the incidence of cancer in the world. No chance. You would be stopped dead in your tracks. In the USA the drug companies are defended by an agency whose agents carry guns and wear gas masks and flak jackets.

The government agencies which are supposed to regulate industries and protect the public now protect industries and regulate the public.

Even the mass media cooperate with this policy. Next time you see, hear or read a programme or article about cancer look carefully. You will almost certainly see that the pronouncements made by employees of the official, orthodox cancer industry are treated as though they were written in stone and handed down from on high whereas comments made by those endeavouring to outline the disadvantages of orthodox therapy and the advantages of alternative therapies will be presented with doubt, scepticism and, possibly, derision.

Information provided by the cancer industry is invariably offered up as `fact' whereas information provided by those advocating alternative approaches will be presented with an indigestible concoction of `alleges' and `in their opinions'.

Innovations are quickly and effectively suppressed by governments in case they prove to be a financial threat to the cartel.

Try to sell - or even give away - a cure for cancer (however genuine and however honourable your motives) and you'll be raided. You will end up in prison - with your assets confiscated. If that wasn't enough to put you off try this: to get your new product approved for sale will cost you around $250 million - and you may have to wait a decade before you can selling the product and bringing in any money to pay off your debts.

The big drug companies happily put up with these absurd costs because they provide them with protection against competitors.

The big drug companies have it made. They make vast profits from selling legal drugs.

(I have described in numerous books the obscene profits which can be made from the sale of prescription drugs - and the ways in which drug companies ensure that their profits remain high.)

The only competition they face comes from other, existing, big drug companies.

Any newcomer is forbidden by law from advertising their product until they have official approval - at a cost of a quarter of a billion dollars.

This cartel protects itself by claiming that all this is done to protect the public from unscrupulous people trying to sell unsafe, ineffective and extremely expensive products.

Er. Excuse me. Pardon? Isn't that exactly what the drug industry does?

Brilliant, independent doctors and scientists are specifically forbidden from breaking into the business of selling drugs.

There is no place for entrepreneurs in the cancer industry - or, indeed, in any branch of medicine.Governments and drug companies control doctors and they control the production and sale of drugs.

In recent years drug companies have become increasingly irritated by small, rival companies selling herbal remedies and supplements. These products have been popular among patients who have been disillusioned by the drug industry and its dangerous, ineffective medicines. The companies selling supplements have side stepped the cartel because their products have not officially been classified as medicines. But the drug companies have now clamped down and put an end to this and have forced governments around the world (including, the EU, of course) to close down those selling these `unofficial' medicines.The only crooks officially allowed in the world of medicine are the crooks who have for decades been promoting, selling and making huge profits out of dangerous and ineffective prescription medicines.

The bottom line is that patients everywhere would be better off if the cartel was smashed and if small companies were allowed to set up and sell drugs. There would be new ideas, it would be possible properly to test herbal products which are rumoured to cure cancer (and other serious disorders) and the drug industry would be broken apart and replaced with people with talent and, perhaps, a little honour. Most important of all, patients would be far better off than they are at the moment.

There are plenty of existing laws suitable for protecting patients against crooks and charlatans.Breaking up the international drug industry would mean that the biggest crooks and charlatans would be out of business.

Chapter 6: Are You Taking too Many Antibiotics?

When antibiotics - drugs such as penicillin - were first introduced in the 1930s they gave doctors a chance to kill the bacteria causing infections and to save the lives of patients who would otherwise have died of infections such as pneumonia. Antibiotics were regarded as genuine life-savers; heralding a revolution in health care.

Although it is certainly true that the impact made by antibiotics has been exaggerated (many of the diseases which are caused by organisms which are susceptible to antibiotics were on the decline before the antibiotics were introduced) these drugs are undoubtedly of considerable value.

The problem is that although doctors are aware of the advantages of these drugs (if they are in any doubt the drug companies will frequently remind them) they seem unaware of the hazards associated with their unnecessary use.

If you have a serious or troublesome infection - bronchitis, sore throat or cystitis for example - the chances are high that your doctor will prescribe an antibiotic.

If you are innocent and naive you might imagine that the prescribing of an antibiotic will have been done scientifically and that your doctor, as a man or woman of science, will have carefully chosen a drug specifically designed to eradicate the type of bug causing your infection and prescribed for precisely the right number of days.

You would, however, be quite wrong to assume that doctors know what they are doing when they prescribe antibiotics. Antibiotics are powerful drugs. They do save lives. But, in general, they are prescribed with neither sound logic nor scientific understanding. The prescribing of antibiotics is a virtually random exercise. The average tapioca brained traffic warden could prescribe them with as much sense and understanding as the average doctor. Visit one doctor with cystitis and she will give you enough antibiotics to last you for five days. Visit the doctor next door, complaining of exactly the same symptoms, and he may prescribe the same antibiotic but give you enough pills to last for seven days. And visit a third doctor and she may give you pills to last for ten or even fourteen days. Where, in the name of Areolus Phillipus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, is the sense in any of this?

This bizarre situation occurs not because doctors haven't bothered to learn how to prescribe antibiotics but because no one knows how antibiotics should be prescribed. Astonishingly, no tests have ever been done to find out precisely how long antibiotics should be given for! Research scientists have been far too busy enjoying themselves doing unspeakable things to monkeys, cats and puppies to bother doing such useful or practical research.

All that is bad enough. But it isn't the end of the horror story. For although scientists know which antibiotics should be used to combat which bugs the evidence shows that the selection of a drug to prescribe is generally done with the sort of scientific judgement the average six year old might apply when picking a coloured sweet out of a box.

As any regular surgery goer will know that there are scores of antibiotics available. Some of these pills are simply variations on profitable themes. But there are some important differences between many of these pills. Drugs are designed to combat specific types of infection. However, most doctors don't usually bother to try to match antibiotics with bugs; instead they simply write out a prescription for any old drug. They tend to choose a drug because they like the name - or can spell it - rather than because it is appropriate.

The end result is that although you might think that the antibiotic you are prescribed has been chosen specifically for your infection you would probably be wrong. Your doctor will have probably simply picked a name at random. She is more likely to prescribe a drug because its name appears on the free disposable pen she happens to be holding than because she knows that it is the best and most suitable drug to kill the bug with which you are infected. Worse still, most doctors are so darned stupid that they happily prescribe antibiotics for virus infections even though viruses are not susceptible to antibiotic therapy.

Today, one in six of the prescriptions doctors write is for an antibiotic and there are at least 100 preparations available for doctors to choose from. Sadly, there is no doubt that most of the prescriptions which are written for antibiotics are unnecessary. Many patients are suffering from viral infections which are not susceptible to antibiotics, and others would get better by themselves without any drug being prescribed. Various independent experts who have studied the use of antibiotics claim that between 50 - 90% of the prescriptions written for antibiotics are unnecessary.

To a certain extent doctors over-prescribe because they like to do something when faced with a patient - and prescribing a drug is virtually the only thing most of them can do. To some extent prescribing a drug is a defence against any possible future charge of negligence (on the basis that if the patient dies it is better to have done something than to have done nothing).

But the main reason for the over-prescribing of antibiotics is, without doubt, the fact that too many doctors are under the influence of the drug companies.

The over-prescribing of antibiotics would not matter too much if these drugs were harmless, and if there were no other hazards associated with their use. But antibiotics are certainly not harmless. I believe that antibiotics kill thousands of patients a year and if nine out of ten prescriptions for antibiotics are unnecessary then it is not unreasonable to assume that nine out of ten of those deaths are unnecessary too.

And antibiotics don't only kill patients. The unnecessary and excessive use of antibiotics causes allergy reactions, side effects and a huge variety of serious complications.

There is also the very real hazard that by overusing antibiotics doctors are enabling bacteria to develop immunity to these potentially life-saving drugs. There is now no doubt that many of our most useful drugs have been devalued by overuse and are no longer effective.

If your doctor prescribes an antibiotic for you don't be afraid to ask him whether you really need it. He may simply be prescribing the antibiotic because he thinks you will be disappointed if you don't get one.

The over-prescribing of antibiotics is not a new phenomenon.

In my first book, `The Medicine Men' (1975), I pointed out that one huge survey had shown that only one third of the patients given antibiotics had infections at all! Other surveys, I explained, had shown that even when patients do have an infection the antibiotic prescribed is usually the wrong one.

Nothing has improved since then. Today's doctors are just as criminally inept as their predecessors were. And members of the medical profession still treat me like a pariah for daring to expose these professional shortcomings.

But it is now clear that the warning about antibiotics which I gave two decades ago was absolutely accurate. The careless, inaccurate and inappropriate prescribing of antibiotics by thousands of ignorant and careless doctors is one of the main reasons why a growing number of bugs are resistant to antibiotic therapy. Many once powerful drugs no longer work because doctors have handed them out like sweeties and bugs have been given the chance to grow stronger and resistant to treatment. An ever increasing number of patients are dying because antibiotics no longer work as well as they used to work.

During the last forty odd years I have made scores of predictions about health matters. Most of those predictions were laughed at by the medical establishment when I first made them. Nearly all of them have already come true.

In the first edition of this book (published in 1996) I predicted that infectious diseases would soon become one of the most feared and important causes of death - just as they were before the development of antibiotics. `This tragic state of affairs.' I wrote, `will be the fault of those doctors who have overprescribed these drugs.'

Sadly, that prediction has now come true too.

Chapter 7: How Safe Are Repeat Prescriptions?

A growing number of prescriptions (now said to be about half of all those written) are provided without there being any meeting between the doctor and the patient. The patient writes or telephones for a new supply of a specific drug and then, a day or so later, either collects or receives through the post the appropriate prescription.

This system of providing prescriptions `on request' was originally designed to help patients suffering from chronic disorders such as diabetes, high blood pressure or epilepsy. Patients suffering from disorders which tend to vary very little over the months do not need daily, weekly or even monthly medical examinations but they may need regular supplies of drugs. For them to have to visit a doctor simply to obtain a prescription is clearly a waste of everyone's time. Doctors do not usually prescribe quantities of drugs likely to last more than four to six weeks since some drugs deteriorate if kept too long and most practitioners feel that it is unwise to allow any patient to keep excessively large quantities of drugs at home.

Unfortunately, repeat prescribing is not always restricted to patients with long-term problems requiring continuous medication. Patients who really should see a doctor (rather than simply continue taking tablets) sometimes ask for repeat prescriptions and, to the shame of the medical profession, not infrequently obtain them.

Many patients have become psychologically dependent upon sleeping tablets and tranquillisers because of the ease with which they have been able to obtain repeat prescriptions.

Arrangements for obtaining repeat prescriptions vary a good deal from one doctor's practice to another's. In some practices patients entitled to receive prescriptions are issued with cards on which the drugs which they are allowed to receive without any consultation are listed. There may be a limit on the number of prescriptions which the patient may obtain without being reviewed. In other practices the cards detailing drugs which can be provided on repeat prescriptions are kept with the patient's notes so that the receptionists, who usually write out repeat prescriptions, can check on drugs, and dosages, and make a note of the number of prescriptions used.

Theoretically, doctors signing prescriptions should check all the details, including specific points such as the dosages and quantities of drugs to be supplied, and general points such as the suitability of continuing with the treatment. In practice many prescriptions supplied in this way are signed with few or no checks being made. I have, in the past, obtained evidence showing that some doctors sign piles of virgin prescription forms and leave their receptionists to fill in the blanks. I have little doubt that this practice continues.

I suggest that patients receiving drugs on repeat prescriptions should always check that the tablets they receive match the tablets previously prescribed, and that any instructions on the bottle label match previous instructions. If there is any confusion or uncertainty then a telephone call should be made to the surgery.

As a general rule, I suggest that only patients who have established and long-term clinical problems should obtain drugs on repeat prescriptions and they should visit the surgery at least once every six months to check that the medication does not need changing. Patients with short-term or acute conditions who need medication should always speak to a doctor.

Repeat prescriptions can be a convenience. But they can lead to drug misuse and eventual abuse - and to addiction and dependence.

Chapter 8: Questions To Ask Before Taking A Prescribed Drug

You will improve your chances of benefiting from a drug - and also minimise the risk of problems - if you know what to expect. You have a right to know what you are taking - and why. Don't be shy. Here are some questions you should ask your doctor:

1. What is this medicine for?

2. How long should I take it? Should I take it until the bottle is empty or until my symptoms have gone?

3. What should I do if I miss a dose?

4. What side effects should I particularly watch out for? Will the medicine make me drowsy?

5. Am I likely to need to take more when these have gone? Should I arrange another consultation?

6. Are there any foods I should avoid? Should I avoid alcohol?

7. How long will the medicine take to work - and how will I know that it is working?

Chapter 9: Don't Let Your Doctor Label You

If, a few years ago, you went to see your doctor complaining that you felt miserable and down in the dumps he would have probably prescribed a harmless tonic, chatted to you for twenty minutes and told you to try and get out and enjoy yourself a bit more.

Today, if you go to see your doctor and complain that you feel under the weather he will probably diagnose you as depressed. There is an excellent chance that he will then start you on one of the many new powerful chemicals now available.

Up until recently depression was a fairly uncommon disease.

The value of world-wide sales of anti-depressants rarely rose above $2,500,000,000 a year.(To the world's drug companies that's small change - hardly worth bothering to take to the bank).

But today depression seems to be one of the fastest growing diseases in the world. Millions of people now suffer from it. And the boom in the diagnosis of depression has coincided with the development of special, new, expensive, chemical anti-depressants.

My fear is that the diagnosis of `depression' is now often being made when patients are simply rather miserable or unhappy or generally fed up with their lives.

You will not be surprised to hear that although I (well known to be suspicious and rather cynical of the motives of the pharmaceutical industry) worry that some of these new anti-depressant drugs may, in due course, prove to produce dangerous or nasty side effects, the majority of doctors are happily prescribing them by the bucket load.

My big fear is that the drugs which are now being prescribed with the enthusiasm which was shown for the benzodiazepine tranquillisers in the 1970s (and, by many doctors, for patients with very similar symptoms) may turn out to produce massive problems of their own.

It may well be true that a relatively small number of depressed patients can be helped by taking drugs.

I have no doubt that people with real depression, who suffer such symptoms as constant crying, an inability to sleep, a total feeling of worthlessness, a loss of appetite, suicidal tendencies or other serious symptoms of depression, need sophisticated, professional help.

But I believe that the amount of good that is being done by these powerful drugs could be far outweighed by the possible harm.

I have absolutely no doubt that there is more sadness, despair, and unhappiness in our society than there has ever been in any previous society but I strongly suspect that many of the patients diagnosed as suffering from `depression' may well be `sad' (and suffering from the disorder which I call The Twentieth Century Blues) rather than clinically `depressed', and may need help of a different kind.

I believe that instead of automatically dosing all their unhappy patients with powerful and potentially hazardous chemicals, and attempting to tackle a vague and ill-defined disease, doctors should be encouraging more of the sad, the despairing and the unhappy to try to tackle the specific causes of their unhappiness themselves. It can be done.

* * *

Depression is not the only disease which is said to be commoner today than it used to be.

Asthma is another disorder which is often said to affect more people now than in the past.

And arthritis is a third disease which is alleged to be getting commoner.

In my view the problem is not that these (and many other) diseases are just becoming commoner, but that doctors are diagnosing them more often!

There is a huge difference.

Take a mild wheeze into a doctor's surgery these days with a mild wheeze and the chances are that the doctor will tell you that you've got asthma and that you must use an inhaler for the rest of your life.

Complain of an aching joint and you'll be labelled `arthritic' - and given pills to take.

As a result of this wild over-prescribing policy countless thousands of people who regard themselves as asthmatics, or arthritics are nothing of the sort. They have, in truth, merely exhibited minor, temporary symptoms which do not need long term treatment.

The driving force behind this vast over prescribing is, in my opinion, the ubiquitous drugs industry.

* * *

The drug companies want doctors to prescribe more medicines (for the simple reason that prescribing more pills pushes up profits even higher) and it is, I believe, their subtle, ever present, overall, global influence which results in doctors deciding that every wheeze must be treated as asthma, that every ache must be diagnosed and treated as `arthritis' and that every mild bout of unhappiness must be treated as depression.

Diseases such as asthma, arthritis and depression are perfect for making big profits because patients labelled as suffering from these conditions are often advised to take pills for years or even decades.

It is by no means unusual for patients to be told that they need drug therapy for life!

With pills often costing a small fortune the profits on each new patient can be colossal.

This bizarre, ruthless but profitable philosophy works because doctors are usually far too ready to listen to the drug company salesmen. These days most doctors are actually taught about new drugs not by independent experts but by paid salesmen!

My advice is simple: if your doctor tells you that you are suffering from a long term disorder for which you need to take long term drug therapy - you should ask for a second opinion!

Never forget that four out of ten patients who take pills suffer side effects. If you are taking pills because you genuinely need them then the risks may be acceptable. But if you are taking pills unnecessarily then the risks are unnecessary too.

Chapter 10: How To Survive In Hospital

Going into hospital is a frightening and worrying experience. The very smell and sound of a hospital is enough to make most peoples' hearts beat faster.

When we go into hospital we are inevitably nervous about what is going to happen and anxious about the outcome. But on top of those natural fears we worry in case we do something silly or offend someone.

To the outsider hospitals seem full of important looking people in uniforms - all rushing round and all knowing exactly what they are doing.

1. Before you go into hospital try and find out as much as you can about the **rules and regulations** for patients and visitors. Good hospitals produce small booklets for new patients. Get one if you can. If the hospital you're going to doesn't produce a booklet or leaflet of its own then find out as much as you can over the telephone. You need to know when visiting times are; whether there are any special rules about children visiting; what buses stop near to the hospital and what car parking facilities there are for visiting.You also need to know what the different types of nurses uniform mean!

2. So that you'll know what to expect find out **what sort of ward** you'll be going into. Open plan wards may seem a little daunting but don't be put off. The evidence shows that nurses can keep a closer eye on patients in large wards than they can when patients are cooped up in private rooms. If your condition is likely to require very special care then you may be put into an Intensive Care Unit or Coronary Care Unit. Children under 12 are usually put onto special children's wards. But older children often go onto adult wards - where they're usually much happier and invariably spoilt rotten by the nurses.

3. Carefully plan **what to take with you.**

Here is my basic check list:

- Any pills or medication that you normally take (that includes medicines that you have been prescribed by your GP, bought yourself or been given by an alternative medicine practitioner).
- Cleansing wipes so that you can clean the area around your bed, and wipe your hands before eating.
- Any letter of introduction written by your own doctor.
- Night clothes, dressing gown and slippers.
- Toilet bag with usual contents for an overnight stay.
- Small box or pack of paper tissues.
- Notepaper, pen and stamps. Coins for the telephone.
- Small, silent bedside clock.
- Enough money to buy a daily paper.
- A couple of books or magazines for light reading.
- Make up bag.
- Mobile phone and charger.
- Emergency food and drink supplies (in British hospitals).

Don't take outdoor clothes or expensive jewellery (including watches) with you.

4. When you go into hospital do remember that however important all the people working there may seem to be **none of them is as important as you are.** They are all employed to look after you. If you are worried about something, or there is something you don't understand then ask. The best person to ask for advice will probably be the most junior doctor. He or she will have all the information you need and will be on the ward many times during the day. And do remember that although you are in hospital you can still consult your family doctor if you want to. If you are unhappy about a planned operation or treatment programme and you want independent advice from someone you trust then telephone your family doctor and ask for his or her help. He or she can visit you in hospital, talk to your doctors and read your notes.

Chapter 11; Watch Out For Side Effects

Whenever your doctor gives you a drug to take it is vitally important that you watch out for side effects. Four out of ten people who are given drugs by their doctors will suffer uncomfortable, hazardous or even lethal side effects.

Drugs which are highly promoted when they are launched but which are eventually shown to be totally useless often cause illnesses far worse than the complaint for which they were prescribed. Far more people are killed by prescription drugs than are killed by illegal drugs such as heroin and cocaine.

The incidence of side effects is now so widespread that it is generally accepted by most doctors that if a patient who is receiving treatment for one condition develops a new symptom then the chances are that the new symptom will have been caused by the treatment for the original problem. And as I have pointed out on many occasions no less than one in six hospital patients are there because they have been made ill by their doctor.

Perhaps the most convincing evidence of the failure of our current drug testing systems to protect patients lies in the number of drugs which have had to be withdrawn after they have been passed as `safe' by the authorities. I know of over 80 drugs which have had to be withdrawn or restricted because they were considered to be too dangerous for widespread use. Some of these drugs were withdrawn after months. Others were taken off the market after being sold for years!

Can you imagine the outcry if testing methods were so inadequate that 80 types of motor car or 80 varieties of food had to be withdrawn because they were found to be unsafe?

Doctors, the drug industry and the government all claim that nothing can be done to avoid this drug scandal. I don't believe this is true. If governments really wanted to protect patients there are many things they could do.

Since the end of the 1970s I have argued that we need an international computerised drug monitoring service - designed to make sure that doctors in one part of the world know when doctors in other countries have spotted problems. Astonishingly, no such system exists.

You might imagine that when a drug is withdrawn in one country other countries will take similar action. But you would be wrong. One drug that was officially withdrawn from the market in the USA and France was not officially withdrawn in the UK until five years later!

I believe that one of the main reasons for the international epidemic of drug induced illness is the greed of the big international drug companies. They make a fortune out of making and selling drugs and their ruthlessness and levels of profit make the arms industry look like a church charity.

Governments could dramatically reduce the incidence of lethal, dangerous and uncomfortable side effects by insisting that drugs be extensively tested before being prescribed for millions of people around the world. At the moment drugs can be launched onto the mass market after relatively few tests have been done. The authorities admit that they don't know what side effects will be produced until a drug has been on the market for a while.

And patients would be far, far safer if drug companies were stopped from testing drugs on animals. Pharmaceutical companies love to test drugs on animals because they can't lose. If the animal tests show that the drug doesn't produce side effects in animals the company will proclaim the drug `safe' and put it on the market. But if the animal tests show that the drug causes side effects the company will dismiss the results as irrelevant - and put the drug on the market anyway - because animals are different to people!

If you have ever suffered unpleasant side effects the chances are high that the drug you were given was tested on animals. The evidence available now shows that animal experiments are so misleading and inaccurate that they result in many human deaths.

Here are three case histories which show that animal experiments kill people:

1. Eight year old Samantha loved ballet dancing passionately. She wanted to be a ballet dancer when she grew up. But she never did grow up. Ten days before her ninth birthday she fell ill. Her ballet class was holding a public performance on the following Saturday and she desperately wanted to be well enough to appear so her mother took

her along to see their family doctor. Within 48 hours Samantha was dead: killed not by the illness but by the drug she'd been given. The drug had been tested but most of the early tests had been done on animals. These had not shown the side effect which killed Samantha.

2. Forty four year old Robert failed a routine life assurance examination, carried out so that he could take out a new and larger mortgage on a house he and his wife had bought. He felt well but his doctor insisted on treating him. The drug he was given had been extensively tested on animals. Unexpected side effects produced by the drug resulted in his death three weeks later.

3. Bill was in pain. Doctors recommended surgery. The surgeon he saw wanted to try out a new technique that had been tested on animals. Bill died three days after the operation. He developed problems and complications which had not occurred when the operation had been performed on animals.

All these human tragedies occurred as a direct result of animal experiments. In all these case histories the identifying facts have been changed to protect the privacy of the families concerned. It isn't only animals who suffer from `animal testing'. People suffer too. No animal experiment has ever saved a human life, but animal experiments have resulted in many deaths. There is much more free information about the use of animals in experiments on my website http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

* * *

Despite the fact that one must hold the pharmaceutical industry directly responsible for most of the side effects (and deaths) caused by drugs there is no doubt that the number of problems could be reduced if patients were more aware of how best to protect themselves from side effects.

It is a sad but true fact that of all the drugs prescribed only a relatively small number are taken in the way that the prescriber originally intended them to be taken. Drugs are taken at the wrong time, they are taken too frequently and they are sometimes never taken out of the bottle at all.

It is important to remember that modern prescribed drugs are not only potentially effective but also powerful and potentially dangerous. There are several questions which should be answered before a patient starts taking a drug - for example, how long the drug should be taken for, whether it should be taken before, during or after meals and whether it can cause drowsiness. Usually the answers to these questions will appear on the label of the bottle containing the drugs. If the answers do not appear there then the fault may lie with the doctor who wrote the prescription or the pharmacist who dispensed it.

Here are some things to watch out for:

1. Some drugs can be stopped when symptoms cease. Others need to be taken as a complete course. A small number of drugs need to be taken continuously and a second prescription will have to be obtained before the first supply has run out. The patient who knows what his drug is for, why he is taking it and what the effect should be, will be more likely to know when a drug is to be stopped.

2. If a drug has to be taken once a day, it is usually important that it is taken at the same time each day. If a drug has to be taken twice a day it should be taken at intervals of 12 hours. A drug that needs to be taken three times a day should be taken at eight-hourly intervals and a drug that needs taking four times a day should be taken at six-hourly intervals. The day should be divided into suitable segments.

3. Some drugs which may cause stomach problems are safer when taken with meals. Other drugs may not be absorbed properly if taken with food.

4. A number of patients (particularly the elderly) are expected to remember to take dozens of pills a day. When a day's medication includes tablets to be taken twice daily, three times daily, mornings only and every four hours, mistakes are inevitable. If a patient needs to take a number of drugs a day mistakes can be minimised by preparing a daily chart on which the names and times of different drugs are marked. Such a chart will reduce the risk of a patient taking one dose twice or struggling to remember whether a particular pill has been taken yet.

To avoid the risk of overdosage sleeping tablets should not be kept by the bedside. It is too easy for a half-asleep patient to mistakenly take extra tablets. In the case of a suspected overdose medical attention must be sought.

* * *

Here is a list of some, possible, common side effects:

1. Drowsiness is a common problem with all drugs which have an effect on the central nervous system - these include sedatives, tranquillisers, sleeping pills, most drugs used in the treatment of anxiety and depression and drugs used in the treatment of epilepsy. Drowsiness is also common with antihistamines (these are commonly used for allergies and so patients suffering from hayfever, for example, should be aware that their medication may make them feel sleepy).

2. Nausea and vomiting may be caused by many different drugs including pain relievers, drugs used to treat infections, hormones and drugs prescribed for heart conditions.

3. Dizziness is commonly caused by aspirin but drugs used to treat high blood pressure, nerve disorders such as anxiety and depression and infections can also cause this side effect.

4. Drugs such as penicillin which are used to treat infections often cause diarrhoea - as do some drugs prescribed for intestinal disorders such as indigestion, gastritis and constipation.

5. Headache is a symptom that is associated with an enormous range of drugs.

6. Drugs used in the treatment of high blood pressure and in the treatment of nerve problems seem particularly likely to produce a dry mouth.

7. Pain relievers, drugs used to treat infections and steroid drugs are the prescription products which seem most likely to cause indigestion or wind.

8. Skin rashes are extremely common among patients taking drugs. Drugs used to treat infections - such as penicillin and sulphonamide - are commonly associated with this problem. A skin rash may suggest an allergy to a drug.

9. Itching associated with a skin rash means that an allergy reaction is almost certain.

10. Constipation is a common side effect with pain relievers, antacids, cough medicines and (naturally enough) drugs used in the treatment of diarrhoea.

11. Other side effects which are commonly noticed by patients taking prescription drugs include: confusion, hallucinations, tremors, fainting, wheezing, palpitations, blurred vision, depression, sweating, ringing in the ears and sexual problems such as frigidity and impotence.

* * *

Here are some tips to help you minimise your risk of developing a side effect if you have to take a prescription drug.

1. Always follow any specific instructions that you have been given by your doctor. Read the label on your bottle of pills and take notice of what it says!

2. When you're not using them drugs should be stored in a locked cupboard out of reach of children in a room where the temperature will be fairly stable. The bathroom is probably the worst room in the house for storing medicines. Your bedroom - which probably has a more stable temperature - is much better.

3. Never take drugs which were prescribed for someone else. Return all unused supplies of drugs to your pharmacist.

4. It is wise to assume that all prescribed drugs can cause drowsiness. You shouldn't drive or operate machinery after taking a drug until you are sure that you are safe.

5. Drugs do not mix well with alcohol. If you want to drink while taking drugs ask your doctor whether or not it will be safe.

6. Do not take non prescribed medicines while taking prescribed drugs unless your doctor has told you that you can.

7. Do not stop taking drugs suddenly if you have been advised to take a full course. Ring your doctor for

advice if you need to stop for any reason. Some drugs have to be stopped gradually rather than abruptly.

8. Be on the look-out for side effects and remember that if you seem to develop new symptoms while taking a prescription drug then the chances are high that the new symptoms were caused by the treatment you are taking for your original symptoms.

9. Report any side effects to your doctor - and ask him if he's going to report the side effects to the authorities. The vast majority of doctors never bother to report side effects - with the result that potentially hazardous drugs remain on the market for far longer than they should.

10. If you need to see a doctor while taking a drug make sure he knows what you are taking - particularly if he intends to prescribe new treatment for you. Many drugs do not mix well together and may, indeed, react together in a dangerous way.

11. Do not assume that a doctor you have seen in the past will remember what he prescribed for you on a previous occasion.

12. Learn the names and purposes of the drugs you take. If you are not sure when to take the drugs that you have been given ask your doctor or the pharmacist. If you think you will forget the instructions you are given ask for them to be written down. The name of the drug should always appear on the container.

13. Do not remove drugs from their proper containers except when you need them or if you are transferring them to a device intended to improve compliance.

14. Try to see the same doctor as often as possible. If several doctors are prescribing for you there may be an increased risk of an interaction between drugs which do not mix well.

15. Use drugs with care and caution, but do use them when they are required. Doctors sometimes divide patients into two main groups: those who are willing to take drugs for any little symptom and who feel deprived if not offered a pharmacological solution to every ailment, and those who are unwilling to take drugs under any circumstances. Try not to fall into either of these extreme groups.

Chapter 12: Should You Get A Second Opinion?

Many patients automatically trust their doctor - assuming that he or she must always be right. But that can be a deadly mistake.

It has always been diagnostic skills which have differentiated between the good doctor and the bad doctor. Treating sick people is easy. If you are a doctor and you know what is wrong with your patient you can look up the correct treatment in two minutes. Sadly, however, many doctors seem to have lost their abilities to diagnose accurately.

1. When researchers examined the medical records of 100 dead patients who had been shown by post mortem to have had heart attacks they found that only 53% of the heart attacks had been diagnosed. What makes this even more alarming is the fact that half the patients had been looked after by experts in heart disease.

2. A study across 32 hospitals which compared the diagnoses doctors had made when treating 1,800 patients with the diagnoses made after the patients had died (and could be examined more thoroughly) showed that doctors had an error rate of nearly 20%.

3. A study of 131 randomly selected psychiatric patients showed that approximately three quarters (75%) of the patients may have been wrongly diagnosed.

4. In many cases patients are diagnosed as having - and are then treated for - serious psychiatric problems when their symptoms are caused by drugs they have been given for physical problems. Whole wards full of patients have been diagnosed, treated and classified as schizophrenic when in fact they were suffering from side effects produced by the drugs they had been given by prescription happy doctors.

5. When 80 doctors were asked to examine silicone models of female breasts they could only find half the hidden lumps. A 50% failure rate even though the doctors knew that they were being tested and observed. * Another study showed that doctors had missed diagnoses in dying patients up to a quarter of the time. Experts concluded that one in ten patients who had died would have lived if the correct diagnosis had been made.

6. Another study revealed that in two thirds of patients who had died, important, previously undiagnosed conditions were discovered in the post mortem room.

7. A report published after pathologists had performed 400 post mortem examinations showed that in more than half the cases the wrong diagnosis had been made. The authors of this report said that potentially treatable disease was missed in 13% of patients; that 65 out of 134 cases of pneumonia had gone undetected and that out of 51 patients who had suffered heart attacks doctors had failed to diagnose the problem in 18 cases.

All this is terrifying. For if the doctor doesn't make the right diagnosis then it doesn't matter how many wonderful drugs he has at his disposal.

There are many reasons why today's doctors are so bad at making the correct diagnosis.

Education is often lamentable - with lecturers too often teaching medical students about organs and tissues rather than living patients, and then examining them on their ability to remember huge lists of details about bones, blood vessels and pathology details without ever testing them on their ability to use the information they have acquired.

And studies have shown that doctors are at their worst when dealing with patients with whom they feel uncomfortable. Narrow training means that doctors feel uncomfortable with a wide range of people. They often have difficulty relating to, talking to or acquiring information from people of `different' races, sexes or social backgrounds.

An even bigger problem is the fact that modern doctors rely far too much on technology - and far too little on building up any diagnostic skills of their own.

Old fashioned doctors used to rely on what their patients told them and on what their own eyes, ears, noses and fingertips told them. Most important of all, perhaps, was the sixth sense that doctors used to acquire through years of clinical experience.

Modern doctors rely too much upon equipment which is often faulty, frequently badly calibrated and more often than not downright misleading.

For example, nearly every published study on the subject puts the error rate for doctors reading X rays at between 20% and 40%. Radiologists working at a big hospital disagreed on the interpretation of chest radiographs as much as 56% of the time. And there were potentially significant errors in 41% of their reports. Even when X rays are read for a second time only about a third of the initial errors are spotted.

So, the lesson here is a very simple one: do not automatically assume that your doctor's diagnosis must be right. If you are at all unhappy about the diagnosis - and feel that your doctor could be wrong - insist on a second opinion.

Chapter 13: Is Your Doctor Really Qualified?

In America a hoax psychiatrist persuaded 10 married women to have sex with total strangers. He telephoned the women at random and claimed to be a psychiatrist secretly treating their husbands for sexual problems. He told them that they should leave the house and come back with the first man they could find and await further instructions. In a second call he told the women - and the strangers they'd brought home - to have sex. He claimed it would help cure the husband’s problem. Ten per cent of the women who'd been telephoned followed the hoaxer's instructions.

In Italy a hospital found that one of its top brain surgeons wasn't even qualified as a doctor. In England a meat salesman performed 14 operations in just 24 days while a biology teacher posed as a gynaecologist for 6 months before getting caught.

Fake doctors are commoner than you might imagine. In recent years I have reported many extraordinary (but true) stories of unqualified doctors convincing both patients and medical colleagues about their authenticity.

So if you have any doubts at all about whether or not your doctor is properly qualified go to your local library and check him out.

Chapter 14: Don't Let Your Doctor Condemn You To Death

It is customary in developed, sophisticated countries to regard voodoo as primitive and mildly amusing. We feel comfortably able to scoff at the idea of anyone dying because a man in a grass skirt, with paint on his face and chicken feathers on his head tells him that he is going to die. We feel secure in the knowledge that such threats would never work on us. And yet, in our own way, we are just as vulnerable as any primitive native who succumbs to the power and influence of a malevolent witch doctor.

The difference is merely that instead of listening to, and believing, curses pronounced by men wearing grass skirts and chicken feathers we listen, believe and respond to the allegedly scientifically based prognoses announced by men wearing white coats.

If a doctor in a white coat tells a man that he is going to die, that man will probably die.

I know a man who was told, several years ago, that he was dying of cancer. He lost weight, became unable to move and started to die.

And then, as he lay in bed quietly and obediently waiting to die, his wife took a telephone call from the hospital. There had, said a voice, been a mistake. Her husband did not have cancer at all. He had a treatable infection. There had been a mix up in the laboratory.

When told this good news the man made a miraculous recovery. He stopped dying because he no longer expected to die.

The evidence confirms that things like this happen regularly. Patients listen to doctors - and take notice of what they are told. And so the doctors predictions come true - whether or not they are accurate.

Whether the information comes from a man dressed in feathers with a string of beads round his neck, or from a man in a white coat with a stethoscope round his neck, it is faith that does the damage.

If the individual on the receiving end of the spell or bad news believes what he is told, his imagination will do the rest. Patients - however intelligent or sophisticated they consider themselves - can sink into a steady decline through their own attitude, without input from anyone else. They can convince themselves that they are going to die. And then they will turn their heads to the wall and prepare themselves for death.

All this is frightening and disturbing.

But there is another way of looking at the power of the imagination. For just as patients have died because they have believed that they are dying, so patients have survived and bloomed because they have refused to accept the bad news that they have been given.

Just as fear and anxiety can kill, so hope and determination can delay death.

By harnessing their inner strength, and the power of their imaginations, individuals who have been told that they are soon to die have succeeded in cheating death.

We all have powers of which too few of us are aware. We should use them.

(I explored the powers of the mind at greater length - and with many practical examples - in my book `*Mindpower*).

Chapter 15: Why Mental Health Care Isn't Always Worth Having

Most people think that mental illness is something that happens to other people; something that touches other peoples families. It isn't. The number of people suffering from mental illness is rising continuously and rapidly. Between 10% and 15% of the entire population suffer, at some stage in their lives, from mental illness severe enough to warrant their admission to a mental hospital.

Think of eight or nine people you know: the chances are that one person in any group of eight or nine will either have already spent time in a mental hospital or will, in the future, need to spend time in a mental hospital.

All that is frightening enough.

But what really frightens me is the fact that today the treatment of patients with psychiatric problems is at best ineffective and at worst barbaric. Twentieth century psychiatry is more of a black art than a science and I believe the majority of mentally ill patients would be better off if all the psychiatrists were banished to Siberia.

We think of psychiatry as a scientific discipline but I think it is based more on rumour, suspicion and gossip than on science. Here are some facts that you should know about the way mental illness is treated today.

1. Electro Convulsive Therapy (ECT: A Truly Shocking Procedure

When we look back a couple of hundred years we tend to be rather critical about the way that the mentally ill were treated in those long off dim and distant days. At the Bethlem Royal Hospital in London in 1770 you could have paid a penny to watch the depressed and the manic being bled, beaten, soaked in cold water and blasted with electricity.

Terrible.

We don't do that.

Do we?

Well, we may no longer deliberately beat or bleed the mentally ill (not officially at least) but we do still blast them with electricity. Electro convulsive therapy is still used by a large number of psychiatrists as a `treatment' for mentally ill patients.

Doctors have been using electricity as a therapy for centuries. In ancient Rome, Scriborus Largus, tried to cure the emperor's headache with an electric eel. But it was in 1938 that the use of electricity for the `treatment' of mental illness was `rediscovered'. Two Italians, called Cerletti and Bini, decided to try pumping fairly large amounts of electricity into the human brain to treat schizophrenia. They developed Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT) because they believed that epilepsy and schizophrenia could not exist together. (ECT is, of course, a sort of artificially induced epileptic attack.)

In a standard ECT session electrodes are attached to one or both sides of the patient's head and something like 80 to 100 volts are applied to the head for up to a second at a time. That amount of electricity provides a big enough current to light up a 100 watt light bulb. Not surprisingly, perhaps, in a human being it causes a brain seizure which can be traced on an electroencephalogram.

While being given the treatment patients are usually anaesthetised and given a muscle relaxant. Without the muscle relaxant contractions can be so severe that bones can be fractured or teeth chipped. An electrocardiogram is sometimes used to monitor the beating of the heart and some doctors give oxygen to reduce the risk of brain damage. (From all this you may begin to get the idea that ECT isn't exactly a risk free procedure.)

After the electric shock has been given, patients slowly regain consciousness but usually remain groggy and confused for a while. Sometimes patients complain that their ability to remember events from the past disappeared. Author Ernest Hemingway was convinced that ECT erased his personal experiences and ruined his career as a writer.

For thirty years or so after Cerletti and Bini introduced ECT psychiatrists all around the world continued to use the `therapy', apparently without worrying too much about such minor inconveniences as the lack of evidence to show that it worked.

Psychiatry is very much a black art and ECT is almost certainly the blackest of the black art therapies.

By the 1960s there was growing disquiet about this type of treatment. Despite a lack of convincing evidence showing that pumping electricity into the brain did any good, a number of experts had decided that it could do harm. Many patients told how they had been held down or tied down and given huge doses of electricity which had sent them into violent convulsions. It all sounded terribly barbaric - more like something from a mediaeval torture chamber than a twentieth century hospital.

Then, in 1975 the film `*One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*' was released. In the book, based on Ken Kesey's book, actor Jack Nicholson was seen receiving electric shock treatment. This reinforced the idea that electric shock therapy was cruel, barbaric and outdated. The amount of public pressure on doctors to stop giving electric shocks to psychiatric patients increased for a while.

But then psychiatrists started to argue that they had nothing else to offer in the place of ECT. And the popularity of the technique began to rise once more.

However, there was still confusion and controversy about just how ECT should be applied and which patients it might help. Numerous experiments had been done - including some at Buchenwald during the Second World War - but there was still no agreement on how to get the best out of the alleged treatment.

The controversy and confusion was, I feel, summarised well in a paper entitled `Indications for Electric-Convulsive Therapy and Its Use by Senior Psychiatrists' that was written by two psychiatrists, Gill and Lambourn, and published in the *British Medical Journal* back in May 1979.

Gill and Lambourn sent a questionnaire to a number of senior psychiatrists and, as a result, showed that there was a considerable difference of opinion among psychiatrists about how best the treatment could be used.

First, there were great differences in the frequency with which psychiatrists used ECT. Some referred ten to twenty patients a month for ECT. One said he never used it.

Second, the survey also showed that there were significant differences between the reasons given for using ECT. Some psychiatrists said they thought it was useful in the treatment of depression. Some said they used it for schizophrenia. Some said they found it useful for mania.

Third, the researchers found that more than a third of the consultants believed that temporary memory loss was invariably associated with clinically effective ECT. Despite this - and other risks associated with the treatment - less than 20% of the consultants personally administered ECT. Most preferred to leave this unpleasant work to junior members of their staffs.

But the most startling conclusion was that psychiatrists still did not agree about how to apply ECT. Some consultants said that they preferred to give four treatments. Others preferred a series of twelve treatments. Some of the consultants placed the electrodes on one side of the head. Other consultants placed the electrodes on both sides of the head. I would not be surprised to read that some had their patients sit in a bath of cold custard.

It seemed to me, when I first read it, that this startling survey strongly suggested that psychiatrists applying ECT didn't have the faintest idea what they are doing.

The disquiet produced by this study led to a major report on ECT published by the UKs Royal College of Psychiatrists (RCP) in 1981. This report was based on 2,755 questionnaires completed by doctors using ECT. The RCP report pointed out that of the 100 clinics where the researchers watched ECT being given not one satisfied the standards that the RCP had outlined. The RCP report also claimed that obsolete machinery was being used.

As a result the UK Secretary of State for Social Services set up a working group which concluded that although over 20,000 ECT treatments were being given every year in the UK there was `no agreed theoretical basis for the use of particular wave forms, frequencies, energy, rate of delivery of energy, etc' and so there were `no minimal performance requirements for the effective and safe use of ECT equipment to guide ECT equipment manufacturers'. In other words, it seemed that after well over four decades of use, doctors did not know how ECT worked, they did not know which patients it should be given to, they did not know how it should be applied and they did not know how best to make the equipment to give the electric shocks. Hardly a rousing vote of confidence for ECT or psychiatry.

Some psychiatrists who used ECT claimed that it was most useful in the treatment of severe depression. Some said it was appropriate for schizophrenia. Some said it wasn't. Some were probably in two minds about it.

The survey done by the Royal College of Psychiatrists showed that very few doctors seemed to know where the electrodes should be applied and in three quarters of the clinics visited by the doctors organising the survey for the RCP the settings on the machines used to give ECT were never altered even though ECT machines are made so that the strength and pulse of the current given can be varied according to the illness and particular needs of each individual patient. (The snag, of course, was that although these things could be altered no one seemed to know how they should be altered.)

Some machines available had no automatic timer so that the control of the dose of electricity given depended entirely on the operator. (Despite the fact that too much ECT is known to lead to prolonged memory impairment). It was even found that only about half the ECT equipment in regular use received any regular maintenance. Why bother to maintain a machine when you don't even know what the damned thing is supposed to do?

I have been vehemently critical of ECT for decades. It has always seemed to me to be a primitive, barbaric and crude form of `therapy'. As a medical student I once had to watch it being administered. I remember feeling deeply ashamed of the profession I was preparing to enter.

In 1988, in my book `*The Health Scandal*' I wrote that: `Every year tens of thousands of patients receive a form of treatment that still hasn't been properly tested. No one has any idea why it should work, or indeed if it works. No one knows the extent of the damage it can do. No one knows when it should be given or when it should be avoided at all costs. No one knows what sort of machinery should be used or what dosage of electricity should be given. No one really knows where the electrodes should be applied.'

Over a quarter of a century ago a wise psychiatrist told me that in his view blasting electricity into the brain (an organ about which we understand little more now than we knew then) was about as rational, as scientific and as logical as blasting 30,000 volts into a malfunctioning TV set.

But, despite all the controversy, doctors still administer ECT.

Professor Hanafy A Youssef sent me a paper entitled `*Time to Abandon Electroconvulsion as a Treatment in Modern Psychiatry'* which he had co-authored with Fatma A Youssef and which had appeared in `*Advances in Therapy*'.

These authors concluded that: `ECT is an unscientific treatment and a symbol of authority of the old psychiatry. ECT is not necessary as a treatment modality in the modern practice of psychiatry.'

Youssef and Youssef argue that: `terror as a therapy for insanity has been used since antiquity' and report that: `From the earliest uses of convulsive therapy, it was recognised that the treatment is unspecific and only shortens the duration of psychiatric illness rather than improves the outcome. Convulsive therapy based on the old belief of shocking the patient into sanity is primitive and unspecific....For ECT to remain an option...transcends clinical and common sense.'

`When an electrical current is applied to the body by tyrannical rulers, we call this electrical torture,' write these two authors, `however, an electric current applied to the brain in public and private hospitals by professional psychiatrists is called therapy.'

`Is ECT necessary as a treatment modality in psychiatry?' ask Youssef and Youssef. Their answer to their own question is that it is `absolutely not'.

But ECT is still in use. Thousands of psychiatrists still use it to 'treat' their patients. Shocking? Of course it is.

The fact that ECT is still used at all is a disgrace to psychiatry and to the medical profession as a whole. A psychiatrist who attacks his patients with such a bizarre and unscientific form of pseudo-therapy is not to be trusted.

2. Brain Surgery

Surgeons have operated on the brains of thousands of mental patients in the last 40 or so years. They have made cuts in the brain and chopped bits out of the brain. But I have never been able to find any real evidence to show that bran surgery does any good for mental illness. One experienced psychiatrist, who now regrets having referred patients for psychosurgery, has compared it to `pulling the wires out of a TV set in an attempt to get a better picture'. In the 1960s many doctors recommended psychosurgery enthusiastically. By 1974 the World Health Organization was getting very critical about brain surgery for mental illness. WHO experts decided that: `the procedures in contemporary psychosurgery are based on inadequate or limited research and they entail many hazards. Psychosurgery has unpredictable effects...'.

You might have thought that would have been that. Nt a bit of it. There are still doctors around who believe that mentally ill patients can be helped by having knives stuck into their brains.

3. Psychotherapy

You don't have to be a doctor to be a psychotherapist. Anyone can describe himself or herself as a psychotherapist. My cat Alice was one of the most highly qualified psychotherapists in the world.

What do psychotherapists do? Good question. Basically, they listen to (and occasionally talk to) their patients.

Do they do any good? I don't think so.

I suspect that a chat to a hairdresser or to a barman will do a patient as much good as a chat to a psychotherapist and that patients who are treated with psychotherapy are slightly more likely to become mentally ill, become alcoholics or commit a major crime than are patients who get no psychotherapy.

In my view lots of psychotherapists are nutters. Many charge ridiculously high fees. Few do any good. Some should be locked up.

Chapter 16: How To Protect Yourself Against Viruses

If you think that viruses are just wishy washy bugs that cause flu, tummy upsets and other relatively minor inconveniences - think again!

Viruses are now a major threat to your health - and your family's health.

Consider the Ebola virus, for example. It can kill in days. There is no cure. The illness starts with a headache and a fever. Just like flu. Within days blood starts to seep from every office. And the body rapidly starts to deteriorate. Every organ fails.

There are three main reasons why viruses are becoming increasingly dangerous.

First, international air travel means that killer bugs can be brought from the jungle to the city within hours. There was far less danger when infected individuals travelled on slower, more traditional forms of transport. Patients carrying the disease would have died long before they reached heavily populated cities.

Second, viruses are constantly changing - and getting stronger. As scientists produce new vaccines existing viruses adapt and change. The deadly Ebola virus used to be transmitted through the blood. But changes to the virus in a laboratory means it can now spread through the air - like flu. In 1918-19 a flu bug, far less deadly than the Ebola virus, killed 25 million people.

Third, vivisectors in laboratories around the world are constantly giving existing viruses to animals. They use some of the rarest and most deadly viruses. Some of the research work is done for the military - who want ever more lethal viruses for biological warfare. Problems really start when viruses - or infected animals - escape from laboratories. There are countless billions of viruses in the world – each one a thousandth the size of a bacterium. Everyone could be a ticking time bomb.

Fourth, the overprescribing and abuse of antibiotics means that bugs have acquired immunity and have become stronger and more lethal.

* * *

Here is what you can do to help protect yourself and your family from killer bugs:

1. Your body’s Immune system helps to protect you against infection. If your immune system – your inbuilt defence system – is in tiptop condition then you will be far less vulnerable to these marauding bugs. What you choose to eat can have a big effect on the strength and effectiveness of your immune system. You can strengthen your immune system – and reduce your susceptibility to infections (and cancer) by changing your diet. You must do everything you can to keep your body’s immune system in tip top condition. It is vital to eat regular supplies of foods which contain antioxidants. Recommended foods include: apples, asparagus, baked beans, broccoli, brown rice, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, chick peas, corn, grapefruit, lentils, oats, oranges, peas, pineapples, potatoes, soya beans, spinach and strawberries. I also recommend taking sunflower and pumpkin seeds daily.

2. Unless your diet naturally contains garlic then I recommend that you take a garlic supplement every day

3. If you eat meat it is important that you give it up – particularly if you have an infection which is being treated with antibiotics. The spread of a number of killer infections has been traced to meat shipments. The basic cause is simple: farmers routinely feed antibiotics to their animals to keep them healthy. Animals which are fed with antibiotics inevitably acquire antibiotic resistant organisms. Repeated problems caused by meat infected with antibiotic resistant E.Coli are a direct result of this still unregulated and uncontrolled farming practice. Many of the people who fall ill after eating infected meat have been taking antibiotics – for throat or ear infections for example. The antibiotic prescribed for the throat or eat infection clears the body of many of its natural infections, allowing the antibiotic resistant superbug to take over a virtually competitor free body.

4. Stress will damage your immune system and impair your body’s ability to fight infection. It is, therefore,

important that you reduce your exposure to unnecessary stress. Make a list of all the factors which add stress to your life and then avoid those stresses which can be avoided.

5. Try to avoid buildings which have closed circuit air conditioning systems. When air is constantly recirculated your chances of acquiring an infection are dramatically increased. If one person sneezes or coughs then the chances are high that everyone in the building will be exposed to the bug.

6. You should try to keep away from hospitals, doctor's clinics, pharmacies and other places where sick people congregate and where antibiotic resistant bugs are likely to be much in control. I used to favour open plan wards (as designed by Florence Nightingale) since patients in such wards can be kept constantly under supervision by nurses. The explosion in the incidence of antibiotic resistant bugs means that single rooms are now preferable for any patient requiring hospital treatment.

7. Whenever possible you should avoid methods of public transport which recirculate air. Modern trains tend to have no opening windows with the result that if one person sneezes in a carriage the chances are that everyone else will be exposed to (and possibly catch) their disease. This risk is, of course, much higher on aeroplanes.

8. If you eat eggs do not every buy (or eat) eggs with cracked shells. It is much easier for an infection to enter an egg with a cracked shell. Eggs laid by genuinely free range chickens are likely to be healthier than eggs laid by hens kept in battery cages.

9. Make sure that your fridge is kept cold enough. The temperature inside your fridge should be below 3 degrees Centigrade.

10. Make sure that you wash your hands thoroughly before preparing food. Staphylococcus, for example, can be transmitted hand to hand. Wash all kitchen dishes and cutlery thoroughly in hot, soapy water.

11. Never refreeze food which has been previously frozen and then thawed. Thawing increases the number of bacteria and refreezing food increases the chances of infection.

12. If you eat meat make sure it is completely thawed before you start to cook it. If you do not do this then the chances are that the middle of the meat will still be frozen when you start to cook it – and will not be properly cooked when the rest of the meat is ready. Meat which is raw will probably be full of bugs.

13. Keep foods apart from one another in your fridge in order to reduce the risk of cross contamination. Put meat (a high risk source of infection) at the bottom of the fridge and keep it away from other foods.

14. Don't ever buy tins which are rusty, bulging or badly damaged.

15. Always check the sell by date before buying food. Don't be tempted to buy or use food which has passed its authorised date.

16. If your doctor wants to prescribe an antibiotic ask him if he thinks it is really essential – of if he is just giving you the prescription because he thinks you want an antibiotic. Don't take these drugs unless you really need them

17. Eat live yoghurt – which contains the `friendly' lactobacillus acidophilus. (Soya yoghurt also contains it.)

18. Don't take drugs which aren't really needed. Always ask your doctor if pill are essential. Always investigate other ways to deal with healthy problems.

19. Teach children not touch or sneeze without using a handkerchief.

20. Try not to touch your eyes with your fingers – that's an easy way for bugs to get into your body.

There is more on this subject in my book *Superbody.*

Chapter 17: Conquer Heart Disease Without Pills Or Surgery

When I first started writing a syndicated column about medical matters several decades ago I got into a great deal of trouble for daring to suggest that some patients with high blood pressure might be able to reduce their need for pills (maybe entirely) by making some fundamental lifestyle changes.

I recommended losing weight, giving up smoking, avoiding too much stress, learning how to relax, cutting out fatty foods and so on and although I had only been qualified for a year or two this advice seemed to me to be extremely sensible, straightforward and non-controversial. After all, I remember arguing, if stress and fat rich foods can cause high blood pressure then surely a lifestyle which involves learning how to deal with stress and avoiding fatty foods must help reduce a high blood pressure.

Today this advice is pretty widely accepted as sound, sensible and effective. Most doctors who have a rudimentary understanding of medicine and whose thinking has not been entirely influenced by the unsubtle promotions of the drugs industry acknowledge that many patients with high blood pressure can avoid drug therapy by following these simple guidelines.

At the time, however, I was regarded as a dangerous heretic. I remember that one eminent doctor, undoubtedly a pillar of the medical establishment, wrote to one of the newspapers which carried my column expressing the view that drug therapy was the only remedy for high blood pressure. Other pillars of the medical establishment sent similarly indignant letters and my column was quickly dropped by several editors who felt that the advice I was offering was too far out of touch with mainstream medicine to be acceptable.

The irony was, I feel now, that safe, sensible, effective advice was being censored because it was simple, because it consisted of too much common sense and not enough high technology and because it did not offer the all- powerful pharmaceutical industry any commercial opportunities. (Over the years I have been `fired' by well over forty local newspapers for having the effrontery to question accepted medical wisdom.)

This was, I think, my first experience of being described as `controversial' for proposing a course of action which seemed to me to be fundamentally sound. The sad bottom line is that the lifestyle solution to high blood pressure attracted criticism because it offered no possibility for profit.

A similar situation has developed with regard to the treatment of heart disease.

Most patients and nearly all doctors regard surgery and drug therapy as the only two ways to treat heart problems. Triple and quadruple bypass operations are now almost commonplace - and a major source of revenue for surgeons around the world. There are over 60 different pharmaceutical products available for the treatment of heart problems and many of these are among the world's best-selling and most profitable drugs. Doctors who make their living with a scalpel tend to recommend surgery for every heart patient they see whereas doctors who make their living with a pen and a prescription pad are more likely to recommend drug therapy.

To say the least the consequences of all this surgery and this epidemic of prescribing are not always ideal. The discussions over the wisdom of operating on President Yeltsin in Russia have drawn attention to the often ignored fact that heart surgery can be dangerous. The unavoidable fact is that giving an anaesthetic, chopping open the chest and physically assaulting the delicate tissues of someone with a dodgy heart is a risky business which results in thousands of deaths every year. As always the irony is that in order to survive hospitalisation and surgery you really need to be in tip top condition!

Pills aren't necessarily safe either. There are always risks with drugs and powerful drugs which have an effect on the heart can produce damaging, uncomfortable and sometimes lethal side effects. And, of course, it's worth remembering that many heart patients have to undergo surgery *and* take drugs. Indeed, the nearest the medical establishment ever gets to a `holistic' approach is to offer surgery and pills!

But the good news is that there is evidence now available to show that surgery and drug therapy are not the only ways to tackle heart disease.

It has, of course, been known for some time that it is possible to prevent heart disease by changing your lifestyle. Family history is a major factor in the development of heart trouble and you can't do much about your parents or grandparents. But whether you come from a line of people with healthy hearts or vulnerable, fragile hearts you can dramatically improve your chances of avoiding cardiac trouble by following such simple rules as avoiding fatty foods, taking regular, gentle exercise, learning how to cope with stress and keeping as far away from tobacco as possible.

The recent breakthrough (made largely through the work of an American doctor called Dr Dean Ornish) has been to show that it is actually possible to treat patients with existing heart disease by encouraging them to make significant changes in the way they live. Dr Ornish was the first clinician to provide documented proof that heart disease can be halted or even reversed simply by a change in life-style. After one year the majority (82%) of the patients who made the comprehensive lifestyle changes recommended by Dr Ornish showed some measurable reversal of their coronary artery blockages.

In a regime which, is it seems to me, a perfect example of holistic medicine in practice Dr Ornish and his colleagues have shown that by persuading patients to follow some simple basic rules - which include taking half an hour's moderate exercise every day, spending at least an hour a day practising relaxation and stress management techniques and following a low fat vegetarian diet they can frequently help get rid of coronary artery blockages and heart pain. This advice is hardly likely to prove popular with surgeons and drug companies, of course. Sadly, I'm afraid that the potential for making money out of this sort of `commonsense' regime is far too slight to please the medical establishment. If your doctor hasn't heard of the non- surgical, non-drug treatment of heart disease it is probably because she obtains all her post-graduate medical information from drug company sponsored lectures and publications.

Dr Ornish isn't the only doctor to have produced important work in this area. In a review entitled 'The Natural Cure of Coronary Heart Disease' (published in the journal '*Nutrition and Health'* in 2003 Dr Allan Withnell concluded that the medical literature: 'strongly suggests that lifestyle and particularly diet are the cause and the cure of coronary heart disease. The proof will lie in persuading the cardiac patient to change his lifestyle to the extent recommended and observing the result.' Dr Withnell has put emphasis on the words 'to the extent recommended' and his point is important. It's no good just cutting down from two burgers a day to one.

Naturally, patients with heart disease must get a doctor's advice, help, support and guidance before following this sort of regime. And it is, of course, vitally important that patients who are already taking drugs do not suddenly stop them (stopping drugs too quickly can be extremely dangerous - many modern drugs are so powerful that they need to be tailed off gradually when the time has come to stop them).

But my advice to anyone suffering from heart disease is simple: before you agree to surgery or consent to starting on what may well be a long term course of drug therapy, do ask your doctor if she will help you follow the sort of programme initiated by Dr Ornish. If your doctor hasn't heard of this type of therapy for heart disease and isn't interested in finding out more then I suggest that you find another medical adviser. Any medical practitioner who is so wedded to drug company propaganda that she won't even consider this type of minimalist interventionist therapy isn't worth patronising.

And even if this holistic approach to heart disease does not completely remove all your symptoms (and, according to the evidence the odds are very much in your favour that it will) the chances are high that you will become much healthier and stronger. You will, therefore, be better able to cope with the traumas of whatever surgery or drug therapy you might need.

* * *

There is, surely, sound advice in this philosophy for those who are fortunate enough not to be suffering from heart disease.

If learning to relax, taking gentle, regular exercise and eating a low fat vegetarian diet can help reverse existing heart disease then I believe it must be true that the same sort of regime will almost certainly help prevent heart disease. I know it isn't fashionable or exciting to offer simple advice but I'm more interested in offering accurate, honest, effective advice than in offering you an exciting sounding remedy that no one has ever heard of and which you can only buy after visiting dozens of stores. My aim is to help you live a long and healthy life - not to impress you by advising you to take a handful of rare Guatemalan beans and a couple of highly coloured and untested chemical cocktail pills every day!

The key about my simple advice for a healthy heart, is it seems to me, that all this advice must be followed enthusiastically and regularly. Going for a walk once a fortnight, eating slightly less butter and making a half-hearted attempt to relax when you can feel your muscles knotting up is not going to make any noticeable difference at all.

In my view, assuming that you are in good health and there are no medical reasons why you should not do any of these things you should, if you want to make a difference, do several things in order to maintain good cardiac condition.

First, you should go for a brisk walk three times a week for at least half an hour at a time. Don't be put off just because it's windy or because you are busy.

Second, you should make a serious attempt to cut down your consumption of fatty foods. Here, for example, are some quick ways to reduce the fat in your diet:

1. Become vegetarian or vegan. Most meat is rich in fat. Fatty beef and pork are really bad for you but even chicken contains far too much fat for a low fat diet.

2. Grill, steam, casserole, bake or boil but don't fry or roast food. (Stir frying can be OK.)

3. Avoid butter, cream, margarine and full cream milk. Choose soya milk instead of dairy milk. Add herbs instead of butter (or salt) when cooking vegetables. Select low fat non-dairy spreads which contain polyunsaturated fats rather than saturated fats.

4. If you buy prepared or convenience foods make sure that you look for low fat labels. Check food constituents and remember that you are aiming at a diet which contains less than 20% fat. (The recommended figure is 10%). Try to put products back onto the shelf if the label tells you that they contain more than 20% fat. (In my view recommended `acceptable' levels, which are sometimes 30%, are far too high.)

You should make a real effort to reduce your exposure to unnecessary stress. The simple way to do this is to make a list of all the activities and commitments in your life which contribute to your general stress levels and to then ask yourself which of those activities and commitments add value to your life and which can be avoided or discarded.

And finally, you should learn how to relax your mind and your body and you should practise what you learn on a regular basis. (There is advice about mental and physical relaxation in my books `*Bodypower*' and `*Mindpower*').

Chapter 18: Learn To Listen To Your Body

Your body can tell you a lot if you will listen to it. Many minor symptoms which you might regard as a nuisance, or which you might hurry to treat, are early signs that something is wrong. Other signs may be simply ignored because you are not aware of their importance.

Here are some pointers to help you listen to your body more attentively.

1. If you are lifting or moving something and you feel a twinge of pain, consider that a warning. If you persist then you are probably going to end up with a strained muscle or damaged joint. If you are digging the garden and your back begins to ache that is an early sign that you would be foolish to ignore. Most episodes of pain should be regarded as early warning signs - the longer you ignore a pain the more likely you are to end up with a serious problem.

2. Vomiting and diarrhoea may be extremely inconvenient but they are sometimes important defence mechanisms employed by your body for very specific purposes. If you develop either of these symptoms without any other signs, there is a chance that you may have acquired some form of gastro intestinal infection and that your body is trying to get rid of the infection. Any treatment you choose to employ to control your symptoms may also ensure that the infection stays in your body for longer. You must always consult your doctor immediately about either of these symptoms.

3. The cough reflex is a sophisticated defence system designed to eject unwelcome foreign matter from your respiratory tract. You should help your body by spitting out anything that you cough up. If you have a persistent or recurrent cough then you could have a persistent or recurrent infection or irritation in your lungs. Or there could be an irritant of some kind in the air you breathe. If you have a cough it isn't always sensible to try to stop it - the cough is, after all, trying to protect your body! The best solution is to enlist your doctor's help and find the cause of the cough.

4. If you develop an unusual or unexpected skin rash the chances are high that you have been in contact with an irritant. The reaction of your skin is a result of the fact that your skin tissues, recognising the irritant as a threat, have produced chemicals designed to counteract it. You can probably ease the resultant rash by using powerful drug therapy to oppose your body's reaction. But it is far more sensible to identify the irritant and avoid it.

5. If you develop cramp in your legs it may be because your circulation has been impeded. The cramp pains develop because the waste products from the metabolic processes which occur during muscle use have accumulated. The slowing down of the circulation has meant that the blood has not been able to clear the wastes away. The cramp pains tell you to change position. Once you have acted the blood will flow more easily. The waste products can then be washed away, and the pain will disappear.

6. If you eat the wrong sort of food, or eat too quickly, you may develop indigestion. If you do your stomach will be telling you that you have done something wrong. You can solve the problem temporarily by using antacids or by taking tablets. Do that, however, and the pain will probably come back. To get rid of the symptoms permanently you must listen to your body and take notice. Maybe you need to change your diet. Maybe you need to change your eating habits. You probably need good medical advice.

7. If you have a lot of accidents, it may be that you are constantly under too much pressure. There is a strong correlation between accident proneness and stress.

8. A woman who has irregular menstrual periods may well be worried about something. Girls who are taking examinations often have delayed periods - and so do girls who think they may be pregnant.

9. Most headaches are caused by pressure, tension and anxiety producing tight and tense muscles. Relaxing those muscles will often help a tension headache disappear more speedily than taking a pill. Relaxing the muscles at an early stage and dealing with the underlying tension may stop a headache developing. Persistent, recurrent or worrying headaches should always be investigated by a doctor.

10. Blood pressure often rises as a result of stress. Taxi drivers, school teachers and surgeons are far more likely to

develop high blood pressure than accountants, church ministers or farmers. If your doctor tells you that you have high blood pressure the chances are high that stress is damaging your health. You can help yourself by exposing yourself to less stress or by improving your resistance to stress.

You will find more about how to listen to your body in my book `*Bodypower*'. Remember that you should always seek professional medical advice for any symptoms which persist for more than five days, which reappear or which worry you.

Chapter 19: Learn To Control Pain Without Your Doctor

Pain is the most common reason why people seek medical advice. It is the most important reason why people take pills. It causes more misery than all other symptoms put together. It ruins lives and wrecks careers.

And yet many doctors aren't very good at all at dealing with pain. Experts claim that up to three quarters of all patients with persistent pain get poor treatment.

There are, I believe, two main reasons for this. First, medical schools spend far too little time teaching students about ways to deal with pain. Many standard medical textbooks don't even mention pain! Second, the education of doctors is largely controlled by the drugs industry which has a vested interest in selling new, expensive and profitable products.

So, here is a quick summary of some of the things you really need to know about pain control techniques. You should only use these techniques with your doctor's approval. Never treat pain without obtaining medical advice. If your doctor hasn't heard of any of these techniques (and a surprising number of doctors still haven't heard of TENS machines, for example) ask him or her to do a little research and then give you his or her opinion.

Drugs

Drugs are the commonest way of dealing with pain. There are scores of different products for doctors to choose from when writing out prescriptions for pain killers. And there are scores of products that you can buy without a prescription. But although pain killers can be extremely effective they aren't always used properly. You should always take pain killers according to the recommended instructions.

Tens machines

There seems to me to be a conspiracy between doctors and drug companies which ensures that millions of patients in pain are denied easy, cheap, reliable pain relief so that drug company profits can remain high.

When body tissues are damaged messages carrying information about the injury travel towards the brain along two quite separate sets of nerve fibres. The larger fibres carry messages about sensations other than pain and the smaller fibres carry the pain messages. The messages which travel along the larger fibres tend to arrive at the spinal cord before the messages travelling along the smaller fibres and, if there are enough non painful sensations travelling, the pain messages won't be able to get through. When you rub a sore spot you are increasing the number of non-pain messages travelling towards your brain - and blocking the pain.

Once scientists had realised just how rubbing a sore or painful place can relieve pain the next step was to come up with a way of stimulating the passage of non-painful sensations even more efficiently.

The knowledge that all nerves within an inch or so of the surface of the skin can be stimulated by electrodes which are simply stuck onto the skin encouraged medical researchers to give patients pocket sized battery operated stimulators which sent out a continuous series of electrical pulses. The pulses got into the large nerves of the body via silicon electrodes stuck onto the skin with a special conducting paste.

And the electrical pulses - non pain messages - stopped the pain messages getting through. More exciting still it was found that Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (it quickly became known as TENS) did not just stimulate the passage of sensory impulses designed to inhibit the passage of pain impulses; it also stimulated the body to start producing its own pain-relieving hormones: the endorphins.

TENS machines are convenient, safe and effective. They are also cheap to buy and cheap to run.

In a study conducted with patients suffering from rheumatoid arthritis it was found that TENS equipment produced pain relief in up to 95% of patients with up to 50% of patients getting long term relief.

But it isn't just arthritis patients who benefit from using TENS machines. TENS machines have been shown to be effective in the treatment of all kinds of pain.

With this sort of success available from a small, cheap, portable, long lasting machine that can be used at home without any training and that does not seem to produce any side effects at all you might imagine that doctors would be recommending TENS machines to millions of patients - and that shops would have different models stocked high on their shelves.

But if you try to buy a TENS machine you'll have difficulty.

Why?

Cynics might suggest it is because drug companies don't want patients in pain to be able to deal with their symptom so easily and quickly and cheaply. Drug companies make huge amounts of money out of selling drugs to pain sufferers and TENS machines would cost them a fortune in lost sales.

Even governments (which try to do their best to keep the drug companies happy) are doing their best to stop people buying TENS machines.

You ought to be able to buy one in your chemist's shop. But I doubt if you'll be able to. If you want to try one you will have to ask your doctor to refer you to the nearest pain clinic where - with luck - you should be able to obtain one on loan.

Now you will perhaps understand why I say that if a scientist found a cure for cancer or heart disease the drug industry - far more enthusiastic about continuing to sell vast quantities of useless pharmaceutical crap than in curing people - would suppress it.

The vibrator

If you can't get hold of a TENS machine there is a cheaper, more readily available (although slightly less efficient) alternative - an ordinary hand held sex shop vibrator. Like TENS machines these work by helping to block pain impulses. And they can work well under medical supervision. Ask your doctor to advise you about when a vibrator can work well to relieve pain.

The rocking chair

One of the most effective ways of managing persistent, long term backache that doctors can't cure is to sit in a rocking chair. Using a rocking chair stimulates the production of nerve impulses which provide effective and continuous pain relief. The late American President John Kennedy, a chronic backache sufferer, used to have a rocking chair in his White House office.

Since pain tends to get worse in the evening it may be a good idea to sit in your rocking chair while relaxing and watching TV.

Heat

Heat can help just about any type of pain - but it can work best on the sort of pain produced by bruises, strains and inflamed joints. To apply heat to specific areas of your body try heated towels, an electrically heated pad, a sun lamp or a good old fashioned hot water bottle.

If you use a hot water bottle make sure that the rubber is not perished, that the stopper fits well and that the bottle is wrapped in a towel so that it doesn't burn you.

Ice

Pain experts have shown that ice can relieve headache pain in 80% of patients and can relieve toothache in over 50% of cases. Its also good for bruises, joint pain and backache. With your doctor's approval put ice cubes into a hot water bottle or wrap them in a thin towel. Don't hold ice on your skin for more than five minutes and move it as soon as the area feels numb.

Music

Four thousand years ago Hindu doctors used to play soothing, gentle music while surgeons were operating. And they used to have musicians playing in the wards too. They discovered that music helped people relax and banished pain. Recently researchers in Warsaw have shown that music therapy is excellent at relieving pain. You'll have to experiment to find the type of music that helps you most. You may find that a portable cassette player with a pair of headphones is useful.

Chapter 20: Be Careful When Buying Medicines Over The Counter

Selling medicines over the counter, without a prescription, is big business.

However, my advice is that you should think very carefully before spending huge amounts of money on buying medicines over the counter. Many of the products which are on sale in thousands of outlets everywhere have never been proven to be effective or useful and some of the products on sale can undoubtedly be dangerous.

Apart from the risk of side effects the other big problem you face when you take over the counter medicines is that you may have made the wrong diagnosis - and you may miss a serious underlying disorder.

For example, if you have persistent indigestion and you keep taking an anti-indigestion remedy there is a risk that in due course you could develop a fully blown ulcer - which could bleed and even kill you. Visit your doctor with persistent symptoms of indigestion and he will, hopefully, want to investigate.

If you have persistent diarrhoea and you keep buying a medicine to stop this symptom you may be missing an early sign of bowel cancer.

If you have a persistent cough and you keep buying bottles of cough medicine you could miss a serious chest problem which your doctor might have diagnosed early if you had visited him soon enough.

My general rule is that in order to minimise the risk of missing something serious you should not take a medicine you have bought yourself for any problem which continues for five days or more, or for any problem which recurs. Nor should you buy an over the counter medicine if you are already taking a prescribed drug. And if you are in any doubt about the diagnosis and the treatment you should get medical advice.

Home medicines - drugs that you have bought over the counter - can be handy and they can save unnecessary visits to the doctor. And if you have a good relationship with a pharmacist whom you trust then there is no doubt that you can benefit. But do bear in mind that the majority of symptoms which can be cleared up with the aid of medicines bought over the counter will probably also clear up without any remedy.

Chapter 21: Using Your Doctor Effectively

Every week thousands of people put off going for a medical examination because they're too anxious or shy. But putting off a visit to the doctors because you're suffering from "pre-examination nerves" could be dangerous. So, here's my advice (aimed particularly at those who feel nervous or embarrassed when they know they have got to go and see a doctor) on how to get the best out of a visit to the doctor.

1. Don't delay. If you have a problem which is worrying you make an appointment straight away - and make sure that you see your doctor as soon as possible. The longer you wait the more you'll worry - and the worse things could get. If you think your problem is urgent insist on having an appointment today or tomorrow. If the receptionist claims that the doctor cannot fit you in then ask for a home visit. My guess is that a surgery appointment will suddenly become available.

2. Be prepared for a physical examination. Would you be happy if a car mechanic tried to repair your car engine without lifting the bonnet? Dress in clothes you can get in and out of quickly. Stockings are usually easier that tights. Zips are quicker than buttons. Don't wear underwear that is going to embarrass you.

3. Don't worry about embarrassing or shocking your doctor. There is nothing you can tell your doctor that will shock him. Every week thousands of women who have `trouble down below' walk in to the surgery, complain of a minor skin rash or a swollen vein and walk out without saying what is really on their minds!

4. Make up your mind beforehand what you want to tell your doctor. Write down a list of your important signs, symptoms, complaints and worries. Women who have not yet gone through the menopause should take along details of their last few periods.

5. Don't be startled or offended by questions your doctor asks. If you have a discharge your doctor will want to know how long you've had it and what it looks like. If you have a gynaecological or urological problem questions about your sex life are routine.

6. Decide beforehand what questions you want to ask your doctor - and what you want him to do. And remember that it is part of your doctor's job to explain things to you. If you've seen a hospital doctor and haven't understood what he's said ask your own family doctor to interpret the medical jargon for you.

7. Your doctor will write down what you tell him. It makes sense for you to write down everything that he tells you - particularly if he is giving you advice or instructions.

8. If at the end of the consultation you aren't happy then ask for a second opinion. If your own doctor refuses point blank to refer you for a second opinion then I suggest that you change doctors.

Chapter 22: Learn When To Use Alternative Medicine

Is alternative medicine safe? Does it work?

Here are some brief notes on some of the best known forms of alternative medicine.

But remember: if you are thinking of trying any form of alternative medicine then my advice is that you should check with your own doctor first. Make sure that he is happy about what you are planning to do. And do make sure that the alternative practitioner you intend to consult is properly trained.

These notes are not complete - they are merely intended to provide a very brief, personal introduction to a massive subject.

* * *

Acupressure

Acupuncture with fingers rather than needles. Like acupuncture the idea is to stimulate the flow of energy along the body's natural channels. Acupressure is a cross between acupuncture and massage and it is said to be very good for dealing with headaches, backache, muscle pains etc.

Acupuncture

The Chinese who invented acupuncture believe that the human body contains 12 channels along which internal energies flow. When one of these channels is blocked and the flow of energy impeded illness develops. Acupuncturists stick needles into the skin in an attempt to unblock the channels and allow the energy flow to continue. Over 1000 acupuncture points have been identified and modern needles are made of stainless steel or copper. Acupuncture does work - particularly in the treatment of pain. Acupuncture is recommended by the World Health Organisation. In addition to helping patients with pain it also works in the treatment of many other disorders.

Alexander Technique

Founded at the turn of the century by an Australian actor called F.M. Alexander who believed that many illnesses develop because we don't sit, stand or walk properly. People who've been trained in the Alexander technique claim it helps relieve many health problems - particularly bone and joint troubles, backache and stress disorders.

Aromatherapy

Aromatherapists claim that by massaging patients with sweet smelling oils they can treat an enormous range of physical and mental disorders. They choose scented oils from specific flowers, plants and trees to influence moods and treat diseases. The massage itself may be soothing and relaxing.

Chiropractic

Chiropractic was established by a Canadian called Daniel Palmer who believed that 95% of illnesses are caused by displaced bones in the spine - and can, therefore, be cured by manipulating the spine. There is evidence available to suggest that chiropractic can be useful in the treatment of bone and joint disorders - for example backache.

Healing

There are thousands of healers in practice. Healers work in many different ways. Some lay their hands on their patients. Some say they don't need to touch their patient. Many work free of charge. There's evidence to show that healers can produce `miraculous' results. No one really knows whether this is because they trigger off the body's self-healing powers or because of mysterious forces! There are virtually no risks or side effects with healing.

Herbalism

One of the oldest branches of medicine. Many modern drugs are derived from herbal remedies. Drug companies base much of their research on looking for useful compounds that can be prepared from plants. About a third of the drugs doctors prescribe are plant based. Today many millions of people have turned away from orthodox medicine and prefer to use herbal remedies. Herbal remedies are available for just about every illness imaginable.

There is no doubt that many herbal remedies do work - whether bought over the counter or prescribed by a herbalist.

Homoeopathy

Modern homoeopathy was invented by Samuel Hahnemann in the 19th century. He believed that he could cure patients with minute doses of drugs. The theory is that the incredibly small doses trigger off the body's self-healing mechanisms. Homoeopathy has much in common with vaccination in which a small amount of a foreign substance is introduced into the patient’s body in order to stimulate the body's defence mechanisms. Homoeopathy really does seem to work.

Hypnotherapy

Modern hypnotherapy began with Franz Mesmer in Vienna in the 18th century. When used by a skilled expert it can be useful and effective. There's evidence to show that hypnotherapy can help patients relax and deal with stress.

Hydrotherapy

Simply means treatment using water. Hydrotherapy is practised in many health farms and alternative clinics. You can sit in it, be sprayed with it or drink it. You can have it very cold or very hot. Those who believe in hydrotherapy claim it can be used to treat all sorts of illnesses.

Music therapy

Four thousand years ago Hindu doctors used to play soothing music while surgeons operated. They used to have music played in the wards too - they believed it helped patients get better. They may have been right. The value of music therapy seems clear. Music helps cure emotional and mental problems - and helps relieve pain.

Meditation

Many modern diseases are caused by stress - and by our inability to relax. Meditation is a relaxation technique which works - and which can be easily learned for home use. My book `*Mindpower*' contains more information.

Naturopathy

Naturopathy was founded by Hippocrates around 400 BC who said that the best way to maintain good health was to eat and exercise moderately and carefully. Simple naturopathy means having a healthy lifestyle.

Osteopathy

Founded in 1874 by Andrew Tayler Still, an American who believed that the faults in the bony part of the body cause many diseases. Osteopaths claim that they can treat illnesses by manipulating the body - especially the spine. I don't think there is much difference between chiropractic and osteopathy. Excellent for problems such as backache. Some experts say that half of the patients going to an osteopath have backache. Many doctors with back trouble seek help from osteopaths.

Five reasons why alternative medicine may be useful

1. Alternative remedies are often more `natural' than orthodox medical remedies - they allow and encourage the body to heal itself.

2. It is often possible to learn alternative techniques for home use - gaining independence from professionals.

3. Most - but not all - forms of alternative medicine are relatively safe. The risk of side effects are usually low.

4. Alternative practitioners are not usually as rushed as orthodox doctors - they have more time to talk to patients.

5. There are not usually any waiting lists for alternative treatment.

Chapter 23: Improve Your Health Simply By Changing Your Diet

Many patients who seek medical help could get better simply by changing their diet. And many more could have avoided illness altogether if they had been more careful about what they had eaten. The food you choose to eat can keep you fit, strong and healthy. Or it can make you ill. The list of diseases associated with food seems to get longer every year.

To help you eat healthily I've prepared a list of just some of the disorders known to be linked to particular eating habits. You could notice a genuine improvement in your condition - or help stop an existing problem getting worse - by selecting your diet with care.

One word of warning. Do have a word with your doctor if you are receiving any medical treatment and you plan to change your diet. Your need for medication may vary if your change of diet improves your health.

Acne

You may be able to help clear up acne by eating less fat and less sugar and more fibre.

Allergies

Hay fever and eczema are often caused by allergies. Eczema affected 2 people per 1000 born in 1946 but over 12 per 1000 of the following generation. Junk food may be one factor. Eat less additive rich food, less highly refined food and more fresh fruit and vegetables.

Anaemia

You need iron to avoid anaemia. But you don't have to eat lots of fat rich meat to get the iron you need. Green vegetables and beans contain iron and eating fresh fruit and vegetables will help your body absorb iron more effectively.

Anxiety

Cut down your caffeine intake and reduce the amount of sugar in your diet.

Asthma

Try to eat less dairy produce - milk, butter and cheese. And cut down on fatty meat. Eat more vegetables, fruit and nuts.

Cancer

Between one third and one half of all cancers are linked to food. Eat less fat, avoid meat, and eat more fruit, more vegetables and more wholegrain cereals.

Constipation

Eat plenty of fibre and roughage.

Diabetes

Cut down on sugar and fat but eat more fibre.

Gall bladder disease

Eat less fatty food. Increase your intake of fibre rich fruit, vegetables and whole grain cereals.

Gout

To avoid or control gout you should restrict your intake of alcohol and reduce the amount of meat you eat. Also limit your intake of fish, peas and beans.

Headaches

To cut down your risk of suffering from headaches eat less chocolate, alcohol, fatty food and additive rich food. Cut down on caffeine too.

Heart disease

Cut down the amount of fat you eat. Butter, milk, cream, fatty cheese and fatty meat should all be kept to a minimum.

High blood pressure

Cut down your intake of salt by reducing your consumption of processed foods, canned foods, junk food, crisps, salted peanuts, salted cheese or butter, sausages, bacon and table salt.

Indigestion

Avoid fried and fatty foods.

Irritable bowel syndrome

Avoid fats and increase the amount of fibre you eat. Try cutting down dairy produce.

Premenstrual syndrome

Reduce your intake of caffeine, milk, sugar and salt.

Rheumatoid arthritis

Eat a low fat diet. And cut out meat.

You can find out more about the way the food you eat affects your health by reading my book `*Food for Thought*'. My book `*Power over Cancer*' contains information about the links between food and cancer.

Chapter 24: How To Cut Your Cancer Risk By 80%

Doctors don't spend much time telling their patients how to avoid cancer - but they do spend enormous amounts of time, energy and money on treating cancer.

In my book `Power over Cancer' I explained why I think the `cancer industry' concentrates its huge resources on the hunt for a cancer `cure' - and why thousands of cancer researchers around the world waste their days performing useless experiments on animals.

Astonishingly, doctors now know what causes 80% of all cancers. It is my view that you should be able to reduce your cancer risk by 80% by avoiding those `triggers' which are known to be responsible for causing cancer.

Here is my advice:

1. Don't smoke tobacco and keep away from other people who smoke tobacco.
2. Cut your consumption of fatty food.
3. Do not eat meat.
4. Eat plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables.
5. Eat plenty of fibre and whole grain foods.
6. Do not have any unnecessary X rays.
7. Do not spend long periods of time in the sun.
8. Try not to live underneath or close to electricity power lines or close to an electricity supply station. Do not sleep or sit too close to electrical appliances.
9. Avoid foods which contain large quantities of additives.
10. Keep your weight under control.
11. Minimise your consumption of alcohol.
12. Avoid smoked, salt cured, salt pickled or barbecued foods.

Chapter 25: Never Eat Another Meal And Stay Slim And Healthy For Life

Few single factors affect your health - and your life expectancy more than your weight. If you want to live a long, healthy life then you need to be thin. Forget all that nonsense about chubby people being happy and healthy. Fat folk may be happy. But not for long. Important new research - which involved following over 100,000 women for more than a decade - has found that many cancer deaths and more than half of cardiovascular deaths are due to excess weight. Even if you are just moderately overweight your health is at risk.

Women who are thirty per cent above their ideal weights are four times as likely to die of heart disease and twice as likely to die of cancer as are slimmer women. Women who are overweight seem more likely to die of cancer of the colon, breast and endometrium. And similar figures probably apply to men too. If you weigh just 22 pounds more than you did when you are 18 years old then you are probably at risk.

So the choice is yours. Being fat doesn't just mean not being able to wear fashionable clothes. It means dying sooner too.

Despite the importance of losing excess weight for good health doctors really are not very good at helping people slim successfully.

Instead of teaching patients sensible eating habits doctors have a terrible tendency to try and produce a `miracle cure'. It has, for example, been popular for many doctors to prescribe amphetamine slimming pills (which can be addictive) or to recommend surgery as a remedy for obesity.

Every year thousands of people who want to lose weight risk their health and their lives having operations that will, at best, result in a small and temporary weight loss but which may, too often, result in either a lifetime of agony or an early death.

Ever since a surgeon earned himself a fortune in 19th century England by removing thousands of yards of intestine from his corpulent patients surgeons have been enthusiastically offering immediate `magic' answers to patients wanting to lose weight without having to go through the alleged agonies of dieting.

All operations are potentially hazardous. Once a surgeon sticks a knife into you there are risks that things will go wrong. If the operation you're having is going to save your life then the risks are worth taking. But operations performed on slimmers aren't usually life-saving procedures - and I do not think that the risks are ever worth taking.

In my view there are dozens of safe and effective ways for people to lose weight but surgery is not one of them. I believe that using surgery to tackle obesity is like using a nuclear bomb to tackle an unruly soccer crowd - it is a totally inappropriate use of modern skills and technology.

Chapter 26: Stay Healthy Through Hugging, Kissing And Cuddling

The chances are high that you touch and cuddle the people you love far too little.

Touching - and being touched - is good for everyone.

If small children aren't touched often they quickly become seriously depressed. They may stop eating and simply fade away. It’s not unknown for a child to die of love starvation. Even when things don't get that bad, children often suffer lasting damage if they aren't touched and cuddled frequently. Children who are deprived of physical love often grow up to be promiscuous - unable to settle down with one partner as they are driven on in an endless search for more and more love.

And it isn't only children who suffer if they're deprived of hugs and cuddles. Without regular signs of physical affection we all become brittle, unstable and more susceptible to stress and pressure.

Ask yourself how many times you've hugged the people who are closest to you in the last 24 hours. And ask yourself how often you've touched the people you love.

If you don't touch or hug or cuddle people often it may be that you have to battle against a feeling that such outward signs of affection are wrong.

If your parents didn't hug or cuddle you very often you may find it difficult to let yourself go. You may have even been encouraged to believe that hugging, cuddling and touching are embarrassing or too `showy'.

Boys are often told off for wanting a hug.

`You're too old for that sort of thing,' a man will say to his son, because he feels uncomfortable at the prospect of close physical contact.

If you think that you need to touch - and be touched - more often then make today the day you start.

- When you greet a loved one - even if it is only after a parting of a few hours - put an arm around them. You don't have to start with a full blooded hug if that makes you feel embarrassed. Build up to a hug slowly! When you greet close friends get into the habit of touching them - maybe clasping their hands or forearm, or perhaps putting an arm around them.

- When you're leaving someone - again if its only for a few hours - touch them on the arm or shoulder. Again, build up to a proper cuddle.

- Don't let children fool you when they wriggle away if you're trying to hug them. All children like to receive physical signs of affection (though they may be embarrassed about it in public - especially if other children's parents don't show any signs of affection). Wait until you're somewhere private to show how you feel.

- When you kiss someone `hello' or `goodbye' don't be content with a distant peck on the cheek. Put your arms around them and give them a big hug too.

Hugging, touching and kissing aren't just for lovers. If you regularly hug, touch and kiss all the people who matter to you then you'll feel better - and so will they!

Chapter 27: In Nine Out Of Ten Illnesses Your Body Will Heal Itself

Many of the people who are injured by doctors never needed medical treatment in the first place.

The human body contains a comprehensive variety of self-healing mechanisms which mean that in nine out of ten illnesses your body will mend itself.

It is important that you learn to understand your body; learn to appreciate your own self-healing skills; learn to acknowledge your body's miraculous range of techniques for dealing with threats and diseases; and learn to know when your body can look after itself - and when you need professional help.

The big trouble with most health care professionals - and this includes acupuncturists, osteopaths, aromatherapists and all other `alternative' practitioners, as well as orthodox doctors - is that they tend to treat their patients as battle grounds, the illness as an enemy and their own armoury of drugs or techniques as weapons with which to fight the illness.

Whether he sticks needles into you, gives you herbal tea to drink or prescribes a drug for you to swallow the therapist has to do something to you or give you something to take in order to justify his fee.

The evidence to show that this interventionist philosophy is wrong is incontrovertible. When you fall ill you do not necessarily need to have anything done to you. Your body is equipped with such an enormous range of subtle and sophisticated feedback mechanisms that it can look after itself very well.

Your body can heal itself, protect itself and guard itself against a thousand different types of threat.

Your body contains internal mechanisms designed to enable you to deal automatically with minor damage, improve your eyesight, keep out the cold, deal with anxiety and even help fight against diseases as threatening as cancer.

Your internal appetite control centre can ensure that you eat only the foods that your body needs - and it can help make sure that you never become overweight.

Your body's internal pain relieving hormones are as powerful as morphine - but you have to know how to take advantage of those pain relieving hormones.

The human brain even contains a natural drug designed to help anxiety.

Your body is marvellous. It contains a vast variety of extraordinarily effective self-healing mechanisms. Most of them you are probably don't even know about. And if you don't know about them then you probably don't know how to take advantage of them.

Your body cannot always cope, of course.

There will be times when even your sophisticated self-healing mechanisms will be overwhelmed and will need support.

But to dismiss these mechanisms on the grounds that they don't provide a complete answer to all health problems is like arguing that it isn't worthwhile learning to swim because occasionally you may need the help of a lifeguard.

I firmly believe that if you learn to use the power of your own body you will benefit in a number of ways.

First, of course, you will reduce the risk of being injured by a healthcare professional. Every year thousands of people suffer because of treatments used by orthodox and alternative practitioners.

Second, you will benefit because when an interventionist treats an illness he usually tries to oppose your body's own internal responses, as well as whatever outside agent may have triggered those responses in the first place. This isn't necessarily a good idea. All symptoms are merely signs that a fight is taking place inside your body. Unless the interventionist treatment is carefully designed to support and aid the fight the treatment applied may well end up damaging and even weakening your body's internal mechanisms - eventually making you more vulnerable and more reliant on interventionists and their treatments.

It is vitally important that you learn to use your body's powers and learn to recognise precisely when you need professional support. You should retain overall control of your body and bring in the healers as advisers and technicians.

Once you've mastered the idea of using your body's own healing powers you will find yourself enjoying a freedom that you might otherwise never know.

I have described the many wonderful ways in which your body can look after itself in my book called `*Bodypower*'. The book explains how you can use your body's self-healing powers to help you deal with 9 out of 10 illnesses without a doctor - it has been described as an `owner's manual' for a human body.

Chapter 28: How To Live to Be 100

Here are 47 tips which will (if you follow them) make a real difference to your life expectancy!

1. Don't lie in bed in the mornings. People who live to be 100 are invariably early risers!

2. Be careful not to eat too much. The type of food you eat is important. But the amount you eat is important too. Overeating puts a strain on your body - and leads to obesity, which is a real killer. Most of us eat far too much - especially in winter when roll of fat are covered up by layers of thick clothes. Too much food will make you lethargic and tired. When you put food on your plate ask yourself if you really NEED that much. If the answer is `no' then take less.

3. If you are feeling glum visit a local travel agent and come away with an armful of brochures. Just dreaming about wonderful holidays can help you relax and feel good.

4. Drink alcohol in moderation. A small amount of alcohol may improve your health. Too much alcohol will damage your health.

5. Do not dwell too much on the past. If you are constantly moaning that life was better in the `good old days' then you will reduce your chances of having a long and healthy life. If you're going to live through ten decades then you must be adaptable - and prepared to cope with the fact that the world around you will constantly change.

6. Giving up work is often a signal for the body to slow down. If you intend to retire from work then make sure that you find something else to keep yourself busy.

7. Be as independent as you can be. Don't let other people push you around or control your life. The more you can control your destiny the healthier you will be. Contrary to all the myths bosses rarely suffer from as much stress as those who work for them.

8. Take as few pills as you can. Constantly taking drugs (both those prescribed and those bought from the pharmacist) will damage your body.

9. Try not to worry about your health. If you are constantly expecting to fall sick then you will fall sick. People who live long, healthy lives rarely worry about illness or death - they just get on with life.

10. Avoid dieting. Constantly gaining and losing weight will damage your body.

11. Do not smoke. And keep away from people who smoke. Breathing in other people's second hand tobacco smoke can permanently damage your health.

12. Find a hobby you really enjoy - and throw yourself into it with enthusiasm. Choose something that you've always wanted to try. Enrol in night school classes or borrow a book from the library or join a correspondence course. A new hobby will put passion and excitement back into your life.

13. Avoid sugar rich foods.

14. Avoid fatty foods.

15. Eat plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables. And buy less stuff in packets. Spend ten minutes reading the packets in your food cupboard and you will probably be horrified to see how many chemicals you are eating. The average diet consists of a mixture of fat and chemicals. Eat crap in packets and you'll feel like a packet of crap.

16. Don't eat meat. Meat causes cancer. And your body doesn't need it.

17. Share your emotions with the people who are closest to you. Don't bottle up your feelings. If you feel the need to cry - then cry. If you feel angry then shout.

18. Say `I love you' at least once a day to the person you love most in the world. And make sure that they say `I love you' to you. Those three words make us feel wanted. We live in a world that is too often cruel and thoughtless and full of anger and hatred. Knowing that someone loves you will help protect you against the toxic stress in your life.

19. Exercise at least three times a week - and preferably every day. The best forms of exercise are: walking, cycling, swimming and dancing. Exercise should never hurt and should always be fun but if you don't need a bath or shower after exercising then you probably haven't exercised properly. (You should always check with your doctor before starting to exercise). If you join a gym make sure that you get expert advice from a qualified professional. Visit the local swimming pool. Make an effort to DO something physical. It's too easy to slump down in front of the TV set. Your body needs regular work-outs. Without exercise you'll become stale, flaccid and vulnerable to germs. Make sure you take the right amount of exercise. Too much can be just as bad for you as too little. Three quarters of the population take too little exercise. Many of the remainder take too much. Exhaust yourself in the gym five nights a week and your battered and exhausted body will be exceptionally vulnerable to infection. I know many women and men who exhaust their bodies by leaping about at strenuous exercise classes. Too much exercise damages the immune system. You don't have to wear yourself out in the gym to keep in good shape. But you do need to take regular, fun exercise. Remember: check with your doctor before starting an exercise programme.

20. Spend half a day a week being selfish. Most of us try to cram too much sensible, useful living in to our lives. Spend half a day a week doing something that you enjoy. Go swimming. Go dancing. Go for a walk. Sit in the park. Indulge yourself. Have half a day a week that is all yours.

21. Drink plenty of fluids - particularly fresh water. Your kidneys need a good supply of water in order to function properly.

22. Eat a banana a day. Bananas are better for you than apples. They are cheap and packed with fibre and vitamins. But most important of all they come ready wrapped so that when you eat one you don't have to worry about it being contaminated with chemicals or bugs. As a bonus bananas contain relatively few calories - so won't make you fat.

23. Make sure you have plenty of fun in your life. Gloomy workaholics tend to die early. People who live lengthy, healthy lives tend to regard life as an adventure to be enjoyed. A sense of humour is important. Read books that make you laugh. Watch videos that you find truly entertaining. Keep a library of favourite books and videos that you know you can turn to when you're feeling miserable. Try to find something to laugh at every day.

24. When you are worried about something ask yourself what the bottom line is - the worst that can happen. Once you know the worst you will be surprised at how many fears suddenly become less significant.

25. Stop wasting your life. Throw away any junk mail unopened. Put the phone down on unsolicited, unwanted calls and shut the door on unsolicited salesmen. In a week you'll save hours - enough time to do something you really enjoy. Unsolicited salesmen - usually selling us things we don't want or need - waste hours. And because they're using up your life they're building up your stress.

26. Turn off your telephones occasionally. How many times have you sat down to relax and been disturbed by the phone? How many times have social evenings been interrupted by irrelevant calls? We allow the phone to rule our lives - and we let it get away with rude behaviour that we would never tolerate from children.

27. Keep a diary. You don't have to fill pages with your innermost thoughts. Or record tedious, mundane daily happenings. But keeping a diary will help you plan your life more effectively - and therefore avoid many unnecessary and unexpected stresses. A diary will also give you a chance to let off steam in private.

28. Do something physical whenever you feel angry. Or frustrated. Or let down. Go for a walk. Beat a rug. Dig the garden. If you aren't fit enough or strong enough to go for a walk or beat a rug go somewhere private and shout. Getting your anger out of your system will help protect you from stress.

29.If you normally go to bed at the same time every evening try staying up late at night occasionally - watch a movie, go out to a party or just invite friends round to talk.

30. Work out how many of your waking hours you spend doing things you want to do; and how many you spend doing things that other people want you to do. If you spend more than half your time doing things for other people make an effort to be more selfish. Make more time for yourself.

31. If your house is dimly lit buy bigger light bulbs. Living in half dark rooms can be depressing. Put a 150 watt bulb in place of a 100 watt bulb and you're unlikely to notice much difference in your electricity bill but the extra light will make your life seem brighter.

32. Make plans so that you have things to look forward to every week. It doesn't have to be anything complicated or expensive. Plan to meet a friend, go for a walk or see a movie. And don't let yourself pull out at the last minute because you want to slump down in front of the television.

33. If you drink tea or coffee drink it fairly weak. Caffeine - found in tea and coffee - is a powerful drug.

34. Make a real effort to look after your appearance - even if the weather is lousy and you have nowhere to go. Wearing bright, cheerful clothes - and looking good - will improve the way you feel. Try to avoid clothes in dark colours.

35. Frustration, tension, anger and worry all lead to stiff, uncomfortable muscles. The result is usually headaches and other pains. Try massaging your temples with your fingertips every evening. You'll feel fresher if you gently massage the whole of your face with your fingertips.

36. Wear the flimsiest, sexiest and most outrageous underwear you can find - and afford. It may not do much towards keeping you warm but it'll make you feel good during the day.

37. Send silly postcards to your five best friends - for no reason at all. It'll make you feel better and it'll make them feel good too.

38. If you're feeling physically exhausted or mentally fed up spend half an hour in a warm bath with a good book or magazine.

39. Go through the TV listings magazines and pick out programmes that you know you'll enjoy. The joy of anticipation is never disappointing.

40. Try to be selective about your TV watching. The average man, woman and child watches three, four or five hours of television a day. Every day. What a waste of a life.

41. Try this simple exercise to calm your entire body: take a deep breath in ; suck in your tummy muscles to make your tummy as hard as it will go; count to five; let your muscles go limp; empty the air out of your lungs. Repeat this several times until you feel thoroughly relaxed.

42.Never underestimate the power of your mind. Your mind can make you ill but it can also make you well again.

43. Always remember that if you develop new symptoms while being treated for a health condition there is a good chance that the new symptoms are caused by the treatment you are receiving for your existing condition.

44. Try to keep out of communal showers. School and sports changing rooms - where sweaty people gather together to huff and puff their germs at one another - are great places for picking up illnesses. Community cleansing should be banned. My advice: wrap up well in warm clothes and go home to bathe or shower.

45. Learn to listen to your body. When I was the regular doctor on breakfast television and told viewers to do this one woman wrote in to say that she couldn't listen to her body because she was deaf. But you don't need ears to listen to your body. You should listen to your body simply by increasing your awareness of it. Watch out for early symptoms and take whatever action your body tells you is appropriate.

46. Never hand over your health, your body and your life to doctors or other professionals. If you need to obtain professional help make sure that you retain control. Call in the experts for their technical skills but remember that you should always retain responsibility and authority. Whenever possible make sure that you know what they plan to do to you - and what the risks are - before they do it. Remember that your body's self-healing powers (what I call `bodypower') can enable you to recover from nine out of ten illnesses without any outside help. But even when you do need professional help your `bodypower' can still help you.

47. Do not be afraid to mix and match orthodox and alternative treatments - but make sure that everyone who is treating you knows about any other treatments you are trying.

48. Learn to adapt. Our world changes more rapidly than at any time in history. To survive you must expect change

and be prepared to adapt.

49. Be prepared to say No when saying Yes will put you under unnecessary stress or make you feel resentful.

50. Breathe clean air as often as you can. And be aware that if you work in a building where the same air is constantly recirculated (to save on heating costs) you will end up sharing the coughs and colds of everyone else in the building.

Chapter 29: Simple Tips To Help You Manipulate Your Doctor

Doctors use their desks to establish their authority. They sit behind them and use them as barriers - to establish their superiority. I know of one doctor who used to shave the bottoms off the front legs of the chair in which his patients sat. Because they were constantly sliding forwards patients always felt slightly uncomfortable - and never wanted to stay too long.

When you visit the surgery and your doctor waves you to a chair a couple of feet in front of his desk he is putting you in an exposed and vulnerable situation. He possesses the desk and is defended by its bulk. You sit alone with your personal space unprotected.

But, as I showed in my book `People Watching' it is very easy to reverse the situation and take control.

When you enter the surgery move the chair a few inches so that it is closer to the desk. Then sit down so that you can lean forwards and put your elbows on the desk. If there is a letter rack in front of you gently but firmly move it to one side. Put your hat, gloves, newspaper, shopping, handbag or notebook down on the desk.

If your doctor is leaning forwards to establish his territorial rights over his desk he will almost certainly respond by leaning backwards and abandoning his control of the desk. His response will be automatic. You will then be able to start your consultation in a much stronger position. You will be in charge of the consultation - a much safer position from which to seek advice.

Chapter 30: Make Your Voice Heard - You'll Feel Better

We live in a world where cruelty is honoured, where dishonesty is rewarded, where power is taken by the vicious and the brutal and where the inept, the incompetent and the uncaring prosper.

We live in a world where integrity is sneered at, where honesty is described as controversy, where passion is regarded as an embarrassment and where the truth is a dangerous commodity.

We are ruled by pompous authoritarians who cloak their petty ambitions and personal greed in stolen power and glory but accept no responsibility for justice; today, the million horsemen of the Apocalypse gallop ever onwards in malignant determination to destroy truth, honesty and compassion.

Morals and ethics have become abstract subjects for university debate, rather than guidelines for our behaviour. No one cares any more about what is right. No one cares about the poor, the meek, the gentle and the kind. No one cares about the innocent.

Our society cares only about what is regarded as proper and `normal'. The joy of giving is an object of scorn and derision. Nobility and honour are freely bought and sold.

We have dirtied our land and polluted our air and our water. We live in a filth of our own making; a filth that gets worse each day and which contaminates our very lives.

We applaud and reward the fat businessmen who cheat the world's poor. We kneel before the representatives of evil and daily pledge our allegiance to witless, passionless mediocrity. We treat those with whom we share this planet with idle, rough, contempt. We use them for our own ends without a thought for their comfort, happiness or dignity.

And yet we claim to be innocents in all this corruption of the spirit. We blame an unseen `them' for the horrors of our world. We blame `them' for the cruelty, the viciousness and the misery. We live in comfort and contentment; slumped in front of the TV screen; deaf to the injustices which mark our world.

It is a slick trick we play on ourselves.

For we are them and they are we.

If you want to know the identity of the mysterious `them' all you have to do is look in the mirror. We have built this society. It is our responsibility. We cannot escape from blame by keeping silent. The evil that is done is done on your account and if you stay silent it is done with your blessing.

Remember, then, that it is up to you to shout `stop' when you have had enough of the wickedness around you.

If you want to change things campaign and protest and do not rest until your voice is heard. If you do nothing then you are just a silent part of the evil which is corrupting and destroying our world.

What have you done in the past to fight cruelty and injustice?

And, more important, what do you plan to do in the future?

* * *

Readers often ask me whether campaigning ever works.

The answer is yes - it often takes a long time but campaigning can work.

For example, I first started my campaign to warn doctors and patients about the dangers of overprescribing benzodiazepine tranquillisers back in 1973. For ten years the only thing the campaign produced was a fairly constant stream of personal abuse - much of it from doctors who were offended that anyone should dare question the medical establishment. Editors who supported my campaign were reminded that most doctors disagreed with me. Because of my constant campaigning about tranquillisers I was constantly in trouble. Numerous doctors publicly claimed that the benzodiazepines were perfectly safe - and that I was irresponsible to frighten the public with articles, books and broadcasts about these drugs.

By the early 1980s, after ten years of campaigning, a growing number of doctors agreed that I was right. Gradually, as the campaign grew many other journalists and broadcasters joined in the battle. Whereas I had originally been a lone voice - and therefore relatively easy to dismiss - those defending the widespread use of benzodiazepine tranquillisers and sleeping tablets found themselves on the defensive. In 1988 the government in Britain finally took action - admitting that they had done so because of my articles. A fifteen year campaign had been vindicated. But it still took several more years before doctors really changed their prescribing habits.

Today there cannot be more than a handful of patients or doctors in the world who do not accept that these drugs can be addictive - and need to be used with extreme caution.

The benzodiazepine campaign was exhausting, expensive and time consuming - but it has been successful. And it is clear from this battle that you and I do have power; we can change things. But we must fight together.Doctors and politicians responded to the benzodiazepine campaign when the protests could no longer be ignored. The lesson is that we must be persistent and determined.

* * *

If you care about the world in which you live and want it to be a better, safer place for humans and animals then you must make your voice heard. Don't worry if people scoff or mock. Don't allow yourself to be put off by scorn, derision, undisguised contempt or a lack of support or encouragement from others.

Just remember that imaginative, thoughtful and creative individuals have always had a hard time. Look back in history and you will find countless examples of citizens who were harassed or persecuted simply because they dared to think for themselves - and tried to share their thoughts with others.

Our world has never welcomed the original, the challenging, the inspirational or the passionate and has always preferred the characterless to the thought provoking.

Those who dare to speak out against the establishment have always been regarded as dangerous heretics. The iconoclast has never been a welcome figure in any age.

Confucius, the Chinese philosopher, was dismissed by his political masters and his books were burned. Those who didn't burn his books within 30 days were branded and condemned to forced labour. Two and a half thousand years later Confucius's influence was still considered so dangerous that Chairman Mao banned his works.

Described by the Delphic Oracle as the wisest man in the world Greek teacher Socrates was accused of corrupting the youth of Athens, arrested for being an evildoer and `a person showing curiosity, searching into things under the earth and above the heaven and teaching all this to others'. Socrates was condemned to death.

Dante, the Italian poet, was banished from Florence and condemned to be burnt at the stake if ever captured.

After they had failed to silence him with threats and bribes the Jewish authorities excommunicated Spinoza in Amsterdam because he refused to toe the party line, refused to think what other people told him he must think and insisted on maintaining his intellectual independence. He and his work were denounced as `forged in Hell by a renegade Jew and the devil'.

Galileo, the seventeenth century Italian mathematician, astrologer and scientist got into terrible trouble with the all-powerful Church for daring to support Copernicus, who had the temerity to claim that the planets revolved around the sun.

Aureolus Philippus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim (known to his chums as Paracelsus) made himself enemies all over Europe because he tried to revolutionise medicine in the sixteenth century. Paracelsus was the greatest influence on medical thinking since Hippocrates but the establishment regarded him as a trouble-maker.

Ignaz Semmelweiss, the Austrian obstetrician who recognised that puerperal fever was caused by doctors' dirty habits was ostracised by the medical profession for daring to criticise practical procedures.

Henry David Thoreau, surely the kindest, wisest philosopher who has ever lived, was imprisoned for sticking to his ideals.

Original thinkers and people who do not fit neatly into the scheme of things have never gone down well. And nothing has changed. Today, incompetence and mediocrity thrive and are now subsidised, supported and encouraged by our increasingly bureaucratic and intrusive society. Schoolteachers and social workers encourage mediocrity because they themselves are mediocre. Talent frightens them witless. Among bureaucrats and administrators incompetence and mediocrity are esteemed virtues; these be-suited morons revere the banal and worship the bland.

The unusual or the eccentric attract scorn and ridicule. Politicians are frightened of anything new or challenging. They reject the innovative, the creative and the imaginative in favour of the accustomed, the comfortable and the ordinary. It is hardly surprising that the sensitive, the thoughtful, the imaginative and the caring find twentieth century life almost too painful to bear.

If you feel that something is wrong, and you feel passionately that something ought to be done about it, then stand up for your principles, shout and make your voice heard. There is a chance that some people will regard you as a lunatic. I have no doubt that many small-minded people will sneer and tell you that in trying to change the world and root out dishonesty, corruption and injustice you are tilting at windmills. But there is also a chance that your voice will be heard; that others will respond and that you will win your battle. And the benefits of victory surely far outweigh the insults of the insignificant. Only when you've found something you are prepared to die for will you really know what life is all about.

Chapter 31: Root Filled Teeth May Be A Time Bomb

Do you have any root filled teeth? If so - beware! They may be a time bomb - waiting to go off at some unknown time in the future.

It now seems that it is possible that root filled teeth may cause any one of a number of serious diseases - including some of the commonest and most troublesome degenerative diseases - such as arthritis, heart disease, muscle problems and many other conditions.

It is even possible that a root filled tooth could kill you.

The bugs trapped inside a root filled tooth may sit there for years - apparently doing no harm. But another disease - or a stressful incident putting pressure on the body's immune system - may trigger the bug into action.

No one really knows just how dangerous root filled teeth can be. Many dentists dismiss the idea of danger out of hand. Some claim that they can eradicate all bugs before root filling a tooth.

I think this confidence is misplaced.

I believe there is a real risk.

I suspect that having a tooth root filled could lead to future health problems.

And I also believe that if you have a serious, chronic problem and you have a root filled tooth the two could be connected.

There's no easy answer to this problem.

But I can tell you that if I had a long standing, troublesome health problem and a root filled tooth I would want my doctors and dentist to consider the possibility that the two could be linked. Removing the root filled tooth might provide a `miracle' solution.

And in future I will think very carefully indeed - and be very reluctant - before allowing my dentist to root fill any of my teeth.

Chapter 32: Ritalin: Child Abuse On Prescription?

Family doctors are these days frequently under pressure (usually from teachers and social workers who know nothing about drug therapy and probably understand nothing about the way the international drug industry operates) to prescribe the drug called Ritalin for children who are accused of behaving badly behaved, reported as not doing well at school and `diagnosed' as suffering from something called Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (known as ADHD).

For several decades now Ritalin, and other amphetamine type drugs, have been prescribed for children diagnosed as suffering from various types of brain dysfunction and hyperactivity. (Other psychostimulants which have, at one time or another, been regarded as competitors to Ritalin have included Dexedrine).

The first problem is that Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (and other variations on the hyperactivity theme) is a rather vague diagnosis which is often leapt upon by teachers, social workers and parents to excuse and explain any unacceptable or uncontrollable behaviour.

Parents of children whose behaviour is in any way regarded as different or unusual are often encouraged to believe that their child is suffering from a disease for two simple reasons. First, it is more socially acceptable to give a child a pseudoscientific label than to have to admit that he or she may simply be badly behaved.

Second, when a child has been given a label it is possible to offer a treatment. Commonly it will be one, such as a drug, which takes away responsibility and offers someone a profit.

ADHD (aka Attention Deficit Disorder, or ADD, hyperkinetic child syndrome, minimal brain damage, minimal brain dysfunction in children, minimal cerebral dysfunction and psycho-organic syndrome in children) is a remarkably non-specific disorder. (I am always suspicious of diseases which have lots of names. Diabetes is diabetes. A broken leg is a broken leg.)

The symptoms which characterise ADHD (or whatever else it's being known as) may include: a chronic history of a short attention span, distractibility, emotional lability, impulsivity, moderate to severe hyperactivity, minor neurological signs and abnormal EEG. Learning may or may not be impaired.

Read that rather nonsensical list of symptoms carefully and you'll find that just about any child alive could probably be described as suffering from ADHD.

What child isn't impulsive occasionally? What child doesn't cry and laugh (that's what emotional lability means)? What child cannot be distracted?

So, by this definition Ritalin could be recommended for any child who seemed bored and restless or who exhibited unusual signs of intelligence or skill. Read the biographies of geniuses and you may wonder what we are doing to our current generation of most talented individuals.

`Is Ritalin a drug in search of a disease?' wrote one author, and it isn't difficult to see why.

* * *

Ritalin has been recommended as a treatment for functional behaviour problems since the 1960s and by 1966 the `experts' had come up with a definition of the sort of child for whom Ritalin could useful be prescribed.

Children suffering from Minimal Brain Dysfunction (MBD), the first syndrome for which Ritalin was recommended, were defined as: `children of near average, average or above average general intelligence with certain learning or behavioural disabilities ranging from mild to severe, which are associated with deviations of function of the central nervous system. These deviations may manifest themselves by various combinations of impairment in perception, conceptualization, language, memory and control of attention, impulse or motor function'.

Other symptoms which children might exhibit and which could be ascribed to MBD included: being sweet and even tempered, being cooperative and friendly, being gullible and easily led, being a light sleeper, being a heavy sleeper and so on and on.

Given that sort of list to work with I find it difficult to think of a child who wouldn't (theoretically) benefit from Ritalin.

* * *

The bottom line is that it has become easy for social workers and teachers to define any children who misbehaves or doesn't learn `properly' as suffering from MBD or ADHD. It’s a convenient diagnosis which excuses parents, teachers and social workers from responsibility or any sense of guilt. How can the parents or the teacher be accused of failing when the child is ill and needs drug therapy?

Commercially Ritalin and MBD became a huge success. By 1975 around a million children in the U.S. were diagnosed as suffering from MBD. Half of these were being given drugs and half of those on drugs were on Ritalin.

(For the sake of completeness I should point out that Ritalin has not always been used exclusively in the treatment of badly behaved children. When Dr Andrew Malleson wrote his book *`Need Your Doctor Be So Useless'* in 1973 he reported that the CIBA Pharmaceutical Company had suggested to doctors the use of their habit forming drug Ritalin for `environmental depression' caused by `NOISE: a new social problem'.)

* * *

Does Ritalin work?

Well, that's a bit of a stinker of a question and I apologise for asking it, particularly since I can't answer it. Actually,I honestly don't think anyone else can answer it either. But the diagnosis (and the drug) are certainly popular. More than one in twenty children are said to be suffering from MBD (or ADHD or ADD or XYZ or whatever else anyone wants to call it) and over a million children are given Ritalin in the U.S.A..

One five year study of hyperactive children who were given Ritalin at Montreal Children's Hospital found that the children did not differ in the long term from hyperactive children who were not given the drug. In Johannesburg a study of 14 children is said to have produced a response in only 2 children. One child showed some deterioration and another showed marked deterioration.

At least one investigator has reported that drugs like Ritalin may produce a deterioration in learning new skills at school and parents have reported that the symptoms of MBD have miraculously disappeared during school holidays.

However, the picture is confused by the fact that there may be a short term improvement in behaviour among children given Ritalin. But is this a real improvement? Or is the child simply drugged and therefore less likely to do anything which might upset parents, social workers or teachers? Amphetamine type drugs reduce the variety of behaviour exhibited by children. A child taking Ritalin might be less disruptive and I can see that being popular in schools. But is the drug really helping the child? And should we give a child a powerful and potentially hazardous drug because it keeps him quiet?

There is evidence suggesting that children who are genuinely hyperactive may have been poisoned by food additives or by lead breathed in from air polluted by petrol fumes. If this is so then is giving another potentially toxic drug really the answer to this problem?

* * *

The next problem is that I believe that Ritalin can reasonably be described as potentially toxic. Ritalin has been described as `very safe' but for the record here is a list of some of the possible side effects which may be associated with Ritalin: nervousness, insomnia, decreased appetite, headache, drowsiness, dizziness, dyskinesia, blurring of vision, convulsions, muscle cramps, tics, Tourette's syndrome, toxic psychosis (some with visual and tactile hallucinations), transient depressed mood, abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, dry mouth, tachycardia, palpitations, arrhythmias, changes in blood pressure and heart rate, angina pectoris, rash, pruritus, urticaria, fever, arthralgia, alopecia, thrombocytopenia purpura, exfoliative dermatitis, erythema multiforme, leucopenia, anaemia and minor retardation of growth during prolonged therapy in children.

Doctors who prescribe Ritalin, and who have the time and the inclination to read the warnings issued with the drug, will discover that Ritalin should not be given to patients suffering from marked anxiety, agitation or tension since it may aggravate these symptoms.

Ritalin is contraindicated in patients with tics, tics in siblings or a family history or diagnosis of Tourette's syndrome. It is also contraindicated in patients with severe angina pectoris, cardiac arrhythmias, glaucoma, thyrotoxicosis, or known sensitivity to methylphenidate and it should be used cautiously in patients with hypertension (blood pressure should be monitored at appropriate intervals).

Ritalin should not be used in children under six years of age, should not be used as treatment for severe depression of either exogenous or endogenous origin and may exacerbate symptoms of behavioural disturbance and thought disorder if given to psychotic children.

It is claimed that taking Ritalin during childhood does not increase the likelihood of addiction but chronic abuse of Ritalin can lead to marked tolerance and psychic dependence with varying degrees of abnormal behaviour.

Ritalin, it is warned, should be employed with caution in emotionally unstable patients, such as those with a history of drug dependence or alcoholism, because such patients may increase the dosage on their own initiative.

Ritalin should also be used with caution in patients with epilepsy since there may be an increase in seizure frequency.

And height and weight should be carefully monitored in children as prolonged therapy may result in growth retardation. (A child might lose several inches in possible height - though if treatment is stopped there is a generally a growth spurt). It is perhaps worth mentioning here my view that if a drug is powerful enough to retard growth it does not seem entirely unreasonable to suspect that the chances are high that it may be having other powerful effects upon and within the body.

Doctors are also warned that careful supervision is required during drug withdrawal, since depression as well as renewed over-activity can be unmasked. Long term follow up may be needed for some patients.

There have also been reports that children have committed suicide after drug withdrawal. And one study has shown that children who are treated with stimulants alone had higher arrest records and were more likely to be

institutionalised.

Long term use of Ritalin has been said to cause irritability and hyperactivity (these are, you may remember, the problems for which the drug is often prescribed). In a study published in Psychiatric Research and entitled `Cortical Atrophy in Young Adults With A History of Hyperactivity' brain atrophy was reported in more than half of 24 adults treated with psychostimulants (though I don't think anyone can say for sure whether or not the psychostimulants caused the brain atrophy the possible link should make prescribers, teachers and parents who are fans of Ritalin stop and think for a moment).

* * *

As an aside there has been some research done on mice.

When early safety tests were done on mice researchers found that the drug caused an increased in hepatocellular adenomas and, in male mice only, an increase in hepatoblastomas (described as `a relatively rare rodent malignant tumour type').

`The significance of these results to humans is unknown' we are told.

Here, once again, is yet more proof of the total worthlessness of animal experiments and the ruthless and cynical attitude shown by drug companies and those government departments which allegedly exist to protect the public from unsafe drugs.

I have frequently argued that when drug companies perform pre-clinical tests on animals they do so knowing that if the tests show that a drug doesn't cause any problems when given to animals they can use the results to help convince the authorities that the drug is safe.

On the other hand when a drug does cause a problem when given to animals the results can be ignored on the grounds that `the significance of these results to humans is unknown'.

The question here is a very simple one: if the experiments on mice which showed that Ritalin causes cancer were of value why is the drug still available on prescription for children? And if the experiments can safely be ignored (on the grounds that animals are so different to human beings that the results are irrelevant) why were the tests done in the first place?

I don't expect any answers. I just like asking the questions.

* * *

Whenever I write about Ritalin I am inundated with letters, faxes and emails from parents, teachers and social workers insisting that Ritalin is `very safe'. I suspect these optimistic folk must either be unable to read or too lazy to do any research into the safety of a product which they are recommending with such enthusiasm. Years of experience mean that I am not in the slightest bit surprised to find such crass stupidity exhibited by social workers. I am, however, surprised to find so many school teachers showing such a potent mixture of ignorance and misplaced trust.

Sadly, it seems it is partly through the enthusiasm of teachers and social workers that Ritalin is now so widely prescribed.

In theory Ritalin should not be prescribed for any child unless a doctor has performed a thorough evaluation. However, despite this, when a team of researchers from the United Nationals International Narcotics Control Board examined the records of nearly 400 paediatricians who had prescribed Ritalin they found that half the children who had been diagnosed as suffering from MBD (or ADD or whatever) had not been given psychological or educational testing before being given the drug. The United Nations concluded that frustrated parents, teachers and doctors were too quick to stick a label of ADD onto children with behavioural problems (or, to be more accurate, to children whose behaviour was annoying the parents, teachers and doctors).

I am less than enthusiastic about this drug. In my view, the world would be a healthier place if all supplies of the damned stuff were wrapped in concrete and buried. I wouldn't prescribe Ritalin for anyone - for anything.

But other doctors clearly don't agree with me. Some observers have described Ritalin as a drug that can unlock a child's potential. And although estimates about the number of children taking Ritalin vary it has been claimed that in the USA alone up to 12 % of all American boys aged between 6 and 14 are being prescribed Ritalin to treat various behavioural disorders. It is now not unknown for schools to arrange for children to be treated with Ritalin without obtaining parental permission.

I've been told that in some cases boys have been given Ritalin because *they ran around the playground making a noise. They ran around the playground making a noise for heaven's sake*!

It is worth remembering that although doctors, parents and teachers have for over forty years now been enthusiastically recommending the use of Ritalin (and similar drugs) in the treatment of MBD there are still a number of unanswered questions.

I don't believe anyone definitely knows whether the drug works or whether it causes any permanent long term damage. I don't believe anyone knows for certan whether the drug does more harm than good. And, perhaps most astonishing of all, despite the fact that millions of children have been diagnosed as suffering from ADHD, ADD or MBD, and treated with powerful drugs, I don't believe we even know whether any of these conditions really exist.

Back in 1970 the Committee on Government Operations of the U.S. House of Representatives studied the use of behaviour modification drugs on children. At that time around 200,000 to 300,000 children a year in the U.S. were being given these drugs. The point was made that hyperactivity was considered a disease because it made it difficult for schools to be run `like maximum security prisons, for the comfort and the convenience of the teachers and administrators who work in them...'.

Since then the only thing that has changed is that the popularity of Ritalin has continued to rise and rise and rise inexorably.

Prescribing Ritalin is, in my view, authorised child abuse on a massive, global scale.

And, sadly, things aren't likely to change.

When I wrote a paper expressing my doubts about Ritalin (a paper which encouraged several major newspapers to question the wisdom of prescrbing this drug so widely) I received an avalanche of angry mail from furious parents, teachers and social workers.

'I'm not going to read your report,' wrote one father of a child on Ritalin. 'I know it's rubbish.'

Most worrying of all is the fact that parents who are reluctant to give their children Ritalin have been told that if they don’t give in and cooperate their children will be taken away from them. This will, of course, not be the first example of `compulsory medication’. In some countries (notably parts of the USA) parents who do not have their children vaccinated are liable to arrest. And, of course, the fluoridation of drinking water is also common in many parts of the world.

Chapter 33: Water, Water Everywhere - And Not A Drop Fit To Drink

You probably don't think of water as a food but water is just as valuable as anything you eat. A massive 60% to 65% of your body is water! (The figure is even higher for a baby. Approximately 75% of a baby's weight is water). If you didn't eat and didn't drink it would be the shortage of water which killed you first! You could survive for weeks without food but you would be dead within about seven days without water.

However, thanks to doctors the water you get when you turn on your tap probably isn't safe to drink. Wittingly, or unwittingly, doctors, it seems, will stop at nothing to kill off their patients.

Back in 1982 my fears had been aroused by one piece of fairly obscure - and widely ignored research - which had shown that sewage entering a US sewage treatment plant contained excreted aspirin, caffeine and nicotine and another piece of equally widely ignored research which had shown that a cholesterol lowering drug had turned up in a reservoir. The drug had, it seemed, got into the reservoir from treated sewage.

The only conclusion to draw from this was that every time anyone drinks a glass of tap water they may well be drinking second hand drugs!

If my theory is right then millions of people now regularly take powerful drugs such as sleeping tablets, pain killers and hormonal contraceptive pills.

The theory is easy to explain.

After a drug has been taken it is metabolized (or broken down) before it is excreted and some of the most powerful and most widely prescribed drugs leave the body in much the same form as they entered it. For example, 75% of a dose of diazepam (one of the world's most popularly prescribed benzodiazepine tranquillisers) leaves in the urine of the person who has taken it as another version of the drug. A third of a dose of ampicillin (a widely prescribed antibiotic) is excreted in the urine within six hours of the pill or capsule being swallowed.

Once domestic waste water leaves our homes it goes to sewage treatment plants where it is `purified' using standard techniques (many of them devised and perfected in the nineteenth century) which are intended to remove bacteria and other obvious contaminants. Once these unwanted additions have been removed the apparently `clean' water goes back into circulation as drinking water. But it isn't clean. It still contains drug residues. And each time the cycle goes round the concentration of drug residues increases.

Although water purification methods are effective at removing bacteria and obvious waste materials from `dirty' water the purification processes are not able to remove all the drug and hormone residues from the sewage.

The result is that when allegedly pure domestic waste water is put back into our water supply systems it still contains many different drug residues - chemicals derived from antibiotics, heart drugs, tranquillisers, sleeping pills, anti-depressants, pain killers and contraceptive pills. (It also, inevitably, also contains residues of other chemicals - such as toiletries, shampoos, cosmetics and garden and kitchen products).

So, when you turn on your kitchen tap and fill your kettle you could be getting water that contains second hand tranquillisers, second hand heart drugs, second hand contraceptive hormones and other substances. And as the years go so the whole process will get worse and worse. Each time another human being somewhere in the cycle takes another tablet the water you drink becomes more polluted. Much drinking water has already become terribly contaminated with second hand drugs and everyone who drinks water which has been purified from sewage effluent or extracted from a river into which sewage effluent has been discharged must inevitably be taking small quantities of a large variety of prescription drugs.

Remarkably little research has been done to find out just how significant this problem is but when scientists tested river water they found detectable amounts of progestogen (one of the ingredients of the contraceptive pill) in it. Research carried out in Germany showed that the amount of oestrogen (another ingredient of the contraceptive pill) seems to be increasing in surface water supplies. What effects are all these hormones and drugs having on us?

Are we all being tranquillised by second hand tranquillisers and sleeping tablets? What effect do all these hormone residues have on pregnant women and their developing babies? (After all the manufacturers of many drugs warn that their products should not be given to pregnant women). What effect are all these hormones having on men? Are we creating a new race of intersexual beings?

Nothing much changed for nearly two decades.

And then I started to find more research being published on this subject.

American and Canadian scientists published preliminary evidence confirming that traces of drugs, excreted by people and animals on farms, have been found in water in their respective countries.

(`At the time,' says one of the new researchers, who obviously missed the paper I wrote for a medical magazine back in 1982, `we didn't pay attention to the finding. It should have been a wake-up call because if one drug could pass through a sewage treatment plant and percolate through soil unscathed so could a host of other drugs.')

There seems little doubt that drinking water is now heavily contaminated with drug residues. Some of the drugs come from sewage. Some come from unwanted prescription drugs dumped with refuse and leaking into underground water supplies. And some come from farm animal waste. Drinking water supplies in the developed world continue to deteriorate. Drug residues in the water go round and round and round - being added to every time someone else swallows a drug. Since most people are on medication our drinking water is now pretty well undrinkable.

The long term effect of all this is difficult to estimate. Minute amounts of antibiotic in drinking water can affect bacteria in many different ways. They can surely have a dramatic effect on the development of antibiotic resistant organisms.

There is not yet any firm evidence showing a clear link between water pollution and problems (such as fertility) affecting human beings. But the absence of any such evidence may possibly be a result of the fact that as far as I know no one has yet done any research into this issue. The research would be extremely simple to do and wouldn't cost very much. Given the extent of the circumstantial evidence it is something of a scandal that no one has bothered to do the research that is needed.

How are the drugs in your drinking water affecting your health? Is your involuntary daily cocktail of tranquillisers, antibiotics, hormones, steroids, chemotherapy drugs, heart drugs, pain killers and so on making you ill? How do all these drugs interact? Are they likely to be at least partly responsible for the way the incidence of cancer is increasing?

This really is one of the biggest health scandals - and dangers - of the twenty first century. A German researcher has found at least three drugs in water from his tap at home. It is hardly surprising that politicians everywhere are now given bottled water to drink (at our expense, of course).

But why, I wonder, has there been a conspiracy of silence among national newspapers and magazines and TV and radio stations? Back in 1982 producers for several TV and radio programmes cancelled interviews with me, arranged to discuss this problem, because they said it would frighten the public too much. And still no one will cover this problem.

When, right at the end of the 20th century, a Sunday newspaper carried a news story about the suggestion in my book `*Superbody*' that drinking water may contain excreted drug residues spokesmen for the water industry were quick to dismiss my fears. One water company spokesman was reported to have said: `To suggest water purification programmes are out dated and not up to the job is quite simply wrong. It's impossible to say there's no drug residues in recycled drinking water but the levels are thousands of times below anything that could cause harm.'

How could that spokesman possibly know that the levels are low when he admits he doesn't know whether there are any drugs in recycled drinking water or not? How can he know that levels are `thousands of times below anything that could cause harm' when he clearly doesn't know what the levels are? Isn't it about time water companies practised a little science and did some tests to find out what is happening?

Doctors continue to say that there is nothing at all to worry about and that my warnings are unjustified. But it should be remembered that by their overprescribing it is doctors who are a major cause of the problem. It is thanks to your doctor (and his or her colleagues) that even the water from your tap may not be fit to drink.

It is also important to remember that the medical profession has firmly allied itself with the financial interests of the international pharmaceutical industry. It is clearly in the interests both of doctors and drug companies for doctors to continue to overprescribe powerful and expensive drugs.

Meanwhile, the circumstantial evidence suggesting the accuracy of my original 1982 warning continues to accumulate and I am now convinced, more than ever, that my warning was valid.

* * *

The other water pollutant that really should worry us all is, of course, fluoride.

Fluoride is deliberately added to drinking water supplies in the hope that it will help reduce the incidence of tooth decay. The link between fluoride and tooth decay was first established at the end of the nineteenth century and there is little doubt that fluoride does help to protect the teeth by making tooth enamel - the hard outside covering of teeth - tougher and more decay resistant. When tests done on large numbers of people showed that tooth decay is slower in those parts of the country where drinking water supplies naturally contain fluoride some scientists and politicians suggested that putting fluoride into the drinking water supplies might improve the dental health of the general population. The fluoridation of water supplies began in America in 1945 and today the move towards fluoridation is spreading all over the world. Politicians are enthusiastic about using fluoride in this way because they have been convinced that the end result will be a reduction in health costs. (There is nothing politicians love more than to be able to cut the cost of looking after the people while at the same time claiming that what they are doing is for the good of the electorate. It's a double whammy for the modern, crooked politician.)

However, those oppose fluoridation are able to put forward several arguments in their favour.

First, you do not, of course, have to add fluoride to drinking water in order to protect teeth. You can get exactly the same effect by persuading people to use fluoride toothpastes. And since many toothpastes now do contain fluoride most people already get all the fluoride they need simply by brushing their teeth.

Second, there is no doubt that putting fluoride into drinking water supplies is a potentially dangerous business. The amount of fluoride that you can put into drinking water has to be judged very accurately. To get the best effect from the fluoride you need to add around one part per million. However, if you get the sums wrong the consequences can be devastating. Just two parts of fluoride per million can cause mottling of the teeth and if the quantities are allowed to rise a little higher bone disorders and cancer may be the result. Naturally, the scientists and politicians who are keen on putting fluoride into our drinking water supplies claim that the methods used are foolproof but I think that one would have to be a fool to believe that! Many people have already been poisoned by accidental overdoses of chemicals and in 1986 the World Health Organization published a report in which concern was expressed about the incidence of dental problems caused by there being too much fluoride in public drinking water supplies. Needless to say getting unwanted, excess fluoride out of the drinking water supplies can be extremely difficult. To all this we must add the fact that since drinking water supplies already contain a number of chemicals - some of which occur naturally in the supplies, nitrates which accumulate because of the use of fertilizers, chlorine and aluminium sulphate which are added deliberately and lead or copper from the pipes which are used to supply the water to our homes - adding fluoride to the mixture may increase the risk of a dangerous interaction between the various chemicals in the water. Whenever chemicals exist in solution together there are chemical reactions. I don't think anyone really knows what the consequences are of putting all these chemicals into our drinking water.

The fourth anti fluoridation argument is that a growing number of people seem to be allergic to the chemicals which are being put into our drinking water. Many people are allergic to fluoride and cannot drink fluoridated drinking water.

Finally, I am particularly worried by the fact that as the pro fluoridation argument is won in more and more parts of the world, scientists and politicians are suggesting putting other chemicals into the drinking water supplies. One scientist has, for example, already suggested that drinking water should have antibiotics added to it (to reduce the incidence of infection and so to reduce health costs). Another has recommended that tranquillisers be added to drinking water supplies (in order to calm down the voters and allow the politicians to get on with running the world the way they want to run it). A third suggestion has been that contraceptives be added to the drinking water in order to reduce the birth rate.

A surprising number of doctors and politicians support the compulsory fluoridisation of water (it is difficult to think of a more fascist act than to force people to take medicine, regardless of their need, whether they want it or not) and in much of the world it seems that this battle is now last. However, it isn't lost everywhere.

* * *

Doctors have now begun to investigate the problem of drug residues in drinking water. Assuming the politicians allow the results to be published (a big assumption) we should know the answers in another decade or so. It will, of course, be far too late to do anything about it by then.

Meanwhile, most people continue to drink far too little water. And many health problems are caused, or made worse, by dehydration.

To avoid this problem try to cut down on alcohol, fizzy drinks and caffeinated teas and coffees - they can all make your intestinal problem worse. Instead you should drink six to eight decent sized glasses of water a day. If you can't bear the idea of drinking that much water look for drinks that contain no alcohol, no caffeine and no sugar or sodium. Herbal, fruit or mint teas are fine as are decaffeinated drinks. Alternatively you can try drinking pure fruit juice diluted with water. So, meanwhile, while doctors, politicians and the water industry look into a problem they should have been investigating two decades ago, here are some tips on how you can best protect yourself from polluted, drug laden drinking water.

1. If you suffer from any bizarre or otherwise inexplicable symptoms consider the possibility that your drinking water may be polluted. And it could be the water which is making you ill. This is particularly likely to be the case if you have acquired any new and unusual health problems after recently moving house.

2. Small babies should be breast fed for as long as possible - ideally for up to twelve months. Breast feeding a baby reduces the risk of the baby being poisoned by polluted water or milk (though it does not reduce the risk to nil since drugs are excreted in breast milk).

3. If you suspect that any symptoms which you have could be caused by drinking water obtained from a tap try drinking bottled water instead to see if your symptoms disappear. My advice is that you drink bottled spring water. Remember that bottled drinking water isn't necessarily pure. Some `spring water' has been purified or chemically treated while the stuff sold as `table water' may be nothing more than filtered tap water. Try to buy `natural mineral water' which comes from a protected, pure, unadulterated source and has not been tampered with. Natural mineral water may contain some bacteria (though not usually enough to do you any harm) and so you shouldn't keep bottled natural mineral water lying around once the bottle has been opened. I believe that the chances are good that spring water will remain relatively unpolluted for some years to come. To hedge my bets I drink different brands of bottled water.

4. If you live in the country and you can do so then you may be better off obtaining your water from a private water supply. But do make sure that you get your water tested before drinking it.

5. Even if you obtain your water from a commercial company or government owned concern you would be wise to have it tested - as it comes out of the tap.

6. You can buy table top small filters which remove many contaminants from drinking water. If you buy and use one of these devices make sure that you follow the manufacturer’s instructions.

7. If you suspect that your drinking water supplies are of poor quality make your protests heard by your political representatives. Things will never change if you do not protest.

I now suspect that the only real answer is to have two separate water supplies - with two inputs to every house. One tap would give out drug contaminated water which could be used for washing up, cleaning cars and flushing lavatories. Water recovered from sewage farms and rivers could be used for this supply. The other tap would give clean, drug free water taken from boreholes, springs and other uncontaminated sources.

Chapter 34: What I Would Do If Doctors Told Me That I Had Cancer

I have a one in three chance of being told one day that I have cancer. And you face the same odds. Actually the odds are getting worse. If the incidence of cancer continues to rise at the same rate at which it has risen for the last few years then within a decade or so one in two of us will hear those frightening words - or whichever euphemism our doctor feels most comfortable with.

(To be accurate, because you and I know many of the commonest causes of cancer we have, hopefully, improved our odds considerably. But the risk is still there. However sensibly we live it is impossible to reduce our cancer risk to zero.)

Half a century or so ago approximately one in fourteen could expect to develop cancer. Fifteen years ago that figure had risen to one in four. During this time governments and charities have spent billions of whatever currency was available to fight cancer and yet none of those responsible for this massive expenditure seem to be in the slightest bit embarrassed by their utter failure. They greet reports of rises in the incidence of cancer with requests for more money - which will, of course, be spent in exactly the same way as all the rest of the money they have been given. More of the same useless research (much of it involving laboratory animals) and more of the same ineffective cancer treatments.

The huge international cancer industry (which raises and spends untold millions of dollars in the constant and in my view futile search for a single cure for cancer) has created the impression that cancer is a single disease.

But it isn't. Indeed, it is vitally important to remember that cancer is not a single disease. The word `cancer' is no more specific than the words `infection' or `arthritis'.

And scientists are as unlikely to find a single magic `cure' for all types of cancer as they are to find a single magic `cure' for all types of infection. I am annoyed when, just about every week, researchers make great claims for their latest breakthrough. (Little or nothing is ever heard of most of these `breakthroughs'. I find it difficult to avoid the conclusion that in many cases these widely publicised `breakthroughs' are little more than fund raising schemes. I find the gullibility of reporters equally annoying. This constant promise of a `cure around the corner' simply helps to ensure that most people remain passive about cancer; happy to do nothing either to protect themselves or to help treat themselves because they believe that scientists will soon have a magic remedy in a bottle with which it will be possible to conquer cancer.)

If I was told that I had cancer I would not be willing to put my future in the hands of the promises made by some anonymous and grant hungry white coated scientists.

I would want to take some control over my own destiny by following a combination programme that would combine the healing powers of my body and my mind.

And because I would undoubtedly be shocked and frightened (and possibly not too capable of rational thought) it seems to me sensible to make some plans now. It is a lot easier to be rational and logical about an emotional issue like cancer when you are feeling fit and healthy. It seems to me to make more sense to prepare for this eventuality now - rather than at a time when I might be frightened and shocked to know what to do. I have planned for my old age (in case I am too frail and weak to work and earn a living). It seems to me to make equal good sense to plan for the possibility that I may one day develop cancer. I may never need to use my cancer plan - just as I may never need to use my retirement plan. But it is good to know that it is there.

I have tried to create a truly holistic anti-cancer plan; taking the best from many different forms of medicine. This plan is built upon my beliefs in medicine, my philosophy of medicine and of life and of living. It is important to understand that I do not suggest that my programme will or could be suitable for everyone. I do not even recommend it to you. What you decide to do if you are ever told that you have cancer has to your choice. You may decide that you dislike my entire programme. You may prefer to put your faith in doctors who offer surgery, chemotherapy or radiotherapy, or some mixture of the three. You may think that my anti-cancer programme makes good sense and is something that you yourself would like to follow.

* * *

The medical profession's approach to the treatment of cancer is supposed to be logical and scientific. The lack of warmth displayed by surgeons and physicians is frequently excused with the argument that doctors have to remain cold, aloof and distant from their patients in order to provide analytical and dispassionate advice. If doctors came into emotional contact with their patients, so the argument goes, they would lose their objective approach and be unable to act as scientists. This, I am afraid, is completely phooey for despite the claims that doctors make the truth is that orthodox medicine is not a science.

I can support this seemingly controversial observation with several distinct arguments.

First, if orthodox doctors were really scientists they would only use treatments which they had good reason to expect would prove to be advantageous. And before using a treatment they would want to look at research work showing that the treatment was effective and likely to do more good than harm.

This simply isn't the case.

Many patients are surprised to discover just how inadequately medical treatments are tested.

The simple truth is that most doctor-patient encounters are experiments and when doctors prescribe or operate on their patients they usually do so more in the hope than in the expectation that the patient will benefit from the experience. If you feel sceptical about this assertion then let me point out that an editorial in the *British Medical Journal* (one of the most respected `establishment' medical journals in the world) has reported that `only about 15% of medical interventions are supported by solid scientific evidence'.

Looked at the other way this means, of course, that a staggering 85% of medical interventions are not supported by solid scientific evidence. The same editorial also `confessed' that `only 1% of the articles in medical journals are scientifically sound'. (Looked at the other way this means that 99% of the articles in medical journals are not scientifically sound.)

Next, if doctors used a truly scientific method when treating their patients they would happily use whichever form of treatment seemed to offer their patients the best chance of recovery. And they would use scientific methods to compare the effectiveness of orthodox methods (such as surgery, drugs and radiotherapy) with the effectiveness of unorthodox methods (such as diet).

Doctors do not do this.

When patients recover from cancer while or after receiving orthodox medical therapy (usually one or more of the triumvirate of surgery, drugs or radiotherapy) doctors invariably claim that those patients have got better because of the therapy they have received. And, of course, any patient who survives for five years is said to have been cured. Doctors are always quick to claim the credit when they can.

However, doctors are far more sceptical when patients recover from `alternative' or `non-orthodox' remedies. When patients recover from cancer while or after receiving unorthodox therapy (such as a particular type of diet) they are usually said to have recovered `in spite' of the treatment they have received. Patients who get better after unorthodox therapy are said to have been misdiagnosed or to have made an `unexplained and spontaneous recovery'. (No patient in history has ever made an `unexplained and spontaneous recovery' while or after receiving orthodox therapy). Patients who survive for five years after alternative therapy are said to be merely in remission, awaiting a relapse.

And although orthodox doctors are invariably derisive when alternative therapists write about individual patients or describe isolated case histories this is exactly what orthodox doctors themselves do. It is not at all uncommon for medical journals to contain articles and letters based upon experiences with one or maybe two patients. (And these experiences may be valuable).

The medical establishment always tends to oppose anything new and original which threatens the status quo. When the disorder in question is as serious and as badly treated as cancer this arrogance and reluctance to even consider something new becomes rather close to deceit and professional recklessness. I could put forward a strong case to charge the medical establishment with manslaughter for its continued refusal even to acknowledge or investigate alternative methods of tackling cancer (methods which do not involve drugs, surgery or radiotherapy). The treatment methods offered by doctors are often the only methods patients know about simply because other, less conventional approaches have either been totally suppressed or sneered at and derided so successfully that no one gives them any credence.

Most convincing of all, however, is the fact that practising physicians and surgeons invariably base their own treatment programmes upon their own personal experiences and upon their own (usually completely unscientific) views of what will be best for a particular patient. Despite the availability of clear evidence showing the efficacy of diet, stress control and modest exercise in the treatment (as well as the prevention) of cardiac disease most doctors still insist on treating all their heart patients with either surgery or drug therapy. And despite the existence of other, far more logical options, most doctors still insist that the only way to treat cancer is to attack it from the outside - rather than to help the body heal and protect itself.

If orthodox medicine was truly scientific then patients with the same symptoms would all receive the same treatment. They don't. There are almost as many different treatment programmes on offer as their doctors in practice. If a patient who has been diagnosed as having a particular type of cancer visits three doctors then it's a pretty safe bet that he or she will be offered three quite different types of advice. Many `official' anti-cancer programmes, accepted by the medical establishment, can reasonably be described as irrational and illogical. The survival of individual patients sometimes seems to be more a matter of luck than a matter of science. Doctors simply don't understand why when two patients are given a treatment one will die and one will live. It never occurs to them that there may be some other factor involved and that the death of one patient and the survival of the other may be quite unrelated to the medical treatment which was given.

The logical, scientific approach to any problem is always to tackle the cause rather than the symptoms. If your car has a leaky radiator hose it makes far more logical sense to replace the leaky hose than to keep on filling up the radiator with water. If your house roof is leaking it is far more logical to repair the leak than to put out a bucket to catch the drips.

Good doctors do sometimes follow this logical approach.

When the bad doctor sees a patient with indigestion he will simply prescribe an antacid remedy - knowing that it will temporarily relieve the patient's symptoms - and send the patient away.

When a good doctor sees a patient with indigestion he will want to find out what is causing the indigestion. He will investigate the patient's diet and other lifestyle habits in a search for a cause. And he will want to deal with the cause of the symptoms, rather than the symptoms themselves.

Sadly, most doctors still treat cancer in a strangely illogical and senseless way.

Apart from telling cancer patients who smoke to give up their cigarettes, and advising patients with skin cancer to keep out of the sun, most doctors seem far more concerned with attacking the symptoms than with dealing with the cause of their cancer.

The average doctor treating a cancer patient will simply want to attack the cancer with a knife, a drug or radiotherapy. This is like refilling the car radiator when the radiator hose is leaking or putting a bucket under a leaky roof: it doesn't address the primary cause of the problem.

And yet this is absurd. Cancer is not a specific disease. Removing the lumps and tumours of a cancer does nothing towards attacking the source and cause of the cancer. One of the reasons why cancer develops is that the body's immune system has broken down. In order to tackle cancer effectively the immune system must be encouraged to fight the cancer. The body must be given a chance to tackle the problem which has, after all, been created by its own cells.

When a cancer recurs it isn't necessarily because the surgeon, the radiotherapist or the physician prescribing the chemotherapy has failed to kill all the cancer cells (this is the excuse usually given by surgeons, radiotherapists and physicians and since I try to retain an open mind I will happily agree that it may sometimes be true) but because nothing in the body has changed. The circumstances which led to the development of a first cancer can just as easily lead to the development of a second cancer. The body is simply vulnerable to cancer.

It is for this reason that one often hears of extremely unfortunate individuals who have developed two or even three cancers in separate organs.

When this happens it is because the cause of the cancer is within the patient.

It is because the cancer industry either fails to understand this (or doesn't want to believe it) that the cancer industry will never succeed in beating cancer.

All those billions of dollars being pumped into cancer research are being wasted because scientists and doctors insist on attacking an enemy they cannot see.

It is no coincidence that doctors and researchers involved in the cancer industry frequently describe themselves as being involved in a war - that is exactly how they plan their treatment programmes.

But the real problem for the cancer industry is that the real enemy isn't just invisible - it simply doesn't exist in the same way that smallpox, tuberculosis or influenza exist. The real problem, the real enemy which has to be confronted, is not a bunch of malignant cells but a weakened, toxin infiltrated body. And since cancer develops when a body is ill and weak it seems pretty obvious to me that the very last thing the body needs when it is ill is to be attacked with toxic chemicals. Prescribing toxic chemotherapy is like prescribing a hammer blow to the head for a man with a headache. The main hope is that the blow to the head will cause so much pain that he won't notice the original headache.

(The real irony here, as I have mentioned before, is the fact that the same huge multinational corporations which produce the toxic chemicals which cause cancer also sell the toxic chemicals which are prescribed as a `cure'. This is the ultimate self-serving perpetual motion money machine; exclusively self-serving.)

Orthodox cancer treatment is neither logical nor scientific and it is important to understand and accept this.

(Curiously many doctors respond to criticism of their profession's approach to cancer as though it was a personal affront, claiming that those who dare to reveal their scepticism in public are depriving patients of hope and are insulting hard working medical professionals. It is rare for doctors to acknowledge that the profession's grotesque failure to combat the ever rising tide of cancer patients could be due to the fact that the medical profession has hunted for cures in the wrong places.)

* * *

Most doctors are terrible at telling people bad news because they themselves don't know how to cope with illness. And they certainly don't know how to cope with death. They shut themselves off from any emotional contact with their patients because they don't have the faintest idea about how to face the death.

We all feel slightly uncomfortable about the fact that we will die one day. We don't very much like to talk about the prospect of our own death or, indeed, even to think about it. We tend to avoid the subject or to make jokes to try and hide our true feelings. And we don't even very much like discussing other peoples’ mortality either. You probably felt slightly queasy and uncomfortable when you read the headline at the top of this chapter. (Perhaps you would have felt even more uncomfortable if the headline had read: `What You Should Do If You Are Told You Have Cancer').

The problem is that the average doctor isn't any different to you. Doctors feel the same mixture of emotions as you do when you think about death (fear, guilt, regret, anger and so on). And so doctors frequently say really crass things when they're trying to deal with patients who have cancer. If you are prepared for your doctor to be gauche and inept when he or she tells you that you have cancer then you will be much better able to cope with the situation. If you don’t expect too much then you won’t be hurt or frightened by the absence of any real warmth or human contact.

If was visiting a doctor and expecting to receive results of tests or investigations which may provide serious news of any kind (not just cancer) I would take someone with me. And that someone would, ideally, be strong and capable. I would want someone with me who could ask questions and remember what the doctor has said but who could also hold my hand when, and for as long as, I needed it held.

I would not try to comfort myself with the thought that doctors are going to more capable, more scientific or more sensitive in a year or two's time.

(And I would not kid myself that *my* doctor - however long I have known him/her - is going to be any better than the rest of the profession. Most people think that their doctor is special. (`I'm seeing the best surgeon in the country'. `My doctor looks after all the top people in the area. He's very highly respected.') This is natural. No one wants to think that their doctor is a complete moron. And yet the inescapable truth is that doctors have treated cancer badly for decades. They aren't going to improve this year or next year. It is probably safest to assume that they aren't ever going to improve.)

Making a diagnosis - and monitoring the way an illness is going - is the one thing orthodox doctors are really good at. Some alternative therapists do claim to be able to make diagnoses (for example through kirlian photography or iridology) but I can see no point at all in using these techniques. Blood tests, X rays and CAT scans aren't always right but they are *usually* right. Even if I was committed to using alternative techniques for the treatment of a cancer I would use orthodox techniques to diagnose it accurately and to keep track of what was happening to it.

* * *

The doctor who tells me I have cancer may be an expert. He may be widely respected. He may have treated thousands of patients. He may wear an expensive suit, drive a Mercedes and have an extensive private practice. But there is a very good chance that he will be completely out of date.

Most doctors treat their patients according to their own whims and prejudices. There are still doctors around who routinely cut off the breasts of women with breast cancer. When you ask them why they perform such savage surgery when all the existing evidence shows, quite clearly, that in most cases a lumpectomy produces a better result they will become very defensive and claim that their experience shows otherwise. If you have the courage and strength to push them further on this they will eventually admit that they have never sat down and assessed their results in a scientific way. They do what they do because it is what they've done for years.

So I would go to my local public library and ask someone there to do a computer search for all the latest scientific papers dealing with my disease. I would then order copies of all the relevant journals. Now I admit that I have an advantage over you here because I know some of the language doctors use. But it is a smaller advantage than you might imagine. One of the best review articles I've ever read about prostate cancer was written by a successful company boss who didn't have any medical training but did his own research. I’d be careful when using the internet because so many stories there are sponsored or subsidised by people representing companies with a product to sell. It’s genuinely difficult to find the truth on the internet unless you already know what the truth is.

Many of the journal articles would probably turn out to be disappointing and useless. But one or two might provide nuggets of useful information. And when I'd read a few journal papers I would probably know as much or more about my disease than the doctor who was supposed to be treating me knows about it. If my research produced the names of drugs being used for the treatment of my particular type of cancer I would then ask the library to see if they could dig out any medical reference books containing information about prescription drugs. I would, in particular, be looking for details of side effects. If the library couldn't get me the information I wanted I would ask my doctor to obtain the information I needed from the drug company making the product. (The drug company will probably only give this information to prescribing doctors). I would repeat the library search for new material every few months in order to make sure that I did not miss any important development that might be important to me.

* * *

I don't know about you but if I'm buying a new motor car or a new washing machine I do some research before I buy. I check out the various possibilities. I compare and contrast. I look for problems. I look for weaknesses. I don't accept the recommendation of the first salesman I see.

Dealing with cancer is obviously considerably more important than choosing a new car or kitchen appliance.

And so once I had done some preliminary research into my disease I would ask my GP to arrange two more consultations with experts. Many doctors don't like patients obtaining views from more than one doctor. (This is because they know that other doctors are likely to offer different views about the best possible treatment - thereby making it clear that they just might be wrong.) But I wouldn't worry about my doctor being hurt or offended. That is his problem and I'd have too much to do to worry about his feelings of inadequacy. (I might go back later, when I've beaten the damned cancer, and try to help him/her deal with his/her problem).

I am aware that obtaining these opinions would probably cost me money. (For reasons which you can easily understand state health services and health insurance companies don't always look upon the idea of second and third opinions with much enthusiasm. I am therefore, already making sure that I keep a small nest egg put on one side so that if I will have the cash I need to do my research.)

Having done my research I would be able to ask the expert sensible and searching questions. At the end of the consultation I would ask him this question: `What would you do if you had what I've got?'

* * *

Doctors treating cancer patients usually offer one of more of these three options: surgery, radiotherapy or drugs (the dreaded trio more commonly known as `slash, burn and poison').

Good doctors will readily admit that there are often unpleasant side effects with these types of treatment. Surgery is invariably painful and often disfiguring. Patients are frequently mutilated for no very good reason. Chemotherapy, which is surely one of the crudest and bluntest of all medical techniques, often results in devastating symptoms such as nausea and sickness as well as relatively physical trivial but potentially dispiriting (and therefore spiritually damaging) symptoms such as hair loss. Battering the entire body with drugs in this clumsy and imprecise way will surely one day be regarded as a major low point of twentieth century medicine (which, admittedly, has many other low points).

Chemotherapy works by poisoning cancer cells. If the drugs only poisoned the cancer cells this would be wonderful. But the problem is that normal cells also die. Chemotherapy drugs are so toxic that they kill just about everything they reach. The prescribing doctor has to carefully adjust the dose of the drug he is prescribing so as to kill the cancer cells without killing too many of the body's essential cells. This is by no means an exact science. Indeed, it isn't really a science at all. It’s guesswork and hope. The concept of chemotherapy pays no attention at all to the body's in-built defence mechanisms. On the contrary chemotherapy reduces the effectiveness of the body's defence system and therefore makes it easier for a cancer to grow. Virtually all chemotherapy drugs are immunosuppressive (thereby destroying the body's self defence mechanisms) and carcinogenic (subsequently producing additional, new cancers). Possible side effects known to be associated with chemotherapy may include: nausea, vomiting, bleeding, loss of hair, liver damage, kidney damage, increased risk of infection, impotence, sterility, bone marrow damage, nerve damage, lung damage, diarrhoea, skin sores, mouth sores, heart damage, allergies and fever. And, of course, an increased susceptibility to another type of cancer. Drugs mask problems rather than deal with them directly. They do not deal with the disease process. They are unnatural. They contaminate the patient and produce an array of confusing side effects. They cover up symptoms which might be of use in leading the doctor to a better form of treatment.

As for radiotherapy - well, I suspect that it kills more people than it saves.

I had a letter from a British patient who had a cancerous growth. `The cancer was removed by a surgeon who told me that the cancer had not spread,' she wrote. `But doctors want me to have radiotherapy. Why.'

The answer is simple and shocking.

Radiotherapists want to prove that radiotherapy works and there is at present surprisingly little evidence for its effectiveness.

The current way to measure the effectiveness of treatments is to see how many patients survive for five years after diagnosis.

By giving treatment to patients who may not really need it - and who are likely to make a full recovery whether or not they receive treatment - doctors can make their pet therapy look good.

But radiotherapy can be extremely dangerous.

Amazingly there are no firm rules about who must get radiotherapy - or how much they should receive. Local doctors decide how much radiotherapy to give and for how long.

Orthodox cancer therapy is just as wishy washy and disorganised as alternative cancer therapy. And it's far more dangerous. My conclusion is that radiotherapy can seriously damage your health.This is a scandal of monumental proportions.

So, how do doctors decide who gets radiotherapy and how much they get?'

If you don't want to know look away now.

Because the answer may frighten you.

They guess.

Radiotherapy is a lottery and (like chemotherapy) about as logical as standing in the garden chanting to the moon.

Don't ever let any doctor tell you that alternative medicine is unscientific.

* * *

What has happened?

Why has this powerful legacy of scientific thought been allowed to crumble away?

Why has 20th century medicine drifted back towards witchcraft and black arts?

The answer is simple.

In the last century the practice of medicine has become no more than an adjunct to the pharmaceutical industry and the other aspects of the huge, powerful and immensely profitable health care industry.

Medicine is no longer an independent profession.

Doctors are no more dedicated to the saving of lives and the improvement of patients’ welfare than are the thousands of drug company salesmen and marketing men. Doctors have become nothing more than a link connecting the pharmaceutical industry to the consumer.

The end result of this modern tragedy is that patients suffer.

The over prescribing, the unnecessary surgery and the exhausting and endless tests and investigations all weaken patients, damage their immune systems and increase their chances of falling ill.

But few doctors will point out that orthodox treatments for cancer may actually reduce a patient's chance of surviving.

Surgery can (particularly if performed clumsily) actually result in the spreading of a cancer and taking a biopsy of a suspected cancer can make things considerably worse. On top of these specific and practical risks there is the fact that the human body is a delicate and vulnerable organism. Chopping bits out is traumatic to the physical form as well as to the psyche. Surgery is an `insult' to the body. A lengthy operation can weaken the body and reduce its ability to fight cancer. The last thing a body fighting a cancer needs is a surgical operation. And so the reasons for the surgery would have to be convincing. And radiotherapy and chemotherapy may result in a patient's death not just as a result of a serious side effect but also as a result of the damage done to the whole organism's ability to fight and survive.

Nevertheless, I would not dismiss the options of surgery, radiotherapy and chemotherapy completely. If I had a discrete, isolated, accessible and easily removable tumour which was threatening my very life through its existence I would consider finding a good surgeon to remove it. I would consider specific radiotherapy aimed directly at a cancer site. I would be extremely cautious about chemotherapy and would consider this option only if I saw extremely convincing evidence proving its efficacy.

The essence of holistic therapy is to retain an open mind about all types of treatment - including so called orthodox therapy.

* * *

At the same time as I was doing research to find out what orthodox medicine knew about my disease I would also ask my local librarian to do a computer search for alternative remedies.

There are a number of respectable and well edited alternative journals now available around the world.

I would want to see as many as possible of these journals. And I would want to look at all the relevant claims made by therapists. (In other words I would want to look at claims which related to my specific type of cancer).

I would, however, be just as sceptical about alternative therapies as I would be about orthodox therapies.

Sadly, the world of alternative medicine is not totally populated by honest, kind and well-meaning individuals.

There are many charlatans around whose sole interest is making money. And although I have absolutely no objection to healers and therapists making money if they are offering a good service I would not want to waste money and time on treatments which had little or no chance of working.

(Some orthodox doctors dismiss all alternative therapists as being `only in it for the money' because they charge a fee. This is, of course, a nonsense. All the orthodox doctors I know get paid. If they don't get paid by individual patients they get paid by the state or by insurance companies. If a therapist offers me a genuine cure for my cancer I will happily pay him whatever I can afford.)

One alternative anti-cancer programme which I would look at very carefully is the one devised by Dr Gerson. The Gerson programme includes the regular consumption of fresh drinks made from vegetables and fruit - and the avoidance of meat, fish, eggs, dairy produce, caffeine, alcohol, salt, nicotine, fats, processed foods, chocolate, spices and ordinary drinking water out of the tap. (I understand, however, that the traditional Gerson programme does, however, include the consumption of liver from very young calves. I do not understand the need for this and would not follow this part of the programme.) I am totally convinced that the regular consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables would make an important difference if I had cancer but I am less convinced about the importance of the castor oil and the coffee enemas (taken to help detoxify the body). One important study of Gerson patients, which was published in the American journal *`Alternative Therapies in Health Medicine'* in September 1995 showed that 100% of patients with early melanomas survived for five years. A much less substantial 79% of patients who were treated with conventional medicine survived for five years. Of the patients who had regional metastases 70% of the Gerson patients recovered whereas only 41% of the patients given orthodox treatment survived. But it was the severely ill patients who showed the most dramatic results for whereas 39% of Gerson treated patients with distant metastases lived five years (the period which officially defines a `cure') only 6% of the patients who were treated with orthodox medical therapies survived for that long. And yet, tragically, despite this evidence, the cancer establishment (composed of both doctors who are supposed to be driven by a desire to find the best therapies for their patients and cancer charities which are given money to find `cures' for cancer) still refuses to accept the Gerson programme - or even to subject it to more tests.

* * *

One woman, investigating an anti-cancer programme that would have entailed considerable effort on her part rejected the programme on the grounds that it would interfere with her lifestyle.

But since it was probably her original lifestyle which had resulted in the development of the cancer would a change in lifestyle have been such a bad thing?

The important question, of course, is just how big a price are you prepared to pay to defeat the cancer?

There are times in our lives when we have to face reality and we have to take responsibility for our own actions. And facing cancer is such a time. This is not a time to put your fate into the hands of a doctor whose only virtue is that his ignorance is heavily disguised by arrogance and conceit. Making the decision about what to do - and how to tackle the disease - is a difficult one.

If I choose not to accept orthodox medicine and I die - did I make a mistake? If I choose to accept orthodox medicine and I die after several months of pain and misery did I make a mistake? Life is all about choices and decisions and this, I believe, is a choice we have to make for ourselves.

* * *

It is a constant disappointment to me that the majority of doctors (and, indeed, patients) will not accept that there is a link between food and cancer.

I don't remember being taught anything at all about the links between food and cancer when I was a medical student so I suppose it isn't all that surprising that the majority of doctors in practise today think that anyone claiming that such a relationship exists must be a crank and possibly a charlatan too.

(The extent of the opposition to the simple and well proven link between food and cancer is well illustrated by what happened in the UK when my book `*Food for Thought*' first came out just a few years ago. To launch the book to the public the EMJ advertising department bought advertisement space in a number of British newspapers. The advertisement used made it clear that the book contained information about foods which are linked to cancer (either because they cause cancer or because they help to prevent it. Shortly after the advertisement had appeared we received notification from a British organisation known as the Advertising Standards Authority that there had been a complaint about the advertisement. Our advertisement had included the statement: `In his bestselling book `*Food for Thought*' Dr Vernon explains which foods to avoid and which to eat to reduce your risk of developing cancer.' The ASA asked us to provide evidence for this claim and we were happy to help relieve their ignorance. We sent a short list of basic references. We pointed out that the National Academy of Sciences in the United States estimates that 60% of women's cancers and 40% of men's cancers are related to nutritional factors. We also gave details of and included references for papers which had been published in the following specialist cancer journals: `*Cancer', `Cancer Research*', `*International Journal of Cancer*', `*British Journal of Cancer*' and the `*New England Journal of Medicine*'.

We also pointed out that the British Medical Association had published a book stating that one third of cancers are caused by food. And we suggested that the ASA might like to look at `*Nutritional Influences on Illness*' by Dr Melvyn R Werbach - an excellent reference source book which contains 18 pages of references showing links between specific foods and cancer. We sent references and details of these publications because we were informed that photocopying all these publications would have been illegal. But the ASA said that they would not accept scientific references. And, working I believe, with the help of medical advice, they duly banned the advertisement which dared to suggest that there are links between food and cancer.)

Although there is plenty of evidence showing that there are links between food and cancer (showing that while some foods cause cancer others can help prevent it) there is not yet any equally convincing scientific evidence proving that eating the right sort of foods can cure cancer.

And yet it is perfectly logical that it should be possible to combat cancer by eating the right sort of foods. After all, if avoiding some types of food can help you avoid cancer it doesn't take much brainpower to conclude that it makes good sense to avoid those foods if you have developed cancer.

Hard, scientific evidence supporting the belief that cancer can be defeated by eating the right sort of diet hasn't yet been produced for the simple (but awful) reason that it is in no one's interest to produce any such evidence.

The cancer industry (which raises billions of dollars in public contributions) is run by doctors who are committed to an orthodox `slash, burn and poison' approach to cancer - the approach they have been educated to accept. They will not make any effort to assess the effectiveness of diet in treating cancer because there is no evidence that such an approach would work. It is a vicious circle of denial. `There is no evidence that diet cures cancer and therefore we cannot justify doing the extensive and costly research that could prove that diet cures cancer and so there is no evidence that diet cures cancer.'

Why are doctors so opposed even to considering the idea that cancer may be tackled (and prevented) by diet? The subject is hardly ever even mentioned by doctors and only rare is it discussed at medical meetings or in journals. The food served in hospitals is consistently reported to be appalling. There are many hospitals where meat is still regarded as an essential part of a main meal and where fruit (if served at all) is served from tins and vegetables are overcooked into a soggy, unidentifiable mass. Those doctors who do dare to offer the suggestion that the right sort of diet is an important pre-requisite for good health are largely regarded as cranks, to be reviled and ignored.

I suspect that the real reason for the opposition to the notion of maintaining or regaining good health through sensible eating is that the medical profession is largely controlled and educated by the pharmaceutical industry - which has a clear financial interest in maintaining the theory that cancer is best tackled with the aid of chemotherapy. And we must also remember that the treatment of cancer patients is big business. Around twenty thousand million dollars a year are spent on conventional cancer treatments in the United States of America alone. I'm not suggesting that all those involved in the cancer industry are consciously refusing even to test new ideas simply because they are worried about being made redundant. But that unspoken fear is undoubtedly there and it undoubtedly influences their thinking. Changing the way we approach cancer would result in mass unemployment in hospitals, drug companies, laboratories, cancer charities and other parts of the huge cancer industry.

The truth, I'm afraid, is that the medical profession is terrible at dealing with cancer. Most doctors think they have done their duty as far as prevention is concerned if they tell their patients to stop smoking. And most believe that the only treatments for cancer involve surgery, drugs and radiotherapy.

Never before in the history of man has the medical establishment demanded (and received) so much money to tackle cancer. Never before have we known as much as we know now about the causes of cancer. Cancer charities are now the biggest and richest charities in the world. Presidents and Prime Ministers around the world have proudly announced that their administration will conquer cancer.

And yet, despite all this effort, the incidence of cancer continues to rise. A few years ago one in three people got cancer. Today the figure is close to one in two.

The medical establishment's approach to cancer has failed miserably. The cancer charities have failed miserably. And, despite their boastful rhetoric, governments have failed miserably.

Why?

The broad answer is simple and comes in three parts.

First: these establishment forces have all been busy working with drug companies and have all insisted on tackling the problem of cancer by searching for a single, pharmacological cure. Billions of dollars have been spent on the search for a magic bullet cure for cancer: a drug or a vaccine that will cure or prevent cancer the easy way. Governments, charities and doctors have spent most of their energy (and a good deal of public money) on helping drug companies look for a hugely profitable solution to this problem.

Second: the same establishment forces have steadfastly refused to face the fact that the vast majority of cancers are caused by chemicals in the food we eat, the air we breathe and the water we drink. The big chemical companies have contaminated our world with known carcinogens. The politicians daren't say anything because these are big, rich companies. And the medical establishment and the charities daren't say anything because their pockets are stuffed with money from drug companies which are often affiliated to, associated with, or subsidiaries of, the big companies making and selling the carcinogens. The result is that millions of innocent people are allowed and encouraged to expose themselves to cancer risks which could often be easily avoided.

Third: while the battle against cancer is inspired, driven by and controlled by a fruitless search for a hugely profitable cancer cure the establishment has failed to put much effort at all into explaining to people the importance and significance of the human immune system. Millions would avoid cancer if their immune systems were in better condition. And millions would recover from cancer if they were told how to boost their immune systems.

Indeed, the cancer industry hasn't just failed to explain the importance of the immune system - it has done its aggressive best to discourage cancer patients (and potential cancer victims) from discovering the truth about the significance of the immune system.

At grass roots level millions of patients have been betrayed because their doctors have failed to realise that their own education has been dominated by a drug industry dominated establishment which cares far more for profits than it does for patient care.

Visit your doctor as a cancer patient and the chances are that you'll be offered one or more choices from the unholy trilogy: chemotherapy, surgery and radiotherapy. And yet the track record for these `weapons' against cancer has been truly abysmal. It is, indeed, so bad that I suspect that if many varieties of chemotherapy were offered by an alternative practitioner as a `cure for cancer' he would be arrested for fraud.

The bottom line is that I believe that the best way to avoid cancer (and the best way to defeat if you get it) is to do everything you can to boost your immune system. I've explained my programme for doing this in some detail in my book `*Superbody*'.

(Of course, strengthening the immune system isn't the only way to attack cancer and the truly holistic approach which I favour accepts that everything (even chemotherapy, radiotherapy and surgery) may on occasion by useful and effective.)

Having studied the evidence I can find, I have absolutely no doubt that by eating a diet which contained a great deal of fresh, organically grown fruit and fresh, organically grown vegetables (a diet which was, therefore, rich in anti-oxidants) but which contained very little fat I would be giving my body every chance to defeat its enemy. I would make sure that I ate soybean products. And I would keep my calorie intake fairly low. I would certainly not want to put on any excess weight through overeating.

I would want to make sure that I eschewed all chemicals (whether used in the farming process or added by food manufacturers) since I am totally convinced that it is the high incidence of chemicals in our diet and in our environment which is responsible for the increase in cancer in the world today.

I already follow a vegetarian diet and so I eat no animal produce. But if I was not a vegetarian I would become one. The evidence linking meat and fats to the development of cancer is irresistible (I summarised many of the most important scientific papers showing a link between diet and cancer in my book `*Food for Thought*').

I believe there is a strong link between fat and cancer because it is in the fat of an animal that the chemicals it has consumed are likely to be found. People who eat a fat rich diet are, therefore, consuming a greater quantity of cancer provoking toxins. Not surprisingly, the last thing someone with cancer needs is to consume a diet which contains more cancer provoking toxins. Anyone who eats the wrong diet will suffer twice: their body will be weakened and handicapped while their cancer is aided and abetted.

One writer recently claimed that in order to get enough of every vitamin and mineral from fruit and vegetables would require eating impossibly large quantities of food. It was also alleged that it is impossible to find organic food in most cities. I think that both these claims are quite wrong. A diet which contains five different servings of fruit and vegetables (with variation from day to day of course) should provide a thoroughly extensive variety of vitamins and minerals. And I don't know of a city where it isn't possible to buy organic food. The quickest way to find a shop or farm selling organic food is usually to visit a vegetarian restaurant and ask for their help.

Finding organically grown fruit and vegetables may require a little effort (and the produce may cost slightly more) but the effort is well worthwhile.

Others have complained that fresh fruit and vegetables are expensive to buy. I suppose they probably are more expensive than many pre-packaged foods. But if you eat in a healthy fashion you will not spend money on meat, fatty foods such as cream, sweets and the other mass produced foods with which so many people conscientiously and steadfastly ruin their health.

I would much prefer to obtain my high doses of vitamins and anti-oxidants through food. I think that this is the healthy and sensible way to feed the body. But if for any reason I found it utterly impossible to obtain or consume large quantities of fresh, organically grown fruit and vegetables I would take vitamin supplements as a substitute.

The important thing to remember is that cancer results from a general metabolic disturbance. And, therefore, I believe that in order to effect a cure it is essential to provide a general remedy.

Most people in the developed world eat too much food but are malnourished. The food they eat is fatty, full of additives and chemicals and poor in vitamins and minerals. Even the water which comes out of our taps, and which we are expected to drink, is often heavily polluted with chemicals.

But it isn't only poor food that causes cancer. Another factor is, I believe, our constant exposure to a polluted environment. The very air we breathe is frequently heavily polluted. Our bodies, weakened by poor food and too much stress, simply cannot cope with the enormous quantities of pollutants and contaminants. If I developed cancer I would make every effort to ensure that I breathed clean air and kept away (as far as possible) from cancer provoking environmental toxins. And so, for example, if I lived in a town or city I would try to spend as much time as possible in the countryside.

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There are powerful links between stress, the human body's immune system and the development of cancer. When the mind is under a great deal of stress the body becomes weaker and more vulnerable and less able to protect itself against cancer.

And so it doesn't take a great deal of intellect to realise that when a cancer has developed, and the body is fighting hard to stop those errant cells multiplying and causing havoc, the strength and health of the immune system is absolutely vital.

Eating the right sort of foods is, of course, one vital ingredient in the recipe for a healthy immune system. But avoiding unnecessary stress is also vital. The therapeutic value of peace and dignity are grossly undervalued by many health care professionals.

(It is for this reason that the stress produced by surgery may be counterproductive. The benefit of removing a tumour has to be carefully weighed against the damage that may be done to the immune system. Most surgeons do not do this because they do not even know that these links between stress, immune system and cancer exist.)

There is even evidence to show that simply worrying about external forces may prove damaging to the immune system.

There is, for example, evidence showing that people who live near to nuclear power stations may have an increased incidence of cancer not because of the radiation which is emitted from the power station but because of the stress created by living near to a possible source of radiation.

It seems pretty certain that the people who worry most about themselves, their families, their friends, their work and the rest of the world in general are the ones who suffer most.

There is no little irony in the fact that hard hearted folk who ignore the effects of what they do to other people, animals or the environment because they simply do not care two hoots about the consequences do not suffer much in the way of damaging stress. It is the kind, the thoughtful and the sensitive who suffer for them - and whose immune systems take a battering as a result of their actions.

In addition to minimising my exposure to stress I would also spend more time making sure that I could relax my body and my mind quite thoroughly. I would also make the effort to meditate regularly - using the sort of techniques described in my book *Mindpower*.

I firmly believe that having a positive, relaxed and contented mind greatly improves the capacity of the body to recover from any illness.

* * *

Simply wanting to stay alive is not a big enough reason not to die. I know that in order to combat cancer I would need to have a real purpose for living.

When I was a GP I saw many patients who defied medical forecasts simply because they could not and would not die. Two women (whose case histories I described in more detail in my book `*Mindpower*') both quite simply refused to die because they had children who needed looking after. They clung to life with dogged determination because for them death was not an acceptable option.

One of the first things I would do would be to sit down and make a written list of my short, medium and long term purposes, aims and ambitions.

I know that it would not be enough to simply write down vague and uncertain hopes and aspirations. I would define my aims quite specifically - listing the projects I wanted to complete and giving each project a timescale.

I would keep my short term projects to a minimum (because I know that I would be spending much of my time, effort and energy fighting the cancer). I would, however, make an extensive list of medium and long term ambitions. Those projects and ambitions would give my life a renewed purpose.

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I first described the power of visualisation therapy in my books `*Bodypower*' (first published in 1983) and *`Mindpower'* (first published in 1987). Astonishingly, this enormously important form of self-treatment is still largely unknown among doctors.

Since the effective practice of visualisation therapy requires the development of a mental skill I would recommend that anyone who feels that they might ever need to use this technique should learn how to use it now.

If you drive a car a great deal and you think you may, at some time in the future, be in a situation where you will have to correct a skid then it obviously makes sense to attend a driving school where you can learn this skill. Waiting for the moment when your car starts to skid, and then deciding to learn, would obviously be less sensible.

* * *

That's my own very personal anti-cancer plan. I do not recommend it to you if you are suffering from cancer or if you are, at any time in the future, told that you have cancer. This is my own personal anti-cancer plan

designed to fit my beliefs and my philosophy of life. I would not follow any therapy in which I could not have faith. And I would make sure that I had faith in my chosen therapies. I have published my plan in the hope that it may help you think about how you would respond if you were told that you had cancer.

Chapter 35: Understand Your Doctor

Any medical word that ends in `-ectomy' suggests a removal operation (as an `tonsillectomy' or `appendicectomy'). A word ending in `-otomy' suggests that in incision will be made (as in `laparotomy' which means an incision in the abdomen). A word ending in `-plasty' suggests a plastic surgery operation (as in `mammoplasty' which means a redesign of breast shape or size). A word ending in `-ostomy' means that an artificial hole has been made (as in `colostomy' in which a hole is made in the colon) and the ending `-orrhaphy' means a repair (as in `herniorrhaphy'). A word ending in `-oscopy' usually means that the doctors are having a look at something (as in `bronchoscopy' which means having a look in the main tubes of the lungs and `laparoscopy' which means taking a look inside the abdomen).

Chapter 36: Don't Be Tricked Into Taking Pills You Don't Want

For years now it has been common for nurses - both in hospitals and in nursing homes - to hide drugs in food and drink. Sedatives, tranquillisers and sleeping tablets are among the drugs most commonly abused in this way.

Now this despicable practice has been made legal in many countries. Nursing staff are officially allowed to crush pills patients don't want to take and put them into food or drinks. The new rules allows for nurses to trick children as well as adults in this way and cover private nursing homes as well as hospitals. To be frank, I would be less horrified if I heard that the authorities had announced that nurses would in future be allowed to steal from their patients whenever they felt it appropriate.

One recent study showed that 'thousands of care home residents were being prescribed powerful tranquillisers for minor problems to make life easier for staff.' Another study showed that more than a quarter of pensioners living in nursing homes are on powerful sedatives which have turned them into 'zombies'. This report concluded that elderly people living in care homes are nearly three times as likely to be given 'chemical cosh' drugs as those in the community. Elderly folk living in the community get mugged by their young neighbours. Elderly folk living in nursing homes get mugged by their nurses. Assault and trickery on the elderly are now legal. Doctors and nurses seem to have forgotten that everyone (including the elderly) has the right to refuse treatment they don't want.

I believe that patients have a right to refuse drugs and that tricking them into taking products which may kill them (and which will very probably reduce their quality of life)is well outside the traditions of medical practice. It is, to be blunt, immoral and unethical.

Drugs are already wildly over used in hospitals and nursing homes and this advice legitimises a practice which reeks of state control. Whatever happened to human rights - let alone patient rights? It is no good for those defending the practice to say that hiding drugs in food and drink is already widespread. Rape and muggings are widespread. That doesn't make them acceptable.

If you suspect that the doctors and nurses looking after you might be tempted to give you medication without your consent give them a letter expressly forbidding them to give you drugs without your consent and insist that they all sign a note in which they promise not to do any such thing. I have no idea whether or not this would provide you with any legal protection but modern human rights legislation is so complex and far-reaching that I suspect that most doctors and nurses would not risk litigation by ignoring your specific instructions and their promise.

Chapter 37: The Danger Of Too Many X-rays

For well over two decades I have been warning that doctors take far too many X rays - and that since X rays are known to be potentially hazardous these unnecessary investigations probably result in many unnecessary deaths.

It was back in 1895 that a fifty year old Professor of Physics in Germany made an accidental discovery which was to have as great an effect on the practice of clinical medicine and practical surgery as any other single technological step forward in the history of healing. His discovery has also become the most significant cause of cancer among the various different types of radiation to which most of us are exposed.

Professor Wilhelm Konrad von Rontgen was an experimental physicist and in 1895 he was investigating the effects of cathode rays. What caught his attention was the fact that, although the tube he was working with was covered with black cardboard, a greenish glow seemed to come from a piece of paper coated with a substance called barium platinocyanide which happened to be lying on a nearby bench. Rontgen realised that the paper must have been made luminous by some unknown rays - something other than the cathode rays he had started off investigating.

Rontgen decided to investigate further. He put a thousand page textbook between the tube and his piece of coated paper and found that the paper still became luminous.

Next, he placed his hand between the tube and the piece of paper and saw the bones of his hands appear on the luminous paper as dark shadows. They were obviously dense enough to prevent the flow of these unseen rays - which had gone straight through the soft tissues of his hand. He had discovered X rays.

Doctors around the world soon saw the benefits to be obtained from Rontgen's discovery. At the end of February 1896, just under two months after Rontgen's original experiment, the *British Medical Journal* '*The Lancet*' published a report from Liverpool which described how a surgeon had used X rays to help him localise an air-gun pellet before arranging for its removal.

By enabling doctors to see inside the living human body X rays made it possible for physicians and surgeons to make much more accurate diagnoses than ever before.

Other research workers discovered that radioactive materials could be used to burn and destroy unwanted pieces of tissue. Doctors used X rays to make the hair fall out from the heads of children so that their ringworm could be treated more effectively. More importantly doctors found that radioactive materials could be used to attack cancerous growths. Pierre and Marie Curie were just two of the researchers who investigated the possibility of using radium as a therapeutic material in the early years of the twentieth century.

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By the beginning of the twentieth century the risks associated with X rays had been well documented. A number of well-known researchers died during the early part of the century. But despite all this evidence X rays were still used very widely. In the thirties and forties X rays were used extensively to look for signs of tuberculosis in the lungs. The result of this was that years later a number of women who had been exposed to these heavy doses of X rays developed breast cancer. By the 1950s it was clear that X rays could cause a great deal of damage. (Though, as a boy in the 1950s, I remember that shoe shops often contained a device with which parents and shoe fitters could look at a foot inside a shoe to see that there was room for the foot to move. Like many other children I delighted in looking at my feet through this publicly available X ray machine.)

By the 1970s doctors were beginning to worry that X rays might be killing more people than they were saving. Mammography (X rays of the breasts) had been introduced in the 1960s but doctors began to worry that mammography might be causing more cancer than it was detecting.

Doctors use X rays in two main ways: as screening tools and as diagnostic aids. These two techniques together make up by far the largest exposure of artificial radiation to which most people are exposed. The average dose of X ray used in a diagnostic X ray is estimated to be about as dangerous as smoking six cigarettes. Every X ray involves a risk and every unnecessary X ray involves an unnecessary risk.

In my book `The Health Scandal' (first published in 1988) I concluded that most X rays are entirely unnecessary. `They are,' I wrote, `potentially hazardous, they are extremely expensive and they are extremely unlikely to contribute anything to your doctor's knowledge of your illness.'

One of the first papers to have been published criticising the number of X rays done appeared in the *British Medical Journal* in the 1960s when a radiologist and a neurologist estimated that the consumption of X ray film was doubling every thirteen years. The authors concluded that their study gave `ample evidence that the great majority of plain X ray films taken for such conditions as migraine and headache, did not contribute materially to the diagnosis.' They pointed out that much time and effort was wasted by doctors, radiographers and patients. Their plea for doctors to think before ordering X rays fell on deaf ears.

In the 1970s the *British Medical Journal* again printed an appeal for doctors to order fewer X ray pictures. By then it was estimated that the number of radiological examinations was increasing by ten per cent every year. This time the report in the BMJ pointed out that after routine chest X rays were taken of 521 patients under the age of twenty not one serious abnormality was detected.

By the 1980s the problem had become such an important one (and a global one) that the World Health Organization issued a statement saying that `routine X ray examinations frequently are not worthwhile. Doctors,' said the W.H.O. `ask for X rays as a comforting ritual.' The W.H.O. went on to point out that X rays are so overused and misused that they constitute a major source of population exposure to manmade ionizing radiation.

Today the situation continues to get worse. Many X rays are done because patients demand them (`Couldn't you just do an X ray to see what is causing the pain, doctor?' `Wouldn't it be sensible to do an X ray to make sure that nothing is broken?'). Doctors comply with these demands because they know that if they don't, and something subsequently goes wrong, then there is a real risk that a court will find them negligent. Taking an X ray just-in-case is now commonplace and these days most X rays are taken for legal rather than medical reasons. Some dentists do routine X rays whenever they seen their patients - apparently unaware that they may well be endangering their patients' lives.

The doctor or dentist who tells you that an X ray is perfectly safe is a dangerous and uninformed fool.

Research has shown that in the US the incidence of cancer rises in step with the number of doctors in an area. The over-enthusiasm of doctors for X rays probably explains this. Three quarters of the current incidence of breast cancer in the United States is caused by earlier ionizing radiation, primarily from medical sources.

* * *

What can you do to protect yourself from unnecessary X rays?

Before being X rayed ask the doctor or dentist whether the X ray is essential or simply routine.

Does the doctor suspect that something is wrong? Or is he merely taking the X ray out of habit? Do you have any symptoms which suggest that an X ray examination is necessary? Make the doctor (or dentist) think twice and she may decide that the X rays isn't necessary after all.

And remember that many routine X rays are simply taken because doctors know that if a patient ever takes them to court the lawyers will regard a failure to X ray as a sign of incompetence and malpractice.

If a doctor or dentist looking after me confirmed that he was only taking an X ray for legal reasons (and not because he expected the X ray to help him decide how best to treat me) I would ask that he accept a short note, signed by me, confirming that I had rejected the offer of an X ray.

X rays were a great discovery. They can save lives. But they can also be another way in which your doctor can kill you.

Chapter 38: Benzodiazepine tranquillisers - facts every patient should know

'The world's biggest addiction problem is not teenagers taking hash but middle-a gers taking sedatives. The tranquilliser is replacing tobacco. It will, perhaps, give us an even bigger problem. It may prove even more dangerous. Already Valium is said to be taken by 14% of the population of Britain.'

'The habit usually starts insidiously. The patient may have a good excuse for taking a few tablets. A close friend or relative has died or there is a rush on at work. And the doctor finds it difficult to refuse the request for a little help.'

'The drugs which people take to help relieve their pressures vary. If he is young the addict may take drugs from a pusher. If he is older he may take drugs from a medical adviser.'

That quote is taken from a book called '*The Medicine Men*' which I wrote and which was published way back in 1975.

* * *

The benzodiazepine problem first began during the 1950s and 1960s when the type of problem being discussed in the doctor's consulting room changed. For the first time family doctors found that they were expected to deal with mental and psychological problems as well as physical problems. They were being consulted by patients who wanted comfort, support, encouragement and help with social and personal problems. As the link between stress and disease become better and better known so more and more patients went to their doctors wanting help with dealing with the stress in their lives.

But there was a big problem.

Doctors had never been trained to cope with psychological or stress induced problems. Most physicians had been taught more about tropical diseases than they had about anxiety or depression.

Doctors didn't know how to help these patients.

So, when the benzodiazepines were introduced and described as safe and effective drugs for the treatment of anxiety and a wide range of stress related disorders doctors welcomed the new pills with open arms. They prescribed them in huge quantities.

The result is that for years now the biggest drug addiction problem in the world today has involved legally prescribed benzodiazepine tranquillisers and sleeping tablets which are widely and regularly prescribed for long periods for men, women and children suffering from stress and stress related symptoms.

It seems hard to believe but I first wrote about the dangers of tranquilliser addiction back in 1973. Over the early years that I campaigned to get these drugs controlled more effectively I received tens of thousands of letters from tranquilliser addicts all over the world. In one month alone I counted over 6,000 letters about tranquillisers. It was the first time in my life that the mail arrived in huge grey mailbags.

After hundreds of articles and TV programmes my campaign to warn patients and doctors about the dangers of these drugs eventually forced the politicians to take action in Britain.

In 1988 - after 15 years of campaigning - doctors were warned of the hazards of handing out drugs such as diazepam, lorazepam, nitrazepam and temazepam for long term use.

(`Dr Vernon Coleman's articles, to which I refer with approval, raised concern about these important matters,' said Edwina Currie, Parliamentary Secretary for Health, in the House of Commons in 1988. She was referring to the introduction of new controls relating to the prescribing of benzodiazepine tranquillisers.)

But not all doctors read official warnings. And not all governments followed Britain's example. And so tens of thousands of doctors are still handing out tranquillisers and sleeping tablets to millions of patients who have too much stress in their lives. In some developed countries over a third of the adult population is currently on prescribed tranquillisers, anti-depressants or sleeping pills.

The simple truth is that the benzodiazepine tranquillisers can cause problems if they are taken for more than two weeks or so. Long term use can cause all sorts of very real problems. And patients who have been taking the drugs for more than a week or two need to cut down slowly if they are to avoid withdrawal symptoms.

Sadly, it seems that doctors are addicted to the drugs too. Doctors are still prescribing these damned pills by the lorry load. Occasionally, newspapers and magazines 'rediscover' the problem and publish articles about the huge addiction problem doctors have created.

* * *

Here, for the record, are some facts about tranquillisers which many doctors still don't seem to know. Look at the dates carefully.

Fact One

In 1961, just a short time after chlordiazepoxide (the first widely prescribed benzodiazepine) had been introduced into clinical practice a report was written by three physicians from a hospital in California. Entitled 'Withdrawal Reactions from Chlordiazepoxide' the paper described very dramatically how patients who had been taking the drug suffered from withdrawal symptoms when the drug was stopped. The authors described how eleven patients who had been taking fairly high doses of chlordiazepoxide for up to six months were quite suddenly taken off the drug and given sugar tablets instead. Ten of the eleven patients experienced new symptoms or signs after the withdrawal of the chlordiazepoxide. Six patients became depressed, five were agitated and unable to sleep, two had major fits.

Fact Two

Testifying to a US Senate Health sub-committee in Washington in 1979 a psychiatrist claimed that patients could get hooked on diazepam in as little as six weeks. The same committee heard testimony that it is harder to kick the tranquilliser habit than it is to get off heroin.

Fact Three

In 1975 three doctors from the Drug Dependence Treatment Center at the Philadelphia VA Hospital and University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, published a paper in the *International Journal of the Addiction*s entitled 'Misuse and Abuse of Diazepam: An Increasingly Common Medical Problem'. The three authors of the paper referred to papers published as far back as 1970 which had documented instances of physical addiction to chlordiazepoxide and diazepam and reported that since the end of 1972 they had noticed an increasing amount of diazepam misuse and abuse. Their paper concluded: 'All physicians should know that diazepam abuse and misuse is occurring and careful attention should be given to prescribing, transporting and storing this drug.'

Fact Four

In 1972 the American Journal of Psychiatry published a paper in which two doctors described how patients on diazepam had exhibited a cluster of symptoms which included tremulousness, apprehension, insomnia and depression. The patients had all been previously emotionally stable and the symptoms, which started suddenly, were quite severe. When these patients were taken off their diazepam their symptoms disappeared.

Fact Five

In 1968 the Journal of the American Medical Association described a series of eight patients who had been given diazepam. The patients became so depressed that seven of them had suicidal thoughts and impulses and two of them made serious attempts to commit suicide.

Fact Six

Several reports published in the 1960s and 1970s showed that the benzodiazepines seemed to increase hostility, aggressiveness and irritability. The benzodiazepines have also been associated with baby battering.

Fact Seven

In a paper published in 1979 researchers found a 'highly significant association between the use of minor tranquillisers and the risk of a serious road accident'. The conclusion was that a patient's risk of being involved in a serious accident was increased five fold if he or she was taking a benzodiazepine.

Fact Eight

Back in 1982 the Committee on Safety of Medicines advised doctors that the benzodiazepines should be prescribed for short periods only and that withdrawal symptoms could be avoided by withdrawing medication slowly.

Fact Nine

When a 75 year old lady was admitted to a British hospital in the early 1970s she was unable to walk or speak clearly and was confused and incontinent. She had been taking a benzodiazepine sleeping tablet for a year. When her pills were stopped she made a physical recovery in three days.

* * *

If you are hooked on a benzodiazepine tranquilliser or sleeping tablet you will need to wean yourself off your drug with care.

Here are some vital tips to help you.

1. Before doing anything visit your doctor and ask for his or her help. If he is unhelpful, if he tells you to cope by yourself or if he insists that you don't need to worry and that withdrawal is easy then I suggest that you find yourself a new doctor. If you see a doctor who tells you that the benzodiazepines never cause problems, don't cause addiction and can be stopped suddenly without danger my advice is simple: change doctors fast. There are plenty of good doctors around who understand the problem and who are prepared to help. Talk to friends and neighbours to find the name of a good local doctor.

2. You may experience unpleasant symptoms (see list). The most common withdrawal symptoms include: tremor and shaking, intense anxiety, panic attacks, dizziness and giddiness, feeling faint, an inability to get to sleep and an inability to sleep through the night, an inability to concentrate, nausea, a metallic taste in your mouth, depression, headaches, clumsiness and poor coordination, sensitivity to light, noise and touch, tiredness and lethargy, a feeling of being 'outside your body', blurred vision, hot and cold feelings and a burning on your face, aching muscles, an inability to speak normally, hallucinations, sweating and fits.

3. Remember that you can minimise your symptoms by reducing your dose slowly. The rate at which you reduce your pills will depend upon the size of the dosage you have been taking and the length of time for which you have been on the pills. As a rule of thumb you should not go faster than to halve your dose every two weeks until it can no longer be halved. Some patients insist that this is much too fast. Others say it is too slow. Many seem to think it works well. For example, if you are taking six tablets a day then reduce to five a day for four days then to four a day for another four days, then to three a day for four days. That will mean that you will have halved your initial dose in your first two weeks.

4. Remember that the benzodiazepines cure nothing. But they do cover symptoms up. If you originally took your tablets for anxiety then the chances are that your original symptoms will return when you stop taking the tablets. Be prepared for this.

5. Warn your family and friends that you are likely to be going through a difficult time. Tell them what to expect and explain that you would welcome a little extra support, guidance, sympathy and patience. If you know someone else who wants to kick the habit then plan to do it together. Ring one another up, keep in touch, share your problems and keep your determination alive.

6. Do not try to give up these pills if you are going through a tricky patch at home or at work. Wait until things are more settled before you try to give up your pills.

7. Do not be tempted to try carving your tablets into tiny pieces. Break them into half by all means. But carving pills into fractions tends to make the whole procedure more difficult. It also makes everything more dramatic. Ask your doctor to prescribe the lowest dose of pills available so that you have the maximum amount of flexibility.

8. Do not despair if you reach a plateau and have difficulty in reducing your pills any more. Do not even despair if you have to increase your pills temporarily. You must stop these drugs at a rate that you find comfortable.

9. If you are taking a drug like lorazepam (which many experts believe is particularly difficult to come off) then your doctor may recommend that you substitute diazepam for part of the lorazepam and then cut down both drugs gradually. This MUST be done under medical supervision. Some people find that this helps cut down the withdrawal symptoms.

10. The question tranquilliser addicts ask most often is: `How long does withdrawal last?'. And it is the question that causes most controversy.

Some people are lucky. They can stop taking one of these drugs with relatively few - or even no - side effects. Some experts claim that withdrawal should take no more than a few weeks. One expert I know says that it can last for 10% of the time for which pills were taken. Some former addicts claim that it has taken them years to get off their pills.

The truth is that there is no fixed time for withdrawal. Some people can do it in days. Some take months.

'But,' say experts, 'it is important not to spread the physical withdrawal over too long a period.' If the pills are cut down too slowly then the patient will be taking the drug for longer than is necessary. 'The quicker you stop the pills,' the argument goes, 'the quicker you will recover. Spread the withdrawal over too long and your recovery will be slow.'

Patients sometimes respond to this by pointing out that although they cut down their pills in a matter of weeks they are still getting side effects months later.

But this does not necessarily mean that these side effects are withdrawal effects. It is important to remember that the benzodiazepines do not cure anything. If you were put on a tranquilliser ten years ago because you were feeling anxious and unhappy then the pills will have numbed your mind for ten years - but they will not have stopped your initial problem. When you stop the pills your anxiety will still be there. While you were taking the pills you may not have noticed the anxiety symptoms. If you were given your pills fifteen years ago to cover up the unhappiness of a bereavement then you will once more have to endure the unhappiness of that bereavement. The benzodiazepines will have put your emotions into a sort of pharmacological 'deep freeze'.

And although the benzodiazepines do not cure anything they do numb the mind. They seal you off from the world and prevent you from experiencing the normal highs and lows of everyday life. Taking these drugs is like having your brain wrapped in a thick layer of cotton wool. While taking the drug you are immune to many of the pressures of everyday living; the world will be uniformly grey; you will be permanently anaethetised.

Once you stop your pills your mind will suddenly be exposed to a whole range of stimuli. The anaesthetic will 'wear off' and you will 'wake up'. It can be a frightening experience. The world will suddenly appear a good deal brighter. Noises will seem louder and joys and sorrows will seem more acute. So, in addition to having to cope with old, half-forgotten emotions you will find that your nerve endings are raw and easily stimulated.

Since all these symptoms occur immediately after stopping or cutting down the pills you will probably assume that the symptoms have developed because you have stopped your drug too quickly. I don't think that this is necessarily the case. The symptoms are an inevitable part of coming off tranquillisers but they will be there however slowly you reduce the dose. Extending the withdrawal period doesn't always affect the end result at all - it may merely prolong the agony.

Finally, it is essential that anyone planning to give up tranquillisers should spend a lot of time and effort learning how to relax and how to deal with stress. And remember: do not stop taking tranquillisers or sleeping tablets or try cutting down without getting professional help from your doctor.

Note: In 1988, after my 15 year battle to persuade doctors and the establishment of the dangers of benzodiazepine tranquillisers finally forced governments around the world to take action (rather inadequate though the action was) I predicted that the drug companies would attempt to deal with their reduced sales of tranquillisers by promoting anti-depressants. The drug companies would, I warned, create a false need for anti-depressants and would, within a few years, have replaced the tranquilliser problem with an anti-depressant problem. That is exactly what happened.

Chapter 39: Lowering blood cholesterol

It isn't difficult to find many examples of the way that drug companies (and doctors) do their best to turn every illness into a profit making opportunity - while endangering the health of individual patients.

The treatment of raised blood cholesterol is one example.

For many years doctors and patients have believed that a patient who had a high blood cholesterol level may be more likely to suffer from heart trouble, high blood pressure or a stroke.

Vast amounts of money have been spent on screening patients for blood cholesterol levels. And many patients have been frightened half to death by finding out that their blood cholesterol levels are too high.

As a result, some years ago, the drugs industry became excited by the prospect of introducing cholesterol lowering drugs on a large scale. Soon after they had first been introduced drugs being prescribed to lower blood cholesterol were described as so safe and so effective that they would soon be prescribed for all individuals over the age of around 30 - whether or not they had a raised blood cholesterol level.

Drugs designed to lower blood fat and cholesterol levels - and therefore reduce the risk of heart disease - have been on the market for some years now. Back in October 1992, I announced that in my view the latest drugs which looked like making a fortune for the drug industry were the products which were designed to lower blood cholesterol levels. At the same time I expressed scepticism about the value of these drugs - and concern about the possible hazards associated with their use.

When they were first launched the cholesterol lowering drugs were everybody's dream. The drug companies loved them because they knew that there was a massive, long term international market. And many patients loved the idea of taking a pill to lower blood cholesterol because even although they believed that a high cholesterol level meant a high heart attack risk many didn't want to stop eating the fatty foods that may cause a high blood cholesterol.

(Our `pill for every ill' society sometimes still amazes me and I am constantly horrified at the number of people who know that their lifestyle is likely to result in a slow but early death but would still rather put all their trust into the greedy hands of the drug companies rather than doing something relatively simple and entirely risk free to help themselves.)

But there are several important questions to be answered here.

First, is a high blood cholesterol level really a danger sign?

The controversy over whether or not there is a direct link between a high blood cholesterol and the development of heart disease just won't go away. Most patients with heart disease have normal cholesterol levels and the alleged link between cholesterol levels and heart disease could, it seems, be a result of prejudices and assumptions being accepted as fact.

A Californian study couldn't find any link between high and low cholesterol levels and heart disease - but concluded that early deaths from heart disease are caused by other risk factors. A study of patients over the age of 70 failed to show any link between a high blood cholesterol level and any heart disease.

Second, is it wise to try and reduce a high blood cholesterol level?

Some trials have seemed to suggest that some of the patients who take cholesterol lowering drugs may be more rather than less likely to die.

Years ago a report in the *British Medical Journal* concluded that `various studies have shown excess mortality from injuries and `causes not related to illness' in those who have participated in trials in which their serum cholesterol concentration is lowered by either diet of drugs'.

A Swedish report looked into the possibility that a low cholesterol level may be linked to death from injury or suicide.

They found that deaths from injuries, particularly suicide, were commoner in some men with a low blood cholesterol level.

An expert from the Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, Los Angeles, USA wrote an article in *The Lancet* which began: `...trials which have shown that the lowering of serum cholesterol concentrations in middle aged subjects by diet, drugs or both leads to a decrease in coronary heart disease have also reported an increase in deaths due to suicide or violence. There has been no adequate explanation for this association.'

This expert suggested that a lowered serum cholesterol concentration may contribute to a: `poorer suppression of aggressive behaviour'.

Californian researchers found that depression was much commoner among individuals who had a low blood cholesterol. They also found that the lower the cholesterol the more depressed the patient was likely to be.

A World Health Organisation trial of a drug designed to lower blood cholesterol levels reduced expectations that cholesterol lowering drugs might lower mortality from heart disease and raised new questions about the role of these drugs.

Does anyone really know for sure whether it is wise to reduce a high blood cholesterol level - or whether such action may create new and as yet poorly understood problems?

For women the truth seems even better hidden than it is for men. Research involving 15,000 women in Scotland showed that women who have high levels of cholesterol are less likely to die of heart disease than men who have high levels of cholesterol (even though the women had higher levels of cholesterol than the men). It seems that lowering a woman's cholesterol levels may even expose her to a greater risk of heart disease.

The big (largely unasked) question is, of course: Can individuals reduce their chances of developing heart disease simply by eating more sensibly?

This question is clearly of vital importance because if the answer is `yes' then blood cholesterol levels (and cholesterol lowering drugs) become of academic, rather than practical, importance.

The curious and sad thing is that most doctors will, despite the `first do no harm' philosophy which I have always regarded as a fundamental tenet of medical practice, be happy to reach for their pens and prescription pads and dish out the pills rather than bothering to ask themselves what is (or is not) a suitable diet for preventing heart disease. There is a constant stream of new information and advice about these pills. But are they perfectly safe? I still don’t think so.

On the other hand, it is possible to cure heart disease without pills.

One of the basic cornerstones of this treatment programme is to follow a diet which cuts fat consumption down to somewhere between 10% and 20% - much lower in fat content than the usually recommended cholesterol lowering diet which is likely to contain 30% fat.

Most doctors still prefer to stick with the advice handed out by slick suited drug company representatives. And prescribe pills rather than diet.

Sadly, all this provides yet more evidence that most doctors are little more than marketing assistants for the pharmaceutical industry.

This is sad because depression and death aren't the only inconvenient side effects which may be associated with the use of cholesterol lowering drugs.

Possible side effects known to be associated with some of the many drugs commonly prescribed for the lowering of raised cholesterol levels may include: nausea, looseness of the bowels, impotence, headache, fatigue, drowsiness, skin rashes, pruritus, hair loss, weight gain, dizziness, cardiac arrhythmia and myositis like syndrome (comprising myalgia, myopathy, muscle cramps and sometimes rhabdomyolysis), rash, myalgia, headache, non-cardiac chest pain, nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea and fatigue, abdominal pain, constipation, flatulence, asthenia, headache, myopathy, nausea, diarrhoea, rash, dyspepsia, pruritis, hair loss, dizziness, muscle cramps, myalgia, pancreatitis, paraesthesia, peripheral neuropathy, vomiting, anaemia, rhabdomyolysis, hepatitis and hypersensitivity.

Remember, these are drugs which are prescribed to apparently healthy people - to keep them healthy without their having to give up burgers and cream doughnuts.

Are cholesterol lowering drugs effective? Will you live a longer, healthier, happier life if you take them?

Dunno.

Will you live a longer, healthier, happier life if you eat less and, in particular, cut your consumption of fatty foods?

I firmly believe so.

But where's the profit to be made out of advising patients to eat fewer burgers?

Chapter 40: Ten Good Reasons Why You Shouldn't Trust Your Doctor

1. He/she will have almost certainly been educated by drug companies anxious to sell their products - regardless of the side effects.

2. He/she may not know who you are - and may confuse you with someone else.

3. He/she may be using you as a guinea pig in a clinical trial. If your doctor gives you a packet of tablets (instead of a prescription) then the chances are high that he's being paid to test out a new drug.

4. He/she may well be sadly out of date. Most doctors are out of date within five years of leaving medical school.

5. He/she may be an alcoholic or a drug addict. Few professions turn to alcohol or drugs more often than doctors.

6. He/she probably has no idea what side effects may be associated with the drug he/she is prescribing.

7. He/she will almost certainly want to prescribe a drug for your symptoms - regardless of the fact that other methods of treatment may be both safer and more effective. Although providing drugs for patients suffering from chronic long term problems (such as asthma, depression, high blood pressure or arthritis) is clearly a profitable area for pharmaceutical companies an even more profitable business is to sell drugs to perfectly healthy patients - the theory being that the drugs patients are given will stop them developing serious health problems in the future. This is, I believe, an area where the drug companies are looking for huge growth in the future.

I predict that even if you are completely healthy and look after yourself by eating sensibly, exercising regularly and controlling your stress exposure there is still a very good chance that at some time during the next year or two your doctor will try to persuade you take a prescription drug - every day for the rest of your life - to help reduce your chances of developing heart disease.

8. He/she may be relying on test results which are wrong - or which he/she simply doesn't understand. Errors involving tests and investigations are much commoner than most patients (and most doctors) realise. Most tests aren't as reliable, as useful or as necessary as most people think.

9. He/she may be depressed and in no fit condition to make a diagnosis or prescribe treatment. Mental illness is commoner among doctors than almost any other group in our society.

10. He/she may make treatment decisions based on his/her own religious beliefs - even though those personal beliefs mean that you do not receive the most appropriate treatment. The doctor is unlikely to tell you that his/her decisions are being affected in this way.

Chapter 41: The Breast Cancer Scandals

Few things illustrate the depths to which the modern medical profession has sunk better than the `treatment' of breast cancer.

I was astonished and horrified when drug companies and doctors conspired to persuade completely healthy women to take a drug (tamoxifen) in order to try to prevent breast cancer despite the fact that it is known that the drug can cause cancer of the uterus. (As an aside, I know of one breast cancer patient whose doctors wanted her to take tamoxifen as a therapy. When she asked if there was any clinical evidence to justify a woman of her age, with her particular type of cancer, taking such a potentially hazardous drug the doctors sent her copies of two utterly irrelevant scientific papers. She then declined their kind offer of drug therapy and put herself (very successfully) on a strict vegetarian diet. When she went to see her GP after she had refused the tamoxifen the GP's sole enquiry was: 'So, what will you do when you get cancer again?' The ignorance of some doctors is, I fear, matched only by their callousness and unsuitability for work within an 'allegedly' caring profession.)

But tamoxifen isn't the only so called `preventive' programme which I find it difficult to understand.

In recent years the failure of the `cancer industry' to halt the incidence of breast cancer (or to find a cure) has resulted in what I believe is one of the most obscene aspects of modern medicine. Surgeons have started to remove perfectly healthy breasts from women in an attempt to prevent cancer developing. The theory is simple: if you remove a woman's breasts she cannot develop breast cancer.

This is not a new approach to breast cancer. Surgeons have been removing healthy breasts - as a method of preventing cancer - for nearly 20 years. But it is an approach which now seems to be winning a considerable amount of support. Some surgeons remove any woman's breasts. Others remove the breasts from women where there is a strong family history - and/or a genetic breast cancer link.

I have several objections to the surgical removal of perfectly healthy breasts in an attempt to prevent breast cancer developing. First, any surgical operation carries a risk. Second, if a woman subsequently has breast enhancement surgery to replace breast tissue with silicone old danger may be replaced by a new hazard. Third, a woman without breasts will not be able to breast feed and her babies will suffer. Fourth, where is this going to stop? Are we going to remove intestines to prevent bowel cancer? What about removing hearts to avoid heart attacks? Fifth, all this surgery will cost money - and one inevitable result of the utilisation of surgeons and hospital resources in this way will be that people who need urgent life-saving treatment won't get it. Finally, and most importantly, half of all breast cancer deaths could be avoided if women just cut down on fatty food and avoided meat.

I don't believe that removing healthy breasts or prescribing tamoxifen are the right way to tackle the epidemic of breast cancer now spreading throughout the western world.

The tragic truth is that the battle against breast cancer has so far been waged by an `industry' (and the world wide anti-cancer establishment is now so large and so rich that it truly merits the word `industry') which is in my view as corrupt and as incompetent as any other industry I can think of anywhere in the world. How many people working for the `cancer industry' have dared to point out that many of the companies selling drugs which are designed to cure cancer also sell chemicals which are known to cause cancer?

For decades now the anti-cancer industry has offered women one ill thought out option after another. For years surgeons around the world happily performed barbaric radical mastectomies (removing the whole breast and much of the tissue on the chest wall) even though the evidence showed that simply removing the breast lump would, for most women, provide an equal chance of success. The medical establishment has concentrated its efforts on surgery, radiotherapy and anti-cancer drugs not because these approaches offer patients the best hope but because the first two options provide work and wealth for doctors and hospitals and the third option offers wealth for doctors, hospitals and the pharmaceutical industry (of which the modern medical profession is, in truth, now little more than a marketing arm.)

Women have been discouraged from examining their own breasts (even though self-examination produces good results) and encouraged to attend mammography clinics (even though the value of such clinics is questionable and many doctors now agree with my long held fear that regularly X-raying breasts might actually cause cancer). Why? Could it be that when a woman examines her own breasts no one makes any money but when a woman attends a mammography clinic there is more work and more money for the medical establishment? How can a once a year (or once every few years) visit to a mammography clinic possibly provide the same level of protection as a once a month manual check-up at home?

Chapter 42: Questions to ask your surgeon

Here are the questions you should ask the doctor when you need to go into hospital for surgery:

1. How often do you perform operations of this type? (And how long have you been doing them?)

2. How long do you expect the operation to take?

3. What are the possible complications?

4. Where will you need to cut? How long will the cut be?

5. Do I expect that I will need a drain, a drip or a catheter after the operation?

6. How soon after surgery will I be able to start eating and drinking?

7. What pain relief do you expect me to need? Will I have to ask for this or will it be provided automatically?

8. How long will I need to stay in bed?

9. When will I be able to have a bath (or shower)?

10. When will I be able to get back to normal activities (driving, sex etc) at home?

11. When will I be able to start playing sport again?

12. When will you need to see me after I leave the hospital?

13. How long am I likely to be in hospital?

When you go into hospital remember to take with you notebooks and pencils (to jot down questions you want to ask doctors and/or nurses and to make a note of their answers).

Note 1

If nurses, doctors and administrators call you by your first name return the compliment. It is disrespectful and demeaning for hospital staff to address patients by their first names when they do not themselves expect to be addressed in that way.

Note 2

Anyone who calls a patient a 'client' rather than a patient should be ignored. Clients are people who consult lawyers and social workers and buy cars and fridges. People who are ill are patients.

Note 3

Patients having surgery invariably (and reasonably) want to know when they will be fit to resume work, household duties and sex. These queries (often unasked) are entirely reasonable. I am, however, constantly surprised by the fact that doctors, when patients ask them how long it will be before they are fit to start work again, will frequently offer a single fixed time scale. It is clearly absurd to tell a professional wrestler that he will be fit for work at the same time as a librarian or telephone operator. And, of course, the health and general fitness of the individual patient has a tremendous impact on the time needed for a full recovery. The only thing a doctor can do is predict functionality. And even that has to be pretty vague. So, when you ask how long it will be before you are fit to start work explain what your work entails - or ask a general question (such as when will I be fit to walk down the garden, play golf, play tennis) which will give you an idea of the answer you want. if that fails try another doctor - explain exactly what you have to do for a living, and make sure that he or she knows exactly what your operation entailed.

Chapter 43: How to read your prescription

When writing out a prescription many doctors still use abbreviations derived from a rough and ready version of Latin. The abbreviations are used to give instructions to the pharmacist who will turn the prescription into a bottle of pills. Here are some of the commonest abbreviations - and their meanings:

ac - before meals

alt die - alternate days

bd (or bid) - twice a day

c - with

dol urg - when the pain is severe

gutt - drops

hs - at bedtime

m - mix

om - every morning

on - every evening

prn - when needed

qd (or qid) four times a day

r - take

sig - label

sos - if necessary

stat - immediately

td (or tid or tds) - three times a day

ung - ointment

Chapter 44: How To Get The Best Out Of Your Doctor

Here are five tips designed to help you make sure that you get the best out of your doctor (and every other doctor who treats you) - and minimise your chances of being made ill by a doctor.

1. Take A Positive Interest In Your Own Health

Patients used to hand over their health (and their lives) to their doctors - without ever questioning what was happening to them. That is a dangerous way to live these days. Patients used to rely on being able to see the same doctor pretty much throughout their lives. They got to know his strengths and weaknesses. And, most important, patient and doctor grew to know and trust one another. These days the patient who sees the same doctor three times running can think him or herself lucky. If you need a doctor out of hours the chances of seeing someone you know are slim indeed.

Patients who take an interest in their own health may sometimes feel that the doctors and nurses who are looking after them regard them as a nuisance. But all the evidence shows clearly that such patients get better quicker, suffer fewer unpleasant side effects and live longer than patients who simply lie back passively and allow the professionals to take over. Be a difficult patient - you'll live longer. If your doctor wants you to take a drug (and all pills, tablets, capsules, medicines, potions, creams and so on are drugs) make sure you know what to expect. Who is going to benefit most? You? Your doctor? Or the drug company? If your doctor wants you to have surgery then make sure that you know what the surgery entails, what the possible consequences might be and what the alternatives are. Good questions to ask your doctor are: `Would you have this operation if you were me?' or: `Would you recommend this operation to someone in your close family?'

Always remember that doctors do some very silly things - mainly because they never really think about what they are doing (or question their own traditions). For example, psychiatrists invariably put all the depressed patients together in one room. The result of this is that the depressed patients become even more depressed. And psychiatrists (and psychologists) describe patients as suffering agoraphobia when in fact they are nervous about going out and meeting other people (sociophobia) rather than going into wide open spaces. (Stupidity and a blind allegiance to unsupportable traditions are not traits exhibited exclusively by psychiatrists.)

Doctors and nurses often complain that patients complain too much - and ask too many questions. Not true. The vast majority of patients complain far too little - and ask far too few questions. Asking questions (and making your needs understood and respected) will help you, and other patients, live longer, healthier lives. Information is the most valuable resource on earth - far more valuable than gold or platinum if you know what to do with it when you get it. Accurate information gives power to those who have it. Information gives you power over many things but most important of all it gives you power over your own health - and increases your chances of survival in an increasingly dangerous and dishonest world. There is, of course, plenty of information available. The world is, indeed, awash with information. Have you ever wondered how you can possibly keep up? Have you ever worried about what to read and, more importantly, who to believe? How can you possibly keep up with the knowledge flow - particularly when having the right information is so crucial; literally a matter of life and death? The problem is made worse by the fact that there are many lobbyists and PR organisations busy laying traps and false information in order to sell specific products and particular points of view. For financial reasons these people often want to hide the truth from you. Much of the material you read in newspapers and magazines has been `planted' by public relations experts - wanting to sell or protect a particular product. The same is true of TV and radio programmes. There are just as many spin doctors in the world of health care as there are in politics. How do you differentiate between the commercially inspired hype and the truth? In our society those who shout the loudest (and have the biggest bank balances) are invariably the ones who get most of the attention - regardless of their real value. You must learn to differentiate between the good and the bad. Do be wary about trusting what you read in newspapers, magazines and even books. The quality of writing on health matters these days is appalling. A surprising number of publications seem to publish press releases and handouts rather than critical assessments. Many 'health writers' have little or no training and no ability at all to 'read' a scientific paper. Most are easily 'conned'. When I was making a programme about the use of animals in drug research I wanted to reveal that a large charity had been using dogs in its experiments - despite having denied this. The BBC producer rang me and told me that we couldn't use the item. Her reason? A public relations officer for the charity had assured her that the charity hadn't used any dogs - only dog tissue. (When I asked the producer where she thought the dog tissue came from she seemed genuinely surprised at the notion that it might have been necessary to kill dogs in order to obtain the dog tissue.) Most medical journalists don't know what questions to ask and wouldn't have the courage to ask them even if they did. Many of the doctors who write for the press are unwilling to criticise the establishment or the pharmaceutical industry. In the end, it's all down to whom you trust. And that's a choice you must make.

2. Don't Be Afraid To Ask For A Second Opinion:

Telling your doctor that you want a second opinion will probably take a great deal of courage. Many doctors are sensitive creatures - they may show their hurt if their all-knowingness is questioned. But just remember that the stakes are high. Your life is at stake. And, if there is time, don't be afraid to check out the past record of the doctor who is going to treat you. One surgeon working in a hospital may have a survival rate which is twice as good as another surgeon working in the same hospital. If you allow the less competent surgeon to operate on you then your chances of walking out of the hospital may be halved. Those are odds you cannot and should not ignore.

3. Remember Coleman's First Law Of Therapy:

If you develop new symptoms while receiving medical treatment then the chances are that the new symptoms are caused by the treatment you are receiving. Doctors do not like accepting that the treatments they recommend can do harm. It reminds them that they are mortal and fallible. But don't just ignore it if you develop a rash, indigestion, tinnitus, a headache or some other side effect: report it to your doctor straight away. Don't stop medication without asking his advice first. Some side effects are mild and if the drug is working and helping to control or defeat a serious or life threatening condition then the side effects may be of little consequence. But other side effects may kill. Many of the thousands who die each year could still be alive if they had taken action earlier when side effects started. Remember, too, that doctors are notoriously reluctant to admit that their therapy could be making you ill. This is partly through ignorance (doctors don't often bother to read drug company information sheets); partly through a fear of litigation (the doctor may be frightened that if he admits that his treatment has made you ill he will receive a letter from your lawyer) and partly through a natural human unwillingness to admit responsibility for something that has gone wrong (this brand of unwillingness is unusually well developed among doctors who are encouraged to think of themselves as godlike by many of their other more passive patients).

4. Always Study All The Options:

There are very few truly holistic practitioners around. But there is nothing at all to stop you being a holistic patient. For example, if your doctor tells you that you need surgery ask him how long you have got before you need to make a decision - and then use that time to make sure that you assess all the possible options. When you are trying to choose between orthodox medicine, acupuncture, homoeopathy, osteopathy or whatever make a list of all the advantages and disadvantages of every available type of therapy - and every available practitioner. Look at the claims and the potential side effects of each therapy and ask each practitioner to tell you where you can find out more. Never forget that you are unique - and that your condition requires a unique solution.

5. Constantly Acquire Information

Information is the key to success in any field. If you want to be a successful investor then you need access to good information. You must know where to obtain information and you must know how to understand it. Exactly the same is true of health. In order to stay healthy - and regain good health if you fall ill - you must have access to good information. Only when you have the best information will you know what questions to ask and how to understand the answers. Doctors (and indeed many others in the health business) are notoriously bad at communicating - even though doctor-patient communication is of vital importance. Since doctors don't seem keen to bridge the understanding gap between patients and themselves it is up to you to make the effort. If you have a long term health problem then learn as much as you can about the disorder and all the possible types of treatment available. I have met patients with chronic health disorders (such as diabetes, arthritis, high blood pressure and so on) who know more about their condition than their doctors. Which patients do you think do best - those who know a great deal about their condition or those who know next to nothing? It may sound cynical to point out that countries are no longer run by governments but by drug, arms, chemical and oil companies but it isn't. It is simply a truth that you should remember. Doctors should do more to defend and protect their patients but, sadly, most are now simply paid up members of a medical establishment which has sold itself to the pharmaceutical industry. In my first book (The Medicine Men), published in 1976, I pointed out that doctors have become little more than a marketing arm of the drug companies. I was laughed at when I said it. But I wonder how many people would still think it funny.

Coleman's Laws:

Here are ten Coleman's laws to help you get the best out of your doctor:

1. If you develop new symptoms while receiving treatment then the chances are the the new symptoms are caused by the treatment.

2. Never trust a doctor who tells you that the drug he is prescribing is free of all side effects.

3. There is such thing as minor surgery.

4. Assume your doctor wants to kill you. You will live longer.

5. When your doctor hands you a packet of pills to 'save you going to the pharmacy' you are probably being used as a guinea pig and helping to test a new drug.

6. Before accepting a vaccine ask your doctor to confirm that the vaccine can do you no harm. There is no point in taking something which can kill you (or make you ill) if you are well.

7. If your doctor wants you to have tests done ask him how the results will affect your treatment. If they won't then the tests are not worth having.

8. Think very carefully before taking a drug if your symptoms are merely irritating. Drugs can kill.

9. If you visit a surgeon the chances are that he will want to operate. Visit a physician with the same symptoms and he may want to give you pills. Remember: surgeons operate and physicians hand out pills; it’s what they do.

10. Drug side effects only appear after time. The big advantage of a drug which has been around for years is that it is unlikely to be the world's most dangerous drug. The longer a drug has been around the more we will know about it.

Afterword

When `How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You' was first published in China I was asked to write a special foreword. In the belief that it might be of some interest to Western readers I have included it here:

Forward to the Chinese Edition of *`How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You'*

As modern, drug-reliant Western so-called orthodox medicine spreads into China the public relations departments of the huge international drug companies will work overtime to convince practitioners and patients that modern, powerful, Western drugs (manufactured in such countries as America, Britain, Switzerland, Germany and France) are the only effective way to prevent and combat disease.

The medical profession will, in general, support and work with the drug companies to promote the belief that the best way to prevent or to cure illness is to take a drug.

In Europe and the United States of America the drug companies now control the medical profession. To a large extent doctors have become the marketing arm of the pharmaceutical industry.

Western doctors may be members of a profession which has a long, proud history but during the last century many doctors in the USA and Europe have sold their soul and their honour to the drug companies.

* * *

Drugs can be useful, of course. Used wisely and with caution drugs can, and do, save lives. And the Western trained, twenty first century physician can do a great deal of good.

But what the medical establishment and the international pharmaceutical companies will not tell you is that drugs which can cure can also kill. Drugs can, and do, cause a great deal of harm.

An astonishing one in six patients in American and European hospitals are there because they have been made ill by a doctor. And most of those patients were made ill by drugs.

Iatrogenesis - the name used to describe the phenomenon of doctor-induced illness - is now one of the three biggest causes of illness and death in Europe and the USA. Doctor-induced illness now ranks alongside cancer and heart disease. Every year hundreds of thousands of patients are made ill or even killed by the doctors to whom they entrusted their health. And drugs are responsible for the largest part of this epidemic of doctor-induced death and disease.

Drugs and doctors can do both good and harm.

The secret of survival is to know how to get the best out of both doctors and drugs; to know how to use them to your advantage; and to know where and how to fit them both safely into an effective, long term programme of self preservation.

And that is what this book, *`How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You`*, is all about.

'I speak the truth not as much as I would, but as much as I dare and I dare a little more as I grow older.' -
MONTAIGNE

For details of other books by Vernon Coleman please visit www.vernoncoleman.com or Amazon Author Central. Many books by Vernon Coleman are now being made available as Kindle books on Amazon.

How to STUDY IN COLLEGE

Improve Your Grades With Effective Studying and Note Taking Techniques

TOM COWAN

How to Study in College: Improve Your Grades with Effective Studying and Note-Taking Techniques

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Introduction

Every student wants to get high grades and achieve academic success. High marks are vital to helping college students land their ideal job and attain a successful professional career. But the problem is that not all of them are able to achieve academic excellence. However, this is not a reason to despair.

If you are a college student and are dealing with academic issues, you are not really alone, as there are millions of students who struggle in college. The reassuring news is that there are now a lot of things you can always do to improve your grades and excel. If you want to know the tips and techniques to get high grades, then this is the ultimate book for you.

This book consists of valuable and proven studying and note-taking techniques and methodologies for college students to help them succeed in the academe and excel in their chosen fields. It tackles about the most essential steps that every student in college must take to improve his or her grades.

Never be frustrated with your low grades. If you are equipped with the proper knowledge and understanding of the secret towards academic success, then you will certainly get to where you want. Now, if you want to know how to study in college effectively, then this is the best book for you.

We congratulate you for downloading this book, and we are very thrilled with the great results you will get with the help of the information and proven study techniques you will get from this book. It has different chapters that highlight the things you need to do to help you improve your grades, develop great study skills and help you achieve good study habits. In this book, you will also learn how to effectively improve your college study skills.

We will help widen your horizon with the information you will get in this book. If you want to grow mentally and have a better career in the future, this book is the best for you.

Again, we congratulate you for getting this book, and we hope to give you a wonderful journey towards a great academic success! Learn How to Study in college and improve your grades through effective studying and note-taking techniques.
Enjoy Reading!

Chapter 1 – *Set and Achieve your Academic Goals*

Goal setting is vital in every aspect of everyone's life, whether it is in one's business, career, health or personal life. If you want to improve your grades in college, setting the right goals is also important. Setting your goals is the first and one of the most crucial steps to academic success and achieving high grades.

What does Goal-Setting Mean?
Goal setting actually means consciously selecting the events that you want to happen in days, weeks, months and years ahead of you. Goals are providing order and structure in your life, letting you focus on particular essential events and ignoring those less important ones.

Goal setting requires careful planning. Without it, you might just find yourself making arbitrary, illogical decisions that will hinder you from achieving your goals.

Setting your Academic Goals
Your academic goals can be either short-term or long-term in nature. For instance, one of the short-term goals you set includes earning an “A” in Physics this semester. For your long-term goal, you might want to achieve a GPA of 3.5 or even higher.

When setting long- or short-term goals, there are some things you need to remember such as:

- Write your goals. This will help crystallize your thoughts and will keep your more focused on your task. When you write your goals, it is also important to place it in a place you can constantly see. You can put in on the wall of your room so that you can always see it every day.
- Make your goals attainable. Do not set goals you know you can't achieve. Always set realistic goals.
- Make your goals more personal. Aspiring to other people's goals may not be very meaningful or successful. It is also very unlikely that you will ever really attain a goal that you cannot actually make your own.

If you want to become successful in setting your goals and in achieving them, try looking at the whole picture and then out things in perspective. Never let your past block you from obtaining what you deserve to get. If you didn't get good grades last semester, do not allow that negative experience to keep you from doing better the next time.

Visualize yourself achieving your goal. Imagine yourself walking up to the stage to get your diploma. Every milestone that you pass today will certainly bring you closer to the moment you want.

Chapter 2 – *Create an Effective Study Plan*

After setting the right goals towards academic success, the next step to take is effective study planning. Just the same with school or work schedules, every college student needs to create and develop an effective study schedule where they can set aside days and time for study. Creating an effective study plan will not just help you become more organized, but it will also hold you accountable for all your learning outcomes.

Creating an effective study plan is also a great way to help every student navigate through his or her college education in a more organized manner. Since there's no standard or correct study plan that works for everyone, it is important for every student to make and develop a different study plan. When creating a personalized study plan, it is important to make a thorough personal evaluation of your schedule.

Creating your Study Plan

Creating an effective study plan is crucial for your overall academic success. Here are the steps you need to take to make and develop an effective study plan that will best work for you:

1. *Make a Time Chart of all your Current Activities:* This will enable you to see how you are spending your time every day. For one week, take notes of all your daily activities. Note the important things like when you're at home, school or at work. You may also note when you sleep and eat. After doing this for a week, determine the times when you can slip in a little time of dedicated studying. A time chart can be of great help to determine the times and days in every week to devote to studying.
2. *Create a Schedule:* After determining your available times and days for studying, start marking your calendar or planner. You can use detailed notes to block out times on your planner or calendar so that you're reminded each time you look at it.
3. *Always Stick to your Schedule:* An effective study plan will work best once it's followed consistently. Develop the right study plan that you can really follow for the length of every semester. Because most students are enrolling in different classes every semester, you need to reassess your plan and modify it every term. The most important thing to keep in mind is to stick to your plan.

Do not Forget your Other Activities

Achieving academic success is not all about reviewing your notes and studying. You also need to balance your social, personal and academic life.

One effective way to make sure that you follow through with the study plan you made is to schedule time for your other activities. It is important to have a balanced schedule so that your mind will become more receptive during the time you devote to studying. When you schedule long days in row studying, you'll certainly get discouraged. You will also become tempted to just give up. Therefore, it is also crucial to schedule for some non-academic activities.

Chapter 3 – *Do not Underestimate the Value of Proper Time Management*

When it comes to improving your grades and achieving academic success of college students, learning to manage one's time effectively is a must. Proper time management can help every student to improve how he/she studies. It is also the core element in successful study habits that leads towards great academic success.

For some students, studying is a really daunting endeavor plagued with interruptions, distractions, procrastination and a lack of free time, which can gravely affect grades and become a source of unnecessary anxiety and stress to students. Most students also find that their biggest challenge in succeeding in the classroom and adjusting to life in college is on how to manage their time effectively, especially for students in community colleges who are often working for long hours. Many adult students are also dealing with some other issues like home and family responsibilities.

Time Management for College Students
Time is a very important for every student. Students do many different activities in their daily routines. Some of their activities are related to their career while others are vital for physical fitness, entertainment or for their overall life. When other activities exceed, like entertainment, then it wastes the time of the student.

No one actually wastes time intentionally. It is always wasted in an insensible manner that is why a student often doesn't feel when he/she wastes time, but then. He or he realizes it on the day of the exam. Therefore, it is important to use your time wisely.

If you waste time, it just means that you are careless about your study or you may not really know how to manage time effectively. Thus, you need to understand the real value of time and be more particular about it.

Managing Time for Study
Proper time management is not just about allocating time against various subjects, but also about identifying right time for every subject, determining the distractions that cause wastage of time and identifying how much time should be given to every subject. Also, effective time management is about dealing with procrastination, which is the number one common problem for a lot of students. To deal with this issue, here are some tips you need to consider:

Clear your Schedule and Do not Overextend yourself. Know that your responsibilities as well as resulting stress are as essential as the needs of other people. You need to set limits around being distracted or interrupted. You may also reschedule your work time to accommodate others. You can reschedule some other obligations you have. Of course, you want to concentrate on your studies without feeling guilty on the things that you are not doing.

Learn to Prioritize. This is one of the most important things you need to do to manage your time properly. Determine what needs to be done first. Identify the most important activities, projects or tasks you need to accomplish first before others. Consider their deadlines and identify what is more important when it comes to your grade.

Avoid any Distractions. There are many distractions students face that could hinder their academic growth or could disrupt them from achieving academic success. If you want to improve your grades, you must learn how to avoid any unnecessary activities that might prevent you from obtaining your objectives.

Set your Own Schedule. No one really wants deadlines, as they cause stress, anxiety, aggravation and worry. However, there are many deadlines you need to meet at school, and if you don't, then your grades will be at stake. A great way to alleviate some stress is by setting a personal deadline. Try to challenge yourself by setting your personal deadlines that are actually earlier. This will not just let you save more time but will also allow you to become more productive.

Break down your Tasks. Estimate how much time you will need to complete the project or task. Do not try to do everything at one time. You need to break them down so that they become more do-able and not too overwhelming. Complete the tasks you can do today rather than doing all things at one time. It is also important to know which task you need to avoid to be able to save more time or determine which activities lead to wastage of your time.

Try to Make things as Enjoyable as Possible. If you really hate a certain project, work on it first while you still have more energy. When you complete some aspects of the project, giving yourself a simple reward can be great.

Remember: It does not have to be Great or Perfect. Not everything has to be great or perfect; what is important is that you allocated enough time, effort and determination to accomplish your task. Just make sure that you understand your instructor's expectations. Then, you have to assess how important the project is and what level of performance is really acceptable to you.

Proper time management is vital in every stage or field of life. This is because time is a precious resource a student needs to complete a task. One single moment that once passed will never come back for you to utilize.

Proper time management is a skill that every student must develop. It is crucial to perform your tasks on time, to complete them perfectly and to use your time more wisely and productively. It will also help you to determine those useless activities that you can avoid to save time. This will help you allocate sufficient task to a project and perform it more effectively. If you are able to manage your time effectively, you will become more productive not only in academics but also in your overall life.

Chapter 4 – *Choose the Right Study Environment*

Every student is unique so each may require different study environments. Many students need a quiet place to study effectively because they are easily distracted by any noises while others cannot study when it's very quiet. They prefer to study with loud music or with a television on.

There are also some students who need to create a "box" to screen out anything that their eyes might see because they're very distracted by any movement. Others can study in a busy environment because there are no any isolated movements that will attract their attention.

Having an appropriate place to study is as crucial as having a good study skill. A person's study environment can become a huge aspect in how successful you will learn, retain information and apply it in your life or career.

Studying with Background Music

Studying while having your headphones on tends to decrease memory and retention, but studying with music on the background can become a valuable aid to study more effectively. The difference between them is that they deal with the level of sound input.

Headphones actually have direct access to your brain through covering the ears, and such direct access can always interfere with learning. This is especially true if the material is still new.

In contrast to music through headphones, the background music has many environment noises that are included in it. It also needs intense levels of concentration to hear the music to the exclusion of the other input. For instance, if you've ever seen someone who tries to listen to a recording in the middle of a very busy work environment, you might have noticed that they close their eyes to reduce the visual input so that they can focus more on the sound.

Some don't use this kind of concentration for environment sounds. Other people are using familiar music to mask the outside noises. Several research studies even reveal that various types of music like the music of Beethoven, Bach or flowing instrumentals, may improve retention of material and intelligence. However, music types like heavy metal, rap music, and hard-driving rock cannot make a similar claim

The Study Settings or Locations

Many students will say that studying in their rooms is a great way to study, but it is actually not true to all.

Before a student studies in his/her room, he/she must first know whether or not he/she has the characteristics to study in a room. The first consideration is to determine if the student is organized. Those who can study in their room effectively are those who will allow themselves to be distracted by some fun things that they have around, like their roommates and friends, email, computer games, etc.

It is also vital for the students to have all their necessary materials close by. They need to set their task and get things done. Moreover, students who can study in a room effectively are those who doesn't confuse the need to study and the need to rest. They should not be tempted to sleep on the bed instead of studying. Also, the student should not be compelled to accomplish some other tasks, like organizing or cleaning the room before studying.

However, a lot of students find that they have to leave their room to be able to study more effectively. This is because they consider their room as a place to play and sleep and not to learn. Such students are actually those who have gone through the process of removing themselves from the “convenient” and “fun” environment and organizing what they want to get done while they are studying. Whether the location is noisy, distractive or quiet, it still depends on how well a student can focus.

Quiet locations, like a classroom or the library, can work for students who are easily distracted and require the minimum visual and sound stimulation. While other students may complain that a classroom or the library is so boring, some students need such “boring” place to study effectively.

There are also many students who prefer a noisier environment so that they can screen out any distractions. In this case, there are a lot of noises that no single noise can draw attention. With this, students can isolate themselves visually through concentrating on what they are studying or books. They do not hear any conversations.

If you want to have good grades, study in an environment conducive to your learning. Whether you prefer a noisy or a quiet place to study, it is important to find a convenient place where you can easily understand your lessons.

The primary step towards successful studying is to create and develop a study environment that will meet your unique requirements and the one that will foster productivity. Since not all students are the same, the right study environment varies. It is also important to avoid distractions to ensure that you have an ideal place of study to become more productive and focused.

This is vital to maximizing your learning efficiency, and when it is combined with proper time management, you will become a more successful college student.

Keep in mind that there is no best study environment that applies to everyone. Identify your ideal place of study. You can do this by determining your learning tasks, learning style and the needed learning resources.

Chapter 5 – *Peer Tutoring: Make your Friends your Teacher*

Peer tutoring is a highly effective studying technique that has been used by many college students to improve their grade and achieve academic success. Peer tutoring is a special type of teaching that complements with the teaching performed by instructors.

Nowadays, an increasingly changing world demands that education changes its emphasis, allowing young people to have a more central role in their very own learning. With peer tutoring, this has been achieved, allowing every learner to play a vital role in the process.

Peer tutoring is not really a new concept. This can actually be traced back to the use of student leaders or archons of Aristotle during his time. Over the past thirty to forty years, peer tutoring has been extremely popular.

In college, peer tutoring takes a lot of different forms. There is surrogate teaching, which is common at many larger universities. It involved giving the older students, often advanced undergraduates or graduates, some o all of the essential teaching roles for undergraduate courses. There is also the proctoring programs that involve a one-on-one tutoring by those students who are quite ahead of other students. They are also those who have demonstrated proficiency in class.

How Can Peer Tutoring Help Students?

Peer learning or peer tutoring can help college students learn more effectively. During the time when college and university resources are stretched, and the demands upon instructors and staff are greatly increasing, it provides students the chance to learn from each other. It also gives them more practice than the traditional learning and teaching methods.

Some of the most common benefits of peer tutoring include, but aren't limited to the following:

- There is a direct interaction between students which promotes active learning
- Students are able to receive more time for personalized or individualized learning
- Students are more open and feel more comfortable interacting with a peer
- Peer instructors reinforce their own learning by teaching others
- Students and peers are sharing the same discourse which allows for better understanding

Also, peer tutoring is a vital confidence booster. When students study with someone their own age, they typically feel more relaxed and confident. They do not feel as intimidated with their peer, as students might with their teacher. They are also more hesitant to raise their concerns and ask questions with a teacher.

Peer tutors can also share their personal struggles with the subject material. They can easily explain the difficulties that they encountered with their problem with a subject, principle or concept.

Peer tutoring is an effective studying strategy, as it leads to better comprehension of material for the tutee. Also, students are able to demonstrate a better attitude in the classroom toward a particular subject matter.

Also, peers easily understand students, since they're closer to each other cognitively. Usually, peer tutors are able to find more effective ways to communicate with other children, and most of the times, they can present a principle or a subject manner to students even better than adult teachers do. Peer tutors can give their students unique models of understanding a particular subject, with the use of fresh ideas, personal experience where the student can also relate to and even use common symbols that can make the learning process simpler.

How can Peer Tutoring Help you?

One of the most effective study techniques you can employ is peer tutoring. Your tutor does not have to be your friend or your classmate. He or she can be your older brother or sister, or someone you can comfortable discussing your ideas and academic concerns with.

Chapter 6 – *Develop the Right Note-taking Technique that Suits You*

Usually, note taking is one of the hardest things for students to do effectively. This is often because it can be very difficult for them to know what they need to write down, how to structure their notes to make it easy for them to study in the future or what pertinent or information should be written down.

By understanding the important of taking notes and the best way to use them, you can easily improve your ability to make them really useful. Note taking can actually be one of the most powerful tools you can use to improve your academic experience and have higher grades.

Before you try to take notes, think about the following question:

- What is an effective note taking and how can I achieve it?
- How can I take valuable notes from written texts or in class?
- How do I study my notes and what should I include in them to help me study effectively?

Now, taking notes is important to summarize, highlight vital information and more importantly, to study from later. Included in your notes should be pertinent information, the questions you have, valid information, ideas, points that you need to study later, examples and more.

The Problem:
Many students often experience difficulty making the transition from high school to college. Those students who did great in high school may actually find themselves struggling once they reach college.

This can be because of an increased freedom. In college, they now need to structure their own time and make their own schedule, rather than doing it for them. Also, a lot of students do not do well in college because the teaching style in college is very different from in high school. T
The instructors in high school are relying more on learning with the use of textbooks, whereas professors in college are relying more on the lecture format. Many students find themselves improperly prepared for the new teaching style and need to rethink their study skills and habits to become successful.

The Solution
The best way for every student to improve grades, comprehension, and retention are through learning how to take notes effectively. Many studies have been and proved that taking lecture notes in college is vital to improving the grades of students.

Facts about Note-Taking

- Note taking an effective way to improve listening, and the use of a logical approach to taking, reviewing and studying of your notes can immeasurably add to the understanding of the student.
- College academic centers are actively promoting note taking in classroom lectures to improve the learning capabilities of students.
- The best students in college are taking the best notes. These do not just aid comprehension, but also make the learning process more active. Most importantly, taking notes make the study time more effective. This is especially true every end-of-the-year semester review

session for final examinations.

- Effective note taking is a vital aspect of a successful study program. It is also a high-level skill that involves different complex cognitive processes, which include reviewing, synthesizing, evaluating, writing and analyzing. However, more than anything else, effective note taking requires active listening.

Important Note-Taking Skills All College Students Must Have

Taking meaningful and effective notes is a critical skill. Good notes do not just help you recall essential information as you review them. They can also help you learn such information and remember it more quickly. Taking good notes is also a crucial way to train your brain to determine important information.

No matter what degree in college you are pursuing, effective note taking is also important. Whether you are in the business industry, science field or education, note taking is a very important skill that can always help you not just to excel in class, but also to develop the type of creative thinking skills that you should build.

Thus, developing a strong note-taking skill is a must, but it is not a skill that is generally thought to everyone. To ensure that you get the most of each class you take, here are some of the most important note taking skills that will certainly help you achieve academic success:

- Always get organized. Start every lecture on a new page. Number your pages and date every lecture. After your class, you also need to ensure that you go back to add a heading or topic on top if every page. This will make it easier for you to find specific information when studying.
- Think! Do not write everything. You do not have to write every single word your college professor says. When you try to transcribe the lecture of your teacher, you do not have any room to rethink about the things you are writing and how they fit together. With this, you will just fall behind inevitably and become frustrated. Every time you listen and write, it is best to think about the information that is more likely to be useful later, whether in an essay, in completing a task or project or on a test. Just focus on vital points that relate to your reading.
- Make a system. There are different ways to organize your notes. You can use graphs, charts, numbered paragraphs, bullets or outline your notes. Think of the ways that will best reflect the way you think, listen to, and process information.
- Review your Notes. Effective note taking does not end in listening and writing valuable information. After writing them down, go through your notes. You may leave a space after every space or after every important section for a summary or a statement of your own words. This is a vital process that can help you retain information and ensure that you understand everything.

Knowing how to take notes effectively and understanding the most important note-taking skills is crucial for your overall academic success. This will not only help you in your academic life but also in your professional life.

Chapter 7 – *Studying for Exams: Effective Tips and Techniques*

Taking college exams is one of the most stressful and tiring parts of college life. Without sugarcoating it, studying for your exams(especially for finals) is very painful, exhausting, and arduous. Such monstrous tests stand in the way between you and your highly anticipated summer break.

So, are you ready for the next college exam you need to take? If you have done poorly in your last exam, do not despair. If you need help to study your exams, here are the top tips and techniques to consider to help you get good grades on your next college examination.

Effective Study Tips for Exams

Learn to Prioritize. It is a great mistake to regard all your final exams equally, especially if you are materially better at a particular subject than another. Many students actually think that they must commit equal time studying for every test. If you are also doing this, then you are taking away the chance to dedicate time on subjects where time is needed.

Make model answers. Identify what sort of questions you need to expect in the exams. You can find essential information about this on the course page or in the course material. If you are not sure about the questions to expect, you can ask your lecturer or tutor for the coverage of the exam.

Study at least a Month in Advance. Students often know the scheduled month for the exam. If you want to get higher grades this time, start studying at least a month in advance. As a student, you know exactly that studying takes time and doing it a little bit over a long period is one of the best study habits you should develop.

Set aside time every week to organize your notes and consider what is going well and what is going badly. Cramming is very toxic, so create a study plan earlier.

Learn when to Stop. Every time you study, your brain is actually consuming glucose. Therefore, it is important to take even a five-minute break every hour to allow your body produces more fuel you need for studying. You can take a walk, stretch or have some healthy snacks. Taking breaks will certainly enhance your studying.

Within twelve to twenty-four hours of the test, you also need to stop studying. If your brain processes too much information for a very long period of time, it will become difficult for you to learn different new contents. You are also more likely to confuse and stress yourself.

Though you might think that it is best to study for the exam as many hours as possible, this can really be counterproductive. If you were training for a marathon, you would not try running twenty-four hours a day. This goes the same with studying. According to studies, taking some breaks can help long-term retention of knowledge.

Studying with a Friend. Another very effective study technique you can employ to obtain high grades during exams is studying with a friend. You can team up with a fellow student, study group or with a friend. You can motivate each other and help one another with some difficult principles and concepts you do not fully understand. Having a study body is a great way to learn. It is also an ideal way to ensure that you can explain something on your own.

Individuals are different, so their needs also vary. It is important to find and develop the right study routine that will best work for you. If you want to study in the morning, it is important to start early before you take a break at lunchtime.

Make Your Own Strategy

Remember that these tips are just a few of the many things that you can do to get the best prepared for each of your exams. No matter what career you are pursuing or course you are taking, there are certainly valuable study tips and techniques you can use for exams.

Chapter 8 – *Changing Your Bad Study Habits & Developing Good Study Habits*

Many college students struggle with many different issues in their lives. Because of the many things that compete for their attention, it can be hard and daunting to concentrate on studying. If you want to progress every year and improve your grades, you need to try and study. The primary key to effective studying is not actually studying longer, but about doing it smarter. You can start studying smarter by changing your bad study habits and developing good habits that work for you.

Change the Way You Approach Studying Matters
Many students look at studying as an obligatory task and not an opportunity to learn or enjoyment. That is normal, but according to researchers, the way you approach something greatly matters almost as much as you do. If you want to improve your grades, you must be in the right mind.

Stop Procrastinating
Many students are guilty of procrastination. It is something that many have done in school, but just because it is a common behavior does not mean that it is fine. If you procrastinate studying, you also run the risk of doing things halfway. If you need to pull all-nighters or always find yourself rushing just to finish a project or an essay, then you have to work more on your time management skills.

Changing Your Bad Study Habits
It's never really too late to change your bad study habits. Whether you are starting a new school year, aiming to improve your performance or grades or you want to excel academically, changing those unhealthy study habit can be of paramount help to achieve what you desire.

If you want to improve your grades, you should assess yourself and change those things that have been blocking you from achieving academic success. All you have to do is to make a new habit and try doing it every day for 30 days.

You must know what it is that you want to change. Write down all your bad study habits and think about what you are going to replace them. It is also important to make them do-able. Never set yourself up to fail. Of course, you are not going to change everything overnight. It requires patience, effort, and determination.

If you want to study more, then start studying for an hour a day and not five or six. Also, if you want to change a study habit, find a technique that you know will work for you and begin with that.

When changing your bad habits, unleash the power of optimism. Stop thinking of negative thoughts and believe in yourself. If you think of negative thoughts, change it immediately with the positive ones. Always believe that you can. Remember that you can always do anything that you set your mind to.

Think positively. Keep in mind that the right mindset can really make all the differences. Think positively when you are studying and avoid any catastrophic thinking.

Never be too hard on yourself. No one is perfect; you're human after all. You may not be able to change all your bad study habits all the first time you try but do not give up. Do not despair. Instead of giving up, get up and resolve all these issues.

Developing New Habits

A good study habit can mean a great difference between success and failure. When you are aware of any of your bad study habits, it is always possible for you to change them.

Think more about your study habits. What study habits do you have? Have you studied in similar old ways without obtaining great success? Are you happy with your bad habits?

REMEMBER THAT STUDYING IS A SKILL. Becoming successful in school requires a great level of study skills. College students need to first learn such skills, practice them and start developing the right study habits to become successful. Good study habits also include many different skill sets such as self-discipline, time management, effort, organization, memorization, and concentration. Your determination to succeed is also vital.

Conclusion

Did you know that even the smartest students could often find themselves underperforming academically? This is usually something that is not their fault. If you are a college student and you find yourself in this situation, it might be because you are still stuck in a rut and aren't sure what to do to improve. With the study tips and techniques highlighted in this book we hope that you can fulfill your academic endeavors successfully.

Being a college student is not easy. There are a lot of distractions and issues you need to deal with. There are also a lot of problems that might hinder you from fulfilling your goals and getting high grades. The great news is that there are always a lot of things you can do to develop study habits, self-discipline and time management skills.

The proven techniques provided in this book will help students to improve their ability to learn by providing an essential source of knowledge and information they can use not only during their time as students but also throughout their lives, no matter what career path they choose.

In the highly competitive business market today, it is vital for everyone to be equipped with essential information, tools, and techniques that will serve as their guide towards achieving their goals and getting to where they want to be in the future. Learning the right study habits is crucial for the overall success not only of the student but of the nation as a whole.

Thank you again for downloading this book!
I hope this book will help you be more successful in your academic career.

Finally, if you enjoyed this book, please share your thoughts and post a review on Amazon!

Thank you and good luck!

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Book 2

"I HOPE YOUR PENIS SHRIVELS UP."

Vernon Coleman

I HOPE YOUR PENIS SHRIVELS UP.

2

VERNON COLEMAN

The Sequel to: `I Hope Your Penis Shrivels Up.

ISBN: 978 1 899726 39 4

NOTE

`I Hope Your Penis Shrivels Up Again book contains questions and answers which appeared in Vernon Colemans agony columns. All the letters reproduced in this book have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the individuals concerned. All details have been altered beyond recognition and anyone who thinks they can identify an individual in one of these letters is wrong. Also please understand that this book of other peoples problems is not intended as an alternative to personal, professional medical advice. The reader should consult a physician in all matters relating to health, and particularly in respect of any symptoms which may require diagnosis or medical attention. While the advice and information are believed to be accurate at the time of going to press, neither the author nor the publisher can accept any legal responsibility or liability for any errors or omissions that may be made. Remember: sex can cause pregnancy and spread diseases. Take precautions.

For a full list of books by Vernon Coleman, please see www.vernoncoleman.com or Amazon Author Central.

My Wife's Panties

Question

I recently found a pair of my wife's panties in my underwear drawer by mistake. I don't know why I did it but I tried them on. I found the sensation so exciting that I kept them on all day and put them into the laundry basket in the evening. Two days later I tried on one of my wife's skirts and put on a pair of her tights and a blouse. I found the experience sexually exciting but also strangely relaxing. I now try on her clothes quite regularly - though she doesn't know, of course. If I know she isn't going to be back home for a while I wear them for as long as I can. I suppose I could stop this strange compunction if I wanted to - but I don't want to. I am 42 years old and happily married. I have always been heterosexual. I run my own successful business and am something of a workaholic. Do you think I could be cracking up or turning gay?

Answer

You're not turning gay and you're not cracking up. Men who get pleasure from dressing in womens clothing usually do so for three reasons.

First, the stuff feels nice. Traditionally, mens clothes are made from harsh, unfriendly fibres. Underpants made from Harris Tweed are harder wearing but womens clothes tend to be softer, silkier and far more erotic to the touch.

Second, there's often some deeply hidden, long forgotten and otherwise irrelevant sexual experience behind the desire to dress up in womens clothes. Maybe you got a thrill from touching your mother's silken slip when you were five. Who knows? Who cares? If you've got £20,000 to waste you can probably find a psychoanalyst who'll help you tip toe through your childhood in search of relevant experiences. But you could buy an awful lot of pretty underwear for £20,000.

And, finally, you probably feel relaxed when you're dressed in your wife's clothes because the soft, feminine side of your personality is being allowed to surface. Aggressive, workaholic macho men who put themselves under a lot of pressure do sometimes find that they can relax most effectively when dressed in something soft and slinky. Wearing a pair of silk panties and a silken slip will do you far less harm than knocking back a bottle of scotch or swallowing a fistful of tranquillisers.

I suggest that you pluck up the courage to talk to your wife as soon as you can. Many women often find it surprisingly easy to come to terms with the fact that they are married to a transvestite. Trying to keep your secret from your wife is likely to make things more difficult for both of you - you will have a guilty secret to hide and when she does find out your wife will have a shock. It might help to point out to her that women often wear mens clothes without anyone batting an eyelid. There is more information about crossdressing in my book `Men Who Wear Bras, Panties and Dresses.

Too old for love

Question

I am divorced and have been going out with a man who is 16 years older than me and whom I love very much. He loves me too and treats me like a person and that I never had in my marriage. My problem is that I have a grown up family and although the youngest girl is all for us getting together my son is dead against it. He says that if I marry this man then as far as he is concerned he won't have a mother any more. He says I'm too old to fall in love. You can imagine how this makes me feel.

Answer

Have one more try to make your son understand that you and this man love each other. Explain to him that no one is ever too old to fall in love but that everyone is susceptible to loneliness. Make it clear that marrying another man will not affect your love for him at all and tell him how much you need his love, support and friendship.

If he won't change his attitude then gently tell him that you suspect that there must have been a mistake at the maternity hospital when the babies were handed out and that someone else must have your real son because you could not have possibly given birth to such a mean spirited and prejudiced oaf.

You will not be losing a son but a nasty little bigot and you will be better off without him.

Betrayed

Question

I had been married for five years when I had an affair with my husband's best friend. I slept with him twice. When my husband found out he started divorce proceedings. I only had the affair because my husband had started beating me up quite badly. My husband now tells me that he has been bi-sexual for the last ten years and that he was hurt by the fact that his best friend had chosen to sleep with me and not him. My husband blames me entirely for the divorce but I feel I have right to feel betrayed since my husband did not tell me that he was bisexual.

Answer

There doesn't seem a lot of point in wasting mental and emotional energy in trying to work out who betrayed whom. You were both at fault - as is usually the case when a relationship breaks down. But I think you should just count yourself lucky that you have escaped from your marriage - not because your husband is bisexual but because if he has been beating you up then he is unlikely to stop.

Incidentally, it might be wise for you to visit a sexually transmitted diseases clinic for a check up. If your husband has been actively bisexual during your marriage then he could have brought home more than a wage packet.

Too small

Question

My husband has found out that I have had an affair and he wants to know why. I can't tell him the truth - it would kill him. It's all because of sex not love. The problem is that my husband is very small. His penis only five and a half inches long and quite thin and I can't feel it most of the time. I try to compensate by making love in different positions but I still never reach a climax. I love my husband but I have had affairs with a number of men - all far larger than him. I must admit that my husband has tried, and still does, but he just isn't big enough. I try not to be unfaithful but I always end up taking a lover for those few extra inches. How do I tell my husband that he is a failure in bed?

Answer

What would you think if you read a letter in this book from a man complaining that he had to have affairs with large breasted women because his wife's breasts were too small? You would, I suspect, regard him as a rather selfish, shallow individual and consider the explanation for his wandering rather feeble.

Or what would you say if I told you that I get letters from men complaining that they had had affairs because their wives (after giving birth to two or three of their children) had vaginas which were too large? Might you possibly consider such men to be self centered and inconsiderate bastards?

(Incidentally, since your husband's five and a half inches is perfectly adequate and well within `average' limits he might well be justified in claiming that it is your physical abnormality - not his - which deprives you of an orgasm during sex).

The fact is that most women don't have orgasms during intercourse - they need oral or manual assistance before, during or afterwards in order to venture temporarily into heaven. Does it really matter exactly how you get your orgasm? If you really loved your husband then it wouldn't matter a damn. Your determination to obtain sexual satisfaction the way you want it is juvenile and inconsiderate and I'm afraid I find your pathetic attempt to blame your husband for your present mess indefensible.

Maybe he will divorce you and throw you out without a penny. You can then earn your living searching for the perfect penis. I am sure that we would all be happy to know that you had settled down with a big prick.

Resentful

Question

When I first got married I really looked forward to having children. But I now have two children (one aged 12 and the other aged 14) and although I love them dearly I'm afraid that there are times when I get fed up and resentful about the way they run my life. Sometimes it seems that every waking hour of my life is spent either looking after them or making money to buy them `essential' clothes, trips or computer software. They never seem to be grateful for anything that is done for them and they sometimes treat my wife and I as though we are servants.

Answer

This is a column about human problems and so I don't usually try to provide advice for or about teenagers, social workers, broadsheet journalists, refugees from the planet Zog, Conservative politicians or others who cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, be regarded as members of the same race as the rest of us. However, the anguish shone out from your letter and so I feel inspired to offer a few thoughts which might be of help.

First, you should be aware that your feelings are by no means unique. The streets and suburbs are populated by individuals who started out their lives full of hope, ambition and pride but who have, through parenthood, been turned into dull and weary `grown ups'; suffocated by awesome responsibility and spiritually dead from the hair downwards. Men who once concerned themselves with such essentials as the price of real ale, and remembering to keep their wallets stocked with condoms, and whose main weekly responsibility was getting up early enough on a Sunday morning to get to the football pitch before the game started, suddenly start worrying about the price of chocolate covered Puff Puffs, and spend their weekends fitting safety gates to the top of the stairs. Girls who only ever worried about visible panty lines suddenly become obsessed with finding the safest push chair and the best buy alphabet spaghetti.

You say that you looked forward to having children before you had them and I'm sure you are right. All newly weds are encouraged to believe that they are obliged to `start a family' as soon as they can. This, it is widely understood, is the price that has to be paid for having access to unlimited sexual opportunities. If you think back you will, I suspect, recall that you were heartily encouraged in this aspiration by your parents and your partner's parents. This is significant and I will return to this in a moment.

Only when it is too late to push the damned things back where they came from do you discover that newborn babies are cute and marginally sufferable only up until the age of about twelve months. After that they gradually become increasingly boring, tiresome and demanding.

Most parents lose any vestiges of hope when their ungrateful children finally turn into whining teenagers. At this point life seems hopeless.

I can, however, offer you a chance for the sweetest revenge. Hold this thought close to you during the coming months and years. It will sustain you in your darkest moments.

When your children finally metamorphose into young adults you can get your own back by encouraging them to marry and to have children of their own. And to have children of their own!

What joy this thought will bring you. The thought of your grotesque and loathsome offspring, who have taken over your life, cursed with children of their own should bring a smile to your lips on the darkest of days.

And now, at last, you will realise why your own parents were so keen for you to start a family.

Disgusted

Question

Your letter about the transvestite in last week's paper disgusted me. You should not print such filth in a family newspaper.

Answer

Careful, sir, your repressions are showing right through your prejudices. The strength of feeling you exhibit suggests that you are unconsciously covering up a very powerful desire to dress up in womens' clothing. Might I suggest that if you try on something in black satin with a nice lace border you might feel a little more at peace with yourself.

Stockings and suspenders

Question

Why do so many of the models who are used to illustrate magazines wear stockings and suspenders?

Answer

Because the concept of pantyhose was invented by the same secret government department which gave us parking meters, carbon monoxide, and the plastic blow up doll. Stockings and suspenders are an essential ingredient in any civilised society.

Breasts

Question

Why are men so interested in womens breasts?

Answer

Males are fascinated with breasts from birth. For the first six months of life the interest is inspired by hunger. Interest then wanes for ten or twelve years. When it returns it is inspired by lust.

In the garden shed

Question

I am in my fifties and since my wife does not enjoy the best of health our sex life is non-existent. To obtain relief I masturbate in the garden shed while looking at pictures of naked ladies. The shed is right at the bottom of my garden. A few months ago I inadvertently left the shed door slightly ajar and looked up to see that the woman who lives next door (who is in her late forties) was standing watching me. Since then every time I have gone into the shed my neighbour has gone into her garden and watched. Recently she has taken to stooping down in such a position that I can see that she is not wearing any panties. I feel a great deal of guilt after each of these sessions but I cannot stop myself.

Answer

And why should you stop yourself? You aren't doing anyone any harm. You're just a lonely, harmless rake in a garden shed. Leaving the shed door open could have got you into trouble if the neighbour's gnome had seen your garden tool and called in the social workers. But solitary manual labour is nothing to feel bad about and the fact that you have attracted an obviously appreciative audience is more a tribute to your natural skills than a cause for anguish. Your relationship with the woman next door is not exactly usual but I don't think you should lose any sleep over the fact that you are both now members of the same Neighbourhood Watch scheme.

Flat on my back

Question

My boyfriend and I were fooling around recently and ended up with me flat on my back on the bed with him lying on top of me. To stop me wriggling he was using one hand to hold my hands together above my head. He then kissed me and started to unfasten the buttons down the front of the shirt I was wearing with his free hand. Finding this difficult to do he pulled out his pyjamas from underneath the pillow. He used one leg of the trousers to tie my left hand to the bed head and one arm of his jacket to tie my other hand to the right hand side of the bedhead. When he had finished tying me up he finished unfastening my shirt and pushed my bra up so that he could kiss my breasts. He clearly found it very exciting to have me tied up in this way. I confess that I was excited by it too. He pushed up my skirt, pulled my knickers and tights down to my knees and made love to me quite aggressively. It was all quite spontaneous and afterwards we both agreed that it had been very exciting. I was quite surprised to find that I enjoyed not having any control over what was happening to me. Is this sort of sex very kinky? I'd like to do it again and my boyfriend has admitted that he would like me to tie him up next time.

Answer

Having sex while one of you is tied up is neither unusual nor kinky. It's very common. An entirely unreliable recent survey showed that 72% of the citizens of Nuneaton do this at least once a week. If a secretary in Nuneaton tells you that her boss is tied up she probably means it. Both women and men confess that they enjoy it. Remember that bondage is not about hurting and it should only ever be done with the consent of both partners. Make sure that the knots can always be quickly and easily undone (by the person who is tied up if necessary) and don't ever tie anything around anyone's neck. Don't get into bondage after drinking alcohol and always arrange some sort of code so that if the person who is tied up wants to be released she or he can communicate this information in a way that will be understood. Yelling: `Stop it, oh, stop it you beast!' isn't always taken at face value in these circumstances.

Breast is best

Question

I like sucking my wife's breasts. Although she hasn't been pregnant for several years she still produces milk which I swallow. Will this do me any harm?

Answer

This habit is unlikely to harm you unless you do it in public in which case it may, if you are planning a career in politics, affect your credibility.

What do lesbians do?

Question

We live next door to two women. I am sure they are lesbians. What do lesbians do together?

Answer

What a daft question. What do heterosexuals do together?

Watch TV? Eat spaghetti with a side salad? Play Scrabble? Hoover the stairs and plump up the cushions in the living room? Sew on loose buttons, feed the cat, water the plants and listen to music? If they are lesbians (and just because they live together that doesn't mean that they are) and are in love with one another then they probably also do all sorts of exciting sexual things to one another when you're not looking. And if you haven't got the imagination to work out for yourself what they do then I think you should remain ignorant. You sound an odious, nosy little toe rag and I think you should get back to masturbating in the lavatory with a copy of your wife's underwear catalogue perched on your knees.

As much fun as herpes

Question

My husband is constantly asking me to let him put a variety of objects inside me - bananas, cucumbers, candles and a roll on deodorant stick have been just a few of the recent things I've had to put up with. If I refuse we have an argument and he sulks. He took topless photos of me and although he promised not to show anyone he had shown them to a friend within two days. He made a video of us making love and, again, took the tape round to show his friend. I would love to leave him but I have nowhere to go.

Answer

Sex games have to be fun and both partners have to be willing. Otherwise they aren't games. Your husband is simply using and abusing you and he sounds about as much fun as herpes would be. Get a job, save your money and within six months you should be able to suggest another site where he can bury his fruit, vegetables and roll on deodorant.

Back passage

Question

I have been going with my present girlfriend for several months. Our sex life is very good but sometime ago while we were having sex she withdrew my penis and put it into her anus. I was rather embarrassed at the time but didn't show it. Since then she has done this on numerous occasions. She seems to enjoy it very much. Is it dangerous?

Answer

Anal sex is far more common than you might imagine. Men sometimes find it enjoyable because the entrance is tighter. Some women claim it gives them a more intense orgasm. Unfortunately, anal sex is illegal in many parts of the world so I suggest that you empty your bedroom of policemen before you try it. It can also transmit dangerous diseases so even though pregnancy may not be an option, condoms are still essential.

Lonely

Question

I am very lonely. Everyone else seems to have friends. Why can't I find friends? I really envy characters on TV programmes who always seem to be surrounded by friends. It has now got to the point where I hate going out because the sight of so many people enjoying one another's company just makes me feel lonelier than ever.

Answer

You have to be a friend to have friends. And true friendships take time to mature. Like seeds growing in the garden you can't hurry friendships; you have to let them take root, you have to be patient and attentive. If you want long term friendships to flourish you have to be prepared to put yourself out and you must accept the bad days as well as the good. To conquer your loneliness go to more places (pubs, clubs, evening classes) where you'll meet people. Strangers will slowly become acquaintances and from those acquaintanceships will be born friendships.

Confession

Question

My husband has a very good job and works away from home quite a lot but I have never worried much about him meeting someone else. He seldom goes back to the same place and so could never build up a relationship. I have thought about him having a `fling' but long ago decided that I would rather not know about it. A couple of weeks ago he seemed very quiet and preoccupied. I left him alone for a while but eventually asked him if there was something on his mind. I thought that perhaps he had a problem at work but he confessed that he had slept with a girl he'd met on a flying visit to France. Once he had told me about it he seemed a lot happier. He says he is glad he has told me. When I got upset he couldn't understand why. He said I'd asked him what was wrong and he had told me the truth - and he seemed to think that this made everything OK. I feel very angry - not so much about his one night stand (he assures me that is what it was) - but because he loaded his guilt onto me and now he won't even discuss it. He says it is over and so I should forget all about it. If he hadn't told me I wouldn't have anything to forget.

Answer

You are right to be angry. Your husband had the fun and now he's leaving you nursing the hurt and the guilt. And you are quite entitled to expect him to do more grovelling. The official EC legislation relating to extra marital affairs (strongly supported by all major religions) makes it clear that every hour of illicit sexual pleasure must be subsequently balanced by a week of intense self-mortification. The legislation is rather weak on exactly what this entails but I gather from advice notes released by Conservative Central Office that you can expect a considerable boost in your housekeeping allowance and, possibly, a small car (between 1 and 1.5 litres, plastic seats and manually operated wing mirrors) as a bonus.

Since your husband enjoyed a whole night of extra marital pleasure (a `night' is officially regarded as `eight hours' during winter months and `nine hours' during the summer) he owes you eight weeks of hand wringing, a good deal of washing up and at least one new set of shelves in the room of your choice. You are, of course, also entitled to take complete control of the television remote control device for the next two months.

And make him talk. Tell him that if your relationship is going to survive (and with time it may become stronger than it has ever been) you need to know why he felt the need to find himself in what can perhaps best be described as an `unofficial legover situation'. Expect to hear words such as `loneliness', `availability', and `boredom' tossed around. And you also want to know what he is going to do about making sure that he doesn't find himself in any more `unofficial legover situations'.

Finally, let this letter be a warning to any spouse tempted to clear their conscience by `spilling the beans' about an affair or sexual indiscretion. Guilt is part of the price that has to be paid when unregulated groin contact sports are enjoyed. Dumping that guilt onto someone else - particularly your partner - is about as sensible as holding a full chamber pot next to the kitchen extractor fan.

The antibiotic

Question

My eleven year old daughter is a normally healthy child who rarely needs to take time off school. Last Monday she had a cough and so I decided to keep her at home and to telephone the doctor for a bottle of cough medicine. I didn't think my daughter was ill enough to need visiting at home but nor did I think she was well enough to sit in the waiting room with all those sick people. The receptionist told me to collect the prescription later that morning. The medicine the doctor prescribed was an antibiotic. Why did my doctor prescribe an antibiotic for a child with a slight cough - without even seeing her?

Answer

Laziness, incompetence, stupidity, a dislike of your child - your guess is as good as mine. As many as nine out of ten prescriptions for antibiotics are unnecessary and it sounds as if your GP is doing her or his bit to keep the drug companies happy by pointlessly prescribing drugs that are more likely to do harm than good. The careless prescribing of drugs for patients who haven't been seen is now commonplace and, as a crime of incompetence, exceeded only by the over liberal handing out of repeat prescriptions to patients who don't need them. One elderly reader of this column recently visited her doctor with a cough. After prescribing a bottle of medicine the doctor said: `Would you like a supply of your usual pills as well?' Puzzled, my reader pointed out that she didn't normally take any pills. Surprised, and apparently not in the slightest bit embarrassed, the doctor confessed that she was the only patient of his over the age of 60 who wasn't regularly collecting `repeat' prescriptions.

The only advice I can give you is that in future, if a doctor offers you a prescription, always ask whether the drugs are really necessary. A good question to ask is: `What will happen to me if I don't take this drug?'

Exciting hobby

Question

I was very interested to read the letter from the man who likes dressing up in womens clothes. When I first found out that my husband likes doing this I was shocked. For a while I worried that our marriage would be threatened. But, I now find my husband's `hobby' exciting and sexually extremely stimulating. I can still remember the first time I ran my hand up his leg while he was wearing stockings and suspenders. I could, for the first time, understand why men like women to wear them! Can you please tell me how common transvestism is?

Answer

No - for the simple but very good reason that most men who like wearing womens clothes are pretty secretive about it. But judging by my mail bag transvestism is considerably more popular than hunting, rail travel or the current government and has far more aficionados than country music, bell ringing or anything shown on terrestrial television.

God fearing folk

Question

I was disgusted by your reply to the man who dresses up in his wife's clothes. Anyone who does such a thing is a pervert and should be locked up - well away from god fearing decent folk. Your sympathetic response will merely encourage these people.

Answer

Who, I wonder, are the god fearing decent folk whose sensibilities are so tender that they must be protected from exposure to men who prefer pink, silky panties and camisoles to grey Y fronts and string vests? I shall continue to provide sympathetic advice and support to individuals whose harmless fancies and delights attract hatred and venom from people like your bad self. And I shall continue to pour scorn on people like you who think that their artificial and paper thin veneer of ecclesiastically based respectability entitles them to look down their noses at everyone else. I'd rather sort sewage bare handed than shake hands with someone like you.

Hard to swallow?

Question

I want my girlfriend to perform oral sex on me. She says it's dirty. What do you think?

Answer

Some people find oral sex in poor taste; others just think it's hard to swallow. But why don't you show your girlfriend what magic you can weave with your tongue? If you take her to places she's never been before she may then be more inclined to reciprocate. You should always make sure that your partner is enthusiastic before trying anything new.

Burned up by jealousy

Question

My ex-wife has got a new boyfriend and he really pisses me off. I see him when I go over to my ex-wife's house to pick up my son on a Saturday. He is good looking, young, drives a smart, new sports car and dresses in really flashy clothes. He makes lots of money and never stops boasting about it. Last weekend I took my son out and my wife's boyfriend insisted on coming with us. He spent a fortune on sweets, ice cream and arcade games - far more than I could afford to spend. And, to cap it all, when we went to the local park he turned out to be a much better footballer than I am. We went down to the lake and he even turned out to better at skimming stones. I feel I am being burned up by jealousy and I don't know what to do.

Answer

Children aren't stupid and although they like presents and ice creams and arcade games they tend to know what's going on. Just be yourself. Talk to your son. Listen to him. Have fun with him. Laugh and lighten up. And just remember that you're not in competition with your wife's new beau. There is room in your son's life for both of you. But you're carrying a very powerful trump card: you're Dad and the other guy isn't and never will be. That's probably why he, poor sod, is trying so hard.

Peeping Tom

Question

My husband was given a telescope for Christmas. He has set it up in our bedroom and although he claims that he is using it to look at the stars I think he spends most of his time watching the women across the road getting undressed at night. We live opposite a small block of flats and you can see into quite a few rooms from our bedroom. One woman in particular seems a special favourite. I've seen her myself without a telescope. She is divorced and aged about 45. She has a rather voluptuous figure. She always gets undressed with the curtains open and the light on and I don't think she would complain. I suspect she knows exactly what is going on. But she's not the only one and although I don't think my husband means any harm I'm worried that he could get into serious trouble.

Answer

You should firmly dissuade your husband from continuing with his newly formed one man Neighbourhood Watch scheme.

The law is rather sexist about this sort of thing. If a man strips off and is seen getting undressed in his own bedroom by a woman then he can be arrested for exhibitionism, lewd behaviour or, depending on his personal endowment, possession of lethal weapon 1, 2 or 3.

On the other hand if a woman strips off in her bedroom and a man who doesn't have an official invitation sees her doing it then he can be arrested as a peeping tom.

If one of the unwilling starlets in your husband's private milky way catches a glimpse of him flashing his telescope at her then the second hand food could really hit the whirling blades. And even though you suspect that voluptuous neighbour is an enthusiastic participant in your husband's Neighbourhood Watch scheme there is a real danger that she may too may turn him in and recommend him for a porridge diet and a job repairing mailbags.

All things considered I think you'd both be better off if you took the telescope back to the shop and got them to swap it for a train set.

Cracking up

Question

I think I am losing my sanity. I do the most stupid things - like putting empty saucepans into the fridge, putting milk and sugar into the tea pot and talking gibberish to myself. My mates think I am a nut case. It is very worrying. Do you think I am cracking up? Should I see a psychiatrist?

Answer

You certainly shouldn't see a psychiatrist if you are at all worried about your mental health. You need to be in tip top mental condition to survive an encounter with anyone in that particular branch of the medical profession. Newly qualified doctors are only allowed to specialise in psychiatry if they fail a series of simple psychological tests and can show that they have serious mental problems of their own.

I don't think you're dotty. If you can still write a sharp letter, spot the plot holes in the average made for TV movie and think of coherent reasons for not voting conservative at the next election then you're playing the game with a better stacked bag of marbles than most politicians.

If it makes you feel any better I too frequently do daft things. Last Wednesday I went out to lunch. I drove 70 miles with my handbrake full on and when I got there found that I should have turned up on Thursday. I frequently catch trains and then forget why and I have twice fallen asleep during the advertising breaks on TV chat shows. I once went to Bristol when I should have gone to Coventry and if I ever wear matching socks it is nothing to do with me.

Sex mad

Question

I am 18 years old and I think about sex all the time. Am I abnormal?

Answer

No. Cherish your youthful fantasies and enjoy them to the full. In a few year's time all your waking hours will be spent worrying about mortgage rates, blocked drains and German measles.

Pissed off

Question

I object strongly to the language you sometimes use when replying to your correspondents. It is not the sort of language one expects to hear a doctor using.

Answer

Sanctimonious and over sensitive souls seem to be increasing in numbers. How do you all manage to breed without getting naked and sweaty? Maybe you simply divide up - rather like amoebae.

I rang up a large company the other day and got told off by a bloke I spoke to for commenting him that I was pissed off with the service they had provided. Sitting on a horse so high that he would have needed a parachute to dismount he told me that he felt that the words `pissed off' were offensive.

Words are merely collections of letters, brought together to express emotions and facts. I believe that it is often easier, and more expressive, to use the sort of short words that most people use and understand than to use long words. But I can manage the long words if you prefer them. So, for example, I could describe you as supratentorially deprived and cryptorchid. But would you understand what I meant? And will the insult work if you have to spend half an hour in the library finding out what I've said?

Zinc dispenser

Question

Is it true that human sperm is rich in zinc? I keep massaging

it into my skin and it helps to keep my complexion clear and young looking. The stuff is cheap, comes in a handy pump dispenser and most partners are happy to assist with its application.

Answer

Human semen does contain zinc but no one seems to have done any research into whether or not massaging the stuff into the skin

improves the complexion. This is clearly an area where research is vital. I have written to the Medical Research Council and applied for a grant for this important work. I will let you know what happens.

More sex, please

Question

After dieting for two months I have lost nearly a stone in weight. I have noticed that as I've lost weight so my desire for sex has increased. I used to make love to my wife no more than once a fortnight. Now we do it two or three times a week. Is there a link?

Answer

It is quite usual for men who lose weight to feel sexier. Women who have fat husbands and rotten sex lives might well be able to solve both problems with nothing more complicated than a decent diet.

Unexpected erection

Question

I am 64 years old and don't get many erections. When I visited my (lady) doctor recently she insisted on performing an intimate examination. I ended up with a large erection and a very red face. What should I do if this happens again?

Answer

Have a willing partner ready nearby and smuggle the erection

out of the surgery as quickly as you can. Don't worry about the lady doctor. If she knows what an erection means she'll be flattered.

Big breasts

Question

My girlfriend's breasts are large - she wears a DD size bra. She is very shy about her breasts and always wears clothes that hide them. How can I persuade her to show them off a little more?

Answer

What you mean is: `How can I help you persuade your girlfriend to make you the envy of all your mates?' Women with very large breasts are often shy and embarrassed by their mammary exuberance. Your girlfriend, who has lived with her breasts for longer than you have, and has probably had to put up with years of sexist abuse, may have grown tired of wise and witty comments like: `Cor, look at them melons!' and `Wot d'ya feed them on, luv?' Just be grateful that your girlfriend lets you look at and play with her assets and try to respect her feelings a little more.

Ugly girlfriend

Question

I am very worried about my son. He has just been promoted and everyone says he should go straight to the top. The problem is his girlfriend. She is a nice girl but looking the way she does she could hardly behave badly. She really is one of the ugliest girls I have ever seen. She has the biggest nose and the smallest eyes you could imagine. To make things worse she has a terrible complexion. When I think of my handsome son lumbering himself with her I could scream. He has had some beautiful girls in the past. Why is he wasting his time with her? I think she may ruin his career if they marry, as the other men will have lovely wives with them at dinners. Apart from that I am worried about what friends and family will think. I get nightmares imagining her face on the wedding photographs. How can I split them up?

Answer

I have been sitting staring at your letter for an hour, trying to think of a tactful way to explain to you that there is more to beauty than skin tone and nose size. By the criteria you have expressed you would exclude some of the most attractive and exciting women in the world from your son's attention. (The corollary is that some of the most physically perfect individuals are among the most unpleasant of people and although they might make attractive ornaments they would make hideous partners.)

I find your cold prejudices, fired by that inspiration which can be so cruel - a mother's love - as *appealing* as used incontinence pads.

But I suppose that what depresses me more than anything is the knowledge that you are right. Your son's career may well be adversely affected if he marries a girl whom you and others regard as ugly. This is not an isolated indictment of the company for which your son works. The bigotry you exhibit is commonplace. I suspect that those who are so corrupted by prejudice that they put appearance above all other qualities are not imaginative or intelligent enough to understand why a happy partnership depends more upon substance than on shape or shadow.

I am, however, somewhat consoled by the thought that if your son loves this woman, and shows more wisdom than his mother and marries her, then disappointment may scar your granite countenance with lines of grief which your hidden rage will constantly fill with tears of frustration and despair. Your own prejudices will, in the end, provide you with the punishment which some would say you richly deserve.

Second opinion

Question

I have breast cancer. My doctor has referred me to a surgeon. He says he will take the breast off. Do you think this is really necessary? A friend of mine had breast cancer but the surgeon merely removed the lump

Answer

Please get a second opinion before you allow the surgeon to remove your breast. Occasionally, removal of the entire breast is the best way to treat this type of cancer. But most of the time it isn't necessary and the cancer can be treated with a simpler, smaller operation which only involves removing the cancerous part. Sadly, surgeons don't always bother to keep up to date. There are many vandals masquerading as surgeons who are still hacking off breasts unnecessarily. Any woman told that she needs to have a breast removed should insist on a second opinion. Any decent doctor will be glad to arrange one - and will understand exactly why it's necessary. Never allow yourself to be treated by any doctor who refuses a request for a second opinion. He or she is likely to be suffering from an overly enlarged ego and a lack of self-confidence. (Odd as it sounds this is not an unusual combination, by the way. People with falsely inflated egos are often low on self-confidence).

Terrified

Question

I think my boyfriend drives far too fast. I hate going out in his car because I am terrified we are going to have a crash. He has had two small accidents already. Whenever I say anything he laughs at me for being frightened.

Answer

Tell him that unless he slows down and drives more sensibly you won't get in his car again. And mean it. Don't let him intimidate you by laughing at your fear. In the circumstances you describe fear is a result of intelligence, imagination and experience. Find something your boyfriend is frightened of and you will be able to turn the tables on him. For example, if he is frightened of his mum warn him that you'll tell her if he doesn't slow down. On a skiing holiday I once ended up with an eighteen year old instructor who sneered at me for being afraid when I refused to ski down what looked like a vertical cliff face. The instructor proudly told me that he didn't know what fear was. I like to think that he became a better ski instructor and more rounded human being after I had used a simple, traditional, physical technique to help him to understand the phenomenon. (`Now are you afraid, you slimy little foreigner?' `Yes, yes, pliss do not my other arm to be breaking!') Embrace fear for it is the key to self-preservation. Only the quarter witted regard it as a sign of weakness.

Obsessions

Question

I am a happily married woman but from time to time I get obsessions for other women. The women I get these crushes on are usually older than me and invariably rather authoritative, snobby, unattainable types. I don't want a lesbian affair but I do want these women to love me and to want to be with me. At the moment I am completely besotted with a woman I know. The other evening she spent ages talking and laughing with another woman and I was so enraged that I went outside and scratched the side of her car with my keys. Why is this happening to me? What can I do about it?

Answer

Freud would have got two textbooks, half a dozen lectures and a monograph out of your confession. I called him up on my ouija board and we both agree that the answer to your problem almost certainly lies in your relationship with your mother. Your desire to be loved by older, slightly distant women suggests that your mother may not have been as loving as you would have liked her to have been when you were small. Recognising this may help you. Even if she is still alive you may not be able to change your mother (if she's dead you'll certainly find changing her an uphill battle) but it may help if you can accept that although she may have failed to show her love that love was almost certainly there.

Why men fall asleep

Question

Why do most men fall asleep almost immediately after making love? When my first lover did this I thought he was just always tired but I've been to bed with quite a few men now and they are all the same. I don't think it is just a male phenomenon because I confess I often feel sleepy after a good sex session! My problem is that my current boyfriend tends to fall asleep the minute he's come - but I often need several minutes of manual stimulation to reach a climax.

Answer

Physiologically, the whole idea of sex is to start a pregnancy. Post orgasmic activity is likely to interfere with this. Nodding off is god's way of ensuring that the sperm that have been fired into position don't get knocked off course by too much leaping about. Men trying hard to make a great impression on a first time lover can sometimes be embarrassed by this phenomenon. More settled lovers may be delighted with the knowledge that sex is an excellent cure for insomnia.

You can solve your problem by getting your boyfriend to take you to orgasm first. Then you won't mind when he falls asleep.

Henry and I

Question

My doctor and family want me to go into sheltered accommodation. I am 72 years old and quite fit but they're worried that if something happens to me I won't be able to call for help. However, the place they have recommended won't allow me to take Henry, my cat, with me. Henry and I have been together for nine years and I can't bear the thought of us being parted. My doctor even suggested that I should have Henry put down if I couldn't find someone else to look after him.

Answer

I suggest that you stand your ground and refuse to move until your doctor or your relatives have found a place where you and Henry can live together. You'll probably need to rely on your relatives since your doctor sounds as though he has the brains of a hubcap and as much talent for empathising as mud.

Despite the existence of an enormous amount of evidence showing that pets are just as important to health as human relationships some so called health care professionals still seem to treat cats, dogs and other animals as of no more consequence than cheap furniture. The result of this ignorance can be devastating. Old people who have been made to abandon their pets often become severely depressed and may die of guilt, anguish and a broken heart.

It is not uncommon for elderly or disabled individuals to refuse to move when they are told that they can't take their pets with them. And many old people refuse to go into hospital at all because they fear that while they are away their pets will be removed.

Not all nursing homes and sheltered accommodation cater for pets and that's fine because not all old people want to live surrounded by animals.

But there are places which cater for old people who want to keep their pets with them. And I strongly recommend that you insist on being found space in such a centre.

Will power

Question

My girlfriend is overweight and is constantly talking about going on a diet. But she never does anything about it. I know she really does want to slim but I suspect she just lacks the necessary will power. I would like to help her but I'm not sure how to. After all she is the one who has got to do the dieting.

Answer

Your girlfriend may, indeed, lack willpower. But there are many other possible reasons why she hasn't started dieting yet. Maybe she doesn't know where to find a good diet. She may be afraid of losing weight (more common than you might think). She may just be too shy to join a slimming club. Why not sit down, talk to her and try to find out exactly why she hasn't yet turned her words into action. The chances are that she won't know herself until she starts to talk. Once you know what is holding her back then you'll know how you can help her.

In the end, of course, it is perfectly true that your girlfriend's success will depend upon her own determination and willpower. You can take your girlfriend to a slimming class but you can't make her slim. But the one thing most slimmers need more than anything else is encouragement and support. Give her that and her chances of success will be boosted enormously.

Two virgins

Question

My boyfriend and I have been together for two years. I am 21 years old and he is 26. He is my first boyfriend and he now wants us to get married. When I told my mother she asked me if I was taking precautions to make sure that I didn't get pregnant. I told her that I didn't need to as my boyfriend and I do not sleep together. My boyfriend wants us both to be virgins for our honeymoon. I thought my mother would be pleased but she was horrified. She said we should sleep together before we get married to make sure that we get on together in bed. I admit I was surprised that my boyfriend hasn't wanted to have sex but I'm not sure what to do now. Do you think I should seduce him to make sure that we are compatible?

Answer

Success in bed won't guarantee a lifetime of marital bliss. If it did then I doubt if there would be many divorces these days since most people who get married have already been for a trial run before they sign up. Successful pre marital nookie is no guarantee that your relationship will last.

If you're going to experiment with sex before you get married (to find out whether or not you are compatible) then there are a whole pile of other things you should try out too. You should make sure that you can put up with the way he eats spaghetti. And you should find out where he cuts his toe nails and what he does with them afterwards. You should spend 24 hours with him the next time he isn't feeling well and you should spend four hours with him stuck in a motorway traffic jam during a boiling hot spring bank holiday. You should help him put up twelve rolls of wallpaper and hand him tools while he puts together a simple, build it yourself wardrobe kit.

If you have sex twice a week for the next fifty years you'll have beaten the national average by miles but you will have probably spent no more than 400 to 500 hours getting sticky and sweaty together.

Compare this with the fact that in the same fifty year period you will have probably both spent around 1200 hours cleaning your teeth.

The conclusion is clear.

You will get a much better idea of whether or not your marriage is going to be a success by standing side by side and cleaning your teeth over the same bowl than you will from clambering into bed and performing sexual gymnastics. If you can put up with the way he squeezes the toothpaste tube from the middle, forgets to rinse the sink and splatters the bathroom mirror with little white flecks then you are probably made for each other.

Drop your panties

Question

I am 43 years old, attractive and divorced. I have no husband. I live with my 39 year old brother. We both caught a bit of flu and went to see our GP. He called us both into his consulting room together and told me to strip first. I stopped when I got down to my bra and panties. `Come on,' said the doctor, `Don't be shy. Off with your bra and drop your panties.' My brother had never seen me naked before. I felt awful but did what the doctor asked. All my brother had to do when it was his turn was unfasten the top two buttons of his shirt.

Answer

I wonder why it is that otherwise sane and sensible individuals will always do whatever their doctor tells them to do - even though they would never dream of doing it for anyone else. A friend of mine who is a GP once sent a very respectable and rather pompous bank manager out of his consulting room to collect a specimen bottle from the receptionists's desk. The bank manager did as he was told - even though this meant walking through a crowded waiting room twice. It was only he arrived back in the surgery, clutching the specimen bottle and looking very red, that my chum realised that he'd sent the bank manager off on this simple errand while he was wearing only his underpants.

I could tell you a hundred - perfectly true - stories like that and so I wasn't in the slightest bit surprised to read your letter.

I firmly agree with your unspoken criticism of your GP. In my view it was absolutely wrong of him to have you and your brother in the consulting room together. And I think that it was absolutely wrong of him to get you to undress in front of your brother. The doctor may have been busy but that's only a reason for his behaviour and not an excuse.

I am, however, even more puzzled by the fact that your GP got you to strip off completely. Phrases which I am having difficulty in suppressing include: `gratuitous nudity' and `dirty old man'. I cannot think of any appropriate tests which would entitle me as a doctor to require a woman complaining of nothing more serious than a mild attack of flu to remove all her underwear while requiring a man with the same symptoms to do nothing more than reveal a few inches of upper chest.

Illogical

Question

My uncle smoked 60 cigarettes a day and lived to be 86 years old. My mother has eaten beef all her life and is a very alert 78 year old. I think this proves that talk about cigarettes and beef being bad for people must be rubbish.

Answer

One friend of mine recently survived a serious car accident, another fell out of a building and lived. By your logic this means that neither car accidents nor falling out of buildings are bad for your health.

Breasts too big

Question

I am 15 years old and quite thin and small except for my breasts. I take a size 36E cup bra. My breasts are much too big for me and there are a lot of things - like sport and dancing - which I do not do because of them. Is there any particular diet or exercise I could follow that would reduce my breast size?

Answer

Breasts are largely made up of fatty tissue and a general weight loss programme might result in a diminution in the size of your mammary assets. However, there is no way of ensuring that a diet results in a loss of fat from any particular part of your body. If you went on a diet (and since you are not overweight you should not be dieting) you might lose weight from other parts of your body. If this happened then your breasts would look even more out of proportion.

Gaining weight might make your breasts look less exceptional IF you gained weight everywhere except your breasts. But this could go wrong, for if you ate more your breasts could simply get larger while the rest of you remained as slim as ever.

Nor are there any exercises you can do to reduce the size of your breasts. Some chest exercises may help to delay gravity induced droop but they won't turn you into a 36B.

The only guaranteed way of reducing the size of your bosom is to have plastic surgery and I don't think you should even consider this for another five years at least. You may be much taller by then and considerably happier with the size of your breasts. You may have grown to love them and to be grateful for God's bountifulness.

Meanwhile, buy and wear good, supportive bras and you should be able to dance and exercise as much as you want.

Addicted to porn

Question

I am 18 years old and have never had a boyfriend or any sexual experiences. I feel that I am too ugly. Recently I have taken an interest in pornographic movies. They make feel very sexy and I can reach a climax while watching them. I watch two or three of them a night and can't relax without them. I come home from work excited and impatient to watch them. Do you think I need professional help?

Answer

No. But I do think that you need more self-confidence and more contact with other people and you're not going to get either sitting stuck in front of a video recorder watching two professionals pretending to have sex with one another. You need to get out and about a bit more and to establish new routines for yourself. Try calling in at a health club on the way home from work. Enrol in a painting class. Take up hockey, aikido or macrame.

Meanwhile, don't feel bad about the fact that you get turned on by porno movies. Research has shown that women are just as likely to enjoy dirty films as men are - though they're probably less likely to admit it. Completely unreliable research recently established that 57% of accountants' wives spend at least one afternoon a week watching pump and thrust movies.

The uncaring, the greedy and the inept

Question

I work with a group of women who only ever seem to talk about housework. They talk incessantly about the price of groceries and how often they wash their curtains. I like to keep my home reasonably clean and smart but I can't get excited about any of these things - and they certainly don't seem to be a reason for living. Do you think I am odd in this?

Answer

No. And before either of us get accused of sexism I think I ought to point out that men are just as likely as women to become obsessed with the mechanics of living instead of getting to grips with life itself. Walk into your local pub on a Sunday morning and you'll find crowds of men wittering on about their twin stroke, four bore, double ended carburettors and about double hammer, triple action home tools that can drill holes in sheet steel. Down at the golf club men will be chuntering about bank charges and slug control and convincing themselves that they are tackling the world's real problems by engaging in earnest banter about the latest bizarre and fashionable but irrelevant exhibition of neo-native finger painting. In pub, club and super market nappy changing facility the talk will be far more likely to be about the goings on in television soapland than the desperate need for a revolution.

It is, of course, much easier to remain obsessed with the minutiae of life than it is to allow yourself to worry about the big problems. It's far less wearying to look at the trees and let someone else worry about the wood.

But it is because millions only ever concern themselves with the trivia - the best way to make a padded pelmet and three ways to eradicate moss from your lawn - that our world has become the obscenely barbaric place it is.

Those who concentrate exclusively on keeping their little bits of the planet looking neat and tidy cannot disclaim responsibility for the horrors of the outside world for it is their apathy which has handed over control to the uncaring, the greedy and the inept.

The entertainer

Question

When I got married 3 years ago my husband had a good job. However, he was recently demoted and we have found it hard to manage financially. He has started to blame me - saying that I cannot manage the housekeeping budget. He works with a man whose wife apparently does wonders with their income. I assumed that this other couple were probably in debt but I recently met the wife in a department store. I was waiting to pay for some stockings. She was paying cash for a very expensive suit. We got chatting and went for a coffee. I asked her how she managed so well. At first she just laughed and said she was careful but suddenly said that she would tell me if I promised not to tell my husband - or hers.

I learned that she visits a house in a nearby town two days a week and `entertains' businessmen. Her husband has no idea but is happy to accept their very comfortable standard of living. She has invited me to join her and says that there is plenty of work for another woman.

I refused but last night my husband had another go at me - saying that I cannot manage his money and referring again to this couple. I couldn't tell him the truth behind his work mate's lifestyle but it all seems very unfair and I am now very tempted to join this other woman. What do you think I should do?

Answer

Sit your husband down with a large piece of paper and a pencil and explain to him exactly where every penny goes. Prove to him that you are managing his money as efficiently as anyone possibly could.

He should then realise that his friend's lifestyle must be being sustained by an extra income from somewhere.

If you want to become a prostitute because its a career you've always found attractive then that's fine. But don't, for heaven's sake, drift into it so that you can try and con your husband into believing that you can feed five thousand with a handful of fish and a few small loaves.

Laddered stockings

Question

My husband and I are both in our 30s. He is more highly sexed than I am and to get satisfaction my husband masturbates. I know this because I asked him how he gets relief when I won't have intercourse. I don't mind him doing this as it is better than him straying to another woman. He does it when there is no one in the house. The problem is that I think he wears my stockings and suspenders when he masturbates. Quite a few times my underwear drawer has been rummaged in and when I've gone to put my stockings on they have been stretched or laddered. I must admit that I was worried at first but the more I think of it the more it excites me. Sometimes I myself even masturbate while thinking about him in my nylons. I wish he would wear them when we have sex but do not know how to approach him and raise the subject.

Answer

Next time you're making love tell him you read a letter in a newspaper about a woman whose husband wears stockings and suspenders when they make love. Tell him the idea turned you on. And ask him if he'd like to try it. But do make sure that there isn't anything on the floor for him to trip over when he leaps out of bed and dashes for your lingerie drawer. He may well break the world record for the six foot sprint. Try not to notice if he seems exceptionally nifty when handling a suspender belt.

Doodle bug

Question

My boyfriend is a psychology student. Every time I do or say anything he finds a sinister interpretation. While I was talking on the telephone the other day I doodled all over the front of the phone book. When I'd finished my boyfriend snatched the book off me, spent fifteen minutes studying all the squiggles and then told me that I clearly didn't love him and had a fixation on my father. I am terrified to speak or do anything in case it is misinterpreted.

Answer

Turn the tables on him. Next time he tells you that a squiggle means that you don't love him ask him why he feels so inadequate and whether or not he has any idea of the cause of his own lack of self-confidence. When he tells you that a chance remark means that you are secretly longing to run off and open a basket weaving factory in Corfu ask him why he always dresses like a homosexual. Next time he tells you that a doodle on your shopping list means that you hate your great grandfather's cousin's next door neighbour's dog ask him if he aware that his mannerisms clearly indicate that he has a wild crush on his maternal grandmother.

He will either go potty, shut up or leave.

From crisis to crisis

Question

Everything seems to happen to me - everything that can go wrong does go wrong. Other people seem to sail serenely through life but I just lurch from one crisis to another. Why is this? What am I doing wrong?

Answer

You may not be doing anything wrong. Everyone gets luck of both sorts. In most peoples' lives the good luck and the bad luck cancel one another out - and the trick is to try and take the greatest possible advantage of all the good luck so that you can ride all the bad luck.

But it's true that some people do get more than their fair share of good luck. Inevitably, that means that others get more than their fair share of bad luck. One guy I know has won the football pools twice. A woman I know has had three different types of cancer.

However, it's not all down to luck. There is no doubt that some people do manage, through their behaviour or attitude, to attract trouble. Then, when trouble arrives, they have an unhappy knack of making things worse for themselves.

And some people have a habit of unconsciously building up ordinary everyday problems into crises - partly because their lives are empty and the presence of the crises makes them feel important and significant, partly because the crises are an excuse for failures in other areas of their life, partly because they want sympathy and partly because crises are, by definition, exciting and attention attracting. Some people seem to enjoy lurching from crisis to crisis; the dramas making them feel more alive.

Love at first sight?

Question

I am in my early forties. I've been married and I'm fairly sensible, sane and cynical. I live in a tourist area of Italy so, not unnaturally, I meet a lot of holidaymakers. Last year half a dozen guys came over to play golf for a few days. I got chatting to one and we went out for drink. I am fairly cynical about men and have never believed in love at first sight but I really fell for this guy. What's more he seemed to feel the same way. He told me that his wife had died three years earlier. We met every night, made love (which was wonderful) and really seemed to feel at ease with one another. Two nights before he left he told me that he had booked a flight back here in about three weeks time and was going to stay with me for a couple of weeks to try and persuade me to return to the UK with him. He held my face in his hands, looked directly at me and said: `I promise I'll never hurt you and I'll never run out on you.' I promised to wait for him and trusted him absolutely.

He never came back. He hasn't written or phoned and I am absolutely heartbroken. I never thought that he was lying to me because there was no reason for him to lie. He gained nothing from it. He wasn't trying to get me into bed because we had already done that. I hadn't asked him to return. I hadn't asked him for anything.

I can understand that people on holiday get carried away and then reality strikes when they get home but surely he could have sent me a note. For 59 minutes of every waking hour it goes round and round in my head. Why did he say all those things if they were lies? Why deliberately hurt me?

Answer

Maybe he meant what he said but lost his nerve when he got back to reality; and maybe he now feels guilty about letting you down. Maybe he lied about his wife dying. Maybe he lied about his job or about how wealthy he is and now feels embarrassed. Maybe he is a real heel and simply wanted to create a fantasy future and you were unwittingly playing a part in his fantasy world.

Maybe he is a lying, cheating, psychopathic bastard who gets a kick out of hurting people.

That's a lot of maybes. And a lot of uncertainty.

Even if he didn't give you his address (and if he didn't then you should fear the worst) you should be able to trace him through the hotel or holiday company with which he travelled. If they won't give you his address tell them you've just found some documents he left behind and ask them to forward an envelope to him. Write to him and ask him to get in touch with you. If that doesn't work write again and tell him that unless you get a reply you'll travel to England to see him. If he has something to hide that should produce a reply.

The jobbing builder

Question

My husband works for himself but is very unambitious. He runs his own small business and whenever he thinks we have enough money in our bank account he just stops work until most of the money has gone. He is a jobbing builder and turns down a lot of work - particularly during the summer months when the weather is good. He just switches on the telephone answering machine and goes fishing. How can I persuade him to take his responsibilities more seriously? I don't want him to become a workaholic but I do the books and last year he had a total of 12 weeks holiday and even during the weeks when he worked he never worked more than a 40 hour week.

Answer

Your husband will probably live a healthy, happy life. While towns full of workaholics are digging themselves into early graves he is enjoying himself and guaranteeing himself an extra couple of decades of stress free life.

When I read your letter I was reminded of an Indian tribe in Montana which was trained to operate a carpet factory. The factory had been built as part of some American government policy of encouraging the Indians to become more self-reliant.

The factory ran successfully for six weeks and then the Indians stopped work. When investigators were sent to find out why the Indians had stopped work they were told that each member of the tribe had put a new carpet down in his home and so there was no longer any need for a carpet factory. The empty factory still stands; an enduring monument to an unsophisticated form of logic and an almost childishly innocent approach to life.

Your husband will probably never be rich in cash terms. But he will be happy. And you can be too. Don't try to change him. Enjoy the lifestyle he has created for himself.

One big party

Question

I went out with one boy for six months and we were really happy together - life with him was like one big party. After I twice saw him with other girls I finished with him. After that I met another boy who I have been going out with for several months. He has been really good to me. He says he loves me and he buys me presents and I like him quite a lot. But now the first boy wants me back. He admits he treated me badly but he says he wants us to get engaged. I don't know whether to trust him after last time. Everything is made more complicated by the fact that the boy I have recently been going out with will be very hurt if I finish with him. I think he'd like to marry me too.

Answer

Isn't life a bitch? Just when you think you've got things sorted out along strolls fate, sneering at all your plans, sending good sense flying out of the window and forcing you to answer questions to which there are never going to be any answers.

You have described what is, I suspect, a pretty classical female dilemma: should you stick with the solid, reliable, loving puppy who can put up shelves and mend your car and who will always remember your birthday or should you take your chances with the irresistible charmer who has replaced his fly zip with quick release Velcro and has a little black book that makes the London telephone directory look like a skimpy paperback?

If you stick with Mr Reliable then the chances are that in a couple of years time you'll start secretly wondering whether life with Mr Nasty might not have been more exciting.

With Mr Reliable's slippers by your bed you'll always have a fridge that works, your bathroom will be festooned with shelves and he'll always take his boots off before he comes in from the garden but don't expect too much nude, moonlight sex on Cannes beach.

If you go with Mr Nasty then you'll probably regret the decision as soon as you find hard evidence that he's been teaching all your friends the ins and outs of horizontal aerobics and generally banging away like an unfastened shed door in a storm.

The comfortable, reliable one sounds about as much fun as a mustard poultice. You obviously don't love him.

And you'll regret shacking up with Mr Super Groin when he slopes off with your best pal and leaves you with three kids, two whippets and a five month rent arrears.

Dump them both and wait until you find someone you like AND love.

Missing underwear

Question

I am a female student living in a house with my boyfriend and another male student. Recently I noticed that some of my underwear had gone missing. I thought nothing of it until I went into the other man's room to borrow a textbook and to my horror noticed one of my bras under his bed. I didn't say anything and now I don't know what to do. Should I tell my boyfriend or should I confront the guy and see what he has to say?

Answer

I think this is probably the time for subtlety rather than confrontation. Tell the guy you know he took your underwear and ask him why. There are several possible explanations. First, he might have taken your underwear as a masturbatory aid. If he has then tell him that you'd rather he supported his fantasies with someone else's smalls. Second, he might have taken your underwear because he wanted to wear it. If he admits to this then suggest that he buys his own. Third, if he confesses that he has fallen in love with you (and you haven't fallen in love with him) then it would probably be wise to suggest that life for all of you will be easier if he moves out and finds somewhere else to live. If he tells you that he borrowed your bra to use as a catapult, because he needed to carry two melons home from the supermarket or so that he could complete a structural engineering project tell him you'll give him thirty seconds to come up with the truth or else you'll shop him to your boyfriend.

The worrier

Question

My wife and I recently went on our first holiday for three years. As soon as we got there she started talking about all the things she'd got to do when we got back. Over the six years that we've been married I've noticed that she does this a lot. Whatever we're doing she always *wants to talk about the thing we're going to do next. We recently decorated the living room* together but instead of enjoying the results she now just talks about what she wants to do to the kitchen. Even when we're making love she finds other things to talk about. She's always worrying about stuff that might or might not happen and she's always making lists and plans for the future. How can I persuade her to take more interest in the present?

Answer

Tell her what you've noticed. Be tactful and gentle about it but tell her. Ask her to try and slow down a little - for both of your sakes. Life is hard enough at ordinary speed. Your wife is running with the turbo booster on and the throttle jammed open. Try and persuade her to smell the flowers she's grown before she worries about the next planting.

Three nipples, two breasts

Question

My girlfriend has three nipples. The extra one is just underneath her left breast. She is very self-conscious about it and gets quite embarrassed if I mention it or draw attention to it. How unusual is this?

Answer

Lots of people (male and female) have a spare nipple. Try not to make a big thing of it. I'm not surprised she's self-conscious about it if you point it out to people. I have this terrible vision of you standing up on the beach shouting: `Hey, folks, look at this! My girlfriend has got an extra nipple!' How would you like it if she told strangers about your very tiny todger?

Torrid affair

Question

My husband recently found out that I had had a brief, casual and rather torrid affair with a man I met through my work. It wasn't a love affair - it was just sex. My husband made me tell him all about it. He wanted to know what we'd done together, how often we'd done it, where we'd done it and so on. He wasn't satisfied until I'd told him everything in great detail. He even made me describe the other man's penis. Afterwards my husband made love to me quite fiercely. It was the best sex we've ever had. He didn't say anything but I got the impression that my confessions had excited him. And I suspect he would like me to do it again with someone else. Could I be right?

Answer

You could be. Some men do get excited by the knowledge that their partners have been making love to other men. But I strongly suggest that before you follow your hunch you talk about this. Even if he gets turned on by your infidelity your husband will probably want to lay down some ground rules. Safe sex at all times. Nothing indiscreet. No anal sex. That sort of thing.

Teenage crush

Question

I am 42 years and quite happily married. The family next door have a 16 year old girl who seems to have developed a crush on me. Whenever I see her she flirts with me outrageously. At first I was embarrassed but I confess that I have recently found her attention flattering and exciting. My wife was out of the house yesterday and she came round to ask me to help her with some homework. She was wearing a very short skirt, a thin T shirt and little or nothing else. While we were sitting together on the sofa she got closer and closer to me. She was pretending to take an interest in what I was writing in her notebook but she obviously wanted me to kiss her and in the end I did. I'm absolutely certain that if I had wanted her to go further she would have been quite happy to do anything I wanted her to do. I don't know what the hell to do now. I would dearly love to take her to bed but I have a suspicion that I'm playing with dynamite.

Answer

Whoa! Down boy! I prescribe cold showers three times a day. Next time you see this girl and feel a stirring in your groin try to believe that you've got a pressure sensitive anti-personnel mine strapped into your underpants.

You aren't playing with dynamite. People play with dynamite and live. You are blindfold, naked and drunk and you are juggling with half a dozen petrol driven chain saws while walking a cheese wire above a 5,000 foot drop into a shark infested lake.

Of course, you'll have fun. Wonderful gravity resistant breasts. Eager, adoring eyes. Firm skin like soft velvet. Magic, stolen, secret moments of loving. And then she will fall in love with a spotty 17 year old and tell her Dad about you. Blame. Wagging fingers. Cruel accusations. Little miss sixteen will wreck your marriage, ruin your reputation and suck you dry.

I suggest that you smile sweetly when you see her but make sure you're never alone with her again.

The annoying boyfriend

Question

My boyfriend really annoys me. He is only ever concerned with himself. I am very concerned about a wide variety of political issues. I campaign about cruelty to animals and about environmental abuses. But he won't get interested in anything. He says it's all a waste of time. He says that THEY won't ever take any notice of people like me so I'm wasting my time writing letters and going on marches. All he is interested in is his career, his car and having a good time. He works as a television presenter and when I try to get him to use his position to help my campaigns he refuses, saying it would damage his career to get too involved. I'm beginning to think that we might not be very well suited.

Answer

The world is divided into two groups of people: those who are selfish, narcissistic and self-obsessed and those whose concern for themselves is tempered or even overwhelmed by their genuine concern for some other aspect of life.

Individuals in the first group tend to become politicians or TV presenters and acquire far more power, money and fame than is good for them or anyone else. They find it difficult to understand why people like you get so upset about things that don't directly concern them.

People in the second group, like you, suffer endless agonies of guilt, frustration and anger because they know what is wrong with the world, they want to put it right and yet they find that those in power won't listen to their screams of outrage.

You, I'm afraid, are one of the unlucky ones. You are in the second group. You CARE. And you won't ever be able to escape from that burden.

Say goodbye to your shallow boyfriend. Your relationship has no future. He won't change and you can't. He will become increasingly irritated by your seemingly illogical commitment to change the world and you will find his conceit, self-satisfaction, arrogance and *aloofness increasingly insufferable.*

Inhibited

Question

My wife and I have been married for nine years and have two lovely children aged six and eight. Unfortunately, we are never likely to add to our family since our sex life has more or less completely dried up. We used to have terrific sex together but these days the children always seem to be around and even at night my wife is constantly worried about them coming in and finding us. On the rare occasions when we do try and do it I find the need to be quiet inhibiting to say the least. Things have got so bad that when we recently left the children with my parents and went away to a hotel it was a total disaster. I couldn't even get an erection. It isn't just our sex life that has suffered. We never seem to have time to do anything together any more. We used to talk and laugh and share things - now everything revolves around the kids.

Answer

If you allow things to continue the way they are then your marriage will soon begin to founder. The lack of sex is bad enough but your current failure to find time to communicate is likely to be have an even deadlier effect on your relationship. I fear it won't be long before one or both of you starts looking for extracurricular sex and companionship. As the 17th century philosopher Sir Ramick Hobbs once said: `Neither man nor woman can live for child alone'.

What is happening to you is very common. The pressures and responsibilities of parenthood often mean that all the love and time that is available gets spent on the kids - with the result that there is none left for sharing between partners. Since children have a quite insatiable appetite for both love and time it's no good waiting for them to say: `Hey, you two guys should have some quality time together!' Wait for that and you'll wait too long. Don't wait for them to give you time together - take it, guard it, treasure it and use it!

You need to teach your children to respect your relationship as man and wife. You should explain to them that you need private time for one another (just as they will want time and space to themselves) and that just as you won't enter their room uninvited so they must respect your privacy.

And, just in case the little bastards are slow in learning, put a lock on your bedroom door - and use it!

Fierce rows

Question

I am having terrible rows with my thirteen year old daughter. She disagrees with everything I say and some of the rows we have are frighteningly fierce. I have never known anything like it before and it frightens me.

Answer

I'm sorry. I only give advice about how to deal with human relationships. Teenagers do not fit into this category. I can only suggest that you hold firm and try to stay calm. The crisis you are going through will resolve itself in around six years. If things get really bad clench your fists, stamp your feet, shout, threaten to leave home and tell her that all your friends have much nicer daughters.

Shared husband

Question

My husband are both in our forties and enjoy each other's company very much but he has always been much more highly sexed than I am. Recently I found that I just could not keep up with his demands. He was exhausting me. The solution to my problem came as I was talking to a friend who was recently widowed and in her mid-fifties but still very smart and attractive. For three years now we have been satisfying my husband's sexual requirements between us. I am very happy with this state of affairs. My husband and I have grown closer together now that we have found a solution to this, our only problem.

Answer

Thank you for telling me about your success. I get armfuls of letters every week and many of them are from people whose lives are in a mess so it was a real delight to get a letter from someone who has found a practical and lasting solution to a potentially disruptive problem!

As you have discovered for yourself the best solutions do not always fit in neatly with society's expectations. Some individuals would probably frown disapprovingly on the way in which you have found happiness and mutual satisfaction but I know from my mail bag that the most enduring solutions are often the most surprising and most imaginative.

I know of many other similar relationships up and down the country and you are by no means the only woman who has found that one into two can make three happier. Maybe god meant his advice to be taken seriously when he told us to love our neighbours.

Self-abuse

Question

As a child I was abused by my father. My wife, who was much older than I am, said only immoral men wanted or enjoyed sex. After our babies were born she would start to sexually arouse me and then turn over laughing. For the last 25 years of our marriage I masturbated. I continued to do so after my wife's death. Recently I was talking to some people I met who are very religious. They listed some sins and said that self-abuse was one of the worst things a person could do. They say that god will never forgive me and that I will burn in hell. As a result I am very ashamed of what I did to myself and I do what I can to atone for my sins. I deny myself this sexual release. What is your opinion? Is what I did a truly terrible sin?

Answer

It is no coincidence that so many people whose parents were real bastards end up marrying real bastards. They do so because their self-respect and self-confidence has been shattered and they are, as a consequence, vulnerable, frail and easily manipulated.

Since an overwhelming susceptibility to guilt is a common result of a lack of self-assurance such individuals (and you are clearly in this category) are also commonly abused and taken advantage of by religious groups.

I suspect that the manipulative, spiritually jackbooted, maniacs who told you that masturbation is a major sin were either intellectual sadists, the sort of people who get their kicks out of making other people suffer, or else after your money, your obedient support and your soul (probably in that order). I'll lay 10 to 1 in guineas that full atonement will eventually require regular cash donations.

If I made a list of the world's worst one million sins masturbation would be in the last few thousand, along with picking your nose in public.

You have done nothing to be ashamed of. Masturbation is a perfectly natural, healthy way for a lonely individual - male or female - to find sexual release. Just about every animal in the world masturbates from time to time.

Please have nothing more to do with these cruel people. I will pray to my God, an altogether more compassionate being, that you find a kind and loving partner with whom you can share body, mind and soul but until then - carry on masturbating!

Going to America

Question

My mother and I plan to go to America in the summer but I am worried that at her age flying may be dangerous. What do you think?

Answer

Buses are dangerous. Lifts are dangerous. Walking across the street is dangerous. Trains are dangerous. Cars are dangerous. Bicycles are dangerous. But sitting in an armchair can be dangerous. And lying in bed too much is very dangerous. If her doctor says she is fit to fly and the airline will take her then go - though make sure you both buy health insurance because doctors and hospitals there are notoriously reluctant to treat anyone who isn't either fully insured or swathed in a thick layer of dollar bills.

And don't worry! Aeroplanes carry first aid kits and I'm absolutely confident that stewards and stewardesses love the excitement and challenge of caring for a sick passenger in mid-air. Besides, there's nearly always at least one doctor on board (usually flying off on a tax deductible golfing or skiing holiday masquerading as a training course) and people who fall ill in mid-air have a wonderful fuss made of them. Go and enjoy. Flying is only really dangerous when the damned planes fall out of the sky and then it doesn't matter how old you are.

I kissed my teacher

Question

I had what I thought was a crush on one of my teachers. Since then I have found out (through eye contact and her touching me) that she feels the same way about me. I now realise that I really do love her. I have kissed her and this week she asked me to make love to her. I know that you would advise me to bring all this to an end but I can't bear to finish it.

Answer

I can understand your dilemma. I'm sure that what is happening to you is exciting. Any new love affair is exciting. But when you're sexually inexperienced (I assume that you're sexually inexperienced) and struggling to cope with the torment of a pubertal emotional maelstrom, and a fully grown woman with proper breasts and an adult complement of pubic hair tells you that she wants to go to bed with you the excitement levels must go off any measurable scale. I can quite understand the fact that you can't bear to end this blossoming relationship and your hesitation and apprehension is, in truth, a commendable tribute to your maturity.

One of the reasons why society tends to punish adults severely when they have sex with children (and however well-developed you may be, in the eye of the law you are still a child) is because adults are supposed to be better able to deal with temptation.

To say that your teacher is behaving irresponsibly is surely an understatement of monumental proportions. Your teacher is behaving so stupidly that there has to be a chance that she is mentally ill.

If you go to bed with your teacher someone will find out. And when they do you will share a considerable amount of pain. Your teacher will have done to her career what she would have you do to her. The only good advice I can give you is to somehow find the strength to turn down this opportunity. If you are convinced that your love will last (and I am sure you are) then maybe you could try to persuade your teacher to move to another school so that you can give your relationship a chance to mature.

If, despite all this advice, you find the call of your loins too strong to ignore just make sure you use a condom.

Equal rights

Question

Why should women expect to be treated equally? I work with a woman who demands equal rights but for one week every month she takes time off and expects to be excused her mistakes because of `hormonal' problems. If men and women have equal rights why shouldn't I be entitled to one week every month when I can blame everything I do wrong on my periods?

Answer

Stop whingeing. The problem you outline has already been dealt with by the bureaucrats. EC Standard Human Body Equality Regulation FR847/c states that: `employees of a male gender are entitled to select one week in four when errors of commission or omission, and events of physical clumsiness, must be excused on the grounds of quasi hormonal imbalance'. The regulation goes on to state that male employees must select their weeks of `substitute menstrual incompetence or incapacity' within seven days of commencing their period of employment. This facility is available only to men under the age of fifty - after that Regulation CD2390/f becomes operative.

Promotion

Question

My husband recently applied for a promotion at work and in order to oil the wheels a little we invited his boss and his wife around to dinner. I hadn't met my husband's boss before but thought he was very charming and attractive. The next day, after my husband had gone to work, his boss called round to bring me some flowers as a `thank you'. I made him a coffee and we got chatting. He made it pretty clear that he found me attractive and hinted that if I slept with him he would give my husband the job he wanted. I am afraid I was all too eager. But when we made love it was very disappointing. He had no idea of foreplay and came within 30 seconds of putting his penis inside me. He then rolled over and fell asleep. I was left feeling very frustrated and couldn't wait for him to leave.

My husband got his promotion and I got rid of my guilt by telling myself it was worth it to see him so happy.

But the next week, while my husband was at work, his boss came around again. When I told him I didn't want to go to bed with him again he said that if I refused he would sack my husband. Since then he has called round at least once a week and had sex with me (it isn't making love). I hate every minute of his company. How can I get out of this situation?

Answer

Call the bastard's bluff. Point out to him that if he sacks your husband and ruins your life you will take him down with you. Explain that if he carries out his threat you will report his infidelity to his wife. Warn him that you will encourage your husband to sue him for wrongful dismissal - and point out that you will entertain the resulting tribunal and the listening journalists with a blow by blow account of his sexual inadequacies. I very much doubt if you will hear any more from him. Indeed, I suggest that once you have told him your plans, and just before he leaves with his tiny tail tucked between his legs, you tell him that you feel that your husband deserves a bigger office, a more seemly pension plan and a much more expensive motor car.

Running low?

Question

Is it possible to run out of sperm? Masturbating is my favourite hobby and I am worried.

Answer

You will not run out of sperm. Indeed, since sperm have a limited shelf life masturbation gets rid of the old ones and makes space available for new, young, vibrant sperm. Because of this masturbation can make a man more fertile! Incidentally, I was impressed the way that you described masturbation as a hobby. I wonder who will be the first celebrity or MP officially to list masturbation among his or her hobbies and interests.

Responsibility

Question

A lot of people near where I live have animals but don't look after them properly. I know one house where 20 rabbits are *kept* in two small cages. And I know people who have dogs but never take them for walks or look after them. People who acquire animals as pets should realise that there is a lot of responsibility involved.

Answer

Looking after animals properly takes time and money - and is a long term commitment. If you know someone who doesn't look after an animal properly you have a moral responsibility to report them to the police - once you've done this make sure that the police take action to stop the cruelty. (If they hesitate point out that mistreating an animal is behaviour likely to cause a breach of the peace).

No orgasms

Question

I have been married for 35 years. In all that time I have never experienced an orgasm. I recently telephoned your Helpline and discovered what I have been missing all these years. However, I can only achieve an orgasm by masturbating and it takes quite a long time - half an hour or more. I cannot achieve an orgasm through penetration and my husband gets tired or bored long before I've reached an orgasm through masturbation. Why does it take so long? A friend in whom I confided told me that it only takes her five minutes to climax.

Answer

Lots of women take a long time to journey into never-never land. And it is abnormal for a woman to get there through ordinary, penetrative sex. So there is nothing wrong with you. But since thirty minutes is long enough for cramp and muscle fatigue to affect the most ardent lover why not share the digital duties with your husband? And don't be afraid to enlist some battery aided support.

New neighbours

Question

Last year we inherited some money and bought a new house on an exclusive housing estate. We were rather worried that our new neighbours would look down on us but they turned out to be very friendly and we soon got invited to parties, dinners and so on. Then at a barbecue we discovered that they were into wife swapping and wanted us to join them.

I was quite shocked and horrified when my husband told me that he was keen. I told him that I had no intention of sleeping with any of the men or letting him sleep with any of the women. He insists the neighbours seem happy with what he describes as their `hobby' and says he can't see why we shouldn't join in.

Since then I have avoided the neighbours but my husband continues to be friendly with them. Every time he goes out into the garden, or works on his car, one of the women appears and starts chatting to him. Now I daren't leave him alone in the house in case something happens. I feel like a prisoner and I am terrified that he is going to get involved. I want to move but he doesn't. Although I don't want to join in the partner swapping I sometimes feel that if I agreed then at least I would know what was happening rather than being tortured by suspicion.

Answer

Moving house won't stop you feeling suspicious and - unless you move to somewhere suitably remote and well away from civilisation - won't stop your husband having a little extracurricular nookie. Come to think of it even if you go somewhere really remote - an igloo in the Arctic Circle, a tent in the Sahara or a semi-detached in Coventry - he won't necessarily stop thinking about it.

You and he need to talk about this. You both have to find out how you can put sparkle and excitement back into your sex life. He has to accept that you don't want to be handed around the Close like a cookery recipe but you have to accept that he obviously wants his cocoa spiced up with a bit more oomph.

There are lots of ways in which you can make things more exciting. For example, I get heaps of letters from women telling me that their love lives have been revitalised by a handful of indecent lingerie. Or maybe you could experiment with a little bit of fantasising or role playing. Dress up in something two sizes too small and get your hubby to take you out for a drink in a hotel bar. Your neighbours' hobby need not threaten your marriage if you are prepared to acknowledge that your husband's eagerness to get involved suggests that your marriage needs some restoration work.

First sex

Question

I had my first sex when I was a boarder at a girls' school. It was with the matron and she was a wonderful lover. Since then I have enjoyed an exciting sex life with girls and women. After school I started an intense affair with a woman I was working with. I found out that she was making love to her son, and with her encouragement I went to bed with them both. I eventually paid the price by getting pregnant. I had the child - a son - who was aware of my female lovers as he grew up. When one particular affair ended I was distraught and my son was a great comfort to me. He then became my second male lover. I still sleep with him though I also enjoy lesbian affairs. I have read in your column about relations between a brother and a sister and wonder how many cases of caring but incestuous relationships there are.

Answer

Before I started to write this column I honestly thought that loving, caring, incestuous relationships were as rare as honest Tories. They aren't - they are quite common (loving, incestuous relationships that is - honest Tories are as rare as ever).

The type of incest that seems to work successfully most often is that between mother and son. Oedipus would be applying to himself for a pardon if he knew what was going on in the shires and suburbs of this pleasant land. Countless thousands of incestuous couples enjoy one another despite the constant fear that their forbidden love will be exposed and attacked.

Many cases of incest are exploitative, tragic and devastating. But those who are most vocal in their condemnation of incest, and those whose response to the very word is automatic revulsion and criticism, should be aware that there are many for whom this type of relationship is satisfying and fulfilling in every sense.

We should, of course, do everything we can to protect the innocent. But when we protect the innocent we should take care not to harm those who are not guilty; those whose only crime is to follow a lifestyle and a form of loving which falls outside the pattern of what we have been taught to think of as `normal' behaviour.

Summer holiday

Question

I have been asked by a group of friends to join them on a summer holiday. I am male and single and would love to go. My problem is that I have thick hair on my arms,legs, thighs, stomach and chest and would feel embarrassed about being seen in a swimming costume. I've been hairy for as long as I can remember and I never wear short sleeved shirts or shorts because of my hairiness - and I never take part in any sports which involve going into changing rooms. I'm not keen on using hair removal cream because I have so much hair and I am worried about the effect it would have on my skin. I have never been abroad and I don't want to miss this opportunity but I don't know what to do. Having so much body hair has made me very depressed and has stopped me developing normal relationships with girls. I feel that I am missing out on everything. When I was 14 my mother took me to my doctor. He wondered if I had a hormonal problem and he arranged for me to see a hospital specialist. They examined me but could find nothing wrong.

Answer

Your sort of hairiness is almost certainly something you've inherited. And your background could have an influence. People of mediterranean descent - Greek, Italian, Jewish or Arabic - are most likely to be exceptionally hairy.

Not all that many generations ago we were all covered in hair - it was there to keep us warm. When the air temperature is cold you can see the vestiges of the system at work: individual hairs will stand on end in order to trap a layer of air next to your skin and keep you warm.

It isn't going to be easy to remove all that unwanted hair. The best and most effective way to remove unwanted individual hairs is electrolysis - in which a tiny electric current is used to kill the hair roots. But removing hair from your whole body would take for ever and cost an arm and a leg.

My advice is that you buy yourself a small pair of good scissors and a pack of disposable razors and shave the stuff off. (Don't wash it all down the plug hole because if you do you'll probably block the drains.) It'll take weeks - maybe months - for the hair to grow back thickly.

I suggest you do this because I can tell from your letter that reassurance isn't going to work. But your fears are unfounded. Most people aren't going to stop what they're doing and stare at you just because you've got hairy legs. A few will - but you may be surprised to hear that some of them will be women who are actually turned on by hairy men.

I think my wife wrote to you

Question

In your column recently you included a letter from a woman who suspected that her husband was dressing up in her underwear when she was out and who was secretly excited by the idea. Everything in the letter suggested that it was my wife who wrote the letter - and if it was then her suspicions are absolutely accurate. I do dress up in her clothes and I do find it terrifically sexually stimulating and I would love my wife to share my pleasure. You advised the woman to tell her husband that she had read about men dressing up in womens clothing and to ask him if he would like to try it but so far my wife has said nothing. How long should I wait? Have you had many letters like the one you printed? Should I tell my wife that I am a secret transvestite?

Answer

I get JJ cup-fuls of letters from men who enjoy dressing up in womens clothing. But all the letters I print (about this or any other topic) are disguised so that the people who wrote them cannot be identified. You must, I'm afraid, make up your own mind about whether or not to tell your wife. Ideally, you should tell her. Secrets burn holes in relationships. But there is a risk that she will be horrified by your confession. I have had very sad letters from men who have told their wives about their peccadillo and then seen their marriages crumble. Sadly, some women wrongly believe that a husband who dresses in female clothing must be gay. This is nonsense, of course. Gays like men so why would they want to dress up as women?

Not very private

Question

When I visited my doctor for a very private examination she asked me if I minded if a medical student sat and watched. I said it would be all right. During the examination the doctor, quite unnecessarily I thought, commented on the size of my penis. `My word, haven't you got a small penis!' she said. She turned to the medical student and pulled a face. I was very upset and embarrassed and I can't stop thinking about what she said.

Answer

What you should have said, of course, was: `It isn't my penis that is small, doctor. It's your mouth that is big.' Your doctor has shot straight into my list of the Ten Most Thoughtless and Stupid Doctors in the world. She is outright winner of this month's `Foot'n'Mouth Trophy' and an early candidate for a gold medal in the Biggest Plonker Outside Politics Award. If this bloody woman had gone into the diplomatic service we would probably now be at war with the Isle of Wight and busily filling in the Channel Tunnel in an attempt to stop irate foreigners pouring into the country waving big sticks at us all.

Someone firm should loosen her corset, pull down her knickers and give her a damned good spanking. You could probably make a formal complaint about her but that would simply extend your embarrassment and publicise the whole miserable business. I suggest that you find yourself another doctor - preferably one who isn't as big a bozo as this one - and take some small comfort from the knowledge that a woman this insensitive will almost certainly be congenitally anorgasmic.

As you will, I hope, have already discovered penis size is of no significant consequence to anyone except ballet dancers and women who have had twenty or more children.

No children

Question

From the moment we met I made it clear to my husband that I didn't want children - and he agreed. However, he is now going back on this agreement. We argue a lot about this (it is the only thing we argue about) and I have told him my feelings but he thinks we have a duty to have children. When I point out the problems our friends have with their children he insists that ours won't be like that. Part of the problem is that my husband's mother is desperate for grandchildren and she puts a lot of pressure on him. He has recently suggested that we stop using condoms for 12 months and let fate decide. He says that if I don't get pregnant in that time he will stop pressing me for a family. I feel like agreeing - just to stop the nagging - and secretly going on the pill for the 12 months to make sure that I don't get pregnant. Do you think I could trust my doctor to keep this secret?

Answer

I am fascinated by the thought of you making it clear right from the outset that you didn't want children. I have this vision of you and your husband being introduced at a party, him making some bland and nervous comment about the weather and then struggling to keep his jaw up when you announce that don't intend to have any children by him.

That's the small talk over. I thought we ought to get into this gently because I suspect you won't like what I'm going to say.

You can, I hope, rely on your doctor not to spill the beans. But I have to tell you that I am appalled that you should even contemplate deceiving your husband in this cold blooded way. Most marital deceptions are inspired by unplanned, hot blooded lust. Such indiscretions are far more excusable than the scenario you describe.

Are you really prepared to let your husband make love to you for twelve months under such dishonest circumstances? Are you honestly prepared to fake surprise and disappointment each month when it becomes clear that the previous month's semenal offerings have fallen on stony ground? And are you prepared to live with your fraud for the rest of your life? I suspect not. I certainly hope not - for your sake as much as your husband's.

Sadly, your marriage has hit one of the biggest rocks in the sea of life. And there is no easy solution. There is no available compromise. You can't have a bit of a baby or become part time parents.

You and your husband have to keep on talking. You both need to express your fears and to define the ways in which you think having - or not having - children will affect your lives. There may be ways in which you can conquer or control some of those fears and anxieties. But in the end one of you has to give in - one of you has to be disappointed - or else your marriage is over.

Life ain't easy, is it?

Keen nudist

Question

My girlfriend is a keen nudist and wants me to go with her and her parents to a nudist camp for a week's holiday. I am very nervous about it. I am worried that with all those naked women around I will have a constant erection.

Answer

Stop worrying. Most men who have never been to a nudist camp wonder how the male nudists manage to avoid getting thumping great boners all the time but the men who patronise these places always insist that all that unadorned naked flesh simply isn't sexually arousing.

I suspect that you'll find that you'll soon get used to all the naked bodies around you. And until you do embarrassment will keep your erectile mechanism under control. (Besides, if you're going to a nudist camp you'll be so bloody cold that people will probably need a magnifying glass even to see your penis - let alone to spot what sort of condition it is in.)

Crude and dim-witted pornographers always produce pictures of completely naked women which are about as arousing as a stumble through a varicose veins clinic but skilled movie makers and photographers have known for years that too much nudity is simply not erotic. The most erotic, exciting and stimulating images are those in which the imagination is given encouragement by glimpses of breast, and a few half hidden and titillating hints of naked thigh, usually decorated in something lacy.

Digital sound

Question

I am a 22 year old woman. I can only reach an orgasm when I or my boyfriend touch my clitoris, or the area around it. I don't seem able to have sex through intercourse. Am I odd?

Answer

Not in the slightest. You have to remember that sex was originally intended as nothing more than a way of multiplying the species. God wanted us to be able to get on with reproducing ourselves while he got on with his next project. Men have to have orgasms in order to get their sperm into the right position for fertilisation but womens orgasms are entirely superfluous and serve no practical purpose whatsoever. Consequently, when god invented women he didn't bother too carefully when putting in the orgasm programme. Fear not. Manually stimulated sexual relief has been popular for centuries. It was, indeed, from this source that the phrase `digital sound' was derived.

Happily married

Question

My husband and I have been happily married for ten years and our sex life has always been very good. For years I have loved to give him oral sex, which he enjoys very much. However, when I told a friend about this she made me feel that oral sex is rather sordid and dirty. It just hasn't been the same for me and I haven't been able to bring myself to do it anymore. An important part of our sex life has gone and I am very sad about it.

Answer

You didn't really think that you were the only couple practising oral sex did you? A recent survey showed that more than half of the population enjoy oral sex so it is, incidentally, the people who are NOT doing it who are abnormal and a bit kinky. Don't let someone else's unfortunate experience affect your own enjoyment of a sex act that gives you both pleasure. Stop listening to other people, keep your head down and enjoy yourself. And, incidentally, I hope he returns the compliment. Most women will put up with shelf-less bathrooms, blocked gutters and uncut lawns if they are living with a man who can scramble eggs and whip cream with his tongue.

Skimpy bra

Question

My husband died when my daughter was a baby and I have brought her up alone. We have always got on very well and although I have had occasional affairs they have always been short lived and never very serious. I recently met a man who I really liked and a few months ago he moved in with us. I was a bit frightened that my daughter might try to grab more of my attention but instead she is flaunting herself at my boyfriend. She wanders around in very skimpy bra and knickers, leaves the door wide open when she is having a bath and lies sprawled on the floor or sofa in such a way that he cannot help but see right up her skirt or dressing gown. When I spoke to her about it she said she was just behaving naturally because she felt comfortable with him around but I have seen her flirting with him and she has a very knowing look in her eyes. I know exactly what she is doing. I wouldn't worry if my boyfriend had just laughed it off but he seems fascinated by her.

Answer

I am sure that you're absolutely spot on. Your daughter fears that she's lost you and so she's going to grab the man out of your life, teach you a lesson and satisfy her own blossoming yearnings all at the same time. To make things even more explosive your daughter has been deprived of adult male company for most of her life so is probably pretty inexperienced in dealing with men. And now, just as her hormones are all of a flutter, she finds herself in a situation where she can safely flirt and flaunt herself, punish you and investigate her own sexuality. The whole situation is an emotional bloodbath. I'm not suggesting for an instant that your daughter has deliberately sat down and worked all this out. She is, I suspect, simply reacting to a cluster of provocative stimuli: jealousy, anger, fear and unrecognised and unbridled teenage lust. What is happening is so predictable that to be honest I think you would have been justified in feeling alarmed if she hadn't responded in this way. Then you might have had a real problem.

Of course, I realise that none of this helps you deal with the fact that your daughter has sharpened her hook and cast her line and your boyfriend may be about to take the bait. Your daughter is female. Your boyfriend, being male, does not stand a chance of coping. He will be out manipulated every step of the way unless he is constantly on his guard.

Your first move should be to talk to him. Explain to him that your daughter is inexperienced with men, uncertain of her sexuality, immature, vulnerable and probably angry and confused about her relationship with you. Tactfully, ask him to be careful. Tell him you know very well that you can trust him and that he would never dream of taking advantage of your daughter's innocence but point out to him that you're worried about him. Explain that teenage girls with vivid imaginations and too many uncontrolled hormones not infrequently make startling allegations about abuse and molestation. If he has any functioning cerebral matter he will hear alarm bells and will in future be more careful.

Then talk to your daughter. Explain to her that this is a difficult time both for you and your boyfriend as well as for her. Make it very clear to her that your love for her has not changed at all. And point out to her that as an attractive and growing woman she is now in possession of dangerous weapons which could cause a great deal of damage if not handled carefully. You will need to exercise great restraint and show a good deal of tact during the coming months. Take every opportunity to talk to your daughter and to tell her how much you love her.

Pear shaped

Question

I am very pear shaped - my waist is quite slender but I have an enormous bum and very large hips. Nothing I do seems to change this.

Answer

Then you are clearly intended to be pear shaped. But take heart! Being pear shaped is actually relatively healthy. People whose waists are bigger than their hips (apple shaped) are much more at risk of health problems such as heart disease, breast cancer, diabetes and stroke than people with your shape.

Porn stars

Question

How do porn stars make sex last so long? They do it for ages but I can never manage to keep it up for more than five minutes at the most. And how come the man's penis never falls out when they're making love and rolling around on the floor?

Answer

Simple: they're only pretending to do it. All that huffing and puffing and screaming and squealing is fake. Porn stars are about as genuine as politicians claiming to be honest, caring and committed. When they fall off the bed, and roll around the room three times the whole thing is more carefully choreographed than professional wrestling. When he nuzzles her ear and batters his groin against her for the 536th time he is whispering: `Two more minutes of this then when I stiffen and close my eyes you howl like a dog and claw my back. We'll give them long enough for a couple of close ups and then we'll pop down to the canteen for a couple of cheese scones and a nice cup of tea before we film the next one.'

Too much sex?

Question

When I got married I was pleased when I discovered that my husband was `highly sexed'. But I am now becoming increasingly worried. We have sex five times every working day - before we get up, before he goes to work, when he comes home for lunch, when he arrives home from work and when we go to bed. At weekends we have it more often. Although he is 33 his ejaculation seems to go on for several minutes. He is so potent that he can climax up to six times in any one love making session. I am worried about the amount of sperm going into my body. Will it have any long term effect if we continue as we are now?

Answer

The average ejaculate contains around 5ml of semen. If your husband ejaculates six times on each occasion when you make love and you make love five times a day then he would, if he produced an average 5ml on each occasion, produce a litre of semen a week. If all that semen stayed where he'd left it then by the end of just one year you would have ten gallons of semen in your body and your whole neighbourhood would smell of horse chestnut blossom.

But I don't think you need worry. Prostitutes cope with heavy sexual activity without blowing up like barrage balloons because gravity ensures that most of the semen trickles out in between love making bouts. This process can be aided by showering and bathing regularly. The enthusiasm of the French for coital sports explains the popularity of the bidet in that country.

You may also be able to gain some slight consolation from the thought that your husband's production of semen will be almost certainly be rather less than that of a less sexually active individual.

Penis for sale

Question

I was interested to read that surgeons find it difficult to provide proper genitals for women wanting to become functional men. If surgeons write to me I will be willing to sell my penis (seven inches long when erect) and testicles for £1,000,000. I have fathered healthy children but am willing to call it a day on the subject of coition for recreation or procreation. I would like to buy a Rolls Royce motor car since our Ford is now over ten years old and is beginning to give us troubles mechanically. I had to have the ignition switch replaced recently and was warned that the cam belt will soon need replacing at a considerable cost. I would also like to have a reliable urine disposal arrangement. If a buyer is found ready and able to meet the terms of my offer I will give you exclusive photos. NB I have not discussed the above with my wife yet so be prepared to cancel the offer if she objects.

Answer

I really do think you ought to speak to your wife before you continue with your plan to start flogging off the family jewels. I have no doubt that a surgeon could transplant your penis and testicles onto a woman keen to acquire male physical characteristics but fear that the price you are asking might prove to be rather a stumbling block - particularly when you remember that fees for surgeons, lawyers and surveyors would have to be added on top of your million. Transsexuals are not particularly common and I would imagine that millionaire transsexuals are about as thin on the ground as thoughtful, sensitive politicians. I can't see many bank managers being eager to offer mortgage facilities to would be purchasers of your reproductive equipment, in fine condition (one careful owner) though it might be.

The talking nurse

Question

I have been a patient in hospital for two months. I am recovering from a stroke. I have been constantly kept cheerful by one of the junior nurses. She works hard but she has always found time to smile, say hello and even talk to me for a little while. A few days ago one of the administrators spotted her talking to another patient and gave her a very severe ticking off. Since then she has hurried by without looking at me or anyone else. Do you think it would be worthwhile writing a letter, pointing out how much patients appreciate these little signs of kindness?

Answer

Yes, I certainly do! Address your letter to the senior administrator. Caring is an essential part of curing and nurses who show warmth, compassion, interest and friendly concern in their patients do far more good than all the administrators in the world.

My husband complains

Question

I have been married for eighteen months. I love my husband very much and we are happy except he complains that I do not tighten my vaginal muscles when we make love. This is worrying me as he mentions it almost every time. Recently I had a smear test and I asked the doctor if she thought I should have an operation. She told me that she was surprised as she thought I was very firm. My husband has a much smaller penis than any of the boyfriends I had before I married. Could this be the problem? If so how do I tell him without hurting his feelings?

Answer

The size of your husband's penis will certainly have an effect. But you don't need to tell him. There is a simple but effective exercise you can do to strengthen your vaginal muscles and squeeze his penis tightly. With a little practice you should be able to clutch something as thin as a pencil in your vagina.

Not an easy man to live with

Question

I have been married for 26 years. My husband is not an easy man to live with - he is selfish and bad tempered - but I stayed with him for the sake of the family. I thought things would be easier when our children grew up (he was always having rows with them) but in fact things couldn't be much worse than they are now. The only thing my husband lives for is his work. He never had a very high sex drive but he hasn't made love to me for a year and when I try to make the first move he always says he is tired, and not interested and would rather have a hot meal. If I try to kiss him and he is smoking he won't even take the cigarette from his mouth, but just gives me his cheek to kiss. I long to be held and made love to but it never happens. I try to talk to him and he tells me he has been talking to customers all day long. He just sits in front of the TV and falls asleep. What can I do? I just feel like walking out. I am stuck in a rut, and bored. I feel so lonely that I might as well be on my own. At least then I wouldn't have to put up with his moods.

Answer

I think you should try to build up other aspects of your life before you seriously contemplate leaving your grumpy and unromantic husband. If you do leave home you will need a source of income, somewhere to live and friends if you are to create a new life for yourself. So expand your interests now. If you don't have an outside job think about finding one - or contemplate setting up your own small business. Enrol at evening classes. Join clubs. There is a chance that you will view your husband in a different light when other aspects of your life have changed and maybe he will see you differently as your life flourishes. There is even a chance that your husband may be less likely to take you for granted when he sees you changing into a butterfly.

On the other hand, I must warn you that by changing your life you may antagonise your husband. If he likes his life the way it is - and feels comfortable having you around to ensure a constant supply of hot meals and clean socks - then he may feel threatened and become even more of a pain. The consolation is that if that happens then you'll be in a much better position to pack your bags and wave him goodbye.

Pork pies

Question

Both my doctor and my dentist say you aren't a proper doctor. My doctor says you never finished medical school. If they're right why do you call yourself `doctor'?

Answer

Your doctor and your dentist are both telling pork pies and will never go to heaven. I have three degrees and practised as a general practitioner for ten years. Over the years I've made a lot of enemies by attacking drug companies and the medical establishment. My critics often find it easier simply to tell lies and to dismiss me as `unqualified' than to try to deal with what I write.

Every week I receive a fistful of letters from confused readers who tell me that their doctors have dismissed me, this column and my claims and campaigns as dangerous and irrelevant nonsense.

So, just to put the record straight, here are just twenty of the scores of assertions and predictions I've made in the past which were regarded as controversial, iconclastic and even heretical at the time (and which attracted varying degrees of derision and vitriol from the medical establishment) but which are now widely accepted by the majority of other doctors.

1. When I wrote that stress and tension could cause high blood pressure one professor wrote to say that if I'd been a student of his he would have failed me. Today most doctors accept that stress is a notable cause of high blood pressure.

2. My initial warnings about mercury in teeth were dismissed as `scaremongering'. Today, many doctors and dentists share my fears.

3. When, in the 1980s, I forecast that the number of old people in our society would soon be so great that doctors and hospitals wouldn't be able to cope the fears were dismissed. Recent evidence shows that the fears were entirely accurate. Hospitals in Britain are now starving old people to death so that beds arent blocked. (They are doing with this with the approval of the Government and the medical profession.)

4. My opposition to the fluoridation of water was widely opposed. Today a growing number of experts believe that adding chemicals to drinking water can be hazardous.

5. My articles proving that meat causes cancer were banned. And attempts were made to ban my books containing the same proof.

6. My enthusiasm for TENS machines for relieving pain was for years opposed by doctors and drug companies alike.

7. When I advocated that the decriminalisation of drugs I was attacked as a dangerous lunatic. Recently politicians supporting my campaign used information I had unearthed to help substantiate a call for a Royal Commission.

8. My warning that mobile phones could cause cancer were laughed at. The laughter has now died down.

9. It was several years after I had pointed out that water supplies were contaminated with prescription drug residues before other doctors agreed with me.

10. My warning that many patients were endangered by the stresses involved in Intensive Care Units and Coronary Care Units was ignored for years.

11. When I first suggested that electricity might cause cancer I was attacked.

12. The British Government eventually admitted that it had acted over tranquillisers because of my articles. And nearly all doctors now agree with me that tranquillisers and sleeping tablets should not be prescribed for long periods. But when I first started campaigning about tranquillisers almost the entire medical establishment attacked me, claiming that these drugs were safe.

13. When I produced evidence showing that AIDS was not a major threat to heterosexuals I was viciously attacked by pressure groups who had their own reasons for claiming that AIDS would kill us all.

14. Exercise freaks condemned my warning that too much exercise could be hazardous. Today just about everyone agrees I was right.

15. My claim that female hormones in drinking water are affecting male babies is now widely supported. At the time I first made the claim it was dismissed as nonsense.

16. The warnings I made about passive smoking were attacked for years. Today many doctors have joined the campaign for smoke free air in public places.

17. A dozen years ago I warned about the dangers of allowing children to watch video nasties. Now it is accepted that violent films cause violent behaviour.

18. My warnings that the government was trying to cut costs by releasing patients from long stay mental institutions so that they could close them down and sell the properties and land were regarded as unjustifiably cynical for years.

19. Many years after I had shown how hospital administrators were wasting tons of money officials agreed with me. (They didnt do anything about it. But at least they agreed that I was right.)

20. On numerous occasions specific drugs which I have attacked have been withdrawn from the market.

Dangerous appliance

Question

I am a divorced lady of 67 years. I am not in good health. Recently a close friend bought me a vibrator which has given me no end of pleasure and fulfilment. I have been told that these appliances are dangerous and not intended for insertion. What is the truth?

Answer

Make sure you use plenty of lubricant, don't push your vibrator in far enough to cause you any pain and take care not to let go of it. When I worked in a hospital casualty department I once saw a female patient who had a buzzing inside her. When I eventually succeeded in catching hold of, and removing, a small vibrator (complete with long lasting batteries) she attempted to deal with her embarrassment by expressing surprise and insisting that she had never seen the device before. When I had washed the vibrator I offered it to her but she refused it, saying that it wasn't hers. She was staying in a nearby hotel and she claimed that the vibrator, which she said must have been left in her bed by a previous visitor, had probably snuck inside her while she was asleep. I am proud of the fact that I showed no obvious signs of disbelief when she told me this.

Climbing the Christmas tree

Question

I am a widower and very fit. My hobby is gardening. There is a small factory next to my home and one warm day recently the girls who work there exchanged light hearted banter with me as they ate their lunches on the grass. I offered them drinks of tea and later two of the girls came into my garden to bring back the mugs. I was in my shorts and they started teasing me. Things got out of hand and one of the girls ran her hand up my shorts. She received quite a shock since my member is over 12 inches long and has a girth of more than 7 inches. The other girl wanted to look and so we went indoors. Then one thing led to another. It has now become regular practice for some of the girls to come into my home and `climb the Christmas tree' as they call it. I never thought that women could get so excited by giving themselves pain. They taught me many things - including oral sex. Several of the women now take turns to visit me in the evenings too. I am worried about the possibility of fathering a child. Would this be possible at my age? I feel very guilty about my lapse into libidinousness but I find these assignations difficult to resist. Do you think I am a `dirty old man'? Should I seek advice to help me conquer these newly aroused urgings?

Answer

No, I don't think you're a dirty old man at all. A lucky old man, maybe. But not dirty. It would be perfectly possible for you to father children and so I suggest you buy a large boxful of condoms and use them both to reduce the chances of finding yourself surrounded by unwanted offspring and to limit your own exposure to sexually transmitted diseases. Then I suggest that you build a small altar in your living room and give thanks every evening to the kindly god who endowed you so generously and then put the factory at the bottom of your garden. With these nubile nymphets perched precariously on top of your Christmas tree you have provided adequate proof that there are at least fairies at the bottom of someone's garden.

A big mistake

Question

You recently wrote about being at medical school in the 1840s. Surely this was a big mistake?

Answer

No, it was a small joke.

Grateful

Question

After I read one of your articles I realised that many of the symptoms I had were being caused by the pills I was taking. I discussed this with my doctor who reluctantly agreed that I could stop the pills and see what happened. My symptoms disappeared within a week and I now feel a thousand per cent better. I am very grateful to you. More people should be aware of the potential hazards involved in taking drugs they might not really need.

Answer

Four out of every ten patients taking prescription drugs suffer side effects - many of which are potentially life threatening. And yet there are still many doctors who either don't know or don't care about this. In the same post as your letter I received a letter from a reader telling me that her doctor had taken a cutting of this column from her, angrily ripped it up and thrown it into her waste basket - dismissing the information it contained as `scary rubbish'!

Unattractive pubic hair

Question

My husband loves me but he has lost interest in sex because my pubic hair has become thin and unattractive. We used to have great sex. What can I do?

Answer

I think a wig is likely to be pretty unmanageable so why not just shave the stuff off completely? Many men would find such a prospect extremely exciting - especially if you livened up the immediate environment with a pair of sexy panties, a suspender belt and a pair of black seamed stockings.

Five minutes

Question

I recently visited my GP for the first time in 18 months. I had hardly sat down and started to describe my symptoms when the doctor, who had been scribbling on the previous patient's medical records, looked up and told me that I'd only got five minutes so would I please hurry up. Is it now official policy for patients to be allowed only five minutes at each consultation?

Answer

Your doctor probably had an urgent appointment at the local golf course, hairdresser or beauty salon. British GPs spend an average of about 8 minutes with each patient. This compares badly with patients in other countries. Patients get 10 minutes in the USA; 12 minutes in New Zealand, 15 minutes in Canada and 21 minutes in Sweden. I heard of one surgery where patients are alleged to have to make separate appointments for each symptom so a complicated disorder could, presumably, take half a dozen separate visits to explain. Some doctors work such long, hard hours that they make themselves ill. Others rush through their work and spend a total of no more than a few hours a week with their patients. I suspect you've got one of the duds. Dump her.

Curing a six year itch

Question

I have been married for six years. My marriage was getting very stale and even when I walked around naked I couldn't turn my husband on. Then I spoke to a friend who suggested that I wear sexy stockings and frilly knickers. I didn't want to do this at first because I felt rather embarrassed but eventually I did and I could not believe the difference it made. Now our sex life is wonderful and our marriage is much healthier.

Answer

I suggest that you thank your friend for alerting you to the most important secret of sexual happiness. Many marriage experts would be out of business if doctors were given permission to prescribe black stockings, lacy suspender belts, silky camisole tops, peek a boo bras and entirely impractical panties. These things would do far more good than most of the expensive tranquillisers, sleeping tablets, antidepressants and other pharmaceutical junk on the market. Politicians should be actively campaigning for VAT to be taken off impractical lingerie and put on the boring, sensible stuff.

Crude and dim-witted pornographers always produce pictures of completely naked women which are about as arousing as a stumble through a varicose veins clinic but skilled movie makers and photographers have known for years that too much nudity is simply not erotic. The most erotic, exciting and stimulating images are those in which the imagination is given encouragement by glimpses of breast, and a few half hidden and titillating hints of naked thigh. Most men who have never been to a nudist camp wonder how the male nudists manage to avoid getting thumping great boners all the time but the men who patronise these places always insist that all that unadorned naked flesh simply isn't sexually arousing.

It used to be said that the way to a man's heart was via his stomach. Forget that. A woman can take a man anywhere she wants with a lead made of a couple of feet of elastic and a few square inches of something skimpy.

Still a virgin

Question

I am 17 and although I have had several boyfriends I am still a virgin. After I have been out with someone for a few months I get bored with them. For the last eighteen months I have found some women as attractive as men and have wondered if I could be a lesbian. I needed to talk to someone so I mentioned this to my best friend. She thinks that I have been brainwashed by the fact that most of my favourite singing artists are gay. She refuses to talk to me about it. All my other friends hate homosexuals so I have no one else to talk to either. I know in my own mind that I have not been brainwashed and I am not afraid of the fact that I might eventually find that I am a lesbian or at least bisexual. I would like to meet people who think the same way that I do but I don't know where to start. I thought about ringing a lesbian and gay telephone line I found but it is in London and my mum will go mad if there is a long distance call on our bill.

Answer

What's the rush? Take your time to explore your sexuality yourself. I agree that talking to committed homophobes is pointless but if you speak to committed lesbians then you'll still be getting biased advice and there is a risk that you may find yourself being talked into believing that you are a lesbian when you may not be. Once you start looking for advice you'll find lots of people prepared to give it to you. But objective, impartial advice is rarer than you might think.

Go to parties, join clubs and make as many new friends as you can - of both sexes. When you first find a partner you feel you want to go to bed with you'll start to learn what you really need to know about yourself. The only way you'll find the real truth about yourself is through experience.

When a man is a woman

Question

My 18 year old son says he wants to be a girl. I was brought up to believe that a man is a man and a woman is a woman. I am very sad to think that my son is a little fairy. I'm sure that as a doctor you will agree with me that an 18 year old boy should not wear make up, dresses, skirts, stockings and high heels. He does this nearly all the time. The only thing in his favour is that he certainly looks good in feminine clothes. He has got a job and goes to work dressed as a woman. The people he works with are completely taken in by him. One of them said what a lovely daughter I have. What shall I do? Do you think my son is a transvestite?

Answer

It sounds to me as if your son is more likely to be a transsexual than a transvestite. There is an important difference.

Transvestitism - or cross dressing - is practised by thousands of entirely heterosexual men and women who get pleasure or relief from stress and tension by dressing in clothes usually regarded as more appropriate to members of the other sex. Virtually every healthy, sane, sensible woman in the country is a transvestite for most wear jeans and trousers from time to time without thinking anything of it. They certainly aren't accused of being homosexual or perverted. Male transvestites have a harder time. They are, however, essentially male, usually enjoy making love to women and don't want to change sex. Unlike using drugs and alcohol to combat stress, dressing in camisoles, French knickers, stockings and suspenders and frocks is an entirely harmless activity.

Transsexuals (who are less common than transvestites) are men or women who feel trapped in the wrong bodies. Transsexual men feel that they should have been born as women. And transsexual women feel that they should be men.

Try to understand your son. He really needs your support.

Talk to him. Ask him whether he thinks he is a transsexual or a transvestite.

If he is a transvestite then there is no need to seek any outside help. Many transvestites are better balanced (psychologically) than non-transvestites.

If your son is a transsexual - and genuinely wants to become a woman (rather than occasionally dress as one) he may eventually want to make what he feels are necessary (and permanent) physical adjustments to his body. The first step towards this end will involve an appointment with a (hopefully) sympathetic psychiatrist. Your GP should be able to find the name and address of someone with experience in this area.

Wet dream

Question

Last night I had a wet dream. I dreamt that I was making love to one of the weather girls off the television. It is a long time since I had sex and it was wonderful - even if it was only a dream. I dreamt that the girl performed oral sex on me and it was terrific. How can I make sure that I have another dream like this?

Answer

There is no way to guarantee a repeat performance but you can increase your chances of success by making sure that you are thinking about a suitable weather girl as you drop off to sleep. There are, as far as I am aware, no laws against this yet though I expect that politicians are working on it so don't tell anyone else your secret.

Fat friend

Question

I suffer from arthritis and my doctor has told me that I should lose weight. He says that according to the official height weight tables I am 8 stones overweight. However, I have recently seen several TV programmes and magazine articles in which people have said that it is all right to be fat. A friend, who is also overweight, says that dieting is just a sexist philosophy promoted by companies selling slimming products.

Answer

In my view the `fat is beautiful' philosophy is nothing more than flummery and wishful thinking. I find the sight of really fat individuals trying to kid themselves that they are merely curvy, plump and cuddly more than just sad. When fat folk like your friend try to drag others into this self-deluding fantasy world then I feel that they are behaving recklessly, dangerously and irresponsibly. It is fair enough for people who are just one or two stones overweight to be fairly relaxed about their excess weight. But I think that anyone who tries to convince you that carrying over 100 pounds of unwanted fat is normal, healthy and natural must either have the sort of intellectual fire power normally associated with lichen or is exhibiting major skills in self-delusion.

Your choices are simple. If you carry on being fat your arthritis will cause you much pain and you'll probably end up a disabled and deteriorating wreck within a year or two. If you lose weight and reduce the pressure on your joints you will probably find that you can get around much more easily: your arthritis won't go away but it will almost certainly cause you less trouble.

The choice is yours.

Mixed

Question

I am a single woman. I recently had to go into hospital and was shocked to find myself on a mixed ward. Most of the other women were unhappy about this. The nurses said they didn't like it. And one or two the men seemed embarrassed. Why do hospitals do this? I found it offensive and degrading and although I need another operation I have made my mind up that I will not go into hospital again.

Answer

Any hospital which puts men and women on the same ward must be run by administrators who think of patients as throughput consumables, inconvenient tumour ridden glands and malfunctioning organs, rather than real live breathing, eating, sleeping, farting, feeling individuals. People who are ill get better quicker when they relatively happy and contented (and as stress free as possible). Anxiety and embarrassment make things worse. At the best of times, even the most sympathetically run hospital must, by its very nature, provide an alien, uncomfortable environment. Bright lights, antiseptic smells and church like hush all add to the stress of hospitalization. Putting men and women on the same ward is thoughtless, stupid and uncaring. Sensitive members of both sexes find such wards enormously disturbing. The insensitive and boorish are merely likely to take advantage of the situation and increase the embarrassment endured by the sensitive.

I fear that all this is a symptom of the undisguised contempt with which many administrators seem to regard the patients who pay their grossly inflated salaries. If hospital administrators had to use ordinary hospital facilities when they were ill they wouldn't dream of putting men and women on the same ward.

If other currently healthy readers think they would find it embarrassing to be on a hospital ward with members of the opposite sex I urge them to complain today to their local politician. Don't wait until you have to go into hospital. It will be too late then. Remember: If you know of an injustice but do not complain about it before that injustice affects you then you have no right to complain when it does affect you.

No energy

Question

My boyfriend is very keen on physical fitness and spends all his time exercising. He never has any energy left for me. I enjoy sex very much and get very frustrated when I don't get it.

Answer

Thanks for the letter, the suggestion and the photo. Wednesday is fine.

Apologised

Question

At a recent party a woman who was, I thought, my best friend said some terrible things to me. She has apologised and now says she had too much to drink. I miss having her friendship.

Answer

Try to forget and forgive. If you can't do both then try to do one.

Five inch high heels

Question

My husband and I have been married for twelve years and although we both still love each other very much our sex life has been rather low key for quite a while now. Last Wednesday it was our anniversary and my husband suggested that we try something he had read about in one of your books. I dressed up in the tartiest clothes I could find (five inch heeled shoes, see through white blouse, black bra, stockings and suspenders and an obscenely short black skirt) took a taxi into town and sat at the bar of our biggest and smartest local hotel. Twenty minutes later (after I had rejected the advances of two complete strangers who had obviously assumed that I was what I looked like) my husband, who had arrived earlier and had been watching, came and sat down beside me and started to chat me up as though he'd never met me before. After I'd `let' him buy me dinner and we had flirted with one another outrageously he drove me to a quiet spot and we made love in the back of the car. It was the best sex we'd had for years. The following day a good friend of mine, clearly shocked, telephoned to tell me that she had seen my husband with a hooker. `The funny thing was,' she said, `that the woman looked a bit like you. But you should have seen the way she was dressed!' It took me a quarter of an hour to persuade her that the hooker was me! Anyway, I just wanted to thank you - and to let you know that your advice really worked for us.

Answer

Congratulations and thanks for letting me know about your successful night out. I've had so many similar letters recently that I'm now a little bit worried that hotel bars up and down the country may become completely clogged with happily married couples pretending to be hookers and tired businessmen - causing all sorts of problems for real hookers and tired businessmen. So, could you all please follow this simple rota system. People whose surnames begin with the letters A to D should try this simple sex game on Mondays. If your surname begins with the letters E to J your night is Tuesday. Wednesday is the night for people whose name begins with the letters K to N. Those of you whose name begins with 0 to S can go out on the town on Thursdays and Fridays are for people with surnames beginning T to Z. We'll leave Saturdays and Sundays for the professionals. And take care. It's a good idea for him to get there before her so that he can make sure nothing gets out of hand.

Tranquillisers

Question

I was put on tranquillisers thirty years ago because I was suffering a lot from stress. I came off them five years ago. I still get nervy attacks. Do you think these could a continuation of the withdrawal symptoms?

Answer

No, although I have been warning about the problems associated with these drugs for over twenty years I doubt if the symptoms you have got now are withdrawal symptoms. Don't forget that you were originally given tranquillisers because you were having some sort of nerve trouble. The tranquillisers won't have cured you. Maybe you now need to learn to deal with your stress and anxiety more effectively.

Beautiful eyes

Question

While travelling from London to York on a crowded train recently I found myself sitting next to a really terrific looking woman. She had beautiful eyes, a magnificent figure and a great sense of humour and we got on extremely well. By the time we got to Leicester we were holding hands. At Derby I'd got my arm around her and we were kissing and cuddling like long-time lovers. After the train pulled out of the station at Sheffield we made love in one of the loos. I had to get out at York but she was going on to Newcastle. I nearly stayed on the train with her and now I wish I had. She wouldn't give me her name, address or telephone number but I can't get her out of my mind. What can I do? I know I'll probably never see her again but I can't forget her wonderful laughing eyes and her soft, ripe body.

Answer

Why should you want to forget her? Enjoy the sweet memory. Keep each moment fresh in your mind and try to remember your on board love affair as an entirely perfect romance, never spoilt or threatened by the harshness of reality and untouched by any disappointment, frustration or regret. Dreams and memories are there to protect you from the dull and savage days. Don't let such a perfect adventure fade; guard it, put it away and take it out when the skies are grey with oppressive thunderclouds. In due course you will, I hope, find a partner with whom you can develop a more permanent, lasting, loving romance. Meanwhile, you have touched love and that is more than some people achieve in a lifetime.

Is this true?

Question

My boyfriend says that if we have sex in the middle of a period then I cannot get pregnant. Is this true?

Answer

Most women ovulate - and are therefore at their most fertile - mid way between their menstrual periods. Since you can't get pregnant unless an egg and a sperm get together you are extremely unlikely to get pregnant if you have sex during a period but I am too old to believe that anything is impossible.

Polish and proud of it

Question

My son is changing his name. I am Polish and proud of it. How can I persuade him that what he is doing is dishonouring his family.

Answer

If your son wants to change his name because he is ashamed of his background and family then I can see that you've got problems but maybe he is proud of being Polish but fed up of all the aggravation that goes with having a name that looks as if it was created by a cat walking on a typewriter keyboard. Maybe he reckons that life will be easier if he doesn't have to spend 5 minutes every day repeating his name, spelling it and getting indignant with people who insist on pronouncing or spelling it wrongly. If he wastes just 5 minutes a day like this (and that is probably a conservative estimate if you've got one of those major misprint names with no vowels and lots of consonants) then that, in a lifetime, that will add up to a waste of TEN WEEKS! Talk to him and ask him WHY he wants to change his name.

Not my type

Question

A man I work with, and whom I have always got on with well, asked me to go out with him. I said `no', as gently as I could. I explained that I have a boyfriend and added that though I liked him as a friend he was not really my type. Since then he has made my life a misery. He has started spreading a rumour that I'm a lesbian and just sniggered and didn't deny it when I accused him of sending me anonymous letters and making late night anonymous telephone calls.

Answer

You need to squeeze the pus out of this malevolent human carbuncle immediately. Gather as much evidence as you can to support your complaint and then tell your boss exactly what has happened. Make it clear to the carbuncle itself that if his petty and irritating campaign continues you will also report him to the police and have him permanently lanced. And then do your best to ignore him. Try to resist the temptation to retaliate by starting slanderous rumours of your own (`he trained as a social worker, votes Conservative, spends his weekends train spotting and is very dull in bed') since this will encourage him to believe that you recognise his miserable existence.

Ugly and stupid

Question

Seven years ago my parents divorced and I chose to go and live with my father and my step mother. I had never really got on very well with my mother. When I was a child she was always telling me that I was ugly and stupid. My older brother stayed with my mother. After two years my brother told me that my mother was having a nervous breakdown. He said it was my fault because my mother felt that I had rejected her. Reluctantly, I went back to live with her. We immediately started having rows. She constantly said hateful things about me, my father and his new wife and all my friends I had. Three boyfriends broke up with me because they couldn't cope with her. It soon became clear to me that my mother only wanted me living with her to score points off my father. So I left home and moved into a bedsit. Now my brother tells me that my mother is crying all the time because I've left. She rings me up all the time and pretends to miss me but I know that she's putting it on in order to trick me into returning. I really don't want to go back. I don't think I have the strength to cope with her any more. Even though she is my mother and I know I should love her I am afraid that she is a very spiteful and manipulative woman. She will never admit that she is wrong and she never lets other people live their own lives. She seems to get real pleasure out of interfering and destroying. I feel guilty for feeling this way.

Answer

If a friend told you this story you would advise her to stand firm, wouldn't you? You would, I suspect, tell her that she should wave a metaphorical (or maybe even a real) two fingers at her mother.

We all have more freedom in our relationships with our relatives - and, indeed, others who we love - than we do in our relationships with acquaintances and strangers. With people who are close to us we can get away with things that would never be allowed in most other relationships. We can be rude and brutally honest in a way that would cause permanent damage to any less well founded relationship.

But that freedom carries with it extra responsibility.

Because we can be tougher and more honest with our relatives - and can reasonably expect their love to make them more forgiving and understanding of our faults and peccadilloes - we have a responsibility to be more sympathetic and compassionate.

Your mother has, it seems, taken all the rights that motherhood gives her and yet refused to acknowledge the responsibilities.

I think you should tell her to piss off and leave you alone. Your strength and determination may help her to see what a nasty old bitch she is. But somehow I doubt it.

Effeminate looks

Question

I have very effeminate looks. Many people think I am gay but I am not. Is it possible for me to take hormones that will make me look more manly? I know that some female athletes who take steroids eventually start to look like men so maybe I should take some of those. Where can I get them?

Answer

Forget about taking hormones. I know of no safe way in which you can change your physical appearance without endangering your health. So declare your masculinity in other ways; the clothes you wear, the way you walk, the way you talk and so on. And try to stop worrying about what other people think about you. The people you care about will know the real you. And console yourself with the knowledge that while it is true that some women like men with huge biceps and hairy chests there are many more who value humour and romance far more highly.

A mistake

Question

When my sister visited the doctors' surgery recently she was handed my medical records by mistake. She noticed that the doctor had written SCHIZOPHRENIC on the top of the records envelope and has now told all the members of my family. I have never been told that I am schizophrenic and I now feel very depressed about this. There has been a change in the way my family treat me.

Answer

Doctors are sometimes very cavalier about the things they write on patients' medical records. I once heard a GP who wrote PSYCHOPATH on the top of the medical records of anyone he didn't like. By the time he retired he had learnt to dislike over a third of his practice and the label had become a bit of a joke. But I bet it wasn't much of a joke when patients moved away to other parts of the country and found the PSYCHOPATH label accompanying them.

Your doctor's staff were wrong to let your sister see your medical notes and your sister was wrong to report what she had seen to the rest of the family. But it may well be that your doctor (or whoever did it) was wrong to write the word on your medical records.

I suggest that you urgently make an appointment to see your doctor and that you discuss things with him. Tell him what has happened and ask him to explain.

For years I have campaigned for patients to be able to keep their own medical records at home. Your rather sad story is just another reason why this would be the right thing to do.

Pointless and endless worrying

Question

I worry a lot about little things which, in my heart, I know do not matter very much. When I send someone a present I worry about whether or not they'll like it. Whenever I put down the telephone I find myself worrying about whether I might have said something out of place. All this worrying is wearing me out. How can I stop this pointless and endless worrying?

Answer

You have to learn to get your worries into perspective. First, try to think your worries through to the bottom line. What is the worst that is going to happen if someone doesn't really like a present they get? Try this. Next time you find yourself worrying about something ask yourself how important the worry will seem in ten years time. You'll almost certainly realise that the worry will have no significance by then. Then ask yourself how important the worry will be in a year's time or a month's time. You should soon be able to differentiate between real worries - which are likely to have an impact on your life - and superficial worries which have no real importance. And you'll probably be liberated enormously when you find that most of the things you spend most of your time worrying about aren't worth worrying about at all. Once you've managed to get rid of all the trivial worries then you can spend your time worrying about the things that really matter.

Glue like

Question

I've been dating my current boyfriend for 4 weeks. He enjoys me masturbating him but his semen is very thick and glue like. It doesn't spurt out but just sort of sits on the end of his penis. All my previous boyfriends made quite a mess when ejaculating and this turned me on. Is there anything wrong with my boyfriend? Will he be infertile? Is there anything we can do to make his semen more runny?

Answer

Semen is usually sticky and creamy. It is thick immediately after ejaculation, then becomes more liquid and eventually dries after exposure to the air. (The white stain can usually be removed with a stiff brush and a weak solution of sodium bicarbonate. Semen stains are fluorescent under ultraviolet light, by the way). The colour varies but is normally white, grey or yellow. The distance a man fires his semen varies and the world record is eight feet eight inches. This doesn't have much influence over his chances of becoming a father (though the ancient Hebrews used to believe that sperm which didn't come out forcefully wasn't fertile) since sperm can swim and as long as they're deposited in the right general area they can make their way up into the womb by themselves. There are several possible reasons for a change in a man's ejaculatory pattern. These include increasing age, diabetes, back injury and prostate trouble. Some drugs are known to have an effect on the amount of semen and the distance it travels after leaving the penis. Your boyfriend should have a word with his doctor.

Useless in bed

Question

Jack, a friend of ours recently separated from his wife and came to stay with us. He was very broken up about it. Things weren't made easy for him by the fact that his wife, who works at the same place as he does, had told all her friends that he was useless in bed. About a week after he had moved in the three of us were sitting in the living room watching a rather erotic late night movie when my husband quietly drew my attention to the fact that Jack had an enormous erection. Saying that he was going to make a cup of tea my husband then went out into the kitchen. While he was there he called to me to join him. He then reminded me that when we have been making love we have frequently fantasised about having a threesome. He asked me if I fancied making love to Jack. At first I was rather shocked at the idea of putting a fantasy into practice but when I thought about it for a moment I found the idea very exciting. The movie had turned me on and I have always found Jack attractive. I told my husband to stay where he was and went back into the living room where Jack was still watching the movie. I sat down beside him and after a few moments casually put my hand on his inner thigh. Jack was clearly surprised and looked at me and then at the door, obviously anxious in case my husband should reappear. I told him not to worry and asked him to kiss me. Five minutes later I was down to my bra and panties giving Jack a blow job when my husband walked back in. Because of the position I was in I didn't see him at first but could tell by Jack's reaction what had happened. I heard my husband tell Jack it was OK. I then felt him pull down my panties and enter me from behind. During the next two hours both men made love to me in every possible position, sometimes both together and sometimes one at a time.

You should have seen the delighted look on Jack's face when I told him that his wife was wrong about his sexual prowess. He moved out to his own flat two weeks later but still comes back to sleep with us once or twice a week.

It is at Jack's suggestion that my husband and I would now like to offer my services to any other man who lacks sexual confidence. Jack says that I gave him back his manhood and I feel that I could provide other men with a useful service. It would be a sort of social work because I would not charge any money. How do I set about doing this?

Answer

There are a few sexperts who provide patients with surrogate lovers and they might well be keen to take up your generous offer (though I fear that your husband's presence and assistance might be regarded as less welcome). Your doctor, local hospital or nearest university should be able to give you the names and addresses of local sex therapists.

But before you dedicate yourself wholeheartedly to waving your bum in the air to save the nation might I suggest that you think a little more carefully about what you are getting yourself into?

By your own admission your first (and so far only) experience in this valuable area of human endeavour was inspired by nothing more complicated than an erotic movie, a visitor's impressive erection and a conveniently matching personal fantasy. The whole thing was made even more acceptable by the fact that you fancied your temporary partner.

How will you feel about removing your knickers to try and satisfy an impotent, underendowed, overweight, garlic breathed solicitor at 10.30 am on a Monday morning?

Do I need to scrub my nipples?

Question

I am five months pregnant and would like to breast feed my baby. My mother says I should start scrubbing my nipples with a toothbrush or nail brush in order to get them ready. My nipples are very sensitive. Do I really have to do this?

Answer

No. Nor do you have to hang kippers round your waist, massage vast quantities of clear honey into your breasts or stand on one leg singing arias from La Boheme.

Mine are bigger than hers

Question

A girlfriend and I recently compared our labia when we were in the showers. They seem quite different. Mine are much bigger than hers - and rather darker in colour. Is this normal?

Answer

Yes. Sexual bits and pieces (of both varieties) are as unique as fingerprints. A friend of mine who is a gynaecologist swears he can identify all his patients by looking at what he calls the `business end'. Another friend, who works with him as a nurse, confirms that he will often hurry into a clinic, glance at a patient lying flat on her back with her legs in the air, and then address her by name without so much as a glance at her face.

Er...

Question

I am very indecisive. Is there anything I can do about it?

Answer

Probably not.

Will my penis stop growing?

Question

I am a 17 year old boy. I always wear quite snug fitting, brief style underpants. My girlfriend says these could damage my penis, restricting its growth. Is this true? Would I be safer if I wore boxer shorts?

Answer

The shape and style of your underwear is unlikely to have any positive or negative impact on your penis's growth prospects.

Short term growth is in your girlfriend's hands. Long term growth is in your genes.

An easy life

Question

My girlfriend won't argue with anyone about anything. She likes an easy life and always agrees with people. How do I get her to change?

Answer

You probably can't. But look on the bright side: her life will be so stress free that she'll probably live for ever. When a man recently celebrated his 105th birthday a reporter asked him for the secret of his longevity. `I never argue,' said the man. `That can't be all there is to it!' said the reporter, sceptically and rather aggressively. The old man shrugged. `Maybe you're right,' he said, without hesitating.

Rich parents

Question

I am dating a rather well to do young lady who has rich parents. When I'm invited round to dinner I try to put on a better speaking voice and always end up putting the letter H in front of lots of words. I hear myself saying things like: `Dinner was habsolutely wonderful' and `The weather has been hawful.' I'm sure they take the mickey out of me behind my back.

Answer

Be yourself. Take confidence from the fact that your girlfriend is going out with you because you are you. If she wanted to go out with a chinless, witless, hunting, shooting upper class twit with a plum in his mouth and a firm aubergine stuffed up his rear end then she would presumably not be going out with you. You do not have to pretend to be something you are not. Indeed, such a pretence can only damage your chances of cementing your relationship - and making a good impression on her family.

Your confidence has been weakened by the fact that you have concentrated too much on your girlfriend's parents' wealth and too little on your own good points. Try to give your self assurance a boost by making a list of all your virtues, skills and accomplishments.

A transvestite writes

Question

I am a transvestite. I'm married and my wife knows about my transvestism and is very supportive. We sometimes shop together as sisters. Once every month I go out to a meeting of a transvestite group to which I belong. I was carefully driving home from a social evening the other night (wearing a split skirt, a pink blouse, five and a half inch heels, a shoulder length blonde wig and full make up) when my car suddenly stuttered to a halt. I had run out of petrol. I was horrified; as much at my own stupidity as at anything else. I was in a part of town that I don't know very well and there was no telephone box to be seen. I sat there for a moment or two wondering what on earth to do. I didn't think that things could possibly be worse. Then a police motor cyclist pulled up alongside me and I knew that they could. I was terrified. It is, I suspect, every transvestite's nightmare to be arrested while `dressed'.I wound down the car window and said `hello', trying to sound as feminine as I could. The policeman asked me what was wrong. When I explained he told me that there was a garage nearby. He ordered me to wind up my window, lock the doors, stay in the car and wait. He then roared off out of sight. Less than five minutes later he was back clutching a can of petrol. He put the petrol in the car and I asked him how much I owed him. He smiled and said I didn't owe him anything but would I go for a drink with him one evening. I couldn't believe my ears. I know I look quite convincing and make a realistic woman when I'm `dressed' but I'd never expected this. I can't remember exactly what I said - I was just desperate to get away - but I remember exchanging telephone numbers and now I'm terrified that he will ring. I just don't know what to say or do.

Answer

If he `read' you and realised that you weren't quite what you appeared to be then your over friendly policeman may have homosexual leanings and may wrongly assume that you have too. If he didn't `read' you - and honestly thought you were a woman - then an evening out is likely to end in disappointment, anger and fairly considerable embarrassment. Since you aren't homosexual and obviously don't want to embarrass your kindly saviour you have to get out of your date and let him down as lightly as you can. Waiting for him to ring you is likely dramatically to increase your chances of having a premature heart attack so the best bet must be for you to ring him and get this over as soon as possible. Try to think of something simple but final if you're going to lie. Telling your blue suited Don Juan that you have to rush off to nurse your ageing grandmother in the Orkneys could lead to all sorts of unwanted complications and leave you taking part in an unpleasantly realistic French farce. Your best bet is to tell him that you're married (that bit, at least, is true) and that although you found him enormously attractive you've thought it over and you really don't think a meeting would be a good idea. Be firm. If he says he just wants to be friends tell him that you found him too attractive for that. Thank him again for his kindness and ask him if you can send him cash to cover the cost of the petrol he bought for you. And next time you go out `dressed' do make sure you fill your petrol tank beforehand!

A year off

Question

My daughter has got a place at university to study modern languages but she wants to take a year off before she starts her studies. I think she should continue with her education and have a year off when she's finished her degree course. What do you think?

Answer

Your daughter will find it difficult to settle down to academic studies if she takes a year off now. Much of university life will seem childish and banal after twelve months' contact with the real world. But if she waits until she has finished her degree course to take time off the problems will be even greater.

I spent a year doing voluntary work in between leaving school and going to university and it was the most valuable educational experience I ever had. I learned more about people and life in that short period than I did in twenty years of formal education.

Exercise bores me

Question

I want to get fit but exercise bores me. Is there any way to get fit without jogging, playing ball games or prancing around in a leotard?

Answer

Why not fuck your way to fitness? Sex is an excellent and under-estimated way to get into shape. Careful selection of positions should enable you to exercise just about every muscle in your body with the possible exception of those responsible for eyebrow movement, though come to think of it if you surprise one another enough you could even give the eyebrows a workout. And you can burn up as many calories having sex as you can while jogging.

Very much in love

Question

My girlfriend and I are both 18 and very much in love. We plan to marry early next year and my girlfriend's parents have already started to make the arrangements. We have a wonderful sex life but neither of us has had any experience with any other partners. Recently my girlfriend asked me if I had ever wondered what it would be like to make love to another woman. When I admitted that I had she said that she had wondered what it would be like to go to bed with a different man. I've talked to a couple of friends about this and they both say that I should sow some wild oats fairly quickly before I get married and it is too late. However, although I am keen to do this I am not so keen about my fiancee having sex with other men. I now don't know what to do. I am worried that if I resist these urges now I may find myself succumbing after I am married.

Answer

Abandon your plans for an early wedding. Cancel the cake maker, the dress and the hotel booking. I don't think that either you or your girlfriend are ready for marriage yet. You don't have to abandon all ideas of marrying one another. But you would be wise to put matrimony on ice for the time being. Neither of you are old enough or mature enough to take such an enormous step.

The absence of a firm date for a wedding will free you both to enjoy one another and will remove this feeling that you urgently need to do a little more sexual exploring before you settle down. Concentrate on having fun and starting to grow old together and see what happens. You will either grow closer together or you will grow apart. If you grow closer together then make another date for your wedding. You'll enjoy the occasion far more. If you grow apart it will be painful but you will at least be able to do it without bloodsucking lawyers wrecking what is left of your relationship and taking all your money.

Whirlwind romance

Question

I work as a presenter for a local radio station. A few months ago I got married to a girl I had met while opening a shop in the town where I work. She worked as an assistant in the store and I fell in love with her immediately. It was a whirlwind romance and we married less than three months after we had met. You will probably be surprised to hear that sexually speaking I was very inexperienced when I got married. I had only had three previous girlfriends and had been to bed with only one of them. It never occurred to me that my wife might be considerably more experienced than I was. Two weeks ago I came off air to find a group of other presenters, engineers and secretaries laughing at something. Naturally, I went over to see what was amusing them. One of the other presenters immediately showed me what they were looking at - a section headed `Readers' Girlfriend' in a several year old mens magazine. The page contained several nude photographs of my wife. Shocked, I tore the magazine out of his hand and rushed to the store where my wife still works. I dragged her out to the car and took her home. She confessed that she had posed for the pictures when going out with another man. When I asked her straight out how many men she had been to bed with she told me that she couldn't remember but that she thought it was probably seven or eight! She wouldn't stop crying but kept insisting that she loved me. I immediately moved out and am now living with my mother. I miss her but how can I ever go back to her knowing what I know.

Answer

I never fail to be impressed by the enormous reservoir of kindness with which the human race is endowed. What good friends you've got at the radio station. What jolly chums they are to have torn your life into shreds for the sake of a quick laugh. It isn't your wife you should be cross with but the malevolent, evil spirited morons you work with.

Try to forget what your wife did before she met you. If she really loves you then nothing she did before she met you matters. Her sex history is certainly not important (I am assuming that both of you have been checked and that neither of you contracted any diseases during your premarital adventures). Lots of people do silly things when they're young - but that doesn't mean that they are evil, amoral or incapable of true and lasting love. Your wife's sexual history is neither unusual nor exotic. Haven't you ever done anything of which you are now rather ashamed or embarrassed?

Parked on a double line? Gone through traffic lights on amber? Voted conservative? Taken up a disabled parking space at the airport? Fantasised about the political figure of your choice being slowly gummed into mince by a shoal of uncontrollable, disenfranchised octogenarians?

I suggest that you buy the biggest bunch of flowers you can afford and go home. Explain that you were hurt and ask your wife to forgive your impetuosity. Curse the nasty little pustules who caused you both so much pain and then repair your bruised marriage with kisses, hugs and whatever else comes naturally.

My hernia

Question

I have a hernia and need surgery. The first surgeon to whom my GP referred me has a waiting list of between eighteen months and two years. After talking to a secretary at the hospital he then found another surgeon who had a waiting list of just six weeks. Why isn't the incompetent surgeon with the two year waiting list disciplined? If it wasn't for the hard working surgeon with the short waiting list I would have had to wait much longer for my operation.

Answer

But how do you know that it is the surgeon with the long waiting list who is incompetent? Maybe the surgeon with the short waiting list has a short waiting list because most GPs refuse to send him their patients. Maybe he's an incompetent buffoon and the other surgeon - the one with the long waiting list - gets ten times as many patients to deal with.

I quite agree with you that hospital consultants should be assessed. And I agree that incompetent or inefficient specialists should be disciplined or sacked. But waiting times alone are not a good way of assessing consultant quality.

Drooping breasts

Question

I'm only 22 but my breasts, which are quite large, are already beginning to droop. Is there anything I can do to keep them firm and stop them sagging anymore?

Answer

You can't make DD size breasts defy gravity and stick straight out but wear the correct bra and you can delay the rate at which even the largest breasts droop. Breast tissue is largely fat so exercise doesnt help much. But a good bra, providing support and helping to prevent gravity-induced sagging, can do wonders.

Jelly in my bra

Question

My little girl recently had a birthday party. After all the other children had gone home and my daughter had gone to bed my husband and I started to clear up. There was quite a lot of mess and a lot of food left over. My husband was nagging me about having made too much food when I don't know what came over me but I picked up a handful of blancmange and threw it at him. It landed right in the middle of his shirt front and I couldn't help giggling. He started to shout but then picked up a jelly, came across to where I was standing and pushed it down the front of my blouse and rubbed it into my bra and over my breasts. I then picked up a handful of trifle, undid his trousers and slipped it down inside his underpants. After a few minutes we were both covered in food. My husband undid my blouse and started licking the jelly off my breasts. I felt really sexy and knelt down and started eating up some of the trifle. In the past I've never been very keen on oral sex but licking the trifle off his penis really turned me on. A few moments later we were making love on the carpet. It was fantastic! There was a terrible mess to clear up but it was well worth it. Have you ever heard of anyone doing anything like this before?

Answer

You are by no means the first couple to discover the sexual delights of covering one another in food, licking some of it off and then humping through the resultant mess. Slippery, sticky, sweet foods such as custard, cream and syrup seem to be particularly popular with those who get their sexual kicks this way. Recently published, entirely unreliable research shows that 34.6% of the staff working for a major bank enjoy sexually stimulating food fights at least once a month. Oddly enough I've never heard of anyone getting turned on by a food fight with cold gravy or salted porridge (though now that I've said that I've absolutely no doubt that I will be flooded with letters from cold gravy and salted porridge aficionados).

Get fat by looking at food

Question

Is it possible to get fat just by looking at food? My mum swears she hardly ever eats and claims she only has to look at a cream cake to put on 5 pounds!

Answer

You may be surprised to hear that your mum is right - it is possible to get fat simply by looking at food. When you see, smell or think of food your body starts to prepare its digestive processes. Saliva is released and your stomach juices get ready to digest the food it expects. Your pancreas will be stimulated to produce insulin and the insulin will start to convert the glucose in your bloodstream into fat because it anticipates more food coming in. As your blood sugar level falls so you'll feel genuinely hungry. And you'll eat. Even though you weren't hungry just a few moments earlier. The answer? Tell your mum to ban books and magazines that contain mouth-watering pictures of food. And suggest that she wears blinkers when shopping trips are likely to take her past cake shops. (I'll lay evens some crafty entrepreneur is producing `blinkers for slimmers' within a week).

I feel fed up

Question

I sometimes feel very fed up. I am particularly fed up with people - most of whom are mean, gloomy, humourless hypocrites who think only about themselves.

Answer

I think you're right. The world is pretty well full of nasty bastards. I wouldn't mind terribly if the human race became extinct. Maybe it's time we gave some other creature a chance. I don't think ants, mice, cockroaches or termites could possibly make a worse job of things than we have. I certainly don't believe that any other creature has quite the reservoir of deceit as man has.

Does complaining do any good?

Question

I always complain when I buy shoddy goods but my husband says I shouldn't bother. He says I'll just get a reputation as a `complainer' and that it won't do any good anyway.

Answer

You must complain. It is important. If we don't all complain when we buy lousy products and get shitty service then things will just get worse. (The Vernon Coleman Guerilla Army task for this week is to write at least one letter of complaint about an annoyance of your choice - something that you've bought and that has broken or isn't any good or some service you've paid for that has turned out to be not worth the money). You should also try to remember to say something complimentary when you're pleased with goods you've bought or service you've been given. Drop the manufacturer, shop or individual concerned a short note of thanks or congratulations. You'll make their day and you'll feel good too.

Perfectly safe

Question

I have been very nervy recently. My doctor gave me a prescription for tranquillisers. He said that they are perfectly safe to take for as long as I like. Is this true?

Answer

I know of no tranquilliser which can be safely taken indefinitely. I have been battling to persuade doctors that tranquillisers are addictive since 1973 - that's over two decades ago! The government eventually acted (and admitted that they'd acted because of my articles) and I've lost count of the number of TV and radio programmes which were eventually made as a result of the campaign but it seems that there are still some doctors around who haven't got the message. My advice is that if any doctor says any tranquilliser is perfectly safe you should run away from his surgery as quickly as you possibly can screaming `Unclean! Unclean!' at the top of your voice.

A small problem

Question

I have a small problem which is far too trivial to bother my GP with (he is a very busy man). My tongue is slightly discoloured. Please advise. I will see my doctor if you think it worth his attention.

Answer

Put out your tongue. Move it to the left. Now to the right. Push it right out. Hmmmm. My word. Doesn't look good, does it? I don't think you should put that back into your mouth until you've let your own doctor have a look at it. Keep it out of your mouth and give it plenty of fresh air until your doctor has had a chance to examine it.

Two girls and a dildo

Question

I'm 22 and recently changed jobs and moved to London where I now rent a room in a flat. The other two occupants of the flat, Jane and Karen, are girls in their mid-twenties. They share the only other bedroom. My girlfriend was initially a little dubious about my sharing with two women but eventually accepted that the arrangement was purely one of convenience. I haven't had much to do with either of the girls because I often work late in the evenings and most weekends I go back up north to be with my girlfriend, but last Wednesday when the trains were on strike I accepted a lift from my boss and arrived back at the flat much earlier than I usually do. I walked into the living room and had the shock of my life when I saw Jane and Karen, who were both entirely naked, sprawled on the sofa watching a porno movie. They didn't seem in the slightest bit embarrassed. There was a dildo lying on the sofa between them. Jane offered me a glass of wine and neither of them made any attempt to cover up. It turned out that the two girls are lesbians and that although they have a rather `loose' and uncommitted relationship they have been sleeping and living together for four years. Jane told me that she was bisexual but Karen admitted that her only sexual experience with a man had been such a disaster that she was really still a virgin. After we'd opened another bottle of wine Jane suggested to Karen that she ought to take advantage of the situation to find out what sex with a man - meaning me - was really like. At first I thought she was joking but realised she wasn't when she reached over, unfastened my trousers, took out my whatsit and started playing with it. I ended up making love to both of them and had the most amazing evening of my life. Afterwards we even slept together in their bed.

To my amazement the two girls seem to regard the evening as of no great significance. The following evening I asked Karen if she'd like to go out for a meal but she said that she was still a lesbian and not interested in a heterosexual relationship. I feel as though I've been used. I don't know whether to stay in the flat or move out and I don't know whether to tell my girlfriend or whether to keep quiet.

Answer

You will have to get used to the fact that after being used as a living, breathing dildo you have been discarded like an old condom (I hope you used condoms, by the way. If you didn't then do pop along to your local Furtive Look Clinic and have your twiddly bits peeped at by experts in white coats who know about these things. Lesbians aren't immune to sexually transmitted diseases). I don't think you should tell your girlfriend about your unsuccessful attempt to convert the natives. A confession might help you unload some of your guilt but it won't *improve her life. If you can lock the memory of your orgiastic evening away in a little* compartment under the heading `Isolated Erotic Incidents' then stay in the flat. If you think you'll find that difficult to do then you should start looking for accommodation elsewhere.

Dampened enthusiasm

Question

I get excruciating headaches whenever I have an orgasm. I don't get the headaches at any other time. As you can probably imagine this rather dampens my enthusiasm for sex (although I do like sex and the headaches are NOT a deliberate excuse!).

Answer

First, pop along and see your doctor for a check-up. If he can't find anything wrong then you may be suffering from genuine `sex' headaches. The explosive, violent, usually one sided headaches which sometimes accompany the moment of orgasm are a bit of a mystery but since such headaches are sometimes thought to be caused by over breathing you may be able to avoid them by making an effort to control your breathing during sex. Another possibility is that the headaches are a type of migraine.

Am I mad?

Question

I recently took a fairly low paid job with an organisation which does work which I respect. My father wants me to take a better paid job with the chemical company he works for. Do you think I'm mad to prefer to have less money but a job I feel good about?

Answer

Not at all. I am constantly amazed by the things which people are prepared to do for a living. Whatever you do I think you should try to spend your life doing things that YOU feel proud about. Personal respect is far more important than being able to afford new shag pile carpets and velvet wallpaper every 12 months.

My boyfriend's fetish

Question

My boyfriend seems to have a fetish for girls wearing tight jeans. Whenever we go out he can't stop staring if he sees a girl's bum in denim. In the summer he wears dark glasses all the time and thinks I can't tell that he's staring but I can. Do you think he's a pervert?

Answer

No. He is just suffering from a common medical disorder called Nice round bums in tight trousers give me a hardonitis. Other similar diseases include Big breasts in skin tight sweaters make my eyes popoutitis and Lovely long legs in very short skirts make me drive into lampostsitis. No treatment is needed, which is just as well since none is available.

I want plastic surgery

Question

I want plastic surgery to improve the shape of my nose but everyone thinks I'm potty. I've seen a picture of the nose I'd like. Do you think I'll be able to get the operation done?

Answer

As the owner of one of the largest noses in the galaxy I think you're pretty potty too. Why do you want plastic surgery? I bet you a pound that it isn't simply because you find your own nose aesthetically displeasing but because you think that having a new nose will change the way people look at you or think about you. And the chances are that it won't. Lots of people seem to regard plastic surgery as a potential miracle solution. I constantly get letters from girls wanting bigger breasts because they think that big breasts will change their lives. They won't. Having bit tits doesn't make the owner immune to nastiness, spite, envy and small minded bigotry. After you've had the surgery the world will still be full of shitty people. Surgery won't make people suddenly start loving you and treating you decently. Wear the nose God gave you with pride. Hold your head up high and face the world with dignity and courage. Stuff anyone who doesn't like you because of the shape of your nose.

If you insist on having your nose reshaped you will, I'm sure be able to find a surgeon prepared to deal with you.

Let down

Question

At a meeting at work recently my boss criticised me at great length for something that was not my fault. He was so aggressive and so rude that I could not defend myself. People who I had previously thought of as friends all said nothing - even though they knew that the attack was quite unfair and unjustified. Afterwards two of these people came up to me and told me that they thought I had been treated unreasonably but confessed that they had not had the courage to stick up for me. One person said that he had tried to remain objective and impartial, another said he felt he had to be neutral. How do I still regard these people as friends? How can I have respect for them after they let me down so badly?

Answer

You've just learned the difference between true friends and passing acquaintances. Most people go through their lives afraid of speaking out and constantly living in fear of what might happen.

However frightened, stupid, faithless, selfish and vain you think people can be you are wrong. People can be more stupid, more feckless, more vain, more selfish and more frightened than you could possibly imagine.

`Neutral', `objective', `fair' and `responsible' are qualities which we are taught to admire. But, in truth, these are the qualities of the weak spirited and the passionless. Name me one great man who was ever `fair'? Name me a social, technical or artistic advance produced by a `bland' man.

Taking charge

Question

My husband likes me to take charge when we have sex. If I loosely tie his wrists behind his back with my tights and gently whip his bottom with my best black bra he gets very excited and that turns me on. He likes me to wear boots, fishnet stockings and a tight, black, plastic micro skirt. Last Saturday there was nothing good on the TV and we were just getting into the swing of things in the living room when the door opened and my sister Daphne and her husband Harold walked in. My husband was stark naked, except for a pink, nylon baby doll nightie of mine which he likes to wear, and was bent over our beige leatherette sofa so he didn't see them arrive but I was in the middle of my back swing and saw them fling open the door. `Surprise, surprise!' said Harold, who was brandishing a bottle of Tesco's claret. My thigh length plastic boots were still at the menders so I was wearing my black wellingtons which aren't really perfect but which are the only other boots I've got. There were a few little red lines across Harold's bottom so it was pretty obvious what I'd been doing.

Daphne is very straight laced and has been heard to say that people should only have sex when they want a baby (She and Harold have got one child and I think he was probably the result of their only sexual experience) and I honestly thought she was going to have a fit. Harold is a staunch member of the church choir, although I suspect that he probably keeps dirty magazines in the garden shed and he certainly didn't seem to mind looking at my bare breasts while Daphne was giving us both a piece of her mind. It rather spoilt the mood so we put our dressing gowns on, had a cocoa each and watched the fencing on television. The thing is, do you think we should stop what we do? We don't hurt anyone else and we both enjoy our little games.

Answer

I think you're both disgusting and should be thoroughly ashamed of yourselves. How dare you have fun with one another's bodies. Marriage is a sacred union and the human body should be treated as a temple. War, murder, deceit, tobacco production, over prescribing and corruption are insignificant moral crimes compared to the inappropriate wearing of feminine nightwear and the use of rubber boots as a substitute component of an erotic costume. Since your husband is clearly the ringleader he must be punished. Make him wear your baby doll nightie and kneel down in front of the sofa. Put on your boots and micro skirt and smack his plump, pink bottom till he pleads for more. Buy, beg or borrow one of those remote control cameras, take a picture of yourselves in action and use it to create a Christmas card to send to your anally constricted sister and her wretched husband.

Oh, and one other thing, if you're not going to lock the back door when you're giving impromptu performances you might as well get one of the neighbours to collect admission money.

A nightmare

Question

My husband and I have just got back from a holiday in Spain. It was a nightmare. There were cats all over the place - all hungry and thirsty, some dying. We went out morning and night taking food and water to them but couldn't carry enough food to feed them all. It broke my heart and I cried every day. I will never go back to Spain ever again. What can I do to help these poor creatures? I feel so helpless.

Answer

One can change some things with logical arguments and reasoned debates. Other things have to be changed by the judicious application of suffering. Naughty children sometimes only learn by being deprived of regular doses of television and I suspect that the Spanish will only start treating animals kindly when forced to do so through economic sanctions. Write to the Ambassador at the Spanish Embassy and tell him that you will never go back to his blood soaked country until his fellow countrymen start treating animals with respect. Spaniards are primitive, rather simple minded people who have few natural skills and rely entirely on their climate to make a living. But they have some native cunning and will start treating animals decently if they understand that the alternative is a boycott by holidaymakers. Economic boycotts helped win freedom for blacks in South Africa and will help win freedom for animals around the world.

Times are hard

Question

I am a married woman in my 30s. My husband is on a low wage and times are hard. We live in our own house with a mortgage but we need a new roof. We have saved some money but still cannot afford to have the whole job done properly. A friend has given us an estimate and suggested that we could make up the rest of the bill if I go away with him to a hotel for the night. My husband has no objection as our friend has had a vasectomy and does not have any infections. I find the whole idea very exciting but do you think this will hurt my relationship with my husband and our friend? Will this make me a prostitute? Do you think I will regret it? I would appreciate an early reply because our friend wants to start work on the roof in August.

Answer

You should think very carefully indeed before accepting your friend's offer. Technically, I suppose that if you go to bed with someone for financial gain (whether you get paid in cash, tins of pineapple or roofing tiles) then you are prostituting yourself. But I don't think that is the important point. Theoretically any woman who has been to bed with a man after he's bought her a meal - because she feels she ought to - is a prostitute. Anyone who has had sex with a partner out of gratitude for something else is a prostitute.

What matters - and you're obviously already worried about this - is what effect your night on the tiles is going to have on the rest of your life. Selling your body for part of a roof is bound to have an effect on your relationship with your husband (and your friend) and the big $69 question is: where is this all going to stop? Are you going to pay the window cleaner by giving him a hand job? What about a blow job for the local builder if the chimney needs repointing? Or are you only going to bed with the roofer because you fancy him? In which case, is once going to be enough?

A student nurse

Question

I am an 18 year old male student nurse. I share a house with four girl students and about a month ago one of the girls told us that her brother was coming to the area for two weeks. She said that if he found out that she was sharing a house with a man she would have to go home. The other girls decided that I would have to become a woman while our friend's brother was around. They dyed my hair, lent me clothes and taught me how to use make up. I had never dressed as a woman before but I found it very exciting. I must have been convincing because my flatmate's brother asked me out and told me he wanted to make love to me. Even when I told him the truth he still insisted that he wanted me as his lover. In the end we went to a hotel and spent the night together. When he left the area he said that his sister could stay with us but that I had to forget all about him. I now miss him terribly and am very confused.

Answer

I'm not surprised that you are confused. You have, in the last few weeks, come face to face with two important and unexpected aspects of your own sexuality. I'm afraid I think you are probably going to have to accept the fact that your relationship with your flatmate's brother is over and was never anything more than a brief `holiday' romance. (I hope you practised `safe sex'. If you didn't or are in any doubt please visit a sexually transmitted diseases clinic straight away.) But you have to ask yourself whether your experiences with cross dressing and homosexuality were also transient or are of greater, longer lasting significance. Cross dressing and homosexuality do not usually go together - the vast majority of transvestites or cross dressers are interested only in having sex with real women - so I think you should try to separate these two experiences in your mind. Do you want to forget about cross dressing but experiment more with homosexuality? Do you want to forget about homosexuality but try cross dressing more often? Do you want to forget about both and return to being a `straight' heterosexual? Or do you want to carry on cross dressing and find another boyfriend? The possibilities are almost endless if you want to mix and match and pick and choose between different aspects of your own sexuality.

Worth the effort?

Question

Is it really worth making the effort to write to politicians and newspapers. I sometimes feel that there is no point at all in ordinary people trying to change anything. The bureaucrats and the politicians just ignore us and carry on looking after themselves.

Answer

Things may seem bleak when your letters are continually ignored or when you receive yet another bland and meaningless response from a bland and meaningless politician but it certainly IS worth making the effort. Who knows what the result will be? On 12th July 1789 an angry revolutionary called Camille Desmoulins jumped up onto a cafe table in Paris and made an impromptu, stirring speech which led, two days later, to the storming of the Bastille and the start of the French Revolution.

Kidney for sale

Question

I would like to sell one of my kidneys. Who can I write to? I need the money for a flat.

Answer

However desperate you are please forget about selling any of your organs in order to raise money. The Manufacturer gave you two kidneys because He thinks you need them. If you sell one you will invalidate the guarantee.

I shoot birds

Question

I have an airgun and like shooting. I shoot birds but because I don't want to risk hitting another person or breaking a window I never aim at birds when they are on the ground only when they are in trees. My girlfriend has broken up with me. She says that what I am doing is cruel but she has a cat that kills birds and she still loves the cat so why doesn't she love me?

Answer

The fact that the cat is obeying a simple, primitive hunting instinct - designed to keep it alive - whereas you are a sadistic, psychopathic cretin getting your pleasure out of killing defenceless creatures purely for fun may have something to do with it. Your girlfriend is obviously sensible and sensitive whereas you are simply an insensitive and intellectually deprived thug suited only to a career in politics or the pharmaceutical industry. I trust that your bank balance will always be small, that you will be for ever besieged by worries, uncertainties and guilt and that you marry an ambitious, pushy, razor tongued, ball busting, shopaholic feminist with halitosis, herpes and a moustache.

My husband is boring

Question

I am middle aged and married with two teenage sons. My husband is kind and thoughtful. He works hard, is popular and a lovely man. But I have recently realised that I find life with him boring. For several years now our sex life has been virtually non-existent. A few months ago I started an affair with a young man who works in my office. He is not much older than my sons and I know there is no future in our relationship. But the sex is fantastic and I am enormously flattered that I can satisfy him. I have started masturbating again. I wear sexy clothes and I flirt with strangers. I had grown dull but I suddenly feel much more alive. Now I worry about getting older and want to make the most of the rest of my life. Should I leave my husband and try life alone? I don't know what is happening to me.

Answer

You're going through a mid life crisis - about as common among men and women in their 40s as spots are among teenagers. Your affair, probably triggered by boredom, has woken up your sleeping hormones and I'm afraid you're not going to find it easy to get them to shut up. Without regular sex your physical urges will have been hibernating. Now that you are back in your action your veins will be full of sex hormones. So now you've got to decide what you want to do with all your reawakened sexual energy.

First you must ask yourself whether you want your marriage to succeed. Do you want to awaken your husband from his sexual slumber? If you do then you must try - stockings, lacy bra and perfume - and see what happens. If you can't get him to show any interest at all then you have to decide whether to sink back into dullsville and try to stuff your hormones back into the box, decide that your relationship has reached its sell by date, leave and move into a flat somewhere or stay with him and continue having short term but physically satisfying affairs. If you don't want to awaken your husband's sexual urges because you don't think of him `that way' any more then that will presumably tell you a good deal about your relationship.

Finally, remember that not all your new energy has to go into humping. There is more to life than sex and orgasms. Maybe you could harness a little of your energy and use it to help do something you've always really wanted to do: write a book, start a business, sail around the world single handed or break the world disco dancing record.

I know all this is rather frightening but you may able to take some slight comfort from the thought that there is one thing worse than having a mid-life crisis: and that is NOT having a mid life crisis but simply muddling along in dullsville, unaware of your potential and dead from the ankles up.

At the seaside

Question

My wife and I recently took our two children on holiday to the seaside. One of our children was hit on the side of the head by a beachball. She was badly upset by the incident. Will you help us organise a campaign to ban ball games on beaches?

Answer

I don't think you're going anywhere near far enough. Ball games are just the thin end of a very big wedge. Beaches, parks and other play areas are potential death traps for children. Children playing on sand or grass can bang their heads on small buckets, get wet feet in rock pools, be hit on the head by falling kites and get sand up their noses. As for swings and slides - well the potential for disaster is vast. I really don't think your campaign goes anywhere near far enough. Indeed, I feel that by even allowing your children to play in public places you are demonstrating your unsuitability for parenthood. All decent and truly caring parents keep their children at home, wrapped up in cotton wool, bringing them out for display purposes only when close relatives arrive for tea.

Sick with grief

Question

My wife died two weeks ago. We were very much in love. I feel sick with grief. People just don't understand how I feel. They say `get out and meet new people' and `start a new life' and tell me that I have my grandchildren and my garden and so should be grateful. But my wife was my life and I miss her so much I just do not know what to do. I just sit in the house or walk around the streets.

Answer

Find someone to talk to who does understand. Your doctor. A neighbour. A friend. You should try to talk about your wife and your love. You have every right to miss her and it is perfectly understandable that you should feel the way you do You should ignore those who thoughtlessly want you to `meet new people'. Remember the good times you had together. Don't be ashamed to get out your photo album. Don't be afraid to cry. Enjoy, cherish and share your memories for it is your wife's love for you which will help you through the seemingly endless days of pain and loneliness. Your grief and sadness will never go completely but time will give you the strength to live with your sorrow.

Should be grateful

Question

You and people like you should be grateful to live in Britain. Our society is free, people's individual rights are respected and everyone is free to express their opinion - however bizarre.

Answer

What joy to find such innocence and naivety. My phone is tapped so heavily that it constantly bleeps and plays back recordings of what I said last week. Private detectives follow me around in such numbers that I'm thinking of hiring a coach for them. And if my car inexplicably goes out of control and I end up squashed under a large lorry I hope someone will investigate the accident carefully.

Things got out of hand

Question

During a recent holiday in Ilfracombe my husband and I were sitting cuddling on a bench overlooking the sea when things got rather out of hand. We both decided we wanted more than just a cuddle but our hotel was about two miles away and we didn't want to wait that long. We ended up making love on the bench with me sitting on his lap with my knickers in my handbag and my dress pulled up to my thighs. It was the best sex either of us have ever had. What made it exciting was that several people walked by as we doing it and no one had any idea what we were doing. Afterwards we did it outdoors on several other occasions. Is there any law about having sex in public places? Could we get into trouble if we got caught?

Answer

I'm sure you could get into trouble if you got caught for outdoor sex is bound to be a breach of some penal code. I haven't the foggiest what they'd do you for. Behaviour likely to lead to a breach of the peace? Behaviour likely to make puritanical presbyterians feel jealous and extremely upset? Behaviour likely to make other people realise what they've been missing for the past 96 years? Behaviour likely to result in a large crowd of people gathering and yelling bawdy encouragement? One thing is for sure: if you're spotted enjoying yourselves in public there is bound to be a law against it and the end result will be that having been screwed by your husband you'll get screwed by the system. My carefully thought out advice is that you should try not to get caught. And if you do get spotted then have a good excuse ready. Alternatively, I know of one couple who escaped prosecution at a Northern seaside resort by arguing that they were both just trying to keep warm. With the right excuse you'd probably get a discharge which is, I suppose, where your troubles started.

I need help

Question

I got involved in a threesome recently and now I need some help. I met a couple in a disco who invited me back to their flat. When we got there the two of them started talking about sex. I was embarrassed but the woman started fondling me and her husband made it pretty clear that he didn't object to what was going on. Eventually the woman took me by the hand and led me into the bedroom. Her husband followed and got into bed with us. I made love to the woman and then her husband made love to her. While I was dozing the husband started fondling me. I was rather shocked and didn't say or do anything - even when he started making love to me I let him do what he wanted. I haven't told anyone else about what happened but now I'm very confused.

Answer

When you've visited your local Sexually Transmitted Diseases clinic to make sure that your sexual adventure hasn't left you with any physical souvenirs you need to sit yourself down and think carefully about what happened.

What did you expect was going to happen when you went back to that flat? Are you really so naive that you thought that the three of you were going to talk about crop prices in the American Mid-West and maybe play a little Monopoly for bottle tops? You must surely have expected some sort of sexual contact. If you now feel that what happened went way too far for you then you should be more careful in future about going home with strangers.

I suspect that you may also be confused about the homosexual element of your sexual adventure. Maybe you even enjoyed it and feel guilty about that. But remember that one homosexual experience doesn't mean that you are gay or even bisexual.

Since you are clearly sensitive and perhaps not ready for a no holds barred sex life you need to think carefully about exactly what you want to do with your body.

A new diet

Question

I am just over a stone overweight. A friend has told me that she lost her excess weight by masturbating several times every day. She says that having lots of orgasms is a very effective way of burning up calories. Is this so? If so then this is a diet I think I could really enjoy.

Answer

You can get rid of about 150 calories by masturbating to orgasm. You need to burn up 3,500 calories to lose a pound of fat. So if you masturbate to orgasm twenty three times that will get rid of a pound. Since you need to lose a stone you'll need to masturbate to orgasm 322 times to reach your desired weight. And this assumes that your calorie intake and other activities remain unaltered. I suggest you produce a book and video about this new diet. You could make a fortune. You could call it `Toss Off Those Unwanted Pounds' or `Smile Your Way To Slenderness'.

Mummy's boy

Question

My husband is a real `mummy's boy' and it's getting me down. I thought he would change after we got married but he hasn't. Even though she is perfectly fit and healthy and has friendly neighbours he calls in to see her every evening on the way home from work. Sometimes he has his tea there and doesn't get back to me until nearly bedtime. Every Sunday his mother comes round to our house and stays for dinner and tea. Since I work on Saturdays this means that my only day off is taken up with looking after his mother, who is perfectly capable of looking after herself. Once or twice I've suggested going out on a Sunday but my husband always says that his mother would be disappointed if we broke the routine. In a funny sort of way I think he is frightened of her; she certainly has a hold over him.

Answer

Some mothers just can't get used to the idea of handing over their sons to other women. Many keep their sons on a tight rein by the careful use of guilt - the most deadly weapon ever invented. Throwing out loaded gems such as `Don't you worry about me, I'll be all right. You go off and enjoy yourself' and `Mrs Feynstropp's boy always calls in to see her every morning. Such a nice, thoughtful, loving son' makes son-control a psychological artform.

Tackling your son's mother head on could be a dangerous and bloody game. Instead I suggest that you try a little subtle manipulation of your own. What does your husband really love? Motor cars? Fell walking? Outdoor sex? Watersports? Stamp collecting? There must be something and when you've decided what it is start looking for Sunday events that you know your husband will enjoy. Just hand him a newspaper cutting or brochure and let him make the first escape move himself.

Alternatively, you could try inviting your relatives or friends over on Sundays. Mother in law probably won't be too keen on having to share centre stage and a couple of noisy barbecues should do the trick.

My penis is small

Question

Are there are any exercises I can do or drugs I can take to make my penis bigger? My penis is quite small and I am very self conscious about it.

Answer

I know it isn't easy but do try not to be so concerned. `No man and no church shall be judged by the size of their organs,' wrote Mrs Confucius, wife of the famous Chinese philosopher and bon vivant, and she certainly knew of what she spoke.

Help me

Question

I have spent most of my life dieting. Every time I try a new diet it works well for a few months and then gradually I put back on every pound I've lost. I've decided that I am going to make one last effort. Can you please help me lose weight permanently?

Answer

The basic trick to losing weight permanently isn't just to change what you eat but to change when and why you eat. What you put into your mouth is far less important than how much and how often.

My girlfriend passed out

Question

While making love to my girlfriend recently she passed out. She came round again after half a minute and told me not to worry. She said it happened a lot to her. I've never come across this before, have you?

Answer

I have no personal experience of this phenomenon but it's known as the `little death' and is quite common - particularly among women. Some individuals have a sort of semi fit. Others just drift into unconsciousness. It can be very scary for the partner who remains awake. Individuals who pass out regularly should warn new partners beforehand to avoid the embarrassment of coming to in an ambulance.

Ten lovers

Question

A couple of weeks after we met my boyfriend asked me how many men I had been to bed with. I couldn't lie to him so I told him the truth: four. Since then it has been obvious that he doesn't trust or respect me. Every time we go out he accuses me of eyeing someone up. If I go out with friends he hits me and accuses me of sleeping with someone. Now we hardly ever go out and when we do I try not to speak to men. Whenever we argue about anything he throws it in my face. He hits me and says he'd never hit a woman, only a slag. No one could regret their past more than me. I would do anything to change it but I can't. It all happened when I was quite young and though it is no excuse I just lacked confidence and got in with the wrong crowd. I never made love before I met my boyfriend - men just used me for sex. I want to forget about it but my boyfriend says he can never forgive me, that people never change and that I am cheap. He is always telling me that that I am ugly and boring and that men are only interested in me for one thing. He says a lot of women fancy him and that he only stays with me because he feels sorry for me. He talks about making love with other women and tells me how much better other women are. Do you think I should just end the relationship as I only seem to be hurting my boyfriend. I realise that no man could ever love or respect me after what I did, so maybe I had better be on my own so that I can't hurt anyone and my boyfriend can have a chance of true love and happiness with a real woman. Please don't tell me that it's all my own fault. I know that. I just want to know what to do for the best.

Answer

Please try to stop feeling so guilty. Your sexual history is neither unusual nor any cause for shame. A recent survey showed that two thirds of all women have had at least six lovers while one in six women have had 25 or more lovers. Whatever has inspired your boyfriend's behaviour -jealousy for example - is no excuse. In my opinion no real man or genuine lover would be in the slightest bit concerned about your past sexual history.

If you care for him and want to make the relationship work then you should try to talk to your boyfriend and explain to him how hurtful you find his behaviour. If he can't or won't honestly accept that your past sexual adventures are now irrelevant then your relationship can have no future. But if you leave him remember that you are doing so for your sake and not for his. It is his behaviour which is unreasonable.

No erection

Question

I tried to make love to my girlfriend recently but could not get an erection - even though I was very enthusiastic. I am very worried. Can you help me? Will this happen again?

Answer

There are many possible explanations. Most men suffer from impotence occasionally. I am reliably informed that it happens to male porn stars so often that blue movie directors have stunt organs on hand in case the intended star of the show doesn't stand up to close scrutiny at the most important moment. I suggest you see your doctor.

Irresponsible

Question

My brother has sex with a different woman every week and boasts that he never uses a condom. How can I persuade him that this is irresponsible. I have only had sex with three different women in the last year and yet I always use a condom.

Answer

People do all sorts of daft things for all sorts of daft reasons. Just look at the number of people who drink and drive or pay good money to jump out of aeroplanes. For heavens sake, there are apparently still people who defy all logic and common sense and vote conservative! You can tell your brother the facts and you can fill him up to the ears with good advice but you can't force him to behave sensibly.

My fat doctor

Question

When I visited my doctor recently he told me that I needed to lose weight and that I should stop smoking. I couldn't help laughing about this when I got home. My doctor is even fatter than I am and smokes like a chimney.

Answer

Your doctor may not have the strength of mind to practise what he preaches but his advice is good. Now that you've enjoyed the joke I strongly suggest that you try to put his advice into practice. However, if your doctor ever offers you advice about how to improve your willpower I think you can safely ignore him.

Unsuccessful relationships

Question

I am female, in my early forties, live alone and run my own successful business. Since my divorce three years ago I have had several unsuccessful relationships. Two of the men I had affairs with just wanted me for money and another's hobby was punching - with me as the target. For a while I decided to give up men completely - on the grounds that they are more trouble than they worth - but I missed sex terribly and found masturbation and vibrators a rather unsatisfactory alternative. Two months ago a girlfriend in a similar situation told me that she had been happily paying for sex for over a year. She gave me the telephone number of the escort agency she used and, after hesitating for several days, I eventually rang them and made my first `date'. Although the young man from the agency was a real hunk I wasn't completely sure whether I'd take him to bed until we'd had dinner. He was good fun and made me laugh and clearly spent a lot of time in the gym so I did take him to bed and he was fantastic. It was a real joy to have a man whose sole aim was to give me pleasure. Even before he entered me I had had a string of breath-taking orgasms. I now ring the agency at least once a week and usually see a different man every time. The sex has always been great - the guys always bring plenty of condoms and use them (I'm very strict about practising `safe sex') and they are never reluctant to perform oral sex (which I enjoy but have often found men unwilling to perform)! Occasionally I feel guilty about what I'm doing. What do you think?

Answer

Prostitution is the best established (and probably the most honest) of all professions and the use of male prostitutes by women is not a new development. Gigilos have been humping for money for centuries. I don't think you should feel in the slightest bit guilty about buying sexual favours when the alternatives are celibacy, masturbation or, as you sadly say, a series of unsatisfying relationships. For your sake I hope that do you find a man with whom you can have a complete, rounded relationship (including physical, mental and spiritual contact and comfort) because I suspect that you will then find the sex even more satisfying. But until then I can think of absolutely no moral reasons why you shouldn't carry on buying physical satisfaction.

Too much sex?

Question

Why do you write so much about sex?

Answer

Because people write to me with their sexual problems. And clearly want to read about sex. When most of the letters I get are about ingrowing toe nails then I'll devote more space to ingrowing toe nails.

Muscle tension

Question

I am a 48 year old male. I suffer from muscle tension in my shoulders and back. I know the tension develops because of my job. My doctor says there is nothing wrong with me and nothing he can do. What can you recommend?

Answer

Beg, borrow or hire a woman. For this treatment a woman with large breasts will be especially useful. Get her to take all her clothes off and kneel astride you. Then ask her to gently stroke every part of your body except your shoulders and back with her naked breasts. This mammary massage will not eradicate the tension from your shoulder muscles but it will cause tension in all the other muscles of your body and so you will be less aware of your problem.

Shall I go all the way?

Question

My boyfriend wants me to make love to some of his friends and I don't know what to do. Every Saturday evening he and a group of four or five mates go out for a curry together. They usually come back to our flat afterwards. Two or three weeks ago my boyfriend insisted on showing a video he'd taken when we were on holiday in Spain. The video included several shots of me topless on the beach. The video went down very well and when my boyfriend suggested that I show off my boobs for real I did. I didn't want to at first but I'd had quite a lot to drink and they were all egging me on. Now my boyfriend wants me to let his mates all have sex with me. I really don't want to but my boyfriend says that after I bared my boobs his pals are expecting me to go all the way with them.

Answer

Tell your boyfriend that you think that exposing your breasts was a mistake. Then arrange to spend the next few weeks with your mother/sister/best friend/aunt in Cleethorpes/Sunderland/Bristol/Dover.

If your boyfriend still tries to insist that you have sex with his chums I suggest that you trade him in for something more sensitive. This won't be difficult. A vibrator would be more sensitive.

Elderly and bad tempered

Question

My parents are both elderly and extremely bad tempered. Neither I, my husband nor any of my children can ever do anything right.

Answer

Irascibility and irritability are as much a part of old age as wrinkles, liver spots and thinning hair. Years of frustration and world weariness are probably the primary cause, though physical infirmities and a sad realisation that life really is a bitch are probably contributory factors. There is no treatment for the age related irritability. Elderly relatives who enjoy poor health are like nymphomaniacs in short, tight skirts. Both are difficult to satisfy and impossible to get into and out of motor cars.

No one I can trust

Question

I am very lonely. I don't have any real friends and there is no one I can really trust.

Answer

Try talking - and listening - to animals. You should be able to obtain peace, comfort and good advice. Animals are honest, straightforward and, if unthreatened, generally full of love. These are not qualities which are widely available among members of the biped master species.

No purpose

Question

My life doesn't seem to have any real purpose. I get up, go to work, watch TV, go to bed and then do it all again. More and more often I've found myself asking what it's all for.

Answer

Set aside a little time for thinking about what you are doing with your life. What do you want out of whatever years you have left? What are your passions? What are you committed to? What drives you? What do you really want to do with your life: change the world, have fun or make money? Once you understand what you want from your life then you will be in a better position to make sure that you go some way towards getting it. One tip: time is the most important, most fundamental currency in the world; the only currency that really matters. Unless you are one of the lucky few who really enjoy what you do - and would do it even if you didn't get paid for it - then when you go to work you sell your time for money. And you must then use that money to pay for the quality time in your life. Try to relate the amount you need to earn to what you want to do with your income and try to balance the time you spend earning it against the time that remains for pleasure.

I enjoy wearing skirts

Question

I am a middle aged man who enjoys wearing skirts. I am a bit bored with just wearing them around the house. I want to go out wearing a skirt. Do you think it would be more acceptable to other people if I put on a wig and make up and tried to look like a woman? I don't want to be a woman and I'm not a pervert I just like wearing feminine clothes. My wife says I should put on a skirt and go out as myself. I would prefer to do this.

Answer

If you lived in some other countries (or had been born in a different century) you would be able to go out dressed in a skirt without anyone raising an eyebrow. But I fear that you will be asking for trouble if you try it in 1994. In our guilt laden society there is a real danger that you will be sneered at by the repressed, laughed at by the prejudiced, beaten up by the ignorant and then arrested for causing a breach of the peace. If you want to go out of the house wearing visible feminine clothing you will, I'm afraid, have to do the job properly. The more convincing you can make yourself look like a woman the smaller the risk of any sort of confrontation.

My wife is rather plain

Question

I am bright and good looking but my wife is rather plain. I deliberately married her because I wanted an obedient wife and felt that an ordinary looking woman would make a better wife than a woman who knew that she was pretty. We have been married for nearly 15 years and I've been very good to her. I have always taken her with me to the golf club and let her sit in the car while I play. On many occasions I have taken her into the clubhouse with me so that she can have a drink. I have always been very good to her and have dutifully made love to her every Saturday night even though I have obtained little pleasure from this myself. Recently I have noticed a change in her. She hasn't been argumentative or troublesome in any obvious way but she has joined a writing circle (although I would not have thought she was bright enough for that sort of thing) and I was shocked this week to discover that she has been taking painting lessons and has joined an aerobics class. She has begun to ignore me and to offer comments of her own when I have been entertaining visitors. I have been a very good husband and I think she has been very lucky to be my wife. Why do you think she is behaving like this? Her whole outlook on life has changed.

Answer

I checked the postmark on the envelope in which your letter arrived and was surprised to see that your query was, indeed, posted this century. I can only assume that you must be living in one of those funny little villages where folk are busy bricking up their windows to avoid the `window tax' and where individual freedom and emancipation are still regarded as rather frightening and alien concepts. If, as I suspect, you have one of those bolt on heads that can be easily detached then I suggest that you order one of your serfs to remove the whole area north of your neck, place it in a cauldron and boil it for several hours over a log fire. After this treatment your head can be replaced and re-bolted and you may find that you are able to think a little more clearly.

The three of us

Question

My boyfriend and his cousin are really close and the three of us spend a lot of time together. One night recently, after an evening at the pub, my boyfriend suggested that his cousin should stay the night with us - in our bed - instead of catching the bus home. He made it pretty clear that they were both going to have sex with me. I was shocked and said `no'. Since then I've thought about it and have regretted that I refused. My boyfriend hasn't mentioned the idea since but I can't get the thought out of my head. I'm sure my boyfriend would still be keen. And I know his cousin fancies me. Do you think I would be making a mistake if I suggested it?

Answer

There's a lot of difference between an exciting sexual fantasy and the sometimes messy, often confusing and invariably `loaded' consequence of turning that fantasy into reality. I suggest you beware and think carefully. Sharing your body with your boyfriend and his cousin will dramatically change your relationship with your boyfriend, his relationship with his cousin, your relationship with his cousin and his cousin's relationship with you. None of these relationships will ever be the same again. They may be better and they may be worse. But they won't be the same. Not even the cactus on the bathroom shelf will look at you in quite the same way. If you WANT to change your whole life then maybe a night of fantasy sex will produce dramatic results which you welcome. But if you're happy with things as they are then the price you have to pay for a few hours of sexual adventure could be a high one.

Angry and upset

Question

What makes you most angry and upset?

Answer

Every week I get armfuls of letters from people who have had a raw deal and who need help. I can't help them and that makes me angry and upset. Sadly, there just aren't enough hours in the day. I am angered, saddened to tears and frustrated by injustice and cruelty; both of which are endemic in our society. One of the great ironies (and in turn one of the great injustices) of life is that I get the feeling from my mailbag that those who are responsible for the worst cruelties and injustices with which our world is tainted rarely seem to suffer guilt or anguish as a result of their actions. It is, it seems to me, the innocent and sensitive, frustrated by their inability to stop these outrages, who are tortured by the knowledge of those deeds and who seem to do all the suffering on behalf of the perpetrators.

Nasty rumours

Question

People I work with have recently been spreading nasty rumours about me. The rumours are not true but they are very hurtful. Several people who I thought were friends will no longer talk to me.

Answer

Look on the bright side: at least you now know the identities of those individuals who you thought were friends but who weren't really friends at all! I know it is difficult to do so but try to rise above the rumours by ignoring them. Once you start trying to counter lies you will find your life taken over by justifiable anger and a constant sense of frustration. Try to comfort yourself with the knowledge that in the end it doesn't matter what people say about you unless you or those who are really close to you (and whose love and support is important to you) believe them.

Work at home

Question

Six months ago I started to work at home. I still do the same job as before but my employer has equipped me with a computer so that can I work in a bedroom instead of travelling every day. At first it seemed ideal but now I'm having second thoughts about it. I find the life very lonely and seem to get depressed far more often than before. Is it possible for working at home to affect me this way?

Answer

Yes. It's now well accepted that working at home isn't always emotionally healthy. People need to talk to others. By isolating ourselves with electronic equipment we deny ourselves human contact. In America people who work at home are known as `hermies' - slang for hermits - and there is a real danger that things could get worse for you if you don't do something soon. My advice: make sure you get out of the house several times a week. Join local clubs, groups or associations so that you have fixed commitments which mean that you leave home regularly.

Sacked

Question

One of the women I work with has been sacked because she has cancer and needs to take time off occasionally for hospital appointments. We have complained but been told that it has nothing to do with us.

Answer

Keep complaining. Transportation to Australia has been stopped and the worst they can do is sack you all. And do you really want to work for people who don't feel that there is anything wrong in sacking a woman because she had cancer?

My best friend and I

Question

When my husband started a new job he had to go on a course. It meant that he couldn't take me to a dinner and dance for which he had already booked tickets. My husband suggested that rather than waste the tickets I should take my best friend with me. Shortly after we arrived two attractive men started chatting us up. By the end of the evening neither of us was capable of driving. The two men said that they had a bedroom booked for each of them and that my friend and I could have one room and stay the night. But it soon became obvious that my friend was going to sleep with the man she'd been dancing with. The man I'd spent the evening with said I could share his bed and promised me that he wouldn't touch me. We did both try to sleep apart but eventually the inevitable happened and we ended up making love. It was wonderful. The next morning the bloke I'd spent the night with gave me his phone number and told me he'd like to see me again. Now I don't know what to do. Since my husband started this new job he has been unbearable. He is constantly irritable and always too tired for sex. I know I should be more understanding but I can't stop thinking about my wonderful night of love. My husband spends several nights a week away from home and I am very tempted to ring and arrange another evening out with the man I met at the dinner and dance but I don't know whether or not I should.

Answer

You're asking yourself the wrong question. Instead of asking yourself whether or not you should be unfaithful again - and, presumably, start a rip roaring, guilt laden affair - you should be asking yourself whether or not you want your marriage to succeed.

If you do regard your relationship with your husband as important then you should be working hard to rescue a marriage which seems to be teetering on the brink of failure.

If you think your marriage is over then the question which follows is: `Am I going to get divorced, or am I going to plod on and get my kicks out of one or more affairs?'

The really big question which you have to answer is: `Do I love my husband?' Answer that one and all the other questions will more or less answer themselves.

The Medicine Men

Question

I've just seen a programme on TV about women who developed cancer because their mothers took a drug during pregnancy. Is it possible that any other drugs could have this sort of effect?

Answer

I haven't got the foggiest idea. And I don't believe anyone else knows either. I first exposed this hazard (and warned about the cancer link you saw described on TV) in a book called `The Medicine Men' which was published in 1975. At the time there had not been any cases identified in the UK. I was, inevitably, dismissed by the establishment as a lunatic. My only practical suggestion is that all pregnant women should do their best to avoid taking unnecessary drugs (and that includes medication bought directly from the chemist and alternative remedies). If you are pregnant and your doctor prescribes a drug for you ask him if you really need it and if the risk is worthwhile.

Treated like a child

Question

I'm in my early twenties and have two problems with my parents. First, they still treat me like a child. I think they believe that being old means that they know everything. I have a responsible job and a nice flat but they still nag me about my clothes and my hair. Second, they are often unbelievably rude to my friends. I've noticed that many old people are amazingly rude. They say things that they would never accept from someone my age.

Answer

At the age of 19 we all go through a phase of life known as the `tact barrier'. We wake up one morning and realise that if we wrap up our prejudices a little, and think before we speak, we will get on better with people. We acquire a `tact veneer'. As the years go by this socially essential `tact veneer' becomes weak, wrinkly and cracked and prejudices peep through the gaps. At the same time there is often a paradoxical hypersensitisation to criticism. This is why old people become so rude and then get really miffed if you dare to say anything to them. There is no treatment. The only answer is to keep out of their way as much as possible when the `tact veneer' cracks become really noticeable.

Fortunately, there are symptoms to show when old folk are starting to lose their `tact veneer'. They will dress almost exclusively in beige, become unbelievably self-centred and selfish and talk only about their feet and their bowels. Females suffering from `tact deprivation' carry folding umbrellas and huge, sensible, imitation plastic shopping bags crammed with spare jumpers, thermos flasks and knitting patterns. Males wear sandals and a haunted look and spend most of their time making sure that they aren't more than 100 yards from a public lavatory. `Tact deprived' old people often live on coaches and eat in restaurants which triple cook all food so that it is suitable for the artificially dentured.

Bra, suspender belt and stockings

Question

My husband often dresses up in women's clothes. He frequently comes to bed wearing a bra, suspender belt and stockings. I'm surprised to have to admit that I find this a real turn on. Is this something I should worry about?

Answer

Many women who are married to (or live with) transvestites or cross dressers are sexually excited by making love to their partners when they are `dressed'. Any psycho-analyst could spend years investigating the reasons behind this phenomenon - and probably send his kids to private school on the proceeds. My advice is that you completely ignore the underlying reasons, suppress your anxieties, buy your husband more sexy underwear and just enjoy yourself.

Missing out

Question

I've been married for eight years and I can't remember when we last had sex. I think we probably do it about half a dozen times a year. I don't really mind - we have a good relationship in other ways - but I sometimes think I'm missing out on something. My best friend, who has been married about the same length of time as I have, says that she and her husband do it two or three times a week.

Answer

People lie most about two things: money and sex. They usually claim that they are getting more of both than they really are. (Oddly, the third and fourth on the list of things people commonly lie about are how much tobacco they smoke and how much alcohol they drink. In each case people over 21 invariably minimise their consumption of these goodies. Teenagers lie in the opposite direction; but then that's hardly surprising because they don't count as real people.)

It is a myth that most people have sex two or three times a week and the chances are that your friend is telling whopping pork pies. In most relationships time has a deadening effect on sexual urges. Familiarity tends to breed contentment. A wise old man in Dorking once said that if a young couple put a penny into a jar every time they have sex for the first six months of their marriage, and then take out a penny every time they have sex after the first six months, they will never empty the jar.

If you're genuinely content then take no notice of your friend's boasts. If, on the other hand, you fancy more nookie than you're getting then try adding a little spice to your marriage. Buy yourself some sexy lingerie and forget to put a frock on next time you're serving up hubby's meal.

Without qualifications

Question

I left school without any qualifications and I've always had boring and poorly paid jobs. My husband works in a factory and although he works hard he doesn't earn much money either. About eighteen months ago I applied for, and got, a much better paid job - as a supervisor in a Bingo Hall. I've worked hard and two weeks ago I was told that if I wanted it

I could have the job as Manager when the current Manager retires. At my age I'm not going to get many more chances like this. I'm really excited and proud of the progress I've made but my husband seems determined to spoil everything. He tells me that I'm getting above myself and accuses me of having an affair because I sometimes have to work late. He constantly puts a dampener on things. Things have got so bad that I don't like to talk to him about my work anymore. I don't want to leave him but if it comes to choosing between him and giving up the chance of a real job I may well choose the job.

Answer

Sit your husband down, turn off the TV and tell him what this job really means to you. If he can't or won't understand how you feel then you will be entirely justified in trading him in for a couple of toyboys - then you'll be the one yelling `Bingo!' every night.

Convenient

Question

My boyfriend still sleeps with his ex-wife every Saturday night. He goes there to see his children and stays over because it's a long drive back. He insists that he doesn't love his ex-wife but sleeps with her because it's convenient. He says the sex with her doesn't mean anything and isn't a threat to our relationship.

Answer

The sex with her means something and is clearly a threat to your relationship. He's parking his pride and joy in the wrong garage and you need to repossess it. Point out to him that his regular infidelities are making you unhappy and either ask him to come home on Saturday nights or tell him that you'll go with him so that you can stay in a hotel together.

Not my fault

Question

I am five feet four inches tall and weigh thirteen and a half stones. What people don't understand is that there is a genetic reason for my excess weight. Both my father and mother were overweight. How can I make people realise that although I have a weight problem it is not my fault.

Answer

I hate to be a spoilsport but I'm afraid the chances are that you're kidding yourself. The chances are that you, your mother and your father are all fat because you eat too much. You are roughly 4 stones overweight. Each pound of unwanted fat is a result of an unnecessary 3,500 calories. So that means that you've consumed 196,000 calories that your body didn't need. That's the approximate equivalent of 600 doughnuts too many. Your obesity is not just making it difficult for you to wear a bikini without looking like a 3D map of a butter mountain but it is also hazarding your health.

Giggling in the showers

Question

What do women talk about in the showers? My girlfriend won't tell me but I can always hear her and the other girls giggling when they're changing.

Answer

I am reliably informed by those who know that all women in groups talk incessantly and almost exclusively about sex. Your girlfriend and her chums will be talking (and laughing) about the size, colour and shape of your penis, how often you do it, what sexual fetishes you have, how long you can last and so on. Next time you meet her out of the showers tell her that you overheard the conversation she and the other girls were having and watch her go red!

Really dull

Question

My husband is really dull. When we were first married he was great fun. These days he is no fun at all. He seems to have grown very old. What can I do to liven him up a bit?

Answer

Most people get more boring and critical as they get older. When a kid sees a pile of leaves on the pavement he will run through them. Twenty years later that same kid will carefully walk around the pile of leaves. And thirty years afterwards the grown old version of that same kid will complain about the weather, write a letter of complaint to the local council about the danger of wet leaves on the pavements and recommend that all trees be chopped down and be replaced with better public lighting.

Your husband has undoubtedly got old because he has been weighed down and made weary by responsibility. Lighten his load in as many ways as you can and you may see some sparks of life in the old corpse.

Constantly exhausted

Question

I do as you say and try to fight against injustice but I find that it makes me feel constantly exhausted.

Answer

Learn to pace yourself and to fight only those battles which you consider to be important. A few years ago a friend of mine and I once decided that we were going to fight every example of injustice we came across for a whole year. We decided that we would complain about everything we bought that promptly - even lightbulbs that went phut the moment they were asked to do what they were made to do. After six months we both gave up exhausted. Complaining and protesting had taken over our lives. You have to be selective. Step away from the unimportant battles and keep your energy for the big battles that really matter. By all means make your feelings clear when you feel that you have come across a minor injustice but then walk away.

No holidays

Question

My husband won't take time off work. He won't take holidays. He just works all the time. We don't have any money worries do I don't understand why he drives himself so hard. I am terrified that he's going to have a heart attack.

Answer

Workaholics usually push themselves because they lack self-confidence. They constantly search for love and try to make themselves indispensible. By working hard they also get the entirely spurious feeling that they are in control. The truth is that workaholics lose love and lose control. Try to encourage your husband to find hobbies that he can become passionate about. And don't ever allow a day to go by without telling him how much you love him. Finally, reassure him frequently that you'll love him whether or not you have any money and try to convince him that it won't worry you whether you spend your lives in luxury or poverty.

My bruise

Question

While my girlfriend and I were making love I got into a rather tricky position and fell out of bed and banged my head. I had quite a big bruise as a result. Two days later I met three of the girls my girlfriend does aerobics with in a shop in town. One of the girls made a great show of examining my bruise and then told me that in future I should stick to the missionary position. All three of them then laughed and it was clear that my girlfriend had told them exactly what had happened. I was very surprised and embarrassed because I had never realised that women discussed things like sex when talking to one another. I had certainly never guessed that my girlfriend would talk about something so intimate to her friends.

Answer

Brace yourself. Even though they may never have seen you naked your girlfriend's pals could probably identify your penis in the dark. They could probably all draw accurate maps of the veins which stand out when you're excited. And I'll give you long odds that they know all about that time you got drunk and tried on your girlfriend's stockings and suspender belt. I realise that it is sexist and politically incorrect to suggest that there are differences between the sexes but this is one area where the difference is oceanic in size. Male conversation tends to be confined to solid, straightforward, tangible subjects. Men talk about cars, plumbing and football. Female conversation is usually dominated by intimate details of emotional and physical relationships. Your girlfriend is no different to any other woman.

Corruption and dishonesty

Question

I sometimes feel depressed when I look around and realise how many terrible things on in this world. Everywhere you look there seems to be corruption and dishonesty. Ordinary people are constantly being shafted by politicians and businessmen. Do you think there is really any hope for any of us?

Answer

The battalions of evil are ranged far and wide, high and ugly. They stand firm against the weak and the poor. The meek won't inherit the earth because they have been disenfranchised. But live your life honestly and with good intentions and you will enjoy the comfort of a clear conscience; now probably the only quality asset in a harsh, cruel world.

A real heel

Question

*My husban*d was a real heel. He had a never ending string of girlfriends. He drank too much. He spent all our money and didn't have a sensible bone in his body. Last year I finally decided that I had had enough and threw him out. I haven't heard from him or seen him for months but I now realise that I miss him terribly. Do you think I should try and get in touch and ask him to come back to me?

Answer

Before you do anything you must answer a very simple question - and you must answer it honestly. Do you miss your husband because you love him or do you miss him because you are lonely? If you miss him because you love him then by all means get in touch and find out whether or not he wants to come back to you. (But, before you do that, just try to remember exactly why you threw him out the first time). If you miss him because you are lonely then you would probably be better off acquiring a more reliable partner. I understand that terrapins make congenial companions.

The stripper

Question

I hired a stripper for my husband's 40th birthday. I thought it would be a good joke. The girl was in her twenties and had a stupendous figure. My husband can't stop talking about the damned girl and has a photograph she gave him on his desk at work. I'm beginning to think that I made a serious mistake.

Answer

The age of 40 is something of a landmark. Consciously or subconsciously your husband is now facing up to the fact that for him the summer is nearly over and the early days of autumn are just a curling leaf away. His mild obsession with the stripper you hired for him is merely a symptom of a deeper malaise. He is having to come to terms with the fact that his wild days are over and his life is set into a pattern. These are dangerous days. It is the shock produced by coming to face with the shadow of the man with the scythe which explains why so many men who have just celebrated their 40th birthday suddenly abandon everything - wife, family, home and job - and run off with top heavy, gravity defying 18 year old hairdressers.

You can help him by doing everything you can to reassure him that he is still young, virile and dangerous. Seduce him with candlelit dinners and sexy new clothes. Tell him how much you love him. (Men need to be told that they are loved every bit as much as women). Encourage him to take up new hobbies and interests. And getting him to talk about his plans for the future will remind him that there IS a future and that his life is not quite so nearly over as he might suspect.

Bonding

Question

My husband goes out drinking with his mates at least three times a week. When I protested and told him I was fed up of being left by myself he told me that going out with other men was important to him because it kept him in touch with his maleness and helped him to gain strength by bonding with members of his own sex.

Answer

This nonsense about male bonding is, I suspect, popular with men who are fed up with doing the washing up and want a sound excuse for enjoying regular drinking and poker sessions with the boys. Buy your husband a good, old fashioned dirty magazine and make sure he doesn't come into contact with any more of those strange self-improvement books.

Outspoken

Question

I am very outspoken and often get into trouble at work. My husband says that I get too agitated about things and that I should try to be more objective. I find it difficult to see both sides of an argument. My husband says that if I don't change my ways I will lose my job. What do you think?

Answer

I think your husband is probably right. If you carry on the way you are there is a decent chance that you will, before long, find yourself discovering the joys of being allowed time to explore other employment possibilities. I regard this as sad but it is life and there is no point in denying it.

Unimaginative

Question

My husband is very unimaginative in bed. We make love quite often but it's always the same. He gets into bed, gropes my breasts for about a minute and a half (that's his idea of foreplay) and then climbs on top of me and pumps away as though he's in the gym. Sex lasts for between two and five minutes (I know because I get so bored that I've found myself timing him). When he's finished he uses his fingers to give me an orgasm and then he turns over and falls asleep. I'd like to do it a different way once in a while. Just once I'd like him to undress me and make love to me while I'm still wearing my underwear. I would desperately like to make love in front of the fire. I'd like to try oral sex (which I have never, ever done with anyone). How do I persuade my husband to add a little excitement to our sex life? I did once try playing with him while he was fondling my breasts but I think he was rather shocked by this.

Answer

Why do you have to persuade him to change your love making ritual? Sex is not something he does to you; it is something you share. Take charge yourself. Whisper the details of your favourite fantasies into his ear the next time his hand reaches out for your breast. Shyly tell him what you'd like him to do to you. You can lead each other into a new world of sexual excitement.

Get rich quick

Question

I don't really like work very much but I would very much like to make a lot of money. I've spent months looking for a way to get rich quick without any success. Have you any suggestions?

Answer

If you define `work' as something that you don't enjoy doing then the only way to make money without working is to find something you can make money out of that do enjoy doing! The added advantage will be that if you spend your days doing something you enjoy then you will, inevitably, work harder and better than if you spend your days doing something you hate. One of the odd truths about our society is that a few people become extremely rich without ever really working while most people work hard all their lives and never make any real money.

Flattered

Question

I am a keen member of my local dramatic society. We've just finished a production of a farce in which I had to run around on stage in my underwear. I've got a very good figure (by that I mean that I've got big breasts) and to be honest

I rather enjoyed my part. I got quite a kick out of knowing that all the men in the audience were watching my every move. I've now been approached by a man who wants me to act in a movie he is making. He has been very honest with me and told me that he wants me to take all my clothes off in several scenes. He says he will pay me for my work and isn't worried by the fact that I don't have an Equity card. My husband says he doesn't mind if the nudity is essential. I am very flattered by the prospect of being in a film but just a little bit wary. Do you think I am right to be cautious or should I just go ahead and make the film?

Answer

If you want to know exactly what you're letting yourself in for then insist that the movie maker lets you see some of his other work and ask to see a copy of the shooting script. Find out who will be sharing your scenes. And what you and they will be doing together. I have a suspicion that you're more likely to find your bottom and breasts taking starring roles than you are to find your thespian skills being tested to the limits. I bet you a laddered stocking to a St Laurent original that you've been invited to make a blue movie and you're more likely to be playing Jane the Big Boobed Randy Typist than Ophelia, the fey heroine. If you (and your husband) are happy with that then that's fine. But find out now what sort of film stardom you are being offered.

Reservations

Question

I love my boyfriend very much and plan to marry him early next year. But I do have some reservations and anxieties. My boyfriend is rather short tempered and can be quite moody if things aren't going right for him. He can be quick to take offence and often tends to act first and think later. He is very talented but I wonder whether or not I might find his faults difficult to live with.

Answer

Only you can decide whether your love for your boyfriend is great enough to counter-balance his faults. But do remember that any man without vices would be dull indeed. Faults are just as much an essential part of any individual character as are virtues. Your boyfriend might be a more admirable character if he was more guarded, less quick to take offence and less likely to act spontaneously. But the zest, the `punch', the vitality, the piquancy and the talent you admire are a result of a combination of vices and virtues. Remove the vices and you would be left with a very different human being.

Breaking the law

Question

I work for a company which is, I know, breaking the law by polluting a local river. Should I say anything? Would it be disloyal to `blow the whistle' on my company?

Answer

You have to decide where your primary loyalties lie - to the company which pays your wages or to the community in which you live. And you must remember that those who tolerate evil are touched and contaminated by the evil they tolerate. Those who are silent in the face of wrong doing are as guilty as those who do wrong.

An honour

Question

I have received a letter telling me that I am being considered for an honour by my old college. But there are my things about the college which I no longer approve of and although I'm flattered by the honour I don't feel entirely comfortable about accepting it. I have, indeed, been a fairly vocal critic of some of the college's policies. What do you think I should do?

Answer

You should turn down the honour and explain exactly why you are turning it down. If you accept an honour then you are publicly allying yourself with the institution which is awarding you the honour. And how can you criticise the college in future if you have accepted an honour? Anyone who accepts an honour from an organisation is adding whatever credence, credibility and prestige they may have to the organisation concerned. Governments, monarchs and institutions constantly seek to win favour, support (and, sometimes, silence) by handing out awards and honours.

Treated as equals

Question

I work in an office with several women. We get on quite well together. I make sure that I always treat them as equals. For example, I always take my turn at making the coffee (whereas in another nearby office it is always the two women who make the coffee). My problem is that the women I work with are sexist in the way they regard me. For example, they always expect me to do any heavy lifting or other physical work that needs doing around the office. I suffer with back trouble and two of the women are bigger and probably stronger than I am!

Answer

The dilemma you describe is one of the commonest men face. If a man stands up on a train to give a woman his seat then he is likely to be branded a sexist pig. If he doesn't stand up then he's a rude bastard. It is this no-win stress producing conflict which helps explain why most men die several years earlier than most women. Next time you think you are being treated differently because of your sex try pointing out to your colleagues what they are doing. Women are often unaware that they are behaving in a sexist way.

Why Do Women

Question

Why do women live longer than men?

Answer

In recent years women have quite reasonably claimed the right to do nearly all of the things that men do - and to behave in many traditionally male ways.

(There are, of course, a few exceptions - the most notable being the almost universal failure of women to master the art of peeing while standing up with their legs together.)

Women now fight fires, drive lorries and sit in the boss's chair and exhibit emotions which were traditionally regarded as male - and which, in the past, women have usually had to suppress.

But while women have won the right to spit, swear and arm wrestle - without losing their feminine qualities - most men still don't feel able to exhibit traditionally female qualities.

The truth is that at heart most men are just as romantic, compassionate and sensitive as most women. But most men dare not admit their femininity to themselves - let alone show it to others.

As a result men are suffering genuine physical harm.

A few decades ago men and women had the same sort of life expectancy.

Today's figures show that women now live seven years longer than men. And men now die earlier than women from all 15 leading causes of death - including heart disease, cancer and suicide.

Nursing homes throughout the country are now full of lonely old women who have outlived their male partners.

There is no biological explanation for this. Women are not intrinsically healthier than men. The explanation has to be found in the way that women have changed their role in society. And there is a vital lesson here for all men - and for all women who love men.

Men should not be ashamed to show their female qualities; they should not be reluctant to let their emotions show, to ask for help and support and to combine traditional male toughness with the soft, gentle qualities which are hidden deep inside.

And women should do their best to encourage their men to show their femininity. These days it isn't women who need liberating but men.

Here are five practical ways in which men can let their soft, feminine nature surface:

1. Don't hide your fears and vulnerability.

2. Learn to listen to your instincts more often.

3. Share your feelings with friends.

4. Show your hurt - rather than burying it.

5. Don't be afraid to let people see your compassionate side.

The prostitute

Question

My husband regularly visits a prostitute who lives near to us. He spends so much on her that there is not enough left for us to pay rent or housekeeping and although we both have jobs I constantly have to borrow money off my mother and my sister. I have repeatedly asked my husband to stop seeing this woman but he refuses. He says she satisfies him much better than I do in bed. I feel guilty about my inability to make him happy but it hurts me to know that he is with her so often and the shortage of money is making my life unbearable. I get very fed up when I think of him lying in bed with her and then paying her with money I have earned.

Answer

Your husband is thoughtless, selfish, unprincipled and contemptible. Leave him. Pack up your belongings and abandon him. He is an evil cad, a foul breathed bounder, an unforgiveable blackguard with no redeeming features and a miscreant with the grace of silage. Your life will be brighter, your future rosier and your world more joyful if you wipe the memory of this dark hearted slubberdegullion from your spirit for ever.

Simple tastes

Question

My girlfriend and I both have very simple tastes. We live in a fairly small house, drive a cheap car and don't have many possessions. We work together at home and although we could work longer hours we are content to make less money and have more time to spend on the things we enjoy doing. My parents are very critical and constantly encourage us to work harder in order `to improve our situation'. But we're quite happy the way we are.

A*nswer*

Stay as you are. It is a virtue and a strength to have simple tastes. You will live healthier, happier (and probably longer) lives if you stand firm together against your parents' attempt to drag you into the horrors of the acquisitive society.

Second class

Question

I work in education. I'm white and male and I'm beginning to feel like a second class citizen. I've applied for promotion on several occasions. Each time I've been told that my qualifications are perfect and my work record exemplary. But each time the job has been given to someone else. On four occasions the `someone else' has been female, black and had fewer qualifications and less experience than I have. I'm beginning to feel that I have no chance of ever getting anywhere. I have always been fervently opposed to racism but it seems to me that I am now suffering from racist policies.

Answer

The process you describe is well established in South Africa where it is known as `affirmative action'. The excuse is that since blacks have been discriminated against for years there now needs to be some discrimination against whites in order to redress the balance. I think `affirmative action' is dangerous for it will eventually lead to a backlash. How much longer before hordes of middle aged white males troop onto the streets and start storming the citadels from whence these dangerous ideas are disseminated? Meanwhile, the process you describe has spread far and wide. One white male author I know sent a book typescript to several publishers. None of them were interested. A few months later he persuaded a black woman friend to send the same typescript to the same publishers. Several of them were wildly enthusiastic and made offers for the book. The moral seems clear enough. In future I will be writing under another name and this column will be called Dr Blodwyn Ngwanda's Casebook.

Insurance claim

Question

I recently needed to claim on my insurance. The whole process nearly sent me potty. Every time I wrote a letter to one department I got a letter back from another department. And every letter needed new information and another form filling in. In the end I gave up. The claim was taking over my life. And no one would take any responsibility for what was happening. It isn't just insurance companies which play this game. Government departments are just as bad. No one seems to care anymore.

Answer

Insurance companies use the wearing down process you describe to avoid paying out on claims. And government departments, which derive their power from individuals, seem to despise and heartily disapprove of individuals. It is the separation of responsibility from authority which is the most dangerous aspect of all modern bureaucracies. It is rare these days to find any employed individual who will accept responsibility. Even those who enjoy considerable authority fearlessly announce that they cannot possibly be expected to take any responsibility for what they do. The separation of responsibility from authority has undoubtedly been a major cause of stress in our society. The bureaucrats have created a deep black nightmare for us all to live in. The only faint ray of joy comes from the fact that they have to live in the same world and, in their turn, suffer the same frustrations that we have to put up with.

Food additives

Question

Do you think that chemical additives in food can be bad for you? I prefer to buy fresh food whenever possible but my mother claims that additives help to keep food longer. She points out that food that doesn't contain preservatives and other chemicals is more likely to go `bad'.

Answer

I think that eating fresh food (preferably grown organically) is much healthier than eating food which is impregnated with chemicals. But if you eat fresh food then you must eat it while it is still fresh! The presence of so many chemicals in food worries me. Many chemicals cause unpleasant, adverse reactions and I have no doubt at all that thousands of patients acquire allergies to chemicals in food. I also worry about the hidden effect of chemicals. Homoeopaths claim that putting very small amounts of a substance into water turns the water into a medicine. The whole principle of homoeopathy is based upon the fact that very small amounts of chemical can have a dramatic effect on the human body. If homoeopathy works then the chemicals in our drinking water (which are there in much greater than homoeopathic doses) and the chemicals in our food must be having a horrifying effect on our health.

Check up

Question

I can't afford to have annual health check-ups. But I do acknowledge the importance of preventive medicine. Have you any advice?

Answer

Learn to listen to your body. Study it daily as though you were looking at a stranger. Try to be observant, caring and critical. If you spot problems early you will be able to prevent small troubles becoming big worries. And learn to be aware of your body. So, for example, if you notice an ache in your back after sitting at your desk for an hour or two then change your position regularly.

Life expectancy

Question

Doesn't the fact that life expectancy has improved enormously show the value of modern medicine?

Answer

It is a myth that we are all living much longer than our ancestors. Improved infant mortality rates have made it seem as though we are living longer but if you look back through the history books you'll find plenty of examples of men and women living well beyond their seventies. For example, when Henry David Thoreau's father died in 1859 he was described as having not been very old. He was 71. Back when The Bible was written a normal life expectation was `three score years and ten'. The improvements which have taken place are largely a result of improvements in hygiene, sanitation, food supplies and living conditions which took place during the 19th century.

A nurse writes

Question

I am a hospital nurse. You are wrong to condemn vivisection. Animal experiments are essential if scientists are to find cures for cancer, AIDS and other diseases.

Answer

According to a piece of unpublished, illiterate research done by the heavily sedated 97 year old Professor Josef Weissmantle of the Mengele Memorial Social Engineering Department at the downtown University of Barnstaple you are right. According to 3,847,184,027,185,290 highly qualified doctors and scientists you are a dangerous, out of date lunatic. I commonly favour a contrarian view on social and scientific matters (on the grounds that the majority is usually misinformed, prejudiced and incapable of coherent thought) but in this instance I'll happy to be going with the flow. I suggest that you ask your colleagues to give you a brain scan. I suspect that you may be a Friday person - produced by God when he was looking forward to the weekend. The chances are that the scan will reveal that you have got your brain in upside down and need urgent remedial surgery. Meanwhile, I have arranged for the hospital where you work to keep you on permanent bed pan duty on the diarrhoea ward.

More responsibility

Question

My husband has already had one heart attack and has been warned by his doctor to take things easy. However, he has now been offered a promotion at work and says he is going to take it. Do you think this is safe? The new job carries a lot more responsibility and will meaning working longer hours.

Answer

If your husband elects to take on extra responsibility at work then he will be risking his health and his life for his work. If his work is the most important thing in his life then there is probably little you can do to persuade him to change his mind. But if a more responsible job is simply a means to a bigger pay cheque and a better placed car parking space then I suggest that you do everything you can to persuade your husband to say `no' to this added risk. Meanwhile, your husband should listen carefully to his doctor, avoid tobacco and animal fats, and, under medical supervision, lose any excess weight and take up a gentle exercise programme.

Blazing row

Question

I had a blazing row with my boyfriend, threw my engagement ring at him and went back to my flat feeling furious. When I got there my flatmate and her boyfriend were watching a blue movie. I sat down with them and had a few drinks. The movie was about a man and two women and we started off by giggling but soon I realised that my friend had unzipped her boyfriend's trousers and was stroking an enormous erection. To my astonishment she looked at me and said: `There's enough here for two. Do you want some?' I thought `Why not?' and joined in. We did everything the people on the video had done and it was the most exciting experience of my life.

A few days later my flat mate's boyfriend brought another movie round. He also brought a friend. I was still feeling angry with my boyfriend - particularly since he hadn't been in touch with me at all. The inevitable result was that the four of us all had sex together.

Now my boyfriend wants us to make up. I don't want him to know what happened but although my flatmate has promised not to say anything she keeps giggling and making oblique references to what went on. I am scared that she will say too much. I would confess but I know that my boyfriend will never forgive me if he finds out what happened. He has a foul temper and is very possessive.

Answer

Are you sure you are ready for a long term relationship? And if you are, then are you sure that your current boyfriend is the right person for you to be involved with? If you answer `yes' to both those questions then maybe you need to think about changing flats or flatmates in order to preserve your secret. If you answer `no' then your course of action is fairly clear: keep your flatmate and tell your boyfriend that you're not interested in a reconciliation.

Totally dependent

Question

My brother has been in a mental hospital for nine months. I now can't see him ever coming out. He seems totally dependent on the hospital. Mentally he is much better and physically he is as strong as an ox but he seems reluctant to leave. Do you think I could be right?

Answer

Patients who have spent a long time in hospital tend to become `institutionalised' after a while. They are so accustomed to having everything done for them that they become frightened by the prospect of having to cope by themselves. (Incidentally, the staff in such places can also become institutionalised!). The answer is to ask the staff if you can take your brother out on day trips and weekend trips. Slowly help him regain his confidence so that he can once again cope with the problems of living in the real world.

Not doing well

Question

Neither of my sons seem to be doing very well at school. They work hard enough and have lots of friends but I'm worried that if they don't do better academically they will have difficulty finding jobs.

Answer

Success at school is of no relevance to real life. The kids who are top in everything at school invariably end up spending their lives as deputy assistant administrators in the town parks and sewage departments.

Pornographic

Question

I watched a late night film on television the other day. It was quite pornographic. The female characters in the movie were quite unlike any women I've ever met. Don't you agree that it is disgusting that such films should be made? Why don't you start a campaign to have all such films banned.

Answer

I'm amazed that you should be surprised and indignant about the fact that some of the characters in a porno movie were unrealistic. Most movies are completely unrealistic. That's why people watch them. The good guy and the bad guy knock hell out of each other for ten times as long as a fight would last in real life. People fly through the air, journey through space, turn into wolves, shrink to the size of ants and travel backwards and forwards through time as easily as real people wander along to the supermarket and you're worried about the fact that women in porn movies aren't shown spending their days shopping, ironing and picking up the kids from school! I don't approve of censorship of any kind. What the hell is wrong with turning the damned set off if you find yourself watching a programme you don't like?

No luck

Question

My husband and I have been trying to start a family for nine months without any luck. Our doctor wants us to keep trying for another few months before he sends us for tests. Can you give us any advice? We are quite desperate to have a baby and have been having sex every morning and every evening.

Answer

I think you may be trying too hard. Your husband's body is probably having a job keeping up with the demand for fresh sperm and his ejaculate could well be a bit on the skimpy side spermwise. Try to confine your baby making activities to those days around ovulation when the chances of your being able to turn a hump into a lump are at their greatest. Incidentally, the fact that lots of sex means low sperm counts and decreased fertility suggests to me that maybe the world's overpopulation problem might be solved by encouraging everyone to have more sex.

I like a lot of sex

Question

I like a lot of sex but my husband doesn't seem particularly keen. I'd like to do it every day. He is happy with sex once a week. How can I increase his interest sex? Alternatively, is there anything I can do to reduce my sex drive?

Answer

Sex and desire are interlinked and self-enhancing. The more sex you have together - and the better it is - the more he will want to make love to you. You can also stimulate his hormones and increase his desire for sex by the careful use of suitable sensory stimulants. Use cosmetics, perfume, sexy lingerie and X rated body language to excite him and you should notice a gradual increase in his yearnings.

How safe are condoms?

Question

How safe are condoms? My girlfriend and I had one break on us the other day.

Answer

One big survey showed that lovers who used 46,657 condoms had 443 breakages. Of those 443 scary incidents just 19 resulted in pregnancy. (I don't know how many resulted in infection).

To minimise the risk of condom rupture take care when handling them. Remember that most condom tears are started by teeth or finger nails.

Traffic warden

Question

I am a traffic warden. I am fed up with motorists being rude to me when I'm just doing my job. Things have got so bad that I no longer dare tell people what I do for a living because they usually make some nasty remark and then never speak to me again. No one seems to like me.

Answer

I cannot possibly imagine why you should expect to get any sympathy from me. I am delighted to hear that people are rude to you and that no one likes you. What on earth do you expect? People who take jobs as traffic wardens are, like car park attendants, the sort of people who would have worked as gas chamber attendants during the Second World War. Your claim that you are `just doing your job' is the sort of pathetic, spineless whinge that was heard from regiments of war criminals in the late 1940s. The truth is that you have chosen to perform an entirely unproductive and largely pointless task simply for the money you are paid. No one becomes a traffic warden out of any sense of vocation. You are an overpaid, hired thug and have absolutely no right to complain if you are treated with contempt by everyone you meet. I do hope that makes you feel worse.

Baby on board

Question

Where can we get a `Baby on Board' sticker for our car? My wife and I have just had our first child and would like one of these stickers for our car.

Answer

Last weekend I drove behind a car which had a `Baby on Board' sticker attached to and partly obscuring the back window and a rather snotty looking baby in a contraption attached to the back seat. The driver and his companion (presumably the parents who were so keen to advertise their fecundity to following motorists) were both smoking cigarettes. I was mildly amused by this for the chances of their baby being killed or seriously injured by their second hand cigarette smoke was considerably greater than the chances of their baby being killed or injured by a road traffic accident. This incident confirmed my suspicion that the people who stick these pointless signs on their motor cars are all intellectually deprived.

Neighbours

Question

We moved into our first house two weeks ago. Taking possession of the key was the proudest moment of my life. Since then life has become a nightmare. The neighbours on one side are very nice but the neighbours on our other side have done everything they can to make life miserable for us. While we were still unpacking they banged on our front door to tell us that the back end of our car was parked in front of their house. There was nowhere else to park because someone else had parked their car in front of our house. I smiled and tried to make light of it but they told me that if I did it again I would receive a solicitor's letter.

Answer

Some neighbours are nice and will freely lend you sugar, gardening equipment and sexual partners. Others are just plain nasty. You seem to have unfortunately landed yourself with the breed known as `neighbouris litigans'. These invariably regard all newcomers as a territorial threat and respond to any modest dispute with the threat of a solicitor's letter. You cannot deflect these people from their single minded pursuit of unhappiness. Ignoring them won't work. They have to be miserable to know that they are alive and you, I'm afraid, are the irritant they need. One possibility is to drive them completely potty so that men in white coats take them away. Alternatively, you can wait until they go out and then paint their front door a different colour and change the number on their house. This will confuse them so much that they may simply spend the rest of their lives wandering the streets looking for their lost home.

Nervous

Question

My doctor recently asked me to appear with him on a television programme. I really don't want to have anything to do with it but I got the impression that he expected me to agree automatically. As the date for the filming gets closer I am getting more and more nervous. I really don't want to discuss my personal problems on television. What are my rights?

Answer

You have every right not to appear on TV with your doctor - and, just as important, you have every right to expect your doctor to respect your confidentiality and not to discuss you on the programme. Simply tell your doctor how you feel. If he makes any effort to pressurise you into changing your mind then tell him that you will make a formal complaints to the head of the TV station involved. This will probably worry him more than threatening to report him to the General Medical Council.

I am constantly appalled at the number of times patients are used as TV fodder. In my view no doctor should ever appear on TV with his or her own patient. The demands on and expectations of a TV doctor are very different from the responsibilities of a doctor looking after a patient. In my view filming inside hospitals is voyeurism at its worst.

A sensible man

Question

My husband is a very sensible person. He always keeps an old coat and a pair of rubber gloves in the car in case he has to change a tyre. He always has change in his pocket for car parks and tips. He always knows when the clocks have to go backwards or forwards. He always has a pen that works and if we're going somewhere by car he plans the route down to where we're going to stop for petrol, coffee and toilets. He always wears a pinafore and rubber gloves when he does the washing up and never makes a mess. We go shopping together on Saturday mornings. We make love on Saturday evenings and he always wears a condom even though I have been sterilised. We always make love in the missionary position and although he always comes first he always tries to give me an orgasm by using his fingers (for two years I've had to fake my orgasms simply because our love making is so predictable that I no longer find it exciting). On Sundays we clean the car and do the garden together.

In contrast to my husband I am totally disorganised and without him my life would, I know, be chaotic. I forget things, lose things and once got lost no more than five miles from home.

My husband is faithful and loyal and reliable but he is also dull, boring and predictable. I don't want to hurt him but the thought of spending the rest of my life in the rut he's built for us makes me want to scream. I would like to make love out of doors. I would love to have some adventure in my life.

Answer

Are you on probation and is your husband your probation officer? No? Well, stop whingeing *then* and start taking some responsibility for your own life. It's about time you started making a more positive contribution to the life you lead together. Take your husband by the rubber gloved hand and occasionally lead him astray and into temptation.

For example, here's something you can try now.

Take off all your clothes and put on a coat or dressing gown. Then go and find your husband and, wherever he is and whatever he is doing, unfasten his trousers and kneel down in front of him. When you've got his penis in your mouth shrug off the coat you're wearing so that he can see that you're completely naked. If he's on the course at his golf club don't forget to wave through the players behind or else your husband could be in trouble with the committee.

If that sounds too adventurous for you then at least you'll now realise that you aren't quite the wild, unfettered free spirit you like to think you are!

Encourage your husband to let it all hang out occasionally. Persuade him to wear coloured socks that don't match his tie. Encourage him to accept crinkle cut chips instead of the straight edged ones. Talk him into staying in bed one Sunday morning and letting the car stay dirty for a whole week.

And here's a thought: how do you know that your husband isn't sensible and responsible because he thinks you want him to be sensible and responsible? Who knows, underneath those rubber gloves and that dainty little pinafore, maybe you could find a wild, tempestous beast of a man just yearning to do unspeakable things to you in the local municipal park.

Loonies

Question

I recently heard two doctors referring to patients in a mental hospital as `loonies'. Do men and women in the psychiatric profession often use this sort of language when talking about patients?

Answer

Yes, I'm afraid so. Current favourite phrases used by psychiatrists include: Bates Motel (mental hospital); pants waver (nymphomaniac); furniture mover (hysterical patient) and double header (schizophrenic). Incidentally, you may be interested to hear that an official complaint was made to the Press Complaints Commission after I described the majority of psychiatrists as `dickheads'. The complaint was turned down.

Documentary evidence

Question

Seven years ago I narrowly missed getting a job as a sales executive for a large, national company. Instead I got a job as with a small family firm. The man who got the job I nearly got is now a very successful senior executive with the company. He earns a considerable amount more than I do, has two homes, two cars and a very enviable life style. I have recently discovered documentary evidence which shows that he lied about his qualifications on the application form for the job I so nearly got. What do you think would be the best way to go about making sure that his bosses get this information?

Answer

Do you think that if you get him fired you'll get the job you clearly think you ought to have got seven years ago? Or do you just want revenge for the fact that he has been more materially successful than you have? Either way you're allowing your envy to wreck your life. You are carrying around old resentments that are weighing you down, holding you back and souring your spirit. Why do you have to measure your life against his? And why must you keep on looking back when you would get so much more out of life if only you would look forward. There are setbacks and disappointments, narrow misses and `almost made it' moments in everyone's life. But there are just as many new opportunities and fresh openings if you keep looking to the future. By concentrating on one professional disappointment and by allowing yourself to become embittered by what you clearly see as an injustice you have blinded yourself to fresh prospects.

Why not dump all this old shit. Bury it. Forget it. Burn your tawdry `documentary evidence' as a symbol of your new determination to start enjoying the present and looking to the future instead of giving yourself (and probably becoming) a pain in the neck by constantly glancing over your shoulder at the past.

Unwanted promotion

Question

I have been offered a promotion at work but I really don't want it. I have seen the way other men of my age ruin their health trying to do jobs in management. I don't have a very demanding job but it suits me fine. I regard my 38 hours of work as `dead time' but as long as I get paid and can enjoy my family and my hobbies I'm happy. I'm healthy and I don't have much stress in my life. I'd like to keep it that way. My wife is more ambitious and she thinks I should take the promotion, which will mean more money and a bit more status for us both. We've agreed to do whatever you think would be wisest.

Answer

If you take on the extra responsibility it is bound to affect your life. No one is going to give you extra money and status without expecting you to work harder and probably for longer hours. You'll have less time and your health will probably suffer. Because you don't really want the extra responsibility you will, I suspect, eventually begin to feel angry and bitter. Your relationship with your wife will probably suffer and may never recover.

On the other hand if you say `no' to the extra money and status your wife (who is clearly the ambitious one in the family) may feel frustrated.

I feel that you should turn down the promotion and that if your wife still wants more money and status for the family then she should start looking for a career of her own.

You should always try to direct your life in directions which will make you happy. If you don't - if you go down roads which do not lead to happiness - then you and evryone around you will suffer.

Large, pink nipples

Question

I am 17 and have very large pink nipples and the inner lips of my genitalia protrude. Are either of these things likely to turn a man off?

Answer

Not in the slightest. On the contrary, many men would find these physical attributes extremely attractive.

Locked in

Question

Is it true that it is possible for a penis to become locked in a girl's vagina? I have heard that a hospital had to treat a couple who hobbled into the hospital covered only by a blanket and embarrassment.

Answer

I've traced the story you heard back to Warsaw, Poland in 1923. The story then was that a young couple had been stuck together while making love in a public garden. They were pulled apart only after a doctor gave the girl an anaesthetic. When the story appeared in the Polish newspapers the couple committed suicide.

Theoretically, it is quite possible for vaginal muscles to go into spasm and imprison a penis. However, such spasms last only minutes and relax spontaneously so I don't think this is a hazard you should worry about too much.

Satisfied and relieved

Question

I masturbate once a week and it leaves me satisfied and relieved. I have heard that women who masturbate eventually stop having periods and become infertile. Is this true?

Answer

I get a lot of letters like this. The answer is `No'. You will not become infertile, hirsute or even short sighted through masturbation.

Striptease artiste

Question

Neither of us were virgins when we married nine months ago but I have just discovered that my wife used to be a striptease artiste. I am having great difficulty in accepting this. I find it hard to believe that my wife used to take off her clothes so that men could ogle her. And I find it hard to forgive her for not telling me. I confess that I am also haunted by the thought that my wife might also have had sex with men for money. I cannot ask her this outright but I know that it is by no means unheard of for a stripper to augment her income by providing selected patrons with more personal services. I would very much appreciate your advice on how to cope with this difficult problem.

Answer

You should try not to allow anything from your wife's past to affect the way you feel about her now. I can think of a thousand occupations more disreputable than taking off your clothes in front of an audience and if you stop to think about it I'm sure that you can too. Try to feel be proud of your wife's skills and looks and happy to know that when she strips now you are her only audience. Try to dismiss your other fears from your mind too. Very few strippers sell their bodies for sex and your suspicion is almost certainly unfounded. However, does it matter even if your wife did have sex with men for money in the past? There isn't any real difference between having sex with a man because he's bought you dinner (as many women do) and having sex with a man because he's given you the money to buy your own dinner. Surely the important thing is not what your wife did in the past but what she does now and in the future.

Secretive

Question

My husband is very secretive about what he earns and how much money he has got in the bank. I receive an adequate weekly housekeeping allowance but feel that since we are partners I surely have a right to know more about these things. When my friends talk about their husband's salaries and savings I feel embarrassed because I know far less about my husband than they do about their husbands.

Answer

Your husband's secretiveness is certainly odd. I agree with you that you are entitled to know more about financial matters which affect you both. I suggest that you talk to your husband. Ask him how he much he earns and tell him why you feel you should know. There are several possible explanations for your husband's secretiveness. He may, for example, have had a costly divorce in the past.

Flat on our faces

Question

My wife wants us to go and live abroad. She says that if we don't go now we'll never go. Part of me wants to go but I have a good job and we have a nice house and I'm worried that if we leave we may fall flat on our faces.

Answer

Your wife is right. And so are you. If you don't go now you probably never will. And if you give up your good job and your nice home there is a chance that you will have to crawl back with your tail between your legs within twelve months. But if you don't go you'll never know what would have happened. And getting old and never knowing what might have been is almost certainly worse than getting old and having regrets. This is a decision that you and your wife must make together. I will simply offer you a quote from Augustine of Hippo who once wrote that: `the world is a great book, of which they who never stir from home read only a page.'

Middle age

Question

How do you define middle age? I'm 46 and get very offended when people call me middle aged. Surely middle age is 50 onwards?

Answer

You're kidding yourself. You are, it is true, on the edge of middle age. But on the wrong edge. If you assume that average life expectancy is 70 years then we're young from 0 to 23, middle aged from 24 to 46 and old from 47 onwards. But what does it matter what you call it? The important thing is that you are as old as you feel (or as someone, probably Groucho Marx, once said, a man is as old as the woman he's feeling). I know 20 year olds who are `old' and 80 year olds who are `young'. I'm sure that if you stop and think about it you'll know exactly what I mean.

Oral sex

Question

My wife loves oral sex. She won't let me have what I call normal sex with her until she has sucked and licked me. Is it normal for a woman to enjoy this sort of thing?

Answer

Yes. Believe it or not some women even enjoy sport on television and find drinking alcohol a pleasant experience too. You should regard yourself as a privileged husband for although many women enjoy giving oral sex not all women are equally enthusiastic. Indeed, I have a list of 1,378,259 men whose wives will not perform oral sex on them. Please let me know if you would like any or all of these men to stand in for you and take over your onerous nuptial responsibilities. I can have a queue of 100,000 by your back door by 5.00 pm on Monday.

Frail

Question

My husband is in his eighties and very frail. I am thirty years younger. I have no idea whether he has left me anything in his will. I don't even know for sure whether or not he has made a will. Do you think I should mention this? Or do you think I should just accept that he will have made all the necessary arrangements in case anything happens to him.

Answer

I think you should explain your fears to him. And be straightforward. I know one man who thought that `putting his affairs in order' meant writing down a list of all the women he'd had sex with and then putting the women on the list in order of preference.

Vulnerable

Question

I know that I am very vulnerable to stress and my doctor has warned me that unless I reduce my exposure to stress I may not live long. I have already had one minor heart attack. My problem is that however hard I try I have great difficulty in changing my life in order to exclude stress.

Answer

You will never be able to exclude all pressures and stresses from your life; for the very simple reason that you can never control the circumstances under which you live. Whatever you do, and however hard you try to control your life, there will always be people who will bring stress into the world in which you live. Every one who asks you to make a decision or who hands you responsibility adds to the stress you have to live with. All you can do is learn to control the way you respond to those stresses.

Whenever you feel stress building up ask yourself what you are worrying about and whether the cause of your anxiety justifies your response. The key is to find the bottom line: decide what is the worst that can happen if your darkest fears are fulfilled. Confront your fears and face the worst; it is the unknown which creates the monsters which will engulf you.

A bottle and a half a day

Question

My husband drinks too much. He starts drinking in the mornings and just doesn't stop until he goes to bed eighteen hours later. I reckon he gets through a bottle and a half of spirits every day. I have tried to persuade him to seek help but he won't listen to me. He won't even telephone Alcoholics Anonymous, although two of his friends go to meetings and are great believers in AA philosophy. He is sometimes violent and I am worried that he may injure me or one of our children. Our life is miserable. The children are afraid of him and I spend much of my life lying to his boss, providing him with alibis and excuses and cleaning up the messes he makes around the house. I have threatened to leave him but I'm worried that if I'm not there he will just drink even more.

Answer

By hanging around and providing your husband with excuses for his drinking you are, I'm afraid, contributing to his problem. You are an accessory. I think you would help him more by walking out, finding somewhere else to live and making it clear to him that you will live with him again only when he acknowledges that he has a problem and seeks help.

Special parking

Question

I am delighted to see that some supermarkets now provide special parking places for parents who have children with them. Will you please campaign for more special parking facilities for parents with children?

Answer

No, I certainly will not. Why on earth should people who have physical evidence that they have had sex without taking effective contraceptive precautions get special parking privileges? You sound like the sort of idiot who has a `Baby on Board' sticker on the back of your car. (I never know what I'm supposed to do when I see one of those things but I gather that repeated sounding of the horn is de rigeur since this alarms or wakes the baby, causes it to cry and thereby makes sure that the parents are comforted by the knowledge that their offspring's lungs are in good working order.) The best car parking spaces are already reserved for perfectly fit people who have managed to obtain parking passes either on false pretenses or for some absent relative and I can see absolutely no reason why people with children should get parking preference over any other group of individuals. What next? Privileged parking for women with a bra cup size in excess of 38 DD?

Money for a rainy day

Question

I like buying nice things for our home but my husband never seems to want to spend money. I keep telling him that we might as well spend what little we've got because we can't take it with us but he says he wants to keep a few pounds in the bank for a `rainy day'. I don't see any point at all in putting money on one side for a rainy day that may never come.

Answer

The two of you must find a comfortable compromise. Sit down with a piece of paper and a pencil. Write down your total income and then make a list of all your essential outgoings. What is left can be divided into two (not necessarily equal) parts: money for buying `nice things for the house' and money for a `rainy day'. Try to think of the `rainy day' money that your husband wants to put on one side as a sort of security blanket. With a few pounds tucked away safely in the bank you will both be able to wave the appropriate two fingers at demanding or unreasonable employers and others who want to manipulate you or take advantage of you. `Rainy day' money is sometimes also known as `f*ck you' money. And do think carefully about how much of your income you spend on `things'. Owning too much `stuff' can be bad for you for there is a real chance that you will eventually be owned by your possessions. There are thousands of people around who don't enjoy life because they are constantly worrying about something happening to their car, their collection of porcelain or their wall to wall snow white shag pile carpeting.

Ugly and unnecessary

Question

I want to have my young son circumcised. I think that foreskins are ugly and unnecessary. Unfortunately, my doctor says that the operation is unnecessary and refuses to arrange for it to be done. My husband says we should follow the doctor's advice.

Answer

I am surprised that you should want surgeons to mutilate your son because you consider part of his body to be ugly. Would you expect doctors to cut off your son's ears if you decided that they were ugly too?

The fact is that the foreskin is there for a purpose. It protects the sensitive end of the male organ and can contribute enormously to the pleasure of the owner and his sexual partners.

Circumcision is a barbaric and fairly hazardous procedure. Side effects, including infection and excessive bleeding, occur in 1 in 500 circumcised infants. There is sometimes also damage to the penis itself. In one operation the child's penis was completely destroyed. A sex change operation had to be performed so that the child could be raised as a sterile girl. The girl will require medical monitoring and hormone therapy for the rest of her life.

Sweet sixteen

Question

I'm 17 years old. I'm going out with a girl. She is 16 and I am desperate to make love to her. She's very willing but the only place we can do it is in her parents' living room and they won't leave us alone. Every five minutes one or the other wanders in on some pretext or another and we have to spring apart and pretend to be engrossed in whatever is on the television. It's not as though I'm irresponsible: I've got condoms which I bought just before last Christmas but still haven't used. And it isn't as though I'm going to take her virginity either. I know for a fact that a boy in the fifth form has had her twice.

Answer

If you want to enjoy adult pleasures then you must start taking on adult-like responsibilities. Buy a cheap, cardboard suitcase and rent a double room at a nearby hotel. If you can't afford these essentials then get a job delivering newspapers or cleaning cars and save up your pennies until you can. And while you're saving up you'd probably better save up for some new condoms too. The antiques that have made their mark on the inside of your wallet are probably fit only for the National Condom Museum in Pontefract.

Burgled

Question

My home has been burgled three times in the last four months. What can you suggest?

Answer

Put up a large notice saying: `This building is patrolled by free roaming, unmuzzled, rabid guard dogs at night and occupied by highly strung, easily offended weight lifters during the day. The building is used for the development of bioactive viruses for military purposes, for the storage of highly toxic acids and for experimental techniques designed to neutralise nuclear waste. You are currently being photographed and bombarded with marker rays. In accordance with Ministry of Defence regulation DF/tr/957 we must inform you that the marker ray system we use may induce cancerous growths. Please try to leave the area quietly to avoid setting off the noise triggered sprinkler system which has been filled with a solution designed to neutralise escaping toxic acid fumes. We are advised that this solution dissolves human skin and causes blindness within 12 hours. Close the door when you leave to prevent the escape of dangerous fumes. Please visit a specialist hospital immediately for decontamination and 28 days observation. For their safety please tell doctors treating you to use full protective clothing according to Ministry Regulation TRW/8376y. Warn them that you are contaminated with Beta Heptazone Dichlorylate and possibly infected with the virus Instabilicus Oriflamivitis. For further information qualified medical personnel only may telephone the Ministry's Hazardous Substances' Research Department.'

Rent or buy?

Question

I want to buy a small house but my husband says he's happier to rent. He says that if we buy somewhere then we'll be stuck with it if we want to move. He also says that if we buy we'll have to do all the maintenance and so on whereas if we rent all that will be someone else's problem. I want to buy somewhere so that we can have somewhere we can really call our own. My husband says I've just got an overdeveloped nesting instinct.

Answer

You don't have to buy a place of your own in order to have somewhere you can call home. `Home' is a concept based more on mental attitudes than on the legal ownership of bricks and mortar. There are significant hazards associated with property ownership. Thousands of people have discovered that owning a home can mean being a prisoner. Those who bought their homes when prices were higher cannot sell and move unless they can afford to take a huge financial loss. The constant stress and strain of buying, owning and maintaining a property is so great that people who rent their homes live on average 5.2 years longer than people who buy the property in which they live.

Terrible nag

Question

My wife is a terrible nag. I can never do anything right. If I sit down with the newspaper for five minutes she calls me lazy. If I've been working on the car or in the garden I have to strip down to my underpants - and leave my dirty clothes outside - before she'll let me into the house. If I want to have sex I have to give her 24 hours notice - and I'm only allowed to have it twice a month. I hand over all my earnings (including those from a part time job I have) and have to provide her with an account of how I spend the £5 a week pocket money I receive. My life is really miserable.

Answer

Beg, buy or borror a French maid's outfit, a blue movie and six cans of beer. Go outside and roll around on your vegetable patch for five minutes. When you're satisfied that you can't get any dirtier lie under the car and change the oil. Then, walk briskly into the house - studiously ignoring your wife's bleatings. Put the blue movie into the video recorder, open yourself a can of beer and sit down in her favourite armchair. She will by now be hysterical. Hand her the French maid's outfit and order her to put it on and to then go into the kitchen and cook you a large plateful of egg and chips. She will either do as you tell her (in which case you can regard her as successfully `broken in') or she will leave you and go back to live with her mother. Either way you win.

Noisy sex

Question

Is it acceptable for a woman to make a noise during sex? When my boyfriend makes love to me I frequently feel like shouting out but I try to keep quiet because it somehow doesn't seem ladylike to make a noise. Do you think he would mind if I let myself go a little more?

Answer

I doubt very much if he would mind. An entirely unreliable recent survey of retired civil servants showed that 83.7% of them preferred noisy sexual partners. Favourite phrases included: `Do it to me!', `Yes, yes, big boy!' and `Oh, my God, I'm coming, I'm coming!'. Many men like their partners to use words which would not be considered appropriate for use in the drawing room. And it is not at all uncommon for some very refined women to use earthy four letter words at moments of high passion. Please don't feel shy or embarrassed about showing your feelings in the bedroom. The average man's dream woman has been described as someone who can be a cook in the kitchen, a house keeper around the home and a whore in the bedroom.

Having the boss for dinner

Question

Last weekend my husband brought his boss home with him for dinner. I knew he was coming and had really made an effort and prepared a lovely meal. I spent a whole week's housekeeping budget on the food and wine. After the meal I sat on the sofa next to my husband's boss and while we were talking he casually put his arm around me and started stroking my shoulder and slipping his fingers inside my blouse. I didn't like to say anything because I know that he has a lot of power over my husband's career but as soon as I could I went out into the kitchen to fetch more coffee. While I was there my husband came in and told me that he had a headache and was going to bed. He asked me to stay up to entertain his boss! I was very surprised. My husband doesn't normally get headaches and even if he had had a stinker I would have thought he would have soldiered on in order to try and make a good impression on his boss. `You've made a real hit with him,' whispered my husband. `He really fancies you so be nice to him!' At that point I suddenly realised what was going on. I asked my husband if he expected me to have sex with his boss. I was absolutely flabbergasted when he told me that it was up to me but that it would do his career a lot of good if I did. I didn't know what to do and so when my husband went back upstairs I was in quite a daze when I went back into the living room with two cups of coffee. The coffee never got drunk. My husband's boss had my clothes off in less than five minutes and he had sex with me twice. After he had gone home I stayed downstairs alone and couldn't believe what had happened. I felt really ashamed of myself and very dirty. But I have to admit that I found the sex very exciting. When he started taking my clothes off I didn't show him any encouragement but I quickly got excited and it showed. I never usually have orgasms when my husband makes love to me but I didn't have any trouble having orgasms with his boss. When my husband eventually crept downstairs to see how things had gone I screamed abuse at him. That was over a week ago. I now feel very confused. I have told my husband that if he ever tries to put me in a position like that again I will leave him. But I can't forget what happened and I have an awful feeling that if a similar situation occurred again I would not put up any resistance. I almost feel like a whore.

Answer

You are a whore. And your husband is a pimp. Having successfully managed the deed why be afraid of the words? Since your aim in making love to your husband's boss was at least partly to improve or secure your husband's wage packet you were screwing for money: that makes you a whore. A potentially high class hooker, but a hooker nevertheless.

I have deliberately been blunt because I think that you have to face reality if you are to decide how best to deal with what has happened and what seems certain to happen again.

Did you really `allow' your husband's boss to have sex with you because you were in a daze? I think that is a rather weak claim. I suspect that the first reaction of most women would have been to try to brain their husband with a kitchen implement. Are you really so weak and insipid that you simply lay down and opened your legs? Would you unquestioningly do anything for your husband rather than disappoint him? Or did you go to bed with this man because you realised that a promotion for your husband would mean a bigger wage packet? Or did you, perhaps, agree to what happened because you were excited by the prospect of having sex with a virtual stranger? Did the knowledge that your husband was upstairs make the whole incident even more exciting?

And what about your husband? Was he liberal with your favours simply to further his own career? Or was he turned on by the knowledge of what was happening? Is he going to want to watch next time?

Only when you are both honest with yourselves about what has already happened will you be able to decide how best to deal with the next time. And one way or another I am pretty sure that there will be a next time.

Finally, I have a question for you. Did your husband get promoted? Or did his boss screw you both?

The kindest way

Question

What is the kindest way of telling an otherwise scrupulously clean friend that he smells like a dirty ash tray? I don't want to hurt his feelings.

Answer

You have to pick the method to suit the individual. Mrs Ann-Marie Confucius, whose philosopher husband was a keen smoker of French cigarettes, told me that she tricked her partner into giving up his noxious habit by persuading him to ask himself the question `Why are we all here?' every time he thought about lighting up. On the other hand, the inimitable Sophia Machiavelli, widow of the much loved Niccolo, told me that she cured her political activist husband of smoking by persuading his numerous friends to drop oblique hints. And Mrs Dolores Torquemada, whose husband helped mastermind the cruellest aspects of the Spanish Inquisition, held lighted matches under her husband's testicles until he agreed to substitute peppermints for cigarettes. You could simply try telling him that you love kissing him but that you find the taste of stale tobacco a real turn off.

Read with interest

Question

I would like to thank you for your campaigns about drug safety.

Answer

I believe that for every medical horror story which gets into print a hundred are suppressed by fears or threats of litigation, a thousand disappear into history because no one finds out about them and ten thousand never even surface because everyone involved keeps their mouths shut and so no one (including the patient, if he or she is still alive, and his relatives and friends if he or she is not) hears about what has happened.

Thousands of big, fat, rich drug company bosses run the world as if they own it and those members of the medical profession who are not incompetent or blind to what is going on are usually too frightened to say anything lest they ruin their careers. (Those who stay silent lest they damage their careers are right to worry: whistle blowing is professional suicide in the healing professions. I am advised that I am the subject of more complaints - coming from other doctors or drug companies - than any other qualified doctor in the country.)

The physical side of marriage

Question

My husband died 5 years ago, after 20 very happy years of marriage. When a nice young couple moved in next door last year I was able to help the wife by looking after her two young children while she went shopping and so on. In return her husband Barry would help me out with odd jobs. My video broke the other day and having seen Barry going to his shed in the garden I followed him. When I opened the shed door I was extremely embarrassed to discover him masturbating over a mens' magazine. I shut the door and rushed away. A few minutes later Barry knocked on my door. He explained that his wife had told him that she could no longer bear him touching her. She had, he said, told her to get his sex somewhere else. As he explained things I felt very sorry for him. When he asked me how I coped with being alone I was honest with him. I told him that I did find it difficult. The physical side of marriage was always very important to me. It came as a complete surprise when he put his arms around me and asked me if he could kiss me. We ended up in bed together. Since that occasion he calls round regularly. His wife either doesn't care or doesn't suspect. I have no illusions. I know he wouldn't leave his family and I wouldn't want him to. But I do enjoy the physical relationship we have. From talking to his wife I believe that Barry has been telling me the truth about their relationship. Do you think it's all right for us to carry on or should I stop having sex with him?

Answer

I love that phrase `the physical side of marriage'. When I hear it I always get a vision of a happily married couple digging the garden together or sweating it out on a matched pair of exercise bicycles.

Whatever she may have told him (or you) there is a risk that your neighbour will hit the roof when she finds out where her husband has been parking his travelling organ. And there's also a risk that one or both of you will fall in love - thereby putting a sizeable cat among the pigeons. You have to weigh up the risks and decide whether the potential downside is worth the upside. I assume, by the way, that you are taking precautions to avoid pregnancy and infection.

Lonely hearts

Question

After my husband left me I answered a lonely hearts advertisement and met a great bloke. It was lovely being half of a couple again. He was much more adventurous than any of my other lovers and when he asked if he could erotic photos of me and video us making love I agreed. He said I could keep all the pictures at my place but since I have two young children I said I would rather he kept them. Two weeks ago he brought a contact magazine round and said he wanted us to meet other couples for sex. I was shocked and said `no' at first. However, eventually I was so worried about losing him that I agreed. I went along to another couple's home with him and then chickened out and just sat and watched. My boyfriend was furious with me afterwards. He now says that if I don't agree to group sex with strangers he will show the photos and video to everyone I know.

Answer

Grit your teeth, steel yourself and call his bluff. Tell him that you're going to report him to the police for attempted blackmail. Try to prepare yourself to cope with the worst that he can do. This man is a slimy bastard with the soul of a lawyer and the morals of a politician. He could crawl under a carpet without wrinkling it. If you give in to him now there is no knowing where or when his demands will end.

Terrible luck

Question

My best friend is always moaning about the fact that she has terrible luck with men but I think she's at least partly to blame for the trouble she gets into. She always seems attracted to men who treat her badly - ones who drink too much, gamble, go out with other women or knock her about. When I pointed this out to her she agreed but explained that the nice, sensitive men she meets are always dull and boring. The really funny thing is that she always tries to reform the bad men she collects into the good guys she could have had in the first place but thought too boring!

Answer

I'm afraid that you will not be able to change your friend. And I certainly don't think you should even hint that you might hold her partly to blame for the problems she finds herself in. As a friend you should restrict yourself to offering advice, succour, support, comfort and a boxful of paper tissues whenever things get bad.

Mistake

Question

I've been married for nine months and I'm beginning to think that I might have made a terrible mistake. I run my own hairdressing and beauty business which I've built up from scratch and I'm keen to expand. I also play quite an active role on the Management Committee at a local health club. Two weeks ago I was flattered to be invited to become a governor of the school which our two daughters attend. My husband, who has a job with the local authority, is not very supportive. He is opposed to me expanding my business and can't understand why I'm not content to just stay at home, cook his meals and iron his shirts. I find it difficult to understand why he is happy with an undemanding routine job and a social life that seems to revolve around the television set.

Answer

There are two sorts of people in this world: the players and the spectators. The players do things, take chances and put their careers, lives and wealth on the line. The spectators criticise and offer their opinions but prefer to stand on the sidelines because they are frightened to take risks. It sounds to me as though you are a natural player and your husband is a committed spectator. It is unlikely that anything will change your respective roles in life (though it is true that some players occasionally tire and become spectators and some spectators succumb to temptation and become players for a while). If you can both understand this and accept and become accustomed to your different roles in life then your marriage may thrive, blossom and survive in a way that eludes other, apparently better matched pairings.

Polite and respectful

Question

Why are young people so rude? I am 72 years old and when I was a child we were all taught to be polite and to be respectful to our elders. Young people these days don't seem to have any manners at all.

Answer

Fashions change and many traditional, old fashioned courtesies are pushed aside by progress but generally speaking people remain much the same: some are polite, thoughtful and kind hearted while others are rude, aggressive and selfish. The percentage in each category is as great among pensioners as it is among pubescents. It's a myth that old people are all patient, sensitive and well mannered. Stand in any queue anywhere and you're as likely to get your shins bruised by orthopaedic shoes and carelessly brandished Zimmer frames as you are by Doc Martins.

Dressed like a woman

Question

When a neighbour of mine dressed up as a woman and walked along the street outside our home he was arrested by the police. What offence was he committing? I am a woman and I often wear slacks or trousers. I am slightly alarmed by the thought that I might be arrested for wearing the wrong sort of clothes.

Answer

There are no laws forbidding the wearing of clothes originally designed for members of the opposite sex. But the existence of laws has little relevance to whether or not you are likely to get arrested. And the laws which do exist are often interpreted in bizarre ways. What logic is there in a legal system which results in the arrests of men and women who try to disrupt the hunting of perfectly innocent wild animals while allowing politicians to walk around our streets unhindered?

Flying

Question

I worry about flying. Can you give me some advice, please?

Answer

No. If God had intended us to fly he would have made aeroplane seats big enough to sit in.

Injured

Question

Our next door neighbour, who is divorced and in his 50s, was recently injured in a car accident. I started popping in to help. Some days he is in so much pain that he cannot move about and has to stay in bed all day. One day, after he had been in bed for three days, I asked him if he wanted a bed bath. I was amazed when I saw how well endowed he was. He developed an enormous erection very quickly and climaxed as soon as I touched him in that area. He was very embarrassed and apologised profusely. He explained that he really missed the physical side of marriage. I told him I didn't mind at all and admitted that I was flattered. When I left he gave me a £20 note. I told my husband and he laughed, saying it was the easiest £20 I'd ever earn. Since then I have given my neighbour a bed bath twice a week - with similar results. On each occasion he gives me a £20 note. The last but one time I saw him he asked if he could touch my breasts. I didn't see any harm in it since he didn't want me to undress or anything. And the last time he asked me if I would use my mouth to bring him off. I told him that I would have to think that. I haven't told my husband about these latest developments nor, indeed, about my regular income from the `special' bed baths, and I realise that the way we are heading it won't be long before I am having full sex with him. He is a very nice man and far better endowed than my husband. I'm pretty sure my husband wouldn't mind - he and I have had sex no more than half a dozen times in the last three years and our relationship is more business-like than loving - and the money is certainly very useful but I am confused. I have never slept with another man but I am really tempted. If I stop things developing any further I know I will regret it but I suspect that if I let things carry on the way they are heading I will be letting myself in for problems I will not be able to deal with.

Answer

Life is full of problems. An out of control lorry could career through your living room. A lump of ice could fall from an aeroplane and crash through your roof. You could be falsely arrested or told by your doctor that you have an incurable wasting disease. You could be bitten by a rabid dog, kidnapped by Welsh terrorists or invited to be a tory party candidate at the next Euro elections.

We get one go each at life. It doesn't sound as though you're having a lot of fun with your go. I think you probably deserve a few more orgasms before you get shut up in an old peoples home. A team of highly trained specialists who I invited to comment on your problem suggested that you take all the usual precautions and bonk yourself senseless. They weren't specialists in human relations, they were car mechanics, but their advice merits serious thought.

Redundant

Question

When my husband was made redundant the only job he could find was 250 miles away. We couldn't sell our house so he got digs with a widow close to his new job. He comes home on Friday evenings and goes back very early on Mondays. At first things weren't as bad as I'd feared. We both appreciated one another more and instead of just sitting around the house at the weekend we made an effort to do things together. The enforced absences did wonders for our sex life too. Then, six weeks ago a young couple made an offer for our house. I was excited but when I rang my husband he made all sorts of excuses for keeping things as they are. In the end we had a big row and I slammed down the telephone in tears. I couldn't sleep and so the next day I caught a train and went to see him. To my horror I discovered that the widow my husband lodges with is five years younger than I am - and very good looking. I found out that my husband and this woman live together as husband and wife during the week. When I confronted him with what I had found out my husband said that he loves us both and wants to carry on with things as they are. He is adamant that he will not give up this woman.

Answer

Have you thought about telling your husband that you will accept his terms on condition that he allows you to make similar arrangements of your own? Maybe the thought of you spending Mondays to Thursdays playing trains and tunnels with a toy boy from the local weights and measures department might make him realise what he is asking you to accept?

No time

Question

I am a nurse working in a busy hospital. Because of your columns and books a lot of patients now demand that we explain things to them. Would you please tell your readers that we don't have time to explain things. People should just trust us to do what is best for them.

Answer

What a stupid, callous and uncaring person you are. Where did you do your nursing training? The local post office? No one with more than half a brain would trust doctors and nurses to do what is best for them. Mistakes made by doctors and nurses are now a major cause of ill health and death. I was tempted to ask you how you would feel if you were in hospital and no one told you what they were doing to your body - or why they were doing it. But I doubt if you have the imagination to understand the question. So, in order to protect patients in the area where you live, I have arranged for the hospital where you work to keep you on permanent bed pan duty. Hopefully, you will soon get fed up of your malodorous duties and seek work elsewhere. Might I suggest that you look for something exceptionally hazardous? Maybe you'd like to open a kosher restaurant in Beirut?

A source of frustration

Question

I have a very responsible job but at the office where I work all the real power lies with the administrators - who do not have any responsibility at all! I have to make many decisions every day and if things go wrong I am held accountable but I do not have the authority I need. I find this a tremendous source of frustration and would appreciate your comments.

Answer

Much of the stress in the world has been created because responsibility and authority have been separated. When I worked as a general practitioner during the early part of the Boer War I was constantly in trouble with the bureaucrats because they had the authority I needed in order to fulfil my responsibilities to my patients. Before I eventually resigned to become a lot of trouble for a living I found that I could exert some degree of control over the bureaucrats by threatening to force them to accept some of my responsibility whether they wanted it or not. So, for example, I found that the men-in-cheap-suits-with-pens-in-their-breast-pockets became remarkably compliant if I told them that unless they did what I considered to be best for my patient I would, if the patient died, list them as a contributory cause of death on the death certificate. This had an almost magical effect - producing instant action from even the most lethargic of administrators. I suggest that you try to find your own way to `persuade' the accursed administrators to trade a little of their authority for some of your responsibility.

The condom fell off

Question

I have been going out with a boy for five months. We have sex a lot. He has got a small penis. This doesn't bother me as I love him. But can a boy with a small penis make me pregnant? We haven't used any contraceptives. We tried a condom but it was much too much big for him and just fell off. I am too nervous to go to the doctor for advice.

Answer

The size of your partner's penis is of no significance as far as conception is concerned. A bullet from a palm sized automatic can kill just as effectively as a bullet from a machine gun. I suggest that you visit a local family planning clinic. You may find the prospect of doing so embarrassing but, believe me, you'll be far more embarrassed when you have to book in at the maternity clinic.

A different pill

Question

For years I have been taking a pill for my blood pressure. Last week a new doctor gave me a different pill. When I went back to complain he told me that although the pill looked different it contained the same ingredients. Can he be right?

Answer

Yes. Drug companies make two sorts of pills: brand name drugs (which are expensively advertised) and generics (which are chemically identical to the branded versions). It's all very much like supermarkets selling `own brand' beans and well known branded beans. I suggested that doctors should prescribe generic rather than brand name drugs in my first book - `The Medicine Men - which was published back in 1975. Everyone laughed. Now many doctors, pharmacists and politicians agree with me that if doctors prescribed generic drugs instead of expensively advertised brand name versions, hospitals and patients would save billions of pounds. There's a bonus: since there would be less drugs around, and less confusion, mix ups would happen less often and patients would be safer.

Becoming a nun

Question

My daughter wants to become a nun. How can I dissuade her?

Answer

Why do you want to dissuade her? Nuns have a pretty good life. Other people do all their worrying for them. They don't have to concern themselves with dreary everyday problems and they get to travel everywhere first class.

In a hurry

Question

I was collecting a prescription from our local surgery when my doctor rushed out in a terrible hurry. I asked the receptionist what the emergency was. She told me that the doctor was late for a lunch being given by a big drug company. When I expressed surprise she told me that my doctor had lunch at the expense of a drug company two or three times every week. This doesn't seem right to me. I'd always thought of doctors as being above bribery but what other reason can drug companies have for buying meals for doctors?

Answer

Being a doctor used to mean being part of a profession. No more. Doctors are now just another arm of drug company marketing departments. Clearly, doctors would not need to be bought free meals in order to be persuaded to prescribe important, life saving new drugs. Doctors are given free meals by drug companies trying to flog drugs which may have little or no advantage over existing products. The smaller the advantage the drug offers the harder the drug company has to try in order to get doctors to prescribe it. You may feel that this means that really crappy drugs are promoted with tremendous enthusiasm and very expensive meals.

Being honest

Question

While we were in bed my boyfriend asked me if his whatsit was as big as all the other whatsits I'd had. I always believe in being honest so I told him it wasn't. In fact I told him that it was the smallest I'd ever seen. When he asked me if I preferred big ones I said I did. He said that it wasn't the size but what you did with it that really counted but I said that was nonsense. He then went all quiet and disappeared. Half an hour later I found him in the bathroom crying.

Answer

I'm surprised he hadn't slit his wrists. How would you feel if he had told you that your breasts were too small and that you had a harbour big enough for the QE II to be moored? Men worry about these things and like women to be tactful. In this instance tact usually involves a certain amount of dishonesty. If you love him would it have really hurt you to lie a little?

Bad back

Question

I would like to see an osteopath about my bad back but I am frightened to do so lest I upset my doctor who has been trying hard to heal me for months. The osteopath I would like to visit has an excellent local reputation.

Answer

Most of the doctors I know who have had back trouble have visited osteopaths for help. Why not tell your doctor what you're planning. The chances are high that he will approve wholeheartedly. Incidentally, the number of people now visiting alternative health care practitioners is so great that osteopathy, acupuncture and so on are just as much a part of mainstream medicine as are men and women in white coats with stethoscopes round their necks.

Rude remarks

Question

We are a group of traffic wardens who were very offended by your recent rude remarks about our profession. We demand an apology.

Answer

Piss off. It was a traffic warden who wouldn't turn a blind eye when a woman left her car parked outside the vet's so that she could take her injured cat in for treatment (`can't make any exceptions'). It was a traffic warden who slapped a ticket on a car while the driver helped his pregnant wife into hospital (`only doing my job'). It was a traffic warden who stuck a ticket on a car from which a disabled woman was struggling to extricate herself (`more than my job's worth not to'). I am delighted to have received thousands of offensive, aggressive and semi-literate letters from traffic wardens. It makes my heart warm to know that I have reached out and touched so many objectionable bastards in one go.

To those who have threatened revenge on the streets I would like to point out that I drive a very old, very large blue Bentley which is far too heavy to tow away and which has wheels which are too large to clamp. You can recognise my Bentley easily because in the place where the queen's car flies a royal standard my car flies a skull and crossbones. Most traffic wardens are so stupid that when they see the flag they salute rather than give me a ticket and I have every confidence that despite this revelation this state of affairs will persist.

Desperately frustrated

Question

My wife's best friend recently came to stay with us. She and her husband broke up about nine months ago. Two days ago while we were in bed my wife asked me if I'd like to make love to her friend. She told me that her friend is feeling desperately frustrated but although she wants sex she doesn't want to start a new relationship. My wife said that her friend found me quite sexy and had told her that she wished she had someone like me to go to bed with. I was absolutely shocked by my wife's suggestion. At first I thought my wife was just joking but it eventually became quite clear that she was very serious. Her friend is a little plump but very attractive and making love to her would be very nice. But do you think I should?

Answer

What on earth are you asking me for? Your wife's friend is keen to play trains and tunnels with you. Your wife is quite happy about this planned adventure. And instead of getting down to business and making a lonely woman very happy you're wasting time writing to me? My guess is that you must be a civil servant working in some sort of planning department. You have spent so much of your life avoiding responsibility that you are now incapable of making any decisions at all. Actually, I don't think there is much hope for you. Any man who can describe the prospect of fully authorised adultery as `very nice' has about as much style and soul as a knitted toilet roll holder. Just for the record I seem to remember that D.H.Lawrence, the expert on mining and body part nomenclature, once argued that a natural sexual relationship should involve three, not two, individuals.

Breach of confidentiality

Question

My mother has been ill for several months. She asked me to go with her when last she went to see the doctor. Before we went I asked her what she wanted to tell the doctor and what she wanted to know from him. I then wrote down a list of questions to ask and a list of symptoms that seemed important. When we got into the surgery the doctor asked me who I was and then refused to let me stay. He said it would be a breach of patient confidentiality for me to stay in the room. Reluctantly I left but before I went I handed him the list I'd made. He laughed when he saw it and said something about `another nutter'. Was the doctor right to refuse to allow me to stay with my mother?

Answer

You did exactly what you should have done. Sensitive, thoughtful doctors who care about their patients heartily approve of patients making list of questions - and taking notes. Your mother's doctor sounds as though he probably obtained postgraduate qualifications in compassion and sensitivity at the Mengele Memorial Social Engineering Department at the downtown University of Barnstaple. I suggest that your mother find an alternative practitioner.

Indeed, she would probably be better off visiting a local vet.

Happily married man

Question

I am a happily married man. Last weekend I attended my sister's fiance's stag night. During the evening her fiance, who is German and looks so pleased with himself that we refer to photos of him as `smug shots', got quite drunk and made a pass at me. He told me that he found me very attractive and wanted to go to bed with me. When I told him that I was strictly heterosexual he confessed that he is bisexual. He then made it pretty clear that he would not regard having homosexual relationships as being unfaithful to his wife. I was - and am - appalled. What should I do? Should I warn my sister about the man she has now married?

Answer

What a pity you didn't say something before she married him. Your sister could then have cancelled her wedding and done something better with the day - like shampooing the carpets or painting her toe nails.

I normally recommend a `blind eye - closed mouth' policy to individuals who ask whether they should share their knowledge of an individual's sexual indiscretions with the individual's partner. But in this instance I will make an exception. I think you should tell your sister now what sort of man she has married. I cannot think of a word that accurately describes your sister's fiance but the word `conservative' perhaps most accurately conveys my feelings of contempt and revulsion.

Sex six times a month

Question

My husband and I are both in very good health and 80 years old. We enjoy sex at least six times a month. Do you think we will damage our health?

Answer

No. Regular sex will help keep you both fit, active, supple, healthy, alert and smiling. People who don't get enough sex become irritable, wheezy, mentally stodgy and defaced with wrinkles and liver spots. It was people who don't get enough sex who voted conservative at the last election.

And finally...

`I've had 120 Christmas cards this year! she said, proudly. `Isn't it wonderful to have so many friends?'

I looked around. The mantlepiece, the top of the TV set, the sideboard and the windowsills were packed with colourful greetings cards.

It was an impressive sight.

But what she said made me think about the way we devalue one of the most important assets in our lives: friendship.

She didn't have 120 friends.

Most of those cards were from casual acquaintances.

And I wondered if she had ever really thought about the true nature - and importance - of friendship.

***

The world you and I live in has become a cold, cruel, heartless place.

The people we pay to look after us when the fates are against us, to take care of us when we most need support and help and to protect us from cruelty and injustice - the justly accursed politicians, lawyers, doctors and clergy - have, by and large, abandoned and betrayed us.

Most politicians don't give a damn about the people they are paid to represent. They are inspired only by self interest, lust and greed.

The law has become a discredited, distrusted sick joke. Policemen, and lawyers constantly abuse their authority. Their primary instinct is not to protect us but to abuse, arrest and imprison us.

On the whole doctors now do more harm than good. The medical establishment has been bought by the drug industry and today's men and women in white coats are an insult to the memory of Hippocrates and Paracelsus and are little more than a twice paid marketing arm of the international pharmaceutical industry.

The clergy have completely lost touch with reality and have become an irrelevance.

Administrators - the faceless, nameless, characterless grey men in suits who now run the world - absorb authority like a sponge and reject responsibility.

The bottom line is that you should no longer expect your country to look after you - or to provide you with education, justice or healthcare.

You and I are on our own.

Except for our friends.

Take great care of your friends. They are the most valuable asset you have.

Choose your friends with care and then treasure them.

Your loyalty to true friends should take precedence over everything else in your life.

Remember there is a world of difference between friends and acquaintances.

The former you can ring at 3 am in the morning for advice and help and support.

The latter will simply add to your annual Christmas card collection.

To win a new friend you must first BE a friend.

And you must work at that friendship. You must invest time and energy and caring.

If you end up with one or two true friends then you will be truly blessed.

True friendship is an asset which will never tarnish and never devalue. And no one will ever be able to take it away from you.

If youve enjoyed this book look out for more books in the `I Hope Your Penis Shrivels Up series. A full list of books by Vernon Coleman is available on www.vernoncoleman.com and on Amazon Author Central.

Is Your Health Written in the Stars?

Dr Vernon Coleman

Is Your Health Written in the Stars?

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Is Your Health (And Sickness) Ruled By Your Star Sign?

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Acknowledgement
My wife, Antoinette, had the idea for this study. And she organised the research and collated the results. I am responsible only for the conclusions and for any errors, spelling mistakes or misjudgements.
Vernon.Coleman

Dedication

To Antoinette: my true love and my inspiration.

Introduction

Does your astrological birth sign really have an influence on your health? Is someone born under Libra more likely to suffer from heart disease than someone born under Taurus? Are Aquarians more inclined to suffer from arthritis than Scorpians?

A lot of nonsense is written about the influence of astrological signs on our lives. And so in an attempt to get at the truth I have conducted a scientific study – designed to find the answers. It is, I believe, the largest and most comprehensive study of this kind ever done; the definitive study to date.

You may find it difficult to understand why astrological signs should have any influence on health (or, indeed, on anything else). I readily admit that I find it difficult to understand why there should be any such link.

But the results obtained in this study seem to leave no room for doubt: your date of birth, and the astrological sign under which you were born, do seem to have a significant impact on the type of diseases to which you are most likely to be susceptible.

My conclusion is simple: the astrology-health link is one which we can no longer ignore.

You can use the information in this report in the same way that you can use other personal health information – for example, a family history showing a susceptibility to a particular disease – as a guide to help you be aware of your body's susceptibilities.

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What Illnesses Are Associated With Your Star Sign?

Under this heading, I have listed under each astrological sign the disorders linked with those signs. These disorders occur more often than average in the signs under which they are listed.

Aries

- Anxiety and depression
- Hair and skin problems such as eczema, dermatitis or psoriasis
- Neurological problems such as epilepsy
- Female health problems (including those affecting the uterus and ovaries)
- Sexual problems
- Hormone, endocrine or metabolic disorders such as diabetes or thyroid problems
- Eye problems

Taurus

- Bone and joint disorders such as arthritis
- Breathing problems such as asthma or bronchitis
- Kidney and bladder problems such as cystitis
- Female health problems (including those affecting the uterus and ovaries)
- Blood disorders, including anaemia and leukaemia
- Hormone, endocrine or metabolic disorders such as diabetes or thyroid problems
- Digestive problems such as indigestion, ulcers or irritable bowel syndrome
- Ear, Nose and Throat problems

Gemini

- Anxiety and depression
- Bone and joint disorders such as arthritis
- Heart disease or high blood pressure
- Hair and skin problems such as eczema, dermatitis or psoriasis
- Kidney and bladder problems such as cystitis
- Neurological problems such as epilepsy
- Female health problems (including those affecting the uterus and ovaries)
- Sexual problems
- Cancer
- Blood disorders, including anaemia and leukaemia
- Breast problems
- Eye problems

Cancer

- Anxiety and depression
- Breathing problems such as asthma or bronchitis
- Kidney and bladder problems, such as cystitis
- Neurological problems such as epilepsy
- Female health problems, including those affecting the uterus and ovaries
- Male health problems, including those affecting the penis and testicles
- Sexual problems
- Nutritional problems such as obesity
- Digestive problems such indigestion, ulcers and irritable bowel syndrome
- Eye problems
- Ear, Nose and Throat problems

Leo

- Anxiety and depression
- Bone and joint problems such as arthritis
- Heart disease or high blood pressure
- Breathing problems such as asthma or bronchitis
- Neurological problems such as epilepsy
- Female health problems, including those affecting the uterus and ovaries
- Male health problems, including those affecting the penis and testicles
- Cancer
- Blood disorders, including anaemia and leukaemia

Virgo

- Heart or high blood pressure
- Breathing problems such as asthma and bronchitis
- Neurological problems such as epilepsy
- Male health problems, including those affecting the penis and testicles
- Cancer
- Liver and gall bladder problems
- Digestive problems such as indigestion, ulcers and irritable bowel syndrome

Libra

- Bone and joint problems such as arthritis
- Heart disease or high blood pressure
- Hair and skin problems such as eczema, dermatitis or psoriasis
- Kidney and bladder problems, such as cystitis
- Hormone, endocrine or metabolic disorders such as diabetes or thyroid problems
- Liver and gall bladder problems
- Digestive problems such as indigestion, ulcers and irritable bowel syndrome
- Breast problems

Scorpio

- Heart or high blood pressure
- Breathing problems such as asthma or bronchitis
- Kidney and bladder problems such as cystitis
- Neurological problems such as epilepsy
- Sex problems
- Blood disorders, such as anaemia and leukaemia
- Hormone, endocrine and metabolic problems such as diabetes and thyroid problems
- Breast problems
- Eye disorders
- Ear, Nose and Throat problems

Sagittarius

- Anxiety and depression
- Sex problems
- Cancer
- Nutritional problems such as obesity
- Digestive problems such as ulcers, indigestion and irritable bowel syndrome
- Breast problems

Capricorn

- Bone and joint disorders such as arthritis
- Hair and skin problems such as eczema, dermatitis and psoriasis
- Male health problems, including those affecting the penis and testicles
- Blood disorders including anaemia and leukaemia
- Nutritional problems such as obesity
- Liver and gall bladder problems
- Eye problems
- Ear, Nose and Throat problems

Aquarius

- Bone and joint problems such as arthritis
- Hair and skin problems such as eczema, dermatitis and psoriasis
- Kidney and bladder problems such as cystitis
- Neurological problems such as epilepsy
- Cancer
- Infectious diseases
- Nutritional problems such as obesity
- Liver and gall bladder problems
- Ear, Nose and Throat problems

Pisces

- Anxiety and depression
- Hair and skin problems such as eczema, dermatitis and psoriasis
- Kidney and bladder problems such as cystitis
- Sex problems
- Infectious diseases
- Hormone, endocrine or metabolic problems such as diabetes and thyroid problems
- Nutritional problems
- Liver and gall bladder problems
- Digestive problems such as ulcers, indigestion and irritable bowel syndrome
- Ear, Nose and Throat problems

The Sickest And The Healthiest

For the purpose of this survey, I collected information about symptoms in 20 different categories:

- Anxiety and/or depression
- Bone or joint problems (such as arthritis, rheumatism)
- Heart disease/high blood pressure
- Breathing problems (such as asthma, bronchitis)
- Hair or skin problems (such as eczema, dermatitis, psoriasis)
- Kidney or urinary problems (such as cystitis)
- Neurological problems (such as epilepsy)
- Female disorders (affecting the womb or ovaries)
- Male disorders (affecting the penis or testicles)
- Sexual problems (such as impotence, or unusually high or low libido)
- Cancer
- Blood disorders (such as anaemia or leukaemia)
- Nutritional problems (such as obesity, anorexia, vitamin deficiency)
- Liver and gall bladder disease (such as hepatitis and gallstones)
- Digestive problems (such as indigestion, ulcers, irritable bowel syndrome)
- Breast problems
- Eye problems
- Ear, nose and throat problems

The average respondent in this survey complained of having (or having had) suffered from diseases in 4.48 of these categories.

The following list shows where each of the 12 star signs stand in relation to one another with regard to the average number of disorders complained about.

Although all 12 signs are relatively close to one another, there is absolutely no doubt from these results that Sagittarians seem to suffer from far fewer different diseases than individuals under any other star signs.

Equally, there is no doubt that Scorpians and those born under Gemini seem, on average, to suffer most.

This list shows the average number of types of illnesses (out of a possible 20) suffered by individuals born under the twelve different star signs.

Do not despair if you find that your star sign is one which seems to be associated with a wide variety of types of ill health.

Remember that knowing your susceptibilities can help you protect yourself and improve your health.

Fewer diseases than average

1.Sagittarius – 3.85
2. Virgo – 4.10
3.Capricorn – 4.26
4. Pisces – 4.47

Average
5. Aries – 4.48
6. Libra – 4.48

More diseases than average

7. Aquarius – 4.52
8. Leo – 4.62
9. Taurus – 4.63
10. Cancer – 4.64
11.Gemini – 4.78
12 Scorpio – 4.96

Your Star Sign and Your Health: The Complete Research Results

The figures on the following lists show the likelihood of an individual under each particular star sign suffering from the condition named. So, for example, an individual born under the star sign of Cancer will have a 69% chance of suffering from anxiety and/or depression in his or her lifetime.

It is vitally important to remember that these figures should not be taken as meaning that anyone has immunity to a particular type of illness. Everyone is susceptible to every disease (with obvious gender limitations – women aren't likely to suffer from problems of the penis or testicles and men aren't likely to suffer from problems involving the uterus or ovaries).

What the research does show, however, is that there are links between specific star signs and an extra susceptibility to some specific disorders. And this information can be useful – particularly when used alongside other information (such as that which might be obtained from a family history). Someone who has a significant family history of heart disease, and who was, in addition, born under a star sign associated with heart disease, might well feel it wise to take very special care to protect themselves from this particular type of problem.

Please note that these figures are rather lower than the normal figures for the lifetime incidence of specific diseases. For example, the incidence of cancer is now generally regarded as one in three. In other words, one in three individuals will, during their lifetime, develop cancer (though they will not necessarily die of it). The figures here are rather lower than this because the people taking part in this survey were, inevitably, only part of the way through their lives. Most illnesses develop in the last few decades of life.

Anxiety and /or depression

Those born under the star signs of Cancer and Aries seem to be significantly more likely to suffer from anxiety and/or depression while those born under the star signs of Capricorn, Virgo and Aquarius seem significantly less likely than average to suffer from problems of this type.

The average risk level is 59%. This means that those born under the sign Libra have an average chance of developing anxiety or depression. Those above Libra on this list have a greater than average chance of developing anxiety or depression. Those below Libra on this list have a lower than average chance of developing anxiety or depression.

- Cancer 69%
- Aries 67%
- Leo 62%
- Pisces 62%
- Gemini 61%
- Sagittarius 61%
- Libra 59%
- Taurus 57%
- Scorpio 54%
- Capricorn 52%
- Virgo 52%
- Aquarius 38%

Bone or Joint Problems (such as arthritis, rheumatism, etc.)

Those born under the star signs Capricorn, Libra and Taurus all seem to have a significantly enhanced risk of suffering from bone or joint problems. In contrast those born under the star signs Aries, Virgo and Cancer seem to have a lower than average risk of suffering from disorders such as arthritis and rheumatism.

The average risk level is 61%. Those above this level on this list have a greater than average chance of developing bone or joint problems. Those below 61% on this list have a lower than average chance of developing bone or joint problems.

- Capricorn 74%
- Libra 74%
- Taurus 70%
- Leo 65%
- Gemini 64%
- Aquarius 62%
- Pisces 60%
- Scorpio 58%
- Sagittarius 57%
- Aries 55%
- Virgo 55%
- Cancer 45%

Heart disease/high blood pressure

It seems from these results that individuals born under the star signs Leo, Gemini, Virgo, Libra and Scorpio may need to take particular care to protect themselves against heart and blood pressure problems. It seems that individuals least likely to suffer from problems of this type are those born under Pisces, Aries, Capricorn and Sagittarius.

The average risk level is 33%. This means that those born under the sign Taurus have an average chance of developing heart disease/high blood pressure. Those above Taurus on this list have a greater than average chance of developing heart disease or high blood pressure or similar problems. Those below Taurus on this list have a lower than average chance of developing heart disease, high blood pressure or a similar problem.

- Leo 46%
- Gemini 43%
- Virgo 39%
- Libra 37%
- Scorpio 37%
- Aquarius 33%
- Taurus 33%
- Cancer 29%
- Pisces 27%
- Aries 26%
- Capricorn 26%
- Sagittarius 24%

Breathing problems (asthma, bronchitis, etc.)

Those born under the star signs Taurus, Scorpio, Leo and Cancer all seem to be exposed to an unusually high risk of developing a problem of this type. On the other hand, those born under Aries, Capricorn, Libra and Sagittarius seem less likely to be affected by breathing problems.

The average risk level is 27%. This means that those born under the sign Pisces have an average chance of developing asthma, bronchitis or another type of breathing problem. Those above Pisces on this list have a greater than average chance of developing a breathing problem. Those below Pisces on this list have a lower than average chance of developing a breathing problem.

- Taurus 37%
- Scorpio 37%
- Leo 35%
- Cancer 33%
- Virgo 29%
- Pisces 27%
- Gemini 25%
- Aquarius 24%
- Aries 22%
- Capricorn 18%
- Libra 18%
- Sagittarius 18%

Hair or skin problems (eczema, dermatitis, psoriasis, etc.)

Those born under Pisces, Aries, Libra, Aquarius and Gemini all seem to have an enhanced chance of suffering from a hair or skin problem. In contrast, those born under Sagittarius, Scorpio, Virgo and Taurus all seem to have a reduced risk of suffering from a hair or skin problem.

The average risk level is 24%. This means that those born under the sign Leo have an average chance of developing a hair or skin problem – such as eczema, dermatitis or psoriasis. Those above Leo on this list have a greater than average chance of developing a hair or skin problem. Those below Leo on this list have a lower than average chance of developing a hair or skin problem.

- Pisces 35%
- Aries 33%
- Libra 30%
- Aquarius 29%
- Gemini 28%
- Capricorn 26%
- Cancer 24%
- Leo 24%
- Sagittarius 21%
- Virgo 19%
- Scorpio 12%
- Taurus 10%

Kidney or urinary problems (cystitis, etc.)

Those born under Scorpio, Aquarius, Taurus and Gemini all appear to have an increased risk of suffering from kidney or urinary problems. Those born under Leo, Virgo, Aries, Capricorn and Sagittarius appear to have a reduced risk of suffering from kidney or urinary problems. Those born under Leo should be aware that the low level of risk which seems to be associated with this sign should not be misinterpreted as meaning that there is no risk at all.

The average risk level is 24%. Those above this level on this list have a greater than average chance of developing a kidney or bladder problem. Those below this level on this list have a lower than average chance of developing a bladder or kidney problem.

- Scorpio 46%
- Aquarius 38%
- Taurus 33%
- Gemini 32%
- Cancer 26%
- Libra 26%
- Pisces 25%
- Virgo 19%
- Aries 18%
- Capricorn 18%
- Sagittarius 18%
- Leo 0%

Neurological Problems (e.g. epilepsy)

Those born under Aquarius, Scorpio, Aries, Gemini, Leo and Capricorn all seem to have an increased risk of suffering from neurological problems. Those born under Libra, Pisces and Taurus all seem to have a lower risk of suffering from neurological problems. (This should not be misinterpreted as a zero risk.)

The average risk level is 4%. This means that those born under the sign Capricorn have an average chance of developing a neurological problem such as epilepsy. Those above Capricorn on this list have a greater than average chance of developing a neurological problem. Those below Capricorn on this list have a lower than average chance of developing a neurological problem.

- Aquarius 9%
- Scorpio 8%
- Aries 7%
- Gemini 7%
- Leo 7%
- Virgo 6%
- Cancer 5%
- Capricorn 4%
- Leo 3%
- Libra 0%
- Pisces 0%
- Taurus 0%

Female disorders (diseases of the womb and/or ovaries)

Women born under Aries, Gemini, Taurus and Cancer seem to have an increased risk of suffering from a problem involving the womb or ovaries whereas women born under Aquarius, Pisces, Sagittarius, Scorpio, Libra, Virgo and Capricorn seem to have a lower risk of these problems.

The average risk level is 17%. Those above this level on this list have a greater than average chance of developing a disorder of the womb or ovaries. Those below this level on this list have a lower than average chance of developing a disorder of this type.

- Aries 44%
- Gemini 29%
- Taurus 23%
- Cancer 21%
- Leo 19%
- Aquarius 14%
- Pisces 12%
- Sagittarius 12%
- Scorpio 12%
- Libra 11%
- Virgo 6%
- Capricorn 4%

Male disorders (diseases affecting penis, testicles, etc.)

Men born under Virgo, Leo and Capricorn seem to have an increased chance of suffering from a disorder involving the penis or testicles. Men born under Pisces, Aquarius, Aries and Libra seem to have a less than average chance of suffering from a problem of this type.

The average risk level is 4%. This means that those born under the signs Gemini or Scorpio have an average chance of developing a male disorder affecting the penis or testicles. Those above Gemini and Scorpio on this list have a greater than average chance of developing a problem of this type. Those below Gemini and Scorpio on this list have a lower than average chance of developing a male disorder affecting the penis or testicles.

- Virgo 13%
- Leo 8%
- Capricorn 7%
- Cancer 5%
- Gemini 4%
- Scorpio 4%
- Taurus 3%
- Sagittarius 3%
- Pisces 2%
- Aquarius 0%
- Aries 0%
- Libra 0%

Sexual problems (unusually high or low libido or specific problems such as impotence)

These results suggest that those born under Gemini, Pisces, Scorpio and Aries may have an increased risk of suffering from a sexual problem. The results also suggest that those born under Aquarius, Capricorn and Libra may have a lower than average risk of suffering from this type of problem.

The average risk level is 11%. This means that those born under the sign Leo have an average chance of developing a sexual problem. Those above Leo on this list have a greater than average chance of developing a sexual problem. Those below Leo on this list have a lower than average chance of developing a sexual problem.

- Gemini 21%
- Pisces 17%
- Scorpio 17%
- Aries 15%
- Cancer 12%
- Sagittarius 12%
- Leo 11%
- Taurus 10%
- Virgo 10%
- Aquarius 5%
- Capricorn 4%
- Libra 4%

Cancer

The results suggest that individuals born under Leo, Gemini and Virgo may have an increased chance of suffering from cancer while those born under Pisces, Scorpio, Capricorn and Cancer may have a reduced risk of contracting a cancer.

The average risk level is 8%. Those above this level on this list have a greater than an average chance of developing cancer. Those below this level on this list have a lower than average chance of developing cancer.

- Leo 16%
- Gemini 14%
- Virgo 10%
- Aquarius 9%
- Sagittarius 9%
- Aries 7%
- Libra 7%
- Taurus 7%
- Cancer 5%
- Capricorn 4%
- Scorpio 4%
- Pisces 2%

Infectious diseases (including chronic, recurrent or frequent infections)

Those born under Aquarius or Pisces seem more likely to suffer from a problematic infectious disease. By contrast those born under Capricorn, Libra, Sagittarius, Taurus, Virgo, Aries and Cancer seem likely to have a lower than average risk of suffering from an infectious disease.

The average risk level is 8%. This means that those born under the sign Scorpio have an average chance of suffering from chronic, recurring or frequent infectious diseases. Those above Scorpio on this list have a greater than average chance of acquiring a troublesome infection or series of infections. Those below Scorpio on this list have a lower than average chance of developing this type of problem.

- Aquarius 14%
- Pisces 10%
- Leo 8%
- Scorpio 8%
- Gemini 7%
- Capricorn 4%
- Libra 4%
- Sagittarius 3%
- Taurus 3%
- Virgo 3%
- Aries 0%
- Cancer 0%

Blood disorders (including anaemia, leukaemia)

Those born under Leo, Scorpio, Capricorn, Gemini and Taurus may have an increased chance of suffering from a blood disorder. Those born under Sagittarius, Pisces and Virgo (and, to a lesser extent, Aquarius and Cancer) seem less likely to suffer from a blood disorder.

The average risk level is 11%. This means that those born under the signs Aries and Libra have an average chance of developing a blood disorder. Those above Aries and Libra on this list have a greater than average chance of developing a blood disorder. Those below Libra on this list have a lower than average chance of developing anxiety or depression.

- Leo 22%
- Scorpio 21%
- Capricorn 15%
- Gemini 14%
- Taurus 13%
- Aries 11%
- Libra 11%
- Aquarius 9%
- Cancer 9%
- Virgo 6%
- Pisces 5%
- Sagittarius 3%

Hormone, endocrine or metabolic disorder (such as diabetes or thyroid disease)

Those born under Scorpio, Libra, Aries and Taurus may have an increased chance of suffering from problems of this type. It seems that those born under Aquarius, Gemini, Capricorn, Leo, Virgo, Cancer and Sagittarius may be likely to have a reduced chance of suffering from problems of this type.

The average risk level is 16%. Those above this level on this list have a greater than average chance of developing a hormone, endocrine or metabolic disorder. Those below this level on this list have a lower than average chance of developing a hormone, endocrine or metabolic disorder.

- Scorpio 33%
- Libra 29%
- Aries 22%
- Taurus 20%
- Pisces 17%
- Aquarius 14%
- Gemini 14%
- Capricorn 11%
- Leo 11%
- Virgo 10%
- Cancer 9%
- Sagittarius 6%

Nutritional problems (including obesity, anorexia, vitamin deficiency)

Those born under the star signs of Cancer, Aquarius, Capricorn, Sagittarius and Pisces may have a higher than average risk of suffering from a nutritional problem. Those born under Leo, Gemini, Taurus, Aries, Virgo, Libra and Scorpio seem less likely to suffer from a nutritional problem.

The average risk level is 15%. Those above this level on this list have a greater than average chance of developing a nutritional problem. Those below this level on this list have a lower than average chance of developing a nutritional problem.

- Cancer 29%
- Aquarius 24%
- Capricorn 22%
- Sagittarius 18%
- Pisces 17%
- Leo 13%
- Gemini 11%
- Taurus 10%
- Aries 7%
- Virgo 7%
- Libra 4%
- Scorpio 4%

Liver/Gall bladder disease (including hepatitis, gall stones)

Those born under Aquarius, Virgo and Pisces seem most likely to suffer from problems of this type. Those born under Sagittarius, Leo, Aries, Gemini and Scorpio all seem less likely to suffer in this way.

The average risk level is 10%. This means that those born under the sign Taurus have an average chance of developing a liver or gall bladder problem. Those above Taurus on this list have a greater than average chance of developing a liver or gall bladder problem. Those below Taurus on this list have a lower than average chance of developing a liver or gall bladder problem.

- Aquarius 24%
- Virgo 13%
- Pisces 12%
- Capricorn 11%
- Libra 11%
- Taurus 10%
- Cancer 9%
- Sagittarius 9%
- Leo 8%
- Aries 7%
- Gemini 7%
- Scorpio 4%

Digestive problems (including indigestion, ulcers, irritable bowel syndrome, etc.)

Those born under Libra, Cancer, Taurus and Sagittarius all seem more likely to suffer from problems of this type. Those born under Leo, Capricorn, Scorpio, Aquarius and Gemini all seem less likely to suffer from diseases in this category.

The average risk level is 44%. Those above this level on this list have a greater than average chance of developing a digestive problem. Those below this level on this list have a lower than average chance of developing a digestive problem.

- Libra 52%
- Cancer 50%
- Taurus 50%
- Sagittarius 48%
- Pisces 47%
- Virgo 45%
- Aries 41%
- Leo 40%
- Capricorn 37%
- Scorpio 37%
- Aquarius 33%
- Gemini 32%

Breast problems

Those born under Scorpio, Leo, Gemini and Libra all seem most likely to suffer from breast problems. Least likely to suffer from problems of this type appear to be those born under Virgo, Aquarius, Cancer, Aries, Pisces and Taurus.

The average risk level is 8%. Those above this level on this list have a greater than average chance of developing a breast problem. Those below this level on this list have a lower than average chance of developing a breast problem.

• Scorpio	17%
• Leo	16%
• Gemini	14%
• Libra	11%
• Sagittarius	9%
• Capricorn	7%
• Virgo	6%
• Aquarius	5%
• Cancer	5%
• Aries	4%
• Pisces	2%
• Taurus	0%

Eye problems

Those born under Capricorn, Cancer and Scorpio seem most likely to suffer from eye problems. Those born under Aquarius, Taurus, Leo and Pisces seem least likely to suffer from eye problems.

The average risk level is 28%. Those above this level on this list have a greater than average chance of developing an eye problem. Those below this level on this list have a lower than average chance of developing an eye problem.

- Capricorn 37%
- Cancer 36%
- Scorpio 33%
- Aries 30%
- Gemini 29%
- Sagittarius 27%
- Libra 26%
- Virgo 26%
- Aquarius 24%
- Taurus 23%
- Leo 22%
- Pisces 22%

Ear, nose and throat problems

Those born under Taurus, Scorpio, Capricorn, Aquarius, Cancer and Pisces seem most likely to suffer from ear, nose or throat problems. Those born under Virgo, Gemini and Sagittarius seem least likely to suffer from problems of this type.

The average risk level is 33%. This means that those born under the sign Libra have an average chance of developing an ear, nose or throat problem. Those above Libra on this list have a greater than average chance of developing a problem of this type. Those below Libra on this list have a lower than average chance of developing an ear, nose, or throat problem.

- Taurus 53%
- Capricorn 44%
- Aquarius 43%
- Cancer 43%
- Scorpio 42%
- Pisces 40%
- Libra 33%
- Leo 32%
- Aries 30%
- Virgo 29%
- Gemini 21%
- Sagittarius 18%

Summary: Results at a Glance

1) Those born under Scorpio and Gemini seem to suffer more illnesses than anyone else.
2) Sagittarians seem to suffer less illness than anyone else.
3) Anxiety and depression seem commonest among those born under the signs of Cancer and Aries.
4) Individuals born under Capricorn and Libra seem more likely to suffer from bone and joint disorders such as arthritis.
5) Those born under Leo and Gemini seem more likely to suffer from heart disease or high blood pressure.
6) Asthma, bronchitis and other breathing difficulties seem commonest among those born under Taurus and Scorpio.
7) Scorpians seem more likely to suffer from kidney and bladder problems such as cystitis.
8) Those born under Pisces and Aries seem more likely to suffer from hair or skin conditions.
9) Ear, nose and throat problems seem commonest among those born under Taurus.
10) Obesity seems commonest among those born under Cancer.
11) Those born under Leo and Gemini seem most likely to suffer from cancer.
12) Blood disorders such as anaemia and leukaemia seem commonest among those born under Leo and Scorpio.
13) Individuals born under Scorpio or Libra seem most likely to suffer from hormone or endocrine problems such as diabetes or thyroid trouble.
14) Sexual problems seem commonest among those born under Gemini.
15) Liver and gall bladder problems seem commonest among those born under Aquarius.
16) Problems affecting the male organs (penis and testicles) seem commonest among those born under Virgo.
17) Problems affecting the female organs (uterus and ovaries) seem commonest among those born under Aries.
18) Chronic and recurrent infections seem commonest among those born under Aquarius.
19) Eye problems seem commonest among those born under Capricorn and Cancer.
20) Digestive problems such as ulcers, irritable bowel syndrome and indigestion seem commonest among those born under Libra, Cancer and Taurus.

Conclusion

To be aware of your susceptibilities is to increase your chances of survival. If you have a family history of heart disease or diabetes then you would be foolish not to take very special care to make sure that you do not expose yourself unnecessarily to external factors which might increase your chances of suffering from that problem. If you have a family history of diabetes then you would be wise to watch your diet carefully, to avoid becoming overweight and to have regular check-ups for early signs of developing diabetes.

The information produced by this research should be used in a similar way. So, for example, if your star sign shows that you are unusually susceptible to digestive problems then you should take special care to avoid that type of problem.

About this survey

This study is based on 1,643 separate pieces of information supplied by 367 respondents. I hope that the results will encourage other researchers to continue the work begun with this report.

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If you have found this study useful, I would be grateful if you would post a favourable review on Amazon.

There is a list of other books by Vernon Coleman on www.vernoncoleman.com and on the author page on Amazon.

IT'S NEVER TOO LATE

VERNON COLEMAN

It's Never Too Late

Vernon Coleman

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Vernon Coleman is the author of over 100 books. For a full list of books available please visit his author page on Amazon, or visit http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

Dedicated
to
Donna Antoinette Coleman,
my beautiful Welsh Princess

Note

All characters, organisations, businesses and places in this publication are fictitious, and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

~ Chapter One ~

A podgy man with lank, greasy hair and oily hands picked up the video recorder and examined it closely as though he had never seen anything like it before.

'Does it work?'

'Yes.'

He balanced the video recorder on one hand, as though trying to guess its weight, and looked up at me. He had tiny pale eyes in a large pale face. He was, I felt certain, the neighbour whose car had been sitting on bricks in his driveway for several months. He wore dirty blue jeans and a grubby Tshirt. The faded face of a miserable-looking, long dead rock star stared out at me from the middle of the podgy man's chest.

'How much do you want for it?' He had a shifty, slightly nervous manner. He looked untrustworthy and would have made a poor salesman.

'There's a price on it,' I said, pointing to the sticky label fixed to the top of the recorder.

'£50?' he said, pulling a face.

'Yes.'

'It's not worth that.'

'It's less than six months old. It cost me £300.'

'I'll give you a tenner for it.'

'It's worth more than that.'

'A tenner. That's all I'll pay.' Still holding the video recorder on the palm of one hand he reached into the back pocket of his oil-stained jeans and pulled out a thin leather wallet. He flicked open the wallet, put it on top of the video recorder and, with some considerable difficulty, extracted a ten pound note. His fingers were podgy and clumsy. At last he held the note out towards me.

'Sorry,' I said, shaking my head. 'I think it's worth more than that.'

A woman I'd never seen before rudely pushed in between us. 'How much do you want for these?' she demanded, thrusting a parcel of gardening books under my nose.

I looked at the label fixed to the uppermost book. '£5.'

The woman pushed the books into my arms, took a small red plastic purse out of her handbag and counted out £5 in small change. She poured the coins into my hand. I put them into my back trouser pocket and handed her the books. Suddenly, my world seemed to be full of people who couldn't read price labels.

'Selling up, Tony?' said a voice I recognised. I turned round and saw Jack Burrows, a man I'd worked with for the past seven years. Jack was two years younger than me. At five foot ten he was six inches shorter than me, but what he lacked in height he more than made up for in weight. He was surprisingly proud of having a waist measurement that matched and increased with his age. Two months ago we had both had company medicals and so I knew that at twenty five stones he weighed exactly twice as much as me. Jack, a friendly, chatty sort of fellow who had been given early retirement the same day as I had, was with his wife, Ethel, a slight, short, rather sour-faced woman who firmly believed that the world was constantly conspiring against her – she even took bad weather personally. They lived two streets away and made an odd couple. She was an Evangelical Christian who regarded her role on this earth as a saviour of sinners and authorised redeemer of souls. Jack was a self-confessed hedonist; left to his own devices he would have devoted as much of his life as possible to the pursuit of fun. Despite his size and unromantic appearance he was renowned, within the firm where we had both worked, as a skirt chaser. In his teens and early twenties he had been lead singer with a band called Throbbie Tinsel and the Twinkletones (he had been Throbbie Tinsel) and although the group had been denied commercial success (largely, it has to be said, through a lack of natural talent and musical ability) he had much enjoyed the bestknown peripheral advantage associated with the music business. He still had undimmed vigour in that direction, and although his notions were now only very rarely converted into reality, the continued drive he enjoyed meant that he regarded sexual harassment as an essential part of his job description. It was once said of him (by a weary typing pool stalwart) that it was his nature to end every sentence with a proposition.

'I really don't need any of this stuff,' I replied. 'Selling the house seems a good opportunity to make a fresh start.'

'Where are you going?' asked Jack.

I shrugged. 'I don't know,' I told him. 'I thought I'd take a short holiday first and then decide. What about you?'

'I thought I'd get an allotment and join the bowls club,' said Jack. 'There are two allotments free. Do you want me to book the other one for you?'

I shook my head. 'No thanks.' I wasn't quite ready for the Darby and Joan club. I would be 56 on my next birthday. It felt like people expected me to sit down and wait to die. But I wasn't ready for that just yet.

‘Do you have any kitchen equipment?’ asked Ethel.

‘I’m afraid most of it’s gone,’ I told her. ‘Whatever’s left should be over there.’ I pointed to a corner of the garage.

‘I can see some pots and pans there,’ I said. ‘And a kettle. Stuff like that. I think my toaster is still there. There doesn’t seem to be much of a market for second-hand toasters.’

‘Thank you, very much,’ said Ethel, scurrying off towards the pots and pans. Jack, looking embarrassed, gave me a slight half-hearted smile and then hurried off after his wife. As he caught up with her I heard her comment. ‘He’ll be back in six months,’ she said. ‘You mark my words. Wherever he goes, in six months he’ll be back with his tail between his legs. It’s too late for him to start again.’ She didn’t even try to make sure I didn’t hear her.

My conversation with Jack and Ethel had depressed me and the parting comment which I had overheard had depressed me even more. I decided to ring a travel agency. I had one of those clever telephones that can be used anywhere within a fifty yard radius of the handset. I went into the house, collected the telephone, looked up a number in the telephone directory and went back outside again, dialling as I walked. I had a feeling that if I didn’t keep an eye on my customers one of them would probably walk off with the garage.

‘Thank you for calling,’ said an annoyingly cheerful woman with a mid transatlantic accent and a breezy manner that made me wish I hadn’t bothered. She paused for half a second or so, just long enough to fool me into believing that she was a real person. She wasn’t. ‘If you have a complaint about your hotel or your airline, please press one and wait to be connected to one of our highly-trained specialist vacation consultants.’

‘I’ll give you £12 for it,’ said the podgy man. He pulled two pound coins out of his trouser pocket and added them to the £10 pound note on top of the video recorder. I shook my head, turned and started to walk away from him. Apart from the clothes and treasured books I had crammed into the two suitcases now standing in my bedroom, my remaining worldly possessions lay scattered around on the grass and in the garage. I watched a boy of 17 or 18 slyly slide a silver plated photograph frame inside his leather jacket. If he thought it was valuable he would be disappointed. The silver plating was thinner than the foil they wrap around chocolates. I didn’t care enough to say anything.

The woman with the transatlantic voice was just getting into her stride. ‘If you are concerned about accidents and illness on holiday and would like to speak to one of our specialist insurance consultants, please press two,’ she said. My enthusiasm for travel was beginning to wane.

Having a garage sale had seemed a good idea. I had a house full of possessions I no longer needed. Converting them into cash would be a great help. The house was sold and the buyer’s cheque would pay off the mortgage, the estate agents and the lawyers and leave me with a small sum – probably around £5,000. I had arranged for a local junk shop owner to come and clear out my furniture. He had paid me just £100 (in crumpled, used notes) for a double bed and a single bed, two wardrobes, a dining table, a three piece suite (complete with washable covers), gas cooker, fridge and washing machine.

‘If you have booked a holiday and your tickets haven’t arrived, please press three,’ continued the cheery spokeswoman. I had a vision of rows of consultant advisors crouched down in concrete bunkers, hiding away from dissatisfied and anxious customers, all with telephones clamped to their ears.

I looked around the slowly diminishing display of clutter and wondered where it had all come from. I had thought that selling my worldly goods might be painful. But it wasn’t. It was one of the most cathartic and liberating experiences I’d ever had. As I stood there I accepted £2 for my ironing board and iron, £4 for a cardboard box full of pots and pans and £2.50 for two plastic garden chairs. I put the coins in my pockets.

‘I’ll go to £15,’ said the podgy man with the oily hands. ‘That’s my best offer.’

For a brief moment I was tempted to take the video recorder and smash it onto the driveway. But I didn’t. I looked around and felt a great surge of sadness. This had been my world. The accumulated detritus of how many years?

‘Take it,’ I said, flatly.

‘...press four,’ said the woman with the transatlantic voice. I’d missed her instruction and I didn’t have the enthusiasm to start again.

The podgy man held out a £10 note, four pound coins and a small collection of silver coins.

I held up a hand, palm out, to make it clear that I didn’t want his money. Just take the damned thing,’ I said, shaking my head.

Puzzled, confused, he looked at me. Once again he held out the note and the coins.

I headed for the front door, breaking the connection with the travel agency and taking out my key. I looked back over my shoulder. ‘Just take it,’ I repeated, ‘I don’t want the money.’ I decided to call in at a travel agency in the High Street. The podgy man stared at me as though I had gone mad. Then, slowly, a new look appeared on his face. It was not happiness, pleasure or gratefulness. And then I realised that what I saw on his face was simple greed. He stuffed his money back into his trouser pocket and waddled away before I could change my mind.

I unlocked the front door and half stepped into the now empty house. And then I paused on the front step and turned. I just wanted to be gone; to be somewhere else. 'You can take the rest,' I said to the small crowd of neighbours collected like vultures around the carcass of my previous existence.

There was a brief pause. Then one or two looked up at me, wondering if what they had heard was truly what I had said. Conscious of their lack of belief I repeated the words. 'There's no need to pay,' I added, in explanation. Just take it all away.'

The squabbling began almost immediately. Hands grabbing at small ornaments, mirrors, a radio, a kettle, a couple of old prints in wooden frames, parcels of books, piles of neatly washed and ironed but unwanted clothing. No one said anything to me. No 'thank you's'. I wasn't surprised. They probably felt as little for me as I felt for them. I had lived with them as neighbours for seven years but there is more to togetherness and friendship than merely living in close proximity. Jack and Ethel hurried past, their arms full of kitchen equipment. Jack looked even more embarrassed than before. He actually blushed. As they walked away Jack leant towards his wife. 'He'll regret not taking that allotment,' he whispered.

'Can we take this?' asked a skinny, greasy-haired youth who had followed me to the house.

I looked at him, genuinely puzzled. I didn't know what he was talking about. I shared my bewilderment with him.

'This,' he said, poking a finger at the door jamb.

'You can't have the door!' I warned him.

'No, not the door' replied the youth, as though speaking to an imbecile. 'The bell.' He pressed the doorbell to show what he was talking about.

I had heard of this sort of thing happening from friends. One man told me that friends of his who bought a huge house in the country took possession to discover that the previous owners had, when they had left rather more suddenly than had been expected, banked his cheque and then taken all the skirting boards and light fittings with them. Much to my friend's annoyance they had even rolled up, and taken away with them, the entire front lawn. Another friend bought a very expensive house and then, while on a final tour of the property, found himself being coerced into making additional cash payments to pay for the TV aerial and the remaining oil in the tank in the garden.

'The doorbell?' He nodded. 'You want to sell the door bell?'

'No.'

I went into the house and fetched my two suitcases. When I came out the squabbling had become more fierce. Half a dozen neighbours were already hurrying home, their new acquisitions clutched to their bosoms like looted gold. They were, I guessed, anxious to stash their gains at home as quickly as possible so that they could return for another armful. Two women were pulling at a small rug which I had inherited from an aunt; one of them was yelling obscenities at the other. A man and a woman were arguing over a pile of bed linen.

Feeling like an alien, I locked the front door, put my key through the letterbox. For the first time in my life I didn't know where I was going. I didn't even know where I was going to sleep that night. The only thing I knew for certain was that I wouldn't miss not having the allotment.

Two months earlier I had lost a job I didn't like and hadn't liked for longer than I cared to remember. I had been both in charge of the customer relations department and editor of the company newsletter. The job in the customer relations department might have been worthwhile if anyone else working for the company had given a damn for customers or for the products we made. And the job as editor of the company newsletter might have been rewarding if my sole instructions had not been to produce a quarterly free sheet which included at least one photograph of the chairman and gave offence to absolutely no one – particularly the chairman's wife, a woman whose personal collection of prejudices was so extensive even with a four drawer filing cabinet devoted to them I found it difficult to keep track of them all. There is little point, or pleasure, in producing a publication which is written to give offence to no one but there is no point, and possibly even less pleasure, in producing a publication which is designed to pander to the whims of a woman who believes that being poor should be made a criminal offence.

My boss, for whom I had no respect, had called me into his office one Friday evening, given me my cards and a cheque and told me not to come in the following Monday. There had been no explanation, though the office gossip was that the company had been taken over by a multinational corporation, which had even less need for a customer relations department than we had, and that the chairman (and his fearsome wife) were to be given boats full of money and floated off into a sunset full of luxurious whingeing.

At the age of 55 I knew I had little or no chance of ever getting another job. It took me a while to realise that my career had ended almost before it had begun. At sixteen I had been a cub reporter on a local newspaper. I had rejected school and university for the prospect of making my way in the real world. I dreamt of becoming a feared and fearless investigative reporter – exposing the corrupt, the dishonest and the uncaring. It hadn't quite turned out like that. I had been fired for daring to expose the crooked machinations of a group of local businessmen. It had been a good story and the editor had been delighted. His delight had disappeared when it turned out that the three businessmen concerned were the newspaper's biggest advertisers. The exposé had never appeared in print. The police investigation had been halted before it had really started. And two weeks later I'd been fired. No apology, no explanation, no glowing reference from a guilt-ridden editor. I had long since given up wondering what might have been. Instead of a career in journalism, I'd spent the best years of my life working in public relations; a stagnant, leech-infested backwater of the profession I had wanted to join since I'd been a teenager.

But, I tried to convince myself that it wasn't all bad. I had no ties and no responsibilities. I had a little money in the bank and so I knew I wouldn't be a candidate for the poor house. In fact after an evening spent with a calculator and a notepad I had come to the conclusion that if I was careful I would be able to get by for a while without working. I had received £40,000 when I had been made redundant and I had around £5,000 due from the sale of the house. I wouldn't have anywhere to live but I certainly wouldn't starve to death for a while.

It had been two years since my wife had left me. She had moved in with a silken-tongued insurance salesman who wore imitation silk suits, tucked his cloven hooves into Italian shoes and drove a small red saloon with a sexy looking but pointless spoiler fitted to the boot lid. There had been no explanation on that occasion either. 'You will remember me if you ever come into a lot of money, won't you?' were my wife's parting words. She always had been a woman who liked to have her own cake and eat someone else's. When the divorce had come through I had made a mental note to send her a postcard if I ever won the lottery. Just to let her know.

We had married after a whirlwind two week romance and regretted the impulse at leisure. She had, by her own admission, been unfaithful to me on our wedding day and at regular intervals thereafter. I have no doubt that she had her good points. The problem was that although we had been married for eighteen years I hadn't been with her long enough to find them. Maybe if she'd stayed with me for another decade or two I'd have spotted the good side to her character. She had constantly changing and always unreachable (and unreasonable) expectations and suffered each new disappointment in pained silence and with unspoken reproval. It wasn't until we had been married three months that I realised that she reminded me of my mother.

I have had just two dates since my divorce. Both had been unmitigated disasters. The first woman had, with commendable and perhaps unwise honesty, bluntly told me, on our first date, that she loathed men but hated her job and wanted to find a man to keep her in the sort of comfort she had often dreamt about but never yet experienced. The second, a plump platinum blonde ten years younger than me, had told me that she liked one night stands and wanted simple, uncomplicated sex rather than a relationship. I was, she told me with some pride, her fourth date of the week. It had been a Wednesday. I felt old-fashioned trying to explain to her that I was looking for something a little more than the opportunity to give her an excuse to carve another notch in her bedpost. I don't think she could really believe it when, in the best tradition of Sunday newspaper reporters, I made my excuses and left her sitting on her faded green velour sofa, blouse unbuttoned and micro skirt mid-thigh.

Both incidents had left me numb for some time afterwards.

I suppose I should have cared about my job and my exwife but somehow I didn't. I had been more genuinely upset when the cat had died three weeks ago. She had been fifteen years old and when she died I realised that I had for years felt closer to her than to any other living creature.

My life had become grey and pointless. There was no value and no significance in anything I did. I had started collecting coupons entitling me to purchase decaffeinated coffee and paper handkerchiefs at a small discount to the normal retail price. I actually found myself feeling a frisson of satisfaction when I received a letter from a credit card company telling me how much they would value my custom. I knew there had to be more to life than putting on a clean shirt every day and making sure that the lawn was cut regularly.

I wanted something better.

I didn't know what I wanted or where to find it. I was leaving simply because I knew I had to leave, not because I had somewhere better to go.

~ Chapter Two ~

At the travel agency the only assistant who was free looked about sixteen. She had short blonde hair and, in an attempt to make herself look more worldly and sophisticated, she had plastered herself with considerably too much make-up. The irony, which had doubtless escaped her was that she was young enough to have perfect skin and to not need any make-up at all. I doubt if she realised that women only ever started using cosmetics so that they could look as natural and as attractive as she probably would have been had she not been wearing any make-up. She was dressed in a brown jacket and green skirt that matched the clothes worn by the girls sitting either side of her.

'How can I help you?' the young assistant asked, confident and smiling. The overall effect was very slightly spoilt by the fact that she had copious amounts of lipstick on her teeth. She had a white name badge pinned to her jacket lapel and in large printed letters the badge announced to the world that her name was Linda.

I put my suitcases down, unbuttoned my coat and sat down on a chromium plated chair that was every bit as uncomfortable as it looked. 'Do you have any last minute holidays?' I asked.

'When can you go?' asked the girl, brightly. She played with a cheap plastic pen that had the name of an airline printed on the side of it and beamed at me.

'Today,' I replied. I nodded to the suitcases. 'I'm packed and ready to go. I'd like to travel today.'

'Oh,' said Linda, who seemed slightly taken aback by this. 'That's wonderful!' she continued, recovering her composure with commendable speed and greeting my announcement with tremendous enthusiasm. She smiled at me. She increased the speed with which she turned the pen up and down.

'Have you got anywhere in mind?' she asked. Without putting the pen down she started tapping on the keyboard in front of her.

I shook my head.

'You have a passport?'

I patted my jacket pocket.

'Well, let's take a look at what's on offer!' said Linda. She typed with just two fingers and pecked at the keys cautiously, as though anxious not to damage her immaculate, sky blue nail varnish. The nail varnish didn't go terribly well with the uniform. 'Two weeks in Tunisia. Flying from Manchester. A week in Benidorm. Flying from Birmingham. Two weeks in Malta. That's flying from Luton. Five days in Paris, travelling by train from Waterloo. A week in Marbella. Flying from Gatwick...' She was getting into her stride and clearly had more offers to make.

I had thought it would be difficult to choose. It wasn't. 'Paris,' I said, instinctively. I paused and thought for a moment. I'd never been to Paris and I've always liked trains. I have never been particularly fond of the French, who I have always regarded as an untrustworthy lot, but for as long as I can remember I have loved French architecture and French cooking.

'It's a real bargain!' she said. 'Just £75 for train fares and hotel, including half board at your hotel and all taxes. You also get a free map, a complimentary bus trip around Paris at night, a discount voucher for a shop selling perfume and wedding dresses and a voucher for a free lunchtime pizza at a restaurant in Montmartre.'

'What sort of hotel is it?' I asked her, not having any need that I knew of for a voucher entitling me to a discount on a wedding dress.

'It's got two stars and it's on the Left Bank,' Linda replied. 'It's in the student quarter.'

'Oh,' I said, my enthusiasm suddenly melting. 'That sounds a bit worrying. I'm a bit old to be mixing with students.'

'Oh don't worry about that!' said the girl. She smiled at me reassuringly. 'You'll love it. There are plenty of cheap cafés and restaurants. And you're just a short walk away from Notre Dame and the Seine.' She reached forward and turned the computer monitor round so that by leaning across the desk I could read what was written on it. The hotel's name was on the screen together with a small map. The descriptive comment underneath a photograph of a bedroom in the hotel included the very words Linda had used when describing the area to me.

'OK,' I said. 'I'll take it.' I took out my wallet, removed a credit card and handed it across the desk. 'What time does the train leave?'

Linda, looking very serious and professional, checked her computer and looked at her watch. 'You've got plenty of time,' she said. 'What's your name please?'

'Davison,' I replied. 'Tony Davison.'

She smiled and together we filled in a long and complicated form.

When Linda had found out more or less everything there was to find out about me (I assumed that most of the questions were aimed more at aiding some future marketing campaign rather than providing information required for providing me with a ticket, and I gave my old address with a smile knowing that someone else would have the joy of throwing away the junk mail inspired by my trip) she handed me a bulky cardboard envelope containing return train tickets, a voucher for the hotel, my free map, my ticket for my complimentary bus trip, a discount voucher entitling me to purchase perfume and wedding dresses at a discount, and a voucher offering me a free pizza but warning me that I would have to pay for my drinks and additional toppings myself. The voucher promising me a free pizza was bulkier than anything else. 'Would you like to take out one of our travel insurance policies?' she asked. 'We recommend them to all our clients. It covers illness, accidental damage to yourself or your belongings, loss of luggage or money and covers you for up to £10,000,000 should you be held responsible for accidental damage to a third party or their belongings.'

'No thanks,' I said, embracing recklessness with gusto. I returned my credit card to my wallet, put the bulky cardboard envelope into my coat pocket, picked up my suitcases, thanked her and set off for Paris.

The train to London was surprisingly empty. I put my suitcases into the overhead locker and pulled out a battered P. G. Wodehouse novel – one of the few books I'd kept. I'd read it a couple of times before but it was the sort of book you could read time and time again. And since I'd read it before, I found it reassuring and comforting to know in advance that I would enjoy it. Renewing a relationship with a previously loved book has all the advantages and none of the disadvantages of renewing a relationship with a previously loved acquaintance.

At the next stop a middle aged couple got onto the train. He was short and balding and wore a green sports jacket, brown cavalry twill trousers, a heather mixture tweed shirt and a brown knitted tie. She wore a blue suit and a white blouse and had a double string of pearls around her neck and matching clip-on pearl earrings.

I helped the man drag their luggage onto the train and then stow it in various places around the carriage (they had four large suitcases and two canvas bags with them but the woman, who was carrying a small dark blue leather handbag, did absolutely nothing to help) and then the trouble started.

'I thought I told you to book seats facing the engine,' the woman said to her husband, checking their tickets.

I thought it safe to assume that they were married to each other since she spoke to him as an irritable school teacher might address an unruly five-year-old child and this is something which I have never seen outside marriage.

'I did, dear,' said the husband. He sounded nervous. He peered at the tickets and then at the reservation slips on the backs of their seats. The seats which had been reserved for them were facing away from the engine.

'Well, you can't have done,' snapped the woman. 'The railway people wouldn't have made a mistake.'

I do not normally interfere in other people's arguments. But I decided to make this an exception.

'There's plenty of room,' I pointed out, waving a hand around the deserted carriage. We were the only three people in the carriage. 'Why not just sit in the seats you want?'

'Certainly not,' said the woman, turning her head slightly to address me. 'We paid to reserve our seats. And I want reserved seats.' She had the thinnest lips I'd ever seen in my life. She wasn't my wife but she frightened me. I felt deeply sorry for her husband. I also felt great admiration for him. If she had been my wife I would have either gone mad or killed her years earlier.

'They don't charge to reserve the seats, dear,' said the husband nervously.

'Don't be stupid, Harold,' said the woman. 'Of course they charge.'

I found myself wondering exactly how I would have killed her. Poison? An axe? Maybe, I thought, I would have beaten her over the head with a good, old-fashioned blunt instrument. Poison would have been far too quick and would have provided far too little satisfaction.

'Get the guard,' said the woman. The train jerked a little and to avoid falling down the woman had to hang onto the back of an empty seat. She still wouldn't sit down.

'Why don't you sit down, dear,' suggested Harold. 'While I sort things out.'

'I'm not sitting down until someone sorts out our reservations,' said the woman. 'This is quite unacceptable. I want the seats we booked.'

'Which seats did you want?' I asked.

'Those two there,' said the woman, nodding towards the two seats opposite the two that had been reserved for them.

'That's easy,' I said. I got up, picked out the two reservation slips and put them onto the backs of the two seats she wanted.

'You can't do that!' said the woman, both horrified and indignant.

'I just did.'

'But it's illegal!'

'But now you have the correct seats,' I said. 'Since no one was sitting in them no one will object. And unless you tell them the railway people won't know either.'

'Call the guard!' cried the woman, addressing her husband. 'What this man did was illegal! He could be arrested. And since we witnessed him committing a crime he's made us criminals too.'

‘Why don’t you sit down, dear?’ asked Harold.

‘I don’t think they send people to prison for sitting in the wrong seats,’ I told her. ‘Not for a first offence anyway.’

‘They aren’t the wrong seats!’ said the woman. ‘Those are the seats we reserved.’

‘Then no one can object if you sit in them,’ I pointed out.

The woman refused to listen to me. No guard came or ticket collector appeared and she and her husband stood for the two hour trip to Paddington station. It occurred to me that only the English could possibly take such satisfaction from behaving in such a pointlessly self-destructive way.

From Paddington I took a taxi across to Waterloo where I caught the Eurostar train to Paris.

It had been a few years since I’d been abroad. Some things weren’t going to be easy. For example, I had forgotten to change any sterling and so had no French currency with me. I thought this might prove to be something of a disadvantage. But not everything was bleak. I rather thought I could probably remember just enough of the French language to enable me to order a cup of coffee. I might not be able to pay for it. But I would probably be able to order it.

~ Chapter Three ~

I arrived at the Gare du Nord just as it was getting dark. I took a taxi to my hotel (getting round my inability to speak the language by showing the driver the booking slip from the travel agency) and long before I got there I was in love with the bright lights, the bustle and the exciting looking cafés. Some streets seemed to contain little more than row after row of cafés. Instinctively I knew that Paris was a woman and instinctively I also knew that I was desperately, permanently, irrevocably in love with her.

I really don't know what it was about the place but from the moment I arrived I felt relaxed, at peace and at ease. I was, of course, a stranger. I didn't speak the language and I didn't know my way around the city. But in some inexplicable way I felt happier and more content there than I had ever felt anywhere else. Paris might not be better than anywhere else but it was different to anything I'd ever known before and the difference invigorated me and made me feel younger, more alert and more alive. Maybe all those writers and artists who have lived there have given the place a welcoming soul.

Of course, a cynic would have probably argued that the initial feeling of being relaxed might have been due, in part at least, to the fact that I had left behind all my troubles and I had no horrid job or empty house to go back to. But I was in no mood to listen to such nonsense and I certainly didn't think so. I was happy to give Paris all the credit for the way I felt.

I paid the taxi driver in sterling and after I had checked in at my hotel (it was much smaller and less imposing than the photograph in the travel agents brochure had suggested but it was also far more romantic and had far more character) I left my suitcases on the small, slightly rickety wooden chair by the side of the double bed, changed some sterling notes into French francs at the hotel and set off to see what Paris could offer me in the way of food and company.

The food I found quickly enough. I had a plateful of excellent chips and a large and tasty salad at a café no more than a hundred yards from the hotel. Before deciding where to eat I had stood on the pavement outside the hotel and counted no less than eight cafés and restaurants. I couldn't help wondering if the French ever ate at home.

The company took a little longer to find.

After eating I studied the small free map which the travel agent had given me with my tickets and decided to head north towards the river Seine. The travel agent had, after all, promised that the river and the hotel were pretty close.

I walked, or rather, strolled, for just over a quarter of an hour. To begin with I tried to count the cafés I passed but when I reached three figures I gave up. I came from a town where there were no more than two or three places where people could eat out. Back in my part of England ordinary people simply didn't eat out unless there was some very special reason – a birthday, an anniversary, a celebration, an apology – but it was clear that the Parisians regarded eating out as a fundamental part of life.

Eventually, I found myself leaning on a stone parapet staring down into the swirling waters of the world's most romantic river. Just a few hundred yards away I could see the impressive and instantly recognisable spires of Notre Dame Cathedral. There was no sign of Quasimodo but I consoled myself with the thought that he was probably in a café having a bite to eat.

Standing there, as the sun went down, I looked to my left and saw the Eiffel Tower silhouetted against the evening sky.

When M. Eiffel and his team of bridge builders first turned their iron dream into what was intended to be a temporary reality the Parisian aristocracy curled their lip, looked down their noses in disgust and in a fit of English Victorianism couldn't wait for the callus-fingered men with spanners to dismantle the whole thing and turn its composite nuts and bolts into something more useful; a nice bridge, perhaps.

Today, of course, Paris is the Eiffel Tower and M. Eiffel is revered for having given the French capital the world's most famous landmark. Anyone who suggested dismantling the Tower would be either locked up as insane or regarded as an excellent excuse for bringing back the guillotine. Age has given M. Eiffel's edifice acceptability and turned those hulking girders into symbols of stylish elegance. The fashionable and the artistic fight each other for the right to shine floodlights at it, perform underneath it, dangle bits of coloured paper from it, or simply have tea at the top of it. Just about every ambitious city in the world has an office building taller than the Eiffel Tower, but that doesn't matter. The Eiffel Tower is such a silly edifice it is exquisitely beautiful.

Today, paradoxically, it is both purposeful and profitable; the most astonishing result of the meeting of modern technology and art. Make something truly exceptional and beautiful and someone will find a use for it. The Eiffel Tower is the best-known man-made erection in the world and probably the most valuable and most beautiful.

I walked on, attracted, like a moth, by the bright lights. The Left Bank seemed ablaze with light. The people who weren't talking were drinking and the ones who weren't drinking were talking.

I wandered about fairly aimlessly for twenty minutes or so and then, picking it out at random, entered a large, friendly looking café, walked up to the zinc-topped bar, squeezed onto a bar stool, and ordered a coffee.

There are times in all our lives when we make seemingly random or insignificant decisions which eventually turn out to shape our future.

For example, I met my former wife in the casualty department of a local hospital. She was working there as a clerk in the reception department. I was a patient. I'd tripped over an uneven piece of pavement and cut open my head. I had been waiting for hours, the blood had long since clotted, and I was bored and so, for the first time in my life, I picked up an abandoned newspaper and decided to do the crossword. Finding this modest ambition thwarted by the lack of a writing implement I asked the clerk if I could borrow one of hers (she had a dozen or more cheap pens rammed into a coffee mug on her desk). Three hours later, when I left I had four stitches in my scalp wound and the reception clerk's telephone number. That was the only crossword puzzle I've ever attempted. I didn't finish that one and I doubt if I will ever try another.

I didn't know it then but walking into that particular café was going to change the rest of my life. It was a random and at the time seemingly insignificant decision. But if I had chosen to go into a café thirty seconds earlier, or thirty seconds later, I would have chosen a different establishment and the rest of my life would have taken a very different path.

Sitting on stools at the bar there were, on my left, two French workmen in blue overalls. One wore a beret. The other had a huge, nicotine-stained moustache. They were both drinking Ricard and both smoking Gauloise cigarettes. They looked like a pair of extras waiting for work in a Hollywood musical set in Paris.

On my right sat a man about my age, wearing a crumpled but well-made and once stylish suit. He was slumped over the bar. He seemed to be at best asleep or at worst unconscious, and he was nursing the empty glass which had once contained what had almost certainly not been his first drink of the day. His top shirt button was undone and his tie, a florid affair consisting of equal quantities of red and yellow, had been pulled down an inch or two into a tight knot.

'What part of England do you come from?' asked the drinker on my right, without raising his head.

I looked at him, surprised. I hadn't realised that he had noticed my arrival. At first I wasn't sure that he was talking to me. He repeated the question.

'How did you know I was English?' I asked him, instead of answering his question.

Very slowly, he turned his head, looked at me and smiled. 'You have a little bit of an accent,' he told me. You could have removed paint with his breath. 'Besides,' he added, 'you're wearing English clothes and no one but the English would ever voluntarily choose to do that.'

I looked down. I was wearing a pair of green corduroy trousers and a scruffy sports coat which had leather patches sewn over the elbows. The leather patches weren't there as a fashion statement but to disguise the fact that my bony elbows had worn holes in both sleeves of the jacket. Underneath the jacket I was wearing a checked shirt and a brown tie. I had an old woollen scarf around my neck.

I told him where I was from.

'Never heard of it,' he said, dismissively. He waved his glass at the barman. 'Do you want a drink?' he asked me, as the barman reached for a bottle of malt whisky and poured a generous slug into his glass.

'No thanks,' I replied.

'So, what are you doing here?'

'In this café?'

'No. In Paris.'

'I'm just taking a short break.'

'Have you been here before?'

'No.'

The stranger picked up his glass, holding it very carefully so as not to spill any, and emptied it in a single gulp. He pushed the glass back across the bar and the barman immediately refilled it.

'Are you here on holiday?' I asked him. It seemed polite to express some curiosity.

'I live here.'

'What do you do?'

The question went unanswered because with surprising grace and fluidity the man to whom I had been talking slowly slid from his bar stool down onto the floor. Startled, I leapt off my own bar stool, knelt down beside him and tried to move him into what I believed to be some sort of recovery position. Given the fact that the café was fairly busy and the floor rather well-occupied with feet (the owners of which did not seem particularly concerned or interested in helping) this wasn't easy. The stranger seemed to be breathing and his colour, though an objective observer might have perhaps remarked that it was a trifle on the florid side of normal, seemed excellent.

I stood up, my heart racing and called out to attract the barman's attention.

The barman, a portly fellow in a large white apron was a good advertisement for the calorific content of his establishment's produce. He responded with a flurry of something incomprehensible. I assumed it was in French but it all came out so quickly that I couldn't identify any of the words. I began to panic a little. I pointed at the man on the floor, clutched my chest and made a noise like an ambulance. I thought it was a pretty impressive improvisation but the barman looked at me, frowned, rolled his eyes and shrugged his shoulders in one practised and fluid movement. Exhausted by all this activity he turned away and started to do something to a beer glass with a damp and grubby looking tea towel. If the towel had been drier and cleaner I would have assumed that he was drying the glass.

Becoming more desperate by the moment I banged on the zinc counter with my fist and reached across the bar to tug at the barman's apron. He turned round and I could see that his patience was wearing thin.

'A man has collapsed!' I told him. I pretended to sit on the bar stool that the other Englishman had fallen off, and then pretended to fall off it. The barman watched me, thought for a moment and then nodded approvingly.

'Isn't there anyone here who speaks English?' I yelled. A woman in her late twenties appeared. She was dressed as a waitress, looked rather harassed and was carrying an order pad and a pen. Despite the fact that I was a foreigner in the land I took a wild, reckless guess and assumed that she probably was a waitress.

'What is the matter?' she demanded. 'Why so much noise? What do you want?'

'The man who was sitting next to me has collapsed,' I said. 'Please call an ambulance.'

'An ambulance?' said the waitress, surprised. She laughed. 'Why do you want me to call an ambulance?' She had a throaty forty-a-day voice.

'This man has collapsed!' I said, pointing to the man at our feet. 'He could be very ill. He is unconscious.'

The waitress laughed at me and then told the barman what I had said. The barman laughed. The two men in blue overalls laughed. Soon everyone in the bar was laughing. A stand-up comedian would have felt a warm glow if he had managed to inspire so much laughter.

'What is so funny?' I demanded, failing to see the funny side of things. The French don't have much of a reputation for kindness to strangers or foreigners but this seemed to be taking things a little too far.

The waitress shrugged and waved her pad and pen about in a typically Gallic gesture. 'He is drunk! That is all.'

'How do you know?' I demanded.

'For one thing he has been having...' she turned to the barman and asked him something, '...eight whiskies in the last hour and a half. For another thing, he is doing this every evening.' She smiled, reached out and patted me on the arm. 'Do not be a worry to yourself. He has a strong constitution. He will be fine in a few minutes,' she assured me.

I bent down and examined the man on the floor again. He was breathing perfectly well – in fact he was snoring – and his colour seemed good.

I decided that the barman and the waitress were probably right, clambered wearily back onto my bar stool and took a sip from my coffee. It was cold and strong enough to strip paint from wood but I'd bought it so I drank it anyway.

~ Chapter Four ~

Ten minutes later, I was still sitting at the bar, still sipping my cup of paint stripper, when I realised that I could hear a bird singing.

I looked around the café but no one else seemed to have heard it. If they had they weren't bothered and certainly weren't doing anything about it. The bird was trilling its little heart away as though it had just woken up on a beautiful spring morning and realised just what a wonderful world we all live in.

I sipped a little more coffee and decided to see if more sugar would soften the taste of paint stripper. It helped a little. But the bird was still singing. I opened another packet of sugar and poured the contents into my coffee cup. And then, just for luck, I added another packet of sugar. The bird was still singing its little heart out.

It was at that point that I realised that what I had thought was a singing bird was in fact a ringing telephone. I looked around. No one else seemed to have noticed. I couldn't see a telephone but it was definitely a telephone and not a bird. And it seemed to be chirping and warbling somewhere around my feet.

I looked down.

The telephone was, of course, in the drunken stranger's jacket pocket.

At first I didn't like to answer it. Telephones – particularly mobile ones – are rather private things. Some people get very itchy if a stranger answers their private telephone.

But when the telephone wouldn't stop ringing I eventually decided that I really ought to find out who was calling. Perhaps it was something urgent. Perhaps the drunken man's wife was calling to see what time he would be home. Perhaps a loving girlfriend was worrying herself sick; waiting for him to turn up at a restaurant somewhere. Besides, I was getting fed up with the noise the damned thing was making.

'Hello?' I said, when, after rummaging through several pockets I eventually found the telephone and worked out which button to press.

'What the bloody hell have you been doing?' demanded an angry Scottish voice.

'I've been drinking my coffee,' I replied, rather put out at the rude way in which this question had been phrased. It had not, at this point, occurred to me that the caller would not have expected to find a complete stranger at the other end of the telephone.

'Who is that?'

'Tony Davison.'

'Who?'

Rather wearily, I repeated my name.

'Who the hell are you?'

'I just happened to be here. I heard the phone ringing and thought I'd better answer it in case it was urgent.'

'It is urgent! What the hell has happened to Albert? Have you stolen this telephone?'

'No, of course not!'

'How did you get hold of it?'

'What?'

'The telephone.'

'It was in this chap's pocket. He's lying on the floor a little bit the worse for wear. If Albert is the owner of this phone then the chap on the floor is probably Albert.'

'Pissed again, is he?'

I hesitated. I didn't want to get the stranger into trouble. But, on the other hand, the caller didn't seem too surprised. 'That would probably sum it up fairly well. 'Who are you?'

'My name's Jack. I'm a sub editor. We're waiting for Albert's copy for tomorrow's paper.'

'He's a journalist?'

'He's a columnist,' replied Jack. He sighed. It was the weary sigh of a weary man. 'Actually, he's our star columnist. His picture is on buses all over London.'

The name suddenly rang a bell. I hadn't seen it on buses (largely because it was a long time since I'd been to London) but I remembered seeing his name and photograph staring out at me on those occasions when I had purchased a copy of the paper he worked for.

Albert, I remembered, wrote a daily column about people he met and whose lives intrigued him and would, he thought, intrigue his readers too. Most of the people he wrote about were the sort usually described, rather patronisingly, as 'ordinary'. Most were either based in Paris or were passing through. They were anything but 'ordinary' but various sections of the media seem to regard anyone who doesn't have a part in a soap opera and regular invitations to social events in London as 'ordinary'.

‘I’m afraid he isn’t in much of a state to write anything for you at the moment,’ I told the fellow at the other end of the phone.

‘Shit,’ muttered the man. He thought for a moment. ‘Would you have a look in his pockets for me?’

‘I don’t like going through an unconscious bloke’s pockets,’ I protested.

‘You found the telephone didn’t you?’

‘Yes, I suppose so.’

‘Just look and see if you can find a notebook. The rest of us are in the age of technology but Albert always writes his column in an old-fashioned reporter’s notebook.’

I slid off my stool, bent down and rather furtively reached into one of Albert’s jacket pockets. Less than a minute later I had found the notebook. I passed the good news to the man at the other end of the telephone.

‘Look inside and see what you can find.’

‘The handwriting is terrible and it’s pretty much indecipherable,’ I told him.

‘Look through and find the start to his latest column...’

I flicked through the notebook.

‘How’s this,’ I said. I started to read.

‘That’s it! Great. Read a bit more.’

I read a bit more.

‘Oh damn. I had a horrible feeling I’d heard that before. That was today’s column. Go through and see if you can find the next column – the one for tomorrow’s paper.’

I flicked through the notebook. ‘How’s this?’ I said, reading another introduction.

‘That sounds great. Does it by any chance have a date at the top of it?’

‘Yes.’

‘What is it?’

I told him. It was tomorrow’s date.

‘Fantastic. Look, I hate to have to ask you to do this, but if I put you onto a copy taker would you read over Albert’s column for us? If we don’t get that copy there’ll be a huge hole in tomorrow’s paper.’

‘OK,’ I said.

‘Give your name and address to the copy taker. I’ll make sure we send you a cheque to cover your time and inconvenience and expenses.’

‘I haven’t got any expenses. I’m using Albert’s telephone and you’re paying for the call.’

‘OK. Stay on the line and I’ll put you through to the copy taker’s desk. You’ve saved our lives. Another five minutes and we’d have had to fill the space with something else.’ A few seconds later a calm voice asked me to start dictating Albert’s copy.

The writing was very sharp and funny. Twice I found myself laughing out loud. It was difficult to believe that the comatose drunk on the floor at my feet had written such beautiful, charming prose.

~ Chapter Five ~

Albert woke up about half an hour later. He clambered back onto his bar stool and ordered another drink as calmly and unconcernedly as though he'd been to the loo or had just popped out to buy a newspaper. He gave no indication of having been lying unconscious in a drunken stupor on the floor of a French café

'How are you feeling?' I asked him.

He looked at me. 'I'm fine, thanks,' he said. He looked surprisingly alert and awake. He frowned, as though trying to remember something. 'I'm sorry if I'm being rude...but would you be kind enough to remind me again who you are?'

I re-introduced myself and pushed his telephone and notebook along the counter towards him.

'Mine?' he said. He picked up the notebook and flicked through it.

'Yes.'

'Where did you find them?' Satisfied that the notebook was his he slipped it into the right hand pocket of his suit jacket, where I had found it.

'In your pockets.'

He looked at me and raised an eyebrow. 'You don't look like a pickpocket.' He picked up his mobile telephone and stared at it for a moment, as though making sure that it was his. Then he slipped it into his left hand jacket pocket, again the pocket in which I had found it.

'I'm not,' I told him. 'Your phone was ringing so I answered it for you.'

'Very kind of you,' he said. 'Let me buy you a drink.'

'No, it's OK,' I said, holding up a hand.

'I insist,' said Albert. 'Have a glass of wine? A hot wine?'

'No thanks, really, I'll just have another coffee in a minute or two.'

'Don't you drink?' he asked. There was no judgement in the question. Just surprise.

'Yes, I do...'

'Then try a vin chaud - a hot wine. If you don't like it you can leave it. OK?' He paused and smiled at me. 'Booze is very cheap here you know. Spend two quid on a bottle of wine and you're obviously expecting guests you want to impress. You can buy whisky here at half the price you'd pay in Britain.'

'OK,' I agreed.

Albert drained his whisky glass and ordered two glasses of vin chaud. 'Who was on the phone?'

'Someone from your newspaper,' I said. 'They wanted your column for tomorrow's paper.'

'Oh Gawd,' said Albert. 'I must have forgotten to phone in my copy. What's the time?' He pulled back his left hand coat sleeve and studied an expensive looking watch. He muttered something half under his breath and pulled out his mobile telephone. 'Excuse me,' he said to me. 'I'd better just ring them back.' He looked at his watch again.

'I read your column to one of the copy takers,' I told him. 'If that's what you were ringing about there's no need...'

Albert stopped in mid dial and looked at me. 'You read my column over to a copytaker?'

'Yes.'

The barman put two glasses of steaming red wine down in front of us. Each glass of wine contained a thick slice of orange.

Albert turned off his phone and slipped it back into his pocket. 'Thank you.'

The barman added a bowl full of sugar sachets and something that looked like a pepper-pot.

'My pleasure. I thought it was very funny.'

Albert picked up and tore open a sugar sachet and poured the contents into one of the wine glasses. 'Thanks,' he said. 'You'll probably need sugar in that,' he added, nodding towards my wine glass. He looked at me. 'Thanks a lot,' he said. 'You pretty much saved my life.' He tore the top off another sugar sachet and poured more sugar into his wine. 'If you don't play on the team, you're not allowed to make any mistakes – suck up to the boss and all your mistakes get covered up.'

'I take it you don't suck up to the boss?'

'I've never been a team player.'

I picked up a sugar sachet and followed his example.

'What are you doing here?' he asked me, as he stirred the sugar into his hot wine. He had obviously forgotten that we had already started this conversation.

'Just a few days break,' I said. 'I retired from work a few days ago.'

'You look a bit young to have retired.'

‘I took early retirement.’

‘How did you come to pick the ‘Fag and Ferret’?’

I looked at him, puzzled. ‘The ‘Fag and Ferret’?’

‘That’s what I call this place,’ he explained. ‘The owner doesn’t call it that,’ he explained, though he said this in such a way as to make it quite clear that he regarded the preferences of the owner as being of little consequence.

‘This is your local, then?’ Albert nodded.

‘You live here?’

‘Round the corner.’

‘I suppose Paris is full of writers.’

Albert pulled a face. ‘These days most of the ones who call themselves writers are just playing at it. Amateurs kidding themselves they’re writers.’ He had become very serious. ‘You know, it’s easy to write something. But there’s an art to knowing when and where to start a piece and an art to knowing when and where to finish. Most of those who master the former never master the latter.’ Albert picked up the pepper shaker and shook some of the brown powdery contents into his vin chaud.

‘What’s that?’

‘Cannelle.’

I looked at him, blankly.

‘Cinnamon.’ He handed me the shaker. ‘Try some. If you’re going to spend time in Paris you have to learn to drink your vin chaud with cannelle.’

I didn’t expect to be spending more than a few days in Paris but I did as he suggested.

~ Chapter Six ~

Five hours later we were still in the same café. We had moved from the bar and were sitting on more comfortable chairs at one of the window tables.

Two girls had come into the café and were sitting at the table next to us, drinking black coffees. One was wearing a shoulder length blonde wig the other had similar amounts of fake red hair. The girl in the blonde wig was wearing thigh length black patent leather boots, a very short black skirt and a skimpy white blouse. The top three or four buttons were undone, showing a well-filled lacy black bra. The girl in the red wig was wearing red high-heeled shoes, fishnet stockings, a red P.V.C. skirt and a matching bullfighter style jacket. Underneath it she wore a skin-tight pink ribbed sweater which left absolutely nothing to the imagination. When they first sat down I thought they were probably in their mid twenties but, after sneaking a longer look, I realised that they could be in their teens or in their thirties. They both wore so much make-up it was impossible to tell how old they were. Guessing what they did for a living wasn't difficult.

As soon as the waiter had brought them their drinks they wrapped their hands around the cups. They seemed to be using the hot coffee to get warm. It was cold outside and they weren't dressed to keep warm. They both carried tiny black handbags which they had placed on the table in front of them.

'Albert, ça va?' said one of the girls, recognising my companion and smiling at him; she seemed genuinely pleased to see him. Her perfectly applied lipstick framed expensively capped teeth.

The journalist opened his eyes, squinted at the girl and her companion and said something in French which I didn't understand. He then waved a hand in my direction and introduced me.

'The blonde is Nicole, the redhead is Simone,' he told me. 'They're friends of Lucie's,' he added, as though in explanation.

'Who is Lucie?' I asked. But the modest effort had proved too much for him and my companion had drifted off again.

'He is drunk again?' said the blonde, turning what might well have been a statement into a question by raising her voice at the end of the sentence.

'I'm afraid so,' I admitted.

'He is a very good drinker,' said the blonde. She opened her handbag and took out a packet of cigarettes and a cheap plastic lighter. She opened the packet and offered it to her companion who took a cigarette. She took a cigarette herself and then offered the packet to me. I thanked her and declined the offer. I started to tell her that I didn't smoke but stopped myself. Denying vices didn't, somehow, seem the right thing to do.

There was a squeal of brakes in the road outside. I turned and watched as a huge silver Mercedes skidded to an expensive tyre wasting halt outside the café. Two men got out of the car. One, in his early thirties, was tall, slim and olive-skinned. He wore faded blue jeans, a white, open necked shirt and a blue blazer with brass buttons and an impressivelooking badge on the breast pocket. The other man, probably no more than a couple of years older, was a foot shorter, totally bald and distinctly chubby. He wore a grey silk suit, a pale blue shirt and an expensive looking silk tie. The two men slammed the car doors, abandoned their expensive vehicle without bothering to lock it, and swaggered into the café. They looked confident and slightly menacing, and although neither of them wore hats they reminded me of Alain Delon and Jean-Paul Belmondo in Borsalino, that classic French gangster movie set in the thirties.

The two girls squealed excitedly and welcomed the men with hugs and kisses. The newcomers, seemingly indifferent to this show of affection, sat down and ordered drinks from an elderly waiter who had gone over to their table even before they had sat down. The waiter, who seemed nervous in their company, scurried away to fetch their drinks.

The small, bald man said something to the girl in the red wig, who was sitting on the other side of the table. She opened her bag, took out a packet of cigarettes and pushed her handbag across towards him. He opened the bag and emptied out the notes it contained. Some were neatly folded, some were rolled and some were crumpled together like bits of waste paper. As he began to sort out the money the woman in the blonde wig pushed her handbag across the table to the tall, slimmer man in the blue blazer. The waiter returned. He put two glasses of Ricard and a jug of water on the table and then put a glass of champagne down in front of each of the girls. There was a rat-a-tat on the café window and to my enormous surprise two policemen, guns, radios and handcuffs attached to broad leather belts around their waists, waved merrily to the two men. The two men both looked, nodded, and resumed sorting the money.

The girls sipped at their champagne while the two men put the bank notes away into already bulging wallets. I found myself wondering how many other women they had working for them on the overcrowded streets of Paris. I had never been this close to a pimp or a prostitute before. I hadn’t been in Paris very long and my world had already changed.

‘Let’s go home,’ said Albert waking up suddenly. Without warning he stood up. He swayed for a moment and held on to my shoulder for support. He was clearly unsteady and as I tried to stand up to support him he started to fall. The tall pimp in the blue blazer caught him, apparently effortlessly. ‘We’d better help you take him home,’ he said, standing up. I was slightly surprised by the fact that he spoke good English but spoke it with a slight American accent.

‘I don’t know where he lives,’ I said, apologetically.

‘That’s OK,’ said the pimp. ‘We do.’ He smiled at me and shrugged. ‘He is a writer,’ he said, as though this explained everything. ‘We often take him home,’ he added.

It was three in the morning but it seemed that most of the cafés were still open. The pavements were almost as busy as they had been five hours earlier but people were walking much more slowly now. It seemed that no one hurried at three o’clock in the morning. Instead of businessmen hurrying to appointments and shoppers scurrying about laden with their purchases the streets were filled with lovers and would-be lovers.

The short, bald fellow drove. His partner sat in the passenger seat, and Albert and I sat in the back. I was terrified that Albert would be sick. The Mercedes had beige leather seats and a thick beige carpet. Everything was clean and perfect, as though this was the first trip the car had made since leaving the show room.

‘Third floor,’ said the tall, thin pimp, when the Mercedes screeched to a halt outside a nondescript hotel in a fairly run down area. ‘Room 347.’ I got out of the car, walked around and dragged Albert out onto the pavement. The tall pimp, the one in the blazer, had to get out of the car and help me. I thanked them both (neither of them acknowledged my thanks) and, with my arm around Albert’s waist, staggered into his hotel. I was relieved to find that there was a lift. A night porter, sleeping at the reception desk, carried on snoring.

Albert didn’t regain consciousness until, with him leant against the wall outside his hotel room, I started to look in his pockets for his key. He giggled, as though I were tickling him, and then, when I told him what I was looking for, pushed his hand into his right trouser pocket and, moments later, produced a key which he handed to me.

‘Thank you,’ he said, as I pushed open his door and helped him into his hotel room. Behind him the room seemed to be filled with books. He stood still, for a moment, seemingly suddenly utterly sober and smiled at me. ‘Have I had too much to drink again?’ he asked, apparently innocently.

~ Chapter Seven ~

Two days after I had met him, I sat in the Fag and Ferret with Albert and drank hot red wine laced with sugar, orange and cinnamon. It was a drink I had already got to know and to love; rather similar to the mulled wine I had once or twice drunk at Christmas time back in England.

This was only the third or fourth time I'd been in the Fag and Ferret but I was already beginning to feel like a regular. French cafés can be forbidding when you visit them for the first time. The proprietor, behind the zinc-topped bar, invariably leans against something, surrounded by a group of suspicious-looking regulars who stare at every newcomer.

I was to learn in due course that while proprietors and waiters tolerate tourists as necessary evils – and tolerating is a long, long way from liking – they are surprisingly quick to accept customers as regulars.

For two hours Albert and I sat together and didn't speak a word. Whenever our glasses were empty Albert simply waved a nicotine-stained finger in the air and the waiter, a sour-faced fellow with a droopy grey moustache silently brought replacements. Albert never turned to see if the waiter was looking when he made these signals, but the waiter never missed one.

In the past, whenever I had sat with someone I didn't know very well, the silences had always seemed rather oppressive; demanding to be filled with idle chatter about the weather, the state of the nation or the latest piece of tabloid gossip. But I felt surprisingly comfortable with Albert and to my surprise the silence didn't seem to be a problem at all. As I got to know him better I discovered that sometimes he would talk for hours without stopping, never repeating himself but never being dull. He could be, and often was, outrageous, prejudiced and bigoted but he was always honest, always funny and never, never boring. Not even Albert's worst enemy could describe him as boring.

I was very conscious of the fact that it wouldn't be very long before I would be catching the train back to England and for over an hour I had been trying to decide where I was going when I got back. I had originally intended to visit my sister – my only living relative and now my only tie to the country in which I had been born – but that idea was slowly becoming less and less attractive. My sister and I had never been close and over the years our relationship had become more and more strained. She was married to a bank manager who had never made any secret of the fact that he regarded me as a pretty sorry apology for a brother-in-law.

My quandary was made more confusing by the fact that I was not only sure where to go but I was also unsure about why I was going back.

All my belongings (pitiful few that they were) were in my hotel room. The little money I had was in an English bank but could, I felt pretty sure, be transferred to a French financial establishment without too much difficulty. After much deliberation I had come to the pretty sad conclusion that I had lots of acquaintances but no real friends in England. I was beginning to feel sorry for myself, and to slide down into a black orgy of self pity when I suddenly became aware that although I didn't know what he had said Albert had broken the silence.

'Sorry,' I said. 'I was a million miles away. What did you say?'

'Why are you going back to England?' Albert asked.

I looked up and stared at him for a moment. It was as though he had been sharing my most private, innermost thoughts.

Albert, still thinking that I hadn't heard him, repeated his question for the third time. He looked down at the table between us and seemed suddenly to become aware that our glasses were empty. Languidly he raised a hand and waved a finger in the air.

'I don't know,' I said at long last. 'I don't know why I'm going back and I don't know where I'm going.'

'So why not stay here?'

It may seem strange but the thought of staying in Paris had never occurred to me. Rather startled by the idea, I looked at him, frowning, and stared for a moment. 'I don't know,' I said. I racked my brain, desperately searching for reasons which I didn't really want to find. 'I don't know anyone here,' I said, and then quickly added. 'And I don't have anywhere to stay.' I couldn't think of any more reasons for not staying in Paris so I stopped.

'You know me,' said Albert, answering my first excuse. Since this was undeniable I didn't say anything.

The waiter came over, put two more glasses of hot wine down on our table and took away half a dozen empty glasses.

Albert picked up the small bottle of cinnamon which sat in the middle of the table and added a healthy sprinkling to his wine. 'And there are plenty of flats to rent,' he added, answering my second objection to staying in Paris. He tore open a cylindrical paper sachet and added the sugar it contained to his hot wine. 'The big advantage Paris has over every other city I've ever lived in – and over the years I've spent time in most of them,' said Albert, 'is that there are apartments to suit every pocket. You can buy or rent a flat in Paris for less than the price of a terraced house in Liverpool.' He paused. 'Of course it won't have five bedrooms and it won't be overlooking the Eiffel Tower...' he looked around thoughtfully. 'Paris is a wonderful city,' he sighed. 'France is a wonderful country.' There was a long silence. 'Of course, it's a pity about the French,' he said at last. 'You've heard that the French hate the English?'

I nodded.

'This is true,' said Albert. 'But they also hate the Welsh, the Scottish and the Irish. And they loathe the Americans even more than they hate the English. And they hate the Australians. And, of course, the Germans. And the Belgians. And the Italians and the Spanish. And the Algerians. Boy, do they loathe the Algerians. The French are the ultimate racists. They hate everyone who isn't French. And if there aren't any foreigners around to hate they just hate each other.'

I stared at him but for a while said nothing.

'But Paris is the most beautiful city in the whole wide world.'

'Why do you love it so much?

'Well, the weather tends to be much more palatable than the brand we get in Britain, the food is invariably well-presented and tasty and the cheap wine they keep for themselves is usually vastly superior to the expensive stuff they sell us. All these things outbalance the fact that the country is absurdly bureaucratic and if I was trying to describe the French people I would have difficulty in doing so without using the words 'aloof', 'vain', 'pompous', 'smug', 'self-satisfied' and 'humourless'. I love French architecture, French cooking and the French attitude to life – which incidentally enables them to smoke and drink more than the British, and to eat vast quantities of fatty food, while still having a much lower heart attack rate, but I have never been particularly fond of the French.'

'But it isn't the weather, the architecture, the food or the wine that keeps me here,' continued Albert. 'It's the cafés. And the café way of life. I adore French cafés. I love them all: smart fashionable ones where the waiters are all clearly former French aristocrats and small scruffy ones frequented by workmen and run by a couple whose corpulence is an advertisement for the food he cooks and she serves.'

'In winter I love sitting inside, my hands wrapped around a glass of vin chaud, watching soaking wet French businessmen scurrying to and fro in the rain. In the summer I love sitting outside under a striped umbrella, sipping something cold and long and patiently watching the world meander or jiggle by.'

'I love the fact that I can order a glass of Ricard, a beer or a bottle of wine at 10 o'clock in the morning without anyone batting an eyelid. I love the fact that I can order a tomato salad and a plate of frites at midnight without the waiter taking off his watch and winding it up.'

'I love the fact that I can buy a cup of coffee, take out my book and settle down for the day, knowing that the ticket in my saucer isn't for the drink but the rent on my chair.'

'I love the fact that if I go into a café more than once or twice, and acquire my wings as a regular, the waiter and the proprietor will shake my hand and greet me with a smile and offer me the same courtesy when I leave.'

'We used to have good cafés in Britain. Back in the days when Dr Samuel Johnson was struggling with his dictionary, coffee houses were fine meeting places where men could settle down with a cup of good coffee or a pint of best porter and sit in peace and ponder.'

'Today, back in Britain, our cafés are almost all gone. All that is left are small, mean places in seaside towns where sour-faced harridans in dirty aprons serve burnt tea cakes and lukewarm tea that tastes of detergent. We have our pubs, of course. But modern pubs reek of plastic and chemical beer.'

'There are excellent cafés in Austria (two or three of the world's top ten can be found in Vienna), Italy (on the via Veneto in Rome and in St Mark's square in Venice in particular), Holland (Amsterdam, of course) and Germany (Berlin has been a favourite centre for café aficionados for decades) but France is still the undisputed world champion for café lovers.'

My heart was beating slightly faster. Somehow I knew that this was a significant moment in my life and that I would remember everything about it for the rest of my life. Just as I would always remember where I had been and what I had been doing when I had heard that President Kennedy had been assassinated and when I had heard that Princess Diana had been killed in a car crash so I would always remember this conversation with Albert. I looked around at the café in which we were sitting. There wasn't anything special or unusual about it. In a way it was really only notable for the fact that it wasn't notable.

I watched as Albert tore open a second paper sachet and added yet more sugar to his wine. He added a slice of orange and only then, when he had finished, did he look across at me and raise an eyebrow. 'Well?' he asked me. 'Just remember that the future turns into the past, and now into then, in the blink of an eye. Anticipations and expectations become memories at an alarming speed.'

While we had been sitting there it had slowly dawned upon me that for years I had felt like an alien at home. I had felt as though I didn't really belong. In Paris I was, of course, still an alien. But being an alien in a foreign land is far less troubling than being an alien in a land where you think you should feel at home. I puzzled over this for a while and eventually came to the conclusion that being an alien abroad is less of a personal indictment.

And after all, I thought, if you are an alien in your own country you might just as well be an alien in a country where they bake the bread four times a day. Besides, these days, it seems to me that we are all foreigners – wherever we live. So, what does it matter where you live?

Paris wasn't necessarily better than any English towns I could think of. It was simply different – very different – and the difference invigorated me and made me feel younger. I felt more alive and more like living. I felt 'foreign' in Paris but there were good reasons for feeling 'foreign'. I didn't have to feel guilty about it.

'I think I'll stay in Paris for a while,' I said, suddenly, knowing that if I didn't make a decision quickly I would prevaricate until I found so many excuses for not staying that I went back to England by default. I reached inside my jacket pocket and took out my return ticket. I looked at it carefully in an attempt to find out whether the return portion of the ticket was open-ended. I couldn't tell. 'Does this have a return date on it?' I asked Albert, handing him the ticket. 'I can't work it out.'

Albert studied the ticket for a moment, hesitated and then slowly tore the ticket in half. 'It was only valid for the day after tomorrow,' he said when he had finished tearing the ticket in two.

He tossed the two halves of the ticket into the ashtray, where they lay on top of the discarded sugar wrappers.

The die was cast. I would not be going back to England.

~ Chapter Eight ~

After breakfast the following morning I set out to walk the streets of Paris in search of accommodation. I couldn't afford to live in a hotel – even a cheap one. I needed to find a small flat.

In the cold light of a cool morning in Paris I felt rather less enthusiastic and optimistic about my new adventure than I had done the night before.

The previous evening, sitting in a warm café with a glass of hot wine in front of me (and several more of the same tucked safely away inside my stomach), things had seemed very different. Inspired by a potent mix of alcohol and excitement, the terrors of living in a foreign city had seemed insignificant.

Now, with the street sweepers still trundling through the city and the gutters awash with rivulets of cleansing water, I felt alone and curiously vulnerable. If Albert had not burnt my boats for me (or, more accurately, torn up my ticket) I would have probably changed my mind, hurried to the railway station and gone back to England.

I packed my suitcases and left them in the care of the hotel receptionist, a stern, efficient woman of indeterminate years.

'You have a late flight?' asked the receptionist. 'Or a late train?' She spoke good English, but with a slight American accent. I always find this slightly irritating.

I paused, about to tell her the truth, and stopped myself, though I didn't really know why. 'Yes, that's right,' I agreed. 'A late train.' Instantly, I felt guilty, although the lie was quite trivial and didn't really matter, and wondered why I had bothered.

'Have a nice day!' said the receptionist, in that falsely friendly way the Americans have spread around the world. I smiled, thanked her, returned the good wish with matching insincerity, and strode purposefully towards the front door as though I knew exactly where I was heading and what I was going to do when I got there. 'You're going to have beautiful weather today!' called the receptionist.

Twenty five minutes later, as I walked along the Boulevard du Montparnasse, the sky turned grey. Five minutes after that the rain started.

I had neither a raincoat nor an umbrella so I turned up my collar and automatically speeded up the rate at which I was walking. I still didn't know where I was going or what I was going to do when I got there. The rain got heavier. I realised that I hadn't told the hotel receptionist what I was planning to do because I felt embarrassed. Finding a flat in Paris seemed a rather silly and romantic thing to do – especially for a man of my age. I had never been an impulsive person. I decided that I would try to find the travel agent's Paris representative, tell them that I had lost my train ticket and beg them to give me a replacement.

The rain was getting heavier and I stepped into a doorway in between two shops to shelter. It was a quiet street but as soon as I was in there a man appeared in front of me. He looked quite young, considerably younger than myself, and was wearing an anorak which reached down to his knees. 'Do you have money for food?' he asked me in very good English. Like the hotel receptionist he had an American accent.

At first I thought he was concerned for my own security. Touched by what I thought was his kindness I thanked him and told him that I had eaten breakfast.

'Do you have money for a drink?' he asked me.

This time I realised that he was asking for money rather than offering it. I rummaged in my pocket, looking for coins. 'You speak good English,' I told him.

'I'm American,' he said. 'I have to get back to visit my sick mother. Do you have money to pay for my airfare?'

I gave him all the coins I had in my pocket. Without thanking me he took the coins and shuffled away.

As he disappeared I watched distractedly as a tall man in a black mackintosh and a blue beret carried on two conversations with two separate mobile telephones. First he shouted into one, then into the other and then into both at once. He didn't seem to spend much time listening to what either of his correspondents had to say; taking as much notice of them as he was of the rain.

'You want to see my apartment?'

I turned away from watching the man in the black mackintosh and found myself looking down at a small, plump woman in her mid forties. She was sheltering underneath a small black umbrella. Better to obtain shelter from the rain I was standing on a doorstep and was, consequently, five or six inches above the woman in front of me. Since I would have been the best part of a foot taller than her if we had both been standing on the pavement I towered above her.

'I beg your pardon?'

The woman repeated her question, speaking English with a heavy French accent. I much preferred it to the American accent favoured by the hotel receptionist. She sounded like a female Maurice Chevalier. She had to hold the umbrella up at arm's length so that we could see each other's faces. She was holding a clipboard and wearing a short black skirt that would have been a tight fit if she had been three or four sizes smaller, a baggy black cardigan and a white blouse that was decorated with little flowers. The top two buttons of the blouse were undone and from my vantage position a foot and a half above her I had a pretty good view of an extremely impressive cleavage. The cleavage might, perhaps, have had a different effect on me if she had not worn a van Dyke beard and had legs well-decorated with varicose veins as thick as hawsers.

I stared at her and genuinely did not know what to say. I thought I was being propositioned and felt embarrassed, flattered and confused all at once. She didn't look much like I expected a prostitute to look like but since my experience in this area was pretty limited I didn't count myself as knowledgeable in this area. I muttered something which even I didn't understand.

'You are the Englishman?' she asked.

After hesitating I confirmed my nationality with a slightly uncertain nod. The rain was getting heavier and neither the doorway nor the umbrella was providing us with enough protection. I looked up and down and noticed that the street was more or less deserted. The man in the dark raincoat had long ago put away his two telephones and scurried off, perhaps to find somewhere dry, perhaps to recharge his batteries.

'I am the Bertha and I am sorry I am going to be late,' said the woman, in which she clearly regarded as impeccable English. She held out her hand. 'I was delayed by being with the client at another viewing elsewheres.' I took the offered hand and shook it. I had read somewhere that the French shake hands a lot but this was my first experience of it. I had also read that they tended to kiss one another a good deal. I silently hoped that the handshake would suffice. I am always averse to kissing but I did not find myself drawn to this woman's lips. I have no great objection to beards or moustaches but, and I realise that I may be quaintly old-fashioned in this area, but I prefer these items of adornment to be worn by men. The woman raised her eyes to heaven and rolled them around rather dramatically. 'He had a tape measure and insisted on measuring all the chambers.' She shrugged her shoulders as though this sort of behaviour was nothing new to her. 'He even measured from floor to ceiling!' She pulled a face, raised her eyes heavenwards again and tapped her forehead with a forefinger. Her fingernails were painted bright red and this added emphasis to the gesture. 'Shall we go inside and look on the apartment?' She held up a key, levered herself up onto the tips of her toes, reached around my body and poked the key into the keyhole behind me. As the door opened inwards I automatically stepped down onto the pavement to let the woman enter the building. I was confused, and tried to remember if I had made an appointment to see this woman when I had been with Albert. When the woman had lowered her umbrella I obeyed her inviting wave and followed her into a dark passageway.

Like many big people she moved with surprising grace and ease, and for an overweight middle-aged woman she showed a surprising burst of speed as she scurried down the passageway. I had a surprising amount of difficulty keeping up with her. If there was a light she didn't bother to switch it on. At the end of the passageway she darted to the right and although I could no longer see her I could tell from the sounds she made that she was climbing a staircase. I followed.

I later discovered that we had climbed six flights of narrow, tightly twisting stairs, but at the time I would have sworn that we had climbed at least ten times that many. To my shame I found myself having difficulty in keeping up with the plump bottom in front of me. I was puffing and wheezing long before we reached the top.

When we finally stopped climbing stairs the woman, seemingly inexhaustible, launched herself down an exceedingly narrow corridor, unlocked a door and, after pushing at it for quite a while eventually managed to force it open. Once she had separated the door from its frame she flung it open with the sort of flourish usually associated with magicians opening cabinets to show that their assistants have disappeared. She pressed herself against the wall behind her so that I could squeeze past her and go through the door ahead of her. 'The door sticks a little,' explained the woman. 'It needs a little oil.'

This wasn't an empty cabinet but it wasn't all that much bigger and as soon as I entered the room I could see why my plump guide had let me go first. The only light came from a small grubby window a few feet in front of us. The room was about twelve feet square. The walls had been painted purple and the two interior doors which broke up the purple had been painted bright yellow. It was clear from the way the ceiling came down to the floor by the window that we were in an attic space.

The previous tenant had left behind a few pieces of remarkably ugly furniture and a few very grubby rugs. The floor was gritty and dirty and didn't look or feel as though it had been cleaned for a long time. When I looked more closely at the walls I could see that they were covered with stains. By each stain someone had written something in French. I tried to read the graffiti but couldn't understand it.

It wasn't much of a home.

~ Chapter Nine ~

‘So, Mr Liebermann,’ said the woman, following close behind me. ‘What are you thinking of the apartment?’ She fumbled with something just inside the door and switched on the light. The bulb must have been the smallest available and it added very little to the light in the room. ‘The colours may not be entirely to your cup of coffee but if you take the apartment you will be free to be repainting them to your own wishing.’

‘Er, I’m afraid that my name isn’t Liebermann,’ I said. I felt a little guilty and wondered what had happened to Mr Liebermann. I guessed that he must have either been held up or had got fed up of waiting and had gone away. I looked around the apartment. This was not a task which took a great deal of time. ‘But it seems very, er...,’ I searched for an appropriate word and eventually found something that I thought would seem appropriate and accurate to an estate agent. ‘Compact.’ The word apartment seemed rather overstated.

As I had already noticed the previous tenant had left behind several pieces of furniture. The more I looked at these the easier it was to see he had left them behind rather than go to the trouble of taking them away with him. I wandered over to the window and looked out. The apartment had a view onto a small courtyard and into a couple of dozen apartments in the building opposite. I realised that I could look straight into a tiny room on the sixth floor of the other building. A well-proportioned woman in skimpy underwear was hanging her washing on a small clothes drier.

‘You are not going to be Mr Liebermann?’

‘No.’ I turned away from the window, feeling rather embarrassed by my inability to be Mr Liebermann.

‘Are you sure of this?’ asked the woman. The French, I was to learn, are above all else a bureaucratic nation. They invariably prefer to believe things that are typed, rather than to believe their own eyes. For a Frenchman (or woman) once something has been put onto a form it acquires the authority of a papal edict. One in five working Frenchmen (and women) work for the government and the percentage is rising so rapidly that it will not be long before every man in La Belle France is a professional bureaucrat. As a child I grew up with building blocks and matured into a chemistry set. French children of my age probably asked for (and received) bureaucracy sets, filled with rubber stamps, packs of incomprehensible forms and miniature filing cabinets.

‘Pretty much,’ I assured her.

‘Tsk!’ said the woman, slapping her hand against her clipboard in disgust; her belief in the infallibility of the typed word temporarily shaken. ‘So,’ she sighed, ‘what are you claiming is your name?’

I told her. She made me spell it and checked it against her clipboard, upon which a list of other names had been typed. She checked again. ‘You are not existing!’ she declared, at last, in some dismay. ‘This is clearly nonsense. Hrmph! You are not there,’ she said, stabbing her finger against the clipboard. There was another Gallic shrug. I looked at her. She looked at me. We looked at each other.

‘But clearly you are here,’ she said, at last. Then, accepting the inevitability of reality, she smiled at me, shrugged her shoulders again and asked me how to spell my name. Using a pen that was attached to her clipboard by a small piece of string she crossed out a name on her list (presumably Mr Liebermann’s name) and wrote my name down on her board in its place. She seemed happy when this small piece of administration had been concluded.

The French, I was to discover many times over the coming months, do very much like to have their paperwork in order but when things don’t match up they are always perfectly happy to make the necessary amendments. A friend of mine in England kept a shop. He had once spent three days poring over his accounts in an attempt to find a missing two pence. A French businessman would have dealt with the problem by simply changing one of the entries accordingly.

‘What does this mean?’ I asked her, pointing to what had been written next to a fairly large, angry looking stain about half way up the wall.

The agent leant a little closer and squinted. ‘It says that this stain was caused when a bottle of the red wine was being thrown in June 1992. The bottle was being thrown by someone called Françoise at someone called Jean.’ The woman shrugged as though this was all quite normal. ‘Clearly the bottle missed,’ she said. ‘Françoise was perhaps not being a very good shot. Or maybe she was with a little too much of the wine.’

‘And this one?’ I said, pointing to another stain, a little higher up the wall.

’Ah, that was having been caused by a thunderstorm in November 1991,’ the agent told me, after studying the graffiti. ‘But you must not worry about that,’ she assured me. ‘The roof was having been repaired in 1996.’

I assured her that I would not worry about the stain caused by the leaky roof

‘Would you like to see the bed chamber?’ asked the agent. Without waiting for a reply she pulled open one of the bright yellow doors. The previous tenant had left behind a bed and a mattress which took up three quarters of the room. I edged around the bed and tugged at an ugly mould green plastic curtain and found that behind it there was a shower, a bidet, a wash-basin and a lavatory. Someone had scrawled graffiti on the wall. 'Gertrude Stein was here, here, here' was my favourite. A closer look at the mould green plastic shower curtain showed that the curtain was actually made of colourless opaque plastic. The curtain was mould green in colour because it was covered in mould. The one window in this room looked out onto the street. There were no curtains at the window but there was a tiny balcony, just big enough to contain a small chair and a table which looked just large enough to accommodate a plate and a cup and saucer.

I opened the window. 'Is it safe?' I asked the agent, who had, given her size and the available amount of space, probably been wise in not following me into the bedroom.

She looked at me, pulled a face and shrugged her shoulders.

Holding onto the window frame, I gingerly stepped out onto the balcony. Nothing terrible happened. I took a big step and put my other foot onto the balcony.

'It seems without danger,' said the agent, from her safe vantage point. 'You are having everything you need here!' she said. 'A completely self-containing apartment. Would you like to meet the kitchen?'

As I retraced my steps around the bedroom she stepped across to the other yellow door (it took her about three fairly short strides) and opened it. The word 'kitchen' was rather grand and 'cupboard' would probably have been more appropriate. Whatever it was called it contained a small cooker, a sink and a tiny fridge. Several rather grubby-looking cupboards were attached to the wall. One of the cupboard doors had loose hinges and looked as if it were about to fall off. A work surface, which had been fitted above the fridge, was covered in crumpled up bits of newspaper and empty cardboard cartons. A sheet of discarded newspaper half hid a partly eaten plate of spaghetti. Whoever had occupied the flat had clearly packed in a hurry and not bothered to tidy up when they had finished. The apartment reminded me of a flat I had once shared many years ago. The two companions which whom I had shared the flat had been such messy individuals that you could always walk into the kitchen and find a half-eaten meal or two on plates.

'The person who used to be renting this flat was not a nice person,' said the agent. 'He was a slub.'

'Slob?' l suggested.

'Slob,' agreed the agent. 'He was also making a good lot of noise. The other residents are pleased that he is gone. He once went away for two weeks and left his television set on with the volume turned up very loud as it would go.' She pulled a face and shivered. 'Not a nice person.'

She looked around, as though she was seeing the apartment for the first time and was considering moving into it herself. 'It could be very nice here,' she said. She sounded surprised. 'Of course, it needs some of the cleaning and tidying,' she added. 'Do you have a wife?'

I shook my head.

'A girlfriend?''

I shook my head again.

'A mistress?'

A third shake of the head.

'You are how you say, a 'happy' man?'

For a moment I was slightly puzzled by this but eventually I realised what she meant. 'No,' I assured her. 'I'm not gay. But there just isn't a woman in my life at the moment.'

'Ah,' said the agent, with a broad smile. 'You will soon be finding one.' She winked at me. 'This is Paris and now you have your own apartment and your own bed chamber.'

I walked around for a few moments. I looked at the curtainless windows, the dirty floor, the hideous decorations, the ugly kitchen with its grease covered walls and the cupboard with a door hanging off and the ugly mouldy green plastic curtain hiding the tiny bathroom. It was all so terrible that a loving touch and a few pots of paint could only make it infinitely more attractive.

Across the courtyard the woman who had been hanging up her washing had disappeared but two floors below a couple were arguing soundlessly. I could see them shouting and gesticulating but I couldn't hear anything they were saying. The agent, behind me, was clearly looking out of the window too. 'It is like a big soapy opera!' she said. 'A dozen television channels?'

'Yes,' I agreed. 'I suppose so.'

'No one paints their curtains,' said the agent. 'It is considered rude.'

'Ah,' I said, making a mental note to be rude to my neighbours.

'The building where I live also has a courtyard,' said the agent. 'There are four sides to the courtyard and all the apartments are looking down upon the courtyard. Two of my neighbours were recently having an alliance - how do you call it - an affair of the heart? A romance?'

'An affair,' I said, nodding. 'I understand.'

‘The man was a postman, he did not have a wife. The woman was married to a very large Jewish policeman with a bad, bad temper. A very jealous man but as I have heard not a particularly good lover. People say he has a very small...’ She placed her hand in front of her and wiggled her little finger and then continued her story. ‘So his wife arranged a simple code with her washing so that she could be telling her lover whether or not her husband was on duty and the coast was cleared so that she could safely entertain him in her bed.’

‘Very imaginative,’ I agreed. The couple across the courtyard were still arguing.

‘If she is hanging out two pairs of pink – what is the word – knick-knacks?’

‘Ornaments?’

‘Ornaments? Can you wear them?’

‘No.’

‘Then that is not the word.’ The agent racked her brain. ‘Ah!’ she said at last. ‘Briefs? No?’

‘Panties?’

‘Panties? What are these panties?’

‘Knickers.’

‘Knickers! Ah, yes. That is what I am looking for. Knickers. If she hanged out two pairs of her pink knickers then it was a sign to her lover that the coastline was clear and that he could be coming,’ said the woman. ‘All went well until one day the woman had la grippe...?’ she paused.

‘The flu, I think.’

‘Ah, yes. The flu. And her mother-in-law came over to help with the washing and the cooking for her son the Jewish policeman. She did the washing and not knowing this code that her daughter-in-law had with her lover she hanged out two pairs of the pink knickers!’

‘Oh dear,’ I said. My neighbours across the courtyard had stopped arguing and were now kissing.

‘The postman, seeing the two pairs of the pink knickers was thinking that the coastline was clear. Excited, and full of high expectations he washed his faces and his hairs, put on some of the aftershave, ran down the stairs and bought some flowers and a bottle of the second best wine from the supermarket below. Then he took the lift up to the apartment of his mistress where, much to his surprise and disappointment the door was opened not by the woman of his dreams but by the mother-in-law who was very much not the woman of his dreams.’

‘Oh la la,’ I offered, thinking this a suitable French interjection.

‘Oh la la indeed,’ said the agent. ‘Bravo! You see, you do speaking French! The mother-in-law immediately guessed what was happened. She threw out the postmen and made the telephone to her son. He run home onto his apartment and insisted that his sick wife tell to him the name of her lover. She did this and then he shot her. And then he shot the postman.’

‘Oh dear.’

‘But there is the happy ending.’

‘Really?’

‘After shooting these people he arrested himself.’

‘Ah.’ This wasn’t quite what I would have called a happy ending. ‘Did he go to prison?’

‘Oh no. It was what we call the crime passionel. You do not go to prison in France for making the crime passionel.’

‘Ah, ’I said, making a mental note to try to avoid being involved in any crime passionels unless I wanted to shoot someone. ‘The apartment is just what I was looking for,’ I said. I looked around. ‘Although I will need to redecorate. How much is the rent?’

The woman consulted her clipboard. ‘The rent is five thousand francs.’

‘A month?’

‘A month.’

I hesitated. For the centre of Paris it didn’t seem unreasonable. And with the proceeds from the sale of my house and contents, and my small pension, I thought I could probably afford it.

The agent misinterpreted my hesitation. ‘I am agreed with you,’ she murmured, responding to my silence. It was now her turn to look around. She examined the purple, graffiti stained walls carefully, as though weighing up their artistic value, shook her head slightly from side to side, moved her lips in and out a good deal, hummed, sighed and then, having weighed the aesthetic advantages of the flat’s current decor and found it slightly underweight, she winked, conspiratorially. ‘You are right. It is a little bit too high.’ She bent forward and lowered her voice still further. ‘Offer to me four thousand.’

‘Four thousand,’ I suggested. Feeling courageous I winked back at her.

‘Done!’ said the agent, slapping her hand on her clipboard. She winked again but this time she smiled as well. She handed me her clipboard and her pen and pointed with her finger at the spot where she wanted me to sign. I signed but decided that between us we'd done more than enough winking

I walked over to the window and looked out into the courtyard. The couple who had been arguing seemed to have settled their argument. They had moved from the living room to the bedroom and were making up. In the flat below a fat man in a pair of brown corduroy trousers and a considerably off-white string vest was playing a soundless accordion.

I had rented a flat in Paris. I didn't have a view of the Eiffel Tower, Notre Dame or Sacre Coeur but I was now a resident in the most glamorous and most romantic city in the world.

The fact that I was alone and unemployed hardly seemed worth bothering about.

In the flat below the accordionist a slender woman in her thirties and in her underwear was sitting in front of a mirror making up her face.

'You will be wishing to have had the flat redecorated a little more to your taste?' the agent inquired. 'If so I have the brother-in-law who...' she allowed the rest of the sentence to fade away.

I held up a hand. 'Thank you, but I will do the decorating myself,' I told her. I had discovered some years earlier that the beauty of self reliance – and 'doing it oneself' lies not so much in the money that is saved but in the anguish which is avoided. It is my experience that dealing with workmen is one of life's most consistently, reliably and enduringly painful experiences. I am not good with a paintbrush but I thought I could probably decorate my small apartment myself though I would need to hire outside experts if I needed to have plumbing or electrical work done.

Although I had no justification for this suspicion I felt that it was likely that French workmen, although perhaps more likely to fill the air with garlic, Gauloise and the aroma of cheap red wine than with strong tea and bacon sandwiches, would probably turn out to be every bit as frustrating and enervating as their English counterparts..

I was relieved to see that the agent did not seem to be at all put out by this declaration of independence. Indeed, her nod of acceptance seemed to contain more than a hint of approval and respect.

As she headed for the door, and I followed, it occurred to me that I didn't have the foggiest idea whereabouts in Paris I had chosen to live. I didn't even know the address. I asked the agent for the name of the street we were in.

The agent seemed surprised to hear that I didn't know where I had decided to live. 'This is the rue Napoleon Bonaparte,' she told me. 'It is between the rue Casimir Périer and the rue de Bellechasse in the seventh arrondissement. It is the very fashionable address.'

I tried to look suitably impressed.

'Now we must back to the office go to fill in some forms!' she said, and it seemed clear from the way she spoke that this was the part of the job she looked forward to most.

The estate agent's office was about a quarter of a mile away. Once we had got there I handed over a deposit and a down payment on the rent. And then we filled in forms. There were lots of forms to sign. I didn't understand any of them but the agent assured me that none of them contained anything terribly important.

'The French don't think they're alive unless they've signed at least a dozen forms every day,' a friend of Albert's once told me. After I had been living in Paris for a while a Frenchman I met confided that neither he nor anyone he knew ever read any of the official or semi official forms they signed. 'If we are reading all zee forms we have been signed we would never be having done the anything else,' he told me, in wonderfully fractured English. (The French are always quick to criticise foreigners who make slight grammatical errors when attempting to speak their language but they are invariably deeply hurt if anyone has the temerity to correct their errors when speaking English.) At the time, not knowing any of this, I simply thought that the agent was unusually zealous.

'What is this one for?' I asked the agent when she produced an especially complicated looking form.

'On this you must promise to be sure that when you are having left the apartment you will be having left it in the condition it was in which you were overtaking.'

'That's a bit worrying,' I said to the agent.

She paused, looking slightly alarmed. 'What is worrying?'

'I want to decorate the apartment,' I told her. 'I was hoping to make it look a bit more respectable – a little more homely. To get it back to its present condition I would have to hold a series of pretty wild parties and invite in a couple of incontinent elephants. Even then I doubt if I could put all the stains back in the right places.'

'Eleph...? What is the eleph...what you say?'

'Elephant,' I replied. I tried to describe one in the air with my hands. I thought I had done quite well.

'Mountains?' asked the agent, clearly very puzzled.

'No, no.'

'Drummers?'

Frustrated I shook my head and wished I had a dictionary with me.

'No. But close. E-1-e-p-h-a-n-t,' I said, spelling out the word. 'Elephant.'

'Ah!' cried the agent, suddenly understanding. 'An elephant!' She pronounced the word in exactly the same way that I had. She looked at me as if I were completely mad.

'That's right,' I said, apologetically. 'It was just a small joke,' I added, rather feebly.

The agent thought about this for a while and then picked up one of the other forms I had already signed. 'You can't have the elephants in the apartment,' she said, very seriously. 'Clause 44 (b) on this form forbids you to have the non-domestic animals in the apartment.' She patted me on the arm, and lowered her voice. 'But do not worry yourself too much about this,' she went on, reassuringly. 'If you have been improving the condition of the apartment I doubt much if the owner will be too upset if you have had the very small elephant.' She nodded sagely. 'He is the very understanding man.'

When the estate agent had finally run out of forms for her to complete and for me to sign she seemed disappointed that the fun had finished. When we parted she hurried off to try to find another client so that she could fill in some more forms.

I went back to the hotel and managed to re-book my room for an additional two nights. I had decided it would take me at least one day to clear out the rubbish (including the disgusting furniture which the previous tenant had sensibly abandoned when he or she had left) and to give the apartment the spring clean it clearly hadn't had since the end of the French Revolution. It would, I reckoned, then take me another day to acquire some furniture.

~ Chapter Ten ~

The estate agent had given me the key to the apartment (together with a smaller key to the mailbox in the hallway) and so the next morning I set off to do some basic shopping. Among the other things on my list were a mop and bucket, some soap, and a large bottle of disinfectant. I also needed to purchase the various ingredients I knew I would need in order to redecorate the flat a little more in keeping with my undoubtedly bourgeois tastes.

I was well aware that my shopping expedition was likely to be made slightly more difficult than it might otherwise have been by the fact that the negotiations would all have to be conducted in a language that was foreign to me but not to the shopkeepers with whom I would be doing business.

When I had decided to visit Paris I had more or less brushed aside the idea of there being any problems associated with the fact that my command of the French language is not exactly what could accurately be described as ‘masterly’. But there is a significant difference between being a tourist and ordering a cup of coffee and being a resident and trying to buy a mop and bucket.

I already wished I had paid more attention to my French teachers at school.

My most memorable French teacher was female, beautiful, French and in her early twenties. Her name was Nathalie. She wore very short skirts, very high heels and very tight sweaters. She was the first woman I’d ever seen who wore eyeshadow and artificial eyelashes. She painted her nails bright, fire engine red. We all thought that only prostitutes did that. One warm summer day she came to school wearing open-toed sandals and no stockings. Her toenails were painted in the same fire engine red as her fingernails. We were hypnotised, shocked and bewildered. I was fourteen years of age and my classmates and I decided that all French women were probably also prostitutes in their spare time.

What sort of asexual lunatic expects teenage boys to learn anything from a young, beautiful French woman who wears short skirts, high-heels, tight sweaters and artificial eyelashes and paints her finger and toenails fire engine red?

Now that I had decided to stay in Paris it was becoming increasingly clear that my lack of knowledge of the French language was going to add an extra layer of difficulty (and countless extra opportunities for confusion) to problems which already came equipped with their own built in variety of complications.

The first mistake I made was to buy a phrase-book. This seemed a good idea at the time but I quickly found there were two reasons why it wasn’t.

First, even though the book was packed with handy looking phrases none of them was of much practical value. The authors of the book had provided copious amounts of help for travellers wishing to purchase gloves or complain about the state of an over-lumpy mattress to the manager of their hotel but it had absolutely nothing of value in it for Englishmen wanting to buy shower curtain hooks or bath plugs. And nowhere in the book could I find out how to explain to a supercilious shop assistant that I needed a can of white emulsion paint that would cover up purple paint and graffiti written in black felt tip pen.

None of the French people I met ever wanted to know that I had just arrived from the railway station or that my uncle’s pen was in the bureau of my aunt (even as a schoolboy I had strongly suspected that the ability to impart this particular piece of information to a Frenchman might prove to be overvalued). And I wasn’t staying at a hotel where there was much point in asking the receptionist whether my shoes would be cleaned if I left them outside my door at night. I knew darned well what would happen to my shoes if I was reckless enough to leave them outside my bedroom door.

Second, I quickly discovered that the biggest mistake the traveller can make is to attempt to convince the locals that he speaks their language when he doesn’t. This is asking for trouble in a big way. And having a phrase book encourages the traveller in a strange land to walk straight into this particular man trap.

For example, before visiting the local post office to purchase a stamp I studied my phrase book carefully and learned the relevant sentence off by heart. I practised it in front of a shop window. Standing outside on the pavement I tried it out half a dozen times in my head and then, much to the astonishment of a couple of passers by, tried it out aloud. Then I went into the Post Office.

‘Quel est le tarif pour une carte postale pour Angleterre?’ I said, the words sliding from my tongue like treacle off a spoon.

That bit of the conversation went well. I said what I had wanted to say and I understood – or at least I was pretty confident that I understood – what I had said.

But that part of the conversation went so well that the grizzle headed clerk behind the counter fired a volley of rapid fire French at the ledger in front of him without looking up.

Only when I responded with silence did he look up. He stared at me, skilfully flicked his Gauloise into the other corner of his mouth, and raised an eyebrow slightly in a way that made it perfectly clear that he was asking a question.

Not having understood a single word he had said I stared back at him unblinkingly and opened and shut my mouth as soundlessly as a ventriloquist's dummy.

He responded by repeating whatever it was he had said. Being a caring Frenchman and wanting to make it easier for me to understand what he was trying to tell me he spoke more quickly and increased the volume.

I stared at him, glumly, swallowed hard and wiped the palms of my hands down the side of my trousers. 'Do you speak English?' I asked, in English, utterly defeated.

The clerk looked at me pityingly, sneered and rolled his eyes. 'How is she you are wanting?' he asked. He pronounced each word separately and when he had finished stared at me with the arrogance only a multilingual man of the world can command. The French always speak English with great confidence and authority. They believe that no foreigner can speak their language properly but also believe that their command of other languages is always complete.

Not having the faintest idea what the clerk wanted to share with me I tried again. 'I want a stamp for a postcard,' I explained, in English, now feeling very feeble. 'To send to England,' I added. 'A postcard. A stamp. For England. To send to my sister in Northampton.'

The clerk stared at me without comprehension.

I had the postcard in my hand, ready to be stamped and posted, I lifted it up and showed it to him. I then pointed to the address and, finally, to the place where I intended to affix the stamp I wanted to buy. This simple mime proved wonderfully effective and for several years afterwards mime was to be a fundamental form of communication for me.

The phrase book was soon abandoned. I found it useful just once. It proved to be the perfect thickness to jam under the undersized leg of a wobbly table in a café. I left it there as my lasting contribution to the stability of late French furniture design.

In the bread shop, next door to the post office, I discovered another problem: should I address the woman behind the counter as 'madame' or 'mademoiselle'?

The one thing I remembered from my French lessons at school was that the gravest faux pas any male can make in France is to address a woman as 'madame' when she really wants to be addressed as 'mademoiselle'. The gravity of this error, I had been assured, can only be compared with the gravity of addressing a woman as 'mademoiselle' when it is her heart's desire to be known as 'madame'.

I had learned that while some women in their late twenties or thirties can be roused close to murder by being called 'mademoiselle' (on the grounds that the insult implies that they are unable to find a husband) others, in exactly the same age group, can be equally offended by being called 'madame' on the grounds that, whatever their legal status might be, they want to think of themselves as still appearing to be young and available.

Attempting to deal with the problem by not using either the word 'madame' or the alternative 'mademoiselle' was, I was taught, an even more heinous crime.

And so I stood outside the bakery next to the post office and tried to decide how to address the shop assistant inside. Through the shop window I could see the baker at work in the back of the shop and a large sign in French, fortuitously simple enough for me to understand, confirmed that bread sold in the shop was freshly baked on the premises and that fresh supplies were put on sale at four hourly intervals throughout the day. I wondered if there was a chance that the baker himself might serve me. I even wondered how long I would have to walk about the streets of Paris to find a bread shop staffed entirely by male employees.

My problem was that there were two women serving in the shop.

Both wore white overalls and sweet little green and white caps and both had their hair tied back in what I believe used to be called (appropriately in view of the establishment in which they were working) buns.

The older woman, who looked to be in her late forties or early fifties, had a friendly smile and was unusually wellendowed in every visible department. She had lots of very white teeth, slightly bulging eyes, plump, red cheeks, vast amounts of blonde hair, huge shoulders, huge arms and a massive chest. Instead of individually defined breasts she had a large single shelf of bosom.

The younger one, slightly taller but much slimmer, was wearing lots of make-up and her hair was perfect. And through her white coat it was clear that she also had two very well-defined breasts. They weren't particularly large but they were separate.

I decided that by any stretch of the imagination the woman with the shelf-like bosom had to be a 'madame' whereas her companion with the twin peaks was clearly a 'mademoiselle'.

And it was in this way that I have since then based my decision on how to speak to French women. I address those with two clearly defined breasts as 'mademoiselle'. Those who have a large amorphous bosom, wherein the two separate parts are merged into one and generally speaking indistinguishable, I address as ‘madame’. This simple technique has never failed me.

‘Avez vous du pain, s’il vous plait, madame?’ I asked the woman with the universal bosom, speaking in my halting, stuttering French. Since I was, at the time, standing in a shop surrounded by several hundred fine examples of the baker’s art the question may have sounded a little odd, superfluous even, but it was the best I could do. I had spent several minutes composing the sentence and I was inordinately proud of it.

‘Ah, American!’ said the woman, presumably coming to this conclusion on the not unreasonable basis that only an American could possibly ask such an inane question.

‘No, no!’ I cried quickly, anxious not to be mistaken for a citizen of that uncivilised land. ‘I’m English!’

‘Ah, you are the English!’ said the woman, clearly much happier about this than she had been when she had thought I was American. ‘I am for speaking the English!’

‘Great!’ I said. ‘That’s good.’

‘Though my English she is like the weather,’ she went on.

I looked at her and frowned slightly, trying to work out why her English was like the weather.

‘Why is it like the weather?’ I asked.

‘Some days she is good,’ replied the bosomy madame, smiling broadly. ‘And some days she is bad.’ She frowned and looked very sad as she said this.

‘I would like to buy some bread,’ I said, speaking in English but trying to keep the sentence as simple as possible.

‘What are you wanting?’ she asked me, waving her arms around in that expansive and (if there are delicate ornaments around) slightly dangerous way that continentals favour.

Looking around, without success, for a simple, sliced white loaf, filled to the crust with a variety of homely chemicals and wrapped in a colourful piece of plastic, I chose and purchased a walking stick length baguette.

A few minutes later, clutching my several feet of warm (it was fresh from the oven) and naked baguette (the bread had been handed over to me wrapped only in a tiny square of greaseproof paper which enabled me to hold it without touching it) I called in at a supermarket and picked up a Camembert cheese, a bottle of wine (cheaper than mineral water in England), a bag of apples, a bottle of disinfectant, a packet of highly-coloured cleaning cloths, a box of scouring pads and a pair of toilet rolls and headed back towards my new apartment.

On the way back to my new home-to-be, while looking for an ironmonger’s where I could purchase a mop and a bucket, I called in at a chemist’s shop so that I could pick up those essentials without which no Englishman abroad can possibly ever feel at home – a hot water bottle, a pair of nail scissors and an eye bath.

Not knowing the French words for any of these items turned a theoretically dull few minutes into something of an adventure. The female assistant in the chemist’s shop was very nice. She smiled when she asked me if I needed help. I warmed towards her and felt grateful. We are all kings of our domains. We feel at home in our office or our shop and we rarely stop to think how nervous – even terrified – the visitor maybe.

‘Avez vous une bouteille pour l’eau chaud?’ I asked.

The assistant, a shy looking mademoiselle who was prone to giggling, brought me a thermos flask.

Not having the faintest idea how to rephrase my request so as to make my requirement more obvious I abandoned language and reverted to mime. Twenty minutes later I was the proud owner of a bright pink hot water bottle, a pair of gold plated nail scissors and a small porcelain eye bath (‘un bains pour les yeux’ seemed to me to be an appropriate phrase but resulted in a good deal more giggling so once again I had reverted to mime). As I left I heard the giggling increase in volume. I half turned as I opened the door and saw that the girl who had served me was whispering to a friend (previously unseen). For a moment it occurred to me that they might be trying to work out what illness I had which required dipping nails, bathing eyes and clutching a hot water bottle. But I quickly comforted myself with the thought that since this was Paris she probably thought I was simply practising some form of bizarre English perversion – some private sexual peccadillo undoubtedly picked up at an English boarding school.

~ Chapter Eleven ~

After the chemist's shop I managed to find an ironmonger's; a veritable Aladdin's cave of a shop. The owner had crammed half the stock on shelves from floor to ceiling and strewn the other half on the floor in untidy piles. A third half was hanging from the ceiling, suspended by pieces of knotted string from cuphooks. I found it difficult to move without banging either my knees or my head.

A short woman with bright blue hair and a dazzling white overall stood behind the counter with her arms folded across her not inconsiderable chest. Like many French shop assistants she managed to give the impression that she was in reality a member of a major royal family and was merely standing in the shop in order to keep an eye on things for some impoverished acquaintance.

I have for many years been an aficionado of stationery shops. Allow me to wander unhindered amidst racks of brightly coloured notebooks and newly designed pens that can write upside down and under water and I am filled to the brim with that very same sense of well-being that fills the average, healthy small boy let loose in a small copse of conker trees in early autumn.

But I was setting up home, and for anyone setting up home a good ironmonger's shop is almost as exciting as a good stationery shop. Within moments the lady in the white coat had generously and graciously allowed me to purchase a red plastic bucket, a wooden-handled mop and a lime green plastic dustpan. I was particularly pleased with the plastic dustpan which came complete with a matching lime green brush with pale yellow bristles. An accompanying label, written in five languages, assured me that the bristles were guaranteed to give lasting service and remain fixed in their sockets for a lifetime (though the guarantee did not say to whose . lifetime this referred). I also selected a packet of what I guessed (and hoped) from the label was a proprietary stain remover, a very shiny kettle with a removable whistle attached to its spout, two large white breakfast cups with matching saucers and a rather large aluminium stepladder which, according to the multi-lingual brochure, was equipped with patented non-slip treads and a 'unique safety system designed to reduce the risk of accidents'. I also picked up a small bottle of oil for use on the door lock.

If these items had been my first and only purchases of the day then walking back to my new home would have been little more than a difficult challenge.

But, in addition to the bucket, the mop, the dustpan (with matching brush), the oil, the stain removers, the kettle, the cups and saucers and the rather large aluminium stepladder I was already carrying a Camembert cheese, a bottle of wine, a bag of apples, a bottle of disinfectant, a packet of cleaning cloths, a box of scouring pads, a pair of toilet rolls, a hot water bottle, a pair of nail scissors, an eyebath and a rapidly cooling baguette. I was grateful for the fact that the stamp I had purchased had already been stuck onto a postcard and passed on to other hands. A stamp may be small and light but the straw which broke the camel's back didn't weigh a lot either.

The journey back to the flat was not easy. But in the end I managed it, discovering on the way that carrying a ladder may be slightly inconvenient but it is the best way to walk through Paris. Motorists and other pedestrians all give way to a man carrying a ladder, and in a city where the right of way usually goes to the rudest and most selfish that is something worth knowing. While threading my way through rush hour traffic I have often regretted the fact that I did not have a ladder in my hand and I have, on more than one occasion, thought that the inconvenience of carrying a ladder everywhere might well be outweighed by the advantage it brings with it.

Indeed, the journey went remarkably smoothly (and certainly rather better than I had expected) until I got back to the building wherein lay my apartment.

When I had first viewed the apartment I had regarded the absence of a lift as of little consequence. Indeed, I had convinced myself that this could prove to be something of a boon. By forcing me to climb the stairs, the apartment would impose upon me the sort of exercise regime I had long intended to impose upon myself.

But when I had first viewed the apartment I had not been carrying anything. I certainly hadn't been carrying a large aluminium stepladder which seemed to defy all rules of science by becoming heavier with every second that I carried it. When I had picked it up in the ironmonger's shop I had been impressed by its lightness. The woman in the white coat had commented upon this very virtue and had taken the ladder from me and shown me, by lifting it with just one hand, that if ever a ladder could be described as light then this was that ladder.

The main problem (apart from the cumbersome nature of my packages and the fact that as the shopping got heavier so my arms seemed to get weaker) was the fact that the stepladder was rather large and the steps up which I was carrying it were rather narrow and twisted upon themselves so much that they could have been almost described as comprising a spiral staircase.

It did not take me long to realise that I was not going to be able to haul all my purchases up the stairs in one trip. And so I left the ladder in the hallway and took everything else upstairs with me. Having dropped my purchases inside the flat I then hurried back downstairs to collect the ladder before someone else decided that it had been abandoned and was fair game for anyone prepared to provide it with a good home.

It was at this point that my problems really began.

Having already decided to defy scientific logic by becoming steadily heavier the ladder now seemed determined to make my life more difficult by also becoming longer and longer. And; of course, as the ladder got longer and longer the staircase responded by becoming steadily narrower and more twisting with every step I took. I lost count of the number of times the ladder banged into the banisters, the ceiling, the walls and the doors of the apartments we passed.

'Hello!' said someone somewhere behind me. 'What can I do for you?' She spoke in a beautifully elegant accent which had just the faintest Welsh lilt to it. If you could have turned the accent into glass it would have made the sort of container from which one would only dare drink the very finest malt whisky.

I stopped for a moment, rested the ladder and looked behind me. On the small landing below stood a slim woman in a red silk dressing gown and a pair of red slippers. Her hair was wrapped in a towel that had, with a few skilful twists, been turned into a turban. I have never been very good at guessing women's ages but it was impossible even to make a guess at this woman's age other than to hazard a guess that she was probably somewhere in between sixteen and sixty for her face was covered in that white goo that women some times smear onto their faces in order to preserve their complexion.

I had by this time lost track of the floors and had no idea whereabouts in the building I was. All I knew was that my apartment was on the top floor.

The woman put one hand on a hip, stared at me rather defiantly and said something in very rapid French. I didn't have the faintest notion what she was saying to me but using information gleaned from her body language and the tone of her voice I felt safe in coming to the conclusion that she wasn't inviting me in for a cup of tea and a sticky bun.

I apologised, in English, and told her, in halting French, that I did not understand her.

'Did you knock?' she asked in English. She spoke rather sharply and then knocked on her own door to illustrate what she had said.

'No.'

'Oh,' she said, looking down the stairs as though looking to see if there was anyone else in sight. 'I thought someone knocked.'

'Maybe it was the stepladder,' I said. 'I'm sorry. It doesn't fit the staircase very well. It might have accidentally banged on your door.'

'Isn't it a trifle large?' asked the woman, after examining the ladder critically.

I looked at her and then at the ladder. 'Is it?'

'The ceilings in these apartments aren't particularly high,' the woman in the red dressing gown pointed out. 'I hope you're going to be able to get that thing to stand up once you manage to get it wherever you are taking it.'

Once again I looked at her and then at the ladder. This time I also allowed my glance to take in the ceiling in the hallway above me. Suddenly, I felt rather uneasy. It had never occurred to me that the ladder might be too big to fit in my room. 'I hadn't thought of that,' I confessed, feeling rather stupid.

The woman frowned, looked me up and down as though preparing to make an offer for the freehold, and then stared at me rather suspiciously. 'Do you work for one of the local decorating firms?' she asked me. 'I haven't seen you around before.'

'I'm not a decorator,' I said. 'I've just rented a flat upstairs – it needs cleaning up a bit.'

'Oh,' said the woman. She did not sound entirely convinced '.And you're English?'

'Yes.'

'Well do try and be careful with the ladder,' said the woman. 'Try not to make so much noise and try not to do so much damage to the paint work.' She stared rather pointedly at a spot on the wall next to her door where the ladder had damaged the wall. A small shower of fresh paint flakes on the floor below made it difficult for me to deny responsibility. She then went back into her apartment, gave me one last firm look, and closed the door very firmly. If shutting a door can be punctuation in a conversation this was a row of exclamation marks. I got the impression that, generally speaking, she wasn't too delighted to have met me.

Feeling rather chastened after my first experience with a fellow resident I was a little more careful with the ladder for the rest of the journey up the stairs.

Of course, when I finally got the wretched aluminium monstrosity into my new apartment I discovered that the woman in the towelling turban and the face mask had been absolutely right: the ladder, which now weighed considerably more than it had when I had purchased it, was far too big to stand up.

I had to carry it all the way back down the stairs and then retrace my steps to the ironmongers. There I had to wait for twenty minutes while the woman behind the counter finished a vital telephone conversation (presumably dealing with some item of state – possibly the design of a new crown or the amount of ermine to tack onto her next set of royal robes). And it then took me another twenty five minutes to explain that I needed a smaller ladder. Eventually, she allowed me to swap my big ladder for a smaller one that cost considerably less. She didn't offer to refund the difference in the prices of the two ladders and I didn't have the courage to ask.

All things considered it would have been fair to say that my first day as a Parisian had not gone terribly well. At eight that evening, exhausted and dirty, I decided to head back to my hotel to have a shower and to change my shirt. Before I left my apartment, while struggling to close the front door, I remembered the bottle of oil I had purchased earlier that day. I popped back into the apartment, picked up the oil, used the dropper to add a considerable amount of the fluid to the sticking and slightly rusty lock, put the oil back into the rickety kitchen cupboard, closed the front door firmly (with a little oil in it the lock shut with a reassuringly smooth click and when I tried it, as one does, the door seemed convincingly impenetrable) and went to my hotel pleased that the day had not been entirely wasted since I had managed to complete at least one small chore.

The receptionist, busy watching a rerun of Sergeant Bilko on a flickering television set handed me my key without a word.

Forty five minutes later, feeling much fresher, I wandered along to the café Albert had so lovingly described as 'The Fag and Ferret' to do something about refreshing the inside of my body.

~ Chapter Twelve ~

In the Fag and Ferret Albert was firmly in residence; sitting on what was clearly his usual bar stool. He had a whisky glass in his left hand and a pen in his right hand. His notebook lay open on the counter in front of him. A couple of lines, written in his distinct handwriting, showed that he had been working.

I sat down on the empty bar stool next to the columnist but said nothing. Since he was working I did not want to disturb him.

'You haven't changed your mind, then?' he said, without looking at me.

'No,' I said. 'I haven't.' I thought for a moment. 'How did you know I hadn't changed my mind?'

'You wouldn't have come back here if you had,' he replied.

I thought for a moment and smiled a little. He was, of course, quite right. If I had changed my mind I would have snuck quietly back to England.

'Now that I'm staying here I'm going to have to learn to speak French,' I said to Albert.

'Why do you want to learn French?' asked Albert. He leant forwards slightly on his stool, concentrating hard.

I thought for a moment. 'So that I can speak to the French,' I answered, rather lamely. 'In shops and so on,' I added, unimaginatively.

'The deaf and dumb get by,' said Albert flatly. 'Besides nearly everyone who matters speaks English. 'And if they don't then they ought to learn.' He emptied his glass and ordered a refill. I would quickly learn that Albert drank more than anyone I had ever met. If there had been national teams for drinking Albert would have qualified for any team in the world – including a French team – but he somehow managed to remain thoughtful and incisive right up to the moment when he fell off his stool. (This was something he did rather often but always with enormous grace. Albert did everything with grace and style.)

'But I think I ought to make a bit of an effort,' I said. 'When did you learn to speak French?' I asked him. 'Did you speak French before you came to Paris? Did you take lessons? Or did you just, sort of pick it up as you went along?'

'My French is awful,' said Albert.

'It's amazing!' I said. 'You jabber away like a native. Did you go to a language school? Conversation classes?'

'I only know a few words,' said Albert, with a depreciatory shrug.

'Surely we all have some sort of obligation to learn their language,' I argued, rather pompously. 'We're the foreigners here.'

'How can we be foreign?' demanded Albert, indignantly. 'We're English! If we speak English to them it will help make them more international. It'll help them build up their exports. And there will be less need for us to speak French.'

'But you're fluent in French!' I pointed out.

'Only if you ignore the fact that I don't know any grammar and my vocabulary is minuscule,' said Albert.

I didn't say anything. I didn't want to push him into giving me advice if he didn't want to give it. For a while we sat in silence.

'I suppose you're right,' said Albert, after a long delay. He sighed. He was a great sigher. 'You should learn French. You never know when you might need it. Have you heard of Jack Kahane?'

I thought for a moment and then shook my head. 'No.'

'Have you heard of Maurice Girodias?'

Once again I had to shake my head and say 'No'.

'God you are ignorant, aren't you? Maurice Girodias was a publisher who worked in Paris. He published The Story of O. Have you heard of that?'

I said I had.

'Hal' said Albert knowingly. 'Girodias published many great writers and many great books - most of which had been turned down by other publishers. He published Samuel Beckett, Lawrence Durrell, Jean Genet, Henry Miller, William Burroughs and Vladimir Nabokov.'

I was impressed and said so.

'Maurice Girodias's father was also a publisher. His name was Jack Kahane. I can't for the life of me remember how a Kahane became a Girodias. Kahane was an amazing Englishman who launched the Obelisk Press in Paris and published a book called The Tropic of Cancer by an unknown American called Henry Miller.'

'I've heard of that.'

Albert looked at me. 'I'm glad to hear it,' he said wryly. 'Anyway, in 1914, at the outbreak of World War I, Jack Kahane rushed off to join the French Foreign Legion. He was turned down for a position in the Legion – I don't know why but the authorities presumably didn't see him as Beau Geste. Undeterred by this minor setback he got a job as an army interpreter in the French cavalry. There were, however, just two gaps in his CV that might have been considered something of an impediment for a man yearning to make his way as an interpreter in the French cavalry. First he couldn't ride a horse. And second, he didn't speak French.'

'So what happened?'

'I rather think they sent him home,' said Albert thoughtfully. He sipped at his fresh drink.

It seemed to me that the lesson here was that learning French would stand me in good stead if I ever wanted to join the French Army.

'But, on the other hand I remember meeting a woman from Hereford who got herself a job in a large, very bureaucratic French bank,' continued Albert. 'She had lied on her application form and claimed that she could speak French. In fact she spoke only one word - and that was 'Non'.'

'She said it was the most terrifying experience of her life – and not something that she would recommend to anyone else. To begin with she simply said 'Non!' to everyone and everything in the hope that this would keep her out of trouble. Her boss thought her problem was shyness and so she was put on the switchboard. She told me it was a miracle that she didn't ruin the company because she said 'Non' to every caller and shut them off without giving them a chance to say anything. After a week she progressed to adding je suis désolé and after another week she added 'Il n'est pas ici'.'

'What happened in the end?'

'She was promoted, of course. And eventually she learned enough French to do her job.'

I scratched my head. 'So it might not be a bad idea to start learning a little French now? In case I need to join the French cavalry or get myself a job in a French bank.'

'Exactly,' said Albert. 'I have French conversation lessons with a woman I know,' he added. For some reason it sounded like a confession.

I waited.

'I met her when I first came to Paris,' said Albert. 'There was a notice in the local tobacconist's shop. 'Pretty Young Woman Gives French Lessons.'

I looked at him, not sure whether or not he was being funny.

'I was young and naive,' explained Albert with a shrug. 'I made an appointment and went to her flat.' He looked at me and grinned. 'I genuinely thought she was a French teacher.'

'But she wasn't?'

'Of course she wasn't,' said Albert, with a snort. 'But she was amused by my innocence and, I think, rather taken by the idea of being able to earn money in a relatively honest sort of way. She was twenty two and she'd been a prostitute for seven years. For her it was a novelty to earn money without having to remove her clothes. So for an hour we just talked and at the end of the hour I booked another appointment. She didn't have the faintest idea what to charge me and so – I found this out much later – she pretended to go to the toilet but instead went out into the hall, looked up a genuine French teacher in the telephone directory, rang her and asked her price. Then she came back and charged me that. That was thirty years ago.'

'Does she take other students?' I asked him.

Albert looked at me and smiled. 'You don't give up, do you?' He thought for a moment. 'I'll take you to her flat and introduce you,' he promised.

I looked at him and started to ask him something.

'Yes,' he answered, guessing my question, and answering it before I had asked it. 'Yes, she still works as a prostitute. Mostly she services her regular clients. Some of them have been going to her for as long as I have.'

I was looking forward to meeting Albert's French teacher.

~ Chapter Thirteen ~

I felt rather nervous as I accompanied Albert on the walk to the building where his French teacher had her private apartment.

'Lucie has three homes – all on the right bank,' Albert had explained. 'She has a private apartment near the Palais Royal. That's where she lives and where she gives me my French lessons. The fees I pay are pin money. She couldn't live off her earnings as a teacher – certainly not the way she lives. Her second home – what she calls her working apartment – is just off the Rue St Denis. That is where she entertains the customers whose contributions pay her mortgage and food bills. A small and rather dour Brazilian widow called Marie-Claire lives there. She looks after the apartment and acts as her maid. I'm not sure precisely how a census collector would describe Marie-Claire's job but, among other things, she collects the fees from the customers and makes sure that there are always fresh clean towels in Lucie's shower room and next to the bidet, fresh sheets on the bed and a plentiful supply of condoms in the top drawer of the bedside cabinet. And, finally, Lucie rents a room at a bordello two streets away from her working apartment.'

'What a wonderfully old-fashioned word!'

'Bordello?'

'Round where I lived when I was a kid they were called brothels. Not that there were many of them as far as I know.'

'Paris is full of them. Most of them specialise. But the one where Lucie works is pretty general I think.'

'Specialise? How? What do you mean?'

Albert laughed. 'You'd be surprised! There are houses for men who like to be tied up and beaten. And there are houses where the women all dress in rubber. At one time there was a brothel on the Île Saint-Louis where all the prostitutes were over 70 years old.'

'You're kidding!'

'I'm not,' insisted Albert. 'Prostitution isn't just the oldest profession. It's also always been one of the most popular. At the start of the 20th century there were 1,00,000 prostitutes in Paris serving a population of under three million. Most of the actresses and nurses in Europe were also prostitutes. Child prostitution was legal and girls of eight toured the cafés at night selling themselves to anyone – male or female – who would pay them.'

It was clear that Albert had done some research. It occurred to me that it probably made it easier for him to accept Lucie's occupation. I was beginning to get the feeling that she was more to him than just a teacher.

'Who owns the bordello where Lucie works?'

'The owners are a Belgian couple – I think they must be in their seventies. He's mean and humourless, has a small toothbrush moustache and looks like a retired tax collector. He looks ten years older than he is. She's still voluptuous, looks at least twenty years younger than she is and looks like everyone's favourite auntie. She still looks after a few of her older clients. They provide room service and the customers and collect the money. They take 75% of whatever Lucie earns and give her the rest - in cash - at the end of every day. The brothel charges relatively low fees but it's a high through put establishment - depending more on quantity than quality. Curiously, Lucie once told me that Sunday morning is their busiest time of the week.'

'Lucie doesn't have a pimp?' I asked. I had thought all prostitutes had pimps. It occurred to me that Albert, who had spoken rather lovingly about his friend, was very knowledgeable about Lucie's professional habits. He clearly knew a great deal about her domestic and working arrangements.

'I suppose the brothel owners are the nearest she's got to a pimp these days,' said Albert. 'I remember that she used to have an arrangement with a huge West Indian fellow called Eddie. He was coal black, about six and a half feet tall and as skinny as a rake. He looked like the archetypal pimp: huge expensive gold rings, a broad brimmed white Fedora and an ancient Lincoln Continental in powder blue. He was a pastiche; absurdly over dressed. He always carried a knife and looked after Lucie and a dozen other girls. If ever they had any trouble with a customer he'd be there and he'd sort things out. She relied on him for years – probably ten or fifteen years altogether – and I never heard her say a bad word about him. But he got arrested for drug dealing about five or six years ago. He was sent to prison and he died after being stabbed in the back with a sharpened spoon. The newspapers reported that a teenage drug addict did it because Eddie had beaten him at table tennis. Since then, as far as I know, Lucie has never had a pimp.'

'Does she have any other, er, language students?' I asked Albert as we crossed the Pont Neuf on our way to Lucie's apartment.

'No,' replied the journalist. 'She was charmed and flattered when she discovered that people would pay her simply to talk to them – and that she didn't even have to talk dirty. But I don't think she's ever taken any other students.' He stopped for a moment to buy two small conically shaped white paper bags full of hot chestnuts from an Algerian street seller. He handed the vendor a twenty franc note, took the two proffered bags of chestnuts and handed one to me.

'When did you find out that she wasn't just a language teacher?' I asked, picking the top chestnut from the bag and popping it into my mouth. It was hotter than I expected and I bounced the chestnut around in my mouth for a few seconds.

'I don't think it was until about my third or fourth visit,' replied Albert, chewing one of the chestnuts. I had noticed that when he had plucked the chestnut from the bag he had sensibly juggled it in the palm of his hand for a few seconds before putting it into his mouth. 'At the beginning I saw her at her working flat and I had noticed that one or two of the blokes I met on the stairs looked rather furtive,' he said. 'But that didn't give the game away because I knew that most of the men who visit prostitutes in Paris do so pretty openly. They don't much care if their wives find out. It's the French way. So when I noticed that one or two – probably Americans or Germans I suspect – hid their faces with their hands when we passed I just thought they were a bit odd.'

'It was her English vocabulary which eventually gave the game away,' said Albert. 'She had picked her English up from her customers and so, as you can imagine, the words she'd learned were rather...,' unusually he seemed to be struggling for the right word and he left the sentence unfinished.

'Like all professionals she had a rather specialised vocabulary,' I suggested.

'Exactly,' said Albert, gratefully. 'I remember being rather startled when I found myself taking part in a long discussion about the aesthetic and practical advantages and disadvantages associated with circumcision. She seemed to be exceptionally experienced in this area and had clearly had close contact with many examples of both types of penis. When I tentatively expressed some surprise at the fact that a young, unmarried French teacher should know so much about penile architecture she laughed and asked me if I did not know what she really did for a living. When I confessed that I didn't she thought it very funny. She told me the truth with out any sense of shame.'

'When I found out I was shocked. I was terribly innocent at the time and even though we hadn't even kissed I rushed out of her apartment at the end of that day's lesson and bought myself a large bottle of antiseptic and some carbolic soap. I then raced home and had a hot bath.'

'When it came time to go back for my next lesson I very nearly didn't go. But in the meantime I'd been to the American library and checked up on venereal diseases. Reassured that it wasn't possible to catch any of the best known diseases simply by sitting on a chair I went back. I even found the courage to accept a cup of coffee and a slice of chocolate cake.'

Albert stopped at a flower stall and started buying flowers. He bought red roses, carnations and irises. When the lady running the stall had wrapped the flowers and Albert had paid her we continued our journey.

'Never visit Lucie without taking her a present,' said Albert. 'Flowers, chocolate, champagne – it doesn't matter which. If you fall in love with her – which you will – you can take her jewellery occasionally.' He looked at me. 'But never take her anything cheap.'

'Are you in love with her?'

Albert looked at me but did not answer the question.

I didn't press him. The answer was obvious.

~ Chapter Fourteen ~

The building where Lucie lived was remarkably like the one in which my own apartment was situated, though the entrance was considerably smarter. There was no lift but the narrow, bare wood staircase was obviously waxed and polished regularly by conscientious hands. As we climbed the stairs I noticed that there were fresh flowers on every window sill.

Lucie's apartment was on the third floor and by the time we got there Albert was wheezing and puffing rather badly. He was not in very good shape. A small card carrying Lucie's name and telephone number had been fitted into a tiny metal frame above the door bell.

We stood there for a moment while Albert recovered from the climb.

'Shall I ring the bell?' I asked.

'Not...yet,' wheezed the out of condition journalist. We waited a little longer while he recovered.

Finally, when his breathing was more normal Albert stepped forward. He ignored the bell and knocked on the door with the knuckles of his right hand.

I felt inexplicably nervous. Although I had no idea what Lucie looked like I was expecting her to open the door wearing a red PVC micro-skirt, fishnet stockings, red patent shoes with five inch heels, a diaphanous blouse and a cleavage-enhancing black bra. I expected her to be wearing lots of lipstick, half a pound of eye make-up and a shoulder-length strawberry blonde wig. In other words I expected Lucie to open the door looking exactly like the stereotyped Parisian prostitute. When I realised this I felt rather ashamed of myself She would, I realised, probably be wearing an expensive grey silk Chanel suit and a pair of elegant Christian Dior shoes.

There was a spyhole in the middle of the solid-looking wooden front door to Lucie's flat and I had an uneasy feeling that Albert and I were being spied on by the resident on the other side of the door. Or, rather, that since Albert was well known to the occupier I was being spied on and carefully studied.

Suddenly, there was the sound of a bolt being pulled back. And then the sound of a safety chain being slipped out of its catch. And then the door opened and I met Lucie for the first time.

If I hadn't known that Lucie was much older, I would have guessed that she was about thirty five. She was surprisingly tall (though several inches of this was down to the heels on her shoes) and distinctly curvaceous rather than plump. She had a mature and memorable figure; she was extremely attractive.

She was wearing a red PVC micro skirt, fishnet stockings, red patent leather shoes with five inch heels, a diaphanous blouse, a cleavage enhancing black bra, a lot of bright red lipstick, half a pound of eye make-up and a shoulder length strawberry blonde wig. In short, when Lucie opened the door she looked exactly like a stereotyped Parisian prostitute.

Of course, sometimes our prejudices and preconceived notions are absolutely spot on.

'My darling!' said Lucie, throwing her arms around the journalist, kissing him and leaving lipstick marks on both cheeks. 'You are so fit!' she said. She turned to me. 'Most of my visitors are out of breath by the time they reach my door, but Albert never is!' Albert turned to me and winked and then gave Lucie the flowers he had bought her. Lucie oohed and aarhed and said how beautiful they were and then Albert introduced me and Lucie gave me the same treatment.

'This man is my very dearest friend,' Lucie said to me with her arms around my neck. 'As Henry Adams once said "One friend in a lifetime is much; two are many; three are hardly possible. Friendship needs a certain parallelism of life, a community of thought, a rivalry of aim".' It seemed odd to hear Henry Adams quoted by a French prostitute but Lucie was, I was to learn, very well read.

She smelt strongly of a subtle and therefore presumably expensive and undoubtedly French perfume. I felt her fingernails dig into my neck and when she eventually released me I instinctively looked down; her nails, which were perfectly manicured and painted bright pink, were the longest I'd ever seen.

'You have to excuse me,' said Lucie, looking down. 'I am still in my working clothes. I got home just two minutes ago and did not have time to change.'

'You've been working hard?' asked Albert.

'Phew!' said Lucie, closing her eyes and shaking her head. 'Oh la la!' she shook her hand as though trying to get rid of droplets of water. 'It has been the world cup,' she sighed, rolling her eyes heavenwards. 'Paris has been full of men full of drink and urges.'

'My friend wants to learn French,' said Albert. 'Would you give him lessons?'

Lucie looked me up and down, as though she were a customer at a slave market and she was trying to decide whether or not to put in a bid at the auction. 'He is a good looking man,' she conceded, seemingly thinking aloud. Just coming into the prime of his life.' Feeling rather flattered I felt myself blushing. She nodded and bit her lower lip. ‘I will take him,’ she said at last. She turned to Albert. ‘I would take him anyway because he is your friend, but him I take for him too.’ She moved a little closer and took my hand.

‘You do not have a wife, do you?’

I admitted that this was an area of my life where there was a job vacancy.

‘I can tell,’ said Lucie, with a nod. She put her arm around me and gave me an affectionate squeeze.

Albert grinned at me. ‘You’re falling in love with her already aren’t you?’

‘I am,’ I admitted, without shame or embarrassment.

‘Would you like some champagne?’ Lucie asked us.

‘Splendid idea,’ said Albert.

‘You drink too much,’ Lucie told him. ‘You will have one glass only. Or your liver will go poof, like this!’ she made a fist and then reached up and threw her fingers wide open. It was obvious from the way she spoke and looked at him that she cared about Albert very much. ‘You get the glasses,’ she told him. ‘I will put these beautiful flowers into water and get the Bolly out of the fridge.’

I looked at Albert as Lucie took her flowers and hurried off, presumably towards her kitchen. ‘Bolly?’

‘Bollinger,’ explained Albert. He walked over to a cup board, opened it and took out three cut glass champagne glasses.

Lucie returned moments later with the flowers, resplendent in a huge, very expensive-looking vase, in one hand and a bottle of Bollinger champagne in the other.

‘There you are,’ she said, putting the flower vase down on a small glass-topped table and handing the champagne to Albert. ‘You open this, no?’

‘Yes, certainly,’ said Albert, taking the bottle and quickly and skilfully unwrapping the foil from around the cork, released it without losing a drop of champagne, and carefully filled the three glasses.

Lucie turned to me. ‘You have a French girlfriend? You want to make passionate love to her in French?’

‘Er, no, I’m afraid not,’ I said, shaking my head. ‘Unfortunately,’ I added.

‘Ah,’ said Lucie, making a sympathetic moue. ‘You want to learn business French? You are a rich businessman?’

‘Sadly, no.’

‘What then?

‘Well, I just thought I would like to know a little grammar,’ I explained. ‘How to decline a verb, that sort of thing.’

She looked at me and then at Albert. ‘How to decline a verb?’ she repeated, looking puzzled.

‘Verbs are doing words,’ explained Albert, now busy with the wire cage which held the cork in place. The foil, screwed up into a ball, had been tossed onto the glass-topped table next to the flowers. ‘Like ‘to drink’.’

‘Drink is a verb?’

‘Yes.’

Lucie looked puzzled, and frowned. ‘How do you decline a verb?’ she asked, looking first at him and then at me. She shrugged her shoulders in the elegant but expressive way that only the French have ever mastered. ‘If you are polite you say, "That is very kind of you but no thank you I have already got one". And in French that is "Vous êtes très gentil. Mais non merci. Déjà j’en ai un".’ She turned to Albert. ‘But why would anyone want to decline a drink, especially a glass of Bollinger?’

And thus began my first French lesson. Learning French with Lucie was clearly going to be lots of fun.

When we left I knew that Albert was in love with Lucie but I found myself wondering if he knew just how much he was in love with her.

~ Chapter Fifteen ~

'It's noisy in here,' I said to Albert. We were sitting in the Fag and Ferret and a group of brightly dressed party goers were shouting and drinking very noisily in one corner of the café.

'They're celebrating New Year,' explained Albert.

For a moment I was confused by this remark. I had to look at my watch and check the date. 'But it isn't New Year.'

'It isn't our New Year,' Albert corrected me. 'But it's obviously their New Year. Whoever they are.'

I looked at him, puzzled.

'The ancient Greeks celebrated New Year on 10thJune and 20th September,' explained Albert. 'The Phoenicians celebrated on November 21st, the medieval Christians on March 15th. I can't remember when the Chinese celebrate but I'm pretty sure it isn't December 31st or January 1st.'

'Do you often get people in here celebrating New Year?'

'No. It's usually quiet at this time of the evening,' Albert replied. He lifted his glass to his mouth and swallowed a couple of ounces of fluid. 'Under normal circumstances – if you believe there is ever such a thing as normal circumstances – The Fag and Ferret has three types of customer,' he began. (I was to learn that the monologue was Albert's favourite form of conversation. Once switched into action he would talk almost endlessly. But since everything he said was interesting – and he way he said it made it even more so – I never objected in the slightest. My contribution to our conversations was usually confined to tossing in the occasional word of encouragement or, when he seemed temporarily to have run out of steam, tossing another log onto the fire by asking a question or making a comment which would trigger off another stream of consciousness. You didn't have to be with Albert for long to realise that he was not only cynical and sharp but also one of the funniest and one of the wisest men you'd ever known.)

'During the day the Fag and Ferret's clientele consists largely of people who, either permanently or temporarily, work in the area: shop girls, taxi drivers, street cleaners, plumbers, policemen, civil servants and so on.'

'Civil servants?' I said, rather surprised. I had always thought of civil servants as being rather dull individuals; not at all the type of people to patronise a café.

'The French government is by far the biggest employee in France,' explained Albert. 'If you run a business then you inevitably end up with civil servants as customers.' He shrugged and continued. 'The day time clientele patronise the café between about seven and nine in the morning – when they call in for a breakfast coffee, a croissant and, if it's cold, a nip of brandy to keep the chill out of their bones; between twelve and two in the afternoon they call in for lunch, a bottle of wine and half a bottle of mineral water to clean out their livers – and at around six in the evening – when they call in for a Ricard or a brandy before going home for dinner.'

'During the late evening, and throughout the night the clientele consists largely of those who live in the immediate area and of night workers (bar staff, prostitutes, pimps, waitresses, taxi drivers and so on). They don't usually start to patronise the café until about ten at night when the locals call in for a drink, a smoke and a chat before bed and the workers call in for their first interlude of the night.'

'The third type of client, the tourists, are mostly afternoon callers. In the mornings they are usually too busy sight-seeing or shopping to sit in a café. In the evenings they are too busy rubbing cream on one another's blistered feet to venture far out of their hotels. They may totter in for a plate of steak and chips – they are always convinced that they are eating a slice of some unfortunate nag which has been retired from the racecourse after a series of disastrous results but although they express some slight disgust at this it never dulls their appetite; in some mysterious way they desperately love the idea of being able to tell their friends back home that they've been to Paris and eaten horse meat but they rarely stay for more than twenty minutes or so. If they are American they like to be in and out even faster.' He shook his head, slowly and clearly with sadness. 'The Americans always think that speed and size are the only things that matter,' he said. I was to learn in time that he loathed Americans more than anyone. 'Their steaks have to be bigger than anyone else's, their women have to have bigger breasts than anyone else's, they have to talk louder, they have to have more money, travel further and go faster,' he shook his head again, and took an other sip from his whisky glass. 'They're all size and no substance,' he said. 'They travel more than anyone else but they see far less than anyone.' He emptied his whisky glass and turned to me. 'Sorry,' he said, with a grin. 'Do you want a drink? Will you have a vin chaud?'

'Are you working?' I asked him, nodding towards the notebook. 'I don't want to disturb you.'

'I'd rather talk than write at the moment,' Albert re plied. 'It's less tiring on the arm.' He put his pen into his inside jacket pocket, closed his notebook, picked it up and slipped it into his right hand outer jacket pocket. 'Vin chaud?'

I thanked him and said I would. ‘By the way, I bought a paper so that I could read your column.’

Albert waved a hand in the barman’s direction, told him what he wanted and then looked at me with one eyebrow raised slightly. ‘You’ve already read it,’ he reminded me.

‘I wanted to read it in the paper,’ I told him. I smiled and shrugged, feeling rather embarrassed. ‘It seemed odd to see it in print,’ I said. ‘I know I only read it over the phone but I felt I had a sort of part interest in it.’ I looked at him. ‘Do you still buy the paper every day?’

Albert nodded. ‘I still get a kick out of seeing my column in print,’ he admitted. ‘But if you tell anyone I said that I’ll deny it.’ He paused. ‘I pretty much hate newspapers. These days the editors spend their days thinking up new scares so that they can frighten the readers into having to buy tomorrow’s paper. It’s a twin conspiracy. The advertisers sell products to help people deal with the fears the newspapers have created.’

‘Don’t you find it difficult having to think up something new to write about every day?’

Albert shook his head. ‘I find it difficult to choose what to write about,’ he said. ‘Normal people learn to suppress their prejudices so as not to upset others. For years now I’ve been paid to foster my prejudices and to share them with the good old general public. Most people push their fears and their anger into some deep dark place. I hang mine out in public – and get paid well for it. It’s probably the only job in the world that is both cathartic and remunerative.’

The barman delivered two glasses of steaming hot vin chaud. And then brought the slices of orange, the pot of cannelle and the sachets of sugar.

‘Of course, all my prejudices are soundly based and well-founded,’ said Albert. ‘And one should stick with one’s prejudices if they are soundly based and well-founded.’ He carefully slid a slice of orange into his hot wine and then added a good sprinkling of cinnamon. ‘Fortunately, writing a column is not quite as easy as it looks,’ Albert told me.

‘I don’t think it looks easy at all.’

‘A lot of people do,’ sighed Albert. ‘And it is fairly easy to write one column. Or two. The difficult trick, however, is to manage to keep writing columns week in and week out for a year, two years, three years and so on...’ he waved a hand in the air rather airily and then reached out and picked up a sachet of sugar. He tore open the sachet and emptied the contents into his wine. I dropped a slice of orange into mine and as the hot liquid splashed out onto my hand realised instantly why Albert had performed the apparently simple task with such care.

‘You have to tell the readers something they already know along with something they don’t know,’ said Albert.

‘You have to give them something to talk about over dinner or in the pub. You have to make them cross, make them laugh or make them cry. You have to make them respond. You have to touch people’s hearts from a distance; to make them feel passion where there was no passion and to make them feel joy and delight where there was nothing but sadness and despair. It doesn’t matter whether they like you or hate you, agree with you or disagree with you. But it is vital that you force a response out of them. And, when you’ve been there for a while, if you’re any good they end up buying the paper because you write for it. And when that happens you’re in a strong position.’

‘Which I would imagine you are,’ I said.

Albert shrugged. ‘If I didn’t drink so much I would be,’ he admitted. I gathered that the previous evening hadn’t been the first time he had ruffled a few editorial feathers. He tore open a second sachet of sugar and added the contents to his red wine. I followed his example.

‘Your column reads very easily,’ I told him. ‘It gives the reader the impression it was easy to write.’

Albert looked at me and smiled. ‘Things that look as though they were easy to write are invariably the hardest to write,’ he told me. ‘The incomprehensible stuff that the broadsheets print, those long, acres of print that look clever and academic, and are nigh on impossible to read, are the sort of stuff that anyone can write. They’re easy to write. Pieces that are easy to write are usually full of preconceptions and old, recycled prejudices – they contribute very little that is new.’ He paused. ‘My prejudices are mostly new and definitely all my own.’

He picked up his glass of vin chaud and sipped at it appreciatively. ‘What sort of day have you had?’ he asked me, suddenly changing the subject, without any warning. This, I was to learn, was typical behaviour on his part. If he felt bored with the way a conversation was going he would simply stop and start to talk about something else – usually something completely different. ‘Are you feeling nervous? Do you think you made the right decision? Have you decided where you are going to live?’

‘I’m feeling apprehensive,’ I admitted. ‘But I think I made the right decision. And rather to my surprise I’ve already found a flat – sorry an apartment.’

Albert looked at me without disguising his surprise. He raised his glass. ‘Congratulations!’ he said, and I got the impression that he meant it. ‘I’ve been living in Paris for more years than I can remember and I still live in a hotel. When I first came here I couldn’t afford to buy a flat and the banks wouldn’t lend me any money because I didn’t have any money.’ He looked at me. ‘Have you noticed that?’ he asked me. ‘It’s one of the great ironies of modern life – banks only want to lend money to people who don’t need it.’

I smiled and nodded.

'I didn't have any money because I'd just got divorced. And that's a crazy story. I was working as news editor before I came here. Going home at eleven o'clock one night I realised that I was only going home to sleep. I decided to give in my notice and to try and get a job with more reasonable hours so that I could spend more time with my wife.' He shrugged. 'I was a bit too late,' he said. 'My wife was already having an affair with an assistant golf professional who'd helped her get her handicap down to 18 and her self-esteem up to par. She took me for everything I'd got - and quite a bit more too.'

I thought I ought to say something but I wasn't sure what.

'I thought about finding somewhere to rent,' continued Albert. 'But I was brought up to think of renting as unacceptable and now that I have enough money for the banks to fall over backwards to lend me as much as I need I keep meaning to find a flat but I've never got round to it.' He shrugged. 'Still, there are hot and cold running chamber maids in the hotel.' He grinned. 'How the hell did you manage it?'

'It was more by accident than design,' I admitted. I told him the story of how I had found my apartment. Albert listened attentively.

'I'm impressed,' he said. 'Isn't it an amazing city, though?' Most other big cities are crammed with so many department stores, government buildings, office blocks and theatres that there isn't room for people to live. Paris is full of apartments of all shapes and sizes and prices.'

I agreed with him that Paris did seem to be a wonderful city.

'The real key is the fact that the people who run the city have made sure that they've kept room for the array of little shop keepers who are essential for a decent civilised life.' He sipped from his hot wine. 'How many bakers are there within a quarter of a mile of your new flat?'

I thought for a moment. 'At least three,' I told him. I thought again. 'No, four. At least.'

'How many cobblers?'

'I can think of two within a couple of hundred yards.'

'That's what makes Paris a great and wonderful city,' said Albert, emphatically. 'Not the Eiffel Tower or Notre Dame or the River Seine or the other tourist sights – glorious though they are. It's the fact that it is a real city, with real people living in it. The key is the fact there are plenty of bakers, butchers and candlestick makers around.'

I drank a little of my vin chaud. It tasted very good. Just then another group of revellers who had been celebrating their New Year in a nearby café poured into the Fag and Ferret. They were waving balloons and streamers and bottles of wine and were clearly having a very good time. They made their way over to the corner where the other revellers were sitting drinking and celebrating.

'Goodnight,' I said to Albert, thinking that this was probably a good moment to go back to my hotel and get some sleep. 'Aren't you going to join the party?' asked Albert, who had already acquired a balloon, a paper hat and an opened bottle of wine from the new revellers.

'I'm going to get an early night,' I said. 'I've got a flat to clean out tomorrow...' I looked at my watch and corrected myself... 'later today.'

I turned towards the door and waved goodnight.

~ Chapter Sixteen ~

Cleaning my new apartment was harder work than I had thought it would be and consequently the task took much longer than I had expected.

Things were not helped by the fact that the day began badly.

When I arrived at the flat the next morning I discovered that I couldn't open the door. My key just didn't work; the door seemed to be jammed solid. I was annoyed because, having oiled the lock thoroughly the night before, I thought I had dealt with this particular problem.

Unable to get into the flat I went back down the stairs and walked round to the agents. The woman I had dealt with before was out with a client but a young colleague of hers, called Paulette, came back to the flat with me to see if her key would work where mine had failed. When it didn't we went back to her office and she telephoned for a locksmith. We then went back to the apartment to await his arrival.

'I'm sorry about this,' said Paulette, as we stood together on the landing. Paulette, who was in her twenties, was rather short but generously proportioned. My grandfather, who had never had to confront the concept of political correctness, would have described her as having been built for comfort rather than speed.

'That's OK,' I said. 'It's not your fault.'

'I think it is going to rain later.'

'Do you?'

'I should have brought an umbrella.'

'Umbrellas are brilliant aren't they?' I said. 'Very useful.' I suddenly felt embarrassed at the inanity of the conversation. 'How long have you worked for the agency?' I asked, realising that since it was impossible for two people to stand on a cramped, dark landing and not talk to one another we really needed to find a more convivial and interesting subject than the weather and the usefulness of umbrellas.

'A little over a year,' replied Paulette.

'Do you like it?'

'It is quite an interesting job. I get to meet lots of people. But my real love is antiques.' .

'Would you like to work with antiques?'

'Oh yes,' she replied. 'I want to be a dealer. I love old furniture.' Paulette's English was very good. 'My uncle works with antiques.'

'What does he do?'

'He is a dealer. He buys and sells antiques.'

'Ah.' I nodded wisely.

'He has taught me many things about antiques,' said Paulette proudly. 'Have you furnished your apartment yet?'

'Not yet,' I admitted.

'You came from England?'

'Yes.'

'You did not have furniture there? Did you not bring any with you?'

'I sold just about everything I owned,' I said. 'I arrived here with just two suitcases.'

'How romantic!' said Paulette. 'But it doesn't matter. You should find a woman. Women always have lots of stuff.'

'It's not that easy,' I told her.

'Then you should buy antiques,' she told me. 'Many people buy cheap furniture as a temporarily measure. They convince themselves that they will get rid of it and replace it with something better. But they don't, of course. They still have it twenty years later. I am furnishing our apartment by buying good furniture one piece at a time. I would rather have two nice pieces of furniture than eight or ten pieces of cheap rubbish.'

'That's good advice.'

'My uncle has taught me a great deal about antiques. He is very creative. He taught me that if you put screws in salt and horse brasses in vinegar you can make them look old. And if you soak a new piece of wood in old sump oil the wood will absorb the oil and look much older than it is.'

'Right,' I said, slightly surprised to receive a lesson in faking antiques from someone I had only just met.

'He makes holes in new furniture and fills the holes with wholemeal flour. This makes it look as though the holes have been made by woodworm which have left their dust behind. When buyers see woodworm holes they believe the furniture to be older than it .is.' Paulette smiled at me, obviously proud of her imaginative relative. 'He buys old copies of Le Monde and uses them to line the drawers of cabinets he has had made. The buyer looks at the old newspaper and thinks that this is proof that the cabinet is equally old. That is clever, no?'

‘Er, yes. I suppose so,’ I agreed.

‘He has also taught me how to behave at auctions. When he goes to an auction he takes with him a can of vegetable dye. If he sees a nice piece of lace he sprays the dye onto the lace. This reduces the price. He takes keys and knobs and handles from pieces of valuable furniture and puts them into his pockets. This also reduces the value to other purchasers. And if he sees a valuable book in a row of books at a house auction he will move it to another row at the last minute. And then buy that row of books instead of the first row.’

I was beginning to get the feeling that Paulette’s uncle was more of a confidence trickster than an antique dealer.

Just then the locksmith arrived. Small, gnomish and sporting a long blond pony tail, he wore a smart and surprisingly clean two-piece white suit and carried a huge red plastic box which he quickly opened and which turned out to be full of tools, spare locks and keys – all of them neatly arranged in separate compartments.

I explained the problem, Paulette showed him documentation proving our legal right to enter the apartment, and he knelt down in front of the lock and started to pick away with the tools of his trade.

Paulette and I stood and watched him.

‘You are not married?’ said Paulette. ‘You have no wife?’

‘No,’ I agreed. ‘No wife.’

‘You are starting out afresh, yes?’ ‘

Absolutely,’ I agreed. ‘Naked to the world!’

Paulette giggled.

The locksmith gave up trying to pick the lock. He started to use a screwdriver to remove the screws which kept the lock in place.

‘It shouldn’t take much longer now,’ he assured us.

~ Chapter Seventeen ~

‘Voila!’ cried the locksmith, removing the lock from the door at last. A few minutes later the door swung open.

‘What was the matter?’ asked Paulette.

‘I don’t know,’ said the locksmith, studying first the lock and then the door. He frowned, as though unable to believe his eyes. ‘It looks to me as though someone has glued the lock together with superglue!’

‘That’s absurd!’ said Paulette.

‘Do you have any enemies?’ the locksmith asked me.

‘I don’t think so. Not yet,’ I told him. I found his question curiously disturbing. ‘I’ve only been in Paris a few days. I haven’t been here long enough to have any enemies.’

The locksmith said something to Paulette. She seemed surprised and sceptical. He insisted that his diagnosis was accurate, showed her the lock and explained how the parts had been very effectively glued together.

‘Someone has certainly dropped superglue into your lock,’ said Paulette. ‘Are you sure you cannot think of a possible suspect?’

I thought for a moment and then shook my head.

‘An aggrieved husband? An abandoned mistress?’ suggested the locksmith rather knowingly.

‘No! Certainly not!’ I said, rather indignantly. I had not been in Paris long enough to realise that this was, if anything, intended as a compliment.

The locksmith shrugged his shoulders, fitted a new lock, handed the two keys to Paulette (who gave one to me), packed up his red plastic box and left. Just before he disappeared he handed me the glued together lock.

‘A souvenir!’ he explained, with a stage wink.

‘I am very sorry about all the trouble you have had,’ said Paulette.

‘That’s OK,’ I said. ‘Perhaps it was done by someone who was angry with the former tenant. I have hardly been here long enough to make any enemies.’

‘Perhaps we could have a meal together?’ suggested Paulette.

Surprised, I looked at her.

‘You are single, are you not?’

‘I’m single,’ I said.

‘Do you find me attractive?’

‘Of course,’ I agreed.

‘Then perhaps we could have a meal together?’

‘I would like that,’ I said, still rather surprised at the unusual way things were working out. ‘You are single too?’

‘No,’ said Paulette. ‘I have been married for six years. But my husband is away a good deal. We do not get on well together.’ She shrugged. ‘And he has a mistress.’

I didn’t know what to say to this and so I didn’t say anything.

‘When we first got married he said that we should sit down every evening and talk to one another.’

‘That sounds a good idea.’

‘He said each one of us should tell the other the faults they saw in them.’

I swallowed hard. ‘Rather daring I would think.’

‘It was perhaps not a very good idea,’ admitted Paulette. ‘At first I was shy about telling the truth but on the first day of our honeymoon my husband told me that he thought me self-absorbed, intolerant, anti-social and too sensitive. I responded by telling him that I thought him rude, ungracious, boorish and insensitive. I also told him that his organ was too small and that he was not a good lover.’

I flinched.

‘Somehow this honesty and openness did not seem to help our relationship or our marriage in quite the way that my husband had expected.’

‘Gosh,’ I said. ‘I am surprised.’

‘He also said that we should tell each other a secret every day.’

I stared at her.

‘He had read in a magazine that this was a good way to cement a relationship.’

‘Did it?’

‘No. I found myself making up secrets because I hadn’t got anything else to tell him. I felt I knew too much about him and that he knew too much about me. There was no mystery left in our marriage.’ She paused, and thought for a moment. ‘How about seven o’clock tomorrow outside the St Michel Metro station?’

‘Perfect,’ I said, unable to think of a way to escape from this proposed assignation without appearing rude.

‘I’ll see you there then,’ said Paulette, giving me a big smile, waving and then skipping down the stairs like a child going out to play. The last thing I wanted was an affair with a married woman – however acquiescent her husband might be. But how, I wondered, was I going to get out of this.

After she had gone I set to work emptying the flat of the rubbish left by the previous tenant. I threw out every piece of furniture, all the carpets and everything else that could be moved – including and, indeed, rather especially, the hideous mould green shower curtains.

The previous tenant had clearly not cleaned the flat for months – possibly years. I didn’t fancy sleeping in the bed he had left behind or even sitting on the chairs he had left in the living room. The mattress looked so much like a miniature wild life park that I had to resist the temptation to drag it along to St Germain and donate it to the biology department of the Sorbonne University. I brought in the furniture from the tiny balcony (two small chairs and a tiny table) and found that all three items were so rotten that I could easily break them into small pieces with my bare hands.

I managed to break up the chairs in the living room (they were several decades past their best days and it didn’t take a lot of effort) and I took the bed apart with the aid of tools – a rusty spanner and a screwdriver with a broken handle – which I found lurking in the kitchen. When I had dragged all the bits and pieces of debris downstairs I crammed what I could into the two dustbins in the small courtyard and stuffed the mattress and the bed frame into a skip I found nearby. For a few moments, as I walked away, I felt a little guilty about filling up someone else’s skip but when I looked back I saw a long haired youth in an army combat jacket dragging the mattress and the bed frame out of the skip and carrying them off down the street. My guilty feeling immediately evaporated.

Once the flat was empty the task ahead seemed a good deal simpler and more straightforward. I scrubbed the floors, the walls and the ceiling. I scraped thick smears of fat from every surface in the kitchen. I repaired the broken cupboard door (this involved another trip to the ironmonger’s shop where, once again, the same member of the royal family, was kind enough to allow me to purchase a hinge, a packet of screws and a screwdriver which fitted the screws and had a handle which was not broken) and used up several bottles of disinfectant removing the vast army of microscopic organisms which my predecessor had left behind as souvenirs of his stay. When I had repaired the kitchen cupboard and was about to replace the few items I had stored therein I idly examined the bottle of oil I had used on the lock the night before. I started to read the label but couldn’t understand it so I went and fetched my dictionary. To my horror I discovered that the oil wasn’t oil at all. It was superglue. Rather embarrassed by this discovery I hid the bottle at the bottom of my rubbish bag.

I then returned yet again to the ironmonger’s shop, where I was delighted to find the uncrowned Queen of Ironmongery still reigning over her small but well-stocked kingdom. I purchased several cans of white paint (as much as I could carry) and an assortment of brushes. White may be a rather clinical colour but it does have the advantage of leaving you free to choose your furniture and curtains without wondering whether or not they will fit in with the stuff you’ve daubed all over the walls. And choosing white means you don’t have to waste several hours agonising over the choice between the competing claims of such colours as ‘Ripening Autumn Wheat’, ‘Moroccan Sunlight On Faded Rain Forest Teak’ or, simply, but perhaps most curiously, ‘Fresh Moldavian Peach’. (Was there, I wondered, a colour known as ‘Rotten Moldavian Peach’?)

Cleaning and painting the apartment took me three whole days, during which I slept at the hotel (I had negotiated a deal for an extended stay) and lived on picnics which I consumed while sitting on the floor of my apartment. My two-baguette-a-day habit was helping me build up quite a good relationship with the bosomy matron in the baker’s shop. We had progressed to the point where my arrival merited a broad smile and a nod of acknowledgement – as good a sign of residency as a paid up rent book.

Each evening I was so exhausted that after dragging my weary body back to the hotel I just collapsed into the bath, washed away as much of the smell, the stains and the paint as I could and then dragged myself into bed and fell asleep almost instantly; revelling in the crispness and coolness of the hotel’s freshly laundered sheets.

So far my life as a Parisian could hardly be described as romantic. When one thinks of impoverished foreigners painting in a French attic one usually thinks of them stylishly daubing oils onto a canvas rather than recklessly slapping two coats of white emulsion onto the walls and the ceiling of a two room sixth floor apartment.

I still hadn’t bought anything with which to furnish the apartment.

~ Chapter Eighteen ~

I arrived at the Metro station at the bottom of the Boulevard St Michel five minutes early and full of hope. Starting life again was beginning to feel exciting. Beginning afresh, in a new city and a new country, but with some experience of the world, promised much. It was raining slightly and so I sheltered under the awning of a nearby bookshop. It was a long time since I'd dated and dating a married woman wasn't exactly what I'd planned but I was, nevertheless, looking for ward to some female companionship.

Every minute or so I looked at my watch, as everyone does when waiting for someone. The Metro station was obviously a popular meeting point for couples on a date and every few moments a man or woman would arrive, wait a few minutes and then go off arm in arm with their companion. After thirty minutes it didn't look as though my first attempt at dating in Paris was going to be a huge success.

But I wasn't the only person who appeared to have been stood up. A tall, slender blonde in a black, ankle length but impractically thin and flimsy coat had been standing with me under the awning for almost as long as I had. Naturally, I found it difficult to judge her age. At first glance I had thought her to be in her early thirties. But after another couple of glances I thought that she was probably a decade or so older than that.

Occasionally we caught one another's eye and smiled or shrugged. The blonde had a fashionable and expensive looking mobile telephone in her hand. The shiny, ostentatious case looked as though it was made of gold – or, at the very least, gold plate. Every few minutes it rang and for a minute or two she chatted brightly and merrily. On several occasions she took out a small notebook and wrote something down. Two or three times she made calls.

'It looks as though we have both been stood up,' she said suddenly.

I had been facing the opposite direction when she spoke but I had heard her speaking on the telephone so much that I recognised her voice instantly. I turned quickly. She smiled and raised an eyebrow slightly. 'I am cold. Would you like to buy me a drink?'

'How did you know I was English?'

'Your clothes,' answered the woman instantly. 'You did not buy those clothes in France.' She looked at me carefully, as though she was shopping and I was in the sales. 'And even if you had no Frenchman would treat a jacket like that.'

I looked down at my jacket and trousers. They were both rather baggy and worn. I realised with some slight shame that the jacket pockets were, as always, bulging. I couldn't even remember what they contained. I tried to compress the mysterious contents a little but it didn't make a great deal of difference. 'Where would you like to go?' I asked her.

'Here will do just fine,' said the woman, indicating the café behind us. She held out her hand. 'My name is Rosemonde.'

I shook her hand, told her my name and then followed her into the café. As we walked in there was an enormous roar and several male voices could be heard shouting out what sounded like approving comments. My companion turned to me and smiled as if to say 'Don't take any notice, this sort of thing happens to me all the time'. I looked around and noticed that there was a large colour television set suspended on a bracket in a corner of the café. A dozen customers were gathered around watching a football match and it was clear from the way the players were behaving that someone had just scored a goal.

'Someone's scored,' I said.

Rosemonde looked at me and raised a perfectly pencilled eyebrow.

'Football,' I explained. I pointed to the television set. 'On the television.'

'Oh,' said Rosemonde.

When I had shaken her hand I had noticed that her skin seemed much older than I had suspected. I was beginning to think that my original estimate of her age might be out by more than a decade. She wore high-heeled black patent leather shoes which had metal plates on the tiny heels; they click-clacked loudly when she walked.

'I don't know why they make so much fuss when one of those little chaps in short trousers scores a goal,' said Rosemonde. 'Isn't that what they are paid for?'

'I suppose it is,' I agreed.

'People don't cheer their accountant when he does their accounts, do they?'

'Er...no, they don't.'

'And they don't jump and down and wave flags when a window cleaner cleans windows?'

'Not that I know of.'

'So why do they get so excited when these little men in the short trousers do what they're paid for?'

'I'm not sure,' I confessed.

We sat in silence for a while.

'I suppose our dates could have been held up in the traffic,' said Rosemonde, while we waited for the waiter to arrive and take our order. She had unbuttoned her coat but not removed it when she had sat down. Underneath it she was wearing a short, simple and probably expensive black dress. Around her waist there was a black patent leather belt with a fancy clasp – although I didn't recognise the design I guessed it was probably done to denote the initials of a fashionable designer. 'There was a demonstration on the Boulevard St Germain and as usual the traffic was held up for hours. I left my taxi and walked here.'

'What was the demonstration about?'

Rosemonde shrugged. 'I don't know,' she said. 'But who cares?' She tossed her head as if to make it quite clear that she certainly didn't. 'The French demonstrate at the drop of a...what is the word?' She flicked her fingers impatiently. I couldn't tell whether she was impatient with herself or with me.

'Hat?' I suggested.

'At the drop of a hat. What a silly expression. Why would anyone demonstrate at the dropping of a hat?' She paused for a moment, trying to answer her own question, and then shrugged. 'There is a demonstration virtually every day on the Boulevard St Germain. They demonstrate for more money, longer holidays, better pensions...,' she waved a hand rather dismissively.

'I take it you don't agree with demonstrations,' I said.

'No, of course not,' she replied. She looked at me, rather sharply. 'Do you?'

I thought for a moment. 'A bit of anarchy can be a counterbalance to an over-regulated society. I'd rather have a bit of chaos and a lot of liberty than be suffocated by conformity and regulation.'

Rosemonde looked at me rather suspiciously. 'If they spent more time working and less time demonstrating they would probably be better off and not need to demonstrate at all,' she said. She opened her handbag (small, black, patent leather and expensive) and took out a packet of cigarettes (long, purple with gold tips and also obviously expensive). She carefully pulled a cigarette from the pack and put the pack back into her bag. She held the cigarette between her fingers expectantly.

'I'm sorry,' I said, realising what she wanted. 'I'm afraid I don't smoke. I don't have any matches. Perhaps we can get some from the waiter. What would you like to drink?'

'A kir royale,' replied the woman instantly. 'Champagne with blackcurrant,' she explained, rather patronisingly I thought. 'The authorities allow everyone to demonstrate,' she continued, returning to a subject which she obviously felt strongly about. 'The French are stupid. They think that laws are made for those who choose to obey them.'

'You're not French?'

'Certainly not!' she replied, her voice replete with apparently genuine indignation. 'I am Swiss.' She looked at me carefully. 'Why don't you get your hair dyed? You look a little old.'

For a moment I didn't quite know what to say. I have never before met anyone quite so forthright. 'I am a little old,' I replied.

The waitress, a young woman in her late twenties or early thirties, came. I gave her our order and asked her to bring some matches. While I spoke Rosemonde took out her telephone and made a call. I looked around the café , wondering what I would do if I saw Paulette outside, and marvelling at the number of people in Paris who can find the time to sit and sip coffee or pastis for hours at a time. I had not been in Paris long enough to realise that for many Parisians the local café is an extra room in their home. They have business meetings in cafés. They write letters, watch television, have meetings with relatives, do homework and, just occasionally, go there to chill out. Many Parisian apartments are small and cramped. The local corner café provides welcome extra space.

'Do you live in Paris?'

'I've just rented an apartment here.'

'In which arrondissement?' I told her.

'That is a very good area.' She took out a small green backed diary and a slim, gold pencil. 'What is your address?'

I told her.

She nodded and wrote down my address in the back of her diary. I didn't have the faintest idea why. I wondered if I should ask her for her address in return.

'And your telephone number?'

'I don't have a telephone at the moment,' I confessed.

She looked at me with a mixture of pity and disbelief.

'I've only just moved in,' I said, immediately hating myself for the feeling of weakness which had inspired the unnecessary excuse. The moment to ask her for her address had gone.

The waitress arrived with our drinks and a small book of matches. There was a reproduction of a rather good painting of the café on the cover. Seeing the packet of cigarettes in front of Rosemonde she put the matches on the table along side the cigarettes. When she had gone Rosemonde put her notebook and pencil back into her handbag, took a sip from her champagne and then pushed the matches across the table towards me. Realising that I was expected to light her cigarette I picked up the matches, tore one out of the book and struck it.

'Jacques – the man I was supposed to meet – is a lawyer,' said Rosemonde, when she had taken a couple of drags at her cigarette. 'He is very rich and has a Porsche but I shall not see him again,' she said. 'Lawyers are always late.' She thought for a moment. 'It is not because they are particularly busy. It is more because they are rude and arrogant. They are also gloomy and pessimistic men.'

She paused and took another long drag at her cigarette. 'Do you know a lot of lawyers?' I asked her, politely trying to keep the conversation going. It had occurred to me to point out that some lawyers are women but I had dismissed the thought almost as quickly as it had occurred to me.

Rosemonde ignored me anyway. 'It makes sound commercial sense for a lawyer to be pessimistic,' she said. 'If he loses his case he can safely say 'I told you so' and leave his client penniless without a qualm. The client may be in prison but he will be content that his lawyer has done all that could possibly be done. And if the case is won then the lawyer can bask in the gratitude and admiration of his client and add another nought to his bill.'

'I take it you don't like lawyers very much?'

'All my husbands have been lawyers,' said Rosemonde. 'Are you a lawyer?'

'Good heavens, no!'

'What do you do for a living?'

'I'm sort of retired,' I told her. 'I sold my house in England and I received a small sum when I was made redundant. I put it all in the bank and I live on the interest from that.'

Her mobile telephone, lying on the table in front of her, rang. The trill tune it played was annoying. Rosemonde picked it up, switched it on and started a conversation in French. Her French was far too good and too fast for me to follow anything she said.

'Did you understand any of that?' she asked me when she had finished her call and switched her phone off again. I had not told her that I did not speak very much French but I assumed that she had drawn this conclusion from the way I had spoken to the waitress.

'No,' I said. 'Even if I spoke French I would not have listened to your private conversation.'

Rosemonde looked at me, seemingly surprised. 'Private conversations are the only ones worth listening to,' she said. 'It was a friend of mine,' she said. 'She is a nice woman, but if she has a fault it is that she always sees the other person's point of view. Today she told me a strange story. You might find it amusing and since it is unlikely that you know her and I will not, in any case, tell you her full name, I will tell you the story.'

'Anita – that is all I will tell you of her name – had a dozen people at her home for lunch yesterday. She was alone in the kitchen making coffee when someone came up behind her and put his hands on her breasts. She assumed that it was her husband. Her husband, whom I know slightly because I once had a brief affair with him, is a remarkably pompous man with no sense of humour. Superficially he earns a living as an art critic on a newspaper and a couple of magazines but he is paid very little for this work. I know that most of his income comes from gallery owners who give him tips – what you would probably call bribes – to give rave reviews to new artists whose work they have bought or contracted to sell in bulk. This helps to build up the value of their work and, therefore, helps the gallery owners to make bigger profits. He is not normally an amorous man but he does have his moments.'

'Anita told me that the man standing behind her lifted her dress and made love to her from where he stood. He seemed to be more skilful than usual and although she found this a little surprising – for in addition to being pompous and humourless he is a very selfish man – she simply assumed that her husband had learned some new tricks from his mistress...'

'Her husband has a mistress?'

'Naturally.'

'And she knows that her husband has a mistress?'

'Of course.'

'And she doesn't mind?'

'Mind?' Rosemonde seemed genuinely surprised. 'Why should she mind? All men have mistresses.'

'Oh,' I said. 'Do they?'

'All French men do,' said Rosemonde. She looked at me hard. 'You have not been in France long?'

I agreed that this was the case and then Rosemonde continued with her story.

'My friend Anita was enjoying the experience when she looked out of the window and to her utter astonishment saw her husband walking across the lawn deep in conversation with another guest – a well-known art dealer.'

'So who was the man making love to her?'

‘Anita did not know.’

‘Didn’t she turn round and look?’

‘That would have been embarrassing, don’t you think?’

I thought for a moment. ‘I suppose so,’ I said. ‘The man didn’t say anything?’

‘Nothing. He finished, put his equipment away and left, leaving her more or less as he had found her – a little shaken perhaps, a trifle dishevelled but unharmed.’

‘And when she took in the coffee there were no clues from the other guests?’

‘None. Isn’t that a quite wonderful story?’

I agreed that it was. She extinguished her cigarette, crushing it in the metal ashtray.

‘I wish that had happened to me,’ s.aid Rosemonde, unexpectedly. She stared straight at me as she said this. I found her stare curiously unnerving.

‘You were saying that all your husbands have been lawyers.’

‘Yes. All my husbands have been lawyers,’ agreed Rosemonde.

‘How many have you had?’

‘Four.’

‘What went wrong with your marriages?’ I asked. Normally I would have not asked such a direct question but Rosemonde’s bald suggestion that I dye my hair had rather encouraged me to feel that she was not a woman who was likely to be embarrassed easily.

‘My first husband was enormously rich but very boring and also quite stupid. He could not do anything. He had to take his shoes into the cobblers when he needed new laces. The second was a cruel man and a bully. He hit me one day and I walked straight out of the house and never went back, not even to fetch my clothes – the third was very handsome but terribly vain an utter fool and the fourth was intolerant.’

‘In what way was he intolerant?’

‘He found out about an affair I was having.’

‘And he objected?’

‘He divorced me,’ she said. ‘It was crazy,’ she said indignantly. ‘I was, in fact, very faithful to him. I had only two lovers in the three years we had been married and apart from when I slept with those two men I was faithful to him for all of that time.’

I didn’t know what to say to this. Having two lovers didn’t seem to me to qualify for a certificate as a faithful wife. I had that morning read a news story in Albert’s paper claiming that according to some sort of official study one in three people are seriously and probably irretrievably bonkers. I had at first found this news item rather unbelievable. But then I had found it strangely comforting. I was beginning to think that I was sitting with one of the thirty three per cent.

‘You obviously haven’t been put off lawyers completely,’ I said, making a clumsy attempt to revive the conversation.

Rosemonde looked at me. She seemed puzzled.

‘You were due to meet one this evening,’ I reminded her.

‘Oh yes,’ said Rosemonde. ‘The devil you know, and all that sort of thing. Having been married to four of them I have learned a great deal about lawyers,’ said Rosemonde. ‘It seems a pity to waste all that knowledge.’

‘What sort of things have you learned?’

Rosemonde thought for a moment. ‘They all want to be something else,’ she said eventually. She nodded, agreeing with herself. ‘Lawyers always want to be something else. My friend Anthea, who has been married to a psychiatrist, a surgeon, a paediatrician ·and two gynaecologists says that doctors are the same.’

‘Really?’

‘Oh yes. But the thing they really want to be never pays as well as lawyering or doctoring. And so because they like the money thy have to carry on as unhappy lawyers or unhappy doctors.’ She shrugged, making it clear that this did not concern her in the slightest.

‘What did your husbands want to be?’

‘Two of them wanted to be businessmen,’ replied Rosemonde. ‘The first, the boring one, tried to run a travel company in his spare time – arranging specialist trips for groups of people. But he did stupid things.’ She took another cigarette out of her pack. I lit it for her.

‘And the second husband who wanted to be a businessman?’

‘That was the vain one. His father was very, very rich. He had an estate in California, a house in the South of France, an apartment in New York and a skiing lodge in St Moritz. He gave my husband an unlimited budget to organise a wine company,’ said Rosemonde. ‘But he overspent wildly and the company went bankrupt.’

I resisted the temptation to ask how her husband had managed to overspend with an unlimited budget.

‘He was unbelievably vain and very shallow,’ said Rosemonde. ‘He used to spend hours getting ready to go out for impromptu meetings. It usually takes me two hours to get ready to go out to lunch but if we started to get ready at the same time I always had to wait for him. I have never in my life known such a vain man.’

I sipped at my Pernod and Rosemonde’s telephone rang again.

‘Get me another champagne, darling,’ whispered Rosemonde, as she picked up her telephone. She started to laugh at something her caller had said. I looked at her but she didn’t look at me. She was engrossed in her conversation and didn’t even seem aware that I was there.

Eventually Rosemonde finished her call, blowing kisses to the caller. I looked across towards her. She smiled at me, held up a finger to stop me talking and, I suspected, to indicate that I should be patient for a little longer, and dialled yet another number. ‘I have to call a friend of mine in Monaco. Could I have another champagne please, darling?’ she whispered hurriedly, reminding me of the order she had given a few moments earlier. The person she had called on the telephone answered almost immediately and Rosemonde began to chatter away nineteen to the dozen. This time even if I had wanted to listen to her side of the conversation it would have been impossible. She wasn’t speaking French and she certainly wasn’t speaking English. It sounded a bit like German but I didn’t think it was. She seemed to be fluent in several languages.

I am, I think, a patient fellow but I was beginning to feel a trifle fed up. Rosemonde wasn’t much of a date but she was costing me a lot of money. I suddenly wondered if she was simply using me to get free drinks. What if there had been no other man? Was that possible? It occurred to me that perhaps Rosemonde picked men up every evening in the same way that she had picked me up. But what did she get out of it? Lots of free champagne?

I stood up and looked down. Rosemonde hadn’t even noticed that I had moved. I walked away from the table and looked back. Rosemonde was still on the telephone. It occurred to me that if I walked to the door and left the café without looking back again Rosemonde would probably not notice.

In time I came to regret not having done just that. But I am far too polite for my own good.

I visited les toilettes, returned to the table and stayed there. I listened, I paid for the drinks and at the end of the evening I took Rosemonde home in a taxi.

‘Thank you,’ she said, smiling sweetly and waving goodnight to me. ‘I’ve had a wonderful evening.’

~ Chapter Nineteen ~

I spent the next morning buying furniture for my new apartment. I found a store called a 'depo vente' less than a quarter of a mile away from my building. The owner of the store didn't own any of the furniture he had on offer. The tables, beds, chairs, bookcases, mirrors, books and so on had all been put on display by the original owners, who simply paid the proprietor of the store a percentage of their sale price in return for the space he provided. It rather reminded me of an upmarket version of my own garage sale.

I bought a double bed (not through optimism as much as the fact that I like to spread out when sleeping), a single wardrobe (small enough to fit into my tiny bedroom but plenty big enough to contain my modest assortment of clothes), a simple wooden table with four chairs (three of which were in a style that almost matched the table) and a small easy chair which had seen better days but which still had functioning springs and seemed far more comfortable than several more modern and better looking items of furniture which the store owner had for sale.

I decided to carry the easy chair home myself, underestimating both the weight of the chair and the distance I had to carry it. I thought it would be good to have something to sit on while I waited for the removal men to turn up with the rest of the furniture I had bought. However, carrying the chair up six flights of stairs proved to be even more problematical than carrying the ladder had been.

I had managed to manoeuvre the chair up two flights and was sitting down on one of the small landings (not actually in the chair, which was on its side, but on the floor next to it) trying to get my breath back when I heard a woman's voice coming from somewhere below me. I instantly recognised the faint Welsh lilt.

'I know that there are some very small apartments in Paris,' said the unseen woman, 'but if you have already lost your apartment and someone has rented you that landing I hope they had the decency to warn you that you are likely to find yourself being disturbed quite frequently. Since we have no lift and this is quite a large apartment building there is a fair amount of traffic on this staircase.'

I opened my eyes (I had been resting them as well) and looked down through the banisters. A slim, very attractive woman in a pair of tight black jeans and a pink Angora sweater was standing half a flight below me. Without the towelling turban she had shoulder length brown hair and a figure good enough to illustrate a calendar. Three plastic carrier bags were on the stair next to her. She was not wearing a face mask this time and I could now tell that she was probably somewhere between twenty and forty years old.

'Oh, I'm sorry,' I said, struggling to my feet. 'Do you want to get past?'

'That would be convenient,' said the woman, holding her head slightly to one side and putting her right hand on her right hip. 'I have two large blocks of ice cream in one of these bags and my refrigerator is in my apartment which is a flight above where you seem to be squatting.' She smiled as she spoke.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I was just having a bit of a rest. This chair is heavier than I thought.' I started to pull at the chair which now appeared to have got stuck.

'Did your ladder fit your room?' the woman asked.

'No, it didn't,' I admitted. 'I had to take it back and exchange it for a smaller one.' I pulled harder at the chair.

'Do you want a hand with that?' asked the woman. 'It looks as if it's stuck.'

'No, it's OK,' I said, pulling hard but getting nowhere. 'I don't want to trouble you.'

'It's no trouble,' the woman assured me. 'Besides, the quicker you move your chair the better my chances of getting my ice cream into the freezer before it melts.' I thought she had been smiling before. I'd been wrong. Now she smiled. And the sun came out and the band began to play.

'Well, OK. If you're sure. If you could push from below I'll pull from above,' I suggested.

The woman stepped up a step and pushed at the chair as hard as she could. As she did this I pulled from above. The chair still refused to budge.

'I'm very sorry about this,' I said, red-faced and thoroughly embarrassed. 'Look, if you could pass your bags up to me and then somehow squeeze over the chair you could get your ice cream into your freezer before it melts.'

'Thank you,' replied the stranger. 'I think I will do that if you don't mind.' She picked up her bags and passed them over the chair to me. She then clambered over the chair, picked up her bags and continued up to her apartment. She managed all this with a surprising amount of grace.

'I'm sorry,' I called after her.

'Don't mention it,' the stranger replied over her shoulder. 'Perhaps you'd put a note under my door when you decide to try moving a double decker bus up to your apartment?'

Before I could think of a suitable retort she had opened her apartment door and disappeared inside.

Five minutes later I was still fighting to free the chair when the door to the woman's apartment opened.

'I heard you still struggling away and I thought perhaps you might need a drink,' she said. 'Will a beer do?' She held out a bottle of French beer. There was condensation on the side of the bottle and it looked beautifully enticing.

‘Thank you,’ I said, taking the beer. Her fingernails were painted a beautiful shade of lilac. I glanced at her left hand. There was no ring.

‘My pleasure. Do you want a hand with that chair?’

‘No, really, thank you. I’m sure I’ll manage,’ I said. ‘But thank you.’

‘OK,’ she said. ‘Just leave the empty bottle outside when you’ve finished.’ And she’d gone.

‘And thank you for the beer!’ I called, hoping the words would find their way through her closed apartment door. I cursed myself quietly. If I’d accepted her offer I might have got to know her better. I didn’t even know her name.

After I had finished the beer it took me another half an hour to free the chair. I was tired and sweating when I finally managed to get it to the top of the stairs and into my apartment. I sat in the chair and cursed myself again for not accepting my neighbour’s offer to help.

Apart from the episode with the chair the rest of the delivery went remarkably smoothly. A French delivery driver, assisted by a large and very hairy Algerian, carried my new bed, wardrobe, table and chairs up the stairs to my apartment and installed them in position without any complaints – though both the driver and his corpulent assistant wheezed and sweated a good deal.

And then I discovered that the heating boiler didn’t work. This not only meant that the two small radiators in the apartment remained stubbornly cold it also meant that there was no hot water.

I went downstairs and walked round to the estate agents from whom I had rented the apartment and, in my very halting French, asked if they would arrange for a plumber to call round and look at my central heating boiler.

‘You want us to have sent a plumber?’ said the bespectacled French maiden who was the sole representative of the agency in the office. The other two women whom I had previously met were not there. I had hoped to see Paulette, wondering what excuse she would give for standing me up. The woman I saw had masses of tightly-permed, purple hair and wore spectacles with glass so thick that her eyes were magnified to an unpleasant degree.

‘Yes, please,’ I said.

The woman looked at me, shrugged her broad shoulders and nodded. ‘OK,’ she said, in English. ‘I will send you a plumber.’

‘When?’ I asked. ‘When will he come?’

‘Today,’ said the woman, as though surprised by my question. ‘He will come immediately.’ I felt impertinent and apologised for my question.

‘In England it is sometimes difficult to get a plumber,’ I explained, with a diffident and rather embarrassed little laugh.

‘In France,’ said the woman proudly, ‘the workmen always come immediately!’

‘Can you ask them to wait an hour?’ I asked her. ‘I have an errand to run.’

The estate agent assured me that this would not be a problem.

I rushed around to the hotel where I had been staying, collected my luggage, paid my bill, said goodbye to everyone and officially moved into my new home.

As I climbed back up the stairs to my flat, lugging my suitcases, I confess that I felt quite pleased with myself. I actually whistled a few bars of some half-forgotten tune, innocently convinced that I was coping tolerably well with the complications offered by new life in the French capital.

I made myself a nice cup of tea and sat down to wait for the plumber.

~ Chapter Twenty ~

I hadn’t had time to drink my tea when there was an urgent knocking on the door.

But it wasn’t the plumber.

‘Hello, I’m Busty,’ said a short, stocky woman dressed in a black leather jacket, a very short black leather skirt and a pair of thigh length black leather boots. ‘Lucie says you are to come straight the way.’ I had never seen the woman before but she had a firm way with her and it was clear that she was not accustomed to being ignored. The jacket, the skirt and the boots were all generously decorated with silver studs and chains. Black, fish net stockings filled in the gap between the top edge of the boots and the bottom edge of the skirt. A shiny black peaked cap with a huge, ornate badge at the front sat perched at the back of a rather cubic head. Spiky blonde hair stuck out from underneath the cap. The name with which she had introduced herself seemed curiously inappropriate since Busty’s chest was as flat as a one egg omelette.

‘What’s happened?’ I asked, anxiously.

‘Albert has been having a bit too much to drink,’ explained Busty.

‘He’s not ill, is he?’

‘Oh no, he’s OK. Or, at least, he will be when he is awoken.’

‘Good. Thank heavens for that.’

‘But Lucie says to tell you that he has not having written his column for the day after today.’

I winced. I could see instantly that this might be a problem. Albert was an experienced columnist but even he had to be conscious – or something close to it – to put something together to satisfy his editor and his readers.

Struggling to keep up with the woman in black leather (and I could not help noticing that when one took account of the fact that she was wearing a pair of boots with heels which must have added at least six inches to her height Busty made remarkably good speed down the stairs) I hurtled round a corner on my descent down the stairs and found my beautiful neighbour flattened against the wall on the landing outside her apartment. She looked slightly alarmed and had clearly been almost crushed by Lucie’s fast moving friend.

‘Sorry,’ I cried, as I skidded past. Below me I could hear Busty clattering down the stairs at a tremendous pace. It sounded as though the toes and heels of her thigh length boots were tipped with steel plates. I stopped for a moment, a few steps below the landing, and turned. ‘I’m sorry,’ I repeated. ‘Thank you for the beer,’ I said.

My beautiful neighbour half smiled and raised a perfectly plucked eyebrow a millimetre or so in carefully modulated surprise. ‘Don’t mention it,’ she said. ‘I’m sure you’ll catch her eventually,’ she assured me. ‘But I don’t think you should waste any time. Your friend moves very quickly.’

I started to explain, hesitated, halted, mumbled something incomprehensible and then simply thanked her, said ‘goodbye’ and hurried on down the stairs.

As I was leaving the building I bumped into Paulette, the girl from the rental agency.

‘Oh I’m so glad I bumped into you,’ she said, grabbing me by the sleeve. ‘I’m so sorry about the other evening.’

‘Oh don’t mention it,’ I said.

‘The thing is that there has been a change in my circumstances.’

‘Ah.’ I nodded.

‘My husband wants a divorce.’

‘Oh I’m sorry.’

‘No, no, don’t be sorry. It’s fine. It’s actually a very sensible move for us to make at this stage in our marriage.’

‘Oh.’

‘So you see the thing is that since we’re getting divorced I don’t really need a lover at the moment.’

‘No?’

‘No,’ she smiled at me, almost apologetically. ‘But I’m sure you would have been wonderful.’ She looked at her watch. ‘I must fly,’ she said. She stood on tip toe and kissed me on the cheek. ‘I’m just sorry it didn’t work out. And I’m so sorry about standing you up the other night.’ She raced into the building, pulling a bunch of keys out of her handbag as she went.

As she disappeared I heard someone calling my name. I looked around. In the back of a taxi, parked by the kerb a couple of yards away, Busty sat waiting for me. She looked impatient and agitated. I got into the taxi and without either of us giving instructions to the driver (or, indeed, saying anything at all to him) we joined the traffic and sped away with a squeal of tyres. Our getaway style departure was accompanied by much tooting of horns as other motorists struggled to get out of the way and got into each other’s way instead. The sound of metal arguing with metal, and glass tangling with metal and losing, provided some evidence to support the notion that one or two motorists had not been paying full attention or had been driving too close to one another.

‘I am sorry for the rushing,’ said Busty.

‘That’s OK,’ I said.

‘‘I’m sorry about to turn up looking like this,’ she apologised. She waved a hand, indicating the boots, the micro skirt and the black leather jacket. ‘I was at the work when Lucie asked me to come and found you.’

‘No problem,’ I said, with a smile.

‘Lucie would have come herself,’ said Busty, ‘but she had the appointment upon the client.’

‘That’s OK,’ I said.

‘I am afraid I think one of your neighbours may have viewed me,’ said Busty.

‘You may well be right,’ I agreed, remembering my neighbour, spread-eagled against the wall as first Busty and then I had thundered past down the stairs.

‘And was that your wife you were speaking at?’

‘Good heavens, no!’ I said. ‘Just someone I know.’

It occurred to me, rather belatedly, that to an uninformed observer it may have appeared that Busty was trying to escape and that I was in hot pursuit. I was not making a good impression with my beautiful new neighbour.

~ Chapter Twenty One ~

Lucie was in a terrible state and had clearly been crying. ‘Albert is drunk and he hasn’t written tomorrow’s column.’

‘Has he made any notes?’ I asked her.

She shook her head. ‘No. There is nothing.’

‘Then we’ll have to do it ourselves. But what on earth are we going to write about? How long have we got?’

Lucie looked at her watch. ‘Forty five minutes,’ she said and I realised that I had been using the royal ‘we’. If anyone was going to write Albert’s missing column it would have to be me.

‘Before the copy has to be telephoned in?’

‘To write it and telephone it.’

I swore quietly and thought for a moment.

‘Have you got another story I could use?’

Lucie shook her head and bit her lip. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I cannot think of anything.’ She started to say something and then stopped. ‘Albert often said that he would never run out of things to write about because he simply wrote about the people he met – or the people I met – and the things that had happened to them. He said that his readers loved to read about other people’s lives.’

I thought about this for a few moments but I couldn’t think of anyone I’d met whose story would fill a column.

‘It’s no good,’ I told Lucie. ‘I’ve met some strange people but most of them have been through Albert. He’s probably written about them already.’

‘What about you?’

I stared at her, puzzled. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Your story. How you came to Paris. What’s happened to you so far?’

‘I couldn’t get all this into one column!’

‘Then just put down some of it.’

And that was exactly what I did. I pretended I was Albert and I interviewed myself about how I’d come to find myself in the world’s most beautiful city. There was no time to write the story before I telephoned it in to the copy-takers so, having made a few notes before I started, I made it up as I went along. I didn’t bother too much about punctuation and because I was dictating the copy, rather than writing it down, I didn’t have to worry about spelling at all.

When I had finished I collapsed back into the easy chair. Sweat was dripping from my forehead and I was utterly drained. Lucie pushed a large glass of whisky into my hand.

‘You were marvellous!’ she said, beaming broadly.

‘Do you think it was OK?’ I asked.

‘It was brilliant,’ smiled Lucie. She kissed me on the forehead. ‘Drink up your whisky,’ she said, in the manner of a mother encouraging her child to drink up his milk.

As much as I was encouraged by Lucie’s approval I knew I would not rest until the following morning when Albert (still fast asleep and snoring without a care in the world) had woken, read the column I had written and announced himself more or less satisfied.

Lucie, who turned out to be a marvellous cook, prepared a splendid meal for the two of us. We started with wild mushrooms moved on to a vegetable pie, served with three different varieties of potato and finished with an apricot tart which Lucie served together with an exquisite ice cream, the like of which I had never before encountered. We drank champagne before and after the meal and with it a magnificent red Bordeaux which was richer, smoother and more delicious than any wine I had ever drunk before.

‘The food is absolutely wonderful and this is splendid wine,’ I told her.

‘The food I take the credit for,’ she told me. ‘The claret came from a very rich client of mine who owns one of the very best vineyards in France.’

She spoke about her ‘client’ in such a matter of fact way that it was not until a few minutes later that I realised exactly what sort of client she meant. She spoke of him with mild regard but no affection, as though she sold him furniture or flowers or exotic motor cars and regarded him simply and solely as a good customer. I had never been friendly with a woman who sold her body and sexual favours for a living and I still found it rather odd and difficult to come to terms with. Back in the part of England from which I had come prostitutes had been generally regarded as though they be longed to some sub-human species.

When I left Lucie’s apartment, at about eleven that night, Albert was still snoring and unconscious.

‘I hope he likes the piece I wrote,’ I said.

‘I’m sure he will,’ said Lucie.

But I was not so easily reassured.

When I left Lucie’s flat I was so worried that I spent the whole night walking the streets of Paris, occasionally calling in at an all night café for a coffee. At dawn I walked to the Gare du Nord where I waited for the English papers to arrive at the station bookstall. I opened the paper with trembling fingers and read Albert’s column with great anxiety. It seemed strange to read the story of my recent life in a newspaper. And it seemed stranger still to know that I had written it myself. It didn’t seem too bad. Relieved I headed back to my flat.

When I got there Albert was sitting at the top of the stairs. He stood up when he saw me. ‘Thanks,’ he said. ‘You’re a real pal.’ He put an arm around me and we hugged one another for a moment. ‘Thank you,’ he said again.

‘Was it OK?’ I asked him.

‘Brilliant,’ he said, simply. ‘I couldn’t have written it better myself.’

I started to ask him if he wanted breakfast but he was gone, already heading down the first flight of stairs. ‘I’ll see you later,’ he called over his shoulder. ‘In the Fag and Ferret.’ He paused, put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a small card. ‘I almost forgot,’ he said. ‘I found this on the floor outside your front door. I think it’s for you.’

I looked at the card. The only word I could read was the word ‘Plombier’ printed at the top. Underneath an address and a telephone number there was a scribbled note.

‘What does it say?’

‘It’s just to say that the plumber called while you were out,’ said Albert. ‘Sorry about that.’ He shrugged and hurried down the stairs.

I took out my key and entered my apartment. I didn’t care two hoots about the plumber. I could not have been more pleased if I had been told that I had won the Nobel Prizes for both Peace and Literature.

I went into the kitchen to put the kettle on but then decided I was simply too tired even to make a cup of tea. I walked into the bedroom, lay down on the bed and fell asleep without even undressing.

~ Chapter Twenty Two ~

I was lying in bed, dozing, when I was woken by something that sounded like thunder. Alarmed, I at up and listened more carefully. Eventually I realised that someone was knocking on my door. I looked at the clock. It was half past seven.

I staggered out of bed, grabbed a towel, padded across the bedroom and the living room and opened the front door.

A huge man in crisp, clean blue overalls was standing here. The overalls were ironed. I had never seen anyone in ironed overalls before. A name, which I couldn't read, and the title 'plombier' were neatly embroidered in red on the breast pocket.

The caller was holding a smart black plastic briefcase in one hand and a piece of yellow paper in the other. He showed me the piece of paper. It had my name and address typed on it. I confirmed the accuracy of this to him by pointing to my name and nodding. Making a cursory acknowledgement of this he walked past me. Only then did I notice that he had a companion with him. The companion, considerably younger as well as smaller was, presumably, some sort of assistant plumber. He too was wearing a pair of neatly ironed blue overalls. Unlike his mentor he was carrying a large blue metal tool box.

The senior plumber asked me something. I had no idea what he wanted but, not wanting to disappoint such an important looking fellow, and feeling grateful to him for having taken the trouble to climb all the way up to my apartment, I nodded and said 'oui'. After nodding and saying 'oui' several times I began to get worried about what I might be agreeing to. Had I joined the French Foreign Legion? Adopted two children? Had I, perhaps, agreed to buy his unwanted 1958 Citroen, complete with rusty bodywork and a shot gearbox?

Unsettled by these anxieties I took him into the kitchen, showed him the boiler which was suspended above the sink and pulled an unpleasant face. I also held out a hand, with the thumb pointing downwards, hoping that these twin indicators would give the impression that this was the boiler which wasn't working properly. It was the only boiler I had but I couldn't think of a facial expression to make this clear.

The plumber made one of those critical noises which plumbers make, whatever their age, sex, religion or nationality. He then called his assistant over to him. This was difficult because the kitchen was crowded with one thin person in it and the plumber was not a thin person. The assistant, squeezing by, obediently opened the door at the front of the cabinet in which the boiler was ensconced. He then stood back. The senior plumber peered in through the door and poked around at something deep inside. I looked over his shoulder. He sucked air in through his nicotine-stained teeth and shook his head (I was relieved to see that French plumbers worked in a similar way to British ones) and with a single grunt made it clear that he hadn't seen anything quite so bad before, that he could probably find a way round it but that it would undoubtedly cost a great deal of money and take a good deal of time. He stood back and indicated to his assistant that the cover of the boiler could now be closed. The assistant did what was expected of him.

'Salle de bains,' said the senior plumber firmly. He had a very deep voice. After he had repeated the request several times (slowing down the speed on each occasion until the final version consisted of three clearly quite separate words) I eventually worked out that he wanted to see the bathroom. Guessing that there must be some key there that would help him make his diagnosis and, subsequently effect a cure, I took him into the bedroom and proudly displayed the shower, the bidet, the water closet and the handbasin.

The senior plumber regally waved a hand and his assistant, who had followed us like a faithful puppy, obediently stepped forward and turned on the hot and cold taps. He then stepped aside and faded into the background. The senior plumber reached forward, picked up my soap and washed his hands. He did this with as much style and care as a top surgeon might be expected to use when preparing his hands before a heart transplant operation. When he had finished the plumber held out his dripping hands and his assistant, who had opened his blue metal tool box, took out a plastic bag and from it produced a small fluffy white towel. The senior plumber dried his hands. The assistant folded the towel, put it back into its plastic bag and put it away.

Without another word they then left.

I considered making myself a cup of tea but decided against it and went back to bed.

But for half an hour I couldn't sleep for worrying that I might have offended the plumber by not giving him a tip.

For the next half an hour I lay awake wondering how much I should have tipped him.

And I spent the half an hour after that wondering whether I perhaps ought to have tipped the plumber's assistant too.

I then got up and made the cup of tea.

~ Chapter Twenty Three ~

‘What are you going to do with yourself now that you’re a Parisian?’ asked Albert, taking a huge bite out of a croissant. Outside the weather was worsening. Paris seemed to have weather which hated to be ignored. It was more dramatic and definite than the weather in England had seemed. When it was warm it was hot. When it was cold it was very cold. When it rained it rained buckets. Crumbs of flaky croissant showered onto the table, Albert’s suit jacket and his lap. He ignored them.

‘I don’t really know,’ I stuttered, knowing that this answer was probably unconvincing but feeling far too embarrassed to tell the truth.

‘Of course you do,’ insisted Albert.

I felt myself going deep red. As a teenager I had blushed easily and often. I had hated it but had assumed that since one didn’t see many adults who blushed then blushing was a habit I would grow out of Other people might grow out of blushing but I hadn’t. I still blushed bright red at the slightest provocation and I still hated it. It occurred to me that I was probably the only fifty odd year old in the world who still blushed.

‘Let me guess,’ said Albert. He took another huge bite from his croissant and showered himself with crumbs once again. ‘Phhnntrr?’ Croissants freshly made in France may look little different to the croissants sold in Britain but they taste infinitely superior and they flake and crumble far more spectacularly.

‘Pardon?’

‘Hnnu hwhannt hnnoo hbee hna phhnntrr.’

‘A what?’ I laughed.

Albert chewed the remains of the croissant in his mouth, swallowed, brushed a small collection of crumbs from around his mouth with the back of his hand and spoke again. ‘Painter? Do you want to be a painter?’

I laughed and shook my head. ‘No.’

‘Everyone who comes to Paris wants to be a painter,’ insisted Albert.

‘I don’t.’

Albert frowned. ‘Then what do you want to do with yourself?’

I felt myself blushing an even deeper shade of red and started to mutter something about now having had time to think about it.

‘A writer! You want to be a writer?’ said Albert, grinning at me. There was a mixture of triumph and amusement on his face.

The blushing got worse.

‘I used to be a journalist,’ I said, partly as an explanation and partly as an excuse for what seemed, when spoken out loud, to be an absurd dream. ‘I’d like to do some journalism again. Something like that. Work on a magazine perhaps.’

‘I didn’t know that you used to be a journalist,’ said Albert. ‘You never said.’

I shrugged.

‘Why did you give it up?’

‘It’s a long story.’

‘Tell me.’

‘It was all a long time ago.’

‘Does it embarrass you to talk about it?’

‘No.’

‘So, tell me.’

I told him.

~ Chapter Twenty Four ~

'So what did you do after that?' asked Albert, when I'd finished telling him why and how my career as a journalist had ended around forty years prematurely.

'I worked as a corporate public relations officer.'

Albert pulled a face and gave me a sympathetic look.

'I know,' I said, holding up a hand. 'It was absolutely terrible. I had to write press releases and edit the company newsletter. I hated every moment of it.' I paused. 'But I had a wife to keep and she wasn't the sort of woman to put up with living in a garret and starving.'

'Do you still have the wife?'

I shook my head. 'We're divorced.'

'So now you're footloose and fancy free?'

'I suppose I am.'

'And you haven't lost that old dream? The dream of being a writer.'

'I thought I had.'

'What sort of writing would you like to do?'

'I don't know. I don't mind. I don't really care. Articles. Books.' I paused, and thought. 'I'd like to write a book, I guess.'

'Every journalist wants to write a book,' said Albert, smiling. 'Most start one. Very few of them ever finish one. Walk into the bedroom of a journalist, pull open the bottom drawer of his dressing table and you'll find an unpublishable typescript.'

'Have you got one?'

'Of course. A book about the street people of Paris. The street entertainers, the tramps, the beggars, the vendors – we all see them regularly but we know nothing about their lives, and how they got to be where they are. I'll probably never finish it,' sighed Albert. 'Even if I do the chances are that no one will publish it. And if they do publish it I doubt if anyone will ever read it.' He looked at me, thoughtfully. 'Did you say that when you were working as a corporate whatever it was you edited the company newsletter?'

'Yes. For my sins. I had to interview directors and employees of the month – that sort of thing. We even had a page listing employees who had got married, had babies or done something remarkable.' I felt embarrassed talking to Albert about this. He was, after all, one of Britain's best known, best loved and most highly paid journalists.

'Full page interviews with a fork lift truck driver who has made a scale model of St Paul's Cathedral with match-sticks interspersed with rather wobbly cartoons drawn by someone in the human resources department who thinks he's got some good ideas and is a bit handy with a pencil.'

'Exactly,' I agreed, laughing. 'I remember interviewing a typist who played hockey for the county second XI and an electrician who had appeared on a television quiz programme and won a teddy bear and a lamp shade. And yes we did have wobbly cartoons but they were drawn by a chap in marketing rather than someone in the human resources department.'

'But you know how to edit a magazine?'

'Oh yes. I guess so.' I thought for a moment. 'I suppose I could probably try and get a job doing some editing.' I thought still more. 'There must be someone in Paris who needs an over-the-hill Englishman who can't speak French but who knows how to do a bit of editing.'

'You wouldn't mind doing some editing, then?' persisted Albert.

'Not as long as I could do some writing too,' I replied. I hadn't enjoyed interviewing company directors or hockey playing typists who thought they were doing me a favour by granting me their views on the world, but I had enjoyed the more general aspects of the editing process. It gave me a kick to start with a few blank sheets of paper and end up with something which looked roughly like a magazine.

Albert signalled to the waiter to bring us two more drinks.

'I have a proposal I want to put to you,' said Albert. He hesitated for a while before continuing, as though picking his words carefully and mentally rehearsing what he had to say. This wasn't at all like him. He usually spoke first and worried about the consequences of what he was saying much later, if at all.

I waited. I didn't have the faintest idea what he was going to say to me but if pushed I would, I think, have guessed that he probably knew a publisher somewhere who might be able to find me a job.

'For some time I've been thinking of starting a magazine,' said Albert. 'It's something I've always wanted to do. Don't ask me why but I've got this dream of publishing a really good magazine about Paris. There are tens of thousands of English speaking expatriates living in Paris. Britons. Americans. Irish. Australians. New Zealanders.

Some of them live here permanently. Some of them are just passing through – staying here for a couple of years on their way up the corporate or diplomatic ladder.'

'Add to them the umpteen thousands who live somewhere else but who regard Paris as their spiritual home and you're talking of a pretty big potential market,' continued Albert.

I nodded. I was trying hard not to get excited.

'There are one or two English speaking magazines around,' said Albert. 'But I don't believe there is anything to compete with what I have in mind.'

'The magazine I'd like to produce – and I'd call it 'Votre Paris' because although that has a sort of French ring to it everyone knows what it means – would be a sort of monthly tribute to the world's most beautiful city.'

'I'd include articles on the history of the city, on the passageways, the hotels, the museums, the shops, the cafés,' Albert waved a hand. 'Plus stories written by people living in Paris or stories with a Parisian flavour to them.'

'And the people,' I suggested.

'Of course,' agreed Albert. 'The people of the city. I already have a mass of material for that feature from the book I'll probably never finish. I think readers would be fascinated to read about those people.'

'I agree,' I nodded. 'It sounds wonderful!'

'Deciding what to put in the magazine is the easy bit,' continued Albert. 'But the clever bit is that I've even worked out a way to make it financially viable.'

'How?'

'What do most people spend most of their time thinking about?' Albert asked me.

'Sex?'

Albert smiled rather knowingly. 'No!' he said, with surprising emphasis. 'That's what everyone thinks. But sex isn't top of the list for most people.'

Puzzled, I shrugged, shook my head and waited to be told what was.

'Money,' replied Albert. He spoke quietly, almost reverently. 'The one thing people worry about more than anything else is money.'

Knowing he was right I smiled and nodded.

'And what is the most valuable thing most people own?'

'Their home, I guess.'

'Absolutely correct. Their home. Their house – or, in Paris, their apartment.'

'So, each month I will include a supplement detailing the prices of apartments throughout the city. We'll include prices for studio apartments, and for apartments with one, two, three, four or five rooms. We'll print little calculations people can do to allow for which floor their apartment is on – and whether or not there is a lift. Readers will be able to go straight to the relevant table and work out exactly what their apartment is worth. To liven things up a bit I'll print one or two special features about how people have made their apartment into something special. They need not be especially expensive apartments. If someone has done something wonderful with a little studio apartment at the back of the Gare du Nord that will be perfect for these pages. Occasionally, we'll have a feature about some celebrity – a film star or a sports star – who has a particularly wonderful apartment overlooking Notre Dame or looking out onto the Eiffel Tower.'

'And it will be the property supplement which will encourage readers to buy the magazine and therefore ensure it is a financial success?'

Albert nodded. 'The magazine will be artistic, literary and valuable but because of the property section it will make a fortune. Everyone who lives in Paris will buy it and so will the tourists.'

'You think the tourists will want to buy a magazine with a property supplement?'

'Of course they will!' cried Albert, enthusiastically. 'Lots of tourists dream of owning their own place in Paris. Most of them will never have one, of course. But they can dream. And 'Votre Paris' will help them dream. They'll buy the magazine for the listings of shows, cinemas, theatres and restaurants. But the property pages will capture their hearts. I reckon a good chunk of them will take out a subscription and have the magazine sent to them in England.' He grinned at me. 'Just think of the advertising and marketing potential!' he said. 'Travel agencies and holiday companies will be falling over themselves to buy advertising space.'

'I can see that the magazine could work,' I agreed. 'But how will it make a fortune?'

'Estate agents in France are at a primitive stage of their development,' explained Albert. 'They charge a fortune for their services but to be frank they haven't got the faintest idea how to sell property. British estate agents, who were, the last time I was over there, a pretty disreputable bunch, do at least make a bit of an effort to sell the properties on their books and to earn their commission. Their French counterparts, however, are useless. They regard themselves as experts in something and don't like to think of themselves as salesmen. Most of the time they can't even be bothered to print out proper details of the properties they've got for sale.'

‘So you’re going to encourage them to change all that?’

‘Any estate agent who wants to offer property to British, American, Irish or Australian buyers will simply have to buy an ad in our magazine,’ said Albert. ‘We’ll have a sophisticated advertising section and encourage them to include photographs and room sizes. Home owners who want to sell their property may even cut out the agents and advertise their home themselves.’ He grinned and shrugged. ‘In due course we might even start our own estate agency,’ he suggested.

‘Sounds brilliant,’ I agreed. ‘Have you got the funding sorted out?’

‘No problem,’ said Albert. ‘Between you and me the newspaper I work for pays me an indecent amount of money. I spoke to a chap in my bank. He said they’ll lend me more than enough on the basis of my contract with the paper.’ We both drank some wine.

‘And once the magazine is up and running we’ll start publishing books,’ Albert went on. ‘We can sell the books to the magazine readers. We won’t need bookshops.’

‘What sort of books?’

‘Anything and everything to do with Paris,’ said Albert.

‘The People of Paris. The Parks of Paris. The Restaurants of Paris. The Cemeteries of Paris...’

‘The Cemeteries of Paris?’

‘Oh, absolutely,’ insisted Albert, his enthusiasm growing as he spoke. ‘Have you seen how many people visit Père Lachaise cemetery every year? Thousands and thousands. They go to see the graves of Oscar Wilde and Jim Morrison and Colette and Chopin and whoever else is buried there.’

‘And we’ll do individual books on the various arrondissements, and a book about walking in Paris, a book for people staying here for a weekend and a book for people who are here for a week. We’ll do a book about literary Paris – detailing the houses where famous writers lived and the cafés where they drank. And we’ll do a book about French cafés! There’s a book for you. Full of amazing photographs and anecdotes. The Dôme, Brasserie Lipp, Deux Magots, Café de Paris, Ia Rotonde, Café de la Paix. Some of the most famous cafés in the world are in Paris.’

We both drank some of our hot wine.

‘Up until now there’s been just one snag,’ said Albert, with a sigh.

I looked at him. ‘What’s that?’

‘I’m a great ideas man but I need an editor and I couldn’t find an editor I wanted to work with,’ he said. ‘I talked to a few people. But the ones who were interested didn’t have any experience of editing. And the ones who had experience of editing didn’t want to leave their good, safe jobs to work with a brand new company full of promises but guaranteeing absolutely nothing.’

I nodded. ‘I can see the problem.’

Albert raised his glass and looked straight at me. ‘Now, at last, I think I might have found the solution,’ he said with a smile.

I looked at him. I had begun to have hopes of my own.

Now I admit that I felt a little disappointed. It seemed that my hopes were about to be dashed.

‘The fellow I’m thinking of is absolutely perfect for the job,’ said Albert.

My heart fell still further. I felt rather bitter about this Mr Perfect.

‘Do you want the job?’.Albert asked me.

~Chapter Twenty Five~

I took a towel from the rail beside the washbasin, wrapped it, as best I could, around my waist and padded to the door. The tapping on the door had been so light that I wasn't even sure I would find anyone there.

'Hello,' said Rosemonde, the woman I'd met outside the Metro. Her eyes were red and her cheeks were streaked with mascara. You didn't need a medical degree and a decade of work in psychiatry to work out that she'd been crying. I recognised the perfume she had used when we had met the first time. I still didn't know what it was but I was still pretty confident it was expensive and not the sort of stuff they sell by the gallon in chain stores.

We stared at one another for a few brief moments. I was surprised to see her and didn't know what to say. I got the impression she didn't know what to say either. But it was Rosemonde who eventually broke the lengthy silence. 'I'm sorry to bother you,' she said. There was a long pause. 'I didn't know where else to turn.'

'What's the matter?' I asked her. 'What's happened?' I didn't understand why Rosemonde had chosen to turn to me but I was, I suppose, rather flattered that she had done so.

'It's...er...rather personal,' said Rosemonde, lowering her voice and looking first to the right and then to the left in the deserted hall-way.

'I'm sorry,' I said, stepping back so that Rosemonde could enter. 'It's all a bit cramped,' I apologised as she swept past me.

Rosemonde said nothing but hurried past me and I followed her into the living room.

'Please,' I said, 'sit down.'

She sat down on the easy chair. I sat on one of the four upright chairs which had come with the dining table.

'I'm so sorry to bother you,' she said. She got up. 'I should go.'

'No, no!' I said, getting up and holding out a hand.

'You must stay. Please. Perhaps I can help. If I can I will.' I wasn't captivated by her and I wasn't even sure that I liked her very much. I felt sorry for her.

She sat down. I sat down.

'Would you like a cup of tea?' I asked her. 'Coffee? Can I make you a sandwich? A bowl of cornflakes?'

'No thank you,' she said. 'I am too upset to drink or to eat.'

'I don't have any champagne,' I said.

'It doesn't matter. Do you mind if I smoke?' Before I could answer she took out a packet of French cigarettes and a small gold lighter. She took out a cigarette and put it into her mouth then she handed me the lighter. Although I hate the smell of cigarette smoke, which always seems to hang around on carpets and curtains for weeks afterwards, I found myself lighting the cigarette for her. She inhaled, exhaled and then sat back, slightly more relaxed.

'I had nowhere else to go,' she said.

I didn't know what to say and so I said nothing.

'When we met you struck me as a very kind and sensitive man,' she said. 'A man who would understand.'

I still didn't know what to say and so I still said nothing.

'You are my knight in shining armour,' she said. She smiled at me. 'Rescuing me from the depths of my despair.' She turned up the voltage on the smile. She was very beautiful and she had, as I suspect she well knew, a captivating smile.

'What's happened?' I asked her. 'If I can help then I will, of course,' I added, anxious not to let down my new found image as Robin Hood.

'I just need somewhere to stay for a few hours,' she said. She looked at her watch. 'Two hours. Two and a half at the most.' She opened her handbag and took out the small notebook in which she had written my details. 'I wrote down your address when we met.' She opened the notebook and showed me the page with my name and address written on it.

'You can stay here,' I told her.

'You are very kind.'

'Not at all. It's nothing. You can stay as long as you like. Are you sure you wouldn't like a cup of tea? Coffee? I have some bread. I could make you a sandwich. I haven't got any butter but I've got strawberry jam or Marmite.'

She held up a hand. 'No thank you,' she said. She spoke very quietly, as though exhausted. 'I really couldn't eat any thing.' She tried to smile. It seemed an effort. 'But you are very kind,' she said. 'I knew you were a kind man.'

We sat in silence for a while. I refastened the towel.

'Do you want to talk about it?' I asked her, at last. I hesitated for a moment. 'Is there anything else I can do for you?' I paused. 'There must be something.'

'There isn't anything anyone can do,' she replied. Now it was her turn to hesitate before continuing. 'I have been let down very badly,' she said.

'By whom?' I asked her. 'Your lawyer friend? I'm sorry, I've forgotten his name.'

'Jacques is the name of my lawyer friend, she said 'But it was not by him that I have been let down. It was by my last husband, Hugo.'

'In what way?' I paused. 'I'm sorry, I shouldn't intrude.'

Rosemonde waved her cigarette around. Ash fluttered onto the carpet. She did not seem concerned. 'No, you are not intruding. Not at all. I have no secrets from you. When my husband and I were divorced it was agreed that he would pay me a sum of money – not a large sum but enough to help me find somewhere to live until I could get back onto my feet. He is a very rich man and the amount of the settlement was not large enough to embarrass him.' She waved the cigarette around again. 'I have very modest tastes,' she insisted. She smiled at me. I thought about the champagne.

'On the basis of our agreement I purchased a small apartment in the sixth arrondissement, near to the Church of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. A tiny apartment. Just three rooms.'

I nodded.

'Are you not cold?' she asked suddenly.

I looked down. 'No,' I said. 'I'm fine.' I gestured to the towel. 'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I should perhaps put on some clothes. This is not a very good way to entertain a guest.'

'Please! No! Stay as you are!' she insisted, holding up a hand. 'I was just worried in case you are feeling the cold.'

'I don't know the sixth arrondissement very well but it is a part of Paris I want to explore when I have the time.'

'I wish I could be here to show you around,' said Rosemonde. She began to cry.

'What on earth has happened?' I asked. I started to get up, intending to move across to put my arm around her shoulder, but the towel became unfastened and I sat down again quickly, fumbling with my towel and feeling rather embarrassed.

'Hugo agreed to pay me the settlement we had agreed in two halves – one half when our divorce was first certified by the courts and the other half one year later. He had – I'm sorry I don't know the correct phrase – a problem with raising the money.'

'A cash flow problem?' I suggested.

'Exactly,' said Rosemonde. 'He said he had a cash flow problem.' She wagged the cigarette at me. 'But he had the money. Of that I am sure. He is a very rich man.'

'And he hasn't paid the second instalment?'

'It has been on the way for over a month,' said Rosemonde. 'And yesterday I learned that it will arrive here tomorrow.' She took out a small lace handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes. 'But tomorrow will be too late.'

'Too late for what?'

'The people from whom I purchased my apartment also agreed to accept the money in two halves,' said Rosemonde. 'I explained to them my arrangement with my ex-husband and they agreed to it. But because it is a little unusual their lawyer put in a clause saying that if I did not give the second half of the money on time then I would lose the apartment and all the money I had already paid for it.'

'Of course I did not worry about this,' said Rosemonde. 'I knew the money from my ex-husband would arrive a month before I needed to hand it over to the people from whom I was buying my apartment. I did not worry about it at all.'

'But your husband's money has not arrived?'

She shook her head.

'The bank has the money,' she said. 'The cheque arrived yesterday. But he is in America and because the cheque was drawn on a foreign bank it will take another forty eight hours for the funds to be put into my account. And by then it will be too late.'

'And you will lose your apartment?'

She nodded. 'I love the apartment very much but knowing that I cannot stay there breaks my heart. I have to return to my parents' home. I am going to catch a train.'

'You are on the way to the station now?'

'Yes. I put my luggage in a locker there. But I could not bear to be alone at the railway station. I remembered you and...' she waved a hand.

'Why on earth did your ex-husband leave it until the very last moment to send you the money?' I asked her. 'Didn't he know what would happen?'

'Of course he knew!' said Rosemonde. 'I told him exactly what would happen.' She took out a lace-edged handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes.

‘At first I thought it was simple laziness,’ she told me. ‘Or perhaps the fact that he is very busy.’ She puffed at her cigarette. ‘I must look very much of a mess,’ she said. ‘I have been crying. I should deal with my make-up.’ She took out a make-up bag and a tiny gold-backed mirror and did things to her face:

‘You look wonderful,’ I lied to her. ‘But was it not laziness? Nor simply the fact that he is very busy?’

She shook her head. ‘Then I thought that he was being malicious. But yesterday I discovered that it was none of these things. A girlfriend of mine in New York telephoned and told me that Hugo had been boasting at a party that he has done the dirty on me.’

‘How? What has he done?’

‘He found out the names of the people from whom I bought the apartment...’

‘...how on earth did he do that?’

‘He is a lawyer. I had told him the address of the apartment. It would not have been difficult.’

‘No, I suppose not.’

‘...and then he made a deal with them.’

‘What sort of deal?’

‘If I do not pay them the rest of the money for the apartment they agreed to give back my ex-husband a large portion – I think it is half of the sum I have paid over. So he gets back a big chunk of that which he has already paid.’

‘What a crook!’ I cried.

Rosemonde shrugged. ‘He is a lawyer,’ she said. ‘I should have expected this from him. He doesn’t need the money. But he is a very mean man.’

‘And there is no way you can do anything to stop this happening?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘Nothing.’ A tear started its journey down her cheek.

We sat in silence. She started to say something and then stopped herself.

‘What were you about to say?’ I asked her, gently. I felt very sorry for her.

‘It’s nothing,’ she said, shaking her head.

‘There is something you can do to stop him?’

She hesitated for a moment. ‘Well there is a way...but only in theory.’

‘Tell me about it.’

‘Well, I know that his money will be in my account tomorrow. If I could borrow the money I need for just twenty four hours then I could save my apartment and his little game would fail.’ She started to cry again. ‘But where on earth could I borrow so much money – even though it is only for 24 hours?’

‘Perhaps I could help,’ I said. ‘I have a little money in a bank in England - around £45,000. Would that help? How much do you need?’

At first, Rosemonde insisted that she couldn’t possibly borrow so much money from me. ‘You hardly know me,’ she said. ‘It would be an imposition.’

But I insisted and in the end she relented. It was, she said, a miracle. It was just enough to help her keep the apartment. She was very grateful. Since I did not have a telephone in the apartment we went downstairs and walked around to a local café. While Rosemonde sipped her customary glass of champagne I telephoned my bank in England and told them to transfer the money to Rosemonde’s account in Monaco. ‘I have an account there because the manager is a good friend,’ she explained. ‘I met him through one of my husbands.’ She promised to send me a cheque within three days and she gave me her telephone number and her address. She even offered to pay me interest on the loan. Naturally, I refused.

We celebrated the saving of her flat with a bottle of champagne. Naturally, she didn’t have any money and so I paid the bill. Being a knight in shining armour can some times be an expensive business.

~ Chapter Twenty Six ~

I was beginning to feel at home in the city. My first French lesson with Lucie seemed to have gone well and I was getting accustomed to the fact that one never knew what one was going to see next. Paris was never, ever dull; never, ever boring.

Nevertheless, when I walked into the Fag and Ferret a few days later I blinked involuntarily. For a brief moment I wondered if I had perhaps been working too hard.

It was late afternoon and Albert, who was sitting on his usual bar stool had one arm around Lucie and with his other hand he was holding his mobile telephone. He was dictating copy, presumably to his newspaper in London. As I approached I could hear him talking. '...couldn't pronounce his 's's properly,' said Albert. 'And naturally a speech impediment of this type, associated with a confidence trickster, was known as a swindler's lisp.'

Lucie was wearing a skin-tight red dress and Albert was wearing the rumpled suit that he always wore. For some reason which was never explained they were both wearing slightly crumpled paper hats. Two rather deflated balloons were tied to their bar stools.

Next to them sat two other women. One, wearing a short green skirt and a white blouse, I immediately recognised, although I did not know her name. It was the beautiful woman I had seen several times on the stairs in the building where I was renting an apartment. I did not think I had ever seen the other woman before. She was wearing a dark blue dress with a slit which travelled almost to her thigh.

I said a quiet 'hello' to the woman in the white blouse. She smiled and mouthed 'hello' back. Albert seemed to be near the end of his column.

Lucie got up, found a spare stool and squeezed it into position against the bar so that I could sit next to Albert. I whispered 'thank you' to her and smiled and mouthed a silent hello to the two women whose names I did not know. The woman from my apartment building, the woman I had recognised, seemed surprised to see me. I thought she seemed rather embarrassed too. As I sat down Albert, who had finished dictating his column, slipped his telephone back into his jacket pocket.

'How are the celebrations going?' I asked him.

He looked at me and frowned.

'Party hats, balloons...'

'Oh, very well, thanks,' said Albert. 'Glad you could make it back before the party ended. This is Busty,' he said, introducing me to the woman in the blue dress. 'And this is Felicity,' he added, introducing the woman in the short green skirt. 'She's Welsh but don't let that put you off her. She's the only reason I can think of for not declaring war on Wales.'

He told the two women my name and while we all kissed one another on the cheek in the affectionate and theatrical style which I now understood to be the Parisian way, he ordered five glasses of hot wine and asked the waiter for a bowl of olives and a bowl of peanuts. 'Do you know the trick of successful drinking?' he asked me. I shook my head and confessed that this was one of the many things I did not know. 'Make sure you eat while you drink,' he said, prodding the bar counter with his forefinger to give extra emphasis to each word. The waiter put a bowl of olives and a bowl of peanuts on the counter top. 'Peanuts, olives, crisps – it doesn't matter what you eat as long as you eat a good balanced diet while you're drinking,' said Albert. Taking his own advice he took a large handful of peanuts, popped them all into his mouth and started chewing.

I had by now remembered where I had seen Busty before. She had fetched me when Albert had been too drunk to write his column. She looked completely different in a dress.

'I didn't know you two knew each other,' I said to Busty, waving a hand in Felicity's direction.

'We only met this evening,' said Felicity.

'You nearly met a few days ago,' I told her. 'On the stairs of our apartment building.'

'Really?' said Felicity, frowning and searching through her memory.

Busty was the first to remember. She screamed with laughter. And then explained to Felicity what she had been wearing at the time.

'Busty is celebrating leaving her husband,' said Albert.

'He was a bastard,' Busty said. She spoke with a very broad French accent which made her sound very sexy. 'I was a lightly buttered wife. I am living in a home for buttered wives.'

I turned and looked at Albert for help.

'Battered,' he whispered, spluttering bits of peanut onto his tie.

'Oh,' I said. I turned to Busty. 'I'm sorry to hear that,' I told her. I looked at her in some surprise. She was a big woman. I would have not liked to have tried to batter her.

'He is a pig, my husband,' said Busty. She pulled a face.

'All his life he has been a judge of gays but now he goes off with a woman who turns out to be a transcendental female.'

I stared at her and looked at Albert again. This time he shrugged and made it clear that he didn't understand either.

'Transsexual,' whispered Felicity.

'I'm sorry,' I said.

'He has been having carnival knowledge of her for months,' complained the woman, full of indignation and, under the circumstances, justifiably upset.

'Carnal,' translated Albert, though I had worked that one out for myself.

The woman in blue turned to me, stared at me and raised a querulous eyebrow. 'Are you gay?' This was the second time a Frenchwoman had asked the same question. I was to discover that Frenchwomen living in Paris are obsessed with male homosexuality. This is, I was later told, because such a high proportion of Parisian men are gay.

'No!'

'I thought all the English were gay. Did you not go to school?'

I heard Felicity giggling and looked across at her. She grinned at me. She had a beautiful smile which quite lit up the café.

I told Busty that I had gone to school but explained that there wasn't an essential link between education and homosexuality and assured her that not all Englishmen were gay. She had had far too much to drink to be interested in this revelation or, I suspected, in anything else I had to say. She grabbed the hot wine the barman had put in front of her and took a large gulp. She didn't bother to add cannelle, orange or sugar.

'I got his own front,' she said, defiantly, licking her lips.

'She got her own back,' translated Albert, *sotto voce*, though I was, by now, beginning to get the hang of Busty's strange way with the English language. It seemed that the more she drank the worse her English became.

'I did workings for him in his office,' she said. 'So I deliberately mixered the xerox machine and the ...er...how you say?' She made a whirring noise and made rapid chopping movements with her hands.

'Food mixer?' suggested Albert.

'Toaster?' was my first suggestion.

'No, no!' cried the woman, frustrated by our inability to understand her mime. She moved her hands faster and made a louder whirring noise.

'Fax machine?' suggested Lucie.

'No.'

I looked at Lucie. 'A fax machine doesn't make a noise like that.'

'It might do,' said Albert indignantly. 'If it wasn't working properly.'

Busty turned to the nearest table and repeated her mime. 'What is this?' she demanded.

'A shredder,' said a white faced, black haired man with out hesitation. He was wearing a black suit, black shirt and black tie and spoke in an American accent. He looked like a role model for movie bad guys.

'Shredder!' screamed Busty with delight. She got up, went over to the man in black, threw her arms around him and burst into tears. The man in black seemed surprised at her response which could, it is only fair to admit, have been regarded as slightly more enthusiastic than might have been considered appropriate. The man's wife, a large woman with mauve hair, did not seem pleased.

'It was a shredder,' Albert assured us all, when Busty had disentangled herself from the man in black.

'I put all the papers he wanted to be photocopies into the shredder,' Busty said, sitting down again and miming the action of putting papers into a shredder. 'And the papers he had put aside for the shreddings I photocopied.' She mimed the actions of putting papers into a photocopier. 'When I the copies had made I handed them around the office.'

I nodded. I could see that this would probably provide pretty good revenge.

Exhausted by these revelations Busty, now smiling broadly, slid gracefully forwards onto the bar counter. Albert peered at her and lifted one of her eyelids. 'She is unconscious,' he reported.

'I think that she may be drunk,' said Lucie. 'Lord Byron said that, 'Man, being reasonable, must get drunk' and I daresay that what he said was as true of women as of men.' Albert sipped at his wine. 'How is the apartment coming along?' he asked me.

'Pretty well,' I said.

Albert turned towards Felicity. 'You should talk to Felicity about doing up apartments,' he said. 'She's got an apartment somewhere. She's bound to be able to give you all sorts of tips about decorating and stuff like that.' I looked across at Felicity. We smiled at one another. I really wanted a chance to get to know her better. Albert climbed off his stool. ‘We’d better carry Busty home,’ he said to Lucie. He eyed Busty up and down. ‘I think she’ll need the two of us,’ he said.

‘Let us get a taxi first,’ said Lucie, sensibly. She climbed off her stool and tottered off towards the door. ‘Wait here!’ she called over her shoulder. I had never before seen anyone walk in such high-heeled shoes. The heels must have been six inches long, and for most of that height no thicker than a pencil. Within less than half a minute a taxi had screeched to a halt outside the café. Lucie, looking justifiably pleased with herself, turned and waved to us through the open door. ‘You see,’ she called, ‘as Rudyard Kipling said ‘He travels the fastest who travels alone.’ Seconds after the first taxi had stopped another taxi skidded to a halt. Then a third did the same thing. In a city where finding a taxi is notably difficult Lucie didn’t seem to have many problems. This may, of course, have had something to do with the dress she was almost wearing but I suspect that it had more to do with the way she wore it.

‘Busty and Lucie live in the same building,’ explained Albert, indicating that I should take Busty’s top half while he took her legs. ‘They’re in the same line of business and they’ve been friends for years.’

I helped Albert carry Busty out onto the pavement. She was not a light woman and this was not an easy task. Felicity walked behind us carrying Busty’s handbag.

Somehow Albert and I managed to squeeze the still unconscious Busty into the backseat of the taxi. Lucie kissed both Felicity and I and then climbed in beside her. Albert opened the front door.

‘Are you going to be OK?’ I asked him.

He looked at me, puzzled.

‘Will you be able to get her out of the taxi by yourselves?’

‘Oh, don’t worry,’ said Albert, with a nonchalant wave of a hand. ‘We’ll manage.’ He peered into the taxi. ‘The driver will help,’ he said with a grin. The taxi driver half turned, looked at the recumbent Busty, tight skirt pulled high up her thighs, nodded, and grinned.

‘Oh, don’t forget this!’ said Felicity, remembering Busty’s handbag. She gave it to Albert who climbed into the taxi and put the bag on his lap. The taxi driver put the car, an almost new Mercedes, into gear and sped off into the night. Through the back window we could see Lucie waving to us.

Felicity and I stood on the pavement for a while. It was a strange moment. In a way we knew each other but we were still strangers. And there we were standing together on the pavement waving off our friends like an old married couple.

~ Chapter Twenty Seven ~

'I hope they're going to be all right,' I said.

'I'm sure they'll be fine,' said Felicity, confidently. 'Albert and Lucie are both very competent people.'

We stood there for a few moments more.

'It's becoming quite chilly,' I said, looking up at the sky, as though it was in some way to blame.

'It is late,' said Felicity, in explanation.

'Would you like another drink?' I asked her. Although our first meetings had been hardly romantic, I found her extremely attractive and really wanted to get to know her better.

'Oh, I don't think so, thank you,' Felicity said, slightly embarrassed, though I felt sure that she must have expected the invitation.

She looked at her watch. 'It's late,' she said again. But she didn't move and she made no attempt to leave. We were standing near a set of traffic lights and another free taxi was waiting for the lights to change. She could easily have got into it if she had wanted to leave. She half turned and smiled at me. I was blushing and sweating and my heart was beating so hard that I felt sure she must have been able to hear it. I hadn't felt so nervous with a woman since I'd been sixteen. I wondered if I was sounding too eager but I felt encouraged by the smile and the still vacant taxi and, emboldened, I tried again.

'I'm going to have something to eat before I go home,' I said. 'Would you like to eat? Then we could share a cab back?'

.'Actually I am rather hungry,' Felicity admitted.

'Do you want to eat here?' I asked, indicating the Fag and Ferret. 'Or would you prefer to go somewhere else?'

'No, here is fine.'

We walked back into the café and sat down at a window table for two. In halting French I asked the waiter for two menus.

'Have you managed to finish decorating your apartment?' Felicity asked me.

'Pretty much,' I said. 'It's very small so there really isn't all that much to do.'

The waiter came with two menus.

'How do you know Albert?' she asked me.

'I met him here,' I said. 'In this café. On my first day in Paris.'

'And Lucie?'

'I met her through Albert,' I explained. Remembering what Lucie did for a living I blushed.

'Sorry,' said Felicity, suddenly giggling. 'I've just thought,' she said. 'That was a slightly tactless question.'

'Er... well... no... not really,' I said, conscious that I was blushing. 'Though I suppose it might have been.'

'They make an odd couple,' she said.

'They seem very loving,' I said. 'And Albert doesn't seem to mind what she does for a living.' The waiter came back and we ordered our food. Felicity asked for a chicken salad. I said I would have egg and chips. I realised, rather to my surprise, that I really was hungry. Inviting Felicity for a meal had been a ploy.

'Shall I order a bottle of wine?'

'No thanks. Not for me. I've drunk enough for one evening. I can hardly keep up with Albert. He just keeps buying drinks. You go to the loo and by the time you get back there are two or three drinks stacked up waiting for you!'

I ordered a bottle of water.

'And she doesn't mind him being a journalist,' Felicity responded, when the waiter had gone.

Puzzled, I frowned. 'I beg your pardon?'

'You said that Albert didn't mind what Lucie does for a living. I said that she doesn't mind him being a journalist.' I looked across the table. Felicity was smiling and her eyes were twinkling. It suddenly occurred to me that I didn't know what she did for a living, or how she and Lucie had met. I found myself wondering if she could possibly be in the same line of business as Lucie. Or was she Albert's friend? Was she, perhaps, an old girlfriend of his? This was all very complicated. I would, I thought, have to tread very carefully.

'Have you been living in Paris for long?' I asked her, deciding that this was probably a fairly safe question.

'Two years.'

'Do you like Paris?'

'Of course. But I was brought up in Port Talbot. After Port Talbot everywhere is beautiful.'

The waiter brought paper place mats, cutlery, a small metal holder containing olive oil, vinegar and mustard, a pot of pepper and a pot of salt. He spread the place mats on the table with smooth efficiency and then arranged the rest of the items to his satisfaction.

‘What made you come to Paris?’ I asked. I found myself wondering if it would make any difference if I discovered that she worked as a prostitute. Would I still fancy her? Would I mind?

‘I’d never been here before,’ I replied. ‘I just came for the weekend. I wanted to see the river Seine and the Eiffel Tower I suppose.’

‘And you stayed.’

‘And I stayed.’

‘Have you seen the Eiffel Tower?’

‘Only from a distance.’

‘And the river?’

‘I’ve walked along it and across it but I haven’t been on it yet.’

‘You should. At night. It’s very beautiful at night.’

‘I should imagine it’s very romantic.’

She blushed. ‘I suppose so.’

The waiter brought a paper lined metal basket filled with slices of baguette. Felicity took one of the pieces of bread and bit off a piece. ‘Do you mind?’ she said. ‘I really am starving.’

I took a piece of bread too. ‘It’s warm,’ I said, in surprise. ‘They must have put it into the oven to heat it up.’

‘It’s fresh from the bakery,’ said Felicity. ‘There is a bakery round the corner which bakes bread eight times a day.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘In Paris there is always a bakery around the corner which bakes bread several times a day. I just happen to know this one bakes fresh bread eight times a day.’

The waiter brought Felicity’s chicken salad and my egg and chips. The table was too small and so he dragged another table alongside ours and moved the bread basket, the cruet and the vinegar and mustard pots onto it. I decided that I didn’t care what she did for a living. What did it matter?

‘Would you like coffee?’ I asked her when we had both finished eating.

‘No thanks. I really ought to be getting back.’ She looked at her watch. ‘Gosh is that the time!’ She took a black leather wallet out of her pocket. ‘We’ll share the bill,’ she said.

‘No, no!’ I said. ‘Please.’

‘Oh I can’t let you pay.’

‘Why not? I’m old enough to regard it as a pleasure to buy a meal for a beautiful young woman.’

Felicity laughed. ‘You’re not that old!’

‘Sadly,’ I sighed. ‘I’m afraid I am.’

‘Well, I like older men anyway,’ she said. And then went bright red.

I picked up the bill that the waiter had left when he’d brought the food. ‘It’s not that much anyway. This isn’t exactly the Ritz.’

I pulled some notes out of my pocket and left them, together with the bill, on the table. Then I pushed my chair back, got to my feet and held out my hand to help Felicity to her feet.

We left the café hand in hand and I felt as though I was walking on air.

~Chapter Twenty Eight~

Fifteen minutes later I helped Felicity out of a taxi in front of our apartment building. We then walked up the stairs together. The moment of intimacy we had shared as we had left the Fag and Ferret had gone. We were, I suspect, simply both rather nervous and unsure of where our very young relationship was going or, indeed, whether it was going anywhere.

'I'm glad we met properly at last,' Felicity said, suddenly rather formal, when we reached the door to her apartment. She held out her hand, which I took and shook.

I suddenly realised that I still knew virtually nothing about her. I didn't know whether or not she was married. I still didn't know what she did for living. I didn't know whether she liked me. But I desperately wanted to see her again.

'It was lovely to meet you,' I said, blushing and even stuttering a little. I wanted to kiss her goodnight but wasn't quite sure whether or not she wanted me to. Instead I found myself holding out a hand again. I felt gauche and foolish as I did it. The Parisians kiss everyone when they say goodbye. But it was too late to withdraw my hand so I left it where it was. When Felicity reached out across the void and took my hand for a second time I held onto her for a little too long. I didn't want to let her go. To my delight and relief she made no effort to free her fingers from mine.

'Can I see you again?' I asked her.

'We're bound to bump into one another,' she said. 'On the stairs.'

'No,' I said. 'I meant, for dinner, the cinema, a drink. That sort of thing...'

'You mean a date?'

'Yes.' Besieged by uncertainties I hesitated, cleared my throat and spoke again. 'Of course if you'd rather not I'd quite understand.'

'I like older men. Remember?'

I blushed, then reached across and took her other hand.

'You don't know anything about me,' she said.

'I don't need to know anything else about you.'

'You don't even know if I'm married.'

'Are you?'

'No.'

'Good. I'm not either.'

'I know.'

'How do know?'

'If you were married you would be more confident. And you wouldn't be so nervous.'

I didn't think it was possible but somehow I managed to blush an even deeper shade of red.

'I'm sorry.'

'What for?'

'For being so nervous.'

'Don't be. It's rather charming. And very flattering.' We stood there in silence for a moment or two, just gazing into one another's eyes. I was still holding both her hands. Gently, very gently, I pulled her towards me.

'Haven't you wondered how I met Lucie,' she said.

'No.' My arm was getting tired and I suppose hers must have been tired too but I had no intention of letting go of her fingers. 'Well, actually, yes. But it doesn't matter.'

'I know. That's sweet too. For the last two hours you've been wondering if I'm in the same line of work as Lucie. And you haven't said a word about it.'

'It really doesn't matter.'

'Doesn't it?'

'No.'

'Are you sure?'

'Absolutely sure. The only thing I'm sure of is the fact that I want to see you again.'

Felicity smiled. 'When?'

My heart missed a beat and I looked at my watch. 'Tonight.'

'You don't waste any time, do you? OK. Where?'

'I'll pick you up and we'll sort something out.'

'What time?'

‘Seven?’

‘That’s a little early.’

‘Five past seven.’

‘Make it half past.’

‘OK. Half past seven.’

We stood for a little longer, staring at one another. I couldn’t take my eyes off her. She had eyes like stars and a smile that could have brought a statue to life. We were still holding hands and she was standing about six inches away from me. I was intoxicated by the smell of her hair and her perfume.

‘I’m afraid you’ll have to let go of my hands.’

I looked down. ‘I suppose so.’ I wondered again if I should kiss her.

Slowly she untangled her fingers from mine and stepped backwards.

‘Goodnight,’ she said. She smiled at me.

‘Goodnight.’

She turned, opened her door, turned back, blew me a kiss and disappeared.

I stood on the stairs for another five minutes or so, staring at her closed door. I was happier at that moment than I could ever remember being. I don’t even remember climbing the stairs up to my own apartment.

There was a note on the mat telling me that the plumber had called while I was out.

~ Chapter Twenty Nine ~

I thought of little but Felicity the following day. I could not remember ever having been so captivated by a woman. I thought back to when I had first met my wife, trying to discount the disastrously souring effect of a loveless marriage and a bitter divorce, and realised that nothing I had felt then had matched what I felt now. I wondered if, perhaps, I was fooling myself. Maybe I was simply captivated, temporarily flattered by Felicity's beauty and youth. I didn't think so. I wondered if it was maybe nothing more than a simple infatuation. I decided that I didn't care if it was.

And through it all I wondered whether Felicity really was in the same profession as Lucie. She hadn't said she wasn't. And yet when I thought about it – which I did often – it seemed so unlikely as to be impossible. She seemed so pure, so innocent, so delicate. She almost seemed too unworldly. But then, who said hookers had to be brash and worldly? Lucie and Busty were the only hookers I had ever really spoken to. Was there any rule which said that all hookers had to be like her? Or, indeed, like anyone? Surely hookers, like shop girls or bank clerks or doctors or nurses or airline pilots, were entitled to be individuals.

Naturally, I also tried to decide if I cared. I had, of course, insisted to Felicity that I didn't care what she did. Did I? Did it really matter more than I had said it did? Was I fooling her and myself?

By lunchtime my mind was buzzing. I needed some air. I rang the plumber, left a message for him to come back again and then headed off to have a drink at the Fag and Ferret.

~Chapter Thirty~

'I've had a pretty exciting morning,' said Albert, who was, as usual, sitting at the bar. 'I went to see an accountant and set up a company to publish our new magazine.'

I looked at him, surprised.

'I had a set of the company papers copied out for you,' said Albert, pulling an envelope out of his pocket and handing it to me.

I opened the envelope. Most of the papers were boring and pretty incomprehensible.

'It looks very impressive,' I said. 'But I'm afraid I don't understand very much of it.'

'That's the important page,' said Albert, rifling through the papers and pulling one out.

'The accountant suggested that we started off with 1,000,000 shares,' said Albert. 'I gave him 10,000 francs so the shares aren't worth much at the moment.'

'That's brilliant,' I said. I looked at the page Albert had handed me and suddenly spotted my name.

'We have 500,000 shares each,' said Albert, pointing to a relevant line on the page. 'Is that OK?'

Stunned, I stared at him. 'Oh no!' I said. 'I can't let you do that!'

'I thought you'd complain,' said Albert. 'That's why I didn't tell you beforehand what I was doing.' He grinned. 'It's too late now. You own half the company.'

I opened my mouth several times before I managed to get anything out. 'Thank you,' was all I could manage. I was amazed but also proud and excited.

'That isn't all that happened today,' Albert continued. 'I also resigned from the newspaper. My last column appears at the end of the month. I'd leave today if I could but I seem to have some sort of contract.'

'Is that good news?'

'It's wonderful news,' insisted Albert. 'I've been writing that column for longer than I can remember. It's about time .I had a change. Anyway, this will give me more time to concentrate on the magazine.'

'Great,' I said. There was something niggling at the back of my mind but I couldn't quite work out what it was.

'A new editor was appointed two days ago,' said Albert. 'Miserable little bug of a fellow whom I remember bumping into once the last time I was in London. He was twelve years old and an assistant on the gossip column at the time. Miraculously, the directors seem to think he has metamorphosed into an editor.'

'Didn't you get on with him?'

'Don't know him enough to know whether or not I get on with him,' said Albert. 'The last time I spoke to him was to tell him to get me a cup of coffee. Now he's too busy to ring me himself. He got some minion to ring and tell me that his lordship wanted me working in the office in London.'

'London?'

'Every day. Nine to five. Or whatever the hours are these days.' Albert shuddered. 'There's no way I was going to agree to go back to work in a newspaper office. What the hell difference does it make to him where I work?'

'So you resigned?'

'Matter of principle,' insisted Albert. 'A spotty teenager wants me to work in London and I won't go.' He ordered another round of drinks. 'It's going to give me far more time to work on the magazine,' he said. 'I'm looking forward to it.' He rubbed his hands. 'Who knows?' he said. 'I might even finish my book.' He ordered more drinks. 'So, what sort of a day have you had? I didn't see you last night.'

'I had a date.'

'Aha! Tell me more. Who was it? Do I know her?'

'You do, actually,' I told him. 'I had a date with Felicity.'

'Felicity! Congratulations!' said Albert. 'She's a smashing girl. I expect to be asked to be best man if there's a wedding.' 'It was· only one date,' I protested.

'But you're obviously taken with her,' said Albert.

'You're blushing.'

·'No, I'm not!'

'You are.'

'I'm very fond of her,' I admitted. I hesitated for a second but Albert spotted that I had been about to say something else.

'What?' he asked.

'What what?'

'You were going to ask me something?'

'How do you know?'

‘You were, weren’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well ask away.’

‘Do you know what she does for a living?’

‘She works at Le Lapin Fou,’ replied Albert.

I frowned. ‘What on earth is Le Lapin Fou?’ I asked him.

‘You haven’t heard of it?’

‘No.’

‘Oh. I thought everyone had heard of Le Lapin Fou.’

‘What is it?’

‘It’s a sort of, well it’s...,’ Albert seemed unusually embarrassed. ‘It’s a sort of clubby sort of place.’

‘What is it?’ I asked him.

‘It’s a tourist place,’ he said. ‘For tourists,’ he added lamely. ‘Lots of tourists go there.’

‘What sort of tourists?’ I asked him.

‘Oh, you know. Touristy type tourists.’

‘Fat American women with noisy children or fat American businessmen in badly fitting suits?’ I was beginning to feel like a contestant on a quiz programme.

‘Er, probably more of the latter than the former. I should imagine.’

‘In the daytime or at night?’

‘Oh probably the evening. By and large.’

‘Do they serve food?’

‘I think they do, as a matter of fact,’ said Albert. He seemed relieved. ‘Yes, I’m pretty sure that they do serve food.’

‘But it’s not primarily a restaurant?’

Albert pursed his lips and thought for a moment. ‘Not what you would primarily call a restaurant.’

‘How many have I had?’

‘How many what?’

‘Questions.’

‘I don’t know,’ said Albert. ‘Eight or nine I should think. Call it nine.’

‘Call it eight.’

‘OK. Twelve more.’

‘Do the people working there take their clothes off?’

‘That’s a leading question,’ protested Albert.

‘I’m allowed to ask leading questions.’

‘Some of them do,’ sighed Albert.

‘It’s a strip club.’

‘It’s a strip club,’ agreed Albert, wearily.

‘Ah’

‘I don’t know what Felicity does there,’ said Albert. ‘But it’s a very upper class place. Lots of English girls work there. I used to go there when I first came to Paris.’ He paused and thought for a moment. ‘But I haven’t been to one of those places for years,’ he added. ‘We should go sometime.’

‘But it’s definitely still a strip club?’

‘Oh yes. Strip acts. Singers. Lap dancers. Hostesses. The usual sort of thing. It’s in Montmartre.’

‘I suppose she could be a singer,’ I said.

Albert said nothing.

‘Do you think she could be a singer?’

‘Er, well, as a matter of fact I know she isn’t a singer,’ said Albert. ‘We were both at some sort of party about nine months ago. They had one of those sing-along machines – what are they called?’

‘Karaoke machines, I believe.’

‘That’s it. Karaoke. She’s a terrible singer. No one would pay her to sing. But she’s got a terrific body...’ He allowed the sentence to tail away, realising that he had made a mistake.

‘She sometimes wears rather revealing dresses,’ he said. ‘Tight. You know the sort of thing.’

‘She’s probably a dancer then,’ I said.

‘No,’ said Albert. He sighed. ‘She’s not a dancer.’ I looked at him.

‘Same party,’ he sighed. ‘I tried to get her to dance with me. She claimed she had two left feet.’

‘Perhaps she just didn’t want to dance with you,’ I suggested.

‘Maybe,’ said Albert. ‘Probably.’

We sat in silence for a while. ‘It doesn’t matter anyway,’ I said. ‘There must be thousands of girls in Paris doing that sort of thing.’ We sat in silence for a few minutes longer. The trivial, niggling thought at the back of my mind got up and tottered to the front. I tried to send it away again but it wasn’t having any of it. I wondered whether to mention it or not. I was still coming to terms with the fact that Felicity worked as a stripper. I had never been out with a stripper before.

‘Do the girls there go home with the customers?’ I asked.

‘The girls where?’

‘The girls at Le Lapin Fou. Do they go home with the customers?’

‘Do they sleep with them?’

‘Do they sleep with them?’

‘I don’t have the foggiest,’ said Albert. ‘I should imagine that some of them do and some of them don’t.’ He looked at me and raised an eyebrow. ‘Does it matter?’

I thought for a while before replying. ‘No,’ I said at last. ‘I don’t suppose it does.’

We both sipped our drinks for a while.

‘Are you sad to be leaving the paper?’ I asked.

‘Not in the slightest,’ said Albert. He seemed very happy and I really didn’t like to mention the thought I’d had.

‘I’m too old to work for a daily newspaper,’ he said. ‘I’m going to spend the rest of my days working on our new magazine.’

I had to tell him.

‘I hate to mention it,’ I said. I paused, searching for the right words. ‘But something occurred to me...’

‘What’s that?’ asked Albert.

‘The financing for the magazine,’ I said.

‘What about it?’

‘Well, it’s just that I remember you saying that the bank had agreed to loan the money for the magazine because you had a contract with the newspaper.’

Albert went a sickly looking off white and I felt terribly guilty. I hated myself for having mentioned it and for a long moment wished I had said nothing. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘I shouldn’t have mentioned it. I’m sure it won’t make any difference to the bank.’

‘No,’ said Albert. ‘You were right to mention it. It is important.’ He rubbed his fingers through his thinning hair and looked at me. The joy, the excitement that had been there a few minutes earlier had disappeared.

‘I think maybe we could have a bit of a problem,’ he said.

~ Chapter Thirty One ~

‘What’s the matter?’ I asked Felicity. ‘What’s wrong?’ She seemed upset.

My day had not gone well. I was still worried about how Albert and I would finance the magazine. And I’d wasted the afternoon waiting in vain for the plumber to call. The one bright spot had been the knowledge that I was having dinner with Felicity that evening.

Felicity sighed and moved her glass around on the table, as though playing a game of chess with no other pieces and no other player. ‘My parents are coming to France,’ she said at last.

There was another long silence. Felicity took a sugar packet from the bowl in the middle of the table.

‘Don’t you get on with them?’

‘We get on pretty well, actually,’ said Felicity, after a pause. She put the sugar down and moved her glass forwards two spaces and one space to the side. She laughed. ‘I wouldn’t want to live with them, but we get on fine.’ She picked up her glass and sipped at her wine. ‘They fuss a lot but then that’s what parents are supposed to do, isn’t it?’

‘Do they, er, know what you do?’ I asked her. ‘For a living?’

Felicity looked at me. She seemed surprised at the question. ‘Yes, of course,’ she said at last.

‘They don’t mind?’

‘No. I don’t think so. Not that I know of.’

‘So what’s the problem?’ I asked her, surprised but impressed that she had such broad-minded parents. I had assumed, obviously quite wrongly, that her parents were rather respectable people who might take a dim view of their daughter taking off her clothes in public in order to pay the electricity bill. ‘Take them out to dinner, buy them a glass of wine in a café...’

‘It’s not that simple,’ said Felicity, with another sigh. She put her glass back down and it turned from a knight into a bishop, moving diagonally across the table. ‘Ever since I got divorced my mum and dad have been nagging me about finding a new boyfriend.’ She paused and looked across at me, rather guiltily. ‘And to keep them happy I told them that I had a boyfriend.’

‘So surely that’s good,’ I said. ‘What’s the problem?’ I felt surprised and disappointed that Felicity had a boyfriend. More than surprised. And much more than disappointed.

‘I haven’t got a boyfriend,’ said Felicity.

‘Oh.’ I now felt enormously relieved. I resisted an almost overwhelming urge to burst into song.

‘They want me to take him over to their hotel to meet him.’

‘The boyfriend you don’t have?’

‘Yes.’

‘Ah,’ I said. I waved a hand, caught the waiter’s eye and, when he came over, ordered two more glasses of wine. ‘I see the problem.’

‘To stop them worrying about me I’ve written and told them all about him.’ Felicity finished her wine. ‘And so now they want to meet him.’

‘This is the parental interview?’

‘Yes.’

‘The ‘‘Are your intentions to my daughter honourable?" sort of thing?’

‘That sort of thing.’

‘Ah.’ I paused. ‘I see your problem.’ I finished what was left of my wine. ‘Can’t you just tell them that he’s had to go away for a few days? Can’t he be out of the country?’

Felicity shook her head. ‘I wish it was that easy. But I know them too well to try that. They’ll just replan their visit for a time when he is· here.’

I nodded and thought about all this for a few moments. The waiter came with two fresh glasses of wine. ‘You’ve got no choice,’ I said at last.

Felicity frowned. ‘What do you mean? I have to tell them I’ve been lying? That there is no boyfriend?’ She picked up her wine and took a large sip. If she hadn’t been a lady it would have been a gulp. ‘I can’t do that,’ she said, shaking her head.

‘No! No! You have to find a ringer.’

‘A ringer?’

‘A stand in.’ I waved a hand around, hoping that I might catch hold of a suitable phrase. ‘An ersatz boyfriend.’

Felicity drank some more of her wine and thought about this for a moment. ‘It could work, I suppose,’ she agreed at last. ‘But where am I going to rent a boyfriend? I can hardly ring up Galeries Lafayette can I?’ She paused and looked at me quizzically. 'Or do you think they might provide escorts? Hey! I could ring an escort agency!' She thought for a moment and then shuddered. 'Oh, I couldn't,' she said. 'It would be too awful. He'd think I was desperate for sex and just wanted a man to take me to bed.'

'How old is this imaginary boyfriend of yours?'

Felicity thought for a moment. 'I don't think I ever said.'

She thought for a while. 'They know I like older men and they would expect him to be older than me. Probably in his early forties.'

'Maybe a bit older than that?'

'Maybe.'

'Hair colour? Build?'

Felicity thought again. 'I haven't ever described him. I just wrote about what sort of person he was.'

'What sort of person did you say he was?'

'Kind, gentle, funny, generous, good with children, that sort of thing.'

There was a silence. This was much longer than a pause. When this one had lasted long enough for a short European war I spoke again.

'Good. It's easy then.' I plucked a packet of sugar from the bowl in the centre of the table and started to undo the wrapping. My fingernails weren't long enough and I couldn't get started.

There was a silence. This one was long enough for seeds to germinate.

'You?' cried Felicity.

'Me.'

'Would you really do this for me?'

'I'd be delighted.'

Felicity leant across the table, put her hand behind my neck, pulled my head towards her and kissed me on the cheek. I just managed to put my glass down in time to avoid spilling my wine.

'You'll have to tell me everything you've told them – or everything you can remember.'

'OK.'

'What does your imaginary boyfriend do for a living?'

'He's a professional golfer.'

'A golfer?'

'I'm sorry. It seemed a good idea at the time,' apologised Felicity. 'It explained why he was away so often. Besides, my dad's keen on golf...it seemed a good idea,' she finished rather lamely.

'A professional golfer?'

'He's on the senior European circuit.'

'Does he have a name?'

'Omar.'

'Omar?' I picked up my glass and drank some more wine.

'Omar.'

'Great. My name is Omar and I'm a golfer. I have an identity crisis already.'

'Forget about it,' said Felicity, leaning back in her chair and waving a hand from side to side. 'You don't have to do it.' She picked up her glass and half emptied it in a single gulp.

'I'll do it! I said I'll do it and I'll do it. But why couldn't you fall in love with a clerk called Bert?'

'My mum has been in love with Omar Sharif for years. I made him a golfer because my dad is keen on golf and called him Omar to please my mum. The only reason for inventing him was to make them happy so I tried to make them really happy.'

'Haven't they noticed that Omar doesn't win any tournaments? The senior tour is sometimes on TV these days. And the results are often printed in the papers.'

'I told them he isn't very good.'

'Oh thanks.'

'I've read that you can make quite a good living on the golf circuit even if you aren't very good.'

'Great. That's even better. Now I'm a not very good golfer called Omar.' I groaned. 'I don't know anything about golf. And your dad is keen on it. He's bound to ask questions about mashie niblicks, bogies and sand pits.'

'Bunkers.'

'Pardon?'

'The sand pits are called bunkers.'

'There you are. What I know about golf you could write on a golf ball with a four inch paintbrush. This is going to be disastrous.'

‘Aren’t you supposed to be a bit more positive?’

‘OK.’ I paused. ‘I’m positive this is going to be disastrous.’

Felicity laughed. There was another silence.

‘You don’t have to do it.’

‘No, no! I’ll do it,’ I said. I found myself smiling too. I liked her laugh. I liked her. ‘I like a challenge.’ I finished my wine and looked around for the waiter. I liked her a lot. ‘When are they coming?’

‘In three days’ time.’

I looked back at her. ‘I should have started on whisky,’ I said. ‘It’s going to take far too long to get drunk on wine.’

~ Chapter Thirty Two ~

Albert was right. We did have a problem with the bank. When they found out that Albert had resigned from the newspaper for which he had worked for so long the offer of a loan was withdrawn.

We were sitting in the café, nursing glasses of hot wine and trying to work out what to do.

'I should have saved some money,' said Albert, cursing his profligacy for the umpteenth time. 'How can a fellow like me not have any savings? I've been earning a fortune for years. Where's it all gone?' He paused, picked up his glass and examined it carefully as though looking for the answer in the wine. 'I suppose I drank quite a lot of it,' he said, though there wasn't much, if any, regret in his voice. 'Who was that chap who once commented that he'd spent most of his money on booze and women but had wasted the rest?'

'I think it was a footballer.'

Albert shook his head. 'It was a gangster. No, not a gangster. Movie star. Movie star who played gangsters. Give me the name of a movie star who played gangsters?'

'Bogart?'

'No.'

'Jimmy Cagney?'

'No.'

'George Raft?'

'That's the one!'

'He went bust and explained that part of it went on gambling, part of it went on horses and part of it on women. He then added that he had spent the rest of it foolishly.' Albert sighed. 'I just paid a hell of a lot of mine to the government,' he moaned. He thought for a moment. 'Since I gave them money when I had plenty of the stuff perhaps they'll give me some now.... They don't do that, do they?'

'Do what?'

'Well, when you make a profit they want their cut. But if you make a loss they don't chip in, do they? They don't take the risk, do they? They just want the profit if you make a bit. Not fair is it?'

'Whoever said governments were fair?'

'True,' nodded Albert.

'Maybe I could help,' I said suddenly.

Surprised, Albert looked at me.

'I don't have a great deal but I do have some savings,' I told him. 'I sold my house before I came over here,' I explained. 'And I got some redundancy money too,' I added.

'How much is there?' asked Albert.

I told him. A few hours before it had seemed a massive amount of money. Suddenly it seemed a pitifully inadequate sum with which to start a magazine.

Albert whistled softly. 'That's a lot of money,' he said, looking surprisingly impressed. He took a sip from his glass and then, very slowly, shook his head. 'You should keep it where it is,' said Albert. 'This is far too risky.'

'But you said yourself that the magazine will make a fortune,' I reminded him.

'Ah, that is quite true,' he agreed. 'But there's always a risk when you start something new,' he added after a moment's pause. He looked defeated. Suddenly, he looked tired and rather old. He produced a weary looking smile, reached across the table and patted my hand. 'But thanks,' he said.

'You don't understand,' I told him. 'This is something I want to do.' I paused and thought for a moment. I smiled at him. 'Besides,' I said, 'we'll make a fortune when the magazine is a great success.'

'You're just a filthy capitalist at heart, aren't you?' said Albert.

'Absolutely,' I agreed enthusiastically. 'It's been hiding in there waiting to come out.'

When I got back to my apartment that evening there was a card on the mat telling me that the plumber had called while I had been out.

~ Chapter Thirty Three ~

'So, Omar, you're a professional golfer,' said Gilbert, Felicity's father. He took his pipe out of his mouth and stuffed it stem first into the breast pocket of his tweed sports jacket.

He had given me this piece of information as though it was something of which I might not have previously been aware. As he spoke he peered over the top of half-moon spectacles which were perched precariously on the end of a rather large nose; I wondered if the spectacles ever slid off and if so whether I would be expected to try and catch them before they crashed onto the floor.

We were standing in the tiny lobby of the hotel at which Felicity's parents were staying. I was still recovering from discovering that Felicity's parents were about my own age. On reflection I suppose that I should not have been surprised at this but up until that moment I had not realised that Felicity was at least twenty years younger than myself. Finding that I was going out with someone young enough to be my daughter was something of a shock. I couldn't help wondering whether Felicity had noticed. I was pretty sure that the age difference would not have escaped her parents' notice.

'We've heard a lot about you,' said Gilbert, looking me up and down.

'Nothing too bad, I hope,' I said, wondering exactly what Felicity's father thought he knew about me.

'We've been staying here for twenty three years,' Felicity's mother said. 'We always have the same room.' She leant towards me confidentially and spoke with some pride. 'It's one of only two rooms in the hotel with its own bathroom.'

'We've been here so often that the receptionist knows us by name,' Gilbert added, also with obvious pride. 'We like Paris and we love this hotel. It's peaceful and quiet. We love the place.'

'I'm afraid we can't have dinner here,' Marion explained, almost apologetically. 'They only do breakfasts.'

'But we booked a table at a very nice little French restaurant just along the street,' Gilbert told us. 'We found it years ago and we eat there once or twice every time we come here. It's very French. Not one of these tourist traps you find in the guide books.'

'Well it would be French, dear, wouldn't it?' said Marion. 'Considering where it is.'

'Not necessarily,' said Gilbert. 'There are Italian, Greek and Japanese restaurants in Paris...'

'But they're all French restaurants, aren't they?' Gilbert looked puzzled.

'They're restaurants in France,' Marion explained. 'So, even if they serve Japanese food that must make them French restaurants, mustn't it?'

'Have you noticed that no one in France ever opens an English restaurant?' I interrupted.

Gilbert and Marion looked at me. Felicity, who was standing next to me, took my hand and gave it a squeeze.

'You can find French, Italian, Greek, Chinese restaurants everywhere,' I explained. 'But you never see anyone advertising an English restaurant...' I gave up in mid sentence, rather regretting having started the interruption. I had only spoken to try to halt what appeared to be developing into an argument between Felicity's parents.

'Very good point,' said Gilbert, taking his pipe out of his mouth, and stabbing a podgy and presumably fireproof forefinger into the bowl. 'And a good opportunity for an entrepreneur with a bit of flair. Open an English restaurant serving roast beef, Yorkshire pudding, toad-in-the-hole, spotted dick – all that sort of thing.' He looked at me over his spectacles. 'Maybe it's something you might consider trying when you give up the golf circuit?'

'It's certainly an idea,' I agreed.

'Felicity could help with the cooking and the waitressing,' continued Gilbert.

'She doesn't want to be a waitress, dear,' Gilbert's wife pointed out.

'You could always serve the food topless,' I suggested to Felicity and instantly regretted the remark. 'It would be good for business...' I added, rather lamely.

Felicity's mother looked puzzled. 'I'm afraid I'm very provincial, dear,' she said to me. 'But what's topless food?'

Felicity and her father both laughed.

Blushing wildly I looked around for help.

'Omar doesn't mean the food,' said Felicity. 'He means that I should be topless.'

'You, topless?' said Felicity's mother. 'You mean serve the food without any clothes on above the waist?'

'That's right,' said Felicity, looking in my direction and clearly enjoying my embarrassment.

'But why on earth would you do that, dear?' asked her mother.

'Men seem to like eating in places like that,' said Felicity. 'Personally I've never seen the appeal.'

'How very strange!' said her mother. 'It sounds frightfully unhygienic.'

Gilbert had ignored all this. 'But then again I suppose most of you chaps end up working as club professionals?

Giving lessons to old duffers like me, selling clubs, that sort of thing?'

'Oh absolutely,' I agreed.

'Shall we go and eat dear?' suggested Felicity's mother. She looked at her watch. 'Our table is booked for eight. They'll be expecting us.'

I could have kissed her.

Felicity's father checked his watch. 'Five to eight, you're right dear, we should be making a move.' He turned to face the reception desk and removed the pipe from his mouth. 'Bonsoir Yvette,' he said to the smartly dressed Frenchwoman standing behind the reception desk.

'Bonsoir Monsieur Dingle,' responded the receptionist, looking up from her calculator.

'This is our daughter, Felicity,' said Gilbert proudly. 'You remember her, of course? She used to stay here when she was little.' He spoke in English, but spoke very slowly and rather loudly, as many people tend to do when talking to foreigners.

'This is Felicity?' said the receptionist, who spoke perfect English, albeit with the ubiquitous American accent. She smiled and showed two rows of expensively capped teeth. 'It is some time since she stayed here, no?'

'Five or six years, don't you think, dear?' said Gilbert, turning to his wife for confirmation.

'It's longer than that,' replied Marion.

'It must be more than ten years,' said Felicity. 'We haven't been on holiday together since I was at school.' She looked around. 'Though I recognise everything. Nothing much has changed.'

'Our daughter lives in Paris now,' Gilbert proudly told the receptionist. 'She has her own apartment.'

Yvette, the receptionist, started to say something but the telephone rang and saved her from having to make any more polite conversation.

'Have you got your hat and scarf, dear?' asked Marion, as the two of them led the way out of the hotel lobby and into the street.

'Don't fuss,' said Gilbert. 'It's not as cold over here as it is at home.'

'Thank you for trying to change the subject when they started arguing,' whispered Felicity as we followed a few paces behind her parents. 'But don't worry. They argue all the time. It's harmless.'

'It didn't seem very harmless.'

'It is. They've always argued.'

'Here it is!' said Felicity's father. He was proudly standing in front of a small restaurant, the door and window of which were festooned with sticky labels informing passers by that the restaurant was approved by a number of English, American, German and Japanese tourist guides and accepted credit and charge cards belonging to around a dozen different banks and financial organisations.

Felicity and I looked at one another. 'Very typically French,' she whispered.

'They do a wonderful cheese soufflé,' said Marion.

'And their puddings are exquisite,' added Gilbert. He pushed open the front door and we followed in line behind him. I brought up the rear.

Inside, the restaurant bore more resemblance to the sort of restaurant English people put together when they are trying to create something that they think looks like a French restaurant, than it did to anywhere I had eaten since I'd been in Paris. The tables were covered in red and white check tablecloths and each one was lit by a single red candle stuck into the top of a wax encrusted wine bottle. A red paper serviette, folded into a cone, stood guard at each place setting. Highly polished farm implements were fixed to the walls and a huge fishing net, decorated with green and blue glass floats, hung from the ceiling like a tent roof.

'Wonderful, isn't it?' said Felicity's mother. She chuckled with pure delight. It was not a laugh, it was a chuckle. When she chuckled her chins vibrated.

A waiter rushed up and started flicking a white linen napkin over the perfectly clean looking chairs. He beamed with delight when Marion thanked him and he pulled her chair out so that she could sit down.

'This meal is on us,' said Gilbert, speaking to me. 'Let's get that straight before we start.'

I started to protest, in a polite sort of way, but Felicity's father would have none of it.

'This is a big day for us,' he said, sitting down next to his wife. 'We've been waiting for Felicity to find Mr Right for some years now. Her mother was beginning to despair and we'd almost begun to accept the idea that she would simply become an old maid – like her Aunt Rebecca.'

'Don't be silly, dear,' said Felicity's mother, who seemed to regard contradicting her husband as an essential responsibility. 'We always knew that Felicity would find the right man in the end.' She spoke to him as a weary mother might speak to – or rather over – a slightly precious child.

Felicity sat down next to her mother. I took the only remaining chair, between her and her father.

'So this evening is on us,' said Gilbert, looking first at me and then at his daughter. 'Eat and drink as much as you like. And as a treat we've booked you a room in our hotel.'

I looked across at Felicity. She looked across at me. I felt startled. She looked shocked.

'Oh no don't worry, dad,' she said, recovering her composure. 'There's no need for you to go to that expense.'

'Not another word about it,' insisted Gilbert. 'The room is booked and that's where you'll be staying tonight.' He looked at us both in turn and winked. 'I'm sure you two modern young people are long past the point where you're likely to be embarrassed by having to share a room.'

'We got them to book you a room with a double bed,' whispered Felicity's mother. 'Your father and I have slept in separate beds for twenty years and I may be old but I can still remember what it was like to be young.' She smiled, first at Felicity and then at me. I got the distinct impression that if she had known how to wink she would have done so.

Felicity and I looked at each other again but this time although we both opened our mouths with the obvious intention of saying something neither of us spoke.

~ Chapter Thirty Four ~

'Do you have any other interests?' asked Gilbert, as the waiter removed our empty soup bowls. 'Other than golf, of course.'

The restaurant was slowly filling up. As far as I could tell everyone in there, apart from the solitary waiter, was English or American. I wasn't sure whether the waiter was Italian or Spanish. I was pretty sure he wasn't French.

I looked across at Felicity, desperate for some sort of hint. We had spent several hours going over everything she had told her parents about Omar. I had made copious notes. Now, my nerves were in such a state that I could hardly remember who I was or why I was there; I certainly couldn't remember whether Omar had any interests outside golf. I had my notes, folded neatly, in my jacket pocket but I could hardly keep slipping out to the loo to rebrief myself every time Felicity's father or mother asked me a question.

Felicity was trying to tell me something but I couldn't make out what it was. I stared hard at her lips as she continued to repeat whatever it was she was silently saying.

'The violin,' I blurted.

Felicity shook her head violently and tried again.

'I used to play the violin,' I said, correcting myself. 'But I gave it up.' I shuddered and pulled a face. 'I hate the violin.' I stared at Felicity. 'You have beautiful hair,' I whispered.

She blushed. 'Don't be silly,' she said.

'Don't stop him,' said her mother, who had clearly overheard my *sotto voce* remark. She gently placed a hand on her daughter's arm. 'Take the compliments now, while you can still get them. I haven't had an unsolicited compliment off your father for a quarter of a century.'

'Yes you have!' insisted an indignant Gilbert.

'When?' demanded his wife.

'Last week,' said Gilbert. 'I told you that the rash on your leg was looking a little less fierce.'

'That wasn't a compliment!' complained Marion.

'Of course it was!' insisted Gilbert.

While Gilbert and Marion were arguing Felicity was still soundlessly trying hard to tell me what my interests were. And I was still unsuccessfully trying to lip read.

'What sort of car do you drive, Omar?' asked Gilbert.

'I, er, I don't have one at the moment,' I answered, feeling that this was not perhaps the best answer even though it was the truth and, as the truth always is, probably the wisest reply. With some relief I realised that I had unintentionally managed to change the direction of the conversation.

'No car?' Gilbert seemed surprised, not to mention horrified, that his daughter was going out with a man who didn't own a car.

'With all the intermittent travelling he has to do there isn't any point in Omar having a car,' said Felicity, coming to my rescue.

'That's it,' I said, gratefully. 'With all the travelling...,' I waved a hand around to give the impression of someone who is constantly flitting from continent to continent. 'Of course, if it wasn't for the travelling I'd have a car,' I said. 'Probably two,' I added. 'What sort of car do you have?' I asked Felicity's father, hoping that the question didn't seem to be too obvious a change in direction. I was anxious to change the subject as quickly as I could. I didn't want Gilbert asking me which tour I played or when I last had a win. I guessed, rightly as it turned out, that asking him about his choice of car would help send the conversation in a new and less dangerous direction. Most men welcome the chance to talk about cars.

'A BMW 5 series,' replied Gilbert. 'I've always had BMWs.'

'Ah,' I said, nodding as though I knew what I was talking about. 'Very sound motor cars.'

'Very sound,' agreed Gilbert.

I nodded, hopefully as though knowledgeably.

'Talking of cars, a pal of mine is in tyres,' said Gilbert. 'Nice fellow. I play golf with him. I expect you chaps just talk about golf. He just talks about tyres.'

'Hmm,' I said.

'Tyres and rubber,' he said. 'Amazing the way they still get the rubber from trees, isn't it? Just like those pictures in the geography books we had at school.' He paused and frowned. 'At least I think they do.'

'Oh yes,' I agreed, though I didn't have the foggiest.

'Funny story about why I drive BMWs,' said Gilbert.

'Oh you're not going to tell Omar that silly story are you, dear,' said Marion. I looked across at her, surprised.

I wasn't aware that she was listening to her husband. She looked slightly embarrassed.

'Why not?' asked Gilbert. 'It's an interesting story. One of my best.' He cleared his throat, and sat up straight, preparing himself to tell his story. 'When I was courting Felicity's mother...'

'Try to catch the waiter's eye, dear,' interrupted Felicity's mother. 'We need another bottle of wine.'

Gilbert dutifully spent a few minutes catching the waiter's eye and persuading him to let us have another bottle of wine.

'Where was I?' he asked, when the new bottle was, at last, sitting on our table and everyone's glass had been replenished.

'You were talking about cars,' I reminded him.

'Of course I was,' said Gilbert. 'When I was courting Felicity's mother – we were both students at the time – we went back to see her parents one Easter and because we were both broke we decided to hitch-hike.'

'It was a long time ago,' said Felicity's mother.

'You wouldn't believe it now,' said Gilbert, 'but back in those days Marion was a bit of a snob.'

'Don't be silly, Gilbert,' said Marion, sharply. 'I was never a snob.'

'Sorry dear,' said Gilbert. 'But I think you were.'

'You're exaggerating as usual,' she said. She reached across the table and touched my hand. She was a keen toucher. 'You have to learn to take everything my husband says with a pinch of salt.'

'So, anyway, we were standing there by the side of the road. I was hidden behind a tree with our bags while Marion was getting ready to stick out her chest and her thumb to get someone to stop and give us a lift.' Gilbert paused and added what was clearly intended to be an aside. 'In those days hitch hiking wasn't as dangerous as it is these days,' he explained, as though he was much older than I. 'Everyone did it,' he added.

'I never stuck out my chest,' complained Marion, blushing enough to make me suspect that her husband's version of what happened was probably pretty accurate. 'You make me sound like some sort of cheap floozy.'

'You were no cheap floozy,' agreed Gilbert. 'But you used to stick out your chest when we were hitch-hiking. You used to stick old tights in your bra to give yourself more, you know,' he used his hands to illustrate the anecdote and searched around for a few moments for an appropriate word. 'Oomph' was the word he finally deemed appropriate.

'Well, I did that maybe just once or twice,' admitted Marion, blushing bright red. 'I wasn't terribly well-endowed in those days.'

'Mother, you didn't!' said Felicity, laughing. She instinctively looked down at her own chest. The scallop-shaped neckline of the dress she was wearing revealed a perfectly ample natural cleavage

'Well if it had been left to your father we would have never got a lift anywhere,' said Marion to her daughter. 'One of us had to use a little ingenuity. You were always nicely developed in that department but I only blossomed when I had you. Before that I looked like a boy when I wore a jumper and jeans.'

'You *never* looked like a boy,' said Gilbert gallantly.

'Anyway, the tights were just a marketing ploy,' explained Marion. 'And I seem to remember that they worked,' she added, with a glance at her husband.

'They certainly did. My wife has always been a genius at marketing,' said Gilbert proudly. 'When we opened our first shop it was Marion who had all the best ideas.'

'Don't be silly, dear,' said Marion, blushing again.

The waiter came to collect our plates. No one spoke while he skilfully used one hand to pile used crockery and cutlery onto the other hand and arm. When he had disappeared Gilbert lowered his voice and leant in towards the centre of the table. 'That waiter reminds me of someone,' he said, furrowing his brow. 'Can't remember who but the name begins with a B.'

There was a silence while Gilbert tried to remember the name of the person the waiter reminded him of.

'What did your first shop sell?' I asked, when it seemed that the silence had gone on for long enough.

'Stamps,' said Gilbert bluntly. 'We started a stall at the local market and it sort of, well grew from there.'

'Gosh!' I said. 'How fascinating.'

'Three shops and a thriving mail order business now,' said Gilbert. 'Collectibles,' he said. 'There's lots of money in collectibles.'

'I had never really thought about it,' I confessed. 'But I suppose there probably is.'

'Bulpit,' said Gilbert. We all looked at him.

'The name of the bloke the waiter reminds me of' He thought for a moment and then shook his head; his disappointment undisguised. 'No, it's not Bulpit,' he said, sadly. 'But it's definitely a B.'

'I gather you are something of a collector, Mr...er...,' stuttered Felicity's mother. 'I'm so sorry, Felicity told us so much about you but never told us your surname.' 'Sheriff,' I said, without thinking. 'But call me Omar.

Please.'

'Omar Sharif?' said Marion, clearly astonished.

'Sheriff,' I said, quickly. 'S-H-E-R-I-F-F,' I said. 'It sounds the same but it's spelt differently.'

I felt a pain in my ankle, looked to my right and saw Felicity staring at me with a raised eyebrow.

'What an astonishing coincidence!' said Marion.

'I think my mother was probably a fan,' I said. 'And with our surnames being similar...'

'Really?' said Mrs Dingle. She frowned and seemed puzzled by something. It was probably the same flaw that had occurred to me.

'Of course I don't think Omar Sharif was a big star when I was born,' I said. 'But she had me re-christened when I was a teenager.'

'Really?' said Gilbert. 'Can you do that?'

'We were talking about your collection,' said Marion, sensing my discomfort.

'Oh yes,' I said. 'Fascinating. Absolutely fascinating. My collection is the most important thing in my life.' I rambled on. 'After Felicity, of course.' I turned to Felicity and smiled.

'Of course,' smiled Marion.

I looked at Felicity, desperate for help. 'Omar has been collecting all his life,' she said. 'Haven't you, darling?'

'All my life,' I agreed. I looked into her eyes, begging her to help.

'My father collects all sorts of things,' said Felicity.

'Stamps, cigarette cards, match boxes, souvenir ashtrays, beermats.' She looked at her father. 'Are you still collecting beermats, father?'

'Oh yes,' he said, with undisguised enthusiasm. 'I picked up five rare German ones last week.'

'So what's your speciality, Mr Sh...Omar?' asked Marion.

'Norton!' said Gilbert suddenly. He spoke so loudly that half the other diners in the restaurants stopped talking and looked in our direction.

'Sshhh!' said Marion. 'Everyone's looking!'

'Who is Norton?' asked Felicity.

'The chap that waiter reminds me of,' said Gilbert. 'Edward Norton. He's a salesman at the BMW garage.' He smiled and looked very relieved. 'It was driving me mad!' he said. He looked across at me. 'Does that ever happen to you?'

'All the time,' I agreed.

'I thought you said his name began with a B,' said Marion.

'An N,' said Gilbert. 'It starts with an N.' He paused, thinking again. 'Maybe his first name starts with a B.'

'Oh, don't start all that again!' said Felicity.

'That reminds me, I was saying something about BMWs before,' said Gilbert. 'What on earth was I about to say?'

'How do you expect us to know what you were about to say?' demanded Marion, perfectly reasonably.

'You told me that you had a BMW;' I reminded him.

'I know what I was going to tell you,' said Gilbert, once again greatly relieved. 'I was telling you about the first time that Marion and I went hitch-hiking.'

'Oh dear,' muttered Marion, only half under her breath.

'I thought you'd forgotten all about that.'

'We had been standing on the grass verge for a quarter of an hour and hundreds of lorries, vans and cars had gone screaming past,' continued Gilbert, bravely ignoring his wife.

'Marion still hadn't put her thumb up...'

'...or stuck her chest out!' added Felicity.

'...or stuck her chest out,' agreed Gilbert. 'So I popped out from behind my tree to ask her why she wasn't trying to get us a lift. And do you know what she said?'

Neither Felicity nor I could guess. 'She said she was waiting for a BMW,' said Gilbert. Felicity laughed out loud. I smiled.

'Well, you'd have accepted a lift in anything,' complained Marion.

'Of course I would,' said Gilbert. 'I just wanted to get where we were going as quickly as possible.'

'He'd have had me laid out in the back of some dirty old van,' complained Marion.

'Oh, mother!' said Felicity, laughing again.

'I didn't mean that!' insisted Marion, going bright red. 'You know what I meant.'

'What happened in the end?' I asked. 'Did a BMW come along?'

'No,' said Gilbert. 'But I eventually managed to persuade her to accept a lift in a Mercedes.' He sighed at the memory of it.

‘So, that’s why you always buy BMWs,’ I said.

‘That’s why I always buy BMWs,’ agreed Gilbert.

‘So, what do you collect?’ asked Marion. She was clearly not a woman who gave up easily.

‘Napkins,’ I blurted out, holding up the red paper square which had been crumpled on my lap, allegedly protecting my clothes from stray bits of food and wine. ‘And serviettes,’ I said.

‘Good heavens,’ said Gilbert. ‘I’ve met all sorts of unusual collectors. I know a man who has the biggest collection of coloured pencils in the world. I heard of a fellow who collects airline sick bags. And a friend of mine knows a chap in New Zealand who collects plastic tea spoons. But you are the first person I’ve ever met who collects napkins.’

‘And serviettes,’ I reminded him.

‘How big is your collection?’ asked Gilbert.

‘I’m not sure,’ I said. ‘I’m reorganising things at the moment,’ I said, twisting the red paper napkin on my lap so hard that a piece came off.

‘You didn’t tell us that Mr Sh...’, began Mrs Dingle.

‘Omar,’ I reminded her.

‘Omar,’ said Mrs Dingle, with a smile and a nod in my direction. ‘You didn’t tell us that Omar collected napkins,’ she said to Felicity. ‘You said he collected golf tees.’

‘I’d forgotten about the serviettes,’ said Felicity. ‘But it’s nice to have a man who has two interests,’ she said, glancing in my direction. ‘It makes it so much easier to find presents for birthdays and Christmas.’

‘You’ve spoilt the surprise now,’ I protested. ‘I’ll know what I’m getting when I find my parcel under the Christmas tree!’

‘Of course you won’t,’ said Felicity, putting her hand on my arm. She seemed to have inherited her mother’s habit of touching people. I liked it...I liked it very much. I looked at her. ‘You won’t know whether you’re getting a packet of Japanese golf tees or a rare old Italian serviette.’ I suddenly realised that I wanted very much to spend next Christmas with Felicity. And I didn’t want her putting her hand on anyone else’s arm.

~ Chapter Thirty Five ~

'I hope you don't mind my asking you,' said Gilbert, leaning a little closer and lowering his voice, 'but since you're a golf professional I simply can't resist the temptation to ask you just one question.'

If Gilbert had asked me a question about golf at the beginning of the evening, when I had been stone cold sober, I would have panicked. But having consumed the best part of a bottle of wine I had acquired more confidence. The confidence may have come out of a bottle but the beauty of confidence which comes out of a bottle is that it is, to the consumer, indistinguishable from the real thing. (To the sober observer, of course, there are startling differences between these two types of confidence. But, fortunately, Gilbert had drunk as much wine as I had.)

'Oh daddy, you really shouldn't ask Omar for advice,' said Felicity. There was panic in her voice. She knew that I had never picked up a golf club in my life. 'It's like being at a cocktail party and asking a doctor about your bad back.'

Gilbert looked puzzled. 'We aren't at a cocktail party and I haven't got a bad back,' he protested, not entirely unreasonably. He looked at me. 'And you're not a doctor, are you?

I shook my head. 'I'm definitely not a doctor,' I told

'There you are!' said Gilbert, genuinely puzzled. 'Why is my asking your boyfriend for advice about my hook like being at a cocktail party, which we're not, asking a doctor, which he isn't, about a bad back which I'm glad to say I haven't got?'

'Because I expect Omar wants to get away from golf for the evening,' said Felicity, not in the slightest bit put off by the complexity of this protest. Her voice was full of finality. Only a brave man – or someone emboldened by alcohol – would have ignored her.

Marion added her voice to Felicity's. 'Don't listen to him Omar, dear,' she said.

'Why not?' demanded Gilbert, whose alcohol enhanced confidence was great enough to enable him to withstand this twin approach. He slapped me on the back. 'Chap is about to become my son-in-law!' he reminded his wife and daughter, though this was of course almost as much of a surprise to them as it was to me. 'It's a poor show if I can't ask my son-in-law about my golf swing.' He turned to me, his face about six inches from mine. 'Do you?' he asked suddenly.

I stared at Gilbert, completely confused and with no idea what he was talking about. 'Do I what?'

'We're not engaged, daddy,' said Felicity, clearly keen to put the record straight. 'No one has said anything about marriage or about Omar becoming your son-in-law.'

'Do you want to get away from golf?' Gilbert asked me.

'No, no, not at all,' I said, full of alcohol inspired irrational confidence. I waved a hand around magnanimously. 'Ask away!'

Beside me Felicity put her hand on my thigh and squeezed. Emboldened by circumstances and alcohol, I misresponded by boldly placing my own hand on her thigh.

'There you are, you see!' said Gilbert to his wife and daughter. There was unmistakeable triumph in his voice. I suspect that it was not often that he enjoyed such a notice able victory over the women in his family.

'Ouch!' I said, as Felicity removed her hand from my thigh and immediately used the liberated fingers to remove my hand from her thigh.

Alarmed by my cry Felicity's mother, clearly a caring and solicitous woman, leant forward. 'Oh dear, what's the matter?' she asked. 'Are you all right?'

'I've talked to the pro about it, of course,' said Gilbert, unmoved by my pain and blissfully ignoring the drama unfolding beside him. 'It's a problem I've had for years.' He sighed. 'I thought I'd got it licked but in recent months it's got worse.'

'Are you all right, Omar?' repeated Mrs Dingle.

'Just a touch of cramp, I expect,' I said, rubbing my wrist.

'The pro says my grip is one of the best he's ever seen,' said Gilbert, who had picked up a coffee spoon and was attempting to use it to illustrate his grip. Since a coffee spoon is considerably smaller than the average golf club he was having some difficulty with this. 'And he tells me I keep my head as steady as a rock,' he said, using the coffee spoon to hit a stray piece of bread off the table cloth. The bread headed off in the direction of his wife. 'But he thinks drop my left shoulder an inch too much. Do you think that could be the problem?' Displaying excellent reflexes Mrs Dingle ducked and the piece of bread flew through the air and landed in the bouffant hair of a blonde woman at the next table. Fortunately, neither she nor her companions noticed the arrival of this unsolicited addition to her coiffure.

'How strange,' said Mrs Dingle, ignoring her husband's display of indoor golfing prowess. She leant towards me, her face full of care and concern. ‘Are you all right, dear? Do you want to lie down? Shall we get you a glass of water? An aspirin tablet?’

‘And so if the problem is that I’m dropping my shoulder – and I’m not saying it is – what should I do about it?’ finished Gilbert.

‘I’m sure he’ll be fine,’ said Felicity, putting her hand on my arm. Feeling her fingers touch me I looked at her in alarm but she smiled sweetly and I relaxed a little.

‘Are you closing your eyes through the swing?’ I asked.

Gilbert looked at me and frowned. He seemed puzzled and slightly sceptical. ‘Closing my eyes?’

‘Closing your eyes helps your mind and body concentrate on the ball,’ I explained, looking around as though to check that no one at any of the other tables was listening. ‘It cuts out distractions from the outside world.’

‘I’ve never heard that one before,’ whispered Gilbert, obviously impressed.

‘And scrunch your toes up in your shoes.’

‘Scrunch my toes up?’

.’Scrunch your toes up.’

‘What does that do?’

‘Improves accuracy off the tee,’ I told him. ‘It liberates inappropriate muscle tension.’ I leant across the table. ‘These are secret tips we professionals use,’ I told him. ‘Don’t whatever you do tell anyone I told you about them.’ He stared at me, open-eyed. ‘You must have noticed that professionals hit the ball further than amateurs?’

‘Of course.’

‘These are the tricks we professionals use to enable us to hit the ball further and straighter than the amateurs,’ I told him. I was drunk enough to think these things up he was certainly drunk enough to believe them.

‘Really,’ I said.

Gilbert leant even closer and looked from side to side before speaking. ‘Can I tell my chum Bernard?’ he asked, in a whisper. ‘We’ve played together for fifteen years. I trust him with my life. He’s a tyre salesman. I know he wouldn’t tell a soul.’

‘Sorry,’ I said, putting a finger to my lips and shaking my head.

‘Enough said!’ said Gilbert, nodding to show that he understood. ‘The secret stops here,’ he said, tapping his lips with his right forefinger. ‘Sealed,’ he said. He winked at me.

~ Chapter Thirty Six ~

We were standing on the pavement outside the restaurant.

'So,' said Mrs Dingle, looking first at me, then at her daughter and then at me again. 'Put us out of our misery. Have you two set the date yet?'

Felicity looked at me. I looked at her. Neither of us said anything.

'For the wedding,' explained Gilbert, in case we hadn't understood what his wife had been talking about. 'When are you two getting married?' Both he and Mrs Dingle stared at us. Their eyes were full of both hope and expectation.

I looked at Felicity. She looked at me. I put my arm around her. She stiffened for a moment and then to my surprise (and delight) I felt her relax. I felt her arm slide around my waist.

'We haven't got a date yet,' I said.

'What on earth are you waiting for?' demanded Gilbert, with clearly faked gruffness. 'You're both obviously madly in love with one another.'

'Well,' I began, and shrugged.

'If you were worried about the little...you know...between the two of you then you can forget it,' said Gilbert. 'Isn't that right, mother?'

'It doesn't bother us at all,' said Felicity's mother. She reached out and put a hand on her daughter's arm. 'We're both just pleased to see you happy, dear,' she said.

I looked at Felicity who clearly didn't have any more idea about what her parents were talking about than I did.

'The, you know, the difference,' said Gilbert. He seemed embarrassed.

'The difference?'

'The fact that you're, well, you know, and she's, er...' Gilbert continued. 'The difference...er vive it, that's what I say. Vive la difference, isn't that what the French say?'

'The age thing,' said Felicity's mother, bluntly, spotting our confusion. She shook her head. 'Gilbert and I talked about it. It doesn't bother us a bit.'

Felicity looked at them and then at me and then back at her parents. Then she burst out laughing.

'What's the matter, dear?' asked her mother, solicitously.

'There's nothing the matter' said Felicity. We all looked at her, waiting to hear why nothing was the matter. 'It's just, well, just that I hadn't thought about it. To be honest, I hadn't even noticed the difference!'

'There you are then,' said Felicity's mother, patting her daughter on the arm. 'It's of no consequence. Your Aunt Giselda will probably have a thing or two to say about it. As you know she has always been a little old-fashioned about these things, but you just leave her to me. You let us know the date when you're ready.'

'There's no hurry,' said Gilbert, with a smile. He looked up at the sky. 'Nice night,' he said. 'But a bit chilly.' He started to walk slowly towards the hotel. His wife followed him.

Felicity and I followed along behind them, still with our arms around one another. It was a moment which I wished could go on for ever.

'Would you like to go for a walk by the river?' I asked Felicity. It had occurred to me that if Felicity and I went upstairs with her parents I would either have to creep back down again afterwards or else climb out of the window and slide down a drainpipe. Neither of these possibilities appealed to me. I had a vision of falling, hurting my back and turning up at breakfast the following morning with a bad back. Gilbert would derive a good deal of amusement from that.

'That would be nice,' she said. 'I'd like that.'

'Ah, how romantic!' said Felicity's mother, who had overheard. 'Your father was just the same when he was younger.' She paused and leant a little closer. 'Before he got his arthritis,' she whispered. 'He doesn't like to be out too long in the night air these days. He's not as young as he used to be.'

We both smiled at her as though we understood. I didn't draw attention to the fact that Gilbert was quite probably a year or two younger than I was.

'You two are in room 220,' called Gilbert, now a few yards ahead, on the steps to the hotel. 'We'll see you at breakfast in the morning.'

'Don't forget,' I said to Gilbert as we left them for the night. 'Close up your toes and scrunch your eyes!'

'Close your toes and scrunch your eyes!' said Gilbert. And he gave me another conspiratorial wink to confirm that my secret was safe with him.

'Goodnight, dears,' said Felicity's mother. She gave her daughter a kiss and then surprised me by giving me one too. 'We specially asked for a room with a double bed,' she told us for the second time. 'I know what it's like to be in love. Your father and I once changed hotels four times because all they had to offer were twin beds.'

'You already told us that, mother,' said Felicity.

I thanked Mrs Dingle for her thoughtfulness, hoping that she could not see my blushing cheeks, and then they were gone and Felicity and I were standing alone on the pavement.

'Do you really want to go for a walk by the river?' I asked her. I still had my arm around her waist and she still had her arm around mine.

'Yes,' she said. She turned, slid her other hand and arm inside my jacket and looked up at me. 'As long as your arthritis won't be too badly affected by the damp air down by the river.'

I smacked her bottom lightly. She wriggled and giggled. And then, for the first time since we had met, I kissed her. To my immense surprise and delight she kissed me back.

~ Chapter Thirty Seven ~

The most beautiful river in the world divides Paris into two exquisite halves. One half is bejewelled, commercial and extravagant. Listen carefully and you can hear the jewellery clanking together, the other half, replete with intellectuals, administrators and bureaucrats, is quieter and much less flamboyant. There you can hear the brains clinking and churning. It is on the left bank that people have ideas and design things. It is on the right bank that they sell the things which are thought up and designed on the left bank.

In the daytime the Seine is something of a working conduit. Barges full of coal and other essentials glide gently up and down the middle of the river. By and large the tourists stay on the banks, having picnics, watching the boats, basking in the sunshine.

At night the Seine changes its nature. It becomes a conduit for romance. The boats which glide up and down from the Eiffel Tower and the Trocadero to the Pont Neuf and the cathedral of Notre Dame are full of rich tourists, eating five course meals and enjoying the spectacle as the Seine's adjacent skyline is floodlit by lamps fixed on the decks of the boats. On the banks stroll lovers, arm in arm. The benches which, just a few hours earlier, were packed with eager picnickers eating sandwiches and drinking wine from plastic beakers are now full of lovers kissing and cuddling and whispering sweet nothings into one another's ears.

Felicity and I strolled arm in arm along the river bank. It was one of those warm evenings which France in general, and Paris in particular, do so well. France is an outdoor country. The weather is frequently perfect for eating outside, strolling through the fields or by a river.

'I hope you didn't find my parents too intimidating,' she said.

'Not at all,' I assured her. 'I enjoyed their company.'

She looked up at me.

'No, really,' I said. 'I admit I didn't expect to get on with them. But I did.'

'My father can be a trifle intimidating at times,' she said. 'But he liked you.'

'I just hope he forgets those golf tips I gave him,' I sighed.

'He was certainly impressed. I was too. I thought you didn't know anything about golf.'

'I don't.'

'Well, you must have done some very quick research then!'

'I didn't.'

'So, where did you get those tips from?'

'I made them up.'

'You didn't!'

'I'm afraid I did.'

Felicity started giggling. 'Oh dear. But you sounded so very convincing.'

We walked on for another hundred yards or so. I had one big worry lingering at the back of my mind – whether or not to tell her that I knew what she did for a living. As we walked it had occurred to me that it might make it easier for her if I told her that I knew, that I didn't mind and that I would love her whatever she did for a living. There were several difficulties in the way of this confession. Not the least of these was the fact that I still wasn't entirely sure what she did do for a living. I knew she worked at Le Lapin Fou but just what else her work entailed I had no idea. Albert had told me that the club employed hostesses and lap dancers but I wasn't sure whether Felicity was a lap dancer or a hostess. And I didn't know what obligations went with these occupations. Were they expected to sleep with the clients? Did Felicity? She didn't look like the sort of woman who earned her living having sex with strangers but I'd been around long enough to know that it isn't always possible to guess someone's occupation simply by their appearance. I had once met a man who looked like a bishop. He had turned out to be an arms salesman specialising in the nastier forms of anti-personnel mines.

Three jazz musicians were playing on a wooden footbridge above the Seine. We stopped, stood and listened to them for a while.

'By the way, I'm sorry about all that 'when are you getting married' stuff,' Felicity said, as we started walking again. 'I hope you weren't too embarrassed by it.'

'I wasn't embarrassed by it in the slightest,' I told her. I stopped walking again, though we had only travelled a few yards, took her free hand in mine and pulled her to me. 'In fact it seemed a good idea to me.'

'Now you're being silly,' she said, looking away. 'Just look at that,' she said, nodding towards a *bateau mouche,* gliding along the river beside us.

The boat's searchlight lit us up. I pulled Felicity to me and kissed her. The beam of the light was astonishingly powerful. It was like standing there in broad daylight. When the boat had passed by we slowly parted, but stayed close together.

Felicity laughed. ‘OK. So what do you do for a living?’

‘At the moment I don’t do anything. I used to have a terrible job in public relations but I gave that up a few months ago. I took early retirement. A sort of voluntary redundancy.’

‘Why did you stick with the job if it was so terrible?’

‘I don’t know. I needed the job when I was married. My wife got through money as if it was bad for our health to hang on to it. And afterwards I suppose I was too frightened to give it up. I didn’t have any hobbies. I didn’t have any friends. It was the only thing I had. Sad, eh?’

‘What are you going to do now?’

‘Albert’s starting a magazine. He’s asked me to edit it.’

‘That’s wonderful! Are you excited?’

‘Very.’

‘Is this Albert’s magazine about Paris?’

‘Yes. You knew about it?’

‘He’s been talking about it for years. He’s got it all worked out. It sounds as if it could work. I really hope it does. Is the bank going to lend him the money?’

‘No. I don’t think so. Albert is leaving the paper. But the magazine is going ahead.’

‘How? Who’s putting up the money?’ I felt rather embarrassed. ‘I am.’

‘You are?’

‘Yes.’

Felicity looked at me, clearly surprised.

I laughed and raised a hand. ‘Don’t get the wrong idea,’ I said. ‘I haven’t won the lottery. I’m not rich. But I’ve got a few thousand pounds in the bank. Some of it is my redundancy money and some of it from the sale of my house in England. And to be honest I can’t think of a better use for it.’

‘Are you sure?’ asked Felicity, concerned. ‘Starting any new business is always risky. But a new magazine...’

‘I know,’ I said. I shrugged and smiled. ‘But what the hell. Albert has been a real friend to me since I came to Paris. It’ll be a pleasure to work with him. Besides, I rather think it will be fun. What about you?’

‘Me what? Of course I think it’s exciting.’

‘No. Your work. Your job. I’ve told you my dark secret. Now it’s your turn.’ I was dreading this moment. Not because I was bothered. I had come to terms with what Felicity did for a living. I really didn’t care whether she worked as a heart surgeon, sold real estate or acted in pornographic movies. It didn’t make any difference to how I felt about her. And I had already decided that I wouldn’t object if she wanted to carry on doing whatever it was she did after we were married. But I did fear that she might be embarrassed about telling me.

‘I work at a club in Montmartre,’ she told me, as though telling me she worked in a store on the Boulevard Haussmann.

‘How fascinating!’ I managed to cry, anxious to feign surprise but also delighted that she had chosen to tell me the truth.

‘How long have you worked there?’ I asked her.

‘Since I first came to Paris,’ she replied. ‘Seven – no, eight – years ago.’

‘Do you enjoy it?’ I asked.

‘Very much. It’s very interesting work,’ she said. ‘The people are very nice.’

‘Do you have to work very late?’ I asked.

‘No, not really. We start a little later than offices, banks and shops – and finish a little later too. But that suits me because I like to sleep late. And the traffic is always quieter when I am going to work and when I am coming home. Sometimes I have to stay later in the evenings but my boss, who is very kind and thoughtful, always gets me a taxi to take me home.’

‘It must be very exciting,’ I said. ‘Being in show business.’

‘Oh, I don’t know that I would call it show business,’ she said, rather shyly. ‘It’s just a job.’

I still hadn’t found out exactly what she did for a living. But I strongly suspected that I had been right.

‘I’ve never been to Montmartre,’ I admitted. ‘Let alone been to a club.’

‘Then you must come there very soon,’ she said.

‘Tomorrow?’ I suggested. Then, suspecting how late it was, I looked at my watch. ‘Today?’ I corrected myself, realising that tomorrow was already today.

Felicity laughed. ‘OK.’

‘Can we have dinner together afterwards?’

‘Thank you. I’d like that. Very much.’

‘You’re shivering,’ I said.

‘It is a bit chilly.’

I took off my jacket and draped it around her shoulders and then we walked slowly back to her parent’s hotel where the double room had been booked for us.

‘I’ll go back to my apartment,’ I said, as we stood on the doorstep outside the hotel. It was the last thing in the world I wanted to do at that moment. The words of Felicity’s mother rang, mockingly, in my ears. ‘We specially asked for a double bed.’

‘Will you be all right?’ asked Felicity.

‘The walk will do me good,’ I replied.

‘You’d better take this,’ she said, sliding my jacket off her shoulders and handing it back to me. ‘Thank you.’

‘It looked better on you,’ I told her, putting my jacket back on. Felicity giggled.

‘Tell your parents I had to rush off before breakfast,’ I suggested.

‘I’ll tell them you’ve had to go and practise your toe scrunching.’

‘When will I see you?’ I asked her.

‘Pick me up at Le Lapin Fou. The address is in the telephone book. Every taxi driver knows it.’

‘What time?’

‘Come at six. I’ll show you round,’ she said. ‘And now you’d better go.’ She put her arms around my neck and kissed me. ‘Are you sure you don’t want me to ask the night porter to ring for a taxi?’

I shook my head. ‘I’ll be fine, thanks,’ I told her. I still didn’t go. ‘I love you,’ I whispered. We were still holding hands.

Tears appeared in Felicity’s eyes.

‘What’s the matter?’ I asked her, concerned. ‘Have I said something wrong?’

She shook her head. ‘I thought you’d never say it,’ she whispered.

I waited.

‘I love you too,’ she whispered back.

I don’t remember anything at all about the walk back to my apartment though it was presumably uneventful.

~ Chapter Thirty Eight ~

Despite not having got to bed until dawn (and being so excited that I had not slept at all) I got up at 8.30 and went downstairs to check my mailbox.

Rosemonde had promised that her cheque would be with me by now and when I found that my mail box contained nothing more exciting than a telephone bill and an advertisement for a company generously offering to fit new windows I thought it rather irritating of her to have failed to stick to her word. There wasn't even a note of apology.

I had cleaned out my bank account in order to make sure that Rosemonde had the money she needed to save her flat, and her failure to send the cheque she had promised meant that I was now pretty well broke. Standing there in the hallway I emptied my pockets and found that I had 170 francs in my wallet, in notes, and about 15 francs in loose change. Hardly enough to get me through the day, and certainly not enough for me to take a taxi to Le Lapin Fou and buy a meal for two.

While I was downstairs I popped along to the baker's two doors away and bought a couple of croissants. I took these upstairs, brewed a pot of coffee and made myself breakfast while I tried to decide what to do next. As I sipped and chewed the old adage about being neither a borrower nor a lender kept popping into my head. I wished I'd remembered it earlier.

I really didn't like to telephone Rosemonde (it seemed so demeaning to have to chase up a debt) but in the end I plucked up the courage, picked up the telephone and dialled the number she had given me. There was no answer. I dialled again. No answer. I waited five minutes and then dialled the number again. There was still no answer.

At this point I began to feel a trifle concerned. I wasn't worried. But I was concerned. Even though there had been no response to the telephone I decided that I would go round to Rosemonde's flat and see if she was in. I washed up my breakfast things and put away the coffee, the butter and the jam. I then locked my front door, hurried downstairs and took a taxi to Rosemonde's flat. Despite my anxiety I honestly thought that two minutes after reaching Rosemonde's flat I would have a cheque in my hand for the sum I was owed. Little did I know just how big a surprise I had ahead of me. If I had even imagined what lay ahead I would have probably saved the Metro fare and walked.

The shock came when the concierge at the address Rosemonde had given me had never heard of her, and did not seem to recognise my description of her. I pressed him. I pushed. I raised my voice. I pleaded. But it was all in vain. For a while I wondered if she had simply given the concierge a healthy tip to develop amnesia in order to put off callers she didn't want to see. But this theory didn't last more than a minute or two. I eventually had to accept that Rosemonde had given me a false address. And it was at this moment that I really began to worry. I immediately realised that if she had given me a false address then there was a very good chance that I would never see my money again.

Outside I found a telephone kiosk and dialled Rosemonde's number once more. It seemed pretty pointless, but what else was there to try? The number just rang and rang. No one answered.

'I didn't know what to do so I took another taxi to the Fag and Ferret in the hope that I could get some useful advice from Albert. But Albert wasn't there. I walked from the Fag and Ferret to his hotel and found him still in bed. He wasn't asleep. On the contrary he was reading the paper (the one for which he wrote) and having breakfast.

'This newspaper is a disgrace,' he said, waving the paper in the air and then tossing it to one side. The crumpled pages separated and floated to the floor beside his bed. 'It is packed with miserable stories about miserable people. It makes me depressed to read it.' He stared at me over his half moon spectacles, reminding me of an old school master.

'You look a bit under the weather,' he said, halting the progress of the tea spoon with which he had been about to decapitate an innocent looking boiled egg. 'What's up? Do you want a drink?' His hand reached towards the telephone, ready to call room service. I had known Albert long enough to know that he wasn't offering me a cup of tea. Albert regarded alcohol as the universal panacea. He prescribed it for all physical and mental ailments. I declined politely. It seemed an appropriate moment to keep my wits about me.

'I've been conned,' I told him, by now seriously agitated. 'All my money has been stolen.'

'Ah,' said Albert. 'That's not good.'

'It's terrible!' I cried, in despair. 'It was the money I was going to use for the magazine.'

'Who's stolen it?' woman called Rosemonde.'

I told him the story.

~ Chapter Thirty Nine ~

'So,' said Albert when I had finished. 'You lent all your money to a woman?'

'Yes.'

'A woman you had met just the once?'

'Yes,' I said quietly. I didn't know whether to feel embarrassed or ashamed. I paused. 'Well, actually, it was twice,' I said, rather defensively.

'The once when you bought her lots of champagne and the once when you gave her all the money that you hadn't spent on champagne?'

'You make me sound really stupid,' I said, although he was simply telling the bald truth. It was hardly his fault if what I had done really was stupid.

Albert looked at me. 'You met her, by accident, while waiting outside a Metro station for a woman who never turned up.'

I sighed. I could hardly believe it myself. 'Yes,' I croaked. Even my voice seemed embarrassed. I made an effort to speak a little louder. 'She and her husband decided to get divorced and so she didn't want to have an affair with me.'

'OK. There's no need to shout. And this is the woman to whom you lent the money?'

'No. This was the woman I was supposed to be meeting.' Albert scratched his head. He seemed puzzled. 'The woman who didn't turn up?'

'The woman who didn't turn up. The woman who didn't turn up was called Paulette. I don't know her other name. She didn't turn up because she and her husband had agreed to get divorced...'

'...so she didn't need to have an affair?'

'That's right.' I sighed. 'It didn't make much sense to me when she told me and it doesn't make much sense now.'

'No, no, that bit I understand,' said Albert. 'The French are like that. Why would a woman want to take a lover if she didn't have a husband?' He thought for a moment, struggling to get the facts assembled in order. 'But she definitely wasn't the woman to whom you lent the money?'

'No. The woman who didn't turn up because she and her husband were getting a divorce was called Paulette. The woman to whom I lent the money was called Rosemonde.'

'Rosemonde was the woman you met outside the Metro?'

'Yes.'

'By accident?'

'Yes.'

'And to whom you subsequently gave every penny you had saved?'

'That's right.'

'Over a lifetime of hard work?' I nodded.

'The money you had got from selling your house?'

'Yes.'

'And your redundancy money?'

'Yes.'

'And whatever else you had managed to put on one side for a rainy day?'

'Yes.' I sighed, cross with myself rather than with him. 'Do you really have to rub this in quite so much?'

'I'm sorry. I'm just trying to get it straight in my mind,' said Albert. He paused for a while, playing with the stem of his wine glass. He looked at me, held his head slightly to one side and smiled before asking the next question. 'This was the money you were going to invest in our magazine?'

'Yes,' I croaked. My throat felt very dry. I looked down at my hands and examined the nail at the end of my left index finger. I felt worse about letting Albert down than I did about losing all my money. Gradually, I became aware of a strange sort of spluttering sound. I didn't like to look up. I had a feeling that Albert was crying. There wasn't a lot more to look at on or around the nail on my left index finger so I turned my attention to the nail at the end of my left middle finger. It looked about as interesting as the nail at the end of my left index finger. In fact, I was already tiring of the subject. If I had been asked I would have been happy to confirm that fingernails were, as a subject for investigation, of strictly limited entertainment value: down there alongside stand up comediennes and presenters on early morning television. The spluttering seemed to be growing in volume. I was now certain that Albert was crying. I could understand it. His magazine, his dream, seemed doomed. He no longer had a job as a columnist and now he didn't have his magazine either. I could hardly blame myself for him not having his job as a columnist but it was certainly my fault that there would not now be a magazine. I felt worse, far worse, about letting Albert down than I did about being conned and losing my money. The spluttering was getting louder. I tried hard but in vain – to think of something comforting to say. I wanted to sink into the woodwork and disappear.

When I eventually found the courage to look up I could hardly believe my eyes. Tears were rolling down his cheeks but Albert wasn't crying, he was laughing. He was holding one hand across his mouth, gripping his abdomen with his other and rocking backwards and forwards.

'Are you OK?' I asked, thinking that perhaps he had had some sort of nervous breakdown.

Albert looked across at me and nodded. His eyes were red and his cheeks were wet with tears. He removed his hand from his mouth, looked at me, struggled for a moment to control himself, failed and started to laugh out loud. 'I'm sorry,' he said. He took a handkerchief out of the breast pocket of his jacket and stuffed it into his mouth in an attempt to stop himself laughing. 'I'm sorry.'

I don't know why but watching Albert laugh made me feel a good deal better. The money had gone and it wasn't coming back but it wasn't the end of the world. I smiled at him and nodded. 'I suppose it is a bit funny,' I admitted. I started to laugh. I wasn't really sure what I was laughing at. Losing all your money to a confidence trickster isn't necessarily the funniest thing that can happen. But I felt like laughing and laughing made me feel better so I laughed.

Albert looked at me, as though trying to decide whether or not I was offended by his laughter. He seemed relieved to note that I was not offended. 'I'm sorry,' he mumbled. He spat out the handkerchief. 'A bit funny?' he said. His laughter got louder and more out of control. 'A bit funny?' he said again. 'It is, without a shadow of a doubt, the daftest thing I've ever heard of. I've met a lot of crazy people but you...! What can I say? You may have lost a busload of money but you've acquired a priceless anecdote. I wish I was still writing a column.'

We both laughed for several minutes.

'You are,' I said, when I eventually managed to stop laughing enough to speak.

'I am what?' demanded Albert. For some unknown reason this triggered another bout of laughter. We had both reached the point at which virtually anything, with the obvious exception of anything prepared or produced by anyone describing themselves as an 'alternative comedian', would have appeared funny.

'You are still writing a column,' I told him, when I could control my breathing, my tongue and my lips long enough to speak.

This news seemed to startle Albert. It had the bizarre effect of sobering him up almost instantaneously. 'Am I?'

'I think so,' I said. 'Didn't you say that you had to write your column until the end of the month?'

'Absolutely,' said Albert. 'Up until the end of the month.' He nodded, remembering. 'If I don't write until the end of the week I'll be in breach of contract and they'll sue me for every penny I haven't got.' He looked at me. 'When is the end of the week? Hasn't the week ended yet? The weeks seem interminable these days. I blame the government.'

I looked at my watch. 'Tomorrow.'

'Streuth!' said Albert. 'It's still this week then. What time is it?'

I looked at my watch again. 'Half past twelve.'

'In the afternoon?'

'In the afternoon. What time do you have to get your column in by?'

'Now will do fine,' said Albert, who had taken out his mobile telephone and dialled the number of the features desk at the newspaper for which he worked.

I listened, in awe, as he proceeded to tell my story – the one I had just finished telling him – in a neat and precise 800 words. At the end he finished with a few paragraphs explaining that he and I had been about to go into business together, starting a new magazine about Paris. And in his final sentence he said goodbye to the readers whom he had amused for so many years. When he had finished dictating he suggested to the sub editor who had taken down his copy that they called the piece ''A Real Champagne Charlie."

I felt a complete idiot. But I felt curiously proud to have provided Albert with the material for his final newspaper column.

~ Chapter Forty ~

When he had finished writing his column Albert rang down for room service and had a drink (to celebrate his last hour's work for the newspaper he had begun to loathe and the editor he hated). He then picked up his telephone again, dialled a number he did not need to look up, apologised for ringing so early, blew a kiss, asked a question, listened carefully to the reply, wrote something down in his diary, blew another kiss, said goodbye, severed the connection, redialled and managed to get hold of a detective whom he knew by name.

'I'm impressed,' I told him, when he had made an appointment for us to see a policeman at a local police station. 'How do you come to know policemen?' Albert was not the sort of man who I could imagine hanging out in cafés and bars frequented by members of the Parisian gendarmerie.

'He's a contact of Lucie's,' Albert explained, with a careless shrug. 'She knows all sorts of strange people,' he added, with a bit of a grin.

When Albert had got dressed we emptied a bottle of wine in the hotel bar ('No responsible citizen can possibly be expected to walk into a police station without at least a couple of drinks inside him,' Albert explained, somehow managing to make this claim seem eminently reasonable) and then tottered around the corner to the local police station. Although he must have been greatly disappointed that the funding for his magazine had disappeared in such a stupid way he uttered not one word of criticism. All I got from him was sympathy and understanding; the sign of a true friendship.

The outside of the building where the local gendarmes drank coffee and hung out when not speeding around the city in beaten up Citroen motor cars was bland, uninteresting 1970s concrete but the inside of the building looked like a set from an old Maigret movie.

On the other side of a counter which marked the limits of the reception area where we had been told to meet Lucie's friend, two middle-aged detectives were sitting at old-fashioned 'sit up and beg' typewriters, hammering keys with just two nicotine-stained fingers each. Both were puffing away at Gauloise cigarettes and the air was thick with blue cigarette smoke. Both men wore hats perched on the backs of their heads. I hadn't seen a man in Paris wearing a hat of any kind and these two detectives must have stood out in the street as much as if they had been wearing pink tutus.

One of the men stopped clattering at his typewriter for a moment, looked up and raised an eyebrow. Albert gave his name and then gave the name of the detective he had arranged to meet. The two fingered typist nodded, picked up an old-fashioned black Bakelite telephone, dialled a short number, muttered something in incomprehensible provincial French and then let the receiver clatter noisily back down onto the rest before turning back to his typewriter and continuing to clatter away. He did all this without removing the cigarette from his lips, simply moving it along to one corner of his mouth and speaking out of the other corner.

I sat on a cheap plastic stacking chair while Albert strolled around examining posters and 'Wanted' notices. The biggest poster carried the simple words 'Defense de Furner'.

I watched the policeman who had passed on our message. Judging by the fact that he kept stopping, cursing, using the backspace lever, and crossing something out with the 'x' key before continuing I got the impression that he was either a very poor typist or a perfectionist whose literary style required constant fine tuning. I don't know why, I am perhaps being unfair, but I figured that he was probably just a poor typist. When his cigarette had burnt down to a useless butt he tossed it into a metal waste bin, pulled a replacement with his lips from an opened pack, lit it, and carried on. He did this so automatically, so effortlessly, that I imagined that it was something he did constantly throughout the day. I tried to work out how many cigarettes he smoked a day but gave up.

After two and a half cigarettes Lucie's contact appeared. He was full of apologies and seemed genuinely contrite for having kept us waiting. He was about sixty, medium height but well-built, with rather long grey curly hair. Like Felicity's father he smoked a pipe. He bore an unnerving resemblance to the way I had always imagined that Simenon's hero Chief Inspector Maigret would have looked.

He led us down a maze of corridors to a small windowless office which contained a desk, piled high with papers, two filing cabinets, three cheap chairs and very little else. There were piles of papers and files on top of the filing cabinets, on two of the three chairs and around the edges of the room. The room was thick with tobacco smoke. The Maigret look-alike carelessly tipped the files from the two chairs and motioned for us to sit down.

Feeling increasingly embarrassed I explained what had happened. By now even I was finding it difficult to believe that I had been conned out of my money so easily. To my relief the detective was sympathetic and hid any contempt he may have felt for my unworldliness. I gave him all the information Rosemonde had given me about her. There wasn't much and I didn't have much faith that any of it would be accurate. I suspected that the name she had given me would probably turn out to be as real as the alleged address and telephone number. I also gave him a fairly complete description. I wasn't even confident that this would prove useful. I had begun to doubt everything about her and if the policeman had told me that 'she' was a 76 year old bald, male Russian sailor in drag I would not have been surprised.

When I had finished giving him information the detective picked up his telephone Like his colleague in the outer office he too had an old-fashioned black Bakelite instrument) and murmured some instructions to another police officer somewhere else in the building.

. I was impressed. It took them less than five minutes to discover that the telephone number Rosemonde had given me belonged to an empty flat in the Marais. The flat belonged to a German businessman who used it for no more than three or four weeks a year. They confirmed that the address she had given me was also false. It took them another five minutes to identify Rosemonde as an Australian citizen who was also known as Kitty Lucas. In a strange way I was relieved to discover that I had been conned by a well-respected professional. Kitty had apparently used the name Rosemonde on numerous occasions in the past.

The detective Albert knew told me that enquiries through Interpol had confirmed that Kitty/Rosemonde was known to the police in several countries as a very successful confidence trickster. She always worked alone and her marks were always single men.

'She usually gets engaged to them first,' the detective told us.

'We didn't get that far,' I said. 'She didn't need that much time.' I thought about it for a moment. I really did feel terribly stupid. 'I just trusted her,' I said. It was my only excuse, my only explanation. 'I felt sorry for her. And I trusted her.'

'Your only fault is that you are too generous, too sympathetic,' said the policeman, kindly.

I did not find that I obtained much consolation from what I learned about Kitty/Rosemonde.

I found no consolation in the news that she invariably took money from vulnerable, middle aged men who were besotted by her charms. And I was not cheered when the police told me that there was very little chance of their ever catching her.

'I'm afraid we're not going to recover your money,' said the winner of the Chief Inspector Maigret lookalike competition. 'Even if we catch her she'll have spent it all on gigolos and champagne.'

He reported that the bank in Monaco had told him that the account to which my money had gone had been closed the following day – after someone had sent a fax transferring every franc it had contained to a bank in Gibraltar.

The detective then led Albert and I back along the maze of corridors to the reception area. The two policemen were still typing and smoking.

Throughout this unhappy (and I have to admit, deeply embarrassing episode) I had never given up hope that my money would be recovered. Now, in a mixture of halting French and indignant English I thanked Lucie's friend and told him that I hoped that the gigolos gave Rosemonde (or whatever name she was using at the time) a series of unpleasant infections which resulted in lots of unsightly rashes and a good deal of itching. I added that I hoped that the champagne gave her heartburn and chronic indigestion.

The policemen received my acidic comments with more sympathy than I had expected. I left the police station to a spontaneous round of applause. It was the first time I had ever been applauded by policemen and although the joy of the moment did not entirely compensate for the financial loss I had endured I nevertheless walked out into the drizzle with something approaching a spring in my step.

For two hundred yards I managed to convince myself that the loss was inconsequential. It was, after all, only money. I had met Felicity and I had been around long enough to know that when fate deals you one good card she usually tosses in a couple of duds – just to keep you on your toes.

Then, suddenly, as I walked past a newspaper kiosk, the real horror of my plight broke through and my thin veneer of complacency cracked wide open. The sight of row upon row of colourful magazines hanging on racks outside the kiosk reminded me that I now didn't have enough money to buy a copy of a magazine – let alone start a new one. I realised that if I was to stay in Paris I needed to find a job or to find some other way to make some money.

I didn't even have enough money to take a taxi to Felicity's club in Montmartre. I wanted to sit down on the kerb and cry. But that wouldn't have helped anyone.

I knew that if I had asked Albert to lend me some money he would have happily given me his wallet. But I couldn't bring myself to ask. I thanked him for his understanding, his practical support and his help and told him that I had a date with Felicity.

'Are you OK?' asked Albert. He put a hand on my arm.

'I'm fine,' I lied, as convincingly as I could. 'Just a bit bruised. I feel such a fool.' I swallowed hard to stop myself crying. 'I'm sorry about the magazine,' I said. 'I was really looking forward to working with you on it.'

'What's with the pessimism?' demanded Albert, remarkably upbeat. 'Something will turn up. We'll do that magazine together. Just you wait and see.'

I didn't believe him. And I don't think he believed himself either. But I grinned at him. 'Sure!' I said.

'Do you need some cash?' he asked.

'No, no,' I lied. 'I'm fine.'

And then we hugged one another. I don't know who initiated it. But it seemed perfectly natural. And good. Although when we broke from our impromptu clinch we both looked around rather nervously, said goodbye formally and headed off in our different directions: Albert towards the Fag and Ferret and me towards Montmartre. It is normal for Frenchmen to hug one another in the street. They do it all the time. But it's not the sort of thing Englishmen do.

I reckoned that if I walked quickly I should just be able to get to Felicity's club on time. I had a spare Metro ticket in my wallet but I thought it might be a good idea to keep it there. A Metro ticket may not sound like much in worldly wealth terms but when it's nearly all you've got you don't want to squander it.

When Albert had disappeared around a corner I took out a small map which I had picked up from the hotel I'd stayed at when I had first arrived in Paris.

When I had worked out the best route to Montmartre I started walking.

~ Chapter Forty One ~

The walk to Montmartre took me just over an hour. I walked quickly and didn’t stop to admire the architecture, the parks or the shops I strode past on the way.

I walked across the Pont Royal, through the Jardin des Tuileries, across the Place Vendome (past The Ritz Hotel from which were emerging gaggles of American and Japanese tourists of such excruciating bad taste that I swore to myself that if I ever became inordinately rich and wanted somewhere to toss my money. aside it would certainly not be there), past the original Paris Opera House and on past Galeries Lafayette (to shoppers what the Musée d'Orsay, is to genuine art lovers).I marched up the street next to the church of Sainte-Trinité and up on ever northwards towards the Boulevard de Clichy and the southernmost edges of Montmartre, dominated, as indeed is Paris herself, by the absurdly, unreal majestic wedding cake white Basilique Sacré-Cœur.

My shoes had begun to pinch, my legs were aching and demanded a respite but I neither slowed nor rested. I was nervous and excited and walking, dodging the other, slower, pedestrians, the tables and chairs on the pavement, the motorists (even on the pavement one was not safe from them for they parked and abandoned their vehicles with two wheels on the pavement whenever they could) and the dogs kept me occupied and stopped me thinking too much and becoming even more apprehensive. Part of me was in a hurry to get there and part of me wanted the journey to never end.

Le Lapin Fou was buried on the slopes of the famous hill of Montmartre and as I got closer the questions and anxieties which had beset me before, and which had been suppressed by the effort of walking so far and so fast, began to reassemble and queue up for attention.

Would Felicity be working? Would she be in her costume? How would I cope with seeing her wearing two spangles and a bunch of feathers? Did she wear a costume at all? Maybe she would consider herself overdressed in two spangles and a bunch of feathers. I still couldn’t really imagine her as a stripper, a lap dancer or a hostess but I had forced myself to accept reality and, rather to my surprise, I knew that I really didn’t give a damn what she did for a living. I had fallen head over heels in love and nothing else mattered.

At night Montmartre is one of the most exciting places in the world, packed with clubs catering for every imaginable taste (and a good many tastes which are pretty well unimaginable).

‘Have you got the time?’ a woman asked, both ambiguously and provocatively. She was standing, looking a trifle unsteady, in the middle of the pavement. I wasn’t sure whether the unsteadiness was a result of something she had drunk (or sniffed or injected) or of the fact that she was struggling to balance on absurdly long stiletto-heeled shoes.

To get round this human obstacle I would have to step into the gutter, and that was full of water, so I stopped a yard and a half away from her. The road was narrow and busy and the traffic was fast, furious and dangerous. I didn’t want to step into the road unless I had to. The woman was wearing a black blouse which was unbuttoned to the waist and her huge breasts were bulging out of an inadequate black bra. Below the waist she was wearing a short black leather skirt with a zip at the side. The zip was open up to her waist so that I could see the expanse of white blotchy thigh between the top of a fishnet stocking and the black and red suspender belt which held it up.

My initial guess was that she was somewhere in her mid forties and that if anything she could have been even older than this. But when I looked a little closer I realised that this was probably a wild over-estimate. She could have been in her thirties or even her twenties. She was wearing far too much make-up but the make-up could not hide the fact that her eyes were dark and she looked tired and rather distant. Her black shoulder-length wig needed combing and the fact that it was slightly askew gave her a pathetic, slightly comical look.

She had a cigarette in her left hand and without warning she lifted it to her mouth, took a drag and blew a lung full of smoke straight at me.

Slightly startled I stepped back half a step. She winked at me, smiled and then raised an eyebrow.

‘I’m afraid not,’ I answered, equally ambiguously. I hesitated and then spoke. ‘I’m trying to find a club called Le Lapin Fou.’ I found it difficult to know where to look. In order to avoid staring at the areas of skin on display I tried to look straight into the woman’s eyes but she seemed to take this as a sign that I was interested in her.

‘It isn’t open yet,’ said the woman. ‘You’ve got a couple of hours. Come with me and I’ll keep you entertained.’

‘That’s very kind of you,’ I said. ‘But I’m meeting a friend who works there.’

In an instant the woman changed. ‘Why didn’t you say so?’ she demanded. ‘Who’s .your friend?’

‘Felicity,’ I replied. ‘Felicity Dingle.’

‘I know Felicity!’ said the streetwalker, with a big smile.

‘Lovely girl! You come with me sweetie-pie. I’ll take you to Le Lapin Fou. It’s only round the corner.’ She took hold of my elbow and, using me as a support, clip clopped her way along the pavements of Montmartre.

Less than five minutes later we were standing on the pavement outside an unimpressive building which was painted entirely in maroon.

There was a porch and doorway in the middle of the building but there were no windows at all. On both sides of the porch three glass fronted display cabinets had been fixed to the wall. The display cabinets all contained photographs of beautiful girls wearing very little and posing in blatantly provocative poses. Each cabinet contained the name ‘Le Lapin Fou’. The same words appeared in gold lettering on a sign above the front door.

‘I used to look like that a few years ago,’ said the streetwalker, as I looked at the pictures on display. I was hunting to see if I could see Felicity’s picture.

‘You still look just as good as any of these,’ I lied, gallantly. I thought she had sounded rather wistful at the sight of so many photographs of slender and nubile young women.

‘No I don’t,’ replied the woman immediately. ‘But you’re an absolute doll to say so.’ She looked down and pulled the two sides of her blouse together, as though suddenly realising for the first time just how much of her body she was displaying.

‘I’d better get back,’ she said, suddenly seeming embarrassed. ‘There are always new girls around on the streets these days. They come in from the provinces by every train and if you move away from your pitch for too long one of them will move in.’

As she started to move away I walked after her, reached into my back pocket and pulled out my wallet. ‘Wait a moment, please,’ I said. I took a note out of the wallet and held it out to her.

‘No thank you,’ she said, holding up a hand. ‘That’s not necessary.’

‘Please,’ I said. ‘I’d like you to take it.’ I closed the wallet quickly and slipped it back into my trouser pocket before she could see that it was now empty.

‘OK then,’ said my guide, speaking quietly. ‘Thank you love,’ she added, taking the note from my hand. She slipped it skilfully into the top of her stocking.

I noticed, for the first time, that it was not the first note to be stored there, though if her stocking top served as her purse she wasn’t a good deal better off than I was.

She nodded towards the front door of Le Lapin Fou. ‘Just knock on the door,’ she said. ‘And then stand back a little so that they can see you properly.’

I waited until she had gone. Clip clopping away on the pavement. Audible long after she had disappeared from sight.

Then I knocked on the door and, as she had advised, stepped back so that I would be clearly visible to anyone inside.

~ Chapter Forty Two ~

I had expected to have to stand on the pavement outside Le Lapin Fou for some time, but Felicity had clearly warned the doorman that I was arriving. She must have given him my description for I had hardly had time to step back from the door after knocking before I heard bolts being drawn back. Then the heavy door swung silently inwards and the doorman, a huge fellow with a bald head, tattoos on the backs of both hands and huge gold loops in his ears stood to one side so that I could enter. He wore black track suit bottoms, a black T-shirt and black shoes and looked like a pirate, only much more frightening.

He was well over six feet tall and probably weighed well in excess of three hundred pounds. He had a bad complexion, tiny pale eyes (he squinted when he opened the door and let in what was left of the daylight) with about as many laugh lines as an egg, and a sour mouth, downturned at the edges. I wouldn't have liked to have him looking down at me if I had been sitting in the dentist's chair but he was a good choice for a doorman; not the sort of fellow you would choose to tangle unless you were drunk or carrying an Uzi machine gun. I nodded and murmured my thanks as I edged past and hoped that I didn't look as nervous as I felt.

The inside of Le Lapin Fou had clearly been decorated with night time visitors in mind. Black was the colour of choice. The floor, the walls and the ceiling were all black. The floor was covered with what looked like_ black linoleum and the walls and the ceiling had been painted black. The only light came from rather dim lights fitted at ankle level along both sides of the corridor.

On the left, just inside the main door, a hatchway and doorway led into a cloakroom. A plump woman in a flowered smock was being very busy in there with a vacuum cleaner. She had her hair tied in a ponytail and the cigarette between her lips had about an inch of ash on the end of it. Apart from her, and the doorman, there was no one else around.

'Where can I find Miss Felicity Dingle?' I asked, in hesitant, halting French.

'Go straight down zee corridor, take zee second left and go down zee stairs,' the doorman replied in the sort of English favoured by German soldiers in World War II movies. 'Zen take see first turning on zee right. Go up two flights of stairs and zen turn left. Take zee second corridor on zee right.'

When he'd finished I waited for a moment, hoping that he would click his heels together. He didn't so I repeated the instructions to myself, under my breath, in the vain hope that I would remember them. I then set off down the corridor.

Inevitably, I got lost.

Other men who got lost in French night clubs, famous for shows in which buxom young women remove all their clothes to entertain the customers, probably find themselves in the artistes' dressing room – surrounded by semi-naked dancers, snake charmers, fire eaters and singers.

But after wandering around for what seemed like an hour or so (but what was probably no more than five minutes) I found myself in a cul-de-sac. In front of me there was a fire door. I turned round, retraced my steps and knocked quietly on every door I passed. The fourth knock produced a response. A tiny woman, as round as she was tall, opened the door, stared up at me and demanded to know what I wanted. She had very short black hair and a face as round as her body. She had a mouthful of pins and these rather hindered her ability to speak clearly. Behind her, crammed together in a gloomy little room, there were racks and racks of stage outfits. The outfits were predictably skimpy but the feathers adorning them had clearly been ordered by the ton. You get a lot of feathers in a ton.

I apologised and explained that I was looking for Felicity Dingle. This produced an immediate response. The woman opened her mouth and grinned broadly. To my surprise the pins stayed where they were.

'I will show you to her,' the little woman said.

She closed her door behind her and started off down the corridor at a pace that would have been impressive if she'd been built rather more athletically. Given her shape and size her speed was remarkable. From behind, in the dim light, it looked as though she was simply rolling along the corridor like a big beachball. We went down one flight of stairs and up two and her speed never slowed.

'Here is Mademoiselle Dingle,' said the rotund dressmaker a few minutes later, standing outside a door which looked exactly like all the other doors we had passed.

I thanked her, we exchanged smiles and then she disappeared.

For a moment or two I watched as she disappeared back down the corridor. And then I turned my attention back to Felicity's door.

All my fears and anxieties had now returned.

What, I wondered, would she be wearing when she opened the door? Would I be able to look her in the eye without showing my embarrassment if she was wearing one of those skimpy little outfits adorned with feathers?

Would I be able to look her in the eye at all?

I dragged together all my courage and knocked on the door.

The door opened.

And it is absolutely no exaggeration to say that when I saw Felicity I had the shock of my life.

Since I had first heard that Felicity worked in a strip club I had frequently wondered about what she did there.

Did she take off all her clothes? Did she work on a stage or did she wander among the customers, talking to them and allowing them to fondle her? Did she go home with them? Did she sleep with them?

While walking through the streets of Paris towards Le Lapin Fou I had toyed with many different possibilities and many different images.

But my imagination had not prepared me for what I saw.

~ Chapter Forty Three ~

‘Hello,’ said Felicity. ‘You found me OK then?’

‘Yes,’ I replied, almost but not quite struck dumb.

She stood back and opened the door wide. I entered. She closed the door. There was no one else in the room.

‘The club isn’t all that easy to find,’ she said. ‘Particularly in the daytime. At night, when all the decorative lights are on, you can see the club from both ends of the street. But in the daytime it rather merges in with the other buildings.’ She paused. ‘This isn’t the prettiest part of Paris.’

‘It wasn’t too difficult to find,’ I assured her. ‘Even in daytime.’ I reached out, gently held her shoulder and pulled her towards me. She did not resist. I lowered my head and kissed her. She kissed me back. I kissed her again.

‘Most of the taxi drivers know where the club is,’ said Felicity at last, during a slight pause in the kissing.

‘I didn’t get a taxi. I walked.’

‘All the way from the apartment?’

‘Yes.’

‘Gosh. That’s a long way.’

There was a pause, during which we simply looked at one another. Then we kissed again.

‘You’re looking well,’ said Felicity, pulling away from me.

‘It’s all the exercise and fresh air.’

‘Is the air in Paris fresh?’

‘Oh, I think so.’

‘Did you find your way around the club without getting lost?’

‘No, I’m afraid not. I had to ask for directions.’

‘Who did you ask?’

‘I don’t know her name. A small, round lady with pins in her mouth. I think she’s probably some sort of dressmaker.’

‘Danielle. Our costumier. She does all the stage costumes. She’s wonderful.’

‘She was very sweet.’

‘She has a reputation for being something of a dragon sometimes. She obviously took to you.’

‘Actually she seemed to take a liking to me when I told her that I was coming to see you.’

Felicity blushed. ‘Did she?’ She paused. ‘She’s a good friend. I’ve told her about you. About us. She probably guessed who you are.’

‘What did you tell her?’

Felicity blushed still deeper. ‘Never you mind.’

‘Was it good?’

‘Yes.’

‘OK. That’s all right then.’

We held hands and gazed into one another’s eyes for a month or two. I thought yet again that she was without doubt the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen. I pulled her to me and put my arms around her. She put her arms around my neck. Her eyes sparkled and her hair shone. I couldn’t help wondering what on earth she saw in me. A middle-aged, balding, slightly overweight guy in his fifties. There was one thing about being poor: she certainly wasn’t after my money. She was radiant.

She was also fully clothed. She was wearing a grey knee length tailored skirt with a matching jacket, a white silk blouse and black, low-heeled shoes.

‘Would you like to sit down?’ she asked.

‘No thank you. I’d rather stand so that I can hold you.’

‘I’m sorry about the office.’

‘Why?’

‘It’s a bit dull.’

I looked around. There was a large desk, upon which sat a computer monitor and keyboard. The rest of the desk was covered in papers. Behind the desk there was an executive style chair in black leather. The only other chair had a pile of files on it. There were three filing cabinets in the room and they were all piled high with papers.

‘It looks great to me,’ I said.

‘And I don’t usually dress like this,’ she said, indicating her grey jacket and skirt.

‘I think you look wonderful.’

‘You’re just being sweet.’

'No, I'm not. I think you look terrific. Actually, to be honest I'm just relieved to see you wearing clothes!'

As soon as I'd said this I wished I hadn't.

For a moment Felicity looked puzzled. 'Why? What do you mean?' She frowned. Why are you relieved to see me wearing clothes?'

'Well, you know...working in a club...this sort of club...a place where women well, you know...'

'You thought I was one of the strippers?' asked Felicity incredulously.

'I wasn't sure,' I admitted. 'It sort of vaguely crossed my mind. As a possibility. Just a remote possibility.' I felt myself starting to blush. 'Not really a possibility. More a, well a, silly thought. Just a notion.' By now I was, I felt sure, bright red.

Felicity stared at me. For a moment, despite my flush, I went cold. And then, much to my relief, she started to laugh.

'You're not cross with me are you?' I asked, anxiously.

'Not in the slightest,' she said, when she had managed to control the giggling long enough to talk. 'Actually I'm very flattered. I'm much too short and far too old and my boobs are too small for me to get a job as a stripper.'

'I think you'd make a marvellous stripper,' I insisted. And then I realised what I'd said. 'Well, from what I've seen of you. Although I can imagine the rest. Only sort of, of course. In theory. But in theory I think you'd make a wonderful stripper.'

She held her head to one side. 'You wouldn't have minded?'

'Minded?'

'If I'd been a stripper?'

'It was only a vague sort of thought.'

'You wouldn't have minded?'

'No.'

'Not at all?'

'No. Not really.' I hesitated. 'I love you,' I said. 'I was jealous. But I wouldn't have really minded. It wouldn't have made any difference.'

Felicity put her arms around me and kissed me. 'You are the sweetest man I've ever met,' she said quietly. 'And I love you.' She kissed me again. 'You would have been jealous?'

'Yes.'

'Good. I'm glad about that.'

'You want me to be jealous?'

'Oh yes. I would be jealous if you were a stripper.'

The idea was so ludicrous that I couldn't help laughing. We held one another for a while, kissed some more and looked into one another's eyes a good deal. I sat on the edge of her desk and pulled her to me.

'So, what exactly do you do here?' I asked her at last.

'I'm the business manager,' said Felicity. 'I trained as an accountant and then took a business management degree.' She took one hand from around my neck and waved it around the office. 'I look after the books and the accounts. I suppose some people would say I'm the boring bit of the club.'

'But the bit that makes sure it makes a profit.'

'Yes, that's true,' smiled Felicity. 'I make sure that the owner doesn't spend more than we're making. And it's a lot more fun than working in a bank.'

'Talking about money reminds me that there's something I have to tell you,' I said.

'What's that?'

'I don't have any.'

'Money?'

'Money.'

'It doesn't matter.' She shrugged. 'We don't need much money. And I have quite a good salary.'

'No,' I said. 'You don't understand. I've lost all my money. Every penny. I wasn't rich before. But ·I had some money. I had enough to be fairly independent. And now I'm poor. I'm pretty well as poor as anyone can get. I don't have any debts at the moment but if I eat tonight I will have.' I paused, trying to think of some way to explain just how poor I had become. 'I didn't walk here because I wanted the exercise. I walked because I couldn't afford a taxi.'

Felicity looked concerned. 'Why? What on earth has happened? Have you been robbed?'

'It's a rather long story.'

'So, tell me,' she insisted. 'I don't care how long it is. I want to know what happened.' I told her.

I was embarrassed about it. I felt a complete idiot. But I told her. I told her everything. I told her about Rosemonde.

I told her how I'd been conned into parting with my money.

And at the end I told her that I could no longer afford to back Albert's magazine and that it looked as though I would have to go back to England and try to find myself a job.

~ Chapter Forty Four ~

'You can't just give in,' said Felicity, when I had finished my sorry tale. 'You can't just abandon the magazine.'

'I don't want to give in,' I assured her. 'But I don't see that we've got much option. Albert doesn't have a job so the bank won't lend him any money. And my money has all disappeared with Rosemonde.' I felt embarrassed, ashamed and rather sorry for myself.

'You are a big softy,' she said quietly. It was her only critical comment then or ever after. If there had been any doubt before it was her uncritical acceptance of what had happened which sealed my love for her. I hadn't known her long but I already felt that I knew her better than anyone else I'd ever met before.

'Soft?' I said. 'Stupid more likely.'

'No,' insisted Felicity. 'You thought she was in trouble. So you helped her. What you did was kind and honourable. What she did was unforgivable. She took advantage of another human being's generous nature.'

'That's what all confidence tricksters do.'

'No, it's not. Most of them take advantage of people's greed. And in a way that's fair enough. People who are greedy are fair game. But you weren't being greedy. You were being kind.' She looked at me for a while. 'I hope you'd do the same thing again,' she said.

We both sat and looked at each for a while.

'The police say there's absolutely no chance of recovering the money?'

'Not a hope.'

'I wish I could help you and Albert,' said Felicity. 'If I had the money I'd lend it to you.'

'You're sweet,' I said. 'But I wouldn't let you.'

'That's silly.'

'No, it isn't.'

'It's irrelevant anyway,' she said. 'Because I haven't got it.'

We sat in silence for a moment or two.

'I know!' said Felicity suddenly. 'What about my father?'

'What about him?'

'I could ask him. He's always looking for new investment opportunities.'

'No,' I said flatly. 'No. No. No. I'm definitely not borrowing money from your father.'

'But he'd be pleased to help. He'd make money out of it.'

'No,' I said. 'Definitely not. Besides your father thinks I'm a professional golfer. He's going to get very confused if we tell him that I want to start a magazine.'

'It would be a good way to explain the fact that you've given up golf,' said Felicity. 'We could say that you've got an injury and that you can't play professional golf any more.'

'No,' I said, shaking my head. 'It's very sweet of you but I can't possibly borrow money off your father.'

'You're very stubborn aren't you?' said Felicity, with sigh.

'When it comes to borrowing money from my future father-in-law I'm immovable,' I told her. 'No. No. No. It's very nice of you to suggest it. But no.'

I folded my arms and did my best impression of a defiant man. I meant what I had said. We sat in silence.

'What did you say a few moments ago?' asked Felicity suddenly.

'When?'

'The last thing you said. Say it again.'

'I said that I wasn't going to borrow money from your father.'

'No you didn't.'

'Yes I did.'

'No, you phrased it differently.'

'Did I?'

'Yes. And you know very well you did,' said Felicity, half laughing. 'What did you say?'

I thought about what I'd said. 'You mean that bit about my refusing to borrow money from my future father-in-law?' I said. I had spoken from the heart, without thinking, and now I felt bad about it. I wished I hadn't said it. But I couldn't take it back.

'That's the bit.' Felicity blushed and lowered her eyes.

'If my father is going to be your father-in-law then...' she blushed still deeper and seemed to have abandoned the sentence. 'You and I would be...' she tried again but didn't get much further. I knew what she was talking about, of course, and realised that she wanted me to say the word first. So I had to say it.

‘If your father became my father-in-law then it would obviously mean that we were married.’

‘Yes,’ said Felicity. She stroked my hair. ‘Is that a proposal?’

I hesitated. I simply didn’t know what to say. The thought had slipped out, had become words, without my thinking things through properly. I now had cold feet not because I didn’t want to marry Felicity but because I knew that I couldn’t feed and clothe myself, let alone a wife. Offering marriage to a woman I knew I could not look after seemed grossly dishonourable. I had spoken without thinking, spoken from the heart. I wanted to marry her but I couldn’t.

Felicity sensed my embarrassment and my reluctance to say what I realised she wanted to hear. I desperately wanted to ask her to marry me and I was overjoyed by the thought that she seemed ready to accept. But I simply couldn’t ask the woman I loved to marry me when I knew I was totally broke and homeless.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Felicity, backing away from me. She looked as though she was about to cry. ‘I obviously misunderstood. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have embarrassed you like that.’

‘I want to marry you,’ I said. ‘But I can’t. I’m broke. How can I marry you with things as they are?’

‘What’s money got to do with love?’ asked Felicity. And suddenly she turned and headed for the door.

She had opened the door, left the room and started to run down the corridor before I’d moved. I got up from the desk, rushed to the door and looked out. The corridor was empty. Felicity had disappeared.

‘Felicity!’ I called. ‘I’m sorry. Where are you?’

The corridor remained empty and silent.

~ Chapter Forty Five ~

It took me an hour to find Felicity. And I doubt if I would ever have found her if it hadn't been for the help of the tiny dressmaker and the huge doorman.

I met the dressmaker by accident.

Hurrying along a corridor, completely and utterly lost, I bumped into her as she came around a corner. She was carrying a huge armful of costumes for the club's dancers and she, and the costumes, ended up on the floor.

'Where are you going in such a hurry?' she demanded, after I had apologised and had helped her to her feet.

I tried to explain. 'Felicity and I have had a misunderstanding. I don't know where she is.' I started picking up the costumes.

The dressmaker looked at me quizzically. 'A lover's tiff?'

'Yes. I suppose so.' A feather came off one of the costumes I was holding. I tried to stick it back on.

She raised an eyebrow, questioningly.

'I sort of mentioned marriage and she sort of accepted and then I didn't actually ask her...,' I confessed, the words tumbling out in something of a rush.

'You did that and she did not kill you?' asked the dress-maker incredulously.

'I was stupid, I guess,' I admitted. I was having no luck at all with the feather which seemed to have a mind of its own.

'Stupid?' said the dressmaker. 'No. Stupid is understandable. Stupid is the man who drinks too much or bets on the horses. You are not simply stupid. You are an imbecile! An absolute imbecile!' She slapped my wrist. 'Put down that silly feather. You are making things worse.'

I stared at her, not knowing what else she expected me to say.

The dressmaker helped me out. 'And you want to marry her?'

'I don't know...'

'What is there not to know?' sighed the diminutive dress-maker. 'Do you love her?'

'Yes.'

'You have no doubts?'

'No doubts.'

'Then there is no problem. She loves you. That I know for certain because this she has told me.'

'Has she really?'

'Yes. And so?'

'You don't think it matters that I don't have any money?'

'Money? Pfui to money. You are in love. What for do you need money?'

'Well, food, somewhere to live, clothes, heat – that sort of stuff.'

The dressmaker waved an arm around dismissively. 'If you are not going to ask her to marry you I am not going to help you find her!' she told me bluntly.

'I love Felicity,' I said softly.

'And so you want to marry her?'

'Yes. I want to marry her.'

'And do you think she wants to marry you?'

'Yes. I think so.'

'I think so too. She has talked of no one else but you for weeks. So are you going to ask her to marry you or shall I go back to my room and finish repairing these silly costumes for the silly girls who wear them and cause all the feathers to moult?'

'I'm going to ask her to marry me,' I said.

'Good,' said the dressmaker, with a big grin. She stood on tip toes, reached up and planted a big kiss on my chin. 'And so let us leave these costumes here and I will help you find her.'

We put the costumes down in a rather untidy pile on the floor and I followed the dressmaker on a high speed tour of the club. When, after ten minutes or so, we had still not found Felicity the dressmaker headed for the front door.

'Have you seen Felicity?' she asked the doorman.

'She vent out,' said the doorman.

'Where did she go?' demanded the dressmaker.

'I vas told not to tell,' said the doorman, holding himself very straight and trying to look both fierce and dignified. 'I cannot betray zee confidence.'

'Where is she, Thomas?' demanded the dressmaker, her tone making it clear that she was not in a mood to be trifled with.

‘She is in zee café,’ said the doorman.

‘Which one?’ I demanded.

‘Ze von across zee road,’ said the doorman. He opened the front door. Looking across the road I could see Felicity sitting at a table in the window.

I thanked the dressmaker and the doorman, dodged between a taxi and a delivery van, and ran across the road.

~ Chapter Forty Six ~

Felicity admitted later (much later) that she had seen me the moment I came out of Le Lapin Fou.

‘I was embarrassed, disappointed and angry. But far angrier with myself more than with you,’ she eventually told me. ‘When you described my father as your potential father-in-law my heart leapt. And then when you started talking about having no money and not being able to marry me I thought you were just making excuses. I thought you had realised that you’d made a mistake. I thought that perhaps referring to my father as your potential father-in-law was just a slip of the tongue. I ran out of the club hoping that you would run after me and find me. I didn’t hide very well, after all. When I saw you coming out of the club, with Danielle and Thomas my heart leapt. But I forced myself to try to stay calm. I didn’t want to rush to any false conclusions again.’

But it was later when she told me this.

When I walked into the café opposite Le Lapin Fou Felicity pretended not to see me. She was drinking an expresso and reading a copy of Le Figaro which she had taken from a rack near the door.

I walked straight over to her table. I knew she was pretending not to see me because even when I stood over her, no more than two or three feet away from her, she continued to pretend to read the newspaper.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said quietly. I knew that I had to handle things carefully. If I just walked in and asked her to marry me she would probably say ‘no’. I’ve never been very good at this sort of thing. I really didn’t know what to say or how to say it.

‘You have nothing to apologise for,’ said Felicity, still not looking up. She sounded very matter-of-fact, as though she was talking to a colleague with whom she had had a minor disagreement.

‘May I sit down?’

She didn’t say anything but when I pulled out a chair and sat down she did not object. She looked up at me for a brief instant, and then looked back down at her newspaper again. I hoped that the fact that she had not told me to go away might be a good sign. It was the only small piece of hope I had so I accepted it gratefully.

‘I was brought up in an era when it was thought that a man contemplating marriage must be able to look after his wife,’ I told her, leaning forwards slightly and speaking in little more than a whisper. ‘In the days before feminism and political correctness a gentleman would not dream of proposing marriage if he couldn’t support his future partner. Heaven knows I’m not claiming to be a gentleman. But that was one of the rules and although I’ve done a lot of things I wish I hadn’t done, and I’ve done a lot of things I shouldn’t have done, I’ve always tried to play by the rules. Just because you fail doesn’t mean you shouldn’t keep trying.’

A waiter had appeared and was hovering beside my chair. He asked what I wanted. I looked up at him, almost surprised to see him there, and was, for a moment, confused. When I realised what he wanted I ordered a coffee. Recognising the delicacy of the moment the waiter murmured something which I did not catch, nodded and scurried away.

‘When I discovered that I had lost all my money I felt a great mixture of emotions,’ I went on. ‘I felt angry though the anger was directed more at myself than at Rosemonde. I felt embarrassed because I realised I’d been very stupid and had allowed myself to be conned. I felt frightened because I realised that without money the world can be an even scarier place than it is normally – and I have to admit that to me the world always seems pretty scary. I felt ashamed because I felt that I had let Albert down very badly. I like Albert very much. I haven’t known him all that long but he’s the best friend I’ve got and he’s probably the best friend I’ve ever had. Starting a magazine with him would fulfil every dream I’ve ever had. And I felt sad because I thought I would probably have to go back to England, with my tail between my legs, and try to start again. I love Paris. I love my life here.’

Felicity had picked up her newspaper and was now completely hidden behind it, as though she was hiding from me. I didn’t feel hurt or offended. In my heart I felt she was justified in ignoring me. I had hurt her badly. I didn’t know what to do to put things right so I simply carried on telling her the truth. The truth was the only hope I had.

The waiter brought my coffee, put it down on the table in front of me and disappeared again without saying a word.

‘Most of all I love you,’ I continued. ‘I don’t know when I first realised that I had fallen in love with you. It started some time ago and it has slowly grown and blossomed. At first I didn’t think there could possibly be any chance for me. You’re beautiful, you seem so confident and you’re much younger than I am.’

Felicity did not say anything and the newspaper didn’t move. I didn’t seem to be getting anywhere. But I persevered.

‘I first thought about asking you to marry me that evening when we walked by the river, after I’d met your parents. I asked you. But you said ‘no’. And I didn’t dare ask again. We hadn’t known each other long. And although I knew I was in love with you I didn’t really know how you felt about me. So I didn’t say anything more, though I told you how I felt. But although I didn't say anything more about marriage I didn't stop thinking about it.'

'I had just about plucked up the courage to ask you to marry me when I discovered that I had lost every penny I had. When the rent is due on my apartment I will have to leave. I can't even afford to buy food. I have nothing. I lent Rosemonde every centime I had because I felt sorry for her and I trusted her. Heaven knows, I wasn't rich before that happened. But I had enough to live on. I had a little security. And I had enough to look after you.'

I stopped. Felicity still hadn't spoken. I realised that I might have said the wrong things, sighed in exasperation, took a sip of my coffee and blundered on.

'I'm not suggesting that you need looking after. I know you have a good job,' I went on, trying to repair any damage which I might have done. 'I know you can look after yourself very well.' I paused, and thought for a while. I was learning a good deal about myself as I talked. 'I suppose that what I'm talking about here isn't your need but my feeling of responsibility. And my need. And the sense of guilt that always goes with a sense of responsibility.'

I sipped some more coffee, took a deep breath and carried on. I'd gone too far to stop, too far to retrace my steps. My only hope was to continue onwards and hope that eventually I might begin to make sense to at least one of us. 'I'm a bit old-fashioned,' I said, with a sigh. 'I know all this probably makes me sound like something out of the Stone Age but it's the way I feel.'

'Today when I referred to your father as my father-inlaw I suddenly felt overwhelmed with a sense of guilt. I desperately wanted to carry on and to ask you to marry me. But I didn't because I felt that I didn't have that right. I love you but I can't look after you properly. Where would we live? How on earth would we eat? I've always believed that a woman has a right to expect her husband to look after her. I felt...oh hell I've said it all and I'm starting to repeat myself. I don't know what to say except that I do love you. I love you with all my heart. And if, knowing everything else you still...'

Slowly, across the table from me, Felicity lowered her newspaper and put it down on an adjacent table. I was astonished to see that she was crying and had clearly been crying for some time. She reached across the table and took my hand.

'I love you,' she whispered. The words were almost inaudible and I moved still closer to her to make sure that I heard her properly. She squeezed my fingers. 'You are a fool,' she said softly and although tears were rolling down her cheeks her eyes were smiling.

'Will you...' I began, my own voice croaking.

'Ssshhh!' said Felicity, reaching up with her free hand ad placing her index finger across my lips.

I felt hollow as I suspected that she didn't want to hurt me by refusing me.

'Will you marry me?' she asked me.

I looked at her. I hadn't expected it.

'This way you don't have to feel guilty,' she said. There was a long pause. 'Unless you say 'no', of course,' she added.

'I'm not going to say 'no'.'

'So say it.'

'Yes, please.'

'Now kiss me.'

I leant across the table, put my arm around her, pulled her towards me and kissed her. She put her arm around my neck and kissed me back.

As I did so I heard cheering from outside the café. We pulled apart and both looked out of the window. Standing on the pavement, separated from us by nothing more than a sheet of plate glass, were Danielle the dressmaker, Thomas the doorman and half a dozen girls I did not recognise. They were all grinning and waving at us.

My leg felt damp. I looked down and discovered that I had knocked over the remains of my coffee. There was a dark, spreading stain on my trouser leg.

A wise man once said that in every day of glorious sunshine there is always at least one small cloud. I was so happy basking in the sunshine that I didn't care about the cloud in the slightest.

~ Chapter Forty Seven ~

'What on earth have you got there?' I asked Albert, when Felicity and I walked into the Fag and Ferret a few hours later. Albert, looked at me, raised an eyebrow and lifted an envelope from the bar counter in front of him. He examined the envelope carefully, holding it up to the light and checking both sides. 'I think it's an envelope,' he said at last. 'It may have a letter inside it.'

'OK. It was a pretty stupid question,' I said. 'But where have they all come from?' Several hundred letters were piled on the bar counter. And at the base of Albert's stool there was a mail sack filled almost to the brim with more letters.

'They're from readers,' explained Albert. 'The paper sent them to me. They came in after my last column.' He flicked at the pile of the letters on the counter in front of him.

'There are heaps more back at the hotel,' said Lucie, who was sitting beside Albert. 'The people in London had to send the sacks over by a special courier.'

'What on earth do all those people want?'

'Dunno,' said Albert, with a shrug. 'I haven't started opening them yet.'

'Maybe they've all written to say how sorry they are that you're leaving the paper?' I suggested.

'That's what the editor thinks,' said Albert. 'He wants me to stay. No one can remember the paper getting so much mail about anything before.'

'That's brilliant!' said Felicity.

'Have you accepted?' I asked him, selfishly thinking that this would mean that we would be able to go ahead with the magazine after all.

'We're negotiating,' said Albert, with a smile. 'They've already agreed that I don't have to work in London.'

'Now Albert is negotiating a pay rise,' said Lucie. 'I'm very proud of him. As Margaret Thatcher once said: "Pennies do not come here from heaven. They have to be earned here on earth".'

'How on earth are you going to answer all these letters?' Felicity asked him.

'I don't have the faintest idea,' confessed Albert, with a shrug. 'I usually get no more than a dozen letters a week. I dump the ones from the nutters and scribble postcards to the rest.'

'How many are there?' I asked him.

'I've just been trying to work it out,' said Albert. 'I reckon there are three thousand in this sack. And there are four more sacks back in my room. That's fifteen thousand. And they're still coming in.'

'Wow!' said Felicity. 'And I thought my mother got a lot of Christmas cards!'

'It will cost a fortune to buy postcards and stamps for fifteen thousand people,' said Lucie quietly.

Albert put his head in his hands. 'Perhaps we could just lose them,' he said.

'How are you going to lose so many letters?' asked Lucie.

'I'm always losing things,' said Albert. 'They fall out of my pocket. I leave them in cafés and in taxis.'

'I think someone would notice and come running after you if you left fifteen thousand letters in a taxi,' I pointed out.

'Anyway, it will be more than fifteen thousand,' said Albert, with a sigh. 'The features editor in London told me that they're still pouring in.'

'Maybe you should start opening them,' suggested Felicity.

'I can't open all these!' said Albert. 'It'll take me for ever.' He rifled a hand through the letters.

'We'll all help you,' said Lucie. 'Aristotle said that a friend is a single soul dwelling in two bodies. Here we are one soul in four bodies.' She picked up a handful of letters and gave them to Felicity. Then she gave a handful to me and took a handful herself. She called the barman over... 'Do you have four knives we can borrow?'

The barman produced four knives from the cutlery box. Lucie handed them around. Albert looked at the knife she handed him, pulled a face and asked her what it was for.

'To use as a letter opener,' Lucie explained.

'Thank god for that,' he said, with feigned relief. 'I thought you were suggesting that we all commit ritual suicide.'

We started slitting open envelopes.

'There's a cheque in with this letter,' said Felicity.

'What for?' asked Albert, looking up.

'Twenty pounds,' replied Felicity.

'No, not how much, what's the cheque for?'

'I don't know yet,' said Felicity. 'I haven't read the letter.'

‘Mine too contains a cheque,’ said Lucie, in astonishment.

‘How much?’ asked Albert.

‘Ten pounds,’ replied Lucie.

‘Good heavens!’ said Albert. ‘The readers must really love me.’ Not surprisingly, he seemed pleased.

‘Well, they do,’ said Felicity, who had been busy reading two pages of tiny scrawl. ‘But this one hasn’t sent you money just because she likes you.’

‘So why has she sent me money then? Is she worried that I might be starving to death - thrown out into the street by an ungrateful editor?’

‘She says she’s sent you money because she was so sad to read about Tony losing his money,’ said Felicity, reading on. ‘She wants to invest in the new magazine you were planning to launch together.’

‘So does this one!’ said Lucie, holding up the letter which had accompanied the cheque for £10. She skimmed through the neatly typed letter. ‘He says he’ll send more when he can.’

‘Good heavens!’ said Albert, who had by now finished opening the envelope he had taken from the pile he’d been given. ‘This woman has sent us a cheque for £50!’

‘I’ve got a rather crumpled and worse for wear five pound note,’ I said, pleased to be able to contribute to the fund and holding the note aloft.

‘Splendid stuff!’ said Albert. ‘There’s a change bureau round the corner. We can swap that for francs and buy a round of drinks with it.’

‘You will not do any such thing!’ said Lucie, sternly. ‘These people aren’t sending you money so that you can buy drinks.’

‘No? Everyone has to drink!’

‘This is amazing,’ said Felicity, who had been busy ripping open envelopes. ‘I’ve just opened three envelopes and two of them have got cheques in!’

‘If all these envelopes contain cheques or cash there must be a fortune here!’ said Albert.

‘I hate to be really boring about this,’ I said. ‘But what are we going to do? Do we have to send all this money back? Can we keep it?’

‘They all seem to be sending the money because they want to help with the new magazine,’ said Lucie. ‘I think you can use it!’

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘It doesn’t seem right somehow.’

‘I’m not very happy with it, either,’ said Albert, gloomily. ‘I feel like a bloody beggar.’

‘There is another way to look at it,’ said Felicity who, unlike the rest of us, had put the contents of the envelopes she had opened into a neat pile on the bar counter. We all looked at her and waited for her alternative view. ‘We could consider all these donations as investments.’

‘Investments?’ said Albert.

‘In what?’ I asked.

‘In the magazine, of course!’ explained Felicity. ‘You already have a company don’t you?’

We agreed that we had.

‘We could give people shares according to how much money they sent.’

‘That sounds very complicated, ‘said Albert.

‘It isn’t really,’ said Felicity.

‘But how do we decide how much the shares are worth?’

‘We have to talk to the accountant who set up the company,’ said Felicity. ‘But, for example, if you and Tony want to keep 51% of the company you can decide to sell the other 49% of the shares to outside investors. It will involve a lot of paperwork and the administrative costs will be high, but if just half of these envelopes contain money – and judging by the envelopes we’ve opened the proportion is likely to be much higher than that – we could easily be talking about something in the region of £100,000. That’s a million francs.’

Lucie whistled.

‘That’s serious money,’ said Albert.

‘Could we start a magazine with that much?’ I asked him.

‘We certainly could!’ he said. ‘We could start a very nice magazine with a million francs. But we need someone to organise it all. Who do we know who could set up a company and allot shares? It sounds like technical stuff to me. The closest I’ve ever been to corporate finance was buying shares when British Gas was privatised.’

‘We’ve got Felicity!’ I said. ‘She’s an accountant.’

Albert looked at me and then at her. ‘Would you do it?’

‘Set up a company for you?’

‘And run it for us?’

Before Felicity could answer I put down the knife I was holding and reached across and took her hand. ‘You don’t have to say ‘yes’,’ I told her.

‘I’d love to help,’ said Felicity. She looked at me and squeezed my hand. ‘You’re going to be busy,’ she told me, with a smile. ‘I’d like to be busy with you.’

‘I want to help too,’ said Lucie.

‘You can,’ Albert told her. ‘We need a section dealing with Paris night life. Why don’t you help Tony put it together?’

Lucie seemed delighted with that. ‘But I want to do more,’ she said. ‘I want to invest!’

‘But we’ve got all this money!’ said Albert, waving his knife at the mail.

‘You need more,’ said Lucie. ‘You need a little office somewhere. And you will have to pay for printing and for photographs. And then there is the telephone and the taxes on the office, and the distribution and the advertising to let people know that the magazine exists. And you will have to pay the contributors and the editor.’

We all looked at her. We knew she was right. A million francs sounded a lot of money. But the more money we had to start with the more we would be likely to succeed.

‘First of all why don’t we finish opening these envelopes?’ said Lucie. ‘Then we will talk!’

‘Do you mind if I ask you something?’ Albert said to me, as we all got back to slitting open envelopes.

‘Of course not. Ask away.’

‘When you came in this evening you looked like a cat who has just drunk a pint of cream.’

I looked at Felicity and smiled. ‘Did I?’

‘What’s happened?’ asked Albert.

‘What makes you think that something’s happened?’

‘I know something has happened,’ insisted Albert. He turned to Lucie. ‘Didn’t you notice it?’

‘Certainly!’ said Lucie. ‘They both look very happy. I have never seen Felicity looking so beautiful and so radiant.’

I put down my knife and the envelope I was holding and took Felicity’s hand. ‘Shall I tell them?’

‘I don’t see why not,’ she replied, blushing.

‘Tell us what?’ demanded Albert, laughing.

‘We’re getting married.’

Albert and Lucie, clearly surprised, exchanged glances and then responded with whoops of joy. Lucie kissed Felicity and then kissed me. Albert kissed Felicity and tried to kiss me. And then I borrowed 500 francs from Albert and bought two bottles of champagne.

The impromptu celebrations slowed things down considerably. It was a couple of hours before we started opening envelopes again.

~ Chapter Forty Eight ~

It took us several days to open and sort all the mail. We had opened all the envelopes by the end of the second evening but by then there were another four sacks of mail waiting to be opened. For a while the mail was coming in faster than we could open it. Fortunately, at the end of a week, the flow of mail slowed down considerably.

In the end Felicity's guess about the amount of money Albert's readers would send in proved to be over optimistic. It wasn't her fault. The first few envelopes we slit open had nearly all contained cheques but as we continued opening envelopes we found that only one in every seven or eight letters contained cheques, postal orders or money. Most of the rest contained simple good wishes. One or two, no more than half a dozen in total and all anonymous, were mildly uncomplimentary or downright rude, telling Albert that he was boring and opinionated and that they were glad he had gone. What they meant by this, of course, was that he had expressed opinions which did not match their own. Whenever possible we didn't show these to Albert. Far, far more readers, a thousand times more, thanked Albert for the pleasure he had given them over the years. I was touched by the comments I read and so, I know, was Albert. I don't think anyone had realised just how many hearts he had touched with his column. His simple honest style, his mischievous sense of humour and his ability to bare his soul and share his passions had won the hearts and minds of thousands of people whom he had never met.

By the time we'd finished opening and sorting the mail we had collected £29,746 in cheques, postal orders and cash. At Felicity's insistence Albert paid the cheques and the cash into a new bank account opened in the name of the company he had set up and which he and I jointly owned. The postal orders were sent back to England to be paid into a bank account there and then moved by electronic transfer to Paris, to the company's new account. Sending letters of acknowledgement to all the readers who had sent good wishes would have taken up all the money that had come in so Albert, who had by this time, successfully renegotiated his contract with the newspaper, wrote a piece for his column in which he thanked all the readers who had written to him.

He also explained that the people who had sent cheques or cash would be given shares in our new magazine. (In due course this brought a new flurry of mail from readers who wanted to invest in the magazine. When we'd counted their cheques we found that we had an additional £7,528 – mostly in contributions which varied between £20 and £50.)

'It's a great start,' said Felicity, speaking in her new role as unpaid Company Secretary. 'But even if we do everything on a shoestring £30,000 – roughly 300,000 French francs – isn't anywhere near enough capital with which to start a magazine.'

'I went to see my bank manager yesterday,' said Albert. 'On the strength of my new contract with the paper he'll lend me £10,000 to invest in the magazine.' He looked pleased with himself, like a conjuror who has just pulled off a difficult trick.

When I looked at Felicity I knew that in her heart she knew that this still wasn't enough money. I cursed Rosemonde, who had stolen my savings, and silently damned her for wrecking our dream. With my savings, Albert's loan and the funds which the readers had contributed we would have been very well-placed for our new venture.

'I want to invest too,' said Lucie, before there was time for any depression to set in. 'It's about time I retired from the business, and as Tennessee Williams wrote: "You can be young without money but you can't be old without it". I need somewhere sound to invest my savings.'

'You're going to retire?' said Albert, who seemed surprised but also pleased.

'I am.'

'That's wonderful!' said Albert. He put his arm around his girlfriend. I had long known how much he loved Lucie and I knew that although he had pretended that he didn't mind in the slightest it must have been difficult for him to deal with the job she did. There were tears in his eyes.

'And I mentioned the idea of the magazine to a few friends of mine,' Lucie continued. 'They're all keen to invest too – if you'd let them.'

'I don't mind in the slightest,' said Albert. He rubbed at his eyes, rather roughly. 'Do you mind?' he asked me.

'I certainly don't object,' I said, in turn, looking at Felicity, knowing that she wouldn't mind either, but for Lucie's sake, and Albert's sake, wanting her to say so.

'As Company Secretary I certainly don't object,' laughed Felicity. 'The more money we can raise the greater our chance of success.'

'You're going to retire completely?' Albert asked Lucie.

He was clearly more interested in the fact that she was planning to give up her work than in the fact that she wanted to invest in our magazine. 'No more clients?' He loved her too much to have ever asked her to give up her work but he loved her enough for what she did to hurt.

‘That’s right,’ said Lucie, with a smile. ‘No more clients at all.’

‘How...er...much are we talking about?’ asked Felicity. ‘How much do you want to invest?’

‘I would like to invest 500,000 francs,’ said Lucie. ‘And four of my friends would each like to invest 100,000 francs. Is that acceptable?’

I was stunned. I hadn’t realised that Lucie had saved so much money. ‘We can’t possibly let you invest that much,’ said Felicity, shocked. ‘It’s far too risky. I’d feel terrible if the magazine failed and you lost all your money, especially now that you’re planning to retire from business.’

Albert, smiling, put his arm around Lucie and gave her a kiss.

‘The magazine isn’t going to fail,’ said Lucie. ‘As the great Virgil almost said: "We can because we think we can.".’ She smiled. ‘Besides,’ she added, ‘as Lord Dewar said: "The road to success is filled with women pushing their husbands along.".’ She kissed Albert and he blushed. ‘And I’m not retiring from the world of business,’ Lucie continued. ‘I’m just exchanging one business for another. It’s kind of you to be concerned about me but please don’t worry – I’m not putting all my eggs into the one basket. The rest of my money I will leave invested in very boring bonds and blue chips. My bank manager has always been trying to persuade me to be a little more adventurous with my money. Now he will have his way at last. And when the magazine is a great success we will all become very, very rich.’

I pulled a piece of paper and a pencil stub out of my jacket pocket and started to do sums, trying to work out how much money we had for the magazine.

Felicity did the sums before me. ‘With the money from Albert’s readers, the loan he has negotiated from his bank and with the money invested by Lucie and her friends we will have well over a million francs,’ she said.

‘Do you think that is enough to start a magazine?’ I asked her.

‘Absolutely,’ said Felicity. ‘Last night I spoke to a friend of mine who works for a French publisher. She says her company allocates between five and ten million francs for a new project.’ She smiled and shrugged, as if this was quite absurd. ‘But she admitted to me that with a little care a magazine could be launched with a million francs.’

‘How on earth can we do it for a tenth of what they would spend?’ I asked, a little worried.

‘They have huge overheads,’ explained Felicity. ‘They pay top salaries and they have lots of men in suits who sit around in meetings trying to come up with marketing plans. Most of their money is spent on things we don’t have to bother with. For example, we don’t have to have posh offices in an expensive building just off the Champs Elysee.’

Albert and Lucie had been whispering together. Suddenly they kissed and then Albert cleared his throat and asked the barman to bring a bottle of chilled champagne and to put another on ice.

‘I have an announcement to make,’ he said. He paused dramatically, extending the suspense, then looked at Lucie and kissed her. ‘Lucie and I are getting married,’ he announced with great pride and joy.

Felicity and I looked at one another and then at the two of them. Felicity kissed Lucie and I put my arm around Albert and gave him a hug. Albert asked me to be his best man. I accepted on condition that he agreed to be mine.

‘Do you fancy a double wedding?’ Albert asked Felicity. ‘It would, of course, produce a considerable saving in the costs of the reception.’

~ Chapter Forty Nine ~

Albert and Lucie and Felicity and I all got married exactly four weeks later.

We had by then found cheap offices to rent and plans for our new magazine were coming along very quickly. A friend of Lucie's had introduced us to the marketing director of a large French media conglomerate. We explained the magazine to him and he was immediately full of enthusiasm. He offered us an excellent distribution deal.

Publicly I said that I wanted to marry before things became too busy for us to take time off for honeymoons. But the truth, which I confessed to my fiancée was that I simply didn't want to wait. I told Felicity that I wanted to marry her before she had time to come to her senses.

Felicity's parents were very good when we explained about Omar. I had been worried about their reaction but I think they were both too excited about their daughter getting married to have any hard feelings about the deception. They flew over to Paris four days before the double wedding.

'You had me fooled,' said Felicity's father. We were sitting in a café on one of the grand boulevards, while his wife and daughter spent the afternoon trying on dresses and then searching for handbags, shoes and hats to match them. Felicity still hadn't found her wedding dress. 'But I must admit that you gave me good advice.'

I looked at him, surprised and puzzled. I couldn't remember ever giving him any advice.

He leant closer, looked around, and whispered. 'I tried that golf tip you gave me,' he told me. He looked around to make sure that no one could overhear. 'It helped me take five shots off my handicap.'

'I'm p-p-p-pleased,' I managed to stutter.

'We must have a game sometime,' he said. 'I didn't like to suggest it before. But now that I know you aren't a professional...'

'That would be nice,' I agreed. 'In a while perhaps,' I added quickly.

'Why wait?' Gilbert asked. He was full of enthusiasm. 'I brought my clubs with me. Never travel without them. I've got a new three wood I'd rather like to show you. Titanium shaft but a genuine wooden head. Remarkable piece of work. Very expensive. Where do you play?'

I took a deep breath and confessed. 'I don't play golf at all I'm afraid.'

'Not at all?' I doubt if Gilbert could have been more startled if I'd told him that I didn't sleep.

'Not unless you count a game of crazy golf. But that was when I was 14.'

Gilbert ignored this. 'I think you'll find that with your new business responsibilities the ability to play golf would be a great asset,' he said, very seriously. 'I've done a lot of good deals out on the golf course.'

'Oh yes. Absolutely.'

'Get a chap relaxed, chit chat about this and that and by the time you're on the fifteenth green you can bring up the business.'

I nodded, wisely.

'We should get you kitted out with some clubs,' said Gilbert, taking out his wallet and putting a note on the table. He stood up. 'Where's the nearest golf shop?'

I thought for a moment. We were in the middle of Paris at the time. 'I think La Samaritaine has a pretty good golf department,' I told him, referring to one of the city's largest department stores.

'What if your wife and Felicity come back?' I asked him. 'Shouldn't we wait here for them? We said we would...'

Gilbert looked at his watch. 'Believe me,' he said, with the experience of a man who knew what he was talking about, 'they won't be back here for at least three hours.'

He was right. Felicity and her mother didn't get back to the café for another four hours.

By that time Gilbert had bought me a huge golf bag, fourteen clubs, two boxes of golf balls, a pair of golf shoes (with three sets of interchangeable spikes for different conditions), a huge, multicoloured golf umbrella, a waterproof jacket, a pair of waterproof trousers, a woolly hat for wet weather, a peaked cap for sunny weather, a pair of sunglasses for very sunny weather, a pair of checked trousers, a jumper with a small logo of a golfer on the right breast, a box of assorted wooden tees, a golf glove for my left hand, a device for repairing pitch marks should my ball ever land on the green, a lightweight, easily folded golf trolley, a sponge for wiping my balls, a special towel for wiping my hands and clubs, a card holder with a small pencil attached and an extendable ball retriever for picking balls out of ditches and streams.

The two of us had to carry this mass of equipment through the middle of Paris (the owner of the one empty taxi we had found had taken one look at our parcels and then sped off in alarm).

'I'm sorry I'm late, darling,' said Felicity, when she and her mother finally appeared. Even before they had sat down Gilbert had ordered two pots of tea and half a dozen croissants. Felicity was empty handed. Her mother was carrying one small carrier bag.

‘Did you find anything?’ I asked.

‘Mum bought some gloves,’ said Felicity. ‘But I didn’t see anything I liked. We’re going to have another look tomorrow.’ She looked around us, at the golf bag, the golf clubs, the trolley and the huge pile of parcels. ‘Have you been shopping?’ she asked me.

‘I’m going to learn to play golf,’ I told her.

‘That’s lovely darling,’ she replied, squeezing my hand in a very affectionate way. ‘Can I come and watch you practise?’ She thought of something. ‘Hey, wouldn’t it be funny if you got so good that you really did turn professional?’

‘I don’t think that’s very likely,’ I warned her. ‘I’m a bit too old. And, besides, I’ve never been any good at ball games.’

‘But you never know!’ insisted Felicity. ‘That would be marvellous wouldn’t it? You could play on the professional circuit as ‘Omar’ couldn’t you?’

‘I really don’t think it’s very likely,’ I pointed out again. ‘Could you really not find a dress you like?’

I was getting worried. We were getting married in three days and Felicity still hadn’t found a dress.

‘Oh don’t worry about it,’ she said, remarkably offhand about the whole thing. ‘I’m sure I’ll eventually find something I like.’

~ Chapter Fifty ~

Felicity fooled me right up until the end.

The day before we were due to get married she asked me if I had a jumper she could borrow.

'What sort of jumper?' I asked her, surprised.

'Oh, I don't mind,' she replied. 'Something long enough to be decent.'

'Why on earth do you want to borrow a jumper?' I asked, genuinely puzzled.

'I thought it would make a nice wedding outfit,' she replied, keeping a straight face so well that I was quite convinced that she was serious. 'It would be something unusual. If you have an old, blue jumper that would be even better, Something old, something borrowed and something blue. I'll wear new underwear.'

I was frantic. 'You can't wear one of my old jumpers!' I told her. 'Lucie will be wearing an amazing dress. Albert told me that she had it made by a friend who works as a dressmaker. You'll be upset if you turn up in an old jumper and she's wearing a beautiful dress.'

For myself I didn't care what Felicity wore. As far as I was concerned she would be the most beautiful woman in the world if she'd turned up wearing blue dungarees, a woolly hat and a pair of oversized muddy Wellington boots. But the little I knew about women convinced me that she would care very much about looking her best.

She put her arm around me and kissed me. 'You are sweet to worry about me,' she said quietly. 'Please don't worry. Everything is going to be absolutely fine.'

'Honest?'

'Honest.' She smiled.

'OK.'

I tried to sound content but in my heart I still wasn't entirely satisfied.

Part of the problem was that I didn't have any money to give Felicity for a dress. At Albert's insistence I was now receiving a small salary from the magazine so I wasn't broke. But I had insisted on taking only enough to pay my basic living costs. If the magazine succeeded my share of the company would ensure that I became rich. Meanwhile I wanted to make sure that the magazine had the very best chance of succeeding. And I knew that the best way to do that was to make sure that as much money as possible was spent on making the magazine look good and on getting it seen by as many people as possible.

Our rather straitened circumstances would improve after the wedding· when I moved out of my tiny apartment and into Felicity's (which was considerably larger than mine and which had no plumbing problems and, therefore, no need for a plumber).

But in the meantime, although Felicity was reasonably well paid, we weren't exactly flush with money. It had, therefore, been with some relief that I had accepted Felicity's parents offer to pay for the wedding, including the costs of our share of the reception.

Actually, it wasn't so much of an offer as an insistence. 'The bride's father traditionally pays for the wedding,' Gilbert had told me in a manner which dared me to defy him. 'And I'm a very traditional sort of fellow.' I knew that Gilbert's offer to pay for our wedding had included the cost of a dress (he had even insisted on paying for the cost of my hiring a morning suit) so I didn't really understand why Felicity hadn't found something expensive, made of a good deal of silk and lace.

In the end it turned out that I had, of course, worried quite unnecessarily.

I had forgotten that one of Felicity's best friends at Le Lapin Fou was Danielle, the dressmaker.

When Felicity and her mother had pretended to be trying on dresses in Printemps and Galeries Lafayette they had been having a fitting with Danielle. And Danielle had designed and made the most beautiful wedding dress I'd ever seen.

The four of us got married in the best kept secret in Paris: the Basilique Ste-Clotilde.

As I stood in the church and watched Felicity walking up the aisle towards me, looking like a fairy Princess and escorted by a justifiably proud father, with the church packed with her friends from Le Lapin Fou and Lucie's friends from the Rue St Denis, I couldn't help thinking how much my life had changed in such a short time.

'He'll be back in six months,' Ethel had said to Jack at my garage sale. It's too late for him to start again.'

I sent Ethel a postcard to let her know that she was wrong.

It's never too late to start again.

Vernon Coleman is the author of over 100 books. For a full list of books available please visit his author page on Amazon, or visit http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

Just Another Bloody Year

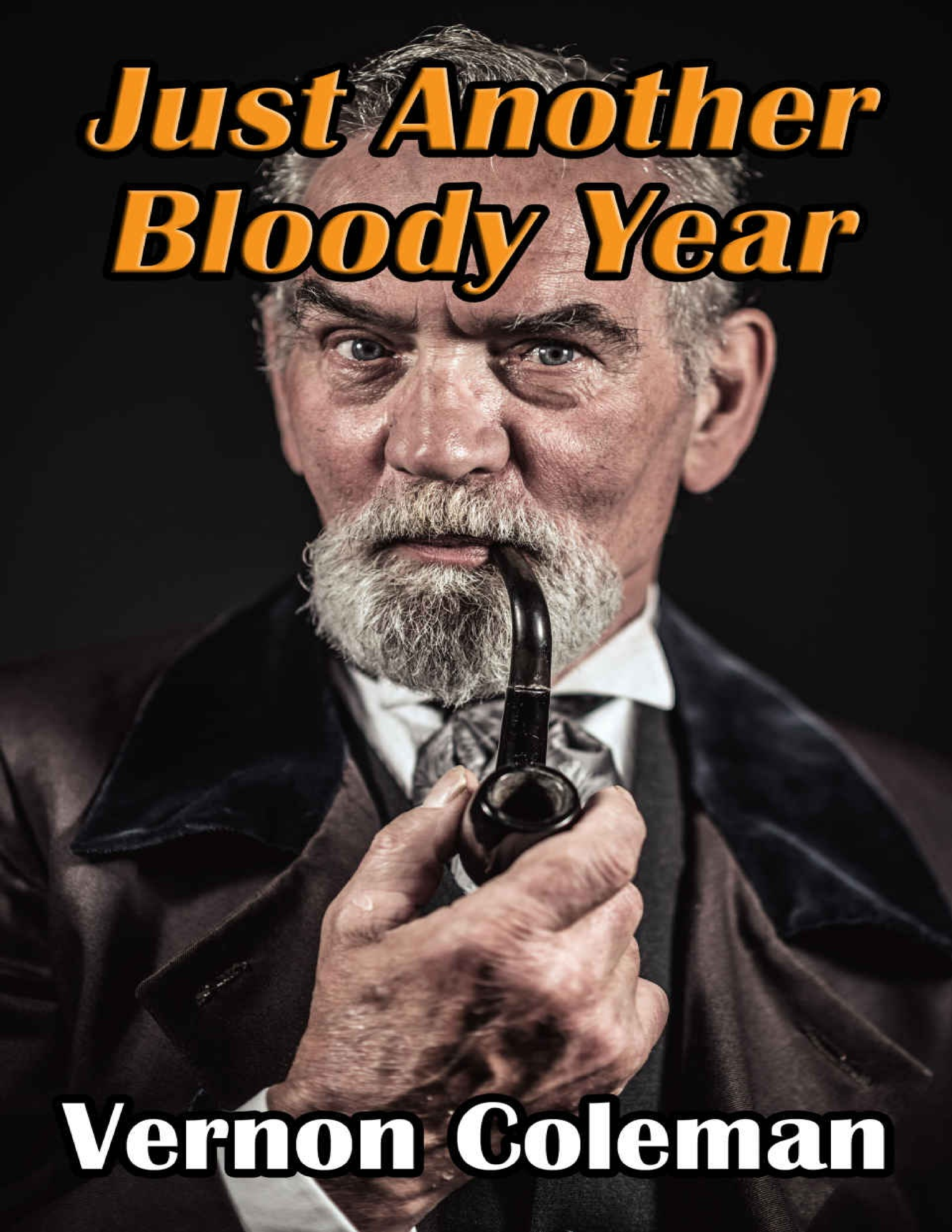

Vernon Coleman

Just Another Bloody Year
(My Life and Other Problems)

Vernon Coleman

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From *The Face on the Cutting Room Floor* by Cameron McCabe, published in 1937.

Dedication

To The Princess, My Antoinette, because when you smile my life is full of sunshine and when you are sad my life is cloudy and grey. In all the years we have been married there has never been a day when I would not have asked you to marry me. And I know that however long I live there will never be a day when I am not happy that you said yes. You are my heroine. I am addicted to you; you have doubled my joy and halved my despair.

PREFACE

This is not a guide book. It is not a novel. There is no information of practical value in this book. No times of museum opening or details of hidden, wonderful restaurants where the owner's wife cooks bass in claret - the fish caught by her cousin and brought up specially that morning. There are no lists of wonderful shops where you can buy genuine Dior dresses at 10% of their price in the Avenue Montaigne. There are no descriptions of gardens or cathedrals or exquisite buildings. There are, however, goodly chunks of raw life, served up with a sauce of passion. I have always had a penchant for doing things the hard way. If there is a short cut and a long way round I have always chosen the long way round. The only difference between fiction and non-fiction is that fiction has to make sense. This book is non-fiction and is doubtless full of the sort of bizarre confusions and scarcely believable contradictions which beset all our lives. This is the book that the old men who stand on street corners shouting at passers-by would write if they had typewriters. This is a book for people who shout at their television sets.

I used to believe that if I worked hard I could deal with all my problems and live a monkish life of unflustered calm but by the age of 11 I realised that whatever I did the problems would keep rolling in like waves onto a beach. It was, however, relatively recently that I realised that the waves had changed; today they are driven by a storm and the beach is windswept and the sky always angry. The Blairs and Browns and Cleggs and Cables and other supernatural horrors, villains of our time, ride the waves with grinning faces and fiendish, ghoulish whoops of glee as they whip their mounts into ever more fury. I feel, as I always have, like a small boy at the beginning of a new day at a new school. But the future seems ever more terrifying. It's as though I've woke up to find everyone speaking a different language and obeying different rules; as though I've been transported to another world, a different galaxy perhaps. The world has been turned upside down, inside out and back to front and most people don't seem to have noticed.

For some time now no one has voted for anything. Most people have just voted against the party they consider most hateful. The problem is that most people feel hostility towards all the parties, and all the politicians, so most don't vote at all.

The fundamental problem we have is that our politicians are a toxic mixture of milquetoast finicks and grasping feather-merchants. They may be cheaper to bribe than anyone else's politicians but they are still crooks. They make promises they know they can't keep. Not once. Not twice. But every time they want a vote. They lie, lie and lie again so often that in the end I doubt if they think they are doing anything wrong. And, of course, in the manner of small-minded functionaries everywhere, they routinely and persistently fiddle and cheat on the big things (elections) and the small things (their expenses). Really big stories which matter hardly ever appear in the media and if they do they are dismissed. Modern politicians, drenched in cynicism, know that the truth is an unnecessary luxury; it simply doesn't matter. Even plausibility is usually unnecessary as long as what is said is memorable, slickly produced and repeated frequently. If something bad happens it can be brushed out of the public consciousness by providing the media with something more immediately newsworthy. (The `A good day to bury bad news' syndrome). And if you want to damage someone then you simply accuse them of something that is not only hard to refute but also tends to last in the public consciousness. So, for example, accuse your opponent or critic of rape or sexual assault, especially involving a child or animal. There doesn't need to be any proof or any conviction. Just an accusation and a rumour will do the trick.

Well over half of all stories in newspapers and on television are a direct result of a press release. Cut out the crime stories, the sports news and the stories about the Duchess of Cambridge taking off her clothes (and then expressing surprise and horror when the photographs end up on mugs and table mats) and there is very little left that is the result of old-fashioned journalism. The releases are often printed verbatim. Newspapers print lies and deceit and myths and misconceptions, and truths and legally enforced apologies are hidden at the bottom of page 19, if they get any space at all. Modern journalists are rarely, if ever, objective. Editors take a stance according to their prejudices and their proprietor's prejudices. Opinions which don't fit the guidelines are often blue pencilled out of existence. When I wrote the agony column for *The People* newspaper one editor (the now famous Neil Wallis) inserted the words `I believe' so many times that the column read like the lyrics for a gospel song.

The modern journalist goes to cocktail parties with politicians, accepts gongs from Prime Ministers and generally behaves like a member of the Establishment. No real writer should be part of the system, be liked by politicians, receive awards or mix with other writers or even publishers. Writing should be a solitary business. My favourite writers were all independent minded and unconsciously eccentric. (It is important not to confuse genuine eccentricity with the sort of forced, faked, attention seeking eccentricity practised by television celebrities. That's exhibitionism. The truly eccentric do not think that their behaviour is in any way odd and they would never dream of describing themselves as eccentric.) The successful modern author is a media celebrity, living in an incestuous pond where he never meets or talks to anyone who isn't a celebrity. Television people need to have lovely hair rather than brains. That's why they tend to pass their view by date so early on in their careers.

British Governments and the submissive media slaves who do their every bidding (with the BBC at the top of the list of course) have done everything they can to destroy the principle of a free press. The phrase `BBC journalist' is oxymoronic nonsense. At the BBC, hypocrisy rules. (My favourite example of BBC hypocrisy is the way news and feature programmes attack newspaper photographers by showing film of them working - as though the TV cameras were somehow invisible to the person being 'papped'. The BBC, which makes Pravda look feisty and anarchic is a loathsome, traitorous organisation which has consistently betrayed and deceived taxpayers. Yesterday, I found an old diary for 1960. In it I discovered an entry in which I questioned the independence of the BBC. I was just 14-years-old at the time.

Tragically, journalism, once an honourable profession, the scourge of the political classes, has become a mixture of gossip, commercial promotion and half-baked second-hand opinion. It is almost impossible to read a news story that hasn't been contaminated with the opinions of an editor or the opinions of the public relations firm which wrote the original release. Most journalists spend their days regurgitating press releases; they no longer understand the meaning of the word `news'. Most of the stuff they prepare for their newspapers is either propaganda or opinionated drivel that distorts the truth in the interests of the proprietor or some of his powerful friends or advertisers. Their idea of balance is to bend the stories they write to fit their paper's needs.

And there's more bad news!

Many apparently eminent publications (newspapers and magazines) now readily print advertisements which look like editorial. Even when you know what you're looking for it can be nigh on impossible to tell which articles were paid for and which are appearing because someone paid for them to appear. The days when the word *Advertisement feature* or *Advertorial* appeared at the top of a page are long gone. Finding the wheat among the chaff requires inside knowledge, a cynical eye and the patience of Job.

The absence of real leadership means that our world is now controlled by interfering, politically correct do-gooders who are misinformed, misguided, hypocritical and more often than not just plain old-fashioned bent in a sly Arthur Daley sort of way. While they insist that small children wear eye protectors when playing tiddly winks, and full body armour before even threading a conker onto a shoelace, they plan new forms of deceit. There seems to be no inbuilt sense of right or wrong among the perpetrators (possibly because of the calamitous decline of the power of religion in the Western world) and this absence is exaggerated by the absence of any sense of justice, or even indignation, among the public at large. Moral outrage is conspicuous by its absence. The effect of all this on our so-called leaders cannot be underestimated. Modern political life is littered with Cleggs and Cables, the dregs of human society.

Many of our politicians have intellectual, commercial, political or personal commitments which mean that we cannot possibly trust them to make impartial decisions. The awful Clegg, to take but one nauseating example of the modern political man, is an ex-employee of the European Union and, as such, is in line for a hefty EU pension. It seems to me that this half-witted nincompoop, who would have surely been out of his depth as a school prefect, has a personal interest in supporting and defending the EU. He is currently Deputy Prime Minister of England and it seems plain to me that he should excuse himself whenever the EU is discussed. He won't, and doesn't, of course.

Our politicians take decisions to protect their party's chance of winning power at the next election. The Scottish banks were rescued by English taxpayers, at vast expense, so that the failing Labour Party could protect the seats of Gordon Brown and his chums. We, and the rest of the Western world, now have a banking system which is so corrupt and indebted that it is the major cause of misery in the country. By creating poverty, depression and anxiety, and consequently causing heart disease and cancer, the big banks have killed far more people than terrorists. It seems impossible but they may have even killed more people than doctors and nurses. We should be waging war not on Al Qaeda, but on Goldman Sachs et al.

We have one of the world's biggest arms industries. Around 300,000 people in England earn their living making things designed to kill (mostly innocent) people. We didn't have that many people making bombs when we really were at war. Our Prime Ministers routinely humiliate themselves (and, therefore, us) by doing dirty arms deals with shady regimes. Our foreign policy is designed to keep those 300,000 people in work. What a bloody country. The Minister of Obfuscation and the Minister for Bed Cushions and Scented Candles spend their days making sure that when they leave office they will have some well-paid directorships waiting for them. If corrupt politicians were a saleable commodity there would be a glut and the market price would go so low that it would be necessary to reintroduce the halfpenny. It isn't difficult to argue that we live in a kleptocracy, where the nation's assets are routinely stolen by our rulers. The tradition in fiction (particularly films) is that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. In the real world, sadly, the opposite is true. The result is that almost everything is worse than it was yesterday, last month, last year and last decade.

Every good idea must run the gauntlet of criticism and suggestions from taxpayer funded busy bodies who must have their say in order to justify their vast salaries and bonuses but who offer nothing of value and do nothing of use except make themselves look important. Government departments and quangos complicate and damage and add nothing to our lives. As a result the world frustrates and disappoints and frightens me, sometimes all at once. In

Victorian England (a time now sneered at) a quarter of the world's population lived under English rule. We spread civilisation, a decent language and cricket to previously unlit corners on all continents. England was the wealthiest nation on earth. Things which bore the stamp `Made in England' were built to last and the label was accepted worldwide as a mark of excellence. England has been reduced to penury and even possible bankruptcy. We now live in a world where classroom assistants are allowed to teach, milkmen are allowed to deliver the mail and nurses allowed to give anaesthetics, prescribe drugs and perform surgical operations. Playing fields are sold by the dozen so that councils which have become little more than pension funds for overpaid former employees can afford to heat school classrooms in the winter.

Our world has been turned inside out, upside down and back to front by people who cheat and lie for a living and who don't give a fig for our history, our culture, our legacy or our nation's integrity. Common sense is now as rare as integrity among politicians or in the EU headquarters.

It's sometimes difficult to avoid the feeling that the world has gone stark raving mad. Just this morning I heard a council spokesman say that his council was turning off the street lights at night because there aren't as many people around after dark. Another council has closed its public library because people in wheelchairs cannot get up the stairs at the front and, since the building is listed, they aren't allowed to put in a ramp. The EU has allowed millions of Bulgarians and Romanians to come to England to claim benefits. No one in Brussels seems to give a damn that our country is packed to the gunwales with legal immigrants and with immigrants who came to England on the Eurostar train but didn't bother to buy tickets because they travelled underneath the carriage instead of inside it. The additional millions will, of course, immediately be entitled to free health care, free education and the world's most generous benefits programme. The number of households surviving on state hand-outs already exceeds 50%. Thanks to the EU's disastrously stupid policies we're heading for bankruptcy. Before we get there we'll enjoy a rapidly declining standard of living and a rapid rise in resentment, confrontation and disappointment.

We live in a world where people who show signs of loyalty, honour, courage, respect and integrity are classified as either just plain potty or dangerously eccentric. We live in a society in which anyone who threatens the State is considered more dangerous than a mere criminal. So not paying your BBC television licence fee will attract a bigger punishment than killing an old man for the change in his pocket. We live in a world where the simple truths are the most complicated, the most difficult to understand, the easiest to ignore and the hardest to do anything about.

We now live in a world dominated by deceit and incompetence; a world where the medium is far more important than the message and the perception widely considered to be of more importance than reality, meaning or truth. True history is what we remember and what influences our lives, rather than what actually happened. Facts are less important than myths. A widely believed falsehood is, in our world, more powerful and relevant than a little known, artfully suppressed truth.

The media generally (or, in the case of the BBC, exclusively) support the Government and the Establishment. Media people think of themselves as good and honest and fair and objective and idealistic. But they are not. They are deluded, prejudiced and bigoted. Just about everyone working for the BBC (particularly those who are salaried employees), is protecting the interests of the commercial establishment as promoted by politicians and lobbyists. The BBC would endorse the Flat Earth Society if it was supported by the European Union.

There may be more types of media available today but there is very little honest news or original thought in any of it. Original ideas of any kind are suppressed - particularly if they oppose the acknowledged establishment in any way. I have for many years believed that the only original work appears in the work produced by small, independent publishers. More than ever I now believe that to be true. There is much talk about the value of our free press but the English press is highly censored and is, when measured impartially, among the least free in the world.

I worked for tabloid newspapers for many years and I know that a big proportion of the stories involving and exposing celebrities are actually done with the approval of the celebrities themselves. So, for example, a press agent for a homosexual male star who wants to appear heterosexual will pay a girl to spill the beans about an alleged night of passion. The newspaper pays a fee for the exposé (knowing that they won't be sued for libel), the girl receives a fee and some publicity and the limp-wristed star has his sexy image burnished. The story itself will be the usual sort of fiction (`He couldn't keep his hands off me. We were at it for hours. At least five times a night. He was better equipped than a horse.').

Forty years ago I exposed how some medical journals will print articles which are paid for by drug companies. Nothing has changed. Whole issues of magazines and newspapers are devoted to a particular subject in order to attract specific advertisements. In newspapers and magazines and on television and the internet, the line is blurred between editorial and advertisements. Book publishers are no different. Some of the snootiest publishers will publish a book by a company, celebrity or politician if they are paid a fee. This is true vanity publishing but everyone concerned pretends it isn't.

We are drowning in information but real news is stuff that someone, somewhere, doesn't want you to print, and very little of it is appearing in newspapers or on the television (which is largely dominated by dodgy celebrities who are rude, very rude and unbelievably rude and whose sole talents are in thinking up new ways to shock). And if you think you can find news or truth on the Web then think again. If you are conducting a search on the internet then you will find the truth (or something related to it) only if you are already an expert and can pick your way through the propaganda, the commercial exploitation and the censorship. Google is the most dangerous and evil creation in the history of the media. Today, the main problem is not a lack of information but a surfeit of information and a limited amount of time and ability to process all the information and to make decisions.

People who read modern newspapers, watch television news programmes, listen to the radio or surf the internet may think they are keeping up with what goes on in the world but most are simply wasting time, effort and energy on remote, complex, insoluble problems and ignoring real, possibly soluble, problems. They are being manipulated in a way that would have delighted Orwell's Big Brother.

We live in a dark world where millions think only of themselves, where the general sense of entitlement exceeds the sense of community and where all sense of responsibility is constantly overwhelmed by a never ending exhibition of petty authority. (Scarily, most people in England have a bigger television set than bookcase and more DVDs and computer games than books.) It is politically incorrect to remind anyone of Thomas Malthus, who pointed out that *giving* food to the poor encourages them to breed, and thus creates an ever bigger problem. It is even more incorrect to suggest that he might have had a point worth debating.

There used to be a rich stratum of honesty running through Middle England. There have always been high levels of crime among the poor and the rich but the middle classes always used to be honest. No more. The main problem, of course, is the fact that there are now so many rules and regulations that it is impossible for the most law abiding citizen to avoid breaking at least one law a day. Much of this law breaking is a result of ignorance (not even specialists can keep up with the torrent of new laws regulating our every move) but a good deal of it is a result of a not unreasonable feeling of weariness. And once people start breaking the law on a regular basis morality starts to crumble.

Living in England today is, in some ways, worse than living in the old USSR. At least residents of the pre-Gorbachev USSR knew what the rules were and could unite together in their distrust of everything they were told. Here most people still believe what they see and hear on the BBC, the most prejudiced, bigoted, fascist organisation on the planet. Most people do not want to hear the truth and so I, and people like me, can be banned, and silenced, very effectively. Staff at the BBC aren't bright enough to understand that it isn't the anti-immigration nationalists who are the dangerous extremists or that it is the fascist authoritarian pro-EU fanatics who threaten our future and whose activities mean that these will soon be the good old days.

Enough.

Finally, I feel that I must take this opportunity to warn readers that this book probably contains numerous errors of fact, certainly includes many uncorroborated anecdotes and is crammed with personal opinions. I mention these undoubted shortcomings only in order to free myself from the tedious responsibility of having to consider making apologies or corrections after publication.

The scene is set for another bloody year in my life.

Vernon Coleman 31.12.12

JANUARY

1.

The vandals from whom we bought our new house took with them the curtain rails, recycling bins, log burning stove, garden shed, instructions for the burglar alarm, outside lights, telephone directories (it is only when moving into a new house in a new area that you discover how useless the internet is for finding tradesmen), all the manuals for all the fixtures we bought (such as the boiler), the curiously shaped seat cushions that fitted the window seats in two 18th century bay windows, the specialist tools for the AGA, wall light fittings (the wires were left hanging out of the wall and we had to find electricians before we dared do anything), fixed mirrors from the bathrooms, toothbrush holders, bathroom cabinets, plugs from sinks and baths, doorbell chime (they left the bell push so callers think they are ringing the bell but we don't hear anything because there is nothing to hear) and the lavatory seats. Yes, unbelievably, they took the seats off the lavatories. Maybe we should be grateful that they left us the doors. The vendors probably sucked the remaining gas out of the pipes and the electricity out of the wires. I have seen tidier, cleaner, smarter squats.

To be fair, they didn't take everything. On a shelf in a bathroom they left us the contents of one of their medicine cabinets: a small brown bottle with a dozen white tablets and the label 'Aspirin (almost certainly)' and a bottle of medicine that had separated into brown and white layers which bore the label `stomach bowel and ear problems - also good for removing stains from carpet'. There was a parcel of rotting fish in the freezer (we had to throw the freezer away because it smelt so much) and in the greenhouse there were three bucketfuls of broken glass. And they left us the foundations for an un-built stable block. We don't want any stables so since the foundations are over 60 foot long and 5 foot wide we're going to sprinkle a few bags of grit and small stoned gravel and create our own boule court.

When we collected the keys the estate agent had handed us a huge paper bag full of assorted keys, none of which were labelled. (After many hours I still hadn't found the garage key but had eliminated 27 suspects from my enquiries. In the end we gave up trying to find out which key fitted which lock and simply had new locks fitted almost everywhere.)

Worst of all the water had been turned off. We found, and turned on, three stop cocks but it took us another three days to find the fourth. The estate agents were unable or unwilling to help, they said they had no contact details for the owner who seemed to be in hiding. The surveyor's report, for which we had paid an arm, a leg and a chest of gold, was of little value, telling us merely that the house was supplied with water. Every time I give money to a surveyor I wonder why I'm behaving so stupidly. Past experience tells me that the bastard will write 40 pages of ass-covering nonsense. He will state the obvious, fill pages with pointless and subjective comments on decorations and recommend that we obtain outside advice on the state of the woodwork, the roof, the walls, the electricity supply, the plumbing and everything else. Our survey contained much talk of work `involving significant costs' and instructions to obtain outside quotes for all repair work before exchanging contracts. There were the inevitable warnings about damp and the usual disclaimers. We ignored everything on the grounds that old houses, unlike new houses, are likely to be still standing in a few decades time. Anything that has remained in the same place for three centuries is probably not going anywhere in a hurry. To be honest, I'm surprised anyone who hires a surveyor ever buys a property in England. It is not surprising that surveyors are as rare as auks in France. I sometimes think that any house buyer would do better with a penknife (to stick in door and window frames), a pair of binoculars (to check out the roof and chimney stacks) and a notebook and pencil to record all their observations.

2.

I found a photograph of my old friend Stuart Roper while clearing out one of my many filing cabinets and waiting for someone at Npower to answer the telephone. (For the record it took them 27 minutes.) It was a BBC publicity photograph taken when he worked for the local radio station in Birmingham. In the photograph he was grinning broadly.

For twenty years, in the 1970s and 1980s, I toured the country constantly, promoting books and campaigning on a variety of issues, and at one time or another I visited every radio station available. And since there were, at the time, very few doctors prepared to talk on the wireless (for fear of attracting the wrath of the General Medical Council and being accused of advertising themselves) I was the resident doctor at many stations - including the BBC in Birmingham. That was where I met Stuart Roper.

Roper was one of the very best of all local radio presenters. He had a distinctive, friendly style which was ideally suited to community radio. He would sit in the studio with a copy of the local A to Z on the desk in front of him and when he spoke to a caller he would ask them where they lived. He would then look up the name of their street in the A to Z, pretend to think for a moment and then, using the map, talk to them about all the local landmarks - schools, pubs, parks, shopping centres and churches. Callers loved him. And at the time, although I'd been to radio stations everywhere, I'd never seen anyone else do this. Added to a natural charm and easy manner it made him a perfect radio presenter. The listeners felt that he knew them, their neighbourhood and their lives. He soon acquired quite a reputation as the man who knew Birmingham best.

And then a woman presenter broke the spell. For a quick laugh, and the chance to put him down, she told the listeners his secret. `He just sits here with an A to Z in front of him,' she scoffed.

Roper was appalled. He was broken. He felt shamed and betrayed. The woman's nasty comment wrecked his fragile self-confidence. I wasn't surprised. I knew many BBC radio stations quite well. Unlike the commercial stations, which tended to be bright and full of quick thinking, go-ahead people, the BBC stations were miserable, dowdy places: full of intrigue and political nonsenses. It is often said that the BBC is the voice of the left-leaning political establishment. It isn't. The BBC is the voice of the State. Since the BBC runs all its staff recruitment advertising in *The Guardian* newspaper this is not particularly surprising. It has always surprised me that a national organisation should be allowed to recruit exclusively from a relatively tiny band of heavy breathing panty-waisters and buttinskis who are eager to represent and promote the State.

Roper announced that he was leaving. He had, he said, been offered work in America. He was emigrating to find fame and fortune in a bigger market.

Since I knew him well his producer asked if I would telephone and wish him goodbye during his final show. I said I would do better than that. I drove 200 miles from Devon and when I arrived at the Pebble Mill Studios in Birmingham I telephoned the studio on a pay phone (there were no mobile telephones in those days). I wished him well and then pretended that I wanted to see him in person. `The show is over in 30 minutes,' he said sadly. `You'll never get here from Devon.' I promised him that I'd make it. I ran up the stairs and two minutes later I bounced into the studio. After the show had finished we went for coffee and promised to keep in touch.

He rang me the next day.

He was in Exmouth in Devon. He was staying at his parents' home. He hadn't gone to America. There had never been any job there. He had resigned without anywhere to go. He was unemployed. He wanted to know if I could find him some work.

I knew people at the BBC in Devon and at the commercial radio station in Exeter and I helped him get shows at both stations. A friend found him occasional work at an English speaking radio station in Vienna.

But he started drinking heavily. He turned up late for shows. He went on air slurring his words. In the world of radio these are unforgiveable sins. He was fired, fired and fired again. I was cross with him for letting himself down, and for embarrassing me, but our friendship survived. He tried to sell time share apartments but couldn't bear the idea of tricking gullible customers and never sold anything. Then he managed to get a job as a photographer on a local paper in Worcestershire. (He'd been a professional photographer before he'd started broadcasting).

But he didn't stop drinking. He drank more and more. He took blurry photographs at a couple of weddings. He refused all offers of help. He said the drinking wasn't a problem. He shouted at me when I tried to persuade him to get help.

And then, inevitably perhaps, he was found dead, alone, in his tiny flat. Did he kill himself? Did the drink kill him? I don't know. But I know what really killed him.

I dug out a copy of an ancient, dog eared A to Z of Birmingham which I'd used when I'd done some locum work in Birmingham, placed the grinning photograph inside it and cremated them together.

3.

I spent twenty minutes browsing in the WHSmith store in Taunton. You can learn a good deal about a town by looking at the magazines on sale. In Cirencester, just a few of miles to the west of our new home there seem to be endless magazines about horses, horse riding, and hunting. In Gloucester, the Cotswold centre for tattoo parlours and all day breakfasts, I counted 15 different magazines dealing with tattooing. (The variety that involves ink and many regrets rather than the type that involves members of the armed forces.)

And you can learn a good deal about life in general by looking at the warnings printed on the back of perfectly ordinary items. In Smith's, for example, I found this warning on the back of a box of pencils: `During all creative activity, we suggest that you wear overalls and/or old clothes and that you cover furnishings and flooring.' They were pencils, for heaven's sake.

WHSmith's have, like most chain stores, employed a puzzle designer to put up a series of barriers defining the route customers must follow if they want to interface with a retail sales executive. While wending my way along the defined route in the branch of Smith's in Taunton I found myself stuck behind a very fat man sitting in one of those motorised scooters that were designed for the disabled but which are so popular these days with the indolent and the obese. The oaf had parked his vehicle (about the same size as one of the original Alex Issigonis mini cars) in the middle of the complicated maze-like aisle all shops now favour (the owners will doubtless argue that they were designed and introduced to save the environment and to help protect us from terrorism and money laundering) while he worked out which of his many credit cards to use. He was quite immobile and oblivious to the fact that a queue was developing behind him while in front of him two assistants had nothing to do because no one could find their way past him.

Eventually, by squeezing between a bollard and a display box full of chocolate bars I managed to by-pass the hold up and reach a waiting assistant who was eventually kind enough to take a break from chatting to her companion in order to attend to my needs. I had finished the fiscal part of my transaction (allowing the two assistants to resume their discussion about the shortcomings of someone else's boyfriend) and was packing my purchases into my bag (in the bad old days the whole transaction would have taken half the time because the assistant would have placed my purchases into a bag immediately after scanning them) when the oaf in the wheelchair decided that he didn't want to buy anything after all. Naturally, he wanted to leave the store and, equally naturally, he didn't want to wait. `Move out of my way!' he snarled. `Can't you see I'm trying to get past. I'm in a wheelchair.' I politely explained that I would be no more than ten seconds. He swore at me and deliberately drove his vehicle against my leg. It hurt. Looking at him I suspected that he was only in a wheelchair because he was very fat. He had no signs or symptoms of ill health. I was terribly tempted to tip him and his vehicle over onto on his side to see if he really needed to be driving through Smith's in what seemed to me a vehicle as big as a small car. I was stopped from doing this only by the thought that I would probably end up on YouTube and, as a result, spend two years sharing a cell with an expense fiddling Member of Parliament. I picked up my purchases and hurried away slightly ahead of the oaf.

Shopping is such a joyless experience these days. I can remember when shop assistants would say 'It's a pleasure' when a customer offered a 'thank you' at the end of a transaction. These days the best you're likely to get in England is: 'It's not a problem'. Why should it be problem to accept money from a customer? In France the shopkeepers do still say 'C'est moi qui vous remercie'.

After leaving Smith's I crossed the road and went into the nearby Marks and Spencer store. They too have little mazes and long queues. I found something that I thought The Princess might like, and was standing in the queue thinking that if I had been able to make constructive use of all the time I've wasted queuing to hand my money to shop assistants I would have been able to learn another foreign language, when I was rewarded with a delightful vignette of modern life.

A fat woman in tight, faux animal skin trousers and a violet cardigan suddenly came into view, running towards the tills with all the eagerness of a keen shopper who had spotted a bargain. But, instead of bearing down on a reduced-price mohair sweater in pink, the surprisingly athletic woman was heading for the sales counter where, I suddenly noticed, someone had left a pair of aluminium health service style crutches. The woman wasn't going quite fast enough to win an Olympic sprint medal but she was moving faster than most folk half her age could manage. She didn't even seem out of breath. When she reached the counter she grabbed her crutches, stuffed one under each armpit and hobbled off, now limping with both legs and moving at a pace that even an arthritic snail would have found painfully slow.

By this time I had reached the top of the queue and the Marks and Spencer assistant greeted me with a cheery `Thank you for waiting'. It's obviously something they're trained to say because they all say it all the time. I suspect that they say it when they're at home serving hubby his dinner. And for all I know they probably say it at more intimate moments too. It's annoying because it's a meaningless phrase when recited by rote. (Marks and Spencer isn't the only guilty store. It's obviously something retail, catering and banking staff are taught when they're hired.) The other annoying thing they all say is: `Oh, what a lovely choice.' I bought three greeting cards the other day. The assistant who handled my order said: `Excellent choices. Lovely cards.' The miracle is that she managed to make this assessment without bothering to look at the cards. It happens in cafés and pubs, too. Order a drink and the waiter will say: `Oh, that's my favourite!' The implication is that you have good taste. But I'm not sure that I want to share my tastes with a 19-year-old Romanian with dirty cuffs, halitosis and a tattooed dotted line around his neck. My life will be complete when I buy a drain cover at the ironmongery store and the assistant says: `What a good choice, sir. What an unusual shade of black you've chosen.' The trouble with compulsory corporate niceness isn't that it is utterly insincere but that it prevents voluntary niceness. No one working in a store bothers to be polite or helpful of their own volition these days. They do what they're taught to do and that's it.)

From Marks and Spencer I walked to the HMV record store where I wanted to exchange a Blue Ray Disk which I had bought by accident, intending to buy a DVD version of the same film. Five assistants were standing behind the counter chatting merrily about something important. I said `excuse me' several times, coughed a few more times and eventually, with an audible sigh, one of the youngest assistants tore herself away and gave me a small part of her attention. I don't think the assistants were accustomed to dealing with customers. Most of the people in the store were browsing and using mobile phones to purchase their chosen items from Amazon and other internet suppliers.

`Receipt?' demanded the assistant, when I had explained that I had picked up the Blue Ray version of the film in error and that since we have only just upgraded from a video recorder we have no intention of replacing all our disks and players yet again.

I handed her the receipt. She examined it minutely, giving it the sort of scrutiny immigration officials give to passports from small African countries.

`Too late,' she said, handing me back the useless disk and the receipt.

`I'm sorry,' I said. `I don't understand.'

`The transaction took place 26 days ago.'

`You're undoubtedly right,' I agreed. I didn't have my reading glasses on and couldn't read the fine print on the receipt.

`You can't change it now.'

`Could I have a word with the manager, please?'

After another loud sigh she tapped the arm of a man with what looked like a metal puzzle from a Christmas cracker screwed into his nose. I couldn't help wondering if he knew it was there. Perhaps I should mention it. Perhaps none of the assistants dared to say anything. Perhaps it had got stuck to his nose during a hectic game of pass the orange.

`We don't exchange after 21 days,' said the manager in the sort of condescending manner which used to be the exclusive right of civil servants but which is now enjoyed by anyone standing behind a counter and protected from questioning customers by an armoury of legislation.

I didn't move and didn't say anything. I simply put the useless Blue Ray Disk and the receipt back on the counter in front of him. I then stared at him as though he had a piece of a metal puzzle from a Christmas cracker attached to his nose. It wasn't difficult.

`I suppose I can make a special exception just this once,' he said. He sent one of his sulky minions off to exchange the Blue Ray Disk for a DVD.

I thanked him.

I wanted to explain to him that the only advantage that High Street stores have over internet stores is in service and courtesy. I wanted to help him understand that his company's future, already bleak, was dependent upon his ability to persuade customers to find shopping at HMV a pleasurable experience. But I couldn't be bothered.

`I have some advice for you,' I told him.

He stared at me, puzzled.

`When HMV goes bust and you find yourself at the Job Centre I suggest that you look for something that isn't a service industry.'

He continued to stare at me. I think perhaps the phrase `service industry' wasn't something he understood.

I was exhausted by my shopping expedition and when a grinning chugger stopped me I was in no mood for extortion or blackmail. Instead of just telling him to 'chugger off' I stopped and smiled back at him. `I am so glad you have stopped me to chat,' I told me. `I'm a Jehovah's Witness.' I reached into my pocket as if for a leaflet. `Do you have an hour or so to spare? We could go somewhere to talk...'

But he was gone.

4.

The Princess and I bought ourselves a new television set. It is, according to the box, a Sony 32 inch LCD digital colour television and we chose it because it was the biggest one we could carry from the shop to the car.

When we opened the box we found a booklet. And when we read the booklet we found this instruction (it was listed as `item 4'):

Preventing the TV from toppling over:

1. Insert a wood screw (not supplied) in the stand.
2. Insert a machine screw (not supplied) into the TV.
3. Tie the wood screw and the machine screw with a strong cord (not supplied).

The Princess and I always share the work when we buy things and have to complete the construction process and so while she fixed the Sony television set onto its stand and connected it to our DVD player I occupied myself by putting the batteries into the remote control device. (While doing this I lost the small screw which holds the lid in place. From past experience I know that the easiest way to find small, lost items such as screws is to move around the floor on my knees. I found the screw with my left knee much more speedily than I would have found it with my hands.)

By the time I'd found the screw The Princess had finished building our television set, including tying the two screws together with string, and had discovered that the leads which had been sold to us with the television set didn't fit. We had, of course, been sold the wrong ones. The assistant had been so keen to sell us an insurance package which we didn't want (and didn't buy) that he didn't bother to check that he was selling us the right stuff.

The first television set I ever saw was built by my Dad in 1952. I was four and my parents woke me up so that I could see people dancing around on a tiny screen amidst a mass of valves and wires on the kitchen table. My dad subsequently made the cabinet to house his home-made television set. I can remember distinctly that there was no string involved in any of the construction.

5.

I am old enough to remember when a 24 hour plumber used to be a plumber who came out 24 hours day. He would even call around at night.

Everything changed around 20 years ago. I remember ringing a 24 hour plumber and being told that the plumber could be with me the following Thursday. ‘But that’s four days away!’ I said. ‘We have water pouring from a leaky tank.’ How can you call yourselves 24 hour plumbers?’ I probably used other words to make my displeasure clear. In those days you could swear at workmen without them seeking legal advice. `We are 24 hour plumbers,’ said an indignant woman at the other end of the telephone. `We answer the telephone 24 hours a day.’

Things have got even worse. I rang a 24 hour plumber and found myself listening to an answering machine. `Please leave your message and one of our executives will get back to you when the office opens.’ The second number I dialled found me talking to an incredibly snotty woman who seemed to have more than her fair share of superciliousness. She demanded that I explain to her the nature of our problem. I did this, as best I could, and waited. `I don’t think you are explaining very well,’ said the woman. `You obviously don’t know anything about plumbing.’ I tried again. The woman sighed the sort of sigh that means `Why are you wasting my time? I am far too important for this’ and told me that if I couldn’t explain my problem she wouldn’t be able to tell the consultant and so he wouldn’t be able to call. By this time I was deeply fed up. `Is there a man in the office?’ I asked her. `Why?’ she demanded. `I just thought that perhaps if I spoke to a man he might understand a little better,’ I said. `Or maybe if you consult with a male colleague he would know a little more about plumbing and so better able to understand the problem.’ The response was a very satisfying scream of abuse and the sound of the telephone receiver being slammed down onto the rest.

Eventually The Princess managed to find old-fashioned plumbers who did house calls. There were two of them and neither of them spoke a word of English. Actually, that’s not strictly true. One of them did say `Cupteayes’ and made a drinking motion with his hand and arm. However, it’s surprising how little conversation you need with plumbers. I pointed to the radiator that was dripping, they got out their tools and they mended it. When they’d finished one of them handed me a figure on a scruffy piece of paper and although I know the European Commission will be terribly upset about this I handed him the appropriate amount of money in cash.

When they’d gone The Princess said that she felt as though she were the one living in a foreign country.

6.

At St Pancras railway station, on our way to Paris, I saw a huge notice in the window of WHSmith promoting their eBook reader. They were selling it for £69 and, according to the poster in the window, they seemed to be offering a million free books with it. These are, presumably, the ones that Google stole. I never fail to be surprised by the way that bookshops work so hard at putting themselves out of business. Waterstone’s have been enthusiastically promoting eBook readers for some time. Barmy. Utterly bonkers.

The whole eBook phenomenon is fascinating. As the world’s biggest online retailer, Amazon had a head start in selling eBooks. In 2007, the company launched its Kindle eBook reader and by 2010 it controlled 90% of the entire eBook market. (Just why that didn’t attract the attention of the Monopoly Commission is an unanswered puzzle.)

Books appeared to have made a successful transition from print to digital. Publishers were relaxed and confident and enthusiastic. Who wouldn’t have been happy? The new eBooks enabled them to make money without actually doing anything very much at all. Amazon still paid the publishers what they wanted. Customers were happy too because Amazon merrily sold many books at knock down prices. The company actually lost money on lots of books.

Unfortunately, the goops, grunts and pipsqueaks at the publishing companies hadn’t realised that what had happened to music and films was inevitably going to happen to their industry. It was so obvious that it was painful to watch the way publishers walked into disaster. (My favourite absurdity was the sight of a book wholesaler, setting up an eBook division. A wholesaler, with huge warehouses, was setting itself up to sell eBooks. Surely, another commercial effort worth a prize for lunacy?)

Eventually, the publishers did wake up. And when Apple introduced its iPad in 2010, and built it in such a way that the device could be used to read books, publishers thought they would prevent Amazon from owning 100% of the eBook market by doing business with Apple as well.

There was one problem.

Apple, still run at the time by the late Steve Jobs, didn’t want to sell books at a loss. It wanted the same 30% margin that it makes selling magazines, newspapers and games on the iPad.

So a number of publishers and Apple did a deal whereby the publishers could charge whatever they wanted for their eBooks and Apple would be paid 30% for doing the selling. The publishers were doubtless very excited and delighted that Apple had agreed to reduce its cut from 30% right the way down to 30%. That was sharp negotiating on their part.

Brain dead, unimaginative publishers were delighted. But, entirely predictably, things have not gone smoothly.

The USA Department of Justice accused Apple and some of the biggest publishers of colluding to fix prices for eBooks. Three of the publishers, realising that the USA Government has more money than they have, quickly settled (this is a legal term meaning `rolled over and played dead’).

And my guess is that cheap eBooks will come back. And since anyone, anywhere in the world, can buy an eBook from anywhere, there seems little doubt that what the American Government decides will decide the price of eBooks.

The return of cheap eBooks will mean that the price differential between a real book and an eBook will rise dramatically.

And we will, I suspect, see the decline and disappearance of the traditional bookshop and the traditional wholesaler. They have no more of a future than candlestick makers or wheelwrights. As a publisher I can't say I'm heartbroken. I never had much help from either shops or wholesalers. In fact, wholesalers were a menace. I remember once buying £15,000 worth of advertising for one of my books, sending out letters to 1,500 bookshops to promote the book and then discovering that our main wholesaler had failed to put the books they had in stock into their computer. The result was that bookshops which asked for copies (a rare enough event, since most bookshops won't touch books from small publishers) were told that the book was out of stock. Our reputation with the bookshops was wrecked and we were left with several thousand books we couldn't sell. So I won't need a box of tissues if wholesalers all go bust.

Not that publishers have much of a future either.

Amazon is now publishing books.

And you don't need much capital to set up as an eBook publisher.

The rise and rise of the eBook will see the decline and fall of professional authors as well as bookshops and publishers. The problem is that eBooks have little or no cost and are therefore regarded as having little or no worth. They will, therefore, be passed around quite freely. People will send them to friends and once books are on the internet they will, like films and music, be available free to anyone. In just one month in 2011 each of the top ten bestselling books was illegally downloaded an average of 80,000 times. The authors didn't make a penny from those sales. The worst three countries in the world for stealing books are the USA, the UK and China. A recent survey of women aged 35 plus, all eBook readers, showed that one in 8 had illegally downloaded a book compared to 1 in 20 who confessed to downloading music. Book piracy will destroy the global publishing industry. And it will destroy authors too.

Just the other day I read a report in the *Financial Times* saying that Amazon will let users of its Kindle e-readers borrow electronic books from two thirds of American libraries. This is significant because public libraries in the USA have spent several years building up their eBook collections. `Amazon is working with OverDrive, a leading distributor of eBooks, which makes a catalogue of 400,000 books available to 11,000 libraries. Tablet users who have a library card can borrow eBooks from their local lender without ever visiting it, by logging on to the library's website.'

At the moment libraries are limited to lending an eBook to one reader at a time and some publishers require that its eBooks expire once they have been borrowed from a library a certain number of times. Anyone who expects either of these restrictions to last long, or to be taken seriously, was clearly born on another planet.

Still, it seems that even the eBook is likely to have a short life. People download the things but it has been shown that 99 per cent of the downloaded eBooks aren't ever read. People download them because it's easy to do so but most find whole books too daunting. In Japan four of the recent five best-selling novels were written and read on cell phones. No printing, no shipping, no returns. And no money changed hands.

There is no future for professional authors. In future authors will have to be sponsored and it will not, I fear, be by kindly benefactors but by lobby groups and industry public relations groups. No one will ever write or publish the sort of books I've spent my life writing.

Whether or not that is sad depends upon your point of view, I suppose, though it is worth pointing out that evidence shows that children develop much more quickly, and become much brighter, when they grow up in houses which have at least 500 real books in them - books that can be looked at, picked up, felt and smelt as well as read. Not, of course, that our masters are too keen on the idea of children growing up intelligent and inquisitive.

The Princess popped into the St Pancras branch of Smith's to buy an armful of assorted newspapers and magazines. The counter assistant recognised her from previous visits and they chatted for a few moments. He told her that he is from Sri Lanka. She told him that she was originally from Wales. The counter assistant was very impressed. `Your English is very good,' he told her with a beaming smile.

7.

We were so tired after our journey yesterday (and, possibly, the fact that we sat up listening to old Dick Barton and Paul Temple tapes until 3 a.m.) that we decided to get up late. When we were woken by the sound of a man on a bicycle ringing a bell to let the world now that he was up and about and ready to grind our knives I picked up the clock, looked at it and discovered to my horror that it was still only 6.00 a.m. Only after I had stared at it for a few moments did I realise that I was holding it upside down and that the time was really 12.00 p.m. It isn't often that we get up at the crack of noon. We had breakfast at 12.30 p.m., lunch at 4.00 p.m., afternoon tea at 6.00 p.m. and dinner at 9.00 p.m. and so in the end everything worked out very well.

After breakfast we spent a pleasant twenty minutes or so blowing soap bubbles out of our window and watching them float up and down the street, occasionally landing on the heads of unsuspecting pedestrians. We gave up only when the wind changed and blew several hundred bubbles back in through our window.

Later in the afternoon we walked to the Passerelle Leopold Sedar Senghor (named for a Senegalese writer). This is a footbridge across the Seine which, on the left bank, starts at the Thomas Jefferson statue on the Quai Anatole France. The bridge, like several others in Paris, including the Pont des Arts, is now festooned with padlocks fastened to the railings and after walking to the middle we added our own padlock to the thousands already there. It is engraved with our names, our wedding date 3.12.99 and the word `Forever'. We tied a pink ribbon to the padlock and then threw the keys into the river. They just missed landing on a police launch which passed under the bridge at just that moment. Looking down I realised how clean the Seine now looks; certainly much cleaner than most rivers passing through English towns and cities where, too often, the bridges look like staples inadequately joining the two sides of a gaping wound filled with green pus.

We then walked back to our apartment, in freezing but invigorating January chill, along the river. We stood and watched an old lady playing with her adoring dog; a happy, white mongrel. She was kicking a cork down the Quai. The dog, of course, was fetching the cork and dropping it back at her feet. She was too stiff and frail to bend down. But she could kick. I can't remember when I last saw a happier woman or a happier dog. Up above, the plane trees still carried their seed pods. They looked like Christmas trees, still festooned with decorations after the festivities.

A little further along, The Princess and I watched a tramp feeding the seagulls. He had set up camp by the river's edge and had lit a fire in a brazier. He had a huge stock of dead Christmas trees for firewood. I don't think I have ever seen a happier man. He was throwing bits of food up into the sky for the birds to catch. `It's always the same isn't it,' said The Princess. `It's the people who can't afford to give who give most generously.'

Finally, close to home, we saw another tramp. He had a black mongrel dog which was wearing an old jumper to keep out the cold. The dog was literally bouncing with joy. The tramp was beaming with pride and happiness.

We were about five minutes from our apartment when what looked like a toilet bowl suddenly crashed onto the pavement directly in front of us. It shattered and the pieces flew in every direction but ours.

Instinctively, we both looked up, though I don't know if this was to see where the toilet had come from or to check that there were no more on the way.

A man in a dinner jacket looked down, waved and shouted his apologies.

`Why did you drop a toilet from your window?' I shouted, rather angrily.

`It was not a toilet, it was a bidet,' he explained.

`It fell so fast I could not tell,' I explained.

`That's OK,' he said with a smile and a wave. He then disappeared back into the room.

`I suppose it would be marginally more acceptable socially to have been killed by a falling bidet than a falling lavatory bowl,' said The Princess as we hurried back home.

We had seen three gloriously happy people and two gloriously happy dogs. We had seen three lonely old people all of whom had, in their own way, found some small delight on a brisk, cold day. And we had closely missed an unpleasant death.

We arrived back at our apartment brimful of happiness. Total cost of all that pleasure? Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

We warmed ourselves up with gloriously smoky lapsang souchong tea and madeleine cakes.

8.

Our French electricity and gas supplier has sent us an easy to remember internet address so that we can drop whatever we are doing and check our energy consumption. It is, they tell us proudly, an aide memoire. Here is our new easy to remember access address: http:/www.economie.gouv.fr/dgccrf/consommation/thematiques/Electricite-et-gas-naturel. Once we have reached this sanctuary all we have to do is fill in our personal details and doubtless answer a couple of dozen security questions.

9.

It rained all day and The Princess and I spent the afternoon in the Deux Magots cafe in St Germain. Buying papers at the kiosk near to Deux Magots I once stood behind a famous fashion designer buying his newspapers. What made this a slightly surreal experience was the fact that most of the papers he and I were buying had his picture on the front page. According to one of the papers he had just gone bankrupt, owing 100 million dollars, or some such extra terrestrial amount. He didn't look like a man who was facing ruin. When he'd paid for his papers he gave the change to a nearby beggar. From the beggar's response it was clearly a daily ritual.

There are few joys greater than sitting comfortably in a quiet, warm Parisian cafe with a large glass of vin chaud on the table, an empty bladder and a good book in one's hands, while outside, inches away through the glass, streams of sodden people are hurrying to and fro in the rain; coats flying, umbrellas inverting and buses splashing. The joy is, of course, so much more intense when the people getting wet and irritable are all foreign and largely French.

I would, of course, never dare admit to any of this in public. Beside opprobrium it would, I fear, draw down upon me the wrath of those authorities whose job it is to stamp on all simple pleasures, particularly those which can be defined as examples of political incorrectness.

As we sat in the café we watched a man walk by pushing a wheelchair. He had a violin case sitting on the chair. A few minutes earlier The Princess had put several euros into his cap as he sat in the chair `playing' his violin (very badly). He clearly could not play the violin and seems clear that he isn't disabled either.

On the way home we called in at our favourite supermarket (there are nine within half a mile of our apartment) and bought a vegetarian pizza, some fruit, a box of ice cream and two large rolls of black refuse sacks. We paid two boy scouts a euro each not to pack our bag for us. They stand at the check-out counter and pack bags to raise money but they are very bad at it. No one has taught them that it is sensible to put the heavy stuff at the bottom and the light stuff on top. They do the opposite. On the other hand, maybe they think that putting the light stuff at the bottom enables them to save the planet by squashing it and, therefore, cramming more stuff into each bag. The pizza and ice cream are for supper. The black bags are to take back to England. In order to cut down the nation's use of petroleum based products such as plastic, the EU has ruled that we are no longer allowed to use old-fashioned metal dustbins but must pack all our rubbish in plastic bags and put the plastic bags inside large plastic containers. I have no doubt that this makes sense to EU parasitic bureaucrats. (The phrase `parasitic bureaucrat' is, of course, tautological.) But then they probably believe that the EU deserved the Nobel Peace Prize. We have been told that we are entitled to have two black rubbish bags taken away by the council but although the instructions tell us that the bags must be black no one has said what size the bags must be. So, although the council delivers tiny little bags we throw those away and use our own black sacks, which we buy in a supermarket in Paris and import. They are huge and will hold four times as much as the council issue bags.

As we tottered back home we were both nearly knocked down by a couple of hugely obese Americans driving along in those large disability scooters which resemble the sort of golf carts used in Florida. They shouted at us to get out of their damned way, as Americans do, and we just managed to save ourselves. The Americans who visit Europe are a self-selected minority who think they are superior to everyone else (including other Americans) because they have passports and two pairs of shoes and because they know that France is the one with the cute metal tower and England is the one with the Queen. They are a shapeless people who have as little style as they have morality or manners. They invariably dress in garish clothes, usually wearing the American national costume of checked shorts and checked shorts (two different checks of course). (`There are lot of Americans in Paris at the moment,' said The Princess as we drove from the Gare du Nord recently. `How do you know?' I asked. `I've seen a lot of fat, badly dressed people wandering about.') I used to think that Americans must take lessons in bad dressing but recently I have come to understand that it is something that comes naturally because they are a new and still culturally backwards people. When they want to walk the obese Americans climb off their golf carts, leaving them in the middle of pavement, and wheeze along bumping other pedestrians out of the way without any concern. They walk with hips pushed forward in a swaggering sort of way; as though they are pushing their bellies ahead of them which, in a way, I suppose they are. There is no doubt that the Americans have a natural sense of self-satisfaction which makes them appear arrogant and insensitive. This is not as bad as it sounds, however, because the vast majority of Americans are arrogant and insensitive and so the image they portray is a true one. The only thing that can be said in favour of Americans is that they are entertaining to watch. To observe Americans at a railway station or in a café is to watch another species. And even if they have been in another country long enough to buy clothes and get their hair cut locally, Americans are always identifiable as Americans. If they could keep their mouths shut (something most Americans do only when their lips are actually stapled together as part of a medically approved dieting programme) they would still obviously be American.

10.

`You can't wear that shirt!' cried The Princess. `I haven't ironed it.'

`It's fine,' I told her.

`It's all wrinkled,' she said, trying to grab the shirt to take it away from me.

`It's ok,' I insisted. `I'm wrinkled too so it will fit nicely.'

We strolled up to Les Invalides this afternoon so that we could walk around the cloisters (my favourite spot on the planet) and then take a look at the beautiful red and black firebugs under the lime trees in the park nearby. On our way back we watched groups of men playing boule (surely the only sport which is widely played without anyone bothering to keep score) and walked around the Eiffel tower. We were approached by at least a dozen men trying to sell us small metal models of the tower. By the way they were all looking over their shoulders they were probably illegal immigrants. In Paris female illegal immigrants end up working in the Rue St Denis as prostitutes while men end up working around the Eiffel tower selling cheap metal trinkets. I don't know which is worse.

The Eiffel tower is a wonderful creation with an extraordinary history. During the First World War the French put trained parrots onto the tower in the hope and belief that the parrots would give advance warning of incoming aircraft and enable anti-aircraft gunners to shoot them down. The plan was abandoned when the French realised that the parrots couldn't discriminate between Allied aircraft and German aircraft and that although they were very good at announcing the imminent arrival of the 11.43 from Dusseldorf they were unable to differentiate between that and the 11.44 from Lyon.

Finally, we fed the birds and the ducks in the lake beside the tower with a loaf of bread we'd taken with us. We have, in the past, tried feeding them with all sorts of good, wholesome food. The experts, who are supposed to know about these things, complain that bread is not good for them. We've even bought them special bird seed from a pet shop. But neither the birds, nor the ducks, have read what the experts say and they all prefer bread.

11.

I went to the freezer shop and was standing in the queue when another till opened. Although I was next in line the woman in front of me had bought enough food to feed the Premier League and so I moved across to the new till. But before I could get there a French couple pushed their way in front of me. I had only one item. They had enough frozen food to feed Algeria. I glowered at them and muttered (in English) something about the French being rude and not understanding the principles of queue forming. `You are not the French liking?' demanded the husband, a round fellow with a red face and eyebrows large enough to vote. `No!' I told him firmly, though I confessed that I did have a secret admiration for the people who voted in vast quantities for the political candidate who had bulldozed a branch of McDonalds to the ground. `Then why you come at France?' he demanded. `I love Paris,' I explained with an English shrug. `Ha!' he cried, despair and disappointment written all over his face in 30 point. He looked like a four minute miler who has just seen someone run a three minute mile. `You is like all the English. You love Paris and hate the French.' `Exactly!' I responded, delighted that the ignorant Gallic fool knew how the English feel about the French, delighted that he had realised that I am English and not American and, I confess, quietly pleased that I had done my little bit for the day to further improve understanding between our two nations. Wonderful. I was far too pleased to worry that I was the victim in what was clearly a racially inspired attack on a member of an ethnic minority. As we parted I merrily waved two fingers, although I suspect that he did not understand the historical significance of the gesture. The V sign was first used by English archers at the battle of Agincourt in 1415. If the French captured English archers they used to cut off their two bow fingers to stop them taking part in any more fighting. The English waved those two fingers to show that they still had them.

I always like talking to the French in my language because they are usually no more capable of speaking English properly than are the Scots or the Americans. It comforts me to know that however bad my French is (and they are always eager to tell me how bad it is), it is probably no worse than their English. Letters, menus and even posters provide evidence for their inability to learn our language. Just today we saw a poster which invited passers-by to attend an *Alone Man Show*.

The French never speak slowly when speaking to people struggling to speak their language and so, in retaliation, I always speak as quickly as one of those voiceover specialists rushing through the small print on an insurance company advertisement on television. And I try to mix up the accents a little too. Sometimes I speak in a broad Somerset accent, sometimes in a Liverpudlian accent and sometimes in my own version of Cockney. Occasionally, I throw in a sentence or two in a Glaswegian accent.

(I find, incidentally, that the Scots are increasingly incomprehensible. Many years ago I travelled to Scotland once a week to make a television programme. I spent two hours a week entombed in taxis with Scotsmen who talked incessantly. I never understood one word any of them said. There is a woman who appears on a discredited BBC programme called *Newsnight* who might as well be speaking Serbo-Croat for all I can understand of her. Why we are expected to pay a massive licence fee for programmes we cannot understand is beyond me. How do we know just how prejudiced the BBC has become if we cannot understand a word the presenters are saying?)

12.

While we've been in Paris I've been studying the career of Jacques Tati, the great French clown, mime and film maker. Tati wanted to control everything himself and worked alone and quite apart from the French film industry. This was, apparently, much admired at the time. He wrote, starred in and directed his own movies. He also produced them and stuck up the posters.

As an artist Tati was a cross between Harpo Marx and Tommy Cooper with a large dose of Orson Welles and touches of Flanders and Swann and the Bonzo Dog Doo Dah band. He was one of the most innovative of film directors. In his films he plays a character who wanders through life in something of a confused daze. However, Tati's real life was a fairly endless series of ultimately damaging misunderstandings.

For example, at a garden party in Paris, Tati waited in line to meet General de Gaulle. When he finally arrived at the head of the queue, de Gaulle's secretary whispered `Jacques Tati'. Suddenly, realising that the General had no idea who Jacques Tati was, the secretary tried to help by whispering `Mon Oncle' (the name of one of Tati's most famous films). The General smiled, nodded and congratulated Tati on having such a charming and brilliant nephew.

Some of the misunderstandings damaged Tati's career quite badly. In Rome, at an audience with Pope Pius XII, the Pope was handed the wrong cue card when he met Tati and as a result the Holy Father talked exclusively about the gas fitting, plumbing and electrical trades. Outside the Vatican, when asked what the Pope had talked about Tati accurately answered `he spoke about gas and electricity'. This was perceived by Italians as heretical. Tati's distributor claimed that the star lost 40% of his Italian audience with that one remark.

In America, the boss at the Warner Brothers studio offered Tati unlimited financing if he would make a film called *Mr Hulot Goes West* with Sophia Loren. Tati's reply was: `No, sir. Mr Tati Goes East.' Tati meant that he was going home to France but it was understood to mean that he was a red and as a result no further offers came to Tati for the rest of his career. His films weren't shown in America because he was considered to be a communist.

As the years went by Tati got into more and more trouble for no fault of his own. He was accused of being anti-Jewish and banned by Jewish producers (though his only arguments with them were as a result of his claiming that he wasn't being paid enough money) and his mime of a traffic policeman directing vehicles in Italy was described as racist.

(I am always slightly bewildered by the way many Jews describe themselves by giving their religion first and whatever it is they do second. `I am a Jewish mother.' `I am a Jewish doctor.' Everyone else I know does things the other way round. A mother and a Catholic. A doctor and a Presbyterian. A Frenchman and a Christian. Religion does not define anyone - not even a Muslim - in quite the same way that it seems to define a Jew. A man who is a surveyor, father, husband, son, fisherman and golfer will think of himself first and foremost as a Jew. I wonder why this is. Is it a sense of elitism? A feeling of exclusivity? Jews often complain that people treat them as different but couldn't that be because they think of themselves as being different; some seem to me to behave as though they are members of a special clique and have a tendency to look down their noses at those of us who are not Jewish. When I wrote my two books about America (*Rogue Nation* and *Global Bully*) I got into terrible trouble with Jews. Although the books were about the USA and not Israel a number of Jews wrote vicious letters accusing me of anti-Semitism simply because I had dared to criticise the illegal invasion of Iraq. They regarded an attack on America as nothing more than a slightly veiled attack on Israel, which it most assuredly was not. More significantly a number wrote angry letters demanding that newspapers and magazines refuse to accept advertisements for the books and a number of those publications did as they were told.)

Gradually, towards the end of his life, Tati found it increasingly difficult to raise money for films. His own circus pals rallied round and helped him make a film but in the end the splendid isolation slowly morphed into fearful solitude.

13.

Our local supermarket in Paris has installed a row of those horrible self-service tills which are now so unpopular in English supermarkets and chain stores. In an uncharacteristically techno-friendly moment I thought I would try to make the thing work. I pressed the button confirming that I wanted to pay for my shopping (presumably there is an alternative option for those who prefer to just take away their shopping without paying for it) and a voice told me to put my bag in the bagging area. I put my bag in the bagging area and a voice immediately told me that before going further I should remove the unauthorised item from the bagging area. This sort of nonsense is clearly built into these machines which are undoubtedly programmed by impoverished Chinese peasants who are directed by their Government to do everything they can to weaken dastardly foreigners by raising their stress levels. However, I have found a solution. Whenever there are no executive sales assistants in sight and I am forced to use one of these damned tills I simply put something heavy down on the weighing scales and leave it there. This causes a pre-recorded voice to scream abuse at me. There are sometimes bell and whistle noises too. And in the more expensive supermarkets a red light flashes. I ignore the instructions and stand there looking elderly and helpless (this is not difficult). Within a minute or so an assistant will come over and operate the machinery for me. I was delighted to see that when I did this in Paris the same thing happened and my technological needs were attended to by a Gallic executive sales assistant. (I refer to her as Gallic but I suspect that her birthplace was nearer to Bucharest than Paris.) Unfortunately, I had to wait a while because all the available executive sales assistants (ESAs) were running hither and thither attending to all the other customers trying to pay for their shopping and their running hither and thither was impeded by a cluster of people collecting money for charity. The whole scene reminded me of something by Brueghel. It transpired that the French have not quite got the hang of this new technology because much of their merchandise is sold without a barcode. For example, fruit and vegetables are still displayed loose and must be selected and bagged by the customers. And baguettes, sold in the customary long thin paper bags, don't have a barcode either. Since every French shopper buys fruit, vegetables and at least one baguette the predictable result was chaos. The ESAs were having to take bags of apples, tomatoes, lemons, potatoes and so on to the back of the store, weigh them, work out the prices and then return to the self-service tills at the front of the store, use their personal key and secret code word to by-pass the barcode readers and then input the information manually. Only the French could create such a circus out of a labour saving device. It took me thirty minutes to pay for my small selection of groceries and compared to other shoppers I did rather well. Still, things will improve soon. The assistant who dealt with my purchases apologised profusely and assured me that the managers (doubtless safely cocooned in an office block in Lyon, Dijon or Toulouse) have been informed of the glitch and have found a solution. `We are being given more staff to help us operate the self-service tills,' she told me proudly. They have also put up a sign advertising `Friendly service with a smile'. Unfortunately, we will have to wait until these luxuries are in season. The French claim to have a sophisticated sense of humour but only the English really understand irony. As I left I saw a young girl of about seven reluctantly handing back the notepad she had intended to buy. The price was five euros and 75 centimes and she only had a five euro note. I wanted to hand over the extra 75 centimes and would have gladly done so but was stopped by the realisation that if I did so in England I would undoubtedly be arrested, vilified and labelled a paedophile or, worse still, a member of UKIP. I'm not sure how barking the French have become about this sort of behaviour but I reluctantly decided that I had better play safe and keep my change in my pocket. What a sad, sad world the politically correct have created for us all.

As I left the supermarket, hurrying back to our apartment where The Princess was making dinner, a woman pushing a pram the size of a small Citroen banged into my legs from behind, nearly knocking me into a large display of seasonal vegetables. Why do pram pushing women the world over always assume that they always have the right of way? They should be forced to take pushing tests. I struggled back to the apartment with arms aching, legs hurting and brain whirling.

When I had taken my medication (a glass of Cardhu) and had recovered from this exhausting experience we watched Carol Reed's film of Graham Greene's novel *The Third Man* for the umpteenth time. Joseph Cotten and Trevor Howard are magnificent and the film will always be in my Top Ten but the movie is, of course, stolen by Orson Welles playing a black marketeer. Hitchcock was wise not to hire Welles to play the wicked spy with the missing finger in *The Thirty Nine Steps* for if he had done so Welles would have stolen my other favourite film too. Even Steve McQueen could have taken lessons on scene stealing from the master. (The traditional advice should have been: `Don't play in films with children, animals or Orson Welles.')

Despite being American (and, therefore, at a huge cultural disadvantage) Orson Welles was one of the most talented men of the 20th century. Sadly, he peaked too early and neither he nor anyone else found it easy to cope with the peaking. He was, however, what Arnold Bennett would have referred to as a `card'. Once, when lecturing at a women's club in Santa Monica, so few people turned up that the lady who was due to introduce Welles fled into the safety of the powder room (a term which always reminds me more of Guy Fawkes than ladies taking the shine off their noses). Unflustered by the absence of his hostess Welles steamed on and introduced himself to his tiny audience by saying: `I am a director of plays. I am a producer of plays. I am an actor. I write, direct and act on the radio. I paint and sketch and am a book publisher. I do many other things.' Then he leant closer to his tiny audience and said, in that wonderful, sherry-rich booming voice: `Isn't it a shame that there are so many of me and so few of you?' They don't make them like Orson any more.

14.

Back in London, we met a tramp outside St Pancras railway station. The authorities no longer allow tramps into public buildings, probably because they're a threat to national security and the banking system and the stability of the European Union, so they have to hang around outside in the rain. The Princess always gives money to tramps who look to be over the age of 55. She knows that most of them will spend it on booze but, as she says, if you give people money you can't tell them how to spend it. Besides, if alcohol helps them forget whatever it is they're running away from then it's medicine. I have a theory that when God makes people He has barrels full of stuff to put into them - kindness, sensitivity and so on. One Friday evening God had most of a barrel of sensitivity left over and knowing that it would go off if not used He put it all into The Princess. And so she became too sensitive. When one of the angels warned Him what would happen He just smiled. `It will be nice for the world to have a really sensitive and kind person around.' The result is that The Princess is a delicate primrose in a world of heavy boots.

This particular tramp was sitting on the pavement with a religious placard resting beside him. I can't remember the exact words - something about the wrath of God and the end of the world.

`What are you going to do if the weather gets really bad?' I asked him. The forecasters were talking about freezing temperatures, snow and ice. He looked at me, thought for a long, long while and then replied with one word: `Vicissitudes.'

He spoke very softly and I didn't quite catch what he had said, though this may have been because it was not an answer I had expected.

`I beg your pardon?' I said, leaning closer.

`Vicissitudes,' he repeated. He shrugged lightly. He looked tired. He clearly didn't have the energy for a proper shrug.

`Do you have a date?' I asked him. `For the end of the world.' I wasn't being funny, I really wanted to know.

He looked at me and I knew he was trying to tell if I was taking the mickey. He could see that I wasn't. He shook his head. `It's in God's hands,' he said. `He will decide when. I could guess. But it is not wise to give a specific date when predicting the end of the world,' he said. I got the impression it was the longest speech he'd made for quite a while.

I waited for him to continue.

`If the date is near and you are wrong then you will be discredited,' he explained. `People will laugh. No one will take you seriously.' He licked his dry, cracked lips with a sore, smooth, tongue. You didn't need a laboratory to tell he was vitamin and iron deficient. `If you give a far-away date then no one will care.'

I nodded and waited but he had finished. I put a bank note into his hand. `Do you want us to take you to hospital?' I asked him. He shook his head. Wise man.

We left him.

`I hadn't realised just how tricky the wrath of God business can be,' I said quietly to The Princess.

15.

I thought lists of criminals went out with John Dillinger (who was famously Public Enemy No 1) but the Americans still publish a list of their most wanted criminals. I know this because someone called Vernon Coleman, the last remaining free member of America's Black Mafia Gang, is on the American Most Wanted list and frequently a member of the Top Ten. I wonder if there is kudos among criminals who make it into the Top Ten. Does number 9 consider himself to be socially superior to, say, no 11? Can number 16 move up a couple of places by knocking over a small bank in Ohio?

16.

We took a pile of books to a local charity shop which raises money for a hospice. We took two huge black sacks of paperbacks and two large boxes full of hardbacks (mostly first editions which were duplicates of books I had on my shelves). We said `good morning' but the woman in charge of the shop that day, who was sitting reading a book, couldn't even be bothered to turn her head, let alone bring herself to greet us or to waste breath muttering `thank you'. A fortnight ago we took the same shop some books and a bag full of DVDs. `There aren't any videos in that bag are there?' demanded the woman. `No, they're all DVDs,' said The Princess. `I'll check,' snapped the woman. She ripped open the bag and insisted on emptying it onto the floor to make sure that we were only donating DVDs. When she was satisfied she grunted something, presumably to let us know that we could go. We won't be taking any more donations to this particular charity shop. Maybe we shouldn't expect a `thank you'. But a little ordinary courtesy wouldn't seem a lot to ask.

On our way out I couldn't help taking a peep at the books they had on their shelves. I picked out three and moved towards the till.

`Do you really want to buy those?' asked The Princess.

I looked at the books I was holding. `I've read them all and I used to have copies but I don't think I have copies now.'

`Those three were among the books we bought here two weeks ago,' she pointed out quietly. I looked at her. She smiled and shrugged. `I just thought I'd mention it.'

I looked at the books more carefully. They were, indeed, the very same books that I'd donated. I put the books back on the shelf.

17.

The hot tap in our lovely new kitchen doesn't work. I have discovered that five years ago a builder who did some `improvement works' put the pipes into the space between the stone walls and then compounded the problem by putting four large airbricks into the outside wall. The result is that the air around the pipe is freezing cold. I have no doubt that the air bricks (huge things, as ugly as social workers) are there to satisfy some daft regulation thought up by a team of quarter-witted Belgians and enforced by equally dim and petty-minded English bureaucrats. (Just for the record I would like to point out that this book would have been finished in half the time and with considerably less effort and expense without the assistance of these malignant posses.) I confess that what worries me more than the number of rules which now exist is the number of people who seem to love applying them with enthusiasm, even when they must surely know that the rules are stupid. We are the only country in the EU who takes any notice of the rules from Brussels. (The French love rules, because their existence gives them the joy of ignoring them. Without rules you cannot be a rebel and the French always consider themselves to be rebels. They are rebels with a thousand causes: some wise, some just and some absurd. In what city other than Paris would lawyers go to the streets and protest en masse about something no one could quite understand?) England is now full to the coastline of sanctimonious self-important cretins and I am full up of worries: I really don't have any room left for new worries. The next self-important prat who tells me I must do this or do that will just have to wait until I've got rid of one of my worries and have some space available.

The temperature fell to minus eight last night when the hot tap froze and so this morning I went outside and screwed four squares of thick carpet over all four airbricks. I am confident that this will solve the problem. I also discovered that our conservatory is freezing cold because a huge air brick which some lunkhead of a builder has stuck in the wall is letting in vast draughts of freezing cold air. I cured that problem by filling the inside of the airbrick with cotton wool then covering over the inside grille. There was a note on the airbrick saying `Do Not Cover' but I don't give a fig. I assume that the people in Brussels are worried that without their intervention we may run out of air. Well, much of our new home is over 200-years-old (the larger part of the modernisation was done in 1750 when planning regulations were just a smirk on some serf's poxy face) and it doesn't need air bricks, thank you very much. The outside air can get in all by itself. Two of our keyholes alone are big enough to get a hand through (the keys are solid iron and a foot long) so I don't think we'll suffocate.

18.

I've been re-reading George Gissing's *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (a fake diary by a retired writer). In the book Gissing (as Ryecroft) writes `They tell me we are burning all our coal, and with wicked wastefulness. I am sorry for it, but I cannot on that account make cheerless perhaps the last winter of my life. There may be waste on domestic hearths, but the wickedness is elsewhere - too blatant to call for indication.' He goes on to say:`...hold by the open fire as you hold by whatever else is best in England. Because, in the course of nature, it will be some-day a thing of the past (like most other things that are worth living for).'

Gissing himself was a great fan of an open fire and wrote warmly of his preference for a real fire over heating circulated through radiators and other systems. At the time when he wrote *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* there was a coal shortage throughout Europe. Coal prices soared to 40 shillings a ton in 1900 just three years before Gissing wrote the book and three years before he died at the age of 46.

I too am a great fan of open fires (to me the words `log on' means that the fire needs feeding) and believe that the size of a problem can be measured by the number of logs it requires to sort it out. (A five log problem being quite a challenge.) Sadly, these days, thanks largely to the efforts of the politically correct and the health and safety brigands, fireplaces everywhere are being blocked up and hearths replaced with fake fires fed by electricity or gas. Pubs and country hotels all over England have got rid of their fireplaces, doing away with log fires on the grounds that central heated lounges and bars are cleaner, healthier and safer. They are undoubtedly correct. But, on a cold winter's day, there is nothing quite as cosy and welcoming as a pub with a log fire burning. From half a mile away the smell of the smoke rising from the chimney is a sign of delights to come. Some pubs and hotels still have log burners but they're a poor substitute for the real thing.

But when the oil finally runs out, and the lunatics in charge of our energy policies realise that the production of electricity requires other energy sources such as oil, coal or gas, those who want to keep warm will suddenly revive their interest in open fires. And then they will rediscover the joy of flame watching.

A real open fire uses fewer logs and gives more heat. And the aesthetic value of flames dancing on a log is beyond price. We now have a new log burner in one of our fireplaces (to replace the one the previous owners carted away) but we always leave the doors open. When I told the installer that I intended to do this he was appalled, insisting that such a practice would use more wood, be a fire risk and do more damage to the environment. I told him I didn't much care about the amount of wood we use (we grow our own), that the risk of a fire starting in a stone fireplace or on a flagstone floor was pretty slim and that we would do far less damage to the environment than if we burnt oil or heated our rooms with electricity.

19.

I received a rather snooty letter from a journalist complaining that self-published books aren't proper books and don't deserve to be reviewed. She told me, rather stiffly, that no decent author ever published their own books. She obviously doesn't understand much, if anything, about books or authors.

Books can, could and should have power and influence for good but now that the international conglomerates are in charge they don't, can't and won't because controversial issues are rejected as not suitable for the list (the lawyers wouldn't allow it or the board wouldn't like it). If in doubt the marketing and financial people who decide which books to publish will just say `no'. No one in publishing ever got fired for saying `No'. For years now, publishing companies have been getting bigger and bigger and more out of touch with books and readers. There are now many layers of bureaucracy between reader and writer. That's why I publish my own books. Many of my books (including some that would have been considered huge bestsellers if they'd been published by the official industry) would have never seen the light of day.

I sent back this reply: `The following authors all published their own books and you may have heard of one or two of them: Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, Walt Whitman, Horace Walpole, John Galsworthy, Rudyard Kipling, Walter Scott, Thomas Paine, Mark Twain, Edgar Allan Poe, Upton Sinclair, W. H. Davies, Zane Grey, Robbie Burns, Tobias Smollett, William Carlos Williams, Alexander Pope, Lawrence Stern, Ezra Pound, Norman Douglas, Anais Nin, Robert Lewis Stevenson, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Evelyn Waugh, Lord Byron, William Morris, Jane Austen, Harry Crosby, Caresse Crosby, Robert Graves, Beatrix Potter, J. M. Barrie, Frank Harris, Henry Miller, T. S. Elliot, Bobby Fischer, J. L. Carr, Susan Hill, Jill Paton Walsh, Timothy Mo, Honore de Balzac, Jonathan Swift and Enid Blyton. Many of these did it frequently, repeatedly or exclusively. William Cobbett did it all his life. (He should be a hero to any self-publisher. During his life he wrote and published 30 million words without a computer or a typewriter. (Not having a computer would have been worth 25 million words in productivity. Because I have run out of old computers able to cope with DOS and Word Perfect 5.1 I have recently had to start using the latest version of Microsoft's graphic based word processing software. Windows is slow, clumsy and seems to me to have been designed by people who hate writers.) Cobbett, who averaged around 3,000 words a day, was sensitive enough to be a writer and tough enough to be a publisher. In addition to writing and publishing, he ran a farm, campaigned for a zillion causes and wandered around the world by boat and horse. Of course, he didn't have to sort his rubbish into five separate containers or fill in VAT forms online. Lewis Carroll self-published *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and Edward Lear did *Book of Nonsense* himself. The Brontë sisters self-published and the first book they did sold two copies. Beatrix Potter published *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and *The Tailor of Gloucester* herself. William Blake, who even made his own ink and printed his books himself, got Mrs Blake to sew on the covers. *Lady Chatterly's Lover* was first published privately by D. H. Lawrence and T. E. Lawrence self-published *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. Graham Greene published himself. Jerome K. Jerome, Balzac and Dickens all ran their own magazines and Scott and Twain all ran their own publishing companies. John Buchan, Grant Richards, T. S. Elliot, Frank Swinnerton and Alec Waugh all worked in publishing. John Grisham self-published his first novel and sold copies from the boot of his car. Some of these authors referred to what they did as `self-publishing', many referred to it as `privately printing' but they all did it because they had something to say and were damned well going to say it whatever the cost and the inconvenience. I suspect they may have shared my own simple publishing philosophy: `I will publish whatever I damned well please and I don't give a fig whether agents, wholesalers or bookshops like it'.'

I doubt if my correspondent will be convinced. Self-publishing has (as a result of manipulative opposition from the publishing industry) come to be regarded as a sin greater than putting your bottles in with your cardboard and failing to bring your wheelie bin back in on time. And it has, of course, been the publishing establishment which has worked hardest to marginalise self-publishers. They have good reason to worry. Self-publishers have, in recent years, shown that they can survive without the industry parasites.

Doing it yourself has always been popular in other areas of creative activity. Charlie Chaplin paid for his own movies to be made. Harold Lloyd financed his own movies. Woody Allen has effectively self-published films throughout his career. Tom Cruise produces films he stars in.

In almost any other area of creative human endeavour, doing it yourself is considered laudable. Make your own film or record and you are regarded as brave and innovative, mould breaking, striking a path away from the hideous commercial leeches who turned creative artists into conveyor belt producers - obeying the predictable whims of marketing men in sharp suits rather than the urges of the muse and ignoring the fact that artists are people who live life out loud not because they choose to but because they can see no other way. Indie film producers and indie record makers are regarded as being at the sharp end of their respective industries. But publish your own book and you will attract nothing but derision and contempt. (The name says it all. Make your own film or record and you are an indie producer. Make your own book and you are a self-publisher or, worse still, a vanity publisher. Many people in the industry like to pretend there is no difference. The irony is that those immensely snooty publications *The Guardian* and *The Independent* are now losing so much money that they are, in reality, nothing more than vanity publications.) There is a very good reason for this. No one making their own film or CD can possibly compete with, or threaten, the giants. These are complex industries. But book publishing is simple. Anyone can do it just as well as the so-called professionals. Moreover, it isn't expensive. You can have your own book printed and delivered to your garage for the price of a small car. Try making a movie for that. Publishers know this, of course, and they are terrified - utterly terrified - that authors (particularly successful ones who make big money for publishers) will find out. The industrial publishers know that if word gets out that publishing is a doddle and anyone can do it then the whole publishing edifice will come tumbling down. Editors, agents and all the rest will have to get proper jobs and since most of them have no skills outside their own conceits they will probably find life in the real world rather hard going.

Mention self-publishing to anyone in the orthodox world of publishing, and their nose will rise several inches into the air. Publishers (and just about everyone else involved in publishing) hate self-publishers: largely because self-publishing is a major threat to the cosy, out-dated world of orthodox publishing. Successful self-publishers prove that orthodox publishers are parasites. Everything they do can be done better by authors.

The simple-minded drones in the publishing world - agents and publishers - are scared stiff self-publishers will put them out of business. They deliberately confuse self-publishing (or indie-publishing) with vanity publishing but the reality is that modern publishing houses often only exist because they are protected and subsidised by other parts of the industrial conglomerate in which they sit. Hot shot authors often fail to sell enough books to cover their advances. One large American publisher recently wrote off about $35,000,000 worth of unearned advances while another wrote off close to $80,000,000 worth.

Why do publishers hand over vast sums on books they should know won't sell? Sometimes, it is because they misunderstand the value of celebrity and pay huge sums for books by individuals who are famous but have nothing much to say. Back in 2005, the *Financial Times* reported that: `In today's competitive publishing world, always on the lookout for the next new name, youth and ethnicity can be an author's most valuable assets.' Publishers are hiring teams of 20-year-old footballers to write autobiographies and they are hiring platoons of semi-literate girlfriends to write novels, cook books, fashion guides and, quite possibly, political treatises. (`Don't worry about the writing stuff, love, we'll find someone to do all that for you. We just put your name on the cover. No, of course you don't have to read it if you don't want to.')

And sometimes it is pay-back time to politicians who have done favours. Publishers pay huge fees to politicians for memoirs which no one with functioning brain tissue expects will sell more than a handful of copies. So why do they hand over so much money for books that aren't really expected to sell? Payment for services rendered or payment for services to come? Of course. The situation is confused even more by the fact that publishers and agents drool at the idea of having long lunches with big-name politicians. I once knew a very pushy literary agent who represented a number of well-known politicians. When I asked her why she bothered to represent such literary disasters she looked at me as if I were mad. `They're not just famous,' she told me. `They're so powerful!' She looked as though she was having a multiple orgasm at the very thought.

The sad truth is that many orthodox publishing houses have far, far more in common with vanity publishing than do successful self-publishers. Overheads at big publishers are vast. There are huge salaries and expense accounts, expensive premises in central locations, expensive sales conferences in five star hotels, long lunches, big bonuses, etc. All this means that there is no money left for publishing daring books. It has been estimated by American publishers that there are no more than 100-200 authors in America who can earn a living from writing books; the rest have to moonlight by working at other day jobs. So how many professional authors are there in the UK? Considerably less than 100 I suspect. And as the internet grows in size, and copyright theft becomes more widely approved, and newspapers and magazines continue to expect articles and serial rights for free, the number will decline still further.

For many years as an indie publisher I paid more tax than many big publishing companies made in profits. The biggest problem I faced was that as a writer I needed a thin skin but as a publisher I needed a thick one.

Sadly, the advent of eBooks and the dramatic rise in print costs and the cost of postage mean that there is no more of a future for proper self-publishing by professional authors than there is for any other type of publishing.

And that is a real tragedy.

20.

The Princess and I had been packing books all day. We were exhausted. `I'm going to light a fire, pour myself a large glass of Laphroaig and read a couple of chapters of my book,' I announced after dinner. I was reading, and much enjoying, a copy of *A Great Man* by Arnold Bennett which I'd picked up for £1 in a second hand bookshop. I looked around the cluttered room. I looked everywhere but couldn't find it. Every available surface in the room was covered with books, padded bags, stamps and sticky tape. `Have you seen my book?' I asked the Executive In Charge Of Literary Product Insertion Procedures. `The one I was reading.'

`Where did you put it?'

`I left it over there,' I said, pointing to a table by the door.

`What did it look like?'

`Hardback. Yellow background with a picture on the front of a living room with four people in it.'

`It was on that table?'

`Yes.'

The Executive In Charge Of Literary Product Insertion Procedures (aka The Princess) looked at the table and then at me. `I packed everything on that table.'

I looked at the row of five large, grey sacks lined up by the door. Each sack contained around 40 parcels, all stamped and ready to go. One of those parcels contained a copy of *A Great Man* by Arnold Bennett.

`I'll just have the whisky,' I said.

21.

This afternoon I received an e-mail offering me a goodly number of dollars for my website - including all the content. This is a puzzle. I regularly receive (and turn down) requests to take advertising on the site but none of these requests has involved sums of more than a thousand dollars or so and I really cannot believe that www.vernoncoleman.com is worth so much money. And then it occurred to me that whoever is offering the money probably wants to close the site down - and remove my articles from the internet. It is the only thing that makes sense.

22.

We tried to find an odd job man to do some small tasks around the house. We wasted thirty minutes searching the local directories, and the internet, for an odd job man. Eventually The Princess found two. One described himself as a multidisciplinary contractor and the other described himself as a household specialist. I assume that both are, in reality, odd job men who can do useful things with taps, plugs and broken bits of wall.

Because the work people do is, by and large, so dull, repetitive and pointless bosses get round this by making all jobs sound important. Everyone is a consultant. Nail clipper operators become digital keratin cosmetic manipulators. The woman who works at the counter in a record store calls herself a `home entertainment consultant'.

And since, despite the nomenclature, the jobs are dull and unsatisfying, most people don't spend their days doing what they want to do, instead they do jobs they don't like and they do them just for money and so they have to spend to make themselves feel alive. And much of the money is spent on needs for their jobs (suit, travel, expensive lunches) so they really aren't going anywhere; they are in jail, self-imposed exile from real life.

And they fight for leisure time which they spend polishing cars, cutting grass and going shopping for things they don't need or even really want. They then need more money to buy cupboards to contain the things they have bought but didn't need. And they have to rent storage lockers for the stuff that won't fit in the cupboards.

23.

Napoleon Bonaparte, when he was first consul of France, and as big a cheese as there ever has been in France, reckoned that nine out of ten letters he received would answer themselves if left. And so he opened letters only after six weeks, by which time not many still required an answer. Coleridge, the English poet, was reputed to have developed an even more effective solution to dealing with mail. He opened none and, therefore, never had to answer any. Neither Napoleon nor Coleridge would, I suspect, have had much time for e-mail. I'm not in the slightest bit surprised to see that more and more companies are deciding that e-mail is an inefficient tool for internal communication. They prefer people to talk, telephone or send physical notes to one another. Astonishingly, most people now receive more than 100 e-mails a day and feel under pressure to answer them quickly. That's not surprising since most senders expect a reply to their e-mails within an hour or two at most. The result is that most people constantly check their e-mail. (I confess I do understand this need for instant gratification. I check my e-mail every week unless we're away or I am very busy.) And, of course, a seemingly endless supply of e-mail newsletters and promotions pour into the average inbox and need to be dealt with.

My Dad, who at one point in his life ran a medium sized factory employing several hundred people insisted that he always left his mail for a week or two `to mature'. `If it had got lost in the post I wouldn't have been able to answer it,' he said, with perfect logic.

These days Napoleon, Coleridge and my Dad would have all been in trouble because of the new habit governments and large companies have of introducing absurd new policies by default. So, Royal Mail wrote recently to tell us that unless we object they will, if we are out or fail to answer our front door within 0.01 seconds, leave our mail with a neighbour. To make life more fun for everyone they won't bother to tell us which neighbour they've left it with. Since one in six people in England now has a criminal record this means that there is a one in six chance that they will leave important parcels and packages with our local, neighbourhood thief. Anyone who wants to opt out of this absurd policy has to ring up and ask for a special sticker to put on the front door.

In France, everyone is now assumed to have a television set and so everyone is assumed to owe the Government a licence fee. When the Government sends along a tax demand it adds on the fee for the licence. Anyone who doesn't watch television and doesn't want to pay the licence fee has to apply to be considered exempt. The default state is always confiscation. This is inertia mugging. 'Unless you take the trouble to do something that will take time and trouble we will do something nasty to you.' Even changes to pension legislation are made by default. If you don't notice what is happening (and say `no') all sorts of terrible things can happen to your pension fund. The authorities know, of course, that most people cannot possibly keep up with all the new information being thrown at them. And they know, too, that even when people do know about something that is about to happen they won't have the time or the energy to take action. And so it goes on. Everywhere we look these days we find that unless we are constantly alert, suspicious, and wary terrible things happen to us by default. (It has also become exceedingly difficult to spot the important news in the constant hail of material with which we are drenched.) We are in a constant state of war; a stage of siege. Every day brings new laws, new demands, new orders and new difficulties. I cannot be the only one who finds it impossible to keep up. Only those dependent upon the State (and in receipt of regular cheques) are immune (their votes are essential and whichever party is in power is kept there by the zombies.) It sometimes seems that we are living in a world of change for the sake of interference.

One problem with the information storm is that most people are appallingly bad at making decisions and judging risks. And most don't understand that you can't really do the former without being able to do the latter. If you don't take risks you never get anything done. The trick is to quantify the risk and then decide if the risk is worth taking. But there is a risk in not doing things and that, too, has to be taken into account. All decisions and actions, however apparently insignificant, have consequences, and all failures to make decisions (or take action) produce equally irreversible consequences.

24.

We drove to Bilbury two days ago, and yesterday afternoon a friend of ours called Dalby Barrington came to stay with us in our cottage there for the night. He is slightly obsessional and extremely polite. He is, indeed, so polite that I have heard him say `thank you' to an automatic cash dispenser. Dalby always carries a furled umbrella but never unfurls it. Once, when walking down Charing Cross Road in the pouring rain I asked him why he didn't open up his umbrella. He said he had to keep it tightly rolled because he knew that he would never again be able roll it so that it looked quite so elegant. He said he had unrolled the umbrella once but that afterwards, when he had dried it off with a series of handkerchiefs, he had taken it back to the shop in New Oxford Street and had it re-furled. Looking elegant was, to him, far more important than keeping dry.

Dalby is an expert on English piers and came to North Devon to study and photograph Bilbury pier. It was, as he quickly discovered, a wild-goose chase. Bilbury is half a mile from the sea and there is not, nor ever has been a pier. This morning, as he was about to leave he burst into the kitchen in quite a panic. `I've lost my reading spectacles!' he announced. `I must get a pair made. Is there an optician in the village?'

I pointed out that there is no optician in Bilbury but told him that there are several in Barnstaple.

`Can you take me there? I can never find my way round. I'll be lost for hours if I drive there myself.' I sighed silently for I was not feeling entirely up to the mark. The Princess woke me three times last night to see if I was still alive. Apparently, I breathe very quietly when I am asleep and she worries that I might have died. Stricken by anxiety she bangs me on the head and rocks me to and fro to find out whether I'm still entitled to claim my winter fuel allowance. Being fast asleep I had no knowledge of any of this until I was woken. `You didn't seem to be breathing,' she explained. `And you seemed to be a funny colour.' `How could you see what colour I am? It's pitch black.' She said she just knew, or thought she knew, and that I should be pleased that she loved me enough to wake me up to see if I was dead or not and eventually I agreed that I was very grateful and I thanked her. So I was tired. But I drove Dalby into town and waited while he persuaded an optician to make him up a pair of glasses that would be suitable.

`They aren't quite right, of course,' he said. `But the optician said they're pretty close to my prescription. They'll do until I get back to London.'

We then drove back to Bilbury where The Princess gave us both a very late salad lunch. He then unfastened the largest of his three suitcases and put the new spectacles inside.

`Don't you need them for the journey?' I asked. `In case you need to look at the map or something?'

`Oh I won't need those,' he said. He then took another spectacle case out of his jacket pocket. `I'd rather use these. They're better than the ones I picked up this morning.'

I honestly didn't understand. `I thought you'd lost your spectacles,' I said, grasping for the plot.

`Oh, I did, I lost one pair,' he said. `These are my spare pair.'

`But we drove into Barnstaple to get you a spare pair.'

`Yes, those are my new spare pair. These are my old spare pair. I always travel with two pairs.'

`But you could have used your spare pair. We didn't need to go into Barnstaple at all.'

`Oh we did. If I use my spare pair I obviously don't have a spare pair. And I must have a spare pair for emergencies.'

`But this was an emergency.'

`Absolutely. But there might be another emergency. I might break or lose the original spare pair. And if I didn't have a new spare pair I wouldn't have a pair at all.'

I don't usually drink alcohol in the morning. But occasionally exceptions must be made. I was so exhausted that I went out into the garden to sit and do absolutely nothing. The Princess kindly said she would come with me to help.

25.

I read a book by someone claiming that England isn't a country and the English aren't members of a nation because England is populated by a mixture of Celts, Danes, Romans, Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Normans and goodness knows what else. What utter nonsense. What about America? The USA is a young nation made up of people from every part of the world and yet no one dares say ‘American isn't a nationality'.

26.

Doctors love treating blood pressure. It is one of the most profitable of all diseases for drug companies because once a patient has started taking tablets to bring his blood pressure down he will probably never stop.

When I first started work as a GP I found that my predecessor had put nearly all patients on pills to lower their blood pressure. For some reason known only to him he had decided that any patient with a systolic reading of over 100 was hypertensive. (A normal systolic is usually said to be around 120 so he was treating vast swathes of perfectly healthy people.)

Not surprisingly, most of these patients were constantly calling into the surgery complaining of dizziness. I solved their problems by telling them that their medication had cured them and that they no longer needed to take it. I told them that the dizziness was a sign that the pills had worked. They all praised my predecessor and I agreed that he had been exceedingly clever in dealing with their problem so effectively.

I took my own blood pressure this morning. (The Princess had bought herself a new self-measuring device which I was testing.)

To my horror I found that my blood pressure was dangerously raised. I couldn't understand why.

I'm not overweight. I don't smoke. I don't eat a lot of fatty food. I take gentle exercise.

And then I had a thought.

I had a lot of intestinal wind at the time (I suffer from that much underestimated problem Irritable Bowel Syndrome) and I wondered if the wind could be pressing upon arteries around my kidneys and elsewhere and forcing up my blood pressure. (On a previous occasion, wind in my intestines caused kidney bleeding which nearly led to my having a kidney ripped out.)

`Hug my teddy bear,' suggested The Princess. `It might help.'

It wasn't a daft suggestion. I have long argued that anxiety can make blood pressure worse. (Indeed, I got into terrible trouble when I was a young doctor for suggesting that there might be a link between stress and blood pressure. Several members of the medical establishment publicly suggested that I be struck off the medical register for voicing such an outlandish thought in public.)

So, I hugged the teddy bear and took my blood pressure again. This time it was down.

`There you are!' said The Princess, delightedly. `My teddy bear has cured you.'

I was quite prepared to accept this and then it occurred to me that while hugging the bear I had sat up very straight and had changed position. By moving around I had taken the pressure off my aorta and renal arteries.

So I tried a simple experiment.

When I was slumped in the chair my blood pressure was high. When I was sitting up it was normal.

I now believe, quite firmly, that intestinal wind can cause intermittent high blood pressure. If I hadn't wriggled around, changed my position and proved the link to my satisfaction I might now be taking potentially dangerous blood pressure medication. The medical profession won't accept this association, of course. It's far too simple. And it would cost the pharmaceutical industry (and, therefore, the medical establishment) untold billions.

27.

The Princess went shopping for new curtains this morning and wisely suggested that instead of hanging around saying things like: `These red and orange ones look fine' and `What's wrong with these blue striped ones' I might like to wander along to the local golf club for an hour or two.

I gave up playing golf several years ago when I was thrown out of a club for leaving my old Bentley S1 in the Lady Vice Captain's parking spot. (My excuse, that it was the only available spot in the whole car park, was dismissed as irrelevant by the prosecution.) However, I am still a member of one club and I go there very occasionally, partly because they have a good selection of malt whiskies and partly because as a professional people watcher I find the people in golf clubs provide tremendous entertainment. The members at this club are surely the most gullible people on the planet. On one occasion I told a fellow member, a headmaster of a private preparatory school, that I had hit a ball so high that, while waiting for it to return to earth, my partner and I had gone ahead and played the next hole before returning to await the fall of my ball at the previous hole. On another occasion, when conversation in the clubhouse had, for reasons which are now long forgotten, turned to Hitler, I asked an accountant whose name I have forgotten if he had heard that Hitler's body had been found in a bunker. When he said he had heard this. I told him confidentially that although it isn't widely known outside certain circles, Hitler's body was actually found in the bunker just short of the green on the fourth hole at the Berlin Golf and Country Club and that that particular bunker had been modelled on the bunker to the left of the 17th on our course. The accountant was astonished at this piece of news and rushed home to tell his wife who was, apparently, quite an enthusiastic viewer of the History Channel on television.

I was sitting at the bar enjoying a quiet Cardhu when a fellow called George Barraclough clambered rather clumsily onto the next but one stool and placed the folded newspaper he had been carrying on the bar in front of him. He nodded, I nodded and we exchanged a few cordial words of greeting.

`Don't often see you having lunch here, George,' said the barman who was the only member of staff to ignore club protocol. He called everyone, regardless of their position in the club, by their Christian names. He leant forward across the bar. `Not planning a little assignation are you, sir?' he asked rather cheekily, with a wink.

`No,' said George, who was studying the bar menu. `Actually I had to come out for lunch because I lost Deidre, my wife, this morning.' He shrugged. `One minute she was there. The next minute...gone.'

The barman turned ashen, muttered apologies and polished the glass he was holding so hard that I feared he might rub right through the glass. `I'm sorry to hear that, sir,' he said. He lowered his voice to a more suitably funereal tone. `What would you like for lunch?' he asked. `Or would you prefer just a drink? Don't suppose you feel much like eating, do you?'

`On the contrary, I'm feeling rather peckish. I think I'll have the steak and kidney pie,' replied George. `With roast potatoes. Lots of 'em.' I glanced across when I heard this. I knew that Deidre always kept George on a short leash when it came to food. I had heard that at home she fed him almost exclusively on food that was green. She had a pet theory that anything brown or white was bad for you. George was clearly not losing any time in restoring the colour balance of his diet.

`Right you are, sir,' said the barman, who seemed to regard George's healthy appetite as a good sign. Perhaps he had remembered that Mary Queen of Scots enjoyed an excellent game of golf after the murder of her husband.

`And turnips, sprouts and peas,' continued George. `No. Forget the sprouts and peas. But I'll have double carrots. Followed by a large portion of spotted dick and custard.'

`Certainly, sir,' said the barman, who was noticeably cheering up as he realised that George was not exactly in mourning and that he was, therefore, freed from any requirement to remain funereal and respectful. It is probably fair to say that no one in the club actually liked Deidre; a self-important woman with an exaggerated sense of her position in life. Most people simply avoided her or ignored her whenever they could. George, on the other hand, was pretty widely liked.

`Make that a large helping of spotted dick, please,' said George. He thought for a moment. `With double custard,' he added.

`Right you are, sir.'

Deidre, I thought, would have never approved of spotted dick. Or custard.

`And a half carafe of the club's claret,' added George. He thought for a moment. `Oh damnit, let's push the boat out a bit. Make that a bottle of decent stuff.' He studied the wine list which was printed on the back of the menu. The list was short enough and unchanging enough for most of the members to know it by heart but George had rarely ventured further down the list than the club claret; a thin, pale red imitation which was served in nasty little glass carafes which had long ago turned opaque in the club's aged industrial dishwasher. `A bottle of St Emilion,' said George, splashing out on the most expensive item on the list.

The barman, whose pallor had now disappeared, scribbled furiously on his pad, nodded and backed away. `Right away, sir,' he murmured. He took two paces, paused, thought about saying something, reconsidered, took another pace, paused again, reconsidered and half turned. `May I just say how pleased I am to see you in such a good state,' he added. He seemed in awe; his admiration inspired by George's lack of false sensitivity. George was behaving like a man who, having just been released after a long prison sentence, walks into a pub and celebrates his freedom by ordering a pint of everything available.

In response to the barman's congratulations, George, who had folded his newspaper to the back page and had been studying the crossword, looked up. He seemed slightly puzzled. `Thank you,' he said. `Don't forget to bring the mustard.'

I sipped at my whisky until the glass was empty, and then quietly stood up. `I'm so sorry to hear about your wife,' I murmured as I prepared to leave.

George looked up at me and frowned.

`Losing your wife,' I said, in case he'd forgotten.

`Oh, she'll turn up,' he said.

It was my turn to frown.

`With any luck she's not noticed I'm missing yet,' said. `We were supposed to meet in Debenhams,' he explained. `But the damned place was crowded out. Sale on, I suppose. She'll be busy buying more shoes I expect.' He grinned. `It'll cost me a few hundred quid but I get a couple of hours off and some decent food for a change.'

28.

Each week seems to bring more revelations about the death of bin Laden. The American military say that they were suspicious of a house in Pakistan because the people living there paid cash for their purchases. And they burnt all their rubbish. Very suspicious. The original official story was that the military raided the house and there was a gunfight. They said that soldiers shot bin Laden as he hid behind his wife. They later admitted that this wasn't true. They executed him. He was unarmed. He didn't hide. He was in his bedroom. They shot his wife too. But how did they know it was him? How did they identify the body? It seems from one report that they knew that bin Laden was 6 feet 4 inches and the body of the man they'd shot seemed about that height. But they didn't have a tape measure or anything else with which they could measure the cadaver. So one of the soldiers who was around 6 foot 4 inches tall lay down beside the corpse. That's how they knew the body was bin Laden. A dead, foreign looking bloke who was around 6 foot 4 inches tall. They then threw the body into the sea so no one will ever really know the identity of the man they killed.

29.

I have learned the hard way in life that initiative is never rewarded. Indeed, at school and in the army, doing well in an initiative test can be positively dangerous.

When I was at grammar school I was forced to be a member of the Combined Cadet Force. I loathed it. I loathed the itchy uniform almost (but not quite) as much as I hated the discipline. We were sent out on an initiative test one day. A coach dropped us in the middle of a great stretch of moorland waste known as Cannock Chase, near Wolverhampton.

At the start of the day's exercise we were given a long questionnaire full of detailed queries about local beauty spots, graveyards, architectural wonders and the like. The idea was that we would trudge around the neighbourhood searching for clues and answers.

I didn't know where I was but I could see a village nearby so I headed in that direction. Once in the village I headed straight for the village shop where I bought a bag of sweets and asked a very nice lady behind the counter if she could help me with my questionnaire. It was the sort of shop where you could buy shaving brushes, potted shrimps, caraway seed, propelling pencil leads, corn plasters, catapult elastic, candles, radio valves and tiger striped bulls' eyes. The questionnaire was full of daft questions such as `Who is the organist in the local church?' The shop was one of those establishments where a few years ago, the proprietor always used to be female, middle aged and rather on the plump side of overweight. I've always regarded such corner shops with great affection, ever since my schoolboy days when they played a great part in my education. They'd sell you anything at the shop that was nearest to the school I attended. You could buy one marble or one liquorice stick. Or one cigarette if you were daring enough to ask for one.

Delighted to help a customer, and with nothing else to do, the woman took the form from me and filled in all the answers in less than five minutes. This freed me from the tedium of wandering around looking for signposts, gravestones and so on. I then found a comfortable spot in a nearby wood and there I sat, ate my sandwiches and sweets and watched the birds and the squirrels (there were red ones in those far off days). When the coach returned at the prescribed time I climbed aboard and handed my form to the officer in charge.

`You're the only cadet to have all the answers right,' he told me forty five minutes later. `You've got twice as many marks as anyone else. How did you manage that?'

`I asked the village shopkeeper to help me,' I replied with naive honesty.

The officer went puce and disqualified me for cheating.

`But you didn't say we couldn't ask for help!' I told him.

`You wouldn't have been able to ask for help if the shopkeeper had been foreign,' replied the officer. `Not if you'd been in enemy territory.'

`But you didn't say we were in enemy territory,' I pointed out. `And she wasn't foreign.'

`This was supposed to be an initiative test!' complained the officer bitterly. `You've spoilt it for everyone by cheating.'

I still think I had been using my initiative.

The oddities of my ageing memory mean that although I can remember all this very well I cannot remember what triggered the memory.

30.

A well-meaning author whose name you would probably know has written to me to suggest that I might be able to sell more books if I were to follow his example. `I always carry copies of my books in my car boot,' he said. `Wherever I go I try to sell copies of my books to people I meet. I rarely go out of the house without selling one or two books.'

I shuddered when I read this letter. I am so shy that I cannot imagine going up to people and trying to sell them copies of my books. I have on many occasions been invited to give talks at public events such as literary festivals and been told that I can cover my expenses by having a table stocked with my books at the back of the hall. The thought makes me go cold.

Another writer once told me that he regularly visits bookshops, finds copies of his books on their shelves and offers to sign them. He says that the `beauty' of this is that the bookshop cannot return books which have been signed. He suggested that I would sell more books if I followed his example.

I feel myself going even colder when I think of doing this.

When I was young I had books in the official bestseller lists a number of times and on a couple of occasions I succumbed to pressure and agreed to visit bookshops so that I could sign copies of my books. It was awful. I remember sitting at a desk at the front of a shop in Nottingham, Leicester or Derby with a huge pile of books in front of me while in the absence of real customers, members of the staff constantly paraded in front of me inviting me to sign books for them. Can you imagine anything worse? Bookshop signings really only work for film stars and major celebrities.

Many years ago I used to speak at literary luncheons and dinners. I remember speaking at a *Birmingham Post* literary dinner and then sitting between Arthur Marshall and Ned Sherrin, waiting for people to ask us to sign their books. The three of us spent the evening chatting and watching in astonishment as a television news reader called Jan Leeming furiously signed endless copies of one of those books that television personalities write for the Christmas market. Towards the end of the evening Arthur Marshall, Ned Sherrin and I all signed books for one another and retired to the bar, leaving Ms Leeming scribbling furiously.

31.

We went to Taunton and took with us some leftover bread for the ducks. I pride myself on being able to land a bill sized piece of bread within two feet of any selected duck within a forty foot range. This enables me to ensure that the shy and sensitive ducks are as well fed as the greedy and aggressive ones. The ducks were so hungry, we went to a nearby Morrisons supermarket and bought four large white loaves which we proceeded to tear into pieces. By the time we'd finished we were feeding around 70 ducks and nearly 20 swans (and, inevitably, a few seagulls). I half expected some jobsworth to tell us that what we were doing was illegal but none did.

FEBRUARY

1.

I heard today of the death of Hugo, an old chum of mine. I hadn’t seen him for years. We met when we both applied for a job as house surgeon in Leamington Spa. He was the scruffiest and most accident prone person I’ve ever known but a kind and warm-hearted fellow. His car was so full of bits of food that I used to kid him that if he ever got stuck in snow he would be able to survive for a week on the bits of biscuit, old sweets and ‘harmburger’ droppings. I liked him very much. I’m sad that our lives took us apart.

As a young man he was a doctor in the RAF. I went to visit him once and he told me with considerable delight that the base where he worked was being visited by some of the RAF’s senior officers. `All the officers have to be on parade,’ he said with considerable pride. Like most doctors in the armed forces Hugo had no idea how to march or stamp his feet or do any of the things that forces personnel do when they are being inspected.

`You’re going to be on parade?’ I asked him, hoping that I’d managed to keep the surprise out of my voice. I couldn’t help noticing that his RAF uniform was stained with dried egg and brown sauce. There were clumps of cigarette ash clinging to the lapels.

`Oh yes,’ he insisted. `I’m looking forward to it.’ I don’t think he ever thought of himself as scruffy. He believed that just wearing a uniform made him smart.

`Don’t you have to be able to march about?’ I asked him, wondering if it would be possible to wangle a ticket so that I could watch. In addition to being scruffy Hugo was innately clumsy. He was the only person I knew to have cut himself putting a plaster onto someone else. He had been trying to cut a piece from a strip of sticking plaster and had nicked himself with the scissors. He also once lacerated his scalp trying to pick apples in his small orchard. Unable to reach the highest apples he put his children’s trampoline under the tree and tried bouncing up and down on it so that he could grab at apples and toss them to his wife. He became increasingly angry at the fact that his wife kept dropping the apples he threw down (and therefore bruising them just as much as they had fallen naturally from the tree) and as a result he lost concentration and hit his head hard on a stout branch. He needed six stitches and told everyone at the hospital that he had hit his head on a low doorway in his local pub.

I next spoke to him a week after the RAF inspection had taken place.

`How did you get on?’ I asked, hoping that he hadn’t turned the wrong way, saluted with the wrong hand or buttoned up his tunic inaccurately.

`It was brilliant, absolutely brilliant!’ said Hugo. `The Group Captain wanted me to feel part of the whole thing so he put me in a plane. We flew over the airfield at 2,000 feet.’

And now he’s sitting on a cloud.

When we’re young we honestly believe that we’re all immortal. Only if we live long enough does it ever dawn on us that we’re not.

2.

I was trying to cram the contents of three sacks full of parcels into a double mouthed red post-box when an old lady (actually, to be honest, she was probably younger than I am) approached with two letters. She thrust the letters at me clearly expecting me to take them from her. With one hand I was holding a grey sack and trying to keep it off the dog shit ridden pavement and with the other hand I was feverishly feeding parcels into one of the openings. It was raining and I was keen to get the parcels out of the rain before the stamps were washed off. `You can pop them into the other opening,’ I told her, helpfully. `What a rude man,’ she snorted. `I shall complain to the Post Office and write to the *Daily Mail*.’ Still clutching her two letters she stalked off. It was only later that I realised that she must have thought that I was a Royal Mail employee. Just why she thought a postman would be busy putting mail into a post-box I do not know.

3.

The Princess and I went to an auction in Prinknash recently and, for no good reason other than that no one else wanted them, I bought a box of old postcards. I was sorting through them this afternoon when I found a card which had been written by my mother almost fifty years ago when we lived in a village called Inkpen, near Newbury. The card had been addressed to Mrs Pearce, a lovely woman in the village who used to `do’ for my parents. (What this meant, in practice, was that my mother would rush around the house with the vacuum cleaner and duster and then give Mrs P a cup of tea and a plateful of biscuits when she arrived.)

On our way home we stopped at a wonderful, old-fashioned looking country bookshop. It was the sort of shop which sells `proper’ books rather than television tie-ins; a genuine delight for those who enjoy `previously enjoyed books’. There was a handwritten sign on the door which announced: `Established a long time ago’. An elderly couple were arguing quietly when we went in. `My wife keeps tidying up the books,’ said the man, a genial looking fellow with gold rimmed half-moon spectacles perched precariously right on the very tip of his nose. `I tell her that people like a bit of a jumble in a second hand bookshop – makes them think they'll find a bargain.' His wife, twice his size in width and the best part of a foot taller, looked at us, and raised an eyebrow but said nothing. We were obviously expected to comment. I hate interfering in domestic discussions. `An organised jumble is probably best,' I said diplomatically. They both laughed and left us alone to browse. Actually, to be precise, she laughed and he chuckled. The chuckle is a rare and probably endangered beast these days (hounded out of existence by sniggers and titters) and always a pleasure to encounter. An hour later we left carrying a first edition of *Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit* by the incomparable Wodehouse in its dust-wrapper (at £7.99 it was the same price as a modern paperback), a first edition of Evelyn Waugh's *Unconditional Surrender* (again in an excellent dust wrapper) and a first edition of his *Officer and Gentleman* (again with a wrapper), and an illustrated early Edwardian edition of R. S. Surtees' books based on Ackerman's 1843 edition (the original marked price was £80 but the set had been knocked down to £18). And I bought two books by the extraordinary William le Queux. I spotted, but did not buy, a book of *Quotations by Women*. Why would anyone compile or publish a collection of quotations by women? It seemed sexist and patronising to me, as though women don't say or write things which are worth putting in a standard book of quotations.

It was a joy to spend some time in a well-stocked bookshop run by kind and warm-hearted folk. They'd been so friendly that as we left I was reminded of the contrast with a shop I once visited near to Ilfracombe. The shop was open but the proprietor, who looked to be at least 150 years old and who was standing in the doorway, wouldn't move to let me in. `What do you want?' he demanded. `Do you have any fiction?' I asked. `No. No fiction,' he barked. `Any non-fiction?' `I don't sell non-fiction. I'm too old to sell non-fiction.' I shouldn't laugh. If I ran a bookshop I would probably be just as unwilling to part with any of the stock.

On our way back we saw a man by the side of the road digging a hole with a shovel. Four men wearing yellow jackets were standing watching, as though they had never seen anything quite like it before. They probably hadn't. We had a good view of this unusual scene as we crept past at 5 mph. There was no danger of triggering the attention of the average speed cameras. When I was a boy I used to love the *I Spy* series of books. A modern version would award at least 100 points for the sight of a workman doing something constructive by the side of the road. A few miles further on we saw a sign which said `Slow Work Force In Road'. There was no comma after the first word. We saw a man washing traffic cones by hand. He was using a piece of rag but there was no sign of a bucket of water. Out of 29 men we counted on his stretch of road he was the only one doing anything. The rest (all 28 of them) were asleep, reading the paper, chatting on the telephone or standing chatting.

We spent so long crawling along the motorway that we took a side road, found a café and stopped for something to eat. This is something of a rarity for us. We don't like eating food which has been fondled by strangers and so we don't usually eat out. We ordered tomatoes on toast, thinking this would be fairly safe. A waiter, a waitress, two chefs, the owner and the owner's wife all stood around trying to work out how to satisfy this apparently unprecedented request. In the end they brought us each a slice of dry toast upon which lay four slices of fresh, cold tomato. The sight of this unappetising meal reminded us why we tend to eat in these days. Disappointed we decided to fill our stomachs with fluid instead. The Princess ordered a cup of Earl Grey and I requested a black coffee. The waitress seemed much more at home with the idea of serving coffee. `Would you like a shot of expresso with water or a cup of our new filter coffee?' I said I'd try a cup of their filter coffee. `Medium roast or full roast?' I said I thought I'd take the full roast. `Cup or mug?' I opted for the mug. `Medium mug or large mug?' Feeling exhausted by all the decisions I mumbled `medium'. `And would you like milk with your black coffee?' she asked. I looked at her and raised an eyebrow until she realised what she'd said, blushed with embarrassment, and went away.

4.

Three dogs belonging to neighbours of ours are constantly in our garden. Although they are kept as pets they are unpleasant, aggressive dogs. They bark, they threaten and, not surprisingly, perhaps, they have acquired the habit of using our lawns as a lavatory. The dogs are unwelcome visitors, their bowel-emptying habits will make cutting and strimming the lawns a deeply unpleasant task and they will frighten away, or kill, the wildlife we hope to encourage. And so we're having a fence erected all around the garden. This will cost us several thousand pounds but since our neighbours are unwilling to control their dogs there seems to be little alternative.

5.

We were woken early this morning by the birds singing. One of these days I'm going to pop outside at midnight and make as much noise as I can to wake up all the birds and let them know what it's like. There is far more noise in the countryside than most people realise. Even if you ignore the manmade sounds of chainsaw, tractor, church bells and pheasant shooting there are always noises, and silence only really comes just after a heavy snowfall. The wind rustling through leafy trees, the cooing of courting pigeons, the twittering and tweeting of the tits, the bubbling of our stream and the distant sound of a cow calling for her calf or a ewe for her lamb. In the daytime there are robins, blackbirds and finches, magpies, jays, crows and a tireless woodpecker and at night the owls seem to hoot tirelessly. We have at least three living among our trees and they call incessantly to one another. And, of course, there is the noise of the squirrels scampering across the roof. (It is a tribute to the marketing and presentational skills of squirrels that we would be a good deal more worried if it were rats we were hearing.)

A couple of decades ago, together with a friend, David Freeman, I recorded a relaxation tape. The plan was that one side of the tape would include a discussion about stress, and the need to relax by a method I called `daydreaming', while the other side of the tape would include countryside sounds recorded by David on a piece of high tech equipment which he'd borrowed from a chum. The problem was that when we played back the countryside sounds they were anything but relaxing. Birds were calling, lambs were baaing, the wind was rustling, a nearby river was making the sound that rivers make and a distant church clock seemed to be constantly chiming. A recording made in Piccadilly Circus would have been more calming. David had to edit out the more intrusive sounds to produce a sanitised, bowdlerised version more suitable for our purposes.

6.

When the Second World War began, my Dad was in a protected occupation (he was an electrical engineer) so he resigned from his job and joined the Royal Navy. At the time he had never even seen the sea so this was a jump into the unknown with his eyes shut. Most people with a little curiosity would have slaked their thirst for knowledge by taking a day trip to the seaside and a wander along a pier. But my Dad joined the Navy. Moreover, because he wasn't allowed to join as a volunteer he had to sign up for twelve years.

In his later years he spoke often about his experiences during the War. He was as proud, or prouder, of his naval adventures as he was of the things he had invented or his successful business career. He even wrote two books about his war years. I lost count of the number of times the ships he was in were torpedoed and sank but he seemed to spend a good part of the early 1940s swimming around in the middle of the Atlantic.

Because I knew of his interest in things nautical I used to buy him books on the Navy and I still find myself spotting volumes he would have liked. Today, I found two he would have loved if the damned doctors hadn't succeeded where the Germans had failed. *The Ships of the Royal Navy,* which was published in 1942, lists all the Royal Navy's ships, and all the ships sunk up until the point of publication. The book gives the sizes, weight, guns, speed and crew details. I imagine the Germans must have bought up thousands of copies and handed them to submarine captains so that they could use them like I-Spy books and tick off the ones they'd sunk. *Warships at Work,* first published in July 17 1940, and reprinted in November of that year, contains precise details of such ships as The Hood and Repulse (our battle cruisers). The book includes precise details of the ships' armaments. The Hood, for example, had eight 15 inch guns, twelve 5.5 inch guns, eight 4 inch AA guns, four three pounders and four above water torpedo tubes. The Germans would undoubtedly have been interested to know that the armour plating over primary target areas was 15 inches thick but between 5 inches and 12 inches `at sides amidships'. Top speed was 31 knots. I wonder how many copies of that the Nazis ordered.

I bought both books to stop them falling into enemy hands.

7.

Researchers who have spent years studying sheep have come to the conclusion that they can detect minute changes in the `baas' other sheep make and can identify individual sheep by the sounds they produce. Shepherds have known this for years, of course. If you watch sheep and their lambs in a big field you will see mother and child finding one another by sound from some distance away. (Sheep are also able to recognise humans by their shape, face and voice and will run towards people they trust and away from strangers. One of the sheep I kept as a pet was terrified when men came to shear her. She kept running away and could not be caught. They were astonished when I called her over. She walked straight up to me and I stroked her head and talked to her while they sheared her. She was fine. Afterwards the shearers admitted that they were absolutely astonished and would not have believed it if they hadn't seen it.) When ewes are shorn and their shaggy fleeces removed their lambs are confused for a while, bewildered by the alteration in visual appearance, but they quickly recognise their mother by her smell and sound.

Sheep have an unjustified reputation for being stupid. When threatened they run away together and ill-informed observers assume that this is through stupidity. In fact, it is the opposite. Sheep have no way of defending themselves from predators other than their speed and agility. And so when they are alarmed they run. The truth is that sheep are considerably more intelligent than horses, so why do people worry about eating horses but not worry about eating sheep? Sheep can undo knots in ropes and as I have shown in previous books they have, over the years, proved themselves capable of original thought. When sheep want to escape from a pen one will stand by the wall to allow others to climb on their backs and climb over the wall. Sheep will remember where to get out of a field and know to get back in when they see someone coming.

When the Government was endeavouring to find and kill sheep because of the foot and mouth outbreak inspectors from the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries twice called to see if we had any sheep. The sheep knew that they had to keep quiet and so they stayed absolutely silent until the inspectors had gone. Not a baa. They didn't move. (There was no way the Government was going to kill those sheep. I had lawyers on stand by and bought two sizeable areas of land in case I needed other hiding places.)

No mentally healthy individual could eat lamb if they had ever spent any time watching sheep and their lambs. I am always appalled when I read that farmers allow their children to keep lambs as pets and then encourage them to eat them when they've been killed. No wonder farmers are such a soulless lot. Farmers say they are sad when their lambs die but this is just commercial disappointment; they breed their ewes in January and leave the lambs out in the freezing cold without any shelter. Then, when they are a few weeks old and have known a life of rain and cold, they tear them from their mothers and send them to be slaughtered. I was even more appalled when I read that teachers at a primary school had allowed children to keep a lamb which was then killed to eat. If I ever become exceedingly rich I will make a one minute film of lambs gambolling in a field in April. I will then add, at the end, a voiceover announcing: `When you eat `lamb', this is what you are eating'. I will then put the advertisement on television stations and broadcast it at dinnertime.

Showing respect for animals, and behaving well towards them, is a vital part of moral human behaviour. If we don't treat animals with kindness and respect how can we ever be expected to behave well in dealing with people? Our treatment of animals is an example of our society's selfish decadence.

8.

`Have I been with you longer than anyone else?' asked The Princess. `Definitely,' I told her. `By miles.' `Gosh,' she said thoughtfully. `I must be very tolerant mustn't I?' She then danced out of reach.

9.

`I have swallowed a stamp,' I said to The Princess.

`What sort was it?'

`One of the pound stamps that you have to lick.'

`Can you bring it up?'

`No. It's gone too far.'

We were packing books and had been doing it for six hours. To be more accurate, The Princess spent six hours packing books. I spent six hours `helping' in that unhelpful way that children `help' their mothers when they're cooking and `help' their fathers when they are doing stuff in their sheds. Though, I did stick on the stamps.

`Where's the book I was reading?' I asked when we'd finished. I'd stupidly put the book down and forgotten where.

After a twenty minute search among the wrapping detritus we gave up. `I'm sorry, I must have packed it,' said The Princess.

I looked at the 140 parcels, all stamped and ready to go. One contained a copy of an Adam Hall novel.

`I'll order another copy,' I said.

This is the second time I've done this.

I wonder which reader received the surprise book this time.

10.

I was out in the garden taking a look at our new fence when a rotund, belligerent looking fellow approached. He wore green wellington boots and a Barbour gilet but had snakes tattooed on his bare arms. It struck me that he was the sort of fellow who hasn't worked out the difference between looking the part and looking a prat.

`What's that?' he demanded.

`What's what?'

`That fence thing?'

`It's a fence.'

`Why have you put that there?'

`To keep out the dogs which wander around,' I explained.

`Bloody stupid thing to do,' he snarled. `If you don't want the dogs in your garden just send them home.'

`Not quite that easy,' I said. `For one thing they don't take much notice of anything anyone says. And for another, I really don't want to spend my life looking out of the window and rushing outside to shout at dogs.'

`Bloody townie!' snarled the prat, storming off.

`Good fences make good neighbours,' wrote Robert Frost. Clearly, Mr Frost had never met our neighbour and our neighbour had never read Mr Frost.

11.

I fell into our pond. It was a very graceful fall, with hardly a splash. I was standing at the edge of the pond, with my boots in six inches of mud and one foot of water, trying to dig out weeds which were growing out of control. I lifted a forkful of weed and mud and, with my feet firmly anchored, the forces of action and reaction, combined with the irresistible temptations of gravity, sent me reeling very slowly backwards. I knew what was happening but could do absolutely nothing to stop myself falling. Both feet were fixed as though in concrete. It took me several minutes of splashing to free myself from the pond's clutches. It occurred to me as I fell that I am probably too long in the tooth to be playing in water and mud.

12.

I told The Princess that I was feeling tired.

`You don't think you could have leukaemia do you?' she asked. `Are you breathless, does your spleen hurt?' She rapidly reeled off all the possible symptoms of leukaemia.

I was impressed and told her so. `How come you know so much about leukaemia?'

`I'm a hypochondriac,' she reminded me with a shrug. `I've had leukaemia dozens and dozens of times.'

The Princess was not exaggerating.

I believe she knows more than most doctors and all nurses about medical ailments. And she is forever checking for signs of illness. She doesn't suffer from high blood pressure but nevertheless she keeps a sphygmomanometer on her dressing table so that she can check her blood pressure and pulse at regular intervals. She loves pharmacies like I love bookshops and stationery shops.

13.

We are still finding the tradesmen we need to do work on our house in the Cotswolds. The search has, inevitably perhaps, become something of a nightmare. In the 18th century it was believed that the commonest cause of madness was moving into a new house. I suspect that is still true but these days the mad days don't end when the boxes are unloaded from the removal van. There are a number of generic problems. First, no one ever writes anything down any more. One builder who came to give a quote walked round with us and nodded emphatically every time we pointed out some work that needed doing. He didn't make a single note. I assumed that he must have been a waiter in a Parisian café and acquired a phenomenal memory. I was wrong about that. His quote, when it came, missed out most of the work we wanted doing and included a good deal that we didn't want doing. The second problem is that, thanks to Mr Berners-Lee's wretched invention it is now fairly easy for tradesmen to find out how much we paid for our house. They then adjust their quote accordingly. It seems that means-testing has hit the private sector. The third problem is that builders in the Cotswolds are very picky about what they will and won't do. We invited two painters to give a quote for painting our rather large Victorian greenhouse. The first wouldn't walk up the garden to look at it because it was raining. And the second shook his head and turned the job down because `there's a lot of glass, a lot of narrow bits of wood and it's quite high isn't it'. He also confessed that he didn't like the smell of the fumes paint gives off. `Why did you pick that one?' I asked The Princess. `He had a lovely advertisement in the local paper,' she replied. `It had flowers round the border.' One tradesman (who described himself in his advertisement as a multidisciplinary consultant) graced us with a consultation (to see if he could fit us into his busy schedule) but warned us that he didn't do anything requiring power tools because he hadn't got any, that he didn't work overtime, weekends, Thursdays or during the Cheltenham Festival, that he didn't do plumbing or electrics and that he didn't work after dark in the winter. The fourth problem is that Godot arrives more speedily and reliably than builders in the Cotswolds. Waiting for them to turn up is enervating. When tradesmen enter your life you are always waiting. Waiting for them to quote, waiting for them to turn up, waiting for them to come back and waiting for them to finish. And, naturally, since we live in an out-of-the-way spot, they always get lost. And when, after two or three telephone calls, they do arrive they moan endlessly about the difficulties they've had. Few things in life are as rare or as welcome as a competent, friendly, reasonably priced workman who brings his own flask of tea, turns off his mobile telephone and has a capacious bladder. I have learned two things about builders. The first is that one should never allow them to get on first name terms with you. They all go to a special training school where they are taught to get on first name terms with their customers. It's much harder to refuse requests for pots of tea and platefuls of sandwiches when they call you by your Christian name. The second thing I've learned is that there is no point in getting upset with them when they do silly things. Builders all have their brains removed at birth by a secret Government department which prepares babies for work in the building trade. One lot of builders The Princess and I once hired finished painting the outside of a house and then announced that they were going to remove a lintel which needed replacing. When I asked why they hadn't replaced the lintel before doing the painting they stared at me as if I were entirely mad. I honestly believe that if builders found themselves with a supply of gloss paint but no undercoat they would apply the gloss paint and put on the undercoat later.

14.

We've now acquired a new problem. Dog walkers who drive down our lane to take their dogs into the woods are using the car parking space outside our house. We came back from the shops and, having unloaded the car, were unable to park. This is the third time it's happened in the last ten days. The only answer is to get the fencing people back to put up a couple of white poles and a `No Parking' sign. I hate having to do this but I really cannot think of any alternative.

15.

Three men turned up to erect a garden shed which we have bought from a garden centre. It took them all day and when they had finished one of them, the leader, handed me a huge bag of screws. `Do you want these?' he asked. Puzzled, I accepted the bag. `They're left over,' he said, hurrying off to his new Audi. He'd told us earlier that he and his girlfriend were off to New York for a few days. When they'd gone I discovered that they had fastened the shed together with staples. I spent two hours putting in some of the leftover screws.

16.

One of our new neighbours is a foreigner and like all foreigners he desperately wants to be mistaken for an Englishman. And why wouldn't he? This one wears a hacking jacket and plus fours. I expect he would wear plus sixes if he could find them anywhere. But, sadly, our neighbour will always be a foreigner. Foreigners don't understand this but the English are never foreign, wherever they might be. When he is abroad an Englishman is merely an Englishman abroad. Foreigners may become British but they can never become English.

Our neighbour will never be English, or even pass for English, not simply because he will never ever master the nuances of our language but because he doesn't understand the first thing about our nation.

The English are a mass of contradictions. We always respect the underdog, we believe that emotions are for foreigners and women and we always play by the rules (as long as we made them in the first place) but we don't like being told what to do. We can be the most polite people on the planet but also the rudest. We believe in moderation in all things except things we enjoy and we have an unmatched ability to put up with discomfort. We have a sense of humour which marries irony with the absurd. Only the English could have selected as their patron saint a man who was not a saint, not English, not a dragon killer and not really called George. We are proud of the fact that our weather and our plumbing have always been more full of surprises than anyone else's. We are proud of our stiff upper lip and our ability to hide our feelings but although we don't like making scenes in public we are perfectly happy to make fools of ourselves if the time seems appropriate. We are stoic, unpredictable, modest and creative. We invented all the sports the world has ever known but never bothered about being particularly good at any of them. We believe that showing off is unacceptable, we apologise for things which aren't our fault and we say please and thank you without ever really meaning either. We say things like `We've had a wonderful time', `We must do this again soon' and `We will speak later' without meaning any of them. We ask people how they are and are shocked and dismayed if they have the effrontery to tell us. We are never happier than when forming a queue but we despise people who stand in line. The English class struggle is never between people in different classes but always between people within the same class (just as those in campaigning societies will always fight one another with far more ferocity than they fight the people they are supposed to be opposing) and we regard foreigners in the same generous way that we regard dogs, cats and budgerigars.

How can foreigners ever understand any of this?

I realise that some of this may sound a little patronising but it isn't meant to be. The big problem is that foreigners are, well, foreign and nothing can be done about that. The other problem is that there are so many of them. Foreigners are no laughing matter these days. Because they breed incessantly there are more of them than the English and they can be found in vast quantities absolutely everywhere

17.

This morning, while clearing out a filing cabinet, I found an old letter from an American nursing magazine asking me to help them set up a Medical Olympics in the United States of America. The request was inspired by a spoof I wrote for *Nursing Times* in which I described how doctors and nurses in England had organised and taken part in a Medical Olympics. Events included such delights as throwing the syringe and needle, bandaging contests and tossing the gallstone. The Americans thought all this had really happened, were desperate to organise their own version and wanted to hire me as a consultant to help them set things up. Unfortunately, I can't find my reply.

I've been involved in several dozen spoofs over the years. I put out a press release once reporting that an entirely imaginary golf course in Devon had installed under-course heating so that players would never again have to worry about bad weather interfering with their play. Several publications printed that one. When cigarette companies were allowed to issue coupons with their product I hoaxed several national newspapers by reporting that one company was offering heavy smokers a chance to have a State funeral. A story that major football clubs were transferring supporters as well as players was printed on the sports pages of several newspapers. When I worked for a radio station in Birmingham I performed open heart surgery live on air, explaining all the time what I was doing. The idea was that listeners could perform the same operation at home. The broadcast was stopped when a senior station official burst into the studio in terror. I spoofed numerous West Country newspapers by reporting that the hill path between Lynton and Lynmouth in Devon was being used by our Winter Olympics team as a practice toboggan run. I also once persuaded several publications that the Open University was conducting a medical degree course and that students could take delivery of a dead body at their homes so that they could study for their anatomy examinations in their kitchen. And I wrote a book on aphrodisiacs which included much material (particularly about the aphrodisiacal qualities of chocolate) which I made up but which seems to have been accepted as fact and is now widely quoted in magazine and newspaper articles.

But my favourite spoof concerned the golf club in Westward Ho!. I was a member at the time and became increasingly irritated by the heavy-handed rules about acceptable clothing which kept appearing on the notice board. The Princess and I crept into the clubhouse one evening and put the following notices on the notice board.

Shorts and Hairy Legs

Men who insist on wearing shorts (and who, therefore, risk being punished by the security guards) must have their legs shaved. Men who wear shorts and exhibit hairy legs will be punished. Their legs will then be shaved before they are allowed back into the club house.

Your alternative committee would like to make it clear that it considers men with hairy legs to be a horrid sight.

Clothing Rules for Women Members

A number of regulations have recently been introduced for male members. In order to ensure that the club complies with Sexual Discrimination Laws your Alternative Committee has decided to introduce new dress code regulations for women members. The following items of clothing will, in future, not be allowed: tweed skirts, trousers (of any kind), skirts which go below the knee, jumpers or sweaters, tights, socks, boots, girdles and sensible shoes. The following items of clothing will be allowed: stockings (compulsory), micro-skirts, see-through blouses, skin tight tops (with lots of cleavage showing), PVC/Rubber wear (must be skin tight), peephole bras (especially worn with see-through blouses), thigh length boots and high heeled shoes.

Women will not be allowed into the clubhouse if not wearing make-up. Women who take size 18 and over will only be allowed to play golf during the hours of darkness and then by prior arrangement with the committee.

Not surprisingly, the Committee immediately launched an enquiry in an attempt to find out which member had dared to place these spoof notices on the notice board. They never did find out, though various newspapers (including *The Times*) reported the story of the spoof clothing requirements and the club's response. Most committees have a collective IQ slightly lower than the IQ of the most stupid member and this particular committee included one individual who had the IQ of a pickled walnut.

The Princess and I resigned from the club a little while later. We told the secretary that we didn't want to be members of a golf club which had attracted such notoriety.

18.

The elderly lady in front of us at the till in WHSmith's was holding two magazines and a small bar of chocolate. The two magazines were both shrink wrapped. She was frail and walked with a stick which she clearly needed. Her clothes were threadbare but neat. The cashier scanned the three items and told the elderly lady the price. She blushed and looked embarrassed. `The magazines are free,' she said nervously. She pointed a shaky finger at the word `free' which was printed in huge letters at the top of both magazines. `There's a free catalogue with each magazine,' said the assistant impatiently. `You have to pay for them. Do you want them or not?' The old lady fumbled with her purse, looked at the price on the till, looked back at the magazines and, with regret, shook her head. `No thank you,' she said. She apologised, paid for her small bar of chocolate and shuffled away. `I'll take the two magazines,' said The Princess, picking up the two magazines the old lady had left, and adding them to our own purchases. She paid for everything and then hurried after the old lady. `Excuse me,' she said. `I just bought these by mistake but then realised that I already have copies at home. It seems a pity to throw them away. Would you like them?' The old lady's face lit up. `Are you sure?' she asked. `You'll be doing me a favour,' said The Princess.

19.

Cloud computing is the new hula hoop. The new Bakelite radio. The new doll that wets itself. I cannot believe that human beings with brains are having anything to do with this nonsense. The cloud involves storing data remotely via the internet and in fact there is nothing new about it since people have been doing this for years. (Interestingly, I was reading William Haggard's novel *The Antagonists* recently and noticed that he used the word `net' to describe a system used for sharing communications back in 1964.) Even Steve Wozniak, the technical genius behind Apple (Steve Jobs was the marketing genius) thinks the cloud is a disaster waiting to happen. `I want my work in progress where I can see it and secure it.' The cloud is as useless and as reliable as a Scottish bank. Those who use it will find that people they don't know (and probably wouldn't like and certainly wouldn't trust) can capture all their private information and will be able to steal and deface everything they write. Mind you, I also believe that anyone who uses internet banking either needs counselling, or will need it later when they find that their bank account has been emptied by a band of 14-year-old Romanian hackers who have spent all the money on sweets and computer games.

20.

Our insurance company has told us that they will no longer insure us. Someone in the company's offices recognised my name. `You have written books which sell on the internet,' said a 17-year-old girl somewhere in Asia. `You are too famous.'

21.

The fencing people have put up our `No Parking' sign and erected three thin, white posts. Our hope is that this will make it clear that our car park isn't just a piece of scrap land, available to anyone who wants to use it.

22.

At the start of our journey to Paris this morning, the Princess sat on a railway station bench waiting for a First Great Western train driver to find his way to the station. An old man in a shabby suit sat down next to us. He was carrying an old-fashioned leather carrier bag which he placed carefully on the bench next to him.

`My wife is coming home today,' he told us. `She's been to see her relatives.' He paused. `Sickness in the family,' he added. `First time we've been apart.'

`You've obviously missed her,' said The Princess.

`Oh yes,' said the old man.

There was then a silence for a while. The station announcer told us that the train we were expecting would be another fifteen minutes. And she thanked us for our patience and understanding. They usually do. The phrase annoys me more than the delay.

`She's a lovely girl,' he said. `Sprightly. A lovely dancer. We used to dance all the time. She moves like a dancer. Doesn't look her age.' He took out a large handkerchief and blew his nose. `She has lovely hair,' he said. `Brunette.'

I assumed that he must have married someone much younger than himself.

We sat together, the three of us, for a little longer and then the train pulled alongside the platform. The Princess and I stood up, ready to board. We said goodbye to the old man. He had now taken a small bouquet of garden flowers out of his shopping bag. He was holding it in his right hand.

As we boarded I looked back and watched as the old man watched his wife get down from the train. She was about his age and had grey hair; it was almost white. She moved with great difficulty, as though she had bad arthritis in both hips. They moved slowly towards each other. He touched her cheek. They kissed. He gave her the flowers and took from her the small blue case she was carrying. She admired the flowers and linked her arm with his. They then hobbled off slowly towards the exit.

23.

The French always honour their great men by naming streets, buildings and Metro stations after them. Walking around Paris it's impossible to avoid the name of Felix Faure who not only has more streets named after him than anyone else but also has his very own Metro station. He even has a requiem, of course. A little investigation in our collection of French history books shows that Faure was a successful industrialist who became President of the French Third Republic until his death in office. In the formal history books his death is simply described as `sudden'. But the less formal books report that he died seated at his official desk wearing a frock coat and a high starched collar. Nothing unusual so far. But he wasn't studying affairs of State. Just before he died he had a naked girl between his legs and his hands were caressing her head. When he reached orgasm he had a heart attack and died with his fingers fastened in her hair. The poor girl could only be released by having some hair cut off. When the news hit the streets Felix Faure immediately became a national hero. Citizens who had regarded him without much affection immediately clutched him to their collective bosom. And Faure became the best remembered politician in French history.

There is no doubt that the French are different to the rest of us.

As we wandered around we couldn't help noticing that Paris is looking unusually scruffy these days. At the Louvre the water feature beside the glass Pyramid has broken and looks dreary and very worn. At the Beaubourg Centre (aka the Pompidou Centre) the massive forecourt, which was originally intended as an arena for jugglers, fire eaters and musicians now smells of urine and the entertainers have all gone, driven away by health and safety regulations.

Still, there are always unusual delights for those who keep their eyes about them. Outside the cathedral of Notre Dame we watched a Chinese tourist guide walk briskly along while holding up a closed, red umbrella as a beacon for her flock. The trouble was that she had no flock. She only noticed that she was alone when she stopped to give her next abbreviated lecture. Horrified, she realised that she was quite alone. A pied-piper with no children following her. Only after a momentary panic and a frantic five minute search did she discover that they were mistakenly but innocently following another tourist guide, this one Japanese, who was using a similar red umbrella as a guiding beacon. This accidental confusion reminded me of a day in London when a medical student friend of mine used a similar device to hijack a flock of 36 assorted American tourists. He took them for miles through Soho and abandoned them in a rather seedy area. Since there were no mobile telephones in those days they probably had quite a job getting back in touch with their leader. On the upside they probably saw a part of London that they might otherwise have missed.

And just a short distance from home we spotted a pub called `Au Bureau'. In England I know of pubs called `The Library', `The Potting Shed' and `The Surgery' so it's good to know that the French have caught on to this piece of mild trickery.

24.

There are many, many things about which I know next to nothing. An alphabetical list would begin with astronomy, beekeeping and campanology and end with yachting and zoology. My ignorance is extensive and, as the world acquires new information, my ignorance enlarges hour by hour. By the end of every day I know less, as a percentage of man's knowledge, than I knew when I had breakfast.

But in order to keep my brain topped up to the brim with knowledge I keep a notebook in which I jot down curious bits and pieces of information. Here are a dozen (admittedly not entirely useful) things I've learned this week:

1. Che Guevara was rhythm and tone deaf. He could be seen dancing a mambo while everyone else was dancing a tango. No one ever told him. (Well, would you tell Che he was dancing the wrong dance?)
2. When Queen Victoria spotted pieces of lavatory paper floating in the river Thames she asked an aide what they were. She was told that the bits of paper were small printed notices telling her subjects that swimming wasn't allowed. It's also true that Victoria famously did not believe that lesbianism existed. And she signed a reprieve for a woman accused of having sex with a dog - on the grounds that despite the evidence she simply didn't believe it could possibly have happened. A sweet lady and a great monarch.
3. When men toasted a lady's health in ancient Rome they would drink one glass for each letter of the woman's name.
4. The gate posts of country houses often have stone balls balanced on top. They are there because in ancient times it was the custom of the victors in battle to decorate their doorposts with the skulls of the vanquished. The stone balls are there as a civilised representation of the skulls.
5. Charlie Chaplin once came second in a Charlie Chaplin look-alike competition. Graham Greene once came second in a competition to `write like Graham Greene'. (In Greene's case the winner was his brother, the then Director General of the BBC).
6. A Mr Thomas Wedgewood, who was a friend of Coleridge's, suffered from restlessness and irritability. He opened a butcher's shop in the belief that the affronts and disputes to which he would inevitably be exposed might be beneficial to his health.
7. Wallpaper was banned by Oliver Cromwell who regarded it as frivolous.
8. An oyster's heart continues to beat for half an hour after it has been swallowed.
9. Isadora Duncan's death is well documented (her scarf caught in a car wheel) but her husband's is less well known. Duncan was married to the Russian poet Serge Essenin who cut the veins in his wrist and wrote a farewell poem in his own blood.
10. In February 1912 Britain's Committee of Imperial Defence, an organisation set up to advise on the military strategy of the British Empire, was staggered to hear the chairman of Lloyds testify that if German ships were sunk by the Royal Navy, Lloyds would be honour bound, and legally obliged, to cover the losses.
11. `Just what the doctor ordered' was an advertising slogan for a brand of cigarettes in the 1950s.
12. When Ian Fleming, the creator of James Bond, was told by his doctor to give up drinking he talked his physician to allow him one drink a day. After the doctor had agreed that Fleming could have one fluid ounce of alcohol each day the novelist did some research and found that Green Chartreuse contains the most alcohol per ounce. And so that was what he drank for the rest of his life. One fluid ounce of Green Chartreuse per day.

25.

Pigeons are as much a part of any city as the people and maybe they have just as much a right to live there. Do they do harm? Of course they do. They defile buildings and vehicles (and occasionally pedestrians) and they undoubtedly carry some diseases. But they contribute a great deal too. They add life and companionship for many who would otherwise be alone. Personally, I find dogs an infinitely greater hazard than pigeons and no one has yet had the temerity to suggest banning the walking or feeding of dogs in cities.

From time to time The Princess and I are told off for feeding the pigeons. Irate citizens shout at us and berate us. The law is doubtless on their side for I understand that, as it is in London, it is now against the law to feed the birds in Paris.

Outside, in the parks, our excuse is that we aren't feeding the birds but that we are simply messy eaters. But it is more difficult to make the same argument when we feed the pigeons from our top floor apartment. We feed them when they land on the ledge below our windows. In the mornings the pigeons gather on the ledge of the building across the street and, when they consider it breakfast time, go to our bedroom window (the one with the shutters drawn) and coo. If there is no response to that then they move to another window and peck loudly on the glass. They are noisier than an alarm clock, though they like to be fed before I would normally like to get up. As soon as they hear movement inside the apartment they flock to the window from which I usually feed them and the sparrows which follow. When they have finished feeding the birds all return to the ledge across the street to chat and dance and court and do what pigeons do to while away the morning.

Last night another resident in our building, a tenant of a lower apartment, banged on our door and protested about our feeding the pigeons. She had a fierce face that looked as if it had known much anger. Unlike many continental women she was pretty well clean shaven though this was probably a result of her having invested in a small shaving device. As she berated me she became almost hysterical. I smiled at her and said: `I don't understand but thank you for the invitation.' I spoke in English as I often do when I don't want to be understood. I find that the ploy works well in both France and England. I then shut the door. Unfortunately, this move was not entirely successful for the pigeon hater returned ten minutes later with an interpreter.

`You want me to feed the pigeons more often?' I asked, deliberately misunderstanding the protest. When it became impossible to pretend not to understand any longer I shook my head and nodded and tutted and agreed wholeheartedly with his objection to the feeding of the pigeons. `We were feeding the wild parrots of Paris,' I explained. `We had heard that there are many rare and beautiful parrots in this wonderful city.' I shrugged. `But, sadly, only pigeons came.'

Our callers went away desperately confused but I have no doubt that they will, like the television licence gestapo, return.

The Princess reminded me that much the same thing happened a few months ago when a caller berated me for feeding the pigeons. On that occasion I shook my head and told her we didn't want cable television, thank you very much. When we went downstairs the next day and opened the front door the angry woman was looking out of her window. She glowered at us. With appalling timing the pigeons that had been waiting on the ledge across the street saw us and reacted instantly. The credibility of my obfuscation faded a little in believability when we were immediately surrounded by a crowd of delighted pigeons who had decided that here, perhaps, was a chance to say `thank you' and maybe enjoy a little mid-morning snack. We walked briskly away up the street, followed closely by a cooing cloud of noisy birds.

26.

Friends of ours who live in the north of England are moving house so we sent a postcard to their new address in the Lake District. I wrote the card and put `Sir and Lady...' before their names. `Why have you put that?' asked The Princess. I explained that postmen always read postcards and that when their local fellow saw the title he would be bound to tell all the neighbours. `There will be much fawning and lending of cups of sugar,' I pointed out. `They will be warmly welcomed to the bosom of their new community.'

27.

We headed back to England.

The Gare du Nord in Paris used to be an exciting and romantic railway station. No more. Catching a train there today is something of a nightmare. There is never room for a taxi to park and so our driver simply stops in the middle of the road. We have to get out, thrust notes into his hand, grab our baggage and then dodge through the traffic and the Romanian beggars to the pavement. On the pavement there are more beggars. They guard the entrance like stony faced militants on a picket line. The only difference is that these pickets jostle and pick pockets. (Paris is now the world centre for pickpockets. They are as skilful as they are shameless. The other day The Princess had her bag opened inside the cathedral of Notre Dame.) The beggars are all graduates of the International School of Begging. They whine, roll their eyes, hold up their borrowed babies, point to their rented dogs and hold out grubby hands. They invariably carry small pieces of crumpled cardboard which contain a message in English. (They only attack the English. Foreigners just boot them out of the way.) The Princess recently learnt a few words in Romanian and these days I leave the beggars to her. I don't know what she says to them but they smile, bow their heads and back away so it must be something good and obviously isn't just `piss off'.

Inside the station, which now appears to be run by a committee with absolutely no common sense, there are queues galore. There's a queue to pass through the ticket barrier. There is a queue to pass the French customs post. (This is laughable. The Princess and I once mistakenly went through this one holding each other's passports. The official on duty let The Princess through on my passport and allowed me through on hers.) And then there's a queue to get past the British passport officials (who are ruder and more arrogant than the worst doctors' receptionists) and finally there is French baggage security. Baggage and coats must be placed on the usual filthy dirty conveyor belt and then collected at the other end. The officials hired to look at the X-ray pictures are usually chatting and looking the other way. You could get a suitcase packed with rocket launchers past them. Everything is made much worse by the fact that the French seem incapable of travelling light. They firmly believe that it is possible to `get away from it all' but when they go to the country or the seaside they take it all with them.

28.

I read an interview with one of our Olympic athletes. I see that in her `team' (everyone worth their salt has a `team' these days) she has two coaches, a physiotherapist, a soft tissue therapist (I wonder if this is what used to be a masseur?), a bio mechanist, a psychologist, a physiologist and an agent. She doubtless has a manager, an accountant and a tax adviser too.

Ah, even I can remember the days of amateur athletics. I remember working as a postman one year when I was still at school and finding that an Olympic runner was also delivering letters. I was told he was earning extra money by running round the streets of Walsall delivering Christmas cards so that he could compete in the Olympics.

The Olympic movement has become absurdly expensive and self-important. The 1948 London Olympics cost £750,000 and the athletes were, of course, amateurs. Allowing for inflation that works out at about £23 million in today's money. The original budget for the 2012 Olympics was £2 billion and the final cost was considerably more than

£10 billion - not counting the billions of pounds worth of volunteer labour. An astonishing £270 million was spent building a swimming pool. How on earth can a pool cost that much money? You dig a big hole, tile it and fill it with water. There's the pool. You then add a few plastic seats around the sides so that very keen relatives can sit and be bored witless for hours on end. What did they spend the other £269 million on?

When it's all over the athletes who won medals will expect gongs from the Queen. Win a gold medal and you get a knighthood. Win a bronze and you get an MBE. What nonsense all this is. This was all fine in the days when athletes were amateurs and were winning medals for their country. Today's athletes run and throw things for a living. And to be honest it's a pretty easy life. They are paid hugely well by the taxpayers and those who win can make millions out of advertising foods that rot teeth and cause heart disease. (Would anyone really be surprised if eating competitions, sponsored by a well-known chain of 'harmburger' restaurants, were introduced into the Olympics?) For all the talk about `stress' and `pressure' those who enjoy sport for a living have a pretty easy time of it. Running, jumping and throwing things are just hobbies that have got out of control. Those who can make a living out of doing these things are damned lucky. I don't see why they should expect to be honoured as well as paid.

Mind you, I don't see why civil servants, pop singers and industrialists should be honoured either. Most do what they do because it's a way of making money. They do it for themselves. They don't shuffle paper, make records or build widgets for their country's sake. Today's honour system is as absurd as the one which rewarded pirates and harlots with honours and huge estates.

Honours should be distributed only to people who do things to help their community and their country and who don't get paid for what they do. Volunteers and campaigners deserve to be honoured. Swimmers, cyclists and people who row boats for a living don't deserve anything other than a bit of plated metal.

MARCH

1.

Three weeks ago a woman who lives in Canada wrote and complained that she had been sent a catalogue for my books but that she had never heard of me and wasn't interested in any of my work. When The Princess checked she found that the woman had bought three copies of *Alice's Diary* and that we had received a letter from her telling me that *Alice's Diary* was her very favourite book. However, because my name doesn't appear on *Alice's Diary* as the author (we like to suggest that Alice herself wrote the book) the woman had no idea that I had written it. Because her letter praising *Alice's Diary* had been so fulsome I sent back a note explaining the situation. Today I received an indignant letter from the woman. She agreed that she had bought and enjoyed copies of Alice's books but said that she was very cross that I was pretending to have written them. `These books are clearly written by Alice herself,' wrote the woman. `If I hear again that you are claiming to have written her books I will report you to the authorities.' She didn't say which authorities. We gave up and deleted her name and address from our simple database.

I received two other letters relating to *Alice's Diary* this morning.

The second letter was from a reader who said: `On the inside front flap of the dust cover you claim that *Alice's Diary* contains `an insight into what its really like to be a cat' but this is a gross error and entirely unacceptable.' She rightly pointed out that its should have been spelt it's. This reminds me that last month I received yet another letter complaining that there is a grammatical error somewhere in the book. `I realise that the book is written by a cat,' complained the letter writer. `But that doesn't excuse bad grammar.' I refuse to change a word of *Alice's Diary.* Since she died many years ago it does not seem right to fiddle with her grammar without being able to obtain her permission. Before I tossed the letter into the bin I wrote back to say that most people are impressed that a cat was able to write a book at all - and that they were, therefore, prepared to overlook the occasional grammatical slip.

The third letter was from a woman offering to ghost write more Alice books for me. `I could do much better illustrations than you have at present,' she added.

2.

At a bookshop in Nailsworth I bought a huge collection of old magazines from the early part of the 1900s up until the 1950s. The magazines included *Lilliput, John Bull* and *Everybodys.* It's fascinating to see just how good the articles were in those days. For example, *Everybodys* was very much a mass market magazine but, in addition to all the usual magazine `furniture' (crosswords and letter page) the contents of the February 2nd edition of 1952 included: an article about the economy entitled *Who Will Wield The New Axe?,* an article *When Royalty Flies* (describing the aircraft used by H.M. the Queen), a piece about humorous barristers, a description of an actress Wagner had loved, *Quo Vadis* (the serialisation of a book by Henryk Sienkiewicz), an article about baboons entitled *Funny Old men of the Kopjes* and a piece entitled *On the Field of the Cloth of Gold* (a description of the rivalry between Henry VIII of England and Francis I of France). There were articles entitled *Tavern of the Seas (a history of Cape Town and Table Mountain), Two Toms and a Joe* (a biographical piece about Wordsworth and the two poets called Warton). Finally, there was a piece headed *Down Dimbleby's Way* (about television), an article headed *Old Buddha* (about China's last empress), a beautifully illustrated piece called *Beware of the Horse* (about thoroughbreds who were dangerous and difficult to ride) and an article about sport called *Football Immortals,* written by the cricket legend John Arlott. These were all long articles (1500-2000 words on average). All that for just four old pennies.

3.

We both jumped out of our skins at midnight as the silence of a moonless night was shattered by a series of violent explosions. Since we have no near neighbours and there are no passers-by at night we don't bother to draw the curtains so we peeped out through the living room window to see if we were being attacked by terrorists firing rocket launchers, noisy burglars announcing their arrival or little green men saying hello.

Fireworks.

It wasn't a bad display. There were some spectacular rockets, showering multi-coloured sparks across the sky, and after a few minutes silence was resumed.

This morning I was putting out our black bags for the rubbish collector to pick up (we live in such an inaccessible spot that there is no room for wheelie bin collecting vehicles and so we are excused rubbish sorting) when Baskerville, one of our distant dog-owning neighbours, drove by in his gleaming limousine. He slowed down, lowered the passenger side window and looked across at me. `Hope my firework celebrations didn't annoy you!' he said, clearly hoping that they had.

I looked puzzled and shook my head. `You must have bought the quiet ones,' I said. `That was very kind of you.' I thought for a moment. `I suppose it's only the big expensive ones that make a lot of noise.'

`Mine made a hell of a lot of noise!' he insisted. `They were the best you can buy. Professional quality.'

`Were you celebrating a special birthday?' I asked, feigning interest. `For a fireworks display I suppose it must have been one with a nought at the end. Gosh it wasn't your 70th was it?'

`Seventy!' he protested indignantly. `Do I look 70?'

I leant forward and examined him closely. `A youngish 70.'

`It was my 60th!' he snarled. He put his foot down and sped off up the lane, skidding on the loose gravel in a frost damaged stretch of tarmacadam and scraping the side of his beloved motor car on an untidy branch. He slowed, almost to a stop, and I could see him trying to decide whether to get out or not. And then he speeded up again and disappeared into the distance.

I love teasing the neighbours but Baskerville is such an easy target that he really isn't much fun.

4.

Some director in America is making a film version of Sherlock Holmes with a woman playing the lead. Inevitable. She will be known as Shirley Holmes. The Princess and I spent a jolly few minutes thinking of other classic stories the Americans might spoil. We came up with *Romeo and Julian, Jim Eyre, Monsieur Bovary, Larry Doone, Marvin Poppins* and *Mr Marple.*

We won't be watching the Shirley Holmes film. But we are currently re-watching the old Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce films. We're working our way through the series. Rathbone and Bruce were the greatest of chums in real life (Rathbone was terribly cut up when Bruce died) and just as screen chemistry works between a male and female star so it is needed between Holmes and Watson. With Rathbone and Bruce the friendship seals the screen partnership. Never before or since have there been two more quintessential Englishmen who weren't born in England. Rathbone was born in South Africa and Bruce was born in Mexico, though only because his parents just happened to be on holiday there when he arrived. The series stopped when Bruce died. Rathbone, who hated Holmes for a long while, refused to make any more without his friend Nigel beside him. (Rathbone, now remembered mainly for his Holmes, made a goodly number of excellent films. He was the Sherriff of Nottingham to Errol Flynn's Robin Hood and always claimed that he could have beaten Errol Flynn in a fair swordfight. He probably could have too. He must have fought more onscreen swordfight battles than any other star - even including Douglas Fairbanks Jr - and was forced by circumstances and plot to lose all but one of them. And Bruce, of course, played one of the cricket mad buffoons in Hitchcock's *The Lady Vanishes.* No man ever played buffoons with more honest enthusiasm.)

Watson, not Holmes, was of course Doyle's greatest invention. (Though, I think Mrs Hudson is pretty important too.) Just about every detective writer now uses the same trick of having an assistant or amanuensis - someone the great man (or woman) can tell what is happening, someone to record the great man's work and someone to listen with admiration while the great man explains what has happened. Even cowboys have their Watsons. Where would Hopalong Cassidy, the Range Rider, Kit Carson or the Lone Ranger be without their Dr Watsons? (If the Scots get too uppity about Doyle it is, of course, possible to argue that Watson is merely a reincarnation of Daniel Defoe's Man Friday.) Watson was Doyle's genius.

Doyle, who was, in real life, prone to say things like `the game's afoot' when involved in adventurous activities, was a rare man: a man who had more than one flash of genius. His second flash of genius was of course in creating Mycroft - Sherlock's cleverer brother. The creators of *Frazier,* the spin off series from *Cheers,* seemed to me to do something similar by creating Niles, the even pottier psychiatrist brother of Frazier. And the third flash of genius was creating Moriaty, the recurring nemesis, the hater of all things Holmes. `Holmes the meddler, Holmes the traitor, Holmes the lickspittle.'

Rathbone *was* Sherlock Holmes. He even looked like the illustrations in the early *Strand* stories. The only possible competition for Rathbone and Bruce might have come from Peter Cushing and Roger Livesey.

But Jeremy Brett was the most entertaining Holmes. He played Holmes as though he were acting on stage, ideally something pantoesque in the Edwardian era, and he played the Great Detective, variously, as gay, vain, and mad. He was constantly posing and trying, in vain, of course, to capture the famous and inimitable Rathbone profile. (Rathbone was once described by Dorothy Parker as two profiles pasted together). Brett started his 40 odd episodes sensibly but was wildly and was gloriously over the top before the end, by the time he was so ill that he had to sit in a wheelchair between takes. (One big mistake was when he walked arm in arm with Watson down Baker Street. Two men walking down the street like that in Victorian times would have attracted a crowd of small boys and a good many rotten tomatoes.) Brett took Holmes to new heights and it always seems to me that the directors must have told all the other actors to play it straight and to leave Jeremy to play the part as though he were playing the bad Baron in a version of Cinderella in Cleethorpes.

The Princess and I agree that the series Brett made for Granada suffered from the two Watsons. They're workmanlike but the truth is that I feel that Brett needed a more dramatic Watson. Basil Rathbone played Sherlock Holmes straight and without emotion but his version would not have been anywhere near as good without Bruce to play the buffoon with such zest. Brett needed someone with more oomph. Ray McNally or Michael Gambon would have both played Watson with tremendous strength and given Brett's Holmes more verisimilitude.

Conan Doyle was many things (it is not widely known but he introduced skiing to Switzerland) but he was primarily a plotsman and his characters do tend to be rather thin occasionally. Jeremy Brett was warned by his close friend Robert Stephens (who played Holmes in a rather curious film made by Billy Wilder) that he shouldn't try to play Holmes because everyone who had done so had had a breakdown (except Rathbone). The problem was that Holmes was never a clearly defined person (in modern parlance there was no `back story') and Brett, like many previous actors, ended up putting too much of himself into the part. (With the result that occasionally viewers were treated to a surprisingly fey, not to say gay, detective.)

Producers will doubtless keep making versions of Sherlock Holmes for as long as there are actors and audiences. There will, undoubtedly, be politically correct directors who want to portray Holmes as a black, wheelchair bound lesbian and Ms Watson as her lover. But there will be good versions too. Robert Downey Jr has made two excellent editions. Downey Jr seems to us to be much like Patrick McGoohan in these films: soft voice, staccato, even speaking out of the side of his mouth occasionally. And McGoohan would have made a fine Holmes.

5.

A reader has sent me a video of a speech I made in Trafalgar Square in 1997, before Labour's narrow victory. I'd forgotten all about it. It was at an anti-hunting rally and I am proud to say that I can be seen persuading an audience of around twenty thousand to chant with me `You can't trust Tony Blair'.

Like millions of others I am constantly appalled that Blair is trying to re-establish a position of influence. I've read that he would like to be Prime Minister again. Harold Shipman, Ian Brady and Fred West all killed `retail' and as a result they were all reviled and punished. Tony Blair killed wholesale and is now a millionaire with far more homes than principles. I hope to live long enough to see him serving a life sentence as a war criminal.

6.

I bought a hat, a fairly ordinary slouch hat, from Bates the Hatter in Jermyn Street. It cost as much as my first three cars put together. That's a pretty good example of inflation.

Last weekend I found a small black and red notebook from my days at medical school in the 1960s. I see that I received £32 per term as a grant and my parents gave me £15 a month. My basic annual income was £276. Out of this I had to pay for rent, food, clothes, stationery, travel and books. I even had to buy a skeleton. (I bought it for £11.10.00 and sold it back for £11 a year later.) I was rich by student standards because I also earned money by writing columns and drama reviews. The *Birmingham Post* paid me thirty shillings a night to review plays. (But having to write a review of 300 to 500 words in less than 30 minutes taught me to write quickly and succinctly.) When I reviewed books the literary editor allowed me to choose as many books as I could carry. I received three guineas a week for writing a magazine column and thought that was absurdly generous. I was as rich then as I am now. That is my definition of inflation.

7.

A reader wants to know if the questions which appear in newspaper agony columns are real. They aren't. At least mine weren't. I've written agony columns for six national newspapers and magazines and all the letters were made up. And I know that Marje Proops, the well-known agony aunt of the *Daily Mirror,* made up letters for her column. She had a slick answer to the question: "Do you make up the questions?" She would reply: "If you saw the amount of mail I received you wouldn't ask that!" The real letters were too long, too rude, too complex or too boring. Besides, I always thought it dangerous and impertinent to try to offer advice through a newspaper. And having made up the questions I could be as rude as I liked since no one could be offended or hurt.

8.

I have always loved piers. I can't remember where it was but when I was a boy I once saw a one-legged man perform an extraordinary act on a pier. He used to set fire to himself and jump into the sea. That was the act. It wasn't clever, or innovative or anything very much really. It was stupid more than anything. But it was a piery sort of thing to do.

The Princess and I walked on the pier in Weston super Mare. In front of us walked a family of three: father, mother and bored daughter. The daughter was about 12-years-old. She was wearing ripped jeans and her hair was dyed green. As she walked she looked at herself in a small hand mirror. She was, I think, examining her spots. And then I saw her notice two 14-year-old boys. They both wore baseball caps with the peaks at the back. They stared at her and nudged one another. She sneered at them to let them know that she was interested.

`Would you like a ride on a donkey?' asked her dad, who hadn't noticed the boys. He also hadn't noticed that he no longer had a little girl who liked ribbons and ice cream and dolls.

The girl gave her father the sort of black look only teenage girls can give. It made my blood go cold. It is a relief that girls lose this skill as they mature. Very few grown women can muster the sort of malevolent look a teenage girl can manage with such ease.

9.

Two days ago The Princess told me that she had read that singing is good for the health. `It releases endorphins,' she told me. `It will make you feel jolly. You should sing every day.' And so for two days I have followed her advice faithfully. I can never remember the words to proper songs so, instead, I have been singing nonsense songs which I've been making up as I went along. After the first day she came home with rubbery yellow plugs which she stuffed into her ears every morning. When I asked her if my singing was annoying her she said that she was wearing the ear plugs because of the noise the neighbours were making. I haven't heard any noise at all and the nearest neighbours are half a mile away but maybe I am going deaf. Today, The Princess told me that she has discovered new advice showing that singing too much can cause laryngeal problems. `It can,' she warns me, `cause permanent damage.'

10.

`Where's your husband?' demanded an uninvited visitor.

`He's busy with a new book,' answered The Princess.

`I wish I had time to sit and read at this time of day,' said the visitor.

`Er no, he's writing one not reading one,' explained The Princess.

`Can't see much difference,' said the visitor sharply.

11.

The trouble with the Cotswolds is that instead of being populated with straw-in-the-mouth yokels, and descendants of W. G. Grace, it is now stuffed to the edges with people who have sold their semi-detached bijou residences in Fulham for a million quid and used the proceeds to buy themselves a little something in yellow stone. Their only quality is an over-reaching sense of self-importance. Having worked for decades as a senior regional manager for a utility company or the Libor fiddling desk at Barclays Bank or the Department of Culture And Ethnic Sensibilities in Whitehall they strut around expecting nature to behave itself and bow before them. There are more snotty bastards per square mile in the Cotswolds than in any other part of the country. Most are so full of their own sense of self-importance that they won't speak to their own wives or husbands, let alone their neighbours. These truculent, hypocritical bastards think they are saving the planet if they put the four wheel drive into two wheel drive occasionally. They clearly believe that owning a large, barky dog and a pair of coloured Wellington boots with little straps at the top turns them into country gentlemen. It may well be true that the meek shall inherit the earth but for the time being the snotty and sanctimonious are in residence.

Three days ago I answered the front door to find a short, round fellow standing there. He was red-faced and looked like a 'before' advertisement for an indigestion remedy. `I've scratched my car on your hedge,' he told me.

I stared at him. I didn't have the foggiest idea who he was or why he'd shared this piece of news with me. He looked the sort of strutty, fussy man who buys posh luggage, wraps it in a special bag for the journey and then takes it out of the bag just before he arrives at the hotel reception.

`It was a piece of bramble, dangling dangerously into the road,' he told me.

`They do that,' I said. `Unruly sometimes.'

`You should trim your hedges more often,' he instructed me. `It's going cost me £200 to have that scratch repaired.'

`Why not just leave it?' I asked him. `These lanes are so narrow that our cars have scratches all over them.'

He stared at me as though I'd asked him if he would like to take out a subscription to the *New Statesman.*

`Disgraceful!' he snorted. And marched off. Actually, it was more of a whinny than a snort.

This morning the indigestion advertisement came back.

`You must cut your hedge,' he told me. `It is too high. And very untidy.'

I looked around the garden. `It looks fine to me,' I said.

`The top of it is very straggly,' he said. `My wife isn't happy with it. It could be a lot neater.' He had one of those pink breast cancer ribbons pinned to his lapel. It was a large one so that people wouldn't miss it.

I said I was very sorry to hear that.

`And are you going to leave your truck parked on that piece of land by your garages?'

I said it seemed a good place to park it because it wouldn't fit into the garage. `We'd bring it into the house and park it in the living room,' I said. `But the wheels always seem so muddy.'

`We can see it from our kitchen window,' said the man.

`Ah,' I said. `You must live in the house near our garage.'

`It's very dirty and we can see it,' said the man, as though this settled the matter. `Besides, if you park your truck there we have nowhere for our visitors to park.'

I stared at him, hardly able to believe my ears.

`It's your land, of course,' he said. `If you want to park on it you can.'

`Thank you,' I said.

`But it's very inconvenient.'

I didn't say anything. Actually, I couldn't think of anything to say.

`Perhaps you could give it a wash?' he sniffed. There was a long and deliberate pause. `If you must leave it there.'

I told The Princess about this extraordinary conversation. We realised that we still don’t know their names. But it doesn’t matter. We will call them Mr Spick and Mrs Span.

12.

The Princess had a rather upset telephone call from our friends in the Lake District. She was told to ask me not to put `Sir and Lady’ on any more correspondence. Apparently the neighbours aren’t speaking to them (assuming, so our friends suspect, that they will be snooty and snobbish and that he probably received the title for selling hand grenades to Bosnians) and all the local tradesman are quoting prices that are twice as high as they should be. Oh dear. It’s so easy to put your foot in it when you’re trying to be jolly and helpful at the same time.

13.

I was appalled to read that another bunch of wimpy, greedy, policemen are suing taxpayers for compensation. The policemen claim that they are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder because of unpleasant experiences they had while doing their jobs. Pfui. Many years ago I worked as a police surgeon and in the course of that work I unwrapped a woman who had been murdered by her husband, wrapped in plastic, put into a supersize plastic bag and left out with the rubbish (the dustmen called the police because they couldn’t lift the bag), certified a man burnt to a crisp (you could smell the burning flesh half a mile away) and dealt with the remains of a man and his dog who had both been bludgeoned to death by two killers (I then examined the two killers, alone, in a police examination room, with the door shut). And so on and on. The point is, I was doing what I was paid to do and even though I still remember these incidents I cannot for the life of me imagine why I should be entitled to sue anyone for compensation.

14.

I see that, as I predicted in my book *2020,* the authorities are planning to force journalists to have licenses. This is a scary idea because it means that if a journalist writes something which makes the authorities feel uncomfortable then there is a risk that their licence will be taken away. Still, I’m not surprised. Some journalists scoffed when I wrote *Living in a Fascist Country.* I wonder if they are still laughing.

15.

Our local council is talking about putting up a sign welcoming careful drivers. They are telling us this as part of their `community awareness and consultation programme’. I have written to tell them I don’t think their planned sign will do any good at all. I have suggested that, instead, they erect a sign which says: `Drive slowly or we will chase after you and when we catch you we will tear off your limbs and stuff them down your throat.’ The Princess said she doesn’t think they will accept my suggestion. I told her that if the sign is too long I will cut it to: `Drive slowly or we will chase you and when we catch you we will tear off your limbs’.

16.

Because they are always in a hurry people who live in towns and cities tend to get to the point quite quickly when they are sharing an anecdote, telling a joke, reporting a piece of news or passing on an item of gossip. To them the message is everything. The method of its telling is of no account.

But life in the country is different. The pace of life is slower in almost every respect; there is a far smaller sense of urgency about things.

This afternoon I tottered up the village shop to buy a loaf of bread and a paper.

`Do you want today’s or yesterday’s paper?’

`Today’s would be good,’ I said, thinking this was a joke.

`Well I’m afraid you’ll have to come back tomorrow,’ said the woman behind the counter. `The delivery van hasn’t come with today’s papers. He broke down.’

I thought for a moment. `Well, in that case,’ I said. `I’ll take a copy of yesterday’s.’

`They’re all much the same aren’t they?’

I don’t know why but I looked around to make sure there was no one else in the shop. `Actually,’ I admitted, `I only want it to light the fire.’

17.

A friend of The Princess’s has children at school. She has been struggling to help them with their homework, which they are expected to do with the aid of research work conducted on the internet. `I’m not convinced that the information is accurate,’ said The Princess’s friend a couple of days ago. `Some of the sites seem to be heavily sponsored.’ The Princess agreed with her, told her that to find information on the internet you really need to know exactly what you are looking for, and to be something of an expert in the subject so that you can differentiate between the reliable and the suspicious. `Why not visit the reference section of the public library,’ suggested The Princess. Today the friend rang. `That was a fantastic idea!’ she said. `Thanks! We did my daughter’s homework in half the time using the library.’ My own feelings about children are somewhat akin to those of the late W. C. Fields but I do feel sorry for the little mites, struggling to thrive and survive in an internet dominated world.

18.

A woman in the street coughed all over me and I have developed the flu. Chest pains, shortness of breath and a temperature. It is scary to realise that many people my age now die of pneumonia. It is probably because the bugs we catch are much stronger, and drug resistant, because they originate in badly run hospitals. If I die I will have been murdered by a careless stranger who couldn't be bothered to put her hand over her mouth when she coughed. I find that I think about death too much at the moment. My life has gone by so fast. There are so many things left to do. So many frustrations and disappointments to be reversed. And most of all I don't want to leave The Princess. How will it all end? And when? Stroke, cancer, pneumonia, run over by a bus?

19.

`I went to Keith Yates's funeral this morning,' said Thumper Robinson, a good friend of ours.

I'd never heard of Keith Yates. Thumper explained that he is famous locally for a sixty year old feud which he and his brother Harry sustained through illness, bereavement and the usual mixture of good and ill fortune. Country dwellers of all shapes and sizes hate their neighbours more than they hate the council or the Chancellor of the Exchequer. They are invigorated and kept alive by feuds about fencing and disputes about boundaries. Nothing keeps them young more than discord over a shared access. They defy their doctors' most pessimistic prognostications thanks to a multi-generational quarrel. Nothing keeps a true countryman alive more than the determination to get one over the farmer on the other side of the hill.

No one could remember what this particular feud was about but for half a century both brothers had been driven exclusively by a desire to spite one another.

`Was Harry at the funeral?' I asked.

`He was,' said Thumper. `But he was in an absolutely foul mood. He told me he was convinced that Keith had died first deliberately so that he could leave Harry out of his will.'

It seems that Harry's solitary remaining ambition in life had been to die before his brother so that he could have the pleasure of knowing that he had left his brother absolutely nothing in his will.

Thumper had, however, managed to cheer Harry up considerably by pointing out to him that by living longer he had really managed to get the best of his brother.

`He left the funeral with a big grin on his face and a spring in his step,' said Thumper. `I've never seen him look so cheerful. So, in a strange sort of way I suppose I did my good turn for the day.'

20.

A reader whose Christian name is Leslie wrote to me putting (M) after his name. I suppose it must be quite confusing to have a Christian name which is used for men and women. And when you think about it a good many names are interchangeable between the sexes. Ruby, Ronnie, Paige and Sam are four that spring to mind. A good many male authors had names which are usually associated with women: Evelyn Waugh, Vicki Baum, Beverley Nichols, Joyce Carey for example. Carol Reed the film director was a bloke. As was Marion Morrison (who worked as John Wayne). A man called Shirley Brooks was the second editor of *Punch* magazine and Florence was Ziegfeld as well as Nightingale.

21.

Our new bed and bedroom furniture were delivered at last. There was, inevitably, a good deal of fuss. The driver of the lorry bringing it telephoned every five yards in hysterics. `I'm stuck!' he cried. `I'll never get out of here!' We constantly reassured him and eventually he reached our home. He was perspiring, red-faced and probably palpitating. It has taken us a couple of months to find anyone prepared to deliver furniture. Several companies refused point blank. When we asked if delivery men would wait at the top of our lane while we transferred our purchases to our truck we were told that this would not be possible. `The driver will unload and leave your stuff on the road,' we were told. `But he won't wait for you or help you put the furniture on your truck roof.' No one would deliver a fridge or a freezer either. In the end we brought both home (separately) in our truck. And we pulled, dragged and lifted them into the house ourselves. So we're grateful to get a delivery at all.

The delivery man told us that our wardrobe should be polished with beeswax every two weeks and given a bowl of water to help it settle in. The Princess asked if we would be expected to take it for walks. He then told us that we must turn our bed mattress once every month and laughed when he reported that he had once met a couple who admitted that they had never turned their mattress. Not once. He grinned and shook his head as though this were the craziest thing he'd ever come across. He couldn't have been more shocked if the people concerned had worn the same socks for a month. The Princess and I exchanged silent, guilty glances and then laughed with him. We said we always turned our mattress at least once a week and that it was one of the things we looked forward to most in life. He nodded approvingly at this and told us that we didn't need to turn it every week once it had settled.

It seems that these days everything comes with instructions. The carpet man, the curtain woman and the rug man all gave us complicated instructions. The man fitting the replacement log burning stove gave us a fifteen minute lecture on chimneys, flues and carbon monoxide poisoning. The man who swept the chimneys gave us a form for our insurance company. Every device that comes with a battery comes with instructions warning us that used batteries must not, under any circumstances, be tossed carelessly into the general rubbish. Apparently we must contact our local council before disposing of so much as a torch battery.

When the furniture delivery guy had gone we went back into the bedroom and stared at the mattress. `Should we turn it side to side as well as top to bottom?' asked The Princess. I said we should try just moving it. We managed to drag it half off the bed but could get it no further. We then dragged it back into exactly the same position it had enjoyed minutes before. We promised each other that we'd enrol in a Mattress Management Guidance Group or purchase a DVD giving instructions on mattress turning.

`I'll get some water,' said The Princess.

`Great!' I said. I was exhausted.

But when she returned she was carrying a dish which she placed beside the wardrobe.

22.

Telecom vans have been blocking our lane for most of the day.

`Are you having trouble with your phones?' asked the postman.

`Not that I know of,' I told him. `We haven't reported anything.'

`They've been here half a dozen times,' said the postman. `They're always working on your overhead lines. They've even been trimming tree branches and doing stuff to the poles. They're the lines to your house so I thought you must be having trouble.'

He handed me a bill and six pieces of junk mail, got back into his little red van and drove off down the lane. If they hold a round of the World Rally Championships in our area he would win by miles.

I didn't like to tell him but whenever we move house the telephone engineers are never far behind. They like to keep the lines clear so that the boys and girls at Special Branch can make good recordings. We regard it as a perk of being spied upon.

23.

Every time a tradesman calls he finds some reason to terrify us.

We made the mistake of asking a firm of electricians to install a couple of new lights. `We could check your electrics for you,' said the jolly one. `It's compulsory now so you might as well let us do it before we start work on the new lights.' When they'd finished checking, the team of smartly suited electricians gave us a six page list of important things that needed to be done if we were not to be in breach of EU regulations. `Your insurance company will want you to have all these done,' said the straight man. `You almost failed some of the tests,' said the jolly one, though it didn't occur to me until later that since we had only almost failed then we hadn't actually failed. So The Princess and I gulped, gasped, held hands and told them to get on with it. It took them four days. The bill was huge. We could have equipped an aircraft carrier with that much money. It was only when they'd finished, and we'd paid them, that we realised that we still didn't have the new lights we wanted fitting. (They did, however, fit a chandelier for us in one of the bedrooms. Unfortunately, they left the chandelier hanging so low that every time I go into the room I hit my head. The two electricians who fitted it were very short.)

A locksmith who came to fit new locks on those of our doors which aren't fastened with keys which are over a foot long (we decided to leave those as they are) told us that in order to satisfy the regulations (from guess where) we had to have locks fitted onto our windows. He said the insurance company would require it. But when he examined the windows he found that they had mostly been built in the 17th and 18th century and none of the window locks that were available would fit. So we had to have window locks specially designed and specially made. We were not in the slightest bit surprised when they turned out to be just ever so slightly more expensive than the ones sold in the local ironmongery store.

Today, we had the boiler men in the house. It was my fault. I thought it would be a good idea to have the boiler serviced. I really should know better. At our last house it took two weeks to get our boiler working after a yahoo from a local company did the servicing. In the end we had to call in an expert from the manufacturer. He told us that the clown who'd done the servicing had put in something upside down.

Anyway, the company we'd called this time sent around four men in two vans. `It'll be quicker with four of us,' said the leader. He didn't mention anything about it being more expensive. He then got out his telephone and rang his head office to find out where they were going next, and to tell them that it had taken them ages to find our house. Another of the men asked us where the lavatory was, one of them went back to the van and started eating sandwiches and the fourth, a teenager who didn't look old enough to be using matches let alone playing with boilers, asked me to show him to the boiler room and direct him to the situation of the nearest heated water outlet. I told him I could show him the boiler room but that I didn't know whether we'd even got a heated water outlet. `Hot tap,' he explained. I thanked him for the translation and showed him both.

After forty five minutes of eating sandwiches, making telephone calls and using our various lavatories the head boiler man came into my study. He looked very grave. `Your boiler isn't working,' he said.

`It was working fine before you came!' I told him.

`Maybe,' he admitted. `But it isn't working now.'

`What's wrong?'

`Not sure,' he said. `We need to bring in one of the experts from Gloucester. But he can't come until next Wednesday.'

`But we'll freeze to death by then!'

`They're forecasting nasty weather for the weekend,' he agreed. He then looked down at the clipboard he was holding. `We've found another problem,' he said. `You haven't got an inspection hatch in your flue.'

I stared at him. I had no idea what he was talking about.

`It's a new EU regulation,' he said. `Flues must have an inspection hatch. You haven't got one.'

`What flue?' I asked. `The flue from the boiler goes straight outside.'

`Not that flue, the flue from your AGA. It goes up through a bathroom and there's no inspection hatch in the flue. It's an EU law. You have to have one.'

Most of the time my brain is stodgy, like porridge which has been left in the pan overnight, but occasionally, probably once every two or three years, I have a brainwave. `Do you have to put inspection hatches in chimneys?'

He frowned and looked puzzled. `Just flues.'

`That's OK then,' I told him with absolute certainty in my voice. `The pipe from the AGA is a chimney not a flue.'

He looked at me, opened his mouth but said nothing and then nodded. `A chimney?'

`Definitely,' I said. `It's a chimney.'

`Oh.' He sounded terribly disappointed. `Well that's OK then.'

`Don't bother with the expert from Gloucester,' I told him as I ushered them out of the front door. `I'll get someone else to sort it out.'

`You need four carbon monoxide alarms fitted,' he shouted as he left. `We could fit them for you.'

When they'd gone I telephoned their head office, told the startled woman who answered the telephone that if they dared to send a bill I would sue them for something, and rang someone else.

The new guy arrived an hour later. It took him approximately nine seconds to get the boiler started. It might have been ten. It wasn't more than ten seconds. He pointed to a switch. `Someone had turned that off,' he said. He spent a few minutes looking around inside the casing and then closed it again. `These modern boilers don't need much attention,' he said. `They're electronic. There isn't much anyone can do unless something needs replacing.'

`Do you have your boiler serviced?' I asked him.

He looked at me and smiled, thought for a moment and then shook his head. `We've had our boiler for seven years,' he said. `And I've never even looked at it – except to check the water pressure every few months. You can do that yourself.' He showed me the gauge I needed to check and the tap I needed to turn.

I paid him what he asked for in cash. Workmen like cash, not because they want to cheat the taxman but because there are no delays, no charges and no risk of the bank going bust.

`I'll tell you something,' he said, lowering his voice. `A fifth of all boiler breakdowns take place immediately after a service.'

24.

I purchased a carbon monoxide alarm. It came with 32 pages of instructions. There was a warning in red on the front of the box. `Must to be installed by a competitant persons.' But, nevertheless, I managed to do it. All I had to do was pull a little plastic tab and the battery started to work. I assume that means that I must be `a competitant persons'. This is quite a thrill.

25.

The water with which we are supplying our new wardrobe has been disappearing at a remarkable rate. `You don't think we've got a wardrobe monster, do you?' asked The Princess. I said I didn't think it likely.

And then we saw the mouse droppings.

We have removed the water.

The wardrobe will have to manage without.

26.

Chris Cairns, a former New Zealand cricketer, has won £90,000 in damages for a libel which appeared on Twitter. Hoorah. I hope he sues in another 100 countries. His success will, hopefully, mean that the internet will no longer be a free for all medium for intellectual thugs and it will become easier for people who are defamed on the internet to take action.

I really do find it difficult to feel any enthusiasm for this silly idea. I gather that the Twitter thing enables millions of people to write daily, and endlessly, about their eating habits and their latest bowel movements. (I suppose we cannot be too surprised by this. Today's twats grew up watching pitiful and desperate nonentities washing, eating and arguing in the Big Brother House.) This is all sad. Even sadder is the fact that people read this stuff (they are, I believe, known as 'followers' and, if they leave, as 'unfollowers' which would have given Orwell a thrill). Children need limits, structures and hierarchies but these days they are all mouth and tweet, all hubris and Facebook. Look at me, I'm the best. Unbelievably, even British Gas has Twitter followers though I struggle to imagine what sort of human being would want to be regularly updated by British Gas about anything. Bloggers, twits and Facebook aficionados have all the knowledge and style and reliability of doodlers and graffiti specialists. It's typing not writing. Do the people who commit their thoughts to these sites realise that Twitter owns everything ever said on it, and that Facebook (which also claims to own everything put on its site) exists to sell advertising? (I heard recently that in America the Library of Congress is so enamoured of Twitter that they are planning to archive every twittle sent by an American. Since American twits send around 400 million a day that's an awful lot of rubbish to store.)

Does anyone really believe that these social media sites are run for the good of the stupid people who use them? (Actually, some probably do. The world is packed with people who believe what they are told.) There is irony in the fact that Web users demand everything free (free books, free music, free films), regard copyright as theft and then allow the biggest, richest corporations to own their copyright so easily? Who, in future, will pay for the production of books, music and films? Even if writers, musicians and filmmakers will all be amateurs someone has to pay for the ink (or the electricity), the instruments and the cameras. (Back in the early 1990s I tried to charge for material on websites. It seemed a good idea at the time. But the principle that everything on the internet must be free had already taken hold. I doubt if it will ever really be possible to charge a decent, commercial fee for original, creative material on the internet.)

I am comforted by the knowledge that it won't be long before Facebook and Twitter will die. These companies rely on making money through advertising and an increasing amount of evidence shows that internet advertising simply doesn't work - either because users are immune to the adverts and ignore them or because they don't bother to click on them. In addition, why would companies pay to have an advertising presence on these sites and to be roundly abused by internet trolls? Without adverts these wretched social media sites will die. (Incidentally, most internet trolls either have a commercial axe to grind because they represent a competitive product or they simply have inferiority complexes because they are inferior.)

The death of these sites will improve all our lives. And make us safer in many, many ways. For example, the internet is a boon for criminals. In the year 2011, 70,000 national heritage sites in England were hit by criminals. The legal director of English Heritage blamed the internet, pointing out that Google Earth helps thieves and vandals go trophy hunting. The thieves can use the internet to work out what they want, where to find it and how to plan their getaway. What is true for heritage sites is, of course, also true for private homes.

And, in the meanwhile, there will doubtless be a good many more lawsuits. I wonder how many twits and Facebook aficionados realise that a writer can be sued for libel in just about any country in the world for anything they write on a blog, a tweet or a Facebook addition. No one should mess around on the Web unless they are confident that they know the criminal and civil laws in every country of the world. Ignorance and prejudice will not be accepted as an excuse.

(I have noticed, incidentally, that computer bullies and hackers (who often cause enormous distress, inconvenience and cost) invariably claim (if they are caught) that they are mentally ill and, therefore, cannot be held responsible for their actions. The favourite diagnosis is some variety of autism. Autism is such a vague diagnosis that it is, of course, possible to argue that almost anyone is suffering from some variant or other.)

27.

We arrived home after a trip to the garden centre to find an anonymous note pinned to a tree near our car parking space. The semi-literate writer of the note accuses us of being territorial and urbanising the countryside because we have tried to protect our car parking space by putting up two poles and a small notice. Anonymous notes are always unpleasant and this one, written in block capitals on a scrap of cardboard, is no exception. Not surprisingly, The Princess is upset by it.

28.

We met a man in a pub just outside Nailsworth who has a donkey living in his garden. He says the donkey earns its keep by eating the grass. `Better than a goat,' he told us. `Goats eat all the trees and bushes.' He told us that the donkey is called Hoti. `That's an unusual name,' said The Princess. The man in the pub just grinned. `Donkey Hoti,' he said.

29.

We met an editor in London. I noticed that he was wearing a rather splendid looking watch. `It keeps perfect time,' he said, admiring it. `Wonderful watch. This is an heirloom.' He looked at my wrist. `And I bet my dad paid less for it than you paid for yours.'

`He probably did,' I agreed. `When did he buy it?'

`Thirty years ago,' said the editor. `He bought it for £2 in Istanbul.'

I didn't have the courage to tell him that the one on my wrist, a genuine version of the same watch, cost considerably more and keeps terrible time. I should have bought the cheap version.

30.

The internet, damn it, is very good for finding books you know exist but cannot find in bookshops, but it is no good at all for browsing.

Here's a list of twelve books I've recently picked up in old bookshops and junk shops recently. I would not have found any of these joys without good old-fashioned browsing. All of these books are out of print and difficult or impossible to find. I paid no more than £1 for any of them. Several are first editions.

1. *Duveen* by S. H. Behrman

Duveen was an English art dealer in the first half of the 20th century. He became the world's greatest art dealer and helped a number of very rich Americans build up hugely impressive art collections. Inevitably, he spent much of his life moving art from Europe to America. Many of the paintings and statues which he sold became significant items in major museums.

2. *Helio-Tropes or New Posies for Sundials*

Published in 1904 this is a reproduction of a book first published in 1625. The book consists of nothing but sundial inscriptions. The original volume was written by John Parmenter and my edition was edited by Percival Landon.

My favourite sundial inscription in the book is: `Munda Solaria dant, sed cor Saloria Mundum.' Underneath this Mr Landon has written: `This motto is, I think, incapable of adequate translation. The meaning is that while ground rents provide the smart and mundane things of this world, sundials by their admonition lead men to purity of heart. But I cannot render into equivalent English the double and daring play upon the words.'

The Princess and I have decided that we have to buy a sundial so that we can have this posy inscribed upon it.

(Incidentally, I bet there isn't a kindle edition of *Helio-Tropes*.)

How the hell would you ever know this book existed unless you found it in a box of jumbled books at an auction or behind a cupboard in a junk shop?

3. *One Day and Another* by E. V. Lucas

Lucas produced some wonderful books and this collection of essays and stories was published in 1909. My favourite story concerns a new born baby. Fairy godmothers turn up with all sorts of gifts. One gives determination, a second gives self-confidence, a third gives indifference to public opinion, a fourth gives the baby a good memory for faces and a fifth gives a knowledge of men. They all agree that with this array of gifts the baby will be enormously successful. And then another fairy godmother turns up. She is angry at not being given the date of the birth and, determined to destroy the child, she gives him a sympathetic heart.

`He is ruined!' cry the other fairies.

This was never more true than it is today. I doubt if there is a leader in the world who isn't a full-bloodied psychopath. In our strange new world the sensitive and sympathetic stand no chance.

4. *American Notes* by Charles Dickens

Dickens was probably the greatest travel writer of them all. Here's a sample: `In all the public establishments of America, the utmost courtesy prevails. Most of our Departments are susceptible of considerable improvement in this respect, but the Customs house above all others would do well to take example from the United States and render itself somewhat less odious and offensive to foreigners. The servile rapacity of the French officials is sufficiently contemptible; but there is a surly boorish incivility about our men, alike disgusting to all persons who fall into their hands, and discreditable to the nation that keeps such ill-conditioned curs snarling about its gates.'

Dickens is remembered as the best novelist the world has ever known. He has left us the greatest cast of characters ever invented. But his travel books are a joy. He stands above even Sterne, Smollett and Twain. His description of his journey across a stormy Atlantic is worthy of Jerome K. Jerome at his very best. Even bearing in mind Benjamin Disraeli's comment (`Like all great travellers, I have seen more than I remember, and remember more than I have seen.') Dickens's adventures are both hair raising and hilarious. Bill Bryson eat your heart out.

How did Dickens manage to write so much really good stuff? Maybe the absence of a typewriter or a computer helped him write faster. No software to clunk, no ribbon to jam. The Princess pointed out that Dickens also had no telephone to slow him down and far fewer forms to fill in. Servants were cheap and although travel was time consuming most things in life were less complicated.

No, it still doesn't make sense.

I have no idea how he wrote so much, so consistently well, in such a short lifetime.

5. *Journal 1929* by Arnold Bennett

I hadn't read any Bennett for years until I picked up this cheap paperback of his diary for 1929. In addition to being a great novelist Bennett was, like Charles Dickens, a terrific travel writer. He always saw the little human things and had a great eye for the funny and the curious. He was never afraid to admire what he saw and to enjoy the places he visited and the people he met. On every page there is always a sense of privilege and wonderment and a vein of mischief. One of the joys of discovering (or rediscovering) a great author who has a great oeuvre is that there will be more delights to come. As soon as I'd finished reading Bennett's journal I bought copies of every other book of his I could find. (In his book *Truth about an Author* Bennett wrote this about his first book: `My profits from this book exceeded the cost of having it typewritten by the sum of one sovereign. Many a first book has cost its author a hundred pounds. I got a new hat out of mine.')

6. *The Riders of High Rock* by Louis L'Amour

I love cowboy films but I had never read a cowboy book before I picked up this book by Louis L'Amour. This one is about Hopalong Cassidy.

L'Amour wrote over 120 books and sold over 300 million copies. He left home at 15 and worked as a seaman, lumberjack, elephant handler and miner. He was an officer in the transportation corps during World War II. L'Amour circled the world on a freighter, sailed a dhow in the Red Sea, was shipwrecked in the West Indies and stranded in the Mojave desert. He fought as a professional boxer and won 51 of his 59 fights. He collected rare books and when he died he left a library of 17,000 volumes. His cowboy books have been translated into 20 languages and nearly 50 of his novels and stories have been made into films. (A figure which must take him close to Georges Simenon.)

7. *We Were Young and Carefree* by Laurent Fignon

Laurent Fignon was my first cycling hero. I've been a fan of the Tour de France since I was a boy and admired Fignon's romantic style. His intelligent, ruthless analysis of his own attitudes, motives and ambitions (not to mention his behaviour after winning his first Tour in 1983) make this the best sporting autobiography I've ever read. It is far removed from the usual sort of self-serving, superficial tat served up in this genre. Fignon was a two time winner of the Tour de France (he famously lost a third race by eight seconds on the final day) and wrote: `Bad luck plays no part in anything I do. I never lose my morale. I don't complain, even if things go against me. Ill fortune does not touch me.' He describes how in the first of his winning tours he ate too much sugar too quickly. The insulin came in so fast that he suffered a hypoglycaemic reaction. I was genuinely sad when Fignon died in his 50s.

8. *Gilbert of Gilbert and Sullivan* by Andrew Crowther

W. S. Gilbert viewed life as a constant battle waged between himself and the rest of the world and I sympathise with him. He was alienated and full of resentment and either because or, in spite of this, he wrote the most marvellously biting lyrics. It is disappointing to realise that there are people who have never listened to Gilbert's librettos. The world would be a much happier place if everyone was obliged to listen to G&S operas during dinner, watch Basil skewering Holmes after dinner and enjoy almost anything by P. G. Wodehouse at bedtime.

9. *The Lionel Bart Story* by David and Caroline Stafford

This is not just an excellent biography but a brilliant account of the music world in the 1960s. It describes how a man who touched the hem of greatness and grabbed a great chunk of it in his fist, then lost virtually everything. It is a story of hubris more than anything.

10. *Festival at Farbridge* by J. B. Priestley

The only Priestley I could remember reading was *Good Companions* - a marvellous account of travelling music hall acts, back in the days before television brought an end to live entertainment. But this novel is just as good. I immediately bought everything else I could find by him (including *Lost Empires* and *Bright Days.* Priestley is unfashionable these days but his books are a delight and his affection for variety artists is tangible.

11. *The Life of John Law* by H Montgomery Hyde

Law is described on the frontispiece as an `honest adventurer'. Born in 1671 he was 34 when he published his banking reform plan *Money and Trade Considered* in which he proposed a central bank for manufacturing money as pieces of paper, rather than as cumbersome gold and silver coins. Law was the first of many incompetent and crooked bankers and economists and far more influential than his countryman Adam Smith who nicked everything from William Petty, an Englishman. France tried Law's scheme in 1716, when he founded the Banque Generale which was authorised to issue bank notes. Things went wrong when he combined the bank with a company designed to develop France's North American territories, particularly part of Mississippi. After the disaster of the `Mississippi bubble' Law fled to Venice where he died in poverty. It surely cannot be a coincidence that, like the proponents of many modern banking disasters, Law was Scottish.

Hyde's biography of an extraordinary man is what used to be called a `thumping good read' and it merits the description `unputdownable' as well as anything I've read for a long time.

12. *Fifty BAB Ballads* by W. S. Gilbert

For several years Gilbert (of Gilbert and Sullivan fame, of course) wrote what he called Bab Ballads for the magazine *Fun*. Fifty of the best were collected for this tiny volume, and given the subtitle: *Much sound and little sense.* I'm surprised the ballads aren't better known. They're a joy.

31.

On the train I jotted down these six things I've learned:

1. Never argue with a fool, or a man with a gun, and definitely don't ever argue with a fool with a gun.
2. Never sit in the front row of the ballet. If you do the beauty of what you see will be ruined by what you hear. (Grunts and wheezes and stomping on the boards.)
3. The unexpected works. Hannibal went over the Alps not because he wanted to take the scenic route but because it was a route that everyone else thought impossible.
4. Don't attend meetings or sit on committees. People go to meetings to impress, to be the most important person in the room and to ignore everyone else. Men and women who yearn for companionship, support, authority and a sense of self-importance love meetings, especially if they can call meetings over which they can preside. And most meetings are called not to do business but to give the impression that something is being done. The meeting becomes a substitute for action. As far as the participants are concerned the meeting is the action. They feel that men and women of such importance cannot possibly get together without something important being achieved. The meeting is the deed in the way that the medium is the message. Moreover, meetings enable the voters to be convinced that things are being done on their behalf; that culprits are about to be punished and causes dealt with. G7, G10 and G20 meetings are perhaps, the perfect example of meetings of which nothing is expected and which invariably satisfy those expectations. (I have it from an unreliable source, by the way, that Gordon Brown was convinced that these meetings all carried the prefix `G' in recognition of his global importance.)
5. When staying in a hotel, make sure you don't take a room on either of the bottom two floors (they are too easy for burglars) or above the 6th floor (because if there is a fire you'll be trapped). And to avoid legionnaire's disease, never shower in a hotel.

APRIL

1.

The Princess and I have decided to organise our own Olympics in the village. We both believe that we can make athletics far more appealing to spectators by making some mild changes to the traditional regulations.

Here are some of our planned rules. We intend to offer these to the Parish Council at the earliest possible opportunity.

1. Javelin throwers will be awarded bonus points if they succeed in spearing another contestant. Double points will be awarded to contestants who manage to spear an official. The treasurer should look into the possibility of renting a few unemployed bankers to use as targets.
2. Synchronised drug injecting is an obvious event. We intend to invite leading sports pharmacists to help with this event and chemists will be entitled to win medals if their drug cocktails proved particularly effective.
3. To cater for older villagers there will be a knitting event. Competitors will be given a pair of needles and a ball of wool and invited to knit a pair of mittens. The first to finish will win.
4. Throwing playing cards into a hat is a traditional English sport and it is outrageous that this event has never been incorporated into the other Olympics. It should be in ours.
5. Running events need livening up. We intend to do this by allowing the Baskervilles to use their dog as a starter. Contestants must start running when the dog barks. After five seconds the dog will be released. We could also ensure more entertainment by insisting that all contestants run in rubber Wellington boots.
6. Events involving the use of conkers and marbles must be included. Apple hurling, another traditional English game, should be considered. Pooh sticks, maypole dancing and non-synchronised Morris dancing will be essential.
7. Jumping events should have some added sense of danger. So, the long jump should be a jump across a pond filled with piranha fish and contestants in the high jump should be expected to jump over a solid brick wall.
8. As currently organised the marathon is a tedious race. It would liven things up considerably if officials were to shoot the last runner to pass every mile post. To avoid too much trouble with the authorities the runners could simply be shot in the leg.
9. In order to enable contestants to succeed in gaining genuine world records all events involving distance should be measured in imperial measurements. So, for example, athletes could contest the ‘102 yard scurry’ and the ‘mile and a little bit’ wheeze and limp.
10. To avoid the embarrassing sight of successful contestants parading around the village with medals around their necks we suggest that all medals be edible. It should be possible to arrange for a manufacturer of seaside rock to prepare suitable awards.

2.

We went to the Cotswold Wildlife Park which is exactly what it says it is and where you’d expect it to be. Brilliant. We watched rhinos courting (with loving nudges that would have sent a double decker bus flying) and a burrowing owl which was clearly terrified at the sight of an approaching Labrador (why do they allow dogs into wildlife parks?) and siamang monkeys reaching through the bars of their enclosure to grab and eat bamboo leaves growing just outside. We stared in astonishment at two vultures watching while a thrush, a robin and two great tits ate their dinner (or some of it), saw a red panda asleep in the fork of a tree and several large pigs asleep and snoring loudly and, for a while, watched as a giant tortoise tried to make a break for it. The whole experience was spoilt only by the damned school trips. The teachers are far noisier than the children and a good deal more objectionable. On our way back we stopped in Lechlade and bought a glazed oak bookcase and a silver plated tray for less than £100. And by late afternoon we found ourselves in Tetbury, which has excellent charity shops and splendid hostelries. I like charity shops. Now that the quality of merchandise has plummeted they are the best places to buy decent products. (Stuff is so badly made these days that if we find something we like we go back immediately and buy six because before long the first one will have broken or stopped working and the manufacturer will, by then, have stopped making them.) I am as addicted to charity shops as I used to be to junk shops (and as I still am to second-hand bookshops). I go in with an open mind and come out with arms full of things I cannot possibly want or use and certainly don’t need but which I have found irresistible. A week later I put them into a box and take them to another charity shop. I much prefer buying shirts which come without pins or four acres of cardboard and cellophane. Prince Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall live a couple of miles away, when they’re feeling rural, and they have a shop in Tetbury, though I understand they’re too busy opening things to spend much time behind the counter. The antique shops aren’t so good since they price their stock for daft Americans who cannot operate currency converters, or who like to think that the dollar has parity with the pound. I parked outside Tetbury post office for a moment while The Princess and I popped two armfuls of parcels into their post-box. Although I wasn’t causing an obstruction, or in anyone’s way, an officious man with dyed hair and jowls told me that I couldn’t park where I was. `Me big chief illegal immigrant asylum seeker with two dogs,’ I told him, beaming happily. `Can park anywhere.’ I waved an arm about to illustrate the remark. He stared at me in terror and confusion and scurried away back to his black hole. The look on his face was worth a cream filled éclair of anyone's calorie allowance. The Cotswolds are wonderful but some of the folk can be a bit uppity and think that having green Wellington boots entitles them to push ordinary folk around.

3.

Is it just me or is the number of annoying things increasing daily? I really can't work out whether it's me or the world. I'm glad I don't have a gun. I made a note of all the people I would have shot if I had been carrying a gun. I'd reached 56 by teatime. Here are some of my pet hates:

1. I hate it when I'm on a train, or at a railway station, and some smooth, supercilious voice says: `We thank you for your understanding and for your cooperation.' I hate it because I probably don't understand why there is a six hour delay and I almost certainly don't want to cooperate. I do and say nothing because if I stand on my seat and scream, or I thump one of their complacent, genuinely uncaring employees, six policemen in riot gear will shoot me with dum dum bullets. I wish they'd forget about the thanks. Just be plain rude to me please, then at least I can feel justifiably resentful and retain my self-respect.
2. I hate it when people suddenly stop at the top of an escalator so that they can look around and decide which way to go next.
3. I hate it when people in hotel or railway lounges talk loudly on their mobile telephones so that no one can else can concentrate on whatever it is they're trying to do. I hate it even more when people take part in video-conferences on their laptops.
4. I hate it when people in shops pay for something cheap with their credit card. And I hate it more when they can't decide which card to use before they pay for their magazine or bar of chocolate. Haven't these people heard of cash?
5. I hate it when the TV licensing thugs start writing to me. I know that whatever I do they will harass and threaten me for months.
6. I hate it when someone demands that before I can perform some simple, basic function I must first hand over my passport, a recent bank statement, my driving licence, one utility bill (original only please) and a signed statement from a neighbour in good standing, who has known me for at least three years.
7. I hate those agreements that appear so often on the internet. (Apple recently sent me a new iPhone agreement for me to read. It's 54 pages long.) If you want to download anything on the internet you are usually required to perjure yourself by agreeing that you have accepted the company's terms and conditions. One year, as an April Fool's Day prank, a video game retailer called Gamestation put up spoof terms and conditions on its website requiring customers to sell their souls. Around 7,500 customers made a purchase from the site and every one of them ticked the box claiming they had read and accepted the conditions. The internet in particular makes casual liars of us all. Terms and conditions (allegedly there to protect us) are incomprehensible and so lengthy that no one ever reads them. In a world where regulations lie so thick on the ground that none of us can possibly know them all it would surely make sense to have a standard terms and conditions agreement for internet companies to use.
8. I hate the dummies at Special Branch who tap our phone and fax machine and I wish they would be quieter and cause less trouble. Every evening our telephone and fax machine make a curious clicking noise as they suck off details of all our messages and faxes. And when they break into the house to see what's on my laptop I wish they would leave things the way they'd found them.
9. I hate people who say `There's no need to worry about privacy if you've got nothing to hide.' As each day goes by it becomes increasingly difficult to preserve any privacy in our mad, internet run age. (My own e-mails go out with this note stuck at the bottom: `Official warning: e-mail messages are public and not private. This e-mail is monitored by the security services. This means that a sweaty, overweight, malodorous moron will scrutinise this message.')
10. I hate workmen who use whichever loo is nearest to them - even if it's in a bathroom - instead of using the one loo they've been asked to use.
11. I hate it when people say: `We can't do that - what will people think?' or `We'll get used to it in time.'
12. I hate people who drive around with a Baby on Board sticker on the back window of their car but have no baby in their vehicle. This should be a criminal offence with a mandatory life sentence. A friend of ours who is an ambulance man once risked his life searching a wrecked and burning car for a non-existent baby.

4.

We had a rotten journey on the Eurostar train to Paris. An aggressive and rude granny groper at the station ordered me to lift up my arms so that he could give me a body search. It took me nearly three minutes to persuade him to say `please' and so, in revenge, while he was patting my chest I handed the coxcomb a small card. `I suspect you'll need this,' I told him.

`What did you give him?' asked The Princess, as we walked away. `Details of the Government's official website for job seekers,' I told her.

On the train a quartet of fat Americans (are there any other sort?) sat near us and regaled the entire carriage with their dull boasting. Americans tend to behave in small groups in the same way that they behave as a nation: loud, noisy and arrogant. Since America is a staunchly matriarchal society the women are invariably the noisiest and most troublesome. (If you ask a European couple something the woman will look at the man and the man will answer. If you ask an American couple something the woman will answer, without hesitation. The man just keeps quiet.) Today's quartet included a harridan who complained, with apparently genuine rancour, when the steward failed to open up her napkin and lay it across a small portion of her vast lap.

Eurostar should have non-American carriages in the same way that trains used to have non-smoking carriages. Actually, it would be best to have carriages without Americans, children, noisy eaters, football supporters, mobile telephone users or talkers. We always book the quiet coach but it hardly ever is. I hate noisy people and intend to write to Eurostar telling them that I suffer from hyper-augmented social phobia syndrome and that I cannot share a carriage with boisterous travellers.

When we arrived in Paris the Gare du Nord was festooned with the usual crowd of drivers holding up signs for the travellers they were due to meet. One of them was for someone called Coleman. We knew the driver wasn't waiting for us but I instantly remembered an understandable mistake my father made half a century ago when he arrived at Frankfurt airport, saw a similar sign and assumed that the driver had been sent for him. He wearily and gratefully handed over his suitcase, followed the driver to the waiting car, climbed in and fell asleep.

Three hours later he was shaken awake and found himself staring at a man he'd never seen before in his life. There had been a terrible mistake. My father had got into a car intended for someone else with the same name. The stranger took one look at my father, scowled, muttered something in German, turned away and dismissed the driver and car. It was dark and my Dad didn't have the foggiest idea where he was but he was clearly miles from anywhere. Eventually, he managed to find himself a taxi. He told the driver to take him to the nearest railway station which turned out to be 90 miles away. The whole episode took half the night and cost a small fortune in taxi and train fares.

Things like that were always happening to my Dad. He was brilliant but very forgetful. He invented miniature circuit breakers (those things that replaced fuses) but once arrived in Madrid wearing carpet slippers and without a passport. When I was four he built a television set on the kitchen table. In the 1960s he managed to fit a 13 amp socket into the back of a half wooden mini traveller, so that I could play music on a reel to reel tape recorder plugged into a three pin socket. I probably had the first car in the world with a built in tape recorder. It worked brilliantly and even coped with potholes with equanimity. But even when he was young he would walk past his own car and forget where he had put it.

He was a brilliant inventor, endlessly creative with hands and brain, and when he died I found a huge pile of patents in a filing cabinet. He had signed away all the rights to his employers. He told me once that one Christmas, when he was a boy, he desperately wanted a huge, top of the range Meccano set which he saw in the window of a local toy shop. His parents couldn't afford it. Instead, they bought him a fairly ordinary torch. The day after Christmas he met a friend and they compared presents. The friend, whose parents were well off, and who had been given the Meccano set coveted my Dad's new torch. So they swapped gifts. `The Meccano set must have cost a hundred times more than the torch,' said my Dad. `But we were young lads. Neither of us thought of that though I suppose his parents must have done.'

He believed very much in the power of drugs, believing that they would always work immediately and always be safe. I once suggested that he try taking Saw Palmetto for a prostate problem. He rang me the next day to complain that it hadn't helped. Tragically, his trust in doctors went too deep and he died when he was given a contraindicated drug. (There is no little irony in the fact that although one of my bestselling books is called *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You* both my parents were, in my view, killed by incompetent doctors.)

He never accepted that he was old or frail or even mortal. I tried to turn the conversation several times to practical matters. Funeral arrangements. Burial. Where stuff was kept. What he wanted me to do with his things. He looked at me as though I were mad and impertinent. Death? No, never. He didn't even leave details of his e-mail passwords and as a result neither I nor the solicitors handling his estate could access his e-mail account. His online presence just sort of died with him.

No one in the so-called caring industry seems to care much about the elderly and to many of them he was, it seemed, just an old, powerless citizen past his sell-by-date; he was just another plain old guy wrapped in various shades of beige. No one saw the inventor who had made their lives easier. No one saw the man who had volunteered for the Navy during the Second World War, and signed up for twelve years, because he was in a reserved occupation. He was just another wheezy old man with a bad back and striped pyjamas. Millions of good people are ignored by the people we pay to care; just because they are old.

In Paris the taxi driver who took us to our apartment was a wimp. He stopped to let other cars pull out. He stopped to let buses pull out. He even stopped to let pedestrians wander across the road. He then made a silly mistake and took us into one of Paris's dark subterranean underpasses; an underworld populated by tramps, vagabonds and the sort of people who earn their living filling empty plastic Evian bottles with water from the Seine and then selling them to tourists who aren't bright enough to check that the seal on the top is still intact. (Since there is no outlay the profit on this small example of entrepreneurial activity is vast and an afternoon's work will produce enough profit to purchase an armful of decent wine.) He had the unnerving knack of picking the slowest moving line of traffic and then switching lanes just as the neighbouring lane slowed and our present lane got going. He took twice as long as usual to reach our apartment. The end result was that the fare came to 35 euros instead of the usual 20. He would only take 25, refusing the rest and saying that the long hold up in the underpass was his fault and that he should pay. The Princess and I decided that he could not possibly be French.

Still, he was probably better than the taxi driver we had the last time we were in Paris. This one had a satellite navigation device which was constantly making noises and a dispatcher who never stopped talking. As if that wasn't enough he spent the entire journey with a mobile phone clamped to his ear with one hand while holding a cup of coffee with the other. And he kept racing alongside a chum in another taxi so that they could chat whenever they had to stop at traffic lights. I have never seen one man do as many things at once. He would say something on his mobile phone, swerve round a bus, chat to his dispatcher, curse his satellite navigation system, take a slurp of his coffee and dodge round a woman with a pram who had been foolish enough to venture onto a pedestrian crossing. And all the time, while busy with these other activities, he somehow managed to keep up a steady stream of invective directed at other drivers. And those who believe that hand signals have died out would have been impressed by his repertoire of signals, though I suspect that none of them is to be found in the French version of the Highway Code (if there is one).

We were most impressed that he managed to do all this reasonably successfully and to get through a 25 minute journey through central Paris, in the middle of the day, with only one collision. Moreover, the motorcyclist he hit wasn't even knocked off his bike. And, to be fair, that collision wasn't entirely our driver's fault. In any case the motorcyclist wasn't seriously hurt and dents and scratches are badges of honour to Parisians so no real harm was done.

This was the second time we had travelled in a taxi which collided with a motorcycle. On the first occasion the driver got out of the cab and started a fight with the motorcyclist. However, he made the mistake of trying to punch the motorcyclist in the face. It was a good blow but the motorcyclist was still wearing his helmet. I examined the man's fist and couldn't find any signs of broken bones but he was clearly in a considerable amount of pain and he had to stop at a café and buy a medicinal brandy before he could continue. He was crying when we had to leave him to catch our train, though this may have been as much a result of the size of the brandy as of the injury to his hand.

Taxi drivers in Paris are a peculiar lot. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that unlike London taxi drivers the ones in the French capital don't seem to have any training. There is no French equivalent to `the knowledge'. We have, in the past, simply told a driver to head for the Eiffel Tower since that is within walking distance of our apartment. (It is fairly easy to find your way across Paris when you realise that the most recognisable buildings, the Eiffel Tower and Sacre Coeur, are both visible from almost anywhere. Once you know where they are situated it isn't difficult to find your way around.) He had absolutely no knowledge of the city and seemed quite unable to read street names. This is not uncommon. Nevertheless, French taxi drivers are masters at finding the long way round. And if you leave them to their own devices they will take you to the Place du Tertre and try to sell you a painting or take you to the Rue St Denis and try to sell you a girl. In London the taxi drivers are professionals and the waiters are amateurs. In Paris it's the other way round.

Apart from the ignorance of the drivers there is one other problem with taxis in Paris. There aren't enough of them. There are 25,000 proper taxi cabs in London and just 15,000 in Paris - the same number that there were in the 1937 when the limit was originally laid down. When the French Government tried to increase the number of licensed taxis, the drivers went on strike and so the Government backed down (as French Governments always do). Finding a taxi in Paris is always something of a nightmare and in wet weather furious matrons with armfuls of shopping can regularly be seen wrestling for the right to commandeer an empty taxi. Tracking down a taxi by telephone isn't any easier. The last time I tried I spent 30 minutes listening to the Rolling Stones singing *I Can't Get No Satisfaction.* The French, like other foreigners, have no sense of irony.

5.

America, the nation of violence and theft, is paradoxically, full of prudes and snitches. According to American newspapers, which I bought at WHSmith in the Rue de Rivoli, several American schoolchildren have been suspended for jumping in puddles, one was referred to a drug awareness programme for accepting a breath mint from a friend, a six-year-old in Delaware was suspended and threatened with reform school for taking to school one of those camping utensils that serves as spoon, fork and knife, a nine-year-old was questioned about a plan to fire a paper pellet with a rubber band (he had to undergo psychological counselling before he was allowed back into class) and a 12-year-old girl in New York was led off in handcuffs for scribbling on her desk with an erasable pen. This is America. Land of slaves and thieves and hypocrites. Those who feel I am being harsh might like to know that after the First World War, the USA was known throughout Europe as Uncle Shylock. Here's what Winston Churchill said about America after the end of that war: `She (the USA) has by her hard treatment of the Allies accumulated probably nearly three quarters of the public gold in the world.' It was American greed during and after the First World War which caused the Germany currency to collapse, the subsequent rise of Adolf Hitler and the Second World War. The Americans then made a trillion tons more money out of that war – during which they sold armaments to Germany as well as to England. Modern America is wealthy because they robbed everyone else blind during the twentieth century's two big wars. There are undoubtedly many good things that can be said about America but generosity and compassion are not two of them.

6.

We live in a quiet street in Paris, opposite an embassy. There is, generally speaking, little traffic or noise. Except. At 1.00 a.m. on most mornings the peace of the night is broken by the annoying, high pitched whine of a 50cc motorcycle being ridden up the street at full speed. It is, presumably, a waiter from one of the cafés in the arrondissement taking a short cut home. Last night The Princess and I decided to take action designed to persuade the motorcyclist to take another route back home. I filled a bucket with water and then spent a little time working out the height of our building and estimating how far the noisy motorcyclist would travel in the time it would take for an object thrown out of our window to reach the ground. It worked like a dream. One minute the motorcyclist was whizzing along in the dry and a split second later he was whizzing through a thunderstorm. Perfect. Soaked, he stopped and looked around. But he didn't see us. The Princess and I were so delighted by our success that we stayed up celebrating until dawn. This is the second time we have successfully used water to drown out unwanted noises. And the beauty is that if the motorcyclist should complain to the police the evidence will soon disappear.

7.

Paris is surprisingly well stocked with shops which sell books in English. There are, of course, the obvious ones such as Bretano's in the Avenue de l'Opera and WHSmith and Galliano's in the Rue de Rivoli. The now legendary Shakespeare & Company opposite Notre Dame is the best known of the smaller shops but there are many more and it is still possible for the enthusiastic collector to find forgotten bargains on the shelves of many. Quite a few of the wooden bookstalls along the banks of the Seine also contain English books, which are often under-priced. Today I managed to pick up a first edition of Elliot Paul's masterpiece *Springtime in Paris;* this is one of the very best books about Paris and infinitely better than Hemingway's overrated *Moveable Feast.* Paul also wrote other forgotten masterpieces including *The Last Time I saw Paris.*

As we walked back home we found ourselves on the wrong side of a solid sea of cars heading for the Place de la Concorde. We managed to thread our way through the unmoving vehicles but then a woman driver in one of those indistinct, indefinable little grey cars that the Parisians always drive, realising that we were about to walk through the two foot gap between the front of her car and the back of the car she was following, deliberately moved forward to stop us getting through. Parisian motorists always do things like this. When they want to get out of their cars they don't park them they just stop and jump out, parking across pavements and pedestrian crossings without a thought for those they will inconvenience. The Princess and I were now trapped. There was no way forward. And behind us a long queue of pedestrians were lined up in the tiny spaces through which we had already passed. There was only one option. I climbed onto the bonnet of the car and helped The Princess up behind me. We then jumped down the other side and carried on wriggling our way through the traffic jam. The long line of pedestrians following us all did the same. The woman driver was incensed but she could not get out of her vehicle because the cars to the left of her and to the right of her were stopped only inches away. All she could do was open her window and shout at us to stop. Red in face and loud in screech she shouted things at us which were, I suspect, not entirely complimentary. There are times when I consider it an advantage to be linguistically challenged. Naturally, no one took any notice. Other motorists either concentrated on staring at their knuckles or continued to examine themselves in their driving mirrors. As we finally stepped onto the pavement we could still her shouting at us and we still couldn't understand a word she was saying.

On our way back to the apartment we were reminded just how awful English people with children can be. We sat in an empty café for a quiet cup of tea, and an English woman with four very noisy and badly behaved brats in tow burst in and deliberately chose the table right next to us. We didn't say a word but simply moved our teas to another table. Clearly offended by this the woman immediately got up and moved herself and her toxic brood to a new table, again right next to us. I couldn't help noticing that, like Duchess Fergie, she walked like a woman wearing Wellington boots which were three sizes too big for her. When the children started to throw food at each other we left. As we went I told the waiter that the children had mumps and that he should keep well away from them.

Reluctant to risk another café we celebrated our victory over the motorist by buying two large chocolate covered meringue and cream concoctions which used (in pre-politically correct times) to be known as Têtes du Negres but which are now called, rather prosaically, Meringue au chocolat. We ate them in the park near to the Rond Point. They were excellent and well worth the indigestion they will doubtless produce.

8.

We have an English friend in Paris who lives, with his French wife, in a duplex apartment near the Montparnasse tower. He has a model railway laid out on the top floor and for over a decade he has run it like a proper railway. There are several lines, three stations, three passenger trains, three goods trains and many points. For years he has not been able to go to bed until he has run the last train of the day. He has a timetable pinned to the wall and he sticks to it far more fervently than any British rail company honours such a commitment.

For some weeks now he has been very ill. He is dying. We visited him yesterday and at regular intervals his wife would apologise, leave us with him and then go upstairs. Moments later we would hear one of his trains running around the track he built himself. Although he was barely conscious he would smile and nod contentedly.

`If I don't run the trains on time he gets very agitated,' his wife explained when we left. `He knows the timetable off by heart and even though I don't think he can see the clock any more he knows if his trains are late.'

She said that she too had grown to enjoy the routine and the responsibility and that running the trains gave her life a strange purpose which she could not easily explain.

`He knows he is dying,' she said. `The other day he asked me if I would continue to run the trains after he had gone. I told him that I would run the trains for as long as I am able and then I will hire a man to run them for me.' She told us that there is a man they know who lives nearby and who ran the trains for them when they were away once at the funeral of a cousin. They have not had a holiday for twenty years because of the trains. `Jean-Jacque will follow the time table if I fall ill,' she said. `He can also repair the trains and the track if there are any problems.'

9.

A curious thing happened this morning. Two days ago we had arranged for a security firm to put a new steel door on our cellar in case anyone wants to steal the rubbish and the mice droppings we keep down there. The workmen were supposed to turn up this morning at 9.00 a.m. By 10.30 a.m. they hadn't turned up so, feeling rather angry, I rang up the shop. (Workmen in Paris are usually on time. They are difficult to pin down but usually on time once you've got things arranged.) The guy at the shop was very affable. `Oh, we did it yesterday,' he said. `We had time so we got it done for you. I have the new keys here.' So I went to the shop and fetched the keys and took a cheque.

Occasionally, French workmen do rather surprise us. On another occasion we were having problems with a slightly leaky chimney so we rang a building company. The boss came round in a smart suit and climbed out onto the roof to take a look. He gave me an estimate and sent his men round the same afternoon. They did the job very efficiently. When I received the bill it was for less than half the estimate. I queried this (thinking it was a ploy to rebill me later for more money). `Oh it wasn't as difficult as I thought,' said the boss. `So I reduced the bill.'

And when our ceiling needed some repair work, and the prospective paperwork looked like taking for ever, we hired some jolly but smelly Russians who came in a huge team, worked like mad and finished the job in two days. We couldn't understand a word they said and they couldn't understand a word we said so everything went very smoothly. I remember being quite miserable about the fact that I couldn't understand anything they said and then being enormously cheered when I discovered that they weren't speaking French. We communicated by sign language and it was efficient and speedy.

I was reminded of these workmen today. The Princess is learning Russian and yesterday she told me that the Russian word for railway station is pronounced `Vauxhall', though it is of course spelt very differently. To get the full effect of the word you have to use lots of throat, a la Oskar Homolka who was, although born in Vienna, my favourite screen Russian. I'm told that when Russian engineers came to England to look at our first railway stations they were taken to Vauxhall and thought that was the English word for railway station. (The world's first railway station was actually at Euston but that's another story.) So, in the same sort of way that the French borrow many of our words, so the Russian language has been enriched with a little English. The Princess, who is using one of those tapes which are sold in very expensive packages, and which guarantee to produce fluency within 90 days, learnt to say (in Russian, of course) `This is not a bank but it is a railway station'. I spent some time trying to work out ways in which this could be of practical value on our planned trip to Russia but decided that this sentence must be the modern equivalent of those now infamous phrase book sections giving advice about ostlers, feeding the horses and finding a room for the maid. Still, I can now say more than just `yes' and `no' in Russian and I can't wait to try out my new word next time we hire workmen. They will no doubt be impressed (if, perhaps, slightly confused) by my ability to tell them that they are in a railway station rather than a bank.

10.

I went to the pharmacy to buy an eyebath and when I got there I realised that I didn't have the faintest idea what the item I wanted was called in French. I created much amusement when I asked for `un petite bain pour mes yeux'. The assistant rather snootily told me that I wanted an `oiellière'. I felt very embarrassed by the hoots of laughter but since I'd got what I wanted I left.

The French language isn't anywhere near as extensive as English (we have 500,000 words and they struggle along with 100,000) but they do, I admit, have some rather fine words.

A flaneur, for example, is someone who saunters through the streets without any particular place to go. A dépaysement means a feeling of being somewhere odd and of having no point of reference. The phrase demi-vierge means a professional virgin. And the French even have a proper word (`le machin') for `thingy'. The curious thing is that although they have nicked a good many of our words (`le weekend' and `le picnic' for example) the one word they have given us (brassiere) is something of a joke. In French the word means a baby's vest. The piece of expensive lingerie used to support a woman's superstructure is known as a soutienne gorge.

But the real problem is that the French do tend to take their language rather too seriously. They are always quick to correct a foreigner's pronunciation and never slow to tell you if you use a word in the wrong way. The natives of other countries are always enthusiastic if you try to speak their language. Not the French. The last time I had a conversation in French, and thought I was doing really well, it turned out that the people I was talking to were English. And they were just as impressed by their linguistic skills as I was by mine. The joke is that when the French do try to speak English they usually make a real hash of it. Even the professional linguists sound more Maurice Chevalier than they think they do. If you've ever listened to tapes recorded by Michel Thomas you'll know precisely what I mean. To me the guy sounds like the third baddie in a Gerard Depardieu film.

The Princess and I have decided that we are no longer going to bother with the sexes of nouns or the finer points of irregular verbs. We don't want to write poetry. We just want to buy groceries and deal with the plumber (who will, in any case, probably be Polish). In future we will be content to speak French like natives, even if not natives of France. And we always cheer ourselves up with a thought from our friend Thumper Robinson who once pointed out: `In France even morons can speak French.'

And when we can't make the French understand us we will switch into English and make them struggle to understand us.

11.

Our French heating service company sent a man round two days ago to point a screwdriver at our French boiler. After five minutes of pointless but noisy activity he told us that we are in breach of a new regulation. Naturally, this comes as a huge surprise. He tells us that our cooker hood has to have an exit pipe in a separate room to our central heating boiler. He told us sternly that he will be reporting us to the authorities and that we have a month to rectify this serious breach of the regulations. It is, apparently, a serious threat to national security, global warming and money laundering activities. In addition I think the bureaucrats in Brussels are worried that the cooker fan will suck all the air out of our 19th century apartment and asphyxiate us. Obviously, only a cynic would suspect that the bureaucrats might be acting on behalf of an expanding industry looking for reasons to do unwanted things and sell unnecessary stuff.

Pretending not to understand what he was saying I thanked him for pointing out that the cooker is in the same room as the boiler. I told him that we had not previously noticed this and that we much appreciated his kindness in sharing his discovery with us. I smiled a lot and shook his grubby hand. He muttered a good deal of sotto voce stuff, gave us an official looking leaflet, picked up his tools and left. (I then scrubbed my hand in a strong antiseptic solution.)

Sadly, I know that this modest victory is as hollow as a politician's promise. The French national motto may be `See a notice, take no notice' but this is clearly an EU law and even the French are nervous about ignoring the dictates of our masters in Brussels - especially when there are good profits to be made. When they were making up their own laws the French did so with the enthusiasm of people who knew very well that they would ignore them. These days things are different.

According to the leaflet the boiler man has left behind, the problem seems to be that we have two extractor fans in the same room. I decide that there is an easier solution than knocking a huge hole in the wall between the kitchen and the living room: the extractor fan over the cooker doesn't work so if we have it removed we will satisfy the rules. We won't have an extractor fan over the cooker and so we won't have two fans in the same room. Bingo.

This morning I telephoned a local building firm and asked them to come and remove the offending piece of equipment. Two hulking brutes were with us within minutes, which should have warned me that something bad was going to happen. They looked like extras in an old Alain Delon film. The sort of baddies who get shot within the first ten minutes. They told me that it would cost 763 euros to remove the hood. I threw my hands in the air and shook my head. They brought the price down to 360 euros and agreed that they would take away the malfunctioning hood and leave it on the pavement downstairs where the official refuse lorry would take over and remove it. The whole job took them less than five minutes and involved removing four holding screws and disconnecting the electricity supply. I could have done it myself. Nick Clegg could have probably done it. They then held out their hands for the money.

I got my own back. I didn't tip them. Not one cent.

When they'd gone we managed to get a taxi to the Gare du Nord where we caught the train back to London.

12.

In Hereford we met a man in a park. He was selling copies of a booklet he'd written and published. It was the story of his life. I bought one. The man had a dog with him. A very old Alsatian. As I took the booklet from him I noticed that the man had three fingers missing from his right hand: the index finger, middle finger and ring finger were all gone.

`What happened to your hand?' I asked him. `How did you lose your fingers?'

`Circular saw,' said the man.

`Couldn't they sew them back on?' I asked.

`The dog ate them,' he said, looking down at the Alsatian with more affection than I might have expected.

Later we went to a café for a cup of coffee. The café was crowded and an elderly woman came over and asked if she could sit at our table. She was very smartly dressed and very proper. She told us that her name was Molly. We moved our cups around so that she could put down her tray. Without further ado she told us that she had met her late husband in 1935 and first kissed five and a half months later. `I was considered rather fast in my set,' she confessed. She was a substantial woman. If she'd been a ship she'd have been a tanker rather than an Americas Cup contender. She had clearly been built for stability, not speed or manoeuvrability. She confessed that she had been fat even when she was a girl. At school she had played Miss Muffett in the Christmas pantomime and one of the parents had been heard to remark that if she had sat on a tuffet she would have squashed it flat. She laughed a lot when she told us this.

She was eating a meat pie, potatoes, carrots and something mushy and green that I couldn't identify but which didn't look like peas. She told us that she was 85 (children and people over 80 always like to tell people their age) and looked at me rather quizzically. `I recognise you, don't I,' she said. I said it was unlikely. `You used to work in my bank,' she said. I shook my head. `I remember you,' she said. `Barclays. You were the manager.' She was very definite about it so I didn't argue. Who knows, maybe she was right and I've forgotten a great chunk of my life. She asked us if we lived locally. We said we didn't. She asked us where we'd come from that day. We said we'd come that day from Weston super Mare and that we'd driven up the Wye Valley, past Chepstow race course, Symonds Yat and Ross on Wye.

`During the War I used to hitch-hike from Yeovil to Weston super Mare,' she told us. `There were dances on the pier. Five of us used to go. The two prettiest stood out front and the other three hid behind a hedge.' She blushed when she told us that despite her size she was always one of the pretty ones out front. `We were picked up by all sorts of people,' she said. `We were picked up by top brass once or twice.' Remembering more, she blushed a deeper red. `Once, we were picked up by a meat lorry. We stood in the back hanging onto the meat hooks.' She put her hand in front of her face and laughed. When she moved her hands away we could see that the surfacing memories had made her blush. `I always behaved myself, mind you,' she said. `I was a married woman by then, of course.'

She didn't look like the sort of woman who'd ever stood in the back of a meat lorry, hanging onto a meat hook. But you can obviously never tell.

13.

We bought several packets of wild seeds to scatter along English verges. But on the back of each packet of seeds there is a warning which says: `Even though they are wild flowers these seeds should not be scattered in the wild without the authorisation of your local Nature Conservation Trust.' Now, the seeds we are planning to scatter are all native to England. So, what do we do? Oh dear. After microseconds of agonising we finally managed to come to a decision. Bugger the quango. Plant the seeds.

14.

Last night The Princess sent an e-mail to a local shop which we often drive past. It's a small shop, in a fairly run down area, but it has three large windows and there is always such a display of beautiful dresses that I slow down so that we can see them more clearly. The displays change regularly. In her e-mail The Princess congratulated the shop owner and told her how much she appreciated the beautifully organised windows. The shop owner e-mailed back today. She was clearly very happy. The Princess is always good at finding ways to make strangers happy.

15.

I collect books, stamps, old toy racing cars, lead soldiers and other people's odd sayings. One of the joys of travelling and sitting in cafés is the opportunity provided to eavesdrop. I don't deliberately listen to what strangers are saying, but some people speak loudly and it's impossible not to hear what they say to one another. If people talk loudly in public places then they must expect what they say to be written down for the entertainment of others. Here's a recent collect of my eaves-droppings (I've sometimes quoted two people speaking):

1. `She's been engaged more often than a public lavatory in central London.'
2. `English beer is like a fresh cowpat – brown, flat and warm.'
3. `You're 20 minutes early!' `Put it on my account, I'm bound to be 20 minutes late sometime.'
4. `Was there *anything* to your satisfaction this evening?' (A waiter in a restaurant in London, talking to a customer who had complained about everything.)
5. `Does my bum look big in this?' `Darling, your bum looks big in anything.'
6. `Don't wear a blue swimming costume in England or people will think you're bathing in the nude.'
7. `Thank you for the lovely tablecloth.' `Actually, you're supposed to wear it.'
8. `She could have been slimmer of the year for three years running – and she'd have still needed to lose weight.'
9. `Since we fought World War II to save Poland you'd think they'd give us a discount when they do our plumbing.'
10. `She works at the airport and at Christmas all her relatives get penknives and nail scissors as presents.'

11. `I don’t like surprises unless I’m ready for them.’
12. `If I wake up and I’m still here I know it’s already a good day.’
13. `That’s enough about me and my new job. What do you think about my new job?’
14. `There’s no future in history books.’
15. `Come on, the sell-by-dates will be up by the time we get this stuff home.’
16. `These will do as my flirty knickers. I’ll wear these when he’s going to be lucky.’ `By the time he sees them he’ll *know* he’s going to be lucky.’
17. `I never give money to fat beggars.’
18. `I bet you I can give up gambling before you can.’
19. `No, he wasn’t bitten by a dog. He was bitten by a German farm worker.’
20. `I was so embarrassed. I hadn’t got anything on under my clothes.’

16.

Our lane is a favourite spot for local dog owners to `walk’ their dogs. This is, of course, a euphemism. They really bring their dogs into the country so that the animals can open their capacious bowels and deposit their unwanted food residues on our doorstep instead of their own. Occasionally, the dog owners obey the signs which the council has pinned to the trees and take home these unwanted offerings. For this purpose they usually bring a little plastic supermarket bag which, when full, they tie at the neck. Clearly, the idea is that when the procedure has been completed the bag is taken back home and disposed of in some unspecified but hygienic way. Alas, many of the dog walkers who parade along the lanes of our bit of the Cotswolds have only got the hang of the first part of the process. Once their hound has filled the plastic bag they tie the neck and fling it into our garden. I confess that I never quite know what to do with these donations. However, if I ever catch anyone hurling their doggie bag onto our land I will know exactly what to do. I live in hope.

17.

I received a note telling me that a pleasant sum has been paid into my bank account for the photocopying of my books in schools and colleges. It would, of course, be far cheaper, easier and less wasteful for teachers to buy copies of my books rather than to photocopy them but the cost of photocopying comes from a different budget to the cost of buying books. And so teachers regularly photocopy whole chapters so that students can study them. They don’t seem to give a damn about how much money this wastes. After all, it isn’t their money they’re wasting.

At one point my books were being photocopied so often that one printer I know suggested that I put my books into spiral binding and print `suitable for photocopying’ on the front cover.

Sadly, this useful income is about to come to an end. I read the other day that the Government is planning to eradicate the remuneration that authors receive from schools and colleges. In the future teachers and lecturers will be able to photocopy articles and books without any payment being made to the author.

The whole principle of copyright is being challenged in a number of ways. Websites (and their users) now frequently argue that `copyright is theft’ and that authors who insist on being paid for their work are doing something anti-social if not actually downright criminal.

I’ve received a number of letters over the years from people demanding that I give my books away and I have long since given up trying to stop people stealing and reproducing my work on the internet.

In the bad old days, when thieving was done largely by men in masks and striped jerseys, I used to earn a modest living from the fees I received for the reproduction of articles and book chapters. The fees weren’t much by themselves but £50 here and £100 there soon added up. For some reason or other extracts from my work often appeared in textbooks and the fees for those reproductions were very welcome. I haven’t received any such fees for years. These days people just help themselves to whatever they want to steal. In recent years the whole concept of copyright has been given a good kicking. Whole articles of mine have been stolen and have appeared in magazines or online. Chapters have been taken from my books and miraculously appeared in other books. (`I have a photographic memory,’ was the excuse of one thieving author.) On the Web I have sometimes been credited as the author (though not paid of course) but more often another `writer’ has claimed credit for my work and simply lifted my piece and put his or her name on top of it. On at least one occasion a whole book of mine has been stolen, retitled and sold on the Web. The new Web-happy generation seem to regard copyright as an outdated concept, rather irrelevant. It isn’t irrelevant to me. I earn my living as a writer. Someone who steals from my website is stealing just as surely as if they steal from my home. Earning a living is pretty difficult for iconoclastic authors these days.

When I first started writing professionally I learned very quickly that it is unwise ever to sell copyright. The creator of the Wombles, Elizabeth Beresford, is reputed to have sold the copyright in her Wombles scripts for £50 each. She apparently received nothing from the television shows, from the repeats, from the cuddly toys or the other merchandise. Ian Fleming is reported to have sold rights in his James Bond books for £100,000, which doubtless seemed a lot at the time but which, if true, now looks to me like a darned good deal for someone else and a pretty poor deal for the late Mr

Fleming.

I always found that holding onto my copyright often made a vast difference to my earning capacity. I've always refused to sell my copyright, insisting on a royalty rather than a fixed fee. In the 1980s I recorded a vast series of taped advice lines for a service known as *The Telephone Doctor.* People could ring up a special number and listen to my advice on a whole range of medical topics. Within months the Royal Society of Medicine, the British Medical Association and the Royal College of Nursing had all found doctors to write and record their own scripts but I'm pleased to say that my lines beat off all the competition. It seemed that not many people wanted the `official' advice. At its peak around 30,000 people were ringing *The Telephone Doctor* every week. (A friend of mine who found out how many people were ringing in said: `Gosh, I wouldn't like to do that. How on earth do you answer so many calls?') When the entrepreneur who set up the service was looking for a doctor to record the lines he talked to three doctors. The other two media doctors (whose names were exceedingly well-known at the time) both preferred to take a hefty fee to record the lines. Like them I was offered £2,500 (a decent sum in the 1980s) but I said I didn't want a fee but would take a royalty on every call. The guy who was setting up the business preferred my choice because it meant I had more involvement in the project, and because it meant he didn't have to fork out a big chunk of money upfront. The scripts took me a week to write and I spent another (very exhausting) week sitting in a studio recording them all. The lines ran for quite a number of years and in the end millions of people used them and were, I hope, helped by the advice. Because I had retained the copyright I received a decent royalty on every phone call. In the end I earned several hundred times the fixed fee I was offered. I was able to use the money to help take risks when publishing and advertising books which threatened the establishment.

But now the principle of copyright is threatened. Web thieves and governments everywhere seem to be opposed to the payment of fees and royalties to the originators of new material. Actually, I can understand governments not approving of copyright. If they aren't able to earn a living from their work authors won't be able to write books. And whatever the bloggers and twits might claim the book always was, is, and will be, the most potent influencing force in the media. The Central Intelligence Agency is on record as saying that books are a more powerful influence on society than films, television, radio, newspapers or anything else.

18.

I went downstairs this morning and found The Princess kneeling on the stone floor in the dining room. I didn't need to ask her what she was doing. She had found a dying woodlouse and was trying to keep it alive by transferring it to a piece of damp tissue before taking it outside to put into a comfortable spot in a pile of logs.

The Princess is writing a book about our garden, and the small creatures with whom we share it, and has spent several weeks poring over rare and difficult to find volumes about woodlice, wasps, butterflies and other garden glories.

Apparently, woodlice are crustaceans and have far more in common with lobsters than spiders. They need water. Like spiders they come into the house when they know the weather is going to be bad (they are a much more accurate and practical source of weather information than the Meteorological Office which today warned us all that bad weather is coming and that we must protect ourselves against falling branches and against our roofs being torn off, without giving any advice about how we should do this) but, because of the central heating, they soon start to dry out and before long they become seriously ill. When they are too dry, and desperately need a little water, some varieties curl up on their backs into a ball as a prelude to dying.

Because we live in the middle of a wood we share our home with a constant stream of woodlice and spiders. The spiders can look after themselves very well but the woodlice need almost constant attention. Our downstairs rooms contain innumerable intensive care units where recovering woodlice can be seen reviving themselves on pieces of damp tissue paper.

19.

Our Government seems to have plenty of money to spend on putting stupid concrete barriers down the middle of our motorways, for planting chicanes in perfectly straight roads and for interrupting our pavements with pimply red slabs which pose a real hazard to wobbly pedestrians. (All these are, inevitably, a result of orders from Brussels.) Oh, and turning perfectly decent sections of motorway into `managed motorways'! (This means creating endless traffic queues by pointlessly limiting traffic to 40 mph. I am convinced that `managed motorways' were created by communists who want to destroy our society by damaging our economy and pushing up our oil consumption. Traffic congestion costs the British economy £4.3 billion a year. Around £4 billion of that is a direct result of unnecessary speed regulations on motorways.)

But we don't have any money to mend potholes. (The bureaucrats in Brussels obviously don't care about potholes.) And yet potholes don't just lead to a bumpy ride. They are dangerous. People drive round them and crash into one another. We drove into one this afternoon that was so large people were living in it.

One of the problems is that repairing a pothole in England costs as much as building a block of flats in Germany.

Repairing a pothole isn't difficult. A man with a degree in brewing sciences digs out the hole a bit more. And a man with a degree in art history fills it in with some black tarry stuff. A man with a degree in economics then drives a small steamroller over it. It's not even as difficult as reading the news and that's one of the easiest damned jobs on the planet. (With the possible exception of being a clothes model, for which narcissism and no brain at all are the only requisites.) And we could use the income from our speed cameras to pay the cost of the navvies and the black tarry stuff. But that won't happen. The money from the speed cameras is already earmarked for paying bonuses to incompetent civil servants in some quango somewhere. And the only way that things are going to change is that next year the potholes will be even bigger.

20.

An advertising agent wants to know if I want to start buying advertising again. He suggests that I might consider advertising direct to bookshops. No thanks. When the film of *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War* came out I wrote to every bookshop in the country. I sent them all a cover of the book, and I offered posters, photographs and promotional leaflets. I gave very specific details of exactly how they could order without effort from their usual wholesalers. I bought full page advertisements in *The Bookseller* (described as `the organ of the book trade'), pointing out that the book could be ordered through all wholesalers or direct from Publishing House. I told bookshops I was buying display advertisements in five major national newspapers (*The Guardian, The Independent, The Daily Telegraph, Daily Mail* and *The Times*).

I should have saved my money. Not one bookshop took any copies of the book and so as far as I am aware none sold any. Not one. And even if I had been able to persuade the shops to take some copies (on sale or return) they would have probably been tucked away in some hidden corner of the shop. It was reported recently in *The Times* that Waterstones, the bookshop chain, was allegedly charging publishers £7,000 for a book to appear on their Paperback of the Year list. Publishers have to pay a fee if they want their books displayed in the window or on the table at the front of the shop.

The truth is that the bookshops wouldn't touch the book of *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War* because it was self-published. They weren't interested in the fact that very few major films are made from novels, or that no other self-published novel has ever been turned into a film. Bookshops don't like independent publishers. And that's one of the many reasons that they are dying. (Incidentally, having a film made of a novel is one of the few win-win situations in life. The author, who has nothing whatsoever to do with the film, cannot lose. If people like the film he can take the credit. If people hate the film he can blame the director, the screenwriter, the producer, the stars and the man who operates the clapper board.)

For the first 15 years of my career as an author I could go into any bookshop in the land and find my books on the shelves. There were sometimes whole shelves of my books on sale. But since I started publishing my own books I have hardly seen a copy of any of my books in a bookshop. And yet during that time I have sold more books than ever, and made more money from my books than I ever did when I was writing genuine best-sellers for London publishers.

Just about the only books of mine that did force their way into bookshops were *England Our England* and *Gordon is a Moron.* I remember that one week I sold 2,500 copies of *England Our England* to bookshops in England. That's damned good for a book on politics.

Naturally, neither book featured in the official bestseller lists. However many books a self-publisher sells he or she will never get onto the bestseller lists.

Surprisingly, you don't need to sell all that many books to get onto the hardback lists in England. The lists aren't compiled according to the number of books that are sold but according to some mysterious measure which ensures that only bookshop sales count and a book will only appear on the lists if it has been `registered'. For many years I sold thousands of copies a week of hardback editions of books such as *Alice's Diary, The Village Cricket Tour* and *The Man Who Inherited a Golf Course* and I know that the sales of these, and other books, were higher than the sales of many books which were sitting proudly in the official lists.

Still, my books had a good long life. Today, most bestsellers now have the shelf life of dairy produce. Book shops return books in the afternoon if they haven't sold well in the morning. And that's the end of it.

21.

There are visitors staying at a nearby house which is usually rented out to holidaymakers. We can just glimpse the house through the trees but yesterday we could hear a good deal of noise coming from that direction. When I walked to the greenhouse to water the plants I looked across and saw a group of six or seven young men standing around. The men all looked to be in their twenties. One of them was holding a badminton racket. I watched as he repeatedly hit a shuttlecock high into the air. I was puzzled because I couldn't see what he was trying to do. And then the other young men gave out a great cheer. One of the men placed a long and very rickety ladder against the side of the house and climbed up to the guttering. The house has three floors and is very high at this point. After a surprisingly long search the man on the ladder pulled the shuttlecock out of the guttering and threw it down. There was another loud cheer. And then the game started again. That's all they did. All day. One man would hit a shuttlecock up into the air until it became stuck in the guttering. A second man would then climb up a very dodgy ladder and rescue the shuttlecock. They seemed to find this aspect of the game to be hysterically funny for they laughed a good deal as the ladder was climbed. When it got too dark to see what they were doing they stopped and went indoors. But early this morning the game started again. I couldn't understand who could makeup such a pointless and dangerous game and then be amused by it for ten hours at a time. I couldn't understand why a group of men should rent a house in the country and spend all their time in such a bizarre way.

`Who are those men who hired the house just up the way?' I asked a local who knows everything that happens in the area.

`They are foreign,' he said. He shrugged and pulled a face. `German,' he added, as though this explained everything. And, on reflection, I realised that it does, for the Germans are a strange people with a peculiar sense of humour.

22.

We were walking in lanes just a mile or two from our house when we stopped to admire an old-fashioned cottage garden. There was, inevitably, a mass of birds about and The Princess, whose study of wildlife has become a serious hobby, suddenly touched me on the arm and said, out loud: `Look at that pair of great tits!' Moments later a red-faced woman rushed into and out of view, heading for the house. She was fastening a bikini top as she ran and had clearly been sunbathing. We hurried on our way. I once compiled a list of collective nouns and, as we fled, I asked The Princess what she thought one should call a concatenation of great tits. `A bosom?' she suggested.

23.

I was quite unable to buy ordinary second or first class postage stamps anywhere. Every retail outlet (apparently the new term for `shop') had sold out and assistants told me that the Royal Mail had refused to provide fresh supplies. Even Post Offices had sold out. There were no stamps on sale anywhere. And so I couldn't post any letters. I couldn't pay my bills. I couldn't reply to readers. The Royal Mail was abusing its monopoly position in this outrageous way because wise citizens (mostly people running small businesses) had realised that by buying stamps before the 30th April (when the price is due for a massive, inflation busting rise) they could save a little money and, perhaps, stave off bankruptcy for a little longer. Royal Mail has stopped printing stamps because they're frightened that awful members of the public might buy a few of the old stamps at the old price. And so we cannot post off any parcels. I sometimes think that the Royal Mail is redesigning itself to reduce the amount of work it has to do.

`Do you have any brown brogues in size 12?' I asked one counter clerk. She was the sort of person who only feels really comfortable when wearing a label, one of those plastic covered identity cards carrying her name and title, dangling on a cord round her neck or pinned to her lapel. She had a chest like a pouter pigeon.

`What are those?' she asked, looking genuinely puzzled.

`Shoes,' I replied.

She considered this for a moment. `We don't sell shoes,' she said eventually.

`I thought I'd try,' I said. `You don't sell stamps so I thought you might sell shoes.' I smiled, bade her good day and hobbled off.

I tried to ring to see if anyone knew where there might be a stash of available stamps for ready money. It was, of course, a futile exercise.

If you ever want to taste eternity try telephoning Royal Mail. Almost any of their numbers will do but I do particularly recommend ringing your local sorting office where it is almost certain that no one will ever answer the damned telephone. Maybe they don't know what it is. They hear it ringing (just above the sound of the television) but aren't sure what they're hearing. It's easier to get hold of MI6 than it is to contact the local sorting office. They make GPs surgeries look accessible.

I have, however, managed to acquire details of the new pricing structure and I've discovered that to post a copy of my *Diary of a Disgruntled Man* to Australia will cost just under £15 (not counting the cost of typing out the label, sticking on the label, buying the padded envelope, putting the book in the bag, sticking on the stamps and taking the parcel to the post-box. The Royal Mail has exclusively killed our export trade. And it has, I suspect, also destroyed the chances of *any* publisher or bookseller selling books to foreign buyers. Bravo Royal Mail. Destroying our export trade is just the way to bring the nation out of the deepening and lengthening (and oft-denied) recession.

It is often said that Edgar Allan Poe was inspired by the catastrophes which affected his life to write *The Murders in Rue Morgue*, *The Fall of the House of Usher, The Pit and the Pendulum, The Black Cat* and many other horror stories. It's a good job poor old Poe didn't have to deal with Royal Mail, the Post Office, British Telecom or British Gas or heaven knows how depraved and terrifying his stories might have been.

24.

A huge tanker was parked in the lane. It stank. It wasn't difficult to see why. On the sides of the tanker were painted the words: *Septic Tanks Emptied*. And underneath was the single word *Guaranteed* and underneath that were the words *Money Back If Not Satisfied*. The driver, a small man in a brown boiler suit, was leaning against the bonnet smoking a cigarette.

`How can you give a guarantee on septic tank emptying?' I asked the driver. `How would people know?'

He thought about this for a moment. `Dunno,' he replied, with a toothless grin. `But if anyone is unhappy with our service we give 'em back their money and everything we sucked out of their tank - all delivered to their door with our compliments.'

It took a moment or two for this to sink in. I shuddered at the thought. `Do you have many unhappy customers?'

`Not one!' said the driver. `Not one complaint in 30 years.'

25.

When I was at medical school the half-wits who ran the place introduced a system of continual assessment. Instead of taking examinations at the end of the year we were to be tested at regular intervals throughout the year by filling in multiple choice questionnaires. The very first test we were given was designed to award marks for correct answers and to take away marks for incorrect answers. We were given one mark for each correct answer but had five marks deducted for every incorrect answer. It seemed to me that the way the system had been designed almost everyone would score a negative final total and so at the end of the examination I handed in a blank paper. I duly came top of the class with nought. I had done well by doing nothing. When she was a young girl The Princess had a similar experience with an examination in the English language. The tutor had created a scheme whereby students lost marks for putting punctuation in the wrong places but gained no marks for putting it in the right place. She rightly and sensibly realised that the best solution was not to put in any punctuation at all.

And it now occurs to me that this must be the philosophy being followed by Royal Mail. If they make life intolerably difficult for their customers they will have less mail to deal with and instead of making a big loss every year they will make a small loss, break even or, by concentrating their efforts on a few profitable areas of their business they may actually make a profit.

I can see this philosophy proving popular with all sorts of people. Rail companies who don't run any trains can never be accused of failing to meet expectations. Councils who do nothing can't be accused of doing a bad job, or letting people down.

26.

I've spent ten days filling in my tax return. They've simplified it. Ten whole productive days gone. That's two working weeks for a bureaucrat. Actually, given their working hours and mine it's probably four working weeks for them. Eight.

Part way through the mind numbing process I found the half-pints at HMRC had sent me the wrong supplementary forms. I rang up and asked a clerk to fax me the right forms so that I could get on with filling in the forms before my mind atrophied. `We can't do that,' she said. `We don't send forms by fax.' So I asked to speak to a manager. He said the same. `OK,' I said, `then in that case I wish to register a formal complaint. You've sent me the wrong forms and now you're refusing to put things right.' There was a slight pause. `Oh,' said the manager. `Well, under the special circumstances...' The forms were faxed within two minutes. Yet more evidence for my argument that when dealing with any Government department (but particularly HMRC) an aggressive approach pays off. I rang the pensions agency the other day and my first words were: `I want to make a formal complaint.'

`What about?' asked the person on the other end of the line. `I don't know yet,' I replied. `You haven't told me anything yet.'

`What will I do if you go senile?' asked The Princess. `I can't possibly fill in the tax forms.'

`Don't worry,' I told her. `I'll continue to fill them in. They'll never notice and I won't care.'

27.

I received a letter from a reader in Durham who has a pet cockerel called Gregory. She explains that he is named after her hero Gregory Peck. I have written back and confessed that the plant on my study window-sill is called Robert, after the lead singer of Led Zeppelin.

28.

A couple who live nearby but come from Norfolk have three daughters and a pug dog. They are the sort of people whose photographs regularly appear on the crowded society pages of those county magazines that no one ever reads but that people buy to put on the hall table next to their telephone. The daughters are known to us as the Norfolk broads. The father scowls at everyone. The mother sneers. The three daughters, who have clearly inherited these characteristics, all scowl and sneer. I swear that the dog is by far the most handsome of them all.

29.

We bought the first *Downton Abbey* television series a few days ago and today we watched the first few episodes. We were both very disappointed. It may be critically acclaimed but to us both it seemed dull, predictable and hackneyed. The characters seemed to us to be two dimensional clichés, the plots straight out of a soap opera and the dialogue certainly not sharp or witty. It seems to have been designed for undemanding but supercilious Audi drivers and doesn't compare with classics such as *Brideshead Revisited, Reilly: Ace of Spies* or *Raffles.*

The building they use for the Abbey is Highclere near Newbury (which is also used in some of the excellent Jeeves and Wooster programmes that were made some years ago with Stephen Fry and Hugh Laurie). I recognised the house because I delivered fish there when I was a medical student. I had a job with a local fishmonger for two weeks during my first year's summer holiday. I remember driving up to the front door and being told to take my small parcel of fish to the gun room at the side of the house.

30.

The village shop employs a girl whose name is Olivia. But everyone calls her Lisa. I asked the owner of the shop the origin of this pseudonym. `She's always moaning,' explained the shop keeper. `And so we call her Moaner Lisa.'

MAY

1.

A friend had a pet duck which was eaten by a fox while sitting on her eggs. Surprisingly, the fox did not eat the eggs. Our friend then persuaded a pet hen to sit on the duck eggs until they hatched. When the young ducklings were old enough to waddle to the pond the hen went mad with panic, clearly frightened that her brood would drown. For the next two years the hen had her own chicks which did not go near the water. But in the following year the hen was again given duck eggs to sit on. This time, when they hatched, the hen flew straight to a small island in the middle of the pond. She stood there and called for the ducklings to follow. They, of course, could not fly. They had to paddle across to her. The hen's actions could not have been a reflex; it was a complex, learned action. We assume animals aren't intelligent because they don't, and can't, do the things we do. But all animals are more intelligent than we suspect.

2.

While reading a copy of *Fanny by Gaslight* by Michael Sadleir (published in 1940) I found this quote. `By trade Warbeck was a book publisher, who did a little writing on the side. He was seldom shocked by the things which shocked the British public, but often found either painful or disgusting things in which that public took delight. Consequently his tastes and theirs were apt not to coincide. Further, his instinct for novelty outran the normal; and he had not even yet learnt to make allowance for the reaction time - seven to ten years - which was common form among his compatriots when faced with any new idea in the practice or appreciation of matters of the mind. As a result, he published books far ahead of any possible acceptability, failed to sell them and was duly chagrined when, years later, his competitors published others of similar character and got away with them. Further again, he refused to admit that political conviction justified an author in distorting truth or lapsing from literary integrity - a prejudice which lost him many opportunities for profit, but in return won him no particular esteem.'

Apart from the fact that I am an author who does a bit of publishing on the side (rather than the other way round) I have, I think, found my fictional alter ego.

The ego has landed.

3.

We met an old friend of ours. He had written to let us know that he would be in London and so we took the train to Paddington so that we could meet him. We are, as always, shocked by just how dirty and scruffy London has become. There are very few rubbish bins and the streets are constantly littered with unwanted paper and plastic. In Paris there are rubbish bins every few yards and there is very little rubbish on the pavements or in the gutters. I wonder if there could be a link?

Jimmy, our old friend, used to be a photographer on a local newspaper. He did well and at the age of 27 he gave up his job and became a freelance, working for several national newspapers. He made good money and in the 1970s he borrowed £35,000 from a bank, added to it the £15,000 he had saved and bought a street of houses in Lancashire. A whole street. He then borrowed another £7,000 (with no other security other than the houses he had just bought), did them up and rented them out. The rents he received more than covered the amount he had to pay the bank each month.

Twenty years later he sold the row of houses to a property company and netted £1,800,000 after tax. He used a quarter of the money to buy a beautiful house in the French countryside and invested the rest. He lives well and is now worth a small fortune.

Jimmy told me that he nearly didn't make it.

`When I worked for the local paper I was told by the editor to get as many people as I could into every picture,' he told me. `In those days local papers made much of their money by selling prints of pictures that had been in the paper.'

`When I managed to get my first chance with one of the nationals I was merely a stand-in for a regular guy who was away on another job. I had to take a picture of some politician whose name I've forgotten. He was opening something. As instructed I took a whole roll of film. But because I was used to taking pictures for the local paper I did the same as I always did - I made sure that I'd got lots of people in every shot. When I put the undeveloped roll of film on the train to London I thought I was a really big cheese. A few hours later I didn't think I was such a star. The picture editor rang me and tore my head off. `There are 27 people in every picture,' he complained. `And if I look very hard I can just about make out the Minister!' The picture editor had to use an agency picture.

Jimmy was lucky; he had a second chance and took pictures for what used to be called Fleet Street for a good few years. `I'm glad I got out when I did,' he confessed. `I had the best years. These days there's no money to be made. Every kid has a mobile phone with a camera in it. The papers get their pictures in seconds. There's no need for freelance professionals. There's no need to put a roll of film on the train. And there's no such thing as an exclusive anymore.'

He said he'd been back to his row of houses in Lancashire. `I just wanted to see what they looked like. Surprisingly, they look exactly the same as they did when I tarted them up. Nothing has changed.'

He admitted that he had the best years for making money out of property too.

`I was lucky,' he said. `I was born at the right time.'

There was more than luck to it, of course.

Lots of people were born when he was. But not many of them did as well as he has.

Afterwards we spent an hour or so sitting in Hyde Park having a picnic. Within five seconds of our sitting down a foreigner who didn't speak any English had appeared in front of us demanding money. I assumed he was a representative of the local council and gave him £4.50 - the rental fee for sitting in three deckchairs for one hour. We had a good view of the lake, though the endless stream of joggers and power walkers was rather irritating. Sadly, we had to leave our deckchairs well before our hour was up. The park is full of untethered dogs which wander thither and hither without restraint. The local constabulary, sitting in their motor car, seemed not in the slightest bit interested in this clear breach of the by-laws.

A genuine fear of loose, marauding dogs is a healthy default condition and The Princess and I decided to leave the park while we still had our preferred number of limbs and digits. It is sensible to be afraid. It is the ruthless, reckless dog owners who have a problem: many are, or behave like, psychopaths. The Princess and I used to love walking but these days we rarely wander out on country trails or in public parks because we know that if we do we are almost bound to come face to fangs with platoons of uncontrolled, aggressive dogs and their aggressive owners. We would love to go walking in places like Westonbirt but what's the point? When you have to pick out a couple of large sticks before you set off for a gentle stroll it seems much more sensible to stay at home. (One of the advantages of old age is that one can carry a stick without attracting critical comment. Walking sticks are excellent, not just as aids for crumbling limbs, but also for poking people with.) The vast majority of the dogs out in public are off the lead (even though this is against the law) and the rest are often on those damned extendable leads. With the dog pulling ahead and the owner struggling along behind it is clear who is in charge; the dog is the pack leader and this is always dangerous. Pack leaders eat babies. And the smaller the owner the bigger and more aggressive the dog is likely to be. The Barboured hooligans who breed so well in the Cotswolds measure their social status by the size of their dog.

Over 6,000 people a year are admitted to hospitals as a result of dog bites. And as foreigners and beggars discover that they can claim extra benefit payments if they have a dog or two so that figure is increasing rapidly - at the moment it is more than doubling annually. That's a big drain on the NHS in particular and the economy in general. (In addition, 5,000 postmen are bitten every year - resulting in 15,000 sick days.)

Many of the owners of all the fashionable Rottweilers, bull terrier cross, Alsatians, Dobermans, pit bulls and so on don't bother to buy a dog licence, don't pick up after their dogs and abuse non-dog owners or the owners of other dogs who dare to protest. (Why on earth would any sane human being have a pit bull as a pet? Once they have their jaws around something soft and human these creatures only ever let go in order to get a better grip. Crocodiles would make more sensible pets.) It is people, not dogs, who need licences.

Instructions to muzzle aggressive animals are simply ignored. Dangerous animals are allowed to roam wild and the police are not in the slightest bit interested. The number of stray dogs has soared by 70% in the last four years, and will doubtless continue to rise. People buy dogs for all the wrong reasons (to make money or as weapons) and when they discover how expensive a dog can be they just let them loose in the road. When animals fall sick, and require expensive vet bills, they are simply abandoned.

Cycle tracks are taken over by dog walkers who always let their dogs off the lead (dogs chase bicycles) and parks are too dangerous for children to play in. Dog owners make a huge fuss when there is talk of not allowing dogs to be let off the lead in public parks used by children. I once wrote an article describing the number of children who had been savaged in a local children's park and the attitude of aggressive dog owners was: `There's a hospital nearby, what's the problem?' When I wrote a column about children being made blind by toxocara an eminent dog lover wrote publicly admonishing me. `This only affects about 50 children a year,' she wrote. She was absolutely right, of course. `Only' 50 kids a year go blind because of toxocara. This doesn't mean that those kids go blind temporarily. Or a bit blind. They aren't just blind on Wednesdays or for two weeks. They are blind for ever and ever amen. As The Princess points out they will never see their Christmas presents, never see patterns in clouds in the sky, never see a daisy chain, never see a kitten with a ball of wool, never catch a leaf in autumn and never see a dog catching a Frisbee. All because some bastard dog owner was too bloody selfish and lazy to behave responsibly.

None of this is the dogs' fault, of course. The Princess and I don't blame them for a moment. It's the damned owners, as tight as Kelsey's nuts, who should be hung, drawn and quartered and then, just to make sure they really suffer, subjected to a full HMRC audit inspection.

Our dog troubled afternoon in Hyde Park was followed by a pleasant walk back to the station through the Islamic hinterland that is now Paddington.

I used to enjoy going to Paddington before the powers that be decided to bugger things up. The authorities never seem able to leave a London railway station alone for more than five minutes. The new St Pancras station looks quite pretty from the outside but inside it is a shambles. Once a Eurostar train is announced there is a mad scramble for the escalator and there is more pushing and shoving than you would expect to find at a Debenhams's January sale. But the lunacy has reached new heights at Paddington where Brunel's magnificent and conveniently designed station has been reorganised by planners with all the style and good sense of blind squirrels. In the good old days the taxi rank was an easy walk from (and to) the trains. Today, tourists need hiking boots and a compass to find the taxi rank and sensible and experienced travellers simply walk out into Praed Street and pick up a taxi there. Every taxi driver I've spoken to regards the changes as making life more difficult for everyone. I can only assume that developers and the (in my view) mortally pompous, irresponsible, patronising, incompetent, contemptuous, arrogant buffoons at English Heritage (surely the worst of our 476 million quangos) have got together to make their mark on our lives by using their seemingly unending supply of taxpayers' money to turn an efficient and good looking public facility into something I now regard as ugly and inefficient. I wonder if anyone working at English Heritage has ever had a proper job, or if they have spent their working lives cocooned in a taxpayer-funded world of luxury and waste, where they can specialise in ineptitude, impracticality and a total disregard for the value of other people's money?

Of course, it isn't just London which has been reorganised by idiots. The Gare du Nord in Paris was once a station people actually visited even when they didn't want to travel. The restaurant there, as at all French mainline stations, was renowned. Today, travellers wanting to reach the Eurostar terminal need stout shoes and determination. And it's necessary to allow an extra thirty minutes to navigate your way through the numerous obstacles which interfere with the route from the station entrance to the platform.

4.

Here's an odd thing.

The price of new books has been falling steadily for years. Although all costs have rocketed books are now much cheaper (in actual prices) than they were twenty years ago.

When I first published *Alice's Diary* in 1989 I sold it for £9.99 - which was the sensible price for a small hardback. I still sell the book for the same price but now it seems expensive. And yet the cost of printing the book is at least twice what it was. And every other cost imaginable has soared. Twenty years ago I could charge £1 for postage and packing of any book and be confident that the fee would cover the cost. Today, it costs me £7.22 in postage to send a copy of *Diary of a Disgruntled Man* to France and around £15 to send the same book to an address in Australia. With those sort of postage costs it is impossible to make a profit out of selling books to foreign readers. So, having spent years trying to build up the `export' side of my publishing venture I have had to pretty well abandon selling books abroad. (I did discover one thing, however. Far fewer of the parcels we sent abroad went missing after we started writing `contains a book' on the outside. One can only assume that customs officers and postmen aren't much interested in stealing books. I keep meaning to get a rubber stamp made to use on parcels posted to destinations within the United Kingdom.)

But (and here's the irony) old Penguin paperbacks which originally cost 2/6d are now sold in Oxfam shops for a smidgeon under £3. That means that old paperbacks have been the best investment anyone could have made. If you'd filled a warehouse with old paperbacks in the 1960s you would have made a fortune. (The dear old orange and green Penguins were a perfect size to carry in a pocket or small bag. It has only been in recent years that publishers have started producing paperbacks the size of tree trunks.)

The collapse in real book prices has recently been speeded up by the internet, of course. But I have a suspicion that when real books come bouncing back into fashion (as they will) the prices will soar simply because at the moment relatively few books are being printed (and many authors are simply being allowed to go out of print).

5.

A reader who lives in the far north of Scotland has written to tell me that she calls her bowels `the willows' because they are always full of wind. I have suggested that she contact the Government in the hope that someone in the natural energy department may be able to work out a way to take advantage of her stormy condition.

6.

My collection of eaves-droppings continues to grow. Here's the best of the latest batch:

1. 'I didn't have any breakfast, and by the middle of the morning I was ravishing.'
2. 'She bought a book called *How to train your dog* but she left it on the sofa and the puppy chewed it to bits.'
3. 'If he started a rock garden even the rocks would die.'
4. 'When asked to name the four seasons one of the kids said: salt, pepper, mustard and vinegar!'
5. 'I can't afford to travel first class any more but I always walk down the carriages and get out of the first class in case anyone I know sees me get off the train.'
6. 'He's one of those people who says: `I always speak my mind' and then takes offence if anyone else speaks theirs.'
7. 'He rented a car and washed it before he took it back.'
8. 'Mummy, is this the fat, thieving bastard Daddy was talking about?'

9. ‘Napoleon just gave the world a silly hat. Wellington gave the world really useful boots.’
10. ‘He said he wanted to paint the sea and I said I’d always quite liked the colour it was.’
11. ‘I can eat anything I like. It’s only afterwards I have problems.’
12. ‘Women have better memories because they have memory glands.’
13. ‘I sometimes wish I were older just so that I’d know I hadn’t died young.’
14. ‘I call my in-laws Fred and Rose. After the Wests.’
15. ‘It fell into the back of our lorry.’
16. ‘Does he paint `Oh, look, it’s a…’ or `Are you sure it’s the right way up?’
17. ‘When the world ends there will be a Dormobile and a shopping trolley left and my brother-in-law will own them both.’
18. ‘Do you think it’s a coincidence that `age’ rhymes with `beige’?’
19. ‘He’s chairman of the local malevolent society.’
20. ‘He carries a screwdriver so that he can even steal stuff that’s screwed down.’

7.

I discovered this morning that one of our drains was blocked. For nearly an hour I poked around with sticks trying to clear the blockage. I couldn’t budge it although I did succeed in disrupting the blockage enough to release some pretty malodorous fumes. I had pretty well resigned myself to calling in the professionals when a chap who works on one of the nearby farms came trundling along the lane on his tractor. He saw me, stopped and came over to see if he could help. When I had explained he did not hesitate. He knelt down and stuck his bare arm into the pipe, rummaged around for a few moments and then pulled out a large handful of brown, glutinous material. He deposited this on the ground nearby and then plunged his hand back into the pipe. He did this half a dozen times until the blockage was cleared. I thanked the Good Samaritan profusely and then, before I thought what I was doing, I held out my hand. He rubbed his hand on his trousers and we shook. When he had driven away I rushed up the garden and rinsed my hand under the garden tap for five minutes. I then opened the back door with my left hand and asked The Princess to pour half a bottle of Dettol into the sink. I scrubbed my hands until they were almost raw.

8.

A retired banker we know vaguely, who lives in a large house nearby, has a huge gravel driveway. Every time a visitor drives on the gravel and leaves wheel marks he rushes out with a rake to make everything look smooth again. One deliveryman tells us that he always leaves with a lot of wheel spin. He says he doesn’t feel at all bad about this because the man is condescending and rude.

9.

`Why do you always wear a hat?’ asked a man I know. He is a small, mean-mouthed man with the eyes of a guilty ferret and the pallor of a professional invalid. He speaks in a reedy voice and offers firm judgements on all subjects with the confidence of a man who believes he has been given privileged access to the truth. He never allows ignorance to interfere with his certainty. He is a sidesman at a local church, treasurer of several local societies and a member of his golf club committee. He is famous there for having introduced a 48 page dress code for members and visitors. Professionally speaking he is something big in sewage and it is tribute to his total lack of any sense of humour, or indeed the absurd, that when asked about his profession he invariably replies, in the utmost seriousness, that he is big in sewage.

`Wearing a hat will make you go bald,’ he said.

When I asked him if he had any evidence for this claim he explained that if you wear a hat you stop the rain getting to your hair. `If you cover up your lawn the grass will die,’ he said. `The same thing happens to hair.’

I thanked him for his advice but said that since the damage is done and I am already balding I will continue to wear hats because I like to keep my head warm.

10.

Belatedly, we visited our local surgery to sign up with a new doctor. It has taken us quite a while to find the doctor with whom we are forced to register. I wrote to the Primary Care Trust but got nowhere. I made numerous telephone calls and no one even knew the names and addresses of local doctors. Since the previous owners of our house took the telephone books with them we can’t use them to help us. Eventually, I managed to find the name of the practice we have to join.

And so we turned up at the appointed surgery.

We were, inevitably, given forms to complete. `And we’ll need your passports, your National Insurance numbers and two utility bills each,’ said the receptionist.

`You can look at some utility company paperwork to prove that we live in the area,’ I told her. `But you can’t make copies.’

`Oh, we have to make copies,’ she said. `We’re told that we must - by the Health Authority.’

`What do you do with them?' I asked.

`We store them,' she said, nodding behind her to an open filing area. `They're kept quite safe.'

`I'm afraid you can't copy them,' I told her. `You can look at our utility bills – though heaven knows why you want to – but I won't allow you to photocopy anything. Moreover, there are no laws which entitle you to copy private documents.' I didn't realise it at the time but they were breaking health service rules in asking for proof of residence of any kind.

`I need to see passports,' she said.

`We don't have them,' I told her honestly (just missing the words `with us' from the end of the sentence).

She wasn't happy about that but I glowered more than she did and eventually she gave in and registered us as new patients. There was no `welcome' and we weren't given any introductory leaflet containing phone numbers and surgery opening hours. The Princess's health problems are still the same as they were when she was investigated so thoroughly (and with such little sympathy and so few useful results) a year or two ago. Scarred by her previous experiences of health care in England she does not want to see more doctors and I do not blame her. Today's experience has not changed our view of the modern medical profession. Indeed, they have confirmed and strengthened our disillusion and distrust.

What a dismal world we live in.

11.

Back in the 1980s I used to go on book promotional tours for three or four weeks at time. It was a strange business. I once ended up on my way to East Anglia and genuinely forgot where I was going, why I was going there and who I was. Every radio and television station in every town I visited was talking about me and my book. You eventually begin to think the world is talking about nothing else but you and your darned book. As I approached each town I would tune in to the local radio station to see how they were promoting me. And as I left each town I would listen to the continuing discussion I had sparked. By the time I lost the signal for the one station I would be approaching the next and the whole process would start again. In the evenings there were interviews with local reporters. That's the distortion being on television can create. I shared sofas with film stars and drank bad wine with famous drunks in television green rooms the length and breadth of the nation. And, having spent a considerable amount of time with some real celebrities, I've learned that genuine star quality, charisma, is made up of some almost indefinable qualities. In my view danger, unselfconsciousness, confidence, talent and vulnerability are the essence of real stardom. Real stars are never vain or conscious of their status. And, most of all, perhaps, they have the genuine capacity to surprise. To give a simple and rather obvious sporting example: David Beckham is undoubtedly famous but it seems a plastic, manufactured sort of fame and although Beckham may make more money I don't think he will ever be as charismatic as George Best or Alex Higgins.

When I wasn't promoting books I did endless radio and television programmes. A few decades ago television and radio programmes used to pay guests chunky fees to appear on news and current affairs programmes. (Back in the 1980s it was not unusual to be paid £750 plus very adequate expenses to appear on a local television discussion programme.) I did so much television that I had an Equity card for a few years. I was paying union dues to four organisations separately representing authors, journalists, doctors and performers until I realised that I really wasn't that much of a joiner. (Shyness and a feeling that it was rude to approach strangers and ask them questions meant that I wasn't much of a journalist either.) I resigned from them all and replaced them with membership of the Desperate Dan Pie Eaters' Club run by the publishers of the *Dandy* comic. These days television producers want guests who will appear free of charge, and even pay their own expenses. The result is that the only experts who can afford to broadcast are the ones with proper jobs and well-paid alliances and consultancies with industry lobby groups. And so the only words broadcast are those supporting the industry point of view. Eventually, even the presenters begin to believe the party line. And anything which questions the perceived reality must be suppressed. I sent out over three hundred review copies of my book *Anyone Who Tells You Vaccines Are Safe And Effective Is Lying. Here's The Proof.* It says on the cover of the book that I am a registered and licensed GP. You might imagine that someone, somewhere would be interested - even if only to try to tear me to shreds. But not one radio or television station wanted to interview me. And not one newspaper or magazine published a review. Indeed, on the contrary, many of the books which were sent out were returned. Instead of flogging the book on Amazon or eBay, editors and reviewers actually paid to send the book back. Revolting figures of the Russell Brand ilk are deemed controversial and banned for twenty minutes. I've been banned very effectively for well over a decade. Too much trouble, you see. I have found trying to tell the truth in general, and about medical matters in particular, to be an ultimately frustrating and dispiriting business.

Most media outlets, but particularly those involving television and radio, have become unhealthily incestuous. A select number of self-aggrandising egocentrics interview one another on their own programmes, write books (or have them written for them) based on their television programmes, write (or have written for them) newspaper columns in which they talk about the people they have met while presenting their programmes, present radio shows on which they discuss their television programmes and work with people who also have radio or television shows where the cycle can be perpetuated. A remarkably small number of people constantly appear and reappear.

There are occasional guests, of course. When a particular subject is in the news previously unheard of talking heads will appear. The problem is that the vast majority of these will have been put forward by lobby groups of one kind or another. They will have been prepared, polished and paid in order to promote a particular point of view.

People who have something useful to contribute because they have impartial knowledge, or well-formed original opinions, are excluded because they don't represent an industry or a lobby group with a product or a viewpoint to promote and because television and radio researchers are far too lazy to find them.

However, there are always occasional exceptions and a reader of mine who has written several well-researched pamphlets has written asking for my advice on how best to survive a television interview without making an ass of himself. `I'm not a great public speaker,' he confessed. `I am nervous about being interviewed on television but I am determined to put forward my point of view, which I believe to be significant and widely overlooked.'

I'm damned sure I wasn't much good on television (I am naturally shy and had to send along a spiritual doppelganger) but I presented and appeared on enough programmes to know how things work, how television and radio programme makers stitch people up and how to counter their crafty little moves. I also discovered just how self-obsessed, ruthless and uncaring people in television can be. When I presented TV programmes I never missed a show but on one occasion I had to go to hospital for a scan because I had suspected kidney cancer. As soon as the scan was done (and a friendly radiologist had given me the all clear) I drove up the motorway like mad to get to the studios. I got there bang on time. `You're nearly late,' said the director. `I had to have a scan to see if I'd got kidney cancer,' I told her. She looked at me, clearly worried. `You're not going to miss any shows are you?' She was much relieved when I assured her that I wasn't. She didn't ask how I was or what the scan had shown. She was concerned only about the show. Television numbs us all and as the years go by so the programmes have to get tougher and nastier to titillate and shock. Just compare Eastenders with Dixon of Dock Green.

Here's the advice I sent my reader:

1. Assume that the presenter will try to stitch you up. Do not trust anyone working for a television or radio company. They will tell you lies in order to disarm you and make you easy prey. It is wise to assume that the programme is being biased in favour of a particular point of view. And it is almost certain that the point of view being presented (and protected) will have originated with some establishment body. Contrary to popular opinion nearly all broadcasters represent and defend the status quo. Before a programme appears the researchers and assistant producers to whom you speak will assure you that they are on your side. They will ooze sympathy, understanding and support. This is all fraudulent, frothy nonsense designed to put you at your ease and make you easy prey. No one in the studio is your friend.
2. Do some research about the programme and the presenter. When I used to appear regularly on television and radio I was constantly surprised by the number of presenters who would, before we went on air, admit (almost boastfully) `I haven't had time to look at any of your books. Can you tell me what sort of thing you do?' If an appearance on a programme is important to you (and if it isn't then why are you appearing?) then you should do a little research. Find out as much as you can about the programme maker and the presenter. Try to watch or listen to a few of their interviews. Study their style and the style of the programme.
3. Try to ensure that you only ever appear on live programmes. It is very easy for editors to turn your wise and thoughtful pronouncements into demented gibberish. If the programme's aim is to promote a particular, establishment point of view then that's what they will do. Anyone who opposes that viewpoint will be given airtime (so that the programme can appear fair, balanced and unbiased) but their words will be cut so that they look foolish, ignorant and even dangerous. If you do make a recorded programme ask for a copy of the pre-edited tape to take home with you.
4. Once you enter a studio you must assume that everything you say will be aired. Never assume that cameras aren't working or that microphones are `dead'. Many neophytes assume that cameras are only `live' when the red light shows but it's easy to cover up or turn off the red lights. Never ask for advice, never look around for support, never say anything you don't want broadcasting.
5. Remember that the presenter makes programmes for a living. That gives him an edge. But it also gives you an edge. His job is on the line - yours isn't. Where is it written that the presenter has to be in control? A few years ago I saw a well-known trade unionist being interviewed by a tough interviewer. When the interviewer asked a particularly nasty question the trade unionist looked him fair and square in the eye and said: `Before the programme you told me that you didn't want to discuss this issue. I'm surprised and disappointed that you lied to me. But since you've asked me the question I'll answer it.' The interviewer went bright red, looked enormously embarrassed and completely lost control of the interview.
6. If you intend to make an important point which you can support with published evidence do take the evidence with you and hand it to the presenter when you make your point. I once saw James Goldsmith destroy two television

interviewers by producing documents which substantiated the points he was making. I was once interviewed by Edwina Currie on television. I guessed that she would attack my credibility so I took with me a copy of *Hansard* which included a statement she had made when she was Minister of Health. When, as expected, she said something derogatory I replied by taking the *Hansard* out of my inside pocket and reading a statement she had made in which she had announced that she always read my columns and that the Government had taken action as a result of articles I had written.

7. If the interviewer makes a mistake - however small - make sure that you correct him. Do it politely but firmly and at length.

8. Don’t be frightened to answer the question you want to answer rather than the question you’ve been asked. If you feel that an interview is heading the wrong way turn it around by mentioning something that you want to mention.

9. If the presenter interrupts you and asks a new question just go back to what you were saying before. Tell him that you will gladly answer the new question but that you’d like to answer the previous question first.

10. Never get cross. Don’t lose your temper on television unless you are faking it and totally in control. But if you can make the presenter cross then you are winning. Marshall McLuhan’s analysis of television as a `hot’ medium is as accurate now as it was in 1964. The presenter may deliberately try to make you angry. Don’t rise to the bait. Don’t allow yourself to be pulled into a shouting match. If you do then you will look bad and you will lose.

11. Learn to breathe in mid-sentence (as Margaret Thatcher did). Once you can do this you can speak for as long as you like. For the interviewer to interrupt you he will have to speak over you. And that will make him look rude.

12. Ignore the hospitality they may offer before a programme. In the minutes before a programme starts they will probably offer you food, chocolate, coffee or alcohol. Don’t accept any of it. The food will make you feel full and lethargic, the chocolate will make it difficult to speak clearly, the coffee will make you want the loo and the booze will dull your mind.

13. Once you have answered a question, and said what you want to say, close your mouth and stay silent. Presenters all use a very old trick: they keep quiet when you think you’ve finished speaking in the hope that you will want to fill the silence by saying more - and probably saying something foolish. Just keep quiet. It is the presenter’s job to keep the programme moving and so he will have to break the silence before it becomes uncomfortable. (I long ago learned the value of the silence. In the mid-1980s an editor rang me to ask if I would write a feature for his magazine. It was a major, weekly woman’s’ magazine. He had just dumped a big feature for the next week’s issue and needed something writing quickly. He wanted 3,000 words delivered by fax in 24 hours. He asked me what fee I wanted. I asked him what he was offering. He said he could pay me £1,500. I didn’t say anything. I was thinking about whether or not I could write the piece. I was also thinking what else I would have to postpone or cancel. I was thinking that I would probably have to work through the night. I was thinking it sounded a decent fee. But the editor didn’t know I was thinking all this. He thought I was hesitating. `I can go to £3,000,’ he said with a sigh. `But that’s the best I can manage.’ `OK,’ I said. A friend of mine, an erudite man who has degrees in French and Russian, and a PhD in European history, and who works as a postman once told me, when I asked him why he said so little, that he believed that one should not say anything unless one had something pertinent and kind to say.)

14. Find out beforehand how long the interview is going to be. If you know that the interview will last two minutes then you will know that you must say whatever is important to you very quickly and succinctly. If the interview is lasting twenty minutes then you will have all the time in the world to make your point.

15. If you have something you really want to say, and the interviewer isn’t giving you a chance to say it, begin a reply by saying: `Before I answer that let me just say...’ Politicians (who are trained in media work and who have, as a breed, mastered the art of the interview) will say `I am glad you asked me that’ and then, without blushing, talk about something completely different. Another trick is to end a reply with `I suppose you will now want to know...’ and to segue into an answer to the question you have effectively asked yourself. The importance of television is now impossible to over-estimate. Even in the world of Facebook and Twitter, television still has the power. Television is all that matters as far as politicians are concerned. It is the beginning and the end. Reagan, Clinton and Blair all became `leaders’ because of their television skills. (Brown would never have been elected Prime Minister. He obtained the post without bothering to trouble the electorate.) The new television age produces bland, dangerous nerds like Clegg and Cameron who wear nice clothes and look reasonably smart in a cheap and tasteless insurance salesman sort of way but who, like fast food, contain nothing of any value and nothing of any real substance. (I’m trying to find a manufacturer to produce loo brushes with a picture of Nick Clegg printed on the bristles. It would, I feel sure, be a huge commercial success.)

16. Always speak in a low, normal voice. Don’t allow yourself to be hurried. (Speaking more urgently can work, however, if you are talking on the radio and want to make sure that the listener’s attention is captured.)

17. Before the programme starts make sure that you set out the points you want to make. And then make those points, regardless of the questions you are asked.

18. Don’t ever look surprised at anything you asked. Long before you go into the studio you should try to think of all the nasty things that could happen. What tricks is the interviewer likely to try? What surprises could there be? Be a boy scout: be prepared.

19. Remember to smile (whenever appropriate). Viewers like people who smile a good deal (that’s why a war criminal like Blair can stay in power). When I regularly made television programmes the other presenters and I would remind one another to `Sparkle!’ before the cameras started to work. Television in particular tends to be a slow business. There is much sitting around. It is easy to relax too much. Reminding yourself to `Sparkle!’ is a good way to remember that you’re entering the entertainment business.

20. Be prepared to be tricked. Before the programme begins the staff will be very friendly. When they talk to you they will be patient and encouraging. If there is a rehearsal they will give you plenty of time to discuss your point of view. But the questions you are asked in the rehearsal are unlikely to be the questions you will be asked when the programme goes live. The presenter wants to put you off your guard. If the programme has a hidden agenda (to promote a particular point of view) they will want to make you look edgy, nervous, ignorant and incompetent. At the same time they will want to make the establishment’s hired hand look wise, benevolent and independent. He or she will be given freedom and time and will be treated with respect.

12.

I have been invited to speak at the annual dinner of a golf club 200 miles away. `Don’t worry, our expectations aren’t particularly high,’ I was assured. `You were our seventh choice for speaker this year.’

`Why did the others turn you down?’ I asked.

`Oh, all sorts of excuses,’ said the fellow from the golf club. `But we had to say `no’ to four of them.’

I was puzzled.

`They wanted expenses,’ explained the man from the golf club.

I haven’t done any public speaking for a long time, and, indeed, the last time I spoke to strangers two thousand of them were armoured policemen and a helicopter was hovering overhead for the whole of my speech. But, over the centuries, I have learned that there are two basic rules that should never be ignored. First, always make sure you know the quickest way out of the room. Second, check with the organisers that only soft bread rolls will be served (the crunchy ones hurt too much). I did once ask for all diners to be equipped only with plastic cutlery, explaining that I wasn’t over-keen on the idea of speaking to several hundred people all armed with knives, but this request was rejected out of hand. I mentioned these requirements.

`Oh, we can’t control the catering,’ I was told. `Hard rolls, soft rolls, we eat what they give us. But the catering people are very good. Last year they gave us meat balls bunkered in mashed potato, served with greens.’

`Can they do vegetarian food?’ I asked.

`Good heavens, no!’ said the man from the golf club, extremely shocked. `Our President owns an abattoir. He doesn’t hold with all those leftie nonsenses.’

I politely declined, citing a prior engagement.

13.

An opinion leader (who is, I suspect, the sort of person who always agrees with the last person to state an opinion) claims that the internet is the greatest invention of all time. Really? I think I’d rather have electricity than the internet. (And I would think it’s rather difficult to have the latter without the former.) I bet most people would choose the washing machine and the vacuum cleaner rather than the internet. The internet has changed our lives. But has it changed our lives for the better? I don’t think so. And in terms of the overall contribution it has made to our lives the internet comes 987th - just above the toaster and just below safety matches. Chimney brushes, the abacus and bicycles all far more useful than computers or the internet. (The bicycle is the only device that gives back more than you put into it. It is the world’s only free lunch.) The internet may have been a decent idea but it is now infested with dribbling, drivelling trolls; petty, incompetent and driven by jealousy, and only too aware of their own inability to create anything original, they drive out the brave and the good and deface everything honest and honourable with pustulent, self-righteous, sanctimonious spite. Both the internet and computers are, in the real world, about as much use as a pair of rubber spanners.

Computers, more about the medium than the message, enable us to do things we have lived our lives never doing and never wanting to do, they have introduced more deceit and confusion into our lives and they have legitimised rumour and destroyed the quality of research and education. People who work in government departments and for large companies love computers because they can blame them for everything that goes wrong. Problems made by public sector employees are always blamed on computers, even though computers virtually never make mistakes and public sector workers frequently do. (Thumper Robinson, a good friend of mine, is always dismissive when computer freaks boast about the ability of computers to play chess. He says that he will be impressed when they can also play table tennis and tickle trout.)

The internet is dominated by nasty, nerdy, malignant youths who defame, steal and destroy with impunity. They can do this because they, and they alone, know how to manipulate search engines.

Artificial fertilisers have had a far, far greater effect on our lives than anything with a plug on the end of it or a battery inside it. The telegraph, the motor car and the train were much more important inventions. The washing machine freed women to go to work, started the consumer revolution and helped destroy domestic service (14% of the workforce in England was in domestic service in the years between 1850 and 1920). It also changed the relationship between men and women and changed the nation's economy. Oil rigs, piped water, sewage services, central heating and satellite communication - the list of great and useful inventions goes on and on. And the computer never appears. Let alone the internet.

It is now widely and generally argued by governments and large companies that the internet must be used and revered by all. A big chunk of the population still has no internet access and has never visited a website and the Government's response to this impertinence is to force people online by making it impossible to live without using the damned internet. The reason for this is simple: the internet saves the Government money and it provides them with information which gives them power.

America has taken over the internet. (It is, of course, an English invention but that sort of thing has never given the Americans pause for thought.) And, having stolen the concept, they are now busy ruining it in a typically brash, greedy American way. Our Government and our multinational corporations are merely doing things the American way.

The establishment enthusiasm for the internet is repeated ad nauseam by newspaper columnists who like to think they are trendy and in the fashion. But the truth is that the internet has improved life only for governments which want more power over us and for large companies who want to accumulate information about us which they can use to help them market their products more efficiently and, therefore, more profitably. When I hear that a company is planning to 'improve' its service my heart sinks - especially if their improvement involves the internet. I know that things are going to be chaotic. I know that the changes are going to require hours of effort from me. I know it is going to be more expensive. And I know that things are never going to work as well again.

Internet use is now compulsory in the UK (not just for anyone who is VAT registered or who employs even one person but often for those who pay utility bills and want a receipt). As a result it should surprise no-one that the UK has the highest online spending in the world and that consequently our towns and cities are being ruined faster than anywhere else. The UK makes up 11% of entire global internet retail sales. Around 10% of all retail sales in the UK are now done through the internet.

It is hardly surprising that the internet has adversely affected productivity and growth (both of which have fallen consistently and fairly dramatically since the internet was introduced). As productivity has fallen so, inevitably, has growth. People started to use computers in the 1960s and it wasn't long before productivity fell. Between 1972 and 1996, as more and more businesses introduced computers, productivity fell dramatically. This was no coincidence. In the mid-1990s the internet was introduced and between 1996 and 2004 there was a small increase in productivity. But that didn't last. Since then the internet had provided very few jobs but has destroyed many businesses and created massive levels of unemployment. (It has not helped that employees have started spending most of their time sending out e-mails, updating their Facebook pages and twittering to other twats.) A small bunch of young billionaires have made money out of the internet but most people's lives have been ruined by it. Even those who have remained in employment have suffered because the internet has helped push down incomes. And investors and pensioners have suffered because company profits and dividends have fallen too. Clearly, enthusiasm for this absurd, over-promoted toy is misplaced. The internet is time wasting nonsense. We would all be much better off if we put it back into the box and screwed the lid down firmly. The internet has not improved my life in any way (in fact my life would be a good deal better if the internet had never been invented at all) and I strongly suspect that this is true for most people if they think about it. The Government could, of course, use the internet to help us and save the nation a fortune. For example, if they put up a website containing constantly updated information about road closures, accidents and delays, motorists would be able to avoid traffic jams and save petrol. But the Government only uses the internet when the Government and civil servants benefit directly.

Finding ways to use coal and oil had an infinitely greater impact on our lives than the discovery of the internet, which is no more than a self-serving, ego buffing vanity publisher and mail order machine. Oil gave us riches beyond our dreams whereas the internet has done more to destroy our society than any other single invention in history. (England would have remained a major force in the world, despite being impoverished by America during two World Wars, if the Treasury hadn't been so damned mean at the start of the 20th century. England could have bought the concession to the Saudi Arabian oilfields for £20,000 in sovereigns. That was what King Ibn Saud wanted. However, the Treasury refused to give the necessary exchange control permits and the confession went instead to Standard Oil of California and the Americans.)

Despite all this evidence, the internet's supporters love it blindly. Idiots are providing computers to countries in

Africa where there are no roads, no food and no electricity. (These doubtless well-intentioned buffoons are almost as daft as those uninformed benefactors who insist on sending vaccination teams around the world, not realising that instead of spreading good health they are spreading illness and disability.)

The internet is just a gimmick, a hula hoop with a plug on the end (and no exercise value). It is useful for governments and large companies who want to cut their costs and spread propaganda. It helps them distract us and feed us an endless supply of misinformation. The internet is intrinsically corrupt. You will only find the truth if you are already an expert in a subject and you know precisely what to look for, what to ignore and what to accept. Our growing dependence on the internet has altered our lives and even our brains. The whole damned thing encourages hurried, distracted reading (all those adverts flickering away). It is all so damned superficial. We don't acquire knowledge. We browse. Information has become entertainment; a diversion. The internet is full of stuff that is there forever but most of it shouldn't be there at all. Nothing ever gets erased and very little gets corrected. Lobbyists and crooks ensure that the internet is a worthless research tool. The internet land is peopled by semi-literate quarter wits who are obese with opinions but skeletal with knowledge. The internet is very useful for bigots, terrorist groups, paedophiles, confidence tricksters, pornographers, fraudsters, religious nutters and political parties. But who else? I recently saw a claim that the internet is unique in that it enables businesses to know more about their customers than traditional businesses. What nonsense. Anyone who has ever run a mail order business will know just as much about his customers. By and large the only people making money out of the internet are the people who are selling books on how to make money out of the internet.

Among the young the internet has done nothing much except encourage narcissism. Moreover, hundreds of thousands of children are, it seems, addicted to internet pornography. With the exception of pornographers and computer nerds we would all be much better if it had never been invented and if Tim Berners-Lee had invented something genuinely useful (such as a non-drip teapot) instead.

The internet is making people poorer and more miserable, more anxious, fearful and self-centred. Our world is packed with so much information that it is increasingly difficult to separate the wheat from the chaff. Most people find it difficult (or impossible) to differentiate between independent advice and sponsored propaganda. Global growth has actually fallen since the internet was introduced.

The people who are enthusiastic about the internet are determined that it will take over every aspect of our lives. Its use has become compulsory in many unavoidable areas of life. It has become an evil monster, a time waster, chewing up minutes, hours and lives. It is a tired and broken creation, producing tired and broken people. It encourages energy wasting in every sense of the word. Notebooks and paper diaries can be more effective, more reliable, simpler to use, cheaper and far, far more private.

I live in hope that the internet will turn out to be a fad, like hula hoops, platform heels, the Spice Girls and CB radio. I wonder how many people remember CB radio. It nearly took over the world not all that long ago.

14.

I have, more by accident than design, acquired three copies of Hesketh Pearson's excellent biography of Sydney Smith, called *The Smith of Smiths.* Pearson was the best biographer of the 20th century. I love this quote from Smith: `I write for three reasons: first, because I really wish to do good; secondly, because if I don't write, I know nobody else will; and thirdly, because it is the nature of the animal to write, and I cannot help it. Still, in looking back I see no reason to repent. What I have said ought to be done, generally has been done, but always twenty or thirty years too late; done, not of course because I have said it, but because it was no longer possible to avoid doing it. Human beings cling to their delicious tyrannies, and to their exquisite nonsense, like a drunkard to his bottle, and go on till death stares them in the face.'

15.

The Princess has been reading a book about English prisoners held in Japan during the Second War. The prisoners building the infamous Bridge over the River Kwai were paraded through the streets, naked and starving. The Japanese jeered at them. It started to rain. And much to the astonishment of the Japanese, the prisoners began singing the famous Gene Kelly song from *Singing in the Rain.*

This reminded The Princess that when bombs went off in London a few years ago the television news people broadcast one of the emergency calls reporting the bomb which killed many commuters in London. `I'm sorry to bother you but a bus has just blown up,' said a quiet, calm, polite, apologetic English voice.

And it reminded me of the Duke of Wellington's aide who, during the battle of Waterloo, turned to the Iron Duke and said calmly: `I think I've lost my leg.' Wellington turned and looked. `Begad sir, so you have!' he replied.

16.

Our local post office has a postcard in the window advertising a course entitled: *Empowering Women Through Embroidery And Poetry.* I am tempted to put on a frock and turn up to find out how this works.

17.

Here are a few bits of late news I've recently collected:

1. When the first bestseller list was introduced in the USA in the 1890s, seven of the first top 10 books were pirated books written by English authors. (It is ironic that the Americans are complaining about the Chinese not respecting their copyright rules).

2. Talleyrand suggested that in order to see what sort of person we are we should imagine that we look out of a window and see a fight between two groups of people. `Do you,' he said, `instinctively help the losing side, wait till you see who is winning and then join them, or find the cause of the fight and then support the morally correct group.' (Talleyrand didn't consider doing nothing at all an option.)

3. An actress spent the last years of her life living alone and unrecognised in a New York apartment building which she owned. She hadn't been forgotten but most people thought she was dead. One day she was standing on the kerb, waiting to cross the road, when a young man stood next to her. It was raining. The old woman had no umbrella, just a headscarf. Something made the young man look at the frail old woman. `I've seen all your films,' he suddenly said. `But I still can't decide which is my favourite.'

She looked up at him. `How did you know?'

`Your eyes. And the cheekbones.'

She nodded. A slight smile appeared.

`May I photograph you?'

She thought for a moment. And then nodded again.

Greta Garbo.

4. In the early days of the BBC, at the times listed for the broadcasting of the news, radio news announcers would sometimes say: `There is no news today'.

5. The drummer with the rock band Def Leppard was involved in a road accident. He lost an arm. `You'll need a replacement drummer,' the band was told. The band shook their collective heads. `We'll wait for him,' they said. `He can play with one arm.' They did and he does.

6. Iconic, Bristol born film star Cary Grant did everything he could to protect his image (and to protect his fans). Film director Peter Bogdanavitch's daughter was a great fan of Cary Grant's movies. When Bogdanavitch asked a frail and elderly Grant if he would meet her, Grant said he would not and that he would rather she remembered him as he was in the films.

7. When Adrienne Brown (wife of the deservedly legendary soul singer James Brown) was stopped in Georgia for driving under the influence of drugs, for speeding and for criminal trespass, she instructed her lawyer to file for diplomatic immunity on the basis that her husband was the Ambassador of Funk. To support her argument a lawyer found a speech by US representative Douglas Barnard of Georgia, who, speaking on James Brown Appreciation Day in Augusta, had announced that: `James is indeed our number one ambassador'. Sadly, it didn't work. But what a try.

8. When Carole Lombard was making a film she suddenly told the cameraman to stop. `There is a light missing,' she announced. She was right. There were 70 lights directed onto her face at that moment. One bulb was out. She had noticed the change in the amount of heat on her face.

9. Marlon Brando could never remember his lines. Sometimes he had them pasted onto the faces of other actors. But some other actors weren't too keen on this so later he had an ear piece with an assistant prompting him with his lines. This worked well until Brando's ear piece somehow got hooked up to the local police radio. The actress who had said: `Darling, I love you,' must have been surprised when Brando replied: `There's been a collision at the corner of Benedix Street and Aspen Avenue'.'

10. And here's a favourite quote from John Fothergill, my favourite innkeeper: (Visitors) `ask for the menu or what is for dinner, which I always feel to be rude and inquisitive. Having become polite of necessity, much fun is withdrawn from my life.'

11. In his quarter final heat of the Amsterdam Olympic Games in 1928, Australian rower Bobby Pearce stopped for a moment to allow a family of ducks to paddle across his lane. He still won by 20 lengths and went on to win the gold medal.

12. When Sir Pelham Warner wrote his history of Lords cricket ground (*Lords: 1787-1945*) in 1947 he invited Viscount Ullswater to contribute a chapter describing the pictures and photographs which hang in the Pavilion's famous Long Room. Ullswater made one or two errors in his chapter but Sir Pelham refrained from correcting the mistakes which were described as minor and `of infinitely less importance than good manners'.

18.

It's my birthday and I am even older than I was yesterday. Today I am 969 years old, matching Methuselah. I began the day by singing `I'm feeling rather weary, though I guess it's just my age. It really won't be long before I'm dressing all in beige.' One minute I am struggling to make a First World War biplane out of Meccano and the next I am fighting to persuade Scottish Life to release the pension for which I've been giving them money for decades. I suppose I've done well to get this far. There were some close calls. I woke up once driving at 70 mph on the central reservation of the M6. I was driving south after three nights on call at a hospital in Birmingham. I'd fallen asleep and my mini was about twenty yards from a concrete bridge when the bumping woke me up and I swerved back into the fast lane. (There were no barriers in those days). Half an hour later I put the car into a ditch near Stow on the World. A pal and I on a holiday in Italy were swept out to sea when bathing on the beach at Piza. We were both young and fit but a vicious undertow wouldn't let us back onto the beach. We floated round the coast and eventually managed to swim to shore. Many years ago I had an anaphylactic shock reaction to a typhoid vaccination. But now, at last, I'm old enough to know that however lucky I might be, however careful I might be, however good my genes might be, I will one day die. It's curious, isn't it, but one never really believes this until one is over 60-years-old. We believe that death is something that happens to other people.

I have decided that if I reach my 75th birthday I will start smoking a pipe. I love the paraphernalia associated with pipe smoking. The metal prodders and pokers. The pouches full of tobacco. The pipe cleaners. The pipes themselves, all sat neatly in a wooden rack. Officious men and women will rush up to me in public places when they see my pipe. I will tell them that my pipe isn't lit and they will remain indignant as they try to work out what the law is about unlit pipes. What fun. Best of all, any doctors and nurses it is my misfortune to see will be appalled. Pipe smoking will definitely add a little je ne sais quoi to my deteriorating years.

More importantly, The Princess and I have decided that within the next year or two we will have to leave England. The problem is a simple one: I am too old to live here for much longer. All my life I have listened to older people telling me that things were better when they were younger. I never believed them, of course. But now I believe that things were better than they are now. And now I know that I am right. I cannot think of any aspect of life that is better today than it was in the 1970s.

It is now perfectly legal for doctors and nurses to kill old people in National Health Service hospitals. If I need to go into any health service institution they will starve me to death, kill me by withholding treatment or simply kill me with an overdose of something. The NHS is a new branch of murder incorporated; it's become the National Homicide Service. Anyone over the age of 60 who isn't a member of the Royal Family or a senior politician and who enters an NHS hospital does so at great personal risk. The doctors and the nurses kill people to clear the beds and to save money; they behave like civil servants because they are civil servants. (If you are paid by the State then you work for the State. And if you work for the State you are a civil servant. Indifference, contempt and arrogance follow with predictable inevitability.) Worse still, many doctors claim that they are starving pensioners to death, and denying them fluids, because it is the humane thing to do. Mengele would have felt right at home working in an NHS hospital. In the old days (now so derided by all and sundry) the elderly were regarded as providing society with a human reservoir of wisdom and experience; a reservoir which vastly increased the intelligence of each community. Today, the elderly in England are merely regarded as an expensive nuisance; an unproductive luxury no longer to be tolerated.

The Government encourages this mass slaughter because it reduces the cost of providing pensions. (English governments hate the elderly - who are regarded as an unnecessary expense and who have been targeted with endless new taxes, lower interest rates and pension grabs for those not working for the State. One legislative change made by Gordon Brown cost pensioners £100 billion. A flick of the Scotsman's pen impoverished generations of non-governmental employees.)

It is hardly surprising that doctors are regarded as somewhere between estate agents and tax inspectors in the social pecking order. The traditional respect has been replaced by contempt.

The more you know the more it is clear that everything is worse than it was. There is no medical care at weekends or at nights. And I guarantee that services are going to get worse and taxes are going to go up. The only certainty in life is that our so-called leaders will continue to do bad and stupid things.

And so it will soon be time to leave the country.

Where do we go?

There's a good deal of choice.

Countries all around the world are now desperate to attract people who have a little money. It is possible to purchase citizenship for remarkably little outlay. It's called `citizenship by investment' and governments everywhere are selling passports to people who have a little money. (Even our Government does this. Foreigners who want British citizenship and a British passport can buy one.) It is, of course, possible to become a citizen of one of those little countries which do not demand that the new citizen pay any taxes. A number of people do this every year. They spend five months living in France, five months living in Switzerland and two months somewhere else. They may spend a week or two in England, just to see how bad things have become. And so they are not liable to pay tax anywhere.

But it isn't the taxes we want to avoid.

And so the simplest solution may be to continue to pay tax in England but to move ourselves to a country where the elderly aren't regarded as a nuisance and treated as disposable; to a country where the elderly aren't sneered at and derided and regarded as rather less important than our weekly recyclables. (You can recycle an empty yoghurt carton but what can you do with an octogenarian?)

Meanwhile, it is my birthday and I feel every minute of my 969 years. If I am not that old then I have been cheated because that is the age I feel.

Only children and old people are ever proud of how old they are but I don't feel proud so I can't be either. I have never been quite this old before and so I am not entirely sure what to expect. How much creaking is normal? How much suggests that parts are malfunctioning and may need attention? Do I care about the creaking? It seems merely inconvenient but is it a sign of more fundamental damage? When I go out into the cold my toes and fingers go white. What on earth happened to my circulation? In my mind I am six and want to play outside. But my body is 66 and won't countenance such nonsense.

The future offers little more than rheumatism, deteriorating senses and developing dementia. I was 24 and then the next day I woke up and I was 66. What happened? Where did it go? What happened to my hopes and dreams and ambitions? I've been running as fast as I could but I'm still in the same place. Why have I spent so much of my life dealing with petty irrelevances that the dreams have been pushed aside?

I can't help feeling that the world has deteriorated massively during my lifetime.

Life was better when I was paid in guineas, when old ladies fed the pigeons without being arrested and when the grass at Lords was green and not covered with painted slogans. (As an MCC member I was told recently that some members of the MCC want to sell part of Lord's Cricket Ground to developers who want to build yet more flats in St Johns Wood. There is talk of a £50 million cheque. But what good is £50 million when the ground is ruined? The club might as well sell the whole ground for £1,000 million and then share out the cash. After expenses we would receive around £50,000 each. We could then all go and watch cricket at the Oval.) I have always been aware of the risk of nostalgia: the essence of history as we remember it; bowdlerised and cleansed of sadness and misfortune, viewed through sentimental eyes and cannibalised for our delight. But these are bad, bad times. It is not surprising that computer games and programmes, events and publications which remind us of happier days are increasing in popularity. Millions who enter these other worlds are unwilling to return to the one in which they are supposed to be living.

The older I get the more I become aware of the fragility of the human body. I no longer take quite so many risks. Which is odd. You'd think that as one got older and had less to lose one would be more willing to gamble with what life there was left. But it doesn't work that way. As I get older I become more aware of the joys of being alive, more protective of what days I have left and more aware of the endless ways in which it can all be ended.

As I become older I become increasingly aware that I need to take full account of whatever time I have left. I am aware that not everyone sees things quite like this. My desperate urge to make the most of what I have left means that I become increasingly impatient with the world and intolerant of time wasting nonsense. I now work harder than ever. Or, at least I try to work harder. Time is running out and I have so many things left to do as the clock tick-tocks remorselessly onwards.

For decades I cherished the prospect of acquiring the sort of respectability and gravitas that would make me feel as if I belonged to the right clubs. I obtained membership of those clubs (easy enough to do) but I never felt that I belonged. I never fitted in; my anger, my sense of injustice would never allow it. Only in the last few years have I realised that I am a born outsider. I have filled my life with worry and anxiety by spending too much time in the future and not enough in the present. Things have got so bad that now if I'm going to worry about something new I have to stop worrying about something that is already taking up worry space. I'm full to the brim with anxiety and haven't got room for new worries - even small ones must wait their turn. I've seen the future and it has exhausted me. Additional regrets and recriminations have been generated by spending too much time in the past and worrying too much about what might have been. Long ago, I learned to anticipate problems; to be proactive. But that was a mistake. Our lives now are so full of real problems, and we are daily besieged with so many new hazards, that it is pointless to try to plan ahead. (Not that I have ever been any good at planning ahead. I have always admired and respected people who could think things through, and then plot their lives years ahead. But my life has been a sequence of occasionally serendipitous and frequently un-serendipitous incidents.) The carefully and imaginatively crafted solution to one problem will be rendered pointless by another completely unpredictable hazard.

What have I learned now that I am as old as Methuselah? I have learned that nothing unsettles any part of the establishment more than an original thinker. I have learned that telling the truth always causes pain and is unpopular with the majority. I used to believe that by writing books I could help change the world. I no longer believe that is possible. The system is now too powerful to be changed by mere words. It is hope-crushing to realise that things now progress out of control, led by corporate and bureaucratic forces which are outside all human control. And, of course, we all have to remember that if we're not in control of our lives then someone else must be.

I have learned that our lives are defined by the opportunities we take and the ones we are offered but reject. Many decisions are completely out of our control and are a consequence of incidents over which we have absolutely no control.

I know that it is not what happens to us in life which determines the outcome but how we respond to what happens. I know that we tell the truth as much as we dare, and we grow more daring as we grow older. I suspect that my mind has been hijacked and put into an old person's body. I have a support bandage on my right knee and one on my right elbow. If I were a motor car my fan belt would be a pair of tights and a piece of string would be holding my exhaust pipe off the ground. I've learned that I am more crippled by shyness and lack of self-confidence than I realised when I was younger. I've learned that being old makes us fragile in two ways. First, things are wearing out and we become weaker. Second, we become more aware of the general fragility of life and the many ways in which it can be taken away. I've learned that too often the big decisions we make, the ones which influence our lives in the most dramatic and enduring ways, aren't decisions at all. Things happen. Sometimes we feel driven to do this or that. Sometimes we are directed by accidental happenchance. Sometimes we go in a particular direction because of momentum and habit and custom and the expectations of others. That, at least, is my experience. Others, I know, are more directed. They set their targets when they are still teenagers, they unfold their life-map and then they resolutely follow their designated route.

Chaos and injustice are an increasingly inevitable part of life. I used to hope that I could one day reach the end of a day, a week a month or a year and have all my problems sorted. But it has taken me until now to realise that at no point in life am I going to be able to clear the `in tray'.

I've learned that life is like eyeing a fancy cake on a plate and deciding to keep it until later. And then, later, you find that you're so full that you can't eat the cake. And you keep it until tomorrow. And when tomorrow comes you find that the cake has gone stale.

My personal hopes, ambitions and expectations have all evaporated, boiled away by the fiery disapproval, prejudices, condescension and arrogance of the establishment (in all its forms) who, threatened by anything new, do everything they can to oppress and suppress humanity, originality and the sort of wisdom that used to be known as common sense.

I feel exhausted by even the simplest activity. The most exhausting thing I've done today was to take the lid off a jar of marmalade and to do that I had to use one of those plastic and rubber devices designed for the weaker paralympians. (I did attempt to invade the vacuum with a kitchen knife but abandoned that when I nearly lost one of my favourite fingers.) Most of my physical skills have diminished. The only thing I am better at these days is dribbling and I can do that in my sleep. Damnit, I have even lost my ability to whistle. Where has my whistle gone to? What peculiarities of the ageing process have removed my ability to whistle?

I look back on my life and see little but failure and disappointment. And, inevitably, the real feelings of failure and disappointment concern the times when I didn't have the courage to try, when I didn't accept the challenge, when I didn't put myself to the test. I have at last learned to accept the inevitability of random and serial and continuous disappointment.

As we get old, our hopeful future becomes a frustrating present and a disappointing past. It is difficult not to slide into resentment and weariness and to waste the days just moping around in front of the television. I suspect that I will know the decline is dangerous when I start to think that the programmes on daytime television are worth watching and that the scheduling seems innovative, exciting and worth getting up early to view. When I look forward to watching the sort of awful programmes I used to make then I will know it's time to call it a day.

Henry David Thoreau, one of my great heroes, was described by E. B. White as torn between the gnawing desire to change life, and the equally troublesome desire to live it. I know the feeling only too well. I have spent much of my life screaming like an Old Testament prophet. Readers who probably know me as well as I know myself have sent me many generous letters and have fed my rage with an endless diet of clippings and tidbits of information.

All my life I have argued with pompous, overbearing representatives of the establishment. I'm doing it with increasing frequency these days and this morning I wondered if I was becoming less tolerant. I honestly don't think I am. On the contrary, I rather suspect that I am mellowing with age and staying silent when I would previously have made a noise. I try hard to ignore the little difficulties with which life tries so hard to tire us out.

The problem, I believe, is that the establishment now employs more overbearing representatives than ever before and they are ever more intrusive and demanding and increasingly pompous.

I have learned that the urgent tends to crowd out the important and that as a result the urgent seeming crap tends to take precedence over the truly important; like some ever-growing parasite the crap expands to fill all the time available, greedily pushing aside all the important, valuable and, heaven help us, fun things we might otherwise do with our time. It is not the big crises or even the real day to day challenges which do the damage to our minds and souls; which erode our spirits and leave us broken and without hope. Even our spiritual lives have been asset stripped. It is the endless torrent of irrelevant, trivial crap I resent; the daily dross, the annoyances and the time wasting paperwork caused by the incompetence, the greed, the laziness, the stupidity and the bloody mindedness of State and corporate employees. The

State is now everything and we are nothing. The eurocrats are (with their usual contempt for democracy) doing everything they can to protect the mortally wounded euro even though their efforts are destroying stability, growth and employment prospects within their territory. The survival of the State, the Superstate, is now all that matters to them. It is no wonder that so many people now believe that we live in a kakistocracy. We waste our lives on an accumulation of pointless red tape and regulations and as a result we never get round to doing the stuff that matters. A hundred tiny pieces of crap, when pooled together, become a huge cloud of the stuff. The crap spoils everything. We were due to go to London yesterday but neither The Princess nor I could face the journey or the inevitable problems. As I threw our expensive, reserved tickets onto the fire I thought of Dr Johnson; who said: "A man who is tired of London is tired of life." The trouble is that, for us, England's capital has lost something. London is, in my heart, gothic buildings covered in soot and pigeon shit; dramatic vistas with surprises round every corner and more nooks and crannies than a thousand 17th century pubs. But the city is now filled with interlopers, visitors, strangers without passion or style who don't live there and who care nothing, absolutely nothing, about London or its history. The invaders occupy the place. They don't live in it. And, as an Englishman, I no longer feel that London belongs to me.

I am constantly amazed by the fact that with so much unavoidable crap spoiling our lives there are millions of people voluntarily wasting their days on social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook and Linkedin. Haven't these people got anything worthwhile to do with their time?

The real problem is that stress is cumulative. Crap causes as much frustration and anger (vital causes of stress) as other, bigger, far more important events. After all, Dr William Harvey, the 17th century physician who discovered the secret of the circulation of the blood, was not exaggerating when he predicted that his life was at the mercy of any petty bureaucrat. He died not long afterwards of a stroke induced during a hospital management meeting.

`Don't sweat the small stuff', they say. But that's not so easy.

I rang the garage to order some tyres for the truck.

`What's the number on your current tyres,' I was asked. I said I didn't have the foggiest idea. `We can't order tyres until we know the size and speed rating.' `It's just a Ford Ranger truck,' I said. `Aren't they all the same?' `Oh no, sir. Not at all.' (I lied about the `sir'. No one ever says `sir' any more.) I protested. `I bought it from your garage. Don't you know how big the wheels are on the biggest selling truck in the world?' No. Of course they don't. It's as difficult to find a competent person working in a garage or car dealership as it would be to find the Holy Grail or an 18-year-old virgin nurse. (At least I know how to spell `competent'. I have a cutting in my vast silly cuttings file which carries the headline: `Competant Person Wanted'. The advertisement was, of course, inserted by a Government department and paid for by taxpayers.)

I had to walk two hundred yards to where I'd left the truck, crouch down in the mud and examine the tyres. I've never looked at tyres much before. But they're covered with numbers and letters. There are as many numbers and letters on a tyre as there are in a telephone book. I wrote down the ones I thought seemed most promising. When I got back to the house, I rang the garage again. `Those aren't the right numbers,' said the man in charge of the tyre department. So I had to trek back to the truck and write down some more numbers. `Those are the ones,' he said. `That's what I thought it would be.'

I tried to take a modest pension which I've been paying into for nearly half a century. It seems that it will pay me an 11% guaranteed annuity. I thought I'd just have to fill in a form and they'd start sending me the money. So far it has taken me three months of letter writing and telephoning to get nowhere. Scottish Life keep finding new ways to delay. There's this form. And that form. It's like trying to make an insurance claim after an accident. And now they have decided they wanted more identification. Do I walk away from the crap? Just living, simply surviving, is to relive the ordeals of Sisyphus. As soon as I satisfy one regulation another comes along. And although I do what I am supposed to do as quickly as I can they do not. I really need what celebrities call `people' to deal with this stuff. A national newspaper editor once told me that the best bit of his job was having a chauffeur driven car at his disposal 24 hours a day. Another confessed that for him the main perk was having a Personal Assistant to pay his bills and deal with all those daily nonsenses which make life miserable for the rest of us.

It annoys me because my life is being frittered away on trivia and whether I sweat it or not the time will be wasted.

I have had so much trouble persuading South West Water that I am not using any water at Publishing House (and that they should, therefore, stop sending me estimated bills) that I am now trying to persuade them to do what they keep threatening to do - cut off the water supply. Threatening letters are, of course, the default position for Government departments, utilities and companies with Head Offices, twitter accounts and stock exchange quotations. Death, taxes and threatening letters from utility companies are, together with a steady deterioration in the quality of public services, now the four inevitabilities of life. I am so old that I always feel that I need to reply to these absurdities and so I wrote back to them attempting, yet again, to explain the situation. Naturally, they ignored me. I telephoned them. They responded by sending me estimated bills and threatening to take me court. I wrote again begging them to cut off the water supply. They threatened to take me to court and to cut off the water supply. I sent them a time and a date to do the cutting off and they wrote again threatening to sue me. Kafka would be proud.

None of this is unusual. This stuff happens all the time. Hours are wasted on crap. I am heartily sick of being threatened and bullied by government departments and large companies which behave like government departments. I am particularly irritated by the fact that most of the zombies working for these damned organisations will never accept any responsibility or make any attempt to help. They hide behind the skirts of the organisation and never for one moment remember that they too are simply pawns and that they too will be harassed and bewildered and angered and frustrated when they come, in turn, to deal with similar organisations. Give a man (or woman) a title, a badge and some sort of uniform and you create a monster. Moreover, because they have been told by the eurocrats that they cannot be bullied or threatened in any way they have taken that to mean that anyone questioning their authority or attitude must be a dangerous criminal. Saatchi's law is that satisfaction equals performance minus expectation. The theory used to be that it was always best to under-promise and over-perform. These days all Government departments, all utilities, the Royal Mail, post offices and most major companies seem to believe that they are doing customers a favour by allowing them to buy their products or services.

I have found that the only way to make any progress is to insist on making a formal complaint right at the very beginning. The zombies are afraid of formal complaints. They have to fill in paperwork and their decisions are studied and analysed. A zombie's career can be destroyed by an official complaint.

I long ago decided that I would resist the temptation to spread myself too wide; I decided I would not fight dozens of small battles which exhaust me and use up all my resources. But are these small battles? I don't know any more.

Either my capacity for dealing with crap has deteriorated or the amount of crap - the background level of crap - has reached levels that are utterly unacceptable. Life is like being nibbled to death by piranhas. The crap expands to fill the time available. The things which matter most should not be at the mercy of things which matter least and yet too often it is the things which really matter which are put off so that the petty irrelevances can be dealt with.

Because we want to get rid of it we always deal with the crap first so it gets priority and there is never time for the good stuff (the fun stuff and the really important stuff). The crap tends to demand to be dealt with first, because it comes from people with the power to have no patience. I have this nightmare. I am dead. `What did he do with his life?' asks someone. `He filled in lots of forms and dealt with a lot of crap.'

Has the crapstorm got worse or am I more sensitive to it? As I get older I realise that the world makes less and less sense. If I open a newspaper I see people in their 40s announcing new discoveries which I know to be two decades old. Does no one ever learn anything? Do people under 50 years of age know nothing? Why do doctors, scientists, economists and politicians insist on rediscovering the wonders of the wheel?

Tolstoy, writing to his son, said that the aim of a good man should be to bring love and truth into the world. He didn't tell him what he should do if the world didn't much fancy love and truth.

I don't much care for the world in which we live. I bear it because I have my love, The Princess, by my side. I tolerate the lunacies of the Cleggs and the Cables because she and I give each other strength. We are all frightened creatures, surviving in an increasingly alien world. Only the comfort of knowing you have someone loyal by your side to love and cherish, to protect and defend you, can overcome the fear. (Occasionally, some physical release is required. The Princes and I both have large bags full of rubber bands next to our chairs. Every time Clegg or Cable appear on TV we let them have one on the nose. We have become very accurate. It makes us feel much better, though it takes us ten minutes to pick up the rubber bands before we go to bed each evening.)

And I receive strength from the kind support of the many readers who still buy and read my books and who share our aims and our inspirations and our frustrations. Bless them all. Every one of them.

19.

We arrived at our new offices after dark. We were planning to have a quick meal and then pack a lot of books into padded envelopes but when we walked through the door we found ourselves wading in an inch or so of water. This, of course, is never a good sign. We remained resolutely cheerful and waded around in a heavy shower as water continued to pour down through the ceiling light fittings. Fortunately, we had noticed the water before either of us had turned on the lights. We managed to deal with the water leak but there was so much water on the first floor that it continued to pour through the ceiling. Having mopped up as much as we could upstairs we went back downstairs and found a dry corner where we could sit for a moment. `Let's have a sandwich and a cup of tea,' I suggested. We couldn't cook anything because the cooker was underneath the deluge. `We can plug the kettle into a socket in another room and find a couple of dry chairs.'

`We'd be better off eating outside,' The Princess pointed out. `It's not raining as hard outside as it is indoors. And someone on the council must be having a street party because the council has inadvertently turned on the street lights.'

We considered eating our marmalade sandwiches on the pavement but eventually decided that we would be prime targets for muggers so we found a dry corner and had an indoors picnic. Then we found a mop and a broom and swept a few thousand gallons of water out through the back door. Fortunately, there are steps outside the back door and the water could travel downhill without any difficulty. As I looked out I realised that our hedge needs cutting again. I am beginning to hate that hedge. Two years ago I spent the best part of a day cutting it. When I'd finished I stood and looked at my handiwork. A stranger walked by and joined me. `Did you do that?' he asked. I said I had. `You've made a terrible job of it,' he said. Last year I telephoned a man who had put a card through our door. He agreed to come and look at the hedge. `How am I going to cut that?' he demanded. `I will need a powered hedge trimmer and a ladder.' I muttered something about my having assumed he would have these. `And where am I going to put the clippings?' he demanded. `I was hoping you might take them away,' I said. He snorted, gave me a pitying look and walked to his car.

When we'd finished playing Mr and Mrs Canute, The Princess stuffed books into padded envelopes and I stuck on stamps. It was early morning when we'd finished.

`You never told me that publishing was such a glamorous business,' said The Princess as we fell into bed. I just about remembered to switch on the alarm clock so that we could wake up in time to catch our early train to London.

20.

My collection of eaves-droppings is growing rapidly. Here's the most recent assortment:

1. `I had such a restful time that my self-winding watch stopped.'
2. `The sign says they've opened a brassiere. But the coffee is very good.'
3. `People turn out differently. Hitler and Michelangelo both started out as house painters.'
4. `There's more to life than being happy.'
5. `People who get to be 100 without a criminal record should be allowed one free crime of their choice.' `I think I'd bring it in at 80.'
6. `I feel like an old person.' `I don't know where we can find one at this time of night. Why don't you have a sandwich?'
7. `He calls his bicycle Brenda after a shorthand typist he once knew.'
8. `Who wants to live to be 90?' `Me. I'm 89.'
9. `He speaks five languages.' `Yes, but I've never heard him say anything interesting in any of them.'
10. `What were you like when you were little?' `Oh, much the same but smaller.'
11. `The terrifying thing is that in a few years' time these will be the good old days.'
12. `The only thing he's ever done is grow old. And he took a long time to do that.'
13. `I wish they'd bring back nostalgia.'
14. `How come soap doesn't get dirty?'
15. `Infertility runs in their family. They've all got it.'
16. `He got six months. He says the worst thing was that the police and the magistrate made him feel like a criminal.'
17. `When she was out I took a good look round her kitchen. It was obviously one of those places that is very difficult to keep clean.'
18. `Halloween is on my birthday this year.'
19. `I quite like some foreigners. Some of them are just like us.'
20. `Anyone over the age of 70 who doesn't believe in God is a fool.'

21.

Shopkeepers in Paris tend to specialise. There is a shop near the Pont d'Alma which sells nothing but pistachio nuts. There is an estate agent in Montmartre which specialises in selling Parisian bakery shops. I know a shop near the Palais Royale which sells only pipes (no cigars or cigarettes - just pipes). And it is possible to find shops which specialise in selling olive oil, mustard, vacuum cleaners or white blouses for women.

Occasionally there are shops which reflect the eclectic tastes of the owner. And so there is, for example, an ironmongery shop near L'Ecole Militaire which also sells fancy hats and fascinators.

But things are changing. The economic crisis and the flood of new laws from Brussels mean that many of the most interesting shops have closed. Paris is still full of shops selling models of the Eiffel Tower, expensive lingerie, wine (cheap and expensive), shoes and tobacco but recently our street has lost two picture-framers, a cobbler and a mattress maker who used to sit in the window making mattresses and scowling at flaneurs who dared to stare. My favourite stationery store has gone too. I love beautiful stationery and notebooks. To me a black mark on beautiful thick, white paper is a thing of beauty. I love pens and pencils and crayons and this was a treasure trove of such delights. But now it's boarded up. Two out of three local toy shops have closed too. (Though that is probably more a result of the global trend than a local phenomenon. All the toy shops in the world are closing as children turn away from proper toys and towards computer game downloads.) Only the pharmacies, the hairdressers and the cake shops seem to be thriving.

One of our favourite cafés has closed and my favourite penknife shop is permanently shuttered. I have never before seen so many empty shops. They look so sad and so much the same. There is invariably a sad looking pile of scattered mail inside the doorway, accompanying the detritus of abandoned dreams.

Thanks to the EU, Paris is virtually shut now at the weekends. And the cafés and shops which don't close on Saturday and Sunday do so on Monday. The absurd working time directive has resulted in the mass closure of small owner run businesses and a dramatic reduction in the quality of life. Entrepreneurs who still manage to build businesses in Europe do so despite the best efforts of the bureaucrats of the European Union.

One or two new shops have opened, but these seem to reflect the new austerity. There is a shop nearby which is called `Je Repare Tout'. A man sits in the window, surrounded by bits and pieces of electrical equipment, wires and lots of chunks of wood. He doesn't seem to have many tools: a couple of screwdrivers, a chisel, a hammer and a soldering iron. I can't wait for something to break down so that I can take it in to him.

All this became of practical importance today because our fridge freezer finally gave up the ghost. It must be nearly 20 years old and so it has served us well. But the motor was whining loudly and the food inside was melting. This is not a good time to be without a fridge. The temperature in Paris is well into the 30s.

I could not for the life of me remember where I had seen a shop selling refrigerators. I pulled out the telephone book, found the address of the nearest electromanegerie and decided to walk around to see what they'd got. When, after a twenty minute brisk walk, I found the address I discovered that the shop now sells only mobile telephones. There seem to be a thousand hairdressers for every Parisian but fridge shops are in short supply. I decided to ask the man who sells me my newspapers if he knew of somewhere suitable. He is a nice fellow and, being a typical Parisian, he is always smartly scruffy. Like Serge Gainsbourg he probably spends an hour and a half every morning making sure that he looks as if he has just clambered out of bed. He thought for a moment, apparently rehearsing his reply in his mind before exposing it to public scrutiny. `Go straight ahead for two hundred metres, turn left at what used to be the cobblers, but which is now another mobile telephone shop,' he shuddered at this revelation, and halted temporarily to regroup and regain his strength before finding the energy to continue. Paris is, like most other towns and cities, now awash with shops selling mobile telephones. `Then go on for three hundred metres, past the pastry shop which was burnt to the ground during the War and is now an office block for an insurance company, then take the second, no, I tell a lie, the third on the left and the second on the right and just before you get to the florists on the corner - which is run by a lovely lady called who used to be a dancer in the Folies Bergere and still has a beautiful complexion - you will see a little café run by my old friend Jacques. Call into the café and ask for Jacques. He knows everyone and everything. If the café is closed go into the bread shop next door and ask for Marie. She will know because her brother works in the Mayor's office.'

I thanked him profusely, bought a couple of magazines, and went back to the apartment where The Princess and I opted for the last resort. We started looking on the internet. And gave up straight away when we found ourselves directed to some hick town in Texas. To the Americans, who run the internet, Paris is a town in Texas not the capital of France. And, believe me, Americans who live there need never worry about finding a replacement if their fridge should ever stop working.

I went out again and started wandering the streets. As I walked I passed `Je Repare Tout'. The owner was in there doing something to a broken chair. He said he could help. He said he would come back to the flat with me. He talked incessantly as we walked. He was, he told me, the only fat person in Europe who doesn't have problems with genes, hormones or glands. `I eat too much,' he explained. `I like food very much.' He also told me that he was worried about going bald. `My father is bald,' he said. `So for a while I thought that I must go bald too. And then I learned that the man I think of as my father is not my father at all. My father is a man I thought was my uncle. He has a full head of hair. So maybe I am not going bald after all.' He grimaced. `But, nevertheless, every time I wash my hair some of it leaves home and never returns.' He shrugged in the Gallic way.

I wanted him to say: `It's the outlet ice valve coordinating widget that's gone. I can repair that. It will take five minutes and cost you 10 euros including parts, labour and tax.' But I feared that he would say: `It's not worth repairing. It's 20 years old and kaput. It'll cost 300 euros to take away the old one and 700 euros for a replacement. I can do you a deal for 1500 euros.'

He tapped the back of the fridge rather like a doctor might percuss a congested lung and announced, with great gravity, that the machine had died and was no longer of any value in its chosen sphere. He said that since we were friends he could provide us with a new machine for 599 euros. He promised that the machine would be delivered and the old one taken away within two hours.

And to our delight and mild astonishment this is exactly what happened. Our new friend and a companion arrived at the top of our stairs with our new fridge freezer. They were exhausted but proud. They then spent some time setting up the new machine and, with patience and uncommon courtesy, explaining how everything worked. Once this had been done, and a cheque handed over, they departed, carrying our old machine down five flights of stairs. (The lift in our building is just about big enough to hold two people if one of them is anorexic and the other breathes in and, can hold their breath for the minute and a half it takes to reach the top floor. It is, in short, impossible for two people to enter the lift and leave still strangers. There is certainly no room in it for a fridge.) What a contrast with England where the dealers wouldn't even make an effort to deliver a fridge to our new house because the approach road is a trifle narrow.

22.

We had lunch with a fellow whom I will call Ambrose Cuthbertson because that isn't his name or, indeed, anything like it. He has had a spacious apartment in Paris for 40 years and believed that he had mastered the language when he had learned to say `mercy buckets' and `silver plate'. He spends four months of the year in France, four in Switzerland and four in Spain. The advantage of this arrangement is that he is not resident in any of these countries and is, therefore, excused income taxes. Having a substantial private income he is also excused employment. He carries a small copy of Molière in his pocket. It is an old, battered book, in English, printed on Bible paper and with a blue leather binding. He reads it all the time and even read bits out occasionally. It wasn't until I'd known him for a couple of years that I discovered that he had learnt little bits of the book by heart. Apart from the two phrases I've already mentioned he cannot read or speak a word of French. It doesn't seem to cause him any inconvenience. If someone doesn't understand what he's saying he just raises his voice until they do. Surprisingly, it seems to work.

Ambrose spent much of our time together giving us a short lecture on foreigners. He has a very refreshing view on the subject and says that he is working himself up towards writing a book which will, he insists, help a good many people understand how the world works.

`Foreigners like to think they are different,' he said. `They divide themselves up into little groups: Americans, French, Somalians and so on. The fact is that these are all rather superficial divisions. Anyone who isn't English is foreign and that's really all there is to it. I always feel sorry for foreigners. After all, they all come from abroad where they are accustomed to dodgy plumbing, dodgy food, dodgy water, predictable weather and, worst of all, living among lots of other foreigners. It is no wonder they are all a bit odd.'

Ambrose went on to say that he always treats the best foreigners, the ones who try hardest, as though they are honorary English people and he insists that they are always proud and pleased about that. I think he would probably like to give them beads and blankets.

23.

For years I have had my hair cut at a hairdressing salon just a few doors away from our apartment. The salon is run by a couple from the South of France.

This morning I wandered out to buy a paper and, as I approached the salon, caught sight of myself reflected in a shop window. I decided I needed a haircut and said to myself that if the salon was quiet I would pop in for a quick trim. But even twenty yards away I could hear them. They were having a huge row. There were no customers in the salon but he was threatening her with one of those brushes they use for flicking the bits of hair off the customers' shoulders and she was threatening him with a pair of electrical clippers. I walked past, tottered up the road and bought my paper, a baguette and some cheese. By the time I got back the black clouds had gone. She was fussing over the hair of an old woman and he was standing in the doorway, smiling and nodding benevolently to everyone who passed by. Neither of them is the sort of person who is tortured by the thought: `What will people think?'

I went in and asked for my usual trim.

24.

One of our neighbours, a female artist in her fifties, is moving out of the building. Jeanette lives on the fourth floor and because the lift is small and the stairs steep she has hired a firm who move stuff out through the window rather than the door. They use a long ladder with a motorised ramp and whizz furniture and boxes up and down very efficiently.

She told us, rather sadly, that she is moving back to live with her elderly mother in Tours because she is broke. Her lover, a medium level civil servant who had a small apartment in the nearby Rue de Grenelle, died a couple of months ago and it was only after his death that Jeanette discovered that she has not been as successful as she had believed. For years she's been selling her paintings through a gallery in the 5th arrondissement and for years she's been getting good prices. Ten or so years ago she gave up her job as a teacher in a nearby infant school and devoted herself to painting full time.

When her lover died his brother, in the absence of a will the sole beneficiary, found a huge cache of our neighbour's paintings stored in the cellar of his apartment building. They were all still wrapped in the brown paper and string in which they had been delivered. The brother contacted the gallery from which they had been bought to ask them for a valuation and found, to his dismay, they were worth very little. It turned out that the lover had been buying up every painting the gallery had acquired. He had instructed the gallery owner not to reveal his identity to the artist and he paid considerably more than their market price. It had been his way of making Jeanette happy and enabling her to paint full time. For a decade she had remained blissfully unaware that her paintings were not commercially successful and that every picture which she had sold had been bought by the same person – her benefactor.

So now Jeanette is broke. She had never saved any of her earnings because she had assumed that her brushes and her talent would feed her for life. But now she knows that the paintings she has in her apartment are virtually worthless and that her career is hardly glittering. When we told her how sorry we were to learn of her misfortune she smiled and told us that she was not sad at all.

`I never knew how much he loved me,' she told us. `Just imagine how much he must have cared for me to do this. He spent all his money to keep my dream alive. I had ten glorious years.'

She is going back to Tours to care for her elderly mother. `I will have somewhere to live and my mother has enough money to feed the two of us,' she said.

`And you will keep on painting!' said The Princess.

`Oh no,' said Jeanette, shaking her head. `The painting is over. They were wonderful years, those years when I thought I was a successful artist. Now, I come back to the real world. But without regrets. How can I have regrets? I have such wonderful memories.' She paused for a moment and wiped her eyes with a small, white linen handkerchief. `What love!' she whispered.

`He truly must have loved you with all his heart,' agreed The Princess.

25.

The moment I got into the bath the telephone rang. For a while I lay in the water and let it ring. It didn't stop. After a while the damned thing had acquired a rhythm which seemed to me to suggest that the person at the other end was never going to give up. Relaxation, the only reason to take a bath as opposed to a shower, was impossible. And The Princess had popped out to the supermarket to buy essential, life-giving supplies of ice cream.

Knowing that the chances were high that the moment I stood up and climbed out of the bath the caller would give up and the telephone would stop ringing, I nevertheless put down my book and pushed myself to my feet. I had been in the warm bath too long and much of my blood was in my skin. I stood up too quickly and felt dizzy. I dropped my book into the bath and grabbed at the sink for support. My remaining blood supplies had all rushed to my feet. Actually, for all the good it was doing me it may well have rushed to Barcelona. I steadied myself, picked my soggy book out of the water, reached for the towel and padded out of the bathroom, leaving behind a trail of drips and soggy footprints. Now keen to answer the damned phone before it stopped ringing I moved quickly. I suddenly had a premonition that it would, after all, be a wrong number. When the telephone rings at an inconvenient time it usually is.

`Hello?' I said.

It wasn't a wrong number.

`You took your time!' said my friend Thumper Robinson.

`I was in the bath. Relaxing. Reading.'

`Oh well, never mind. You're out now.'

`Did you want anything in particular?'

`Are you in France?'

`Yes. You rang me in France.'

`I just wanted to see if it worked.'

`What?'

`My new telephone. I've got a new mobile phone. It takes pictures and plays music. I've put your number into the memory thing and I wanted to see if it worked.' Thumper is still struggling to escape from the 1970s, where he has been happily ensconced for some time.

`Well, it does.'

`Good. That's OK then. Must go. I want to see if I can change the ring tone to something a bit brighter. Patchy and I are going to visit Frank in hospital.' Frank is the landlord of my favourite pub, the Duck and Puddle. `I've got to get him a bottle of wine.'

`Aren't you supposed to take hospital patients the grapes before they press them?' I asked him.

`He can't eat grapes. Too acidic. Just wine. Nice to talk to you. Bye.'

I replaced the receiver and tiptoed back to the bathroom. The water was tepid and the mood had gone. I pulled out the plug and decided to wait for The Princess to return with the ice cream.

26.

We heard of the deaths of two very old friends who lived in Australia.

They were both seriously ill and had been in a bad way for some considerable time. He had heart disease, and had had a stroke, and she had cancer which had spread throughout her body. They were both constantly in pain and there was little joy in their lives.

Two days ago they drove down to their small cabin cruiser, moored in a marina on the coast, and clambered aboard. They carried with them several bottles of their favourite whisky and a picnic hamper packed with all their favourite foods. They set off in late afternoon and several locals who knew them were surprised to see them set out because it was a bitterly cold day and the forecast was for a really cold night.

They anchored just outside the harbour, ate their picnic and they drank the whisky they'd taken with them. And then they lay in each other's arms, with just a rug over them, and waited for the cold to do its work.

They were found the following day, still in each other’s arms. The empty whisky bottles were neatly stacked in the empty picnic hamper, along with the food wrappings they’d carefully collected together. They’d even rinsed the plates they’d used.

They died, of course, of hypothermia.

27.

My collection of eaves-droppings expands virtually every time I leave the apartment. Almost every visit to a café results in my jotting down another oddity. Here’s the pick of the latest batch:

1. `Why do we try so hard to make foreigners feel at home? If they had wanted to feel at home they’d have stayed where they were.’
2. `The more I learn, the less I want to know.’
3. `What would Napoleon do now?’ `I think it would be more helpful to ask: `What would Harpo Marx do now?’’
4. `I can remember when the big question in life was whether to buy a bottle of Vimto or a bottle of Dandelion and Burdock.’ `There was a penny back on the bottle with the Dandelion and Burdock. I always thought of it as a sort of savings plan.’
5. `I don’t want to blink, I might miss something.’
6. `This sauce is very rich and thick.’ `You make it sound like a footballer.’
7. `I put women on a pedestal.’ `Only so that you can look up their skirts.’
8. `He is insensitive and uncaring.’ `Is he American?’
9. `I don’t want to be famous. Famous people are always dying. The obituary columns are full of famous people who’ve just died.’
10. `What would a smart person do, I asked myself.’
11. `Why don’t you give me the room you’re going to give me when I come back downstairs in two minutes and complain about the room you’re about to give me now?’ (This was overheard at a hotel reception desk.)
12. `I’ve got an F in maths but I’m going to tell my parents it stands for `fantastic’.’
13. `Dreams never come true so you might as well dream big.’
14. `Come on, cheer up. It could be worse. How’s your dad?’ `I’m afraid he died two days ago.’
15. `Does this phone take French speaking?’
16. `Why do you always have to stay in five star hotels?’ `Because there aren’t any six star hotels.’
17. `He’s taken a job as front end lead at a multi-channel system integrator and subservice cloud management unit.’ `Oh, that’s nice.’
18. `He is driving me sane!’
19. `The truth always prevails but by then it’s generally too late.’
20. `I wish I’d known he was on TV. I’d have made a point of not watching it.’ `But you didn’t watch it!’ `I know. But I didn’t watch it by accident. I would have liked to have not watched it on purpose.’

28.

Reading through a book I obtained from the American Library in Paris (which often has a bookcase outside containing unwanted books which can be picked up free by passers-by) I discovered this wonderful quote from W. C. Fields: `If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again. Then quit. There’s no point in being a damned fool about it.’

29.

A woman who lives in the building next to us here in Paris has two sons. I discovered that they are twins though they look nothing like one another. Talking to an old woman who knows everything that goes on in our street, The Princess discovered that the two boys have different fathers. This can happen occasionally. It is, of course, a constant reminder to the world of the mother’s generous nature.

30.

We travelled back to England on Eurostar as usual. A small businessman spent the first forty minutes making very loud telephone calls. (When I say `small’ I am referring to his size. I have no idea whether or not his enterprise might be classified as small, medium or large.) He was speaking so loudly that it was impossible to think or to read.

Eventually, as he finished one call and started another, I leant across the aisle towards him. `This is a quiet carriage,’ I reminded him.

`I know,’ he replied impatiently, dialling a fresh number. `But it is very noisy in the other carriage. Too many people making calls.’

He reminded me of Auberon Waugh.

Waugh was an enthusiastic smoker but back in the days when smoking was allowed in designated railway carriages he objected strongly to being forced to sit in a smoking compartment.

`It’s full of smoke in there!’ he complained angrily.

31.

I collected several sacks full of mail from Royal Mail. When she had handed me all the sacks the clerk produced an unstamped letter. Sending something in an unstamped envelope is far, far more secure than sending anything by registered mail or special delivery. The Royal Mail takes good care of unstamped letters. And the postmen, assuming that they are of little value, don’t bother to steal them. `You have to pay £1.50 for this,’ she said.

I looked at the letter and turned it over. There was no return address on the back. They let you look at the envelope but they don’t let you open it. `Maybe someone stamped it,’ I said. `The stamp could have fallen off.’

The clerk examined the envelope and shrugged. `You have to pay £1.50 if you want it.’

`What happens if I refuse to pay?’

`We send the letter to Belfast.’

`What happens to it in Belfast?’

`Someone opens it and then returns it.’

`That must cost Royal Mail more than £1.50.’

She thought about this for a moment. `Yes, I suppose it would.’

I handed her the envelope. `So, send it to Belfast.’

JUNE

1.

I've written a short 'pome' which I intend to offer to the European Union. They have a flag and an anthem so now they need a poet laureate.

I am the EU president
I'm held in great esteem
I'm really not the plonker
Some people say I seem

2.

The Princess spent a glum morning at The Post Office. She had nearly 50 parcels to post off. The zombie behind the counter complained bitterly about every parcel. `Have you got many more of these?' she sighed after she'd weighed and stamped three of them. She was obviously much happier handing out money to benefit claimants than dealing with the needs of a very small business. The people who work in Post Offices don't have any financial interest in the shop's success and are too dim to realise that their wages might be vulnerable if the business goes bust. There is much public discussion about whether or not prisoners should be allowed to vote. Personally, I am just as concerned about the fact that Post Office employees are allowed to vote.

3.

We have a new toaster. After sterling service our old one gave up the ghost and browned its last slice of bread. It now sits in our black rubbish sack, hidden under old tins and jars. I am, I have no doubt, breaking several EU laws in putting it there but if the clapperdogeons in Brussels think I am going to drive to the local toaster recycling centre (and burn up a gallon of diesel in so doing) they are further out of their tiny minds than I already think they are. Our new machine is a splendid looking beast, packed with chromium plated features and finished in metallic paint. It looks as though it could, with the right pilot, travel to the moon and back. It fails to satisfy only in the making of toast for which it is, I fear, woefully ill-fitted. This morning, when I arrived in the kitchen, I put a piece of bread into the toaster. I then sliced a grapefruit into halves, put one half in the fridge and the other half on the table. I poured out fruit juice. I made a cup of lemon tea for myself and a mug of hot chocolate for The Princess. I took the hot chocolate upstairs to The Princess's dressing room. I went back downstairs. And waited. And then, eventually, with obvious reluctance, a piece of lightly browned bread popped up in the toaster. If I left the bread out in the sun it would toast quicker.

4.

My book *Moneypower* has proved far more successful than I hoped or imagined. A reader has asked for an update on my investment advice. I told him that the principles expressed in *Moneypower* are still valid and will, I believe, be up-to-date indefinitely.

The combined efforts of the Federal Reserve in America, the Bank of England, the Bank of Japan and the dolts running the European Union will ruin the world and produce the greatest depression ever known. The result will be that currencies will collapse and unemployment will soar. Sadly, I suspect that in few (if any) countries will the depression be deeper and run longer than in England. The so-called Austrian school of economics (which espouses sound money, freedom for the people and small government) has become unfashionable. Our Government has been in denial for years and as a result we are now heading for a multi-generational decline. The future will be defined by a massive deleveraging by governments, companies and individuals. Inflation, devaluation, low interest rates, rising taxes and falling property prices will mean that there will be a massive transfer of wealth from the middle classes to the poor and to the rich. The value of almost every paper currency will fall and so pensions and benefits of all sorts will slump in purchasing power (just as the value of houses has slumped far more than most people realise).

I offered the following thoughts:

1. It is essential to question everything and to assume that everyone in power is corrupt, immoral and selfish and that the decisions they make will be at best self-serving and at worse dangerously destructive. Since I started to follow this sceptical philosophy I have been delightfully successful as an investor. Ignore the old adage `Look after the pennies and the pounds will look after themselves' and adopt my new one `Look after the pounds and you won't have to worry about the pennies'.

2. Don't allow your finances to become too complex. W. C. Fields had 200 bank accounts under fake names because he was worried about losing his money. Sadly when he got old and needed the money he couldn't remember the towns, the banks or the names he had used.

3. The only sound money is gold. Imagine. You are going to put something into a box, bury it and leave it for your grandchild to dig up in fifty years. It's a pension plan. What do you choose? A thick wad of fivers? Share certificates for Apple? Or a few handfuls of sovereigns? You'd be barking if you chose anything other than the sovereigns. The fivers will (if sterling still exists by then) buy your grandchild an ice-cream. The Apple shares will probably be

worthless (since Apple will have long since gone bust). But the gold coins will still be gold coins and they will make a very welcome legacy. Critics point out that gold pays no interest. True. But there is no better way to preserve capital. A century ago ten sovereigns would have been a very good week's income. Today they are still a very good week's income. Today 0.6% of global financial assets are in gold. In 1980 the figure was 3%. That hardly suggests that we are currently experiencing a bubble. Indeed, the only people who call it a bubble are those who missed investing in gold when it was much cheaper and those who have a financial interest in promoting paper alternatives (that's just about everyone, and certainly includes all politicians, all bankers and all economists).

4. Control your money yourself. Financial advisers charge up to £250 an hour for advice which can only be described as pathetic. New regulations (doubtless straight from Brussels) mean that financial advisers must pass qualifications equivalent to the first year of an undergraduate degree course before they can advise clients about investments and pensions. Well bully for them. I don't want a first year undergraduate deciding where I should invest my money. As far as I can remember that's the year when most students learn to drink lots of beer and chat up the opposite sex.

5. Last year Standard Life told pension holders who thought that they had invested in a gilt fund that the money had, by mistake, been invested in equities. If people who are paid hundreds of thousands a year can't tell the difference between equities and gilts they really ought to be doing something else for a living. Don't trust the 'experts'.

6. I recently read an interview with a flash investment fund manager who boasted that he took no notice at all of macroeconomics. He said this with the sort of dare devil insolence of a dangerous sports participant eschewing elbow pads. Macroeconomics is unimportant if you don't think the prices of oil and food are likely to have any impact on inflation and if you feel that the value of sterling will remain unaffected by geopolitical issues. I think I may organise an investment course called the Macroeconomic And Geopolitical Investment Course. I rather like the acronym: MAGIC.

7. Never trust an auditor's report. Auditors are either incompetent or crooked. A total of 180 European banks had to be rescued during or after the financial crisis which started in 2007. All 180 of those banks had previously been given clean audit reports. In other words the auditors failed to spot that any of those banks were facing problems, were badly managed or were likely to fail.

5.

I stood in the Post Office for fifty three minutes waiting to post 40 parcels. The staff who work there have been on an unofficial go slow since 1958. I had the parcels in a large sack and every time the queue moved forward a foot or so I had to drag the sack with me. When I got close to the front of the queue I found that the man behind the counter was busy chatting to the customer ahead of me. I don't know what language they were talking but it wasn't English. Indeed, it wasn't a language I recognised. They chatted for ages. I coughed and harrumphed and did all those things one does to draw attention to one's existence but they took no notice. Eventually, the customer left and I shuffled forward. `I have some parcels to post,' I said. The man turned his head slightly to look at the clock (it required more effort than anything else he'd done for nearly an hour) and then shook it. `Closed now,' he said. `But I've been waiting...' I began but he had pulled down the blind on his little hatch and he had gone, showing a surprising burst of speed. I had to drag the sack back to the car and take all the parcels back home. It was not a good moment for a Romanian seller of the *Big Issue* to accost me.

6.

The average individual in the UK spends more than four hours a day watching television. That doesn't include the time they spend watching DVDs or playing with the internet. That's the time they spend watching television. And since there are not a few of us who watch little or no television there are clearly a good many people out there watching a damned sight more than four hours a day. Many of them are children and teenagers. And that is scary.

It's scary because television destroys the imagination and natural sense of wonder and replaces these joy-giving glories with a constant sense of inadequacy, a whole armoury of anxieties and fears and, as an over-rich topping, a strange streak of superiority and arrogance.

I caught a programme called *Dragons Den* on the BBC today and was appalled by the smug, smirking bullies who make up the panel. Who the hell are these people? I've never heard of any of them. Why do people want to parade their wealth and arrogance and nastiness in this very public way? It is a foul and pointless show which seems to me to have been designed, like much on television in general, and on the BBC in particular, to entertain through humiliation.

7.

I saw a packet of a variety of crisps called Hula Hoops which warned: `May contain milk, soya, gluten, mustard.' Don't they have any idea what their products contain? Do they just throw in whatever they can get hold of? The Princess bought a packet of crisps which had, printed on the packet, a warning saying `May contain mustard '. How can they possibly not know whether or not their crisps contain mustard? Does mustard just invade crisp factories? Don't they clean their machinery? I never knew that mustard was quite so dangerously invasive. It sounds more deadly than Dutch elm disease and more virulent than anthrax.

Anyone who is genuinely allergic to nuts or mustard or even both must either starve to death or buy their own raw materials and prepare all their food themselves. Even bread is now apparently `made in a factory where nuts are used and may therefore contain traces of nut'. Don't bakeries clean anything any more? Packets of sweets are sold with a warning that they have been: `Packed in a factory which also handles nuts. May contain nuts.'

There is, of course, a hidden question here: how did so many people acquire nut allergies? Or could it merely be yet another side effect of those advertisements promising untold wealth if you fall off a ladder or burn yourself drinking a cup of coffee that is too hot?

8.

The post office has returned a book we posted off. The parcel has `No Longer At This Address' written on the outside. When I opened the parcel I was surprised to find that it was posted on 24th January 2007. So it took nearly five years for Royal Mail to fail to deliver it. That must be a record. I see that at that time we were charging £1 for postage and packing of books. How times change.

9.

I had my eyes tested at an opticians. `Macular degeneration must be starting,' I said to myself when the teenage boy in charge of the machine conducted an examination of my visual fields. `Can I do it again?' I asked. Generously, he said I could. I wiped the screen with a paper handkerchief and did the test again. This time all was well. When medical equipment is not cleaned and calibrated the consequences can be fearful.

10.

Sorting through a box of papers I found a large brown envelope containing bits and pieces I'd collected from my parents' bureau when my father died. One of the documents was a Mortgage Account book taken out when they bought their first house in November 1952. The purchase price of the house, a fairly large detached house with a good garden, two greenhouses and backing onto a splendid arboretum, was £2,300. We moved there, I remember, from one of those freezing cold pre-fabricated buildings. The monthly payments to the Cooperative Society started off at fourteen pounds, five shillings and seven pence though in later years my parents paid £16 a month and occasionally a little more. The mortgage was paid off in June 1964, just under twelve years after it had been taken out. I remember going with my parents to pick up the deeds from the building society. The three of us were ushered into the manager's office and with great ceremony he handed my father a very large envelope containing the deeds to the house. I had never seen my parents so proud as they were that day. The house, the garden, the greenhouses and the rose bushes were all theirs. The day is marked with a brown two and a half penny stamp, franked with a bold, blue rubber stamp confirming that the final payment had been made. Two things occur to me. First, I wonder how many young couples will be able to purchase such a house and pay off the mortgage, out of a fairly modest salary, in less than twelve years. We had motor cars, holidays and all the usual stuff. The mortgage was paid off out of an ordinary middle class income. Second, how sad it is that today's house buyers will never be presented with the deeds to their property. The extraordinary rise in house prices means that most will probably never pay off their mortgage at all. And the ones that do will, if they are lucky, merely receive a letter confirming that there are no more payments to be made. The Land Registry now records all property transactions on computer. No more deeds. No more parchment histories, filled with wonderful detail. (The absurdity of house prices is illustrated by the fact that around the world it is generally agreed that a house is worth buying if the purchase price is ten times the rent and a house should be sold if the price is twenty times the rent. In England, as I write, the average purchase price is around thirty times the rent.)

11.

We were in a car park in Barnstaple when a smartly dressed young man approached us rather diffidently. `I'm terribly sorry to bother you,' he began, and he did look terribly sorry. He told us a long, complicated story about his car breaking down and him needing to catch a bus and having no money for bus fare. He was, he said, in a real hurry. He apologised again and again for having to ask us for help but said we looked kindly folk. The story was packed with detail. The Princess emptied her purse and I emptied my pocket and we gave him about £5 in change. `Is there any way I can let you have the money back?' he asked. We said there was no need. He smiled and thanked us. And then hurried off in exactly the opposite direction to the bus station.

`There was, perhaps, rather too much detail,' said The Princess.

12.

I received quite a bundle of odd letters this afternoon. (The mail delivery used to be at 8.30 a.m. and then it was delayed to around 12 noon. I assume that this was done in order to save the environment. It has now been put back until around 4.00 p.m., presumably to prevent money laundering and to discourage terrorists.)

The first letter was from a reader who tells me that she responded to a knock on her door to find the postman standing there holding three parcels which were held together with tightly stretched red rubber bands. The postman told her that he had had to knock on her door because the parcels were too big to fit through her letterbox. However, when my reader removed the rubber bands she found that the three individual parcels passed through her letterbox quite easily. Maybe postmen aren't all malicious. Maybe some of them are just plain stupid.

The second curious letter came from a reader who demanded, rather snottily, that she be removed from our mailing list because we have addressed her as `Miss' when she should have been addressed as `Ms'. `Because of this I shall not be buying any more of your books,' she writes pompously. What a silly woman. I wrote back: `The member of staff who made the terrible and unforgiveable mistake relating to your title is elderly, partially sighted and although suffering from the early stages of Alzheimer's disease she has been struggling to work on because, since her husband's death, she has had difficulty in paying fuel and food bills. You will be pleased to know that on your behalf I have fired her for making such an egregious mistake.'

Next, I opened a letter from a reader who is an accountant who wrote to tell me that according to a 1997 court case it was ruled that accountants may be liable for damages if they fail to inform clients on how to structure their affairs in a tax efficient manner. He is puzzled because the Government is now cracking down on accountants who help their clients to structure their affairs in a tax efficient manner.

A reader sent me a cutting from a Scottish newspaper reporting that a woman has just won her fight to prove that she was made deaf by a vaccination she received when she was 15 months old. But a medical assessment panel has ruled that the woman (now aged 21) will not receive any compensation because she is not considered to be disabled enough. Officials at the Vaccine Damage Payment Unit accepted that the vaccine was the likely cause of her hearing problem but they ruled that since she is `only' partially disabled she can't have any compensation.

I received a wonderful letter from a pharmacist in response to a piece in my book *Diary of a Disgruntled Man* asking why 93% of pharmacists are so bloody snotty. `The two main reasons, in my case,' he wrote, `are that 93% of the general public got right up my nose with their demanding demeanour and their unreasonable expectations. Secondly, when I went to be a pharmacist I entered my course full of enthusiasm with the naive intention of becoming a helpful member of the medical services of the nation. I soon learned that the ability to produce liquid extracts of vegetable matter, roll a good rhubarb pill and make an acceptable suppository were among the skills I learned which were totally superfluous, as was approximately 99% of the knowledge I had gained. I soon found that the only way I could make any kind of living was to write a label, stick it on a box or bottle and hand it out to one of the aforementioned general public. Endlessly. And you think you are disgruntled.' To my relief he goes on to say how very much he is enjoying the diary. `There are parts which have even made me laugh out loud, something that rarely happens to me.'

Finally a reader wants my advice for her grandson. She wants to know if he should go into the sixth form or get an apprenticeship. I sent this reply: `I really do find it difficult to give any sort of advice - it gets harder the older I become and the more I know (and realise I don't know). I do know, however, that we live in a world where education accompanied by certificates is considered (by the authorities) to be far more worthwhile than any other sort. We now live by certificates and licences and I can't see that ever changing. Bits of paper (though probably digitalised) rule our lives. It's daft but it's the way of the world. So, in a way, the more bits of worthwhile paper (including a degree) the better. On the other hand I can't see the jobs market improving for quite a while. And in that environment a real skill of any sort is invaluable. There will always be a market for plumbers and electricians whereas degrees in media studies are of very little value. What really matters, of course, is the aptitude of the student concerned. Some enjoy studying and find it agreeable. Others hate it and will always find it a struggle. The latter should probably choose education allied with practical apprenticeships if they're going to be happy. Horses for courses, as they say. And of course there is the cost. A degree is now going to cost a fortune and many who `buy' them will not find them financially worthwhile. One other thought: the most useful thing I ever learned was how to type. I have yards of certificates. But to learn typing I taught myself. No certificate. But it's a most valuable skill.'

13.

The postman brought several angry letters. The first writer said: `I have heard about you. I don't like what you say or how you say it. I work for an environmentalist group. I have not read any of your books and I do not intend to do so but you are a dangerous person. I intend to go onto every website and give your books bad reviews and the lowest rating I can.' This didn't surprise me at all. Climate change fanatics are largely the same people who advocated biofuels with such ignorant enthusiasm, who claim to care much for the world but who care nothing for their own country's history or heritage, who are always unable to put anything in context and who talk glibly of hectares and kilometres instead of acres and miles. They are also, invariably, meat eaters who refuse to recognise that it is impossible to be a meat eater and to care about the environment. And they profess to worry about polar bears without giving a damn for animals caged in laboratories or farm animals crowded for days into animal transporters.

The second letter (which came unstamped) contained one of our mailed-out catalogues with the words `This is a waste of resources' scrawled across the front. The catalogue has been deliberately crumpled up so that we cannot reuse it. All the catalogues were sent to people who had previously bought our books so I'm not sure why this reader was so upset.

Third, a reader writes to say that he has read my book *Moneypower,* and has found it of interest, but that he doesn't want to keep it on his shelves and so he wants a full refund. He says, presumably as a sweetener, that he liked the book so much that he will buy more books of mine in the future. I have written back to point out that we do not run a library book lending service. We always give refunds if we send the wrong book or if a reader doesn't like the look of a book for some reason when it arrives. But if we are now to be forced to give refunds for books which have been read 'with interest' then I think I will give up. I wonder how WHSmith would deal with a customer who walked in, announced that he read a book but didn't want to keep it and so wanted a refund. The curious thing is that I half suspect there may well be a law shortly which will insist that I do give refunds to such customers. It will, of course, be devised by EU bureaucrats who have never done a day's proper work in their lives. They will, presumably, also force cake shops to give refunds to customers who have eaten and enjoyed their produce but don't want to eat it again.

A reader has complained about my book *2020* (a book predicting what will happen by the year 2020), claiming that it is full of predictions and opinions and was written before `the reshaping of Britain could be evaluated'. She also complains that the book is not balanced and that I have relied very heavily on my own viewpoint of the world.

Two weeks ago a reader wrote in and wanted me to publish his book. I sent him a note wishing him luck and explaining that I only publish my own books. Today I received another letter from him. He has written back complaining that this is unfair and that I have an obligation to publish his book too. His beef seems to be that it is unfair that my books should be published while his remain cooped up in his computer.

A 70-year-old woman wrote to tell me that she had been fired by her employer (her local council) on the grounds that she is too old to do her job properly. `I cannot survive on the old age pension,' she says. `But I'm not allowed to work because I'm considered too old.' A reader wrote to tell me that her 86-year-old mother was told by her surgery that she couldn't attend for a blood pressure check unless she also had a flu vaccination. A woman returned a copy of *England's Glory* because it contains no pictures. (The book is in excellent condition and we can resell it so I sent her a refund cheque with a note suggesting that if she wanted books with pictures she either look for books described as `illustrated' or choose books intended for children.) A reader in Spain has written ordering a book. He tells us that it must arrive at his home on the 16th or 17th of next month. He clearly has more faith in the postal services than I have. I'll be content if the book gets where it's going. A producer wants to turn my Bilbury novels into a television series. But he insists that the doctor hero must be black. (This is, of course, in response to the usual, perverse political correctness which now pervades every aspect of our world. I wonder how many Devon villages had black doctors in the 1970s? And, while on the subject, why do advertisers pander to the vigilantes in our society by always including a mixed couple in advertisements and always ensuring that the man is black and the woman is white and never the other way round?) A reader points out that since schools were originally introduced to keep children occupied while their parents were working (and to train children for the daily drudge of employment) it makes no sense to waste money running schools in Scotland. `Since nine out of ten Scots are parasites, dependent upon English taxpayers for their daily kippers and haggis, they will be better prepared for a life on the dole or working for the civil service if they merely stay at home and watch daytime television.' A reader tells me that his computer deletes articles from my website before they can be read and downloaded. And another reader points out that Muslims will be taking over within a decade or so. He predicts that under Muslim rule, all dogs which roam free will be rounded up and shot, gays will not be allowed to marry (`Try forcing Muslims to accept gay marriage and see where it gets you') and that Harriet Harman will have to wear a burqa and walk some distance behind Mr Harman.

And we've also received a letter from the local council asking us if we would like to contribute to the debate about school holiday timing. Adding up the suggested holiday periods I see that local schools will be open for 195 days next year. Teachers and pupils will have 170 days a year off. This is part time working for teachers since it means that on average they work 3.75 days a week.

I don't know what the rest of the mail contains. I stopped opening envelopes for the day. I wonder if it's too late to get a job as a teacher.

14.

For years now British employers have been complaining about the European Working Directive, which limits the number of hours employees are allowed to work each week. The Directive has been widely blamed for the fact that hospital doctors now work very restricted shifts (endangering the lives of patients) and for the fact that general practitioners no longer work nights and weekends. But today I discovered that the UK had originally obtained an official `opt out' from this legislation. We do not have to restrict working hours. A previous government must have decided to ignore the opt out and to introduce the legislation despite knowing how much damage it would do. My bet is that we can blame Blair and Brown for this. Even if I'm wrong I think I'll blame them anyway. Dumb and Dumber have done so much damage to England that they might as well accept this extra chunk of blame.

15.

The Princess and I met an Irishman in a bar this evening. When I asked him what he did for a living he told me that he was a liar. I told him that I was impressed by his honesty. He seemed confused. After a few minutes of conversation which left us both bewildered I realised that he meant that he was a lawyer. When spoken in a gentle Irish brogue the two words do sound rather similar. He was a decent fellow, for a lawyer. He told us that whenever he is in London he stays at the Ritz because he thinks the name is rather appropriate for a man in his profession. He told me something I will never forget. `People often say that you don't need a lawyer if you haven't done anything wrong,' he said. `But that is dangerous nonsense. It is when you are innocent that you do need a lawyer.'

16.

We met one of our new neighbours. I call him a neighbour but he lives two or three miles away from us. We met because his car was blocking the lane.

`Sorry about this,' he said. He was small and rather round. He was wearing a blue fisherman's smock, orange trousers that were too short for him and bright yellow socks. `Can you help me push this thing off the road? It seems to have stopped.'

While The Princess steered he and I pushed his car onto the parking area next to what I assumed was his cottage.

`It's the carburettor,' he said.

I nodded as though I understood all about the vagaries, inconsistencies and unreliability of carburettors.

`Or the gearbox. Or maybe something in the engine.'

`It won't go?'

`That's it exactly,' he said. `Are you good with cars?'

`Not in the slightest.'

`I used to sell garage doors,' he told us. `But I've never been good with cars. I'll have to call the garage. That would be best, don't you think?'

I agreed with him that calling the garage would probably be favourite option.

`I started off life wanting to change the world and found myself selling garage doors,' he said. `Those things that roll up and disappear into the ceiling. You press a button and they roll up and you press another button and they roll down again.'

`I've seen them,' said The Princess.

`To be honest I never had much faith in them,' he said. `Too much to go wrong. I preferred the old-fashioned wooden doors you open and close by hand.'

`But you don't sell them anymore?'

`No. I gave it all up. I lived in Sheffield. Horrible little house on an estate. My wife was a social worker. She had Ambitions. She enjoyed our life but I hated it. I wanted to give up the garage doors and become a painter but she wouldn't consider the idea. She said we needed the money. I said I didn't see why we needed the money. I've always had simple enough tastes. Much of the money I was making was spent on sustaining a lifestyle I hated. Two cars, grey suits, white shirts, ties and dinner parties with upwardly mobile couples every Saturday evening. We used to argue about it all the time. Then one Wednesday morning she told me she was going to live with a man who works for the council. Half of one of the couples we had dinner with on Saturdays. So I gave up my job, put a few things in the car and came down to the Cotswolds. I was in Bourton-on-the-Water by tea time. I rented a room over an estate agency, bought some paints and started painting. My name is Pettigrew by the way.'

We introduced ourselves. `Is that what you do now?' I asked. `Paint?'

He nodded. `I paint countryside scenes of the Cotswolds. Watercolours. I'll never be in the Damien Hirst bracket but I make a living. I frame them, take them to the tourist shops and they sell them for me. We split the proceeds.' He looked at his watch. `Must get on. You're not going near Cirencester are you?'

I said I was.

`Could you give me a lift do you think? I promised to take a couple of paintings in to a shop in town.'

The Princess said we could.

`With my bicycle? So that I can get back afterwards?'

I put half of his bicycle into the boot and left the other half hanging out. Clutching two framed pictures our new friend climbed into the back seat and we drove him into the town.

`May I look?' asked The Princess, as we drove.

Mr Pettigrew showed her his pictures and before we dropped him off had commissioned him to paint a picture of our new home.

`A truly serendipitous breakdown!' he said, as he left us, beaming broadly. `What a wonderful day this has been.'

He is, without a shadow of a doubt, the nicest neighbour we've met.

17.

I spent the morning trying to do the accounts and found myself stumbling over the new paperwork the utility companies are sending and the new statements the bank is mailing.

I am fed up to the back teeth with progress. I've had enough of it. Progress has given us bookshops staffed with reject shelf stackers from Tesco rather than with booksellers. We used to have newspapers written by journalists old enough to shave and when television programmes ended at the end of the evening the National Anthem was played. Postmen used to deliver the mail twice a day (including Sundays before Christmas). Progress has given us deserted High Streets, darkened suburbs and bankrupt banks.

In the bad old days we lived near to an old-fashioned ironmonger. The man who owned the shop (who ran it with his wife and a 'boy' who was in his fifties) had a thingy board upon which was screwed, glued or otherwise fastened an example of every type of screw, washer and fitting. I would point to the thingamajig I wanted and within seconds he would produce it. He would put it into a brown paper bag and ring up the purchase price on an old-fashioned cash register. Today, the ironmonger has been replaced by a chain store where the staff hardly know the name of the town where they are working, let alone where to find the department where ironmongery bits and pieces are to be found. And so, thanks to progress, I spend half an hour peering into plastic packs and eventually I find something that looks as if it might be the right thing. I want one but I buy twelve, because they come in blister packs of twelve. When I get home I have to slash open the pack (an adventure in itself) to find out if the thingy is the right thingy. And when it isn't, which I know it won't be, I cannot take back the blister pack because I have opened it.

Everything is constantly changing in the name of progress. Am I, I wonder, the only person who doesn't know what or how or why the telephone company charges me whatever it does, the only person who prefers paper bills to electronic ones, the only person who wishes the bank would just do what it is supposed to do instead of forever offering me services no sane person would buy? Every change means upheaval, time wasting and confusion. None of them makes my life easier; most of them are designed simply to cut costs and improve efficiency at the expense of quality of service. These things are changes. But they aren't progress.

When the Government forced us to watch digital television we found we needed three pieces of electrical equipment (instead of one) to watch television. The incomprehensible brochure which came with one of them informed us that we had to leave it on all night on standby (something we have been told we shouldn't do because it threatens the planet's very existence.) All were complicated to set up and more difficult to operate than the system we had before. Every piece of progress seems to mean that I have less control over, or understanding of, my life than I had yesterday. Good ideas seem to be abandoned simply because they can be described as old-fashioned. My first small mobile telephone, which I had in the late 1980s and which wasn't much bigger than the one I have now, could, in an emergency, be operated with two AA batteries. That was immensely useful. I used it to edit a column while sitting in Café Sperl in Vienna, to buy shares while sitting in Deux Magots in St Germain and to buy advertising while sitting on a cliff-top in Devon. I know of no modern phone which can be battery operated. (And where are the clockwork phones which would make life so much easier?)

We have a richer heritage than all our predecessors because we have all they knew and more. But our problem is overload. We are constantly struggling to sift the wheat from the chaff; to separate the music from the noise of modern life. I am not against change but I am against change without purpose. There seems to be a myth that before anything new can be created everything old must be destroyed. This is nonsense, of course. But it's an example of newstyle thinking. Traditions are sneered at not because they are irrelevant or irrational but simply because they are old. We all depend on one another more than ever but we have been encouraged (indeed forced) to be ever more selfish. People are so self-centred these days they no longer have friends; these days they have support systems. Here's a truth I have discovered: the more technology promises the less it is likely to do what it promises and the more effort you will have to waste trying to make it work.

We bought a shed. It was the best we could find. The walls are so thin that I could probably push my fist through the wall. We bought a CD player but before we could get it to work we had to connect two bare wires.

We all need daily rituals. They comfort us. Routine, predictability, habit, reliability - all are comforting. But the rules and regulations change daily. And so life becomes ever more tiring and stressful. The lack of stability and the increase in uncertainty mean that our stress levels soar and our health and productivity decline. Too much freedom in little things is exhausting because it leaves us needing to make too many decisions. That's why we allow ourselves to develop habits. We tend to eat the same thing for breakfast every morning and we tend to follow the same route when we go to work. In shops we queue so that we don't have to remember who is in front of us and who is behind us. But while the state is trying to get rid of all our important freedoms, taking control of the big decisions for us, it is also making life more complicated by making it impossible for us to deal with the little things in life by following routines; we are constantly unsettled and fearful without really knowing why. And so we happily allow the bureaucrats to tell us how to live our lives because we suspect that our inability to cope with daily problems must also mean that we will be incapable of coping with the big dilemmas.

Politicians are crooked or completely out of touch or a mixture of both. They are in love with progress. The Government wants to spend billions on building a new railway line so that trains will travel a few minutes faster. Is that really what people want? I don't think so. I suspect that most people would rather have more frequent trains, more reliable trains, cheaper tickets and a bit more leg room.

The whole of our society has crumbled in the face of progress. In the bad old days a family would have a doctor, a solicitor and probably an accountant whom they could trust. Reliable motor mechanics and gardeners could be found if you needed them. Today? Ha! The Princess and I trust no one. I know that if I go for an eye test, the optician will try to sell me something. He won't be content to charge for testing my eyes. He will want to sell me new spectacles or some pills to stop me going blind. If I take the car to a garage I will have to pretend that I know what a carburettor is and that I like to spend my evenings taking apart gearboxes, oiling them and putting them back together again. If I give any hint that I am not au fait with the niceties of motor car construction I will be ripped off. The standards in all areas of life have fallen consistently. We are awash with self-righteous police chiefs who stand up and scream when anyone dares criticise a policemen, despite the fact that they must surely know that today's policemen lie routinely and with just as much fluency as politicians. And the village policeman, the one real person in an authoritarian world, now lives 40 miles away from the village he polices.

I've been with the same clearing bank for decades. But it's a one-sided loyalty. Every month I find simple transactions ever more difficult to manage. I used to receive statements every week. Now, in the name of progress, they come once a month. If I pay in cheques the teller just wants to sell me insurance, an ISA, or a new deposit account. Even the lowest employee receives bonuses and incentives - those two corrosive and destructive inventions. I am a constant victim of institutionalised deceit.

Life is stressful because of the incessant and usually unnecessary changes, and the confusions created as a result.

One of our banks was recently taken over. The mess produced by this seems unending. We pay the price. Another bank has written to say that our account is (for our convenience, of course) being moved to a virtual bank. Our account number has, inevitably, changed. And so everything that was set up with the original bank account also has to be changed. The potential for disaster is vast. And inevitable. Another bank wrote to tell me that a deed box they were storing for me was being moved to a branch in Glasgow. They gave us three days' notice.

And always the Government gets bigger. Civil servants now run the NHS, the BBC, two of the nation's largest banks and many of the biggest and best known home and car insurance companies. None of the staff understands the meaning of hard work or thrift.

Many years ago I used to work as a consultant for several Trading Standards offices. I remember that two men in cheap suits would drive 200 miles to bring me documents to sign. They would then have a pleasant lunch in the pub, remove their jackets and sit on the beach before driving back. When I suggested that they might save themselves considerable trouble and expense by putting the documents in the post (the Royal Mail was more reliable in those days and it was heard of for mail to reach its destination within days of being posted) the senior of the two men explained that if they drove they could claim all their expenses, plus a very generous mileage allowance.

Thoreau's motto: `Simplify! Simplify!' is clearly not popular with politicians (particularly Chancellors). The only sensible change is change for the sake of improvement or making us feel better. But we don't have that sort of change. We have the change-for-the-sake-of-change sort of change. And we have the change because it's more-profitable-for-someone-else sort of change.

18.

I tottered to a pharmacy to buy an Epipen. Now that there is no longer much of a health service in the United Kingdom I always like to have one of these handy. One of the few things doctors can do in an emergency is to inject adrenaline to deal with an anaphylactic shock. I carry one not just for The Princess and myself but for any emergency. Carrying an Epipen is easier than carrying adrenaline ampoules, a syringe and a needle.

After about five minutes of searching, the pharmacist, a foreign woman, came to me holding an Epipen. `Is this what you want?' she asked.

`Perfect!' I said. I took a piece of paper out of my pocket, wrote out a private prescription and handed it to her. `It will be ready in 20 minutes,' said the woman. `But you've got it!' I protested. `You're holding it. I can take it now.' The Epipen was inches from my grasp. I thought about throwing down a £20 note, snatching up the pen and running.

`Twenty minutes,' insisted the woman. `We have to put a label on it and put it into a bag. Those are the rules.'

`It's already in a box,' I pointed out. `I don't need a label or a bag.'

`Haven't you ever been to a pharmacy before?' she demanded, rather rudely I thought.

`Yes,' I replied. `But they didn't keep me waiting for 20 minutes while they stuck a pointless label on a box.'

I left, wasted 17 minutes walking around the shopping centre, and went back to the pharmacy.

Five assistants were standing round doing nothing.

`Is my Epipen ready?' I asked.

`The 20 minutes is not up', said another foreigner. I asked if she had trained in the USSR but she didn't understand me.

After another three minutes I looked at my watch again and wondered why it is that everyone in England with any power at all has to use it as a default. After exactly 20 minutes, a self-important missy brought the Epipen. It still had no label and no bag. The pharmacist I'd spoken to first stuck on the label and put the labelled Epipen in a bag. I gave her the money. She handed me the bag and my change.

I took the Epipen out of the bag, and handed her the bag. `I don't need this,' I said. I then peeled the `As directed by a physician' label off the Epipen box and handed her that. `I don't need that either,' I said, and wandered off.

Another jolly shopping experience in England.

19.

We visited a friend in Wiltshire and were surprised when we arrived to find the house empty but the front door wide open.

`Oh, I never lock the doors,' he said. `Around here it's not necessary. There are very few strangers around and the locals all know I don't own anything worth stealing.'

`What about at night?' asked The Princess. `Don't you lock up when you go to bed?'

`No,' replied our friend. `I keep a double barrelled shotgun under the bed. If anyone comes into my house uninvited I'll shoot him with the first barrel and put the second barrel load into the ceiling.'

We both looked at him, puzzled.

`The one into the ceiling was the warning shot,' he explained with a grin.

20.

We arrived in Paris and when I emptied our mailbox I found, among all the letters, advertising leaflets and magazines a small piece of carefully folded white paper. When I opened the paper I found that it contained a small quantity of white powder. I immediately poured the powder down the lavatory, threw the piece of paper into the communal dustbins and washed my hands. The Princess and I spent quite a while puzzling over how the package got into our mailbox. We can only assume that it was either intended for another apartment, and was dropped into our mailbox by mistake, or that someone who was carrying the package panicked for some reason and dropped it into our mailbox to get rid of it. Why do really odd things always happen to us?

21.

The man who runs a newspaper kiosk near to our apartment, and who knows that I am medically qualified, asked me whether I could name five members of the animal kingdom who are known to live longer than human beings. I could manage only two – parrots and tortoise. The other three are carp, pike and crocodile.

22.

I tried to send a text message to wish a friend 'Happy Birthday'. I had great difficulty in coping with the tiny keyboard on my mobile telephone. (My first mobile phone, purchased around 25 years ago was the size and weight of a brick and much easier to handle.) I blame the minute keys, not my clumsiness, for the fact that the text which was received at the other end of its ethereal journey read 'gapqy biqtgdaz' and was wrongly assumed, for some time, to be a message in code.

23.

`Who lives in the apartment at the front of the first floor?' I asked our neighbour Henri `I've never seen anyone go in or out but I've heard noises and I've seen a light at the window so I know someone lives there.'

Henri explained that the man who lives there lives alone and is 'un ermite' (a hermit). `For years he was just a hypochondriac, nothing unusual in France, but gradually things got worse. He read first that most people die in their sleep and so at night he did not go to bed at all. He napped in a chair through the night. Then he read that most people who are murdered are killed by people they know and so he refused to leave his apartment in the day time. He goes out only at night. Twice a week he rushes to the supermarket at the top of Rue Cler which is open 24 hours a day. He buys what he needs and rushes home again.'

24.

I'm always interested in finding out medical customs in other countries. For example, when I wrote my book *The Story of Medicine* I was delighted to discover that in ancient China it was the custom for patients to pay their doctors only when they were well and to stop paying for the duration of any illnesses they suffered.

Today, I learned from a German picture framer who has a shop in our street that it always used to be customary for German doctors to offer a glass of champagne to patients they could not cure, and to whom they could offer no hope. If the doctor had to give bad news he would attempt to ease the moment by opening a bottle of something bubbly.

25.

The salon where I've had my hair cut for years is closed. The husband and wife team who ran it have presumably divided up the scissors and the combs and gone their separate ways. I am not surprised. They had been arguing for years, sometimes on the street.

So, instead I went to a fellow with a small shop nearby. There was no one waiting and this should have alarmed me because waiting is now so popular that whole rooms are put aside for it in many buildings. The barber ushered me straight into the chair. It was only when he tried to throw the cloth around my neck in that skilful, debonair way barbers have that I spotted that he had Parkinson’s disease.

It was an interesting thirty minutes.

He cut my hair by holding the scissors in two hands and making sudden lunges at my head but all things considered he made a pretty good job of things. He told me that the electric razor was too heavy for him to hold and so he used a cut throat razor for trimming my neck hairs. Once again he held it in both hands.

Sitting in that chair, and letting him cut my hair, was one of the bravest things I’ve done for ages. `If I get out of this alive,’ I thought, `and with my ears and eyes intact, I don’t care what my hair looks like.’

`Congratulations!’ he said, when he had finished. `You are my first customer of the day.’

I handed him a note in payment. He dropped it and then dropped the change. I smiled weakly and thanked him.

`Your hair looks good,’ said The Princess. `Did you go to the usual place?’

26.

We went to `Printemps’, one of the biggest stores in Paris, hoping to find one of those things you lay across the bath to hold soap, nail brushes and books. I don’t know the name in English so couldn’t even look up the word in my dictionary. Eventually, after spending an hour or so riding on escalators we found the bathroom fittings department and, after a little miming and much talk of reading in the bath, purchased a device designed to be held up by two suckers fastened to the tiles alongside the bath. Not as good as a thing to lay across the bath but it was all we could find. `Shall we have two?’ I suggested to A, as the assistant dug one out of the cupboard. She held up the box for my approval. `How much is it?’ I asked. `Sixty five euros.’ I looked at The Princess. Nearly sixty quid for a soap dish seemed a lot. `I think one will be enough,’ I said firmly though I did purchase a box of 44 tiles. (We have one cracked tile in the bathroom but the shop only sold tiles in boxes of 44. We now have 43 spares.) When we got back to the apartment I spent three hours trying to fix the damned thing to the wall. The suckers wouldn’t stick. It is, it seems, impossible to buy quality these days. Over sixty quid for a useless, and it seemed to me rather cheaply made, bathroom fitting.

After Printemps we went to FNAC to spend the 200 euro vouchers we’d obtained with our Eurostar frequent traveller points. It feels like party time whenever we spend our free vouchers. It’s an annual delight. We each chose an armful of CDs that added up to just short of 200 euros. When we got to the counter the assistant pointed out that most of mine were on special offer and, therefore, could not be purchased with the vouchers.

When we got home I opened a Harry Nilsson album and the cheap plastic case broke. The Nilsson album contains two of his most unforgettable tracks: *You’re breaking my heart, so fuck you* and *I’d rather be dead than wet my bed* (sung together with the Senior Citizens of the Stepney and Pinner Choir Club No 6). A real musical curiosity.

27.

We started to walk along the river this afternoon.

`My shoes are pinching,’ I said, after we’d gone a mile or so. It was a beautiful, warm afternoon.

`There’s a bench just here,’ said The Princess.

`Oh, is there?’ I said, feigning surprise. `Gosh. So there is.’

We sat in the sunshine. I took out an old orange Penguin Wodehouse I was re-reading for the umpteenth time. Pelham Grenville Wodehouse created sentences with the skill and care that Georges Auguste Escoffier created soufflés. The Princess took out an improving book. And occasionally we watched as the world tottered by. There was a children’s playground not far away and we could hear the shouts and laughter of the children playing. Playgrounds in Paris are marvellous; full of colour and originality. In England all the playgrounds are rubberised and sanitised and utterly boring; there is no opportunity for creative play or even the slightest bit of danger. We used to have adventure playgrounds which consisted of planks of wood, scaffolding, piles of mud and rope. They are long gone. Banished to a world of memories.

After an hour or so The Princess closed her book and looked at me. `How are your shoes?’ she asked. `I thought we could go back for tea and buns, if you can walk.’

`Oh, I think I’ll manage,’ I said bravely. `What a pity our walk was spoiled.’

The Princess smiled.

She always knows.

28.

Sorting through a cupboard full of my own books I found one which carried a photograph of me leaning up against a pillar in Covent Garden. The picture was taken for a Pan paperback by a photographer called Jerry Bauer who specialises in taking portraits of authors. I was wearing, I noticed, a sports jacket which I remember buying from Austin Reed in Regent Street some 40 years ago. It looked smart in the picture and for a moment I wondered what had happened to it. And then I realised that I was wearing it. The lining has worn through in a couple of places but the jacket is still going strong and still looks good. It has, to be honest, worn better than I have.

29.

We visited our favourite church, St Clothilde, which is near to Les Invalides. The organist was practising and we sat and listened to him for a while. We lit candles for the friends we have lost in the last year or two and then spoke to one of the priests. He had a beautiful smile; a smile that was in his eyes as well as on his lips.

`It is very quiet in here,' said The Princess. `I don't suppose very much ever happens.'

`Oh you are wrong,' he said. `Things do happen here.' And he told us a story. He said that one of his tasks is to open the wooden boxes which are placed around the church next to the candles which visitors can buy and light. The boxes don't often contain very much, usually just a few euro coins and occasionally a small denomination note.

`Two weeks ago,' he said, `I opened one of the boxes and found inside it a ring wrapped in a piece of paper torn from an envelope. There was a note on the paper, written in what was clearly a child's handwriting, apologising. The writer said that she had lit a candle and then realised that she had no money with her to pay for it. All she had of value was her ring and so she was putting that into the box instead of the fee of two euros.'

`The ring was not a valuable one,' said the priest. `In fact it was worthless in monetary terms. It was made of plastic and probably from a Christmas cracker or something similar. But I had a feeling that it meant a good deal to the child who had given it to us and so I put it aside. I hoped that one day I might be able to return it to its owner.'

`And did you?' asked The Princess, desperate to know the outcome.

`Ah,' said the priest with a smile. `You are intrigued too!' He nodded. `Yes,' he said. `A week later I was on duty in the confessional boxes but business was quiet. There was no one with sins to confess and so I was standing in the church just thinking quietly to myself. And then I saw a young girl come into the church. She was about seven years old. She had long hair; she was quite a thin little thing. I could tell from her clothes that she came from quite a poor family. She had very cheap shoes that were too big for her.'

`I waited a while before I did anything. I don't know why. But I waited. She walked up to the place where the candles are displayed and she took one from the storage shelf, carefully lit it from one of the candles which was already alight, and then placed it on the rack above. Then she reached into the pocket of her dress, took out a coin and dropped it into the wooden box. It was a two euro coin. I have heard so many coins fall into those boxes that I can tell you the value of any coin that I hear drop. It must have been the world to her. Perhaps her pocket money for a week, a month, who knows.'

`And then I approached her. I took the ring out of my pocket and I held it out to her. I asked her if the ring was hers. She had tears in her eyes when she saw it. She nodded. She did not say anything. She just nodded. She could not trust herself to speak because she was crying. And besides I am a priest and I think she was frightened a little. Perhaps she had never spoken to a priest before. And I think that maybe she was frightened that she would be in trouble for putting the ring into the box instead of two euros.'

`Please take it back,' I said to her. `God was pleased to borrow your ring. It was kind of you to lend it to Him. But now He returns it to you with His thanks.' The girl took the ring and put it into her pocket. She did not put it onto her finger. I think perhaps it was too big for her.'

`She asked me if God was not cross with her and I told her that He most certainly was not. The loan of the ring was, I said, worth far more than two euros to Him. She thanked me and she made a strange gesture, a sort of curtsey I think. And then she walked away. She did not run. Little girls do not run in church. She walked. And just when she got to the door, before she left, she turned and she waved to me. Like this.' He waved a little girl sort of wave.

`Do you know who she was lighting the candles for?' I asked.

`Oh no,' said the priest. `That is between her and God.' He smiled. And he bowed to us, and then he walked slowly away.

Priests do not even walk quickly in church.

30.

I received a telephone call from a man who, a century or two ago, used to be my dentist. I hadn't heard from him for years but was pleased to hear his voice, particularly as he wasn't telling me that I needed a filling. He was, he told me, in Nice attending a dental course. It was his first time abroad and he was terribly excited about the fact that people were driving on the wrong side of the road and eating bread rolls with chocolate in them for breakfast. Just as some people are excited by the word `sea-front', and others drool when the words `immensely' and `rich' are placed in the same sentence, so our former dentist was excited by the idea of anything foreign and romantic. (These tax deductible courses are always held in places like Nice. Presumably there is never any hotel accommodation available in Wolverhampton.) I don't know what the course was about, something to do with better pliers for yanking out resistant teeth I suppose, but my erstwhile jaw breaker had got himself into rather a complicated situation in the dull evening hours when he and his chums weren't purring over shiny bits of dental equipment. He had met a young lady in his hotel with whom he had developed what can best be described as a close relationship. She was, he said, 18-years-old, five foot ten inches tall, blonde, willowy but well-endowed and Russian, and she had told him that she was trying to escape from the Russian Mafia. He said that despite being a virgin she was incredible in bed and that anyone who'd seen her in action and didn't know her would not have believed that she’d only ever once kissed a boy before meeting him. My dentist friend, being probably the most naïve person on the planet, had believed her story and, after giving one of the receptionists a huge tip, had secretly moved her into his hotel room so that the bad guys couldn’t find her and force her to do unspeakable things to, for and with dentists attending courses in tooth extraction techniques. He had also given her a considerable sum of money so that she could buy new clothes to replace the ones she didn’t dare go back and collect. `She wants to escape to England,’ he told me, `so I need money for her to buy a new passport. She knows someone who can help her but she needs 5,000 euros.’ He told me that although he’d known her for less than 24 hours, and hadn’t been able to exchange more than two words with her, since she didn’t speak English and he didn’t speak Russian, he was in love with her and when she arrived in England he was going to leave his family and move into a flat with her. I asked him how he knew all these things when they didn’t share a language and he told me that the kind-hearted Russian waiter who had introduced them had been very helpful. At no point had it occurred to my friend that this beautiful young Russian girl was in another branch of the `lie back and open wide’ business. The bottom line to this bizarre but entirely true story was that the dentist hadn’t got as much cash as his new friend needed and didn’t know where he could find it and wondered if I could help, either by sending him the money or by sending him The Princess’s passport so that the girl could use it to travel to London. I told him that I didn’t think the passport switch was going to work terribly well and that if things went wrong we would all end up hoping that the makers of `soap on a rope’ were still in business. I tentatively and delicately tried to suggest that the girl might, perhaps, not be telling him the complete truth but I obviously wasn’t tentative or delicate enough because he became quite indignant and told me that he thought I’d understand because I’m married to a younger woman. He then slammed down the telephone.

JULY

1.

The title of my book *People Push Bottles Up Peaceniks* was inspired by the headline *British Army Push Bottles Up Germans* which appeared in the *Daily Mirror* during the Second World War. Knowing this a reader has written to remind me that when Michael Foot, then the leader of the Labour Party, was chairman of a European Parliament lobby group formed with the aim of getting rid of the nuclear bomb, a newspaper ran the headline *Foot Heads Arms Body.* He also told me that a newspaper in Essex ran a story about spending cuts for local libraries with the headline *Book Lack In Ongar.*

My other favourite newspaper headlines include: Lawyers give poor free legal advice, March planned for next August, Lingerie shipment hijacked-thief gives police the slip, LA voters approve urban renewal by landslide, Patient at death's door - doctors pull him through, Headless body in topless bar, Teachers strikes idle kids and Antique stripper to display wares at store.

I spent most of the day replying to this and other mail which had accumulated and we were just sitting down to watch a DVD which The Princess had bought me when the telephone rang. It was my dentist friend. He was distraught. He had popped out of a lecture on new ways to make holes in teeth in the hope that he could see his new love and had spotted her canoodling with an orthodontist from Idaho. He seemed particularly upset about the fact that he was an orthodontist though I don't think the fact that he was from Idaho bothered him too much. There had, apparently, been quite a scene which had ended only when the girl had telephoned for help and a burly Russian pimp with tattoos had turned up in a Mercedes coupé and adjudicated in favour of the man from Idaho who had apparently produced a well filled wallet as a character witness.

`I've been such a fool,' said my former dentist. `How could I be such an idiot?'

`Don't feel so bad,' I said. `It was the sort of mistake anyone could make.'

2.

`I'd like to buy some stamps,' I told the Post Office counter clerk.

`What do you want?'

`Five hundred of your excellent 20p stamps please.'

She shook her head. `I can't let you have those. The manager says we have to keep them for customers, they're very difficult to get hold of.'

`I need them because quite a number of packets and parcels need 20p stamps on them.'

`The 20p stamps are very popular.'

I said I knew that and that I'd been to three other Post Offices trying to buy them. `Do you have any in the safe?'

The Princess has also tried to buy 20p stamps. They are, literally, rarer than penny blacks. Every post office counter clerk admits that there is a huge demand for them but that they can't get supplies.

`Yes, but the manager says we can't touch those because we need them for customers.'

`I am a customer. Why are you saving them?'

`Because they're difficult to get hold of and customers need them.'

`But I'm a customer.'

`Why do you want so many 20p stamps? Why not just buy £1 stamps?'

`Because it costs £2.20 to post a book weighing up to 750 grams and £1.40 to post small packets,' I explained. `It's 20p stamps I need. But I'll take some £1 stamps while I'm here.'

`I can let you have some 10p stamps. But I haven't got any £1 stamps. There's a shortage.'

`If I buy 10p stamps I've got to stick on twice as many stamps,' I sighed.

`Why don't you get a franking machine?'

`Because we can only rent them and the forms drive me mad.'

`You can always bring your parcels in so that we can weigh them and put our postage stickers on them.'

`But you go mad if we bring in more than 10 parcels at a time. And the people in the queue behind start rioting. Do you have any 40p stamps?'

She looked at me as though I were potty. `There isn't a 40p stamp.'

`Why not? There should be.'

She shrugged. `Do you want the 10p stamps?'

`How many do you have?'

She opened her folder and found the 10p stamps.

`I can let you have 12.'

`Just 12?'

`That's all I can let you have.'

`What about some 20p stamps?'

`I can't let you have those.'

`But you have 20p stamps! I saw some when you flicked through your folder.'

`Those are for customers.'

`I am a customer.'

`I can let you have one.'

`One is no good!'

`OK. You can have two. But I can't let you have more.'

At this point the youth behind me punched me in the back. `Hurry up, mate,' he said. `I want to collect my money.'

I turned round. The youth who had punched me was in his early twenties. He had bits of metal attached to his nose and both ears and numerous tattoos. He wore a Burberry cap and a dirty singlet. His pupils were as big as black tiddlywinks and his head was bobbing from side to side. I turned back to the counter clerk.

`Do you have any 50p stamps?'

`There isn't a 50p stamp.'

`Yes there is.'

`No there isn't.'

`It's the stamp for a second class letter.'

`Oh. A second class stamp.'

`It's worth 50p so it's a 50p stamp. If I put two of those on a parcel they count as £1.'

So I bought £300 worth of second class stamps. And as I left I heard her complaining to the next customer, the youth collecting his money.

`Did you hear all that?' she demanded. `We get some awfully difficult customers in here.'

Eventually, in order to purchase the stamps I needed I had to visit five separate post offices. At each establishment I was received with the same arrogant, unhelpful manner. And burglars should take note: post offices carry very little stamp stock these days.

3.

I received a letter this morning giving me the news that Archie, once a general practitioner, had died. I only knew him slightly but his was the saddest of sad stories.

Fifteen years ago he was a partner in a well-established two man medical practice. He was a good doctor, well-liked by his patients and well respected by his colleagues. He was also a keen musician, regularly playing the saxophone in a jazz band and able to play over a dozen different instruments.

Archie and his partner looked after their patients themselves. They worked alternate nights and alternate weekends and when one of them was away on holiday the other worked 168 hour weeks. They had once tried using a locum but they found that it caused more problems than it solved.

One dark December evening Archie, who was not on duty, was sitting with his wife watching a film on television. He and his wife had drunk a bottle of wine with their dinner and Archie was sipping a brandy. At ten o'clock he received a telephone call to tell him that his partner had been injured in a motor car accident on the way back from visiting a patient. He wasn't seriously ill but he was obviously unable to look after the practice. And so Archie had to take over looking after the night time emergency calls.

Just after midnight Archie was called to see a patient who had had a suspected heart attack. Knowing that he had been drinking Archie tried to get a taxi but couldn't find one. The local taxi firms couldn't help him for half an hour. And so Archie had to drive himself. Racing through the town he was stopped by a police patrol and, because one of the policemen smelt alcohol on his breath, he was breathalysed.

That was the point at which the nightmare started.

Archie's breath sample was positive and so was a blood sample. He was convicted of driving while under the influence of alcohol and he lost his driving licence. More crucially the police sent a routine report to the General Medical Council and Archie was struck off the medical register. His career was in ruins.

Without an income he and his wife couldn't pay the mortgage. Archie was in his early forties and the couple had two young children at a local private school. They had huge outgoings and no income. Archie could only get a low paid administrative job. His wife resumed her career as a nurse but they were no longer earning enough to pay their bills. Within a year they had to take their children out of their schools and they were forced to sell their home. They moved into a small flat and sold most of their furniture. They struggled on but Archie, who felt that their disaster was entirely his fault, started drinking heavily. And two years later he and his wife split up.

In the years which followed Archie became a tramp and lived on the street. He earned money for alcohol, and a little food, by playing a penny whistle outside the local railway station. His former patients would sometimes recognise him and give him money.

And now he's dead.

When I first heard this tragic story I couldn't help thinking that the courts and the General Medical Council had been unthinkingly unsympathetic. Was there no one in authority with the imagination to remember the words `There but for the grace of God'?

I still feel the same.

A kind and good-hearted man was crucified by society for trying to do his duty.

4.

The National Trust shop in Wells is selling Christmas cards. I asked the assistant if the cards were left over from last year or being sold early for this year. The entirely unembarrassed assistant told me that they were on sale for American customers. I said that in my ignorance I had always assumed that the Americans, for all their idiosyncrasies, celebrated Christmas on the same day as us. She looked at me sharply and then looked away.

I'm no great fan of the National Trust. When my parents died I wanted to pay for a bench to be put in the garden at one of the National Trust properties where they had both worked for many years as volunteers. I said I thought a bench around a tree might be rather jolly. But I was told that it couldn't be done. In what I thought was a rather pompous reply I was told that the National Trust wants its houses to look like normal homes. I replied that I don't know many homes which have retired bank managers and other dignitaries sitting or standing in every room to protect the porcelain, making sure that no one runs off with a davenport and ensuring that no one steps over the ropes. Nor do I know many homes which have little signs designed to keep people moving in the right direction, `Do Not Touch' signs on the furniture, and a shop in the conservatory selling overpriced chocolate.

We used to visit National Trust properties occasionally but we decided we won't visit them anymore. On the basis of this personal disappointment I have decided arbitrarily that National Trust properties are soulless, dispiriting morgues and that the people who run the organisation are small-minded bean counters.

We wandered around to the cathedral as we always do when we visit Wells. The cathedral was begun in the 12th century and finished in the 13th century. To be honest it hasn't lasted well for there are clear signs that the building is starting to age. It really isn't good enough that a building which is only 900 years old should be already showing signs of wear. There's a tombstone in the Cathedral which reads: `Reader that shalt shortly die: what is thy hope?' We also visited the moated Bishop's Palace. George Gissing said that there was no more beautiful place in England for `thinking' than the walk beside the Palace moat and I wouldn't want to argue with him.

And then, as the local schools emptied and the main street filled with unruly rashes of schoolgirls dressed like teenage hookers, we headed back towards the car park. The rampaging schoolchildren of Wells are far more of a menace than the genial tramps who live on the streets in the city. The Princess saw a middle aged woman rummaging in a rubbish bin in the main street, looking for something to eat. The Princess was so upset she opened her handbag, took out her purse and handed everything in it, about £30, to the woman. We wandered into the Swan hotel for afternoon tea. In the lounge a member of staff was talking with a very loud woman from a local rubbish company about whether or not the hotel's bins should be padlocked. This occupied them for longer than one might have imagined possible. When they'd gone, two salesmen equipped with laptops and telephones sat down and started ringing up their customers and conducting conference calls with distant managers. We left. Outside, the city was quiet, except for the tramps. The unfriendly car parking regime means that visitors are discouraged. But the tramps, who don't have cars, don't mind. It occurred to me that tramps may well flock to Wells because it is one of the few places in England which still has decent public lavatories. Most other towns and cities have closed all their conveniences and are, consequently, woefully inconvenient for visitors. I cannot understand why councils which can no longer afford to run public loos do not do as the French do and auction off the right to run the loos to a local matron. The French have done this for years. All over Paris women rent the lavatories from the council and then make their living by charging a modest fee for the use of the facilities - which they invariably keep spotlessly clean.

5.

I read that employees can claim tax relief if they give their employees flowers on their birthdays. Since The Princess is employed by me and it is her birthday next month I am terribly tempted to try this out. Maybe this year I could try it out with a posy of something restrained, discreet and inhibited and then, if all goes well, I could go for the indulgent, ostentatious, extravagant tax deductible gesture next year.

6.

Yesterday I spent four hours strimming the orchard while The Princess mowed the lawn. Today I feel knackered although I admit that being old is considerably better than being dead. Still, there are privileges. I can give unsolicited advice to people who don't want it and don't know what to do with it. And there are some advantages to being older. Now that I am fairly aged I can always pretend to be senile. `You're in the wrong seat!' snapped an angry young businessman on the train the other day. If he hadn't shouted and looked such a prig I would have moved. He was holding a laptop computer bag and an iPad and looked the sort of witless idiot who might well work for a bank so, instead of moving, I settled still further into the seat, looked up at him and smiled benevolently. `Do I want a cup of tea? No thank you. But that is very kind of you, young man.' I reached into my jacket pocket. `Do you want to see my ticket?'

Being old can even be useful. When the boiler engineer wouldn't come out to repair our heating system I told him that I am an old aged pensioner and talked of cold, death, coroners and responsibility. `I'm just making a note that you are refusing to come out,' I said. `In case I die.' This ploy doesn't work with doctors, they no longer give a damn, but it works with heating engineers.

I must have become someone else. I cannot be this old. I keep thinking of all the missed opportunities. I have wasted far too much of my life dealing with crap. I have not yet come to terms with being so damned old. Still, I mustn't moan. At least I didn't die very young.

I remembered an old story about an old king who was challenged to a duel by a young pretender. The winner, said the pretender, will take the throne. `OK,' said the king. But the duel won't be with swords. The weapons will be two cakes on a plate. One will be poisoned. The protagonists will each take a cake and eat it. The winner, who lives, will keep or take the throne.

The young pretender refused the duel and had to leave.

7.

Looking through a pile of old medical magazines I see that in 1994 I was invited to write a paper putting my point of view about animal experimentation for the journal *Cardiovascular Research* (published by the *British Medical Journal*). I wrote, as invited, a simple, one page denunciation of animal experiments. When the journal appeared I was astonished to see that the editors had been so worried by my paper that in addition to publishing an editorial opposing my view, and a rebuttal article opposing what I had written, they had also sent a copy of my article to no less than 13 eminent medical experts and had, as a result, printed just under 14 pages of letters defending vivisection. I was not given sight of any of these letters and so had no opportunity to respond. And that, believe it or not, was the best offer I ever had from a medical journal to discuss vivisection. And even that was a damned sight better than anything ever offered by a broadsheet newspaper, any magazine or the BBC. (It is widely accepted that the subject of the holocaust is now closed for discussion but I suspect that many people don't realise just how many other subjects are also regarded as unsuitable for discussion on the BBC. When it comes to AIDS, global warming, genetic engineering, the European Union, vaccination, vivisection and a host of other crucial issues, only the official view is acceptable to the BBC. Alternative, or critical, views are simply not aired.)

I first started to campaign against vivisection when I was a first year medical student at Birmingham University. A friend of mine met a technician who worked in the basement where cats were kept for experimental work. The technician had boasted that he had won money by entering a competition which was being run by the manufacturers of a well- known brand of cat food. The university was buying cat food by the case load and enabling the technician to collect labels at a wholesale rate. My friend and I somehow managed to get into the basement to see what was happening there. We were appalled to find scores of unhappy looking cats kept in cages. I wrote a news story about what we had found for one of the Sunday newspapers. From that moment on I was pretty much a marked man.

A few months later I walked into a class to discover that I was expected to dissect a live rabbit. There seemed to me to be no real point to this. I walked out and went to the canteen where I drank coffee with equally outraged students. None of us returned to the class. None failed (which gives you an idea of just how crucial the experiment was considered to be). Later I cut up my medical school tie on television as a protest against the vivisection experiments being conducted in Birmingham.

It truly isn't difficult to demolish the arguments in favour of vivisection. For one thing all vivisectors readily admit that at least half of their experiments produce unreliable results. But they don't know which half. Under those circumstances it is pretty clear that you can't possibly rely upon the results of any experiments performed on animals. For another thing I can name over 50 regularly prescribed drugs which cause cancer and other serious problems when given to animals. Drug companies (and the Government) ignore results which are inconvenient, arguing that animals are different to people and so the results really don't matter. Every disastrously dangerous drug introduced in the last century has been thoroughly tested on animals. I once offered vivisectors £250,000 to produce a single patient who had been saved as a direct result of animal experiments. The offer was widely publicised but there were no takers. A House of Lords enquiry into animal experimentation invited me to assess the pro-vivisection evidence produced by the Department of Health. It was not difficult to destroy the evidence on purely scientific grounds. But no one took any notice. In the old days (when I was allowed to debate vivisection on television and radio) I debated many times with leading vivisectionists. I won every public vote afterwards. These days the vivisectionists refuse to debate with me simply because they always lose. When the vivisectors found that I was booked to take part in a debate at Oxford University they refused to attend and Oxford University, to its eternal shame, bowed down and recruited someone else to take my place.

Despite the evidence vivisection continues because those who support it have far more money and clout than those who oppose it.

Part of the problem is that those who oppose vivisection tend to be enthusiastic but amateurish whereas those who support vivisection are ruthless and exceedingly professional. The anti-vivisectionists imagine that they can get away with gentle, reasoned, intelligent debate. This doesn't work because the other side (funded by drug companies) lie and cheat very efficiently. They know that the first rule of propaganda is that if you tell a lie enough times to enough people it will eventually become the accepted truth. And the vivisectionists have succeeded in controlling the establishment quite firmly. So, for example, animal charities in the UK are not allowed to campaign against vivisection. The Charities Commission is a Government department and they won't allow any charity to oppose animal experiments. The big animal charities will not oppose vivisection because those who run them are frightened of losing their charitable status. Similarly, lottery money cannot be given to charities campaigning on behalf of animals.

Moreover, it is my experience that whenever one fights hard for something, the people who will provide the most potent opposition will not be those who hold opposing views, but those who claim to hold similar views but who do so from a slightly different vantage point. They may, for example, be members of an organisation of which you are not a member. This opposition is inspired by jealousy and a feeling that their territory has been threatened, and it is infinitely more toxic than the kind of opposition inspired by simple disagreement. The result is that anti-vivisectionists spend more time, money and effort fighting one another than they spend fighting vivisectionists. Some years ago I tried to persuade all anti-vivisection groups to work together. The refusal was unanimous. I suspect that too many groups saw themselves in competition with one another, rather than partnership.

Meanwhile, the pro-vivisection propaganda continues unabated. And we do what we can to oppose it.

A few years ago we sent copies of all my books on animal experimentation to every school in the country. One or two school librarians sent the books back on the grounds that they did not approve of their students reading such material but the vast majority was delighted and many librarians asked for more copies. These days we put copies of the same books onto the shelves in public libraries and bookshops which refuse to stock them. This probably causes some confusion at stocktaking (`Who ordered six copies of *Why Animal Experiments Must Stop?*) but it does allow readers to see what is available.

After speaking at a rally in Oxford I was taken to the railway station by an enthusiastic animal rights campaigner who turned out to have a jemmy and other laboratory breaking tools in her car boot. We were stopped by several van loads of policemen on the way to the station but I managed to intimidate the policemen by photographing and recording their every move, and even though they searched the car thoroughly they didn't notice the jemmy or any of the other equipment. (I found out later that the person driving the car had previously been arrested before for breaking and entering.)

8.

Many things in life genuinely confuse me. During the last week alone I've jotted down the following small mysteries:

1. In films people tear up handkerchiefs and shirts to make bandages. How do they do this? I once tried to rip up a shirt and found it quite impossible. I could probably manage to rip up a paper handkerchief but I don't believe a circus strong man could tear a linen handkerchief with hemmed edges into strips.
2. Why do people never give luck any credit (`I owe everything to good luck') but are always quick to blame luck when things go wrong?
3. Why do we say paintings are wonderful if they look like photographs and that photographs are wonderful if they are like paintings?
4. Why do parents say to children who want to follow the herd: `Why do you have to do what everyone else does?' and then, when they try to do something different: `Why can't you do what other people do?'
5. Why does the Government spend money telling people to go hospital at the first sign of a stroke (because speedy action is vital) when they know that the average waiting time in a hospital casualty department is between four and five hours?
6. Why do parents receive compensation if their child dies? The family isn't losing any money unless they were going to sell the child or send him up chimneys.
7. Why should we automatically respect someone who is rich and titled when everyone knows this is probably because one or more of his/her ancestors was a thief or a whore?
8. Why do school teachers have their training day during school time when they only work part-time and could easily fit their training into one of their many long holidays?
9. Why do so many people dress according to what the weather ought to be rather than according to what it is?
10. Why do motor racing trophies look like the bits which are left behind when a new central heating system has been installed?
11. Why do workmen always have a radio blaring as loudly as they can so that there is no peace even when they are not

hammering and banging?
12. Why do rail companies force customers to buy car park tickets which tell thieves precisely how long each car will be left unattended?
13. What happens if a nobleman becomes a transsexual? If an earl had a sex change would he become a countess? If an earl had a son and daughter, and the daughter were older and she had a sex change and becomes a man, would she then become the viscount instead of the younger brother?
14. Why do people keep their best crockery (and everything else) for strangers, the next best stuff for friends and the worst stuff for loved ones?
15. Why are train and aeroplane designers allowed to discriminate against tall people by making the distance between seats so small that there is no room for legs which are longer than average? If I travel in anything other than first class I have to sit with my legs sticking out into the aisle, where they are constantly attacked by trolleys and bags. Fat people get special treatment when travelling but whereas most fat people are fat by choice I cannot help being tall. Travellers above a certain height should be allowed to travel first class at a reduced price. I gave up flying some years ago and although this was partly because of all the rules and regulations (they insisted on taking my Swiss Army Penknife from me) it was also a result of the fact that the seats are always crammed too close together. I have, in the past, been invited to speak in America, Australia, Sri Lanka and Israel but have, in the end, always declined because I simply couldn't face the thought of spending more than an hour on an aeroplane.)
16. Why do rich people buy so-called art that everyone else knows is rubbish? (When I was at medical school a friend and I produced a piece of art rubbish and entered it into a prestigious local art competition. Our effort was highly commended by the judges.)
17. Who first discovered that yak droppings could be used to light a fire? How would you even think that might be the case? What did his chums say when he suggested it?
18. Nine out of ten men over 50 are bald or balding but nine out of ten rock stars have a full head of hair. How can this be? There are only two explanations: either most rock stars are women masquerading as men or else they are wearing wigs.
19. Why do tags and leaflets say: `Do not remove' and `Retain for future reference'. Why would I want to keep the tags which decorate bed linen, furniture and just about everything else I buy? And why do people decorate their homes with large signs which say HOME? Don't they know where they are? And why do shops sell doormats with `Welcome' or `Home' woven into them? The last time we bought a doormat The Princess had to physically restrain me from asking for one with `Fuck Off!' woven into the coconut fibre.
20. Why are manuals always written by foreigners who can't speak English?
21. On television programmes where viewers are invited to phone in to vote for something why do the presenters always say: `Do not call after the lines are closed. Your vote will not be counted but you may still be charged.' Why don't they just turn the machine off? There's a special device for doing this. It's called a switch.
22. Estate agents often describe homes as having two and a half bathrooms. But how can you have half a bathroom. Does it contain half a bath? And what does half a bath look like? And why do estate agents insist on offering customers completely inappropriate properties? During our last property search one agent offered us a house with duck and grouse doors which was cornered between a busy dual carriageway and a pig farm. Mind you, to be fair, the estate agent seemed genuinely grateful when I told him that it wasn't quite what we were looking for but that it might well suit a deaf dwarf with no sense of smell.
23. Why don't bills ever get lost in the post?
24. Why do people hire 19-year-old life coaches and 20-year-old management consultants? Don't they realise how amazingly stupid this is? Our world is full of 20-year-old management consultants who know everything about nothing and nothing about everything.

9.

I received a letter telling me that in May 2012 the English Democratic candidate for Liverpool Mayor, Paul Rimmer, went into a police station in Liverpool to ask why they were flying a striped flag outside the station. He was told that it was `the gay flag'. Mr Rimmer asked why the station was flying a gay rights flag rather than the Union Jack or the Cross of St George. He quoted from the Old Testament and left the police station but shortly afterwards he was arrested for a hate crime. He was duly photographed, finger printed and had his DNA taken. He was held for six hours. He was then told that the Police were dropping any charges. Meanwhile, Liverpool City Council had confirmed that Merseyside Police had allegedly not obtained permission under the Town and Country Planning Regulations to fly a gay rights flag. And since the flag was being flown at 42 police stations across Merseyside the police have been accused of committing 42 criminal offences. (I am always fascinated by the way that words change over time. The word `gay' was used in Victorian times as a synonym for prostitute.)

10.

The Princess had to visit a doctor. She went with great reluctance. Her past experiences with the medical profession have not filled her with confidence.

`You're not VERNON Coleman are you?' demanded the doctor looking at her surname and glowering at me. The chill over the consulting room was palpable.

I confessed.

`He's the doctor who writes nasty books about doctors?' he said.

`Yes,' whispered The Princess. We left. We won't be going back to see him again.

11.

I am an idiot. We have two outside taps, one near our back door and the other inside the greenhouse and I have been using those taps and carrying water all over the garden in buckets and watering cans. Today, I realised, belatedly, that it is much easier to take water from the stream and, since the stream meanders from the top to the bottom of the garden, and there are several small bridges, there is nowhere in the garden very far from running water.

12.

A woman working at a garage we use saw the title `Doctor' on my cheque book. `Oh, I'm in the health care business too,' she said excitedly. `I'm just working here temporarily.' She waved a hand around the garage and pulling a face to show how little she liked it. `My real job is as a chiropodist.' I made appropriate noises of admiration and approval. `I did a correspondence course,' she said. `It was some years ago now, but I still do a little corn paring to keep my hand in.' It occurred to me, but I did not say, that the first patient who visits a chiropodist who has trained by mail order must be a brave patient.

13.

In London we popped into Boots the chemist (I can no longer remember why) where a man approached me and complained that he couldn't find the nail clippers. I don't know why he told me about it. Presumably, Boots employees are getting older and more decrepit looking than in happier, healthier times. I sympathised with him and suggested that he go somewhere else and buy a box of crackers. When he looked puzzled by this advice I pointed out that most boxes of crackers contain at least one pair of nail clippers. `I doubt if you'll have to pull more than half a dozen crackers before you find one,' I assured him. `You can throw away the silly metal puzzle, the shoehorn and the revolting metal egg cup.' He seemed surprisingly grateful for this information and hurried off to find a shop selling Christmas crackers. It's so satisfying to be able to help complete strangers in this way. As I left the shop I was assailed by the stench of stale animal fat which pervades this area of the city and is presumably a consequence of one of the fast food outlets. I wonder if it is possible to develop coronary artery disease by inhaling fat? The unfortunate souls working here must constantly suffer from nausea.

Then, while standing waiting in another shop, I picked up a packet of something called Fritos. Printed on the packet was a notice telling prospective purchasers: `You could be a winner! No purchase necessary. Details inside.' I told the hobbledehoy behind the counter that I didn't want to buy the packet but that I wanted to study the details. I asked if it would be all right for me to open the packet, find the relevant document, and then put the packet back on the rack. The woman, who had clearly been fully trained to work in a Post Office, looked at me very firmly and told me in a voice that was full of hidden menace that if I opened the packet and didn't buy it she would call the police and have me arrested. I pointed out that if I didn't eat any of the Fritos I wouldn't have stolen anything and I wasn't sure I would have committed an offence. She said she would think of something. The outcome of this potentially informative experience remains hidden in uncertainty for The Princess then pulled at my sleeve and told me that we needed to be at the railway station.

14.

There's quite a row going on in our nearest village. One householder, who operates a small bed and breakfast establishment, has put up a sign claiming that Gloucestershire's most famous son, the Victorian cricketer W. G. Grace, once slept in the house. They are even offering tourists the chance to sleep in `W. G.'s bedroom'. Although it doesn't seem to me likely that this offer is likely to draw holidaymakers and thrill seekers from afar the claim has aroused considerable antagonism. The village pub has a picture of W. G. Grace in its snug and has long claimed, in a fairly low key sort of way, that the cricketer stayed there on numerous occasions. I only hope the rising bad feeling doesn't end up with the protagonists waving cricket bats at dawn. The Princess wonders where it will end. Maybe there will be fights over the identity of the pub where Cotswold poemstress Pam Ayres enjoyed a bowl of soup and a bread roll.

15.

My parents had a wonderful canteen of cutlery that was given to my father as a leaving present in the 1960s, after many years working at a firm called Crabtree in Walsall. The cutlery, in a beautiful wooden box, had never been used. They were keeping it, each piece still wrapped in tissue paper, for some special occasion. And whatever the special occasion was it never came. Silver wedding, golden wedding, ruby wedding - all passed by and the cutlery remained in its box. It has been ours for a year or two now and today we opened the box and decided to use it. I noticed immediately that one of the knives had a little rust on it. The others are just as bad. There is a clear lesson. Use it or lose it doesn't just refer to muscles and brainpower.

16.

The landlord at our local public house is trying hard to attract publicity. His bar menu now includes garlic mushrooms with butterscotch sauce and a strawberry and fried egg sandwich. I think he must have been watching too many cookery programmes on television.

17.

Queen Elizabeth II's father, George V1, was a smoker who died of lung cancer while still in his fifties. It occurred to me that if he hadn't smoked the second Elizabethan age might have been considerably shorter. What difference would this have made to our world?

18.

I read that Arnold Schwarzenegger decided to run for Governor of California pretty much as a joke. Arnold was promoting a film on the Jay Leno show when Leno asked what he was going to do next. Trying to find something zippy to say, for fun, the film star apparently said that he intended to run for Governor. And thus it was and came to be. When he made the claim, Schwarzenegger had no staff and no plans. Two months later he was Governor.

19.

The Princess and I were in our front garden when a woman walked past our gate. She had three dogs with her. Naturally, they were not on leads (although this is an offence). She stopped for a moment to chat. `The boy is so naughty,' she said, simpering. `He chases the deer and sometimes,' she looked around and lowered her voice,' `sometimes he kills the young ones.'

We both stared at her in horror.

`Isn't he a naughty boy?' She pretended to be critical but clearly was rather proud of her damned dog.

Neither of us could think of anything to say. I could think of lots of things to shout. But nothing to say.

20.

We visited a couple who have built a house using hand cut oak beams fastened together with wooden pegs. He doesn't seem to have any nerves and when they were still building the house we regularly saw him walking across a narrow beam without any sort of safety harness. She says whatever comes into her mouth without using her brain to filter the words. We call them Frank and Fearless. They admitted that when the wind blows their whole house moves and creaks like a sailing ship. As we left The Princess and I agreed that we prefer a house to stay still and silent.

21.

Pablo Picasso wanted a new wardrobe making. He met a carpenter in a café and drew a picture of the wardrobe he wanted. `How much will it be?' he asked the carpenter, handing him the sketch. `Just sign the drawing,' was the reply.

22.

I've been trying to grow tomatoes in our wonderful Victorian greenhouse and it has not been a great success. At the beginning of the year we spent £2,000 having broken glass and rotten timbers replaced and I then spent several hundred pounds restoring and equipping the interior of the greenhouse. I bought seeds for a variety called `Moneymaker', but they ought to have been called `Moneyloser' because although I spent hours watering and staking and feeding and tending the growing trusses the flowers refused to turn into fruit. So far our numerous plants have, between them, produced just three, small, green tomatoes. One of them has acquired a slightly orange tint on one side and I constantly examine it to see if the colour is spreading. It isn't. My mother used to make chutney with green tomatoes but I can't remember the recipe and I doubt if three very small green tomatoes would have filled many jars. It's a good job I don't grow tomatoes for a living. I gather that farmers everywhere are having a terrible year. The endless rain and the lack of sunshine mean that nothing is growing. Only the slugs are flourishing.

23.

We met our friend Thumper Robinson for lunch. We met him in the Duck and Puddle public house. (The sign hanging outside shows a duck and a poodle because the artist misheard the commission when it was given to him. The owners of the pub decided they liked the sign and hung it anyway.)

`I won't say no,' said Thumper, when I offered him another pint. `You don't think this stuff could be habit forming, do you?'

`Only if you drink it regularly,' I assured him.

24.

Reading an old copy of *Country Life* magazine I found this quote: `It is in our nature to hunt and fish and shoot.'

What nonsense!

It is no more in our nature to hunt and fish and shoot than it is in our nature to put wode on our faces and run around wearing animal skins and waving wooden clubs. The people who still hunt are primitive, under-developed and quite uncivilised. Their attempts to justify their bloody thirsty habit are really rather sad.

25.

A friend of ours is making a television programme in the wilds somewhere. He will appear on camera by himself and the publicity will no doubt make a great fuss of the fact that he is making his journey alone.

I teased him about this. `You're not properly alone,' I pointed out. `You have a cameraman, sound man, director, producer, research assistant and location manager with you.'

`I'm near as damnit on my own!' he protested. `We aren't even taking hair and make-up with us.'

26.

While waiting to cross a busy road in London I noticed a small child aged about six or seven standing beside me. It's a road I'm always worried about crossing and I couldn't help worrying about the child. Where on earth were her parents? I wanted to take her hand and make sure she got to the other side safely but I didn't dare. Instead I just prayed that she would cross when I did and follow me across the road. Thankfully she did so. The biggest danger to children doesn't come from evil strangers but from stupid parents.

27.

Thumper rang me to tell me that a mutual friend has gone insane.

`How do you know?' I asked, laughing.

`He's applied for a job with a council and started cleaning his car on Sunday mornings,' replied Thumper.

28.

We visited Charles Dickens' house in Doughty Street in London. We both found it rather sad, soulless and dispiriting. They have an old chair of the Great Man's but at some time or other a vandal has reupholstered it! What, pray, was the point of that? I reached out to touch the chair and set off an alarm.

We also visited the fake rooms of Sherlock Holmes in Baker Street and they were much, much more fun. I took a photograph of The Princess together with a sturdy gentlemen dressed as Dr Watson.

29.

Sitting in the garden, looking at the dandelions and wondering how long it will be before they take over the world, I found myself looking through the retrospectoscope. I thought of all the times I'd done things I shouldn't have done and of all the times I'd said 'I wish I'd done that'. And I realised that the regrets for the latter outweighed the former by far. I suspect it is true of most people. We regret much of what we do, but we regret more of what we don't do. We still all have some choices, though sometimes we don't stop to consider what they all are but simply pick the easy option. But we do have choices. And sometimes we are too conscious of the downside; of what might happen to us if we do what might turn out to be the wrong thing for us; what might in some way prove to be uncomfortable. The truth is that the seminal moments in life are only obvious retrospectively. (The only advantage of taking away choice is that you do at least take away all possibility of regret.)

I once had a contract to commentate on cricket matches. I pulled out and have regretted it ever since. I pulled out because the touring Test side were from the West Indies and most of them were cricketers I'd never seen play. When I looked at their photographs I had a cold sweat. I knew, just knew, that I would never be able to identify them. What a fool I would have looked mixing up the players. But I should have tried it. It would have been fun. They'd have sacked me if I'd screwed up, but what the hell.

And I once got very close to publishing a magazine called *Dr Vernon Coleman Monthly* or some such thing. I panicked when I realised that I was going to have to proof read the whole thing - as well as write and edit most of the material myself. I was already writing two weekly columns, one of 3,000 words and one of 1500 words, running my publishing business and writing and editing a monthly newsletter. The pal I'd hired as production manager was a heavy drinker and although he was supposed to proof read the magazine he was drinking too much gin to do the job properly. I knew I couldn't rely on him and so I panicked. I abandoned the project and he was so cross he never spoke to me again. I have huge regrets about that. `Might have been' is one of the saddest phrases in the English language. Never to have lost or been disappointed is a result of not trying enough. It is the excursions and diversions and asides which make life fun.

30.

Our neighbours are really excelling themselves. The Princess met one of them in our lane and was appalled when she was told that our home has always been an unhappy place. `It's haunted by evil spirits,' said a woman who really ought to be placed in a ducking stool and submerged until she confesses that she is a witch. The neighbour who complained about our hedge, and who is not the brightest log on the fire, has complained because our builder has to rebuild a stone archway. He swore at the builders and even when they explained that the archway is crumbling, dangerous and about to collapse he still accused us of being vandals. We've also received two anonymous letters in our letterbox. One warned us that excrement will be placed in our letterbox if we do not take down our fence. The other warned us that our cars will be sabotaged if we stay in the area and continue to refuse to allow dogs to roam free across our land. We don't really know who sent the anonymous letters, of course, but we have a pretty good idea of the identity of the devious little cretin who is responsible. It’s always a mistake to write anonymous letters on the back of envelopes addressed to yourself. Just crossing out the name and address with a felt tipped pen doesn’t do the job well enough. We could go the police, I suppose, but it would be good to lance this boil sooner rather than later and the only way to deal with such cruel individuals effectively is to attack them in a way they don’t expect. As the author of *The Art of War* pointed out: `To fail to take the battle to the enemy when your back is against the wall is to perish.’

31.

A foreign friend who cannot be expected to know better since he is foreign complained that women aren’t encouraged to play sport seriously in England. This is a foul calumny. The English have led the way in encouraging women to take part in sport. For example, it is now well established that women play a vital part in village cricket. Many make the teas (producing vast quantities of sponge cake and cucumber sandwiches) and most are responsible for washing the whites belonging to their spouse or boyfriend. Women have welcomed this opportunity to take an active part in the game and there are even stories of girls and women being allowed to adjust the numbers on the score board (though naturally this is only allowed under the strictest of supervision). In the light of all this evidence those who complain that the English gentleman can be sexist and politically incorrect should think carefully before repeating their slanderous remarks.

AUGUST

1.

If you ever want to taste eternity try telephoning Royal Mail. Almost any of their numbers will do but I particularly recommend ringing your local sorting office where it is almost certain that no one will ever answer the damned telephone. Maybe they don’t know what it is. They hear it ringing (just above the sound of the television) but aren’t sure what they’re hearing. It’s easier to get hold of MI6 than it is to contact the local sorting office. They make GPs surgeries look accessible.

2.

I was driving slowly back home, enjoying a few moments of unexpected summer sunshine that had presumably landed on our shores in error, when I approached the local garage. The proprietor was standing on his forecourt while a tall stranger wearing green Bermuda shorts, a pale blue short sleeved shirt and a Panama hat with a yellow band around it was waving a finger at him. I tried not to look, hoping that I could drive past without getting involved but when the stranger heard my car he turned away and stood in the road so that I had to stop.

`This man is a crook,’ he said, loudly.

`You’re probably right,’ I agreed. Behind him I could see the proprietor grinning broadly.

`There’s a sign that clearly says `Cars repaired while you wait’ complained the tourist. He pointed to the sign as Exhibit One. `We’ve been waiting since 9 o’clock this morning and there’s no sign of anyone starting to do anything to our car...and as for finishing it!’ Only when he’d finished his complaint did it register that I had agreed with him. `You say he’s a crook?’

`No,’ I said. `I didn’t say he’s a crook. You said he’s a crook. I said you’re probably right.’

`I don’t open up ‘till ten,’ the proprietor said. In the winter it’s later.

`It says `Cars repaired while you wait’!’ the exasperated tourist shouted, pointing to the sign.

`Shouting at me ain’t going to get your car mended sooner,’ said the proprietor. `If I’m listening to you I ain’t mending your car is I?’

`I think that there has perhaps been a bit of a misunderstanding,’ I suggested, trying to turn a potential crisis into a mere disappointment.

`Cars mended while you wait,’ said the tourist. `It seems simple enough to me.’ He was getting very red and it wasn’t that hot. `And we’ve been waiting,’ said the tourist. `We’ve met our part of the bargain. But the car still isn’t mended.’

`Don’t say how long you have to wait,’ said the proprietor. `We had a fellow last month who waited four days. He didn’t complain. He did his waiting down at the Duck and Puddle and I fetched him when his car were ready. He said he’d had the best time he’d had in years and that he’d be coming back next year to break down again.’

3.

The Princess and I have birthdays always on the same day of the week. I have a beautiful brass 50 year calendar which shows that on whatever year you select, our birthdays will be on the same day of the week each year. Not even leap years disturb this pattern.

4.

Here are a dozen more not entirely useful things I’ve learned during the last few days:

1. The horse chestnut tree got its name because there are marks resembling horse shoes on its trunk and branches.
2. I heard a man from Bomber Command talking on the wireless. He said that when he first joined he was told by his station commander that he would have to do 30 flights before he could have a break. `How long will that take?’ he asked. The station commander said he didn’t know because no one had ever completed that many.
3. When Empress Catherine the Great, the dictator of Russia, planned to visit the newly conquered Crimea there were worries about her seeing shivering people huddling in cold, shanty towns and so her chief minister, Potemkin, sent carpenters, plasterers and painters to build a fake town of clean, smart cottages. They were instructed to fill them with smiling peasants who were told to wave from the windows as Catherine went by. The short-sighted old queen was delighted by the fake rural bliss which, after she had gone, was dismantled. The deceptions were called Potemkin villages. Much the same happens when our Queen travels around the country. (It is not unknown for houses due for demolition to be painted if they are on the route the Queen’s car will take.)
4. The father of W. G. Grace, the cricketer, once drove a kite-drawn carriage from Bristol to London. He also used box kites to suspend his wife above the Cheddar Gorge.
5. Dylan Thomas, the great Welsh literary god, wrote exclusively in English. Any versions of his work in Welsh have been translated from the English.
6. When he was a young boy Charlie Chaplin was looked after by a woman called Mrs O’Shea. She made him his first pair of long trousers and made them without pockets so that he wouldn’t stand and slouch. She also thought it would teach him how to use his hands when standing. But Charlie made two slits in the sides of the new trousers and sewed in

a pair of socks to use as pockets. Most of the iconic pictures of Chaplin show him with his hands in his pockets.

7. In 1957, when Spanish nobleman Francisco Godia-Sales drove in the German Grand Prix, his valet stepped forward when he pulled into the pits for mechanics to refuel his Maserati 250F. The valet placed an enamel bowl, warm water and a towel on the pit counter. After the nobleman had washed, the valet held out a silver tray with a glass of champagne. By the time that was drained the mechanics had finished and were shouting `Avanti!' The driver moved to get in and then hesitated, looked back at his valet and the champagne glass. `No,' he said. `I'll have another glass first.' And he did.

8. When he was dying the economist John Maynard Keynes was asked what he regretted most. He said that he wished he had drunk more champagne.

9. When Andy Warhol was shot, and thought to be dying, in June 1968, the artist was put into an ambulance, bleeding. A friend, Mario Amaya, an art critic, was with him. He had also been shot. The ambulance driver looked at Mario and said: `If we sound the siren, it'll cost five dollars extra'. Mario said they would pay the extra five dollars.

10. Cary Grant insisted on signing cheques for everything under $50. Grant explained that his autograph was sold for $50 and so no one cashed cheques he wrote for under $50 because the signature was worth more than the cheque.

11. On August 18th 1914, with the Germans still two hundred miles away in Brussels, the Banque de France set in motion its emergency plan. Paris had, after all, fallen three times in the previous hundred years. The bank's gold reserves, (38,800 gold ingots and bags of coins weighing some 1,300 tons) were secretly shipped to hiding places in central and southern France. The train carrying the gold was derailed at Clermont-Ferrand. Around 500 men were needed to get the train back on track, to collect up the spilt coins and to keep people away.

12. During the early part of the First World War, *The Times* ran a column on preparing for the hostilities which included this practical advice: `Instruct your keeper immediately to stop feeding your pheasants with maize or corn.' (This rather reminded me of the barrister who prosecuted Penguin, the publishers of *Lady Chatterly's Lover,* and infamously asked the jury to consider whether they would allow their servants to read the book.)

5.

`You are very old-fashioned', said an acquaintance. I thanked him. He looked at me strangely and I realised that the fool had meant it as an insult.

6.

We received a letter saying: `I recently ordered three books by Vernon Coleman and am pleased to report their condition on arrival at my house was excellent. I decided to start by reading *The Diary of a Disgruntled Man* and have hardly put the book down since opening it. When I got round to removing the address label from the packaging I noticed that the postage stamps had no franking marks on them to show they had been used. I decided to forward the stamps to Publishing House. If the Post Office can't be bothered to frank the stamps why not reuse them?'

Over the last few months we have received a good many letters like this one. It seems that the Royal Mail doesn't bother franking stamps any more. I suspect that we are pretty well the only people in the country still sticking real stamps on parcels. A reader in Northern Ireland simply stuck an address label over his address and used the jiffy bag to post something to me. I then reused the same envelope (and the same stamps) to send something to him. And so on and so on. This is called recycling and is, of course, helping to save the planet and mankind. The same stamps have now been used seven times which may well be some sort of a record.

7.

Listening to the news I'm reminded that statistics are used with ruthless efficiency by politicians and lobbyists. And they are used to mislead as much as to inform. For example, if I say that 500,000 walkers die in England and Wales every year it sounds as though walking must be a dangerous activity. But although the statistic is true (most of the 500,000 people who die each year have done some walking) it is egregiously misleading.

8.

I've had another standard letter from the General Medical Council (the GMC) asking me to let them know who my employer is and who will be responsible for handling my revalidation paperwork. I am, apparently, required to provide details of my designated body.

The GMC's entirely daft new scheme requires anyone who wishes to remain registered and licensed to practice medicine to find an establishment approved doctor prepared to assess them and to check that they have managed to find the requisite number of doctors and patients prepared to confirm that they are `satisfied' with a doctor's competence. The last time I looked the revalidation programme required each doctor to find 15 other doctors and 35 patients to stand up and be counted on their behalf. Now, Harold Shipman would doubtless have been able to find all these supporters but I don't think I've known that many doctors in my entire life. The revalidation programme exists to exist; it will, without doubt, make life worse for both doctors and patients. It will provide a good deal of pointless employment for arrogant bureaucrats but the quality of medical care will decline still further. Even the Government admits that no one really knows whether there will be any benefits. A programme of red tape, intrusive paperwork and pointless interfering, which will cost many billions and waste millions of doctor-hours, is being introduced to satisfy the egos of a bunch of self-important nonentities. The revalidation programme will not protect patients from bad medical practices and nor will it prevent the remorseless slide in medical ethics - a process which is being orchestrated by the wretched GMC.

The whole revalidation process seems arrogant, disorganised, unprincipled and designed to remove creative, thoughtful, original doctors who vary from the `norm' (whatever that may be). But then what can we expect from an organisation which has apparently decided that the Hippocratic Oath is out of date and unnecessary and which now seems to approve of doctors killing their patients where this is deemed appropriate and necessary (for which read `a useful cost-saving procedure')?

The revalidation scheme is poorly designed administrative rubbish which will eradicate originality and imagination and promote and preserve the worst aspects of modern medicine. The manipulative, the superficial, the ruthless, the commercial, the hypocritical and the greedy will thrive. The thoughtful, the caring, the sensitive and the original will struggle to survive. The absurdly overcomplicated scheme will result in doctors having even less time for patients and there will, consequently, be more complaints than ever. The process as approved by the GMC and the medical establishment and the Department of Health is chaotic and will, I believe, do far more harm than good.

The General Medical Council, like so many organisations these days, seems to exist to exist. A recent GMC budget shows that the organisation had an income of nearly £100 million and spent over half of that on staff and lawyers. They spent vast amounts of money on premises and office costs and something called `purchase of assets'. Just 6% of their budget went on providing professional advice to doctors. In other words the main purpose of the GMC seems to me to be, like all professional bureaucracies and quangos, to exist.

And as a final irony the GMC buys and pays for private medical insurance for many of its staff - presumably because it reckons that the quality of health care provided by the NHS just isn't good enough for the people whose jobs consist of protecting the quality of care provided by doctors. The GMC is not unusual in this regard, of course. Most NHS employees wouldn't be seen dead in an NHS hospital bed.

The Department of Health, the GMC and the medical establishment have, together, lost touch with what patients really want and need. And the General Medical Council has completely lost touch with what doctors need. A plague on all their houses. My biggest fear these days is that The Princess or I will one day be taken into an NHS hospital. The last time I was in one the doctors tried to rip out one of my perfectly healthy kidneys. I believe that both my parents were killed by the NHS. And the `treatment' my Princess received in one of the nation's most eminent medical facilities would have disgraced a country veterinary practice.

9.

The Tory led coalition Government has announced that it wants to redistribute wealth and to ensure that the middle classes pay their fair share of the nation's tax bill. I thought at first that this was a joke put about by Ed Balls but to my astonishment I discovered that it was real.

This absurdity stinks of Clegg and Cable, the evil fiscal twins. Other than foreigners and bankers there is no honest, working person in the UK who does not pay more than their fair share. Indeed, the phrase annoys me just as much as the phrase `unearned income' when used to refer to investment income. I earn, I save, I invest. And any income I receive from my labours is unearned. In what way is it unearned?

Socialists want to pull people down to equality, true Tories want to pull people up to equality but the Liberals just want everyone to suffer and feel bad about everyone else. Their dream is universal resentment, their style sanctimonious hypocrisy. The curious thing is that it is the Liberals who have given us a world dominated by and run for scroungers, skivers and shirkers who are driven to spend their lives buying stuff they don't need with money they haven't earned. It is their ill-based, obsession with caring for people (in a remarkably patronising way) that has created our absurd and unaffordable welfare based society. It is sometimes mistakenly thought that it was communism which has given us this world of hand outs and 21st century soup kitchens. Not a bit of it. Lenin and his chums would not have tolerated the lazy and the expectant for a second. They believed that everyone had to work, and work hard.

And yet the Liberals are irredeemably totalitarian in many ways. In the world of the Cleggs and Cables everyone is entitled to an opinion as long as it matches the party line. Clegg and company chunter on about the wealthy having to pay their fair share when the whole point of our taxation system is that the indigenous wealthy always pay more than their fair share. Do they not understand this or do they not want to understand it? Or do they simply believe that if you hand out vast amounts of other people's money then the recipients of your largesse will always vote for you?

I have no doubt that with the nation's economy in a complete mess the Government will soon start introducing far more taxes. Indeed, I have been predicting wealth taxes for some time now. No one in Government cares a damn that wealth taxes, inheritance taxes, taxes on so-called unearned income and capital gains tax are all vindictive taxes which are morally and fiscally indefensible.

Our tax system is a bad joke. My favourite absurdity is the fact that if you win a prize that involves no work or skill it is tax free but if you win a prize that involves work and skill it is taxable. That pretty well sums up the whole philosophy of the politicians and the malicious, spite-inspired half-wits who work at HMRC. And my favourite example of their complete lack of understanding is the fact that they always seem to think that I will know how much I am going to earn in the forthcoming year. At the beginning of each tax year I have no more idea of my income during the coming twelve months than I have of the weather we will enjoy. But tax inspectors, never having done a proper day's work in their lives, simply don't understand.

Still, the next time I am picked out `at random' by tax inspectors determined to waste my time I will have the joy of handing them a cheap notebook. When the staff member who used to manage my accounts retired I decided not to hire a replacement but to manage the books myself. Since I can't make head nor tail of the accounting packages that fit computers (and since they don't seem to bear any resemblance to the requirements of the tax form) I now run my accounts in an A4 notebook.

And if things get too bad I think I will do what an acquaintance of mine did a year or two ago. He went abroad, renounced his British citizenship and came back as a foreigner. He now lives in England, pays a modest premium to the Government so that they won't send in the thugs, and never has to fill in a tax form at all.

10.

Our telephone went at 5.30 a.m. A woman whom The Princess knows very slightly was on the other end of the line. The Princess had given her the telephone number in a moment of uncharacteristic weakness. The woman wanted to know if we could recommend a hotel in Paris.

`It's half past five!' said The Princess.

`Best time of the day!' I heard the woman say. `I can never sleep well at this time of the year.'

`We'll ring you later,' said The Princess. `When tomorrow has properly started.'

Naturally, neither of us could get back to sleep. We lay in bed for a while and then the birds started singing and that was that.

There are, I think, two sorts of people in the world: those who think 5.30 a.m. is early in the morning and those who think it's very late at night.

11.

One of our builders is in a bad mood. He visited his income tax inspector yesterday and things did not go well.

`Do you ever use your van for private purposes?' asked the inspector.

`No,' said the builder. `I've got a car for private use.'

`You don't ever use the van to carry things around for your wife or your children?'

`Oh, no!'

`Do you ever stop off on the way home and do any errands?'

`Well, last week I did stop off at the chip shop and buy some fish and chips. My wife was out so I thought I'd save myself the bother of making tea for myself and the kids.'

The inspector from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs leapt on this admission and told the builder that he was disallowing fifty per cent of the cost of running his van. This was particularly galling since the van is one of those scruffy, battered vehicles that is full of old paint cans and empty cement bags.

`Why on earth did you go to the meeting?' I asked. `They always try to trick people who meet them face to face.'

`The inspector said he wanted a meeting,' said the builder. `My accountant said I had to go.'

`You have to answer their letters but you don't have to go to meetings with them,' I told him.

`He would never have got that out of me in a letter,' said the builder.

`Exactly.'

That visit to the inspector's office has cost our builder several thousand pounds a year. And it will cost him that money every year for as long as he remains in business.

12.

The sunset of our lives should be a time of contentment. We should be allowed to approach old age with a warm expectation of peace, the knowledge that we will have the time to savour delights previously passed by in the hurry of daily work. The elderly have the right to expect to be respected for the work they have done in their lives and the wisdom they have accumulated.

And yet today's elderly (and the problem is becoming greater by the year) face uncertainty, fear, disillusion and abuse.

We in England could learn a great deal from how the people of the East still treat their elderly. Our culture places an increasingly large premium on youth. Everything in our society is geared towards helping the young, and improving their lot. In China, the first question an official asks (after enquiring about name) is `What is your glorious age?'

If the reply is anything over 50 then the caller responds with increased humility and respect. The 51st birthday is welcomed with enthusiasm. It means that the individual can rejoice on reaching his half century. And birthdays after that are, increasingly, regarded a reason to rejoice. Someone who reaches 61 will be prouder still. And anyone who reaches his 80s can expect to be revered.

Not so in England today.

In England we kill our old people.

Officially.

Hospitals are instructed to kill off the elderly to empty beds and to save money. They are told to do it by withholding food and water from old, infirm patients. Let them starve to death or die through dehydration. And it happens. I've seen it happening. No wonder medical schools and the General Medical Council consider the Hippocratic Oath to be out-of-date. You can't have doctors being taught to care for their patients when you know damned well that they are going to be instructed to kill them.

What a bloody country.

13.

We drove a few miles to the west and met a friend of ours in a hotel in Cirencester. He has been enormously successful. He's a member of a rock band and a multi-millionaire. When we came out of the hotel the vegetable and flower market in the town's high street was closing down. One of the traders, trying to attract the attention of another, put his fingers into his mouth and whistled. It was loud and piercing.

`I've always wanted to be able to do that,' said the rock star rather wistfully. `I really envy that fellow.' And he clearly meant it too.

It seemed curious. The fellow we were with was rich beyond dreams. He has three lavish homes and more sports cars than he can possibly drive. He is envied by millions. The object of his envy sells vegetables on a market stall.

14.

We have two local councillors living nearby. Both are women. One, whom we call Ebb, is in charge of highways and the other, whom we refer to as Flo, is in charge of amenities. Collectively they are known as the Tide sisters. Since we don't have much in the way of highways or amenities in our district the former is responsible for making sure that the grit bins are kept filled for the winter (and is therefore known locally as the Minister of Snow) while the latter is responsible for ensuring that someone cuts the small area of grass around the war memorial (and is, consequently, known as the Minister of Grass). Neither of them actually does either of these things, of course, but both are particularly adept at using their telephones. They use them in the same way that jousting knights in the Middle Ages used their lances.

There is, perhaps inevitably, some tension between these two important political figures. One, the elder of the two, is the only person I know who is both thick and thin at the same time (though I have no doubt that there are many models who would also fit that description) while the younger, who has one of the most luxuriant moustaches in Gloucestershire, is an emotionally blowsy woman. It is doubtless rude and politically incorrect to say that any woman has an oversized derriere these days but it is sufficient to postulate that both these women would have sat comfortably alongside those ladies who, in the days when bustles were popular, were accustomed to magnifying the delights with which God had endowed them with the assistance of artificial aids. In the vernacular, both had bums which followed them round like faithful, if slightly arthritic, Labradors. If measured on an intellectual scale both women would sit comfortably a rung or two below the fungi. Ebb is the sort of person who campaigns to have Noddy books banned from the libraries on the grounds that Noddy sleeps with Big Ears who is not only clearly a paedophile but also cursed with a name drawing attention to a physical deformity. Flo sends toasters to characters in television soaps when they get married.

Despite their differences of opinion (which are many and varied), Ebb and Flo sometimes operate as a duo, possibly believing (quite erroneously) that this gives them greater clout.

And today they came round to see us to tell us that there had been a complaint about our hedge.

`One of your neighbours is very upset because one of your brambly bits sticks out,' said Ebb.

`He has to drive past it every day and it brushes against his paint work,' said Flo.

`I wonder who that could be,' I said.

`We can't possibly tell you that,' they said in unison, clearly unable to differentiate between a question and an ironic comment.

`Shall we take a look at the errant bramble?' I suggested.

They thought this a terrific idea so we walked a hundred yards up the lane until we found it.

`There it is,' said Ebb, pointing to a piece of bramble which was dangling down menacingly.

`It's clearly over the highway,' said Flo.

I took out my penknife, cut off the piece of bramble and threw it over the hedge into our garden.

Ebb looked at Flo.

Flo looked at Ebb.

They were clearly nonplussed by this. They had expected that the Saga of the Bramble might be worth at least three committee meetings, a report and possibly even a council inquiry. It had not occurred to them or to the complainant that the problem might be dealt with in such a simple way.

`Phew,' I said. `Another deadly menace has been over-come.'

They looked at each other.

I closed my penknife, turned round and went back home. This is life in the Cotswolds in the 21st century.

15.

We visited Roddy and Molly, friends of The Princess, who live just outside Chepstow. When we arrived I was surprised to see a large `Beware Of The Dog' sign fastened to the gate. There were rubber toys and a large well chewed bone on the front lawn. We opened the gate cautiously, keeping it open behind us so that we could, if necessary, make a quick retreat. `I'll telephone and tell them we're here,' said The Princess sensibly.

`We don't actually have a dog,' admitted Roddy as he led us into the house.

`But the rubber dog toys and the bone…,' I began.

`All just window dressing,' replied Roddy. `Makes the house look unattractive to hawkers, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, burglars, tax inspectors and busy bodies from the council.'

Breathing audible sighs of relief we relaxed.

`Do you have any pets?' asked The Princess.

`We've got a black and white cat called Minstrel, and the kids have got a tortoise and two goldfish,' said Roddy. `But none of them has bitten anyone yet.'

16.

The widespread availability of better methods of transport has changed the world dramatically. To a man or woman today a journey of 10,000 miles is as common as a journey of 1,000 miles was to their fathers, 100 miles to their grandfathers and 10 miles to their great-grandfathers. I was reminded of this truth when we met an old couple just outside Lynton in North Devon. He is 92 and she is 87 and they have never been out of Devon. Indeed, they have never been out of North Devon. To them a trip to Barnstaple has always been a great adventure. And although their grandchildren travel the world they find it difficult to contemplate travelling as far as Taunton or Exeter.

17.

I read of a transsexual who was given an operation on the NHS to replace her penis with a vagina. When this had been completed the local health authority apparently told her that they couldn't afford to give her any breasts. So they left her in limbo - a man above the waist and a woman below the waist.

My first thought was that the hapless transsexual should pray to St Agatha, the patron saint of breasts. But maybe she should also pray to St Dympna, the patron saint of insanity.

The NHS was created to provide free medical care for the genuinely sick and I don't believe the NHS should pay for sex change operations (or for cosmetic surgery or infertility treatment) but what sort of wicked human beings would do this? Only the sort of nameless, faceless, brainless halfwits who sit on committees could be so ruthlessly cruel.

And then I read about a ten-year-old boy who became a girl. When he returned to school after the holidays, wearing a dress instead of trousers, other parents complained that they should have been consulted and then stood at the school gates hurling abuse at the ten-year-old. It was, note, parents not children who hurled abuse. I'd horsewhip the lot of them. And why do parents have to collect their kids from school? I remember walking two miles home quite merrily at the age of six. If my mum was out I knew where the key was kept. The paedophilia mania and overcautious parenting has ruined the lives of an entire generation.

18.

The squirrels have stripped the bark from a number of our beech trees and in so doing they have destroyed their own habitat. Several trees are now so unsafe that they need to be felled. There is no little irony in the fact that there is a dray at the top of one of the doomed beech trees.

19.

Like many authors I keep a cuttings file of strange news items. Here are just a few of the items I've collected in the last month or so.

1. The Home Office has admitted that two million people in the UK have disappeared. They don't appear to have died, they don't pay tax and, horror of horrors, the authorities and the police do not know where they are. I think this probably shows that there are two million people in the UK who are brighter than the rest of us.
2. The ambulance service estimates that 500 lives are lost because of slower response times as a result of sleeping policemen - which are backbreaking and car busting. In some areas ambulance drivers have to take the long way round in order to avoid these horrors. In other areas they have no choice but to slow down and then accelerate again - causing more noise and pollution and using more fuel. These damned sleeping policemen (aka speed bumps) cause massive damage to backs and motor cars. And the number of potholes in our roads make the sleeping policemen quite

superfluous.
3. A woman refused to move her car which was blocking in an ambulance. The patient in the ambulance subsequently died. The woman was fined just £500.
4. University staff are now given sabbaticals every two or three years. Apparently they find it too exhausting to have to wait seven years.
5. It has been announced that the NHS plans to make Caesarian section deliveries available to healthy women when there is no medical need. Women will have an automatic right to demand that their baby is delivered by surgery - instead of naturally. This will cost the NHS a fortune and it will result in many unnecessary deaths. Caesarians cost at least £800 more than natural births. The decision to make Caesarians available to all was made by the same bunch of half-wits who decide which drugs will or will not be available to dying patients.
6. The no touching rule at lap dancing clubs has been waived for visually challenged members. (I rather suspect that such clubs will receive a good many more applications from men turning up carrying white sticks and leading the family dog.)
7. According to a free copy of *The Economist* which I picked up on Eurostar, the male hippopotamus flings its faeces to impress the ladies, and flatworms have penis jousting contests to demonstrate their fitness and virility. These are the only items of useful news I have ever read in *The Economist*.
8. A new company is selling statues of Lady Hamilton. They do not advertise them as such but it seems to me that these could most properly be described as whore memorials.
9. Internet addiction is now being treated online.
10. Products sold within the EU now use `UK' as abbreviation for Ukraine, not the United Kingdom. The abbreviation for all things British is EN. That should delight the Scots.
11. There are apparently just two football teams on the Scilly Isles. They only ever play each other and they only have one pitch. I am told that the teams play each other 22 times a year in their own league but also play for an annual cup. Each year the winner of the cup plays the winner of the league and if one team wins both, then the winner plays the runner up.
12. Financial traders with the longest ring fingers make more than three times as much money as their less well-endowed colleagues. The length of the ring finger is a measure of prenatal exposure to male sex hormones, which boost the concentration and reflexes. The traders with the longest ring fingers earned on average £828,000 over 20 months while the men with the shortest fingers made £154,000. Other research has shown that finger length is linked to fertility, sporting ability, increased confidence and faster reaction times.
13. William Morris wallpaper has been found in a house in the West Country. The wallpaper is believed to be worth more than the house and experts are looking at ways to remove the paper so that it can be taken to London and put into a more expensive property.
14. Scientists have worked out that if the earth were divided up and shared out we would all get around 1 trillion tons each.
15. There is a report that the brain function of civil servants starts to decline at the age of 45. My immediate question is: how does one measure brain function in a civil servant? Is there anything to measure? Most have never done anything worth doing, made anything worth owning or written anything worth reading. And most have never had an original thought.
16. Research has shown that 25% of men who think they are fathers are not the fathers of the children they call their own.
17. McDonalds, the fast food people, has lost a lengthy court battle to stop the `Mc' prefix being used by a Malaysian restaurant. Malaysia's highest court decided that a privately owned Kuala Lumpur restaurant could call itself McCurry. I gather that McDonalds, being American, do this quite often. In the mid-1990s McDonalds stopped a Seattle coffee shop from using the name McCoffee, a name under which the café had operated for 17 years. But McDonalds have failed in Canada to prevent the use of the name McBeans. I have written to McDonalds to ask if they have any objections to my plans to open a chain of restaurants called McCrap. I have told them that since my restaurants will sell only fatty junk food and I will pay minimum wages they cannot possibly argue that I will be a competitor. Our advertisements will proudly claim: "We sell the cheapest, crappiest food on the planet. McCrap burgers will give you bigger heart attacks because they contain more fat than anyone else's - with extra gristle!"
18. After council workers (including teachers) went on strike one employee asked for a day off in lieu because he was off sick when the strike took place.
19. A man was stopped by the police in Italy for driving a Lamborghini too slowly. They told him he was being an embarrassment.
20. A female celebrity with footballing connections is reported to travel with an eyebrow architect and nail technician (in addition to the usual entourage of hairdresser, bodyguards, make-up specialist and so on).

21. More than a quarter of all births in England are to foreign born mothers, who are breeding far faster than home-grown mothers.

22. The authorities have decided that those without homes may now use a park bench as an official address. Is this because the authorities feel that they must make an attempt to register the homeless or is it because they fear that they will need to keep track of the people losing their homes through foreclosure?

23. Film bosses say that modern film fans like lots of noise and action. The studio owners say that cinema goers don't give a bruised gooseberry who appears in a film, or even if it is in focus, as long as it is noisy and fast moving. Film producers also admit that they now try to keep sex out of their films (so that young film goers will be able to get in to see them) but that there are no limits on violence. Films are aimed at teenagers because they are the patrons who buy the most popcorn and cola - and that is where the profits are.

24. A recent survey showed that the vast majority of people don't want to pay more tax or give more money to the Government. The BBC's (self-serving) conclusion was that people have become selfish. There was no suggestion that perhaps, just maybe, people didn't want to give more money to the Government because they didn't like the way their money was being spent, and are beginning to understand that the Government is always the problem and never the solution.

25. I read that another well-known couple are naming their baby after the place where they think he was conceived. But such couples are often making a huge mistake. Sperm and egg don't get together until around 12 hours after intercourse took place and so most babies are actually conceived on public transport or in offices or shops. And the baby named after the place where his parents thought he was conceived is quite likely to have been conceived somewhere else. The baby named `Ritz' should, in reality, be known as `Harrods'. Or `Tesco Express'.

20.

The Princess spoke to a woman in Cirencester. Within 90 seconds of the conversation starting the woman had told her that she and her husband owned two houses. `I'm a houseswife!' she announced.

21.

It is alleged that a man who used to live in the East of the Cotswolds (and who died recently) was fired from his position as Master of the Queen's Bedchamber when he was found in flagrante in the bedchamber itself. His paramour was one of the Queen's Ladies In Waiting who had clearly decided not to wait any longer. I suspect that this is merely a scurrilous and unfounded rumour. But it is, nevertheless, rather glorious.

22.

A man I met in the nearby village shop (and whom The Princess and I refer to as Archibald the Grim) told me that he likes to go for a walk at 6.00 a.m. every morning. When I expressed surprise at this he told me that he liked to get out and breathe the air before it has been breathed by others and become second-hand and stale. Since he lives at least a mile from anyone else this seems to me to be rather excessively cautious.

23.

I was walking back from the post-box when I saw a man lying on his back on his garden lawn. He had his legs in the air and was shaking them from side to side. He seemed quite anguished. I asked him if he needed help. `A bee went up my trouser leg,' he explained, clearly in some distress. `They always try to fly upwards so I'm giving him the opportunity to leave in peace.' And moments later a bee emerged from his left trouser leg and flew away.

24.

Apart from the incident with the bee up the trouser leg it has been a quiet week. A leaf falling off a tree three days ago was pretty much the only other highlight.

25.

There has been much excitement in the next village. When a cat was reported as having been stuck up a tree for two hours the fire brigade sent an engine, the police sent two squad cars and an animal charity sent a small white van. The council sent two clip-board carrying youths in cheap suits, the local newspaper sent a reporter and a photographer and the local independent television station sent a crew. There was no one there from any of the local radio stations and I hope that questions will be asked at a managerial level. It turned out that the story was not so much the cat as the identity of the owner who turns out to be someone who regularly appears on our television screens. We were passing when the excitement was at its peak and we stopped to observe.

`There seems to be a lot of talking going on,' pointed out The Princess. `But very little rescuing.'

She was right, as usual.

Representatives of the emergency services were giving lengthy interviews and posing for endless photographs and when the reporters and cameramen had finished interviewing them they began interviewing one another. An elderly local resident told us that the owner of the cat, a black and white moggie, was away doing whatever television celebrities do but that she was believed to be rushing back home either to try to persuade the cat to come down or to be interviewed or both.

`I don't know why they make so much fuss,' said the elderly local resident. `No-one has ever found a cat skeleton in a tree. He'll come down when he's hungry but he's not going to come down with all these people here is he? Besides, cats like being the centre of attention. He's probably having a great time up there.'

The Princess and I decided that the elderly local resident was probably right and so we climbed back into the car and drove away. We did so just in the nick of time for as we left a flashy Japanese sports car came screeching to a halt next to the television crew and a distraught looking young woman leapt out. `Not until I've done my hair!' she screeched at the television cameraman.

Neither of us recognised her but since we rarely watch television this was not surprising. Nevertheless, excitement of this nature is rare in our part of the world. For a few brief moments we felt we were at the centre of the universe.

26.

My eavesdropping has been going well. It's a glorious hobby. You can do it sitting down or standing up, indoors or outdoors and while you're doing something else. There is no closed season. All you need is a notebook and pencil. Here are some of my favourite recent additions to the collection:

1. `The difference between plump and Rubenesque is all in the mind.'
2. `I'm not even a has-been.'
3. `What's the point of learning geography? Everything I learn this year will be out of date by next year. Why don't I wait and learn everything then?'
4. `I had to fuck a lot of frogs before I found a prince.'
5. `The male ballet dancer looked as if he had a bag of plumbing tools down the front of his tights. I didn't know where to look.'
6. `You don't have to be rich enough to do everything you want to do, just rich enough not to have to do things you don't want to do.'
7. `I have a theory about why old people can remember stuff that happened to them fifty years ago but can't remember what happened yesterday. I think memory is like a bucket. When it's full it's full and there isn't any room for new stuff. If doctors could get in there and clear out all the old, unnecessary memories people would be able to remember more recent stuff.'
8. `When things look tickety there is always some boo waiting.'
9. `My husband thinks women should all wear white.' `Oh, that's romantic. Like brides?' `No, so that they blend in with the domestic appliances.'
10. `What exactly is a loose woman?' `I think it's one who has had lots of kids.'
11. `Apart from my teeth, bowels, stomach and feet I'm not in bad condition for a man of 89.' `How old are you?' `I'll be 47 next birthday.'
12. `Old people all look the same to me; grey hair, wrinkles, beige clothes and sensible shopping bags. They limp, smell of wintergreen and wear too many clothes for the weather.'
13. `I have too much trouble with life before death to worry about life after death.'
14. `What does your husband do now?' `I suspect he's still decomposing.'
15. `Every morning a stream of people run past our house. And it's the same people every morning. I can't understand why they don't get up a bit earlier so that they can just walk to work.'
16. `I'm going to put my husband's ashes into an egg timer. It'll be the first useful work he's ever done.'
17. `She said she had nothing to wear and he didn't believe her so she turned up to the dinner wearing nothing but a coat and a pair of shoes.'
18. `She called the police and told them he kept trying to touch her.' `Did they arrest him?' `No, he said he was only trying to steal her handbag so they let him off with a caution.'
19. `If you can't get the cap off it's a good glue.'
20. `When the gorse is yellow it means that it was a mild winter or a harsh one. Or that it will be a warm summer or a bad one. It's one of those. I can't remember.'

27.

A local farmer died. He was working in the fields when his elderly tractor toppled over. There was no safety cage and he was crushed underneath it and must have died instantly. The farmer was a well-known character who was often seen riding a black stallion along the local lanes. He used to ride it bareback, without reins or any of the usual paraphernalia. He gripped the horse's flanks with his knees and held on tight to its mane with his hands. He was a regular in all the local pubs where his favourite evening meal was a plate of chips and a bottle of champagne. He used to call it `fizz and chips'.

28.

There is a small hall and a sharp, blind bend near to our house. Three young children on bicycles were racing down the hill as fast as they could. Sometimes they got round the bend and sometimes they crashed into the ditch which runs beside it. It was a dangerous game to play but my main fear was that as they came racing round the corner they would collide head on with a vehicle coming in the opposite direction. I went out to warn them of the danger, thinking that perhaps they did not realise that cars often travel quickly along the lane. The three children, two boys and a girl, listened to me as I spoke, as though taking notice of my warning. And then the biggest, and presumably the eldest, replied, looking me straight in the eye as he did so. `Fork off,' he said, in a sneery, posh, public school accent. The supercilious little brat will doubtless find employment in the police force if he lives long enough to grow up. The three of them then turned away and continued their dangerous game.

29.

I decided to watch some cricket and so The Princess and I drove to Taunton. It's a town that we both love though it is fading fast and becomes scruffier and sadder every time we visit. While The Princess went shopping I took out a mortgage on an entrance ticket and settled down on a bench. To my surprise I saw Mr Pettigrew sitting in the row in front of me. He wore a mustard coloured blazer, a sky blue shirt, plum coloured corduroy trousers and black patent leather dancing pumps. He looked like a misshape out of a bag of liquorice allsorts. At the end of the over I wandered over to where he was settled and said good morning. He seemed to be enjoying himself enormously. There are some men who take a scorebook with them to cricket grounds so that they can record the result of every ball bowled (the same men who go to concerts with a copy of the score, so that they can follow every note) but Mr Pettigrew was clearly not one of those. He was reading a novel by Laurence Block, and sipping from a large tumbler which clearly still contained a good deal of whisky. He was smiling and looked very content. `I didn't know you liked cricket,' I said.

`Mrs Pettigrew said I should have a hobby,' said Mr Pettigrew. He put the whisky glass down on the bench beside him, marked his place in the book with a finger and closed it. `She read in a magazine that there are definite health benefits to both partners if a man has a hobby.'

`Ah!' I said. `I didn't know there was a Mrs Pettigrew.'

`Indeed there is,' he told me proudly. `We met two years ago. She makes cushions. Very splendid cushions. When she suggested that I ought to find a hobby I looked at various possibilities,' he said. `Cycling, stamp collecting, bell ringing, orchid growing, flower arranging, fishing, darts, collecting beer mats...' he waved an arm to suggest that the list he had considered had been much longer.

`And in the end you chose cricket?'

He looked puzzled. `Oh no,' he said. `Not cricket. In the end I decided I would drink in public houses. A very traditional hobby. The bar here is very nice. They serve a good cheese sandwich. I come here, I go to Gloucester and so on.' He held up his glass. `And I've found a way to save the planet and contribute to the environment too,' he said.

`Marvellous,' I said. My heart always sinks when I hear this. Everything is done with the excuse that it's to save the planet. The gas company wants me to pay by direct debit to save the planet. They send me letters regularly inviting me to do this; as does just about every company I do business with. In France, the phone company wants me to manage my account on the internet to save the planet. But at the same time everything you can think of is wrapped and double wrapped and triple wrapped in a complicated wrapping melange of plastic and cardboard, held together with staples and wire. I've seen plastic toys fastened into their cardboard containers with enough wire to fence a ten acre paddock.

`I help the water shortage by drinking my whisky neat,' he said with a big smile.

I couldn't help smiling back. `Do you enjoy the cricket?'

`I like it best when the sun goes in and the players go back to their dressing room,' he said. `Everything is more peaceful then. I like to watch the groundsmen. They are so busy, there is so much to watch. They drag on those huge tarpaulins even though it is not raining. They brush the grass and mess around with sticks and poles and buckets and wheelbarrows. They do all sorts of things. It is much more interesting than the cricket. And there is no clapping so it is quiet so I can enjoy my book.'

`That won't last you the rest of the day,' I pointed out. He only had about 50 pages to go.

`Oh, I have two more books with me,' he said contentedly. He pointed to a bag on the ground by his feet. It contained a box of sandwiches and a couple of books. `Tell me,' he said, `why do so many people bring cushions with them?'

`The wooden benches can get a bit uncomfortable after eight hours or so,' I explained.

`Ah, I don't think that will be a problem for me,' smiled Mr Pettigrew. `I have a very large bottom. Lots of natural padding.'

`Do you like the one day matches?' I asked.

He shook his head. `I watched one on the television,' he said, with a shudder. `I saw no point in it. Instant cricket. Instant everything. How much longer will it be before football matches consist only of penalty shootouts? They could call it `Penaltyball' and replace those tedious 90 minute matches with the penalty shootouts previously used to find a decider in drawn matches.'

The fielders had, by now, settled into their new positions for the fresh over and the bowler had walked back to start his run. `I'd better get back to my seat,' I whispered. Mr Pettigrew looked up. `Oh yes,' he said rather sadly. `They are going to play again.' He nodded goodbye, took his finger out of his book and resumed reading the novel he had brought with him.

If the authorities did a head count that day they would have probably put him down as a cricket supporter. And, in a way, I suppose he was.

When I got back to my seat I looked around. At least a quarter of the spectators were reading books, magazines or newspapers. A quarter were chatting to their neighbours. And another quarter were busy eating or drinking. None of these was keeping more than half an eye on the cricket.

I took a book out of my pocket and settled back to enjoy an hour or two at the cricket. A moment later something happened on the pitch. There was a good deal of shouting. By the time I looked up the shouting had stopped. There was some talking but I couldn't hear what was being said. I realised I didn't know the identity of the team Somerset was playing. I decided that I'd perhaps buy a score card during the tea interval so that I could find out. I could perhaps buy a cup of tea too. I went back to my book. I used to follow cricket very keenly. But I'm older now. I have an old man's habits, an old man's preferences. When I was younger I often used to think `I'll do that when I'm older'. Now there are just regrets and an acceptance that it is too late to take up competitive skiing, scuba diving or even club cricket.

The cricket ground at Taunton is almost unique in being in the centre of the town, and during the tea interval I visited a couple of nearby charity shops. I bought original 19th century cast recordings of *The Mikado* and *The Gondoliers* made by the D'Oyly Carte company under the supervision of Rupert D'Oyly Carte. The records came in huge cases which I could hardly carry. I paid £5 for the lot and wondered how we were going to play them. When I met The Princess later she was carrying a huge cardboard box which turned out to contain a 19th century wind up gramophone. I couldn't believe it. She'd bought the gramophone for just £50 from a small antique shop she'd found. Serendipity rules today.

30.

The Princess bought me a copy of *The Dandy* comic. I was terribly disappointed to see that Desperate Dan has been changed beyond all recognition. He has lost his gun and his spurs and a good deal of weight. He now looks like a cartoon version of a local authority recycling collection consultant. He no longer eats cow pie and when he is frightened he cries. The old comics, the ones published half a century ago, used to contain wonderful messages. For example, I have a copy of *The Beano* dated December 5th 1959 in which Biffo the bear hides a bottle of pop so that his friends won't see it. In the final frame of the sequence Biffo finds a secret place to drink his hoarded lemonade. But in hiding it he has shaken it so much that the pop fizzes out and is lost. The message, printed in a bubble above his head, is: `That'll teach you not to be so greedy'.

The politically correct have destroyed children's comics in general and Desperate Dan in particular, just as they have made their mark on all other aspects of our lives. Books by Kipling, Buchan, Sapper, Dornford Yates and even Enid Blyton are now considered politically incorrect by the scrofulous, ever whingeing literary censors who patrol our schools, libraries and bookshops, and books by the first four are hardly ever available in public. Even Dickens and Shakespeare are out of favour. The smarmy, whey faced commissars who stalk our libraries no longer approve of *Oliver Twist* or the *Merchant of Venice* because the authors who invented Fagin and Shylock are considered to be unacceptably anti-Semitic. When you start banning authors because you don't like the characters they have created then you are in a dark, bad place. Well, yah boo sucks to the lot of them. May their gums rot, their teeth fall out and they spend their lives watching endless loops of television programmes made by Simon Cowell.

Aggressive Jews have frequently attacked me (and successfully campaigned to have my books banned) for daring to criticise warmongering American policies. That's political censorship and although I find it dangerous and offensive I understand it. But to try to ban Shakespeare and Dickens because you don't like a character they have created shows a single-mindedness that should frighten the rest of us to death.

31.

I found a copy of an old newspaper interview with someone called David Maude-Roxby-Montalto Di Fragnito. What a wonderful name. I once heard of a fellow called Cecil John Edward d'Orellana Plantaganet Tollemache Manning which I thought was pretty good though my personal favourite name is Coplestone Warre Bampfylde (the soldier and artist who created Hestercombe). And Sir Ranulph Twistleton-Fynnes is pretty impressive.

Names matter an awful lot.

I once heard of a woman doctor who refused to marry the father of her children because his name was Nutter. She was a psychiatrist and preferred to live in sin rather than be Dr Nutter.

And would Prince William have married Kate Middleton if her name had been Tracey Ramsbotham and she'd had a sister called Sharon, a brother called Elvis and parents called Stan and Ethel?

SEPTEMBER

1.

The BBC continues to annoy me by using metric measurements whenever a measurement is necessary. The BBC is, in my view, unpatriotic to the point of treachery, but this absurd allegiance to all things fascist is deeply irritating. England (and, as far as I know, the rest of our island) still uses proper measurements for all official purposes. Speed limits are measured in miles per hour and cricket pitches are measured in yards. But a growing number of government departments (and I think it is fair enough to include the BBC in this wide category) insist on using foreign measurements. Do these people not realise that metric measurements were devised by activists during the French Revolution? Don't they realise that they needed decimalised measurements because the revolting peasants were all innumerate? Don't they realise that even today the French still measure many things in feet and inches and that when they weigh stuff they still sell it by the livre?

All this damned metrication causes enormous confusion. Car speeds are measured in miles per hour but the Highway Code measures stopping distances in metres and most signposts now fail to include distances at all, presumably so that the authorities don't have to bother changing miles into kilometres when the EU deems it appropriate to make the change. Fuel consumption is measured in miles per gallon but fuel is sold by the litre.

Still, things could be worse. A fellow we know is a pilot and he tells us that airspeed is measured in knots per hour, altitude is measured in feet, but occasionally in metres, distances are in nautical miles, visibility is in kilometres and barometric pressure in either inches of mercury or hectopascals, which until recently were known as millibars.

How much simpler and safer life would be for everyone if the entire world went back to using proper measurements: feet, inches, yards and miles and pints and gallons. You know where you are with a mile or a pint.

2.

Looking around I am constantly bewildered and disappointed by the attitudes of the young. Life for many is over by the time they reach the age of twenty. Most of them won't be buried for another sixty years or more, but they are already dead in mind and spirit. For millions there is nothing ahead but a smorgasbord of wasted days and missed opportunities and in the end, expectations and perceived entitlements will be turned into resentments and what remains of life will become an unmanageable burden of cares, responsibilities, commitments, debts and nightmares. Anger and resentment will burn holes in their souls. It is bad enough to die in vain, but worse to live in vain.

My generation, and my parents' generation, had real purpose. Today, the young seem to have only a meagre, mean, selfish sort of purpose. Too many expect to become rich and famous without having to do anything. My generation, and my parent's generation, had an ingrained desire to do something that would make the world a better place. But this sense of public service, of duty (oh, how that word is out of date) has been largely drummed out of today's generation by rapacious politicians, greedy corporations and a numbing sense of entitlement. Millions watch life drift by, never grasping their destiny or taking control of any aspect of their lives. Thoreau, one of my favourite authors, famously wrote that `the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation' and he was never more right than he is now. By the time people are old enough to have acquired the wit and cunning to do something about the ideas they had when they were young, they have lost those ideals and the passion that fed them. The worst sin of modern man is obedience wrote Trevor Dudley Smith (aka Adam Hall) in *The Quiller Memorandum* and he was right. Time and time again I see people being advised to keep a low profile, keep their heads down and keep their powder dry. The sensible argument is that if you follow this advice you will avoid career and life damaging confrontations with the `authorities'. But what's the point of living if you do that? Ships are safest in the harbour but that's not what they're for. My approach has always been quite different.

But I do try to be offensive to everyone in authority so that no one can accuse me of favouritism.

`Being potty is the only thing that keeps me sane in this world,' said The Princess this afternoon. As usual, she is absolutely right.

3.

We're off to an auction in deepest Somerset. We like to buy furniture at auctions. We don't buy old things because they are old but because they tend to be better made than new things. In the simple old days workmen made things with care, attention, love and skill. There's a financial advantage too. If you buy a brand new piece of modern furniture it becomes worthless junk the minute you've paid for it. If you buy an antique the chances are good that you are investing rather than spending.

Both The Princess and I love going to auctions though I confess, it is the people as much as the stuff for sale that I find fascinating.

First, of course, there are the dealers. You can always tell a dealer. They still wear sheepskin coats, drive Volvo estate cars and carry thick wads of twenty pound notes. They cluster together in groups, waking up and paying attention sporadically when the auctioneer reaches a lot one of them is interested in buying. They've all watched every episode of `Lovejoy' and they bid with vague nods and flicks of the finger. Some of them are skilled. Some of them are chancers. Some can tell the difference between a chiffonier and a credenza. Some are just looking for brown furniture or something that looks as if it might be silver. They mostly know how to use strong tea, chicken shit and vinegar to make things look older than they are. And they all know that catalogues are written in a special language. `Attributed to' probably means a work possibly by or partly by a particular artist. `School of...' can mean that a picture is contemporary, with and showing the influence of a particular artist. `In the manner of…' suggests that a painting is in the style of a particular artist but has a date later than his death. `After…' probably means that it's a copy. And `Bears the signature of…' suggests that a painting is probably a forgery. Bidding against dealers is, generally speaking, a wise move. They usually know what things are worth and if you pay a little more than they're prepared to fork out you will buy it at a cheaper price than you'd have paid in a shop.

Much of the stuff they buy is merely moving up a long chain and will probably never grace anyone's home. It is stuff for buying and selling rather than for doing anything with. The awful, uncomfortable looking furniture and the terrible paintings will eventually end up in auction rooms in New York and from there probably find their way to a private museum somewhere that no one can find on a map.

Sadly, things aren't as good as they used to be for dealers and with auctioneers charging huge commissions from both buyers and vendors I suspect that the only people making real money from auctions are the auctioneers. And internet bidding means that a private museum in the middle of the Arizona desert can bid directly for everything on offer in an English auction room. Once again the damned internet has taken the fun out of life. Potential buyers who have driven miles and braved the weather sit and shiver in cold auction rooms while unknown, unseen internet bidders do battle. Curiously, bidders who use the telephone don't seem to be cheating in quite the way that bidders who use the internet seem to be cheating. I don't understand why this should be but it is.

And, of course, there are the collectors. Most are there because they are dreamers. The book collectors live in hope of finding the MSS of *Cardenio,* Shakespeare's lost play, or the 6th Gutenberg bible. Or a copy of *Ulysses* with James Joyce's scribbles in the margin, or signed to Sylvia Beech. Or one of the handful of copies of the very first edition of *Alice in Wonderland* (most were destroyed because Tenniel didn't like the way the illustrations had turned out in Carroll's self- published edition). All dreams. The professionals know that real bargains are rarer than mare's nests.

Some are there because they have to be there and as the years go by they become enormously attached to their collections. Since they may have devoted many years of their lives to their obsessions this is hardly surprising. When I worked as a GP I knew a fellow who collected beer mats. He had a massive collection and in the last years of his life he wouldn't leave his house for fear that burglars would break in and steal them, or that there would be a fire which would consume them. In his final weeks on earth he worried incessantly about what would happen to his collection after he had died. Sadly, after he had died a nephew he had never seen inherited the house, the furniture and the beermats. The house and the furniture were sold and the beermats taken to the council refuse tip. It is extraordinary how often this happens. Artefacts which are of enormous importance to one man will be of no interest or value to anyone else. I once knew a man who had a vast collection of sporting trophies which he had collected. He hadn't won any of them. He'd bought them all in junk shops and jumble sales. They, too, were thrown away when he died. And I once knew a man who had a collection of oddly shaped vegetables. He kept them on his conservatory window sill. The trouble was that when they had dried, the vegetables had lost their shape and so he had to explain what they were supposed to look like. When he died his widow, who loathed them and had put up with them for nearly a quarter of a century, threw them all onto the compost heap. There is almost nothing that someone, somewhere will not collect. I know a transvestite who collects old bras, corsetry and other bits and pieces of lingerie. I suspect that the local charity shops are going to have quite a time sorting and selling that collection.

Whether it is stamps, train numbers or bits of old pewter it is usually, but not always, men who collect stuff. I did once know a woman who had a collection of 10,000 small glass animals, and my mother used to collect book matches which she picked up from all around the world. Not knowing what to do with them, and not sharing this particular collecting fetish I use them to light the fire. There will, I suspect, be enough matches to last us until 2087. Collecting is, I suppose, part of the `hunter-gatherer' in us all. The specialists never show the slightest interest in anything other than the objects of their affection. But others, the generalists, have unstructured needs and will buy just about anything. A pal of mine, a GP, bought a bag full of old car keys. He paid 50 pence for them. For years afterwards, whenever he saw a traffic warden putting a ticket on a car he would stand, curse quietly, shake his head, take a set of keys out of his pocket and throw them to the warden. `Here you are,' he would say. `I'm fed up with cars. You have the damned thing.' He would then walk away, leaving the traffic warden to spend ages trying to get into the car with a key that didn't fit.

Another fellow I know used to buy old paintings of eminent looking folk. He hung them on his dining room walls. `This is my great grandfather,' he would say, pointing with well-simulated pride at a cracked oil painting of a stern and stout man in uniform. We knew he was faking because we once saw a picture on his wall which we'd seen in a junk shop in Bideford. He liked to give the appearance that he came from a long, distinguished family. He wore a crested signet ring and had furniture which he claimed had been in his family for two hundred years.

When we buy at an auction (and we never go to an auction without buying heaps of things we didn't want when we first saw them and certainly don't want when we get them home) we always do best when we buy a mixed lot. This is wholesale, jackdaw style materialism. A box of bits and pieces. Box and contents is the usual technical term. Or, best of all, a large box of assorted books. We go to auctions these days not to look for bargains but to look for adventure and excitement and in the hope of finding something unusual. A box and contents may fetch between 50p and £10 and the glories are as unpredictable. They can be enormously disappointing or quite enchanting. At today's auction we bought two boxes of books, each costing the magnificent sum of £10 plus commission. The first box contained a number of first editions (including a splendid edition of Jerome K. Jerome's *My First Book*) and the second contained all eight volumes of the 1812 edition of *History of England* by Hume, a book of poems about ants and a variety of well looked after Victorian and Edwardian first editions.

The highlight of the day was the sale of a tray of kitchen ephemera: some EPNS cutlery, three wooden egg cups, a few chipped plates, an old, ugly brown jug and a broken toast rack. There wasn't a thing on the tray I wouldn't have thrown into the bin.

`Anyone give me 50 pence for this?'

`£1.'

`£1.50'

`£2.00'

At this point it became clear that something strange was happening. Two dealers were bidding for the tray of rubbish. And they were bidding seriously. Everyone in the room was looking at them. The two dealers looked at each other. One of them shrugged. `£100,' he said.

`£200.' countered the other.

The auctioneer, now a passenger in his own auction, could only stare in wonderment.

`£300.'

`£400.'

`I think we missed something,' said the auctioneer, with an embarrassed laugh.

We all stared at the tray and tried to work out what had been missed. The plates? The cutlery? Was the toast rack a rare piece of Georgian silver? Could it be the tray? It looked like a very plain wooden tray.

`£1,000,' said one of the dealers. The room had now gone silent.

`£1,100.'

`£1,200.'

`£1,500.'

The other dealer thought for a moment, looked hard at the tray and then slowly, regretfully, shook his head.

The winning dealer showed the auctioneer his number and made his way towards the tray. We watched as he reached over, picked up the ugly brown jug and walked away. `You can put the rest back in at 50 pence,' he said to the auctioneer.

4.

I heard that Vivian Stanshall, the eccentric singer and raconteur, is being remembered at a Bonzo Dog revival concert with a one minute cacophony. Silence really just wouldn't have been appropriate, would it?

5.

We arrived in Paris in the early evening. Our route from the Gare du Nord usually takes us across La Place de La Concorde (unless the taxi driver is exceptionally imaginative and greedy) and, as always, it is there that we catch our first glimpse of the Eiffel Tower. Illuminated, as always, she looked wonderful. I cannot think of another man-made object, anywhere in the world, which is so instantly recognisable. And it is difficult to think of any man-made object which is admired so much. It seems strange to think that when M.Eiffel first erected his tower it was intended as a temporary structure and was greeted by the Parisians with boos and catcalls. The taxi driver who drove us must have learned to drive in dodgem cars in a fairground. How he managed to travel across Paris without actually hitting anything is a mystery. It is always good to arrive at the apartment. It's on the top floor and feels like a nest; secure, cosy and high above the travails of the world.

6.

We saw a motorcyclist in St Germain who had a face painted on the back of his helmet. He is playing a dangerous game. If he has an accident short-sighted doctors could well spend some time trying to turn his head round so that it faced the right way.

7.

A visit to Giverny, near the small town of Vernon reminded me that Monet was in his nineties when painting the famous lily ponds helped him create abstractionism. A little research among our books in Paris shows that he wasn't the only individual to have achieved great things after the age of 65. Doctors and nurses in England may want to kill off every citizen of pensionable age but the list of great achievements among the over 65s is impressive. Haydn wrote *Deutschland, Deutschland uber alles* when he was 65. Josephine Baker was dancing on the Broadway stage at 67 and Grandma Moses started her highly successful painting career at the same age. Ronald Reagan became president of the USA at the age of 69 and Gilbert White was the same age when he published *The Natural History of Selbourne*. Colette was 72 when she wrote *Gigi*, H. G. Wells successfully submitted a doctoral thesis at 78 and George Burns was 80 when he won an Oscar for *The Sunshine Boys.* Marc Chagall was still painting in his 90s, Benjamin Franklin was 81 when he helped write the American Constitution and Goethe was the same age when he wrote *Faust.* Stradivari was still making violins at 93 and P.G.Wodehouse was still writing novels in his nineties.

Suddenly, I don't feel quite so old.

8.

In a café today, The Princess and I overheard a Frenchman ordering an omelette. "Tell the chef I want it made with half a dozen eggs and plenty of cheese," he told the waiter. He turned to us and guessed that we'd overheard. "I feel like something light and healthy," he explained with an apologetic smile.

9.

A simple but insignificant truth occurred to me today. People in show business who use just one name (and I'm thinking of performers such as Bono, Madonna and Sting) invariably seem to me to be self-righteous, self-important and dull. I don't know why this is.

10.

An American friend of ours who lives in Thailand told us that a year ago a man he knows refused to have a wobbly kitten in his house. He said the kitten wouldn't live and he didn't want the unhappiness of seeing it die. It was given to a neighbour. And today the man, who a year ago seemed healthy and good for another three or four decades of life, is lying in a coffin while the kitten, which seemed so frail, is still alive and looks stronger than ever.

11.

The Women's Institute and the Churches' Legislation Advisory Service have advised their members that a new EU law makes it illegal to sell jam, marmalade or chutney in pre-used jars. The people who created this law hadn't been able to find anyone who has actually been injured, made ill or killed by jams or chutneys put into used jam jars but, hey, who said common sense had anything to do with EU life these days? The pitiless, brain-dead eurocrats have presumably stuck their dirty fingers into the used jam jar cottage industry in order to protect the manufacturers of jam jars and the official manufacturers of jams and chutneys. And just so that everyone knows that when the EU creates a law it means business the eurocrats have told us the penalties. Anyone who sells home-made strawberry jam or tomato chutney at a village fête will now be liable to a £5,000 fine and six months in prison. The eurocrats always deny that they are responsible for the daft laws with which we are encumbered. And it is illegal for ministers and civil servants to blame the EU for anything. But when the voters eventually learn just how many really stupid laws came from the eurocrats then the eurocrats' days of wine and roses will be finished. Any government's natural act is to grow. The EU, running a whole continent without any democratic control, has grown in authority and hubris, expanding its reach like hogweed or ground elder. The cost of this pointless bureaucratic extravaganza rises inexorably with salaries, perks and expenses soaring as though the EU and its employees were immune to the problems of the real world. Their idea of cost saving is to limit themselves to two bottles of wine each for lunch. The organisation's constant and unerring aim is to protect the interests of industry, management and staff and damn the consequences for the consumer. The lunacy seems never ending. And there is always someone else to blame. When it became clear that the EU's Common Fisheries Policy had resulted in a dramatic fall in fish stocks the eurocrats introduced a plan to slaughter thousands of seals and seabirds on the grounds that it was *their* fault that there would soon be no more fish in our seas. When the EU falls, it will be dramatic, noisy and a real delight to watch.

The fascists and socialists who run the EU argue that individual liberty has to be shelved until collective liberty can be made secure (which, of course, it never will be). It will all end in tears and, of course, it's all happened before. Rome had a socialist interlude under a bozo called Diocletian who created an expensive bureaucracy, payments for Romans who weren't working and taxes so high that men lost the incentive to work. Half the lawyers in Rome spent their days trying to find ways to evade taxes and the other half were busy closing the loopholes and creating new laws to prevent evasion. Lawyers and bureaucrats have always had hearts of flint and the morals of pirates. High taxes resulted in complaints from the hard-working that they were supporting the lazy and the incompetent. Golly. And in China in 100 BC exactly the same thing happened, and then happened again and again at intervals thereafter. In 11th century China the State took over the economy and gave benefits to anyone who wanted them. But the high taxes needed to pay for all the government employees and corrupt bureaucrats resulted in disaster. Human corruptibility and incompetence always make government control impractical. Oppressive, socialist states are always overthrown eventually and though communist, fascist governments exist for a while through a mixture of corruption, tyranny, bribery and suppression of individual freedom the result, in the end, is that the people always get fed up with the way things are. Too many rules, too much bureaucracy, too little individual freedom and too many taxes result in chaos, protest and the collapse of the economy.

We have a welfare state which ensures that wealth is distributed from those who work to those who do not. We have rules which are now patently absurd and the EU is being run by people who seem to be inextricably linked to the trilateral commission, the Bilderbergers and, of course, Goldman Sachs. In practice the EU consists of an army of bureaucrats who must spend their lives laughing hysterically at the absurdly silly rules they have made up. It is certainly true that anything that doesn't make sense came from the EU. The EU is what we would have if a committee was set up consisting of Marx (Karl), Hitler (Adolf), Marx (Groucho) and Attila (the Hun). Just who are the people who carry EU flags, put them on their cars or in their gardens or wave them at the Last Night of the Proms? There were even people at the last Olympics waving EU flags. Are they EU bureaucrats on an all-expenses paid day out or simply demented fascists?

The EU, fascist and dangerous, is the most absurd organisation created in history. I recently told a fellow I know that the EU had discussed plans to ban children from building sandcastles (because they were considered to be too elitist) but had finally agreed to a compromise suggestion that for every castle built on the beach there should be five ordinary starter homes - made with just one bucket of sand with an EU flag on it. The chap to whom I told this nodded thoughtfully and not for one moment did he think that I was pulling his leg.

There are tears ahead.

12.

It has just been revealed that a best-selling British crime writer has used pseudonyms to write glowing reviews of his own books. He modestly described his own work as `magnificent genius'. He has also apparently been writing reviews criticising his rivals. Sadly, I am not in the slightest bit surprised.

It is now a well-established truth that at least half of all the reviews on the Web are fake. They are either written to promote a product or service or they are written to attack a competitive product. Since over half of the reviews on the Web are worse than useless, because they are deliberately designed to mislead the reader, and since no one cannot possibly know which reviews are real and which are fake, then all the reviews on the Web must be entirely worthless.

I don't really think things are quite that bad yet but I certainly believe that the majority of bad reviews should be ignored. The internet has created a society in which people feel entitled to pontificate without knowing any of the facts. The internet is a hunting ground for venomous cowards who, like HMRC snitches, attack anonymously. The problem with these cowardly, malignant nerds is that they know how to manipulate the search engines. They have no shame, no sense of responsibility and no personal pride. They are, it seems to me, often driven by anger, vengeance or jealousy. There is an attack on my book *Oil Apocalypse* on the internet which was written by an individual who admitted that he had never even seen a copy of the book. Others encourage co-conspirators to add nasty reviews and comments to websites without bothering to buy or read the books they are attempting to destroy. Is it any wonder that an increasing number of people are turning away from the internet and want no more of it.

The internet is based on fakery, deceit, prejudice and self-interest. It is now possible to get a job as a `fake review writer' (that's the official job description) and to write reviews of books you've never read or hotels you've never visited. The job pays $1 per 500 words so you can imagine how skilful the people are who do this work.

Now, it is a well-known fact that professional reviewers rarely ever read through a book they are sent to review. Arnold Bennett, probably the best known and best paid of all book critics, was quite open about it, pointing out that reviewers could not possibly earn a living if they actually had to read the books they reviewed. (Nor, incidentally, do publishers' readers bother to read the books they are sent.) And there is no doubt that much review space is effectively `sold' to publishers by ambitious literary editors. Big publishers get most of the review coverage because they can afford to hire expensive publicity people to take literary editors out to lunch. I have sat through many of these lunches and they are, believe me, not about the author or his book but about the literary editor and his or her unpublished book. Since all literary editors are frustrated authors who have at least one book sitting waiting on their computer the relationship between big publisher and literary editor is a symbiotic one. The publisher gets review coverage (and useful quotes to use on the paperback) and after a year or two the literary editor gets his or her book published. (The book, being terrible, will sink without trace, but for the publisher the cost is a tax deductible and worthwhile expense.)

But the activities of reviewers on the internet are particularly absurd. I've seen books given bad reviews on the internet because a delivery arrived late or because the reviewer didn't like the author's looks. I've seen a book given the lowest possible rating on Amazon because a copy arrived with a slightly damaged cover. (Amazon will remove reviews which are obviously unfair or libellous but it is time-consuming to police the internet and I long ago gave up on this particular task.)

A pimply 16-year-old child can go on a family holiday to a seaside hotel and not like the soup. He can then write nasty reviews on a couple of websites and his uninspired hostility can destroy the hotel. Much of the stuff written on the internet is negative because it is written by self-important amateurs who are simply spiteful. Trolls are hecklers without style or substance. Much Web criticism is mischievous and designed to damage someone’s reputation for no reason other than that the writer disagrees with something that an author has said or written in a previous book. The internet has given a loud voice to the crooked, dishonest, spiteful, prejudiced, vindictive and damned stupid. Thousands of honest folk now have to waste their time, money and energy fighting lies created by unemployed and unemployable semi-literates.

I moan about reviews on the internet but in reality I suppose things haven’t changed all that much. Reviewers have always been a pretty seedy bunch. They are, for example, often automatically patronising about first novels and probably don’t realise that *Pickwick Papers* was a first novel. *Wuthering Heights* was Emily Brontë’s first novel. (Since she never wrote anything else it was also her last novel.) I was a reviewer of books and plays for *The Guardian, The Birmingham Post, The Times Educational Supplement, The Times Higher Educational Supplement, The Teacher* and many other important sounding publications when I was a teenager.

When I first started publishing my own books I used to receive quite a few reviews. *The Village Cricket Tour,* for example, received excellent reviews. But when reviewers found that I was self-publishing (and actually having the temerity to do it successfully), jealousy and industry pressure stepped in and the reviews stopped. One literary editor indignantly announced that he threw my books straight into his wastepaper basket because it wasn’t right that an author should be able to make a success out of publishing his own work.

13.

We took the Metro to Pere Lachaise this afternoon. On the way to the station I picked up a copy of *L’Equipe* and found that it contained `10 regles d’or pour prevenir’ - a guide to help sportsmen avoid heart trouble while exercising. My favourite was number seven which was `Je ne fume jamais une heure avant, ni deux heures apres une practique sportive’. (I never smoke an hour before or within two hours after exercise.) How absolutely wonderful. Only the French. It has always been thus. I remember that back in the 1950s the French authorities used to display a health warning in all Paris Metro carriages. The warning showed a healthy, rosy cheeked workman upending a bottle of red wine. The caption on the poster was `Jamais plus de deux litres par jour.’ (Never more than two litres a day.) Another poster used at the same time contained the warning `L’alcool tue lentement’. (Alcohol kills you slowly). Underneath someone had scrawled: `Tant mieux. Nous ne sommes pas presses.’ (Fine. We are not in a hurry.) And yet, despite the drinking, the smoking and the enthusiastic consumption of fatty food the French have an enviable life expectancy. One theory is that the Roquefort cheese keeps them alive. My theory is that they live long because they worry little and are far less susceptible to life’s stresses and strains.

In foggy gloom we wandered around Pere Lachaise, and said hello to Jim Morrison, Lauren Fignon and the other heroes who now live there. Cemeteries always look much better in the mist. We spoke to a tramp who was sitting propped up against a gravestone. He had a bottle of claret in a brown paper bag.

He told us he sat there every day. `I come because here I’m better off than anybody else,’ he told us.

14.

There is a story in a French paper about a man who ran away from a circus to get a job in a bank. The man, who is 23-years-old, was born into a circus family but has tired of all the travelling and wants to settle down. He now has a job as a clerk in a bank in Paris.

15.

Preston Sturges, now almost forgotten, was one of the world’s greatest screenwriters and film directors. (`Dialogue,’ he once wrote, `consists of the bright things you would have liked to have said, except you didn’t think of them in time.’) Sturges had a wonderful sense of fun and no great love for bureaucrats. I read today that the night before a meeting with the taxman he took all the receipts and papers which he had accumulated, placed them in a large cardboard box and mixed them up thoroughly. A wonderful recipe for chaos and, therefore, sound advice.

16.

We spent a very pleasant hour playing badminton in our apartment. Because we live in a loft apartment we have enormously high ceilings (when we painted them we had to tie brushes onto very long poles and stand on a very tall step ladder) and it’s perfectly possible to play a decent game of badminton indoors. Afterwards we broke the law and risked the wrath of the Paris gendarmerie by feeding the pigeons on our windowsill. They are exceptionally civilised and health conscious pigeons and seem to be content with two meals a day: breakfast and afternoon tea.

17.

We went to St Clothilde, our favourite church in Paris, and lit a candle in memory of our friend C. J. Morris. He was one of my partners when I was a general practitioner, and the only one who dared to speak to me after I became a full time author and began to excoriate the medical establishment. I can remember many things about him but one incident in particular sticks in my mind and sums up his character perfectly.

John was a great cricket fan and particularly loved watching England play Australia. He and I were at a Test Match at

Edgbaston one year and he had brought with him a friend whose name I have long since forgotten but whom I will call Derek. During the tea interval the friend disappeared for a while to get rid of some waste beer and John turned and told me that he was getting divorced. I expressed dismay and surprise and offered sympathy and whatever practical help I could. He told me that he didn't want a divorce but that his wife wanted to leave to set up home with another man.

`Anyone you know?' I asked.

`Derek,' said John.

I looked at him, aghast. `Not the chap who has been sitting next to you all day?'

John nodded.

`But…,' I began, almost speechless. `But your wife's having an affair with him, and leaving you to move in with him?'

John nodded. `But it was months ago when I invited him to come with me to the Test Match,' he said. `It wouldn't have been right to tell him he couldn't come. It wouldn't have been the decent thing to do.'

It was a gentleman's obligation and John was a gentleman.

18.

I bought a new swordstick today. I have always had rather a fancy for sticks which are more than sticks. There are excellent shops in both Paris and London which sell nothing but walking sticks equipped with swords, compasses and drinking vessels. I've seen one stick which comes complete with a pen and a bottle of ink hidden inside it.

It is, of course, illegal to carry the ones with swords inside them and a few years ago an unfortunate fellow in London was prosecuted and imprisoned for daring to defend himself against a gang of ruffians with a sword which he drew from his walking stick.

I bought my first swordstick when I was a medical student in Birmingham and I found it an enormous help when I ran a nightclub in my spare time. My club was called The Gallows and to help me run it I recruited a band of local miscreants who would, in other times, have been called street urchins. None of them had homes and they all lived in a loft above the club. Most of them carried knives and were not afraid to use them. My swordstick earned its price one evening when one of the youths was flashing a new knife he'd bought. It was, like Crocodile Dundee's, rather larger than the average sort of knife. The banter was rapidly turning rather nasty as the youths argued about whose knife was the biggest. To try to ease the situation (in my defence, I was only about 19 at the time) I pulled the sword half out of my swordstick. As the lights glinted on the blade there was a gasp of admiration. Mine was far bigger than anyone else's. The competition was over.

19.

In the old, far away days the post used to arrive in the morning and in the early afternoon. And then the bosses improved things and stopped the second delivery and the post arrived late in the morning or in the afternoon or sometimes not at all. The bosses all received huge bonuses for improving the service in this curious way.

Now the Royal Mail is going to dump mail with complete strangers. If you're not in and have a parcel which needs signing for, or which is too big to go through the letterbox, the postman can now dump your mail with a neighbour of his choice. Royal Mail won't tell you which neighbour because that would spoil their fun. Since one in six individuals in our wonderful country is now officially listed as a criminal this wonderful new scheme will undoubtedly have a dramatic effect on the amount of mail euphemistically getting lost ('lost' is the Royal Mail term for 'stolen').

This is, of course, the default option. Citizens who do not want their mail handed to criminals can apply for a small sticker to place on their letterbox instructing the postman to take undeliverable mail back to the sorting office. Postmen may, or may not, take any notice.

20.

Earlier in the year we tried to order some expensive office furniture from a well-known supplier. Knowing that their delivery lorry wouldn't be able to reach our house we offered to meet the lorry nearby and to bring the furniture the rest of the way in or on our truck. Inevitably, our offer was declined without hesitation. It isn't difficult to see why retail companies are having such a hard time these days.

The only alternative was to order from a company which uses a Luton van for its deliveries. Despite charging a substantial sum for delivery, and promising that we could decide when we wanted the furniture delivered, they gave us a date and told us that they would deliver sometime between 7.00 a.m. and 5.00 p.m.

We got up at 6.30 a.m. and by 8.30 a.m. I was fading fast. By midday I was cursing loudly. And at 4.40 p.m. the driver arrived. He complained endlessly about our lane, complained about his lorry, complained about his employer, complained about the roads, and complained about the weather. He dumped the furniture by our front gate and disappeared in a cloud of diesel smoke.

It took us nearly an hour to unwrap the stuff we'd bought but long before we'd finished it was apparent that we were expected to finish building the furniture ourselves. These days everything that is sold comes in a flat pack with a cheap Allen key and four tons of polystyrene packing.

Naturally, the holes weren't positioned in the right place and the sticky out bits didn't fit them. Everything was well wrapped in corrugated cardboard (as well as the polystyrene) but the shippers had somehow managed to damage just about everything.

`Do you want to send it all back?' I asked The Princess.

She thought about it for a moment.

`I don't think I can bear it,' she said. `The telephone calls, the bad tempered driver coming back, the forms we'll have to fill in. And, then, we'll be left with no furniture and we'll have to start again.'

I agreed with her and so we decided to try to finish building the bits and pieces of desks and chairs that we'd bought. To be honest I must admit that when I say `we' I really mean `The Princess'. I am infamously short of patience and I never last long when faced with a boxful of bits and pieces of furniture. I usually end up throwing them all on the bonfire.

21.

The Princess has built one of the desks. At least, we are pretty certain that it is supposed to be a desk. Everything is so badly designed, and so badly made, that what she has made could easily be a wardrobe or a log box. I suspect that the manufacturers simply make a supply of bits, throw an assortment into each box and then stick a label on the outside. Since we know it is supposed to be a desk we are prepared to call it a desk. But to an outsider, unaware of its purpose, things would not be so clear.

22.

A friend of ours is suffering from intermittent claudication. He cannot walk more than a few hundred yards without getting a pain in his calves. He has no other symptoms. Surgeons have recommended major surgery to replace malfunctioning blood vessels in his legs. But our friend has said ‘No’ to the knife. Instead, he has solved his problem by buying a bicycle.

23.

We watched *My Week With Marilyn,* the enthralling story of the time third assistant director Colin Clarke spent with Marilyn Monroe as she struggled to make a movie with the ever-charmless Laurence Olivier. In one delightful scene Clarke dares to move a chair so that Dame Sybil Thorndyke can sit down for a moment and is confronted by a militant props man who threatens to close down the set.

Props men used to take their responsibilities very seriously and this immensely serious threat reminded me of a time back in the 1980s when I was making a television programme at Central TV studios in Birmingham. The programme was about tranquillisers and to illustrate the variety of drugs available I had taken with me a carrier bag full of bottles of pills. I'd given the bag to one of the presenters who had handed it to a props man to display on a table where he and I would sit.

Moments before the recording started I moved a couple of the bottles an inch or two so that I could see the labels more clearly. Before I'd finished there was a cry of outrage and the ominous sound of lights being switched off. A huge and very angry props man appeared from nowhere and glowered at me. `If you want anything moving we'll move it!' he snarled. `If you touch anything again we'll close this studio.'

Thankfully, my brain was having one of its rare operational days.

`These are my drugs,' I told him, inspired by fury at his arrogance and pomposity and doubtless emboldened by the fact that I genuinely didn't give a damn if he closed down every studio in the country. `They are all prescription medicines and their distribution is controlled by Act of Parliament. I am a registered medical practitioner and I suspect that you are not. I am the only person here who is allowed to touch these bottles. If you try to move them in any way I will immediately telephone the police because you will be breaking the law.'

The props man, speechless, stared at me and stared at the pills, mumbled an apology and backed away. The lights were switched back on and the recording continued. When we'd finished the programme the presenter and the director insisted on taking me for a drink.

`That was a moment I will cherish all my life,' said the presenter who was positively aglow with delight.

`That uppity union bastard makes our life miserable,' explained the director.

And for a few moments I was a hero.

Alas, such moments come so infrequently. Why do the right words, the clever riposte, the smart response, usually come too late?

24.

I queued in Lloyds Bank in Cirencester and when I was eventually lucky enough to obtain an interview with a teller I asked if I might move some money from one of my current accounts to one of my deposit accounts. (I'm not sure whether they're called tellers or clerks or customer service executives or financial consultants but I refer to the unfortunate soul who sits behind the bullet proof glass). I gave her the two relevant account numbers and the bank sort code. The clerk asked if I had my passport or a driving licence with a photograph. I told her, regretfully, that I do not walk around carrying my passport and that my driving licence doesn't have my photograph. I showed her the usual bundle of plastic credit and bank guarantee cards and an official, police recognised press card which does carry my photograph. She said that none of this was acceptable. I playfully suggested that if she thought I had acquired the credit cards illegally then she should telephone the police. She said that there was no question of that but that she was following bank policy and that it was all done to protect me. I pointed out that I was merely trying to move my own money from one of my accounts to another of my accounts. I also pointed out that both accounts were in my sole name and that it is impossible to see how moving my own money from one of my accounts to another of my accounts could possibly put me at risk, be regarded as money laundering or be described as an activity conducive to terrorist activities. Moreover, the clerk agreed that I was trying to move money from a vulnerable account (a current account) to a less vulnerable account (a deposit account) and that I would hardly be doing that if my motives were dishonourable. At this point a manager was called. She agreed with the clerk, claiming that they were merely applying the bank's rules. It all seemed extraordinarily patronising. I asked again why they weren't calling the police. `Either these cards are mine, and I am behaving quite properly, and you should do as I ask, or you doubt my authenticity and you should call the police.' `Oh, there's no question of that,' said the managerial woman. `We believe that you are who you say you are.' I pointed out that I was trying to move my money from one of my accounts to another of my accounts and that since the account I was trying to move it to would pay me interest it was difficult to see how I could possibly lose out. `Would a thief move my money to a deposit account?' I asked. They agreed that this would seem unlikely but stood firm. I asked if they would telephone my branch and ask someone to identify me. They refused. The managerial person asked if I had access to internet banking. I said I didn't because I didn't believe it was safe. She looked alarmed, as though I had suddenly expressed doubt in the value of breathing or the sanctity of Fred Goodwin, and, after a pause, said that I was entitled to think that if I wanted to. It didn't seem to have occurred to her that when everyone does their banking online there will be little need for banks to have buildings, clerks or managers. I asked if she would look me up on the internet where, I explained, they would doubtless find photographs which would confirm to her that standing before her was the person I claimed to be. To my surprise, the manager said that the bank had no internet access. Feeling by now rather peeved I told her that I could see why Lloyds had gone damned near bankrupt and had required bailing out by taxpayers. `You're just another civil servant,' I told her. She stared at me as though she'd never before seen anyone with steam coming out of their ears and backed away a foot or so, clearly concerned that I might explode and make a mess of her and the bank's fitted carpet. We parted company. Two people from different worlds.

After I left I rang my branch, spoke to someone to whom I had never spoken before and moved the money. The call, including polite chit chat, took three minutes.

This isn't the first time I've had difficulty moving my own money to another place.

`I know we all know you,' said a teller once when I was trying to do much the same thing at a branch I visit regularly. `But we do this to protect you.' I pointed out that my passport, birth certificate and bank cards can all be stolen but that no one can steal my face and voice.

The truth, of course, is that none of this nonsense has anything to do with protecting my money or your money. All these absurd regulations are a result of laws brought in by the European Union to try to prevent money laundering. They don't prevent money laundering, of course, any more than confiscating nail files from old ladies prevents terrorism. The eurocrats have, as always, created a series of laws and regulations which simply make life difficult for honest, decent folk trying to go about their business with the minimum of fuss and time wasting. And, of course, the EU does absolutely nothing to stop the banks mis-selling interest rate swaps or payment protection insurance, nothing to stop them rigging interest rates and nothing to stop them supervising wholesale money laundering operations.

25.

A reader who works in a nursing home has written to tell me of a scam that, she says, is now extremely widely practised. When a resident dies, rings and other jewellery are routinely removed and are placed in an envelope. The resident's name is written on the envelope. The envelope is then put away somewhere and nothing is said about it. If the relatives notice that the rings are missing then the envelope will be produced and the jewellery handed over. But if no one notices, and no one asks for the jewellery, then it will be kept and, after the resident has been buried or cremated, quietly sold. `Two women, both qualified nurses, who are employed at the nursing home where I work make several thousand pounds a year each out of this scam,' wrote my correspondent. `I cannot expose the scam because there is never any proof. If the police were to come the nurses would simply produce the envelope containing the jewellery, and point to the name written on it.

26.

A friend of The Princess's called Molly was born in Wales but hates Welsh nationalists with a fervour. (Her real name is Glynis but she renamed herself Molly.) I asked The Princess if she knew why. `When she was a little girl,' explained The Princess, `Molly and a friend were playing at school when the friend fell over and hurt herself rather badly. Molly ran to the headmaster who was in the playground and told him what had happened. But she told him in English. The headmaster was very cross. He told her off and before he would do anything he made her say it all again – in Welsh.'

27.

We met a friend who is a well-known press photographer. I've known him for years and although he, like me, is becoming rather frail and wobbly he still takes outstanding pictures. `My problem is that I've always been a photographer who likes to move about a lot,' he said. `Now that I'm a bit slow I find it difficult to jump around.' This reminded me of the time when he visited us and was asked to take photographs of a local girl who wanted to become a model. The first pictures he took were pretty ordinary (on two of them he cut her head off completely) and he was clearly becoming embarrassed. `Do you mind if I move about a bit?' he asked eventually. He then leapt around taking pictures of her from all sorts of unexpected angles. The best picture was one he took after leaping out from behind a bush. He has, needless to say, earned a good portion of his living as what is known as a paparazzi photographer.

28.

The Princess and I were in the lounge of a pub in Somerset when a middle aged woman fainted. She did it very gracefully. I watched from a safe distance while the three people with her all did what people do under these circumstances. One picked up the woman's handbag and put it on a chair. A second unfastened the woman's coat (but, fortunately, went no further). And the third just ran round and round the room like a balloon that someone has blown up, failed to tie and then released. It was clear that there was nothing serious wrong and the faintee started to come round within a second or two. It isn't difficult to tell when someone is seriously ill and in desperate need of medical attention. She was neither. I was in the process of wandering over to offer comfort and professional solace when a woman in her twenties ran in from the bar. `I'm the accredited health and safety officer for the hotel,' she shouted, elbowing me out of the way with all the finesse of a French front row forward. `Bring me a glass of water!' she shouted to a waitress who had appeared in another doorway. She gave the impression of having been waiting many months for this moment. All those lectures she'd attended and all those regulations she'd learned were paying dividends. I watched in admiration as the health and safety officer took charge. She clearly didn't have the foggiest idea what to do but she did everything with great confidence and even if her first aid advice won no marks for substance she certainly deserved full marks for style. There was much flouncing and many irrelevant and pointless orders were given. She was the sort of woman who, in an earlier era, would have volunteered to work as a milk monitor. People were told to keep back so that the patient could have air to breathe. There was much talk of liability and insurance and we were all warned neither to give the faintee hot fluids nor to put a teaspoon into her mouth. I don't honestly think anyone had been planning to do either. Within a minute the waitress came rushing into the room carrying the glass of water which had been requested. She handed the water to the health and safety officer who took it from her, raised it to her lips and, apparently without knowing quite what she was doing, drained it. When the glass was empty she handed it back to the waitress and then, realising what she'd done, she blushed an impressive shade of crimson and ordered a replacement.

By this time the woman who'd fainted had fully recovered and was apologising profusely to everyone in the room. `It's warm in here,' she explained. `I've not had anything to eat since breakfast.' She seemed a trifle embarrassed.

29.

I walked into a Tourist Office to ask for the date of the local Carnival. The receptionist watched me walk up to the desk and, with exquisite timing, reached for her telephone just as I came to a halt.

`CouldyoupleasetellmethedateoftheCarnival?' I gabbled, before she could start to dial.

`I'm on the phone,' she said.

`You weren't when I arrived,' I pointed out.

`I am now,' she said.

`Not yet,' I said.

`I'm dialling,' she said snottily. She started to prod the buttons.

I glowered and bent over her with that crazed look I reserve for everyday encounters. `The date of the carnival?' I demanded.

She told me. I thanked her and left.

30.

An old woman who lives in the next village, and who has always been poor, recently inherited a fortune from a rich brother who died. He had made his money out of a car dealership. She had never before had enough money to eat anything much more exciting than bread and cheese or to drink anything more exotic than weak tea. To celebrate her good fortune she invited everyone she knew to a local restaurant. On the day that the lawyers completed all the paperwork, and she took charge of the money and became a rich woman, they all enjoyed an expensive meal and drank a good deal of expensive wine. At the end of the evening the old woman staggered out into the street, drunk for the first time in her life. She fell into the path of a taxi and died instantly. There is a moral hiding there somewhere but I'm damned if I can find it. The story, a true one, is just too, too sad to be turned into a morality tale.

OCTOBER

1.

I realised that my Lloyds credit card is about to expire and that the new one hasn't yet arrived. I telephoned the `help' number printed on the card, navigated the usual `press one if you are living, press 2 if you died recently, press 3 if you died a long time ago' sequence and eventually spoke to a real, living Lloyds TSB employee. After confirming my identity with the usual idiotic security questions (`What's your name? How many legs do you have?') I had the following conversation.

`My new card hasn't arrived. Has it been posted?'

(After some delay). `Yes.'

`Do you know when it was posted?'

(After some delay). `Two weeks ago.'

`How do you send them these days?'

`By second class post.'

I am aware that the three secret numbers that can be used to confirm a telephone transaction will be printed on the back of my card so that anyone who steals the card can buy anything they like with it. The Passport Office won't trust Royal Mail to deliver passports but Lloyds trusts them to carry my credit card.

`Whose responsibility is it if the card is stolen?' I asked.

`Oh, it's yours. We don't take any responsibility if your card gets lost in the post. Once it leaves us it's yours.'

I cancelled the card and now must wait for them to send another.

I remember the staff at Lloyds in Cirencester and their irritating claims that their daft regulations are designed to protect me. The bank which won't allow me to control my own money, posts out a credit card by ordinary second class mail and if it gets lost it's my responsibility! The envelope might as well have *Contains A Credit Card* stamped on the outside in big red letters (in all European languages). Maybe *Please Steal Me* would be marginally clearer.

Why doesn't the bank send the cards to local branches where they can be collected?

2.

Around 2,000 copies of a new book of mine were delivered this afternoon. When we'd agreed the delivery date we had arranged for the lorry driver to help us unload but when the lorry arrived the driver refused to raise a finger. Despite the accompanying slip of paper confirming that he would help us with the unloading he stood and watched as a pensioner (me) and my wife (The Princess) moved all the books into what we rather grandly call our warehouse. While we struggled with the boxes of books he took time off from swigging something from a can to hand me a delivery note to sign. As my eyes flicked over it I noticed that it contained a phrase telling me that writing `not checked' would have no validity. Since there was no way to check that the boxes all contained the books they were supposed to contain, or that the books were in a saleable condition, I refused to sign his bit of paper. The driver, extremely put out by this, telephoned his boss to find out what to do. Having some experience of situations like this I immediately ripped open the thick plastic which was wrapped around the boxes of books and rapidly unloaded all the boxes from the pallets. After a few minutes on the phone the lorry driver swaggered over to tell me his news. `My boss says I'm to take the books back,' he announced with a sneer. Only then did he notice that the pallets were empty and that those boxes which hadn't been moved indoors were all piled up on the pavement. `Best of luck,' I said. `You can't go into our premises, of course. And if you want to load up the remaining books you'll have to do it yourself.' I then pointed out to him that he was parked on a double yellow line.' He jumped around, saw that I was right and then looked back at me. He had clearly not noticed the yellow lines before. `There isn't anywhere else to park!' he said, as though this were my fault. `No,' I agreed. `There isn't is there?' `Are you going to sign this?' he demanded, waving the delivery note under my nose. `I don't think so,' I told him. `I've lost my pen.' He mumbled something, crushed his can and dropped it into the gutter. He then climbed into his cab and drove off. He would, I suspect, have liked to leave with lots of noise and wheel spin but it's difficult to do that in a large lorry. As the cryptorchid, pustulent excrescence drove away a red admiral butterfly landed on one of the boxes of books. Beauty arrived as the beast left.

Just then our local street sweeper came by. He's a simple fellow but always has a smile for us. `There are lots of leaves around,' he said. I agreed with him that there were. He looked around, as though trying to decide where the leaves had come from. And then he looked up. `The trees don't help,' he said thoughtfully.' `But they're lovely trees,' said The Princess. He thought about this for a moment. And then he smiled and nodded. `I like this job,' he said. `It's an outdoor job.'

`For every nasty person life delivers there's someone decent coming up just behind,' said The Princess.

3.

A recent article in the magazine *Country Life* stated categorically that badgers cause tuberculosis in cattle. This inaccuracy annoyed me so much I sent a short letter to the editor pointing out that there is no scientific evidence in support of this hypothesis. I added a postscript warning that if my letter were not published I would complain to the Press Complaints Committee. After some delay I received a note from the magazine confirming that my letter would be published. When it appeared they had included the threatening postscript. I suspect that they may have done this to assuage angry readers who might wonder why an animal rights campaigner should be given space in a pro-hunting magazine but if that was the idea then I fear it rather backfired. In printing the postscript they surely gave extra credence to my note and made it clear that what they printed was factually inaccurate.

Meanwhile, much to the delight of dairy farmers and other animal haters, the State-endorsed, State-funded annihilation of badgers is proceeding at quite a pace. It is a myth that badgers spread tuberculosis (TB) to cows. The evidence shows that cattle movements spread TB among cows. And it is cows that give TB to badgers - not the other way round. Killing badgers is just an excuse farmers make in order to avoid having to face the truth: modern farming methods are inhumane and unhealthy. Wild animals are often accused of spreading disease to `farm' animals. Wild badgers are blamed for infecting cattle with tuberculosis, wild boar are persecuted for spreading classical swine fever to commercial pigs, deer have been killed lest they carry foot and mouth disease and bison are slaughtered lest they spread brucellosis to cattle. Even the hedgehog has been accused of carrying numerous dangerous diseases which might affect people or domesticated animals.

The belief that wild animals are the cause of illness and disease spread among domesticated and farm animals is a well-cultivated but unsubstantiated myth.

Farmers who perpetuate these myths invariably claim that the wild animal concerned has somehow acquired a natural immunity to the disease and is, therefore, able to remain symptom free while still being a threat to farmed animals. There is no scientific evidence to support these claims. And if the claim were true it would, of course, be scientifically illogical to kill the wild animals because they had successfully developed immunity to a disease.

Today's farmed animals are weak and susceptible to disease because of the confined, unnatural and stressful conditions in which they are kept and the poor and often unnatural diet they are given.

There is a lesson to be learnt from the fact that wild animals, who must fend for themselves and who are deprived of antibiotic cover and the other luxuries afforded domestic animals, are generally much healthier, and suffer far less disease, even though they are exposed to the same parasites and pathogens as domestic animals.

But it's not a lesson farmers are likely to learn. They claim to understand the countryside and to care for animals. Most don't understand nature very well and don't care a jot for animals - except as items on a balance sheet. (Why do farmers have tears in their eyes when they talk about orphan lambs? These are the same people who send lambs, just a few weeks old, to the slaughterhouse; tearing them from their mothers without a qualm.)

When wild animals fall ill in large numbers it is usually because of a violent, new problem - pollution, drought, overcrowding or the invasion of some new pathogen (usually introduced by human beings).

The bottom line is that farmed cattle are sickly and prone to tuberculosis because of the appalling conditions in which they are kept. Farmers who blame badgers when their cows fall ill are simply looking for an excuse; a scapegoat. (But don't tell them this. When farmers hear about a new animal they want to kill it. And so they'll start wandering around, guns blazing, in an attempt to kill all the scapegoats.) Killing badgers is mindless, pointless, politically convenient, commercially expedient brutality.

4.

In the *Financial Times* there is an article claiming that America `has often surprised with inventions such as aircraft, automobiles and computers'. I was appalled by this. Don't they have sub editors or reference books at the *Financial Times?* Perhaps they're just being creepy to America, though I really cannot help wondering why there isn't someone there with more national pride. Journalists always fall for the American nonsense that they invented everything worthwhile. The truth, of course is very different. The first person to fly was George Cayley (1773-1857). Cayley was born in Brompton-by-Sawdon, near Scarborough in Yorkshire. He was thoroughly English and he was the founder of the science of aerodynamics, the pioneer of aerial navigation and the designer of the first modern aeroplane. He was the first person to understand the principles of flight and worked over half a century before people now often credited with inventing the aeroplane. (The Wright Brothers, often described by American writers as the first men to fly, did not get into the air with a heavier-than-air machine until 1903 - nearly half a century after Cayley's death). And there was also Sir Hiram Stevens Maxim (remembered today for his machine gun) who on 31st July 1894 at Baldwyn's Park flew ten years before the Wright Brothers got off the ground.

The first car was invented in England by Richard Trevithick in 1802. He also invented the bus in the same year. And then, because there were no roads suitable for his vehicles, he built rails and invented the train and the railways. The first mass production of cars was begun by Thomas Rickett in England in 1860. Karl Benz, the German, was laughably later in 1885 and by the time Henry Ford started experimenting with cars Trevithick's invention was nearly a century old.

And computers? Well, it was Charles Babbage (1791-1871), an employee of the Royal Mint and a Professor of

Mathematics at Cambridge University, who invented the computer. Even the Americans (never good losers in the `we were first' stakes) acknowledge that Charles Babbage was the first person to build a programmable calculating machine - a machine which had a programme of instructions which could be stored in a memory and used at will.

I'm not surprised that the *Financial Times* got this so wrong. The Americans are always at it. For example, they regularly claim that their man Edison invented the electric lightbulb though. The truth is that the lightbulb was invented by another Englishman, Joseph Swan (1828-1914). He managed it twenty years before Thomas Edison.

The Americans think (and claim) that they invented just about everything. Actually, the poor sods didn't invent anything very much. To give them full credit where it is due, they did invent barbed wire (though I've never understood the point of barbed wire which doesn't do anything other wires don't do except damage animals), pantyhose, a horseshoe manufacturing machine, the cash register and the revolving pistol. They've also given us grey squirrels, harlequin ladybirds (which kill our traditional ladybirds), the banjo and the vaginal deodorant spray. That is pretty much the total contribution the U.S.A. has made to world culture. Not terribly impressive. With the best will in the world it is difficult to think of very much else. After racking our brains The Princess and I came up with bubble-gum, Donald Duck, nasal hair clippers, parking meters, supermarket trolleys, the cheeseburger and breast enlargement surgery. Those are all useful and have no doubt made their mark in some areas of life. But. The Americans claim the brassiere but that isn't theirs either. And they always claim that Henry Ford invented the production line but the Venetians had a boat building factory with a production line in the 15th century. The Americans spent millions inventing a pen that would work in space but the Russians just took pencils.

England is, as you might imagine, the gold standard when it comes to discoveries, achievements and inventions.

Other countries have, considering their limitations, done quite well and certainly better than the Americans. The French have given us meringue, berets, cirrhosis, feather boas, cigarettes which smell of intestinal gases and long thin loaves of bread that cannot be properly wrapped. The Scots have given us tartan trews, the Tam o'Shanter, the sporran, skirts for men, haggis and bagpipes. The Germans gave us some sausages, the goose step, and plastic that looks like plastic to anyone except Germans, and which is used instead of wood to decorate the dashboards of expensive motor cars. (I have, over the years, learned three things about the Germans. First, their humour always involves someone else's misfortune. Comedy for German adults, otherwise known as 'groan ups' involves men losing their trousers and being chased by buxom women. Only once have I come across an exception. I once met a German publisher in London and asked him if he had been to the city before. `I have been many times,' he said, `but never made welcome.' `I'm sorry about that,' I said. `Don't worry,' he replied with a mischievous grin. `I was bombing it at the time.' Second, they always obey all the rules. At the end of the First World War shots were fired at a crowd near the Berliner Schloss. There was mass panic as thousands ran for their lives. Every one of them obeyed the signs to keep off the grass. Third, the Germans cannot do anything by themselves. They have to do things together, preferably by numbers. This explains the success of those sex clubs in Hamburg and Frankfurt where strapping Teutonic matrons give instructions to platoons of fat but enthusiastic German businessmen.)

The Chinese gave the world chopsticks (despite being given plenty of opportunities to follow our example they still haven't caught on to the advantages of the knife and fork), the laundry mark, restaurant menus with numbers, crispy duck, jackets with little collars suitable for wearing without ties, long walls and rice pudding. The Swiss are rather like the Germans, except that they do not have their sense of humour or their joie de vivre. I once asked a Swiss friend to tell me the funniest thing the Swiss do. He told me, in all seriousness, that when young people start to work at Swiss banks they are told to go into the vault and polish the gold. `Pretty funny, eh?' he said. Moreover, the Swiss do not always take their sense of humour with them when they get out of bed in the morning. Sometimes, they leave it under the pillow, sometimes they leave it safely locked in their safe deposit box and sometimes they simply cannot remember where they last saw it. To understand the Swiss you have to know that Swiss men wear white socks and think nothing of it. They do not even seem to be embarrassed about it. As Harry Lime pointed out they gave us the cuckoo clock and expensive chocolate but very little else.

The Spanish, who are not terribly bright and whose favourite colour is black, are a masochistic people who spend most of their free time being chased by bulls. It is not surprising that they have never had the time to invent anything except a variation on the cheap package holiday. (A concept which was devised by Thomas Cook, an Englishman.) The Italians have produced some great artists, some wonderful food and some magnificent motorcars. They have proved, beyond doubt, that politicians should never be taken seriously and they have acquired a vocabulary of gestures and a passion which enable them to make `Isn't it a nice day?' sound so exciting that it could easily be a declaration of war. The Greeks have produced nothing whatsoever and do very little work. As a result all the buildings in Greece are falling down and in ruins. This is good for the Greeks because lots of people visit the country just to look at the ruins, some of which were built as long ago as the 1960s. The Greek people are friendly but very lazy. They spend most of their time sitting or lying down. They do their sitting in cafés or on boats and their lying down in bed or on the beaches. They drink a lot of furniture polish and can afford to do this because they do not pay any taxes and are kept by rich

Germans who visit once a year and bring them beach towels. And, finally, the Australians gave us the boomerang, ostrich skin handbags and hats decorated with corks.

These are all valuable commercial and cultural additions to the world's inventory of useful bits and bobs but none of these countries has come close to contributing the sort of wonders that Englishmen have produced. All have simply done their best and all have added a little special something to the smorgasbord of tat which makes junk shops, charity shops and eBay so fascinating.

The *Financial Times,* and all those who adore America and sneer at England should know that the English were responsible for inventing many things usually credited to other nations. The electric lamp, the internal combustion engine, the cinema, the steam engine, the car, anaesthetics, the first manned flight, champagne, photography, the guillotine, the first railway, the electric telegraph - all these are usually credited elsewhere but were, in truth the inventions of Englishmen. Adam Smith's economic theories were first propagated by Englishman William Petty a whole century earlier. Englishmen gave the world the first police force and the first postal service. We do not have to put England on our stamps since we invented them. Other less significant countries (such as France, Russia, the Falkland Islands, Vatican City and the United States of America) must identify their stamps by printing their name on them. England invented free trade and parliamentary democracy and was the first country to recognise that every man has a right to a fair and free trial before his peers. Countless sailors around the world have good reason to be grateful to Samuel Plimsoll, who helped overcome resistance to the Merchant Shipping Act which brought in such reforms as a loading limit for cargo ships. A Plimsoll line was marked on the hull of every cargo ship, showing the maximum depth to which the ship could be safely loaded. This practice, started in England, spread around the world. Francis Crick, an Englishman, was co-discoverer of the double helix structure of deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA), the basic building block of all living cells. And it was, I must not forget, an Englishman, Tim Berners-Lee, who invented the World Wide Web which gave us the internet.

The English were the first to invent the free press and modern democratic government. The English invented the jet engine, hovercraft, steam engine, the telephone and television, lawnmower, nuclear physics, post-boxes, buses, satellites, submarines, knitting machines, the flushing toilet, the slide rule, the syringe, matches, the seed drill, the tuning fork, the diving bell, the jigsaw puzzle, carbonated water and the universal joint, the pencil eraser, the fire extinguisher, the electromagnet, dynamo, computer software, plastic, traffic lights, the light bulb, steam turbine, vacuum cleaner, crossword puzzle, mass spectrometer, polythene, cat's eyes in the middle of the road, liquid crystal display (LCD) and digital music player. It was Englishmen who discovered the circulation of the blood, the existence of red blood cells, binary stars, the laws of gravity and motion, orbiting comets, hydrogen, atomic theory, chemical electrolysis, the law of conservation of energy, diamagnetism, planet Neptune, absolute zero temperature, the theory of evolution by natural selection, the existence of electrons and neutrons, hormones, concrete, sewing machines, tarmac and radar. If you are beginning to think that doesn't leave much for the citizens of any other nation to invent, you're absolutely right. Over the last 250 years, English scientists and engineers have been responsible for around four out of every five major inventions, discoveries and new technologies.

To all that must be added the fact that the English have invented more sports than the citizens of all the other nations in the world put together. Indeed, all sports worth playing or watching were invented by Englishmen. But although the English love inventing sports, and playing them, they don't care much about winning. The English make the best losers because when it really comes down to it they would rather lose than win. Winners have social obligations which the English find embarrassing. It is much easier for an Englishman to be a good loser (to show appreciation for the winner and to be a `good sport') than it is to be a good winner. And it is bad form to beat one's guests or visitors. The decent thing is to allow them to win (without, of course, realising that they have been allowed to win) and to then congratulate them heartily.

It is hardly surprising that the citizens of other countries dislike the English. They must all have massive inferiority complexes.

In addition, of course, the French hate us because we twice saved them from the Germans, the Germans hate us because we beat them twice and the Americans hate us because they aren't English, because they feel guilty for spending years sitting on their backsides while we fought two World Wars by ourselves and because they have never managed to build an empire like ours.

5.

I went to the Post Office to buy stamps. It is a chore I always dread, partly because of the inevitable queues and partly because the staff are so hostile and unhelpful that virtually every encounter is an unpleasant experience. I read a report recently which showed that 20% of our nation is functionally illiterate. The report didn't say this but I strongly suspect that they all work for the Post Office. And they aren't just benignly stupid. They are genuinely malignant. I am undecided about whether Post Offices give rudeness lessons to prospective employees or simply hire people who are already rude. Perhaps Post Offices pre-select cretins who are then sent away on special courses where they are taught to do everything at half speed, to ignore common sense and to regard their customers as the enemy.

I tried to stay calm as I watched the assistants handing out money to an apparently endless series of State subsidised supplicants. Why don't they have one queue for people who are taking money out (and who are in absolutely no hurry) and another, fast track, queue for people who are struggling to make a living so that they can pay taxes and subsidise the people who are queuing to take money out? The Government means test virtually everything these days and those on benefits are swamped with official breaks and goodwill. Just the other day, I received a note from Royal Mail informing me that if I am on benefits I will be able to buy cheap stamps this Christmas. So it doesn't seem unreasonable to ask that the Government bends over the other way a degree or two for a change. Few things the Government could do would help small businesses more than providing them with shorter Post Office queues.

The woman in front of me was sending Christmas cards to friends in Spain and France. The cards were identical. And they were all going to people within the European Union. But the counter assistant insisted on weighing every one before printing out those hideous, dull labels they use instead of stamps. These days the only people who buy real stamps are collectors (who mistakenly believe that they are investing in their pension fund) and people like The Princess and I running small mail order businesses. Since we turned Publishing House into a small, kitchen table enterprise we've found that the biggest problems we have are acquiring stamps and finding somewhere to put the stamped parcels.

Eventually I got to the front of the queue and found myself face to face with the day's zombie of choice.

`Two hundred one pound stamps and two hundred fifty pence stamps please.'

`Haven't got any,' said the zombie with a big smile. `We're right out of stamps.' He was clearly delighted to be able to tell me this.

`What do you mean?' I asked stupidly, looking around to make sure that I hadn't entered a fish and chip emporium by mistake.

`We've run out of stamps,' he chortled. I don't think I've ever seen anyone chortle before but he was definitely chortling. A chortle is like a snort - difficult to describe but impossible to miss. `We ran out a couple of days ago. We're waiting for a delivery.'

As I left, empty-handed, I found that I couldn't leave the Post Office. Two hugely fat women were standing talking in the doorway. They were blocking the exit. They would have blocked the entrance to St Paul's Cathedral. `Excuse me,' I said more politely than I felt. `Could I come through, please.'

The women ignored me.

I repeated my request.

One of the women turned her head slightly and glared at me. `Can't you see we're busy talking,' she said.

It was one of those days.

6.

Wandering through a local graveyard we found a stone carrying this rhyme:

He squandered health in search of wealth,
To gold became a slave;
Then spent his wealth in search of health,
But only found a grave.

7.

The eavesdropping collection came along quite quickly last week. Here's a small selection:

1. `I've got a gent here who wants to know what we can do for his piles?' (White coated assistant shouting across to the pharmacist.)
2. `You can't hoard fun. So let's go out and spend some while we've got the chance.'
3. `Blood may be thicker than water, but it ain't as thick as pus.'
4. `There's an eclipse next week.' `I'll catch it next time round.' `There won't be another for 100 years!' `I'm in no hurry.'
5. `Women are like horses. They need to be given a good workout every day.'
6. `I know more than you do, kid. I know what it's like to be young but I also know what it's like to be old.'
7. `If he ever gets to heaven he will immediately start arguing with God about whether or not He exists.'
8. `Working for the council is excellent preparation for retirement.'
9. `I enjoy widowhood very much. I can have all the male companionship I like without ever having to darn socks or iron shirts. I wish I'd become a widow sooner. It's just a pity that a woman can't become a widow without having to find a husband and then get rid of him.'
10. `I suppose all that traffic will be going somewhere.'
11. `You think too much, and to be honest, thinking isn't your strong suit.'
12. `If I'm not wanted you only have to say so.' `You're not wanted.' `If you want me to go away just say and I'll go

away.' `Go away.' `I'm a man who believes in straight talking. I don't want to hang around somewhere I'm not wanted.'
13. `He has a special benefits outfit which he wears when he claims his money. He wears an old worn suit, mismatched jacket and trousers, and a pair of shoes with a detached sole that flaps about as he walks.'
14. `Women and children should always have priority.' `What about Lucrezia Borgia and Myra Hindley?'
15. `I've had a brilliant day and now I'm going to go home and celebrate by cracking open a bottle of white medicine. I think I'm getting old.'
16. `What do you think is the worst disease?' `The one you've got.'
17. `When I was young people were always asking me questions. I didn't know anything but that didn't stop them asking me questions. Now that I'm older and I know a few things no one ever asks me anything.'
18. `He has no luck at all. When he had a heart attack the ambulance had a puncture on the way to the hospital.'

8.

We are receiving more than our fair share of wrong numbers these days. This is probably the fault of Special Branch. I expect one of their in-house communication experts mixed up a bundle of wires when wobbling about on the top of a ladder recently. I have now started answering the telephone by telling callers that they have rung the vicarage. Moments ago I had a call from a man who wanted to speak to the chiropodist. `Oh no my son,' I told him, in my best vicar voice. `I'm afraid you have telephoned the vicarage in error. But may God go with you and may your feet always be healthy.' Apart from the fun this provides I rather like the idea of someone at MI5's GCHQ spending merry hours trying to work out if this was some sort of coded message.

9.

The European Union has won the Nobel Peace prize. Since Warmonger and Assassin in Chief Obama was another recent winner of this absurd prize one can hardly be surprised by this. The irony, of course, is that the EU could well be the cause of World War III.

The world is awash with serious geopolitical problems. The Israelis are desperate to bomb the sand out of Iran and the Middle East in general is about as stable as wet gelignite. There's a real possibility of a war between Japan and China, and America is stuffed to the coasts with idiots who want to start a war with China. (If they can't afford a bloody war a cold one will do nicely.)

But it's Europe that is most unstable. Selfish politicians defending their much beloved euro have deliberately ruined the lives of millions and caused massive unemployment. Will they be forgiven when the news gets out? The growing greed of bankers, company bosses, senior civil servants and politicians mean that there is a huge divide between the haves and the have-nots. The politicians are trying to solve Europe's economic problems without annoying the rich and the resultant austerity programmes, linked with high taxes for the middle classes, mean that the only people not ready to go onto the streets in anger are Russian billionaires and hedge fund crooks (who've bought the politicians with huge bribes and neutralised them with lawyers).

The determination to save the euro (a fake currency which was created as a quiet route to a federal Europe) has resulted in high unemployment - focussed among the young and the old - in most European countries. And the continuing economic problems produced by this nonsense mean that pensions are being battered into submission for all those who aren't employed by governments or the European Union itself. And, finally, the policies espoused by the lovers of the euro mean that hyperinflation is pretty much a certainty. And with the Americans deliberately destroying their own currency the prices of basic commodities are bound to soar.

The euro was created by a process known as groupthink and it survives by groupthink. In this phenomenon ideas or views which originate outside a powerful group are not even considered. The result is that terrible decisions which are made for all the wrong reasons are sustained simply because a small but powerful group of people won't even contemplate the idea that they could be wrong, or that there could be a better way. As times goes by the chances of the groupthink conclusion being questioned become increasingly unlikely.

Will there be a war in Europe during the next five years? I wouldn't bet against it. History shows that nation states everywhere fail when the people are first encouraged and then forced to kowtow to the bureaucracy and the functionaries of the State. The functionaries do not have the charisma required for leadership and so the next stage is mass resentment against what is perceived as oppression. We live in a world where the masses want everything but aren't prepared to pay for anything: resentment is never very far from the surface; it's always there, simmering away. The EU bureaucrats are too stupid to realise it but they are, through their fascist and undemocratic ways, creating an inevitable revolution.

10.

My replacement Lloyds bank card has struggled through. (The stolen one is by now doubtless in the hands of crooks in Delaware or Islamabad who have yet to discover that their prize is about as useful as a dead leaf). Endless brave postmen and postwomen have valiantly resisted temptation and the piece of plastic without which there can be little life for any of us has finally dropped onto the doormat. The card does have to be activated before I can use it and the procedure has clearly been designed to foil the cleverest of crooks. I have to key in the card number (which is on the card), the expiry date (which is on the card), the three security numbers (which are on the back of the card) and my birth date (which is about as good a security question as asking which month comes after January). Still, I have my card and can now once again seek out rare print delicacies on Amazon, the demon website.

11.

Max Hastings, the former editor of the *Daily Telegraph,* has promised to leave the country if Boris Johnson ever becomes Prime Minister. Hastings says that he has known Johnson for 20 years and he is a `gold medal egomaniac'. `I would not trust him with my wife, nor with my wallet,' he says. `He is manically disorganised about everything except the carefully crafted chaos of his public image, and he is far more ruthless and nasty than the public appreciates.'

I have long thought the same.

When Johnson was editor of *The Spectator,* the magazine ran full page advertisements for my book *Rogue Nation* (an attack on the USA and its illegal war on Iraq). Johnson then hired his sister to write a profile of me. The unpleasant (and, I thought, patronising) piece was not accurate and the magazine printed a long letter from me in rebuttal. All my advertisements were subsequently rejected by *The Spectator.*

Despite his carefully crafted image as a quintessential Englishman, a sort of Bertie Wooster type buffoon, Johnson was, of course, born in America and in my book that makes him an American and, therefore, doubly unfit to be Prime Minister of England.

There was a time when our politicians were serious minded and had genuine beliefs. Remember Enoch Powell? Johnson would make a good host of a cheap game show. He is about as well designed for political power as Tony Blair, Gordon Brown or David Cameron.

12.

We were in one of those excellent antique markets which are scattered throughout the Cotswolds. A few dozen local dealers rent stands and display their wares in small alcoves. They then take it turns to man the desk and the till at the front of the shop. `Look at this!' said the Princess, drawing my attention to a small mahogany cupboard. `It'll be perfect for the living room. Just the thing for my reading lamp. And there's room for a cup of tea, too.' She bent down and examined it more closely. `And look,' she said. `There's a handy little cupboard for magazines and books. It's really unusual. It opens forwards - just like the cupboard for music in my piano stool.'

`That's the space for the chamber pot,' I pointed out.

The Princess squealed, shut the door quickly and jumped away.

We moved on.

13.

We went to Stroud and picked up a few magazines and a bad bout of depression. It is said that old hippies go to Stroud to die. I can see why. Stroud is the sort of town where anyone would feel ready to die. There isn't any point to it. It is ugly and has no redeeming features whatsoever, except for the fact that it is on a main railway line and, with the station right in the centre of the town, residents can get away quite easily. The town council must be composed entirely of dead people. We have been there several times and have yet to spot anyone smiling. The whole place is full of gloom. It's the sort of place that would be good for organising funerals because there would be no chance of anyone showing any inappropriate signs of levity. We were told by a mechanic who works in a nearby garage that he once attended a wedding in Stroud where the best man made a long speech about all the dead people who would have liked to attend the ceremony if they had been alive. He talked at great length about these individuals, their lives, their relationship to the bride and the groom and the great sadness which everyone felt at their not being available for the fixture. By the time he had finished, everyone there was in tears. The bride's make-up had all run and her mother was sobbing hysterically. That's the sort of place Stroud is.

Architecturally, Glumsville, as the locals call it, is a tribute to bad taste. There is an indoor market which isn't as interesting as a 1950's bring and buy sale and, with the exception of an acceptable music shop, we haven't found one acceptable commercial establishment in the place. There are, however, a couple of decent advertising signs in the town. There is a curry house run by a man called Singh which has a large notice up which proclaims: `Singh for your Supper'. And a shop selling clothes for ladies has a sign on the window announcing: `Our bikinis are exciting – they are simply the tops!' Despite these delights, if I had to describe Stroud in two words I would choose `pustulent' and `excrescence'.

14.

In my book *Stuffed!* I argued that the way we run our State is now unsustainable. I have been warning for nearly a quarter of a century that we will, by 2020, reach the point where the number of people dependent upon the State will exceed the number of taxpayers supporting them. And for several years now I have warned that our governments are elected by the takers not the makers. There are a good many people in our country who now believe that they are entitled to live at everyone else's expense. A new study from the Centre for Policy Studies recently showed that 53% of households now receive more in benefits than they pay in tax. In Scotland, the figure is 88%. It is difficult to believe but just 12% of the people in a country whose politicians are fighting for independence pay more tax than they receive in benefits. (Incidentally, if Scotland does become independent, who is going to pay for the rebuilding of Hadrian's Wall? There will obviously have to be a wall because if there isn't, millions of illegal immigrants will be pouring into all the twee Scottish ports and then screaming south across the borders in order to claim their English benefits. They obviously won't want to stay in an impoverished Scotland which will be struggling to survive on the sale of kilts and silly Tam o'Shanter hats to easily beguiled American tourists.)

We now have a bigger State sector than China. During an average lifetime, a British citizen hands over two thirds of a million pounds to pay for government services. That means that the average working man and woman pay more, over their lifetimes, for oppressive legislation and interfering State financed busy bodies than they pay for houses, pensions and cars combined.

I have quoted 19th century historian Alexis de Tocqueville on many previous occasions but one of the things he wrote suggests that we are now running out of time: `A democracy cannot exist as a permanent form of government. It can only exist until the voters discover that they can vote themselves largesse from the public treasury. The majority always votes for the candidates promising the most benefits. A democracy always collapses over loose fiscal policy. The average age of the world's greatest civilisations has been 200 years.'

For the moment, we are left living in a fascist superstate where freedom is regarded as a disposable luxury and where laws and regulations are produced with glee by fecund administrators. Still, the plethora of rules created by the system can be turned against the bureaucrats themselves. The Princess and I have discovered that whereas large companies and government departments may not give a fig for us, their employees do have their weak spots and they respond with terror to a nice mixture of refined, pompous, aggressive, gleefully offensive, patronising, threatening abuse, and spirited, targeted vituperation, served with a formal complaint and a quotation from a vaguely relevant section of the Human Rights Act. Those who live by the pointless regulation must also die by it.

What a sad world. It is difficult to believe that ours is a nation which gave us, and the world Cecil Rhodes and Sir Stamford Raffles.

15.

We were driving along in our latest motor car, a four wheel drive BMW, when suddenly all the warning lights came on, producing a dashboard extravaganza which would have delighted any aficionado of seaside illuminations. I obeyed the instructions, pulled over and stopped immediately. When I telephoned the dealer from whom we'd bought the car I was offered a service appointment for the following week. BMW's emergency service engineer came out and looked at the car but was baffled. So we ignored the pretty lights and drove on. After a while they all went out.

16.

The council sent round a skilled and trained team of arboreal specialists to prune the trees near a friend's house. The team came equipped with helmets and other safety equipment but no ladders and no saws. They contented themselves with reaching up and breaking off the lower, smaller branches and twigs. They then went away, leaving debris on the pavement.

17.

A reader who comes from Leeds (but spells it Leed's) wants to know why my books are now often priced at £50. She complains that the price of my books is too high and goes on: `I can buy a book packed with insights by the statesman Tony Blair for £12.50 and he will not get a penny.' She also complained that my books `seem to tumble out of the author's own head'.

Putting aside the slightly puzzling `tumbling out of my head' criticism I replied saying that she was entitled to believe that Blair was a statesman and quite right in asserting that she can buy books more cheaply. I pointed out that I am told that the latest volume from the writer with a surgically enhanced bosom known as Jordan is quite reasonably priced. I explained that I now limit the print runs for my books and that I do this partly because it is impossible to persuade bookshops to stock self-published books in serious numbers and partly because I want to restrict the information I offer to a relatively small and loyal group of readers. In the old days (when we had staff at Publishing House and we were printing and selling hundreds of thousands of books we could keep the prices low and still make enough money to survive. It was not unusual for us to print 5,000 to 10,000 copies at a time of a big-selling book. Large print runs mean much lower costs per book.)

What I didn't bother to point out in my reply is that although my books have a cover price of £50 I usually sell them to my regular readers at a much lower price.

The reason for this is simple.

If a book buyer decides to order one of my books through a wholesaler or a bookshop I will be expected to offer a huge discount. It is not uncommon for wholesalers to demand that they be allowed to buy the book with a 50% discount.

And they do not pay the cost of packing and posting the book to them.

The sums are easy to do.

If a book has a retail cost of £20 and I give a £10 discount I am left with £10. (In order to receive this money I may have to send half a dozen invoices and wait a year. There's a good chance I will never be paid.)

Out of the £10 I have to pay for the printing of the book and for packing and posting it. Some of my books cost £3.50 to post within the UK and over £12 to post abroad. The padded bags we use can cost up to £1 each. Then there are labels and sticky tape and so on. Because my print runs are low and I insist that my books look and feel good the setting and printing costs are high. It is not unusual for me to pay £6 to £7 for copies of my books. Obviously, I don't receive any money for the books which don't sell. I have to pay the printers before the books are sold and I have to pay for the cost of transporting and storing the books somewhere dry.

And so I now price my books at £50 so that when a bookshop or wholesaler orders a copy I can fulfil the order without making a huge loss. Readers who order directly (from my catalogue) can buy books at a much lower price.

The truth is that many publishers now lose vast amounts of money. And many small publishers and self-publishers struggle to break even - let alone survive commercially.

For a variety of reasons, proper, printed books have come down in price dramatically in recent years (and prices are falling even faster now that eBooks are being sold). I have on my shelves many books that cost £20 or more when I bought them ten or twenty years ago. Meanwhile, print costs, paper costs and storage costs have all soared. A few years ago it was possible to print and bind a book for less than £2. Today you would have a job to print anything other than a catalogue (or a mass market book) for that sort of price.

In those old days it was usual for a publisher to price a book at around five or ten times the printing costs. And that is exactly what I would like to do now. The rest of the price would include the cost of overheads (offices, warehouse, council taxes, electricity, heating, telephone and so on). The problem is that the cost of setting and printing a book has risen so much that I paid over £8 per copy to produce *Stuffed!*, my last book. The cost would have been higher but I collected the books from the printer myself. And, of course, there is the cost of marketing and advertising. Simply printing a catalogue can result in a four figure bill. And it costs at least 50p to buy the stamp to post off each copy.

Finally, of course, there is the question of unsold books and returns. No publisher can predict precisely how many copies a particular title will sell. If you print too few you will annoy potential customers and lose sales. If you print too many you will end up with hundreds or thousands of unsold books cluttering up the place. However well I try to estimate a print run I will get it wrong sometimes. All publishers do. (That's why bookshops so often have piles of books being sold at very low prices.) In America around a third of all published hardbound books are returned unsold. Most of these books cannot be resold and unless they can find a home on the remainder tables they are simply destroyed. Astonishingly high returns (in excess of 50%) are by no means unknown and in the world of paperback publishing are fairly commonplace.

So, that's why I now price my books so high. I'm not profiteering. I don't accept advertisements in my books or on my website so my only income (apart from my investments and the old age pension which the Government puts into my bank account each month) comes from selling books.

18.

We were unloading boxes of books at our new offices when I saw an elderly neighbour confronting two council workmen. He asked them, politely, not to lean their heavy equipment up against his fence. (They were doing something messy, pointless and expensive to the kerbs.)

`We'll lean our stuff where we want to lean it!' snarled the foreman. And they did.

`It cost me £400 to have it repaired last time,' said the old man, close to tears.

`That's your problem,' said the foreman.

I had a similar experience when workmen were digging a channel to bury television cables. They dug so close to our elderly but solid stone garden wall that part of it fell down. When I remonstrated a very belligerent man in ugly boots said the wall was in a poor state anyway.

Workmen don't give a damn when folk complain because they know that little or nothing will happen to them. And if they are fired they will receive generous benefits from the State.

19.

The Princess was reading a magazine.

`Why do nurses and barristers always talk about `us' when they mean `you'?' she asked.

I looked at her.

`Nurses always say things like `Have we had our bowels opened?' when they're not talking about *their* bowel movements. And barristers always say things like: `We're going down for three to five I'm afraid.' Why do they do it?'

`I have no idea,' I admitted.

`You're a doctor!'

`It doesn't alter anything. I still have no idea.'

The Princess sighed and put down her magazine. `Would you like a cup of tea?'

20.

It is impossible to pick up a newspaper or turn on the television without hearing the name Jimmy Savile.

I have no idea how much truth there is in the allegations but it is true that people working for the BBC treated him as a god-like figure. I remember once going into a Radio 1 studio to record an interview and finding that the whole studio was thick with cigar smoke. A huge cigar butt lay in a cheap metal ashtray on the studio desk. `Sorry about this,' apologised the producer. `Jimmy has been recording in here.' I was astonished. Smoking had long been banned in recording studios. No one else would have dared to light up. No one else would have got away with it.

21.

Some doctors are now apparently telling patients that they can only discuss one problem per consultation. This is utterly absurd. Any doctor who only allows patients to discuss one problem per consultation should, in my view, be reported to the General Medical Council for incompetence and struck off the medical register. It is a basic principle of medicine that one disease may produce many different symptoms and signs. Diabetes, for example, may produce a whole host of different problems - which may appear unrelated. Only when the symptoms and signs are presented together will the diagnosis be clear. Are patients who turn up at the surgery complaining of diarrhoea now to be expected to come back the next day to mention the vomiting?

Moreover, any doctor with experience knows that when patients say `While I'm here, doctor...' or `There's one other thing...', they're introducing into the conversation the sign or the symptom that really took them into the surgery in the first place. Embarrassment may have prevented them from mentioning the thing that has really been worrying them. Receptionists now often demand to know why a patient is making an appointment and patients who have rectal bleeding, for example, may prefer to mention something more mundane such as a small skin rash in order to get into the surgery.

Any good doctor ends every consultation with the words: `Is there anything else?' because he knows that patients are often too shy or embarrassed or frightened to mention the symptoms which really matter.

22.

The Princess and I went to Malmesbury and parted for an hour so that we could both do some shopping. When we met in the art gallery café near to the car-park we compared purchases. `And I bought this from a woman in the car park,' I said, pulling a thin paperback entitled *Composting Through The Ages* from my pocket. `I bought it from a woman who approached me when I was buying the car-park ticket.

`I have one of those too!' said The Princess. `She caught me a minute ago as I came back.'

The paperback is self-published and packed with photographs of compost bins and compost. The printing is a little idiosyncratic, as is the spelling, but the book was clearly written with great passion.

`She said sales were going very well,' The Princess told me. `She says she doesn't let anyone into her home unless they buy one. She even sold one to the man who came to read her electricity meter and he apparently lives in a flat.`

23.

The Princess met an old lady in a charity shop today. The old lady told The Princess that she had lived alone for over half a century. She had been married for just six weeks when the Second World War started. Her new husband was in the army and he was captured by the Japanese. He was in a Prisoner of War camp for three years. When he arrived back home for the first time his wife had, rather unthinkingly perhaps, made him a rice pudding for desert. When she placed it on the table he got up, put on his coat and walked out. Neither she nor anyone else ever saw or heard from him again. I think it's one of the saddest stories I've ever heard.

24.

All the emergency warning lights came on in our BMW for the second time. It's quite alarming when it happens. But this time the lights clearly came on when we drove over, or into, a pothole. I suspect there must be some sort of electronic fault hidden deep within the car's innards. When I stopped the car, and allowed it to have a little rest to calm itself, all the lights disappeared. I'm contemplating covering the area of the dashboard where the little lights appear with sticking plaster.

25.

A third of all England's trees could disappear in the next year or two. There are around 80 million ash trees in our forests and woodlands. A disease which has been devastating ash trees on continental Europe (and which started in Poland twenty years ago) finally reached England in February 2012. Amazingly, unbelievably, it was not until the very end of August that Government officials put down the coffee cups and the biscuits and launched a `consultation' review to decide what to do about the impending disaster. Why were they thumb twiddling for so long? Were they deliberately waiting for the situation to get bad enough to need action? I just hope that the responsible civil servants have their bonuses trimmed this year. Thinking about this it occurred to me that one of my great sadnesses is that I did not plant more trees when I was a young man. I planted a few dozen, here and there, but what a joy it would be now to be able to go back and look at acres of deciduous woodland where once there had been nothing but fields. The great and now largely forgotten novelist and essayist Compton Mackenzie once wrote of the joy of going back to see trees he'd planted as a boy. I envy him that.

26.

The news that hospitals are deliberately killing off elderly patients in order to empty blocked beds and reduce health service costs came as no surprise. I exposed this some time ago in one of my books on medicine. But the revival of the story has hit the headlines. I stood in the newsagents alongside a man of about my own age who looked aghast as he read the front page of the *Daily Mail.*

`The Government made a mistake when they put Dr Shipman in prison,' I said.

The man looked at me, puzzled.

`They should have made him Minister of Health,' I pointed out. `He'd have done all the necessary killing for nothing. The National Homicide Service would have saved a fortune. He'd have got rid of patients humanely and cheaply.'

The man laughed loudly and then, when he realised that what I had said made too much sense, he stopped laughing and looked very sombre. He nodded, once, looked at me, said `Yes' very softly and walked away.

27.

We met Mr Pettigrew. He was looking very pleased with himself; as though he'd been freed from some great burden.

`We had relatives to stay,' he said. `It's always the same with visitors. For the first two days it's good to have them around. They're a bit of a change. They're polite and helpful and we have fun. `We must go,' they say. `We don't want to be a burden.' `Oh no,' we say stupidly. `You must stay.' And so they stay. And then suddenly everything goes bad. After four days it has all become very tiring. We have to tip toe when we move about because they're still in bed. They want breakfast at ten o'clock. They leave all the towels damp in the bathroom. They wander about the house in the middle of the night and we think they're burglars.'

We nodded and made sympathetic noises.

`So then we have to use our trick to get rid of them,' said Mr Pettigrew.

`Please tell us,' said The Princess.

`Well, all our visitors like going for walks across the fields,' he explained. `And at this time of year it's becoming a bit chilly. And it rains occasionally. So we lend them yellow anoraks.'

We both looked at him and frowned.

`Yellow anoraks attract all the midges and mites and bees and wasps,' explained Mr Pettigrew. `There are still a few around even at this time of the year. Our visitors come back covered in bites and very fed up. And although we tell them how much we like having them with us, and beg them to stay, they go home the next morning.'

28.

Thanks to a few hundred Scottish farmers, afternoons in England have suddenly become much darker. I spent an hour this morning putting the clocks an hour forward and another hour putting them two hours back. This is more than a biannual waste of time. Insurance companies have shown that there is a significant increase in the number of road traffic accidents every time the clocks change. And there is clear evidence that changing our sleep patterns affects our already delicate mental health. According to researchers at Stockholm's Karonlinska Institute, our risk of having a heart attack goes up by 5% every time we change the clocks.

As far as I can make out the only people who benefit are a few hundred farmers in the north of Scotland who moan that if we don't change the clocks they'll have to get up in the dark to milk their cows. They are presumably frightened that there might be ghoulies and beasties hiding in the shadowy corners of their darkened barns. So, why don't we buy them all torches or install electricity on their farms? Alternatively, we could let Scotland have its own time zone. Hadrian, bless him, had the right idea. He just didn't build the damned wall high enough.

29.

The world is, it seems, now full of very sensitive individuals. A few weeks ago the nation was gripped by the saga of the senior politician who had allegedly called two policemen `plebs' and who had decorated his verbal attack with a fairly traditional expletive ending in the word `off'. Allegedly. Numerous pompous policemen and defenders of the force complained that in disputing the allegation the politician was suggesting that policemen might not always tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Their indignation was diluted somewhat by the fact that an enquiry into the Hillsborough Disaster concluded, just a day or two earlier, that policemen in Yorkshire had been lying more vigorously than they had been drinking tea. In the eyes of too many it is, it seems perfectly acceptable for policemen to shoot, bully and push innocent members of the public but it is not acceptable for elected ministers to say rude things to them. I think I must have been the only citizen who thought that the politician would have been better served if he admitted that he'd sworn at the coppers and called them `plebs' because they deserved it. (The policemen had allegedly refused to open the gate for him and allegedly forced him to climb off his bicycle and allegedly push it through the pedestrian gate. Allegedly.) In the end I thought the politician showed a lack of back bone by resigning. (Although the policemen alleged that the politician had sworn at them, they did not arrest him and so it will presumably be in order for me to swear at a policeman next time I see one out in public. They can hardly arrest me for the same offence. My problem is that since I don't live or work in Downing Street the only policemen I ever see are the ones sitting in cars on motorway bridges, and shouting abuse while driving underneath them at 69 mph is unlikely to produce much of a response.)

And now the news is dominated by the story of a professional football referee who is allegedly accused of calling a footballer a Spanish twit. (He may have called him something else if the asterisk was there to replace another vowel in the daily newspaper reports.) I gather that the complaint here is that in describing the Spanish footballer as `Spanish' the referee was being racist. The uproar is vast. I have little doubt that if we still had a Home Guard they would have been mobilised. The Cleggs and Cables of this world speak of little else. I am, I confess, a little puzzled by this, though I am, I regret to say, not in the slightest bit surprised. What puzzles me is how commentators at the next international sporting event are going to describe competitors if they cannot say which country they represent. Commentaries at the Olympics should be interesting.

It seems to me that the world is now populated almost entirely by hypersensitive, self-righteous prigs who regard any sort of passionate comment as racist or improper. We have become absurdly tolerant of small things in public life but at the same time we have become absurdly intolerant of the big things. A politician who is alleged to have called a couple of policemen plebs feels forced to resign from office but politicians who take us into illegal wars are allowed to sit in the back of chauffeur driven cars and tell the rest of us how we must and must not live our lives.

30.

Just about everything I do these days seems to involve my breaking the law. The Princess and I have been working hard packing books and putting them into grey Royal Mail sacks. Earlier today we filled the truck with ten sacks and took them into the local sorting office. When I returned with another truck full of sacks the Royal Mail employee who accepted the sacks glowered at me and asked if I had weighed the sacks before delivering them. I confessed that I hadn't. (Our postage scales weigh only up to 1 kg). `You're only allowed to put 11.5 kg into one sack,' he snarled. (Like most public institutions everything done by Royal Mail is weighed in EU friendly figures rather than proper, traditional and perfectly legal British measurements.) He proceeded to instruct me that our sacks were too full and that the postmen had had to take out some of the parcels before the sacks could be moved. All this was done not in a friendly sort of way but in a 'State Functionary reprimanding a peasant' sort of way. The truth is that these bloody rules may well apply within their four walls but they do not apply to us. But, nevertheless, if we want the bastards to accept our sacks The Princess and I will, in future, have to try and estimate 11.5 kg worth of parcels when filling sacks. It seems an awful feeble load - under two stones in proper measurements. The Princess and I carried our overladen sacks two at a time without difficulty. What unthinking, milquetoast, namby pamby zombies the Royal Mail now employs. We have become a nation of overregulated wimps and wusses, terrified to open our mouths in case we inadvertently offend someone and find ourselves in court and frightened to death that if we ever actually do something we will find ourselves in breach of one of the gazillion regulations which now control our every move. And what seems to me worse than all the rules, and the damned rule-makers, is that there are legions of big girls' blouses out there who are so empty-headed and incapable of rational thought that they enthusiastically, officiously and efficiently obey the latest regulation and make damned sure that everyone else also obeys. What a world we have created. The sad truth is that most people and Royal Mail employees (not necessary the same thing) will happily do bad things if they're told to do them. Researchers have shown that one in two individuals will merrily shock strangers to the death if they are instructed to do so. We have a resigned and apathetic population, exhausted by the chicanery and craven behaviour of a seemingly endless stream of self-serving, greedy, rancid, political pirates. Cant and political correctness are commonplace. The bottom line is that the people are responsible for the mess we are in because most have never protested about the idiotic rules. They haven't spoken up and they have continued to vote for the same lying psychopaths. Is it any wonder that we now live in a cesspit of debt with home owners, banks and nation all bankrupt when the Government deals with our financial problems by printing money and using it to buy gilts? And this, they seem to believe, is a solution. For our Government to try to spend its way out of a recession is like someone who can't afford to pay their mortgage saying that they'll deal with the problem by buying a new car. We are surrounded by lunatics. Do the people put up with all the stupid regulations because they are brainwashed into thinking that the daft ideas are good ideas or because they are frightened to say anything? Or is it because they never bother to find out what is happening but, instead, just immerse themselves in the goings on of television soap characters. And, perhaps, they have forgotten how to be truly shocked because they are constantly pseudo-shocked by the never ending supply of bad and scary news about bad and scary behaviour by our crooked politicians, incompetent civil servants and cheating, dishonest, drug and bribe soaked sporting heroes. Maybe I'm being too hard on the people and the Royal Mail employees. Maybe their skulls are stuffed with tapioca pudding instead of brain. Maybe I should just blame the politicians who have grabbed far too much power for themselves. It was Thomas Jefferson who wrote: `My reading of history convinces me that much bad government comes from too much government.' And it was one my heroes, the late, lamented and sadly mislaid Ambrose Bierce, hero to all sensible men and women, who claimed to disapprove of all forms of government and of most laws. Wise man.

I do feel so much better after writing all that.

31.

A week ago I spent the best part of a day clearing leaves away from our car parking space. The damned things had already turned into a three inch thick mulch. Running out of space to put them I moved a few hundredweight of leaves onto a piece of our garden. I received a letter from the council telling me that they were intending to prosecute me for fly tipping. The only person who saw me moving the leaves was Mrs Baskerville who was out walking her damned dog at the time and who marched past pretending to be interested in the toes of her Wellington boots so that she didn't have to notice me. I have written back to the council pointing out that the leaves I moved did not belong to me but came from trees which are public property. Furthermore, I explained that they had arrived on our land uninvited and that in the interests of health and safety I had moved them onto another piece of our land. I enclosed an invoice for £500 for the time I had spent moving their leaves around. I also pointed out that the only person who had seen me moving the leaves was at the time walking her dog. `The dog was not on a lead,' I wrote, `and the owner was therefore in breach of the law which states that dogs should be kept on leads when walking on public roads.' I also pointed out that since the dog owner was returning from the woods but was not carrying a doggy bag it seemed entirely possible that her hound had emptied its capacious bowels on public land and that the owner had failed to collect her dog's droppings as prescribed by law. That should keep the snotty bastards at the council busy for a few months. With any luck at all, the criminal Mrs Baskerville will be carted off to Holloway Jail.

NOVEMBER

1.

We arrived at our offices to find that the doorbell had been ripped out of the door frame and the knocker wrenched off the front door. Both were thrown down on the mat. In addition someone had scrawled all over the paintwork with an indelible marker pen.

`Who on earth would do all that?' I wondered out loud.

`Trick or treaters,' said The Princess. `It was Halloween last night and we weren't here to hand out sweets and money.'

I'm convinced she's right. Several neighbouring buildings had the same treatment. It seems that today's youngsters are learning the protection racket at any early age.

2.

For nearly 20 years now I've managed my own pension fund through a SIPP. The firm which runs the fund is supposed to send me a statement twice a year. They never do. When I ring up to remind them of this small obligation I am always told that the statement was posted and must have got lost. This happens twice a year as regularly as the clocks go forwards and backwards. `Would you please send me another copy,' I ask. They say they will. And a few days later the statement arrives. How odd it is that the first statement always gets lost in the mail while the second statement always arrives safely.

3.

Councils all over the country are now turning on the street lights at dusk and then turning them off again as soon as it gets really dark. There has been much boasting recently about the amount of money this saves. One council announced that it had saved £300,000 by not turning on street lights at all in areas of the town where no council employees had parked their cars. A quick look at the accounts showed that the £300,000 would enable a team of administrative assistants to go on a fact finding mission to attend a conference held in the South of France, though without also turning off the traffic lights there would not be any money with which to do anything with their conclusions. None of this matters very much to The Princess and me. Our nearest street lights are four miles away as the crow flies and considerably further as we mortals must travel. (When the council didn't bother to mend faulty street lights near our offices I rang twice without success but on the third occasion I pointed out that drunks frequently wandered into the road because there were no lights. `There will be an accident, and probably a death,' I warned. `I've now told you about this three times. Could I have your name please?' Since no bureaucrat ever likes the idea of taking responsibility, or finding themselves in a coroner's court, the lights were mended within 24 hours.

4.

Here are three animal stories I've discovered recently. All are absolutely true.

1. During the Second World War the Americans tried to use bloodsucking insects to detect hidden enemy troops. The idea was that the insects would be released and would bite the enemy. When the enemy soldiers jumped up and down scratching, the American soldiers could shoot them. The plot didn't work because the insects refused to stay where they were released or to bite the intended targets.
2. In 1860, a pig almost started a war between England and America. The pig, which was Canadian, kept crossing the border between Canada and the USA so that it could eat American potatoes. When an American farmer shot the pig, a British warship was dispatched to deal with the miscreant. The Americans sent a unit of 60 soldiers to defend their countryman. The War of the Pig was averted only when the commanders of the two sides agreed to stand down.
3. When Paris was under siege in 1870 a war correspondent called Henry Labouchere claimed to have eaten cats and kittens. `A cat is something between a rabbit and a squirrel, with a flavour of its own,' he wrote afterwards. `It is delicious. Don't drown your kittens, eat them.' He described a dish of kittens in onion ragout as simply `excellent'. During the same siege Labouchere also claimed to have eaten spaniel slices (which he said weren't bad and tasted rather like lamb) and donkey steaks (which he wasn't terribly keen on, saying they tasted rather like mutton). During this siege the Parisians ate every horse, dog, cat and rat they could find. When they'd finished they descended on the zoo and served themselves a banquet of boiled bison, slices of elephant's ears, stewed monkey, baboon on a stick and roast macaw. The French will eat anything as long as it is cooked and served nicely.

5.

The Princess and I have made a guy to sit on our bonfire. We haven't bought any fireworks because we don't want to scare the animals who live in the wood but we're having a bonfire, a guy and baked potatoes.

Our guy is a splendid looking fellow, about six feet tall and plump. After a voting exercise which we based on the proportional representation system so popular with politicians who can't win anything by fairer means we have decided to name our guy `Vince'. It seems apt. After all, Vince Cable must surely be the most dangerous man in England. If Scotland Yard published a list of public enemies he ought to be Number 1.

I'm much looking forward to tonight's entertainment but bonfires are not just a once a year delight in our household.

One of the main advantages of a garden is being able to have regular bonfires - not piddling little things in tinny incinerators but proper, raging fires with flames leaping thirty feet into the sky. There are always plenty of clippings, prunings, fallen leaves and so on to be burnt and these, of course, provide the framework for our burning of all the waste paper which one naturally accumulates and which would otherwise take up too much of our meagre allocated rubbish allowance. I have been going through my old files and burning letters and documents relating to old battles. I've burnt old libel actions, old complaints and old cuttings. I found scores of old interviews I can't remember giving. And I added to the burning pile details of a publicity tour I made for my book *Bodysense.* I travelled for three weeks, averaged 36 towns and cities a week and did literally hundreds of television, radio and newspaper interviews. It made me feel tired just to read the itinerary. A bonfire gets rid of confidential waste far more effectively than a shredder - and with less ecological damage. It is also a visual and olfactory joy. I adore the smell of a garden bonfire. Kyril Bonfiglioli, writing in his acidic, gloriously anarchic novel *Don't Point That Thing At Me,* described bonfires having a smell which is `at once wild and homely' and he was precisely right.

I've also used our massive, stone walled bonfire site (a professional quality bonfire site if ever I saw one) to rid the garden of infected leaves. Our horse chestnut tree is infected with the accursed leaf mining moth and the only way to break the cycle is to burn the discoloured leaves wherein lie buried the larvae. An expert from `Trees'R'Us' (`branches everywhere') tells us that the disease is not supposed to harm the tree or prevent the production of conkers but it does. We have had no fruit at all this year. Not one conker. This is truly sad. Even The Princess (who is not quite as taken with the fruit of the horse chestnut as a former third form conkers champion must be) is saddened by this. She collects conkers too because she knows that if you spread them around the house they will keep spiders away. (The only other truly effective method involves turning up the heat very high. Spiders don't much like hot, dry houses. But nor do we.) For some unfathomable reason spiders don't like anything to do with the horse chestnut. A man I know once had a home made entirely with chestnut wood. He never had a single spider in the house.

I couldn't help wondering if the disease could have been started, or at least spread, by the spoilsports who want conker trees chopped down to stop small boys risking bruised knuckles. There is apparently a therapeutic chemical you can spray onto the tree to get rid of the disease. But how the hell do I spray a tree which is sixty, seventy feet high in the middle of a small woodland?

And so I rake up every leaf I can find and burn them all.

The horse chestnut is also threatened by something called bleeding canker. Elm trees have been decimated by Dutch elm disease. Sweet-chestnut trees are being threatened by sweet-chestnut blight. Larch trees, camellia and rhododendron have all been destroyed by a fungus like disease. Oak trees are dying of something called acute oak decline and plane trees are attacked by their own infection. And now ash trees are under attack. The Princess fears that the biggest threat to us all could well be the apocalypse of the trees. Without them we cannot survive. I agree with her. But nobody in power seems to care much. They probably don't realise how much we depend upon our trees and how long it takes a tree to grow.

Several of our apple trees are threatened by something nasty too. I've been busy with the pruning saw. Only our scores of beech trees, huge willow and tree sized hazel bushes seem clean and healthy. Oh, and the firs and holly bushes look pretty good.

As a result of all this disease my bonfires have been particularly large and smoky this autumn.

In addition to their aesthetic qualities bonfires have other uses. There is, for example, no better way to destroy hard drives and old computer disks than in the heat of a raging bonfire. A computer contact of mine once boasted that whatever I did to a hard drive he would still be able to read whatever was written on it. Two days later I gave him a hard drive which had sat for three hours at the heart of a raging bonfire. The whole thing had melted into an unrecognisable shape. It did not, indeed, look man made, but had smooth surfaces and more resembled something that wind and rain had carved. I don't know how hot it was in the middle of that fire but old manuals and telephone directories were bursting into flame upon being thrown into the heart of it and so the temperature must have been well over 451 degrees Fahrenheit.

`What the hell is this?' he demanded, holding the still warm relic.

`It's my old hard drive,' I told him.

He examined it carefully, grudgingly admitted that it looked as if it could have been a hard drive and admitted without further ado that he had about as much chance of extracting information from it as I have of being recognised in the New Year's Honours list.

I have, over the years, acquired small skills at bonfire lighting and am, I suppose, a legal pyromaniac. With a cardboard box lain on its side and filled with crumpled broadsheet newspaper (the tabloids don't work anywhere near as well, and the *Daily Telegraph* is by far the most inflammatory publication I've ever known) I've burnt green and soggy clippings in the middle of a snowstorm. The trick is to lay the clippings carefully in layers so each layer smokes and then heats up while the top layer keeps out the snow.

But the forecast for tonight is cold and dry so there will be no need for heroics. A wind proof lighter, some old cuttings and a huge pile of hazel, beech, apple and sycamore prunings will be all I need.

Tonight our guy will burn and we will eat decent sized potatoes, pricked all over with a fork, carefully placed in the ash of the fire until they are powder soft on the inside and crisp on the outside, then seasoned with butter and salt and eaten with a fork. Who needs to scare the squirrels and the pheasant, the robins or the deer? Only a Philistine with no love for nature lights fireworks in the countryside. And yet, sadly, there are many of those. Yesterday one of our neighbours, a self-proclaimed tree hugger, an ethanol and windmill obsessive, a hypocritical nature loving boor with the sensitivities of a sarcastic fringehead fish and the imagination of an abandoned tree stump, invited a group of relatives from some far off metropolis and together they burst the silence of the night with an expensive barrage of display-quality bangs and flashes and the inevitable whoops of sad, middle aged delight. They dined al fresco on gallons of white wine spritzer and battalions of barbecue sausages stuffed in white finger rolls. The following morning our lawns and woodland were scarred with the rocket stick and burnt paper leftovers of their homage to a night in Beirut.

6.

Our postman dumped two handfuls of indiscriminate and irrelevant mailing rubbish through our letterbox this morning. When I went into town this afternoon I took the leaflets, brochures and catalogues with me and handed them in at the local Post Office. `What are you giving me these for?' demanded the puzzled counter clerk. He had a mean, sharp face and looked as though he stole coat hooks from public lavatories as a hobby. `The postman dropped them through our letterbox by mistake,' I explained. `I thought you'd like them back.' I then walked swiftly away. I don't usually do this. Usually I put such unwanted rubbish into a red pillar box so that the postman can pick it up with the proper mail.

7.

The myrmidons at HMRC have written to warn me that from next April they are going to make my employer's tax form at least twelve times as complicated as it already is. Instead of filling in an online form once a year I will have to download special software, do unspeakable and unimaginably perverse things on their website and then complete an online form every month.

This is, of course, utter lunacy. I wrote a letter asking if their aim is to force all small businesses to close down. `I know that the European Union does not like small businesses,' I wrote. `And I understand this. After all, all fascist organisations prefer a world in which society is managed by a consortium of big companies working with the State. However, I do think that given the nation's current parlous economic condition you really ought to be destroying employers at a rather more sedate pace.'

I then realised that the letter I had received from HMRC did not include a mailing address, a telephone number, a fax number or an e-mail address.

I am not surprised that HMRC receives a constant barrage of complaints. My biggest wonder is that people know where to send their protests. Talking of complaints, I saw today that, according to research carried out for a legal firm, of the 58,000 complaints received by HMRC last year an amazing 57% were upheld by HMRC itself. Isn't that hysterical? The most common causes for complaint were mistakes, unreasonable delays and poor treatment by HMRC staff. And the Treasury recently announced that the average caller gave up waiting for someone to answer the tax helpline after five minutes and 45 seconds.

The corollary to the letter from HMRC that contains no mailing address, and no other way of getting in touch, is that taxpayers should never give government departments (such as HMRC) their home address, their private telephone number or their e-mail address. Anyone who does so is likely to be harassed so incessantly and so soundly that he or she will give in to whatever their demands might be simply to make them go away. In my experience it is far better to use a Post Office box or an accommodation address and to insist that the slimy bastards send all their communications through the mail.

It is also sensible to avoid attending meetings. Attending meetings with the HMRC is not yet compulsory and I always prefer to conduct negotiations by mail so that I have everything in writing. If they change the rules and I do ever have to attend a meeting with a tax inspector I will insist that it is held either underneath the Arc de Triomphe or in the Hard Rock café in Paris (the noisiest and busiest places I know). And I will wear a T-shirt emblazoned with the slogan: `I pay your wages'.

8.

Three days ago we succumbed and decided to install broadband. The Government now insists that I fill in my VAT forms and some of my tax forms online. If I don't they will send me to prison. I have to register new books online because there is no other way.

And so I rang the telephone company and asked them to set up a broadband connection. They did it in seconds over the phone. Today, we received a largely incomprehensible letter from them telling us that they will be sending us something called a router and that we will need micro-filters attached to all our telephone sockets. I have no idea what a router is and I am afraid that we are completely out of micro-filters. I telephoned to find out what these things are.

Apparently I can buy micro-filters from appropriate IT friendly stores. And a router is being sent to us by a carrier. I rang up to ask if the router could be sent with the postman who knows how to find the house. It cannot. It must be sent with a carrier. I suggested that the company give the carrier our telephone number so that he would be able to ring us when he gets lost. `Our carrier drivers are very experienced,' said the snotty 12-year-old on the other end of the telephone. `They will find your house without any problem.' The driver will get lost. The satellite navigation systems used by van drivers all take them to the wrong village. And most van drivers panic when they see the sequence of `Road unsuitable for motor vehicle' signs which they have to ignore if they are to reach us.

9.

The gas and electricity people have for months been demanding access to Publishing House so that they can read the meters. They repeatedly inform me that we are obliged by law to allow them access to read the numbers on the little dials. Two weeks ago I at last took pity on them and gave them a date and a time that would be convenient to us. We may be obliged to let them view the meters (even though I have repeatedly told them that no gas or electricity is being used) but there is no law that says we have to let them in at a time convenient to them. So, today, at 12 noon promptly a man arrived. He had been given special permission to read both meters. The whole procedure took approximately a minute and a half and was quite painless. I suspect that many people spoil the utility companies by allowing them to dictate the date and time when the meters will be read.

10.

It took me several hours to open the mail. Someone has written trying to persuade me to store all my files on the `cloud'. Idiots. This is not a new idea, of course. Ever since biorhythms and food combining were fashionable people have been trying to persuade me to store my confidential files on the internet so that they will be `safe' and I can collect them from space wherever I am and with whatever device I am using. The people who use such a system are naive and stupid to the point of needing full time care. They are, without a doubt, the sort of people who go on holiday with their home addresses clearly visible on their luggage labels and then show genuine surprise when they arrive back a fortnight later and discover that they have been burgled.

A former education minister in a commonwealth country sent us his book. He has instructed us to publish his book or to find him another publisher. There isn't a single `please' in the letter.' And a former bestselling author has sent his typescript `for consideration'. More cheerily three proud readers have sent me copies of books which they published for themselves. It is a delight to see how many people are now self-publishing and showing courage, determination and single-mindedness in so doing. Dr Samuel Johnson once wrote: `He would earn his bread writing books must have the assurance of a duke, the wit of a courtier and the guts of a burglar'. All this is doubly true for the author who also publishes.

To my astonishment three copies of my book on vaccination have been returned by newspaper editors to which they were sent for review. They (or, rather, their proprietors) paid good money to post the books back to me. It seems that the book is so `hot' that they don't want to keep it on their premises, don't want to sell it on eBay and certainly don't want to review it. We have now sent out 300 review copies of this book. As far as I am aware there have been no reviews. In China, a newspaper for which I was working refused to print an article criticising vaccination and subsequently my publishers refused to reprint any of my books (which had been extremely successful there) or to print any of the books which they had asked for permission to publish.

A relative we haven't seen for decades, has written saying that she has just seen a copy of our new catalogue. She wants to know how she can obtain a copy of one of my books. She says she is particularly interested to read my latest book. So, in pure Dodgson style, we post her a copy of my book on vaccination.

A reader tells me that her husband, who has Alzheimer's, has had to re-sit his driving test. Much to her horror he has passed the test. `He hardly knows who I am, he gets lost and confused just walking around the supermarket. But they've given him back his driving licence.' She has decided that the only solution is to sell the car. It means that they will have to go everywhere by bus.

When I went to Liverpool as a Community Service Volunteer in the 1960s the founder, Alec Dickson, described me as a catalyst - there to make things happen. (I spent a year persuading thousands of children and teenagers to do things like decorate old people's flats. I didn't tell them that they would be doing a good thing. I told them that the council, the police and the unions were all strongly opposed to what I wanted them to do.) I thought of that when I opened a lovely letter from America. I sent a reader over there a copy of one of my books on animal experimentation and he has written back to say that he is 43-years-old and that he intends to spend the rest of his life sending letters to senators and congressman based on my book. No writer can hope for more.

A reader has written to tell me that the council she works for pays £7.50 for each ream of copy paper which is used in its offices. She says that she can buy the same paper for £4.99 in a chain store. I'm not surprised. When, some years ago, I exposed the fact that the NHS was paying far more for stationery and other essentials than I would pay if I bought the same items from my local supermarket the NHS bosses were instructed by the Government to hold an inquiry. They did. But it wasn't an inquiry into why they were wasting so much money. It was an inquiry into how I'd found out.

And a kind reader has asked if I have any objections to him using phrases from my *Stress and Anxiety* audio tape in a song he is recording. I thought a sampler was an example of embroidery skills but it is apparently something quite different. I will tell him that I have no objections and that I hope it is the Christmas number 1. If they still have such things.

11.

There are many ways to annoy sanctimonious neighbours but I have found that one of the best methods is to light a bonfire. We have enormous piles of garden rubbish to burn (clippings, cuttings, dead branches and so on) and I have found that as soon as I start to burn garden rubbish one of our unpleasant neighbours walks along the lane coughing loudly. I think this is supposed to be a hint. I suspect I am supposed to dowse the fire immediately. However, our neighbours have been so unpleasant that I regard this as a sign of weakness on their part. I am now searching the house, the garage and the sheds looking for bits of old carpet and polystyrene to add to the next bonfire.

12.

I overheard this conversation in a pub today:

`Plans always look fool proof and then the unexpected comes along and screws things up.'

`That's why we plan; that's why we prepare for the unexpected.'

`You can't.'

`What do you mean?'

`You can only plan for the expected. You can never plan for the unexpected because, by definition, it's unexpected and, therefore, beyond planning.'

`Then we'll just have to keep our fingers crossed.'

`That's probably the best we can do.'

13.

The Princess has a friend called Lucky.

I asked her where he got the nickname.

`He's always lucky. Good things happen to him.'

`Give me an example.'

She thought for a moment. `He lives in a smart neighbourhood but never bothers to cut his hedge. It's a scruffy mess. Terrible. The neighbours are always complaining about it. Then one day a man from an advertising agency knocked on his door and asked him if he'd let them cut his hedge. They were making an advertisement for a new hedge trimmer.'

`So they cut his hedge for him?'

`Yes.'

`That's pretty lucky.'

`You haven't heard it all.'

`Go on then.'

`They paid him £500 to let them film an actor cutting his hedge.'

`That's definitely lucky.'

14.

We were discussing people we know.

`I don't know anyone who's normal,' I said.

`I'm not sure there is any such thing as a `normal' person,' said The Princess.

`Humphrey Todcaster,' I suggested. `He's pretty normal.'

`Do you know anyone like him?'

`No. I don't suppose so. I don't suppose there is anyone like him.'

`So he can't be normal.'

`What about Bertie Warburton?'

`There's no one like Bertie! He's a bell ringer and he collects shells.'

`I can't think of anyone who's normal.'

Maybe no one is normal,' said The Princess.

And I'm sure she's right. As she always is.

15.

I learned of a new scam today. A man I met in the street told me about it. He was picking up receipts that had been dropped on the pavement and examining them all very carefully. He'd been drinking and was more talkative than he should have been. `These are worth money,' he said, showing me a handful of receipts he'd picked up. I asked him why he thought old receipts could be worth money.

`Look at this one,' he said. `It's a receipt for a blouse. Nearly £40. Nearly £40 for a blouse! They paid cash. What I do is I go into the shop and I find a blouse to match the receipt. Then I take it off the hanger and go to the till and hand it to the assistant. I say it doesn't fit or it's the wrong colour. And they give me the £40.' He grinned and breathed beery fumes over me. `Of course it doesn't work when people pay by credit card,' he said. `The receipt has to be for cash.'

`How often do you do this?'

He shrugged. `Three or four times a day,' he said. `You can only go in each shop once a day or so.' He smiled, very proud of himself. `I thought it all up,' he said. He waved an arm around. `And there are receipts everywhere! Too many for me to use by myself. Why don't you come in on it with me? With two of us we could hit twice as many shops!'

16.

I have often heard it said of people that they would be late for their own funeral. But today a local man called Nigel Harborough (known to his friends as `Market') actually managed it. The hearse in which he was travelling was held up by road-works and did not arrive at the cemetery until forty five minutes after the allocated time. The star of the event was, therefore, the `late' Mr Harborough in every sense of the word.

17.

A friend of ours who has been holiday in Devon told us this story. A budding bridegroom, enjoying a three day stag party with some friends, was sitting by the side of the outdoor swimming pool. The men were all dressed in evening dress, ready for dinner, when one or two of the friends decided that it would improve the quality of their lives if they were to throw the would-be bridegroom into the pool.

`Wait!' he cried, as they grabbed his arms and legs and prepared to heave him into the pool.

Surprisingly, perhaps, they paused. And then they waited while the object of their interest removed an expensive looking wrist watch and placed it in his jacket pocket. `A present from my fiancée,' he said.

And the watch was still in his pocket when they threw him into the pool five seconds later.

18.

I started to watch an international rugby match on television and was appalled at the fact that my eyes were constantly distracted by very intrusive advertising. Why on earth do the rugby people need to sell their souls? Why do they need so much money?

At most theatrical venues it is usual for the performing artist to split the take down the middle with the venue owner so it's fair to say that at a rugby ground or cricket ground the take is probably divided in a similar way. So, consider a rugby stadium where there are seats for 100,000 and the ticket prices average out at £50 each. That's a gross income of £5 million. (I am ignoring the profit from selling shirts, silly hats, hot dogs and beer although this sum must also be considerable.) Assume the teams receive £2.5 million as their share of the loot. And then assume that each player receives £5,000 for the match and that each team brings 20 players. That takes up £200,000. Now assume that providing the team with transport and training facilities and a manager to pick a team and make sure they all get to the ground on time costs another £100,000 a match. And let's take out another £200,000 for providing referees and linesmen, drinks at half time and free tickets for wives and girlfriends, and fresh jerseys and shorts, and hot water for baths afterwards. That leaves a neat £2 million in profit. And I still haven't counted the money paid by the television companies which will have paid a small fortune to show the match. So, why the hell do they need to sell advertising on the pitch, on annoying moving boards around the ground and on the players? It cannot be long before stretchers are emblazoned with tacky, inappropriate and annoying logos.

The answer to my own question is, of course, that they need the money to pay for a vast army of administrators and people hired to find yet more sponsorship. Rugby, like cricket, and every other professional sport, has been taken over by accountants and marketing specialists.

Actually, cricket is even worse than rugby. It is run by administrators, businessmen and politicians who seem to me to have lost any interest they might have ever had in the sport itself. The game, in their hands, has become a crude and charmless business; the sole purpose is to make money, though it is never quite clear why, or who will benefit. The passion, the sport, the honour have all been purged. The game would be in safer hands if it were run by cricket loving spectators, with no experience of anything but the patience to sit all day under an umbrella, eking out the tea and sandwiches in the small hope that there might, just might, be an over or two of cricket before the official close of play.

The modern team travels with doctors, analysts, bowling coaches, batting coaches, fielding coaches, psychologists, fitness gurus, dieticians, masseurs, physiotherapists, wives, girlfriends and probably mothers. To pay for all these unnecessary acolytes, cricket grounds are selling the naming rights to their grounds, and allowing sponsors to decorate the boards around the ground, the grass, the players, the umpires and the sightscreens. And despite all this pampering there are constant complaints about how hard the work is, though most cricketers have probably never worked down a mine or on a fishing boat and have very little idea of the meaning of the words `hard work'. Cricketers are now so wimpy that they rush home mid-match if their wives or girlfriends have babies, headaches or menstrual cramps. Worse still is the fact that too many of the people concerned with the game from a professional perspective are so obsessed with money that corruption has spread widely among players and umpires. It is no longer possible to believe the results of any professional cricket match.

Life was much more fun for cricket fans in the 17th 18th and 19th centuries. Cricket matches were organised between teams of cripples and teams of women. Publicans put on games to attract beer buying customers and the local gentry made the bets. In the 19th century there was one glorious match played between 11 one-legged pensioners from Greenwich and 11 Greenwich pensioners who only had one arm each. The one-legged cricketers won, even though one of the batting side lost his false leg as he ran and a one-armed fielder seized the fallen limb and threw down the wicket with it. (The umpire gave the hopping batsman out, though heaven knows under what rule.)

I got so fed up with the advertisement drenched rugby on the television that I went out into the garden. I collected two buckets full of slugs which I deposited in the garden of one of our obnoxious dog-loving neighbours. I also buried around 200 old pre-decimal coins, pennies, threepenny bits, sixpences, shillings, florins and half crowns, which I recently found in a cupboard. They have very little value but in a few decades time a small boy will, I hope, dig them up and carry them into the house as `treasure’.

19.

We have had a lot of trouble with our unpleasant, thoughtless, snooty and churlish neighbours during the last few months and the other day The Princess came up with a terrific idea.

We have printed an official looking notice headed *Regional Development Authority Planning Directive.* The rest of the notice contains details of approved plans for the conversion of our garage into a three story structure (with flat concrete roof). We have, the notice informs anyone who cares to read it, been given permission to erect ‘light industrial manufacturing facilities for lathe metalworking and chemical spinning.’ In addition, we have been granted permission by the Deputy Commercial Planning Director for the Region to convert a barn into a commercial recording studio to be known as *Loudsound Studios.* This will be made available for hire by rock bands from all EU countries. Our planning permission gives us the right to operate the studios between the hours of 08.00 a.m. and 23.30 p.m. At the bottom of the letter we have printed a good many official-looking names and references and a few vaguely accurate telephone numbers in Brussels. Naturally, no one there will be prepared to confirm or deny that any of these permissions has been given. The whole thing has been wrapped in plastic and pinned to the doors of our garage.

As we left to catch our Eurostar train to Paris this evening we spotted two neighbours studying the notice. And The Princess tells me that as we drove away she saw them both running back to their respective homes. There was, she says, a good deal of urgency in their movement.

20.

We met an Englishman on the train to Paris who has lived in France for thirty years. He misses only the cricket but has found a way to cure himself of this particular brand of homesickness. When the weather is cloudy and the sky overcast he takes an uncomfortable chair out into the garden and then fetches an umbrella, a newspaper, a flask of tea and a packet of sandwiches. He then holds the umbrella between his knees, opens the flask and the sandwiches and reads his paper. It is, he says, a surefire cure for homesickness.

21.

Another wretched organisation representing the gas fitters of France has written to us demanding access to the apartment. They say we are obliged to let them in so that they can check that we know how to turn on our gas by ourselves. We are told that we will be expected to show the technician our technique for gas tap turning. We are also told that we must be present in the apartment when we do this. (This is all so stupid that it is clearly a piece of EU nonsense.) The gas fitters have sent us an inconvenient appointment but stupidly and with delightful naivety they have printed their fax number on their letter heading. (Most well-run bureaucracies no longer print fax numbers or, indeed, addresses of any kind on their letter heading. HMRC in England, world masters at inconveniencing the general public, now send out letters which don’t even have a telephone number or a website address.) I sent the gas fitters a letter, in English, cancelling their appointment and telling them the time and date when their man would be expected to arrive. He would, I added, be expected to remove his shoes or to bring with him a pair of clean plastic overshoes. When their man does not arrive I will make a formal complaint and our persecutors will immediately find themselves two sets down. There is no place for tender mercies when one is dealing with modern bureaucracies.

22.

Walking in a small park near the Trocadero I dived to catch a falling leaf and ricked my knee. Like all professional sportsmen I can now boast that I have a recurrence of an old injury. The Princess will give the unhappy joint some healing and I am confident that all will soon be well. Her healing hands should be an official national wonder.

My dive did not go unnoticed. The Princess later reported that several couples walking past eyed my antics with some surprise. And, out of the corner of one eye, I caught one elderly couple looking at me with ill-disguised contempt. They clearly thought me too old to be dancing around in a park. How absurd. I was determined to catch a falling leaf to give to The Princess as a good luck charm. They have always been hard to catch but there is no doubt that these days leaves are more elusive than ever. Moreover, their elusive nature seems to have coincided with a slight diminution in my own ability to move about with quite the catlike skills I possessed half a century ago. I suspect that this must all be another consequence of global warming, global cooling or some other global phenomenon.

Still, I eventually caught a very fine leaf. I placed it in a small, white paper bag I found in my pocket and wrote on The Princess's name, the place, the time and the date. It is something else for The Princess to keep I'm afraid. And it is always difficult to throw these things away.

23.

We were travelling on the number 69 bus which goes across Paris to St Germain, when there was quite a kerfuffle at the front of the vehicle, which was quite crowded. A woman of about 30, who was standing, suddenly turned and hit a man on the face with the flat of her hand. It was quite a slap. Not unnaturally the man, who was about the same age and who had been standing nearby, wanted to know why the woman had seen fit to attack him. `You pinched me!' complained the woman. She pointed to her ample but smartly clothed derriere. `I did not!' protested the man. He was saved by an elderly couple who were sitting next to the offended young woman. `He did not touch you,' said the old woman. `But I fear that when the bus rocked my umbrella might have caught you in that place.' The young woman, realising that she was in the wrong but not wishing to admit this in public, responded at first by blustering. But then, under intense public pressure, she apologised. `It is not enough,' said the man, assuming the air of an aggrieved party. `You must now allow me to commit the crime for which I have already been punished.' The woman stared at him uncomprehendingly. `You have slapped me for pinching your bottom,' said the man. `So now I am entitled to pinch your bottom.' Everyone laughed and it was generally agreed that this would be just. `Alternatively,' continued the man. `We will leave the bus and you will allow me to buy you coffee.' And so they left the bus at the next stop and there was much genial applause as they did so. The old woman looked particularly pleased with herself.

24.

The Princess and I were kept awake until 4.00 a.m. by music and singing in an apartment three floors below. We were invited but I'm afraid neither of us is keen on parties these days. The occupant, and party thrower, is a 55-year-old man who works as a teller in a bank on the Champs Elysee. Until recently he lived with his mother in the suburbs but when she died he sold her flat and bought a place in our building so that he could be in the heart of the city. When his mother was alive he obeyed her every command. He did not smoke or drink or eat meat or fatty food. He did not go out with girls, go dancing or frequent nightclubs. But now that she is in the family vault in Père Lachaise he is a changed man. He does all the things that he was not allowed to do when she was alive. He is living like a teenager enjoying a wild weekend while his parents are away. A young secretary from the bank has moved in with him and the two of them have become stalwarts of Parisian nightlife. He smiles a good deal and is quite charming. But in the morning I will have stern words with him about the noise. He will apologise profusely and bring flowers and chocolates for The Princess. I will tactfully remind him of his obligations to the other occupants of the building and he will promise not to do it again until the next time. (Making a lot of noise in an apartment building is a dangerous game to play. We know of a man in a nearby building who was so incensed by the noise made by his neighbour's parties that before he went away on his fortnight's holiday he turned on his television set and put the volume switch to `high'. The guilty individual learned his lesson the hard way.)

25.

We spent the day indoors. Outside it was wet and miserable. Inside we were cosy. We read, painted and watched several movies. Thankfully, we have a good collection of our favourite films here. We also watched a couple of episodes from the Jeeves and Wooster series starring Hugh Laurie and Stephen Fry. I'm old enough to remember the series made in black and white starring the immortal duo of Ian Carmichael and Dennis Price but the Fry and Laurie series is exceptionally good and a delight for the eye and the ear.

26.

The Chinese Government gets a lot of criticism and much of it is well deserved. Personally, I don't much like the way they have succeeded in banning my books. But there are one or two things they do of which I approve. For example, the Chinese recently announced that people who use the internet must disclose their identity. The cowardly vipers who snipe at people from behind pseudonyms will, in future, be forced to reveal themselves. I'm all for that. I also rather liked the fact that during a deadly flu scare they announced that people who cough and sneeze in public without putting their hands over the mouths and noses will be punished. And I very much approved of their decision to execute corrupt civil servants who had endangered the health of the public. Who, apart from corrupt civil servants, could possibly object to that? But I'm still peeved that they banned my books. My books used to sell well in China.

27.

Our building in Paris was awash with heavy duty rumours this morning. On the second floor, the apartment at the back of the building is occupied by a couple who come from Nantes. He is a kind, warm-hearted fellow who always has a jolly word and a joke for everyone. He used to be an auctioneer and still talks like one with the result that both The

Princess and I have to ask him to slow down every time he speaks to us. He thinks this is very funny and so he talks even faster. He has red cheeks, a purple nose and a huge, tobacco stained moustache of which he is extremely proud. Although he has lived in the city for decades his clothes smell of mould, sheep dip, diesel, whisky, pipe tobacco and damp Harris Tweed. His jackets are fitted with poachers' pockets (for hare, rabbits and pheasant) which he uses to carry a bottle of whisky around with him. He always enjoys good health. He is the sort of man who could eat six sausages, a pound and a half of bacon and three eggs without showing any signs of indigestion. She is a miserable, bad-tempered soul who responds to any remark with a tale of woe. Whenever anything bad happens to anyone she can always top it. Whenever anything good happens she can change the mood of a conversation in a second with a miserable account of someone's botched operation or failed lawsuit. She is an enthusiastic spreader of malicious gossip and a mean-spirited pessimist who always leaves everyone feeling more depressed than they were before they spoke to her.

No one has seen her for two days and the rumour is that Jean-Louis has done away with her. The problem is: what, if anything, should we do about it if he has. We are all better off without her. But is it our duty to tell the police and have Jean-Louis arrested?

It had been decided that we would all keep quiet when she returned. She had been to visit her mother who is dying again.

28.

We are using the tourist boat on the Seine in the same way that we once used buses and taxis. It is cheaper than using taxis, and more expensive than the ordinary bus. But it is more convenient than either, considerably more practical and far more fun. Since just about everything worth seeing in Paris is within a short walk of the Seine (the top part of Montmartre is, perhaps, an exception) the boat is an excellent way to move around. There are just enough stops to make it handy for most of the places we are likely to want to visit and not enough to make it too slow. And we avoid traffic jams and diesel fumes.

29.

A couple we vaguely know called us up and asked us to show them round Paris. We love showing people round the city but we really don't know this pair well enough (or like them enough) to devote a day of our life to taking them round. We're going back to England tomorrow and we have a lot we are planning to do. And we know, from past experience, that they will take advantage of us in every way possible (they will, for example, expect us to pay for absolutely everything). But we both find it difficult to say `No', and so we agreed to meet them in a café at the bottom of the Champs Elysee.

When we left the apartment I took with me a copy of an excellent, lavishly illustrated guide book to Paris. The Princess raised an eyebrow. `They'll want to borrow that,' she said.

`I know they will,' I replied.

`But it's your favourite guidebook!' she said, knowing how much I hate to lend my books to people.

I told her that there was method in my madness and that I knew what I was doing. When we met I took out the guidebook and used it to show them several places they ought to visit.

`Oh that looks a wonderful book!' said the wife, gazing at it as though she'd never seen a book before.

`Would you like to borrow it?' I asked. `It's a new edition. It's got all the opening times, addresses and so on in it.'

They both leapt at the opportunity to borrow the book. The husband put the book in his rucksack before I could change my mind.

`We'll look after it for you,' they promised.

We bought them coffee and cakes and, after an hour or so, made our excuses and left.

`You won't see that book again,' said The Princess.

`Cheap at the price,' I told her. `I can buy another.'

She looked at me.

`It's an idea I got from Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield,'* I admitted. `If you have unwelcome visitors you lend them something that is of more value to them than to you. They won't want to return it and so they'll keep away so that they don't have to give it back.'

The Princess nodded and smiled. `The cost of a new guidebook is much less than the cost of looking after them for a day.'

`Exactly!'

30.

A friend who lives in our building took us to the Gare du Nord. He drives rather wildly, even for a Parisian.

`Why don't drivers in Paris ever give any signals?' asked The Princess.

Our friend turned to her and shrugged in a typically Gallic way. `We French are a very private people,' he said. `It is no one else's business where we are going.'

DECEMBER

1.

I picked up a newspaper at the station as we headed back to England. Mark Carney, the new Governor of the Bank of England is an ex-Goldman Sachs employee so Goldman Sachs now pretty much controls the world. (Carney is also Canadian and it sometimes seems that the majority of important posts in England (in finance, administration, sport and media) are held by foreigners. Even the Mayor of London was born in America. This does not happen in other countries. In countries as dissimilar as France and the USA, for example, you simply won't find foreigners in positions of authority.) The rest of the news is equally dispiriting. People living in flooded areas of England have been told that they can only apply for sandbags only when flood water has already entered their homes. The Government is changing the rules about pensions yet again. (My SIPP managers sent me new rules last week. These are now already out-of-date.) And there is some discussion about the fact that NHS hospital staff are being paid bonuses if they kill off enough old people through a scheme named the Liverpool Care Pathway (a name straight out of Orwell). No one really seems to care terribly much about this, however. Even the laughably inept and stupid General Medical Council, which I discovered recently has reorganised itself as a charity, seems to approve of the mass slaughter of the elderly as long as there is Government funding involved. I wonder how much uproar there would be if hospitals started killing off everyone under the age of 20, or poor people, or the very badly and expensively injured, or civil servants or members of the railwaymen's union. In fact, of course, the Liverpool Care Pathway is quite unnecessary. Hospitals kill the elderly without being paid bonuses. Nurses refuse to feed patients because they consider it beneath them to do anything that doesn't involve a computer. And auxiliary workers aren't allowed to do anything that involves getting physically close to a patient or a mop.

In a second newspaper we picked up there was a story reporting that yet another bunch of scientists have claimed that there is a link between badgers with tuberculosis and cows with tuberculosis. The story makes it clear that it is not possible to tell whether cows give TB to badgers or badgers give TB to cows but the headline, with scant regard to the facts, announces: *Science blames badgers for TB.* I put away the newspaper and took out Bruce Lockhart's biography of Sidney Reilly, the British spy. Reilly was probably the only spy who really did nearly change history.

As soon as we arrived back at the house I sent a letter to the newspaper which printed the inaccurate badger headline, pointing out that their own story invalidated their own headline and that it would be just as accurate to have printed *Science blames cows for TB* and to call for a cull of cows. At the bottom of the letter I added a note telling the editor that if he doesn't print my letter I will make a formal complaint to the Press Complaints Commission. This invariably proves effective.

When I got round to opening the mail I found a letter from Scottish Life offering me compensation of £600 for behaving like a utility company.

2.

The weather has been so bad recently that a young roe deer has been visiting our garden at night to take some of the food which we put out for the birds. We now feed so many wild animals that their food bill is greater than our own. They repay us a million-fold with their presence.

3.

One of the squirrels which regularly visits our bird table and bird feeders is quite a bully. Whenever another squirrel approaches he leaves whatever he is doing and chases them away. Today, the bully was so busy gnawing nuts through the metal latticework of one of our feeders that a second, smaller squirrel managed to climb onto another feeder hanging from a nearby hazel bush, without being noticed. It is, of course, quite pointless to purchase `squirrel proof' bird feeders. Make one out of riveted titanium and carbon fibre (assuming it is possible to rivet titanium and carbon fibre) and our squirrels would have it in bits and spread over three acres before we could get back into the house, so we have learned to sit back and enjoy them. However, to try to deter the squirrels, to slow them down for long enough to leave some nuts for the birds, I had hung this particular feeder from a very small and extremely flexible branch. The smaller squirrel, nervously looking over his shoulder to make sure that he hadn't been spotted, struggled so much to get at the nuts that the branch bounced up and down and the feeder slipped and fell onto the ground. For a few moments the squirrel couldn't understand what had happened. He looked around desperately. And then, suddenly, he spotted the feeder. The lid had come off when it had fallen and the nuts were now all spread on the ground around it. The squirrel launched himself into the nuts and started, literally, stuffing his face with them. Meanwhile, the bullying squirrel, who had seen nothing of this piece of good fortune, was still busily gnawing through the wire mesh of the feeder he was attacking and every so often managing to obtain a small piece of nut.

There was, I felt, a moral hiding in this incident. Aesop would have made something of it. The greedy squirrel was working hard for very little reward. The nervous squirrel, through a little determination, a good deal of courage and a lot of luck, was in nut heaven.

It’s our 13th wedding anniversary and one of the days when we do our best to avoid all contact with the outside world. I remember that when Professor Albert Einstein and his wife were interviewed on their golden wedding anniversary they were asked to what they attributed the success of their marriage. Professor Einstein took his wife’s hand and said: `When we were married fifty years ago we made a pact that in our life together I would make all the big decisions and she would make all the little decisions. And we have kept to it for fifty years. That is I think the reason for the success of our marriage.’ Then he thought for a moment before adding, `The strange thing is that in fifty years there hasn’t yet been one big decision.’

4.

The Princess and I decided that it might be fun to take our car to France and explore some of the countryside without having to bother with trains and taxis. But we have abandoned this idea. I discovered that in order to drive in France a driver must carry with him at all times his driving licence and his insurance documents, and he or his vehicle must be equipped with headlamp converters, a luminous vest, a warning triangle, a GB sticker and a breathalyser kit. And, of course, it is *very* illegal to carry in the car a device for warning about the presence of speed cameras (this includes carrying a satellite navigation system which offers this sort of facility). A fellow I know told me that when he last drove in France the storm-troopers stopped him and searched his car just for the hell of it. When they found his expensive satellite navigation device shut away in the glove compartment they threw it on the ground and stamped on it and then fined him the sort of sum usually only associated with serious bribery accusations. `None of this worries me too much,’ I told The Princess. `But I refuse to have anything to do with luminous vests.’

5.

This is quite a day for mankind. I have defeated the squirrels.

Yesterday, I smeared some Vaseline around the metal poles of our two bird stations and put one of those collars which vets sell to stop dogs scratching their ears around the wooden post holding up the wooden bird table. The squirrels are bemused and thwarted. The Vaseline won’t harm the squirrels (largely because having slid down the pole once they don’t try a second time) and the collar has them stumped. I am pathetically pleased with myself. I have temporarily defeated half a dozen rodents.

6.

It is sad but true that Christmas is, for millions, the most miserable time of the year. It is a time full of forced joviality, of boredom, of excruciatingly dull television and of commercially organised theft in overcrowded shops. It is a time when people buy each other expensive gadgets and jumpers that no sensible person would actually want, and when they wrap bath salts, soap, slippers and tea towels and give them to maiden aunts who put them, unwrapped, onto the shop shelf of their wardrobes. It is a time when they send silly and expensive cards to people they never speak to and hardly remember, and eat and drink so much that they feel ill and have to spend the first three months of the following year dieting. Even supermarkets become unbearable as people panic buy when they discover that the shops may have reduced opening hours for a couple of days. It is a time when sadness seems more intense than in any other season. I know one fellow who puts up the same cards year after year in an attempt to disguise his lack of friends. And I know another who sends out the cards he received the year before. He crosses out the messages and writes new ones. Although quite wealthy he is so mean that he doesn’t put stamps on the envelopes, claiming, quite wrongly, that the postmen will be far too busy to bother charging the postage and the penalty fee. Those unlucky enough to be on his Christmas card list have to spend two hours queuing at their local sorting office before picking up, and paying for, a second-hand card.

But for The Princess and me it is a joyful time. Since neither of us has any family to entertain we spend quiet Christmases indulging ourselves in peace and tranquillity. We do whatever we want to do. We do no real work. We make no courtesy visits. We neither make nor receive any telephone calls. We stock up with logs, good food, armfuls of books, a few toys and a good many old films.

We do, of course, have a well decorated tree. Although we once owned 30,000 real Christmas trees in a plantation (we sold them when thieves stole many and damaged more and when trespassing dog walkers just trampled down the younger trees) we use a tree we bought 12 years ago. We found it at Woolworths and we paid £9.99 for it. I wouldn’t swap it for the Norwegian spruce that sits in Trafalgar Square. We have a fine collection of Victorian ornaments and we buy new lights each year so that we don’t have to spend hours untangling last year’s. (However carefully you put away the lights they will, by the following December, have become hopelessly entangled. There will be knots that even a sailor would look at with awe.) Most of our cards are ones we send each other, which may sound sad but isn’t in the slightest. And, of course, we buy loads of crackers, though the people who make them (and who select the bits and pieces to put inside them) seem to have run out of imagination and style. I think the modern definition of the word `disappointment’ should be the feeling which follows the pulling of a Christmas cracker and finding a shoe horn, egg cup or nail clipper inside.

We won’t get carol singers where we live and so when The Princess had finished decorating the tree (I keep away to minimise damage) I snuck outside and repeatedly sang the only chorus of *Oh Come All Ye Faithful* with which I am familiar. The Princess brought me a mince pie and a glass of the very best 18-year-old Laphroaig. I ate and drank the delights on the doorstep and then the lady of the house, with a promising twinkle in her eyes, kindly invited me to step inside. It looked as if additional benefits might be available and I did so with aclarity.

7.

There is much bleating on television from teenage economists arguing that pensioners are not being hit hard enough by the Government, as it struggles to repair the damage done by Brown and the Scottish banks. This, I fear, shows only how ignorant and stupid teenage economists can be. The truth (as if anyone is interested in that these days) is that pensioners who aren't former civil servants with massive inflation-proofed pensions, have been hit harder than any other group. Their pensions and savings have been devastated by absurdly low interest rates, deliberately lowered annuity rates and soaring real inflation. In our new world of debt and continuing recession anyone who has worked hard and saved hard is treated as a criminal. No one in England has suffered more than pensioners as a result of the fiscal chaos caused by the moronic Brown and the egregiously incompetent Scottish bankers.

8.

The Princess and I bumped into Ebb, one of the Tide sisters in the village shop.

She smiled sweetly at us and if we had been holding a baby she would have kissed it. She drew herself up to her full five foot one inch. The added height made her almost perfectly spherical.

`Am I right in thinking that you are in charge of snow?' I asked.

She frowned. `I am,' she said. `But we haven't had any yet this year.'

`Exactly!' I said, making sure that the exclamation point was clearly audible.

She looked very confused. `I don't understand,' she said.

`My wife and I have bought a toboggan,' I said. `We want to go sledging in our garden.'

She nodded and frowned again.

`We can't,' I said. `There hasn't been any snow.'

`No,' she agreed. `There hasn't been any snow. Not yet.'

`So when are you going to get us some snow?'

`I'm sorry,' she said, backing away. `I'm only the parish councillor. I think you need to speak to someone at the District Council.' She turned and if she'd been capable of running she'd have run.

`You shouldn't tease her,' whispered The Princess. `She takes herself very seriously.'

`That's why I tease her,' I said.

9.

Our modest stream has become a raging torrent. If it would promise to stay like this I would consider installing a turbine so that we can create our own electricity. I remember being very impressed many years ago when I saw the hydroelectric plant at Lynmouth in Devon. But I am confident that if I do this then it will never rain again and our stream will dry up completely.

The weather is so bad that we are now putting out food specifically for the squirrels. We've tied bags of nuts and two halves of coconut to one of the beech trees near their dray.

10.

A little while ago I had winter tyres fitted to our four wheel drive truck – just in case we had any bad weather this winter. Yesterday I managed to fry the clutch and had to take the truck to a nearby garage to be repaired. Today it started to snow. We spent an hour this morning refilling all our bird feeders and, as soon as the snow had stopped, putting down food for the ground feeders such as blackbirds and robins. Then we spent a couple of hours tobogganing on a slope at the top of the garden. As we walked back to the house I noticed that a group of adults and children from the nearby village were using the hilly part of the lane near to our house as a toboggan run. As a result the snow on the road, which is already impassable to all motor vehicles, has been turned into ice. Inevitably, the ice on the road will remain there long after the snow has melted. More politely than I felt I pointed this out to one of the adults. `There's a terrific slope in that field over there,' I said, pointing to a nearby meadow. `I'm sure the farmer wouldn't mind if you tobogganed on the grass.'

`We've made a good run on the road now,' replied the man.

`But if you keep going the ice will be packed really hard and no one will be able to use that road for days.'

The man looked at me, thought for a brief moment and then glared. `That's your problem then innit, mate.'

11.

The Princess and I spent another wonderful afternoon on the home-made toboggan run in our garden. She had never been tobogganing before but she took to it like a St Moritz regular. At one point, early in the afternoon, I was giving her a push start when the toboggan suddenly stopped (it had caught on the rope at the front which had somehow got underneath the runners) and my momentum and weight carried me forwards at quite a speed. Not wanting to land on top of The Princess I managed to fly over her and got so much air (as I think the skiers say) that I cleared her head comfortably. I must have been flying at least four feet off the ground. I then landed ten to twelve feet in front of her, on my back. I was in the air so long that I was surprised not to have been offered a plastic sandwich and the chance to buy duty free spirits. Fortunately, I landed in a thick blanket of fluffy snow and, apart from losing my hat, my dignity and one glove, suffered no damage. We were both disappointed afterwards that we did not have a video of the incident to review at leisure.

12.

The snow has melted, quicker than expected. The ice created on the lane, by the activities of the thoughtless tobogganers, is still there. And since the forecast is for the cold weather to continue for several more days the ice is likely to remain a problem for a good while to come.

13.

Just after five o'clock this evening I heard what sounded like a strimmer in the lane outside. I looked out of the window and could not believe my eyes when I saw Mr Spick using a huge petrol driven leaf blower to remove leaves from the lane and to blow them into our garden. It was so dark outside that I could only see him because our exterior lights had all flicked on. It was also raining quite heavily. It occurred to me that he was probably the sort of fellow who, in suburbia, would voluntarily cut the roadside verge outside his house within half an inch of its life. My incredulity turned to outrage when I realised that he was blowing leaves from the lane through our garden gate. Since we already have enough dead leaves in our garden (and since I had recently spent most of a day clearing piles of them out of the way) I pulled on a coat and tottered outside to remonstrate with him. `I'm just cleaning up the road a bit,' he explained. `The leaves interfere with traction on the road.' He drives a gloriously inappropriate rear wheel drive sports car with so little ground clearance that two leaves piled one on top of the other probably stop it dead in its tracks. I once found him sobbing in the lane because six inches of errant bramble had scratched his paintwork. To someone who drives a variety of travelling dent exhibits such behaviour is difficult to understand. From the way he looked at me I just knew that he thought I would be certifiable if I did not understand. I think he wondered why I wasn't grateful to him for this selfless, public-spirited act. It was pitch dark outside and what he couldn't see was that behind him the wind, which was gaining strength, was blowing the leaves he'd moved back onto the road he'd cleared. Nature likes her dead leaves to be distributed where she wants to put them and she always wins.

I came back indoors and told The Princess that I thought Mr Spick had lost touch with reality. He is normally so uptight that if you put a piece of coal up his rear end you would have a diamond within a week or ten days at most, but blowing leaves off the battered, potholed, ice damaged tarmacadam of a single track country lane with grass growing in the middle of it seems to me to take nuttiness to an entirely new level. For another three quarters of an hour we could hear him continuing to clear the lane, using the earth's valuable petroleum reserves to enable him to blow leaves onto our land. I hope the leaves realise that they are supposed to stay where they've been put. I was tempted to take him a scrubbing brush and a bucket of soapy water but I resisted the temptation. I was worried that he would use them and knock on our door for constant refills.

14.

We received one of those annual round robin letters from friends who insisted on telling us what an absolutely wonderful year they'd had, and how tremendously successful all their marvellous children had been. Nauseating.

I sent them the following round robin describing our year and the wonderful successes of our fictional son Albert:

`Well, what a year it has been. It is difficult to believe that a whole twelve months have gone by since I wrote to you last. We hope that this seasonal missive finds you and yours healthy, wealthy and wise! We look forward to another Christmas of joy and a modicum of goodwill to all men.

As always this has been a very special year for us. Albert has painted some marvellous pictures. Sixteen of them have been accepted by the Royal Academy where they sold a whole bunch of old Masters to pay for his pictures to be nicely framed. His French horn concert at the Royal Albert Hall was a tremendous success, as I'm sure you heard. I had to insist that they redid the ceiling in order to improve the acoustics but it was well worthwhile. The CD they made of his playing has been number 1 in 87 countries for the last 19 weeks. Oh, and I must tell you that his book on insect life has been chosen as the Booker Prize Winner and Albert himself is the favourite to win this year's Nobel Prize for Literature. All the critics loved the book and the Americans were particularly enthusiastic. Next year Albert will celebrate his eighth birthday and his skiing instructor tells us that several gold medals are a certainty at the winter Olympics.

I do hope that your own lives have not been too dull in comparison, and that your children do not sound too disappointing when compared with Albert. He is the most special little boy on the planet so your family is bound to appear unsuccessful in comparison. So the answer, my dear friends, is simple: don't bother to try to compare, just content yourselves with feeling inadequate and envious.

On that happy note we send you annual greetings and love.'

15.

In today’s mail I’ve received three letters from people asking me to appear on television documentaries they are preparing. (I suspect they are all students and that I’m part of a college project). There is a letter from a woman wanting to know how to write a book, a letter from a man wanting to know how to sell the book he has self-published and a 46 page letter (together with X-rays and laboratory results) from someone wanting a second opinion. I have a letter allegedly from a cat, writing about my book *Secret Lives of Cats* and a copy of a diary allegedly written by another cat. A man wants to use chunks of my book *England Our England* in a leaflet he is writing and a woman wants to know how to patent mud. She also wants to know how to protect the mud around a lake at a secret location in South America. A woman wants me to tell her where she can buy organic food near her home, a man has written to tell me that he can show me how to be a successful publisher if I send him £147.50 and a reader tells me that Josef Mengele is alive and well. (He will be over 100-years-old if he is alive. Maybe he is now running the NHS.)

I’ve also received a four page colour leaflet from the Marylebone Cricket Club telling me what I must (and must not) wear when visiting Lords. There is much advice on the type of clothing that is appropriate when visiting the pavilion on match days, when visiting the pavilion on days when there is no match and on visiting other parts of the ground. I am advised that certain types of garment are considered inappropriate and that The Princess is not allowed to wear dresses with straps unless she also wears a cardigan to cover up flesh that would otherwise drive members to distraction or worse.

And a man in Sunderland has sent me a long letter about his health problems. At the top of the letter he has written, in red ink: `Please let me know if you don’t get this letter.’

16.

We never fly these days. But we do travel a good deal. Here are my accumulated tips on travelling comfortably.

1. Never travel with luggage you cannot carry by yourself for half a mile. Porters and trolleys are, like steam trains, a thing of the past.

2. Don’t expect any form of public transport to arrive at its destination on time. Always carry enough reading matter and food to last for at least a day more than your journey is scheduled to last.

3. Never miss an opportunity to go to the loo. You may not see the sense in this now. But the next time you are stuck in a taxi in a traffic jam in central London for 90 minutes the wisdom of this hint will glow like a beacon in your memory.

4. When packing always put the most fragile things right at the very bottom of your bag - without wrapping them. This will enable you to stop worrying about whether the delicate items which you have packed are going to get broken. You will know that they stand no chance of surviving the journey and you will find this strangely liberating.

5. Holiday brochure writers are trained by estate agents. Here are some of the terms you may come across - and their real meaning:

a) Walking distance = you can save two taxi fares every day if you take hiking boots, thick socks and a compass.

b) Friendly locals = if you are female the local men will have their hands on your bottom at least 60% of the time and if you are male the local men and women will have their hands in your wallet at least 98% of the time.

c) Unspoilt area = three and a half hours from the airport, no telephone, no television, no newspapers, undrinkable alcohol and food that is swimming in grease.

d) A local speciality = hideous concoction, not eaten by locals for a century and a half, which enables restaurants to charge double for bits of food which no one else wants to eat.

6. When you are shown into your room at the hotel do not unpack. Wait five minutes and then ring the receptionist and demand to be given a better room. (The chances are high that they will have put you into a room which is over the discotheque/next to the lift/above the fan outside the hotel kitchens. They will be counting on the fact that when you have unpacked you will not want to be bothered about changing your room.)

7. For the first two days of your trip tip the hotel staff generously and indiscriminately if they treat you with anything which could be vaguely described as courtesy. There is then no need to tip again. Waiting until the last day to tip the staff will do you no good at all.

8. Men should always wear a silly but expensive hat; a proper hat not a baseball cap. Wear a hat which makes you look like an English tourist. It should be something that will roll up or which can be crushed. Profiling at airports and railway stations mean that the best way to avoid attention is to look slightly absurd - like a tourist with bad taste. (But not an American tourist. They are loathed everywhere.) And the easiest way to do this is to wear an unfashionable hat. The added advantage of wearing a hat is that when you remove it your appearance and profile changes instantly. If you find yourself being chased by officials you can hide quite quickly simply by stuffing your hat into a bag.

9. Pack as few metal objects in your bag as you can. Border guards believe fervently in the power of metal detectors. (They have not yet realised that it is possible to buy guns made entirely of plastic.) Johannesburg airport used to have real life examples of things that you couldn’t take on the plane fixed to the wall above the entrance door. I was particularly reassured by the fact that passengers were being actively discouraged to carry rocket launchers and

landmines in their luggage.

10. If at all possible try travelling with a television camera crew in attendance. As Palin, Boorman et al will doubtless confirm it makes travel so much easier. Forget paying extra for first class tickets. Use the money to take your own camera crew. If you can't manage a camera crew then at least take a movie camera of some kind and keep it running if you ever have trouble with officials.

17.

We went to Tetbury to buy provisions and magazines. As we walked back to the car I saw someone I thought I recognised. I nudged The Princess.

``Who's that?' I asked. `I'm sure I recognise him. He's someone famous. He must be in films. I think he plays villains.'

She looked at him and then looked back at me. `It's the chap who sold us our last car,' she told me.

18.

Parents and schoolchildren are demanding free iPads, free Wi-Fi and free home broadband connections. These are today's bread and circuses. You could start a religion that would sweep the world if you gave away free mobile telephones with free e-mail connection.

Young people used to fight for peace, freedom and democracy. Today, most don't even know those words exist and those who do don't know their meaning. In our new, fascist world we are ruled by eurocrats and the only things that matters are Twitter, Facebook and the digital revolution.

Half a lifetime ago Tom Wolfe wrote about the `me' generation. Neither he nor anyone else could have forecast just how bad things would get. Our New World is broken and the people in it don't yet realise the price they are going to have to pay.

19.

I received a letter offering me help with the new regulations which Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) is introducing for employers. At the moment I have to fill in an employer's form once a year. (Naturally, I have to do this online, using HMRC's abysmal website.) From next April I will have to visit the damned website and fill in an online form once a month. This will, of course, increase my workload by a factor of twelve and the letter I received came from a firm of accountants who are offering to help me complete all these wretched forms. There will, of course, be a fee.

Just how all this extra `paperwork' will help the nation escape from recession has not been explained but I'm prepared to guess that all this red tape comes to us courtesy of the European Union and with the enthusiastic support of the HMRC staff. Today, anyone who runs a business is used by the Government as a tax collector but, in contravention of the guaranteed minimum wage agreements brought in by the EU, the Government refuses to pay a penny for this work. Not only does the Government not pay for this work but it also imposes automatic fines on anyone who makes a mistake. And mistakes are, of course, almost inevitable since the tax systems which are in operation (both for employment taxes and for VAT) are so absurdly complicated that not even paid professionals understand them. Indeed, HMRC's own inspectors don't understand them either.

People who work for the Government don't have the foggiest idea how the real world works and they don't have any sympathy or understanding for anyone struggling to make a living or run a business.

According to a report commissioned by HMRC itself small companies now bear 80% of the burden of the nation's red tape. The average small businessman or woman now spends 28 hours a month filling in tax forms of one sort or another. (This means, of course, that they invariably end up in breach of the Working Time Directive.) On top of that he or she spends about a week filling in the annual tax form. And in addition there are endless enquiries to be dealt with. That's just HMRC. There are, of course, numerous other Government departments demanding that forms be completed, answers provided and regulations obeyed. Everything is made worse, much worse, by the fact that there is little or no consistency or continuity within the system and tax inspectors in one part of the country will interpret the legislation in quite a different way to tax inspectors in another area. The aim in some areas seems to be not to see that the taxpayer has paid the right amount of tax but to find something to disallow and, if nothing can be found, then to harass and bully the taxpayer until he simply hands over what is, in effect, no more than old-fashioned protection money. The assumption is that every taxpayer is cheating and the aim is to cause as much distress and inconvenience as possible so that the taxpayer despairs and abandons his search for justice. I doubt if I am alone in regarding HMRC as a corrupt organisation staffed by greedy, vindictive inadequates who use their positions to abuse honest people and who are, in the process, wrecking the nation's economy. Everything is made infinitely worse by the fact that today's HMRC employees are given bonuses if they gouge extra money out of taxpayers.

And on top of all that, the entrepreneur has to deal with the day to day problems created by the banks and the utility companies. It is the endless official and unofficial paperwork which is largely responsible for the fact that bankruptcies are rising at a phenomenal rate. I'm surprised that any real work ever gets done and that those who endeavour to deal with all these demands are not collapsing and dying in even greater numbers.

Our modern bureaucracy is also made worse by the fact that those in charge, and their underlings, seem convinced that everyone in the country is a crook. Politicians and civil servants lie, lie and lie again and so they assume that everyone else lies too. In a way I suppose this is hardly surprising. Since we have a Government which lies about everything to everyone, and which employs people who are encouraged, by example, to lie about everything to everyone, it is only to be expected that HMRC staff, who are, even if not civil, still our servants, should assume that taxpayers are similarly deficient in moral standards.

Moreover, although the principle that every man is expected to know the law (and that ignorance of a law could never be offered as an excuse for breaking it) was probably reasonable when the laws in existence were basic and straightforward it is now neither fair nor reasonable. The principle that a man is expected to know the law (and, indeed, all the laws) was fair when the laws were logical and easy to understand (and based, albeit rather loosely, on the Ten Commandments) but when the laws are incomprehensible, confusing, contradictory and constantly being altered both prospectively and retrospectively, and when even the experts in a particular area cannot keep up with what is right and what is wrong, then the principle no longer works and becomes contrary to good sense and to basic human rights.

My own experience convinces me that the HMRC is largely populated by individuals who are arrogant, pompous and patronising and who, moreover, don't even know their own rules and regulations. It seems hardly surprising that although vast numbers of immigrants are pouring into England (largely to take advantage of the over-generous benefits programme) around 500,000 hard-working taxpayers are leaving every year. Many, if not most, of these are the self-employed and those running small businesses – the very economic backbone of any country. It is usually argued that they are all going because of our weather but this, of course, is a lie. Most are leaving because they no longer feel that they belong; they feel that they are being over-taxed and they feel that the State expects them to take but never receive. Moreover, they are exhausted by the ever-growing demands of the nation's bureaucracy. (No one at the HMRC ever bothers to work out what all these emigrants cost the country in hard cash but it is clearly a sum well into the billions.)

`Taxes are the price we pay for a civilised society,' said Oliver Wendell Holmes, who has always been one of my heroes. And he was right, of course. But uncivilised tax demands, expectations and enquiries are too high a price and they threaten the fabric of our society. Government employees have created a world in which the divisions between the State and its functionaries on the one hand, and the citizens on the other hand, grow wider day by day. There is growing distrust and disappointment and anger and resentment among people who create the wealth which pays for the State. And without those people there will be no money and no State and no comfortable jobs for the functionaries. An over-aggressive, over-demanding HMRC does enormous damage to the economy and the nation's tax gatherers are destroying the nation's economy.

In the end those taxpayers who do not choose to emigrate will have to learn to defend themselves more aggressively. The millions who rely upon the State for their daily bread have become adept at manipulating and controlling the system. Taxpayers will have to learn to deal with England's vast army of apparatchiks in the same way.

Many have already learned the hard way that if they are picked out for an enquiry they have only two choices: kill themselves or prepare for war. They must forget the nonsense about there being nothing to worry about if they've done nothing wrong, and they must gird their loins and unsheathe their swords.

HMRC employees have been given the power to bug telephones (at home and at work). They have the power to intercept the mail (whether earthly or electronic) and to plant listening devices in cars and offices. Accountants are now legally obliged to share everything they know about their clients with the authorities. Nothing is private, nothing is confidential.

HMRC likes people who roll over and pay up quickly. Because HMRC staff now earn bonuses if they thug people into handing over extra cash they no longer like wasting their time on long drawn-out and unproductive enquiries. But because we all now have rights (not least those given to us by the Human Rights Act) our complaints must be taken seriously. HMRC staff don't like that either. The honest taxpayer has more control over the morons at Revenue and Customs than he thinks he has.

I always like to rant and rage about HMRC. It makes me feel better.

But meanwhile I have to decide what to do about the new monthly employer's forms. Many small employers will doubtless make their staff redundant. These new rules will be the straw that breaks many an employer's back. (Neither the Government nor HMRC has the intellectual capability to work out that this will push up the unemployment figures and increase the expenditure on benefits.) But I'm not going to make The Princess redundant so it seems I have two choices: either I hire someone to fill in these damned monthly forms (it will, I hope, be a tax deductible expense) or I devote yet another few hours a month to fighting HMRC's evil website. But maybe I can find a better solution.

20.

In Bilbury, our mail is delivered to a Post Office Box. However, the new postman occasionally delivers mail addressed to the previous owner, or simply to The Owner (most commonly mail from the TV licensing bandits). Whatever he delivers, the postman folds twice before half pushing it through the letterbox, leaving half the item poking out into the rain. There is no need for him to do this because the letterbox is big enough to accept an A4 envelope. When he has left the folded envelope sticking in the letterbox there is, inevitably, a large gap which allows cold air to enter the building. I left an envelope pinned to the door. The envelope was clearly marked *Christmas Tip For Postman.* Inside I included this note: `My tip is that you get a job outside the service sector. Your total lack of concern for your customers makes you unsuitable for your present work. I enclose an alternative opportunity you might like to consider.' I pinned to the letter an advertisement requiring construction workers for a rebuilding project in Iraq. I do hope he found it helpful.

21.

We collected our P.O. Box mail from Royal Mail. There was a huge queue stretching out of the sorting office and for about thirty yards outside. Most of them did not know it but they were queuing to pay good money to collect Christmas cards which were too big for the standard postage rate. It was raining and they were all getting soaked. The old man in front of me was having a lengthy argument with the postman at the counter. `I keep getting mail for my neighbours,' he complained. `If it continues to happen I'll just throw it in the bin.' He seemed exasperated, but not as exasperated as the huge queue behind him. `Do you think you could perhaps sort this out after Christmas?' I suggested. `There are a lot of people queuing in the rain.' He turned and stared at me as if I'd suggested he join the Foreign Legion. No one else said a word. No one else ever does. He turned back to the man on the other side of the counter. `So, what do you suggest?' he demanded. `I suggest you just throw the mail in the bin,' said the weary postman. `It's probably just junk mail anyway.' `Right,' said the angry customer. `I will. I'll bin any more mail that isn't mine.'

And he left. He was gone before I dared to suggest that he might simply drop the mis-delivered mail into a post-box. I was appalled by the postman's response. I now understand why so much mail goes astray. The real problem, of course, is that many organisations (such as HMRC) consider that a letter posted is a letter received. If you don't pay a tax demand because you didn't receive it you will still have to pay the fine. To be fair, it isn't just the Royal Mail which seems to take a debonair attitude towards mail. I recently ordered a Christmas present through Amazon which the courier firm left at the local Post Office. I only found this out when I complained that the parcel hadn't arrived. `It was left in a safe place,' I was told. `It's not here,' I countered, only to be told that the courier had left the parcel for me to collect. Pity no one bothered to tell me. Even bigger pity they couldn't be bothered to deliver the damned parcel instead of expecting me to complete the final few miles of the delivery myself.

`I'd like to collect my P.O. Box mail,' I told the postman. I showed him the small cardboard card with the relevant P.O. Box details (we have a number of P.O. Boxes and picking out the wrong one can cause great confusion.) He stared at it and frowned. I had to explain what a P.O. Box is. He went away. It took him fifteen minutes to find the mail. My loathing and contempt for the Royal Mail grows with each day that passes. And I'm not alone. I see that a number of the few remaining mail order suppliers who still use the Royal Mail (and who once proudly offered delivery within two days) now warn their customers to allow up to 28 days for parcels sent by first class mail to arrive. I doubt if even the Italians have a postal service as bad as ours. It is, perhaps, hardly surprising that a growing number of people who buy stuff through the internet choose to collect the things they've bought from a local shop, rather than entrust them to carriers of any hue.

As we drove home, it occurred to me that I have just ten days to go to finish this book. I will be heartily miffed if the Mayans are right and the world ends today.

22.

Our Christmas groceries were delivered. `Well, I won't see you again until after Christmas,' said the delivery driver. `So I'll wish you a Happy Christmas.' He sighed. `This will be the last time I see you until after the holidays.' I handed him the £20 note I had ready folded in my back pocket and wished him Happy Christmas. `Oh I couldn't,' he said. `I shouldn't. I mustn't. It really isn't allowed.' `It's OK,' I said, `we won't tell anyone.' `Are you sure?' he said. They always say: `Are you sure?' I hate it when they say `Are you sure?' What do they think I'm going to say? Am I going to say: `No, I'm not sure. It was a crazy idea. Give it back to me.'

I said I was sure. The £20 note disappeared. One minute it was there. The next minute it was gone. He should be in cabaret. *Mr Magic Makes Your £20 Note Disappear Before Your Very Eyes.*

When we unpacked the delivery we found they'd forgotten to include the damned parsnips. How can we have Christmas dinner without roast parsnips?

23.

Mr Pettigrew told us a wonderful, true story. He has a neighbour who is frail and elderly and who uses his dog to do the shopping for him. Every day he puts money and a shopping list into a basket and the dog carries the basket to the village shop. The shopkeeper puts the groceries and the change into the basket and the dog takes everything back to the old man. The old man always leaves his back door open, whatever the weather, so that the dog can get in and out easily. Two days ago the dog arrived at the shop carrying an empty basket. There was no shopping list and no money. Alarmed by this the shopkeeper drove round to the old man's house and found him lying on the bedroom floor with a broken leg. He was in a bad way but he is now making a good recovery in hospital and the dog is being looked after by the shopkeeper’s family. If the dog hadn’t gone to the shop, and the shopkeeper hadn’t guessed that there was something wrong, the old man would have doubtless died. But the dog did go to the shop, the shopkeeper did guess that something must be wrong and the old man is fine. A wonderful piece of news for Christmas.

24.

We gave our friend Thumper his two presents. One we wrapped and one we did not wrap. The unwrapped present was a chain saw (his old one has been jamming a good deal recently). He opened the wrapped present in the way that a child would, tearing at the paper excitedly. I could tell that he was disappointed. He looked just how I felt when my parents took me to see the Da Vinci cartoon when I was a lad. I hadn’t thought it at all funny and couldn’t see what all the fuss was about.

`It’s a book,’ I said, unnecessarily.

`I’ve already got a book,’ he said. Thumper never manages to avoid saying what is on his mind. Thumper is a practical fellow. He is the sort of chap who can build a cupboard, clean out a septic tank or tune a car without needing to buy a textbook or use a YouTube video to show him how.

`Not this one.’

He examined it carefully, as though seeing it for the first time. `No,’ he agreed. `Not this one.’

`You don’t have to read it,’ I told him. Thumper can pick locks, tickle trout and start a car without a key. But he doesn’t read much.

`We just thought you’d like to have one,’ said The Princess. She took my arm. `It’s one we wrote together,’ she told him.

Thumper looked at the names of the authors and smiled. He hugged the book to his chest and then stepped forward and embraced us, first individually and then together. When he moved away, a few moments later, there were tears in his eyes.

`I’ll treasure it,’ he said gruffly. `Always.’

`If you want to give your new chain saw a bit of a run we’ve got a couple of trees that need taking down,’ I told him.

His eyes lit up. `Really?’ he said.

25.

We watched two cartoons *Toy Story* and *The Snowman and the Snowdog.* One was witty, sharp and professional. The one about the snowman was predictable, badly written and dull. Both had something in common: the central human characters were a mother and a son. No father. Airbrushing dads out of stories for children seems fashionable. If they are there then they tend to be cruel, arrogant and distant. How sad.

26.

Among other wonderful goodies The Princess bought me a pile of old *Cricketer* magazines from the late 1940s and early 1950s. She found them on a stall in an antiques market in Cirencester.

I’ve been a huge cricket fan since the age of five but I have in recent years been enormously disillusioned by the way the game has been taken over by people who seem (and probably are) more interested in money than sport.

What a joy it is to be able to read about real cricketers and real cricket matches. I read with delight about the exploits of Denis Compton, Len Hutton, Godfrey Evans et al, pitting their skills and strengths against Keith Miller, Ray Lindwall and Don Bradman. There is no talk of tantrums or agents or coaches or television replays used to question the umpires’ authority. I particularly enjoyed a reprinted article from the *Sydney Telegraph.* The article had been written at the end of the Ashes Tour of Australia in 1947. A slightly battered England had been destroyed by a powerful Australian side (and a good deal of bad luck) and the writer in the *Sydney Telegraph* concluded his piece with this paragraph: `Australians who realise what mass bombing and doodlebugs and rationing can do to one’s sense of fun and games would prefer Hammond (England’s captain) to take the Ashes home - and to win them for Australia some other time when Englishmen are fitter and less tired.’

I think I shall spend a lot of time living in the distant past for a while. It’s a highly recommended place to be. I shall abandon newspapers and magazines and, instead, immerse myself in reading about better times.

27.

A woman who works at one of the local supermarkets collapsed in the pub this morning. There was nothing wrong with her and it was generally agreed that she had probably drunk too much and slept too little.

`Don’t suppose anyone has any smelling salts?’ said the landlord’s wife who attended a first aid course in 1958 and naturally considers herself an expert on matters medical.

No one had.

But Thumper removed his boot and tore off a sock. He then waved the sock under the woman’s nose. She came round almost instantly.

`For heaven’s sake don’t anyone tell her what brought her round,’ said the landlord’s wife. `Or she’ll need counselling for years.’

28.

Here's what's wrong with our world: hopes and dreams have been replaced by demands and expectations. It's an incurable disease of the spirit.

29.

It has become impossible to run a mail order business in England. The Royal Mail is now so unreliable that it is not possible to offer anything remotely resembling a decent service. Orders coming in can take weeks to arrive. And the parcels which we send out seem to disappear with increasing frequency; when they do get through they sometimes arrive so late that the unhappy recipients send them back. We have, for the first time in our history, suffered from a spate of cancelled cheques as readers despair of ever receiving their books. One reader wondered if we were being targeted because of the political nature of some of my books. Not at all. Everyone involved in mail order seems to be suffering.

And, as if all that were not enough, the Royal Mail is now going to introduce a new barrier for those trying to run any sort of business. It will soon not be possible to post books abroad without taking the parcels to a Post Office, queuing for hours and answering a series of searching questions from one of their gestapo guards. There will have to be an inquiry about every parcel which is being posted. This reeks of a European Union directive. The aim, apparently, is to stop people sending explosives and body parts through the mail. There is no suggestion that people have actually been doing this; no gangs have been found sending sawn up grannies or landmines through the mail. But the new rule will make sure that they don't – unless, of course, the miscreants are naughty and lie to the inquisitors at their local Post Office.

Posting books abroad was already a commercial disaster. We put up our postage charges to £7 a book for those parts of the world outside Europe but that has proved woefully inadequate. A reader from the Cayman Islands ordered five books and, quite properly, sent £35 to cover postage. But the books actually cost nearly twice that much to post. So we lost money on the order. It took us 45 minutes just to stick on the stamps – which took up every available inch of space on the parcels. International postage prices have soared in the last year or so and the prices invariably require a complex combination of stamps. This latest absurd regulation will put an end to our selling books abroad.

I am, indeed, seriously depressed about our business. I can see no future for it. I loathe eBooks and Kindles. I love printed books. But I cannot see how we can continue printing and sending out books through the post. Our business model is doomed. I am saddened too when I realise that no author will ever again be able to run a commercially successful self-publishing business.

30.

The hound of the Baskervilles is still being allowed to roam free and has killed one of the pheasants which live in our garden. He succeeded in leaping a four foot high wall and today we found all that remains: a sad collection of feathers. A couple of weeks ago he killed a pair of loving and inseparable wood pigeons which had been living with us for months. Once again we found nothing more than a bunch of feathers; the birds were as inseparable in death as they had been in life. The tracks in the snow proved that it was the hound, and not a fox, which had done the killing.

31.

It has always seemed to me that the only route to follow is the precarious one of the independent thinker. As an iconoclast I have always exposed my ideas to the risk of ridicule and dismissal. I have always believed that all good new ideas sound crazy at first (if they don't then they are probably not very original) and I have always recognised that speaking my mind and eschewing conformity is bound to bring resentment and serious opposition. I have always understood that swimming against the current must mean that the journey will be wearing and depressing. I have always known that being original will mean being labelled controversial and that the conformists will dismiss me as a lunatic. I have always known that standing up, and being counted, is a dangerous thing to do. But I had not counted on being silenced, stifled, banned so very effectively. I underestimated the power of the establishment and now I understand what Herodotus meant when he wrote: `Of all human troubles the most hateful is to feel you have the capacity for power and yet no field in which to practise it.' I can sympathise with H. G. Wells who, at the end of his life, cried out in real pain: `Goddam you all. I told you so.'

How I wish I had been able to write the *Diary of a Gruntled Man.*

Publisher's Note

`Just Another Bloody Year' is Vernon Coleman's second diary. The first was called `The Diary of a Disgruntled Man'. If you enjoyed this book you will enjoy that one. A list of books by Vernon Coleman is available in Amazon's `AuthorCentral and on his website http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

THE AUTHOR

By `Patchy' Fogg

After working in Liverpool for a year, as a Community Service Volunteer, Vernon Coleman attended Birmingham Medical School back in the days when doctors and nurses regarded it as their duty to keep patients alive regardless of the demands of the State bureaucrats. When he arrived at the university he was told that he had to join the National Union of Students. He was told that it was compulsory and since he didn't much fancy joining something because he had to, he invoked the United Nation Charter and was allowed not to join. During his years as a medical student he ran a nightclub, reviewed plays and books for a number of national publications and wrote several columns. He qualified as a doctor in 1970 and has worked both in hospitals and as a GP. He is still registered and licensed to practise as a GP principal. He has founded and organised many campaigns concerning iatrogenesis, drug addiction and the abuse of animals and has given evidence to committees at the House of Commons and House of Lords.

Coleman resigned as a GP when he was fined for refusing to put diagnoses on sick notes. Patients asked him not to disclose details of their illnesses to their employers and he believed it was wrong that he should write diagnoses on bits of paper that would be seen by colleagues and employers. He was taken before a tribunal of what he calls `faceless, nameless idiots' who demanded to know what his patients were suffering from. He refused to answer, telling them that their diagnoses were confidential and none of their business. They fined him £100 and threatened to keep fining him if he didn't start writing proper diagnoses on all his sick notes. His colleagues seemed utterly disinterested. Their view was that if the State wanted full diagnoses written on forms, then full diagnoses should be written on forms. Since no one else (and certainly no one from the British Medical Association or the General Medical Council) seemed interested in his stand he resigned and became a full time author.

He has worked as a columnist for numerous national newspapers including *The Sun, The Daily Star, The Sunday Express* and *The People.* He once wrote five columns at the same time for national papers (he wrote them under three different names, Dr Duncan Scott in *The Sunday People,* Dr James in *The Sun* and Dr Vernon Coleman in the *Daily Star, Sunday Scot* and the sadly short lived *Sunday Correspondent*). At the same time he was also writing weekly columns for the *Evening Times* in Glasgow. His syndicated columns have appeared in over 50 regional newspapers**.**

He says that he has never gone looking for trouble but that it has always had no difficulty in finding him. He hates being told what to do, loathes bureaucrats and dislikes compromise. He has been described as `a rebel with too many causes'. Thanks largely to bits of paper awarded by foreigners his official title is Professor Dr Sir Vernon Coleman MB ChB DSc KStJ (KC). He now writes books which are printed in limited editions and could, therefore, be classified as `rare books' before they start their lives.

Coleman is pathologically shy, sceptical and gullible and has, belatedly, discovered that kindness is often mistaken for weakness. He has no networking skills at all. On his one visit to Buckingham Palace he slipped out of a line of people waiting to be presented to HM and dodged Margaret Thatcher who was looking for someone to talk to. He describes himself as an outsider in the mould of Cobbett or Bierce and regards himself as a revolutionary anarchist. He has been told by the editor of one national newspaper that thanks to a decree from on high his name is now not allowed to appear in the media and although this sounds bizarre he suspects it might be true. His favourite mythical character is Cassandra, a Trojan princess who was cursed by Apollo to make accurate predictions that were disbelieved. His motto is: `Why take the easy road when there are harder paths to follow?' He believes that he has a very special relationship with his readers and that when someone picks up a book a personal and private bond between author and reader can be established. He always tries to write sentences which encourage the reader to want to tell someone what they've just read. He knows that he would have been more successful as an author if he'd been sensible and stuck to writing the same book over and over again. (It's difficult to argue that a reader who liked *Rogue Nation* will enjoy *Alice's Diary*.) He says that his God loves all creatures equally and does not believe that a horse is better than an accountant or that a lawyer is better than a frog.

He can, at different times of day, be a cavalier and a roundhead, and is a rebellious traditionalist and a radical who hates change. He believes in the value of Old England and despises social engineering programmes such as political correctness, means-testing and multiculturalism. He believes that we all have a duty to stand up and speak out for those who have no voice.

Vernon Coleman and his wife have designed for themselves a unique world to sustain and nourish them in these dark and difficult times. The author is devoted to Donna Antoinette (The Princess) whom he describes as the kindest, sweetest, most sensitive and loyal woman a man could hope to meet. Whatever the season they can both often be found in a corner of The Duck and Puddle, and can always be relied upon to buy a round when it is their turn, and sometimes when it is not.

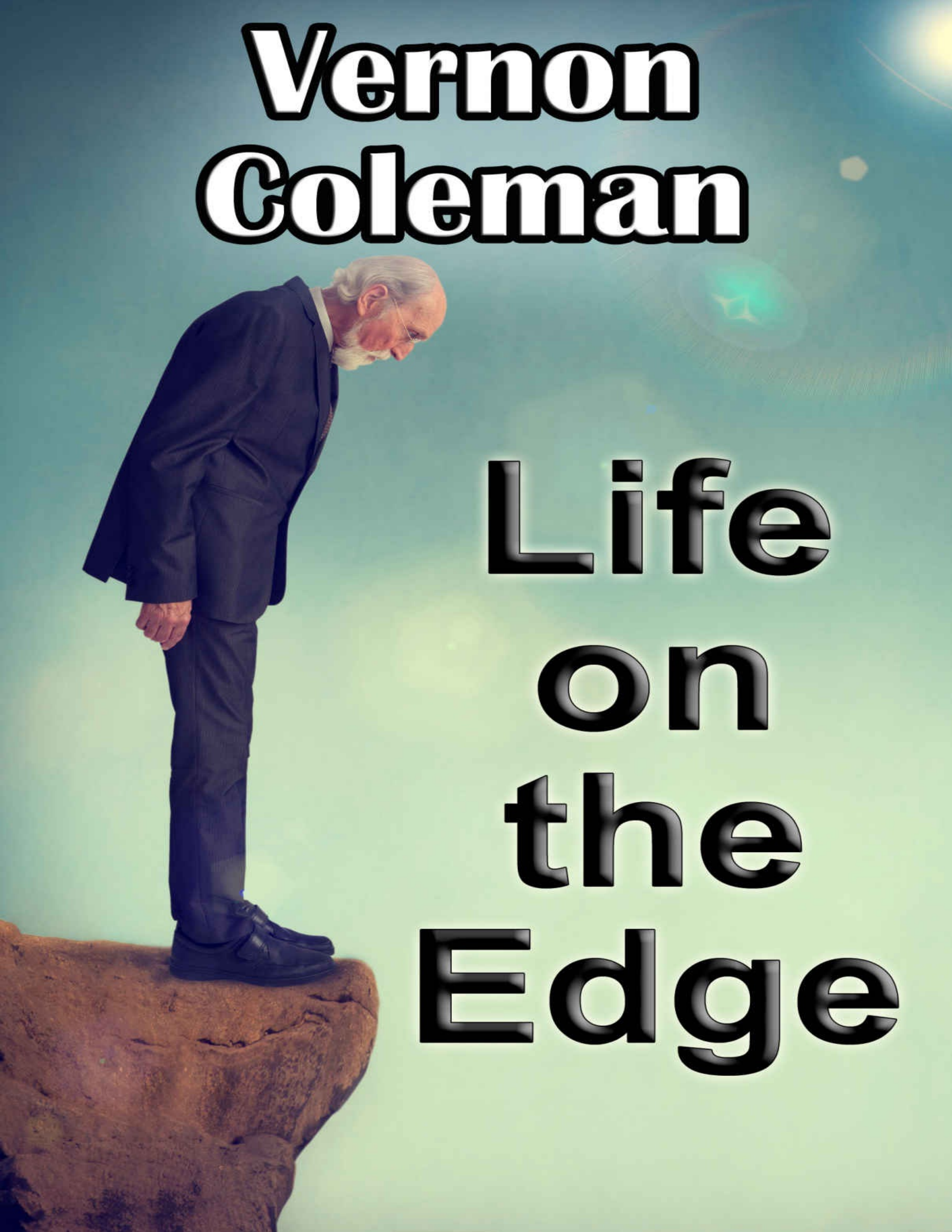

Vernon Coleman

Life on the Edge

Life on the Edge

Vernon Coleman

Note from the author:
The previous books in this series are *Diary of a Disgruntled Man, Just Another Bloody Year, Bugger Off And Leave Me Alone* and *Return of the Disgruntled Man*. So, that makes this approximately the fifth diary in the series.

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Who the hell is Vernon Coleman?
Vernon Coleman is a writer and the author of over 100 other books which have sold over two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK and have been translated into 25 languages. Many of his books are available as Kindle books on Amazon. For a list of available eBooks, please see Vernon Coleman's author page on Amazon. Vernon Coleman owns a small collection of rather nice ties and a frighteningly huge number of books. He is married to the delectable Antoinette. There is nothing else worth knowing.

Note
To litigants and lawyers: please distribute the following words and phrases throughout this book at points where they appear to be appropriate: 'in my opinion', 'allegedly', 'under some circumstances' and 'possibly'.

Dedication

To Antoinette: my everyone. We are always alone, forever together. Without you there is nothing. With you there is everything. Without you I would be only half a person. You make me complete. Thank you.

Wise and Relevant Biblical Saying

‘Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is happening, and what will take place later.’ – *Revelation 1:19*

January

1

(Gloucestershire)

Silicon Valley inventors constantly claim that their latest gadget or app is ‘the most important invention since the wheel’.

This is nonsense, of course.

Nothing much of any great value has come out of Silicon Valley.

In the last few months of last year, we were reminded of the joys of drones, virtual reality thingies and robots.

(Virtual reality gadgets are never going to catch on. The people who use them invariably suffer from awful nausea since what they see is not what their semi-circular canals tell them they are experiencing. Medical scientists have been trying for decades to cure motion sickness, without getting anywhere profitable. I can’t see millions of people wanting to buy a product which makes them nauseous.)

The latest excitement to be dreamt up by people who clearly don’t have enough real work to do is the driverless car.

When I first read about driverless cars I thought they seemed a good idea (though rather dull and worthy, like instant coffee) until I saw that Google was involved with one version of this invention. Google is, of course, the third most self-serving, evil company on the planet (after Monsanto and Goldman Sachs).

Those funny Google spectacles didn’t do too well, did they?

I suspect they were about as successful as that silly Apple Watch.

I wonder how many of those wunderkinds who are working on driverless cars imagine themselves to be breaking new ground and travelling into an uncharted future.

And I wonder how many realise that the first driverless car was actually on the roads back in the 1930s. Not many, I suspect.

A driverless Tin Lizzy car called the Phantom Auto drove around America – no driver, no wires, no strings during the years after the Great Crash.

The driverless car drove in and out of traffic and did everything as though there were a driver at the wheel. There was no trickery. The car was actually controlled by operators using a remote control device. They sat in another car which was driven along behind the driverless car.

The experiment came to a rather unhappy end when the Phantom Auto accidentally hit 10 people. There were no fatalities but some injuries and cars went back to having drivers.

Very few things are genuinely new.

I wouldn’t be surprised to read that Leonardo da Vinci once wrote a code for a Pokémon App. If he did, I bet it was the bee’s knees of Apps.

The bottom line, I fear, is that there is no chance of driverless cars becoming widespread.

Who is going to want to trust their lives to a deadly vehicle controlled by software designed by the sort of self-indulgent spotty youths who gave us Google Glasses, the Apple Watch and the absurdly over complicated Microsoft Word for Windows?

I can see that a single driverless vehicle might cope perfectly well on a nice straight motorway or on one of those 17 lane highways popular in the United States, but I cannot see a driverless car managing to cope in a narrow Devon country lane or on British roads where junctions are often blind and drivers have to put their foot down and ‘go’ when there doesn’t appear to be a vehicle approaching.

England is covered with narrow roads where a driverless car will be constantly confused.

We own a vehicle which is fitted with computer software which enables it to tell if the driver is crossing a white line on the road. I usually keep it switched off because it is simply too annoying for words. Sensors which pick out obstacles are commonplace on modern cars. All these things work well on a motorway or in a car park but on narrow country roads the systems become hysterical, beeping constantly and forever giving out unnecessary warnings.

Faced with such a situation, a driverless car would halt and never move again.

And what will happen when a driverless car encounters a pothole?

If a driverless car hits a pothole it will be thrown into a panic, assuming that it has crashed. Airbags will explode.

At road junctions and in car parks and in other real life situations the driverless car, which will have to be programmed to be cautious, will be frozen to the spot. Real drivers will bully the driverless cars into submission. At junctions, the driverless car will remain stationary for hours, creating massive queues. And what will happen when two driverless cars meet in a single track lane in the countryside? Which one will reverse?

I strongly suspect that, despite all the hype, the only driverless cars which will work will be ones which have a midget driver hidden somewhere under the bonnet – in the same way that the most successful original chest computer had a small Japanese person hidden in the box.

The truth is that we have become obsessed with the power of electronics in general and the computer in particular. We have become so obsessed that we have forgotten that the purpose of progress is to make life better in some way. Computer people always claim that the computer is the greatest invention ever. That's plain silly. The computer doesn't come in the top 100. It isn't difficult to think of inventions which affected our lives far more thoroughly than the computer. Assuming we leave out major discoveries such as the wheel then stoves, ovens, clocks, spectacles, water closets, electricity, the combustion engine, the telephone, the washing machine and the bicycle would make my top dozen. But then anaesthesia, antiseptics (and the principle of antisepsis), the discovery of the circulation of the blood and antibiotics must be in the top dozen too. And that's more than a dozen already.

I know this will be heresy to many but it seems to me these days that the main role of the computer is to give utility companies something to blame when they screw up.

I suspect that no one under the age of 40 will believe this but organisations are, on the whole, now slower, less efficient and more encumbered with bureaucracy than they were before computers were introduced into everyday life.

Before the introduction of the computer, people had a greater sense of responsibility. An individual kept his firm's ledger or diary and if something was wrong then it was his fault. His handwriting gave him away. He couldn't blame the pen in the same way that today's worker blames the computer. Today, the computer has the authority and the responsibility and the humans are as nothing.

So, stuff the driverless car. And confusion to computers.

2

(Gloucestershire)

We bought a new Morphy Richards toaster to replace one which decided to commit suicide and blow itself up.

The instructions which accompanied the new toaster warn us that the user must stay with the toaster at all times while using it.

This seemed an odd instruction but I discovered why when I used the toaster for the first time.

For some reason which I am yet to discern, the toaster's eject mechanism has been given the sort of power usually associated with an ejector seat on a fighter plane. Maybe the company hired an eager new designer fresh from an apprenticeship with British Aerospace or Lockheed. When the toaster considers that the toast is done (presumably for health and safety reasons, it considers very slightly browned to be the acme of toasting perfection) it hurls the piece of toast upwards with such ferocity that it flies out of the toaster and gets very close to the ceiling. My first two attempts to turn bread into toast landed on the floor. I then realised why I had been instructed to stand near to the toaster. Maybe the device was also designed to give budding cricketers and baseball players some catching practice.

I was delighted when I caught the third piece of bread which I toasted this morning. Sadly, however, the toast, which nicely browned, was so hot that I dropped it.

In the end, I gave up and ate plain bread and marmalade.

(Oxford coarse cut marmalade spread generously since you ask. I understand that in this, the age of Twitter, sharing details of one's breakfast is now de rigueur.)

Still, it's a nice looking toaster and Mr Morphy and Mr Richards get full marks for making something that looks good.

William Morris, who believed that everything in a home should be useful or beautiful, would have been half pleased.

3

(Gloucestershire)

We have a large porch outside our backdoor. The porch is big enough to contain a bench and to store logs and bird food under cover.

Today, I noticed, with horror, that the bottom six inches of each of the two oak posts which support the roof of the structure are rotten. Rain and snow have done their worst and the wood has crumbled. In addition, the posts have been scratched by badgers and squirrels, eaten by wasps and other insects and hammered by woodpeckers.

The result of all this is that the ravaged posts now appear to be resting on a sliver of wood the size of a long matchstick. Indeed, forget the matchsticks, one of the posts appears to be resting on air rather than wood.

When we bought the house, I asked the surveyor if he thought the posts would ever be a problem. ‘Oh no,’ he said, reassuringly. ‘The edges are a bit rotten but the rot won’t spread through the wood.’

A builder whom we employed to do a lot of work on the house told us the same thing.

It is now clear that they were both wrong and that for the 11,890th time in my life I was mistaken to trust the experts.

Now we have to find a builder who can put up a couple of supporting props while we decide how best to mend the structure.

There is some urgency.

Our local family of magpies (there are usually six who come to breakfast) have a tendency to dance the tango on the roof every morning. Since magpies are notoriously heave footed there is a real risk that they will bring the house down.

I have no doubt that when we find a builder he will start off confidently and optimistically, talking of a job that will take a day or two and cost a thousand or so but will, within a remarkably short space of time, end up having to rebuild most of Gloucestershire with annoyance and cost in proportion.

4

(Gloucestershire)

Britain is rich enough to spend £50 billion on a new rail link (which is widely regarded as unnecessary except by those involved in its building) between London and wherever you can reach with the amount of railway line you can buy for £50 billion; rich enough to waste billions every year on foreign aid (most of it is creamed off by greedy consultants and self-serving charities); and rich enough to pay £350 million a week for membership of the European Union.

And yet every winter 40,000 elderly citizens die of cold in the United Kingdom. Surely this is proof, if proof be needed, that we do not live in a civilised country. The elderly are today’s oppressed and forgotten people. More than a million old people who have trouble with basic activities receive no help whatsoever. A contact working in an English hospital tells me that elderly patients are deliberately put onto a ward where MRSA is endemic in order to get rid of them as quickly as possible. (Could this be one of the reasons hospitals seem apparently reluctant to take simple steps to eradicate killer, antibiotic resistant bugs?)

In the UK, the expected annual retirement income for men is £19,850 in 2016. This includes the State pension and all private pensions. Back in 2010, the average man had a retirement income of £19,600. I don’t think anyone would suggest that £250 for a period of six years covers the increase in inflation during that period. And yet the Entitlement Generation, entirely self-obsessed, narcissistic and led around by their apps, still loudly claim that the elderly now have all the money.

A decade or so ago, the young would inevitably have had little or no respect for their elders (‘What do they know?’ was the cry) but the Entitlement Generation have replaced that normal, predictable, expected sense of innate and illogical superiority common to all previous generations with something worse than mere contempt.

The Entitlement Generation may spend hours in the gym and worry about being ‘fit’ (in both modern senses of the word – the traditional one and the silly new one) but mentally they are big, fat, lazy slugs, desperately afraid of anything which threatens to disrupt their expectations and they cannot see the point of the elderly. They would, I suspect, happily vote to have everyone over the age of 60 put down to save money and effort.

(Incidentally, I was not in the slightest bit surprised to read that an ‘Adulting School’ has opened in the United States where 20-30 year olds can learn how to be adults. Students pay good money to learn how to book dental appointments and how to turn up on time. So, now we know: the millennials are as stupid, as gormless and as self-absorbed and spoilt as we always thought they were.)

The oppression of the elderly is worse in Britain than anywhere else but it is a global phenomenon.

I saw today that the boss of Canada Post recently announced that he was planning to eliminate home deliveries so that citizens could be forced to walk to community mailboxes.

He is doing this, he said, because ‘seniors’ are telling him that they want to be active and to lead fuller lives. What a nice fellow. All heart and spin. He forgets that he too will, if he is lucky and blessed, one day be old, frail and hoping for a heart-warming Christmas card.

5

(Gloucestershire)

We already have negative interest rates and now we have negative deaths.

In the old days, heirs who wanted to get their hands on Grandpa's money might be tempted to plump up a pillow and place it over his face instead of behind his head. But these days, the tax laws are such that in many cases it pays to keep someone alive for longer than God might have planned. The result is that doctors are encouraged to keep the moribund on life support for months or even years in order to minimise tax liabilities.

It is, I suppose, the opposite to murder.

An unhappy shopping experience this afternoon made me realise (for the umpteenth time) that the idea that the customer is always right is now just a memory. Similarly, the idea that customers should always be treated well in the hope that they will remain regular customers is now out of fashion.

When we ran our publishing house (to sell my self-published books) we did everything wrong.

Thirty years ago, self-publishing was not supposed to be profitable. Selling books by mail order was not supposed to be profitable. And using newspaper advertisements to sell books was supposed to be commercial suicide. And bookshops, always reluctant to order from small publishers (even though they could take the books on sale or return), definitely would not take self-published books – even if they were huge bestsellers.

But we made self-publishing work by taking care to look after our long-term regular customers. Even if we lost money on an advertisement or a mailing, we hoped that we would eventually make money because the readers we acquired would come back and want to buy a second, a third and a twentieth book. Many of our customers bought books by the dozen both for themselves and as gifts. We did everything we could to look after our customers. If something went wrong, we did everything we could to put it right. If a customer said a book was lost or damaged then we replaced the missing or damaged book without question. If something really bad happened we would send another book, free of charge, in an attempt to make amends and to keep the customers happy. It felt right and it seemed to work. We had regular, loyal customers all over the world. Self-publishing actually worked for us.

The whole thing eventually fell apart for a number of reasons. It didn't help that the banks demanded huge fees for allowing us to take payment by credit card. But the real problem was Royal Mail, which put up prices at such a rate that we couldn't keep up. We struggled to survive the huge costs of processing credit card orders (essential because we were taking orders by telephone) but the business became unprofitable when it started to cost us more to post a small parcel of books than the customer was paying for the books. Our unique business model became unsustainable. I do not believe anyone will succeed in publishing hard or paperback books and selling them by mail order unless or until Royal Mail's endless price rising is curbed. When we began publishing just a few decades ago, we were able to send books post free. Then we charged £1 towards postage and packing. Then we had to put that price up to £2. Then the £2 went nowhere near paying the cost of buying packaging and stamps and, unlike the books, we were stuffed.

So, I don't understand why so many companies now seem to regard their customers with contempt.

The staff in big stores would laugh at you if you suggested that 'the customer is always right'. And if they make a mistake they don't give a damn about keeping the customer happy. You often have to fight hard even to get a refund these days.

What I find particularly surprising is the fact that small companies seem to be just as bad (and sometimes worse) as big companies. Small Web based companies, selling mail order, refuse to give refunds and fight to the end to deny customers any rights at all. Things have become so bad that in many instances, I have gone back to buying stuff in shops – where I can see what I am getting and I know that when I hand over my money I will receive something in return.

6

(Gloucestershire)

I got up this morning and found Percy, our resident pheasant peering through the dining room window wondering why he hadn't been given his breakfast. When I went outside I could hear a fox at the top of the garden. The pheasant seemed totally unperturbed by this. As soon as I had given Percy his sunflower hearts, and had filled the squirrel and bird feeders, a young lesser spotted woodpecker arrived and started hammering at the peanuts. I watched in amazement; always astonished that this relatively slight and elegant bird can hammer away with such ferocity without doing itself any harm. I read somewhere (so it must be true) that in an average sort of day, a woodpecker bangs its beak at trees around 12,000 times, building up G forces of around 1,000. When the woodpecker flies into town, he is rather like John Wayne riding into a Western town. Every other living creature bolts for cover.

7

(Gloucestershire)

If the wretched Jeremy Corbyn, the bedazzled, lunatic leader of the Labour Party, had stayed true to his instincts and supported the coming vote to leave the European Union he and Labour would have been electable at the next election.

The British people hate the EU, with its adopted German anthem and Nazi background, but have no obvious champion among the traditional political leaders. They hate the fact that EU staff are paid huge salaries (the lowest file clerk receives £50,000 tax free with a massive pension which can be taken at the age of 50) given absurdly extensive holidays, allowed free travel, free private health care and more perks than even a banker would consider reasonable. And they hate the way that the EU interferes with every aspect of our lives; making things worse in every conceivable way. (So, for example, in the EU's world, fruit and vegetables must be as perfect as baby eurocrats, bereft of all faults and blemishes, and to attain this perfection the fruit and vegetables must be created with the aid of genetically engineered seeds and soaked in antibiotics, hormones, toxins, insecticides and a whole galaxy of carcinogenic chemicals. It is largely thanks to the EU that cancer rates are soaring, the bees are disappearing and our countryside is uncluttered by birds or butterflies.)

But Corybn gave in and is now working on the same side of the street as the greatly loathed Cameron and the even more loathed Osborne. No one takes Corbyn seriously, partly because he is so scruffy that when he wanders about London people mistake him for a homeless Big Issue seller and probably give him their loose change, but also because he is both a megalomaniac and barking mad. (You are allowed to be one in British politics – but not both.)

British politics is in a bad, bad way at the moment.

Cameron and Osborne are lying little b'stards who went to the Blair School of governance: never tell the truth when you can find a lie to tell instead. They have clearly graduated with dishonourable degrees in deceit and dishonesty. Both have, I suspect, buggered their careers and they will share the same sort of ignominious legacy that Blair trails behind him. (I cheered when I heard that Blair will be campaigning on behalf of the EU. It is difficult to think of anything more likely to harm the EU than the support of Britain's most famous war criminal.)

I'm surprised, too, that the Royal Family haven't established themselves as being opposed to the EU. I don't think the Queen et al realise that they are doomed if we stay in the European Union. There is no place for England, Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland in the EU's plans. We are all to become numbered regions. And there will certainly be no place for monarchies.

It is a tragedy that Queen Elizabeth II has betrayed her people in a way that Queen Elizabeth I would have never done.

Going back to Corbyn, I am puzzled, by the fact that the Labour Party seems to hate England and the English. For some reason, which I cannot understand, the Labour Party disapproves of anyone who supports England. They regard such a stance as racist and chauvinistic. And yet the same people enthuse wildly about the overtly racist Scottish National Party and the not quite so bad Welsh nationalists. Strange. I can't think that this will win Corbyn many votes.

8

(Gloucestershire)

A woman in the next village left her considerable fortune for the care of her dog.

The woman left her house and her money (several million of it) to a couple in the village for as long as they continued to look after her beloved pooch. That was 23 years ago and it is rumoured in the neighbourhood that the surprisingly young and agile poodle which now lives in luxury is actually at least the third reincarnation of the much loved companion. There is apparently no fixed date to the Will and so in theory, I suppose, the couple could continue to live the life of Mr and Mrs Reilly for as long as they can find dogs which look like the one they are supposed to be looking after.

The Reillys, as I will call them, are a strange pair: they look so alike that if they dressed the same, you could mistake them for twins. Lots of people tend to look like their partners because, over the years, they adopt the same gestures and facial movements but the Reillys are so identical that it's spooky. Maybe they are clones.

9

(Gloucestershire)
Why did God put all the good stuff, vitamins, protein and so on, in green vegetables which are dull and which make anyone over 40 feel ill? Why didn't He put some of the good things into chocolate and ice cream and especially into those chocolate covered cream filled meringues which Parisians used to call something else but which, overcome by inexplicable political correctness they now call meringue au chocolat? Then people would eat loads of good things and we would all be much healthier than we are.

And why does the skin on your heels suddenly get hard when you're old?

Why do old men have no hair on their heads and lots of hair in their ears?

Why do people in offices now always say that X is away on annual leave instead of saying that they are on holiday? Have we all joined the armed forces?

10
(Gloucestershire)
Why doesn't Britain put motorway signs and instructions on the overhead gantries instead of on poles at the side of the road?

If you're driving in the centre or outer lane of a motorway and there is a line of large lorries in the inside lane then all the signs will be hidden.

Today we missed our turning because until we passed it I didn't even know there was a turning.

And why, when there is a blockage on the motorway closing both carriageways (as seems to happen often these days), don't the police open up the central reservation and allow cars from both directions to cross over and return the way they had come on the other carriageway? This would be desperately easy to do since the carriageway on the other side of the reservation will necessarily be quite empty of traffic. Motorists could then reset their satellite navigation systems to find a route to their destination not using motorways. This would save the country billions every month in wasted petrol and lost time.

11
(Gloucestershire)
I was delighted to hear that it is now possible to purchase small flags which bear the cross of St George together with a small note: 'If this flag offends you, why not consider moving to another country?' Wonderful.

Why anyone with functioning brain tissue would want to buy and wave an EU flag is quite beyond me – though people do, notably at the BBC's Last Night of the Proms where I have no doubt they are encouraged to do so by the BBC itself. It would be no less distressing to see people waving Nazi flags. There is, after all, very little difference between the two since the European Union was designed by Adolf and his chums.

12
(Paris)
We travelled to Paris on Eurostar as usual. But it was a terrible disappointment.

The company's new trains are truly awful, harshly lit, like a supermarket, and as dull as ditch water.

When the Eurostar service was first introduced the trains were designed to look a little like the Orient Express. The tables in first class carriages were even equipped with little tasselled lamps. You could adjust your ventilation and lighting to suit. The seats looked good and were comfortable. The excitement started when you boarded the train at Waterloo.

I always feared that the Channel Tunnel would take the thrill out of foreign travel and so it has now come to pass.

Aeroplanes pretty well emasculated the whole experience, of course, but there remained, for a while, the joy of travelling from Dover to Calais on the ferry or even going by sleeper from Victoria back in the days when they put the sleeping carriages onto the boat and then took them off and put them back onto a train in France.

The Old Eurostar trains helped maintained the myth that travel to Continental Europe was something special.

But today's trains, which were apparently designed by a company called Pininfarina and which cost 1 billion euros, look like the 8.22 commuter train from Reading to London Paddington. What a disappointment. All the glory and excitement have gone. Even the ride has changed, and staff agreed with us that it is not as comfortable as it used to be.

Moreover, the staff no longer open the doors and never offer to help elderly or frail travellers struggling with heavy luggage. There are no hot towels, no after dinner mints and no champagne. I gather the staff have been in dispute with the management and to be honest it shows. The whole experience is more akin to British Rail 1960 than Eurostar 2000.

I used to recommend the Eurostar service but I shall no longer do so. I've been using the Eurostar service since it started, and in the last couple of years the whole experience has deteriorated in every way imaginable. It almost seems as though Eurostar has been bought up by British Airways and has done everything within its power to make travelling by rail a deeply unpleasant experience.

These days the staff don't even protect reserved seats, and almost every time we board the train we have to argue with people who are sitting in our seats – which they have decided are better situated than their own reserved seats.

I can't make my mind up whether it is better to be travelling on Eurostar for the first time (and therefore unaware of just how much it has deteriorated) or to be a disappointed traveller who can remember how much better the service used to be.

I suppose the pain of disappointment is, at least, softened by the good memories.

The new trains are faster than the old ones and in order to cut ten minutes off the journey time, Eurostar has produced a train which sways from side to side in an unpleasantly nauseating way. It is now impossible to move about the carriage, and my attempt to visit la toilette ended up with an embarrassing crash onto a table where two stern looking nuns were finishing off a post prandial glass of something red and probably very acidic which was, I fear, unlikely to improve their moods. The train journey was made even more hellish by a couple travelling with three children. The children were well behaved and surprisingly quiet. The parents were noisy, forever shouting at their offspring and threatening them with all sorts of terrible consequences if they didn't do this or did do that.

Journeys like this merely exacerbate my chronic unremitting misanthropy.

In the bad old days I could get quite a lot of work done on the train. If required I could doze comfortably. Now I can neither work nor doze, so the entire time on the train is lost. I feel like the designer of the new train has stolen my time – in chunks of several hours at a time.

Few things annoy me more than the theft of my time.

Utility companies do it all the time. If I try to ring up they keep me waiting for half an hour. They ask me to key in a 32 digit identification number to save time and then, when I eventually get to speak to someone, they demand the same 32 digit identification number. HMRC are even worse. I have to ring them five times to get through – and then they ignore my request, whatever it might be. It is common for taxpayers to waste an hour trying to get through to an HMRC advice line. The official HMRC target is to handle 80% of the calls it receives. Heaven alone knows why they are allowed to get away with such a pitiful target but in reality it doesn't matter much since HMRC met this target in only 10 weeks of last year.

Companies and workmen who ignore instructions or who require unnecessary paperwork are time thieves. Banks are awful time bandits. They send me weekly documents which they require me to read on pain of excommunication. Or maybe it's extermination. It's certainly something permanent and terrifying.

Going back to Eurostar, I gather from talking to other travellers that the new (and allegedly improved) train is distinctly unpopular.

Why don't big companies do a little research before bowing before the idolatrous God of change? I used to very much enjoy the train journey on Eurostar. No more. Evidence, once more, that nothing improves.

Young folk do not know this because they do not remember when things were better and they assume that those of us who moan are simply old farts who don't like progress. They're wrong. I like progress. It's regress I can't stand. By every objective criterion imaginable, Britain is a poorer place to live in than it used to be.

As someone who desperately wants Britain to leave the European Union and who looks forward to the adventure, I think I can safely say that I am not frightened of change.

13

(Paris)

I decided, a few months ago, to write a new book about Bilbury – simply because I still love the village and the villagers and I find it relaxing to write about my friends Thumper Robinson and Patchy Fogg. The characters are there all the time, doing whatever they are doing when I'm not writing about them. The books are merely a peep into a continuum.

But now that the book is nearly finished I am getting worried. How will the book be received? Will an unhappy or offended reader 'kill' the book with a one star review? I see every paragraph as the cause of a potential one star review. I try not to edit the book as I am writing but I worry that I am censoring myself subconsciously.

I am seriously considering not publishing the book when it is finished.

Paranoia is a consequence of experience and we are unwise to ignore it.

Am I, I wonder, the only person to have noticed that reviews of all kinds now seem to be polarised between those giving five stars (the best pub/hotel/book/film in the entire history of the world) and those giving one star (the worst pub/hotel/book/film in the entire history of the world). There are no grey areas. Reviewers are less likely to realise that just because they don't like a book, or it doesn't suit their mood, that doesn't mean that it is without merit and should be hammered.

On the train yesterday I picked up a free copy of *The Spectator* magazine in which a writer pointed out that Wikipedia entries are usually written either by admirers or enemies. If an entry is written by a fan then the tone will be laudatory. If an entry is written by an enemy then the tone will be condemnatory. Once the tone has been set it will probably never change.

My Wikipedia entry was originally written by an anonymous enemy – probably a pro-drug industry campaigner upset by my views on vaccination or vivisection. The last time I saw it 'my' entry was so bizarrely biased and woefully incomplete as to be laughable. It was a warts and all biography which concentrated entirely on the warts. Judging by the booklist a reader would assume that I must have died in 2011.

Drug company lobbyists can do what they like with my Wikipedia entry, searching out bad things to include, omitting anything good and making stuff up as and when they like but I am not allowed to correct factual errors.

Going back to reviews, I am certainly not the only person to find modern reviewing alarming. I saw recently that *The Guardian* bans 'ordinary people' from commenting on articles in the newspaper if their comments are thought by the paper to be 'controversial'. No dissent is tolerated. I'm not surprised. *The Guardian* is, like the *FT,* a pro – fascist newspaper. Nor does *The Guardian* allow readers to complain through the latest version of the Press Complaints Commission, the newspaper trade's in-house guardian.

This afternoon we walked along the quays by the Seine near to Notre Dame and watched a man pull a bag out of the river. The bag was tied to a bollard by a piece of fishing line. When he saw us pulling out the bag the man scowled at us. We left the area with some haste. But now I can't stop wondering what was in the bag. What would you store in a bag dangling in several feet of dirty river water?

There are pictures of Johnny Hallyday everywhere.

The French Elvis is, it seems, immortal.

He has been French royalty and France's favourite singer since 1960. It isn't widely known but his real name is Jean-Philippe Smet which probably wouldn't have worked quite so well. He borrowed the name 'Halliday' from his cousin's husband who was a singer but the name was misspelt by the record company and he became Johnny Hallyday.

An English neighbour in our apartment building told us that Monsieur Hallyday bought himself a Hummer when they first came out. He had dark windows fitted so that he could travel around Paris anonymously. Unfortunately, he was the only person in Paris to have a Hummer and so every time the vehicle appeared it was mobbed. Sadly, Mr Hallyday has, like everyone else with money and good sense, gone to live in Switzerland or Belgium or some other country where there is no President Hollande determined to gouge every last centime out of the fingers of those who dare to work hard for a living.

The neighbour is a martyr to terrible circulation. She reputedly has worse circulation than *The Independent* newspaper had before it died. She speaks of everyone with a strange and ostensibly contradictory mixture of envy and contempt. I once told her that she had a rather vicious streak. 'You say that like it is a bad thing,' she replied.

14
(Paris)
We are now obliged, by law, to allow a meter reader into our apartment twice a year. And we must, by law, allow a man in to service the boiler. We also have to fix an appointment with a man to clean the chimneys. We haven't actually got any proper chimneys so I suppose that this being France the chimney sweep will just come in, sit down for twenty minutes and then leave – mission accomplished. The company which wants to send round a man to show us how to turn on the gas cooker seems to have given up. We haven't heard from them for months, though they did claim that it was another legal necessity.

A kind American reader of my diary entitled *The Return of the Disgruntled Man* has drawn attention to the fact that in that book I am critical of the way that people tend to be forever bent over their mobile phones but are rarely seen with a book in their hands. My reader points out, with gentle patience that I probably do not deserve, that at the time he read that he was reading a copy of my book on his mobile phone.

Whoops.

In Paris, an American neighbour, who works for EDF (where every employee gets ten weeks paid holiday – which is nowhere as good as EU employees get but still not bad) tells us that he has tickets for la Comedie Francaise, a French theatre which specialises, not surprisingly in view of its name, in comedies and farces. His wife is an artist who does the modern stuff which needs to have hanging instructions printed on the back ('This Way Up'). She dismisses all criticism by claiming that anyone who doesn't like her work is too much of a philistine to understand it.

'I didn't know you understood French well enough to enjoy a theatre production!' I said, not meaning this to be as rude as I realised it sounded. 'I've been learning French for nearly 60 years and if a waiter speaks too quickly I get confused.'

Actually, to be honest, I have pretty well given up bothering to speak French at all. The French are always quick to criticise anyone who speaks their language but makes an error with grammar or vocabulary.

Worse still, I have a suspicion that the dictionaries which are sold to English speakers are deliberately designed to cause confusion. For example, the dictionaries available in the UK claim that the word 'lentement' in French means 'slower'. This is rubbish. Every time I say 'lentement s'il vous plait' to a French person who is speaking too quickly they just speak louder. So 'lentement' actually means 'louder' not 'slower'. However, I think I deserve a gold star for trying. A very rich American I know who has lived in France (well, Monaco to be accurate) for the last 40 years, has learned just two French phrases: 'Mercy buckets' and 'Silver plate'. He throws these into conversations with natives and genuinely expects them to be grateful and impressed. The French people I talk to always seem to think I deserve a detention for getting a tense wrong. So I make them speak English and I tell them that Antoinette and I will laugh afterwards at their appalling pronunciation and bizarre grammar. I try to make life more fun for them by using a lot of idioms and including long, difficult, rare or old-fashioned words in my conversation.

'Oh it's easy,' said our neighbour.

He then explained.

'All French plays have the same plot these days,' he said. 'It doesn't matter if they're supposed to be a comedy, a farce, a drama or a tragedy. In Act One, Scene One a couple talk about their son. They think it is time he found a wife (of either sex) and settled down. Suddenly, the wife, who looks just about old enough to be thinking of leaving school and who is usually called Brigitte, gets a telegram to say that her aunt/former nanny/grandmother is poorly and wants her to visit. The aunt/former nanny/grandmother is called Edith. The wife rushes off but, because the couple have recently lost all their money through undefined circumstances entirely outside their control, she has to travel by bus/bicycle. In Scene Two the husband, who is clearly old enough to be wondering if his pension plan is going to be adequate and who is called Jean-Jacques, meets a waitress/student/air stewardess in a park/a café in St Germain/airport terminal. She is called Claudette and has a Rolls Phantom superstructure imposed on a Smart car chassis. In Act One Scene Three, the husband, on finding that the girl has nowhere to stay because she and her boyfriend have had a row and she has walked out on him, takes her home with him. The husband is a very kind man and will invariably be played by a very famous French movie star who needs the work because he has five former wives to support. In Act Two Scene One, the wife returns home unexpectedly because her aunt/former nanny/grandmother has suddenly died. If the play is a farce the wife will not be upset and the death will be described as a 'relief'. If the play is a tragedy the aunt/former nanny/grandmother will have been much loved and the wife will be in floods of tears. Startled by the sudden and unexpected return of his wife, the husband panics and puts the waitress/student/air stewardess, who is by now wearing a very flimsy nightie because her own clothes got soaked in a sudden downpour, into a cupboard or wardrobe. In Act Two Scene Two, the couple's young son returns home. He is called Alain, is at college/in the army/a professional tennis player and he has come home because his girlfriend has left him and he is distraught. He does not know why his girlfriend has left him but he suspects she has run off with another man/a woman/to become a nun. He exits stage left, saying he is going to see his chums at a nearby café. In Act Two Scene Three, the wife reveals to her husband that her aunt/former nanny/grandmother has left her a vast fortune. The aunt/former nanny/grandmother was, it is revealed, a secret investor/lottery winner/author of enormously successful dirty books/westerns/romantic novels. In Act Three Scene One, the wife opens the cupboard or wardrobe in which the waitress/student/air stewardess is hiding and immediately suspects the worst. She announces that she wants a divorce. Her husband, and the waitress/student/air stewardess, try to explain to the wife that she is mistaken and that, despite the flimsy nightie, nothing untoward has happened. The wife refuses to listen. In Act Three Scene Two, the son returns. When he sees the waitress/student/air stewardess he is astonished. The two throw their arms around each other and kiss. In Act Three Scene Three, it is revealed that the waitress/student/air stewardess is the son's girlfriend. Their tiff and mutual misunderstanding is now forgotten. The wife understands at last and she and the husband laugh and make up. The son asks the waitress/student/air stewardess to marry him. Everything ends happily, with the two couples embracing. If the play is a tragedy, Act Three Scenes Two and Three are altered slightly. The wife stabs the husband and announces, as he dies, that she has taken a deadly poison while the son shoots his girlfriend and then turns the gun on himself. The drama ends with the four actors dead on the stage.'

We were very impressed by our neighbour's grasp of modern French drama. It was easy to see how and why he was able to go to the theatre without understanding much more than 's'il vous plait' (pronounced silver plate) and merci beaucoup (pronounced mercy buckets).

'The French have devised the universal French play,' explained our neighbour. 'It can run for ever.'

If he is correct, and I suspect he is, French dramatists can now all retire or spend their days merely changing the names of the universal protagonists.

One other thing I must record about our neighbour.

He travels back to the United States several times a year and I can always tell when he is going because he leaves the apartment building with a cast on his left leg and wearing one of those little skull caps favoured by Jewish men.

'Gosh, what have you done to your leg?' I asked, the first time I saw him thus attired.

'Oh, nothing,' he said. 'But if you turn up at the airport with your leg in plaster they insist on putting you in a wheelchair and taking you everywhere. I always get pushed through the security checks, upgraded and given a seat with plenty of leg room.' He touched his head. 'And I wear this skullcap thing so that I get kosher food on the plane. They have to make kosher food separately and it's always far superior to the usual rubbish they serve up.'

The plaster cast is a stage prop which has a hidden clip. It can be placed on a leg and subsequently removed with great ease.

15

(Paris)

Reading a book of French history today I discovered that on the 31st October 1501 the Duke of Valentin threw a sex part in the Vatican which was attended by, among others, Pope Alexander VI and 50 courtesans. The courtesans danced naked and then wandered around on their hands and knees picking up chestnuts which had been scattered on the floor between candelabra holding lighted candles. The Pope, the Duke and the Duke's sister, Donna Lucrezia, watched the entertainment. Afterwards prizes of nice hats were offered to those men who had sex with the greatest number of whores. There is no record of whether the Pope left clutching a new hat. French history books are far more fun than English ones. English history books are full of stories of Kings burning cakes and knocking down monasteries.

16

(Paris)

In Paris we live no more than a decent shot with a three iron from the Eiffel Tower and we walk past, under and round it almost every day. The names of the engineers who built it are immortalised in the ironwork around the tower and I have long been fascinated by its extraordinary history.

It is, I think, now well known that the tower was originally intended to be a temporary structure, erected as part of the World's Fair of the Universal Exposition to commemorate the centenary of the French revolution. The tower was only saved by the erection of a radio antenna on the top in 1900.

But there are three facts about the Tower which aren't terribly well known.

First, the tower was not originally intended for Paris at all.

Gustave Eiffel originally intended to put the tower up in Barcelona but the great and good of that Spanish city didn't like the look of the plans, said 'Non' in their very best Spanish, sent him on his way and doubtless regret the decision to this day.

Second, in the same way that M. Hallyday isn't really M. Hallyday, M. Eiffel wasn't really M. Eiffel at all. His family originally came from Germany and the family name was Bonickhause. However, the French couldn't pronounce Bonickhause and probably didn't like it terribly much so Herr Bonickhause became Monsieur Eiffel. It was probably a good thing that he changed his name because the Bonickhause Tower doesn't have much of a ring to it.

Finally, although M. Eiffel gets all the credit, the tower was originally designed by Maurice Koechlin y Emile Nouguier and Stephen Sauvestre. It wasn't designed by M. Eiffel at all.

But then I suppose everyone knows that.

17

(Paris)

We watched Quentin Tarantino's film Django again and once again were frustrated and disappointed at the death of the character played by Christopher Waltz, an actor who has so much screen charisma and charm that his characters regularly transcend the script.

It is always a disappointment when a sympathetic character dies.

We have The Great Escape running every Boxing Day (a silly tradition but it is our own) and we always complain when the characters played by Donald Pleasance and James Garner die. In the case of Pleasance, it is the character who has our sympathy but in the case of Garner's character it is the actor's baggage which makes us especially sad when he dies. We don't worry when Richard Attenborough dies but we are sad when James Garner is killed.

Film directors are sometimes surprisingly unaware of the baggage their actors bring to a screen role. When Clint Eastwood was making a film (I can't remember which one) he was required to shoot an opponent.

'Shouldn't we have an establishing shot showing that my character can handle a gun?' asked Mr Eastwood.

'No need,' said the director. 'Everyone in the audience knows you're good with a gun, Clint.'

18

(Paris)

Even in winter the beautifully maintained gardens at the Palais de Luxembourg are always busy. Today, the gardens seemed unusually full of fathers entertaining small children on the swings. Their wives were probably all busy at the hairdressers or beauty salon. I always think that the gardens at the Palais de Luxembourg are the best insight into Parisian life.

Back in England, I see that Heston Blumenthal, surely the world's most pretentious cook, is at it again. His expensive 'caff' now serves little boxes of cereals with milk that has overtones of bacon, a dish called 'the sound of the sea' which consists of small pieces of mackerel and kingfish served on a bed of tapioca (which all has to be eaten while listening to an iPod soundtrack of gentle surf), orange and beetroot jelly and botrytis cinerea, which is described as an edible replication of a plate of grapes attacked by noble rot. The word 'pretentious' really isn't enough, is it?

A meal for one at the Blumenthal caff can cost £255 a head. If I were prepared to risk the food poisoning, I'd take the Princess and demand that we were given a plate of chips and a couple of well fried eggs.

In the UK, a wealthy Arabian fellow has been in court defending himself against a charge of rape. In his defence, he claimed that he fell on top of the woman he was alleged to have raped and then accidentally penetrated her. He said he couldn't move because he had a sudden attack of spasm in the muscles of his back and that it was for this reason that he remained inside the woman long enough to ejaculate.

His tale was accepted and he was found not guilty.

I can't help wondering how well this excuse would play if offered by a less illustrious gentleman.

19

(Paris)

There are four million hidden cameras in Britain. That's on top of the millions we can see. Heaven knows how many cameras there are altogether. Britons are, without a shadow of doubt, the most peeked at people on the planet. And heaven knows who watches the screens. There must be millions of people sitting in dark rooms staring at us all going about our daily business, enduring our inevitable irritations and aggravations.

I'm not sure what all these cameras are there for.

One thing they don't do is prevent crime.

It is not widely known, since neither the police nor the politicians want it spread about, but despite having more CCTV cameras than any other city in the world there is now more violent crime in London than anywhere else in Europe.

Petty thieving is on the rise too; so much so that whereas Napoleon is said to have thought us to be a nation of shopkeepers we are now a nation of shoplifters.

The average citizen in London gets caught on camera so often that there is a rumour that all Londoners will soon have to join Equity, the actors' trade union.

Confidentially, the authorities agree that the crime rate is a direct consequence of the level of immigration. But no one is allowed to discuss this in public because 'immigration' is, like global warming and a dozen other issues, one of the subjects which cannot be aired.

Russian, Chinese and Romanian gangs now operate freely in London because political correctness means that they are immune to censure, investigation or prosecution. Thanks to the European Union anyone, even major criminals can now obtain unfettered access to Britain by buying citizenship in countries which the EU recognises.

So, for example, for a $250,000 donation to the Sugar Industry Diversification Foundation an individual from anywhere in the world can obtain full citizenship of the Caribbean Island of St Kitts and Nevis. And that citizenship provides a passport which allows visa free travel throughout Europe. All you do is send a cheque for $250,000 (in the form of a charitable donation) or invest $400,000 in real estate and wait six to eight months. You then become a citizen for life, entitled to passports for you and your family. You will have no tax liabilities. You will have visa free travel to the UK and Ireland, Switzerland and all EU countries.

Other countries offer cheaper citizenship programmes but I like the fact that St Kitts and Nevis offer lifetime citizenship and passports. I would find it difficult to cope without having to fill in tax forms or write cheques to HMRC but I expect I would learn to cope.

It’s tempting, aint it?

Mind you, it is perfectly possible for anyone to buy more direct EU access if they have a little money.

Crooks can buy Greek citizenship for 250,000 euros and they can get Spanish citizenship thrown in free if they spend more than 500,000 euros on a property in Spain. In Malta, the price for citizenship of the EU and a passport is 350,000 euros invested in real estate and a 650,000 contribution to a national fund. Anyone who wants Portuguese residency status has only to buy a property costing 500,000 euros and spend one week a year there.

(Thinking of all these wonderfully corrupt ways to buy a passport reminds me that the fastest growing offshore finance centre in the world is the United States. The US refused to adopt the international disclosure rules which have been introduced everywhere else, and foreigners who invest in the US don’t have to pay tax or explain where the money came from. It’s not surprising that there is now around $800 billion in offshore money in the US – with half of that having come from Latin America countries such as Columbia which are well known for their production of material which people stuff up their noses.)

Could the filth on London’s streets have any possible link to the massive influx of immigrants?

Most of the people pouring into the capital care nothing for England and have no pride in the city, considering London to be nothing more than a passing place, a convenient source of funds and free health care.

It is generally forgotten that immigrants (the vast majority of whom are economic migrants and not asylum seekers) want to come to Britain for entirely selfish reasons. They don’t come because they are escaping death threats or because they are in love with our culture. And they go, by and large, to pleasant, interesting or exciting areas. And there seems no doubt that they also choose to go where there is little employment available. So, for example, huge numbers of immigrants have headed straight for Wales where there is massive unemployment. And they go, by and large, to the beautiful seaside towns where they can live in taxpayer-funded comfort without ever having to face the possibility of working for a living.

The corollary is, it seems to me, that there is, therefore, absolutely nothing wrong with Britons deciding to restrict immigration for purely selfish reasons. Why are all immigrants ‘good’ and all those who want to restrict immigration ‘racist’?

No one in authority seems to know just how many people have come in to Britain since the EU opened our borders but just the other day, the Government admitted that their figures were a little low (by a million or more) so we can safely assume that the country really is as crowded as it appears to be.

One of the few certain things I have learned in life is that although most people assume that the folk in authority know what they are doing, the truth is that this is a complete misconception. The people in authority may know what you are doing and they almost certainly know what I am doing but they don’t have the faintest idea what they themselves are doing.

As far as the littered streets of London are concerned, the almost total absence of rubbish bins doesn’t help, of course. The official reason for there being no bins is that terrorists might put bombs into them. No one dares point out that the EU’s rules about rubbish mean that councils everywhere don’t want to have to deal with rubbish.

England’s capital used to be a wonderful place. Today it is noisy and filthy and the locals are leaving in their thousands. The official immigration figures always give the figure for net immigration. This fails to record the fact that hundreds of thousands of Britain’s best and hardest workers, most skilful, most ambitious and best qualified are emigrating because they are fed up with a country which no longer cares for them or their preferences.

The inevitable effect is that the whole nature of the country is changing dramatically. Within a generation at most the English will be an ethnic minority in their own country.

British women are already being told that they must dress modestly when in public so that Muslims will not be offended, and the opening of new public houses and off-licence shops are being limited to avoid upsetting Muslims who don’t drink alcohol.

The odd thing is that these attempts to appease immigrants are not being made by or directly on behalf of the immigrants themselves but by politically correct idiots who have absolutely no idea what they are doing or how they are destroying their own country.

It is now well established that the EU was set up by Nazis, but the end result will be that Muslims will take over Europe.

It is worth remembering that two out of three British Muslims say that they would not tell the police if someone they knew became involved in terrorism.

I find that scary but our politicians shrug it aside as if it were of little importance.

It is no wonder that Muslim terrorists think we’re stupid and weak. We’re the Romans in Rome before the Fall.

There are Muslims in the UK who argue, quite seriously, that Britons should adapt their lifestyle and their culture to Muslim lifestyle and culture.

What chance is there, I wonder, of the Iraqis and the Iranians adapting their lifestyle and their culture to Christian lifestyle culture?

When it found itself facing a massive problem of illegal immigration, the EU decided to solve the problem by making all the illegal immigrants perfectly legal. It is impossible to imagine a policy more guaranteed to cause racism.

Why, I wonder, are the big banks (most of which are run by Jews) not aware of precisely what this will mean? The metropolitan elite always dismiss those who dare to question the sense of unlimited migration as racists or little Englanders (mainly because they don’t understand what they mean) but the fact is that many people in Britain now live in small towns where between a fifth and a half of the population were born in another EU country.

I am convinced that the commonest victims of racism in Britain today are white, native born citizens. Just to say this, however, is to be accused of racism.

How many people know that if you are a white, working-class boy, you are less likely than anybody else in the country to go to university?

The Labour Party’s metropolitan elite love the European Union for its unlimited immigration policy. They welcome immigrants because they make great nannies, maids and gardeners. Without the cheap labour provided by the EU, a good many Labour grandees would have to look after their own children and do their own cooking and cleaning.

On the other hand, Labour’s supporters (the other 99.999% of the party) want immigration to stop because they know that the country is already over full. They know that trains, buses and roads are painfully overcrowded. Trains are now so overcrowded that when boarding one it is essential to be fit so that you can run and get a seat. If you dawdle and allow yourself to be overtaken, you’ll probably have to stand. And having a reservation is of absolutely no value these days. The Entitlement Generation believe that if a seat is empty it is theirs.

Real people, who live in the real world, know that hospital waiting lists and hospital waiting times are becoming ever longer because of the vast influx of immigrants. They know that schools are deteriorating as they struggle to cope with millions of pupils who speak no English. They know that Muslims are advised to vote in whatever way will best help Muslims – rather than the population in general.

The Labour grandees know nothing of this. When they need medical care they go private. And, in a wonderful example of group hypocrisy, they send their children to private schools.

The reality is that Britain does more for refugees than any other country in the world because Britain spends several hundred million pounds a year giving food, shelter and support to potential refugees in their home countries. That is infinitely more useful than allowing refugees to pour into a country which is ill-equipped to deal with them.

It is also important to note that Britain spends more on resettling refugees than just about any other country. Britain spends £85,000 per refugee, compared to £21,000 per refugee in the US, £17,000 per refugee in Germany and £16,000 per refugee in Canada. Britain will spend £1.7 billion over the next four years on re-homing 20,000 Syrian refugees. Those figures may startle some of those who are being forced to wait 12 months for life saving treatment from the NHS or who are being told that the country cannot afford to give them the drug that would save their lives.

The Office for National Statistics has shown that 2.4 million eastern Europeans came to Britain in the last four years. That’s three times as many as the Government said came in. And none of them went to live in Islington or the other posh parts of London where the millionaire liberals who dictate the nation’s immigration policies live and pontificate. The millionaire liberal metrosexuals live in neat, safe, middle class bubbles and never have to worry about inadequate public services because they can afford to do everything privately.

The EU’s enforced immigration policies have hit the poorest communities hardest but these days there is no political party other than UKIP standing up for them.

People in politics and the media stay on the left (which is probably where they were when they were students and didn't know any better) because they are rich enough and selfish enough and isolated enough from the real world to be able to promote their generous, liberal ideas without their own luxurious lives being affected in any way. They are fundamentally dishonest, living a lie, but unless they are egregiously ill-informed they must know that other people (people whom they have never met and whose lives and worries they do not comprehend) will pay the price for their generosity.

The truth is that bulbous middle aged ladies (of both sexes) who fancy themselves as running soup kitchens find that being 'Liberal' (with a capital L) entitles them to all the moral and social superiority of running a soup kitchen without having to stand around in the cold ladling out broth to smelly, poor people and running the risk of spilling some of the stuff on their expensive suits or, horror of horrors, of picking up fleas.

20

(Gloucestershire)

I have, for the first time in my life, bought an incinerator.

I have always preferred to have an open bonfire, taking pride in starting bonfires in heavy rain and deep snow. I have over the years become something of a bonfire aficionado. I can usually identify the ingredients of a bonfire simply by smell. Antoinette says I am as good at identifying the source of bonfire smells as the average viniculturalist is at identifying the smells in a bottle of wine.

Stand me blindfolded, downwind of a decent bonfire and I'll be able to tell you what is on fire – garden rubbish, household rubbish, a piece of old carpet, a quantity of polystyrene or an old tyre. Stand me close enough, I can even tell you what sort of wood is being burnt. I myself often smell of bonfire. Eau de bonfire, says Antoinette.

I confess that I've always been a bit of a bonfire snob and always thought that using an incinerator was cheating. But the badgers have taken to rooting through the remains in search of something edible and they tend to drag the remains of my fires around the garden. The result is that after every bonfire I have had to clean up the rest of the garden.

So I've bought an incinerator.

There are, so I am told, mean-spirited folk around who disapprove of bonfires but I wouldn't like to live without a bonfire site (with or without an incinerator).

I know bonfires produce a little smoke but if you don't burn unwanted plants such as Japanese Knotweed and Giant Hogweed (and their seeds) the world would soon be taken over.

And a bonfire is far, far less damaging to the environment than a shredder which uses vast amounts of electricity – usually obtained from a coal or diesel fired power station.

I checked with the Home Office and the local council and I am allowed to have one or two bonfires per week. They do not, however, have any restrictions on the length of time for which a bonfire can last, so with a little careful tending I should be able to keep a single conflagration alight for seven days.

I doubt if this will change in the foreseeable future. Councils everywhere know that without allowing people to have bonfires there would be a good deal more rubbish to collect. And if they didn't collect it then there would be a dramatic increase in fly tipping.

I'm so enthusiastic about my new incinerator that I have suggested to Antoinette that I'll start Coleman Incinerator Services. 'Bring your rubbish and for a modest fee I'll burn it.'

How long before someone starts offering such a service?

Our local pheasant, Lord Percival, is very fond of our incinerator too.

He spends cold nights sleeping just a few feet away from it and clearly rejoices in the fact that our garden is now equipped with very efficient central heating.

The incinerator is a life-changing purchase.

If I had to choose between the television set and the incinerator there would be no contest. As the laws about rubbish disposal become increasingly restrictive and absurd so more and more people will purchase incinerators. I predict that sales of incinerators will rocket. If I could find out who made them I would buy shares.

Next time we go to Paris I think I will take a suitcase full of rubbish.

In Paris, the rubbish is collected from our apartment building on a daily basis and there are no discernible limits.

Our apartment building in Paris has four very large wheelie bins for around 10 flats and the bins are emptied every day. We can leave our extra boxes and bags if the four wheelie bins aren't enough. That works out at 28 wheelie bins full of rubbish every week. All that means that in France the council collects 2.8 large wheelie bins per household per week.

In the UK, residents who have a wheelie bin emptied once a fortnight consider themselves lucky.

Taking a bag full of rubbish to France will be worth it for the pleasure of the conversation when we go through customs.

'What have you got in the suitcase?'

'Rubbish.'

'Open it up!'

21

(Gloucestershire)

There are only four reasons to keep books: they are useful as reference books, they are likely to be read again, they have sentimental value or they are valuable. Without culling my book collection, it reaches absurd levels. If I hadn't given away around 100,000 books I would by now be living in an aircraft hangar.

Sorting through some books to send to charity I discovered, and rescued, my copy of *Truth,* a small book which I think I mentioned in *The Diary of a Disgruntled Man.*

The 'Truth' Cautionary List was published in 1910 and contained the names and addresses of thousands of confidence tricksters and quacks who were busy taking advantage of the innocent, the gullible and the lonely.

Looking through the book, I found that a certain H. H. Crippen MD, a graduate of an American Homoeopathic Hospital College, and doubtless a much esteemed member of the medical establishment, was listed as being associated with a company called Aural Remedies Co which sold a quack treatment for deafness.

Crippen later became notorious, of course, when he was arrested at sea, running away to America with his mistress. He had killed his wife.

The book *Truth* is full of scams and trickery which are still popular now, over a century later.

There are details of a Mr John C Clarke who advertises a course in proof reading. He claims that young women who pay him 5 shillings and 6 pence for instruction will be able to earn two guineas a week.

There is the National Old-Age Pension Trust (run by a man called William Taverner who was a one-time secretary of the Spurgeon Memorial Sermon Society) which offers to provide contributory old age pensions for the thrifty but which is deemed 'financially unsound'.

And the *Truth* offers a warning about what it calls the Spanish Prisoner trick.

A letter is sent, ostensibly from a prison, and the writer explains that through complicated circumstances, he has had to bury some money somewhere in England, or place it in an English bank. The writer asks the recipient to help him recover the treasure and offers a large share in the loot in return for assistance. Once the mark has been hooked, the trickster asks for a substantial sum of money required to release the writer's portmanteau which contains the details of where the money has been hidden but which has been detained by Customs.

This scam, with variations, is still popular and profitable though instead of writing from Spain, today's tricksters usually write from Nigeria.

I put the book back onto the shelf from which I had taken it.

There are plenty more books to take to charity shops.

I am constantly searching for, and finding, stuff that I neither want nor need and have no idea why I bought it in the first place.

And I wish someone would stop breaking into the house and filling every drawer in my study with old keys, bits of foreign currency, instruction manuals in Japanese and out-of-date insurance documents. I have plenty of these already.

22

(Gloucestershire)

Have you ever wondered why broadsheet newspapers only print reviews of books which are very unlikely to sell more than a few dozen copies?

Oscar Wilde said that the truth is rarely pure and never simple but although I am reluctant to question the Master we must remember that Oscar's bon mots were designed for effect rather than accuracy and there are exceptions which prove him wrong.

The truth in this regard is hideously simple.

Broadsheet reviewers, and literary editors in particular, are all writers manqué and they are consumed with jealousy about the fact that other writers have managed to write books and get them published. The very idea that an author might also make money out of a book is just too much for them. And so only books which have absolutely no commercial future are chosen for review. Books which look as if they might prove popular are sold on Amazon or eBay so that the literary editor can make a few extra quid.

I mentioned the other day that Britain has more closed circuit television cameras than any other country.

I realised today that it is not, however, the official cameras which worry me as much as the unofficial ones attached to smart phones and iPads. (The phones may be smart but that doesn't necessarily apply to the people using them.)

You can't go out of the house these days without being filmed by one of these amateur cameramen. We have become a nation of busy bodies and we live in an accusatory age – though I am sad to say that this is a phenomenon which is unique to the United Kingdom.

Antoinette worries about being filmed and having her innocent peccadilloes broadcast on the internet. 'What,' she says, 'if someone films me accidentally walking into a glass door in public. Is that allowed? And what if someone films me going down the street trying not to step on the cracks?'

I tell her not to give a stuff.

Neither of us ever looks at those sort of sites on the internet so we won't ever know if we are filmed.

The tragedy of the internet is that it has given complete strangers the power to approve of or criticise our lives – consequently, the internet has given strangers the right to decide whether or not we are happy and content.

That is bad.

23

(Gloucestershire)

It is not my birthday and it is certainly not Christmas but for absolutely no reason at all Antoinette bought me a small toy train set in a tin.

Unexpected gifts are always a joy. I am as excited as any boy of seven would be.

The notice on the tin tells me that the train requires one AA battery and warns me not to mix old and new batteries. I can see that this might be a problem if the train required two, three or twelve batteries but it is difficult to see how it is possible to mix old and new batteries when you only need to use one.

This nonsense gives the adult me almost as much joy as the train gives my childhood me.

The people who write instruction leaflets never fail to amaze me with the gibberish they produce.

The engine, however, is excellent. It came with a stretch of track and a number of wagons and it chugs around with crash defying determination.

24

(Gloucestershire)

I ordered yet another strimmer (in my search for the perfect tool) and paid extra for express delivery. I was then sent an email telling me that the parcel would arrive during the next six days. Furthermore, I was warned that the damned thing would have to be signed for. This means that for six days I have to stay within hearing range of the front door bell.

And when, or rather if, the damned thing does arrive I will doubtless have to sign one of those silly little screens which make everyone's signature look as if a spider has crawled around inside the machine. Has anyone ever contested one of those signatures in court, I wonder.

Incidentally, am I the only one to have noticed that most of the delivery drivers employed these days do not speak or read English but are allowed to drive cars and vans on British roads where, when there are road signs, they are usually in English.

Today, rummaging around in a cupboard, I found a wonderful old recording of Danny Kaye singing Gilbert and Sullivan.

Mr Kaye recorded a selection of Gilbert and Sullivan classics in 1947 and 1949.

At first I wasn't sure that I liked the recording because Kaye has a little fun with the songs and I've got rather used to singers treating Gilbert's lyrics with some respect.

But after I had listened a few times I became convinced that Kaye's version is better than any other I've heard. The modern standard, of course, is probably Martyn Gilbert's 1953 recording though the work by Peter Pratt and John Reed's work is exemplary.

But Danny Kaye adds an element of fun and understanding of Gilbert's words and purpose that is rare and in my view unsurpassed. What a glorious surprise and what a joy. I'm convinced that W.S.G. would have loved Mr Kaye's rendition.

My only reservation is that for some unknown reason, someone has changed the words to the Nightmare Song from Iolanthe. Who had the arrogance to think he could write a better comic song than W. S. Gilbert?

No one ever, ever wrote better comic songs than the great and immortal W.S.G.

25

(Gloucestershire)

A couple we know had a collision while driving around the Arc de Triomphe at the top of the Champs Elysee. When they reported the incident to their insurance company, they were told that an accident happens, on average, every 20 minutes around the Arc. And insurance companies are now so fed up with trying to sort out who was responsible, and paying for lengthy disputes and legal challengers, that they always split the responsibility evenly between the protagonists.

Sadly, the couple concerned are still rowing about whose fault it was. He was driving but he says that the crash was her fault because she was navigating. She says the fault was his because he was holding the steering wheel and pressing the pedals.

They want to get divorced but are both in their 60s and have decided that they will avoid the expense and just stay together until one or both of them needs to go into an old people's home.

If they both need to go into a home then they will go into separate homes.

26

(Gloucestershire)

I have discovered marmalade containing malt whisky.

How much marmalade can I spread on my toast before there is a risk that I may fail a breathalyser test?

27

(Gloucestershire)

Disruption is apparently the new key word in the world of the Internet and among the millennial members of the Entitlement Generation.

Spotty billionaires who made their money out of creating a piece of fashionable but intrinsically worthless software proudly strut around the world telling us all that 'disruption' is their middle name.

It is, they say, their purpose.

They want to 'disrupt' the world in the way that teenagers everywhere want to 'disrupt' but usually limit themselves to shouting, getting drunk and setting fire to themselves.

The average pontificating software billionaire is so pompous, patronising, condescending, superficial and smug that he reminds me of that nauseatingly pleased with himself broadcaster and political smoothie Melvyn Bragg.

These sorry souls think they are original in describing themselves as disrupters. Indeed, they seem to think they invented the very idea.

If they took a little time away from disrupting in order to read an old-fashioned book or two, they would know that it was quite a long while ago that a certain American known as Thomas Jefferson called the English the 'disturbers of our harmony'.

The funny thing is that the youths who talk so boldly about disruption are the very people who are terrified of Britain leaving the European Union. They want disruption, but only a little bit please because too much might very well be more frightening than they can cope with.

Older citizens, who are altogether much braver than software billionaires, hoodies, students, IT specialists and media commentators, are perfectly happy to vote for disruption.

'Bring it on', say our society's much despised granddads and grannies.

Thinking of young people reminds me that they now all look the same to me.

They dress the same, they talk the same way and they say the same things.

Antoinette, who is much younger than I am, has also noticed this.

The corollary is that she has also noticed that whereas she once saw all old people as almost indistinguishable, she now sees them as individuals. I suspect this is a common but unreported phenomenon. In the same way that occidentals tend to find it difficult to identify Orientals (and vice versa) so we find it difficult to identify individuals who are much younger or much older than we are.

When I see a group of youths it is their very youth which is the most significant factor in their appearance.

More merrily, I have discovered a wonderful new drink.

You half fill a Pernod glass or sherry schooner with cream soda and then add the juice of a whole lemon.

It's an exquisite drink.

I think I'll start building my bottling plant next week. It will be more fun than my incinerator service.

28

(Gloucestershire)

I have come to the conclusion that I should have sued the doctors who managed to kill my parents through a toxic mixture of ignorance and incompetence.

I regret having made the decision to let them all off the hook.

In fact, I have reluctantly and belatedly come to the conclusion that relatives should always sue when doctors make mistakes.

The doctors whose incompetence, and inability to confirm a diagnosis which was handed to them on a plate, were, in my view, responsible for my mother's death, but learned nothing from her death because I let them off the hook.

And the doctors and nursing home staff whose ignorance and stupidity led directly to my father's death probably congratulated themselves on a narrow escape. But I doubt if they changed their behaviour in the way that they would have done if I had sued them. Other doctors would have probably learned valuable lessons if they had seen colleagues in court.

I am angry at the doctor who stupidly gave my father a drug which killed him, angry at the nursing home employee who allowed my father to be given the drug even after I had expressly forbidden him to do so, angry at my father for taking the drug which killed him after I had told him that the drug would kill him and angry with myself for failing to convince my father to have enough faith in me to believe my warning.

I am also angry because the doctor and nursing home staff who succeeded in killing him denied me the chance to be with him when he died.

And at the end of it, I am angry because an apparently closed-minded coroner denied him a proper, fair inquest.

That's a hell of a lot of anger.

I wish I'd sued everyone in sight. It would have been a healthier and more productive response.

29

(Gloucestershire)

Governments all around the world worry endlessly about the food people eat.

They are, at the moment, narrowly focused on sugar which has come back into view as the 'evil' cause of obesity, heart disease and strokes.

(Politicians and doctors who have stood idly by while councils have closed school playing fields and warned parents not to allow their children to walk or cycle to school, seem genuinely puzzled by the epidemic of obesity among the young but don't seem to realise that the absence of playing fields might have had an effect on the health of young folk. It is officially estimated that by the year 2020, a massive 80% of the population will be obese. It is rather frightening to realise that obesity will then be the 'norm'.)

The concern about sugar is justified, of course, though I do wonder what has triggered this latest excitement.

Sugar was being demonised when I was a medical student. And that was half a century ago.

Today, the 'responsible' corporate response to this newly found discovery is to make doughnuts and chocolate bars smaller but to charge the same price for them.

Does no one in authority realise that the inevitable consumer response to this is to eat twice as many doughnuts or chocolate bars?

However, the real problem with our food isn't the amount of sugar it contains (bad though that undoubtedly is) but the vast quantity of carcinogenic chemicals which end up in the food we eat.

Most herbicides, for example, contain a chemical called glyphosate which first hit the planet in the 1970s when one of the world's most evil companies, Monsanto, started to flog a herbicide called Roundup which contained the stuff and which proved enormously profitable.

Since those days, the use of glyphosate has increased a zillion fold because in 1996 the same company, Monsanto, developed genetically engineered crops which could live when the stuff was sprayed on it.

The sale of Roundup and modified seeds earn Monsanto $5 billion a year in the US alone. But glyphosate hangs around in the soil for much longer than was originally feared and the stuff has been detected in all sorts of food.

Is glyphosate carcinogenic?

I have no idea.

Nor does Monsanto.

Nor does anyone else – not even the European Union which licenses the damned stuff.

One of the first articles I wrote for a national newspaper (it was in the 1970s, for the *Daily Telegraph* in the UK) was about the dangers of herbicides.

And back in the 1990s, I wrote a good deal about genetically engineered products (my book *Food for Thought* contains a chapter on the subject).

However, we still know next to nothing about these products.

The companies flogging them don't want to do any research.

Why would they?

Research might show that the products kill millions and then they'd probably have to stop selling them.

And governments (such as the European Union which now clearly regards itself as a government) don't bother doing any research because to do so would be expensive.

The other big problem is that there is little sense of perspective or priority in all these scares.

There isn't a food known to many which isn't potentially deadly in the appropriate (or inappropriate) circumstances.

Give me a list of foods and I will be able to give you excellent reasons why you shouldn't eat any of them. And so the big threats get lost among all the scares.

The truth is that the most dangerous food on the planet is meat. It causes more deaths than tobacco. But most people don't know that. Most people would probably put peanuts or shellfish at the top of the danger list. They'd be completely wrong. It's meat, especially red meat, which is the big killer.

30

(Gloucestershire)

These days you would, I fear, be a fool to trust your doctor.

Confidentiality is now but a memory, hidden deep in the hearts of doctors who have been forced to retire.

And there are many aspects of medical practice which are indefensible. Doctors over-test their patients and, partly as a result, they over-treat them too. Far too many drugs are prescribed. Far too many operations are performed.

Sadly, good GPs (who might fight against these disastrous practices) retire the minute they can, tired of all the paperwork, the regulations and the inability to practise decent medicine. As a result, there is now a growing shortage of experienced GPs.

The Department of Health seems puzzled by this.

They shouldn't be.

In Britain, the General Medical Council and the EU have succeeded in destroying general practice.

Having got rid of the Hippocratic Oath (so that they could force doctors to share confidential information about patients with just about anyone asking for it) the GMC introduced its absurd revalidation rules and the EU introduced its working hours' directive.

The GMC's incredibly stupid revalidation rules mean that doctors who retire have to give up medicine completely – and are completely lost to medical practice. Before the GMC introduced this thoughtless rule, older doctors with much experience would work part time as locums or assistants during busy times such as flu epidemics.

The EU law means that doctors cannot work more than 40 hours a week. And that daft rule is made dafter by a law ruling that being on call and asleep for the night counts as being at work.

The effective, practical result of this nonsense is that GPs aren't allowed to work nights and weekends and hospital patients often have to survive for days at a time without seeing any doctors at all.

In the bad old days, two young doctors looked after two hospital wards and shared the night duty.

Now a hospital needs at least five young doctors to cover the same responsibilities but hospitals spend so much on administration that they cannot afford that many young doctors.

Things are made even worse by the fact that most young doctors are female and have children to look after and so refuse to do night calls anyway.

As a result of all this, the NHS attempts to cover the gaping holes in its service by hiring locum doctors brought in from abroad. The highest paid locum doctor in the NHS was paid £478,181 last year – slightly up from the year before. The doctor, who worked an average of 84 hours a week because he was freelance and not an employee worked through an agency which received £25,856 for organising his services.

Altogether, the NHS spent £1.2 billion on very expensive locum doctors – who were paid £1,000 an hour or more in some areas.

Still, it’s all what is now called ‘progress’ so I suppose it must be a good thing.

I’ve seen a doctor twice in the last 40 years. (And for that I thank the Good Lord and Antoinette’s ministrations).

On both occasions, the doctors I saw were trainees who gave every impression of knowing slightly less than the average first aid worker. The trainees were under no obvious supervision. The senior partners who should have been supervising these trainees were probably off playing golf or earning money elsewhere.

It is not widely known, I suspect, but the salaries paid to trainee GPs are paid by the NHS not the practice which employs them. Similarly, the salaries paid to the nurses who give injections and so on are paid by the NHS (whereas the GPs receive the fees paid for the injections).

So the GPs get free labour and have their work done for them.

The patients?

Well they get shafted.

31

(Gloucestershire)

A pair of our Gloucestershire neighbours wants us to cut down some of our trees so that they have a better view ‘of the horizon’ (and into our conservatory). He wears bright red trousers and she wears headscarves with horses on them. (Thankfully, they wear other clothes as well, of course.)

They drive around in a pair of matching Range Rovers though these are usually accepted as the vehicles of choice for crooks (they’re good for ramming police road blocks), footballers’ wives (they are good for looking down on people) and antique dealers (you can get half a bookcase in the back of one).

He is in the Freemasons, which is a bit like the Cosa Nostra except that they all drive Range Rovers instead of black Cadillacs and they have golf clubs instead of machine guns in the boot. At least I assume their golf bags are full of clubs rather than guns.

In our experience, the Cotswolds are full of people who are effortlessly superior and patronising. They sneer at everyone. They sneer automatically. They probably sneer at themselves when they clean their teeth.

And it is, apparently, widely acknowledged among those who know that there are more confidence tricksters and crooks operating in the Cotswolds than there are anywhere in England outside the City of London.

There are also more half-wits too and, from time to time, when the fancy takes me, I have taken to referring the area as the Clotswolds.

In some parts of the country, this can be blamed on inbreeding.

Where villages are isolated, strangers are rare and cousins are considered to be distant relatives. Incest is a way of life.

There is no such excuse in the Cotswolds, for the countryside in Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire is so over-built that there are no isolated villages.

The Clotswolds are a theme park for those members of the criminal classes who think that a farm is merely a legal tax avoidance scheme.

We might have considered our neighbour’s request had they been a little more welcoming.

But ever since we arrived in the county, they have turned their backs on us when they’ve seen us coming and have ignored us when we have spoken to them.

So the trees are staying and may they grow ever higher and thicker. If I was a decade younger, I’d plant a couple of dozen Leylandii.

February

1

(Gloucestershire)

A door leading from one of our bedrooms onto a balcony swung open during a gale in the night. I must have forgotten to latch the door properly. When we woke this morning we found the result: glass all over the floor.

We rang several glaziers, all of whom had websites promised instant response, as such folk always do.

When they heard that the glass was required for a door (albeit a door from a bedroom onto a balcony) they all became very excited and told me that since the glass would have to be armoured, safety glass there would be some procedures to follow.

I pointed out that there were several other panes of glass in the door and that none of them was armoured safety glass but this, of course, was of no avail. Everything in life is more complex, time consuming and expensive than it was last year, and last year it was more complex, time consuming and expensive than it was the year before.

Rules are rules, and regulations which come from Brussels are laws to be obeyed.

First, said all the glaziers, reading from a communal hymn book written by eurocrats in Brussels, there would have to be a preliminary appointment. This would be ten days hence. Then the armoured, safety glass would have to be ordered, cut to size and prepared. This would, I was told, take at least another week. I would then have to make an appointment to have the glass fitted. And that would take another week; at the very least.

All things considered it would, I was told, take around a month; or quite possibly longer before the glass could be replaced.

‘But we have wind and rain coming into the bedroom!’ I protested.

They were unmoved and unmoving.

So I cut up an old polythene suit bag and stuck polythene over the hole with sticky tape. I then measured the frame and we set off for the nearest town. Half an hour later we were the proud owners of a pane of glass, a plastic pot of putty, some little pins for holding in the glass while we applied the putty, a small hammer and a chisel for removing the old putty.

The lady who sold us these items, and who cut the glass, was enormously helpful and, after I had admitted that I had never before fitted a piece of glass into a window frame, gave us a valuable demonstration. We then went back to the house. I put in the glass and Antoinette applied and smoothed the putty. It took us a couple of hours but it looked very professional.

When you have too many rules, and many of them are silly, people don’t take much notice of them and will always do what they can to circumvent the system.

The morons at the European Union are not human enough to understand this.

2

(Gloucestershire)

If sell-by-dates for food get any shorter we will all have to throw away our food before we buy it. I suspect that the whole idea of sell-by-dates was introduced after lobbying by large food companies looking for a way to boost their profits. The ultimate joke will be when packets of salt are stamped with a sell-by-date. Antoinette and I spent half an hour this morning clearing out the pantry and trying to decide which out-of-date items were perfectly safe to eat.

3

(Gloucestershire)

People who sneer at heaven, and at those who believe in God and heaven are wicked people.

Authors called Dawkins and Hitchens have made a few bob out of claiming that there is no God and that anyone who believes in God must be a fool.

The impression given is that these authors somehow ‘know’ there is no God and no afterlife. The dismissal of the very idea of God is even given a sort of quasi scientific assurance – as though the claim were based on scientific experimentation.

In reality, of course, neither Dawkins nor Hitchens nor anyone else knows whether or not there is a God. They have no better information than you, I or the vicar down the road.

But they cruelly and deliberately take away comfort from people for no reason other than to flog their miserable and pointlessly depressing books.

It is the love of, fear of and respect for God which encourages moral behaviour.

Take God out of the human equation and the reason to behave well becomes, for many, far less compelling.

4

(Gloucestershire)

A workman came round to attend to a problem with our central heating. He spent most of his time reading and sending text messages or emails on his smart phone. He clearly didn't want to be wasting time with us. He reminded me of a bus driver I heard of who was fired because he insisted he wanted to work from home.

According to entirely reliable research, the average citizen now sends 50 emails or texts a day; these messages mainly describe their activities.

Millions now update their Facebook page on an hourly basis and send Twitter messages constantly to their followers. Or they have them sent for them by professional Twitterers who will, for a fee, tell the world what you had for breakfast, or what you would like the world to think you had for breakfast. I have heard of amateur football players checking their twitter accounts in the middle of a match in the middle of the pitch, and golfers now apparently spend their time between shots checking their Facebook pages and their email accounts.

Twitter is beautifully designed for narcissists with egos the size of the Himalayas and plenty of opinions but no facts with which to back them up.

'The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation,' wrote Thoreau, who understood a lot of things.

Shakespeare, who understood everything, must surely have been able to see Twitter coming when he wrote: 'Nothing is so common as the wish to be remarkable.'

The 'social media' has changed people's lives.

Many folk, especially young ones, now become physically ill if they find themselves in places without mobile phone reception; stranded away from the strange new world which enables them to share with friends and stranger every odd thought that wanders into their head and an account of every detail of their lives.

The average person now checks their mobile phone 200 times a day and spends more than 25 hours a week conducting online searches.

A huge majority of teenagers and young adults admit that they prefer texting to talking.

Would those folk write and post 50 letters a day if they did not have the facility to send free messages through the air? Would they ring up friends and acquaintances to tell them what they'd had for breakfast and what they'd decided to wear for the day? I suspect not.

The Internet was supposed to liberate us and improve our productivity. It has done none of these things. It has, indeed, caused endless misery and confusion.

And the whole damned caboodle is intrinsically corrupt. Earlier today Antoinette keyed in the word 'Waitrose' and the top entry on the Google search page was Tesco – which had somehow managed to get its website to masquerade as Waitrose. This has happened to me quite often. I key in one word, assume that the top site must be the one I've requested, and then find myself in Albania when I was hoping to be in Austria.

There's clear evidence that the more time people spend on social media the more likely they are to become depressed. (That's hardly surprising since much of the stuff on social media is mindless, cruel, venomous criticism.)

And what, pray, is all this nonsense about 'followers'?

It's turned the average plumber into someone who sounds as self-important as a Ruritanian princeling. The views of our central heating guy were clearly much in demand and he presumably has many followers.

Still, the Internet is fun occasionally.

Today, an acquaintance accidentally sent me a copy of an email he had sent to a friend of his. Having mentioned a new book of mine which he'd seen, the acquaintance added the comment: 'I didn't know the old sod was still alive.'

Exquisite.

5

(Gloucestershire)

Today I purchased several small books about France.

One, entitled *Instructions for British Servicemen in France 1944* contains advice for soldiers, sailors and airmen who found themselves on the ground in France during the Second World War.

The small book is full of sensible, practical advice such as: ''French women, both young and old, are far from shy and you will, if you are a man of sense, make them your friends. But do not mistake friendship for willingness to give you favours. The same sort of girl with whom you can take liberties in England can be found in France, and the same sort of girl whom you would grossly offend in this country would be greatly offended if you were to 'try anything on' in France.'

'The fathers, brothers and fiancés of French girls will often be unable to protect them because they are fighting the Germans or have been deported to Germany. Apart from any questions of discipline, you are on your honour to behave to their womenfolk as you would wish them to behave to yours. If you do not, you will injure the reputation of the British soldier, by showing a worse example than the Germans, who at the start, at least, behaved with considerable restraint, though they later lapsed. As for the loose women, if you have noted the facts on page 17 about the prevalence of VD you will see good reasons for avoiding them.'

How wonderful.

On the flyleaf, a previous owner had drawn a circle round an old sixpence and within the boundaries of the circle had written every word of the Lord's Prayer.

6

(Gloucestershire)

I realised today that the Liberal Democrats have disappeared more or less completely from the British political scene. Under the appalling Clegg they made outrageous promises because they never thought they'd be in a position to be expected to do anything about them. Then a quirk of electoral fate put them into a coalition government and they had to abandon the outrageous promises which they'd made to get themselves elected. This completely buggered them with the voters and now they are as relevant as the Green Party and the remnants of the Monster Raving Loony Party; if David Lord Sutch, bless his memory, were still alive they would kill for his voting appeal. The Liberal Democrats are forgotten and will probably be so until the next generation falls for the next batch of outrageous promises. Never was a downfall so richly deserved.

Am I the only one to have noticed that the people who call themselves 'liberals' are invariably the ones who are exceptionally keen to oppose and suppress the views of anyone who dares to disagree with them? The remaining bits of the Liberal Democrat party are composed almost entirely of members of the Entitlement Generation who believe fervently in the welfare state since most of them find it an excellent way to avoid having to work for a living.

The fact is that data has shown that too much gratuitous welfare blunts ambition, decreases self-regard and increases greed and sense of entitlement.

Tom Wolfe wrote about the 'Me, me generation' several decades ago but today's new millennials (as they like to call themselves) are something else; they have never known anything other than prosperity and their whining, self-absorption and yearning for instant gratification means that they do not see, let alone understand, the world in which they live.

No one has ever had things as good as today's generation, no one has ever moaned as much and no one has ever been as boorish and as humourless.

Members of the entitlement generation (as I prefer to call the millennials) who do graciously agree to accept employment expect to be able to work the hours that suit them, to work at home when it suits them and to disrupt everyone else while themselves remaining immune from disruption of any kind.

They expect to enjoy absurdly long holidays and to be protected by whole libraries of rules and regulations designed to ensure that they are never exposed to insults, whether they be physical, mental or spiritual.

Never in history has a generation been so bloody spoilt and molly coddled.

And still they whinge and moan and complain about the fact that old folk who have worked unbelievably long hours and saved money when they couldn't really afford to do so are now able to afford to have their heating on for a few hours a day.

The entitlement generation don't care about the past or the poor or the elderly or anything except their own present and future. They are professional victims, always on the look-out for an insult or some reason for a sense of personal injustice. They seem to go through life with antennae constantly alert for provocations. When they pop next door it is not to borrow a cup of sugar but a cup of money – which they have no intention of repaying.

They like to call themselves 'millennials', though most of the really mouthy ones were sharing their opinions long before the millennium, and they are now desperately trying not to let alone notice that they have one foot firmly planted in the pleasant lands of middle age.

They tweet incessantly and their most valuable possessions are a smart phone and a selfie stick and they have serious withdrawal symptoms if they can't access their Facebook page several times an hour. They are utterly, totally, completely self-absorbed. Their expectations are endless. They expect to get rich and famous without having to do anything which involves effort. They expect to be able to earn a living doing exactly what they want to do, when they want to do it and for no longer than they want to do it. They will not accept criticism. If a teacher, lecturer or employer criticises them they stomp off in a huff and consult a solicitor.

The entitlement generation are frighteningly sure of themselves and pleased with themselves too in a way which has always been common with 14-year-olds but which seems uncomfortable and inappropriate with 25 to 35-year-olds.

The entitlement generation don't seem to have grown up; they still behave like sulky, surly teenagers who believe they are better than all those who came before them, that the world owes them everything they want and that they are truly the only people who matter.

The entitlement generation have filled the world with vociferous minorities, many of them well off and well nurtured by society, who demand more than their fair share of attention and money because they are, well, 'entitled' to it.

The British have always been guilty of complaining, blaming and whingeing far more enthusiastically than they praise, and this tendency seems to have been exacerbated in recent years.

The entitlement generation seem to regard it as their destiny and their right to moan.

The Americans are far behind us on this (always preferring to praise rather than to condemn) but, sad to say, they seem to be catching us up and the entitlement generation in the US is also showing unpleasant signs of bitchiness.

The British members of the entitlement generation will vote to remain in the EU because they are so stupid that they genuinely believe that leaving the EU will mean that they won't be able to drink French wine or eat Italian pasta. They will lose badly and will find it impossible to believe that their wishes were ignored. In America, they will vote for Hillary Clinton for no other reason than because they think it is about time that a woman was President.

There is a simple explanation for the unhealthy self-absorption which characterises the entitlement generation.

This is the generation which was never allowed to lose.

When they were at school, the sports day was abandoned because daft teachers thought that competition would do irreparable harm to those who didn't win medals.

Exams were made easier and easier so that every pupil who remembered to turn up, and was capable of putting their name on a piece of paper, was awarded a 'pass'.

They were taught, by their indulgent teachers and parents, that they were the most important people in the world. They were never taught about kindness, respect or to help others.

And now the spoilt little bastards have grown up into spoilt big bastards. They don't have any solid values and they feel no loyalty whatsoever to employers or customers. They are only interested in themselves.

Whatever they do they seem to regard themselves as creative artists (unbelievably there are nearly two million people on the LinkedIn website who describe themselves as 'creative'). Even people making sandwiches for the Subway chain now describe themselves as 'sandwich artists'.

The entitlement generation feel that they are entitled to a good life and they expect to be treated with immense respect and given everything they need. They demand that the world be interested in their every thought and deed. They are soft in every conceivable way.

They claim to welcome change and to know no fear but they run screaming at the first sign of real change. When the European Union collapses and the world they have grown to know starts to crumble they will squeal, squeal and squeal again.

7

(Gloucestershire)

If the Government puts interest rates up just 1% there will be several million homeowners in London who will be unable to meet their financial obligations.

Folk in London have to pay, on average, well over £500,000 for a poky little flat in some godforsaken part of Greater London.

They pretend to their friends and themselves that they live in London but they live in suburbs where the only bits of 'green' are green cars because all the gardens have been covered in concrete to store recycling bins and plastic rubbish bins and to provide car parking spaces. These poor devils pay a fortune to live an hour and a half away from anything that could possibly be described as civilisation.

Oddly enough, no one in authority seems to realise that concreting gardens leads to flooding and other environmental disasters. The *Financial Times* still claims that flooding of homes is a result of climate change. The staff of the World's Joint First Worst Newspaper (*The Guardian* is the other holder of the title) have, presumably, not been made aware that it is current government policy to build on flood plains and to allow rivers to flood by not dredging them properly.

So, here's the irony.

The wheelie bins and plastic recycling bins which we are forced to use because the EU believes that by using them we will stave off imaginary environmental disasters caused by global warming, require so much storage space that gardens have to be covered in concrete. Putting down all that concrete means that when it rains, the water can't soak into the ground and so it runs away into rivers which become bloated and which cause flooding which the EU then blames on global warming.

Many of the owners of these expensive flatlets in the London area were forced to take out 90% or 100% mortgages because they had spent so much on their weddings and their utterly essential flat screen television sets and satellite TV subscriptions that there was nothing left to use as a deposit on a house.

Surprisingly, and rather worryingly, they do not see any correlation between the fact that they have spent between £24,000 and £27,000 (the average expenditure) on their wedding and the fact that they have no money left to buy a house.

Nor does it seem to them to be a sign of reckless waste that between them the entitlement generation spend £310 million a year on Halloween fripperies.

The bottom line is that the entitlement generation cannot afford to buy property because they are greedy and self-indulgent. They spend too much time messing around with their social media profiles and they don't work hard enough.

But no one ever dares say any of this lest the members of the EG be upset, go on strike and twitter critical remarks.

The bottom line is that a 1% rise in interest rates will mean at least another £5,000 a year (after tax) in mortgage payments. Most of them won't be able to afford this extra cost.

So, it seems quite likely that interest rates will never go up and that the poor sods who saved their pennies and put them into banks and building societies in the hope of receiving a small income in their declining years, will continue to earn next to nothing and to see their inflation eat away at their savings.

(They won't really know how much damage inflation is doing, of course, since the Government fiddles the figures and lies about the inflation rate. At the moment, they claim it is considerably less than 2% but anyone who actually lives, keeps warm and eats will know that this is an absurd lie.)

And, of course, ridiculously low interest rates will mean that weak businesses and bad businesses will struggle on, surviving simply because interest rates are absurdly low and they can keep borrowing money in order to delay the inevitable bankruptcy.

Trillions of pounds which should have been given to savers as interest have been handed over to debtors; the carefree, the careless and the cavalier have benefitted enormously.

And all this is destroying the very fabric of our society – and its future too.

As weak businesses struggle on, they take business from enterprises which could and should be growing.

And so our business environment becomes ever weaker and the nation's long-term economic position becomes ever frailer. The absurd interest rate experiment will lead to long-term stagnation and the longest recession in history.

While ex-Goldman Sachs Canadian loonie Carney and his chums around the globe enjoy champagne lunches and huge salaries and massive expense accounts hard-working citizens despair.

It used to be said that gilts and bonds offered risk free returns.

Thanks to the central bankers, gilts and bonds now offer return free risk.

8

(Gloucestershire)

Collecting is a basic human instinct; entertaining and educational. It's something people have been doing since there was stuff to collect. I've no doubt that Stone Age man collected old bones and original, signed cave drawings.

Sadly, the Internet has taken the fun out of many types of collecting.

In pre-Internet days, if you collected 18th century glass scent bottles or silver decanter labels, you could spend a lifetime trawling through antique shops, curio shops, second-hand shops, bric a brac shops, junk shops, auction catalogues and even charity shops.

Part of the joy of collecting is the owning; the being able to look at something and admire it. But part of the joy has always been the search; the chase.

Now, you can find everything you're ever likely to need in two minutes flat. Just key in the name of the item you're looking for and a whole host of offers will appear. The junk and antique shop owners spend much of their time putting their stuff up for sale on eBay.

Where is the fun in that?

And charity shops have taken the fun of trawling there too.

Today, every bag that goes into a charity shop is sorted and sifted and anything of interest or value is taken out and put on eBay.

Worse still, it is apparently normal in charity shops for the staff to take their pick of whatever has been donated for sale.

Defenders of this practice claim that it is merely a perk. To me it seems like an indefensible perk. Actually the word perk isn't quite as appropriate as the word theft.

Part of the fun of collecting was the disappointment and the joy of the discovery.

All that has pretty well gone.

And it's no good in insisting that you won't buy on the Internet because there is nowhere else to buy now that many of the curio shops and junk shops have disappeared – with the owners storing their stuff in a spare bedroom or the garage and using eBay as their shop window. And, as I said, charity shops are now useless as hunting grounds.

Incidentally, I wonder when and if the number of charities will ever stop growing.

It is the fashion these days for all celebrities to start their own charity or foundation. It is, however, often difficult to avoid the suspicion that the whole thing is a vanity project designed to garner publicity.

Many of these charities fold within a year or two, having raised vast amounts of public money and then wasting it all on hiring expensive premises and staff.

The celebrities involved in these short-term disasters never seem to worry about the fact that small businesses, real people, end up being owed huge amounts of money simply because the charity has been badly managed and has gone bust owing huge amounts of money.

I know of one nasty fellow who sets up charities as a business. He finds a popular theme, sets up a charity, pulls in some money, pays himself a fat salary as 'Director' and then, when the charity goes bust, (as it inevitably does), he simply closes it and starts another.

The people running charities pay themselves such obscene amounts of money that although we give lots of stuff (books and clothes and DVDs) to charity shops, we no longer make cash donations to charities.

I see that former foreign secretary David Miliband (the one with the banana) is now working as a charity boss. He runs something called the International Rescue Committee which I'd never heard of and I don't mind betting you'd never heard of it either. His salary is £530,000 a year and is subsidised by British taxpayers. The good news is that the banana Miliband (as opposed to the one who led the Labour Party for twenty minutes) works in New York.

It was probably worth that much to get rid of him.

But, going back to the art of collecting, I am delighted to say that cigarette cards are still an adventure. My resurrected hobby is giving me much pleasure and I am now an enthusiastic cartophilist. These little pieces of card are small works of art and documents of social history. Originally designed, back in the 19th century, as nothing more than stiffeners to protect the cigarettes they accompanied, cigarette cards became an art form in the first half of the twentieth century.

Each small piece of cardboard contains on one side a photograph or a drawing and on the other side a piece of text of around 100 words. Those 100 word summaries are precise, defining and fascinating. And I constantly learn amazing stuff from the cards I have found and that Antoinette has bought me.

9

(London)

Antoinette and I went to the National Liberal Club in Whitehall in London. I've been a member for over 50 years and I used to live there part of the week when I worked in London as editor of the *British Clinical Journal*.

These days the club has become terribly political and is, I fear, headed for the end. In the old days, writers such as H.G.Wells and A.A.Milne were enthusiastic members and the club was at least much social as political.

When we arrived in Whitehall we walked into the Club lobby and had gone just a few yards when Antoinette drew my attention to the fact that someone in the reception area was shouting at me. He was shouting 'Oi!' in the style of a car park attendant chasing a motorist who has not paid his parking fee. I turned and found myself facing a club employee whom I recognised. He asked me what I wanted and demanded, rather aggressively, to know if I was a club member. 'Your name is Louis isn't it?' I said. He agreed that it was. I pointed out that we had spoken a number of times, that after a previous similar encounter I had asked him his name, introduced myself and shaken his hand. I reminded him that I had been a member since around 1972 and remarked that if I could remember his name, it seemed strange that he couldn't remember that I was a member – particularly since my height means that I have a fairly distinctive physical appearance. I told him that I was going to my lockers and that if the door giving access to the locker area was locked, I would return and tell him that I needed him. He returned to the reception area sat down, waved a hand imperiously, muttered a good deal and dismissed me rather contemptuously.

I made the decision there and then that I would definitely resign from the club.

I had been toying with the idea of my leaving the club, despite my long association, since my last visit a few months ago when I had a similarly unpleasant confrontation with the same employee. I am only grateful that I did not have guests with me on either of those occasions. I shudder to think of the embarrassment.

I then went to my locker and emptied much of the contents into a large bag I had with me. I then took the bag upstairs so that I could sort through it all in peace and with as little inconvenience to others as possible. There was no one in the smoking room, so my wife and I went in there and settled in a distant corner. I sorted through the bag's contents, deciding what could be thrown away and what I wanted to take home with me.

We were leaving the smoking room when a man whom I did not know chased after me and told me that bags were not allowed in the smoking room. He addressed me in the manner of a headmaster speaking to an errant schoolboy. He did not explain whether he was a member or an employee.

The unidentified stranger asked if I was a member. I told him that I had been a member since 1972 and that I was aware that there was a club rule about not taking bags into the smoking room, though it is honoured more in the breach than in the observance. I also explained that we were leaving and pointed out that there was no one else in the smoking room. I then started to explain the circumstances. But he rather aggressively repeated that it was forbidden to take bags into the smoking room, though actually since we were leaving you could say that I was taking the bag out of the smoking room.

When he persisted I waved a hand rather dismissively, in the style of Jeremy Brett as Sherlock Holmes dismissing an annoyance, and told him to go away. He was, I thought, an extremely unpleasant little man.

We then left the club. As we did so, there were two men at the reception desk. The one who was not Louis said Good evening to us both. We both responded in kind.

It seems to me that the standards in the National Liberal Club have fallen to deplorable levels since the days when a porter called Mr Peters controlled the lobby in a dignified and respectful way. My wife and I have for a decade or more eaten our meals at the hotel next door to the club since we found that we were better treated there than on the club premises.

I shall not be renewing my membership at the end of the year. I will destroy my cheap, plastic club card by tossing it onto the fire.

I think it is pertinent to mention that when we entered the first class lounge at Paddington Station that evening, the attendant greeted us with a cry of delight. I have seen him on fewer occasions than I have seen the lobby porters at the club but he recognised me instantly. 'Come in, sir!' he cried with a cheery smile and a hand held out. 'I have some wine open and some very nice cake for you today, sir.'

Maybe the National Liberal Club should consider offering him employment.

I'm sorry to be resigning from the Club. It's been a big part of my life for a long time.

When I first joined, it was possible to stay in one of the upstairs bedrooms for three guineas (including breakfast), and for some years I used to live at the club for several days a week.

After we left the club, we walked back up past Trafalgar Square (it's not the same since they banned the pigeons) and along Gerard Street, which is London's Chinatown. It looked very dull. It is colourful but the Chinese restaurants have been joined by a number of bookies including a horrid looking Paddy Power shop which has its usual green frontage. The rest of the street is, of course, decorated largely in red.

London has, it seems to me, lost its cultural heritage.

The Burlington Arcade, which was once a real shopping precinct for Bertram Wooster and his chums (and where I used to buy my bow ties when I was a medical student) is now just an oddity, catering to tourists who don't quite understand the British currency and who are prepared to pay ridiculous prices for fairly ordinary items.

Charing Cross road, once a haven for book lovers, has lost its purpose and its way. Denmark Street, where, in the 1960s, bands bought all their instruments, is now just a scruffy street with a few guitar shops in it.

Even the sounds of the city have changed dramatically.

I can remember hearing knife sharpeners and onion sellers and newspaper sellers crying out their simple advertising slogans. These days the 'cries of London' are limited to the sound of police sirens, the beeping noise that lorries make when reversing, the electronic voice that shouts 'turning right' when a lorry is turning right and 'turning left' when it going the other way, the bus announcing that its safety ramp is being extended, the sirens which go off on building sites for no apparent reason, the burglar alarms ringing and being ignored and so on. The London cacophony is deafening and debilitating.

Paris has, despite all its problems, retained its 'Frenchness' and cultural identity. London, which is now a curious dormitory city with millions working there in the daytime but leaving in the evening to go home, is vastly overweight with immigrants who have no affection for the city's cultural heritage. This saddens me enormously. For most of my life, I have loved London and have spent many, many hours wandering around there. Today, London is too expensive for Britons. Most of the houses in the centre of the city are owned as investments by Russians, Chinese and Arabs and others who rarely, if ever, visit them. The suburbs of our once great city are now mean, wastelands which offer neither colour nor hope; viewed from a railway compartment they are unremittingly ugly and dull. The people who live in them may work in central London but they cannot possibly manage to enjoy many of London's much acclaimed joys. If you earn a median London salary then most of your post tax income will go on mortgage or rent and travel costs. There are people working in London who spend six hours a day travelling to their offices or shops. This isn't because they enjoy travelling but because they cannot afford to live any closer to their employment. Londoners earn more money than people in other parts of the country but they readily admit to having the lowest sense of satisfaction. They are exhausted by travelling, by dirt, by congestion, by foul air and by the language problems.

Dr Johnson famously said that a man who is tired of London is tired of life but Dr Johnson didn't live in today's London. If he did then he too would doubtless be exhausted.

The truth today is that most of the native population of Greater London is under the age of 30. By the time they reach that age, Britons are too exhausted to stick it any longer. They move out to the country. If they have bought a home in London then they can almost certainly flog it for several times what they paid for it and use the liberated cash to buy a comfortable house in the country or by the sea. Or even, more probably, in France.

The UK's Office for National Statistics has shown that the exodus of young people in their 30s from London has accelerated over the past five years. Around 66,000 British born citizens in their 30s left London in 2015. The number leaving has risen by 18% in the past two years.

In London half a million pounds buys you a tiny flat in some godforsaken suburb an hour or two from the West End. You can buy a decent country property, with several rooms and a garden, for that amount of money. And if you move to northern France, you can buy a home and commute to London in no more time than it took to commute from your squalid bed sitting room.

Every time I visit London, I am shocked afresh by the number of building sites. Many of these are for office blocks but others are for blocks of flats already sold, off plan, to foreigners looking for somewhere to invest their money.

10

(Paris)

'Auf Wiedersehen,' said a German friend. 'Until we see you again.'

It is, of course, the same principle as the French 'Au revoir'.

How typically English that when we part from friends we do so with a much more permanent sounding 'Goodbye'.

We walked in the Champs de Mars today. Antoinette saw an old lady rummaging in one of the rubbish bins, searching for food. The old lady was emaciated and clearly clinging to life by her fingertips. Antoinette immediately walked over to the old lady and, without saying a word, handed her the contents of her wallet. The old lady stared disbelievingly at the wad of notes in her hand. And then she looked at Antoinette and said, 'You are English?'

What a tribute

This is the second time that this has happened.

I felt very proud.

Proud of my wife.

And proud to be English.

11

(Gloucestershire)

It has been known for years that people who have been pronounced brain dead have then recovered. Sometimes stories about such recoveries are startling.

This morning I read about a young Palestinian who was hit in the head by an Israeli bullet and lay in bed comatose in an Israeli hospital. The hospital doctors pronounced the young man brain dead and sent him home to Gaza strip to die. He recovered and five years later had a wife and three sons. The only sign of his injury was a limp.

The significance of this is, of course, the fact that brain death is used as a sign for the transplant surgeons to move in and start removing vital organs.

12

(Gloucestershire)

Every time I buy anything, I receive at least six emails asking me, begging me, demanding, reminding me to write a review.

How do you write a review of a lavatory? What is there to say? It's the whitest lavatory bowl I've ever seen? It is a delight to open my bowels into your product?

Since we bought a new toilet, I have found that every time I open my iPhone it is stuffed with adverts for toilets. How many toilets do they think I want to buy? Do they think I'm collecting the damned things? Have they put me down as a toilet fetishist?

This sort of silly advertising wastes my time and wastes the money of the toilet manufacturers.

The only beneficiaries are the Web companies who flog the advertising.

I have, for more than two decades, had a feeling that the only people who really make money out of the Internet are the people who run it.

13

(Gloucestershire)

I have long believed that Britain's National Health Service does more harm than good. It is a badly organised, badly run organisation and most of the people who work for it admit that they would hate to have to rely on NHS hospital care if they were sick. Most senior health care people in Britain take out private health care insurance for themselves and their families.

Lives would be saved, and the nation would save billions of pounds, if the NHS were closed and every citizen provided with free private health care.

But it occurs to me that leaving the European Union might save the NHS in two ways.

First, when we leave the EU we can get rid of the working time directive which prevents doctors working effectively within the NHS.

The EU's laws about working hours mean that doctors are said to be working when they are on call. And so a doctor who has been on call but sleeping for eight hours has, according to EU law, been working for eight hours. As a result of this utterly stupid law, hospitals have difficulty in providing night time and weekend cover. It is for this reason that small hospitals are being closed.

Administrators admit that they are closing busy hospitals because they cannot provide enough staff to care for the patients seeking help.

Second, leaving the EU will reduce the pressure on the NHS created by unlimited immigration.

Mass immigration affects the NHS in several ways.

First, there is the obvious problem caused by the number of people now entitled to NHS care. The result is long waiting times and poor quality of care.

Second, there is the problem that many immigrants do not speak English. As a result, interpreters have to be hired (at enormous expense) and consultations take additional time.

Many of the committed fascists/remainers who support the EU believe that everyone who wants to come to Britain for free health care should be entitled to free treatment.

Nowhere else in Europe offers free State paid for health care so the UK is a magnet for health tourists who have no interest in Britain other than as a source of free medical care, free surgery and free drugs.

And so the NHS is besieged by thousands of foreigners arriving in Britain for free health care.

Many want to have their babies on the NHS. Some want cosmetic surgery or sex change operations. A good many want treatment for AIDS.

The cost of providing this free treatment to foreigners runs into billions. And it is one of the reasons Britons have to wait months or years for essential investigations, treatment or surgery. It is the reason why expensive treatments are often withdrawn.

Those who believe that foreigners are entitled to use the NHS probably don't have friends or relatives who have suffered or died because of NHS shortages. And they probably don't realise that NHS resources are finite.

Leaving the European Union will improve the NHS immeasurably.

It might even save the NHS from the inevitability of a slow, lingering death.

Might.

14

(Gloucestershire)

A neighbour who had a tennis court created in his garden has just discovered that he made a huge mistake. His new court is built east to west and so on sunny days, players are blinded by the sun if they arrange games for morning or evening. We don't have any such problems with our outdoor tennis table. If the sun is annoying, we just pick up the table and turn it about ninety degrees.

15

(Gloucestershire)

A pal of mine who works as a GP tells me that patients' medical records are now completely worthless. He says that now that the General Medical Council no longer approves of doctors treating patient records as confidential, an increasing number of doctors are refusing to write potentially embarrassing material on their patients' notes. Indeed, an increasing number of doctors, particularly those with private patients, keep their patients' records under false names if those patients have delicate or embarrassing case histories.

This is, of course, exceedingly dangerous for it means that if a patient is suddenly taken ill and is seen by a new doctor, the proper medical records will not be available.

We can blame the General Medical Council for this tragic state of affairs.

16

(Gloucestershire)

A new report has concluded that chemotherapy may do as much harm as good.

My word, it's taken them long enough to reach that conclusion.

I've been in trouble for two decades for arguing that chemotherapy often does far more harm than good.

17

(Gloucestershire)

Search engines are a joke – having been devised and run by morons. Actually, they aren't a joke. They are dangerous.

The sponsored search results and advertisements mean that as research tools, they are entirely useless. It horrifies me to think that children use this commercial crap and think they are doing research. They might as well just make stuff up.

Things are made worse by the fact that every time I try to search for something, my screen is filled with advertisements for mattresses and lavatories.

How many mattresses and lavatories do they think I want to buy?

I have gone back to using books for research since the stuff available on the Internet is, being totally contaminated with commercial and political propaganda, almost entirely useless.

The Internet is now even useless for finding a tradesman. If the telephone company still produces a Yellow Pages book I would be happy to pay for a copy.

18

(Gloucestershire)

I got fed up with our naggy car today. If I try to drive the car a few yards on our own land, it nags me to put on my seat belt.

When cars first started talking to people, I was a GP and one of my partners had a Volvo which was forever nagging him to put on his seat belt.

Since his job meant that he was getting into and out of his car every few minutes, he grew more and more annoyed by the voice.

One day I got into his car and there was no smarmy voice telling us to put on our belts.

'How did you turn off the voice?' I asked.

He looked at me with a small, contented smile.

'I took the fuse out.'

An excellent idea, I thought. So I decided to take the fuse out.

Now the car won't start and nothing works.

19

(Gloucestershire)

I got into trouble today when asked on the telephone to give my postcode. I can't remember whom I had rung or why. It must have seemed important when I started.

Attempting to explain the letters of the postcode I said 'Y for yodel'.

I don't know why. It was the only word beginning with Y which sprang to mind.

'Y for Yankee' said the voice at the other end very crossly.

'Pardon?' I said.

'It's Y for Yankee,' said the voice at the other end.

'It could be yacht, yam or yappy,' I said.

'It's Y for Yankee,' said the insistent voice.

'Why,' I said.

'What?'

'No, why not what,' I said. 'Why would work. Why for Y.'

'It's Y for Yankee. It must be Y for Yankee.'

'Why must it? Who says it must be Y for Yankee?'

'It is what everyone says. It is written down.'

'I've got yard written down,' I said, writing 'yard' on a piece of paper. 'It could be yawn, yes, yearbook, yeast or yellow. I've got all those written down.' I had too. I'd written them down on a piece of paper. I always have a pen and a piece of paper handy. I'm a writer. You never know when inspiration might strike.

'It's Y for Yankee,' said the voice, now close to hysteria.

'Yelp, yeoman, yes, yesterday, yippee, yob or yoghurt,' I said. 'It could be any of those. Yonder or Yorkshire. Yucky or yummy.'

'No, no, no,' said the voice. There were tears coming.

'You,' I said.

'Me?'

'No. You. Y for you. It could be Y for you.'

'It's Y for Yankee,' he whispered.

'Yeah,' I said.

I put the phone down. I couldn't remember why I'd rung. Somehow it didn't seem important any more.

20

(Gloucestershire)

It is sad that hospitals have got rid of their chapels.

When I was a medical student every hospital had a chapel.

If a patient was seriously ill or had died I used to sit in the chapel for a while, pray, talk to God and ask for help.

These days most former hospital chapels have been turned into offices and the remaining cluster have been turned into multidenominational cupboards, cleansed of all Christian influence in a deep nod to the Pagan God of Multiculturalism.

21

(Gloucestershire)

I read today that during World War II, around 85% of all the soldiers involved never fired their weapons in anger. Even when their own lives were at risk, they were not inclined to kill another human being. It is, I suppose, possible to argue that the soldiers who did the shooting were all psychopaths and if that is so then our psychopaths must have been more deadly than the German psychopaths. (Incidentally, it is worth remembering that some psychopaths are superficially extremely charming. Dr Harold Shipman, GP and mass murderer, was loved by his patients and when he was in prison he was loved by the inmates too – who apparently flocked to his cell for medical advice. (And here's another unprintable thought: has anyone else noticed that the listed symptoms for sufferers of Asperger's syndrome are almost identical to the listed symptoms for psychopaths? I make no comment or judgement. But it's an undeniable fact. Maybe, if this were more widely available, all those hackers who claim to be Asperger patients, and therefore not responsible for their actions, would not be using the diagnosis to help them fight extradition.)

22

(Gloucestershire)

Right on the heels of reports showing that productivity in the UK is continuing to fall and that illiteracy and innumeracy are rising, comes news that the average Briton now spends 8 hours 45 minutes a day on the Internet (mostly on a mobile phone). I wonder if all these facts could be connected. If the average person spends 8 hours and 45 minutes on the Internet what do they do? How do they ever get any work done at all? We have become a nation of Facebook and Twitter slaves.

23

(Gloucestershire)

Looking through a newspaper after breakfast today I read that a Swiss firm called Erfolgswelle will help parents choose a name for their child.

They charge £22,000 for this service.

I think I can probably do it cheaper than that.

Indeed, I've decided to offer a child naming service for a mere £21,000.

A snip, as the vasectomy surgeons are wont to say.

I expect I will be too busy providing names for babies to do anything else. So this may be the last entry in this diary.

24

(Gloucestershire)

I am astonished and disappointed.

Despite my offering to provide a child naming service at a cut price rate I have received absolutely no orders. And no cheques.

I sat here for most of the day; ready, willing and perfectly able to offer names for babies. I had a good assortment of names available.

But everyone wanting a name is clearly prepared to pay the full £22,000 rather than submit to the temptation of my cut price rate.

So it's back to the diary tomorrow.

25

(Gloucestershire)

I spent half an hour trying to convince a website that I was not a robot.

I can never read the damned clever letters and numbers which they jumble together to fool the robots.

Does this mean that I am a robot but do not know it?

26

(Gloucestershire)

It has been agreed at long last that asthma has been wildly over-diagnosed.

Golly, that took a long time.

It has been clear for many years that doctors have been over-diagnosing asthma. There have been two reasons for this.

First, parents tend to assume that if a child wheezes once then it must have asthma. And it must be treated. Countless thousands of children have been diagnosed as suffering from asthma after a single bout of wheezing. There are many causes of wheezing which aren't asthma – an infection or an isolated allergy attack, for example – but once diagnosed as suffering from asthma, children are often given regular doses of potentially dangerous drugs.

Second, doctors in the UK receive a fee every time they add another child to the list of patients suffering from asthma. And so, oddly enough, thousands of GPs are happy to diagnose children as asthmatic.

It has also been announced that antidepressants can lead to suicide and mental health problems. I find it scary to hear that there are doctors (and medical journalists) who regard this as news.

All this makes me feel rather tired and old.

The majority of medical journalists today don't ever seem to read anything published more than a week ago. If they did, they would know that most of the stories they publish are history not news.

27

(Gloucestershire)

I was reminded today that in America it is perfectly permissible for householders to shoot burglars. This is, surely, a good thing.

In the UK, householders have to make burglars a nice cup of tea and give them a biscuit. And they must make sure that the burglars don't hurt themselves carrying away the loot.

What a bloody wimpy, politically correct country we have become.

When the Iranian navy (I can't type that without smirking) stopped a British naval vessel a few years ago, our brave sailors surrendered without a protest and were taken prisoner. They were later released wearing ill-fitting Iranian clobber and clutching plastic bags full of goodies.

But when the Iranian navy (I'm smirking again) stopped an Australian naval vessel and demanded that the sailors surrender, the Aussie response was to tell the Iranians to fuck off (or, more probably, to fark orf).

The shocked and terrified Iranians duly 'farked orf'.

If American citizens are attacked while abroad their Government responds immediately and firmly.

But if British citizens are attacked while abroad the British Government apologises, pours itself another gin and tonic and tells the relatives and friends not to do anything that might strain international relations.

The result is that kidnappers and crooks tend to steer clear of Americans abroad and to target Britons.

28

(Gloucestershire)

We drove through Chard today (someone has to or there wouldn't be any need for a road) and I noticed a sign boasting that the town was the home of the first powered flight.

It's true.

The world's first powered flight did take place in Chard in Somerset.

The plane was invented and flown by John Stringfellow in 1848 but it didn't carry a pilot because it was a large model aeroplane.

The aeroplane had a 10-foot wide wingspan with a wooden frame covered in silk and it was powered by a tiny steam engine which was housed in a gondola suspended beneath the wings.

I find it remarkable that someone was flying a powered model aeroplane twenty years before the Wright brothers flew at Kittyhawk.

I don't know why but I had always thought of model aeroplanes as being copies of the real thing, rather than the other way around.

29

(Gloucestershire)

It is now possible to obtain a degree in Circus Arts. There are, presumably, extra credits for exceptional skills with the Custard Pie and the Exploding Car.

When I was a boy, I liked circuses (though I was upset by the way the animals were treated) and it's good to know that circus skills are still being passed on.

But a degree in circus arts?

Why would a circus performer want or need a degree?

The problem, of course, is that the Government wants every young person to go to university (however pointless and unnecessary their degree course might be) because when there are more students there must, inevitably, be fewer young people listed as unemployed.

It's not me that is being cynical about this.

It’s the politicians who are being both cynical and cruel.
Millions of young people are wasting money and time acquiring degrees which are worthless.

March

1

(Devon)

The residents of Sidmouth in Devon are being encouraged to mend the town's potholes themselves.

Residents can apply to be trained in the use of an instant tarmacadam mixture and, once qualified, they are recruited as official road wardens.

Each fully qualified but volunteer road warden is expected to recruit a team of Pothole Hunters and to go around the town looking for potholes to repair.

The scheme has apparently proved enormously popular with the local taxpayers for scores of them are already in training.

Have I gone mad or is it the rest of the world?

2

(Gloucestershire)

It seems that Britain's new HS2 railway line, theoretically designed to connect London to the north of England and to scar the countryside between the two, is heading off the rails.

Despite an estimated bill of £60 billion (due to rise to £100 billlion before a single foot of track has been lain down) and to take 15 years to build (due to rise to 30 years before the last foot of line is down) it seems that it is likely that the nation won't be able to afford to take the line all the way from London to Manchester (a distance of under 200 miles) or to stop on the way at a station in Sheffield (an absolutely staggering 166 miles away from London).

This is utter madness.

The original estimate for this bit of quite ordinary railway line was £17 billion. That quickly soared to £49 billion and then to £60 billion.

Since the whole project seems likely to run out of money before it can reach Manchester, it seems likely that trains using the new fast line will stop in a field somewhere between London and Manchester.

Or they may stop at Crewe which is much the same thing as stopping in a field since Crewe is famous largely for having a railway station and no one much has ever wanted to go there. It is, unfortunately, 35 miles short of Manchester. Stopping the HS2 train at Crewe would be a bit like sending a space probe to Mars but then admitting that it will actually stop at the Moon instead.

That's the bad news.

The good news is that the trains will get to the field they are aiming for quite quickly – cutting ten or fifteen minutes off the time taken at the moment, though this is something of a guess because no one really knows the location of the field where the new HS2 line will end.

Of course, getting from the field to somewhere useful will probably add an hour or two to the journey time, but just think of the excitement, the adventure and the chance to commune with nature. London city dwellers will doubtless be thrilled by the chance to stand in a field and try to hail a taxi.

'Is that a taxi over there, Julian?'

'No. I think that one is a cow.'

Some folk, largely those who are involved in making money out of the whole project, think it is wonderful that Britain can afford to build such a pointless and expensive piece of railway line.

I wonder if the people who made the decision to spend our money this way know that every winter 40,000 elderly Britons die because they cannot afford to keep themselves warm. (Though to be fair, this usually happens not because the elderly folk are intrinsically impoverished, but because they have been ripped off by utility companies, banks, pension companies and their local councils.)

The strange thing is that Parliament has still not formally approved of the HS2 scheme.

However, despite this lack of authority, civil servants and quangonistas have already spent £1.5 billion of taxpayer's money on planning the project and trying to decide which field bests suit their purposes as a stopping point.

Britain desperately needs new infrastructure (much of what we have was built by the Victorians). We need new hospitals and roads, for example. And we need to repair the damage done by the deadly Dr Beeching and his silly, short-sighted report.

But we don't need to spend a gazillion on a railway line improvement that will add little or nothing to people's lives.

I find it impossible to avoid the conclusion that our civil servants must now be the most dishonest and incompetent in the world.

They have, remember, recently given us helicopters which won't fly when it is cloudy and destroyers with engines which don't work in hot places.

The BBC wasted £100 million a scheme to move away from using and storing video tape.

And the NHS wastes billions on an annual basis – it wasted ten billion on an absurd and unwanted IT project.

No one responsible for these screw ups is ever fired, demoted, rapped across the knuckles or punished in any way.

Indeed, most of the idiots responsible get promoted, given a huge bonus to cheer them up and awarded a gong of some kind in the Honours List.

3

(Gloucestershire)

I bought some fat balls from a store called Gardner Haskins in Cirencester. The shop was selling them at 6 for £1.99 and 12 for £3.99. I wanted a dozen to supplement the peanuts and sunflower hearts we already have, so I bought two packs of half a dozen balls and saved myself a penny.

In the street outside two women, both in their fifties and dressed as one might expect school teacher/grandmothers to dress, were playing jazz on a pair of saxophones.

I mean absolutely no disrespect when I say that they looked like jam making enthusiasts whose favourite piece of music was probably the WI theme tune 'Jerusalem'.

Oh, how appearances deceive.

As they played, busking for charity, they swayed and bopped.

It was a strange experience because what I might have expected didn't quite match what I saw and heard.

A little further along the street a man was parading with a large sign on which he had written 'The End May Not Be Nigh Just Yet – But It Soon Will Be'.

There are so many strange and wonderful things to see in even the quietest of country towns. Most of us miss these things either because we are hurrying so as to be at B instead of A or because we are peering at our mobile telephones and living in a different world.

4

(Gloucestershire)

When we went out this morning, heading for Devon, a group of workmen were mending potholes. The team consisted of a lorry and a driver, with a pile of tarmacadam in the back, and two men with shovels.

When the lorry driver spotted a pothole, he would stop for a moment to allow the men with shovels to dump some tarmac into the pothole. They didn't even bother to climb down from the back of the lorry. It seemed a pointless and thankless task, quite devoid of purpose and the men involved clearly had no pride in what they were doing.

Given the state of our roads, I was reminded of Sisyphus. Perhaps these workmen live in hope. But can they ever be happy in their work? I suspect not. It is, rather, merely a way to fill the time between cups of tea.

On our way south, the queues on the motorway were horrendous (the police were doubtless taking part in the Who Can Create The Biggest Queue On The Motorway Competition By Switching On the 40 mph Warning Lights For No Reason Whatsoever And Then Leaving Them Switched On For Several Hours).

I wonder if anyone responsible for creating these artificial queues knows that diesel engines have optimum efficiency when working at 80% while petrol engines are most efficient when working at 60% to 75% of their power potential.

So a diesel motor car with a top speed of 120 mph will be most efficient (and use least fuel) when doing 96mph and a petrol engine car with the same top speed will be most efficient when doing around 80 mph.

If the Government really wants us to use less fuel (for the sake of the environment) they should encourage motorists to drive faster not slower.

We left the motorway and its solid lines of traffic and drove through Bristol.

Bristol claims to be congenial and bright and exciting but I have never in my life seen a more depressing city.

Our satellite navigation system seemed determined to keep us imprisoned and we spent two hours driving round and round, trying to find a way out through this nightmare. It seems that wherever we go the roads are always busy these days. Britain has become unbelievably over-crowded and the police are unbearably officious and self-important.

The roads are crowded at 9 a.m. when people set off for work and at 4 p.m. when they set off back home. Travel is unbearable on weekdays, from Monday to Friday, and it's intolerable at weekends.

When we came back this evening, the tarmac that had been put into the potholes had been pushed and pulled out by passing traffic and the potholes were as just big as ever.

Still, I suppose the potholes were probably 'mended' for an hour or so.

5

(Gloucestershire)

I have long been fascinated by the notion that people often become enormously depressed (so depressed, indeed, that they lie down and die) when they have finished their life's work and completed their ambitions.

There are many examples, which I have listed elsewhere but today I discovered three more.

First, Michael Ventris was an English linguist who helped decipher Linear B, an ancient script. Ventris had been working on the script since his teenage years and apparently killed himself a little while later.

Second, I read that when Lord Kinross finished writing his book *The Ottoman Empire* he was 71-years-old. He had spent a good part of the previous decade working on the book. When he had chosen the illustrations and sent the book to the printer he promptly died.

Third, I read that 'when Alexander the Great saw the breadth of his domain he wept, for there were no more lands to conquer.'

This is a remarkably common phenomenon. Several retired readers have written to me in the past to tell me that after finishing their work they became quite severely depressed.

The lesson, I suppose, is that when approaching retirement we should all look for new worlds to conquer.

6

(Gloucestershire)

Second class mail now seems to take between 10 and 14 days to arrive at its destination.

This is not entirely the fault of Royal Mail but is often the responsibility of those companies which choose to take advantage of Royal Mail's cut price second class service (whereby a company posting more than 4,000 letters can get a price reduction on the understanding that the mail will be sorted by machines which were made in 1876.)

The annoying thing is that companies which use this delayed service always date their mail with the date that it is written. So, I frequently receive letters telling me that I have to do something within 14 days but I find that this is impossible because the letter has arrived after the 14 day period has expired. Could this possibly be deliberate?

The quality of our mail service has deteriorated dramatically over the years.

I remembered today that when I was a boy (admittedly quite a while ago) I inadvertently put a letter into a post box but forgot to stick on a stamp.

The next day I received a very sympathetic letter from the local postmaster telling me that he had delivered my letter (because he was sure that I would wish him to do that) and that he would be grateful if I would send him a stamp for the appropriate postage. This I did, of course.

The fact that nothing like this could possibly happen today is, sadly, a reflection on the nature of society in general as much as it is a reflection on Royal Mail.

Progress, thank you very much.

7

(Gloucestershire)

There's a lot of inaccurate and nasty stuff about me on the Internet. Much of it was commissioned or published or 'arranged' by drug company lobbyists upset by my campaigning. (I have long argued that the so-called ethical drug companies are much nastier and more vengeful than the drug barons who flog cocaine and heroin. They are bad people.)

I don't much bother about the lies because neither Antoinette nor I ever look up my name on search engines.

But today I discovered a sad side effect.

A week or so ago we met a nice couple and today, Antoinette had a rather patronising and curiously forgiving email from them which made it clear that they had found my name on the Internet and had been avidly reading some of the imaginative articles therein.

It sounds whingey and pathetic to say that most of the stuff about me on the Web is either made up, totally inaccurate or selected by lobbyists working for drug companies, etc.

So we say nothing and we won't see them again.

I feel so sorry that Antoinette is being dragged into this morass of lies and manipulations. She is a sensitive and caring woman.

(She once went into a church in Barnstaple and discovered that there was no pen available for the use of visitors who wished to write and leave prayers. So she donated a pen which I had given her as a present and of which she was very fond. 'I couldn't bear the thought of all those people not being able to write down their prayers', she said. The corollary to this story is that by chance, and knowing nothing of this, I had bought her another identical pen which for no particular reason I presented to her that same evening. A serendipitous happenstance, perchance.)

8

(Gloucestershire)

Here's an odd thing.

Vaccines contain a horrendous mixture of bad-for-you stuff, including aluminium and mercury (the EU has banned barometers which contain mercury safely encased in glass and brass but they allow doctors to inject the stuff straight into children) but some also contain pork gelatin.

Why is that Muslims and Jews won't eat pork, or meat that has not been killed by having its throat slit, but they will allow themselves and their children to be injected with vaccines containing pork gelatin?

Just curious.

I really don't understand why so many people are prepared to allow themselves to be injected with the deadly stuff crammed into vaccines.

It is hardly surprising that I am never more than an old-fashioned inch away from being the glorious madman who strolls the streets yelling abuse at bewildered strangers.

I may one day carry a sandwich board carrying the slogan 'The End of the World is Nigh'.

There used to be a nice chap who wandered up and down Oxford Street with a sandwich board of that nature but the local police and the courts arrested him for disturbing the peace and getting in the way of the sandwich board men advertising McClinton Burgers ('Our Burgers Contain 50% Extra Gristle') and cut price golf clubs

9

(Gloucestershire)

A man whom Antoinette met told her that his best friend's wife died a month ago.

'The husband was devastated,' said the man. 'He loved her very much and was in a terrible state. I met his new girlfriend last week and she said that he's still quite glum.'

The man's best friend has clearly and bravely overcome his despair.

10

(Gloucestershire)

Waving two fingers is now apparently a public order offence.

A politician who waved two fingers at an opponent is being investigated by the police after the person at whom the two fingers were aimed made a formal complaint.

Ye gods, how thin some skins have become.

Antoinette sometimes warns me that my own activities are likely to result in my appearing on YouTube.

I do not give a damn.

Since I never look at YouTube I will never know.

And why isn't it called MeTube? From what I have heard, the people who appear on it are massively egotistical and entirely self-centred.

11

(Gloucestershire)

Old folk are these days wildly over promoted and over sold on the wonders of modern medicine. They are over investigated and over treated and often made sicker than they really are. They are also worried a good deal more than they need be.

The best health advice is the simplest: eat when you're hungry, avoid tobacco and meat and take regular gentle exercise.

There really isn't anything much else that matters.

12

(Gloucestershire)

An accountant I know told me that a chap he knows went to Las Vegas where he had a winning streak which resulted in wins totalling a pleasing $60,000.

My accountant chum tells me that he knows that the fellow had simply spent his holiday in Las Vegas buying chips with cash which he'd taken with him. The cash was money which he had earned as a self-employed plasterer. He'd smuggled it over to America in pockets and his carry-on luggage.

On the last day of the holiday, he cashed in all the chips to make it look as though he had had a very lucky week. He got the casino to give him a note confirming that they'd given him the $60,000 in exchange for chips.

When he came back home he put the money into his bank account and put the casino receipt with his accounts.

The gambler/plasterer apparently excuses his behaviour on the grounds that people who pay tax are contributing to war and many different varieties of corruption.

And when you think about it, it is difficult to argue with him.

Maybe citizens have a duty to pay as little tax as conceivably possible?

Our governments spend most of our money on patently immoral activities, bombing small countries and bullying their own citizens. And the rest of it they simple fritter away on themselves.

Maybe we should all follow the example set by the *Guardian* newspaper, the Prime Minister and pop singer Bono and become tax avoiders.

13

(Gloucestershire)

'Whenever I telephone anyone these days they immediately want to call me by my first name,' I complained to Antoinette. 'They always call me 'Vernon' and never address me as Dr Coleman or Mr Coleman. Do they do that with you?'

'No,' she said thoughtfully. 'No, I don't think so. I don't think anyone has ever wanted to address me as Vernon.'

14

(Gloucestershire)

When the EU introduced its potty rules forcing us all to use special mercury enriched light bulbs, I purchased as many old-fashioned, and much more effective, light bulbs as I could. We have lots of light fittings which won't take the new bulbs and it would be pointless, complicated and expensive to change them all.

I checked our stocks today to see how we are doing and found that we still have a fairly impressive cupboard full of bulbs. I was delighted to find that we have, in our cupboard, 138 sixty watt bulbs with bayonet fittings, for example. Our little store should last for a year or two yet.

On the afternoon news I saw that a rich, famous, fortunate and vastly over rated actress from another country has claimed that we should all welcome all immigrants. She does not think we are overloaded with them or that they have imported sexism and racism to our shores. She says she has generously given a home to several immigrants herself and finds that they make excellent, obedient and inexpensive servants.

Oh, how the other 0.001% do live and how irrelevant are their musings.

15

(Gloucestershire)

We live in a time when people can acquire enormous reputations for doing very little and achieving almost nothing.

This is known as the Eddie the Eagle phenomenon.

(Eddie the Eagle was an English ski jumper of limited skills, who became arguably Britain's most famous Olympian without ever getting close to winning a medal, but who brought smiles and cheers to millions who think that modern professional sport is taken far too seriously by the sports people themselves, by their administrators and by the media.)

Eddie worked hard, tried hard and deserved his moments of fame.

But the world is now awash with reality television 'stars' who have absolutely no skills, no talents and no achievements behind them.

We are expected to revere them merely because they are notorious.

It is hardly surprising that the Entitlement Generation expect to be revered merely for getting up in the morning and telling us, via Twitter, what they have eaten for breakfast.

Frank Zappa once claimed that stupidity is the basic building block of the universe, and every day there is fresh evidence to support the belief that he was absolutely right. But who are the stupid ones – the reality TV 'stars' who demand to be revered for no good reason or those of us who revere them?

Thinking about it, of course, modern politicians acquire power, fame and money without any discernible life skills or usable experiences except the ability to lie without showing that they are lying.

16

(Paris)

We rediscovered a CD of a musical called 'Sitting Pretty'. (If you could see our pile of CDs you would know why I say we 'rediscovered' it.)

The music for Sitting Pretty was written by Jerome Kern, the book was by Guy Bolton and P.G.Wodehouse and the lyrics were by P.G.Wodehouse. It's a marvellous musical.

It is perhaps not widely known that Wodehouse wrote regularly and successfully for the New York stage. The musical was performed in New York in 1924 and it's now my favourite ever musical. Especially if you ignore the plot. (I've read the plot and it is absurd, surreal and so unlikely as to be incomprehensible. Bolton and Wodehouse clearly had a wonderful time with it).

The music is addictive and these are probably Kern's best tunes; so classy that you can almost feel the house lights going down when the overture begins.

Wodehouse's lyrics are predictably ticklish.

'The girls of all varieties, wear little but a freckle as a rule.'

'I'll talk so fast I'll slip, and dislocate a lip.'

'I'd rather have neuralgia, than be tortured by nostalgia.'

And my joint favourite, from a song entitled Bongo on the Congo. 'You simply hit them with an axe, that's the way you pay your income tax.' (Wodehouse had long running problems with the Inland Revenue.)

My other joint favourite line goes: 'Poverty is the banana skin on the doorstep of romance.'

I have a book of Wodehouse's lyrics for other shows and tunes. They make marvellous reading.

The CD of Sitting Pretty was in a Led Zeppelin case because Antoinette likes to make life more interesting by putting CDs into whichever case comes to hand.

I spent many hours over the last two years hunting for a favourite CD of 'The Bob Dylan Radio Hour'.

In the end I gave up, even though I know the CD is there somewhere, and bought another copy at an outrageous price from a fellow in Australia who was, it seems, the only person in the world to have a copy for sale.

Sitting Pretty is now pretty well forgotten but deserves to be revived. It's a marvellous musical.

Antoinette and I spent the rest of the evening listening to an old recording of the Last Night of the Proms (when people waved Union Jacks instead of that silly EU flag).

As we listened, we read.

I started with a book about the First World War and discovered, to my absolute horror, that a battle for a cowshed, of no military significance, resulted in 360,000 deaths.

I then moved onto a biography of Rimbaud (written by Jean-Marie Carre and called, with untypical Gallic accuracy, La Vie de Rimbaud) in which the author tells that Verlaine and Rimbaud once shared a flat behind King's Cross railway station in London.

The pair of temporarily exiled poets did their own cooking and housekeeping.

One day, when it was Verlaine's turn to go the shops, he bought a herring and a litre bottle of cooking oil. As he approached the building in which their flat was situated, Rimbaud leant out of the window and shouted abuse. When he got up the stairs and into the flat Verlaine threw the herring at Rimbaud.

The herring hit Rimbaud full in the face, which suggests that he was a pretty good shot with a herring. If he had been as good a shot with a bottle of cooking oil then Rimbaud was lucky in Verlaine's choice of missile.

Having hurled the herring, Verlaine stormed off to catch a boat to Brussels, leaving Rimbaud alone and penniless in London and with only a slightly soiled herring between him and starvation.

Verlaine had hoped to meet up with his wife in Brussels but that didn't go as well as he had hoped and so Verlaine, perhaps feeling guilty, sent some money to London so that Rimbaud could buy a ticket to Brussels and meet him there.

Rimbaud probably thought that the abuse and the fuss over the herring had been forgotten but he was wrong for Verlaine then shot him in the hand. This seems to have been the end of the friendship and to be honest I am not surprised. Being shot in the hand is rather an escalation from having a herring thrown at your face.

This is not the sort of stuff students of French literature are taught and nor, I suspect, is the sort of stuff found in books about London.

Incidentally, according to Carre, Rimbaud didn't think much of books. He once said that buying books is idiotic and that 'Books, ranged on shelves, only serve to conceal the foul leprosies on old walls.'

But he may have been influenced by memories of that flat behind King's Cross railway station in London.

17

(Paris)

A chap we know, who currently lives in Cyprus and spends his days managing an olive stuffing business, has plans to market an aerosol can containing mud.

His 'unique selling point' (as advertisers know these things) is that he will sell the mud to motorists so that they can spray it onto their number plates and so escape speeding fines. This is not the first time I have come across this idea and I can't see it working terribly well. Still, you have to give the fellow good marks for trying.

After trying, unsuccessfully, to persuade us to invest in his idea, the chap told us that the world has been taken by a new trend called 'mindfulness'.

As I understand it (by which I mean as he explained it) the idea behind 'mindfulness' is that we should all concentrate all our energies on 'the moment' and be forever aware of all our feelings in the instant that we have them.

If I've got this right then it is a dangerous and counter-productive piece of nonsense which is likely to kill the imagination, produce selfishness and lead to more stress.

What happens if you're having a bad time?

Is it really a good idea to concentrate all your energy on the bad things that are happening?

Surely it would be better to use your imagination to soar above it all?

I have for nearly half a century encouraged people under stress to use 'daydreaming' to escape from their day-to-day anxieties. And I still think that is good advice.

Talking of old ways to deal with stress, I saw the other day that punch balls are back in fashion and are again being promoted as a good way to deal with daily lifestyle problems.

It isn't only punch balls that are being used as stress relievers.

In America, where 71% of the people say they are angry with the way things are, 'rage rooms' are now extremely popular.

Customers pay $3 a minute to go into a room and smash up old TV sets, bottles and crockery with a sledgehammer. The solution isn't new, of course. When I wrote my book *Stress Control* back in the 1970s I wrote about a banker in Vienna who had left a tense meeting, gone to the nearby fair and spent a few schillings smashing old crockery with wooden balls.

The difference now lies not so much in the solution but in the size of the problem.

In the evening, we listened to CDs of two live shows by Flanders and Swann, who were enormously successful revue artists in the 1950s and 1960s.

The first show was called 'At the drop of a hat' and the second show was entitled 'At the drop of another hat'. I expect they spent some time thinking that up.

Sadly, there was not as far as I know, a third show though if there had been it would have undoubtedly been entitled 'At the drop of yet another hat'.

In the show, Flanders tells an anecdote which I won't bother retelling but, as part of the tale, mentions his own address in London (it was number 1a in Scarsdale Villas road) and I couldn't help wondering how many modern artists would dare reveal their home addresses on stage and on a recording.

None, is my best guess.

18

(Paris)

We wandered around the empty streets of a city deserted by travellers and occupied by fear. It feels strange to wander around a Paris so quiet and peaceful that it could be post-Apocalypse.

As we walked about I was reminded, for the umpteenth time, that although the British tend to regard their motor cars as ornaments to be protected, washed, cleaned and worshipped (with their Ford Fiascos or Vauxhall Smegmas being treated as part of the family) the French regard their cars as pieces of equipment to be used (like spades or washing machines) driven at the maximum possible speed and then, when not needed, abandoned somewhere within hailing distance of a pavement (it doesn't matter which one). At several points in our journey we had to climb over touching bumpers in order to cross the road.

From a newsagents, which had opened in the desperate hope that someone might venture out of doors, I bought a couple of newspapers and was fascinated to read again of Bernard Tapie's latest goings on.

Frenchman Bernard Tapie has rarely been out of the news for decades and he is in the news at the moment because a French court has ordered him to repay 400 million euros which he was given eight years ago to settle a legal kerfuffle.

The current boss of the International Monetary Fund, Christine Lagarde, is mixed up in the scandal and has now been charged with 'negligence'. She could well end up in court and then in jail, living off the French equivalent of porridge.

Tapie is a fascinating character.

Born in 1943 to a metalworker and a cleaner in Paris, he made a fortune in the 1980s buying up distressed companies. He then used some of the loot to become President of the Olympique de Marseille football club in 1986. He also decided to move into television and long before the TV show The Apprentice, he hosted a prime time TV show called Ambition that helped young entrepreneurs. He also broke the translatlantic sailing record and founded a cycling team that won the Tour de France twice.

You might think that was enough for one man.

But the indefatigable Tapie was only just starting.

He entered politics and won a seat in the French parliament as a socialist and was appointed urban affairs minister in 1992. Things were then going pretty well but his political career came to a fairly abrupt standstill when the company Adidas (which he had acquired along the way) got into trouble and he asked his bank to sell it for him. Things got worse in 1995 when he was sentenced to eight months in jail over a football match rigging scandal.

When he got out of jail, Mr Tapie decided to change direction a little.

He backed and became friends with a young politician called Sarkozy, who became the centre-right President of France. And he landed himself a job playing the lead character in a television crime drama. (You could not, as they say, make this up.)

In 2008, he was given 400 million euros of taxpayers' money to settle arbitration relating to the sale of the company Adidas. (That was where Christine Lagarde got involved).

Then last year the French government decided it wanted its money back, and a Paris court asked Mr Tapie to hand back the 400 million euros.

Well, you wouldn't would you?

Mr Tapie seems to have told the court and the Government to go hang (and who can blame him) and is now standing for President of La Belle France.

It seems that his remarkable career is nowhere near over.

Some people lead lives like that.

I am, for some reason, reminded of Horatio Bottomley and Robert Maxwell.

I wouldn't be in the slightest bit surprised to read that Tapie had decided to become an astronaut.

19

(Paris)

It costs about half as much to send a letter to England from France as it costs to send one from France to England.

Britain must now have the most expensive postal service in the world for the costs are absurdly high when compared with the costs of sending mail from other countries.

It is the cheap postage which gives Chinese mail order companies such an advantage over British mail order companies. I don't think anyone in Britain would care too much if the service was any good. But it isn't.

When we ran our publishing company, we relied heavily upon the Royal Mail because there really wasn't any parcel delivery competition at the time. The biggest problems were not the delays but the costs and the losses.

I reckon that we were, at one time, losing around ten per cent of the books we parcelled up and sent out. Readers were understandably cross when their books didn't arrive (in Royal Mail jargon the books were 'lost' but in my jargon they were 'nicked') and I suspect we often lost customers whom we appeared to have let down.

20

(Paris)

A man we know in Paris has a fine collection of erotic literature. Apparently, the difference between erotica and pornography is that erotica is far more expensive and is sold in smart shops by men and women in expensive suits. Pornography, on the other hand, is either sold online or in small shops where it tends to be displayed just out of reach so that only very tall people can buy it.

Our acquaintance told us today that Messalina, the wife of Claudius, prostituted herself by working in common brothels because Claudius's penis was too small to satisfy her.

It is a good job that all women whose husbands suffer from variations on the microphallic theme do not follow her lead for if they were to do so then the brothels of the world would, I suspect, be overflowing and those seeking paid horizontal relief would find that the prices had fallen dramatically.

The most interesting thing in the contemporary news in Paris is that a French worker is suing his bosses because he says his job is too boring. He wants £280,000 in compensation. The claim is being taken very seriously by everyone.

Yesterday, I would have said that I thought the world had probably gone mad. Today, I would say that the world has definitely gone mad.

21

(Paris)

It had to happen. A whorehouse in Montmartre has introduced an examination for prospective employees. Girls who want to work in the brothel must take both written and practical examinations to show that they are suitable candidates for employment. Successful girls receive a diploma (in penology, perhaps) and a licence to operate.

There is talk that the EU will soon introduce an official licensing system for the profession.

And why not?

It is, as we are so often assured, the oldest profession in the world.

The next obvious step is for universities to start offering courses for those wishing to enter the profession. Since it is now possible to get a degree in 'circus arts' I see absolutely no reason why it should not be possible to obtain a degree in 'bedroom arts'.

22

(Paris)

I discovered today that my iPhone is voice activated and that if I talk to it then it will try to follow my instructions.

I tried out this facility by asking one or two silly questions but each time the iPhone started to dial a very long number.

I can only assume that it was trying to connect me to somewhere very foreign which would cost me a great deal of money.

Why am I not surprised?

23

(Gloucestershire)

Part of the M5 motorway is closed and there are huge signs telling motorists that the road-works will continue until the summer of 2017.

The modest amount of work (repair work to a bridge) will take the best part of two years. The Egyptians could have probably built a decent sized pyramid in less time. The Chinese would have built a 2,000 mile motorway in that time. You'd have thought, would you not, that if a bridge was unsafe then the repair work might need to be done with some haste, rather than spread out over two years.

As we passed by there were, inevitably, no signs of anyone doing anything but the average speed cameras have been installed so that the police and the Government can make as much money as possible during the lengthy period of the disruption. The money raised will doubtless be used to provide the Chief Constable and his closest minions with an endless supply of chocolate digestive biscuits with his morning coffee.

I see, incidentally, that those parts of the country which do not have any speed cameras (because the local police regard them as unhelpful) have less accidents than those which do – proving beyond doubt that speed cameras kill, and are there purely to raise money.

I cannot get over the fact that it is going to take two years to repair a bridge. How can it possibly take that long to fiddle around with a bit of bridge?

The cost to the nation in wasted petrol and lost time will doubtless run into billions. It has been estimated that closing a motorway costs the nation at least £1 million an hour (the cost of the stress and distress and wasted petrol much be added to that figure) and the overall cost of the variety of unnecessary delays resulting from officiousness on the roads is well north of £100 billion a year.

Things are now so bad that when we plan a journey on a motorway (and Britain's appalling road network means that it is difficult to get anywhere without using a motorway) we do not expect to average more than 30 miles an hour for the journey.

Indeed, earlier this week I read that the average vehicle speed on many British motorways is now between 25 mph and 30 mph.

It is clear that a few overzealous, incompetent and arrogant highways officials and traffic policemen are probably doing more harm to the nation's economy than any number of militant unions.

Most annoying of all is the way that the people employed to look after so-called 'smart motorways' will leave warning signs switched on for hours, days and, for all I know, weeks after an incident has been dealt with and any blockage removed. It is hardly surprising that irritated and disillusioned motorists now regularly ignore warning signs completely.

The M5, which is one of the country's busiest motorways must be one of the most disrupted. Contractors are forever closing a lane on each side of the central reservation, usually because they have been hired to tear down Armco barriers (which collect cars and prevent serious accidents) and replacing them with solid concrete barriers (which seem to me to have been especially designed to turn small accidents into much bigger ones).

I can only assume that the Department of Transport, guided by the European Union, has done some sort of deal with car manufacturers and scrap metal dealers – both of which will make vast amounts of money out of the changes.

Here's another thing: who the hell thought up the daft idea of putting curved roofs on large lorries.

I know what the lorry owners say.

They claim that the lorries are more aerodynamic because they move through the air easier than lorries with flat tops. That is doubtless true. But these lorries undoubtedly cost more to make, and carry less stuff, than old-fashioned flat top lorries. Has it not occurred to anyone that it is difficult to cram as much stuff into a lorry that has a curved top?

No one cares about the practicality or otherwise, of course. The fact is that the owners of these curved top lorries can claim that they are saving icebergs and these days political correctness always trumps logic and functionality.

24

(Gloucestershire)

The UK is now almost entirely a service economy. This means that the only people doing real jobs are the ones who style hair, polish nails, cut grass and sell insurance. None of these activities brings money into the country.

Very few people actually make things and even less grow stuff or dig stuff out of the ground.

The only way Britain can become great again is for us to bring over planeloads of tourists who want to have their hair cut and their nails polished. It would be even better if they could be persuaded to bring their lawns over with them. We, as a nation, are very good at caring for lawns.

25

(Gloucestershire)

In the old days, if something went badly wrong you resigned or were fired. This was true in business, government and politics. But today, if you screw up badly you get a huge bonus to make you feel better and you are told that it wasn't your fault, it could have happened to anyone and you mustn't worry about a thing.

Civil servants are now treated like company lifers were treated in Japan in the 1950s. Senior servants demand huge salaries, vast arrays of perks, regular bonuses, long holidays, a total lack of accountability and a mention in the New Year's Honours List.

The casual arrogance of the modern civil servant is astounding.

They enjoy complete job security, absolutely no real responsibility and freedom from all work at evenings, nights and weekends.

And they do not seem realise the meaning of the word 'servant' in their job description.

We live in a time of civil service tyranny and roulette wheel justice.

26

(Gloucestershire)

An acquaintance of ours who has written an excellent book about his experiences as a GP now refuses to have it published because he is nervous of the reviews it may receive on Amazon. He knows that a single spelling mistake can lead to permanent damnation. I know what he means. Thus is the power of those whose cruel, one second criticisms destroy people and careers before they have started.

Of course, having done a lot of campaigning over the years I should really expect to have enemies.

There is an old Dutch saying: 'If the shit is up to your neck, don't make waves.'

Well, the shit has been up to my neck for quite a while and. It's time I learned to stop making waves.

I'll try to avoid putting anything contentious or offensive into this diary.

27

(Gloucestershire)

Today, while crawling along the motorway, we saw a woman with two children standing on the hard shoulder. It was dusk and it was raining. The mother was smoking and was not holding onto the children who were two or three-years-old. This is not the first time I have seen such a scene.

What blithering idiot thought it was safe to tell motorists to stand behind their cars on the hard shoulder if they break down?

If I break down and there is no grassy bank to climb then I'm damned well staying in the car – which will, I'm pretty darned sure, be a good deal safer than standing behind it, waiting for a lorry to smash me into the back bumper.

28

(Gloucestershire)

I woke up having had a nightmare which I remembered quite clearly. In the nightmare I was trying to take money out of my bank and they refused to acknowledge my passport or driving licence, arguing that these documents could be forged. A supercilious clerk told me that I would only be allowed to access my money if I could produce a civil servant or a bank official who recognised me and was prepared to vouch for me.

But was it a nightmare or a prescient moment?

29

(Gloucestershire)

A few years ago, I bought membership of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds for Antoinette. I have renewed the membership annually on receipt of an invoice.

Today, Antoinette received a letter from the Royal Society for Protection of Birds.

The letter said: 'We noticed that Mr V.Coleman has not yet renewed your membership. We'd love to invite you to renew your own membership.'

This was a surprise to me since I had not received a letter telling me that the membership was expiring.

More to the point, I was horrified that an organisation would send such a letter for it rather suggests that I have chosen not to renew the membership for some reason. I have no doubt that some people would be upset by this peculiarly hard sell.

Antoinette has decided not to renew her membership.

And since she doesn't want to be a member of an organisation which would send out such a letter, I will not be renewing it for her.

30

(Gloucestershire)

I am convinced that the decline in manners, attitudes and behaviour in Britain can, at least partly, be lain at the door of the BBC.

Back in the days of valves, before even transistors were thought of, the BBC created a soap opera entitled ‘Eastenders’. It was the start of the nation’s downfall.

The characters in the programme are relentlessly evil. They do not represent any of the usual, traditional qualities of the British. The programme is full of murder, senseless violence, betrayal and spite and has done immeasurable harm to the country because the people who watch it think that they must behave in the same way.

Maybe bankers all watch Eastenders and maybe that’s why they have become so crooked, so base and so uncaring.

The banks have still done nothing to repair the damage done by the 2008 collapse, and the governments and the regulators have done absolutely nothing to make sure there isn’t another collapse.

In 2015, the world’s ten biggest investment banks paid out over $10 billion in fines. They were fined because they had lied and cheated their customers. No bank employees were fired or fined.

The figure for 2016 looks like being even higher.

Finance used to be a service industry. We needed bankers like we needed hairdressers and cobblers.

But something strange has happened, and in the US and the UK bankers have become the economy.

Britain, for example, now relies on finance rather than manufacturing or agriculture. It is as daft as having an economy reliant entirely on hairdressers. Or cobblers.

The really disturbing thing is the fact that financial journalists do not seem to have worked out just how corrupt the system really is.

Here’s how the real world now works.

A big bank, let’s call it Sachman Gold, buys up all the zinc, platinum, wheat or shares in Nestle that it can lay its dirty hands on.

It then issues a report saying that zinc, platinum, wheat or shares in Nestle are going to soar.

Punters everywhere, including pension fund managers and investment company managers, pile in and the price duly soars.

When they’ve made a vast profit, Sachman Gold flogs all its zinc, platinum, wheat or shares in Nestle and the price duly collapses, leaving small shareholders, pensioners and investment company investors holding stuff worth a lot less than it was when they bought it.

That’s the way the money world operates these days.

31

(Gloucestershire)

We bought the house that is falling off the cliff.

(I first mentioned our discovery of this house in my fourth diary *The Return of the Disgruntled Man*.)

The house is 120 feet from the edge of the cliff and the cliff is 120 feet above the beach and the sea. If there is comfort in such symmetry then we are comforted. We looked and thought and looked and worried the idea to death but eventually we decided that we couldn’t not buy it. Having flirted with the theory for many years, we decided to embrace life on the edge in a practical sense.

The house, which is in the Arts and Crafts style of William Morris, has deep skirting boards, cornicings and picture rails, a pedimented arch above the front door, an ogee arched doorway into the drawing room and enough quoins to keep any architectural historian happy for a year. There’s a stately staircase and a magnificent conservatory. The house is built with stone dug out of the ground on which it stands.

The builders adored cast iron. The downpipes, guttering and central heating radiators and pipes are all made of cast iron. Our radiators are the sort you used to see in Victorian schools and our piping is an inch and a half in diameter. The balcony, which runs along the side of the house facing the sea, is built of cast iron. If the house does fall into the sea, we will be able to salvage all the cast iron and make a fortune.

It is, in short, quite beautiful.

Surprisingly the house is not listed. Some of the most unpleasing houses we have looked at have been listed but this isn’t. In the old days, estate agents were proud if a house was listed and would put this on particulars together with other important selling factors. But these days agents and sellers try to keep quiet about the fact that a house is listed, for buyers have learned from experience that the meddling bureaucrats who control listed buildings can make life a real misery.

The gardens, mature and full of beautiful trees, shrubs and flowers, were designed by an Edwardian with a penchant for stone steps and secret places and successive owners have added stone ornaments in suitable spots.

The number of hazel bushes growing in different parts of the garden tell us that we will have plenty of squirrels to watch. And there are rabbits and a raven too.

But we didn't buy the house.

We bought the view which has, not without reason, been frequently described as the best in England.

We are, of course, convinced that the risk of the house falling off the cliff isn't as high as we had feared. We are encouraged by the knowledge that the cliffs below are riddled with caves used by smugglers in the 18th and 19th century. That sort of solid rock doesn't usually collapse.

But no one else would or could buy the place because no bank would lend money on it and no insurance company will provide cover.

All banks and insurers are aware the Jurassic coast is moving slowly inland, and the English Channel is getting wider, and they are worried that because it is near to the sea it will flood and because it is on a cliff top it might fall in. It is difficult to see how a house can be low enough to flood and high enough to fall in but there you are.

What the hell, we thought, if we don't spend our money on something that is glorious and fun, the damned Government will steal it, the European Union will confiscate it or the banks will lose it.

When we bought the house in Gloucestershire, we thought we were done with house buying since we had found somewhere peaceful and quiet. Sadly, however, the surrounding area has changed so much in the last few years that it seems as though we're living in the middle of an industrial estate. Trucks and bulldozers and all sorts of other vehicles are constantly trundling past the house and although I suspect that there aren't any trees left to chop down and burn, the sound of chainsaws is still ringing in my ears.

I find it difficult to work in a noisy environment and so we needed another home.

When we entered our new house today, the owners were having lunch.

It was our house. The solicitors had confirmed that it belonged to us. We had a car full of stuff to put into the house. But the owners were sitting there eating their lunch. It seemed surreal. Being English, we apologised profusely for troubling them and said we would leave and return in an hour or so.

'Make it an hour and a half,' said the man. 'I don't like to rush my meals.'

So we had coffee in Sidmouth and returned two hours later.

The former owners had gone but when we opened the door, the alarm started to make a noise. Lots of little green screens flashed menacingly and there was much annoying beeping.

I rang the company which operates the alarm to ask them how I could stop the noise. 'Are you registered with us?' demanded a rather aggressive and unpleasant sounding fellow.

I admitted that we had only just bought the house and hadn't had time to register the alarm.

'Then I can't help you,' he said snottily.

'What happens if I smash all the alarms with a large hammer?' I asked.

'I can't tell you that,' he said.

'But we can't live with this noise!' I told him. 'It's your alarm that's making the noise.'

He told me that he could send an engineer along in five or six days' time and that we would have to pay a call out fee of £260 or thereabouts.

Antoinette then wisely suggested that we telephone the previous owners to ask for the alarm code.

And two minutes later, having keyed in the appropriate code, the damned alarm stopped bleeping. The previous owners had set the alarm when leaving the house but had forgotten to give us the code.

As we struggled to find our way around the house, and to unload our car, neighbours who have a house just along the cliff dropped by to say hello. Their house is much nearer to the edge than ours and they lose bits of their garden every few months. They are German, seem to be in their fifties and told us they run an underwear shop called 'Thongs of Praise'.

They said that they had read about a type of tumble dryer which has a tendency to catch fire and they have bought one which they keep running all the time.

'It cost us a lot in electricity,' said the woman, 'but we consider them a good investment. One of them is bound to catch fire sooner or later and then we'll be able to claim the value of the house on our insurance.'

After we had been talking for half an hour or so, I apologised and said I would have to go because I needed to be up early 'with the birds'.

'Ah,' said the male half of the partnership, 'there is, is there not, an idiomatic saying: 'The early bird catches the worm'?'

I agreed that there was.

'Then surely,' said the man, waving a finger at me, 'you should be getting up with the worms because for the early bird to catch the worm the worm must already be up.’

‘I have to get up with the worms,’ I agreed.

Hopefully, we won’t have to see too much of them.

All old houses have idiosyncrasies and our new house by the sea is packed with them.

For example, I have learned that the boot room door can only be opened if you push in and pull up quite firmly when you have the key in the lock. The back door, leading into the kitchen, can only be opened if you pull the door towards you while using the key. The door to what will be my new study will only open if you push down on the handle and use your knee to push the door inwards. None of this is any surprise.

The front door to our apartment in Paris will only open if you push the door inwards with your knee before trying to turn the second key and it has been that way for nearly twenty years.

I’ve never had it changed because it has always seemed to me to be an excellent way to keep out burglars. They may have lock picks and skeleton keys but how many burglars know that you have to push the door inwards with your knee in order to open it?

April

1

(Paris)

English humour relies on understatement, self-deprecation and deadpan absurdity.

French humour is quite different. The French have a strange sense of humour which they like to think of as more intellectual than that of any other nation – particularly the British or the Americans.

So, for example, in order to celebrate the 1st April, the French cut out paper fish (poisons d'avril) and attach them to one another's backs.

That's it.

That is how they celebrate April Fool's Day.

Fortune magazine has published a nine-page hagiographic feature article on Bono, the music person with large aspirations and tax avoidance tendencies.

The writer of the feature dismisses in five lines the band's renowned tax avoidance scheme, a piece of accountancy which Bono himself describes as 'smart business'.

Does it, I wonder, ever occur to the sanctimonious, hypocritical little git that if he paid all the tax he owned on all his income he wouldn't have to preach the virtues of generosity to the millions struggling to survive on minimum wage?

On the other hand, if he paid his taxes he wouldn't be a hypocrite but he wouldn't be well on his way to becoming a billionaire.

I like *Fortune* because the magazine's writers (and most of the people they write about) live in a parallel universe.

The magazine, which seems to me to be overtly sexist in a wonderfully silly way, now produces a patronising newsletter entitled *The World's Most Powerful Women*.

How do they do this, I wonder?

Maybe alongside each woman mentioned, *Fortune* will print her vital statistics.

'Gloria Ticklehopper, 42-42-42, the COO of Fintech start-up Digicloud, hails from Ohio and forecasts a $7 billion sales boom in Digicloud operations. Digicloud currently has worldwide sales of $5.'

'Avelina Goldman, 48-42-54, is CFO for Toothrotcandies.com which will send you a pack of chocolate bars every day for a subscription of $900 a month.'

It is Shakespeare's 400th birthday this month.

There isn't going to be much in the way of celebrations. The politicians daren't get involved because the European Union doesn't approve of celebrating individuals who represent specific countries (it would be fine if we would describe Shakespeare as a great European and a fan of the EU) and because some Jews loathe him (because of Shylock) almost as much as they loathe Dickens (because of Fagin).

Incidentally, am I the only one to have noticed that Jews tend to bring their religion into things in the way that Christians rarely do? This is an observation not a criticism.

2

(Paris)

American, French and British papers are all full of the serious plans afoot to get rid of cash.

Bankers don't like the idea of us having access to cash because it makes negative interest rates difficult to manage.

And it is easier to control us and to follow our every move if we have to buy and sell with the aid of bank controlled plastic.

Anyone who supports the idea of getting rid of cash has to have faith that their government (and their bank) will never cheat them. And anyone who believes this should be locked away for their own protection.

The *Financial Times*, voted the most fascist newspaper on the planet by a panel consisting of me and six squirrels, seems to think that taxing savers is a pretty damned good idea and a whizzo way to curtail tax fraud, end terrorism and make our lives more convenient.

If they thought anyone would listen, the *FT* would probably also claim that getting rid of cash will eradicate cancer, get rid of Japanese Knotweed and push house prices ever upwards.

The bankers believe that the end of cash cannot be too far away. JP Morgan Chase, apparently the world's biggest bank and therefore probably employing more crooks than any of the others, is restricting the use of cash and does not allow anyone to store cash of any kind (including coins) in safe deposit boxes.

The police in America are stamping down on people who hold cash.

According to the *Washington Post*, men with uniforms and guns made 61,998 cash seizures in 2015. They have confiscated more than $2 billion in the last decade or so.

In both the USA and the UK, banks are required by law to complete 'suspicious activity reports' on any of their customers who make cash withdrawals. Having large amounts of cash is assumed to be suspicious. It is, of course, unclear precisely how 'large' is defined. In France, the police can search people on trains and confiscate cash if they find someone carrying 'too much'. ('Too much' is defined in the same way as 'large' and is clearly a new legal concept.)

In Greece, it will soon be illegal to pay any bill with more than £50 in cash.

In Denmark, there is a new law coming in to stop people using cash when shopping.

In Germany, the Baader Bank is formally abolishing cash so that it can enforce negative interest rates on its customers' accounts. And on and on it goes.

All this is being done because the authorities are aware that if banks charge people interest on their deposits, then people will merely take their money out of the banks and stuff it under the bed.

(I cannot get my head around the idea of negative interest rates which, although totally unfair and an entirely undemocratic way of supporting the indebted and punishing the frugal and the careful, is a piece of financial lunacy which, thanks to our central banks, seems to be here to stay.)

So-called investors are buying German ten-year bonds which have a negative yield. This means that the people buying the bonds are paying the German Government to allow them to lend it their money. In ten years' time, when the bonds are redeemed, the investors will get back less than they paid for the bonds. They would be better off if they bought a tin box, dug a hole and put their money into the box and into the hole.

This is utter, utter madness.

Dafter still, two Belgian banks, ING and BNP Paribas, are now paying people to take out mortgages.

The customer finds a house they like and the bank lends them the money to buy it and gives them some more money to thank them for being kind enough to borrow the money.

That is utter, utter, utter madness.

Governments are also keen to get rid of cash because it is easier to control people if their only way to survive is with credit cards. And modern governments do not want individuals to have power, authority, responsibility or autonomy.

'The individual has always had to struggle to keep being overwhelmed by the tribe,' wrote Friedrich Nietzsche who knew about struggles.

Today, if an individual misbehaves or even just criticises the Government he can be silenced by switching off his cards. (Don't laugh – this has already happened.)

And of course in a cashless society, governments don't have to print notes or make coins and banks don't have to move them around. Money simply becomes a complete illusion.

Before long we will all end up having microchips planted under our skin so that we can buy stuff simply by waving an arm at a microchip reader. (In a book published several decades ago, I reported on an experiment to trial just this.)

Banning cash will give the State, Google and the banks complete power over our lives. They will know everything we do and our privacy will merely be a memory. It's pretty well a memory already, of course. The intelligence agencies in the US now employ nearly as many people as Walmart. In the US and the UK, organised privacy invasion is now one of the biggest growth industries.

Unless.

Unless, of course, the people who have supported UKIP in the UK, Donald Trump in the US and Le Pen in France continue to stand up and reject the authoritarian bullying of the super-privileged, quasi-liberal metropolitan elite.

The odd thing about all this is that everyone with whom I do business seems to want paying in cash these days.

I have twice had to visit the bank to take out several thousand pounds in cash in order to pay for goods and services.

People selling furniture or doing stuff to bathrooms either want cash or they want to be paid by a bank transfer.

I cannot do bank transfers because if I want to organise one of these I have to drive to the bank, with my passport and driving licence, wait three quarters of an hour in a queue, and fill in a lot of forms.

Of course, if I were idiotic enough to have an online bank account, I (or anyone else) could simply go into my account and move the money across to the antique dealer, plumber or whoever.

The reality is that the war on cash is over before it has really begun.

And the winner, no surprise, will be the Government.

It does not matter that the politicians were not elected to eradicate cash. They will do it anyway.

Whatever they say on their job application manifestos, politicians always rewrite the rules as soon as they have power.

You have to be a psychopath and have oodles of self-confidence to become a politician these days. The self-confidence metamorphoses into arrogance and then the arrogance segues into hubris.

Meanwhile the bankers are just as greedy as ever.

In the last five years for which figures are available, the top five British banks paid out £31.5 billion to their shareholders and £32.9 billion in fines for cheating, lying and fiddling interest rates and the price of gold.

By the year 2020, the British banks will have had to pay out £250 billion in fines – that works out at £50,000 for every man, woman and child in Britain.

The bankers who were responsible for the dishonesty resulting in these fines will have paid not one penny towards the fines. Indeed, they are still paying themselves multi-million bonuses.

Even at the Royal Bank of Scotland, surely the worst bank in the world, ruined by Fred 'the shred' Godwin, surely the worst banker in the history of banking, the bankers are still taking home millions. In the period when they had to pay out £32.9 billion in fines, the directors and executives responsible for all this crookery paid themselves £32.6 billion in bonuses.

And this, remember, all came after the collapse of the banks, the huge taxpayer funded bailouts.

The boss of the Royal Bank of Scotland was paid £3.8 million last year, though the bank's pre-tax losses more than doubled to £968 million.

It is worth remembering that the Royal Bank of Scotland was one of the major causes of the financial crisis in the UK and that, according to a study published in *The Lancet*, the financial crisis was associated with, and probably responsible for, about 260,000 extra cancer deaths.

The greed and obscene overpayments are the same everywhere throughout the banking world.

The bosses of 11 European banks earned an average of $10.4 million last year.

American bank bosses did even better.

Jamie Dimon, the boss of JP Morgan earned, or rather, was paid, an utterly obscene $27.6 million. Dimon is infamous for claiming that foreclosure is 'giving debt relief to people that really need it'.)

I suspect that most investors assume that when bankers are handing out advice, the people offering the advice are accomplished, experienced and well-seasoned in financial matters – and that bankers, being well educated, deserve their high pay.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

The people who make investment announcements from the big investment banks are usually the analysts. And bank analysts are the lowest rank investment bank employees, usually aged 22 or 23 and straight out of university or college where they probably studied golf course management or political science. They often have no experience or knowledge.

Anyone with an IQ over 80 could be trained in a week to do what financial analysts do. But these are the people whose advice is circulated to retail brokers, clearing banks and to the financial pages of the press. Even when the analysts are honest, and able to withstand pressure to do as the bank feels appropriate for its own purposes, or the purposes of its major commercial clients, the analysts know little about the companies they are recommending. Most of their advice will be a recommendation to invest because what bank wants to annoy big companies by telling investors to sell the shares?

It's as though first year medical students were allowed to pontificate and offer medical advice through the national press.

Even the higher up employees in investment banks are nowhere near as well informed as customers might imagine. A decent sized investment bank will have (literally) thousands of managing directors, for example. Ordinary rank and file employees are given important sounding titles so that investors will be impressed and will assume that their affairs are being looked after by someone with knowledge and clout.

It is, I suppose, wrong to blame bankers alone for the greed which is the symbol of the early 21st century. There's certainly plenty of greed about these days – especially in Britain where chief executives earn substantially more than executives elsewhere in Europe. The median pay of a chief executive in the UK is now over £5 million a year – vastly higher than in any other European country. The differential between bosses and workers is rising at a terrifying rate.

And yet the evidence shows that paying bosses more does not improve profitability. Indeed, companies tend to do worse when their executives are overpaid.

It used to be the case that no one got really rich working for someone else.

People got really rich by inventing things; by starting companies and taking risks.

That time has gone.

Today, the safest way to get really, disgustingly rich is to work for an industry which pays absurdly high salaries, bonuses and expenses. For the last few years that has meant investment banking, but all other businesses are now joining in. Idiots working for two bit companies which are struggling to survive, make millions while employees and shareholders struggle.

The egregious greed seems to be universal.

Sir Martin Sorrell, the boss of an advertising company, received £70.4 million last year – plus a £62.8 million long-term bonus for agreeing to work for such a pittance.

A house building company called Persimmon is paying more than £100 million bonus to Jeff Fairburn, its chief executive.

Mike Coupe, the Chief Executive of Sainsbury saw his pay packet double to £2.8 million, despite a steep fall in profits.

The boss of TalkTalk, Dido Harding, saw her pay triple to £2.8 million and received a bonus of £220,000 as a reward for presiding over a company which allowed a hacker to obtain the personal details of four million customers.

At a time when public sector salaries were limited to a 1% rise, high court judges pocketed pay rises of up to 15% to take them up to over £200,000 a year. Lord Chief Justice Thomas, the head of the judiciary in England and Wales, who is paid £250,000, moaned that it was difficult to recruit judges because of the low pay on offer.

A company called Old Mutual planned to give Bruce Hemphill, its CEO, a 1,000% bonus as a reward for breaking up the company into four smaller companies.

Marc Bolland, the largely unsuccessful boss of Marks & Spencer was paid more than £15 million over five years and, after resigning in January, was allowed to receive his salary, benefits and pensions for the rest of the year.

The boss of the beleaguered and much criticised BP oil company saw his pay rise to more than $19 million last year, despite the fact that the company made big losses.

The boss of GlaxoSmithKline has £35 million in options and will receive a pension of £735,000 a year.

Marissa Mayer the boss of Yahoo who was hired to rescue the company from ignominious failure, was paid $218 million in four years despite the fact that the company seems to have foundered on the rocks of ignominious failure.

Last year, the average boss of a top asset management fund received a bonus worth 15 times his or her salary. (It's no wonder returns for investors and pensioners are so poor.)

Steve Holliday, who retired as National Grid's chief executive after nine years in the job will retire on a pension of £591,000 a year. He also has shares and options in the company worth another £26 million.

Dianne Thompson retired from lottery operator Camelot in 2014 but is still receiving up to £1,000,000 a year as some sort of on-going bonus.

A lawyer called Cornel Borbely, hired to investigate the financial scandals at Fifa, the body which controls world football, charged £1.8 million for his work.

Staff at the Met Office received £322,000 in bonuses for hitting social media targets and filling up Twitter with a lot of nonsense.

Tricia Hart, the former chief executive of South Tees Hospital NHS foundation (hardly a major NHS job), retired recently with a pension that gave her a lump sum of £335,000 and an inflation proof pension of £110,000 a year. One NHS consultant received £374,999 in overtime pay.

In 2015, the MoD spent £222 million on travel and hotels with most of the money spent on putting top brass up in hugely expensive hotels – often just minutes away from army barracks where they could have been looked after for next to nothing.

And then there is the former Pirelli calendar girl who sued her billionaire ex-husband for more money when he offered her a miserly £37 million in a divorce settlement. She wanted £196million. Her demands included £62 million for a house in London, £1 million a year for clothes (including 54 pairs of shoes per annum) and £50,000 a year to pay for Christmas dinner.

And for sheer, unadulterated common greed, it is difficult to beat the Wells Fargo banker who headed a division which had signed up two million customers for accounts and credit cards without bothering to ask their permission. The bank was fined $185 million and five thousand employees were fired for malpractice but the ignorant or incompetent boss of the errant employees received a payoff of $124 million as a reward for being a fool or a crook or both. The chief executive of the bank retired with even more loot to keep him warm at nights.

Politicians are at it, too, of course.

Nick Clegg, the former deputy Prime Minister has claimed £100,000 out of a fund usually reserved for former

Prime Ministers. (Why that isn't fraud is quite beyond me. I hope he at least paid tax on it.)

Even the trade union leaders have their snouts tucked firmly into the trough.

Len MCluskey, the boss of the Unite trade union earned £95,962 last year and has been seen swanning around at the five star Hotel de Paris in Monte Carlo where visitors can chomp on caviar and lobster sandwiches and where wine costs up to £12,800 a bottle. Mr McCluskey apparently recently received £417,300 from the trade union towards the purchase of his £695,500 flat.

Unite, one of the most loathsome, troublesome and lefty unions in the country claims that the money was part of an equity sharing scheme – something that it apparently described as 'extraordinarily commonplace'.

Maybe it is in union circles but I don't know many bosses who help buy their employees' houses.

Mick Cash, the boss of RMT, the rail union, has a pay package worth £137,344.

(To be honest I cannot see any reason why trade unions continue to exist. They were important, vital even, a few decades ago, but today they are an anachronism: as much a symbol of greed as are investment bankers. Their members are awash with rights and it is small employers, not their employees, who need protection from avarice and exploitation.)

BBC licence fee payers will doubtless be pleased to hear that the retiring director of radio, a woman called Helen Boaden, has a pension worth £2.8 million. BBC staff receive such wonderful pensions that licence-fee payers will have to pay £220 million into the BBC pension fund next April.

And then, of course, there are the utterly nauseating Sir Philip and Lady Greed, the new unacceptable, obscene face of capitalism whose desire for conspicuous wealth is, it seems, matched only by their lack of morality and lack of compassion for the hapless employees of British Home Stores whose pensions seem to have disappeared.

The Greeds have just taken delivery of a new £100 million yacht to add to their fleet. According to the magazine *Boat International* (which I bought for a laugh) their 'new super yacht has a helipad, expensive wellness areas and is understood to accommodate 12 guests and 40 crew'. There is no mention of the canon, marlin spikes and anti-boarding nets which I suspect the Greeds may need. The yacht, named Lionheart, is now no 59 in a list of the world's biggest yachts. I have to say that it looks nothing like a yacht. The Greed's new yacht apparently has a crew of 40, including one crew member hired to walk the family's pets. The Greeds really are the unacceptable face of humanity. They remind me of the notorious and equally widely loathed Lord Cardigan who had 15 men to keep the home fires burning and 20 men to collect ice during the winter months and put it into the ice house for use in the summer. At least Cardigan gave us a name for a sweater with buttons, what the devil has Greed ever done for us?

I sincerely hope that their always undeserved title is taken from them and given to some more deserving recipient. Anyone else would be more deserving.

I read an article about Sir Philip in the Jewish Chronicle. 'In many ways,' wrote the author, 'Sir Philip Green is an entrepreneur of whom Britain's Jewish community should be proud.'

I found that difficult to understand. Why would anyone be proud of a tax avoiding, pension sucking parasite known to millions as Sir Shifty? It's like being proud of Bernie Madoff or Goldman Sachs or, indeed, most of the international banking community. I can't think of any way in which any group could be proud of the Greeds unless simply making yachts full of money is the sole criterion.

Here's another odd thing I've noticed. When someone who is Jewish does something laudable, the Jewish community will often be quick to claim them as their own. But when someone who is Jewish does something perceived as bad then any criticism which mentions the fact that he or she is Jewish will be dismissed as anti-Semitic.

Just an observation.

Incidentally, what a surprise it was to learn that the Greeds had been advised by Goldman Sachs; the world's most consistently disreputable company, the Official House of Greed and poster child of all that is wrong with our modern civilisation.

The co-head of Goldman Sachs Europe, a fellow called Michael Sherwood, who had received $21 million in 2015 and $95 million over the past eight years, was one of the executives who advised Greed on the disastrous sale of BHS. He later resigned but denied that his departure had anything to do with the collapse of the department store.

Incidentally, what the papers haven't pointed out, however, is that every company, shareholder and pensioner in the country will suffer because of the Greeds. The state run Pension Protection Fund, which ensures that pensioners receive an income even if their company goes bust, receives its money from a levy, a charge, paid by every company, every pension fund, every shareholder and every worker.

Just about everyone in the country will suffer as a result of the activities of the Greeds – unless they cough up a good deal of cash.

3

(Devon)

The elderly used to be respected and admired, and consulted for their wisdom and experience.

Today, I'm afraid that the elderly are too often ignored, abused, despised and taken advantage of; dismissed as nuisances, invisible in fifty shades of beige.

Politicians seem to do everything they can to belittle and demean the elderly. Newspaper commentators have weighed in with their heavy boots too and several are now claiming that the elderly should not be allowed to vote. Why? Most pensioners have spent their lives working and paying tax so why should they be deprived of a voice just because they've passed a certain birthday. A good number of older folk have far more get up and go than most youngsters, and their knowledge of current affairs is surely helped not hindered by their experience and accumulated wisdom.

Not all have their hair cut short and walk around wearing elasticated trousers in beige poplin. We know one septuagenarian whose one remaining ambition is to get a job in a brothel. 'I've buried four husbands and seven lovers so I must be doing something right,' she says.

I am convinced that when utility companies put the elderly onto special lists, it is not so that they can provide them with extra services (as they claim it is) but so that they can charge them extra and treat them appallingly.

Sadly, many among the elderly do little to defend themselves.

They allow themselves to be demeaned, they put up with abuse without complaining and they dress appallingly. I have discovered that if I dress smartly, I am invariably treated with more respect than if I go out dressed like a harmless pensioner.

It is hardly surprising that so many older folk are now so desperate to deny their age that they spend a fortune on cosmetic surgery in an attempt to preserve the youth they have lost.

(Oddly enough, however, it is customary for such individuals to take pride in telling those they meet their real age. There is something charmingly contradictory in having plastic surgery to disguise your age and then telling everyone you meet precisely how old you are.)

One of our first pieces of correspondence in our Devon home came from the TV Licensing people who are already demanding money with menaces.

What outrageous bullies they are. We already have one licence on our other home and since we cannot possibly watch two televisions at once, and rarely watch live television anyway, they can hang if I'm going to pay for another one.

I rang them up to try to stop them harassing us and having fought through their typically incomprehensible series of telephone options ('Press 1 if you wish the BBC would implode', 'Press 2 if you think BBC celebrities are vastly overpaid', 'Press 3 if you think the licence fee should be abandoned as an absurd anachronism', 'Press 4 if you think the BBC is a repressive State controlled danger to democracy') I pressed some buttons and left some messages and have probably signed up to join the Communist Party. The TV Licensing people are like attack dogs – they never give up. And I have no doubt that we will be lighting our fires with their threatening correspondence for years to come. The letters always talk of 'opening an investigation' and there are usually lots of red ink and printing in bold and threats of the Enforcement Division scheduling a visit. It's all a bit silly, of course, but no one has to open the door and let them in.

Talking of buttons reminds me that last night I counted the buttons on the three devices we use to control our television set, satellite receiver and DVD player and found to my astonishment that there are 122 of them. I then checked to see how many of the buttons I could identify as to their function. Sadly, this came to 14. So there are 108 buttons on these devices which could, for all I know, start a nuclear war or turn off our water.

I rely entirely on Antoinette to encourage our television to do things.

4

(Devon)

The company which brought our new bed offered to take away the old one for a very modest £220 and £2 a minute for labour.

Instead, we found a very nice man to take away three unwanted beds, a broken chair, and a vast pile of other rubbish for £160.

Rubbish collecting is the new boom industry, now that the EU has blackmailed local councils into stopping their regular collections.

I recently saw a letter in a local newspaper in which a man said that he and his wife could manage perfectly well with a smaller rubbish bin and a once a month collection. There was, unsurprisingly, a note from a council representative underneath the letter, saying that they were looking into the 'public spirited citizen's' suggestion.

Give both men a banana; but to be taken rectally.

I have no doubt that in the near future all rubbish collections will be stopped and home owners will be issued with ten coupons which they can use to take one black bagful of rubbish along to their local rubbish centre.

Extra coupons will cost a small fortune.

Councils will express surprise when fly tipping increases dramatically. It is already soaring. Most of the waste tipped by the roadside or on footpaths is household waste, dumped by despairing householders who cannot cope with the myriad of ever changing rules and regulations. In my experience, the rules relating to rubbish collections change at least once a year. Councils, which have mastered the art of spin if nothing else, preface their letters introducing the changes with a note announcing their delight at being able to tell taxpayers about another improvement to their services. But the 'improvement' always ends up as a marked deterioration.

And, of course, anyone who gets things wrong when sorting out their rubbish is likely to find themselves hammered with a huge fine or worse.

A woman was fined £270 for putting three bin bags on the wrong side of the road. She was charged with fly tipping. (She was identified because she put an envelope with her name and address on into one of the bags – a clear message to the rest of the world never to put identifiable items into rubbish sacks.)

I do miss the simple days when householders put out their rubbish and the council collected it and used the unwanted to fill up disused mind shafts. Nowadays, most people I know spend hours every week dealing with their rubbish and hours worrying about whether they are doing things correctly or are likely to be fined for failing to wash their yoghurt cartons properly or for failing to put their potato peelings in the right bucket. I know several people who plan their holidays around their bin collections because when rubbish is collected once every three weeks and you miss a collection you can suddenly find yourself quite unable to cope.

There are councils in Britain who have employees hired, at £50,000 a year, to do nothing more than check that people are putting the right packets in the right bins.

Just what mothers who have babies are expected to do I cannot imagine. Where on earth do they store three weeks' supply of soiled nappies?

These daft rules are entirely due to the legislation introduced by EU bureaucrats who undoubtedly have immigrant serfs to deal with their own rubbish.

The eurocrats claim that their rubbish rules are inspired by the need to protect the planet.

They are not.

They are inspired by the need for State run organisations to control costs so that there is enough money available to pay salaries and inflation proof pensions for administrators.

If, as a side result, the rules mean that ordinary people are constantly worried, and constantly under pressure then that is a good thing.

The inevitable consequence of all this nonsense, however, is that fly tipping, the new national sport, is inexorably on the rise and our verges, hedgerows, motorways and laybys are awash with rubbish. Wherever there is no CCTV camera there will be a pile of unwanted rubbish.

Buying a new house has reminded me that everything in life is more complicated than it used to be.

A little while ago, I arranged for a landline phone for our seaside home and was told that it would take three weeks for the phone to be connected.

British Telecom, whom I tried first, seemed to think that making our telephone line work would be quite impossible.

'There is no phone at your address,' said an idiot BT employee.

'There is,' I pointed out, 'because I'm speaking on it. It hasn't yet been turned off.'

This simple observation confused the BT man so much that I ended the conversation before I went stark raving mad.

The second company I tried, called TalkTalk gave all sorts of pseudo-technical explanations for the lengthy delay in connecting us up. And they asked a lot of damn fool questions.

'Will you be making any telephone calls?' was my favourite question. I don't know what else people do with their telephones and I suspect I probably don't want to know.

This company, like BT, insisted that in order to make our phone work they would have to send a man round to the house to do things. Since there is already a telephone line at the house (which is operated by TalkTalk) I was puzzled by this until I realised that there is a cooling off period, usually two to three weeks, for any financial transaction and the alleged need for an appointment was probably just an excuse for the delay.

We made arrangements to be at the house at the appointed time for a man with tools to make our phone work.

Surprise, surprise, a day or so before his arrival we were told that he wouldn't be coming after all because a visit wasn't necessary. I don't believe he was ever coming.

It didn't take them three weeks to connect our telephone. They were, I suspect, merely making sure that we didn't have a telephone until we couldn't cancel it because the 14 day cooling off period had expired.

The house is equipped with a massive four oven AGA which is probably big enough for a cook to prepare a State Banquet. There are more knobs and dials than are good for us.

Sadly, the oven is filthy with grease. We tried chemical cleaners but they failed miserably so today we spent an hour each scraping off the grease with my penknife. We had to abandon this when the penknife blade broke.

This evening I discovered that Tom and Jerry were originally the names of the two chief characters in Egan's Life in London which was first published in 1821.

It's the little things that make life worth living.

5

(Devon)

A man came round to try to sell us some radiators which we can use if our boiler stops working. The radiators, which operate entirely on electricity, seem rather a good idea and certainly preferable to freezing to death.

The salesman talked to us for over an hour but refused steadfastly to tell us how much the damned things would cost.

'I'll try to keep the bill under £40,000,' he said.

Antoinette and I laughed lightly, assuming that this was a joke.

However, it wasn't much of a joke.

The proposed bill, for what are effectively four electric fires, turned out to be slightly north of £24,000.

And there would be extra charges if we want the fires to be fitted with little feet so that they don't fall over.

And extra charges for the thermostats which go with the fires and tell them what to do.

And extra charges for delivering them.

And extra charges for…

We thanked the salesman for coming and stood up.

He asked us if we would give him a few minutes to see if he could carve something off the price.

I didn't like to tell him that he would need a hatchet not a carving knife. We left him with his calculator and a big file of figures which looked very impressive.

Five minutes later he called us back.

The bill was down to £16,000.

We shook our heads.

After another five minutes the bill was down to just over £12,000.

This, remember, is for four electric fires to use as a backup heating system.

And there would be a wait of six to eight weeks before the fires could be delivered.

The salesman is a nice bloke and we felt sorry for him

But not that sorry.

We all shook hands and then we waved him goodbye. He set off to another prospective customer.

When he'd gone, we went online and checked out the electric fires on sale on the Argos website and purchase four electric fires which look like radiators for £150 each.

The radiators we buy are fitted with thermostats and the little feet they need to stop them from falling over are included in the price. They will be delivered tomorrow.

I honestly cannot see the difference between the ones we have bought and the ones we didn't buy. Except that we have saved well over £11,000 and we get them tomorrow. I feel sorry for the salesman trying to flog these overpriced radiators but I feel much sorrier for the poor souls (all of them over 60-years-old is my guess) who pay their extortionate prices.

We have to go back to Gloucestershire tomorrow. The animals and birds will be wondering why they haven't been fed.

When we go to Paris I usually fill around 20 feeders with nuts and sunflower hearts to keep them going but our trip to Devon was unexpected and I only managed to fill half a dozen feeders.

6

(Gloucestershire)

The Scottish Nationalist Party has introduced something called the Named Persons Scheme.

Straight out of a George Orwell nightmare, this utterly bizarre and grossly intrusive bit of legislation means that the State will in future appoint a State employee as a guardian for every child in Scotland.

Bugger the rights of parents and children.

The SNP clearly believes that the State, and State employees, know better than parents, doctors, and courts how to look after children.

The SNP might do better to put a little effort into trying to make less of a mess of running its own Parliament and government paid for services.

The Supreme Court ruled their outrageous scheme illegal but the SNP said they'd go ahead anyway and I have no doubt that they will.

The SNP is without a doubt a new and scary offshoot of the Monster Raving Loony Party, but without Lord Sutch's good humour, intelligence or civility.

In another part of the country, a local council which has an aggressive policy about saving the environment through forcing residents to wash out jam pots and yoghurt cartons with fresh, running water has announced that it is chopping down most of the trees in the town. It is doing this, said a spokesman, because the trees tend to drop leaves in the autumn and these usually end up looking very untidy unless they are cleared up.

And, as I predicted, some councils are now stopping all rubbish collections.

They are not even pretending that they are doing this to save the environment. They have admitted that they are doing it because they can no longer afford to provide this service. This is, I'm afraid, the future. Elderly residents without their own cars will have to take their wheelie bin to the local rubbish dump on the bus.

Many local councils in Britain are effectively broke because they have such massive pension commitments. There are already councils which spend most of their annual income on paying pensions to former employees – most of whom retired at 60 and many of whom retired in their 50s.

No society can afford to pay huge pension bills for administrators and bureaucrats for half a century and town and city councils all over the country will be going bust during the next generation.

There is much sense in allowing men and women with heavy, arduous physical jobs (fishermen, miners, bricklayers and so on) to retire at 60 but bureaucrats could carry on shining their bottoms until they are well into their 90s, for their work requires little physical effort and senility will not be apparent in folk who push paper and fiddle with computers for a living.

7

(Gloucestershire)

I spent much of the day in Gloucestershire sorting through my library, deciding which books to take to the seaside. We haven't yet decided whether to move to Devon or to split our lives between the two houses.

As I sorted through books, I discovered that I have three copies of *Confessions of an Opium Eater*, two copies of *The Little Prince*, three copies of Daniel Defoe's *Journal of a Plague Year*, four copies of *John McNab* by John Buchan, five copies of *Three Men in a Boat* by Jerome K Jerome (not counting a signed first edition) and three copies of Elliot Paul's book about Paris called *A Narrow Street* (probably the best book about Paris ever written).

I'm delighted to see that in today's *Daily Telegraph* there is an article criticising the widespread enthusiasm for electric cars. I have long felt that the smug and morally superior people who promote, sell and buy electric cars are fooling themselves and trying to fool us.

They genuinely seem to believe that because their cars run on electricity they are somehow cleaner than other types of car. This, of course, is utter nonsense. Billions of pounds have been spent producing these damned things, and the British Government subsidises each one to the tune of £4,500, but the effect on carbon emissions has been hardly noticeable.

Around the world, electric car manufacturers and purchasers have been rewarded with £9 billion in subsidies but even if the climate change theorists turn out to be correct in their worst case scenario then all this expenditure will, according to the *Daily Telegraph* reduce world temperatures by 0.00001 degree centigrade by the year 2100.

The problem, of course, is that the electricity powering these cars has to be produced and it is usually produced with coal or diesel.

Electric cars are actually worse for the environment than cars which operate on petrol or diesel. The folk who promote electric cars often claim that the things save lives. This is not true. Electric cars cause twice as much air pollution as cars which operate on petrol or diesel and the people who buy them are, sadly, woefully self-deluded. If electric cars become as popular as it predicted (people brave enough to make predictions about these things claim that within a decade or so a third to a half of all new cars will be powered by electricity) then Europe will have to build 50 power stations the size of the planned nuclear plant at Hinkley Point in the West Country.

Even the European Environment Agency has warned that if electric cars become as popular as planned, then overall levels of sulphur dioxide air pollution will rise.

On top of all this, there is the question of the damned batteries. The cost of manufacturing and disposing of these things is always ignored when enthusiasts are extolling the virtues of electric cars as is the massive environmental cost.

The bottom line is that the next generation will look back on petrol driven vehicles as the least polluting way to travel since the horse and cart. The electric car is neither cost effective nor environmentally sound and anyone claims that it is either or both of these things is guilty of succumbing to wishful thinking and propaganda published by the companies manufacturing the damned things.

Still, I doubt if the environmentalists will allow the facts to get in the way or their excitement or their rhetoric. They seem to be convinced that the electricity which will operate electric cars can be created out of thin air just by wishful thinking. They are, I suspect, the same people who thought biofuels were a good idea – and who didn't think through the consequences, the rise in food prices and the starvation that would ensue.

And, of course, the supporters of electric cars imagine themselves to be at the very cutting edge of progress; the vanguard of disruption.

Ha!

Little do they know, these pitifully ignorant children of tomorrow, that the first electric car was developed in 1888 and that the first land speed was set in an electrically powered vehicle. The driver, a Frenchman called Count Gaston de Chasseloup-Laubert, attained a top speed of 39 mph, and before any of us sneer, we should remember that this is considerably more than most modern motorists will reach on British motorways this year or next, whatever sort of vehicle they are driving.

Also in the news today is the fact that according to a massive study of 500,000 people, eating a piece of fruit every day can have exactly the same effect as taking one of those awful statin drugs. I'm not surprised. Actually, I am. I would have thought that eating a piece of fruit a day would have had a better outcome than taking statins. And, of course, the research doesn't take any account of the fact that statins produce horrendous side effects.

Around 17.5 million people in Britain are currently eligible for free statins and most men over the age of 60 and women over the age of 65 are offered the drug by their GPs in the hope that the damned things will reduce the incidence of heart attacks and strokes. Many stop taking them because of the hideous side effects. And, the killer fact is that I have yet to meet any doctor, anywhere, who takes statins. Doctors prescribe them by the lorry load but they're far sensible to take them themselves.

It is, of course, the same thing with the flu vaccine.

Doctors make a fortune out of jabbing their patients with the flu vaccine but they wouldn't dream of having the vaccine themselves.

I know for a fact that most doctors agree with my attacks on vaccines and vaccination but very few will dare put their head above the parapet and say so. In a way, this isn't surprising since criticising vaccination is a sure way to wreck your career. Doctors have been hauled before the General Medical Council simply for voicing doubts about vaccination. My book on the subject *Anyone Who Tells You Vaccines Are Safe and Effective is Lying: Here's the Proof* has not endeared me to the drug company controlled medical establishment. What a surprise.

We had a new strimmer delivered today.

Naturally, it came in bits with instructions written by an illiterate alien who speaks only a Martian dialect of Danish.

I spent an hour trying to put the bits together and ended up tossing the whole damned thing into the rubbish. I am far too scared to put petrol into it and to pull the starter for I suspect that bits will fly off in all directions. Were the bits which are left over vital? Was part DD really supposed to be fixed onto position J or should it have been K? Performing brain surgery on a trampoline artist in full flow would be easier than building a strimmer made by these people.

And what am I supposed to do with the hideously complicated webbing harness which came in the box?

I tried it on a dozen different ways and strangled myself twice. After nearly emasculating myself, I threw the harness into a corner. Perhaps all that webbing will be useful if someone falls over the edge of the cliff. There is a small picture of a stick man apparently wearing the harness but I have absolutely no idea how he got into it. Perhaps he was born in it. Why do companies never give buyers the option of purchasing their products built and ready to use? I would pay handsomely for such a service. Alternatively, I would pay someone to come round and show me how it all fits together.

Perhaps it would be better to hire a gardener and leave him to work it all out.

I understand why companies expect their customers to finish the manufacturing process (it must save a good deal of money and, of course, a machine in bits is much easier to pack and post than a finished item) but I can't help wondering where all this is going to end.

Maybe, in a year or two, patients going into hospital for surgery will be handed a box of assorted instruments and a bottle of chloroform and told to do their operation themselves.

My other favourite bit of news of the day is that legal firms in London are now charging £1,000 an hour. The only people who can afford to hire them are executives (whose bills will be paid by their shareholders) and asylum seekers (whose bills will be paid by taxpayers).

I predict that it will not be long before lawyers are replaced by computers and robots. This will be good news for everyone (except lawyers) since the hourly rate for London lawyers is expected to exceed £1,000 this year. This is nearly as much as plumbers earn and is clearly excessive.

There are already websites and apps which can do all the routine legal work (looking for precedents and filling in forms for conveyancing) and for the rest it's just a matter of time.

Five years should see those lawyers who are still around and looking for work reducing their fees a tad. I predict that lawyers (who are replaceable by computers and robots) will end up charging less than plumbers (who are not).

Oddly, I read recently that 64% of individuals believe that technology will improve their job prospects. Where do they find these people? Who could possibly believe that robots and computers will lead to the development of more jobs? Is the general level of intelligence really falling so rapidly?

Robots will be popular and everywhere but an absolute bloody disaster.

I know this because robots will be programmed by the same morons who write out the advice sheets for people working for utility companies and insurance companies.

You ring up and you know straight away that the person at the other end isn't acting like a person at all.

They're reading from a script and if you ask a question to which they don't have a scripted answer the whole conversation goes rapidly downhill.

When I worked as a GP, and was very young and innocent, I occasionally agreed to see drug company representatives who came to the surgery to try to persuade me to prescribe to their company's latest drug.

In those days, the sales reps didn't have any proper training and although they pretended to know what they were talking about they didn't really have the foggiest idea about the stuff they were flogging. They had learned a script. After they sat down, they would immediately begin to recite the stuff they'd learned. And if you stopped them and asked a question they would look blank, pause and then go right back to the beginning and start all over again.

The people who wrote the scripts for those reps are the same people who write the scripts for the people who work for utility, phone and insurance companies and they are the same half-witted nitwits who will write the scripts for robots.

And don't tell me that robots will be intelligent and will be able to think for themselves because that's phooey; its science fiction and it isn't going to happen.

There was a lot of fuss among the computer people when a chess computer beat the world champion chess player. I never understood why there was so much fuss. Chess is a game of logic. It is perfect for computers. A player can do unusual things (lead with two knights and leave all his pawns where they were to start with), but the computer can be programmed to respond appropriately. There are only a finite number of men and a finite number of squares and so every possibility can be written into the program.

Real life isn't like that.

There are a number of people around these days (most of them under 20 and not yet properly baked) who honestly believe that artificial intelligence (which they call AI) is the future and that computers will be able to think creatively and will eventually take over the planet. This is, of course, utter bollocks. No one will ever make a computer which can play chess and table tennis let alone swim and make a sponge cake. Computers and robots will never take over the world. All we have to do to stop them is to ration their electricity ('behave yourself or I'll remove your batteries') and if that fails then we just make sure that, like Daleks, they can't go up and down stairs.

In the 1980s, before writing the world's first software for computers (ah, that surprised you didn't it) I wrote the first book which was based on computer style algorithms.

The book was called *Aspirin or Ambulance* and the idea was that people who bought the book could look up a symptom and then work their way through a series of 'yes' and 'no' answers to find out if their problem could be treated at home or if they need a doctor.

I see that this technique is now being used more and more widely with several mobile phone apps using exactly the same system to help users treat themselves.

It took them thirty years but they got there in the end.

8

(Devon)

I was oiling the hinges of our front gate when a neighbour appeared.

He seemed very friendly so I listened to him for a while.

The neighbour, whom I had never met before, drops all his aiches and the lane was ankle deep in them after a few minutes.

I am reminded of F.E. Smith, the lawyer.

When a friend of his complained that he had ‘one ‘ell of an ‘eadache’, F.E. Smith prescribed ‘a couple of aspirates’.

‘It’s very quiet here,’ said our neighbour, ‘except in the summer of course.’

As he talked, I could not help noticing that there was a steady stream of hikers walking behind him in the narrow lane. And it was raining. I hate to think how busy the lane gets in the summer. But I don’t care. We have a long drive and our house is invisible to everyone except sailors or people in France with high-powered telescopes.

Talking of France, I see that at least 38% of the entire EU budget is allocated to subsidies for European farmers. Farm subsidies mean that rich landowners are getting richer at the expense of taxpayers who foot the bills.

Isn’t the EU a wonderful thing?

It isn’t difficult to see why rich landowners love the EU.

It’s more difficult to see why ordinary taxpayers, who pay much higher prices for their food, love the damned thing.

I was pleased to see that according to *Fortune* magazine, Britain’s economy would not be as damaged by leaving the EU as Cameron, the OECD and the IMF have forecast.

I’m delighted to see that the boss of the International Monetary Fund, the pompous and stupid Christine Lagarde (who claimed, while campaigning alongside the unheavenly quartet of Cameron, Osborne, the BBC and the ubiquitous Goldman Sachs, that leaving the EU would result in economic chaos and envisioned scenarios ranging from ‘pretty bad’ to ‘very, very bad’) is to stand trial in France not for trying to blackmail the British voters with absurd predictions pulled out of a dunce’s cap, but for old-fashioned criminal negligence.

The gods do have a sense of humour.

The IMF seems to attract folk of slightly less than shiny reputations.

The previous boss of the IMF, another French citizen by the name of Dominique Strauss-Kahn, left the well-rewarded employ of the Fund after some very unsavoury business with a maid in a hotel in New York.

He also turned out to have an unusual side line as a pimp.

‘The EU imposes heavy duties on manufactured goods from outside the union and espouses a highly protectionist agricultural policy,’ said *Fortune* magazine. ‘Prices for everything from food to appliances to PCs are about 20% higher in Europe than on world markets. Freed from those barriers, the UK could lower prices for consumers by an estimated 8%. The UK would also escape around $9 billion in annual EU membership dues and potentially scrap costly labor and environmental regulations legislated from Brussels.’

None of that appeared in British newspapers and I suspect that it didn’t appear on the BBC.

I suspect that the EU’s agriculture policy may be even dafter than *Fortune* suspects. Last year the EU paid British golf courses £406,794 in agricultural subsidies.

The EU is the ultimately dystopian society.

It is clear that the people who want to leave the EU are daring and passionate individuals who feel strongly about their country and who are driven by selfless motives.

On the other hand, the people who want to remain in the EU are greedy, shrill and selfish individuals, who want to stay in the EU for their own financial reasons, but who are ignorant, gutless and fearful of anything new, challenging and adventurous and woefully unable to think for themselves.

The sad and sorry souls who want us to stay in the EU are, by definition, opposed to democracy, personal liberty and the rule of law. They are also ignorant enough to be willing to put their lives, and the lives of the next generations, into the hands of a bunch of incompetent and criminally inept politicians and bureaucrats.

The EU lovers are the same silly, hysterical folk who think that unlimited immigration is a wonderful thing, that doctors’ strikes are a blow for freedom and that global warming is going to result in London being underwater by the year 2020.

These are the sorry souls whose lives are dominated by Facebook and Twitter; they have no time to read, to think or to stand and look at the world.

It is no surprise at all that most politicians and most bankers want to stay within the European Union.

The banks and investment professionals are desperate for us to stay in the EU because they have lent governments and companies in the rest of the EU a staggering £1.1 trillion.

The battle to leave is hotting up and will divide families for a generation.

The harsh words being exchanged will not be forgotten and I suspect that when the campaign is finally over, and the result is in, even politicians will find it difficult to forget some of the things which have been said. It is the lies and the abuse, not the fundamental disagreements, which will lead to permanent estrangement.

The bottom line is that the EU demands from us money and allegiance and obedience. But what do eurocrats give us in return?

Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

And does it not seem unfair that although the UK makes up one eighth of the population of the EU, our vote in the EU's Council of Ministers means that our influence is no greater than that of tiny countries. There are 28 votes on the Council of Ministers and we have just one of them. Not surprisingly, Britain invariably finds itself on the losing side whenever votes are held. And frighteningly few eurocrats are British.

Brexiteers have been described as rats for wanting to leave the EU. But surely the rats who vote to leave are wiser than the rats who choose to stay behind and drown in a sinking ship.

If Britain does not leave, the EU there will be mass demonstrations and civil unrest.

The unrest and demonstrations will not, however, be aimed at the failure to take us out of a putative superstate, which no one ever voted to join, but to protest about the consequences of the EUs bizarre immigration policy which has been foisted upon us.

Our country has, without our permission, been turned into an overcrowded island where everyone is forever under stress and where our lives are ruled and regulated by 100,000 laws created by unelected eurocrats.

'No time to turn at Beauty's glance, And watch her feet, how they can dance. A poor life this is if, full of care, we have no time to stand and stare.'

That was from W. H. Davies, the Welsh poet tramp.

Here is the whole thing:

'What is this life if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.
No time to stand beneath the boughs
And stare as long as sheep or cows.
No time to see, when woods we pass,
Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass.
No time to see, in broad daylight,
Streams full of stars, like skies at night.
No time to turn at Beauty's glance,
And watch her feet, how they can dance.
No time to wait till her mouth can
Enrich that smile her eyes began.
A poor life this if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.

These days, if you are sitting or standing and staring, doing nothing, and not apparently going anywhere, you are quite likely to feel the heavy hand of the law upon your shoulder.

9

(Devon)

I found this wonderful quote from economist Milton Friedman today: 'You can spend your own money on yourself. When you do that, why then you really watch out what you're doing, and you try to get the most for your money. Then you can spend your own money on somebody else. For example, I buy a birthday present for someone. Well, then I'm not so careful about the content of the present but I'm very careful about the cost, but if I spend somebody else's money on somebody else, I'm not concerned about how much it is and I'm not concerned about what I get. That's government. And that's close to 40% of our national income.'

That, in a nutshell, is much of what is wrong with our world.

It occurred to me today that I haven't heard anything about Bill Stickers for a long, long time.

When I were but a lad, blank walls and empty shop fronts were all papered with posters warning that 'Bill Stickers Will Be Prosecuted'.

And underneath would be scrawled 'Bill Stickers is Innocent.'

Dear old Bill was as ubiquitous as Kilroy and his foreign cousin Kilroy Wasir.

All have disappeared into the mists of time, gone and mostly forgotten. And they have been replaced by absurd graffiti, sprayed out of paint cans. The 21st century graffiti looks horrid and never raises a smile.

Back in the 1980s, I autographed a chunk of wall at a railway station in East Berlin with Kilroy's name. I thought he should be represented behind the iron curtain.

For at least a decade afterwards I was expecting a visit from the Stasi.

10

(Devon)

American academics have worked out that there are 21.4 million bureaucrats (including managers and administrators) in the United States.

The academics reckon that these 'paper pushing' bureaucrats, many of whom carry out chores 'of questionable value' are 'clogging up the US economy' and that if the bureaucrats were found useful jobs to do they would, between them, add $3 trillion to America's annual gross domestic product.

The American researchers reckon that bureaucrats make up 17.6% of the American workforce but that in the UK things are even worse, for the bureaucratic class make up 19% of the workforce.

The layer of managers, administrators and bureaucrats smothering communications between the real bosses and the people who do the work has become so thick that huge amounts of money, time and energy are wasted.

Since 1970, the number of doctors in the US has doubled but the number of administrative employees has gone up by 3,000%. Since 1970, the number of teachers has risen by 60% but the number of school administrators has gone up by 120%.

In the UK, many of the administrators in existence are employed to fill in forms to satisfy the requirements of the State's bureaucrats (who are, in turn, satisfying the demands of the EU's bureaucrats).

Nearly all these parasites could be sacked without having any discernible impact on productivity, but there would be a massive increase in profitability and the happiness of the people doing the real work.

There is no doubt at all that the best way to improve productivity would be to sack 90% of those who do their jobs sitting down in front of a computer.

For example, I have long argued that the best way to improve the National Health Service would be to sack 90% of the bureaucrats. It doesn't matter which 90% are sacked.

The truth is that very few individuals who are truly talented in their field become bureaucrats and I doubt if there are many children who grow up dreaming of becoming one.

And yet, despite the fact that they do nothing of value, many of these bureaucrats, talentless handmaidens of both sexes, live in the sort of luxury enjoyed by billionaires.

In itself, this does not matter a jot.

But it is taxpayers' money which gives them these unelected folk their lifestyle.

I am reminded again for some reason of East Berlin.

When I first visited, in the 1970s, before the Wall came down, the streets were decorated not with advertising hoardings (there weren't any) but with huge boards which were decorated with the photographs of the workers who had been particularly industrious in the previous month.

And so there would be a picture of the bricklayer who had laid the most bricks and a picture of the filing clerk who had filed the most paper.

The pictures were all of sour looking people, superficially pleased with themselves, but painfully aware that next month they would be gone; replaced by another squad of Great Achievers.

11

(Devon)

I woke up late and then lay in bed for an extra twenty minutes. This was good because both of these things were on my To Do list for the day and when I finally got up, I was able to cross them both off the list with the feeling of jobs well done.

Two men representing local house decorating firms came round today to decide whether or not they would be prepared to redecorate a couple of rooms which need what is in the business known, I believe, as a lick of paint. Nothing much more than that. There was no wallpaper to strip. Nothing complicated to do.

They wandered around and looked at the eight walls (four to a room) and the two ceilings (one to a room) and both promised that the work could be started within a week or so and completed within a few days. We'll send at least two men, they both promised.

I look forward to hearing from them.

I see today that according to the Department of Health, just 2% of the British population are vegetarian. This is such blatant nonsense that I expect the staff who put out this figure are permanently red faced with embarrassment. The figure was over 10% around 20 years ago and vegetarianism has been getting commoner ever since – particularly among each new generation.

The establishment, which is largely controlled by the meat industry, finds it very difficult to acknowledge that vegetarianism exists at all.

When my mother was ill in hospital, suffering from normal pressure hydrocephalus and wrongly diagnosed by incompetent doctors in hospitals in Exeter and Budleigh Salterton, she was served up a plate containing some foul looking sausages.

She looked at them, frowned and then looked at the member of staff who had deposited the plate on her table. 'I don't eat that sort of thing,' she said softly. Naturally, the staff in both hospitals took no notice whatsoever and continued to serve her meat dishes which she, as a vegetarian, did not eat.

Those damned hospitals confirmed in my heart the view I have held for some time: that many administrators and even nursing and medical staff, believe that their particular health care institutions would operate far more efficiently and effectively without patients.

In a way, I suppose that that they are right.

It is entirely the fault of the patients that so much money which could otherwise be spent on better salaries and pensions for administrators, has to be spent on drugs, laundry, floor cleaning and swabs.

Patients are also responsible for spoiling doctors' lunches and for increasing the need for hospital administrators to leave their comfortable offices.

It is an indisputable fact that without patients, the cost of running almost all hospital facilities could be cut by 7.5%

12

(Devon)

While trying to find a plumbing supplies website I suddenly realised that I had inadvertently wandered onto a service called 192.com which offered to connect my telephone call for a fee of £1.88 and a subsequent charge of £2.57 per minute plus my phone company's own charge.

Even a short call would have cost a tenner.

I cannot believe that anyone uses this extortionate service except by mistake.

Why does the damned EU, which is forever interfering in things where its input is not required, not do something about this sort of business activity?

13

(Devon)

The political establishment, the commentators writing for the posh papers and the world's vast array of lobbyists are becoming increasingly terrified at the prospect of Donald Trump becoming the next American President. Personally, I think it's a hoot. The supporters of the EU and the opponents of Trump appear to be the same rather hysterical, over-noisy people: committed members of the establishment, died in the wool fascists, who believe that non-celebrities are there to be used and oppressed and that they should damned well know their place and keep quiet about important things they cannot possibly understand because they aren't celebrities.

I can't stand the Donald, who has always seemed to me to be little more than an ego served with a topping of absurd hair, but he is clearly an anti-politician and that is why he is so popular with the voters.

One of Trump's proposals, and one which has scared the life out of the lobbyists, is to pull out of various international organisations. I would vote for anyone who offered such a platform. I would love to hear a British politician suggest that we should pull out of every damned alliance, organisation, institution and body to which we belong. The self-important parasites who work for these organisations spend our money on endless first class travel, endless first class hotels, endless expensive meals, huge salaries, vast bonuses and pointless decisions which cost us all a fortune and do absolutely nothing to improve our lives. The political elite around the world have created disasters, wars and poverty and profited from them all.

Think Blair and Brown in the UK.

Blair is, of course, a war criminal. Brown is best remembered for selling two thirds of the UK's gold at close to the lowest price of the last 35 years. He sold the gold at $275 an ounce and cost the British taxpayer somewhere between 15 and 20 billion dollars. While Brown was selling gold other countries were buying it. Today, Britain has about half as much gold as India and when the big financial crisis does come, the amount of gold a country has in its vaults will decide how much clout it has when the international monetary system is redesigned. There is some irony in the fact that Britain, now an impoverished country with huge debts, still gives aid to India. Has no one in the Government noticed that Indian companies now own Jaguar and Land Rover car companies and almost all the UK's steel production? It would make more sense for India to give financial aid to Britain.

Our potty leaders have fought wars against numerous Middle East countries, against cancer and against drugs.

All these wars have been fought (but fought incompetently) because they have enriched lobbyists and industries with a vested interest but none of them has done anything to save or protect the public.

(The shameful myth about cancer, which is perpetuated by politicians, doctors, journalists and, especially, by the cancer industry, is that cancer is a disease. The truth, as I have been shouting for decades, is that cancer is no more a disease than infection is a disease. There are hundreds of different types of infection and there are hundreds of different types of cancer and the chances of anyone finding a single cure for the latter are as remote as finding a single cure for the former. And yet still that is where the money goes. The vast majority of cancers could be prevented if governments really gave a damn for we know what causes most forms of cancer.)

Voters have, via the politicians, given billions to the arms companies, the drug companies and the security companies. And much of that money has, of course, stuck to the sticky hands of the politicians who know that if they toady to the right people then they will receive multi million pound advances for books no one wants to read and vast fees for giving lectures that no one is interested in hearing. Royalty advances and fees for speaking are the new way to bribe politicians openly, in plain sight, but without anyone realising that the bribes are being paid.

I cannot be the only person to have noticed that politicians always seem to live better than their income would justify. They have bigger houses and larger cars than they could possibly afford and, whatever their political persuasion, they always seem to find the money to send their children to private schools (and the excuses to justify doing so).

Politicians find numerous ways to reward their chums.

For example, vast amounts of money described as 'overseas aid' never reaches its proposed destination.

Since 2012, ten British companies have received almost half of the money paid to 'consultancies' as overseas aid. One think tank received £10,306 to write a single blog post. Another charged taxpayers £23,000 to prepare a two page briefing note.

Today, the words 'foreign aid' may still sound good but the money simply goes into the pockets of those who are insisting that our taxes must rise, rise and rise again.

(Oh, how I often wish I had had the hide and nerveless contempt for the truth required for entrance into modern politics. Maybe I should have toughened myself up and braved a world for which I have nothing but contempt. Maybe the problem with politics today is that people like me do not have the courage to take on the crooks who have taken over the political world.)

Sadly, Trump wouldn't get anywhere if he were standing for office in the UK because we wouldn't be able to stop laughing at him. He is far too self-important and that silly hair which looks as if it belongs on an outdated music hall comedian, means that everyone would be laughing so much that no one would hear a word the poor fellow said. Successful comedians need to be ugly and to look rather odd. Trump would have done wonderfully well at the Glasgow Empire but they would have laughed at him and not with him. The allegation that he once had a yacht with gold plated screws on the propeller would also cause some tittering.

Still, if Trump wins the Presidential election (and I suspect that he will), my guess is that he will turn out to be the most popular and successful President the US has ever had. This is not because he is a wise and clever man (personally, I think he is a sociopath) but because he is ruthless, doesn't give a fig what anyone thinks and he is not worried by political correctness. He will make a good many mistakes but he will also get things done.

However, he must first win the election.

14

(Gloucestershire)

In London, a restaurant has opened which refuses to accept notes or coins in payment for food and drink.

Waitrose, the grocery store, is opening a cashless store where customers will, presumably, only be able to pay for goods with credit cards or beads. I very much doubt if the store will be geared up to accept cheques.

It will be a very long time before either establishment gets my custom, and I sincerely hope they both go bust. I've only just become accustomed to decimalisation and I'm damned well not going to waste more mental energy just to please a bunch of fascist bankers and accountants.

Long live cash.

And what the hell is wrong with cheques?

Every time I buy a new car the garage tells me that they won't take cheques and that I must pay with a bank transfer. This takes hours and costs money so bugger it. The next time I buy a car I'm paying by cheque or they can keep the car.

Apart from the time it takes, transferring money is a risky business. At the moment, only the sort code and an account number are required to transfer money. If a mistake is made with one number then the money will go to the wrong account. And it may be impossible to get it back.

Believe it or not, banks are only now considering insisting that customers include the name of the intended recipient so that this can be checked against the other account information. However, even if this becomes a rule, the heavy hand of the EU means that it will not come into effect before the year 2020. Until then people who transfer money electronically will have to take their chances.

The plan to get rid of cash was devised by bankers who don't like the idea of grubby punters being able to wander around buying and selling things without their taking a cut of the proceeds. Getting rid of cash will mean that the bank will know everything we do and will be able to keep track of our every move. Politicians, who reckon that in a cashless society it will be easier to stop people avoiding tax, are also keen.

More and more people already use credit and debit cards for everything they buy (I always find myself queuing behind half a dozen of them when I want to buy a coffee or a newspaper).

And now my bank tells me that I can buy things with my credit card without even bothering to enter a pin number.

With their new contactless technology you, or the person who has stolen it, just waves your card around in the vicinity of a card reader and the money is automatically taken from your account. Naturally, the banks, who may well be right in thinking that we are all fools, assure us that there is absolutely no risk at all of anyone using this technology to steal money or goods.

I hate the idea of a world without cash.

I hate the idea of a world in which banks and governments know exactly what I am doing, where I am and what I am spending my money on. I also hate the idea of a world in which you can't put cash into the hands of a homeless person; a world in which village shops which cannot afford the percentage banks charge, will go bust; a world in which charities will not be able to organise fetes and collecting days; a world in which the queues in shops will be longer than ever. I don't care what the banks say, cash is quicker than any other form of payment.

The side effects of doing away with cash will be roaring inflation (as shops put up their prices to cope with the extortionate charges made by the credit card companies) and a dramatic increase in the number of local currencies and of bartering. It is perhaps not widely understood just how widespread bartering has become. Indeed, bartering is now a global phenomenon.

For example, a bloke I know who works in China told me that a little while ago China Railway had a customer, a poultry processor, which filed for bankruptcy. As a result of the bankruptcy, the railroad ended up owning a huge pile of frozen turkeys.

At the same time, an American company called General Electric was selling new electric locomotives to the railroad and China Railway asked if it could pay for the engines with turkeys. (I am not making this up.) General Electric found that it could flog the turkeys to a company called Tyson Foods China. And so the deal was done. China Railway delivered the turkeys to Tyson Foods. Tyson Foods paid cash to General Electric and General Electric delivered the locomotives to the railroad company in China.

Done deal.

More giant rats have been spotted around the country.

Judging from the photographs, I've seen the rats are as big as cats or small dogs. They look terrifying. No one in authority seems to have put two and two together and realised that the appearance of the giant rats could possibly have anything to do with the fact that the rubbish rules which came from the European Union have resulted in rubbish being left uncollected for weeks at a time.

Everywhere we go in the UK, the streets are awash with overflowing bins and plastic bags. Householders are told that they must put all their food waste into a plastic box which a rat can eat through in 17 minutes flat.

The EU's mad policy on recycling means that the rats will continue to become larger and more numerous. And all the hormones in our waste food and water will be helping them to get bigger, stronger and braver of course.

Heaven knows what diseases they are spreading but leptospirosis is becoming a real problem.

A pal who lives in Northern Ireland recently wrote to tell me that when he complained about the size of the local rats, he was told that the council wasn't doing anything at all about the problem because the local Pest Control

Officer had been made redundant. He was allegedly unable to work after he was hospitalised with leptospirosis. This is, of course, a disorder spread by rats.

(When we lived in Weston-super-Mare, we did not use the waste food bucket and, as a result, received notification that we would be receiving a visit from a Waste Food Bucket Consultant Operative to find out why. Personally, I feel that the people who introduced these buckets should be examined by a psychiatrist and taken into protective custody. We still don't use the wretched waste food buckets so I expect we will soon be threatened with a visit from another Waste Food Bucket Consultant Operative. I'll tell him we don't have any food waste because we eat everything on our plates.)

The EU's bullshit has ruined Europe's economy and it's ruined our streets as well.

Talking of bullshit, reminds of me of something I heard recently.

I don't think it is widely known but in the 1990s, the EU issued a directive ordering farmers to send sachets of slurry to special teams of sniffers in Brussels. The sniffers' task was to guarantee that the smells were within acceptable limits.

15

(Gloucestershire)

McCrap, the deadly burger people, have introduced new contracts for staff which allow employees to choose to work the precise number of hours (16 and 30) that fit in neatly with the tax credit system.

When he was Chancellor, Gordon 'the moron' Brown introduced this scheme which allows employees to receive taxpayers' money if their income is below a certain level because they only work part time.

The main beneficiaries, however, are greedy companies like McCrap which deliberately employ staff for the defined number of hours and then expect taxpayers to make up the difference so that their staff members can afford to eat and rent somewhere with a roof.

The two firms of decorators have sent in their estimates for the work that needs doing at our cliff top house in Devon.

One firm wants £3,500 and the other has quoted £4,000.

Moreover, both firms are planning to send along just one man and the work will, therefore, take considerably longer than they promised. My ghast was as flabbered as any ghast can possibly be – not just at the price but at the fact that despite their promises they are sending just one man to do the work.

Antoinette has decided that she will paint the rooms herself.

It will be done sooner and it will be much cheaper.

We will also get the work done properly.

One of the professional decorators claimed that he could paint cast iron radiators with ordinary paint (seemingly unconcerned by the fact that other experts believe that if you do this, the paint will crack and peel) and the other claimed that he could paint over wallpaper with ordinary emulsion paint (not knowing that it could cause the paper to peel).

And, most important of all, we will not have to have the house cluttered up with a workman and his radio for a week or two.

The medical profession of which I was once a proud member, has been bribed, bullied and overwhelmed by bureaucrats, businessmen and politicians and it has, as a result, been forced to abandon most of its traditional ethical principles.

Through the weaknesses of their leaders, doctors have been turned into ethically impoverished mercenaries. Principles should be indigestible but the modern medical profession has swallowed its principles without hesitation, regret or any signs of discomfort.

And now we have reached a new low.

Junior hospital doctors working for the National Health Service are on strike and have been pictured marching through the streets with angry faces and badly drawn banners. I find it all very depressing.

Professionals with duties and responsibilities should never, ever withdraw their labour because the only people who really suffer are, in the case of doctors, the patients. There is absolutely no doubt that striking doctors will cause much distress and unnecessary pain. Doctors who strike should be struck off the medical register and have their licenses revoked. A good spanking would do them good, too.

I was a junior hospital doctor back in the early 1970s and although we worked much harder than today's doctors (168 hour weeks were not at all unknown and working weeks of 120 hours or more were commonplace) and were paid a pittance (under £700 a year I seem to remember) we would have no more dreamt of going on strike than today's young doctors would dream of turning off their mobile phones and closing their Twitter accounts.

Today's call for the strike has apparently been supported by 99% of junior doctors.

If there had been a vote in the 1970s the vote would have been the other way round; with 99% voting not to strike. Oh, how the world has changed. Today's young doctors are members of the Entitlement Generation. They think only of themselves. They are well paid and work short hours but they want more money and even shorter working hours. They are self-righteous, they take themselves oh-so-very seriously and they talk and act as if they know (not think) that they are better (and far more important) than anyone else.

Greed engenders greed.

I find it deeply depressing that doctors should even contemplate punishing patients because they have a dispute with their employers.

The gentlemanly, professional thing to do would be to resign en masse and give the requisite period of notice. But today's doctors are too imbued with a sense of personal entitlement, and a complete lack of courage, to have the guts to do that. So, instead, they use their patients as weapons in striving for more money.

I am particularly saddened because today's pampered young doctors are striking not because Britain's health care services are among the worst in the world, or because the incidence of infection in British hospitals is higher than anywhere else, or because Britain's cancer survival rates are the worst in the developed world but because they aren't happy about the new contract they're being offered.

The strike is about money.

The striking doctors don't want more money for patient care. They don't want less money spent on administration and more on treatment programmes. They aren't fighting for the sick. They are fighting for themselves; selfishly demanding a better contract and more cash.

(Young GPs are often just as bad. Until the practice was banned, some young GPs were charging patients to telephone their surgeries to make appointments. Since that was stopped, I have heard of doctors billing patients who telephoned them for medical advice.)

Despite these truths, the selfish little buggers (well versed in the art of spin) have been prancing around in the streets holding up banners carrying slogans such as 'Save the NHS'. Most of the strikers seem to be sour faced, resentful women. I'd hate to have one tending to me if I were ill. They should all be struck off the medical register for entirely unprofessional behaviour. As their posters suggest, the doctors and their union officials persist in arguing that they are going on strike to improve the NHS in some strange way. This is a blatant lie and reminds me of the sort of spin favoured by politicians and corporate public relations spokespersons. It also reminds me of the confectionary companies claiming that they are making their chocolate bars smaller in order to fight obesity.

The junior doctors are also complaining that the NHS bosses now want them to be available for work at weekends so that patients can be treated seven days a week. The doctors will, of course, be paid for this inconvenience but their complaint appears to be that they won't be paid enough. And lots of them don't want to work weekends because to do so would cut into their social lives.

All this saddens me enormously. Junior hospital doctors want all the professional perks without any of the professional responsibilities and, like young members of the Royal Family, seem unaware of the concept of noblesse oblige.

Medicine died when the General Medical Council decreed that doctors should no longer respect the principle of patient confidentiality. Today, thanks to the GMC, patients who enter the consulting room might just as well be wandering into a local radio studio, prepared to share his or her innermost secrets with one and all.

That, allied to the medical profession's craven willingness to accept drug company dictates, ended the profession's traditional status.

In recent years, things have steadily deteriorated.

The GMC's bizarre and much hated money making licensing scheme means that the vast majority of doctors who have chosen to retire from full time practice are permanently lost to the profession. The EU's working time legislation means that doctors have a good excuse to avoid night time and weekend duty. And the enthusiasm of young doctors for striking (with the surprising support of their trade union, the British Medical Association) means that doctors are now regarded as being on the same sort of professional plane as estate agents and life insurance salespersons.

I am so cross about the doctors who are on strike. The miserable little bastards should have trained as accountants.

Sadly, older doctors who would happily stand in for the striking doctors are prevented from doing so by the General Medical Council which has introduced regulations preventing retired doctors from doing any medical work at all.

Thousands of experienced doctors must now sit on the side-lines; unable to do anything to help.

Modern doctors have proved time and time again that as a profession they don't give a damn about patients or the NHS. The death of medicine as a profession is now complete.

Still, patients need not worry too much. There is one bright spot.

Whenever and wherever doctors go on strike, the incidence of doctor induced disease falls, the number of deaths from hospital infections drops and, not surprisingly, the nation's death rate goes down. Undertakers hate it when doctors go on strike because business goes into a steep decline.

I bet the striking junior doctors didn't know that.

16

(Gloucestershire)

We went shopping for curtains and paint.

I was astonished to see that one company is now flogging medically approved curtains. The drapes are apparently medically approved because they shut out the dark and help keep out the noise. The face of a real doctor is stuck on the front of every pack of curtains.

I wondered what other items could be advertised as 'medically approved' but then realised that it is harder to think of items which could not be medically approved than it is to think of items which could.

'Birkenshaw's Bicycles save your legs and boost your heart.'

'Pocock's Kitchen Colonder Helps Every Chef Prepare Healthy Salads.'

'Gas Helps Keep You Warm'.

My, oh my I've missed my calling. I should have been something in advertising.

In the end, we had to have our curtains specially made.

Our first requirement is for curtains to cover the front door. In the winter we will need something to keep out the draughts, for the doors are over a hundred-years-old and if they fitted the frame when they were made they don't quite fit now.

The front door is actually a huge double door which is eight feet tall and eight feet wide and since the new curtains will have to drape nicely in folds we will need enough curtain material to cover Dorset.

When we'd finished buying curtains, I wandered into the gardening department of the same store and looked for a new mower.

When I met the gardener we inherited from the previous owners, I was rather startled.

'Good morning, I'm Vernon Coleman,' I said, introducing myself.

'You need a new mower,' he said.

They were the first words he spoke to me.

'You need a new mower'.

I thought he could have waited until he'd said, 'Good morning' before giving me the bad news but some people are like that.

And so, although we already own enough mowers and strimmers to stock a decent sized market garden, we apparently need another one. The gardener suggested something with a Honda engine and the cheapest Honda mower I could find was nearly £700. That seems a lot of money for a machine to cut some grass. I will look around.

We then visited a paint shop.

Antoinette rather likes a colour made by an expensive paint company.

We were told we had to buy a can just slightly bigger than an oil drum because the people in the shop suggested that if we bought two smaller cans then you would have to mix the contents of the two cans together to avoid any alterations in shade. I was surprised by this. Paint is enormously expensive these days and I would have honestly thought that a paint company might be expected to make all the tins of, say, Faeces Brown, end up the same shade of Faeces Brown.

17

(Devon)

We requested a quote for changing our bathrooms. At the moment, one bathroom has a green suite and the other has a peach coloured suite. It is difficult to say which colour is the most nauseating. We have to change the colours or take our baths while wearing blindfolds.

The whole business was very complicated.

First of all, we had to be interviewed in the store. Then an employee visited us at home and looked around the house. Then we had to go back to the store for another interview with a bathroom fitting consultant. And then finally a plumber had to visit the two bathrooms, presumably to make sure that there were indeed two bathrooms and that we hadn't made a mistake with our sums.

The plumber who came, turned out (according to himself) to be the cleverest and wisest man on the planet and although I originally wanted to call him The Omniscient Bathroom Fitter we decided to call him Mr Clammy instead because he had one of those handshakes that make you want to wipe your hand down your trousers when you've finished shaking hands.

He seemed rather strangely seedy; the sort of man who only has sex with women who can be deflated and stored in a drawer. He entered our home with a confidence I haven't seen for years. In that respect (and that respect alone) he reminded me of Roger Vadim the film director. In the days before the BBC decided that I was too dangerous to be allowed on air, I used to broadcast regularly on many radio programmes include one called 'Start the Week' which took place, live, on Monday mornings. The format was simple. A variety of guests would sit around a table and discuss various topics with the host who at the time was a former newsreader called Richard Baker. One morning the guests included Vadim and at nine o'clock, as the weather forecast was being read and the clock was ticking with seconds to go until the start of the programme, the film director had still not appeared. His chair, next to mine, remained empty.

Suddenly, the door to the studio was flung open and there stood Vadim. He was immaculately dressed and coiffed and clouds of expensive cologne burst into the room. Two tall women stood alongside him, one either side, and, clearly choreographed, they removed the stylish overcoat which was hung, French style, over his shoulders. He smiled, nodded at us all and sat down.

It was the most amazing entrance I have ever seen.

Actually, the plumber wasn't in the same league but he thought he was.

He was with us for nearly two hours and he spent an hour and three quarters of that talking about himself, his astonishing achievements, his amazing skills and his wonderful personality. By golly he could talk. He was way beyond garrulous and well into toxic logorrhoea. He told us that he contributed to a number of plumbing websites where, he boasted, he invariably gave bad and misleading advice in the hope that householders attempting to 'do it themselves' would make a mess of things and have to call in a professional.

Antoinette and I were appalled but, sadly, not surprised by this additional evidence of the worthlessness of the Internet.

Every sentence he uttered contained at least two clichés.

I had to fight hard not to take the wind out of his sails, the ground from beneath his feet and the clichés out of his conversation.

'Don't say anything more,' I said at one point, 'that's such an interesting thought that I would like to spend the next 30 minutes thinking about it.'

He preened but lasted only three seconds.

I have met many politicians and television celebrities but I have never met anyone quite so much in love with himself as this fellow.

When he tired of talking about himself, he took out his smart phone and showed us 300 photographs which he had stored. Most of the photographs were of a swimming pool he had recently installed at his home. To be more accurate, they weren't of the swimming pool but of the hole he had dug and the concrete with which he had lined it. Believe me, once you have seen 50 photographs of a large hole lined with concrete you have seen enough pictures of holes lined with concrete to last you a lifetime. (This is not the first time we have been subjected to photographic torture of this kind. Some years ago, another acquaintance bored us both into a stupor by showing us photographs of his newly concreted patio and swimming pool. If this happens again, I will suspect that a trend is developing.) When he showed us the last picture of the hole and the concrete, I breathed a huge sigh of relief. But there was to be no respite, for next came the pictures of the blue plastic lining he was using to give the pool a pleasant blue colour and to ensure that all the water didn't drain away.

I didn't want to start any more discussions by asking questions so I just carried on going 'Ah' and 'My word' and 'Golly' and 'Isn't that wonderful' and stuff like that. Antoinette did her bit too and she managed to give her 'Ahs', 'My gollys' and 'Goshs' a realistic quality which I fear mine lacked.

I don't mix a good deal with people who have smart phones so this was only the second time I've had to endure this particular type of torture. I feel sorry for those who are subjected to it on a daily basis.

Then, after the visit from the plumber, we had to go back to the store.

I was staggered when the bloke working there showed us the estimated bill.

But it was only when I took a close look at the estimate that I realised just how much they were intending to rip us off.

So they were, for example, intending to charge us nearly £500 to get rid of our unwanted, old bathroom suites. And we would have to have this done at their convenience. (Pardon the pun.)

One quick check on the Internet told us that the waste disposal company they were intending to use would charge us around £100 if we contacted them direct. Moreover, they would take it away when we wanted them to take it away.

And a phone call to our friendly rubbish man confirmed that he would take all the stuff away for £80 cash no questions asked.

(Our rubbish man is a fascinating fellow. He told me that he got into the rubbish collecting business because he was never any good at doing what he was told to do when he was a boy. He admits he could not play 'Simon Says' without arguing with Simon. After three jobs had ended in him storming out, he realised that he needed to find something he could do by himself. Collecting rubbish was a natural choice, he says. I suspect that he has a good future ahead of him. As councils limit their rubbish collecting services, so the demand will grow for private companies and individuals who are prepared to take away unwanted stuff and get rid of it.)

It seemed a bit over the top to me to charge us £400 or more in commission, for arranging for someone to take away a couple of old bathroom suites. I reckoned that meant that they were billing us at a rate of nearly £5,000 an hour to arrange for another company to come along and take away our rubbish.

Doing anything with a house these days is a tiring, disappointing and frustrating experience.

And, the more we thought about it, the more we thought that throwing away our baths and sinks seemed to involve a good deal of waste.

We hate the colours, but the designs and shapes of the baths and sinks were excellent and suited the house perfectly.

Perhaps there might be another way.

18

(Devon)

When I was very young and had no idea what I was talking about, I appeared on national television several times a week and on the wireless even more often.

A few decades later, when I was a little wiser and a good deal better informed, no one wanted me to speak on either television or radio because what I had to say was considered by the establishment to be genuinely troubling.

Occasionally, however, an interview request still filters through.

Today, a fellow I don't know sent me an email asking me to appear on his Internet radio programme. These things are apparently now very popular and have many listeners.

However, since I am busy writing a new book I sent him a polite note declining the invitation.

I immediately received an admonitory email telling me that we are now living in a multimedia age and that I should embrace the new opportunities for communication which are available. I was tempted to write back and point out that in addition to writing books and newspaper columns I have made radio and television programmes, had a book turned into a film, had a website since the early 1990s when websites were available, produced audio tape versions of my books, provided around 100 telephone advice lines and even been a T-shirt.

But it was easier to delete his email.

I did it with all due deference.

I discovered today that the Food Standards Agency in the UK regards it as perfectly acceptable for meat products (hamburgers, sausages and so on) sold in the UK to contain 1% horsemeat.

19

(Gloucestershire)

For some time now, vulnerable people have been advised that they should consult Independent Financial Advisors in order to obtain advice about financial matters. The Government, the financial establishment and the press have all encouraged the elderly, the vulnerable and the uniformed to seek the advice of IFAs – most of whom have had to complete an entire 20 minute course before being licensed.

The course titles are: 'How to deceive customers into thinking they're going to make huge profits', 'How to deceive customers into thinking their money will be safe' and 'How to make people trust you'.

It now turns out that IFAs are not quite as independent as their name might suggest for fund managers have been taking zillions of them on extravagant outings in order to win their business.

Frail, vulnerable and elderly punters who consult these advisers are being pushed into products on the basis of good old-fashioned bribery and corruption.

I am constantly surprised and disappointed by the extent of corruption and cruelty in our world.

In our society the frail and the vulnerable and the demented and those without a voice are generally forgotten and only remembered when there is some easy way to rip them off.

Civilised, huh?

20

(Gloucestershire)

I'm reading Cecil Woodham Smith's book *The Reason Why* and I see that Thomas Brudenell was created Earl of Cardigan on 20th April 1661 after lending King Charles £1,000.

We are accustomed to modern day peers and knights acquiring their titles by crookery and roguery but we forget that most of the aristocracy acquired their titles by bribery, loans, and gifts.

There are many men and women sitting in the House of Lords because an ancestor lent his wife to the monarch. It seems extraordinary that the nation's affairs should be controlled by a few fools whose only claim to authority is that an ancestor was a crook or a cuckold. Labour politicians have, in the past, frequently promised to get rid of the House of Lords. Not a bit of it. Today, quite a few of those Labour politicians now sit in the Chamber they previously derided.

Those who campaign to keep Britain in the EU will doubtless find themselves blessed with titles of their choice.

Knighthoods and peerages have always been handed out for political favours, financial skulduggery and sexual generosities.

The honours system has always been corrupt but it is now as bad as ever. At its best, it sees industrialists and pop stars rewarded for their entirely selfish money making activities.

Civil servants are automatically made knights or dames in recognition of the fact that they have served their country rather than worked in the private sector. When this tradition began it was assumed that their income in the civil service would be notably lower than their income might have been had they dirtied their souls by venturing into commerce. Today, senior civil servants earn more than most, enjoy job security and a freedom from all responsibilities and, when they retire, are given pensions which those in the private sector can only admire from afar. Moreover, civil servants who have reached the upper levels (the ones who receive the honours) now move seamlessly into commerce when they retire. But still they automatically receive their quite undeserved honours.

The system reaches the zenith of absurdity when tax exiles are rewarded for nothing more than successful self-enrichment. The House of Lords now contains a former children's TV presenter and a woman who made some money flogging brassieres. I heard recently about someone who received a knighthood for services to mobile phones. That's beyond absurd; it's obscene; though there is probably some self-important bozo out there with a knighthood for services to pop up toasters. And he probably received the award because he gave a chunk of shareholders' money to one of the big political parties. Fred Goodwin and Philip Green both received knighthoods, though few can now remember why and fewer still would say that such men deserve such honours.

Public honours should go to people who have done great things for their neighbours – and not to people who have simply made a ton of money out of doing something they'd have done anyway, or who have become notorious for being able to break the world pie eating record.

My disaffection with public figures in Britain is constantly being fed.

I see, for example, that the Prime Minister's wife now has her very own personal aide, paid for by taxpayers. The new aide is a 28-year-old former model and the granddaughter of a Tory party grandee. She will be paid up to £52,999 a year. Her duties will include assisting with Mrs Cameron's social diary and helping to organise her wardrobe.

Since Mrs Cameron (whom we know is not bright since she is an enthusiastic supporter of the European Union) appears to have the fashion sense of warthog, it is probably sensible for her to hire help with picking clothes to wear, but do the taxpayers have to be given the bill?

Cecil Woodham-Smith's book provides an extraordinary, behind the scenes account of the Charge of the Light Brigade. We all tend to think of the soldiers involved as enormously brave and quixotically English, which they were, but their leaders were absolute buffoons of the very worst kind.

Lords Lucan and Cardigan were barking megalomaniacs, with Cardigan completely off his rocker and a nasty, sadistic piece of work to boot.

Lord Raglan, who was supposedly in charge of them all was simply potty. Maybe he was peeved because he only got a type of sleeve whereas Cardigan became a jumper with buttons.

Raglan thought we were still fighting the French which was a pity since in the Crimea they were our allies. Raglan's basic problem was that for 40 years he had been handmaiden to the Duke of Wellington and had never had to think for himself. His job had always been to do what the Great Man told him to do and not to ask any questions or reason why.

The whole Crimean adventure was badly conceived, badly organised, badly equipped and badly managed with Cardigan seemingly obsessed by the need to make sure that his men wore trousers which were the right colour and very tightly fitting.

21

(Gloucestershire)

Another of my medical school pals has died.

Most of the few who are left are now retired and because of the GMC's absurd licensing procedures they are no longer allowed to practise medicine.

Most would have been happy to work as locums, standing in for colleagues at times of sickness or during holiday periods, but the GMC's revalidation rules mean that when they retire they must hang up their stethoscope for ever. What a tragic waste.

22

(Devon)

I have bought Antoinette a new piano for our seaside home. Well, actually, I wanted to buy a new one but Antoinette insisted that I find something "previously enjoyed". We therefore ended up with a second-hand Bechstein boudoir grand piano. Despite a few scratches and scars on the case it looks magnificent.

A boudoir grand is apparently smaller than a Concert Grand but larger than a Baby Grand.

The leader of the team who transported the piano to the house was the most helpful removal man I've ever encountered.

The piano needs a little loving care and attention and the man explained which types of wax and French polish we should use.

Inside and outside the house the paint is flaking off. We have nothing to sit on and we have no dining table. The television set is still in its box. We have no curtains. Our heating system doesn't work.

But we have a grand piano.

Priorities.

That's what life is all about.

23

(Devon)

I bought a copy of the *Financial Times* in order to see what the idiots are thinking these days.

I doubt if there can be a more hysterical, undemocratic newspaper on the planet.

The editorial fear of our leaving the European Union has become akin to the madman's screech for every time I look at it, the paper appears to have become even more hysterical in its opposition to Britain leaving the European Union.

Today's edition attempts to compare and contrast two towns, Brighton and Bognor Regis. where the locals take differing views of the European Union. The story is illustrated with photographs of the two towns.

The picture of Brighton (where the residents love the EU) shows two young, scantily clad girls wandering through the colourful lanes in Brighton on a beautiful sunny day. The picture of Bognor Regis (where the residents are largely Eurosceptic) shows an elderly couple, he with an umbrella and she with a plastic shopping bag, outside a toilet block on a deserted beach. It is raining and clearly cold. Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's Propaganda Minister, and a member of the team which created the European Economic Community, could not have done it better.

I wonder if this outrageous prejudice and fascist inclined bigotry could possibly have anything to do with the fact that the *FT* is now owned by a Japanese company.

Could it possibly be the case that *FT* journalists are beaten on the soles of their feet with bamboo sticks if they fail to write enough articles extolling the non-existent virtues of fascism and the anti-democratic state?

The paper's enthusiasm for the European Project (as first described by Adolf Hitler) is remarkably loyal. The *Financial Times* manages to get anti Brexit comments into just about every article in the paper.

'This month's fashion from Paris includes wonderful all wood jackets carved by Black Forest carpenters. These wonderful artifacts will not be available to British buyers if the nation votes to leave the EU.'

'The weather for the next week should be warm. If Britain leaves the EU the weather will always be cold and wet.'

‘England should do well in the forthcoming football matches though sadly these will be the last internationals England will ever play if electors choose to leave the EU.’

‘The items required for this recipe will not be available if the people of Britain are so stupid as to vote to leave the EU. We won’t be able to buy olive oil because it comes from continental Europe!’

No one at the *FT* ever points out to its readers that under UK law they can do whatever is not illegal but under EU law they can do only what is allowed.

I have also noticed that at the bottom of travel articles in the *Financial Times* there are now printed details of the companies which provided the transport and accommodation for the journalist. In my opinion, travel writers who don’t pay their own expenses (or have them paid for them by their newspaper) are not proper travel writers. The *FT* seems to believe that the only things that matter are profits and profits. What a stinky policy and what a disgraceful newspaper.

The BBC is equally one sided and I can no longer bring myself to watch or listen to any of their Goebbels’ approved propaganda.

It appals me that there are people who listen to, or watch, BBC programmes and think they are keeping up with the news. Hatred of England and the English is now such a fundamental part of BBC culture that it has probably been incorporated into the BBC charter.

It seems to me that the BBC is now a sort of state subsidised benefits system for the unpatriotic, the racist, the sexist, the marginally talented and the supremely hypocritical.

(Anyone who doubts that the BBC is sexist might like to try explaining why the Corporation broadcasts women’s golf but refuses to broadcast men’s golf. It is of course perfectly fine that the BBC should choose to broadcast women’s golf if it believes there is an audience for it, but it is more of a puzzle that the BBC deliberately chooses not to broadcast men’s golf for which there is a proven audience. It is difficult not to conclude that this is simply an example of BBC sexism.)

The bullying Corporation happily throws its full weight behind attacks on small businessmen who have made small errors but it will never criticise huge bureaucracies, fascist dictatorships or large international corporations.

The BBC’s vast staff, many of whom are foreign, have no idea how to prioritise news stories for a British audience and so some obscure event which is big news in their home country of Ruritania will lead the news programme while a major British story will be relegated to 15 seconds at the end of the bulletin.

I heard today that several allegedly impoverished councils are paying huge salaries to spies whose job it is to wander around and check that householders have properly rinsed out bottles and cans and yoghurt cartons before putting them into their rubbish bags.

Citizens whose washing up is deemed inadequate will be fined.

This is stupidity on an unprecedented scale.

Do these people not realise that water is the new gold? Fresh water is the rarest commodity on the planet and it won’t be long before it is also the most expensive. And these half-witted council employees, obeying the orders of quarter witted eurocrats in Brussels, want to make sure we waste the stuff washing out bottles and cans. I despair, I truly do despair.

Today, we received our council tax bill for the house on the cliff. The letter accompanying the bill informed us that: ‘The slowest way to pay is to pay with cheque or cash’. Oddly enough, I think this is supposed to encourage me to eschew paying by cheque or cash.

But the council will charge me an extra 1.5% if I pay by credit card so they’re getting a cheque and if they are too snooty to cash it that’s fine with me.

24

(Devon)

President Obama is today widely pictured with Prince George, the heir to the heir to the throne in Britain.

The young George is dressed in pyjamas and dressing gown.

The picture was released on the same day that Obama threatened Britain with exile and eternal penury if they didn’t vote the way he wanted in the forthcoming EU referendum.

This wasn’t the usual condescending, patronising guff that we have come to expect from foreign politicians – this was a blatant threat.

The funny thing is that the royal parents are quick to object if their children are photographed without permission but this was blatant political manipulation and neither William nor Kate have any right to complain in future if their kids are pictured slurping ice cream or having a tantrum.

I am appalled by the behaviour of Prince William. It sometimes seems to me that no one has ever bothered to find the time to teach him that it is perfectly allowable to think before you say or do anything. He sometimes behaves as he thinks a 16th century monarch should behave.

And Obama should realise that this vote is nothing to do with the dirty business of politics. This is a vote by the people of Britain for their future and it is a vote in which the British people are lined up against the entire global establishment and regiments of the smug, metropolitan self-appointed elite; battalions of the gilded and self-important.

The really odd thing about all this, of course, is that it is clear that Prince William does not realise that the EU plans to get rid of the Royal Family.

By supporting the EU, William is committing professional suicide.

I wonder how he and Kate will adapt to living in a semi-detached house in Giggleswick.

And I doubt if Obama's orders will be obeyed.

Britons are getting fed up with the incessant threats and manipulation.

British taxpayers paid for Obama's visit and for the Government's official pro EU leaflet, and for EU propaganda prepared by civil servants and I strongly suspect that all these things will encourage people to vote to leave the EU. Indeed, Obama's intervention is without a doubt the best thing that could have happened for those of us who desperately want to leave the European Union.

Brexiteers have leapt on the American President by asking how the American people would respond if told that they had to join with Canada and Mexico to form an American superstate and to allow in an endless supply of immigrants.

As the protector of Guantanamo, Obama is hardly in a position to pass judgements, moral or otherwise, on anyone or anything.

The establishment's support of the EU is becoming increasingly hysterical.

But if the Prime Minister and the Governor of the Bank of England and other doomsters are correct in predicting that Britain will sink into armed conflict, recession and a total financial collapse if we leave the EU, then why haven't the markets priced in this apocalyptic scenario?

The financial markets, run by people playing with real money, don't really seem to give a stuff whether Britain stays in the EU or not – presumably because the brokers realise that leaving the EU will have little or negative impact on the country, though it might well result in the collapse of the EU itself.

The Government has been busy encouraging industrialists who hope to receive knighthoods to say how awful Britain will be if we escape from Hitler's EU.

Today, a manufacturer of knitted goods said that he was desperately worried that his sales would fall if people voted to leave the European Union. Why should this be? I cannot imagine his line of thought but he is in any case wrong. Hundreds of thousands more Britons are preparing to emigrate if the nation votes to remain a member of the European Union. And those are the people who buy sweaters and cardigans.

If we stay in the EU then many of his customers will emigrate to warmer countries (and there aren't many countries colder and wetter than Britain) and they won't have any need for warm woollies.

It isn't surprising that the young and impressionable and ignorant support the EU. But my own feeling is that the people who accept the pro-EU nonsense being shovelled into the media should not be allowed to vote. Indeed, prospective voters should be required to take a short exam to make sure that they know something about the issue at hand. And the questions should not be set by the Government but by some genuinely independent body – if such a body can be found.

In the rest of my immediate world it is said that inflation is stable. At least that is what the Government says so it must, of course, be true.

This is, of course, only because the Government has successfully fiddled the figures by including things that never vary in price in the basket of goods which they use when judging whether inflation is going up or down or staying where it is.

So, for example, instead of putting things like bread, petrol and rent into the 'basket of goods' used to measure inflation, they include essentials such as violin strings, French polish and horseshoes.

These items are particularly handy for this purpose since they hardly ever vary in price and if they do, they can be thrown out of the basket for being too volatile and replaced with kumquats, awls and ice picks.

The reality is that all governments everywhere desperately want as much inflation as they can get for it is the only way for them to get rid of their huge debts.

The plan is, quite simply, to use inflation to transfer wealth from savers and give it to the profligate (such as the Government) whose debts are un-payable.

All governments with debts love inflation because it transfers money from the suckers who earned it and saved it to the Government. Inflation is popular with debtors too because it helps reduce their debts. And if there are enough people in debt a government can get away with this for years.

25

(Gloucestershire)

It is now clear that spending up to £9,000 in tuition fees for a university education is a waste of money.

Many men and women who go to university do so in the hope, and belief, that a degree will improve their employment prospects. They have been misled, for many who graduate from universities and colleges earn less than non-graduates – but are lumbered with huge loans and interest payments.

Much modern education simply trains people in subjects for which there is virtually no demand outside teaching.

Just how many graduates in art history, brewing technology, golf course management, French literature and spa management does a country need?

I feel sorry for all those who are tricked into spending time and money on these useless courses.

Like most people we get cheated, deceived, bullied and harassed so much that the good moments are truly memorable.

A delivery man who brought a new lavatory to us in Gloucestershire, walked a mile down the hill because his lorry was too big to drive down the lane. He was genuinely grateful when I agreed to drive up in the truck to collect the lavatory – and to give him a lift up the hill.

Many delivery men would have just given up and gone on to their next port of call.

A man at my stockbrokers rang me back to confess that he had bought the wrong stock and to explain that he was going to put things right. (Some would have merely hoped that I didn't notice.)

And Lloyds Bank apologised for a screw up, refunded the money, gave me £10 'sorry' money. They even paid for my phone call of complaint.

And, to top it all, while standing in a long queue in a local Post Office, Antoinette saw a young man at the head of the queue help a frail old man to the very front. Moreover, not one of the other customers, whose places also went back one spot, murmured a word of protest.

26

(Gloucestershire)

It is illegal to let a dog off the lead in most parks and on almost all British beaches. But no one takes any notice and so children who play in the sand are constantly having to run into the sea to wash excrement from their hands.

Every year dozens of children who acquire toxocara infections will become blind because dog owners allow their animals to foul parks and beaches.

No one takes any notice of the laws about dogs and I know (from past experience) that if I try to complain to the council or a police officer they will assume that I am mad and probably try to lock me up.

We are now being told that English nationalism is a bad thing and that those who support, defend or rejoice in England's culture and history are ipso facto racists.

What is so bad about English nationalism?

And if nationalism is so terrible, why are we encouraged to support our national sports teams? Why are we encouraged to support our nation's athletes when they compete at the Olympics?

(Incidentally, I discovered the other day that at the 1908 Olympics, Britain won more gold medals than all the other 18 competing nations added together. And every medal was won by an amateur. How things have changed.)

And why is nationalism bad when it involves England but good when it involves Scotland or Wales?

Actually, I know the answer to that one.

It is because Scotland and Wales are already EU regions but England is going to be divided by the EU into nine new regions. There will be no place at all for England in the new United States of Europe.

A lovely fellow we know tells us that he knows a chap who is going to vote for Britain to remain in the EU because he is worried that if we leave he will not be able to buy something called a euromillion lottery ticket.

Honest.

27

(Gloucestershire)

I tried to take some of my own money out of my own account at Lloyds Bank today. Dealers selling furniture and people doing jobs around the house insist on being paid in cash. I know that the Government says we shouldn't do this but if we want furniture we have to pay them in the way they demand. Since I needed rather more cash than is allowed by the automatic teller machines, I queued for 20 minutes and presented a cheque to the teller. I wrote it out and signed it in front of him.

'You've made a mistake,' he said, 'you've made this out for £2,000 in cash.'

'That's right,' I said. 'I would like £2,000 in cash please.'

'I can't give you that much,' he said.

I looked at him. 'Why not? There is enough in my account.'

'Yes,' he said. 'There is enough there but I can't give you that much.'

'You can't give me my own money?'

'No.'

'I'll shout and have a tantrum and tell everyone in the bank that Lloyds has stolen my money.'

'Have you got a passport or a driving licence?' he asked, looking pale.

'Not with me. I've never before needed a passport to take my own money out of the bank.'

'I can't give it to you without a passport.'

Eventually, he gave me £2,000 on my debit card.

I just put the plastic into a card reader and keyed in the code numbers. He then gave me the cash.

What a crazy, crazy world.

28

(Gloucestershire)

When we got home from a visit to Cheltenham, Antoinette gave me a DVD she had bought as a present. The first was called *Follow the Money* and had apparently first been seen on the BBC. It looked good, though I didn't recognise any of the actors named on the front. When I read the notes on the back of the double sleeve (DVDs of productions which have been shown on BBC are usually encased in the usual plastic holder and then wrapped in both plastic and cardboard in order to maximise the environmental impact and to justify the accusation that the BBC, which fervently promotes the climate change myth can be accused of rank hypocrisy) I could not help noticing that the programmes were made in Danish. This information was given in very small print on the back of the packaging and did not appear anywhere on the front of the package. There are, apparently, partial subtitles in English. Antoinette paid £19.99 for an unwatchable disk.

I had to tell her since it seemed unlikely that she would not notice.

Since HMV won't accept returns unless they are taken back within 21 days and we have no plans to visit Cheltenham in that time, we were stuck with the damned thing.

'Never mind,' sighed Antoinette, handing me a second DVD. 'I bought you this too.'

She handed me a DVD entitled *Trapped*. This apparently had also appeared on the BBC and also cost £19.99. I looked at the blurb on the back.

'Don't tell me this one is in Danish,' joked Antoinette. 'Or Swahili.'

I hesitated. 'No,' I said softly. 'According to the very, very small print on the back this one is in Icelandic.'

I don't much care what anyone else calls this but I call it fraud.

The day was not lost, however. We had vegetarian sausage hotdogs for tea. Marvellous.

The disaster with the DVDs was not our only disappointment today.

When we bought our house in Gloucestershire we were careful to check that there was mobile phone reception.

We have a landline but these days a mobile phone is essential and if you travel around, as we do, since being able to give a single telephone number to people makes life much easier.

The only mobile telephone which seemed to work for a couple of years was one on the Vodafone network.

Annoyingly, the Vodafone reception stopped working a couple of months ago.

We have no idea why this is.

I wrote to the Vodafone chairman but he was about as much use as a mouldy kipper.

I can only assume that aliens were in some way responsible.

Meanwhile, it appears that sophisticated thieves have been stealing money from Vodafone customers by racking up phantom calls. Vodafone, predictably, refuses to help its customers and seems to prefer to allow the crooks to carry on stealing. The phone company's executives don't give a stuff because it is just customers who are losing out. What a foul company Vodafone is.

Not having a mobile phone in Gloucestershire is becoming quite a trial. We gave the mobile number to the workmen who are working on the house in Devon so that they could call us if necessary.

In desperation, I checked out all the other phone companies on the Internet and keyed in our Gloucestershire postcode.

I was delighted to find that a new company called EE promised that their phones would work efficiently in exactly the place where the house is situated. Glory be! Antoinette and I sang a couple of choruses of an exultant hymn in order to celebrate this discovery.

So today, in Cheltenham, I managed to buy an EE telephone which works on the Pay as You Go principle. The salesman tried to sell me a phone that would use up its money whether I used it or not but I think I persuaded him to sell me a phone and package that would use up money only when I made calls.

Incidentally, it was a surprise to discover that it is still possible to buy ‘burner’ telephones over the counter without giving any identification. I paid cash for the phone which is, therefore, untraceable.

Naturally, when we got the phone back home we discovered that the damned phone doesn’t work. It’s as dead as the four mobile phones we already have which are on the Vodafone network.

It seems that EE has lied to us. I am shocked to the core that a large company should tell porkies in order to increase its sales. How can this possibly be?

And so the burner phone is going in the incinerator.

Gosh, what a surprise is that.

When will I ever learn that mobile phone companies are fundamentally crooked.

A good friend who lives in Northern Ireland, near the border with the Irish Republic, told me the other day that the masts near his home don’t work. If he wants to use his mobile he has to connect to the masts over the border and pay roaming charges. That’s a cute way to make more money out of your customers.

29

(Devon)

After waiting for over a month, we have at least been told that the people in charge of connecting houses to the mains gas supply can join our cliff top property to the gas main. According to their little map, the gas main runs about two feet away from our gate.

This is good news because it means that we can get rid of our ancient oil boiler and the two huge oil tanks which live in a small building attached to the kitchen.

Today, a man came along to inspect our heating system.

He is an Expert with a very capital E and he was very impressed with our radiators and pipes (which are all made of cast iron and which were almost certainly installed when the house was built in 1902 when modern central heating systems were in their infancy) but slightly less complimentary about our boiler which isn’t quite that old but which looks large enough to satisfy the requirements of an ocean going liner. It was easy to tell that he was an Expert because he wore a tie with a company logo on it. Jeeves would have had a fit.

Indeed, I suspect that when they made the boiler for the Queen Mary they made a spare and installed it in our house.

The Expert was very uncomplimentary about oil boilers.

He told us that oil tanks and pipes have a tendency to leak and that when they do it is quite likely that part of the house will have to be knocked down in order to dig out the contaminated ground. He said that a woman in a nearby village lost half her house when her oil tank leaked. Apparently, health and safety gestapo guards came along and insisted on knocking down walls galore and then digging up her foundations. I am honestly surprised that people who have oil leaks tell anyone about it. It would be better to mop up any spilt oil with a couple of rags and a bucket. Not that this is something I would ever contemplate, of course.

Oddly enough, the company for which the Expert works doesn’t do oil boilers but specialises in gas installations.

The Expert told us that in order to update our boiler and system we will have to arrange for a utility company to connect us to the mains gas supply. We will then need a company (preferably his) to put in a new gas boiler, a company to do something electrical to make the gas supply pipe safe, a company to install a meter and a company to supply us with gas.

This seems horrendously complicated.

Oh, and we will, of course, also need a company to remove the existing oil tanks and, obviously, another company (properly accredited) to remove any oil that is left in them.

Antoinette decided that we should opt for a gas system but not with the Expert who is too gloomy.

When the Expert had gone, we immediately turned up the heating in the hope that we will be able to empty the oil tanks before it is time for them to be removed. It seems bizarre to have to waste heating oil in this way but there doesn’t seem to be any alternative.

This afternoon, I was saddened to read that plans to hold a John Wayne Day in California were scuppered after protests from politically very correct opponents.

The proposers suggested that Wayne, one of the best-known American film stars, was a patriotic man who was famous for supporting the military and cancer research. The opponents of the proposal pointed out that in his films, Wayne killed a lot of Native American Indians.

Maybe someone should have explained that all the dead Indians were well paid and got up and went home at the end of the day's shooting.

Over in Venezuela, the economy is in such a mess that people have to carry gym bags and rucksacks full of money with them if they want to buy a cup of tea or a packet of biscuits.

A bloke I know out there tells me that the Government would like to issue notes of higher denomination than the 100 bolivar note (now pretty well useless since you can't buy anything with it) but the printers who make the money won't print any more because they haven't been paid.

30

(Devon)

Now that Prime Minister Cameron has, quite reasonably and accurately, been accused of tax avoidance (it has been revealed by a bunch of journalists who accepted illegally obtained information, and who will, presumably, be arrested in due course for profiting from stolen goods, that he had shares in a Trust based in the Bahamas) his government has introduced an endless stream of attacks on tax avoidance (which has always been regarded as perfectly legal, in contrast to tax evasion which is not).

It is, it seems, now illegal for anyone to try to reduce their tax bills by legal means unless they are a senior member of the British Government.

Cameron's daft laws now mean that perfectly honest citizens can be sent to prison if they have a perfectly legal and proper offshore account and the institution handling it makes a mistake.

Cameron and his sidekick, the inestimably dishonest Osborne, have deliberately confused tax avoidance with tax evasion and if they are not careful they will soon have to arrest everyone who holds Premium Bonds (for which the winnings are served up free of tax and which are, therefore, a form of tax avoidance.) They will also have to arrest people who give up smoking because by giving up tobacco, former smokers are avoiding the heavy tax on the substance.

The only answer for anyone wishing to avoid trouble with the authorities is to ensure that they only invest in stuff that has the Prime Minister as an investor.

The Guardian was, as usual, the most sanctimonious of those complaining about tax avoidance.

The Guardian columnists sneer at the rich in general and at tax avoiders in particular (except Bono, of course) and deserve, therefore, a high place at the table for hypocrites.

The Guardian's employees are beneficiaries of tax exempt shell companies based in the Cayman Islands, and the paper is still alive only because the Trust which pays the bills made fistfuls of cash by investing in a website which specialised in flogging second-hand cars.

The Guardian is a vanity publication which survives only because the Trust which pays the journalists' high wages makes loads of dosh by investing in companies which pay low wages. *The Guardian* is, therefore, distributing money from the very poor to a bunch of wealthy, elitist commentators. The readers of *The Guardian*, most of whom are State employees, are obviously comfortable with this form of redistribution. It is, indeed, a process with which most of them are familiar and comfortable.

Some time ago, the National Environment Research Council invited members of the public to choose the name for a new scientific research vessel. This seemed a fair nod in the direction of democracy. Since taxpayers will be paying £200 million for the ship which they will never board they should at least get to give it a name.

Eventually, an online vote confirmed that the overwhelming vote of the public was in favour of calling the vessel 'Boaty McBoatface'.

It turns out that was not quite what the civil servants expected when they had this democratic lapse. They had, presumably, rather expected the public to choose a more traditional name: something like Saucy Jane or The Mrs Cameron.

But 'Boaty McBoatface' was the name the people wanted.

Not surprisingly, the bureaucrats are now rejecting democracy.

Since they don't like the name which the owners (the taxpayers) have given the boat, the bureaucrats at the NERC are going to call it "Sir David Attenborough".

Boring cheats.

May

1

(Gloucestershire)

Lloyds Bank has written to tell me that they are increasing the number of transactions they fit onto a statement so that they can reduce the frequency with which statements are sent out. At least I think that's what they said – their communications bore me to distraction and I rarely manage to read through to the end, which is probably the aim.

The usual weekly communication consists of a new 'Terms and Conditions' booklet which is always in tiny print and contains far too many pages for anyone ever to read. They might as well send round a 12 volume version. They know damned well that no one ever reads their booklets.

The bank says they are making these changes not to save money (heaven forbid that they should think of such an awful thing) or to reduce their service to customers but to reduce their impact on the environment. Of course they are.

I love the way banks and other large companies treat customers like complete idiots.

Are there really people working for the bank who believe that the customers will accept this tosh?

And they sweeten this news with the assurance that I can view my statements online at any time if I am idiotic enough to trust their website against the five million predatory hackers who trawl through banking websites on an hourly basis.

I do not like banks.

They have cut costs to the bone but they continue to pay their executives obscene salaries and bonuses. And they have had to pay out billions to people who were too stupid to realise that they were buying cars with three wheels when they bought insurance they didn't need and which was never going to pay out.

I was offered the bank's daft and pointless insurance policies on many occasions and always turned them down with a wry smile.

But customers who accepted the stupid policies are now being paid huge amounts of compensation. It seems, yet again, that I would have been far better off if I had done the idiotic thing. Shareholders, customers and depositors have all suffered.

As always, if enough people do something stupid they will receive compensation.

I've had money invested in funds which were stolen by the Government without any compensation being offered.

2

(Devon)

We hired a new plumber to do some essential repair work to the plumbing structure of our new home in Devon. He is not replacing the pastel coloured baths or sinks but is merely trying to deal with some dodgy pipework and leaky bits and pieces.

He came again today.

Every time I see him he has another problem to tell me about. He is full to the brim with problems but quite empty of solutions. We seem to have an endless assortment of pipes that suddenly don't fit or break or are in the wrong position. Every time he finds a problem he has to go back to the supplier to fetch whatever he thinks he needs. Since the supplier is thirty miles away, this requires a 60 mile round trip and he is invariably away for the best part of three hours. I have a suspicion that he goes off to ask a pal how to do something, or he goes away to look stuff up on the Internet. I have lost count of the number of times we've seen him.

You know you've seen a workman too often when you know that he likes coffee not tea, that he likes milk and three spoons full of sugar.

There have to date been three attempts to fit a new loo into my bathroom and if we didn't have two spares in other parts of the house I would by now have had my legs crossed for a very long time.

In Antoinette's bathroom, he has fastened the taps so tightly that if she wants to run water into her bath I have to use a wrench to turn the tap on and off.

'What do you do for a living?' he asked.

'I write books,' I replied.

'Have you had any published?' he asked.

I didn't know what to say.

How do you earn a living writing books if none of them gets published.

The curious thing is that whenever the plumber screws up he does so with a big smile and a joke and is very jolly about it.

‘Ho, ho, ho look what’s happened now!’ is his attitude.

He doesn’t actually do the ho, ho hos of course but he might as well.

We find it’s difficult to be cross with him even though Antoinette suggested the other day, sotto voce, that if he doesn’t hurry up, the house will have fallen into the sea before he’s finished.

Of course, some of the errors have been ours.

For example, I started off by buying the wrong sort of loo.

I will confess that I thought a loo was a loo was a loo and that a good plumber would merely use bits of piping to connect the porcelain to the house’s plumbing and sewage system. It turns out, sadly, that this is not the case at all. I’m not sure what the differences are but suffice it to say that there are differences.

I then compounded the problem by ordering some nice, shiny new taps from Amazon which turned out not to fit the bath they were intended to fit.

Wouldn’t you think that the EU, the most interfering busy body organisation in the history of interfering busy body organisations would have issued a law ruling that taps must all be of a standard size?

No, I suppose you wouldn’t.

After all, the telephone companies still produce endless variations on the connectors they use and when they introduce a new model they usually make sure that the old connectors and chargers no longer fit.

(When I travel, I find myself carting around four or five different chargers. If the EU wants to do something really useful why doesn’t it force telecom companies and IT companies to make all their devices fit a universal charger? Not difficult.)

But although I take full responsibility for those errors with the loos I take no responsibility for the other mistakes.

So far our plumber, who talks magnificent pseudoscience and can make a simple question about the time into an incomprehensible five minute oration on the meaning of time and its relationship to space, and who is I believe a graduate of the Frank Spencer school of plumbing, has broken four stop cocks (don’t ask), eight bathroom tiles and a big pipe thing, the replacement for which involved a four hour car journey (though that would have given me time to go to Reading and back and I cannot for the life of me think why there isn’t a plumbing supply merchant closer than Reading) bust the hot tap in Antoinette’s bathroom and broke a lavatory seat.

The breaking of the lavatory seat doesn’t matter a damn because through a little excessive enthusiasm on my part and a little incompetence on behalf of the firm through which I ordered the seats, we have three spare lavatory seats sitting in the garage, all still in their boxes.

They’re all bog standard seats (if you’ll pardon the expression) but I expect they will prove useful in due course.

The plumber’s incompetent activities in the loft have left us with a leak which has brought down a quarter of the ceiling in a guest bedroom. When I drew his attention to this disaster he pointed out that three quarters of the ceiling was still in situ.

I have no idea how much the plumber’s bill is going to be because he refuses to let me pay him as we go along. And we still have to find someone slightly more competent to replace the sinks and the baths without giving us a bill for over £6,000 (the estimate we had from the company which wanted £500 to take away the old baths and sinks). This fellow is the sort of workman who makes you want to wrap a cheese wire around his neck, very tightly, and to then tie a neat double knot. I could throw the body over the edge of the cliff and no one would ever find it. The rocks and scrub at the bottom of the cliff are impenetrable.

3

(Devon)

There is no subtlety in our world anymore.

Everyone who is annoyed by something writes to say that they are disgusted and even modest annoyances are treated as though they are the end of the world. I don’t know how hoteliers and restaurateurs get through the day. If I ran an eating establishment (heaven forbid) I would be forever on tenterhooks, waiting to see if a customer had complained that his teacake didn’t contain enough currants or his cup of tea wasn’t hot enough.

It is impossible to fight the mad reviewers because they have nothing to do and all the time in the world in which to do it. If you annoy one, he will happily spend 16 hours a day making your life miserable. Logic plays no part in their lives and nor does compassion. Understanding and forgiveness are alien concepts to them. In the world of books, most give either five star or one star reviews because that is how they see the world.

But who reviews the reviewers? Or, as the ancient Romans might have said if their Latin had been as rusty as mine: ‘Qui detrahit critici?’

Our world is being destroyed by self-appointed do-gooders, officious and authoritarian, untroubled by baubles such as evidence, history and democracy, easily offended, definitely prejudiced and always, permanently, irretrievably, intolerant. (Criticise the most enthusiastic reviewers and they become hysterical.)

The new breed of critics consider themselves to be above common sense or justice and their clear aim is to ensure that all those who hold opposing or even questioning views are suppressed, oppressed and silenced.

They hold clear to themselves a host of entirely unproven tenets: that the world is getting hotter because of man’s activities; that vaccination and vivisection are good things, and so on.

And if they find a book with which they disagree in any respect then they give it one star.

So a book like this, which is packed with opinions and arguments and questions is bound to end up being hammered.

In order to obtain decent reviews, it is necessary to write books which do not, cannot, upset anyone.

And what a dreary book that would be.

Those dot-to-dot books and adult colouring books doubtless get rave reviews. (Though I don’t mind betting that some people manage to find something about which to complain.)

Talking of colouring books, I see that Sidmouth Library now runs an Adult Colouring Club – with all materials supplied free of charge by the local taxpayers.

I suspect that these books (if that is truly the right word) are popular because they enable people to escape from their problems, and the real world, and to concentrate on something superficial and irrelevant – much in the same sort of way that politicians trot along to the Houses of Parliament to listen to debates.

Incidentally, how curious it is to see that HMRC has decided that colouring books should be free of VAT.

If you buy an ebook, fiction or non-fiction, the price includes 20% VAT. If you buy a blank notebook, the price includes 20% VAT.

But if you buy a colouring book there is no VAT.

Maybe I’m missing something but this seems bonkers to me.

4

(Gloucestershire)

An insurance person telephoned.

At the start of the conversation he assured me that the whole discussion would take no more than two minutes. That was, presumably, the introductory lie.

After 25 minutes he asked me a question which I could not answer.

‘Remember, it’s important to be accurate, and honest,’ he warned me, as I pondered. ‘Inaccurate answers could invalidate the policy.’ It seems perfectly acceptable for insurance people to lie to their customers but not for the customers to return the compliment.

When I confessed to being stumped by the question, the insurance man advised me to take a guess. Honest.

All this was my own fault.

I got myself in this mess because I answered the telephone.

Generally speaking, I never do this so I must have been daydreaming.

Answering the telephone these days is silly because the caller invariably wants me to do something I don’t particularly want to do, tell me something I don’t particularly need to know, ask me something to which I don’t know the answer or threaten me in some way. And so I usually ignore ringing phones.

Now that I am no longer a GP this is something I am allowed to do.

Indeed, I am merely following a policy which has been established, and is widely and consistently practised by HMRC, all utility companies, all phone companies and most council departments.

Our garden in Gloucestershire is rapidly becoming a hazel forest. We now have eleven hazel bushes growing within ten feet of our front door. All are between three and five feet tall. Some are growing in a small flowerbed, the rest are happily ensconced between old stone slabs.

The odd thing is that there is no mature hazel bush within 50 yards of the front door. The new bushes have all grown from hazelnuts which were buried by the squirrels and then forgotten.

Our squirrels follow an ‘eat one, bury one’ philosophy.

5

(Gloucestershire)
It's the first sunny day of the year. The inhabitants of the Cotswolds are wandering around in shorts, displaying their hairy legs with great pride. The men are doing the same thing.

Our apple and plum trees should be bright with blossom; but they aren't. It's going to be a hard autumn for the badgers and the squirrels who have grown accustomed to relying on their annual apple feast. Curiously, however, our crab apple trees are laden with blossom so, winds and bees willing, the jays who seem particularly fond of crab apples, should have a good autumn.

William Cobbett wasn't over fond of the Cotswolds which he described as an ugly country, complaining of shallow soil that was difficult to farm. He was right about the shallow soil and about the land being difficult to farm but it isn't an ugly country. The limestone that shaped the gently contoured landscape has also provided the classic Cotswold building material, soft stone that can be turned into building blocks or roof tiles; the whole classically known as honey coloured but acquiring a leaden, metallic depth as the centuries pass by. And, as a final touch, the honey coloured stone is given a thousand shades of green and blue by the lichen that loves the limestone.

I've had an email from an Italian publisher asking for my bank account details. They want to send me royalties for sales of my book *How to Stop Your Doctor Killing You* in Italy. And they want to put the money straight into my bank account.

I admit with some embarrassment that I don't remember ever selling Italian rights to that book.

My first thought was that the email was a scam from some crook simply wanting to get hold of my bank account numbers. But when I checked, I saw that the book is available in Italian and that the publisher who wrote to me had, indeed, published it.

I've asked them to send a cheque since I hate emailing my bank account details.

6
(Devon)
We ordered some curtains for the living room at the cliff top house. We paid just over £3,000 for curtains for one room. The material is not particularly expensive but the room is huge and has two vast bay windows. Besides, we asked for the curtains to be lined with something heavy to keep out the winter winds. I know I am old because I can remember when you could buy a damned good car for a tenth of the price of some curtains.

The Scottish Nationalist Party has claimed to have won a majority of seats in the Scottish Parliament. The SNP leader, the feisty Sturgeon, claims that she has a 'clear and unequivocal mandate to govern'. This is odd because, according to the figures I've seen, most electors voted for someone else and the SNP does not have a majority at all.

Ms Sturgeon has clearly allowed her lack of respect for the facts (common during elections) to spill over into the post-election period.

Her enthusiasm and boundless self-confidence is admirable in a 'Through the Looking Glass' sort of way, though personally I regard her as barking mad and deeply unpleasant. I can't help feeling that if an English politician had the same attitude towards the Scots which some SNP members seem to have towards the English, he or she might well be regarded as somewhat racist.

I have bad news for the Sturgeon. The fact is that if we are going by wishful thinking rather than reality then it is my party which has a clear and unequivocal mandate to govern Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England.

I don't see why my wishful thinking should be in any way inferior to Ms Sturgeon's.

7
(Gloucestershire)
The new Mayor of London is a Muslim who has called 'moderate Muslims Uncle Toms'. When he was sworn into office, the woman visible behind him appeared to be wearing a white head covering. When sworn in as a member of the Queen's Privy Council, Mr Khan took the oath on a copy of the Koran.

Times they are definitely a changing.

The London mayoral elections are a puzzle to many folk, who find the bureaucracy and the expense to be inexplicable. Millions still wonder why we have this entirely unnecessary piece of extra bureaucracy cluttering up our democracy. The truth is that no one wanted a mayor or an assembly in London until the EU forced us to have one. London is, of course, one of the nine planned regions into which England will be divided. Londoners may think that they have an Assembly and a Mayor but in fact they actually have a Regional Parliament.

(There has been a Lord Mayor of London since before the days of Dick Whittington and his cat, but that is an entirely different kettle of pomp and circumstance.)

Now that Londoners have a mayor and an assembly, no one understands what they're for or why they've got them – other than to provide oodles of money for second rate politicians and their cronies.

The whole thing is an expensive, long-running fiasco and it is one of the many legacies which the EU will leave us with when we have escaped its malignant clutches. The politicians who enjoy the power and money that the Assembly gives them will never want to give up either.

The other news this week is that two thirds of British Muslims say that they would refuse to inform on a fellow Muslim whatever terrorist activity he might be planning. The survey also showed that virtually no British Muslims have any interest in British culture or any interest in integrating or sharing any of our views.

The sad truth seems to be that Britain has rolled over completely. We have suppressed our own cultural mores to accommodate those of our visitors.

So, for example, in schools where only a few pupils are Muslim, the kitchens serve only halal meat because the authorities assume that non-Muslims will suppress their ethical objections to halal food whereas Muslims will refuse to eat anything else.

Worse still, there are schools in England where pupils are taught not in English but in a language regarded as acceptable by immigrant families.

We are overwhelmed by ungrateful, demanding, permanent house guests. And things are going to get worse, much worse. The latest news is that the EU has offered visa-free access to 75 million Turks who would 'like to travel'. Around 14 million of them have said that they will be coming to Britain – and they intend to stay.

Mr Cameron seems to think he can stop this but sadly his Canute impersonation is unlikely to be successful.

Sir Richard Dearlove, the former head of MI6 told a conference on migration that our current policy 'seems perverse, like storing gasoline next to the fire one is trying to extinguish'.

A report for the European Commission predicted that the new arrangement with Turkey will mean 'increased mobility into the…area of criminals and terrorists'.

Europe is changing at a faster rate than ever before. Three million Turkish Muslims already live in Germany. An astonishing 10% of the French population is Muslim. The most common name for a baby boy in Belgium is Mohammed. There is no immigration enforcement for illegal immigrants in Europe and even if there were, the regular amnesties would devalue it. (It has been said that immigrants should be renamed gimmigrants.)

In many parts of Britain (London, for example) the English are now an ethnic minority.

There are many parts of the English capital in which I feel uncomfortable and unsafe. If I were a young woman, walking alone, I would like it even less. I have seen the way young Muslim males stare at girls in mini-skirts with contempt and hatred in their eyes.

The English have lost their sense of identity and purpose. They have also lost the country. That is why the Referendum vote is a certain win for our side.

Meanwhile, the Government has announced that it is planning to introduce bills in favour of driverless cars, drones, commercial space travel and adoption. It plans to turn all prisons into academies.

Oh, and there will be a bill against extremism. I think the Government is going to ban it.

(Why, incidentally, doesn't the Monopolies Commission look into the fact that we only have one government? Surely there should be at least two. If there were two competing governments, we could vote constantly for our favourite.)

It astonishes me that so many female British politicians campaign so noisily and enthusiastically in support of our multicultural society. They seem peculiarly blind to the fact that the Muslim society they welcome will almost certainly result in them being forced to wear clothes that cover their heads and faces. And they will have to walk a decent distance behind their lords and masters.

The Muslim religion does not rate women very much above dogs, and I very much look forward to seeing the loathsome Thornberry woman (infamous for disliking the England flag and English patriots and famous for her multiracial, multicultural enthusiasms) peeping through the eye slits of a voluminous burka and walking a goodly distance behind her lord and master. It will be a relief to others who have to travel around in London and might have caught a glimpse of the odious creature. I wonder what the Muslims think of the fact that the number of dogs in Britain is increasing exponentially?

I have a suspicion that millionaire liberals of Thornberry's ilk consider themselves to be multiracial and multicultural because their dinner parties are attended by Chinese, Russians, Iranians and probably even people from the Isle of Wight (though definitely not from Peckham).

The reality, however, is that their guests will almost certainly be totally westernised. They will have jobs as barristers and cardiologists and they will dress and think like Britons.

I very much doubt if any of the Thornberry's neighbours defecate in the street, have bonfires in the local park, throw stones at women whose skirts are considered too short or organise vigilantes to prevent locals carrying a bottle of Chablis in the street.

The millionaire liberals never see the ghettoes and so have absolutely no idea just how dysfunctional Britain has become as a consequence of their policies.

I used to be appalled by the sight of Europeans or Americans sunbathing in skimpy costumes or drinking alcohol in Arabic countries. It seemed to me to be disrespectful.

I don't feel that way anymore.

It seems to me that it is only fair that, if we have had to abandon our mores and ethical standards then the Muslim countries should change their culture to adapt to our way of life. Quid pro quo.

We used to enjoy watching the horse racing on Channel 4 (a strange television channel which is, like the BBC, owned by the Government which is to say owned by the people but controlled by the Government) but we have given up.

I have decided that horse racing is the world's most crooked and elitist sport and that the commentators on Channel 4 are the most elitist people in an elitist sport. They even have their own incomprehensible jargon. All professions create their own jargon because it makes them feel aloof, special and superior and enables them to charge higher fees but why does the horse racing industry feel it necessary to create a language of its own when it is trying to sell itself to the general public on television? There is more bullshit talked than there is at a high school reunion.

The whole programme on Channel 4 seems to revolve around a small group of chums and it is all very exclusive. When Clare Balding is presenting the programme is seems to be mostly about her family and friends.

And am I the only person to have noticed, by the way, that Ms Balding looks like Stephen Fry in drag?

Has anyone ever seen the two of them together?

Could it be…

8

(Gloucestershire)

According to the experts who keep records of these things, today is the hottest May 8th since May 8th last year. I'm not sure if I believe anything the climate experts say so I am doubtful.

The big news of the day is that the people of St Ives in Cornwall have voted to ban the sale of new homes to non-residents in a bizarre and, I suspect, counter-productive attempt to make housing more affordable for the locals. The electors of other pretty towns in beautiful parts of the country have apparently done much the same.

It does not seem to have occurred to anyone supporting this daft scheme that if non-residents are not allowed to buy new houses on housing estates they will buy the pretty, well-situated houses near to the beach and the harbour.

Moreover, if people from outside the area aren't allowed to buy holiday homes and spend their holidays in St Ives then a large part of the town's income will disappear.

Finally, if builders are limited in their markets they will probably build homes somewhere else.

This seems to me to be a spiteful sort of law that may make a few vigilantes feel good about themselves but which will, in the long run, do inestimable harm to the town.

Of course, banning non-residents from buying property isn't a new idea, for the Welsh tried it without much lasting success some years ago.

A spokesperson for St Ives said that lots of people wanted to live there because it is such a beautiful place.

Why, I wonder, do they think that gives them a right to stop people who work hard from sharing that beauty and that joy and escaping from time to time from the diesel fumes and the overcrowding where they work in order to keep the nation rich?

The case of Antoinette's new grand piano has some scratches and neither of us is surprised by this. It is a long time since the piano left Mr Bechstein's piano factory.

Antoinette has decided to restore the piano to its former glory itself and has purchased a book on French polishing and various polishes and materials required for the restoration. She announced this evening that she would like to become a French Polisher.

I have not yet got round to telling her that many years ago, when I edited a magazine which had offices in Soho, I became accustomed to passing doorways which had cards pinned next to lines of doorbells.

On the cards were written messages such as 'Double fronted dresser – ring bell' and 'French lessons – ring bell'.

One of the most popular messages was 'French Polish – ring bell'.

These, of course, were coded messages advertising the services of Soho prostitutes.

9

(Gloucestershire)

I completed my tax return today. It is over 60 pages long and took me an hour to make a photocopy. According to the excellent Schmidt Tax Report the tax handbooks, produced to help tax accountants understand the process of taxpaying, have increased in size by five million words since 2009 and now contains 12 times as many words as the Bible.

I have first-hand experience of the fact that not even tax inspectors understand the legislation and will often merrily argue that black is white and that white is very definitely black. It has long been the case that the so-called experts at call centres know less than the average caller.

Since new recruits to the tax service are now put straight onto case work after just three weeks of training, it isn't surprising that many tax inspectors know absolutely nothing about tax law and frequently substitute arrogance and threatening behaviour for knowledge. It is surely no coincidence that the taxman's official cartoon mascot is called Hector – a word which means to torment or to bully.

The nation's tax laws are a mess. And the management of them is an even greater mess.

Things are so bad that a recent survey by HMRC itself showed that 90% of 'business decision makers' (including tax specialists and finance directors) had no idea what the authorities would, or would not, count as tax avoidance. Chancellor George Osborne has produced new laws and complications faster than any Chancellor. Not even Gordon 'the moron' Brown produced new laws at the rate that Osborne has churned them out.

The latest lunacy is the news that HMRC is now going to force companies to complete quarterly tax returns, instead of annual returns. A government minister announced that the new system will offer 'huge benefits' to businesses because it will save time and money. There is, it seems, no one working for HMRC or the Government who has enough experience of real life to know that since filling in one annual tax return takes up many days and wastes much time and effort, it is exceedingly likely that filling in four will very probably take up four times as many days and waste four times as much time and effort. It will also require the purchase of special software which will require many hours of study because it will, I suspect, be damned near incomprehensible. Several hundred thousand small business owners have already complained about the new plans, and independent experts reckon it will cost each of 2.6 million small businesses an annual bill of at least £1,250 to change to quarterly tax returns. (The total cost will, therefore, be in excess of £3 billion a year.) As accountancy bills soar, so productivity must fall.

What a pity it is that no one in Government realises that the Treasury would have far more money to spend if, instead of constantly gouging more and more loot out of hard-pressed taxpaying citizens, they made an effort to reduce waste? It would be the work of half a day to cut £50 billion of Government expenditure without there being any deterioration in services provided. (I never fail to be amazed at the way civil servants are constantly finding new ways to waste taxpayers' money. I heard the other day that civil servants lose over 1,000 laptops a year. How do they do that? Or do they steal them and then claim that they have been lost?)

Isn't it strange, by the way, that although I am constantly being invited to review or comment on everything I buy or consume, no Government department ever wants me to write a review. Indeed, as far as I am aware, it is not possible to write a review of organisations such as Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. I am still being bothered almost daily to write a review of the lavatory we bought several months ago but the tax authorities aren't in the slightest bit interested in my views on their competence.

The good news is that Britain's referendum on leaving the EU will be held on June 23rd. Older voters are largely desperate to vote to leave the EU because they remember how much better life was before we joined the EU. Younger voters, who think that life as it is now is as good as it gets, and who have been indoctrinated by schools spoon fed with pro EU propaganda, are far more likely to vote to stay in the European Union. It is sad how many voters choose to vote according to their own circumstances rather than what they think would be best for the country. Patriotism and selflessness are not the modern way.

I wonder, incidentally, how many of those who are so keen on the EU realise that Value Added Tax (VAT) was invented by the EU?

The eurocrats wanted a universal system of indirect taxation throughout Europe and ordered all EU member countries to charge VAT on goods and services. Countries showed their independence by making the amounts they charge slightly different and throughout the EU there are now scores of different VAT rates. All this makes life much more complicated for small businesses and mean that lots of profitable extra work is created for accountants. Lots of small companies refuse to export their goods to other EU countries because of the VAT complications.

I discovered today that according to Article 7 of the EU's basic treaty (no 1 in an endless series of treaties, manifestos and other binding documents) a government whose policies threaten democratic values can be punished with sanctions.

I laughed long and loud when I read this.

Never, in the whole history of the world, has there been a less democratic body than the European Union.

Does Article 7 mean that the EU will be forced to punish itself with sanctions?

10

(Gloucestershire)

I wonder if the Internet could be the reason so many parents are giving their children really strange names these days.

Parents who are called John or Mary are fed up with being unable to find email addresses or domain names without adding a pile of numbers to their names. And so they are giving their children really odd names, such as Grey, Luna, Wolf or Rainbow.

At one time a third of the men in England were called John. Now the name doesn't get into the top 100. The name Mary doesn't make it into the top 200 girls' names. There are more girls called Zoya, Skylar and Luna than there are girls called Mary.

Kids are named after cars, singers (as long as they have strange names), flowers, fruits, cities and countries. Boys are given names usually given to girls and girls are given names usually allocated to boys. Both are given names which defy categorisation.

Are Hazard, Zephyr, Sky and Fortune boys or girls?

(This sort of confusion isn't new, of course. Evelyn Waugh's first wife was also called Evelyn which must have caused some mild confusion in the marital home; especially when sorting out the mail.)

The *Daily Telegraph* births column recently ran an announcement for the birth of 'Elektra Esmeralda, a little sister for Dorothy, Wulfstan and Cleopatra'.

How long before parents call their children 'Moron', 'Cretin' or 'Ringworm'? I am reminded of a fellow who wanted to call his business 'Herpes' because he thought it was a catchy name.

This morning a reader sent me details of a company which is selling (for £100) a gene editing kit which will enable schoolboy scientists, maniacs and terrorists to engineer superbugs such as antibiotic resistant E.coli bacteria.

The world has, without a doubt, gone stark raving mad. This is more of a danger to mankind than all the guns and bombs in the world but no one does a damned thing about it

And this afternoon, an antique dealer delivered a huge Edwardian mahogany, glass-fronted bookcase which we had bought.

When we had finally wriggled it into position in the drawing room, I noticed that the two keys required to lock the doors were missing.

The dealer, who had obviously hoped that I wouldn't notice, unscrewed the locks and took them back with him, claiming that he would look for the keys in his workshop but obviously planning simply to find a couple of keys which fitted the locks.

It wasn't until he had gone that Antoinette noticed that a small brass handle was missing from one of the escutcheons.

And it wasn't until I tried to fit the bookshelves (which had been taken out and transported separately) that I found that they didn't fit properly. Moreover, they didn't look as if they really belonged. I felt a complete idiot.

I had fallen in love with the bookcase and had therefore been an easy mark. It was ever thus.

Still, it's a damned handsome bookcase.

11

(Gloucestershire)

The Governor of the Bank of England (who is called Carney and whose nickname at school was, appropriately, Carnage) has introduced policies which seem to me designed to lead Britain to disaster. He is proving himself to be the truly unacceptable face of capitalism and has joined the Government's Project Fear campaign, designed to terrify voters into agreeing to keep Britain in Hitler's European Project.

(I have no doubt that the scare tactics will have the opposite effect of that intended. The British people do not like being bullied and do not enjoy scare mongering.)

It is quite outrageous that the Bank of England should involve itself in domestic politics, particularly when the Governor is Canadian and is an appointed official whose previous employers, Goldman Sachs, have contributed hugely to the pro-Hitler campaign.

I'm not surprised that Goldman Sachs support the Hitler project – they will doubtless make far more money if Britons are bullied into voting to stay slaves to the eurocrats. Supporting a fascist, Nazi organisation is probably right up their street. Has there ever, in the history of the world, been a more corrupt, self-serving organisation than Goldman-Sachs? Most worryingly, perhaps, is the fact that its truly repellent, reptilian alumni have succeeded in getting themselves into positions of authority all over the world. And it's odd too to see *The Guardian* and the *Daily Mirror* standing side by side with this disgusting organisation in their enthusiastic, blinkered support of Hitler's great, post mortem achievement.

The irony is that when the EU dies, as it surely will, it will have been destroyed by Goldman Sachs because it was Goldman Sachs which, on 1st January 2001, fraudulently fiddled Greece into the euro and as a direct result landed it in an impossible financial situation. Goldman Sachs' only lasting memorial will be killing off the European Union.

But what a grand achievement!

The Governor of the Bank of England should really concentrate on trying to do what he is paid to do. So far, he has proved remarkably incompetent at his day job and his forecasts and predictions have been woefully, laughably wrong. He makes that bloke with the seaweed who does the weather forecasts look positively brilliant.

Carney has now re-politicised the Bank of England and stolen for himself a political role – either out of vanity or misplayed loyalty to please politicians or, perhaps, to please the contemptible Goldman Sachs.

And if the obnoxious Carney objects to these aspersions then he should damned well keep out of politics; an area of life where citizens have the right (and duty) to ask questions such as these. He should certainly keep out of the EU debate.

There are times when I find myself at least understanding Stalin whose prescription for misdirected zeal was seven grams of lead, taken internally in whatever dosage was felt necessary and administered with the aid of some sort of trigger controlled propulsion device.

Carney is not alone, of course. His enthusiasm for the EU is shared by most of the political establishment in the UK.

How in the name of everything holy can the Greens and the so-called Liberals support the anti-democratic European Union; the most fascist, undemocratic organisation in the history of the world; the ultimate in Big Government?

We would be better off if we were ruled by Vlad the Impaler or Ghengis Khan than by the unelected, dribbling, incontinent, drunken, malignant ne'er do wells who have fiddled their way onto the European Commission. We live in an oligarchic kakistrocracy. We'd be better off if we lived in a strumpetocracy.

The unique thing about the EU is that it manages to be totally incompetent, irredeemably crooked and irretrievably fascist all at the same time. Founded by Nazis, the EU is run by unelected self-serving dingbats. The EU's public supporters are all driven by one factor: greed, though there is no doubt that some of the industrialised and bankers who have given money to the campaign to keep Britain in the EU have done so in the expectation that their 'loyalty' will be rewarded with a knighthood or a peerage. I doubt if they will be disappointed.

We have a huge flagpole in our new cliff top home and we will be flying the Union Jack until the 23rd June.

In the unlikely event that we lose the referendum, we will fly the flag at half-mast and after that we will fly the Jolly Roger as a gesture of defiance.

Actually, come to think of it, we may fly the Jolly Roger anyway. It is rather more my style than anything else.

A neighbour, who writes a financial newsletter which provides subscribers with investment advice, had to be rescued after a stretch of grass he was mowing fell down the cliff face. He is fine but, sadly, the mower is lost. It was, by all accounts, a good and reliable grass cutting machine with some years of good service left in it. It has now become a small hazard to shipping. I have no doubt that in 50 years' time someone will discover the wreckage and wonder what sort of boat it was.

A few days ago, our wheelbarrow met the same fate.

But, fortunately, I was not attached to it at the time.

12

(Gloucestershire)

We went into Cheltenham and we had an extraordinary experience.

As we drove through the town on our way to the car park, we went past some road works and I spotted a workman carrying a shovel loaded with earth. It was, I think, the first time I have ever seen a road repair workman actually doing anything.

We made a note of the time. It was noon.

The car park was packed (as car parks always are these days). Three times I got excited when I saw what seemed to be an empty space. Each time the putative space turned out to be occupied by one of those tiny cars, hardly bigger than a shoebox. The people who own these miniature cars always park them right at the back of the space so that other motorists think there is a space available, start to turn in and then, only at the very last moment, realise that the space is already occupied. I'm sure the small car owners do this deliberately.

We both had coffee and biscuits at a branch of Caffe Nero which is ensconced in a local store. The café has shelves full of hardback books which give it an old-fashioned, literary café sort of look. I always browse the bookshelves and become frustrated when I find first editions which have been missed and which have found themselves used as wallpaper. The books aren't for sale, of course, though I suspect that if the café turned itself into a combined café bookshop it might do quite well. I don't know where they got their stock but I suspect they bought them by the lorry load from a bookshop which went bankrupt.

I much prefer Caffe Nero to the better-known Starbucks – not because Starbucks is a tax fiddling company but because the ones I have visited have been dull, inspiring places; the sort of café you want to get out of as quickly as possible. And, in my experience, the coffee they serve is terribly weak. What is the point of drinking coffee if it doesn't give your heart the sort of uplift provided by two paddles in the casualty department?

While in Cheltenham, I took my camera into Boots the chemist to print out a few pictures of a double rainbow we saw down in Devon the other day. I used to print my own pictures but all the printers I tried drank ink with ridiculous enthusiasm. And since the inks were obscenely expensive and always had absurdly short sell-by-dates, I found the whole business complicated, tricky and unreasonably expensive.

The photo printing department of the store was packed with a bunch of young college students crowded around a nearby machine. They were young enough to be confident of being all knowing and infallible but not yet old enough to realise that they were slightly short of this ideal.

I sat down in front of one of the machines and tried to make it work.

A young fellow, one of the gang of students, noticed my problem and leaned across to help me.

'Do you want your pictures instantly or in an hour?' he asked, as he pressed icons on the screen of a second machine.

'Oh, immediately,' I said. 'Or quicker if possible. I am a child of my generation. We cannot wait for anything.'

I selected the pictures I wanted to print.

One of the teenagers had brought a small picture frame and they were clearly planning to print a photo suitable to put into the frame. The whole gang were however stumped by the fact that the picture they were planning to print was portrait whereas the frame was set up to take a landscape photograph.

They were so bemused by this that I leant across, gently took the frame, turned it over and showed them that the little wooden stand at the back of the frame could be moved so that the frame would display a portrait photograph just as well as a landscape one.

They were very grateful.

From Boots I went to a local Oxfam bookshop. I left with a huge bagful of books including a wonderful looking autobiography called *Old Beautiful*, written by Thomas Rohan, who was an antique dealer in the 1920s.

Walking through Cheltenham is becoming increasingly difficult since the main streets are now packed with beggars. The vast majority of these are probably better off than the people who give them money. They certainly enjoy an easier lifestyle. Most live in flats in or near the town centre and claim their full allowances in benefits. The chuggers are an even bigger nuisance. Today, I spotted five of them within a 100-yard stretch of pavement.

I then bought a new Toshiba laptop from Argos. I need another so that I can work at the new house.

I know laptops are supposed to be portable but I always work with a separate keyboard and I have the laptop balanced on a foot high pile of books, so it's easier to just buy separate laptops and carry my work around with me on dongles.

It was a salutary experience and one which reminded me just why the only part of retail which is growing is the part which involves the Internet and Romanian delivery drivers.

I stood in a queue for ten minutes in the store without seeing any Argos employees at all. The other people in the queue neither did nor said anything, accepting their lot with equanimity. I was reminded of Thoreau who said: 'The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation'.

Eventually a fellow wandered in and started to take our orders. When it was my turn to be served, I paid one eighth of the price I had paid for far less powerful machines more than two decades ago.

I was so exhausted by this experience, that I went to my favourite pub in Gloucestershire, the Old Restoration. It's a proper pub, with old, comfortable chairs and decent wooden tables which look as if they've been there since King Charles hid up a tree.

When the landlord asked me what I'd like, I told him that I would like a large Laphroiag but that since I was driving I would have to settle for something made out of raspberries and apple.

(Apart from a fondness for the stuff they put in bottles, I do rather like the Laphroiag marketing ploy of offering customers a square foot of land with every bottle they buy. I keep meaning to ask them to put all my square feet together so that I can park a caravan on them.)

We drove back behind a cyclist who was riding at 10 mph and who had stationed his machine at a point in the road which made overtaking impossible. The cyclist soon had a vast queue stretched out behind him. We were all burning up four times as much fuel as we would have used if we had not been forced to drive at his speed. The only thing worse than being stuck behind a cyclist is being stuck behind a recycling lorry picking up plastic boxes full of wine bottles and carefully washed empty yoghurt cartons. I wonder how many people know that cyclists give off more carbon dioxide as a result of riding bicycles than motorists do when driving cars.

There is a good argument that cyclists (who do not in any case pay any road tax) should be banned from roads completely on the grounds that they cause accidents (especially on narrow roads where a car overtaking a cyclist is likely to hit a car coming the other way) and by slowing up traffic so much that cars, buses and lorries burn up vast amounts of fuel unnecessarily. Cyclists are bad for the economy and bad for the environment. They aren't doing themselves much good either. Their lungs are ruined by all the diesel fumes they breathe in and their knees and hips get a terrible hammering from all that pedalling. In summer, there are stings and sunburn and in winter there are colds to catch. I can think of 100 ways to get fit and lose weight that are better for you than riding a bicycle in busy traffic.

When we finally got it home, I took the laptop out of the box and tried to make it work.

It turned out to be just as unfriendly, counter-intuitive and badly designed as the dozens of other models I have bought over the last quarter of a century. The computer industry has made absolutely no progress in making its machines as accessible as, say, washing machines or television sets.

Even turning the damned things on can be a challenge.

Why can't the on/off button have a label telling you what it is? Why does the button have to be disguised as a piece of trim?

Why don't they make the hard drive detachable so that I can keep it secure and then, when I need to ditch the laptop because it no longer works, I can remove the hard drive without a need for a hammer and chisel?

About once an hour I wish computers had never been invented. The washing machine helped women free themselves from drudgery. The computer has turned us all into slaves.

As I write, I see that an American company hired by HMRC to identify fraudulent benefit claims has picked out a single mother as a fraudster, claiming that she is in a relationship with someone called Joseph Rowntree. They do not realise that Rowntree was a 19th century philanthropist or that the woman lives in a Rowntree Housing Trust property. Someone will, no doubt, blame 'computer error' and I sympathise with this to a certain extent for there is no doubt that computers have minds of their own. I will be merrily typing away, minding my own business when suddenly everything I write will be in red, in italics or underlined and in four point type. It is a classic case of the medium getting in the way of the message.

The Microsoft Word processing programme which now has a virtual monopoly of word processing, is counter intuitive and desperately unfriendly to use. I think it must have been designed by or for those people who write Japanese television and DVD manuals. My latest complaint about Microsoft is that when I key in three asterisks (I daren't do it here for reasons which will become obvious in a moment) a dotted line appears all across the page. And if I try to delete the dotted line the damned thing reproduces, making the screen incomprehensible and unusable. It is clear that the idiot technicians at Microsoft do not realise that it is traditional for writers to use three asterisks in the middle of a page to suggest a break in the action. Authors have been using three asterisks for decades. Mark Twain probably used them, or something like them. But the Microsoft nerds have probably never read a book and so they don't realise this. I loathe Microsoft almost as much as I loathe McAfee. The damned company even tries to impose its own views on political correctness into my world. The spell check programme provided by Microsoft, does not allow me to use the word 'himself' unless I modify it with the word 'him or herself'.

Has anyone else noticed, by the way, that characters in novels and films may get ill, they may get shot, they may die but when they are doing clever things with laptops they never have to contend with popups from Microsoft and McAfee?

In the end, it took Antoinette three hours to turn the new machine into a writing implement. If I had tried to do it myself I would have thrown it away.

Antoinette had to turn off a pile of default settings, including one which wanted to connect the laptop into our Wi-Fi on a permanent basis and before she could move on she had to key in a host of imaginary information. It was impossible to make the machine work without inputting an email address so that Toshiba could send me junk mail. I never ever work on a laptop connected to the Internet.

Incidentally, I have had great fun recently trying to persuade people that Wi-Fi should be pronounced ‘whiffy’. I have had no little success. I simply tell people who call it ‘whyfie’ that they are pronouncing it incorrectly and that they will be laughed at unless they adopt the correct pronunciation.

I have no idea why I do this but I have no intention of having therapy to find out.

13

(Gloucestershire)

Because I have spent most of my life working as what is, I believe, known officially as a self-employed contractor, I have a self-invested pension scheme. I wrote recently to the administrators of the scheme asking them to change the amount of money I take out each month. Since the money is mine and is controlled by me it had seemed to me that I was entitled to do with it as I wanted. The only other people with a vested interest are my wife and the income tax people.

I was shocked today to receive a special delivery letter from the administrators of the scheme, whom I pay handsomely to manage the administration of my money. The letter says that the company is ‘no longer accepting instructions to process income changes unless they are submitted through our secure website. Therefore we have not actioned your recent request.’

The rest of the letter, which rambles on for a month and a half, tells me how to go online and why I should conduct my financial transactions online. There is, curiously, no mention of the fact that if I go online their profits will be greater and nor is there any warning that once I start managing my pension money online it will probably all be stolen by a Russian hacker.

If the American military can be hacked (and a hacker recently got into the National Security Agency in the US, broke into the NSA’s elite hacking unit, stole some of the agency’s most powerful cyber weapons and is now selling them online) then I suspect my pension company computer will be vulnerable and won’t be able to keep secrets with any more success.

I always use this excuse when banks and finance companies want me to trust their website. They never have an answer, of course.

The fact is that anyone who claims that their website is ‘secure’ is either a fool or a liar. Or, I suppose, both.

A computer security consultant managed to take control of an aeroplane using its in-flight entertainment system. And two hackers managed to hack into a car’s computer as it was driving along the road. They tampered with the radio, the climate control and the windscreen wipers and then slammed on the brakes.

Hackers can even use wireless networks to turn off medical devices such as pacemakers. In Los Angeles, hackers broke into the computer system of a hospital and threatened to shut it down unless the administrators paid a ransom in bitcoins. There is apparently a special malware program which can be used to hit hospitals. Nice people our hackers.

The introduction of contactless bank payment cards is obviously going to increase fraud too. Researchers have already shown that it is easy to pull details from these cards, break the encryption and then use the data obtained to buy goods online.

Our banks, having bankrupted themselves, now seem keen to bankrupt everyone else.

Current estimates suggest that cybercrime costs between $475 billion and $574 billion a year and forecasts are that the total cost will be around $3 trillion by the year 2020. The chances of terrorists causing financial chaos are much better than inevitable.

And still banks and pension companies pressurise us to use their ‘perfectly safe and secure’ online banking facilities. Of course, they wriggle out of all responsibility when things go wrong. The banks get all the benefits but it’s the public who pays the price.

When I telephoned my pension management company to complain about their attempt to bully me into joining their damned website (and bully is surely the right word) I was told that they would consider making a special exemption for me and allow me to continue to manage my account in the old-fashioned way.

(The people who work for large companies are ruder, more aggressive and less caring than I ever remember but the good news is that they are also slaves to their own complaints systems. When dealing with such companies, I now find that it is less stressful to make a formal complaint at the earliest possible moment of dissatisfaction.)

Antoinette has now completed preparing my latest book for Amazon.

When a book is finished and is to be sold as an ebook it has to be specially formatted before it can be served up on a reading device. This is a process fraught with difficulties. A book which looks fine when read on an iPhone may look terrible when downloaded onto a Kindle device. No one seems to know why this should be or how a book should be formatted to guarantee that it looks perfect however it is read. I don't understand why it is necessary to format a book at all. Why can't it simply be downloaded in the same way that it can be read on an ordinary computer?

Many readers don't understand any of this and I doubt if I am the only author to have received one star reviews of books which failed to come out properly on a particular type of mobile phone or reading device.

Sadly, the future for ebooks is pretty bleak whatever we do.

In a three month period in 2015, a total of six million people in the UK accessed at least one book illegally. A quarter of all Internet traffic concerns unauthorised, i.e. pirated, content. There is not much of a future for creative artists.

To cheer ourselves up, Antoinette and I wrote a few reviews which are quite likely to appear soon on the Internet – if they're not there already:

The Bible – Far too much about religion. Some of the characters' names are frankly unbelievable. For example, have you ever met anyone called Job? And anyway there is ointment for boils. Plots seem clichéd and there is much repetition in the second half of this overlong book.

Yellow Pages – Poor plotting and character development. Excess of dramatic personae results in confusion for the reader.

Pride and Prejudice – the author of this book has nicked the title and the plot from a film that was much better.

War and Peace – Too long and far too much about Russia. Also, very old-fashioned. Where were the car chases?

Oliver Twist – Not relevant out of date. Social workers would have stepped in so story not believable.

The 39 Steps – I bought this expecting some self-help advice but did not find any steps at all – let alone 39. I want my money back. This is fraud. If I could give this book less than one star, I would.

Murder at the Orient Express – The Orient Express stopped running years ago, so could anyone have been murdered on a non-existent train?

Encyclopaedia Britannica – Very bitty. Just a lot of unconnected facts. I can't imagine why anyone would want to plough through this. I gave up after I finished the O's. Definitely not recommended.

Roget's Thesaurus – The author seems very proud of his ability to say the same thing a dozen different ways. Dr Roget should pick on a word and stick to it if he wants to make a career out of authorship.

The Hunchback of Notre Dame – It is unforgivable to describe the unfortunate hero as a hunchback. The proper term is kyphosis, and the title should be altered to 'The Kyphosis Sufferer of Notre Dame'.

Three Musketeers – Sexist! Why are all the musketeers male? One and a half of them should be female. And there should be one black one and a gay one. Or possibly two gay ones.

14

(Gloucestershire)

Today the BBC ('the EU's official broadcasting partner') will broadcast the European Song Contest. Now that most of the nations involved hate Britain and will vote against us on political grounds, we no longer watch this nonsense. The BBC should abandon this outdated competition, now more political than musical, and replace it with something more suitable.

Maybe a European Thong Contest might prove to be a winner; intellectually stimulating and a guaranteed ratings success.

I am still collecting comments I have overheard in public places.

I don't make a deliberate attempt to listen to other people's conversations but if people speak loudly and I can hear them easily then I jot down the best of their bon mots. Here are a dozen more eavesdroppings I have recently collected in cafes, on trains and elsewhere:

'He asked if I had difficulty in rolling my r's' but I said I just found it difficult to move my hips in these shoes.'

'She is a beautiful woman now but that's not surprising since she was quite attractive before she had the surgery.'

'This wine was just three euros a bottle.' 'Really? I would have guessed you must have paid three and a half or even four for it.'

'What's pot noodle?' 'I don't rightly know. I think it's a cannabis smoker who has gone a bit crazy.'

'I've fucked uglier men. But not much uglier.'

We won't know until we find out.

'If I'm going to have a free lunch I'm damned well going to have wine with it.'

'Look after the millions and the billions will look after themselves.' (Heard in the restaurant at the Ritz.)

'If I'd murdered my husband fifteen years ago, when I first thought of it, I'd have been out of prison by now.'

‘His hobbies are making elderberry wine, making ends meet and making love. But not in that order.’

‘Clouds are full of water and water is heavy so they must weigh quite a lot – why don’t they just fall down?’

‘She was the sort of woman who was only interested in what she could get out of a man and he was the sort of man who was only interested in what he could put into a woman and so they were perfectly well matched.’

It is sometimes interesting to listen to entire conversations. You can learn a lot about people when they are talking loudly.

In a café today, for example, the table next to me on my right was occupied by three young men who appeared to be discussing some important business deal. All three had laptops open and all three also had their smart phones switched on. I assumed at first that they were discussing an exciting new project which would earn them money and give them something useful to do in the daytime. But, no, they were in fact discussing a computer game to which they were all addicted and they were exchanging tips and thoughts on the best way to play the game.

The table to my left was occupied by two elderly couples. They were having coffee and cakes together and all had that look which some retired folk acquire after a few months of retirement. (You know the look: beige elasticated trousers and a beige jacket with Velcro fastenings. Everything about them screams ‘sensible’.) They spent all their time talking rubbish. I don’t mean that they were spouting nonsense but that they were talking about rubbish. They were talking about how they managed to cope with the council’s recycling demands and they were explaining how they sometimes managed to cram an occasional empty jam jar into the box for tins and how they would sometimes fail to wash out glassware thoroughly. One man confessed that he burnt cardboard and paper on his living room hearth and his wife complained that when he did so the whole house always smelt of smoke afterwards.

15

(Devon)

I got up early because a plumber was due to call and our replacement loo seats were scheduled to arrive, transported to our very door by a carrier company of international renown.

Neither turned up, of course.

Perhaps they have eloped.

Not being able to concentrate on anything else I spent an hour trying to build yet another strimmer with a kit which arrived yesterday. The harness which came with the strimmer was clearly designed to be used by Jacque Tati as a prop.

Later I tried again to use the Voice Control gimmick on my iPhone.

I gather that the idea behind this is that when I ask a question the iPhone will provide me with an answer. ‘Is George Osborne an alien?’ I asked.

The phone immediately tried to connect me with a number in the United States.

We have to go to bed very early tonight since a Chesterfield sofa and two wing back chairs are due to be delivered early tomorrow morning. The company which sold us the suite could not deliver at a time to suit us so we hired two men and a van to bring the furniture from Mansfield to South Devon. We used a website called AnyVan. The website charged £54 and the two men are charging £107 in cash for their services.

The snag is that the men are coming at 7 a.m. and have promised to ring us an hour earlier to let us know that they are on their way.

There are doubtless some folk who believe fervently in getting up early. Their policy is to grab an extra couple of hours from the day and get a head start on everyone else. I envy them. I bow down before them. It never works for me. Whenever I rise early, I just mess around for three hours, thinking I have all the time in the world to shave, have breakfast and generally prepare myself for the day. Before I know it, the clock has struck ten and I’m worse off than if I’d got up at nine.

Antoinette and I debated whether to stay up all night or to get up early.

In the end, we were so tired we went to bed and gave the alarm clock an extra shilling to wake us up early.

16

(Devon)

It seems that when the delivery men said they would be with us at seven they really meant to say that they would be with us at ten or possibly eleven.

In the end, they arrived at about half ten and several other workmen had to move their vehicles so that they could bring their van closer to the house.

I have noticed this a good deal with deliverymen in particular and workmen in general. If they say they will arrive at 8.00 a.m., I get up at 7.30 a.m. (which is the crack of doom for someone who prefers the crack of noon) and am washed, shaved and breakfasted by one minute to eight.

They then arrive at 9.30 a.m. If, on the other hand I plan to get up at 9.00, they will be banging on the door at 7.30 a.m., indignant that I am not up and about with the kettle already boiling.

Our central heating is being installed, we have electricians doing stuff with wires and there are plumbers everywhere. I was astonished to see that by 9.00 a.m. this morning, we had six vans and a small lorry parked in the driveway.

One of the workmen, clearly a senior figure since he wore a white shirt, seemed very offended that we should have other workmen in the house and even more offended that he should have to move his van a few feet to give the furniture deliverers room to park and unload their cargo. Another, on finding out that I am medically qualified insisted, before doing anything else, on dropping his trousers and showing me his hernia and asking for my advice. A workman whom I did not recognise and who could, for all I know, have been a burglar casing the joint, dropped his heavy metal toolbox directly on top of my best brown brogues, crushing them beyond repair.

Everyone who sees our new home on the cliff is surprised that the house is not listed and even the workmen keep asking us if we're sure it isn't listed. We are and we are simply delighted. Putting this house back together is going to be hard enough as it is. If we had small-minded men in nasty suits telling us where we could and could not drill holes we would never get anything done.

At one point in the early afternoon, I had lost count and track of the workmen who were in the house.

Why do they feel the need to leave open every outside door they find? Why do they always turn on lights which they cannot possibly need and then leave them on all day long? They do this the minute they come through the door, even if it's a bright and sunny day. And if it's a freezing cold day why do they open all the doors and windows? I know why. It's in the trade union rule book. Put the customer on the back foot right from the start.

I find the arrogance and conceit of workmen to be endlessly frustrating and annoying.

The truth is that most people can do most things if they have a little training, some enthusiasm and the correct equipment. And it does annoy me when a tradesman patronises me and treats me like an idiot because he knows how to change a tap washer and I don't have the right sort of wrench. I remember once sitting at my Dad's house and listening in horror as a teenage electrician talked about electrical matters to my father as if he had been a complete idiot. My father invented miniature circuit breakers and many items of switchgear and undoubtedly knew far, far more about electricity than the boastful youth. But when my Dad tried to correct an error of fact in the youth's monologue, he was dismissed with a sneer.

And why do they sit around chatting when they are supposed to be working outside and then bugger off home the minute it starts to rain? Why do they have to march all over my bathmat in their muddy boots? Do they do that in their homes? Why do they have to move everything they find into another place? Why do they unplug everything? Why do they feel the need to open all the locked windows – and to leave them open when they leave. And why do they lose the window lock keys – or take them away with them? And why is that small jobs always grow and grow and become big jobs?

Once they are in your house, they wander about as freely as if they were in their own homes – but without offering the fabric or the furniture the same respect.

I constantly remembered that song from Flanders and Swann about the series of workmen who were required to repair the damage done after the gas man had called. It occurred to me that I could at least write the most objectionable workmen into a novel and have them all killed in some particularly painful way.

And why is everything always more complicated than it originally seemed to be?

'Oh you need a new wunkle discriminator. They're very difficult to get hold of. We may have to replace the whole durgeon multiplier.'

'I've just found that your plidgeon discurser needs a replacement sliptohofer. I'll have to go to the supplier to get one.' This invariably entails a six hour journey and huge expense. We are, of course, paying for the workman's wages throughout his absence.

Changing a tap washer invariably results in re-plumbing the whole of the bathroom and putting a new roof on the garage too. And the plumber changing the tap will drop his tools in the bath and chip the enamel in six places. When you point this out, he will claim that the enamel must have already been chipped, even though you know it wasn't.

At 3 p.m. they start to pack up so that they can make sure they finish whatever they are doing before it is time for them to be elsewhere doing something else more enjoyable.

And why are so many workmen clumsy and untidy and disrespectful?

I know it's boring to say so but things weren't always this way.

Today, even older workmen are clumsy, untidy and disrespectful.

Antoinette makes them mugs of tea or coffee every hour and gives them platefuls of wrapped chocolate biscuits but still they break things, throw their wrappers down on the floor or outside in the garden and then leave the mess for us to clear up. They leave empty mugs and plates scattered everywhere around the house.

I make a real effort to remember their names but they invariably don't bother to learn mine and refer to me as Mr Campbell, Dr Cameron or, if they think I'm not listening, 'the old geezer'.

Maybe we are too soft with them.

Maybe we should simply tell them that unless they are careful and tidy we will have them horsewhipped. Maybe we should just call them all Gary or Bert.

Or maybe we should be grateful that they don't all deliberately damage things so that they can charge us for fixing them.

Late this afternoon, I found Antoinette in the kitchen where she appeared to be hiding from the regiments of heavy footed men who were stomping all over our carpets, rugs and parquet floors.

Two workmen whom I did not recognise were showing each other photographs on their mobile phones.

A third was sitting on a bench at the bottom of the garden, looking out over the sea.

Outside, a carpenter, having finished bump starting his lungs for the day, had spread his tools out on the grass as though preparing for a lawn sale. I half expected to see price tags attached to the pieces of equipment which were on display. It occurred to me that the heavy pieces of equipment would doubtless leave us with dead grass markings where the equipment had been laid out. When I looked for him to ask him to move some of his equipment off the grass, I could not find him. It was probably just as well for the modern workman does not like to be told what to do, or not to do, and is likely to go into a sulk and disappear permanently.

The carpenter is a jolly round little chap who looks a little like Father Christmas without the beard, the white hair and the red coat. He does, however, wear elderly Wellington boots which could, with a wipe down, be suitable for the employer of the seven dwarfs.

He says he saw me on television when I was a youth and that I am, therefore, the second most famous person he has ever met – second to the son of Lloyd George, the politician and aficionado of fallen women.

He (the carpenter) could talk for England and it is impossible to stop him. We are paying him £35 an hour for his services but he works for only about five minutes an hour and talks for the rest of the time. So, I suppose, this means that we are effectively paying him around £400 an hour. We could hire a cheap solicitor for that much, though he probably wouldn't be much good at woodwork. Sadly, our professional carpenter isn't that much good at it either. He mended a loose doorknob and somehow managed to put it back on upside down or back to front so that the door now only opens if you turn the handle the wrong way. It's very strange and may well confuse burglars who will believe that the door is locked when it isn't.

Yesterday I walked near to the carpenter while I was carrying a load of rubbish for the incinerator. He started talking to me as I approached but I apologised and told him that I couldn't stop since my load was heavy. This didn't stop him, however. He just kept talking. By the time I reached the incinerator fifty yards away (it is, quite possibly the only incinerator parked on a World Heritage Site) I could still hear that he was talking, though I couldn't make out what he was saying.

By the time I passed him again, on my way back to the house, he was still chattering to me. I couldn't make head nor tail of what he was saying so I nodded and murmured something sympathetic and non-committal.

He makes more mess than all our other workmen put together and never cleans up after himself. Indeed, I rather think that he feels that clearing up is beneath him. After he has left, I spend at least an hour with a dustpan and brush (if he has been working inside) and with a broom and wheelbarrow (if he has been working outside).

Another thing that is odd about him is that he seems unable to do anything without carrying several boxes full of equipment. If he is going to hammer in a nail, he has to carry with him enough equipment to build an ark. Any minor job requires two ladders, two drills, a variety of planes, spare pieces of wood, a variety of buckets and a small suitcase which contains his thermos flask and two large plastic boxes full of sandwiches.

Why I put up with all this I have no idea other than the fact that finding workmen of any description has become unbelievably difficult.

As I wandered around, I noticed that another workman, I have no idea which one, had mixed some cement on another piece of lawn. Why would anyone be so stupid as to do that?

When the carpenter left at the end of the day, my fears were realised. The heavy equipment he had strewn across our lawn had left patches of dead grass in the shape of all his stuff. You can clearly see where the hammers, saws, planes, drills and so on have been lying. It's strangely artistic in an unpleasant sort of way.

The electrician has been an utter nightmare and although I have no doubt that his mother loves him, he really ought to be doing something that doesn't require him to enter other people's homes. He has so far broken two spare refrigerators. He managed to knock them over. It is not easy to break one fridge but to break two at the same time requires a concomitance of circumstances and a unique level of clumsiness. To fail to apologise or explain requires something else entirely different. He ruined an expensive landing carpet by folding it back and then kneeling on the crease, filled the butler's pantry with debris (by making a hole in the ceiling without bothering to put down a dust sheet), stapled yards of grey cable across a white wall and tacked yellow and green earth-wire down a bedroom wall so that it looks like a curious Christmas decoration. He removed some old rubber wiring from sockets in the boiler room but then failed to replace the wiring he had removed with the result that the equipment which was plugged into those sockets now has to be plugged into sockets in the kitchen and, more importantly, that the workmen also have to plug all their drills and other equipment into sockets in the kitchen. I watched him throw a piece of small furniture from one side of the room to another simply because it was in his way – knocking over a pile of old books when it landed. I really don't want this fellow anywhere near our house again.

One of his colleagues succeeded in spilling a gallon or two of heating oil onto the driveway by picking up a plastic bucket without bothering to use the handles properly. We will, I have no doubt, have a permanent stain to remind us of the buffoon's stupidity.

'Do you fancy an ice cream?' asked Antoinette. 'I was going to make us a sandwich but we have run out of bread.'

'Come with me,' I whispered. We crept out through the back door and walked quietly down through the garden. We tiptoed through the courtyard where the workmen had all parked their vehicles, down the driveway and along the path leading down to the beach. On the beach, we bought two ice creams from a beach hut vendor.

We sat on a rock and ate our ice creams.

In a moment of wild madness the two of us performed a Mexican Wave – for absolutely no reason other than that we could.

As a Mexican Wave it may have lacked a little something in quantity but the quality was superb.

When we'd finished the ice creams, we bought two cups of tea from the same beach hut.

An hour or so later Antoinette turned to me.

'Do you think they've gone?' she asked.

'We can but hope,' I replied.

We walked slowly back up our driveway. Everything was quiet. The workmen's vans had all disappeared.

To our astonishment, we saw that someone had hoovered the hall, the stairs and the landing. Everything was peaceful. The dirty mugs and plates had all been placed in the dishwasher.

I'm lying, of course.

They workmen had all gone. But if you'd told me there had been an explosion I would have believed you.

'Do you think we'll ever get our home back?' asked Antoinette, looking around rather sadly. There were signs everywhere of the work that was in progress. Floorboards were up, grubby paint spattered dustsheets had been carefully lain down in the places where there was unlikely to be any mess and lengths of piping and cabling were leaning against just about every stretch of wall. Bits of plaster had been chipped off by ladders and clumsily handled tools. Three doors which used to open and shut perfectly satisfactorily will now no longer shut or lock.

Doing up an old house is like pregnancy. You forget the pain and remember only the joy.

Every time I buy an old property, I think it will be 'better this time'. But it never is. In fact, it is worse these days than ever before. Workmen have become more precious, surly and demanding. They won't do anything unless they are provided with constant cups of tea and plates of biscuits (preferably ones with plenty of chocolate on them) and they are forever consulting their expensive looking phones. The rules and regulations about what they can and cannot do have become ever more onerous, intricate and absurd and it is, of course, the householder who always pays the price.

Looking around it was difficult to believe that this was a home and not a building site.

It was impossible to go into a room without finding signs of a workman there. The garage was filled to the brim with bits of piping and boxes of tools.

Antoinette went upstairs to take a bath and to wash away some of the day's dust.

Two minutes later, she came downstairs looking unhappy. Her bath had been used to wash out buckets, her hot tap had been left full on and so there was no hot water.

One of the workmen had used the lavatory in her bathroom (despite the fact that we have repeatedly asked them to use the downstairs lavatory) and had failed miserably in his attempt to aim at the porcelain bowl.

I think incontinency must be common among workmen these days. We have several who spend far more time sitting on the loo than they spend working. I am actively considering having one of those portable lavatories placed somewhere in the garden.

There is no part of the house which is ours any more. I found wrappers from chocolate biscuits (which we had supplied) on our bed and on my study floor.

‘Shall we sack all the workmen, put the place on the market and live in a hotel?’ I asked her.

I was not entirely joking. I once fired 17 workmen who were working on another house I owned in Devon. I got home one day to find that one of them had hammered a six inch nail into the back door with a note attached to a friend, a second had poured old diesel fuel into the drain leading to our septic tank and a group of them had taken it upon themselves to start plaster boarding a beautiful old 19th century ceiling ‘because it didn’t look very smooth’.

Having workmen in situ is worse, far worse than having bad relatives outstaying their welcome.

I found myself wishing that instead of having our new boiler installed we had decided to use electric heaters to keep the house warm. It would have been far less disruptive and, in the long run, probably much cheaper.

But we aren’t going to sell.

It’s a beautiful house. And the view is exquisite.

In the early evening another delivery van arrived.

The really kind and helpful delivery man who brought some furniture we had ordered told us that he used to run quite a large business – with sixty vans delivering stuff hither and thither. He gave up the business, and reverted to having just one van, when he had a call at 2 a.m. one morning because a driver hadn’t completed an urgent delivery.

When he telephoned the missing driver to find out why he hadn’t made the delivery, the driver apparently explained that he couldn’t go to work because his dog had eaten a new kitten. It was, I suppose, a new variation on the old ‘the dog ate my homework’ excuse.

‘It seemed,’ said the delivery man, ‘a good point to close the business’.

The delivery driver and his grandson stayed for a while.

To be honest, it was nice to have furniture delivered by a team of two men. On several occasions recently, I have been expected to assist in the moving of furniture and when I have paid a fee for an item to be delivered I really don’t expect to have to help carry it up the driveway or up the stairs.

It was interesting to hear what the two delivery men had to say about Britain today. They told us that parts of Bristol are now ‘no go’ areas for delivery drivers. And they find London so awful that they won’t deliver or collect anything from the London area.

The older man told us that a week or so ago he had been rung up at 12.30 a.m. by a woman in Cardiff who wanted to check that her refrigerator would be delivered by ten the following morning.

‘I don’t know what time it is in Wales, but here in Somerset it is 12.30 in the morning,’ said the delivery man.

‘Oh it’s the same time here in Cardiff,’ replied the woman, completely missing the point of the man’s sarcasm.

This evening an American chum sent me details of a man called Allen Swift who was born in 1908 and died in 2010.

I don’t know much more about Mr Swift but I do know that he owned and drove the same motor car for 82 years.

In 1928, his father gave him a brand new Rolls Royce Piccadilly P1 Roadster as a graduation present. Mr Swift kept the car and drove it all his life until his death at the age of 102.

By then the car had done 1,070,000 miles and was still running perfectly.

17

(Devon)

It is my birthday tomorrow. Suddenly I am 70 and it really is time to decide what to do with my life.

Of course, age is always relative.

At the age of six we think that anyone who is 14 is ancient. At 14 anyone who is 20 is old. And at 70 anyone who dies in their 70s has been taken at a very early age. I will, I suppose, now be entitled to tell people my age in the way that children and old people are wont to do.

I give thanks to God that I got here when so many fall by the wayside en route.

Is 100 the new 70?

What now?

Taking each day at a time seems a wise course.

Where on earth did life go? Just ten minutes ago, I was 50 and now I’m two decades older.

Antoinette and I will spend the day doing very little. We plan to have afternoon tea in the summerhouse (with butterfly cakes taking the pride of place). Afterwards, we may play some games. I fancy pass the parcel and musical chair. Antoinette favours tag, blind man’s bluff and postman’s knock.

The one thing I have learned for certain is that life is short and things always go wrong. Plans are never more than theoretical guidelines.

Life is like a game of crazy golf: you never know when you are going to come across a little wooden windmill with three exits.

Someone representing, or acting on behalf of a local cycling or walking club has painted huge arrows and simple instructions on the lane outside our home in Gloucestershire. Alongside the arrow, they have painted the word LEFT. This seems slightly superfluous because there is really no alternative. Anyone who goes RIGHT will end up crushed against a five foot tall stone wall and anyone who goes STRAIGHT AHEAD will find themselves in the river. The painted messages will stay visible for months and as soon as they have faded someone will add their own new instructions in white or yellow paint.

I see that a Government funded organisation called Sport England has given the English Cricket Board a total of £27,500,000 of taxpayers' money in order to harness 'the inherent appeal of the game within South-Asian communities'.

Isn't that racist?

I can't help thinking that if I offered the ECB £27,500,000 to spend on harnessing 'the inherent appeal of the game within English communities they would, with some reluctance no doubt, report me to the proper authorities.

But what a waste of taxpayers' money this is.

Cricket is a dead sport. No one watches it, no one talks about it, no one cares a damn about it. It is now a sport run entirely for bookies (who make fortunes out of manipulating match results) and held together by the cash rich marketing departments of huge, public companies who don't know how to measure the fact that no one watches, talks or cares about cricket any more.

The only spectators are the bankers and advertising moguls sitting at the back of the expensive corporate boxes quaffing champagne and sucking down oysters. And they aren't really spectators since they don't even notice when rain or bad light stops play.

According to figures published in the *Financial Times*, cricket is now so far behind football and horse racing and rugby union in popularity that it has become a minority sport. The figures show that cricket now has many spectators as rugby league, which is never watched by anyone south of Leeds and just a few more than greyhound racing.

A few years ago, when cricket was shown regularly on terrestrial television, cricket was England's national sport, superior to football in popularity. Football was allowed in, as a temporary guest, only when the cricket season was in hibernation.

Denis Compton, the most famous batsman of the immediate post World War II period, was said to be able to score a century with the aid of any old piece of wood. Rumour had it that he had once scored a double century with a piece of floorboard taken from the Lord's dressing room. He like other major cricket stars was a legend in his own lifetime but though he played football for Arsenal, it was as a cricketer that he was famous. (Oddly enough when I recently put Denis Compton's name into a search engine, I found him described as a 'footballer'. That really says it all.

Arthur Milton was the last man to play both cricket and football for England. But he was more famous for being a cricketer than for being a footballer.

Cricket died because money hungry administrators sold the broadcasting rights to satellite television, with the result that the viewing figures fell from several million to an audience suitable for a single living room. Inevitably, the game's popularity has waned. It was all so predictable, and surely a warning to other sports. The England Cricket Board destroyed cricket in England as effectively as if they had burned all the bats and ploughed up all the cricket pitches. A sport which used to be England's national game has become a novelty, about as much a part of our modern sporting scene as weightlifting and table tennis.

We have to assume that the authorities didn't destroy cricket on purpose, so the only logical conclusion is that they did it through stupidity.

18

(Devon)

Although I have reached my authorised biblical allowance, I realise with some sadness that I still cannot play any musical instruments, paint, dance, play any sport, speak any foreign languages with any degree of fluency or hang wallpaper.

At least it is now too late for me to develop early onset dementia.

('How will I ever know if you develop dementia?' asked Antoinette the other day. I'm not sure that she was joking.)

Still, at 70 I can consider myself reborn and can start counting again.

This is not a time for rest or contemplation. It is a time for doing something different and new, for taking chances and for adventures.

Talking of adventures I am looking forward to the fact that later today Thumper Robinson and Anne Thwaites, Patchy Fogg and Adrienne, Frank and Gilly from the Duck and Puddle and Peter Marshall are all coming to the house for a barbecue.

I received a birthday card from an old chum. He had written a message on the card. This is what it said: 'My wife has been in hospital again. The doctors don't seem to know what to do to help her. She is in a lot of pain and naturally depressed. She talks about ending it all. I've not been well either. I broke my leg a few weeks ago and it was set badly with the result that I'm going to have to have another operation. And we've received bad news about my pension. Apparently there is some doubt about the company's future. If it goes bust then a big chunk of my pension goes with it. Hope you have a good day.'

I think I have my first liver spot. I should know what they are and what causes them but I cannot remember. So there are two signs of ageing all for the price of one.

I'm not sure whether or not my memory is fading faster than is normal for someone of my advanced years. I've always had a poor memory. Some people remember faces but can't remember names. Some people remember names but aren't good with faces. I've never been any good at remembering names or faces.

I did some research on achievements after 65 and included the list as an appendix in my ninth Bilbury book (Bilbury Relish).

I found the results so impressive that I'm including part of the list here as well. The numbers below are the age the named individuals were when they did what they did. If Donald Trump is elected President of the United States then he will be worth a place on the list.

66 – Colonel Sanders started Kentucky Fried Chicken and by the time he was 70 had 400 franchise restaurants; John Betjeman became Poet Laureate; Edgar Rice Burroughs, author of the Tarzan books, became a war correspondent

67 – Josephine Baker, the dancer, made a return to the Broadway stage; Tolstoy rode a bicycle for the first time in his life; John Dryden the poet agreed to supply a publisher with 10,000 verses for £300; Simeon Poisson discovered the laws of probability (after studying the chances of French army personnel being killed by mule kicks)

68 – Queen Victoria started to learn Hindustani and Mrs Patrick Campbell, the actress, made her first film. In 1933, Sir C. Aubrey Smith, the former England cricket captain also made his first movie in Hollywood. These days it is relatively common for sports stars to transfer their fame to the silver screen. Eric Cantona, Vinnie Jones, Jim Brown and O. J. Smith are just four who spring to mind. But Sir C. Aubrey Smith was the first to make the move. He was a fast bowler who played for Sussex in the English county championships. Late in his life, when he had become very famous as a film star, he was sitting in the pavilion at Lord's Cricket Ground when one member turned to another, nodded towards Sir C. Aubrey and said: 'Who is that fellow? He looks familiar.' 'Oh that's Smith,' replied his companion. 'He used to play for Sussex.'

69 – Ronald Reagan was elected President of the United States of America; Noah Webster published his eponymous dictionary; Gilbert White published the *Natural History of Selborne*.

70 – Francis Galton invented the science of finger printing; Alfred Wallis began to paint and duly became world famous; Copernicus published *The Revolutions of Heavenly Bodies*; Herbert Marcuse became world famous overnight, Enid Blyton wrote 11 books in the year; Hilda Johnstone became a competitor in the Olympics, taking part in the equestrian dressage competition; Maurice Chevalier starred in the film Gigi.

71 – Coco Chanel designed the Chanel suit; Leni Riefenstahl, the filmmaker, took up scuba diving; Katsusuke Yanagisawa, a retired Japanese schoolteacher, climbed Mount Everest

72 – Karl Wallenda walked a tightrope between the top floors of two hotels in Miami; Colette wrote Gigi; Jomo Kenyatta became Prime Minister of Kenya; Charles Blondin was still walking tightropes; Dame May Whitty made her first film; the Marquis de Sade acquired a new mistress.

73 – Dr Roget finishes compiling his thesaurus (which he began at the age of 69); Konrad Adenauer became Chancellor of Germany; dog trainer Barbara Woodhouse began a world dog training crusade

74 – S. J. Perelman, the humourist, drove from Paris to Peking in an old MG; Franz Liszt was still performing and Jean Cocteau was busy decorating the church of Saint Blaise-des-Simples in Milly La Foret

75 – Ed Delano rode his bicycle 3,100 miles in 33 days to a reunion meeting; Nicholas Hawksmoor designed the towers of Westminster Abbey

76 – August Rodin married the girl with whom he had lived since he was 23; John XXIII became Pope

77 – Mahatma Gandhi took India independent; Clara Burton served in Cuba in the Spanish-American war; John Glenn went into space

78 – H.G.Wells successfully submitted his doctoral thesis; Thomas Beecham, the conductor, started a foreign

tour; Mae West, the American actress after whom the inflatable life vest was named, appeared in the film Myra Breckinridge; Dame Edith Evans asked that her age be removed from reference books because she feared that it might prevent her getting work; Chevalier de Lamarck proposed a new theory of evolution, suggesting that acquired characteristics can be transmitted to the next generation

79 – Admiral Lord Cochrane volunteered for active service at the start of the Crimean War; Dame Edith Evans was still appearing on stage in New York; George Cayley invented a glider capable of carrying a man (in 1853)

80 – Grandma Moses had her first solo art show; Levi Burlingham, American jockey, rode in his last race; Marc Chagal created the sets for the Metropolitan Opera's production of Mozart's 'Magic Flute'; Leopold Stokowski founded the American Symphony Orchestra (in the same year he broke a leg playing football)

81 – Benjamin Franklin helped to write the American constitution; Johann Goethe finished writing Faust; Marcus Cato decided to destroy Carthage before it became a threat to the Roman Empire

82 – William Gladstone became British Prime Minister; Winston Churchill published the first part of his four volume *A History of the English Speaking Peoples*; American cowboy Bill Kane was still riding in rodeos (though he won his last even at the age of 80); Tolstoy was so fed up with all the people fussing around in his house that he caught the first train out of town. (Sadly he became ill on the train and died in a station master's cottage in the middle of nowhere)

83 – Charlie Chaplin received an Oscar; Dr Benjamin Spock was fighting for world peace

84 – George Burns had his first hit record; Henri Matisse and Claude Monet were still painting; Somerset Maugham was still writing

85 – Carl Jung finished work on *Man and his Symbols*, his best known work; Mae West made the film *Sextette*; Theodore Mommsen received a Nobel Prize

86 – Louise Weiss is elected an MEP; Francis Rous received the Nobel Prize for identifying a virus which caused tumours in chickens; Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman doctor, was still working; Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres was still painting

87 – Frank Lloyd Wright proposed building a skyscraper one mile high; Mary Baker Eddy founded the Christian Science Monitor; George Burns, comedian was still performing and telling jokes which he admitted were older than he was

88 – Michelangelo worked on the Rondanini Pieta; ex German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer started work on his memoirs; Pablos Casals, the cellist, was still giving concerts

89 – Philip W Whitcomb, a mature student, was awarded a degree from the University of Kansas; Dr Albert Schweitzer was still running his hospital in West Africa; Arthur Rubenstein, the pianist, was still giving concerts

90 – Leopold Stokowski, now recovered from his broken leg, recorded 20 albums, P. G. Wodehouse wrote the last Jeeves and Wooster book; Pearl Taylor was chosen as Campus Queen at Long Beach City College where she was a student; Marc Chagall became the first living artist to be exhibited at the Louvre museum; Pablo Picasso was still drawing and engraving

And I could go on, for many nonagenarians have achieved remarkable things. At the age of 91 Alexander Baldine Kosloff was still teaching ballet, Thomas Hobbes was still writing books and Adolph Zukor was still chairman of Paramount Pictures. Antonio Stradivari was still making violins at the age of 93. George Bernard Shaw wrote his play *Why She Would Not* in seven days, just before his 94th birthday – he died at the age of 94 after falling while pruning a tree in his garden. Comedian George Burns was still performing at the age of 94. Bertrand Russell was still campaigning for peace at 94 – and he was in his 94th year when he set up the International War Crimes Tribunal in Stockholm.

19

(Devon)

I've been a customer of Eurostar, the company which runs the train service between London and Paris ever since it started but the company has, it seems to me, become increasingly aggressive and greedy.

They have just written to us to tell us that if we do not spend our 'frequent traveller' points by September they will confiscate them. How kind.

This sort of thing happens quite a lot.

Twenty years ago, I remember buying my parents a mobile phone for emergency use and then being shocked when, after six months, I discovered that the device had been disconnected by the phone company and the money which I had put into it 'stolen' because the phone hadn't been used.

How can Eurostar excuse this sort of aggressive behaviour?

A new report shows that young women who become pregnant are far more likely to lose their jobs than anyone else. The people writing the report seem surprised by this but that, I suspect, is because they have never run a business or had to meet a payroll. Over generous rules (introduced at the behest of bureaucrats working for the European Union) have, as usual, done far more harm than good.

A second report shows that diabetes is increasing in India, China and other countries which are adopting a Western diet, rich in hamburgers and calories. There seems to be much surprise among those in the medical establishment. I am not in the slightest bit surprised since I predicted that this would happen several decades ago. It was really pretty obvious.

Another report suggests that heart disease is becoming commoner among men in their 40s. I am relieved that I am now over 70 in the shade since this means I am well out of the danger zone.

But at least I can be happy that I live in England.

In Turkey, prosecutors have just begun the 1,800th legal case against Turkish citizens accused of insulting Erdogan since he became president in 2014. Master Erdogan clearly has too thin a skin to be a politician.

I ended the day reading *Some Country Houses and their Owners* by James Lees-Milne. It is one of the most fascinating books I've read for a while. Lees-Milne was a sort of scout for the National Trust in the 1930s and 1940s. His task was to wander around the country and look at large houses which the owners might be prepared to give to the Trust. His honest and sometimes acerbic comments are wonderfully revealing.

20
(Gloucestershire)

A few weeks ago, we bought a new mattress for our new house in Devon.

I bought the mattress (and the bed) on my iPhone and now every time I try to use my phone there are advertisements for mattresses and beds wherever I look. As far as I can tell, all the ads come from the companies which sold us the mattress and the bed. This does not seem to me to be very clever. How many mattresses and beds do they think I am going to buy? Why continue advertising a product to someone who has just bought it?

Incidentally, this has nothing to do with mattresses, but am I the only one to have noticed that in television adverts which make fun of people, the ones who are the butts of the jokes are always white, invariably male and heterosexual and usually over the age of 40. No one would dream of creating an advert which made fun of a woman, a homosexual or a black person.

Later in the day, we went out shopping to buy an anniversary present for someone we know. Antoinette dismissed my usual, crass suggestions and headed for an antique shop. She believes that when buying a present you should also try to choose something that will be valued for ever rather than something functional that will be replaced in six months' time when it breaks down.

Whenever I go shopping, I find myself facing the same dilemma.

When, at the end of the transaction, the assistant says 'Have a good day' (or some variation on that particular theme) do I simply say 'thank you' or do I add 'you too' (or some variation on that particular response)?

I really never know what to say.

Can the shop assistant really have a good day if they are anchored to a till and a store full of stock? I am free to wander hither and possibly thither. They are as restrained as if they were dogs tied up outside a supermarket.

As a general rule, I usually obey good manners and wish them a good day too. Sometimes they respond with a smile. And sometimes they do not.

'Fat chance!' growled a female shop assistant today. 'I'm stuck in this bloody place for another two and a half hours.'

This evening I received an email from PayPal asking for vast amounts of personal and financial information. I wasn't sure whether the email came from them or was a fake and so I forwarded it them (as they request people do).

I received no reply.

We are constantly told that we must report suspicious communications. What is the point when our reports are ignored?

21
(Devon)

We keep putting furniture into the drawing room at our cliff top house but the damned room seems to be expanding. The room now contains a huge glass fronted Walnut bookcase, a large walnut chest, a Japanese wall cupboard, a four piece Chesterfield suite (including a huge button back three seater sofa), a grand piano and assorted other chairs and it still looks empty, Indeed, there is the sort of echo in the room that you get with empty spaces.

A man who delivered a small item of furniture today made so much fuss about it that I took it off him and carried it into the house myself. He grunted like a woman tennis player. (Why, I wonder, is it mainly women tennis players who grunt when they hit the ball?)

A pair of carpet fitters also arrived today. The man in charge, who was wearing pink and blue Bermuda shorts, the strange ones which come down six inches below the knee and look as though they were either made as shorts for someone much taller or as trousers for someone much shorter, took one look at the bathrooms where he is due to lay down our chosen floor covering and sucked in a bushel of air before shaking his head in dismay.

'What's up?' I asked him, wearily.

'You've got a lot of impedimenta in here,' he complained. 'Loo, washbasin, radiator,' he said, pointing at each in turn. 'They'll make it more difficult.'

I didn't know what to say. It didn't seem to me that our bathrooms were cursed with more 'impedimenta' than most other bathrooms.

'That'll be £237,' he said, when he'd finished. 'Call it £240. Are you paying cash or bank transfer?'

22

(Devon)

The EU is preparing to 'deal with' Austria if the Austrians dare to elect a new President of whom the unelected eurocrats do not approve. They haven't said exactly what they are going to do but they are threatening to do something to protect the EU if the people dare to vote for an unapproved candidate.

The short history of the EU shows, without any doubt, that nations, particularly those which are using the euro currency, are no longer free in any meaningful sense of the word. It really doesn't matter who is elected to power because if the eurocrats don't like them then they and their policies are toast.

If a radical government is elected, the eurocrats will quickly bring it to heel – imposing EU control if a government doesn't have a stamp of approval from the entirely unelected European Commissioners.

The plain fact is that the EU is now run, as was always planned, by Germany. It is Germany which controls the Bundesbank and it is Germany which controls the euro. The other EU members simply do what they are told. Since the Berlin Consensus emerged after the banking crisis of 2008 it has become abundantly clear that the European project is in reality the German project. Every major EU policy is designed to strengthen and enrich one country and one country alone.

The BBC, a greedy recipient of EU largesse, never mentions any of this and the dumb celebrities (often BBC employees) who praise the EU have no idea what is really going on.

We interviewed a new gardener today. He had a large jaw and looked a little like Tommy Cooper, the late and much lamented comedian who was, it is generally agreed, the funniest man who ever lived.

Cooper was hewn by a not terribly good sculptor from a piece of rough stone the size of one of those Easter Island statues and subsequently brought to life by the touch of an angel blessed with the gift of comedy.

Our version of Cooper, although sadly not touched by any angels, let alone the one with the gift of comedy, wore a nice suit, had very clean hands and seemed a very pleasant fellow though he clearly has the sort of intelligence level usually associated with plants in pots. He would have not looked out of place in a showroom selling carpets or gas fires.

Before we had discussed the work involved, he said he would be charging us £27 an hour and that we could either pay him in cash (the favourite method among workmen these days) or by direct Web transfer from our bank account to his. He said he didn't take payment by credit card though he was considering obtaining a machine which would enable him to take debit card payments and there would be an additional fee of 7.5% if we wanted to pay this way.

He said he fancied a life outdoors but sadly he didn't seem to know the names of any plants, bushes or trees.

'Oh, er this one has nice little white flowers', 'That's a very tall one isn't it' and 'What pretty blossom' seemed to be the full extent of his gardening knowledge.

The only name he seemed to know was 'privet' and everything he looked at he confidently assured us was 'privet'.

I can only assume that he has one of these new diplomas which require students to turn up for classes regularly but which do not require that they assimilate any knowledge. He did not seem in the slightest bit embarrassed by his extensive ignorance.

It seemed cruel to leave him hoping, so we told him straight away that he seemed over qualified and that we feared that our modest gardens would not be enough of a challenge for him. He seemed flattered by this and went away quite happy. We will look instead for a wizened, sunburned old fellow with calluses, ill-fitting dentures and green fingers. He will have to know something about plants and like animals – including squirrels and rabbits.

The previous owners of our house by the sea used to allow a man to sit in the garden and shoot the rabbits and squirrels. There are plenty of both on the lawns and we love watching them. There will be no shooting here.

I prefer to sit and watch the sea crashing onto the rocks and the beach below. Watching the waves breaking over the rocks is as calming as watching flames in a fireplace.

Some pictures we bought at auction arrived today. We now have 78 pictures to hang but since some of the pictures are large oil paintings, I don't think we have enough wall space. Perhaps we could open a gallery. Or maybe we need to have more walls built.

23

(Paris)

We had a horrendous journey to Paris. The worst part, by far, was the drive to Ebbsfleet international railway station. Our nation is now overcrowded and our transport systems are run by overzealous officials who seem to be engaged in a constant competition to create a bigger and longer traffic jam than anyone else.

We always allow an hour on any journey for the delays and blockages which are now inevitable in Britain but today we were held up three times by massive traffic jams and after much tyre squealing, arrived at the station just in time to hurtle through the passport and baggage formalities.

The worst holdups were, inevitably, on the M25 where the police seem to do everything they can to destroy what is left of the British economy and where the police will close several lanes if they spot a sweet wrapper or cigarette butt on the motorway.

One lengthy tailback was caused by the closure of three out of four lanes because two lorries, which had broken down, were parked on the hard shoulder. The only vehicle actually causing an obstruction was a police car parked half on the hard shoulder and half in the slow lane. A single lane closure would have been plenty.

The police, who seem unaware that creating unnecessary traffic jams wastes both time and fuel (let alone polluting the air) should not be surprised when motorists ignore lane closures and arbitrary speed restrictions.

When we finally arrived at Ebbsfleet, the car park was, of course, full and we had to park the car slightly further away from the station than we had been when we'd left home in the Cotswolds.

Things got worse when I had to open my suitcase and found to the Gestapo's surprise and my horror that it contained a strimmer mask, a pair of old gardening trousers, an old jumper full of holes, two framed pictures, a spare pair of secaturs, four packets of seeds and 12 pea sticks.

Before we left Gloucestershire, I packed two suitcases. One was to take to Devon (where we were due to go the day after we returned from France) and one was to take to Paris. Both suitcases are the same sort of size and the same colour. I had, inevitably, picked up the wrong suitcase.

This incident reminded that one day I intend to fill my suitcase with helium filled balloons so that when the case is opened the balloons all float up to the ceiling.

In the waiting area, prior to boarding the train, we watched with horror as a cleaner washed the seats with a floor mop. Yuk.

An announcer on the loudspeaker told us that if we noticed anything suspicious we should report it immediately to a member of staff.

Wanting to be helpful, I pointed out a youth who had been sitting reading a book for 20 minutes.

'He hasn't once looked at a phone. He hasn't texted or sent any emails. And he hasn't taken any selfies.'

The member of staff agreed with me that it was suspicious behaviour and said he'd keep an eye on the youth.

When we boarded the train we discovered that the station's managers had carefully painted carriage numbers on the ground and on the pillars so that travellers could stand at the point on the platform where their carriage would stop. Sadly, the numbers on the ground didn't match the numbers on the pillars.

Still, there are still some joys in travelling. My favourite is listening to the French train manager struggling to translate what he has just said so fluently in French into English. A five minute discourse in French becomes a ten second stilted and incomprehensible muttering in English.

On the train, I watched in astonishment as four teenagers sat down, put on their headphones and bent their heads over their mobile telephones. They did not exchange a word throughout the journey. I suspect children are now given mobile phones, Facebook pages and twitter accounts at the age of three.

'I is going to infant skule nxt wk. See more on my Facebook page.'

Our taxi driver in Paris did not know where anything was.

Unlike London cab drivers, the drivers of Parisian taxis are not required to have any knowledge of their city. I never expect much of them. Indeed, taxi drivers in Paris are so bad that if I'm headed for the station and I am asked what time my train leaves, I always knock 30 minutes off the expected departure time – to discourage the driver from taking the scenic route.

But this driver took the cake and the biscuit and had clearly been trained as a plumber or a chimney sweep rather than as a taxi driver.

When he shook his head after I mentioned the street where we live, I mentioned a larger rue, then worked my way up to a couple of avenues and a boulevard. I doubt if he would have been able to find his way to the Champs Elysee.

In the end I just told him to drive to the Eiffel Tower (which is within a short stroll of our apartment), which can be seen from almost anywhere in the city. He did so slowly and so erratically that every driver in Paris hooted at us. French horns are pitched annoyingly, ear splittingly high and by the time we reached the apartment our already tattered nerves had tatters on their tatters.

All this reminded me of an American acquaintance who found that there was a taxi strike last time he was in Paris.

Unable to find or book a traditional taxi, he asked around and was told that the taxi drivers were on strike in protest at Uber, the ubiquitous Internet based taxi company. So he telephoned Uber and got a taxi within five minutes. He said the Uber fellow was faster, cheaper and friendlier than all the usually Parisian taxi drivers. And so he is now an Uber convert.

That was probably not quite what the taxi drivers had in mind when they went on strike.

It was the same man who warned me not to put any valuable bags (such as briefcases) into the boot of a taxi. His own briefcase was stolen from the boot of a taxi while the vehicle was stationary at traffic lights.

And it was the same man who has two locks on his apartment door and who told me that whenever he left the apartment he always locked just one – leaving the other unlocked. ‘If a burglar tries to pick my locks he will always be opening one lock and locking the other,’ he explained.

When we arrived in the apartment I turned on the hot water boiler (it is always a happy moment when it starts to purr contentedly), opened a bottle of champagne to celebrate our arrival and sorted through the mail – sifting the dozen letters from the 227 pieces of junk mail which had arrived.

24

(Paris)

I listened to Gilbert and Sullivan while in the bath. I was, as always, so entranced by Gilbert’s lyrics that afterwards I ended up reading the Penguin edition of the Savoy Operas for an hour and a half.

Gilbert was every bit as good a satirist as Swift and Carroll and without a doubt the best lyricist England has ever produced. And his partner, Sir Arthur, was pretty good at what he did.

Dear Gilbert would have had a lot of fun with the European Union.

My computer in Paris has acquired a virus.

(I don’t try carrying a computer from England lest the idiots at customs insist on putting it through their X-ray machines or try to remove the contents from the hard drive. It’s safer to carry a dongle, or a couple of dongles, and use them to update computers at each end of the journey.)

I know the computer has a virus because every time I turn it on someone called McAfee demands money. There is no way to turn him off or send him away. I hate McAfee with a vengeance and nothing would ever induce me to give the damned intruder a penny.

I hope the damned company goes bust and that the people who put their damned pop up virus into my computer suffer embarrassment and indignity for decades. Only the cursed LinkedIn comes close to McAfee as an annoyance.

I have no need for McAfee’s damned product because the laptop I use for my work is never ever connected to the Internet and the only dongles pushed into its sockets are my own. Moreover, it never goes anywhere near a public road so no one can hack into my keystrokes. So bugger off McAfee.

I read an interview with Sean Penn. While discussing some bad press he had Penn responded by saying: ‘Who among us is fairly thought of? Worse things happen to better people.’

I don’t why, but these seemed surprisingly wise remarks.

25

(Paris)

Every so often, we receive a copy of a magazine containing details of what is going on in our arrondissement in Paris. It’s a modest publication, just 36 pages including the cover, and it seems to consist mainly of pictures of the local mayor, a woman called Rachida Dati. The current edition has 21 photographs of her and she is, of course, on the cover too. Just about the only picture she's not in is a reproduction of a painting of Chopin. A photo opportunity missed, perchance.

I assume that as Parisian tax payers, we pay for this piece of extraordinary ego polishing but it would be nice to see an opposition politician get a look in occasionally. I suspect that Madame Dati has ambitions. President of France, President of the European Union, President of the World. Who knows where it will all end.

The only certainty is that there will be lots of photo opportunities.

A man in our building told us that Napoleon had once said that the English are a nation of shoplifters. I was about to correct him when I realised that he was now probably right. The same fellow once told me that whenever faced with a dilemma, he always asked himself what Napoleon would have done. He seemed to think that this was a good idea, though I suspect that he used the trick to make sure that he always did what he himself wanted to do without having to shoulder any of the blame. I find it alarming to think that when faced with a modest domestic dilemma our neighbour might decide to invade Russia or do something distasteful to Austria.

I have in the past known other people to ask themselves what all sorts of different people would have done.

'What would Hippocrates have done?'

'What would Elvis have done in these circumstances?' (Probably called for another peanut butter and bacon sandwich.)

Personally, I thought choosing Napoleon is an odd thing to do. A fellow really can't go around invading countries every five minutes.

This fellow has another home in Venice and once told us that he has ferries at the bottom of his garden. I rather liked that.

26

(Paris)

I always feed the pigeons in Paris and they are quick learners.

On our first day in the apartment I put some bird seed on the windowsill at 9 am. I buy bags of seed for cage birds because it is obviously far better for them than pieces of bread. The pigeons find the seed within twenty minutes.

I then put out some seed at 4 p.m.

The pigeons find that within ten minutes.

And from then on the pigeons are there waiting for their food at 8.45 a.m. and at 3.45 p.m. and if I don't put out their food they will stomp up and down noisily, coo very loudly and, if none of that works, peck at the windowsill and at the window panes until they are fed.

When the pigeons do their stomping, they sound just like rain.

I suspect that the people in the flats below (who are French and therefore of limited intelligence) are often confused by this.

They are quick learners our city pigeons.

And now that people are banned from feeding them, they are hungry too.

I wish I could think of a way to make a seed dispenser to feed them when we aren't in Paris.

We have at last heard from Wales and West Utilities, the company which will be responsible for connecting our Devon house to the national gas supply. Our new boiler has been installed but there is no gas supply yet.

Wales and West have sent an email confirming that the work will be done in August. (They were going to do it in September since the council requires 12 weeks' notice before they will allow them to dig a hole in the road. I am not sure what the council is going to do during that twelve week period.)

The Wales and West people wrote to say: 'On the day that the works are due to commence, please ensure that a responsible person with the authority to take any necessary decisions is present on site.'

Antoinette and I puzzled over this for a while. We really don't know any responsible persons. Maybe we could hire one for the day.

I sent an email complaining about the twelve weeks' delay and pointed out that if I die of the cold it will be their fault. (I know it will still be summer but large organisations aren't clever enough to know that).

I also received an email from the company from which we bought a bed for the Devon house. This is what it said: 'If you wouldn't like to be the first to know about the latest, exclusive offers, products and competitions that you will find in our newsletter, please uncheck this box.'

An hour later, I was still trying to work out what it meant.

27

(Paris)

We spent a very pleasant couple of hours in Les Deux Magots, the excellent and legendary café next to St Germain church.

Le Deux Magots was, of course, the birth of surrealism and the café next door, Le Flore, was the original home of the existentialists. Jean Paul Sartre and his girlfriend Simone de Beavoir, a pair of old pseudo intellectuals and, in the worst sense, collaborators to boot, used Le Flore as an office (working there all day rent free and then having the indecency to go out for lunch). Camus and Picasso also drank at Le Flore.

Lipps, the caff across the road has always been popular with the literary elite and with politicians. I've always thought it rather stuffy – the sort of place where they'd toss you out with a sneer if you laughed or threw a paper aeroplane.

Afterwards, we took a roundabout route up towards the Luxembourg Gardens, past a café where English breakfast as advertised on the menu consists of a bowl of chips, a croissant and a pot of tea, and stopped off on the Boulevard du Montparnasse at Le Dome; another of our favourite cafes. I'm not sure why but I always prefer it to La Coupole. The windows of both are always smashed by radicals during upheavals though I'm not sure why that happens either. It's probably just one of those 'tradition' things.

Higher up the road, closer to the Luxembourg Gardens, is a café called La Closerie des lilas, which started as an open air tavern for drinkers and billiards players and which was for a while one of Hemingway's favourite watering holes. It is, today, rather austere looking. A man standing on the pavement outside was staring at his smart phone and swearing at it. 'I hate this phone!' he yelled, repeatedly. His female companion had problems of her own. 'I can't get Yahoo!' she complained over and over again.

The oldest café in Paris is Le Procope which opened in 1685 by a Sicilian called Fancesco Procopio dei Coltelli. He was the man who turned France into a coffee drinking society. Le Procope was popular with both Voltaire and Rousseau. For centuries, cafés always provided their patrons with writing paper and free newspapers. These days these extras are available only in a few establishments.

When we got back, I sorted out my wardrobe. My sports jacket, purchased from Austin Reed in Regent Street the best part of half a century ago, long before I could really afford such luxury, is still serviceable though the lining has what could best be described as a honeycomb appearance. The jacket has now become comfortable and has acquired the 'run in' feeling that clothes only acquire after four and half decades of use.

'When did you last wash this dressing gown?' asked Antoinette, who was helping me sort my clothes. 'I've never seen this before.'

I looked at her and then at it and then back at her. 'Does it smell?'

She sniffed and shook her head.

'Does it creak?'

She laughed and said it didn't.

I realised with horror that I had bought the dressing gown 20 years earlier, when I had first stocked the flat with essentials, and that it had never been washed.

When clothes were put into the washing machine, I had repeatedly forgotten the dressing gown.

'Don't you dare mention that in your diary,' said Antoinette.

'Of course not,' I agreed. 'Even I would be embarrassed.'

28

(Paris)

We walked up the Café de la Paix on the right bank, up through the place Vendome and past the Ritz. The hotel is still closed for renovations, though it's due to open again next month.

The hotel Ritz, today a centre for extravagance and expense account shenanigans, was created by one of the greatest hoteliers of all time. The French would say, of course, without much exaggeration, that he was the greatest of all hoteliers.

It was Cesar Ritz, a former waiter from Switzerland, who coined the phrase 'the customer is always right' when he was manager of the Savoy Hotel in London. Later, when he had restored the fortunes of the Savoy and mastered his own artful profession, Ritz went back to Paris and took the chef from the Savoy with him. The chef was a man called Escoffier.

Ritz's philosophy about customers is now regarded as rather out-of-date and most employees of commercial establishments seem to think the opposite. The average employee forgets that he or she is also often a customer. The snotty man at the post office will be aggrieved if he is treated badly when he goes to buy a train ticket or when he needs to have his piles annihilated.

Ritz's burning ambition was to create a hotel that would be as welcoming and as elegant as any chateau in the country. He found a town house on the Place Vendome, formerly the home of the Duc de Lauzun, and built elegant restaurants, a garden area and a lobby. There was no sitting room, and guests who wanted to sit and talk had to do so in the lobby. He put wood burning stoves into all the bedrooms, filled all the rooms with flowers he raised in his own glasshouses and furnished the hotel with costly reproductions of Louis XVI's furniture at Versailles. The bathrooms contained king sized bathtubs which were designed by Ritz himself after the rather plump King Edward VII got stuck in an ordinary bath while sharing his water with a few young ladies who also needed a wash.

It was the indefatigable Ritz who invented indirect lighting, king sized beds and wardrobes which lit up when the door was opened. Amazingly, it was Ritz who established the costume that is common among waiters around the world: with a white tie for waiters and a black tie for the maître d'hotel.

One of the older waiters at the Ritz once told me that famous customers have include Proust, Scott Fitzgerald, Noel Coward, Dietrich, Greta Garbo, President Teddy Roosevelt, the Prince of Wales, Winston Churchill, Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks Snr and such bastions of commerce as Woolworth, Carnegie and Rockefeller.

When we got back to the apartment, I found another email from the gas utility company which we are hoping will connect our new home to the gas supply. I paid them weeks ago for the work they need to do. I have managed to persuade them to change their plan (which was to dig a trench to the front door of the house) so that the gas supply goes to the boiler room. As a result of my complaint, they say they will connect us to the gas earlier than planned. The council now needs just eight weeks' notice. The planned work will cause no inconvenience to anyone but the council is clearly more concerned with bureaucracy than logic. Since it will apparently take another eight weeks after we have been connected for a company to connect the gas to our new boiler, we may just have our new heating system before the winter. Once the gas supply has been arranged, we have to fix up for an electrician to come and earth the supply pipe and then we have to arrange for a gas supply company to provide us with gas. Oh and we have to find someone to fit a meter to measure the amount of gas we use. What sounded relatively simple has become rather more complicated than invading Poland.

29

(Paris)

Today, I discovered a new fact about France. It was a French chef who first started putting food into tins in 1804. He had previously used old champagne bottles but found tins safer and more effective.

Sadly, the can opener wasn't invented for another 30 years. The first can opener was patented in England in 1855.

Of course, not everyone agrees that it was a Frenchman who invented canned food. The Dutch claim that food was being preserved in tin cans since 1772.

But the interesting thing is that the first can openers weren't invented until much later – a century later. So, naturally, I can't help wondering how people opened their cans of food. Opening a can without a proper opener can be a messy and frustrating business as Jerome K Jerome described so vividly in *Three Men in a Boat*.

I also learned, to my astonishment, that the French only stopped using the Guillotine to behead criminals in 1981 when capital punishment was abolished. I had always thought the Guillotine to be something out of distant history and the idea that in 1981 there were people polishing and sharpening a guillotine blade is as strangely shocking as if I had discovered that the English were still using a man with an axe to chop off the heads of renegade subjects.

I was astonished to read, in an old copy of *New Yorker* magazine that I picked up from the American Library in Paris, that the Supreme Court in the US has ruled that a video re-packager is free to strip the original credits from a film and replace them with its own.

Appalled by the modern world, I dug out a copy of *The Cricketer* magazine from 1951.

I was delighted to see that one of the advertisements (for cricket equipment) was written partly in Latin.

30

(Paris)

At the time of the Revolution in 1789, two classes of people enjoyed great privileges in France: the nobility and the clergy. There were 130,000 clergy in France at the time and the Church owned a quarter of France. Members of the nobility were even more fortunate. A hundred thousand families had pensions or salaries granted by the king. The ordinary people had no rights and no say in how their country was run. They lived in appalling poverty and were treated little better than slaves. The king took half of everything a small landowner produced, the local nobleman helped himself to 15%, the clergy took a tenth – leaving the farmer with less than a quarter of the money he had made. The king had 13,000 personal servants and guards. The queen had 500 maids and their infant daughter had 80 servants of her own though I have no idea what on earth they all found to do. Building Versailles cost a thousand fortunes.

At this time, Napoleon was a lieutenant of artillery and the country was ripe for the revolution.

The French have always been revolting and it isn't difficult to make the argument that French are ready for another revolution.

Today, more and more small shops and cafés are closing as a result of higher and higher taxes and absurd employment legislation, all of which make running a business extremely difficult and scarcely profitable. Traditional shops, which sold excellent, fresh food or clothes have been converted into souvenir shops and the ubiquitous phone shops, flogging yet more mobile telephones.

The streets are full of clochards, surrounded by their paraphernalia and usually clutching a bottle of cheap wine. Much of the legislation which has damaged small businesses has, of course, come direct from Brussels, devised by eurocrats who have never had meaningful employment and who have no idea of the difficulties they have created for entrepreneurs.

The legislation, much of it created in accordance with the suggestions made by lobbyists working for multinational corporations, does not damage the big companies – just the small ones.

This is a global problem and it is hardly surprising that in the last 20 years the share of American GDP generated by the biggest 100 companies has risen from 33% to 46%.

But I have to admit that some of the daftest laws have been devised by successive French governments and even the current socialist President, the absurdly unpopular Hollande, is now aware that the endless laws favouring the rights of workers have gone too far. Every attempt to create a fairer world and a more efficient France results in another round of absurd strikes. There is, in France, an enthusiasm for industrial action which far exceeds the need. Modern workers don't go on strike because they are starving or working in awful conditions but because they want better quality biscuits with their afternoon tea.

A fellow in our building told me a good story today.

We were trying to have a conversation in a mixture of French and English and we had managed to tie ourselves up in a couple of double negatives.

He then told me a story about Alexander Korda, the film-maker, who apparently had a very personal way with expanded double negatives. When an employee walked into his office, interrupting a train of thought, Korda looked at the man sternly and said: 'Please don't come in until I don't tell you not to don't come. Now go.'

31

(Paris)

We travelled back from Paris today and had possibly the worst journey ever. (And that includes the days of Laker Airways.)

Travelling between Britain and France has become an absolute nightmare in recent years. Twenty years ago, I used to cross the Channel weekly. Fifteen years ago, Antoinette and I crossed the English Channel once a month. Now we go far less frequently, not only because we like Paris less but because travelling has become so time consuming and exhausting.

The first problem today was the fact that Paris was flooded and that our taxi had to travel via Hamburg, Leningrad and Stockholm in order to get to the Gare du Nord. That was an Act of God and, therefore, entirely forgivable, excusable and understandable. It is strange, is it not, that in the 21st century, our best method of keeping water out of places where it is not wanted is the humble sand bag. When rivers rise, we reach not for some technological wonder but for a lorry load of sandbags.

Actually, I'm not surprised Paris was flooded. It was raining when we arrived, it rained all the time we were there and it was still raining when we left. It rained so much at night that the sound of it bouncing off the roof kept us awake. We stayed indoors listening to audio tapes of the Raffles adventures and old Gilbert and Sullivan recordings. Outside there were apparently riots, violent protests and running battles between protestors and the police but we knew nothing of it. We did not switch on our radio or access the Internet and so we missed all this excitement. Whenever the sun dared to come out and say 'bonjour' we went out for a stroll and got soaked because it started to rain the moment we stepped outside the front door.

We went out to the supermarket to buy essentials. A small man with a large moustache was taking pictures of the shelves. I wondered if he was a spy from a rival supermarket.

'Why is he doing that?' I asked Antoinette.

'He's taking a shelfie,' she replied.

I went down to our cellar to remove anything that looked as though it might be safer brought upstairs. When I went through all the stuff in the cellar I remembered why I had put it down there and realised that I didn't really care if it was dry or under six feet of water.

The second problem on our journey was that the Gare du Nord is still not fit for purpose (if its purpose is to act as a railway station).

A sign on the wall informs travellers that the renovations currently in progress were begun in 2014 and should finish by 2019. This is a railway station for heaven's sake. The whole area allotted to passengers can't be much more than the extent of a decent sized house. A decent builder could put up an entire new town in less than five years. The Eiffel Tower took two years to build, for heaven's sake. But SNCF is taking two and a half times as long to redecorate the Eurostar terminal at the Gare du Nord than it took Monsieur Eiffel and his chums to knock up the world's tallest erection.

The queues for the Eurostar trains were at least a quarter of a mile long, snaking down stairs and the (as always) not working escalator. I sometimes think the railway people do this on purpose; peeved because airports have much longer queues than they do.

I politely asked a Eurostar employee if there was a reason for the extraordinary scene but she found my question absurd and simply said that people were queuing for the trains. Others standing in the queue were clearly shocked and appalled that anyone should dare to ask for information. They were aghast. Maybe this is a generational thing. Maybe today's travellers just complain on the Internet but never ask a real person for an explanation.

I was told recently that first class passengers on some routes in England now routinely have to stand for two or three hour journeys to London. Apparently, no one ever complains.

I heard a woman behind us say: 'Every time a friend succeeds a part of me dies.' I didn't hear the rest of it.

We stood in a queue for the best part of an hour to get through the French customs, 15 minutes for British customs and 25 minutes to get through the baggage area.

The more often I go through customs the more convinced I am that when the Iron Curtain came down, all the newly employed apparatchiks and KGB operatives who weren't bright enough to steal billions and become oligarchs headed west and signed up with EU border controls.

I always get the impression that the people in uniform have absolutely no idea what they are looking for or what day of the week it is, and are probably not entirely sure what country they are in.

(Incidentally, if the British customs posts are run by something called Border Control, why do they make far more fuss when you're leaving the country than they do when you're coming back in?)

The train was, inevitably, late setting off (so we would now arrive in Ebbsfleet in time to hit London at the rush hour).

On the train, a couple of teenagers were sitting opposite us. She was telling him off and listing all his faults. He, mute, had his hood up and was playing with his iPhone. A man with a child arrived and complained that they were sitting in his seats. They said they weren't. The man with the iPhone stood up. This was, I thought, a strategic error. For one thing, if you are sitting in a railway seat then possession is at least nine tenths of the law. And for another thing, the fellow who stood up was just over five feet tall. The only point in standing up is if you can tower over the other person and intimidate them. No one is going to be intimidated by a tiddly little fellow just over five feet tall. Unless he pulls a knife. But, fortunately, he didn't pull a knife and the man with the daughter melted away to sit somewhere else.

Further up the train, a businessman spent most of the journey making a long and intensely boring telephone call. Men and women on mobile telephones are the modern equivalent of the crying baby.

Afterwards I discovered that the day before, an idiot had tried to board a train carrying a World War II bomb as a souvenir and that as a result the station was still in a state of shock and bewilderment.

As someone who knows nothing about running a railway station, I would have thought that finding an idiot with an old bomb was one of the things baggage checks were for (along with finding idiots with new bombs) and that finding the idiot proved that the system was working. Carry on as before would have been my prescription.

But oh no, not at all.

Instead of carrying on as normal, the Gare du Nord idiots (as opposed to the idiot with the old bomb) had ordered a slow-down and the baggage check people were examining every piece of baggage as if it contained a nuclear device. There were just two conveyor belts for several thousand items of luggage. Of course there were lengthy delays.

The baggage people found the damned bomb for heaven's sake. Give the man at the X-ray machine a biscuit and thank him for doing what he is paid for. Did they think there was going to be a flood of idiots with World War II bombs in their bags?

This silliness will last a week and then even the station staff will get bored and things will go back to what passes for normal these days.

Unfortunately, we were caught up in the bout of silliness.

As we passed Calais I gazed in horror at the endless rows of high, barbed wire fences, the platoons of policemen and soldiers; all there to prevent immigrants pouring into Britain.

No one who sees this could possibly support the EU, the fascist organisation responsible for this wholesale movement of people in search of a dream they have been promised but which will almost certainly remain an illusion.

On the English side of the Channel there is, of course, very little fencing. No one wants to leave Britain and run away to France. Why should they? The French don't hand out free money in quite the way that the British do.

To compound the silliness, at Ebbsfleet the armed security people were out in force to make sure that if the French had missed any idiots with World War II bombs, they would be there to miss them too. There are no normal representatives of HM Government at Ebbsfleet. A stuffed dog sits in a cage and that's it. (I'm not joking.) But today there were policemen to examine passports (presumably in case they contained World War II bombs tucked between the pages) and security men with walkie talkies and guns and bullet proof vests wandering around the station wondering what the hell they were doing and trying not to look as silly and as pointless as they were and as they undoubtedly felt.

And then, of course, it was the motorway.

And, in particular, the M25 – surely the world's worst road.

We used to be able to travel from North Devon to Ashford in Kent in three hours. Today, it takes around five hours to travel half that distance and in our experience any journey which involves the M4 and the M25 motorways will probably mean an average speed of less than 25 miles an hour. Travelling at that sort of speed (if speed is the right word) is exhausting.

These endless delays are partly because our roads are now vastly overcrowded, partly because non-essential road works (such replacing perfectly good barriers with far less safe concrete barriers in order to satisfy EU requirements, erecting traffic calming chicanes, installing cycle lanes on roads which are far too narrow to accommodate them, and closing lanes in order to put up more speed cameras) cause incredible delays and partly because the police, in their infinite stupidity, now close whole stretches of motorway if a vehicle is spotted parked on the hard shoulder.

The police don't seem to understand that when motorways were originally designed, the hard shoulders were put there so that vehicles which broke down could be parked without impeding the traffic flow. Today the police seem to regard a parked car on the hard shoulder as a major emergency, though they have absolutely no evidence to support this bizarre notion.

The fog warning signs are frequently left on for days at a time; left on so often that now no one takes any more notice of them than they take of the 50 mph speed signs which seem to be left on almost permanently, and quite unnecessarily, on some motorways.

The variable speed limit policy was always going to be the end for happy motoring because it gave control to a bunch of self-important morons who switch on speed limit signs for absolutely no sensible reason and who are, as a result, a major cause of hold ups, delays and road rage.

At no point on our journey were both lots of traffic moving normally but at no time was there any sensible reason for the blockages. At one point the whole motorway, four lanes wide, was closed completely because a large continental lorry was parked on the hard shoulder. This is not high way management, it is lunacy.

How many people die every year because of the stress brought on by these entirely unnecessary traffic jams? And how many millions of man hours are wasted? Every jam results in, on average, ten thousand vehicles sitting motionless or pretty well motionless, burning up fuel and brake pads and clutches and causing massive pollution. How many meetings are missed? How many appointments missed? How many potentially life-saving operations cancelled because either the surgeon or the anaesthetist or the patient have been stuck in an entirely unnecessary traffic jam?

If the police are going to receive money from speed cameras then they should pay a penalty for every minute that a motorway is blocked. That would give them an incentive to get on and clear away broken down vehicles. As things are, the police, instead of fixing up a tow truck, simply put up cones, close the motorway and stand around looking important and pleased with themselves.

June

1

(Gloucestershire)

A group of writers and artists claim that it will be bad for Britain to leave the European Union because we will lose contact with other cultures.

That has to be the most stupid remark of the century. It is the sort of stuff usually associated with children who've eaten too many of those red sweets which are crammed to their crisply coated covers with deliciously irritating E numbers.

The European Union is a political organisation. Europe is a land mass. Our relationship with other countries will be affected not at all by our leaving the EU.

British writers have had contact with France, Germany, America, China and Guadeloupe without having to betray their nation's sovereignty in order to do so.

The confusion between the EU and Europe is not surprising because the bribed and bent BBC made the decision some time ago to refer to the fascist organisation as if it were the continent.

And so idiots have for some time now been told that Britain is thinking of leaving Europe – as though we could hitch the island up to the back of a tug and tow it somewhere warmer.

I love Europe but hate the EU and to deliberately confuse the two is brutally manipulative.

2

(Gloucestershire)

A bloke we know has bought a 3D printer.

(Actually, that's a bit of a fib. We hardly know him at all but I like to give the impression that we know lots of people and have the usual 21st century supply of friends, acquaintances and 'followers'.)

He bought it believing the hype and hoping to be able to print everything he ever needed. It is however, a pretty useless piece of rubbish – on a par with Google glasses and the Apple watch.

It is very labour intensive and you have to feed it all the correct ingredients before it will do anything.

It is like one of those cheap radio controlled helicopters which promise much but which end up in the back of a cupboard en route to the charity shop. This fellow's cupboard must be stuffed with useless stuff. He also bought an Apple watch.

We drove down to our new home in Devon today. It is normally a joy to be there. Devon is an infinitely friendlier county than Gloucestershire in particular or The Cotswolds in general.

When we got to the house, we discovered that there was water pouring from an overflow pipe high on the side of the house. And inside we found that the ceiling in the spare bedroom had unilaterally decided that it didn't want to be a ceiling any more but would prefer to be a floor.

Half an acre of plaster was, therefore, strewn over the bed, the dressing table and the bedside cabinets. A rather nice clock had been smashed.

We spent an unpleasant few hours collecting together the pieces of fallen ceiling. I never realised just how heavy plaster is. The stuff had clearly been put into position some time ago because it was nearly an inch thick. When I went up into the loft, I could see absolutely no sign of any leak and I suspect that what happened was that when our plumber switched the mains water off and then back on again, one of the many ballcocks in one of the many water tanks in the loft found it all too shocking and overdid things when allowing water to flow back into the tank. The water is still pouring out of the overflow pipe. We decided not to claim on our house insurance since if we do so they will doubtless increase our premium by vastly more than the claim is worth.

We were reassured by the thought that the plumber returns tomorrow to continue his work on our bathrooms. We decided that we'd ask him to take a look.

We now need a plasterer, a carpenter and an electrician. It will, I know, be enormously difficult to find any of these – even though we are prepared to pay ready money for anyone who knows how to do the work we need.

I spent the evening trying to scrape sticky labels off furniture that we bought from the previous owners.

In order to make sure that the removal men didn't take the stuff they had sold us they, or someone on their behalf, had stuck large sticky labels on everything. And the large sticky labels won't come off. And when they do come off, they remove varnish or paint as appropriate.

I hate people who use labels which won't come off easily. Charity bookshops are among the worst offenders. They always slam awful sticky labels onto books and other items they put out for sale and the labels often cause permanent damage to whatever it is they are selling.

Much of our previously owned furniture contains hidden staches of medicines. I'm tempted to open a pharmacy.

I also found a large old coffee tin full of ancient keys.

I have discovered, over the years, that all old houses come with a huge variety of keys – some six to eight inches long and weighing half a pound or so. None of these old keys ever fits any of the rooms, of course. I suspect that Victorians used to have a parlour game that involved exchanging tins full of room keys. We probably have all the keys for a house in the Lake District and a house in the Lake District probably has a tin full of keys that would fit all our rooms.

I received an email this evening offering to reposition my main website and 'optimise relevant keywords for search rankings and higher traffic'.

I have no idea what he was on about and since he did not give his name, I deleted his email.

3

(Devon)

I received a letter from a good friend who wrote to tell me that his house martins, who arrived recently for the summer, have their nests built in exactly the same place under his eaves. They've been coming back to the same spot for years. Birds had been nesting in the eaves of the house next door to him for the same period of time but the new owners, who come from Poland, don't like the birds and removed their nests with a pressure hose. He thinks this is a sign of the difference between our cultures.

I think he is right and that this is one of the reasons so many Britons are fed up with the fact that the country's culture is being changed by people who don't understand our ways.

When I was young, I was taught the old adage 'when in Rome do as the Romans do'.

The British still try to behave like this when abroad. But none of our immigrants seems to treat us with that level of respect.

The plumber who caused our ceiling downfall did not return.

4

(Gloucestershire)

A man from a hedge fund had bought the farm up the lane and across the road from our house in Gloucestershire.

I have no idea what he and his hedge fund are going to do with it though I suspect that they will, ironically, probably take down all the remaining hedges and store them in a vault somewhere.

This will be tricky because the previous vandal-in-residence tore down most of the centuries old hedges and replaced them with barbed wire fences. Strangely, the birds don't find barbed wire quite so comfortable for nesting and so the wildlife in the area has diminished considerably.

Hedges are numbered among England's greatest glories and should be protected but say 'hedge' to most modern land owners and they instantly think of a financial instrument rather than a home for wildlife.

The sad truth is that no one really runs farms as farms these days. Instead, they are bought for their investment prospects. Land prices have soared, and so investors who are looking for secure places to put their money are buying vast acreages. Most of these new farmers have no more interest in farming than the people who bought tulip bulbs in 17th century Holland were interested in growing tulips.

Our new neighbour, whom no one has seen, has bought a medium sized flock of sheep and hired a couple of men to look after them. There are no trees and very few hedges left but none of these sheep herders has thought to provide any shelter. The inevitable result is that when the weather is boiling hot the sheep will suffer and when it is cold they will suffer. Sheep hate getting wet.

It should be a criminal offence punishable by confiscation of all lands and a week in the stocks to keep animals in circumstances where they have no opportunity to escape from the elements.

Our hedge fund neighbour has reportedly made his fortune out of gambling with other people's money. He is described as a contrarian, and is presumably the sort of person who would, if employed as a fireman, carry babies and old ladies into burning buildings just for the hell of it and then expect to be given medals and honours in recognition of his endeavours.

I suspect that his fund has made a good deal of money for him but, alas, not so much for his unfortunate investors.

I am a stout believer in the value of a proper hedge fund but I prefer to run my own, balancing investments in equities with investments in boring but stable products such as gold.

After my investments had, over the decades, produced rather better results than the vast majority of professional investment fund managers, I wrote a book called *Moneypower*. It has sold very few copies but I don't really care. I wrote it for my wife, Antoinette, so that when I am no longer here she will know what to do with the investments I have made.

The hedge fund man's wife, or her ladyship as she doubtless prefers to be known, is an internationally renowned expert on cushion plumping and when she dies people will say of her: 'She always had clean windows and nicely plumped up cushions.

I've heard it said that no one ever goes to any of her many houses and sees a rumpled cushion.

Incidentally, have you noticed that all modern chairs are desperately uncomfortable without cushions? If you buy old chairs, more than fifty-years-old, they don't usually need cushions because they are shaped to provide support in all the appropriate places – notably the lower back. But modern chair designers, whether designing chairs for the home, the motor car or the train have absolutely no idea how to do their job.

5

(Devon)

New research suggests that people who don't get enough sleep are more likely to suffer from dementia.

Might there be corollaries to this?

Maybe people who take sleeping tablets don't get the right kind of sleep? Maybe they are more likely to suffer from dementia disorders such as Alzheimer's?

I see that a group of MPs have said that even if the people vote to leave the EU there is a chance that Parliament will refuse to take any notice of the referendum.

They are, I suppose, only following the standard EU view of democracy which is that it is a damned nuisance and best avoided.

A group of gays have wisely said that they will vote en masse to leave the EU since the rising number of immigrants means that their way of life could be under threat. It is no secret that Muslims do not approve of homosexuality and there is no doubt that when Muslims are in the majority, and Britain becomes a Muslim enclave of the European Union, homosexuality will be made illegal again.

A Scottish politician claims that anyone who talks about immigration must be a racist. This is just as sensible as claiming that anyone who talks about the economy must be a thief.

6

(Gloucestershire)

I spent a very pleasant hour sitting in a pub in Gloucestershire.

I was waiting for Antoinette who was doing some essential household shopping for the sort of vital stuff which I hate buying but without which no house can function. I intended to read a book but I couldn't help listening to two workmen who were supposed to be doing up a shop across the road. They had popped into the pub for several halves. It is amazing what you can hear in pubs if you sit quietly with your back to the room. If people can't see your face they treat you as invisible.

'My son and some of his mates set fire to a tramp,' said one of the men, 'and they broke into a house that was being done up and set fire to it. They destroyed that house and the one next door. The little fuckers didn't give a shit. I told him off, said there could have been someone asleep in there and that it was someone's house but he didn't care. He never cares about anything like that; never thinks about other people.'

The two men laughed as though this were just 'boys being boys' and as though setting fire to tramps and houses was quite a good jape.

This is not, however, what I would call 'horseplay' or 'uncalculated eccentricity'.

It has become fashionable these days for authors to include pages and pages of references at the back of their books. The references are never consulted of course but are there to make the author look learned. Half the time the author hasn't consulted the sources either but has bought them by the yard in the same way that interior decorators buy books by the yard when constructing libraries for rich illiterates. It is, I am told by an experienced editor, now possible to buy scientific, medical or literary references by the barrow load and authors who want to look well-read will buy a bunch of ready-made references. This is, I guess, a good way to increase the size of the book and it certainly helps give rather light authors an element of gravitas which might otherwise be missing.

References are easy to deal with. Authors either have them or they don't.

But spelling is a continuing problem.

I don't know how other authors manage but I get criticised quite often because readers don't like my spelling. Much of the time they are referring to the fact that I have used UK spelling rather than US spelling – or vice versa

There are, of course, alternative ways of spelling many words. Both grey and gray are correct. Dependent can also be dependant. A gaol can be a jail and a jail can be a gaol.

But, of course, some words have a different meaning. So, for example, in Britain the word suspenders refers to the undergarment women use to hold up their stockings whereas in America the word is used to refer to the equipment men use to hold up their trousers, though to be accurate I am led to believe that American men wear pants rather than trousers which is odd and rather confusing since English men wear their pants under their trousers. In the UK, a man who wears suspenders is a cross dresser. In America a man who wears suspenders is usually a megalomaniac and often a banker and sometimes both.

7

(Gloucestershire)

I'm sorry to see that I missed this year's Boring Conference, which was held in London last month. The conference is, I hear, 'an annual celebration of the mundane'.

Twenty speakers each talked for 10 minutes on topics such as ice cream van chimes and electric hand dryers. One man gave a lecture on how to catalogue a tie collection, another spoke about the sounds made by vending machines and a third described all his sneezes since the year 2007.

The conference catch phrase is 'It won't be as good as last year'. Last year the star of the show was a seven-year-old who spoke about elevators for his statutory ten minutes. I missed that and I missed this year's conference too.

I am sad too that I missed the Libertarian Party's nominating convention the other day in America.

One candidate wore a rubber boot on his head and a platform which consisted of support for time travel, self defence against zombies and free ponies for all. I bet you don't get fun times like that at a Green Party Conference.

Goldman Sachs (the infamous, incompetent American bank which had to be bailed out by American taxpayers) has helped a Japanese company issue 'notes' which yield below nothing. If you invest £100.45 today then in 2018 you will receive £100.

This is utterly bonkers.

I am going to rent out our nice new mattress and charge just 0.1% for the privilege.

Stuff your £100.45 under our mattress and in two years' time, I'll give you £100.35 back. You'll be better off than if you let Goldman Sachs handle your money.

But then that pretty well applies all the time.

A reader has kindly written to point out that in a previous diary I referred to a pop singer called Bonio. Apparently, Bonio is the brand name of a well-known dog biscuit. The Irish singer is apparently simply called Bono. My sincere apologies to the dog biscuit. I hope it isn't offended.

I ordered yet another strimmer ten days ago and was assured that it would be delivered a week ago. Showing embarrassing naivete I believed the promise and waited in. No parcel arrived. It now transpires that Parcelforce (surely the world's most incompetent company) sent the parcel to the wrong part of the country.

The strimmer company tells me that Parcelforce will deliver the item tomorrow. I have told them to stuff it. I have so far wasted several hours and over a dozen emails trying to persuade the company and eBay that, since they have broken their agreement, I want to cancel the order. At one point, the supplier told me that Parcelforce would leave the parcel at a post office for me and that I could collect it. In my experience, this is a favourite Parcelforce trick.

I wrote back and said that I didn't think the parcel they were supposed to be delivering would fit in my bicycle saddlebag.

I must say I am very disappointed with eBay.

When Amazon screws up, the company apologies and does its best to put things right. I always get the impression that they are on the side of the consumer. With eBay, I have the feeling that the company is on the side of the seller and not the buyer. I'm going to try to find a garden centre where I can buy another strimmer.

Incidentally, it is rather worrying that so much mail now has to be signed for.

Even items which are worth only a pound or two have to be signed for if they are sent out by eBay.

Amazon seems happy to leave parcels by the door or in a shed but almost everything sent out on eBay requires a signature. And that inevitably means problems and delays.

8

(Devon)

A local farmer is taking full advantage of the fact that farm vehicles do not need to be taxed or to have number plates. He uses his tractor to take his wife to the shops. Moreover, since there is no number plate he can park the darned thing wherever he likes without any risk of being given a ticket. I think we should buy a tractor. After all, with the average speed on motorways as low as it is, travelling by tractor will not be slower than travelling by Bentley.

A campaign, led by a television game show host called Jeremy Paxman, wants people over the age of 70 to be disenfranchised unless they are still earning enough to pay tax. The fact that they may have paid tax for half a century is ignored.

A logical extension of this policy would be that only taxpayers should be allowed to vote and that the unemployed should be deprived of their vote unless or until they find employment and start paying tax. I wonder if that is what Mr Paxman has in mind.

The plumber who was responsible for our roof space flood never returned. This was probably wise of him.

A new plumber came today. He looked at everything that needs doing (we are acquiring new problems by the day, many of which are souvenirs of the work done by the plumber who disappeared) and told us that he would come back tomorrow to do the work.

He seemed about twelve-years-old, maybe a little younger, and was accompanied by a mate of about ten. They reminded us of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn except that they were much better fed and less hungry for work. Foolishly thinking that since they had arrived they were about to start work, Antoinette gave each of them a can of Coca Cola and a wrapped chocolate biscuit (but no fancy hat or little toy). When they left, clutching their unopened cans and chocolate biscuits, I felt rather curiously resentful. They looked like kids leaving a birthday party, clutching their goodies.

I have decided that 90% of the hassle involved in doing up a house is simply trying to get people to do the things I am quite prepared to pay them to do. I feel as though great chunks of my life are being stolen by useless companies and tradesmen.

'I'll ring you later on with a time for tomorrow,' said the plumber, as he left. That, of course, is what most of them say.

When the plumber and his mate had roared off to paint a white picket fence somewhere, a man from British Gas turned up. He looked like the expert he claimed to be. Instead of a bag of tools, he carried a large computer bag and had the stern look of a man who knows his way around a central heating system and whose dreams are all of valves and ignition systems.

He had come to arrange for the installation of a new boiler and heating system (the whole sorry saga goes on and on and I have lost the plot pretty well completely) but the minute he arrived he told us that it would be impossible to fit a gas boiler because we have single piping (which is, at its narrowest one and a half inches across) and cast iron radiators. He said that our Edwardian system would destroy a modern boiler within an hour. He explained that modern houses (the ones which are built for couples who want to know that all the dust is their own and which are built according to EU specifications using cardboard for the walls, and destined not to last as long as the owners' mortgages) have double piping.

As we grew increasingly depressed, he told us that we would have to spend £20,000 tearing out around two dozen beautiful old existing radiators (which suit the house perfectly), ripping up our wood block flooring and running pipes through, around and over just about every floor and wall in the house.

We would then have to equip the house with a modern system if we wanted to have gas central heating.

Since he was a British Gas expert, our hopes slumped.

The man then stayed and talked for the best part of an hour about his house, his cars, his family and his talents and wisdom. He told us so much, and in such precise detail, that I can still remember what sort of furniture he has in the drawing room. And the size of it.

We all like to talk about ourselves but there are times, especially when you are there to provide expert advice, that it is a good idea to take a little interest in the person you are supposed to be helping.

He reminded us very much of the plumber we had narrowly avoided hiring to do our bathrooms.

When he poked at the peeling white paint on one of the radiators we noticed that the paint underneath was gold and seemed to be in good condition.

We will clearly have to invest in some wire brushes and carefully remove the flaking white paint so that we can enjoy the golden radiators as the original architect intended.

I have no doubt that the first owner of the house, who commissioned the building for himself and his family, was very proud of his central heating system and his golden radiators and we will be proud of them too.

After the British Gas man had gone I rang Worcester Bosch, the manufacturers of the boiler we had hoped to have installed.

Their technical department told us that there was no problem at all with fitting one of their boilers onto a single pipe system.

I also checked out what the British Gas man had told us on the Internet.

I am now confident that he was talking absolute bollocks. So confident, indeed, that we rang a local central heating firm and commissioned them to fit a gas boiler to the house.

They told me that I would also have to find someone to fit a gas meter. I'd sort of forgotten about the damned gas meter. In fact, I had stupidly rather thought that the people providing us with gas might glue a meter into the system somewhere.

I had never thought that having gas central heating fitted would be easy but it is even harder than I had feared and requires patience, determination and perseverance.

And, as everyone keeps reminding us, we still have to find an electrician prepared to fit an earth wire to the pipe supplying the gas.

Why the gas supply fitters cannot do this is quite beyond me though I suppose that if they did this it would make the process easier for customers and that is never ever a priority for any utility company.

I next telephoned a gas company.

This is always a tiring and annoying business for when they have got you on hold (and probably paying a premium rate for the call) big companies usually play dire music interspersed with exhortations to go to their website.

Whenever I hear these little pre-recorded announcements breaking into the music, I always think that a real person has come on the line at last so I stop whatever I am doing and listen. So my time on hold is always wasted.

(Utility companies are terrible for doing this but none of them is as bad as the tax office whose average answering time is now well over three weeks. People are born, get married and die while trying to ring the tax people.)

I chose a gas supplier called Eon for no reason other than that they already supply us with electricity. That is no reason at all but it would, I thought, at least prevent the gas supplier from constantly nagging us to take electricity from them and prevent the electricity supplier from constantly nagging us to take their gas.

I very much admire people who switch their utility companies every month or two in order to save money. (And when I discovered that the average consumer paying a standard energy tariff is being overcharged by £329 a year, I realised why they do it. We did switch our gas and electricity once and I was told that we had saved £1,500 a year.) However, I really don't have the energy let alone the time to do this.

I rang the number they give on their website for people to want to begin a new gas supply and who need to have a gas meter fitted.

'You can't move to us unless you have a meter,' said the woman to whom I had spoken, after she had demanded my date of birth. I told her it was nice of them to want to send me a birthday card so early on in our relationship.

'What?' she demanded.

I repeated the stuff about the birthday card.

She snorted and said she needed my birth date before she could do anything else and she needed it in order to protect my data.

I'm not sure how giving my birth date to complete strangers helps keep my data private and secure but I gave it to her because I know from past experience that if you don't then the conversation will end there. I'm not entirely sure that the date I gave her was the date on which I was born because I sometimes give Desperate Dan's birthday details, just for fun.

'How do you expect me to protect your data if you don't give it to me?' demanded one sassy utility employer on a previous occasion. I was defeated by her sense of logic and I know that in such battles I will always be on the losing side.

Although I had explained what I needed, the Eon woman clearly hadn't listened to a word I'd said and was for some bizarre reason convinced that I just wanted to switch gas suppliers.

'We can't deliver gas to you unless you have a meter,' she said when she'd eventually realised what we needed.

I said I understood this and sympathised with the company's position. I explained that I very much wanted to have a meter fitted.

'Why do you want a gas meter if you don't have any gas?' she demanded. I'm sure this query made sense to her but I was beginning to feel as if I had wandered into a Marx Brothers film.

'We've got an oil boiler at the moment…,' I began, intending to go on to explain that the boiler didn't work and that for simplicity we wanted to switch to gas. But before I could explain any further she interrupted. 'A gas meter is no good for oil central heating,' she explained, very kindly, as though I was clearly trying her patience and she found this difficult to disguise. 'You'll need an oil meter,' she said.

'Oil doesn't work quite like that,' I said. 'The oil people send a tanker round with the stuff and the driver pumps it into our tanks. But if the weather is bad he won't be able to get up or down our hill and so we won't get any oil delivered.'

'Well you need to talk to them,' she said firmly. 'We don't do oil.' There was a pause. 'And anyway the weather is very nice at the moment.'

'Please don't hang up,' I said. I had fought hard to speak to this woman. I'd had to fight my way through the usual litany of 'Press 1 if you would like to be ignored', 'Press 2 if you would like to be misunderstood', 'Press 3 if you are a masochist and want to be made to feel like an idiot' and so on and on. And then there had been the long, long wait with the voice constantly interrupting me with reassurances about my call being important and patronising guff about all their agents and consultants being busy dealing with other customers.

Eventually, after a few hours, I managed to persuade her that we needed both a gas meter and a gas supply.

'Why didn't you say so in the first place?' she demanded, clearly fed up with having to deal with a drivelling idiot and even now clearly finding it difficult to come to terms with the whole concept; something she obviously found puzzling and possibly of dubious legality.

I resisted the temptation to say that I had said what I had wanted a day or two earlier when the conversation had started but agreed that I would wait while she asked a colleague if it were indeed possible to supply gas and a meter to someone who had neither.

After a long delay, during which I listened to the entire works of an unknown composer, one of those who now specialises in providing faux music for imprisoned listeners, another Eon agent or consultant came onto the line and took my details. She also wanted to send me a birthday card.

When she had finished doing all this, she told me that I could not make an appointment for a gas meter because they would not fit a gas meter until we had some gas to go through it.

Since I had previously been led to believe that we could not have any gas unless we had a meter for it to go though, I found this rather disturbing. It looked as if we might well be heading for a classic Catch 22 situation.

I told her we had a date when we would have our gas supply connected and that there was some delay in having this work done because the council insisted on having an eight week delay because connecting the supply would require digging up a small lane which no one else ever uses because it is an 'access only' road and we are the only people who need to use the lane in order to have access to our driveway.

The new consultant then made it clear that they were not prepared to consider my request to have gas connected and a gas meter fitted. The problem was that without any gas supply there wasn't any point in having a meter installed and without a meter they couldn't and wouldn't provide us with any gas.

I said I wanted to make a formal complaint.

This is always a good thing to do.

Even when you have nothing to complain about it is a good thing to do when dealing with large companies. It keeps the staff on their toes.

The next person I spoke to was a complaints resolution officer. She listened to my complaint and told me that they could not do anything because this was the way they did things. 'Does that now resolve your complaint?' she asked.

I said it didn't resolve my complaint at all and that I wanted my complaint to be dealt with at a higher level.

She said that there was no chance of their processes being changed in time to make any difference to me. I said I realised that but I hoped that my complaint would lead to a change which might aid a customer at some time in the future. The complaints resolution officer seemed surprised by this. The idea of doing something because it might help someone else was clearly an alien concept. She said she wanted me to wait while she put me through to another complaints officer.

I'm afraid that I then said I had to go because someone was at the door.

In truth there was no one at the door but the conversation was driving me closer to sanity than I find comfortable and I was feeling so exhausted that I felt I had to go and eat something containing sugar, fat or some other forbidden luxury.

So we may soon have a gas supply pipe and we may even have a gas boiler but there will be no meter and nothing to go through the pipe or feed the boiler.

I told Antoinette that I was very pleased that we had bought the electric fires.

While I had been enjoying myself chatting to the entire staff of Eon Antoinette, consumed by curiosity, had emailed the plumber who had broken our ceiling and who had never bothered to come back. We had no intention of ever using him again but we were curious to see what excuse he would come up with.

The missing plumber told her that he had had to go to the North of England for a family emergency and that he had been unable to ring us because he had left his mobile phone behind. He had, he said, rung several times on his return to apologise. I know he was lying because our house telephone keeps a record of calls and there is no record that he tried to ring. It is, I suppose, a coincidence that Friday was a sunny day and the children were off school.

This absolute bastard did untold damage to our house, cost us money and, more importantly, cost us a great deal of time. He caused a delay of about a fortnight in the work on the house.

If he sends us a bill for the very modest amount of work he did do, I will send him a financial demand for the damage he did and the inconvenience he caused.

It is clear that finding decent workmen is becoming harder and harder. Price is no longer the major factor. Today the problem is finding someone prepared to leave their TV set and go out and do some work.

I blame the tax system, invented by Gordon the Moron and perpetuated by George the Gormless which gives free money to people who work just half a week.

By 9.30 p.m., the plumber who was supposed to be coming to fix the lavatory still hadn't telephoned. So I rang him.

'I was just about to ring you,' he said, obviously having learned early on in his career the correct words to use on this sort of occasion. 'I'll be with you between 12 and 1 tomorrow lunchtime.'

Meanwhile, I cannot get away from lavatories. Every news item I look at on the Internet has ads for lavatories included within it. These ads have clearly been paid for by the company from which we bought our loos. Do they think I have an insatiable demand for lavatories? Don't they realise that I'm collecting mattresses and beds and not lavatories?

Antoinette says it will rain tomorrow.

Her weather forecasts are always absolutely accurate. She does it by counting the woodlice crawling around in the house. If there are lots of woodlice around then it means that it will rain within 24 hours. The Met Office forecasts would be a lot more trustworthy if the forecasters just counted the woodlice in their offices.

9

(Devon)

This morning I received yet another email from an alleged writer telling me how much he likes my website and asking if I would publish on it one of his specially written articles – for no charge.

I've been receiving emails saying pretty much exactly the same thing for months now. I wrote back to the first one, telling him that I never carry outside material on my website (and nor do I carry ads) but thanking him for the offer and wishing him well.

I now realise that this is some sort of scam. The idea, I suspect, is that I publish an article on my website but don't realise that the article contains embedded links or advertising promoting products or other websites.

The Internet is little more than a huge playground for confidence tricksters.

Still, that's perhaps not too surprising. There are a lot of buffoons around these days. Today, I saw a photograph of the office occupied by Ted Sarandos, the Chief Content Office of a company called Netflix. Mr Sarandos has a window featuring a quote from the *Godfather Part III*. The quote is: 'Never hate your enemies, it effects your judgement.'

You'd think, would you not, that even if Mr Sarandos can't spell he would have an employee somewhere who can. Maybe no one dares to tell him. Anyway, he knows now.

At 1.30 the plumber still hadn't arrived, so I telephoned him.

'I was just setting off to come to your place,' he said, sticking firmly to the plumber's book of Common Prayer.

An hour or so later he arrived. He brought his little pal with him again.

This is, I think, at least the fifth attempt we have made to get the new lavatory installed in my bathroom. The old lavatory still sits there, looking increasingly permanent, and the new one, together with its cistern, piping, ball valve and seat takes up much of the rest of the bathroom.

After sawing away at a pipe in one of the bathrooms, the plumber suddenly emerged from the room screaming 'Asbestos!' at the top of his voice.

He slammed the bathroom door shut and raced down the stairs. His little pal raced after him.

I was sitting in the conservatory, working on my next Bilbury book, and I hurtled into the hallway just in time to see them disappear outside.

I found them both in the courtyard, white faced, wide-eyed and trembling. They were both coughing and taking deep breaths in attempts to defer the inevitably wheezy deaths they clearly regarded as imminent.

I could feel my own heart racing. Asbestos is worse than dry rot, wet rot, woodworm and termites. If you have asbestos then you end up with men in space suits and officials with clipboards.

I bent down and looked at the old lavatory they had hauled down with them. It was an ordinary lavatory made out of whatever it is that lavatories are made of and there were no signs of any asbestos whatsoever.

I have, in the past, renovated two houses and an office building which included asbestos.

One of them appeared to be have been built almost entirely out of asbestos. The interior walls and ceilings were certainly asbestos. I know about asbestos.

However, this was a false alarm.

It appeared that when the young plumber had cut through the pipe which connected the lavatory to the world outside, he had been alarmed by the dust which had been produced and had assumed that if there was dust there must be asbestos. My conviction that he was not terribly experienced in such matters was confirmed.

'I cut into it,' sobbed the plumber who was now close to hysterics, 'I breathed it in. I'm going to die aren't I?' He had aged dramatically and now looked to be in his early twenties.

'It isn't asbestos and you aren't going to die,' I assured him. 'Panic over.'

He looked at me. 'Isn't it?'

'No.'

'Are you sure?'

'I'm sure.'

He slowly began to relax and breathe a little easier. The wheezing abated and his pallor receded. 'You're sure?' His little pal, who had also been pale, wheezy and distraught, started to look healthier and happier.

'I'm sure.'

'That's good. It's just an ordinary lavatory?'

'It's just an ordinary lavatory.'

The plumber stood up, now far braver and happier. He strode past me and walked back to the house. As he entered, he beamed at Antoinette. 'Panic over!' he said proudly. He strode up the staircase, his little pal trailing behind. 'Panic over!' repeated the little pal faithfully.

When they had disappeared back into the bathroom to install the replacement lavatory I turned to Antoinette, who was still standing beside me at the bottom of the stairs.

'There's one thing about doing up an old house,' I murmured softly, 'I get plenty of copy for my next Diary.' I paused and felt my own pulse. The excitement of the whole incident had given me a decent cardiovascular workout. 'All I need to do,' I added, 'is live long enough to type it all in.'

'Do you think we should ask them to help us with the double glazing?' asked Antoinette.

We need someone to help us carry the secondary double glazing out of the garage and back into the drawing room.

These vast acres of glass, all of which were specially made, were removed by, or rather on behalf of, the previous owners of the house. They apparently planned to take the double glazing with them to their small flat (heaven knows what they were going to do with it). They were dissuaded from this seemingly senseless plan by our giving them a wodge of notes.

The glass is so heavy that Antoinette and I cannot possibly move it and so we need strong arm help.

I thought for a moment about asking the plumber and his little pal if they would help us with this if I kept them on the clock.

'I honestly don't think they are strong enough,' I said sadly. 'We will have to wait for some more muscular help to arrive. Hopefully we'll get some grown-ups to help with the central heating.'

10

(Gloucestershire)

A week or so ago I ordered an advanced Mandarin language course for Antoinette. It is part of her birthday present.

(Don't tell anyone but I have also bought her an accordion. I have a vision of her singing songs in Mandarin and accompanying herself on the accordion. We should clean up in the busking business.)

The company which produces the course, sent it from America by FedEx which appears to be having a great deal of difficulty in delivering the package.

At first they claimed (quite wrongly) that they didn't have the correct address and so couldn't deliver the item.

Having sent the company all the usual details (address, telephone number, inside leg measurement, shoe size, hat size, glove size and information about which side I hang) I was then advised to telephone Fedex to make sure that the parcel was going to be delivered.

So I telephoned the number I was given and found myself speaking to someone in Mumbai in India.

The woman to whom I spoke, didn't seem to have any idea about anything very much and after being put on hold for 19 minutes (and discovering for the umpteenth time that trying to shave while holding a telephone is not easy) I gave up and rang back a little later.

Once again I found myself talking to an employee in India.

Neither of these telephone operators had the ability to telephone the Gloucester offices of FedEx to find out if the parcel was going to be delivered. I was told that it would probably be delivered because they usually do deliver parcels with which they are entrusted.

So I will have to stay in all day, and make sure we don't miss hearing the doorbell or the telephone, in the hope that FedEx will do what they are being paid to do.

The whole business of delivering stuff seems to have got rather out of control recently. Companies which used to be in the delivery business but which now describe themselves as 'logistics specialists' (in the same way that rat catchers have become 'Special Rodent Exterminators', sales reps have become 'Product Consultants' and cafes will soon be known as 'Hunger Appeasement Solution Facilities') are having difficulty in coping with the huge mail order demand that has been created by the Internet.

Deliveries are scheduled, abandoned, rescheduled and then forgotten about.

Everything, it seems, now has to be signed for (partly because the delivery drivers, even for companies like FedEx, are usually freelance operatives who only get paid when an item is delivered) and the international nature of the mail order business means even more complications. I recently ordered a can of WD40 because some screws had rusted and were unmoveable and it is difficult to find an ironmonger these days. The can, which cost a couple of quid, came from Germany and was delivered by the carrier DHL.

The logistics business is so badly run that I predict that it will not be soon before Internet shopping begins to lose its attraction and people will go back to shopping in whatever is left of the High Street.

Book and record shops could well make a come-back.

I saw on the news today that a well-known gay actor called Ian McKellern is reported as saying that gays are internationalist and should, therefore, support the EU and its immigration policies.

This is, in my view, 824,462 on a list of stupid comments to come out of the whole referendum debate.

Does McKellern really not understand that the majority of the immigrants being pushed into the UK by the EU are Muslim and that it is a basic Muslim tenet that homosexuality should be banned and homosexuals punished and ideally beheaded?

If Britain stays in the EU then it is certain that homosexuality will be illegal again within ten years.

Electors really should be made to take some sort of intelligence test, as well as a knowledge test, before being allowed to vote in the EU Referendum.

I am convinced that the country is now divided into two.

On the one hand there are well-informed patriots who want Britain to leave the EU.

On the other hand there are the idiots, the fascists, the neo Nazis and the rich liberal lefties who want their cheap nannies and gardeners and who have absolutely no idea what membership of the EU entails.

A builder came to look at our back porch in Gloucestershire. He took one look at the base of the posts which support the porch and announced that they were indeed as unsafe as I had suspected.

Disagreeing with the surveyor who had pronounced the porch entirely safe, he told us that we should not go out through the back door until he and an engineer had put two metal support props in position to hold up the roof.

This is agonising because Percy, our tame and friendly pheasant, and now very much a member of the family, has spent the entire afternoon waiting to be fed and I cannot get out of the house to give him any seeds.

I realise that the builder has a vested interest in pronouncing the porch 'unsafe' but since daylight is clearly visible through the base of one of the supporting pillars I am inclined to believe him rather than the surveyor who pronounced it 'perfectly safe and suitable for another century at least'.

We did not have a survey on our new house in Devon for the simple reason that surveyors' reports tend to be gloomy but unreliable. The report invariably includes photos of unpleasant looking wallpaper, cracked window frames and bits of weed in guttering but often seems to miss huge problems like dry rot and major subsidence cracks.

The last few surveyors' reports I've seen have contained almost as many pages of disclaimer as of information ('the author of this report takes no responsibility for any comments made herein and no recommendations are made as to the suitability or otherwise of the property as a home or investment').

There are always pages of unwanted personal commentary on the interior decoration ('the kitchen is decorated in a foul 1970s style and desperately cries out for redecoration and one of the bathroom suites is a hideous shade of maroon and was doubtless purchased by a previous owner suffering from some diminution of their visual sense') and, most useless of all, describing the weather on the day the survey was performed (‘there was a slight breeze from the East and a few drops of rain fell half an hour after our arrival, making it impossible to examine the outside of the building’), but there is equally commonly nothing whatsoever about the electrics, the plumbing or the central heating (‘specialist advice on these areas is strongly recommended and the names and contact details of suitable independent professionals who will send me £50 for including their details here are listed at the end of this report’).

Eventually, this afternoon, a very nice FedEx delivery man telephoned and then arrived with the missing parcel.

He told me that, like many in the delivery business, he is a freelance and that he was glad that I was in because he doesn’t get paid unless I sign for the delivery.

The EU employment legislation which has pushed supermarkets into hiring staff on a contract basis seems to have done the same to the logistics industry.

Once again the EU has, though a failure to understand how the real world works, made things far, far worse than they ever were.

11

(Gloucestershire)

We didn’t have our Gloucestershire boiler serviced last year because we were fed up with having to call the heating engineers back the following day.

Whenever they visit, something always goes wrong. The boiler stops working, a radiator starts to leak or something else disastrous happens.

Besides, we don’t have our TV set serviced annually and although I’m fairly ignorant about these things I’m pretty confident that the television set is infinitely more complicated than a modern, electronically controlled gas boiler.

British Gas were very upset by our failure to take advantage of the service we pay for and they sent me a number of letters asking me to make an appointment. So I suppose that we’d better get it done this year. Antoinette has brilliantly suggested that when I telephone I make two appointments, on consecutive days. On the first day, the engineer can service the boiler. On the second day, another engineer can mend the boiler and make it work again.

My main problem when ringing certain parts of British Gas is that the entire staff appear to be Scottish. It may be a stretch but I’m guessing that their call centre is based in or close to Glasgow.

I expect it is my fault but I do sometimes have great difficulty understanding what is said when I am listening to someone from Glasgow. I have to keep asking them to speak more slowly (just as though I were in France talking to someone from our French gas supplier).

I worry that this may appear racist in some way.

I have mentioned this to other people and been surprised to discover that several folk of my acquaintance have felt that it is easier to understand the staff working in call centres in India or the Philippines than it is to understand the staff working in Glasgow.

Antoinette gave a copy of her wonderful book *My Quirky Cotswold Garden* to an acquaintance whom she thought might enjoy it. He thanked her and said that he would let her know what he thought of it when he had read it.

Wow. That’s akin to telling new parents that you’ll let them know what you think of their baby when you’ve seen it. Everyone now feels they are expected to be a critic.

No one wants a reader to tell them what they thought about a book unless they guarantee to say something marvellous.

The publishing industry is shouting very loudly about the fact that the sales of physical books have risen in the last twelve months. What no one has mentioned is the fact that the sale of ‘real’ books has gone up only because of the popularity of adult colouring-in books and dot-to-dot puzzles. These books are obviously unsuitable for publication as ebooks and it is these which are responsible for the apparent upsurge in the sale of physical books. W.H.Smith, the stationer and retailer of overpriced greeting cards, is apparently making huge profits out of selling these wretched books and the sad, sorry, desperate, souls whose lives are so miserable that they need to buy them.

There are, it seems to me, more stupid and senseless people around than ever before.

I’m thinking of writing a series of books beginning with ‘How to Make Toast’ and ‘More How to Make Toast’ (which will include details of how to make two pieces of toast at once).

It should be a huge success.

12

(Gloucestershire)
Occasionally I miss not running my publishing business. And then I see something which reminds me of the horrors of trying to run any sort of business in Britain these days. Today, for example, I saw a section from the UK's Employment Relations Act 1999: 'A person carrying on an employment business shall not request or directly or indirectly receive a fee from a second person for providing services (whether by the provision of information or otherwise) for the purposes of finding or seeking to find a third person, with a view to the second person becoming employed by the first person and acting for and under the control of the third person.'

My eyes still glaze over when I read stuff like that. What highly paid idiots write this gibberish? Does anyone in the world really understand it?

It would all be a joke except for the fact that all this legislation comes equipped with huge legal penalties. Ignore or break any bit of legislation and an employer can (and probably will) find himself subject to unlimited fines and prison sentences. Ignoring the bureaucracy is punished more severely than murder in modern Britain.

More cheerfully, I was today reminded that Charlie Chaplin once entered a Charlie Chaplin lookalike contest in Monaco and came third. And Graham Greene entered a 'write like Graham Greene' competition and came second. His brother, who was Director General of the BBC won.

13
(Gloucestershire)
My Vodafone mobile telephone doesn't work in Gloucestershire because there is no signal but today we went to Cirencester, the centre of which has been turned into a building site. Maybe treasure seekers are hunting for pirate gold along the main street.

Driven by wild enthusiasm I tried to use my phone.

Alas, the phone didn't work and a voice told me that I was not able to make a call because there was no money in the phone.

However, when I rang Vodafone's automatic balance checking whatever it told me that I had £38.47 credit. I tried to use the phone again and this time the 'World's Worst Phone Company' (as we Vodafone users affectionately refer to the company) sent me a text to tell me that I couldn't use the phone because I didn't have any money in it.

Instead of simply stamping on the phone and throwing it into a rubbish bin, I then made the silly mistake of trying to ring Vodafone to ask what the hell was going on.

I don't think I have ever had so much trouble getting through to a live person as I had getting through to someone at Vodafone. They have the worst press 1, press 2, press 3 system on the entire planet.

No company anywhere else in the universe can possibly have an automated phone system which is worse than the one that Vodafone has designed. The only option missing is 'Would you like to strangle a Vodafone employee? Press 648 and we will send one round.'

After 38 minutes, I found myself talking to a chap in South Africa who asked me how I was and seemed startled when I told him that I had been well until I had tried to ring Vodafone but that I was now not so well.

He then admitted that I had been put through to the wrong bit of South Africa so he transferred my call to a woman somewhere else, probably deep in the Orange Free State.

She and some technical guys then messed around with stuff and eventually admitted that there had been a technical error on their side and that my phone would work perfectly if I switched it off and then switched it back on again. I told her that sadly the phone wouldn't work even if they put 1,000 volts through it because there is no signal in most of rural Gloucestershire but that I would hope that it might work when next I managed to find myself standing next to one of their masts.

I did not receive an apology.

Not even a mild 'sorry about that'.

Vodafone, I assume, is proud of its reputation as the 'World's Worst Phone Company' and determined to retain a well-deserved title of which it is clearly proud.

Am I being unduly cynical in wondering if they do this on purpose – knowing that it is so difficult to get the money reinstated that most people will give up? Or that, perhaps, elderly phone owners will be confused and believe that their phone really is empty of money? And how much, I wonder, did all that telephoning cost me? (I forgot to look.) Would a major global phone company do such disreputable things? Would a wasp sting if you sat on it?

Whenever anyone over 60 starts to forget things it is easy to slap a diagnosis of Alzheimer's onto them. Now that GPs are paid a bonus for every patient they diagnose with dementia, the figures are soaring. And although less than two thirds of patients with dementia have Alzheimer's, the reality is that Alzheimer's is the default diagnosis.

Thousands of patients are given the wrong diagnosis and the profession's official attitude seems to be that it doesn't matter. But it does matter because although Alzheimer's can't be cured, there are some forms of dementia that can be treated and cured.

Doctors can be remarkably stupid sometimes.

On the radio the other day I heard a doctor say that all old people take pills. What rubbish. What he means is that all the old people he sees take pills. What he doesn't realise is that the old people he sees go to see him because they want him to prescribe more of the pills he has told them they need to take. Many of the people for whom he prescribes pills probably don't need them. And he doesn't realise that the old people who don't take pills don't go to see him.

This idiocy reminded me of psychiatrists who claim, with apparent sincerity, that all transvestites are suffering from psychological problems. The truth, of course, is that all the transvestites they see are suffering from psychological problems but that doesn't mean that all transvestites are suffering from psychological problems, because they don't see all transvestites. It is as daft as saying that all gardeners are suffering from psychological problems because all the gardeners they see are suffering from psychological problems.

14

(Gloucestershire)

A reader has written to complain about my book *Secrets of Paris* which she purchased from a charity shop. She says that she has been to Paris three times, on one occasion spending a whole week there, and that she is, therefore, very knowledgeable about the city. She says that I am wrong to make fun of the Parisians because they are all polite, hard-working and attentive people. I am tempted to write back to point out that the people she met were undoubtedly all working in the tourist industry (in hotels, restaurants, nightclubs and so on) and were, therefore, extremely unlikely to be Parisian or even French. It is a pretty safe bet that if you meet a friendly, helpful and welcoming waiter then he (or she) will not be a native Parisian. Believe me, the Parisians actually pride themselves on being rude to foreigners.

But if I do write back and say all this, she will write nasty things about my books on review sites so I have instead written and thanked her and apologised for my thoughtless and inaccurate remarks, doubtless gleaned from having spent too many years living in the city.

I am constantly surprised by the number of people who do not realise that making fun of the French is a traditional and quite harmless English pastime. It was Samuel Taylor Coleridge who wrote: 'Frenchmen are like gunpowder, each by itself smutty and contemptible, but mass them together and they are terrible indeed!'

Our relationship with France is, and always has been, a love-hate relationship. Sir Philip Sidney, who described France as 'that sweet enemy', knew of what he spoke.

Even the French have difficulty in putting up with their fellow countrymen.

In 1792, Chamfort, who was keeper of the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris and who was disgusted by the folly and corruption in French society before the Revolution said: 'A man must swallow a toad every morning if he wishes to be sure of finding nothing still more disgusting before the day is over.'

I think M. Chamfort's stricture remains a good one.

The fact is that the French can, like the people of every other country, reach both the heights and the depths.

One of my joys is to thank a shopkeeper when I've bought something. He or she will invariably insist: 'Non, c'est moi qui vous remercie'. I then thank them again and watch with delight as they bend at the waist and repeat their insistence that it is they who thanks me.

15

(Gloucestershire)

Cheltenham is, like Cirencester, also being dug up.

The whole of the main shopping centre is once again a dirty, grungy mess awash with drills and compactors and men with earplugs. The shoppers don't have earplugs and nor, indeed, do the poor sods working in the shops.

This is, I believe, the 94th time that the once neatly paved shopping centre has been dug up. The city centre looks as I imagine Coventry must have looked by the end of World War II.

I bought two more cans of a foul smelling product called Old Spice which I can use to spray on our rubbish bags. Old Spice proves particularly effective at deterring foxes and badgers who might otherwise be tempted to tear open our bags.

Not many things embarrass me but I am, I confess, always rather embarrassed when I go to the till carrying these products.

A few months ago, Antoinette and I were in a shop somewhere and I suddenly sniffed.

'What's that funny smell?' I asked. 'It reminds me of something.'

'It's the nasty stuff you spray on the rubbish bags,' said Antoinette sotto voce, 'the salesman is wearing it.'

'Ah,' I said to the salesman who had twigged that we were talking about him. 'You're wearing Old Spice, eh?'

The salesman was pleased that I had recognised his scent.

Today, we stood for a few minutes and watched a busker.

He was singing and playing a guitar and using a CD player to provide his backing music. Or at least he appeared to be singing and playing a guitar. But at one point he stopped playing and singing in order to adjust the strap which was holding up his guitar. When he did this the singing and the guitar playing continued uninterrupted. Antoinette had by this time made a generous donation, not realising that she was actually paying good money to listen to Eric Clapton circa 1978.

An hour or so later I happened to be passing again when I saw the man carrying his equipment and heading into the local car park. Curious, I followed him. He got into a brand new Volvo estate car. Either busking is good business these days or he is a schoolteacher earning extra tax free money from innocent passers-by.

Are buskers expected to need the money they are given? Or are they merely street entertainers, being paid for the music they play?

I don't know. But, either way, I'm old-fashioned enough for it to seem to me entirely reasonable to expect a busker to play the instrument he is holding rather than simply mime to someone else's recording.

16

(Devon)

I read this morning that there's yet another new cure for cancer on the way. When I wrote medical columns, I tried to keep track of all the new research promising cures for cancer, arthritis, Alzheimer's disease and so on. There is usually a cure on the way for at least one of these disorders every month. The truth is that each one of these so-called cures is usually no more than an attempt by a ruthless scientist to obtain a grant for his research work. These scientists don't give a damn for the fact that they are creating false hope. All they want is a grant extension.

More cheerily, there are signs that the cancer establishment is at last beginning to take immunotherapy seriously. When I first wrote about immunotherapy, a few decades ago, the largest British cancer charity did all it could to destroy me since it preferred chemotherapy – the form of treatment for which its partners in the drug industry have a natural penchant.

(It was the Cancer Research Campaign, one of Britain's biggest cancer charities, which attacked me and a website which I had constructed entitled Immunesystem.co.uk. The charity was unhappy with my suggestion that there was a link between cancer and the body's immune system and the website was effectively destroyed by their ability to persuade the *Daily Mirror* to publicise their disapproval.)

Traditional methods of attacking cancer depend upon battering the hell out of the body with a drug, using radiation to poison the mutant cells or cutting the malignant cells out of the body with a knife.

These methods have always appeared to me to be crude and simplistic and it has not surprised me that they have, on the whole, failed pretty miserably to make a difference to mortality rates.

There have been occasional, largely fortuitous, successes and the cancer industry (which consists of the drug industry, the medical industry and the hugely rich cancer charities) has promoted these mild successes with great vigour. But it has always seemed to me that immunotherapy makes far more sense. Instead of attacking the cancer cells (a process which, particularly in the case of chemotherapy, means attacking the whole body) immunotherapy works by inspiring the body's immune system to be more aggressive in its own defence and to make sure that the aggression is efficient and effective and well-targeted.

A growing number of cancer experts now agree with my long held view that immunotherapy makes good sense. Even drug companies have now started testing immune-related cancer therapies so the big industry controlled charities will have to do so too.

After lunch, we drove to Bridport to test drive a Mitsubishi L200.

Our Ford Ranger truck is a worthy workhorse (you could get eight corpses in the back and this will be handy if we ever go into the undertaking business) and it has only done 30,000 miles (probably no more than is required to run it in nicely) but the gearbox is manual and the regular five hour queues on the M25 to Ebbsfleet are becoming painful.

My foot and knee actually become sore when I have put the truck into and out of first gear a few hundred times. (We always use the Ford when we go to the railway station because I just can't bring myself to leave the Bentley in an open, unprotected railway station car park.)

Plus, the Ford is noisy and leaf springs mean that the ride is bumpy to say the least. Worst of all it has the turning circle of an oil tanker and in order to turn it round at our seaside home I have to do a 571 point turn.

When we arrived at the Mitsubishi garage the salesman surprised me by handing me the key, telling me that he'd put plenty of fuel in the car and invited us to go for a test drive for a couple of hours or so. It turned out that England were about to play Wales and the match was due to be televised. The salesman was a mad keen football fan.

The Mitsubishi was a revelation. It feels like a luxury car, drives like a luxury car and has all the added extras associated with a luxury car. There is a rear camera to make reversing ridiculously easy, rain sensitive glass to turn on the windscreen wipers and a variety of four wheel drive options which can be turned on and off with the aid of a simple dial. The lights come on automatically if daylight fades, the wing mirrors turn in when the engine is turned off and the interior is filled with far more practical toys than either of our last BMWs.

And at the back, behind the rear seats, there is the trucky part of the vehicle, capable of carrying over a ton of books.

Best of all, the beast (it's called a Barbarian) has running boards which ensure that the doors and sides of the vehicle are well protected from clumsy neighbours when left in a car park. I can't imagine why they don't sell more of them. Why would anyone have a boring car when they could have one of these?

17

(Gloucestershire)

I am fed up with reading what a wonderful country we live in, what a wonderful world it is and how content and grateful we should all be. This sanctimonious, sugar coated, self-satisfied smugness comes now in waves from members of the metropolitan elite, MPs and commentators and well-off folk who never have to stand in queues, never try to get their children into a school where English is the main language, who never have to wait a year for an essential X-ray and don't have to cope with living in a world which has been changed beyond recognition by the EU's immigration policies.

I sat in the Old Restoration in Cheltenham listening to a couple of workmen sitting behind me. Since I was facing away from them they ignored me, on the not entirely reliable assumption that if you can't see someone's face then they can't hear what you are saying. People always do this in pubs and cafés.

'I can understand them all coming over to this country,' said one. 'They want the money.'

'But we've got to stop it,' said the other.

They agreed on this and they were desperate for the country to vote to leave the European Union.

I have, over the last few months, met and heard many people who loathe the European Union. But I have not met or heard one person talking of the EU with fondness or enthusiasm.

If the referendum vote fails to produce an 'Out' vote then the results will have been fiddled.

The medical establishment is now calling for illegal drugs to be decriminalised.

Oh, how the world changes. When I wrote books and articles suggesting this well over a quarter of a century ago I was vilified by the same parts of the medical establishment which now thinks it is a good idea.

18

(Gloucestershire)

Twenty years ago, it was crystal clear that the European Union fascist policies and fervent opposition to democracy would lead to an explosion of patriotism, nationalism and racism. I made such definitive predictions in my early books about the EU. This is now exactly what is happening.

All over Europe, nationalist parties are thriving as concerned and honest citizens protest at the EU's absurd and illogical policies.

The EU's ill thought immigration policies have led, quite predictably, to overcrowding, anger, resentment and, tragically, growing racism.

Many of those who support unlimited immigration and who talk glibly and unknowingly of the benefits of multiculturalism (a phenomenon which is, in reality, so rare as to be unknown) will, perhaps, one day rue their innocence and ignorance.

I suspect that women and gays, in particular, may one day find that tolerance sometimes means giving in to someone else's prejudice and discriminatory practices.

The vast majority of the EU's supporters are young people who have been indoctrinated by the EU's propaganda programmes in schools and colleges and who, because they have lived their short lives in the long shadow of the EU, do not realise just how much better life was before the EU came along.

The EU's other supporters are people who make a profit from its payouts and fat salaries and those who are cowed and fearful of the consequences of Britain regaining its independence.

Celebrities support the EU because they want to continue working for the BBC – itself a fully paid up supporter of the EU – and because they are desperate to be recognised in the honours lists.

It is also worth remembering that one of the biggest supporters of the EU is Goldman Sachs; possibly one of the most evil organisations in the history of commerce. How proud Cameron and Osborne must be to have Goldman Sachs on their side – and helping to fund the pro-EU campaign for its own narrow, greed-soaked purposes. The UK financial sector employs a staggering 750,000 people and around 10% of those will probably lose their jobs. It is hardly surprising that the most vocal supporters of the EU (and the ones giving most money to the Remain campaign) have been bankers such as Goldman Sachs.

I discovered today that George Bernard Shaw is the only person to have ever won both an Oscar and a Nobel Prize. Shaw got the Nobel Prize for Literature and an Oscar for his adapted screenplay of *Pygmalion.*

19

(Devon)

The photo company from which we buy pictures to use as book covers, called 123rf, has recently 'expired' the money I had put into my account. Apparently, I hadn't been buying photographs (and spending money) fast enough. So, without a by your leave, they retired my money and stuffed it in their own piggy bank.

And a phone company from which I purchased a new mobile phone took the money out of the phone because I hadn't been making enough calls and using up the money.

All this is obviously legal because they do it and obviously wouldn't if it wasn't.

This morning, our house in Devon was, as it now always seems to be, awash with plumbers, electricians and carpenters.

There were at least half a dozen vans and lorries parked on our driveway.

We were trying to keep up with who was knocking holes where and for what when someone rang the bell on our outside pedestrian gate. It turned out to be a neighbour who did not come to welcome us and to bring a cup of introductory sugar (as might, perhaps, have been expected) but to request that we chopped down some of our trees. The neighbour, a sun loving pensioner with skin the colour and texture of mahogany, turned out to be a representative of a block of flats which stands behind our house. He explained that some of our trees were impeding their view of the sea and asked if we would allow him to send in the tree surgeons to do some fairly heavy lopping. Neither of us knew what to say. We wanted to be good neighbours but with workmen scurrying around we didn't feel it was an appropriate time to ask for a large favour. We said we would ring him later.

Neither of us copes well with workmen and our skills in managing them run somewhere between poor and inadequate. I try to play the hard man and Antoinette constantly makes them drinks and gives them sandwiches and chocolate biscuits. This is not our clumsy variation on the old good cop/bad cop routine but merely a reflection of the fact that Antoinette is a good, kind and generous person.

Later that evening, when the workmen had all gone and we once again had temporary ownership of our home by the sea, we wandered down the driveway and took a look at the trees in question.

We decided that if some of the trees were pollarded, the result would be a very uneven look. Moreover, part of our garden, currently very private, would be overlooked by houses across the valley. I telephoned and gave the bad news. Some people don't like trees much and don't understand the concept of privacy. We like trees and privacy very much which is one of the many reasons why we bought the house in the first place.

20

(Devon)

The Internet means that musicians must now tour if they want to make any money. An acquaintance who is in the music business (he manages a tribute band called 'The Grateful Deaf' which works pubs and clubs) tells me that an artist who sells five million copies of a single will earn around $20,000 gross. Take manager's fees, taxes and other payments out of that and there isn't a lot left. If the band has five members, they get a fifth of what is left. And so a lot of artists who should be enjoying their dotage by working in the recording studio are now having to dig out their suitcases and schlep around the world trying to earn a living. Heaven knows how classical orchestras will cope. Without an income from their recordings they will, presumably, have to organise twice as many concerts.

Still, at least they have that option. The internet is also destroying authorship and not many authors are able to earn a living wandering around speaking and giving readings. I do notice however that a small number of authors are now organising theatre tours entitled ‘Spend an Evening with…’.

If I ever have to do this, I will sit on stage in an easy chair reading a book. Antoinette will be in a second chair, also reading a book. There will be a log fire burning backstage left. We will chat between ourselves occasionally and from time to time, we will consume a tasty morsel or two. After two or three hours, we will stand up and thank the audience for spending an evening with us.

The neighbour with the mahogany legs, the one whom I had telephoned about our trees, rang our bell again. Surprise, surprise he wanted to talk about trees. We were, once again, awash with workmen doing things to the fabric of our home and we really weren’t in the mood for an arboreal conference. We both felt guilty, but why is it that these days most of the neighbours we have always seem to want things from us? In Gloucestershire, the only time we ever see the neighbours is when they lie in wait for us, wanting us to cut down bushes or trees so that they will have a better view over the countryside and our garden.

The mahogany-legged neighbour told us that he had tried to ring us on several occasions. Feeling rather uncomfortable about this (for I had been deliberately ignoring the telephone), I muttered something about not having heard the bell ring. The fellow then pulled out his phone, proudly showed us our number now sitting in his phone’s memory, and pressed the button to call us. Our telephone, sitting in the butler’s pantry a few yards away, could be heard quite clearly.

‘We must have been outside when you called,’ said Antoinette very quickly.

The man looked at us disbelievingly.

When he’d gone, I rang the phone company and put a block on his number. Later on, Antoinette put a block on her own mobile phone number to see if it worked. It did. A disembodied voice told her that the owner of the number she was calling did not want her call and was so determined never to speak to her again that they had put a permanent block on her number. It seemed rather heavy handed, not to say tactless, but the phone company wouldn’t let me lift the bar without a password which I don’t have. So the neighbour will just have to be offended.

In the infamous words of Rhett Butler, I don’t give a damn.

21

(Devon)

The Princess and I went to a local DIY store to buy some essentials for our new home by the sea. We each had a small list and I couldn’t find anything on my list. Eventually I gave up, found Antoinette and handed her the list of things I was looking for. She immediately found an assistant and within three minutes I was clutching nearly all the things that had been on my list.

‘What else do you need?’ asked Antoinette.

‘Just a loo brush for the downstairs cloakroom.’

‘Behind you.’

I looked round and there they were. I plucked one off the shelf and added it to my armful of goods. I had, of course, forgotten to pick up a basket or take a trolley.

Once again, I had acquired evidence proving that women are infinitely better at shopping than men could ever be.

In the evening, we watched two new films. The Revenant and The Bone Tomahawk.

They were two of the gloomiest, dullest most depressing films I’ve ever seen.

And they are almost identical in their steadfast determination that humour is something to be avoided at all cost, that the warmth of the human spirit is something to eschew and that generosity and compassion are weaknesses to be exploited.

It wasn’t until we had watched the two films that we noticed the reviews on the front of the DVDs.

The review on The Revenant reads: ‘Brutal and Beautiful’ and it comes from *The Guardian*. The review on The Bone Tomahawk reads ‘Truly Superb’ and once again comes from *The Guardian*.

We usually try to avoid watching films which have been given good reviews by *The Guardian* because such films are invariably unwatchable, arty-farty rubbish.

I always enjoy the moment in the Bourne Ultimatum when the snotty little *Guardian* journalist gets shot at Waterloo Station because he is arrogant enough to think he knows everything and too stupid to know that he doesn’t. *Guardian* writers seem to understand very little about real life. They live in a privileged, subsidised world.

I love the Bourne movies but as Mr Bourne races around the world without any luggage or hand baggage where does he put his spare shirts, socks, underwear and passports, let alone the vast amounts of currency he carries? Just a thought.

Tomorrow we'll dig out a collection of films made by Frank Capra and Preston Sturges: proper films, with humour, optimism and compassion and an understanding of the human condition. I have no doubt that *The Guardian* would hate them.

The Guardian is the house journal for the sanctimonious and the hypocritical, the selfish and the narrow minded, the pretentious and the supercilious.

22

(Devon)

I see that the new Mayor of London, a Muslim man called Khan, wants to ban advertisements for lingerie and swimwear on London Underground. This will doubtless go down well with Muslims.

It is being argued that the ads the mayor wants to ban are exploitative. That is a trifle silly, of course, since all advertisements are, by definition, exploitative and manipulative. Ads for cures for baldness exploit the fact that bald men feel bad about their lack of hair. Adverts for deodorants exploit the fact that we worry that we smell unpleasantly. Is Khan suggesting that women are weaker, and more susceptible than men to exploitation and the wiles of the advertising copywriters? Surely that would be outrageously sexist? Daft women's rights activists who don't see where this is heading have welcomed the ban. They should take a look at Saudi Arabia et al to see how women are treated in countries where such ads are also doubtless banned. Wedge. Thin. Of. The. End. They should know that over 45% of Arab women are completely illiterate.

An article in the *Financial Times* suggests that it is never defensible to defy democratically elected rulers.

Really?

I much prefer the sentiments expressed in Thoreau's excellent small book: *On Civil Disobedience*.

The evidence that the *Financial Times* is wrong (as it usually is these days) is not difficult to find. But it can, of course, be summed up in one word: Hitler.

Maybe the *FT* writer doesn't realise this, but Hitler was elected democratically.

Is the newspaper really suggesting that the Germans who opposed Hitler were behaving immorally?

The *FT's* position might be a reasonable one if our civil liberties, freedom and privacy were not being constantly eroded by elected politicians who clearly care nothing about the people who elected them but care a good deal for the opinions of the lobbyists who represent big banks and other businesses.

Politicians have made so many bad decisions in recent years, and have made lying such a feature of power, that it is surely more accurate to say that it is the citizens duty to follow his conscience and to object to the laws, regulations and demands of the ever-increasing State.

Most electors have no idea how many new laws have been introduced in the last few decades. There are so many that I honestly do not believe that any individual can possibly get through a day without breaking at least one of them. Some of the laws are quite outrageous. So, for example, according to the EU's Charter of Rights, anyone accused of discrimination (based on race, sex, religion, disability, age or gender) will be presumed guilty and will be found so unless they can prove their innocence.

Those of us in Europe and America may appear to live in democratic countries but we are sleepwalking towards fascism and our countries have more in common with totalitarian states than with true democracies.

I have for some time regarded Australia as the last bastion of freedom of speech and the politically incorrect.

But, sadly, those days are apparently over and the Aussies have become as namby pamby as the rest of the world.

An Aussie sports person called Eddie McGuire said that he would give $10,000 to see a woman sports journalist dumped in a pool of freezing cold water and that he would pay more if she stayed under. It was fairly clearly what used to be called a joke – not a very good one it is true, but nevertheless an attempt at a joke.

But he could have hardly attracted more opprobrium if he had actually drowned the woman himself. The grovelling apology he gave was embarrassing.

How sad to see that Australia is now as pathetically humourless as the rest of the world.

Naturally, however, things are still distinctly worse in the UK.

Britain has become a haven for obsessives who spend their lives searching for ways to be offended. They air their grievances with much trumpeting.

Free speech is now just a memory. We have now reached a state in our universities where things are not said if it is believed that someone, anyone, might possibly be offended. This is the direct route to intolerance. The rights of the person who might be offended always seem to take precedence over the rights of the person who might (wittingly, unwittingly or entirely accidentally and innocently) cause offence. And so, inevitably, the rights of the putative offender are duly trampled upon, ignored, dismissed and forgotten. Protests are of no value. In our strangely, uniquely balanced world, the first person to take offence is the only one who matters.

23

(Gloucestershire)

Today's Referendum vote is, without a doubt, the most important in Britain's history. It's a vote about 'us' and 'them'. The tragedy is that 90% of the people voting with 'them' are actually 'us;' but they just don't know it.

I fear that the vote will show that although young people claim that they like change, and are fearless, the result will show that they really don't like big change and, that despite their protestations, they are overwhelmed by fear.

The EU opposes freedom and democracy and if we lose tomorrow's vote then millions more hard-working, tax paying citizens will emigrate.

Suckered by an ad I saw when I was trying to find the odds on Brexit, I tried to join an organisation called Betfair. The company was offering odds of 10 to 1 on Brexit. In any two horse race those odds are irresistible.

But the information they required went on and on and at one point they seemed to want me to post them my passport or my driving licence or both. They may well have wanted a few square inches of skin so that they could do DNA checks.

I eventually found a way to email them and to ask them to cancel the account which, in fairness, they did though apparently they will keep all my personal details on file for seven years, doubtless in order to protect my privacy and identity.

We went to Hereford for the day and drove past a car which had crashed just ten yards after a large sign saying 'Thank you for driving carefully'. The driver was probably distracted by the sign.

Driving these days is a nightmare.

I'm not surprised that more and more people are refusing to bother taking out a driving licence or buying a car.

It can't help that cars aren't promoted in the way they were. Advertisements for cars used to say how fast a car would accelerate and how fast it would go if you put your foot down. These days the ads just tell you how many miles to the gallon it will do and what the carbon dioxide emissions will be. Those, it seems, are the selling points. No wonder people aren't driving cars. Whatever happened to romance, excitement and dreams?

We drove on the road between Ross on Wye and Gloucester and I lost count of the number of times the speed limit changed. One minute it was 20mph, the next 30 mph, the next 40 mph, then 20 mph again, then 50 mph, then 30 mph. All of this on a ten mile journey. There were, inevitably, speed cameras every two yards.

Motorists spend all their time looking out for the signs telling them what speed they should be driving at. There is absolutely no time left for looking out for approaching cars, pedestrians, dogs or bloody cyclists.

24

(Gloucestershire)

This is Independence Day. The British people have put the Great back into Britain!

Glory be! Britain has led the way to the destruction of the European Union – the most fascist, undemocratic, arrogant organisation ever devised.

Now that we are leaving, it is a fair bet that citizens all over Europe will demand their own chance to vote on their destiny. The EU does not have long to live. Only aged Nazis, Goldman Sachs and an army of overpaid eurocrats will mourn its passing.

A sizeable majority voted to leave the EU. Those who object to the result are moaning that it was close. It was not close. The Brexiteers won in nine out of 12 regions and if Vote Leave had been a political party fighting at a general election it would have won around 420 seats. I suspect that more people would have liked to have voted to leave but were scared off by the lies told by the Government and the Bank of England.

The people have given the political establishment the biggest spiritual kicking they've had for a long time.

The referendum has shown us that we can control our own destiny. The mass of people now understand that bankers and business bosses support the EU only out of self-interest.

Those who predicted a victory for the 'remain' camp claimed that they would win with the aid of votes cast by people on council estates. These, they said, are Labour's strongholds and, therefore, an easy source of votes.

This was arrogant and misguided.

The poorest people in Britain are the ones who have suffered most from our membership of the European Union. Their wages have fallen. Their job security has disappeared. Rules and regulations have damaged their lives and affected their employment chances.

It is not widely understood that the EU introduces new regulations at the behest of large international corporations who want new laws and rules – and as many of them as possible – because the more complicated the regulations become the more difficult it is for new companies to develop.

This is, of course, the very essence of fascism as originally described by its creator – Mussolini.

The people who were taken for granted by the 'remain' campaigners have proved that they had the grit to ignore Project Fear and to stand up for their country and themselves.

Recent research has shown conclusively that giving people guidelines works far better than trying to micromanage everything in the way favoured by the unelected eurocrats.

When you give people too many rules they tend to ignore common sense and their own inbuilt sense of morality because they feel that their only obligation is to follow the official guidelines. People think it is perfectly acceptable to cheat and to be sly as long as there are no specific rules against the type of cheating or slyness they are practising.

The only puzzle is where did the Government find 20 million treacherous idiots prepared to vote for the 'remain' side? Are there really that many people in Britain who are certifiably insane? Actually, to answer my own question, there probably are. Roughly one in three Britons is a psychopath or has serious mental health problems. And of the other two, approximately half are taking psychotropic drugs of some kind.

The lies started with Edward Heath, who later admitted that he had lied to the British people in order to trick them into allowing him to take the country into the Common Market. He knew that he was signing away the nation's sovereignty and joining a group of nations destined by design to become the United States of Europe.

When Heath signed the Treaty of Accession in Brussels on 24th January 1972 he betrayed the people of Britain and became the nation's greatest traitor. Heath received £35,000 tax free for that little piece of betrayal.

(Some time ago, a reader criticised me for mentioning this in one of my books on the European Union. He claimed that Heath had received only £30,000. On the basis of this he concluded that my criticism of Heath was completely unfounded. In fact, of course, the money given to Heath was a prize and was probably originally measured in French francs. However, whether it was £35,000, £30,000 or £3,000 I really don't think the amount is significant. What matters is that Heath accepted tax free loot for signing us up to Adolf Hitler's pet project.)

And the lies and deceit have continued ever since.

David Cameron, surely as smug, as oily and as arrogant a politician as Britain has ever had, did everything he could to fiddle the result he wanted. Cameron has, rather to my surprise, turned out to have many of the 'qualities' associated with Tony Blair: greed, cronyism, selfishness, arrogance and an unfailing determination to put himself first and to treat the voters with contempt.

Cameron even allowed the people of Gibraltar to vote in our referendum (knowing that 90% of them would vote to remain in the EU). He would have doubtless allowed Australia and India to vote if he'd thought they would vote 'remain'.

He spent £9 million of taxpayers' money on a leaflet promoting the EU knowing that half the country disapproved of the message and therefore of the expenditure.

He extended voter registration for two days so that people who were too stupid to know what day it was could still vote (knowing that if they were too stupid to know what day it was they would probably believe his lies and vote 'remain').

Cameron and Osborne offered wild guesses as facts. They recruited economists who had wanted us to join the euro (great call that was) and welcomed the support of bankers who were so incompetent that they found ways to go bust in 2008.

If Cameron, Osborne and the rest of the EU supporters had won, then today's children would have grown up in a country with no health care, an appalling education system, no votes for women, no rights for gays and no pubs.

We would have abandoned our history, our culture and our sovereignty for the right to give vast amounts of money to unelected idiots in Brussels so that they could wallow in luxury while telling us how to live our lives.

We were on the brink.

Still, now the fun starts.

It was essential that Cameron should go and his resignation was the best thing he's ever done for Britain. The man has proved himself to be an incompetent, out of touch buffoon. He could not possibly be allowed to negotiate our withdrawal from the European Union. Osborne et al must also find some other way to earn their living.

Predictably, the noisy celebrity traitors who fought to sustain Hitler's legacy, and who campaigned for Britain to remain beholden to bureaucrats in Brussels, have become hysterical and abusive, howling and spluttering and screeching like fish wives, insisting that anyone intelligent and brave enough to have voted against the fascist EU must be stupid and racist for the simple reason that they dared to disobey the strictures of *The Guardian*, the BBC, Goldman Sachs and the massed ranks of minor celebrities.

'Getting stuck without EU access is my worst nightmare!' said one woman who seems to assume that Britons will now be barred from travelling to France and all points south.

‘To be a citizen of a country which is no longer in Europe would feel like a betrayal of our basic instincts,’ said another, even more stupid, who obviously believes that Britain will now be towed out into the middle of the Atlantic and its citizens marooned for eternity, cast out and away from Europe.

Thousands have been marching, singing EU songs and sending twitter messages of condolence to one another. There have been many tears and even suicide attempts. There is now even a new dating site called Idbenothingwithouteu.co.uk set up for single Remain voters who want to meet an EU national so that they can fall in love with a foreigner, marry them and take up nationality which will guarantee that they remain within the EU. Hitler would be so proud of them all.

The nation is now awash with people like Owen Smith MP, fighting to take over as leader of the Labour Party from Corbyn the Loser, who apparently don’t believe in democracy and are demanding a second referendum on whether or not we should leave the EU.

It is as though they were football supporters whose club had lost in a Cup Final and they were demanding that the match be held again so that they had another chance at victory.

These people need to look at the news. We had a referendum. They lost. Indeed, they were thrashed.

Someone needs to have a word with the daft Sturgeon woman who is threatening a referendum because Scotland wants to stay in the EU. Sturgeon reminds me of John Prescott in appearing to have a very large mouth and a very small brain. She has made a number of fundamental errors. First, she can’t call for a referendum. She doesn’t have that authority. Second, the EU has made it pretty clear that it doesn’t want Scotland as a member, thank you very much. And it double won’t want Scotland now that the oil price has collapsed.

Finally, let us now give Nigel Farage the credit he deserves. This is Nigel’s victory as much as it is anyone’s victory. He had the courage and strength to soak up endless abuse so that he could fight for Britain and proved himself to be a true British hero in the Guy Gibson mould. Thank you, Nigel! Cameron only gave us the referendum because Nigel and UKIP forced him to do so.

Maybe we can now go back to having our bins emptied once a week. It would be good to forget the EUs silly recycling rules which do more harm than good to the environment and maybe we can start using proper light bulbs again.

It has recently been proved that the widely held suspicion that councils send carefully washed and sorted recycling material to be used as landfill is no myth but it is totally true. From the beginning of the absurd ‘recycling’ campaign I have been arguing that neatly washed household waste was being dumped in landfill sites or, worse still, shipped to China to be dumped in landfill sites there. There is now clear evidence that hundreds of thousands of tons of household waste which has been carefully placed in recycling bins is immediately whisked off to landfill sites.

Councils persist in forcing citizens to spend time sorting their rubbish because if they do not achieve EU targets, they themselves will be forced to pay massive fines. The whole damned recycling scam is one of the great confidence tricks of the 21st century. It is, of course, part of the global warming scam which is, in turn, the establishment’s way of making sure that we don’t use too much oil keeping warm, moving about and having fun. The politicians want the oil for tanks and bombers.

Councils everywhere even say that they are entitled to look in people’s rubbish (to check that the cans have been properly washed and are sparkling clean) because once rubbish has been put outside the gate, it belongs to them. That may be but if it is, then surely if it is their rubbish then how can they do something to me if they find that my cans haven’t been properly washed? How can I still have responsibility for something that belongs to someone else?

I despise councils and rubbish collectors and the Greens who have, with the eurocrats, forced us all into this absurd way of living. Most Greens are awful hypocrites as well as being egregiously sanctimonious. They eat meat and happily claim benefits when they are perfectly fit enough to work for a living. No rational, sentient human being could possibly support the Green Party; most of the members of which seem to prefer the idea of dragging everyone down to the lowest level instead of dragging people up to the highest level.

Environmental health departments everywhere refuse to do anything about the growing rat problem – a direct result of the EU’s laws. Councils say that rat infestation is now not their problem. It’s a problem to decide what is.

As a result of the scam, millions of man hours are spent on sorting rubbish and vast amounts of water is wasted on washing bottles, cans and cartons. The EU’s new, yet to be announced rules, insisting that taxpayers separate raspberry yoghurt cartons from strawberry yoghurt cartons will, I suspect, cause notable distress among enthusiastic yoghurt eaters.

Meanwhile, if rubbish collections in England continue to become rarer and rarer, we have decided to take our rubbish over to Paris in suitcases. The French are much more prepared to ignore the EU’s daft rules on rubbish collecting. In Paris we just toss all our rubbish into the bins and it is collected every evening. So we will fill our suitcases with waste and cart it over to France on Eurostar. There is no baggage limit on the train and I rather look forward to the look on some border guard’s face when he opens my suitcase and sees a pile of old tins, bottles and other unwanted, unsorted debris.

I like to think that Antoinette and I helped do our bit to help win the Referendum vote. We sent 2,500 copies of the book I wrote under the names Beddowes and Cipollini to journalists, politicians, bishops, lawyers and everyone I could think who might be considered an opinion maker. I even sent copies to all the bankers I could find (including Goldman Sachs) and worked my way through all the addresses in Whitaker's Almanack. Printing the books and posting them off cost a pretty penny but it was well worth it.

My books about the European Union (starting with *England Our England* in 2002, in which I predicted that the EU would inevitably lead to a rise in patriotism and racism) were met with extraordinary abuse. The books were banned by bookshops and advertising for them was refused. Criticising the EU was regarded as unacceptable and unforgiveable. Sticking up for England was condemned as a form of racism.

Well, yah boo sucks to all the critics. We won, damn you.

25

(Devon)

I love our Ford Ranger (in the way that one can love a car) but I think it probably has the worst turning circle of any car in the world. I suspect this is because America is a very big country and so the streets are wide and parking spaces huge. The Americans don't have to wriggle their vehicles to squeeze them into spaces.

Our new Mitsubishi Barbarian was delivered today.

Buying it was, as usual, quite a painful process. The garage refused to take a cheque and transferring money from one account to another is harder than ever. You have to go into the bank, queue, queue again and sign forms. The system assumes that everyone trying to conduct even a modest financial transaction is a terrorist, a money launderer or a Brexit voter and treats them accordingly. The next time we buy a car or anything too expensive to put on a credit card we are paying by cheque. And if the garage or whatever refuses to take a cheque then we won't be buying it.

There were, inevitably perhaps, a few teething problems with the new truck.

The garage gave me the wrong licence plate number and so I had to ring the insurance company and ask them to change it. They also put the wrong address on the registration forms so heaven knows where the DVLA will send the bit of scruffy paper which now masquerades as a log book.

The car itself is magnificent and is packed with the sort of useful gizmos usually associated with expensive saloons. The windscreen wipers turn themselves on automatically if it rains, the headlights turn themselves on if the sky darkens and the vehicle beeps loudly if I allow it to drift out of its lane on a motorway. (It also beeps if I am driving in a narrow lane and it thinks I have drifted out of my lane, even if there isn't a lane out of which to drift.) I love the reversing camera. I want cameras fitted everywhere around the car and a bank of TV screens to watch.

The only physical snag is that the strut which should allow the tailgate to be lowered gently and easily hasn't been fastened to the body of the truck. I hope they fixed the wheels on properly. I also found that I couldn't see anything out of the back window because of the three massive headrests on the rear seats. I got round this problem by removing the headrests and putting them somewhere safe where neither I nor anyone else will ever find them again.

As usual when taking delivery of a new car, I spent an unpleasant hour or two leafing through the instruction manuals in an attempt to understand what the various knobs and dials are for. The manuals, as thick as telephone books, are, inevitably perhaps, the most incomprehensive pieces of gibberish I have ever seen in my entire life. I have three degrees and a professorship and I gave up and put the manuals away. I'd have put them together with the unwanted rear headrests if I could remember where I had put the unwanted rear headrests.

We had only owned the truck for about five minutes when we realised that we should have had a metal tonneau cover put over the truck section behind the cab. So I rang up and ordered one. The garage have kindly promised to connect the bit of the tailgate to the bodywork when they fit the tonneau cover. The snag is that having a new tonneau cover fitted means that the brand new and expensive liner currently fitted into the back of the truck will have to come out. The woman I spoke to said that they would consider buying this back from me. My hopes are not high.

26

(Devon)

A workman who was doing stuff on the house laughed at the fact that we drink bottled water. 'You're wasting your money,' he said with a sneer. 'I drink tap water. Lovely, fresh, sparkling tap water. You can't beat it.'

I thought him rather rude to be honest. He is very young but rather full of himself.

I told him that tap water contains all sorts of drug residues including female hormones left over from the contraceptive pill.

'It can't,' he said, defiantly. 'The water is purified. The water people put it through filters.'

I agreed with him that tap water is filtered but explained that the water people have admitted that their filters are not fine enough to remove chemicals or hormone residues which are dissolved in the water.

'There's really no doubt that millions of men have been feminised by the oestrogen and progesterone in the tap water they drink,' I added.

There was a long pause.

'Which variety of bottled water do you recommend?' he asked.

The response to the nation's decision to leave the EU has been astonishing. The sulky and demanding members of the Entitlement Generation are taking it particularly badly. Thus is the generation which has taught itself to be positive – especially when they don't know what they are talking about. They stand together on one side of the electoral divide.

On the other side of the divide, stand the real people who are fed up with globalisation, the EU superstate, overpaid bankers (both the investment and the central varieties), mass immigration, ever rising stealth taxes, poorer State services and pseudo-scientific nonsenses such as the global warming scam.

Young folk who wander around with No Fear printed on their T-shirts seem terrified at the idea that their country might have to make it outside the European Union.

At a demonstration in London one idiot held up a map and said 'We can't leave Europe because we're in it!'.

A young writer has claimed, quite inexplicably, that 'literature knows no boundaries and so Brexit feels like a bereavement'.

A witless economics and finance student blew his entire £2,000 student loan betting that Britain would vote to stay in the European Union. He took odds of 1/7 which meant that he would have won £286 if he'd been right. The scary thing is that he was studying economics and finance.

We seem to have acquired a generation of humourless, self-important, self-righteous, self-deluded, hypocritical, politically correct young people who are obsessed with themselves and with social media, who feel that when something goes wrong in their processed cheese lives then there must be someone to blame. They are, as a breed, also immeasurably stupid and no good will come of them.

Naturally, the big banks are taking advantage of the vote to reduce services to customers. Antonio Horta-Osorio, who is Spanish and who is the boss of Lloyds Bank (one of the many financial institutions which went bust in 2008 and had to be bailed out with money generously donated by unwitting and almost certainly unwilling taxpayers) has said that because of the Brexit vote, the bank will have to sack thousands of staff and close another gazillion branches – thereby forcing more and more customers to use the fraud laden, privacy light Internet banking service.

Lloyds will have fired 12,000 people by the end of next year. Many of those people will never work again. All British banks already provide an appalling level of service and I doubt if I am alone in wishing that Gordon the Moron Brown had led the banks go bust and hadn't bailed them out. The remaining banks would doubtless now be much stronger.

When I tried to move money the other day it took someone at the bank four hours to press a button and move the money – even though I'd paid a hefty fee for the button to be pressed. You can imagine the conversation. 'Shall I press the button yet?' 'Oh, no, wait another twenty minutes. We can lend it out at 20% to some sucker with a credit card. Let's have another sherry.'

The whingers complaining about the vote (and wanting a rerun because they didn't get the victory they expected) are members of a generation of mean-spirited snipers who expect to be treated as special, to be allowed to update their Facebook page and attend to their Twitter accounts while at work. They believe they are entitled to be regarded as members of a team, rather than as employees, and that it is their right to make as many mistakes as they like (they aren't called mistakes now, they're learning experiences) and for these to be at someone else's expense. They reply 'No problem' instead of 'thank you' and everything except the Referendum vote is 'perfect'. They expect to be given free food at work just like the people at Google and if there isn't a table tennis table, a basket-ball court and a gym then they cannot possibly be expected to stay. They expect to be allowed to take days off without warning and to have long holidays and sabbaticals whenever they feel the need. They don't work on sunny days because it is their right to be out soaking up the rays and they don't work on rainy days because they are too depressed and if they went out of mummy and daddy's house they might get wet.

And they moan a lot.

Boy how they whinge.

They are forever complaining that today's older generation had it easy.

This is bollocks of course.

But there is one area where today's generation miss out: fun.

Back in my bad old days we all had far more fun. Working for newspapers, magazines, television and radio was endless fun. Even working as a doctor was fun at times. Now everyone is too po-faced, too earnest and too terrified of upsetting someone to ever crack a joke or do anything remotely entertaining.

Meanwhile, the doomsters are now changing their tune.

Former Chancellor George Osborne, the chief doomster, decided, when it looked as if his entire political career was going south, decided that being outside the EU would mean that the UK could 'reach out to build stronger economic and trading ties with old allies…and new partners'.

President Obama, who had said that Britain would be put at the back of the queue if we voted to leave the EU, has announced that he wants to 'maximise the economic opportunity' and make a deal with Britain 'as fast as possible'.

And all around the world countries (including Germany and France) are queuing up to make trade deals with the new, soon to be independent Britain.

27

(Devon)

Now that I am rapidly approaching adulthood, and will soon be unable to escape the fact that I am a grown up, I am more determined than ever to do everything I can to escape the pointlessly unpleasant and to refuse to tolerate the avoidable.

There is no doubt that the outside world continues to get sillier.

An American bank called Citigroup believes it owns the word 'thanks' and is taking legal action against a phone company which used the word in marketing for its loyalty scheme.

Still, sillier things have happened. Oil company BP once tried to sue anyone who used the colour green on the grounds that they owned it and no one else could use it without their permission.

And a company in the US seems to think it owns the word 'monster'.

A monster thanks to all these drooling nutters for entertaining us.

28

(Gloucestershire)

Britain's planning laws are a source of amusement for much of the world and a source of continuing annoyance to home owners and builders within the United Kingdom.

Governments and councils have over the years, developed an impenetrable mess of planning regulations which confuse and bewilder but which, strangely, allow statutory bodies to build the most amazingly ugly buildings. In every town I have ever visited, the council buildings are by far the ugliest edifices around.

There is, as most Britons know, a system of listing properties which are considered worth protecting and as a result different government and council departments are having heated battles over their perceived and practical jurisdictions.

We recently heard of owners of a listed building who wanted to put solar panels on the roof of a barn which was next to but separate from their home. The barn wasn't particularly interesting but it was included in the house's official listing and was, therefore, just as protected as the house itself.

The local quango officials in charge of protecting the integrity and appearance of listed buildings said that they would never allow anyone to put solar panels onto the roof of the house. But the quango in charge of saving us all from sinking icebergs said that putting solar panels onto the roof would save the planet and must be allowed.

While the argument raged, with spirited ejaculations coming from all directions, the owners of the house got so fed up that they sold up and bought a house which wasn't a listed property.

The whole damned alternative energy thing is a mess. And an expensive mess.

In Britain, the Government is still throwing lorry loads of cash at anyone selling alternative energy.

In 2013, the wind energy business created 17,000 new jobs but each job required a taxpayers' subsidy of £98,000. That sum was paid for through higher electricity charges so it is the poor, the elderly and those struggling to survive on low wages who pay most severely for the subsidy.

Wind farms and solar farms are built with absolutely no regard for planning regulations. The people who put these things up can ignore the rules relating to Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty or anything else in existence Not even Ancient Monuments are safe.

Destroying the environment is, apparently, acceptable if a windmill is being erected to save the environment.

No one in government sees the irony; no one cares that the result will be a bird killing machine, the noise of which will drive everyone in the neighbourhood to distraction.

And environmentalists and global warming conspiracy theorists who campaign for more of these unsightly beasts seem to believe that making steel and pouring concrete are harmless.

The truth is that wind turbines rarely operate to more than 10% of their capacity and often need to be turned (by electricity) to stop them seizing up.

And manufacturing the wind turbines uses up so much energy that in the long run the damned things never produce as much energy as they cost.

The environmentalists, sitting smugly in their bloody stupid electric cars do not care. They don't seem to know that the electricity to drive their cars comes from coal and diesel driven power stations. And they believe that wind turbines and solar panels (which are just as useless) will keep the earth's temperature down, stop icebergs and glaciers melting and save us all.

The other thing about solar and wind energy is that apart from being wickedly expensive and reliably inefficient it depends upon unpredictable meteorological conditions.

We have quite a number of solar powered lights in both our gardens and we have noticed that they hardly work at all during the winter months. In the summer, when there are several hours of sunshine a day, the lights shine brightly for much of the night. In the winter, when there is far less sunshine, the lights are dim and shine for no more than an hour or two.

At our home in Gloucestershire, most of the squirrels have disappeared. We used to have eight come to feed with us every day. And the numbers should have gone up because there should now be young squirrels accompanying their parents.

I have always done everything I could to stop them becoming tame (on the grounds that not all humans can be trusted by animals) but I nevertheless felt a great affection for the ones which have disappeared.

But for a week we have seen no more than two squirrels at a time and now we have just one squirrel left. He poses like a meercat, looking around him nervously. He has huge eyes, like a rabbit.

I have no doubt some ignorant, stupid bastard who does not realise that grey squirrels do no more damage to trees than red squirrels and, indeed, plant far more trees than they harm, has shot or poisoned the other squirrels. By burying nuts and then forgetting where they have put them squirrels plant far more trees than they damage. In our garden they have damaged just two branches of a beech tree by ring barking them (and the tree thrives without those branches) and they have (to my knowledge) planted at the very least 50 hazel and beech trees – a dozen or so of which I have dug up, moved and replanted in more convenient positions.

The second possibility, of course, is that they've killed the squirrels because they, like the badgers, dig holes in lawns and flowerbeds. The obsession with neat, suburban style lawns and manicured shrubberies is endemic in the Clotswolds and it's hardly a surprise that butterflies and other wildlife are now a rarity. Ours is the only stretch of cultivated land for miles which contains nettles, wild brambles and flowers to attract creatures looking for food, nesting places or somewhere to lay eggs.

The only other possibility is that they've killed them in the vain and racist hope that if the grey squirrels are eradicated then the red squirrels will come back. This is popular among ignorant country folk who do not realise that the red squirrel does every bit as much damage as the grey squirrel and was itself, not long ago, regarded as a pest. And the red squirrel does not help trees by planting their seeds. The red squirrel piles up its stored nuts and this is of no value whatsoever to trees. The grey squirrel has been shown to do a vital service for oak, walnut and beech trees. And woodland experts believe that if the grey squirrel is driven out then our forests will suffer enormously. Just the other day I read of yet another hotelier who wants to get rid of the grey squirrels in his area. He wants red squirrels to be introduced. He pretends he wants to do this because the grey squirrels nibble occasional bits of bark but he really wants to do it because he knows that if there are red squirrels in the woods around his hotel his trade will increase. He either does not know, or does not care, that red squirrels do just as much damage to trees as their grey cousins. A few decades ago red squirrels were persecuted just as the greys are now shot, trapped and otherwise killed.

Antoinette and I are devastated; it is as though we have been serially bereaved.

The squirrels who visited us, and who spent much of each day in our garden, were family. We loved their games, their play, their courtship rituals, their cheekiness and their intelligence in finding new ways to raid our nut and seed stores.

Our garden is now very wild and has become a forest because of all the beech trees and hazel bushes which the squirrels have planted.

It is, I suppose, not all that surprising that this has happened since I can think of several obvious psychopaths living in this area. We have never told anyone in Gloucestershire that we feed the squirrels (and they're all far too stupid to read any of my books) because we feared that some local Clotswold thug would kill the squirrels simply as an act of meanness. That's the sort of people the horsy headscarf crowd are. The thug is probably one of those local idiots who believes that 'Eh what, don't you know?' passes for sparkling conversation and that a pair of red corduroy trousers are a perfectly adequate substitute for brains and personality.

Come to think of it there is of course another possibility: that the squirrels were shot for fun. Some primitive people do that. They are mostly cowards of course and not many of them would regard it as a pleasant way to spend a Saturday afternoon if the animals could shoot back. I can think of one or two farm workers who are likely candidates. And the owner of the former Duke of Gloucestershire's modest estate hates trees and would not like the idea of squirrels planting hazel and beech that weren't grown in neat, straight lines.

29

(Gloucestershire)

A local horse riding club for the terminally insane has decided to use our lane for daily exercise. Huge, half-ton horses clip-clop by with tiny tots aboard. Since the lane is narrow, has more bends in it than a corkscrew and is in places too steep for even a Tour de France mountain climber, it seems risky not to say reckless to bring horses down it – especially when they are laden with six-year-old passengers.

It seems strange that this is allowed when there are so many other bizarre rules about what can and cannot be done on the road.

A kid with a moped needs a licence, tax, insurance and a helmet. A kid on a horse doesn't need any of those. And yet if the horse runs amok it could cause far more havoc than the moped.

They come down our lane because it leads to a newly made bridle path through some beech woods (the council chopped down a gazillion lovely trees to make the bridle path for two or three local horse riders who are, presumably, related to council officials).

I am told that a visiting walker recently wrote to the council asking for permission to be married on the 'bridal path'. No one had the courage to write back and tell her of her spelling error so they gave her permission.

I received a rather aggressive email from the agency which looks after the building in which our apartment is situated in Paris. We, along with the other owners, pay the agency to arrange for someone to clean the building and to ensure that the rubbish bins are put out every evening. They are also responsible for arranging insurance for the building, for hiring painters when we decide that the inside of the building or the public areas inside need redecorating. They are also responsible for organising essential repairs to the building.

Today's email tells me that the company which is paid to service the lift wants access to the roof to do some maintenance work.

Our building's lift is, like many Parisian lifts, quite small. It is a tight squeeze for two and suitable for three only if they are all in a fully consenting ménage a trois relationship.

But despite its modest size, the lift seems to need a good deal of attention and I suspect that much of this is probably a result of legislation devised by the European Union.

The agent's representative, a youth who has been in his job for weeks rather than months, told me that I must immediately make arrangements for the workmen to reach the roof.

Since our apartment takes up the whole of the top floor of the building, the easiest way to reach the roof is obviously through one of our skylights. Indeed, our deeds for the apartment include a clause requiring us to allow access when it is possible. (The significant words being 'when it is possible'.)

I pointed out that we weren't in France and weren't due to be there any time soon. I suggested that if the problem were urgent, the builders should use an external lift machine to access the roof. These are widely used in Paris. People use them to move furniture in and out of high up apartments. It is often far easier to put bulky objects through a window and onto a lift platform than it is to carry them downstairs (lifts are usually so small that nothing bigger than a pair of shoes will fit inside).

This was the trigger for a sequence of emails which I found aggressive and even threatening. A second employee joined in and demanded that we either return to Paris immediately or send over the key so that the workman could clamber through our apartment.

Suddenly, I felt tired.

During the last year or so, the amount of aggravation associated with the flat has increased dramatically.

The utility companies now insist on reading our meters at least once a year. A rather aggressive company sends regular letters demanding to be allowed to teach us how to turn our gas on and off. And if we put any money into our French bank account we immediately receive lengthy forms demanding that we immediately send passports, driving licences and loads of personal information to prove that we aren't terrorists or money launderers.

The French Government is forever introducing new rules requiring that the building be checked for termites, asbestos and a host of other deadly threats.

And although we increased the size of our mail box a couple of years ago, it is already far too small to accommodate the mass of junk mail which we receive. Every time we go to Paris we have to sort through a couple of armfuls of promotional leaflets in order to find the few pieces of mail which are of any use.

And Paris itself has changed dramatically and for the worse.

Cricket stopped being cricket when the authorities allowed advertisers to paint slogans on the grass and Paris stopped being Paris when the city authorities turned the street lights off at night.

Moreover, some bastard bureaucrat has decreed that all the birds must be exterminated, slaughtered or otherwise eradicated.

The parks used to be aflutter with birds. Sit near to a hedge and scores of sparrows and dunnocks and chaffinches would fly out looking for crumbs. We still have pigeons visiting our windowsills but Paris is now almost devoid of birds and the parks, once happily noisy with birdsong, are now as quiet as graveyards. Only a few hungry pigeons and crows remain. Any brave tourists who attempts to feed the remaining birds are certain to find themselves verbally assaulted by spoil sport locals who will call for a gendarme. Tossing out a few crumbs to the pigeons is, as in London, likely to result in an arrest and a fine. What an excellent way to welcome visitors. There are children living in Paris (and London and other cities) who grow up without ever seeing a bird. What possible reason can there be for this? The only argument put forward is that birds foul buildings, pavements, streets and cars and are a threat to human health. But birds produce a minute amount of waste material when compared with dogs. And dog faeces are, of course, well known to cause many serious human health problems (including many cases of blindness in children every year).

Instead of birds, the parks and open spaces in Paris are now full of confidence tricksters taking money from gullible tourists and people clutching selfie sticks.

The selfie stick is the 21st century icon; the 21st century equivalent of the electric backscratcher. It is the lava lamp for the millennium generation, as much a must have accessory as a Facebook page and a Twitter account.

And the tricksters are everywhere – seemingly untouched by the police.

One of the most persistent tricks is the 'collecting signatures on a clipboard for some worthy cause' ploy.

The trickster, usually a woman of foreign origin, holds out the clipboard and requests a signature for some worthy sounding cause. The gullible tourist stops and looks at the petition and while they are reading it the woman holding the clipboard (or an accomplice) picks their pocket or steals their watch.

I've been terrified of pickpockets since I was a boy. I saw a pickpocket operating in a visiting circus in Walsall where I grew up. The pick pocket managed to take wallets and watches from people I knew and even removed the brassiere from a discomforted neighbour. One day I saw him in a shop in town. I ran away holding onto the few coins which I had in my pocket.

The clipboard is used to hide the hand that is doing the stealing. And if anyone is silly enough to add their name and address to the petition, the trickster probably sells the details to burglars who always like to have the details of people who are away on holiday.

Absurd employment laws and the compulsory 35 hour working week mean that the small cafes and shops which used to make Paris the friendly city, are shutting by the hundred. Within 400 yards of our apartment there used to be a shop selling nothing but vacuum cleaners, a shop selling nothing but white blouses and a shop selling nothing but olive oil. Today, you can still buy olive oil in one of the supermarkets but if you want the vacuum cleaner or the white blouse you'll probably have to go outside Paris. There are, however, plenty of shops selling cheap berets, nasty models of the Eiffel Tower, tea towels and those awful T-shirts with the 'My Parents Bought Me This Lousy T-Shirt from Paris'.

(Apropos of absolutely nothing much, French shops, particularly supermarkets, are different to English ones in two clear respects. First, the French check-out staff love to be given the exact change and will spend minutes picking through a handful of coins in order to achieve this aim. Second, if the shopper is a few centimes short of being able to complete a transaction without breaking a larger note then the check-out operator will waive the extra centimes, even though this means a small loss to their till. This never, ever happens in Britain.)

The French themselves seem to be ruder than ever, too.

I have given up speaking French at all. Instead I make people speak English. Most of the French do speak English and then I have the joy of being able to correct their pronunciation. They all think they speak perfect English, of course. But they never do. I have yet to meet a French born individual who can speak English properly.

And as if all that were not bad enough, the journey to and from Paris has gone from being pleasant, through distinctly unpleasant and well into nightmare territory.

When we lived in Bideford in North Devon, we could comfortably cover the 260 mile journey to Ashford in around three and a half hours. All we had to do was settle in the motorway fast lane, keeping a safe distance from the vehicle in front, and following the road signs which in those days were plentiful and helpful. We made the journey once every couple of weeks and only rarely were there any holdups.

Today, thanks to constant road works, entirely unnecessary police lane closures and a massively increased number of speed cameras a journey of half that distance to Ebbsfleet (a nearer railway station than Ashford) takes twice as long.

The Eurostar trains used to be dramatic and beautiful. Today they are dull and uncomfortable and the service is a faint shadow of its former self. We used to be served champagne and a proper meal. Afterwards there would be chocolates and hot towels. Today we are offered tiny cans of cola and an inedible snack. The staff no longer announce when the train is passing into the Channel Tunnel. No one welcomes first class passengers and helps them with their luggage. They don't even tell you the time when you reach another country. The seats used to be comfortable and adjustable but now they seem to have been especially designed to aggravate backache. Perhaps they were designed on behalf of osteopaths. There doesn't appear to be a notifying sign telling passengers that the loo is occupied. And there seem to be fewer loos. Passing through customs and the baggage checks used to be fairly quick and simple. Today it has become tedious, time consuming and exhausting. The Gare du Nord in Paris was always grubby and unwelcoming. Today, after years of upheaval, it is worse than ever and the facilities would shame an English provincial station in the Victorian era. There don't seem to be all that many people travelling but the trains are constantly crowded and I have a suspicion that the company may well have cut some trains from its schedules in order to cut costs.

And so after I had sent a final email telling the agents that if the problem was an urgent one then they should instruct the elevator company to hire a furniture lift to take their workman up to the roof, and told them that if the problem was not urgent then we would be available in September, I also mentioned that we had decided to sell our apartment.

I was not in the slightest bit surprised to receive, almost immediately, an email from another employee of the agency offering to help us sell the apartment. The aggressive, demanding emails stopped immediately. Someone smelt the beautiful aroma of a decent sized commission and in France, as most other places, the sound of money is deafening.

I am enormously sad to be selling an apartment which I have for two decades thought of as my refuge. But the more I see of Paris the more I am convinced that this is the right thing to do. France is now even more of a mess than Britain, and Paris is not just shabby and dirty now it is also patently dangerous, threatening and unwelcoming. The streets away from the major tourist centres are full of homeless immigrants and the major tourist attractions and public buildings are surrounded with concrete bollards and wire fences and soldiers with guns. The Eiffel Tower looks like a concentration camp barracks and most of the soldiers guarding it appear to be teenagers; they walk around scowling and glaring at visitors, their fingers constantly on their triggers. This would not be so worrying if it were not for the fact that it is well known that the French military attracts a strange mixture of juvenile delinquents, psychopaths and gun happy youths.

London is stuffed but Paris is double stuffed.

The city streets used to be home to harmless street salesmen and rather charming beggars but now they are full of rubbish (with bursting black bags full of rubbish dumped alongside overflowing rubbish bins) as local business owners struggle to cope with EU rubbish legislation. Many shops and cafes are permanently shut because the working time directive prevents them from making a living. I cannot believe how quickly Paris has gone downhill.

Moving out is going to be quite a nightmare.

We have copies of a couple of thousand favourite books in the apartment, copies of all our favourite DVDs and over 400 CDs. Sorting through all the CDs is going to take quite some time. Antoinette has a habit of never putting a CD back into the case from whence it came. This means that when you pick out a CD purporting to offer the music of Deep Purple you are quite likely to find yourself listening to Kate Bush and when you fancy a little something from Vivian Stanshall and the Bonzo Dog Doo-dah Band you will probably have to make do with a Bach piano concerto instead.

I never thought I would sell the apartment but the problems associated with ownership have now become so unbearable that I really see no choice.

My preliminary enquiries have shown that when we have finished paying taxes to the French Government (I have so far counted three separate taxes, a large chunk of which cannot be put against British taxes) and taxes to the British Government there will be surprisingly little capital gain.

Still, for a long time, it was fun.

And we enjoyed Paris in her twilight years.

To stay would be to watch the decline of a city destroyed by bureaucracy and greed. We will leave and live with the memories. Paris may no longer have us but we will always have Paris. Our most reassured possessions are our memories; they are our gold and our grain, stored against the dark, unimaginable desert days of the future.

We will find our adventures and our future memories elsewhere. We stop living when we no longer believe that our best days start tomorrow.

30

(Gloucestershire)

Another author has given up writing books. Once enormously successful, he says that he can no longer work in a world where he spends a year writing a book and then sees it destroyed in two seconds by a reviewer who trashes it because there was a delivery problem. George Lucas, the creator of the Star Wars films, has vowed to spend his final years making films that may well never appear in cinemas, thereby avoiding reviewers completely.

The truth is that the whole reviewing business is now completely out of hand. I am still receiving requests to review the mattress and lavatory I bought several months ago.

There are warnings all over Europe that subsidies to farmers will have to be cut without Britain's financial contribution to the European Union. Germans are complaining bitterly that they will be expected to pay more to sustain the EU (so now it is clear why German politicians were such enthusiastic opponents of Brexit).

But, it was no surprise to see countries all over the world (including the USA) leaping up and down and wanting to have free trade deals with Britain.

The fact is, of course, that Britain makes and sells very little abroad. We import virtually everything we buy. So why wouldn't other countries want to deal with us?

The Remainers, smug, complacent, selfish and irritatingly ignorant have proved themselves to be every bit as stupid as they seemed to be.

Their latest nonsense is to claim that President Putin of Russia somehow managed to fiddle the Brexit vote and will arrange for Trump to win the American election.

This is nonsense, of course.

Everyone knows that this couldn't have happened because the Martians are now fiddling all elections.

The only country still forecasting economic gloom for Britain is Japan. Japan! The Japanese economy has been in a dire mess for decades. Japan is the country which invented money printing and negative interest rates as an attempted solution to its intractable problems. I think we can safely ignore everything they have to say.

There were 3,500 people on my website early this morning. I didn't know that many people at MI5 and Special Branch worked early in the mornings.

(In the old days, when my website first opened and was operated by clockwork, I was able to tell who was looking at the site, where they came from and what pages they were examining. Progress has done away with all that. These days I have to pay a huge annual sum just to know how many people visit the website and whether it is worth continuing to put stuff up on it.)

I read that a silly celebrity says she wants an idle life of luxury like the Queen of England.
I wonder if the silly woman knows that the queen works around 335 days a year – including evenings and weekends. And she is fast approaching 90.
It is hardly a life of idle luxury.
Now, Prince Andrew, on the other hand…

July

1

(Devon)

There is already speculation about possible drug taking among cyclists in the Tour de France. I don't see why the authorities continue to bother. Like all modern professional athletes, in all disciplines, the cyclists and their teams of doctors and coaches will always find ways around the rules. But there is a way around the problem. Forget about drug testing and instead of awarding a yellow jersey to the winning cyclist, award a yellow lab coat to the winning doctor. The fact is that modern sport is intrinsically unfair. All sporting winners must have some inherent advantage. Most have unnaturally slow heart rates, massive lung capacity and low pain thresholds. Sportsmen and women who take part in stamina events must come from places where the air is so thin that they have more red blood cells than normal. Athletes who win sprint events must have explosive 'fast muscle fibres'. These are not advantages which come through training: they are just part of the luck of the natal draw.

I have again been invited to speak at a literary festival.

Every small town which wants to attract a little attention (and a few visitors prepared to spend money renting rooms, buying food and so on) now has a literary festival.

The organiser told me the names of the other speakers. Some of them were quite well known in their own fields. There were two sportswomen, a politician and a television performer.

'Have they all written books?' I asked, genuinely curious.

'They've all had books ghost written for them,' said the organiser with a sigh. 'I don't think any of our speakers has actually read a book, let alone written one. We were hoping to find a proper author to add to the mix – even one no one has ever heard of. So someone suggested you.'

Ah, the wonderful world of books these days.

It is a comfort to me to know that the best-selling novel of all time is still *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens. It has apparently sold over 200 million copies – and that doesn't count all the pirated versions.

(Actually, I think it is a mistake to use the word 'pirated' to describe work which has been stolen. Most people rather like pirates and think of them as rather jolly. The people who routinely steal books, films and music tend to be rather seedy, mean-spirited and hollow hearted.)

I was delighted to find that I had a prior engagement on the date the organiser offered. We have someone coming to read our gas meter.

It is my long held view that real writers don't attend literary festivals.

This evening, at around 7 p.m., Antoinette and I sat in our conservatory and watched a fox wandering around on the lawn. He was doing no harm. Suddenly, a seagull which lives on our roof, and who seems to regard the house and gardens as his personal domain (so much so that he has, on occasion, even attacked Antoinette), swept down and dive bombed the fox.

The fox seemed surprised by this.

The seagull then flew over the sea, banked, turned and repeated the attack. He did this several times. The fox ducked, mewed in distress and protest, and hurried off into the undergrowth with his tail literally between his legs.

For reasons which escape me seagulls are protected animals and it is illegal to say boo to them even though they are, like rats, the only creatures most of us come into contact with which are inveterate bullies.

Seaside towns all over Britain would be happier, healthier places if the seagull populations could be persuaded to go on a long-term holiday to France. This would then allow residents and tourists to feed the smaller, less aggressive birds without being arrested. The fox, being a wise and doubtless well informed creature, almost certainly knew this and feared that any attempt at retaliation would be met with unpleasant consequences.

We have a very large and ferocious looking raven living in our garden and we live in quiet hope that he will do something about the bullying seagull.

Antoinette has named the seagull Merkel because it is a bossy, bad-tempered, incontinent old bird who appears to hate everyone and whose sole purpose seems to be to produce vast amounts of crap.

Merkel and her pals use our garden furniture for target practice and they are exceptionally accurate. There are no signs of guano on our paths but the furniture is covered – as are the windscreens of any vehicles which are parked in one position for more than five minutes.

When we went into the main part of our house, I noticed that the phone was telling us that we had four messages. I did not even know that the phone, which is a new one, had an answering machine and message storage facility.

In a moment of stupidity I tried to ring British Telecom to find out if anyone there knew whether the phone we had bought from them was equipped with an answering machine.

When I eventually found their telephone number (in my experience phone companies always make it extremely difficult for customers to telephone them and they add to the difficulty by never printing a phone number) I found myself listening to the inevitable answering machine.

'Thank you for calling. Your call is important to us and will be answered shortly by one of our operators.'

This message was repeated every ten seconds so that I couldn't do anything else while I was waiting for a reply. I hate it when they do that. Eventually, I gave up, of course. I then tried pressing some buttons and in my attempt to find the messages, I succeeded in deleting them. I have now decided not to bother trying to find any more messages.

When I first had a telephone answering machine, back in the days when answering machines came in a box and had to be connected to the telephone and the mains electricity, I always listened to every message. Some were interesting and all were useful and genuine.

Today, Antoinette and I have the best part of a dozen answering machines between us. Neither of us bothers to listen to any of the messages. The last time I tried, I found a seemingly endless series of messages from confidence tricksters trying to persuade me to sue a bank and claim compensation for something or other.

The good news is that a few days ago, I ordered a Moka Expresso coffee maker and a can of ground coffee.

Both arrived today and have already revolutionised my life. The coffee the small machine makes is infinitely better than the rubbish produced by those environmentally unsound machines with the little plastic pods – the ones which are promoted by George Clooney, who really ought to know better.

2

(Gloucestershire)

You might have thought that air pollution was a thing of the past – something that went out with the last London pea soup smog.

Sadly, however, air pollution is still a major killer.

The World Health Organisation recently calculated that air pollution in Europe costs more than £1.5 trillion a year and results in 600,000 premature deaths annually. On top of that, millions suffer illnesses caused or made worse by polluted air. The WHO found that air pollution is a major factor in one in four European deaths or illnesses.

The biggest single cause of air pollution is diesel car exhaust and this is where the story gets really dirty. And where the very dirty double dealing EU can be shown up for the truly fascist organisation it is – an organisation which cares exclusively about power and money and doesn't give a damn about people.

The story is a complex one. Here are the facts:

In 2005, German company Volkswagen was fined $1.1 million after the EPA alleged that the company had received reports pointing out that their cars were producing excessive carbon monoxide and other dangerous emissions but had failed to report the defect to regulators (as they were required to do). VW signed a decree promising to do better.

In 2009, the US announced strict rules about car pollution. The new rules allowed maximum emissions of 44 milligrams of nitrogen dioxide and nitric oxide (known as NOx) per kilometre. At the same time, Europe introduced new regulations requiring vehicles to produce no more than 180 milligrams of NOx per kilometre. In other words, the EU was being four times as generous to car companies as the American authorities.

In 2010, Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor and EU big shot, met with the chief of the American regulators, and complained that the strict NOx limits were damaging German car makers. The regulator reported that 'I never experienced a similar intervention against our environmental law by a politician either before or after.' Merkel was ignored.

In 2011, the European Commission found that diesel cars were putting out seven times more NOx than they had produced when tested in the laboratory. It was also found that cars were obtaining far fewer miles per gallon than was being claimed. Nothing happened.

In the US, cars are subject to spot checks which test emission levels. This does not happen in the EU.

If a car is certified as 'compliant' in one EU country, it is EU law that it be accepted as complaint in all other countries. Car companies therefore shop around for the country with the most lenient testing service. This benefits car companies enormously. (And since Germany is a major EU producer of motor cars, it benefits Germany very enormously.)

American tests showed that VW had devised a way to cheat pollution tests. The Americans also allege that VW ‘impeded and obstructed’ American inquiries by providing ‘misleading information’ and ‘concealing facts’.

In 2015, VW engineers admitted that since 2008 they had installed software in their engines which deliberately made their cars appear less polluting than they were.

A key part of the standard US emissions test lasts 1,370 seconds. Audi’s software was designed to emit legal emissions for just 1,370 seconds. After 1,371 seconds, the software switched settings and allowed the cars to put out nine times the permitted amount of NOx.

In America, VW is subject to massive fines and huge court cases. No one gives a fig for Merkel and the German car industry. In Europe, VW is under far less pressure. The EU had plans to introduce new tests in 2017. But Merkel, as pleasant as she is beautiful, having been lobbied by the German car industry, pressed the EU to relax the new standards. And so the new EU rules will permit diesel cars to continue to produce vast amounts of NOx.

Road transport accounts for most of the carbon monoxide and NOx in Britain’s air. These chemicals cause cancer, heart disease and respiratory disorders. (NB In Paris cars made before 1997 (which are more polluting) are now banned from the city streets on weekdays. In London, the authorities are being rather more feeble. From the year 2020, older cars will have to pay a higher congestion charge fee. That’s it. There will be no ban. When Gordon Brown was chancellor he cut taxes on diesel cars – boosting the sale of polluting vehicles. The funeral directors of Britain should give the Scot a special medal.)

So, that’s the story so far. In Europe it seems unlikely that Volkswagen will be punished at all. Volkswagen top brass deliberately sold cars which they knew were in violation of Clean Air Acts all over the world. It is known that car exhaust fumes can cause illness and kill. So, why aren’t the directors and senior staff of Volkswagen all in jail awaiting trial for manslaughter? That is a silly question, of course. The EU, dominated by the German government, will turn a blind eye. And the conclusion is fairly clear. The EU doesn’t give a fig about the number of people dying from pollution in Europe. But, thanks to Merkel (who looks to me increasingly like one of the guards in a women’s prison drama), it cares a good deal about protecting the German car industry. In a just world, Volkswagen would be bankrupted and its executives and directors would be locked up for life. All the company’s money used to try to repair some of the damage done to the environment and to human health. It would be a strong disincentive to company bosses who might, in future, be tempted to tell big lies so that their company profits could be higher.

On an even stranger note, a bloke I know, who is in his sixties and dying of cancer, has made a list of seven people who, he claims, fucked his life and hurt the people he loved. Now that he is dying and has little or nothing to lose he is, he told me, planning to go back and fuck with their lives.

I’m happy to report that I am not one of the unlucky seven.

3

(Gloucestershire)

A passer-by in the lane stopped and spoke to me.

I asked if he found the locals rather standoffish.

‘Oh yes,’ he replied immediately. ‘They’re a pompous, self-righteous, humourless lot. Some of them would cut their own parents if they thought they were beneath them socially.’

A few days ago, I ordered a device which will enable me to crush cans. This should help me fit our rubbish into the tiny bags we are going to be forced to use once every three weeks when the council deigns to send round a designated team of Waste Assimilation Consultants in a large dirty lorry.

Sadly, the can crusher does not quite live up to expectations since it only works on soft drink cans (the sort you can crush with your hands or, if you are John Belushi, against your forehead).

The crusher is useless for soup cans.

Now I’ve got the problem of getting rid of the useless can crusher.

Maybe I can buy a crusher that will crush it.

4

(Gloucestershire)

I heard today that the man who sells more Big Macs in London than anyone else was awarded an OBE. This sums up Britain’s honours system better than anything else I can think of.

Knighthoods and so on are handed out to millionaire businessmen, tax exile pop singers and millionaire sportsmen. Most have done bugger all for their country. Everything they have done has been for money – for themselves.

But giving a gong to someone who sold a lot of hamburgers is positively obscene.

Honours should be awarded to people who give their time free of charge, and who risk their lives for organisations such as the Royal National Lifeboat Institute. Honours should not be given to folk who have done nothing more than enrich themselves.

Here is next year's list of honours:

Freddie the Fingers Fanshaw gets an MBE for services to house breaking

Cameron McOsborne, a banker employed at the Royal Bank of Scotland, receives a knighthood for services to self-enrichment and for discovering new ways to defraud customers

Pxjkhtpl Kwelqpzxk receives an OBE for services to arms trading and devising new low cost land mines

Wyre Piddle (of Wyre Piddle and the Steel Catheters) receives a knighthood for writing and singing noisy songs and succeeding in making himself a fortune without paying a penny in income tax.

Doris 'Bigtits' Bedworth receives a Damehood for services in Soho.

And here's another oddity.

If a man receives a knighthood or a peerage, his wife will become 'Lady' whatsit. But if a woman is made a Dame or receives a Baronetcy then her husband remains a plain, unvarnished Mister.

'I dislike summer,' said Antoinette this afternoon.

It was cold and pouring with rain. I pointed this out to her.

'Yes, I know,' she replied, 'but there's always a risk that the sun will come out and it will get hot again. And then there will be wasps and horse flies everywhere in the garden.'

5

(Gloucestershire)

I have been having an email conversation with an Italian publisher who is rightly very proud of her English.

Indeed, she is, perhaps, just a little too proud of it.

And so I have started using words like 'spiffing', and ending my letters with 'tickety tonk' or 'pip pip'.

We watched an episode of an American crime television programme called Criminal Minds.

One of the characters made a rather feeble joke which, if it had appeared in a British programme, would have produced a torrent of abuse and an Internet controversy for weeks.

A woman, describing information she had acquired, added the rider 'It's a small but'.

A second character then turned the comment into a small joke about the size of the character's butt.

Yes, I know it was a feeble attempt at humour, but the point is that no one working in British television would allow a character to say such a thing.

And the British people would not allow a television maker to get away with it.

When and why did we become so po-faced and humourless?

6

(Gloucestershire)

A letter from the DVLA has found its way to us.

They say that before they will register our new Mitsubishi they want to see a copy of a tax coding letter and a utility bill. It is, apparently, now illegal to own a motor car in Britain unless you pay tax and consume water, gas and electricity. I rang them up and asked if they could not check out my existence electronically, the way banks and investment companies are now able to do by using the privacy busting data stores which the Government has authorised.

The Government employee to whom I spoke sounded startled at the idea that the DVLA might trust an electronic source of information and insisted that I risk identity theft by posting them the original documents they required.

She said I was being subjected to a random check.

I didn't believe her.

That's what the tax people always say and I never believe them either.

Fortunately, I can provide a utility bill since I insist that at least one utility company sends us paper bills.

Folk who have all their bills sent electronically would be stuffed in this situation because the DVLA (like banks and other organisations) refuses to accept Internet bills, or print out of Internet bills, as proof of existence.

7

(Gloucestershire)

The Chilcot Report, published in the UK in July 2016, vindicated all those who opposed the Iraq War. the first World War was once described as 'the war to end all wars'. The war on Iraq has proved to be the 'war to start all wars'.

I hope that those who supported the war will now regret their part in defending an indefensible conflict.

But although British Prime Minister Tony Blair has rightly been castigated (when will he be arrested as a war criminal?) the role of the media in the war has, perhaps not surprisingly, been ignored.

I was working as a columnist on a Sunday newspaper called *The People* when war was declared and I was in a prime position to see just how the early days of the conflict were reported and how the newspaper attempted to manipulate its readers.

With the complete support of my wife Donna Antoinette, I resigned from *The People* when the editor refused to print a column in which I questioned the validity of the conflict – and the reasons for it.

Immediately afterwards I wrote a short book called *People Push Bottles Up Peaceniks* in which I explained why I thought that the editor was wrong to suppress an alternative view of the war. Judging from the reviews I think it is fair to say that most journalists thought I was mad to resign from a newspaper column on a matter of principle.

Finally, as a matter of record it is of some interest to note that in 2003, when I resigned, the circulation of The People was well over 1.1 million copies. Today, the newspaper has a circulation of just 277,021. I don't think any national newspaper in Britain has lost readers at quite the same rate.

I think that rather proves my point. When a newspaper loses its way, and loses its integrity, it also loses its readers.

Generally speaking, newspapers lost their way some years ago.

And that, allied to the rise of the free Internet, has resulted in their destruction.

It is not surprising that a recent major survey showed that just 43% of Europeans trust the written press. To be honest I'm surprised it's that high. The 43% trust the written press because they haven't yet learned not to.

Newspapers and news magazines are dead. Television and radio are finished. And the Internet, which relies on fake and manufactured news, was born moribund.

Which leaves us with books which are, I believe, the only trustworthy medium left.

8

(Gloucestershire)

I have learned a number of things about the people who live in the Clotswolds.

First, it is extremely uncommon for those who own dogs to be able to afford a dog lead. And so their dogs run wild. A fear of dogs is not a phobia (as it is commonly and erroneously reckoned to be) but an entirely logical and sensible form of self-protection. Barely a day goes by without some innocent being killed by a dog.

Today, in our lane, an aggressive brown Labrador ran up to me and stopped about inch away from my thigh. Its mouth was open and its eyes looked rather wild. I was, to be frank, quite frightened by the animal. I made shooing away gestures and told the dog to go away. The woman with the dog, presumably its owner, rushed up to me and shouted at me for not welcoming her dog and, presumably, allowing it to bite a chunk out of my leg.

'Why are you doing that to my dog?' she demanded.

'Because it frightened me,' I told her honestly. 'I've been bitten by dogs twice and I'm rather nervous of them.'

'You are stupid,' said the Clotswold woman, with a sneer.

'You should control your dog,' I told her. 'This is a public place.'

'There is no such law,' she shouted. 'The only law is that a dog must have a collar. You should not talk about the law when you are so ignorant.'

And she would not accept that the law says, quite clearly, that a dog must be kept under control when in a public place and that if anyone thinks that they might be attacked then the dog is, in law, dangerously out of control. The punishment for the owner is six months in prison and an unlimited fine. The dog can be destroyed and the owner banned from owning an animal again.

Second, the 1% who 'pick up' after their dogs, invariably hang the little plastic bags on a nearby tree or fence so that they don't have to bother carting it home with them.

Third, the people who live in the Clotswolds cannot reverse. If you meet a local head on in a narrow lane he or she will sit there until he or she is dead rather than attempt to go backwards.

Fourth, they never, ever say thank you.

We went into town today and it is clear that the queues in shops are getting worse.

Indeed, a private, independent survey, has shown that the queues are worst in Marks and Spencer, W.H.Smith, Boots the chemist and any bank you care to name.

Another survey has shown that there are more cyclists on our roads than at any time since the Great Depression.

I think there are four explanations.

First, the success of Wiggins and Froome in the Tour de France means that form-fitting Lycra has become the costume of choice among the under 40s and it is difficult to wear the stuff, and excuse the fact that it highlights every roll of fat and varicose vein, unless you also own a bicycle with racing handlebars, two bottle holders and at least 21 gears.

Second, a determination to become fit and svelte enough to fit into the Lycra without looking totally absurd has pushed millions out of motor cars and buses and onto bicycles.

Third, the bicycle is a cheaper and more convenient form of local transport than the motor car.

Fourth, once they have bought the Lycra and the bicycle, the new cyclists excuse their behaviour by claiming that they are saving ice floes and low lying residential areas by pedalling everywhere they go. This enables them to feel superior to everyone else.

Today I saw a cyclist being interviewed on television. He was, I believe, competing in some international event.

‘If I go faster than the others, complete the course and don’t fall, I could win,’ he said.

Today it took us (and several hundred other motorists) well over an hour to travel 15 miles from Cheltenham. We were all lined up behind a cyclist who was pedalling along in the middle of the road as though he were the pace maker in some bizarre race. At that speed, our Bentley uses up three times as much petrol as it would if it were travelling at the legal limit of 50 mph.

A single cyclist can do a massive amount of damage to the environment. When we eventually succeeded in overtaking this lunatic I noticed that he had a camera on his helmet so I slowed down and put my hand out of the window to make sure that he could film, on his digital camera, my digital recommendation.

The Bentley has a spoiler which rises up from the back of the car if I exceed 80 mph (or, more accurately, if I were to be naughty enough to exceed 80 mph) but I can control the spoiler myself and send it up or down on a whim.

I think I will have a message for cyclists stuck onto the spoiler. Maybe the words ‘I Hope Your Penis Shrivels Up’ would be suitable. I cannot possibly get into trouble because this is the title of one my books and I can always argue that the words are there as an advertisement.

Or maybe, if I pull in front of him (or her) and drive slowly I could put something longer and more personal on the spoiler. Something such as: ‘This vehicle emits specially toxic fumes. You will be dead in two hours.’

9

(Gloucestershire)

In a pub today I heard a man complain that the country is now full of people who look as though they could do with a damned good wash.

You couldn’t say that sort of thing if you hoped to have a career in politics.

The pub had a big board containing an apparently handwritten list of all the dishes available but actually I know that the apparently handwritten list is available in all the pubs that belong to the same chain and the lettering isn’t done by hand but printed.

Everything on the menu is made to sound very special. So they don’t have ‘chips’ they have ‘crinkle cut chips from Gloucestershire potatoes’ and they don’t have pizza they have ‘genuine Italian handmade pizza made with sundried tomatoes from Andorra’. If you ask for a glass of water they probably bring you a glass of a ‘sparkling, fresh, natural beverage with life enhancing properties’.

I see that John Prescott is now complaining about the illegal invasion of Iraq.

Prescott was deputy Prime Minister at the time and if he really didn’t know what was going on then he must be even more stupid than most of us believe him to be. Personally, I can’t see why he shouldn’t be standing alongside his chum Blair when they are both charged as war criminals.

Indeed, all those politicians who have supported the so called humanitarian military adventures (in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and so on) should all be arrested. Their actions have helped make Britons everywhere terrorist targets.

War criminals like Blair don’t care, of course, since they have 24 hour police protection paid for by us.

10

(Devon)

It is well known that Germans have a long lasting obsession with faeces. The first thing Gutenberg wanted to publish after the Bible was a laxative timetable. Martin Luther (the original one not the American sequel) is reported to have once said: ‘I am like ripe shit and the world is a gigantic asshole’. He apparently had the idea for Protestant Reform while sitting on the toilet.

Both Mozart and Hitler were obsessed with faeces (I know they were Austrian but there really isn’t much difference) and even today Germans enjoy discussing their bowel movements (both qualitatively and quantitatively) at the dinner table. If I had any idea how to access Twitter or Facebook I have no doubt that I would find that Germans regularly provide intimate bowel reports – possibly with appropriate photographs.

Thinking of Mozart, I read the other day that doctors are now claiming that he suffered from that fashionable disorder known as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (known to its closest chums as ADHD).

Now, I’m still not convinced that there is any such a disease as ADHD but it occurs to me that if Mozart had been born in the 21st century and diagnosed with this disease, he would have almost certainly been prescribed large doses of Ritalin to keep him quiet.

And he’d have written a vast collection of lift music.

11

(Devon)

The mantra among the young is now apparently ‘less is more’.

Young people, I am told, want to reduce their ambitions and their commitments in order to reduce their stress levels. This is both sensible and commendable but I hope they will accept that this change means that their material expectations must be downgraded accordingly.

12

(Devon)

I went into a branch of The Works (the store which is always clearing out or closing down or having a massive end of something sale) and bought a few books.

‘Did you find everything you were looking for today?’ asked the assistant who served me.

‘Yes thank you,’ I replied, ‘everything except eternal peace and goodwill between men.’

‘Try our website,’ said the assistant helpfully.

For a moment I thought that he was replying to my mild attempt at humour by extending the gag.

But he wasn’t.

He was deadly serious.

He wasn’t taking part in our conversation at all on a conscious level but he was merely parroting the words he had been taught.

‘You’ll find many items there that aren’t available in the shop. And if you order online you can have the item delivered to this shop so that you can collect it. The process usually takes three or four days. The website…’

He was still talking about the wonders of their website when I crept out of the door a few moments later.

A reader has used one of the relaxation tapes I recorded 30 years ago in one of those rap songs which seem to be so popular.

This is the second time this has happened. I haven’t heard either record though I believe one of them did quite well. I haven’t received any money either.

Antoinette and I played a game of silly walks. One of us did the funny walk and the other had to guess who we were impersonating. I did Groucho. Antoinette did John Wayne. I did Jacques Tati. Then Antoinette did one I didn’t recognise.

‘I don’t know,’ I confessed at last. ‘Who is it?’

‘That man we see when we go to Taunton. He’s sometimes in the antiques place. He walks like that.’

‘You’re supposed to know who it is if you’re impersonating someone!’ I protested. ‘You can’t just say that bloke we sometimes see in the antiques place!’

‘Well I don’t know his name but he could be famous,’ said Antoinette. ‘And he does have a funny walk.’

‘He limps!’ I said. ‘He’s got a gammy knee.’

But I let her have that one and then I did Denis Compton who was a famous cricketer when I was boy. He had a gammy knee too. But Antoinette said that was cheating because she never saw him walk.

So then we couldn’t think of any other famous people with funny walks and we had a cup of tea and a piece of cake instead.

13

(Gloucestershire)

The authorities are planning to shut Cirencester Hospital and Stroud Hospital at night. They are doing this to save money which is needed to pay for loads of administrators though they claim it is because new rules mean that the hospital cannot be open unless there are two qualified nurses on the premises.

(I thought that sounded silly so I checked. The rules mean that there have to be two registered nurses in the hospital. Not two hundred, not twenty, but two. In the whole hospital.)

A spokesidiot for Gloucester Care Services, which appears to be in some bizarre way responsible for what is happening, said that the hospitals weren’t been closed to save money but to make the service safer.

And you know, he’s right.

If the hospitals are shut then no patients can be injured by maladroit doctors or careless nurses and so the safety record will be perfect.

People will die, of course, but no one will be able to blame those deaths on the hospitals because the hospitals will be shut and therefore blameless.

If you are a bureaucrat then closing a hospital is always the sensible option: there will be no patients messing up the corridors, less risk of anything going wrong and less risk of there having to be an enquiry afterwards.

Naturally, however, no bureaucrats are ever fired when hospitals are closed.

Another spokesidiot pointed out that there are plenty of hospitals open in France and Scotland all during the night, and that French and Scottish hospitals are only a short flight away from the Cotswolds.

I read somewhere that MI5 is short of funds so I bought a spy outfit in a charity shop. The outfit contains a pair of false spectacles, a false moustache and a secret code book with instructions on how to make invisible ink out of seagull droppings. The moustache has been used but it still looks quite new and has a fair amount of wear left in it.

Antoinette and I took the kit round to GCHQ and asked if we could give it as a donation because we thought it might prove useful in the fight against spies and terrorism and bad people generally.

The man on the gate wouldn’t let us in and wouldn’t accept our gift so we took it to the Post Office and sent it to the head of MI5 in London. I’m sure they’ll appreciate it.

Talking of spies I read today that there is an organisation in America called the Culinary Institute of America and another called the Food and Beverage Institute. The first of these two is, of course, known as the CIA and the second is the officially referred to as the FBI.

14

(Devon)

I am delighted to see that Mark Carney, the Canadian ex-Goldman Sachs banker who is now supposedly in charge of the Bank of England, had a good time watching tennis in the royal box during Wimbledon.

Since the pound is collapsing (largely thanks to the nonsensical forecasts he and Osborne made before the Referendum) that looks suspiciously like fiddling while Rome burns.

Carney, whom we are paying a small fortune, has apparently been having a wonderful time this summer, attending lots of really jolly garden parties. He’s obviously had plenty of time for fun because when not interfering with the Brexit referendum (on the wrong side) Carney has managed to claim £250,000 in travel expenses – masking 30 trips abroad to New York, Paris, Rio de Janeiro, Singapore and Sydney. (I note he does not appear from this list to have been to Wolverhampton, Manchester or Glasgow).

Interest rates have been at the lowest level ever for the last seven years and policies of central banks such as the Bank of England have resulted in terrible changes to our society. The wealth of the mega rich has soared and poor people have become poorer. Just 62 people (most of them crooks and the rest the children of crooks) now own half the world’s wealth and, thanks to Carney and other central bankers, the wealth of the poorest 50% of people has fallen by 41%.

Most people in Britain are far poorer today than they were when the hedonistic, super smooth Canadian (and, did I mention, former Goldman Sachs hack) Carney was hired and it sometimes seems to me that there was a misprint in his job description and instead of being hired to run it he was hired to ruin the Bank of England.

Carney and his overpaid chums at the Bank of England seem to regard anything unforeseen as merely a result of irrational behaviour on the part of the public. It is our fault if things go wrong, never their fault for failing to spot trends or dangers and then doing something about them.

The fact that the economists at the Bank of England are packed full with hubris, and get things wrong with remarkable predictability, does not matter in itself.

What matters is that they make their decisions based on their erroneous readings of the economy and the public mood. As a result, all investors have to make judgements based on what the Bank of England decides to do, and might decide to do in the future, however wrong the Bank might be. The world has always been topsy turvy but it was never as topsy turvy as Carney and the Bank of England have made it.

Quantitative easing and other inexplicable and indefensible policies have exacerbated wealth inequality around the world. In the US, the very rich have become exceedingly rich but everyone else has become poorer. The whole financial system has been deliberately arranged to ensure that compensation for bankers and other senior executives rises up into the stratosphere while everyone else goes broke.

Bankers who led their countries into disaster in 2008 should have been imprisoned or fined or both but the link between the criminals, the authorities and the watchdogs is so close (Carney is by no means alone in being a central banker with a stretch at Goldman Sachs on his CV) that they were all bailed out and in the end the only people who suffered were taxpayers and savers.

Banks like Citibank, Morgan Stanley and the egregious Goldman Sachs should have been nationalised. The shareholders should have lost everything and the directors and senior executives should have been fired, fined and taken to court. There would have been a healthy cleansing of the financial system. The problem was always structural and cyclical but the governments and the regulators (tied as they were to the banks) refused to acknowledge this.

And nothing has changed.

The same idiots are in charge of the big banks. They are still paying themselves zillions in salaries and bonuses. And today, our main too-big-to-fail banks are still creating the very sort of financial weapons of mass deception which caused the crash of 2008. The derivative positions held by the banks now exceed $650 trillion and the risk to the world economy is infinitely greater than it has ever been. Once again the system is set up so that the people who cause the problem will not suffer from the consequences of their malfeasance.

The borrowers, those with massive leverage and huge mortgages will benefit massively. The victims, the sufferers, will be savers, pensioners and employees. Those who hold bank deposits, annuities, pensions and insurance policies will find themselves holding worthless pieces of paper. Anyone who doubts this should remember that in March 2013, bank depositors in Cyprus had their money forcibly converted into bank shares. The EU and America approved of this plan, making it clear that it was the blueprint for all future bank crises. (The original plan was to simply confiscate depositors' savings.)

It is hardly surprising that gold is becoming ever more popular as a safe haven. The curious thing is that gold, which has no yield, is for the first time in history a relatively high yielding asset compared to the many bonds and bank deposit accounts which now offer negative interest rates.

House owners think they are rich but, of course, unless they sell their homes, their profits will remain illusory. Millions are now relying on their inflated house prices to keep them when they retire but for how much longer will house prices remain at unsupportable levels?

And by the time fees and other costs have been taken out of the equation, the result will usually be that the sale of one house and the purchase of a smaller alternative will lead to a penurious old age. This is why older folk with big houses aren't selling them and downsizing.

The lunatic policies now espoused by central banks everywhere are a result of the fact that central bankers fear nothing quite as much as they fear deflation. And they fear deflation, a fall in the price of goods, because when prices fall the real value of debt goes up. Governments don't care about the debts held by taxpayers but they do care very much about government debt. And debt is the one thing Western governments have in abundance. When it comes to debt, Britain and America are in no better state than Greece, Brazil and Japan. We are all living in a financial disaster waiting to happen. Politicians and central bankers fear deflation because it slows the growth in the Gross Domestic Product at the same time as the nominal debt increases. By increasing personal and corporate nominal debt deflation produces a mass of bankruptcies and defaults. This means that the banks lose money again (and the bankers have to find more money from somewhere in order to keep paying themselves their million pound plus salaries and their million pound plus bonuses). Deflation also means that tax income falls too. And Governments everywhere hate that. And so, in order to fight deflation, the central banks keep printing money.

Nations are supposed to exist to serve and protect the people but none of them do; they exist instead to serve the feather bedded politicians and civil servants and, on the side, manage the requirements of political correctness.

And so, in order to avoid deflation, the politicians and the bankers are feeding us a diet of inflation. Governments and central banks adore inflation because it helps turn big debts into smaller, manageable debts and at the same helps increase tax revenues. They are, of course, doing it bit by bit in the knowledge that we probably won't notice if it happens slowly. And to help things along they lie about the inflation rate by fiddling the things which are in the 'basket' of items they use to measure inflation.

The official inflation rate at the moment is supposedly below 2% but anyone who ever buys anything knows that the true inflation level is three, four or even five times that level. The central bankers who screwed up for a decade or more believe that when inflation has reached a level they like they can just rein it in. This is wishful thinking. History shows that once inflation has got going it becomes unstoppable.

The result of all this is, predictably, going to be disaster. Countless millions of cautious savers are going to be ruined. There will be chaos, rioting in the streets and the mother of all financial crises. Pensioners who thought they were prepared for their old age will find that they are penniless (while politicians, bankers and the ruthless Greeds of this world get ever richer).

Governments, who have given themselves massive powers to confront terrorism, will find it remarkably easy to deal with the rioters. CCTV cameras will be available and ringleaders will be easily arrested and imprisoned.

Mussolini, the man who invented fascism was considered a man of the left, a Statist, but his methods have been enthusiastically accepted by most modern governments and, in particular, by the United States and by the European Union.

And, of course, by Britain: the country which has more CCTV cameras than any other country on earth.

15

(Devon)

To my old-fashioned mind there is much about modern living which deserves criticism.

We are constantly required to get used to the idea that although less may not be more it is all we are going to get and so we might as well stop whingeing and accept it. We get less chocolate in our snack bars, less honesty in our politicians, less service in restaurants, cafés and pubs and less integrity and honesty in our civil servants.

Today, life is like a crazy golf course: utterly unpredictable and entirely unfair.

I am nostalgic for the days when lawyers, accountants and bank managers took their responsibilities seriously, and could always be trusted to offer honest, impartial advice.

I am nostalgic for honest sportsmen who always played the game, who regarded competing as more important than winning and who would not have been able to see the point in playing and cheating. I think it is sad that spontaneous passion has disappeared from sport; today, professional sports persons are enormously self-conscious, they have been media trained to imitate what they think they should feel and they are far too nervous to do anything which might offend their sponsors or the agents who control the money.

I am nostalgic for the days when dignity, discretion and respect were still regarded as virtues rather than as weaknesses.

16

(Gloucestershire)

Last year our resident pheasant, Lord Percival, brought his family to see us. He was very proud.

He now seems to have given our garden to his eldest son for although we rarely see Lord Percival himself we see Percival junior every day.

Indeed, Percival junior never leaves the garden.

Now Percival junior has in turn, brought his son to take his meals with us. We are honoured to have had three generations of the same family dining al fresco at our table.

Good news on the tax front. Lord Howe, the defence minister and clearly therefore not a man to be lightly accused of tax avoidance, has done a deal with HMRC to avoid paying vast amounts of tax.

He inherited his family's £30 million estate but avoids paying vast amounts of tax by allowing the public access to the house on two days a year.

Brilliant idea.

I hope everyone in the country follows suit.

I dare say most people would be happy to allow the public two days access to their property in return for a dramatically diminished tax bill.

Less exciting is the news that tax authorities everywhere are gleeful at having been able to buy yet more stolen bank account details. I don't quite understand this. If I were to buy stolen goods I would expect to go to prison. But HMRC, and its chums abroad, can buy stolen bank records and boast about it.

17

(Gloucestershire)

The Bank of England is planning to introduce plastic bank notes. These will be made out of oil, which is a diminishing resource and which we are constantly being told we should not be using. Shoppers in the UK who want something in which to carry home their purchases must pay good money for a plastic bag.

(This is supposed to be a piece of EU legislation but, strangely, it does not appear to have reached France. Shops in Paris hand out plastic bags as if they grow on trees and wouldn't dare or dream of charging for them.)

The old-fashioned bank notes were, of course, made of paper which does grow on trees which were, the last time I looked, a renewable resource.

It is clear that incessantly changing the physical nature of the currency is merely part of a plot to discourage people from storing paper currency under their beds since this will be inconvenient and unacceptable as banks introduce negative interest rates. There are plans to change our £10 and £20 notes shortly. And I guarantee that there will be more changes in another couple of years.

The EU is doing the same thing – and euro bank notes are being replaced. (Good luck to them. Replacing all the notes throughout the EU will be a logistical nightmare.)

The Government and the banks want us to keep our money in banks which can charge us for storing our money. To ensure that we do this, and that our savings lose value, they are changing the currency at a bewildering speed.

I have no doubt that I will, in due course, find some old out-of-date notes in a pocket somewhere. They will then have to be sent to the Bank of England by special delivery mail to be exchanged.

I know from bitter experience that if you send notes to the Bank of England without paying Royal Mail a huge fee to ensure that the letter isn't stolen, the notes will never arrive at their destination. Too many postal workers know that a slightly thicker than usual envelope addressed to the Bank of England will be worth stealing.

18

(Devon)

We watched the film 'Truth' this evening. It's about how American newscaster Dan Rather was ruined after the programme for which he worked, broadcast criticism of George W. Bush.

The programme describes how trolls and bloggers attacked the programme makers and it is one of the first examples of social media and lobbyists manipulating the news and closing down proper debate.

It is now impossible for any serious topics to be discussed in the way they should be aired. Anyone attempting to initiate a sensible debate on, say, climate change, is likely to find themselves the victim of a barrage of mindless and personal abuse.

Too often the truth is lost in the smearing, the screaming, the moaning, the self-righteous abuse, the whingeing, the hypocrisy, the pseudoscience and the self-serving lobbying.

19

(Devon)

Someone called Owen Smith is standing against Jeremy Corbyn for the leadership of the Labour Party.

Mr Smith, who is an MP, is a former lobbyist for an American drug company. He was head of Government affairs for the company.

The fact that he is standing, let alone that some people will doubtless vote for him, is depressing.

Modern politics seems to attract the very worst sort of people, and then brings out the very worst in them.

I wonder, incidentally, how much time modern political leaders spend reading and learning. Not much I suspect. The bedside reading of the average political heavyweight probably consists of something detailing the exploits of Nick and Nora. Or, possibly, Dick and Dora.

20

(Devon)

We took the Mitsubishi back to the dealer in Bridport to have the tonneau cover fitted and the malfunctioning tailgate repaired. While we left the truck at the garage we drove to Dorchester in a loan car.

We hadn't been to Dorchester for over a decade and I have to say that I was well impressed. The newly built houses look good and the town itself is busy with a good variety of shops. I think the town probably has most of the ironmongers remaining in England. There seems to be one every few yards in the High Street and anyone looking for pans, hammers and fly spray would be in ironmongery heaven.

We bought a beautiful ceramic cockerel and a splendid looking vase. William Morris said that one should never buy anything which is not either beautiful or useful. The cockerel is beautiful. The vase is both beautiful and useful.

My only complaint in Dorchester concerned the car park.

I walked 200 yards to the parking ticket meter only to find that I couldn't buy a ticket until I keyed in the car registration.

I can never remember my car registration at the best of times but with a loan car I had absolutely no chance. I had to walk back, write down the number and then retake my place in the queue to buy a ticket. The sun was shining directly onto the keyboard and I had forgotten to bring my reading glasses so it took me ages to complete the registration. By the time I'd finished there was quite a huge queue waiting. I apologised.

'I've taken exams that were easier than that,' I announced, finally taking my ticket from the machine.

I hate it when car park officials install these machines which require customers to key in their registration number. I have only ever seen them previously in Wales. They are there to stop people passing unused tickets onto other motorists. Legalising meanness and making generosity illegal seems a strange way to run a town.

Car park spaces are getting smaller too. If you drive anything wider than one of those horrid little tin can Smart cars you are stuffed.

We spent three hours in Dorchester and the garage should have finished fixing the tonneau by then but when we got back they hadn't.

And so we drove into nearby Bridport and had coffee and fine biscuits in a Costa Coffee café.

In the café, I noticed a sign in the lavatory asking customers to 'Please refrain from throwing magpies into the W.C.'.

I told Antoinette about this. Neither of us could think of an explanation but it did occur to us that the residents of Bridport must be a strange lot.

A few minutes later Antoinette came back from the lavatory with a large grin on her face.

'It says: 'Please refrain from throwing nappies into the W.C.',' she said.

'It was written in a funny sort of script,' I said defensively.

'Aren't you due to visit the optician soon?' she asked.

In a local Waitrose I found a bottle of Islay Malt, a malt whisky which is difficult to find. It's the favourite tipple of Charlie Muffin, the marvellous anti-hero spy created by Brian Freemantle so I bought a bottle to give to Charlie.

If I can't find Charlie I will drink the stuff myself.

It's been a good week for malt whiskies. I discovered that there are quite a few English malt whiskies now available. Malt whisky is made at a distillery in Norfolk and there are now two whisky making operations in London.

When we got back to the garage, the mechanics had at last managed to fit the tonneau cover.

'You can't have a refund on the other liner,' snapped the receptionist the minute we turned up.

I stared at her as she delivered a tirade telling me that the brand new liner which they had just removed and which had cost us a couple of hundred pounds just a week before was entirely useless and without value. I had said nothing about the liner and had already paid the bill but I now stood silently while the tirade and the abuse continued unabated.

Eventually I had had enough and I told the wretched woman to stop being so rude and aggressive.

She seemed surprised to discover that she had been misbehaving and to be fair she did apologise.

The salesman, who had been standing nearby, and who was clearly shocked, told us that she often treated customers rather rudely.

I thought her quite a harridan and later in the evening when I received a Customer Survey from Mitsubishi I gave the garage very poor marks. I don't usually fill in these things but I felt that I had been treated appallingly and ought to say something.

Only when I had completed the form did I discover that rather than being sent to the Mitsubishi head office it had been forwarded direct to the dealer.

21

(Gloucestershire)

If and when our 'leaders' eventually get around to begin extricating our country from its jailers, there will have to be some negotiations.

Britain will be up against the EU's three presidents.

First, there is Jean-Claude Juncker, the President of the European Commission. Once the PM of Luxembourg, Juncker was forced to resign from that little job after a bizarre scandal involving illegal phone tapping. Juncker is a self-confessed liar ('When it becomes serious you have to lie,' he said during one of the Eurozone crises) and a rumoured heavy drinker (it is said that there is little point in trying to talk to him after midday so the negotiations will have to be done in the morning). Juncker helped Luxembourg become rich by fixing tax avoidance agreements with hundreds of multinational firms. In May 2011, Juncker told a meeting of the federalist European Movement that he often 'had to lie' and that Eurozone monetary policy should be discussed in 'secret, dark debates'. Luxembourg has always been a rather pathetic, crooked little country, not quite as bad as Liechtenstein but cut from the same cloth, and it seems odd that it should be a Luxembourger taking the moral and political high ground in Europe.

Second there is Donald Tusk, the President of the European Council. Tusk is a Pole and a passionate believer in European integration. No one really knows anything about him except that he appears to have been named after a duck and that is probably the nicest thing anyone can say about any of the EU presidents.

Third, there is Martin Schulz, who is the President of the European Parliament. Schulz is an alcoholic and from his photographs does not appear to be as big as the other two though I realise you can't always tell. Mr Schulz was famous before Brexit only because former Italian PM, Silvio Berlusconi, once suggested that he audition for the part of a concentration camp guard. I have no idea why Mr Berlusconi made this suggestion but it inevitably made headlines. Before becoming a full time, highly paid eurocrat Schulz did have a job, as a bookseller, but he lost that job, allegedly because of his drinking. Thanks to the EU, Schulz now has two limousines and 33 personal assistants (paid for by taxpayers) who include five press officers and two diary assistants. We also provide him with two ushers who dress in black tails and greet his guests. Schulz is reported to have claimed that democracy is a threat to the EU. I think he is probably right about that.

I suspect that all these Presidents are graduates of the Captain Bligh School of Diplomacy.

There is much confusion in London about where we will find good negotiators to deal with all the Presidents and their many aides. There is talk of bringing in people from Australia and America. Mrs Clegg, an ex EU employee and the foreign born wife of Nick Clegg, the former Lib Dem party leader who is also an ex EU employee (they both have a vested interest in the EU remaining strong and wealthy enough to pay their huge EU pensions) has said that Britain will need to recruit at least 500 negotiators. (Since the Cleggs have a clear vested interest in the success and survival of the EU they should not be allowed to comment on the subject.)

The wretched Mrs Clegg is as wrong as her even more wretched husband always was. There is no need to bring in any negotiators.

First, we are already in a strong position. The economy is booming now that we have voted to leave the EU. The stock market is up and businesses are investing. Osborne, the Bank of England and the gloomy bankers have (predictably) been proved wrong in their claims that a vote to leave would lead Britain to ruin and penury. They were either incompetent or scare mongering or both. And the fact is that we buy far, far more from the EU than the EU countries buy from us. What are the EU countries going to do? Stop selling us cars and cheese? I think not. The nasty little people from the EU will roll over quickly enough when they realise which side their croissants are buttered. The arrogant and patronising 'Remainers' don't seem to understand basic psychology; the elemental greed (for wealth and power) upon which the EU is built.

Second, we already have the best negotiator in the entire world: Bernie Ecclestone. Mr Ecclestone has been running Formula I for decades and is renowned for being able to make corporate bosses and state leaders eat acorns out of his hand. It was Ecclestone who managed to persuade the German Government to allow him to give them some cash instead of going to prison. It was Ecclestone who stitched up Tony Blair over tobacco sponsorship (Ecclestone got the advertising ban lifted and got his £1 million bribe money returned, proving that you can have your cake and eat it). Bernie Ecclestone would eat up Juncker, Schulz and Tusk in half a day.

So let's hope we see a little less negativity – and a little more optimism.

The future is bright now that we're on track to leave the clutches of the fascists. How proud we can all be that England and Wales are leading the anti-EU revolution.

I finished the day reading a few pages of Burt Reynold's autobiography.

It's the funniest and best show business autobiography I've read for years – and I have read hundreds of books by and about the movies.

22

(Gloucestershire)

British children are getting fatter and the Government is blaming the food they eat. That's undoubtedly partly true. But it is disingenuous not to blame the fact that local authorities have closed nearly all the school playing fields so that the land can be sold off (at a huge profit) to developers. And it doesn't help much that parents have been warned not to allow their children to walk or cycle to school because of the dangers on our roads and pavements. Anyone who lives near a school will know that most children now travel to school by motor car. The diesel pollution around schools is horrendous.

23

(Gloucestershire)

Employees are constantly stealing from the NHS. They steal stationery, they steal equipment and they steal medical instruments. But mainly they steal time and it is the stealing of time which is really doing the damage.

I have studied the NHS carefully for five decades and I believe quite fervently that an indecent majority of employees hold the NHS itself in contempt and, worst of all, have contempt for patients.

Whenever surveys are done, they invariably show that at any hospital the vast majority of employees admit that they would hate to be admitted to the hospital where they work and that they would never recommend their hospital to anyone needing medical attention.

Most senior NHS employees (like General Medical Council employees and most senior politicians) don't use the NHS at all (even though it is the NHS which has made most of them wealthy beyond their wildest dreams) since they are paid up members of private health care organisations.

The NHS has become a dangerous joke. Women having sex change operations on the NHS are now being given free fertility treatment so that they can have babies after they become men. The courts have decided that homosexuals and drug addicts can be given an incredibly expensive drug that might prevent AIDS – so that they don't have to take precautions to protect themselves. The drug, which is less effective than condoms, will cost at least £20 million a year to start with (and much more in a few years' time) and cannot possibly be described as 'essential'.

But the elderly are not allowed to have cataract operations under the NHS until they are virtually blind (the authorities clearly hope that they will either be dead or be too old for surgery). This absurd policy means that old people denied such surgery cannot look after themselves and need to be cared for – usually by relatives or neighbours since the State won't do that these days.

Naturally, no one in authority cares a damn about the quality of life of septuagenarians who are unable to feed themselves, read, use the Internet or watch television. They do not have the wit or imagination to realise that one day they too may be unable to feed themselves, use the Internet or watch television.

And, of course, very little money is spent on preventing dementia, or looking after patients with disorders such as Alzheimer's Disease which cause dementia.

And no one cares about the old people who haven't been officially diagnosed as demented, because they aren't yet quite that far gone, but who find daily life wavering between difficult and impossible in our increasingly demanding and aggressive and threatening age.

No one in the NHS cares much about old people, although everyone in Britain will, if they're lucky, one day be old themselves.

Indeed, it seems popular these days for everyone who can to take advantage of the elderly, the frail and the not quite as sharp as they once were.

For example, it seems to me that utility companies, train companies, Royal Mail and banks (and their vast armies of employees) deliberately take advantage of the elderly by producing payment schedules and pricing structures which are quite impossible to understand. Even charities, including some which exist to care for the elderly, cold-bloodedly rip off old people.

After I have given my date of birth to an employee of any of these companies, I find that I am patronised and treated as a demented idiot by some Asian teenager who seems to find it bizarre, and close to a miracle, that anyone so old should still be consuming electricity and making telephone calls.

‘Brilliant!’ they say, when I’ve managed to give my correct birth date; enthusing as though I’ve just managed to split an atom with only a garlic crusher and a grapefruit spoon.

On the upside, however, I can shout at people in shops without too much risk of being arrested for by-standers will simply assume that I am in the early stages of dementia and should be ignored.

24

(Devon)

Sport venues in Britain have for years now forbidden customers from taking their own food and drink into the grounds. I am not talking about alcohol. I am talking about sandwiches, cola and soft drinks. The excuse is that someone who takes, say, a bottle of Coca Cola into a sports arena might be filmed drinking that beverage despite the fact that the ground has signed a sponsorship deal with Pepsi Cola. I have never heard of anything so daft.

When they arrive at the grounds, customers (who have often paid very hefty fees for their tickets) must submit their bags to a search. Any food or drink which is considered unacceptable is confiscated and the customer must then purchase their replacement comestibles from the vastly over-priced stands around the ground. All this is now so commonplace that no one takes much notice.

But things have now got worse.

A race course is now refusing to allow people in if they have their own cameras. The logic for this is that professional photographers have to pay a special fee for a licence to take pictures and that punters who wander in and take snaps might in some way threaten the ability of the professionals to make a living.

What balderdash.

If professional photographers, equipped with expensive telephone lenses and given close access to all the correct enclosures, cannot take better pictures than amateurs armed only with their Box Brownies, then the pros should really take up some other line of work.

Where is all this going to end, I wonder?

How long before sports arenas refuse to allow in customers who are wearing clothes made by a non-sponsoring manufacturer?

That should be fun.

‘You can keep the bra, madam, but everything else has to go.’

‘Please remove everything except your socks, sir.’

25

(Gloucestershire)

I was strimming in the garden today when, having just run out of petrol, I heard a voice behind me. I nearly had a heart attack. Our garden is large and does not usually contain stray persons.

When I looked round I saw a small, slight woman with a rucksack on her back. She was foreign and, speaking with a thick accent, wanted to know where she was.

I told her.

‘There is an emergency,’ she said.

My heart immediately began to race.

‘What is the emergency?’ I demanded. ‘Is someone injured? Where are they?’

‘I am lost,’ she said.

‘That is the emergency?’

‘Yes.’

‘How the hell did you get in here?’ I asked.

We have a four foot high fence around the garden and we keep all garden gates locked to keep out the wandering dog walkers. (At both our homes locals have complained bitterly because our fences prevent their dogs from wandering into our gardens and doing what dogs do when they see trees.)

‘I climbed over the fence,’ she said brightly, clearly not realising that there are few worse sins in England than climbing over a garden fence. Not even leaving a gate open, or hanging plastic bags full of dog poo on a tree can match the awfulness of climbing over a fence that is clearly there not to be climbed. ‘Which way should I go?’

I am, from experience, more of a misanthrope than a xenophobe but for a while both these developing prejudices were exacerbated. I told her the way to go. There is only one lane and she had come one way so, even for a foreigner, it shouldn’t have been a difficult choice to make.

I told her to carry on in the direction she had been travelling before she had climbed over our fence.

‘How do I get out of the garden?’ she asked.

‘The way you came in,’ I told her. ‘Climb back over the fence.’

It was the best part of a quarter of a mile to the house and to let her through the house, or to fetch a key for one of the gates, I would have had to take off my boots.

I was not in the mood to offer cups of tea and platefuls of cake.

Grumbling loudly she headed back to the fence.

I put more petrol into my strimmer.

I made a note to get the fencing company round to make our fences higher.

How high do you have to make a fence, I wonder, to keep out a wandering hiker?

Afterwards I went to check on the fire I had started in our incinerator.

I have to buy more incinerators for, to my astonishment, I realised this afternoon that the incinerator we have is already coming apart.

The heat of the fires I’ve lit in it has destroyed the metal which is now as friable as tissue paper. Why, I wonder, does anyone manufacture an incinerator which cannot cope with heat? Silly question, I suppose, since I now have to buy another. I think I’ll buy half a dozen and have two or three of them fired up in tandem. If I don’t stock up on the damned things they will soon go out of stock – either because everyone else has caught on and joined the incinerator generation or because the authorities have banned them as an aid to terrorism and money laundering. There is no point in my taking the wounded incinerator back to the store because I can imagine the conversation.

‘Have you been burning things in it?’

‘Yes, I’m afraid I have.’

‘Well, then, what do you expect? If you burn things inside it then you’ll destroy it.’

‘But it’s an incinerator!’

‘Yes, that’s as maybe, but you shouldn’t put things into it and then set fire to them.’

Maybe, if I have enough incinerators, I could take in rubbish, in much the way that women used to take in washing. I suspect that there will be quite a market for a home incinerating business. The other day I popped in an old laptop which had stopped working. I was worried that a thief might manage to get into it and fiddle around with draft copies of my books or some old accounts. In the old days I used to take out the hard drive, bash it into an unrecognisable lump and then toss it away. But after a few hours in the incinerator, the laptop was unrecognisable as a laptop and was a quarter of its original size. I was tempted to take it along to one of those computer shops which boasts that it can recover lost files from damaged computers. That would have been fun.

I have made, en passant, a significant improvement to incinerator design.

The idea behind the simple, basic incinerator is that you set fire to a few sheets of newspaper and then throw in your rubbish (twigs, leaves, household refuse, etc.).

But if you do as I do and throw in a black bag full of rubbish, there is an inevitable tendency for the black bag to land with a thump on the burning newspaper and to put out the flames.

And so I have added a refinement of my own.

I purchased some metal rods from a home-ware store (I have no idea what they are intended for) and pushed one through the holes near the bottom of the incinerator. The rod prevents the heavy black bag from falling to the bottom of the incinerator and, therefore, allows the newspaper to burn merrily underneath the black bag. Eventually, the black bag falls apart and releases bits of rubbish onto the flames.

I originally tried using long thin pieces of hazel (nothing grows as long and as straight as hazel) but, of course, the wood burnt through and had to be replaced. The metal rods should last quite a while.

26

(Gloucestershire)

I settled down in my favourite pub in Cheltenham, enjoying a coffee. I could see no sign of any other customers. I pulled out the book I was reading. I don’t know why but there is something especially pleasant about reading a book in a café or a pub.

‘Is it still raining heavily?’

I looked around and saw, for the first time, that I wasn’t, as I had thought, alone in the pub. A small man was sitting in a dark corner. He was wearing a suit jacket, with a cardigan underneath it. He was nursing a pint glass half full of stout. He looked an unhappy man and I suspect he would have described the glass as half empty.

‘No, the rain had pretty well stopped when I came in.’

‘Oh.’ He sounded disappointed. ‘I only came in out of the rain.’

‘Ah.’

‘I’m supposed to be doing some shopping for the wife.’ He sighed. ‘I hate shopping.’

He took a sip of his stout, in the delicate way of a man who is making his drink last as long as possible.

I felt sorry for him. ‘Oh, you mean is it still raining heavily now?’ I asked.

He looked at me. ‘That’s it,’ he said.

‘Oh yes,’ I told him. I brushed some imaginary raindrops off my jacket.

‘You definitely wouldn’t want to go out there without an umbrella,’ I said.

‘Thank you,’ he said. A trace of a smile appeared on his face.

My good deed for the day.

27

(Gloucestershire)

I have made a decision to stop buying big stuff online. I am fed up with being told that I have to stay in for five or six days on the off chance that the delivery man will call.

28

(Gloucestershire)

A local mower repair man told me that a customer recently brought in a petrol driven mower which was in six pieces.

‘The fellow apologised,’ said the mower man, ‘and said he just had a Basil Fawlty moment.’

Oh, I know the feeling. Indeed, I do.

29

(Gloucestershire)

A 14 year study of 1,500 companies found that the more a chief executive is paid the worse a company performs.

I’m not surprised.

It seems to me that the only talent a chief executive requires these days is unmitigated greed.

Even when executives quit they still seem to manage to wangle huge payoffs for themselves.

After Mark Price resigned as managing director of Waitrose, he was paid over £1,800,000 for loss of office – including £642,541 in paid holiday money.

Today I thought I had spotted a sign that even some company bosses recognise that they are paying themselves too much.

Nigel Wilson, chairman of the Executive Remuneration Working Group, has attacked executive pay as ‘not fit for purpose’. He complains that sky high salaries have resulted in a loss of public confidence.

Sadly, I don’t think we should hold out great hopes for a change for the better.

Mr Wilson is chief executive of an insurance company called Legal and General and last year he took home £4,700,000.

30

(Gloucestershire)

A month ago, an Italian publisher sent me a royalty cheque because I refused to give them my bank account details so that they could pay my royalties online. Having already had my identity stolen, and one of my bank accounts completely emptied (the money ended up in Monaco and was never seen again) I am reluctant to do financial business online.

A week or so ago, I spent an hour queuing and filling in forms at Lloyds Bank so that I could pay the cheque into my account.

Today, I received a letter from Lloyds telling me that the cheque cannot be paid into my account because Italian banks, like the ones in France, insist that the writer of the cheque put on the date and the town where the cheque was written.

The publisher, who surely knew this, had done neither and so the cheque has bounced all the way back to my desk.

I have now given up on ever receiving this money.

I can’t help wondering if the publisher deliberately sent me a useless cheque because I wouldn’t allow them to conduct the whole damned transaction online. Either that or they are too ignorant to be in business.

I have no doubt that I will now have to pay Lloyds a hefty fee for the privilege of not being paid for my work.

31

(Gloucestershire)

There is much excitement about the fact that delivery companies are to be allowed to use drones to deliver parcels. And science magazines are full of bright young things describing just how clever they are being by experimenting with their pilotless aeroplanes.

But are they really so original?

This evening, looking through a bunch of unsorted cigarette cards, I found several from a series entitled ‘This Mechanised Age’ and one in particular caught my eye.

Number 7 of a series of 50 is entitled ‘The Queen Bee – The Robot Aeroplane’ and it describes how, in June 1935, Great Britain showed the world the first pilotless aeroplane – The Queen Bee – which was designed to take off without a pilot, to rise to a height of over 10,000 feet, fly at a speed of a hundred miles an hour, and land perfectly, with no other human control than remote radio.

One side of the cigarette card shows a picture of the drone, a full size aeroplane adapted from the De Havilland Tiger Moth, being flown by remote, radio control. The other side explains that the drone was ‘the result of more than ten years’ patient experimenting by the Technical Department of the British Air Ministry’.

It was, I believe, the name of The Queen Bee, which led to the use of the term ‘drone’ for pilotless aircraft which are radio controlled.

The gas people are due to arrive tomorrow to connect us to the gas mains. Looking at the confirmation note they sent I see that they ask that ‘a responsible person’ be present during the connection process.

I showed this to Antoinette.

‘Do you think we could, perhaps, hire a responsible person?’ she asked.

August

1

(Devon)

Our new carpenter was due to arrive today to finish off some work he had started. But we had a phone message to say that he is starting another job today and cannot come as agreed. He will however pop round some other time. I fired him by email.

I have over the years acquired a visceral loathing of workmen. If they deign to turn up you have to stand over them or they will avoid doing the things you want doing so that they can do things they want to do (because they are easy or profitable).

The gas people did, however, eventually turn up.

Two nice blokes in a van arrived mid-morning and, after looking around, told us that we couldn't have the gas meter inside the house because it is made of plastic and would melt if we had a fire. They couldn't put it inside the garage for the same reason. They eventually decided that they could fix it to the outside of the garage wall. We are quite happy about this since the box in which the meter will live is a huge, horrid looking, white plastic box which looks like the sort of packaging container things arrive in – the sort of box that gets thrown away once whatever was in it was taken out.

The men who are going to fix it told us that we can paint it any colour we like.

Naturally, the business of connecting the house to the gas main didn't quite go according to plan. The lane under which the gas main is supposed to run can't be more than seven or eight feet wide. It is similar to a typical Devon lane except that it is narrower. It is so narrow in fact that if a car and a pedestrian meet and are determined to travel in opposite directions then one of them will have to go into the hedge.

I had thought (in my naivety) that the people who own and run the gas pipelines would know where their pipes are running. I had thought that they would have had little maps showing whereabouts the pipes can be found. Judging by what went on today they do not.

The two men (one of them chain smoking with a desperation that suggests that he has shares in a tobacco company) started off by digging a hole in a spot which had been previously dug up, in the rather optimistic hope that this would prove to be the site of the gas main.

The result, sadly, was a large empty hole, full only with disappointment.

They then tried using a device which shows where pipes are hiding under the ground. I don't know why they didn't use this before their first attempt but hole digging is a specialist art and it is not our place to wonder.

Sadly, the second hole also proved disappointing and by now the men had dug a deep trench half way across the road.

At this point I was, I confess, beginning to get worried.

Was there any gas at all? Or had we just bought a £10,000 new top of the range gas boiler system, only to find that we had no access to gas?

Nothing, not even that, would surprise me these days.

'I think it might be over here,' said the chain smoker, three hours later. He was now pointing to the last six inches of road; the only piece of road they had not yet dug up.

As he spoke, an old woman strolled past.

I had never seen her before but she looked like a witch and would have doubtless failed the ducking stool test in mediaeval times. 'Got a problem have you?' she cackled, delightedly. She laughed so much that she was no doubt grateful that she was wearing incontinence pants. She had with her a small dog of indeterminate breed. I swear the dog cackled too.

I went back into the house and tried to concentrate on the book I was writing. It wasn't easy. All workmen find ways to disrupt everyone around them.

I am old enough to remember the days when workmen arrived, were told what to do and they did it. You gave them money and everyone was happy. These days there are rules and regulations to be followed, consultations to be arranged and decisions to be made. Nothing, it seems, is simple.

Plus here's a thing: I have noticed that if we have the rather battered and middle aged Ford Ranger truck visible, the workmen charge us £X. If we have the brand new Mitsubishi Barbarian out in the drive they charge us twice as much. And if we have the Bentley Continental in the driveway, they charge us three times as much. This is inviolable and unchanging.

I'm going to buy a very old battered bicycle and leave that leaning against a wall so that we can get workmen to do jobs for next to nothing.

This was irrelevant with the gas men, of course. We had already paid their company to connect us to the gas main. And it occurred to me that if the nearest gas main turned out to be in Middlesbrough, they would still have to connect us.

Ten minutes later one of the workmen rang the bell.

'Our van is getting very hot,' he said. 'I've called the AA. Have you got somewhere we can park the trailer?' This was worrying. It was raining heavily at the time and the van was switched off. I walked down the drive with the gas man to show him a spot at the bottom of the driveway where they could put their trailer.

'What made you come here to live, then?' he asked, looking down the garden towards the beach and the sea. To me it seemed an unnecessary question.

'What's your line of work, then?' he asked, not waiting for a reply.

'I write books.'

'Oh,' he said. 'Are they any good?'

People often ask me this. I never know what to say. Do people ask a shoe salesman if he is any good at his job? Do they ask gas men if they are any good? I mumbled something about it paying the bills.

'Have you written anything famous?' he asked.

'Nothing you'd have heard of,' I said, pretty confident that he hadn't. He didn't seem like much of a reader. We walked on down the drive. 'Do you like gardening?' he asked. People always ask that too. I said there wasn't all that much to do – just keeping the paths clear and cutting the grass. 'It's a proper Victorian garden,' I said, 'lots of secret pathways.'

'You could write a book on it,' he said helpfully. 'Call it 'The Secret Garden'.'

'I think someone's done that,' I said.

'Oh,' he said, disappointed. 'You should write books about Devon.'

I didn't like to tell him that I already did. I said it was a good idea and I'd think about it.

'What do you do then?' he asked. 'Write ten and get one published?'

I said it was probably like that when I first started.

'How long does it take to write a book?'

That's another question I can never answer. I felt like asking 'How long does it take to dig a hole?' But that would be a stupid question and he would know it was a stupid question because he digs holes for a living.

I asked them how they were going to connect us to the gas pipe, if they ever found it.

The gasman took the fag out of his mouth and pointed to the pipe. 'We just tap into that,' he said.

'Don't you turn it off?' I asked.

'Can't do that,' he said, 'we don't know how many houses the pipe supplies.'

'So you just drill into the pipe while the gas is flowing through it?'

'That's right,' laughed the man.

'I've got a ladder,' I told him, wondering if he would put his fag out if and when they got to that part of the operation. 'I'll come and get you out of the tree.'

I went back indoors and Antoinette and I moved to a part of the house where we thought we would be safe.

I showed him where they could park the trailer and we walked back up the driveway. It was cold and it was raining heavily. The weather forecasters had forecast a sunny day. Now that it was raining they were forecasting a rainy day. Or, rather, they were reporting a rainy day.

'The garden needs it,' he said, as people do when it's raining and they are trying to cheer themselves up.

By the time we got back to the scene of the hole, the other gas man had found what he said he thought was the mains. It was as big as a sewer pipe.

'And are you sure that's the gas pipe?' I asked.

'It's definitely that or the water pipe,' he said seriously. 'If it's the water pipe we'll get very wet if we drill a hole in it.'

But by now it was 3.30 p.m. and so they put some barriers around the hole and went home. They had arrived at 10.30 a.m.

A five hour working day is pretty exhausting for the modern British workman and I expect they will be putting in claims for overtime.

A man from another company is coming tomorrow morning at 10.00 a.m. to fit a gas meter into the huge, white plastic box they've already attached to the wall. If they haven't found the gas main, and attached us to it, by the time he arrives then he will, I have been assured by E.ON turn round and go back to his depot. And our whole nicely planned week will be blown to bits. The central heating people are due to come back the day after that to connect our boiler to the mains. And an electrician is due to arrive to put an earthing wire on the gas main.

It has taken three arduous months to get this far and I am beginning to wish we'd simply settled for a collection of electric radiators. It would have been simpler and probably a lot cheaper.

Later that evening, I walked down the driveway to shut the gates and the old witch walked by with her dog. She stopped and scowled at me.

'I wish you wouldn't shut the gates,' she snapped. 'My dog always liked to run around in that garden.' She nodded towards a grassy bank a dozen yards beyond the gate. She seemed genuinely put out that I had put a stop to her dog making its unwelcome but invariably generous daily deposit on our grassy bank.

I made a mental note to run her over if I spot her again. And the damned dog. Some people are genuinely unbelievable.

It took me twenty minutes to run a bath this evening. Since the central heating people took the tanks out of our loft and installed their very expensive new system, our water supply has developed severe prostate trouble. Both the hot and cold taps deliver water at a trickle rather than the previous healthy spurt. The radiator in one of the bathrooms does not work at all. And we have to open up the taps and add water to the system several times a day. There is no leak. But there is a good deal of air in the system, largely because our pipes are an inch and a half in diameter.

I've lost count of the number of mistakes which have been made. If the central heating folk were doctors and our house were a patient, she'd have been dead by now. Killed in action; a victim of iatrogenesis. Still, there's a lot of that around in the real world.

We spent a fortune having some of our existing carpets professionally cleaned. They now smell foul and each day Antoinette has to drop £20 worth of Chanel no 5 onto them in an attempt to overcome the bad smell with something rather more pleasant.

2

(Devon)

The gas people came back and after an hour or so reported that what they thought was the gas main isn't a gas main at all but is an old water main. They discovered this because when they drilled a hole in it, no gas came out. So now, although they have dug a deep trench right across the road, they have failed to find the gas main. They have dug a deep hole right up to the edge of the garage wall and so the next thing will probably be that the garage will fall down.

'Don't worry,' said the gas man in charge.

Saying don't worry to an inveterate worrier is like saying don't breathe for a while and everything will be fine.

I am beginning to suspect that there is no gas at all in the area.

This is, to say the least, slightly annoying.

The gas men are very jolly about their failure to find the gas main but I am not. I got very cross with them and in a fit of pique told them to remove their damned trailer from where it is parked on our land.

They said that I should instruct the man coming to fit the gas meter not to bother. But the people at E.ON took an aeon to fix this appointment and I'm afraid that if I cancel the man who is due to come this morning, we will have to make an appointment for sometime in September.

Just as I was wondering which wrist to slit, the phone went. It was the man coming to fix the meter. Apparently he does not work for E.ON at all but for Wales and West, the same company which has sent the men to dig the hole and find the gas man. Why, I wonder, did E.ON pretend that they were going to install the meter? Why did I have to ring them when Wales and West, who are putting in the meter, told me that they didn't do meters when in fact they do?

I decided that I didn't understand any of this and, moreover, I didn't much care anymore.

Nothing has gone smoothly with our house on the cliff and, contrary to all outside expectations it has not been the cliff which has caused the problems. Indeed, the cliff has behaved in an exemplary fashion. Our problem has been entirely with utility companies, private companies and workmen.

As I piled up some rubbish to put into the incinerator (a good fire always calms my nerves) I reminded myself again that we have paid Wales and West to connect us to the gas mains. If there is no gas main in our lane then they will have to bring gas from somewhere else. And, frankly, if they have to dig a trench all the way from Glasgow that is their problem and not ours.

A couple of hours later the doorbell went.

It was the man who had fitted the meter to tell us that we have now been connected to the gas.

The hole diggers had eventually found the gas main and were now packing up their van. The gas main was a few inches underneath the part of the road where they had dug their first hole. They had simply failed to dig deep enough.

'Aren't you going to fill in the hole?' I asked, looking at the huge hole and the mound of earth and rock.

'That's another contractor,' explained one of the men.

'Don't you just shovel the rubble that you've dug out back into the hole?'

The man looked at me as if I'd suggested that they fill the hole with marzipan. 'Can't do that,' he said. 'The regulations say we have to bring in fresh rubble from somewhere else.'

'When will they do that?'

'Dunno, that's another contractor.'

'So what happens to all the rubble they've dug out and piled up all over the road?'

'They take it away.'

'And use it to fill in someone else's hole?'

'That's right.'

'Is this an EU law?'

'I expect so,' he said.

And then they all left.

I have no idea when the contractors will arrive to take away the old rubble and bring some new rubble.

Or if and when someone else will come to repair the road.

I don't really care.

We have gas.

Then the gate bell went again. It was one of the gas men; a fellow the size of a barn.

'We have to do a customer satisfaction survey,' he said, producing a mobile phone with a survey on it. He stared at me. 'Would you say our attitude was excellent?'

'Definitely excellent,' I agreed.

'Were we on time?'

'Definitely on time,' I lied merrily.

And so it went on.

'Would you allow us to remove your appendix?'

'Definitely.'

'Would you allow us to represent you if you were in court charged with a capital offence?'

'Absolutely. Without a doubt.'

What a bloody stupid survey; an utterly pointless piece of self-serving nonsense. A huge guy stands in front of you and demands to know whether or not you were happy with him. Who the hell is going to say he was late, took too long, was as daft as a brush and dug a hole five times as big as it needed to be? No one. And that, presumably, is the point of allowing the person who is being assessed to run the survey. Who decided to run a survey this way? The unions?

We went to bed.

Suddenly, I heard Antoinette calling me.

'There's a leak in my bathroom,' she said wearily.

We mopped up the water with a towel. We have no idea where the water is coming from. But it serves us right for having had the house filled with plumbers for a month.

3

(Devon)

It is Antoinette's birthday.

I made a huge greetings banner with separate letters all fastened on with bits of sticky tape. I did it in the dark before she got up and when she came downstairs I expected a cry of delight when she opened the door. She did cry with delight but there was also some slight confusion because the sign read 'Bippy Harthday'.

If I put up a sign next year I will make sure I do it in the light.

A huge lorry, fitted with a crane and a grab bucket, arrived today to take away the earth and rubble which had been removed from our hole in the road. A couple of blokes with shovels could have removed the stuff in an hour or so but they sent along the machine which was used to dig the Channel Tunnel. It fitted our lane like a petrol tanker would fit a suburban garage. The operator swung the grab bucket around a couple of inches below an overhead electricity cable and a couple of inches above our garage.

And although the stuff they removed from the hole was largely stones and heavy rubble they sent nice, fresh, soft earth to replace it.

When the lane is re-tarmacadamed it will doubtless subside, leaving us with a speed dip in the road.

I am genuinely beginning to think that having gas central heating installed was a huge mistake. We should have just got rid of the 20-year-old oil boiler and the rotting oil tanks and bought nice electric heaters to keep us warm. There would have been none of the trouble and the overall cost would have been considerably less.

4

(Devon)

The world is full of curious stories. I read today of a woman who picked up her telephone and found herself listening to the heavy breathing of an obscene phone caller. ‘I’m too busy to take an obscene phone call just now,’ said the woman, ‘but if you leave me your number I’ll ring you back.’

The caller gave the woman his number and was duly arrested shortly afterwards.

And I read about a woman who was locked out of her house quite naked.

She had slipped out through her front door without any clothes on, intending to pick up some rubbish which she had been seen in her garden. The inevitable had happened. The front door had slammed shut. So that no one would recognise her the woman had put a bucket over her head, intending to make her way round to the gate leading into her back garden. Unfortunately, the woman got lost and when the police picked her up she was wandering half a mile from her home.

It must be quite difficult to explain why you are tottering around naked and with a bucket over your head.

Oddest of everything in the news today is David Cameron’s special ‘I Am Leaving My Job Because I Screwed Up, Lied To The People And Completely Misread The Nation’s Mood’ honours list. The list of honours being handed out is enormous, and Cameron, who is doubtless rushing off now to follow in the footsteps of Blair to make gazillions by cashing in on the value of his contacts book, seems to have handed out gongs to all his chums and servants.

It is, it seems, the British version of the strange American tradition which entitles a departing President to hand out pardons to anyone who has given him huge sums of money.

Even the woman who chose Cameron’s wife’s frocks and carried her bag has been given an OBE, the sort of honour which used to be given to people who have been given a lifetime of valuable service to the nation. Since he’d already given his own hairdresser a sizeable public gong I suppose he had to give his wife’s maid something notable.

The honours system has now been totally discredited and I have decided to make a mockery of the system by giving knighthoods and damehoods to everyone I know or have anything to do with.

Every Tom, Dick and Harriet with whom I correspond will, in future, be addressed as Sir Tom, Sir Dick or Dame Harriet. If everyone does this then the whole silly charade will soon come to a grinding halt. I shall of course be giving myself and Antoinette honours which seem appropriate and in future I shall ignore anyone, including gas meter readers and so on, who does not address me as ‘My Lord’.

Our rabbits will be given OBEs for services to grass control and similar honours will be awarded to our squirrels, who have inadvertently planted many hazel trees.

5

(Devon)

Ninety per cent of British universities now censor speakers. Lecturers, students and visiting authorities who want to say something which is opposed (even by a small group) will find themselves banned. Apparently students are unwilling to listen to anyone saying anything which they find contentious or controversial and so, to avoid the risk of them being upset in any way, the principle of free speech has been abandoned.

What a wimpy generation of students we have now.

Students used to be rebels. Today’s batch seem to be preparing themselves for lives as jack booted fascists.

Small, vocal, minority groups of students do not believe in debating contentious issues (probably they don’t have the skills, knowledge or confidence to debate them). Instead, they just demand that anyone who disagrees with them be banned.

Today, I bought several more incinerators. When I got them home, I discovered that one of them is a dustbin. The only difference between the incinerators and the dustbins on sale is that the incinerators have holes in them and the dustbin does not. I was about to drive back in order to exchange the rogue dustbin when I realised that it would probably be easier to make my own holes. This I did in about two minutes flat, using a chisel and a small hammer. It occurred to me that the metal from which the incinerator (and the dustbin) is made is about as thick as the stuff which is used to wrap around some bars of chocolate.

My foolishness knows no bounds.

I recently spent good money on a device which, according to the advertisement I saw, will spot speed cameras and help protect me from greedy police forces which are after my money. We had one of these devices fifteen or so years ago and it was brilliant. Sadly, it died and we have never found an adequate replacement.

The new device is about as much use as the Mitsubishi satellite navigation system which is to say that it is bordering on entirely useless. It beeps when it spots a lamppost and says absolutely nothing when I drive past yellow speed cameras and average speed cameras.

Yesterday we made the mistake of having the satellite navigation system and the speed camera spotting device plugged in at the same time.

Both devices have female voices and for a while it seemed as though they were arguing with each other. Just when I didn't think things could get any worse, the radio started issuing traffic warnings too.

I pulled over and while Antoinette disconnected the two devices I turned off the radio. I then fished out a map. We decided that in future we will take our chances.

I bought a can of paint today.

It is in a can and is the sort which can be used to write graffiti on walls. When I bought it I asked the checkout assistant in the shop if it was the right sort of paint to use for vandalism. She looked worried. I said I was planning on becoming a vandal and thought I would begin by spraying police cars a nice shade of green. She looked very worried and was edging away from her till. I told her I was speaking in jest. She looked confused. I explained that I was really going to use the aerosol can to repaint our new gas meter box. This seemed to cheer her up considerably.

Yet another friend with whom I shared a flat at medical school died recently. He had a full medical which proved him to be entirely fit and healthy but a week later he had a massive heart attack and died on the spot.

Many people believed he was half of a pair of twins because when they took the final year photograph at the school he attended, the man hired to take the picture used one of those clockwork cameras that move slowly from right to left so that the resulting photograph turns out to be six inches deep and two or three feet wide.

Timothy (never, ever Tim and certainly not Timmy) realised that if he stood at the far right of the picture and then ran around the back of all the other boys he could reappear on the far left of the picture. He used to show the picture as proof that he had an identical twin brother.

He had an amazing memory. We used to play cards together but he could count cards.

'You know what cards I've got, don't you? I said, towards the end of one disastrous evening.

'Yes,' he replied with a grin.

'There really isn't much point in our playing any more, is there?'

'Not really,' he agreed.

And so we gave up cards and played Monopoly.

We went on holiday together to Italy in our last full student vacation. We travelled down to Pisa by train and then went across to Elba on the ferry. I think we must have missed just about every connection on that journey. He was always late and if he ever managed to catch a train he was supposed to catch then he almost always boarded it when it was moving.

He was forgetful, too. He once invited me to lunch at a smart hotel in Paris where he was staying. (For a year or two, he had a job as a medical director of an international drug company and he had an absurdly generous expense account.) As he studied the menu he was called away to the telephone. I next heard from him six weeks later when he telephoned me from Singapore.

The restaurant in Paris was well outside my price range and I had slunk out of the dining room hoping that no one was going to give me a bill for the four breadsticks I'd eaten.

'Weren't we supposed to have lunch somewhere?' he asked, when he rang.

I told him we had got as far as the dining room. 'Oh yes,' he said, remembering. 'Sorry about that. I got ordered to go to Baltimore for something or other and I had to rush up to my room, collect my stuff and get a cab to the airport.'

I forgave him, of course. He had enormous charm. He called everyone he met 'doll' (whether they were male or female) and I don't think I've ever known anyone else who could have got away with that.

It's funny what you remember about people, isn't it? He was 6 foot 5 inches tall and for two weeks on that Italian holiday, we shared a tiny two man tent. Both of us had our feet sticking out of the end of the tent with the inevitable result that when it rained we got wet feet. But it was Italy in August so it didn't rain much. We very nearly died together on that trip. We went swimming at Pizza and got caught by a rip tide. After struggling in vain to get back to shore Timothy suggested that we swim along the coast and allow the tide to take us to another beach. It was good advice because we both survived.

And now he is dead.

6

(Gloucestershire)

Once again, there have been very few butterflies around this summer.

This is despite the fact that we have designed our garden to be butterfly friendly.

We have at least a dozen budlea bushes and masses of lavender. Our nettles remain uncut and we make sure that we grow flowers which are butterfly friendly.

Sadly, our experience is not unique.

Butterflies have, once again, been scarce all over the country.

Some species are now almost never seen and even once common butterflies are now seen but rarely.

Predictably, the so called experts claim that the disappearance of butterflies must be blamed on climate change. (I'm surprised they don't blame it on Brexit.) I can understand why they say this, of course. If you blame anything on climate change then you will be overwhelmed with grants and government money.

Blaming the disappearance of butterflies on climate change is a politically and commercially convenient excuse but if you think about it there is no doubt that it is nonsense. Even if the manipulative climate change fantasists were correct, there is no way that the changes they describe could have possibly resulted in the disappearance of so many species of butterfly.

The truth, of course, is far simpler but quite unacceptable to farmers, chemical companies and those responsible for producing and selling genetically modified seeds.

Butterflies are disappearing because we have changed our world.

Farmers and gardeners now pour untold gallons of insecticide over every square yard of countryside and garden and even the crops we grow are genetically engineered to kill insects. (Farmers everywhere are being forced to grow exactly the same varieties of seeds. The failure of the potato crop in Ireland will be as nothing compared to the disaster which will ensue when these genetically engineered crops fail.)

Suburban householders have covered their front gardens with concrete in order to turn them into car parking spaces and covered their back gardens with barbecue friendly but environmentally unsound wooden decking. They have, moreover, poured millions of gallons of weed-killer over their nettle patches to ensure that their gardens remain neat and sterile. I know traffic islands which are more attractive to humans and to insects than most suburban gardens.

Butterflies are dying out. And it's man's damned fault.

Naturally, the people responsible refuse even to accept that there is a problem.

'Our natural environment is cleaner and healthier than at any time since the industrial revolution,' said a spokeswoman for the Environment Department of the British Government, though she must have issued this statement in writing because I don't believe there is anyone on the planet who could tell such an outrageous lie without falling onto the floor in hysterics and, quite possibly, frothing at the mouth as well. The truth is that tens of thousands of people die every year because the air in and around our cities and towns is heavily polluted.

I have sprayed the gas meter box a nice shade of green. It was remarkably easy and quite fun to do. I also sprayed the length of copper piping which comes out of the box. And I sprayed some ivy leaves which were looking a little the worse for wear.

7

(Devon)

I saw an old photograph today of Winston Churchill sitting on a railway platform in St Andrews in October 1940. Winston is reading a newspaper.

Number of security officers present: None.

Number of aides, assistants and general hangers on: None.

When I was young I remember seeing Enoch Powell standing on the platform at Coventry Station. It was not long after his ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech but he too was entirely alone, untroubled by aides or bodyguards.

Have things really got more dangerous or are our modern politicians just less courageous?

Meanwhile I sincerely hope that the five-year-old who designed the British Olympic Team’s absurd kit has been given a packet of sweets in return for a promise that she will never, ever do anything like again.

She or he should have been disqualified for failing a dope test. The kit design is appalling.

I would take more interest in the Olympics if the events were more exciting. So, for example, what fun it would be if the people throwing spears had to hit something. An ordinary bullseye target would be good but a moving target would be better. Maybe the spear chuckers could aim at officials in blazers – with the most successful competitor, the one getting the best medal, being the one who spears the most officials.

And why isn’t biffing the balloon back and forth an Olympic event? Balloon biffing is certainly no sillier than volleyball or synchronised swimming or dancing around on a mat while trailing a piece of ribbon. There should be at least two dozen balloon biffing events. There could be medals for biffing a yellow balloon, medals for biffing a red one and so on.

Britain does well at rowing and cycling because there are so many events in which to compete. There are medals for rowing 100,150,200 and 250 yards alone and with company, and in cycling there are medals for riding once round the track, twice round the track and so on almost without end. So there damned well should be medals for biffing yellow, red, blue, green, white and orange balloons.

We stopped at a motorway petrol station where I bought diesel for our Ford Ranger and filled two cans with petrol for our mowers and strimmers. When I went in to pay, the cashier looked very puzzled.

‘I like to mix them,’ I told him, explaining why I’d bought both diesel and petrol.

He stared at me as if I’d suddenly turned bright green and developed horns. In the end he looked so alarmed that I had to explain.

Antoinette bought me a BBC audio tape. It cost £24. Since the BBC is funded by licence fee payers and made the programme at our expense this seems to me to be outright profiteering.

Talking of the BBC, we’ve had a letter demanding that we pay a television licence fee for our home in Devon. This is a nonsense since, as we cannot possibly be in two places at once, we can only watch one television at a time.

8

(Gloucestershire)

The NHS has sent me a brightly coloured and expensively printed leaflet designed to help the elderly remain healthy. The leaflet tells me that diet is important for my general health (golly, that must have required a good deal of discussion) but it does not mention the single most important cause of illness: eating meat.

Researchers have shown, time and time again, that there is no food more guaranteed to cause cancer and circulatory disease than meat – particularly red meat.

Most of the discoveries made by medical researchers were first identified decades ago. But the meat industry is very powerful and so the Government doesn’t like to mention this politically uncomfortable evidence.

The fact that the research papers dealing with meat and cancer all show the same thing is something quite remarkable. It is usual these days for researchers running experiments to find that very few results can be reproduced. In cancer research, to give just one example, it is rare for a second set of researchers to agree with the hopeful conclusions of a first set of researchers. And only slightly more than 1% of studies in psychology have ever been replicated. All this happens because scientists are prey to confirmation basis. They cherry pick their results to find answers which fit their hopes and expectations.

All this means that the fact that every available study shows that meat causes cancer really stands out as convincing.

Barely a day goes by without someone in power telling us that hate crimes are going up in Britain. It is true to say that the number of hate crime incidents has risen in recent years but to say that hate crime is increasing in Britain is a bare faced lie for which there is a one explanation and one reason.

The explanation is simple: the authorities have lost all sense of proportion and humour and anyone who criticises terrorism is now officially classified as being guilty of a hate crime. And so, inevitably, the number of official hate crimes has risen slightly.

The reason is also simple: the authorities are desperately keen to show that the millions who voted to leave the EU must have done so solely because they are motivated by racial hatred. In order to monster the Brexit voters and to show that they hate the French, the Italians, the Iranians, the Germans, the Syrians and so on, the authorities must show an increase in the number of hate crimes.

And so that is exactly what is happening.

Everything which could possibly be described as a hate crime (e.g. asking for Welsh Rarebit in a café when you really want cheese on toast) is reported as a hate crime and, moreover, a hate crime which is a result of the Brexit vote, as though a referendum must have, in some strange way, had an effect on people's behaviour.

It's all lies, of course.

And all because people had the courage to stand up to fascism and oppression and dared to vote for freedom and democracy.

For decades those of us who loathe the EU and all it stands for have been the forgotten majority. Now we have spoken and the establishment and its hangers on are desperate to asset their authority and have us silenced again.

It is an undeniable fact of life that people will always exceed and abuse the authority they are given.

(The corollary, equally true, is that people who are given a uniform, even if it is only a white coat, will abuse the authority they are given with extra zeal. Stick a man in a fancy dress uniform so that he looks like the King of Ruritania and he'll believe he is the King of Ruritania and, moreover, act as though he is the King of Ruritania.)

The real truth Britons are far less racist today than they were five, ten or twenty years ago.

Indeed, the victims of most real racially motivated hate crimes are white English folk – particularly the ones who are middle aged or older and middle class.

But no one talks about that, of course. As far as the authorities are concerned you can say pretty much what you like about a white English person without ever being accused of a racially motivated hate crime.

9

(Devon)

An electrician turned up at our house by the sea. While replacing some elderly but perfectly safe and serviceable wiring (made of rubber and therefore entirely unacceptable in exactly the same way that anything encased in PVC will be considered entirely unacceptable in another ten years) he discovered that the existing light fitting in the boiler room had bare wires a gnat's fingertip away each other and no further from the metal of the fitting itself. The electrician took out the old fitting and went off to fetch a new one.

While he was gone, I looked at a paper I'd bought for its fire lighting capabilities. It seems that the National Union of Students is crumbling. A number of universities are threatening to leave the Union. I'm surprised it has taken them so long. When I first went to medical school, in 1964, I was told that I had to join the National Union of Students and that the membership fee would automatically be charged to my account. I protested and said I didn't want to join the damned union. The university said I had to. I then found something called the United Nations Charter and used it to force it to allow me not to be a member of the union. That all happened in my first week at university. I was enormously popular with the university administrators from the start.

It is now clear that Carney, the former Goldman Sachs hack now ruining the Bank of England (that isn't a misprint, by the way), has got just about everything wrong. And his pre-Brexit vote predictions were clearly political rather than economic. The lunatics running the central banks, and the overpaid investment bankers, can best be compared to the mediaeval priests who gave sermons in Latin to peasants who thought that because they didn't understand what was being said the 'wise' folk who were talking must know best.

Carney has reduced interest rates to a point where people are now genuinely talking about the possibility of negative interest rates being introduced. This is utter lunacy. Carney's theory (based, I suspect, more on what suits Goldman Sachs than what suits the British people) is that low interest rates will force people to spend and therefore move the economy into top gear. The theory was never viable. In the real world (rather than the world occupied by central bankers) low interest rates force savers to save more because their savings aren't growing, while at the same time the low rates push up house prices and rental costs.

Lower interest rates have made life worse for everyone except failing companies which can now fail more slowly. It pisses me off that young social media addicts moan that the elderly have it made. In the 1970s and 1980s, when I was a borrower more than a saver, I paid interest rates of up to 17%. The government was paying 15% for the money it borrowed and I remember borrowing money for an investment at 11% and thinking I had made the deal of the century. People who saved hard and worked hard and who paid these absurdly high rates of interest are now, in their dotage, told that they should feel grateful that they don't have to pay interest on their savings. (And members of the Entitlement Generation have the nerve to moan that they are hard done by!)

Just as bizarrely as this, is the fact that the Bank of England, under its former Goldman Sachs golden boy, is now planning to buy corporate bonds in firms such as Apple and McDonald's. This will, of course, help those companies enormously but just how it will help British taxpayers, savers and investors isn't quite so clear.

(Apple, which has $231 billion sitting in banks, pays its workers in China a princely $1.60 an hour and forces its unfortunate customers to buy another expensive connector and throw away their existing ones every time they buy a new product. Tim Cook, the current boss who as far as I know had absolutely nothing to do with the founding of the company, now has stock worth $785 million.)

Carney is an egregiously overpaid idiot who should be sent packing immediately. The new light fitting which the electrician brought back and fitted in the boiler room was clearly designed for industrial purposes.

It is an LED fitting around two feet in diameter and it could easily be used to light up the Eiffel Tower. The local firm which supplied the electrician is charging us over £500 a day for his services so I assume he is a member of some European royal family. (I only found out what the charges were going to be when it was too late to save money by flying an ordinary electrician in from Australia.)

10

(Devon)

Why are people so keen on the all-oppressive multiculturalism? Why is it such a good thing to have so many different nationalities all living on one small piece of land?

In London alone there are now 300 official languages and Britain being Britain, the authorities have decided that we must provide translators for them all.

In the London borough of Newham, once a Cockney conclave, the residents speak 147 languages. Since many of the immigrants don't bother to learn English, it costs all the public services a fortune to find all the necessary translators.

Why don't we all live peacefully in our lands, enjoying our own culture, and then visit other lands and cultures for holidays?

Our problem in Britain is that we are too tolerant; we are the only people in the world who think that multiculturalism is a wonderful thing. Every other race and religion seems to think we're suckers. Our absurd enthusiasm means that our generosity is abused and our culture, our history and our ways are no longer acknowledged, accepted or properly legal. Britain is a Christian country but in many parts of the nation the celebration of Christmas is banned. As an irreligious Christian I find this deeply offensive.

Today's plumber (I have lost count) has no idea what to do to cure our latest plumbing problems. I don't know why the plumbing company doesn't send the same blokes around. I have no idea how many plumbers we have had working on our pipes. Two of them looked about twelve-years-old and I suspect they should have been at home playing with their Lego. How can we take them seriously? They didn't even have decent bum cleavage when they crawled under the sink. Plumbers look young but not in the way that policemen and doctors look young. They have, rather, the clearly-not-yet-started-to-shave sort of look.

Today's instalment from the nation's lending library of plumbers had to telephone his predecessor every few minutes to find out which pipe does what. He filled in the waiting period by telling us about the famous people for whom he had plumbed. He has apparently tinkered with tubing for Nigel Mansell, Kate Bush and Noel Edmunds.

Impressive though this may be, I wish our ersatz celebrity plumber would just find out what to do with our pipes. He spent most of the day freezing, unsoldering, soldering and knocking holes in the walls so that he could add yet more piping. I swear we ended the day with exactly the same connections as we had started but with a hell of a lot more piping and a hell of a lot more mess. We are now going to have to hire a decorator to cover up some of the many holes he has made.

I wouldn't mind so much but we are now worse off than we were before we started this whole adventure. The towel rail in my bathroom, which used to work quite well, still doesn't work at all. And twice a day I have to turn on special little taps to increase the water pressure within the system. I know we don't have a leak because I used to have to turn them on six times a day. The plumbers don't believe that we don't have a leak because they have been taught that the only reason for putting more water into a heating system is to replace water that has been lost. They were taught wrongly. We still have air in the system.

11

(Devon)

A GP I know tells me that he was recently called to see a man who had gone swimming naked in the pool in his back garden. After his swim he had sat on a wooden slatted chair to enjoy a little of the day's sunshine. When he decided to move, he found that his testicles which had shrunk in the water of the pool had swollen back up to their normal size because they had warmed up a little.

'I told him that I could see two options,' said the GP. 'I said I could either amputate both testicles or I could borrow a saw and cut one of the slats out of the chair. He didn't seem to think it was a difficult decision to make. I took a saw out of his garage and he was free a few minutes later.'

A good chum who lives in Northern Ireland has sent me a cutting from the *Fermanagh Herald* which describes how a 38-year-old man who had already been banned from driving for 15 years was spotted driving his car while under the influence of alcohol. The driver is reported to have 314 previous convictions for driving while drunk. Maybe it is about time someone treated his law breaking seriously.

My chum has also sent me a cutting from the same newspaper about a local businessman who saved himself £2 million over a period of 7 years by simply dumping and burying waste on his own land – instead of disposing of it properly. Environmental agency officials found 19,721 tonnes of mixed domestic and commercial waste on land around his home. I suspect that this sort of thing will be happening much more often as regulations pertaining to rubbish disposal become increasingly onerous. The businessman was given a suspended prison sentence, which to be honest seems to me to be rather modest punishment for such a crime and an incentive for others to do the same.

12

(Devon)

We met a bloke who is a script writer for reality television programmes – the ones which are obviously artificial as well as the ones which are supposed to be set in real places such as hospitals, shops, prisons and so on. These are the sort of programmes which specialise in allowing 19-year-old tartlets hoping to turn their bosoms into careers and 55-year-old former pop singers, hoping to resurrect their moribund careers, to make fools of themselves.

'You don't think those idiots can say those idiotic things all by themselves, do you?' he said.

He told me that people on the shows complain bitterly if they are given poor lines, not enough lines or if they don't like the plots. 'They're just like ruddy actors,' he said. 'But without any of the talent.'

In the evening, we listened to some remarkably beautiful 16th century choral music by Thomas Tallis.

While listening, it occurred to me how awful it must be for a boy soprano when his voice goes and I wondered if they could delay the moment by drinking more tap water. There are enough feminising hormones (from all the excreted contraceptive pill residues) to be of considerable help.

13

(Devon)

Britain's manufacturing industry has collapsed and it is difficult to think of anything other than freshly minted babies which can still have 'Made in England', 'Made in Scotland' or 'Made in Wales' stamped on the bottom. Oh, actually, that's not entirely true. Bentley motor cars are still made in Crewe and very well made they are too.

Today just about everything else is made in China and since Chinese companies are subject to very few of the absurd rules and regulations which strangle British invention and entrepreneurship, and since Chinese employees earn just a fraction of employees in Britain, the result is that China's biggest export is deflation. Prices are falling because China can make everything cheaper than we can make it.

I discovered recently that there are places in China which specialise in making certain items. So, for example, there is a place called Suzhou which is known to its friends and relatives as 'Wedding Dress City' because it is home to over 700 factories making wedding dresses. A place called Datang is known as 'Sock City' for the simple reason that one third of the world's socks are made there. And a town called Qiaotou is known as 'Zipper City' because that is where 80% of the world's zips and 60% of the world's buttons are made.

Talking of socks I see that someone has written a book called *Socks: The Rule Book*. It is a best seller, selling almost as much as the colouring in books which are now all the rage.

14

(Devon)

There are many things which puzzle me.

Why don't people who have been tried and found not guilty have their legal costs paid for them by the State? I'm sure there's a reason but I cannot imagine what it is.

And why do children still have six weeks off from school in the summer? The original idea was to give kids long summer holidays so that they could help on the farm during the busiest months of the year.

I wonder how many kids are helping on the farm this month.

We forget that institutionalised schools were only introduced so that factory workers would have somewhere to dump their kids while they went off to work from 8 a.m. until 6 p.m.

15

(Devon)

Jim Laker took 19 wickets in a Test Match against the Australians at Old Trafford in Manchester.

Men were men in those days and after the match Laker shook a few hands, got into his car and drove south.

In Litchfield he stopped off at a pub and bought two stale cheese sandwiches and a pint of beer.

The other patrons were sitting at the bar watching the news on the pub's small, black and white television set. The big news of the day was the Test Match. (Cricket was, at that time, the premier national game, much bigger than football, which had a following only during the winter months outside the cricket season.)

Laker sat quietly and said nothing as the men watched and commented on the match. No one recognised him.

Laker, a sportsman whose achievement it is difficult to imagine these days – equivalent, perhaps, to a footballer scoring four goals in a World Cup Final and thereby taking England to victory – just sat and ate his cheese sandwiches.

These days, a minor sportsperson, not out of his or her teens, who has acquired enough skill to be able to knot his shoelaces neatly, will have an agent, a television deal, an autobiography, a website and will, quite probably, find him or herself the star of a feature biopic. He or she will be deeply offended if not recognised in the Honours List.

16

(Devon)

We bought a couple of original pastel drawings of kittens from a junk shop in Somerset. The junk shop owner said he couldn't be bothered to find out what they were or if they were worth anything since he never had any luck with pictures.

He was, I suspect, too busy flogging freshly made antiques which come by the lorry load from China and which are fastened together with cross head screws.

The pictures are quite nicely framed but it was the drawings which took our eye.

When we got home I did a little research and discovered that they are both original pastels by an artist called Mabel Gear. Here work sells for between £600 and £1,000 a time. We paid £30 for the two. That sort of thing doesn't happen to us very often.

In the evening, we watched the second of a series of films about W. Somerset Maugham's character 'Ashenden'. The stories, the first spy novels ever written, are brilliant and the television series is excellent too.

Incidentally, film companies who rail against pirates really need to do more to improve the quality of the stuff they sell. Twice this week we bought expensive DVDs only to have them stop half way through because the disk had not been properly pressed. One of the faulty DVDs was Amadeus, the other was the original Hitchcock version of The Lady Vanishes. We've seen both films many times but we wanted the DVDs to replace our old VHS versions. It was irritating to see half of each film.

17

(Devon)

I woke this morning to see smoke coming from the edge of the cliff at the end of a garden. At first I thought that this was simply the incinerator smoking from yesterday's controlled conflagration but Antoinette, whose eyes are considerably better than mine, was inclined to think that the smoke was coming from outside the incinerator rather than from within it.

When I tottered down the garden I found that I had accidentally set fire to the Jurassic Coast.

Since this is already a hot tourist attraction, an area of outstanding natural beauty and a national heritage site, and quite probably all sorts of other important sounding things in addition, it is bound to be illegal to set fire to it. (Nevertheless, the authorities are quite happy to allow chunks of it to fall into the sea.)

What happened was this: yesterday I used the incinerator to burn some papers and bits of garden rubbish (prunings and so on) and the fire got so hot that it burnt out the bottom of the metal incinerator. The hot ashes fell through the bottom of the incinerator and the fire then spread to a pile of old grass cuttings. From there the fire then slowly spread across the cliff top.

When I saw what was happening, I rushed back to the house and grabbed the hosepipe. Sadly, I found that the hose, which is about 140 feet long was around 10 feet short. I could just manage to direct a jet of water onto the smoking areas but it wasn't easy. So while Antoinette held the end of the hose and sprayed water onto the Jurassic Coast I found another hose (we have them spread all over the garden, some of them buried and some of them curving through the undergrowth) and chopped off twenty feet. I then attached this twenty foot of hose to the 140 foot length, making a hose of 160 feet; quite enough to reach all the smoking areas. We then fitted a spray attachment to the end of the hose and used the handle on the top of the now useless incinerator to hold the spray in position so that we could go indoors and have breakfast.

Phew. It was a close call. I'm so pleased that Antoinette noticed.

It took me an hour this morning to set up a direct debit for Eon to supply us with gas and electricity. Ye gods, life has become unbearably complicated.

There are over one million people in the UK with dementia and at least five times that many in the USA. Moreover, there are probably five times as many suffering from undiagnosed dementia. How the hell do all these people cope with a world where setting up a direct debit requires an hour and a couple of PhDs?

(This sorry saga began yesterday. When I rang Eon for the first time I was told that it would take 24 hours to change my account number so that I could set up a direct debit. When I asked why it took 24 hours to do something so simple, the Eon man told me sharply that that was how long it took. I told him it could be done in a second or two. He said it couldn't. I bet him £1,000 it could. He said yes maybe it could but they would have to change their system. I suspect that I have now been given a huge black mark on my record. Every time I ring Eon, the person to whom I speak will see a note saying that I am difficult and argumentative. Well, I am so bugger it.)

Today's call to set up the direct debit involved my trying to decide which tariff to join.

Utility companies are as bad as train companies for setting up an endless number of complicated and confusing tariffs. They do this on purpose, of course, knowing damned well that no one (particularly the elderly, the not too bright and the slightly dotty) will know what the hell they are doing and will therefore end up paying far more than they should.

When I'd finished selecting a tariff (and probably getting it wrong) I asked the Eon bloke if he would put my wife onto the account so that if I am incapacitated by incandescence she will be able to deal with our bills. The man said he would send us a form for me to complete.

Here's another thing: why did it take Lloyds Bank eight days (count them, eight) to put money into my account when it was sent to me by telegraphic transfer?

In the bad old days, before computers, it would take a couple of hours at most to move some money from one account to another. Now it takes eight bloody days. (The bank tells me that smaller amounts are moved more speedily. Large amounts take longer because of climate change. It is either that or because the bank likes to hold onto large amounts for longer. Guess which.)

Still, there was some good news late this afternoon. The council came and repainted the yellow lines outside the gates to our home. It has taken four months to persuade them to do this. In the end I had to make it clear to them that they would be responsible for any altercations which might take place as a result of holidaymakers leaving their cars parked outside the gates. It is my experience that the only way to persuade bureaucrats to do anything is to make them responsible for something.

'I think you can turn the hose off now,' said Antoinette, later that evening as we stood on our balcony and admired the sea.

'Do you think we're safe now?' I asked.

'It's raining,' Antoinette pointed out. 'And it's been raining quite heavily for over an hour.'

I turned off the hose.

Only women notice these things. It's genetic or hormonal or both.

18

(Gloucestershire)

Since we are going to sell our flat in Paris I wrote to the insurance company in France telling me that I would not be renewing our policy when it falls due next July. That was about a week ago. Today I received an email from them telling me that to cancel the insurance I must print out a form, fill it in and post it to them by recorded delivery at least two months before I want the policy to conclude.

This wretched company has increased the premium by leaps and bounds and when the policy stops Antoinette and I will be able to stay at the Ritz for a month and have enough loot left over to buy a cake each at the Café de la Paix.

One of the local Cotswold cottages which is rented out to holidaymakers is currently being hired by a couple who have a Rottweiler. The damned dog barks for 23 hours a day. It only stops barking when it's eating or biting.

No one who lives in or visits the Cotswolds seems to give a damn about wildlife. Or peace and quiet.

When the local school children go for a nature ramble they spend all their time shouting to one another. The teachers also spend their time shouting. They shout to one another and at the children.

Dog walkers who bring their dogs to the area so that they can use it as a lavatory cannot possibly hear anything for the sound of their bloody dogs yapping and growling. Very few of them pick up the unpleasant debris their dogs leave behind and children who play on the woodland paths are inevitably at risk of contracting toxocariasis and becoming blind.

And astonishingly, very few dog owners are able to read. There are signs everywhere asking dog owners to put their dogs on leads so that the local sheep aren't attacked. Nine out of ten dog owners either cannot read the signs or else they ignore them. It is hardly surprising that every year 15,000 sheep are killed by dogs which have been taken for a walk by their owners. Farmers are legally entitled to shoot dogs which kill sheep and I don't know why more of them don't take advantage of this. Actually, maybe they should cut out the middleman and just shoot the bloody dog owners. I like dogs. It's the arrogant, rude dog owners I can't stand.

Driving back from Devon to Gloucestershire earlier today, the M5 motorway was blocked solid. Flicking around on my iPhone I found that most of Britain's motorways were blocked and that the M5 had been closed in one direction or the other almost every day for a month.

I slipped out of the car to attend to a minor call of nature and on the other side of the nearside metal barrier found a very convenient set of steps down to a little piece of woodland where I was able to water the weeds in privacy.

On my way back to the car, I was nearly mown down by a string of motorcyclists hurtling along the blocked motorway. They were travelling at speed in the narrow space between stationary lanes of traffic and seemed uninterested in the fact that there were dozens of people standing around chatting.

British motorists are now so accustomed to traffic jams that they get out of their cars and start chatting within minutes.

I've heard that travellers often make friends for life, sending Christmas cards to motorists they've met in traffic jams. It is, apparently, also quite common for solitary travellers to pass the time by having sex with complete strangers.

Some silly research just published shows that joggers live 16 years longer than people who don't jog. Without even looking at the criteria used I can guarantee that these results are entirely useless. The people who jog will, by definition, care enough about their health to avoid smoking, to watch what they eat and to avoid getting overweight.

I bet that the research was paid for by a company making running shoes or those silly, indecent running shorts favoured by the modern jogger.

My final thought on the matter is that joggers don't live 16 years longer than anyone else.

It just seems like it.

19

(Gloucestershire)

Farting cows cause far more climate change problems than motor cars and so the climate change conspiracy theorists really should be encouraging the world to stop eating meat rather than to stop driving cars.

We should bring back duelling.

In the 19th century the Duck of Wellington, the Duke of York, Lord Cardigan, Lord Castlereagh and the fifth Lord Byron all fought duels (though not necessarily with or against one another).

As a boy, I devoured books about duelling which I thought an excellent way of dealing with disagreements of all kinds.

Duelling would make great television.

Who wouldn't watch Nigel Farage duelling with Nick Clegg?

20

(Gloucestershire)

Antoinette and I have had an idea for a film. It's about the von Trapp family and if describing it to a film company executive I would say it will be a cross between the Sound of Music and Where Eagles Dare.

The Trapps will shoot their way out of Austria, with the kids firing bows and arrows and the Senior Trapps using guns they've stolen from Germans. It will be a crossover movie with a huge potential audience.

Thinking of the War reminds me that during the Second World War, Britain put Germans into internment camps. Now that we are fighting the Third World War (against the Germans, the EU and the militant Muslims) we let all our enemies into the country. And we give them money and free health care.

Madness. Utter madness.

We have lost this war already because we are stupid and our politicians are all namby pamby wets.

A friend of Antoinette's has bought a King Charles Spaniel.

She has done so, she says, because, as a result of an edict from Charles II several hundred years ago, King Charles Spaniels are the only dogs which are allowed within the confines of the Palace of Westminster.

She is not an MP or a member of the House of Lords, and is quite unlikely ever to visit the Palace, but she says that this knowledge makes her and her small dog feel very special.

21

(Gloucestershire)

Positive discrimination is racism, sexism or ageism or some other ism and however you dress it up, and however many fine excuses you dream up, it is desperately unfair, elitist, exclusive and indefensible.

But the liberal elite, all of whom have climbed their ladders and are now comfortably established in their overpaid jobs and their £2 million houses, love positive discrimination as much as they love multiculturalism, political correctness and the other inanities which do not affect their own lives in any way but which allow them to look broadminded and generous at someone else's expense.

We are watching 'Elementary', the American television series about Holmes and Watson.

Johnny Lee Miller is brilliant as Holmes and far, far better than the Cumberbatch version which seems to me to be laughably pretentious nonsense so far up its own bottom that it has reached well past the colon and is several yards into the collective small intestine.

The surprise, perhaps, is that Lucy Liu is excellent as Dr Watson. I don't mean this to be condescending or patronising, but I can think of very few actresses who could play Dr Watson successfully.

(The best Holmes are Basil Rathbone, Jeremy Brett, Ronald Howard, Robert Downey and then Johnny Lee Miller. Rathbone also had the luxury of by far the best Watson in Nigel Bruce.)

The writers and producers of 'Elementary' have twisted everything somewhat (Holmes is working in New York and Watson has become Joan) but the series is well done and somehow it works brilliantly.

I have only two complaints. First, it was absurd to make Professor Moriarty and Irene Adler the same person. Second, I have yet to spot any credit for Arthur Conan Doyle. Doyle's books may be out of copyright but that shouldn't mean that the author is ignored. Respect?

I wonder how many people know that Dr Conan Doyle also played first class cricket and once bowled the immortal Dr W.G.Grace.

22

(Devon)

I've been reading Gyles Brandreth's political diary.

Brandreth (who was, I was amazed to discover, born in Germany) is surely the best networker and name dropper in Britain; a modern day Boswell to the entire celebrity industry.

Whether they be actors, disc jockeys, politicians or cartoon characters the redoubtable Brandreth is ever ready with an anecdote and a quip.

I was full of admiration for, and exhausted by, his networking endeavours.

Lunch here, coffee there, a meeting there, a dinner somewhere else. He doesn't go more than five minutes without meeting a celebrity or pitching a new idea for a book, a theatrical production or a jumper.

In his diary he is careful never to express too contentious an opinion, or even to get too close to expressing a ghost of an opinion, and usually careful to avoid any signs of passion.

Bless him, if he ever buckled on a swash it would be for pantomime only.

Sensible fellow.

His political nous enabled him to serve as MP for Chester for a few years and gave the rest of us the best political diary I've read. Better, by far, than Alan Clark's sometimes tedious and self-consciously cheeky diaries.

Some might describe Brandreth as superficial, self-serving and a snob but with his teddy bears, scrabble board and extremely silly jumpers he has always struck me as a harmless butterfly in search of a flower; a jester in search of a court.

Years ago we both worked on TV AM. He wore silly jumpers and I was the doctor. Curiously we were never in the studio at the same time. From his diaries it is clear that there is an innocent naiveté about him which I find utterly charming – he comes across like a small boy, wide eyed constantly impressed by all he sees and hears and amazed at the world around him: always ready to put on a silly costume or stand on his head or wear an incredibly silly jumper.

I've also much enjoyed his longer diary called 'Something sensational to read on the train' (a phrase taken, of course, from Oscar Wilde's Importance of Being Earnest). It is truly impossible not to admire the fellow's seemingly inexhaustible levels of energy.

Brandreth seems to worry a lot about wasting his life with trivia and nonsense and endless meetings and lectures to odd groups here, there and everywhere but I am sure he has given a lot of fun, pleasure and laughter to a good many people and that's a pretty good way for someone to spend their life. I have slowly to come to realise that most of us waste much of our lives in some way. I know that I have wasted too much of my life, not just on trivia and fripperies and dealing with utility companies and government departments, but also in passionate but frustrating campaigning which has, too often, led nowhere because the vested interests which control too much of the world are too powerful and too determined in their defence of their realms. On the other hand I would have felt my life to have been wasted if I hadn't tried.

While reading his book I remembered that I had met Brandreth once, on a train, shortly after the collapse of the exhibition he helmed called Royal Britain.

I had invested in Royal Britain and had lost all the money I put in.

When I told him this he looked, at first, a little nervous. He was much relieved when it was clear that I wasn't going to attack him with my newspaper. The poor fellow had put a great deal of effort into what seemed a good idea at the time but which steadily became a commercial disaster.

Every generation should have a Gyles Brandreth.

23
(Devon)
In a shop today, I watched in horror as a young man in his mid-twenties walked around coughing merrily in every conceivable direction. Not once did he put his hand in front of his mouth. It was an unpleasant cough, possibly a bad chest infection and possibly a case of tuberculosis. I wonder how many people he will have killed by the end of the day. Those with weak hearts, cancer, asthma and so on who catch whatever he has may die.

24
(Gloucestershire)
An 87-year-old man with dementia has been sentenced to six years for manslaughter, five years for possession of a firearm and one year for possession of ammunition.

The crime?

He killed his wife who also suffered from dementia.

He had intended to shoot himself but was prevented from doing so.

Presumably, the judge is also demented. It's a pity someone didn't shoot him too. Who, pray, benefited from this sentence? Is society being protected? Hardly, the poor old man has any wives left. Are others likely to be deterred? Doubtful to say the least.

25
(Gloucestershire)
I am always amazed when I find out how much money advisers, consultants and general hangers on make when one company is bought by another. Shareholders and employees often suffer and lose out but advisers of various kinds do amazingly well. So, for example, the recent $103 billion takeover of the brewery SABMiller by Anheuser-Busch InBev resulted in thousands of lawyers, accountants, PR firms and bankers becoming very rich indeed. The companies paid out $725 million in fees to bankers, $261 million to shysters, $180 million to management consultants, $248 million to investment banks and $29 million for public relations advice.

Life is full of tricks. Here's one of my favourite, from the days of the Wild West in America.

One of the most successful gunmen in the history of the West had a simple trick to make sure that he won his duels. When his opponent went for his gun he would grab his own gun and, without pulling the gun out of the holster, pull the trigger. The bullet would go harmlessly into the floor but his opponent would be shocked by the suddenness of the noise and would wonder if he had, perhaps, been shot. While he paused, deafened and slightly confused, the clever gunman would take out his gun and shoot the other fellow.

26

(Gloucestershire)

By email today I received five requests for me to complete a survey. ‘Our survey will take only 5 minutes of your time,’ said three of them.

No chance.

I’ve decided that for the rest of my life I’m going to be on my hols.

Not retired.

That’s boring.

On my hols.

27

(Devon)

We visited a male acquaintance in hospital. When we got there we realised that we had arrived empty handed. Flowers seemed inappropriate (and would probably result in their being thrown away for lack of a vase) so we popped into the hospital shop and bought a packet of home-made biscuits. The packet was tied with red ribbon and definitely looked home-made. I suspect that one of the volunteers baked them.

‘Oh, home-made cookies!’ said the patient. ‘How kind of you? You shouldn’t have gone to so much trouble.’

‘Oh it was a pleasure,’ we both said, not wanting to spoil the moment by admitting that we’d bought the biscuits in the hospital shop.

But sadly, when we left, I could not help noticing that the man’s bedside locker door was open. And through the gap I could see half a dozen identical packs of home-made biscuits. All tied with the same, damned red ribbon.

28

(Devon)

A growing number of people are starting work at 4.00 a.m. or even earlier so that (they say) they can avoid the distractions of social media and email.

‘When you have peace and quiet you are likely to get much more work done,’ said one early bird, as proud as though this were an entirely original discovery.

I don’t understand why these idiots don’t just turn off their iPhones when they want some peace and quiet, and abandon (temporarily at least) their Internet access?

In addition to being an unprecedented source of evil, the Internet can be a bloody nuisance.

The world is, it seems, filling up with stupid people.

There have always been plenty of them but now it appears that they are breeding in huge numbers.

I read earlier this week that one in ten university and college students now blows their entire loan within their first two weeks. And half will have spent the lot before the end of their first term.

As a result, students are now being given official advice on how to manage money.

Here, is the basic, official advice: ‘Work out exactly how much money you’ll get from your student loan and divide it by the number of weeks you’ll be away. Then create a weekly budget but make sure you allow for less frequent expenses such as monthly rent bills etc.’

Why are these stupid folk studying at university?

Surely they would be better served taking street sweeping courses.

‘To begin with you will need a broom. Hold the broom with both hands. Now, push the broom away from you so that rubbish and debris is collected by the broom’s bristles.’

That would do for Day One.

It’s important not to tax the poor dears with too much information.

29

(Devon)

Do the Germans know something the rest of us don't know? The German government is advising its citizens to 'prepare for emergencies' and to stockpile medical supplies, food and cash.

Of course, in Britain this has become increasingly difficult since the Bank of England and its ex Goldman Sachs boss, are now changing the currency on an almost annual basis. Anyone who stockpiles £10 or £20 notes will probably find themselves hoarding a pile of useless paper in a few months' time.

A man we know is building a wall around his small estate.

He could easily afford to hire workmen to build the wall but, in true Churchillian style, he is building the wall himself. He insists that he finds the work relaxing.

I remember reading that Denis Wheatley, the novelist, was also a keen amateur bricklayer. Indeed, he wrote a book called *Saturdays with Bricks* in which he described his hobby at length.

The fellow we know is no Churchill and no Wheatley but he is as determined as either. He told us that he reckons he will need to live to the age of 93 if he is to finish his wall. The wall is six feet high and he says he can build at a rate of twenty feet a year. He has allowed for the fact that his work rate will diminish as he ages but he has not, he admits, factored in holidays, illnesses or brick shortages.

30

(Gloucestershire)

There is much cheering still about Britain's success in the Rio Olympics. I feel very proud but just a teeny bit guilty – as though we had cheated. The truth is that we spent more money than just about every country on the planet. We have highly professional athletes who are paid salaries and supported by teams of professional coaches. All this is paid for by taxpayers. Some folk have been complaining that the medal winners should receive bonuses. Why? They were just doing what they were paid for.

The athletes who are supported by taxpayers but don't win anything aren't punished so why should the ones who did what they were paid for be given bonuses?

In practice, of course, most if not all of the medal winners will receive a gong of some kind – a knighthood, a damehood or some other nonsense.

It is possible to argue that both the medals and the gongs actually belong to the taxpayers – not the athletes – since we bought them.

A new report claims that asthma is not being treated properly and that some asthma sufferers are dying unnecessarily. This is probably true but what the report does not say is that asthma is now vastly over diagnosed and countless thousands who have had a touch of wheezing or a bout of hay fever are now labelled as asthmatics. One result is that thousands are over medicated (and exposed to unnecessary side effects). Another result is that patients with serious asthma get lost in the crowd.

31

(Gloucestershire)

A fellow we know has been living in a nursing home for a year. He hated it. The food was awful, the place stank of urine and the staff were thoughtless bordering on cruel. His son and daughter-in-law chose the nursing home for him.

He has now moved out of the nursing home and into a seaside hotel. He has done a deal with the hotel for a room at the back of the hotel which he occupies for 52 weeks of the year. He pays far less for the room, including full board, than he was paying the nursing home.

His room, which has its own bathroom, is larger than the nursing home room which did not have its own bathroom. The hotel does not specialise in elderly guests but the owners are keen to keep some of their rooms fully occupied all the year round.

It sounds a no brainer.

I am convinced that the vast majority of people paying big money for accommodation in nursing homes would do better to move into hotels.

September

1

(Gloucestershire)

We've had an awful summer but the conspiracy theorists who are addicted to the absurd and utterly discredited piece of pseudoscience known as the global warming hypothesis will no doubt tell us that we have just endured the hottest summer since records began.

It is, as I have pointed out before, a rerun of the AIDS scare, grown for political, commercial and professional reasons.

Academics who specialised in AIDS became rich and powerful and famous and the same thing has happened to the climate change academics. It used to be that if you wanted a grant to study, say, falls among the elderly, you had to find a link to AIDS and to be prepared to state in your grant application that the AIDS 'virus' was in some way responsible for octogenarians falling over.

Now, you have to be prepared to argue that more old people are falling down because of climate change. If you can do so convincingly then you will get your grant money.

The climate change conspiracy theorists are making big money by writing books and articles and making television programmes preaching their peculiar brand of pseudoscience.

A decade or two ago, when I believed in the global warming theory, I used to receive angry letters from a reader in France arguing that it was all nonsense. He was right.

Incidentally, they changed the name of the scare from 'global warming' to 'climate change' when it became clear that the weather wasn't always getting hotter. It was a bit difficult to keep banging on about global warming when people were sitting on the beach shivering.

2

(Devon)

There were huge delays on a motorway today with a tailback of 28 miles. The problem turned out to be a bridge jumper – someone who was threatening to commit suicide by jumping off the bridge. Instead of isolating the jumper so that she couldn't move around and then merely closing one lane of the motorway and putting a lorry filled with those airbags firemen use under the relevant part of the bridge, the stupid police closed both sides of the motorway and kept thousands of people queuing for hours and hours. Would-be jumpers who cause chaos this way are not serious suicide jumpers but simply attention seekers. Having put the lorry with airbags under the bridge, the police should have simply approached the would-be jumper and arrested her.

3

(Gloucestershire)

Governments everywhere are encouraging company employees to blow the whistle if they believe their company has been behaving badly. But time and time again employees who blow the whistle on their government find themselves being severely punished. Edward Snowden's revelations should have earned him a commendation and a bunch of awards but instead he is stranded in Moscow because the woefully untrustworthy and hypocritical Obama decided to prosecute him under the Espionage Act. Antoine Deltour is on trial for providing journalists with details of how Luxembourg gave secret 'sweetheart deals' to multi- national corporations (thereby stealing billions in tax revenues from other countries) under the leadership of Juncker, one of the current EU Presidents. All this proves, yet again, that the State, in all its forms, is our real enemy.

4

(Gloucestershire)

Our local GP practice has invited me for an NHS cardiovascular disease health check because, they say, I do not have heart disease, diabetes, stroke, high blood pressure or chronic kidney disease.

This is nice to know but I'm not entirely sure how they know that I don't have any of these things because, as far as I am aware, they have never tested me for any of them.

Still, maybe they came round when I was asleep one night and did the necessary tests.

They sent me a form to complete so that they could decide whether or not I was at risk of developing any of these diseases in the future. The form contains just three questions about my diet (all relating to the number of portions of fruit and vegetables I consume each day) and 15 questions about my alcohol consumption. To describe the questionnaire as pitiful and inadequate and entirely pointless would be over generous.

5

(Devon)

For some decades now I have paid the Patent Office for a trademark on my name. I did this merely to protect myself from people who might write books appearing to be by Vernon Coleman – thereby confusing my readers. (I was worried that someone might write a spoiler book claiming to support vivisection, meat eating or drug companies.) Today I needed to renew the protection for another decade. The Government generously allowed me to pay by email.

We still have boiler people in our seaside house. We have two significant problems since the new system was installed.

The first problem is something that the plumbers have done results in water dribbling out of all the taps in the house when they are turned on. It takes five minutes to fill a kettle and the best part of half an hour to fill a bath. Just holding the increasingly heavy kettle under the tap exhausts me.

Second, the pressure inside our single pipe central heating system is constantly diminishing. This means that the system needs to be topped up at least twice a day. If you look up this problem on the Internet a host of idiotic plumbers and central heating engineers will all say (usually managing to sound superior and patronising) that the problem must always be a leak somewhere in the system. They are all wrong. There is no leak. The problem is that our central heating pipes are one and a half inches across and the radiators are the old cast iron school radiators and there is a huge volume of air in the system. The engineers have fitted valves which allow the air out and as the air leaves so the pressure in the system falls. And so we are forever having to put in more water. The oh so clever engineers on the Internet who sneer and insist that if the water pressure is falling then there must be a leak, do not know what they are talking about and should not be allowed to mess with central heating systems.

I don’t know how long this is going to take to put right but once again I desperately wish that we had forgotten all about the damned central heating system and simply relied on the electric heaters we bought. These are thermostatically controlled and they are brilliant. Simple, easy, quick and remarkably cheap. We would have saved ourselves around £20,000 and weeks of mess and noise and trouble if we had stuck with the electric heaters.

Today we have a singing plumber working in the house. He bursts into song, very loudly, with absolutely no warning. He then sings about seven or eight words of something before stopping and doing noisy things with a wrench. He was supposed to be here at 8 a.m. so we got up at 7 a.m. so that we could get breakfast and stuff out of the way. He arrived at 9 a.m.

We also had an electrician here. He kept finding bits of old wiring, some of it covered with bits of cloth and some of it consisting of bare wires. We have had two more chandeliers fitted. I have lost count of the total number of bulbs involved but if I need to put on a light in the hallway I can with a single flick of the finger turn on 24 light bulbs.

The rubbish collecting rules down in Devon are as absurd as they are everywhere else. I took childish delight today in tricking the refuse collectors into taking away an old vacuum cleaner which our predecessors had left behind. (I don’t blame them. It didn’t work. It was one of the old uprights and probably museum quality.)

I chopped the cleaner in two with a branch lopper (an impressive piece of equipment – just imagine the damage a ham fisted and short-sighted rabbi could do with it) and then broke up the engine part of the cleaner with an axe. I then stuffed the whole lot into a black bag and put the black bag into the wheelie bin. When I collected the wheelie bin the black bag, and contents, had disappeared. Another small victory for mankind.

6

(Devon)

Antoinette showed me a cutting about a lady called Doreen Pechey who recently became the oldest dancer to pass her Grade 6 examination at the Royal Academy of Dance. She was 71-years-old and had a knee replacement operation two years ago. A wonderful, inspirational story.

Ms Pechey took up ballet ten years ago but because of her age she had difficulty finding a class that would accept her. Casual ageism is now a part of life in Britain. Can you imagine what would have happened if a ballet class teacher had refused to accept a pupil who was gay, black or born in Scotland?

Earlier in the year we hung up two fake wasps' nests: one in our front porch and one in the back porch. We put these up because every year that we have had the house in Gloucestershire we have had at least two, and usually more, wasps' nests in or around the house. The fake nests are supposed to work by making it clear to wasps looking for a good nest making spot that the area is 'taken'. I am delighted to report that the fakes seem to have worked.

7

(Devon)

We had four plumbers in the house today. They seemed to spend their time connecting pipes, disconnecting pipes and connecting them up again. I was worried at one point that they were going to connect the cold water system to the chimney.

After six plumbers have tried, they now seem to have succeeded in stopping the bath tap in one of the bathrooms from dripping. The sink still leaks but we have put a towel underneath it and we no longer care. We are worse off now than we were several months ago – and we have wasted days of our time looking after an endless series of seemingly half-witted plumbers. The radiator in my bathroom still does not work at all. Antoinette's bath has several chips in the enamel where clumsy plumbers have put down their tools with a clatter.

We had a plasterer in too. He was repairing one of the ceilings which had come down when a tank in the loft had overflown after one of our earlier plumbers had destroyed a ball valve. When the plasterer had finished he moved a plastic drain cover from an outside drain so that he could pour waste sludge down the drain (I don't expect we'll know about the blockage for a week or so). When he disappeared he left the plastic drain cover in the middle of the courtyard, nicely positioned so that one of the plumbers could drive over it in his van when he turned round to leave. Since there were four plumbers there were four vans and, therefore, four times the chances of the drain cover being crushed. The cover was duly crushed.

The plasterer also unlocked a window and left it wide open.

Upstairs one of the plumbers had emptied a bucket of dirty water (drained out of the central heating system) into the lavatory in my bathroom. When you empty a bucket full of water into a lavatory bowl there is always lots of splashing. The results of this were clear to see. That's another new toothbrush and another bar of soap to throw away and another towel to wash. Every time we have a workman in the house I have to throw away a toothbrush. The problem is that it is impossible to persuade workmen that this is our house and not a building site. We have pictures on the walls, carpets on the floor and furniture in the rooms but to them it is a building site.

I am pleased to see that the police are advising householders never to open their front door unless they are expecting a visitor. This should put paid to the intrusive activities of BBC licence fee chasers and utility meter readers. Antoinette and I have long followed this philosophy and have found it to be an excellent one.

A couple we know are leaving their home, which they both adore, and moving into a small flat. This seems lunacy to us. She is a nag and he spends much of his day outside, out of range of her lashing tongue. How, we wonder, will he cope when he is cooped up in a three room flat?

They are moving for two reasons. First, they are both rather frail and they have difficulty in getting up and down the stairs and second, they complain that the house, which is quite large, is cold in the winter. Antoinette and I think they are both mad. They could easily have a stair lift fitted so that they could move up and down easily. And to keep their home warm would cost them no more than another £2,000 a year. If they live for another 20 years (an unlikely possibility I fear) they would still not spend as much as they are now spending in stamp duty to buy their flat.

8

(Devon)

Today I saw three road signs which all advertised hospitals with the words 'Minor Injuries only: Not 24 hours.'

Putting aside the fact that no one – not even doctors – can adequately define a 'minor injury' it seems pointless and absurd to waste time and money putting 'not 24 hours' on a sign. Why not just print the hours that the hospital is open? It would take up less space and be of more help to people.

Gyles Brandreth tells a good story about Hilaire Belloc the writer. Belloc was an MP for a while. In his London club he was asked by an elderly member what he did for a living. 'I'm a Member of Parliament,' replied Belloc.

‘Good God,’ spluttered the obviously startled member, ‘is that still going on?’

9

(Gloucestershire)

One of the window panes in my study in Gloucestershire has developed a large crack.

(I am having difficulty knowing where we are these days. I have to look out of the window to see if I can see the sea. If I can see the sea we are in Devon. If I cannot see the sea it is either misty or we are in Gloucestershire. If I can see the Eiffel Tower we are probably in Paris.)

The crack looks dodgy and my first instinct was to call in a glazier to have the pane replaced. After a quarter of an hour working my way through a variety of entirely appropriate advertisers I realised that I really didn’t want any more workmen in my life. Having recently repaired a broken window with Antoinette, my first thought was to go to a glass cutting shop, buy a pane of glass and some putty and do the replacement myself. But the more I thought about this the more depressed I became. Replacing one pane of glass had taken the best part of a day. I didn’t want to spend another day replacing another pane. So I hunted around until I found a picture frame containing a suitable sized piece of glass and removed the picture and the glass. The glass wasn’t exactly the same size as the window but it was a reasonable match. I then fixed the glass from the picture frame over the cracked pane and fixed it into place with Blu-Tack and Sellotape. It does not, I am prepared to admit, look quite as good as a professional replacement. But it took me about five minutes and didn’t involve any telephone calls or any long discussions with workmen. So I’m happy.

In fact, I am becoming a bit of a dab hand at Doing It Myself.

The other month I managed to put up a Venetian blind in a bathroom. More impressive still is the fact that the blind is still there.

10

(Devon)

One of our new coastal neighbours introduced himself when I was busy fixing another bolt to the main gate. The gate already has a latch and a huge padlock and a sign that says PRIVATE and another that says GUARD DOGS LOOSE and a small bolt but I thought that a bigger bolt would be better than a small bolt.

I am very proud of the padlock.

It is huge and when I went to a locksmith to have a second key made, the guy in the shop drooled over it. He showed me a catalogue with a picture of the lock and pointed out that the padlock would have cost £140 when the catalogue had been printed 15 years ago and that it must by now cost several times as much. When he showed me this I felt that I ought to put the padlock into the bank rather than use it to strap a huge metal chain onto the gate and leave it outside in all weathers.

Anyway, there I was trying to fit the new bolt, using the new portable power drill I bought on the same day that I managed to find a locksmith able to make a spare key for the padlock, when a guy in shorts and a short sleeved shirt came over and said ‘hello’.

He looked to be in his late forties, maybe early fifties, and someone had persuaded him that hair transplants are a sensible investment and so he’d had one done though you could spot it for what it was about thirty feet away. He was solid proof of the fashion rule that men should only wear shorts when on a yacht – and then only when below decks. If God had intended men to wear shorts he would not have given them such knobbly knees. Show me a man in shorts who has nice knees and I will show you a female transvestite.

Within three minutes he had somehow managed to tell me his life story. At least if he was telling the truth it was his life story. It might have been someone else’s life story. Or a life story he had read somewhere. Or one he had simply made up.

He told me that he was a property magnate and he actually used the word magnate, which was curious because I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone use the word in speech before. It’s the sort of word that journalists on the city pages might use to describe Canadian billionaires who are so dull that they need to be given some character. He had, he told me, started out in life with a small, terraced house in Lancashire which he had inherited from his parents. He had then read a book on property development and he’d taken out a loan against the value of the small terraced house and used the loan to put down deposits on six other small terraced houses in Lancashire. Within five years he had a substantial property portfolio (that’s another word he used that I’ve only ever seen when I’ve been waiting for a fire to catch and have been reduced to reading the city pages in a newspaper) and by the time he was 30-years-old, the time of life when most of my generation were thinking that it was perhaps time to think of settling down, doing something sensible and perhaps even making some money, he owned over 200 properties. Or that's what he said. I suspect that he owned 200 houses in that his name was on the bits of paper but I suspect that a bank, or more likely several banks, actually owned them. Anyway, having told me all this his watch suddenly beeped and he hurried off. (It was one of those Apple watches which beep when you've got an email. Several of our plumbers have them).

The funny thing is that when the stranger had gone I realised that although he had told me all this stuff about his own life he hadn't asked one thing about Antoinette and myself. A lot of people are like that these days. I don't mind in the slightest because I'm shy and I really don't like talking about myself (a diary doesn't count) but it does seem odd.

11
(Gloucestershire)
In Gloucestershire our hazel bushes are already showing catkins. This is surely the earliest I've ever seen them.

My family doctor (or rather a computer writing on behalf of a doctor whom I have never heard of and never met) has sent me a letter inviting me to have my annual flu vaccination.

The invitation includes this sentence: 'Please note we have already bought the flu vaccines which would be wasted if you do not have your vaccination administered here at the Surgery.'

Neat touch that: a lovely little piece of emotional blackmail to encourage the wavering patient.

There is, strangely, no mention of the huge profits that GPs make out of administering flu vaccines. The GPs would do better by their patients by advising them to keep away from pharmacy counters and GP surgeries during the winter months. It's there that the flu bug can be found in greatest abundance.

Why are GPs so mean and so damned greedy?

I knew one who was so mean that if he bought a car park ticket for three hours, he would sit in his car and wait for the three hours to expire before he left – even if his business requiring him to park his car had taken only two hours.

12
(Gloucestershire)
The British tax laws become dafter and crueller by the year and changes now seem to be made with frightening frequency. Changes to the tax legislation are like buses in that when one change comes along you can be pretty sure there will be another change tottering along close behind.

One of the cruellest, daftest laws is the one that decrees that if I die before my 75th birthday then my pension will pass tax free to my beneficiaries (in my case my wife). However, if I am selfish enough to live beyond the age of 75 then my pension will be heavily taxed and the Government will help itself to round about half of whatever there is in the pension fund.

This cruel and crazy law does not just apply to me, of course. And it is difficult not to suspect that there will be many 74-year-olds, perhaps not in the best of health, who will be tempted to fly over to Switzerland for a one time consultation with Dr Death. Indeed, I have no doubt that there will be many relatives who will be urging Mum or Dad to 'do the decent thing' as they linger on into their 70s.

And I wonder if George Osborne, the Chancellor who devised this dotty law, realised that the legislation actually encourages pensioners to spend their money as quickly as they can as they wander innocently into their 70s. Was that really the plan? In what way is the country well served if those who have saved are encouraged to fritter away their savings in order to reduce their post-mortem tax bill?

Finally, what about elderly folk who are demented or sick or on life support machines? Doctors will be under tremendous pressure to 'do the decent thing' and to put Mum or Dad into the ground a little earlier than God intended in order to minimise the tax bill.

What a bloody country.

13
(Gloucestershire)
Antoinette bought me a beautiful leather backgammon travel set from an antique shop. The case is embossed with the letters M.G. and is so beautifully made that I am considering changing my name to Mycroft Guillam or Marmaduke Guillemot so that my initials match the ones on the case.

While walking back to the car we passed an old man sitting on a stone wall. He looked very unhappy. Antoinette stopped to ask him if he was all right. He told her that he could not bear to go home as his wife had sent him out to purchase three items. He had been unable to complete the task because the two small shops he'd visited were both out of fresh tomatoes. He was, he said, terrified of going back home because he knew his wife would shout at him.

We put him in the car and took him to a nearby supermarket where tomatoes are readily available. We then took him to within a hundred yards of his home and dropped him off so that he could walk the rest of the way with his purchases.

14

(Gloucestershire)

Antoinette wrote about squirrels burying their nuts in her wonderful book *My Quirky Cotswold Garden* and every time I see squirrels burying nuts I cannot help stopping what I am doing in order to watch the process.

Today, for the umpteenth time, I watched a grey squirrel burying nuts in the lawn.

He has a wonderful system for storing nuts and he buries each one with great care. He digs a little hole, drops in a nut and then puts the earth back on top of the nut, meticulously patting down the soil. He then rushes around and picks up bits of mown grass and dead leaves and spreads them over the top of the hiding place to cover the site and to disguise the fact that it contains a buried hazelnut.

He then goes and fetches another nut and repeats the procedure.

Next spring the lawn will be full of holes where he has tried to find his buried nuts. And there will be young hazel trees growing everywhere.

We don't care. The squirrels more than pay for the damage with the entertainment they provide.

I know people who get unbelievably cross when squirrels and rabbits dig holes in their lawns but I think they're missing a great deal of joy.

15

(Devon)

Carpetright's fitters came and fitted the last of our new carpets. It is a relief to be done with them.

They cancelled the first appointment.

Then they came, but despite my having made about 68,000 phone calls reminding them to make sure that the fitters brought the brass door bars they needed, the fitters didn't bring everything they needed so they had to go away and come back again.

I hate all workmen with a deep and burning loathing not because they do a shoddy job (which most of them do) and not because they overcharge (because most of them do that too) but because no one bloody cares and they regard my time as irrelevant.

When we are sitting waiting for a workman to arrive we cannot work. We cannot go out into the garden because we might not hear the door or the telephone, or if we do hear the bell we might not reach the telephone before it stops ringing (when they ring to tell us that they aren't coming they never let it ring more than three times). They never answer their own telephones. And they lie. They lie all the time. 'We'll be there in the morning.' 'I've had to rush off because my granny died again.' ' I need to go to the dentist.' 'The van broke down.' 'The dog ate my tools'.

So my time is just wasted. And now I stick bits of old glass over cracked window panes and if we can do a job ourselves we do it ourselves – even if we make a botch of it. This afternoon I fitted new bolts to two back doors. The bolts are slightly askew and look as if they were fitted by someone with a serious medical disorder. But they work. And no workmen were required.

I have learned quite a few things about doing it myself. For example, modern screws are made of such cheap material that the heads will usually break when you try to screw them into wood. It is much easier to hammer in screws than it is to try to screw them in with a screwdriver.

16

(Gloucestershire)

We were in Cirencester (though as soon as we got there I forgot why) and found the town crammed to the gunwales with motorists looking for a parking space. While touring round and round the best car park (i.e. the one which does not entail walking for half an hour with a heavy shopping bag or three) I spotted a space that was a real vacancy and not one of those half spaces which look as though they are empty but which turn out to be half occupied by one of those incredibly tiny little cars – the owners of which always park right at the back of the space to tempt and infuriate other motorists.

The problem was that I couldn’t see a way to get to the space without going the wrong way round the car park. So I went the wrong way round a part of the car park. A fellow in the smallest red car I’ve ever seen in my life drove straight at us, doing his best to take up the whole of the road and waving furiously to indicate that in his mind at least I was going the wrong way. Since we were in the Mitsubishi Barbarian which is larger than some houses this was not a good move on his part. I drove slowly forwards and eventually, while still gesticulating with all the wasted energy of a man with St Vitus’s Dance, the idiot motorist moved over so that we could pass each other. There was oodles of room.

Is it me or has the world suddenly become full of prissy little bastards who regard all rules as sacrosanct and when there aren’t any rules they make some up.

As we passed, I too waved furiously and angered him beyond measure by winding down my window and telling him that he was going the wrong way. He was so angry that he couldn’t respond, but just spluttered and probably burst a few blood vessels.

I had so much fun doing this that in future I have decided that I will always drive the wrong way round public car parks.

Antoinette, who is full of gentle kindness and far too much fear, worries that someone will film me doing this and put the film on YouTube. I point out that since we never look at YouTube (and I wouldn’t know how to find it) it really doesn’t matter a toss what they put up there.

Cirencester is still dug up and is now in a worse state than when the Romans started work a couple of thousand years ago. They’ve had the town centre dug up for what seems like years now and it is still impossible to tell what they’re planning to do or why they are planning to do it. Maybe they are just digging up roads and pavements in the hope that an idea will come to them. I must say that everything I have ever done on impulse has been far more successful and profitable than the things I have done after thought, planning and consideration. Most of the projects I have calculated carefully have been disastrous.

I would have asked a workman what the plan is but there was, of course, no one actually doing anything. There weren’t even any workmen sitting in huts or vans reading a tabloid and drinking tea from a flask. Workmen don’t drink tea from flasks any more, of course. They buy a caffe latte with added chocolate sprinkles and sip it slowly while munching one of those expensive and indigestible buns they always sell in coffee shops these days. They probably tuck a napkin into their shirt collar so that no crumbs fall onto their pristine overalls.

Walking around the building site that is now Cirencester, I couldn’t help noticing that a number of retail establishments have succumbed to the inevitable. Since we were last there a couple of weeks ago one of the town’s largest stores has disappeared entirely, a café has gone and even an estate agents’ office has closed. It comes to something when estate agents close down for they are usually as indestructible as giant hogweed; the first to appear when a town is developing and the last to go when it is failing. This is not, I suspect, a time to be purchasing property in Cirencester.

As we headed for the car park, we met an old editor of mine. He is long retired but he spent many years as a subeditor on one of England’s tabloid newspapers and he still speaks in headlines. Whatever he says he sounds as though he is announcing a new Government policy or a major event of some kind.

Some years ago he came to visit us in Devon and, not having spent much time outside London, he filled his suitcase with cigarettes and gin in case these essentials were not available on the train or in the wilds of Devonshire. By the time he arrived at the railway station where I was picking him up, he had smoked all the cigarettes and consumed all the gin.

17

(Paris)

We haven’t been to Paris for a while. The summer is simply far too hot.

Today, we spent the inevitable tedious half an hour getting through customs. The idiot in a uniform demanded to open and search my suitcase. I opened the case, stood back and kept my mouth shut. I know the form. You’re not allowed to talk or distract the Man from the Gestapo. Besides, there isn’t much point in talking to them since most British border guards speak very little English. There’s irony hidden not far below the surface there.

He began by lifting out a large plastic bag. He untied the loosely tied handles. Inside there were a couple of dozen scrunched up identical plastic bags. He opened each bag in turn, examined it carefully and then put it to one side. Soon the counter was awash with plastic bags. When you unscrunch them, plastic bags take up far more space. Eventually he opened the last bag. It, like all the others, was empty. He looked at me, puzzled. I gave him my best inscrutable look. Then he opened a black bin liner bag. From this he took a padded bag. He opened the padded bag and peered inside. He stuck his hand into the bag. Nothing. He followed the same procedure with the other 24 padded bags. The only thing left in my suitcase was a large roll of bubble wrap. He unrolled the bubble wrap. There was about twenty feet of the stuff. He was by now surrounded by plastic bags, padded bags and bubble wrap. There were no guns, no hand grenades, no drugs and no English folk smuggling themselves out of England.

The man in the uniform didn't give up though. He fingered the suitcase, as they do, looking for hidden compartments. It was a cheap suitcase which I bought as a replacement for the one with squeaky wheels. There was nothing else in the case.

I could have explained that I was taking the bags and the bubble wrap over to Paris so that we could start packing up books and other stuff in the apartment. But I didn't say anything.

Eventually he managed to get everything back into the suitcase. He zipped it up. I picked up the suitcase, ready to walk across to where Antoinette was standing. 'In three hours' time I'll be sitting in the Café de la Paix drinking a vin rouge and nibbling on a croissant,' I whispered to the man in uniform. 'Sadly, you will still be here, probably leafing through a stranger's dirty underpants.'

We met a foreign publisher in a café this morning. He drank café calva (which is espresso with Calvados added). I drank diablo menthe (which is mint syrup with mineral water). Antoinette had mint tea. We all nibbled at chunks broken off a baguette. When a baguette is fresh and just nicely crispy on the outside there is no need for jam or butter.

The baguette is as much a symbol of France as the beret, the string of onions and the Eiffel Tower on a key ring but my companion told me that the baguette has been popular in France for less than a century.

At the end of the Great War (later, for obvious reasons, renamed the First World War) there was a labour shortage because many French bakers had died. Making Viennese style long loaves was the solution. In addition, the law made it illegal for people in bakeries to start work before 4 a.m. and the baguette was the only style of bread which could be baked ready for breakfast.

As far as boulangeries are concerned, the baguette has another advantage: after an hour it goes hard and stale and useful only for scaffolding. And so the remains of the baguette which was bought for breakfast have to be thrown away and another baguette bought for luncheon. After luncheon the remains of the second baguette have to be discarded and a third baguette bought for dinner. This explains why there are always such long queues at boulangeries.

I have decided that it is possible to conduct a conversation in France with the aid of four phrases. These are 'Oh la la' (which does not need any explanation), 'Merde!' (which means 'Shit! and is best kept for uncensored moments) Zut! (which implies considerable frustration and is a polite version of 'Merde!') and 'Bof' (which suggests complete indifference and which should be delivered with a shrug of the shoulders).

Antoinette read an interview with Sir Jackie Stewart, the former racing driver, in a copy of *The Lady* magazine which she had bought at Ebbsfleet. In the article, Sir Jackie talked about his wife who is apparently suffering from dementia but also mentioned that she had fallen a number of times. Since demented patients who fall a good deal sometimes have idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus I sent him a card via the magazine asking if Lady Stewart's doctors had thought of this diagnosis.

18

(Paris)

We were woken at 8.00 a.m. sharp by the sound of drilling outside. Every time we come to Paris someone is drilling holes in the ground. I suspect that there are spies who wait for us to arrive and then rush around and organise some hole digging. There are three hotels in our street and I wonder what the visitors think of the noise and the mess. The tourist industry in Paris has been devastated by the bombings and there are very few foreigners coming to the city. When we arrived at the Gare du Nord last night, there were fifty taxis waiting and we were the only people looking for a cab. Our driver was so delighted to have customers that he asked us if we were thirsty and offered us bottles of water. He then gave us a guided tour of the city as we drove south to the left bank.

And now they're digging up the street again.

Our building is 150-years-old but it shakes whenever they dig. Cracks are appearing in the plaster and pictures hanging on the walls have slipped. When I went out to buy food, I noticed with horror that the trench they are digging extends a good distance underneath the front of the building. Maybe the building will fall down. I hope we're not in it if it does. I pointed out to Antoinette that if the building collapses we will at least have a large chunk of a piece of prime building land in the most expensive part of Paris. I noticed with horror that in a nearby street where the workmen are a step ahead, they are filling in the trench with sand. They are taking out rock and putting in sand.

Just three or four men are working on the whole of our street. They start work at 8.00 a.m. and the pneumatic drill operates until 9.00 a.m. They then mess around for a few hours and shortly after lunch they pack up and go home.

It will, apparently, take them four months to complete the digging. Four months of early morning wake up calls by pneumatic drill. The hotel owners in our street must be beside themselves.

The city itself has never looked as sad, as scruffy and as uninviting. The whole city is full of rubbish with black bags sitting beside waste bins in the same way that they do in so many parts of England. Many shops are shut (closed down or shut for the day to satisfy EU requirements on working time) and the pavements are dug up everywhere. The digging is apparently being done by workmen from an electricity company though I suspect they are probably installing yet more cables for cable TV. Does anyone bother to subscribe to cable television these days? They are digging a trench under the front wall of every building.

The result is that a street full of 19th century buildings (all holding one another up) has moved forwards slightly.

There are no jolly tourists around in Paris today. Actually, there are no miserable ones either and to be honest I can't say I blame them. I doubt if the threat of being gunned down or blown up (isn't it strange that we talk about being gunned down or being blown up but on reflection I suppose that is pretty much what one might expect to happen) is as much a deterrent as the fact that the city is now about as welcoming as a redundant prisoner of war camp.

The Eiffel Tower is surrounded by wire fencing and looks like a prison camp. To complete the image, the perimeter is patrolled by armed guards. The terrorists have clearly won.

Workmen arrived to do something inexplicable to our lift shaft. A boy of about fifteen climbed out of a skylight, tied himself to our bannisters (I pointed out that they wobble and are desperately insecure but he didn't seem terribly disturbed by this) and abseiled down the side of the building.

You are very brave, I said to him.

He shrugged. 'D'habitude', he replied.

19
(Paris)
There is a headline in one of the French papers about the fact that the French distrust vaccines and vaccination more than the people of any other nation. Doctors (and the pharmaceutical companies) are terribly upset by this. Hoorah for the French!

Once again we were woken by drilling. But it stopped at 9.00 a.m. and didn't resume. The workmen sat around for a while and then went home, leaving the street deserted and silent. French employment laws only allow a very short working week.

It isn't difficult to see why the country is in such a mess.

More shops have closed since we were here last. One shopkeeper told me he hadn't seen any Americans for a month. The truth is that Americans aren't travelling to Paris. It's a long way to travel in order to get stoned, or beaten by men with clubs, and they can stay at home and get shot.

20
(Paris)
Today there were two dozen policemen supervising the trench diggers. Maybe someone has threatened them or pointed out that they are threatening a whole street full of protected buildings? (The buildings are all protected because they are not far from the Eiffel Tower.)

This afternoon I bought a book from one of the bookstalls along the banks of the Seine.

I read that in October 1533, Monseigneur Jean du Bellay, the Bishop of Paris was on his way to Rome to receive his cardinal's hat when, as he was travelling through Lyon, he was suddenly struck with terrible pains in his hips and buttocks. He was forced to order the coachman to stop. Screaming in pain he had to be carried from the coach to the nearest inn. The innkeeper sent a message to the local teaching hospital, which like most hospitals in France at the time was called the Hotel Dieu, asking them to send a doctor.

The doctor who turned up looked pretty outlandish even by the standards of 16th century France. He wore a fur edged robe and a skull cap decorated with a golden scarab. He was exceptionally merry looking and his name was Francois Rabelais, the local lecturer in anatomy.

Rabelais, who was an exceptionally good doctor, immediately diagnosed sciatica and prescribed some balm and demanded a fee of 10 gold Louis. The Bishop nearly fainted with horror at this.

'That's unjustifiable!' he protested. 'You've been here only moments!'

'Ah,' said Rabelais, 'I'm charging you one Louis for my time and the balm and nine Louis for being able to tell you the nature of your illness.'

And thus was coined an apothegm which has since been used a thousand times by doctors, lawyers, portrait painters, entertainers and everyone else who ever charges big fees for services which don't seem to take very long to perform.

In fact Rabelais didn't take the ten Louis fee but, instead, he told the Bishop that he would relinquish the fee, and accompany the Bishop to Rome as his personal medical attendant, if the Bishop would arrange for his young girlfriend, Roberte Vimeux, to be released from the convent where she was learning to be a nun – apparently without much enthusiasm.

The Bishop thought this a tremendous idea. He would save himself ten Louis and be able to travel to Rome with his own doctor. The deal was done.

What the Bishop did not know, of course, was that his new doctor was, using the pen name Alcofribas Nasier (an anagrammatical pseudonym which doesn't exactly trip off the tongue) and was the author of a hugely successful book about a character called Pantagruel; a book so rude and bawdy that it was bound to look like a holy book so that those who read it didn't get excommunicated.

Rabelais ultimately became enormously rich writing a series of novels about Pantagruel.

In the supermarket I got into terrible trouble for not having the correct change. Then the surly assistant gave me a five euro note as part of my change. The note was torn almost completely across. I gave her the note back and asked if she could replace it. She took a roll of Sellotape from underneath her till and without saying a word she taped the note back together. France must be in even more trouble than I had thought.

I then went to freezer shop, counted out the exact money and the guy beamed and was effusive. I managed to get rid of my stuck together five euro note.

21

(Paris)

There is more snobbery about where you live in Paris than there is in any other city in the world. For example, I heard of a Parisienne living in the 7th arrondissement in Paris who was asked: 'Would you consider living anywhere else in the world?'

She thought about her answer for a while

'I suppose I might consider moving to the 6th,' she said, at last.

22

(Paris)

I bought a small book in French that explains how one should behave in France. The book was written not for foreigners but for the French themselves and was, surprisingly, published quite recently. I had fun today translating some of the advice. Here are my favourite sections:

A gentleman always uncovers himself when in a lift in the presence of a lady.
A lady should not stand with her fist on a hip.
A lady who crosses her legs should do so without too much up her skirt.
A lady who sits should keep her bust straight.
If going up stairs with a lady, a gentleman always follows her behind.
A gentleman does not send a present to a new mother unless he has been intimate with her.
When using an umbrella hold it above your head.
If you're driving and traffic lights go green do not paint your nails in case you injure a pedestrian.
If you are invited to someone's house do not leave stains on the sheets.
Older people can interrupt a conversation by leaving discreetly.
Do not sing at the dinner table.
If you have an itch in a public place rub yourself with kid gloves.
If you wish to appear elegant you should play with your accessories.
If a woman visits a political personality she should allow him to take the initiative in conversation.

Honest. That’s what the French are being taught these days.

23
(Paris)
Now that we are planning to sell the apartment, we have a good deal of stuff to bring back to the UK. The furniture will be easy. We can get an international remover to bring that. But the idea of bringing back boxes full of books alarms them. This is possibly because the customs inspectors will want to open all the boxes and inspect the contents. We have around 3,000 books to bring back and, I reckon, nearly 1,000 DVDs and CDs. We’ve decided to collect together some cardboard boxes and post the books and disks back to ourselves. It will be easier than anything else. French postal rates are very cheap when parcels are marked as containing ‘Livres’.

Antoinette decided to put in the order for our Waitrose delivery today. To her horror she discovered that people are already booking their slots for Christmas deliveries. She had to order the Christmas deliveries for the 22nd December because all the delivery slots closer to Christmas had been taken. It seems that Waitrose simply allows anyone to book the slots and gives no priority to regular customers. This is, sadly, rather typical of most big companies these days. They don’t realise that it makes commercial sense to look after existing customers.

24
(Paris)
I read today about some French research which showed that shoppers outside posh stores are less likely to help strangers in distress than are people outside low end stores. Researchers in Paris ‘accidentally dropped’ belongings on the street outside top stores and common stores. Outside the common stores 77.5% of pedestrians helped but outside the posh stores only 35% were willing to offer assistance. The same thing happened when researchers asked shoppers to help supervise a wheelchair bound friend for a few moments. It seems that there are far fewer ‘good Samaritans’ patronising places like Dior and Chanel than there are shopping at places like Bon Marche. Gosh, what a surprise that was. Our Clotswold experiences suggest that the same is true of Britain.

We had tea with an old chum of mine. He and I went to medical school together and because he was brought up in France and speaks excellent French (his father was a diplomat) he took a job as a doctor in Paris. One of his tasks was to look after the English holidaymakers at a caravan site in the Bois de Boulogne.

Five years after he’d arrived in France, my chum married a young widow whose first husband had run a large car sales business. My chum gave up medicine and, together with his wife, took over the car business. They knew nothing about selling cars but the two of them have been enormously successful.

To my surprise my chum still wears plus fours (occasionally, he admits, he even wears plus sixes and plus eights). He started wearing plus fours because he played a good deal of golf and there are no cuffs to get muddy. Today, he admits that he wears them as a fashion statement in the same way that some executives hold their trousers up with fancy braces.

In the car sales business he is well-known as the ‘man with the funny trousers’.

25
(Paris)
I read today that the obelisk in the Place de la Concorde took seven years to transport from Egypt to central Paris. A whole village was torn down in order to build a road from Luxor Temple so that the obelisk could be moved to a ship before being taken to France.

On 25th October 1836, a crowd of 200,000 turned out to watch the obelisk being put into position. I wonder if that many people would turn out today to watch an obelisk arriving.

I noticed that the T-shirts on sale in souvenir shops now carry the words I Love Paris City rather than the simpler I Love Paris.

One of the souvenir shop salesmen explained that the the people printing the T-shirts had added the word ‘City’ because there are now so many unpleasant minor celebrities called Paris that visitors weren’t buying the shirts lest folk back home thought them to be fans of a celebrity. So they put on the word ‘City’ so that it’s clear the T-shirt commemorates the home of the Eiffel Tower.

26

(Paris)

At the entrance to the escalator leading up to the part of the Gare du Nord where travellers are marinated and inspected prior to travelling, there stood a man and a woman wearing yellow hi-visibility yellow vests. They were both holding large signs showing pictures of weapons. There were pictures of a rocket launcher, a grenade, a landmine and so on. There were a dozen or so photographs. One of the pictures was of a gun. It had the word ‘gun’ written beside it to make it clear that all types of firearm and not just the variety shown were banned.

The sign reminded me of one that used to be stuck on the wall at Johannesburg Airport back in the 1980s. Red crosses against the items made it clear that passengers were not allowed to carry anything on the signs rather than that carrying them was compulsory. They too didn’t want people travelling with rocket launchers in their luggage.

I dutifully looked at the signs, adopted what I thought to be an acceptably earnest and thoughtful look and then shook my head. The sign holders nodded acceptance and I boarded the escalator.

Upstairs, in the part of the railway station used by travellers to Britain, there are fewer seats than ever though someone with a sense of humour has installed a table football game where there used to be some seats. The seats which are there seem to have been designed by or on behalf of a company making back pain products.

Even the French customs operatives now require travellers to remove their hats. They didn’t always do this. I remember a photographer friend of mine came through customs with a roll of film under his hat. He had an exposed roll of film in his camera bag and this was duly confiscated by Special Branch officers who were waiting for him. But the real roll of film, the one the Special Branch officers were looking for, was under his hat. The pictures appeared in the Sunday papers a day or so later.

The journey back from the Gare du Nord was as unpleasant as we have come to expect it to be, with the added delight that behind us there sat a German woman with a very loud voice.

She reminded me very much of the awful woman in Caught on a Train – one of our favourite curiosity films. A young man, played by Michael Kitchen, is bullied and manipulated by a mean and selfish woman called Frau Messner played by the extraordinary Peggy Ashcroft (who played the innocent wife of a crofter in The Thirty Nine Steps and the delightful Miss Dubber in A Perfect Spy).

For two hours, the woman on our train lectured a man whom we assumed to be her travelling companion but who turned out to be a complete stranger. He had one glass eye but the real eye was so cold and dead and empty of emotion that it was impossible to tell the difference.

As our train raced through the station at Calais (where the train used to stop) I wondered what had happened to all the people who had bought homes near to Calais in the belief that they would be able to catch fast trains to London or Paris.

Although we are planning to post most of our books, we brought back four large suitcases full of books and other treasures. When we arrived at Ebbsfleet railway station, we realised that we couldn’t possibly carry all our heavy bags the mile or so to where we had left the car.

(The Ebbsfleet car parks are always pretty nearly full and we had, as usual, had to leave the car at the very far end of the parking areas. Most of the parked cars belong to commuters who’ve gone to London for the day so the travellers with heavy baggage (those travelling to the continent) have to walk the furthest, trudging a vast distance out in the open and the ever present wind. There are, of course, no porters. I suppose that a job that requires a certain amount of lifting or pushing would be too demeaning. And who in their right mind is going to take such a job when they could instead sit at home all day and watch the horse racing channels on satellite television? If tired cynicism is showing through here I make no excuses and no explanations are required.)

So we decided that I would fetch the car while Antoinette stood guard over the suitcases. I paid for the car park (£44 for a week in the open air) and a quarter of an hour later returned with the car.

There was nowhere to park.

Antoinette was standing on the pavement surrounded by our suitcases but I could see absolutely nowhere that I could stop. There were zig zaggy white lines and double yellow lines everywhere and no sign of anywhere for me to stop to collect my wife and the suitcases. I could see spaces for taxis but in my experience, taxi drivers do not take kindly to ordinary motorists stopping in their designated area even for a moment.

Eventually, I decided that the best solution was to park very temporarily on a small stretch of the 200 yards of double yellow lines guarding the bus stops. There were no buses and no passengers waiting so it didn’t seem like a terribly big crime.

But as I drove away I wondered whether I’d be summonsed, arrested, fined or filmed for YouTube. Most likely someone will have filmed my stop so that I can be shamed and humiliated online. Every day, every minute out of bed is a potential YouTube humiliation or a court summons. I no longer care.

Everyone breaks the law these days. Breaking the law is unavoidable now that there are so many absurd and unreasonably rigid laws

As I drove away from the station, several little lights came on in the car. I had no idea what they meant and there was nowhere to stop to look at the huge instruction book that came with the car. I decided that the indecipherable little hieroglyphics probably didn't mean anything important. I'm sure the dyslexic folk who think up these little hieroglyphics intend them to mean something but they never mean anything to me. I lost all faith in little lights on the dashboard after my experience with the BMW 7 series we once owned. The lights on that car lit up and stayed lit and no one from BMW could explain them or make them go away so I covered them up with a piece of sticking plaster. These days, unless the new light is red and accompanied by a scrunching sound I ignore it. (The Bentley is quite different. When any little lights come on they are clear and as polite and deferential as you would expect them to be.)

The motorway was clogged at 4 p.m. as it always is these days. The rush hour used to be between 5 p.m. and 6 p.m. but it gets earlier as people work less and less. Council workers and social workers leave their offices at 3.30 p.m. to avoid traffic jams which they find more stressful than other people.

When we got home we lit a fire and watched Errol Flynn in Robin Hood. Once again I was reminded what a wise fellow Robin Hood really was. He stole from the rich.

What sort of idiot steals from the poor?

27

(Gloucestershire)

To maintain decent control of your life these days, you really need to stay at home all the time. Is that the Grand Plan? If you go away, you are bound to miss a vital rubbish collection and when you get back you will find official looking letters demanding that you do this or ordering you to do that.

Some people now plan their holidays around rubbish collection dates (far more important than trying to fit in with official school holidays) since if you miss one collection there will probably be at least a month to wait between one and the next.

I have noticed that the utility companies and banks are, like government departments, particularly clever. They date a letter the 10th, say, and post it on the 17th, using a service which takes 10 days, so that it arrives on the 27th or later. In the letter they tell you, with apparent generosity, that you have three weeks to do something but in reality you have three days if you are lucky and if you have had the temerity to be away then you are probably out of time, in trouble or deeply out of pocket.

And why, pray, is that when they are doing something for us, a week is a working week (excluding weekends and bank holidays) but when we have to do something for them, and are given two or three weeks to take action, a week is an ordinary seven day week?

I am exhausted by the fact that virtually nothing is done properly these days. I genuinely think I have developed an allergy to 21st century uncaringness, in the same way that people develop an allergy to bee stings or peanuts.

(Talking of peanut allergies why is it that so many food packets have the phrase 'May contain peanuts' printed on them. Don't the manufacturers know what they put into their products? What else might be in there? Pigs' trotters? Jellied eel? Cockles? Why don't they know what ingredients they are using?)

Even small thing seems to enrage me and I am sorry for Antoinette who has to put up with me stomping around the house hitting things and shouting abuse at the furniture. I never ever shout at her but inanimate objects get it in the neck.

The council bin men regularly forget to pick up our dustbin (or whatever it is called these days) and when I email a protest, I am told to leave the bin out for 48 hours. By then the bin will be overflowing with rubbish tossed in by passing walkers. The new strimmer I bought will not start. Even when I hit it with a large hammer and threw it onto the floor it would not start. The patent office forgot to send the paperwork they had promised. The boiler company failed to send the warranty they have repeatedly promised to send. And the council forgot to send confirmation that we had purchased a grave in the local cemetery, though they did remember to cash the cheque I sent. And that's just today.

Still, it feels strangely comforting to know that we have bought our final resting place – to know where the story ends and that Antoinette and I can share a home for as much of eternity as the council allows us before they dig up our coffins and resell the land.

The 'Recycling Team' at Stroud District Council has written, with great enthusiasm, to let us know that our new 'improved' waste collection service starts in November. They will now collect our rubbish every two weeks. In the old, unimproved, days they collected the rubbish every week. I suspect that someone on the Recycling Team has been reading Orwell and improving their Newspeak.

'Improvement' indeed.

In the bad old days we were allowed to put out two huge bags of rubbish every week. We are now limited to two small plastic bags of rubbish a fortnight. I suspect that the gossamer thin bags, which are of a peculiar beige colour are transparent so that spies from the council can see what we are putting out for collection. The new bags we must use on pain of imprisonment are certainly smaller and thinner than anything we can buy. They are so thin and delicate that they tear if you put anything inside them. We will get around this problem by putting our rubbish in black bags and then putting the black bags inside the beige bags. Indeed, we will have to put the black bag inside another black bag to provide some sort of defence against the wild animals who love tearing their way into rubbish bags. I can find nothing in the regulations forbidding this, though naturally this means that we will be using a good many more plastic bags than is strictly speaking necessary. And we have to buy large plastic dustbins in which to store the bags we have filled but aren't allowed to put out, so that the rats don't get too fat. Naturally, the bags the council have supplied (and which we have paid for) do not come with built-in ties so we have to purchase several packets of plastic ties. So we will be using lots of plastic bags, an additional two plastic bins and a large supply of plastic ties. And instead of working, earning and paying tax I will be spending my life wrapping rubbish in plastic bags. I'm sure that some plonker working for the council will argue that this helps save polar bears from the TV licensing authorities.

As a special treat, the council is now going to allow us to recycle our food waste. They have issued us with two small plastic containers. One we are supposed to keep in the kitchen. The other we should keep outside. Every day or so we are supposed to empty the slops from the kitchen container into the outdoor container. Our food waste will be collected every week by some poor sod who will have to tip our food box into a larger food box on his lorry. Since our lane is far too narrow for a proper recycling lorry to reach us, I expect that the fellow will simply have a larger plastic box. Let's hope he doesn't crash or hit too many potholes or else the stuff will doubtless spill out. We will, presumably, be expected to waste vast quantities of the world's most important and valuable resource in order to wash out the damned boxes.

We will not be putting our food waste into their nauseating little plastic boxes for the simple reason that if we do we will have badgers, squirrels, foxes, weasels and rats gathered around for a nightly feast of leftovers. There is no plastic box on this planet that is immune to the teeth of hungry woodland creatures, and the members of the Recycling Team have clearly never stepped outside their neat boxy offices.

I used to keep bird and squirrel food in plastic boxes outside but I've had to abandon that since three large, heavy duty boxes have been eaten into in the last twelve months. I reckon the Council's box would last a month at the most. I could, of course, spray the box with toxic aftershave (as I will continue to do with the new beige bags) but the box will doubtless still stink and become disgusting.

I will continue to burn our food waste in the incinerator and put the mineral and nitrogen rich ash onto the garden. I think I'll put the damned plastic boxes into the incinerator too. They will go up quite nicely. Maybe I'll keep them for bonfire night.

28

(Devon)

We paid the best part of £1,000 for a space in the local cemetery in which to dig a hole in the ground big enough for two. The council have at last sent us the details of what we've purchased. It appears that we are in a different cemetery to the one we thought we were buying. And after 50 years, the council can dig us up and throw us into the sea or the town incinerator. Wonderful.

I think everyone should come to terms with the idea of death at a relatively early age. And keep their affairs in as good an order as is readily possible. (By this I do not mean keep an alphabetical list of their lovers or mistresses.)

I am especially aware of this for my father made absolutely no plans, did no clearing and left his estate and his home in such a state of confusion that I never knew how best to deal with things

29

(Devon)

Here's a thing I have noticed: the world is now so full of intolerance that if a book contains anything of which an intolerant reader disapproves he or she will give the book a one star review.

A growing number of people, who have no role in life, no meaning, have appointed themselves professional critics and Wikipedia editors.

(Real encyclopedias report the facts. Wikipedia writers take positions and editorialise. The result is that Wikipedia entries are entirely worthless and unreliable. No serious researchers ever use Wikipedia which is written by sulky teenagers with gripes. I lost all faith in the Internet when I realised that people took Wikipedia seriously and actually used the bizarre ramblings upon its many sites as valid research material. The truth is that Wikipedia is no more an encyclopaedia than Zimbabwe is a force in world chess and is about as useful and reliable a source of material as the scrawled graffiti on toilet walls. I was told recently that my entry in Wikipedia claims that the books I wrote under the name 'Edward Vernon' are autobiographical. Really? That's news to me. I thought they were novels. But then I'm just the author so what do I know.)

The only printed publication to come close to Wikipedia for inaccuracy is *The Economist*, which has led the way in inaccuracy and a lack of common sense for decades. I confess I used to read it from cover to cover when I was very young and wanted to get my money's worth but these days I only read it if I want a good laugh.

Years ago I decided that *The Economist* was a good contrarian indicator. If the magazine says that the oil price was going up then it would probably go down. I have for many years used The Economist as a useful aid in making investments.

I was delighted to see recently that when experts analysed *The Economist* they found that the magazine really has been getting it very wrong for decades.

How does such a magazine continue to attract purchasers, I wonder.

The problem with book reviewers is a serious concern these days. In a book like this, which contains around 500 views and opinions, it is inconceivable that anyone could read it without disagreeing with something.

And so this book (like its predecessors) will receive one star reviews simply and solely because reviewers do not agree with some of my comments. A reader may agree with some of what I write but disagree with one or two things – and then slam the book in revenge.

I guess that is how reviewing is going to be in the future.

And so in the future there will be a good many bland, apologetic books around.

The other thing I've noticed is that the critics who write the most vitriolic comments become hysterical if the object of their criticism dares to stick up for him or herself.

It is not surprising that a growing number of authors are now writing books which they refuse to publish.

Too many reviews are written without humour or compassion or any vestige of understanding for the aims of the author, how successful they have been in meeting those aims; and with absolutely no recognition of the effort required to write a book or indeed that at the other end of the work there is a sensitive human being.

I am not saying that reviewers should never give a book or film one star but that they should think about it and not give one star reviews just because there is a line or a thought in the book with which they do not agree or because they are feeling pissed with the world or because they have thought of a clever put down line.

If you only read books with which you entirely agree how do you ever learn anything?

The premeditated venom and sheer unadulterated nastiness sometimes seems unnecessary and to be honest I find it unnerving.

The sad truth is that there is very little I trust on the Internet these days. You have to know the basic facts about something before you can rely on information you acquire from any Internet site.

Medical journalists reproduce press releases verbatim, drug companies and others 'buy' journalists wholesale (by paying them huge fees to write articles for subsidised medical journals) and the truth becomes more difficult to find every day.

Charities form alliances with drug companies so you can't trust their websites – many charities are actually corrupt. Government departments merely parrot the official line. And too many websites are written by people who simply don't know their subjects properly.

I do find it all rather sad as well as worrying.

We went to visit the cemetery where we have bought our plot. When we visited, we found it quite welcoming and congenial; neat and with well-tended graves. It was impossible to find the plot we'd bought because the council's numbering scheme is incomprehensible but we both always find graveyards quite calming and cheering. They are always full of so much love. The inscriptions were marvellous and the little added touches pull on the heart. One grave had a photograph of a dog and a tractor fixed into the stone. Another had a photograph of a couple on their wedding day and the inscription made it clear that she had already moved into their new home and he would eventually be joining her.

There were half a dozen people about, men and women, tidying graves, putting fresh flowers into vases, weeding and generally working hard to make things look neat and attractive.

I know this may sound rather strange but I sometimes think that graveyards, particularly the small and very personal ones, can bring out the best in people. The council had got into the spirit of things too; there was a row of watering cans hanging near to a tap.

It feels odd knowing that this will be my final move. But I confess that I found it soothing in a strange way. I know now how things will end and where I'll be.

My mother died fairly suddenly, largely because doctors at the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital were too incompetent to make the diagnosis which would have kept her alive, and my father, who kept her ashes in the bottom of a wardrobe, made absolutely no plans for his death.

When a couple of incompetent GPs combined with the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital to kill him off, he had made absolutely no plans for their final resting place. I ended up mixing their ashes and distributing them on the beach at Budleigh Salterton where they had lived for many years.

(The story of how they were both killed by incompetent doctors is told in my book *Do Doctors and Nurses Kill More People than Cancer?* The answer to the question is a resounding 'yes', and for later editions I removed the word 'Do' and took the question mark off the end of the title.)

But now that I've got my final resting place sorted out, and I know that Antoinette will eventually be able to join me in our burial plot built for two I feel strangely calm about life and death.

30

(Devon)

The EU project is failing fast and Adolf Hitler's plan for a federal Europe (controlled by Germany) is fading fast. The Austrians will vote next month for a president and there are many there who are fed up with the overbearing attitude of EU bureaucrats. It is perfectly possible that the Austrian Freedom Party will prevail and the EU will take another bloody nose.

But, for the EU, the real danger comes later this year and early in 2017. Italy is likely to hold a referendum vote in November which could influence the country's position within the European Union. The big election, the most important one, takes place in France next May. If Marine Le Pen wins the presidency then the EU will be dead.

Ms Le Pen is campaigning to restore French national law, taking the oomph out of the European Central Bank, ending free movement, killing the single market, bringing back the French franc and renegotiating all links and treaties with the European Union. Even if Le Pen doesn't win, the other candidates will probably have to adopt some of her policies, thereby weakening the European Union whoever wins.

I see that Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, has pledged $3 billion to medical research 'to end all illness'.

How nice it is to know that naivety is still fashionable among children.

I wonder if anyone will dare tell Master Zuckerberg that $3 billion would probably just about pay for a marketing campaign for a new arthritis drug.

(I am not surprised that Mr Zuckerberg is rich. His company is uniquely skilled at tax avoidance. It is one of the most profitable and wealthy companies in the world but in 2015 the British bit of the company paid less in corporate taxes than a British worker on average wages paid in income tax.)

October

1

(Devon)

I discovered today that the gap between private and public pensions in the UK is higher than the gap anywhere else in the developed world. Civil servants in the UK now have such generous pensions that the average pensioner joining the work force will now enjoy a 6% pay rise when they reach retirement age.

According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (the OECD) the UK is the only country in the world where civil servants receive a pension worth more than 100% of their final salary.

In contrast to this, a private sector worker will be lucky if his pension reaches 50% of their final salary, assuming that they wait until the age of 68 to retire. Civil servants, of course, can, and often do, retire much earlier than everyone else.

The new chairman of the company which is buying Formula 1 motor racing, has, according to *Autosport* magazine, reassured fans by saying: ‘Profits are important – but realistically the primary goal of the business that I have been in has always been to build long-term value. So the goal is not what can be achieved in the next 12 months, but where you are going to be in three to five years.’

So, that’s it. In business circles ‘long-term’ now means ‘three to five years’.

2

(Devon)

An acquaintance of ours who plays a lot of golf has lost his touch. The silly fellow recently started to visit a gym in order to bulk up his muscles. He believed that this would give him more power and consequently more length of the tee. However, his game has collapsed. It’s a pity because if he’d asked I would have told him not to go to the gym at all. The problem is that all sportsmen (and, indeed, others such as musicians) rely very much on muscle memory and when you build up the bulk of muscle you change the muscle memories. Lots of professional golfers have made exactly the same mistake – and in every case that I’m aware of they have, by trying to improve their game, destroyed it.

This fellow has more prejudices than anyone else I know. If prejudices were trees he would be the nation’s largest landowner.

He does some odd things. When his mother died he mixed her ashes into some paint and painted his workshop with the resulting mixture. I have no idea why he did this and nor, I suspect, does he.

He is married to a Welsh woman who is, to say the least, quite generously endowed. However, she complained once that when she was growing up it was said about breasts that more than a handful is a waste.

‘In that respect it was my good fortune to marry a man with exceptionally large hands,’ she said. ‘I hate waste.’

3

(Devon)

Someone called Ms Kardashian, of whom I have never heard, is apparently worth $50 million. She has millions of ‘followers’ who hang on her every word on one of those twittery things. I wondered at first if she was a singer or an actress. But apparently she is neither. Her entire career is built on social media. She is a celebrity because she is. The whole thing is a bit like Jordan, the British topless model whose fortune was built on the rather wobbly basis of a pair of gargantuan silicone implants.

With these women as role models it is no wonder that youngsters don’t want to bother learning to read or write, let alone study for a career. When I look at these people I realise how badly I have organised my life. I have never ever networked or done anything resembling social media and I have repeatedly fought campaigns which have done nothing but harm to my reputation.

I was the only person in Britain arguing that AIDS wasn’t going to kill us all. I was the only person in Britain arguing that benzodiazepine tranquillisers and sleeping tablets were addictive and dangerous.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, I was attacked quite viciously by the medical establishment in general, and the British Medical Association in particular, for daring to question the efficacy and safety of the mass prescribing of benzodiazepine tranquillisers such as Valium and Ativan.

Spokesmen for one mental health organisation which attacked me claimed that the drugs were useful and should, if anything, be available more freely, rather than being controlled more carefully. I wrote numerous articles on the subject and made a series of radio programmes which were broadcast on over a dozen local radio stations.

In around 1980, I remember telling journalist friends that my mail from benzodiazepine addicts was coming in grey sacks. They did not believe me until, one day, they happened to be at my home when the postman arrived – bringing with him the usual two grey mail sacks full of letters from patients who recognised that the benzodiazepines they had been given were ruining their lives.

And I have for decades made numerous powerful enemies by writing critical books and articles about vaccination and vivisection.

These are not, however, regrets. I would do nothing different in this regard.

And I have reached a point in my life where I am happier and more content than ever before – entirely because I have found a sympathetic, kind wife and friend with whom to share my anxieties, angers and frustrations.

4

(Gloucestershire)

I read today that according to climatologists a new ice age is coming. So instead of the planet getting hotter (as a result of the absurd claims made by the climate change hysterics) we are probably all going to freeze to death.

But I also read that the Antarctic log books kept by Robert Scott and Ernest Shackleton show that the amount of Antarctic sea ice has barely changed in the last 100 years.

So the hysterical nonsense about climate change has yet again been proved to be hysterical nonsense.

Finally, today, I also read that research published in *Nature* by the British Antarctic Survey shows that the loss of the Pine Island Glacier was probably a result of El Nino activity in the Pacific Ocean in the 1940s.

I bought a few bags of logs from a Tesco petrol station today.

I haven't bought anything from a Tesco petrol station anywhere for some years but I made the purchase thinking that the logs would at least be cheap and hopefully also cheerful. I threw them into the truck without much thought but when we got the bags home and opened one I discovered that each bag contained just five logs. Five bits of wood for £4.85 seems to me like a rip off. How can Tesco justify charging 97 pence per modest sized log? Ripping off punters is now de rigeur in Britain.

5

(Gloucestershire)

There are estimated to be 45 million people around the world suffering from dementia. (Alzheimer's disease is just one of the causes of dementia. There are others.) In Britain there are at present around a million people suffering from dementia. And the number is going up annually. Dementia is a global epidemic.

Many patients with this awful disease have developed a tendency to wander. Relatives sometimes write and ask if I think it would be a good idea to have them fitted with an electronic tag so that they can be found quickly if they wander away from home. They worry, however, that it might be demeaning to do this. However, safety is paramount and I think patients with dementia should be tagged – for everyone's benefit.

Indeed, I cannot see why all patients with dementia are not routinely offered an electronic tagging service. It would be a better answer than the solution favoured in some British hospitals where patients with Alzheimer's are now handcuffed to their beds so that they do not require care and attention from the nurses.

Whenever I hear the word 'progress' being used to describe changes in the world of medicine I am inclined to sink into a deep and lasting depression. The truth is that the quality of nursing care in hospitals has declined to the point where it now probably matches that which was available in pre Nightingale 19th century when nursing was certainly not a profession and probably not even a trade.

The basic problem today is that nurses consider themselves far too important to be occupied providing bed pans, plumping up pillows or comforting patients and the sense of self-importance which they have been encouraged to espouse has resulted in them becoming uncaring, thoughtless and cruel.

The incidence of dementia in Britain is about to rise exponentially now that doctors are now being paid £200 every time they diagnose dementia. I've told everyone I know to be on their toes when visiting their doctor. Too much hesitation and not enough blind certainty could well lead to an inconvenient diagnosis and a place of your own on the (very short) Involuntary Euthanasia Waiting List.

(Talking of toes, I am delighted to report that the treatment of fungal infection is working well. Whenever I remember, I stick my toes into one of those little machines which manicurists use to dry nail varnish. It was

Antoinette’s notion that the fungus would not like the ultra violet light and it seems that, as usual, she is right.)

Medical journalists in the UK claim that this is the first time doctors have been paid to make a specific diagnosis but, as usual, they’re wrong. British doctors have for years been given cash bonuses for diagnosing a wide range of disorders – including asthma, diabetes, heart disease and that artificial diagnostic confection known as ‘COPD’.

It is, therefore, no surprise to discover that (officially at least) all these diseases are becoming commoner by the week.

Moreover, patients (and relatives) must take care to ensure that a diagnosis of Alzheimer’s Disease is not made when the real diagnosis should be the eminently treatable condition of Normal Pressure Hydrocephalus. Normal Pressure Hydrocephalus is dramatically underdiagnosed and is far commoner than most doctors believe.

6

(Gloucestershire)

These are truly strange times.

Today, in Cheltenham I saw a white British man with a woman, clearly his wife, girlfriend or partner, who was also white and who was wearing a burka.

He had no beard, though I have always understood that for a devout Muslim (the sort who would require his wife to wear a burka) a beard is essential costume.

I find it strange that British men and women who convert to Islam should adopt the rule which says that the woman should be covered up but not the rule which the man, presumably, finds inconvenient.

There are Muslim women in Britain today who are not allowed to leave home without first obtaining their husband’s permission. And it has been reported that Muslim women are often instructed in how to vote by the men in their families. Is this the Britain we want? No one in authority dares say anything about these absurd practices for fear of being classified as politically incorrect or racist.

I also saw a man in the street giving his credit card details to a charity chugger who was keying them into her iPad. Unbelievable.

I read recently that a French firm has made a credit card which could make life much more difficult for fraudsters. On the reverse side of every credit card there is a card verification number – a three digit number which must be used when you buy something over the phone or online. The French company has improved this system by producing a three digit number which constantly changes on a tiny digital display. The display is powered by an amazingly thin lithium battery which lasts three years. The new system is called Motion Code and it is being introduced in France and other countries.

There’s no sign of it in Britain, though. Bank fraud in Britain costs the best part of £1 billion a year but much of the time the banks refuse to take any responsibility and so it’s consumers who lose money.

I had my French bank account emptied a few years ago by a fraudster who sent all my money to his account in Monaco. The bank wasn’t much interested in the crime but when I threatened the bank with the police and a good deal of bad publicity they suddenly changed the tune they were singing. They gave me back all the money which had been stolen. And then they closed my account and told me to leave and never return. Since it was clear that the theft had been organised by an insider I wasn’t too disappointed by this. Insider bank fraud is a huge and rising problem but it is wildly underestimated since banks are reluctant to admit that they have a problem. They tend to deny, deny, deny, and sack anyone they can prove to have been stealing but they don’t tell the police.

My advice is simple: if you have money stolen from your bank account, tell the police and threaten to tell the press.

These days I won’t even allow my iPhone or my iPad to register my location. As a result both believe, for some inexplicable reason, that I am always in Ludlow in Shropshire. As far as I am aware I have never been to Ludlow.

(I recently purchased a new iPad. The minute I switched it on, I received notification from Apple of an upgrade. You have to laugh don’t you?)

Walking around Cheltenham today, it occurred to me that whereas two years ago, everyone under 90 was busy talking on their mobile phone they are today busy texting or emailing one another. You can walk around any decent sized town for an hour without seeing two people actually talking to each other.

What do they all find to text to one another?

‘I am outside a shop.’

‘That’s interesting.’

‘Do you think I should go in?’

‘Yes, perhaps you should.’

‘I am going in’.

‘Are you in now?’

‘Yes I am in.’

‘What are you going to buy?’

‘I want to buy a dictionary.’

‘Cool.’

‘They don’t sell them. The man tells me they only sell shoes.’

‘You’ll have to buy a shoe instead.’

‘I’ve bought two.’

‘A pair?’

‘Yes. They match. I am in a queue now.’

‘Great. How many people ahead of you?’

‘None. I am at the front of the queue. The man behind the counter is asking me something.’

‘Bloody rude to do that when you’re texting. Ignore him.’

‘I will. I’m going to leave the shop when I’ve finished.’

‘Good for you. I’ll go online and give the shop a bad review.’

‘The man behind me is shouting.’

‘What does he want?’

‘He wants me to pay and go.’

‘Stuff him. Take his picture and put it online.’

‘Ugh.’

’What happened?’

‘I turned to take his picture and he punched me. I think I’m dying.’

‘Oh that’s not cool.’

‘Ugh ugh. Now he’s cut my throat with the blade out of a pencil sharpener. I’m bleeding on my new trainers. I’m going to die.’

‘That sucks. Will you leave me your phone please.’

‘Gurgle ugh.’

‘And the apps. Don’t forget the apps.’

7

(Devon)

All over Britain, hospitals are being closed. And even when whole hospitals aren’t being closed many accident and emergency departments are being shut.

Numerous excuses have been given for this – and administrators have been busy lying through their teeth as they have merrily closed down local hospitals and casualty units. The excuses given are feeble, inaccurate and misleading and display an almost criminal failure either to understand the facts or to tell the truth.

And since the quality of medical journalism in the UK is now at an all-time low (with many health correspondents having absolutely no medical knowledge or training) the simplistic and inaccurate excuses are given publicity and credence.

Here are the commonest excuses for the closures:

There isn’t enough money. This is rubbish. The NHS is awash with money. The problem is that the money is spent on the wrong things. Thousands of NHS administrators now earn huge six figure salaries (with inflation linked pensions). Thousands have been given huge payoffs – and then almost immediately rehired as advisers. Over the past six years NHS managers received nearly £2 billion in redundancy settlements with more than 3,000 members of staff being handed pay outs of over £100,000 each. In one case a married couple who were NHS managers received almost £1 million when they were ‘let go’ and were then quickly rehired in the health service. This is an appalling waste of money. Moreover, it is, it seems, almost impossible for a hospital to sack an incompetent administrator without giving them a lottery win type ‘goodbye bonus’. If the NHS were closed down tomorrow, and the money used to buy private BUPA style care there would be more than enough money available to buy private health care for every man, woman and child in Britain. The level of service would be infinitely better than it is with the NHS.

There aren’t enough doctors or nurses. This is also rubbish. Britain is full of doctors and nurses who can’t get jobs. The problem is that the NHS spends too much of its money on hiring administrators – and then allowing them to waste money on expense account fripperies.

The number of old people in Britain is rising. And old people cost a good deal of money. (This is a straightforward, old-fashioned lie. The evidence shows that most pensioners require – and receive – surprisingly little medical care.)

Administrators are closing hospitals in an attempt to ‘rationalise’. It does not seem to occur to them that if patients have to travel 40 or 50 miles to hospital then they will probably be dead by the time they arrive there.

And now here are the real reasons why NHS hospitals and accident and emergency units are being closed:

The Government now allows GPs to opt out of providing 24 hour cover. As a result, most GPs work a 38 hour week and refuse to see patients at night or at weekends. This means that patients who fall ill out of hours must either call an ambulance or make their own way to the nearest hospital. Inevitably, this has put pressure on hospitals. Some administrators are now closing busy hospitals on the perverse grounds that their hospitals are so busy that they cannot provide enough staff to care for the patients seeking help.

The European Union’s laws about working hours mean that doctors are said to be working when they are on call. And so a doctor who is asleep for eight hours but is on call has, in EU law, been working for eight hours. This means that hospitals have difficulty in providing night time and weekend cover. The EU has forced the NHS into a position where it is now virtually open only during ordinary working hours. This means that administrators find it easy to claim that they need to shut down. (Administrators love nothing more than a hospital with no patients. It is very easy to manage and clean a hospital where there are no patients – and the money saved can be spent on more administrators.)

The General Medical Council has introduced regulations preventing experienced, older doctors from helping out or working part time. This is total lunacy and is a major cause of the problems patients now face in finding medical care.

A few years ago, the Government decided to increase the number of female doctors. It therefore introduced a policy forcing medical schools to take in more female students than male students. Sadly, many women doctors do not want to work at night or at weekends – and they want to work part time. This has exacerbated the existing problems. Legislation forcing hospitals and GP practices to keep positions open for women having babies also means that staff shortages are endemic. (This is not a sexist comment. It just happens to be a politically inconvenient fact.)

Because of the power of the drug companies, vast amounts of money are spent on drugs (such as statins) which are not necessary and which do more harm than good. The money would be much better spent – and would save far more lives – if used to keep hospital departments open.

That’s the real truth about hospital closures.

We climbed into the Mitsubishi today and made the mistake of starting the engine.

What we should have done, of course, was just sat there quietly, got out again and made a nice cup of tea. The minute the engine started, the dashboard lit up like Christmas with orange lights everywhere. One particularly excitable little light flashed determinedly. I normally try to ignore these little dashboard lights which are commonplace in over engineered vehicles these days but even after turning the engine off and on, the lights remained and looked ominous.

I rang the Mitsubishi hotline for emergencies and three hours (it may have been two and a half) later a nice man in a shirt and tie arrived with a computer. (Car mechanics still carry spanners but only to use if the computer needs a good clout.)

After messing around with the computer and the car for a while, he gave up and ordered a low loader to take the car to Exeter where people with bigger and better computers will endeavour to deal with the fault. (The garage in Bridport, from where we bought the vehicle, refused to deal with it because I gave them a poor report when I filled in the company questionnaire.)

Not for the first time it occurs to me that cars are far too complicated for our own good. I don’t use more than 10% of the gizmos a car is fitted with these days and if I need to turn on the fog lights I have to stop the car, park, fish out the manual and turn to page 748-6d to find out what to do. (The manual never has fog lights in the index, of course. They will usually be found under the heading ‘supplementary bad weather lighting’ or some similar nonsense.)

I think I’ll sell the Mitsubishi, which has done only 1,700 miles. It has not been a happy experience and I now no longer trust the thing to get me from A to B.

8

(Gloucestershire)

In Gloucestershire, we need to have a patch of rough grass replaced with gravel. The area is no more than the size of a couple of cars. Two days ago a builder we invited to quote for the work looked at it, walked around it, stamped on it, made all the usual noises such folk make and then said that the work would cost £1,500 rising to £1,800 if it turned out that they would need to dig deeper than anticipated. I accepted. We then walked back to the house. He saw and admired our truck which was parked nearby.

'That looks new,' he said. I admitted that it was.

Today we received an invoice for payment of £1,850 in full for the work to be done.

I sent him an email message telling him that I'd changed my mind. I have no doubt that if he'd seen the Bentley sitting there the bill would have been even higher. I hate workmen who do that.

9

According to *Fortune* magazine, McCrap, the global purveyors of 'food you'll die for' (I offer them that slogan at no charge) is changing the way it raises its poultry so that its customers will stop thinking of it as an evil company.

In future its egg laying hens will be known as 'cage free'. That sounds wonderful. But, inevitably, when you look at what 'cage free' actually means it doesn't sound quite so wonderful.

The hens are not kept in cages, it is true, but they are kept in a hideous warehouse sort of place equipped with metal and wire mesh shelves.

According to *Fortune* (which seems to me to be reinventing itself as a promotional sheet for the world's worst companies) the hens are allotted 144 square inches each and 'can roam anywhere they want'. And that, says, *Fortune*, is the equivalent of the hens flying first class.

Unbelievable.

McCrap gives each hen one square foot of space and *Fortune* magazine devotes a fistful of pages to a nauseating eulogy praising the company for its 'cage free commitment'.

10

(Gloucestershire)

I rang Eurostar to book some tickets. They have introduced a £10 penalty charge for all customers who book by telephone. And there is, of course, an £8.00 fee if you want to have your tickets posted to you. If you want to change your tickets there is a £40 per ticket per person surcharge, plus the £10 penalty charge for using the telephone. And if you want to pay by credit card there is a penalty charge of another £3.00. I laughed. It all sounds too much like the Marx Brothers in 'At the Races'.

Eurostar has done well out of the European Union.

For decades, the trains have been used by MEPs and eurocrats travelling between Brussels and London – and buying the most expensive tickets. These travellers have chosen the train despite the fact that the rail tickets are more expensive than aeroplane tickets because they give politicians and civil servants a good opportunity to travel in style at taxpayers' expense. And there are doubtless many opportunities to fiddle expenses by claiming for the full fare and buying a cheaper ticket. (The EU does not require receipts when paying out expenses.)

When Britain leaves the EU, this constant and doubtless profitable movement between Brussels and London will come to a halt. Eurostar may then start treating its ordinary customers with a little more consideration.

I have received an unsigned letter from our GP inviting me to ring and make an appointment to have the shingles vaccination.

The vaccine is apparently being offered to selected groups of individuals over the age of 70 and is, no doubt, a result of determined efforts by the drug industry to find ways to make more money out of old people (an expanding market) as well as children (a market which is definitely not expanding quite so rapidly).

The letter from my GP contains no reference to side effects but tells me that if I want more information I should consult the website www.shinglesaware.co.uk

What the GPs fail to point out is that www.shinglesaware.co.uk was set up by Sanofi Pasteur MSD which is (golly I can hardly believe this) a manufacturer of vaccines. To be more specific, it is the manufacturer of this very vaccine. So my GPs are using a vaccine manufacturer's website as the source of information about a vaccine they want me to have so that they can make some more money. Great. That warms the cockles and muscles of my tired old heart.

Naturally neither the manufacturer nor the GP practice has bothered to point out that the cost to the NHS of each vaccine jab is at least £55 (no doubt shared between the company making the stuff and the doctors who give it).

And the side effects that the GP doesn't bother to mention?

Well, the common ones include headache, pain, swelling at the area of the vaccination, itching, bruising, joint pain, muscle pain, fever and rash.

Slightly less common side effects include nausea and swollen glands.

Less common side effects include developing chickenpox, developing shingles, sight problems and, of course, having an anaphylactic shock reaction causing difficulty in breathing or swallowing and with death being a possible consequence.

That's the sort of death that ends up with a coffin and a spot in the local cemetery.

And what exactly does this doubtless profitable-for-all-concerned-vaccine contain?

Well, my GP didn't bother to tell me that either but I can reveal that he (or she) wants to inject me with a delightful mixture of the live varicella-zoster virus (the live virus you will note) to which has been added sucrose, gelatin, sodium chloride, potassium chloride, disodium phosphate, sodium hydroxide, urea and some other doubtless really good stuff.

I've decided to pass on the invitation, thank you very much.

I'll take my chances with shingles.

11

(Gloucestershire)

In Cheltenham in W.H.Smith today, I discovered to my horror that all the magazines had been moved from their usual shelves and hidden away somewhere at the back of the store. I asked why this had been done and was told that it was something to do with the fact that there is a literary festival this week in Cheltenham and the management required the space for plenty of books.

I had a look around but all I could find were copies of the Dandy and Beano annuals and a host of calendars. Come to think of it, though, that probably was in response to the fact that the town is holding its annual literary festival. The Beano and the Dandy annuals and a host of calendars. Sums things up quite well.

As I walked back to the car I noticed two teenage girls. One was wearing a T-shirt carrying the single word SELF and the other wore a T-shirt with the word SOMETHING.

Why would you wear something like that?

At just about every other shop where I bought something the assistant wanted my name and either my email address or my postcode and, of course, my grandmother's date of birth. None could understand why I would not give out the required information in return for a discount or a bonus or a promise of points to come.

Finally, for the day, here is a prediction.

In Japan thousands of impoverished old people commit crimes so that they get sent to prison where they will be fed, given warm accommodation and provided with free health care.

This will happen in Britain

12

(Devon)

Our still almost brand new and hardly used Mitsubishi is still at the garage. It appeared at first that the transfer box had broken. This, so the garage told me, is the bit in the car which tells the gearbox what to do. Subsequent investigations determined that the transfer box had broken because the output shaft bearing had broken because it had not been put in straight when the vehicle had been built.

Unfortunately, Mitsubishi does not have one of these things in the United Kingdom and so one will have to be imported from Japan or Mars.

There does not seem to be any hurry in importing this missing item and I get the feeling it will probably be brought over by a one-legged man on a bicycle.

I am appalled by the whole Mitsubishi operation. I asked them to buy the damned thing back but I was told that I should seek legal advice and told that I do not have a contract with Mitsubishi but with the dealer.

I would have thought that a company which has sold a vehicle which is clearly not fit for purpose would bend over backwards to put things right. But that is not, it seems, the way that Mitsubishi does business. If they ever manage to find the necessary bits and repair the damned thing, I will either sell it or push it over the cliff.

Years ago a friend who ran a publishing company told me that whenever anyone complained he would reply with the question: 'What do you want me to do about it?' This, he assured me, invariably, softened the complainant's attitude dramatically.

(I first met this fellow when he hired me to write a fully illustrated article for *The Sun* describing how it is possible to draw firm conclusions about a woman's personality by a careful study of the size and shape of her bottom. This caused much discussion and none of the anger that it would occasion today. I was a medical student at the time and extremely grateful for the notes which were handed over in exchange for this frivolous piece of science.)

I have decided that the question ‘What are you going to do about it?’ is my new mantra.

In the case of Mitsubishi the answer is clearly ‘Not very much at all’.

13

(Gloucestershire)

Britain is awash with cameras. In addition to the four million official CCTV cameras scattered around there are the ‘automatic number plate recognition cameras’ stuck on poles beside British roads. No one seems to know how many of those there are (other than ‘a lot’) but they take 34 million pictures a day and together keep a record of where every motorist goes to.

So far the police have 22 billion records of where you and I have been and when we went there.

To all of this, of course, must be the added the information provided by mobile telephones (which are effectively personal surveillance devices which we willingly carry with us) and the Internet (an inherently intrusive and destructive invention).

Why don’t the police feed all the information from their traffic cameras into my satellite navigation software so that if there is a traffic jam ahead I can change my route, thereby saving time and money and fuel?

As things are at the moment, if I see signs of a jam forming ahead and I try to change my route my wretched satellite navigation system will invariably take me back to the site of the traffic jam because the damned thing is a computer and it is, therefore, amazingly stupid.

(It also talks funny. Antoinette and I had wonderful fun in the car mimicking the robotic voice. ‘What-would-you-like-for-tea?’ ‘I-would-like-to-turn-left-and-have-beans-on-toast’

And why don’t the police publish details of when the roads are at their quietest? They must know which day of the week is the best day to travel.

Since we’re paying for all this surveillance we didn’t ask for, surely we are entitled to get something out of it?

As autumn takes hold we have been reflecting on the summer.

In Gloucestershire, we have carefully designed our garden (best part of an acre) to attract wildlife but it has been, to say the least, a quiet year.

We have seen very few butterflies and relatively few birds. Last year I remember counting over 20 peacock butterflies on one budlea bush at the same time and we had at least six blackbirds visiting our bird feeders.

This year we didn’t see a single peacock butterfly and we haven’t seen or heard a blackbird all summer.

What on earth could explain this? I suspect that we can fairly place the blame on the former Duke of the Whole of Gloucestershire who, a couple of years ago, chopped down as many trees as he could and had his workmen tear up hedgerows and replace them with barbed wire. Without hedgerows birds have nowhere to nest or to feed.

The sick joke is that I recently saw an interview with the Duke of the Whole of Gloucestershire in which he proclaimed his love for the countryside in general and trees in particular.

I’ve heard tell that he plans to build himself a nine hole golf course on his tiny piece of land. Good luck to him. I used to play golf but gave up because I found that the greens were always put in the wrong places and the balls I was sold were always fitted with some internal homing device which drew them towards the rough grass.

The Duke has also complained about the swans on the local river. Swans which live on open and common rivers belong to the crown, of course; they are royal property managed by the Royal Swanmaster but swans can be rather bad-tempered, untidy and destructive and although they do a good deal of lolling around, preening and looking elegant, they are also liable to do a lot of very messy fouling.

It is this to which the Duke of Gloucestershire objects. If he does any harm to the swans I shall report him to the Royal Swanmaster and demand that he be beheaded.

We miss the squirrels too. They were our friends and we both felt a sincere responsibility for their welfare.

The thugs who killed them understand and care nothing for the countryside and must have a very poor understanding of their own position on our planet.

A man or woman’s determination to adhere to their understanding of the obligations of humanity is their only inviolable and fundamental responsibility.

All personal and social loyalties, duties and roles are built upon that determination and someone who kills squirrels because they can do so must have a very poor view of their own and humanity’s responsibilities.

14

(Gloucestershire)

A report that Vlad the Impaler behaved badly and may not have respected the rights of citizens is being investigated by the 'Historic Crimes Unit' of the police.

'We have far too much money,' said a police spokesman, 'and so we are trying to get rid of some of it by investigating crimes which may have been committed by very dead people.'

15

(Devon)

A chap who runs a guest house in Sidmouth wants to retire but he can't find anyone to buy his property because the value that has been put on it makes it non-viable as a business. The estate agent told him that the guest house was worth £800,000 (a fairly modest price for a large, Victorian seven bedroom house with a decent garden and within walking distance of the beach) so they put it on the market at £799,999 because, of course, that sounds an awful lot less than £800,000.

The seller and his wife have had numerous nibbles but no takers.

The people who want to run it as a business have done their sums and know that by the time they've paid their business mortgage there will be no profit left over for them to live on and so they've all backed out.

The only people able and willing to buy the place are private homeowners who want to buy the house so that they can live in it – perhaps letting a couple of rooms occasionally or having friends and relatives come to stay during the summer.

But they can't buy it because the council insist that the property must be run as a business. It is officially labelled as a guest house and so a guest house it must remain. This, they say, is to ensure that the town retains its traditional proportion of holiday accommodation so that there will be plenty of visitors to buy ice creams, buckets and spades and picture postcards.

Why don't the owners of the property simply reduce the price so that a buyer could run a business and make a profit?

That's simple. The owners know that if they sell for much less than their asking price they won't have enough money left over (after paying off the remains of their own substantial mortgage) to buy a retirement home of their own.

And so they're stuck. Or, at least they did seem to be stuck.

But today the owners had an offer for their property from a businessman who wants to run the property as a guest house but who knows that he can do so at a profit. He is going to let all the rooms on a long-term basis to people on benefits who have nowhere to live and for whom the authorities must find accommodation.

The businessman is buying up guest houses and small hotels in small towns all along the south coast and filling them with people (many of them asylum seekers) whose fees are paid by the taxpayer. The councils are quite happy with this because technically the buildings are still being run as guest houses and hotels. The businessman can make money because his residents live in the accommodation all year round. He has no advertising bills, he doesn't have to worry about tourist board inspectors telling him that his crockery doesn't come up to scratch and he doesn't have long, barren spells during the winter months.

(A friend of ours reserved a room in one of this man's boarding houses. 'There's a dead body in the room we were going to put you in,' apologised the receptionist. 'And the rats have eaten all the bacon again.')

No one seems to have yet realised that this will change the nature of all those towns indefinitely. Within five years the seaside resorts will have become large doss houses for people who have absolutely no interest in buying plastic buckets and spades or picture postcards, though they may buy an occasional ice cream.

All this has already happened elsewhere around the country, of course.

It has happened in Ilfracombe in North Devon and in Weston-super-Mare in North Somerset. The nature of these towns has been altered dramatically and probably permanently.

It is what is known as a 'lose-lose' situation.

16

(Devon)

Like them or not there is no doubt that the robots are coming. And there is one area of the world where they are going to be very successful: health care.

Back in 1980, I wrote a book called *Aspirin or Ambulance*. It consisted exclusively of flow charts designed to enable to readers to decide whether their symptoms required them to take an aspirin or call an ambulance. (It was a little more complicated than that. But the title was catchy and it was my first venture into the sort of algorithms so beloved of computer software authors.)

A short while after publication a chap who had seen a copy of the book wrote and asked me if he could turn it into a computer program. Since everything in the book was based on simple ‘yes’ and ‘no’ answers (‘Do you have a headache?’ ‘Is the headache at the front of your head?’ ‘Have you vomited?’ and so on) the text was eminently suitable for conversion to a computer program. The resultant software, available on a cassette tape, did quite well. It was promoted as the Home Doctor, written about in *The Times* (where it was described as the first computerised medical program in the world), described in every computer magazine imaginable and sold in 26 countries. But the problem was that the market was extremely limited since the only home computer capable of running the program was something called a Sinclair.

It was an idea well before its time.

However, there is no doubt that computerised medicine is now about to hit the big time.

There are several reasons why medicine is well suited to computers and why the idea I had in 1980 is now ready to reach fruition.

First, the technology is ready, available and capable.

Second, the market is massive. The incidence of serious disease is rising rapidly. Disorders such as diabetes are increasing rapidly. (Type 1 diabetes is inherited and Type 2 diabetes is increasing because too many people eat too much.) Heart disease is rocketing because millions take very little exercise and eat far too much fatty, processed food. The demand for medical care is rising rapidly.

Third, it has become clear that doctors make lots of mistakes. One in six people in hospital is there because he or she has been made ill by doctors. Iatrogenesis (doctor induced disease) is now one of the top three killers (up there with cancer and circulatory disorders such as heart disease and stroke). A computer program is far less likely to make mistakes.

Fourth, in Britain (and many other ‘developed’ countries) the availability of medical care is worse than it was half a century ago. In Britain there is no effective medical cover outside working hours. GPs have been allowed to opt out of the traditional 24 hour a day medical cover which they used to provide. It is often impossible to persuade a GP to visit a patient at home and patients frequently report that even when they are ill they have to wait two or three weeks for an appointment with a doctor. (‘You’re either better or dead by then,’ quipped one.) EU working regulations mean that hospitals are struggling to provide medical care at night time and at weekends. The General Medical Council’s regulations have forced doctors who choose to retire to retire completely. Retired doctors are no longer allowed to help out in emergencies.

Fifth, young doctors do not have the sense of service, responsibility and duty which characterised their predecessors. Today, young doctors in the Entitlement Generation will happily go on strike for more money and improved working conditions. The unreliability of already wafer thin medical services make computerised medicine an inevitability.

Sixth, it is relatively easy to prepare a medical robot which can check your pulse, take your blood pressure, examine your eyes and check out rashes and other skin abnormalities. I designed such a system over 35 years ago so it is definitely possible and practical now.

The bottom line is that medical robots (in whatever form they might appear – probably an Internet program or an App suitable for smart phones) will be cheaper, more reliable and less likely to make mistakes than human doctors.

Computerised doctors are far less likely to misdiagnose, far less likely to miss serious conditions and far less likely to prescribe inappropriate or dangerous remedies. And courier services mean that it is perfectly possible for patients to be given their prescriptions within hours.

But it is important that when medical robots become widely available they are independent and not controlled by drug companies or others with products to promote.

If medical robots are truly independent then I think we can all welcome computerised medicine with open arms.

But if they aren’t independent they will kill even more people than human doctors.

This is one area of the Internet where regulation is urgently needed.

Antoinette and I agree that the other area where robots will do well will be hairdressing. Not only will robots be able to snip hair as well as any human, but it will be perfectly possible to program your selected stylist to chat about the football (with a polite request ‘Anything for the weekend, sir?’ as he whips away the white sheet) the weather, the soaps on television or even, what bliss, to stay totally silent throughout the snipping experience.

‘Robots will want trade unions,’ Antoinette pointed out. ‘And if they really become like people they’ll soon demand better pay and working conditions.’

That’ll be fun.

17

(Devon)

It is rubbish day in Devon.

On the last two occasions the bin men (or whatever they known as these days – probably waste collection disbursement consultants) have driven past and failed to empty our bin.

Attempts to persuade them to return have proved unsuccessful. Today I put the bin out very early and when I went to see if it had been emptied I was startled to see that someone had put one of their black bags full of rubbish in our bin. Heaven knows what the rogue black bag contains. Unwanted heroin and paedophile pictures for all I know. In future, I will put out the wheelie bin just minutes before the whirly-crunchy machine arrives. While I was fuming and kicking the bin in anger, the bin lorry drove past, once again ignoring our wheelie bin. I had to chase after the lorry shouting 'Stop! Come back! You've missed me'. It was very humiliating. Eventually, I managed, after much pleading and begging, to persuade the driver to stop, return and empty our bin. By the time he had stopped and reversed and picked up our wheelie bin, I felt like something out of a 1970s situation comedy programme. And pathetically grateful.

The Government is again paying good money for advertisements telling people that if they have signs of a stroke they must get to their nearest hospital as quickly as possibly because time is of the essence. People can't ring their GP, of course, because these days GPs don't do visits in the day time and at night and at weekends they are shut, closed and totally out of bounds to even the most severely ill.

In one respect the advertisements make sense. It is important that they get to hospital quickly because once there patients will, on average, have to sit in the casualty department for 9 to 12 hours before being seen.

Does it never occur to anyone in the Government that they might save lives if, instead of spending zillions on television adverts, they spent the money taking health care in Britain back a few decades, to the 70s say, when patients who had symptoms of a stroke could be seen by their GP or a hospital doctor within 9 to 12 minutes.

Those who talk about how wonderful the NHS is should look at these figures and think again.

When I told Antoinette that one of our neighbours had dumped some of their disgusting rubbish into our wheelie bin she suggested that I stick a printed message inside the lid of the bin saying: 'Congratulations bin diver. You've been photographed. See yourself on YouTube!'

I think that's a splendid idea though I confess I also like the idea of putting a helium filled monster inside the bin. Imagine the shock when the errant neighbour opens the lid and a scary looking monster rises from the depths. This will be all the more terrifying because it will, of course, happen during the hours of darkness.

People who mess with our wheelie bin do so at their own peril.

18

(Devon)

A man growing cannabis is reported to have hung fake tomatoes on his plants in order to persuade suspicious neighbours that his crop was entirely harmless.

Unfortunately, the man chose to hang suspiciously large tomatoes on his cannabis plants and a jealous neighbour reported him to the police.

We have had another carpet delivered and fitted. One of the men who came to do the fitting is in his mid 70s. More and more men are having to work way beyond retirement age.

The man who runs the furniture moving business we use is 72 and a man whom we nearly hired as a gardener was well into his 70s.

Mitsubishi has offered to lend me a hire car while they try to find or make the part required to turn our Barbarian back into a functioning vehicle.

There are several snags.

First, they don't seem entirely sure just how long I can have the car.

Second, they want to take my credit card details though I understand I won't have to pay to rent the vehicle they are lending me because the one they sold me turned out to be a turkey.

And third they want me to pay £9 to £11 a day for insurance (working out at over £3500 a year) for a car I would only need because the one which they sold me three months ago turned out to be considerably less useful than a wheelbarrow.

I've now been told that the part required to mend the Mitsubishi will not arrive in England until the 11th November. The truck will have been off the road for six weeks by the time we get it back. I have spoken to many people there and so far no one seems concerned. The company, being Japanese in origin, has systems which are inviolable. I have no doubt that such systems are profitable in the short-term, and helped make Japan great after the disgrace of World War II, but it is also their total commitment to systems which has led to their commercial decline.

I will never again buy anything made by a Japanese company and I will not invest in Japan.

19

(Paris)

High rents and rates have destroyed family bistros and hotels but, if you search the neighbourhood carefully, there are still one or two dusty old shops surviving.

Our local mattress maker, who worked in an unheated shop, has gone but there is a specialist shop selling umbrellas. And there is a wonderful junk shop selling curule chairs, Recamier sofas and empire breakfronts. For how long, though?

A local picture framer has just gone, as have several wonderful food shops. Our arrondissement now has far more than its fair share of shops flogging electronic goods and so-called boutiques flogging chain store frocks at extortionate prices. Our letterbox used to be full to the brim with junk mail from local businesses. Today, the flood has dried up to a trickle. This I do not mind but it is not a healthy sign.

I see that a crisp salesman and former footballer called Gary Lineker has gathered headlines for accusing Britons of being racists.

Mr Lineker has tried to position himself on some high moral ground but I refuse to be lectured to (or at) by a man who has made a fortune making TV adverts flogging crisps to obese children.

Crisps are almost entirely without nutritional value and they are a bad food product. Lineker is, I suspect, indirectly responsible for many thousands of deaths.

20

(Paris)

A café we passed today had three prices for its coffee.

According to a sign on the window if you ordered a coffee it would cost you two euros. If you said 'coffee please' when you gave your order then the price fell to one and a half euros. And if you said 'hello, coffee please' the bill crashed to one euro.

We watched a recording of this year's Last Night of the Proms on the BBC. The music was largely marvellous (except for the inevitable discordant piece of rubbish done to showcase undiscovered talent) but we have decided never to watch again.

The Last Night of the Proms is a quintessential British event but the BBC hates Britain and double hates England and has for years done everything possible to dilute the Britishness of the event by, for example, hiring foreign conductors and soloists.

But it seems particularly nasty and vindictive for people to wave EU flags throughout the performance, even fixing one behind a soloist in the BBC orchestra. There was an EU flag prominently fixed to the conductor's rostrum too, though there were no 'officially positioned' union jacks or flags of St George. The flag wavers seemed to me to know where the camera positions were and so I guess it is likely that the BBC was involved. After all, it is now proven beyond doubt that the BBC is partial and biased in favour of the EU and it would certainly not be beyond introducing politics into a traditional musical event. The BBC is institutionally racist, sexist, ageist and treacherous.

When the programme showed shots from Promenaders in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and a park in London there were no EU flags to be seen – just union jacks and a few national flags. To me that seems like yet more proof that the BBC 'fixed' the EU flag displays inside the Royal Albert Hall.

One idiot even waved an EU flag during 'God Save the Queen'. That was truly moronic for the EU wants to get rid of the monarchy in Britain.

21

(Paris)

Modern western civilisation is collapsing before our very eyes. And when you stop and think about it then it isn't difficult to see why.

For decades now Western countries have been bombing cities and killing people in order to force foreigners to adopt our corrupt, elitist and absurdly ineffective and unjust version of democracy.

And now we are surprised and hate that they hate us and are fighting back. We are surprised (so it seems) that they are not convinced that our version of civilisation is the only one which can possibly be acceptable. And because we have become weak, bloated by success, greed and self-satisfaction, we are easy prey.

In our pathetic attempts to explain and excuse our past behaviour, in attempts to atone for our on-going determination to impose our version of civilisation on everyone else, we have adopted a form of self-flagellation which we call political correctness. This, we believe, allows us to feel less guilty about the fact that we are still bombing and killing and stealing oil and supporting the bad guys with bombs and guns so that they can bomb and shoot and oppress on our behalf.

We (Europe and the United States) have made an almighty mess of our attempts at civilisation and now we are on the downward slope.

There is an inevitability about it all; it is the last days of the Roman Empire speeded up. It's like watching history with the fast forward button pressed down. And the funny thing, the really hysterical thing, is that most people (and all politicians) have absolutely no idea what a mess we have made, how badly it is all going to turn out and how determinedly doomed we are. We are so confident of the superiority of our system, our civilisation, that we cannot comprehend that others may not feel the same way and might be happy to see our world in ruins.

The fact is that whoever has the highest birth rate will win the War and our enthusiasm for multiculturalism and our knee bending to the lords of political correctness will spell out our doom.

In Britain, we already allow Muslim dietary laws in our schools.

When he was Prime Minister David Cameron promised that halal meat would be available in schools and now it is customary for all schools to provide nothing but halal meat. We promote and allow sharia law and it will not be long before girls are banned from schools. How long will it be before homosexuality becomes illegal?

We have bent over so far backwards in our search to welcome Muslims that we have banned many Christian practises lest they prove offensive to our immigrants.

22

(Paris)

I heard an odd story today.

A man filled his car boot with copies of a tract entitled 'Christian Principles. He was due to give a lecture in a church hall and wanted to give out copies of the booklet after he had finished speaking.

But he had to park his car some distance from the hall where he was speaking and forgot to take the tracts with him. He was met at the door by a shapely and nubile young wife who greeted him enthusiastically.

Suddenly, the speaker pulled away. 'I must go,' he cried, 'I've left my Christian Principles in the back of the car.

Much the same could probably be said for many of us.

23

(Paris)

At the supermarket check-out a middle aged woman in front of me did that handbag thing women sometimes do in shops. It was one of those handbags which used to be favoured by Mrs Thatcher in her Iron Lady years – big enough for a couple of international treaties, a plan to overthrow the unions and a strategy for a short war against a small country should it be necessary to boost party popularity in the event of the need to call an unexpected election.

After completing her transaction (two pots of yoghurt which she paid for with a 100 euro note) and receiving her change, the woman started to rearrange everything in her bag.

Meanwhile, the items I had purchased were arriving at their temporary destination in the check-out process and naturally, since the woman's handbag spring clean was taking place on the area reserved for arriving goods I couldn't get at them to start packing them away in my bag.

'Oh bugger off,' I muttered sotto voce, standing right behind the woman and resisting the temptation to elbow her out of the way.

It occurred to me that if I killed her I would probably be able to persuade a jury to find my not guilty, in the same way that Jack Lemmon persuaded the jury to acquit him in ‘How to Murder your Wife’.

To my surprise, the woman heard and understood my sotto voce comment. She hurriedly put her stuff back into her bag, picked up her yoghurt and buggered off.

I have never been a patient man and people tend to become more like themselves as they age.

In the UK the medical establishment, acting en masse for once, has announced that chemotherapy is usually pretty useless (and does more harm than good), that the prostate screening test which is so beloved of many is a waste of time (and does more harm than good) and that the overprescribing of antibiotics is dangerous (and invariably does more harm than good).

Why does the medical establishment always take a decade or two to reach the obvious conclusion?

Part of the answer is that there is very little common sense in the higher reaches of the medical profession.

But the main reason is, I fear, that the medical profession was long ago bought by the pharmaceutical industry and is always reluctant to do or say anything which might damage drug company profits.

They could have made all these warnings a couple of decades ago if they had bothered to read my books.

I look forward to the letters of apology from doctors who have, over the last decade or so, written scathing reviews and comments about the books in which I made all these points and who will now, no doubt, be full of remorse and eager to apologise for their aggressively expressed condemnations.

Ho, ho.

24

(Paris)

We had lunch with our good friend Piers Morgan. He has just married a 17-year-old waitress but swore us to secrecy because none of his family has met the girl.

I should, perhaps, mention that Piers is an accountant and is fed up to the back teeth with his namesake’s notoriety.

A clever entrepreneur has opened a pub in Paris and called it The Gym. One of our neighbours goes there three times a week, taking his gym kit with him. He thinks his wife believes he is going to the gym. She is not that stupid. She has noticed that the squash gear he puts into the linen basket has never been worn. To save washing clean clothing, she fishes it out and gives it a quick once over with an iron.

‘His Reeboks smell far too sweet to have been worn for months,’ she told us with a laugh. She doesn’t mind because while he is at The Gym she entertains a man who lives on the ground floor and who is a big wheel in plumbing supplies.

The squash player and his wife live in flat 34B and the wife said apropos of absolutely nothing that this is also her bra size. Antoinette asked her if she would have to move across the hall to 34D were she ever to succumb to fashion and have a breast boosting operation.

25

(Paris)

Today I discovered a study, first published in 1981, which shows that experts make inferential errors just as much as non-experts.

The study was written by Richard Nesbitt and Lee Ross and entitled ‘Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings in Social Judgement’.

It seems that the more information we have the more we will be likely to make errors. In other words, we fail to see the wood because we are focussing entirely on the leaves – let alone the trees.

This seems to be particularly true for traders and investors who buy and sell shares on the basis of information which pours in every minute, rather than making a value judgement based on information they have acquired over a period of time. It seems that the most successful investors have to be prepared to avoid ‘information noise’ and persevere with their judgement and their investment.

The same thing is also true for doctors who are, for example, bombarded with information about Alzheimer’s disease but who, knowing next to nothing about idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus, make the diagnosis of Alzheimer’s disease far more often than they should and the diagnosis of idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus far less often than would be appropriate. (The tragedy in this case being that Alzheimer’s disease cannot be treated but idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus can be treated and cured.)

26

(Paris)

'I've got a bit of a headache,' I said. 'Do you know where the aspirin tablets are?'

I rarely take tablets but don't mind an occasional soluble aspirin tablet.

'Is it a bleed?' asked Antoinette anxiously. 'Are you having a haemorrhagic stroke?'

'Oh no, it's not that bad,' I said, laughing as much as you can when your head hurts. 'I've probably just slept in a funny position. Or maybe I've done too much work on the computer.'

'It could be the start of an intracranial bleed,' said Antoinette.

'No, no,' I said, dismissively. 'I'm sure it's just an ordinary headache.'

'How do you know?' asked Antoinette. 'How do you really know? You've never had a stroke.'

'It's just a headache,' I said.

'Not all illnesses follow a textbook pattern,' said Antoinette, quite accurately. 'It could be the beginnings of a stroke. An unusual onset.'

I surreptitiously wriggled my toes and my fingers just to check that everything was working properly.

It is a joy to have a wife who cares.

But it can be worrying when her hypochondriasis spreads to me.

27

(Gloucestershire)

There are two important pieces of medical news today.

First, the Liverpool Care Pathway (a murderers' charter, which allows doctors and nurses to withhold food, water and essential treatment from patients who are over 65 and who are, therefore, regarded as an expensive nuisance) is being replaced by something called Sustainable Development Goals (which originated with the United Nations).

Sustainable Development Goals allows the NHS to discriminate against anyone over the age of 70 on the grounds that people who die when they are over 70 cannot be said to have died 'prematurely' and so will not count when the nation's healthcare is being assessed.

The Government loves this new rule because it gives the State permission to get rid of citizens who are of pensionable age and, therefore, regarded by society's accountants as a 'burden'.

Second, the medical establishment has decreed that in future patients should make the big decisions about their own treatment programmes. I am delighted since this is something I have been advocating since the Hundred Years War. Sadly, the medical establishment has not made this move because of my campaigns or because it thinks it is the right thing to do but because they believe that if patients make their own strategic decisions then the number of lawsuits will fall.

An electrician came this morning to repair two outside lights which have stopped working.

Since our nearest street lamp is several miles away we rely on our infra-red lighting when we arrive home in the dark.

The electrician had to replace both lamps.

One, which is just eighteen months old, had simply stopped working. The other, which was also too young to go to school simply needed a new bulb but the case couldn't be opened because the screw holding things together had rusted solid.

It seemed to us both that it would be sensible for the manufacturers to put a simple fastener instead of a screw that rusts; a metal clip would do the job very well. But then, if they did that, people wouldn't throw away their product and replace it with a new one.

When he'd finished providing us with brand new outside lights, the electrician went round the house checking that our plumbing and gas supply were properly earthed.

Tradesmen seem to be instructed to do this these days.

We passed in every department except the fact that our almost new circuit breaker box does not satisfy modern requirements. Apparently a new rule came in a few months ago decreeing that such boxes have to be made of metal rather than plastic. It does not seem to have occurred to anyone that metal is an excellent conductor of electricity whereas plastic is not. We will stick with our plastic box. The minute we change it someone in Brussels will decide that it should be made of linen and embroidered with little blue butterflies.

When the electrician had gone, we went to the printers in Chippenham to pick up the copies of my new book which is called *Millions of Alzheimer's Patients Have Been Misdiagnosed And Could Be Cured*. This is a scientific monograph on idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus.

When we'd filled the truck with boxes of books, we drove into the town to have a celebratory coffee at Caffe Nero and to buy a new copy of the *Writers and Artists Yearbook* so that we could send our review copies to up to date addresses.

When I asked an assistant in a branch of WHSmith to direct me to the reference department she looked at me as if had asked her for a pair of size 16 ballet shoes with steel toe caps.

I repeated the request.

She then repeated the words. 'Reference books' and looked very alarmed.

She found another, more senior member of staff and passed on my request.

He shook his head. 'Oh we don't stock anything like that,' he replied sadly. 'That's a niche we don't supply.'

'Can you tell me where the local Post Office is?' I asked, wanting to buy stamps to put on the envelopes in which the books would be sent to review editors.

'There isn't one in Chippenham,' he replied.

Apparently, Chippenham has a population of 45,000 but no Post Office.

So we went to the café.

The place was crowded with three types of customer.

Three writers were busy tapping away on their laptops (how do they find laptops with battery life long enough to complete a sentence?), three young mothers had come in out of the cold to breastfeed their babies (I assume that the babies were their own for as far as I know the wet nurse profession has gone into a deep decline) and the rest of the café was full of feral children.

The place had clearly been chosen by the local branch of the Loud Mothers and Hyperactive Children's Society as the meeting place for its half-term event.

Young mothers these days seem to have arrogant contempt for others. They do nothing whatsoever to try to stop their unruly children racing around. As the children raced around so the other customers hurriedly finished their drinks and their buns, closed their computers or their blouses and departed.

Later on, while Antoinette did some essential shopping, I walked past a new barber's shop and noticed that one of the barbers was sitting in his own chair reading a newspaper. I tottered in and asked for a trim.

Fifteen minutes afterwards, the only other customer got up to leave. I don't know why but I suddenly turned my head (risking the loss of an ear) and saw that the man had put on my new, winter tweed overcoat and was about to open the door and leave.

Fortunately, he saw me looking (he was obviously keeping an eye on me) and immediately noticed that he had taken the wrong coat.

'Oh shit,' he said, 'I think I've picked on the wrong coat.'

He took off my coat, hung it, by the collar, back on a peg and picked up his own coat.

'Easily done; easy mistake to make' he said, with a laugh as he opened the door and disappeared, now wearing a rather tatty looking black anorak.

It was one of those air filled jackets which make their wearers look like Michelin men - easy to mistake for a tweed overcoat.

28

(Gloucestershire)

I noticed that the spine of my new book has a misprint. And if it is anyone's fault the misprint is mine.

What happened was this: we had the book set for the printers by a fellow whom I've never met but who does this sort of thing as a freelance. We use him because the book printers we use, who used to accept a Windows text of a book and set it ready for printing, no longer provide this service.

I sent the Microsoft version of my book to the chap who turns Windows text into something that the printing machines find acceptable and he sent back two files: one for the book and one for the cover.

Unfortunately, for some reason or other, he set the book to a size that was just bigger than A5 and was not what I needed at all because since it is my intention to send out most of the first print run of 1,000 as review copies I need the books to fit into a C5 envelope.

(I bought the envelopes for the mailing on eBay at an extraordinary price. I paid £10 for 500 good quality self-seal envelopes. Post free. How on earth can anyone make a profit on that? I also bought the stamps at a cut price rate on eBay. I bought a huge quantity of 81p stamps at about 20% discount from the price for 75p stamps. The postage rate for the book is 75p but there is no regulation which prevents me putting on too much postage. I don't know where the seller buys his stamps but I guess they must be bankruptcy stock.)

I proof read the book and the cover and sent the files on to the printers without noticing that the book was the wrong size.

The chap at the printing company which prints the ‘real book’ versions of our books noticed this sizing problem and suggested that I ask the chap who had set the book to rejig the size. He asked if we could do this quickly because they had the book lined up in their schedule. So the fellow who was setting the book then sent me new files which I glanced at and sent on to the printers.

What no one noticed (and this was my responsibility so it is my fault) was that when the chap reset the book he somehow managed to miss two words off the (very narrow) spine and so, instead of reading ‘Millions of Alzheimer’s Patients Have Been Misdiagnosed’ the spine of the finished book reads ‘Millions of Alzheimer’s Patients Have Been Misdiagnos’.

This does not, of course, affect the ebook – partly because Antoinette prepared that for kindling and partly because there is no spine on an ebook.

We spent some hours trying to decide whether or not to pulp the books and have the cover reset. Our contact at the printers suggested tearing off all the covers, reprinting them and then fixing them back on with glue.

In the end I decided to leave things the way they are. The book is very thin and the spine is very narrow and if the book ever becomes hugely collectible then the literal on the spine will make the first edition instantly recognisable.

I would love to give the ebook version of this book away free. Sadly, this is not a good idea. People simply don’t value free stuff the way they value things for which they have paid even a small price.

I know that if I put the book free on Amazon it will quickly get a couple of one star ratings (‘There are nothings in here on tranes’, ‘Nothing about Gloucester Cathedral in this’, ‘No mention of Bilbury’ and so on) and that will be the end of that.

Life, wrote Samuel Butler, is like giving a concert on the violin while learning to play the instrument. I know what he meant.

We put up our new curtains in the drawing room in the house in Devon. It took us hours. It’s a job we have been putting off for weeks. The room is vast and there are nine curtains, all nine feet long. Each window is unique; none is the same size. The smallest curtain, for a side window, is six feet wide. The others are wider than our longest tape measure. The shop which had prepared the curtains did not label them but merely put them into three large cardboard boxes. It took us an extra hour or two to work out which curtain was for which window and we only reached a happy conclusion after hanging the wrong curtain at the right window several times.

The world has gone stark raving mad. I offer two pieces of proof.

First, there is great enthusiasm for a plan to dig up Sir Jimmy Savile’s body. The former disc jockey is apparently buried in a cemetery which is near to two schools. (It would, I assume, have been acceptable if there had been just one school nearby. But there are two.) I find this strange for Sir Jimmy is now dead and whatever he may or may not have done when he was alive, he is now unlikely to do a great deal of harm in his present condition. I have no idea what the would be disinterrers had planned for the body.

Second, a woman has received considerable publicity because she alleges that a check-out assistant in a supermarket ‘gender shamed’ her three-year-old son. The boy, having apparently been invited by his mother to take a Kinder egg, selected a pink one. The check-out assistant kindly pointed out to him that he had picked a pink egg and was, therefore, likely to receive a toy designed for girls rather than the toy intended for boys which he would have received if he had chosen a blue egg.

The mother then had what seems to be to be a typical 21st century social media hissy fit, scattering complaints around as if she and the child had been gang raped by a bunch of sticky aliens.

What the hell is wrong with people these days?

There is tons of research work showing that boys like to play with toy cars and girls prefer dolls. This is even true for animals. Offer a bunch of toys to young chimps and the boy chimps will pick out the cars and the girl chimps will select the dolls. It’s nature. The woman at the check-out was being thoughtful and kind and should have received a big thank you and a smile. Instead, she became the centre of something which is apparently called a gender shaming storm.

29
(Devon)
My shoulders ache from helping to put up the curtains, my back aches from the gardening I did yesterday afternoon, my neck aches from bending over the laptop, my left knee aches because it’s temperamental and doesn’t like the fact that we drove 200 miles in our manual Ford Ranger, my right ear aches because I have a sensitive tooth as a result of

the efforts of an over energetic dental hygienist and I spent an hour or two this afternoon sitting quietly feeling woeful. Bette Davis was absolutely spot on when she said that old age 'aint for sissies.

We watched the Dambusters film again. It is one of the most stirring of all war movies – and all the more stirring because it is based closely on a true story of remarkable heroism.

It is fashionable with the metropolitan elite to deride Barnes Wallis's bouncing bomb and to dismiss the Dambusters as something of an irrelevance. To my surprise, Bill Bryson sneered at the Dambusters who were as a group without question as brave a group of men as ever fought for freedom and democracy.

Barnes Wallis was unquestionably a genius and Guy Gibson was arguably the most important motivator, the bravest man and the second most important leader in World War II (the first being Churchill, of course).

Bryson claimed that the raid killed very few people and that some of those who died were allied prisoners of war. This is true but it misses several points.

First, the aim was not to kill people but to disrupt the German war machine, and this the raid did very effectively.

Second, the whole operation gave Britain a massive psychological point at a low point in the War. The men who took part in the Dambuster raid were courageous beyond our imagination, they gave the British a great deal to cheer and we owe them unconditional respect.

And third, the leader of the Dambusters raid, Guy Gibson, was sent to America to try to help persuade the USA to join the War on Britain's side. (For a while there was some doubt about which, if any side, America would support.) It was widely believed at the time that it was Guy Gibson's effort which helped get America to join Britain in the fight against Germany.

I usually enjoy Bryson's books. But he is dead wrong about the Dambusters.

30

(Gloucestershire)

In Gloucestershire, one of our roof valleys is blocked and water is coming into the bedroom. In a local magazine I found an advertisement placed by a man who does roofing jobs. 'No job too small!' is the headline. I rang him and asked if he would come round and clean the valleys. And possibly the gutters too.

'I'm not coming out for that,' he said grumpily. 'Not worth my while.'

'But your advert said 'no job too small',' I reminded him.

'I didn't mean that small!'

'So what do you call small?' I enquired.

He thought for a moment. 'Oh, re-roofing a small house sort of small.'

I recently heard it said in an official sounding report that the elderly reminisce a good deal in order to keep their memories alive. This is bollocks. The memories don't need keeping alive. The elderly reminisce a good deal because then was so much better than now and living in the past is far more pleasant than living in the present.

We've solved our leaky roof problem by putting a couple of buckets under the worst of the drips.

31

(Devon)

I am now embarrassed to be the owner of a leaf blower.

Our drive in Devon is long and steep and lined on both sides with dozens of deciduous trees. We have a massive wide yard broom but I reckon that a leaf blower might enable me to get rid of some of the leaves onto the garden and let them turn into mulch. It's a shame to burn leaves or to bag them and toss them into a skip. Leaves are a valuable part of nature's annual cycle.

This new piece of equipment gave me an idea for a game for the iPhone. The player must use a leaf blower to attempt to control falling leaves and blow them into a pile. Occasional gusts of wind counter his attempts. Points are lost if leaves land on the operator's head.

Someone called Lloyd Blankfein, the boss of Goldman Sachs, the world's number one most evil bank (quite an achievement), claims that he lives in fear that a rogue employee will tarnish the name of both the bank and himself, engulfing it in a scandal.

He says his fear has left him 'on edge all the time'.

I haven't heard anything quite so funny for years.

There are some people and companies in the world who have absolutely no reputation to lose or to protect.

And Goldman Sachs is top of the list. And, along with Adolf Hitler, Attila the Hun, Genghis Khan and Tony Blair, Mr Blankfein is beyond the pale and below the salt.

I cannot think of anything anyone could do which would damage his reputation or the reputation of Goldman Sachs. If they served up stewed baby in the boardroom no one would think any the worse of them.

I also read today that Goldman Sachs has set aside $3,210,000,000 to pay its staff bonuses this year. That's a 36% increase on last year. Mr Blankfein received $23 million for hanging around and living in fear.

Personally, I think the deeply unpleasant Blankfein probably deserves all that money for the shame of working for one of the most consistently crooked and distasteful operations in the history of the world.

Founded in 1869 by Jewish money men, the company history includes allegations of share price manipulation, insider trading and just about every corrupt, dishonest and immoral activity that it is possible to think of that doesn't actually involve selling drugs or pimping.

Goldman Sachs is, without a doubt, a company the world would be better without.

I have a new laptop in Devon which Antoinette has set up so that I can work on it. Unfortunately, the machine is contaminated by the inevitable McAfee virus. As I type away merrily, the damned McAfee appears in the middle of everything, stops me in full flow and demands money with menaces.

Today, I actually succeeded in getting rid of it.

At least I think I did.

I lost half a morning though because it froze my computer for a while as it departed.

Who in the world gave McAfee (owned I see by Intel) the right to invade my computer?

Why do Toshiba and Microsoft allow the damned company to invade my life?

And don't they realise that if I ever need virus protection, the last company I will ever turn to will be McAfee?

As far as I am concerned McAfee is the most evil computer virus on the planet.

November

1

(Devon)

The Mitsubishi was returned a couple of days ago and I have begun the long, slow process of correcting all the settings.

As soon as I got into the damned thing I realised that the seat had been moved. There is no memory in the Mitsubishi so now I have to spend days trying to get the seat back into a position which does not induce crippling backache.

The wing mirrors have been moved so they have to be reset. The automatic wipers and headlights have been turned off, and so on.

I suspect garages do this on purpose.

The minute a car arrives in a garage for a service or repair the mechanics, sales people and receptionists all crowd round thinking of things they can change.

I noticed today, with absolute horror, that the Mitsubishi number plates carry the hideous little EU flag. I usually stipulate that number plates should not be so adorned but I forgot this time. I've found a couple of England flag stickers and glued them over the nasty little EU badges. Unfortunately, in my haste I didn't manage to get them quite straight but at least the EU flags have gone.

We spent the afternoon in Taunton, trying to dodge the Greenpeace salespersons who seem to be everywhere. You can be just walking along, minding your own business and one will pop up out of the pavement as though by magic. I assume they want money and probably want me to give them my credit card details. The town was crowded with them. Some were male, some were female and some were not clearly defined and probably not sure themselves.

We haven't been to Taunton for a while and though it looks the same but it is nevertheless different.

The cricket ground, where we park because I know of nowhere else to park in Taunton, has built the ugliest stand in the history of the world. It looks as if the club had a competition among architects and then chose the worst design. I can't begin to describe it except to say that if it fell down you wouldn't be able to tell the difference.

Many of our favourite shops are gone or going. The music shop has gone. The art shop has gone. Country Stores (wherein now sits the Post Office) is about to go. The biggest retail premises (which used to be occupied by British Home Stores) lies vacant but the doorway provides shelter for the homeless.

In a remaining jewellery shop I stood for three minutes while the sole assistant, a teenage girl, chatted to her teenage pal about boyfriends. They both ignored me and only reluctantly did the assistant agree to serve me.

If I'd been her boss I would have fired her.

I bought a selection of newspapers, not to read but for lighting fires and for starting the incinerators. Newspapers are getting quite expensive and so I tend to look for value, always buying the paper which has the most pages and costs the least.

A reader has written to tell me that a woman in Maidstone, Kent was recently fined £80 for feeding the ducks. Apparently she had to pay on the spot to a private firm which shares the loot with the local council. In five years the firm has handed out more than 20,000 fines so everyone concerned has doubtless been making good money out of this latest bit of lunacy. The problem, of course, is that when a private firm shares in the money collected in fines, it has a vested interest in fining people for trivial or non-existent offences.

I find it impossible to conceive a reason why it should be against the law to feed the ducks. Whenever Antoinette and I feed them (which is whenever we see any) the food we give them disappears within a minute or two and so there cannot possibly be a 'littering issue'.

On the road back up to Gloucestershire, we were passed by nine ambulances, all with their lights and sirens on, all racing to accidents and crashes. There are far more accidents on our roads these days. And although I have no evidence that there is a link it doesn't seem to me to be a big leap to conclude that the number of immigrants must have something to do with this. Hundreds of thousands of drivers in Britain don't speak English (and so don't have the foggiest idea what the often complicated road signs are telling them) and zillions drive on licences which did not, I suspect, require quite the same level of learning as a British driving licence.

Commentators everywhere are saying that Hillary Clinton has pretty much already won the American Presidential election. The *Financial Times* has, of course, decided that the crooked Clintons should be in the White House.

Journalists everywhere cannot understand why anyone would vote for Trump but this is simply because they do not understand the sense of anger which is as common in the US as it is in Europe.

I hope Trump wins. He is an egomaniac, a megalomaniac and probably several other types of maniac too. But if he is elected, the establishment in the US will perhaps realise that they cannot go on oppressing the people and getting away with it.

If Clinton wins then I'm afraid that the bad people will remain in power, nothing will improve and the next step will be violent demonstrations and a bloody evolution.

According to leaked documents from the Department of Health, apprentice nurses will soon be allowed to administer controlled drugs (such as morphine and heroin) to NHS patients. This is absolute lunacy. Drug errors are rife in NHS hospitals and iatrogenesis (doctor induced illness) has for some years been one of the top three causes of death in the developed world. The safe administration of medicines is a vital part of medical care. The nurse administering a drug needs to be capable of making a professional judgement and of taking responsibility for her actions.

I am not, however, surprised by this decision. It is akin to the decision, made some years ago, to allow nurses to take on many of the other tasks which were previously the responsibility of qualified doctors. It is, I fear, all part of a plan to obtain health care on the cheap. How long will it be before ward cleaners, porters and folk wandering through hospitals on the way to somewhere else are allowed to give injections, take blood samples and perform so-called minor surgery?

2

(Gloucestershire)

According to researchers (always a dodgy lot, almost as dodgy as opinion pollsters) the average human attention span has fallen to eight seconds. Just over a decade ago it was 12 seconds so we aren't getting any better at concentrating. The *Financial Times* says that an eight second attention span is one second shorter than that of a goldfish so this is probably rubbish made up by someone in search of a grant extension. Still.

I ordered our Christmas crackers today.

We decided that we didn't want any more crackers containing egg cups, nail clippers or ridiculously small staplers. We want Christmas crackers with toys in them. I wandered around on EBay and kept buying boxes of children's crackers containing spinning tops, yoyos, kaleidoscopes, mini skittles, super bouncy balls, marbles and puzzles of all kinds. When I had finished I discovered, rather to my embarrassment, that I had bought 72 crackers. I think I perhaps got a little carried away.

I do feel a trifle concerned because Antoinette and I are spending Christmas alone again. (It is how we like to spend it). Still, 72 crackers, pulled at lunch and dinner will last just 18 days. If we start a couple of days before Christmas we will have used them all up by Twelfth Night. Or we could pull them with our afternoon tea as well as with lunch and dinner.

I don't care if this sounds stupid. I love Christmas. I love the reason behind it. I love the fact that it is a celebration of our spiritual way of life. But I also love the trimmings. Our 17-year-old artificial Christmas tree is now looking rather worn and threadbare but we have had it since our first Christmas together. Antoinette decorates it with boxes full of beautiful Victorian decorations which I keep in an inaccessible cupboard over the old bread oven in the snug. The colourful glass baubles I hang on the real tree outside in the garden. I love the yule log burning in the fire place. (I am an open fire sort of fellow and Christmas without a decent fire would for me be a shadowy celebration.) I love the pies and the puddings and the roast parsnips; the cards and the presents and the old black and white films that we pick out of our collection.

And I love the crackers with their daft jokes, their silly hats and their small toys which litter the house for weeks afterwards because throwing them away is like saying that Christmas is now over for another year.

3

(Gloucestershire)

I see that according to a copy of *Moneyweek* magazine 'the decline in male fertility has science baffled'. No it hasn't. Scientists who know how to read have known for decades that male fertility is falling because of all the female hormones in our drinking water. Sadly, however, many scientists don't know how to read. This explains why so many of them keep asking questions which were answered decades ago.

The three other big myths which are repeated with monotonous regularity are that life expectation has risen rapidly (it hasn't, child mortality has fallen and life expectation for adults is not very different to what it was in 1840), that the elderly are becoming more of a burden on society (individually, the elderly aren't becoming more of a burden but there are more of them and as immigration increases and Britain becomes more crowded, so the number of old people will continue to increase) and that women live longer than men because of some inner physical strength (women used to live longer because they smoked less, drank less and did not expose themselves to as much stress but these days they smoke and drink more and expose themselves to a great deal of stress so the difference in life expectation is disappearing).

I made the mistake of looking to see whether my latest Bilbury book has been reviewed. I was devastated to see that one reviewer has given the book a lowly rating of three stars because the book is a collection of short pieces which the reviewer describes, with obvious contempt, as memories.

Any professional writer will confirm that writing a book of short stories is harder than producing a continual narrative novel. If there are, say, 15 stories in a book then the author will need to create 15 plots, 15 beginnings and 15 endings. Numerous characters are required and because of the length restriction, the work has to be tighter and this requires working harder. It has been said that a short story depends upon what is left out, rather than what is included.

My books about Bilbury are very special to me and I may have to remove the book from Amazon in the UK. The problem is that if another reviewer gives the book a bad rating it will be doomed anyway.

Like most professionals I find writing hard work. Every sentence is carved out of my heart. I've had a good many different jobs but sitting down in front of a blank screen or a blank piece of paper or a blank notebook and knowing that if you are going to pay the bills then you have to think of something to write is quite challenging. For fiction, the writer has to find stuff in his or her head that is worth repeating and then find a way to express it in words.

The memories in Bilbury come from my heart and the fact that there is a mixture of frivolous and thoughtful is merely a reflection of life itself.

The Americans, bless their hearts, love the book and I can leave it on sale there but may now take it off the UK market.

I have spent the last three months writing the next Bilbury. In despair I threw away all the work I had done. I cannot see how a book dealing with events in the 1970s can be anything other than a collection of memories. This callous, dismissive review (which probably took the reviewer 30 seconds to write and was doubtless completely forgotten before the rest of the minute had ticked by) broke my heart. At the moment I really don't want to write any more books. I simply cannot bear the pain of waiting for a reader to dismiss the book for some trivial reason.

4

(Gloucestershire)

A man we know is 76-years-old. He is a fairly healthy widower who lives in a local nursing home. He is courting a 77-year-old spinster who is a resident in the same establishment. She has high blood pressure and arthritis in her knees. He is as nervous as a teenager on Prom night for she has just invited him to take tea with her parents. Her father is 101 and her mother is 96 and they still look after themselves in the house where they've spent their entire married life.

5

(Gloucestershire)

When politicians debate the immigration issue, they rarely look at the way the influx of millions of foreigners is affecting Britain's infrastructure and, in particular, the provision of health care.

They also usually look at net immigration figures which are reached by subtracting the number of Britons who are quitting the UK from the number of foreigners who are coming in. And so, if two million foreigners come into Britain and 1.9 million Britons leave, the official figure for immigration is just 100,000. This method of measuring immigration is totally misleading for it fails to account for the fact that as Britons leave the UK in their millions so the very nature of the nation is being changed dramatically.

The fact is that when you bring several million people into a country with an antiquated, creaking health care structure, the inevitable result will be that the health care structure creaks ever more – and increasingly fails to provide an acceptable service for those who have paid for it.

The situation at the moment is that it is customary for those attending Accident and Emergency departments at major hospitals (there aren't any Accident and Emergency departments at smaller hospitals) to wait between four and nine hours to be seen by a doctor or, indeed, anyone with any medical or nursing qualifications. Parents who have sat for hours with children who have broken limbs may feel that this level of service is unacceptable. So too may the relatives of stroke and heart attack victims. There isn't much point in seeking help the moment you notice the warning signs of a serious illness if you then have to wait nine hours for someone to call out your name in the waiting room at the local hospital.

The basic problem is the same throughout the health service: too much demand for the services and facilities available.

It is now customary in some parts of the country for patients to wait three to four weeks for an appointment to see a GP. Patients who are suspected of having cancer may wait six months for an X-ray which will decide whether or not they need treatment. By the time they've had the X-ray it will, of course, almost certainly be too late for treatment. And patients wait two years or more for essential surgery that might have saved their lives if they'd had it in time.

These are the realistic, day-to-day, real human problems created by a rapidly growing population (many of whom do not speak English and are suffering from diseases which are not commonly seen in the United Kingdom) and a State controlled, bureaucratic health service. The result is that millions of citizens are suffering unnecessarily and thousands are dying unnecessarily. That is the cost of allowing virtually unlimited immigration.

And it is a cost which the politicians, commentators and show business luvvies who encourage immigration do not understand. They don't understand it because they, of course, are not going to be the ones waiting hours, weeks, months and years for treatment. When they, or their nearest and dearest, fall ill they are seen in private hospitals where they are waited on hand and foot and where every investigation and every treatment is available without delay.

The truth is that the vast majority of the immigrations coming into Britain are not seeking asylum because their lives are threatened. They are not escaping oppression or tyranny. They are part of a mass migration process which, now that it has started, will continue for decades until the standard of living in Britain has fallen to that of the immigrants' homelands. The millions are coming from Eastern Europe, Africa and the Middle East and there are tens of millions more who are preparing to come.

(There is no little irony in the fact that some immigrants already believe that the quality of health care in Britain has now fallen below that which is available in their home countries. When they fall ill they head for home because they know they will receive better treatment in the country they left.)

There is a very simple philosophical question here: should we be allowing (and encouraging) migrants to flock to Britain so that they can improve their lot (even at a huge cost to our own citizens) or should we be doing everything we can to help those people improve the quality of life in their own countries?

Meanwhile, as the politicians, the metropolitan liberal commentators and the tax avoiding show business luvvies campaign for unlimited immigration (and unfairly stigmatise those who object to it as racists) we should remember the untold thousands of tax paying citizens who cannot afford private treatment and who will, as a result of the over-stretched health service, suffer months of agony and die prematurely.

6

(Devon)

I ordered some perfume for Antoinette for Christmas. The supplier is sending it by a carrier called DHL which has given me a three week window for delivery. I have no doubt that I will have to sign for the package so they are clearly expecting me to stay in the house for the next three weeks and await their arrival. I wish companies would make it clear which carriers they use. If I get the chance I will never again order anything from any company which uses DHL to deliver their goods.

Our new dining room suite was delivered today. It is absolutely magnificent. The mahogany table is big enough for eight or ten (depending upon how many extensions are used) and the matching chairs, with two marvellous carvers, are all in absolutely excellent condition and extremely comfortable. The suite would cost at least £1,500 at auction but Antoinette found it on a website called Gumdrop or Gumbush or Gumtree or something similar. Having bought it (on the basis of the photographs on the Internet) we arranged for our favourite carrier to pick it up and deliver it.

The table and chairs cost £200 and the collection and delivery cost another £100.

7

(Devon)

We bought a new Hewlett Packard Officejet Pro printer for our Devon office.

I discovered, to my absolute horror, that we have to connect something to the Internet in order to make it work and once connected we must download some software. I hate anything that won't work unless you connect it to the Internet because in my experience it usually takes forever and then doesn't work at all. We usually give up and end up throwing everything away.

To my delight however I discovered that the printer came with between 100 and 150 pages of instructions. (There are no page numbers and somewhere over 100 I got bored counting the pages). The instructions come in a couple of dozen languages and there is an additional leaflet entitled 'HP tips for reducing environmental impact'. I fell about laughing when I saw that one – particularly the tip suggesting that I save paper and follow their instructions on how to lower my carbon footprint.

Much of the paperwork appears to be a list of European Union Commission regulations in the usual variety of languages.

The world is now awash with celebrities supporting the EU and attacking everyone who voted to leave the fascist would-be super state.

Every day another celebrity pops up to gather their allotted three minutes of free BBC publicity by describing Brexiteers as racists, or worse. Many are demanding a second referendum because they don't like the result of the first one and think the British people are wrong.

(The BBC is well-known to be a great supporter of the EU and any celebrity supporting the fascists is guaranteed laudatory publicity on the State broadcaster's stations.)

These celebrities (many of whom know nothing about politics or the background to the EU) want to stay on the right side of the most powerful broadcaster in the country.

And some doubtless want their gong too – their complimentary knighthood or whatever.

Some of these celebrities denounce England and the English. All seem convinced that those of us who want to leave the EU are dangerous disruptors and revolutionaries who are somehow threatening the freedom of celebrities to eat Camembert cheese or spend their holidays at their farmhouse in Tuscany.

Many seem to believe (quite genuinely) that if we leave the EU, Britain will somehow stop being European. They presumably assume that our island will be towed off to some distant part of the planet from whence there will be no opportunity to pop over to Paris or spend a weekend skiing in Switzerland.

The celebrity loonies are wrong for many reasons.

First, most of us who loathe the EU do so because the organisation is badly run, organised by and for dedicated fascists and a very serious threat to freedom, privacy and everything we love. The celebrities who support the EU do not (I hope) know that the organisation was conceived and designed by Adolf Hitler and his Nazi colleagues.

Second, we know that it is EU policy to get rid of England. Indeed, the EU has already managed to ensure that England can no longer be considered a country. A bunch of unelected, fascist eurocrats have decided that the English have no official nationality. And it is EU policy to remove the constitutional status of the Royal Family. (Princes William and Andrew, please note: if the EU has its way you'll need to get proper jobs instead of swanning around enjoying life as the original Reality TV family. This may or may not be a bad idea. But it's something the British should decide – not a bunch of overpaid yahoos in Brussels.)

Third, their argument about immigration is puerile. England is now the most overcrowded country in Europe – by a long way.

Many of the celebrities who campaign for more immigration live in comfortable luxury and for them immigrants are merely a useful, cheap source of household labour. The mouthy celebrities don't understand just how badly England and the English have been damaged by our bizarre, politically correct unilateral homage to multiculturalism. The EU loving celebrities (who include tax exiles and runaways now living in America) do not know or care that our culture has been damned near destroyed. Moreover, in their ignorance, they mistakenly describe economic migrants as refugees.

Do the celebrities who support the EU really think that Adolf Hitler's plan was a good one, that getting rid of England is a great idea, that fraud and corruption are to be welcomed and that bureaucracy and red tape are a 'good thing'?

I suspect not.

8

(Gloucestershire)

In Cheltenham today, Antoinette spotted a youth who had left his shoe laces undone. They were exceptionally long laces. Antoinette kindly asked him if he knew that his laces were undone. 'I don't want you to trip up over them,' she added. My wife is kind not because it is the right thing to be but because it is in her nature; it is the only thing she knows how to be. However, instead of thanking her, the youth stared at her as though she had just arrived from Mars. ‘They’re supposed to be undone,’ he snarled. He might as well have added ‘you fool’ though he left the addition unsaid. His girlfriend joined in the staring and sneering.

I thought this was very rude of him.

‘Are people still leaving their shoe laces untied?’ I asked him. ‘I thought that went out in the 90s!’

The rude youth glowered at me as if I’d criticised his hairstyle and started to move away.

Unfortunately for him I was standing on one of his extra long laces and as he moved he left his shoe behind and fell over, crashing into a display cabinet. I took Antoinette by the hand and we left.

We have now posted off over 500 review copies of my new book on Normal Pressure Hydrocephalus. This is approximately five times as many books as most publishers send out. Moreover, we intend to send off another 500 when we can find suitable addresses.

The diagnosing of patients as suffering from Alzheimer’s disease (which cannot be cured) when they have idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus (which is curable) is in my view the biggest health scandal around at the moment (and I know of quite a few).

I offered to allow editors to take extracts from the book free of charge.

Sadly, not one journalist or editor has responded. And the book has not been reviewed anywhere.

However, another of my campaigns seems to have come to life again.

Benzodiazepine tranquillisers are back in the news. A small number of doctors have drawn attention to the addictive nature of these drugs. And it is rumoured that even the British Medical Association (the doctors’ trade union) has declared that there could, just might perhaps be a problem though actually they’ve known about it for quite a while and not to worry because they’ve been keeping an eye on things and you can trust them to look after everyone.

Journalists and commentators talk about the benzodiazepine problem as though it is something new; something they themselves have just discovered.

I am amazed that medical journalists are not capable of doing some basic research. The benzodiazepine problem has been discussed endlessly for decades. It was itself merely a repeat of problems created by the bromides and the barbiturates. It seems to me that if journalists cannot find something on the Internet within seconds then it does not exist. Much of the work done on benzodiazepines was published decades before the Internet began – and so the work is only available in books and libraries.

The BMA apparently say that they ‘didn’t realise the scale of the problem or the depth of feeling it causes in those affected’.

Oh dear.

Maybe someone at the BMA needs to learn how to look things up in libraries. Maybe they need a spokesman who is out of his teens.

I first started drawing attention to the horrors of benzodiazepines (drugs such as Valium, Ativan and Mogadon) back in 1973, and the first scientific papers drawing attention to the problems associated with these drugs were published in the 1960s. I drew attention to the problem in my first book *The Medicine Men* in 1975 and was vilified by the medical profession for doing so.

Thousands of patients wrote in to me to say that their lives had been ruined by benzodiazepines. I had endless TV programmes and a hugely popular radio series devoted to benzodiazepine addiction. My mail from patients came in large grey Royal Mail sacks.

(*The Medicine Men*, incidentally, was the first book drawing attention to the close links between the medical establishment and the pharmaceutical industry. It was attacked mercilessly by the medical profession but has since then spawned a host of similar books by other authors and I’m pleased to say that these days, authors who mention this profitable relationship tend to be acclaimed rather than vilified.)

At that time (and I remember this very well) the British Medical Association seemed able to find an endless parade of doctors prepared to go on radio or television and tell the world that I was a dangerous, scaremongering lunatic. The BMA and the medical establishment stood shoulder to shoulder with the pharmaceutical industry in defence of these awful medicines. After all, the BMA’s in-house comic (the British Medical Journal) was earning zillions in advertising revenue from the drug companies.

As a team they were very powerful. I lost work and reputation because of my campaign. My telephone was tapped and my home entered and evidence taken.

Despite the public disquiet, the standard line was that benzodiazepines were wonderful drugs.

I remember a number of celebrities attacking me for daring to criticise their beloved benzodiazepines.

A television nurse called Claire Rayner (who I always found to be rather bossy, very loud, distinctly unpleasant and quite uninterested in anyone else or in facts) attacked me live on television and complained that she found the drugs very useful so yah boo sucks to me.

It did not seem to bother the corpulent nurse that the drugs had been proven to be extremely addictive. Nor did she seem concerned by the number of side effects associated with the products. And she was certainly not interested in the fact that thousands of people believed, quite passionately, that the drugs had ruined their lives. To my surprise, she was also unimpressed by the evidence available in numerous medical journals that benzodiazepines were distinctly more addictive than illegal drugs such as heroin or cocaine. The drug companies did not have a better friend.

At least one charity which ostensibly existed to protect the interests of the mentally ill attacked me incessantly, arguing that benzodiazepines were valuable and should not be controlled.

Eventually, in 1988, the Government took action and changed the classification of benzodiazepines in an attempt to persuade doctors to treat them with more respect. (The Government admitted that they had done this as a direct result of my campaigning.)

Sadly, doctors did not take much notice.

They continued to hand out the most addictive drugs in the world as though they were as harmless as sweets. And millions of patients got hooked.

But now, 43 years after my first articles warning about these drugs, the medical establishment apparently recognises that there is a problem.

Why could that be?

Two reasons.

First, the patents on the original drugs have long since expired. There is no longer big money to be made from benzodiazepines.

Second, the drug companies have produced a whole host of alternatives which are more powerful and more profitable.

Patients who come off their benzodiazepines can be given one of the new, more expensive products as an alternative.

The bottom line is that attacking benzodiazepines is now actually quite good for business.

And so the BMA, which never gives a damn about patients (and was, don't forget, behind the recent doctor strikes), but which invariably stands shoulder to shoulder with the drug industry, now suddenly feels comfortable about admitting that there could, might perhaps be a bit of a problem with benzodiazepines.

I have a terrible fear that it will be at least another 47 years before the scandal over idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus is exposed.

9

(Gloucestershire)

I am not misanthropic but I am rapidly moving in that general direction. I am weary of thoughtless, bad mannered, inconsiderate behaviour and of selfish folk wandering through life with no respect for anyone else.

A few examples gleaned today.

A delivery driver rang our door bell and when I opened the door he thrust a parcel at me, glowered, turned on his heel and left without a single word.

We drove to Cheltenham and on the way missed two lots of red lights because the driver at the head of the queue was too busy napping, texting or chatting on his mobile phone to move away from the lights until the last possible moment, making it impossible for anyone else to follow. Our world is full of people who have nowhere to go and all day to get there. And so we all had to sit and wait through another cycle of the lights.

In the car park, we had to wait for someone to leave because two motorists had parked badly, with two wheels on the white lines so that although there were, technically, spaces available they were unusable.

Antoinette and I went into a café for a lunchtime coffee. The atmosphere was ruined by a screaming baby. Everyone looked uncomfortable but no one dared say a word. The mother made no effort to silence her baby. She merely tapped away on her laptop – probably writing her latest baby care manual.

And so life goes.

Occasionally, I glower or mutter or actually say something out loud. If people with muscles, knives or guns look as if they are preparing to attack me I mutter something about having forgotten to take my pills and walk away rapidly.

I don't go out much anymore. Staying in the house is better.

10

(Gloucestershire)

What on earth do people mean when they say ‘Don’t sweat the small stuff?’ They say it as though it is a key to a happy and comfortable life. But what is the small stuff? And isn’t the small stuff important – on the same basis that if you take care of the pennies then the pounds will take care of themselves?

So, America will soon be known as the United States of Trump and the White House will doubtless soon be known as Trump House.

The Donald always likes to have his name on things.

And I have no doubt that he will want to rename the country which has chosen him to be the next President and the house wherein the President resides.

And why not?

Trump won by a massive majority. And he won because the voters are fed up with a greed soaked elite enriching themselves at the expense of working people. It is exactly the same thing that happened in Britain’s Referendum vote. Voters everywhere are sick of bankers and politicians and chief executives filling their pockets and doing absolutely nothing for the mass of taxpayers.

Trump won by understanding that the mass of people are fed up with vested interests trying to preserve and protect the status quo. Clinton lost because she was, probably rightly, perceived to be a representative of the status quo. Her relationship with Goldman Sachs did her far more harm than the email nonsense – which very few people understand or really cared about.

Few sentient creatures like Trump, admire him or respect him.

He is, by many accounts, a rogue, a bully and a megalomaniac. In 2015, one of Trump’s former teachers, on his death bed, described the aspiring President as ‘a little shit’. For many it seems to sum him up. It may be true. But it’s irrelevant.

What I really don’t understand is that so many commentators didn’t see how and why Trump would succeed.

Nearly every political commentator (to be honest, every single one I read, I am just allowing for the possibility that there might have been one or two who went against the crowd) argued cogently that Trump had no chance and would be destroyed in the polls. In London, the *Financial Times* became as hysterical in its opposition to Trump as it had been in its opposition to Brexit.

How, how, how could all these people fail to see that citizens everywhere are angry?

The people who are outside the oligarchs who run our world are tired and angry and disappointed and disgruntled and frustrated. They aren’t the sort to go out and smash shop windows or throw stones at policemen (those are pastimes favoured by the rancid liberal left and the more rumbustious members of the Entitlement Generation).

So they voted for Brexit and for Trump. It was a protest vote.

Trump won because he frightened the establishment. He scared the living daylights out of the sort of people who write for the *Financial Times* and the *Washington Post*.

And people wanted to scare some of the hubris out of the establishment.

The voters can’t make things right by themselves. They can’t thug the awful few who rule the world. But they were as pleased as Punch to see someone else scare the arrogant, the pompous, the dishonest, the incompetent politicians and bankers. In America it was Trump. In the UK it was Farage. They are, without a doubt, the two most popular politicians in the world today. (It is salutary to realise that Nigel Farage, the most astute and influential politician in Britain for half a century, has never sat in the House of Commons or the House of Lords).

And it will happen a good deal more in the coming years.

The revolution is not over yet. Indeed, it is only just beginning.

People aren’t all pessimists; they aren’t all cynics and they don’t all want to burn and destroy. But they are angry and they feel betrayed (they know they have been betrayed) and they want someone to be honest and to at least acknowledge their existence, their rights and the truth.

I suspect that The Donald will surprise everyone by turning out to be the most popular American President there has ever been. True, he will continue to antagonise the noisy, militant minority, the Entitlement Generation liberals, but this is his true legacy: he will want to be remembered for doing things and achieving something useful and memorable for his country. (I wish Britain had a few more leaders who believe in putting Britain first.)

Incidentally, the pollsters (and the commentators and journalists and politicians) keep getting things wrong because they don’t understand that most people are, not without good cause, now slightly paranoid. When questioned by strangers, people dare not admit that they are supporting the politically incorrect side of a vote. For this very good the pollsters will continue to get things wrong.

The usual suspect celebrities who supported the awful Clinton woman are, once again, sobbing their hearts out (though being careful not to spoil their make-up).

I suspect that most of those who supported Clinton did so because she is female rather than because they believe in the Goldman Sachs sponsored world she represents. Most of the politically correct entitlement generation would have supported Myra Hindley if she'd been running for President.

Whingeing cry-baby members of the entitlement generation are already demonstrating and (as they always are when an election result isn't to their liking) demanding a rerun of the election. These people are unbelievable whingers, they are also self-centred, self-important and narcissistic. And they are gutless and terribly weak. If we were attacked by Martians or Muslims they would roll over with a whimper and refuse to fight.

What none of the celebrities and entitlement generation understands is that Trump will probably cause a major disruption to the banks and arms manufacturers. He will shake up the political elite which has been ruining America for a generation. And, as a non-believer in the fashionable but pseudo-science climate change myth he will, I hope, dismantle some of the nonsensical legislation designed to maintain the myth that man-made emissions are changing our climate.

Why, I wonder, do the bleeding heart liberals always end up on the side of the warmongering, money grubbing establishment?

Britain's problem now is that numerous British politicians have bad mouthed Trump so viciously that Britain is going to have to work hard to establish a good relationship with the US.

Let's hope that Mrs May makes Nigel Farage the UK's Ambassador to the United States. Farage and Trump get on well together.

Our Nigel is probably the only man in Britain who can repair our relationship with the United States.

11

(Gloucestershire)

I made a list of the dozen minor annoyances which make shopping, and window shopping, an unpleasant experience these days. (When compiling lists I try to include 12 items whenever possible because 12 is an imperial, rather than a metric, number.)

Here it my list:

1) People who don't cover their mouths and noses when they cough and sneeze

2) The parents of noisy babies and children who make no attempt to control their offspring and, indeed, seem to take pride in the fact that their progeny can cause disruption and ruin other people's days.

3) Women who rearrange their handbag when they've finished a till transaction

4) Families who walk five abreast, forcing others to step onto the road.

5) Women with double wide prams.

6) People who use mobility scooters simply because they are grossly overweight – and then block the pavement and shopping aisles.

7) Folk who do not say 'thank you' when you hold a shop door open for them.

8) People under the age of 60 who chat interminably to shop assistants and bank tellers, not because they have important information to impart or because they are lonely but because they have gossip to share.

9) Anyone who works behind the counter in a Post Office

10) People who talk loudly when using a mobile phone in a café or shop.

11) Arrogant young shop assistants who treat everyone over the age of 40 as though they are idiots. (Whose the idiot here?)

12) People (of both sexes) who parade around towns and cities with vast quantities of tattooed blubber on display. This is particularly unpleasant in cafes, bakeries, greengrocers and other shops selling comestibles.

I spent the afternoon picking a few apples. We have several dozen fruit trees and I should have been picking the fruit weeks ago. There just hasn't been time. I have consoled myself with the thought that our local representatives of the wildlife world have been having a good time. The badgers and squirrels love apples as do most of the birds. The apples from our trees tend to look awful. No shop would accept them. But they taste and smell wonderful.

12

(Gloucestershire)

If you've travelled in France, Germany, Spain or Italy recently then you will have doubtless noticed that most places seem less crowded than England. Roads are nowhere near as busy and traffic jams and holdups far less of a problem. There is more countryside, and in the towns and cities; parks, playing fields and other open places seem to have survived.

As a whole, the figures show that the United Kingdom is one of the most crowded countries in Europe. Only tiny countries such as Monaco, Gibraltar and the Vatican have more people packed into each square mile of land than Britain has. And, to be honest, they don't really count as proper, independent countries. Monaco is part of France, Gibraltar is part of the United Kingdom and the Vatican is part of Italy.

Compared to Germany, France and Spain and Italy, the United Kingdom is definitely packed and overcrowded.

But the available figures are misleading.

Within the United Kingdom, there are huge differences between the number of people packed into England and the number living in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

And the figures show clearly that England is massively overcrowded – to the point where the overcrowding is undoubtedly causing massive amounts of stress and serious, chronic illness.

The United Kingdom has a population density per square mile of 680.93 people. But if you divide that up into the four separate countries which make up the UK then the results are startling. Wales has a population density of 374.35 people per square mile, Scotland has 161.73 people per square mile and Northern Ireland has a population density of 329 individuals per square mile.

But England, which seems to be where all the immigrants want to settle, has a population density of 1052.9 people per square mile. (These figures include only those individuals who are officially registered as living in England. If illegal immigrants are included – and there are almost certainly more illegal immigrants in England than anywhere else in Europe – then the overcrowding becomes even more intense.)

All this makes England vastly overcrowded.

Just look at other EU countries: Germany has 599.09 people per square mile, France has 305.25 and Spain has 241.65 people per square mile. Romania has 306.32 people per square mile and Poland has 234.5. Portugal has 298.82 and Italy has 525.69. And so it goes throughout Europe. There is no country anywhere (other than anomalies such as the tiny principality of Monaco) which is as crowded as England.

It is clear from these figures that England should close its doors now. There is no room. It is not surprising that roads are so overcrowded that there are constant traffic jams. The average speed on English motorways is now less than 40 mph. That is less than the speed at which cars travelled before the first motorways were opened. In some parts of the country – such as the M25 – the average speed of travel is well under 30 mph because of the number of people crammed into one very small island. Back in the 1950s, my Dad would be upset if, when travelling from Walsall (which was then in Staffordshire but which has now been moved somewhere else) to Cornwall (which is, I am relieved to say, unmoved and unmoving) for our summer holidays, he didn't manage to average at least 40 mph in our second hand Morris 8. The dear old thing had an official top speed of 58 mph.

The overcrowding doesn't just mean that our roads are absurdly busy. It doesn't just mean that our hospitals and schools cannot cope. It doesn't just mean that we are, as a nation, heading for penury and, eventually, certain bankruptcy. The overcrowding is also making us ill.

In my book *Stress Control* (first published in 1978) I pointed out that studies done on human beings have shown that crime rates, mental disease, the incidence of heart attacks and strokes and the incidence of infective diseases all rise when overcrowding gets worse.

People who live in overcrowded circumstances lose their sense of personal identity, develop a tendency to accept wrongs and injustices passively and without protest and, curiously, suffer from loneliness. In overcrowded situations, differences and problems which might otherwise be tolerated become unbearable. Overcrowding causes people to become aggressive and increases criminal behaviour. Finally, overcrowding means that people are more likely to develop high blood pressure and more likely to have heart problems.

England is so overcrowded that the English are being made mentally and physically ill by excessive immigration.

Every time another planeload, boatload or trainload of immigrants arrives in England, the pressure increases. The newcomers will suffer just as much as the residents.

The evidence shows clearly that immigration must stop now.

This is not a question of politics or racism; it is a question of good health and of survival.

For the sake of those arriving, and those already here, we must call a halt to all immigration to England.

If the United Kingdom must take more immigrants then they should go directly to Scotland (which is under populated) and they must stay there.

(Devon)

There is, it seems, a widespread official campaign to ridicule and destroy Christianity. I classify myself as an irreligious Christian (I am a Christian and a believer and I try to live my life by Christian values, but I do not attend church because it seems to me that too many of the people running the church do not believe in these values) and I am appalled at the way that our leaders have deliberately tried to oppress Christianity and Christians while doing everything possible to defend the rights of Muslims, atheists and everyone who isn't a Christian.

Traditional Christian values such as compassion, respect and generosity of spirit are widely forgotten and regarded as archaic and rather twee and silly.

We worship a mixture of mammon and Allah and our lives are regulated by the requirements of the politically correct but morally deficient. We are encouraged to sneer at the values which made England great, and which allowed us to lead the world in democracy, civilisation, science, medicine and engineering. The vast majority for the world's greatest inventions were the work of Englishmen. The industrial revolution began in England. Our parliamentary democracy is a model around the world. Just about every popular sport was invented in England.

And yet now we are encouraged by politicians and the media to dismiss our history and our culture and to be embarrassed by our forebears. We are told we must apologise for having had an Empire and indeed for the glories of the Victorian age. We are even badgered into apologising for the work and generosity of great men such as Raffles and Cecil Rhodes. We are coerced into looking at great historical figures through today's distorted social values.

Our home in Devon has a long tree lined drive and I spent the afternoon sweeping up leaves. I found it an enormously satisfying. I used the new leaf blower for a while, and then tried an older, bigger leaf blower which I found in the garage, but to be honest in the end I found it far easier to just sweep the leaves into piles with a three foot wide yard broom. The problem, of course, is what do with the leaves when you've got them in nice neat piles. I put several full sacks into the incinerator (and produced a good deal of very pleasing grey smoke) but that clearly wasn't to get rid of them as fast as they were falling from the trees. I piled a few million into a huge heap on the edge of the cliff, hoping that a light breeze might take them down the cliff and out to sea but eventually, when the heap was five foot high, I had to give up that idea. In the end I found a large, hidden nook among some bushes where I could dump a huge quantity of dead leaves. As I did so, I looked round and saw that the damned things were coming down faster than I could sweep them up. It was like living in a heavy snow storm.

One of the joys of sweeping leaves is that in the end you can actually see what you've done. After just an hour or so, stretches of tarmacadam become visible and there is the driveway! The other joy is that there are no reviews. No one is going to go online and post a critical review of my leaf sweeping skills. So I thought.

I was leaning on my broom, admiring the stretch of driveway which I had cleared when I heard a voice.

I turned round and a neighbour was standing at our gate.

'It will soon look as bad as it was,' he said.

I looked at him.

'You haven't finished. There are plenty of leaves left to come down.'

I looked up.

He was right, of course. The beech trees hold on to their leaves. And our numerous hazel shrubs (technically shrubs but as big as trees) have lost hardly a leaf. We have quite a number of evergreens, conifers and yew, but most of our trees are deciduous and will be shedding leaves for another month.

'And you've missed quite a lot of leaves down there,' he added, nodding towards a leg of the driveway which I had not yet touched.

So much for there not being any reviews.

I went indoors for a cup of tea.

Afterwards Antoinette and I stood at the bottom of our garden, leaning against a metal railing a few feet away from the edge of the cliff. Down in the water we could see a seal bobbing about.

'Not many people have a seal at the bottom of their garden,' said Antoinette proudly.

14

(Devon)

We were sitting down to dinner, enjoying eating at our splendid, new 'previously owned' mahogany dining table, when suddenly Antoinette let out a high pitched screech, threw down her cutlery, stood up and started tearing off her clothes.

Startled, shocked and bewildered I stood up, putting my cutlery down on my plate, and asked what was wrong. I wasn't thinking clearly for I hadn't really noticed she had begun her personalised callisthenic programme by brushing an arm. My first thought was that Antoinette had perhaps spotted a mouse. When living in the country these things do happen from time to time.

Instead of replying, Antoinette merely carried on tearing off items of clothing. When there wasn't any more clothing to remove she started to run her fingers through her hair as though trying to remove something that she thought might be there, though she didn't quite know where it might be.

'What's the matter?' I enquired, rushing to her end of the table and carefully stepping over the cutlery and bits of food decorating the original Arts and Crafts parquet flooring. (It's one of those long tables where if there are just two diners there is a considerable distance between them. When we wish to communicate we use mobile telephones.)

'A spider!' she cried. 'There was a spider on my bare arm. It was huge. The biggest spider I've ever seen in my life.'

I looked around and spotted a nervous looking spider disappearing into a crack in the wall. It wasn't a Tarantula.

'It's gone,' I said, as reassuringly as I could.

'Are you sure?'

'Positive.'

Antoinette picked up her clothes and, having carefully examined and shaken each item, started dressing again. I helped by picking up items off the floor and taking the cutlery and food from the floor into the kitchen.

'That was awful,' she said. 'I felt something on my arm, looked down and there was this huge spider. Do you think it might have bitten me?'

I examined her forearm. There were no bite marks.

'People can die from spider bites,' she pointed out.

'They do,' I agreed.

'I'd better get some fresh cutlery,' she said. She disappeared and reappeared moments later with a fresh knife and a clean fork.

She sat down. I sat down. We resumed our meal.

It was a large spider. I didn't admit this to her but if I'd seen it on my arm I would have behaved in exactly the same way.

15

(Devon)

'No one survives a diagnosis of dementia.'

The quote is attributed to Hilary Evans, the chief executive of Alzheimer's Research UK.

Did she really say that? I suppose she must have done.

But it is not true.

The Alzheimer Industry (a convenient mixture of drug companies and charities) seems determined to ignore the facts.

(As I have shown before, many medical charities have very close links with the pharmaceutical industry. I always suspect that these links, which have financial implications, must influence the activities of those charities.)

But there is a type of dementia which can be cured.

And cured permanently.

And yet time and time again people who really should know better – doctors, charity workers and journalists – fail to tell the full facts about dementia.

There is, I fear, a conspiracy of silence among those in the Alzheimer Industry.

No one wants to discuss the one cause of dementia which can be cured: idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus.

Indeed, a partially successful attempt was made to shut down my website, which had reported the publication of the book. (This sort of thing has happened to me often when I have written about contentious medical issues.)

And yet normal pressure hydrocephalus is the commonest cause of dementia other than Alzheimer's: it affects millions. And the diagnosis is missed more than 80% of the time. Between 5% and 10% of patients diagnosed as suffering from Alzheimer's disease or dementia are in fact suffering from the curable disease idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus.

The three symptoms of idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus are:

A tendency to fall a good deal. If an elderly patient falls a lot then a diagnosis of idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus must be considered.

Dementia.

Urinary incontinence.

Why does the Alzheimer Industry refuse to publicise the truth? Why do doctors continue to suppress the evidence?

There are two very good and simple reasons.

First, idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus can be treated and cured with a simple surgical operation. But drug companies make millions out of selling drugs for the treatment of Alzheimer's disease. If patients with idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus were properly diagnosed, the demand for their drugs would plummet. And profits would fall. Sadly, many charities now work hand in glove with drug companies. So, for example, Alzheimer's Research UK (which I quoted at the start of this piece) works closely with several pharmaceutical companies.

Second, doctors in the UK are now paid when they make a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease. But they do not get paid when they make a diagnosis of normal pressure hydrocephalus. Doctors have a financial interest in over-diagnosing Alzheimer's disease.

And so the tragedy, and the scandal, continues.

I could weep. I could really weep.

Countless millions of patients with idiopathic normal pressure disease have been diagnosed as suffering from Alzheimer's disease. They have been given drugs and abandoned – left to die.

They could have been treated and cured.

And nothing is going to change.

It's business as before for the drug companies.

Meanwhile, the EU supporters are filling the news programmes with their complaints about the Referendum result.

Most of the smarmy beggars have one thing in common with the eurocrats living it up in Brussels, quaffing quails eggs and oysters at our expense: none of them has ever had a proper job. They've never had to really work for a living. They have certainly never had to run a business. They don't care about red tape or absurd regulations because they have never, ever done any proper work for a living. They live off Mum and Dad and they call themselves artists, models, musicians or writers though what they earn from the alleged employment wouldn't keep them in selfie sticks. They are above all else intrinsically selfish. They care only about themselves.

Ever since they lost the Referendum they have, like the Sturgeon woman (aka The Ego Has Landed) and the runts who inhabit the leftover remains of the Liberal Party, been screaming about the unfairness of life and the cruelty of the voters who rejected Hitler's United States of Europe.

These are the sort of 'never my fault' whingers who sue McDonalds when they get fat and, when they go to sporting events, wear fancy dress so that they can be picked up by the television cameras. They spend £25,000 on a wedding and then complain that they cannot afford to put down a deposit on a house which they will be able to buy at an utterly derisory interest rate. (Their parents would have paid 10%, 12%, or 15% or more on their loan than the Entitlement Generation are paying – and still the graceless, ungrateful little bastards whinge and moan.). They are utterly self-obsessed; always aggressive, never courteous. They love anything that can be defined as progress, however pointless, as long as they can take the credit for it. And they worship disruption unless it is something of which they themselves do not approve (such as leaving the EU).

These sad and sorry citizens, who are utterly incapable of thinking for themselves and who remind me of the zombies in the films 'The Cell' and 'Cockneys v Zombies', have now found an answer to their self-imposed despair.

They have decided that they now want to be allowed to become special individual members of the EU. Presumably, they want to be awarded personalised EU passports, their brown shirts, their marching boots and their little swastika flags so that they too can celebrate the Nazi dream of a grand Teutonic Superstate.

And the EU, desperate for any attempt to embarrass Britain and the British, will doubtless welcome these lunatics as special members.

There is already talk that those who elect to be special individual members of the EU will be entitled to travel within the EU, buy a home in the EU, buy products made in the EU and make friends with people who live in EU countries. I wonder when the poor deluded dears will realise that they will still be able to do all those things when Britain leaves the European Union.

As usual, the eurocrats are offering absolutely nothing in return for money and allegiance. And only complete morons could be fooled by such nonsense. But then, that's the remainers through and through isn't it?

This afternoon, a neighbour told me that he has received a letter from the council telling him that he is not allowed to have bonfires on his land. Someone has apparently complained and the council has spoken.

The neighbour was burning ivy which he and his gardener had pulled from trees and fences and he isn't quite sure what he is supposed to do with similar stuff in the future. I had always thought that it was a man's right to have a bonfire if he lived in the country and if I receive such a letter from the council I shall put it into the incinerator and set fire to it. There are many things in a large garden which cannot possibly be put onto a compost heap because they are too woody. (We have three large compost heaps in Devon and three more in the Cotswolds so we are doing our bit for the world of composting.)

I pointed out to our neighbour that unless his bonfires are excessively frequent or particularly toxic to humans, there is nothing that the council can do to stop him burning his garden rubbish. I suggested that he tell the council that if they won't let him burn the waste then they will have to send a lorry round and dispose of the stuff themselves. I suspect that they won't like that. Local councils are full of petty bureaucrats who believe they have the right to make up laws and to be obeyed by everyone with whom they come into contact; they genuinely seem to believe that their employment by a statutory body entitles them to boss other citizens around. Well, yah boo sucks to them.

Seeing his huge bundles of ivy reminds me that we have a number of trees which need attention because of the ivy climbing up them. I love ivy, it provides homes and food for numerous creatures, but if can topple a tree if it gets too high. The weight of the ivy can be tremendous and if the ivy reaches the tree's crown the result can be serious damage. I usually leave the ivy in situ when I have cut through the stem, since even dead it can provide homes for millions of creatures, but I know enough about trees to know that it is important not just to cut through the ivy stem but to remove a short piece of ivy to prevent the two cut ends joining up again.

Two pigeons were busy copulating in a tree in our garden.

Antoinette suggests that this probably means that we are in for a mild winter. If the pigeons are planning a family they probably know that there won't be any snow or freezing weather booked for the next few months. I'm sure she is probably right. I'd put good money on pigeons being better forecasters than the Meteorological Office. Come to think of it, old men with bits of seaweed make better forecasters than the Meteorological Office.

16

(Devon)

It occurred to me today that it might be fun to buy a boat. Nothing flashy; nothing that the Greeds would call a boat. Something simple that floats. Since we now live no more than 100 feet from the sea, and have a Jolly Roger flying from our flagpole, it seems that this is probably the right time to become nautical. It will be something pointless to look forward to – something which has nothing whatsoever to do with the damned Internet.

17

(Devon)

Most of us ordinary mortals have to bear the pain when currency rates go up and down. Most of my income is in dollars because I earn my money by selling books abroad. I was surprised to see, however, that British MEPs are immune to currency changes. British MEPs are now being given a £1,000 a month bonus so that they don't suffer now that the pound has declined against the euro. I'm not sure why MEPs should be immune to the sort of financial problems which affect the rest of us.

Out of the blue I had a postcard today from a fellow I haven't seen for years.

He used to be a television producer. I remember that he produced a series of programmes based on one of my books and when I attended one filming session he sat me down with three men I had never met before.

Just before the cameras started rolling, the producer told me that two of the men were schizophrenics and the third was a mental health social worker. 'You have got three minutes to talk to them,' he said. 'At the end of that time I'm going to come into shot and ask you tell the viewers which of the two men are schizophrenics and who is the social worker.'

This was done 'as live' as television people like to say. In other words what happened in those three minutes would appear on the television screen.

It was, I think, the scariest three minutes of my television career. I was well aware that I would look a complete idiot if I diagnosed the social worker as being schizophrenic.

Fortunately, I got it right.

It was a nasty moment though.

18

(Devon)

The biggest lie in the world is: 'If you really want something and you work really hard then you will achieve your dream'.

It is a lie which is told time and time again by people who have been successful in show business, sport and the world of entertainment. And it is absolute bollocks. It is the lie told by those who have achieved their dream and do not want to admit that their success was, more than anything, down to luck.

The Commonwealth Secretary General, a woman called Patricia Scotland is alleged to have spent £450,000 of public money doing up her grace-and favour flat in Mayfair. It appears that she ordered wallpaper worth £10,500 and £5000 to refurbish a safe. This is, of course, quite the norm among politicians and civil servants who clearly treat public money as being more like Monopoly money than the real stuff. The absurdly named Baroness Scotland insists that the allegations are nonsense. She claims that the bill for doing up the flat is closer to £330,000. So, presumably, she thinks that is acceptable.

The company which provides hosting services for my websites is a disaster and seems to me to be neither as efficient nor as friendly as British Telecom or British Gas. The people who work there don't answer the phone very often and when they do I don't think they have much idea what day of the week it is. When talking to one of them about a problem the other day he said: 'Is yours the website with a picture of an old bloke in a mac on the first page?'

I have however noticed that the part of their operation which sends out bills always seems to function perfectly well and is never slow to send out demands. They pour in like hail by email and even by snail mail. (It's nice to know that they're not too proud to use old-fashioned methods of gouging money out of customers.) But, in my experience, that's where the efficiency begins and ends. I have lost count of the number of emails I have received telling me that I owe money, that money is about to be taken from my credit card, that if I do not pay this or that bill then I will no longer be allowed to breathe or make red blood cells.

It's a horrid company which I heartily recommend to anyone who feels life is too easy.

If life is going well and you join up with this lot you will, like Mark Tapley in Martin Chuzzlewit, soon find yourself facing a worthwhile challenge to your cheeriness.

19

(Devon)

I went into a shop and picked out the thickest sweater I could find.

'How much is it?' I asked the young male assistant when I'd tried it on.

'£50' he replied, having consulted the label.

'Hmm,' I said, thoughtfully. 'I tell you what, I'll give you £50 for it.'

He looked at me, frowning. 'I'm sorry, I don't have the authority to do that,' he said, very apologetically.

20

(Gloucestershire)

Here is another collection of my eavesdroppings:

'We've got one of those new round houses.' 'Round?' 'Yes, the builder specialises in corner cutting.'

'I looked at my medical notes while I was in the hospital. They'd put PIA by my name. Do you know what that means?' 'I think it means 'pain in the ass'.'

'He took me to a fish restaurant called Cod-on-Bleu.'

I got up because I thought it was quarter past six but the clock was upside down and it was nine o'clock.'

'He doesn't get on with his in-laws. When they send him and his wife an anniversary card they address it to her but leave him off the card.'

'She wore a dress which didn't come within hailing distance of her knees.'

'I can't stand people who exaggerate. They should be hung, drawn and quartered.'

'She was a city girl. When she was six she saw some horse manure for the first time and she was terrified of meeting a dog that big.'

'She was born with a mouth for sneering – and had eyes to match.'

'Optimism, not laughter, is the best medicine.'

'She said barking dogs don't bite but that's rubbish. They may not bark and bite at the same time but they can do both.'

'He had a lot of affairs but he was unemployed at the time and had a lot of time on his hands.'

'If he lives long enough and talks enough even an idiot will say something sensible once or twice in a lifetime.'

'Kindness is the most important human quality. It's the basis of all other good qualities.'

‘I’m English. If you tread on my feet I apologise. If you stole my wallet, banged into my car and ran off with my wife I’d apologise and feel guilty for a month. Possibly two.’

‘They’ve never been a lucky couple. They went to Spain on their honeymoon and both got badly sunburnt on their first day there. They spent the rest of the week both lying on their stomachs. It can’t have been much of a honeymoon.’

‘She was one of those people made entirely of gristle.’

‘He used to be a gynaecologist and he’s retired now but he still works on Wednesdays at the hospital. He says he wants to keep his hand in.’

‘They didn’t have a condom so he used a crisp packet. It can’t have been much fun for either of them.’

‘He’s never been very good at it but he says practice makes you not as bad.’

‘Their alcohol consumption was staggering and to be honest so were they.’

‘You’d have thought they would have got on well together; both being foreign.’

‘If you think about it, cleavage is always fake.’

‘His mum wanted him to go to a chickenpox party but he caught it two days before and wasn’t well enough to go.’

‘I like to talk to myself when I am alone. I know that what I hear will be worth listening to and that I won’t be interrupted.’

‘He drove his car into a ditch and woke up surrounded by men in white. He thought he’d died and gone to heaven. Then he thought that he was, perhaps, in hospital. It took him a while to realise that there was a cricket match going on in the field next to the ditch where he’d crashed and then men around him were all cricketers.’

21

(Gloucestershire)

We woke up this morning and discovered that some of Storm Angus had decided to take refuge from itself and hide in our living room. Water was pouring through the ceiling and the television set, Sky box and DVD player were all as drenched as if they had been taking a shower. Water was pouring in just a couple of inches away from my bar billiard table; a beloved and reconditioned original from an English pub.

Outside there are many signs of the storm. Branches had been brought down and the wind had been strong enough to blow over wooden benches. I am always surprised at how easily wooden benches can be upturned. They are heavy and have gaps between the slats in the back. But they were on their backs, looking rather sad.

I knew immediately why the water was coming into the house.

One of our roof valleys has proved popular with nesting magpies but, unfortunately, when they left the nest, they didn’t bother to clear up after themselves. Maybe they were planning to come back and reuse the site. Anyway, the result is that the valley is clogged with debris and so instead of running away into the appropriate gutter, the rainwater has been pooling in the valley and overflowing into the house.

I am an idiot. I should have called a man in to deal with the problem weeks ago. In fact, I did try but I simply couldn’t find a roofer prepared to come out for such a small job.

If we had a long enough ladder I could have done it myself. All I require is a long stick or pole with which to drag out the debris. I could use my long handled pruner. But I need a longish ladder. And I need the courage to go up. I’ve never been good with heights but in recent years my wobbliness has made me cautious.

I can’t help remembering that the unfortunate Rod Hull, the intelligent half of the puppet called Emu, died when he fell from the roof of his bungalow while fiddling with his TV aerial.

With hope far greater than expectation I telephoned a roofer who had an advert in a local free magazine. It was another one of those promising ‘No job too small’ adverts.

I left an appropriately pathetic, wheedling message on his machine with a hint that if he came and sorted out our immediate problem then there would be more work available in the form of reworking the valley so that this problem does not return.

‘I can’t come today because it’s raining,’ he said when he rang back. ‘I’ll have to wait until it’s stopped.’

This, I confess, rather surprised me. If the guy only works when it isn’t raining he can’t possibly work more than half the year.

I pointed out that the job would take only five or ten minutes and require the clearing of a small roof valley. I promised the loan of a waterproof coat, ample supplies of cash money and a hot drink as a reward.

But he would not budge.

‘It might stop raining tomorrow,’ he said. ‘If it does, I’ll come and have a look at it then.’

And so we wait, impatiently, for a roofer to come and clear out our valley.

Later, as our living room ceiling started to crumble and water poured in so fast that we were using every bucket and bin we could find I telephoned again and left a message offering to pay whatever it took.

He came. He saw. He conquered. He is our saviour.

Our valley is cleaned. My wallet is a little lighter. Never was money more readily and happily spent.

Later in the day, I met a bloke I haven't seen for years. 'You look good!' he said. This, of course, is newspeak for 'Gosh! You're still alive.'

He showed me a news story reporting that the CEO of Ryanair is looking for an assistant.

With a commendable lack of self-importance the CEO, Michael O'Leary, has allowed the company to advertise the job as 'the worst job in Ireland'. They are, apparently, looking for someone prepared for 'general drudgery' and applicants should have a 'saint like patience' and an 'aversion to bolloxology'. Inexplicably, applicants should be able to bring with them their own collection of nursery rhymes and bedtime stories. The company adds that fans of Manchester United football club need not apply and nor need cyclists. Anyone in either group will be 'tracked down and shot'.

What a joy to see someone whose sense of humour exceeds their sense of political correctness.

22

(Gloucestershire)

I had to drive to the nearest Post Office to collect a parcel which had been left there by Parcel Force.

It took me an hour to collect the parcel (there was, as usual, a huge and very slow queue in the Post Office) and I will not do this again. Parcel Force is the only company which does this and if they do it again then the parcel can sit there until it decays. The Parcel Force driver told me that he will no longer bring parcels to our home because there are some leaves on the road and they are occasionally quite wet and, therefore, an unacceptable hazard.

I have noticed that the leaves tend to fall off the trees during the autumn months and they get wet when it rains. No other courier drivers have found our brand of leaves to be a particular problem.

I sent an email to Parcel Force asking that they refrain from accepting parcels intended for our address or that if that is not possible they simply return them direct to the sender since when I order something by mail I expect it to come by mail and not for me to have to go and collect it. Parcel Force replied with some instructions telling me how to get items redelivered. Unfortunately, this will presumably mean waiting until the spring and even then there is no real guarantee that there won't be any leaves on the road.

They also asked me to give them the delivery number of the parcels which have not yet been delivered so that someone in management can check and find out why they haven't been received. I have told them that I'll consult a psychic and get back to them.

I think I am going to stop ordering by mail.

The complications which ensue when carriers or parcels get lost are hideously time consuming.

I am going to go back to doing all my shopping in real shops where I can hand over money in return for immediate possession of the item I wish to purchase. This is what I now intend to call 'regressive progress'.

As an afterthought to the day, why is that every time I see a bus these days it is always heading for a place called 'Sorry Not in Service'? I have no idea where it is, but it must be crowded.

23

(Gloucestershire)

We went to Bourton on the Water and, having purchased hot coffee from the small, local supermarket, had a picnic by the river.

There are, quite rightly and not at all unreasonably, always loads of tourists in Bourton (mostly from Japan and China) and they seem to find it odd that anyone should have a picnic when the temperature has struggled to rise above freezing. But, as long as you wrap up in warm clothing, it's the best time of year to eat outdoors. There are no flies, no wasps and no competition for benches beside the river. We ate alone. The Japanese took their usual photographs to send back to Tokyo, proving to their friends that the English are barking mad.

Antoinette did admit at one point that her fingers were so cold that she couldn't feel them.

'When you bite into what you think is a sandwich make sure you stop if you see blood,' I advised her.

I think she was grateful for this thought.

We both love Bourton, although, like everywhere on the planet, it has its modest faults.

Today we spotted a sign near the river Windrush which flows through the centre of the village.

'Do Not Feed the Ducks.' shouted the sign, without a 'please' in sight.

We thought it a silly sign so we fed the ducks.

Whoever put up the sign clearly does not realise that the ducks are an integral part of Bourton's charm.

There is an excellent Christmas shop in Bourton and as usual we bought another bag full of ornaments. And we bought another box of Christmas crackers. I think we now have 80 crackers for two of us to pull over the holidays. Foolishly I have spent a fortune on them. I hope they are full of joyful nonsenses. We are going to be the only people to develop repetitive strain injury from pulling crackers. The assistant told us that everyone she serves is happy because they're buying Christmas ornaments and other delights.

If we can find the right premises we have decided that we would like to open a Christmas shop of our own. Selling Christmas tree decorations and so on appeals to us because Christmas is a genuinely wonderful celebration and most of our customers will be happy. How can you be miserable when you're picking out Christmas ornaments? These aren't boring and essential purchases.

And we would have a chance to put more of Christ back into Christmas.

In our politically correct world there are now many shops (particularly national chains and charity shops) which bend over backwards and sideways to avoid linking Christianity with Christmas.

Our first thought was that in order to circumvent the problem of the employment regulations we would make it a charity shop, with all the profits going to a defined charity, and then ask the charity to provide us with volunteers. There will still be plenty of red tape to deal with but at least we wouldn't have to try to cope with the awful regulations which are destroying small businesses by the thousand.

But then we realised that we would have to hand over too much control to the charity we chose and the project would, as a result, be unworkable.

So we decided we would have to face the agonies of the EU's invasive employment legislation.

I bought a local paper (mainly for fire lighting purposes) and learned that the Christmas lights in a nearby town will be switched on by a national celebrity. The celebrity turned out to be a woman who initially made her name on a reality television show, graduated to appearances on 'celebrity' shows, segued painlessly into a job escorting participants on and off a game show and is now an occasional weather presenter. She is the modern celebrity. I read somewhere that her second autobiography is coming out in time for Christmas. It will doubtless be a huge bestseller in The Works and other outlets which specialise in books which have been remaindered before they have been published.

I am glad I've decided to stop ordering stuff by mail.

Today, a retailer told me that a female employee of the carrier Hermes had refused to deliver a (not particularly heavy) package to us because it was too much for her to handle. The failure to deliver this particular parcel has caused us considerable annoyance and wasted a good deal of time. (I must have exchanged around 20 emails with the supplier.) It doesn't seem to be in the spirit of equality that a woman can take a job she cannot do. I bet Hermes can't sack her even though they surely should be able to. I can lift two of these boxes and Antoinette can carry much heavier parcels.

24

(Gloucestershire)

I was sitting in the conservatory (which we manage to keep quite cosy with the aid of two radiators and an electric heater) when I heard an annoying buzzing. It wasn't a chainsaw or a lawnmower. It was, I decided, either a strimmer or a leaf blower.

'That bloody noise has been going on for half an hour,' I moaned, when Antoinette appeared. 'Someone is blowing leaves about.'

'No they're not,' she said.

'Yes, they are,' I insisted. 'Listen!'

'Well they may be, but that isn't the noise you can hear,' she said. 'There's a wasp trying to get out.'

She opened the conservatory door. The wasp left. The noise stopped.

That wasn't my only act of stupidity for the day.

We had two large bags of stuff in the kitchen. Both of them were tied at the top. One bag was for me to put into the incinerator. The other bag contained laundry which we were taking from one house to the other.

I burnt the laundry and put the rubbish into the back of the car.

We drove off afterwards to Cheltenham.

Antoinette spotted one passenger taking pictures of other drivers with his mobile phone. We both assumed that she was targeting drivers whom she felt had in some way broken the law. This business of dobbing in fellow citizens to the authorities has become a national pastime. There are thousands of motorists who have dashboard cameras fixed into the cars so that they can film what other motorists do. And of course there are also thousands of cyclists pedalling around with cameras attached to their helmets. All then upload their little films to the Internet and do their best to humiliate their victims.

I have suggested to Antoinette that in future she should carry one of my books. If she sees anyone filming me she can then hold up a copy of the book and get us some free advertising.

In the evening, we watched the third version of The Lady Vanishes. It was awful. Was this really based on the same story which Hitchcock dealt with so deftly? The second version, starring Elliot Gould, was infinitely better than this piece of modern nonsense.

Where on earth were the cricket loving Englishmen who stole the previous two versions? Eradicated, presumably, because they were definitively English.

I found the film particularly depressing because the lead female character was irredeemably horrid. I don't think I have ever seen a more unpleasant female character on the screen.

Since Frank Capra gave us lead characters, usually played by Jimmy Stewart or Gary Cooper, with whom we could identify, cinema audiences have always identified with lead characters.

It is scary to think that film makers expect their audiences to feel any sympathy towards such an awful character as the one in the latest version of The Lady Vanishes.

The people who made the film had confused irresponsibility (the trait exhibited by the first two actresses who played the part) with sheer, unadultered selfishness and nastiness: the dominant traits of the Entitlement Generation.

The film had good reviews so the producer, director and writer clearly got their market right. But it is that which I find so depressing. Are members of the Entitlement Generation (for whom the film was clearly made) really so lacking in any sense of judgement? I suppose they must be for they seem to approve a character who exhibits traits which could accurately be described as sociopathic.

Patricia Highsmith, and the makers of films about Tom Ripley, did not expect us to like Ripley. And liking him was not an essential part of the film. In The Lady Vanishes we need to like the female lead and so we are required to like and admire a sociopath. No wonder the world is in a mess.

25

(Devon)

We heard a noise which sounded as though there was someone upstairs.

'Get the gun!' shouted Antoinette.

I looked at her. 'We don't have a gun,' I said softly. 'There's a burglar in the house,' said Antoinette very loudly. 'Get the gun!'

I got it at last.

'Oh yes, the gun!' I said. I looked round and spotted a huge pile of balloons that were left over from Antoinette's birthday celebrations. I find it difficult to burst balloons and usually just wait for them to go down.

I picked up as many balloons as I could and headed for the hall. 'I'll just test the gun,' I said loudly. 'Make sure it's loaded.'

I pulled out my penknife and burst one of the balloons. I wasn't entirely sure that it didn't simply sound like a bursting balloon but I've never heard a pistol being fired and maybe the burglar hadn't either.

The pair of us then headed upstairs with me firing my 'pistol' at random moments.

There was no one there, of course.

But we could hear a heavy footed squirrel in the attic. Antoinette played a recording of a buzzard and the noise stopped.

At least we got rid of some of the old balloons and they died in a moderately good cause.

26

(Devon)

There seems to be very little interest among doctors and researchers in the reason why Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia are on the rise.

I have two theories.

First, electronic gadgets of one sort and another have changed people's habits and today many people never bother to use their brain. They don't use it to do calculations and they don't try to remember things.

Second, in many countries mobile phone usage has rocketed at the same pace as dementia. Is that a coincidence or cause and effect?

If it’s cause and effect then it seems unlikely that the rise in the incidence of dementia has caused increased mobile phone usage. It seems more likely to be the other way around.

Twenty odd years ago I wrote a number of articles expressing concern about the safety of mobile telephones. I still think the fears were justified. But it will probably be another twenty years before there is clear evidence showing that mobile telephones cause brain cancer – particularly in children.

27

(Gloucestershire)

A teenage boy on a bicycle swore loudly at an elderly couple who were rude enough to be walking on the pavement where he planned to ride his machine. The boy, who was wearing one of those hooded tops which meant that his face was almost invisible, and who had been forced to halt because parked cars meant that he could not bump down the kerb and onto the road, glared and swore some more.

‘Go away and die!’ snarled the youth. ‘You’re nearly dead anyway.’

The old man stopped, paused and looked at the boy. ‘What makes you think you’re going to live longer than me?’ he asked.

The teenager stared at him.

‘Anyone can die at any age,’ said the old man quietly, and with a quiet dignity. ‘If you die today you will have drawn a very short straw. I, on the other hand, will have had a long and largely pleasurable life.’

The boy lifted his head and looked at him. He then rode on very slowly as if struggling to digest this piece of slightly alarming and completely unexpected piece of information.

28

(Gloucestershire)

We watched Citizen Kane again and marvelled at the precocity of Orson Welles who produced, directed and starred in one of the cinema’s great masterpieces.

Welles liked to give the impression that he wrote the original screenplay too but he didn’t (though he rather dishonestly managed to take advantage of his contract with the studio – which allowed him to take credit for any screenplay with which he was associated – to fiddle himself a shared Oscar as co-writer).

The screenplay was actually written by Herman Mankiewicz, though to be more precise he dictated it to a secretary since he was in bed at the time recovering from a broken leg.

Mankiewicz’s three hobbies were drinking, falling over and breaking limbs and he managed to combine the three very effectively.

Mankiewicz’s drinking led him into an endless series of embarrassing situations but even when drunk he maintained his sharp wit. He once threw up on the dining table of a punctilious producer called Arthur Hornblow Jr.

As the other guests stared in horror Makiewitz turned to the producer and said: ‘Don’t worry Arthur. The white wine came up with the fish.’

It is odd that Makiewitz broke so many bones when falling. Usually, drunks are relatively safe when they fall over because they aren’t alert enough to tense up when they fall. And it’s tensing up of the muscles which leads to broken bones.

29

(Gloucestershire)

Although Britons voted overwhelmingly to leave the EU, our leaving is now being threatened by a legal action brought by two foreign born immigrants.

A woman called Gina Miller, who is married to a bloke called ‘Mr Hedge Fund’ (who made a reputed £30 million in the City) and who was born in British Guyana is one of the people bringing the legal case in an attempt to overthrow democracy.

The other person who brought the action is a hairdresser called Dier Dos Santos who was born in Brazil.

So the wishes of 17 million Britons are now under threat because of a woman from Guyana and a bloke from Brazil. Only in Britain could this happen.

The fascists who run the European Union must be thrilled. Adolf Hitler, Walther Funk, Herman Goering, Benito Mussolini, Reinhard Heydrich and Edward Heath must be having a party down there in Hell. Their dream of German domination is almost certainly still alive.

One bunch of judges has already decided in favour of Miller and Dos Santos.

So I rather suspect that when the Supreme Court gets round to producing their verdict it will sustain the views of the two rather than the views of the 17 million. And two immigrants, a woman from British Guiana (who seems to me to be the smuggest, most self-satisfied woman I have seen in my life) and a hairdresser from Brazil, will have used the law to defeat the will of the British electorate in the battle for democracy and freedom from Nazi born tyranny.

I wonder how many people know that the Supreme Court, which sounds very ancient and grand, dates back to the distant days of 2009, was set up so that the British would satisfy the demands of the European Convention on Human Rights. The ECHR was, surprise, surprise, so closely linked to the European Union that both have the same silly flag and Teutonic anthem.

So, let’s make this clear:

The British Parliament gave the British people a Referendum. It was agreed by Parliament that the Government would act according to the wishes of the British people.

The British people voted clearly to leave the European Union.

The Supreme Court, which was set up to satisfy the EU, agreed with two immigrants that the will of the British people must be ignored. As, indeed, must the will of Parliament which, don’t forget, gave the British people the right to determine whether or not we stayed in the EU or left.

So much for democracy EU style.

Britain has become addicted to making decisions based on the wishes of the minority but really, this is absurd. I always thought that Parliament made the laws and the judiciary were responsible for making sure that they were followed. But now, it seems, judges will take it upon themselves to tell Parliament what it can and cannot do. It seems rather akin to a parlour maid telling the Duke and Duchess of Tiddlebury that they can’t have a dinner party on Saturday but that they can have one the following Tuesday.

The tragedy is that all this chaos is destroying Britain’s economic future.

Those who love the EU and hate Britain will doubtless claim that the economic chaos these court proceedings will inevitably produce are a result of Brexit.

But they’ll be wrong.

The mess will be a result of the inability of the few to accept the truth, the facts and the view of the majority.

The anti-Brexit campaigners have already cost Britain an estimated £65 billion.

The figure mounts with every day the Remainers continue to refuse to accept the result of the referendum and the will of the British people.

30

(Gloucestershire)

I looked on eBay for some Windeze tablets. They contain simeticone (a mixture of hydrated silica gel and polydimethylsiloxane) and are therefore excellent for dealing with the intestinal wind which is an inevitable consequence of over-indulging.

At first I looked on my brand new iPad where I found that I could buy one pack of 30 tablets for £5.39 with free postage. The battery then ran out and so I looked on my iPhone. There, to my astonishment, I found that I could buy exactly the same product, still post free, for £4.82.

Disbelieving I checked this an hour or so later.

And the prices were still the same.

The same product was available notably cheaper on my iPhone than on my iPad.

Life is something of a mystery to me. The Internet is a total mystery to me.

December

1

(Gloucestershire)

The latest big news in the world of medicine is the discovery that the incidence of colon cancer is soaring.

And the teenage experts who have popped out of school to offer their commentary have deduced that the problem is caused by people eating too much meat. Well, there's a huge surprise for you.

It has been well known for decades that meat causes cancer. The scientific evidence supporting the existence of this relationship is well established and incontrovertible.

But the problem is that the meat industry is too powerful and will not allow the truth to be shared with the public.

When, in the 1980s and 1990s, I wrote articles and columns drawing attention to the link between eating meat and acquiring cancer I was widely banned. The Press Complaints Commission forbad me to repeat the allegation. The Advertising Standards Authority (which is actually a private body paid for largely by big companies) castigated me and told me that I could not run advertisements for my book *Food for Thought* because it contained evidence that meat causes cancer.

I offered both organisations copies of more than two dozen scientific papers proving my point. But the PCC and the ASA weren't interested in the facts.

Even publications which were prepared to ignore the ASA refused ads. So, for example, Ian Hislop's magazine *Private Eye* refused to run an advertisement for *Food for Thought*.

I was told that Hislop, the little weed, thought that the advert might upset his readers. Maybe he thought them unable to cope with the truth.

The result is that hundreds of thousands of people died unnecessarily.

And those deaths can be blamed on the Press Complaints Commission and the Advertising Standards Authority.

The really shocking truth is that meat causes more cancer than tobacco.

2

(Gloucestershire)

We went to Cheltenham.

Apart from a few isolated Christmas trees and some coloured lights in a few small shops you'd have had a job to know that Christmas is less than a month away.

A few years ago the council and the shops would have clubbed together and paid for some recorded carols. Today the only sounds came from a solitary busker playing carols on a trumpet.

It's misplaced political correctness I suppose. Town councils and big store chains don't dare celebrate the main event on the Christian calendar in case our visitors (or their sympathisers) are offended.

It annoys me enormously. We will definitely be celebrating Christmas.

Antoinette put up and decorated our beautiful tree. Every year I tell her that it's better than ever. And every year I am absolutely right because we've got more decorations and pretty lights. Annoyingly, some decorations which Antoinette bought from a National Trust shop came without hooks or string so we have to find some suitable cotton and thread the baubles before we can hang them on the tree. That's just mean and rather typical of the National Trust.

We will celebrate Christmas with wonderful food, gifts, crackers and endless log fires with well dried hard wood logs in the starring role. Meat eaters always wonder what vegetarians eat over the holidays. Believe me, we eat well. But we will also remember what Christmas is about and what we are remembering and celebrating.

Two women glared at us today and muttered something, rather loudly, about my being much older than Antoinette or she being much younger than me. There are, sadly, people out and about who like to stick their noses into other people's lives. One of the women wore a grey coat and the other wore one of those puffy anoraks, in a rather nauseous shade of purple, and a pair of pink trousers that might have fitted someone with a considerably small bottom.

'How's your husband?' I asked the woman in the grey coat. I spoke in a loud voice. Several people turned round and looked at us.

'When's he due out?' I continued. 'The judge only gave him four years didn't he?'

The woman opened and shut her mouth like a politician asked to tell the truth.

‘And yours?’ I said to the woman in the purple anorak.’ He went down at the same time didn’t he? Sheep wasn’t it?’

The two women, blushing and looking as if they wanted to be somewhere else, hurried away into the crowds.

Two things occurred to me today.

First, in several chain store shops I noticed that the assistants who I had seen in the past had all disappeared and have been replaced by much younger assistants. Could this possibly be a consequence of the fact that the Government has pushed up the minimum wage for staff members who are over the age of 25?

Companies which wish to keep their profits high enough to continue paying obscene salaries and bonuses to directors and executives, routinely fire older staff when the minimum wage rises. The inevitable result is poorer service in shops and restaurants. It won’t be long before cafés will have the automatic self-service coffee machines which are already popular in petrol stations. Drinks will be served in waxed cardboard containers and customers will be asked to clear their own tables and put their rubbish into the bins provided.

Second, I also noticed that the number of people smoking roll-up cigarettes is increasing rapidly. I would guess that this is a consequence of the rise in the price of cigarettes. The Government’s policy has pushed people into smoking much more dangerous products. How many cigarette smokers put filters onto their cigarettes when they roll their own?

These are just two examples of the way that governments make things worse when they fiddle around and try to influence the world with too much fine tuning.

I have in the past already pointed out banning smoking in pubs has led to more and more people drinking at home with booze they buy at the supermarket. It is, of course, well known that because the booze bought in shops is much cheaper than the booze bought in pubs people who drink alone tend to drink more.

We watched our DVD of the film Conspiracy Theory starring Mel Gibson, for the umpteenth time. The film also stars Julia Roberts but Gibson steals the movie, as he usually does.

Thanks largely to comments he made about Jews in Hollywood Gibson is now a largely forgotten figure but he is one of the very few action hero actors who could also play comedy convincingly.

His version of Richard Stark’s character Parker is the best since Lee Marvin first appeared in the role in the film Point Blank.

3

(Gloucestershire)

A pal of mine who is a hospital consultant was talking about his work with great enthusiasm. He specialises in gastroenterology.

‘He clearly believes there is poetry in motions,’ said Antoinette, when he’d gone.

Today is our wedding anniversary. We lit a roaring log fire, opened a bottle of Bollinger and settled down for an evening of Good films. We watched The Third Man and The Thirty Nine Steps. Bliss.

Tomorrow we will continue to watch two American television series Elementary and the West Wing. Johnny Lee Miller is brilliant as Sherlock Holmes. We’re watching the latter for the umpteenth time and everyone is brilliant.

4

(Paris)

I do miss the sparrows and pigeons in Paris. Oh, there are still some around. But today Antoinette and I walked for two miles through Paris without seeing a single pigeon. I had a bag full of bread crumbs and pigeon food (a local shop sells bags of seed for pigeon fanciers) and I was surreptitiously dropping a handful here and a handful there without attracting any takers. When we got back to the apartment I sprinkled two handfuls of seed on the window sill and half a dozen pigeons arrived. They were clearly starving hungry. I haven’t seen a sparrow in Paris for years.

Things are no better back in Gloucestershire. The squirrels have all been shot, there are no butterflies and there are very few birds. It isn’t surprising. The people who farm the nearby land have chopped down most of the trees and torn up the hedgerows and replaced them with barbed wire. Now there is nowhere for birds to nest and nothing for them to eat. We have seen at first hand the despoliation of the countryside.

Our cliff top home, however, is a joy. We have rabbits on the lawn, squirrels having a great time in several huge hazel and beech trees, and a rookery behind the house which is enormous. We have a raven too. (We don’t like to talk about the seagulls.)

Meanwhile, we continue to plan for the sale of the apartment in Paris. It is, however, going slowly. Today I received a quote to move some of our belongings back to the UK. The estimate was absurdly high. It will be cheaper to wrap up everything and post it all back to England.

5

(Paris)

I picked up a book in French which has on the cover a note telling readers that the volume is suitable for readers who have a vocabulary of 1,000 words. Books of this type always puzzle me for how do the publishers know that my 1,000 words are the same as their 1,000 words? I have in the past easily read some books with this number of French words while other books, making the same claim, have required constant reference to a dictionary.

Antoinette bought me a gift of an excellent penknife. (I have an embarrassingly large collection of penknives). Only after she had purchased it did she realise that it is emblazoned with the initials BG. We spent some time trying to decide why and tried to think of all the celebrities whose initials are BG. Billy Graham? Billy Gates? Barrie Gibb? Bamber Gasgoine? Brian Glover? Bob Geldof? Bobby George? All seemed unlikely advocates of penknifery. Eventually we discovered that the initials apparently stand for someone called Bare Grills or Bear Grylls who is a television performer of some kind. Antoinette was embarrassed at having purchased a knife celebrating a television person and so we decided that if anyone asks we will say that the letters BG stand for British Gas.

6

(Paris)

A fellow in our apartment building tells us that he gets up at 5.30 a.m. every morning to go for a run around the Eiffel Tower. He then spends 45 minutes at a gym lifting weights and so on. Then, after a yoghurt and a spinach drink he goes to work. He repeats the exercise in reverse at the end of each day. He tells me that he is doing all this so that he can stay fit and healthy. He looks drained, exhausted and fit for nothing. It does not seem much of a way to live.

I read that big mail order companies are planning to minimise packaging. This is a definitely a good thing but I'll believe it when I see it. Even with a couple of incinerators I find it difficult to get rid of all the unnecessary plastic and cardboard wrapped around everything we purchase. We have created a world in which everything is highly packaged and the EU has made it impossible for any of us to get rid of the damned stuff.

Ostensibly, the aim is to cut waste (though obviously the real aim is to cut costs) but the attitude of some of the teenage sustainability specialists worries me. 'Wrapping paper has no value,' said one 'director of worldwide sustainability and social responsibility'.

Tell that to a five-year-old on Christmas morning.

The phrase 'babies and bath water' springs to mind.

7

(Paris)

Antoinette downloaded an audio book designed to improve her knowledge of Mandarin (which is already considerable). The book instructs her to listen to the audio for 'the five minutes before going to sleep'. I am puzzled by this. How will she, or anyone else for that matter, know which are the five minutes before they go to sleep?

Paris gets sadder by the day. Apart from the huge numbers of immigrants now crowding the streets and the barricades of concrete and wire around bomb targets such as the Eiffel Tower the city is, for the first time ever, filthy with rubbish. Cafés and shops are closing and there is an air of despair and despondency everywhere. The only new shops opening are souvenir shops selling cheap scarves and models of the Eiffel Tower. These take up the remaining years of the leases on shops that have gone out of business and they are mostly run by foreigners.

I always felt rather cross with people who complained that Paris wasn't as it used to be in the days of Ernest Hemingway, F Scott Fitzgerald, James Joyce and Gertrude Stein. It still had enormous charm and the physical beauty of the city was unchanged.

But today Paris isn't as it used to be. And by 'used to be' I mean that it isn't like it used to be a year ago. Several things have happened to destroy the city.

First, of course, the terrorist attacks have had a dramatic effect on the appearance of the city. The Eiffel Tower is now surrounded with wire fences and concrete barriers. This doesn't matter as much as it might because there aren't any tourists. (When I say that there aren't any tourists this might be seen as an exaggeration. It isn't. I haven't seen a tourist for days. And, of course, tourists in Paris are instantly recognisable. Even if the tourists aren't standing on a street corner peering at a map, no Parisian would be seen dead walking around wearing a kagool or shorts or carrying a knapsack of any description.)

Second, daft EU laws mean the city turns off its lights at night. The streets are gloomy and foreboding. The City of Light has become the City of Darkness.

Third, legislation introduced by the EU and Hollande (when a President is said to be worse than Sarkozy you know he must be bad) has resulted in shops and businesses shutting all over the city. Our street in the seventh arrondissement used to be packed with small businesses. Every shop was occupied. And the businesses were useful – providing goods and services that people needed. You have your blinds made at one shop, your pictures framed at a second and your mattress hand stitched at a third. There was a man who polished shoes and another who would repair (just about) anything that was broken. When I went out today to buy bread I was staggered to see that there are now nearly two dozen empty shops. Even the hotel at the end of the street has closed its doors. We are left with two estate agents and the picture framer who, judging by the way he stands in his doorway, is clinging on by his fingertips. The laws about the hours that people can work have resulted in shops and cafes being shut for one or two days a week. This is not good for locals or tourists and it makes the city look unwanted but the real problem with this is that business owners can no longer make ends meet – let alone make a profit. ‘When you run a café your basic costs are the same whether you are open or shut,’ explained one former café owner. ‘You have insurance and taxes and utilities and telephone and maintenance costs if you are open five or seven days a week. Your income, however, falls dramatically if you are only allowed to open on a certain number of days. If I am shut one day a week then my income is down by 15%. If I am shut for two days a week then my income is down by 30%. This is disastrous. Instead of making a profit I am making a loss.’ Can’t the eurocrats and the French politicians see how they are ruining Paris (and I suspect the rest of their country)? My answer to my own question is that they can’t because they never go out into the real world. They never walk down real streets, they never talk to real people, they never see the world the way the rest of us see it. Exactly the same thing happens in London. The politicians talk about how wonderfully ethnic and varied and mixed London has become. But they live in a bubble and they don’t see the reality of the world they have created and the city they have destroyed.

Fourth, the rules about the collection of rubbish are destroying Paris as they are destroying cities and towns all across Europe. Because of the rules, shopkeepers now to try cut costs by dumping bags of rubbish in the street. They remove anything which might identify them and then leave their waste next to public bins or just on the pavement a few yards from their business. And so the rats are coming up out of the sewers and Paris has gone from being the City of Light to the City of Rodents. Of course, if Paris hadn’t deliberately killed off most of the wild birds in the city then the crows, pigeons and sparrows would have eaten up the waste food and the rat problem would not have become such a health hazard.

It occurs to me that now that city zoos are being forced to close (often with good reason), the only animals children will ever see will be pet dogs and wild rats.

When we sell it, our apartment will probably be bought by a foreign investor who will buy it without seeing it and will never visit it. The smarter parts of Paris are now owned by foreign investors. It happened in London and now it is happening in Paris.

8

(Paris)

We picked up a recent copy of the *Daily Express* today. I am amazed to see that the paper is still running blatant scare stories. If the country isn’t about to be overrun by snow storms and floods then the nation is about to go bust because of Brexit. Scare journalism, as practised so successfully by the *Daily Mail*, is a quick route to big sales but I’d have thought that the appeal would have worn off by now.

Having had a website for two and a half decades (and done very little with it up until now) Antoinette and I decided we needed to try to give the site a spring clean and a metaphorical coat of paint. First of all, however, we decided that we needed to find out who visits the site, where they come from, what articles they read and whether they clean their teeth regularly.

In order to help us achieve these disparate aims we decided to sign up for something called Google Analytics, a branch of the Google empire which spies on web users and makes the information obtained available to website owners and, I suspect, to Google itself and, quite probably, to MI6, the FBI, the CIA and Hackers United.

I have never in my life seen anything as unfriendly and as badly designed as Google Analytics.

I suspect it was designed by nerds who have never had to do anything in the real world and who are the sort of people who spend their Saturday evenings playing with bits of computer code because they enjoy it. The programme is clunkier than clunky and looks as if it were designed for a Sinclair ZX computer back in the 1980s and has never been updated. It looks as if the designers are still working with dot matrix printers.

(I knoweth of which I speaketh for in ye olde days of yore I did prepare ye world's first medical software for tapes to play on yonder Sinclair ZX computer.)

Honestly, the thing is as crude as anything available 30 years ago. I took one look at the site and turned it off. I'd rather study Latin again than waste my ageing brain on such badly designed garbage. I can't help wondering if they've deliberately made it absurdly incomprehensible or if they've made it absurdly incomprehensible because they're just darned stupid and are so nerdy and stupid that they don't realise just how stupid they are. I suspect the latter is the case.

I readily admit that I normally have the patience of a six-year-old who has just eaten all the red sweets out of six packets of additive crammed sweets and that this probably doesn't help. Plus, I tend to become slightly homicidal when faced with anything remotely resembling a computer programme. Years of struggling to cope with Microsoft have done that to me.

But I'm not kidding: Google Analytics is so absurdly incomprehensible that you need a book, another website or an app to find out what the hell the whole thing is all about. As so many things do these days, it reminds me of the Marx Brothers in that wonderful scene from 'At the Races' when Groucho sells Chico a whole series of form books, each one designed to explain the one before. Mind you, I doubt if anyone at Google is old enough to know who the Marx Brothers were. Actually, I doubt if anyone at Google has a sense of humour.

9

(Paris)

Here is my forecast for what will happen if Blair, Clegg, Sturgeon and other EU lovers succeed in thwarting the will of the British people – and keeping Britain in the European Union.

Many Muslim politicians will promote the EU's immigration policies and encourage unlimited immigration. Militant Muslims know that the more immigrants there are in Britain the sooner there will be a Muslim Government in charge of the remains of the United Kingdom. It is worth noting that many British Muslims admit that they would not report terrorist activity to the authorities.

Muslims will quickly reach positions of great power. For example, the new Mayor of London is a Muslim who has called 'moderate Muslims' 'Uncle Toms'. When sworn in as a member of the Queen's Privy Council, Mr Khan took the oath on a copy of the Koran. Within days of taking office the new mayor of London wanted to ban advertisements for lingerie and swimwear from the London Underground. (He said he wanted to protect women from harmful adverts. He did not, however, propose a ban on hair products or deodorants. And why do women need to be protected in this way?) As the Muslim population continues to grow rapidly so the number of Muslim voters will increase. And a Muslim Government will be inevitable – and there will be inevitable changes in culture and law.

Homosexuality will be made illegal. As, of course, will same sex marriage. Homosexuals will be executed.

Women will not be allowed to vote in national elections.

Women will not be allowed to drive motor cars.

Women will not be allowed to wear clothes or make-up which 'shows off their beauty'.

The police will be allowed to harass or arrest women who expose too much flesh.

Women will not be allowed to mix with men in parks, on beaches or on public transport.

Women will not be allowed to use public swimming pools where men are present.

Women will not be allowed to try on clothes when shopping.

Women will not be allowed to compete in sports.

Women will not be allowed to read fashion magazines

Women will not be allowed to enter cemeteries.

Rape will no longer be a crime.

Christian churches will be destroyed. It will be illegal to celebrate Christian events.

There will be no alcohol on sale in supermarkets and public houses will be closed if they sell alcohol.

It will be illegal to keep a dog as a pet.

That's a taster of what we can look forward to if Britain remains a member of the EU and unlimited immigration continues. That will be Britain within a decade. And if you think I'm exaggerating then you should, perhaps, be aware that the items listed above are the law in Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia.

Defending British traditions, culture, tolerance and freedoms is not racism.

10

(Paris)

We have a vast number of books in the apartment. We want to take a goodly number back to England. But finding a removal company prepared to pack and carry boxes of books alongside furniture proved challenging. (In this instance the word 'challenging' is a synonym for either impossible or absurdly expensive). I thought about getting Fedex to collect and deliver the books but then I realised that Fedex won't deliver to our house in Gloucestershire because the drivers always get lost. Parcel Force won't deliver because their driver doesn't like driving on leaves.

So, I thought, why don't we post the books to ourselves – using the ordinary mail?

So we crammed books into three medium sized cardboard boxes, wrote LIVRES on the boxes and took them to the nearest post office.

Two were accepted but the third weighed slightly more than five kilograms which is the accepted limit for posting parcels through the ordinary mail to Royaume Uni.

'You have to take some books out and then the parcel will weigh less than five kilos,' said the very helpful lady behind the counter. (She said it in French, of course.)

We started to take the parcel back but the woman told us to wait and then she disappeared. The half a dozen Parisians in the queue behind us waited with exemplary patience. Two or three minutes later the counter assistant reappeared with an empty cardboard box (for which she refused any payment) and a pair of scissors. I really cannot imagine any Post Office employee in the UK being so helpful.

I opened up the overweight box, took out some books and put them into the new box. I then borrowed a brown parcel tape dispenser from the friendly counter assistant and sealed up the two boxes. We then rejoined the queue and, in due course, had our parcels weighed and stamped.

It cost us around £15 to post just under 20 kilos of books to the UK. We have now found the perfect, easy and cheap way to move the library in our apartment over to England. We bought a dozen special French mailing boxes and next time we come we'll bring a pile of boxes and a couple of rolls of brown parcel tape.

The ancillary lesson in all this was a reminder of why British publishers and booksellers are at such a huge disadvantage when compared with publishers and booksellers in other countries. It is now quite impractical for anyone who sells books to make money selling them abroad. Books are heavy and Royal Mail offers no useful support to book sellers in the form of discounted postage rates for parcels. Publishers and booksellers in all other countries can sell books to British buyers because postage rates are low but publishers and booksellers in the UK cannot sell their books outside the UK because of prohibitive international parcel rates. The result is that Britain is losing out in every conceivable way.

The bizarre thing about all this is, of course, the fact that when a French or American publisher or bookseller sells a book to a British buyer and sends the book through the post, the hard work will be done by Royal Mail which receives no income at all for the work it has to do, whereas when a British seller sends a book abroad, Royal Mail keeps all the money but expects a foreign postal service to do the hard work of actually delivering the book.

11

(Gloucestershire)

I spent twenty minutes this morning repairing the damage done by drunken badgers last night. We have hundreds of windfall apples on the grass and even in our stream. The squirrels and birds eat quite a lot of them and the badgers love them. The deer eat them too but I'm not sure about the foxes who visit. The trouble is that the apples are starting to ferment and turn into alcohol. When the squirrels eat too many apples and get drunk they just wobble about a bit and tend to misjudge their leaps from branch to shed to branch. But the badgers, being larger and earthbound, tend to knock into things. Last night they managed to knock over quite a few large and heavy plant pots and most of our solar operated lamps, the ones that are simply stuck into the ground, were lying flat on the ground.

Lord Percival, our much loved pheasant has clearly been discussing our fast food emporium with his chums. Last week he brought two cock pheasants with him to share his breakfast. Today he brought five and so we provided breakfast, lunch and dinner for six. We already buy sunflower hearts in bulk, we will soon need to set up as a wholesaler. The pheasant shooting season has, of course, been in full flow for a while. I hope Lord Percival and his pals stay in our garden where they will be safe.

Everyone knows that robins are territorial but ours seems to be taking his responsibilities especially seriously at the moment. He now sits on top of our main bird feeding pole (which carries the feeders for peanuts and sunflower hearts) constantly checking out newcomers, scaring away some and tolerating others without much rhyme nor reason. Eventually, with birds coming from all four quarters, he gave up the battle and simply sat there; king of his castle.

But when Lord Percival and his chums arrived to hoover up the handfuls of sunflower seeds which I had sprinkled on the ground beneath the feeder the robin went ballistic. He flew to a nearby rock about two feet away from the pheasants and danced up and down with impotent frustration. Naturally, they took absolutely no notice of him. And that enraged him even more. The robin is, if nothing else, an egoist. He likes to be noticed. If he were a human he would have a Facebook page and a very active Twitter account. Antoinette wrote a beautiful piece about robins in her enthralling, informative and sensitive book *My Quirky Cotswold Garden*. The book is about a year in the life of our Cotswold Garden but sadly, she won't allow it to be marketed, promoted or sold on any Internet site because she's worried that the book might receive a nasty review. This is a huge pity, because it is a beautiful book which well deserves a wide readership, but I sympathise and completely understand. Someone out there is bound to give it a humiliating one star review because it doesn't contain any reference to Gloucester Cathedral.

I spent the afternoon putting felt patches on our shed roof. The squirrels scrabble on the roof sometimes and they tear holes in the felt. Already, the shed roof looks like a patchwork view of grey fields seen from an aeroplane.

12

(Devon)

Antoinette has painted several rooms of our new home in Devon. We had had more than enough of workmen when the plumbers and heating engineers finally finished their work. We really couldn't bear the idea of having the painters and decorators in the house with their noisy radios, their ladders, their demands for cups of tea and biscuits every half an hour and so on. Two firms gave us quotes and estimated that the work would take several weeks. So we are doing it ourselves. Or, rather, since my incompetence reaches new lows when I have a paintbrush in my hand, Antoinette is doing it herself.

Today, Antoinette became quite depressed when she realised that a good deal of the paintwork in the house needs attention. Bits of paint have been chipped from doors and doorframes and window frames. Endless workmen parading through the house with ladders and heavy tool bags have left their marks. The trouble is, of course, that when a small piece of paint has been chipped off the resultant scar will be horribly eye catching. The first thing you see when you enter a room are the chips and scratches on the paint. These make a room look shabby and unloved.

But we both knew that it would take weeks to paint all the doors, doorframes and window frames. There seem to be hundreds of them.

And then Antoinette had one of her brilliant ideas. (These are coming thick and fast these days.)

'I'm going to just touch up the chipped bits,' she announced a few days ago. She bought a pot of suitable paint and a collection of paint brushes and today she set to work painting over the chips and the scratches.

The result is brilliant.

The inside of the house looks brand new. Touching up the battered bits of paint has made all the difference.

We are thinking of setting up as house repairers, specialising in quick, simple, cover up and cobble jobs and calling ourselves 'Tartit and Bodge'.

Last Friday we took a large 19th century original painting in pastels to a local picture framer. The picture, which we bought at auction, needs re-glazing. He promised that he would have it ready by today. When I rang him to ask what time would be convenient for us to pick up the picture, there was a hollow laugh. 'Oh, it won't be ready today,' he said. 'Nor any time soon. I might have it ready by the end of the week.'

Is it just me or is getting anything done increasingly difficult these days? No one seems to care about promises or providing good value for money. I'm accustomed to large companies (utility companies and banks) treating me as though I'm a nuisance when I am unreasonable enough to expect something in return for the money I give them but even small companies and sole traders are now providing the same shoddy service.

A few weeks ago, I took an old silver pocket watch into a jeweller's shop in Cheltenham. The watch had stopped and needed attention. I was given a quote of just over £100 for the work. Then I received an email telling me that the cleaning and servicing would cost £180 and that there would be no guarantee that the watch would work. Since the watch isn't worth that much I sent a return email saying that I would pick up the watch. But when I made a special trip to collect it I was told that the watch wasn't available and that I would have to go back another day to pick it up.

This sort of thing is now commonplace in my experience. No one seems to care anymore. There is no sense of responsibility. And when I protest, even mildly, I am met with puzzled stares.

My main website (www.vernoncoleman.com) is down and out for the count. I'm not sure whether the incompetent buffoons who charge me huge fees to host the site have screwed up again (quite likely) or if the site has been hacked. We tried to produce a short list of possible cuplrits and ended up with quite a long list – featuring those who want Britain to remain within the EU and a wide variety of international drug companies.

'Stay positive and don't let the bastards get you down,' wrote a kind reader in an email. (My emails were down for a day too but we managed to get them back.)

‘I’m positive I hate the bastards,’ I wrote back. I was quite out of pithy.

Still, if the authorities ever bother to catch the culprit he’ll get it in the neck.

A 17-year-old hacker who hacked into the phone company Talk Talk, affecting the lives of four million customers and costing shareholders a big chunk of £83 million, went to court with his mummy and was fined £85. He cannot be named for legal reasons and will not serve any jail time because, well, he wasn’t given any. But that’ll teach hackers and show them that the courts mean business.

13

(Gloucestershire)

Neighbours of ours in Gloucestershire proudly told us the other day that their Christmas card posting operation was run like an efficient commercial mail order operation. ‘We have all our cards posted out by the 1st December,’ she said. ‘And we keep a dozen cards all ready to go out if we get an unexpected card from a friend we’ve forgotten.’

They were both unbelievably pleased with themselves and ‘holier than everyone else’ and are obviously devotees of *The Guardian* ‘newspaper’.

(You can spot *Guardian* readers a mile away if you know what to look for – that stultifying mixture of smugness, sanctimoniousness and self-satisfaction. This is a useful skill to acquire for it enables you to run speedily in the opposite direction before contact is made. I’d rather have tea with a mixed bunch of Ebola and Lassa Fever patients than with a group of *Guardian* journalists or even *Guardian* readers).

The male neighbour is, I believe, the marketing manager for a sawdust manufacturer. She does something in logistical outsourcing, whatever that is, and like most of the people in this part of the world she has a garden which looks like a suburban roundabout – lots of dull shrubs and well-kept but sterile and colourless . She once told us that she likes men like her wine and her cheese – mature. This is a good thing for her current husband looks about 150-years-old and I reckon he died in 1968. She says he has ‘reiters syndrome’ and thinks it may be because he once wrote a column for a fishing magazine. I did not have the heart to tell her that it is not spelt ‘writer’s syndrome’ and has nothing to do with putting one word after another. She tells enormous fibs but would make a terrible poker player because whenever she lies she scratches her nose. When people lie their bodies are filled with adrenalin and a good deal of the stuff goes to the capillaries in the nose – making it itch. She tells us that she’s been to a Buckingham Palace garden party and then scratches her nose as though trying to take it off because she’s really been to the races at Cheltenham.

To add a little spice to their lives, Antoinette and I sent them a card and signed it Barbara and Yusef. We are relying on the fact that they probably don’t know a couple called Barbara and Yusef and they will be racking their brains trying to remember who these people are and where they live.

We are investigating other fun ways to annoy the neighbours. I am doing well at this and it gives me extraordinary pleasure to see grumpy local bastards scurry back into their holes whenever they see me coming. When you are surrounded by footling idiots, as we are in our corner of the Clotswolds, the only way to survive is to convince them that you are stark raving bonkers. Fools are far more frightened of lunatics, whom they know to be unpredictable, than they are of raving axe carrying madmen.

I spent a long time on the phone with a reporter for the *Daily Mail* which is interested in writing a story about normal pressure hydrocephalus and the fact that the disease is often misdiagnosed as Alzheimer’s disease. However, there are problems and I think it rather unlikely that the story will ever be published.

First, the editor wants the journalist to find someone who has been misdiagnosed. This will not be terribly easy in the UK since normal pressure hydrocephalus is hardly ever diagnosed. That is the point I’m trying to make in the book.

The second problem is that the disease affects old people and is therefore neither sexy (in media terms) nor fashionable. Alzheimer’s affects around 800,000 people in Britain and between 40,000 and 80,000 of those are really suffering from NPH and could be permanently cured with a simple operation. If that many children had been misdiagnosed, and could be relatively easily cured, it would be considered a major scandal and the *Daily Mail* would run the story on its front page for a week – or until something was done about it.

Thirdly, a neurologist has claimed that I am giving people false hope. This seems to me to be outrageously patronising and ageist. He says that the lumbar puncture required to diagnose the disease is an unpleasant procedure and that it is not fair to put old people through such a painful inconvenience. When I heard this I was furious. Taking a biopsy from breast lumps, to find out whether or not they are cancerous, is an unpleasant procedure. Are we going to stop doing biopsies so that women are not put through a painful inconvenience? Normal pressure hydrocephalus is common and can be cured. It is the commonest curable form of dementia.

The fact is that there is no diagnostic test for Alzheimer's disease. The diagnosis is made, with increasing frequency, because it is a fashionable and easy diagnosis to make when a patient is suffering from any mental problems. Alzheimer's is the default diagnosis for dementia in the UK. But Alzheimer's isn't a proper diagnosis for most patients. And, unlike normal pressure hydrocephalus, and despite the nonsense appearing in the official statistics, Alzheimer's is not a killer.

I pointed out that it isn't always necessary to perform a lumbar puncture in order to make a diagnosis of normal pressure hydrocephalus. The symptoms of the disease are pretty pathognomic. A patient with NPH will be unsteady, and fall a good deal, and have a wide legged gait which should be instantly recognisable. And their mental problems won't just include the sort of memory loss typical of Alzheimer's disease. The NPH patient may behave abnormally, and show personality changes, because the expanding ventricles can affect any part of the brain. Headaches are also not uncommon.

Sadly, tragically, I still suspect that the *Daily Mail* won't run the story.

If the reporter could find a large breasted reality TV star with the disease then NPH would be guaranteed a double page spread at least.

In a final attempt to get the story into the paper, I sent the journalist an email pointing out that there are probably 10,000 *Daily Mail* readers with dementia who could be cured in a week. I doubt if they'll print anything. None of the 10,000 is reality TV stars and I doubt if any of them have surgically enhanced breasts.

Still, the good news is that our parcels of books have all arrived from France.

14

(Devon)

We were sitting quietly having luncheon when we both heard it: the annoying chirp of the alarm system keypad. We have not yet used the alarm system that the previous owners had fitted and left behind them. There are several reasons for this. First, we have a variety of other excellent defences. Second, alarm systems cause a lot of trouble. They tend to go off when you're half way to the other side of the world. No one in the neighbourhood gives a damn, or rings the police, but someone will complain to the council and then they'll break into the house to try to turn off the alarm. Third, when I telephoned the alarm company to ask them to turn off the alarm temporarily (it had started to scream at us) while we tried to sort out what to do with it, a snotty little bastard at a company called ADT to whom I spoke said that it would be two or three weeks before they could possibly consider coming and that there would then be a callout fee of £276 (or some similarly obscene amount) just to turn off the alarm.

Unwilling to wait so long, we telephoned the previous owners who gave us the code so that we could switch off the alarm.

Brilliant. It worked.

So far, all so good.

But today, two keypads started to chirp. They did it loudly and annoyingly. We keyed in the code. No good. The keypads would no longer recognise the code. So I took the fuse out of the plug to the main alarm box. That made no damned difference. I then removed the front from the alarm box and peeped inside, guessing that there was probably a battery back-up in there. Indeed, there was. I unfastened the battery terminals. All hell broke loose. The alarm bell outside started to ring with that spine chilling ferocity we all know so well. How the hell did the alarm manage to do that? I had turned off the mains and disconnected the battery so where was the power coming from?

We were by now getting rather desperate. We considered taking an axe to the keypads. We considered cutting every wire we could find.

Antoinette then managed to pull the front off one of the keypads. Inside it was full of wires. Which to cut? I felt like James Bond trying to work out which wire to cut to disable the atomic bomb that would blow up the world.

But then I noticed that some of the wires were held in place by tiny screws. So I fetched one of those little screwdrivers that are given away in Christmas crackers (along with the nail clippers, the egg cups and the shoe horns) and unfastened the screw holding the red wire. James Bond always undoes the red wire.

Nothing. The beeping continued.

So I unfastened the screw holding the black wire.

Bliss.

The damned bleeping stopped.

We then did the same thing to the other keypad.

In the peace and quiet which resulted I couldn't help wondering why the keypads had both suddenly decided to start beeping on the same day – some months after we had purchased the house.

Was the back-up battery failing? Maybe it was programmed to make the keypads beep so that we could call the alarm people.

Or could it possibly be, I wondered, that the keypads are designed to beep at a fixed interval when the alarm company hadn't received its monthly fee. Could the alarm company have possibly rigged things so that the keypads beep incessantly – forcing us to call them in and pay their extortionate call out fee?

Could any company be so devious and mean?

No, of course not.

Silly me.

I expect a bit of dust had got into both keypads at the same instant. That made far more sense. Next week we're going to turn on the alarm for the first time. That should be fun.

Meanwhile, great news from Ireland. Travellers from Heathrow to Dublin can pass through customs control without passports because of a special Anglo-Irish agreement.

However, the Gardai insist that travellers have their passports with them so that they can prove that they are eligible to travel without their passports.

And then the Irish complain about their reputation.

Later, I completed a LinkedIn application form. In the space for previous employment I tried to put Go Go dancer at the Galloping Butterfly night club in Istanbul. Sadly, however, the LinkedIn site refused to accept this.

What spoil sports.

Is there no fun left in the world?

15

(Gloucestershire)

We have posted our neighbours a pack of scented candles and signed the package 'From Barbara and Yusef'. With any luck they will spend the next week desperately struggling to remember the identities of Barbara and Yusef.

I read an article warning children to beware of strangers. I think this is rather silly for it tends to make children think that the only people who can be dangerous are strangers when in truth 99% of offences against children are committed by relatives, neighbours and teachers. Logically, it would make far more sense to warn children to beware of the people they know.

Today, I bought Antoinette some pot plants from Marks and Spencer. We were both shocked when unwrapping the pot containing hyacinth bulbs to discover that the bulbs were not yet planted. Usually, whenever I have bought hyacinths in the past the bulbs have been sitting there cosily in their compost. This time the bulbs are sitting naked alongside some compost brickettes. So now we have to plant the bulbs and leave them for ten weeks in a cool, dark place at between 5 degrees and 10 degrees centigrade which means that they can't be indoors and can't go into a shed or outside in the garden. We haven't got anywhere which fits the requirements. Even in the loft, where I will forget about them, the temperature on cold days will fall too low. I feel annoyed and cheated. I bought these thinking that (as always) there would be flowers for Christmas. What will Marks and Spencer do next year? Maybe they will sell me a lump of clay so that I can make my own pot.

I also bought a pack of doughnuts from Sainsbury's. It was not until I got home that I realised that the pack said: 'Display until 16th December. Best before 16th December.' It seemed to me odd that a supermarket should sell a product with a best before date prior to the display until date.

I also bought a TV listings magazines so that we could try and spot if there was anything worth watching on television over the Christmas holidays. When I got home, Antoinette took one look at the magazine and asked if I minded if she ripped off the front cover.

'I can't stand that woman on the cover,' she explained, tearing off the cover and screwing it up into a ball.

'I can't stand him,' I said pointing to the television celebrity whose picture was on page three and who was now the new cover. I tore off the cover and revealed a third putative cover.

'Oh, I can't bear to look at that face for the whole of Christmas!' said Antoinette. She removed another page. This time several pages from the back of the magazine came free and floated to the ground. I picked them up and screwed them into balls. They would make fire lighting fodder. When I looked at the new 'cover' picture I shuddered. The new cover duo always set my teeth on edge. I tore the page off and added to our collection of fire lighting detritus.

Three minutes later we had a good supply of fire lighting paper and all we had left of the magazine was one double paged sheet containing the schedule for a few satellite channels on the 21st December.

16

(Devon)
I spent an hour or so this morning writing my Dictionary for Discerning Readers. It is, I'm afraid, highly unsuitable for the politically correct.

Here, for your education and entertainment, are a few new word definitions that haven't yet found their way into the OED or Webster's Dictionary. After each definition I have shown whether the word is a verb (v) or a noun (n) and given an example of the word as it might be used in a sentence.

Blair (v): to blair is to deceive, to lie and cheat, usually for personal gain; e.g., 'He blaired throughout his career and became a very rich man.'

Boris (n): someone who pretends to be a bumbling buffoon but is really a bumbling buffoon; e.g., 'He pretended to be a fool and so not many people realised that he really was a complete Boris.'

Bono (n): an individual who tries to take the moral high ground but who is also accomplished in the art of tax avoidance; e.g., 'He set up a shell company on the moon so that he could reduce his own taxes but campaigned enthusiastically for governments to spend more money on poor people; he was a right bono.'

Caldicot (v): to stick up for yourself and others; e.g., 'She bravely fought hard for those whom she regarded as being oppressed or hard done by; she was a real caldicot'.

Cameron (n): a light weight; e.g., 'He was forgotten about within weeks. He was nothing but a cameron.'

Celebrity (n): cf 'twat' and 'twit'

Clinton (v): a charming and smiling deceiver e.g., 'He was a consummate political trickster, a real clinton'.

Coleman (n): someone who is witty, wise and handsome and manages to make thinning hair and creaking joints fashionable; e.g., 'His wisdom knew no bounds; he was a proper Coleman.'

Computer (n): something to blame when things go wrong; e.g., 'It was the computer's fault.' 'The computer is very slow today.'

Cruise (n): to search desperately and without embarrassment for publicity and acclaim e.g., 'He would cruise for hours outside a cinema looking for people with whom he could have his picture taken.'

Facebook (n): a digital mirror to the soul e.g., 'She was self-absorbed and spent all day fiddling with her Facebook'.

Farage (v): to be better at something than the professionals; e.g., 'The people loved him because he always managed to farage the establishment politicians.'

Fergie (n): a shameless, money grubbing hussy; e.g., 'She was rich and well-connected but she always wanted more, she was quite a fergie.'

Goldmansachs (n): a crook with good connections; e.g., 'He was never arrested because he knew the right people; he was a goldmansachs'.

Hillary (n): a sham, a charlatan; someone who pretends to be one thing but is seen to be someone quite different; e.g., 'She pretended to be a woman of the people but was in fact a secret spokesperson for the great vampire squid that is Goldman Sachs.'

Holiday snap (n): A close up photograph of a megalomaniac's visage with a small part of the Eiffel Tower (or some other notable monument) visible somewhere in the background; e.g., 'He came back from his trip to Italy with 763 holiday snaps of himself.'

Karadashian(n): a self-obsessed woman with a bottom large enough to accommodate her ego; e.g., 'She was a complete karadashian; she had an ego the size of Asia and her bum had its own postcode.'

Hamilton: a small, petulant child with a massive ego and silly hair; e.g., 'He had hair by Mr Teasy Weasy and drove like Mr Toad; he was a complete Hamilton.'

Ladygreen (n): someone who is widely loathed and despised; e.g., 'She wrote a cookery book full of recipes for stewed babies and was considered a ladygreen by those who knew of her.'

Millennial (n): someone who is stupid and selfish but does not realise they are either let alone both e.g., 'He was greedy, lazy and self-absorbed: a complete millennial'

Obama (n): a disappointment, a letdown; someone who promises much but delivers little (all mouth but no action); e.g., 'When he first appeared on the scene everyone thought he was going to change the world for the better but in the end he turned out to be an Obama.'

Ozzie (n): someone who pretends to be scary but who loves kittens and rabbits; e.g., He tried to frighten the neighbour's children by biting the heads of chocolate mice but no one was convinced, he was a total Ozzie.'

Selfie(n): a photograph no one else wants to look at e.g., 'While she was on holiday she bored her friends witless by sending them hundreds of selfies.'

Sturgeon (n): a politician who thinks he or she has more power than he or she really has e.g., 'She thought she controlled the world but in reality she was just a sturgeon.'

Trump (v): to lie and boast successfully; to defy the experts; e.g., 'The candidate exceeded all expectations and trumped the opposition.'

Tweet (n): a high pitched wheedling cry from a creature desperate for attention e.g., 'She produced a desperate stream of tweets in her yearning to be noticed'.

Twit (n): a reader of a tweet; e.g., 'He looked at his smart phone at least once every two minutes and everyone who knew him described him as a twit'.

Twat(n): a provider of tweets, e.g., 'He sent a tweet every five minutes and as a result everyone knew he was a twat.'

Twitter(n): company built upon the ability to take advantage of the enormous egos of the entitlement generation (aka millenials); e.g., 'The company rose from nowhere and returned to whence it had come without anyone ever really noticing; it was just another twitter'.

Wikileak (n): an Australian with the charm and personality of a urine sample e.g., he was the bore no one wanted at their party, a complete wikileak.'

Wikipedia (n): a faux encyclopedia written by 14-year-olds for amusement and mischief (the modern equivalent of knocking on doors and running away); e.g., 'He spotty boy regarded himself as an expert on everything and was one of the authors of the wikipedia website'

Willie (wet) (n): a whinger, named after Prince William who lives the life of Reilly but never stops moaning; e.g., 'Willie had many homes and lots of servants (all paid for by someone else) but he thought it unfair that he was occasionally expected to open a cupboard or an envelope in public and even more unfair if anyone took a picture of him while he was doing it.'

17

(Devon)

I read today that scientists who had nothing better to do have shown that frogs talk to one another and acquire regional accents. Researchers reckon that the accents prevent frogs from mating with strangers, though why this should be considered a bad thing no one seems to know.

The really odd thing is that I remember reading somewhere else that cows also have regional accents and that a cow that comes from Lancashire will have difficulty in understanding one which comes from Devon. Mind you, from what I've seen of bulls, I wouldn't think they would give too hoots whether a cow mooed with a Lancashire inflection, a Gloucestershire burr, an Irish brogue, an Oxfordshire drawl, a Somerset twang or a Devon drawl.

A cow is a cow is a cow is a cow is a cow, as a certain Paris resident but compatriot of Mr Hemingway's was wont to say.

18

(Devon)

Successive governments have spent years trying to work out why productivity in Britain is the worst in the world.

Productivity in the UK is 30% lower than that in the United States and more than 20% lower than productivity in Germany or France.

And that's not the worst.

I find it almost unbelievable but Britain is even 8% less efficient than Italy, for heaven's sake.

Billions are now being spent on trying to improve our productivity.

The Government is spending zillions on boosting broadband (though why taxpayers' money should be spent helping rich telecom companies is something of a mystery to me), building houses and messing around with over-expensive changes to the railway network in a very belated attempt to counter some of the damage done half a century ago by the Beeching Report.

But it's all wasted money.

If anyone in the Government is genuinely interested in the answer to our productivity problem I can tell them what it is for free.

It is actually in several parts.

First, Britain gold plates every bit of red tape and pointless bureaucracy which is sent over from the European Union. The other EU member countries pick and choose when confronted with new legislation from Brussels. But British politicians and civil servants look hard at each new piece of legislative absurdity and do whatever they can to make things worse. They seem to take pride in wrapping the country in pointless and damaging red tape. Most of those who run small companies spend at least one and a half days a week dealing with nonsensical rules which help no one.

Second, we have become pointlessly obsessed with political correctness. No one, however dotty, must ever be offended. And so vast amounts of money and time are spent eradicating all possible cause of disappointment and disapproval.

Third, our roads are a mess. Now that our public transport systems are in as dire state most people have to travel around the country by car. Unnecessary road works and changes are the main source of trouble. Every motorway in Britain is constantly being dug up so that pointless changes can be made to central reservations (in order to satisfy daft rules from the EU.) And the police close down motorways at the drop of a hat. If a car pulls onto the hard shoulder the police will either close down one or two lanes or put up speed limit signs. And the restrictions will remain long after the problem has been dealt with. The result is that average speeds on most of our motorways are now well below 40 miles per hour. That's worse than average speeds half a century ago. And the cost to the economy in lost productivity must be measured in tens of billions.

Fourth, rush hour on British roads is now between 4 p.m. and 5 p.m. A few years ago rush hour was an hour later. In Britain, millions of people now stop work half way through the afternoon.

Fifth, the British take every possible opportunity to stay away from work. A few years ago, workers were happy with two weeks holiday. The 'norm' now appears to be four to six weeks holiday – plus bank holidays. Sickness rates among British workers are the second highest in the world. (The highest sickness rates are among EU employees who spend such little time at work that they clearly find the whole business unacceptably dull.) And every time a bank holiday appears, the time off expands in an extraordinary manner. If Christmas falls on a Sunday, as it does this year, then workers demand (and are given) an additional bank holiday in lieu. This does not happen in other countries where it is considered 'bad luck' if Christmas Day or Boxing Day lands on a weekend. In Britain this year the two day Christmas holiday has morphed into a fortnight's holiday for millions. (If you're going to have the Monday and Tuesday off as a supplementary bank holidays then there isn't much point in going in to work for the remainder of the week – particularly when the following week starts with one or two more supplementary bank holidays.) The Entitlement Generation spend so little time at work that retired folk are beginning to feel miffed. 'What's the point in being retired if everyone else has just as much time off?' asked one retiree.

Sixth (and I realise that this probably applies to workers in other countries) Britons spend vast amounts of time fighting their computer software. I was far more productive in the days when I used Word Perfect than I am now that I am virtually forced to use Windows. I spend a third of my working day trying to solve problems and complications created by the world's worst designed piece of software. I was more productive in the days when I wrote using a typewriter and a ream of paper than I am with Windows. The much cursed McAfee doesn't help. The damned popups are annoying and difficult to eradicate.

Seventh, the British take more tea, coffee, biscuit and bun breaks than any other nation on the planet. When we have workmen in England they require hourly cups of tea and plates of biscuits. When we have workmen in France, they look at us as if we are mad if we offer them any sort of refreshment.

Finally, British workers spend far more of their work time messing with their Facebook and Twitter accounts than any other group anywhere in the world. Workers in other countries would be fired on the spot if they were found doing their shopping online when they were supposed to be working. But in Britain no employer dare sack an employee for such an offence.

So, that's it.

Those are the reasons for our appallingly low productivity.

And the Government is doing absolutely nothing to deal with any of them.

19

(Gloucestershire)

Antoinette got hit on by a young man in a café today. He was unpleasantly persistent in his endeavours. Eventually, Antoinette thought of an excellent way to get rid of him.

'What are you planning for Christmas?' asked the young Romeo, ignoring the fact that my wife had already told him that she was married.

'My husband and I are looking forward to a normal Christmas,' she told him with a disarming smile. 'He's a professional boxer, a heavyweight, and he's always been in training in the past. But this year he doesn't have a fight until the spring so he can let himself go and enjoy himself with the mince pies and the Christmas pudding.'

The young man made his excuses and hurried away into the gloaming.

20

(Gloucestershire)

They like to call themselves 'millennials', though most of the really mouthy ones were sharing their opinions long before the millennium and they are now desperately trying not to let anyone notice that they have one foot firmly planted in the pleasant lands of middle age. They are the entitlement generation. They are self-obsessed and over-full with themselves.

They tweet incessantly.

Their most valuable possessions are a smart phone and a selfie stick.

They have serious withdrawal symptoms if they can't access their Facebook page several times an hour.

They are narcissistic; utterly, totally, completely self-absorbed. They clutch their carefully nursed resentments as if they were life rafts.

Their expectations are endless.

They expect to get rich and famous without having to do anything as unpleasant as 'work'.

They expect to be able to earn a living doing exactly what they want to do, when they want to do it and for no longer than they want to do it.

They will not accept criticism. If an employer criticises them they stomp off in a huff and consult a solicitor.

They expect things to go their own way – and if they don't then they sulk for months. They voted to remain in the EU because they are so stupid that they genuinely believe that leaving the EU will mean that they won't be able to drink French wine or eat Italian pasta. They now find it impossible to believe that their wishes were ignored. In America they voted for Clinton because they thought it about time that a woman was President.

They are totally, utterly, completely self-obsessed.

There are, I think, several simple explanations for this unhealthy self-absorption.

First, they have been brought up in an era of manufactured celebrity. Everyone under 40 seems to believe that they are entitled to be famous. They expect it. But they don't expect to have to do anything for their fame (or the riches which they assume will come naturally to them). Survey after survey has shown that young people leave school with absurd expectations but with very little will to work hard in order to achieve their ambitions. The result is a sense of outrage when their expectations are not met. And, inevitably, the offended individual then makes formal complaints to everyone who will listen. The authorities, terrified of appearing politically incorrect, insist that the sensibilities of the one who complains first must take priority and precedence and trump everyone else's sensibilities. And then, again inevitably, the outrage morphs seamlessly into resentment. The resentment is then taken out on those who have achieved notoriety; especially those who have done so without actually doing anything or achieving anything. Celebrities who have done good things (made great music or good films for example) still have a chance of being treated with a little respect. But celebrities whose fame is built on sand are likely to be attacked, reviled, condemned and subjected to an endless quantity of online abuse.

Second, I think the media has had a bad effect. Paul Dacre, the editor of the *Daily Mail* for the last century or two, realised early on in his reign that he could sell more papers by encouraging his readers to be afraid and angry and resentful. And by then feeding those feelings he succeeded in selling a good many newspapers. The result has been that millions of Britons are constantly afraid, angry, bitchy and resentful. At *The Guardian*, the long standing editor Alan Rusbridger fed slightly different fears and resentments, and added a strong helping of sanctimoniousness, but he too helped create a mean and nasty generation. And the BBC encouraged young people to feel loathing for their own country and the institutions which made it great. Heaven knows how much damage has been done by judgemental oafs such as Jeremy Kyle (the very poor man's Jerry Springer) being let loose on our television screens.

Finally, and most important of all, this is the generation which was never allowed to lose.

When they were at school, the sports day was abandoned because daft teachers thought that competition would do irreparable harm to those who didn't win medals.

Exams were made easier and easier so that every pupil who remembered to turn up, and was capable of putting their name on a piece of paper, was awarded a 'pass'.

And now the spoilt little bastards have grown up into spoilt big bastards.

This afternoon I wasted the better part of an hour making an entirely unnecessary telephone call.

The pension company which runs my SIPP no longer sends out paper dealing contracts (in an attempt, no doubt, to force me to do all my trading online) so today I had to telephone them to find out the price at which a trade had been completed. It took 47 minutes for a member of the dealing staff to find the details. Posting the contract note would have cost them a piece of paper and a 55 pence second class stamp. So, clearly the company values my time at around 60 pence an hour.

This is how life gets frittered away these days. An hour here, an hour there and soon another year has disappeared.

21

(Gloucestershire)

Any doubt I had that the world has gone completely bonkers disappeared when I heard someone complaining that ‘White Christmas’ should not be sung because it is a racist song.

The Christmas favourite is, apparently, racist because it has the word ‘white’ in the title and is, therefore, inappropriate and unacceptable to those whose skin is not white or who prefer eating wholemeal bread or using brown envelopes.

There is, it seems, no end to the ability of some people to find offence in the simplest and most innocent of circumstances.

Antoinette and I went through some of our best known carols and decided that they are all potentially offensive.

‘I wish it could be Christmas every day’ – is offensive to those who cannot afford to have Christmas every day.

‘Rudolph the red nosed reindeer’ – is offensive to those suffering from acne rosacea and other disorders which cause reddening of the nose

‘Mistletoe and wine’ – is offensive to recovering alcoholics

‘Unto us a boy is born’ – is clearly sexist and also offensive to those suffering from fertility problems

‘Lonely this Christmas’ – is offensive to those who will be alone at Christmastime

‘We wish you a merry Christmas’ – is offensive to those who are allergic to figgy pudding, which is mentioned in the song

‘Little donkey’ – is plainly sizeist

‘I saw Mummy kissing Santa Claus’ – is offensive to those who are being cuckolded

‘Oh come all ye faithful’– is offensive because it clearly discriminates against those who are not faithful

‘Blue Christmas’ – is offensive to those with circulatory disorders

‘Ding dong merrily on high’ – is offensive to drug addicts and their families

‘Silent night’ – is offensive to those who are deaf

‘The twelve days of Christmas – is offensive to those with numeracy issues

‘I believe in Father Christmas’ – is offensive to non-believers

‘Good King Wenceslas’ – is offensive to republicans

‘While shepherds watched their flocks – is offensive to those without flocks

‘Deck the halls’ – is clearly offensive to those without halls to deck

So there we are.

22

(Gloucestershire)

Nine out of ten GPs admit that they can no longer provide a decent service or look after their patients properly. Why? Modern GPs work far less and are paid far more than their predecessors so what on earth is the problem?

First expectations are higher than ever. This is largely the fault of the medical profession which has, supported by the pharmaceutical industry, tried to claim an omniscience and omnipotence which it has never got close to attaining.

Second, modern GPs work a 38 hour week. I hate to say this but in my day, GPs were responsible for their patients for 24 hours a day and 365 days a year. I often worked on Bank Holidays such as Christmas Day and I worked nights and weekends even though I was working long weeks. I would guess that when I was a GP I worked at least 70-80 hours a week.

Third, modern GPs spend too much time on administration. There is far too much filling in of forms and taking care to avoid legal responsibilities and liabilities.

Fourth, the General Medical Council has driven older doctors out of practice by the introduction of its absurd, widely disliked and entirely pointless revalidation game. Older doctors provided stability, common sense, experience, intuition and local knowledge. The GMC has helped to destroy general practice and is probably responsible for as many deaths as any other factor.

Still, the good news is that as far as I know GPs aren’t on strike this Christmas.

Everyone else seems to be going on strike so that they can have a few extra days off during the festive season – and with absolutely no regard for everyone else in the world.

There is hardly a form of transport unaffected by industrial action and both the Post Office and Royal Mail employees have gone on strike to ensure that children don’t receive their parcels and cards on time.

No one feels any sense of responsibility any more.

But now that the country is run and managed by crooks that is hardly surprising.

For some weeks I have been having a very strange correspondence with an organisation in the UK called the Independent Press Standards Organisation (known, rather snappily, to any friends it may have, as IPSO) which is the replacement for the much unloved Press Complaints Commission. It is the watchdog which the British press has appointed to look after itself and it claims that it exists to promote and uphold the highest professional standards of journalism in the UK and to support members of the public in seeking redress when they believe that the Editor's Code of Practice has been breached. I doubt if many people have heard of IPSO but the idea is that people who are unhappy about stories printed in newspapers or magazines can send in their complaints to IPSO's surprisingly large staff. The authority of IPSO is, however, not recognised by all newspapers. For example, if you have a complaint against *The Guardian* (and who hasn't) you can go whistle because *The Guardian* is not a member.

The *Daily Telegraph* does recognise IPSO and so, when the newspaper published a front page story quoting an Alzheimer charity worker as saying that dementia cannot be cured, I made a formal complaint. Back on 21st November 2016, I pointed out it is not true to say that dementia can't cured. I pointed out that: 'The second commonest cause of dementia is normal pressure hydrocephalus which affects thousands and can be cured with a simple operation.'

Todd Stammers of the IPSO wrote to ask me to send a copy of the article about which I was complaining and Mel Huggett, also of the IPSO, wrote saying: 'I note from the following link (link supplied to an NHS website) that dementia is said to be one of the symptoms of Normal Pressure Hydrocephalus, rather than a form of dementia itself. I would be grateful if you could confirm whether you dispute the information contained in the link.'

On the 23rd of November I wrote back pointing out that the dementia which is part of normal pressure hydrocephalus can be cured. I also pointed out that dementia is not a disease.

I then immediately received a reply from Tonia Milton who said that according to the NHS's webpage on dementia: 'The concept that dementia is a disease rather than an inevitable side effect of ageing (so called senile dementia) has been around for over 100 years. But after a century of research, there's still a lot we don't know about the condition and if dementia can be cured. However, many areas of research may lead to more effective treatments and possibly, a cure for dementia. Inevitably, such treatments are many years, probably decades, of hard work away. Dementia charities have argued, with some justification, that there is a lack of funding for research into dementia compared with research into treatments for other long-term conditions, such as cancer. Even without a cure, there is reason to believe that a continuous improvement in the standards of dementia care can be achieved.'

I wrote back and pointed out, again, that between 5 and 10% of dementia patients can be cured now because their dementia is caused by normal pressure hydrocephalus which can be cured with a simple operation.

I also explained that the quote the *Daily Telegraph* used came from a charity which specialises in Alzheimer's and that the charity has drug company links.

'Look around the Web,' I said, 'and you will see that neurologists and neurosurgeons are increasingly frustrated by the failure to diagnose and treat normal pressure hydrocephalus. I suggest you put 'dementia caused by normal pressure hydrocephalus' into a search engine. The *Daily Telegraph* (and most of the other papers) perpetuated a myth that results in hundreds of thousands being left untreated when they could be cured.'

I pointed out that the NHS website is quite wrong in describing normal pressure hydrocephalus as rare when it patently is not.

'The *Daily Telegraph* made a serious mistake,' I concluded, 'in helping to perpetuate a myth which is a result of commercial influences and widespread ignorance. Many cases of dementia can be cured now – cheaply and permanently.'

On 2nd December I had a note from Isabel Gillen-Smith to say that the IPSO Complaints' team were looking at my complaint and later she wrote to say that IPSO had decided that the Telegraph had merely quoted a statement from Alzheimer's Research UK and the Alzheimer's Society and had not been 'significantly misleading' in reporting that dementia is not curable. She also reported that the NHS's position is that dementia is not curable.

I then appealed this absurd decision. I pointed out again that the word dementia is a catch-all word like 'infection' or 'cancer' and that just as there are many causes of cancer and many causes of infection so there are many causes of dementia.

'Some types of cancer are incurable,' I wrote, 'and some types of dementia are incurable. But the corollary is true. Of course, the Alzheimer's charities don't want anyone to understand this. They have a vested interest in promoting their own agenda. They want the words dementia and Alzheimer's to be synonymous. They are not.'

Finally, Ciaran Cronin of IPSO wrote apologising for misunderstanding the nature of dementia and acknowledging that dementia is not a disease but a catch-all word used to describe a number of different diseases.

IPSO concluded, however, that since Alzheimer's disease cannot be cured, the article in the *Daily Telegraph* was not significantly misleading in claiming that dementia is incurable.

My scream of frustration was probably heard on the other side of the planet.

The IPSO clearly still didn't understand that when the words 'dementia' and 'Alzheimer's' are not synonymous and that when dementia is caused by normal pressure hydrocephalus it can be cured.

Every year tens of thousands of patients are diagnosed as suffering from Alzheimer's (and are thrown aside as incurable) when, in fact, they are suffering from normal pressure hydrocephalus and could be cured.

Does no one care?

It appears not.

I think I may burst with frustration and disappointment.

23

(Gloucestershire)

Our gas boiler stopped working three days ago.

I telephoned British Gas, with whom we have a full service contract and they said they would send an engineer round between 12 noon and 6 p.m. the following day and that he would ring before he arrived. I was a little disappointed since we pay British Gas a good deal of money for a 24 hour a day, 365 day a year service.

At four o'clock the following day there had been no sign of an engineer so I telephoned to make sure that one would still come.

'Oh yes, he will be there before six,' insisted British Gas.

At six the telephone rang.

'I'm afraid we won't be able to get an engineer to you today,' said British Gas. 'But I guarantee that an engineer will call between 8 a.m. and 10 a.m. tomorrow morning.'

At 10 a.m. the following morning the telephone went.

'I'm afraid the engineer wasn't able to come to your property,' said British Gas. 'We will get an engineer to you tomorrow morning.'

An engineer came this morning at 9.00 a.m .

24

(Gloucestershire)

Lord Percival and his three pals failed to turn up for their breakfast this morning. As I called them I heard shooting in the nearby wood.

'You got me!' I shouted at the top of my voice. 'You hit me! Stop shooting.'

The shooting duly stopped.

And five minutes later, three cock pheasants turned up en masse. They had been hiding in a thick clump of rhododendron bushes at the top of the garden.

They seemed to enjoy their breakfast. Better by far to enjoy breakfast than to be someone else's dinner.

The odd thing is that they have now acquired a distinct pecking order.

First, the boss pheasant (who is, I hope, our original son of son Percy) dines and has his fill, while the other two pheasants stand around and look wistfully at the disappearing pile of seed. When the boss pheasant has finished, number two pheasant takes over and number three pheasant looks on anxiously, hoping that there are going to be some seeds left when it is his turn to eat.

We had a look at the Heston Blumenthal mince pies in Waitrose. He's the snail porridge man, also famous for making celebrity diners at his restaurant ill with a vomiting and diarrhoea bug. Twice.

I looked at the side of the box and checked the contents.

Each of the awful Blumenthal's mincepies contains: colour carotenes, sodium propionate, potassium sorbate, preservatives, salt, emulsier soya lecithin, soya flour, flavouring, disodium diphosphate, ammonium hydrogen carbonate, sodium hydrogen carbonate, dextrose monohydrate, corn glucose syrup, egg yolk, almonds, mixed spices, butter oil, sugar, wheat flour, rose water, orange oil, ground cloves, pectin, nutmeg, ground cinnamon, more salt, orange juice from concentrate, lemon juice from concentrate, lemon zest, orange zest, butter, frisodium citrate, citric acid, lemon oil, cornflour, dried egg, butter, wheat glucose syrup, apple puree, sugar, currants, raisins and sultanas .

Makes the mouth water doesn't it? Yum yum.

I love to get my teeth into ammonium hydrogen carbonate pies at Christmas. You can always rely on Blumenthal to do the business.

Still, Blumenthal has an unfortunate reputation vis a vis tummy bugs and we don't want to spend Christmas calling God on the big white phone, so Antoinette has bought the ingredients to make her own mince pies.

She couldn't find any disodium diphosphate or potassium sorbate in any of the stores but we'll try to manage without.

Meanwhile, we've picked out some good films on DVD for the Christmas period. Our selection includes: Toy Story, It's a Wonderful Life, Avanti, El Dorado, The Maggie, Swallows and Amazons, It Happened One Night, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, The Dambusters, The Titfield Thunderbolt and The Greatest Little Show on Earth.

We had our now traditional Christmas Eve egg hunt today.

I hid 21 plastic fried eggs around the house. Antoinette has to look for them. If she finds them all she gets a prize.

Of course, she finds them all.

The squirrels stole two whole feeders which I had filled with biscuits as a Christmas treat. The feeders are nowhere to be found. I expect I will find them in the summer when the lawnmower grinds to a sudden halt.

I have now turned off all news sources. The iPad and iPhone are off. And the television set will be used for showing DVDs and for nothing else. Will the world still be there when I switch them all back on again?

25

(Gloucestershire)

The mince pies are delicious. Eat your heart out, Mr Blumenthal.

Actually, knowing the way he works Mr Blumenthal will probably decorate his heart with mosquito wings, damson jam and bat livers and then serve the whole thing on a bed of cold tripe.

But Antoinette's mince pies are delicious.

Our Christmas crackers were a complete disaster. The jokes and quotes were old and pathetic or had some indiscernible commercial motive. The hats were very poorly made. Some of the crackers were empty. The gifts were truly pathetic and consisted, on the whole of ungrammatical, badly printed, promotional nonsenses. What on earth has happened? Only last year we bought crackers which contained silly toys you could play with. This year the toys were silly, little colouring books the size of a postage stamp and short plastic straws which will be useful if either of us needs to perform a tracheotomy but which are, otherwise, of no value. Every Christmas we used to fill a drawer with small toys: spinning tops, yoyos and so on. Toys that were just too good to throw away. This year we emptied the crackers straight into the bin. The expected toys simply did not materialise.

Finding decent crackers seems impossible. If you pay a ridiculous price you still get the same boring nail clippers, screwdrivers, bottle opener and shoe horn but they are all silver plated. If you pay an obscene amount you get the same items made out of solid silver.

Antoinette has had a brilliant idea.

Next year we are going to buy a couple of dozen of the largest and best looking crackers we can find. We will then empty out the miserable contents and replace them with toys and jokes of our own. We will limit each other to £1 per toy per cracker. This will be easier than making our own from scratch. Our crackers will look professional but the contents will be superior.

We had one or two other disappointments.

First, the oven chose Christmas Day to misbehave.

Second, a pair of earrings which I bought for Antoinette fell apart as we ate dinner. (She had been wearing them for two hours so there is no point in taking them back. The shop will tell me that they were worn out.)

Still, there were many bright spots.

We lit a fire with some excellent kiln dried hardwood logs and I made toast with an extendable long handled brass toasting fork. Toast, crumpets and pikelets all taste much better when prepared on a real log fire. It is true that some bits get burned, as do the odd finger or thumb, but it's a small price to pay for a special piece of toast. And toasting forks remind me of old England; they come from a time of coster mongers, knife grinders, curds and whey, imperial measurements such as pecks and bushels and long-forgotten singing glasses; of a time when Toby jugs and horse brasses were real, and meant something, rather than being merely tatty artefacts produced en masse in Chinese factories.

26

(Gloucestershire)

We put on the DVD of the Great Escape as is our custom on Boxing Day. James Garner and Donald Pleasance still died. I live in hope that one year they will escape.

27

(Gloucestershire)

A reader has written to ask me if it is true, as is apparently claimed in the Wikipedia entry dedicated to my alleged biography, that I used the penname Edward Vernon for three books in the 1970s (*Practice Makes Perfect*, *Practise What You Preach* and *Getting Into Practice*) because the books were ‘an amended version of my actual cases’.

I have absolutely no idea where this idea came from but it is as fictional as the books themselves.

The three Edward Vernon books are all novels (which is to say that everything in them was made up) and my literary agent at the time suggested that I use the pen name because I was busy writing non-fiction medical books under my own name.

My literary agent at the time (at the elite Curtis Brown agency) was selling my non-fiction books under the name Vernon Coleman and thought it might be difficult to sell paperback rights to a series of novels written under the same name. So I created a not very original pen name using my Christian names reversed.

Pan, which published my early non-fiction books, subsequently bought the paperback rights to my novel *Practise Makes Perfect* by Edward Vernon (it had been published in the UK in hardback by Macmillan and in America by Tom McCormack of St Martin’s Press, who had also published Alf Wight’s ‘James Herriot’ books) but the editors there didn’t know that Vernon Coleman and Edward Vernon were the same person. I remember a rather embarrassing meeting with Pan Books when I had to admit that I was also Edward Vernon. I couldn’t really avoid the confession because the paper-backer had planned promotional tours for both books. Pan published the books under the heading Autobiography/Humour for commercial reasons. Actually, Pan were very happy that the books were fictional because it reduced the libel risk.

I grew a beard when I was promoting the Edward Vernon books, thinking that it might prove a suitable disguise. However, when I appeared live on Central Television in the Midlands the first question was: ‘Vernon Coleman, why have you grown a beard and why are you now calling yourself Edward Vernon.’ I can’t remember what I replied.

Sadly, I’m not allowed to correct these (or any other errors, misconceptions and omissions) because the subjects of Wikipedia biographies are not allowed to make corrections. However, drug company employees, and others with nefarious motives, are allowed to change whatever they like and to amend my ‘biography’ to suit their masters.

Wikipedia apparently also reports that I have been censured by both the Press Complaints Council and the Advertising Standards Authority. This is absolutely true but what Wikipedia doesn’t mention is that in both cases I was censored for claiming that meat can cause cancer. The complainant in both cases was the meat trade.

The PCC did not like an article I wrote warning that researchers had proved a link between eating red meat and developing cancer. The ASA did not like an advert for my book *Food for Thought* which contains details of 26 scientific references proving the link between eating meat and developing cancer.

These two bodies (both funded by large companies and neither of them statutory) refused to look at the 26 medical and scientific references which I offered to them in my defence.

Subsequently, of course, the World Health Organisation, and just about every Government agency in the world, published reports confirming that I had been right to point out the link between meat and cancer. It might have been nice if Wikipedia had mentioned this background.

The last time I looked, Wikipedia also published a bitchy quote about me from *The Independent* but failed to mention that this comment appeared in *The Independent* after its sister paper the *Independent in Sunday* had found it necessary to publish a lengthy correction and an apology for a libellous and inaccurate profile which they had printed.

I have annoyed a lot of people in my life. But I’m pleased to say that most of them worked for large organisations such as drug companies, meat companies and so on.

It does seem terribly unreasonable to continue publishing proven inaccuracies and misleading comments. If an Encyclopaedia is to be taken seriously it must surely be impartial and as complete as possible.

Talking of complete, the list of my books on Wikipedia mysteriously stops at the year 2011 (though I have written a number of books since then, including several diaries and two more volumes in the Bilbury series).

I have spent my life campaigning on many issues. Sadly, and not unexpectedly, this has led to endless attacks from the drug industry and from journalists hired to protect the establishment’s interests.

I have been threatened, libelled, burgled, banned and hacked and much of the material about me on the Web is patently spiteful and malicious. My website has been taken down more times than I can remember and I had to threaten to sue Yahoo to persuade their legal department to remove an article claiming that I wasn’t a properly qualified doctor.

It is perhaps hardly surprising that I know of no young medical writers taking on the medical and pharmaceutical establishment.

And to be honest, campaigning on health issues is not something I would recommend.

However, my sincere thanks to the many readers who have, in one way or another, supported me over the years.

28

(Gloucestershire)

Oscar Wilde is often regarded as a man with a razor sharp wit. And he was, of course. But apart from the fact that he stole some of his best lines he also had a habit of preparing bon mots for appropriate occasions.

So, for example, a gentleman who travelled from London to the country with Oscar tells how when they were leaving their hosts and had boarded the train at the station, Oscar leant through the carriage window and said something (now long forgotten) very appropriate, sharp and witty. The onlookers on the platform laughed and clapped with delight. Oscar then sank back into the carriage and waved goodbye as the train started to chug out of the station.

But then disaster struck and the train suddenly stopped. It had travelled no more than a dozen yards.

The onlookers, excited by the delay and the chance of witty snippets from the Great Man, hurried along the platform, ready for another bon mot or two.

'You say something,' said Oscar to his companion. The Great Man was now holding up his newspaper and pretending to read. 'I only prepared one witty quip and I've used it.'

29

(Devon)

Health officials today warned people over the age of 65 not go out of doors. Pensioners should, said the State's officially appointed nannies, stay indoors and consume plenty of warm food and hot drinks (not hot food and warm drinks you will notice). If they must go out they should wear several layers of clothing.

This advice is, of course, absolute bollocks.

And it is bollocks for two reasons.

First, the weather forecasters are merely suggesting that there might be a bit of frost about. Staying indoors is probably going to kill more people than going out for a walk.

And second, do the health officials who issued this bizarre warning not realise that vast numbers of people over the age of 65 are now forced to work? Civil servants receive huge, inflation linked pensions and can probably retire the minute they reach their 35th birthday but proper folk cannot live on the pitiful pensions they receive. And, of course, even those who save cannot possibly live on the interest they receive. A pensioner who has £100,000 in the bank will be lucky to receive £1,000 in interest these days – thanks to the Bank of England's determination to push house prices through the roof.

I realised today that I am weary.

The problem of publishing books and then dealing with the nasty reviews has become a burden. And I thought today, for the first time, of retirement; of properly retiring.

'Don't think of it as retirement,' said Antoinette 'Think of it as going on a long holiday.'

What a wonderful thought.

And so, with a renewed sense of recklessness surfing through my veins, I ignored the Government's official warning and went outside. I am nothing if not daring.

While out I bought a pile of boating magazines and a book on how to choose a motor boat.

To my astonishment I discovered that the biggest private yacht is longer than any ship currently in commission in Britain's Royal Navy. One private boat has a dedicated concert room where a 50 piece orchestra can entertain the owner and his guests. Three boats have a fuel tank capacity of a million litres or more of fuel.

I strongly suspect that the majority of the people who own the world's largest boats are crooks. But I could be wrong about this. It could be that all of them are crooks.

I may be daft but I'm not stupid enough to buy a boat with sails, ropes and requiring crew members who know the meaning of 'avast', 'heave ho'. I do know the difference between port and starboard and stern and aft and I think that should do me nicely. I have read all the Hornblower books by C.S.Forrester and I have listened to every episode of the Navy Lark.

'How about we buy a boat next year?' I said to Antoinette. 'A small one with an engine so that we can phut phut along the coast while eating cucumber sandwiches and drinking tea from a thermos flask?'

'Do they make small boats with two engines?' asked Antoinette. 'Is there a nautical equivalent of the AA? What happens if we break down? We won't need oars will we? There won't be any bobbing up and down to be done, will there?'

And then I read the book I'd bought and learnt about insurance and boat surveys and barnacles and moorings and compulsory helmsman examinations and winter storage and red tape and bureaucracy and harbour fees and licenses for this and for that.

And I thought again. And I thought that, perhaps, on the other hand, I could always take up croquet again. I used to be pretty good at croquet. And we have an excellent flat lawn overlooking the sea.

Of course, if you hit a ball too hard it won't just go into the bushes. It will go down 100 feet to the beach, the rocks and the sea.

Still, losing an occasional croquet ball sounds far preferable to drifting out into the English Channel where the shipping lanes are, I believe, just as busy as the M25 during the evening rush hour.

30

(Devon)

I am so weary of reading about the wonders of progress that I sat down today and tried to think of the ways in which our world today has changed from what it was like when I was a boy 60 odd years ago. I know that what I'm about to write will doubtless be dismissed as the senile, 'better in my day' ranting of an old man who should buy his fawn coloured elasticated trousers and shut up and leave the world to the Entitlement Generation. But bugger that. This is my book.

I miss variety shows, railway compartments, ironmongers, proper sports shops selling cricket bats and balls, toy shops full of pocket money sized toys, decent sweet shops with gobstoppers and liquorice sticks in large glass containers, well stocked second hand book shops, banks where the manger wore a frock coat and greeted the customers with a smile and a small bow, (actually there aren't many banks around anymore – the big banks are closing around 700 branches a year in an attempt to force us all to do our banking in hackerland online) and small newsagents which didn't sell greeting cards at inflated prices but which had a bubble gum machine bolted to the pavement outside.

And I miss shops which had helpful staff, instead of dragons trained at the Post Office Training Centre in darkest Dartmoor.

Shop assistants no longer seem to understand that the words 'serving customers' suggest a level of helpfulness. The idea that the customer is always right is a forgotten concept; a retail anachronism.

No one seems to care about making customers happy. Big companies have absolutely no interest in retaining their existing customers – they regard them as cash cows to be milked and then tossed aside when empty. And, to my surprise small companies are often just as bad.

I will even miss a world in which men were allowed to smoke pipes. In the mid-1950s, I read avidly about the dangerous of smoking and throughout my years as a doctor I have campaigned as hard as anyone for the dangers of smoking to be widely circulated. I was also, I believe, the first to warn of the dangers of passive smoking.

But I can't help thinking that the whole thing has gone too far. Many of those who obtained relief and satisfaction from cigarettes now take tranquillisers and antidepressants and mix them with vast quantities of alcohol or marijuana. Are these safer? No, I fear not. Millions are addicted to fearsome drugs. On the roads I have to remind myself that at least one in four drivers will be drugged by the prescription medicines they are taking, and that their reflexes will be as slow as if they were drunk – if not slower.

The EU's fascist smoking laws have killed music halls, clubs and pubs and the result is that people drink (and smoke) at home and because the booze they buy from the supermarket costs a quarter the price of the booze sold in a pub, they drink far more of it. So, instead of lung cancer, they get liver disease and they live miserable, solitary lives.

Governments always make a mess of things when they try to interfere in people's lives.

In the US, the prohibition years led to people drinking more not less alcohol and the speakeasies spawned a massive crime wave. Prohibition encouraged and enabled gangsters to become organised. The American Government tried to support their absurd legislation by deliberately distributing poisoned alcohol in an attempt to frighten people into not drinking. It didn't work, of course, but simply encouraged people to make their own booze in their cellars. What a great success that was.

Here are some of the ways in which society has changed over the last half a century or so:

We have become far more judgemental than we were. There is less courtesy, less respect for the sensitivity of others and more outspokenness morphing into rudeness in the name of 'the right to criticise'.

There is much more violence on our streets. This may, or may not, be linked to the fact that there were, in the bad old days, heaps of policemen (on foot) wandering up and down preventing crime. These days nearly all our senior policemen spend their days sitting behind desks working out ways to be more politically correct while the lower ranks sit in motor cars waiting to catch drivers exceeding the speed limits. I cannot remember when I last saw a policeman standing or walking. Do they still have legs? Or is it possible that they now have a special breeding programme producing policemen without a lower half? Sadly, this obsession with forcing motorists to obey speed limits has coincided with a noticeable increase in road traffic accidents. A criminology lecturer recently pointed out that 'it is well known in police circles that provided one is not caught doing anything criminal, no amount of ineptitude will serve as a bar to advancement in the service'. To be fair the same is true within most professions and trades these days.

In the bad old days you really could leave your door open (and your car unlocked) and expect that everything would still be where you had left it when you returned. Really.

Children could and did walk or cycle happily to school. They got good exercise, the air around our schools was not polluted by thousands of short car journeys and parents could get on with doing more important things. I doubt if there are more adult perverts or lunatics around these days but parents think there are because that is what they have been told and that's what matters. I suspect that the number of children dying today from obesity related illnesses (not unrelated to the fact that they no longer walk anywhere) is far greater than the number of children who were molested, attacked or kidnapped back in the bad old days.

The incidence of illiteracy and innumeracy has rocketed in recent years. One in five 15-year-old Britons is now illiterate and innumerate. They cannot read at all, nor can they do the simplest of sums. One in five! Britain is now the bottom of the world in these basic skills. Curiously, the rise in these two problems has matched the increasing reluctance of teachers to teach pupils the basic principles of reading, writing and arithmetic. Teachers will doubtless say this is just a coincidence. At schools children older than infants were very often segregated by sex, with boys going to a school for boys and girls going to a school for girls. Sex education did not exist and, among children and teenagers, sexual offences of any kind were pretty well unknown. Today, many schools are now unisex, even having unisex toilets, and by the time they leave school a substantial proportion of male pupils will have had their lives ruined by their being placed on the sex offenders register. (The enthusiasm for unisex lavatories is a bizarre phenomenon and I really can't work out who thought it a good idea. Unisex lavatories simply mean that everyone, male and female, has to wait longer to use the loo. You can cram more urinals than cubicles into a small building and so throughput productivity is greater with separate male and female lavatories.)

Half a century ago or more, the council would send round a large vehicle, called a dustcart, into which metal dustbins would be emptied. People kept their dustbins in their back yard or near their back gate and the dustmen would collect the bins, empty them and then put them back where they found them. These days, councils no longer do this. Instead, citizens are expected to sort their rubbish and put it into a variety of bags and boxes. Some of the rubbish will be collected once a fortnight, some will be collected once a month and so on. Dustmen have become officious sneaks, refusing to take a bag of rubbish if it contains an item which does not satisfy the appropriate EU regulations. Lucky citizens, who still have any sort of rubbish collecting service, have to keep charts so that they know which rubbish will be collected when and they must spend an hour or two every week washing, sorting and filling their containers. When the rubbish has been collected, it is all mixed up again, put on large container vessels (the ones which brought over television sets, cars and washing machines) and sent off to China to be dealt with.

Administration of all kinds used to be done by clerks who worked on ledgers and accounts books. Appointments were kept in the same way. Very occasionally the clerks would make mistakes but generally speaking they were quite fast and efficient and many found the work worthwhile and rewarding. There was never any problem with ledgers breaking down or 'operating slowly' and the clerks who did the work took responsibility for what they did.

Patients who needed to see a GP would simply turn up at the doctor's surgery. There were no appointments systems and patients only telephoned the doctor if they had an emergency problem which needed to be dealt with by a home visit. Doctors would visit patients at home, on request, any time of the day or night for 365 days a year. When a patient arrived at the surgery he or she would be given a number and the receptionist, who often knew him or her by name, would tell him or her how long they would have to wait to see the doctor of his or her choice. If there was likely to be a wait of more than twenty minutes, the patient would pop out and do some shopping or visit the public library or pop into the local council offices to pay a rates bill in cash or with a piece of paper called a cheque.

Every reasonably sized community used to have its own hospital. The management of the hospital would be organised by a matron and each ward would be managed by a ward sister who would be assisted by a ward clerk. The matron would also have a secretary and probably a couple of filing cabinets. Hospitals were run very efficiently. There was little waste and most patients who entered a hospital left feeling considerably improved. Hospital infections were virtually unknown and if a patient did acquire an infection or a bedsore while in hospital the nursing staff would be ashamed and matron's wrath would be fearsome. Patients' social problems (finding someone to feed the cat or arranging for a fresh nightie to be brought in) would be managed by the Hospital Almoner. Nurses always seemed to have time to attend to the hair and make-up of their female patients and they would do this regularly just before visiting time. After visitors had gone, the nurses would put the flowers which had been brought into vases and place them on the patients' lockers. It was generally agreed that having flowers in a hospital helped to make the place look warmer and friendlier. It was widely known that several thousand years earlier the Greeks had shown that having flowers in a hospital contributed enormously to the well-being of patients.

Most of the food that was eaten was grown organically, though the word wasn't really in use half a century ago. Most areas had their own farms producing basic produce, though much food was imported from other parts of the Commonwealth. Food was sold fresh in small shops where customers would be invited to sit on a chair and point to what they wanted. The shopkeeper would then select the appropriate items and an assistant would place the purchases into a large, brown paper bag. At the end of the shopping, a boy would deliver the purchases in a basket fitted to the front of a bicycle. Most bizarrely of all, the customer was always right. Foods contained neither carcinogens nor genetically modified material and nor did they contain chemicals, drugs or hormones. Food tasted better and was far healthier. Finally, today's candy bars are smaller and they don't taste as good as they used to.

Most small towns and even villages had their own railway station though if it was a small village it would probably have a 'halt' rather than a fully blown station. The train services were good and it was possible to get from a small village in the far south of the country to another village in the far north of the country with only a couple of changes of train. Local bus services were excellent and even people who lived in small villages could rely on an excellent daily bus service to their nearest large town. Most people took their holidays in Britain and those who did not have motor cars could rely on travelling from home to their holiday destination on public transport without any difficulty. Those who wanted to go abroad could fly if they wished, though it was usually necessary to arrive at the airport fifteen or twenty minutes before take-off.

Roads were well made and usually kept in good condition. Potholes were few and far between. It was generally accepted that a journey across country could be completed at an average speed of between 40 and 50 mph, which meant that it was possible to move around the country rather more speedily before the introduction of motorways than after their arrival. Cars were simply made, but solid and surprisingly reliable, and many men enjoyed working on their vehicles at the weekend. It was possible to do most things, including change an engine, with a reasonably well-equipped garage at home. It was possible for a small boy to identify several dozen makes of motor car simply by observing their general shapes. Today's cars look dull. They go faster but travel more slowly and, as a result, use more fuel than cars did in the 1950s. Things went wrong when the European Union said that cars all had to look the same in order to be more aerodynamic and use less fuel. Unfortunately, they also insisted on absurd changes in road and motorway design with the consequence that endless road works result in cars wasting fuel by pootling along at sub 40mph speeds.

Entertainment was often made in the home but the radio and the television were available. Most programmes (even dramas) were broadcast live and few attempts were made to shock or frighten the viewers. The aim was to educate or to entertain or, ideally, to do both at once. Today, the televisions are bigger, smarter and clearer. Flat screen television sets doubtless provide a better picture than the ones requiring a cathode ray tube. Sadly, the programmes aren't as good as they were; being poorer both in quality and intent. The television has succumbed to the inclination to put form before function; everything is appearance and there is little energy left for substance. News and documentary programmes are invariably biased and designed to promote a particular point of view.

Accidents happened, both in the home and at work, but there were fewer accidents then than there are now. The introduction of a mass of health and safety legislation has led to conflict and confusion and an absence of common sense and when accidents do happen they are often far more damaging than in the past. Moreover, there is now a firm belief that all accidents must be someone's fault – someone must be held legally, financially responsible. Whenever there is an accident there must be retribution.

All cities were well equipped with parks, flower beds and public lavatories. There were playing fields available too, so that people with an interest in sport could book a pitch and organise their own game of football or cricket. Parks invariably had public tennis courts where amateurs could hire a court at very little cost. Parks were well kept and there were often plenty of birds and squirrels to be seen. There would invariably be ducks and swans on lakes and ponds and mothers and fathers would take their children to the park to feed the ducks. This was considered a good way to spend a weekend afternoon. No one was arrested for feeding the birds or the ducks.

Public buildings were well-designed and well made in a stout, solid Victorian style and when new public buildings were erected they were designed to fit in with their surroundings.

Top class sport was played in good humour and with all players showing respect for their opponents. Many sportsmen were genuine amateurs – playing their favourite game in their spare time. Cheating and unfair play were unknown. There were very few professional sportsmen around and even the country's top footballers would have full time jobs and play football as a secondary occupation. So, for example, Tom Finney, who was one of the country's leading footballers, was also a plumber during the week. As late as the 1950s, the Australian Test cricket players all had proper jobs – and played cricket in their spare time. It would have been considered absurd and slightly indecent for a professional sportsman to travel the world with his mother or father in tow. (These days professional, grown up, millionaire tennis players, cricketers, footballers and even racing drivers will not leave home unless at least one parent accompanies them and is, one assumes, available to make sure that they have a sufficient supply of clean vests.)

Dentists were freely available and mostly did good work. Fillings which were put into teeth stayed there. (I have fillings which were put in over half a century ago. They are solid and stable. Fillings which were put in a few years ago are forever crumbling and falling out.)

Mail was delivered twice a day on six days a week and occasionally, particularly in the month of December, as Christmas approached, there would be deliveries on Sundays. Every street had its own post box from which mail would be collected two or three times a day. There was no class system for mail and all letters posted one day would invariably reach their destination the following day. (This was not, however, as good as the postal service provided in the days of Queen Victoria, when a letter posted in the morning would invariably produce a response before the evening and housewives would frequently post their shopping lists to the local butcher, grocer and greengrocer in the morning and expect deliveries of the ordered items by late afternoon.) Post offices were friendly, well run places.

Town centres were lively, jolly, safe places with evening newspaper sellers on every street corner and, in winter, hot chestnut salesmen. These days the newspaper sellers have been replaced by the Internet and the hot chestnut salesmen have been banned by the health gestapo. Actually, of course, there are no real newspapers around anymore. The publications which used to be described as 'newspapers' have lost, or abandoned, the ability to differentiate between news and opinion and most national newspapers (notably the *Financial Times* and *The Guardian*) have, like the BBC, become little more than fascist propaganda machines. Drunkenness in public places was confined to the occasional wine supping tramp. Lewd and drunken behaviour, and communal vomiting parties, were confined to boat race night and members of the two affected universities. Public drunkenness among young women was entirely unknown.

Every small town had its own record shop, music shop, book shop and art shop. Most towns have none of these now. The Internet has crushed them. Courtesy and respect were normal. If there was insufficient seating accommodation men would always stand up for women on buses and trains. Children and youths who failed to do so would quickly receive a clip around the ear and the donor of the clip around the ear would be heartily commended by all and sundry. Men doffed their hats or caps, or touched the brim or peak, when approaching their elders or betters as well when preparing to converse with members of what was called 'the fair sex'. These days the wearing of hats is popular only among women and even then only among women going to weddings and to Ascot and the headgear they wear can no more be called hats than the immodest coverings they drape around their bodies can be called dresses. Today, any man who stood up and offered his seat to a woman would be subjected to physical and verbal abuse, a 90 second spot on YouTube and, quite probably, a lawsuit demanding damages for offensive behaviour.

So that was then and this is now.

Today we have supermarkets with the size, shape, décor and welcoming ambience of aircraft hangers where you can buy lower than ever quality food, motorways with their inevitable and often unnecessary holdups, reality television, mobile telephones to annoy us day and night, social media and all its attendant joys of constant carping and criticism, satellite television with 500 channels but nothing worth watching, a failing public transport system, failing hospitals (with the only waiting lists in the world and the worst risk of contracting a deadly infection of anywhere on the planet), a failed primary health care service, failing schools (so bad that thousands now scrimp and save in order to send their children to private school) and three hour queues at airports. We have the highest fuel taxes in the world, massively increased road fund licences, an ever increasing smorgasbord of taxes and an ever decreasing assortment of services and facilities. Town and city roads are pockmarked with massive potholes (which concerned citizens are invited to repair themselves) and street lights are turned off in the early evening in order to satisfy EU regulations. Modern health and safety regulations mean that firemen and police officers, hired to protect us and traditionally expected to take on hazards in the execution of their duty, run the absurd risk of being severely disciplined if they expose themselves to even the slightest risk of personal injury. Policemen don't deal with burglaries or muggings but seem to spend all their time shooting innocent people and arresting 85-year-old men who have been accused of historic sex crimes, often by seemingly deranged complainants. Senior police officers, over full of themselves, seemingly unbalanced by their sense of arrogance and self-importance, have adopted an attitude of supreme authority and have completely lost touch with their responsibility to the public. Our roads are blocked with pointless and damaging speed bumps and there are endless queues of recycling lorries, spewing out deadly diesel fumes. We are forced, by law, to spend hours every week sorting and cleaning our rubbish and, at pain of imprisonment, forced to put each discarded item of packaging into its designated container. Most of our nation's excellent, caring local hospitals were closed long ago. The few remaining small, local hospitals will be closing soon. For years now the remaining local hospitals have erected signs warning folk 'No Accident and Emergency Cover'. Only huge bureaucratic, impersonal and deadly hospitals are surviving. Patients who need to attend an accident and emergency department must travel for an hour or two. In the bad old days the local casualty department was open 24 hours a day and the emphasis was on the word 'local'. How many sick or injured patients now die on their way to hospital? My guess is tens of thousands a year. All this was done to satisfy the European Union which has always believed that bigger is always better. It is the fascist way. Life expectancy today is, for adults, no more than it was a century ago. The myth of prolonged life is merely a result of reduced infant mortality. (There are more old people around today simply because the population is vastly greater.)

So what do we have to thank progress for? What gains has mankind made in the last half a century or so?

Christmas tree lights are more reliable now that they are not sold in series and liable to go out when a single bulb expires. They are doubtless safer than having lighted candles fastened to the tree (though nowhere near as attractive). Mobile telephones enable us to be in touch with one another at every minute of the day and the night, but they also make us available to others for those same time periods. Computers are faster but go wrong more often than the clerks they have replaced.

And, er, I'm sure there was something else, but I can't quite remember what it was at the moment.

Those who define and measure progress don't believe in measuring the quality of life.

If they did they would realise that Britons have never been happier, more content, or more pleased with their country than they were in the 1950s.

Where, oh where, did we go so wrong?

Order has always been an illusion but today everything about our lives which seems solid turns out to be built upon sand, and where we would like to enjoy the peace of certainty there is only deliberated constructed chaos.

Our lives are structured in such a way that we feel besieged by uncertainty and bewildered by endless waves of fear. How much of it is part of a Grand Plan? How much merely a result of a toxic mixture of incompetence, greed, corruption and selfishness emanating from those who have taken power unto themselves? How much of it is a result of the worshipping of progress at all costs – without consideration for the price? How much is a result of heightened and exaggerated expectations? How much a result of over confidence which has turned into hubris?

Ah, these are the mysteries.

In a way, the origins of the fears and bewilderment are of little practical consequence.

It seems to me that all we can do is try to teach ourselves to guard our own values, our own hopes and our own expectations.

And to ignore those who would force us to accept their fake values, their false hopes and their unreasonable expectations.

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(Devon)

And so another year bites the dust. Every professional athlete in the country has been mentioned in the New Honours List for doing the jobs they were paid by us to do. Antoinette and I have decided that Lord Percival, our most persistent and loyal pheasant, should now become the Earl of All Gloucestershire while all our squirrels should be given knighthoods in recognition of their services to tree planting.

Possibly more significantly, the official figures just published show that a record number of immigrants came to Britain this year. Officially 650,000 newcomers arrived. (Unofficially the figure was probably two or three times as high.)

A Government spokesman said that this influx of newcomers was fine because quite a lot of the immigrants had a job to go to and intended to work rather than simply claim benefits. The Government also pointed out that the number of immigrants wasn't as worrying as it sounds because a record 315,000 Britons left the country in despair, thereby reducing the official net immigration figures to 335,000. No one in the Government seemed to notice that the 315,000 Britons leaving were pretty well all hard working, educated, tax paying citizens whom the country could ill afford to lose. Nor did anyone notice that the nature of the country is changing very rapidly and that in ten years' time Britain will be completely unrecognisable.

And councils everywhere have closed down for a fortnight. In Derby, the City Council has abandoned rubbish collections for the duration and has advised citizens to keep their rubbish in their freezers in order to keep it fresh.

What a wonderful idea. Who wants stale, smelly rubbish? If the undertakers go on strike then we could keep dead bodies in our freezers too.

For the New Year, I have decided that I am going to reclassify myself as a ‘tech start up’. This is, apparently, the certain way to instant riches. Entrepreneurs who are doing quite dull things such as selling soap or socks are now defining themselves as ‘tech start ups’ by arguing that since they will be selling their products on the Internet they must be considered to be part of the new Information Age.

And so it seems that it would be perfectly reasonable for me to position myself as a ‘tech start up’ (and claim my share of the trillion dollar funding now available for all entrepreneurs who can be so described). I sell my books on the Internet (and that satisfies the ‘tech’ part of the name). I am constantly writing new books (or ‘product’ as the Web people prefer to refer to books) and so it is clearly reasonable for me to describe myself as ‘new’. And I haven’t been selling ebooks for very long so that satisfies the ‘start’ bit of the name.

Angel investors who would like to invest in ‘Vernon Coleman’ in $100 million chunks should send cheques or cash. Either will be perfectly acceptable.

But no socks, aftershave or bath salts, please.

Note 1:
Some reviewers will doubtless damn this book (and, curiously, my life) because it contains thoughts, ideas, opinions or whatever, with which they do not agree.

As readers will no doubt already be aware, one of my books was recently slammed with a one star review because it did not contain any mention of Gloucester Cathedral. The book in question did not promise to include anything about Gloucester Cathedral, it was not about Gloucester and it was not about cathedrals and there was no reason why Gloucester Cathedral should have been mentioned but this didn't prevent the reviewer, who presumably felt very strongly about Gloucester Cathedral, from dissing a book on which I had spent the best part of a year. Like so many people he or she did not review the book I had written but the book they wanted me to write, or thought they might have wanted me to write or wanted to write themselves. I should therefore mention at this point that I am aware that this book is similarly deficient in that respect. I apologise to readers who are therefore disappointed.

The sensible thing for me to do would be to write a book entirely devoid of facts and opinions. But bugger that. It would be a sad and sorry world if that were so. But I would be grateful if readers who have found this book, in part or in whole, stimulating or entertaining or even both would find the time to give it a decent rating on Amazon. Otherwise the book will doubtless die and freedom of speech will take another kicking.

Note 2:
Author! Author!

Vernon Coleman is tall and now has less hair than would be considered appropriate for a television presenter or politician. He does, however, have most of his own teeth and nails. He is a qualified doctor and a long-term iconoclast who writes with the aim of making people think. This has not been a particularly wise career choice for he has attracted a good deal of spiteful criticism from those parts of the medical establishment (such as the drug industry) which have been annoyed by his books and articles.

He was a successful self-published author long before self-publishing became fashionable and this annoyed the publishing establishment. To make things worse he has been quite good at it and has sold a lot of books. The only thing that annoys the publishing establishment more than an author who self publishes is an author who self publishes and turns out to be quite good at it. Every time someone buys one of his books you can hear editors and literary agents gnashing their teeth at their lost commissions.

Coleman's early books were published by many leading London publishers but he chose to self-publish when no one would publish a small book called *Alice's Diary*.

Just about every publisher in London turned down *Alice's Diary* on the twin grounds that it wasn't the sort of thing the author usually wrote and there was no market for a book purporting to be a diary written by a cat.

After he had sold more than 60,000 hardback copies, Coleman decided that posh publishers and agents didn't know more about publishing than he did so he'd publish more stuff himself. (Bookshop staff often rang up to find out who had really written the book but when told that a cat had written it all accepted this explanation without protest or, apparently, much surprise.)

Within a few years, Coleman was running a large self-publishing operation from Publishing House, a specially converted building in Barnstaple where he employed over a dozen members of staff. Always a free spirit he said that he enjoyed publishing his own books because he did not have to deal with editors or marketing people and could write whatever he chose to write. His success as a self-publisher attracted a new collection of enemies. 'You mean to tell me that you write whatever you want to write, publish it and then make money?' said one newspaper journalist, who was appalled by Coleman's way of working.

The Advertising Standards Authority (a private body funded by large advertisers) frequently complained noisily about adverts which upset large corporate interests but Coleman delighted in continuing to use the same 'banned' adverts. He was particularly delighted when *The Guardian* newspaper, which he had always considered to be sanctimonious and hypocritical, agreed to publish a series of full page adverts which had been 'banned' by the fact-averse Advertising Standards Authority.

His many books included *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War* (which is believed to have been the only self-published novel to be turned into a full length feature film) and the internationally successful books about characters living in the village of Bilbury in North Devon.

Born in Walsall in 1946, Coleman went to school at Queen Mary's Grammar School (which wisely prefers to keep quiet about the association) and after leaving school spent a year working in Kirkby, just outside Liverpool, as a Community Service Volunteer. In Liverpool, Coleman organised a small army of volunteers and arranged for them to perform chores such as decorating the homes of the elderly and the poor. This activity proved popular with the elderly and the poor and the young people who did the work but very unpopular with bureaucrats and trades unions. While in Liverpool, Coleman began writing for newspapers and (doubtless in the absence of any competition) was appointed drama critic for a number of local newspapers.

After that, Coleman went to Birmingham University to study medicine. This turned out to be something of an anti-climax and while at university he ran a youth club called The Gallows in the centre of the city. This was designed to attract teenagers who had nowhere to go in the evenings. While studying medicine, Coleman also reviewed books and plays for the *Birmingham Post*, the *Times Educational Supplement* and other publications.

After hospital posts in Leamington Spa in the English Midlands and Shoreham on the South Coast, he became a GP principal in Leamington Spa where he worked for ten years.

He resigned from the health service in protest at being required to write diagnoses on sick notes which were, by law, made available to a patient's employer.

He argued that this was a breach of the confidentiality aspect of the Hippocratic Oath. Shortly after his resignation the law was changed.

In 1975 his first book *The Medicine Men* was published and both this and the sequel, *Paper Doctors*, received extensive, largely laudatory review coverage in the national press and on television. This was the last time this would happen.

The Medicine Men, which was serialised in *The Guardian* newspaper (which now prefers to keep quiet about the association) was a powerful critique both of the pharmaceutical industry's marketing practices and of the medical profession's close links with the pharmaceutical industry. Coleman was stupid enough to be the first author to draw attention to this dangerous relationship. It has done him no good at all.

In the sequel, called *Paper Doctors*, Coleman made things much worse for himself by arguing that much medical research was a waste of money and effort and that doctors would do better to spend time taking advantage of the useful research which had already been done and ignored.

Not surprisingly, Coleman immediately made enemies of those parts of the medical establishment which had not been annoyed by the first book. He has been pilloried by doctors, drug companies and everyone else owning a white coat ever since.

These two books were quickly followed by a series of a number of other titles: a mixture of polemics and popular health books. In 1978, Coleman wrote a book called *Stress Control*, which was the first popular medical book on the subject of stress.

Under the pen name Edward Vernon he wrote three 'funny doctor' novels for Pan/Macmillan in the UK and for St Martin's Press in the US.

His literary agent (at Curtis Brown) at the time suggested that he use the pen name because he was busy writing non-fiction medical books under his own name and she thought that writing two types of book under one name would prove too confusing for publishers, bookshops and reviewers.

His book *Bodypower*, published in 1983, explained how the human body can protect and repair itself. This was his first major bestseller – appearing in the *Sunday Times* top ten and becoming a huge success when serialised in the *Sunday Mirror* newspaper. It was subsequently serialised in newspapers around the world.

Other notable health titles included *Life Without Tranquillisers* (also a *Sunday Times* top ten bestseller) and *Aspirin or Ambulance*, published in 1980. The latter title was turned into the world's first medical software for home computers and subsequently sold in 26 countries. Coleman now gets slightly peeved when he is described as a Luddite because he has not embraced social media. He has never had a Facebook page or a Twitter account – regarding both as being more suitable for the Entitlement Generation.

Over the years his numerous books were published by many of Britain's leading hardback and paperback publishers and foreign language versions were published by over a score of overseas publishers. His books were regularly published in large print and audio versions.

In 1980 Robert Hale published his novel *Tunnel* under the name Marc Charbonnier. (Over the years Coleman has, like many other prolific authors, written books under a number of other pen names.)

From the early 1980s onwards, Coleman was a regular presenter and guest on a number of television and radio programmes including the Afternoon Show which was broadcast from Glasgow. He was television's first agony uncle on this programme, which was, curiously, broadcast in the afternoons. He was the regular doctor on TV AM and made several series of programmes based on his book *Bodypower*. Whenever a new book was published he toured the country for several weeks – often doing 30 to 40 radio and television interviews in each promotional campaign.

He was the first doctor to record a series of recordings which could be accessed through premium rate telephone numbers and his service, known as The Telephone Doctor, was hugely popular and was used by several million people in the 1980s.

While still a student at university, Coleman contributed to a wide range of newspapers and including *The Guardian* and the *Daily Telegraph* and magazines such as *The Spectator*, *The Lady* and *Punch*. He wrote columns for several medical magazines. Although still a medical student he also wrote a weekly 'doctor' column which was syndicated to around50 local and regional newspapers in the UK and to a number of newspapers in India and the Far East.

After qualifying, he was the original editor of the *British Clinical Journal* and continued to write columns and regular pieces for most national newspapers and a wide variety of magazines in the UK and abroad.

In the 1980s, Coleman became a columnist for both *The Daily Star* newspaper and *The Sun*, both sequentially and simultaneously. He was the *Sun* doctor for about a decade.

His *Daily Star* campaign about benzodiazepine drugs led directly to a change in government policy. He also wrote a column under a pen name (Dr Duncan Scott) for *The People* newspaper and for a year or so had the curious distinction of writing columns for three major tabloid newspapers at the same time – two of them under his own name. He also wrote columns for the *Sunday Independent*, the *Sunday Scot* and the *Sunday Correspondent*.

In 1993, Coleman moved to *The Sunday People* newspaper to write a column under his own name. He continued to write this until 2003, resigning when the paper's editor refused to publish a piece criticising the Iraq War. At the time, Coleman was one of Britain's highest paid columnists.

Altogether Coleman wrote over 5,000 articles and columns for major newspapers and magazines.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s Coleman had been a keen campaigner on animal rights issues, regularly speaking at large rallies in the UK and abroad. He founded and funded an organisation called Plan 2000, aimed at eradicating animal experiments, which received considerable celebrity and popular support, including support from many MPs. Coleman gave evidence about the pointlessness of animal experimentation to committees at the House of Commons and the House of Lords. He also campaigned vigorously against vaccination, which he considered far more dangerous than was widely appreciated and, long before it became popular to do so, for the legalisation of recreational drugs. He also wrote and campaigned about cross-dressing.

In support of his campaigns, he has distributed thousands of his books free of charge and provided columns without charge. He has also spoken widely at many events (including rallies in Trafalgar Square.)

These, and other campaigns, succeeded in annoying the people who had failed to be annoyed by his books and resulted in many attacks from and inspired by the drug industry, the medical establishment and others and Coleman was the victim of many libellous and widely inaccurate articles both in print and on the Internet.

After they had lost a number of high profile television debates on animal experimentation opponents refused to appear with him and even a planned debate at the Oxford Union had to be cancelled after the Union found it impossible to find anyone prepared to speak against him. Instead of debating with him, his opponents chose to organise a massive campaign of abuse and misinformation.

Distressed by the attacks, which were matched in their inaccuracy only by their venom, Coleman chose to become a recluse; disappearing almost entirely from view and speaking only through his books. From around 2003, he refused to do interviews or to read reviews or articles about himself on the Internet.

In the 1980s, he established a number of websites, including www.vernoncoleman.com.

Coleman's books have always sold well outside the UK, where the attacks from the establishment have been more muted. His books have been particularly successful in Portugal and Germany.

Throughout the 1990s and the early part of the 21st century, Coleman continued to write a number of books on health, books on animal issues, and books on politics. Many of these, books such as *England our England* and *Gordon is a Moron* which were hugely successful. For several years Coleman also wrote a monthly Health Letter which was distributed to several thousand readers in the UK and around the world. He also wrote a number of successful novels including *The Village Cricket Tour* and *The Man Who Inherited a Golf Course.*

Many of his novels sold over 30,000 copies each in the UK in hardback but because they were self-published did not count for the official bestseller lists.

Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War was turned into a popular full length feature film starring Pauline Collins as Mr Caldicot and John Alderton as a nursing home owner.

His numerous books also included a series of books about a village called Bilbury in North Devon which were serialised in a number of publications, most notably *People's Friend* magazine.

His non-fiction books included a successful and very personal guide to Paris called *Secrets of Paris*. Coleman and his wife had spent several months a year in a large, top floor flat just a two minute walk away from the Eiffel Tower in Paris.

The publishing business became successful because Coleman had acquired a large and loyal readership. Nearly every one of his books sold out and was reprinted many times and Coleman wrote a number of successful books together with his wife. During the most successful years of the self-publishing business, annual sales exceeded those of many well-known small publishing houses.

When the publishing business was threatened by the soaring cost of postage and the advent of ebooks, he closed Publishing House, intending to retire. However, his wife, Donna Antoinette Coleman, who had first written to him when he wrote his column in *The Sunday People* and whom he had married in 1999, convinced him to publish his books as ebooks. Thanks to Antoinette's skill and determination in converting the books and Coleman's experience in self-publishing this proved to be an enormous success and a series of books about Bilbury (retitled *The Young Country Doctor*) became bestsellers on Amazon in the US.

Over 60 of his old titles, including the now out of print Edward Vernon novels, were republished as ebooks and Coleman wrote a number of new novels and non-fiction books especially for the ebook market. Coleman happily admitted that without his wife's support, encouragement and knowledge he would not have published any of his books in the electronic format.

Coleman has always refused to say whether his Bilbury books are entirely factual, entirely fictional or a judicious mixture of both and has muddied the waters considerably by, for example, crediting one of the characters in the books with having taken cover photographs.

Coleman has also published a series of diaries (starting with *The Diary of a Disgruntled Man*), which divided readers: some loved them and some abhorred the freedom with which he expressed politically incorrect opinions. As with many of his books the reviews from readers tended to be either glowing or condemnatory.

In the first part of his life Coleman, who was a member of the MCC and a number of other clubs, was a keen cricket spectator. He gave up watching cricket when 'they started painting adverts on the pitch'. He is an inveterate bibliophile, with a huge collection of first editions, and has owned a number of classic Bentley motor cars.

Vernon and Antoinette Coleman moved from Devon to Gloucestershire in 2010, where they bought an isolated house in the country. Eventually, they decided that the house was not isolated enough and in 2016 they also purchased a large Arts and Crafts house perched on the cliffs in Devon. The house has views often described as the best in England.

Vernon Coleman is an iconoclast who writes his non-fiction with the aim of making people think and his fiction with the aim of making people smile.

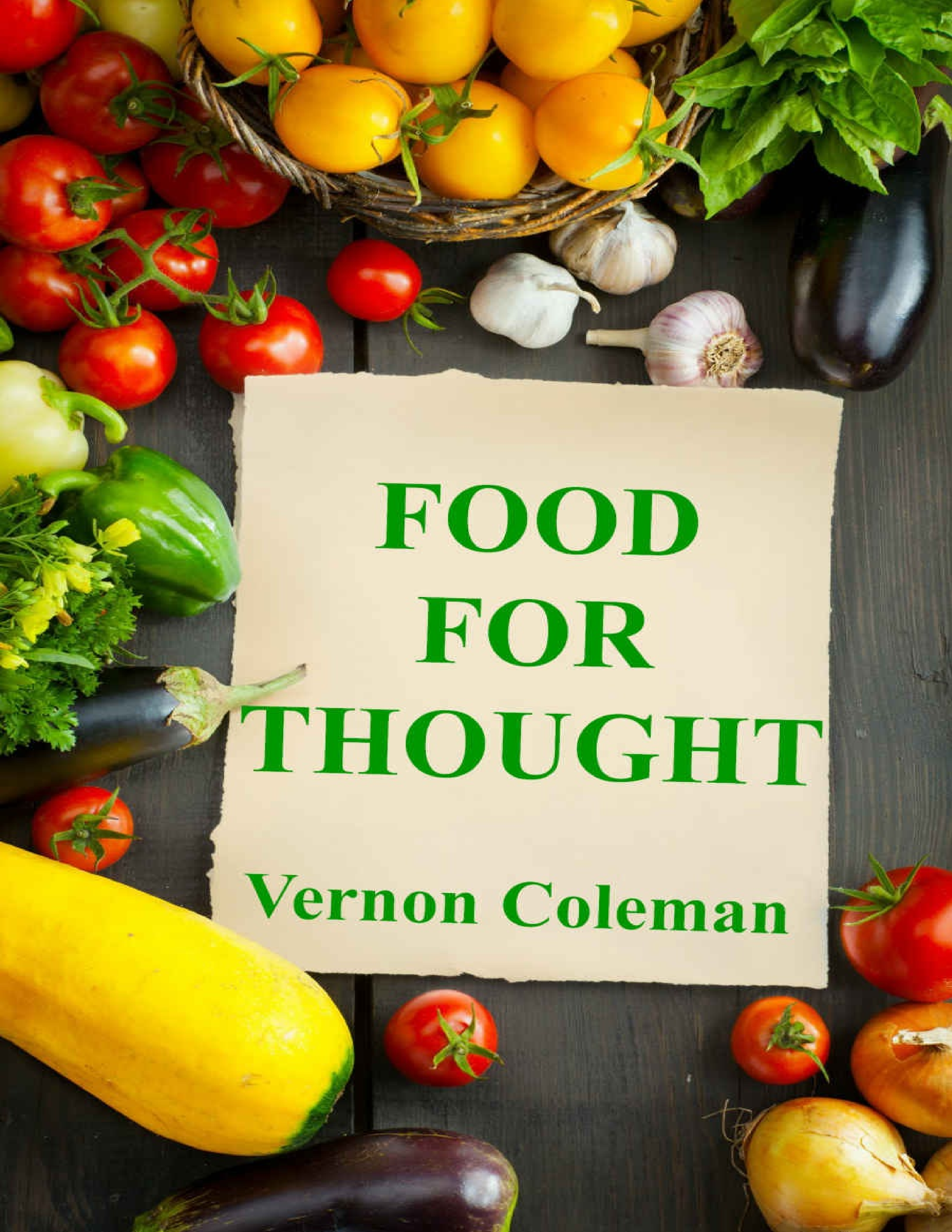

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Vernon Coleman

Food for Thought

VERNON COLEMAN

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The author
Vernon Coleman MB ChB DSc is a registered and licensed medical practitioner with many years of experience as a GP. He is the author of over 100 other books, many of which are available as kindle books on Amazon. For a list of books please see Vernon Coleman's author page on Amazon or visit http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

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Warning

This book is not intended to be, and cannot be, an alternative to personal, professional, medical advice.

Readers should immediately consult a trained and properly qualified health professional, whom they trust and respect, for advice about any symptom or health problem which requires diagnosis, treatment or any kind of medical attention.

While the advice and information in this book are believed to be accurate at the time of writing, neither the author nor the publisher can accept any legal responsibility for errors or omission which may be made.

CHAPTER 1

FOOD THE FUEL

In an average lifetime you will eat thirty tons of food.

From those thirty tons of food your body will derive the building materials it needs both to grow and to repair itself and the energy to keep muscles functioning and organs such as the brain and the liver operating effectively. Food helps to provide the fuel to keep you warm and to keep your heart pumping.

If you eat too much food then the excess will be turned into fat and stored. The idea of storing food as fat is that if at any time in the future your intake of food is less than your body needs then the stored fat can be used as a reserve supply.

The food that you eat is made up of carbohydrates, fats, proteins, vitamins and minerals.

Carbohydrates

Carbohydrates have a terrible reputation — particularly among slimmers who always regard them as a threat to dieting success. It is true that some carbohydrates are bad for you. But other carbohydrates are excellent and essential foodstuffs. If you are going to eat healthily you must know the difference between the good and the bad.

There are three basic types of carbohydrate:

* simple carbohydrates (also known as sugars)
* complex carbohydrates (also known as starches)
* fibre (also known as roughage)

Simple carbohydrates

These are the ‘bad’ carbohydrates — the ones your body can do without. They are full of calories and will provide you with a lot of energy — often very quickly — but by and large they don’t contain anything else of much value. Honey (which is basically a type of sugar) is very much a mysterious exception and some types of sugar (such as blackstrap molasses) contain a few minerals but basically sugar is something you can do without.

You should keep your intake of sugar down because sugar causes tooth decay, makes you fat and increases your risk of developing heart disease. There is even evidence now which shows that too much sugar may increase your chances of developing cancer.

Complex carbohydrates

Simple carbohydrates — sugars — are broken down very quickly in the body. That is why they provide more or less ‘instant’ energy. Complex carbohydrates — foods such as cereals, pasta, rice, pulses and fruits and vegetables — are digested much more slowly.

You should increase your intake of complex carbohydrates because foods that are rich in starch also tend to contain essentials such as protein, iron and vitamins. They are also often rich in fibre and usually contain relatively few calories. You can easily increase your intake of complex carbohydrates by eating more bread (just buy bread — preferably wholemeal — which tastes good and cut it thicker), more pasta (preferably wholemeal), more pulses (beans and peas), more rice (brown rice is better for you) and more fresh fruit and vegetables. Wholemeal bread and pasta and brown rice are better because they contain more fibre and haven’t had so many of the original vitamins and minerals removed in the manufacturing process. Starchy foods contain a lot of potential energy and also contain a lot of the essential proteins, vitamins and minerals to enable your body to remain healthy and strong.

Fibre

Your body needs a plentiful and regular supply of roughage. The list of disorders known to be associated with a low fibre diet is constantly growing but already includes cancer, diverticular disease, gallstones, varicose veins and appendicitis. Fibre consists of a number of complex carbohydrates and there are two types: soluble fibre and insoluble fibre. Most foods which contain fibre include both types.

Soluble fibre has two important jobs. First, it forms a sticky substance in your stomach which restricts the amount of fat that your body absorbs from the other food you have eaten. Second, it helps to control the production of insulin (the hormone which controls the level of your blood sugar) and thereby helps to stop you feeling hungry. Soluble fibre is found in most vegetables and fruits, in oats, barley and rye and in pulses such as peas and beans.

Insoluble fibre is found in wheat (and in the bread and cereals which are made from them) and in some vegetables. As you might imagine from the fact that it is insoluble this type of fibre doesn’t turn into a sticky mass but acts like a sponge and simply swells up as it absorbs the liquid in your stomach. It is because it swells up that insoluble fibre helps to make you feel full — and stops you eating so much.

Protein

Your body makes its own protein from the amino acids which are in the proteins you eat; it needs protein to grow and to repair damaged tissues. There are twenty two types of amino acid — all containing nitrogen — in your body.

Eight of the amino acids which are used to create adult proteins and ten of the amino acids used to create proteins in children have to be obtained in our diet because our bodies cannot make them. These amino acids are, not surprisingly, known as ‘essential’ amino acids. Any good, balanced diet will contain all the amino acids your body needs — including these ‘essential’ amino acids.

You don’t need to eat meat to get the amino acids your body needs to make protein. For example, soya beans, seeds and nuts all contain essential ingredients for making protein. Whatever type of protein rich food you eat the protein will be broken down into amino acids which will then be absorbed into your body. If your diet doesn’t contain enough material to make proteins then the proteins already in your body — usually starting with the ones in your muscles — will be cannibalised to keep you alive. Your body cannot store protein in the same way that it can store fat and so you need a regular supply of protein. If you eat too much protein then the excess is excreted (although some of it will be converted into fat and stored as fat).

You must eat enough protein because:

1. If you eat too little protein then tissue proteins — particularly muscles — will be broken down.

2. Protein is essential for growth and for the repair of damaged tissues.

3. Protein is essential for the production of some enzymes.

But don’t eat too much protein because:

1. If you eat more protein than your body needs the amino acids in the protein will be broken down and some of the protein will be converted into body fat.

2. Eating too much protein may also increase the loss of calcium from your body — with an increased risk of osteoporosis developing.

3. In addition too much protein may put a strain on your liver and kidneys.

4. Eating too much protein may lead to vitamin deficiency.

5. Too much protein may produce an increased risk of cancer and heart disease.

Fat

Fat has a terrible reputation. The bad image is well deserved. Fat in your diet can cause heart disease and high blood pressure and can increase your chances of having a stroke.

But some fat is essential and the bad reputation that fat has acquired is largely due to the fact that most people eat far too much of it. Many people get one half of their calorie intake from fat and most people would be healthier if they ate less fat and, in particular, if their consumption of saturated fat was reduced.

In practical terms this means cutting down on the consumption of meat and dairy produce such as milk, cream, butter and cheese for it is these foods which contain large amounts of saturated fat.

There are three types of fatty acid in fat: saturated, unsaturated and polyunsaturated. But different fats contain these three types in different proportions. Saturated fats cause trouble because our bodies cannot digest them properly. The result is that they stay in the blood for a long time, sticking to the inside of the blood vessels. In the end these sticky, indigestible saturated fats clog up the blood vessels — producing a condition called atherosclerosis which leads to high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke. Saturated fats also interfere with the metabolism of other foods and with the removal of wastes. Polyunsaturated fats are much healthier and much more useful.

You can often tell which sort of fat a food contains by looking at it. Foods like butter and lard which are rich in saturated fatty acids are hard at room temperature. Foods containing unsaturated fatty acids tend to be liquid or oily. It is healthier to cook with liquid fats such as sunflower oil or safflower oil (which are rich in polyunsaturated fatty acids) than to cook with solid fats such as lard or butter. (But watch out: palm oil and coconut oil are both plant oils but they do contain quite a lot of saturated fat.)

Cholesterol

Cholesterol, which is present in all animal tissues, has some similar properties to fat but is recognised as being potentially dangerous because if the level of cholesterol in your blood reaches too high a concentration then it may increase your chances of having a heart attack.

Cholesterol is present in many ordinary foods (cheese, chocolate, cream, eggs, heart, kidneys, liver, crab, lobster, brains, caviar) but most of the cholesterol in our bodies comes not from foods that contain cholesterol itself but from other fatty foods.

Your body can make its own cholesterol from saturated fats so if your diet contains a high quantity of saturated fat then your body will make more cholesterol and your blood cholesterol level will probably rise. (Unsaturated fats provide the same amount of energy as saturated fats but tend to reduce blood cholesterol levels.)

Vitamins and minerals

Although they are sometimes called ‘micro-nutrients’ because we need them in such very small quantities, vitamins and minerals are essential for healthy living.

Vitamins help keep your body tissues healthy, maintain your skin in good condition, produce enzymes to enable your body to function, help turn food into energy, keep your nerves in good condition, assist in the production of hormones, help keep your teeth and bones strong and aid in the production of blood cells.

Minerals also play a vital part in the functioning of your body. For example, iron is essential for the formation of red blood cells. If your body is deficient in iron then your body will form too few red blood cells — the cells which normally carry oxygen around your body — and your tissues will not receive enough oxygen. Calcium helps form the structure of your bones and teeth. Zinc is essential for the proper functioning of some of your body’s enzymes.

For the last two decades there has been a considerable amount of discussion about the value of vitamins (particularly vitamins A and C) in the prevention — and even treatment — of cancer. In vitamin A it is the beta-carotene content which is believed to have the protective quality. Researchers have found that people who eat a diet which is low in vitamin A tend to be more likely to suffer from cancers of the lung, larynx, bladder, oesophagus, stomach, colon, rectum and prostate. And it has been found that vitamin C may lower the risk of cancer of the oesophagus and stomach.

Vitamins aren’t the only micronutrients which help prevent cancer. Minerals can play a part too. Zinc, for example, is believed to help prevent cancer. I am aware of three scientific papers which have shown that there may be a link between a low zinc intake and prostate cancer.

Despite all the billions of dollars spent on research no one yet knows how cancer develops. One theory is that free radicals — molecules produced routinely within the body — may damage the DNA within our cells, transforming a previously normal cell into a potentially cancerous cell. Every cell in the human body needs oxygen but oxygen is responsible for the production of free radicals — oxygen carrying molecules which are destructive and aggressive. It is free radicals which encourage our tissues and bodies to age and which cause damage to cells and tissues when our immune systems falter. The formation of free radicals is an inevitable part of life. (And is added to by pollutants from the outside world. For example, a smoker breathes in several billion free radicals every time he sucks on a cigarette.)

Fortunately, it is now believed that there are some food substances called anti-oxidants which can neutralise free radicals which are formed. There are four known anti-oxidants at the moment: beta-carotene (which is converted in the human body to vitamin A), vitamins C and E and the mineral selenium. There is a growing amount of evidence to show that anti-oxidants can help reduce the likelihood of numerous diseases including: cancer, arteriosclerosis, heart disease, skin diseases, types of arthritis, Parkinson’s disease, cataracts, Alzheimer’s disease and radiation damage. The anti-oxidants could, it seems, even help to counter the effects of ageing.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that human experiments have shown that your body can repair the DNA which has been damaged by free radicals if it receives a plentiful supply of folic acid — one of the vitamin B complex of vitamins. Your body will receive the folic acid it needs if you eat a diet which is rich in dark green, leafy vegetables, fruits, dried peas, beans and wheatgerm.

BE CAREFUL HOW YOU PREPARE YOUR FOOD

It is important to be careful about how you store and prepare your food. Vitamin C and the vitamins in the B group are water soluble, which makes them especially vulnerable. As well as being very sensitive to heat, they leach out of food when it is soaked, blanched or boiled. Put a cabbage into cold water and bring it to the boil and you destroy 75% of its vitamin C content. Cook fresh peas for just five minutes and you wipe out 20-40% of their thiamine (one of the B vitamins) and 30-40% of their vitamin C.

Other B vitamins especially at risk in vegetables are folate, and riboflavin. Folic acid is sensitive to heat and light and it is soluble in water. If you boil your vegetables in too much water, cook food at too high a temperature or even allow your lettuce to soak in water for too long then much of the folic acid will be lost.

Even before you start cooking you can damage the vitamin content of food simply by keeping it for too long. If salad, spinach or green beans or peas are stored for a day they lose up to 40% of their vitamin C content. After another day in storage they may lose the same amount again. If salad vegetables are allowed to stand in water for a quarter of an hour they may lose up to 30% of their vitamin C content and a considerable amount of the vitamin B1 content.

Vitamins are also lost when food is cut up. And the more you chop food the greater the vitamin loss. If bananas or tomatoes are allowed to stand after being chopped they lose 10% of their vitamin content within minutes. Chopped red cabbage may lose 60% of its vitamin content if allowed to stand for two hours. (Incidentally, dribbling a little vinegar or lemon juice onto freshly prepared food may help to slow down the loss of vitamin C.) When fruit is peeled and potatoes and tomatoes skinned most of the vitamins are lost.

Vitamins A, D, E and K are fat soluble and so less at risk. Nevertheless, up to 50% of the vitamin E in food can be destroyed by frying or baking and the A vitamin and carotene are destroyed at high temperatures.

Making sure that you get the best out of the food you eat is not difficult: it simply requires a little knowledge and a little care. Modern raw foodstuffs are not intrinsically worthless; they are more likely to be emptied of essential vitamins and minerals by careless preparation in the home and the kitchen than by having been grown in poor soil.

Vitamin and Mineral Fact File

VITAMIN A (RETINOL)

What It Does:

Although vitamin A is probably best known as the vitamin that helps us to see in the dark, this reputation is rather exaggerated. The fact is that an excess of vitamin A won’t help you see better — vitamin A does help us to see in dim light and a deficiency can cause night blindness but that’s about as far as it goes. Another important function of vitamin A is to help us fight infection. Anyone deficient in vitamin A will be more susceptible to infection. Since vitamin A is an anti-oxidant a shortage of vitamin A may lead to the development of certain types of cancer. Vitamin A may also help protect against heart disease and is necessary for sexual function. Vitamin A also helps in the formation of bones and teeth and helps to keep skin and hair healthy.

Where You May Find It:

Some animal foods — for example, liver, eggs and butter — are particularly rich in vitamin A and are sometimes said to be a suitable source of the vitamin. There are, however, two big problems with animal sources of vitamin A. First, the animal foods which are rich in vitamin A are also often rich in fat. Dairy products rich in fat, such as milk, cheese, butter and ice cream, are rich in vitamin A but are also likely to block your arteries and lead to the development of heart disease and cancer. Second, some animal products are so rich in vitamin A that they can be dangerous.

Retinol is only found in animal foods but the carotenes, of which the most important is beta-carotene, are found in carrots and other orange and yellow/orange fruits and vegetables and dark green, leafy vegetables. In the body, beta-carotene is converted to vitamin A. Unlike retinol, foods which contain beta-carotene can be consumed in plentiful amounts without fear of toxicity. You can obtain all the Vitamin A you need from plant foods.

Good supplies of beta-carotene can be obtained from carrots, broccoli, chicory, endives, spinach, lettuce, apricots, elderberries and mangoes. Other useful sources include: sweet potatoes, pumpkin, peas, spinach, kale, peppers, melons, cabbage, peaches, asparagus, watermelon, tomatoes, parsley, avocado. The average person has a two year supply of vitamin A stored in their liver.

Possible Signs of Deficiency May Include:

Night blindness; lack of tear secretion; changes in eyes with eventual blindness if deficiency is severe and untreated; increased susceptibility to respiratory infection; dry, rough skin; changes in mucous membranes; weight loss; poor bone growth; weak tooth enamel; diarrhoea; slow growth.

Possible Signs Of Overdose/Toxicity May Include:

A high intake of retinol — the animal form of vitamin A — can be harmful, causing liver and bone damage. Anorexia, drowsiness, irritability, hair loss, headaches and skin problems are possible symptoms. Excessive consumption by pregnant women of vitamin A, but not beta-carotene, has also been linked with an increased risk of birth defects. Children are more sensitive to vitamin A and are more likely to develop toxicity with high dosages. Taking oral contraceptives may increase vitamin A concentration.

VITAMIN B

Note: When vitamins were first discovered they were given letters as they were discovered — A, B, C, D etc. But scientists then discovered that the substance they had called vitamin B actually consisted of several different substances, so they began to rename the vitamins in the B group, calling them B1, B2, B3 and so on. To add to the confusion some of the vitamins in the B group — are also known by names. Vitamin B1, for example, is known as thiamine while vitamin B2 is sometimes called riboflavin.

VITAMIN B1 (THIAMINE)

What It Does:
Vitamin B1 is used by the body to release energy from carbohydrates, fats and alcohol. The bigger the carbohydrate consumption the greater the need for thiamine. This can lead to deficiency if high levels of refined carbohydrate are eaten.

Where You May Find It:
Vitamin B1 is present in many different plant foods but most of us get all the vitamin B1 we need from the cereals we eat. As with rice much of the vitamin B1 is removed from the husk during the milling process. Theoretically, therefore, white flour should be deficient in vitamin B1. However, most countries have laws which ensure that white flour has the missing vitamin B1 put back into it. Foods which contain vitamin B1 include: peas, wholewheat flour, wheatgerm, dried sunflower seeds, brown rice, soya beans, kidney beans.

Possible Signs of Deficiency May Include:
If your body is short of vitamin B1 then you are likely to develop fairly typical symptoms which consist of numbness and pins and needles in your hands and feet. A severe deficiency of vitamin B1 can lead to a condition called beri-beri which is particularly common in rice-eating countries where the husk (the part of the rice which contains vitamin B1) is removed and the rice is polished.

Deficiency of thiamine may also cause palpitations and muscular weakness; loss of appetite; anorexia; indigestion; constipation; fatigue; nausea and vomiting; depression and other mental problems such as memory loss and personality changes. Vitamin B1 deficiency is common among alcoholics and elderly people — particularly those who live alone and may not feed themselves properly. In alcoholics vitamin B1 deficiency can lead to permanent brain damage. In the elderly vitamin B1 deficiency commonly leads to mental confusion and to heart disease.

Possible Signs of Overdose/Toxicity May Include:
The vitamins in the vitamin B group can cause a wide range of problems when taken in excess (despite the fact that vitamin B, like vitamin C, is water soluble and therefore excesses of the vitamin are eventually discarded in the urine).

Occasionally large doses of vitamin B1 have caused hypersensitive reactions resembling anaphylactic shock. The vitamin may cause drowsiness in some people.

VITAMIN B2 (RIBOFLAVIN)

What It Does:
Vitamin B2 helps your body turn carbohydrate foodstuffs into energy. (It shares this duty with vitamin B1 and vitamin B3). It isn't particularly easy to become deficient in vitamin B2 but if you do then your first symptoms are likely to include sore, cracked lips and a sore, discoloured tongue. When vitamin B2 deficiency does occur it is usually accompanied by a deficiency of other vitamins. Vitamin B2 also helps keeps the eyes healthy, and helps keep the skin, tongue and mouth healthy. It helps preserve the nervous system and promotes normal growth and development.

Where You May Find It:
Vitamin B2 is found in fairly large quantities in eggs and in dairy products such as milk and cheese; however, since vitamin B2 is sensitive to light the vitamin B2 content of milk can be destroyed if the milk is left in full sunshine on the doorstep. Vitamin B2 is also found in wholemeal products and wheatgerm, broccoli, spinach and brewer's yeast.

Possible Signs Of Deficiency May Include:
Cracks and sores in the corners of mouth and inflammation of tongue and lips. The eyes become red, sore, sensitive to light and easily tired, there is itching and scaling of skin around the nose, mouth, forehead, ears and scalp. Other symptoms may include: trembling; dizziness; tiredness; poor concentration; insomnia.

Possible Signs Of Overdose/Toxicity May Include:
Dark urine; nausea; vomiting.

VITAMIN B3 (NIACIN — CONSISTING OF NICOTINIC ACID AND NICOTINAMIDE)

What It Does:
Vitamin B3 helps turn food into energy and helps to maintain the skin, nerves and digestive system.

Where You May Find It:
Vitamin B3 can be found m a wide variety of plant and animal foods. Liver, chicken and fish contain it. Sunflower

seeds, nuts and many vegetable and cereal foodstuffs contain it.

Possible Signs Of Deficiency May Include:
Muscle weakness; general fatigue; loss of appetite; headaches; swollen, red tongue; skin lesions, including rashes; dry scaly skin; wrinkles; coarse skin texture; nausea and vomiting; dermatitis; diarrhoea, irritability; dizziness. A severe deficiency can cause a disorder called pellagra — this will affect the brain, skin and gastro-intestinal tract and can result in death.

Possible Signs Of Overdose/Toxicity May Include:
Nausea; vomiting; abdominal cramps; diarrhoea; weakness; light-headedness; headache; fainting; sweating; high blood sugar; heart-rhythm disturbances; jaundice.

VITAMIN B5 (PANTOTHENIC ACID)

What It Does:
Promotes normal growth and development; aids in release of energy from fats, carbohydrates and proteins and helps the synthesis of numerous body materials.

Where You May Find It:
A diet with a good nutritional intake of the other B group vitamins will contain enough vitamin B5. (Sources include offal, meat and cereals.)

Possible Signs Of Deficiency May Include:
Vitamin B5 is so widely distributed in foods that deficiency is rare.

Possible Signs Of Overdose/Toxicity May Include:
Diarrhoea and water retention.

VITAMIN B6 (PYRIDOXINE)

What It Does:
Vitamin B6 plays a vital role in the way enzymes metabolize proteins and amino acids. However, although some drugs (notably the oral contraceptives) increase the human body’s requirement for vitamin B6, diseases due to vitamin B6 deficiency are not usually reported in adult human beings. The body’s requirement for vitamin B6 increases with protein consumption — and, in particular, with the consumption of animal protein. Meat-eaters have a greater need for this vitamin than vegetarians and vegans.

Where You May Find It:
No particular foods contain large amounts of vitamin B6 but many foods contain small amounts and your body’s requirements for the vitamin are small. Meat, offal, fruit, vegetables and cereals contain vitamin B6. Foods containing vitamin B6 include: bananas, potatoes, peas, carrots, cabbage and beans, cereal products and bread.

Possible Signs Of Deficiency May Include:
Weakness; mental confusion or depression; irritability; hyperactivity; skin lesions and anaemia.

Possible Signs of Overdose/Toxicity May Include:
Too much vitamin B6 can cause depression and nerve damage that can lead to clumsiness, numbness and a loss of balance.

VITAMIN B9 (FOLIC ACID)

Note: the word ‘folate’ is a generic term for the many compounds which are derived from folic acid.

What It Does:
Promotes normal red blood cell formation and is essential for protein metabolism. Recent research suggests that people who have a diet which is low in folic acid may be more likely to die of heart disease.

Where You May Find It:
In green, leafy vegetables, such as spinach, kale, lettuce and also in wholemeal products, peas, rice and soya beans.

Possible Signs Of Deficiency May Include:
Anaemia; infertility; abnormalities of the linings of the intestines, vagina, uterus and bronchi.

Possible Signs Of Overdose/Toxicity May Include:
Appetite loss; nausea; flatulence.

VITAMIN B12 (CYANOCOBALAMIN)

What It Does:
Like folic acid, vitamin B12 is essential for the formation of red blood cells. If your body is short of vitamin B12 you are likely to develop a condition called pernicious anaemia — the size of your individual red blood cells will be increased but their number will be reduced. Vitamin B12 plays a vital part in the working of your central nervous system. A long term shortage of the vitamin can lead to permanent damage being done to the brain and spinal cord. Vitamin B12 aids the production of genetic matter inside cells which is needed for the creation of new cells. Vitamin B12 is an unusual vitamin in that before it can be absorbed into the body it needs to be linked to a substance called ‘intrinsic factor’ which is formed in the stomach. Patients who have had stomach surgery may be unable to produce this ‘intrinsic factor’. This problem is less common these days now that ulcer healing drugs have made many stomach operations obsolete.

Where You May Find It:
Found in many animal products — including meat, eggs and dairy produce. Also available in tempeh, soya milk, edible seaweeds, dried spirulina and the wide range of fortified products now available (including cereals, margarines, textured vegetable proteins and fortified yeast extracts and savoury spreads). Vitamin B12 is manufactured by micro-organisms such as yeasts, bacteria, moulds and some algae.

The human body can store this vitamin for long periods (up to five or six years) so a daily dietary source is therefore not necessary. In addition, the healthy body recycles this vitamin very effectively, recovering it from bile and other intestinal secretions, which is why the dietary requirement is so low. There is also some evidence that vitamin B12 may be produced by bacterial activity in the small intestine.

Vitamin B12 is also found in nutritional yeast, beer, cider, fermented soya foods (such as soy sauce), barley malt syrup and parsley. The most reliable vegan sources of B12 are foods fortified with the vitamin. Soya products (such as soya milks), breakfast cereals, yeast extracts and margarines are particularly likely to contain added vitamin B12.

Vegan women who are pregnant and vegan mothers who intend to breast feed their babies should make sure that they eat foods which are fortified with vitamin B12 and they should talk to their doctors too.

Possible Signs Of Deficiency May Include:
Pernicious anaemia with the following symptoms: fatigue; weakness, especially in arms and legs; sore tongue; nausea; appetite loss; weight loss; bleeding gums; numbness and tingling in hands and feet; difficulty in maintaining balance; pale lips; pale tongue; pale gums; yellow eyes and skin; shortness of breath; depression; confusion and dementia; headache; poor memory. First obvious signs of B12 deficiency might be pins and needles or coldness in the hands and feet, fatigue and weakness, poor concentration or even psychosis.

Possible Signs Of Overdose/Toxicity May Include:
If taken with large doses of vitamin C, vitamin B12 may cause nose bleeding, ear bleeding, dry mouth.

VITAMIN H (B-GROUP VITAMIN, BIOTIN)

What It Does:
Essential for normal growth and development and repair and for a healthy metabolism.

Where You May Find It:
Intestinal bacteria probably produce all the biotin the body needs. The vitamin is available in almost all foods including brown rice, bulgur wheat, cashew nuts, peas, lentils, oats, soya beans, sunflower seeds.

Possible Signs Of Deficiency May Include:
Dry scaly dermatitis; nausea and vomiting; anorexia; fatigue; depression; sleepiness; muscular pains; loss of muscular reflexes; tongue becomes smooth and pale; hair loss; anaemia.

Possible Signs Of Overdose/Toxicity May Include:
Unlikely.

VITAMIN C (ASCORBIC ACID)

What It Does:
Vitamin C helps the body to form connective tissue — the packing material which supports and protects the rest of the body. Your skin contains a considerable amount of connective tissue and if you are short of vitamin C the first symptoms you notice are likely to be bruising and bleeding. This condition is called scurvy and the gums are usually the first part of the body to show it. In addition small cuts and grazes take an extraordinarily long time to heal. Scurvy is still fairly common — usually among people who do not eat enough fresh fruit and vegetables.

Vitamin C also helps your body to fight off infections and it helps your body to absorb iron. Indeed vitamin C increases the ease with which iron is absorbed by a factor of five. Meat eaters are often more likely to develop iron deficiency anaemia because they tend to eat less fruit and vegetables.

Vitamin C also helps the body to use calcium to build bones and blood vessels. Women need slightly more vitamin C than men and the sick and convalescent need good supplies of vitamin C in order to get well again. We need regular supplies of vitamin C since, like all the vitamins in the B group, it is water soluble.

Where You May Find It:

Fresh fruit of most kinds (but particularly citrus fruits) and fresh vegetables contain good quantities of vitamin C. One of the most important sources of vitamin C, however, is the potato (simply because it is such an important constituent in our diets). New potatoes contain more vitamin C than old ones and overcooking potatoes destroys the vitamin.

Since vitamin C is water soluble, leaving vegetables to soak in water for a long time will cause the vitamin C to disappear. Vitamin C is extremely fragile. It is destroyed by heat and it leaks out of foods into the water in which they are being cooked.

Possible Signs Of Deficiency May Include:

Wounds fail to heal and there is an increased liability to infection. Severe deficiency manifests as scurvy: muscle weakness; swollen gums; loss of teeth; tiredness; depression; bleeding under skin; bleeding gums.

Possible Signs Of Overdose/Toxicity May Include:

Large amounts of vitamin C can produce diarrhoea and gastric irritation and it is possible that too much vitamin C may cause kidney problems — specifically kidney stones — and can affect growing bones. In addition people who have been taking high doses of vitamin C for long periods and then suddenly cut down their intake can develop rebound scurvy.

VITAMIN D (CHOLECALCIFEROL, CALCIFEROL)

What It Does:

Vitamin D helps the body absorb and use calcium and phosphorus effectively for making strong bones and teeth. If your body is deficient in vitamin D then you will develop a condition called osteomalacia — in which your bones become weak and prone to fracture. In children a shortage of vitamin D leads to a condition called rickets.

Where You May Find It:

Your body can make its own vitamin D with the aid of a little sunshine and there are relatively few countries in the world where the supply of sunshine is inadequate for the manufacture of vitamin D. Regular exposure of hands, arms and face to summer sunlight (for as little as ten to twenty minutes a day three times a week) can provide sufficient vitamin D. People with dark skin, or those who live in cloudy or smoggy areas or in northern areas, may need slightly more exposure.

The main dietary sources are fortified foods such as margarine and breakfast cereals although vitamin D is present in quite a number of different foods — salt water fish, mushrooms and dairy products for example.

Possible Signs Of Deficiency May Include:

Rickets (a childhood disease): bent, bowed legs; malformations of joints and bones. Osteomalacia (adult rickets): pain in ribs, lower spine, pelvis and legs; brittle, easily broken bones.

Possible Signs Of Overdose/Toxicity May Include:

Vitamin D, even in only relatively high doses, can damage the body by encouraging deposits of calcium. Vitamin D is one of the most toxic of vitamins when taken in excessive quantities.

VITAMIN E (TOCOPHEROL)

What It Does:

Vitamin E deficiency disorders are virtually unknown. Some manufacturers (and some fans of the vitamin) claim that vitamin E supplements can be used to boost mental, athletic or even sexual skills but I have not been able to find any scientific evidence to support these claims. Vitamin E has, over the years, acquired something of a reputation as a ‘sex vitamin’ but this reputation was based on experiments done on rats many decades ago. The experiments showed that a vitamin E deficiency in rats can lead to sterility. However, since a deficiency of vitamin E in human beings is virtually unknown (you would probably have symptoms of something else before doctors identified a vitamin E deficiency if you were eating an inadequate diet) and since experiments on animals are of absolutely no value to human beings this evidence is clearly of no significance. More recently it has been claimed that vitamin E may help reduce the incidence of heart disease and may improve the immune system. This is far more likely. Vitamin E is an important anti-oxidant and therefore protects cells from damage by scavenging free radicals.

Where You May Find It:

Vitamin E is found in vegetable oils such as olive oil, sunflower oil and soya bean oil and in vegetables such as spinach, celery and broccoli. A vegetarian diet is particularly rich in vitamin E.

Possible Signs Of Deficiency May Include:
Lethargy; inability to concentrate; irritability; poor reflexes; visual disturbances; muscle weakness.

Possible Signs Of Overdose/Toxicity May Include:
Tendency to bleed; altered immunity; impaired sex functions; increased risk of blood clots; altered metabolism of essential hormones.

VITAMIN K (NAPTHAQUINONE)

What It Does:
Vitamin K plays an essential role in the blood clotting mechanism. It is rare for a healthy adult to be short of this vitamin since vitamin K is widely available in foods.

Where You May Find It:
In many vegetables, particularly green vegetables such as broccoli, cabbage, lettuce and spinach. Vitamin K is also produced by bacterial activity in the large intestine. The use of antibiotics, which reduce gut bacteria, can occasionally cause deficiency.

Possible Signs of Deficiency May Include:
Excessive bleeding and haemorrhaging.

Possible Signs Of Overdose/Toxicity May Include:
Large doses may impair liver function.

Minerals and trace elements

CALCIUM

What It Does:
Helps build and maintain bones and teeth (99% of the calcium in the body is in the bones and teeth); controls transmission of nerve impulses; aids in muscle contraction; assists with blood clotting.

Where You May Find It:
Dairy products (such as milk and cheese) are sometimes thought of as a standard or irreplaceable source of calcium. However, this isn’t true. For example, only about 30% of the calcium in milk is absorbed by the human body — possibly less than for typical green, leafy vegetables. Dark green, leafy vegetables (such as kale and broccoli) are good plant sources, and some experts believe that calcium is more readily absorbed from kale than it is from milk.

One recent study has shown that vegetarians absorb and retain more calcium from foods than do non-vegetarians and other studies cite lower rates of osteoporosis in vegetarians than in non-vegetarians. Vegetarian and vegan diets may actually protect against osteoporosis. The wisest course is to obtain dietary calcium from a wide range of sources. Possible calcium sources include: broccoli, molasses, chick peas, dried figs, tofu, endive, cabbage, kale, turnip greens, spinach and many different types of beans (including soya beans and baked beans). Probably the simplest way to make sure you get plenty of calcium is to eat plenty of dark green, leafy vegetables.

It is important to remember that a high calcium intake alone will not necessarily prevent osteoporosis. Countries where there is a high calcium intake (such as Sweden or Finland) tend to have higher fracture rates than countries (such as those in Asia) where calcium intake is not high. Apart from ensuring a reasonable intake of calcium it is necessary to reduce the loss of calcium from your body. There are six things you can do to minimise calcium loss:

1. Avoid tobacco (smokers have a hip fracture risk 40% higher than non-smokers).

2. Don’t drink more than two cups of coffee a day.

3. Keep your intake of alcohol down.

4. Cut animal proteins out of your diet — this can slice your calcium losses in half.

5. Take regular, gentle exercise which you enjoy. (But do not exercise if it is painful and always consult your doctor before starting an exercise programme or altering your exercise habits.)

6. Keep your salt intake down.

Possible Signs Of Deficiency May Include:
Muscle spasms, such as leg cramps; high blood pressure.

Possible Signs Of Toxicity/Overdose May Include:
Confusion; high blood pressure; irregular heartbeat; depression; bone pain; muscle pain; nausea; vomiting; sensitivity of skin and eyes to light.

COPPER

What It Does:
Helps with production of red blood cells and controls enzyme activity which stimulates the formation of connective tissues and pigments which protect the skin.

Where You May Find It:
Wheatgerm, oats, peas, lentils, nuts and seeds. Also in liver, shellfish, dried beans, mushrooms, grapes.

Possible Signs Of Deficiency May Include:
Anaemia and a low white blood cell count associated with reduced resistance to infection.

Possible Signs Of Overdose/Toxicity May Include:
Nausea; vomiting; muscle aches; anaemia; abdominal pain. In some countries the amount of copper in drinking water has been enough to produce toxic effects.

IODINE

What It Does
Iodine helps produce thyroid hormones which control the rate of metabolism and control growth and development.

Where You May Find It:
Sunflower seeds, table salt (iodised), cod, haddock, shellfish. Levels in foods depend upon amount of iodine in the soil.

Possible Signs Of Deficiency May Include:
Listlessness (low thyroid hormone level); enlargement of the thyroid gland. Severe deficiency leads to cretinism in new born.

Possible Signs Of Overdose/Toxicity May Include:
Irregular heartbeat; confusion; swollen neck or throat; bloody .or black, tarry stools.

IRON

What It Does:
Helps with transport of oxygen from lungs to tissue and transports and stores oxygen in muscles; acts with production of essential enzymes.

Where You May Find It:
Iron is found in meat, fish and eggs but also in many vegetarian foods including green, leafy vegetables, nuts, cereals and beans. Foods rich in vitamin C eaten at the same time as iron-containing food will considerably increase absorption. Some of those who advocate meat eating claim that vegetarians are likely to have a diet which is deficient in iron. This is nonsense. A good, well-balanced vegetarian diet will contain plenty of iron.

Possible Signs Of Deficiency May Include:
Pale appearance; listlessness; fatigue; irritability.

Possible Signs Of Overdose/Toxicity May Include:
Too much iron may be as dangerous as too little. A vegetarian diet which allows the body to absorb the right amount of iron from several natural sources is probably the healthiest option. Iron supplements need to be taken with care; they can kill adults and children.

MAGNESIUM

What It Does:
Helps bones develop and helps nerves and muscles to function.

Where You May Find It:
It is an essential constituent of chlorophyll — and therefore green produce. Also found in whole grains, yeast extracts and nuts.

Possible Signs Of Deficiency May Include:
Muscle contractions; irritability; confusion.

Possible Signs Of Overdose/Toxicity May Include:
Severe nausea and vomiting; low blood pressure; muscle weakness; difficulty in breathing; heartbeat irregularity.

POTASSIUM

What It Does:
Maintains normal heart rhythm; helps in the generation of nerve impulses; helps with muscle contraction; controls body's water balance.

Where You May Find It:
In green, leafy vegetables, whole grain cereals and bread. Also in avocado, bananas, citrus fruits, juices (grapefruit, tomato, orange), lentils, molasses, many nuts, parsnips, dried peaches, potatoes, raisins.

Possible Signs Of Deficiency May Include:
Weakness; paralysis; low blood pressure; irregular or rapid heartbeat that can lead to cardiac arrest and death.

Possible Signs Of Overdose/Toxicity May Include:
Irregular or fast heartbeat; paralysis of arms and legs; blood pressure drop; convulsions; coma; cardiac arrest.

SELENIUM

What It Does:
Works as an anti-oxidant to protect cells from free radicals. May help preserve the elasticity of tissues.

Where You May Find It:
The selenium content in foods is closely related to the selenium content of the soil in which it is grown, which makes generalisations about the selenium content of foods difficult. But deficiency is not common, especially in countries where foods come from a wide variety of sources.

Foods likely to contain selenium include: meat, fish, shellfish, whole grain cereals, broccoli, dairy products.

Possible Signs Of Deficiency May Include:
A mild deficiency may affect the body's ability to deal with free radicals — and increase a risk of disorders including cancer. Gross deficiency may result in damage to the heart.

Possible Signs Of Overdose/Toxicity May Include:
Liver and heart disease; hair loss; nail loss; decaying teeth; fatigue; nausea; vomiting.

SODIUM

What It Does:
Maintains normal heart rhythm; controls body's water balance; helps with muscle contraction; helps with the generation of nerve impulses.

Where You May Find It:
Processed foods, smoked meat and fish. Also added in cooking and as table salt. Most people take far more sodium than they need.

Possible Signs Of Deficiency May Include:
Nausea; fatigue; muscle cramps; apathy; muscle twitching; appetite loss.

Possible Signs Of Overdose/Toxicity May Include:
Fluid retention, tissue swelling, coma.

ZINC

What It Does:
Zinc is essential for the functioning of many enzymes; it is also needed for wound healing and is a factor in many other vital processes. Enables growth and sexual development to occur.

Where You May Find It:
Whole grain cereals, wholemeal bread, wheat germ, sunflower seeds, soya beans. Also found in lean meat, fish, oysters and eggs.

Possible Signs Of Deficiency May Include:
Diminution of taste and smell; prolonged wound healing; reduced growth in children; loss of hair; inflammation of tongue, mouth, eyelids; reduced sperm count. Severe depletion results in dwarfism, small testicles, and enlarged

spleen/liver.

Possible Signs Of Overdose/Toxicity May Include:
Drowsiness; lethargy; light-headedness; staggering gait; restlessness; repeated vomiting may lead to dehydration.

HOW TO PREPARE FOOD TO PRESERVE THE VITAMIN AND MINERAL CONTENT

Vitamins can easily be destroyed. Mushrooms, lettuce, broccoli, asparagus and strawberries, for example, all lose their vitamins very quickly. Food which has to be cooked should be cooked for the shortest possible time and at the lowest possible temperature.

In order to ensure that the food you eat retains a high vitamin content follow these simple rules:

1. Food processing tends to reduce the nutritional quality of food and so where possible you should try to buy fresh food and either eat it raw (if appropriate) or eat it after cooking for the shortest length of time.

2. Buy vegetables whole. Don’t have the leaves removed from carrots or the stalk removed from a cabbage or cauliflower. If you buy the vegetable whole vitamin C will continue to be produced and moved into the edible parts of the plant.

3. Cook foods in the minimum amount of water or steam.

4. Avoid high cooking temperatures and long heat exposure.

5. Do not allow food to stand for long periods at room temperature. Do not store food in warm places.

6. Do not soak vegetables for long periods.

7. Do not peel fruit or vegetables unless necessary. (For example, do not peel apples or skin potatoes.)

8. Try to use food the day you have bought it rather than use frozen foods. Use foods the day you buy them to get the best out of them.

9. You can keep fresh products for longer by freezing as soon as you buy them. Deep freezing preserves vitamins and other nutrients. Vegetables should be blanched before freezing. Put them in hot water for a short time. This inactivates enzymes which might otherwise degrade vitamin C.

10. Do not allow food — particularly unpackaged fruit and vegetables, vegetable oils and milk — to stand in sunlight.

ARE VITAMIN AND MINERAL SUPPLEMENTS NECESSARY?

For over a quarter of a century I was the most vocal and consistent critic of vitamin and mineral supplements. But I always added a rider to my criticism. I always promised that I would keep the situation under constant review and if I ever felt that vitamin and mineral supplements were necessary then I would say so. Changing an opinion is, in my view, a sign of strength not weakness.

A fundamental foundation stone for my argument over the years has always been my belief that it is much better (both more effective and safer) to take your needed vitamins and minerals in the food you eat than in an artificial way.

I have great faith in the ability of the human body to obtain what it needs from natural sources — to protect itself from a wide range of threats and to heal itself when necessary. But the world has changed. And I am convinced that the body now does need some outside help.

I believe that it will very soon be difficult (if not impossible) to obtain good quality food which contains the necessary basic ingredients for healthy living. It is already difficult to buy decent food. Supermarkets are very patchy suppliers of organic foods.

The food industry has recently introduced a number of techniques which are clearly not going to go away. Those of us who care about what we eat have, quite simply, lost the battle. I am not being defeatist in saying this: merely practical. There comes a time when one has to step back, take a good hard look at the situation and recognise the need to establish a new position from which to fight. We have lost a good many battles in recent years. But we have not yet lost the war.

Moreover, there is, I believe, a very real chance that the quality of organic food will deteriorate dramatically in the next year or two. The American food Goliaths are keen to dilute the meaning of the phrase ‘organic food’ and, sooner or later, I believe that they will succeed.

Unless you grow your own food (or obtain it from a neighbour) the chances are that within a few years the only food available (whether or not it is labelled as ‘organic’) will contain a rich mixture of hormones, chemicals, drug residues and other possible carcinogens.

Our bodies are now constantly under siege from a hostile world. And things are going to get worse.

Microwave ovens, poor quality drinking water, mass vaccination programmes, electricity power lines, mobile telephones, air conditioning, aeroplanes and a thousand and one sources of physical and mental stress are all putting our bodies under pressure. Just when we need the best food we can get our food is the worst it has ever been.

In a nutshell: we need a good supply of vitamins more than ever but the quality of our food is deteriorating rapidly and we’re getting fewer vitamins than before.

If you are going to take a supplement (as I now do) then in my view you should make sure that you take the best you can. There are hundreds if not thousands of products available: some will contain high levels of active ingredients and others will undoubtedly contain inactive fillers and bulking agents. If you decide to take a supplement then you should choose one which has a safe and effective level of active ingredients which are as pure as possible.

RECOMMENDED DAILY VITAMINS & MINERALS

Readers often ask me for details of the official recommended daily allowances (RDAs) for vitamins and minerals. The RDA for any particular vitamin is the minimum suggested daily intake you need to take in order to avoid health-related problems. RDAs sound a good idea but like many other things produced by committees or government departments they are, in truth, best described as guesses.

This is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that different countries have different RDAs. For example, the South African RDA for vitamin A for men is 1000 mcg. For women the figure is 800 mcg and 1300 mcg for women who are lactating. In the United Kingdom, however, the RDA for vitamin A is much lower. The figure for men is 700 mcg and for women it is 600 mcg (rising to 950 mcg when a woman is breast feeding). For some vitamins and minerals the differences are even greater. The UK RDA for potassium is 3500 mg for both men and women. In South Africa the RDA is 2000 mg for both sexes. The UK RDA for sodium is 1600 mg for men and women. In South Africa the RDA for sodium is 500 mg. In the UK the RDA for chromium is 25 mcg. In South Africa the RDA is between 50 mcg and 200 mcg.

I’ve compared UK figures to South African figures because I happen to have both lists in front of me. But the variations exist in other countries too. For example, in the UK the RDA for phosphorus is 550 mg for both men and women but in Australia and New Zealand the RDA for phosphorus is 1000 mg for both sexes. How on earth government officials explain these differences I cannot imagine. I don’t think I want to know.

Some countries don’t have RDAs for vitamins and minerals for which other countries do have RDAs. The countries which do have RDAs say the figures have been established. The countries which haven’t say they haven’t.

All this is made even dottier by the fact that governments recommend exactly the same RDA for a man weighing 8 stones as they do for a man weighing 20 stones. Common sense suggests that the practical requirements must be very different.

Salt

We need some salt to stay healthy but most of us eat around twenty times as much salt as we need. There is salt in bread, milk, cream, cheese, butter, margarine and meat and meat products — as well as many tinned products — so avoiding salt isn’t always easy.

Hundreds of scientific papers have been published by experts trying to decide just how dangerous salt can be. And the experts are divided. A few — rather vociferous — experts believe that salt is a killer. But the majority seem unconvinced as yet and admit that they don’t know how bad salt is or how much salt causes real problems. (Though all experts seem generally agreed on the fact that people with high blood pressure or with a family history of high blood pressure should keep their salt intake down to a minimum.)

Although there is uncertainty about the size of the problem there is little doubt that too much salt can cause problems.

For example, salt is a serious cause of fluid retention. Avoiding or cutting down salt consumption can, therefore, help patients (such as women with the premenstrual syndrome) who suffer from symptoms created by fluid retention.

If you want to cut down your salt intake you can do so by avoiding: processed foods in general, canned foods, junk foods, crisps, salted peanuts, salted biscuits, salted butter, salted cheese, sausages and bacon. Alternative flavourings include lemon juice, parsley, garlic, horseradish and tarragon.

Seven ways to reduce your salt intake

1. Eat fewer salted snacks — such as peanuts and crisps — which tend to be heavily salted.

2. Avoid meat products — which often contain salt.

3. Avoid smoked fish and bacon — which are often salted.

4. Cook with herbs and spices rather than salt.

5. Buy spreads, sauces and pickles which are low in salt content.

6. Whenever possible use fresh vegetables rather than tinned vegetables to which extra salt has already been added.

7. Keep salt off the table.

CHAPTER 2

SAFE DRINKING

Water

You probably don't think of water as a food but water is just as valuable as anything you eat. A massive 60% to 65% of your body is water. (The figure is even higher for a baby. Approximately 75% of a baby's weight is water.) If you didn't eat and didn't drink it would be the shortage of water which killed you first. You could survive for weeks without food but you would be dead within about seven days without water.

Your body's need for water varies according to the outside temperature. When the weather outside is hot your body will deliberately lose water as sweat to try to keep your internal body temperature low. However, even when the outside temperature is fairly low your body will lose some water in urine, in faeces and as evaporation from your skin, and will need that water replacing if you are to stay alive. You lose about two litres of water a day even when the weather isn't warm.

You don't have to drink your entire daily fluid requirements as water or as fluid, of course. Your intake of water is supplemented by the water which is present in many of the foods you eat. Some fruits and vegetables contain 90% water. To that you can add the fact that the metabolism of carbohydrates, fat and protein leads to the production of yet more water. On balance the average sized human being, living in a fairly average climate, will need at least two or three litres of fluid a day in order to satisfy his or her body's requirements, to maintain healthy kidneys and to stay in good health.

Most of us take it for granted that the water we obtain by turning on our taps will be fresh and pure. Sadly, however, there is a growing amount of evidence to show that the water most of us get when we turn on our taps isn't always quite as pure as we like to think it is.

There are four reasons why your drinking water may not be as pure as you would like:

First, much of our drinking water is contaminated with nitrates. The nitrates get into the water supplies when farmers use large quantities of artificial fertilizer. The nitrates from the fertiliser seep down into the ground and eventually find their way into the water supplies. Just what damage nitrates can do to the human body is still something of a mystery, though some people believe that they may be linked to a variety of serious disorders, including cancer.

The second problem is that many of the facilities for extracting and supplying water to the developed world are now getting rather old. Many water pipes were laid during the nineteenth century and throughout the developed world there are many people who still get their water pumped through lead pipes. Unfortunately, water that passes through lead piping has a nasty tendency to pick up quite a bit of lead before it gets to the tap. And lead in drinking water can lead to many serious problems — including damage to the brain and the central nervous system.

The third problem comes from the fact that the people whose job it is to provide us with clean water often use chemicals to disinfect, sterilise, purify or otherwise cleanse the water they are selling. Two of the substances which they are most likely to use are chlorine and aluminium sulphate and both these substances may cause problems. It is now suspected that one of the substances that is produced when chlorine mixes with the acids which naturally occur in peaty soils may cause intestinal cancer. And aluminium sulphate, used partly to help remove the acids which might otherwise interact with the chlorine to create cancer producing chemicals, and partly to take the discoloration out of peaty water, may cause problems too. The worry is that there may be a link between the drinking of aluminium rich water and the development of premature senility — in particular Alzheimer's disease. In addition to the dangers which may exist when chlorine and aluminium sulphate are added to drinking water supplies in ordinary quantities there is the extra hazard of what can happen when large quantities of a chemical are accidentally dumped into drinking water supplies — as has happened.

The fourth reason why modern drinking water supplies might be hazardous to your health involves the deliberate adding of chemicals to water in order to keep us 'healthy'. The substance most commonly added to drinking water supplies is fluoride. This is done in the hope that it will help reduce the incidence of tooth decay. The link between fluoride and tooth decay was first established at the end of the nineteenth century and there is little doubt that fluoride does help to protect the teeth by making tooth enamel — the hard outside covering of teeth — tougher and more decay resistant. When tests done on large numbers of people showed that tooth decay is slower in those parts of the country where drinking water supplies naturally contain fluoride some scientists and politicians suggested that putting fluoride into the drinking water supplies might improve the dental health of the general population. The fluoridation of water supplies began in America in 1945 and today the move towards fluoridation is spreading all over the world. Politicians are enthusiastic about using fluoride in this way because the end result is, of course, to cut health costs.

However, those who oppose fluoridation are able to put forward several arguments in their favour.

First, you do not, of course, have to add fluoride to drinking water in order to protect teeth. You can get exactly the same effect by persuading people to use fluoride toothpastes. And since many toothpastes now do contain fluoride most people already get all the fluoride they need simply by brushing their teeth.

Second, there is no doubt that putting fluoride into drinking water supplies is a potentially dangerous business. The amount of fluoride that you can put into drinking water has to be judged very accurately. To get the best effect from the fluoride you need to add around one part per million. However, if you get the sums wrong the consequences can be devastating. Just two parts of fluoride per million can cause mottling of the teeth and if the quantities are allowed to rise a little higher bone disorders and cancer may be the result. Naturally, the scientists and politicians who are keen on putting fluoride into our drinking water supplies claim that the methods used are foolproof but I think that one would have to be a fool to believe that. Many people have already been poisoned by accidental overdoses of chemicals and in 1986 the World Health Organization published a report in which concern was expressed about the incidence of dental problems caused by there being too much fluoride in public drinking water supplies. Needless to say getting unwanted, excess fluoride out of the drinking water supplies can be extremely difficult.

To all this we must add the fact that since drinking water supplies already contain a number of chemicals — some of which occur naturally in the supplies, nitrates which accumulate because of the use of fertilizers, chlorine and aluminium sulphate which are added deliberately and lead or copper from the pipes which are used to supply the water to our homes — adding fluoride to the mixture may increase the risk of a dangerous interaction between the various chemicals in the water. Whenever chemicals exist in solution together there are chemical reactions. I don’t think anyone really knows what the consequences are of putting all these chemicals into our drinking water.

The fourth anti fluoridation argument is that a growing number of people seem to be allergic to the chemicals which are being put into our drinking water. Many people are allergic to fluoride and cannot drink fluoridated drinking water.

Finally, I am particularly worried by the fact that as the pro fluoridation argument is won in more and more parts of the world, scientists and politicians are suggesting putting other chemicals into the drinking water supplies. One scientist has, for example, already suggested that drinking water should have antibiotics added to it (to reduce the incidence of infection and so to reduce health costs). Another has recommended that tranquillisers be added to drinking water supplies (in order to calm down the voters and allow the politicians to get on with running the world the way they want to run it). A third suggestion has been that contraceptives be added to the drinking water in order to reduce the birth rate.

THE CONTAMINATION OF OUR DRINKING WATER

Back in 1982 — in a column I was writing in a medical journal — I raised the question of whether or not public drinking water supplies could be polluted with female hormone residues which might affect the development of male babies.

I tried to get television and radio journalists to take up the problem. And I tried to interest politicians in the topic too. But although many were horrified by the idea all quickly decided that it was far too controversial a subject.

‘It’ll frighten people far too much!’ was the common view.

However, it wasn’t just the possibility of female hormones — residues from the contraceptive pill — which might be causing problems which worried me. At the time when I first wrote about this subject I was so alarmed by what I had discovered that I spent over a year doing research before I wrote the article and my fear was built on several pieces of information.

* Fact one: More and more people are taking increasingly powerful medicinal drugs such as antibiotics, painkillers, tranquillisers, sleeping tablets, hormones (particularly those in the contraceptive pill) and steroids. Huge numbers of people take drugs every day. Not many people go through a whole year without taking at least one course of tablets. Half of the population will take a prescribed medicine today (and tomorrow and the day after that). And on top of the prescribed drugs there are all the non prescription drugs that are taken — pills bought over the chemists counter and taken day in and day out.
* Fact two: Many drugs are excreted in the urine when the body has finished with them. For example, up to 75% of a dose of a tranquilliser may be excreted in the urine. With other drugs the figure may be as high as 90%. Some drugs which are degraded can chemically react with the environment and become active again.
* Fact three: After going through standard purification procedures waste water is often discharged into fresh water rivers.

Fact four. Drinking water supplies are often taken from fresh water rivers — the same rivers into which the waste water has been discharged.

* Fact five: Water purification programmes were designed many years ago — before doctors started prescribing vast quantities of drugs for millions of patients and before the problem of removing drug residues had been

thought of.

I felt that even someone with a modest IQ should be able to see where all this was leading.

It seemed clear to me that anyone who turned on a tap and made a cup of tea could be getting a cocktail containing leftover chemicals from other people's tranquillisers, sleeping pills, antibiotics, contraceptive pills, heart drugs, anti-arthritis pills and so on.

Back in 1982 I wrote that: 'with an increasing number of people taking drugs there must be a risk that the drinking water supplies will eventually become contaminated so heavily that people using ordinary drinking water will effectively be taking drugs. Or have we already reached that point: and are people who drink water in certain areas of the country already passively involved in daily drug taking?'

Back in 1982 no one seemed to know the answer to that frightening question.

And today I still don't know the answer.

Does anyone?

Are you an involuntary drug taker? Could you be addicted to any of the drug residues which might be in your drinking water? Could you be taking regular supplies of bits and pieces of other people's antibiotics? Are you taking contraceptive hormone leftovers? Could these drug residues be affecting your fertility? Could drug residues affect the health of any unborn children?

No one in government seems concerned by these questions.

I think they should be.

It may soon be too late, for evidence is already appearing to suggest that my original fears were accurate.

A report published in 1999 by the Environmental Agency in the UK reports that 57% of the roach in one river had changed sex. Chemicals in treated sewage and factory waste were blamed for upsetting natural fish hormones. The researchers found that the fish were more likely to be affected when they spent time close to a sewage outlet. They also found that fish who lived upstream (away from the sewage outlet) were much less likely to be affected. Apparently, the chemicals in sewage which are most likely to affect fish are female hormones such as oestrogens.

Strangely, some scientists still seem puzzled about the source of the female hormones. (Since the average scientist seems to have the IQ of a dead tree one should not, I suppose, be too surprised by this.)

While they were studying lake water for pesticide contamination Swiss chemists were surprised to find that the lake was polluted with clofibric acid — a drug which is used to lower blood cholesterol levels. The possibility that this could have been caused by industrial spillage was ruled out when it was established that clofibric acid is not manufactured in Switzerland. When the chemists checked other lakes and rivers they found low concentrates of the drug everywhere.

When researchers in Germany started looking for clofibric acid they found the drug in all sorts of water supplies — including tap water.

Intrigued, the researchers looked harder.

And they found lipid-lowering drugs, analgesics (including diclofenac and ibuprofen), beta blocker heart drugs, antibiotics, chemotherapy drugs and hormones. They found all these drugs in water bodies and in drinking water. And they found that the concentrations were highest in heavily populated areas. Once they had ruled out industrial spillage the researchers realised that the drugs had come from human body wastes. Exactly what I had predicted in 1982.

The chances are that no one knows what drugs can be found in your drinking water. Why? Because no one is looking. Most governments do not monitor water supplies to see if they contain drug residues. Nor do they require anyone else to do this.

But there seems little doubt that drinking water is now heavily contaminated with drug residues. And the long term effect of all this is difficult to estimate. Minute amounts of antibiotics in drinking water can affect bacteria in many different ways. They can surely have a dramatic effect on the development of antibiotic-resistant organisms.

There is not yet any evidence showing a clear link between water pollution and problems (such as fertility) affecting human beings. But the absence of any such evidence may possibly be a result of the fact that as far as I know no one has yet done any research into this issue. The research would be extremely simple to do and wouldn't cost very much. Scientists would simply count the number of people with fertility problems (or some other specific disorder) who had drunk re-circulated water and then compare that figure with the incidence of fertility problems among people who had drunk fresh spring or borehole water. But who would want to do such research? Certainly not the water companies.

How are the drugs in your drinking water affecting your health? Is your daily cocktail of tranquillisers, antibiotics, hormones, steroids, chemotherapy drugs, heart drugs, pain killers and so on making you ill? How do all these drugs interact? Are they likely to be at least partly responsible for the way the incidence of cancer is increasing? Are they affecting your immune system?

No one knows.

And no one in authority seems to want to know.

Maybe they are frightened to discover the truth.

Meanwhile, politicians around the world now drink spring water, at taxpayers' expense, which is bottled at source before it has too much chance of becoming contaminated.

DON'T DRINK UNFILTERED TAP WATER

You should drink six to eight decent sized glasses of water a day. Fizzy drinks and caffeinated teas and coffees don't count. Nor do alcoholic drinks. Caffeine and alcohol are diuretics which cause the body to lose water. If you can't bear the idea of drinking that much water look for drinks that contain no alcohol, no caffeine and no sugar or sodium. Herbal, fruit or mint teas are fine as are decaffeinated drinks. Alternatively, you can try drinking pure fruit juice diluted with water.

If you want to drink plain water I suggest you avoid tap water. In most countries governments make sure that tap water is regulated and undergoes rigorous tests which means, I'm afraid, that it is pretty much undrinkable and best used for doing the washing up unless you use a filter. Bottled drinking water isn't necessarily pure. Some 'spring water' has been purified or chemically treated while the stuff sold as 'table water' may be nothing more than filtered tap water.

The best bet is probably 'natural mineral water' which comes from a protected, pure, unadulterated source and should not have been treated or tampered with. Natural mineral water may contain some bacteria (though not usually enough to do you any harm) and so you shouldn't keep bottled natural mineral water lying around once the bottle has been opened.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF FROM 'POLLUTED' DRINKING WATER

1. If you suffer from any bizarre or otherwise inexplicable symptoms consider the possibility that your drinking water may be polluted. And it could be the water which is making you ill. This is particularly likely to be the case if you have acquired any new and unusual health problems after recently moving house.

2. Small babies should be breast fed for as long as possible — ideally for up to twelve months. Breast feeding a baby reduces the risk of the baby being poisoned by polluted water or milk (though it does not reduce the risk to nil since drugs are excreted in breast milk).

3. If you suspect that any symptoms which you have could be caused by drinking water obtained from a tap try drinking bottled water instead to see if your symptoms disappear.

4. If you live in the country and you can do so then you may be better off obtaining your water from a private water supply. But do make sure that you get your water tested before drinking it.

5. Even if you obtain your water from a commercial company or government owned concern you would be wise to have it tested — as it comes out of the tap.

6. You can buy table top small filters which remove many contaminants from drinking water. If you buy and use one of these devices make sure that you follow the manufacturer's instructions.

7. If you suspect that your drinking water supplies are of poor quality make your protests heard by your political representatives. Things will never change if you do not protest.

Alcohol and Alcoholism

The liver isn't the only organ damaged by too much drinking of alcohol. Stomach ulcers, muscle wastage, cancer and brain disease all occur in alcoholics. The incidence of alcoholism is going up fast as more women drink to excess. Early physical symptoms include hand tremor, indigestion, poor appetite, impotence, fits, blackouts, memory lapses and frequent accidents. Anxiety, depression and restlessness at night are also common. Most alcoholics do enormous damage to those around them as they lie, steal and break the law. Half of road deaths are caused by alcoholics. Alcoholism is an addiction but it can be treated.

Alcohol: weekly drink limit

For men the weekly limit is 21 units spread throughout the week. For women the weekly limit is 14 units spread throughout the week.

How much alcohol is there in your drink?

1 pint of ordinary strength beer or lager contains 2 units
1 pint export beer or lager contains 2.5 units
1 pint strong beer or lager contains 4 units
1 pint extra strong beer or lager contains 5 units
1 pint cider contains 3 units
1 pint strong cider contains 4 units
1 average glass of wine contains 1 unit (pub measure)
1 average glass of sherry, port or vermouth contains 1 unit (pub measure)
1 average glass of liqueur contains 1 unit (pub measure)
1 single of spirits contains 1 unit (pub measure)

Caffeine

Are you a caffeine addict?

Do you regularly suffer from headaches, indigestion or palpitations?
Do you get edgy, irritable and nervous?
Do you ever feel tired and washed out?
Do you have difficulty in getting to sleep at night?

If you have answered ‘yes’ to any of these questions then there could be a simple explanation. For if, in addition to suffering from any of the symptoms I have listed, you also drink more than three or four cups of coffee and/or tea a day then you could be a caffeine addict.

And the symptoms you are getting could be a result of your addiction.

Caffeine is one of the most powerful stimulants in the world. The largest pharmacology textbook in my library devotes more space to caffeine than it does to cannabis or amphetamine.

Taken regularly or in high doses caffeine will send your blood pressure sky high and make your heart beat faster. Caffeine causes trouble when the daily intake exceeds 250 mg and since a cup of tea contains between 50 and 100 mg of caffeine and a cup of coffee contains between 75 and 150 mg of caffeine just three or four cups a day is all you need to produce symptoms.

But if you are thinking of cutting down do take care. If you cut down too quickly then you could get withdrawal symptoms such as headaches, depression, anxiety and irritability. To avoid these problems cut down slowly either by drinking fewer cups or by taking your tea or coffee weaker. An alternative long-term solution is to try decaffeinated coffee or herbal tea.

TOO MUCH COFFEE OR TEA MAY INCREASE YOUR CHANCES OF DEVELOPING HEART DISEASE

Heart disease is the biggest killer in all Western style countries.

And, although not all experts agree, there is plenty of research and expert material available to show that there is a link between caffeine-rich drinks and heart disease.

* In a study of 1,130 medical students, reported in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, it was reported that ‘the relative risks of coronary heart disease for men drinking five or more cups of coffee a day, as compared to non-drinkers, were approx. 2.49’.

* Caffeine is a powerful stimulant affecting the heart and its arteries as well as kidneys, lungs, brain and central nervous system.

* Large amounts of coffee can cause a temporary increase in heart rate and blood pressure. If there is any tendency to extra heart beats or palpitations then the caffeine in coffee can make this worse.

* Coffee may trigger odd (ectopic) beats. If you are troubled by odd heart beats it might be better to cut down your coffee intake.

* Excessive coffee drinking (5 or 6 cups or more per day) is likely to be associated with a raised level of blood cholesterol.

* In a study which involved 1,596 men and women it was shown that there is a significant association between

coffee consumption and blood cholesterol levels.

Coffee isn’t just a possible cause of heart symptoms.

Despite its wide availability caffeine (the active substance in the 5 million tonnes of coffee sold annually) is a remarkably powerful stimulant; it stimulates the brain and nervous system; it increases the effect of acid on the stomach and it stimulates the kidneys.

Researchers have claimed that too much caffeine can lead to muscle tremors, insomnia, anxiety, depression, headaches, indigestion, palpitations, bowel problems and personality changes.

Numerous scientific research studies have shown that caffeine containing beverages can be dangerous in other ways. After a critical assessment of a large number of experimental and epidemiological studies the International Agency for Research on Cancer recently concluded that coffee may cause bladder cancer while drinking tea may increase the risk of oesophageal cancer.

Cows’ Milk

Milk has a tremendous reputation as a healthy food. The consumption of milk has been rising steadily for decades. But that reputation is hardly deserved.

Here are three health reasons why I don’t drink cows’ milk — a drink which is really only suitable for calves. (I also object to the way cows are ‘farmed’ but that is a moral question.)

1. Milk contains fat which can clog up your arteries and increase your chances of having a heart attack. Amazingly most people still seem to drink milk which contains lots of fat — instead of the much healthier, low fat skimmed and semi-skimmed varieties.

2. Cows’ milk can cause allergies and digestive troubles. Eczema, asthma, migraine, irritable bowel syndrome and sinus problems are just five of the common disorders believed to be associated with milk drinking.

3. Most worrying is the fact that some farmers give their cows hormones to increase their milk yield. What effect will these hormones have on you and your family? I don’t know. And I don’t think anyone else knows either.

Soya Milk

Soya milk — made by washing, soaking and grinding soya beans and then mixing them with boiling water — is an excellent alternative to cows’ milk.

Soya milk (and soya yoghurt and ice cream are also available) contains no cholesterol, little sugar and plenty of protein. The fats in soya milk are of the polyunsaturated kind (in cows’ milk the fats are saturated). Soya milk can easily be used as a replacement for cows’ milk and although you would be able to tell the difference if you drank the two straight from a glass you probably won’t be able to tell the difference if you used the soya milk on cereal or in cooking.

CHAPTER 3

HOW HEALTHY ARE YOUR EATING HABITS?

You may think your diet is healthy. But let's find out!

Answer the questions in this simple quiz to find out exactly how healthy your eating habits really are.

1. Which sort of bread do you usually buy?
a) white
b) wholemeal

2. Do you eat an average of one piece of fresh fruit?
a) every day?
b) most days?
c) occasionally?
d) rarely?
e) never?

3. Where do you get most of your vegetables from?
a) own garden (or friend's garden)
b) fresh from the greengrocer
c) ready packaged or tinned

4. What sort of milk do you buy?
a) extra cream
b) ordinary
c) skimmed
d) semi-skimmed
e) soya

6. When you eat meals do you
a) tend to eat in a rush?
b) usually make sure that you allow yourself enough time?

7. Do you eat sweets or chocolates
a) every day or nearly every day?
b) most days of the week?
c) occasionally?
d) rarely?
e) never?

8. Do you
a) eat unlimited amounts of sugar?
b) make a conscious effort to control the amount of sugar you eat?
c) keep the amount of sugar you eat to a minimum?

9. Do you
a) eat meat every day?
b) eat meat most days?
c) eat meat occasionally?
d) eat meat rarely?
e) never eat meat at all?

10. When buying pasta or rice do you
a) usually buy the white variety?
b) usually buy the wholemeal or brown variety?

11. How many times a week do you eat beans, peas or lentils?

a) at least once a day
b) most days
c) occasionally
d) rarely
e) never

12. How often do you eat cakes, buns, pastries or biscuits?
a) at least once a day
b) most days
c) occasionally
d) rarely
e) never

13. Do you usually use?
a) butter
b) a low fat spread
c) a very low fat spread

14. Do you make a conscious effort to limit your fat intake?
a) yes
b) no

15. Do you make a conscious effort to keep your fibre intake high?
a) yes
b) no

NOW CHECK YOUR SCORE

1. a) 0 b) 5
2. a) 5 b) 4 c) 3 d) 2 e) 1
3. a) 5 b) 3 c) 1
4. a) 0 b) 1 c) 3 d) 5 e) 5
5. a) 3 b) 0
6. a) 0 b) 3
7. a) 0 b) 1 c) 2 d) 3 e) 5
8. a) 0 b) 3 c) 5
9. a) 0 b) 1 c) 2 d) 3 e) 5
10. a) 0 b) 3
11. a) 5 b) 4 c) 3 d) 1 e) 0
12. a) 0 b) 1 c) 3 d) 4 e) 5
13. a) 0 b) 3 c) 5
14. a) 5 b) 0
15. a) 5 b) 0

If you scored 60 or more then your diet is a healthy one.

If you scored less than 60 you could improve your health noticeably by taking more care with your diet.

Do you put your convenience before your health?

The shops are full of ‘convenience’ foods these days: packets and tins of prepared food which require no kitchen skills but which provide a ready to eat meal in just a few minutes. Sadly, these ‘convenience’ foods are often low in fibre, vitamins and minerals and high in fat. If you’re living on a diet of convenience foods you could be endangering your health.

CHAPTER 4

FOOD ADDITIVES

Food manufacturers use flavourings, preservatives and colourings to restore or improve the taste, texture or colour of the foods they sell. Altogether they use several thousand different additives and in recent years there has been a considerable amount of discussion about the safety of these substances. Since the average consumer eats around 5.51b (2.5kg) of additives every year the problem clearly *could* be a massive one. Additives enable manufacturers to debase foods in order to increase their own profits.

No one has the foggiest idea how safe food additives are but I honestly don't think anyone in power gives a stuff about this. I have in front of me a booklet which was published by a government agency. In this booklet the government sternly warns that 'ham and bacon couldn't be sold without the preservative that also gives them their pink colour' and claims that 'scientists and doctors who check safety evidence for the government are satisfied the use of these additives is safe'.

Feel better?

No, I thought not.

And you are right to be sceptical.

When bravely explaining the fact that flavourings are not controlled as tightly as other additives the same booklet boldly admits that this is because there are over 3,000 flavourings in use, in many different combinations.

So, there you have it.

One official reason for not controlling flavourings tightly is that there are too many of them to control properly.

My advice is to consume as few additives as you possibly can. Try to eat fresh food whenever possible and avoid buying pre-packed foods that are stuffed with chemicals.

Food Additives And Cancer

Food ingredients which may cause cancer in humans include the polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (the concentration of which is increased by burning, overcooking or barbecuing); the nitrosamines (which may be formed by a reaction between substances normally present in food and the nitrates or nitrates which are added to fish, sausages, bacon, ham cheese etc. in order to stop the food from 'spoiling') and moulds which grow on foods which are normally free of carcinogens and then produce toxic substances called mycotoxins (the fungus called ergot which grows on rye and causes womb contractions in healthy women has been used as a prescription drug and is the substance from which LSD was created). The aflatoxins, which grow on peanuts, are among the most powerful of all carcinogenic substances.

It is, however, the artificial additives which are added to food as preservatives, colourings and flavourings which worry consumers most. Theoretically, chemicals which are added to food are subjected to extensive testing to make sure that they are not dangerous. But the value of many of the tests which are performed must be in question. 'The interpretation of studies which appear to show the potential for tumour formation in animals is becoming increasingly difficult,' said the British Medical Association in its book *The BMA Guide to Living With Risk* (published by Penguin in 1990). 'Some testing procedures are very tightly standardised, but have little relationship to the real world or to use by humans. Other tests are more flexible but difficult to relate one to the other. Indeed, a great deal more needs to be known about the induction of cancer in animals by chemicals before the findings can be confidently related to man.' (One wonders why scientists don't just forget about the animal experiments completely and concentrate on human studies. They could do preliminary toxicity and carcinogenicity tests on human tissue and organ samples and then study limits cohort samples in order to investigate the long-term carcinogenicity in humans.)

'Chemicals that cause cancer are a diverse group which act in different ways,' says the British Medical Association. 'To classify all of them for the purpose of regulation as 'carcinogens' is not very logical today, because we really do not know what some of the laboratory findings in animals actually mean, and the mechanism of action of chemical carcinogens in biochemical terms is very unclear. Some of the testing defies common sense. If a chemical is administered to a rat in relatively enormous amounts there will be absolutely inevitable changes in that part of the diet which remains and is acceptable to that unfortunate animal, its metabolism is bound to be altered, and these changes may or may not have as much influence on the animal's illness as the chemical itself.'

'In summary, then,' said the BMA, 'carcinogens in food are more likely to be there 'naturally' or as a result of traditional preservation methods than by the addition of synthetic chemicals. The significance to human beings of very tiny amounts of carcinogens (as assessed through animal experimentation) is unknown. It would be hard to live on a diet which contained no substances which at some time had been shown by laboratory or animal tests to have carcinogenic properties.' The British Medical Association has also pointed out that: 'if salt and sugar were being tested as potential food additives today, and if judgement of acceptability was to be based purely on the laboratory and animal testing, it is unlikely that either would be permitted for use in food.'

In my view food additives are potential hazards. They are best avoided as much as possible and this is best done by eating as much fresh food as possible.

The types of additives

1. Flavourings

Flavourings are sometimes added to give added or extra or enhanced flavour to a product and they are sometimes used to give an entirely different flavour to a rather bland product or to a product which has an unpleasant taste. Monosodium glutamate is often used to stimulate the taste buds and increase the sensation of flavour — despite the fact that it can cause severe headaches. Manufacturers who use flavourings well can make just about anything — including a ground up telephone directory — taste good.

2. Colourings

Colourings are often added to make food look more like the pictures on the packaging. Without colourings, many prepackaged foods would probably look dull and unappetising.

Sometimes colourings are deliberately used to deceive customers. For example, companies making meat products will use a red dye to disguise the fat and other non-meat ingredients in pies and sausages. Sometimes there isn't much logic in the way in which colourings are used. For example, custard consists mainly of corn starch flavoured with vanilla but contains a dye to make it look yellow. This is done because when custard was first introduced the customers were persuaded that the product was made from eggs. Not many people still believe that custard has anything at all to do with eggs but the yellow colour has become 'normal' and so the dye is invariably added to the mix.

3. *Preservatives*

Preservatives are used to stop micro organisms developing — and to slow down the rate at which products go bad. Amazingly, some preservatives are included to stop the colourings fading or the flavourings going 'off'.

4. *Emulsifiers*

Emulsifiers are used so that water can be included in a product. There are two reasons to do this. First, water helps to give a product a smooth, firm texture. Second, water is cheap and helps to increase the weight of a product without adding to its cost. Food manufacturers often use water and emulsifiers to increase the weight of meat products.

5. *Stabilizers*

Stabilisers are used, often in conjunction with emulsifiers, to stop water and fat separating and, therefore, to improve the smoothness and creaminess of a food.

6. *Acids*

Are used to help preserve food and to give it a sharper taste.

7. *Anti-caking agent*

Added to stop food being lumpy.

8. *Bulking agent*

Added to make you feel fuller and more satisfied after a meal.

9. *Sweeteners*

Added to make a food taste sweeter.

10. *Thickeners*

Are used to make food thicker and to improve its consistency.

11. *Glazing agents*

May help to preserve food but also used to give food a shiny look.

12. *The rest*

Many of the available food additives are used to make foods easier to process or pack. Some are included to make a product easier to spread or to improve its consistency in other ways. Manufacturers sometimes add anti splattering agents to stop oil splashing out when wet chips are added. Additives can, if used properly, enable a manufacturer to make a food look or taste like virtually anything. Because meat tends to be expensive the most common use of additives is in the preparation of meat products (which sometimes contain very little genuine meat).

THE HARM ADDITIVES CAN DO

Additives included in food can kill vitamins and cause a massive variety of symptoms and diseases including:

asthma, eczema, dermatitis, migraine, hyperactivity in children, dizziness, kidney problems, diarrhoea, fits, palpitations, stomach pains, intestinal disorders and allergy problems.

Many of the most commonly used additives have never been tested to see if they are safe for human consumption. Those working in the food industry excuse this bizarre fact by pointing out that there are several thousand additives in use and that testing procedures are lengthy, expensive and time consuming. I doubt if many consumers will take more comfort from this.

I have heard some food company representatives defending the use of food additives by saying that only 1 in a 1000 people are likely to be adversely affected by a particular additive. I don’t find that particularly comforting for 1 in 1000 is not good odds. If 1,000,000 eat a particular food then a 1 in 1,000 risk means that 1,000 people are going to be made ill by it.

I am also worried by the fact that many different additives are often used together. It is widely acknowledged that chemicals often interact. If you include two different chemical substances in one product then there is a real risk that the two will combine and produce something quite different. Modern foods contain so many different additives that it is quite easy to eat a meal which contains fifty different chemicals.

No one knows what all those additives are likely to do to your health. No one knows what long term side effects may be building up. No one knows how those additives are likely to interact with one another.

Five tips to help you limit the number of additives you consume

1. In order to minimise your consumption of food additives I suggest that you try to buy as many fresh foods as you possibly can.

2. When you do buy processed or packaged foods try to buy products with a short list of additives. It is well worth remembering that the substance named first on the packet is usually the one that appears in the largest quantity inside the packet — other products should appear on the list in decreasing order of quantity.

3. Grow as much of your own food as you possibly can. Even if you only have a small garden you may be able to grow many of your own vegetables.

4. If you (or anyone in your family) develop new or unusual symptoms after eating a new product try to avoid that product in future.

5. Become a cynic when reading food advertisements and food labels. Over the last few years the food industry has managed to devalue the word ‘natural’ so that it has become virtually meaningless. For example, the phrase ‘only natural ingredients’ is sometimes used to describe foods which are stuffed with additives if those additives are chemicals that occur naturally, or synthetic versions of chemicals which occur naturally.

E Numbers to Avoid

In countries within the European Community some food additives are given E numbers so that consumers can tell what they are buying. The E numbers contained within a food are usually listed on the packet or tin.

Though this list of potentially troublesome additives is by no means exhaustive here are ten E numbers which I think you should try to avoid whenever possible. Make a copy of this list when you go shopping. Try to find products that do not include any of these additives. And try to avoid *all* additives as much as you can.

1. E102 (tartrazine)
2. E 110 (sunset yellow)
3. E123 (amaranth)
4. E127 (erythrosine)
5. E132 (indigo carmine)
6. E153 (carbon black)
7. E173 (aluminium)
8. E210 (benzoic acid)
9. E222 (sodium hydrogen sulphite)
10. E321 (butylated hydroxytoluene)

CHAPTER 5

HOW MUCH DO YOU KNOW ABOUT FOOD SAFETY?

Food poisoning is a major problem — frequently caused by carelessness and bad habits in the kitchen. Do this quiz to find out how much you know about preparing food the healthy way.

1. Which of these foods is safest to eat in the street?
a) bananas
b) oranges
c) hot dog
d) hamburger

2. You have got raw meat defrosting in the fridge. Where should you store it?
a) on the top shelf
b) it doesn’t matter
c) on the bottom shelf

3. Which of these is true?
a) you should store cooked food away from uncooked food
b) you should always cover up food that has been prepared
c) raw meat is safer to eat than cooked meat

4. Which of these infections is most dangerous?
a) botulism
b) salmonella
c) listeria

5. Is it safe to cook meat taken straight out of the freezer?
a) yes
b) no

6. Which of these creatures carry infection?
a) flies
b) mice
c) rats

7. After preparing an uncooked chicken you should always:
a) wash the knife and cutting board thoroughly
b) wash your hands well
c) dispose of the waste carefully and quickly

8. Why shouldn’t you put hot food into the fridge?
a) because it will develop salmonella
b) because it will heat up other food stored in the fridge and increase the chance of that food developing an infection
c) because it will go bad more rapidly

9. The symptoms of food poisoning can occur up to how long after eating infected food?
a) 4 hours
b) 24 hours
c) 5 days

10. Which type of food should be avoided by pregnant women?
a) apples
b) soft cheeses
c) fish

11. How cold should your fridge be?

a) between 3 degrees Centigrade and freezing
b) 32 degrees Centigrade below zero
c) 12 degrees Centigrade or below

12. Which of these symptoms can suggest food poisoning?
a) headache
b) vomiting
c) diarrhoea

13. Why is listeria dangerous to pregnant women?
a) it can cause a miscarriage
b) it may affect the unborn baby
c) it can affect the production of breast milk

14. Which of these is a common cause of salmonella poisoning?
a) poultry
b) fruit
c) milk

15. How hot should food get to make sure that it is cooked properly?
a) 70 degrees Centigrade
b) 50 degrees Centigrade
c) 30 degrees Centigrade

NOW CHECK YOUR SCORE

1. a) 2 points b) 2 points c) 0 points d) 0 points
Bananas and oranges — which come wrapped in their own disposable wrapping — are the safest ‘street’ foods you can buy.

2. a) 0 points b) 0 points c) 2 points
You should store meat on the bottom shelf so that any blood dripping from it doesn’t contaminate other food.

3. a) 2 points b) 2 points c) 0 points
Raw meat is one of the most dangerous types of food you can eat.

4. a) 2 points b) 0 points c) 0 points
Botulism is by far the most dangerous bug you are likely to come in contact with through eating food.

5. a) 0 points b) 2 points
Meat needs to be thawed properly before being cooked — otherwise there is a risk that the meat in the centre will not be cooked properly when you eat it.

6. a) 1 point b) 1 point c) 1 point
All these creatures can, of course, carry infection.

7. a) 1 point b) 1 point c) 1 point
You should do all these things.

8. a) 0 points b) 2 points c) 0 points
If you put hot food into the fridge it will increase the temperature inside the fridge and other food stored there may rise in temperature to a dangerous level.

9. a) 0 points b) 0 points c) 2 points
Food poisoning can occur up to 5 days after eating infected food.

10. a) 0 points b) 2 points c) 0 points

Pregnant women should avoid soft cheeses — and other foods made with unpasteurised milk. These are likely to contain listeria.

11. a) 2 points b) 0 points c) 0 points
You should keep your refrigerator between freezing and 3 degrees Centigrade in order to keep bugs at bay.

12. a) 2 points b) 2 points c) 2 points
Each of these symptoms can be produced by food poisoning.

13. a) 1 point b) 1 point c) 0 points
Listeria can cause miscarriages and can affect an unborn baby.

14. a) 2 points b) 0 points c) 0 points
Poultry is a common cause of salmonella poisoning.

15. a) 2 points b) 0 points c) 0 points
Food should be cooked at 70 degrees Centigrade or above to make sure that bugs are destroyed.

If you scored less than 30 points you should read this section of the book very carefully.

Food Poisoning

Stomach pain, vomiting and diarrhoea are the classic symptoms of food poisoning — a syndrome caused by eating contaminated food. If several members of the same family all develop these symptoms after eating the same meal then food poisoning has to be suspected. Some types of food poisoning begin within hours — even minutes — while others may take days to develop.

If you think you might have contracted food poisoning: rest, avoid solids, drink plenty of fluids and contact your doctor for advice.

Botulism

Botulism is one of the most deadly and horrifying diseases known to man. The toxin produced by the Clostridium botulinum bacteria — probably the most poisonous substance in the world — is so deadly that one small drop can kill 50,000 people.

Unlike most types of food poisoning botulism affects the nervous system rather than the stomach. There may be some nausea and vomiting a few hours after eating contaminated food but the first real symptoms usually start fairly suddenly 18 to 36 hours after the food was eaten.

The faster symptoms start the more serious the disease is likely to be.

The symptoms to watch out for are (in the order in which they may appear):

* tiredness
* dizziness
* blurred or double vision
* dry mouth
* difficulty in swallowing
* slurred speech
* breathing difficulties
* general weakness of arms and legs.

As the disease spreads through the body so the paralysis spreads and becomes gradually more and more severe. One of the most terrifying aspects of the disease is that patients remain fully alert as the paralysis spreads. Because there is no effect on mental skills patients remain fully aware of what is happening to them. Doctors usually have to inject calming drugs in order to help prevent understandable panic.

Botulism is so deadly that it kills up to 70% of the patients who get it if they are not treated quickly and properly.

Since the chest muscles which control breathing are often affected patients will frequently need to be put onto a respirator and looked after in an intensive care unit.

A tracheotomy — in which a life saving tube is inserted into the patient’s windpipe — is often essential as the poison spreads.

Anti-toxins — to combat the poison — are usually given not only to people who have the disease but also to those who have eaten the poisonous food but have not yet shown signs of the disease — though this must be done within hours.

The bacteria which cause botulism cannot survive in the presence of oxygen and normally live buried in the soil — which is how they get into food. Heat and sterilisation techniques usually prevent botulism. It is usually home preserved foods that are usually the cause of the disease — vegetables, fruits and meats can all cause it.

Here are three additional reasons why botulism needs to be taken seriously:

1. The poison produced by the botulism organism is probably the most deadly substance in the world. No one is immune. One yoghurt carton full of botulism poison could wipe out an entire nation.

2. Botulism is so rare that relatively little of the potentially life-saving botulism anti-toxin is kept in stock.

3. Victims of botulism poisoning usually need to be treated in special intensive care units — and many need to be kept alive on life support machines and ventilators until the paralysis produced by the poison wears off. But there are never many spare intensive care unit beds available.

Salmonella

Salmonella infections are responsible for many types of food poisoning and for the disease ‘typhoid fever’. Infection of hens’ eggs with salmonella is believed to be widespread.

The symptoms of salmonella food poisoning usually include headache, nausea, abdominal pain, diarrhoea and a feeling of weakness. Symptoms generally last only for a few days. Patients are usually advised to avoid solid food for the first twenty four hours of their illness but to drink plenty of fluids.

Salmonella organisms are particularly likely to be present in raw or lightly-cooked foods.

20 Point Plan For Reducing Your Chances of Developing Food Poisoning

The widespread use of preservatives to keep food in good condition has not stopped the incidence of food poisoning. The majority of food borne infections are transmitted via meat and meat products. Here are twenty tips to help you reduce your chances of acquiring a food transmitted infection.

1. Make sure that you always check the sell by date on any packaged food you buy. Sell by dates are important — and they are there for a reason. If you buy food that has gone past its sell by date you may save money but you could be putting yourself at risk.

2. Don’t ever buy tins which are rusty or bulging or badly damaged (the food inside might be contaminated) and do not buy packets of food if the packet is damaged or torn.

3. When choosing food from a freezer in a store make sure that the freezer is working (i.e. is cold) and that the food is cold when you take it out. Make sure that you put the food into your freezer as soon as possible and if possible transport it home in a ‘cool bag’. If you drive around with cold food in your car and it defrosts then the growth of bacteria will be encouraged.

4. Don’t ever buy anything from a food shop which looks dirty. And don’t buy anything from a food shop assistant who has dirty hands. The reason for this is simple: if the manager of the shop can’t be bothered to ensure that the shop and his staff are clean then the chances are that he is not too fussy about food hygiene either.

5. When you are buying eggs don’t buy eggs which are cracked (it is obviously easier for the egg inside to become infected if the shell is cracked). And try to buy eggs which have been laid by free range chickens rather than chickens kept in tiny cages. (Apart from the moral reasons chickens which are allowed to roam around are likely to be healthier than chickens kept in cages.)

6. When you store food in the fridge try to keep different types of food apart from one another in order to reduce the risk of cross contamination. Make sure that you put meat — and any other foods which are defrosting — on a plate at the bottom of the fridge so that drips won’t fall onto other foods. Always keep meat (a high risk source of infection) well away from other foods.

7. Do make sure that your fridge is kept cold enough. The temperature inside your fridge should be below 3 degrees Centigrade. If your fridge is too warm then the food in it will spoil so make sure that you check the thermostat if necessary. Your fridge will work more efficiently if you defrost it regularly.

8. Never ever re-freeze food which has been frozen and already thawed. Thawing increases the number of bacteria and refreezing food increases your chances of being infected.

9. If you eat meat it is vitally important that you make sure that it is completely thawed before you start to cook it. If you don’t do this then there is a risk that the middle of the meat will still be frozen when you start to cook it. If this happens then when you think all the meat is cooked the centre will still be uncooked — and probably full of bugs. It is particularly important that poultry is properly thawed before being cooked.

10. Once an item of food has been thawed make sure that you use it quickly. Do not leave it sitting around in the kitchen — if you do then micro organisms will be given a chance to multiply.

11. Always wash vegetables and fruit thoroughly in running water before using them. You should, of course, even wash food which you have grown yourself since some bugs can be carried in the soil.

12. Take care to ensure that all the worktops and equipment in your kitchen are kept scrupulously clean. Wash with soapy water; rinse afterwards in clean water and dry surfaces and utensils carefully with a clean cloth. Dirty cloths are one of the commonest causes of infection in the kitchen. It is better to let dishes and utensils drip and drain if possible. Do not use old or dirty dish cloths and change towels regularly (disposable paper towels are best because they keep the risk of cross infection to an absolute minimum).

13. Make sure that you wash your hands thoroughly before you start preparing any food — and after any interruption. If you have any infected or open wound make sure that you always wear a proper plaster or bandage (both to protect the food you are handling and yourself). Always wash your hands thoroughly after handling meat of any kind.

14. When food has been cooked you should, if possible, eat it quickly. If food which has been cooked is allowed to cool then any bugs in it will multiply. The risk increases with the length of time that cooked food is left. Cooked food which is stored should be kept cold in the fridge or hot in the oven. If you intend to eat foods which have been previously cooked make sure that you thoroughly reheat them. When reheating food it is essential that all parts of the food reach a temperature of at least 70 degrees Centigrade.

15. The best way to kill the bugs in meat, poultry or fish is to ensure that you cook the food properly. Avoid dishes which include raw meat, raw poultry or raw fish.

16. Anyone pregnant, elderly or frail should avoid soft cheeses (such as Brie and Camembert) and blue veined cheeses since these can be contaminated with listeria bacteria.

17. Don’t eat raw eggs or dishes prepared with raw eggs (if you do the risk of salmonella poisoning will increase).

18. Cats, dogs and even birds can all carry infections which may be dangerous to you so don’t let them clamber over surfaces where you prepare or serve food. And if you handle an animal make sure that you wash your hands thoroughly before preparing or eating food. Make sure that you keep feeding dishes and serving utensils intended for animals well away from those which you use. Wash up dishes used by animals in different water.

19. Don’t put warm food into the refrigerator — if you do then the temperature inside the fridge may rise to an unsafe level and other food stored there may be spoilt.

20. Make sure that you know how to use all the equipment in your kitchen — and check that your oven, fridge and microwave (if you use one) are all working properly. Be careful to make sure that you follow the manufacturer’s instructions carefully

CHAPTER 6

DRUGS AND HORMONES

In order to maximise their profits modern farmers often use drugs and hormones to keep their animals ‘healthy’. The drugs help to reduce the financial loss of animals dying. Since animals are often kept in overcrowded conditions the need for artificial help is often considerable. In addition drugs are frequently used to improve the weight and appearance of animals intended for sale as meat.

Modern, intensive farming techniques mean that animals are usually kept in very cramped and uncomfortable conditions. To keep animals calm tranquillisers are used. And to reduce the risk of infection antibiotics are used. A few years ago antibiotics were used simply to treat sick animals and to prevent illness spreading. There can, of course, be no argument against this. It would be obviously wrong not to treat animals who were ill. But these days antibiotics are quite commonly used in a very different — and indefensible way. In order to prevent infections developing and to encourage a faster than average growth rate antibiotics are routinely added to animal feeds. Nearly half of all the antibiotics currently being manufactured go into animal feeds. Young animals are taken from their mothers at such an early age that they have no chance to acquire any natural immunity by drinking their mother’s milk and so they are much more susceptible to disease. It is not at all uncommon for young animals to be kept on antibiotics for the whole of their lives.

There are several dangers with this over-use of antibiotics. First, drug resistant bacteria are already developing. The overuse of antibiotics in farming means that when doctors try to use those drugs to treat sick human patients the drugs simply don’t work — the bacteria have become so accustomed to the antibiotics that they are not killed by them. The number of drugs available to doctors has, in this way, been dramatically reduced in recent years. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that when humans eat the meat from animals fed on antibiotics they swallow both the remnants of the antibiotics and the bacteria which have acquired antibiotic resistance. By giving their animals antibiotics modern farmers are endangering the health and indeed the lives of their customers.

People who eat meat are also at risk from the hormones which are commonly used by farmers. Growth hormones are popular because if you give an animal a growth hormone it will grow faster and achieve a heavier weight sooner. In some parts of the world meat which has been prepared with the aid of hormones has officially been banned. However, these bans usually prove to be more technical than realistic and the profits to be made by using hormones to increase the speed at which animals grow means that farmers are secretly often still giving hormones to their animals. The people who eat meat from animals which have been reared with the aid of hormones eventually end up consuming those hormones too. No one knows what effect the hormone residues will have on human consumers of meat.

One of the hormones traditionally used by farmers is diethylstilboestrol. This hormone is popular because it helps to increase the rate at which both sheep and cattle develop. But diethylstilboestrol is a potentially dangerous substance. Shortly after the Second World War it was given to pregnant women who seemed likely to have miscarriages. In the 1970s it was then revealed that the daughters of women who had been given the hormone were prone to develop cancer of the vagina. This was the first time in history that a link had been established between a drug given to one generation and a disease developing in the next generation. Officially farmers are not supposed to use diethylstilboestrol. But farmers do a lot of things which they are not officially supposed to do and just as drug use among athletes is commonplace, so the use of this hormone on farms around the world is common. Doctors have reported that babies and young girls have started to develop breasts — and even started to produce milk of their own — after being fed on milk that has come from cows which have been given hormones. In Italy women noticed that their babies had started developing breasts: this bizarre occurrence was blamed on the use of hormones in meat, after it was found that the women had given their babies baby food manufactured from animals which had been boosted with diethylstilboestrol.

In America the use of hormones is so common that 80% of the cattle reared have been artificially enhanced with the aid of hormones. A single, very cheap hormone pellet can help make an animal put on an extra 22kg of lean meat — while consuming less food than an animal which has not been given a hormone pellet.

The Americans claim that giving hormones to cattle is perfectly safe but beef from such cattle is banned in the EU.

Farmers give six sex hormones to their cattle for exactly the same reason that body-builders and weight-lifters take hormones: to speedily build more muscle. The benefit to a farmer is financial: there is obviously more saleable beef on a heavily muscled cow.

The row, which has been going on for well over a decade, is about whether or not beef taken from cows which have been given extra hormones is safe to eat. Although there is no evidence to show that hormone-soaked beef is safe American farmers say that it is. And that, of course, is good enough for their government. (All governments are as frightened of farmers as they are of any other big commercial group.)

However, European farmers are not allowed to give extra hormones to cattle. And so, not surprisingly, they have put pressure on European politicians to ban the American beef (which, because of the help from the hormones, is cheaper to produce).

The American claim that it is safe to give hormones to cattle is based upon the fact that there is, as yet, not very much scientific proof that it is dangerous to do this.

This is exactly the same spurious argument that is used to defend genetic engineering, microwave ovens and other possible hazards to human health.

Everyone conveniently ignores the fact that it is extremely difficult to prove that something is dangerous when no research has been done to find the truth.

What we do know, however, is that the amount of hormone in 500 grams of meat can be more than a pubertal boy produces in a day. And that’s a lot. And sex hormones can and do have a dramatic effect on any human body (and mind).

Moreover, research has been done showing that there is a convincing epidemiological link between one of the six hormones used by American farmers and endometrial and breast cancers. The hormone causes cancer by interfering with a cell’s DNA — a process known as genotoxicity. It is generally accepted that there are no safe levels for genotoxic substances.

You might think that would be enough to embarrass the American politicians into telling their farmers to stop using hormones. After all, the incidence of cancer is rising dramatically in the US — and has been doing so for some years.

However, the American farmers (and their government) have taken comfort from the fact that although a joint committee set up by the World Health Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organisation has agreed that one of the hormones in use (estradiol-17-beta) has what it calls ‘genotoxic properties’, and does cause cancer, it has argued that it is safe to allow people to consume modest amounts of this cancer inducing hormone. Moreover, much to the delight of the Americans, the committee claims to know what the safe level is. You will not be surprised to hear that the American farmers and their government claim that their beef contains less than this safe amount of this known cancer inducing substance.

In my view anyone who eats American beef is playing a modern version of Russian roulette and is exhibiting an extraordinary amount of trust in a group of people (American politicians and American farmers) who have consistently shown that they do not give a fig for human health or human life.

The use of hormones in Europe is illegal but I know of fifteen illegal growth hormones available on the black market in European countries. It seems reasonable to assume that some farmers probably know of the existence of these illegal growth hormones too.

Tranquillisers, hormones and antibiotics are not the only chemicals or drugs which are given to animals — and which are likely to find their way into the bodies of those who eat meat. Farmers use a variety of other chemicals in order to maximise their profits. One chemical is given to animals to kill fly eggs in their manure. The aim is to reduce the number of flies in overcrowded animal sheds but I don’t think anyone knows how dangerous this chemical could be to the human consumers of meat taken from these animals. A substance called a prostaglandin is sometimes injected into animals in order to bring them into ‘season’ at a convenient time.

To all this we must add the fact that animals do produce their own natural hormones — and modern farming techniques often mean that the existence of these hormones may be particularly high. For example, when they are frightened animals produce the hormone adrenalin. Since slaughterhouses are pretty terrifying places there can be little doubt that just before they die animals usually have a lot of adrenalin circulating in their bodies. Just what effect does all that adrenalin have on humans? Your guess is as good as anyone else’s.

CHAPTER 7

MAD COW DISEASE

Britain's mad cow disease scandal was caused when farmers turned herbivores into cannibals. It was a direct result of greed. But politicians consistently defended and protected farmers, and for years deliberately hid the truth about this exceptional — but very real — hazard.

When, in 1990, I first warned that mad cow disease could prove to be a major problem (and cause serious health problems — and death — in human beings) I was vilified by the government for 'scaremongering'. When in 1993 I repeated my warning that people who ate beef, and beef products, were taking a real risk with their health Sir Kenneth Calman, at the time Britain's chief medical officer, assured people that beef could safely be eaten by everyone. 'To say that Dr Coleman's views are alarmist would be an understatement,' Calman announced. (Since this senior government spokesman used the word 'alarmist' I feel justified in pointing out that it was politicians who warned us that we were all going to die of AIDS — deliberately creating the biggest false scare of the 20th century.)

When I exclusively revealed that mad cow disease was being transmitted back to sheep by feeding the carcases of cows suffering from mad cow disease to sheep I was again dismissed as a scaremonger. Subsequently, I was once again proved right.

It seems to me that the whole mad cow saga confirms my thesis that far too much decision making in our world is done in the interests of institutions and corporations — and business in general — rather than in the interests of individuals.

Details of how politicians allow farmers to feed their animals are coming to light with greater frequency in the wake of the appalling mad cow disease scandal in the UK.

For example, among the cheap 'foods' fed to cattle and pigs on farms in the US are: human sewage sludge, dead cats and dogs, chicken manure, slaughterhouse waste (blood, bones, intestines), cement kiln dust, old newspapers, waste cardboard, agricultural waste (corn cobs, fruit and vegetable peelings) and old fat from restaurants and grease traps. Those who eat meat are, of course, consuming the residues of all these delectables. What a tribute all this is to the glory of our allegedly sophisticated world.

If it is true (as I believe it is) that we are what we eat then this news should alarm all meat eaters. What farmers choose to include in animal feed is crucial to human health.

ANIMAL FEED

Approximately seven million Americans suffer from food-borne illnesses every year. (The figures for other Western nations are proportionately similar.)

One reason for what is now undeniably a major epidemic is the fact that animal manure remains attached to or mixed with meat which is sent to the shops for human consumption.

Another reason for the food-borne epidemic is the fact that many cooks do not prepare meat properly — often by not cooking it thoroughly.

But the use of animal excrement as animal feed must be another major cause of illness.

The millions of farm animals reared to satisfy the Western world's apparently insatiable demand for meat between them produce an enormous amount of waste. Farm animals in the United States produce ten times as much waste as the human population and an expert working at the University of Georgia recently pointed out that just seven chickens produce as much manure as one human being. In America, where around seven billion chickens are raised and killed every year, the annual production of excrement now totals in excess of 1.5 billion tons.

Getting rid of this enormous quantity of excrement obviously poses something of a problem to farmers. You simply can't spread it all on the fields as fertiliser. (Getting rid of just some of that excrement by dumping it onto the land is one reason why drinking water supplies are so polluted.)

And so, in an attempt to get rid of all this toxic waste, farmers now frequently mix animal waste into livestock feed. Chicken litter is particularly commonly dealt with in this way (perhaps because its composition makes it easier to deal with — and the quantity of it makes its disposal a real problem).

In some areas of America roughly one in every five chicken farmers now use their chicken manure for cattle feed. Such laws as there are only seem to apply to commercial feed manufacturers and so farmers who keep both chicken and cattle seem to be able to feed chicken manure to cows with impunity. I have no doubt that this same practice is followed in other areas of the world where farmers keep chicken and cattle.

I am convinced that the mixing of chicken manure in with animal feed is an important cause of infection. Chicken commonly carry the salmonella bug (among others). And so the cattle who eat the chicken manure also then become infected with the salmonella.

It is hardly surprising that food borne disease is now commonplace. Food from the US is, of course, imported freely into Britain and other parts of Europe.

MEAT PRODUCTS

Modern regulations allow farmers, meat processors, packers and food companies selling meat to mislead their consumers in a way that would startle people in other industries.

The word ‘meat’ can include the head, feet, rectum (full or empty), spinal cord and tail of an animal. The term ‘meat product’ can include the eyeballs and the nose. A package which is labelled as containing pure beef may include fat, rind, gristle and skin. It is commonplace for sausages to include ground up tonsils, fat, bone, cartilage and intestines (with or without the contents). The people selling meat and meat products use flavourings and colourings to disguise what they are selling. Faecal matter is an advantage — it adds extra weight. Water and polyphosphates are injected into the animal’s dead body at high pressure in order to increase the weight of the animal (and the profit to the farmer).

MORE MEAT WORRIES

The enormous demand for meat these days means that every day huge numbers of animals are killed and ‘processed’. In theory the killing should be clean, fast, painless and hygienic. It is none of those things. The killing invariably goes on in huge sheds where cross infection is commonplace and where there is little or no time to clear away blood or faecal matter. Chickens are routinely killed in batches of thousands at a time. Inevitably carcasses become infected. Cross infection in slaughterhouses is common. Contamination with faecal matter is commonplace and animals which are ill, infected or cancerous are killed and ‘processed’ into the food chain for humans. People who eat meat could easily end up eating a lump of cancer.

Before animals are killed they are usually made unconscious. This is done either with a special type of pistol which fires a captive steel bolt or by passing an electric current through the animal’s brain.

Then, when they are supposedly unconscious, the animals are killed by having their throats slit. (The men who work in the slaughterhouses call this ‘sticking’, ‘bleeding out’, or — if they are feeling unusually literate — ‘exsanguination’.)

However, the animals aren’t always unconscious when their throats are cut. Approximately 6% of cattle are not properly stunned before their throats are cut. And many animals wake up in time to see what is happening to them. Worst of all, however, are the practices in slaughterhouses which cater to Jews and Muslims. Here, for some (to me quite incomprehensible) reason, animals are fully conscious when their throats are cut. In Britain alone approximately 50,000 to 60,000 cattle and calves, 25,000 to 30,000 sheep and lambs and millions of chickens, turkey and hens are alive when their throats are cut so that Jews can eat kosher meat. Cattle can take up to six minutes to die this way.

Approximately 4,000 animals die every minute of every working day in slaughterhouses in the United Kingdom.

CHAPTER 8

FOOD IRRADIATION — FACTS YOU SHOULD KNOW

Food is often expensive and time consuming to grow. It is, however, often more expensive to transport, package and store. So to avoid the inevitable wastage (and financial cost) of food 'spoiling', manufacturers and distributors use a wide variety of techniques to preserve and to extend the shelf life of the food they sell.

Drying, smoking and salting are among the oldest and best-established techniques but these methods do not always work and are not always entirely safe. Not long ago a report from the Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Health Organization concluded that 'illness due to contaminated food is perhaps the most widespread health problem in the contemporary world'.

There is no doubt that the incidence of food borne disease has gone up dramatically during the last few years. Much to the consternation of the food manufacturers — and their scientists — many of the chemicals previously used to preserve food are now under suspicion of damaging human health.

Because of the problems associated with chemicals used to preserve food a new technique — irradiation — is now being used to preserve food.

The technique used is very simple.

The food to be preserved is radiated — exposed to the same sort of radiation that is more normally used to take X-rays of broken bones and to treat some types of cancer. One of the substances used to irradiate food is extracted from waste products obtained from nuclear plants. The X-rays kill fungi, bacteria and insects that might otherwise make food spoil.

This technique is proving to be very popular with food companies. They do not, of course, like it when food goes rotten and has to be thrown away. 'Spoilt' food costs the industry huge sums of money every year.

But the 64,000 dollar question is: Is radiation safe?

Those who advocate radiation claim that it is safer than using chemical preservatives.

But the truth is that we won't know whether irradiated food is safe to eat until a large number of human beings have eaten it for a long time.

Here are just some of the possible problems which could be associated with irradiated food.

1. Irradiation can reduce the number of vitamins in food. How much will this affect the people who eat irradiated food? I don't think anyone knows yet. We will probably have to wait another twenty years to find out.

2. Irradiation does not kill all the bugs in food. After treatment any bugs which have survived in the food may simply start to multiply again. For example, irradiating food doesn't necessarily protect the consumer against botulism, a frequently fatal and particularly nasty form of food-borne disease.

3. Exposing food to ionizing radiation can result in the production of special chemical compounds called radiolytic products. These compounds will, of course, be eaten. But will they be safe to eat? I don't think anyone knows the answer to that question yet. We will probably have to wait another twenty years to find out.

4. Irradiated food may taste and smell differently to ordinary food. Apart from the obvious disadvantage associated with this there is another hazard: will consumers be able to recognise when food is bad if it smells and tastes different anyway? At present the smell and taste of food is often a useful guide to its edibility. I don't think anyone knows the answer to those questions yet.

5. The individuals who work in the food irradiating plants may be exposed to danger — in just the same way that the first radiologists were exposed to danger because the hazards associated with the technique being used were not fully understood. How dangerous will food irradiation be to people working in the food industry? I don't think anyone knows the answer to that question yet. We will probably have to wait another twenty years to find out.

6. Many of the foods that seem to be most suitable for irradiation — and this includes such staples as fruit and vegetables — are the foods which are normally the healthiest and which provide many people with vital nutrients. These foods are particularly suitable for irradiation because they go off quite quickly if they are not 'preserved'. But how many essential nutrients will be damaged by irradiation? And will consumers be turned away from these excellent foods if they know that they have been irradiated? I don't think anyone knows the answer to that question yet. We will probably have to wait another twenty years to find out.

7. Even if one country brings in laws to control irradiation — and to ensure that consumers are told when the food

they are buying has been irradiated — it will probably be difficult to stop importers moving foods around the world after they have been given large doses of radiation. How will the consumer know how much radiation a food has been given? How much is too much? I don’t think anyone knows the answer to those questions yet. We will probably have to wait another twenty years to find out.

8. Irradiated foods may look fresh even though they are not. The result may be that you will buy food that is past its best. You will, therefore, suffer twice: you will be eating ‘bad’ food and you will be eating food that has been irradiated.

I am convinced that food irradiation is neither necessary nor welcome. There are, in my view, far too many opportunities for abuse and far too many potential pitfalls.

My advice is to avoid any food that has been irradiated. Try to do most of your shopping at shops which you know do not sell irradiated food. And try to eat out in restaurants which do not serve irradiated food.

CHAPTER 9

MICROWAVE OVENS

It isn’t just the poor quality of the food we buy which makes us ill — damaging our immune systems and making us vulnerable to infections and to cancer.

The way we prepare our food can also have a dramatic effect on our health. Overcooking food can destroy the vitamin content, for example.

And consider the microwave oven.

There are millions of microwave ovens in use around the world. Unlike traditional ovens they work by using short wave electromagnetic radiation to heat up food.

But, although microwave ovens are widely sold, widely used and sit in millions of kitchens heating (and affecting) the food that people eat, neither governments nor manufacturers seem keen to provide or publish information showing exactly how safe these products are.

In 1998 *The Journal of Natural Science* published an extremely significant paper dealing with the effects of microwaves on humans. The paper, was written by William Kopp, who worked at the Atlantis Rising Educational Center in Portland, Oregon from 1977 to 1979 and who, while working there, gathered together early documents detailing what was then known about the harmful effects of microwave ovens on human beings.

By writing this paper Kopp annoyed a powerful lobby. According to the *Journal of Natural Science* he subsequently changed his name and disappeared. This may sound dramatic but I have met another researcher who examined the dangers of microwave ovens who has been subjected to threats, and whose attempts to publicise the truth about microwave ovens has been met with lawsuits and other attempts to silence him.

Kopp reported that microwave ovens were originally developed by the Nazis for use by mobile support operations during the planned invasion of the Soviet Union. The aim was to eliminate the logistical problem of finding cooking fuels — as well as to cut down cooking times. The initial German research was conducted by the Germans in 1942-3 at the Humboldt-Universitat zu Berlin.

After the end of World War II, wrote Kopp, the Allies discovered the medical research which related to microwave ovens. Experimental microwave equipment was transferred both to the US War Department and to the Soviet Union for investigation. In the Soviet Union research work was done at the Institute of Radio Technology at Kinsk and the Institute of Radio Technology at Rajasthan.

It was in the Soviet Union that most of the research was done and published. And it was the Soviet Union, reported Kopp, which found that a human did not even need to ingest microwaved food substances to be in danger, because even exposure to the energy field itself was sufficient to cause serious adverse side effects.

Kopp pointed out that Soviet scientists were so alarmed about the hazards associated with microwave ovens that the Soviet Union produced a state law in 1976 which forbad the use of any microwave apparatus.

Here is a list of some of the adverse effects listed by the Soviet scientists back in the 1970s as having been observed when human beings were exposed to microwaves:

* A destabilisation in the production of hormones and the maintenance of hormone balance in both males and females.

* Brainwave disturbance in the alpha, theta and delta wave signal patterns.

* A breakdown of the human ‘life energy field’.

* A degeneration and destabilisation of internal cellular membrane properties.

* A degeneration and breakdown of electrical nerve impulses within the cerebrum.

* A long term cumulative loss of vital energies within humans, animals and plants which were located within a 500 m radius of the operational equipment.

* Long lasting residual effects in the nervous system and lymphatic systems.

* Negative psychological effects (produced as a result of the brain wave pattern changes) which included: loss of memory, loss of ability to concentrate, changes in intellect and emotional responses and sleep disturbances.

More recently obtained evidence seems to confirm that the danger of microwave ovens is not confined to what happens to the food that is cooked inside them.

Despite the protective shields with which they may be fitted microwave ovens give out extra low frequency electromagnetic fields which may be high enough to produce lymphatic cancer in children.

And when white blood cells are exposed to the sort of electromagnetic fields given out by microwave ovens their ability to fight disease may be reduced dramatically.

Worldwide there are now over 7,000 scientific publications in existence dealing with the health damage caused by short wave transmitters. The damage to cells and cell membranes caused by electromagnetic fields has been well known to scientists for years. (Although, naturally, the electrical and telecommunications industries have steadfastly followed the early example of the tobacco industry and denied that their products could possibly cause cancer or, indeed, any other serious health problem.)

The scientists who examined food which had been cooked in microwave ovens came across a number of serious problems. Here is a summary, listed in William Kopp's paper in the *Journal of Natural Science* of some of the serious changes which have been identified:

* In a statistically high percentage of persons, microwaved foods caused stomach and intestinal cancerous growths, as well as a gradual breakdown of the function of the digestive and excretive systems.

* When meat was heated sufficiently for eating the cancer causing agent d-nitrosodiethanoloamine was created.

* Cancer-causing agents in milk and cereal grains were produced.

* Eating food that had been heated by microwave resulted in a higher percentage of cancer cells within the blood.

* Microwave emissions caused serious alterations to frozen fruits when they were thawed in a microwave oven.

* Changes took place in raw, cooked or frozen vegetables when they were exposed to microwaves for 'extremely short' periods of time.

* Because of chemical changes which had taken place in food that was heated in a microwave oven, human lymphatic systems malfunctioned with a result that the human body did not adequately protect itself against some types of cancerous growth.

In addition, scientists have found that microwave heating also causes 'significant decreases in the nutritive value of all foods researched'.

Among other serious problems they found that there was a drop in the availability of B complex vitamins, vitamin C, vitamin E and essential minerals in foods that had been heated in a microwave oven.

The September 1998 edition of *The Journal of Natural Science* contained yet more evidence drawing attention to the possible hazards associated with microwave ovens:

* In 1990 researchers in Berlin found that all the microwave ovens it tested emitted microwaves while operating.

* As far as microwaves are concerned the most sensitive part of the body is the lens in the eye. Anyone who operates a microwave oven (particularly at eye level) which leaks could go blind.

* Studies with broccoli and carrots have revealed that cell structures are destroyed in the microwave oven. (In conventional ovens the cell walls remain intact.)

* Cooking in a microwave oven creates free radicals — known to be a possible cancer trigger.

* Food cooked in a microwave oven may be cooked unevenly — leaving possible 'cold spots' inside the food. This may result in the possible development of listeria or salmonella infection.

* Water samples were heated, both conventionally and in a microwave oven. The water samples were then used to help grain germinate. Grain did not germinate when in contact with water which had been heated in a microwave oven.

* At the end of the 1980s it was reported that there was an increased incidence of malformations among children of mothers exposed to microwave ovens.

* In 1991 a patient in Oklahoma is alleged to have died of anaphylaxis after receiving a blood transfusion with blood warmed in a microwave oven. It is claimed that the microwave irradiation had altered the blood and thereby caused the patient's death.

* Scientists have discovered that microwaving human breast milk at high temperatures produced a marked decrease in activity of all the tested anti-infective factors naturally present in breast milk. The growth of E.coli was 18 times that observed in normal human breast milk.

* In 1989 the Swiss biologist Dr Hans Hertel, together with another researcher, conducted a study on the effects of microwaved food which proved that food which had been cooked in a microwave oven caused significant changes in the blood. The authors noted that these changes indicated the beginning of a pathological process (e.g. the beginning of cancer). Afterwards the second researcher, who had worked with Dr Hertel, disassociated himself from the results and his earlier interpretation of the results. In a private letter to Dr Hertel the second researcher admitted that he feared 'consequences' and that the safety of his family was more important to him than anything else.

The October/November 1998 issue of *Nexus* magazine reported that a physicist had presented research showing that the human body generates and emits its own low intensity radiation.

The physicist claimed that the human body's metabolism generates its own electromagnetic field. The weak emissions of light which are produced by the body are an outward sign of an orderly, functioning metabolism. This research opens up another series of questions about the effect external sources of microwave radiation may have on living tissues.

It seems perfectly clear to me that microwave ovens should be banned. And any such ban should only be lifted if the manufacturers are prepared to do research which either shows that these original research findings are inaccurate or shows that there are ways to counteract the problems. But a ban on microwave ovens seems about as likely as the medical profession standing up and admitting that the orthodox approach to cancer treatment has failed.

The manufacture and sale of microwave ovens is now big business and these convenient items have become fixtures in canteens, restaurants, hotels and homes all over the world.

In *The Journal of Natural Science* Dr Hertel points out that: '...research of the biological effects of electromagnetic fields on life, especially connected with technical microwaves, is successfully being suppressed. Such research projects are, therefore, only possible on a private basis while the relevant authorities do everything they can to keep the findings from the public, denying them, making them look ridiculous or dismissing them as non scientific.'

I believe that Dr Hertel is absolutely right.

Mainstream newspapers, magazines, television and radio have consistently ignored or denied the threat posed by microwave ovens. Politicians have refused to ask for these devices to be properly tested.

In my experience, attempts to publicise the possible hazards (and the fact that the industry making and selling microwave ovens has never done adequate testing on the effects on human health) seem to have been met with more concern for the health of the microwave industry than for the health and safety of consumers.

Back in January 1990 I warned, in a newspaper article, that thousands could die every year from the effect of food cooked in microwave ovens.

I pointed out that it could be 10, 20 or 30 years before the damage done by microwave ovens could be fully assessed and added that I was appalled that manufacturers had not fully tested microwave ovens.

In the UK the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) subsequently broadcast a programme attacking me for this warning and blaming me as the source of a 'scare' about the heating of milk in microwave ovens. My offer to appear on the programme to discuss the issue and defend my point of view was rejected.

(Rather to my surprise, my complaint about the BBC's *Food and Drink* programme was duly upheld by the Broadcasting Complaints Commission which described the BBC programme as 'unfair to Dr Coleman'.)

CHAPTER 10

GENETICALLY ALTERED FOOD

Science has, during the last few decades, presented us with a steadily increasing and apparently endless variety of moral dilemmas and practical threats. The subject of genetic engineering is a perfect example of how politicians have betrayed us all and are, through their refusal to take on big industry, threatening our very future.

In two decades or so genetic engineering has evolved so rapidly as a branch of science (if science is the right word for a form of alchemy which seems to pay little or no attention to logic or research) that the future of our species is now threatened. Genetic engineering enables scientists to transfer genes between species in an entirely unnatural way. Human genes can be transferred to pigs, sheep, fish or bacteria. And genes from bacteria, slugs, elephants, fish, tomatoes and anything else can be put into human beings.

Genetic engineering started in the 1970s. The technique involves putting genes from one species into another species. In order to do this the genetic engineers put the genes they want to move into viruses. They then put the virus into the animal or plant which is to be the recipient. Genetic engineering is nothing at all like conventional breeding techniques (such as are used by dog breeders who want dogs with very floppy ears or by people who want to grow black tulips).

Listen to the boastful, extraordinarily arrogant claims of genetic scientists and you might believe that they had all the answers to hunger and disease. They talk grandly about eradicating starvation by creating new high yield, pest resistant versions of existing foods and manipulating genes to banish physical ailments, aggression and depression. They will, they say, be able to eradicate homosexuality, control the overpopulation problem, purify water supplies, remove crime from our streets and deal with deforestation. Genetic engineers have even talked of modified strains of bacteria able to eat up plastics, heavy metals and other toxic wastes.

Vast amounts of money (at least $3 billion) have been poured into identifying the human genome (the genetic blue print for human life). There has even been talk that we will be able to clone ourselves so that we need never die.

Moral and ethical questions have been brushed aside as the unnecessary anxieties of ignorant Luddites who either do not understand what is going on or are temperamentally opposed to progress.

But if it all sounds too good to be true — and all rather reminiscent of the sort of cheap promises with which confidence tricksters make their money — that is because it simply isn’t true. Genetic scientists don’t have the answers to any of our problems. On the contrary they have created a hugely successful money making myth which keeps them in fat grants and huge salaries. (It is important not to underestimate the importance of money in the world of genetic engineering. The world market for biotechnology products is growing at 30% a year.)

None of this would matter too much if what they were doing was as harmless as it is useless. But harmless it is definitely not! Fiddling around with genes is an exceedingly hazardous business. Simply inserting a gene from one creature into another can cause cancer.

Genetic engineering is not something we can simply ignore until the thousands who are making the grand claims are exposed as fraudsters, or until their poorly based pseudoscience falls out of fashion. It is time that the insane burblings of the geneticists were exposed for what they are. I have been writing about the horrors of genetic engineering for over twenty years — since I first realised that scientists were making promises it was clear they couldn’t keep — but most doctors, critics and journalists have so far been too frightened (or ignorant) to oppose the torrent of undiluted praise for genetic engineering and point a firm finger at just another invisible suit of clothes for the same old naked Emperor.

When genetic engineering first hit the headlines, the public was promised that there would be strict rules about just what could and could not be done. But the rules that were intended to protect us have been bent, pushed aside and ignored. Regulations were, it was claimed, slowing down progress, interfering with the competitiveness of the developing new industry and getting in the way of individual scientists keen to get on with their plan for improving the world. It is wrong, say the scientists, to try to ban new thinking or new research.

Genetic engineers claim that there is no need for caution and that only the narrow minded and the reactionary have reservations about this exciting new branch of scientific endeavour.

But the fact is that the genetic engineering industry has even succeeded in ‘persuading’ politicians and administrators that there is no need to segregate genetically engineered produce from naturally grown produce.

The risks associated with genetic engineering are numerous and widespread. There is little doubt that genetic engineering is at least partly responsible for the problem of antibiotic-resistant organisms. And there is even less doubt that genetic engineering is responsible for some, and possibly many, of the new infective organisms now threatening human health.

Under normal circumstances viruses are species specific. A virus that attacks a cat will not attack a human being. And a virus that attacks a human being will not attack a cow. But the genetic engineers have changed all that. They have deliberately glued together different bits of viruses in order to cross species barriers. These genetically engineered viruses can then become virulent again. Genetically engineered viruses are extremely infectious. None of this happens by accident — this is how genetic engineering works.

Naturally, the men and women in white coats who were convinced that they knew best ('Trust us — nothing can go wrong') have been releasing genetic material that they have been fiddling with into the environment for years. A year or two ago we thought that the dumping of waste chemicals was bad news. But the dumping of genetic misshapes and off-cuts will, I believe, create a problem infinitely larger than the dumping of chemical waste or even nuclear waste. Genes, once they start moving and reproducing, can keep spreading, recombining and affecting new species for ever. Once the door has been opened it cannot be shut. And the door has been opened.

'Don't worry!' said the genetic engineers, when this problem was identified. 'Genetic material is easily digested by gut enzymes.'

Sadly, they were wrong about that too.

Genetic material can survive a journey through an intestine and find its way, via the blood stream, into all sorts of body cells. And once inside a new body the genetic material can begin to affect host cells. If you eat a genetically engineered tomato the foreign genes in the tomato could end up in your cells. Cancer is an obvious possible consequence of this. Exactly what are the risks? I'm afraid that your guess is as good as mine. And our guesses are just as good as the guesses made by genetic engineers. They don't have the foggiest idea what will happen. But they know that something terrible could happen.

Readers will, I am sure, have realised that this poses a new and startling question: what about the altered genetic material in new types of food? What happens to genetically altered food when it is eaten? Will the altered genes find their way into our own genetic material? Could genetically engineered food cause cancer? Could genetically engineered food affect the human immune system?

Asking the questions is easy. But no one knows the answers.

Genetically engineered foods have already been shown to produce allergy problems — and to be toxic. One major hazard is that plants which have been genetically engineered to be resistant to disease may be more likely to produce allergy problems. A soya bean genetically engineered with a gene from a brazil nut was found to cause allergy problems when eaten by people sensitive to Brazil nuts. A strain of yeast, genetically altered in order to ferment more quickly, acquired cancer inducing qualities. Contaminants in an amino acid produced by a Japanese company led to 1,500 people falling ill and to the deaths of 37 individuals.

And yet politicians have done nothing to protect the public. The manufacturers of genetically engineered foods do not have to identify foods that have been genetically engineered. No one tests genetically engineered foods to see whether or not they are particularly likely to cause allergy problems. The new food is tested when it is put onto the market. You and I are the unwitting test subjects. Even drug companies have to do some tests before they can launch new products. Food companies seem to be entirely free of controls.

Amazingly, the politicians and administrators whom we pay to protect us allow the manufacturers to get away with the argument that it would be impossible to separate and identify genetically engineered foods. 'Segregation of bulk commodities is not scientifically justified and is economically unrealistic,' said the industries involved in genetic engineering. 'Certainly!' said the politicians and the bureaucrats. 'If you say so.' The US government announced that it would not tolerate the segregation or labelling of genetically engineered crops. The US government has stated: 'We do not find any scientific evidence to support the assertion that bio-engineered foods are inherently less safe. Therefore they should not be singled out for special labelling requirements.' In my view this must rank as one of the most hollow and absurd statements of the century since as far as I am aware no one has done any clinical investigations to find out whether or not bio-engineered foods are safe, a bit unsafe or completely deadly.

European politicians do not have the guts to stand up to American politicians. They are frightened that if they upset the Americans the Americans will introduce trade embargoes. (The American government, desperate as ever not to annoy big American companies, warned food companies that if they label their products as not containing genetically engineered food they will not be looked upon favourably if they attempt to market their products in the US.)

The problems are only just beginning but already they are frightening. Potatoes and oilseed rape were genetically engineered to be resistant to herbicide. The resistance spread to weeds within a single growing season. Thanks to the irresponsible overuse and abuse of pesticides, and the widespread introduction of crops genetically engineered to produce 'natural' insecticides, more than 1,000 agricultural pests have now acquired so much resistance that they are immune to chemical control. Crops which have been genetically engineered to tolerate herbicides have already begun to make weeds immune to the same herbicides.

If the big seed companies and the politicians have their way then within a year or two farmers throughout the world will be growing the same variety of genetically engineered soya, the same type of genetically engineer potato and the same genetically engineered corn. That is not a prediction which is difficult to make. It is exactly what the big seed manufacturers are planning. And when the world's single crop of soya/potatoes/corn is destroyed by an insect or plant disease which is immune to every pesticide known to man (and remember there are already 1,000 insects and plant diseases which satisfy that requirement) countless millions around the world will die of starvation.

I strongly suggest that you refuse to buy — or eat — food that has had its genetic composition changed in any way.

CHAPTER 11

FOODS THAT CAUSE CANCER

An A to Z of Evidence

You may be surprised to hear that there is now clear medical and scientific evidence available to show that nothing, not even tobacco, influences your chances of developing cancer as much as the food you choose to eat. It is estimated that between 30% and 60% of all cancers are caused by what you choose to eat. Doctors, scientists and supporters of the cancer industry claim that the battle against cancer will only be won with the aid of more money. They claim that in order to obtain the information we need we must spend, spend, spend. But that isn't true. It is not more knowledge we need (we have, as I pointed out in *Paper Doctors* nearly twenty years ago, already amassed far more knowledge than we will ever use in our lifetime), but the ability and courage and determination to use the knowledge we already have.

Back in 1982 the National Research Council in the United States of America published a technical report entitled Diet, Nutrition and Cancer which showed that diet was probably the single most important factor in the development of cancer, and that there was evidence linking cancers of the breast, colon and prostate to particular foods or types of food.

It is a scandal of astonishing proportions that a majority of the population still do not know about these vitally important and well established links. It is an even bigger scandal that a majority of the medical profession are unaware of these links too. Most doctors I have spoken to — even recently qualified ones — still dismiss the idea of a food/cancer link as mumbo- jumbo nonsense, preferring to rely entirely on prescription drugs, radiotherapy and surgery as 'treatments' for cancer. The average medical student probably spends more time staring down a microscope at histology slides than he or she spends studying the importance and significance of nutrition.

After he had seen an earlier edition of this book, one doctor sent me a very indignant letter, asking me whether I thought it was ethical to publish such statements as 'Between a third and a half of all cancers are caused by eating the wrong types of food' and 'You can dramatically reduce your chances of developing cancer of the breast, cancer of the prostate, cancer of the colon, cancer of the ovary or cancer of the uterus.'

(After I had sent him details of a small amount of the evidence upon which I had based those statements, the doctor wrote back and apologised.)

I checked one large (over 1,000 pages) recently published medical textbook and found that the chapter on cancer summed up the role of food as a causal agent in just one, rather short sentence. I find this all extremely difficult to understand. I have been studying scientific research papers for over two decades and I have never seen such convincing research as that which shows the links between particular types of food and particular types of cancer.

It is not uncommon for new drugs to be launched after clinical trials which may have involved relatively small numbers of patients. In my book *Betrayal of Trust* I pointed out that the number of patients studied in clinical trials before a drug is marketed is, on average, only 1,480 — and that the final, total, overall figure is sometimes much less than this.

In contrast some of the individual research projects which have been published showing links between food and cancer have involved tens of thousands of patients.

I have absolutely no doubt that if these undeniable links had been publicised by the responsible authorities (in medicine as elsewhere the phrase 'responsible authorities' is, I fear, oxymoronic) countless millions of lives and an enormous amount of agony and distress could — and would — have been avoided.

The suppression of this information by a greedy and conscience-free food industry, compliant revenue conscious politicians, a cancer industry dominated by grant hungry researchers and an uncaring, drug company dominated medical profession has, I sincerely believe, led to more deaths than any war in history.

Since the early 1980s the amount of evidence linking diet to cancer has grown steadily. In 1990 even the British Medical Association, hardly an organisation which would be widely described as revolutionary, supported the view that there is a link between food and cancer. Their published view was that 35% of cancers, just over a third, were caused by the natural constituents of food and that another 1% of cancers were caused by food additives.

Other organisations suggest that the link between food and cancer is even higher. The National Academy of Sciences in the United States, founded in 1863 by Act of Congress to serve as an official adviser to the US government in all matters of science and technology, has reported that researchers have estimated that almost 60% of women's cancers and a little more than 40% of men's cancers are related to nutritional factors.

Because I recognise that many readers may be sceptical about the claim that there is a strong link between diet and food (such scepticism will undoubtedly be enhanced by the fact that neither governments nor the medical profession have made much, if any, effort to publicise these links) I have in this chapter summarised just some of the scientific evidence which supports this claim.

My previous efforts to publicise the health values of eating a low fat, meatless diet have been consistently confronted by scepticism and opposition. It is my hope that this summary of just some of the most important available evidence supporting the contention that certain foods are a risk factor in the development of cancer will help settle this particular controversy permanently and may, perhaps, help other writers who may be tempted to tell their readers the truth about food and cancer.

I must emphasise that this list is not intended to be comprehensive. I have accumulated a list of several hundred scientific papers and journal articles dealing with the links between food and cancer (and many thousands more dealing with food and other disorders) and this list is merely intended to be representative — and to provide you with some idea of the breadth and importance of the available evidence.

If you would like to study even more evidence linking food to cancer (and many other diseases) then I heartily recommend the book *Nutritional Influences on Illness: A sourcebook of clinical research,* written by Melvyn R. Werbach MD and published by Thorsons. In a remarkably comprehensive and quite fascinating book Dr Werbach has listed and summarised thousands of clinical studies and scientific reports. He reports that: ‘The cancers most closely associated with nutritional factors are breast and endometrial cancer in women, prostate cancer in men and gastrointestinal cancer’, points out that ‘the value of a low fat, high fibre diet in cancer prevention is well documented’ and notes that ‘avoidance of smoked, pickled and salt cured foods’ has been shown...to be beneficial in preventing cancers of the gastrointestinal tract.’

Dr Werbach adds that ‘there is early evidence that certain precancerous changes may be reversible with supplementation’. He reports that cervical dysplasia may possibly be reversed with folic acid supplements, that calcium supplements may help ‘reduce the number of rapidly proliferating cells in the colonic epithelium in patients with family histories of colon cancer and elevated numbers of such cells compared to controls’ and that Vitamin A or beta-carotene reduce the percent of genetically damaged cells inside the cheek when betel quid, a tobacco-like plant mixture is chewed regularly.’

Exhibit A

Title

Calorie-Providing Nutrients and Risk of Breast Cancer

Authors

Paolo Toniolo (Epidemiology Unit, Istituto Nazionale per lo Studio e la Cura dei Tumori, Milan, Italy and Department of Environmental Medicine, New York University Medical Center, New York, USA), Elio Riboli (Unit of Analytical Epidemiology, International Agency for Research on Cancer, Lyon, France), Fulvia Protta (Pathology Service, Ospedale Maggiore S. Giovanni, Turin, Italy), Martine Charrel (Unit of Analytical Epidemiology, International Agency for Research on Cancer, Lyon, France), Alberto M Cappa (Pathology Service, Ospedale Maggiore S. Giovanni, Turin, Italy)

Source

Journal of the National Cancer Institute

Date

February 15th 1989

Report

This study, which was conducted in the province of Vercelli in northwestern Italy where there is a moderately high incidence of breast cancer, was designed to investigate the role of diet in breast cancer and ‘to test the primary hypothesis that fat and proteins from animal sources are associated with increased risk of breast cancer.’

The researchers questioned 250 women with breast cancer and a random sample of 499 women from the general population, using a structured questionnaire to identify the types and quantities of food each woman consumed.

After reporting that they had ‘found evidence that the intake of total fat, saturated fat or proteins of animal origin is positively associated with the risk of breast cancer in women’ the researchers reported that their ‘findings had suggested that during adult life a reduction in total fat to less than 30% of calorie intake, of saturated fat to less than 10% of calorie intake and of animal proteins to less than 6% may lead to a substantial reduction in the incidence of breast cancer in population subgroups with high intake of saturated fat and animal proteins in agreement with some dietary recommendations that have been made.’

‘These data,’ said the researchers, ‘suggest that during adult life a reduction in dietary intake of fat and proteins of animal origin may contribute to a substantial reduction in the incidence of breast cancer in population subgroups with high intake of animal products.’

Exhibit B

Title

Dietary Habits and Prognostic Factors in Breast Cancer

Authors

Lars-Erik Holm (Department of Cancer Prevention, Karolinska Hospital, Stockholm, Sweden), Eva Callmer (Department of Medical Nutrition, Huddinge Hospital, Huddinge, Sweden), Marie-Louise Hjalmar (Department of General Oncology, Danderyd Hospital, Danderyd, Sweden), Elizabet Lidbrink (Department of General Oncology, South Hospital, Stockholm, Sweden), Bo Nilsson (Department of Cancer Epidemiology, Karolinska Hospital, Stockholm, Sweden, Lambert Skoog (Department of Clinical Cytology, Karolinska Hospital, Stockholm, Sweden).

Source

Journal of the National Cancer Institute

Date

August 16th 1989

Report

The link between dietary fat and breast tumours was first described in 1942. Since then many other scientists have published papers detailing this link in further detail. ‘Dietary fat has been suggested as an etiological factor in human breast cancer because of the high correlation between national per capita fat consumption and breast cancer incidence,’ begin the authors of this paper whose study included 240 women who had surgery for breast cancer between the years of 1983 and 1986 in Stockholm, Sweden. All the women involved in this study were aged between 50 and 65 at the time that their cancers were diagnosed. After analysing their results the authors of this paper concluded: ‘The results of this study of mainly postmenopausal women and some premenopausal women suggest that dietary habits have an impact on the prognosis of breast cancer.’

‘Study results indicate that dietary factors may act in breast carcinogenesis,’ continued the authors in their discussion of their results. ‘Several studies have found that these factors also operate after diagnosis of the tumour, suggesting that dietary habits are important even after a successful primary treatment. The results of this study suggest that dietary patterns of the Western world (e.g. high fat intake and low consumption of carbohydrates and fiber) affect certain prognostic factors in breast cancer, such as tumour size and oestrogen receptor content of the tumour.’

Exhibit C

Title

A Case-Control Study of Prostatic Cancer With Reference to Dietary Habits

Authors

Kenji Oishi, Kenichiro Okada, Osamu Yoshida, Hirohiko Yamabe, Yoshiyuki Ohno, Richard B Hayes and Fritz H. Schroeder; (these authors were from the Department of Urology, Kyoto University, Kyoto, Japan; Laboratory of Anatomic Pathology, Kyoto University Hospital, Japan; Department of Public Health, Medical School, Nagoya City University, Nagoya, Japan; Department of Urology, Faculty of Medicine, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands.)

Source

The Prostate

Date

1988

Report

In 1950 the incidence of prostatic cancer in Japan was about 0.4 per 100,000 male members of the population but by 1963 it had increased to 2.0 per 100,000 and by 1975 it was 2.5 per 100,000.

Observers have suggested that this increase (which is not unique, for increases in the incidence of cancer of the lung, cancer of the breast and cancer of the colon have also occurred in recent years) may be linked to the Westernisation of Japanese eating habits. During recent years the consumption of fat, animal protein, eggs, dairy products and oil have all increased considerably in Japan.

This study was of sufferers from prostatic cancer from 1981 to 1984 and patients suffering from benign prostatic hypertrophy (non cancerous prostate enlargement) and was conducted to find the risk factors for prostatic cancer. ‘Two well trained nutritionists and one urologist interviewed each subject at the time of hospital admission’.

The findings included: ‘Low daily intake of beta-carotene ... were significantly correlated with prostatic cancer development.’

Exhibit D

Title

Relation of Meat, Fat and Fiber Intake To The Risk of Colon Cancer in a Prospective Study Among Women

Authors

Walter C. Willett M.D, Meir J. Stampfer M.D., Graham A. Colditz M.D., Bernard A. Rosner Ph.D., and Frank E. Speizer M.D. from the Channing Laboratory, Department of Medicine, Harvard Medical School and Brigham and

Women's Hospital, the Department of Preventive Medicine, Harvard Medical School and the Departments of Epidemiology, Nutrition and Biostatistics at the Harvard School of Public Health, all in Boston in the United States of America.

Source

The New England Journal of Medicine

Date

December 13th 1990

Report

The authors of this paper began by pointing out that in Western countries cancer rates are up to ten times as high as they are in many Far Eastern and developing countries. For many years doctors and scientists have noted rapid increases in rates of colon cancer among men and women migrating from low risk areas to high risk areas and these observations have suggested that the large differences which exist may be due to environmental causes rather than genetic causes.

The authors pointed out that two general dietary hypotheses have evolved in recent decades: firstly, that dietary fat, particularly from animal sources, increases the risk of colon cancer and secondly, that the intake of fibre reduces the risk.

This study involved observing 88,751 women between the ages of 34 and 59 for six years. The women, none of whom had any history of cancer, inflammatory bowel disease or familial polyposis, completed a questionnaire about their eating habits in 1980. By the year 1986 a total of 150 cases of colon cancer had been noted.

The researchers concluded that 'animal fat was positively associated with the risk of colon cancer' but that 'no association was found for vegetable fat'. The researchers found that women who ate beef, pork or lamb as a main dish every day were more likely to develop cancer of the colon than were women who ate beef, pork or lamb as a main dish less than once a month. It was also found that processed meats and liver were also 'significantly associated with increased risk'.

The ratio of the intake of red meat to the intake of chicken and fish was particularly strongly associated with an increased incidence of colon cancer,' concluded the researchers, who also noted that 'a low intake of fiber from fruits appeared to contribute to the risk of colon cancer, but this relation was not statistically independent of meat intake.'

'These prospective data provide evidence for the hypothesis that a high intake of animal fat increases the risk of colon cancer,' said the researchers, 'and they support existing recommendations to substitute fish and chicken for meats high in fat.'

Exhibit E

Title

Dietary Fat Consumption and Survival Among Women With Breast Cancer

Authors

David I. Gregorio, Department of Social and Preventive Medicine, State University of New York, Buffalo, New York, United States of America; Lawrence J. Emrich, Department of Biomathematics, Roswell Park Memorial Institute, Buffalo, New York, United States of America; Saxon Graham, Department of Social and Preventive Medicine, State University of New York, Buffalo, New York, United States of America; James R. Marshall, Department of Social and Preventive Medicine, State University of New York, Buffalo, New York, United States of America, and Takuma Nemoto, Department of Breast Surgery, Roswell Park Memorial Institute, Buffalo, New York, United States of America

Source

Journal of the National Cancer Institute

Date

July 1985

Report

The researchers estimated monthly fat consumption for a total of 854 patients who completed dietary intake interviews when they were admitted to hospital and subsequently estimated that 24% of the women consumed between 500 and 1,000 grams of fat a month, 42% consumed between 1,001 and 1,500 grams of fat a month, 21% consumed between 1,501 and 2,000 grams of fat a month and 11% consumed between 2,001 and 3,000 grams of fat.

They reported their findings as follows: 'Consistent with our hypothesis, an effect of fat intake on survival time was reported in this study' and concluded that the 'estimated risk of death at any time increased 1.4 fold for every 1,000 gram in monthly fat intake'.

Exhibit F

Title

Dietary Factors and Breast Cancer Risk

Authors

Jay H. Lubin, Environmental Epidemiology Branch, National Cancer Institute, Bethesda, Maryland, U.S.A.; Patricia E. Burns, Cross Cancer Institute, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada; William J. Blot, Environmental Epidemiology Branch, National Cancer Institute, Bethesda, Maryland, U.S.A.; Regina G. Ziegler, Environmental Epidemiology Branch, National Cancer Institute, Bethesda, Maryland, U.S.A.; Alan W. Lees, Cross Cancer Institute, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada and Joseph F. Fraumeni, Jr., Environmental Epidemiology Branch, National Cancer Institute, Bethesda, Maryland, U.S.A.

Source

International Journal of Cancer

Date

1981

Report

These researchers questioned 577 women aged between 30 and 80 (all of whom had breast cancer) and 826 disease free women about their eating habits. They found that women who ate beef, pork and sweet desserts were significantly more likely to develop breast cancer than women who did not. They also found that women who fried with butter or margarine, as opposed to vegetable oils, and who used butter at the table were also more likely to develop breast cancer.

Exhibit G

Title

Role of Life-style and Dietary Habits in Risk of Cancer among Seventh-Day Adventists

Author

Roland L. Phillips, Department of Biostatistics and Epidemiology, Lorna Linda University School of Health, Lorna Linda, California, U.S.A.

Source

Cancer Research

Date

November 1975

Report

Seventh-Day Adventists neither drink alcohol nor smoke, most avoid the use of coffee, tea, hot condiments and spices and about half eat a vegetarian diet which includes dairy produce and eggs. In his summary the author noted that existing data on cancer mortality in Seventh-Day Adventists showed death rates that were 50% to 70% of the rates within the general population for most of the cancer sites that are unrelated to smoking or drinking alcohol. The author’s studies showed statistically significant links between the eating of beef, lamb or a combined group of highly saturated fat foods and the development of colon cancer. ‘It is quite clear,’ he wrote, ‘that these results are supportive of the hypothesis that beef, meat and saturated fat or fat in general are etiologically related to colon cancer.’ He went on to say that: ‘Green leafy vegetables that are quite high in fiber are negatively associated.’

The author concluded: ‘Overall, the currently available evidence on cancer among Seventh-Day Adventists is consistent with the hypothesis that one or more components of the typical Adventist lifestyle account for a large portion of their apparent reduced risk of the types of cancer which are unrelated to cigarette smoking and alcohol consumption. Aside from abstinence from smoking and drinking, the most distinctive feature of the typical Adventist lifestyle is a unique diet whose principal feature is lacto-ovo-vegetarianism.’ The author then added that other researchers had shown that the typical lacto-ovo-vegetarian diet contained about 25% less fat and 50% more fibre than the average non-vegetarian diet.

Exhibit H

Title

Diet as an Etiological Factor in the Development of Cancers of the Colon and Rectum

Author

Margaret A. Howell, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland, U.S.A.

Source

Journal of Chronic Diseases

Date

1975

Report
The author concludes: 'The evidence suggests that meat, particularly beef, is a food associated with the development of malignancies of the large bowel.'

Exhibit I
Title
Nutrient Intakes In Relation to Cancer Incidence in Hawaii
Authors
L. N. Kolonel, J. H. Hankin, J. Lee, S.Y Chu, A.M.Y Nomura and M. Ward Hinds — from the Epidemiology Program, Cancer Center of Hawaii, University of Hawaii, Honolulu, Hawaii, U.S.A.
Source
British Journal of Cancer
Date
1981
Report
For this study 4,657 adults from the five main ethnic groups in Hawaii (Caucasians, Japanese, Chinese, Hawaiians and Filipinos) were interviewed about their diets between the years 1977 and 1979. The researchers reported that: 'significant positive associations were found for six of the cancer sites: breast cancer with fat (saturated, unsaturated, animal and total) and protein (animal); corpus-uteri cancer with the same components as breast cancer, prostate cancer with fat (saturated, animal) and protein (animal, total), stomach cancer with fat (fish only) and protein (fish only), lung cancer with cholesterol and laryngeal cancer with cholesterol. The researchers also found significant negative associations between breast and corpus-uteri cancers and carbohydrate intake.

Exhibit J
Title
Environmental Factors of Cancer of the Colon and Rectum
Authors:
Ernest L. Wynder M.D., and Takao Shigematsu M.D., both from the Division of Environmental Cancerigenesis, Sloan Kettering Institute for Cancer Research, New York, U.S.A.
Source
Cancer
Date
September 1967
Report
The authors of this paper concluded: '...dietary factors appear to be associated with the etiology of cancer of the large bowel. The dietary pattern that may fit the distribution of cancer of the large bowel includes a high intake of fats. The effect of this pattern appears to be more marked for cancer of the colon than cancer of the rectum.' And they added: 'There is a statistically significant association of obesity to cancer of the large bowel from the cecum to the sigmoid colon in men.'

Exhibit K
Title
Epidemiological Correlations between Diet and Cancer Frequency
Author
Pelayo Correa, Louisiana State University Medical Center, New Orleans, Louisiana, U.S.A.
Source
Cancer Research
Date
September 1981
Report
The author stated that: 'Strong and consistent correlations are reported between death rates of cancers of the colon and breast and the per capita consumption of total fat and of nutrients derived from animal sources, especially beef, pork, eggs and milk. Similar but less consistent correlations have been reported with cancers of the prostate, ovary and endometrium.' The author also reported that: 'Negative correlations of colon cancer rates and vegetable consumption are reported ... Epidemiological data are consistent with the hypothesis that excessive beef and low vegetable consumption are causally related to colon cancer.' The author explained the link between the foods linked to cancer and the development of cancer by stating that 'these food items probably do not have a direct carcinogenic

role but rather provide a microenvironment favourable to the actions of carcinogens.'

Exhibit L
Title
Food Consumption and Cancer of the Colon and Rectum in North-Eastern Italy
Authors
Ettore Bidoli, Epidemiology Unit, Aviano Cancer Center, Via Pedemontana Occ, Aviano, Italy; Silvia Franceschi, Epidemiology Unit, Aviano Cancer Center, Via Pedemontana Occ, Aviano, Italy and European Cancer Prevention Organisation, Epidemiology and Cancer Working Group, Brussels, Belgium; Renata Talamini, Epidemiology Unit, Aviano Cancer Center, Via Pedemontana Occ, Aviano, Italy; Salvatore Barra, Epidemiology Unit, Aviano Cancer Center, Via Pedemontana Occ, Aviano, Italy; and Carlo La Vecchia, Mario Negri Institute for Pharmacological Research, Via Eiritrea, Milan, Italy and Institute of Social and Preventive Medicine, University of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland
Source
International Journal of Cancer
Date
1992
Report
The authors studied 123 patients with colon cancer, 125 patients with rectal cancer and 699 patients with no cancer. They concluded: '...the present study gives support for a protective effect associated with a fiber rich or vegetable rich diet, while it indicates that frequent consumption of refined starchy foods, eggs and fat rich foods such as cheese and red meat is a risk factor for colorectal cancer.' The authors found that a high consumption of margarine 'exerted a significant protection against cancer of the colon' and that 'high consumption of carrots, spinach, whole grain bread and pasta' reduced the risk of rectal cancer.

Exhibit M
Title
Diet and Lung Cancer in California Seventh-Day Adventists
Authors
Gary E. Fraser, Center for Health Research, Lorna Linda University, Lorna Linda, California, U.S.A., W. Lawrence Beeson, Center for Health Research, Lorna Linda University, Lorna Linda, California, U.S.A. and Roland L. Phillips, Lorna Linda University, Lorna Linda, California, U.S.A.
Source
American Journal of Epidemiology
Date
1991
Report
The authors reported that: 'fruit consumption was the dietary constituent that showed a strong, statistically significant protective association with lung cancer...'

Exhibit N
Title
Dietary Habits and Past Medical History as Related to Fatal Pancreas Cancer Risk Among Adventists
Authors
Paul K. Mills Ph.D., W. Lawrence Beeson, M.S.P.H., David E. Abbey Ph.D., Gary E. Fraser M.D., Ph.D., and Roland L. Phillips M.D., DrPH, from the Department of Preventive Medicine, School of Medicine, Lorna Linda University, Lorna Linda, California, U.S.A.
Source
Cancer
Date
1988
Report
The authors began by pointing out that the foods and/or nutrients which had been suggested to be associated with an increased risk of cancer of the prostate included 'total fat intake, eggs, animal protein, sugar, meat, coffee and butter' whereas the consumption of 'raw fruits and vegetables' had been 'consistently associated with decreased risk'. In this study the authors found that there was strong evidence that 'increasing consumption of vegetarian protein products, beans, lentils and peas as well as dried fruit' helped to protect against cancer of the pancreas.

Exhibit O
Title
Increasing use of soyfoods and their potential role in cancer prevention
Authors
Mark Messina Ph.D, Diet and Cancer Branch, Division of Cancer Prevention and Control, National Cancer Institute, Bethesda, U.S.A. Virginia Messina PhD, RD., Washington, U.S.A.
Source
Journal American Diet Association
Date
July 1991
Report
Most of the soya beans produced are used as animal feed but evidence has been accumulating that soybeans can prevent cancer. The authors of this report state that: 'Soybeans contain, in relatively high concentrations, several compounds with demonstrated anticarcinogenic activity.'

Exhibit P
Title
Dietary Prevention of Breast Cancer
Authors
David P. Rose and Jeanne M. Connolly, Division of Nutrition and Endocrinology, American Health Foundation, Valhalla, New York, U.S.A.
Source
Med.Oncol & Tumour Pharmacother.
Date
1990
Report
A review of the epidemiological and experimental data suggests that dietary modification does have a place in breast cancer prevention,' say the authors. 'Based on present evidence, a dietary approach to breast cancer prevention should include weight control, when indicated, a reduction in dietary fat intake to approximately 20% total intake, and an increase in fiber consumption to 25-30 grams a day.'

Exhibit Q
Title
Shift From a Mixed Diet to a Lactovegetarian Diet: Influence on Some Cancer-Associated Intestinal Bacterial Enzyme Activities
Authors
Gunnar K. Johansson, Ludmila Ottova and Jan-Ake Gustafsson (the authors are affiliated with the Department of Medical Nutrution, Karolinska Institute, Huddinge University Hospital, Huddinge, Sweden).
Source
Nutr. Cancer
Date
1990
Report
The authors of this paper conclude: '...the results in this paper indicate that a change from a mixed diet to a lactovegetarian diet leads to a decrease in certain enzyme activities proposed to be risk factors for colon cancer.'

Exhibit R
Title
Nutritional Approach to Oesophageal Cancer in Scotland
Author
Valda M Craddock, M.R.C. Toxicology Unit, Carshalton, Surrey, U.K.
Source
The Lancet
Date
24th January 1987
Report
This publication took the form of a letter. The author began by pointing out that oesophageal cancer has a sharply

defined geographical distribution in Britain — with many sufferers being in the north-west of Scotland where the consumption of green vegetables is believed to be low.

The author also pointed out that oesophageal cancer is also very common in areas of China, in Iran, around the Caspian Sea and in parts of South Africa and adds that in all these regions the diet is low in fresh fruit and green vegetables — and the micronutrients they contain. A consistent finding from studies around the world of diet in relation to cancer is that consumption of fresh green vegetables is negatively associated with cancer,' writes the author. 'Deaths in women from this exceptionally distressing malignant disease total around 2,000 per year. Early diagnosis is not yet possible and treatment is unsatisfactory. Prevention, however, may be relatively easy.' The author also adds that the incidence of oesophageal cancer in Britain has almost doubled since 1970 and that 'there are epidemiological and experimental grounds for intervention studies which might lead to effective preventive measures, but nothing is being done.'

Exhibit S

Title

Cohort Study of Diet, Lifestyle and Prostate Cancer in Adventist Men

Authors

Paul K. Mills, Ph.D, MPH; W. Lawrence Beeson, MSPH; Roland L. Phillips, M.D. DrPH, and Gary E. Fraser M.D., Ph.D; from the Department of Preventive Medicine, Lorna Linda University School of Medicine, Lorna Linda, California, U.S.A.

Source

Cancer

Date

1989

Report

For this study the authors evaluated dietary and lifestyle characteristics of approximately 14,000 Seventh-Day Adventist men. The men completed a detailed lifestyle questionnaire in 1976 and were monitored for cancer incidence until the end of 1982. The authors concluded that: 'increasing consumption of beans, lentils and peas, tomatoes, raisin, dates and other dried fruit were all associated with significantly decreased prostate cancer risk.'

Exhibit T

Title

A Prospective Study of Dietary Fat and Risk of Prostate Cancer

Authors

Edward Giovannucci, Channing Laboratory, Department of Medicine, Harvard Medical School and Brigham and Women's Hospital, Boston, Mass, U.S.A.; Eric B. Rimm, Department of Epidemiology, Harvard School of Public Health, Boston, U.S.A.; Graham A. Colditz, Channing Laboratory, Department of Medicine, Harvard Medical School and Brigham and Women's Hospital, Department of Epidemiology, Harvard School of Public Health, Boston, U.S.A.; Meir J. Stampfer, Channing Laboratory, Department of Medicine, Harvard Medical School and Brigham and Women's Hospital, Department of Epidemiology, Harvard School of Public Health, Boston, U.S.A.; Alberto Ascherio, Department of Nutrition, Harvard School of Public Health, Boston, U.S.A.; Chris C. Chute, Department of Health Sciences Research, Mayo Medical School, Rochester, Minn., U.S.A.; Walter C. Willett, Channing Laboratory, Department of Medicine, Harvard Medical School and Brigham and Women's Hospital, Department of Epidemiology and Department of Nutrition, Harvard School of Public Health, Boston, U.S.A.

Source

Journal of the National Cancer Institute

Date

October 6th 1993

Report

The authors pointed out that: 'The strong correlation between national consumption of fat and national rate of mortality from prostate cancer has raised the hypothesis that dietary fat increases the risk of this malignancy.' By studying information relating to 51,529 American men between the ages of 40 and 75 and sending follow up questionnaires to the men in 1988 and 1990 they examined the relationship of fat consumption to the incidence of advanced prostate cancer and to the total incidence of prostate cancer.

The authors found that 'total fat consumption was directly related to risk of advanced prostate cancer' and that 'this association was due primarily to animal fat... but not vegetable fat. Red meat represented the food group with the strongest positive association with advanced cancer.'

The authors concluded that: 'The results support the hypothesis that animal fat, especially fat from red meat, is associated with an elevated risk of advanced prostate cancer.' They also noted that: 'These findings support recommendations to lower intake of meat to reduce the risk of prostate cancer.'

Exhibit U
Title
Risk of death from cancer and ischaemic heart disease in meat and non-meat eaters
Authors
Margaret Thorogood, senior research fellow, Department of Public Health and Policy, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London, UK; Jim Mann, professor, Department of Human Nutrition, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand; Paul Appleby, research officer, Department of Public Health and Primary Care, University of Oxford, Oxford, U.K.; Klim McPherson, professor, Department of Public Health and Policy, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London, U.K.
Source
British Medical Journal
Date
25th June 1994
Report
The aim of this research was to investigate the health consequences of a vegetarian diet by examining the twelve year mortality of vegetarians and meat eaters. The researchers reported: 'These data confirm the findings of previous studies that have shown a reduction in all cause, cancer and cardiovascular mortality among people who do not eat meat.'

The researchers showed a 'roughly 40% reduction in mortality from cancer in vegetarians and fish eaters compared with meat eaters' and also added that 'the fact that total mortality was about 20% lower in the non-meat eating group than the meat eaters is perhaps of greatest clinical importance.'

Exhibit V
Title
Risk Factors for Renal-Cell Cancer in Shanghai, China ***Authors***
Joseph K. McLaughlin, National Cancer Institute, Division of Cancer Etiology, Epidemiology and Biostatistics Program, Bethesda, MD, U.S.A; Yu-Tang Gao, Shanghai Cancer Institute, Department of Epidemiology, Shanghai, People's Republic of China; Ru-Nie Gao, Shanghai Cancer Institute, Department of Epidemiology, Shanghai, People's Republic of China; Wei Zheng, National Cancer Institute, Division of Cancer Etiology, Epidemiology and Biostatistics Program, Bethesda, MD, U.S.A; Bu-Tianji, Shanghai Cancer Institute, Department of Epidemiology, Shanghai, People's Republic of China; William J. Blot, National Cancer Institute, Division of Cancer Etiology, Epidemiology and Biostatistics Program, Bethesda, MD, U.S.A; and Joseph F. Fraumeni Jr, National Cancer Institute, Division of Cancer Etiology, Epidemiology and Biostatistics Program, Bethesda, MD, U.S.A.
Source
International Journal of Cancer
Date
1992
Report
The authors studied 154 patients with renal cell cancer and 157 controls. They reported: 'Elevated risks were observed for cigarette smoking...and for increasing categories of body weight and meat consumption, while reduced risks were seen for increasing categories of fruit and vegetable intake. An increase was also observed for regular use of phenacetin containing analgesics.' The authors also noted that these findings were 'consistent with earlier studies in Western countries and indicate that many of the same etiologic factors for renal cell cancer operate in low and high risk societies.'

Exhibit W
Title
Shift from a mixed to a lactovegetarian diet: influence on acid lipids in fecal water — a potential risk factor for colon cancer
Authors
Ulrika Geltner Allinger, Gunnar K. Johansson, Jan-Ake Gustafsson and Joseph J. Rafter; from the Department of Medical Nutrition, Karolinska Institute, Huddinge University Hospital, Huddinge, Sweden
Source
The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition
Date

1989

Report

The authors concluded that: ‘the consumption of a lactovegetarian diet may reduce certain risk factors of potential significance in colon carcinogenesis.’

Exhibit X

Title

NCI dietary guidelines: rationale

*Author*s

Ritva R. Butrum Ph.D., Carolyn K. Clifford Ph.D., and Elaine Lanza Ph.D from the Division of Cancer Prevention and Control, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD, US.A ***Source***

The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition

Date

1988

Report

The authors report that in 1986 it was estimated that 930,000 Americans would develop cancer and that 472,000 individuals would die of their cancer.

The National Cancer Institute (the NCI), which aims to reduce cancer incidence, morbidity and mortality, ‘believes that the potential for dietary changes to reduce the risk of cancer is considerable and that the existing scientific data provide evidence that is sufficiently consistent to warrant prudent interim dietary guidelines that will promote good health and reduce the risk of some types of cancer.’

The NCI suggests reducing fat intake, increasing fibre intake, including a variety of fruits and vegetables in the daily diet, avoiding obesity, consuming alcoholic beverages in moderation if at all and minimising the consumption of salt cured, salt pickled and smoked foods. The NCI believes that if these guidelines were followed there would be a 50% reduction in cancer of the colon and rectum, a 25% reduction in breast cancer and a 15% reduction in cancers of the prostate, endometrium and gallbladder.

Exhibit Y

Title

Shifting from a Conventional Diet to an Uncooked Vegan Diet Reversibly Alters Fecal Hydrolytic Activities in Humans

Authors

Wen Hua Ling and Osmo Hanninen from the Department of Physiology, University of Kuopio, Kuopio, Finland

Source

Journal of Nutrition

Date

1992

Report

The authors conclude that an ‘uncooked extreme vegan diet causes a decrease in bacterial enzymes and certain toxic products that have been implicated in colon cancer risk.’

Exhibit Z

Title

Association between dietary changes and mortality rates: Israel 1949 to 1977; a trend-free regression model

Author

Aviva Palgi Ph.D., Instructor in Nutrition, Harvard Medical School, Nutrition/Metabolism Laboratory, New England Deaconess Hospital, United States of America

Source

The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition

Date

August 1981

Report

The author investigated the statistical effect of ‘changes in food consumption of the Israeli population during 1949 to 1977 on concurrent mortality rates from cancer, heart disease, peptic ulcer, and diabetes mellitus’.

The author reported that: ‘All the investigated mortality rates were in statistically significant positive association with increasing total fat consumption. Mortality rates of ischemic heart disease as well as of hypertensive and cerebrovascular disease were in positive association with both plant fat and animal fat. These findings suggest that reduced total fat intake may prove to reduce the investigated mortality rates.’

Note 1

Where I have included medical or scientific qualifications alongside the names of researchers it is because these were published on the scientific papers concerned. Where no qualifications are listed it is because no qualifications were listed on the journal articles I have quoted.

Note 2

In January 1986 the *Journal of Occupational Medicine* published a paper entitled *Cancer Mortality Among White Males in the Meat Industry***.** The paper was written by Eric S. Johnson M.B., B.S.; H. R. Fischman D.VM.; Genevieve M. Martanoski M.D.; and E. Diamond Ph.D. from the Department of Epidemiology, The Johns Hopkins University School of Hygiene and Public Health, Baltimore, United States of America. The authors studied 13,844 members of a meat cutter's union from July 1949 to December 1980 'to examine cancer occurrence in the meat industry'. They reported that a 'statistically significant proportional mortality ratio of 2.9 was obtained for Hodgkin's disease among abattoir workers' and that 'the results suggest that the excess risk of death from Hodgkin's disease in abattoir workers may be associated with the slaughtering activity'. They also found that meat packing plant workers were more likely to develop bone cancer, cancer of the buccal cavity and pharynx and lung cancer than workers in other industries.

I report this paper because although it does not show a direct link between cancer and the eating of meat as a food it does pose an important question: if human beings can get cancer merely by handling meat why on earth should there be any surprise that human beings can get cancer from eating meat? The authors of this paper also named viruses which naturally cause cancer in cattle and chickens and pointed out that these viruses are present not only in diseased but also in healthy cattle and chickens destined for human consumption. 'Evidence suggests that consumers of meat and unpasteurized milk may be exposed to these viruses. It would appear, therefore, that these viruses present a potentially serious public health problem.' Other researchers have made similar discoveries about a link between the meat industry and the development of cancer. A study of 300,000 adult white males in Washington State in the United States of America showed a 'statistically significant elevated risk of death from cancer of the buccal cavity and pharynx among butchers and meat cutters'.

CHAPTER 12

FOODS TO AVOID — AND FOODS TO EAT — TO CUT YOUR CANCER RISK

However careful you are to avoid cancer-inducing chemicals, cancer cells will occasionally develop inside your body Most of the time those cancer cells are dealt with speedily and effectively by your body's defence systems. White blood cells find and destroy cancer cells in just the same way that they find and destroy bacteria.

Your body's natural immune system (and its ability to deal with cancer) will be damaged if you eat the wrong sort of foods — and will be aided and improved if you eat the right foods. Fatty foods will weaken your immune system and make your body less capable of fighting off those occasional cancer cells. When researchers studied the blood of human volunteers they found that a low fat diet greatly improved the activity of the body's natural killer cells.

Incidentally, it has been shown that as far as the body's immune system is concerned vegetable fats are just as bad as animal fats. You will protect your heart by reducing your animal fat consumption but in order to protect yourself against cancer you need to reduce your entire fat consumption — and that includes vegetable oils.

Vegetarians have more than double the cancer cell destroying capability of non-vegetarians. But this is not entirely due to the low fat content of a vegetarian diet. It is probably also due to the fact that vegetarians consume fewer toxic chemicals and no animal proteins.

And vegetarians have another advantage too: the ability of the human body's natural killer cells to do their work is improved by substances such as beta-carotene which are found in considerable quantities in vegetables. (One survey of meat eaters showed that many could neither name nor describe any green vegetables.)

Foods to avoid

FATTY FOODS IN GENERAL

The average diet still contains 40% fat. Many official recommendations are still only encouraging a reduction in fat intake to around 30% of the diet — despite evidence showing that a reduction to somewhere between 10% and 20% would make far more sense. Fat was the first dietary constituent to be linked with cancer and there is now probably more evidence damning fat than any other foodstuff. According to the National Academy of Sciences report *Diet, Nutrition and Cancer* (published by the National Academy Press in Washington DC, US in 1982) there were at least six international studies published in the 1970s which showed a direct association between the amount of fat eaten and breast cancer incidence or mortality. In addition a state by state study published within the US showed a significant direct correlation between fat intake and breast cancer mortality rates.

'Japanese women have the lowest breast cancer rate in the world',' says Dr Oliver Alabaster, Director of the Institute for Disease Prevention at the George Washington University Medical Center, quoted in *The Power of your Plate*, by Dr Neal D Barnard. 'Many Japanese women have migrated to Hawaii and the US mainland. While marrying within their own community and keeping the population relatively unchanged genetically, they shifted their diet towards a more Western, higher fat diet and their breast cancer rate steadily climbed. A few decades ago the Japanese diet contained only around 10% fat — today the average Japanese diet contains about 25% fat. Within one generation it approximated that of Caucasian women living around them. This is very dramatic evidence that cancer is mainly environmentally induced, rather than genetically inherited.'

Peter Greenwald, Director of Cancer Prevention and Control of the National Cancer Institute in the United States of America also says that there is a great deal of evidence that fat increases cancer risk and points out that the differences in breast cancer rates in different countries cannot be due to other factors such as stress, pollution or industrialisation since there are highly industrialised countries such as Japan where stress and pollution are as high as the US or Europe but where colon and breast cancer rates are low.

Since the mid 1970s there has been strong evidence to show a link between a high fat intake and prostate cancer. The National Academy of Sciences reports that an American study showed a correlation between a high fat intake and a high risk for prostate cancer. Studies in 41 countries have shown a high correlation between mortality from prostate cancer and intake of fats, milk and meats (especially beef). A ten year Japanese study involving 122,261 men aged 40 or older showed 'an inverse association between daily intake of green and yellow vegetables and mortality from prostate cancer'. Another study showed that vegetarian men were less likely to develop prostate cancer.

Other studies also confirm this link. In 1993 a study of 47,855 men, reported in the *Medical Research Modernization Committee Report* revealed that those men who had high fat diets had a relative risk of 1.79 for advanced prostate cancer compared to those on a low fat diet. The investigators found that 'most animal fats were associated with advanced prostate cancer, but fats from vegetables, dairy products (except butter) and fish were not.'

The National Academy of Sciences reports that: 'other reproductive organs for which there have been associations between dietary fat and cancer include the testes, corpus uteri, and ovary'.

There is also a considerable amount of published evidence available to show that there is a firm association between dietary fat and gastrointestinal tract cancer. Some researchers have shown a link between dietary fat and cancer of the pancreas, and others have shown a link between fat and stomach cancer. Researchers have also accumulated strong evidence confirming a correlation between dietary fat and large bowel cancer (cancers of the colon and rectum).

The National Academy of Sciences reports that: ‘In general, it is not possible to identify specific components of fat as being clearly responsible for the observed effects, although total fat and saturated fat have been associated most frequently.’

With all this evidence available directly from observations of human patients it is exceedingly difficult to see why such a large proportion of the cancer industry’s budget is spent on performing experiments on animals.

Although the evidence showing that fat causes cancer is totally convincing (a United States Surgeon General has advised US citizens that ‘a comparison of populations indicates that death rates for cancers of the breast, colon and prostate are directly proportional to estimated dietary fat intakes’) there is still a considerable amount of doubt about the mechanism whereby fat causes cancer.

One theory is that carcinogenic chemicals simply dissolve and accumulate in fatty tissues. If this is the case then people who eat animal fats will suffer twice for the chances are high that the fat they are eating already contains dissolved carcinogens. Another possibility is that fat may encourage the development of cancer by affecting the activity of sex hormones. Vegetarian and low fat diets reduce the levels of circulating female sex hormones such as oestradiol. Sex hormones are known to help promote the development of breast cancer and cancer of the reproductive organs (such as uterus and ovary in women and the prostate in men).

Despite the lack of clear evidence about exactly how fat causes cancer the final message is quite clear — to reduce your cancer risk you should make a real effort to cut back your fat intake — and that includes cutting out vegetable fats too. You should not make the mistake of assuming that you can avoid or cut down your fat intake noticeably by living on a diet of chicken and fish. Although it is widely believed that both fish and chicken are low in fat the truth is that even skinless white meat from a chicken is 23% fat while most fish contain between 20 to 30% fat and some are much higher — mackerel, for example, contains over 50% fat. The only truly low fat diet is a diet which is mainly composed of vegetables, fruits, and whole grain cereals. Rice contains only about 1% fat and no plant foods contain any cholesterol (although frying potatoes and turning them into chips can add a lot of fat).

If you ignore this message then you are making a clear and conscious choice to accept a high cancer risk as the price for your high fat diet.

MEAT AND ANIMAL PRODUCTS

Numerous researchers have linked protein with cancers of the breast, prostate, endometrium (lining of the uterus), colon and rectum, pancreas and kidney. And the type of protein which is most likely to cause cancer is protein obtained from meat.

The United States Surgeon General’s Report Nutrition and Health said: ‘In one international correlational study, for example, a positive association was observed between total protein and animal protein and breast, colon, prostate, renal and endometrial cancers (Armstrong and Doll 1975). Similarly, a migrant study indicated an association between meat consumption and cancer of the breast and colon (Kolonel 1987).’

The Surgeon General also reported that: ‘Studies have also found an association between breast cancer and meat intake (Lubin et al 1981) and an association of meat, especially beef, with large bowel cancer among Japanese (Haenszel et al 1973)...’

One possible reason for the meat-cancer link may be the fact that chemicals such as DDT tend to accumulate in animal tissues — and may be found in animal tissues years after their usage has been controlled or stopped. Whether it is the chemicals in animal protein which cause cancer is, however, a question of rather theoretical interest: the important point is that meat causes cancer.

There is evidence to show that Japanese women who eat meat daily have more than eight times the risk of breast cancer compared to poorer women who rarely consume meat.

There have also been several reports showing a high correlation between meat (an important source of dietary fat, especially saturated fat) and colon cancer. Beef has been specifically named as one type of meat associated with colon cancer. Several studies have shown a relationship between the incidence of prostate cancer and the consumption of animal protein.

Because most people who eat a lot of meat usually also eat a great deal of fat (because meat often contains a lot of fat) it is difficult to know whether these links between meat and cancer are a result of the protein in the meat or the fat in the meat. It is also possible that the link between meat and cancer is a result of mutagens being formed during the cooking of meat. And some experts have pointed out that carcinogenic fat-soluble contaminants such as drugs and pesticides may be the reason why meat causes cancer.

However, I regard the question of how meat causes cancer as being of largely theoretical interest. The important thing is that most of us need to eat less protein in general — and since there is a link between meat and cancer it seems pretty clear that cutting out meat is a sensible way to cut down protein.

DAIRY PRODUCTS

The consumption of milk and other dairy products is relatively new in human history. And it is only in the 'highly developed' and 'Westernised' world that milk drinking is considered essential or even normal.

Milk drinking (and the consumption of other dairy products) has developed because farmers and marketing experts have created the products and not because consuming these products is normal, essential or healthy. Babies need their mother's milk, taken direct from the breast, but no human beings need to drink dairy milk, or eat butter or cheese or other dairy products.

It is almost certainly the fat in dairy products which makes them particularly dangerous. Inevitably, therefore, some dairy products are more dangerous than others. Butter and cream and high fat cheeses are far more likely to cause problems than are low fat yoghurt, low fat cheese or skimmed milk.

But it isn't only the fat in dairy products which causes problems. There has for some years been accumulating evidence to suggest that dairy products can cause a wide variety of illnesses and there is now also some evidence to suggest that dairy products may be a contributory factor in the development of cancer of the ovary. The problem is, it seems, that a sugar in milk called lactose is broken down within the body to produce another sugar called galactose — which is then, in turn, broken down again. But if the consumption of dairy produce exceeds the body's ability to break down galactose this sugar may accumulate in the blood — and have an effect on the ovaries. Drinking low or non-fat milk won't help this particular problem because the problem is caused by a sugar not fat.

ALCOHOL

It has been known for some years that there is an association between alcohol abuse and cancer. In 1937, in France, it was noted that 95% of patients with oesophageal cancer were alcohol abusers. Another French study, published in the 1960s and involving 4,000 patients, showed a significant correlation between alcohol consumption and cancers of the tongue, hypopharynx and larynx. In 1964 the World Health Organisation concluded that: 'excessive consumption of alcoholic beverages was associated with cancer of the mouth, larynx and oesophagus'. A Finnish study, published in 1974, showed that chronic alcoholics were more likely to develop cancers of the pharynx, oesophagus and lung.

Alcohol has also been linked with cancer of the stomach and cancer of the pancreas. In 1988 the United States Surgeon General reported that: 'Reviews of experimental and epidemiological data suggest an association between alcohol consumption and human cancer that is strongest for certain head and neck cancers.'

Smoking seems to make matters even worse and there is a synergistic carcinogenic relationship between alcohol and smoking tobacco: people who drink a good deal of alcohol and smoke tobacco are particularly likely to suffer from cancer of the mouth, larynx, oesophagus and respiratory tract.

You don't have to give up drinking alcohol completely in order to avoid or minimise this cancer risk. If you enjoy a glass of wine with a meal or a glass of whisky afterwards then that's fine. I myself am rather partial to a glass of malt whisky. But limit yourself to one or possibly two drinks a day at most.

FOOD ADDITIVES

Over 15,000 chemical substances are added to food as it is processed. Some of these chemicals are introduced deliberately (to add flavour, colour and consistency and so on) but many thousands of chemicals are added indirectly, either because they are used in food packaging or because they have been consumed by animals (as drugs or hormones) before finding their way into animal products.

Only a very small number of the substances added to foods have been tested for carcinogenicity and very few epidemiological studies have been conducted to find out whether or not there are any relationships between food additives and cancer incidence. At least one government has admitted that there are too many additives for them all to be fully tested. (The extent of the problem can be seen from the fact that any comprehensive testing programme would have to examine any possible synergistic activity between any combination of the many thousands of additives used.)

SMOKED, SALTED AND PICKLED FOODS

Substances which are potentially carcinogenic are produced in charred meat and fish because of changes in the proteins in those foods which occur when foods are cooked at very high temperatures.

Cooking foods over charcoal or smoking foods results in the food being covered with carcinogenic substances. In 1964 it was reported that beef grilled over a gas or charcoal fire contained polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) produced from smoke generated by the dripping of fat from the meat onto the hot coals. Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons have also been found in a number of different types of smoked foods. Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons account for some of the potentially carcinogenic changes that occur in food during cooking.

The United States Surgeon General has reported that: ‘International epidemiological evidence suggests that populations consuming diets high in salt-cured, salt-pickled, and smoked foods have a higher incidence of stomach and oesophageal cancers.’

The available evidence suggests that it is wisest to avoid food which has been salt-cured, salt-pickled, smoked or cooked on a barbecue.

Foods to eat

FIBRE

Until relatively recently fibre was regarded as an entirely inert substance — an unnecessary ‘filler’ that simply took up space in food, on the plate and in your stomach. There were even many experts who regarded fibre as a nuisance — something to be removed from food whenever possible. It was argued that because of its bulky presence fibre might interfere with the absorption of essential minerals.

The research work of Dr Denis Burkitt and other doctors changed that point of view for ever. It is now clear that fibre passes through the small intestines without being digested but that it removes harmful substances and helps to speed up the passage of food through the intestinal tract.

Once it had been recognised that people who ate a ‘primitive diet’ (rich in complex carbohydrates such as fibre) were less likely to suffer from a range of disorders, including bowel cancer, the popularity of fibre began to rise.

Burkitt noted that colorectal cancer (cancers of the colon and rectum) is rare among primitive people who eat unrefined foods.

Inevitably, perhaps, the food industry’s immediate, knee jerk response to this discovery was to start selling consumers bran and fibre supplements. Instead of encouraging people to buy more natural foods, full of natural fibre, the massive, international industry continued to sell packaged foods from which the fibre had been removed — but added a new range of foods which had been artificially enriched with fibre and many new varieties of fibre supplements. It was a trick of stupefying audacity, but it worked: all around the globe, in so called developed countries, people who regarded themselves as educated and intelligent consumers sought to balance their fibre deprived diets by purchasing and swallowing these artificial fibre supplements. Having paid the food industry to take the essential fibre out of their food they then paid the industry a second time to buy the fibre back.

Dietary fibre usually includes indigestible carbohydrates and carbohydrate like food components such as cellulose, lignin, hemicellulose, pentosans, gums and pectins — all of which provide bulk. The foods that usually provide fibre are vegetables, fruits and whole grain cereals.

Researchers are still trying to decide whether fibre helps prevent cancer directly or whether it works by helping to rid the body of carcinogenic substances. Fibre can dilute the carcinogens present in the large bowel; it can influence the composition and activity of the flora living in the intestine; it can affect the production of carcinogenic substances and it can speed up the rate at which food passes through the bowel (thereby reducing the amount of time that carcinogens are in contact with bowel tissue). Fibre seems to affect cholesterol metabolism and it is also believed to reduce the levels of hormones which may lead to the development of cancer.

There is evidence that fibre helps to balance the cancer producing effect of fat in the diet. When you eat a fatty meal the gallbladder produces bile acids which flow into the intestine. The job of the bile acids is to help with the absorption of the fat in your meal. Bacteria which already exist within the intestine turn the bile acids into substances called secondary bile acids which are believed to promote the development of cancer. Fibre helps by having an effect on the bacteria in the intestine and, because it has a ‘blotting paper’ effect, by absorbing the bile acids. Because fibre takes up a lot of space it also dilutes the effect of the potentially harmful substances. In addition fibre is believed to delay the onset of menstruation in young girls. Girls who are brought up on a primitive, fibre-rich diet start to menstruate several years later than girls who are brought up on a typical, fat-rich, fibre-poor ‘Western’ diet. This is important because there is also evidence to show that the risk of breast cancer goes up as the onset of menstruation comes down. Just how fibre has all these effects is still the subject of some discussion although it has been suggested that specific components of fibre are more likely than fibre *per se* to be responsible for protecting humans against cancer.

As far as you and I are concerned, however, I believe that all this theory and all this research is only of academic value. The important thing to know is that your diet should contain a plentiful supply of natural fibre. You can get fibre from vegetables and beans and whole wheat bread, brown rice and cereals. Fibre is lost from refined grains and no foods made from dead animals contain fibre.

VEGETABLES AND FRUIT

One advantage of eating more vegetable products is undoubtedly the fact that by so doing you will inevitably eat few animal products — foodstuffs which are known to cause cancer. But fruit and vegetables have positive values too.

Vegetables and fruit also contain fibre — and some vegetables (cruciferous vegetables — cabbage, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts and broccoli) contain constituents (such as indoles and isothiocyanates) which are believed to have an anti-cancer effect.

A large number of scientific studies have shown that an individual's risk of developing cancer (particularly cancer of the gastro-intestinal tract — including the stomach and the large bowel) goes down if he eats more vegetables. No one really knows for certain why this is — but once again the exact mechanism by which the consumption of vegetables protects against the development of cancer is much less important than the existence of the relationship.

In 1972 it was found that the consumption of raw vegetables, including coleslaw and red cabbage seemed to protect against stomach cancer. In 1975 it was found that the consumption of fibre rich foods such as cabbage protected against colon cancer. In 1978 it was reported that individuals who frequently ate raw vegetables (especially cabbage, brussels sprouts and broccoli) were less likely to develop cancer of the colon.

Garlic and onions contain large quantities of a chemical which seems to have anti-cancer properties. People who eat large quantities of garlic and onions have less than half the risk of stomach cancer of people who either don't eat these vegetables at all or who eat them in very small quantities.

There are many other substances found in vegetables and fruits which seem to help prevent cancer. Phenols, flavones, protease inhibitors, glutathione and beta-sitosterol are just a few of the natural chemicals found in vegetables and fruits which seem to have an anti-cancer effect. And there is evidence to suggest that many vegetables and fruits contain antimutagens which help protect cells against the activity of mutagens — substances which damage a cell's DNA and can turn an ordinary cell into a cancerous cell.

There have been many attempts to explain the protective effects of vegetables but I believe the important thing is that the inverse relationship between these vegetables and the development of cancer (that is the fact that those who eat these vegetables are less likely to develop cancer) has been clearly and indisputably established.

In 1982 the American National Academy of Sciences concluded that there is sufficient epidemiological evidence to suggest that consumption of certain vegetables, especially carotene rich (i.e. dark green and deep yellow) vegetables and cruciferous vegetables (e.g. cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower and Brussels sprouts) is associated with a reduction in the incidence of cancer at several sites in humans.

WHOLE GRAINs

Whole grains (rice, oats, wheat, barley etc. which have not been processed and had part of the 'goodness' removed) contain fibre, vitamin E and selenium — all of which can help reduce your risk of developing cancer.

VITAMINS AND MINERALS

For the last two decades there has been a considerable amount of discussion about the value of vitamins (particularly vitamins A and C) in the prevention — and even treatment — of cancer. In vitamin A it is the beta-carotene content which is believed to have the protective quality. (A large body of evidence suggests that foods high in vitamin A and carotenoids are protective against a variety of epithelial cancers', said the US Surgeon General.)

Researchers have found that people who eat a diet which is low in vitamin A tend to be more likely to suffer from cancers of the lung, larynx, bladder, oesophagus, stomach, colon, rectum and prostate.

With vitamin C researchers have again found that this vitamin may lower the risk of cancer; in particular, it seems to lower the risk of cancer of the oesophagus and stomach.

Some of those who advocate meat eating claim that vegetarians are likely to have a diet which is deficient in iron. This is nonsense. A good, well-balanced vegetarian diet will contain plenty of iron. Indeed, there is now evidence to suggest that too much iron in the blood (a problem which can occur among meat eaters) increases the chances of cancer developing. When iron has been absorbed the body stores it. In many Westernised countries iron 'overload' is thought to be more common than iron deficiency. According to the American Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine 'higher amounts of iron in the blood mean a higher cancer risk.' It also appears that iron that comes from animal sources is more likely to cause heart disease.

Zinc is another mineral which is believed to have some beneficial effects on cancer risk. Dr Melvyn R. Werbach's excellent source book *Nutritional Influences on Illness* lists three scientific papers which have shown that there may be a link between a low zinc intake and prostate cancer. One paper showed that serum levels in prostatic cancer are low when compared to patients who have benign prostatic hypertrophy. A second paper showed that prostatic tissue levels of zinc are low in prostatic cancer compared to normal men. And a third paper showed that prostatic tissue levels are low in prostatic cancer compared to patients with prostatic hyperplasia.

Sadly, there still seems to be insufficient evidence avail able for me to offer solid guidelines on the subject of zinc and prostate cancer. It seems a pity that the cancer industry (the recipient of billions of dollars in charitable contributions) has not done more work into this possible link. Prostate cancer is, of course, one of the major killers of men.

Zinc is present in rice, corn and oats, spinach, peas and potatoes and so a good, well-balanced vegetarian diet should provide a plentiful supply. It is possible that too much zinc (as with most things) may cause damage.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that human experiments have shown that your body can repair the DNA which has been damaged by free radicals if it receives a plentiful supply of folic acid — one of the vitamin B complex of vitamins. Your body will receive the folic acid it needs if you eat a diet which is rich in dark green, leafy vegetables, fruits, dried peas, beans and wheat germ.

Foods which contain anti-oxidants (beta carotene, vitamin C, vitamin E):

* Apple
* Broccoli
* Brussels sprouts
* Cauliflower
* Chick peas
* Corn
* Grapefruit
* Orange
* Pineapple
* Brown rice
* Soya beans
* Spinach
* Strawberries
* Sweet Potato

Foods which contain folic acid

* Asparagus
* Baked beans
* Black beans
* Black eyed peas
* Broccoli
* Brussels sprouts
* Chick peas
* Kidney beans
* Lentils
* Soya beans
* Spinach

CHAPTER 13

OTHER COMMON DISEASES — AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO WHAT YOU EAT

The diet you choose to eat will determine what illnesses you suffer from and how healthy you are. Most of us eat too much fat, too much meat, too much sugar and far too little fresh fruit, fresh vegetables and fibre. The list of diseases known to be associated with the food we eat grows longer every year and now includes an enormous variety of problems, ranging from asthma to cancer and heart disease to varicose veins.

Note

If you are suffering from any of the medical problems listed below do talk to your doctor before changing your eating habits. It is possible that if you change your eating habits your need for medical help may change too. For example, if you suffer from high blood pressure and normally take tablets to control your condition, changing your diet may reduce your need for medication.

Acne

Several scientific studies have shown that there are powerful links between eating habits and acne — one of the commonest, most troublesome and most embarrassing of all skin disorders. Doctors have shown that Eskimos who change to a Western diet develop more acne than Eskimos who remain faithful to their traditional, more natural diet which contains far less sugar. It has also been shown that there is less acne among black people living in Kenya and Zambia and surviving on a traditional diet than there is among black people of similar origins living in America — one of the main differences between the two groups is, of course, the diet that they eat. It is clear from the evidence which is now available that you can help clear up acne by eating less fat and less sugar and by eating more fibre.

Allergies

Asthma, dermatitis, eczema, hay fever and rhinitis are all much more common now than they were a few decades ago. Two generations ago eczema affected two people out of every thousand. Today the same disorder affects six times as many people. The one thing that all these disorders have in common is that they are frequently caused by allergies. What to? Well, a growing number of doctors have noticed that these conditions are more common among people who eat a junk food diet or who consume large amounts of dairy food and the suspicion is that many of those who suffer from these allergy-related problems do so because of their diet. It is now widely believed among doctors that many people whose diet includes too many refined foods, too many additive-rich foods and not enough fresh fruit or vegetables would be much healthier if they changed their eating habits.

Anaemia

The type of anaemia caused by eating a diet which contains too little iron is remarkably common in the Western world. The human body can absorb iron more easily when the iron is consumed along with a diet which is rich in vitamin C.

Anxiety

Many who suffer from constant or recurrent anxiety live on a diet which contains too little vitamin B and so if you are an anxiety sufferer you may be able to improve your resistance to anxiety by increasing your consumption of vitamin B rich foods. Anxiety sufferers should also be able to reduce their symptoms by cutting down the amount of sugar they eat and by drinking less caffeine-rich drinks.

Asthma

The incidence of asthma has trebled in the last two or three generations and it is now widely acknowledged that there are probably two main reasons for this: the pollution of our atmosphere with industrial waste chemicals and carbon monoxide gases and general poor eating habits. (There is a third reason: the fact that doctors are today much quicker to diagnose asthma, and to regard every patient who wheezes as being a full blown asthmatic.) The problem which seems most likely to be responsible for the increase in the incidence of asthma is our increased consumption of dairy products such as milk, butter and cheese (though a diet which is rich in fatty meat is also very likely to trigger off asthma attacks). Many patients who suffer from asthma have found that their symptoms improve if they change to a diet which contains more fruit, nuts and vegetables and less dairy products and meat. In an emergency, by the way, it is possible to obtain some slight relief from the wheezing associated with asthma by consuming a drink which is rich in caffeine

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Atherosclerosis

Doctors around the world now agree that your chances of developing atherosclerosis — or clogged up arteries — are closely linked to what you choose to eat. If you eat too much fat (and, in particular, too much saturated animal fat) and too much sugar then your risk of developing atherosclerosis and suffering from heart disease, stroke or high blood pressure will be dramatically increased. There is also evidence to show that a high caffeine consumption can also increase your chances of suffering from atherosclerosis. You can reduce your chances of developing atherosclerosis — and the associated disorders — by increasing your consumption of high fibre foods such as oat bran and of vegetables. You may also be able to help yourself by eating more beans, garlic, onions and live yoghurt.

Cataracts

You can reduce your risk of developing a cataract by keeping your intake of sugar as low as possible.

Constipation

A diet that is rich in sugar and meat will increase your chances of suffering from constipation. You can reduce your chances of suffering from constipation by increasing the amount of roughage or fibre that you eat.

Depression

If you suffer from depression you may also be suffering from a shortage of vitamin B.

Diabetes

If you already have diabetes then you may be able to reduce your need for drug therapy by cutting down your consumption of sugar and fat rich foods. Cutting down your consumption of foods of this type may also help you not to develop diabetes. Individuals with a family history of diabetes who want to reduce their chances of suffering from the disorder should, therefore, eat less fat and less sugar rich foods. A diet which is high in fibre and complex carbohydrates is excellent. The fibre helps by slowing down the rate at which sugar is absorbed. You must, of course, see your doctor if you are a diabetic before you make any change to your diet.

Gall Bladder Disease (Including Gallstones)

The high incidence of gallstones in Western society is very closely linked to the type of food we eat. Most of us eat far too much fat and far too little fibre. We also tend to eat far too much food in general. Gallstones are an almost inevitable consequence of all this overeating and self indulgence. You can reduce your risk of developing gallstones (or suffering from any symptoms associated with their existence) by keeping your fat consumption down, reducing your consumption of refined carbohydrates, controlling your weight, increasing your intake of fibre rich foods such as fresh fruit, fresh vegetables and whole grain cereals. There is, in addition, some evidence showing that eating a regular breakfast will help to reduce your chances of suffering from gall bladder problems. Some experts also claim that food allergies can sometimes lead to gall bladder problems. The three foods most commonly blamed for allergies leading to gall bladder trouble are eggs, pork and onions. If you suffer from a gall bladder problem you should (in addition to cutting down your fat intake and increasing the amount of fibre you eat) reduce your intake of these three foods for a while to see if your symptoms disappear.

Gout

Gout can be triggered off by foods which are rich in purines so if you suffer from gout you would probably be sensible to avoid meat extracts, game, asparagus, spinach, strawberries, rhubarb, fish roe, herring, salmon, whitebait, liver, kidneys and sweetbreads. You will probably also benefit by cutting down on your consumption of protein rich foods and by limiting your intake of fish, peas and beans. Gout sufferers are also sometimes intolerant of carbonated drinks, beer, sparkling wines, port, champagne and, indeed, other types of alcohol.

Headaches

Stress, tension and anxiety are undoubtedly the commonest causes of headaches. Food is the second commonest cause although most headache sufferers only seem to get problems because of a sensitivity to specific types of food. Alcohol, chocolate, fatty foods and additive rich foods are among the most frequent causes of headaches. Many patients who suffer from food-related headaches are able to deal with their problem permanently by keeping a diary, finding out which foods seem to trigger their symptoms, and then eliminating those foods from their diet. Caffeine — usually drunk as strong coffee or as tea — is a common cause of headaches. In some cases caffeine linked headaches are caused by drinking coffee or tea. In other cases the headaches occur as withdrawal headaches — when the victim hasn't drunk any coffee or tea for a while.

Heart disease

The link between fat intake and heart disease was first officially established back in 1953. Since then a great deal more evidence has been collected to support the contention that fat intake is one of the major factors in the development of heart disease. Virtually every major, independent scientific and medical committee in the world now agrees that saturated fats cause heart disease. And just about every expert in the world agrees that we would all be wise to cut down our consumption of fat — and, in particular, of saturated fat. Despite this agreement, many people have continued to eat lots of fat and there is little doubt that this is a result of the efforts of pressure groups working for those industries trying to boost the sales of dairy products and meat.

I have no doubt at all that every year thousands of men and women around the world die prematurely — often in their thirties and forties — largely because they have been encouraged to eat fatty food.

The 'credit' for this disgraceful state of affairs must, in my view, go to the food manufacturers and their lobbyists — and to the politicians who have allowed the lobbyists to pressure them into inaction. The propaganda experts — hired by those industries which have a vested interest in ensuring that we all continue to eat lots of butter, eggs and fatty meat (washed down with full cream milk) — have funded a number of extremely effective campaigns. Sometimes attempts are made to exert pressure in other ways. For example, after I appeared on one British TV station and told viewers that a high fat diet containing too much butter and milk could lead to heart disease the station received a letter from an executive of the Butter Information Council. The writer of the letter pointed out that his organisation had been about to spend a large sum of money on TV advertising, and that this plan had 'come under review' as a result of my remarks. Cutting down your consumption of fat will cut down your calorie intake, improve your health and ensure that your heart remains in the best possible condition. Saturated fat won't just clog up your blood vessels; it will also reduce the efficiency with which your red blood cells carry oxygen around your body, and it will pick up and accumulate waste products which should be excreted. To keep your heart healthy reduce the amount of fatty meat that you eat and keep down your intake of high fat dairy products.

Heartburn

Under normal circumstances the acid mixture that helps to digest food within the stomach is kept away from the oesophagus by a sphincter which allows food to travel down into the stomach but doesn't allow food and acid to travel upwards into the gullet. The acid in the stomach is strong enough to dissolve steak (or burn holes in your carpet) and the oesophagus simply isn't made to cope with it. The sphincter is important. If the sphincter which usually divides the oesophagus from the stomach in this way doesn't do its job properly acid can sometimes splash upwards and irritate the oesophageal mucosa. The technical term for this is gastro-oesophageal reflux and the word 'heartburn' is very descriptive. The burning sensation rises up from the stomach and radiates to the upper chest — sometimes producing such a vicious pain that it can be confused with a heart attack.

Even when the sphincter is in good working condition acid can irritate the oesophagus when you lie down or bend over. Naturally enough, therefore, individuals who have a weak sphincter at that point will find that they suffer far more when they are lying flat or bending over than they do when they are standing up straight. Being overweight can increase the risk of heartburn. As can eating a diet which contains too much fat. And despite the fact that heartburn usually has a solid physical cause there are many individuals who suffer from this symptom purely as a result of stress.

As many as one in ten adults has reflux symptoms on a daily basis. Nearly half get symptoms at least once a month. Pregnant women are particularly at risk and around three quarters of pregnant women suffer from heartburn at some point in their pregnancy. Heartburn is a widespread and major problem.

There are a number of things that you can do to protect yourself from heartburn (whether you've already got it or not). Avoiding smoking is a good start. Losing excess weight helps.

Here are my top tips for dealing with heartburn:

1. Avoid coffee and tea.

2. Avoid fatty foods.

3. Avoid spicy foods.

4. Avoid chocolate.

5. Avoid peppermint.

6. Avoid drinks which are too hot or too cold.

7. Avoid alcohol.

8. Avoid fizzy drinks.

9. Eat brown rice, buckwheat and legumes.

10. Vitamins A and D are believed to help.

11. Don’t lie down within three hours of eating a meal.

12. Try sleeping on an extra pillow.

13. Eat small meals.

14. Avoid unnecessary stress — and learn to deal with the unavoidable stresses in your life more effectively.

15. Antacid preparations will neutralise acid in the stomach and provide a fairly instant relief. Liquid preparations coat the oesophagus effectively. The snag is that the stomach can react by producing more acid — meaning that the relief can be short lived. The stomach is likely to respond to antacids in tablet form by producing a lower level of acidity — the desired effect may take more time but the effect should last longer.

High Blood Pressure

Up to 25% of the world’s population have high blood pressure.

Only 50% of those individuals know that they suffer from high blood pressure. Only 25% are being treated. And only half of those are being treated effectively. But high blood pressure is a major killer — an important cause of heart disease and strokes. If you suffer from high blood pressure you may be able to control your problem simply by eating more carefully. You should eat a low fat, high fibre diet and you should reduce your intake of salt as much as you can and increase your intake of potassium. Even if you don’t suffer from high blood pressure but have a family history of high blood pressure you should reduce your salt intake. You can do this by not adding salt to foods that are being cooked and by leaving the salt cellar off the table. Other flavourings which can be used instead of salt include lemon juice, parsley, garlic, horseradish and tarragon.

You should also avoid or reduce your consumption of the following foods:

* Processed foods in general
* Canned foods
* Junk food
* Crisps
* Salted peanuts
* Salted biscuits
* Salted butter
* Salted cheese
* Sausages

- Bacon

Just as there is evidence to show that too much salt has an adverse effect on some patients with high blood pressure so there is also evidence that some patients with blood pressure problems may be helped by increasing their intake of potassium.

Foods that are rich in potassium include:

- Apples
- Apricots
- Asparagus
- Bananas
- Beans
- Brussels Sprouts
- Cabbage
- Corn on the Cob
- Dates
- Grapefruit
- Oranges
- Peas
- Peppers
- Prunes
- Potatoes
- Radishes
- Raisins

For more information about high blood pressure see my book *High Blood Pressure,* published by the European Medical Journal.

Indigestion

Indigestion is one of the commonest of all diseases. The chances are that there is a sufferer in your family. Most sufferers simply head straight for the bathroom cabinet or the local chemist’s shop and take a few slugs from a bottle of white medicine.

Traditional stomach remedies usually work well because they contain a substance which counteracts the powerful acid that is causing the pain. But swallowing a few gulps of white medicine after your symptoms develop only provides an immediate and short term answer and there is a real risk that if you don’t do something to stop your indigestion developing you will eventually end up with a stomach ulcer.

Since what you eat — and how you eat it — is largely responsible for the pains of indigestion, here are some tips on exactly how you can reduce your chances of developing indigestion. Even if you’re not already a sufferer you’ll benefit by following this advice.

1. Remember that eating regular meals is better for you than going for long periods without food. If you eat regularly then the acid that accumulates in your stomach will have nothing to work on — except your stomach lining.

2. Eat slowly. Put down your knife and fork between mouthfuls — that should slow you down.

3. Put small amounts into your mouth. If you stuff huge amounts of food into your mouth then you’ll swallow without chewing. Chewing is an essential part of the digestive process.

4. When you’ve finished a meal have a short rest. Give your stomach time to finish its job before you start chasing around again.

5. Don’t read or watch TV while you’re eating. If you concentrate on what you’re doing when you have a meal then you’ll be much more likely to know when you’ve had enough to eat. Overeating is a common cause of stomach problems.

6. Don’t let other people push you into eating more than you want. Be prepared to leave food on the side of your

plate if you’ve had enough.

7. Avoid any foods which upset your stomach. The sort of foods that can cause upsets are: all fried foods, fizzy drinks, alcohol, strong tea or coffee, fatty foods; spicy foods, unripe fruit, very hot or very cold foods, tough food that can’t be chewed easily, pickles, sprouts, radishes, cucumber, coarse bread, biscuits or cereals, nuts and dried fruit.

8. Finally, remember that tobacco smoke will irritate your stomach too.

If you suffer from recurrent or persistent indigestion then you should, of course, see your GP. There are powerful drugs available which can be used to help treat this problem without recourse to surgery.

Infections

Your body will be better able to fight off infections if you eat a diet which contains very little fat and very little sugar but good amounts of vitamins A, B and C. There is, in addition, now some evidence to show that eating a diet which contains garlic and live yoghurt will help your body fight off infection.

Insomnia

In order to sleep better and more soundly you should avoid caffeine and cows’ milk and keep your consumption of alcohol down.

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)

Some experts claim that at one time or another as many as one in three people suffer from irritable bowel syndrome. Children under ten can get it and there are many sufferers in their seventies and eighties. Irritable bowel syndrome probably affects as many people as toothache or the common cold. It is also one of the most commonly misdiagnosed of all diseases — and one of the most badly treated. Once it has developed it hardly ever disappears completely.

That’s the bad news.

The good news is twofold.

First, irritable bowel syndrome isn’t dangerous or life threatening; it doesn’t turn into anything more serious, it won’t turn into cancer and it won’t kill you or even threaten your life.

The symptoms associated with irritable bowel syndrome may be exhausting, irritating, worrying and disabling but there is no underlying deadly pathology.

And second, although it does tend to hang around — once you have got it you’ve probably got it for life — irritable bowel syndrome can be controlled. There is no quick, simple, reliable cure because there is no clearly defined cause. But although you may not be able to conquer IBS completely — and make the symptoms disappear — you *can* control it.

The primary symptoms are the ones which involve the bowel itself and what goes on inside it. Pain is probably the most obvious of these symptoms — though it is also one of the most variable. It is often a colicky, spasmodic sort of pain which comes and goes in waves; it can affect just about any part of the abdomen and it frequently fades a little when the sufferer goes to the toilet. Bowel irregularities are common too. Most sufferers complain of diarrhoea — which can sometimes be quite sudden and explosive — but, oddly enough, constipation is also a common symptom. Sometimes the two problems alternate.

The other very common bowel problem associated with this complaint is wind and this really is typical. Most sufferers complain that their tummies swell up so much that their clothes don’t fit them properly. Many complain of embarrassing rumblings and gurglings and other noises and of the social problems associated with escaping wind.

In a survey of irritable bowel syndrome sufferers which was published in the *British Medical Journal* it was found that every single patient with this problem complained of these three symptoms: abdominal pain, abdominal distension caused by wind and an abnormal bowel habit.

Next, there are the secondary symptoms which affect a lot of sufferers but which don’t affect all patients. You’re almost certain to have the three primary symptoms but you are unlikely to have all of these secondary symptoms.

One or two of the secondary symptoms are caused by the wind that is so widely associated with irritable bowel syndrome and these will probably come and go as the wind comes and goes. Symptoms in this category include a feeling of being full all the time and not being able to eat very much, a constant feeling of nausea, heartburn and indigestion. Back pains of one sort or another are also fairly commonplace and these too are frequently a result of wind accumulating in the intestines. It is even quite common for irritable bowel syndrome sufferers to complain of urinary frequency and other bladder problems caused by pressure produced by wind in the intestines.

Last, but certainly not least, there are the mental symptoms. Anxiety, depression and irritability are all common, but the one mental symptom that really seems to affect irritable bowel syndrome patients more than any other is tiredness.

Even though you may be quite convinced that you are suffering from irritable bowel syndrome you shouldn't make the diagnosis by yourself without visiting your doctor. Although irritable bowel syndrome is probably the commonest of all bowel problems today there are other problems which can cause bowel symptoms and only by visiting your doctor can you be absolutely sure that you have got the diagnosis right.

Stress is one cause of irritable bowel syndrome. The other is diet.

In the last century or so the people who produce, market and sell our food have changed our diet almost beyond recognition.

Today most of us tend to eat a bland over-refined diet that contains very little natural roughage. And the result is that our bowels can't cope very well with this change — they haven't had time to adapt and so they struggle. Our grandparents ate a diet that contained lots of raw, natural foods. We tend to live on prepackaged, convenience foods that may be rich in vitamins and minerals but which are dangerously short on fibre.

To control your IBS properly you need to take a long, cool, careful and critical look at your diet.

You will almost certainly benefit if you gradually increase the amount of fibre that you eat. To do this start eating wholemeal bread or high bran cereals. Eat wholewheat pasta, brown rice, oats — in porridge for example — and more fresh vegetables and fruit, though if you suffer a lot from wind you will probably be wise to avoid any vegetables — such as sprouts — which seem to give you a lot of wind. Nibble fruit and nuts instead of chocolate and sweets.

Try to cut down your fat intake too. If you eat meat then cut off the visible fat. Don't add fat when cooking and grill, bake, steam, poach, casserole and boil rather than roasting or frying. Finally, you may find that you can help yourself by cutting out all dairy products — milk, butter and cheese.

For more information about IBS see my book *Relief from Irritable Bowel Syndrome* published by the European Medical Journal.

Kidney Stones

You can help reduce your risk of developing kidney stones by avoiding sugar and meat and by following a high fibre diet. You should also avoid milk and caffeine and drink plenty of fresh water.

Osteoporosis

There are probably more misconceptions about osteoporosis than about any other disease.

Myth 1: Osteoporosis is a disease which exclusively or largely affects women.

Myth 2: Osteoporosis is directly caused by, or is an inevitable consequence, of menopausal changes in circulating hormone levels.

Myth 3: Osteoporosis (and the risk of developing bone fractures) can be safely prevented and/or cured by swallowing large quantities of calcium — ideally either in the form of dairy produce or calcium tablets.

These myths are well established as apparent facts but are relatively easy to disprove. Osteoporosis is not exclusive to women and it is not caused by the menopause (or even associated with it directly). And a high intake of milk doesn't appear to help avoid bone loss, osteoporosis or fractures. A major study of 77,761 women aged between 34 and 59 showed that women who drank three or more glasses of milk a day had no fewer hip or arm fractures than those who drank little or no milk. The results also showed that fracture rates for milk drinkers were significantly higher for those women who consumed three or more glasses of milk a day.

The three myths were, of course, developed quite deliberately for very specific commercial purposes.

The truth about maintaining strong bones (and avoiding osteoporosis) is quite different to these myths.

One recent study has shown that vegetarians absorb and retain more calcium from foods than do non-vegetarians and other studies cite lower rates of osteoporosis in vegetarians than in non-vegetarians. Vegetarian and vegan diets may actually protect against osteoporosis. The wisest course is to obtain dietary calcium from a wide range of sources. Possible calcium sources include: broccoli, molasses, chick peas, dried figs, tofu, endive, cabbage, kale, spinach and many different types of beans (including soya beans and vegetarian baked beans).

Probably the simplest way to make sure you get plenty of calcium is to eat plenty of dark green leafy vegetables.

Many factors in addition to, and other than, the consumption of calcium play a significant part in the development and maintenance of healthy bones. These factors have not been widely discussed or promoted in recent years and I find it difficult to avoid the conclusion that this has been because these other factors have not been promoted by individuals working for or on behalf of commercial organisations. Put quite simply, it is easy to make money out of selling calcium (either in the form of milk or calcium tablets) but not easy to make money out of offering good advice which does not involve the sale of a product.

It is, for example, vital to remember that there are, in addition to calcium, around twenty other essential nutrients — including a variety of vitamins and minerals — which are required before the body can build and maintain healthy bones. If the diet is deficient in any of these nutrients then the bones will become weak. You don't need to take supplements to obtain these essential nutrients: all you need is a good, balanced diet that includes plenty of fruit and vegetables (preferably organically grown and genetically unmodified).

It is also important to remember that apart from ensuring a reasonable intake of calcium (best done without dairy produce) it is also necessary to reduce the loss of calcium from your body.

There are a number of things you can do to minimise calcium loss.

First, you should avoid tobacco (smokers have a hip fracture risk 40% higher than non smokers).

Second, don't drink more than two cups of coffee or tea a day and keep your intake of alcohol down.

Third, you should be aware that a sedentary lifestyle may lead to calcium losses so take regular, gentle exercise which you enjoy. Exercising just three times a week will help to strengthen bone density noticeably. The best forms of exercise for strengthening the bones include weight training and walking uphill or cycling uphill. (Remember that you should not exercise if it is painful and you should always consult your doctor before starting an exercise programme or altering your exercise habits.)

Fourth you should keep your intake of salt down.

Fifth, it is important to avoid constant dieting. The evidence shows that whenever someone diets and loses weight he or she will also lose bone. Since women tend to diet more than men this is a problem which affects women more than men. Clearly, therefore, women who have spent much of their lives dieting, regaining weight and dieting again will have lost a good deal of bone by the time they reach the menopause. (And the arrival of the menopause will be a mere coincidence.)

It is also important to be aware that the human body also needs vitamin D to make healthy bones. Obtaining vitamin D is easy: ten or twenty minutes of sun on face, hands and arms, taken just three times a week, should produce all the vitamin D the body needs. People with dark skin, or those who live in cloudy or smoggy areas or in northern areas may need slightly more exposure.

Finally, and most importantly, you should be aware that eating animal protein results in withdrawal of calcium from the bones into the bloodstream. The calcium is then excreted in the urine and lost. Eating large amounts of animal protein can dramatically increase the rate at which the body loses calcium. This is probably the most important single secret in the battle against osteoporosis and bone fractures. It is a secret which has been deliberately suppressed and hidden by those industries which have a vested interest in selling their 'solutions' to this problem — and by the meat industry which is, not surprisingly, nervous about the long term consequences to its own profitability once the secret becomes widely known.

The truth is that meat consumption is one of the most important factors in the development of bone loss, osteoporosis and fractures.

(Incidentally, meat protein is a very poor source of calcium. Strawberries contain more calcium than rump steak or corned beef.)

A report which was published in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* in 1994 showed that when volunteers switch from a typical Western diet to one which does not include animal protein calcium losses are halved. A study of the health of 85,900 women aged between 35 and 59 showed that an increase in consumption of animal protein was associated with an increased risk of forearm fracture. No such association was found for the consumption of vegetable protein. Women who consume five or more servings of red meat each week have a significantly increased risk of forearm fracture when compared with women who eat red meat less than once a week.

Moreover, there is strong evidence to suggest that in those countries where calcium consumption is low and bone fracture rates are also low the key factor may well be the level of animal protein consumption.

For example, according to an article in *The Vegan* magazine (published by the Vegan Society in Britain) hip fracture rates in Beijing (China) are among the lowest in the world despite the fact that the mean daily intake of calcium in China is only 540 mg per person per day. (In the US the comparable figure is 1140 mg.) The big nutritional difference between the two countries lies in the amount of animal protein which is consumed. A staggering 70% of the protein consumed in the US is from animals. In China just 7% of the protein consumed is from animals.

In addition to all this it is important to remember that environmental toxins and mental stresses can also interfere with the body's ability to function effectively — and, therefore, its ability to build new bone. And the surgical removal of the ovaries can have a damaging effect on the body's bone building ability.

Osteoporosis is a nasty disease. But it is a disease largely created and sustained by our way of life. As with so many other disorders our slick 'in a bottle', modern solutions often simply add additional problems to existing ones. In my view the best way to avoid osteoporosis — and to deal with it — is to be aware of the real causes and to do something about them.

I believe that osteoporosis is yet another twentieth century lifestyle disease which can, not surprisingly perhaps, best be avoided (and conquered) through a change in lifestyle.

Premenstrual Syndrome

Women who suffer from painful, uncomfortable or unpleasant symptoms just before a period may be able to help themselves by reducing their intake of caffeine, milk, salt and sugar.

Restless Legs Syndrome

Many women complain that while they lie in bed at night their legs twitch. This is called the ‘restless legs syndrome’. It is one of the oldest of all disorders and was first described over 300 years ago. Caffeine is believed to be one of the major causes today. To avoid the problem try drinking less — or weaker — coffee or tea. If you spend much of your time sitting down then mild exercise will probably help.

Rheumatoid Arthritis

There is evidence now available to show that sufferers from rheumatoid arthritis can help themselves by avoiding meat and following a vegetarian diet. You may also benefit from limiting the amount of fresh fruit that you eat.

For more information on arthritis see my book *How To Conquer Arthritis* published by the European Medical Journal.

Strokes

If you want to cut down your risk of having a stroke you should eat more fresh vegetables, more fibre rich cereals and more fresh fruit and avoid foods which are rich in fat — particularly saturated fat. In practice this means avoiding red meat and dairy products.

Tinnitus

It is sometimes possible to ease this exceptionally annoying problem of noises in the ears by cutting down your consumption of fat and sugar.

Tooth Decay and Gum Disease

Half of all five year old children in the West have some tooth decay. Campaigns organised by governments, doctors and dentists have been successfully overshadowed by advertising campaigns run by food companies encouraging children to eat more sweets and chocolates.

The constant consumption of sugar-rich foods feeds the bacteria which produce the acid which attacks teeth and starts the process of decay. By eating fewer sugar-rich foods and by increasing your consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables you will be able dramatically to reduce the risk of suffering from either tooth decay or gum disease.

Ulcers (gastric and duodenal)

cf Indigestion

Varicose Veins

You are more likely to develop and suffer from varicose veins if you eat a high fat, low fibre diet. Constipation and obesity — both problems which are associated with a high fat, low fibre diet — dramatically increase the risk of varicose veins developing.

Wind

This problem is one of the commonest of all health problems — affecting well over half of the population. Doctors really don t understand much about, it. And can’t do much to deal with it.

The normal gastrointestinal tract is said to contain between 100 and 200 millilitres of gas under normal circumstances. During an ordinary sort of day a normal individual will often produce 1 to 2 litres of gas. It is, therefore, quite obvious that there must be a tendency for wind to pass out of the gastrointestinal tract at one end or the other. (Wind consists of 250 different gases. The study of flatulence is called flatology. The most astonishing fact about wind is that it is normal to ‘break wind’ at around 100 mph.)

Wind is produced within the gastrointestinal tract as food is digested, and some foods are more likely than others to result in the production of large quantities of wind. Brussels sprouts and cabbage are fairly widely recognised as offending vegetables and beans, of course, have a tremendous reputation in this respect.

It is, however, important to understand that not all of the wind in the gastrointestinal tract is a result of the normal digestive process. Some of the wind that causes such embarrassing noises gets into the intestinal tract in the same way that food gets in: it is swallowed. People who chew gum, smoke cigarettes or eat too quickly will often swallow air as will those individuals who gulp in air as a nervous habit. Indeed, two thirds of the gas in your body is probably swallowed air. You’re likely to swallow too much air if you gulp hot drinks or sip drinks through a straw. Habits like sucking mints can also cause wind to accumulate. Fizzy drinks are an obvious cause of wind. Chewing with an open mouth or talking with your mouth full increases the likelihood of wind too. Foods that are likely to cause wind include: beans, broccoli, cabbage, raisins, bananas, popcorn, peanuts, onions, chocolate, coffee and milk.

Things Every Wind Sufferer Should Know

1. Swallowing air is a common (and unconscious) cause of bloating.

2. Bacterial metabolism of food in the intestine may cause gas. Some foods — e.g. beans and cabbage — are worse than others.

3. Eating simple sugars may make wind worse. Foods to avoid in particular include table sugar, sweets, biscuits, cakes, crisps, white bread and processed breakfast cereals. Remember that around 80% of the sugar we eat annually comes from packaged foods.

4. Tolerance to the amount of gas in the intestine varies enormously. Some people are particularly sensitive to it.

5. Eating too quickly can result in air being swallowed and chewing gum and smoking cigarettes can also both result in more air being swallowed.

6. Wind sufferers should avoid the following foods: milk and dairy produce, fresh fruits, some vegetables. Carbonated beverages may make things worse — as may antacids such as baking soda.

7. Some people benefit by eating more fibre. Others benefit by eating less.

8. If the gas coming out smells unpleasant then you are probably eating too much animal protein (or failing to digest it properly). Animal proteins contain large amounts of sulphur — which smells a lot.

9. Too much fat encourages inflammation in the intestinal tract. And this can cause bloating.

10. The foods we are most likely to be sensitive to (and which are most likely to cause problems) are the foods to which we are addicted. So, if you can’t stop eating chocolate you are probably sensitive to it. If cheese is your favourite food then you may well be sensitive to dairy produce.

11. Lactose intolerance affects around 1 in 7 individuals of Northern or Middle European descent — and up to 95% of those of African, American, Asian origin.

12. Drinking water can help reduce bloating. You need two to three litres a day. Coffee, tea and cola drinks don’t count because they may make things worse.

CHAPTER 14

TWENTY ONE REASONS FOR BEING A VEGETARIAN

Vegetarianism is the fastest growing trend in the developed world.

Here are 21 reasons why you should think about turning vegetarian too.

1. Avoiding meat is one of the best and simplest ways to cut down your fat consumption. Modern farm animals are deliberately fattened up to increase profits. Eating fatty meat increases your chances of having a heart attack or developing cancer.

2. Every minute of every working day thousands of animals are killed in slaughterhouses. Many animals are bled to death. Pain and misery are commonplace. In America alone 500,000 animals are killed for meat every hour.

3. There are millions of cases of food poisoning recorded every year. The vast majority of all those cases are caused by eating meat.

4. Meat contains absolutely nothing — no proteins, vitamins or minerals — that the human body cannot obtain perfectly happily from a vegetarian diet.

5. African countries — where millions are starving to death — export grain to the developed world so that animals can be fattened for the dining tables of the affluent nations.

6. ‘Meat’ can include the tail, head, feet, rectum and spinal cord of an animal.

7. A sausage may contain ground-up intestines. How can anyone be sure that the intestines are empty when they are ground up? Do you really want to eat the content of a pig’s intestines?

8. If we eat the plants we grow — instead of feeding them to animals — the world’s food shortage will disappear virtually overnight. One hundred acres of land will produce enough beef for 20 people but enough wheat to feed 240 people.

9. Every day tens of millions of one day old male chicks are killed because they will not be able to lay eggs. There are no rules about how this mass slaughter takes place. Some are crushed or suffocated to death. Many are used for fertiliser or fed to other animals.

10. Animals who die for your dinner table die alone, in terror, in sadness and in pain. The killing is merciless and inhumane.

11. It is much easier to become — and stay — slim if you are vegetarian. (By ‘slim’ I do not mean ‘abnormally slender’ or ‘underweight’ but, rather, an absence of excess weight.)

12. Half the rainforests in the world have been destroyed to clear ground to graze cattle to make beefburgers. The burning of the forests contributes 20% of all greenhouse gases. Roughly 1,000 species a year become extinct because of the destruction of the rain forests. Approximately 260 million acres of US forest have been cleared to grow crops to feed cattle so that people can eat meat.

13. Every year 440 million tons of grain are fed to livestock — so that the world’s rich can eat meat. At the same time 500 million people in poor countries are starving to death. Every six seconds someone in the world starves to death because people in the west are eating meat. Approximately 60 million people a year die of starvation. All those lives could be saved — because those people could eat the grain used to fatten cattle and other farm animals — if Americans ate 10% less meat.

14. The world’s fresh water shortage is being made worse by animal farming. And meat producers are the biggest polluters of water. It takes 2,500 gallons of water to produce one pound of meat. If the meat industry in America wasn’t supported by the taxpayer paying a large proportion of its water costs then hamburger meat would cost $35 a pound.

15. If you eat meat you are consuming hormones that were fed to the animals. No one knows what effect those hormones will have on your health. In some parts of the world as many as one in four hamburgers contain growth hormones that were originally given to cattle.

16. The following diseases are commoner among meat eaters: anaemia, appendicitis, arthritis, breast cancer, cancer of the colon, cancer of the prostate, constipation, diabetes, gallstones, gout, high blood pressure, indigestion, obesity, piles, strokes and varicose veins. Lifelong vegetarians visit hospital 22% less often than meat eaters — and for shorter stays. Vegetarians have a 20% lower blood cholesterol levels than meat eaters — and this reduces heart attack and cancer risks considerably.

17. Some farmers use tranquillisers to keep animals calm. Others routinely use antibiotics to stave off infection. When you eat meat you are eating those drugs. Considerably more than half of all the antibiotics sold are given by farmers to healthy animals and the percentage of staphylococci infections resistant to penicillin went up from 13% in 1960 to 91% in 1988.

18. In a lifetime the average meat eater will consume 36 pigs, 36 sheep and 750 chickens and turkeys. Do you want that much carnage on your conscience?

19. Animals suffer from pain and fear just as much as you do. How would you like to spend your last hours locked in a truck, packed into a cage with hundreds of other terrified animals and then cruelly pushed into a blood soaked death chamber. Anyone who eats meat condones and supports the way animals are treated.

20. Animals which are a year old are often far more rational — and capable of logical thought — than six week old babies. Pigs and sheep are far more intelligent than small children. Eating dead animals is barbaric.

21. Vegetarians are fitter than meat eaters. Many of the world's most successful athletes are vegetarian.

What can I eat?

Many people are put off becoming vegetarian because they can't think what they will be able to eat if they don't eat meat.

A quick trip to your local supermarket will, however, show that there are not only many different fruits and vegetables available but that because vegetarianism is growing rapidly there are many ready-made vegetarian meals on sale.

You will also find many 'meat substitute' meals available. You can buy vegetarian sausages and hamburgers, and stews and curries made with soya have a similar texture to meals made with meat.

Vegetarian Recipes

Here are some simple, meat free recipes designed to show you that life without meat need not be dull.

SPAGHETTI NAPOLETANA

Serves 2

3oz/90g wholemeal spaghetti
1 tablespoon oil
2oz/60g mushrooms, chopped
1/2 green pepper, chopped
1 small carrot, chopped
1 small clove garlic, chopped
1 small onion, chopped
4oz/250g tinned tomatoes
1 tablespoon tomato puree
herbs and seasoning to taste

Cook the spaghetti in boiling water. Fry the vegetables in oil for 5 minutes. Add the tomatoes, the tomato puree and herbs and seasoning to taste. Cook for a few more minutes. Drain the spaghetti and serve with the thick vegetable sauce poured over it.

PARISIAN SALAD

Serves 2

1 orange, peeled and segmented
1 carrot, grated
l/2oz/15g almonds, chopped
2oz/60g celery, chopped
1 stick French bread

Break the orange segments in half, then mix the first four ingredients together. Eat with the French bread stick.

SAVOURY DUTCH CAKES

Serves 2
8oz/250g potatoes, cooked in their skins
nutmeg to taste
ground black pepper to taste
1 tablespoon soya milk
1 medium onion, finely chopped
4oz/125g cooked green vegetables

If you intend to use the oven, preheat to 180 C (350 F/gas mark 4) and grease a baking tray. Peel the potatoes, then mash with the nutmeg and black pepper. Add the soya milk. Fry the onion without oil in a non-stick pan until tender. Mix together the potatoes, green vegetables and onion and form them into four round cakes. Bake for 10 minutes or grill under a moderate heat for 15 minutes.

GOLDEN VEGETABLE PARCELS

Serves 2
1/4 pint/150ml soya milk
1/2 tablespoon cornflour
1/2 tablespoon chopped parsley
black pepper to taste
selection of leftover cooked vegetables
4oz/125g shortcrust puff pastry

Preheat the oven to 220 C (425 F/gas mark 7) and grease a baking tray. Mix the cornflour with a little cold soya milk to make a smooth paste. Pour remaining milk into a saucepan, then add cornflour paste and heat slowly, and stir. Keep the milk on the heat until it has thickened, then add the parsley and season with black pepper. Add the cooked vegetables. Roll out the pastry on a floured surface and cut it into four squares. Put the vegetables into the centres of two of the pastry squares. Brush the edges of the squares with water, and then put the remaining squares on top to make ‘parcels’. Pinch the edges together well to seal them. Transfer the parcels to the baking tray and bake for 25 minutes.

FRENCH BROCCOLI

Serves 2
1 tablespoon vegetable oil
2 spring onions, chopped
1 clove garlic crushed
1/2 teaspoon oregano
1/2 teaspoon tarragon
1 tablespoon freshly chopped parsley
pinch cayenne pepper
ground black pepper to taste
12oz/350g cooked broccoli
2oz/60g breadcrumbs

Heat the oil and sauté the onions and garlic. Add the herbs and seasonings and then the broccoli. Put the mixture into a fireproof casserole. Place the breadcrumbs on top. Grill until the top appears well browned.

HOT DEVILLED EGGS

Serves 2

2 hard-boiled eggs
1 tablespoon soya yoghurt
ground black pepper to taste
pinch of dry mustard powder
paprika to taste

Shell the eggs and cut in half lengthways. Carefully remove the yolks with a sharp knife and put to one side for use in another dish, or as a sandwich filling. Add the pepper and mustard to the yoghurt and mix until smooth. Spoon the mixture into egg white hollows and sprinkle lightly with paprika.

MILANESE PEPPERS

Serves 2
1 large red or green pepper
1 tablespoon vegetable oil 1 large onion, chopped
1 clove garlic, crushed
2 tablespoons red wine
1 tablespoon tomato puree
1 tablespoon mixed chopped rosemary, oregano, parsley and mint
4 tablespoons vegetable stock
4oz/125g pasta shapes, uncooked
1 1/2 oz/40g breadcrumbs
1 egg white

Preheat the oven to 180 C (350 F/gas mark 4) and grease a baking dish. Boil the pepper in water for 1 minute. Then cool it under running water, halve and remove the seeds. Heat the oil and sauté the onion and garlic. Add the wine, tomato puree, herbs and stock. Simmer for 10 minutes. Place the pasta shapes in a large bowl. Add the breadcrumbs and egg white, mix well, then add the cooked onion and herbs. Spoon the mixture into the pepper halves and place on a baking dish. Put the entire baking dish into a shallow tray containing a little water. Cover, and bake for 35 minutes.

OAT BRAN MUFFINS

Makes about 12 American-style muffins (small cakes, not muffins for toasting)
12oz/350g oat bran
1/2 oz/40g mixed dried fruit
(raisins, sultanas, currants, chopped dates, etc.)
1 tablespoon baking powder
1 1/2 oz/40g chopped, mixed nuts
2oz/60g sugar or equivalent artificial sweetener
8 fl. oz/250ml soya milk
2 tablespoons vegetable oil
2 egg whites

Preheat the oven to 220 C (425 F/ gas mark 7) and grease a 12-hole deep patty tin. Mix the oat bran, dried fruit, baking powder and nuts, then add the sugar. Mix the milk, oil and egg whites together and add to the oat bran mixture. Mix thoroughly and spoon the mixture evenly into the patty tins. Bake for 15-20 minutes or until the muffins are firm to press.

NUT BISCUITS

Makes about 10 biscuits
rice paper
2 egg whites
4oz/125g ground mixed nuts
30z/90g sugar
2 tablespoons ground brown rice

Preheat the oven to 180 C (350 F/gas mark 4). Grease a baking tray and line it with rice paper. Whisk the egg whites until stiff. Add the nuts, sugar and rice. Space out dollops of the mixture on the rice paper, and cook for 20-25 minutes. Serve the biscuits each with their square of rice paper.

VEGETABLE HOTPOT

Serves 2
1 tablespoon vegetable oil
1 medium onion, chopped
1 small turnip, sliced
1 large carrot, sliced
1 medium potato, sliced
4 sprouts, sliced
1 pint/600ml water
1 tablespoon soya sauce
1 tablespoon chopped fresh parsley

In a heavy saucepan fry the onion in the oil. Add the rest of the vegetables and half the water. Bring to the boil, then simmer covered for 20 minutes. Add the remaining water and the soya sauce. Just before serving add the parsley.

ROYAL SALAD

Serves 2
1 cos lettuce
2 carrots
2 tomatoes
4 radishes
2oz/60g mushrooms
4 spring onions
1/2 small green pepper
1 apple
2 tablespoons vegetable oil
1 tablespoon cider vinegar
2oz/60g walnut piece
l oz/30g roasted peanuts
l oz/30g raisins

Shred the lettuce. Grate and chop the vegetables and slice the apple. Combine the oil and vinegar to make a dressing and mix well with the salad. Finally, add the nuts and raisins.

WELSH MUSHROOMS

Serves 2
1/2 onion, finely chopped
1 clove garlic, finely chopped
1 tablespoon vegetable oil
8oz/250g mushrooms, chopped
dash of soya sauce
2 slices wholemeal toast

Sauté the onion and garlic in the oil. Add the mushrooms to the pan and cook gently. Stir in the soya sauce. Serve on hot toast.

SPAGHETTI VERONA

Serves 2
oil for frying
1 onion, chopped
1 stick celery, chopped
2 tablespoons red wine
2oz/390g tin tomatoes
1 tablespoon tomato puree
1 teaspoon dried mixed Italian herbs

1/4 pint/150ml vegetable stock
6oz/175g wholewheat spaghetti

Heat the oil in a frying pan and add the onion and the celery. Add the wine and bring to the boil. Simmer for a few minutes and add the tomatoes, tomato puree and seasoning. Pour in the stock and simmer for 30 minutes. Cook the spaghetti according to the instructions on the packet, and serve immediately with the hot sauce poured over it.

PORTUGUESE HOTPOT

Serves 2
1 large potato
1 turnip
1 carrot
1 parsnip
1 onion
4oz/125g French beans
1 clove garlic
1/4 pint/ 150ml vegetable stock
1 teaspoon lemon juice
4 tomatoes, quartered

Coarsely chop all the vegetables (except the tomatoes) and steam them. Add the vegetable stock and lemon juice. Mix well and continue to cook over a low heat. When the vegetables are just about ready, add the chopped tomatoes. Cook until vegetables ready and tomatoes warmed through.

RUSSIAN CHILLI

Serves 2
1 /2 large onion, chopped
1 tablespoon vegetable oil
4oz/125g burghul (or bulgur) wheat
1 large tin tomatoes
1 tablespoon tomato puree
1 teaspoon chilli powder
ground black pepper to taste
1/2 large tin red kidney beans or 1 small tin

Saute the onion in the oil. Add the remaining ingredients except the kidney beans and simmer until the wheat is cooked but still firm. Heat the kidney beans separately and then add.

PILOT'S PIE

Serves 2
1 tablespoon vegetable oil
3oz/90g onion, chopped
3oz/90g carrot, grated
1/2 teaspoon dried thyme
1/2 tablespoon wholemeal flour
1/2 teaspoon yeast extract
4oz/125g shortcrust pastry

Preheat the oven to 190 C (375 F/gas mark 5) and grease a baking dish. Heat the oil and sauté the onion, then add the carrot and thyme and cook gently for 10 minutes. Stir in the flour and yeast extract. Leave to cool. Roll out the pastry and line the dish with half the pastry and pile the filling into the centre. Put the remaining pastry on top and seal the edges. Make two or three small slits in the top of the pie and bake for 30 minutes.

GREEK TOMATOES

Serves 2
1 courgette
1 small aubergine

1 tablespoon vegetable oil
1 medium onion, chopped
1 clove garlic, finely chopped
1 small pepper, seeded and chopped
12oz/390g tin tomatoes
black pepper to taste

Slice the courgette and the aubergine. Leave to drain for 30 minutes. Rinse and squeeze out any excess moisture. Heat the oil in a frying pan and fry the onion and garlic. Then add all the vegetables except the tomatoes and sauté for a few minutes. Add the tomatoes and season with black pepper. Cover and simmer for 30 minutes.

WINTER SOUP

Serves 2
1 large carrot
1 large onion
2 sticks celery
half small turnip
2 medium sized potatoes
half pint/300ml vegetable stock
6 sprigs parsley
grated nutmeg and grated black pepper to taste

Chop all the vegetables and put them into a large saucepan. Add the stock and simmer for 1 hour. Just before the end of the cooking time add the parsley. Season with grated nutmeg and black pepper.

JAMAICAN RICE

Serves 2
1 tablespoon vegetable oil
half large onion, sliced
half red apple, sliced
pinch of curry powder
half pint/300ml water
4oz/125g brown rice
1 teaspoon black treacle
1 small banana, sliced
1 tablespoon desiccated coconut

Heat the oil and saute the onion and apple. Add the curry powder and water. Bring to the boil. Add the rice and treacle and cook until the water is absorbed and the rice is tender. Drain and add the banana. Sprinkle the coconut on top and heat through for a moment and then serve.

BANANA SPECIAL

Serves 2
2 bananas
1 small orange, juiced
l oz/30g sugar
l oz/15g polyunsaturated low fat spread

Preheat the oven to 180 C (350 F/gas mark 4), and grease an ovenproof dish. Peel the bananas, cut them in half lengthways and place them in the dish. Pour the orange juice over the bananas and sprinkle the sugar on top. Place the low fat spread on top of the bananas and cook for 15 minutes.

SPICY RED PEAR

Serves 1
1 large pear
4 tablespoons red wine
ground or whole spices — ginger, cinnamon and cloves

Peel the pear, leaving it whole with the stalk on.
Simmer in the red wine with the spices until cooked.
Serve hot.

FRUIT PUNCH

Makes about 1 pint/600ml
1 pint/600ml natural (unsweetened) pineapple juice
1 banana, sliced
1apple, chopped
l oz/30g sesame seeds
l oz/30g sunflower seeds
l oz/30g raisins
l oz/30g currants

Put all the ingredients in blender and liquidise. Keep in the refrigerator and serve chilled.

CHAPTER 15

HEALTHY EATING — STEP ONE: EAT MORE FIBRE

Why you should increase the amount of fibre you eat

Modern food manufacturing processes make life much easier for us in many ways. Most of us don't have to grow our own food. We don't have to get up early in the morning, go out into the fields and break our backs picking the food we need to eat. We don't even have to wash our food or prepare it for cooking. We can walk into a supermarket and buy our food in boxes and tins. The preservatives used by food manufacturers mean that we can keep stocks of food on our pantry shelves so that we only have to visit the shops once a month. Life has never been easier and the big food companies spend a lot of time and energy trying to make things easier and easier for us.

Unfortunately, our bodies have failed to develop and change as fast as the food industry has changed the sort of food we eat. One major problem is that although food manufacturers have got into the habit of removing most of the roughage — which they see as waste — from our food our bodies still need that roughage in order to function properly.

When they first started doing this the food manufacturers probably thought that they were doing us a favour. After all, fibre doesn't contain any obvious nutrients. Indeed, most of the fibre we eat goes straight through our intestinal tracts and comes out — almost unchanged — at the other end. Fibre doesn't help you to build muscles and it doesn't provide essential ingredients. However, despite this, fibre is an essential part of your daily diet; it helps to stimulate the digestive system, helps to keep food moving and gives the bowels something to squeeze. Since fibre is filling but low calorie the consumption of a diet which contains a good quantity of fibre means that you will be less likely to put on weight.

This slimming quality of fibre is enhanced by the fact that fibre slows down the absorption of sugar and helps to reduce the amount of fat that your body absorbs. Fibre may not contain any essential nutrients but it is a vital part of your diet — particularly if you want to lose excess weight and stay slim. If your diet contains too little fibre then the result will be that in addition to being overweight you may well be susceptible to a wide range of disorders as varied as cancer, diverticular disease of the bowel, appendicitis, gall stones and varicose veins.

By now it should be clear to you that the chances are high that you need to eat more fibre. If your present diet is 'average' and depends heavily on prepackaged, modern 'convenience' foods then you probably need to double your consumption of fibre. You can get all the extra fibre you need simply by taking special care about the diet you eat. You do not need to buy special fibre supplements. In fact your body will be healthier if you get the fibre it needs simply by making some fundamental alterations to the sort of things that you eat on a regular basis.

Seven ways in which increasing your fibre intake will improve your health

1. Foods which contain a large amount of fibre tend to need a lot of chewing. This will help your digestion.

2. By eating regular amounts of fibre you will help to ensure that your body gets rid of waste products more easily. A diet which contains too little fibre is likely to lead to constipation. A diet which contains decent quantities of fibre is likely to produce healthy and regular bowel movements.

3. If you ensure that your diet contains good quantities of fibre you will reduce your chances of suffering from a wide range of digestive troubles — including appendicitis, gall stones and many bowel and stomach problems (including cancer).

4. Because foods which contain large quantities of fibre are filling (but inevitably contain relatively few calories) a diet which includes fibre-rich foods will result in you feeling full sooner and, therefore, eating less. An important advantage of this type of diet is that you will be less likely to put on excess weight and more likely to stay slim when you have become slim.

5. A diet which contains decent quantities of fibre will protect you from a variety of non-bowel disorders — including diabetes and varicose veins.

6. The fibre in the food you eat helps to reduce the amount of fat that your body absorbs. Inevitably, therefore, this means that a high fibre diet will help reduce the amount of damage which fat does to your body. By eating plenty of fibre rich foods you will reduce your chances of developing heart disease, high blood pressure or a stroke.

7. Because fibre helps to absorb unwanted toxins and poisons — which you may swallow with the food you eat — a

high fibre diet will help to stop these toxic substances being absorbed into your body and making you ill.

Ten natural, healthy, easy ways to increase the amount of fibre you eat

Warning: If your fibre intake is low you should increase the amount of fibre you eat fairly gradually and slowly. If you suddenly and dramatically increase your fibre intake you may suffer from wind, pain and other signs of abdominal discomfort.

1. Try to eat more bread. Your intake of fibre will be kept highest if you eat wholemeal bread rather than white bread.

2. Eat more pasta. Again your intake of fibre will be maximised if you eat wholewheat pasta rather than white pasta.

3. Make an effort to eat more fresh, organic vegetables — a simple move which will dramatically increase your fibre intake. Try not to peel vegetables before you cook them — and certainly don’t peel them too thickly. Don’t cook your vegetables for too long, and cook them in as little water as possible. When preparing salads add grated raw vegetables.

4. You should also increase your intake of fresh fruit. Most fruits are rich in fibre.

5. Eat more rice. If possible eat brown rather than white rice.

6. Use wholemeal or wholewheat flour whenever possible.

7. Oats are an excellent source of fibre. You can eat them in cereals or in porridge or you can use them to make biscuits and crumbles.

8. Instead of nibbling sugar-rich sweets or fat-rich chocolates eat fibre-rich dried fruits between meals when you want a snack.

9. Try to eat more pulses (such as beans). These contain quite a lot of fibre.

10. If you must buy biscuits (which tend to contain large quantities of sugar) try to buy wholemeal biscuits — which are likely to contain more fibre.

CHAPTER 16

HEALTHY EATING — STEP TWO: EAT LESS SUGAR

Why you should eat less sugar

Sugar has a vastly over-rated reputation as a foodstuff. Whenever small villages get cut off by snow or floods sugar is usually one of the allegedly 'staple' ingredients airlifted in by relief organisations. But sugar is a pretty useless food. It is rich in calories and will give you a quick fix if you are feeling hungry. But apart from energy you won't get much else from sugar. It is true that some types of sugar — for example blackstrap molasses — contain a few vitamins and minerals. But these ingredients aren't present in any appreciable quantities, and apart from honey (which is an exception) there isn't very much nutritional advantage to be gained by eating these types of sugar to the refined white or brown varieties which are most commonly sold. By and large sugar is sugar and most of us eat far too much of it.

It is important to realise that you won't necessarily cut down your intake of sugar simply by avoiding sweets, by not putting sugar in your tea or coffee and by using less sugar in cooking.

It is customary these days for many food manufacturers to use sugar in a whole host of unlikely ways. For example, sugar is likely to be added to tinned soup (allegedly to 'bring out the flavour' and to 'improve the texture' though you have to wonder at the quality of the soup which needs such artificial help); to tomato sauce (to make it 'smoother', though I'm not sure who decided that 'smooth' sauce was inevitably better than 'unsmoothed' sauce); to biscuits (apparently to make them 'crumblier' and 'crunchier', though I don't know about you but I don't particularly want my biscuits to crumble all over the place) and even to tinned meat to make it 'soft' (though I can't imagine anyone interested in healthy eating being prepared even to contemplate buying tinned meat).

The ubiquitous nature of sugar in refined and prepackaged foods and its image as a useful, even essential, foodstuff (and the image of it as being a rather harmless substance) means that on average we eat around 100 lbs (45kg) of sugar every year. There is no doubt that many people eat their own weight in sugar every twelve months!

Despite its image, however, sugar can be — and often is — extremely bad for you. The consumption of too much sugar frequently leads to obesity and all the problems associated with overweight. Sugar causes tooth decay and is now strongly associated with cancers of the breast and intestine.

Two ways in which eating less sugar will improve your health

1. Eating less sugar will mean that you suffer less tooth decay.

2. Keeping your sugar intake down will help you to control your weight. There is no doubt that a high sugar intake results in obesity and an increased risk of heart disease, cancer and other potentially lethal conditions.

Twelve easy ways to eat less sugar

1. Eat more natural foods — and fewer prepackaged foods. Some foods (such as fruit) do contain natural sugars but these will be mixed with lots of fibre and will be far less likely to do you harm. If you buy tinned fruits try to select the products which are packed in their own juices rather than in a sugar rich syrup.

2. Make an effort to reduce the amount of sugar you use in drinks such as tea or coffee. If you can't cope with hot drinks unless they are sweetened try using one of the many, available artificial sweeteners. As an alternative try reducing the number of cups of tea or coffee that you drink or change to other types of hot drink (for example: tea with lemon or peppermint tea which does not need sweetening).

3. Don't buy sugar rich soft drinks. Instead choose low calorie drinks or mineral water.

4. To make sure that your baby doesn't develop a 'sweet tooth' don't add sugar to milk when preparing a feed and don't buy baby foods which contain added sugar.

5. When buying fruit juices look for the natural variety rather than the ones which have added, extra sugar.

6. Buy jams and marmalades which contain less sugar than usual and when baking experiment by using slightly less sugar than recipes recommend.

7. When cooking try using spices or fruits to sweeten foods — instead of adding an enormous amount of sugar.

8. Instead of buying sweets and chocolates to nibble in between meals or during the evening choose dried fruits and nuts instead.

9. When buying biscuits choose wholemeal ones which contain relatively little sugar and eschew biscuits which are filled with cream or covered with chocolate.

10 Don’t buy sweetened yoghurts. Instead buy natural, unsweetened yoghurt and to add taste and flavour add your own fruit.

11. If you are spreading jam or marmalade on bread do it thinly to reduce your sugar intake.

12. Choose fresh fruit or another alternative instead of a sugar rich pudding which is probably also rich in fat. (Remember this when eating out.)

CHAPTER 17

HEALTHY EATING — STEP THREE: EAT LESS FAT

Why you should eat less fat

If you eat too much cholesterol there is a risk that your body’s white cells — crucial warriors in your body’s immune system defences — may be damaged. And if you have lots of fat in your blood that will also affect your body’s ability to deal with infections.

In a normal, healthy body white cells constantly patrol your blood stream hunting out bacteria (and stray cancer cells). If your blood stream is clogged with fat your white cells simply cannot move around effectively.

Imagine how difficult it would be for a group of lifeguards to swim through an oilslick and you’ll have an idea of just how difficult it is for white cells to move through fat-soaked blood.

Incidentally, all fats are bad for your immune system but animal fats are probably worse than others, and can probably do more damage to your immune system. One of the reasons for this is the fact that animal fat is often contaminated with chemical residues — toxic and possibly carcinogenic residues of drugs consumed (accidentally or deliberately) by feeding animals.

Governments often recommend that a healthy diet should contain no more than 30% fat. I think that figure is far too high (probably because a relatively high fat diet helps keep the food industry rich and happy).

I believe that you should aim to have no more than 15-20% fat in your diet. If for some reason you need to follow a low fat diet you may wish to cut your consumption of fat to 10-15%.

Cutting down your total fat intake will reduce your calorie intake and will make it easier for you to get slim — and stay slim. And reducing your intake of saturated fat will dramatically improve your health and reduce your susceptibility to a wide range of disorders (particularly heart disease and high blood pressure).

It is essential to have some fat in your diet in order to stay healthy and fit. There are two obvious reasons why your body needs some fat.

First, essential vitamins such as A and D are soluble in fat. If your diet doesn’t include any fat then you may become short in these vitamins.

Second, some polyunsaturated fatty acids are needed for the maintenance of your cell membranes and for the production of vital substances such as prostaglandins.

But it is desperately important that you try to keep your intake of fat to a minimum. If you eat too much fat — and an ordinary, modern, Western diet will almost certainly contain too much fat — then you will run a risk of developing clogged arteries, heart disease and high blood pressure.

Three ways in which a low fat diet will improve your health

1. Fat is rich in calories. If you eat a diet which contains a lot of fat then there is a big chance that you will become obese — and you will subsequently have difficulty in losing that excess weight. Eating a low fat diet will make it easier for you to get slim — and stay slim.

2. If you eat a diet which contains too much saturated fat then you will run a real risk of developing potentially deadly heart disease. A low fat diet won’t make you immune from heart disease — but it will reduce your susceptibility to this type of illness.

3. A high fat diet will increase your risk of developing cancer. Keeping down your intake of fat will cut your risk of developing cancer.

Ten easy ways to reduce the amount of fat you eat

1. Don’t fry or roast food. Grill, steam, poach, casserole, bake or boil — but don’t fry or roast unless you absolutely must. If you do fry then use a non-stick pan so that you don’t have to add lots of extra fat to whatever it is that you are cooking.

2. Drink skimmed or semi-skimmed milk rather than the full fat variety.

3. Avoid butter and margarine (which contain a lot of saturated fat) and use low fat spreads instead. You will find it easier to be more sparing with fatty spreads if you make an effort to buy bread which you really like. Good bread doesn’t need a layer of fat to make it palatable.

4. If you must eat meat (which isn’t good for your health) then eat only lean meat; avoid red meat whenever you can

(because red meat is often rich in hidden or invisible fat); cut off visible fat before cooking or eating, and after grilling or cooking meat on a rack (so that the fat drips out), throw the fat away rather than try to find a use for it in the kitchen.

5. Use oil which is rich in polyunsaturates and which contains few saturates, instead of a hard fat, when you are baking.

6. When making chips out of potatoes cut them thickly (because they will soak up less fat), make sure that the fat or oil you use is very hot before you add the chips (they will soak up less of the fat if it is very hot) and dry them on kitchen paper after you have cooked them in order to remove any excess oil.

7. If you must buy cream buy single cream rather than double cream. It is often possible to replace cream in recipes with yoghurt.

8. Try to choose low fat cheese, yoghurt, salad dressings and other products when you are shopping.

9. Add herbs rather than butter to vegetables when you have cooked them. Vegetables don’t need to have butter added to them if they have been properly cooked.

10. Try to use less fat in cooking. Experiment with low fat recipes.

How much fat is there in the food you eat?

It is often difficult to find out how much fat there is in particular foods. And it is often terribly easy to eat foods which contain a lot of fat without realising it. This specially produced list below is designed to help solve that problem. It may contain a few surprises.

Remember that the figures on this list are only approximate figures intended to be used as a general guide. And remember that if you cook in additional fat the effective fat content of the food you are cooking will rise — often dramatically.

To calculate the percentage of fat in foods which are not on this list look at the calorie list on the package label and divide the number of calories obtained from fat by the total number of calories; then multiply that total by 100 to obtain the percentage.

Almonds 56%
Anchovies 20%
Anchovy, canned, drained 20%
Apple 1%
Apple juice 0%
Apple, baked 0%
Apricot 0%
Artichoke 0%
Asparagus 0%
Aubergine 0%
Avocado pear 22%

Bacon, back fried 44%
Bacon, back grilled 35%
Bacon, streaky 38%
Baked beans 1 %
Banana 0%
Beans, green 0%
Beans, kidney 1%
Beans, lentils 0%
Beans, lima 0%
Beans, pinto 0%
Beef, minced 26%
Beef, roast 34%
Beef suet 95%

Beefburger 27%
Beer 0%
Beetroot 0%
Biscuits, chocolate (digestives) 24%
Biscuits, chocolate chip 20%
Biscuits, cream sandwich 26%
Biscuits, digestive 20%
Biscuits, macaroon 23%
Biscuits, plain 17%
Black pudding 25%
Blackberries 0%
Blackcurrant drink 0%
Blackcurrants 0%
Bran 6%
Bran flakes 2%
Bran wheat 5%
Brazil nuts 61 %
Bread, brown 2%
Bread, Currant 8%
Bread, English muffin 2%
Bread, French stick 3%
Bread, granary 3%
Bread roll (white) 7%
Bread, rye 2%
Bread, soda 3%
Bread, wheatgerm 2%
Bread, white 2%
Bread, white, fried 32%
Bread, white, toasted 1 %
Bread, wholemeal 3%
Broad beans 1 %
Broccoli 0%
Brown sauce 0%
Brussels sprouts 0%
Butter 82%

Cabbage 0%
Carrot 0%
Cashew nuts, roasted, unsalted 46%
Cauliflower 0%
Caviar, black 16%
Celery 0%
Chapatti 1%
Cheese, Austrian smoked 22%
Cheese, Blue Brie 38%
Cheese, Boursin 42%
Cheese, Brie 27%
Cheese, Caerphilly 31%
Cheese, Camembert 23%
Cheese, Cheddar 33%
Cheese, Cheshire 31%
Cheese, Cottage (low fat) 2%
Cheese, Cream 47%
Cheese, Danish Blue 30%
Cheese, Double Gloucester 34%
Cheese, Edam 28%

Cheese, Emmenthal 30%
Cheese, Feta 20%
Cheese, Fromage Frais 7%
Cheese, Gorgonzola 34%
Cheese, Gouda 31%
Cheese, Gruyere 32%
Cheese, Lancashire 31 %
Cheese, Leicester 34%
Cheese, Marscarpone 46%
Cheese, Mozarella 21 %
Cheese, Parmesan 33%
Cheese, Roquefort 31%
Cheese, Stilton, blue 35%
Cheese, Stilton, white 31 %
Cheese, Wensleydale 31%
Cherries 0%
Chestnuts 3%
Chickpeas 2%
Chicken, dark meat, no skin 6%
Chicken, light meat, no skin 5%
Chicken, roast 14%
Chicory 0%
Chillies 1%
Chinese leaves 0%
Chocolate bar, milk 30%
Chocolate bar, plain 30%
Chocolate bar with nuts 26%
Chocolate drink 6%
Chutney 0%
Cider 0%
Cockles, shelled 1%
Cocoa 20%
Coconut, shredded 35%
Cod, steamed 1%
Cod, grilled 1%
Cod fillet in batter 10%
Cod’s roe 4%
Coffee 0%
Cola drink 0%
Coleslaw 5%
Coley, raw 1%
Corn, canned, cream style 1 %
Corn, canned 1%
Corn on the cob, fresh 0%
Cornflakes 1%
Corned beef 33%
Courgettes 0%
Crabmeat 5%
Cranberry sauce 0%
Cream, aerosol spray 32%
Cream, clotted 64%
Cream, double 48%
Cream, Fraiche, Half fat 10%
Cream, Fraiche 27%
Cream, half cream 14%
Cream, single 20%

Cream, sour 20%
Cream, whipping 39%
Cream crackers 16%
Crispbread 2%
Crumpet 1%
Cucumber 0%
Custard 4%

Danish pastry 26%
Dates, dried 1%
Duck, roasted without skin 10%
Duck’s egg 14%

Egg, boiled 11%
Egg, fried 19%
Egg, omelette 16%

Figs, dried 0%
Figs, fresh 0%
Fish cakes (fried) 11%
Fish fingers (fried) 13%
Fish paste 10%
Flour, white 1%
Flour, wholemeal 2%

Gammon rasher 12%
Garlic 0%
Gin, whisky, vodka, brandy 0%
Ginger ale 0%
Goat’s milk 5%
Golden syrup 0%
Goose 22%
Gooseberries 0%
Grapefruit 0%
Grapefruit juice, unsweetened 0%
Grapes, black 0%
Grapes, white 0%
Gravy (meat juices, fat, flour and stock) 9%

Haddock fillet, smoked 1%
Halibut, steamed 16%
Ham 26%
Hazel nuts 36%
Herring, grilled 13%
Herring, pickled 18%
Herring, raw 18%
Herring, rollmop 10%
Honey 0%
Horseradish sauce 8%
Hot dog sausages 25%

Ice cream 16%

Jam 0%
Jelly 0%

Kidney, fried 6%
Kipper, baked 45%
Kipper grilled 11%
Kiwi fruit 1%

Lager 0%
Lamb chop, grilled 22%
Lamb leg, roasted 24%
Lamb shoulder, roasted 29%
Lard 99%
Leeks 0%
Lemon 0%
Lemon curd 5%
Lemonade 0%
Lentils 1%
Lettuce 1%
Liver, lamb’s, fried 14%
Liver, pig’s, braised 8%
Lobster 3%
Low fat spread 40%
Luncheon meat 27%
Lychees 0%

Macadamia nuts 73%
Mackerel 11 %
Mackerel flesh, raw 16%
Mackerel, fillet, smoked 13%
Malt loaf 3%
Malted milk drink 7%
Mandarin oranges 0%
Mango 0%
Margarine, low fat 40%
Margarine, very low fat 25%
Margarine, full fat, 81 %
Marmalade 0%
Marrow 0%
Marzipan 25%
Mayonnaise 79%
Meat pie 24%
Melon, cantaloupe 0%
Melon, honey dew 0%
Milk, condensed 9%
Milk, evaporated 9%
Milk, fresh semi-skimmed 2%
Milk, fresh skimmed 1 %
Milk, fresh whole 4%
Milk, skimmed, powder 1%
Mince pie 21 %
Mincemeat 4%
Mints 1%
Mixed vegetables (frozen) 0%
Molasses 0%
Mousse (fruit) 7%
Muesli 8%
Mushrooms, fried 22%
Mushrooms, raw 1%

Mussels 2%
Mustard and cress 0%
Mustard 8%

Nectarine 0%
Noodles, egg 2%

Oil, coconut 97%
Oil, corn 97%
Oil, olive 96%
Oil, peanut 96%
Oil, soybean 97%
Oil, sunflower 97%
Okra 0%
Olives (in brine) 11 %
Onion, fried 33%
Onion, raw 0%
Orange 0%
Orange juice, unsweetened 0%
Orange squash 0%
Oysters 1%

Pancake 7%
Parsley 0%
Parsnips 0%
Passion fruit 0%
Pasta, boiled 1 %
Peach, fresh 0%
Peaches, tinned 0%
Peanut butter 51%
Peanuts, salted 49%
Pear 0%
Peas, frozen 0%
Peas, tinned 0%
Pecans 74%
Pepper, green 0%
Pepper, red 0%
Pickle 0%
Pilchards 5%
Pineapple juice 0%
Pineapple, fresh 0%
Pineapple, tinned 0%
Pitta bread 1%
Plaice, steamed 2%
Plum 0%
Popcorn (no salt or fat) 5%
Pork chop 18%
Pork leg, roasted 32%
Pork pie 29%
Pork, spareribs 39%
Porridge with water 1%
Port 0%
Potatoes, boiled 0%
Potatoes, deep fried chips 40%
Potato, jacket 0%
Potatoes, oven chips 8%

Potatoes, roasted 5%
Potatoes, sweet, baked 0%
Prawns 2%
Prunes 1%

Quiche 28%

Rabbit 5%
Radishes 0%
Raisins 0%
Raspberries 0%
Ratatouille 6%
Red wine 0%
Rhubarb (stewed) 0%
Rice, brown, boiled 1%
Rice, white, boiled 0%
Runner beans 0%

Salad dressing: French 39%
Salad dressing: French, low cal 4%
Salad dressing: Italian 60%
Salad dressing: Italian, low cal 5%
Salad dressing: mayonnaise, low calorie 12%
Salad dressing: mayonnaise: 75%
Salami 47%
Salmon, fresh 13%
Salmon, tinned 8%
Sardines 14%
Sausages, beef, grilled 21%
Sausages, pork, grilled 30%
Scampi 21%
Scotch egg 21%
Sesame seeds, dry, hulled 55%
Sherry 0%
Shortbread 26%
Smoked haddock 1%
Smoked salmon 4%
Soy sauce 1%
Soybean curd (tofu) 6%
Spinach 1%
Sponge pudding 16%
Spring greens 0%
Squid 1%
Steak, grilled 6%
Steak and kidney pie 21 %
Steak pudding 12%
Stock cube 3%
Strawberries 0%
Stuffing, sage and onion 0%
Sugar, demerara 0%
Sugar, muscavado 0%
Sugar, white 0%
Sultanas 0%
Sunflower seeds 48%
Swede 0%
Sweet potato 1 %

Sweetcorn 1%
Sweets, boiled 0%
Swiss roll 5%
Syrup, cane and maple 0%

Taco shell, fried tortilla 19%
Tangerine 0%
Taramasalata 46%
Tartar sauce 59%
Tea 0%
Tinned fruit salad 0%
Toffee apple 0%
Toffees 17%
Tomato, fried 6%
Tomato juice 0%
Tomato paste 0%
Tomato puree 0%
Tomato, raw 0%
Tomato soup 3%
Tomatoes, tinned 0%
Tonic water 0%
Treacle 0%
Tripe, stewed 4%
Trout 5%
Tuna fish tinned in oil 22%
Turkey, roast 10%
Turnip 0%

Veal 28%
Vegetable soup 1 %
Venison 6%
Vinegar 0%

Walnuts 52%
Water biscuits 13%
Water chestnuts 1 %
Watercress 0%
Watermelon 0%
White wine 0%
Whitebait 48%
Wine, dessert (port, madeira, sweet sherry) 0%
Wine, table (burgundy, rose, white, dry sherry) 0%

Yam 0%
Yeast extract (Marmite) 0%
Yoghurt, fruit (low fat) 1 %
Yoghurt, plain (low fat) 1 %
Yoghurt, soya 2%

CHAPTER 18

101 SUPERFOODS

Finding out exactly what you should eat isn't quite so easy. The truth is shrouded in mystery and confusion -much of created, quite deliberately, on behalf of vested interests, by lobbyists, advertising agencies and public relations groups.

The far reaching tentacles of the big food companies are as powerful as those of the big drug companies. Finding the truth is made particularly difficult by the fact that many newspapers, magazines and journals readily publish material they are given by companies with products to sell. Television and radio are, of course, just as likely to publicise these commercial messages disguised as independent news items.

Frequently, undue emphasis is placed on small — often almost irrelevant bits and pieces of scientific information — which are fed to the media because they help to build up and strengthen some hidden agenda. Too many observers (by which I mean editors, journalists and commentators) fail to analyse the information which appears; seemingly ignorant of the fact that an overview is necessary if any information is going to be put into perspective and used effectively.

Hyperbole and exaggeration used to be the preserve of the tabloid newspapers. These days they are everyday tools for broadsheet journalists and for just about everyone working in television and radio.

Sponsorship is widespread and often subtle, and this can make it difficult to decide exactly what is true and what isn't. Hidden agendas are sometimes well hidden, sometimes hidden only a little and sometimes not hidden at all.

I have prepared a list of the 101 healthiest, tastiest and very best foods in the world. These are foods that don't just taste good and look good - they will provide you with a massive amount of protection against cancer and heart disease, they will boost your immune system and they help reduce your susceptibility to infection.

And whether they agree or disagree with the contents of this list you can be confident that no one has sponsored this list.

Naturally, you don't have to limit yourself to the foods on this list which I have compiled as a starting point: a healthy basis for any good, well-balanced, diet.

The list will, I hope, also help the many readers who have written to me explaining that they plan to become vegetarian (or vegan) but confessing that they really don't know what to eat.

I've arranged this list in alphabetical order — partly because I think it will make it easier to use, and partly because I didn't want to print a list that suggested that any one particular food was 'number one'.

To make the list more accessible I haven't listed all the specific nutrients and health giving ingredients these foods contain but have simply given a very brief summary of the main qualities of individual foods.

Foods which contain anti-oxidants (such as vitamins C and E, the mineral selenium and beta-carotene, which are converted in the human body to vitamin A) help prevent cancer and heart disease and reduce susceptibility to infection.

My recommended healthy diet would contain a good and varied selection of foods from this list.

1. Alfalfa sprouts

Low in protein and don't contain much in the way of minerals or vitamins but they are also low in fat, calories and sodium. They are a tasty filler for salads and sandwiches.

2. Almonds

Rich in vitamin E (an anti-oxidant), plus calcium and protein. (But watch out: they also contain a high proportion of fat.)

3. Apples

Will help strengthen your immune system. Apples contain lots of fibre and plenty of vitamins. Easily obtainable and relatively inexpensive apples make a great snack and an excellent ingredient for pies and crumbles. But try to buy apples which are not covered with a wax coating to preserve them. More natural apples may not have the 'sheen' of a waxed apple but they will be better for you.

4. Apricots

Like all orange-coloured fruits and vegetables apricots are packed with the anti-oxidant beta-carotene which helps protect against cancer. Apricots are also full of fibre. Dried apricots make an excellent snack food. (Buy organic dried apricots not the bright orange ones.)

5. Artichoke

May help reduce blood fat and cholesterol levels and may help with liver, gall bladder and digestive problems.

6. Asparagus

Has a diuretic effect and is also believed to be useful in the treatment of nausea, heartburn and hiatus hernia.

7. Aubergine (eggplant)

In South East Asia some people use it to treat stomach cancer. Not a food to fry because it absorbs huge amounts of fat.

8. Avocado Pear

Because it grows in clusters rather than singly the avocado should officially be classed as a berry rather than a pear. The avocado tree yields more food per acre than any other tree crop and before humans started eating them they were popular with animals as varied as dinosaurs, giant sloths and jaguars.

The avocado contains a rich mixture of nutrients — 14 minerals (including copper, iron, calcium, potassium and magnesium), 11 vitamins and a lot of protein. An additional point in their favour is that the avocado is low in sodium. This makes them good for individuals who are on a low salt diet.

The oil content of the avocado can be quite high. It is believed that the avocado also contains special anti-bacterial and anti-fungal ingredients. Some say the avocado has anticancer properties.

9. Baked beans

Excellent source of fibre.

10. Bananas

Prepacked in a moisture and bug proof wrapping (so environmentally friendly and so biodegradable that you can quickly turn it into compost) that ensures the fruit inside arrives with you clean, fresh and uncontaminated, bananas are packed with vitamins and minerals and fibre and carbohydrate and very low in fat. Bananas, which are rich in potassium and contain a useful quantity of vitamin C, make an excellent snacking food for picnics or people who are travelling.

11. Bean sprouts

A good source of vitamins B and C. Also contain protein.

12. Beans

A good source of potassium and folate. May help prevent or treat anaemia. May help reduce the risk of heart disease. High in fibre and protein. Pulses are usually low in fat.

13. Beetroot

Good source of folate and iron.

14. Bilberry (aka blueberry)

Believed to help improve the circulation and to counteract urinary tract infections. Bilberries have anti-oxidant, anti-inflammatory and anti-infective effects.

15. Blackberries

Excellent low fat source of vitamin E.

16. Blackcurrant

An excellent source of vitamin C. (Weight for weight blackcurrants contain four times as much vitamin C as oranges.) Moreover the blackcurrant retains its vitamin C content well. Blackcurrants contain anthocyanins which are anti-inflammatory and which inhibit bacteria such as E.coli, holidaying merrily among the villae of the intestinal riviera.

17. Bread

Not for nothing is bread traditionally known as the ‘staff of life’. Wholemeal bread is particularly good for you. Rich in fibre and vitamins and minerals wholemeal bread should play a large part in any healthy diet. A ‘honey on wholemeal bread’ sandwich makes an excellent quick snack.

18. Broad beans

A good source of protein and soluble fibre.

19. Broccoli

Several studies have shown that vegetables such as broccoli can help to stop you getting cancer. Other vegetables which have the same apparently magical ‘superfood’ effect include cauliflower, cabbage and Brussels sprouts. These vegetables are believed to help prevent cancer because they contain compounds called indole glycosinolates (known for short as IGs). Cancers which may be prevented — or slowed — by these vegetables include cancers of the breast, colon and stomach.

However, cooking or even slight steaming seems to reduce the anti-cancer quality of these vegetables which seem to be most powerful when eaten raw. Cutting the vegetables into fairly small pieces seems to increase their anti-cancer power.

20. Brussels sprouts
Contain anti-oxidants and other substances which provide protection against cancer.

21. Cabbage
Contains substances which provide protection against cancer.

22. Carrots
Contain anti-oxidants. A great, healthy snack food. I often stuff a carrot and an apple in my bag when travelling. Full of fibre, vitamins and minerals, carrots are excellent cooked or eaten raw. Most children enjoy chewing on a raw carrot — it is an excellent and healthy alternative to a biscuit or bar of chocolate.

23. Cauliflower
Contains anti-oxidants and other substances which provide protection against cancer.

24. Celeriac
A good source of potassium. When eaten raw (e.g. in salads) it is also a good source of vitamin C.

25. Cherries
Contain potassium and vitamin C.

26. Chestnuts
High in carbohydrates and fibre but, unusually for nuts, low in fat. Brazil nuts, walnuts and hazelnuts have more than twenty times as much fat as chestnuts. Contain vitamin E and vitamin B6.

27. Chickpeas
Will help reduce cholesterol levels. Impecunious Indians who live on a chickpea diet have low blood cholesterol. Contain anti-oxidants.

28. Chillies
Chilli pepper may help desensitise the airways and may help stop an asthma attack. By having a mildly irritant effect on the stomach chillies may also stimulate the stomach to defend itself against more serious threats — and may help to protect against damage and the development of ulcers. The substance which gives chillies their fierce flavour is capsaicin which is an anti-oxidant which helps provide protection against cancer.

29. Corn
Contains protein, iron, zinc and potassium. Low in sodium. The Tarahumara Indians of Mexico live on a diet of corn and beans. High blood cholesterol and artery clogging and their fateful consequences are virtually unknown among these people. Contain anti-oxidants.

30. Courgettes (Zucchini)
A type of small marrow and a useful source of vitamin C and folate. Also a good source of beta-carotene. Most of the nutrients are stored in the skins, which are edible.

31. Cranberry
Widely used as a home remedy in the treatment of bladder, kidney and urinary tract infection. Recent research has shown that cranberries contain something which prevents bacteria from multiplying in the urinary tract. The only other fruit to have a similar effect is the bilberry (aka blueberry).

32. Cress
A cruciferous vegetable which can help prevent the development of cancer. Rich in vitamins and minerals. May help prevent anaemia and heart disease.

33. Dates
Dried dates are rich in potassium and a good source of many other nutrients too (including iron).

34. Fennel
Toasted fennel seeds are chewed in India to prevent indigestion and bad breath. Alternatively the seeds can be used to make a tea which helps digestive problems including flatulence and colic. Fennel seeds should be avoided during pregnancy.

35. Figs
Rich in potassium and fibre. Also contain pectin which can help lower blood cholesterol levels.

36. Garlic
There is a growing amount of evidence available now to show that if it is eaten regularly garlic will help to reduce

your chances of having a heart attack. Garlic has been used for thousands of years as a flavouring and as a preventive medicine. It seems that it can reduce the level of fat and cholesterol in the blood and also help prevent blood clotting. These factors mean that garlic may well help to prevent heart disease. Certainly, the evidence is powerful enough not to be ignored. The value of garlic is enhanced by the fact that unlike many modern drugs is contains no significant side effects (unless you count the antisocial effect of the smell on your breath as a significant side effect). I believe that garlic, onions, chives, leeks and shallots will all provide protection against cancer and infection as well as against heart disease.

37. Ginger

Helps relieve nausea, flatulence and indigestion. May stimulate the circulation and prevent blood clots. May also relieve rheumatism. Ginger keeps many of its properties when dried.

38. Grapefruit

Packed with vitamins (especially vitamin C) and rich in fibre. Will help strengthen the immune system. Contains anti-oxidants. Pink grapefruit contains lycopene which helps provide protection against cancer (particularly prostate cancer) and heart disease.

39. Grapes

Grapes contain ellagic acid which may help prevent cancer developing. (Cherries and strawberries contain the same substance).

40. Hazelnuts

Contain vitamin E (an anti-oxidant) plus vitamins B1 and B6. Also contain protein. The downside is a high fat content.

41. Honey

Although it is sugar with one or two added vitamins and minerals honey does seem to have some mysterious and almost ‘magical’ qualities. Honey is being prescribed more and more often by doctors.

Theoretically, honey shouldn’t be of any special value. But surgeons have found that if they spread honey onto infected wounds and burns then healing takes place much faster. It seems that honey helps to clean the tissues and conquer the infection.

Second, doctors have found that honey kills dangerous bugs like salmonella, cholera and escherichia coli quickly and efficiently.

Third, it has been shown that honey is better at killing many of the bugs that cause urinary infection than some powerful, modern drugs such as penicillin.

Fourth, research has shown that children suffering from gastro-enteritis seem to get better quicker if given honey to eat.

No one seems to know just why honey works so well. But there seems little doubt that honey is one of the great ‘magical mystery’ foods.

42. Hummus

Contains chickpeas, sesame seeds, garlic, coriander seeds, lemon juice and olive oil. It is, consequently, packed with goodness (but buy a low fat version).

43. Kale

A very good source of vitamin C and beta-carotene. Also, like other deep green vegetables, kale is a good source of calcium and iron. It also contains compounds which may provide protection against cancer.

44. Kidney beans

A good source of protein. Contains potassium, zinc and iron. But be careful: raw or undercooked kidney beans can cause serious food poisoning.

45. Lentils

A good source of protein, fibre, minerals and vitamins.

46. Lettuce

Lettuce (and other salad greens) provides protection against cancer (particularly cancer of the stomach). Also contains the anti-oxidant vitamins C and E. A good source of iron. May also aid digestion.

47. Lime

May help to reduce cancer risk. May also help to prevent infection. A good source of potassium.

48. Linseed

A good source of omega 3 fatty acids which lower the risk of colorectal cancer by reducing the amount of prostaglandin in the bowel. May aid digestion and prevent constipation. May also help prevent breast cancer and may help ease menopausal symptoms.

49. Lychees

An excellent source of vitamin C.

50. Mango

A useful source of vitamins C and E when raw. Also contain iron. A good source of carotene — particularly when ripe.

51. Melon

Watermelon contains lycopene which helps provide protection against cancer (particularly prostate cancer) and heart disease. Melon with orange flesh (such as cantaloupe) is rich in carotene.

52. Mushrooms

Contain protein, vitamins and minerals but are low in fat and calories. Rich in potassium, iron and niacin. Some varieties may discourage the development of cancer. Try to buy field picked mushrooms rather than specially grown mushrooms if you can — they taste better.

53. Mustard

Mustard (commonly grown with cress) may help prevent cancer and heart disease.

54. Oats

Whether you eat them in porridge or in specially made bread, buns or biscuits you'll benefit enormously by increasing your consumption of oats. Oat bran contains protein, carbohydrate and vitamin B — and more useful fibre than any other food. A regular addition of oat bran to your diet will help you lose weight and stay slim. Plus, oat bran will also help to reduce your blood cholesterol level and, therefore, reduce your chances of having a heart attack or a stroke.

55. Olive oil

Cold pressed extra virgin olive oil is a good source of vitamin E.

56. Olives

A good source of vitamin E.

57. Onions

Onions, chives, leeks and shallots may all provide protection against cancer, infection and heart disease.

58. Orange

Oranges, like bananas, come in their own environmentally-friendly wrapper (even if you throw it down it soon rots). Oranges contain slightly less fibre than bananas but they are packed with vitamins (especially vitamin C) and minerals. A genuine, fresh fruit salad which consists of orange, banana and apple will make a cheap, tasty and healthy pudding.

59. Papaya (pawpaw)

Contains carotene and vitamin C and, when raw, an enzyme which digests protein.

60. Parsley

An enormously underestimated food which often ends up being used as a sprig of decoration on the side of the plate — and then not even eaten! Parsley contains essential protein and useful vitamins and minerals,

61. Parsnip

A useful source of starch and fibre and of vitamins C and E.

62. Passion fruit

Contain vitamin C.

63. Pasta

Available in many different forms — as spaghetti, lasagna, tagliatelle, macaroni etc. — pasta is the athlete's favourite food. Professional cyclists, athletes and other sportsmen and women eat pasta at most of their main meals — particularly on the night before a big event. Pasta contains a good quantity of complex carbohydrate and a lot of fibre but is low in fat. It is cheap, easy and quick to cook and very filling.

64. Peaches

Rich in vitamin C. Dried peaches contain a good deal of potassium.

65. Pears

A good source of natural sugar. Contain some vitamins.

66. Peas

Rich in vitamin B1 and a good source of vitamin C. Contain fibre, protein, phosphorus and folate.

67. Peppers

An excellent source of vitamin C. Red peppers contain more vitamin C than green peppers and are also an excellent source of beta-carotene. Although they are extremely low in calories peppers are among the most nutritious foods you can buy.

68. Pine nuts

Contain iron, manganese, magnesium and zinc — as well as vitamin B1 and vitamin E (an anti-oxidant). Also contain protein. Downside is a high fat content.

69. Pineapple

Contain anti-oxidants.

70. Pinto beans

High in protein and fibre and low in fat.

71. Plums

Contain vitamin E and potassium.

72. Pomegranate

A good source of vitamin C.

73. Potato

Potatoes are almost certainly the most under-valued food in the world and the most mistreated. Potatoes are rich in vitamins (particularly vitamin C) and are an excellent foodstuff. To get the most out of them you should try to eat your potatoes in their jackets.

If you eat potatoes as chips keep the fat down by cutting them thickly, making sure that the oil you use (preferably vegetable oil high in polyunsaturates and low in saturates) is sizzling hot before you add the chips and drying the chips on a piece of kitchen towel before you serve them.

When cooked properly and wisely potatoes make an excellent food. When cooked unwisely the goodness in potatoes can be destroyed and the amount of fat they contain can be dramatically increased,

74. Prunes

Contain vitamins and minerals as well as heaps of fibre. Good to add to breakfast cereals or salads. Gentle laxative effect.

75. Pumpkin

Packed with cancer preventing beta-carotene plus plenty of other vitamins and minerals — and fibre too. Pumpkin seeds, which contain zinc, are widely used to help prevent (and treat) prostate enlargement.

76. Radishes

Useful source of vitamin C.

77. Raspberries

Rich in vitamin C.

78. Redcurrant

Rich in vitamin G and potassium.

79. Rhubarb

A good source of potassium.

80. Rice

Brown rice contains anti-oxidants. Rice bran may help reduce the risk of bowel cancer. A good source of starch.

81. Runner beans

Contain iron, folate and vitamin C.

82. Seaweed

Contains beta-carotene and B vitamins as well as many minerals. Most types of seaweed are a good source of iodine.

83. Sesame seeds

Contain vitamin E and calcium.

84. Soya beans

Soya beans are almost certainly one of the world's most valuable crops. They are packed with protein and contain anti-oxidants. If farmers around the world grew soya beans instead of breeding animals there would be no need for anyone anywhere to be hungry. Soya is used in the preparation of a vast array of different products which include milk and yoghurt substitutes as well as textured vegetable protein — also known as TVP Soya is an enormously flexible foodstuff but it is important to remember that the basic ingredients for a healthy diet are vegetables, fruit and whole grains.

85. Spinach

Popeye was right! Spinach is rich in vitamins, minerals, fibre and protein — and low in calories and fat. The usual mistake is to overcook spinach so that it becomes soggy and tasteless (as well as less valuable nutritionally). If spinach is bought fresh and properly cooked it will be both tastier and better for you. Can be used raw in salads.

86. Squash (Winter)

Pumpkins and other winter squash are a good source of beta-carotene.

87. Strawberries

Contains anti-oxidants. One of the richest sources of vitamin C.

88. Sunflower oil

Rich in vitamin E.

89. Sunflower seeds

Rich in zinc.

90. Swedes

May help to prevent cancer. A good source of vitamin C.

91. Sweet potato (yam)

Contains anti-oxidants.

92. Tea

A gentle stimulant which also supplies an anti-oxidant which may lower the risk of cancer and heart disease. But drink in moderation. (No more than two or three cups a day.)

93. Tomatoes

Contain lycopene which helps provide protection against cancer — particularly prostate cancer. Men who eat tomato-based foods (particularly tomato ketchup, canned tomatoes, tomato soup, tomato-based spaghetti sauce and the tomato sauce used in preparing pizza) are less likely to develop prostate cancer. Lycopene may also protect against heart disease and other cancers. It is the heat processing which seems to increase the availability of lycopene in tomatoes. So frying tomatoes should also increase their lycopene availability.

94. Turnip

A good source of fibre and vitamin C.

95. Walnut

Help lower blood cholesterol and may help prevent heart disease. Rich in essential fatty acids which are vital for tissue growth and development.

96. Watercress

Although it is rich in vitamins and minerals watercress is virtually calorie free. It makes an excellent addition to any salad and is much under-utilised by chefs and sandwich makers.

97. Wheat

The consumption of wheat fibre is linked to a lower cancer risk (particularly breast cancer). May help relieve menopausal symptoms and prevent heart disease.

98. Wheatgerm

The most nutrient rich part of wheat. Provides vitamins B and E.

99. Wine

Red wine drinkers seem to have a reduced incidence of heart disease. Moderation is the key. One or two glasses a day seem ideal. Red wine is also believed to have an anti-oxidant effect (and may provide some protection against viruses too).

100. Wholegrains

Wholegrain barley, buckwheat, maize and rye may help prevent heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes and some cancers.

101 Yoghurt

Natural yoghurt (not the sweetened, fruit and calorie filled variety) is really good for you. It is high in protein and calcium and a good source of iron and some of the vitamins in the B group. Yoghurt contains lactobacilli which compete with and oust numerous infections — including thrush.

Everyone should try to eat natural yoghurt regularly. Women who are suffering from thrush can often ease their symptoms by dipping a tampon in natural yoghurt before inserting it. Sufferers from irritable bowel syndrome sometimes find that they benefit after eating yoghurt (soya yoghurt is now increasingly available for those who wish or need to avoid dairy produce). Watch out because some yoghurts contain many additives which you might not want to eat.

CHAPTER 19

OVERWEIGHT

Overweight caused by overeating is the biggest cause of death in the Western world. At least one in three of us needs to lose weight. Being fat doesn't just make people miserable — and make it difficult for them to wear the clothes they'd like to wear — it makes diseases as varied as asthma, gout, diabetes, high blood pressure and arthritis worse, and it *kills* people.

If you weigh too much you are more likely to have a stroke or suffer from diabetes. Eczema, varicose veins, piles, gall stones and hernias are all associated with obesity. People who are overweight are more likely to face extra risks if they need to have surgery (because having an anaesthetic is more dangerous if you are overweight) and women who are fat face extra difficulties if they get pregnant.

In addition excess fat makes many lives miserable, causes depression and makes crippling diseases such as asthma and arthritis considerably worse.

Heart disease of all kinds is made much worse when patients weigh too much. In many cases heart disease is brought on because of obesity. The fatter you are the greater the burden will be on your heart.

Diabetes mellitus is now so common that 2% of the population have it. And the number of diabetics is doubling every ten years. Many patients become diabetic because they eat too much. Thousands of cases of diabetes could be prevented if people ate less fattening food. Overweight people are far more likely to get diabetes than people of average or below average weight. Diabetes is caused by a malfunction in the pancreatic gland — the gland that produces the hormone insulin. Insulin helps the body make proper use of carbohydrates in your food.

Many of those who develop diabetes — and this is particularly true of those who develop the disease in late adulthood — can get rid of the signs and symptoms of the disease by dieting, losing weight and carefully controlling their food intake. (All this should, of course, be done under medical supervision.)

Losing excess weight will help your body in hundreds of different ways. Even your feet will benefit. An average sized pair of feet provide their owner with less than 50 square inches of support. You can get some idea of the sort of strain there is on your feet by trying to hold a bag of flour on the tip of one finger. Losing weight dramatically reduces the pressure on your feet and makes bunions, corns and similar problems far less likely.

Here are some of the specific ways in which being overweight can affect your health:

YOUR JOINTS

Fat people are far more likely to suffer from arthritis and rheumatism. Because they have more weight to carry around, their joints and ligaments creak under the strain. The knees are often the first to give way. Losing excess weight won't repair the damage that has already been done to your joints; but it will dramatically reduce the incidence of future problems. Arthritis and backache sufferers who are overweight will usually suffer from less pain — and become more mobile — if they lose weight.

YOUR HEART

Your heart has to supply the rest of your body with fresh blood — delivering oxygen and then taking away the waste products. The bigger your body is the harder your heart has to work. An average heart beats seventy times a minute and if your heart has to work 20% harder (because you are 20% overweight) the strain will tell. If your heart beats 70 times a minute then it will beat 4,200 times an hour; 100,800 times a day; 705,600 times a week; 36,691,200 times a year and an astonishing 2,568,384,000 times in an average lifetime. Add another 20% to that total and you can see the difference it makes. A small 1500 cc motor car engine may work very well when put in a small car body but if the same engine is put into a bus it will soon show real signs of overstrain. Getting rid of your excess weight will ensure that the strain on your heart is reduced — and in the long run that means that your chances of suffering from heart trouble will fall significantly.

YOUR SKIN

Because fat acts as a sort of insulation — keeping the body warm — overweight people sweat a great deal more than thin people when the weather is hot. To this must be added the fact that fat people tend to have deep skin creases in which the sweat can accumulate. These skin creases are difficult to keep clean and dry — so fungal infections are commonplace. Women who are overweight often find that their abdominal skin creases and the areas around their groins and under their breasts are particularly likely to cause problems and eczema or dermatitis often develop.

Losing weight means that fat disappears but if the skin has been stretched for a long period of time the skin folds may not disappear and when this happens surgery may be needed to remove the excess skin.

YOUR BLOOD PRESSURE

Blood normally travels around your body under pressure — much in the same way that water travels through a hose-pipe under pressure. If you use a longer hose then you'll need more pressure to push the water through as quickly.

And if your body gets bigger then your blood pressure will need to increase to make sure that all parts of your body continue to receive a good blood supply. When blood pressure rises there is a danger that a blood vessel will be unable to take the strain and may burst. If you lose your excess weight then your blood pressure should fall — and you will be less likely to have a stroke.

YOUR LUNGS

Your chest is permanently expanding and contracting as air is sucked into and forced out of your lungs. If your chest wall is thick with fat breathing becomes more difficult. This will become particularly noticeable on slight exertion and explains why overweight people often appear to be short of breath. The shortage of fresh air getting into the lungs means that the blood is short of oxygen — and that means that the heart has to work even harder to keep the tissues supplied. People who are overweight are more likely to suffer from heart disease and from lung disorders such as asthma and bronchitis. Losing excess weight often means that some of the fatty tissue around the lungs disappears — freeing the lungs.

YOUR VEINS

Blood in your legs gets up to your heart through your veins. It is the muscles in your legs which help to squeeze the blood upwards. If you are overweight your muscles will have difficulty in squeezing your veins so your blood will tend to stay where it is — producing swollen or varicose veins. Losing excess weight helps to make sure that this problem doesn’t get any worse.

CHAPTER 20

HOW MUCH SHOULD YOU WEIGH?

There is no doubt that the simplest and most reliable way to find out whether or not you are overweight is to weigh yourself.

Unfortunately, it isn’t always as easy as it should be to decide from this just how much weight you need to lose. Many of the height weight charts which are in existence are pretty useless. Some of them were devised many years ago when people were much skinnier (and less muscular) than they are today. As a result, the charts seem to suggest that virtually everyone who isn’t skeletal needs to lose weight.

I also have grave misgivings about height weight charts which require you to decide whether you are small, medium or large boned before you can use them. It’s nigh on impossible to decide this without first stripping off all your flesh but even if it was a practical question it is of relatively little significance because bones don’t usually weigh all that much and the difference between large and small bones is a fairly small one.

I have compiled special height weight tables which enable you to compare your weight with the ideal weight for your height. I’ve given you an ideal weight band — you should try to make sure that your weight falls into this band.

Height/weight chart for women

Instructions

1. Weigh yourself with as few clothes as possible — and no shoes.
2. Measure your height in bare or stockinged feet.
3. You are overweight if your weight falls above your ideal weight band.

Height Weight Band
(ft/in) (st/lb)
4.10 — 7.5-8.5
4.11 — 7.7-8.7
5.0 — 7.9-8.9
5.1 — 7.11-8.11
5.2 — 8.1-9.1
5.3 — 8.4-9.4
5.4 — 8.6-9.6
5.5 — 8.10-9.10
5.6 — 9.0-10.0
5.7 — 9.3-10.3
5.8 — 9.7-10.7
5.9 — 9.10-10.10
5.10 — 10.0-11.0
5.11 — 10.3-11.3
6. 0 — 10.7-11.7
6.1 — 10.9-11.9
6.2 — 10.12-11.12
6.3 — 11.2-12.2
6.4 — 11.5-12.5

NOTE

Ideal weights vary with age and various other factors. But if you weigh more than 14 pounds above the maximum in your Ideal Weight Band then your weight will almost certainly be having an adverse effect on your health.

Height/weight chart for men

Instructions

1. Weigh yourself with as few clothes as possible — and no shoes.
2. Measure your height in bare feet or socks.
3. You are overweight if your weight falls above your ideal weight band.

Height Weight Band
(ft/in) (st/lb)
5.0 — 8.5-9.5
5.1 — 8.6-9.6

5.2 — 8.7-9.7
5.3 — 8.8-9.8
5.4 — 8.11-9.11
5.5 — 9.2-10.2
5.6 — 9.6-10.6
5.7 — 9.10-10.10
5.8 — 10.0-11.0
5.9 — 10.4-11.4
5.10 — 10.8-11.8
5.11 — 10.12-11.12
6. 0 — 11.2-12.2
6.1 — 11.6-12.6
6.2 — 11.10-12.10
6.3 — 12.0-13.0
6.4 — 12.4-13.4
6.5 — 12.8-13.8
6.6 — 13.0-14.0

NOTE
Ideal weights vary with age and various other factors. But if you weigh more than 14 pounds above the maximum in your Ideal Weight Band then your weight will almost certainly be having an adverse effect on your health.

TRY THE PINCH TEST

When doctors want to find out how much fat there is in someone’s body they sometimes use specially designed calipers to do the measuring.

You can use a simple version of this technique yourself. The big advantage of it is that it will enable you to find out which parts of your body contain most fat. (Though you probably already have a pretty good idea of the answer to this question.)

Just pick up a lump of flesh between your thumb and forefinger and see how much space it takes up. If you try this test with the flesh on the back of your hand you will see that there isn’t much fat stored there. But if you try the same test around your waist you will find that it is a very different story. Fat deposits vary from site to site around your body.

When you use your thumb and forefinger for this test you are, of course, picking up two layers of skin and two layers of fat. (Since human skin is fairly thin you are effectively holding two thicknesses of body fat.) So, in order to get an idea of the thickness of your body fat at that particular point on your body you have only to halve the distance between your thumb and your forefinger.

You can probably do this measuring yourself. Don’t squeeze until it hurts. Just make sure that you have a firm hold on the flesh you want to measure. Then, using a ruler, measure the distance between the skin of your thumb and the skin of your forefinger.

You can do this test all over your body.

If you want to do this test to get an idea of whether or not you are generally fat then the best place for the test is probably the triceps muscle at the back of your upper arm. You can also try measuring the amount of body fat at your waist, on the back of your legs, on your thighs, hips and buttocks.

If the thickness of your skin and under-skin fat exceeds half an inch then there is probably too much fat there. Since the ‘pinch test’ measures a double thickness of skin and fat this means that anything more than one inch thick means that you have too much fat.

If you can pinch more than an inch then you need to diet.

OR TRY THE MIRROR TEST

Take off all your clothes and stand naked in front of a full length mirror. You should be able to tell whether or not you are overweight — and where the excess weight is — simply by looking at your reflection and being honest with yourself.

OR TRY THE TAPE MEASURE TEST

1. Measure your chest with a tape measure.
2. Measure your waist with a tape measure.
3. If your waist measurement exceeds your chest measurement then you are almost certainly carrying far too much fat around your waist.

OR TRY THE RULER TEST

1. Take off all your clothes.
2. Lie flat on your back.
3. Rest one end of a twelve inch ruler on the bottom edge of your rib cage and the other end on the top end of your pelvis. If the ruler lies firmly on bone (with no flesh touching it in the middle) then you don’t have a fat tummy. If, however, the ruler bobs about (particularly if you breathe or laugh) then you probably need to lose weight — and your waist is probably one of the places where you have got most fat stored.

OR TRY THE WAIST AND HIP TEST

Divide your waist measurement by your hip measurement.

If you are a woman and the answer is 0.85 or more then you need to lose weight.

If you are a man and the answer is 1.00 or more then you need to lose weight.

CELLULITE

There is no such thing as cellulite. It is simply a posh, pseudoscientific word for *fat.* If you have fat thighs then the best way to deal with them is to put yourself on a good diet, eat less and take more exercise. Forget about special anti-cellulite remedies.

CHAPTER 21

THE DIRTY DOZEN: DIETING MYTHS

When magic isn't enough

The slimming 'industry' is the biggest and most profitable part of the health care industry and many companies and individuals have made fortunes out of the twin facts that losing weight is harder than putting it on and that most would-be slimmers are on the constant look out for an easy, quick and painless way to lose weight. Everyone, it sometimes seems, wants to *lose* weight; but no one wants to have to work at it.

Here are some of the most popular diets and dieting tricks you are likely to come across — needless to say I don't recommend any of these.

MYTH 1. YOU CAN LOSE WEIGHT BY TAKING SLIMMING PILLS OBTAINED WITHOUT A DOCTOR'S PRESCRIPTION

Millions of people buy them but I doubt if any of these would-be slimmers obtain any appreciable long term weight loss through taking them. Magic slimming pills — often sold by post — are frequently expensive but, in my view, never worth buying. Most of these pills fall into three general categories:

a) Many of the most popular pills simply contain a laxative. By increasing the rate at which the bowels work these pills can, inevitably, produce a modest short term weight loss. But after a while — or if you stop taking these laxative pills — the chances are that your weight will go back up again. The major disadvantage with these pills is that if you take them for more than a few days you are quite likely to suffer from constipation when you stop taking them.

b) A second group of pills fill up your stomach so that you don't feel like eating — or don't eat as much when you do sit down for a meal. The major disadvantage with these pills is that as soon as you stop taking them you will probably put back on all the weight you have lost (if you've lost any at all).

c) Thirdly, there are those pills which contain a diuretic. A diuretic is a substance which encourages fluid loss. In my view these pills can be dangerous because they could damage your kidneys. And, of course, once you stop the pills you will put back on any weight that you have lost.

MYTH 2. THERE ARE FOODS AVAILABLE WHICH WILL BURN UP FAT AND HELP YOU LOSE WEIGHT WITHOUT DIETING

Over the years I have come across literally dozens of 'wonder diets'. Many of them have been based on one or two particular foods which have been credited with remarkable, almost 'magical', qualities. The only way to eat a healthy diet is to eat a balanced diet.

MYTH 3. YOU CAN LOSE WEIGHT SAFELY AND EFFECTIVELY BY TAKING SUMMING PILLS PRESCRIBED BY A DOCTOR

The only truly effective slimming pills — and there is no doubt that they really do work — are the ones which are available only on prescription. There is, as you might imagine, a snag. The snag is that the most effective slimming pills in the world are probably a group of drugs known as the amphetamines — and these are extremely addictive. Many thousands of slimmers have taken these drugs, become hooked on them and found that it is extremely difficult to get off them.

MYTH 4. REGULARLY ATTENDING AM EXERCISE CLASS WILL HELP YOU LOSE WEIGHT, FIRM UP YOUR BODY AND GET THE SHAPE YOU WANT

It is, of course, quite true that exercise will *help* you lose weight. But exercise alone won't enable you to lose vast amounts of weight. To get rid of one pound of fat you need to use up approximately 3,500 calories. You'll be able to see how hard it is to get rid of 3,500 calories through exercise when I tell you that even if you exercise very hard — running, for example — you will only burn up around 500 calories an hour.

During recent years I have heard claims that by doing the right types of exercise you can lose enormous amounts of weight. Exercise can help you to tone up muscles (and having toned up muscles will undoubtedly make you look slimmer) but I don't think it will make a dramatic difference to your total weight or suddenly ensure that you have a pert bottom or breasts as big and as firm as beach balls.

By all means use an exercise programme as part of a get fit programme (though do make sure that you talk to your doctor first, make sure that any exercise programme you start has been prepared by an expert and always stop if you notice any pain or discomfort).

Exactly how many calories can you burn up exercising?

The number of calories you burn up during exercise depends on several factors — including the amount of effort you put into your exercise programme and your weight — but this list will give you a rough idea of the number of calories you can expect to burn up in a 30 minute exercise session.

Aerobics: 250
Bodybuilding: 150
Boxing: 250
Cycling: 225
Dancing: 150
Gardening: 125
Golf: 125
Housework: 150
Jogging: 200
Rowing: 250
Running: 250
Sex: 150
Skiing: 225
Squash: 250
Swimming: 150
Tennis: 200
Walking: 150

MYTH 5. YOU CAN GET RID OF UNWANTED WEIGHT SAFELY AND QUICKLY AND PERMANENTLY SIMPLY BY VISITING A SURGEON AND HAVING A WEIGHT REDUCING OPERATION

There are many special operations available these days for would be slimmers who want to lose weight more or less overnight. Here are two of the best known:

Liposuction

Fat is sucked out of your body (usually from the thighs) with a tube and a piece of equipment which bears a passing resemblance to a sophisticated vacuum cleaner. The fat then collects in a jar and can be thrown away. You leave the clinic slimmer and lighter. I am extremely sceptical about the long-term effectiveness of liposuction. I think there are better ways to lose unwanted fat.

Jaw wiring

The idea behind this particular operation is simply that if your mouth is closed you won’t be able to eat very easily — and if you can’t eat then you’ll lose weight. The surgeon performing the operation uses steel wires to bind your two jaws together. The operation may produce a temporary weight loss but many of those who have tried it have simply put all their weight back on again when they have had their jaws unwired.

Some people have even managed to have their jaws wired and *not* lose weight. One woman I know of discovered that by using her blender she could liquidise all her favourite foods and drink them through a straw poked in between the wires holding her jaws together.

MYTH 6. YOU CAN LOSE UNWANTED WEIGHT BY GOING ON A LOW FLUID DIET

The theory behind this diet is that many people put on weight because they drink too much fluid. I doubt if that is true. In my experience most people who are overweight are fat because they eat too much food. Fluid doesn’t usually pay too large a part in their weight problem. I am extremely sceptical about this type of diet. Indeed, it worries me. I am sure that anyone who goes on a low fluid diet would lose weight. But I worry that by going on a low fluid diet they might put a strain on their kidneys. Besides, I can’t see a low fluid diet offering anything more than a very short-term dieting success.

MYTH 7. A NO FAT DIET IS THE BEST WAY TO LOSE WEIGHT

As the name suggests a ‘no fat’ diet simply involves cutting out as much fat as you possibly can — avoiding fatty meat, dairy products and other foods which are rich in fat. At first glance this diet sounds very sensible. After all, fat is well known to be a killer — it is partly responsible for the high incidence of heart disease in the Western world.

However, I don’t think that cutting all the fat out of your diet is really the safe, effective way to lose weight permanently. Your body needs some fat. Without fat your hair will lose its lustre and your skin will soon become dry; more important you will become deficient in fat soluble vitamins A and D. You could even develop a serious mental disorder if you ate a diet which didn’t contain enough fat.

MYTH 8. A HIGH FAT DIET IS THE BEST WAY TO LOSE WEIGHT

I have to confess that I don’t have the faintest idea why this diet ever became popular. But it has, and diet experts regularly suggest that the best way to lose weight is to eat large amounts of butter, cheese, fatty meat, full cream milk and other fatty foods.

I regard this as a potentially dangerous diet. I have explained elsewhere the hazards of a high fat diet. If you followed a high fat diet you would probably develop diarrhoea. This would probably lead to a loss of fluids, vitamins and minerals and the long-term consequences could be exceedingly dangerous.

MYTH 9. A LOW CARBOHYDRATE DIET IS THE BEST WAY TO LOSE WEIGHT

Too much carbohydrate will make you fat. But too little carbohydrate will lead to dizziness, tiredness, irritability and faintness. I don’t like diets which involve an unbalanced food intake. And a low carbohydrate diet is, by definition, unbalanced.

MYTH 10. A HIGH CARBOHYDRATE DIET IS THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY TO LOSE WEIGHT

Some carbohydrates are essential but a high carbohydrate diet makes absolutely no sense at all to me. I cannot see the point of it. Your body needs a balanced diet to survive in good condition. Even if a high carbohydrate diet helped you to lose weight temporarily you would eventually have to go back to a properly balanced diet — and then you would probably put back all the weight you had lost. The only sensible way to lose weight permanently is to learn proper, sensible eating habits.

MYTH 11. THE LOW PROTEIN DIET

This diet bursts into prominence every few years. But I don’t like it at all. In my view the real danger is that in order to achieve a real weight loss you would have to reduce your protein intake considerably. You would, indeed, have to lower it so far that your body started to break down its own protein stores. This, in turn, would mean that muscles would start to disappear. How do you know that your heart muscle won’t be the first to suffer? In my view a low protein diet could be potentially fatal.

MYTH 12. THE HIGH PROTEIN DIET

In my view this is yet another potentially hazardous diet. I think the gravest danger with this diet is that it could put the kidneys under too much pressure. Anyone with a kidney disorder or a kidney infection might become seriously ill if they followed this diet. I think that in order to reduce the danger of kidney damage you would have to drink a lot of fluid — every day. And I rather suspect that the large quantities of fluid you would have to drink would probably mean that you might gain weight instead of losing it.

CHAPTER 22

TEN DIETING EXCUSES — AND WHY YOU SHOULD FORGET THEM

1. I DON'T HAVE THE TIME TO DIET

'I keep meaning to go on a diet,' is a common cry. 'I could be slim if I had the time. But my life's so busy. It's all right for her — she isn't as busy as I am.'

If dieting really did involve weighing out food portions, working out calorie values and spending two hours a day in the gym then these excuses might be valid.

But real dieting — dieting that will make you slim for ever — need not take any time. However busy and important you may be you should still be able to find the time to eat sensibly and to lose your unwanted weight quickly and permanently.

2. I'M LARGE FRAMED

I can't tell you how many times I've heard this excuse — usually coming from hugely overweight men and women who have rolls of fat bursting out through their clothes.

Bones weigh very little and add, at most, just another few pounds to your weight.

If you can strip naked, look in the mirror and tell yourself honestly that your weight problem is caused entirely by the size of your bones then I may — just may — believe you.

3. EVERYONE IN MY FAMILY IS FAT — IT RUNS IN THE FAMILY

It is quite true that being overweight does seem to run in families. But if you are fat and blame your ancestors you should know that there are two reasons for the fact that you are overweight.

First, you may, it is true, have inherited a certain genetic tendency to be overweight. But this tendency is not terribly important. Overweight is not a dominant gene. You do not always have to be fat just because your parents and grandparents are fat.

Second, and much more important, you probably learned bad eating habits from your parents when you were small. If your mother and father ate too much — and were overweight — then you probably grew up being used to the idea of eating too much. And you were probably overweight as a child. That, I'm afraid, is almost certainly the main reason why you are overweight today.

If you are prepared to learn new eating habits — and to throw aside the bad eating habits which led to the fact that you are currently overweight — then you should be able to get thin and stay thin.

You don't have to be fat just because your parents were fat.

You can't change your height — that is something which is governed entirely by your genes — but you can change your weight.

4. MY PARTNER PREFERS ME WITH A BIT OF FLESH ON MY BONES

This excuse is most commonly favoured by women — though I've heard men use it.

It is perfectly true that most men do prefer their partners to have some curves. Survey after survey has shown that men are not sexually attracted to particularly thin women — and may, indeed, be rather frightened of them. You only have to look at the pictures in a 'girlie' magazine or to examine the paintings of nude women in an art gallery (the old time equivalent of a 'girlie' magazine) to realise the truth of this statement. If men really liked very skinny women then all the top nude models would be skinny.

But it's not generally true that men prefer fat women either.

Some do, of course. Some men like their partners to have rolls of fat, to have huge, baggy thighs and to have pendulous breasts which need restraining with brassieres designed by engineers.

And some women like to be made love to by mountainous men who have vast stomachs and fat-laden limbs.

But these are exceptions.

Most men and most women prefer their partners to be curvy rather than fat.

So, if you use this excuse take all your clothes off and stand in front of a full-length mirror. That is what your partner sees. Now, be honest: would you describe yourself as curvy or fat?

5. I LOVE EATING TOO MUCH TO CUT DOWN — IT'S MY ONLY PLEASURE

If eating food is your *only* pleasure then you need to sit down and carefully re-evaluate your life. There is nothing at all wrong with enjoying your food — but if it is your *only* pleasure then there is something sadly wrong. You need to find new aims, new ambitions, new objectives, new hopes, new aspirations.

6. AT MY AGE EVERYONE IS OVERWEIGHT

Most people do tend to put on a little excess weight as they get older. There are two good reasons for this.

First, we all tend to do less exercise as we age. We become slightly stiffer. We aren't as fit as we were. Our joints tend to seize up a little as arthritis and other disorders begin to take over. We move more slowly — and usually have the time to be a little slower. The result is that we burn up fewer calories. And so, if we eat the same amount of food as we did when we were young the inevitable result is that we tend to put on weight.

Second, because we tend to have more available time as we grow older we tend to spend more time eating. People in their twenties and thirties are often rushing about looking after children or building up careers. They don't have much time for long lunches or leisurely evening meals.

But although these may be explanations for why people are overweight they do not provide an adequate defence.

Being aware of these hazards you should take care to watch your weight as you get older. You should be careful not to eat too much. And you should try to ensure that you take plenty of exercise.

If you allow yourself to become overweight then your whole body — joints, heart, lungs etc. — will suffer.

*7. DIETING IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR ME BECAUSE **I** HAVE TO EAT OUT A GREAT DEAL*

Many businessmen and women claim that they are only over weight because they have to spend a lot of time eating in restaurants or attending dinners.

This is no excuse.

No one forces a diner to choose the most calorie rich foods in a restaurant. Or to eat everything put before them at a dinner.

People who eat out a lot of the time can control their weight just as easily as anyone else — if they have the necessary willpower.

8. I CAN'T AFFORD TO GO ON A DIET

This excuse really is nonsense.

You don't have to buy special foods in order to diet successfully. You don't have to buy pills or attend expensive classes.

All you have to do is to eat sensibly — and to eat less.

Anyone who can afford to eat can afford to diet.

9. SLIMMING IS SEXIST — I REFUSE TO GET INVOLVED

Some women claim that dieting is an activity which is designed by men to control women. It may well be true that parts of the dieting industry are controlled by men. It may be true that many women model themselves on photographic models who are selected because they are young, attractive and fairly slender. And it may be true that the people who spend most time dieting are women.

But it is nonsense to use any of this as an excuse for not dieting.

There are two huge industries vying for our attention.

On the one hand there are the food companies which are keen to persuade us to eat more — and to eat all the wrong foods. These industries want to make us all fat — because if we are fat it will be because we have eaten too much, and contributed to their profits.

On the other hand there are the diet promoters who are keen to sell their pills and their dieting techniques. These people want us to slim (but they don't want us to stay slim because if we stay slim then we will be of no future value to them).

You should learn to ignore the exhortations, claims and counter claims of both these pressure groups.

Eating sensibly, and maintaining your weight at a healthy level, should be something you do for yourself.

Fat women who refuse to diet because they claim that dieting is a sexist activity are merely grabbing at yet another excuse for their inability to control their own greed.

10. IT'S MY HORMONES

This is the failsafe argument frequently put forward by the fat person who has tried all other excuses and found that they don't work.

It is perfectly true that some people are overweight because of hormonal problems. If you genuinely think that your weight problem could be caused by a hormonal disorder then you should see your doctor straight away. But for every individual whose overweight is caused by hormone problems I could find many thousands whose weight problems are caused simply by eating too much.

CHAPTER 23

DR VERNON COLEMAN'S SLIM FOR LIFE PROGRAMME

Warning: You should not begin any diet without first checking with your doctor. Successful dieting can affect your body in many ways and may alter your need for prescription drugs.

Nibbling: The Painless Way to Lose Weight Permanently

Eating three square meals a day is old fashioned and bad for you. The healthy way to eat is to eat *mini-meals* — and to eat little and often. You probably think of it as nibbling. Marketing experts call it 'grazing' because it is the way that wild animals eat. Whatever you call it eating numerous small meals is much better for you than eating just three big meals. Follow this regime and you will lose weight quickly, efficiently, painlessly and permanently — without taking tablets, performing exercises, spending money on special foods or feeling hungry.

Just look at the evidence:

* A group of doctors working in Canada have shown that nibbling is good for your health — and an excellent way to slim.

* Researchers at Tokyo Medical School have concluded that 'three meals a day are quite artificial'. They have pointed out that in contrast to big meals — which lead to fat storage *mini-meals* are burned up as soon as they are eaten.

* Researchers in America have shown that slimmers can lose two to three pounds a week while grazing, even though they may be eating 300 calories a day more than slimmers on other diets.

* Tests in Wales have shown that one group of people who 'grazed' gained no weight while another group who ate the same food as three set meals gained up to ten pounds each in just three weeks.

* Research in Chicago showed that when young children are encouraged to 'graze' and eat *mini-meals* rather than eat big set meals they grow up slim and healthy.

* Other studies have shown that if you nibble — instead of gorging yourself on three big meals a day — you will have lower cholesterol levels and be less likely to suffer from heart disease.

All the available evidence shows clearly that if you eat *mini-meals* whenever you are hungry your body will burn up the calories you consume. By spreading your energy intake throughout the day you won't ever feel hungry or faint. And you will be far less likely to put on weight than someone who eats three square meals a day.

Meals are bad for you.

Most of us eat at fixed meal-times. We eat at breakfast time, in the middle of the day and again in the evening. But as far as your body *is* concerned this is a bizarre, unnatural and thoroughly irrational way to eat. Your body doesn't just need food three times a day. It needs energy supplies all day long. By choosing to eat fixed meals you create problems for yourself.

HERE ARE THREE REASONS WHY YOU SHOULD NEVER EAT ANOTHER MEAL AGAIN:

1. When you eat at fixed mealtimes you eat whether you are hungry or not. Instead of obeying your body's inbuilt appetite control centre you eat because the clock shows that it is time to eat. Your body's internal appetite control can make sure that you never get fat — if only you let it. But eating meals at fixed meal times means that your natural appetite control centre doesn't get a chance to work properly.

2. When you eat at fixed mealtimes you tend to eat what is available, what you have prepared or what you have been given — whether you need it or not. It is easy to eat the wrong foods — and to eat too much.

3. Because you and your body know that it will be some hours before you eat another big meal there is a tendency to overeat. Your body then stores the excess food as fat so that you can live off the fatty stores while you are not eating. But because you probably nibble a little between meals your body will never need to burn up that stored fat — besides your next fixed mealtime probably comes just before your body starts burning up those stored fat deposits.

Meal times are not natural. They were invented because they just happen to fit in with the way most of us work and live. If you get most of your calories three times a day at fixed meal times then you are almost certain to end up overweight. Calories that aren't burnt up straight away will end up stuck on your hips. And however much you try to diet the chances are that you will fail.

The best way to slim successfully is to eat small amounts of food whenever you feel hungry.

Make meals a thing of the past. 'Grazing' is healthy. And it will help you stay slim. And while you're changing your eating habits make a real effort to eat less. Most of us eat far too much — dangerously overloading our bodies.

Golden Rule

If you are going to try my *mini-meal* diet there is one golden rule that you *must* remember:

Only ever eat when you are hungry

Every time you are about to eat ask yourself if you are genuinely hungry.

If you are — eat!

But as soon as your hunger has gone - stop eating.

The *mini-meal* diet depends heavily upon you learning to recognise when you are hungry - and being prepared to obey your body.

Silver Rule

The *mini-meal* diet will work best if you leave between 60 to 90 minute gaps between *mini-meal*s.

What Can You Eat?

Don't be worried or puzzled about what you can eat - and how you can eat a balanced diet without eating meals. There is no need at all to worry. The type of food you need to eat isn't going to change at all - just the way you eat it!

20 Sample *mini-meal*s

1. Mixed vegetable soup (90 calories)
2. Baked beans on wholemeal toast (140 calories)
3. Raw carrot with dip (70 calories)
4. Small herb omelette (200 calories)
5. Tomato salad (30 calories)
6. Low fat yoghurt (70 calories)
7. Boiled egg with slice of bread (200 calories)
8. Raw apple (60 calories)
9. Salad sandwich on wholemeal bread (180 calories)
10. Slice melon (15 calories)
11. Bowl of porridge (300 calories)
12. Corn on the cob (100 calories)
13. Vegetable pasty (230 calories)
14. Half a grapefruit (15 calories)
15. Bowl of cornflakes with soya milk (150 calories)
16. Fresh fruit salad (50 calories)

17. Spaghetti with tomato sauce (250 calories)
18. Baked potato with cottage cheese and pineapple (170 calories)
19. Grilled vegetable burger in bun (400 calories)
20. Two toasted muffins with honey (400 calories)

BONUS NUMBER ONE

The *mini-meal* diet may help to lower your blood cholesterol level. A recent American study showed that men who ate every hour (instead of three times a day) had lower blood cholesterol levels. In Canada researchers found that people who ate 17 (yes, 17!) snacks a day had less fat in their blood than people who ate identical food in three large, main meals.

Big meals stimulate the body to produce insulin to cope with the high blood sugar levels that follow. And the insulin stimulates the liver to produce cholesterol.

By lowering your cholesterol levels the *mini-meal* diet may help to protect you against heart disease.

BONUS NUMBER TWO

The *mini-meal* diet won't just help you get slim. Eating *mini-meals* will also help you to live longer.

When you start eating *mini-meals* you will soon find that you are fussier about what you eat — and you will eat only what your body needs.

By eating just what your body needs you will look younger, feel more energetic, feel sexier, avoid infections and diseases such as arthritis and live longer.

In Okinawa in Japan people eat just 40% less than other Japanese people — they also have lower rates of cancer, heart disease, diabetes and mental illness. And more people from Okinawa live to be 100 years old than from anywhere else in Japan.

Reducing your food intake will probably increase your life expectancy and reduce your susceptibility to illness.

Warning

If you are going to start the *mini-meal* diet then you must stop eating meals. You can't eat *mini-meal* and ordinary meals as well!

You don't have to be unsociable and leave your family and friends to eat alone. If they want a meal sit down with them but just eat a *mini-meal***.**

The *mini-meal* diet will help take advantage of your body's central eating control mechanism.

Your body has an impressive appetite control centre which can make sure that you never get overweight or underweight. It can even make sure that you eat the right mix of foods — so that your body obtains all the protein it needs and the right mix of vitamins and minerals.

The existence of the appetite control centre in your brain was first identified in research work done by Dr Clara M Davis of Chicago in the 1920s. Dr Davis's initial aim was to find out whether newly weaned children could choose their own food and eat enough to stay alive, select a good balance of different types of food without being told what to eat and pick foods designed to keep them healthy.

The infants in Dr Davis's experiment chose excellent and well varied diets. Their growth rates, development and appearance were just as good as those of babies who had been given foods selected by nutritionists. The babies chose the right food — and just as important — ate them in the right quantities. And they stayed healthy.

Later Dr Davis reported that in an additional research project she had studied 15 infants for between 6 months and 4 and a half years and had come to the conclusion that they all were able to select a good variety of satisfying foods, ensuring that they ate neither too much nor too little. Their eating habits were, of course, unplanned and may have looked rather chaotic to the trained eye but none of the infants ever developed stomach ache or became constipated. None of the children who were allowed to choose their own diets became chubby or fat.

Subsequently further research, this time done with soldiers, showed that when adults were allowed access to unlimited supplies of food they ate just what their bodies needed. Even more startling was the fact that the soldiers varied their diet according to their environment, quite naturally selecting a mixture of protein, fat and carbohydrate that was ideal for their circumstances and needs.

The conclusion has to be that the presence of the appetite control centre means that if you listen to your body when it tells you what — and how much — you need to eat, then you will stay slim and well fed for life.'

Despite the existence of this astonishing appetite control centre most of us do get fat, of course. We eat the wrong types of food. And we eat the wrong quantities. There are several reasons for this.

Some people eat because they are depressed or anxious or miserable. They eat because they are bored. And they don't stop eating when they are no longer hungry. They become overweight — or ill — because they have overridden their appetite control centres.

There is evidence that babies who are bottle fed are more likely to put on excess weight than babies who are breast fed. And, of course, fat babies often grow into fat children who then grow into fat adults.

The appetite control centre is directly controlled by the amount of sugar circulating in your blood and is designed to ensure that you eat what your body needs, when your body needs it and in the quantities required. Things go wrong because you ignore your appetite control centre and instead of eating according to your needs eat according to behavioural patterns imposed on you by the society in which you live.

Our eating habits are usually established when we are very small. We are taught to eat at meal times (whether or not we are hungry). We are told off if we don't clear up all the food on our plates (whether or not we need it). We learn bad habits and we learn to ignore our appetite control centre.

If you were bottle fed when you were a baby then the chances are that you started picking up bad habits before you could sit down at the table. One reason why bottle fed babies tend to get fatter than breast fed babies is that while it is impossible to see how much milk has been taken out of the breast (and, therefore, how much is left) it is all too easy to see exactly how much is left in the bottle. Anxious mothers tend to encourage their babies to empty the bottle even when their babies are no longer hungry. (In fact there is a device in the female breast to make sure that breast-fed babies do not get overweight before their appetite control centre starts to function properly. The contents of breast milk change slightly when the mother's body decides that her baby has had enough to drink. This change in the constituents triggers the end of the baby's feeding response. Breasts are far more sophisticated than most of us realise.)

These distorted behavioural patterns all help to ensure that your appetite control centre is ignored and overruled. Your eating habits are controlled not by your body's genuine need for food but by a totally artificial conception of its requirements. By the time we reach adulthood most of us have learned to eat for all sorts of bizarre reasons. We have learned to eat when we are sad or lonely. We have learned to eat when we are happy or want to celebrate. We have learned to eat simply because it is an official meal time and everyone else around us is eating. We eat what the advertising copywriters want us to eat and we eat it when the boss says we should eat it.

However, you can break all these bad habits. And by following the *mini-meal* diet you can allow your appetite control centre to re-establish itself. By abandoning habits which overrule your appetite control centre, by learning to eat when you need to eat and by listening to your body (so that you eat when you are hungry and stop when you are no longer hungry) you will find it possible to lose weight and maintain a steady weight without following an artificial dieting programme.

CHAPTER 24

FORTY EIGHT QUICK TIPS FOR LOSING WEIGHT

1. Try to set yourself easy slimming targets. If you try to get rid of all your unwanted weight in a month you will probably fail. Decide what your ideal weight should be and then aim at losing two pounds a week.

2. Remember that regular exercise will help to tone up your muscles and burn up a few extra calories. You don t have to do anything you don’t enjoy. Two of the best — and most stress-free — exercises are swimming and walking.

3. Try to resist the temptation to weigh yourself every day. Weigh yourself once a week. Your weight will naturally fluctuate and if you weigh yourself too often you will be confused (and possibly even disappointed) by the results.

4. Don’t let other people decide what you eat (or when you eat it). If you’re full — stand up for yourself and say so!

5. Remember Coleman’s First Golden Rule of Slimming: Only ever eat when you are hungry. Coleman’s Second Golden Rule of Slimming is: Stop when you are full. Every time you are about to put food into your mouth ask yourself whether or not you really need it.

6. Whenever you feel hungry and you find yourself reaching for food wait five minutes. Then — if you still feel hungry — you can eat.

7. Try to get into the habit of using sweeteners instead of sugar.

8. Make a real effort to eat most of your meals sitting at the table rather than slumped in front of the television. You need to concentrate on what you are doing if you are going to use the power of your mind to help you slim successfully.

9. Never be afraid to throw food away if you don’t want it. Don’t eat up scraps just so that they ‘won’t be wasted’. Sort through all your food cupboards and your fridge every week and throw out (or give away) food that you aren’t going to use.

10. Learn to let your body help you diet by deciding when — and how much — you need to eat.

11. When you sit down to a meal wait for a moment or two and relax. Then — and only then — start to eat. And eat slowly. If you concentrate you will be far more likely to hear your body ‘talking’ to you and telling you when you are ‘full’.

12. Acquire a new habit. Try stopping between courses for a short rest. If you’ve had enough to eat get up and leave the table. If you stay sitting at the table after you’ve finished eating there is a risk that you will nibble at whatever is left.

13. Learn not to eat too much in the evening. If you eat when you are about to go to bed your body will store the unwanted calories as fat. Do most of your eating early in the day — so that your body can burn up the calories.

14. Whenever you have to have a big meal try to have a snack half an hour beforehand. The snack will spoil your appetite and ensure that you feel full long before you do your diet too much damage.

15. Make sure that you never reward yourself with food. If you want to celebrate do so with a bunch of flowers, a new CD or a book or magazine.

16. Put a little time in trying to work out how you acquired your bad eating habits. What bad eating habits did you learn as a child? Awareness of your bad eating habits will make them easier to conquer.

17. Many people who find slimming alone difficult benefit by joining a slimming club. There are hundreds of slimming clubs around. Look in the local telephone book or ask your doctor. Many people get support and encouragement from slimming with others.

18. Be prepared for the compliments when you start losing weight. Some people (particularly women) get frightened when they realise that they have become sexually attractive — they don't know how to cope.

19. Ignore 'magical' or 'wonder' diets that promise you instant slenderness. And don't waste your money on slimming pills or supplements.

20. Don't worry if you find that you need less sleep. Slimmers often need less sleep. If you have given up meat you will probably also have more energy. A diet that contains a lot of fat often leads to a constant feeling of tiredness and exhaustion.

21. Tackle each day as it comes. Try not to think too far ahead.

22. Once you start to lose weight you will find that some people who you thought of as friends will start to scoff. They will tell you that you'll soon put back all the weight you've lost. They will do this because they are jealous. Ignore them.

23. Be positive about your new eating programme. Don't say: I'm trying to lose weight'. But say: 'I've changed my eating habits and I'm losing weight.'

24. Never forget that no one else is to blame for your weight. You have the ability to control how much you weigh.

25. Make your right hand into a fist. That is the size of your stomach. The amount of food you need to eat in order to fill your stomach would only fill a container the size of your fist.

26. See if you can find a friend who wants to change her or his eating habits — and maybe lose weight too. Ring one another up every day and offer encouragement and advice and support.

27. If you want to take up exercise do something you really enjoy and look forward to. If you don't enjoy it then you won't do it properly (if at all). Walking, cycling, dancing and swimming are four of the best forms of exercise. Remember that if you are receiving medical treatment or are in any way uncertain about your health you shouldn't do any exercise unless your doctor has given approval.

28. Make an effort to learn how to relax — and to deal with stress. Many people eat when they are under pressure — it's an easy and commonplace way of dealing with problems. If you can deal with stress effectively there will be less temptation to eat too much.

29. Always weigh yourself at the same time of day (i.e. morning or evening) and wearing (or not wearing) the same clothes.

30. If you have difficulty in losing weight but are taking prescribed or over the counter drugs talk to your doctor or pharmacist. Many drugs cause weight gain — or make it difficult for you to lose weight. You should not, of course, stop taking prescription drugs without first talking to your doctor.

31. As soon as you start to lose weight throw out the clothes that no longer fit you. Keeping them is merely a sign that you don't expect your dieting to be permanent. This book is going to help you make sure that this diet is the last diet you ever need try. Buy yourself new clothes and slim into them.

32. If you need a break but don't really feel hungry do something else — write a letter, do a crossword, make a phone call, go for a short walk or read a magazine. But don't eat just because everyone else is eating.

33. Remember that alcohol is packed with calories. And remember that low-calorie soft drinks are available when ordering drinks in a bar.

34. Collect recipes for snacks. You'll be surprised at how many quick, tasty, nutritious *mini-meals* you can make.

35. Always read the labels on food when you are shopping. You will soon learn to differentiate between the good and the bad.

36. Make sure that you don’t spend too much time looking at attractive food. You can get fat simply by staring at food because when you see, smell or think of food your body starts to prepare its digestive processes. Saliva is released and your stomach juices get ready to digest the food it expects. Your pancreas will be stimulated to produce insulin and the insulin will start to convert the glucose in your bloodstream into fat because it anticipates more food coming in. As your blood sugar level falls so you’ll feel hungry. And you’ll eat. Even though you weren’t hungry just a few moments earlier.

37. Don’t worry too much about trying to make sure that you eat all the necessary vitamins and minerals that your body needs. Just eat a balanced diet. Your body will do the rest.

38. Don’t bother weighing food or counting calories. It’s mind numbingly boring and unnecessary.

39. Keep one or two glucose sweets (the sort sold for athletes) in your pocket. On rare occasions only if you are feeling hungry and don t have a snack handy have a glucose sweet to boost your blood sugar level and take away the hunger pangs.

40. Learn to enjoy your food. Get into the habit of tasting every mouthful. If you enjoy your food you’ll eat more slowly and your appetite control centre will have a better chance to operate effectively.

41. When putting out food choose the smallest plate that you can practically use. If you use a big plate there is always a danger that you will fill it — and then empty it! If you have a small plate you can always refill it if necessary.

42. Turn off the telephone while you are eating. If you are interrupted your appetite control centre will probably get confused.

43. Always chew your food properly. If you chew properly then you will be less likely to suffer from digestive upsets and because you will be eating slowly you will give your appetite control centre a chance to work properly.

44. Always put down your knife and fork between courses and stop eating for a while (though if you are on the *mini-meals* diet this won’t really apply). This will make sure that your body has a chance to tell you that it is full.

45. Eat as many raw vegetables as you can. They take a lot of chewing but are better for you. Because they take a lot of chewing they will slow you down — and give your appetite control centre a better chance to work.

46. If you buy fizzy drinks always buy the diet ‘low calorie’ versions.

47. If you must eat biscuits buy the small packets — with just two or three biscuits in them. They are expensive but you’re less likely to end up eating half a large packet in five minutes.

48. Don’t worry if your good intentions slip occasionally. Don’t give up your new eating programme just because you misbehave for one day. Just start again the next day.

CHAPTER 25

CHILDREN WHO ARE OVERWEIGHT

A lifetime of obesity and dieting often begins in childhood. Children who are fat often stay fat — and find it extremely difficult to lose excess weight later in life.

How to cope if your child is fat

At least one in four children is overweight. Obesity is now one of the biggest health problems facing children.

Children who are overweight are likely to:

* grow up to be fat adults
* develop heart disease
* develop high blood pressure
* develop chest problems
* develop bone and joint problems
* develop diabetes
* find exercise difficult
* suffer from more colds and coughs
* suffer from anxiety and depression
* be victims of bullying at school
* suffer from loneliness

The vast majority of overweight children get fat because they eat too much — or eat the wrong foods. It is rare for a child to be fat because he or she suffers from a hormone or glandular problem.

You can help your child get slim and stay slim.

But you must take care.

If you push too hard you could make your child anorexic. Remember that pound for pound growing children need twice as many calories as adults. A child who weighs just five stones will probably need as many calories as an adult who weighs ten stones.

Many of those extra calories are needed to help the child grow.

Twelve ways to help children lose excess weight — and stay slim

1. Never push them into eating up all the food on their plate if they say they are full. If you are worried that they aren't eating enough talk to your doctor. If you push children into eating more than they want you could make them fat for life by teaching them bad eating habits.

2. Try to teach them the facts about foods. You will be surprised at how interested most children are in what they eat. Explain why fresh vegetables and fruit are good (they're full of vitamins and fibre and low in fats) and why chocolate and cake are bad (they are low in fibre and vitamins and full of sugar and fat).

3. Remember that many children overeat because they are looking for love. Give children plenty of love and they won't need to nibble on bars of chocolate to cure their unhappiness.

4. Be consistent. And be fair. Don't advise your children to cut down on the chocolates and then let them see you pigging out on a whole bar of chocolate. If you are overweight then you too should try to control your weight. Your children will find weight control difficult to understand if they see their parents eating anything and everything — and ignoring their own weight problem.

5. Encourage children to eat slowly. Fat children often eat far too quickly. Teach children to chew properly. And remember that good table manners will help keep weight down.

6. Remember that breast fed babies are probably less likely to become fat than bottle fed babies.

7. Don't use food as a punishment or a reward. If you do then your children will associate food with emotional as well as physical needs.

8. Make sure that children have a good breakfast but eat as little as possible in the evening when calorie requirements are at their lowest.

9. Encourage children to eat when they are hungry whenever possible. Do not allow children to read or watch television when they are eating. Children who eat while doing something else will not be aware of their appetite control centre. They will just keep cramming food into their mouths automatically, regardless of whether or not they are still hungry.

10. Try to keep children out of the habit of eating lots of sweets. Sweets ruin the teeth and are usually rich in calories. Teach children to understand which foods are fattening.

11. Encourage children to take regular exercise. Too many parents insist on carrying their children everywhere by motor car.

12. Weigh children regularly. If they seem to be gaining weight too quickly then try to correct this. It will be easier to make a modest correction now than to try to deal with a massive weight problem in a year or two’s time.

We hope you found this book useful. If so we would be grateful if you would post a favourable review on Amazon.

Vernon Coleman is a qualified doctor and the author of over 100 books (including *Bodypower* and *Spiritpower*) which have sold over two million copies in the UK and been translated into 25 languages. There is a list of his books on his author page on Amazon. Many books by Vernon Coleman are available as kindle books on Amazon. For more information please visit http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

Men in Bras, Panties and Dresses

The Secret Truths about Transvestites

Vernon Coleman

Men in Bras, Panties and Dresses

The Secret Truths about Transvestites

One in ten men regularly wears feminine clothing. Cross-dressers live longer, healthier lives than other men. But many wives and girlfriends don’t know their man’s undercover secrets.

Vernon Coleman

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‘The transvestite is a man who has discovered a way of being at peace with herself. Transvestism is a gift not a curse; we should be grateful for it.’

Anonymous transvestite

Introduction

This European Medical Journal Special Monograph is based on a study of 1,015 British males. The study was conducted, and the report written, by Dr Vernon Coleman MB ChB DSc – a registered and licensed medical practitioner.

Abstract

There are many myths and misconceptions about why men cross dress. This survey shows quite clearly that most cross-dressers are neither homosexual nor aspirational transsexuals. Cross dressing is not an illness and most transvestites do not want to be ‘cured’. Transvestism is regarded by many as a valuable remedy for stress. The variations among cross-dressers are vast. Some men like dressing entirely in female clothing; some enjoy wearing individual items of feminine apparel. Some go out in public dressed in female clothing while others stay indoors while cross-dressed. Some wear feminine lingerie underneath male clothing. Transvestism crosses all class and social barriers but seems to be exceptionally common among men who have acquired exceptional responsibilities.

Transvestism: A Social Phenomenon

It is doubtful if anyone knows exactly how many men obtain pleasure, sexual satisfaction or relief from stress by dressing up in women's clothes (or, more accurately, clothing designed primarily for women to wear). The potential embarrassment and perceived social stigma associated with transvestism means that many men are extremely secretive about their cross-dressing habits; consequently it is difficult to obtain an accurate figure. Some authorities have claimed that as many as 50% of men have, at some time or another, dressed partly or completely in women's clothes. More conservative estimates put the number regular transvestites at around 10% of the male population in most developed countries. It seems that cross dressing is currently one of the fastest growing social phenomena in the western world.

My own studies suggest that the figure of 1 in 10 is probably accurate. And that the figure is undoubtedly rising quite rapidly. It seems that cross dressing is currently one of the fastest growing social phenomena in the western world.

History

Cross-dressing isn't new, of course. Men and women have been doing it since clothing was invented. Transvestism occurs to some degree in the oldest societies, whether sophisticated or primitive.

In some societies, transvestites were ridiculed (as they usually are today) but far more often they were treated with respect, and regarded as possessing great wisdom and of having magical or mystical qualities. Christian saints and Hindu gods have changed sex at will and Hippocrates reported that men who dressed as women became priests. Ancient Jewish history contains accounts of men dressing as women. Caligula used to dress as a woman as did at least one English king and one French king. Today, shamans (powerful and deeply respected figures in religions around the world) are often men dressed in feminine clothing.

The most famous transvestite in history was probably Le Chevalier d'Eon de Beaumont, a lawyer, political adventurer, spy and diplomat in the service of Louis XV. He was born in 1728, christened Charles Genevieve Louise Auguste Andre Timothee d'Eon de Beaumont and died at the age of 82, having spent 48 years living as a man and 34 living as a woman. The word 'eonism' is now often used as a synonym for 'transvestism' or 'cross-dressing'.

Cross-dressing hasn't always involved men dressing in feminine clothing, of course. Female suffragettes in England often dressed as men and in the 18th century it was fairly common for Dutch women to dress as men in order to obtain work as sailors.

Part of the problem for transvestites is the fact that we are so wrapped up in what we now consider to be 'proper' or 'acceptable' behaviour that we often forget that fashion is never more than fleeting. In some cultures it is women who wear the trousers and men who wear the skirts. Painting finger nails is currently considered to be a feminine preserve but the habit originated in China where warriors going into battle would paint their nails crimson in the hope that this would give the enemy the impression that their hands were already dripping with blood.

Terminology

The words ‘transvestite’ and ‘cross-dresser’ are used throughout this monograph as though they were totally interchangeable: both referring to an individual (usually and in the case of this study exclusively male) who dresses in the clothes normally associated with the opposite sex. The word ‘cross-dresser’ is generally preferred by those heterosexuals who wish to establish a clear difference between themselves and others such as ‘drag queens’. However, I have retained the word ‘transvestite’ since this is in general use. The terms ‘cross-dresser’ and ‘transvestite’ are usually regarded as referring to males who wear clothing normally associated with women, for the simple reason that cross-dressing among women (millions of whom regularly wear trousers, shirts, jackets and other items of clothing traditionally associated with men) is so commonplace that it is not regarded as in any way exceptional or worthy of comment. In some communities, indeed, it is more usual to see women wearing trousers than to see them wearing dresses or skirts.

The Survey: the form used

The transvestites who took part in the survey were invited to complete the following survey form:

1. How old were you when you first started wearing women's clothes?
2. Why do you do it? (tick as many of the options as you like)
a) I like the feeling of women's clothing
b) It gives me a sexual kick
c) It helps me relax and deal with stress
d) I want to be like a woman
e) I don't know
3. If you had the opportunity would you have a sex change operation? Yes/No
4. Do you dress completely as a woman (e.g. including wig, make up etc)? Yes/No
5. Has being a transvestite ever lost you
a) A job
b) A relationship
6. Do you go out of the house dressed as a woman? Yes/No
7. Do you attend parties, social events with other transvestites? Yes/No
8. Do you ever go shopping dressed as a woman? Yes/No
9. If you go out cross dressed, in your opinion, how many of the people who see you are convinced that you are a woman?
a) None
b) A few
c) Most
d) All
10. Do you wear women's underwear when you are dressed in ordinary male clothes?
a) Never
b) Occasionally
c) Always
11. What do you sleep in?
a) The nude
b) Pyjamas
c) Nightie
12. Have you ever had sex with another man? Yes/No
13. Do you live in fear of people finding out that you are a transvestite? Yes/No
14. Has cross dressing ever got you into trouble with the law? Yes/No
15. Have you ever had sex with a woman while you've been dressed as a woman? Yes/No
16. Does your partner know of your transvestism? Yes/No
17. Does she approve?
a) Not at all
b) With reluctance
c) With enthusiasm
18. Does your partner help you choose clothes, make up and so on? Yes/No
19. How many daytime hours a week do you spend dressed as a woman?
20. How many daytime hours a week would you like to spend dressed as a woman?

About yourself: (all optional – but please give as much information as you feel able)
Age:
Partner's Age:
Name:
Female name you use when dressed in feminine clothing:
Occupation:
Address:

The Survey: Results, Commentaries and Quotes from Cross-dressers

1. Survey Results: At what age do Cross-dressers Start Wearing Women's Clothing?

Question asked: How old were you when you began wearing women's clothes?

The average age at which males in this survey started dressing in women's clothes was 13. One individual reported that he had started cross-dressing at the age of four. The oldest respondent was 70 when he started dressing in feminine clothing.

Commentary

Transvestites who start young usually do so either because they are encouraged to do so by relatives or because they discover a tactile thrill from wearing clothes of a texture quite different to the clothes they normally wear. One bank manager reported that he regularly wore a lacy bra and panties and a garter belt and stockings underneath his three piece pinstriped suit simply because he liked the feel of the lingerie against his skin. Although some transvestism is actively encouraged (for example, by mothers who dress their sons as daughters – often because they wish they had given birth to a daughter rather than a son) there is often an element of secretiveness about 'cross dressing' right from the very beginning.

Transvestites who start cross dressing later in life often do so because they find their lives unbearably stressful and demanding and because they need to 'escape'; they need some form of release and discover that cross-dressing provides them with an opportunity to forget their male responsibilities.

Quotes from cross-dressers

'I was approximately eight or nine years old. My mother used to throw old clothes out for the "rag-bag" and I used to get them out and dress up in them. I graduated from there to raiding her drawers and wardrobe and from there to stealing items of clothing from female relatives when we went visiting. I became quite adept at asking to go to the toilet and taking a wrong turning into Aunty's bedroom to pinch a petticoat or a pair of knickers.'

'From about the age of four I've been hooked on wearing female underwear. At that early age I used to steal what I could from washing lines and sneak them into the house and put them on in front of the mirror and pose and wear them in heels and masturbate into them. It was great fun. I never got caught stealing them but gave that up as I thought that one day I might.'

'My earliest memory of dressing up was when I was four. I believe that my reasons for cross dressing started at this age. I can remember my late mother speaking to her friends and saying that she always wanted a daughter, to be called Ann, and when told at the nursing home that she had a boy she said that she didn't want him. I am not experienced in psychology but I think that must be the cause.'

'One of my earliest memories was when I was about seven years old and I saw a pair of my mother's tights in her room. Alongside them was a pair of blue court shoes. I went into her room, picked up the tights, gathered up the leg as I'd seen her do and I slowly slipped my foot inside its nylon sheath and began to gently and steadily roll it up to my calf toward my knee. Then I looked at my tights clad leg and something said to me that this was right. I then put on her shoes and felt the high heels hoist me to even greater desires.'

'The first time I became aware of female clothing and of its appeal, was as a small child when I was put to bed as a toddler in ladies' knickers because I had run out of night wear. I had a fever with German measles; all my clothes had become damp and were in the wash. I can still remember how I wished I could wear the same clothes the next night...without any idea why! But I can remember after all these years the yearning that a small child felt to wear silk knickers. This could hardly be a sexual need or kick, not as a little toddler!'

'The compulsion to wear female clothing began by chance at the age of 10. For no apparent reason I went into my sister's bedroom and finding her underwear drawer open, I took her bra and panties to my room and tried them on. She was coming up to her 12th birthday and had decided that only girls would be invited to her party. I had been pressing to be included for some time to no avail. Although I had returned the bra to the drawer, the panties were found in my room. I was told not to take other people's things again and I thought that was the end of the matter. Two weeks later on the day of the party I was told that they had changed their minds and I could go but they had a surprise for me. I was led to my bedroom and to my horror laid out on my bed was a party dress, frilly knickers, knee length white socks and even a 'Shirley Temple' type wig. Despite my protests I was told if I wanted to be a girl here's my chance. The party went ahead and I was the centre of fun. It did not end there. For two weeks every evening after school I had to change into girl's clothing as a punishment. To my surprise, as the evenings went on I found I was secretly enjoying the experience. Since then at every opportunity I have cross dressed. My relatives who had started me on this road are totally opposed to this idea of men dressing in women's clothing. In fact they think those who do it are 'sick'.'

'If I had no clean underwear, my mother used to put a pair of my sister's knickers on me. I used to get upset at first, but I grew to enjoy the feel of satin, lace, etc., and the pretty, frilly, fussy look of female underwear.'

'I spent a lot of time in one aunt's house who was a dressmaker. She used me as a model when making dresses when I stayed at her house.'

'It started when I was about nine or ten years old. As I was tubby I was always being ribbed about my breasts and about needing to wear a bra! I commenced by trying on corsetry and progressed to stockings, slips, panties and dresses and found I thoroughly enjoyed the experience.'

'I was a girl in various all-boys school dramatic society events (Cleopatra's handmaiden, a Welsh maid, Titania, a chorus girl in crinolines, and Juliet) before my voice broke; then I deputised as a girl in a couple of dance routines at about 14 years. I am sure this set a pattern, but after that it was too 'sissy' until after National Service. I made occasional forays in my early twenties (I used to go out with some nurses in Birmingham dressed as one of them). This went on for about a year, then in middle age I took it up seriously, first as a closet TV, and now openly with my wife's support.'

'I tried on a pair of my wife's panties one day. I was in my mid-fifties at the time. I have no idea why I did it. But it felt good. There was no looking back.'

'I started off just wearing my wife's knickers. I didn't think it would go any further than that. Then I started wearing a camisole top and then a bra. Eventually I started putting on a dress. By the time I got to that stage I realised I was a lost cause and that I might as well put make-up on as well. I then had to buy a wig so that I could go out of the house in my dress and make-up. A bald man walking down the street in a frock would look pretty stupid wouldn't he?'

2. Survey results: Why do Men Cross-dress?

Question asked: Why do you do it?

Note: Respondents were invited to tick as many options as they liked.

a) Because I like the feeling of women's clothes: 77%
b) Because it gives me a sexual kick: 59%
c) Because it helps me relax and deal with stress: 48%
d) Because I want to be like a woman: 63%

Commentary
It is clear that many transvestites dress for more than one reason.

Surprisingly, perhaps, the most common reason given for cross dressing was the feeling of wearing women's clothes. Men who are accustomed to wearing rough and itchy clothing obtain considerable tactile pleasure from contact with the thinner, softer, more delicate fabrics used in the manufacture of women's clothing. Although this feeling sometimes arises as a result of a childhood experience there are many transvestites who have discovered the pleasure of wearing silky, satiny materials in their 30's, 40's or older. 'Putting on stockings for the first time was, without question, the single most erotic, sensually exciting thing I have ever done without a woman,' wrote one transvestite.

Many transvestites also report that they find cross dressing helps them deal with stress.

'Men dress for different reasons. I don't dress to shock or to be glamorous or sexy. I don't dress to attract men (or women). I don't do it for any reason other than to relax. Cross-dressing gets me out of myself. I don't want to be cured because there is nothing wrong with me. I won’t ever stop.’

The twentieth century male is under a tremendous amount of pressure to be strong, masculine and successful. It is no coincidence that cross dressing is particularly popular among those men who are either workaholics or who are involved in particularly macho activities (such as the military or the police).

Transvestites who cross-dress to escape from stress are often workaholics. Having pushed themselves hard they are frequently successful in their business or professional careers and so they have a great deal to lose if their transvestism is exposed. Like all workaholics the transvestite workaholic pushes himself to the point of mental and physical exhaustion because he is searching for a love that has always been denied to him by his parents. Dressing as a woman enables him to escape completely from the pressure to succeed because it enables him to escape from his tortured male persona for a while.

A man who is under constant pressure to achieve, to perform and to make money may find that he can escape from those pressures most effectively by slipping on silky, feminine clothes. He can change his personality and his perception of society’s expectations of him within seconds. He removes his suit or uniform and with it puts aside his responsibilities. When he puts on a pair of stockings, a garter belt and a dress or a skirt the soft, feminine side of his personality (which may have been suppressed for years) is allowed to come to the surface.

Time and time again, cross-dressers have told me that putting on a frock helps to bring out the gentle, non-aggressive, calm side of their personalities (the qualities which society wrong regards as ‘feminine’.) Moreover, many cross-dressers have told me that they have never been able to find any other form of relaxation which is anywhere near as effective as cross-dressing in enabling them to step aside from the demands of their masculinity for a while; and to be more accepting, less demanding of themselves, more easy-going and more relaxed.

It is because cross-dressing is an effective way of dealing with stress and tension and pressure that many high flyers, politicians, military men, business leaders and professionals enjoy cross-dressing. There are an increasing number of clubs in the USA where business, political and military leaders can learn how to put on make-up, borrow clothing, relax and forget their everyday pressures and anxieties. In the UK male transvestites can now get a bank card to use when they are dressed as women.

One of the reasons why cross-dressing is so often done in secret is the fact that it is particularly common among the most successful men in business, the services and the professions – the very men who have most to lose by being ‘found out’ and who are, therefore, least likely to admit to cross dressing.

Many men who cross dress to escape from stress claim that when they put on stockings, a bra and a dress they can feel their cares and worries fading away. They feel calm and relaxed and so their bodies benefit enormously. Moreover, selecting and purchasing underwear, and putting on lipstick and nail varnish, helps them to find a different part of their personality and to forget their day to day anxieties. For them transvestism is a healthier way of relaxing than smoking or drinking and probably no more expensive or absurd a hobby than golf.

Cross dressing has no physical side effects (though there are still many social hazards – ranging from embarrassment through to unemployment). As a physician I would much rather see a man under stress deal with pressure by cross dressing than by taking tranquillisers.

Some may feel it surprising that anyone should be able to throw off stresses simply by putting on different clothes. But there is plenty of evidence to show that clothes do have an impact on the way we look at the world and the way we feel.

When a man dresses in his ‘Sunday best’ suit he will often feel and behave quite differently to the way he feels and behaves when he is wearing his work or leisure clothes. Simply putting on a suit may affect the way he walks and talks – as well as the way he thinks. When I was a senior medical student and a young doctor I had a smart, pinstriped suit which I kept for important, formal occasions. I wore it mainly for examinations and for job interviews. Consequently, it was hardly surprising that I found myself feeling stressed and ‘uptight’ whenever I wore that suit. Eventually, just looking at the suit made me feel tense and so I gave it away to a charity shop knowing that the new owner would buy it without any emotional baggage.

In exactly the same way that my suit made me feel stressed so the transvestite can throw off his day to day worries – the worries normally associated with his male persona – and feel relaxed by taking off his working clothes (which he associates with anxiety) and putting on a dress (which is very different to the suit, uniform or working clothes he wears to work).

There are, without doubt, other ways in which a man under stress could obtain relief. But most of the available alternatives are likely to be considerably more damaging to him, his family and society in general than dressing up in fancy lingerie. The cross dresser could undoubtedly obtain a similar level of release by taking tranquillisers (likely to become an addictive habit), smoking cigarettes (likely to give him cancer) or drinking himself senseless.

Alcohol alters the senses and so makes stress bearable for many. Clothes can affect the senses with a similar result. The difference is that wearing silks and satins won’t wreck your liver. (As an aside it is strange that the importance of the skin as a sense organ is so vastly and consistently underestimated.)

It seems odd that society should, in general, choose to regard alcoholism as a forgivable and understandable consequence of overwork, whereas cross dressing remains such a misunderstood remedy that most transvestites make enormous efforts to keep their dressing a secret.

(The secret nature of transvestism is something of a self-perpetuating problem: transvestites who are secretive inevitably risk being exposed and if they are exposed the fact that they kept their transvestism secret makes it sound as if even they consider it to be rather unpleasant habit. The fact that they kept it secret suggests to the observer that they were ashamed of it.)

Because of its importance in the relief of stress transvestism could, if promoted more actively, become one of the most important social developments of the century.

Many of the men who responded to my survey request were open about the fact that they get a sexual kick out of wearing women's clothes, though some pointed out that they merely enjoyed the erotic feeling of putting on feminine clothing. When you consider that feminine clothing is invariably much more erotic than the male equivalents (stockings to socks, camisoles to string vests, silky French knickers to Y front underpants) it is, perhaps, hardly surprising that some transvestites get a sexual kick out of dressing in feminine clothing. Some reported that cross-dressing helped to sexually stimulate themselves and their female partners. It is important to point out, however, that many cross-dressers do not believe there to be any sexual motive in their wearing of feminine clothing.

Medical and psychological textbooks sometimes claim that cross-dressing is a purely or largely sexual activity and this is clearly not true.

Quotes from cross-dressers

'I find painting my toe nails the most relaxing thing I've ever done. I have to concentrate but it takes no real effort and there are no significant consequences. If I make a mistake it doesn't really matter but if I make a good job of it the end result will be there to admire for weeks.'

'I sat on a bench in the garden, in the sun, painting my finger nails in a gloriously decadent shade of red. I know of no more relaxing activity. You have to concentrate totally. It is impossible to think of anything else. Painting your nails requires every ounce of available concentration – particularly when you are using your non dominant hand to paint the nails of your dominant hand. I understand at last why receptionists never even look up when they're painting their nails.'

'Women have the freedom to wear clothes to match their moods. Most of the time men have only the freedom to wear a different coloured tie.'

'I think that transvestites are probably healthier – and may live longer – than non-transvestites. My guess is that transvestites probably suffer far less from stress related diseases than do than do non transvestites.'

'There is a woman in every man. But some men just never let her out. I think they are the unlucky ones.'

'Being a transvestite has caused me a great deal of heartache. But the day I became one was one of the most important days of my life. The day I helped the secret woman in my life to gain her freedom was the day I became a whole man – and the day I found my freedom too.'

'I like the feel of women's underwear. It is softer and more feminine than male underwear and more comfortable.'

'In times of stress and anxiety I need the feel of women's clothing to try and 'escape' from the source of stress. It helps me forget the outside causes of the stress.'

'My cross dressing started when I put on a girlfriend's underwear for fun when we were making love. I liked the feel of it and kept it on afterwards. It made me feel good. My transvestism just progressed from there.'

'I went to an all-boys school and I first dressed as a woman when I was in the school drama society. My voice broke late and I had a rather feminine sort of face so I always got given the female parts. I enjoyed dressing up in silky, feminine things and just carried on. I haven't acted for years but I still wear women's clothes.'

‘I put on a girlfriend’s teddy when I lost a bet. I had to wear it all day. When I got up the next morning I realised I wanted to wear it again. That was how I got hooked. It was as simple as that.’

‘Looking through a clothes catalogue I realised that I was looking at the women’s clothes far more than the men’s clothes. And it wasn’t the models I was looking at – it was the clothes.’

‘It is alright for women to dress in men’s type of clothing but it is strange that men are considered ‘odd’ if they like women’s style clothing.’

‘I have tried to stop wearing ‘women’s’ underwear for various periods of time but have had only limited success. The urge/desire always returns and cannot be controlled. I have explained this to my wife but I do not know if she can understand this.’

‘Transvestism is a hobby but it is addictive like drinking, gambling, smoking and the like, but with one major difference – it doesn’t kill. But it can hurt, especially if it is your partner or family who finds out.’

‘Being a transvestite is the most painful experience of my life. I feel that there is another person inside of me, a female who will not stop at anything to get out. I seem to be more vulnerable when I have had a few drinks. Then she likes to try and take over. I know that it sounds crazy but I honestly feel that this is the case. The agony can drive you mental. The thought of wanting to be a woman, the softness of her clothes, the freedom of her legs; not an hour of the day goes by without this mental anguish. I have tried to suppress my desires but it’s almost as if she will claw at my insides to get out.’

‘I must say I get a great pleasure and buzz out of dressing up in women’s underwear and dresses, getting all made up and putting on my high heels so I can pose in front of my mirrors. I find it so natural to do this and I see nothing wrong in doing so.’

‘Why is it that I cannot stop a thing I started sometime in 1976 – the compulsion to wear female clothing and sometimes even make up?’

‘I still cannot give it up. I think I’ll go on forever like this because I enjoy it so much.’

‘I love the feel of silks and satins and wearing silky undies definitely gives me a kick. I am quite able to deal with stress without dressing up and I have no desire whatsoever to be a woman.’

‘I know one or two transvestites who blame their parents. They blame their mothers for forcing them to wear girls’ clothes and they blame their fathers for not stopping them. I don’t see why it’s necessary to blame anyone. Transvestism is nothing to worry about and nothing to be ashamed of. It’s just something I enjoy. It’s great fun. And I love meeting and talking to other transvestites – they are very nice people.’

‘The last time I wore any woman’s clothing was probably about seven or eight months ago (knickers only). I keep hoping that the feelings will go away and that perhaps the longer I go without women’s clothing then perhaps I will be ‘cured’ of transvestism but this does not seemed to have stopped me looking in the windows of clothes shops and through the women’ sections of mail order catalogues and longing to wear the items that I see.’

‘I feel the need to wear silky directoire knickers and French knickers. I would also like to wear a silky slip and a dress. Am I cracking up?’

‘I suffer very high blood pressure but when I am dressed all the stress and tension goes, and it’s a great help to me.’

‘I feel as though I am possessed.’

‘I used to get sexually aroused, then, not now. Dressing up, for me is as normal as it would be for a woman. I like the touch and feel of clothes – the tight elastic of a girdle, the softness of a pair of tights – there is so much more ‘freedom’ in a skirt than in trousers or jeans.’

‘As I became older and the effects of my war time injuries became much more life threatening the yearning to wear female clothes and indeed to look like and feel like a woman became unbearable. I started wearing female clothes under my male attire and in the evenings would change and put on make-up. This evolved slowly until I had acquired all the skills of make-up and dress sense.’

‘There is one great saving grace about transvestism, and that is ‘it’s the greatest pain killer I know’. Since I have to put up with a great deal of discomfort and pain due to my injuries, I find that I completely and genuinely forget all my pain and troubles when I am ‘dressed’.’

‘I do it because I enjoy it, feel relaxed and able to calm down, love the feeling of the clothes and give the impression of a woman and sometimes get a sexual kick out of it but not every time.’

‘I now find that when I get uptight, just by letting my female persona take over and getting appropriately dressed, the tensions fade.’

‘I get enjoyment from wearing feminine clothes. It helps me to relax and allows me to change my character and male image. XX years in the RAF and supposed leader of men – it is great to get away from it, even for an hour or two.’

‘I also think it helps me in my work as I have feminine feelings and can talk to all the females working for me and in some way appreciate how hard they have to work to get recognition in a male dominated workforce.’

‘I am a happy man. I just like acting the part of a woman. It is relaxing.’

‘I always find myself relaxed after dressing up.’

‘I enjoy dressing as a woman as it helps to release stress and I like the feelings of dressing and being dressed.’

‘I am a serving police officer in the YY Police and after a tour of weekend violence, dressing up helps me to calm down.’

‘Instead of reaching for booze or drugs, I reach out for my skirt and blouse and find it far more relaxing.’

‘I love women so much that I enjoy dressing like one.’

‘I am fascinated by all the paraphernalia of womanhood – garter belts, bras, corsets and so on. I love touching them and wearing them.’

‘I don’t have to cross-dress. I discovered the art and pleasure of cross-dressing by accident. I do it because it helps me to relax and I enjoy it. What’s the big deal? What does it matter to anyone else whether I wear underpants or ladies knickers? It’s what inside and what you intend to do with it that counts.’

‘Women can have male qualities and still be accepted but men aren’t allowed to have female qualities. In my experience men are just as soft as most women – possibly softer. Women think men are hard. But they aren’t. Men need sympathy, support, cuddles and reassurance just as much as women.’

‘I think of my life in two halves: pre Michelle and post Michelle. (The name I use when I am dressed as a woman). The moment when I first realised I could spend part of my life as a woman was one of the most important in my life.’

‘I used to suffer from all sorts of stress symptoms. I had to take tranquillisers and sleeping tablets. Since becoming a transvestite my symptoms have virtually disappeared. I would much rather be a transvestite than a stress sufferer.’

‘I used to be a very aggressive workaholic. I was always picking rows with people. Since I became a transvestite I’ve changed enormously. My wife says I’m more fun and more likeable now. I think I’m an altogether much nicer person.’

3. Survey Results: The incidence of transsexualism among cross-dressers.

Question asked: If you had the opportunity would you have a sex change operation?
23% of respondents answered 'yes'
77% respondents answered 'no'

Commentary
Many lay people who come into contact with transvestites confuse cross dressing with transsexualism. Wives, girlfriends, employers, workmates and friends often suspect that transvestism is merely a stepping stone on a longer journey; a half-way house on the way to transsexualism. This mistaken view is also common among many professionals (doctors, psychologists and social workers) who assume that transvestites and transsexuals are merely variations on the same theme. Some psychiatrists regard cross-dressing as an illness and diagnose transvestites as gender dysphorics but on the evidence obtained by this study I would regard that as nonsense. Some transvestites would like to become transsexuals but most transvestites (over three quarters according to this survey) have no doubts about their gender and are perfectly happy about their cross-dressing. Their problems (if they have any problems) arise almost exclusively from society's reaction to their cross-dressing rather than from their cross-dressing itself. It would be, perhaps, more accurate to describe transvestites as social dysphorics.

'I don't want to be female or have a sex change operation,' wrote one cross-dresser. 'I like dressing up because it brings out the feminine, softer side of my personality and helps me calm down and relax. It helps me to be a more balanced, stable person. Who is nutty? Me? Or the man who smokes too much, drinks too much and takes pills to help him deal with his stress?'

Transvestites and transsexuals themselves often add to the confusion by mixing together and sharing clubs and magazines. They do this because they are brought together by the fact that they are rejected by society. But conflicts often develop. Transsexuals sometimes regard transvestites at 'playing' at being women. Some transvestites, on the other hand, feel uncomfortable with the fact that transsexuals are often sexually attracted to men. To add to the confusion those transvestites who do have homosexual inclinations are frequently attracted to transsexuals.

The fact is, however, that there are differences between the needs and driving forces of many transvestites and the needs and driving forces of transsexuals; a difference made most clear, perhaps, by the fact that transvestism is an exclusively male phenomenon (women do it but since society allows women to dress as men they face no problems or social isolation) whereas transsexualism affects both men and women. Male transsexuals want to be women. Male transvestites want to dress in feminine clothing. There is a huge difference. Many cross-dressers are intrigued and delighted by the paraphernalia of dressing in feminine clothing: stockings, corsets and corselettes, brassieres and so on. Some want to behave like women, look like women and even be treated like women but they do not want to be women. Curiously, when they dress as women, transsexuals often wear jeans or trousers (just as many gender females do) but transvestites nearly always wear frocks or skirts.

Despite the significant differences which do exist between transvestites and transsexuals there is one common area (apart from the important fact that both tend to be attacked, ridiculed, persecuted and subjected to entirely unjustified prejudices): some transvestites (like all transsexuals) admit to a strong desire to have their own breasts. The conflicts here are considerable. Transvestites do not usually want to take hormone therapy (because they know that it will affect their sexual prowess) and they are usually unwilling to consider surgery (because then they would have to share their secret with their family doctor). On top of all this their yearning for breasts is balanced, and to a certain extent overwhelmed, by the fear that breast tissue would almost certainly be impossible to hide from wives, girlfriends, workmates and others. For most transvestites this problem has been solved by the development of new bras which, because they are designed to give an enhanced cleavage to a relatively flat-chested woman, can give a modest cleavage to almost any male. Transvestites who want a bigger bust than can be obtained in this fashion use a variety of techniques ranging from silicone prostheses to heavy duty balloons filled with wallpaper paste. The number of 'she-males' in any community (a she-male' is a transvestite who still has male genitals but who also has breasts – provided by hormones or by surgery or by both) is extremely small. Many young she-males work as prostitutes.

Quotes from cross-dressers
'When I dream of womanhood I see myself as a slender, demure female. I know that even full gender reassignment wouldn't give me this and could possibly lead to an unhappier situation than I'm in now. So for now I'll take my pleasure in stepping into Kate's shoes on a temporary basis.' (Kate is this man's femme name – the name he uses when dressed as a woman. Most transvestites have a femme name.)

'I have no desire to change sex. Escaping from my male body to a female body by having surgery would be a false escape. I would simply take all my old baggage and problems with me. As a transvestite I have the best of both worlds.

I can keep all the unpleasant parts of my life in my male world and have the fun as my female self. Being a man isn't about having a penis any more than being a woman is about having a vagina; both are much more than that.'

'I don't want to be a woman but I wish people would understand that some men have many qualities which are generally regarded as being exclusively female. It doesn't seem fair that it is all right for women to have male qualities (ambition, aggression and so on) but it is not acceptable for men to have female qualities. I have a theory that men are just as romantic as women – and probably less inclined to be physical.'

'I love women so much I like to dress like them. That's all.'

'As a transvestite I have had a hard time from straights, gays and transsexuals because I don't fit into any neat category. People get confused. I feel that I am attacked and ridiculed by everyone. I am heterosexual and so gays don't like me. And yet because they think I am gay I'm not accepted by ordinary people.'

'I just love to get dressed as much as I can in women's clothes for I'm a woman in a man's body. I used to have a male boyfriend and he was a smashing and loving fellow and he treated me as woman with love and sex. We were just like husband and wife and were always talking about getting married. But I think we were a bit frightened to go to see anyone about it so in the end he walked out on me.'

'I want to be like a woman but I would not have a sex change operation.'

'Male transsexuals are like golfers: they always lose their balls. Transvestites would run a mile if threatened with the loss of theirs.'

'I would like to be a woman but I don't know if my family would approve.'

'I am living the apparently happy life of a lad who does fancy the girls but would, quite often, rather be one of the girls.'

4. Survey results: extent of cross-dressing

Question asked: Do you dress completely as a woman (e.g. including wig, make-up, etc.)?
76% respondents answered 'yes'
24% respondents answered 'no'

Commentary
Some transvestites wear only female underwear. Some wear only one particular type of female underwear (e.g. panties, slips, stockings and garters). But most go all the way – and dress completely as women.

Most agree that they reached full transvestism slowly and in stages. 'I began by wearing knickers under my trousers. Then I wore a camisole under my shirt as well. After that things just rather snowballed. When I started cross-dressing I never imagined that things would go as far as they have. But I'm very happy.'

Many transvestites, particularly the shorter, smaller ones, buy their clothes direct from women's shops. Some shop themselves while cross-dressed but many shop in their male clothes and explain their purchases by saying that they are buying a present for a woman friend. A few shop in their male clothes and, if questioned, explain to the assistant that they are transvestites. Transvestites often exchange the names and addresses of shops where the assistants are known to be helpful and sympathetic. Some transvestites' wives or girlfriends shop for them. Many transvestites shop in charity shops – partly because prices tend to be lower but mainly because they feel more at ease in shops where male and female clothes are displayed close together.

Those transvestites who do not wish to buy clothing from shops catering to women buy from specialist stores or mail order companies. Many transvestites who buy most of their clothing from the shops women use, also patronise these specialist concerns for the purchase of items such as shoes which may not be available in their size in ordinary stores. (There aren't many high street shoe stores selling high heeled shoes in size 12). The internet has revolutionised shopping for transvestites.

Quotes from cross-dressers
'I do not have the need/urge to dress fully as a woman, it is purely the female underwear which attracts me.'

‘I never wear a bra and only put on a girdle or garter belt if I am putting on stockings. I only ever wear blouses, skirts, dresses, knickers and petticoats.’

‘I dress as a woman and I do not see why I shouldn’t. Lots of women wear male clothing – jeans, trousers, shirts and jumpers. It is sexual discrimination to say that men shouldn’t wear feminine clothes.’

‘When alone in the house I dress completely as a woman, wearing the nicest lingerie, skirts, blouses, dresses and so on. This makes me feel completely relaxed.’

‘I am fascinated by the variety of feminine underwear. Even the words are beautiful. Men wear vests, pants and socks. Women have camisoles, corsets, camiknickers, girdles, garters, knickers, teddies, waspies and a hundred different types of bra: bullet bras, booster bras, balcony bras and so on.’

‘Being a transvestite is the ultimate narcissistic experience. I go all the way and make myself look as beautiful as possible!’

‘I really do not see what is wrong with a man dressing completely as a woman. In many parts of the Far East transvestites are very highly regarded. In some cultures transvestites were regarded as exceptionally wise and sensitive. The healers and wise men and wise women were often transvestites.’

‘I don’t believe the differences between the two sexes are anywhere near as profound as some people believe. There is a man in every woman and a woman in every man. Most women have learnt to let their ‘male’ self out. Transvestites are merely men who are learning to let their ‘female’ self out.

‘I am very particular about how I am dressed when I am en femme. I wear seamed stockings and the seams must be straight.’ (En femme is the phrase transvestites often use to describe themselves when cross-dressed).

‘Last week I went into a restaurant dressed as a woman. It was my first time. The waiter called me ‘madam’ throughout my meal and I left him an enormous tip. It was wonderful.’

‘I love everything feminine. If I’m feeling down I pop into a store and buy myself some underwear or a pair of earrings. I’ve got drawers full of stuff but a girl can’t have too much underwear or too many earrings, can she?’

‘I find that dressing as a woman is a great way to relax. I simply cannot get the same level of relation when dressed in my male clothes. Dressing as a woman provides me with a definitive way of escaping from my male persona – and it brings out the gentle, feminine, non-aggressive side of my personality. When I am fully dressed as a woman I am softer and more easy going. My wife tells me that I am a different person. I find this only works properly when I am fully dressed.’

‘It takes me ages to turn into a woman but it is well worthwhile. Shaving is the last male thing I do. I have to shave very carefully to make sure that I don’t cut myself. Cuts are very hard to hide and a small nick can ruin a planned evening out.’

‘I love dressing up in women’s clothes. Male clothes bore me. If you look at paintings of the clothes people used to wear a few hundred years ago you’ll find that it was often the men who wore the prettiest clothes. I don’t know why things have changed so much. Amongst other animals and birds it is often the male who has the prettiest colours or the most striking plumage. Look at the peacock!’

‘I feel that dressing en femme gives me a short cut to another person and another life. I can escape from all the stuff that goes with being a man if I dress completely as a woman. I do the whole thing properly: I shave my chest and paint my toe nails even if I’m wearing a high necked dress and shoes and stockings.’

‘Dressing as a woman has given me a real insight into women – and into myself. I discovered that when I am dressed as a man I like to be waited upon because I’m a macho male and when I am dressed as a woman I like to be waited upon because I’m a delicate, very feminine female.’

‘I think that the pressure of being a man is much greater than the pressure of being a woman in our society. Dressing as a woman is my way of escaping and so I do it properly.’

‘When I dress as a woman I become some quite different. The proof for this claim lies in the fact that when I am a man I never wear anything black. I don’t know why but I just don’t. I would feel distinctly uncomfortable wearing black. But when I am a woman I often dress in black. I have black dresses and black skirts and I love black underwear.’

‘When dressed as a woman I go all the way. I try to feel like a woman as well as look like one. I like to be treated like a woman too. I love being treated gently.’

‘I dress completely as a woman and I have learned to be much more sympathetic about the time it takes my girlfriend to get ready when we are going out. I am also more sympathetic about the length of time she spends in the loo! I always use ladies’ loos (and sit down to pee partly because it feels right and partly because otherwise it makes a different sound) when I go out dressed and it takes me ages. The first time I went out I put my garter belt straps on over my panties and I was in the loo for ever.’

‘Being a transvestite is great fun but you have to be on your toes. I go out dressed quite often and I have to concentrate to remember what sex I’m supposed to be at any one time. I have to remember to remove my nail varnish before people come to dinner, to take my ear rings off when I rush to the door and to put on sensible underpants when I go to the doctor.’

‘I sometimes dress completely but I’m sometimes happy to just sit in my frilly underwear watching the television. For me it is the texture which is most important. I’ve never heard of a transvestite dressing in flannelette, for example. I find frilly, silky things sensual and relaxing.’

‘They are only clothes, and you can make yourself as attractive as you like with make-up, and when you feel attractive you feel good. And who doesn’t want to feel good in this shitty world.’

‘Not all women wear make-up every day – I’ll wear it and a wig on average four times a week.’

‘Some of the TVs I know like to dress up in wedding dresses etc while I stick to skirts and blouses or a dress.’

‘I enjoy wearing a skirt whenever I can but I do not like putting a wig and make up on. I have only put a wig on to go out wearing a skirt because I feel it would be more acceptable to look like a woman when I go out wearing a skirt (or dress). But I have been out for a walk wearing a skirt without a wig on. My wife and I prefer this and if it was more acceptable I would do it more often.’

5. Survey results: The negative social impact of cross-dressing on cross-dressers themselves.

Question asked: Has being a transvestite ever lost you a job or a relationship?
16% respondents answered ‘yes’
84% respondents answered ‘no’

Commentary
At first sight the low percentage of cross-dressers answering ‘yes’ to this question seems surprising. It is clear, however, (particularly from the response to Question No 13: Do you live in fear of people finding out that you are a transvestite?) that a very large number of transvestites are extremely secretive about their cross-dressing. These transvestites clearly believe that they would lose jobs or relationships if their secret became common knowledge. Most transvestites would probably prefer to be open about what they do. The secrecy tends to add to the guilt they feel. Many transvestites are also aware that it would be much better to tell their loved ones than to have them find out by accident.

I have no doubt that there is a great deal of prejudice against cross-dressing but the evidence from those transvestites who have been ‘open’ with those around them suggests that they feel that the fears of what might happen may sometimes be exaggerated.

Transvestites who do decide to ‘come out of the closet’ face a number of problems. First, they have to decide how to tell those around them about their cross-dressing. Suddenly blurting out the truth (‘I like dressing up as a woman’) can be shocking and even frightening for the individual who knows little or nothing about transvestism. The wife who is suddenly told that her husband is a transvestite may be frightened that he is also gay or that he plans to have a sex change operation. Her transvestite husband may have had years to come to terms with his cross-dressing. She will need some time too. She will need explanations and reassurance in abundance. She may need to talk to the wives or girlfriends of other transvestites.

Second, transvestites who decide to be open about their cross-dressing have to decide who to tell. Should children be told? Which relatives should be told? Should people at work be told? Should the secret be kept from anyone who might find it difficult to accept? These are personal questions which the transvestite will probably feel that only he can answer.

There is also the problem that it is difficult to know what sort of response to expect. A friend who may seem broadminded may turn out to be heavily prejudiced. A wife who might have been expected to remain loving, loyal and understanding may prove to be so horrified that the relationship never recovers. An admission of cross-dressing may lead to a messy divorce, complicated by the fact that the angry wife and her lawyers may believe that they have a heavy stick with which the transvestite can be beaten into submission.

Some people (including doctors and social workers) who encounter transvestism for the first time assume that a man who dresses in female clothing must be mentally ill.

Here are some comments from transvestites on this subject:

‘Psychiatrists talk a lot of rubbish about transvestites. The only transvestites they see are the mentally ill ones. I know scores of transvestites and not one of them has ever seen a psychiatrist. I think we are saner than most other so called ‘sane’ people.’

‘I suspect that most of us would have probably needed psychiatric help if we hadn’t discovered cross-dressing.’ ‘Psychiatrists have no idea why we dress or what we get out of it. The only people they see are the ones who are depressed or anxious for other reasons. There are so many transvestites around that there are bound to be a few who are mentally ill. But well balanced transvestites never see psychiatrists and so for psychiatrists to make judgements about transvestism on the basis of the men they do see is crazy. All the golfers that psychiatrists see are mentally ill but that doesn’t mean that all golfers are mentally ill does it?’

Quotes from cross-dressers

‘I lost my job when someone told my boss they had seen me in a pub dressed as en femme. I wasn’t doing anyone any harm – just having some fun with a couple of other transvestite friends. He called me into his office and said he was letting me go because it had come to his attention that I had been seen dressed as a woman. I asked him whether he was unhappy with my work and he said no but that he couldn’t have people like me working for him. If I’d been a train spotter and had spent my weekends standing on draughty platforms collecting numbers he would have thought that quite alright. If I’d been a keen climber and had spent my weekends risking my life by scrambling around on cliffs he would have thought nothing of it. But because I wear stockings, a bra, a wig and a dress I’m unemployable.’

‘It annoys me that my cross-dressing has to be kept secret. I would much rather be open about it. But I dare not risk the consequences. Why people should be so uptight about men wearing frocks I do not know – but they are. What the hell difference does it make what clothes I choose to wear? I realise that society needs some rules. I have to wear a jacket and tie if I want to eat in a smart restaurant, for example. But why should anyone care about what I choose to wear in the privacy of my own home?’

‘My fear of the marriage breaking up stopped me telling her earlier in our marriage and my fear of losing her before our marriage stopped me telling her then.’

‘Perhaps if I told her earlier, soon after we met, I might have reduced the devastating effect that the revelation of my cross-dressing had on my wife.’

‘It must have come as a shock that a person who loves trekking, long distance walking and climbing etc wears ‘women’s’ underwear under ‘men’s’ top clothing.’

‘As I’m getting older I’m afraid of getting caught out by my wife and the shame it would bring. I am now feeling full of guilt as though I have betrayed her.’

‘It has possibly lost me a job.’

‘I’ve never lost a job because I’m a TV because nobody at work knows.’

‘As a serviceman the fear of being found out is very real. They say TVism is common in the service. I have seen many dressed as a woman for fun, but I have yet to meet one as committed as I am.’

6. Survey results: Interpersonal recreational external socialisation in controlled and uncontrolled situations. (Going out and having fun).

Three relevant questions were asked:
i) Do you go out of the house dressed as a woman?
47% respondents answered ‘yes’
53% respondents answered ‘no’
ii) Do you attend parties or social events with other transvestites?
23% respondents answered ‘yes’
77% respondents answered ‘no’
iii) Do you ever go shopping dressed as a woman?
21% respondents answered ‘yes’
79% respondents answered ‘no’

Nearly half of all transvestites venture out of the house in women’s clothing. But many – those who are most concerned about being seen – go out at night, after dark and often fairly furtively. They stick to poorly lit streets and avoid crowds. This can clearly be dangerous for it is at night, after dark and in poorly lit streets that muggers and gangs abound. Transvestites who wander around lonely streets are also likely to be arrested for suspected soliciting. Transvestites who venture out at night may be more likely to have their secret exposed – because they end up in hospital or in the local police station.

The number of transvestites who go shopping while cross-dressed is quite high. Obviously, the transvestites who go shopping are usually the ones who are best able to ‘pass’ as women while en femme. Many shop assistants will readily admit that they regularly serve transvestites and a shop which is known to have sympathetic assistants will often get a growing amount of custom from tall, well-built women with rather large hands and feet.

There is a growing number of clubs of various kinds catering for transvestites – though these are usually situated only in the larger cities or towns but most cross-dressers who wish to socialise do so in pubs and clubs which have a fetish or gay clientele. Although there may be frictions, jealousies and misunderstandings, many transvestites, transsexuals, gays and fetishists get on well together; all groups being aware that as ‘outsiders’ they are victims of many unjustified prejudices.

Transvestites who go out in public have to deal with the problem of using ladies’ lavatories. It would obviously be impossible for someone wearing a dress, stockings and high heels to go into a gents’ lavatory. Most deal with the problem by using ladies’ lavatories and being as quick and as discreet as they can be.

Quotes from cross-dressers
‘Before I married I used to go to gay pubs and clubs all dressed up because I never used to get any trouble in places like that.’

‘I always try to dress as conservatively as possible when I’m going out. I think it is important to dress your age if you want to look convincing. Anyone who goes out looking a drag queen is looking for trouble – and will probably find it.’

‘I have not left my house dressed as a woman but have returned to my house when its dark especially after midnight after I have been to Z (a nearby town) for our local TV meetings – having a night out with the rest of us girls and enjoying ourselves very much.’

‘I go to TV parties and socials quite a lot. Transvestites are terrific people. We don’t have orgies or anything like that. We just dress up, dance a bit, have a drink and sit around and talk.’

‘Since going out dressed I have discovered that women get far more smiles than men. It’s great fun being a woman. Strange women smile at me when I’m dressed because they do not see me as any threat to them. And men smile at me because they want to get into my knickers.’

‘I like mixing with transvestites. They are the nicest people I know. Transvestites are generally compassionate and sensitive people who are slow to judge others. I don’t know whether men who become transvestites tend to be more compassionate and sensitive than other men or whether men become compassionate and sensitive because they are transvestites.’

‘I go to transvestite parties where I can meet other transvestites because I can really let my hair down. We don’t just dress like women – we behave like women too. We giggle and gossip and cuddle each other but there is nothing sexual about it. We’re just like a lot of girls on a night out. I have a couple of bitter lemons and I’m as high as a kite. When I get back home I take off my high heels, my knickers, my tights, my bra and my dress, my make-up, my jewellery and my wig and then I start worrying again about the mortgage, the car, the bills and the business. Dressing as a woman is the best way I know of escaping from the pressures of being a man.’

‘I have been openly dressing, i.e. actually going out, travelling on public transport, socialising, shopping and many other things that normal women do every day of their lives, for the past two years. Before that I was a closet dresser.’

‘I have been more happy and content with life since being able to go out dressed and socialise. The trouble is that society is so narrow-minded.’

‘I’ve been to London to a club there, but travelled from home to the club dressed as a man. When I got to the club I straight away got dressed in women’s clothes and had a wonderful evening.’

‘I go out dressed – but I only go to a little supermarket at the end of my road as I’m not sure if the man who runs it knows what I am.’

‘In the local paper there was a help group for TVs advertised. I rang them up and they told me to come down. I made up a story to my wife that I was going out with my mates. I used to hide my clothes in the wheel well of my car and only bring them into the house when I needed them, so off I went with all my clothes already in my car. When I got there I knocked on a big wooden door, and a rather pretty TV in short black skirt and frilly blouse answered the door in the highest stilettos I’d ever seen. Gorgeous long legs in black stockings the top of which were just showing as he walked up the stairs. He showed me into the changing room where there were men in various stages of undress in various items of women’s clothes, some of which you could see were very expensive. I felt a bit shy at first, until one young lad asked if I wanted a hand. I said yes, probably because that was the first word that came out. He was in his early 20s and looked sensational. He started to help me undress with his beautifully manicured red nails. Before long I was completely naked. I was completely seduced and was starting to get aroused when he threw my knickers at me and told me to cover my embarrassment. He then set about transforming me into a stunning female form; wig, make up, bra, knickers, skirt, blouse and high heels. On finishing, he planted a big kiss on my lipsticked lips. It felt greasy but nice. He retouched my lipstick but it was at this point I began to worry whether I was gay, because I had just been kissed by a man in lipstick and thoroughly enjoyed it. He asked me my name. I gave my male name but he said no, your female name. I said I didn’t have one, so he called me Angie and introduced me to the group. That was a bit weird as they were all ages and were both strange and wonderful. The young lad tried to put me at ease and constantly passed me comments. He asked me whether I was gay, bi or straight. I don’t know why but I said bi. He then made a play, sneaking his hand up my skirt. I then felt I had to get out of that place. I made an excuse and left never to return again. So going to a help group didn’t help me.’

‘I would love to go shopping but being tall I would be very noticeable and make people look twice.’

7. Survey results: Cross-dressers’ realistic, critical self- appraisal of their ability to ‘pass’ in public. (How convincing are you as a woman?)

Question asked: If you go out cross-dressed, in your opinion, how many of the people who see you are convinced that you are a woman?
a) None
b) A few
c) Most
d) All
30% of respondents reported that no one who saw them would be convinced that they were women

23% of respondents reported that a few of those who saw them would be convinced that they were women
21% respondents reported that most of those who saw them would be convinced that they were women
6% respondents reported that all of those who saw them would be convinced that they were women
(The other 20% reported that they never went out cross-dressed.)

When the results to this question are compared with the results to Question 6 (Do you go out of the house dressed as a woman?) there appears to be some conflict. The apparent conflict is, however, easily explained: many cross-dressers who attend special parties and other social occasions attended only by other cross-dressers do not consider that they go out of their homes cross-dressed because they drive to the party venue in male clothes and change at the venue.

Commentary
Most transvestites are very honest and pragmatic about their attempts to 'pass' as women. Only a small number (6%) believe that they could successfully pass as women in any circumstances. Most accept that they are 'read' by at least some of those with whom they come into contact. (The word 'pass' is commonly used among cross-dressers to define their ability to convince others that they are women rather than men dressed in feminine clothing. The word 'read' is used to define the ability of members of the public to 'see through' the 'disguise'.)

Most transvestites are too tall and too broad shouldered to pass easily as women. Large, and often hairy, hands and large feet don't help. In addition male waists, hips and bottoms are usually the wrong shape (though this problem can, to a certain extent, be resolved by the wearing of suitable corsetry and padding).

In order to 'pass' most transvestites would need to have electrolysis to remove all their facial hair. Most are unwilling to do this because they would then have difficulty in maintaining a presentable male image.

Many transvestites also find it difficult to 'pass' because of their voices, although it is possible to slightly soften the usual, deep male voice by speaking softly and blowing slightly to take the edge of the sounds.

Transvestites also admit that it can take many years to learn the behavioural patterns which make women identifiable. For example, women tend to walk with smaller strides and to sit rather differently to men.

Quotes from cross-dressers
'I would say I'm quite convincing with all my gear on. I'm quite tall at 6 foot and my shoes are size 9 but my corset and false boobs give me an hour glass figure and I'm quite a dab hand with the old make-up which helps a lot.'

'When a transvestite says he can 'pass' I have a suspicion that this means only that the people (s)he meets are nice enough not to say anything and that (s)he has created an image which is, at least, not overtly shocking.'

'People see a woman and assume it is a woman. They don't always check to see whether or not every woman they see is a man dressed as a woman. The person most likely to spot a transvestite is another transvestite. Like most transvestites I'm very good at 'spotting' cross dressers.'

'I try to be as convincing as I can be. I think I am quite good at it. I live alone but my neighbours think I am a couple. They see a man and a woman coming and going into and out of the house and think they are two different people. My next door neighbours invited me round to a meal and told me to bring my lady friend. I had to make an excuse. I feel quite bad about it and I think I will tell them the truth soon.'

'I have no idea whether or not anyone 'reads' me. I simply avoid eye contact with strangers and I never turn round to see if anyone is staring at me. If people want to look – or even laugh – that is up to them.'

'I am 'readable' because I am biggish. But I have seldom had any hassle.'

'The male side of my nature is as far removed from my female side as it would be possible to imagine. Nothing at all, in any way, looks or sounds like the person who sometimes gets herself dressed in the evenings.'

'When made up and out I am not aware of anyone having it worked it out. But when you are in the company of transvestites who are not able to 'pass', you are automatically recognised by the company you are with.'

'I find that if I am dressed smartly and sensibly and am pleasant with people that I am accepted by all sorts.'

8. Survey Results: Bra and panties beneath the suit: the number of cross-dressers who wear women's underwear when *dressed in ordinary male clothes.*

Question asked: Do you wear women's underwear when you are dressed in ordinary male clothes?
75% respondents answered 'yes'
25% respondents answered 'no'

Commentary
The majority of transvestites regularly wear female underwear underneath their male clothing. Some keep a supply of male underwear for visits to the doctor. A minority of transvestites keep the two parts of their lives quite separate – dressing either entirely as a man or else entirely as a woman.

Quotes from cross-dressers
'I go out of the house with 'women's' underwear under my normal clothes. (This includes tights/stockings, camisole top etc) This is mainly at weekends as I am afraid that if I wore 'women's' underwear to work I would be found out and it would affect my future career and family life.'

'Any man who wears cotton underpants and a string vest when he could be wearing garments made out of lace edged silk or satin (or some cheaper but similarly sensuous material) is denying himself constant tactile delight for the sake of satisfying custom and an anxiety about what people will say if he is knocked down in the street and his secret discovered.'

'I wear lacy underwear and I don't care if anyone knows it. I wear beautiful camisole tops underneath a white shirt for work and I'm sure everyone can see them but I don't care.'

'I go shopping with my wife and family with 'men's clothes on top of 'women's' underwear.'

'I avoid using public conveniences when I am outside as I'm afraid of being found out.'

'I normally wear 'women's underwear 3-5 hours per week day and 12-15 hours on a Saturday and Sunday. If I think I will be caught women's underwear is not worn.'

'I would like to wear 'women's underwear permanently.'

'I find it very strange that most clothing manufacturers do not manufacture soft underwear for men. I normally use women's shops for my clothes.'

'I even take a small set of underwear on holiday but there is always the fear that this will be found.'

'When I've got female underwear on under my outdoor wear I always go and take them off and put my dressing gown on before we go to bed.'

'I often wear undies, bra, garter belt, stockings, panties and waspie, also at times wearing an ankle chain, under my male clothes.'

'It gave me some sort of pleasure walking around at work to think that beneath the male exterior that everyone could see was a pair of turquoise silky knickers.'

'I quite regularly wear knickers and sometimes I'll put on a pair of stockings as well underneath my male clothes.'

'I work in an office. In winter I'll wear tights under my trousers, after all, they are warm, and who likes being cold?'

'I wear female underwear all the time.'

'My wife insists that I wear her underwear all the time.'

'I wear female panties all the time and have worn tights and a bra as well.'

‘I never mix man and woman in that way.’

‘I wear women’s underwear most of the time. I feel good deceiving the general public and some of those I work with, but at the same time I feel guilty at deceiving my friends and family.’

9. Survey results: night-time wear.

Question asked: What do you sleep in?
a) The nude
b) Pyjamas
c) Nightie
37% of respondents said they slept in the nude
18% of respondents said they slept in pyjamas
45% of respondents said they slept in a nightie

Commentary
The low incidence of pyjama wearing among transvestites, and the growing incidence of transvestism suggest that the future for the pyjama industry may be less than rosy. These figures suggest either that many of the transvestites who took part in this survey live alone or that they have understanding partners.

Quotes from cross-dressers
‘I sleep in the nude except when I’m working nights. I’ll slip on my wife’s little black nightie and knickers. I just love the feel of the silk against my skin.’

‘The nude; but I have slept in both men’s traditional stripy pyjamas and women’s satin pyjamas.’

‘If I could I would wear women’s underwear to sleep in. I only do this if my wife is sleeping in our daughter’s room.’

‘When she (my wife) goes away I sometimes wear one of her nighties in bed and she knows this.’

‘I do have nighties but prefer bra and panties.’

‘With two children who stay up late – my main outlet at the moment is wearing a nightie at night spasmodically – usually when I become ratty and moody. If anyone else knew I would be very embarrassed.’

10. Survey results: homosexual experiences among cross-dressers.

Question asked: Have you ever had sex with another man?
20% respondents said ‘yes’
80% respondents said ‘no’

Commentary
The incidence of any homosexual experience among transvestites (1 in 5) is slightly lower than the incidence of any homosexual experience among non-transvestite heterosexuals (usually regarded as 1 in 3). Most of those transvestites who admitted to having had sex with another man said that their homosexual experiences were isolated. The incidence of genuine homosexuality and bisexuality among transvestites is considerably less than 1 in 5 and probably close to the normal figure for non-transvestite males of between 5% and 10%.

Most men who cross dress to escape from the stresses in their lives are staunchly heterosexual; some may occasionally fantasise about being picked up and made love to by another man but that is usually simply a part of the pretence of being a woman and not a genuine sexual need or desire.

One side effect of transvestism is that men who are impotent when dressed as men may become potent again when dressed as women – simply because they are more relaxed and more at ease with themselves and the world.

There are a number of significant differences between those transvestites who are homosexual or bisexual and those who are exclusively heterosexual.

Heterosexual transvestites tend to dress to escape from everyday stresses, because they enjoy the feel of women’s clothes or, quite simply, because they enjoy looking like women and escaping from their male persona. Many explained that they love women so much that they dress like women as a homage to them. Heterosexual transvestites often tend to disapprove of 'drag queens' and flamboyant, erotically dressed homosexual transvestites who, they feel, tend to make fun of women. Some transvestites get into difficult situations because although they enjoy attracting male attention it is often affection and admiration which they crave – rather than sex. They want to be treated as women emotionally rather than physically.

Homosexual transvestites (who can be subdivided into many subcategories – the most obvious of which are the flamboyant drag queens) frequently admit that they dress for the sexual thrill they get – and to attract male partners. Homosexual transvestites frequently masturbate when they are dressed, often fantasising about a homosexual sexual encounter, and then, overcome by guilt, quickly removing their feminine clothes. In contrast, when heterosexual transvestites indulge in sexual fantasies their fantasies often revolve around real women. (Many heterosexual transvestites have had sexual experiences with female partners while cross dressed. More than half of the transvestites responding to this survey said that they had sex with a woman while cross dressed.)

Quotes from cross-dressers
The survey clearly shows that the majority of transvestites are heterosexual. Most of those respondents who added comments to this part of the survey form made their feelings quite clear:

'I have no desire to sleep with a man. I'm not gay.'

'I know quite a lot of transvestites and none of them are gay. It would be daft for a transvestite to be gay. Gays like men and transvestites like dressing and behaving as women.'

'A friend and I take it in turns to take each other out. He's a transvestite too. One night he will dress and I will take him out. The next time we go out together I'll dress and he will play the part of my male escort. We feel that we are less conspicuous this way. Occasionally we hold hands or put our arms around one another when entering a restaurant or walking along the street but it is only for the sake of appearances and it never goes any further than that.'

'I have to say I am a macho man myself at all other times and cannot abide the thought of sex with another man.'

'Wolf whistles make me feel wonderful. It's nice to know that men fancy me – and that I make a convincing and good looking woman. But that's as far as it goes.'

'I'm not gay – I love women so much I want to dress like them.'

Some respondents did write about homosexual relationships:

'We did enter into a brief sexual relationship, but as I didn't consider myself a homosexual, more part-time heterosexual female, it didn't really work out.'

'I once met with another TV and we both dressed up at his house. He masturbated me which at the time I found enjoyable, but it raised questions within myself as to my sexuality. I would not wish to go any further than this and I thought myself to be heterosexual but now I think I may be slightly bisexual. I frequently fantasize about doing it again.'

'I went to a gay club once (while I was dressed). A chap chatted me up. I made excuses after a few drinks that I had to go home. We made a date to see each other. He kissed me goodnight. I never got the nerve to see him again.'

'Whilst cross dressed I have acted out the role of a woman and was attracted to a male. I found I was sexually aroused in a peculiar way, lost my inhibitions, commenced fondling his genitals, progressed to oral and allowed him to finish off by penetrating me. I found performing oral sex quite scintillating.'

11. Survey results: The extent and significance of fear of exposure.

Question asked: Do you live in fear of people finding out that you are a transvestite?
69% of respondents said 'yes'

31% of respondents said ‘no’

Commentary

Fear of public exposure is the major anxiety experienced by transvestites. The extent to which transvestites will go to preserve their secret is well illustrated by the fact that one anonymous survey respondent took his completed and untraceable survey form to another town ten miles away before posting it to me. Numerous other transvestites copied out the entire survey form in longhand – and then filled in their answers. They did this, they explained, because they had not dared to cut the survey form out of the newspaper in which it had appeared in case anyone saw what they had done.

The worst problems transvestites face generally involve other men. It is male colleagues and friends who are most likely to respond with horror, abuse or disgust when a man is exposed as a transvestite. It is possibly the same men who object to homosexuality and who, through ignorance assume that a man who is a transvestite must also be a homosexual.

The fear that what they are doing is wrong – and would not be tolerated by those around them – means that many transvestites suffer enormously from guilt. Indeed, the extent of their guilt is so great that in many cases it must very nearly match the stress relief they obtain.

In order to help themselves deal with this guilt it is common for transvestites to fantasise about having been ‘forced’ to dress in women’s clothing. These fantasies can sometimes be extremely complicated and sophisticated but the basic premise is simple enough: the transvestite is kidnapped, captured or taken prisoner by one or more women and then coerced, blackmailed or physically forced into dressing as a woman. The person or persons forcing the transvestite to cross-dress is or are invariably female. While cross-dressed the transvestite may be humiliated and often forced to act as a maidservant. This fantasy is particularly common among transvestites who were dressed as girls by their mothers when they were young boys and later told off by their mother, wife or some other relative for continuing the cross-dressing.

Fantasising about forced cross-dressing also occurs among those transvestites who have an added layer of guilt because while they are dressed they enjoy homosexual fantasies. As I have already shown homosexuality among transvestites is no more common than it is among non-transvestites and this type of fantasy is, therefore, much less common.

There is a final, small, corollary to all this: a few transvestites have expressed the fear that if cross dressing becomes more acceptable, more mainstream, their enjoyment may be diminished. It appears that, for a few transvestites, the fact that what they do is secret and forbidden provides some of the attraction.

Quotes from cross-dressers

‘I live in fear of being found out by our daughter, work colleagues and family etc. My parents found out when I was about 15, when they found women’s underwear hidden within the bed base. They said it was not normal and confiscated the clothing. They threatened me with calling in a psychologist and I lived in fear of this.’

‘I get annoyed about the way people make judgements about people according to the clothes they wear and their general appearance. Such things are trivial and insignificant. It is the inner person that is important. Identity is not about sex or anything physical but is spiritual.’

‘A few years ago I decided I was going to be honest about being a transvestite. I was threatened with blackmail by a former girlfriend and I decided that whatever the cost I was going to come out of the closet. I expected to lose work (I run my own business in a small town) and I thought I might lose some friends but I felt that being honest and open was more important. I also wanted to make it clear to other transvestites that they should not be ashamed of what they do. After all, what the hell does it matter in the general scheme of things? I simply cannot understand why some wives get so uptight when they find out that their husbands like wearing bras and panties. In the end I was very pleasantly surprised: I didn’t lose any work and instead of losing friends I gained new friends and, I think, eventually ended up with more respect from the friends I have. Most of the women I know were intensely curious about my transvestism – they wanted to know all the details such as whether or not I shave my legs and chest and what sort of make-up I use to cover up my beard area.’

‘I live in fear of my doctor finding out and maybe taking our daughter away from us.’

‘My wife discovered my transvestism after X years of marriage. This was the result of my wife opening my briefcase one evening. I immediately got into the car and drove to an isolated location to try and commit suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning.'

'I'm not afraid of being found out. Nearly everyone knows about me.'

'I don't often wear women's underwear when we go out in the car because I'm afraid of an accident and that someone will find out what I'm wearing under my clothes.'

'Thank you for listening to me and I'm sorry about the writing but I'm so nervous. You're the first person I've told about what I like to wear.'

'I have been in a steady relationship with the same girl for 7 years and we have been living together for nearly 4 years. About 18 months ago we had a fairly major bust-up and at the time I became frightened that if she found my secret stash of female clothing the relationship would break up permanently. I instantly threw out most of my clothing (a decision I now regret.)'

'I love cross dressing and feel completely at peace with myself while I'm doing it. I myself feel no guilt and would openly wear women's clothes most of the time if it would not be for the hell most people would put my wife and children through. So I choose to stay 'closeted' because it's easiest.'

'As long as you have a fun adult attitude, and don't dress like a whore in public (when shopping and so on), most of the general public take you as you are or (just think you) slightly barmy.'

'I hate it being in me sometimes, the fear of being found out by friends, family, children; the sheer frustration at not being able to dress up at times when I get the desire. There have been a lot of times when I have just taken to cutting myself on my arm (I have between 50-60 scars) because of the frustration and hate of this problem being in me. I just wish a lot more people could understand this problem (especially my wife) and realise that we are not gay and love the opposite sex as much as anyone else. It's just that we need this release from everyday pressures, and dressing up certainly helps relieve stress.'

'Now and again at the weekends I'll spend all day dressed up. If anyone rings the doorbell, I have to pretend I'm not in – obviously!'

'Keeping it a secret is hard work – it makes it seem as if you're keeping hidden some terrible secret – but that's the way it's got to be.'

'Maybe one day it'll be different – but that's up to the general public.'

'If I hadn't got married and had children I would have committed suicide years ago as in today's society I am termed as a freak.'

'I have a great fear of being 'found out' and would do almost to prevent that happening. My wife (we are great pals) does not like it! She puts up with my habit and will help me if I ask her...though she does not like it and for heaven's sake who could blame her?'

'I don't live in fear of being found out as a transvestite as I feel as soon as everybody knows I will be able to do it openly.'

'This took a couple of days as I posted it away from the place where I work as someone may find out. I am glad you did this survey as I'm glad to tell someone albeit anonymously, about my transvestism.'

'I'm not a bad husband. I don't go out drinking, womanising etc. Dressing up was my only vice.'

'This is the first time I have ever admitted being a TV (albeit anonymously).'

'I am completely open about my transvestism and am accepted by my family and workmates.'

‘I would leave this town if I was ever found out about my cross dressing. I was nearly caught once and I’m very careful now not to get found out.’

‘I bet there are lots of blokes who have these tendencies but are well in the closet to save embarrassment.’

‘I do live in fear of being found out. It is still seen as not acceptable to be a TV and could not face the ridicule and rejection that I’m sure it would bring.’

12. Survey results: cross-dressers’ experience of the law.

Question asked: Has cross-dressing ever got you into trouble with the law?
4% of respondents answered ‘yes’
96% of respondents answered ‘no’

Commentary
Although some transvestites report having been hounded and harassed by the police most transvestites (even those who regularly go out shopping or otherwise mixing in the community) have never had any contact with the police while dressed.

Surprisingly, perhaps, several transvestites who said that they had been stopped by the police (usually while driving) said that one of the policemen who had stopped them had later asked them out. Since most policemen work in pairs this contact had usually occurred the day after. The majority of those who reported being asked out by policemen said that the policeman had asked for their telephone number and had rung the next day to ask for a date. This may be fantasy/wishful thinking but there must be a large number of policemen who are gay but who find it difficult to find partners because of their fear of exposure. Finding a male transvestite, whom they could safely assume would be secretive and discrete, and might often wrongly assume to be homosexual, might be regarded by some police officers as a tremendous opportunity.

Many transvestites claim that their fear of the law (and of having an accident while dressed) means that they drive much more carefully than other men.

‘We should get lower motor car insurance than other motorists,’ wrote one. ‘Because I always wear female underwear I always drive cautiously but when I’m fully dressed en femme I always obey the speed limits and other road traffic laws.’

‘Transvestites are the safest drivers in the world,’ said another. ‘I would much rather travel with another transvestite than with anyone else. They take far fewer risks because they don’t want to be arrested or to be found in an accident wearing ladies panties and with their toe nails painted red.’

Quotes from cross-dressers
‘I have been stopped for potential (and un-pursued) traffic offenses a couple of times when dressed but have received only courtesy from police to date; I always tell them I am a cross-dresser immediately.’

‘We did go out only once last year late at night for a walk – 11.30 dressed up. It was bliss! But we haven’t done it since. We are afraid we may meet a neighbour or get stopped by the police!’

‘It would be a nightmare to get into trouble with the law with regards to my cross dressing.’

‘Once I was stopped in my car dressed up by the police. All my documents were correct. In fact the officer asked me for a date knowing I was a TV.’

‘I was stopped by a policeman while I was driving and dressed en femme. I had to tell him my real name (though I’m honest enough with myself to suspect that he had guessed that all was not what it seemed) but when he took down my details he also asked for my telephone number. The next day he rang up and asked me out. I assume he must have been gay. Part of me wanted to say ‘yes’ but I said ‘no’. I’ve regretted it ever since.’

‘I have not yet had trouble with the law because I always go out in the dark and avoid crowded places. If I go out in the daytime I go out in the car. I may try going to a gay club used by TVs.’

13. Survey results: sexual experience of transvestites while cross-dressed.

Question asked: Have you ever had sex with a woman while you've been dressed as a woman?
55% of respondents answered 'yes'
45% of respondents answered 'no'

Commentary
The number of transvestites who have made love to their wives, or girlfriends, while cross-dressed will probably surprise many – particularly those who, quite wrongly, assume that transvestites are gay. The fact that over half of the survey respondents said that they had sex with a woman while 'dressed' also shows that many women do accept transvestism – and enjoy their partner's dressing.

Quotes from cross-dressers
'If you've never been fondled through silk you've never been fondled.'

'My wife makes me dress in a black or red slip, bra, panties and stockings on alternate nights. She loves to fondle me for 30-45 minutes, slipping her hand over the slinky underwear. This gives her an orgasm. Then she sits astride me and quickly has another.'

'There is no doubt that some women are really turned on by making love to transvestites. They call us 'dicks in knickers' or 'cocks in frocks'.'

'I love being caressed through sexy underwear. And my wife loves it too.'

'I would like to, but I doubt if my wife would agree and I accept our unspoken understanding.'

'I would love to wear a pair of silk panties in front of my wife and have her masturbate me but I'm afraid this will never be.'

14. Survey results: Female partners' attitudes towards cross-dressing males.

Three relevant questions were asked:
i) Does your (female) partner know of your transvestism?
74% of respondents answered 'yes'
26% of respondents answered 'no'
ii) Does she approve?
43% of respondents answered 'yes'
57% of respondents answered 'no'
iii) Does your partner help you choose clothes, make up etc?
37% of respondents answered 'yes'
63% of respondents answered 'no'

Commentary
Wives and girlfriends who know that the men in the lives cross-dress respond in many different ways.

At the one extreme are the women who are disgusted by the very idea of a man putting on a woman's clothes. If they tolerate it at all they do so with a bad grace and with very strict rules. Their partners are allowed to dress only at certain times of the week, only in certain rooms and always behind locked doors and with the curtains drawn.

At the other extreme there are the women who enjoy their partners' transvestism, who share their partners' pleasure and who see it as adding to their relationship.

In between there are as many shades of acceptance as there are relationships.

Quotes from cross-dressers
'I worry my wife will find out about my cross dressing because she would divorce me. I wish we could talk about it and be open about it but she just wouldn't understand me.'

'My partner does not have a clue that I'm a transvestite.'

‘I started to wear women’s clothes when I was about seven years old. Looking back, I think I was always aware of not feeling quite right dressed as a boy. I would dress up in my sister’s clothes whenever I had an opportunity, but it would always be my secret. As the years went on I continued to wear women’s clothes but always in private, and with a sense of guilt. I got married and my wife and I had three children. I thought that I could get over my cross dressing but it was impossible. So I told my wife all about it. She was very shocked of course, but she is such a wonderful person and tries to help me in all ways.’

‘This was a major reason why I did not get married until I was about thirty.’

‘All my girlfriends have lot of fun with the TV stuff.’

‘She accepted my position of dressing when we were first married (married 23 years) but recently she has changed her position. She still knows I dress up.’

‘My wife doesn’t approve at all but the transvestite group I’m a member of is run by a woman (we call gender females ‘real girls’). I find that this makes me feel more comfortable than if the organisation was run by a man, partly because I am definitely heterosexual and partly because it is comforting to know that not all women reject us as perverts. To know that there is at least one woman who accepts and understands and doesn’t judge is very important.’

‘My partner knows that I wear this sort of stuff and I’ve even got some of her cast-offs. She doesn’t encourage or discourage me. She just says that I’m not hurting anybody but she doesn’t like to see me in them.’

‘(My wife was) totally against for our nearly 40 years of marriage until the last 3 months when she started buying me underwear. That’s how I know she knew she was going to die and tried to make me happy before she left me.’

‘I have tried talking to her about men who wear women’s panties to which she said they are queer. I’ve also dropped hints at Christmas that I would like silk boxer shorts to which she called me a silly old fool.’

‘In the main my wife puts up with my transvestism and will accompany me on nights out in the winter while on other instances she will deliberately put obstacles in my way knowing I intend to dress up on that particular day.’

‘In my experience it is usually only men who disapprove of transvestism. Women understand that wearing nice clothes does make a difference to the way you feel. I have told dozens of people about my transvestism and the only people who have ever made a big thing about it have been men.’

‘My girlfriend was really surprised when I told her. She said afterwards that she had known I wanted to get into her knickers but that she hadn’t realised that I wanted to get into her knickers literally – and to keep them on! She thought it was a real laugh and has been great about it.’

‘In shops my wife and I compete to find the prettiest bras in our sizes.’

‘Although my wife does not approve, she does give me her discarded underwear.’

‘We both have found that the first rule of being accepted as we are is to be honest with everyone. That way they have the choice of either walking away or mixing with us socially. Not many walk away. Women do find us fascinating and want to know all about us and although being a transvestite does not lend itself to long-term relationships neither of us is ever short of female company.’ (From a letter from two transvestites).

‘When I met my present wife B years ago she was happy to go along with dressing me up, saying she regarded it as a game, but after C children and D years of marriage she decided she hated it, saying she thought that I would grow out of it as I got older.’

‘I’d like to find a partner who understands and accepts my cross dressing. Transvestites have a tremendous amount of respect for women – after all we dress as them – loyal, caring, loving; it’s all there, if a woman wants it.’

‘My wife says that what I do cannot be natural since I am so secretive about it. And yet she won’t let me tell anyone because she says that I would lose my job and my position in society if it became common knowledge that I am a transvestite.'

'Compliments are like music to the transvestite and she may well seek them just like any woman. My wife is marvellous that way.'

'My wife has helped a little with buying some clothes and selected my female glasses.'

'Quite often dresses and blouses tend to fit us both.'

'One night she was out and her mother had sent down a bag of dresses etc for a jumble sale. As I was fed up I 'borrowed' panties, stockings and girdle from my wife's cupboard and tried on a silky dress which fitted me perfectly. My wife came home early and caught me. From then on, every Saturday night I was her 'maid', washing, ironing etc with full make up. This lasted for about four years and then abruptly stopped.'

'Eventually I set my camera timer up and took a photo of my bottom half in short skirt, stockings and high heels, and I left the photo in the phone book for my wife to find. At first she was convinced it was of another woman, but I told her it was me. She went berserk, she was going to leave, she burnt all her underwear and replaced it all with dull unattractive stuff. She cried for about a month and has totally banned any talk of it in the house. If anything appears on the television or in the papers, she goes into a decline about it.'

'It was my only secret from her and I feel I should have kept it.'

'After telling my wife we went through all the usual nightmares until I was able to convince her that I was not gay etc.'

'I have no partner – but both sisters know and approve.'

'Also any of her friends who stayed here, well if the opportunity arose, I'd be into their kit. I must have tried on the clothes of about 20 or more different women, all without them having a clue.'

'Since my wife found out I cross dressed she has been a tower of strength, advising with my clothes, make up etc. It has brought us closer.'

'The reason for the PO Box is I don't want my wife to find out I am a transvestite. I would like her to know because I would like someone to help me buy clothes, make up etc and help me to dress up properly, but I also wouldn't like my wife to know because I love her and she might not understand me being a transvestite and I don't want to risk my marriage.

'Late wife knew about my desire but could not accept it. Only dressed in secret, subject was never mentioned again between us.'

'My wife likes me dressing. She says I become softer and more feminine when I am changed.'

'My daughter helps me.'

'She does her best and says that it is OK for me to cross dress. Her main concern is that I am not found out.'

'She buys, I try.'

15. Survey results: Hours a week spent cross-dressed: reality and expectation.

Two relevant questions were asked:
i) How many daytime hours a week do you spend dressed as a woman?
The average response was 12 hours (range: 0 hours to 168 hours)
ii) How many daytime hours a week would you like to spend dressed as a woman?

The average response was 70 hours (range: 1 hour to 168 hours)

Commentary
It is here that the difference between transvestites and transsexuals becomes most obvious. Whereas transsexuals say (by definition) that they would like to spend 168 hours a week as a woman the majority of transvestites are keen to retain their mix and match approach to sexuality. Although most transvestites would like to be able to spend more time ‘dressed’, and the vast majority of those who are still ‘in the closet’ would like to come out into the open, nearly all of the transvestites who took part in this survey made it quite clear that they did not want to stop dressing as men. For most transvestites cross dressing is a part of being male – not an alternative.

Quotes from cross-dressers
‘The skeleton in my closet wears silk panties, ten denier stockings and an itsy bitsy satin bra but that doesn’t mean that I don’t still enjoy male things. I still watch football and mess with my car like any other man.’

‘If it was possible – (I’d cross-dress) most of the time.’

‘All the time if I felt in the mood. But I still enjoy my male self.’

‘Probably 30-70 hours. But I also have a male existence which I also enjoy at work, in sport and as a TV I can have much of the best of both worlds – male and female. I don’t mix the two. I am either one or the other!’

‘This is a hard one to answer as I feel if you did it too often, the feelings of enjoyment would be reduced or disappear altogether.’

‘I spend most of the weekend dressed, or as much as possible.’

‘I would dearly love to enjoy the same freedom as women who wear trousers and jackets without fear of public condemnation or arrest. Probably the only way that this innocent behaviour will ever be tolerated is for it to become fashionable.’

‘I would like to wear a skirt or dress most of the time if I could, but I do not like wearing a wig or make up.’

‘At present I manage to dress for approximately 10 hours a week but like all TVs I would dress all the time if society would accept it and I wasn’t persecuted, made a laughing stock and was accepted for who I am and what I know.’

‘(I dress) three hours a night, seven nights a week. We are retired, having sex morning and afternoon. But I’ve been known to dress up early.’

General conclusion

In recent decades, women have quite reasonably claimed the right to do nearly all the things that men do – and to behave in many traditionally 'male' ways. Women now fight fires, drive lorries, sit in the boss's chair and exhibit emotions which were traditionally regarded as male – and which, in the past, women usually had to suppress. Women can be as tough and as aggressive as men without anyone thinking any the worse of them. And they can wear male clothing without anyone batting an eyelid.

But while women have won the right to exhibit qualities which used to be regarded as 'male', most men still don't feel able to exhibit traditionally female qualities.

Although they now have to cope with a world in which women's rights and expectations have changed, most men still hide their emotions from one another, and from themselves.

At heart most men are just as romantic, compassionate and sensitive as most women. (Indeed, research shows that women tend to be much stronger and more capable of dealing with divorce, unemployment and bereavement than men are.) But those basic feelings are often suppressed.

A surprisingly large number of men dare not admit their femininity to themselves – let alone show it to others. Natural feelings are suppressed and bottled up and, as a direct result, men suffer from high blood pressure, heart disease and immune system disorders.

While women have enlarged their role in society (and have, as a result benefitted in many ways) men have been pushed further and further into their destructive and damaging masculinity.

The old fashioned theory that men are men, that women are women and that, in addition to the obvious physical differences, there are fundamental physiological and psychological differences which mean that men and women see the world through entirely different eyes and must, in consequence, respond entirely differently to identical stimuli, is a nonsense. The theory no longer applies to women but still applies to men.

Society has tried to define males and females in harsh black and white tones whereas in reality the truth is that people exist in a vast variety of shades of grey.

It seems that transvestism provides for many men a healthy release of feelings which would otherwise have remained hidden.

Cross-dressing has been described as a 'symbolic excursion across gender boundaries'. It is probably a healthier and more natural excursion than we realise for it enables a man to show his 'softer side'. And it seems reasonable that men should have the right to express their femininity, in just the same way that women have fought for and won the right to express their masculine qualities.

Men should not be ashamed to show their female qualities; they should not be reluctant to let their emotions show, to ask for help and support, and to combine traditional male toughness with the soft, gentle qualities which are hidden deep inside.

And women should do their best to encourage their men to show their femininity. These days it isn't women who need liberating but men.

There are many practical ways in which men can let their soft, feminine nature surface. They can learn to share their fears and admit to their vulnerability; they can learn to listen to their instincts more often and they can share their feelings with friends.

But it isn't always easy to do these things when you've spent decades doing the opposite.

And so increasing numbers of men are finding that there is a short cut: by dressing in soft, feminine fabrics they can quickly liberate their feminine, gentle side – and (temporarily at least) escape from their aggressive, ambitious, demanding masculine selves.

After all, women often dress as men when taking on male attributes. The woman truck driver may wear jeans and a plaid shirt. Many female executives wear smart suits and carry briefcases. Some women hardly ever wear dresses or feminine clothing at all – claiming that they find trousers more comfortable, more practical and more satisfying from a personal point of view.

(As an aside, it seems rather sad that determined feminists, themselves often full-time cross-dressers, are frequently the most vocal critics of male cross-dressing. It seems curious that women who have fought for, and won, the freedom to live their lives as they wish, and the right to dress however they choose, should feel justified in expending effort condemning men who are trying to obtain the same freedom.)

This survey shows that the benefits of cross dressing are great. So many transvestites get stress relief from their cross-dressing that doctors should consider encouraging some of their harassed male patients to try wearing feminine clothing occasionally. As a doctor, I have no doubt that this would be more useful, and far less damaging, than prescribing another ton or two of anxiolytic and antidepressant drugs.

Many people still regard cross dressing as a joke. It is something that often attracts sneers and giggles. And there is no doubt that a good many people find it unnerving and slightly disturbing. But, from a medical point of view, it seems clear that if there were more transvestites in our society there would probably be fewer men suffering from heart disease, cancer, high blood pressure and ulcers. And that's no laughing matter. (There is real evidence that men who cross-dress are often able to reduce their blood pressure to a point where they no longer need medication.)

Sadly, many of those who have found the courage to escape from the stresses of twentieth century life by putting on panties, bra, stockings and a dress still feel guilty about what they do.

It is time for the sneering to stop and the guilt to be banished. Women fighting for liberation often burnt their bras; men fighting for liberation are now wearing theirs.

I was saddened by many of the letters I received while preparing this report. There is nothing wrong with cross-dressing but there is a great deal wrong with a society which deals so harshly with such a modest behavioural variation from the accepted norm. Prejudice, intolerance and fear breed guilt and shame, which lead directly to anxiety, depression and physical illness. What a pity that is, when there is evidence that men who wear bras, panties and dresses may be protecting themselves from serious health problems.

Our society requires many of us to dress up and wear some sort of uniform. The judge wears a gown and a wig. Soldiers, policemen and people who work in supermarkets wear uniforms. Hotel porters, car park attendants, railway staff, airline cabin crew and nurses all wear uniforms. Doctors wear white coats. Plumbers wear overalls. Bishops wear particularly fine gowns. Bankers wear pinstripe suits. More than ever before in history we define people by what they wear.

Men who dress in clothing usually regarded as being 'feminine' are throwing a spanner into the works of a finely balanced piece of social machinery. So it is, perhaps, hardly surprising that cross-dressing produces confusion, bewilderment and resentment. Dressing up in feminine clothing is one of the most harmless activities imaginable but it is also one of the most socially misunderstood and challenging.

The most important conclusion from this survey is that men who dress in feminine clothing bring out a normal, healthy part of themselves; they broaden their outlook on life, and they enjoy a temporary respite from the responsibilities, demands and expectations associated with being male.

The cost of cross-dressing is small, the real side effects non- existent and the benefits enormous.

Note:

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MINDPOWER

Vernon Coleman

Mindpower

How to use your mind to heal your body

VERNON COLEMAN

Re-issued as a Century paperback in 1987, reprinted 1988
Published by Vermilion in 1992, reprinted 4 times. Published in 1994 by the European Medical Journal. Reprinted 1994, 1995, 1996, 1998, 1999 (twice), 2002 (twice), 2003, 2005, etc, etc.

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What they say about *Mindpower*

‘If you believe, as many experts do, that your state of mind is often reflected in your physical health, you’ll enjoy Dr Vernon Coleman’s book *Mindpowe*r. Dr Coleman explains the importance of a patient’s mental attitude in controlling and treating illness, and suggests some easy to learn techniques.’ WOMAN’S WORLD

‘...offers an insight into the most powerful healing agent in the world the power of the mind.’ BIRMINGHAM POST

‘I thoroughly enjoyed it and am sure it will be another bestseller’ NURSING TIMES

‘It’ll give you a whole new outlook on life!’ NORTHERN SCOT

‘Dr Coleman has certainly come up with another thought provoking winner.’
WARWICKSHIRE AND WORCESTERSHIRE LIFE

‘Do read this book!’ SUNDAY INDEPENDENT

‘A guide to harnessing the hidden force of healing.’ JOURNAL OF ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE

‘Dr Coleman’s *Mindpowe*r philosophy is based on an inspiring message of hope.’ WESTERN MORNING NEWS

‘A practical guide to self-healing that draws on a range of scientific evidence to illustrate how forcefully the human imagination can influence the body.’ PUBLISHING NEWS

‘Exciting!’ BIRMINGHAM EVENING MAIL

Preface

Mindpower was first published in 1986. At the time it was considered a rather innovative and daring book. It was, almost inevitably, attacked by those members of the medical establishment who felt that the only ‘proper’ way to tackle any illness was to give the patient a bottle full of powerful pills. The book sealed my image as a rather lunatic medical writer full of rather dangerous ideas. I didn’t mind much for within months of the book’s publication I was receiving a steady stream of letters from people telling me that they believed the book had helped save their lives. I would rather have received those letters than any number of fine reviews. One woman who was suffering from breast cancer and had been told by her doctors that she had a matter of weeks to live used the visualisation techniques I describe in the book and waved the text at her doctors when she turned up for an appointment they did not think she would keep. (She is still alive and very healthy.)

The front cover of the original hardback contained a flash announcing that the book contained ‘a new approach to health care’. The back cover announced that: ‘It is your state of mind which determines what diseases you develop, how long you will live and how healthy you will be. Although your state of mind can kill you, it can also cure and protect you. You can keep yourself fit and help yourself get better when you are ill by using the power of your mind to support your body’s remarkable self-healing mechanisms.’ Today, there is plenty of evidence available to prove that the mind can have a powerful, positive effect on the body and the contents of *Mindpower* can certainly no longer be described as ‘new’.

I looked through the text before this edition came out to see whether or not I needed to update anything. I decided that the book is just as valid today as it was when I wrote it. The only thing that has changed is the medical establishment which has now begun to agree that the power of the mind *can* be used to overcome ill health. Why, I wonder, does the establishment always take so long to accept such obvious truths?

Vernon Coleman
Devon 1994, Paris 2014

PART 1: *MINDPOWER* IN THEORY

1 THE BIRTH OF AN IDEA: THE ORIGINS OF MINDPOWER

I’ve been interested in the power of the mind over the body for ten or fifteen years now. Nearly a decade ago one of the first books I ever wrote was on the subject of stress and the way that the human body can be damaged by pressure and anxiety. After exploring the reasons why stress is so prevalent in our society, I detailed the hundred and one different diseases that can be caused or made worse by one sort of pressure or another.

At that time I saw the effect of the mind on the body as being largely negative. I realised that contentment and happiness could reduce the risk of disease developing, but I didn’t really comprehend the way in which the mind can have a healing as well as a damaging effect. I thought that happiness and other positive emotions were therapeutic only in so far as they kept stress at bay.

And then a couple of years after I’d written my book on stress I had a revelation. I was getting towards the end of a book promotion tour at the time and I was absolutely shattered. In the space of about two weeks I’d visited dozens of radio and television studios and talked to a variety of newspaper and magazine reporters. I’d covered hundreds of miles and stayed in all sorts of strange hotel rooms. I’d travelled by aeroplane, by train, by car and by foot. I’d answered the same questions a thousand times.

The book I was promoting at the time had absolutely nothing to do with stress – it was about how the beauty industry takes money from customers by selling them dreams and images rather than good, honest products but during the tour I’d experienced about as much stress as I could take. I was physically and mentally exhausted.

With about five days of the tour to go I woke up with a streaming cold. My throat was sore and my head ached. My legs, arms and back felt as though they’d been pummelled by a heavyweight boxing champion. I had the ’flu and I should have stayed where I was for a few days to recover.

But I still had several important interviews to do and I knew that the book was selling well. Everywhere I’d been there had been a tremendous amount of interest in the subject and every time I’d done a phone-in radio programme the lines had been blocked with callers. I knew that if I could just get through the next five days, I could then rest for as long as I liked. And I also knew that if I ended the tour prematurely, I would probably lose a good deal of the interest I’d stimulated. If only I could drag myself out of bed and carry on with the rest of the tour I would probably manage to arouse a lot more enthusiasm for the subject and, at the same time, sell a lot more books.

Feeling rather foolish, I lay there in bed and made a deal with my body and with the bug that had undoubtedly infected it. I told both of them that I needed five days of good health and that I couldn’t spare the time to be ill until those five days had elapsed. I explained that I would be perfectly willing to put up with the ’flu after the five-day period was over. Then I got up, had a shower and got dressed.

By the time I was ready to get out on the road again I was feeling much better. My throat was no longer sore and my voice wasn’t cracked and hoarse. My muscles felt fine and my headache had gone. My nose was unblocked and I was raring to go.

I got through the next five days without any trouble at all. I hit the radio and television stations precisely on time and I completed the schedule of arranged interviews. Everything went well and the book sold out and had to be reprinted.

And then, with the tour over, I went back home to rest for a while before starting work on my next manuscript. I already knew what I wanted to write, but I knew that I needed a short rest before I started work on it. I’d completely forgotten about the attack of ’flu and the deal I’d made with my body.

But my body hadn’t forgotten. And nor had the ’flu bug disappeared. I’d hardly taken off my shoes before my throat started to feel sore again. My headache returned and my legs began to feel heavy once more. My sniffles returned and within an hour or two I had all the symptoms that I’d had five days before.

At the time I didn’t really take too much notice of what had happened. I was tired and I felt ill and I just wanted to rest. Since I had no more interviews to do, I just lay around for the next few days allowing my body to recover at its own pace.

It was only afterwards that I remembered the deal I’d made in the middle of the gruelling publicity tour. I remembered the way I’d felt when I’d woken up with five days of my tour to go. And I remembered the miraculous way in which the symptoms of the ’flu had disappeared.

It was then that, for the first time, I realised that the human mind has powers which are far more remarkable than I had ever before imagined. That single, isolated and in a way, I suppose, fairly insignificant incident, had opened my eyes to the fact that the mind has powers we have not yet begun to tap: powers that can control the way our bodies respond to disease and infection and powers that can be controlled in order to improve our health and well-being. Suddenly, all sorts of things started to fall into place and make sense.

For ten years after I qualified as a doctor, and before I started to earn my living as a professional author, I practised as a general practitioner. And during that time I found myself time and again dealing with patients who should have died but didn’t. To a young medical student, brought up on the idea that science is all-powerful and that the human body responds to illness and pressure in fairly strictly defined ways, it was all very puzzling.

So, for example, there was Pam, a young woman who had cancer of the bowel and who should have died within a matter of weeks according to the hospital specialists who were involved in her care. But Pam didn't die. And she wouldn't even stay in hospital. She wasn't married, but she had three small children and insisted on going back home to look after them. The laboratory tests that the hospital doctors organised showed that she ought to have been dead, but she wasn't. She got thinner and thinner and began to look more and more like a skeleton, but she still didn't die.

Everyone involved in her care found it baffling. It was indeed difficult to understand just what was keeping her alive. It certainly wasn't anything that anyone had prescribed for her. The drugs that had been offered had made her feel sick and she had steadfastly refused to continue with the treatment that had been recommended.

In the end, however, Pam got so weak that she agreed to go into the hospital for a short rest just as long as her children could be looked after by a family. That was, it suddenly seemed, the key to it all. She wouldn't even consider going into hospital if it meant that her three children had to be split up.

Finding a home for Pam's three children wasn't easy. The social workers I got in touch with wanted to split up the family and put the children into foster homes. There weren't any available homes that could cope with three new children all at the same time. But just as I was about to despair of ever finding an answer, a chance conversation with another patient led to a solution. A foster family was found where the three children could be cared for together. And so Pam went into hospital and her children went to stay with temporary foster parents. While she was in hospital the children went to see Pam every day. In response to her constant fears and questions, they told her that they were happy and comfortable. They talked about the things they'd done with their foster parents and of the places they'd visited. They were missing her, but they were settled and they were together. To my surprise, Pam didn't insist on leaving the hospital. She seemed happy to stay there for the time being.

And then one day she asked me to find out whether the children could stay with the foster parents indefinitely. The answer was an emphatic 'yes'. The foster parents had quickly fallen in love with their new family. They didn't want to be parted from them.

Pam died that day. It was as though she had held on to life all that time simply to make sure that her children were going to be all right. She had defied medical science through willpower, through a strong determination to stay alive until she was satisfied that her children were going to be well looked after and able to stay together as a family unit. And once her fears for them had been assuaged, she had let go of life and succumbed to the cancer that should have taken her life weeks or months before.

Pam hadn't been the only such patient, of course. There had been countless others. Each time I'd managed to convince myself that what had happened had been an exception, that the laboratory results must have been wrong, that there must have been some other unknown factors. Each time I had resisted the temptation to believe that there could have been some stronger, internal force involved in defying or doing a deal with death.

It wasn't just my own personal experiences as a general practitioner that had begun to convince me that the power of the mind over the body can be far greater than I had ever been taught possible. All my life I've read everything I could lay my hands on. I've devoured books and journals with a permanent appetite for the unusual. And all through the late 1960s and 1970s I'd come across countless authors claiming that the human mind can have a great influence on the things we do and the way we live.

To start with, much of the material I'd read had been anecdotal and fairly easy to dismiss. Together with most other doctors, I'd been sceptical of stories of Eastern yogis stopping their hearts beating or walking on beds of red-hot coals. I'd been intrigued but not convinced. Doctors are taught to be cynical and sceptical and I'd majored in both specialities. I wouldn't believe anything until I'd seen it proved beyond doubt.

But much of the material I'd come across wasn't quite so easy to dismiss. In 1972, for example, two American researchers, one the Assistant Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School, published results which showed that during meditation oxygen consumption and metabolic rates markedly decreased and that it was possible to measure a reduction in the level of anxiety recorded by people meditating. From France there was evidence from physiologists to prove that some people can slow or even stop their hearts while meditating. In 1970 *The Lancet* had published research showing that breathing rates per minute drop significantly during meditation. German research workers at the University of Cologne showed that people meditating reduced their levels of aggression, depression, irritability and nervousness.

There was a veritable deluge of similar material being published. All around the world researchers were finding that the human mind can have all sorts of positive effects on the body and that by learning to control the mind it is possible to control the way the body responds. Not that I'm pretending that all this material was new, of course. People had been arguing that the mind can affect the body for decades. It was just that the more I looked around, the clearer became the signs that this wasn't just hypothetical nonsense; it was valuable material that the medical profession was choosing to ignore.

When I began to look back at the way that medicine had been practised several thousand years ago I discovered that it had been very well established then that the power of the mind over the body can be quite dramatic. In India, for example, four or five thousand years ago flowers, perfumes and music therapy were used to make convalescence more enjoyable and successful. The Greek physician, Hippocrates, frequently described as the father of modern medicine, understood that the individual’s mind has a tremendous influence over what illnesses he develops and what happens to him when he develops those illnesses. Living over two thousand years ago, Hippocrates had understood the value of meditation and mental relaxation. He had recognised that the mind can have a tremendous, positive power over the body.

While I was finding new evidence to support the developing theory of *Mindpower* just about everywhere I looked, I was also finding myself face to face with just as many questions as answers. So, for example, when I was still a general practitioner, I remember an elderly lady coming into the surgery and asking me to give her something to stop her getting a winter cold. She said she didn’t want any of the ordinary things such as ’flu vaccines or vitamin tablets, but she wanted one of the special remedies.

Puzzled, I asked her what she meant.

‘I want what you doctors use,’ she told me. ‘You sit there all winter and get coughed on and sneezed at and yet you never get colds.’

I couldn’t help her, of course. There is no special remedy that doctors use to protect themselves. And yet what she said had more than a little truth in it. Doctors, particularly in general practice, do spend an awful lot of time sitting directly in front of patients who are sneezing and spluttering and firing germs all over the place. And yet only rarely do general practitioners seem to catch colds. During my ten years of practice, for example, I only ever got a common or garden cold when I was away from the hurly-burly of daily practice. I could sit in the firing line for three months without getting a cold and then I would go away for a long weekend and come back with a running nose and streaming eyes.

Nor is this just true of the common cold. Doctors who work with patients suffering from other infectious diseases rarely seem to develop those diseases. Missionaries who work with patients suffering from all sorts of horrible bugs stay remarkably healthy when they should be falling sick. Why? That was just one of a hundred different questions I found myself unable to answer. And just one of a hundred questions that I desperately wanted to be able to answer.

By the early 1980s I felt that I was getting close to an explanation that would solve all those unanswered questions and enable me to understand just how patients like Pam had managed to stay alive when they should have died, just why I’d been able to throw off my ’flu bug while on my book promotion tour, and why patients with apparently identical bodies and apparently similar stresses should thrive and suffer in such very different ways.

I began to suspect that something had gone sadly wrong with orthodox medicine, that my training had been misleading and that all of us, doctors and patients, have become so obsessed with the mechanical wonders of modern science that we have lost our way.

2 TRADITIONAL INFLUENCES AND MEDICAL PRACTICES

My first book published in 1975, had been a highly critical attack on the drugs industry. I had exposed the many ways in which doctors are misled by drug companies and encouraged to prescribe products which are neither safe nor effective. At the time, the book had caused a furore within the medical profession. Doctors had attacked me violently for daring to suggest that they ever prescribed products which were unsafe.

My second book, published a year or so later, had taken me one step further. I had investigated the world of medical research and come to the then startling conclusion that medical researchers were contributing very little to the quality of health care, but were simply amassing new information and filling libraries with research papers which had little practical value. Medical researchers were, I concluded, inspired by personal and commercial motives and were accumulating information for all the wrong reasons.

But even though I had found much fault with the drug industry and the research 'industry', I still hadn't really found out why the medical profession was so out of touch. And it was clear that the profession wasn't just out of touch; it was completely failing to deal with the health problems of the twentieth century.

In the nineteenth century the medical profession had made enormous strides forward. At the beginning of that century life expectancy was low and millions of babies and young children never grew to adulthood. Diseases such as smallpox, typhoid, cholera and tuberculosis devastated whole communities. By the end of the century things had changed dramatically. Life expectancy had improved enormously and infants stood a much better chance of living to childhood and even adulthood. Improvements in public health facilities, in housing regulations, in food supplies and in agricultural policies had all helped to ensure that people had more to eat, better homes to live in, cleaner water to drink and greater protection against disease and infection.

By the start of the twentieth century the future looked bright. The drugs industry was just developing and surgical skills were being honed to new high standards. Anyone alive at the start of this century would have felt confident that the medical profession would bloom and that in future people would lead longer and healthier lives.

That hasn't happened. Within the last twenty years more money has been spent on medical care and research than had been spent on the whole of the rest of man's history on earth. Even allowing for inflation, that is a hell of a lot of money. Health care has become one of the world's largest and fastest growing industries. And yet we have virtually nothing to show for all the effort and money that has been expended. Very few important medical advances have been made in the last quarter of a century, and in those areas where advances have been made the work was begun decades ago.

Despite the fact that individual doctors remain committed to caring for the sick and the infirm, medicine has sunk into a slough and there has been almost no improvement in either the quality or the quantity of life enjoyed in the developed countries of the world. Indeed, the World Health Organisation figures suggest that in some developed countries there has, in recent years, been a decrease in life expectancy and an increase in the mortality rate among young people.

Medicine has become full of confusions and paradoxes. Doctors keep a greater proportion of our over 65-year-olds and over 75-year-olds alive. But at the same time there has been an increase in the number of people dying in their thirties and forties. The expenditure on health care has rocketed in the developed countries. But the statistics suggest that people are now more likely to fall ill than they were a generation ago. The number of doctors goes up annually. But whenever doctors go on strike, the death rate goes down.

We have richer food supplies and more readily available medicines today than ever before. But all the evidence suggests that in Britain people were never healthier than during the ravages of the Second World War. The government claims to recognise the value of preventative medicine. And yet in Britain half the adult population and a third of the child population take some form of medicament every day.

During the last quarter of a century we have developed remarkably sophisticated machinery for our hospitals. And yet cancers, immune disorders and allergy problems become commoner day by day. We now have specialist coronary care units for heart attack victims. And yet more people than ever are dying of heart disease. Young people are bigger and stronger than our ancestors. And yet the number of young children with diabetes is doubling every decade. More and more people are living in air-conditioned, centrally heated buildings. And yet infections still kill millions.

We have more surgeons and more operating theatres then ever before. And yet there are still enormous waiting lists for essential surgery. New procedures and drugs are tested far more effectively and extensively than ever before. And yet the incidence of doctor-induced disease continues to rise. There have never been so many rules to protect the rights of patients. And yet patients have never been so deprived of freedom. We have the technology to prevent unwanted pregnancies. And yet the demand for abortions never stops growing. Medicine has never been more sophisticated. And yet patients have never been so dissatisfied. Doctors have never tried harder, and never been less well loved. There is no single, simple explanation for this disastrous state of affairs.

In part, the problems are due to the fact that the medical profession has spent the last century creating a system of health care designed to suit its own needs rather than the needs of the patients. In part, the problems are due to the medical profession's failure to define or understand the real needs of the community.

But the overriding, essential fact is that doctors have taken too much control for themselves. Overcome with enthusiasm for the marvels of science, doctors have ignored the healing powers of the individual body and mind. Convinced by their own professional propaganda, they have built a profession which has too much respect for therapy and not enough respect for healing. For the first time in history we have a medical profession with the power to interfere with nature. But for the first time in history we have a medical profession which has chosen to ignore the phenomenon of natural healing.

Doctors have become instilled with a sense of power and have taken too much responsibility. And out of a mixture of respect, admiration and fear, patients have let them take that responsibility. At the one time when we should be recognising the remarkable curative and protective powers of the human mind, we have abdicated all responsibility and handed over our bodies to the technicians.

One of the most important reasons why doctors, as a group, have tended to ignore the natural healing powers of the human body and mind is because their attitude towards the body and towards illness was largely formulated by a seventeenth-century philosopher called René Descartes, who believed that the human body is little more than a piece of machinery.

Following on from this Cartesian philosophy, the modern doctor believes that when something goes wrong, when symptoms develop or when the system is not functioning effectively, all you have to do is take the machine apart, examine all the bits and pieces and fiddle with those parts which are malfunctioning.

It is a simple, mechanistic approach which has served science well for several centuries. Modern surgical approaches and drug therapies have all been designed to help restore the smooth functioning of a machine which has been disrupted by infection or injury. The basic aim of most medical treatments is to suppress any signs and symptoms of illness or distress as quickly and as effectively as possible. A headache will be treated with a painkiller, indigestion will be treated with an antacid and high blood pressure will be treated with a drug designed to lower blood pressure.

Despite the fact that this philosophy has been responsible for many of the successes of modern medicine, there have for over a century been people who have not been convinced that Descartes got it completely right. There have, for example, been the many individuals who have pointed to the remarkable ability of the human body to heal itself and have argued that, in view of what we know about the body's self-healing systems, a mechanistic approach is far too simplistic.

Following the early lead set by nineteenth-century French physiologist Claude Bernard and American physiologist W. B. Cannon, many researchers around the world have produced evidence to show that the body's internal mechanisms are designed to enable it to adapt to internal pressures and variations and to show that the most efficient healing systems in the world are to be found not in the doctor's pharmacy or the herbalist's garden, but inside the body itself.

Even the simplest available research evidence strongly suggests that the human body cannot be dismissed as a piece of simple machinery, but instead should be regarded as having an astonishing variety of internal self-healing systems. For example, consider what researchers have shown happens if you cut yourself The first thing is that special proteins which circulate all the time in human blood automatically form a protective net designed to catch blood cells and form a clot designed to seal the wound and prevent further, unnecessary blood loss. (In fact, of course, the clotting system is more complex than that. There are a host of fail-safe devices which ensure that the system isn't accidentally triggered into action when there is no leak and that the clotting system doesn't begin to operate until enough blood has flown through an injury site to wash away any dirt and bacteria.)

Once the clotting system has ensured that the blood loss is kept to a minimum, another series of complex systems will guard against any potential risk of infection. As soon as a blood clot has formed and the loss of blood has been stopped, the damaged cells will release substances into the tissues, resulting in the expansion of the local blood vessels and the flow of extra quantities of blood into the injury site. This additional blood will make the area red, swollen and hot. The heat will help damage any infective organisms and the swelling will ensure that the injured part is not used too much. By immobilising the area, the pain and stiffness will act as a natural splint.

White blood cells that are brought to the injury site will help by swallowing up any debris or bacteria which might still be there. Once they have done their job, these scavenging cells, bloated with rubbish, will allow themselves to be discharged from the body as pus. Once the injury begins to heal, the body shows an additional refinement. The scar tissue it builds will be much tougher than the original, damaged area of skin. Unsightly though it may be, the scar tissue ensures that the injured site is stronger than ever and better able to withstand any further injury.

Even when the body's blood clotting systems aren't quick enough or powerful enough to cope with damage without appreciable amounts of fluid escaping, all is not lost. Arteries supplying the injured area will constrict so as to limit further blood losses. Peripheral blood vessels supplying the skin will shut down so as to ensure that the supply of blood to the more essential organs can be preserved. The kidneys will cut the production of urine so that fluid levels in the body can be kept as high as possible. Fluids will be withdrawn from tissues to dilute and increase the amount of blood which remains. The red blood cell-producing site within the body will step up production in order to replace those cells which have been lost. Finally, as an added refinement, the loss of blood will trigger a thirst intended to make sure that the missing fluids are replaced as quickly as possible.

There are within every human body thousands of similar sophisticated protective systems. So, for example, we all have efficient temperature control devices so that wherever we happen to be – sitting on an ice floe or sweltering on a sand dune – our internal temperatures remain stable. If the outside temperature is too hot, we sweat and blood is diverted to our skin to increase the amount of heat that our bodies lose. If the outside temperature is cold, blood is diverted away from the skin in order to minimise the amount of internal heat being lost.

In the 1920s Dr Clara M. Davis of Chicago discovered that the human body has an efficient appetite control centre of its own. Dr Davis took a group of newly weaned infants and allowed them to choose their own food without any outside guidance whatsoever. The results were staggering. She found that without any prompting the infants chose good, varied diets. They ate the right types of food in the correct quantities and their growth rates, development and appearance were all just as satisfactory as those of babies who had been eating foods chosen by experts.

More recently other researchers have found that there is a natural tranquilliser in the human brain and that a pain killer, as powerful and as effective as morphine, is released when pain needs to be overruled. It has been shown, too, that when a person with an infection develops a mild temperature and loses his appetite, both symptoms are signs that the body is dealing with the infection itself. The sort of bugs that commonly produce infections need regular, fresh food supplies – and they can’t cope with heat. When you lose your appetite and your temperature goes up, the infection-producing organisms will be threatened and weakened.

A few years ago I wrote a book called *Bodypower* which contained a comprehensive account of the human body’s remarkable self-healing mechanisms. The evidence is unquestionable, but it is significant that it has been ignored and even positively suppressed by members of the medical profession. Ruled and still convinced by the mechanistic philosophy of Descartes, modern members of the profession have been strangely reluctant to acknowledge the importance of these discoveries. They have found it easier to believe that they, and they alone, have the answers to all health problems than to accept that they must work together with the body’s own self-healing systems to obtain the maximum benefit with the minimum of disruption.

Members of the medical establishment, and in particular doctors involved in medical education, have been slow to accept that the mechanistic philosophy could possibly be wrong. When, almost a decade ago, I wrote a newspaper article suggesting that high blood pressure was a natural response to stress and pressure and that it could sometimes be alleviated by learning to relax, a professor at one of Britain’s medical schools wrote to the editor to complain and announced that if I had expressed such ideas as a student of his I would never have been allowed to qualify. (Today, of course, even reactionary professors will admit that stress and high blood pressure are closely linked.)

To a certain extent this repressive and somewhat depressing attitude is understandable. After all, when Descartes first put forward his mechanistic philosophy, doctors had very little to offer in the way of science. They relied on black magic and faith and had to work hard to create the myth that they were alone in knowing the secrets of good health.

And so, despite the evidence that now exists to show the extent of the body’s own healing powers, large numbers of the medical profession persist with the mechanistic philosophy. And it is hardly surprising that since they argue that the body is a machine, they also claim that the best person to deal with any problems is a mechanical doctor.

A second reason why natural healing mechanisms have not been accepted is that there are today many commercial interests and pressure groups which have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo and protecting and preserving the traditional attitudes towards health and healing.

The paternalistic approach towards medicine suits industry well. The drugs industry, for example, which would suffer badly if the mechanistic approach towards medical care was revised, makes many millions of pounds every year out of the fact that doctors prescribe huge quantities of drugs. Over the years the drugs industry has seen to it that there are many powerful links between the industry and the medical profession. No secret is made of the fact that if the industry were to suffer in any way, the profession would suffer too. A weakening of the international drugs industry would see the end to the existence of the majority of medical journals, an end to many research grants, an end to company sponsorship of medical events and, perhaps most important of all, an end to the drugs industry’s ability to protect the medical profession. It is a neat circle of interdependence.

The result is that a large number of practising doctors still claim that all symptoms require interventionist treatment of some kind and that the majority of disorders are best treated by suppressing the body’s own responses. They know only too well that if they were to accept that diseases such as high blood pressure or insomnia could be treated effectively without drug therapy, both the industry and the medical profession would suffer enormously.

This unhealthy obsession with drugs has damaged the medical profession. Not only has the obsession meant that doctors have remained blind to the potential benefits of the body's variety of self-healing systems, it has also resulted in a tremendous increase in the number of patients being injured by medical treatment. The fact is that if there are ten patients lying in a hospital ward today, then the chances are that one of them is there because he has been made ill by doctors. Or, to put the same thing in a different way, if you develop fresh symptoms after being treated by your doctor, the chances are that your new symptoms were caused by the treatment given to you for your original problem. Although it is often patients who are blamed for expecting too many wonder pills, it is doctors addicted to prescribing who create the problem in the first place.

Drugs of one sort or another have undoubtedly played a major part in the development of twentieth-century society. Penicillin alone has saved thousands of lives. The contraceptive pill has saved society from an overpopulation explosion. Insulin has helped millions of diabetics live normal, healthy, comfortable lives. Steroids have revolutionised treatments for conditions such as asthma and arthritis.

But drugs have not been used wisely or cautiously. Despite the available evidence that drugs which can cure also kill, doctors have consistently obeyed drug company exhortations to keep on prescribing. A quarter of a century ago doctors wrote about four prescriptions a year for each of their patients. These days they write out 6.5 prescriptions a year for their patients. And the figure is rising. Although the number of doctor-patient consultations has fallen in the last twenty-five years, the number of prescriptions written per person per year has gone up dramatically.

Doctors frequently claim that they write out all these prescriptions because patients demand drugs. That simply isn't true. Roughly one half of all the drugs prescribed are never used at all, but simply end up in bathroom cabinets, discolouring and gathering dust. The truth is that doctors have been pushed and bullied into overprescribing and now overprescribe out of habit and addiction rather than to satisfy the demands of their patients.

Not that it is just in the quantity of drugs they prescribe that doctors are at fault. They also prescribe far too many different drugs. In 1977 the World Health Organisation asked a group of experts to decide which drugs out of the many thousands now on the market were really necessary. The expert committee came to the rather surprising conclusion that doctors ought to be able to deal with most health problems (including all tropical diseases) with a library of no more than two hundred drugs and vaccines. Since 1977 the expert committee has reconsidered its list twice but has made only minor adjustments.

Despite this, doctors throughout the Western world continue to prescribe drugs that are inappropriate, unnecessary, dangerous or ineffective. Misled by drug company advertising, they continue to prescribe drugs that have been recognised as dangerous and they overuse drugs that are in themselves safe and useful.

One major problem is undoubtedly the appallingly low standard of teaching in medical schools. Academics are often more concerned with their own research projects than with the students they are paid to teach. The result is that out-of-date philosophies and techniques are handed on to generation after generation. Graduates know far too little about the drugs they will spend their lives prescribing.

Speaking at a symposium held at the Royal Society of Medicine in London in 1983, British physician Professor Lant pointed out that 50 per cent of the prescriptions written for antibiotics were either not necessary or inappropriate. According to Professor Lawson of the Royal Infirmary in Glasgow, drug treatment side-effects occur in no less than 25 per cent of patients on medical wards. This sort of prescribing anarchy suggests a high level of dangerous incompetence.

The group of drugs which best illustrates the zealous promotional activities of the drugs industry and the poor prescribing habits of the medical profession is the so-called minor tranquillisers. In the quarter of a century since they were first introduced, tranquillisers such as Valium and Librium became so widely used that during any twelve-month period between one in five and one in three women received a prescription for a tranquilliser. In 1981 the health services of sixty-seven of the world's poorest countries spent less on health care than the rich countries spent on tranquillisers. By the time they are eighteen months old some 25 per cent of all babies will have already received a sedative of one sort or another.

In Britain alone there are well over a million people who have been taking tranquillisers for several years and a quarter of a million people who have been taking them for seven years or more. Since tranquillisers of this sort were never intended to be prescribed for more than a week or two, that rather suggests that there are many doctors who don't know what they are doing.

There are several reasons why all this happened. The first and probably most important reason is that most of the doctors now in practice qualified before drugs of this type appeared on the market.

Another reason why so many doctors overprescribe tranquillisers is that they simply don't know what else to do for the vast number of patients requiring help with problems caused or made worse by stress and anxiety.

It was not until the 1960s that it became clear that there was a close link between stress and physical and mental disease. Patients learned about this link at about the same time as doctors. And since traditional medical school training has been largely concerned with purely physical problems, such as heart disease and broken bones, hardly any practising doctors knew what to do with these stress-related symptoms. Today, even though they know that tranquillisers cause problems, doctors continue to prescribe the drugs because they don't know what else to do and they aren't prepared to admit it. The average doctor today has to keep on prescribing tranquillisers because he can see no alternative way of getting through his daily work load.

There is an alternative, of course. If only the medical establishment had not become so dedicated to the mechanistic theory of the human body and so closely dependent on the drugs industry, the medical schools could have been teaching doctors better ways to help patients suffering from anxiety and other stress-related diseases long before tranquillisers became popular.

The drugs industry solution only succeeded because the medical profession's leaders looked inside the established therapeutic system for all its solutions, rather than being prepared to look outside for fresh, alternative answers. Not that the drugs industry influence has been confined to general practice. The industry has had a major effect on hospital prescribing too. Many of the most widely prescribed heart drugs are neither particularly useful nor especially safe and yet the companies making them promote them with tremendous enthusiasm. And they promote new products for the treatment of disorders such as arthritis with unfaltering optimism.

The cost of all this is, of course, phenomenal. The World Health Organisation has estimated that the drug needs of each individual patient should cost no more than one dollar a year. In Britain, and most other developed countries, the amount spent is nearer twenty times that amount. Thanks to doctors' poor education, the international drugs industry continues to make enormously healthy profits. Every time an attempt is made to control prescribing, doctors' representatives (encouraged by the drugs industry, of course) shout loudly about prescribing freedoms and patients' rights. The truth is that in Britain alone something like £1,000 million a year could be cut off the National Health Service budget without any patient suffering at all.

And it isn't only the drugs industry which influences medical practices. These days there is a host of companies selling a wide range of expensive gadgets and high technology products. The average piece of equipment has a plug on one end of it, a computer somewhere in the middle and a price tag for thousands of pounds on the other end.

To the uninitiated, high technology medicine may sound as if it has all the answers, but it is a truly Faustian bargain. When you look at scanners, for example, it quickly becomes clear that these may be successful in technical terms, but they are neither successful nor particularly useful in human terms. Such medical toys may make profits for the companies making them and satisfy the pride and professional curiosity of the doctors using them, but they don't save many lives and they certainly don't improve the quality of life for patients. If you look through the medical literature, you will find no evidence to show that CAT scanners are worth buying; yet dozens of hospital doctors have helped organise fund-raising committees to buy themselves the medical equivalent of a bigger, brighter motor car.

There is one final commercial factor that has an influence on the ways that doctors practise medicine: the drive to make money. This influence is best seen at work among our surgeons who have for decades now been so driven by the need to make money that they have done thousands of unnecessary operations simply to enlarge their own bank balances. Even in Britain, where the majority of patients are seen through the National Health Service, countless unnecessary operations are performed every year.

In 1982 Sir George Godber, chief medical officer at the Department of Health and Social Security, wrote that, 'It is commonly believed that many of the 90,000 tonsillectomies done in England and Wales are of questionable benefit.' Why are they done? Well, many of the patients having tonsillectomies are operated on privately. Others are put on to health service lists in order to keep those waiting times as long as possible. People do not want private operations unless the health service list is a long one.

Apart from Cartesian philosophy, there is another, much older tradition which has also played an important part in regulating medical practice for many centuries. And that is that the relationship between the doctor and the patient has been based on a sale of information, advice and skill

If a patient falls ill, he visits a doctor, receives advice and treatment, pays a fee and either gets better or comes back again. This simple and well established tradition has had a dominating effect on medical thought. It has also prevented doctors from accepting the idea of preventative medicine.

Taking more of an interest in preventative medicine would have hardly destroyed the mechanistic philosophy or taken doctors very far along the road towards considering the genuine possibilities offered by the self-healing philosophy, but it would have been a start. If doctors had been prepared to put effort and enthusiasm into understanding their patients' lifestyles and into encouraging them to change their more dangerous activities, they would at least have gone some of the way towards persuading their patients to take back some of the responsibility for their own health.

It isn't as though preventative medicine is a new concept. After all, Hippocrates argued at length that the relationship between a man and his environment is an important one. He pointed out that the health of an individual depends to a very large extent on his personal habits and the world he lives in. He believed that understanding and influencing a man's environment is an essential way of keeping him healthy.

Over the centuries since Hippocrates spelt out the importance of preventative medicine other experts have shown that in order to be effective doctors must take into account four different aspects of each patient's life. First, they must consider his general environment: the air he breathes, the water he drinks, and the general climate of the country he lives in. All these factors must inevitably have an influence on his health. The man who lives in the jungle and drinks contaminated water from stagnant pools will suffer different problems from the man who lives in New York or Paris.

Second, they must consider his immediate environment. The man who lives in a mansion standing in thirty acres of his own land will be subject to different pressures from the man living in a small two-room apartment. And the man whose job consists of sitting behind a desk will suffer different problems from the man who spends his days driving a bus.

Third, the patient's personal environment must be considered. Smoking, eating and drinking habits will all influence a man's health and all have an effect on the type of illnesses from which he suffers. Finally, if a man is to be protected effectively, his doctor must know what sort of person he is. An individual's personality will have a powerful effect on the way that he responds to his immediate environment. It will, of course, also have an important effect on the way he gets on with the people around him including the doctor.

Today a large number of doctors agree that attempting to treat patients without investigating their environment is like trying to grow seeds without looking at the soil you're trying to grow them in. Indeed, it is by no means going too far to say that treating a patient with drugs or surgery without investigating his personality or outside environment is rather like pulling a plant that isn't growing properly out of its pot, nibbling at its roots with secateurs and then putting it straight back into the same potful of soil.

But despite all the evidence showing the value of preventative medicine, the medical profession has continued to toy with the idea rather unenthusiastically. History contains a thousand lessons to show that doctors can do a tremendous amount of good simply by advising their patients about their lifestyle.

Modern, twentieth-century doctors have persistently failed to make the best of the opportunities they have had. They have made two basic errors in the way that they have tried to use the principles of preventative medicine. In the first place they have tried to turn preventative medicine into a new medical speciality involving patients and doctors in a traditional one-to-one relationship. It is easy to understand just how this approach became popular with doctors. It does, after all, turn preventative medicine into a fairly ordinary commercial process with the doctor getting paid a specific fee and retaining all the responsibility. The patient has no added responsibility for his own health apart from remembering to turn up at the surgery or clinic for a 'check-up' or consultation.

This new version of preventative medicine now appears in many different forms. So, for example, you can visit your doctor and have a flu jab to stop you getting flu. (In fact, there is absolutely no evidence to show that there is any real value in a flu jab since the number of flu viruses multiplies every year and the chances of your vaccination protecting you against all the right viruses are slim indeed.) Or you can visit your doctor to have your blood pressure checked. (No one has as yet decided which levels of blood pressure are dangerous and need treating and which are safe to leave alone.)

If you are a woman, you can visit your doctor and have a cervical smear done. First introduced about thirty years ago, this test had become so common by 1973 that nearly 50 per cent of all American women over the age of seventeen had had at least one smear during the previous twelve-month period. Unfortunately, however, the cervical smear was accepted as a diagnostic tool long before proper tests on its validity had been done. Today, after millions of smears have been taken, there is still confusion about which women should have smears done, at what age smears are most useful and which women are most at risk. It's widely accepted that the cost of providing all women with annual smears would be prohibitively expensive and yet if annual smears aren't done, tumours which grow quickly (and those are the ones which need to be picked up early) aren't picked up soon enough.

Astonishingly, there still isn't any real evidence to show that cancer smear campaigns have been responsible for any appreciable fall in the incidence of cervical cancer. But there is also plenty of evidence to show that different cytologists reading the same slides often produce different reports. And there is also plenty of evidence to show that many thousands of women have been worried into illness by being told that they need to have follow-up smears performed for 'technical' reasons'.

The other main innovation offered by doctors as a type of preventative medicine has been the annual 'check-up' or general medical screening examination. Check-ups and screening examinations do, in fact, go back to the early part of the twentieth century. As long ago as 1917 more than 10 per cent of the 300 largest American corporations were sponsoring regular examinations of their employees. When over half of 4 million draftees called up during the First World War were found to be either completely or partly unfit for military service, insurance companies became enthusiastic about the idea of screening the general population too.

Today screening clinics are booming. And yet there still isn't any real evidence to suggest that health checks do any good. Indeed, one recent study financed by the British government has concluded that regular screening examinations are both expensive and ineffective. When two groups of individuals were compared, it was found that there was no significant difference between the health of those individuals who had been regularly screened throughout a seven-year period and those individuals who had not been screened. A study of 7,000 patients showed that those who had had health checks were no more or less likely to lose time from work, to need admitting to hospital, to have a visit from their family doctor, or to die any sooner than those who hadn't had health checks.

Similar results have come from surveys conducted in other countries. In Canada a task force studied the question of medical screening for three years before coming to the conclusion that annual check-ups should be abandoned since they were both inefficient and potentially harmful. (Checkups tend to give patients a false sense of confidence and to encourage them to ignore subsequent warning signs or symptoms. The problem, in short, is that the screening takes away even more personal responsibility from the patient and hands it to his physician.)

The second mistake that doctors have made in trying to introduce preventative medicine into the community in a professionally acceptable way is to do so publicly without first coming to some agreement among themselves and without taking care to silence the commercial groups and lobbyists which have a vested interest in fighting for specific products and types of products. The result has been chaos and confusion. And sadly, a diminution in the ability of the medical profession as a whole to attract attention when speaking on any important issue.

Take the world of food, for example. There is an enormous amount of controversy here. Should you eat salt? How much fibre should you eat? Are animal fats good for you or bad for you? If you listen carefully to everything so-called experts have to say, you'll end up thoroughly confused because while one group will tell you one thing, another equally eminent group will say exactly the opposite.

It's not difficult to understand how this happens. Imagine, for example, that a lone researcher in Sweden produces a piece of evidence showing that runner beans cause migraine. Now, because food and health are always of interest some newspaper or television correspondent will notice this research work and will print a paragraph or two detailing the results. At this point little harm will have been done. The research work will have affected relatively few people.

But by now the Runner Bean Marketing Board will have been alerted. Its advisers will scour the world's literature until they find an expert prepared to argue that runner beans are good for you. They may, if they are lucky, find a researcher in, say, Australia or California, who believes that without daily runner beans we run an increased risk of developing liver disease.

Frightened that the consumption of runner beans might be damaged by the original Swedish report, the Runner Bean Marketing Board (which is, of course, financed by the farmers whose livelihood depends upon the steady marketing and sale of runner beans) will pay for the foreign research scientist to go on an international tour. They'll arrange for him to hold press conferences and they'll send copies of his reports to doctors and dieticians everywhere.

At this point the Broad Bean Marketing Board will get worried. They will see all this publicity for runner beans as a threat and will look around for an expert or two of their own. They'll come up with a specialist in Germany or Israel who believes that broad beans prevent heart disease or tooth decay. They'll provide him with an international platform from which to expound his views. And they won't be particularly worried if he also uses the massive publicity machine with which they have armed him to propound another dotty theory that carrots cause baldness and impotence. After all, their reasoning will go, if people stop buying carrots, they'll probably buy more broad beans.

The Carrot Marketing Board won't be too pleased by this new development, however, and they'll quickly launch a campaign of their own. In no time at all hundreds of experts from all around the world will be arguing with one another, producing quite different statistics, making all sorts of outrageous claims and ensuring that no one listens to anything that doctors say.

The food industry was one of the first to realise that you can buy any number of medical experts for a few grants and a fistful of airline tickets to conferences in Miami. And it has become one of the most successful industries at lobbying.

To give a more specific example, consider animal fat. The way in which our understanding of the importance of animal fat has been confused highlights the power, effectiveness and consequences of this type of enthusiastic commercial lobbying. Animal fat is the one foodstuff that most of the genuinely independent experts agree we really should avoid if we want to stay healthy. In 1953 it was shown that there was a convincing correlation between a high intake of animal fat and the development of heart disease.

In 1982 the World Health Organisation, which always takes its time before coming to any conclusion, published a recommendation of its own advising people to cut down on fat. Numerous major scientific and medical committees around the world have agreed that we should eat less fatty meat, less butter, less cream and fewer eggs.

Look at the evidence coolly and scientifically and there isn't much doubt about it. And in many countries around the world a reduction in the consumption of animal fat has led to a reduction in the incidence of heart disease.

In Britain, however, confusion and chaos have remained. The consumption of animal fat has remained high. And the incidence of heart disease has not fallen. I think that the credit (if that is the right word) for this failure by British doctors to convince people to eat less fat must be shared by Britain's farmers and food manufacturers, who have between them organised a powerful and effective lobby to disguise the truth about animal fats. Since they have an obvious commercial interest in ensuring that we continue to eat lots of butter and drink plenty of milk British farmers and food manufacturers have joined together to pay for a number of extremely effective propaganda organisations. These organisations do their work in a number of ways.

First, they bombard journalists of all kinds with information suggesting that animal fats really aren't bad for you after all. That ensures a certain amount of confusion in the press and on television. Then, they send doctors a stream of information prepared by their own team of hired experts. I keep up-to-date files on all medical subjects and before writing this page I took out my file on fats and weighed the papers I'd collected. The accumulated papers and reports weighed 7½ lbs.

In response the medical profession has become more and more aggressive, dominating and dogmatic. Doctors have failed to put advice into perspective and they have been drawn into long, complicated arguments by lobbyists anxious to produce as much confusion as possible. What started as an attempt to offer useful and practical advice on how to stay healthy has become something quite different, for instead of offering information doctors have once more started to give instructions.

Once again the result has been that the freedom of the individual patient has been eroded. The medical profession's flirtations with preventative medicine have failed to give people more responsibility for their own health and have failed to lead doctors towards the principles of self-healing. Paradoxically and unexpectedly the doctors' attempts to utilise the principles of preventative medicine have strengthened the traditional medical philosophy which rules that the doctor should dominate and make all the decisions while the patient should listen and obey.

By a combination of accident and design the twentieth century has seen the traditionally dominant role of the doctor confirmed and strengthened, and the traditionally subservient role of the patient confirmed equally vehemently. To a certain extent patients have encouraged this trend. When you are frightened and ill, it is comforting to have someone who can' take over your life for you. When you are anxious and worried about your health, it is reassuring to be able to hand over all responsibility to a dispassionate professional. But as I studied the contrasting roles of patients and doctors in the late twentieth century, it became clear to me that the relationship had become unhealthy. Patients had been encouraged to hand over too much responsibility. This unequal and imbalanced distribution of responsibility had had a number of bad effects. First, it had undoubtedly damaged the relationship between doctors and patients. The medical profession had, in the end, oversold itself. It had promised far more than it could offer. As a result, many millions of patients who had put all their trust in their doctors had had their trust shattered when they had fallen ill. They had been promised good health and longevity and their doctors had been unable to fulfil either promise.

Second, it had put far too much pressure on doctors themselves. For some time now doctors have been found to be the unhealthiest group of individuals in the world. They die younger than most other people. They commit suicide more often. They have more heart disease and more peptic ulcerations. They need psychiatric advice more often than most other groups. They turn to alcohol and drugs far more frequently than most of their contemporaries. Their marriages do not survive. They crumble and they shatter under the tremendous pressure. They have put themselves into an impossible situation. How can they pretend to promise the rest of the world good health when their own state of health is so terrible? Who would trust a bankrupt accountant, a car mechanic reduced to thumbing a lift, a dietician with a weight problem or a lawyer behind bars?

Third, by denying their patients a chance to take back more personal responsibility for their own health, twentieth-century doctors have failed to take advantage of the rapidly growing amount of evidence pointing to the powerful self-healing qualities of the human body – self-healing techniques which cost nothing, are free of side-effects and offer protection as well as cure, well-being as well as good health.

Finally, and most important of all, twentieth-century doctors have, by strengthening the mechanistic philosophy of health, denied each one of us the opportunity to experience and benefit from the remarkable self-healing powers hidden within our own minds. And by denying us the chance to learn how to utilise *Mindpower*, doctors have ignored a healing process which is far more powerful than the body's own automatic healing processes. It is a hidden force of remarkable depth and exceptional strength. It is to natural self-healing as a shout is to a whisper.

3 THE ROLE OF THE HEALER AND THE ROLE OF THE PATIENT

The late 1970s and early 1980s were for me confusing, bewildering years. Convinced that the medical profession's full-blooded support for an entirely mechanistic approach to health care was wrong, I resigned from my medical practice to spend my time writing about medicine and searching for a more practical solution that would enable doctors and patients to work together.

I had become disillusioned with the way that orthodox medicine is practised for a good many reasons. But the most important reason was that I felt it was quite wrong for doctors to regard medical care as an exclusive science. Nearly all the doctors I knew were caring, considerate individuals. They desperately wanted to help their patients get better and they worried about them endlessly when they didn't. But they had all been trained to regard themselves as offering a complete, caring package. They had been taught to take over responsibility for the health of each patient they saw. And most of them seemed to feel uncomfortable when their authority was threatened in any way.

So, for example, I remember a consultant with whom I worked as a young hospital doctor becoming red with rage when a patient told him that she had visited an osteopath. As far as the consultant was concerned, the patient had betrayed him in a treacherous way. He firmly believed that she had, by seeking advice from another professional, deliberately sought to humiliate him. And he was by no means the exception. Indeed, from my experience as a doctor in hospital and in general practice I would say that the consultant's reaction was fairly standard.

Nor is it just when their patients see unorthodox practitioners that doctors get upset. Within the last ten years I have met many doctors who have been so proprietorial about their patients that they have felt aggrieved if their patients have dared even to talk to other medical men.

One general practitioner I knew would refuse to see patients ever again if they were brave enough to ask for second opinions from other doctors. As far as he was concerned, the patient's health belonged to the doctor looking after him and the patient had no right at all to look elsewhere for advice or treatment.

This particular doctor's attitude caused many patients deep unhappiness. I remember one young patient, whom I shall call Karen, whose life was deeply influenced by the doctor's sense of ownership. Karen worked in a hairdressing salon and had a boyfriend who was unemployed but struggling to start a small business as a photographer. She was nineteen and he was a year older, and they were sleeping together.

For the first few weeks of their courtship they used no contraceptive precautions, but then a scary few days waiting for a delayed menstrual period sent Karen running along to her general practitioner to ask for help. She wanted to start taking the contraceptive pill and as a young, fit, healthy girl with no personal or family history likely to cause problems there were no medical reasons why she shouldn't have been given a prescription for the first month's pills there and then.

Karen's doctor was, however, a staunch Catholic and he refused to give Karen a prescription. He told her that he did not approve of contraception and would not in any circumstances be prepared to write out a prescription for any contraceptive pills. And not only did he allow his personal moral beliefs to decide what Karen could or could not do with her body, but he also told her that he would remove her name from his list of patients if he found out that she had obtained the pill from any other doctor. He made it fairly clear that her parents would be left in no doubt as to the cause of this medical excommunication. By the time Karen changed doctors she was six months pregnant. And the course of her life had been changed irrevocably by the proprietorial attitude of her family general practitioner.

I could relate dozens of similar stories to illustrate this same point, but I'll confine myself to just one more. This time I'll call the patient Mary, although that was not her name. She was twenty-two and very pretty. But she had one problem that worried her enormously: the size of her breasts. She was so well endowed by nature that her breasts had dominated her relationships with men. From the age of twelve or thirteen she had been subjected to all sorts of lewd remarks from strangers as well as friends, and she had, not unnaturally, become extremely self-conscious about her size. She wanted to have a plastic surgery operation and have the size of her breasts reduced.

Her doctor laughed at her when she told him what she wanted. He told her that most young women would have been delighted with breasts of such a size. He told her that he thought it would be a crying shame to have them reduced and that he wouldn't even allow her to contemplate such butchery. He told her that she should go away and enjoy herself and be grateful for her full and voluptuous figure.

She went away but she didn't enjoy herself and she didn't manage to feel grateful for having such a full and voluptuous figure. She still felt dominated by her breasts and still wanted to have them reduced in size by a surgeon. And so she answered an advertisement she found in a magazine and visited a private clinic.

It took her nearly a year to save up for the operation and it was an absolute disaster. The surgeon was crude and clumsy and she was discharged from the clinic with breasts that were misshapen, still bleeding and painful rather than just tender. Back home in her flat she couldn't stand the pain and so she dragged herself to her doctor's evening surgery.

It is difficult to describe the doctor’s conduct, but to say that he was unsympathetic is an understatement. He berated her for her stupidity in visiting a private clinic. He shouted at her for allowing herself to be disfigured. He told her off for disobeying his instructions and having her breasts reduced in size. And then he told her that because she had visited another doctor without his permission he would not be prepared to provide her with any treatment nor to see her again. The one thing he couldn’t find it in himself to forgive was that she had dared to go behind his back and see another doctor. She had been unfaithful to him and shared her body with another.

I have even known doctors get upset because patients have dared to treat themselves. Now, under some circumstances, this is understandable. If a doctor is giving a patient pills for a heart condition and that patient then goes away from the surgery and buys an over-the-counter remedy, there is a very real danger that the two drugs will interact badly. But, under other circumstances, it is less easy to explain why the doctor gets so upset.

For several years now I have frequently encouraged patients suffering from insomnia to try and deal with their problem without the aid of sleeping pills. My argument is that sleeping pills do not provide a long-term answer. They merely provide a short-term solution. And I believe that my argument is strengthened by the fact that when they have been used for more than a week or two sleeping pills stop helping people get to sleep and start keeping them awake. Even the companies which make sleeping tablets usually suggest that their products are best used as occasional aids.

But after giving this advice on radio programmes, I have on several occasions spoken to patients who have told me that they wouldn’t dare try other solutions or try stopping their sleeping pills because their doctors would be offended. One patient rang me up in tears to tell me that when she had told her doctor that she could manage without sleeping pills he had shouted at her. He had been offended because she had been able to overcome her problem without his help and no longer needed regular prescriptions from him.

That sort of incident is by no means unusual. The same sort of thing has happened quite frequently with patients taking tranquillisers. All this seemed to me quite wrong. At that stage I began to look towards alternative medicine as a possible solution. During the 1970s I was by no means the only person becoming disenchanted with the attitudes of orthodox medical practitioners. Huge numbers of patients had turned away from registered medical practitioners and were seeking help from alternative or complementary medical practitioners.

And during that time the number of people seeking help from acupuncturists, homeopaths, hypnotherapists, osteopaths and others was rising rapidly. In 1981 a third of the French population tried unorthodox types of medicine. By 1983 the number of people in Britain seeking help from alternative practitioners had reached one million for the first time and was said to be rising at a quite extraordinary rate. In 1984 a British survey showed that one out of every three people had used alternative practitioners. In America, Germany, Australia, Scandinavia and just about every other developed country the picture was very similar

People started consulting alternative medical practitioners for many different reasons. Some turned away from orthodox, registered medical practitioners because they wanted more control over their own health and they felt that they would be allowed to share control if they visited alternative practitioners. Some were frightened by the high incidence of side-effects associated with modern drugs and surgical techniques. Others visited alternative practitioners simply because they had failed to find either relief or cure from orthodox medicine.

As a scientifically trained sceptic, I found many of the claims made by alternative practitioners puzzling. I found a few of them downright dishonest. But some of the better established alternative remedies seemed to me to offer sound, logical explanations for the cures they promised. Acupuncture, for example, seemed to me to be useful and effective. When I looked through scientific journals published around the world I found a good deal of evidence to show that the claims made by skilful acupuncturists were reasonable and sound. In 1974, for example, four American surgeons reported that they had treated over 300 patients in and around the New York area by acupuncture. The surgeons stated that in over three quarters of the cases they had found that acupuncture is one of the most effective treatments for arthritis, neuralgia and other skeletomuscular pains.

Two doctors writing in the Canadian Anaesthetists’ Society Journal in the same year wrote that ‘reports of a large number of surgical cases operated on under acupuncture anaesthesia with a success rate of up to 90 per cent have now been sufficiently substantiated that the effectiveness of acupuncture can no longer be doubted.’

By 1979 so much had been published about acupuncture and it had been so widely tested and tried that at a meeting of medical representatives from all six World Health Organisation regions it was concluded that ‘the sheer weight of evidence demands that it must be taken seriously as a clinical procedure of considerable value.’

More recently the World Health Organisation actually condemned doctors for failing to accept acupuncture as a useful medical technique, arguing that the antagonistic attitude of many doctors and other health professions is proving a major obstacle hindering the acceptance of acupuncture.

But the more I looked at the alternative remedies, the more I decided that, while some seemed sensible and some seemed silly, not one could be seen as a genuinely complete alternative to orthodox medicine. That seemed to me to be a great weakness.

The more useful and the more responsible an alternative practitioner was, the more he would insist that he offered not a complete but a partial alternative to orthodox medicine. The best qualified alternative practitioners all told me that they saw themselves as offering a complementary service to orthodox medicine. The best acupuncturists, hypnotherapists and osteopaths all worked alongside registered medical practitioners rather than competing with them.

Only the dottiest and least responsible alternative practitioners claimed to offer a complete service. The sensible ones all admitted that they always sent some of their patients to see general practitioners or hospital specialists. They agreed that they didn't deal with heart attack victims or patients with compound fractures or brain haemorrhages. It seemed to me that none of these so-called alternative forms of medicine were really 'alternatives' at all. They were, rather, variations on an existing theme.

Indeed, by the early 1980s there were huge numbers of orthodox doctors already practising some of the so-called alternative remedies. There were doctors practising hypnotherapy, osteopathy, homeopathy and acupuncture, for example. Admittedly, many of them were badly trained and offering a woefully inadequate service. But they had had very little difficulty in accommodating these strange new disciplines into their own medical practices. Even the British Medical Association, the doctors' trade union, had begun to take an interest in alternative medicine and had set up a special committee to investigate it.

The so-called alternatives were being drawn into orthodox medicine. Acupuncture and osteopathy were being linked up alongside traditional medical remedies such as drugs and surgery. It seemed perfectly clear to me that within another couple of decades all the very best aspects of alternative medicine would have been incorporated into traditional medical practices. And alternative medical practitioners would be working alongside registered medical practitioners in health centres and clinics all over the country.

There was something else too that convinced me that the new wave of alternative remedies weren't really alternatives at all. And that was that the practitioners of alternative remedies were mostly following the Cartesian mechanistic theory of the human body. It seemed to me that the majority of alternative practitioners had been so brainwashed by traditional medical thought that they had fallen into the trap of selling their skills and their products in exactly the same way as any orthodox doctor sells his skills and his products.

To me there seemed to be very little difference between the practitioner scribbling out a prescription for penicillin or a tranquilliser, the practitioner sticking acupuncture needles into his patients, the practitioner handing over a herbal remedy, the practitioner preparing a homeopathic remedy, the practitioner offering hypnotherapy or the practitioner dancing among the pile of old bones on the living-room carpet. All of these people had one thing in common: they were offering an interventionist approach. They wanted to take responsibility for their patients' health and offer their skills and services to people needing help.

During the early 1980s my suspicions and fears about the growing variety of alternative remedies were substantiated in a number of ways. First, there was the fact that all over the world new teaching schools seemed to have been set up to show people how to practise alternative medicine. It had become big business and diplomas were readily for sale. Many of the people practising alternative medicine had done nothing but spend a weekend on a course. Some had simply done short mail order courses.

Second, many alternative practitioners were boasting of the equipment they had. Computers were popular with many and all sorts of sophisticated bits and pieces of machinery could be seen in the consulting rooms of the most successful alternative practitioners.

Third, there were a growing number of reports showing that patients had been injured or made ill by alternative medicines. It seemed that alternative practitioners offered solutions that could sometimes be just as dangerous as those of orthodox practitioners.

My unavoidable conclusion was that, despite the huge amount of publicity that had been given to alternative medicine, none of these remedies were truly alternative. Many were valuable additions to orthodox medicine. But that was all.

Having decided that alternative practitioners offer little that is really new, I was to a large extent back where I had started in the late 1970s. I felt convinced that there had to be a simple answer to it all, a new philosophy, a new way of looking at health that could revolutionise our approach to sickness and to doctors. And I thought I was getting close to it. But first I felt that I needed to make clear in my own mind exactly what role I thought the professional ought to play.

So far I've been fairly critical about health care professionals and in particular about doctors. But I need now to put the criticism in perspective. For however much I may disapprove of the fact that doctors have become far too paternalistic, however much I may want to draw attention to the short-comings of the medical profession and the drugs industry and the growing alternative health care industry, I do not for one moment think that we could manage without any of these people.

Doctors and all the other health care professionals have a vital role to play in maintaining and preserving our health, in dealing with sickness and disease when it becomes threatening and in helping to care for us when we become frail, weak or disabled.

The problem is, I think, a fairly simple one. Up until today the emphasis has been wrong. The doctor has taken over our health care completely and has left us far too little responsibility. In the past the relationship between doctor and patient has been similar to that of teacher and pupil, employer and employee, master and slave.

I believe that the relationship between doctor and patient should not be weighted at all on the side of the doctor. Both doctor and patient should be entitled to make whatever contributions they consider appropriate or possible. But, and this is I think absolutely vital, the patient should always take the dominant role. The doctor, whether he be surgeon, physician or general practitioner, is there to offer technical advice and help. But he should see his role as technical adviser rather than anything else.

With this sort of relationship established, the doctor's responsibilities will be reduced to a manageable level and the patient's responsibilities will be extended in a way which will enable him to take full advantage of his body's many self-healing mechanisms.

By putting an end to this traditional master-slave relationship we will benefit in three very distinct, practical ways. First, patients will have much more freedom. They will be able to consult whichever practitioner they feel might be able to help without having to worry about upsetting any existing relationship. And with the added freedom there will undoubtedly be more honesty. Patients will see their family doctor, their local acupuncturist or their local herbalist. But they will do so openly and honestly. With things the way they are at the moment, patients do consult other professionals, but they invariably keep quiet about it and avoid telling one practitioner what another has suggested. That can be dangerous.

When I was in general practice a young woman came to see me with a long history of high blood pressure. I started to teach her how to relax, advised her to lose weight, helped her learn how to deal with stress more effectively and, because her blood pressure was quite high, gave her a prescription for some pills which I thought should help. But when I saw her a week later her blood pressure was higher rather than lower. Anxious to control the level of her blood pressure I increased the dose of the tablets and asked her to return to see me in another week.

By that time her blood pressure had gone even higher. I'm not quite sure what made me ask her whether she was taking any other treatment at the time it wasn't a question I asked routinely but I did. And, after a moment's hesitation she confessed quite tearfully that she had been to a local herbalist and had been taking a remedy the herbalist had recommended. She hadn't told me about it because she'd felt sure that I would be offended. What had happened, of course, was that the two remedies had interacted dangerously, with the result that her high blood pressure, instead of falling, had risen even higher.

By changing the proprietorial attitude of medical professionals, we will free patients to consult whichever professional they like – and to then be honest about which treatments they have tried or are trying. That will be a much safer approach. (In those countries where doctors are paid an annual retainer or capitation fee for looking after patients the system will have to be changed so that doctors receive a fee for each consultation. The capitation fee strengthens the doctor's feeling of ownership.)

The second advantage of putting an end to the paternalistic relationship between doctors and patients will be that the outdated mechanistic approach will be weakened. Doctors find it easy to think of the patient's body as a piece of machinery because they find it easy to think of the patient as an object rather than a person. Doctors frequently talk of patients as 'cases' or 'diseases' rather than as individual people. In hospital a man or woman will frequently become 'the liver in the end bed' or 'the heart attack in the second on the right'. Under those circumstances it is hardly surprising that doctors then treat their patients as machines. (It is sometimes quite difficult to decide which comes first: the paternalistic approach or the mechanistic philosophy. But as long as the circle is broken somewhere, it will remain broken.) The third advantage of getting rid of die old-fashioned relationship between doctor and patient is that the doctor will be able to take full advantage of his potential as a healer.

So far I haven't mentioned the role of the doctor as healer, but this is, I think, of absolutely vital importance. Since time immemorial it has been established that doctors, priests, alternative medical professionals, kings, medicine men and all sorts of individuals can have a healing effect on patients simply by being close to them or touching them.

For centuries, for example, there has been a strong belief in the ability of royalty to heal by the laying on of hands. In France healing on a large (and successful) scale was first tried by Clovis the Frank in AD 496. In England this apparently pagan practice is said to have started with Edward the Confessor. Patients would queue for days for a chance to be touched or blessed by a member of the royal family. And they would very often get better as a result of their blessing.

Through the centimes there have been endless examples of the healing effect that doctors can have too. In the Middle Ages, for example, when medicine was in its darkest period and there were few if any useful remedies available to the average practitioner, there were still doctors around who had a remarkably high success rate. If they hadn't had success with at least some of their patients then they wouldn't have stayed in business for long. No one wants to spend money going to see a doctor who never cures any of his patients.

I can still remember vividly one of the first times that I was made aware of the tremendous healing power to which doctors have access simply by virtue of being doctors. A patient of mine called Nan was a regular sufferer from arthritis. Her pains came and went and she used drugs only when absolutely necessary.

One Friday evening she came in late during the surgery and told me that her joints were playing up particularly badly. She desperately needed something to take for the weekend. She also wanted to pick up a prescription for an antibiotic being taken on a long-term basis by her teenage son, who suffered from particularly bad facial acne. I wrote out the two prescriptions, but told her that instead of giving her the usual pain killer I normally prescribed for her I was going to try something new. I wrote out a prescription for a product which had been well tried but which, according to all the evidence I'd read, had a greater chance of producing a lasting improvement. I was very positive about the drug and told her that I thought it could help her a great deal.

When she got to the chemist, the pharmacist only had one of the two drugs in stock. He told her that she would have to wait for the other prescription. She misunderstood what he had told her and thought that the tablets she was taking home were the ones I had prescribed for her arthritis. In fact, they were the ones normally taken by her son the acne-sufferer. She then proceeded to take the antibiotics thinking that they would have a useful effect on her arthritis pains.

Remarkably, after two days her arthritis was far less troublesome than it had ever been. She was virtually free of pain and quite able to walk about freely. She was so delighted that she came back to the surgery to tell me the good news. She showed me the bottle of pills she was taking to make sure that I made a note in her medical records of the drug that had proved so efficacious. It was then that I realised that she was taking the wrong drug. The antibiotics could not possibly have had any useful effect on her joint pains. And that was the first practical experience I had of the power of the placebo effect.

At medical school I'd never heard the word 'placebo' mentioned and there certainly had not been any mention of the way that apparently powerless pills can have a useful, practical effect in medical practice. But that experience triggered my interest in the subject and I started hunting through the medical journals for more examples of the effectiveness of this type of healing.

I found that the medical literature was absolutely full of references to placebo power. It had all really started, it seemed, during the Second World War when an American army medical officer had run out of morphine while treating injured soldiers. Rather than admit to the soldiers (many of whom were in terrible pain) that he had nothing to give them the doctor found some vials of plain water and gave those by injection. To his amazement the water proved to be as powerful a pain killer as morphine. The soldiers' pains were eased though they'd been injected with nothing more powerful than water.

In the years which followed, the power of the placebo was investigated quite thoroughly by many experts. In 1946 a researcher called Jellinek found that out of 199 patients who complained of having a headache, 120 lost their headache when given nothing more powerful than a sugar tablet. It was shown that 30 per cent of patients with severe, steady, post-operative pain got relief from placebos. And according to a report in the *British Medical Journal* in 1970 no less than 60 per cent of patients suffering from angina had fewer attacks when given placebo tablets and told that their attacks would be less frequent.

Further research has shown that although the colour, shape and size of a placebo tablet affects its efficacy, nothing governs the power of a placebo quite so much as the enthusiasm with which it is offered to the patient.

So, if a doctor gives a patient a placebo tablet and says something like, Try this, it might help you a little', the chances of the placebo working are relatively slight.

If, however, the doctor hands over the placebo tablet with an enthusiastic comment such as, 'Try this. It's the most powerful and effective drug on the market. It will help you', the chances of the placebo working are increased enormously.

It is even possible for doctors to influence the sort of side-effects patients are likely to get simply by what they say.

So, if a doctor handing over a pill (whether or not it is a placebo pill) says, 'Watch out. This pill may produce a rash and make you feel drowsy', the chances are very high that the patient will complain that the pill makes him feel drowsy and gives him a rash. Our bodies respond, it seems, not simply to what is in a tablet but to what we expect it to contain.

Nor is it just tablets and pills and drugs that operate the placebo effect. We associate the placebo effect with pills simply because we associate doctors with pills, but in fact the placebo effect can work in a thousand other ways too.

So, for example, if a surgeon who is about to operate on a patient says, 'I'm afraid that when you wake up you'll be in a lot of pain and probably rolling around in agony', the patient will probably wake up in a good deal of pain. (That sounds like a silly thing for any surgeon to say but I've known it done.)

Whereas if a surgeon who is about to operate on a patient says something like, 'When you wake up you will feel much better and calmer and we will make sure that you do not suffer any pain', the patient will probably wake up free of pain and discomfort.

To give another example, if a doctor sees a patient who complains of a pain in his neck and says, 'I can help get rid of that pain for you with a little massage', the patient's pain will quite probably disappear after a little massage. It probably won't be the massage that will have got rid of the pain. It will be the fact that the doctor has promised the patient a cure.

By now, of course, it should be fairly clear that if a doctor can have this ‘healing’ effect, there is nothing at all to stop non-qualified practitioners from producing a similar effect. And that, of course, is just what happens. Many of the alternative practitioners who have a remarkably high degree of success with patients depend very much on the placebo effect. They help their patients get better by being enthusiastic and optimistic.

The ultimate placebo effect is obtained by those practitioners who do not use any tricks or drugs or mechanical aids, but who imply ‘heal’ their patients either by being close to them or by touching them. I’ve seen this work, too, and I’m totally convinced that it is possible to ‘heal’ a patient simply by telling him or her that you are going to heal them.

I have to admit that I remained sceptical about the abilities of healers to produce genuine changes until I interviewed a healer for a Midlands television programme. The healer had written to me claiming to have unusual healing powers and asking me to help assess her skills. At my request she brought with her to the studio a patient who had for years suffered from bad arthritis and who claimed that the healer had helped get rid of her pains. I was perfectly prepared to accept that the woman’s pains had disappeared, but less ready to believe that there had been any genuine changes in her condition.

However, my scepticism faded when I obtained the woman’s X-rays from her hospital consultant. I found that there had been a definite radiological improvement. The X-rays taken before the patient had been seen by the healer showed definite arthritis. The X-rays taken afterwards showed virtually no arthritis at all. And an expert radiologist, who did not even know that the patient had been seen by a healer, agreed that there had been a definite and apparently unexplained improvement in the patient’s condition.

A hundred years ago that sort of healing event would have been described as a miracle. And even these days there are spiritual healers who argue vehemently that when healing occurs it is thanks to the intervention of spirits from some other world. I think that is nonsense. The majority of responsible healers now agree that there is nothing particularly miraculous about what they do; they don’t invoke any unworldly aids, they simply assist the body to heal itself.

The fact is that there is now an enormous amount of evidence to show that ‘healing’ works by producing a positive effect on the body and can be explained in straightforward physiological terms. (Spiritual healers argue that they can ‘cure’ people at a distance, but the physiological explanation of healing does not exclude so-called ‘distance’ healing. Nor do I think there is anything particularly unusual about the fact that animals can be healed.) All the healer does is to trigger the body’s internal healing responses and enable the body to heal itself.

I started this short section on placebos and healing by suggesting that by putting an end to the paternalistic, master-slave relationship between doctor and patient, the ability of the doctor to function as a healer would be enhanced. I think that the evidence for that lies in the fact that all the very best healers work *with* their patients.

One of the reasons why alternative health care professionals have won so many patients away from orthodox doctors in recent years is that alternative professionals tend to be friendlier and more obviously compassionate. They still follow the old mechanistic philosophy; they are still interventionists, but they are far less paternalistic. Most of them have not yet had time to acquire the aura of dispassionate professionalism that is so typical of orthodox medical practitioners.

And yet most alternative medicine practitioners rely very heavily indeed on the placebo response, on their ability to heal and on their ability to trigger a healing response. The doctor who remains aloof and distanced from his patients will achieve a certain amount of healing effect through blind trust and faith. Patients who want to get better will put an enormous amount of trust in those looking after them. But the doctor who can shatter the now traditional barrier between doctor and patient will be far more likely to produce a positive, healing effect. The doctor must learn to have faith in his patient just as the patient is expected to have faith in his doctor. If the power of the healing effect is to be achieved respect and trust need to be shared between both partners.

By exploring the real role that must be filled by the professional ‘healer’, I have also, inevitably, redefined the role that must be filled by the patient. Up until today the patient has had a secondary role in medical care.

But the change of role that I have outlined in this chapter means that I am now encouraging the patient to take advantage of the skills offered by the professionals only as and when they are needed. The patient must seek professional advice when he is unsure about how best to treat specific ailments, symptoms or conditions. He must seek expert, technical help when he can no longer cope with symptoms which threaten his comfort or survival. He must always be prepared to ask for support and encouragement when he feels weakened or threatened. He must never be shy about calling in the professionals.

The independent patient who is in control of his own health will know that unexplained changes and alterations in his body which he can neither explain nor deal with effectively need technical advice as soon as possible. He will be closer to medical advice, not further from it. He will be better able to take advantage of the skills and facilities offered by the wide range of twentieth-century health care professionals. He will be able to select the most appropriate source of help from among the wide range of professionals now offering their services.

But at the same time the independent patient will be better equipped to care for himself. By relegating the professionals to an advisory capacity he will have created a vacuum which he himself can fill with his own personal skills and strengths. Now he can take full advantage of a health-enhancing and disease-devastating range of mental powers which have for too long been ignored, misunderstood and suppressed.

Only the independent patient is in a position to take advantage of *Mindpower*. And it is *Mindpower* which offers the solution I have been seeking. I shall explain exactly how your mind rules your body and how *Mindpower* works in the next chapter.

4 THE LINKS BETWEEN MIND AND BODY

A few years ago the majority of medical scientists would have laughed at the idea of there being any substantial link between problems in the mind and problems affecting the body. No doctor with any sort of reputation in the profession would have dared to acknowledge that such a link existed.

In 1978 I wrote a book called *Stress Control* in which I put forward the view that nearly all the common twentieth-century diseases are caused or made worse by stress. I argued that stress was the greatest environmental hazard of our time and that doctors should be spending more time helping to manage stress, rather than simply treating symptoms.

Even then many doctors with powerful academic positions laughed at the idea and dismissed it as hypothetical nonsense. They still believed that all diseases had a physical basis. Today, I very much doubt if there is a doctor or reputable medical scientist anywhere in the world who doesn't accept that stress, fear, anxiety, worry, apprehension, pressure, anger and even joy can all cause quite genuine physical responses and very real diseases.

The figures vary from report to report, but at a conservative estimate at least three quarters of all the problems seen by doctors are illnesses which are either completely or partly psychosomatic in origin. If you include all the illnesses not seen by doctors and that means such problems as headaches, period pains, mild anxiety, sleeplessness, back problems, colds and so on – then the figures will be even greater. After talking at length to experts working in many different areas of medicine I would estimate that between 90 per cent and 95 per cent of all illnesses can be blamed totally or partially on psychological forces. Our minds are killing us.

Consider the common or garden headache, for example. There are some headaches that are caused by injuries and brain tumours, but experts now agree that at least 98 per cent of headaches are stress - and pressure - related. When under stress we screw up our eyes, we tighten and tense the muscles around our heads and we get headaches.

Or take indigestion: one of the commonest disorders known to twentieth-century man. It is so common that if five people sit down to dinner, the chances are that afterwards at least one of them will have stomach pains. Occasionally, indigestion may be caused by poor eating habits or by eating die wrong sort of food. But in die vast majority of cases it is caused by anxiety and nervousness.

Even when indigestion seems to be caused by bad eating habits it is often easy to prove that the root cause was stress. When a man hurries his lunch he is probably hurrying because he is under stress. When a man swallows food without chewing, it is probably because he is desperate to get back to the office to see how his latest deal is going. When a woman grabs a sandwich at her desk it is quite possible that she is feeling anxious about her work.

Some of the evidence that is available links stress to particular types of occupation. So, for example, the importance of industrial stress was first recognised in America in 1956 when a machine operator called James Carter cracked up while working on the General Motors production line in Detroit. Mr Carter had what is now commonly known as a nervous breakdown and he sued General Motors, claiming that the stresses of his job had contributed to his breakdown. It was an important law suit, for Carter won and from that day onwards American industry took the relationship between stress and disease very seriously indeed.

Since then researchers all around the world have published work linking specific occupations with specific types of stress-induced disease.

At one time or another trades unions representing doctors, nurses, tax collectors, school teachers, journalists, taxi drivers, airline pilots and air traffic controllers have all claimed that their members are particularly prone to stress. It has even been argued that some occupations can be linked to particular stress-linked diseases. Dr Jack Dunham, a consultant psychologist working with Berkshire County Council and Bath University in England has claimed that the type of classroom stress suffered by schoolteachers can cause infertility.

But the truth is that you don't even have to have a job to suffer from a stress-related disorder. Heaps of researchers have now published work showing that unemployment can produce pressure and stress-related illnesses too. That evidence should have put to rest for ever the old myth that the only people likely to suffer from stress are overworked business executives rushing to catch the next plane. In fact, over the last year or two I have found evidence linking stress to just about every type of human situation and endeavour.

There have been many papers published showing that social situations can cause damaging amounts of stress. In a paper presented to the American Psychiatric Association recently one author showed that the immune system of a recently bereaved widow showed a marked reduction in efficiency – stress had changed her body's ability to cope with disease. Another report, published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* showed that the type of depression which is suffered following a bereavement can affect the body's internal defence mechanisms so violently that small, cancerous tumours which might have otherwise been suppressed by the body's own defences, can survive, grow and eventually kill the patient. A third study, published this time in Australia, showed that these changes in the body's internal immune responses and defences take place within a mere eight weeks of the death of a close relative. In other words, just two months after the death of someone close to us our bodies are so badly damaged by the stress that they become exceptionally vulnerable to cancers and infections of all kinds.

And, of course, as just about any doctor will confirm that's just what happens. One partner dies and within a month or two the second partner, previously apparently fit and healthy, will die too. In one large study it was shown that the death rate among widowed individuals was twelve times the rate among a similar group of individuals who had not been bereaved. Stress won't appear on die death certificate; nevertheless it is the cause of death.

Similar evidence is available for all sorts of other social pressures too. If you're under pressure at home or your love life is too hectic, your chances of having a heart attack are six times greater than normal. The same is true if you have money worries or problems involving close friends. If you are what is known as 'socially mobile' (moving up the promotion ladder, getting a better job, earning more money, living in a bigger house and so on), that can increase your chances of having a heart attack three or four times.

In all these cases the important factor is stress. It is, without a doubt, the major twentieth-century killer.

Although there is now absolutely no doubt that stress is killing many people, there is still one important question to be answered; why are we so much more susceptible to stress, when we have such well-organised lives? Our ancestors had to worry about getting enough to eat, finding somewhere warm and dry to sleep at night, and staying alive while marauding, wild animals wandered around. Most of us have enough to eat and somewhere to live. We don't have to worry too much about being eaten by wild animals and we have central heating, microwave ovens and the choice of several channels of TV entertainment. Compared to our ancestors we have it easy. And yet we suffer more from stress than any of our ancestors ever did. Why?

The answer is quite simple. Our bodies were not designed for the sort of world in which we live today. They were designed for a world in which fighting and running were useful, practical solutions. They were designed to enable us to cope with physical confrontations with sabre-toothed tigers.

Today we respond in the same way. If we come face to face with a problem, our muscles tighten, our hearts beat faster, our blood pressure goes up, adrenalin surges through our veins and our bodies are put on general alert. We can fight, run, jump and climb with astonishing agility.

The trouble is, however, that today's problems are not quite so simple or as straightforward as they used to be. Instead of finding ourselves face to face with a sabre-toothed tiger, a pack of hungry wolves or an angry boar, we are far more likely to find ourselves having to face unemployment, big gas bills, traffic wardens, parking problems or officious policemen. None of these modern problems is easily solved and none can be dealt with by a faster heartbeat, a higher blood pressure or muscles that have been tensed. Our natural, physiological responses no longer help us to cope effectively or appropriately with our problems.

Faced with threats of any kind our bodies respond in the only way they know how: by preparing for physical action. We have not yet evolved fast enough to have learnt that purely physical responses won't help. The real source of the problem is that we have changed our world faster than our bodies have been able to adapt. At no other time in the history of the world has there been such a constant progression of ideas. Never before have fashions, themes and attitudes changed quite so rapidly. Never before have expectations and pressures been so enormous.

During the last couple of centuries revolutionary changes in medicine, navigation, printing, agriculture, military techniques, design, transport, industrial methods and communication systems have transformed our world. But our bodies are very much the same as they were ten, twenty, or a hundred thousand years ago. It takes many thousands of years for the human body to adapt and we have moved far too quickly for our own good.

It is, sadly, those natural responses which cause the ill effects produced by stress. And the symptoms of stress-induced disease are produced because the problems that cause the responses do not go away but last for hours, days, months and even years.

When a hefty gas bill lands on your door mat your body will respond to the threat in the only way it knows how: your heart will beat faster, your blood pressure will go up, your muscles will become tense and your whole body will be prepared for a fight. Unfortunately, your chances of being able to pay the bill are not increased by such simple physiological changes. And, indeed, the responses are worse than useless. They are damaging. Because the gas bill won't go away in a few minutes. The problem will remain for some considerable time. And for as long as the problem remains so your body will remain on the alert.

Like many people, I've been aware of the significance of stress for many years now. But there has always been something puzzling about stress: the fact that it doesn't seem to affect people in the same way. To illustrate what I mean let me describe two patients I knew when I was in general practice.

When I first met Humphrey he was in his mid-thirties and married with two small children. He worked as an assistant manager in a small grocery shop not far from the surgery. To be honest, I don't think the shop really merited an 'assistant manager', but the owner wanted to give Humphrey a bit of status (largely, I suspect, as an excuse for not giving him a pay rise) and so he had bought Humphrey a white coat and a name label for his lapel.

Humphrey was one of life’s sufferers. He was hardly ever away from my surgery. And he was constantly worrying about the pressures in his life. He worried if the shop looked like running out of beans or cat food or tomato sauce. He worried if there were lots of customers waiting to be served. He worried if there weren’t any customers. He worried if it was raining in case the bad weather kept the customers away. He worried if the sun was shining in case the customers all went swimming or stayed at home sunbathing. He worried about anything and everything. And he made himself ill.

Humphrey had become a one-man example of what stress can do to you. He had high blood pressure; he had asthma which got much worse when he was worried; he had indigestion which wouldn’t go away and which suggested that he might have an early duodenal ulcer; he had a patch of eczema which flared up when he got particularly upset about anything; and he had recurrent diarrhoea at the most difficult times of the year. Eventually he even started getting heart pains. When I left my practice he was a physical wreck. He looked about fifty-five rather than thirty-five. He just couldn’t cope with the stress in his life.

And yet by anybody’s standards Humphrey didn’t have all that much stress to cope with. His wife was loyal, loving and faithful. He had his own home with a small mortgage. He had a good, secure job with a steady income and little real responsibility. He had two healthy children. He should have been relatively stress- free. But he wasn’t. He was a stress victim.

Doreen on the other hand seemed perfectly capable of coping with any amount of stress. She seemed rocklike and untouchable. She had married early, but her first husband had left her with two small children to bring up. She had worked for a while as a school teacher and then married a local builder, given up work and had another two children. Within three years the builder had gone bankrupt and committed suicide leaving Doreen with a drawer full of bills, no money, no house and four children to look after.

Doreen had not only survived, she had thrived. She had gone back to work and within ten years had become headmistress of a large comprehensive school. Her children were all growing up reasonably well, but one was a diabetic and another had managed to get himself into a certain amount of trouble with the local police.

The pressure Doreen was under at school was only matched by the pressure she was under at home. At school she had over a thousand children to look after and a huge staff of teachers to cope with. She had a board of governors and a management committee and a Parent-Teachers Association. She had strikes, drug problems and teenage pregnancies. At home she had no husband, a huge mortgage and four growing and rather boisterous children of her own to look after.

And yet Doreen never suffered from any stress-related diseases. I only saw her professionally twice – for routine vaccinations.

These two, and many hundreds of other patients, convinced me that although stress is a root cause of most twentieth-century diseases, it isn’t actually stress itself that ever kills anyone. True, we all respond to physical pressures and dangers in much the same sort of way. If we all stood face to face with an army of sabre-toothed tigers, our hearts would all beat faster. (Some of us would respond more dramatically than others, but we would all respond in some way to the danger.)

But most twentieth-century pressures are abstract fears, worries, anxieties and suspicions. And it is not what is really happening around us that produces a reaction: it is what we suspect might be happening, it is what we think is likely to happen, it is what we imagine.

And that is what gave me the clue that enabled me to create the *Mindpower* philosophy. The damage that is done by twentieth-century stress is done through our minds. It is not what is happening around us that is killing us; it is what we think is happening, it is what we suspect may be the consequences.

Brian works for a large car component manufacturer and has a well paid job with them. He is married and has one son, aged nineteen and away at teacher training college. When I first saw Brian he was lying in bed recovering from a heart attack. He readily confessed that he felt sure that his heart attack had been brought on by the pressure he’d been under. He said that nearly all his pressure was related to his job. When I asked him to explain to me exactly what sort of stresses he had to cope with he thought for a long moment before answering.

‘It’s difficult to answer that,’ he confessed. ‘There are so many different pressures it’s hard to know where to start. But to give you an idea,’ he went on, ‘one of my most important functions is to buy in raw materials. If I don’t get the raw materials to the factory on time then we can’t make any of our products. That can be very worrying.’

‘Why is it worrying?’ I asked him.

He looked puzzled.

‘I know it’s your job to get the materials to the factory,’ I explained. ‘But why do you worry if it looks as if there is going to be a shortage?’

‘Well, for a start my job would be on the line,’ said Brian.

‘You mean you’d get the sack if a supplier didn’t provide what you’d ordered?’

‘Well, no, I don’t suppose I’d get the sack,’ admitted Brian. ‘But it wouldn’t look very good.’

He thought about it for a minute or two longer.

'I'd feel guilty about it,' he said. 'I'd feel I'd let the side down.'

'And what if you did get the sack?' I asked him. 'How terrible would that be?'

'Awful,' Brian said quickly.

'Do you enjoy your work?' I asked him.

'Most of the time.'

'But it does have its dull moments?'

He nodded.

'Is there anything you'd like to do but don't have time to do?'

'Lots of things,' he said. 'I write articles on cricket for a magazine. I'd like to turn them into a book one day if I had the time.'

'So you'd have things to do if you lost your job?'

'Oh yes,' he agreed.

'How many bedrooms has your house got?'

Brian looked puzzled. 'Four,' he told me.

'How many do you need?' I asked. 'Really need?'

'One,' said Brian after a moment or two. 'Two, perhaps at the most.'

'When did you buy your house?'

'Twenty years ago.'

'And it's probably worth a lot more than you paid for it?' Brian nodded and smiled. 'It's worth quite a lot,' he admitted. 'People always say that it's wise to put your money in property and it's true.'

'So if you sold it you could buy somewhere smaller and still be quite well off?'

Brian thought for a moment and then nodded. He was still smiling. 'Yes, I suppose so,' he agreed.

'So getting the sack wouldn't be quite so terrible after all?' I said. 'You could buy somewhere smaller, enjoy life more and write your book on cricket.'

There was silence for a moment. 'It's a thought,' said Brian. 'Do you think that's what I should do?'

'No,' I said quickly. 'I'm not suggesting that you should do anything in particular. All I'm trying to do is point out to you that you probably don't have quite so many stresses in your life as you think you have. In fact, it's the way you've been thinking about your work that has turned daily problems and tasks into stresses.'

And what is true of Brian is, of course, true for the rest of us too. We frequently respond not to the realities of our lives but to what we think are the realities. We respond not to the real pressures that surround us but to the pressures that we think are there. The stress that is killing us all exists not in the real world around us but in the world that exists in our heads. By changing our society we have changed the type of pressures we have to face. And because those new pressures are so often abstract and ethereal, we create new stresses and fears out of thin air.

It isn't unemployment that causes heart disease; it is the way we respond to unemployment. It isn't gas bills that cause high blood pressure; it is the way we respond to gas bills. It isn't the heavy traffic and the telephone that causes duodenal ulcers and colitis and headaches; it is the way we respond to heavy traffic and telephones.

Sabre-toothed tigers can kill you with their claws or teeth. Gas bills can kill you only by the effect they have on your mind.

Each month something like six thousand medical journals are published around the world. And today a growing number of them are carrying reports of new evidence to illustrate the existence and importance of the vital link between mental pressure and physical and mental disease.

As far back as 1946 a research project started at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in Baltimore, involving nearly 1,500 medical students, was designed to investigate the relationship between attitudes and illness. The research programme lasted for seventeen years and suggested that the way an individual responds to pressure has a powerful effect on the types of illnesses his or her body develops.

Since then an overwhelming amount of evidence has been produced to show the truth of that assertion. At a conference hosted by the Department of Epidemiology and Rheumatology at McMaster University in Ontario, Canada, there was near unanimous agreement that a patient's attitudes towards life directly affect both his physical and mental health. It has even been shown that when people fell ill their worries about their illness are likely to produce yet further problems and delay the rate at which they get better. The link between the mind and the body can produce a constricting, destructive circle of endless physical and mental distress.

This relationship between the mind and the body is so close that, even when a disease or an injury seem to have been caused by some entirely external force, the attitude of the individual concerned can have a powerful effect on the speed with which the damaged parts of the body recover. If you fell down and break your leg, the rate at which your broken bones mend will depend upon your attitude, hopes, fears and aspirations. (In fact, they can also have an effect on whether or not you break your leg at all but I'll come back to that later.)

A medical colleague of mine who works as a medical officer for a football club recently told me about two players in the team he looks after who had suffered very similar injuries after being tackled by rather ruthless opponents. The first player, Michael, was bitter and resentful and he was extremely angry because the opponent who had fouled him had been neither booked by the referee nor punished by his own club. He was worried too about his place in the side for which he normally played. He was well aware that a younger player in the reserves had taken full advantage of his opportunity to shine in the first team. He was aware that even when he had fully recovered he would still have to fight very hard to have a chance of regaining his place.

The second player, Tony, was much calmer about his injury. He accepted it as an occupational hazard and had plenty of confidence in his own ability to win back his place in the team. He spent hardly any time brooding about his injury, but concentrated instead on watching videotaped football games. He wanted desperately to play for his country and regarded the injury as nothing more than a temporary setback.

Within a couple of months Tony was back in the first team, fully recovered and hungry for success. Michael, the man who had spent his time sulking and worrying, was still walking with the aid of a stick. He looked like having a long, hard period of convalescence. There was a real risk that he would never play professional football again.

The power of the mind over the body can be so completely powerful that it can even affect an individual’s will to live and his chances of staying alive. Most of us in the Western world think of voodoo as something of a joke. We think it slightly bizarre that there are still people living in Africa who can be so terrified by a threat uttered by a witch doctor that they will drop down dead within hours of being told that they will die.

And yet we are no different. It is just that our witch doctors, instead of wearing war paint, grass skirts and hideous masks, tend to wear dark trousers and white coats and have stethoscopes hanging round their necks. When a doctor tells us that we have three months to live or six months to live, or whatever, then the chances are that we will duly die on time.

Consider the true story of Lionel, for example. For several weeks Lionel had had a number of persistent and uncomfortable chest symptoms. He had a cough that wouldn’t go away and he had some difficulty in getting his breath too. He had never had trouble with his chest before, but the symptoms seemed quite serious. Lionel’s general practitioner tried all the usual antibiotics, but none of them seemed to make very much difference. Although he still managed to get to work, Lionel found his symptoms annoying, troublesome and tiring.

Fed up eventually with the persistent coughing and spluttering and weariness, Lionel asked his doctor to refer him to a specialist at the nearest hospital. He thought that perhaps a second opinion would provide him with a more permanent solution. He felt sure that someone, somewhere, ought to be able to tell him what was wrong and then do something about it.

At the hospital the consultant looking after Lionel was puzzled, but recognising that the symptoms were undoubtedly extremely troublesome he suggested that a few days in hospital might produce a proper diagnosis. Some sophisticated tests and X-rays might, he suggested, enable them to offer a satisfactory solution to the problem. Lionel readily accepted the consultant’s offer, went into hospital and had a host of tests done.

After a week he was discharged and sent home. He was still no better than he had been when he had been admitted to the hospital, but at least he was no worse. And he was told that after he had been at home for a few days someone from the hospital would ring with the results of the tests.

It was five days after he’d gone back home before someone did ring. And the news was devastating. The hospital spokesman explained to Lionel’s wife that the investigations had shown the presence of a fast-growing cancer for which no useful treatment could be offered. The hospital consultant had predicted a rapid decline and a death within a month or two at the outside.

This sad, frightening, unexpected and depressing news staggered Lionel and his family. They had not realised that the problem was so serious. Within two days of receiving the news Lionel started to deteriorate. For the first time since the illness had begun he could not get out of bed. Work became impossible and he felt so weak that he could not eat properly. He began to lose weight so quickly that his family felt that he would be lucky to last out the week. He needed nursing night and day and complained of pains in his chest, arms and head. The family doctor offered painkillers, nursing aids and much-needed professional sympathy. Relatives came from distant parts of the country to await the predicted outcome.

And then came the second telephone call from the hospital. An apologetic voice told Lionel’s wife that a mistake had been made and that Lionel didn’t have cancer at all. Instead he had a rather rare type of chest infection – one that could be treated successfully with drugs. There had, explained the embarrassed hospital voice, been a mix-up between two sets of medical records belonging to patients with rather similar names.

Within twenty-four hours Lionel was out of bed and back at work. His appetite had come back, his pains had gone and he could walk perfectly easily. His weakness had entirely disappeared and he had been left with nothing more than the symptoms he’d started with: the cough and the breathlessness.

This dramatic but true story is by no means unusual. Daphne, for example, was told when she was small that she would always walk with a limp because she had one leg slightly shorter than the other. So she limped. Then at the age of twenty she visited a doctor who doubted the diagnosis. He had some fresh X-rays taken and was able to tell her that there was really nothing wrong with her legs. They were, according to the radiological evidence, exactly the same length. There were no abnormalities. When given this news Daphne lost the limp that she'd had for the best part of twenty years. Almost overnight she started to walk normally.

The writer T. H. White tells a story about an old man who lay on his death bed for days and days, only just alive but apparently unable to drift into the peace of death. Eventually, the old man's relatives remembered that around his neck the old man always wore a good luck charm. Throughout his life the man had never removed this charm, always believing that it gave him superhuman powers and provided him with some protection against death. When the chain was cut and the charm gently removed from around the old man's neck he died quickly and peacefully.

Earlier in the book I described how one of my patients had refused to die until satisfied that her children would be well looked after. But she wasn't the only patient I've looked after who defied death for her own personal, loving reasons.

Helen was separated from her husband and in her early forties when she developed cancer. It was a particularly virulent type of cancer and within months it had spread throughout her body. Every specialist she saw predicted that she would last no more than a matter of weeks. Every organ in her body was damaged, diseased and malfunctioning. The laboratory consultant at the nearby hospital found it quite remarkable that she was still alive at all, so severe was the damage that had been done.

And yet, despite the predictions of all the experts, Helen did not die. She had two small children to look after and she lived on. She repeatedly insisted that she would not and could not possibly die and leave them alone in the world. She would, she insisted, live and look after them. She looked terrible. The cancer ate away her body until there seemed to be more of the cancer than there was of her. And yet she still refused to die. In the end she survived until her children had both reached their teens and were old enough to go away to boarding school. And then she died. The post-mortem showed that there had been no mistake in the diagnosis. Every part of her body had been attacked by the cancer. She should have died years earlier.

Since it became clear that the mind does have power over the body, scientists have worked hard to try and show precisely how the functioning of the body can be influenced by transient thought processes. They have shown that it is through the medium of the imagination that the mind exerts much of its power. Our bodies are affected by what we think has happened, is happening or is likely to happen.

If you believe that you are going to be fired from your job, then your body will respond in as dramatic a way as if you are fired from your job. If you believe that you are pregnant, then your periods will stop, your breasts will swell and you will put on weight. Even if you do not have a developing foetus inside you.

Hypnotherapists have for years exploited the power of the human imagination. A year or two ago I saw a stage hypnotherapist illustrate the power of the imagination very vividly. After calling for a volunteer from the audience, the hypnotherapist (or hypnotist I suppose he should really be called) told his volunteer to stand in the middle of the stage. He then talked quietly to him for a few seconds, perhaps a minute or so, and told the volunteer that he was relaxed, comfortable and ready to listen to suggestions.

The first trick that the hypnotist performed was really enough to convince me of the value of the skill he was exhibiting. He simply told the volunteer that his arms were too heavy to lift above his head. I happened to know the volunteer and I rather suspected that he would be difficult to hypnotise. I certainly knew that he would not agree to do anything just to make the hypnotist look good. But, to my amazement, when he tried to lift his arms above his head he couldn't. They really did look as if they were too heavy to be moved.

Since then I've seen many other examples of the way that hypnotism and hypnotherapy can work. I've hypnotised people myself. And there is absolutely no doubt that it is a potent force. I have seen a volunteer convinced, under hypnosis, that a piece of ice is a red-hot poker. And I've seen that volunteer develop a blister and burn when touched by the piece of ice. The body reacts to the suggestion and not to the reality.

Hypnotherapy is often associated with Svengali-like figures, darkened rooms with drawn curtains, soft voices, swinging fob watches and long leather couches. It is often associated with charlatans, quacks, cheap diplomas, quick profits and dishonest practitioners. But it is, in fact, a genuine way of using the power of the imagination.

The first evidence to show that hypnotherapy can have useful effects was produced in 1847, when James Esdale performed 300 major surgical operations in India using no anaesthetic other than hypnosis. Since then, evidence has accumulated all around the world to show that by hypnotising patients and putting them into an altered state of consciousness it is possible to combat many different kinds of pain and discomfort.

Scientists have also performed experiments proving that the power of the imagination is so complete that apparently involuntary reflexes can be controlled by thought processes. For example, it seems that the body's digestive processes can be controlled by the imagination. In one experiment volunteers were able to produce enzymes which their bodies did not need. Normally, if human beings eat meals that contain a good deal of fat, their bodies produce special enzymes which break down the fat and turn it into products which can be readily transported in the blood. Those enzymes are produced without any thought; their production is controlled by a sophisticated series of reflexes. Under experimental conditions, however, it was shown that if volunteers were told that they had eaten fat when they hadn't, their bodies would respond to the imagined truth rather than the real truth. The fat-dissolving enzymes were produced.

In another experiment it was shown that the body's immune system can be controlled by using the imagination too. Normally when human beings are given an intradermal tuberculin injection to find out whether or not they are immune to T.B., their bodies respond automatically. If the individual has been previously exposed to tuberculosis and has prepared internal immune defence systems, a swelling and a small red mark will develop at the site. If the individual has not previously been exposed to T.B., and has not developed any immune defences, no mark and no swelling will develop. This test is done routinely to find out whether patients need vaccinations to help provide them with protection against T.B.

And yet researchers have shown that the body's apparently entirely involuntary response to the testing injection can be regulated by the imagination. If an individual who would normally have reacted to an intradermal injection of tuberculin is told not to respond, his body does not respond. The swelling and the red mark do not develop. The imagination can, it seems, even control a cell-mediated immunity reaction.

In my medical practice I've seen plenty of clinical evidence of the way that the immune system can be influenced by the imagination. A patient of mine called Malcolm was a constant sufferer from hay fever. He was allergic to a huge number of different types of plant but his main problem seemed to be flowers. Whenever he got close to flowers of any kind, he would sneeze and sneeze and sneeze. His eyes would run and he would look and sound extremely uncomfortable. His allergy got so bad that he only had to see a bunch of flowers to start sneezing.

Hay fever is, of course, an allergy disorder that depends to a large extent upon the body's immune defence systems getting out of control. The body for some reason recognises pollen as an enemy and prepares its own defences. The idea is to get rid of the pollen as quickly as possible and the symptoms of hay fever are designed to do just that. Tears are produced to wash pollen away from the eyes and sneezes are started to empty the nose. It is an efficient overreaction.

Theoretically, of course, these responses will not start unless the pollen is present. But I managed to prove that Malcolm's problems weren't purely physical when he came into the surgery one day and started sneezing because of a vase full of flowers that a patient had left in the reception area. The flowers were artificial. Malcolm's imagination had done the rest.

Since there is now a growing amount of evidence to suggest that the body's immune system may well be linked to the development of many of the most destructive diseases of the twentieth century – including rheumatoid arthritis and some forms of cancer the significance of this link between the imagination and the body's immune responses cannot be overestimated.

If the imagination can have such a powerful effect, its strength as a healing power must surely match its damaging potential. The most remarkable thing about the imagination is perhaps the way that we have been aware of its power without really recognising the importance of that power. It really isn't difficult to think of plenty of other examples of ways in which the imagination rules the body.

If you put a wooden plank on the floor and try to walk along it, you'll find it a remarkably easy task. Now, try telling yourself that the plank is suspended fifty feet above the floor. And that there are wild tigers waiting underneath for you to fall. The plank won't have altered in width or height above the floor. But you'll find walking along it a much more difficult and daunting task.

Football managers also know the value of the human imagination. If a player's mind tells him that he is tired, he will be tired. And he will find it difficult to keep running in the second half of the game. If all the players in a team believe that they are going to lose they will probably lose. If all the players in a team believe that they are going to win, they will probably win. The half-time pep talk can make a staggering amount of difference to a team's success. The team manager or captain who can instil a sense of confidence and quiet determination in his team will be well worth his place for his qualities of leadership alone.

Film directors have for years exploited the power of the human imagination without really being fully aware of the strength of the power they have at their disposal. When a cinema patron settles down in his seat to enjoy a good film, he will be lost in the fantasy world that has been created for him. As long as the film is a good one, and is convincing, each member of the audience will forget that he is sitting in a darkened room with several hundred other people. He won't hear the rustling of toffee papers or the crackle of popcorn. The illusion created on the screen will be enough to enable him to escape from the real world in which his body is imprisoned. His mind will wander freely, directed by the actions of the figures on the screen. And what is happening in his mind will rule what happens to his body too.

When the film *Lawrence of Arabia* was shown on the cinema screen, reports from around the world indicated that the sale of ice-cream in those cinemas had rocketed. The endless desert scenes had made the patrons feel uncomfortably hot. Their bodies had responded to what they thought they were seeing and experiencing, and during the intervals thousands of people had bought themselves cooling ice-creams.

You can see this influence for yourself next time there is a film on the television at home. If, for example, the film shows shots of icy wastes and explorers huddled together in tents, you'll probably see the people with you shivering, moaning about the cold and switching on the fire. If the film is frightening with shots of dark passageways, hidden terrors, vampires, murderers and other threats, the people with you will be biting their finger nails, covering their eyes with their hands and rushing out during the advertisements to check that the back door is firmly locked and bolted.

And you can obtain the same sort of genuine physical response by reading a good book. If the story is frightening, you'll feel your pulse racing and the hairs standing up on the back of your neck and the backs of your hands. If the story is sad, the tears will start to pour down your cheeks. Your body will have responded to your imagination.

For some years now scientists in a number of very reputable institutes around the world have been producing evidence to show that patients who meditate and relax are often capable of dealing with the sort of disorders known to be associated with stress and pressure. Under laboratory conditions there is absolutely no doubt that people who relax themselves thoroughly can reduce their blood pressure, slow down their heart rate and generally increase their ability to cope with pressure without becoming ill.

From the research evidence available it seems that modern life is so fast and so frenetic, so totally unforgiving, that most of us push ourselves too far and too quickly. We do not allow ourselves time to accustom ourselves to our lifestyles; we do not allow ourselves the chance to soothe our minds (and therefore our bodies) with gentle, pleasing, relaxing images.

There are, I think, three main reasons why the advantages of thorough relaxation have not been enjoyed by a wider audience. First, the word 'relaxation' tends to cause a good deal of confusion and misunderstanding. Many people assume that if they sit down in front of the television set with a sandwich and a beer, they are relaxing.

In fact, of course, that sort of relaxation may well help the body but it doesn't help the mind very much. And as I have already shown, it is the mind that rules the body. Lying down in a stupor in front of the television won't do very much to soothe the troubled mind. The images of the day's problems will continue to fight for space alongside the images being projected by the evening's television programmes. The television news will be full of terrible new worries to be added to the ones already clamouring for attention. It is hardly surprising that after an evening in front of the television set many people need sleeping pills to help them get to sleep at night. I do wish that the television companies would bring back the old-fashioned 'interlude'. It would, I feel quite sure, make a tremendous difference to the quality of life for most viewers. Played once an hour for five minutes the interlude would give viewers a chance to rest their minds very effectively.

Second, the religious and semi-religious features which seem to be an essential part of many forms of meditation are frightening and forbidding to many people. The words 'relaxation' and 'meditation' have become linked with shaven-headed mystics, religious groups and orange-robed eccentrics. It is hardly surprising that many people shy away from either concept. They want to know how to deal with life. They don't want to take part in any organised rituals and they would feel self-conscious if they had to sing or chant any magic incantations.

Many who try to introduce meditation into our culture make the simple mistake of trying to introduce a technique devised for an Eastern culture. Repetitive dance and chant rhythms have been used by primitive tribes around the world for centuries (and have been used very effectively too, with a loss of self-awareness and an accompanying sense of soothing relaxation), but they were never suitable for mass marketing in the Western world.

Third, those who have talked about the values of meditation have constantly claimed that it is necessary to empty the mind of all inputs and all thoughts in order to benefit from the respite. And that is not easy. Many people find the prospect of emptying their minds so daunting that they never even try.

These three drawbacks have resulted in meditation and relaxation remaining the prerogative of a relatively small number of individuals. And that is a terrible shame, for millions would undoubtedly benefit from using techniques of this type. Meditation helps by triggering off the body's own quite natural relaxation response – the natural antithesis to the stress response. And it is ironic that although most of us put our bodies and our minds under more pressure than our ancestors ever had to face we have forgotten how to use these natural techniques for opposing pressure.

Another factor that has a powerful influence on the way that an individual responds to stressful situations is the nature of his or her personality. Indeed, not only is there now plenty of evidence to show that the personality of an individual can have a tremendous influence on the way that his or her body responds to stress, pressure and environmental problems, but there is also evidence to show that the personality of an individual can have an effect on the type of illness he subsequently develops.

Some of the research evidence linking personality type to specific types of disease is very old. In 1910 William Osier wrote in *The Lancet* that it was ambitious, hard-working men who were most likely to have heart trouble. And in 1945 it was suggested that people who have heart attacks are often tortured by their need to compete with their fathers.

Since then a growing number of researchers have managed to amplify both these statements. In her book *Biotypes* (London, 1981), for example, Joan Arehart-Treichel tells how in the early 1950s an upholsterer repairing chairs in a reception room shared by two doctors noticed that only the front edges of the chairs were worn as though the patients who had been sitting there had all been literally 'on edge'. The two doctors were called Rosenman and Friedman and they spent a large part of the next two decades trying to find out more about the type of patients likely to have heart attacks.

They discovered that the people who were getting heart attacks were usually male and commonly under great pressure. They also managed to show that these men invariably had a strong drive to compete and to achieve. The heart attack patient, it seems, works long hours, sets out to succeed, finds it difficult to sit still, is unable to relax and is a perfectionist. No matter how successful he is, he will rarely be able to satisfy his ambitions. And, of course, it's not how successful you are that determines your sense of personal satisfaction – it is how successful you think you are.

The evidence linking personality to cancer also goes back a long way. In the second century AD the Roman physician Galen noticed that women who were depressed were far more likely to develop cancer than women who were happy. In recent years we've acquired considerable evidence to support that early observation. Today it is known that the people who are cancer-prone tend to try too hard to please the world. When they fail, as they invariably must (simply because it is never possible to please everybody all the time), they are more likely to develop cancer.

Cancer sufferers often have unhappy childhoods and frequently grow up suffering from a lack of love, a sense of loneliness and a feeling that they have been deserted by those closest to them. Cancer victims tend to give more than they take; they tend to repress their own desires and their own emotional feelings. Unselfishly, they do their best to please those around them and when anything goes wrong with the world they have created, they develop cancer.

There is evidence showing that it is possible to link specific personality types to all sorts of diseases arthritis, asthma, colitis, eczema, hay fever and migraine, for example. And there is even evidence to show that there are personality factors which determine who is most likely to suffer from colds and minor throat and chest infections. Dr Richard Totman of Sussex University and Dr Donald Broadbent of Oxford, working with the Common Cold Research Unit in England, have come to the conclusion that introverts are far more likely to get lots of colds than extroverts, and that people who are obsessional are particularly likely to get colds. It seems that the severity of the symptoms endured by someone who has a cold depends upon the amount of stress and strain he thinks he is under.

Not only are specific types of personality linked to specific physical conditions but there is also a great deal of evidence showing that the personality of an individual will have an influence on the lifestyle he follows, the type of partner he chooses and the sort of work he selects for himself.

The individual's personality may help ensure that his life follows a certain, fairly well-defined pattern. But at the same time it may mean that he comes face to face with a regular series of stresses and problems.

Take Henry, for example. At the age of sixteen he knew he wanted to spend his life working with figures. He loved mathematics at school and obtained a considerable amount of satisfaction from fairly tedious, routine work with figures. By the time he was twenty-five he was well established in an office with a firm of accountants. It was the sort of work he had always wanted to do. And, in a way, it was the sort of work that he was cut out to do best.

Yet by the time Henry came to see me, his work had done a considerable amount of damage to his health. He had a nasty inflammatory disease of the large bowel called colitis a disease commonly associated with stress and pressure. Henry's problem was that although he enjoyed his work, he also took it very seriously. He got very upset when errors crept into the columns of figures in front of him. If at the end of a day's work he had one set of accounts that were a penny out he would lie awake at night worrying about it. His obsessional personality meant that he was perfectly well suited to the work he did. But his obsessional personality also meant that the work he did was making him ill.

And Henry was by no means an isolated case. During the years I spent in general practice I came across hundreds of patients whose lives had been mapped out for them by their personalities. And in many cases the lifestyles those patients had chosen for themselves had ended up crippling or destroying them.

Our personalities play a vitally important role in our lives. They determine the sort of immediate environment we create for ourselves and they then determine the way in which we respond to the stresses and strains that are inherent in that self-made environment. It is our minds which commonly kill our bodies. But it is our personalities which decide just how the killing is done.

In some ways the human memory is extraordinarily inefficient. But in many ways it is extremely efficient. Different people seem able to remember different things in entirely different ways – and with different degrees of success. Wine tasters store the memory of the tastes of scores of wines. Art historians can store images quite clearly in their minds. Musicians retain scores and arrangements. Tailors can retain the ‘feel’ of certain types of cloth. Cooks and gourmets can remember certain types of smell.

And, of course, a person who has a particularly good memory in one respect may be devoid of it in another respect. I once had a patient who could remember every football match his favourite first division side ever played. He could tell you the result of every league match and every cup match. He could tell you whether the match had been played at home or away from home. He could tell you the players on each side and the final and halftime scores. And he could remember matches and scorelines from years ago. In this respect his memory was faultless.

Yet he couldn’t remember how to do simple tasks when he was at work. He couldn’t even remember how to operate the machine he was supposed to be minding. After listening to him talk about football matches you’d have thought he was a genius. But after listening to his foreman describe his failings at work you’d have thought him more likely to be mentally deficient.

The reason why our memories change so much – and why my patient had such an efficient memory for football matches and such an appalling memory for work – is that our memories are often mixed up with emotions, feelings, attitudes and prejudices. Those emotions and attitudes influence the way we respond to specific incidents and they influence the way that those events stay in our minds. My patient remembered all his team’s football matches because he was desperately interested in football in general and in the success of his side in particular. When he talked about a particular match he could ‘see’ it taking place. He could remember whether he was happy or sad at the time. But he had no interest at all in the work he was doing. And there were no emotional aids to help him remember what the foreman had told him. Memories are influenced in this way quite frequently and the result is that our attitudes towards new events and incidents and stresses can be controlled not simply by straightforward past memories, but by memories which have been distorted by association as well as by time.

I hardly ever wear a suit, but recently, as a joke, I put on a three-piece pin-stripe suit that I hadn’t worn for years. A television producer with whom I was working had complained that I always turned up at the studios wearing a jumper and that I needed to look more like a doctor. I thought that the three-piece pin-striped suit, together with a blue-and white spotted bow tie, might produce a smile or two.

As it happened, however, the suit was the one I wore when I attended my first medical school interview. And it was the one I’d worn for my medical school examinations. I’d hardly ever worn it except for interviews and other equally important engagements. Physically the suit still fitted fairly comfortably. But, nevertheless, I felt distinctly uncomfortable as soon as I put it on. Theoretically, it wasn’t any different from just wearing a sports jacket, waistcoat and trousers. But to me it brought back fears, anxieties, long-forgotten worries. Past memories and associations flooded back. And I felt uncomfortable and rather nervous. My stomach started rumbling and my heart started beating faster than usual. I wasn’t going anywhere threatening or doing anything worrying, but my body (under the influence of my mind) was responding as though I was going to an important interview.

If you stop and think about it for a minute or two, you’ll realise that this sort of thing happens quite a lot. If you go out to buy some new furniture and the salesman reminds you of someone who always used to annoy you – perhaps he looks like a particularly obnoxious prefect at school, for example – then you’ll be critical and suspicious and you probably won’t buy furniture from him however hard he tries or however good a bargain he offers you.

If, however, you are served by a salesman who reminds you more of a close friend, you’ll feel much warmer towards him, and you’ll probably buy something even if you aren’t offered a good price. Unless, that is, the salesman is unfortunate enough to trigger off some unhappy memory while he gives you his sales pitch. If, for example, he asks you about your holidays and you’ve just come back from a really miserable two weeks in Spain during which time you caught all sorts of nasty diseases, were mugged, found yourself staying in a half-finished hotel and didn’t have an edible forkful of food, then you’ll lose some of your good humour and unconsciously you’ll begin to dislike him.

While writing this book, I spent a good deal of time touring around Devon and Cornwall looking for a new home and I noticed this phenomenon at work on numerous occasions. When I went into a house where the people were warm and friendly, I was favourably impressed by the house – even if it had woodworm, damp and dry rot. When I went into homes where the people were cold and unfriendly – or, more important, reminded me of people who had annoyed me or been unkind to me in the past – I was not very enthusiastic about their houses.

We will also respond to simple things like a smile or a scowl, simply because our minds (and our memories) tell us that a smile suggests that things are going to go smoothly, while a scowl suggests that things are going to go badly. This phenomenon is illustrated neatly by a true anecdote.

Inspired by research which shows that our behaviour can be influenced by the behaviour of other people, and by our interpretation of that behaviour as determined by our association between memories and circumstances, a group of American psychology students decided to play a trick on their psychology professor.

When he was lecturing, the professor habitually walked about the lecture theatre, usually wandering from one side to the other many times during a single one-hour lecture. So the students decided to start behaving differently according to the corner of the room that the professor was occupying. When he was in the left-hand corner of the lecture theatre, all the students smiled at him and listened attentively to what he had to say. When he was in the other corner, they were noisy and inattentive. Within a remarkably short space of time he was doing all his lecturing standing in just one spot. You won't need any help to guess which corner he chose.

The mind-controlling factors which I've discussed so far have been both explicable and understandable. But there are many aspects of the human mind that are far from explicable, for the human mind has skills, strengths and powers that we have as yet only glimpsed. For example, have you ever noticed that if you are at a party where dozens of people are talking loudly and someone mentions your name, your ears will automatically prick up? You will have isolated the sounds of your name from the general hubbub, even though you hadn't consciously been listening to the conversation concerned.

From research done in the last few years it seems that our hearing acuity is very much more powerful than any of us might have imagined. In one fascinating experiment, volunteers listened to various numbers being read out on a piece of recording tape. Every time the number five was mentioned a puff of air was blown on to the eyelids of the volunteers. Eventually, the individuals all acquired reflexes which meant that they blinked whenever they heard the number five on the tape.

That was straightforward enough. But the next part of the experiment was really remarkable. For the people who had organised the experiment discovered that when they turned down the tape recorder and played it so that the voice on it was inaudible, the volunteers still blinked every time the number five was mentioned. Somehow they had managed to hear unconsciously what they had been unable to detect consciously.

Since the remarkable Uri Geller startled the world with his metal-bending experiments numerous researchers around the world have done experiments with other individuals and produced similar results. At London University's Birkbeck College, for example, Professor John Hasted has tested over twenty youngsters, using sophisticated electronic sensors to prevent trickery and to filter out the effects of freak atmospheric conditions and electrical interference. He, and other scientists around the world, have confirmed that many individuals do have quite remarkable and totally inexplicable powers. Cameramen working with film crews recording such experiments have reported that their equipment has frequently been broken or distorted.

And countless scientists are now prepared to confirm that extra-sensory perception can no longer be dismissed as merely a piece of science fiction. There are many authenticated stories illustrating this aspect of the mind's unexplained power.

In Saratoga, California, a forty-nine-year-old widow, asleep in her flat, suddenly woke up at 2 a.m. after dreaming of a burning house full of elderly people running about in their nightwear. The dream was so realistic that she felt sure that she had to do something about it. Feeling rather foolish she dressed quickly and drove off to the first of three old people's homes that she helped to run, anxious to make sure that there was nothing wrong.

In a small room at the back of one of these houses she found flames shooting out of a gas main. No one could have possibly seen the fire, and the fire brigade chief who dealt with the blaze said that within half an hour the blaze would have destroyed the house, killing many of the inhabitants.

No one yet can explain this type of phenomenon, but nor do many scientists deny that these things take place. Indeed, although there are no certain answers available, some answers and explanations do seem to be emerging. At the Maudsley Hospital in London, for example, Dr Peter Fenwick and his colleagues have found significant numbers of head injuries, episodes of being knocked unconscious, blackouts and serious illnesses in the medical histories of the mediums they have studied. From their work it seems that there is a link between an individual being knocked unconscious and that individual later showing skills at telepathy or clairvoyance.

Good scientists tend to greet all new ideas and partly substantiated theories with a healthy mixture of scepticism and fear. But I believe that there is now convincing evidence to support the theory that a sixth sense does exist and that such things as extrasensory perception, telepathy and premonitions are as real as vision and hearing. The capacities of the sense organs we know about are far greater than we might have suspected a few years ago. The capacities of the sense organs we have not yet identified are so vast that it is unwise at this stage even to attempt to define any boundaries.

The strength of the evidence in existence can no longer be ignored. Human beings have the capacity to transmit and receive messages through their minds and they have the capacity to affect matter through the power of their minds alone. These truths may sit uncomfortably beside traditional scientific teachings, and we may not understand how these mechanisms operate. But their existence can no longer be denied.

So far most of the practical evidence I've produced has illustrated the destructive effect that the mind can have on the body. But there is also a staggering amount of evidence to show that the power of the mind can have a remarkably constructive, healing effect on the body too. The powers that can stimulate the development of disease can be used to stimulate the body's self-healing processes and to protect an individual from all sorts of diseases and disorders. The very same powers that can produce devastating damage can also be used to prevent illness developing and to deal with problems which have already started.

When I was a medical student I remember a physiology lecturer who used to push a metal spike into his biceps to show us the electrical effects produced by a muscle contracting. He used to do this as a regular part of his teaching course and he never bled or seemed to suffer any pain. The spike was about as long as a knitting needle and the lecturer would push it right into his arm without so much as a flinch or a moment's hesitation.

I was impressed by that memory for years, but never really understood how the lecturer had done it. And then, quite recently, I came across another physician, this time an American, who had had a similar experience while still a medical student. His lecturer had also pushed a metal skewer about the length of a knitting needle straight through the centre of his biceps muscle without so much as a drop of blood and without suffering in any obvious way at all.

This student, more courageous and perhaps more curious than I had been at the time, had asked his lecturer to explain just how he had managed to perform such an extraordinary feat.

The lecturer had duly explained that every time he performed the experiment he would mentally place himself in a far corner of the room so that he wouldn't feel any pain as the spike went through his muscle. And he would leave behind instructions that his body's defences would deal with any infection introduced into the muscle and also ensure that any blood vessels damaged by the spike entering the skin would be closed up immediately without blood loss.

This wasn't a crazy circus performer talking. It was an ordinary physiology lecturer talking to a medical school student. And although only an anecdote, it does, I think, illustrate the extent to which the mind can influence the body's susceptibility to infection and disease. Both those lecturers were, of course, way ahead of their time. A year or two ago the majority of medical academics would have still found it difficult to believe that the mind could have such control over the body.

But a number of scientific papers have been published showing that the mind does have this quite remarkable power over what happens to the body. For example, the imagination can exert a deep and lasting influence over the body's ability to acquire simple physical skills.

In an experiment conducted in Australia in 1983, researchers took a large group of people who had absolutely nothing in common apart from the fact that none of them had ever played basketball before. After being allowed to spend one day throwing basketballs through a hoop the volunteers were divided into three separate groups. The first group were told to play absolutely no basketball for a month. They were told not even to think about basketball. The second group were told to practise every day. And the third group were told to spend ten minutes a day imagining that they were throwing balls into a basket.

At the end of the one-month experiment the people in the first group were no better at basketball than they had been at the start of the whole exercise. However, the other two groups had improved by closely similar amounts. The players who had been spending their time out on the court throwing basketballs through hoops had improved by 24 per cent. And the players who had spent ten minutes a day imagining that they had been throwing basketballs through hoops had improved by 23 per cent.

Even more impressive has been the work done in America by Dr Carl Simonton and his wife. For a number of years now they have been teaching patients how to cope with cancer by using their imaginations. The theory is that if the imagination can have a destructive effect, it can also have a positive effect. If people can give themselves cancer by negative thinking, they should be able to protect themselves against cancer and maybe even cure themselves of cancer by positive thinking. If people can give themselves cancer by being miserable and sad, perhaps they can help get themselves better by being happy and cheerful. In the first years of their experiment the Simontons have found that their patients have lived, on average, more than a year longer than patients who were not encouraged to use their minds to help fight their disease.

All around the world research is beginning to come up with similarly impressive results. Growing numbers of doctors and healers of all kinds are finding that the mind can protect the body, help it to fight off ill health and help it to conquer and defeat disease.

At the start of this book I explained how I had first been made aware of the way in which the human mind can regulate the body's responses. Because just about every single physical disorder that affects us is influenced in one way or another by the mind, the influences of these mental powers are far-reaching and exhaustive. *Mindpower* is, I believe, a positive force which can help any patient under any circumstances. No longer do we have to be spectators at our illnesses.

I hope that by now I will have convinced you that your mind has power over your body. And I hope that you understand that if you learn how to use your mental powers to the full, you will become both physically and mentally stronger; you will be happier, healthier and far less vulnerable to disease than you would otherwise have been. *Mindpower* is a marriage between traditional philosophies and modern technologies and it offers a safe, genuine solution to the special rigours and threats of twentieth-century life.

At its simplest level *Mindpower* can help you deal with many of the common physical troubles which seem to plague us all. If you know that your indigestion is caused by worry, it is obviously more logical to do something about your worry (or the way you respond to the things which are worrying you) than it is simply to keep on treating the indigestion. The old-fashioned, interventionist, approach was to pour bottles of antacid into an acid-filled stomach to quell the symptoms. That was, I believe, about as logical as repapering the bedroom ceiling because of problems caused by a leaky roof.

The link between the mind and the body is so complex that you don't have to be under stress to develop stress-induced symptoms of distress – you need only to imagine that you are under stress. You don't have to be unemployed to develop physical symptoms. You need only worry about being made redundant. You don't need to be penniless. You need only worry that you might become penniless. You don't need to feel tense to develop a headache. You need only worry that you will become tense. You don't need to be pregnant to miss a period. You need only worry that you might be pregnant. Once you genuinely believe that you have problems, your body will respond as though the problems were real. You will develop physical symptoms of a real illness. An entirely imaginary problem can cause potentially lethal, physical changes to take place.

And so the strength of *Mindpower* can operate at a far more sophisticated level. You can become genuinely ill by worrying and by imagining that dreadful things are going to happen. But you can also keep yourself fit and help yourself get better when you are ill by using the power of your imagination to help you support your body's self-healing mechanisms.

This capacity of the imagination to help us fight illness is still something that we do not fully understand. And it is something that many still find difficult to accept. Most people readily understand that the mind can have a destructive effect on the body. But fewer are prepared to acknowledge that the mind can have an equally powerful constructive effect.

If you still remain sceptical, stop for a while and read through some of the preceding pages again. Try to remember that one of the problems we all face when trying to come to terms with the power of the mind is that these new theories and principles of life defy just about everything we were taught when we were small. And yet to ignore these truths simply because they do not fit in with what we used to regard as the truth is foolish.

During the last half century we have all learned to accept a growing number of things which we can neither explain nor understand. We accept that television programmes are transmitted around the world although most of us do not understand how it happens. We accept that men walk on the moon. Although we don't know just how it is done. We accept that aeroplanes fly faster than the speed of sound. We accept that radios can pick up signals through house walls. We accept the telephone and the electric light bulb. So why should we remain sceptical about the unseen powers of our minds? Why should we stay blind to the irony that although our minds can make us ill, our minds can make us better?

In recent years exercising the body has become something of a religion. Thousands of people exercise their bodies regularly in attempts to become fit and to avoid ill health. But I believe that you can do far more for your health by learning to exercise your mind and use it properly and effectively than you can by exercising your body. Far more disorders are caused by mental pressures than are caused by a lack of physical exercise. By using your natural *Mindpower* you can deal with those pressures and maintain good health. You can learn how to treat the vast majority of problems likely to affect your body without asking for help from any sort of interventionist. And you can improve your chances of survival when you do need to seek outside help.

Mindpower is an effective source of primary health care. Learn to harness the hidden healing powers of your mind and you can learn to control your health.

5 USING YOUR MIND TO HEAL YOUR BODY: CONTROLLING NEGATIVE FORCES

Sadness

One common emotional response to pressure and stress is sorrow. Sadness is our way of reacting to problems which affect us in a deeply personal way. The natural, human way of responding to sadness is by crying. When we are small and unhappy, we cry naturally to make it clear to those who are close to us and near to us that we need sympathy and attention. Gradually, as we grow older we find that by shedding tears we gain sympathy, love and affection: all the things which help us live with and overcome sadness.

Not that tears simply provide an emotional release. They also provide a genuine, physical release. According to a number of researchers who specialise in the subject of grief, and who attended a meeting of the American Psychological Association in Washington, emotionally shed tears don’t just provide an important stress relief valve – they also help the body get rid of harmful chemical wastes.

In studies done with both men and women Dr William H. Frey of the St Paul-Ramsey Medical Centre found that tears that were shed for emotional reasons have a higher protein content than tears shed because of winds, specks of dust and other sources of irritation. It is clear, therefore, that crying is a useful and constructive way of dealing with sadness.

However, because crying is such an obvious physical sign of distress many people regard it as a sign of weakness and emotional instability. Boys are often taught that it is unforgivable to cry in public and that they should bottle up their feelings rather than let themselves be seen with tears on their cheeks. Politicians have ruined their careers by shedding a tear or two at an inappropriate moment. Sadly, but perhaps predictably, the evidence also shows that when children or adults do not cry they suffer badly when under pressure. People who don’t cry because they consider it unacceptable end up not only suppressing their tears but also their emotions.

The damage is done in three ways: first, the storing up of tears means that unwanted chemical wastes are not excreted; second, the failure to cry means that much-needed love and attention is not obtained; and third, the sense of emotional release through crying is also missed. Most people will confirm that after crying they feel calm, rested in a strange sort of way, and much happier about their original problems, fears and worries.

The conclusion from all the available evidence has to be that crying is an excellent way of dealing with sadness and sorrow. Individuals who suppress their natural instinct to cry are increasing their chances of acquiring a stress-related disorder. If you have acquired the habit of suppressing tears when you feel them welling up inside you, try to get out of the habit; try to let yourself go next time you feel upset. Crying is nothing to be ashamed of. And if you are close to someone who never cries, try to persuade him that crying is neither unnatural nor unmanly.

Anger

Anger is a common response to anything which produces physical or mental pain. It is one of the commonest, most fundamental human feelings. It can be produced by our own shortcomings, by disappointments, by frustrations and by what we see as injustices. It is inspired by aggressive ticket collectors, surly car park attendants, officious police officers, rude, indifferent bureaucrats, mean-minded clerks, impatient drivers, thoughtless relatives and unreasonable employers.

Whatever causes it, anger is often physically, mentally, socially and economically damaging. An angry man will raise his voice and become irascible; his face will become red, he will fidget and move around more than usual and, since fear commonly accompanies anger, he will sweat too. Stored, unexpressed anger produces high blood pressure and all the other symptoms of stress-induced disease. The extra flow of acid into the stomach may help produce an ulcer and persistent anger can produce mental symptoms such as insomnia. Anger is so often linked to pain and discomfort that it is no coincidence that we turn the relationship round and describe red, painful burns and wounds as looking ‘angry’.

Many diseases are produced by anger. High blood pressure, heart attacks and strokes are all common consequences of uncontrolled anger. The eighteenth-century surgeon John Hunter correctly predicted that his life was at the mercy of anyone who ‘put him in a passion’. He died at a meeting of hospital administrators.

Today we know that anger doesn’t only produce disease in this direct and straightforward way. There is now plenty of evidence around to show that any individual who suppresses his anger will be more likely to develop cancer than an individual who responds to his anger in a more natural and emotional way. Among the many studies done, one at the Institute of Psychiatry in London has shown that women who suppress their anger are more prone to develop breast cancer than women who let their feelings out when they are angry or upset.

Anger is a killer. And in order to reduce its damaging effects it is vitally important to know just how to deal with it safely and effectively. There are four things to remember if you want to learn how to control the negative force of anger.

1. Accept the fact that you, like everyone else, will get angry from time to time. Anger is a perfectly natural

and reasonably healthy response to stressful circumstances. It is no sin to get angry – although it may be a sin to allow your anger to take over your emotions completely. Remember that it is dangerous to suppress your anger and to refuse to acknowledge its existence.

2. Learn to recognise when you are heading towards a confrontation and, if possible, avoid stressful situations. Don’t push other people into a position where they cannot easily escape without a tremendous loss of face. Decide as early as possible whether or not the subject is worth getting excited about. If you pick your problem carefully, your anger will be justifiable and possibly effective and you will suffer far less.

3. If you feel angry and you believe that your anger is justified, don’t suppress it all – let it out.

Dr Sheldon Tobin, Associate Professor at the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago, found that the nursing home patients most likely to survive are those patients who are most aggressive, irritating and demanding. The passive, gentle individuals who never complain and who always accept everything that happens to them tend to die sooner.

If your doctor tells you something you don’t like, make it clear that you don’t like what he’s told you. If he tells you that you’ve got three months to live, make it damned clear that you object to his arrogance. Let your anger out and make up your mind to show him whether he can tell you how long you’ve got to live! (Paradoxically, getting angry with your doctor will often cement your relationship with him. And if it ruins the relationship, it doesn’t really matter does it? If he doesn’t understand how you feel and doesn’t respond to your reactions, his presence is hardly helping you.)

Some experts have, in the past, argued that it is sensible to count to ten before acting or speaking when feeling angry It would now seem that this is a rather counter-productive technique. It doesn’t stop anger producing damaging effects, but merely hides the consequences and, in the end, leads to greater problems. The best response to anger is neither to hide it nor to allow it to turn into an uncontrolled explosion of noise and unhappiness, but to get rid of it by making specific, powerful complaints and expressing your anger and frustration in as positive a manner as possible.

Don’t be a wimp, but don’t be a boar either!

4. If you feel anger building up inside you and you feel tempted to get rid of it in some physical way, follow your natural instincts as far as possible. I don’t suggest that you race round and hit whoever it is who has annoyed you. But you can get rid of your excess energy and anger by taking part in some hectic and energetic sporting activity. Hitting a squash or tennis ball or kicking a football can all be pretty good ways to get rid of aggressive feelings. Or you can paint the face of someone you dislike on to a punchball – and then try hitting the stuffing out of them.

Alternatively, try chopping up some firewood in the garden. Or hanging out a few carpets and giving them a good beating. Or digging over a patch of garden. Or taking a pile of old plates into the garage or down the garden and smashing them one by one. Whichever technique you choose, getting rid of aggressive feelings will leave you far healthier than if you allow your feelings to build up inside you.

Symptoms of ill health

When I first started as a general practitioner some fifteen years ago one of the first patients I saw was a six-year-old boy called William who was suffering from intermittent abdominal pains. According to his mother, the pains never lasted for more than a few hours but they were always fairly severe. I examined William but could find absolutely nothing wrong with him, so I asked his mother to telephone me the next time the pains developed.

She rang me the following Sunday evening, at about nine o’clock, to tell me that her son was in bed and in considerable pain. Suspecting a possible appendicitis, I leaped into my motor car and drove round to their house just as quickly as I was able. After a thorough examination I had to confess that I still couldn’t find anything wrong. But William’s pains were so severe that I thought he ought to be in hospital so I made all the necessary arrangements.

On the following Monday morning, after my surgery was finished, I called in at the hospital to see how my young patient was. I half expected to find that the surgeons had removed his appendix. To my surprise, however, William wasn’t even in the hospital. The consultant surgeon had sent him back home again.

‘He’d had those pains several times before,’ explained the surgeon, ‘and they’d always developed on a Sunday evening. I thought it was rather odd, so I asked his mother how long the pains usually lasted. She said that they invariably lasted until about mid-way through Monday morning.’

And that, the surgeon explained, had given him the clue.

'Every fourth Monday our young friend and all his chums have a spelling test,' the surgeon continued. 'Like most of us, he doesn't particularly like examinations...'

Slowly, the truth dawned on me.

Young William had been 'using' his abdominal pains as an excuse for not having to put up with his monthly spelling test. He wasn't playing ill deliberately, but his mind had learned that if he showed signs of abdominal pain, he would not only gain a good deal of extra sympathy and love from his mother, but he would also be allowed to stay at home and avoid his examination.

'So what do we do?' his mother and father wanted to know when I saw them later and explained what had been going on. 'When he gets the pain next month do we just send him off to school regardless?'

I told them that I didn't think that was the answer, pointing out that the pains their son was getting were undoubtedly very real.

'The answer,' I explained, 'is to try and stop him worrying so much about the spelling test.'

'Talk to him about it, help him to understand that as long as he does his best you won't mind what score he gets, ask his teacher to play down the importance of the test and gradually try to build up his confidence. Give him some small tests at home to get him used to them. And ask his teacher, too, to make it clear that anyone who misses the test will be expected to take it at some later date.'

That is exactly what they did. And I'm delighted to be able to say that it worked. William's mind learned that it would not be able to avoid the pressure of a school test by creating physical symptoms and it learned that the importance of the test was limited. William had been using an illness to help him cope with a real life problem, and the symptoms of his illness would undoubtedly have continued to puzzle us all if the surgeon hadn't spotted the link between the abdominal pains and the spelling tests.

In the years that followed I came across a great many other patients who were subconsciously using quite genuine physical problems to help them with problems in their daily lives. I met a young solicitor who used his migraines to help him avoid meeting a particularly objectionable client. I met an elderly lady who used her arthritis to enable her to avoid travelling with her sister. And I met a young woman who used her menstrual problems to help her avoid intercourse with a husband she no longer loved.

All these patients had allowed symptoms to develop and to grow in such a way that they provided them with an excuse for not doing something that they were frightened of or didn't want to do. And in every case it was quite impossible to treat the disease without finding out what benefit the patient was getting from it, and finding some alternative way to deal with the social or mental worry that was at the root of the problem.

If the surgeon hadn't spotted the link between young William's spelling tests and his abdominal pains then William would have undoubtedly lost his appendix and been treated with all sorts of drug therapies. His pains would not have gone away, however, because the original problem would have remained unchanged. And if I hadn't spotted that the solicitor was developing migraines when he had a particularly troublesome client to see he would have carried on getting migraines whatever treatments had been tried.

To a certain extent we all use such excuses to avoid unpleasant tasks. A physical symptom or two can give us a solid, reliable excuse whenever we are embarrassed, frightened, nervous or ashamed. Getting a cold is a good way of avoiding a dinner party you don't fancy very much. Acquiring muscle strain is an excellent way to get out of a sporting confrontation that you fear. And acquiring a headache is a classic way of avoiding an unwanted sexual encounter.

Some of the unconscious links between the body and the mind have drifted into the language. So, for example, we say things like: 'He is a pain in the neck', 'He makes me sick', 'They get up my nose', 'He makes me weak at the knees', 'I can't swallow that', 'I wish he'd get off my back', 'I've got cold feet', and 'I had to get it off my chest'.

If you are using symptoms or an illness as an excuse, you'll almost certainly be totally unaware of it. But if the link is there, it won't be difficult to find. And it will be well worth while doing the necessary digging, for using symptoms of ill health in this apparently advantageous way will, in the long run, produce far more problems than it solves. Your basic fear won't have disappeared. You will still be responding to stress in an unhealthy way. And you will have developed or exacerbated a condition which will have an adverse effect on your health and on your ability to enjoy life.

If you do suspect that you could be developing a set of symptoms in order to protect yourself from unpleasant or threatening experiences, you must ask yourself what benefits you gain from the illness and what the illness really means to you. Then you must learn to deal with your problems in a more positive and constructive way. Ask yourself what it is that you find so difficult to accept that you need to use an illness to hide from it. And then look for alternative solutions.

So, for example, if your back condition always seems to get a lot worse the day before your monthly Parent Teachers Association committee meeting, it might be more sensible for you to resign from the committee. You should, at the very least, ask yourself what it is that you dislike so much about these meetings.

If your migraine headaches become particularly incapacitating when you have to see your area manager then ask yourself what it is about the meetings that causes you so much distress. What are you frightened of? What is the worst that the area manager can do to you? Is the job worth the worry and the aggravation?

If your colitis always gets worse when you have particular jobs to do, the best way to treat the colitis will be either to find a way of avoiding those tasks or to try and find out what it is about those tasks that you find so impossible to accept.

If your child always develops a strange stomach ache on the third Tuesday of every month, find out what worries him about the third Tuesday of the month. What benefits does he get from his illness? What does the illness really mean to him?

If your partner always gets a headache when you make sexual overtures, ask yourself what is wrong with your relationship – not what you can do about the headaches. When your mind is using your body, the solution to your body's problem can be found by studying your mind.

Incidentally, there is one final thing that parents should remember: make sure that you don't overprotect children who are in pain and do not encourage children to associate pain with love and affection. Parents will often make a tremendous fuss of children when they bump themselves. The result is that the children grow up linking pain and discomfort to cuddling and care. In the long run that can easily lead to all sorts of problems.

Boredom

We tend to think of stress and pressure as being caused by too much activity. But inactivity and boredom can be just as great a cause of stress and can cause all the physical and mental problems associated with having too much to do.

There are four basic groups of people whose lives are threatened by boredom and inaction. First, there are those people whose daily work is undemanding and unrewarding. There are millions of people around today whose work demands nothing more than that they act as nursemaids to expensive, complicated pieces of machinery which they do not understand. In factories there are pieces of machinery which can turn out an endless stream of finely finished objects. No craftsman working with his own hands and tools could hope to emulate such accuracy. In offices there are computers and word processors which can write letters, check spelling and keep files far more speedily and efficiently than any individual could hope to do them. These days machines are so sophisticated that they are invariably the principals in any working relationship. The individual is left little opportunity for pride or self-expression.

Replacing skilled workmen with machines has led to a second major cause of boredom – unemployment. With remarkably short-sighted political approval, companies are installing more and more machinery and laying off an increasing proportion of their workforce. Unemployment produces a number of damaging forces, of which boredom is one of the most destructive.

The third group of individuals who suffer from boredom are those who have retired from work but who have too little to do in their later years. Thousands of men and women who have retired at fifty and fifty-five have then discovered that life without work can too often become dull, purposeless and boring.

Finally, boredom is a major cause of stress among the many women whose work keeps them in their homes. Tied to the kitchen sink and washing machine by a cluster of small children, today's housewife can suffer enormously from boredom. There isn't a lot of opportunity for job satisfaction when you spend your days opening packets of cake mix and hunting for lost socks, only to find that no one respects and appreciates your achievements afterwards.

There have been countless reports published showing that people who are unemployed, or whose jobs are dull and unexciting, suffer from all the usual stress-related diseases. They have a much higher than average risk of developing stomach ulcers, heart disease, asthma and skin problems such as eczema. But the politicians and the journalists still underestimate the power of boredom as a force. They still fail to understand that it is boredom that is causing much of the stress-related disease in our society. And they fail to see that it is often boredom that drives people to drugs or alcohol. The housewife who becomes a secret drinker, the schoolboy who starts sniffing glue, the pensioner who takes too many tranquillisers, the football vandal who behaves in a violent and inexcusable way all have one thing in common: their lives are dull, monotonous, unexciting and without hope. There seems to be no escape from the daily boredom and no hope for the future.

Under the circumstances, it is not surprising that there is so much violence on our football terraces and so much drug-taking in our streets. It is, rather, surprising that there is so little.

Anyone suffering from boredom – or the ill effects of boredom – needs to add excitement to his or her life. Excitement can provide a stimulus that can keep the mind and the body active and healthy.

Tony, Robert and Chris were all patients in a hospital where the matron had a reputation for being more like a prison camp warder than a hospital administrator. They were kept under close control by a small army of warders dressed as nurses. All three men had had fairly minor surgical operations but they were all taking an awfully long time to get better. They were bored out of their minds. They weren't allowed to get out of their beds for more than ten minutes at a time. They weren't allowed to talk to one another in anything louder than a whisper. And they certainly weren't allowed to play cards.

I think that they might well have still been in the hospital to this day – still convalescing – if they hadn't decided to rebel and add a touch of excitement to their lives. Over a period of two or three days they carefully planned a break-out. They knew that there was a pub about fifty yards away from the hospital entrance and so they set about planning a late-night drinking trip. They got relatives to smuggle in outdoor clothes and they hid these clothes underneath their mattresses. They practised making body-sized lumps out of pillows and bolsters. They found a loose window in the bathroom through which they could escape to the street. And they even planned a minor diversion in a side ward.

And it worked. They managed to get out of the hospital for twenty minutes and drink half a pint of lager each. And they managed to get back into bed without anyone noticing. But the excitement that was built up by planning and executing the expedition did them – and the rest of the ward – a tremendous amount of good. Forty-eight hours after their escape the three of them were discharged and allowed to go back home.

If you feel that parts of your life are unspeakably dull and that you need to balance that boredom by adding excitement and colour to your life, do not despair. There are plenty of ways in which you can add excitement to your life.

1. Take up a pastime or hobby which you find rewarding. Do something that you can become really good at, and something that you can take pride in. If you have no job at all then consider the possibility of establishing a small business of your own. Window cleaning, grass cutting, gardening and catering for special events are just a few of the obvious ways to begin a small business venture without much capital.

2. If you find yourself working with machines which you don’t understand, and which break down regularly, do your best to find out how they operate and how you can keep them going. Ask for instruction manuals and read them. Write to the manufacturers for background information and for any details that aren’t included in the service manual.

If you spend your days with a machine which you don’t understand, it will become your master and ruin your life. If you know how the machine works and you can help keep it in good working condition then it can become your servant.

3. If you need more intellectual stimulation in your life, or you feel the need for new friends, then start taking evening classes or day classes at a local college. Don’t just pick a subject that sounds useful. Find something that excites you and that you will enjoy. If it’s useful as well, consider that a bonus.

4. Learn to avoid potentially boring situations with as much skill and tact as you can muster.

A friend of mine who works in television has an excellent technique for avoiding boring meetings. He explains that he feels overloaded with information, agrees that the subject is an important one, argues that he needs time to think about it before discussing it further and disappears to ‘think’ about the subject in silent privacy. He says all this with charm and sincerity and I’ve never yet seen it fail him.

5. Plan your life as cautiously as you like and as carefully as you can. But be prepared to take risks occasionally. If you never take risks because you are frightened of the possible consequences, your life will be dull. The individuals whose lives we find most attractive are those who are most readily prepared to take chances. In the world of sport we tend to admire people who are flamboyant and take risks. We find their daring and courage exciting and attractive. They fail quite often, but their attitude to life means that they are never dull to watch and their lives are never boring.

If you take risks and fail, you will at least have tried. If you never take risks, you’ll never know what you could have achieved. And you’ll probably die of boredom. What a sad way to go.

6. If you are doing something immeasurably dull and unspeakably boring, escape by creating a fantasy daydream for yourself. Think of a situation that you would enjoy, of people you would like to be with, and of places you would like to visit. Then add as much exotic (or erotic) background to the fantasy as you like. This type of daydream is quite different from the type of daydream needed for relaxation. In order to relax your mind you need to create a soothing, calm, relaxing situation. In order to defeat boredom you need an invigorating, exciting fantasy.

Fantasise about success, about what you would do if you won half a million pounds on the football pools, about what it would be like to have a motor yacht moored at Monaco, about what it would be like to trek across the Himalayas.

If you have difficulty in creating suitable fantasies for yourself, collect a pile of brochures from a travel agent or buy one or two glossy magazines from your newsagents. A journal full of pictures of elegant country houses, expensive boats or naked members of the appropriate sex should provide a useful starting point.

This type of simple but rewarding fantasy will help provide you with a temporary escape from your boredom. But by providing you with a positive approach to your life and by filling your mind with positive, pleasant images, it will also improve your confidence and self-assurance.

Failing relationships

Our relationships with other people have a tremendous influence on our lives in general and our health in particular. When close relationships founder or crumble altogether, we often respond badly to stresses and strains that might ordinarily be regarded as relatively insignificant. Arguments with loved ones, with colleagues at work and with friends can cause a wide range of emotional responses. In order to stay healthy it is clearly important that we understand what factors influence how we get on with other people.

The first thing to realise is that our own attitudes do not stay constant. We all behave in many different ways when we are with different people. We act differently with our lovers, employers, employees, spouses, neighbours, doctors, friends, parents and children.

A middle-aged, divorced man working as a highly placed business executive may be bitter towards his ex-wife, sycophantic towards the chairman of his company, lustful towards his young, blond secretary, respectful towards his parents, tyrannical towards his assistants and domineering with his children. In return, his parents may be proud of him, his secretary may be embarrassed and offended by his advances, his wife may be jealous of his freedom, his children may fear him, his chairman may despise him and his assistants may simply dislike him However stable and constant we may consider ourselves, different people will always think of us in different ways. Our bank managers don’t see us in the same way that our neighbours do. The friends we go on holiday with won’t see the same side of us as the people we work with.

Our roles in life will vary according to our own beliefs and aspirations, according to the attitudes and needs of others and according to the ways in which our needs and their needs interreact. We are none of us single individuals. If our parents described our virtues our business enemies would not recognise us. If our children described us, the chances are that our employers wouldn’t know whom they were talking about.

Yet we tend to jump to instant conclusions about other people and about the way other people see us. We make assumptions which may prove damaging or destructive. We spend remarkably little time thinking about our relationships with other people. It is, in the end, hardly surprising that our relationships with others often break down and produce great heartache and distress. It is hardly surprising, indeed, that instead of being a source of comfort, our close relationships with other people are often a source of great unhappiness and subsequent physical illness.

If you try to understand the basis upon which your relationships are built, you will be much more likely to enjoy those relationships rather than suffer through them.

There are, however, some simple, basic guidelines worth following with all your relationships.

1. Try to take care not to allow the prejudices of others to influence your attitudes to people you have not met. If you accept other people’s judgements, you will often make mistakes.

Remember that any relationship is a result of an interaction between two quite separate sets of needs, ambitions and requirements. If you accept second-hand judgements, you are accepting second-hand needs, ambitions and requirements.

2. When you meet someone new, try not to allow your past prejudices and personal experiences to have too much influence on your relationships. If you judge people by the way they dress, for example, you will only ever make friends with people who have a similar social or cultural background to yourself. Read also the notes in chapter 4 which describe how past associations can influence relationships.

3. Always remember that even people who are close to you will often have feelings, ambitions and fears which vary considerably from your own. Consequently their attitudes towards specific events may also vary considerably from yours.

If you expect other people to respond to varying circumstances in the same way as you, you will undoubtedly end up being disappointed. Try to learn as much as you can about the people with whom you have close relationships – the people who are important to you and your health. And try to understand their fears and needs. If you do this, your personal relationships will be strengthened.

Guilt

Guilt is an emotion that is as common as love and as damaging as hate. It is an emotion that is difficult to define precisely, but in practical terms it is hard to distinguish it from what we commonly call our consciences. We feel guilty when we have done something wrong – or not done something that we feel we ought to have done – because we feel that we have failed in some way. We torture ourselves with self-recriminations and then, having prosecuted ourselves, we find ourselves guilty. Guilt is one of the most powerful and damaging of human emotions. And ironically, it is an emotion that is built on love and compassion.

There are so many possible sources of guilt that it is impossible to classify them all. But most varieties of guilt fall into one of two main categories. First, there are the types of guilt that result from our personal relationships with other people. Sometimes, guilt can be introduced crudely and deliberately, as when a mother says to her son or daughter, ‘You wouldn’t do that if you loved me.’ Sometimes, guilt is produced subtly and unintentionally, as when one partner says to another, ‘Don’t worry about me, you go off and enjoy yourself. I’ll be all right.’

There are other types of guilt which result from the demands, expectations and teachings of those around us. Most of us have an inbuilt sense of right and wrong and if we trespass against it, we feel guilty. This inbuilt sense of right and wrong does not, however, come from some mysterious, inherited force, but from social and religious prejudices which have been established by instruction and example. Some of these forces are sound, logical and simple – so, for example, most of us feel guilty if we steal, because stealing is widely considered to be an anti-social activity. But other feelings of guilt are not so easy to explain, developing as they do from prejudices and fears which do not have such obvious origins. So, we feel guilty if we lie in bed on Sunday morning, if we earn too much money, if we allow ourselves to be seen naked on the beach or if we enjoy ourselves too much. These types of guilt are produced by pressures exerted by teachers, religious leaders, politicians, philosophers and pundits of all kinds.

All this guilt has a number of damaging effects on the way we live. But the most important and damaging effect it has is to create within us a feeling of inferiority and inadequacy: a positive lack of self-confidence. We feel guilty because we fail to live up to the expectations of those around us (both personal and social) and as a result we feel insecure and lose our confidence.

It is directly through its ability to damage our confidence that guilt causes so much physical and mental damage. Because we feel guilty about our failure to satisfy our parents (and others who have expectations for us) we feel a sense of shame and we lose our self-esteem. And as a result we push ourselves far more cruelly than any slave driver ever pushed his slave.

This internally inspired pressure is the most damaging type of stress. It is impossible to escape from it and the consequences can be far-reaching. The greater our lack of self-confidence, the greater our risk of developing heart disease, stomach ulcers, asthma, intestinal problems, skin conditions and the other hundred and one problems associated with pressure and tension.

So, for example, the workaholic who cannot relax and who must force himself to continue working, even though he has all the money he is ever likely to need, continues to work harder and harder. This may be because he has no self-confidence, because he has no self-esteem, because he still fears failure, because he desperately needs to please those whose respect he yearns for, or because whatever he does, however great his achievements may be, he has a continuing sense of inadequacy. All those feelings will have very probably been inspired by his continuing failure to elicit praise from his parents. His duodenal ulcer, his raised blood pressure and his heart condition will all have been produced by the guilt he feels at failing their expectations.

If your health is being put at risk by a lack of self-confidence, you can use your mind to help your body by emptying it of hate, regret, fear and guilt and filling it instead with positive feelings and hopeful thoughts; you must learn to think of yourself as a success.

There are ten specific steps that you can take to help yourself conquer guilt and gain health-giving confidence.

1. If you lack confidence, the chances are that, although you know very well what your weaknesses are, you don’t know what your strengths are. You are probably rather timid and shy (even though other people may not realise that) and you doubtless have little faith in your own abilities.

   To counteract those fears, sit yourself down with a piece of paper and a pencil and write down all the good things you can think of to say about yourself. Imagine that you’re preparing your own obituary and try to pick out all your very best points. You’ll probably be amazed to see just how many virtues you have got. Individuals who are shy and lacking in self-confidence tend to be unusually honest, generous, thoughtful and hard-working. You’re probably punctual, careful, moral, kind, ambitious and unusually creative.

   Alternatively, try writing an advertisement for yourself. Pretend that you are a copywriter with the job of selling yourself to a group of potential ‘buyers’. Write a piece of advertising copy extolling your virtues, outlining all your good points and exaggerating all your advantages. Remember to list all your physical as well as mental attributes. Study your advertisement as often as you can in order to build up your own image of yourself.

2. Learn to put things into proportion. You may feel that you have failed your parents because you haven't managed to become a millionaire by the age of thirty-five but would you really criticise anyone else for such an absurd 'failure'? You'll almost certainly find that you expect far too much from yourself – and put yourself under quite unreasonable amounts of pressure. The section on 'priorities' examines how we can put our problems in perspective.

3. Try to boost your self-confidence by thinking of your faults as virtues. Shyness, for example, isn't necessarily a disadvantage. The unusually shy are often exceptionally aware of the needs of others and well aware of the problems involved in building up any sort of relationship. The shy tend to try harder – and have greater amounts of care and unselfish affection to share with their friends and loved ones.

You may be rather obsessional. But that probably means that you pay great attention to detail and that you can be relied upon to be observant and watchful. You're probably often unusually sensitive to criticism. And yet just think of those individuals who are insensitive to criticism: they can often be rude, unthinking and boorish. Which would you rather be?

4. Your lack of self-confidence will mean that you will often worry about disastrous things happening to you. It may be possible for you to 'defuse' this particular fear by always asking yourself, 'What is the worst thing that can happen in this situation?' You'll often be surprised to find that the 'worst' really isn't all that bad. Once you know the worst, you can make plans accordingly.

When taking examinations at school and medical school I, like just about everyone I know, used to worry about what would happen if I failed. But when I stopped to think about it, I realised that it really wasn't all that terrible. It would have simply meant that I'd have had to change courses or get a job. I would still have had my health and plenty of opportunities to enjoy my life. It didn't take much imagination to convince myself that failing would probably mean that I'd be able to have much more fun. When I stopped worrying so much about the examinations and had removed the fear of the unknown (the most potent fear in the world) I found them far less of a threat and far less of a problem.

You can use this sort of technique in all sorts of situations where you feel shy or nervous. For example, if you want to ask your boss for a raise, but you feel frightened about what will happen if he says 'no', just ask yourself what is the worst possible consequence of your confronting him. You'll probably decide that the worst thing that can happen is that he'll sack you for having such an outrageous cheek. But will that really be such a terrible thing? If you are so badly underpaid that you've got to ask for a raise, and your boss is so unreasonable that he's likely to sack you for asking for one, wouldn't you be better off trying your luck elsewhere?

5. Try not to think of every rejection as a personal insult. If the film producers who read the play you have written all send it back, it may very well be because they are busy with some other project, or because they don't have the intelligence to spot a winner when they see one. They aren't turning it down because they hate you or your script.

6. When you are next feeling rather down, make a list of all your assets. I don't mean a bald list of the money you've got and the things you own, but a list of the things in your life that are important to you – your partner, your children, your integrity, your friends, your health, your country, your interests, your knowledge, your accomplishments and so on.

7. Make a list of all the things you are supposed to be really bad at. Then put the list in order, your worst shortcomings at the top of the list. Then work your way up the list from the bottom, doing what you can to eradicate each shortcoming in turn.

We all get labels as we go through life and those labels are often quite unfair. If you've put up a shelf and it's been crooked, you'll have probably acquired a label as a useless handyman. And yet if you were given another chance, you would probably be able to show that you had learned from your mistakes. If you didn't like gardening when you were small and were told to weed what looked like a forty-acre patch, you'll probably grow up with a reputation as someone who isn't any good at .gardening. In fact, you may be quite good at gardening. And it may be something that you'd really enjoy.

Labels can often be applied on the basis of an isolated comment or experience or a misinterpretation. But once you have acquired a label, you'll find yourself expecting to fail. Because of other people's feelings about you, you will have learned to be helpless and incompetent.

8. Try to be aware that there are many people who have a vested interest in your shortcomings. Manufacturers and advertisers want you to think that you are incompetent so that they can sell you products to help give you confidence. Colleagues and rivals want you to feel incompetent so that they can improve their own status and standing. And, occasionally, friends and relatives will want you to feel incompetent so that they can continue to boost their own confidence by providing you with guidance and protection.

9. Don't be ashamed of your mistakes. Everyone makes mistakes occasionally. Don't worry about admitting that you are wrong. No one can be right all the time. Accept your responsibility, deal with any consequences and try to learn what you can from the error. Other people who find it difficult to accept your apologies are very probably short of confidence themselves. They are particularly conscious of your errors because you remind them of their own fallibility

10. Accept your limitations, your shortcomings and your faults. Find out just how far you are prepared to go – and how far you won't go. Then temper this knowledge of your limitations with the realisation that everyone else has limitations too. But at least you know what yours are. And that will always give you an edge.

6 USING YOUR MIND TO HEAL YOUR BODY: CONTROLLING POSITIVE FORCES

Laughter

The story of the man who laughed himself back to good health is now well known. Norman Cousins had been assured by his doctors that there was no cure for the inflammatory disease that was crippling him. The physicians had, sadly, told Norman that all they could do was to try to keep him comfortable. Desperately unhappy about the prognosis and feeling extremely miserable in his dreary hospital room, Norman Cousins moved out and went to stay in a nearby hotel. There he deliberately tried to cheer himself up by watching some of his favourite comedy films and reading books by some of his favourite writers of humour.

Not only did Norman find that he felt better in his happy hotel room than he had felt in his hospital room, but with the aid of the doctors who were still looking after him, he managed to produce incontrovertible scientific evidence to show that his laughter and his merriment had had a useful, positive, practical effect on his physical condition. The hospital laboratory even showed that there had been a reduction in the inflammatory changes affecting his body. Norman Cousins had laughed himself better.

Just how laughter and humour can have such a positive effect on the human body is still something of a mystery. It has been suggested that laughter helps by improving respiration, by lowering the blood pressure and, possibly, by increasing the supply of specific types of internally produced healing hormone. The diaphragm is relaxed, the lungs are exercised (with the result that the amount of oxygen in the blood is increased) and the cardiovascular system is given a good tuning-up exercise.

Dr Paul Ekman of the University of California has claimed that the very act of flexing the facial muscles into a smile may produce a genuine and calming effect on the nervous system, heart rate and respiratory system. Next time you’re feeling miserable just try putting a really cheerful smile on your face. You’ll find it difficult to stay quite so sad. Try making your eyes sparkle with laughter and you’ll notice the effect even more.

Humour also helps by diverting the patient’s attention. When you’re busy laughing at something that you’re reading or watching, you ‘forget’ that you have a pain. When I worked as a hospital doctor we always used to have a Christmas pantomime for the younger patients. And the number of painkillers that we had to dish out on the day of the pantomime was always very low. Laughter isn’t just a pleasant experience. It is a positive, natural phenomenon which helps to ensure that the body benefits to the fullest extent. It may well be that laughter really is the best medicine!

There are a number of things that you can do to help put more laughter into your life. First, you can try to spend as much time as possible with cheerful, happy people. If you spend your days with people who always have long faces and always look on the black side, the chances are that eventually you will acquire a long face and a gloomy view of life. Depression is contagious. Psychiatrists do a lot of silly things, but it has always struck me that the silliest thing they do is put all their depressed patients together on a ward. Spend as much time as possible with people who laugh and enjoy life to the full. You will benefit from their company. Bright and cheerful friends will probably do you far more good than any pills your doctor can prescribe.

Second, try not to take yourself too seriously. Many people with reasonably responsible jobs feel that they have to maintain a serious demeanour at all times. And yet they’re quite wrong. As long as you take care to preserve your serious manner for the times when it really matters, you’ll lose nothing by allowing yourself to laugh occasionally.

A patient of mine who had a job as a factory foreman always suffered from terrible headaches when he was at work – largely because he took himself and his responsibility far too seriously. He never got headaches when he was on holiday, enjoying himself with his family and friends. When I managed to persuade him to take his role in life a little less seriously and to have a bit more fun at work he found that his headaches stopped troubling him. And, even more to his surprise, he found that the people working for him respected him just as much. The bonus was that they liked him as well.

Third, make a list now of your favourite funny films and books. If you have a video recorder try to keep copies of one or two films that you find particularly pleasing – and that you know you can rely on to provide you with an hour or two of genuine relaxation. And keep a library of your favourite funny books. When you find a favourite author whose books always amuse you, keep one or two of his or her books on one side for a bad day when you need to cheer yourself up. I’ve always got half a dozen light novels and books of cartoons on one side of my desk. I know that if I feel a bit low I can always find something there to cheer me up quickly. The funny thing is, of course, that when you know that you’ve got something that you can rely on to cheer you up a little, you hardly ever need it. Just having a tonic to pick up and read is enough.

Of course, if you don’t like books, magazines or comics can give you good laughs. I recently met a man with a very responsible job in banking who always keeps a copy of a boy’s comic in his briefcase. If he’s had a particular hard day at the bank, he gets it out to read on the train back home. He used to hide it behind a copy of *The Times*. These days he doesn’t care who sees him reading it.

We can’t always lift ourselves out of the slough of a cruelly destructive despair by watching funny films or reading funny books. When things are really bad, we often rely on the understanding of friends and relatives.

Sadly, very few people visiting sick friends or relatives offer much in the way of positive encouragement through laughter. The average visitor turns up at the bedside clutching a brown paper bag full of grapes (which the patient never normally eats and doesn't like very much anyway) and then sits for half an hour or so offering an uninspiring series of sorry anecdotes and dreary gossip. It's really hardly surprising that when the average visitor leaves the average bedside, the average patient is more miserable and depressed than ever.

If, on the other hand, visitors were to arrive at the hospital or bedside with a bag full of cheerful magazines and lively books and half an hour's worth of jolly stories and merry jokes, the patient would be much happier and much more cheerful on their departure. Smiles are as contagious as yawns and even the slightest of grins or the weakest of laughs can have a beneficial healing effect.

The value of keeping patients cheerful and happy is now so well established that hospital authorities should pay more attention to the ways in which they could make patients happy. There are many experts around the world who now claim that doctors can do more for the health of their patients by helping them to laugh and smile than by encouraging them to lose weight, give up smoking or watch what they eat. Whatever the truth of that, there seems to me to be little doubt that we should all pay more attention to the value of the healing smile. Every effort should be made to make hospitals warm and friendly places and to ensure that staff members recognise the importance of trying to keep patients entertained and happy.

Purpose

I don't remember much that I learned while studying chemistry at school, but one thing does stick in my mind. We were studying the freezing points of gases when the chemistry master told us a rather sad story about the man who had dedicated his life to identifying these scientific landmarks. After working in his laboratory for many years, the scientist eventually managed to complete his research; he found the freezing point of the last remaining gas. His wife and his colleagues thought that he would be overwhelmed with joy. He had completed his life's work and achieved more than most ordinary men could ever hope to achieve. But the scientist wasn't overcome with joy. On the contrary, he was plunged into the very depths of despair. He became severely depressed and within a month or two of making his final, momentous discovery he was dead. Once his life's work was finished, there was nothing left for him to live for.

I've heard of men who have retired, come home, hung up their work boots, gone to bed and never woken up again. I've heard of explorers who have been plunged into the very depths of despair after finishing adventures that should have killed them, but which kept them alive for years. I've heard of mountaineers being overcome with misery after conquering mountains that had defied them for decades. I've heard of sportsmen and women wandering about as though lost and in despair after winning trophies they had yearned for since childhood.

The truth is, of course, that we do all need a purpose in our life. We need something to hope for, something to fight for and something to look forward to. Without purpose and meaning our lives are hollow and unrewarding. With purpose and hope we can survive the meanest of circumstances and the most distressing of problems. Purpose and ambition enable us to live through the worst of life's crises.

Begin putting purpose into your life by making a list of all the goals and ambitions that you had when you were a teenager. Try to think back and remember what hopes and aspirations fired your imagination at that age. Perhaps you dreamt of becoming an actor, a musician, a politician or an artist. Include all your ambitions on your list – long-term as well as short-term ones, reasonable expectations alongside outrageous, wild dreams.

Then take a look through your list to see just how many of those dreams and ambitions still excite you. Forget your responsibilities and commitments for a few moments and try to revive and relive you teenage hopes and enthusiasms. Remember the talents you felt that you had and the energy that gave your life meaning.

Now think carefully about your ambitions and hopes and you'll probably realise that a number of your old dreams are still possible. You may be too old to become a world gymnastic champion, but you aren't too old to write a book or a play. Your dream of becoming an astronaut many seem a little farfetched now, but your plan to travel around the world need not be impossible. By repressing and forgetting your hopes and your ambitions, you will have reduced any likelihood of them being realised. If you dismiss a dream as impossible, your negative attitude will influence your approach – and will influence the attitude of others who might have been able to help you. Remove those unnecessary restrictions and your subconscious mind will spring to your help. Once you decide that you would like to take up painting (and that there really isn't anything to stop you taking up painting) you'll start to notice all sorts of hints and tips and possibilities that you would otherwise have missed.

If someone mentions a well-known actor whom you've never heard of before, then the chances are that you'll see the actor's name everywhere you look for the next few days. Your enhanced awareness means that you notice things that you would otherwise have missed. Similarly, by allowing your hidden ambitions to surface, you'll enable your mind to help you collect useful bits and pieces of information. So, if you decide that you really would still like to take up painting, you'll notice an advertisement in your local paper announcing that new evening classes are about to start, you'll notice an article in your favourite magazine giving rudimentary advice about sketching equipment and you'll hear people talking about art exhibitions for beginners. Without doing anything other than recognise your own ambition (and thereby put purpose into your life), you will have greatly improved your chances of realising that ambition.

The main advantage will be that your life will have been given a fresh purpose and a new meaning. Without ambitions and hopes and aspirations our lives are sterile and empty. With them you will have given yourself tremendous new powers with which to combat the stresses and strains associated with your daily boredom, pressures and frustrations.

Whatever your age, your job and your personal responsibilities, your life needs purpose and direction as much as it needs food and oxygen. You need to be stretched, you need to take chances and you need to know that, whatever you may achieve, you have at least given yourself every chance of satisfying those early ambitions and dreams.

Optimism

When I was in my final year at medical school just about everyone I knew seemed to be heading for a nervous breakdown. After five years of study our nerves had become rather frayed. Two of the students with whom I worked reacted to this pressure in very different ways. As I have done throughout this book, I have changed all names etc. so that no one can be identified.

Jack was extremely pessimistic about it all. He had studied carefully and conscientiously and knew just about everything he needed to know. He was one of the best students in my year and he was almost certain to pass. In spite of this, he seemed convinced that he would fail. He spent his days reading text books and moping around the flat in a terrible state of despair.

Christopher, on the other hand, was wildly optimistic. He had spent hardly any time studying and had already failed several examinations. He had been warned by the Dean on several occasions, but he had a very happy-go-lucky attitude. He was convinced that he would pass. And not particularly worried about what would happen if he didn’t.

When the examination results were posted, Jack had passed (although he hadn’t done quite as well as the rest of us had thought he would do), but Christopher had failed. You might have thought that Jack would have been pleased with himself and would have rushed off to celebrate his success. But you’d be wrong. He wasn’t pleased and he didn’t go and celebrate. With one problem out of the way he started worrying about another hurdle: getting a prestigious hospital job. He told anyone who would listen that it was vitally important to get the right sort of job in the right sort of hospital in exactly the right sort of area, and that he knew for a fact that if he didn’t get the right post his career would be in ruins.

Christopher, on the other hand, was remarkably calm about his failure. He seemed to take it all in his stride, happily looking forward to another few months as a carefree medical student. ‘It’ll be a peaceful six months,’ he insisted, ‘and it’ll mean that I can delay paying income tax for another six months of my life.’

Jack was an absolutely typical pessimist: always thinking that the worst was about to happen and always prepared for disaster. Christopher, on the other hand, was an incorrigible optimist. He never really allowed himself to worry about things.

After we left medical school I lost contact with both of them. Recently, out of curiosity, I got in touch. Jack is working as a leading hospital consultant in a very pleasant part of the country. But when I spoke to him he was worried about the fact that he doesn’t have a very good pension plan to look forward to. He was also worried about his daughter, who is due to start taking important school examinations shortly. He is convinced that she will fail and make a disaster of her life. He also confessed to being worried about his raised blood pressure and about the fact that he has already had a number of niggling chest pains.

Christopher is working as a general practitioner in a busy inner city practice and sounds as carefree and optimistic as ever. He plays golf a couple of times a week, has a small touring caravan which he and his family tow around France for several weeks every summer and enjoys more or less perfect health.

These two doctors seem to me to illustrate very accurately the simple difference between an optimist and a pessimist. Jack is always worrying about something. He can never enjoy the good things in his life because he is always worrying about the things that are likely to go wrong. He already has one or two serious health problems and if I were representing an insurance company, I wouldn’t be too happy about selling him a life insurance policy. Christopher, on the other hand, is a perpetual optimist. Whatever life throws at him he will never stop smiling or looking on the bright side. He will probably live for ever.

If you look around among your friends, relatives and neighbours, you’ll probably find that most of the people you know are neither exceptionally optimistic nor exceptionally pessimistic. But you will find that most people do tend to be either largely one type or the other. And you’ll find too that the people who are mainly pessimistic tend, on the whole, to suffer more with their health than the individuals who are more optimistic.

If you are a naturally pessimistic individual then it would not be easy to convert yourself into a full-blown optimist. But it will be possible to temper your pessimism with some optimism. Try first of all to start each day in a cheerful, optimistic frame of mind. If you get up in the morning thinking of all the terrible chores you’ve got to do, and the awful people you have to meet, it won't take much to turn a potentially horrendous day into a truly awful experience.

If something goes wrong early on in the day, your attitude will simply make things worse. Your gloom will deepen and your approach will probably mean that one disaster will follow another. As you wander around with your scowl and your gloomy demeanour the people you meet will be depressed by your approach. It won't be surprising if they respond accordingly. And by evening you'll be in a deep, dark depression of your own. Your pessimism will have rebounded on you and rebuilt your own fear and misery. Your depression, confusion, fear, anger and frustration will together end up producing genuine physical symptoms of disease.

When you get up try to think of all the good things that make your life worth living. Do you have the use of all your limbs and your eyes? Do you have a partner who cares for you? Do you have children who love you and need you? Do you have things to look forward to in the future – a holiday or a weekend away or a party? Do you have a good book you're looking forward to reading? A television programme you're planning to watch? A sporting encounter that you're looking forward to? A meeting with friends?

Take pleasure in the small things in your life: the clean shirt, the first cup of tea or coffee in the morning, the birds in the garden, the smell of rain and so on. Think of the chores that you have in front of you as single tasks to be undertaken. Think of the worst of them as a challenge to your good humour – to be tackled with determination and enthusiasm.

Every job that has to be done can be looked at in a variety of different ways. A man laying bricks can think of himself as having a dull, tedious job that merely involves placing one brick next to another for hours on end. Or he can think of himself as earning a living for himself and his family so that they can live together as comfortably and as happily as possible. Or he can think of himself as helping to create a house which some new family will excitedly turn into a home.

Try to establish a positive approach to everything you do and everyone you meet. Although you will sometimes be disappointed, you will gain far more from your life than if you constantly nurture a cautious, negative approach.

If you buy a new car, 'discover' a new holiday resort or hear about a new film star, the chances are that for the next few days or weeks you will see and hear nothing else but the name of the type of car you've bought, the place you've discovered or the star you've found. Your interest and your memory will enhance your sense of awareness.

Through a similar sort of mental mechanism your interests and your memories will dominate your attitudes to other things in your life. If you have an unhappy experience when trying to put up a shelf, your impressions and memories of your skills with a hammer and a piece of wood will be negative. If you make a mistake in a business deal, you will be unusually cautious when you are in similar situations. If a relationship fails, you will remember that failure when trying to develop new relationships. Your attitudes and your memories will affect your responses and your approach to fresh encounters.

When things go wrong, as they most surely will in anyone's life, you should try to learn what you can from each unhappy experience and then forget about it. You should extract what useful memories you can from each experience, and regard the experience as a lesson not a punishment. If you brood on your failures, the chances are that they will recur, eventually growing in your mind until they reach exaggerated and unmanageable proportions. Pessimists tend to think of their failures as unforgivable and eternally damning, whereas in truth they are priceless experiences without which none of us could change, progress or improve ourselves.

I'm not suggesting that failure is ever welcome, of course. But if you fear failure, as many pessimists do, then you will never try new projects. You should learn to dominate your failures by sharing them rather than hiding them, and by using them rather than by allowing them to limit you.

Assertiveness

Anne Bambridge came into my surgery about six weeks before Christmas. I can remember her visit vividly. I had only ever seen her before when she'd come to the surgery to collect a prescription for her contraceptive pill, or when she'd come in with one of her small children. But this time it wasn't one of the children who was ill. And she didn't need any more contraceptive pills.

'I'm in a terrible state, doctor,' she told me. 'Can you give me something to relax?'

Now in the weeks before Christmas just about everyone I know gets over-excited and rather anxious. There are so many things to be done – particularly if there are small children in the house – that a little tension is almost inevitable. So, I wasn't all that surprised by Mrs Bambridge's comment, even though Christmas was still quite a time away. I simply asked her to tell me what was worrying her.

To my surprise she started to cry. Eventually, two or three paper handkerchiefs later, she managed to talk to me. She explained that she was worried and upset because her parents were coming to stay and she didn't think that she could cope.

'It's not the cooking or anything like that,' she explained quickly. 'It's just that they treat me like such an idiot and they push me around so much that I feel terrible. I get so angry with them and yet I never say anything to them, so I just get awfully frustrated.'

She went on to tell me that she invariably ended up with a more or less continuous headache for the whole of the Christmas holiday.

'Last year I got terrible colicky pains as well,' she confessed. 'And I'm sure that it's all just because I get so furious with myself for letting them come into my home and treat me the way they do.'

'What sort of things happen?' I asked her.

'Well, we like to watch some of the television programme that are on over Christmas,' said Mrs Bambridge. 'But my mother doesn't think it's right to watch television at Christmas time so we all have to sit around and talk to one another. That would be all right if we could have a nice friendly natter, but it always ends up with my Dad moaning at Michael – that's my husband – for not having a better job and earning more money.'

'Sounds as if you have a pretty miserable time,' I agreed.

'And then on Boxing Day my father always insists that we go for a five-mile walk,' said Mrs Bambridge. 'He gets us all up early even though it's one of the few mornings in the year that Michael and I can have a bit of a lie in together.'

'Haven't you ever pointed out that you'd rather lie in bed while they go for a walk?' I asked her.

'I said that last year,' said Mrs Bambridge, 'and it took me all my courage to say it. But my father just laughed it off and said that I wasn't to be so silly, that a walk would do us good and so on.'

'And you gave in?'

'I don't like arguing,' said Mrs Bambridge. 'So I did give in. Then afterwards I felt really cross with myself. Do you know, I was ill for nearly a fortnight after they'd eventually gone home.'

'I gather that you'd really rather spend Christmas without your parents visiting?'

'Oh, it would be wonderful,' admitted Mrs Bambridge.

'Have you ever told your parents that you and your husband would like to have a quiet Christmas occasionally?'

'I half mentioned it a couple of years ago,' said Mrs Bambridge. 'But my mother got very nasty about it. She said that she thought it was very selfish of me to want to keep them away and pointed out that they always look forward to sharing their Christmas with us. She told me that if they didn't come to us, they'd have to stay at home by themselves and since there were only the two of them they wouldn't even be able to have a turkey. She made me feel really awful and I didn't say anything else about it.'

I explained to Mrs Bambridge that there wasn't much point in my simply giving her pills to turn her into a zombie over Christmas.

'Christmas is still six weeks away,' I pointed out, 'and you're in an absolutely terrible state already. What do you think you're going to be like by Christmas Eve? You'll be lucky if you're still on your own feet and not flat on your back in a hospital bed. Or in a straight jacket.'

Mrs Bambridge nodded in dumb agreement.

'But what can I do?' she demanded after a moment or two's silence. 'I couldn't tell them not to come. I'd feel awful.'

'Why would you feel awful?' I asked her.

'I'd feel I was letting them down,' Mrs Bambridge explained. 'I'd feel that I was just behaving selfishly.'

'From an outsider's point of view it looks to me as if it's your parents who have been behaving selfishly,' I told her. 'They're the ones who have insisted on sharing your Christmas and then organising it the way that they want it organised.'

Mrs Bambridge thought for a moment and slowly nodded. 'They have been very unreasonable,' she agreed.

'If you had a good friend whose parents behaved in the same sort of way what would you tell her to do?'

'I'd suggest that she told her parents to do something else for once,' said Mrs Bambridge.

'You wouldn't think that she was behaving unreasonably or selfishly?'

'Not at all,' replied Mrs Bambridge straight away.

'Then if you're going to enjoy your Christmas and stay healthy you have to follow the same advice that you'd give to a good friend,' I told her. 'You've already admitted that you wouldn't think a friend who behaved like that would be behaving unreasonably.'

'How about if I said that one of the children wasn't well?' suggested Mrs Bambridge.

'What would your mother say?' I asked her.

'She'd probably insist on coming to make sure that I was looking after them properly,' Mrs Bambridge admitted.

'Exactly,' I agreed. 'There isn't much point in trying to offer excuses. Your parents won't be put off that easily. The only solution is to be entirely honest with them. You have to explain that you've thought about it long and hard and decided that this year you want to spend Christmas alone.'

'But what do I do when my mother starts on about the fact that they'll be alone too?'

'Tell her that it'll probably be nice for her and your father to share a Christmas without having to put up with all your noise, without your television set blaring and without having to drag you out of bed. And then fix a date now to see them after the holiday.'

'She'll be terribly offended.'

'And she'll get over it,' I promised. 'She may sulk for a while, but she'll get over it.'

There are thousands of people who, like my patient Mrs Bambridge, suffer enormously because of their inability to assert themselves. They are pushed around by parents, family, friends, relatives, employers, doctors and just about everyone else they meet. Their lives are run by others. They find themselves doing errands for people who could perfectly well run their own errands. They find themselves sitting on committees and doing boring administrative jobs which no one else wants. They find themselves lumbered with looking after the children while everyone else goes off to have a good time at a party. They find themselves working overtime at the weekends and not getting paid for it. They find themselves accepting dinner invitations, speaking engagements and so on that they would really like to refuse.

In restaurants the unassertive will never think of returning poorly cooked meals or complaining when they have been overcharged. In shops they will buy things that they don't really need or want because they are pressured to buy by a domineering salesman. In bus queues they'll find themselves being pushed out of the way by more self-important, assertive individuals.

Things reach a peak in hospital. There the unassertive patient will be put in bed, in pyjamas, and will stay there, confined and bound to conform. The unassertive patient will do what he is told to do, when he is told to do it. He will keep still and quiet and he won't ask questions.

Doctors and nurses like their patients to be unassertive because it makes the hospital easier to run. If all the patients keep still and don't ask too many questions, it makes life very easy for the nurses and the doctors. But the evidence shows that seriously ill patients who do not assert themselves are the patients who are the first to die. The patients who are considered 'model' patients and who are liked by the doctors and the nurses are the ones who don't survive.

The patients who survive are the assertive ones: the ones who demand information, who refuse to be dominated, who write down things that they are told, who want to be put into a good position near a window or the television set, who won't accept administrative nonsense just because everyone else accepts it, who want to know the reason behind every test and procedure, and who, in short, stick up for themselves as individuals. They demand to be allowed out of bed. They demand to be allowed home. They aren't very much liked by the doctors or the nurses. But they get better quickly and they survive.

The hospital situation is a rather special one, of course. But outside the hospital the non-assertive individual can suffer in a number of ways. As well as being physically and mentally worn out from doing chores for other people, he will often suffer a great deal of frustration and hidden anger. These feelings can be intense and extremely destructive, producing a wide range of physical and mental problems. Headaches and stomach pains are just two common physical consequences of an individual's failure to assert himself.

In fact, however, it is remarkably easy to become assertive and to gain in mental and physical health. The first thing to remember is that you don't have to be aggressive, rude or unpleasant. You simply have to be more aware of your own needs and wishes and more prepared to stand your ground when you are being put under pressure by someone else.

Naturally you won't always get your own way. But by learning how to assert yourself more effectively you will help yourself to stay healthier. You will gain enormously from the greater self-respect that you have and from being far less likely to spend most of your time on things you dislike.

To begin with you must remember to be straightforward and honest as often as possible. If you don't want to do something, say so. If you try to offer people explanations or excuses, you'll probably end up trapping yourself and being manipulated into a corner.

So, for example, if you are invited to attend a meeting and you try to get out of the meeting by saying that you are busy that day, you'll be trapped if the date of the meeting is changed. Your excuses will have implied that it is only the date that is making it difficult for you to attend. If you try to get out of something by saying that you don't have any particular skills for that kind of work, you'll simply encourage praise and flattery that will push you into accepting an offer or invitation that you'd have preferred to turn down.

You should be careful not to try and solve people's problems for them when they're trying to involve you in something you are anxious to avoid. If, for example, someone telephones you and asks you to speak to a group of people that you'd rather avoid, you'll end up trapping yourself if you start suggesting alternative speakers. The chances are that the people you suggest will either be unavailable or unsuitable. And when you can no longer help with useful alternatives you will find yourself accepting.

You can also help yourself by trying to put yourself into the position of an outside observer. Many people who are unassertive fail to look after themselves effectively because they are frightened of how they will appear to other people. But if you do put yourself into someone else's shoes, you'll often find that your behaviour really isn't as terrible as you first thought it was.

Would you really think any less of your best friend if she didn't invite her troublesome relatives to dinner every fortnight? Would you despise your best friend if she told her boss that she wasn't going to work on

Sunday morning every week? Would you be horrified by the thought of someone sending back a poorly cooked meal in a restaurant or refusing to tip a surly and uncooperative waiter?

Once you start standing up for yourself a little, you'll soon find that you feel less frustrated. You'll feel more comfortable with other people too. And, most surprisingly perhaps, you'll find that other people treat you with respect and consideration.

Loving and caring

Researchers around the world have produced evidence to show that people of all ages can benefit from sharing a warm, caring relationship. Insurance companies in America, for example, have found that if a wife kisses her husband goodbye when he goes off to work every morning, he will be less likely to have car accidents on the way to the office or factory. He will, on average, live five years longer than if she doesn't give him a morning kiss.

Babies are particularly likely to benefit from a close relationship with their mothers. They are especially likely to suffer if deprived of a close relationship. Evidence has been produced which shows that babies deprived of a close relationship with mothers become emotionally unstable and develop more slowly than other babies.

There is, it seems, even a natural mechanism designed to help ensure that mothers and babies kiss one another as much as possible. During the last three months of pregnancy, and for the twelve months after a pregnancy has ended, a mother's lips will produce sexually attractive chemicals designed to make her lips more kissable. Sebaceous glands along the borders of the newborn baby's lips produce similar chemicals and help ensure that the baby responds to its mother's kisses in an appropriate way.

As we grow up our need for a close, loving relationship with those who are nearest and dearest to us does not diminish. Children who are neglected by their parents, and deprived of a normal relationship with their parents as they grow up, will become 'harder' and 'tougher' in both physical and emotional terms. They will respond more slowly to signs of physical distress or pain and they will themselves show less affection to those around them.

Even in adulthood our need for love, care and affection does not fall. The healing power of a cuddle has, indeed, been so well established that in 1985 it was announced that double beds would be provided in the maternity units of some hospitals in Lincolnshire, so that husbands could cuddle and comfort their wives. In other hospitals doctors and nurses will often now turn a blind eye to patients in private rooms who want to turn visiting hours into personalised therapeutic experiences. Without these physical signs of affection we become more brittle, less emotionally stable and more susceptible to fear, stress, pressure and distress.

There are a number of simple ways in which you can increase the amount of loving in your life.

1. Try not to hide your feelings for those who are close to you. Don't be afraid to tell someone if you love them. Don't be shy about offering a kiss or a cuddle. And remember that it is just as important that you do not shy away when someone who is close to you approaches with a kiss, a hug or some other sign of physical affection.

2. Try to get rid of old-fashioned prejudices about showing affection in public. Members of previous generations often thought it was wrong for courting couples to hold hands, for young mothers to breastfeed their babies in public or for couples to exchange kisses in the street.

These prejudices were based on nothing more substantial than an unhealthy mixture of religious guilt and unnatural embarrassment. There is nothing unnatural about sex, courtship or love. A few decades ago some people thought that nakedness was a sin and sex a duty to be endured by those prepared to procreate for the sake of society. Those attitudes are outdated and the time has come for the prejudices that they inspired to be discarded too. Learn to accept that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with two people hugging, kissing or cuddling in public. Until you have eradicated these fears and anxieties about public displays of affection, you will continue to find it difficult to enjoy or initiate private displays of affection.

3. Don't be shy about touching people – or allowing people to touch you. You may be able to break down some of your own barriers by having – or giving – a massage.

The word 'massage' has acquired a rather seedy reputation in recent years, thanks largely to the fact that it is frequently linked with such words as 'topless' and 'relief. But a thorough massage can be extremely relaxing and soothing. It can help give us an excuse to touch one another. And it certainly can be therapeutic.

At one end of the spectrum it is sometimes possible to soothe a troubled individual to sleep by gently massaging his forearm with a single finger. As a junior hospital doctor I often used this technique with remarkable success when nursing elderly patients or small babies who couldn’t get to sleep. It worked best with people at either end of the age spectrum – probably because they were least likely to feel embarrassed or shocked.

Alternatively, and more dramatically, a thorough kneading of the neck muscles can frequently help get rid of headaches and back pains. Neither of these are difficult skills to acquire, requiring nothing more than a couple of hands, some practice and a little lubrication to overcome natural friction. No one with a good friend needs ever pay for a decent massage.

When having – or giving – a massage it is also well worth remembering that a pleasant-smelling oil can help. In the first place, oils of any kind reduce the amount of friction between the skin of the person giving the massage and the skin of the individual receiving it. Second, they are of positive benefit because we all tend to respond well to good, therapeutic smells.

Olfactory influences are extremely effective at triggering off memories. In 1938, in a test conducted with a thousand women, it was shown that when one pair of stockings out of four was faintly perfumed, 96 per cent of all the women tested thought that those stocking were the best of the bunch – even though all the stockings were, in fact, made of exactly the same material.

More recently George Dodd and other research workers at Warwick University in England have conducted experiments with people under stress. They have shown that when individuals are given stressful tasks to do, and at the same time are exposed to an unfamiliar odour, they learn to associate the smell with the task. Then, when they are later exposed to the smell alone, they react to it as if they were under stress.

It is this simple relationship between smells and experiences which explains why hospital smells strike fear into otherwise brave individuals and why certain perfumes bring some men out in a sweat. It is the same sort of relationship which explains why some people become euphoric at the smell of freshly mown grass, while others tend to drool over the smell of hot tar. And it is the same relationship which explains why a relaxing massage with a pleasant smelling oil may be particularly beneficial.

4. Remember that children are particularly susceptible to a lack of affection. Newborn babies should be placed on their mothers’ stomachs as soon as possible after birth. And for the first few years of life babies need to be touched as often as possible by the people who are closest to them. In our society it is all too easy for a baby to spend its days in a pram or cot well away from people. That can be a destructive experience. Parents should try to keep their babies as close to them as they possibly can.

And remember that when a child starts to pay an unusual amount of attention to a doll (such as a teddy bear, for example), that child is crying out for more parental affection and love. There is a danger that the child who constantly needs to hug his teddy bear isn’t getting enough affection from his parents.

Understanding your priorities

Some years ago a friend of mine decided that there was money to be made in the computer business. He didn’t really know anything about computers, but he’d seen the queues of youngsters standing around in amusement arcades and public houses where there were computer games to be played. He made a few enquiries and found out that several companies were planning to start selling home computers. Within a few months he had taken a crash course in computer programming, borrowed a few thousand pounds from his bank manager and started a small company dedicated to the manufacture and sale of software designed to enable young computer users to play arcade games in their own homes.

The business proved to be far more successful than he had ever dared to hope. Within six months of marketing his first cassette he had to hire two dozen people to help him deal with the demand. The total turnover in the first twelve months exceeded a quarter of a million pounds. My friend was naturally delighted by the success of his venture. But he had tremendous difficulty in learning how to delegate authority and responsibility to the people working for him. He had hired an accountant, but he still insisted on signing every cheque and examining every invoice. He had several programmers working for him, but he still tried to check through all the work they did. He had an experienced production manager working for him, but he still insisted on keeping a close eye on production.

He became obsessed with the minutiae of his business and spent most of his time checking figures and cassette labels and examining new programs. He arrived at work at seven thirty every morning and didn’t leave until ten at night. He worked on Sundays, Saturdays and Bank Holidays. He gave everything to his business. He developed a stomach ulcer and started getting migraines. He gave his time, his energy and his health.

Two years after setting up the company he looked likely to become a millionaire. A year after that he was bankrupt. While he had been spending his time dealing with the small, day-to-day problems of his business, he had entirely failed to notice that the market was changing. He had neither the time nor the energy to see the need to diversify. When the demand for games programs for home computer machines disappeared almost overnight his business collapsed. Because he had been obsessed with minor problems he had been unable to spot the warning signs which should have told him that he needed to introduce new ideas and new concepts to his company.

My friend isn't the only person to have failed to see things in proper perspective. Ex-President Lyndon B. Johnson is said to have spent a good deal of time helping to redesign Air Force uniform trousers. And Jimmy Carter is said to have insisted on arranging the tennis schedule for the White House tennis court, even when he should have been thinking about much larger and more important problems.

This type of failure to differentiate between those important problems which need a considerable amount of attention, and the far less significant problems which can be safely delegated, ignored or simply left to other people, doesn't just lead to economic or political disaster, of course. It can lead to a wide variety of health problems. Pressures, worries and problems of all sizes can have an adverse effect on your body and your mind and the smaller problems and the insignificant worries can have just as devastating an effect on your health as the major problems.

If you fail to differentiate between the big problems and the little ones, and you fail to establish priorities in your life, you will suffer in a number of ways. First, the number of problems you're exposed to will prove damaging simply because there are so many of them. If you allow yourself to worry about the scratch on your car and the missing button on your shirt sleeve, your mind will simply add these anxieties to the other more essential worries that you have. Unless you make a conscious decision to separate minor problems from major problems your mind will treat them all in the same way.

Second, while you are spending valuable time worrying about minor difficulties, you will fail to solve the major problems which need your attention. While my friend was worrying about what colour boxes his computer cassettes should be packed in the market's requirements were changing. While you're worrying about your missing shirt button you may fail to spot the business opportunity of a lifetime. And while you make yourself ill worrying about minor problems the major difficulties will be getting worse and worse – with the result that in the end you'll have even greater problems.

Finally, your failure to establish genuine priorities in your life will mean that you spend too much of your time on the things which don't really matter and too little time on the things which do matter. The businessman who spends every waking hour making money so that his family can have all the things that money can buy, may well wake up one morning to the realisation that he doesn't 'know' his wife and that his children have grown up as strangers. Learning how to differentiate between trivia and essentials in your life is an important part of staying alive and healthy.

Getting your priorities sorted out really isn't all that difficult. But it will take a little time. The following list of suggestions should help you.

1. It may sound exceptionally simplistic, but the first thing you have to do is decide exactly what is important to you. That may sound easier than it is. But before you can decide which things are unimportant to you, you must know what your priorities are. You must decide exactly what you want to do with your life. Is your family more important than your work? Or must your career take precedence over everything else? Is your hobby more important than your work? What would you do – and not do – to further your ambitions? What limits are there? Is having time to sit and relax and enjoy life more important than becoming rich and successful? Are your children more important than anything else? Is a wonderful home in a pleasant part of the country your main aim?

   You must also decide just how important money is to you. What are your material needs? How far is your life being controlled by the material needs of others? If other people's material needs are dominating your life, you must decide just how important the needs – and the individuals – are to you. Are the sacrifices you have to make acceptable? How far are your needs being influenced by what you think other people want (as opposed to what they really want)? And how can you best adapt your life to suit your needs?

   When making out the list of things that are important to you, don't forget to include the simpler things in life. We tend to think of homes, cars and material possessions as being the most important things in our lives. They may well be. But there are many pleasures available which won't cost you a penny to enjoy. Lying on your back watching the clouds float by, having a cat sit on your lap, spending a warm day on the beach, walking in the rain, sitting by an old-fashioned log fire toasting muffins – many of the most enjoyable things in life won't cost you much at all.

But if you are going to enjoy these things, you will have to be prepared to make some special effort and leave a little time free from everyday hassles. Work out how many of the important things in your life you need money for. And work out how many need people. Work out how many of the things you really enjoy are missing from your world because of your current lifestyle. If your priorities have been determined by other people, you may well spend a large proportion of your time on striving for success that you don't really need or want, while at the same time missing out on the things which should really give you pleasure.

Remember to include your health in your list of priorities. How important is your health? And are you giving your health the attention it warrants?

2. Make a list of all the things in your life that are causing you stress. Then look through your list and try to decide what you can do about the problems which are causing you the greatest amount of worry. You may be able to delegate some problems to others. You may be able to deal with worries by taking specific action. You may be able to find help or share tasks with other people.

By deciding what your priorities are you should be able to concentrate on the problems which are most important to you and dismiss, shelve or deal with the less important problems.

While sorting through your problems, remember that it isn't stress that causes the difficulties so much as your response and reaction to stress.

3. Learn to say 'no' to people when they want you to do things which are likely to eat into your time or disrupt your personal list of priorities. If you are constantly doing things that strangers want you to do, the chances are that the people who really matter will suffer. Don't hesitate to refuse to take on tasks that are not particularly important to you or to those who matter in your life.

Remember, too, that no one is indispensable. If you wander into a cemetery, you'll be surrounded by people who all thought that the world depended on their doing this or that in a hurry. Your saying 'no' occasionally isn't going to stop the world going round.

4. When you are faced with a problem, try to see it in perspective. Is a bad golf shot really likely to ruin your whole life? Is a missing sock going to disrupt your whole week? Is your career so delicately balanced that a missed train will result in your financial ruin? Is a leaky washing machine going to stop you ever having any fun in life?

5. Try to plan your life a little and put your ambitions, aims and priorities in some sort of perspective. What do you want to be doing in five, ten and fifteen years' time? How many of the things that you worry about every day would you spend your time on if this was your last day on earth? And how important will some of today's major problems seem in five years' – or even six months' – time?

Then decide how best you can achieve your aims, and tackle your problems one by one. When Horatius was defending his Roman bridge against the invading Etruscan army, he tackled each opponent one at a time. If he'd worried about how he was going to deal with the rest of the force that was facing him, he would have never got anywhere. But by being realistic and taking his problems one at a time he was far more successful than he could have dared imagine.

6. Don't let yourself be fooled into spending time, effort and energy on products or ambitions that are not important to you. If you buy a cottage in the country so that your friends, neighbours and relatives will know that you are successful and rich, you'll gain very little from the purchase if you then have to spend every weekend cleaning out the gutters, retiling the roof, repairing the fences and coping with the overgrown garden. If you buy a fancy Italian car to impress strangers on the motorway, you'll pay a higher price when you have to fork out a king's ransom to insure it and a fortune to get it serviced. If you have a swimming pool put into your garden and spend most of the summer fishing out the leaves, the slugs and the neighbours' noisy children, you'll probably wish you'd been less anxious to impress everyone.

You'll be able to protect yourself against stresses of this sort only by sorting out your priorities beforehand.

7. Don't ever make unrealistic goals for yourself. If you do, you'll end up suffering from stress and anxiety produced by frustration. When you've decided on your priorities and you're planning on changing your life, keep your immediate ambitions small and within reach. That way you'll get accustomed to success. If, for

example, you want to lose fifty pounds of excess weight, don’t start off with such a massive goal; instead plan on getting rid of, say, ten pounds in your first full month of dieting. At the end of that month aim at another ten pounds’ loss in another month.

7 MINDPOWER TECHNIQUES

Roger (not his real name, of course) is a good friend of mine who has worked as a television presenter for several years. During that time he has expended a considerable amount of energy fighting a worrying assortment of stress-induced problems. Early in his career he developed a stomach ulcer and that was soon followed by a raised blood pressure. He has also suffered from persistent arthritis in his knees. To help him to confront the day-to-day pressures of presenting a live television programme he has regularly used cigarettes and tranquillizing drugs.

Inevitably, all these problems began to have an adverse effect on his skills as a performer. His edginess began to show through on the programme and the drugs he needed to help him stay reasonably calm began to affect his ability to think quickly when things went wrong. One of the producers working on the programme told him that they were thinking of terminating his contract and suggested that if he found work in front of the camera too nerve-racking, he would perhaps be well advised to look for a job behind the scenes.

This warning was a blessing in disguise, for although it frightened Roger and meant that for a week or two he needed even larger amounts of tranquillisers, it inspired him to try and do something positive about his problem.

When I first suggested ‘daydreaming’ as a permanent solution Roger was sceptical. He thought it sounded rather silly and far too simplistic to work for him. But he was desperate and knew that he had to try something if he was to retain both his sanity and his job. So he decided to try it.

When things were getting particularly hectic during the hours before a programme was due to start, Roger learnt to disappear for ten minutes and go and sit in his dressing room. He would lock the door and stuff some cotton wool into his ears to cut out the noise from outside. Then he would settle back in a comfortable chair, close his eyes and imagine that he was sunning himself on a beach somewhere. He would position his chair so that it was underneath the room’s most powerful lamp and, with his eyes closed, he would imagine that the heat he could feel from the lamp was being produced by the sun’s rays. After ten minutes of mental relaxation he would emerge from his dressing room refreshed and ready to carry on preparing for the show.

After a couple of weeks he found that he didn’t even need to lock himself in his dressing room in order to ‘escape’ from all the pressures that were surrounding him. He needed only to close his eyes and find somewhere comfortable to sit for a few moments. He found that he could even manage to relax in the studio, imagining that the heat from the strong studio lights was summer sunlight. His mind would do the rest.

Roger now manages to cope with the stresses in his life quite effectively. He no longer has high blood pressure or indigestion and he doesn’t need to take tranquillisers. He hasn’t given up smoking completely, but he has cut down. Most important of all as far as he is concerned, his calmness and sense of tranquillity have improved his performance and removed the producer’s doubts about his suitability for the job.

I could quote dozens of other case histories to prove exactly the same point. And so could many others working in this same field of medicine. There is convincing scientific evidence now to show that any individual who learns how to deal with stress by relaxing his mind will benefit in a variety of different ways. He will be stronger, healthier and far less vulnerable to worry and anxiety than the individual who is at the mercy of each day’s new stresses and strains.

Under normal circumstances an almost unending stream of facts and feelings will pour into your mind. Your eyes and your ears will join with your other senses in gathering an enormous variety of bits and pieces of information. Each one of those pieces will itself produce assessments, interpretations and conclusions. Even when you aren’t consciously thinking of anything, or putting yourself under pressure, thousands of sensory images will keep your body busy adapting to changes in your environment.

If you can cut down the amount of information that your mind is receiving, you will cut down the number of mental responses that take place. You will become rested and relaxed and your body and your mind will benefit in a number of positive ways. If you suffer from any stress-induced disorders (such as high blood pressure, colitis, asthma, indigestion or eczema, for example), you will benefit enormously. If you suffer from any stress-induced mental problems (such as anxiety or insomnia, for example), that problem also will diminish in importance. And you will benefit by feeling stronger and healthier and by being more resistant to disease and disorder of every kind.

Many of us find it difficult to reduce the amount of information pouring into our minds because we feel guilty if we slow down. We feel that we are failing ourselves and those around us if we sit and watch the world go by for a minute or two. We’ve been conditioned to think that only by pushing ourselves as hard as possible will we ever achieve anything worthwhile or win the respect of those around us.

Pressured by expectations, we are always in a hurry, rushing from crisis to crisis and struggling to cram as much as we possibly can into every moment of our lives. We rush through life at top speed, making ourselves ill by pushing ourselves so hard, and failing to gain any real pleasure from the things we do because we are doing them so quickly. We hurtle along beautiful country roads at breakneck pace, seeing little of the world and gaining little from our constant hurrying.

Of course, it isn’t always easy to know exactly how to set about doing nothing. If you sit in the garden, you’ll probably be disturbed by the noises of your neighbour's lawn mower. Or you'll spot weeds that need to be pulled. Or someone will come round and interrupt your reverie. But there are ways of doing nothing in such a way that people will leave you alone.

You could try taking up a hobby such as stamp collecting that involves a lot of sitting still and very little else. It's an excellent way to relax your mind. Or become an avid spectator of a peaceful sport such as cricket or bowls. Settle down in your local park and watch a match and people will usually leave you alone as long as you like.

Or find a comfortable bench by the seaside. I know of few things as relaxing as watching a gentle sea breaking on a sandy shore or pebbly beach. It is almost impossible to stay irritated or anxious when you're watching the sea. If you can't find a bench where you aren't likely to be disturbed by noisy children or people hungry for conversation, then simply take your own deckchair or find a lonely rock. Alternatively, seek out a cafe where you can sit for as long as you like with a single cup of coffee or a glass of lemon tea. And just sit and stare and watch the people go by. Parisian and Viennese cafes are excellent for doing nothing.

Try taking the telephone off the hook and run yourself a warm bath. A shower may be the most hygienic way to wash yourself, but nothing is quite as relaxing as a warm bath. Make sure that there is plenty of fresh hot water available so that you can keep the temperature at a comfortable level. And then just lie back and enjoy the warmth and the peace. It's as close as you or I will ever get to being back in the womb.

Or try lying down in a country field, or even a church graveyard. (There are few places as peaceful and relaxing as graveyards.) And then just watch the clouds wandering by overhead. If it's raining, find a quiet church and spend ten or fifteen minutes in peaceful contemplation. You don't have to be a member of any official religious group to enjoy the peace available there.

As a final resort, if you've been under pressure and you feel stressed and strained, try to take a couple of days away from it all Don't hurry away and try to visit six different countries or rush off in an attempt to drive half way across Europe, or try to break the world waterspeed record. Plan on spending a couple of days in a peaceful country hotel that is miles from anywhere and where you can linger over breakfast, sit around doing very little and pamper yourself a good deal. If you can't go away for any reason, have a relaxing time at home. Don't listen to the radio or watch television (use music cassettes and film videos for entertainment). Take the telephone off the hook. Avoid any chores. And tell any potential visitors that you're going 'away' for the weekend. Get in a supply of entertaining books and magazines.

You'll benefit enormously by allowing your mind to rest and roam free in this sort of way. You may even find that stored-up ideas and worries drift into sight. Keep a notebook by your side and jot them down as they come into view. If, when you try to relax by doing nothing, you find that your mind fills up completely and uncomfortably with worries, thoughts and anxieties (worries you can't get rid of by simply writing them down) you need to cut the flow of potentially harmful data pouring into your brain. You need to learn how to daydream.

Most of us daydream when we are small. But our teachers and our parents teach us that it is a wasteful, undesirable habit that we must lose. In fact, it isn't a bad habit at all. It is, on the contrary, a natural technique which can help you relax your mind thoroughly and achieve a beneficial level of tranquillity even when things around you are just as hectic as ever. (Few places are as hectic as a television studio and yet my friend Roger manages to daydream very effectively.) When you daydream, you use a cut-out process which your mind has available but which it has forgotten how to use.

To daydream effectively you have to allow your imagination to dominate your thinking and to take over your body too. It really isn't a difficult trick to master and once you've learned how to do it, you'll be able to use the technique wherever you happen to be and whatever you happen to be doing. (Although I must warn you that the daydreaming technique is so effective that you should not try it while driving or operating machinery of any kind.)

To begin with, you have to learn how to practise. Learning to daydream is a bit like learning to play golf or learning how to dance. If you don't practise it will never come easily or naturally.

Start by finding somewhere comfortable to lie down. Your bedroom is probably the best place. Close the door and lock it if you can. Put a 'Do Not Disturb' notice on the outside door handle. Before you go into your room, by the way, take the telephone off the hook, put the cats out and make sure that there isn't anyone due to call or arrive home for fifteen or twenty minutes or so.

Now, lie down on your bed and make yourself as comfortable as you can get. Take big, deep breaths and try to conjure up some particularly restful and relaxing scene from your past. Don't let anyone else wander into your daydream because if you do the chances are that your daydream will either become a fantasy or a nightmare.

You can, of course, use just about any scene you like when you are daydreaming. And you can even build up a library of your own very private daydreams as the months go by. You can store a valuable personal collection of happy memories – some of them can be real, some may be memories taken from films or television programmes, others may be based on scenes that you've encountered in favourite books or magazine stories.

To give you an idea of the sort of daydream that will prove most effective I have prepared three simple ones. Either read through these scenes and learn them by heart, or ask someone close to you to read these words out slowly and softly while you are lying down and feeling as relaxed and comfortable as possible.

Daydream One

Imagine that you are in a dressing gown lying down on a large, soft, four-poster bed in a country hotel. Above your head the bed is hung with a brocade canopy made of a rich red and gold material. Matching curtains hang at all four corners of the bed and are tied back with red ropes, knotted neatly into bows. The room is panelled in oak and there is one window on your right. It is an old fashioned metal lattice-work window with thick, red velvet curtains hanging on each side of it. Through the window you can see a corner of a peaceful, typically English country garden and beyond, in the distance, there are pleasant acres of rolling countryside. In front of the window there is a long window seat covered in material that matches the curtains.

To your left as you lie on the bed there is a door. This is almost impossible to distinguish from the walls, being made from exactly the same sort of panelled oak. A large key protrudes from the lock and a bolt has been drawn as an added security.

You don’t know what the weather is like outside, but in your bedroom it is warm and cosy. Directly in front of your bed there is a large open fireplace and a wood fire is crackling away. The fire itself looks solid enough to last for several hours, but there is a huge pile of fresh logs stacked neatly in the hearth.

Your eyes are closed as you lie back on your bed, but you can hear the crackle of the fire and feel its warmth. Outside you can hear the birds, and a few farmyard animals in the distance. A gentle breeze plays with the tops of the nearby trees. There is a faint smell of woodsmoke in the room.

You lie back, drifting comfortably into a sleepy sort of state and knowing that you have nothing to do for several hours. You’ve had a fairly tiring morning walking through the countryside and your damp outdoor clothes are all being dried downstairs. You’ve had lunch and had a bath and have several hours to go before dinner. The hotel staff who are looking after you are quiet, caring and considerate. They obviously feel well-disposed to you and you know that your evening is going to be peaceful and enjoyable. You have nothing to do but rest, doze and drift peacefully and calmly into a sleepy and relaxing state of mind.

Daydream Two

Imagine that you are lying on a warm, sunny beach. It is a midsummer day and yet the beach is quite deserted. In the distance to your right and to your left there are one or two families scattered around and you can hear the faint sound of children playing. In front of you the waves are breaking gently on the soft sand and behind you a slight breeze rustles through the long grasses growing in the sand dunes. High above, you can hear seagulls calling to one another as they circle overhead. They and the far-off children are the only sounds that disturb the peace and tranquillity of the afternoon.

The most insistent sensation is, however, that of warmth. The sand underneath you is warm and the sun is warm on your skin. You’ve oiled yourself carefully with sun lotion and can smell it still. If you opened your eyes, you’d be able to see your skin glistening in the sunshine. But the sun is bright on your eyelids and you don’t want to open your eyes just yet. Still and peaceful, you soak up the sun and enjoy the afternoon warmth. (If you find it difficult to create this scene, try using a sunlamp to stimulate the warmth of the sun and a sound effects record to create the sound of the sea.)

Daydream Three

Imagine that you are lying back on a grassy bank by the side of a slow-moving stream. It is a clear, fresh stream with the pebbles that make up its base clearly visible through the bright water. As the stream meanders along, you can hear the sound it makes rippling over the pebbles. You can hear birds up above you in the branches of a huge oak tree. You can hear insects in the fields behind you and in the field across the stream you can hear the occasional sheep. High in the sky there are birds circling, but you cannot see them for the sun is too bright for you to open your eyes. It is a warm, relaxing summer sun and the gentle coolness of the grassy bank on which you lie makes a pleasant contrast.

If you find it difficult to recreate one of these images, hunt out an old photograph or postcard of some spot that you remember as restful, peaceful and relaxing. Carry the photograph with you and look at it through half-closed eyes as often as you can. Try to imagine yourself there once again. Try to remember all the relevant sensations: the sounds, the smells, the temperature and so on. Try to see yourself in that relaxing situation as often as you can.

In future when you go on holiday collect postcards of the places that you find comfortable and calming. Take your own photographs too and if possible get someone to take photographs showing you sitting or lying somewhere peaceful, comfortable and relaxing. Then carry these postcards and photographs around with you.

Daydreaming has one important advantage over the type of meditation favoured by some doctors and many religious groups. With meditation you have to empty your mind completely and replace real anxieties and troubles with a clinically, empty, clean space. That isn’t easy to do. When you daydream, you replace your natural fears with calming, comfortable, tranquil memories which do themselves have a useful and positive effect. Meditation does undoubtedly halt the damage caused by the pressures of the outside world. But when you fill the void instead with peaceful, tranquil thoughts, you don’t just halt the damage – you do much more. You can build up your inner strength by filling your mind with positive, health-giving feelings. Once you have learned how to daydream properly, you will be able to use the same technique just about wherever you are and whatever you are doing. If you’re stuck in a traffic jam, for example, and you feel your heart rate rising and your muscles tensing, just lie back and get as comfortable as you can. Close your eyes and imagine that you are on your beach or in your country hotel. Replace the real fears and frustrations of the world around you with the relaxing feelings and memories of a scene that you find soothing and calming.

Similarly, you can try the same technique when you are sitting in an office and besieged by people anxious for your attention. Take a few minutes off and rest completely and properly. If there is nowhere to do your daydreaming, disappear into the washroom. A few minutes’ relaxation will help you work far more effectively and efficiently.

Incidentally, if you do want to prove to yourself just how useful this technique can be, take your pulse when you start a daydreaming session and then take your pulse again when you finish. You’ll almost certainly find that your pulse rate will fall noticeably during a ten- or fifteen-minute daydreaming session.

Try not to make this a routine test, however. It is all too easy to turn a relaxation technique into a competitive exercise. You won’t benefit from this technique if you end up trying to get your pulse rate lower and lower or worrying about the natural variations in your heart rate.

Finally, a word of warning. When you have relaxed, don’t get up suddenly. If you have relaxed efficiently, your blood pressure will have fallen fairly considerably. And if you do get up too quickly, you’ll probably feel rather dizzy. Instead, stretch your arms and legs carefully and gently for a minute or two. If you’ve been lying down move slowly in to a sitting position and stay like that for a few seconds more in order to give your body time to re-adapt.

Physical relaxation

Your mind has a number of very obvious effects on your body. If you get angry, your skin will go red. If you are afraid, your skin will go pale and you may sweat. Your heart will beat faster and your muscles will tense. Your rate of breathing may increase and, if you are susceptible to asthma, you’ll probably start to wheeze as well.

All these changes can produce a number of quite devastating physical effects. For example, tensed muscles commonly produce headaches, back pains and stiff necks. If you suffer from any problem caused by physical tension, all sorts of professionals will be able to help you. Orthodox doctors can help you deal with the symptoms of the disease. And if your symptoms are produced by muscle tension, a physiotherapist or masseur should be able to help you by relaxing your muscles.

But seeking help from a medical professional when you are suffering from a stress-induced disorder can only provide you with a short-term solution. It’s obviously much more sensible to learn how to deal with your symptoms yourself. The ancient Chinese used to point out that if you give a man a fish you feed him for a day, whereas if you teach him how to fish you feed him for a lifetime. And the same is true of relaxation.

If a professional helps to relax a patient’s tensed muscles, he’ll provide an immediate solution. If, however, the patient can learn how to relax his own muscles – and how to keep his muscles relaxed when he is in stressful situations – he’ll have access to a permanent solution that can be used at any time.

It isn’t difficult to learn how to help your mind by relaxing your body. Select one of the following techniques.

1. Take slow, deep breaths. Anger or fear will make you breathe faster. You can, however, soothe your mind by deliberately taking slower, deeper breaths. If you are anxious because you are about to make a public speech, try taking long, slow, deep breaths. You’ll find that your anxiety will be kept under control.

2. Keep your voice as low as you can. Anger and other emotions often make you want to shout. Sometimes you must let your anger out. But if that is totally inappropriate, whisper – and you’ll find it difficult to stay angry.

3. Learn to relax your muscles. When you are angry or upset, your muscles will become tense. That tension will then produce symptoms such as muscle pains and headaches. You can deal with those symptoms and help reduce the tension in your mind by deliberately relaxing your body.

   Next time you are so angry that your muscles are tense and your fists clenched, try lying down and deliberately loosening and relaxing all your muscles. You’ll probably find that your anger just fades away. It is remarkably difficult to stay angry when you are completely relaxed.

   To learn how to relax all your muscles begin by clenching the muscles of your left hand as firmly as you possible can. Make a fist as though you were about to punch someone. Your knuckles will eventually turn white and your hand will become quite painful. If you now let your fist unfold, you will feel the muscle relax. To relax your body completely use this same technique to tense and relax all your muscles group by group. Within fifteen minutes or so you should have managed to relax every group of muscles in your body.

4. Remember that tiring physical work can be extremely relaxing. Do not overdo things, of course. You must stop as soon as your muscles begin to ache. But chopping wood or digging the garden can be extremely therapeutic. It is possible to ease a troubled mind by simple physical exertion. If you are not fit enough to chop wood or you have no garden to dig, I recommend a good, brisk walk. It is an excellent way to get rid of muscle tension.

5. Muscles which are tense and sore can be eased by simple massage – and the soothing effect that the massage has on the muscles will also soothe the mind. (The link between mind and body is a close one: a tense mind can produce tense muscles, and soothed, relaxed muscles can also produce a soothed, relaxed mind.) You can massage your own feet, legs and arms and may even be able to massage your own neck muscles. But back problems are best massaged by another pair of hands. Remember that a little oil will make massage far more soothing and effective as a restorative.

Mental imagery

The relationship between imagination and reality is closer than you think. And it is a relationship that has been acknowledged and accepted for a long time. William Shakespeare wrote that, ‘there is nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so.’ And more recently the philosopher William James announced that in his opinion, too, human beings could, by changing the inner attitudes of their minds, change the outer aspects of their lives, and thereby control their own destinies.

Only in the last few years, however, have these philosophical conclusions been translated into practical reality. While the majority of physicians and surgeons around the world have continued to concentrate on using knives, poisons, electricity, chemicals and radiation to attack disease and disorder (forgetting that the battleground, the human body, is often as vulnerable to the weapons being employed as the disease itself), a small but persistent number of researchers have continued to experiment with techniques involving the imagination. It is a weapon that is both simple and sophisticated, commonplace and unique, remarkably easy to use and yet far more powerful than any other available tool.

As is well known, the human imagination can prove destructive and damaging. If a man thinks he has cancer developing, there is a very good chance indeed that he will develop a cancer. If a woman thinks she is going to lose her baby, the chances of her losing the baby are greatly enhanced. If a man thinks he is going to have a heart attack, he will probably have a heart attack. If a woman thinks she is likely to die, she will probably die.

It is this power of the imagination over the body that accounts for the strengths of the voodoo priest and the African witchdoctor. It is the same power that underpins the doctor’s ability to convince his patients of his own infallibility. It is the same power that explains the placebo effect and the ability of an untrained healer to conquer pain and disease with nothing more mysterious than his own hands.

In the past the power of the imagination has been used almost exclusively as a method of augmenting the unnatural skills of the interventionist. The general practitioner and the hospital specialist use their patients’ imaginations when telling them that the prescription they are providing will banish their symptoms. The homeopath, the hypnotherapist, the acupuncturist and the herbalist all use the imagination to augment and enhance their own limited technical skills. When the professional suggests to the patient that he will get better, the patient’s imagination responds by triggering the release of natural pain-relieving hormones (or endorphins). And when the patient duly gets better, the professional usually takes the credit.

Recently, however, it has become clear that in order to harness the power of his imagination the patient does not necessarily need the help of a medical professional. He needs only to believe in the power of his imagination in order to benefit from its potential strength. He has to learn a few simple creative ‘tricks’ in order to harness these powers, but the basic requirement, the fundamental, essential prerequisite is that he believes.

To walk a tightrope you need faith in your skills and you need to believe that you will succeed. If you do not have that faith and belief, however great your skills may be, you will fall. To use your imagination to help you fight illness and disease you need just that type of faith and belief in your own abilities. In order to build up your faith in your imagination I suggest that you start by practising the daydreaming exercises described earlier in this chapter. You don’t need to spend long on the exercises – five or ten minutes will do – but practise them as often as you can. In addition to these general exercises, there is another, more specific exercise that you can try.

Cut a lemon in two and suck a little of the juice out of one half. Concentrate hard on the taste and the bitterness and try to be aware of all your reactions. Notice how your mouth fills with saliva, how your nose automatically wrinkles up in distaste and how you find yourself almost backing away from the lemon. A couple of hours later try to imagine that you are sucking that lemon again. Use your imagination to help you taste the bitterness and you’ll soon notice that your nose automatically wrinkles again.

You can repeat this simple exercise as often as you like. It will help give you confidence in your ability to recreate scenes with the aid of your imagination. And as your mouth automatically waters every time, you'll have positive evidence to show that your imagination is working.

When you fall ill and need to use the powers of your imagination to help you combat very real symptoms, there are a number of simple ways in which you can stimulate your imagination to help you.

1. Always think of yourself getting better and try to see yourself fully recovered, doing all the things you would normally do. If you develop the early symptoms of a cold and you visualise yourself snuffling away in bed and missing all sorts of important appointments, you'll probably end up in bed with a terrible cold – missing all sorts of important appointments.

   If, however, you see yourself recovering from your cold after a few hours mild snuffling, the cold symptoms will disappear and you won't need to miss any appointments at all. Naturally, I'm not promising that you can stay healthy all the time simply by seeing yourself as healthy – some genuine problems will require outside help – but minor troubles such as coughs, colds and aches and pains can often be defeated in this simple way. And even when your imagination on its own cannot defeat illness, it is much better to have it working on your side than to have it contributing strength to your illness. At the very worst, your imagination will help minimise the length of time that you are ill.

2. Never think of any disease as being strong or powerful. Always think of your body as being stronger than any attacking force. If you have an infection of any kind, think of the infective organisms as being evil, but weak, homeless, lonely and frightened. And think of your body as a tower of strength. If you have a cancer, think of it as an uncertain intruder, struggling to survive. If you think of a cancer or infection as a 'being', think of it as weak and weedy, having a hacking cough and terrible skin.

3. Try leaving your body if you are suffering from pain or some specific illness. Decide that you'll move to a far corner of the room and settle yourself down to help heal your body. Imagine that you can see yourself from the front, the side, the back and from above. Leave the pain or the illness behind. Now see teams of skilled and dedicated doctors working on your body to remove the disease and eradicate the pain. Visualise the disease as a pile of rubbish that simply needs to be cleaned out and carted away. Imagine that the pain in your body is being transmitted along special wires and try to see the doctors cutting those wires. Don't re-enter your body until you are satisfied that the doctors have done as much as they can for the time being.

4. If you are being treated with drugs of any kind imagine each tablet or capsule as being full of special miniature fighting forces. Imagine those forces being released in your stomach, finding their way into your bloodstream and travelling around your body fighting the disease that is affecting you. Imagine the white blood cells in your body fighting also on your behalf. Think of your fighting forces as cowboys, as cavalry, as spacemen or as mediaeval knights of the Round Table. It really doesn't matter how you use your imagination as long as you use it in a positive and dramatic way and as long as you pick images which you can believe in and have faith.

Some of this may sound alarmingly simple. But that is only because we have been trained to think of medical technology as having all the answers and of our bodies as being fundamentally weak and fragile. As children we are told off for fantasising and daydreaming. As adults we are encouraged to put our faith in the professionals. And yet all the evidence now available shows that the professionals have very few answers, while our bodies contain many forces that we have consistently underestimated. Our minds can make our bodies ill. But they can also keep them healthy – and make them well again.

The healing touch

There is quite a difference between ordinary 'healing' and 'faith healing'. With faith healing (or spiritual healing), the healer needs to call on some supernatural force, some god or religious being, who will offer a cure; usually in return for some form of prayer, pilgrimage or supplication.

Many modern healers don't really approve of faith healing, however. And healing certainly isn't necessarily mystical, nor does it need to be associated with any religion or religious group. In recent years healing has indeed become a thriving alternative medical speciality, quite divorced from religion. In Britain alone the Confederation of Healing Organisations represents no less than nine separate healing groups and some seven thousand individual healers. Most surprising of all, perhaps, is the fact that the majority of practising healers do not believe that there is anything particularly exceptional in what they do. 'Healing,' one healer has said, 'is not a special gift, it's just that the full-time healers practise a lot and get quite good at it.'

Over the years healers have been regarded with considerable scepticism by many people. And yet there is a considerable amount of evidence around to show that healing does have a useful effect on many patients.

Dolores Krieger, Professor of Nursing at New York University and one of the best known healers in the world, has convinced many sceptical doctors by running controlled clinical trials which have shown that blood changes produced by healing can be measured in the laboratory. You really can't get better evidence than that.

Today a number of research programmes are studying the effects of healing on patients suffering from diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis, where it is possible to measure the levels of improvement quite specifically. Just what these research projects will show is still something of a mystery. But one thing that already seems clear is that healers do seem to get better results when the subject knows that he or she is being healed and positively wants to get better. Healing, it seems, works by releasing the individual patient's own internal personal healing powers.

Indeed, a good many healers seem to agree that although there may be some benefit to be gained from visiting a professional healer, most people can use healing techniques themselves. Anyone, it seems, can become a healer. The only advantage of going to see a healing professional is that you benefit from his or her strength of personality and enthusiasm. To use your own healing powers place your hands on or close to your patient's body. And then simply project a feeling of well-being, comfort and good health from your body to theirs.

If you want to check your own healing potential, there is a simple experiment that you can try. Start by putting your hands close together, with your fingers pointing away from you as though you were praying. Don't quite let your hands touch, but get them as close together as you possibly can. Now separate your hands by two inches and keep them apart for a few seconds. Then return them to your original position – with your hands close together without actually touching. Keep your hands in that position for a few more seconds and then separate them by four inches. Once again keep them apart for a few seconds.

After returning your hands back to your original position, separate them by six inches. Do this as slowly as you possibly can and remember to stay in each different position for a few seconds at a time. Finally, separate your hands by eight or ten inches and then slowly bring them back together again in rather jerky, two-inch movements. You may well feel a strange sort of bounciness, as though the air were being compressed between your hands, but you'll probably also notice a change in the skin temperature of your hands. They may become a little warmer or simply tingle, but with most people the changes make the skin slightly cooler.

Intuition

A decade or two ago you would have had difficulty in finding any reputable scientist prepared to admit that he believed in telepathy or extra sensory perception. These days you'd have as much difficulty in finding a reputable scientist prepared to say categorically that he did *not* believe in parapsychology. In America the Federal Bureau of Investigation has hired psychics to help them solve crimes; the Pentagon has invested millions in the whole subject of parapsychology. Around the world many intelligent and well-placed individuals have sought personal and professional advice from people with undefined powers of this kind.

As the whole subject becomes better known, so too increasing numbers of people provide us with practical illustrations of the remarkable ways in which the mind often operates. There have been countless stories of individuals having dreams and then discovering that their dreams were very close to reality. The mind, it seems, can work in many remarkable ways.

One continuing problem is that it is only too easy to pick out specific instances and examples of intuition and exaggerate or distort their importance. But even allowing for this, there is little doubt that most of us do have skills that we use only too rarely. Nor is there any doubt that by taking greater advantage of these skills we could deal with many of our daily problems far more readily, and with far less stress and heartache.

If you want to use your intuitive powers more constructively, read through the following paragraphs.

1. If you tend to spend ages making relatively minor decisions – and find yourself getting into quite a state trying to decide what to wear, what to eat and so on – then give yourself a ten-second limit for making your decision. You'll find this a remarkably liberating exercise. Simply make up your mind to follow whatever thought sprang first into your mind. If your first instinct was to put on your red dress or blue suit, do just that. Don't waste mental energy thinking about it for an hour and trying on everything in your wardrobe. Similarly, if your first instinct tells you to order the mushrooms, order them. Don't spend half an hour worrying about whether to order the mushrooms or the melon. The chances are that your first, instinctive solution was probably the best. And with fairly minor decisions like these you haven't got much to lose anyway. The longer you spend worrying before coming to a conclusion, the greater the price you'll have to pay for defying your sense of intuition.

   Remember too that if you don't do what your instinct tells you to do, you'll curse yourself afterwards, and probably never be really satisfied with your solution.

2. If you have a difficult problem to solve and you’ve spent hours worrying about it, give up and do something completely different. Take a walk or a warm, relaxing bath. Or sit down in front of the fire with an entertaining book. The chances are that the best solution will be quite clear to you after an interval of an hour or so. Your subconscious mind will have continued to work on the problem and will have produced a solution for you.

3. When you’re looking for a solution to a major problem, try writing down a string of possible answers. Scribble them down just as fast as you possibly can. Do this for ten or fifteen minutes or so and then sit down and look at what you’ve produced. You’ll find that many of the things you’ve written down still look silly or downright stupid. These can be discarded straight away. But many of the others will be useful. One of your jottings will very probably be the solution you’re looking for.

4. If you want to try sharpening your powers of prediction, try guessing what are going to be the lead stories in tomorrow morning’s newspapers. Or try guessing whose picture will appear on the cover of one of the weekly news magazines. Or try to predict the outcome of forthcoming sporting events or elections. Try to see a particular individual winning. Or try to see yourself holding a newspaper with the headline clearly visible. Remember that visual images are easier to play with than any other kind. So when you’re trying this type of exercise always try to ‘see’ something happening, rather than trying to think about it in cold, analytical terms. If you try this type of technique regularly, your brain will become more and more efficient at sorting out information and coming up with instant answers – your intuitive sense will be improved.

8 KNOWING YOUR OWN MIND

Everyone has *Mindpower.* The questionnaires on the following pages are designed to help you decide how to make the best possible use of your personal strengths, how best to conquer your weaknesses and how to use the *Mindpower* techniques which are likely to be most useful to you.

Do you let enough laughter into your life?

To find out answer these questions with a ‘yes’ or ‘no’.

1. Do you find it difficult to laugh at yourself?
2. Do you get cross if you are in an important meeting and someone starts to tell a joke or funny story?
3. Would you be deeply offended if you did something silly and people laughed at you?
4. Do you prefer watching serious documentaries to light comedy films?
5. Do you think that your position or status means that you need to behave in a serious manner when in public?
6. Do you think cartoon books and comic magazines are a waste of time?
7. Do you think that sex and humour should be kept apart?
8. Would you be embarrassed to laugh out loud in a hospital or church?
9. Do you think that practical jokes are invariably childish?

10 Do you think people who laugh a lot are immature?

If you answered ‘yes’ to four or fewer questions, humour plays a sensible part in your life. If you answered ‘yes’ to five or more questions, there is probably too little laughter in your life. Laughter can offer protection as well as providing a healing force.

Has your life got purpose?

To find out whether or not you need more purpose in your life answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to the following questions.

1. Do you ever feel that something is lacking in your life?
2. Are you frequently bored?
3. Do you have any unfulfilled ambitions?
4. Do you wish you had more responsibility?
5. Do you sometimes think that you are wasting your life?
6. Are you doing what you dreamt of doing when you were eighteen years old?
7. Do you look forward to the future?
8. Do you wish you were extended more often?
9. Have you got any talent or skills which are not fully employed?
10. Are you proud of your achievements?

1. Yes: 1 point; No: 0 points
2. Yes: 1 point; No: 0 points
3. Yes: 0 points; No: 1 point
4. Yes: 1 point; No: 0 points
5. Yes: 1 point; No: 0 points
6. Yes: 0 points; No: 1 point
7. Yes: 0 points; No: 1 point
8. Yes: 1 point; No: 0 points
9. Yes: 1 point; No: 0 points
10. Yes: 0 points; No: 1 point

If you scored between 7 and 10 points, you definitely need more purpose in your life. At the moment your failure to satisfy the simplest of your ambitions means that you are frustrated and bored; both can be damaging and destructive forces which can produce physical and mental disorders. If you scored 4 to 6 points, you are not so dangerously short of satisfaction. But you are still at risk of disease and damage from boredom and frustration. Your life needs purpose. If you scored 3 or less, your life is rich in purpose and you seem likely to satisfy some if not all of your ambitions. At least you will have tried.

Are you floating on optimism – or sunk by pessimism?

Answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to these ten questions to find out whether you are an optimist, a pessimist or a comfortable mixture of the two.

1. Do you ever bet?
2. Do you ever dream about what you’d do if you suddenly came into a large sum of money?
3. Do you routinely carry a safety pin with you in case something breaks?
4. If you heard a knock on the door late at night, would you assume that it meant either bad news or trouble of some sort?
5. You get a Valentine card but you don’t know who it is from. Would you assume that it was a joke from a friend rather than a message from an unknown admirer?

6. Would you ever go away without making hotel reservations beforehand?
7. Do you regularly spend money on insurance of one sort or another?
8. When you're going out, do you always carry a macintosh or umbrella?
9. If your doctor arranged for you to see a hospital consultant, would you assume that something serious must be wrong?
10. Would you catch an earlier train than necessary if you had an important appointment?

1. Yes: 1 point; No: 0 points
2. Yes: 1 point; No: 0 points
3. Yes: 0 points; No: 1 point
4. Yes: 0 points; No: 1 point
5. Yes: 0 points; No: 1 point
6. Yes; 1 point; No: 0 points
7. Yes: 0 points; No: 1 point
8. Yes: 0 points; No: 1 point
9. Yes: 0 points; No: 1 point
10. Yes: 0 points; No: 1 point

If you scored between 7 and 10 points, you are an absolute optimist. Your approach to life should ensure that your health is not adversely affected by your attitude towards minor problems and troubles. (Although you should be aware that if your attitude becomes too cavalier, you could find yourself in tremendous trouble one day.) If you scored 4 or less points, you are an absolute pessimist. Your approach to life will probably affect your health adversely and you should try to modify your naturally pessimistic feelings. If you scored 4, 5 or 6 points, you are fairly well balanced but you could undoubtedly enhance your health by learning how to deal with your ups and downs in a more optimistic way.

Are you so cool that your health is suffering?

Answer 'yes' or 'no' to these questions.

1. Do you touch someone you love at least once every day?
2. Do you enjoy physical signs of affection?
3. Do you regularly tell those you love just how you feel about them?
4. Do you enjoy being kissed and hugged by people you love?
5. Do you dislike sleeping alone?
6. Have you ever had a pet of which you were very fond?
7. Do you enjoy being massaged?
8. Would you happily hold hands in public with someone you care for?
9. Do you think women should be encouraged to breastfeed babies in public?
10. Do you ever get broody when you see small babies?

If you answered 'yes' to less than 5 questions, you are a rather cool individual and you should make more effort to allow yourself to care for others. Even more important, you should try to let yourself show your affection without feeling guilty or embarrassed. If you answered 'yes' to 5 or more questions, you are already a very caring person with few problems in this area. The more 'yes' answers you scored, the safer you are.

Have you got your priorities right?

Read through these questions carefully. There are no right or wrong answers. But by asking yourself these questions you will learn a great deal about your ability to differentiate between the important things in your life and the trivia.

1. Do you know what things are important in your life?
2. Do you always make sure that those things take precedence over other areas of your life?
3. Do you find it easy to delegate responsibility for minor problems?
4. Do you ever waste time worrying about trivial problems?
5. How far would you go to protect or further the priorities in your life?
6. What things in your life give you the greatest happiness?
7. What things in your life make you most miserable?
8. How much time do you spend on those things that give you happiness?
9. How much time do you spend on those things that make you miserable?
10. Which individuals contribute most to your happiness?
11. Which individuals contribute most to your unhappiness?
12. How much time do you spend with the people you care about most?
13. How much time do you spend with people you don't really like?
14. How much time do you spend enjoying yourself?
15. How important is money to you?
16. How much time do you spend making money?

17. How important is your work?
18. How much time do you spend worrying about your work?
19. How important to you are your possessions?
20. How much time do you spend making money to buy possessions?
21. How important are your hobbies?
22. How much time do you spend on your hobbies?
23. What is your most important ambition?
24. How could you best improve the quality of your life?
25. What priorities do the people who are close to you have?

Do you need to assert yourself more?

Answer these questions to find out whether or not you need to be more assertive. Answer all the questions with a 'yes' or a no' and then add up the total number of 'yes' points that you have scored.

1. Do you ever find yourself accepting invitations that you'd really rather turn down?
2. Do you sit on any committees that you consider to be a waste of time?
3. Do you ever go out to dinner or to see friends when you'd rather have a quiet evening at home?
4. Would you feel guilty if you let the telephone ring without answering it?
5. Have you ever lent anyone money (or anything else) because you didn't like to say 'no'?
6. When watching television do you invariably end up watching what someone else wants to watch?
7. If a waiter was rude to you, would you put up with his behaviour rather than complain?
8. Do you ever buy things that you don't really want because you don't like to disappoint the salesman?
9. Do you ever take holidays in places you don't really like?
10. Do you ever spend Christmas with people you don't get on with particularly well?

If you scored between 7 and 10 'yes' points, your lack of self-confidence is very likely to be having an adverse effect on your health. You need to assert yourself more and take greater control of your life. If you scored between 3 and 6 'yes' points you still probably need to assert yourself a little more. If you scored 2 or fewer 'yes' points, you are unlikely to need advice on how to assert yourself.

Do you have a healthy attitude towards crying?

Answer these questions to find out whether or not your attitude to crying is a healthy one. Simply answer 'yes' or 'no' to each question.

1. Do you feel guilty if you cry in public?
2. Do you think that crying is usually a sign of weakness?
3. Do you think that boys should be encouraged to hide their tears?
4. Do you feel embarrassed if you cry while watching a film or reading a book with a sensitive theme?
5. Would you try to hold back your tears if attending a funeral or some other sad event?
6. Would you distrust a leader who shed tears in public?
7. Would you pretend that you had something in your eye if you were unexpectedly discovered crying?
8. Do you get embarrassed if you see grown men crying?
9. Would you allow someone to comfort you if you were found crying?
10. Do you think tears are an unnecessary expression of emotion?

If you scored 3 or more 'yes' points your attitude to crying is not healthy. Crying is a natural response and suppressing tears is storing up trouble for yourself.

Is anger damaging your health?

To find out just how susceptible you are to anger answer 'yes' or 'no' to these questions.

1. Do you always try to hide your anger?
2. Do you tend to stay angry for long periods of time?
3. Does your temper ever get out of control?
4. Do you suffer from physical symptoms (headaches, stomach pains, etc) when you are angry?
5. Do you always try to resist the temptation to complain if you are angry about something?
6. Do you get cross quite often?
7. Do you tend to brood about things which have made you angry?
8. Do you have difficulty in getting to sleep after something has annoyed you?
9. Does your face go red (or white) when you are angry?
10. Have you ever got into trouble because of your anger?

If you answered 'yes' between 7 and 10 times, you do need to learn to control your anger. If you scored 4 to 6 'yes' points, anger is less likely to produce problems. If you scored 3 or fewer 'yes' points, anger is unlikely to be a major force in your life; nor is it likely to cause you any physical or mental damage.

Do you need to be ill?

To find out whether or not you use any illness as a weapon or excuse just answer 'yes' or 'no' to the following questions.

1. Do you suffer from any symptoms which disappear and reappear at apparently irregular and unexpected intervals?
2. Do you have any long-term medical problem for which your doctor has been unable to find any explanation?
3. When you were small, did you ever use physical symptom of any kind to enable you to stay away from school?
4. Have you ever felt secretly pleased when you've developed an illness which has enabled you to avoid some unpleasant social event?
5. When you were ill as a child, did your mother make a tremendous fuss of you?
6. Do you enjoy being looked after when you are ill?
7. Do you regularly have to miss important but unpleasant appointments through ill health?
8. Do you invariably develop mild physical symptoms (such as nausea, diarrhoea, muscular pains, etc.) when you are under pressure or stressed?
9. Has anyone ever accused you of malingering?
10. Do you tend to retire to your bed if you are upset, worried or anxious?

If you answered 'yes' to 7 or more questions, it is very likely that you (probably unconsciously) regularly use symptoms of ill health to enable you to avoid unpleasant confrontations or threatening experiences. The real problem with using ill health in this way is that you are never likely to get healthy as long as you *need* your illness. If you answered 'yes' to between 4 and 7 questions, it is possible that you use ill health as a weapon. If you answered 'yes' to 3 or fewer questions, it is unlikely that you use ill health as a weapon.

Do you need more excitement in your life?

Read through these questions carefully and answer 'yes' or 'no' to them all.

1. Do you think you are in a rut?
2. Do you regularly get bored?
3. Do you wish that you had more responsibility?
4. Do you regularly spend time operating machinery over which you have little or no control?
5. Do you usually know what you are going to do each day?
6. Do your partner's habits regularly get on your nerves?
7. Does television provide most of the highlights in your life?
8. Is your partner totally predictable in bed?
9. Do you wish there were more surprises in your life?
10. Do you envy people who live exciting lives?

If you scored 7 or more 'yes' points, you are suffering badly from boredom. You desperately need to add more excitement to your life. If you scored between 4 and 6 'yes' points, boredom is a fairly major driving force affecting your health. You should do something to combat your boredom. If you scored 3 or less, boredom is unlikely to play an important part in your life.

Do you need to be more self-confident?

To find out how much your life is damaged by a lack of self-confidence, read these questions carefully and answer 'yes' or 'no' to them all.

1. Do you usually avoid doing things that might upset other people – even if they are things that you'd like to do?
2. Do you feel bad if you go into a shop and come out without having bought anything?
3. Do you invariably dress to please other people?
4. Do you spend a lot of your life doing things that you don't enjoy?
5. Do you feel guilty if you really enjoy yourself?
6. Do you let other people run your life for you?
7. Do you think that you have far more weaknesses than strengths?
8. Do you worry a lot if you accidentally upset other people?
9. Do you regularly find yourself apologising to other people?
10. Do you often find yourself wishing that you had more skills and talents?

If you answered 'yes' to 7 or more questions, you are desperately in need of more confidence. Your lack of self-assurance is undoubtedly having an adverse affect on your health. If you answered 'yes' to 3 to 6 questions, it is still quite likely that your lack of self-confidence is affecting your health. If you answered 'yes' to 2 or less questions, your health is unlikely to be damaged by any lack of confidence you may feel.

How do your relationships with others affect your health?

Make a list of all the people with whom you have close and important relationships. Now, beginning with the top name on your list, answer the questions which follow. Then repeat the questions for each individual on your list. The answers to your questions will help you understand your relationships with others a little better.

1. Who is the stronger partner in your relationship?
2. Do you tend to lean on him/her a great deal?
3. Does he/she tend to lean on you a great deal?
4. Do you tend to take him/her for granted a good deal?
5. Does he/she tend to take you for granted?
6. Can you always rely on him/her when you need help?
7. Can he/she always rely on you when he/she needs help?
8. Does he/she ever intimidate or frighten you?
9. Do you think you ever intimidate or frighten him/her?
10. Is he/she dependent on you for money?
11. Are you dependent on him/her for money?
12. Would you trust him/her with money or important possessions?
13. Do you think that he/she would trust you with money or important possessions?
14. Do you like him/her?
15. Do you love him/her?
16. Do you think he/she likes you?
17. Do you think he/she loves you?
18. What do you gain from your relationship?
19. What does he/she gain from your relationship?
20. Do you always talk kindly about him/her when he/she is not present?
21. Do you think he/she always talks kindly about you when you are absent?
22. What are his/her greatest ambitions?
23. What are his/her greatest fears?
24. What do you think is the most important thing in his/her life?
25. If your car broke down at 3 in the morning, would you be able to ring him/her and ask for help?
26. If his/her car broke down at 3 in the morning, would he/she be able to ring you and ask for help?
27. Does he/she benefit financially from your relationship?
28. Do you benefit financially from your relationship?
29. What annoys you most about him/her?
30. What do you think annoys him/her most about you?

There are no correct answers to these questions. But if you think about your answers carefully, you may find that you will learn something about your relationships with and your attitudes to other people.

How tranquil are you?

These questions are designed to help you find out just how vulnerable your mind is to stress and pressure – and how much you would benefit from learning how to relax your mind. Answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to all these questions and then add up the total number of ‘yes’ answers that you have scored.

1. Do you get easily irritated?
2. Do you ever suffer from ‘panic’ attacks?
3. Do you find it difficult to relax?
4. Do you wish you had less responsibility?
5. Do you find yourself getting frustrated a good deal?
6. Do you need tranquillisers or sleeping tablets to help you deal with stress or pressure?
7. Do you ever feel like packing it all in and running away?
8. Do you suffer from any symptoms which are caused by or made worse by pressure?
9. Would you describe yourself as a ‘worrier’?
10. Do you always seem to be in a hurry?

If you scored 7 to 10 ‘yes’ points, you would benefit enormously from learning how to relax your mind. You are extremely susceptible to stress, pressure, anxiety and worry. If you scored 4 to 6 ‘yes’ points, you are far less susceptible to worry and stress. But you would still benefit from learning how to relax your mind. If you scored 3 or less ‘yes’ points, you are fairly strong. But you might still benefit from studying the pages dealing with tranquillity.

How physically tense are you?

The questions below are designed to help you find out just how vulnerable your body is to stress and pressure – and to show how important it is that you learn how to relax your body properly. Simply answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to all these questions and then add up the total number of ‘yes’ answers that you score.

1. When you are excited do you ever have difficulty in breathing or do you ever wheeze?
2. When you are angry does your face ever go red?
3. When you are frightened or anxious do you sweat?
4. Do you ever get butterflies in your stomach?

5. Do you ever suffer from palpitations when you are anxious or upset?
6. Do you ever suffer from vomiting or diarrhoea before important occasions?
7. Does your pulse ever race when you are excited?
8. Do you ever develop a rash when you are excited or nervous?
9. Do you ever get headaches when you are worried?
10. Have you ever fainted when you've been frightened?

The number of times you've answered 'yes' indicates the extent to which your body responds to mental stresses and pressures. If you continue to remain exposed to stress and pressure without learning how to protect yourself, you will eventually develop symptoms and signs of stress-induced illness. (The questions you have answered above will probably help you determine the types of problems that are most likely to worry you.) To protect yourself you must learn to relax your body.

A score of 7 to 10 'yes' points indicates that your body is particularly susceptible to stress and pressures. A score of 3 to 6 'yes' points is average. A score of 2 or fewer 'yes' points indicates that you are less vulnerable than most individuals to physical problems produced by stress.

How well developed is your imagination?

Read through the questions below. And answer them 'yes' or 'no'.

1. Do you ever dream while you are asleep?
2. Did you ever daydream as a child?
3. Have you ever had a nightmare?
4. Do you ever fantasise about people you know or about film stars or celebrities?
5. Have you ever had a feeling of déjà vu? (Thinking that you have been somewhere before, when in reality it is your first visit).
6. Do you ever fantasise when making love?
7. Do you have any strong religious beliefs?
8. Do you ever get frightened when watching horror movies?
9. Do you ever wonder what it would have been like to live in a different century?
10. Do you ever worry about your loved ones' safety when they are travelling?

The more times you answered 'yes', the greater the power of your imagination. But as long as you answered 'yes' at least once, your imagination is powerful enough to be used as a healing force.

How strong is your sense of intuition?

Answer 'yes' or 'no' to the following questions.

1. Do you tend to do well in guessing games?
2. Have you ever had a long run of good luck when gambling?
3. Have you ever known what was in a letter before opening it?
4. Have you ever had bad dreams which turned out to be true?
5. Have you ever thought about someone you haven't heard from and then, out of the blue, received a telephone call, postcard or letter from them? Or met them unexpectedly in the street?
6. Do you ever know what people are going to say before they say it?
7. Have you ever heard voices telling you what to do?
8. Have you ever 'known' who was on the other end before picking up a ringing telephone?
9. Have you ever felt that a house was right for you the moment you saw it?
10. Have you ever felt that you wanted to know someone better after seeing them for no more than an instant?

If you answered 'yes' to at least one question, you have intuitive powers that you could use to your advantage. The greater your score, the greater your powers.

PART 2 *MINDPOWER* IN PRACTICE

MENTAL SELF-DEFENCE

These sections are designed to give you some practical examples of how the principles of *Mindpower* can be used.

Although you can use *Mindpower* to help you deal with well over 90 per cent of all symptoms and diseases, there are obviously problems which do need interventionist help. In general, I suggest that you seek help from a professional if you have any severe or uncontrollable pain which recurs or which is present for more than five days, any unexplained bleeding, any persistent changes in your body or in any existing lump, wart or skin blemish, any new symptoms which develop after receiving medical treatment, or any severe mental symptoms such as confusion, paranoia, disorientation or severe depression. If you are in any doubt about the diagnosis, I strongly suggest that you visit a registered medical practitioner for a preliminary assessment of your condition.

But do not forget that, even when a problem needs the attention of a health professional, you can still use *Mindpower* to help improve your strength and rate of healing. *Mindpower* has an important part to play in your self-preservation programme too. If you constantly see yourself as ill and weak, you will become ill and weak. If you constantly see yourself as strong, supple and healthy, your chances of being strong, supple and healthy will be improved immeasurably. If you spend your days expecting your joints to become arthritic because your parents suffered from arthritis, the chances are that your joints will become arthritic. If, however, you see your joints as smooth and pain-free, the chances are that they will remain smooth and pain-free.

Finally, remember that the following sections are designed only to provide you with an introduction to the ways in which you can use your *Mindpower*. In order to benefit fully from *Mindpower* I suggest that you re-read Chapters 5, 6 and 7 and then apply the principles to your particular problems.

Accidents

If you are worrying about something that happened at work and you fail to see a red light, is that really an accident? If you are upset because of a problem with a love one and you step out in front of a bus, is that really an accident? If you are thinking about your financial problems rather than what you’re doing and you scald yourself in the kitchen, can that really be described as an unavoidable accident? I don’t think so. Stress, pressure and anxiety are all major causes of accidental injury. And in many cases the accident could have been prevented.

Indeed it is, I think, quite safe to say that the majority of accidents aren’t truly accidental at all. They don’t occur because of completely unforeseen circumstances, but because someone has been careless or ignorant or, even more commonly, because someone has been unable to concentrate because of worry or anxiety produced by some outside problem.

If you seem to be accident-prone, so well known that the staff in your local casualty department greet you by your first name, you can use *Mindpower* to help you avoid accidents in two quite different ways.

Mindpower can’t prevent all accidents, of course. There will occasionally be incidents which will be totally outside your control. But if you think about it carefully, you’ll soon see that the vast majority of accidents can be prevented.

And even when accidents do happen, you can still use *Mindpower* to improve your chances of getting well quickly. Once again the value of *Mindpower* has to be put into perspective, of course. If you have a broken leg, you’ll need to have the bones set, you’ll probably need a splint or plaster cast for the leg and you’ll need specialist advice from an orthopaedic consultant and a physiotherapist. But by using *Mindpower* you will be able to speed up the rate of your recovery. There are several ways in which you can help yourself.

1. Try to remain as hopeful and as positive as possible if you do suffer injury. Suppose you fall down while skiing. If you immediately decide that you have broken your leg, that it is going to go septic, that it will probably need amputating and that you will undoubtedly be disabled for the rest of your life, by the time that you arrive in the local casualty department your body will have reacted, not to the fall you’ve just had, but to the major threat that you have imagined. Your muscles will be tense, the pain will be enormous and your heart rate and blood pressure will have reacted, not to the real problem that you’ve acquired (possibly a fairly minor one), but to the problem that you’ve started worrying about (a major one).
   If, on the other hand, you find that, although it hurts, you can stand and walk and you tell yourself that you’ve simply bruised some tissues and you’ll take things a little carefully for a while, you’ll suffer far less pain and far less immobility. If instead of ‘seeing’ yourself in a hospital bed you see yourself recovering in no time and winning the Olympic downhill gold medal, you’ll get over your accident far more speedily.

2. The amount of attention you give to an injury will be influenced by the importance of whatever else is in your mind at the same time. If you are concentrating hard on something which is important to you, your injury may well go virtually unnoticed. People playing sport, for example, can often injure themselves seriously without being aware of the injury. In one famous Cup Final football match a goalkeeper carried on playing

unaware that he had broken his neck.

If you have banged your arm while gardening, give it a good rub, check that you haven't broken anything or cut yourself and then get yourself interested in the next job you've planned. Your injury will be far less serious than it might otherwise have been.

3. If after an injury you succeed in relaxing your mind and your body, your body's natural healing response will take over, your body's responses to the injury will not be exaggerated and the pain and discomfort that you feel will be minimised.

So, if you have a serious injury which necessitates a stay in hospital or simply a stay in bed, try to relax your mind by daydreaming. Allow your mind to wander from your sick bed to enjoy a day on the beach or a day in the country or whatever else you find relaxing.

4. Laughter helps eradicate pain and heal damaged tissues. So, if your accident results in a stay in bed, make sure that you have a good supply of entertaining books and magazines to read and funny films and videos to watch.

5. Pains that accompany injuries can often be relieved by using imagery techniques. So, for example, relax yourself completely and then imagine that the pains which are worrying you are being transmitted around your body through a series of thin wires. Then imagine that a team of tiny physicians are wandering around your body cutting all the wires they can find. Take a team of wire-cutting medics to each painful part of your body in turn.

Remember, I'm not suggesting that any of these techniques alone will mend your broken bones or heal your damaged body. You may still need professional medical help. But by using *Mindpower*, you will improve the speed with which you get better and you will reduce the risk of complications developing.

Anxiety and depression

Mental diseases are becoming more and more common. In America, the National Institutes of Mental Health conducted a $15 million survey that lasted six years and arrived at the startling conclusion that one in every six American adults suffers from at least one psychiatric ailment. And the commonest ailments suffered were anxiety and depression. Similar figures would be obtained if surveys were done in Britain, France, Germany, Scandinavia, Australia or just about any other so-called 'developed' country.

There are, of course, times when depression does need specialist psychiatric help. There are some types of depression which are difficult to treat, which require hospital treatment and which may last for considerable periods of time. But the majority of patients suffering from anxiety or depression do not need specialist help or in-patient therapy. And of all the common medical problems, these two states of mind are probably the two most badly treated by general practitioners.

The usual response is, I fear, for a general practitioner to prescribe tranquillisers of one sort or another. In my view these are neither an effective short-term solution, nor a safe and satisfactory long-term answer. Around the world tranquilliser addiction is now a major medical problem.

The *Mindpower* philosophy does, however, offer a number of effective remedies for individuals who are suffering from anxiety or depression and who want to learn how to deal with their symptoms permanently and safely. I believe that these same remedies, incidentally, will help those individuals currently trying to wean themselves off benzodiazepine tranquillisers.

1. People who suffer from depression or who suffer from anxiety often lack self-assurance. If you feel that a lack of self-confidence could be contributing to your problem, try to restore your faith in yourself by thinking of all your virtues. Imagine that you are a good friend and try to describe yourself from afar, from an enthusiastic point of view. You'll probably be amazed to find out just how many hidden virtues you have got.

2. Use your imagination to help build up your confidence. Most people who suffer from anxiety make things far worse for themselves by forever imagining the worst.

A patient of mine called Olive worked as a shop assistant in a large department store. When the post of floor supervisor became vacant, she desperately wanted to apply. But every time she went up to the personnel office to fill in an application form she got cold feet. She thought that they would probably laugh at her for applying and in her mind could see them having a good giggle behind her back. She felt certain that they wouldn't treat her application seriously.

In the end she got into quite a state about it. She even considered complaining to the store manager about what she imagined the personnel office would say about her. Her problem, of course, was that she had absolutely no confidence in herself or her abilities. And her lack of confidence was crippling her chances of getting the job she so desperately wanted. She couldn't 'see' herself being successful. But she could 'see' herself failing very clearly.

Eventually I managed to persuade her to try substituting her negative image of herself with a much more positive one. I told her to spend a few minutes every morning and every evening just imagining herself handing in her application form, being interviewed by the personnel manager and doing the job of floor supervisor.

After a week, during which she had bombarded her mind with a series of very positive images, Olive successfully managed to hand in her application. To her surprise the clerk in the personnel office said they'd been waiting for her to apply and had wondered why she hadn't applied before. Ten days later Olive got the job.

3. Many people who suffer with their 'nerves' find it difficult to express their feelings – they tend to bottle things up inside them. This can be very harmful.

Try, therefore, to get into the habit of letting your emotions flow quite freely from time to time. If you feel like getting angry, let your anger out. You don't have to shout or have a tantrum in a shop, but let the manager know if you are dissatisfied with a product you've bought or with the service you've had. Write a strong letter of complaint to the company's managing director and post it – don't just leave it lying on the mantelpiece. You'll benefit not just by getting rid of your anger but also by building up your self-confidence and self-esteem. You'll begin to see yourself as someone who can't be 'sat' upon or abused so freely.

If you do feel your anger building up inside you and eating away at you, do something physical to get rid of the accumulating tension. Go for a good, brisk walk, for example. It really is possible to 'walk off an angry feeling. If you feel very upset about something, let your emotions show. Don't be afraid to cry. Sobbing can often make you feel a good deal fitter and stronger. And be prepared to share your sorrow with someone else too.

Some people who suffer from anxiety or depression say that they can't share their state of mind because they haven't got any good friends. In fact, it is often because they don't share their emotional feelings that they don't have any good friends. Friendship is all about sharing – telling people about things that have upset you and listening when they tell you things which have upset them. Start talking, start sharing and you'll find that you do have friends.

4. Take a good, close look at your relationships with others. Are there any people at work who annoy you or upset you? Do you get annoyed by relatives? If so, ask yourself why things are so wrong. Whose fault is it? What can you do to heal the rift? Do you need to heal the rift or can you just avoid seeing them? Remember, just because people are relatives, you won't necessarily like them or be able to get on with them.

5. Learn to laugh. Does your life need more fun? Are you too serious? Many people feel that it is childish to have fun, to play games, to enjoy a laugh or to squander time on entertainment. Maybe it is. But it's healthy to laugh and to have fun. Visit a local joke shop or toy shop and see what memories are stimulated. Buy books and magazines that you find entertaining and amusing rather than just educational. Start watching entertaining programmes on television – or try hiring a good video occasionally. If you are hiring a video film, invite one or two friends round to enjoy it with you.

6. Spend a little time daydreaming. If the weather is cold and wet and you're feeling miserable lie back, close your eyes and imagine that you're on a beach having a splendid time. Visit your local travel agent and pick up a collection of holiday brochures. Look through the illustrations, find a picture that takes your fancy and imagine that you're there, soaking up the sun.

Arthritis

Few diseases affect as many people as arthritis, few cause as much pain, discomfort and disablement and few are the subject of so many myths and so much misunderstanding. In fact, the first myth to get out of the way is the idea that there is any such thing as a single disease called arthritis. The word 'arthritis' is about as useful and specific as the word 'infection', and just as there are over a hundred different types of infection so there are over a hundred different types of arthritis. These different forms of arthritis vary enormously in the amount of damage and crippling they produce and in the length of time they are likely to last.

The second important point is that, although arthritis is usually incurable, it is invariably possible to minimise the symptoms produced. The diseases which are collectively known as 'arthritis' do not kill and, if treated with respect rather than fear, it is possible to reduce the amount of damage they do.

Whether an individual's arthritis has been caused or made worse by strain, ageing, wear and tear, genetic susceptibility, infection with a bacterium or a virus, injury, a metabolic or chemical abnormality or a hormonal abnormality, the symptoms will get worse if they are left untreated or treated half-heartedly. If, on the other hand, treatment is initiated early and with enthusiasm, the outlook can be greatly improved.

By using the knowledge which has been acquired over the last few decades, it is possible to prevent the destruction of the body's joints and the associated crippling, to relieve joint pain and stiffness, to restore lost joint function and slow down, or even halt, the rate at which arthritis affects the body. And although it is perfectly true that some of the treatments used for arthritis have been shown to have dangerous side-effects, it is equally true that there are millions of patients around the world who have been treated quite safely by drugs, surgery and physiotherapy.

While I think that it is important to stress the value of obtaining proper orthodox medical advice for any arthritic condition, I am also sure that *Mindpower* has a valuable part to play in the treatment of these conditions. Arthritis, like so many other types of disease, is not simply a mechanical problem. The physical symptoms produced by the joint changes which characterise arthritic disorders are known to be exacerbated by anxiety, pressure, stress and worry.

We know that arthritis is probably a disorder produced by changes in the body's immune system. And we know that the body's immune system can be affected by the mind. We know that arthritis is affected by an individual's personality. We know that arthritis is an inflammatory disorder and we know that inflammatory disorders are made worse by anxiety. We know that the type of muscle tension produced by nervousness can make arthritic pains and deformities worse by having a simple, mechanical effect on the muscles and therefore on the bones and joints. But just how stress makes arthritis worse and just how all these effects interact is still something of a mystery.

What we also know, however, is that the symptoms produced by arthritic changes can be relieved by using *Mindpower*. On its own it won't produce a marvellous 'wonder' cure (although it is far more likely to do so than any therapeutic solution). But it will, whether used alone or in conjunction with other prescribed remedies, relieve symptoms, help banish pain and help restore lost mobility.

There are several ways in which *Mindpower* can help sufferers from arthritis.

1. Start by learning how to relax your body. So, for example, if you get arthritic pains in your leg, you will be able to minimise those pains by learning how to relax the muscles of that leg.

Start by practising when your pains are at their least troublesome. And start with the smallest muscles in the area. With your left leg, for example, begin by curling up the toes of your left foot. Try to tighten the muscles of your foot as much as you possibly can. When the muscles really begin to hurt, deliberately and carefully allow them to relax. Try to feel the muscles stretching and becoming looser. Imagine a good, plentiful blood supply to the area pumping in plenty of fresh, refreshing oxygen.

Then do the same sort of thing with your left ankle. Move the ankle up and down as far as it will go in both directions. Turn the ankle first to one side and then to the other side. Keep it in each position until the muscles become slightly uncomfortable and start to ache. And then deliberately and slowly relax the muscles of your ankle.

Gradually work your way up your leg, tightening and then relaxing all the muscles in turn. As you move upwards, you'll learn how your muscles feel when they are loose and relaxed.

After practising this exercise, you'll be able to relax the muscles of your leg quite quickly without going through the tensing and tightening stage at all. This you can do every morning and evening, and whenever the pains of your arthritis are troubling you.

2. People who suffer from arthritis often appear strong-willed and purposeful. But that is frequently a false front. Arthritis sufferers often lack confidence and self-assurance. If you think that you lack self-confidence, try to boost your opinion of yourself by making a list of all your virtues and strengths. Write out the sort of obituary for yourself that a really good friend might compose. Don't be modest. Write out a promotions leaflet for yourself that an advertising agency might prepare. Think of yourself as the product and then try to sell yourself to the world.

3. Use the power of your mind to help combat the pains in your joints. You may not be able to get rid of your arthritic pains completely in this way, but you will certainly be able to reduce the amount of pain and reduce your dependence on analgesic drugs.

Try to see inside each joint that is painful. If, for example, you have pains in a hip joint, try to imagine that you have X-ray vision and you can see right inside the joint. See the raw edges of bone grating together uncomfortably, noisily and painfully. Now imagine that you can see an army of white-coated men inside that joint working hard to fill in all the cracks and crevices in the bony surfaces. They have a huge task before them, but it is a purely physical problem and one that can be overcome. Spend a few minutes visualising the men working hard inside your joint. Imagine them as a team with a foreman supervising them and a series of experts offering specialist advice.

Then return to your image of the joint at frequent intervals during the day to check on the way that the work is progressing. Gradually the white-coated men will be able to repair the damage and reduce the amount of pain that you're suffering.

Alternatively, try to imagine that there is a central pain centre inside your brain. Now imagine that between all your joints and that central pain centre there are a number of pain-transmitting wires. Imagine that there is a wire from your left knee, one from your left hip, one from your right ankle and so on. Where you have joints that are pain-free the wires have already been cut, or have been broken. But where you have lots of pain the wires are clearly visible. Now cut each one of those wires in turn and prevent the pain messages getting to your pain centre.

Those are two examples of the ways in which you can use the *Mindpower* technique of imagery to help yourself conquer pain. You can create new techniques that are tailor-made to suit your own imagination. So, if you enjoy cowboy films, substitute galloping cowboys for white-coated workers tackling the pains. If you like films or stories about science fiction, imagine that the pains in your joints are being produced by extra-terrestrial monsters. And imagine those pain-producing monsters being killed off by a fleet of tiny space craft inside you.

Asthma

I became very well aware of the close relationship between stress and asthma during my years working as a general practitioner. Time after time I saw both children and adults wheezing badly and struggling to breathe as a result of an accumulation of worries and fears. Children would sometimes start wheezing in response to their own anxieties – in the day or so prior to a school test or examination, for example. And sometimes their asthma would get worse in response to their parents' fears and anxieties. Adults would develop worsening symptoms of asthma as a result of domestic, occupational or social stresses.

As a short-term aid, I found that it was usually necessary to prescribe drugs designed to have a specific effect on the chest and to help relax the muscles controlling the breathing. In those instances where the asthma was produced or made worse by an allergy reaction, it was sometimes necessary to accompany the treatment with a drug designed to counter the allergy response. Where the problem was made worse by an infection, it was obviously necessary to prescribe an antibiotic too.

There are today a wide range of useful and extremely safe drugs available for the treatment of asthma. In addition to tablets to be taken by mouth or drugs requiring an injection, there are quite a number of products which can be administered simply through the aid of an inhaler. (Over the years I have met quite a number of patients who have become quite dependent on their inhalers. It is by no means unknown for asthma sufferers to start wheezing if they discover that they do not have an inhaler with them.)

But although these drugs are undoubtedly valuable, and although such products will continue to play a vital role in the treatment of asthma, I do believe that the link between pressures affecting the mind and the symptoms of asthma is so powerful that the principles of *Mindpower* can in many cases be used with great effect.

Indeed, I have gradually become certain that the only real solution likely to offer any genuine long-term improvement is to be found through *Mindpower*. Patients must be taught how to deal effectively with their own pressures and must learn how to protect themselves against the environmental circumstances most likely to exacerbate their own conditions. Many of the *Mindpower* principles will help. The precise way in which the principles should be applied will invariably depend upon individual susceptibilities, but the notes which follow are intended to offer some basic guidance.

1. The typical wheezing of asthma develops because the muscles of the chest become constricted and air cannot easily get in and out of the lungs. The asthmatic makes a noise when breathing out for the same reason that air coming out of a balloon makes a noise if you pinch the neck with your fingers. Asthmatics can often relieve their symptoms by imagining that they can see the constricted tubes within their lungs and by then deliberately relaxing and opening those passageways.

Put baldly this sounds ridiculously simplistic, of course. But the fact is that it does work. The passageways which carry air into the lungs are tubes with muscles. And it is the tightening of those muscles which narrows them. Deliberately relaxing the muscles which encircle the air-carrying passageways is really no more difficult than deliberately relaxing the muscles of the hand or foot. All it takes is practice and the belief that it will work. And when you stop and think about it, there is absolutely no reason why it shouldn't work. After all if the muscles which regulate the size of the air-carrying tubes can be narrowed by stress, it is logical to assume that they can be widened by relaxation.

2. Asthma sufferers often benefit simply by learning how to relax their minds. A general state of relaxation affects the whole body – including the lungs.

To start you need to practise in a dark, quiet room. Disturbances and distractions can make things difficult. Then, while lying down comfortably, you should close your eyes and imagine that you are on a warm beach somewhere. Imagine that you can hear the waves breaking on the shore, that you can hear the seagulls overhead and that you can feel the warm sun on your face. The more convincing the daydream the more effective it will be as a relaxation aid.

3. Individuals who suffer from asthma often have a considerable amount of difficulty in expressing their emotions. They bottle up anger and don't let themselves cry. That needs to change.

If you are an asthma sufferer try to make sure that you let out your anger whenever possible. If you are cross about something, let people know. You can still be polite and reasonable, but don't just bottle up your anger and frustrations inside you – they'll simply make things worse for you. Tell people you're cross. Tell people why you're cross. And expect solutions, answers and, where appropriate, apologies. As a final solution, remember that exercise is often a good way to get rid of anger. If you're feeling upset, go for a good, brisk walk.

Remember too that it is important to let yourself cry when you feel as if you want to. Don't keep your sorrow inside you – it will just do you damage and make your asthma worse. Let the tears out and don't be frightened to let people see that you are sad. If they are good friends, they are more likely to comfort you than to feel embarrassed.

4. People who suffer from asthma are sometimes deprived of love and affection – or even if they aren't they may think that they are. If you are an asthma sufferer and you feel that you need more 'love' in your life, ask yourself whether you are as loving as you could be. Do you tell your loved ones how you feel about them? Do you touch them as often as you could? Do you hug and cuddle them frequently? It may well be that you would receive more loving if you gave more.

If you are close to an asthma sufferer, try to show him or her as much affection as you possibly can – and encourage him or her to show you affection. People who suffer from asthma are often shy and easily embarrassed – they need bringing out of their shells.

Cancer

During the last few decades millions and millions of pounds have been spent by doctors searching for a cure for cancer. Many of their efforts have been designed to try and discover a single, pharmacological solution to what is, in fact, a whole range of different disorders.

The word 'cancer' is about as specific as the word 'infection' and covers a wide range of quite separate disorders. Just as it is unlikely that researchers will ever find a single drug answer to all infections, so it is unlikely that doctors will ever find a single drug answer to all cancers. In other words, although breakthroughs may be made in the treatment of individual cancers, it is unlikely that those breakthroughs will benefit sufferers from other types of cancer.

Doctors looking for a single solution have persisted with their rather irrational search for a variety of reasons – most of them economic or political, rather than scientific or medical. Cancer is an emotive word and it isn't difficult to raise money for a general cancer research programme. Not all doctors have, however, been looking for a single wonder cure. In laboratories throughout the world researchers have made specific but significant developments in the treatment of cancers. New drugs have been brought onto the market and great advances have been made in the development of radiotherapy techniques. It is these researchers who have had the greatest amount of success, and who have enabled doctors to improve the survival rate of patients suffering from such disorders as skin cancer and leukaemia.

Ironically, while orthodox researchers have been struggling unsuccessfully to produce a single drug remedy for cancer, there has been one tremendous advance made in the search for a single solution. And that advance has been made by researchers working not in orthodox areas of medicine but in the very unorthodox area linking the power of the mind to diseases of the body.

From the evidence of those who have been working in this valuable but under-financed medical backwater, it has become clear that there are a number of very specific ways in which cancer sufferers can help themselves by using *Mindpower* techniques.

There is, on the other hand, a considerable amount of evidence to show that to get the best possible results the *Mindpower* techniques should be used in conjunction with orthodox medical techniques such as drug therapy or radiotherapy. If you are a cancer sufferer, your best chance of defeating your cancer lies in combining the orthodox weapons offered by doctors with the mental attitudes associated with *Mindpower*. Neither method alone will have the power of these two approaches combined. And no other combination of techniques is as effective as this one.

1. Learn to relax your mind as completely and as often as you possibly can. Prepare for yourself a small series of pleasant daydreaming scenarios to help you deal with stressful circumstances and threatening situations.

2. Try to avoid too much contact with people who make you feel gloomy or depressed. And try to spend as much time as you can with people who make you smile. Don't be frightened to laugh and enjoy yourself. We all have a limited lifespan on this earth. If we don't laugh and learn to enjoy ourselves, our lives are simply not worth living.

3. When you have learned to relax your mind thoroughly and completely, use your imagination to help you challenge your cancer. In the *Daily Mail* in June 1985 the actress Jill Ireland described how she used imagery techniques to help her fight cancer.

'I began visualising cancer cells, then telling myself that cancer is a weak disease, composed of weak, confused, deformed cells ... I visualised my white blood cells. I imagined them as piranha fish. They poured into the areas where the cancer cells were and destroyed them and I visualised them going around quietly and competently doing their job, taking care of my body and, if they saw any cancer cells they destroyed them.'

You can adapt this type of imagery technique to suit your own personal imagination. Think of the cancer cells as the baddies and of your body's defences as the goodies. Imagine your body's defences tearing around your body destroying the frightened cancer cells.

4. Learn to express your emotions. There is plenty of evidence available now to show that people who repress their anger and their tears are more likely to develop cancer and to succumb to it once they have developed it.

If you feel like crying, don't be afraid to cry. If you feel angry about something, don't be afraid to let your anger show. Share your emotional experiences with other people. The more you store up your emotions inside, the more damage those emotions are likely to do.

5. Assert yourself. If you are in hospital and the doctors and nurses won't tell you things that you feel that you want to know, make a fuss and make a nuisance of yourself until they answer your questions.

Don't lie back and let the medical staff just do things to you. Insist on sharing in the care of your body. Insist on being consulted. Get out of bed if you really want to get out of bed. Watch television if you want to watch television. Eat a peanut butter sandwich at midnight if that is really what you want.

6. Build up your self-confidence. Learn to respect and value yourself as an individual. People who develop – and die of – cancer often have a low opinion of themselves. Build up your confidence and you'll live longer.

Colds and influenza

The officially recommended treatments for colds and influenza are primitive and of limited value. Treating colds by prescribing substances designed to dry up secretions is rather like treating depression by prescribing something to dry up the tear ducts. And yet that, of course, is exactly what most doctors and pharmacists do.

What is offered as an apparent solution can, in fact, create problems of its own. There is now ample evidence to show that some of the products available on the market and widely used in the treatment of colds can, if used for more than a day or so, eventually produce exactly the same symptoms as the ones they were designed to counteract. If, for example, you use an inhaler to try and deal with your nasal congestion, you could end up with nasal congestion caused by your inhaler.

Nor are any of the other orthodox techniques of much value when it comes to dealing with a cold. Drugs such as penicillin don't work for the very simple but important reason that, whereas penicillin works by killing bacteria, colds are caused by a virus – an organism which is quite immune to penicillin and similar products.

Vaccines don't work because the common cold can be caused by any one of a couple of hundred different viruses and the chances of your being vaccinated against the right virus are remarkably slim. Indeed, since cold-producing viruses now travel around the world as fast as aeroplanes the chances are that the types of vaccine in one country will be quite out of date by the time they are made generally available.

The medical profession's failure to devise an effective remedy for the common cold (or indeed the 'flu virus) is largely due to the fact that, although a considerable amount of research work has been done on the subject, we still don't really know just how colds spread nor what makes particular individuals susceptible. We do know that infections seem to spread through the air and that the bugs which cause them seem to get into the body either through the mouth or through the eyes. And we know that many people who get colds do so because they touch their eyes with virus-carrying fingers which push the infection into the nearest tear duct. But we don't know why one individual will get a cold while another, seemingly exposed to an identical risk, will not.

What does seem clear is that our susceptibility to colds is enhanced by any sort of emotional imbalance. We get colds when we are frightened, worried, upset or nervous. We get colds when we are feeling low and expect to get them. We get colds before important functions or major occasions. And we get them when we are feeling uncertain about something. With all this information, how the viruses which cause colds get into the body becomes almost irrelevant.

The answer is, it would seem, not to spend all our energies in trying to find ways to interfere with the spread of infection nor to continue treating symptoms (itself a rather foolish activity since we now know that the naturally occurring mild fever and loss of appetite we have with a minor infection are produced to kill off the invading organism by exposing it to heat and a shortage of food supplies). Instead we should concentrate our efforts on using *Mindpower* to improve our resistance to these minor forms of infection. There are many ways in which it is possible to do this.

1. If you frequently get colds just before important occasions and often find yourself having to miss dinners or meetings, think carefully. Do you really want to go to those meetings or dinners? Or are you using your colds as an excuse? Is there something about those events which frightens or worries you? If you really wanted to go to those meetings, you would not get so many colds – your body would suppress the symptoms. Only by understanding what it is you are trying to escape will you find out how to avoid getting so many colds.

2. Individuals who lack self-assurance are especially vulnerable to disease and infection. Improve your self-confidence by trying to think of all the good points you have.

3. Boredom can increase your chances of getting colds. You need to add purpose and excitement to your life if you are going to minimise your chances of getting a lot of colds. One of the reasons why doctors rarely get colds is that they work with a sense of purpose. Give yourself goals and aims to strive for and your body will become much more efficient at combating germs and infections. If you have a dull, boring job (or no job at all), add purpose and excitement to your life by acquiring a skill or learning a sport that you can dedicate yourself to with enthusiasm.

Convalescence

Wander into any large hospital at visiting time and you'll find it an extremely depressing experience. From the car park to the hospital entrance there will be a phalanx of unhappy-looking men and women, their faces pinched and strained with earnest determination. The men will be dressed uncomfortably in their Sunday best clothes – squeaky, polished shoes, tight suits and out-of-fashion raincoats. The women will be dressed soberly and respectfully, as though on their way to a funeral.

On the wards the conversations will be subdued and cautious. There will be lots of grave whispering and hardly any laughter. Both visitors and patients will examine their clocks and watches at frequent intervals as though to see just how much longer the whole tedious business of visiting is likely to last.

No one benefits from this sort of encounter – least of all the patients themselves. Abandoned by their visitors, the patients will lie silent and depressed by the encounter. On their lockers will be souvenirs of these sad visits: bottles of orange squash and doom-laden copies of local newspapers.

The sad irony in all this is that there are now shelves full of evidence showing that if people who are ill or recovering from surgery are made to smile and laugh, they will get better much quicker than they would otherwise. Patients of all ages and all descriptions will, wherever they may be, benefit enormously from hope, encouragement, laughter, merriment, love and affection.

I think that medical professionals have a responsibility to recognise this both in their own approach to medical care, hospital design and internal administration and in their attitudes to visitors. (Hospitals need to be made hospitable – many are far too gloomy and dull.) But whether or not the medical professionals recognise and accept that responsibility, relatives and friends can contribute enormously by developing the right attitude and approach to those who are ill or convalescent.

1. Remember that people who are ill respond very well to humour and happiness. When you visit someone in hospital take with you entertaining presents – books, magazines, comics, puzzles and even toys.

Don't tell them about all the dull and boring and miserable things that have happened to you. Don't take them bills that need to be paid or local newspapers that are full of depressing news about road accidents and deaths. Tell them funny anecdotes about people they know, tell them jokes that you've heard on television and that they might have missed. Entertain them and make them laugh.

2. Remember that all convalescent patients benefit enormously when shown love and affection. Make sure that you keep telling your loved ones that you love them. If you can't visit the hospital, send cards and letters. Send flowers. Telephone and leave a message. Make sure that they know you care.

3. Be careful not to allow a patient's illness to become a shield, protecting him or her from the future. People often use their illnesses to hide behind. It is often too easy to stay in a sick bed and hide away from the reality of the world. To counteract that potential problem spend some time discussing future plans. Talk very positively about what will happen when things get back to normal. Start making practical plans for holidays and coming-home parties. Make sure that the patient remembers that there are things to look forward to in the world outside.

Diabetes

Diabetes, or diabetes mellitus to give the disease its full name, is a disorder in which there is too much sugar in the bloodstream. Normally, the food that we eat is broken down by a series of enzymes and acids in our intestines. If the food is rich in carbohydrate, the breakdown products will include sugar and the sugar will end up in our bloodstream. Sugar provides us with energy and we all have a certain amount of it circulating at any one time. Carbohydrates include such varied foodstuffs as bread, potatoes, cake, pastry, biscuits, jam, chocolate, rice, pasta and fruit.

The sugar that we do not need for instant energy is stored in our livers. If too much sugar is already stored there and fresh supplies are continuing to pour in, the excess will be stored as fat deposits. The amount of sugar allowed into the bloodstream at any one time is regulated by a hormone called insulin which is produced by the pancreas gland.

Under normal circumstances, if an ordinary healthy individual eats a packet of biscuits or a box of chocolates and his or her body does not need that much energy, his or her pancreas will pump out a considerable amount of insulin which will ensure that the excess sugar is stored in the liver. If the individual keeps eating biscuits or chocolate and the sugar that is stored is not needed, some of it will be put into long-term storage as fat. In the condition known as diabetes this normally efficient system does not work properly. The production of insulin is inefficient and the amount of sugar circulating in the blood reaches quite high levels.

There are two basic types of diabetes. First, there is the condition in which there is either no or virtually no insulin being produced. This version of the disease normally affects children and is known as child onset diabetes. Second, there is the condition in which there is some insulin being produced, but not enough for the amount of sugar being eaten. In this condition the pancreas still functions but it does not work well enough. This is known as adult onset diabetes. The first of these two types of diabetes usually starts, as its name suggests, in childhood or early adulthood. The second type does not usually start until middle or later life. The average sufferer from child diabetes will be twelve when he first gets symptoms. Of the two types of diabetes by far the commonest is the adult onset diabetes. Together the two conditions produce one of the commonest of all long-term disorders, with approximately two per cent of the population being affected.

There are a number of different factors which influence any one individual’s chances of developing diabetes. Heredity is, without a doubt, the single most important predisposing factor. Your chances of developing diabetes are much higher if you have a family history of the disease. There is also evidence to show that if you are overweight, your chances of developing diabetes are greatly increased. If you are moderately obese, your chances of developing diabetes are increased four-fold. If you are extremely overweight, your chances of developing diabetes are increased thirty-fold. Other factors include race, nationality, age and sex.

Stress, too, can play a very important part in determining whether an individual is likely to develop diabetes. Not only can it increase your chances of developing diabetes, but it can also make it much more difficult for you and your physician to control your disease successfully. When you are under pressure, your body will normally respond by increasing the amount of sugar in your blood, in order to enable your muscles to work more effectively. A good blood sugar level is essential if you are likely to need to respond to any threat or danger. When your blood sugar levels change, the demand for available insulin in your body changes too. The result can be that a stressful situation (or a situation perceived as stressful or potentially stressful) can result in a normally stable case of diabetes becoming unstable and extremely difficult to control.

Once diabetes has developed, it can be controlled in a strictly limited number of ways. In child onset diabetes insulin injections will probably be necessary. In adult onset diabetes tablets may be required to stimulate the pancreas to produce more insulin. In both types of diabetes it is important that the patient controls his intake of carbohydrates and watches his diet and weight carefully. And, again, in both types of diabetes it is tremendously helpful if the individual’s exposure and susceptibility to stress can be controlled.

It is here that *Mindpower* techniques can be used to greatest effect: helping diabetics and their doctors to obtain and maintain control of threatening and potentially dangerous situations.

1. Restrained emotional outbursts can have a deleterious effect on your body. If you are a diabetic, it is important that you know how to deal safely and comfortably with all extremes of emotional response.

2. Learn how to relax efficiently and effectively. Spend a little time learning how to daydream.

Eczema and Dermatitis

Our skin provides a remarkable reflection of our emotional state. When we are frightened we turn white; when we are embarrassed we go red; when we are anxious our sweat glands work overtime and our skin becomes sweaty and slippery. It is, it seems, always our skin which knows first when there is any confrontation between the body and its environment. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that one of the most important reasons for the high incidence of eczema these days is the increase in the amount of stress in our society.

Eczema, I should explain straight away, is not a single disease. It is, rather, a skin problem caused by a number of different factors, but usually producing a fairly well defined set of symptoms including dryness, redness, itchiness, swelling, blistering and weeping. (Incidentally, there is a good deal of confusion about the difference between the two words ‘eczema’ and ‘dermatitis’. Although some experts claim that there are differences, the two words are more or less interchangeable and can be used to describe much the same type of condition.)

Researchers have found several factors which influence the likelihood of any one individual developing eczema. First, they have found that there is a strong genetic influence. When one parent has eczema as a child, the risk of his or her children developing eczema (or some similar condition such as asthma) is approximately 50 per cent. If both parents have had eczema when they were small, the chances of their child being affected are higher still.

Second, they have found that the personality of an individual can have a powerful influence. They have, for example, found that many eczema sufferers are extremely sensitive individuals who tend to repress their emotions. When upset or sad, they refuse to cry or to let other people see how upset they are. This sort of attitude is apparently commonest among males, who will have almost certainly been taught as boys to suppress their emotions.

It has been found too that eczema sufferers tend to be unusually dependent. As children they will have probably been given a lot of attention when ill, but treated very strictly when fit. It is easy for parents to fall into this trap since it as natural to be generous and kind to a child with inflamed, sore skin as it is to be keen to balance this with some strictness when the child is feeling a little better. The problem is, of course, that eczematous children may therefore grow up to associate love and affection with poor health and dependence.

Researchers have also found that eczema sufferers tend to be particularly sensitive to stress. We all respond differently to stress and we all have different stress thresholds. It is never the amount of stress that we are subjected to that causes the problems so much as our ability to cope with that stress. Eczema sufferers tend to respond badly to relatively small amounts of stress.

Finally, it has been shown that eczema sufferers tend to carry more than their fair share of guilt. They tend to be particularly unselfish and loyal and they worry a lot about what other people think. Indeed, they worry a good deal about everything: whether or not they are going to have enough money, whether they are doing a good job, whether the people who are close to them are happy. And, of course, they worry about their skin condition.

Not all eczema sufferers exhibit all these personality traits. But the majority of eczema sufferers will probably recognise something about themselves in this list. And if you are an eczema sufferer, you should be able to see which aspect of *Mindpower* to pay most attention to simply by checking out your personality traits.

The aspects of *Mindpower* which are likely to prove most useful for sufferers from eczema, dermatitis and other similar skin problems are listed below. I must stress, as usual, that the eczema sufferer should, in addition to using the *Mindpower* techniques, follow whatever advice is given to him by his medical adviser. There are many useful creams available for the amelioration of eczema – some designed to protect the skin and some to deal with existing or developing skin problems. The *Mindpower* techniques won’t necessarily cure an eczematous condition (although they are more likely to cure the condition than any available remedy), but they will minimise the amount of discomfort.

1. Be prepared to let your emotions out, particularly if you are the sort of individual who represses them. Holding in your emotions can lead to all sorts of problems, and your skin will suffer.

2. Learn how to relax your mind properly. Practise when you are not under pressure.

3. Build up your confidence. Eczema sufferers tend as a group to have very little confidence.

4. Ask yourself whether you ever use your eczema to protect yourself from situations which you might find threatening or difficult. If you do, it is important that you investigate other ways of dealing with your problems. If you don’t, your eczema will persist.

Headaches

Headaches are so common that four out of every five people reading this book will suffer regularly or occasionally from what is undoubtedly the commonest single medical symptom requiring treatment or advice. They can, of course, be caused by all sorts of different things. You can get a headache if you drink too much alcohol, strain your eyes, have bad teeth, bite ice cream or develop a type of arthritis in the bones of your neck. Some people even get headaches when they have sexual orgasms.

Because headaches can be so excruciatingly painful they can be frightening, and many people who get headaches feel sure that it is a sign of some serious disorder developing, such as a brain tumour. The truth, however, is that brain tumours are exceptionally rare. One expert recently surveyed 1,152 patients referred to a hospital specialist because of headaches. Only one of them had a brain tumour. All had been seen by general practitioners and thought to have possible brain tumours. Obviously, you should always seek expert medical help if you suffer from recurrent, persistent or particularly troublesome headaches. You should also seek medical advice if your headache is accompanied by any other symptoms. Anxiety about a headache can only make it worse and professional reassurance is often as useful a remedy as can possibly be obtained.

The majority of headache sufferers have what are known as tension or stress headaches – these are estimated to account for 88 per cent of all types of headaches. Tension headaches develop in a very simple way: they are produced by sustained muscle contraction. When certain muscles of the head, neck and scalp are held too tightly for too long, tension headache results. You can see how the problem develops simply by looking around you in a busy office or in a traffic jam. You'll notice that quite a number of individuals will be frowning and squinting with their shoulders hunched and their faces contorted by anxiety. The nervous tension produces muscle tension and that produces the pain.

It may be possible to deal with the pain by taking analgesics such as aspirin or paracetamol. Both drugs will probably prove effective. But *Mindpower* can offer tension headache sufferers a much better long-term solution: a remedy which is often the only permanent, effective remedy.

1. Many regular sufferers have headaches because they are constantly being manipulated into doing things that they really don't want to do.

Norah, a patient of mine in her early forties, was forever complaining of headaches. When I first saw her, she was swallowing a couple of dozen aspirin tablets a day in a desperate and dangerous attempt to control her problem. After talking to her for a while I discovered that Norah's main problem was that she had a very manipulative friend with an extremely powerful personality. Norah's friend had pushed her into serving on a local charity committee, she had pushed her into getting involved with a boys' club, she had pushed her into becoming a member of the Parent-Teachers Association.

Norah wasn't living her own life at all. She was living her life at second hand. It was hardly surprising that all the stress was getting to her and giving her an almost endless series of headaches. When Norah learned to stand up for herself, to explain that she really didn't want to go to a meeting every Monday, every Wednesday and every Sunday and to stand firm under pressure, her headaches miraculously disappeared.

Asserting yourself can be an invaluable way of dealing with nervous tension and with symptoms such as headaches produced by subsequent muscle tension.

2. We often use headaches as an excuse for not doing something that we don't want to do. If we use the headache excuse often enough, eventually our bodies begin to 'give' us headaches on other occasions too. The headache becomes a universal solution to problems that seem to have no answer. Our minds learn to create headaches when confronted with all sorts of problems. The headache becomes a universal answer. If you find yourself using your headache as an excuse, try to identify the real problems which lie behind the excuse.

3. Learning to relax mentally is an excellent way to deal with headaches that have already developed. It is also an excellent way of preventing headaches developing. You can break that chain of events leading from nervous tension to muscle tension by mental relaxation.

4. When a headache is caused by muscle tension, then relaxing your muscles will help get rid of your headache.

Heart disease

Every year in Europe more than a million men and women die of heart trouble. A similar number die in America. In Britain alone more than 60,000 men and women under the age of sixty-five die suddenly and often unexpectedly of heart disease. Men aged between forty-five and fifty-five are most at risk. Although a number of those deaths are caused by heart failure, itself triggered by faulty valves or worn out muscles, most of the younger victims have healthy hearts. They die because the arteries which supply their heart muscles with blood become clogged and unable to carry fresh supplies of food and oxygen.

About the size of a fist, the human heart pumps between 10 and 50 pints of blood every minute, depending on the body's individual needs. To do this, the average heart must beat 70 times a minute, 100,000 times a day, 36 million times a year and about 2,500 million times in an average lifetime. The coronary arteries which encircle the heart provide the raw materials which enable the heart to operate and take away the waste products which might otherwise accumulate and cause damage.

There are a number of factors which affect the ability of the coronary arteries to function efficiently and effectively. Research has shown that people who exercise, such as bus conductors, are less at risk than people who don't, such as bus drivers, and that high blood pressure, excess weight and eating animal fats all increase the likelihood of a heart attack.

Heart attacks can be caused by sudden exposure to cold weather, by a sudden fright or a great surge of excitement. A number of people die every year while watching television programmes. Sporting events such as football matches are particularly likely to cause heart attacks in excited viewers. I remember being called out from home on four separate occasions during one major soccer match.

Smoking damages the coronary arteries since one of the substances in tobacco makes the blood vessels contract. The majority of men who die from heart attacks are cigarette smokers, although there are, of course, exceptions to the rule.

But mental strain is undoubtedly one of the most important causes of heart disease. Three hundred years ago the surgeon John Hunter remarked that his life would be at the mercy of anyone who made him angry. Friedman and Rosenman, the two American doctors who have specialised in the effects of strain on the heart, studied a group of accountants and found that when the April tax deadline approached they were far more likely to have heart attacks.

Researchers who have studied the personalities of heart attack victims have concluded that those who are most at risk are individuals who are ambitious, competitive and hardworking. More important, there is evidence to show that if these individuals learn to relax, their chances of having heart attacks will be reduced.

In a large clinical trial 800 men who had had heart attacks were divided into two groups. Those in the first group were given fairly standard medical advice. They were told to cut down on their consumption of animal fats, reduce the number of cigarettes that they smoked and to take the pills which had been prescribed for them. The men in the second group were given more imaginative instructions. As well as being given all the standard advice, they were also taught how to relax, how to deal with emotional problems more safely and how to re-evaluate their aims and ambitions.

Then the researchers sat back and waited to see what happened. Before long a quite startling difference in the health of their two groups emerged. It was found that the men in the second group who had been give advice about relaxation had only half as many second heart attacks as the men in the first group.

I would sincerely and strongly recommend that any patient with a history of heart disease re-read Chapter 7. But the following tips are designed to give heart disease sufferers some ideas of the ways in which their condition can be helped by *Mindpower.*

1. Men and women who develop heart disease often tend to push themselves too hard. They work long hours, find it difficult to sit still and relax and often have difficulty in limiting their ambitions. They push themselves into early graves.

If you have heart disease, it is important that you try to establish some proper priorities in your life. How much time are you spending on work? How much time are you spending with your family? And how much time are you giving to yourself? Remember that there isn't a lot of point in earning a million pounds if you are working so hard that you die before you can enjoy the money.

Decide how much money you really need to live happily. Consider how much time you want to spend on your work. Try to allocate time for relaxation and for friendships. Try to put your life into proper perspective.

If you are prepared to make the effort required to understand exactly what you want out of life, you will benefit enormously.

2. Learn how to relax your mind and your body. And be prepared to spend a little time practising relaxation. You can't relax properly simply by flopping down in front of the television set with the day's problems still whirring around in your mind. You wouldn't expect to be able to play golf without practising. So why should you be able to relax properly without practising?

3. People who develop heart disease are often impatient and aggressive. Do not let your anger kill you. Try to put things into perspective. When you feel justifiably cross, let your anger out. Tell people that you are disappointed in them. A quiet word of protest from you will probably do just as much good as a wild tantrum. And your health will suffer far less. Don't let yourself get over-excited over trivial problems. When the problem isn't worth getting angry about, dismiss it. If you find it difficult to forget, write yourself a memo about it and put the memo into a filing tray. Once a problem has been written down, it is invariably much easier to forget about it.

High blood pressure

In order to survive and thrive the tissues and organs of the human body need regular supplies of fresh blood. It is blood that brings the oxygen and other essential foodstuffs without which the tissues would die, and it is blood that carries away the many waste products that are made. To travel around the body, through a complicated network of arteries, veins and capillaries, blood has to be kept under pressure. It is, of course, the heart which maintains that pressure and it does this by regular, rhythmic pumping.

Under normal circumstances several factors affect the pressure at which the blood travels round the body. First, there is the heart pump itself. If it is beating unusually rapidly or with exceptional force, that will obviously increase the pressure on the blood. Second, there is the size of the blood vessels and, in particular, the muscular walled arteries. If the bore of an artery has been narrowed by muscular contraction, obviously the blood will have to be put under greater pressure for it to travel through the artery. Third, there is the amount of blood in the body. If the amount of blood increases for some reason, the pressure will rise; if the amount of fluid falls, the pressure will fall.

From day to day your blood pressure changes in response to all sorts of outside influences. So, for example, if you are being physically attacked, your body, recognising that your tissues need larger amounts of oxygen in order to cope with the crisis, will raise your blood pressure. This temporary variation will help you to stay alive. Once you have escaped, your blood pressure will go back to normal. Such a temporary change in blood pressure is acceptable and useful. It can, quite literally, help save your life.

Unfortunately, blood pressure sometimes goes up and stays up. And that can cause all sorts of problems. The tissues and organs around the body will be subjected to excessive pressures and there is a real risk that they will be damaged. If left unchecked, a persistent rise in blood pressure can kill. It is, for example, a major cause of heart disease and strokes. High blood pressure is one of the major causes of death in the Western world. It has been estimated that up to 20 per cent of the world's population suffers from raised blood pressure.

There are a number of reasons why an individual's blood pressure may be abnormally raised. In some people there may be a genetic influence. In others smoking may be a causative factor. Too much salt or too much animal fat can also cause high blood pressure to develop. But there is little doubt that one of the most important reasons for the current epidemic of high blood pressure is that many millions of individuals are under far more stress than they can reasonably cope with. Stress, it is now clear, causes or exacerbates or influences almost every single case of high blood pressure.

Traditionally, the medical treatment of high blood pressure has involved a number of powerful drugs. Some of these drugs have an important part to play in dealing with and controlling high blood pressure. But today's evidence shows that individuals suffering from high blood pressure can also help themselves by losing excess weight, by avoiding animal fats and cigarettes, by cutting down on their consumption of table salt, by avoiding the consumption of large amounts of coffee and by learning how best to deal with stress and pressure and how best to relax their minds and therefore their bodies.

When used together, these measures will often make it possible for an individual to control his (or her) blood pressure without resort to drugs. And of all these approaches by far the most important is the ability to deal with stress and pressure. It is here that *Mindpower* can help patients suffering from high blood pressure.

By following the advice which follows, many high blood pressure sufferers will, with their doctor's approval, be able to cut down or even leave off altogether, pills which they are taking to control their blood pressure.

1. It is vitally important that all patients with high blood pressure learn how to relax properly, and set aside at least ten minutes every day to do so.

2. Patients who suffer from high blood pressure are often quite competitive and particularly aggressive. When you feel yourself getting cross ask yourself whether your anger is really justified. If it is, let it out. If not, forget it. There isn't much point in getting excited about an insignificant problem.

3. Take a close look at your relationships with others and ask yourself whether any of the problems you have in your dealings with other people could be your fault. Try to analyse your relationships. Ask yourself which of your friends and acquaintances are really important to you. Ask yourself whether you are fair and reasonable with your friends. And ask yourself whether they are fair and reasonable with you. Are you being used? Or are you using other people? By learning as much as you can about your relationships you will learn a good deal about yourself - and about the way that the stresses in your life originate.

Indigestion

It is your stomach's job to turn the vast variety of assorted foodstuffs that you drop into it into a movable thick soup which can be passed on to the next part of the intestinal tract. The stomach is a vestibule to the rest of the intestinal tract and it is here that food is prepared for digestion. The stomach, it is important to understand, is not just a passive repository for food.

Your stomach helps digest food in two ways. First, the cells of the stomach lining produce something like three litres of gastric juice every day. Of the different substances which make up these juices probably the most important is hydrochloric acid, which is produced by the parietal cells. These exist in the stomach wall in a total population of something approaching a billion.

As a tutor of mine was fond of pointing out when I was a medical student, the acid found in the average stomach is powerful enough to burn holes in your living room carpet. The effect of these acidic juices is enhanced by the stomach's muscular wall, which churns the food and the juices together before propelling the mixture through a valve into the next part of the intestine, the duodenum. It is these two properties of the stomach which give it its power as a digestive force.

The normal functioning of the stomach depends on a number of different factors: a steady supply of the right sort of food, for example. And these days more and more stomachs are malfunctioning. Indigestion is, indeed, so common that if half a dozen people sit down to dinner, the chances are that by the time the coffee is served at least one of them will have indigestion.

A number of different factors can cause indigestion. It can, for example, be caused by eating too quickly. Or by eating the wrong sort of food. If you’ve ever had to gobble down a meal quickly because you’ve been late for an appointment, you’ll know how easy it is to push more food into your stomach than your stomach can comfortably handle. Or if you’ve ever tried eating an exceptionally hot Indian meal, you’ll know how devastating the wrong sort of food can be.

Too much alcohol or cigarette smoke can cause indigestion too – simply by irritating and damaging the stomach lining and making the whole area more susceptible to damage by the acid that is washing around inside the stomach. But there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that in the majority of cases indigestion is caused by, or at the very least exacerbated by, stress, tension, worry or anxiety.

One of the most dramatic studies of the effect of stress on the stomach was conducted roughly a century ago by Dr Stewart Wolf, who did most of his work with a patient known simply as Tom. As a boy of nine Tom had made the mistake of stuffing some scalding hot clam chowder into his mouth. The hot food had burned his oesophagus so badly that as a result of the incident Tom couldn’t swallow food in the normal way; instead an opening had to be made in his abdominal wall so that food could be put directly into his stomach.

When Dr Wolf met Tom he recognised the extraordinary opportunity for research that Tom presented and so he arranged for him to be given a job as a hospital orderly. Dr Wolf then proceeded to study Tom’s stomach very carefully indeed. One of the most remarkable discoveries that he made was that if Tom was annoyed or angry then the cells in his stomach wall produced huge amounts of quite unnecessary acid. As Tom’s face went red with anger so his stomach wall would start to secrete huge amounts of acid.

Excess acid is produced by the stomach lining for an apparently sound physiological reason. The body, recognising an outside threat of some kind, produces more acid to ensure that any food lying in the stomach is quickly prepared for digestion so that it can be converted into blood sugar supplies as soon as possible. As far as your body is concerned, it is behaving quite rationally. It is responding to an outside threat in the only way it knows how: by preparing it for a fight.

Unfortunately, of course, the excess acid isn’t needed and because the threat which has triggered the acid production doesn’t go away the stomach continues to produce fairly huge amounts of the acid.

The result is the typical pain and discomfort associated with indigestion, gastritis and other stomach upsets when the acid starts digesting the stomach lining.

The traditional way to deal with indigestion is, of course, to take a tablespoon of white antacid medicine. But that can offer only a very short-term solution. To find a long-term solution you should follow the principles of *Mindpower*. Of course, if your indigestion recurs, persists or remains difficult to control, you should seek medical advice as well as using *Mindpower*.

1. Uncontrolled or badly controlled anger is a common cause of digestive upsets. The indigestion sufferer who fails to learn how to control his emotions effectively may well end up with his indigestion developing into a fully blown peptic ulceration.

2. Learn how to relax your mind. Don’t be tempted to believe that you can learn how to relax in one ten-minute session. To relax properly and efficiently you need to spend some time practising every day.

3. Do not let minor irritations annoy you too much. Make a list of priorities in your life. And make sure that you remember what things are important and what are not.

4. Do not allow stress or pressure to force you into eating your food too quickly. Make sure that you find time to eat properly and in an unhurried fashion. If you force your food down in unchewed mouthfuls, you are bound to suffer from indigestion. Take a few minutes longer over your lunch and you’ll be fitter and stronger for the rest of the day’s problems.

5. Try to sort out your relationships with other people. If your relationships often cause you worry and distress spend some time trying to decide just what you can do to solve those problems permanently.

6. If you get a bout of indigestion try and imagine that the flow of acid into your stomach is being controlled by a team of special internal ‘plumbers’ hurriedly turning off the taps through which the acid is pouring. At the same time try to imagine that another team of specialists is busy pouring antacid into your stomach to neutralise the effects of the acid and prevent further symptoms developing.

Infertility

Infertility is a problem that affects something like one couple in ten. Although it is the female half of the partnership that is usually blamed when children aren’t forthcoming, in practice the fault lies just as often with the man.

There are said to be approximately forty possible physical causes of infertility, although you could probably find more if you looked hard enough. Among women, the common problems are a failure of ovulation and a blockage of the fallopian tubes (often caused by some previous infection). Among men, the problems include a failure to produce spermatozoa in sufficient numbers, and a failure to produce spermatozoa of good enough quality. Those disorders can themselves be traced back to other problems in many cases. When a woman fails to ovulate, for instance, the cause may be a specific disorder such as endometriosis or a general complaint such as a considerable or sudden weight loss. When a man doesn't produce enough sperm or produces sperm of inferior quality, the basic cause may be an old infection or even an accident. Mumps is a common enough cause of male sterility. General illnesses such as diabetes and thyroid disorders can also cause infertility; past episodes of venereal disease can be responsible and, occasionally, one partner may develop anti-sperm antibodies.

It is also important to remember that infertility may be a result not of some internal failure but of a simple, straightforward failure to give spermatozoa a decent chance to meet an egg. So, for example, a man who is impotent is unlikely to impregnate his partner. Finally, it is worth remembering that frequency of intercourse is also of some significance. The couple who make love once every six months are unlikely to start their family as soon as the couple who make love every day.

Generally speaking, unless a woman is over the age of thirty, it isn't usually necessary to investigate a case of alleged infertility until a couple have been having intercourse without any form of contraception for two years. And well before that time is reached there are several things that a couple can do to enhance their chances of having a child.

Having sex as close as possible to the moment of ovulation is as good a starting point as any. Most women ovulate fourteen days before the end of their menstrual cycle, so sex at that time is far more likely to result in a pregnancy than sex immediately before or after a period. Sex during a period is particularly unlikely to result in conception since not only is there unlikely to be an egg, but also the womb lining isn't in any fit state to receive a fertilised egg. Incidentally, any woman who menstruates regularly is unlikely not to be ovulating. The moment of ovulation can also be timed by keeping a record of the woman's body temperature. A slight fall and rise usually denote ovulation.

To ensure that his sperm are kept in the best possible condition a man should avoid tight jeans, keep out of hot baths and saunas and sit with his legs apart as often as possible. Sperm are very susceptible to heat (that's why the testicles are suspended outside the body).

After intercourse a woman who wants to get pregnant should stay in bed for half an hour, should draw up her knees and should put a pillow under her bottom. These actions are designed to improve the chances of the sperm getting into and through the cervix. The more sperm getting through into the womb, the greater the chance of a pregnancy.

Those are all practical aspects of infertility. But infertility isn't always quite so easy to explain, nor is it always so easy to deal with in a purely practical way. There are, it seems, other hidden factors which have an influence on a woman's ability to conceive.

There is evidence to show that a woman's ability to conceive depends upon her state of mind. In some primitive tribes, for example, it has been claimed that women do not conceive until they have been married and it has become socially acceptable for them to have babies. It seems that this rule applies however many sexual partners a woman has and however long she may continue to have intercourse without using any form of contraceptive.

Startling though this claim may be, evidence from developed countries suggests that it is not as far-fetched as it might at first appear to be. Even in our highly sophisticated society there are many women who claim that they have conceived very quickly after deciding that the time is right for them to start having children. And since hormonal changes in a woman are known to be easily influenced by psychological factors (it is, for example, extremely common for a woman who is worried or nervous to fail to have a menstrual period), it is perfectly possible that conception may be far more readily controlled by *Mindpower* than we had previously imagined.

Since fertility may be governed by mental attitudes, by fears and by anxieties, a woman who is frightened that she will become less attractive to her husband if she gets pregnant may fail to conceive, not because of any physical abnormality, but simply because of her approach and attitude to potential motherhood.

An infertile woman who wants to use her *Mindpower* to help, rather than hinder, her ambition for motherhood should read the following notes, particularly if she is eager to conceive but remains inexplicably infertile.

1. Could you be harbouring any doubts or fears (conscious or unconscious) which might impair your body's willingness to start a pregnancy? Are you worried that your figure will be damaged by having a baby? Are you sure that your relationship will be strengthened rather than weakened by a pregnancy? Are you worried about a pregnancy damaging your career? If you can think of any possible problem which might be produced by your having a baby, you should be aware that your hidden uncertainties may be influencing your ability to become

pregnant.

Try to deal with those problems in as straightforward and as honest a way as possible. Talk about the prospects of motherhood with your partner and your employer. Make up your mind positively about your yearnings for motherhood.

2. You may be able to help yourself by thinking about the priorities and purposes in your life. Do you know what things are most important to you? How important is your career? And how important is your family? Difficult though it may be to answer these questions, you must decide exactly where your priorities lie if you are to overcome any hidden barriers to conception.

You may be able to help yourself by deciding that you will work part-time for a while and resume full-time employment at some specific future date. Perhaps you should also be thinking now about how many other children you are going to have. (You can always change your mind, of course, but a positive decision now will eradicate any temporary uncertainty.)

3. Think carefully about your relationships. Does your partner want a baby too? Do you have any doubts about your personal relationships? Are there likely to be any new problems with people who will play an important role in your life during and after your pregnancy?

4. Fear can make a woman infertile. Try to eradicate your fears about pregnancy by learning as much as you can about what happens to a woman during pregnancy.

5. Build up your self-confidence. Try to think of the ways in which pregnancy may enhance your appearance rather than damage it (for example, if you think your breasts are too small, pregnancy may enlarge them).

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6. Learn to relax your mind as thoroughly as you possibly can. There is evidence available to show that women who work under stress may have difficulty in conceiving.

Menopausal problems

Between the ages of forty and fifty-five most women reach the menopause. Their glands slow down the production of sex hormones, their ovaries stop producing eggs and their periods cease. They are no longer likely to get pregnant.

The problems that are commonly associated with the menopause are largely caused by the fall in oestrogen levels and the symptoms produced at this time may include (in order of frequency):

Hot flushes and sweats
Anxiety, depression, irritability, tiredness, sleeplessness
Irregularities of the menstrual period
A fall in sexual interest and some pain on intercourse
Aches and pains – headaches and joint pains being commonest
Hair and skin changes. The skin becomes dry and wrinkles become unusually apparent. The head hair becomes thin and paradoxically hair appears where it isn't wanted – on the face, for example.
Inability to remember things and to concentrate
A dry and sometimes sore vagina
A general loss of confidence and a feeling of not being quite so much a woman
Urinary problems such as incontinence
A burning or strange taste in the mouth
An increased incidence of broken bones

Treating the problems which so often accompany the menopause is something of a challenge. Occasionally, of course, if specific problems are troublesome enough, specific solutions can be tried. Calcium supplements will help prevent bone weaknesses. Oestrogen will help give dry vaginal walls more suppleness. And sometimes a mental state of depression accompanying the change will be so severe that anti-depressant therapy will be required.

In addition to the physical problems associated with the hormonal changes produced by the menopause, the average woman in her fifties will be facing changing circumstances which will put her under pressure and will produce stress and anxiety.

These pressures are significant because the hormonal changes which produce the typical symptoms of the menopause – the flushing, the hot sweats and so on – are greatly influenced by the mental attitude of the individual concerned. A woman who is embarrassed by her flushing will go even redder. A woman who fears that her menopausal symptoms are instantly obvious to everyone around will draw attention to herself by her nervous behaviour. A woman who is worried that the cessation of her periods will be accompanied by a vast series of uncomfortable and distressing symptoms will almost certainly suffer from a series of uncomfortable and distressing symptoms. And a woman who is worried about her partner or her children will also suffer more from menopausal problems.

However, just as the symptoms accompanying the menopause can be made worse by each individual's mental approach, so those symptoms can be minimised if the individual has the correct mental approach. The principles of Mindpower are designed to enable women to find that right attitude.

1. Many women in their fifties lack purpose. Their children may have left home and retirement may loom ahead. Inevitably, they frequently find their lives without direction. If you are suffering from menopausal problems, ask yourself if your life needs purpose. If the answer is 'yes' try to create new targets, aims and ambitions. Start studying at a local college or take a correspondence course in something that has always interested you. Start up your own business. Take on added responsibilities.

2. Menopausal problems are often made worse by lack of personal confidence. Work on your self-confidence.

3. Use imagery techniques to help you overcome your physical symptoms. If you feel that you are getting hot and red, try to think of yourself sitting or standing somewhere extremely cold. Imagine that you are standing in several inches of snow, or plunging into a cold bath or taking part in an Arctic expedition. Your skin temperature will fall and the amount of flushing that takes place will be kept to an absolute minimum.

Menstrual problems

Every month a woman's womb lining builds up ready to receive a fertilised egg. The growth of the lining, or endometrium, is governed by hormones produced by the ovaries. If sperm get into the womb at or around the time of ovulation and an egg is fertilised, the lining will remain where it is. If no egg is fertilised, the cells of the lining will be discharged from the womb ready for a whole new cycle of events to begin. The discharge of the lining makes up the contents of a woman's monthly period.

The length of the average cycle (from the start of one period to the start of the next) is twenty-eight days, but anything between twenty-one days and forty-two days can be regarded as perfectly normal. The important thing is not so much the length of the cycle but its regularity. If a woman regularly has a thirty-five day cycle, that is normal for her.

The period itself, or bleeding phase, usually lasts for between two and seven days. The average bleed lasts for four or five days. Again it is the pattern and regularity that is important. So, if a woman normally has a six-day period, a three-day period will be abnormal for her. And if a woman normally has a three-day period, a six-day period will be abnormal.

Period problems normally fall into one or more of four main categories: absent periods, heavy periods, irregular periods and painful periods. The absence of menstrual periods doesn't always mean that there is something wrong, of course. Young girls who haven't yet reached puberty don't have periods and nor do women who have passed through the menopause. During pregnancy, when a fertilised egg has landed on the endometrium, there won't be any periods. After pregnancy two out of three women who breastfeed their babies still haven't started having their periods again by the time their baby is three months old.

When there isn't a straightforward explanation for the absence of periods, there can be a number of possible reasons for a woman not to have a monthly bleed. Excessive dieting, anorexia nervosa and some drugs can all stop periods coming when they are expected.

Heavy periods can be caused by a variety of factors. Sometimes the excess blood is produced by hormonal changes. Sometimes an excess bleed can be caused by inflammatory disease, fibroids, an incomplete abortion or an intrauterine contraceptive device. And clearly the first objective must be to identify a specific cause if one can be found. Once the problem has been isolated, a specific medical or surgical remedy may be available.

Irregular periods can be caused by all sorts of problems and always need investigating. They can be caused by hormonal problems, cervical lesions, polyps and a dozen other things. The solution obviously depends upon the cause, but the contraceptive pill is often the answer.

Painful periods are usually divided into two main groups: those which start a year or two after puberty (known as primary dysmenorrhoea) and those which start after years of painless menstruation (known as secondary dysmenorrhoea). The onset of pain in primary dysmenorrhoea usually comes at puberty, and it is caused by the uterine contractions which the production of prostaglandins has inspired. It is a colicky sort of pain, coming a few hours before menstruation, lasting for about a day and sometimes being accompanied by nausea, sweating, fainting and constipation. The pain is usually situated in the lower part of the abdomen and it usually goes into the thighs and lower part of the buttocks. Two thirds of the girls who develop primary dysmenorrhoea have a family history of such pains and many girls who suffer badly have been warned by their mothers to expect a lot of pain and suffering when their periods start. At the very least they will have seen their mothers suffering and learnt to associate periods with pain.

Secondary dysmenorrhoea can be produced in a number of different ways. It always (by definition) develops after years of pain-free menstruation and can be caused by infections, endometriosis, pelvic inflammatory disease, fibroids, polyps, cancer, intrauterine contraceptive devices, bowel disorders, skeletal problems, urinary disorders and just about anything else you can think of.

Of these four types of period problem, the two that are most likely to be alleviated by using *Mindpower* are the first and the last. When periods are missing it is often because the woman concerned is worried about something. Classically the young girl or woman who is worried that she might be pregnant will have a late period or miss one completely.

Under these circumstances there can be little doubt that it is the power of the mind over the body that is having the dramatic effect. And since the period is absent because of the effect of stress on the mind the solution should be clear: the answer is for the woman to relax her mind as effectively as she possibly can. She should spend ten or fifteen minutes three or four times a day deliberately relaxing her mind by daydreaming. She should imagine that she is lying somewhere quiet and peaceful with no worries and no cares. She should feel the warm sun on her face and the soft sand of a warm beach on her back. She should allow the sounds and smells of a sunny day at the seaside to wash away the problems and pressures of her life.

The problems will still be there when she returns from her daydreams, of course. But she will return refreshed and the stress on her body will have been reduced. The result may well be that her periods will resume quite normally.

The other menstrual problem particularly well suited to treatment with *Mindpower* is period pain. Although doctors continue to treat menstrual pains with drugs of many kinds, it has been shown that mental attitudes play a very significant part in the development of this problem. Consequently, analysing and dealing with attitudes, suspicions and anxieties is far more likely to lead to a significant, long-term improvement.

The pains associated with menstruation cause countless thousands of women considerable discomfort every month. The truth is, however, teenage girls are often encouraged to expect their menstrual cycles to be marked by several days of pain. Well-meaning mothers and doctors, and not so well meaning advertisers, all help to perpetuate this suspicion and turn it into an expectation.

Mindpower can help in the following practical ways.

1. Imagery is an excellent way to deal with pains of many different kinds. For the specific, abdominal pains associated with menstrual problems there are two techniques which you can try.

First, try clasping your right hand as tightly as you possibly can, imagining in your mind that, as the muscles of your hand contract, so the muscles of your uterus contract too. Try to see your hand as your uterus or womb. Keep your hand like this for a minute or two. Now, slowly relax the muscles of your hand and allow your fingers to unfold. As you do this, your uterine muscles will relax too and your pain will slowly fade away.

Second, as an alternative, imagine that your right hand is as cold as it can possibly be. Try to freeze it so much that it feels quite numb. Then place your frozen hand over the area where your abdominal pain is greatest and let the numbness soak down through your abdominal wall to the site where it is needed most.

2. Learn to relax your mind thoroughly and completely.

Migraine

Migraine sufferers have to put up with headaches, itchy eyes, stuffed up noses, mood changes, sensitivity to light and noise, and nausea. The headaches, commonly one-sided, can be particularly severe and difficult to treat.

Although there is still some confusion about precisely what happens during a migraine attack, it seems that the problem is largely a result of the body’s inappropriate response to stress. Misled into thinking that it can cope with a stressful situation by preparing muscles for direct physical action, the body increases the supply of blood to the muscles and reduces the supply to the brain. Then, when the threat seems to be lifting, the blood vessels to the brain reopen and the blood surges into the tissues. It is this sudden flow of blood which seems to cause the pain associated with a migraine attack.

So far doctors and alternative medical practitioners have all failed to produce any truly useful solutions which can be used to help migraine sufferers. But there are several principles of *Mindpower* which can be applied with good effect.

1. There is a powerful link between stress and migraine – or to be more accurate, what an individual perceives as a stressful problem, and migraine.

Migraine attacks will, therefore, be kept to a minimum by your reducing your exposure to unnecessary stresses. Sort out the real priorities in your life. Make sure that you do not spend too much time dealing with problems which may be of relatively slight importance.

In order to cut down your exposure to unnecessarily stressful situations you may need to assert yourself occasionally. If you constantly find yourself being manipulated into doing things which you find unpleasant or uncomfortable, ask yourself why you succumb to such pressure. Try to understand how others manipulate you and strengthen your resolve to manage your own affairs and create your own order of priorities.

2. Learn to relax your mind. Once you have mastered the technique you will be able to use it whenever you are in a potentially stressful situation.

3. Migraine sufferers often lack confidence. Consciously build up your self-confidence.

4. You may be able to get rid of a migraine attack (you will certainly be able to minimise its effects) by using imagery techniques. Since the pain associated with a migraine attack is caused primarily by the constriction of the blood vessels supplying the brain, the aim of any imagery procedure must be to help enlarge the vessels concerned. The trouble is, of course, that it is extremely difficult to open up the arteries supplying the brain – largely because it is difficult to tell just how effective an imagery exercise is, since neither the vessels nor the brain can be seen. However, since the blood vessels to the hands are constricted whenever the blood vessels to the brain are too there is a solution: you must make a conscious effort to direct blood into your hands.

This is easier than it sounds. You simply need to imagine that your hands are getting warmer and warmer. As you do this your blood vessels will open to ensure that more blood goes to the tissues. And as the blood vessels in your hands open, so will the blood vessels to your brain.

Overweight

In half the world the majority of illnesses which kill and disable are caused by a lack of food. In the other half of the world – the half in which you and I live – the majority of illnesses are caused by or made worse by our eating too much food.

It is impossible to work out precisely how many people die every year because they are overweight – just as it is impossible to work out precisely how many people die because they smoke – but there isn't a shadow of a doubt that obesity is a major cause of death. Overeating and overweight are together probably the single biggest cause of death in the Western world.

If you are overweight, you will be more likely to get high blood pressure, develop heart disease, develop diabetes or have a stroke. In addition, obesity is likely to make your life unpleasant and uncomfortable. It makes crippling diseases such as asthma and arthritis far worse than they need be. And it commonly causes mental problems such as anxiety and depression.

People get fat for a number of different reasons, of course. Some people eat because they are depressed. Others eat because they need comfort. But the one thing most overweight individuals have in common is that they do not listen to their bodies telling them when they have had enough to eat. They do not eat to satisfy their hunger; they eat to satisfy social and emotional rather than physical needs.

Deep within our brains we all have an appetite control centre, itself controlled by the amount of sugar circulating in our blood. This centre can tell us exactly when we need to eat and precisely how much food we need to eat. There is no doubt that if we would only listen to our appetite control centres, we would never get fat. We would eat the right balance of food and the right quantities of food. But we don't listen. We eat for all the wrong reasons.

Think back to when you were small and you'll probably remember that you always ate at fixed meal times. You may well have been encouraged to eat particular types of food. And you were very probably encouraged to finish up all the food on your plate. You were probably told that it was naughty to leave food on the side of your plate when there were people starving in Africa and India who would have been very grateful for the food you didn't really want. Indeed, if you were bottle-fed, your 'training' probably started before you could even sit down at the table and start feeding yourself. Your mother will have encouraged you to keep sucking until the bottle was empty – even if you didn't really want any more. (Breastfed babies are allowed to obey their appetite control centres for the simple but very effective reason that their mothers, while feeding them, can't see how much is left in the container.)

Together all these distorted behavioural patterns help to ensure that you grow up accustomed to overruling your appetite control centre. Eventually your eating habits are controlled not by your body's requirements but by social needs and requirements. You grow up accustomed to the idea of eating at fixed meal times and eating what other people want you to eat. And you eat in the sort of quantities they want to set before you. Look around you next time you eat out – you'll see that most people finish off everything on their plates, however much was put there in the first place. Instead of regulating your appetite by your own needs, you allow your personal eating habits to be controlled by the needs and requirements of others.

You may also have got into the habit of eating while reading, working or watching television. As a result you probably have little idea of what you are eating – or how much – and you just carry on eating until you feel bloated or until everything has gone.

There are several ways in which you can use *Mindpower* to help you regain – and maintain – your natural, healthy weight.

1. Learn to use your intuition to help you tell when you are hungry and when you have had enough to eat. If you listen to your body – and your hunger – and eat only when you need to eat, you will eat in the quantities required by your body.

Get into the habit of eating not according to strict meal times but according to your natural feelings. And, just as important, get into the habit of stopping eating when you are no longer hungry. To do this you must concentrate on what you are doing while you are eating.

2. Learn to be more assertive when you are eating. If you continue to allow other people to determine your dietary intake, you will undoubtedly remain overweight. If you let other people decide how much food to put on your plate, how many portions to give you and when you can stop eating, you will end up with a long-term weight problem. If you are to control your weight permanently, you must learn to control your own intake of food.

Just remember that it is the people who insist on your having a second helping of food who are behaving unreasonably. Imagine what your feeling would be if a friend had the nerve to say ‘no’ to an overforceful hostess.

3. If you are planning to lose weight, create a sensible weight loss programme for yourself. If you start off with a longterm plan to lose four stone, you will probably lose heart well before you’ve lost your first stone. The target is too great and too unattainable. Begin with a shorter-term goal – intending to lose say ten pounds – and you will gain your objective far more speedily. The success will give you more confidence and that will boost the chances of your long-term dieting success. You’ll think of yourself as a winner.

4. If you want to lose weight from a particular part of your body, try and imagine yourself the shape that you would like to be. Try not to think too much about your large hips, overgenerous bottom or whatever. If you think constantly about your bad points, you will be forcing negative images into your mind and reinforcing your own vision of yourself as an overweight fatty. Try to think instead of the sort of body you would like to have. Think of yourself as slender but shapely. The more realistic you can make this image, the more likely you are to succeed in your weight loss campaign.

Pain

The relationship between pain and the mind has been well established for a long time. And it isn’t difficult to find practical examples of how a person’s mental state can affect the way he feels or responds to pain. You may not approve of boxing as a ‘sport’, but next time there is a boxing match on television take a look at the two protagonists when a bout comes to an end. Even though both will have received a considerable amount of punishment, and may well be battered and bruised to quite similar extents, the loser will seem to be in much greater pain than the winner.

Or take a look at the athletes who’ve just completed a race. The winner will look fit and fresh and he’ll carry on running round to get the applause of the crowd. The runner who came second will be standing with his hands on his knees, gasping for breath and in obvious pain.

Whatever the source of your pain, there is little doubt that it will be made much worse by worry, anxiety and fear. If you can relax, calm yourself and amuse yourself, it will be reduced. Here are some of the specific ways in which you can use *Mindpower* to help yourself deal with pain.

1. Remember that we all sometimes use pain as an excuse to enable us to avoid unpleasant or difficult tasks. If you suffer from any recurrent or persistent pain that could be associated with some specific responsibility, try to deal with your fears and anxieties about that responsibility, rather than simply attacking the pain.

In other words, if you always get a headache when you have a particular meeting to attend, ask yourself what it is about that meeting that upsets you so much. If you always get a pain in your stomach when certain relatives are due to arrive, you will only obtain a long-term solution to your pain by resolving your conflict with your relatives.

2. Tension and anxiety can make you far more susceptible to pain – and will make any pain that you do feel far more intense. You must learn to relax your mind if you are to lower your susceptibility to pain and increase your chances of defeating pains when they arrive as a result of stress and pressure.

3. Imagery techniques are vitally important in pain control. Relax your mind and then try to imagine that you

can see your body’s self-healing mechanisms at work. Imagine that you can see the white cells in your blood heading towards the site of your pain and taking with them valuable pain-relieving hormones. Imagine that you can see your white cells patrolling your body as defenders of your peace.

As an alternative try taking yourself outside your body and watching yourself from the other side of the room. Then watch while a nurse soothes your brow and offers you comfort and support. Imagine that there are loving, gentle, compassionate people all around you working with you to help ease your pain. When the pain has been banished, return to your body.

4. Pain is often made worse by sadness and unhappiness. You can make a small pain worse by mixing with miserable people. Conversely you can reduce the extent of a pain by smiling, laughing and enjoying yourself. Ask yourself whether there is enough fun and laughter in your life. Do you take things too seriously? If your life is too serious, try to find time for more games and for enjoying yourself a little more.

5. Love, care and affection will all help relieve pain. Try to make sure that there is plenty of love and affection in your life. And try to make sure too that no one who is close to you is deprived of love and affection. (You should take care not to offer love *only* when a friend or relative is in pain. If you do then they will gradually come to realise that in order to win your affection they will have to exhibit signs of pain or discomfort.)

Phobias

All of us have our own particular likes and dislikes. One friend of mine doesn’t much care for cats. Another has confessed to feeling slightly uneasy when he watches snakes on television. Usually these likes and dislikes are reasonably well controlled but occasionally they can turn into something much stronger – and produce genuine, specific, physical symptoms of anxiety. They become phobias.

People who don’t just dislike cats, but who are so scared of them that they become genuinely ill if a cat is around, are said to suffer from ailurophobia. Individuals who can’t stand heights are said to suffer from acrophobia. Those who can’t cope with horses have equinophobia, and those who get exceptionally and unreasonably frightened of the dark are said to have nyctophobia. Xenophobia is a fear of strangers, pyrophobia is a fear of fire, brantophobia is a fear of thunder, claustrophobia is a fear of confined or enclosed spaces such as small rooms, lifts or cupboards. Agoraphobia – one of the commonest phobias of all – is a fear of going out of doors into open spaces.

When a phobia develops, it is often possible to find some specific reason for it. Someone who is frightened of dogs may well have acquired his fear after some unhappy childhood experience. Someone who has claustrophobia may have acquired that fear after being accidentally or deliberately trapped in a cupboard. A patient with agoraphobia may be frightened to go out of doors because she lacks self-confidence and feels frightened or inadequate when faced with the pressures and tensions of the real world.

Because we now understand how phobias develop, it is quite possible for us to do a great deal to help one another avoid them. When a child is frightened by a dog, it is wise to encourage him to take a mild interest in dogs. If a child falls off a chair, help him back up on to the chair straight away, make a joke about it and keep a tight hold of him so that he will feel both reassured and secure.

When phobias have already developed, *Mindpower* can be used to help find a permanent solution.

1. Phobias often get worse because we allow our imaginations to take over and produce exaggerated fears. It is, however, just as possible to use the imagination to help a patient eradicate a phobia.

A patient with agoraphobia, for example, will be able to lessen her fears by spending some time each day imagining herself walking out of her home, along the street and down the road to her nearest row of shops. She must then imagine herself having a conversation with someone she meets, buying whatever she needs and then returning home. The successful image she creates for herself will enable her to overcome what might otherwise develop into a major social problem.

Similarly, a patient with a phobia of cats should spend some time each day imagining himself first watching cats, then approaching them and finally stroking them. His imagination will have helped create his phobia; it can also help demolish his phobia.

2. People who suffer from phobias suffer from a lack of self-confidence and self-assurance. Any phobic individual should, therefore, spend a little time thinking of a list of all his or her personal virtues.

Pregnancy

Pregnancy is not an illness but pregnant women are often treated as though they were ill. And, even more significantly, they are often encouraged to think of themselves as being ill.

Right from the very start of her pregnancy a woman has to visit her doctor, have her blood pressure taken, have a urine sample examined and fill in a form or two. She is give a blood test and told that she’ll have to start taking iron tablets. Her friends and relatives will ask her whether she has suffered from any early morning sickness.

Against this background it is hardly surprising that many women do suffer an enormous amount of discomfort and unhappiness while they are pregnant. They are never given the chance to think of the baby they are carrying; they are encouraged only to think of the symptoms from which they are suffering.

Because she is concerned about the risks to her own health the pregnant woman will be under a quite exceptional amount of stress. When the general practitioner looking after her makes non-committal noises after taking her blood pressure, she will leave the surgery terrified that she is going to develop unpleasant complications. When the obstetrician at the hospital mutters something she doesn't understand about her unborn baby, she will spend the next month worrying herself sick (often literally) that there is something wrong.

Under these circumstances it is perhaps surprising not that a few women do suffer from high blood pressure and severe morning sickness, but that so many women manage to get through their pregnancy without any complications at all. In order to get through the months of a pregnancy with the least possible risk of complications developing because of mental pressure, anxiety and worry I suggest that expectant mothers protect themselves in these simple ways.

1. Never be afraid to ask if there is something that you do not understand. Fear of the unknown is one of the most damaging fears of all. If your doctor says something that you don't entirely understand, ask him to explain himself. Or ask someone else to explain what he meant. Do not simply take your fears home with you and allow them to build and grow in your mind. If you do then you will worry yourself into an illness.

2. Always think of yourself as a perfectly healthy woman who happens to be pregnant. Remember that your visits to the surgery and the hospital are probably unnecessary. Unless some abnormality has been discovered (and in the vast majority of pregnancies no abnormality is found), your visits are preventative rather than curative. You are no more ill than you would be when visiting the surgery for a routine vaccination or an insurance medical. If you think of yourself as a patient, you will probably become a patient.

3. Concentrate on the positive, joyful aspects of your pregnancy as much as possible. Remember that many men find pregnant women particularly attractive. Remember that unless you find it painful or uncomfortable, there is no reason why you and your partner should not have sex even though you are pregnant. And remember the baby you are carrying in your womb. Think of yourself as a mother-to-be rather than someone enduring the agonies of pregnancy.

4. If you develop early morning sickness, remember that it is a common, usually mild condition that rarely requires treatment and does not usually last for long. It is probably caused by nothing more complex or threatening than a simple hormonal change. It can be helped by avoiding sickly, fatty smells, alleviated with the aid of simple medicines which your doctor can prescribe. It will most likely disappear as your hormone levels change. It is rarely likely to be a threat to you or your baby.

As your pregnancy nears its end you will find yourself feeing other problems. There are, indeed, quite a number of culturally conditioned stimuli seemingly designed to ensure that the pregnant woman suffers as much as possible while giving birth. For instance, the natural muscle contractions which she will have when giving birth are not known simply as muscle contractions but as 'labour pains' – a phrase almost guaranteed to ensure that some form of artificial pain relief will be required.

There are a number of ways in which *Mindpower* can be used to lessen the pain and discomfort associated with childbirth.

1 Pregnant women are usually encouraged to spend a good deal of time thinking about the pain they will have to suffer. This medical preoccupation with pain invariably means that pain is a problem during the delivery period. However, by replacing the unpleasant expectations encouraged by doctors with happy thoughts of the baby that is to come, a mother-to-be can often reduce the amount of analgesic that she requires.

I'm not suggesting that childbirth can ever be entirely free of pain, or that there is anything wrong with a woman who feels pain during childbirth. What I am suggesting is that the pain of childbirth can often be helped by replacing negative images with positive ones.

2. Fear produces tension and when muscles are tense they are easily damaged. It is hardly surprising therefore that pregnant women who approach childbirth in a state of fear are more than likely to end up suffering from damaged tissues and requiring medical attention. It always helps if women approaching childbirth learn how to relax their minds thoroughly with daydreaming techniques.

Sexual problems

Many of the commonest and most destructive sexual problems arise because our early experiences are reinforced and restimulated when circumstances trigger our memories.

A patient of mine called Nicola had tremendous problems with her marriage because she steadfastly refused to let her husband look at her unclothed. When she finally plucked up the courage to tell me about her problem, she actually found it impossible to say the word ‘naked’. Not unnaturally her husband found her reticence difficult to understand and even more difficult to accept. He had a fairly normal, healthy sex drive. He didn’t expect his wife to take part in any exceptional sexual callisthenics. But he rather fancied the idea of being able to admire her naked body. He got fed up of having to make love to her with the lights off, the bedclothes pulled tight around her chin and her nightdress hardly ruffled.

After talking to Nicola at some length, I discovered that as a girl she had been brought up by extremely strict parents. Her fear of nakedness and her terrible embarrassment had been developed during a series of summer holidays spent by the seaside on the south coast. Unlike other girls of her own age, Nicola had not been allowed to wear a bathing costume (let alone a bikini) but had been made to stay fully clothed on the sand while others were splashing and having fun in the sea. In a rash moment one summer she had hitched up her skirt and paddled her feet in the water, but her father had seen her exhibiting her knees to all and sundry and had sent her back to their boarding house in disgrace.

That incident, and one or two others like it, had established in Nicola a terrible fear of what might happen if she were to allow others to see her body ‘unclothed’, as she so quaintly and sadly put it. Even as a married woman she couldn’t bury those early inhibitions – at least not until after a great deal of discussion and baring of her soul.

Nicola’s problem was rather exceptional, but it was by no means unique. And although few of us are quite so inhibited, most of us have inhibitions of our own. We feel embarrassed at being touched or seen by strangers or by members of our own sex. Our responses come, as do so many feelings, from what we have learnt as children.

When we are young, we sense when adults are excited, stimulated, shocked or disgusted by things that they have seen and we learn to respond accordingly. Our sexual anxieties, fears and tensions are all created by those whose actions we followed and respected when we were young. It is perhaps hardly surprising that in later life pleasure and fear so often come together when sexual feelings are aroused.

In order to deal successfully with your own sexual problems, you must first try to discover what forces have been involved in helping you to form your own tastes, predilections, ambitions and weaknesses. Try to identify your personal attitudes towards sex and then search through your past memories looking for possible links and explanations. Your sexual tastes will have been moulded by your parents, your teachers, your friends and your earliest sexual partners.

What you learnt as a child will influence your attitudes and preferences as an adult. So, for example, if you were discovered in the act of making love on the living-room carpet, you may, in later years, find that a most stimulating memory. You may find yourself powerfully stimulated by the thought of making love on the living-room carpet. On the other hand, of course, you may remember the incident with such shame and horror that the very thought of it still makes you quite impotent with fear. If your parents disapproved of sex and taught you that it was something rather dirty, you may only be able to obtain real sexual gratification by having secret assignations in seedy surroundings.

Whatever sexual problems you may develop (and whatever the reasons for those problems), you will very probably be able to use *Mindpower* to help you in a number of ways. These techniques can be used either in conjunction with professional advice or by themselves.

1. You may be able to improve your sexual potency or appeal by learning to fantasise. There is a powerful link between sexual appeal and physical danger and you may be able to use these links to enhance your personal sexuality.

   If, for example, you imagine that you are involved in a fast car chase and that your life is repeatedly endangered, your body will respond to the imagined danger. Your heart will beat faster, your pupils will enlarge, your face will become flushed and you will sweat a little. All these changes are also signals which suggest a high level of sexual arousal and you will, therefore, appear more attractive to members of the opposite sex.

2. If you are male and you have difficulty in having an erection, fantasising will probably help you. Think of a woman whom you find distinctly attractive and then imagine her making overtures towards you in circumstances which you find appealing. Allow your mind to roam free and unfettered. Imagine that she undresses herself and then you. Allow your imagination to construct a powerfully erotic screenplay.

3. The other common male problem (apart from impotence) is premature ejaculation. You should be able to conquer this problem by creating a non-erotic fantasy in your imagination. As you start making love, imagine that you are doing something distinctly non-arousing – checking your accounts, for example. Or doing some

gardening. Your imagination's dull fantasy will slow down your sexual response.

4. Many sexual problems are caused by a lack of self-confidence. Make a list of your sexual strengths, physical virtues and personal achievements. Think of the aspects of your personality which are sexually appealing. Imagine ways in which others might find you particularly attractive. Invent a role for yourself as a sex symbol. See also pages 102-106.

5. If you have difficulty in initiating or maintaining sexual relationships, ask yourself what goes wrong with your relationships with other people. Do you expect too much? Do you promise too much? Do you promise too little? By asking yourself such specific questions about your sexual relationships, you should be able to find where the faults lie.

Sleeplessness

Every night millions of people take pills to help them get to sleep. But, sadly, many of those sleeping pills cause more problems than they solve. If you take sleeping pills for more than a week or two, you are quite likely to find yourself needing to increase your nightly dose of drugs for the simple reason that sleeping tablets can actually produce insomnia when taken for more than seven days or so.

If you have difficulty in sleeping at night, your first task should be to find out exactly why you have difficulty in sleeping. Once you have identified the cause of your problem, there may well be a very simple solution.

Answer these simple questions.

1. Are you currently taking a sleeping tablet or tranquilliser?

If you are, then the pills you are taking may well be contributing to your problem. Talk to your doctor about reducing the dose of your tablets, but remember that sleeping pills and tranquillisers need to be reduced under medical supervision. To 'kick' your habit you will need to reduce your nightly dose of pills as gently and as cautiously as you can. You should aim at halving your dosage every fortnight.

2. Are you kept awake by pain?

If you are, you must attempt to treat the cause of your pain. Discuss your problem with your doctor. If he is unable to help you and you cannot get rid of your pains yourself, ask for a second opinion.

3. Are you kept awake by any other symptoms such as breathlessness or cramp?

If you are, you need to visit your doctor for help and advice.

4. Do you have difficulty in getting to sleep because you are too hot or too cold or because you are in some other way uncomfortable?

If you have answered 'yes' to any of these queries, you must make whatever adjustments are necessary to your sleeping arrangements.

5. Are you kept awake by noise?

If so, try sound proofing your bedroom with bookshelves and double glazing. Or try wearing ear plugs.

6. Are you currently trying to lose weight?

People who are slimming seem to get less sleep than others. Their low blood sugar seems to keep them awake.

7. Do you get kept awake by hunger?

If so, have a bite of supper. Don't have anything hot, rich or spicy. A glass of milk and a biscuit should do fine.

8. Do you have to get up at night to pass urine?

If you do, avoid alcohol, tea, coffee and other drinks during the evening. Empty your bladder before retiring. If the problem persists, see your doctor.

9. Do you usually take a nap in the afternoon?

Your inability to get to sleep at night may simply be the result of the fact that you are sleeping too much! Cut out the afternoon nap.

10. Are you depressed?

When depression and sleeplessness go together it is the depression that needs a doctor's treatment.

11. Do you worry because you don't sleep as much as other people you know?

Some people need nine hours sleep a night. Others only need five hours. There is no perfect figure.

12. Do you worry because you don't sleep as much as you used to?

We all need less sleep as we grow older.

13. Do you take any prescribed drugs at all?

Then have a word with your doctor. Some drugs may produce sleeplessness.

If you have still not found a specific reason for your insomnia, it may well be that you are going to bed at night with the day's worries and anxieties buzzing around in your head. If that is the case, it is hardly surprising that you are having difficulty in sleeping. The day's stresses need to be eradicated. Even if you get to sleep with so many problems on your mind, you will probably sleep fitfully since your mind will spend the nocturnal hours playing with all the problems you have left lying around.

In order to rest and relax your mind thoroughly so that you will sleep properly, follow this simple *Mindpower* programme.

1. Relax your body thoroughly before getting into bed. Begin by taking a good brisk walk for ten or fifteen minutes and try to walk as fast as you can. Try to think through any of your day's problems. When you get back from your walk, take out a notebook and a pencil and write down all your problems and worries. Keep that notebook by your side from now on. Every time a new problem or thought pops into your head, write it down.

2. Have a soothing, warm bath for another ten or fifteen minutes. Allow your mind to float quite freely as you bathe. If any fresh thoughts or ideas pop into your head, write them down in your notebook.

3. Go to bed with a relaxing book. This is designed to eradicate the day's troubles from your head. Make sure that you take any pain-killing tablets that have been prescribed for you. Read your book for ten or fifteen minutes. (Making love is an excellent but optional alternative.)

4. Before you lie down, turn off the lights. It helps, incidentally, if your bed is warm. If you have used an electric blanket, make sure that it is turned off.

5. As soon as you lie down close your eyes and create for yourself a soothing relaxing dream.

Smoking

It all started when Christopher Columbus received a gift of tobacco leaves from the natives of San Salvador and brought them back to Europe. Gradually through the centuries which followed, chewing and smoking tobacco spread in popularity all around the world. The habit really caught on, however, when machine-rolled cigarettes were introduced less than a century ago. The introduction of neatly rolled cigarettes led to women starting smoking too.

During the many years that it has taken to reach its present popularity tobacco has been investigated by scientists on many, many occasions. In 1928 researchers isolated nicotine and identified it as an active ingredient of tobacco that was particularly poisonous. Surprisingly there is enough nicotine in the average cigar to kill two people. The only reason why cigars and cigarettes aren't instantly lethal is that the nicotine they contain is taken into the body fairly slowly over a period of time.

In addition to its poisonous qualities, nicotine has a number of effects on the human body. It stimulates the central nervous system and increases electrical activity in the brain, it lowers the skin temperature, causes blood vessels in the skin to narrow, increases the blood pressure and the heart rate and numbs the taste buds on the tongue.

Since it has so many effects on the human body it is perhaps hardly surprising that tobacco is now known to cause or make worse a considerable range of disorders. We tend to think of it as being only the cause of lung cancer, bronchitis and other types of chest infections. But, in fact, smoking is a powerful and important cause of heart disease and high blood pressure. Smoking narrows the arteries and decreases the efficiency of the human heart. A high proportion of the younger men who die from heart disease smoke.

Smoking is also a major cause of stomach ulcers, gastritis and indigestion. Cigarettes have an irritating, damaging effect on the stomach, they help to produce ulcers where there are none and they help to prevent the healing of ulcers that are already present.

Many smokers dismiss the dangers of smoking by arguing that they have known heavy smokers who have been unaffected by tobacco. One man I once met, for example, insisted that his father had smoked fifty cigarettes a day for half a century without having any physical illness at all. That is rather like arguing that because some people have survived serious car crashes without injury, there is no danger in being involved in a serious car crash.

Those who claim that smoking is a harmless activity are, of course, encouraged by those representatives of the tobacco industry who are, for their own quite obvious reasons, anxious to deny the evidence that exists. Few commercial lobbying groups are quite as powerful as the tobacco industry. And few governments are able to be entirely ruthless when it comes to dealing with the tobacco industry. In Britain, for example, in 1992/3 the tobacco industry contributed £7,561 million in taxes. It is difficult for any government to ignore the claims and protestations of such an important tax payer.

But despite all the discussion about whether or not tobacco is dangerous, a growing number of people are now struggling to break the powerful hold that tobacco can have. Convinced by the evidence that they have seen and read, and convinced too no doubt by the fact that they have noticed their own health being damaged by tobacco, hundred of thousands of smokers are struggling to give up tobacco each year. It isn't easy, of course. Smoking is just as addictive as drinking alcohol or using heroin.

Many give up smoking for a short period but within a matter of weeks or months they are smoking again. They fail not because they are lured back by an unbroken physical addiction, but because they have never come face to face with the reasons which led them to smoke in the first place.

If you are planning to give up smoking, you must first find out precisely *why* you do most of your smoking. Occasionally, it is perfectly true, you will smoke to be sociable, or because someone has offered you a cigarette and you have accepted one without really thinking about it. But most of the time when you smoke, you do so to help yourself deal with quite specific problems of one sort or another. You may smoke when you are under a tremendous amount of pressure, for example. Or you may smoke when you are bored.

If you don't find out exactly what those problems are and why you smoke, and you don't find other ways of dealing with those problems, then your chances of giving up tobacco permanently are very limited indeed. *Mindpower*, however, can help you a great deal.

1. If you tend to do most of your smoking when you are under stress or pressure, try to think back to one particular occasion when you can remember smoking and remember being under a tremendous amount of pressure. Try to see the room that you were in and the people you were with. Try to smell the furniture polish and the stale cigarette smoke. Now try to recreate the fears, the anxieties and the apprehensions which were with you as you sat in that room. Try to feel the dryness in your mouth and the sweat on your hands. Try to remember what it was that you were so worried about.

When you have succeeded in creating the background for yourself, try to step back and see yourself sitting in that room. Become an invisible stranger standing in a far corner of the room just watching yourself. And now watch yourself coping perfectly well without needing to light up a cigarette. Watch yourself dealing with all the problems which come up. And watch yourself coping perfectly adequately without the need for a cigarette.

If you practise this imagery technique regularly, you will gradually replace your accustomed image of yourself smoking when under pressure with an image of yourself coping perfectly well without a cigarette.

2. If you do a great deal of your smoking when you are bored, there are two techniques which you can try. First, simply try imagining yourself sitting quiet and still and coping very well with boredom without smoking. See yourself sitting at the breakfast table calmly reading your paper but without a cigarette between your fingers. See yourself sitting on a train without a cigarette in your hand. Create this image of yourself as often as you possibly can and you will gradually build a picture of yourself surviving boredom without tobacco.

Alternatively, try filling your mind with exciting fantasies the next time you are feeling bored. You will, in this way, conquer your boredom and banish your need for a cigarette. Try to see yourself making love to someone you find extremely attractive. Imagine yourself doing something daring, exciting and glamorous.

3. If you decide that you do most of your smoking because you lack self-confidence, read the relevant section. As you build up your confidence, your need for cigarettes will gradually disappear.

Note: You can use the above techniques to help you conquer other bad habits such as nail biting and stuttering.

AFTERWORD: PUTTING MINDPOWER INTO PERSPECTIVE

The strength of Mindpower lies in its simplicity. The aim is to enable you to conquer the powers that cause illness and then to turn those powers round to produce good health. You cannot change your personality and you may not be able to change your circumstances. But you can change the way that you allow your personality and your environment to interact; that is the simple strength of *Mindpower*.

Follow the *Mindpower* philosophy and you will benefit in two distinct ways: when you are well you'll be less likely to fall ill; and when you are ill you'll be more likely to get well.

There are two final points which I think are worth stressing. First, *Mindpower* is not an alternative to orthodox medicine. Eventually, I hope that *Mindpower* will encourage patients to think of health care in an entirely different way. I believe that we as individuals must take more responsibility for our bodies and our minds. But *Mindpower* will not replace medical treatment. There will always be a place for doctors and healers; they are needed as technicians, to be called as aides and assistants in the fight for good health and happiness. *Mindpower* offers a new approach, a new philosophy, a new dimension and a new priority.

Second, *Mindpower* is essentially a philosophy designed for the individual. When I first started talking about the idea of *Mindpower,* I was delighted to find that it was accepted with tremendous enthusiasm by just about everyone with whom I came into contact. But, at the same time I was horrified when several people wanted to turn *Mindpower* into a genuine form of 'alternative medicine'. Two separate individuals wanted to launch a chain of *Mindpower* clinics across Britain – with Vernon Coleman as resident guru. Another, more ambitious, wanted a chain of clinics around the world.

They had missed the point. *Mindpower* offers an opportunity for you the reader to take charge of your own life, to look after your own medical destiny and to take back some of the responsibility which has, in recent years, been taken from you by traditional interventionists.

There will be no *Mindpower* clinics, no *Mindpower* products, and no *Mindpower* practitioners. Mindpower is an idea, an approach and a philosophy of life. It is a book. No more and no less. But I hope it will change your life.

We hope you found this book useful. If so we would be grateful if you would post a favourable review on Amazon.

Vernon Coleman is a qualified doctor and the author of over 100 books (including *Bodypower* and *Spiritpower*) which have sold over two million copies in the UK and been translated into 25 languages. There is a list of his books on his author page on Amazon. Many books by Vernon Coleman are available as kindle books on Amazon. For more information please visit http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

The Best Money Book You'll Ever Read

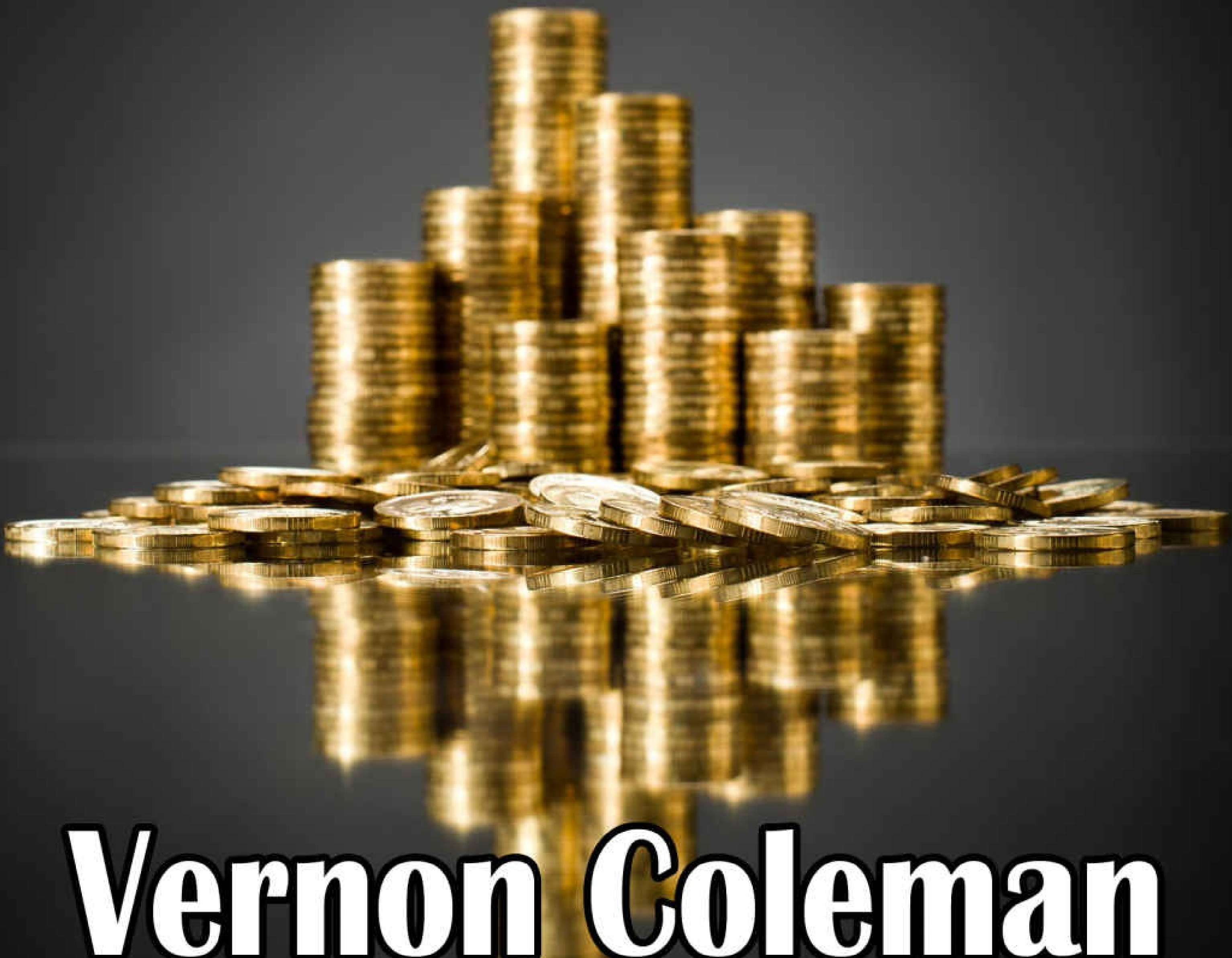

Vernon Coleman

TACTICS AND STRATEGIES FOR THE THINKING INVESTOR

MONEYPOWER

THE SECRETS OF POWER OVER MONEY AND THE ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLES OF MACRO INVESTING

Vernon Coleman

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Vernon Coleman is the bestselling author of 100 books which have sold over two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK and been translated into 25 languages. Many of his books are available as Kindle books on Amazon. For a full list of available books please visit Vernon Coleman's author page on Amazon. For more information please visit www.vernoncoleman.com

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NOTE

This book is a general investment guide; an introduction to a wide variety of matters relating to money. The author does not offer specific investment advice of any kind and *Moneypower* is intended as general guidance and to help readers formulate their own, personal, independent investment philosophies.

INTRODUCTION

'Have you a good map in this house?'
THE DUKE OF WELLINGTON, SPEAKING TO HIS HOSTESS AS HE LEFT A BALL HELD IN BRUSSELS ON THE EVE OF THE BATTLE OF WATERLOO. AS THE DUKE SPOKE, NAPOLEON AND HIS ARMY WERE JUST NINE MILES AWAY.

Investing isn't taught at school (though it should be – it certainly is more deserving of a place on the education syllabus than sex). When it comes to finding a place to invest their money most people blunder around; accepting advice where it is offered, but never really having the foggiest idea what they are doing. People who wouldn't trust a second-hand car salesman or an estate agent will willingly trust a bank manager or an investment adviser.

Everyone knows the adage: 'If you think education is expensive, try ignorance'. But no one takes it seriously. Primary schools should be teaching pupils about compound interest and the shortcomings of unit trusts instead of organising compulsory lessons on the joys of anal sex. It is through ignorance that so many people end up failing to budget properly. It is through rows about money (not sex) that marriages most commonly fail. It is because people don't have the faintest idea what they are getting into that homes are repossessed. If you don't teach yourself about money then you will stay ignorant because the state's educational system will most certainly leave you ignorant.

Very few people understand just how important money will be in their lives. They see money as merely a tool for purchasing carpets, television sets and motor cars. How dull and prosaic and unimaginative. It's like saying sex is about having children. Money also provides security, freedom and endless opportunities. Money can help you escape from difficult circumstances. Money can sometimes even free you from the many petty tyrannies which rule our lives. Money can enrich your life. Or at least it can do if you know how to use it properly.

Most people fritter away their money. They think of saving as boring. They regard investing as something done exclusively by clever people in expensive suits.

Amazingly few people understand money management which, although it isn't taught in our schools, is one of the most important skills anyone can have. Most people think they can trust the experts; they think that money management is boring, too complex, or beneath them. Most people think that you need years of training to understand shares, bonds and money markets. None of this is true. Most of the spectacularly successful investors have never had any proper or orthodox training. And if you do decide to manage your own money you will have one huge advantage over everyone else: you will always care more about your money than anyone else will.

I think the future is exceedingly worrying. To survive you will need to understand money; you will need to make the most of what you have available. And so will your children.

* * *

I used to find it terribly difficult to get money matters straight in my head. One problem was the fact that I found myself being bombarded with so much confusing information; so much deceit and deliberate misinformation.

Like most people, I had never had any training in understanding money. I spent the first 20 years of my life at school and although I was taught a great deal of stuff that was never of any value to me (other than in enabling me to pass examinations so that I could learn more useless stuff), I was never given as much as one minute's advice on how to look after or invest my money.

Prudent adults with no formal medical training take a first aid course. How many attend genuinely unbiased investment courses?

* * *

I have wanted to write a book on investing for years; a book describing the things I have learned and the things I have worked out for myself and which have enabled me to be successful as an investor.

This book doesn't offer you the names of shares you can buy to make a fortune. Such a list would, in any case, be out of date by the time you read it. And I would worry that sceptical readers might fear that I was recommending shares I already held so that the price would rise. Nor does this book contain long lists of useful websites or tips on using charts. It doesn't even contain boastful examples of successful investments I've made.

There is nothing in this book about convertibles, preference shares, guaranteed income bonds, contracts for difference, futures, spread betting, corporate bonds or horse racing. Some of these investments are sound and useful. But I believe that to be a successful investor I have to accept that I need to restrict the areas in which I choose to invest. In order to produce a good return I prefer to use the time I'm prepared to allocate to finance on taking an overview. Besides, my experience tells me that this approach is more profitable. (I have in the past made investments in most of the areas I now ignore.)

This is a philosophical book about investing. My aim is to tell you the things I've learned about making money from money.

You remember the old Chinese adage about fishing?

Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day but teach him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.

This is a 'teach you how to invest' book.

There isn't a single tip on how to get rich in this book. You can't turn to page 128 and find a list of recommended shares.

I hate those books. They are useless. If the guys writing them really have a list of foolproof shares why are they telling the world? And surely by the time the books come out the shares will have either gone up (and therefore stopped being a bargain) or the companies behind them will have gone bankrupt?

There isn't even a brilliant new investing technique in this book. There are no wonderful but complex plans based on past records and there are no wonderfully unreadable charts created by specially devised computer software. Books on money are often full of graphs and charts which are either forbidding or incomprehensible or both. Not here.

This is intended to be the book on money that you can keep on your shelf and refer to whenever you are getting jittery. It is, I hope, the honest, impartial book about money that you can give your children and grandchildren to read – so that they grow up understanding something about money.

This is a book to last a lifetime. This is a book to teach you things you need to know in order to invest profitably. It's a book that will, I hope, be just as valid in ten, twenty or thirty years as it is today. The advice in it is timeless and hard won. This book enables you to benefit from my mistakes.

Most of us have to work hard to get rich or even mildly well-off. And once we've become rich we have to work hard to keep it. But we have to work at the right things. As someone once put it: if simply working hard made people rich then the exit gates at most factories would be jammed with people driving home in Rolls Royce or Bentley motor cars.

Your investment capital consists of two things: your accumulated savings on the one hand and your skills, experience, training and wisdom on the other.

Ignore people who tell you (or imply) that making money out of money is unbelievably complicated and inevitably involves the use of complex software programmes, high powered computers and many hours spent staring at computer screens. I know one man who is regarded by many around the world as an investment guru. He spends hours every day hunched in front of his computer screen. He and I used to be good friends but we drifted apart after he cancelled numerous social engagements because he couldn't leave his screen. His reward for all this effort? Sub-average profits and poor health. Too much information can seriously damage your wealth.

Why else am I writing this book? Four reasons.

First, I find investing fun. And I've found writing about investing fun too. I've spent the best part of a lifetime accumulating the information contained in this book.

Second, I wanted to write down everything I know about money to pass on to my wife. I don't want her to have to trust investment advisers when I get run over by the inevitable bus. This book is, curious as that may sound, a labour of love.

Third, writing books is what I do for a living. What else am I going to do with my time? I don't need to do anything. But I'm not the beach type and I've been thrown out of almost every golf club I've ever joined.

Fourth, I've had a number of letters from readers asking for precisely this book. Indeed, this is, I think, the first time I've written a book in response to popular demand from readers.

I have written this book in the first person because the advice is personal. There are no firm rules. All I can tell you is what has worked for me. And you know the advice is honest because this is the advice I am giving the one I love. There can be no guarantees, but this is the book I wish I'd been given half a century ago.

I hope you will use this book to help you formulate your own investment style.

It is necessary to plan and to organise in order to get rich. Staying poor is very easy; poverty needs no plan.'
NAPOLEON HILL

Investing is not primarily a science. There is a smidgen of science in there somewhere, but investing is partly a craft and partly an art. Every investor's needs, views and style must be personal. I hope you will cherry-pick my advice and use it to create your own personal approach to investing.

It is never too late to start investing and to start using money for your benefit. There are wonderful stories about people in their seventies (or even older) suddenly starting to invest – and doing very well on the stock market. Being older means you have all sorts of advantages. Experience, for a start. And not having to worry about feeding and clothing young kids for another.

* * *

Next, two practical points.

First, I haven't included all the research references I've used in this book. You have to take my word for it that I believe everything in this book. I haven't included references for two reasons. First, the book would be twice as big and twice as expensive to print and mail. Second, if you don't believe what I tell you then I don't believe references are going to help either of us very much. The relationship between the author and reader of a non-fiction book has to be one built on trust. There’s no specific advice in this book but I hope my experiences, and the general advice here, will help you formulate your own investing philosophy.

Second, you will doubtless find that I have repeated pieces of advice at different points in this book. I’ve done that not through carelessness but because these are points that I wanted to reinforce – and it seemed to me easier to do it by occasionally repeating advice rather than by cross referring the reader to another part of the book.

* * *

Few, if any, of the so-called experts who appear on your television screen, or who are quoted in your newspaper, know more about the general principles of money than you will by the time you have finished this book. Many of them probably know considerably less. Most are far too close to the action to be able to use strategy or tactics in the way you will.

And you will, of course, have one enormous advantage over them. They aren’t handling their own money.

You are.

And that will, I believe, give you an unbeatable edge.

Vernon Coleman, England 2009

PART ONE
THE DOWNSHIFT PRINCIPLE

'He who knows when he has enough is rich'.
TAO TE JING BY LAO TSU

The latter part of the twentieth century was, without a doubt, the era of greed. Millions of people fought hard not to acquire a decent standard of living but to get everything. Humans went from needs to wants, through luxury to excess. Moral, ethical, environmental, cultural, emotional, spiritual and personal consequences were ignored in the search for more stuff.

Shopping became a hobby, a recreation ('retail therapy', 'shop till you drop') and, for many, an addiction. Work became a constant grind. Instead of going to work to 'earn a living' people were earning but no longer living. Work had become simply a source of money and there could never be enough (or too much) of that. Earning and spending, owing and worrying.

Money became an end rather than a means. Money was no longer a way to buy food and pay for shelter and nor was it something to use to purchase treats and delights. Acquiring money - and then spending it - had become everything. And we were encouraged in this belief by advertisers (who wanted our money themselves) and by politicians (who wanted us to keep spending so that the economy would grow and they could disguise the fact that the state itself had a huge spending problem). To them we are consumers and taxpayers. Nothing more. When the nation's economy hits hard times the citizens are exhorted to go and spend. If things are really bad the government will hand out tax refunds – together with instructions that they are to be spent.

Millions learnt the superficial short-term joys of debt. People didn't just borrow money to buy a home (though they did that in huge quantities). They also borrowed money to buy cars (why share one when you can have one each – besides with two jobs, necessary to bring in the money to pay all the bills, two cars became essential), kitchen equipment, huge flat-screen digital televisions and computers. They borrowed money to make sure that everyone in the house had a mobile telephone of their own. They borrowed money so that they could talk to their neighbours on the telephone (so much more satisfying than leaning on the garden fence which can't possibly be as much fun because it costs nothing). They borrowed money to go on holiday. They borrowed money to buy second homes. And, of course, they borrowed money to buy smart clothes to wear for work. They borrowed money to buy the season ticket for the train to get to work. They borrowed money to pay for expensive snacks bought to eat on the train while rushing from one appointment to the next. They borrowed money to pay the interest on the money they had borrowed.

No one ever slowed down long enough to realise that if they didn't have two jobs they wouldn't need two cars. Born to work. Born to shop. Whoever dies with the most toys is the winner and gets the biggest obituary. (Though those with the most toys have, paradoxically, probably worked so hard to pay for them that they have played with them very little.) Life, liberty and the pursuit of a bigger television set.

Survey after survey has shown that the majority of people find their work boring and stressful. People complain that they have no free time and no time for hobbies. The divorce rate has risen and risen (the vast majority of divorces being caused by arguments over money not sex). Anxiety and depression are often blamed on stress caused by worrying about work and money.

Work and money.

During the last years of the 20th Century, and the first of the 21st Century, our identities became our work and our shopping; our earning and our spending. We became worth what we earned. A top television performer in the USA has a clause in his contract confirming that he will always be paid $1 more than the next highest paid performer at the network. Why? What does it matter to him what anyone else gets paid?

Our self-regard became tied up with the stuff we had bought with the money we'd borrowed. Our status was determined not by what we had done or learnt or contributed, nor even by what we had acquired through our hard work, but by what we had acquired through borrowing. Our success was measured by our capacity to borrow.

Today, we think we are working to pay the bills but we end up spending more than we earn on more than we need. And when our only joy is shopping we make things worse for ourselves. We shop to cheer ourselves up (a new outfit, a bottle of wine, a visit to the hairdresser, a trip to Disneyland). We buy books about hobbies rather than actually spending time doing them ourselves. We watch television programmes about other people experiencing life because we are too busy to experience life ourselves.

'No man ever stood the lower in my estimation for having a patch in his clothes; yet I am sure that there is greater anxiety, commonly, to have fashionable, or at least clean and un-patched clothes, than to have a sound conscience.'
HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Here are five questions hardly anyone ever asks about money. Try them. Think about them. They sound surprisingly straightforward but you might surprise yourself with your answers.

1. What is money for?
2. Why do you need money?
3. How much do you really need?
4. Are you wasting money?
5. Do you know the real cost of everything you buy?

* * *

Minimise your wastage and cut your expenses. Know where your money goes and you may find that you need less. But don't make false economies.

I usually drive big cars. I keep them and drive them into the ground. There are several reasons for this. I like big cars because I'm tall and my back aches if I spend too long in a tiny car. I also like big, well-made cars because they tend to be tougher and have a better chance of surviving a crash. Finally, I prefer them because they tend to break down less often and to last longer. I hate looking for and buying new cars. It's a tiresome, time consuming chore. One friend buys a new, small car every two years. He sniffily claims that his vehicle is much cheaper to run and better for the environment. He has to change these tinny little things after two years because by then they're not fit for anything much. The cars he buys seem to be made out of some sort of plastic coated reinforced cardboard and they fall apart if kept too long. His cars use less petrol than mine but I don't use my car all that much (I prefer to travel by train) so I don't spend much more on petrol than he does. His cars are cheaper to mend when they break down but they break down a lot more often. Bits are always falling off them and the dealer usually manages to find a clause in the contract which excludes the latest disaster from the guarantee. And what's better for the environment – buying a big, expensive car which lasts or buying loads of smaller, cheaper cars which have to be replaced every couple of years? The slightly surprising truth is that the big, expensive car may sometimes be much, much better for the environment.

* * *

Debt creates shackles. To pay our debts (and the debts our debts themselves accrue) we are forced to continue with work we hate. We cannot afford to quit. We cannot even afford to pause, rethink and replan our lives. Every small threat becomes a major stress. A temporary illness, an inability to work, becomes a huge problem. The threat of unemployment is a nightmare when credit card bills are pouring through the letterbox.

Real dreams, hopes and aspirations are forgotten; pushed aside by plastic dreams, cardboard hopes and tinsel aspirations. The essentials in life are drowned by the non-essentials. In the same way that savings can provide freedom so debt will inevitably produce slavery. We may be affluent but our noses are stuck to the grindstone as we work ever harder to keep the banks and loan companies off our backs. We make our businesses bigger. And then we need accountants, lawyers and other specialists. The man who used to enjoy his work finds that the more successful he becomes the less time he spends doing what he originally wanted to do with his life. He spends all his time in meetings and preparing for meetings. The problem with our recommended lifestyle is that when your life is designed to accumulate then what you have is never enough. More is always better and 'enough' is always a distant, unattainable horizon. If more is better then what we have can never be enough. There is always more more.

* * *

Look around your house. How much stuff do you have that you don't need? How much time and energy are you wasting looking after it and providing storage space for it? How much time are you wasting wondering if you'll ever wear it again, find the manual or find the other bit that makes it work? How much of it could you sell? How much of it could you give away to your local charity shop? How much of it should you throw away? How much cleaner and clearer – will your life be without all this unnecessary stuff?

Social security has created jealousy, resentment and institutionalised laziness. People who have been unemployed for generations, in families where no one has done a day's work and where everyone is a parasite, live well. They have smart homes, motor cars, huge television sets, satellite channels and crates of beer delivered by the local supermarket once a week. Even the long-term unemployed have become addicted consumers.

Few people need a new car every two years. Most people have more pairs of shoes than they really need. Millions have electrical equipment they never use. Standard of living and quality of life aren't the same thing but we confuse the two.

There have been more shopping malls than high schools in the USA for many years. Three quarters of the people who go shopping are not looking for something in particular. They are simply out 'shopping'.

We all need to get into the habit of asking ourselves why we buy the things we buy. This isn't a judgemental question. I honestly don't give a damn how you spend your money. But it's a question well worth asking. How many jumpers do you really need? Why do so many people insist on having an entirely new outfit if they are planning to attend someone else's wedding? The complaint 'I don't have a thing to wear' has become a social joke

‘Desire is the source of all suffering.’
THE BUDDHA

Why do people always expect their standard of living to keep going up? It is this bizarre, inexplicable modern phenomenon (the constantly growing greed of progress) which is largely responsible for the mess we are in. This curious anxiety is based on the apparent belief that our happiness will grow if we have more wealth. People don’t want better health, or more time to do things they enjoy, as much as they want more money. And more stuff.

Today, most people spend considerably more than they earn and give no real thought to the future. There is a widespread feeling that everything will sort itself out. Perhaps they are relying on inflation to make their debts disappear.

If you did not have so much stuff (to buy and maintain) how much money would you have left over? What could you do with it? Maybe you could take a year off or train yourself to do another job.

Savings help us avoid making bad choices. Savings give us the ability to say ‘no’ to things we don’t want to do. Saving money helps create a force which can be used to power all sorts of things, and to improve our lives in many different ways, but largely, in my view, by giving us freedom.

Frugality is regarded as a rude word. But in reality it means being efficient in finding happiness from the world around. It means using time, money, energy and possessions wisely. We buy on impulse and forget how long we had to work to earn the money to pay for it.

How mad we are to waste money on stuff we neither want nor need. How mad to spend money (bought with our time) on trying to impress people we don’t even know. How crazy to buy children so many presents that they become confused and bad tempered because there is too much choice and they don’t know what to play with next.

We insure everything. Is it all really necessary? Public liability insurance is wise and essential. But how many people waste money insuring heirlooms they would never replace if they were stolen?

Look through your standing orders. Are you still subscribing to magazines you don’t really want? Many people do. It’s easy just to let the standing orders go through. (This also applies to other standing orders. Check them all out.)

When we’ve got rid of all the material clutter, what about the social clutter? The meetings we go to but don’t really need to attend. The television programmes we watch for no very good reason. The cocktail parties, organised dinners and power breakfasts we attend because we have been asked, or because other people expect us to be there. These things take so much time, so many hours that will never return, but offer so little real reward.

‘Men do not desire to be rich, only to be richer than other men.’
JOHN STUART MILL

It is, of course, a myth that money produces happiness. I know there are all sorts of witty sayings such as ‘I’ve tried rich and I’ve tried poor and believe me rich is better’, but riches alone do not produce joy.

One big American study showed that there was a negative correlation between ‘quality of life’ and ‘income level’. Poor people had a better quality of life than rich people. It isn’t difficult to find evidence of this.

Study after study has shown that very few lottery winners are happier after their wins. Very few, indeed, had any real idea about what to do with the money. A surprising number were less happy after their wins. Those who gave up work entirely felt that their lives no longer had purpose; their self-esteem was lower and they were lonely. Many felt guilty because they had suddenly acquired money they didn’t deserve. Isolated and glum many lottery winners turn to alcohol or drugs, or both. Money can help ease pains and can smooth the way through many of life’s travails. But when money runs our lives we forget the joy of just walking in the park or sitting on a bench listening to the birds sing and looking at the flowers.

* * *

If you don’t understand why you spend money, you will never be able to control your spending and eliminate the unnecessary expenditures. Here are five reasons people buy things which aren’t necessities:

1. To make themselves feel good.
2. To impress family and friends.
3. To impress complete strangers.
4. Because they enjoy spending money.
5. Because they have been seduced into spending by a salesman.

* * *

Don’t waste your life penny pinching. You aren’t going to get rich by buying cheap beans or cheap jam. And cheap doesn’t necessarily save you money. Always figure in the value of your time. For example, if you are travelling somewhere and there’s a choice of going by coach or train think about the time it’s going to take you. Which journey will take longest? And will one form of transport enable you to do something useful while you are travelling? I can work on trains but I couldn't possibly work on a coach. I get travel sick on coaches and I can't get my long legs between the seats. If I travel by coach I risk getting a deep vein thrombosis and I waste the time I'm travelling. If I travel by train I can go in some comfort and I can work while I travel. The travelling time won't be wasted.

If you buy cheap, new furniture it will probably fall apart, it will never make you feel good and it will be worthless when you come to sell it. If you buy expensive, well-made old furniture it will not fall apart, it will make you feel good when you use it and if you ever want to sell it, it will probably be worth more than you paid for it. The same isn't quite true for clothes (you probably aren't going to be able to sell them at all unless they're very expensive designer outfits) but good clothes will always look better, feel better, keep their shape better and last longer. And good clothes will make you feel good too. (There is the added bonus that when you are travelling, security guards and waiters will usually treat you better if you are well-dressed than they will if you are dressed in scruffy, cheap clothes. It's just human nature. They know that rich people are more likely to have clout and make their lives miserable if they mess them around too much.)

Buy quality, rather than quantity. When you are buying new stuff remember William Morris: "Don't buy anything that isn't beautiful or useful or preferably both".

Finally, remember: it isn't wrong to spend money on yourself occasionally. Enjoy your money. Enjoy making it. Enjoy having it. And enjoy spending it. What the hell is it for if not to enjoy?

* * *

Many well-off people living in cities don't own cars. The hassle of having a car serviced and repaired, and finding somewhere to park it, mean that it really isn't worthwhile. When they need to move around they use trains and taxis. And if they want a car for the weekend they just hire one. It's often cheaper to do this than to buy a car and cope with all the expense and trouble.

* * *

I never spend money I haven't yet got sitting in my bank account. There are always a million and one things that can go wrong to turn expectations into disappointments. And I don't believe in tempting fate.

* * *

Most investors spend more time thinking about which telephone system to use, or which shoes to buy, than they spend thinking before making an investment or starting a pension. Learn to spend more time on the big stuff and less time on the little stuff. I have known many people who spent their lives saving pennies through thrifty shopping but losing pounds through bad investments.

* * *

No one will ever spend your money as wisely, or with as much care as you will. Apart from leaving enough money to ensure that your dependants are looked after, your aim should be to spend your money (or to give it away) and to die destitute; with just enough money to pay the undertaker and to meet the solicitor's bill.

* * *

Not everyone can be rich. But everyone who wants it can have some independent wealth. The first trick is not to spend all your income. The second is to invest your savings carefully. That's all.

* * *

A friend of mine recently sold his fairly new large car because the cost of petrol had gone up. He bought a much smaller car that does far more miles to the gallon. He lost a lot of money when he sold the big car. I asked him how much mileage he did each year. I then worked out that even if the price of petrol doubled it would still take him eight years for the money he was saving on petrol to match the money he had lost on the car he'd sold.

* * *

Don't lend money to anyone.

Don't lend money to friends if you want to keep them as friends. They will resent you for being able to lend them money. And, if they don't pay you back, you will resent them for cheating you.

And why the hell would you lend money to enemies?

* * *

Consume less and you need to work less.

* * *

Use cash not credit cards. When I stand in a queue at the newsagents I am constantly surprised by the number of people using plastic to buy one magazine or one notebook. Don't these people carry cash? Are they all Royal? Using plastic is stupid for three reasons. First, the more you use your cards the more you are likely to end up with an identity theft problem. Second, if you use cards for all your purchases you will lose track of your spending. If you have to go and get the cash out of the bank then you'll know that your money is disappearing. It's much easier to keep control of your spending if you use cash. Third, if you use plastic then anyone following you can easily see where you are. If someone has access to the credit card company's computers they will easily spot that you're on holiday in Brighton and not at your flat in Leeds. If you are worried about carrying enough cash just split it between two or three wallets. Make sure that the wallet you use in shops only contains a modest amount of cash. Keep the rest of your cash in inside pockets or in a money belt or money pouch of some kind. And carry what I call a 'mugger's wallet' with you. (A mugger's wallet is simply an old wallet which contains a few notes, and a few bits of useless plastic which look like credit cards but aren't. If a mugger demands your wallet, this is the one you hand over.)

* * *

Don't wait for a lucky break. It will probably never come.

* * *

If you want to make money but you also need the stability and security of a salaried job, think about earning money through a supplementary source. Start a business on the side. (But do remember that you must declare the earnings to the Inland Revenue.) Make sure it is something you enjoy. (You'll be much more likely to be successful if you do. And why not also have fun?). And make sure that you don't short change your employer (or steal his telephone or stationery). That's dishonest and apart from anything else there's a risk that if you do this you could end up losing your stable, secure job before your side line has blossomed and is producing a genuine income.

'Fill your house with gold and jade,
And it can no longer be fully guarded.
If you set store by your riches and honour,
You will only reap a crop of calamities.'
TAO TE JING BY LAO TSU

What's the difference between comfort and luxury?
Is the extra value of the latter worth the extra cost?

'This spending of the best part of one's life earning money in order to enjoy a questionable liberty during the least valuable part of it, reminds me of the Englishman who went to India to make a fortune first, in order that he might return to England and live the life of a poet.'
HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Here's a question most people never ask: What is money for and how much money do you need? And what do you need it for? Most investment books I have ever seen never touch on this. The authors seem to assume that acquiring money is an end in itself with no purpose necessary other than the accumulation of wealth.

'The first couple of million bucks you make put it away! You don't ever touch that. That's the 'fuck you' money. That way, anybody ever tries to make you do something that you don't want to, you can tell 'em 'fuck you'.'
IRVING (SWIFTY) LAZAR

Money is crucial: it provides freedom, independence, time and 'fuck you' money. Money can give you the opportunity to say 'No' when you want to say 'No'. Money can give you a voice. The more money you have, the more your voice will be heard. But you can only choose to do two things with money: spend it or save it. If you're doing the latter you need to know why. And you need to know what your needs are (and are likely to become) and what you are prepared to do to satisfy those needs. You need a strategy.

'In the dissipation of worldly treasure the frugality of the future may balance the extravagance of the past; but who can say: 'I will take minutes from tomorrow to compensate for those I have lost today.'
BISHOP JACKSON OF EXETER

If you are old and frail you may need money for nursing home fees. If you are young and healthy you may need money to buy a car or a house. Or to travel. If you are in the middle you may need money to mend the roof or to pay for shoes for the kids.

And, however old you are now, you will almost certainly need money to buy health care at some time in your life. Even in Britain, the home of the National Health Service, the quality of 'free' medical care has been deteriorating for decades and it is now commonplace for potentially lifesaving drugs to be withheld from some patients on the grounds of cost. The elderly (by which the authorities seem to mean anyone over the age of 60) are now officially regarded as not worth saving. You will likely need money for drugs, operations and essential dental care.

What do you need money for? And what do you want money for?

They are the most important questions of all and yet they are the questions hardly anyone ever asks. (Needs and wants are, of course, very different. We all need food and shelter. No one needs a yacht. No one needs to own a football club. No one needs to own a diamond encrusted gold watch.)

None of us actually needs very much money. It's the wanting that is special.

So, what do you want money for?

Necessities? Helping others? Looking after yourself and your loved ones in the future when the State has thrown you on the scrapheap? Luxuries? Do you like travelling first class and enjoy eating expensive delicacies?

'Money is like a sixth sense without which you cannot make a complete use of the other five.'
W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

Do you want money because you know it will buy you freedom? Money doesn't just buy foods, shelter and clothing. It doesn't just buy electric nose hair clippers. Money also buys a certain amount of freedom.

If you want money then first you have to know what you want it for. There has to be a purpose. Otherwise you might as well be collecting blades of grass or old newspapers. Money doesn't have any value unless you do something with it. There has to be a reason for wanting money. Money can buy you expensive, hand-made shoes. It can buy you a yacht. It can buy you first class travel. It can buy you (or someone you love) medical treatment that might not otherwise be available. People's reasons for wanting money vary. As far as I am concerned the one thing money can provide which I really value is freedom. Money gives me the freedom to write what I want to write and to make sure that it gets published and marketed without my worrying too much about whether or not it is commercially successful. (In the bad old days most publishers used to operate like this. They published what they wanted to publish – regardless of whether or not it was likely to make money. If they were unlucky they went bust. If they were lucky they published enough commercial successful books to pay for the commercially unsuccessful books. So far, I'm pleased to say, I've managed to ensure that the commercially successful books I write make more than enough money to pay for the commercially unsuccessful books I want to write and publish anyway.)

'Money can't buy friends but you can get a better class of enemy.'
SPIKE MILLIGAN

1. What do you need money for?
2. How much do you need?
3. When are you likely to need it?

Once you have answered these questions you will find it much easier what to do next. Only when you have these answers will you be able to judge what risks you should be taking, what investments you should be making and so on.

Some assets fit certain aims much better than others. For example, if your sole aim is capital preservation putting at least some of your funds into index-linked gilts makes excellent sense.

* * *

Before you begin to think about investing your money you need to ask yourself some fundamental questions.

How much richer are you likely to become through investing your money? If your investments are successful will you buy a bigger house? A bigger car?

Or will you just be able to buy more of what you already have?

Will that make your life better? How much food can you eat?

How many pairs of shoes do you want? (We know how many you need.) How much would you be hurt if you lost your money?

When will you be as rich as you need to be?

'Being rich is having more money; being wealthy is having time.'
MARGARET BONNANO

Be careful you don't spend money buying too much insurance. The extended warranties so beloved by electrical stores are a perfect example of stores using fear to sell us an expensive product we probably don't really need. The small print is usually complicated and far too daunting to read in the time available. And so we hand over another substantial sum for an over-expensive extended warranty. (The fact that many stores now make a considerable portion of their profit from selling these warranties should tell you something about their value to the customer.)

We have been brought up willing to pay to avoid risk. And some risks (the big ones) are always worth insuring against. Most of us need to take out public liability insurance because if a slate falls off our roof and lands on a passer-by the resulting claim for damages could bankrupt us. Most of us need to insure our homes against fire because if our house burns down we won't be able to afford another one. This sort of insurance doesn't usually cost a great deal (because the risks are quite small) but it is worth buying.

But much of the insurance we are sold doesn't fit into that sort of category. Most of the time we insure ourselves against losses which will not seriously embarrass us. To make things worse we take out extra insurance when the manufacturer's guarantee will protect us against the risk of buying a particularly shoddy item. And our excessive zeal for insurance cover means that we end up buying multiple cover for the same risk. The expense of these accumulated policies can be horrendous.

The variety of risks against which one can now take out insurance is apparently unending. Every time you buy one insurance policy the company from which you bought it will try to sell you another policy, covering areas that weren't included in the first policy. The small print invariably means that the insurance company can find an escape clause or a reason to charge another fee for something else.

We should really only buy insurance which is legally required or to insure against losses that we really cannot afford - huge legal costs for example. Most of us - particularly those who are careful and honest - will be better off if we put many other premiums into a special savings account and use that to pay for plumbing costs, heating repairs and so on.

And since it is probably not worthwhile making a claim against an insurance policy unless the claim is considerable it makes sense to agree formally not to make a claim for small sums, in return for a discount on the premium. (Remember, too, that insurance companies now tend to put up premiums when they pay out. A small claim can lead to an annual rise in premiums which matches the one-off payment.)

The careful and honest lose out twice in the current way of things. First, they must pay high premiums to include the cost of all the false claims that will be made, and the cost of all the problems which will arise because of poor maintenance or bad habits. Second, they must struggle to obtain payment and put up with small print clauses which exclude most claims and put huge excesses on the ones which are (eventually and grudgingly) paid.

Finally, remember that insurance companies are routinely dishonest. They lie. A lot. When they tell you the cheque is in the post they are probably lying. When they tell you that the claims form is in the post they are probably lying. When they tell you that your claim is being processed they are probably lying. Insurance companies lie (and make life exceedingly difficult for anyone trying to make a claim) for one very good reason: they hope that if they make things difficult for you then you will get bored and go away without them ever having to give you any money.

* * *

Put money aside for emergencies, the taxman, your old age and medical problems. Who knows when you will need to have a hernia repaired?

I have never taken out insurance against ill health. There are two reasons for this. First, I try to look after my health. This means that if I pay premiums to a medical insurance company I will probably be subsidising all the over-weight, meat-eating smokers who don't take any exercise but do need a lot of medical attention. Second, I long ago worked out that if I put money aside each month I could use that money if I fell ill and needed private treatment. The money I've put aside has been earning its keep for years. On the other hand, premiums paid are money lost for ever. (I have, however, always bought sickness insurance that pays me money if I am too sick to be able to work.)

I first recommended this policy in the 1970's. It has, I'm pleased to say, now become widely accepted.

* * *

Look after your money and one day it will look after you.

* * *

How much money do you really need?

Take a good hard look at your income and expenditure. Do you need more money for the things you want to do with your life? Or could it be that you already have enough income (and enough money saved up) to buy everything you need? Are you, perhaps, simply wasting money on things you neither want nor need. I know a fellow who lives in the country and has a job in the city. He spends six hours a day on trains (three hours each way) and an hour a day on the Underground. That is seven hours a day, five days a week. He says he has the benefit of a London salary while living in a large house in the country. But he spends seven hours a day travelling. Unless there are breakdowns, of course. When there are breakdowns he spends more time travelling.

* * *

The other day I saw a piece of software being advertised for businessmen and women. The idea was that when you paid for a coffee in a cafe and wanted to claim the expenditure as an expense, either against your company's accounts department or the taxman, you photographed the receipt with your mobile phone and then e-mailed the photograph to the software site, together with a text note serving as an explanatory caption. The receipt would then be stored in photographic form, together with all its colleagues. In due course, the receipt could be printed out and then used to fill in the usual claim form or to substantiate a tax form claim.

Have you ever heard of such nonsense? What better example is there of how we waste our time and our money in an attempt to find ways to use technology in order to complicate fairly simple matters? I keep my receipts in old envelopes and have done so for many decades. If the taxman wants to compare receipts with the totals I've prepared he is quite at liberty to do so. All he has to do is tip the receipts out of the envelope and start rummaging.

(The day after I wrote this I watched in astonishment as a traffic warden photographed an inappropriately parked car with an expensive looking digital camera. Instead of taking out a notepad and writing down the car number plate, and details of where the vehicle was parked, he took a series of pictures. He photographed the number plate, the tax disk, the car as a whole, the surroundings and the disabled driver's badge clearly visible on the dashboard

‘Half our life is spent trying to find something to do with the time we have rushed through life trying to save.’
WILL ROGERS

You don’t have to be rich enough to do anything you want to do. You just have to be rich enough not to have to do things you don’t want to do.

* * *

The advantages of having money are pretty obvious. People are sometimes surprised to discover that there are also some pretty vast disadvantages. For one thing most people who have money worry enormously about losing it all. And so hanging on to it becomes a burden. And, in a purely practical sense, there is the fact that means-testing rules mean that if you have worked hard and saved hard you will be denied government help if and when it might otherwise be appropriate.

* * *

Money and plastic surgery have something in common. Neither will solve your problems. If your life is glum it won’t get better just because you have bigger breasts or a shapelier nose. Similarly, your life won’t automatically be better just because you have money in the bank. Money won’t make all your problems and anxieties disappear.

* * *

Some people accumulate vast quantities of money for its own sake. They acquire far more money than they can ever possibly need. Why do they want so much? Often, they seem frightened to spend it once they’ve got it. It’s as though they are frightened that they will lose the game if they spend the wealth they have acquired.

Others spend their wealth on absurd and clearly overpriced dross. This morning I read about one idiot who had spent £100,000 on a bottle of brandy and another who had paid untold millions for a boat with three helipads. It used to be called showing off. Today it’s known as conspicuous consumption.

‘I don’t want money. It is only people who pay their bills who want that, and I never pay mine.’
OSCAR WILDE

What is your income per hour, after tax? Work it out. Remember it.

Get into the habit of thinking of the things you buy in terms of hours rather than pounds.

If you buy a television set that costs £1,000 and you earn £10 an hour then the television set has cost you 100 hours.

If you buy a book for £10 and your income is £10 an hour then the book has cost you one hour.

Every time you spend money ask yourself how long you have had to work to earn that money. Do this especially when you are spending money on something destined to go down in value.

How much of your life would you give in order to buy a car with a threespeed rear window wiper instead of one with a one-speed rear window wiper? (That was the sole difference between two models of a car I once saw for sale. The extra price was £500.) I suspect you’ll soon find yourself less willing to spend money on things you don’t really need or want.

Much of this sounds pretty obvious. But it isn’t what most people do, so it isn’t that obvious.

You have to trade your time (that means your life and your energy) for money. So, what does money mean to you?

If you are 40-years-old you can reasonably expect to have 37 years of life left – that s 329,601 hours. Assuming that half your time is spent maintaining your body (sleeping, eating, washing, etc.) you have 164,800 hours left.

* * *

What can money buy you in addition to £100,000 bottles of brandy?

Security
Power
Social acceptance
Comfort
Freedom
Your life (if you need medical treatment which is only available if you pay for it privately.)

* * *

What is rich?

There are some who claim that you aren’t rich until you have £50 million or £100 million in the bank. But that seems to me to be nonsensical.

Ignore all those idiotic books by rich people who define ‘wealth’ by their own success and standards. ‘You aren’t rich unless you have £50,000,000,’ wrote one author I saw. What planet does he call home? What expensive habits do you need to have to require a bank balance of £50,000,000 before you feel ‘rich’?

Maybe being rich is just being free of guilt, envy and anxiety about money. Maybe it is not having to buy things you don't want or need because you are comfortable with your life and your world, and immune to the entreaties of advertisers.

* * *

Here are some more questions you should ask yourself:

1. Do you want to be rich?
2. Do you need to be rich?
3. Why do you want or need to be rich?
4. How rich do you want or need to be?
5. In what way would being rich change your life?

Curiously, these are questions very few people ask themselves.

* * *

In the old days people considered themselves rich if they were millionaires.

But having a million doesn't necessarily make you rich these days. And a million what? A million Zimbabwean dollars wouldn't buy you a loaf of bread. A millionaire used to be someone who had a million pounds or a million dollars. But if you add in houses and pensions there are a lot of millionaires around these days. Not many of them would really call themselves 'rich'.

Perhaps being rich these days is having a million that doesn't include the money tied up in your home or your pension fund.

* * *

Don't ever tell anyone how much you earn, how much stuff you have or how much you are worth. Such confessions will inspire jealousy and contempt rather than admiration. And you're likely to be robbed.

Don't talk about money to other people. Most people aren't interested.

Talking about money is more likely to invoke jealousy than to impress people or make them pleased for you.

I know a couple who are very well off. They live in Monaco (don't even think about it incidentally – it's an awful place, and what's the point of being rich if you end up living somewhere that is soulless, simply so that you don't have to pay any tax?) and they can't enjoy their wealth unless everyone they meet knows that they are rich. So, she walks around with jewellery dripping from every place from which you can hang jewellery. They might as well walk around waving a copy of their latest bank statement.

The inevitable result is that they are forever looking over their shoulders for muggers. They won't walk down the street because they are frightened of muggers. They won't sit in the park or on the beach because they are frightened of muggers. (She wouldn't dream of going on the beach without her bracelets, necklaces and earrings. She'd rather go without a bikini than go without jewellery.) Instead of making their lives better, their money (and their taste for conspicuous consumption) has made them prisoners of their own vanity.

Here are the top ten most disgustingly flashy things rich people do:

1. Fly all their relatives to somewhere hot and sticky and then rent a whole hotel.
2. Hire an ageing pop star to perform at their birthday party.
3. Buy such expensive, rattly pieces of jewellery that the newspapers carry pictures of it.
4. Own two private jets and then say it is because one is always in the wrong country.
5. Have a private zoo.
6. Buy a farm or ranch where they pretend to farm.
7. Allow television or magazine cameras into their home. (This is really stupid. Burglars buy these magazines and look through them to find nice things to steal.)
8. Sell their wedding (or any other occasion) to a magazine.
9. Fill a whole garage with expensive motor cars.
10. Have a yacht with more than one helicopter pad.

'Unsure of what they stand for, people increasingly rely on money as the criterion of value. What is more expensive is considered better. What used to be a medium of exchange has usurped the place o fundamental values...The cult of success has replaced a belief in principles. Society has lost its anchor'.
GEORGE SOROS

What is wealth?

Some people say it is being able to live on your capital.

Some say it is being able to live on the income derived from your capital.

And some say it is being able to live on the interest you get on the income derived from your capital.

You are certainly rich if you can live on the interest on the interest on your capital.

If you have £1,000,000 invested and you receive 5% income (after tax and inflation) that's an income of £50,000 a year. At 5% the interest on that £50,000 is £2,500. If you can live on £2,500 a year (before tax) then you are rich. (You are also a very good shopper).

So, if you reckon you would need £10,000 a year before tax to survive then you would need £4 million before you considered yourself rich (if you were planning to live on the interest on the income from your capital). You would not, however, be living the life of someone rich. If you need £50,000 a year to live comfortably then you would need investments of £20 million before you could consider yourself rich.

If you want to get rich you need to know how much you want, when you want it and how you're going to get it.

* * *

Some people (largely, it has to be said, the people who don't have any) regard money as evil. Having the stuff is a sin, they say. That is balderdash. Money isn't good or bad. How you got it can be good or bad. How it affects you can be good or bad. And what you do with it can be good or bad. But money itself can't be good or bad or anything. It's just money. Money isn't dirty. It's what you do with it that matters. Not how much you have.

* * *

One of the fundamental truths about getting rich is that very few people get rich by earning a salary. Most people who have money acquired it by working for themselves. Their money came in fees, royalties or profits.

To become rich you may need several income streams. (The added advantage of this is that it will give you more security.) Most of the people who are independent because they are wealthy usually have several sources of income. They may have a business, a consultancy, a rental property and a portfolio of shares, for example.

* * *

Financial security is a state of mind.

Lots of people think that having a job with a big company provides more security than working for yourself. It is true that the self-employed have less immediate security. They often don't know where the next job is coming from. But in a downturn big companies often lay off employees. No one can make you redundant if you are self-employed. You may find it harder to get work, and you may have to work longer hours for the same income as before, but you aren't going to be queuing on the docks waiting for a chance to unload ships.

Financial security means knowing that whatever happens you and your family won't starve because you will be able to find a way to earn a living and put bread on the table. I know a millionaire who keeps a bicycle and a bucket in his garage next to his Rolls Royce and his wife's Mercedes sports car. 'If I lose all my money,' he told me once, 'I'll start a window cleaning round and build it up.' The bicycle and the ladder are his ultimate financial security.

Having some savings will provide you with security against bad times, misfortune and mistakes.

But do not trust anyone to look after your financial security blanket for you. Do not trust banks. Do not trust brokers. Do not trust advisers. And, most of all, do not trust your government or any official regulators. The financial world today is riddled with regulations which make life difficult for everyone. The regulations will not, I fear, protect you against thievery, dishonesty or incompetence. The bottom line is that there is no one more interested in your financial security than you are.

* * *

If you want to be rich, are you prepared to do the work?

Most people who make money are actors and sport stars) have usually put in years of hard work before they become overnight successes. (Though it is, of course, a myth that hard work alone is the route to financial success.)

Some people inherit money. Some people marry it. Some people win it. Some people grab huge quantities of it; scooping it up simply because it's there and no one stops them. Some people are given it as bribes. Some people steal it or obtain it through fraud.

But most people who have a lot of money probably got it by working hard.

* * *

Some people would like to be rich but only if they can get there by winning the lottery.

Ah, the lottery.

The tragedy for lottery winners is four fold.

First, the money arrives suddenly: there is no time to get used to it. The very suddenness of its arrival means that many lottery winners are made miserable by their sudden wealth. Apart from splashing out on a new house and a new car and a holiday they don't know what to do with the money. The new house will be far away from anyone they know. They will be lonely and lost. They will probably be scared of scratching the new car (or having it stolen). And the holiday (in a posh hotel) will probably make them feel out of their depth.

Second, their chances of replicating their success are slim to none. If you've become rich through your own efforts then you can probably do it again. If you've won the lottery you are extremely unlikely to be able to win it twice (though many people try). Everyone who is rich is afraid of losing their money. Lottery winners worry more than other rich people because they know that if they lose it they're sunk. They'll never have a second chance.

Third, many lottery winners lose their money because they don't know how to handle the stuff properly. Because they didn't make it themselves, and have never learned the basic principles of money management, they have to put their trust in advisors and managers. And so they often lose all their money. (Or it is taken from them in fees and expenses and poor investments.)

Fourth, lottery winners start off just wanting to be rich. They haven't usually worked out in any detail why they want to be rich. They think that being rich will solve all their problems. It won't, of course. People who work hard for their money are usually driven by something more specific than a vague desire to be able to drive a Ferrari or buy a season ticket for Manchester United football club.

* * *

You are the best investment you'll ever make. Put as much time as you can into improving your knowledge and skills. Remember that imagination and a capacity for hard work are far more important than formal qualifications. And if you have a good business idea, and you have a little capital, doesn't it make sense to invest in yourself? Put your own money into your business and you will retain control. Allow banks or investors to put up all the money and they will take over. If your business becomes successful, they will be the ones to profit.

If you meet someone successful, spend a little time asking them about themselves and their philosophy. Ask them how they succeeded. I read an article yesterday about a would-be billionaire who claimed that his hero was Richard Branson. The two had met by accident at an airport. 'I talked to him for fifteen minutes and told him everything about my plans and my business,' said the young would-be billionaire who didn't seem to realise that he should have been listening, not talking; asking not telling.

The more you understand about money the more you will feel comfortable with it. I felt much more comfortable about money after I sacked an incompetent accountant. For the first time in my life I knew how much I was earning, how much I owed the taxman, how much I had saved and how best I could invest.

'A Monday through Friday sort of dying'
STUDS TERKEL

Being rich may mean being financially independent, but it also means being independent of the tyranny of money; the tyranny which forces so many people to spend their lives earning money they don't really need in order to buy things they neither need nor want.

If you didn't have to work so hard, and had more time to yourself, how would you spend it?

Are you getting real value out of your life, out of your job and out of the money you earn?

'For most of human history people only worked for two or three hours per day. As we moved from agriculture to industrialisation, work hours increased, creating standards that label a person lazy if he or she doesn't work a forty hour week...The very notion that everyone should have a job only began with the Industrial Revolution.'
DR FRITHJOF BERGMANN

Rich is earning more than you are spending.
Rich is earning money while you sleep, watch television and lie in the bath.
Rich is not having to worry about money.
Rich is being able to buy whatever you want without worrying about the price.
Rich is not knowing how much your central heating costs to run.
Rich is having a job you enjoy so much that you don't think of it as work.

He squandered health in search of wealth,
To gold became a slave;
Then spent his wealth in search of health
But only found a grave.
INSCRIPTION ON A TOMBSTONE

Most of our lives we allow money to use us. You can, and should, learn to use money. That, after all, is what it is for. Always try to make your money work for you. Don't let it just sit around, lazily. Make it provide you with rents, dividends and so on. Money loves working. And it never gets tired.

* * *

In 2003, 12 million Europeans deliberately took a cut in salary and chose to work shorter hours. They decided that they could earn what they needed by working less.

* * *

Don't waste time envying other people. It's true that some people are extraordinarily lucky. They inherit millions. They win the lottery. Rejoice for them. That's their good fortune. But their good fortune doesn't damage your chances of becoming wealthy enough for your purposes.

'There is no wealth but life. Life, including all its powers of love, of joy and of admiration. That country is the richest which nourishes the greatest number of noble and happy human beings; that man is richest who, having perfected the functions of his own life to the utmost has also the widest helpful influence, both personal, and by means of his possessions, over the lives of others.'
JOHN RUSKIN

Do you want to be really, really rich? Why?

Why not?

When you can answer those two questions you will understand your attitude to money a little better.

You have to trade your time (that means your life and your energy) for money. So, what does money mean to you?

* * *

Decades ago I wrote a book called *Bodypower* for which I formulated my basic principles of dieting. They were amazingly simple: Eat when you are hungry and need food.

Stop eating when you are no longer hungry

The same principles can be applied to money.

Earn what you need.

Stop earning when you have enough.

* * *

People usually buy things (such as expensive cars) because they want to appear rich and because they want to convince themselves they are rich and because they believe that looking wealthy and behaving rich will make them rich. In fact the opposite is true. Unless you really are rich, behaving rich will simply make you poor.

* * *

If you didn't have to work so hard, and had more time to yourself, how would you spend it?

Are you getting real value out of your life, out of your job and out of the money you earn?

What have you done with your life that you are proud of? How would you spend the next year if you knew it was going to be your last year?

What are your values? How does your earning money satisfy those values? What about your spending of money?

What do you want from your money? How much money do you really need?

What do you intend to do with your money when you have it?

* * *

Don't allow yourself to become obsessed with money. If you spend too much time reading, thinking and worrying about money there is a risk that you will lose contact with the important things in life. Money, remember, is there to make life better for you. Once you have some capital it should be working for you, not the other way round. The key is to find your balance of money and happiness. What do you want/need out of life? How much money do you need to do that?

Where do you want to be, and what do you want to be doing, in 5, 10, 15, 20, 25 years time?

How much money might you need then?

'Not for to hide it in a hedge
Nor for a train attendant,
But for the glorious privilege
Of being independent'.
ROBERT BURNS

PART TWO
THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF INVESTING

'Wealth is not without its advantages, and the case to the contrary, although it has often been made, has never proved widely persuasive.'
JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH

Acquisitions and Mergers
Alternative Investments
Analysts and Economists
Asset Allocation
Averaging Up and Down
Bank Deposits
Bear and Bull Markets
Bonds and Gilts
Brokers
Bubbles
Cashflow
Charts
Commodities
Company Accounts
Company Reports
Complex Investments
Contrarian Investors
Corporate Pay
Corporate Power
Correlation
Costs
Directors
Diversification
Dividends
Efficient Market Hypothesis
Emerging Markets
Ethical Investing
Exchange Traded Funds (ETFs)
Fashion
Foreign Investments
Fund Managers
Gambling
Gold Standard
Growth Investing
Hedge Funds
Independent Financial Advisers
Index Funds
Inflation
Information for Investors: Lies and Deceits
Investment Trusts and Unit Trusts
Leverage Liquidity
Luck
Mission Statements
Momentum Investing
Net Asset Value
New Companies
Penny Stocks
Pensions and Retirement
Portfolio Management
Pound Cost Averaging
Price Earnings Ratios
Property

Recession
Regulators
Risk
Safe Investments
Sectors
Selling
Shares
Speculation
Strategic Thinking
Structured Products
Tax
Timing
Trading
Tricksters and Swindlers
Value Investing
Volatility

ACQUISITIONS AND MERGERS

'It is not enough to be busy. The question is: 'What are you busy about?''
HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Directors and senior executives often want to grow a company to justify giving themselves higher salaries and huge bonuses. But, as far as shareholders are concerned, acquisitions can be damaging. There are several reasons for this. Combining two corporate cultures can be difficult (and expensive). Managers of both firms will be distracted (possibly for long periods) when making an acquisition. And, of course, the buyer may pay over the odds for the company it purchases. The real problem, however, is that the people making the acquisition (or allowing their company to be acquired) may well be thinking more of their own interests than the interests of the shareholders. When there is a takeover who do you think the board of directors and the executives are thinking of most? The staff, the shareholders or themselves?

So, remember, company bosses want their companies to be bigger so that they can give themselves bigger salaries and bigger bonuses and more options and more perks. Virtually every manager in a large company gains financially when the company gets bigger. The main losers are shareholders. Companies which get bigger through takeovers do not usually become more efficient or more profitable. If I hold shares in a company which is involved in a takeover I usually sell as soon as I can and regard the takeover premium as a bonus. In my experience the value of the new, larger company will usually fall below the value of the corporate constituents.

When a major report found that 83% of corporate mergers produced no benefits, and half actually made the companies involved poorer – though not, of course, the deal makers – managers tried, and failed, to suppress it. Another study of 124 mergers showed that only 30% produced additional revenue close to that which the acquirer had predicted during the courtship. Executives overpay when buying other companies because they need to expand in order to justify giving themselves bigger salaries, bigger bonuses, bigger expense accounts and bigger aeroplanes. They pay too much because they worry that someone else might steal the deal. And, of course, it isn't their money they are throwing around.

ALTERNATIVE INVESTMENTS (INCLUDING GOLD)

'There is nothing more disastrous than a rational investment policy in an irrational world.'
JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES

If you want to make money out of alternative investments (such as books, paintings, furniture, stamps or coins) then you have to separate your collecting instinct from your investment ambitions. Collecting for fun is an entirely different game to collecting for money, and the methods employed need to be very different.

Your aims as a collector will be quite different to your aims as an investor.

As a collector you are acquiring 'things' to please yourself. As an investor you are acquiring 'things' because you think other people will want them.

Don't mix the two.

I have two book collections.

I buy some books because I want to read them and own them.

But I also buy books because I think they are a good medium and long-term investment. I believe modern authors such as Ian Fleming, Arthur Conan Doyle, Graham Greene and P.G.Wodehouse offer excellent rewards for investors. These authors are still enormously popular and new generations of readers (and cinema viewers) are constantly being introduced to their work. It is difficult to believe that Sherlock Holmes, James Bond or Bertie Wooster will ever go out of fashion. I also collect historically significant authors such as T. E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia). (Most of the books I collect as an investment are first editions of books which I already own.)

* * *

Stamps and books can be a good investment if you buy very carefully. But the mark up and dealers commissions are so great that you have to hold the objects for long periods in order to make money. And you will usually only make money if you buy very rare items – which are worth at least several hundred pounds each. The cost of storage, security and insurance can be high. No one is going to get rich by buying items which cost just a few pounds each.

It's also important to remember that such items can be illiquid. If your wealth is tied up in a Constable painting you are probably going to have to wait a while to get your money. On the other hand you are far more likely to get pleasure out of having a painting hanging on your wall than you are out of putting a share certificate on your wall.

* * *

Pictures that are Great Art often turn to be enormously successful investments. A picture called The Woman in Red, painted by Leger, was bought for 200 francs in Paris in 1921 and was held in the same family until 2005 when it was sold for $22 million. That's a steady return of 19% a year over 84 years. Van Gogh's picture 'Irises' was bought in 1947 for $80,000. It probably seemed a lot at the time. Exactly 40 years later the buyer's son sold the painting for $53.9 million. That's a return of 17.7% for 40 years. And, of course, the families had the joy of having the pictures hanging on their walls.

The problem is that the market for pictures goes up and down. Sometimes artists are in fashion. Sometimes they aren't.

Many investors turned to modern art in the early part of the 21st Century but by 2007 it seemed clear to me that this particular part of the art market had pushed prices up way beyond any sensible levels. Dealers and collectors were, it seemed, conspiring to pay absurd prices in order to keep prices high. If new works of art by a fashionable (if untalented) artist appeared at auction the prices would be kept high because it was in the modern art industry's interests to keep prices high. Dealers and collectors kept bidding up prices of new pieces in order to ensure that the prices of the stuff they'd already bought didn't collapse. It was a classical case of the Emperor's new clothes. Pieces which didn't sell at auction were quietly bought privately, often at discounted prices, by collectors or dealers or even by the artists themselves, determined to keep their prices high.

The absurd boom in modern art prices at the end of the 20th Century, and the start of the 21st Century, is a re-run of something that has happened before. In 1904, a picture by Laurence Alma-Tadema went for £5,240. That was a fairly spectacular price at the time. Half a century later it was knocked down for £252. The world of art is full of similar examples of contemporary art losing its value over the years. So-called art which appeals to one generation of investors is quite likely to leave another generation cold – particular when the 'artists' concerned are far more adept at marketing than at creating.

Writing in the *Financial Times*, one commentator pointed out that 'No part of the market is more vulnerable than contemporary art, much of which will end up in skips, worthless emblems of a period with too much liquidity and not enough cultural judgement.'

* * *

For apocalyptic times, valuable items need to be portable, easily hidden and marketable. Gold coins such as krugerrands are good. Expensive jewellery is good too and many royal families have escaped into exile carrying nothing but the family jewels.

Diamonds are popular with novelists and screenwriters but they are a commodity with a manipulated price and unless you are a diamond expert they are probably best left alone.

* * *

Bullion coins are rare coins which have little value to collectors but which are bought and sold for their bullion content. Coins which have a value to collectors are 'numismatic'. Bullion coins which are rare may have a numismatic value and a bullion value.

* * *

Gold has for centuries been the commodity of choice among investors looking for a safe haven for their savings. Back in the 15th and 16th centuries Spanish and English explorers sailed the world not to build empires but in search of gold. Pirates such as Sir Francis Drake and Sir Waiter Raleigh acquired great wealth by stealing the yellow metal from the Spaniards.

Over the years many people have tried to end the idea of using gold as a store of wealth. More than half a century ago John Maynard Keynes, a much admired economist, foolishly described the gold standard (by which Governments were required to back up their currencies with real gold bars sitting in their vaults) as a barbarous relic. Today, however, gold is still a currency rather than a commodity. And it is widely agreed that if governments had kept the gold standard the world's 21st Century economic problems could have been prevented.

As an investment, gold traditionally does well when bonds or stocks or both are doing badly, when there is inflation or deflation or any sort of financial or geopolitical turmoil. When there is a raging bull market for stocks, gold usually slumps.

It is widely believed that the price of gold could soar if any sort of financial, social or political catastrophe hit the world. If you believe, as I do, that the world's oil is running out and the consequences will be more dramatic and far reaching than most politicians or journalists accept then holding some of your wealth as gold is essential.

Traditionally, experts suggest holding between 5% and 10% of a portfolio in gold. I believe that this is far too low a figure. I am prepared to put up with volatility (the price of gold tends to fluctuate a good deal) for the comforting knowledge that gold is extremely unlikely to become worthless and could, in the not too distant future, become far more valuable than it is at present.

* * *

Shares in mining companies which dig out gold usually do better than the metal itself when there is a boom in the gold price. This isn't difficult to understand. If the gold price is $400 an ounce a mining company which digs out gold at the cost of $350 an ounce will make $50 dollars an ounce profit. But if the gold price is $1,000 an ounce the price of digging out the gold will probably remain much the same and so the profit for every ounce which is produced will soar. To that has to be added the value of the gold that remains in the mine.

However, this nice and simple equation doesn't always work.

Sometimes, the price of the gold itself can go up while the price of gold mining shares goes down.

This happened to some extent during the 2007-8 bull market in gold. One reason was that some gold mining companies in South Africa couldn't get enough electricity to operate their mines properly. A second reason was that the rise in the cost of oil meant that the cost of extracting gold went up significantly.

Gold mining shares can also suffer when companies hedge their exposure to the gold price by selling their future supplies at the present price.

I think it's a good idea to avoid buying shares in mining and exploration companies that hope to find gold (or oil) on land they've bought. When considering buying shares in a gold mining company it is important to have some evidence that the company actually has some gold and is capable of digging it out.

When the gold price rises many unscrupulous people (sometimes backed by very impressive banks) form gold mining companies which may own nothing more than the right to dig a hole in some far off piece of land. Remember, too, that political upheaval may make life difficult for mines operating in remote parts of the world.

Gold is a controversial, anti-establishment investment. Politicians don't like citizens holding gold. When citizens have a stash of gold coins under their beds they become more independent and less malleable. Some gold-bugs (enthusiastic supporters of gold as an investment) believe that politicians deliberately do everything they can to keep the gold price down – often by selling official reserves of gold and sometimes by announcing that they are going to dump those official reserves on the market.

There are many ways of holding an investment in gold.

1. Buy gold coins and put them somewhere safe (preferably in a safe deposit box and not at home). Make sure that you obtain and keep receipts for gold bought this way. Keep a list of whatever you store in your box. If you store your gold (and other valuables) in a private safe deposit box (rather than a deposit box in a reputable bank) do what you can to make sure that the owners of the deposit box are reputable. There's quite a variety of suitable coins available. South African krugerrands are popular because they sell at very little above the price of gold. Sovereigns are also readily available.
2. Ask a bank to buy coins or bullion bars on your behalf and to put it in their vault. If you do this make sure that the gold is bought and held in your name and cannot be used or accessed by the bank (or any of its creditors if the bank goes bust).

3. Buy shares in gold mining companies.
4. Exchange traded funds are now available, though it is important to be sure that any fund in which you invest is actually holding the gold you've bought in its vault and isn't merely using bits of paper, and contracts with other institutions, to reflect the price of the metal.
5. Some institutions sell certificates 'proving' that you have bought a certain amount of gold and that it is being held in their vaults on your behalf

Confidence (among investors) has an enormous effect on investment success. If people feel confident about the economy they will buy shares and property (and just about everything else that is for sale). If people feel gloomy about the economy they won't buy anything much except gold. They will want to hoard their cash because they don't know what is coming. Gold, being the oldest currency in the world, is often a good investment at such times.

Gold did badly during the 1980s and 1990s because investors were confident, and were making huge profits from their share portfolios. They didn't need the reassurance of having some of their wealth in gold. Who would bother buying gold when you could get 15% a year by buying stocks you'd chosen by throwing a dart at a newspaper?

* * *

Gordon Brown, when he was the UK's Chancellor of the Exchequer, sold more than half the United Kingdom's gold reserves when the price stood at a 20 year low. By telling the market in advance what he was planning to do Brown managed to get the lowest possible price for the nation's gold reserves.

* * *

Precious metals (gold, silver, platinum, palladium) don't produce dividends or interest. They have value because they always have had a value. And because they are in limited supply. They offer two things. First, they offer some level of security. In recessionary times, when companies are going bust and governments are threatened, gold (and other precious metals) will retain at least some of their value. Your shares in BP might fall to nothing. Your gold coin is probably always going to be worth something. Second, there is an opportunity to make money if prices go up. Note that although gold is used largely as a monetary precious metal (though it does have uses in jewellery), the other precious metals are all used in industrial processes and so also have a commercial value. There are no upper or lower price limits for precious metals.

* * *

It has been alleged (and is fairly widely believed) that it is not unknown for large, famous financial establishments to claim that they are storing precious metals (such as silver and gold) on behalf of their clients and to claim that the metals are safely locked away in their vaults when, in reality, there is nothing stored at all. To add insult to this particular injury, the banks then charge their clients big fees for storing the imaginary metal. One bank, sued by clients for precisely this, defended itself by claiming that everything it did followed 'standard industry practices'.

The answer, if you entrust a bank to buy and store coins or bullion for you, is to ask for a letter, signed by at least one named bank official, confirming that there is real metal stored in your name (not in the bank's name) in the bank's vault.

* * *

Occasionally, things which are offered for sale will have an underlying or intrinsic value which is greater than their apparent commercial value. So, for example, if the price of silver or gold rises a great deal (as happens sometimes) then the price you are asked to pay for a piece of silver tableware or an item of gold jewellery may be less than the price of the metal used to make the item. This does happen from time to time and beautiful and valuable works of art get melted down because they are worth more as bullion than as examples of creative genius.

ANALYSTS AND ECONOMISTS

'Economists forecast not because they know but because they are asked.'
JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH

The recommendations produced by professional analysts employed by banks and brokers are often treated with great deference by journalists and investors.

This deference is misplaced.

I don't rely on analysts when making investments.

As I write, the Ford motor company has just announced a quarterly loss of 62 cents a share. Analysts covering the Ford motor company forecast an average loss of 25 cents a share. Merrill Lynch bank lost $4.42 per share. Analysts specialising in the bank forecast a loss of $1.94.

Author David Dreman studied 1,500 American shares between 1971 and 1996. He discovered that when analysts picked their top tips they underperformed the market a staggering 75% of the time.

In 2001, three American academics, Brad Barber, Reuven Lehavy and Maureen McNicolls studied the performance of the most and least favoured stocks of analysts in the previous years. They found that the shares with the most strongly positive recommendations subsequently fell by an average of 31.2% while those with the most strongly negative recommendations rose by an average of 48.7%.

Consultants Davis Advisors compared the interest rate forecasts in *The Wall Street Journal Survey of Economists* for the period 1982 to 2008 with actual interest rates. The 'experts' got it wrong 35 times out of 52 – giving them a 67% failure rate.

Writing in his book *A Random Walk Down Wall Street,* which includes the results of his study of analysts, Burton G. Malkiel reports that when confronted with the poor record of their five-year growth estimates, security analysts sheepishly admitted that five years ahead is really too far in advance to make reliable projections. They said they felt that they really ought to be judged on their ability to project earning changes one year ahead. Sadly, for the credibility of the analysts, it turned out that their one-year forecasts were even worse than their five-year projections.

Malkiel also reported that no analysts proved consistently superior to the others. In one year, one analyst would do better. In another year another analyst would shine. 'Analysts who did better than average one year were,' says Malkiel, 'no more likely than the others to make superior forecasts in the next year.'

Other researchers have drawn the same conclusions. A study by David Dreman and M.A.Berry in the *Financial Analysts Journal* concluded that analysts' earnings forecasting errors 'are too large to be reliably used by investors and are increasing over time while analysts' forecasts are too optimistic and the investment community relies too heavily on them'.

Yale professor Robert Shiller says that analysts engage in herd behaviour because they are constantly evaluated against their peers. Younger analysts know that a few failures can destroy their growing reputations – so they stick with the crowd.

Error rates among analysts are embarrassing. 'Financial forecasting,' says Malkiel, 'appears to be a science that makes astrology look respectable.'

There is, Malkiel says, a message. 'Investors who put blind faith in such forecasts in making their investment selections are in for some rude disappointments.'

'Be sceptical of macro-economic forecasts. Forecasters have a very bad track record in predicting genuine booms and slumps. They sometimes fail to forecast a recession even when it has actually started.'
PAUL OMEROD

Although this is surprising, given the evidence, professional investors put a lot of faith in the views of analysts. Pension and investment fund managers rely on analysts to tell them what share prices are likely to do in the next three months. And they maintain their faith despite the existence of a good deal of evidence showing that analysts are worse than useless. It is partly because analysts are so useless that investment managers produce such rotten results.

John Maynard Keynes pointed out that for many investors and advisors: 'it is better to fail conventionally than to succeed unconventionally'. Analysts are frightened of being the lone voice and losing their well-paid jobs if they turn out to be wrong. So analysts tend to keep on promoting the shares that are going up and avoiding the shares that have gone down.

Why are analysts so bad?

There are several reasons.

But the biggest is that analysts rely very heavily on something called the 'discounted cash flow model'. This sounds grand and terribly scientific but it is, in reality, rather dependent on a number of what they call forecasts and what you and I might prefer to call guesses. In order to make their forecasts, analysts have to guess the amount of free cash flow which a firm will generate in the period ahead. In order to do this analysts often rely upon the company's directors. Not surprisingly, company directors are often rather optimistic when it comes to judging their own company's future performance.

'All you need in life is ignorance and confidence. Then success is sure.'
MARK TWAIN

The vast majority of recommendations made by analysts are 'buys' rather than 'sells'. Buy recommendations issued by analysts often outnumber sell recommendations by 100 to 1. In other words analysts are recommending 100 shares as a 'buy' for every one they are recommending as a 'sell'. This is patent nonsense. The sad truth is that analysts earn millions by disregarding the welfare of their investing clients while promoting the financial interests of their employers.

Can it possibly be true that nearly all companies are worth buying? Of course not. By the time analysts finally issue a 'sell' warning on a stock it is usually far too late for investors to get out with anything other than crumbs.

Analysts sometimes describe shares as 'hold' rather than a 'buy' or a 'sell'. They do this to avoid upsetting people. (Company directors and executives are likely to be unhappy if a bank's analyst describes their shares as a 'sell'.) There are, in reality, only two ways to describe a share. It is either a 'buy' or it is a 'sell'. If you wouldn't buy it then you shouldn't be holding it.

Analysts are supposed to predict. But they usually confine themselves to telling people what they already know. When a share is doing well analysts jump on the bandwagon and say how good it is. They give it a stamp of approval by labelling it with a 'buy' recommendation. Conversely, when a share is doing badly, analysts give it a good kicking and tell investors to avoid it at all costs. It is the work of analysts which at least partly explains why share prices tend to rise far too much and then tend to fall far too much.

Many professional analysts make the mistake of forecasting (or attempting to forecast) what the stock market will do on the basis of current economic information. This is dangerous stuff because the stock market does not follow the economy; the stock market leads the economy and share prices predict the future rather than reflect the past. Current economic information is historic. It relates to the past. And it pays no regard to the future. Economic data is history. The stock market is constantly trying to look into the future. The price of a share today tells you what the market thinks the company will be worth in the future. That is one of the most important things to understand about investing in shares. It's also one of the least known. And, surprisingly, it seems to me that a good many analysts aren't aware of this.

Analysts claim that they use many different tools in order to reach their conclusions. They have lengthy meetings with company managers. They use specially written software to evaluate the companies they write about. They collect (and feed into their computers) endless bits of information. They are paid fortunes. And their expenses are stratospheric. But, in the end, the advice they provide is at best worthless and at worst misleading.

The sad truth is that analysts are self-serving; protecting the interests of the institution for which they work (and, inevitably, their own interests). They have betrayed investors and are best ignored. Their only real value, curiously, is as a guide for contrarians. When all the economists and analysts agree on something they are almost certainly wrong. Whatever they are predicting will almost certainly not happen. There are several reasons for this.

First, analysts and other so-called experts are not as clever as they think they are. Many of them are stupid and incompetent.

Second, many analysts are bent. They are under pressure to produce favourable recommendations. And, too often, they succumb to that pressure. The advice they give is designed to satisfy the needs of their employers (banks and other institutions) and the companies paying their employers to represent them. The Financial Services Authority in the UK found that almost 80% of recommendations from investment banks which also acted as advisers to the companies in question were 'buys'. This was twice as high as the percentage of 'buys' where the investment bank did not work for the company in question. Honest, impartial analysts are about as common as honest politicians. Analysts make second-hand car dealers look ethical. Unless you know the exact nature of the relationship between an analyst writing a research report, the company concerned and the investment bank which pays the analyst's salary, it is very difficult to assess the value of an analyst's report. That level of information is virtually impossible for investors to find and so all analysts' research is worthless and should be ignored. Many so-called experts who promoted Internet stocks with pseudo-scientific hogwash (describing the Internet as a new paradigm) were discredited as dishonest, but far from being banished most are still operating and selling new absurd and shameful nonsenses. Analysts had 19 buy recommendations on Enron at the time it went bust. Between 1996 and 2000 the shares had gone up 350% but earnings per share had gone up 1%. Enron reported wonderful profits to shareholders and was one of the most admired companies in America. But it told the Internal Revenue Service that it had $3 billion in cumulative losses and the IRS accepted this. Consequently the company paid no taxes. The IRS would have looked at the accounts. They do not allow companies to avoid paying taxes when they are making profits. But the analysts ignored this clear evidence that the company was in trouble. (Companies which are healthy and profitable are usually paying taxes at the normal rate.)

The bottom line is that many analysts are over informed and spend too much time looking at the trees and missing the wood. They are so busy concentrating on minutiae that they miss the strategic moves.

* * *

Macroeconomic forecasting is difficult. Economists invariably fail to forecast recessions and predicting bear markets has proved tricky for them. Most economists agreed that the USA would avoid recessions in 1969-70, 1973-4, 1981-82 and 1990. They were wrong all four times. Generally speaking, economic forecasts are so bad that you're better off believing the opposite, rather than the forecast that the economist has made. It is perhaps not surprising that there aren't many rich economists around. Most of them are academics who make what money they have by teaching, writing and talking about finance.

* * *

Burton G. Malkiel concludes that there are five factors explaining why security analysts have such difficulty in predicting the future. His five factors are:

1. The influence of random events.
2. The production of dubious reported earnings through 'creative' accounting.
3. The basic incompetence of many of the analysts themselves.
4. The loss of the best analysts to the sales desk or to portfolio management.
5. The conflicts of interest facing security analysts at firms with large investment banking operations.

The end result is that when analysts say 'buy' I am inclined to consider selling. When they say 'sell' I am inclined to consider buying. Generally speaking, if all the analysts are praising something you have bought it is probably time to sell, whereas if all the analysts are damning something it is probably time to buy it. Portfolios made up of shares least popular with city analysts have worked well. When Investors Chronicle magazine recommended buying the 10 shares that got the worst press from stockbrokers' analysts they found that a year later the portfolio had risen by 20.4% – a significant 4.6% better than the FTSE All Share's performance during the same period. Research in America has shown the same thing: it is possible to beat the market by buying Wall Street's least favourite stocks.

Finally, here are some concluding thoughts about analysts:

1. Ignore forecasts and predictions which seem unbelievably precise. They may be precise but they are unbelievable. When a forecaster announces that house prices will rise by 8.3% during the next 12 months you can happily ignore everything he or she says.
2. If all analysts scream 'sell' there is a good chance that a share will be pushed down further than is justified. If all analysts scream 'buy' then a share is likely to go up far too much. Analysts inflate bubbles and then ensure that the bubble bursting process is as messy and as expensive as can be.
3. Analysts have a tendency to fall in love with the stocks they cover. This isn't just because they are being paid to promote those stocks. Analysts also seem to get close to the stocks on their 'watch' list. It's a variation on the Stockholm syndrome. They end up believing that the stocks they cover are better than all others and will survive whatever happens.
4. It is wise for investors to assume that everything that analysts (and investment bankers and brokers) say is a lie. Occasionally, analysts may tell the truth (probably because it serves their interest to do so and possibly by accident). But because you will never be able to tell whether they are lying or telling the truth the only safe approach is to assume that everything they say is a lie. There are some analysts who get it right. But you will never know who they are. And so they are all useless.

ASSET ALLOCATION

‘As time goes on, I get more and more convinced that the right method in investment is to put fairly large sums into enterprises which one thinks one knows something about and in the management of which one thoroughly believes. It is a mistake to think that one limits one’s risk by spreading too much between enterprises about which one knows little and has no reason for special confidence. One’s knowledge and experience are definitely limited and there are seldom more than two or three enterprises at any given time in which I personally feel myself entitled to put full confidence.’
JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES

Many investors spend a lot of effort trying to time the market or trying to pick stocks. A study in 1986 by Gary Brinson and colleagues called *The Determinants of Portfolio Performance* involved an analysis of 91 pension funds. The aim was to find out what decided performance most: asset allocation (policy), stock-picking, market timing or costs.

The results showed that asset allocation (between stocks, bonds and cash) decided 94% of performance. Stock picking and market timing had no useful effect. The busiest fund managers seemed to harm their results by too much action (partly because trading involves costs).

The skill, it seems, lies not in choosing particular companies or properties to invest in, but in picking asset classes and investment cycles. If you invest at a time when the stock market is going up then it doesn’t terribly much matter which shares you pick – most of them will go up. But if you invest at a time when the market is going down then most of the shares you choose will fall.

More equities mean more risk and volatility but (usually) better returns. With bonds and cash returns tend to be stable but lower.

AVERAGING UP AND DOWN

'Stock prices are anchored to 'fundamentals' but the anchor is easily pulled up and then dropped in another place. Given that expected growth rates and the price the market is willing to pay for growth can change rapidly on the basis of market psychology, the concept of a firm intrinsic value for shares must be an elusive will-o-the-wisp.'

BURTON MALKIEL

If you buy a share and it falls in price for no obvious reason (there has been no change in the company's circumstances or the investing environment) you have three options. You can sell the share. You can hold on and hope it goes back up. Or you can buy more on the grounds that it was worth buying when it was more expensive and so it is now even more worth buying. The third option is called 'averaging down' and the experts say you should never do it. They call it throwing good money after bad.

I'm not sure that the experts are right.

My feeling is that if you thought a share was worth £4 and it falls to £3 (without there being any change in circumstances) then the share must be a bargain at £3. If you buy more shares at the lower price then your average purchase price will be between £3 and £4.

If the share price then falls to £2 and you buy more your average price will be even lower.

Averaging down is a contrarian method of investing. It is contrary to the usually accepted rules.

Many investors claim that they never average losses. They say that if an investment has gone down in price then it means that they made a mistake and that they should be selling not buying more. I can see the sense in the argument but it isn't one that I follow. I believe that I am unlikely to be able to pick the 'bottom' and that, therefore, it is quite possible that an investment I make may fall in price after I have bought it. But if I still believe in my original choice then the investment is now an even better buy than it was when I made my first purchase. For this reason I will, if I am planning to make a new investment, sometimes begin by investing only a proportion of the amount I intend to invest. Then in a week or two's time I will invest some more – whether the price has fallen or risen. And in another week or two's time I will invest a third time. This method enables me to avoid having to try and time an investment a traditionally impossible task.

I do the same thing when I am selling. When I think a share may be a little expensive, even though the price is still rising, I sell some and then wait a while before selling some more.

The opposite of averaging down is averaging up. This only makes good sense if the argument in favour of the share concerned has improved.

BANK DEPOSITS

'It is amazing that this monster interest has not devoured the whole of humanity. It would have done so long ago had not bankruptcy and revolution acted as counter-poisons.'
NAPOLEON BONAPARTE

There are a few things to consider when putting your money in a bank:
1. How safe is the bank (and, therefore, how safe is your money)? Will the bank look after your money and remain solvent? Will you be able to get your money back when you need it to buy something? Generally speaking, the higher the return the greater the risk. If Honest Albert's International Corner Bank offers you 22% interest and all the High Street banks are offering 3% then you're risking your money if you decide to trust your money to Honest Albert.
2. How much interest are you getting on your money? If you're going to give your money to the bank to look after, you are entitled to receive 'rent' on your money. The bank is looking after your money, it is true, but they won't just stick it in a vault and shut the door on it. They will lend it out and charge interest on it. So it's only fair and decent that you should get a share of the interest.
3. The amount of interest you receive (known as the yield) will depend on the length of time for which you are prepared to loan the bank your money. Banks will often pay a higher rate of interest to depositors who are prepared to abandon access to their money for longer periods. Give your money to a bank and tell them that you don't want it back for a year and you will probably get a higher rate of interest than if you tell them that you want instant access to your money. But be wary and remember that any institution offering very high interest rates is probably having difficulty attracting money.

'A lot of people will also urge you to put some money in a bank, and in fact – within reason – this is very good advice. But don't go overboard. Remember, what you are doing is giving your money to somebody else to hold on to, and I think that it is worth keeping in mind that the businessmen who run banks are so worried about holding on to things that they put little chains on all their pens.'
MISS PIGGY

4. The more you save, and the longer you save, the more you will benefit from the wonders of compound interest. Albert Einstein once called compounding the eighth wonder of the world. If you start with £100 and increase your capital by 10% every year then at the end of the first year you have £110. But at the end of the second year you actually have £121 because your 10% rise includes the £10 you have added to your total. Compounding helps your wealth to grow faster and faster. Einstein was right. It is the miracle of compound interest which explains why people who look after their money sometimes become extremely rich. As someone (I forget who) once said to me: 'It is the interest on the interest that made me rich.'

'A banker is a man who lends you an umbrella when the weather is fair, and takes it away from you when it rains.'
ANON

5. Putting your money into a foreign bank, based abroad somewhere, will sometimes produce a higher rate of interest. But beware, there are potential problems. If you put your money into a foreign bank in a foreign country it will usually be in a foreign currency and you will then be susceptible to the vagaries of the currency markets. When a country lowers its interest rates its currency usually suffers in comparison with those of other countries where interest rates are higher. The reason for this is simple. If an investor can choose between putting his money into a currency with a high interest rate and putting it into a currency with a low interest rate which do you think he will choose? Exactly. As long as the value of the high interest rate currency doesn't go down too much (thereby damaging his capital) he will put his money into the currency producing the high interest rate. Investors who like to think themselves as terribly sophisticated will borrow money in a country whose currency has low interest rates and then invest that money in a country where the currency carries a high interest rate. Their profit is, of course, the difference between the two interest rates. (Of course, if the currency rates change too much the profit can be wiped out and turned into a loss.) The markets (manned by men in shirt sleeves sitting in front of computer screens) usually try to anticipate all this action, of course. Brokers and banks have a view about whether or not central banks are likely to lower or raise interest rates. And so they mark currencies up or down accordingly. Playing with currencies is really more like gambling than investing. I don't recommend that you do it with your own hard-earned savings.
6. If you remain a passive investor (leaving your savings on deposit at the bank is about as passive as you can get) you will not become rich because those hard-earned savings will, thanks to inflation, probably be shrinking every day you leave them there. In order to flourish and grow money, like seeds, needs nurturing. And that means that it needs to be invested with a little more imagination.
7. One thing is certain: a cash deposit is not a 'risk free' investment. Even if your cash doesn't disappear with the bank in which you put it, its purchasing power will shrink whenever inflation rates are higher than interest

rates (which seems to be most of the time these days).

8. For many years Money Market funds were regarded as excellent alternatives to bank deposit accounts. Money Market funds are, as the name suggests, simply funds in which the invested money is spread among a number of banks. The investor in a Money Market fund has the reassurance of knowing that his money is spread around – rather than being deposited in a single bank. But the aura of safety that used to surround Money Market funds has disappeared. During the autumn of 2008 five out of 29 Money Market funds lost money over a single three month period. How did they do that? Simple. They lost money because some of the institutions in which the money was deposited went bust.

'Banking was conceived in iniquity and born in sin.'
SIR JOSIAH STAMP

9. People expect banks to protect their interests – but why should they? Banks cannot look after the interests of shareholders and customers at the same time since their interests are often diametrically opposed (even though both groups of people may be the same). The shareholder wants the bank to make huge profits and to pay its depositors a very low rate of interest. The customer wants the bank to do everything for free and to pay high rates of interest on its deposits.

10. And remember: lower interest rates make equities more attractive to most investors. If Gilbert can only get 2.5% interest on bank deposits, but he can get dividends of 5% on investments in Blue Chip companies then he will probably think it makes sense to use his money to buy Blue Chip companies rather than to leave his money on deposit in the bank. Lower interest rates also mean that companies (many of which have borrowed money to expand) will have to pay less interest on their loans. This makes them more profitable – and makes them less likely to default on interest payments. On the other hand, high interest rates make equities less attractive. If Gilbert can get 15% from a bank deposit, dividends paying 5% don't look quite so enchanting. And with interest rates high, companies with a lot of debt are more likely to get into trouble. So, Gilbert sells his shares and puts his money on deposit in the bank and hopes that the bank doesn't go bust and take his money with it.

BEAR AND BULL MARKETS

'Bull markets are born on pessimism, grow on scepticism, mature on optimism and die on euphoria. The time of maximum pessimism is the best time to buy, and the time of maximum optimism is the best time to sell.'
SIR JOHN TEMPLETON

A bull is someone who is optimistic about prospects and thinks a share, or the market as a whole, is going to go up. A bear is someone who is pessimistic about prospects and thinks a share, or the market as a whole, is going to go down. A bull market is one in which shares are soaring ever upwards. A bear market is one in which shares are going down. In a bull market even idiots can make money. In a bear market even geniuses can lose it.

Bear markets can do enormous damage to the wealth of investors and can sometimes be horrendous. In the UK, shares slumped by 74% in real terms in 1973-74. The 1973-74 crash resulted in many big funds disappearing completely. (If you spotted that they were too high beforehand, and you got at least some of your money into cash, this was a buying opportunity of a lifetime.) When there are hard times people spend less. This means that corporate profits must fall. But just as share prices go up too much during a bull market, so they usually go down too much during a bear market. At a bear market bottom shares usually have dividend yields of 5-6%. Bear markets can seem to go on for ever.

The Japanese stock market peaked in the late 1980's. Twenty years later it was still on a downward slide. After two decades of waiting, investors who still held Japanese shares which they had bought in 1987 were sitting on a loss of well over half their original investment.

In a secular bear market, a big bear market where prices seem destined to fall for ever, the decline is likely to be at least 40%. The bear market will probably last for up to five years by which time pessimistic investors will be convinced that the end of the world has come and formerly optimistic investors will be convinced that the bears are right. At the end of the bear market there may well be another five years of nothingness as investors get accustomed to the fact that prices aren't still going down. Cyclical bear markets are much less dramatic and far less destructive.

Bear markets can last longer than most people think and do far more damage than is generally imagined. In a real bear market almost everyone who has money becomes poorer (while, paradoxically, those who have nothing or are in debt may emerge from the chaos much better off since interest rates will be low and inflation may be high.) After the stock market crash of 1929 the American market took 25 years to go higher. In 1957 the Dow Jones index was at 685. In 1970 it was lower than that. In 1966 the Dow Jones was up at 995. By 1981 it was down to 776.

Investors who had merely followed the index over those periods would have lost serious amounts of money when costs and commissions are included.

* * *

Bull and bear markets can last a long time. Here, for example, is a list of major American bull and bear markets in the 20th Century.

1. 1921 to 1929:bull(8 years)
2. 1929 to 1949: bear (20 years)
3. 1949 to 1966: bull (17 years)
4. 1966 to 1982: bear (16 years)
5. 1982 to 2000: bull (18 years)

In a real bear market everything goes down – property, shares, commodities, bonds and sometimes even gold. And, if inflation is higher than interest rates, even cash loses value. Sometimes, as in 2008, nothing remains safe. Shares, commodities, bonds, property were all falling rapidly. Putting money into cash is equally foolish because inflation means that the purchasing value of your money is shrinking. (Plus there is, of course, the risk that the bank holding your cash might go bust and take your cash with it.) Don't believe anyone who tells you that bonds are a safe place to put your money during difficult times. There was a bear market in bonds that lasted from 1947 to 1981. Mark Twain once pointed out that at times like these investors worry about the return *of* their capital, not the return *on* their capital.

Once a bear market develops there is a tendency for analysts, journalists and investors to concentrate on bad news. Every piece of bad news is highlighted and bits and pieces of good news are ignored. The negative is accentuated and the positive is eliminated. Share prices fall more. Investors are terrified. They sell everything they can. (Because they hate taking losses, they sell their best investments first, taking the profits where they can and retaining the shares that have fallen the most.) Eventually, there is usually a 'capitulation' point at which everyone – analysts, brokers, journalists and investors – decide that shares are no good to man or beast and should never, ever be bought again.

In long bear markets there can often be dramatic upsurges in share prices. Shares may go up to four times the level they were at. And then carry on going down again. If you suspect that you are in a bear market you should be very careful. At the least you should try to own things that pay you to own them – stocks that pay decent, well-covered dividends, for example.

In a bear market share prices never seem too low, but in a bull market share prices never seem too high to buy. Profits are easy. In a bear market the slightest bit of bad news will send shares into a tailspin. Exactly the opposite happens in a bull market when shares will often fight a wall of worry. Investors ignore bad news as irrelevant. Slowdowns in profits, rises in input costs, industrial action – all are deemed irrelevant as investors chase prices ever higher, frightened not to buy (and far too frightened to sell) lest they miss out on the chance of huge, apparently no-risk profits. Investors take risks; hope triumphs over fear. But it is vital to remember that when a boom ends the bad years will last just as long as the boom – probably longer. And the fall will be further, as well as lasting for longer, than the rise. When the prices of shares and property have risen to such high levels that experts are explaining that 'it's different this time' and 'it's a new paradigm' then it is time be worried. When the good times end, the bad times will be deeper, and last longer, than seems possible. That is what history teaches us. And it is the way things are.

There is, of course, a third option: the time when share prices are going nowhere in particular. And then, if you have money which you are waiting to invest you must either wait to see if you can see a new direction or else invest in dribs and drabs. The most important thing any investor can do is learn to recognise the onset of a bear market. In a real bear market your primary aim should be to preserve your capital. When you think the market has reached its bottom, or is close to its bottom will be the time to start investing again.

It is sometimes easier to suspect that the whole market has reached a bottom than to decide which particular sectors are most likely to recover fastest and furthest. Following a specific investment strategy and taking a punt on a particular sector will then be more dangerous than simply investing in the whole market by buying a tracker fund or a general investment trust. It is worth remembering that most successful investors claim that the really big money is to be made by being a contrarian in a serious bear market – provided that you can pick a moment to buy when it seems that the end of the world has come and no one else wants to buy. And then buy companies which you believe will survive, which will not need to raise fresh capital (because that would dilute the value of your holding), which will not lose a share of their market because they do not have the money to stay in business through the worst of the economic downturn and which will still be able to take advantage of the boom when it (eventually) comes. Buy too soon as a bear market falls and you could lose a lot of money for bears are dangerous beasts, but get your timing right and you could make the killing of a lifetime.

In contrast, handling a bull market is easy. You buy stuff and it goes up in price. In a real bull market you can buy almost anything and it will go up. Surviving in a bear market is much more difficult than thriving in a bull market. Some people claim they can make money in bear markets by trading aggressively. But such folk always seem to have mislaid the paperwork that proves how they did it.

Towards the end of a long bull market investors tend to be nervous. When there is a correction, and prices start to dip, investors worry that their gains are going to disappear. They are likely to sell their best investments in order to pocket their profits. (Unwisely, they continue to hold their bad investments so that they don't have to face the pain of crystallising their losses.)

But after a day or two they tend to go back into the market. The bull market has given investors false confidence and encouraged them to believe that being fully invested is the best way to make big profits. During the bull market they will have got used to the idea that dips are buying opportunities. And so they buy back the stuff they've sold. If they've done well they might even make a small profit.

But then the bear bites back.

At the end of a bull market shares will become overpriced and the professionals will come up with all sorts of explanations for this. 'The rules have changed,' sneer arrogant, bright young things in silk suits.

The best strategy is to wait for the professionals to panic and start dumping shares.

Eventually shares will become underpriced.

BONDS AND GILTS

'An investor who is seriously eager to make money doesn't have to watch the markets every day. He just has to make, once in a while, a good investment decision on the trends that will last for a number of years.'
MARC FABER

A bond is just a rather fancy IOU issued by someone grand who wants to borrow money but wants to make it sound rather formal and impressive. When companies borrow money they call their IOUs 'bonds'. When governments borrow money they call their bonds something different so that lenders don't get confused (or, perhaps, so that they do). When the British Government borrows money its bonds are called gilts (short for gilt-edged securities). When the American Government borrows money its bonds are called 'Treasuries' (with a capital T to show how important they are).

Theoretically, a gilt is a security which is considered reliable and likely to pay dividends or interest over a long period of time. However, the word is usually kept to describe bonds issued by financially responsible governments or governments which are regarded as financially responsible (which actually isn't the same thing at all).

Bonds and gilts are convenient because they can be bought and sold just like pots of jam, houses and shares. There are two main ways in which bonds vary.

First, there is the amount of interest that is paid. This is known as the 'coupon' because it sounds more impressive and because, at some time in the past, bonds were issued with little coupons attached that you could exchange for money. The word 'coupon' has a number of possible meanings but it is commonly used to describe the nominal rate of interest on a fixed interest security. The word 'coupon' is used by bankers and investment professionals to confuse ordinary mortals. Bankers, like all quasi-professionals, like to think that they are skilled and educated professionals, on a par with doctors and lawyers, and so they try to give themselves an arcane, incomprehensible language just like doctors and lawyers. Incidentally, bankers also often talk about basis points when talking about yields and interest rates. A basis point is one hundredth of one per cent or 0.01%. So, if your bank's interest rate goes up from 7% to 8% it will have risen by 100 basis points.

Second, there is the length of time that the bond lasts before it expires. When it expires the owner of the bond at the time receives a sum of money, the amount of which was usually determined when the bond was issued.

The price of a bond can vary throughout its life. If a bond was issued when interest rates were high its coupon might have been 10%. If interest rates subsequently fall, buyers might be prepared to pay more for such a good rate of interest and so the value of the bond will rise and the original owner (if he still owns it) will make a capital gain.

And, although there are an almost infinite number of complications, that is more or less the way that bonds operate. When interest rates go up (and the rate of interest paid by a bank to a depositor rises) the purchase prices of bonds tend to fall. When interest rates go down (and the interest paid by bonds may seem more attractive) the purchase prices of bonds may rise.

People who buy bonds receive interest payments until their bonds expire or are sold. And when the bonds expire or are sold the owner either makes a capital gain (because the value of the bond is more than the price they paid) or they make a capital loss (because the value of the bond is less than the price they paid).

Bonds are riskier than most people think. Investors buy bonds with the 'safe' part of their portfolio in the belief that bonds are solid investments which produce a steady income and don't move about much. Not much of this is true. Bonds may produce a steady income (unless they go bust) but they are likely to move about far more than you might expect.

Corporate bonds, the ones issued by companies, can be extravagantly volatile. During the financial collapse of 2008 corporate bonds went downhill faster than an alpine skier.

Some bonds, the ones which are considered riskiest, are known as junk bonds. The interest paid by junk bonds may sound very appealing (15% for example, in an era of low interest rates) but I leave junk bonds to the junk bond professionals. Junk bonds are bonds that are risky. And it is because they are risky that they offer a high rate of interest. If you are the sort of person who feels happy to put all your savings on a horse running in the 2 o'clock at Newbury then you will probably be the sort of investor who will be suitable for junk bonds.

The best and safest investments in terms of capital and income are undoubtedly government bonds which are issued by fairly large, stable governments.

There are two main varieties of bonds issued by governments. First, there are the ones which simply pay a small amount of interest. Then there are the ones which are index linked – and which are designed to pay interest at or slightly above the official rate of inflation. These won't keep up with the real rate of inflation (because the level of inflation that index linked bonds protect you against is the variety defined by the government, the sort that doesn't include such 'irrelevant' factors as energy costs, housing costs or food) but government bonds aren't likely to disappear overnight. And the income should keep on coming. Government bonds are liquid (you can get your money back at short notice), the expenses are low and there are sometimes significant tax advantages to be had. You don't have to keep an eye on them and if you purchase long-term bonds the fluctuations in the capital price are irrelevant as long as you are happy with the interest you accepted when you first bought them.

Gilts and bonds are generally thought to be 'safe and stable' investments. But they aren't really as safe or as stable as their reputation sometimes suggests. Their value can rise and fall just as share prices can rise and fall. Many gilts and bonds which were issued years ago are now worth considerably more than they were when they were issued. In times of high inflation gilts and bonds had to be issued with a high coupon in order to attract buyers. As inflation (and general interest rates) have fallen so the price of these gilts has risen. But, on the other hand, there are quite a few gilts around which have gone down in price since they were first issued.

It is widely assumed that governments do not default, and that this makes government bonds totally safe. This is definitely not true. In 200l the country Argentina defaulted on $100 billion of its loans held by foreigners. In 2005 Argentine generously agreed to repay these loans but said that it could only afford to pay 34 cents on the dollar. This meant that the Argentinian people gained quite a few billion and the investors who had trusted the Argentinian Government lost quite a few billions.

BROKERS

'Stockbroking is a trade found in fraud, born of deceit and nourished by trick, cheat, wheedle forgeries, falsehoods and all sorts of delusions.'
DANIEL DEFOE

There are plenty of ways to trade shares but one of the easiest is probably to do it through your bank. This is easy because you can trade in and out of your current account. If you choose a specialist broker make sure that they are properly registered with all the relevant authorities. Brokers charge more for telephone orders than for Internet orders but I don't trade on line. It may be easy and quick (and cheap) but I fear it also makes life too easy for fraudsters.

Here are some terms you'll hear from (or in relation to) brokers:

1. Execution only dealing

As the name suggests this means that instead of offering you advice the broker simply buys and sells whatever you tell him to buy and sell. I prefer this sort of relationship with my broker.

2. Margin

A loan from a broker to enable the investor to buy shares is called 'margin'. And so investors going into debt are said to buy 'on margin'. If things go badly and the price of the share falls, the broker will call the investor and ask for more money (this is known as a 'margin call'). I never borrow money to buy shares.

3. Market order

If you buy shares 'at the market' or 'at best' your order will be filled as soon as possible and at the best price available at the time. There is no guarantee about the price you will pay but you will get the shares.

And here is something to remember: A brokerage account that can't cope when there isn't any pressure is going to fail completely when the pressure is on. If your broker is slow, or has frequent computer malfunctions when things in the market are peaceful, they will not be able to cope when things in the market are chaotic – at the very time when you need to get in touch with them quickly. So, if your broker is slow, if there are long delays in answering the phone or they are always having unspecified problems dump them and move your money elsewhere. Even cheap dealing becomes expensive when you cannot deal when you want to.

'Every man his own broker.'
THOMAS MORTIMER
(THOMAS MORTIMER WROTE THE FIRST INVESTMENT BOOK IN THE 1750's.)

4. Position

Your position is the number of shares you hold in a security. And so, for example, you might say: 'My position in KuddlyBears Inc is 1,500 shares'.

5. Fundamental Analysis

Analysing a company's prospects by looking at its balance sheet and so on is known as fundamental analysis. Fundamental analysts check all the things that can be found out about the company. The problem is that there are, of course, still many things which remain unknown. And how do you decide how much weight to attach to each piece of information? There's also the problem that although the analyst's interpretation of the facts may be accurate the market may remain stubbornly 'wrong' for years to come. And there is the added problem that fundamental analysis depends totally on things that have happened in the past. And the past, as the authorities insist we be constantly reminded, is no guarantee of the future.

6. Bid-Offer Spread

The bid/offer spread is the difference between the price you will pay if you buy and the price you will receive if you sell. This is how the marketmakers (people who buy and sell shares for a living) make part of their profit. (They also charge a commission.) The bid/offer spread will widen when a share or investment is difficult to trade (illiquid) and become narrower when liquidity is good. The spread is, therefore, usually wider for shares in small companies than it is for larger companies. With some shares the spread can be considerable. This is particularly likely to be a problem with a low cost share. If (for example) you have to pay 5p for a share but the selling price is 4p you will lose 20% of your money if you resell immediately. I wouldn't usually buy a share which brought that sort of disadvantage with it.

7. Churning

Trading costs can ruin a portfolio's performance. Add the difference in the buy and sell prices to the commissions that are charged and the taxes that have to be paid and every 'deal' becomes expensive. Some fund managers (and many managers of private portfolios) deliberately buy and sell as often as they can in order to maximise their own commissions and, therefore, their own profits. This is called 'churning' and is a despicable practice.

Investment costs eat away at your capital. Such costs are certain and remorseless. And their effect compounds. Every £1 you pay in costs is £1 you no longer have to invest. Costs tend to destroy investment performance more than anything else. Expenses turn investing into a worse than zero sum game.

'A. broker is someone who invests your money until it is all gone.'
WOODY ALLEN

8. Offshore

Offshore is anywhere that isn't the country where you live. If you are an American, Britain is offshore. To people throughout the world Britain is a major offshore tax haven. London is the money laundering capital of the world for people who aren't British. Governments can sometimes get very greedy. It is not unknown for governments to stop their citizens moving their money out of their country. In bad times governments confiscate money, property and anything they can get their hands on – which means anything that is nailed down and anything that is securely tucked away in a bank. For this reason alone, having some money in an offshore bank might be a good idea.

9. Outperformance and Underperformance

A share or another asset that goes up faster than the market generally is said to be outperforming. Similarly, a share that doesn't go down as fast as the rest of the market is outperforming. A share or another asset that doesn't go up as fast as the rest of the market (or goes down faster than the market) generally is said to be underperforming.

10. Paper profits

Don't confuse real profits with paper profits. A paper profit is a gain which has not yet been realised because the position hasn't been 'closed'. A paper profit isn't something you can spend, because you don't have the money. And, unless you close the position to your advantage, you may never have the money.

11. Ratings agencies

Formidable rating agencies with tremendous international reputations give investment products rating. Traditionally a triple A rating (AAA) suggests that the institution, or its product, is as safe as houses. Well, safer if you're in the middle of a housing crash or live in something built on a flood plain. I ignore such ratings and regard them as worthless. During the crash season of 2008 institutions and products with AAA ratings were disappearing from the scene with a rapidity that would have caused red faces at the ratings agencies had they been capable of embarrassment.

The ratings agencies which hand down these ratings from on high are private companies. They are paid huge fees by the companies which they rate. I no longer pay any attention whatsoever to ratings given to bonds, institutions or anything else. My advice is that all such ratings are worthless. A triple A rating is an AAA rating until the day the rating agency changes it to something less impressive, or the day the company goes bust – which may, indeed, be the same day.

12. Returns

The return is, not surprisingly perhaps, what you get back. Don't be greedy. Bull markets have given many investors an exaggerated idea of what return they can expect from their investments. Anyone who tries to get an endless 15% return on their capital will, outside a roaring bull market, be taking huge risks. And the chances are that they will lose money, rather than make it. In the real world a return of 8% after tax is fantastic. A return of 2% above inflation is perfectly acceptable. In a high inflation world, just beating inflation (and ensuring that your capital preserves its purchasing power) is creditable.

13. The Rule of 72

The Rule of 72 is the one mathematical oddity that is really useful. It enables you to find out how long it will take to double the size of an investment. All you need to know is the annual return you are expecting.

Divide the expected rate of return (the growth rate) into 72 and the number you get is the approximate number of years it will take for the investment to double.

So, if your annual return is 6% it will take 12 years for your investment to double. (72 divided by 6 = 12). If your annual return is a much healthier 9% it will take 8 years for your investment to double. (72 divided by 9 = 8). And if your annual return is a miserable 3% it will take 24 years to double your money. (72 divided by 3 = 24).

Using the Rule of 72 it is possible to see just how dramatic an effect compound interest can have once an investment has started to grow.

So, if you start with an investment of £1,000 and you manage to obtain a 12% return you will have £2,000 in just six years. (72 divided by 12 = 6). And if your money keeps doubling every six years you will have £4,000 in 12 years, £8,000 in 18 years, £16,000 in 24 years and £32,000 in 30 years. Add a nought to a sum of £1,000 to turn it into £10,000 and you can see that at the end of 30 years you'll have a pension pot worth around a third of a million pounds.

If your money is growing at 10% per year then it will double in around seven years. If it is growing at 5% per year then it will double in around 14 years. If it is growing at 1% per year (and in high inflationary times you may be lucky if your after tax gain is that high) then it will double in around 70 years.

If you are feeling more ambitious, you can divide 115 by the interest rate (or rate of growth you are getting) to find how long it will take for your money to triple.

14. Stop-loss orders

Investment journalists often tell their readers to put stop-loss orders on shares they recommend. The idea is that the broker sells the share once the price falls to the stop-loss price that the customer has designated. The aim is to minimise losses-Journalists and investment advisers recommend stop-loss orders because they enable them to claim that their advice is more successful than it often is. So, for example, if they recommend that their readers buy shares at £1.50 and put a stop-loss order of £1.20 on the holding, the investor can (theoretically) lose only 30 pence per share.

There are, however, several problems. First, not all brokers will provide a stop-loss selling service. If your broker won't (and in my experience most won't) you have to sit there all day watching share prices to see if any of your holdings totters down through your stop-loss level. Life is too short for that. I have better things to do with my time and I'm sure you have too. Second, if a share is falling rapidly it may not be possible to sell it at the stop-loss price. The price obtained may be much lower than the £1.20 requested. Third, shares which are volatile may wander through the stop-loss price and trigger an unwanted sale before going back up again. You might want to hold onto the share, but your holding will be sold and you will have made a loss.

Many investors who favour stop-losses raise their stop-loss price as the share price rises. They do this to ensure that if a share goes up 50% and then down, say 10%, they can sell without losing the rest of their profit. The problem here is that prices rarely go up in a straight line and it is perfectly possible that if the share hadn't been sold it might have gone up another 50%. Or 500%. Who knows?

My view is that stop-losses are impractical and a waste of time.

If you have done your research and you believe in the share you have bought, and have great expectations, why sell it just because the price goes down? You should, of course, sell if the fundamentals have changed. But if the fundamentals don't change, and your expectations are still the same, and the share becomes cheaper that could just mean that the share is even more of a 'buy'. Shares often go up and down for no very good reason. A geopolitical shock might have affected your shares temporarily. There might have been an item of news which scared the whole market and produced a general overreaction. A stop loss might mean that you sell shares that might have made you a lot of money.

The bottom line is that I believe that stop-losses are for sissies who can't trust themselves to make decent decisions.

15. Short selling

Short selling is selling shares you don't own in the hope that the price will fall. If this happens you will be able to buy the shares you have sold but don't own. You will pay less for them than the buyer who bought from you paid and so you will make a profit. The snag (and it's a big one) is that you can lose everything (and more) by short selling. The maximum profit you can make when shorting is 100% (if you can buy the share you have shorted back for nothing) but the maximum loss is everything you have and then more (if you have to pay a much higher price for the share because it has risen enormously since you sold it). If you buy a share at £1 and it falls to £0 you have lost only what you invested. But if you are short selling and you sell a share for £1, hoping to be able to buy it cheaper, you will be in a tricky position if the share price goes up to £50 or £100. When you buy long you can only lose what you have invested. When you short sell the sky is the limit.

Bottom line? Going short is for gamblers who want to lose their money so that they can feel aggrieved with society and bad about themselves.

Here are three basic terms all investors should know:

Long: You are 'long' in a share or an asset class if you invested in it, or have an interest in it, or in some other way will benefit if the price goes up and lose if the price goes down.

Short: You are short in a sector or share if you will profit if the value of the sector or share goes down. You can 'short' shares by selling them when you don't own any or by using complex financial instruments known as derivatives.

Flat: If you are neither 'long' nor 'short' then you are flat. If you don't have a financial interest in pork bellies (you don't stand to make money whatever happens to their price) then you are 'flat pork bellies' and you probably sleep better at night than the bloke who isn't.

16. Top Down and Top Up Investing

Top Down investing means selecting and buying shares according to sector or geographical area. The investor picks a sector (or a country or region) and then picks shares within that sector, country or region. The antonym is Bottom Up Investing which means buying individual shares for their own special appeal and ignoring wider criteria – such as the stability of the sector or the currency involved.

17. Underweight and Overweight

You are underweight if you don’t have as much money invested in an individual share (or sector) as you would if you were trying to match a specified benchmark such as, for example, the FTSE 100 or the FTSE All Share Index. In contrast (and I bet you didn’t see this coming) you are overweight if you have more money invested in an individual share or sector than you would have if you were trying to match a specified benchmark such as, for example, the FTSE All Share Index or the FTSE 100.

18. Trackers

When you are buying a tracker to follow the market there are several options because the market is subdivided. If you are investing in the UK you can buy a tracker following the FTSE 100, the FTSE 250 or the FTSE All Share. You will probably not be surprised to learn that the first of these follows the fortunes of shares in the FTSE 100, the second follows the fortunes of shares in the FTSE 250 and the third follows all the shares quoted on the stock exchange.

Funds which aim to match the rise and fall of a particular index are known as trackers. Since the dealing for tracker funds is usually done by computer the costs should be considerably lower than for funds where the dealing is done by absurdly overpaid fund managers. A very large number of allegedly actively managed funds are, in reality, simple tracker funds. The fund manager pretends to be making decisions based on extensive research and experience when, in fact, he is buying and selling shares simply to match what is happening in an index. Investors are paying for a service they aren’t getting: they are paying huge annual fees for something that can be purchased for a fraction of the cost by investing in a tracker fund. Most actively managed equity funds have, for many years, underperformed index tracker funds.

BUBBLES

'When the rest of the world is mad, we must imitate them in some measure.'

JOHN MARTIN (JOHN MARTIN WAS A BANKER IN THE 18TH CENTURY, ACTIVE DURING THE SOUTH SEA BUBBLE OF 1720. THE THEORY HE WAS EXPRESSING WAS THAT IT IS POSSIBLE TO BUY OVERPRICED SHARES AND MAKE A PROFIT BY SELLING THEM ON TO THE NEXT SUCKER. THIS IS ALSO KNOWN AS 'MOMENTUM INVESTING' AND IS THE FINANCIAL EQUIVALENT OF THE CHAIN LETTER. INCIDENTALLY, MR MARTIN LOST ALL HIS MONEY WHEN THE SOUTH SEA BUBBLE COLLAPSED.)

A bubble exists when an asset price rises to absurd levels.

Every now and again investment experts talk of a new era. They say stuff like 'things are different now' and they talk about 'gardens of prosperity', 'perfect economic climates' and 'Camelot'. This sort of talk usually leads to the top of a bull market top and, shortly afterwards, a great bear market. Experts talked of a new era in the late 1920's, the late 1960's and the late 1990's. Talk of a new era in the 1920's led to a massive bear market. Talk of a new era in the 1960's led to a massive bear market. And talk of a new era in the late 1990's led to a massive bear market. In each case the bull turned into a bubble which turned into a bear.

There have been many bubbles in history but gullibility and greed ensure they keep coming. Shares in Internet companies were in a bubble at the end of the 20th Century and houses were a bubble of their own at the beginning of the 21st Century. There have always been bubbles, financed by greedy, stupid people. But modern bubbles do more harm because bankers have worked out ways to make them more explosive. And there will, doubtless, be many more bubbles in the future.

When a bubble has grown and grown and grown enthusiasts will always be able to find good reasons why the price of the underlying asset(s) should continue to rise. Bubbles always go on longer than seems possible. The fuel that keeps bubbles growing is money. If there is plenty of money available then it tends to be invested. And when large amounts of money are being invested then the price of something tends to go up.

In a bubble, prices never look silly (however silly they make look in retrospect) and investors who are involved in the bubble believe that prices will continue to rise. The words 'this time it's different' and 'you don't understand the new paradigm' are heard and read often. Finally, everyone has bought into the dream. The bubble has become a dream. Everyone is calm and happy. But there is a problem. There is no one left to buy. And so when one or two people start to sell (maybe to take a profit or maybe just because they need their money to fund a house purchase, a divorce or another investment) the price must inevitably fall. The fall in price wakes people up. The bubble may not continue to grow indefinitely after all. More people want to sell to preserve their profits. But there is no one buying. And so the price crashes. When a bubble bursts the damage is done quickly and fiercely.

CASHFLOW

'That's the way the money goes, pop goes the weasel.'
W.R.MANDALE

The dot.com companies went bust long before they made a penny in profits. Many had no income at all. Some had never even worked out how they were going to make a profit. It wasn't surprising that when they had burnt through all the cash they'd started with they went bankrupt.

But even small companies which are profitable can go bust.

There are a number of potential downfalls. Cash is the lifeblood of any company and if the cash doesn't flow properly the company will die. Surprisingly, a company that grows too quickly can sometimes get into serious trouble. Look at what could happen to a small publishing company. The publisher does well and sells £1,000,000 worth of books in a month. The opening stock (at the start of the month) cost £100,000 and the extra books it purchases during the month cost another £500,000. At the end of the month the publisher has £150,000 worth of books left unsold in its warehouse. The cost of selling £1,000,000 worth of books is therefore £100,000 plus £500,000 minus £150,000. We will assume that the £150,000 worth of books left will be sold in due course and we will, for the purpose of this exercise, ignore other costs such as employing staff and finding somewhere for them to work. Assuming that other costs are under control the business seems to be doing well. The cost of selling £1,000,000 worth of books is £450,000. So that means that the gross profit for the month is £550,000. The company is doing well.

But it is unlikely that the money for the books which have been sold will be received straight away. Many bookshops take 60 to 90 days credit. Let us assume that only 25% of the books were paid for by the end of that successful month. That means that the cash flow into the company is 25% of £1,000,000 which is £250,000.

On the other hand the suppliers, the people who printed the books, may want to be paid up front. The company is small and new and the printer has lost money before on new publishers. So, in order to get the books it sold, the publisher had to pay out £600,000 during that first month.

The cash flow does not now look so good.

The company has £250,000 in cash but it has spent £600,000. It is short of £350,000 and unless the company has an understanding bank manager and a large overdraft it will go bust. It is, surprisingly easy for an enormously successful company to go bankrupt.

CHARTS (TECHNICAL ANALYSIS)

'History doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes.'
MARK TWAIN

Some investors believe in charts and historical patterns. They believe that things that happened to shares in the past will happen again in the future. Charts of historic prices are created, and conclusions are drawn. There are many different varieties of chart produced and there are many different ways to interpret charts.

Technical analysts use charts to predict the future path of share prices. They plot their charts using historic prices and details of the number of shares traded. They also create charts showing relative strengths (the way one share performs compared to another, or compared to the index as a whole). They then look for patterns in their charts. The technical analyst believes he can use the past to tell him which way prices will go in the future. I have known many technical analysts but I have to admit that the only ones who genuinely got rich did so not by buying and selling shares but by buying and selling charts.

I steadfastly ignore the claims of those who believe in charts (sometimes also known as technical analysis) just as I ignore the claims made by those who believe that share prices are influenced by the movements of the planets. If prices could be predicted by using charts then all chartists would be rich and we would all be chartists.

Charts are useful only if you use them to tell you what has happened in the past – and not because you expect them to tell you what will happen in the future. A chart showing a company's share price over the last five years may show a steady decline. This does not necessarily mean that the share price will continue to decline.

However, it is true that knowing what has happened in the past can sometimes provide hints as to what will happen in the future. So, for example, you may notice that a company's share price always goes down in the summer and up in the winter. Maybe the company sells skis or umbrellas. There is no guarantee that the company share price will follow the same pattern in the future. But there's a chance. Making decisions on the basis of this information alone is, however, gambling and not investing.

And, despite my general scepticism (and my fear that many chartists put far too much faith in their bits of paper or, rather, their computer screens) I do admit that I often look at charts. I don't make decisions on the basis of the information available in charts but I do use charts to help me get a general view of how a share has performed in the past. Charts are a good way to display basic information about a company or a market. And it's true that patterns do emerge. It is, for example, often possible to see on a chart that a particular share price usually bounces upwards when it reaches a certain low point. This doesn't mean that the share will always bounce up when it goes that low, but it does suggest that there is a certain level of support.

Put very simply, a chart is the easiest way to look at the history of a share's price performance over a period of time. Charts are usually available for quite short periods (a day or a week for example) but I find charts which show the performance of a share over two, three or five years to be most useful.

COMMODITIES

'A mine is a hole in the ground with a liar standing over it.'
MARK TWAIN

There are several types of commodity. There are base metals such as aluminium, copper, lead, nickel, tin and zinc. There are precious metals such as gold, silver, palladium and platinum. There are energy commodities, such as oil (of various kinds), natural gas and uranium. And there are the soft commodities such as sugar, corn, wheat, soya beans, cotton, coffee, cocoa, palm oil, live cattle, lean hogs, frozen pork bellies and orange juice. There are variations on these individual themes, of course, and so different varieties of coffee are traded at different prices.

Throughout the early years of the 21st Century there was growing talk of a super-cycle in commodities. The theory was that the price of commodities (such as oil, metals and soft commodities such as wheat and corn) would all rise to great new heights as China, India and other emerging nations began to drag themselves through the Industrial Revolution. The theory was that China and India would grow as fast in a few years as Europe and America had grown in centuries. There would be a huge and unprecedented demand for concrete and steel (for building things) and because the vast populations of these rapidly developing countries would demand a Western type of diet there would be a huge demand for wheat, soya, corn, meat and other 'soft' commodities. There was, said those who believed in the super cycle, another reason why commodity prices would go up higher and for longer than ever before: many of the commodities the developing countries would need were in short supply. The world's oil supplies are hardly enough to satisfy the needs of the West. Add the needs of the East and there will be a crisis.

I explained this problem in detail in my book *Oil Apocalypse*. It is, to me, an utterly compelling argument, one that we ignore at our peril, and, almost certainly the most significant problem faced by mankind.

Sceptics dismissed the boom in commodities as nothing more than another bubble; little different to the dot.com bubble that had marked the end of the 20th Century and which had done so much damage to the portfolios of so many investors. During the dot.com bubble the enthusiasts claimed that the Internet would change everything. Nothing, they said, would ever be the same again. It was, of course, pure rubbish. The Internet was never anything much more than a new way of selling stuff by mail order. The commodities super-cycle, said the sceptics, was no different. The argument put forward by those who didn't believe it was that human beings have always found a way of coping and that things will never be as bad as seems possible.

In the long-term I don't see how energy companies are suddenly going to find enough new supplies of oil and gas to cope with the world's exploding demand. The amount that was previously available was hardly enough to satisfy the demands of America and Europe. China and India are both huge countries. How, can oil and mining companies suddenly find stuff that they hadn't been able to find before? Those dismissing the idea of a commodity super-cycle claimed that mining companies would look harder when prices rose high enough. But I don't find that argument convincing either. And if prices rise high enough to make it worthwhile for companies to spend even more money on exploration then the effect on our society will be devastating.

There have been modest commodity super-cycles before. There was one towards the end of the 19th Century and another in the 20th Century. The first was a result of the emergence of the United States of America as a superpower. The second was a result of Japan becoming a superpower.

'Clients should note the following: Trading physical commodities is highly speculative and very risky; the vast majority of investors have lost money trading commodities.'
FROM AN ADVERTISEMENT FOR A METALS TRADING BROKER.

I believe that, in the long-term, commodity prices are likely to keep rising.

But (and there is always a 'but' and if you are planning to invest and haven't spotted the 'but' then you are probably always heading for trouble) even in commodity super-cycles prices don't move upwards smoothly.

The prices of all commodities (whether they be oil, copper, wheat or whatever) will go up and down. There will be moments of panic when prices will seemingly collapse. But the trend will, I believe, be upwards.

One enduring problem is, of course, that it is extremely difficult to put a precise value on a barrel of oil or a sack of wheat. There are a large number of weird and wonderful mathematical formulae around which enable investors to assess the value of companies making cars, toothpaste and sewing machines. These formulae aren't always as useful as their inventors and supporters would have us believe but at least they are there. With commodities there are no ways of assessing value. How much is an ounce of gold really worth? How much is a barrel of oil really worth? You can't measure their value by the dividends they produce because they don't pay any dividends. You can't decide to buy because the directors are buying. You can't assess the value of a pound of uranium by looking at its balance sheet because there isn't a balance sheet. Commodities are worth what people will pay for them. It's as simple and as complicated as that.

COMPANY ACCOUNTS

'Business must be run at a profit, else it will die. But when anyone tries to run a business solely for profit ...then also the business must die, for it no longer has a reason for existence.'
HENRY FORD

There is very little point in reading published accounts and expecting to find much worthwhile information. If a company has a problem it will probably find a way to hide the problem and to disguise the truth. Published accounts are worth a glance but they aren't worth a lot of your time. Company accounts are difficult to read because there are so many tricks that can be used to manipulate the way the accounts appear. For example, over how many years do you depreciate assets? Do you depreciate at all? Simple decisions like this can make a huge difference to a company's profits. The company accountant who wants to hide something has an easy time of it even today. For example, all he has to do is change the way the company's pension commitments are included in the accounts, or the value of the company's inventories, in order to alter the accounts completely. Company employees have learned a lot from politicians over the years. Rather than studying the accounts, I prefer to see if the directors have a large personal investment in the company. Or are they just paying themselves huge salaries and giving themselves lot of bonuses and free shares?

Company accounts are out-of-date the day they are sent to the printers. And, of course, people sometimes lie. All you can get from the annual accounts is the stuff the writers want to tell you about what the company does, and how enthusiastic the directors are. Company accounts are a snapshot of the company's financial situation and are, therefore, not much more use than a single bank statement. Finally, of course, knowing about the past tells you very little about the future. And although company directors may be good at running their company they are not often good at predicting the future.

COMPANY REPORTS

'Annual reports are now far less useful to private investors than they were 20 years ago. Their volume and opacity is bamboozling.'
ROBIN ANGUS

When I look at company annual reports I look for several things. First, I want to check out the company's five (or, preferably, ten) year performance. This is difficult to fake. Even though past performance is no guarantee of future performance I want to know that the company has continued to grow over a decent period of time. Second, I want to see that the directors have invested their own money in the company. They should have at least a year's salary invested. Third, I want to check that the directors aren't paying themselves too much. Fourth, I want to be able to understand what the company does to make money. Fifth, I need to check the company's fixed assets. I'm not much interested in intangible assets (brand names, copyrights, patents, etc.). I am interested in buildings and land. It is sometimes still possible to find companies which are selling for less than the value of the real assets they own. And sometimes it is possible to find a company which hasn't revalued its real assets since 1959.

'It's not the figures. It's the tale you tell.'
COMPANY REPORT AUTHOR.

Two final thoughts on company reports:

First, I tend not to buy shares in companies which produce hugely expensive glossy annual reports which are full of colour photographs of the directors and their offices.

Second, if a company's results seem too good to be true, assume that the executives are lying. It is more likely that the executives are lying than that the results really are too good to be true.

COMPLEX INVESTMENTS

'Your goal as an investor should simply be to purchase, at a rational price, a part interest in an easily-understandable business whose earnings are virtually certain to be materially higher five, 10 and 20 years from now. Over time you will find only a few companies that meet these standards – so when you see one that qualifies, you should buy a meaningful amount of stock. You must resist the temptation to stray from your guidelines: If you aren't willing to own a stock for 10 years don't even think about owning it for 10 minutes'
WARREN BUFFETT

The investment professionals are constantly coming up with new ways to part investors from their money. Some of the complex investments available have been around for a long time and can, on occasion, be an excellent choice for the careful investor. Preference shares, convertibles, corporate bonds and permanent interest bearing shares can all be a great source of profit. So can warrants and capital shares. They all have advantages and disadvantages. But if you are going to invest in them you have to do more work and learn more things. And, in my experience, the risk-time-reward relationship is not convincing. I've invested in all these things, and have generally made money out of them, but these days I prefer to keep my investments simple.

CONTRARIAN INVESTORS

'If you can find unanimity and do the opposite you can be certain to be successful.'
JAMES GOLDSMITH

A contrarian is someone who believes that the crowd is usually wrong. When most people are bulls, contrarians may well be bears. Most investors regard themselves as contrarians because they don't want to think of themselves as just part of the general herd but they aren't, of course, because only a minority can ever truly be contrarians. The world is full of investors who think they are contrarians. Ask 20 investors if any of them are contrarians and they will probably all say 'yes, me'.

Contrarians understand that you cannot make good investment or policy decisions based on projecting past trends forwards. And they are aware that sooner or later every investment theory will be hyped up too far and will, therefore, fall. Contrarianism is based on a healthy scepticism about uncritical political or market manias, a realisation that you cannot make good investment or policy decisions based on projecting past trends forwards and an awareness that sooner or later everything that is hyped will fall to earth.

To be a successful contrarian investor you need to understand and play on the psychological weaknesses of other investors.

Conventional wisdom results in conventional returns. Running with the crowd is fine as long as you don't want to get anywhere quickly. And running with the crowd can be dangerous. Being a contrarian during the final stages of the dot.com bubble would have saved you a lot of money.

You should not, of course, be a contrarian for the sake of it. That would be potty and counterproductive. You should only be a contrarian because you believe that the fundamentals support your stance. Don't oppose the herd just to be contrary.

'If everybody agrees that you should increase capacity in ball bearings you can be absolutely sure that there's going to be a glut of ball bearings, and you'll end up losing money.'
JAMES GOLDSMITH

Here are some things you should know about contrarians and contrarian investing.

1. Contrarians are often 'value investors'
2. The contrarian should not find it too difficult to spot the top of a market – and the setting for a crash-to-be. When hairdressers, taxi drivers and shop assistants are investing (whether in shares or property) and are talking (and boasting) about their successes then the time has come for the cautious investor to think about selling up. When people in general are optimistic and self indulgent then a crash is not far ahead. When people are borrowing heavily and accumulating huge personal debts then dark days are not far away. When newspapers and television programmes are full of advertisements for smart cars and expensive holidays, a collapse is coming. When fashions become more daring and extravagant and moral standards drop, the end is undoubtedly nigh. When obesity becomes a major problem and thousands turn to drugs and alcohol for excitement it's usually fair to say that there are problems ahead. When people stop saving (because they have no fears about the future) it is time to tighten your belt. Markets that foster excesses are usually the product of a permissive attitude. A consensus of the best and brightest brains is so likely to be wrong that it acts as a useful contrarian indicator. When a group of Nobel prize winning scientists say something about finance or economics they are almost certain to be wrong and if you want to be right you should do the opposite to what they recommend. Looking at magazine covers has always seemed to me to be a good way to spot trends at a very early stage.

When magazine covers shout loudly about some new investment trend it is probably time to sell not buy. The Economist has always worked well for me as a contrary indicator. If they run a story on the cover promoting oil or diamonds then the bottom is probably about to fall out of the market for oil or diamonds and so you should do the opposite. I don't know why this works so well, but it does. Magazine editors are, perhaps, slow to spot trends but rather sensationalist. They certainly seem poor at spotting trends but very good at jumping on bandwagons that are running out of power. The more emphatic and emotional a story, the more you can trust it to be wrong. On the other hand when the experts are predicting the permanent end of banks (housebuilders, commercial property or whatever) that will be the time to buy.

3. Doctors, lawyers and other sensible people usually do badly on the stock market, and tend to underperform, because they always like to do the logical, sensible thing that everyone else is doing. If you do what everyone else is doing you will never make money as an investor because you will never beat the 'averages'. (Costs of one sort or another will ensure that you do worse than 'average'). The investment winners are more likely to be those who always seem to be doing the 'wrong' thing.
4. When hunting for an investment a contrarian will look for shares that have fallen in the last six months. He will, for example, look for a sector that is down at least 50% on its recent highs.
5. When newspapers or magazines think they have spotted a contrarian theme worth following, they are almost certainly wrong. When you see a headline that reads 'A Brave Bet For Bold Contrarians' you can safely ignore the recommended investment; it is almost certainly a sure way to lose money.

CORPORATE PAY

'The salary of the chief executive of a large corporation is not a market award for achievement. It is frequently in the nature of a warm personal gesture by the individual to himself.'
JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH

Today, corporate bosses are paying themselves obscene salaries. The average chief executive officer (CEO) of the average listed firm is paid more than three hundred times as much as the average worker. These huge salaries are often dwarfed by even larger bonus payments, expense accounts and share options. The schemes devised to reward successful directors and executives with bonuses are invariably woefully undemanding. In 2008, it was revealed that, despite the fact that many companies were making losses, 95% of British company executives would receive bonuses. One study of 1,500 companies found that two thirds claimed to be outperforming their peer groups. Naturally, they used this outperformance to justify their high salaries. It was also revealed that, in view of the fact that operating conditions were difficult and corporate profits likely to be low, many remuneration committees were looking at ways to alter the way in which bonuses were awarded. One of the biggest absurdities about corporate pay is that bosses invariably receive huge bonuses when a company does well (and the criteria are usually arranged so that most companies do well most of the time) but never have to give anything back when the company does badly. Because of this, the interests of bosses are divorced from the interests of shareholders.

Chief executive officers frequently claim that they have to be paid these huge salaries in order to stop them leaving to do something else. No one ever seems to bother asking them what else they are likely to do. This is the same empty argument used by council leaders and senior hospital administrators, who justify their six figure salaries by arguing that they are merely receiving what they would be paid in the private sector. This, of course, is nonsense. Most council leaders and senior hospital administrators wouldn't last five minutes in an enterprise which had to make a profit. (And, of course, the public service employees receive vast pensions, long holidays, endless time off work when they are suffering from mild backache or 'stress' and a working week that probably doesn't match the number of hours put in at the weekend by the average industry boss.)

As a result of obscene greed, executive pay has rocketed unreasonably in recent years. In the 1970's company bosses usually earned between 30 and 40 times the income of ordinary workers. In 1984 the average executive earned 45 times the shopfloor pay (so if the guy working on the shopfloor earned £10,000 a year the boss would earn £450,000). In 2007 the ratio was between 175 to 1 and 400 to 1 (so if the average worker was taking home £20,000 the boss would be earning £8,000,000). The bosses receiving these enormous salaries weren't people who had created companies. They were people hired to do a job. They were people hired to attend meetings and shout at the people who did the work. It is true that in the same period share prices went up but this was a result of rising global prosperity, technological advancement, the fall of communism and the opening up of new markets – and not the skills of company bosses.

It is staggering and appalling to realise that in 2007 the CEOs of large public companies averaged 344 times the average pay of workers. In 2008, the combined revenue of 1,130 of the world's leading Chief Executive Officers was 2.224 trillion dollars. Would they do the work for less? Of course they would. (Would footballers kick a ball around for less than £150,000 a week? Of course they would, if anyone had the guts to offer them less. What else are they going to do for a living? Wash cars? Cut lawns?) The problem is that the boards of public companies are largely occupied by the bosses of other public companies. And they are all too busy scratching one another's backs, and feathering one another's nests, to worry too much about shareholders.

Too often these days directors, executives and employees get rich but the investors don't. An increasing number of companies now exist to make their key employees – rather than their shareholders – wealthy. An official investigation in the USA showed that almost two thirds of American firms avoid corporate income taxes altogether most years. They do this by recording high expenses. And expenses are kept high by paying employees (particularly executives and directors) huge salaries, huge bonuses and vast expenses. Very little is left over for the taxman but, more importantly, very little is left over for shareholders.

And, finally, many companies give out stock options to directors and other favoured employees. These options give the right to purchase shares at absurdly low levels. It is, of course, just another way of taking money away from shareholders and giving it to employees. Be aware that is not unknown for company directors and executives to manipulate their company share price (either by buying back shares or fiddling the accounts to boost the company's apparent earnings) so that they can push up the share price and sell their share options for a huge profit. The methods they use to achieve this selfish aim rarely lead to any lasting increase in the company's value.

CORPORATE POWER

'It is a strange desire to seek power and to lose liberty.'
FRANCIS BACON

The people who run companies think they have the power. But in an increasing number of companies the people with the big offices and the chauffeur driven cars have remarkably little authority. Today, companies have lost control over their staff who demand a bigger and bigger share of the profits. (Think of footballers demanding such huge salaries that their football clubs can only survive if billionaires subsidise them and think of investment banks paying out multi-million pound bonuses to their employees.) Companies have lost control of their customers who demand better and better prices (because the Internet has given consumers the information they need to be able to compare prices quickly). Consumers think that this has given them more power. But, although it has given them cheaper prices, it has also ensured that they receive poorer service. And companies have lost control of their own environment, and the way they do business, because of the thousands of new laws which have been brought in by various regulatory authorities.

The people who run large companies may think that they are in control but in reality they aren't. The directors have to do what is in their company's best interests. If they don't then their company will falter and that can't be allowed to happen. The company, the unimaginably powerful corporate demon, must come first. Every multinational company has a constant thirst for cash. In order to satisfy bankers and brokers, companies need to produce quarterly figures which show a nice profit on the bottom line.

So, for example, consider what happens if the directors of a drug company find that one of their products causes lethal side effects. They may, as human beings, feel ashamed about this. Individually the directors may want to withdraw the drug immediately and to apologise to the people who have been injured by their product. But this course of action would not be in the company's best short-term interests. Withdrawing the drug would doubtless cost the company money. Research and development costs would have to be written off. And apologising would expose the company to lawsuits. So the directors, acting in the company's best interests, must keep the drug on the market and deny that there are any problems. In these circumstances the company (a non-human entity which only exists on paper) is in control. The decisions are made not in the interests of people (whether they be customers or directors) but in the interests of the corporate 'being'.

The problem is compounded by the fact that, big as they are, multinational companies have no souls and no sense of responsibility. Moreover they never think beyond the next set of profit figures; they are ultimately ruthless and (since they are inanimate and bloodless) utterly 'cold blooded', but they are also ultimately short sighted. Big institutions, like computers, are inherently, irretrievably, stupid. They do not realise that their behaviour will, in the long run, lead to their total destruction – partly because it will annoy and alienate their customers and partly because in some circumstances it may even result in the deaths of many of their customers!

By and large, the men and women who run large drug companies, arms companies, food companies and genetic engineering companies don't really want to destroy the world in which we all live. They know that their families have to breathe the same air as you and I. They know that they too need good food, clean drinking water and a healthy environment.

However, despite the evidence being to the contrary the people who run these companies probably think that they are doing good and useful work. They have denied the truth to themselves in order to avoid coming face to face with a reality which would probably drive them insane if they accepted it. It is only through denial and self-deceit that most of the men and women who work for tobacco companies can continue to sell a product which causes so much misery and so much death. Adolf Hitler killed fewer people than the big tobacco companies have killed. But I doubt if many of the people running big tobacco companies think of themselves as evil.

Occasionally, this constant denial and self-deceit breaks down and absurdities appear. For example, British Members of Parliament have, as members of an institution, consistently voted to allow multinational corporations to pollute our drinking water and to tamper with and pollute our food. And yet MPs themselves, as individuals, are so conscious of the value of pure food and clean drinking water that in the House of Commons they have arranged to be given spring water to drink and to be fed on organic food which has not been genetically modified. The men and women who vote to allow our water to be polluted and our food to be genetically modified are voting as representatives of institutions rather than as representatives of people. They know that they are creating a world in which the food is unfit to eat and the water unfit to drink. But they can't stop it happening because they are operating for the benefit of institutions rather than people.

The huge organisations which now run the world have developed identities, strengths, purposes and needs of their own. And in order to continue to grow in size and in strength those organisations need to ignore or suppress as much of the truth as they can -and to ignore the truths which they cannot suppress. Obviously, the people who work for those institutions must also ignore and suppress the unpalatable truths (and they must find ways to hide from the reality of what they are doing).

Some years ago, Dr Albert Schweizer saw the first signs of what has happened. 'Another hindrance to civilisation today,' he wrote, 'is the over-organisation of our public life. While it is certain that a properly ordered environment is the condition and, at the same time, the result of civilisation, it is also undeniable that, after a certain point has been reached, external organisation is developed at the expense of spiritual life. Personality and ideas are often subordinated to institutions, when it is really these which ought to influence the latter and keep them inwardly alive.’

CORRELATION

‘Charlie and I let our marketable equities tell us by their operating results – not by their daily or even yearly price quotations – whether our investments are successful. The market may ignore business success for a while, but eventually will confirm it.’
WARREN BUFFETT

Investing experts with pointy heads like to measure the extent that the prices of different types of asset (they are known as different asset ‘classes’) move in line with each other. They call this the ‘correlation’ and measure it from 0 to 1. The idea is that by having a portfolio in which the various ingredients have a low correlation you will be able to protect yourself against a fall in any particular market. So, the experts claim that gold and property both have a low degree of correlation with shares. In recent years it has become clear that correlation measurements really aren’t as useful as the pointy-headed people once thought they were.

The ‘alpha’ is an individual share’s ability to outperform the average return from the stock market. The average return from the stock market is known as the ‘beta’.

I regard this sort of information as being of very little value- mainly because the figures involved are entirely retrospective. The sort of people who spend hours fiddling with computer software may find alpha and beta of interest but in the real world I don’t regard either as being of much practical significance.

COSTS

'Beware of small expenses. A little leak will sink a great ship.'
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

Every time you trade you incur costs. These add up rapidly. They eat away at your investment and are a major reason why investors lose money. Expenses include: spreads (the difference between the buying and selling price), stamp duty (a tax on each transaction), commissions (a fee on each transaction), custody fees (a fee for holding whatever you've bought and which, since it is probably only held electronically, is a bit of a cheek), management fees (which can range from modest – in the case of an index fund – to outrageous – in the case of a hedge fund), taxes on income, taxes on gains. The spread alone can often be 3% to 6% and may be considerably more in the case of a stock which isn't traded very often.

If you have a financial adviser you are paying money to him and to the manager of the fund in which you invest. If your financial adviser suggests that you buy a fund of funds hedge fund you will be paying a fee to the financial adviser, a fee to the manager of the fund of funds fund and fees to each of the managers of the funds your fund of funds is invested in. Management costs add up rapidly when one manager invests in a fund run by a second manager. There is very little left over when everyone has taken their cut and all this, remember, is before the directors of the companies in which you invest have taken their bonuses and cheap shares.

The more advisers, consultants, financial planners and self-styled experts you employ the less profit there will be for you and the more risk you will have to take to stand a chance of keeping up with inflation.

The moral is simple: trade as little as you possibly can and try to ensure that your trading costs are kept to a minimum.

DIRECTORS

'I am their leader; I must follow them.'
BERTOLT BRECHT

Company directors often pay themselves too much and give themselves too many perks. They also often fail to do things in the shareholders' best interests. (It is frequently forgotten these days but the sole reason for the existence of the company is to make money for the shareholders. Companies don't exist to make the world a better place or to provide employment. In theory, companies exist to make money for shareholders). Directors get away with all sorts of naughtiness because most shares are not held by individuals but by funds whose managers also have a vested interest in allowing directors a good deal of leeway – and maintaining the status quo. Neither company directors nor fund managers do jobs which merit the sort of money they are paid. So both do little to rock the boat. In some companies directors continue to bleed the company dry – and to pay themselves huge salaries and huge, undeserved bonuses – while fund managers stand by and pay themselves huge salaries and huge, undeserved bonuses for buying shares in those companies. Directors and fund managers like to maintain the fiction that running a company and investing are difficult tasks that deserve much more money than running the country, making movies or performing brain surgery. The truth is that company directors and fund managers are members of a privileged group whose exceptional and utterly undeserved prosperity depends upon their maintaining the status quo and covering up the truth.

I feel more comfortable about directors when:

1. They have a good chunk of their own money tied up in the company. Share options don't count.
2. Directors don't pay themselves too much compared with other companies of the same size.
3. There is a well balanced board, with strong non-executive directors on board to keep the executive directors under control.
4. The directors have a good track record. I don't like investing money in companies when the directors have presided over a series of companies which went bust.
5. The directors don't have advantages over other shareholders. This can happen when the company has 'special' links to other companies or organisations owned or controlled by the directors or their wives.
6. The directors don't own too many of the shares.

I don't invest in companies where the chairman and the chief executive share the same brain. The most important duty of the chairman of a company is to get rid of the chief executive if he is failing. The chairman is unlikely to sack the chief executive if he is the chief executive. Research has shown that companies in which these two posts are combined have a more than 50% greater chance of going bust than other listed companies. That's a huge risk.

* * *

It has become popular in recent years for investors to take note of when directors buy and sell shares in their own company. Theoretically, this is a good idea. You might imagine that directors would know their own company's prospects better than anyone else. This is one of the few ways that it is possible for investors to check whether their interests are aligned with those of the directors. In practice, however, there are two problems. First, directors are not allowed to trade in their own company's shares when they are in possession of sensitive, privileged information. If they do so they can get into terrible trouble. (It's called insider trading.) The second problem is that, when they're not in possession of special information, directors aren't terribly good at deciding when to buy or sell their own shares.

Here are some facts you should know:

1. If you are watching to see when directors buy or sell shares in their company, look at the number of shares they have bought or sold. Directors will sometimes buy less than £10,000 worth of shares in an attempt to encourage investors to pile in. If the director is being paid £500,000 a year in salary and another £500,000 in bonuses and options, a £10,000 investment is of no positive significance. It is in fact of negative significance because it suggests to me that the director is so concerned about the company's share price that he is prepared to try and trick investors into buying shares.
2. How many directors are dealing? If two or more directors are buying (or selling) then their actions are more significant than if one director is dealing. If the whole board is busy buying huge amounts of shares then it's possibly worth getting involved. If one director is selling it may be because he's getting divorced. Directors of small companies who buy in clusters often know what they are doing.
3. Share sales which relate to share options don't count. Share purchases and sales only count when real money is involved.
4. Remember that company directors are not investment experts – and although they may know their own company very well they probably don't know the general market terribly well. Bank directors bought lots of shares in a variety of banks early in 2008. They lost a ton of money when their shares continued to plunge. It quickly became clear that their confidence had been entirely misplaced. The directors lost money and anyone

who followed their example lost money too. Even as a director of a company it is difficult to get your timing right when conditions are volatile and economic conditions are deteriorating rapidly. The fact that directors often time their sales and purchases badly shows just how difficult it is to time the market. If company directors can't tell when to buy a share how can anyone outside the company? This rather confirms that it is usually a good thing to bet the field (and to buy shares in a whole sector) rather than on a particular horse. However, if you are following directors' share dealings, it is probably more significant (and a bad sign) if directors sell shares when the price is falling. This suggests that the price will go down further and the directors know it. If directors sell when the share price is rising they could just be taking profits.

5. The overall ratio of director buying to selling is useful. If more directors are selling than buying this suggests that the overall future for the market may be bleak. If most directors who are trading are buying then there is probably a mood of optimism in boardrooms. That isn't usually a bad thing for share prices.
6. It is a good sign when directors make purchases in the period just before the company's results are declared.
7. The size of a purchase relative to the director's holding is important. If a director is doubling an already sizeable stake in a company, he probably believes that the price is too low.
8. Are the directors who are buying executive or non-executive directors? Non executive directors often buy shares when they are appointed and know nothing about the company. They do this because it looks good. But they often time their purchase badly. However, I think it is a good sign if outside directors (who aren't being paid a huge fortune as executives) have a big investment in a company. It's nice to know that people who attend board meetings are prepared to put their own money into the company.
9. When executive directors buy shares in their company even though the shares are generally thought to be expensive their purchase usually does well. On the other hand when executive directors buy shares in companies regarded as cheap, they may be about to lose at least some of their money.
10. Watch out that a director isn't building a controlling stake. Don't buy or hold shares in companies where less than 25% of the stock is in public hands. A number of small companies, which are quoted on the stock market, are controlled by one or two directors who hold the majority of the shares. It is always good to have the directors interests allied with those of the shareholders but when the directors have too much control there is a danger that the interests of small shareholders may be forgotten or ignored.
11. I am not terribly interested in how much money a director invests. I am far more interested in what percentage of his personal wealth he has invested in the company.
12. Be wary of investing in any company which puts the sons or daughters of the boss or a former director onto the board. The original boss might have been a genius but that doesn't mean that the child will be. How many wonderful pieces of music were written by Elgar Junior? How many great plays were written by Shakespeare's grandson? Similarly, don't invest in a company which puts celebrities or former politicians on the board of directors. The celebrities or former politicians can be hired for a fee if they have some special knowledge that will be of help to the company. Celebrity endorsements are just as likely to damage a company's reputation as they are to help it. And politicians are all self-serving, grasping crooks. Why would any company want a known self-serving, grasping crook on its board?

DIVERSIFICATION

'To carry one's eggs in a great number of baskets without having the time or opportunity to discover how many have holes in the bottom, is the surest way of increasing risk and loss'
JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES

Investors are usually advised to reduce their risk by investing in a variety of investments. A well-diversified portfolio might include shares, bonds, money market accounts, currencies, precious metals, property and collectibles (such as books, stamps and art). Within some sections there will be investments in different countries, though hopes that national stock markets will eventually decouple have proved fruitless and shares in most markets round the world tend to go up and down together. Investors diversify in order to reduce their risk. The idea is that if one investment does badly another will do well (or, at least, not do badly).

Diversification is the key to investment survival. But most people are confused about what it means. I have known people describe their investment portfolio as diversified because it contains a dozen different UK shares. When examined carefully, however, it was clear that the shares were likely to go up and down together.

There are four main investment classes: cash, bonds, property and shares. You should aim to have your money spread among these four groups. And within each group you should diversify again. You need to make a decision about how much of your money you want to put into each category of investment. And, if you are going to diversify properly, when you're selecting shares, you should choose companies in different sectors and different parts of the world. And diversify through time too. When making investments do so over a period of time. So, if you have £100,000 and want to invest it in equities do so at the rate of £10,000 a month. If shares rocket after two months you will kick yourself. But you'll probably kick yourself more if they collapse after two months.

Some experts say that you need around 30 stocks for a properly diversified portfolio but that involves a lot of work, not just in choosing and buying shares but also in watching them all and in dealing with dividends, sales, and tax consequences. You can reduce your holding to a more manageable number by putting at least some of your money in investment trusts which specialise in specific sectors. For example, one investment trust could cover all emerging countries and another could provide you with exposure to mining or property companies.

Diversification is truly vital for the preservation of your money. And it's a good idea not to have too much of your wealth in any particular investment. As a general rule it's wise not to have more than 5% of your total wealth in a single position. Your investments should be diversified to a degree that you will never have to worry too much about any one investment.

However, although diversification is vital for preservation, if you want to make money you need to be a little more daring; you need to specialise in something. If you diversify too much you will always fail to beat the market, and you might as well just put your money into a collection of cheap tracker funds. Diversification may reduce risk (depending on the way you are diversified – if you just buy shares in ten banks you aren't diversified at all) but the more you diversify the more you are likely to end up just matching everyone else. Diversification can be numbing. If you have a truly diversified share portfolio you will only ever match the average return produced by the market. Your overall portfolio should be diversified. But if you want to beat the market you may have to put part of your money into a range of shares which aren't really diversified. In other words, if you want to make big money you need to back your instincts and put a larger proportion of your wealth into one sector than might be generally considered wise. If you have a sound view of the future then perhaps you should take your chances.

DIVIDENDS

'Well managed industrial companies do not, as a rule, distribute to the shareholders the whole of their earned profits. In good years, if not in all years, they retain a part of their profits and put them back in the business. Thus there is an element of compound interest operating in favour of a sound industrial investment.'
JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES

Companies don't pay interest. They pay dividends. Dividends are important. I look for shares paying a real, decent, worthwhile dividend of at least three to four percent. And I want to find companies which have a long, stable history of paying a dividend and which make sufficient profit to keep paying the dividend even when the economy or the company or both are going through difficult times.

Here's what I think you need to know about dividends:

1. The dividend yield may be measured as a historic figure (what investors used to get) or a prospective figure (what they hope to get). It is obtained by dividing the gross annual dividend into the share price. Companies which are growing quickly may have low dividend yields because investors are hoping to make money through capital growth. Some companies (such as utilities) are bought and sold largely for their dividend yield (because there is only limited room for capital growth).
2. The dividend cover is the amount by which the net amount paid to shareholders is covered by the earnings generated by the capital they have invested in the business. The dividend cover is obtained by dividing the net dividend per share into the earnings per share.
3. If you buy a share ex-dividend you will not receive the recently declared dividend. The previous owner of the share will get the money. Share prices are usually adjusted when they become ex-dividend. Newspapers which list share prices usually put 'xd' by the side of share prices so that investors can see when a share goes ex-dividend.
4. If you spend your dividends you will have a good time but your money will only increase through capital growth. If you reinvest your dividends in shares your money will grow much more rapidly and you will become seriously wealthy much more speedily. If you had invested £100 in UK shares in 1899 your money would, if you'd spent all your dividends, have grown to an inflation adjusted £279 by the end of 2007. On the other hand, if you had reinvested all your dividends, and taken full advantage of the miracle of compound interest, your money would have grown to £4,061 in the same time. An alternative bank, working out the same figures, came to the conclusion that a pound invested in British shares in 1900 would have grown to £161 (ignoring inflation) by the end of 2006 but £21,174 with dividends reinvested. A third set of investment gurus worked out that £1 invested in 1900 would have produced £16,160 by the end of the 20th Century if all the dividends had been reinvested but would have turned into just £149 if they had not. I quote these three different pieces of research not because they are different (they relate to slightly different time periods) but because the conclusions are, effectively, the same. Dividend income, particularly if reinvested and therefore compounded, plays an extremely significant role in investment return.
5. Some companies offer investors automatic reinvestment programmes. Instead of receiving dividends investors who sign up for one of these schemes get extra shares. It's a nice idea but it is one which has, over the years, caused me considerable annoyance. The problem is that this sort of scheme is likely to leave you owning small amounts of shares which you forget about when you sell your holding. Sometimes, I have received notification of extra shares being allocated to me after I've sold my main holding. When this has happened I have been left with a handful of shares. And small quantities of shares aren't economical to sell or to hold. The accounting and tax problems can be horrendous.
6. Companies that pay big dividends usually increase their earnings faster than those that don't. It's worth remembering that growth stocks often don't pay dividends. That's bad. Value shares usually do. That's good.
7. Dividends drive value. Without dividends a company has no value to shareholders. Many investors put their money into a company hoping for a capital gain. But it is companies which produce steady dividends which produce the most significant capital gains. In the long term, investors will pay for income. And by paying for income they also produce capital gain. At the end of the 20th Century investors who only put their money into companies paying a dividend avoided the dot.com stocks and saved their shirts. In order to pay a dividend a company needs to produce cash, and to produce real profits (rather than the sort of profits produced by creative accounting).
8. Small, long-standing companies often pay regular dividends, especially when many of the shares are held by a family whose members need the income. Such companies are often reluctant to reduce the dividend, even when times are hard. The directors will use whatever cash the company has in the bank to continue paying dividends.
9. Buying shares because they pay a high dividend is unfashionable. But I know one successful investor who buys shares when dividends are increased and sells them when dividends are reduced. It's a good way to pick companies which are thriving and to avoid companies which are struggling.
10. Be wary, and suspicious, if a company seems to be paying a very high dividend – above the rate of dividends paid by companies in the same sector. This might be because the company concerned is in trouble and is about

to cut its dividend. The share price may have fallen (and pushed up the apparent dividend yield) because investors know that the next dividend will be lower than the last one.

11. The fundamental reason for buying shares is income. (Expecting constant capital gains is a triumph of innocence and hope over experience.) And income comes through dividends. A share price is a measure of the expected future dividends. If a share price rises dramatically it is because investors believe that the company is growing quickly and that the dividends available will also grow. During the dot.com boom of the 1990's investors forgot this. 'This time it's different,' they cried. Investors bought shares in companies that paid no dividends and had no chance of ever paying any dividends. Many dot.com companies had no profits and didn't even have any plans for making profits. Without profits it's difficult to find any money with which to pay dividends.

12. Traditionally (i.e. for a long time) investors have accepted a lower dividend from shares than the yield they would receive from holding gilts. The reasoning behind this is that shares are more likely to produce capital gains than gilts – and that the dividend should grow over time. However, when shares are unwanted (usually because investors are frightened that something terrible is happening) the dividend yield on shares may rise above the yield on gilts or other bonds. This may happen because companies are in trouble and their yield may be about to fall. Or it may be because shares are cheaper than they are traditionally. And this may mean that brave investors can make money by buying shares.

EFFICIENT MARKETS HYPOTHESIS

'Markets can remain irrational longer than you can remain solvent.'
JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES

In addition to being a great economist, Keynes, was also a well-known speculator who is reputed to have made four fortunes and lost three of them. Keynes was pointing out that your logic might well be correct, but that the market may take a long time to catch up with logic. The dot.com bubble, in which the shares of Internet companies were blown up to absurd levels, lasted for just under five years. That's a lot of irrationality.

Academics claim that all known information is already priced into the market. This is the theory behind the philosophy that markets are generally efficient and it is known as the Efficient Markets Hypothesis (EMH). First developed by Eugene Fama at the University of Chicago the hypothesis suggests that you can't beat the market – whatever method you use – without taking on extra risk. Academics who believe this assume that all human beings are rational and argue that the few investors who do beat the market are just lucky and that the wisest move is simply to put your money into index funds and go away and do something else.

'Madness is rare among individuals but common among crowds.'
FREDERICH NIETZSCHE

Here's a story which illustrates the Efficient Market Hypothesis quite nicely.

Two economists are walking down the street. One sees a £10 note lying on the pavement. He stoops to pick it up. The other economist, who believes in the efficient market hypothesis, stops him. 'If it were a real £10 note, someone would have already picked it up,' says the second economist.

The Efficient Market Hypothesis means that the prices of shares are governed by the available information. Changes in share prices (whether up or down) are, by definition, unpredictable because they occur as a result of information that wasn't previously available becoming available.

It is true, of course, that most of the business and investment news that you hear on television or the radio, or read in newspapers or magazines or on the Internet has already been discounted by the stock market before you can pick up the telephone to deal. Much of the geopolitical news will have already been discounted too (though not necessarily the inferences likely to have been made by strategic thinkers). In that respect the Efficient Market Hypothesis does work and you are wasting your time if you think that you can beat other investors simply by keeping up with the news. In order to be successful you need to be able to predict and to anticipate. Indeed, if someone tells you that the shares of company A are going to rise because (for example) they have a new product ready to hit the market, you should ask yourself why the information isn't already reflected in the price. (If you are receiving information which is not generally available then you need to be aware that insider trading is a serious crime.) There may be a genuine and honest reason why the information isn't widely available and has not pushed up the price. But before you invest you should know what it is.

It is also true, of course, that investors can get too excited and too depressed. And the information produced by analysts and provided by the media is often inaccurate. And markets get it wrong. The dot.com bubble at the end of the 20th Century was an obvious example of irrational exuberance.

Academics argue that bubbles are only recognised in hindsight. This is rubbish. I believe now (and believed then) that the dot.com bubble was pretty obvious. And the housing bubble of the early 21st Century was pretty obvious to anyone who wasn't earning a living as an estate agent or a mortgage broker.

Another problem the EMH supporters have to face is the fact that stock prices show momentum- in other words they keep going up (or down) without there being any logical reason for their doing so. They move because they have moved. Some experts argue that momentum exists because investors sometimes over react to news and sometimes under-react to news. A company which is doing well issues a warning but no one takes it seriously and so the price continues to rise. Another company which is doing badly issues a warning which results in a huge crash.

The bottom line is that you and I can safely let all the clever people do all their clever stuff with company reports and figures and statistics in the comforting knowledge that they are wasting their time. They are wasting their time for two reasons. First, all their efforts cancel out the value of the information they have. (They will all buy or sell at the same time). Second, you cannot trust the figures obtained from politicians or company directors. The wise investor assumes that all politicians and company spokesmen are lying. Everyone who has made decisions according to the available information is making a mistake. (They are all making the same mistake.)

EMERGING MARKETS

'A man should know something of his own country, too, before he goes abroad.'
LAURENCE STERN

Emerging markets are markets in countries that are not well-established but which are probably growing rapidly and developing. It is possible to make a lot of money by investing in emerging markets. This is because it is easier for a small country to grow quickly than it is for a big country to grow quickly. (This is the same philosophy which explains why it may be more profitable to invest in small companies than in big ones. A small company can easily double in size. A big company is unlikely to double in size.) Unfortunately, a lot of other people know that emerging markets can be enormously profitable (either because they have worked it out for themselves or because they have read about it in a magazine) and so share prices may have already been pushed up to quite high levels. When the world economy does badly emerging markets may go down even faster than established markets. It is possible to benefit from the growth in emerging markets by investing in commodities rather than in the emerging markets themselves. (If emerging markets are going to grow, and build roads and factories, they will need steel, concrete and copper and so the prices of these things will probably go up.)

ETHICAL INVESTING

‘A man must believe in himself and his judgement if he expects to make a living at this game. Nobody can make big money on what someone else tells him to do. That is why I don’t believe in tips.’
JESSE LIVERMORE

In recent years ethical investing has become extremely popular. The funds that claim to invest money ethically tend not to do terribly well, but well-meaning investors really don’t seem to mind this as long as they can claim that their money is invested ‘ethically’. The warm glow they receive from knowing that their money is behaving itself presumably overwhelms the cold shiver they feel when they open their quarterly or half yearly statement and see just how badly their investment has done.

I’m afraid I don’t have much faith in, or respect for, the ethical investment funds which exist. The problem is that some of the funds may call themselves ‘ethical’ but, nevertheless, invest in companies which I don’t regard as the slightest bit ‘ethical’.

So, for example, it is not unknown for ethical funds to eschew tobacco companies, companies which make their money out of betting and publishers which produce books or magazines which are not considered ‘acceptable’ in what the fund manager imagines to be polite society, but to invest enthusiastically in drug companies, banks, breweries and even arms companies.

When you consider the damage banks have done to modern society over recent years it is laughable to realise that fund managers who claim to be running ethical investment funds have been merrily putting huge chunks of their investors’ money into bank shares.

I prefer to make up my own rules about what I will and will not invest in. I have never invested in companies of which I disapprove. I don’t approve of animal experiments and so I refuse to invest in pharmaceutical companies. I am vegetarian so I won’t invest in food companies or farms which deal in animals or meat. I know that there have been times when I could have made a lot of money by ignoring my principles. But I don’t want money if that’s the price. I will not invest in companies making or dealing in arms or tobacco. I won’t buy shares in companies which do anything with, for or to animals (either as food or fashion). I won’t buy shares in companies which use genetic engineering for anything. I have stuck to these simple rules for many years without any obvious hardship.

If you want to be an ethical investor then I think you really have to make up your own mind about what you consider to be ‘ethical’ and ‘unethical’. I don’t allow other people to make moral judgements for me so I don’t allow strangers to make judgements about which investments are moral. Handing over money to a so-called ethical fund manager seems to me to be chickening out. It’s not necessarily ethical and it’s morally invalid. The joke is that it’s probably also a bad move financially since such funds rarely do as well as other investments.

You don’t have to do anything dishonest, disreputable or immoral to make money. You can retain all your principles and still make money. I wouldn’t want money if in order to get it I had to rip people off, take advantage of people or do wicked things.

(Incidentally, there are now funds which specialise in investing in non-ethical companies. Such funds, which put their money into gambling, alcohol, tobacco and pornography tend to do much better than average.)

Of course, some investors take a different view, claiming that they can separate their personal sense of right and wrong from the way they invest their money. Legendary investor George Soros has said that he sees ‘nothing wrong with investing in companies with whose activities you disagree’. He argues that buying a stock has no impact on the fortunes of a company ‘because you are one in a crowd’.

However, even Soros admitted that he had sold shares in a company that manufactured land mines while he was involved in a campaign to ban the mines. He said he did that to avoid public pillory for double standards. ‘It was hypocritical,’ he said,’ because if I had followed my beliefs I wouldn’t have sold the stock. It was a good investment and I lost money by selling.’

EXCHANGE TRADED FUNDS (ETFS)

'Never is there just one cockroach in the kitchen.'
WARREN BUFFETT

ETFs are single shares, which track an underlying index or sector. ETFs follow all sorts of indices in the UK and the rest of the world and can also be used to track the price of commodities, either in bundles (groups of agricultural commodities for example) or as individuals (as cotton, sugar etc.). Fees are low. Theoretically, it is possible to create a balanced portfolio using just a handful of Exchange Traded Funds.

There are several kinds of ETFs. First, there are the ETFs which broadly hold the underlying securities of the index they track. If the fund provider fails, the investor has recourse to the fund's ring-fenced assets. For example, physical ETFs hold between 90% and 100% of the stuff they are selling. So, a gold ETF of this type which tracks the gold price must be backed by at least 90% gold. Then there are 'swap based' ETFs which invest in derivatives contracts, offered by banks and brokers, and designed to provide exposure to a particular index. If the fund issuer collapses the investors can claim the basket of securities. If the banks and brokers offering the contracts go bust then the investor will probably be left whistling. ETNs are exchange traded notes and investors are exposed to the counterparty going bust. Exchange Traded Commodities (ETCs) are ETNs which are linked specifically to commodities or to commodity indices. Some are backed by physical assets. Others are backed by guarantees and promises.

The bottom line is that although physical ETFs should be pretty safe, other varieties of these products can be riskier than some investors realise. The investor may think that his only risk is that the price of wheat, orange juice or copper will go the wrong way and that he will lose money. In reality, he may also lose some or all of his money if counterparties are involved and they go bust.

When ETFs first became available I (like many investors) regarded them as an excellent, hassle-free and competitively priced way to invest. And fees are certainly low (they are sometimes less than 0.5% though they do vary).

But, in addition to the counterparty risks, which can be scary, you do need to check exactly what an ETF is tracking before you buy.

For example, there are several ETFs which track BRIC economies (shares in Brazil, Russia, India and China) but the constituents of the available ETFs vary enormously. As I write, one such ETF currently offers 5% exposure to the Russian market, with the other 95% invested in the other three markets. The other two ETFs have a much higher percentage of their shares in Russian shares. One has 30% and the other has 29% in Russia. (These will have doubtless changed by the time you read this. But the principle remains the same.)

Then there is the problem of very small ETFs which deal with very specialised markets. Very small ETFs, which are not heavily traded, may develop price anomalies – with the price of the ETF not being the same as its net asset value.

For some investors, the beauty of ETFs is that they give an opportunity to invest in sectors easily, quickly and cheaply. If you think that shares in oil companies are likely to rise, but you are not sure which oil companies to select, you can, by purchasing a relevant ETF, invest in the whole sector.

And there are many investors who feel that Exchange Traded Commodities are the best way to deal in commodities. Before the invention of ETCs it was difficult and expensive for private investors to put money into commodities. Now, it's remarkably simple.

Exchange Traded Funds which deal with commodities track the performance of indices – usually based in the USA – and are traded on ordinary stock exchanges so that investors can buy and sell them just as easily as they can buy and sell shares in Marks and Spencer or British Telecom.

Today you can buy almost anything as an ETF. You can buy single metals or soft commodities (such as cotton or sugar) and you can buy baskets of commodities. There is, for example, a precious metal basket which contains gold, silver, platinum and palladium. If the value of these four commodities goes up then the price of the ETF goes up. And there are baskets which contain a bit of every sort of commodity – oil, precious metals, non precious metals and soft commodities such as farm products.

There are variations in the types of ETF available. Some deal with spot prices (the price that a buyer would pay today if he bought and had delivered a barrel of oil, an ounce of gold or a bushel of corn), but many are based on a commodity index where the price varies with futures prices – the price the buyer would pay if he took delivery at some time in the future. If you hold one of these ETCs for some time the contracts to buy in the future will be automatically sold and rolled over into new ones as time goes buy. If the new futures contract costs more then you lose out. If the new futures contract costs less then you gain.

And, as I explained at the start of this chapter, you can buy physical ETCs too. These track the real physical commodity price. When you buy into one of these ETCs you are buying an allocated bit of the commodity named. These funds can be a good way to buy precious metals such as gold and silver. The underlying metal, the gold or the silver, is (or should be) held in trust by a custodian.

You can even buy geared Exchange Traded Commodities which enable you to double your risk. If the index on which the ETC is based goes up by a factor of one your investment goes up by two. On the other hand if the index goes down then your investment goes down twice as much. And you can buy ETCs which enable you to short commodities (to profit if they go down in price and to lose if they go up in price.) It is even possible to invest in different currencies by using Exchange Traded Funds.

I used to be a great fan of ETFs.

However, as I've already explained, my enthusiasm diminished during September 2008 when trading in many varieties was suspended because of the problems traced back to AIG the huge American insurance company. I had been under the mistaken impression that these investments were secure and independent and depended for their viability solely on the financial strength of the company issuing them. But it then became clear that investors in some commodity indices did not own hard assets but (in the words of the Financial Times) 'a swap on an index of commodity futures with counterparty risk'. Thousands of investors had put money into ETFs believing that the low charges and apparently simple structures were an attractive alternative to other forms of investment. But nothing tests out a new investment scheme better than a crisis.

The problem with ETFs and ETCs was that the counterparty risk (the hazard that the firm on the other side of the trade would not be able to meet its contractual commitments) suddenly increased dramatically.

Over 100 exchange traded commodity products from ETF Securities were backed by AIG, the American insurer which had to be bailed out by American taxpayers. Dealing in the commodity products was suspended when no one knew what was happening with AIG. In the end AIG honoured its contracts and everything ended happily. ETF Securities took commendable steps to reassure investors. These products are potentially complex and explosive and in a world where strange things seem to happen with unusual frequency I decided that most ETFs were a risk too far for me.

With considerable regret I sold the majority of my commodity investments in Exchange Traded Funds (most of which had made a profit). I kept only the ETFs which were backed by something real, rather than by paper promises. Some providers of ETFs have now made great efforts to remove (or minimise) this risk but I remain cautious.

Incidentally, there are many other risky ways to invest. Contracts for difference, futures, spread betting, warrants, capital shares and turbo derivatives are just a few of the ones I have considered or tried over the years. I have now resolved not to touch any of these products again. (Nor, incidentally, will I ever put money into an insurance company with profits fund. These are, in my view, one of the most efficient ways to get rid of money known to man. And unlike other ways of getting rid of money there is no pleasure to be obtained from investing in with profit funds promoted by insurance companies.)

Financial engineering, and clever financial products, make money for bankers and brokers. They do not make money for ordinary investors. Fund managers, investment banks, brokers and so on are not altruistic. They do not exist to help private investors make money. Their aim and purpose and ambition is to make money out of us. They do not care what happens to us. If we lose all our money they will dump us, like empty banana skins, and find richer replacements.

If I am tempted to succumb to any of their promotional material in the future I will wander into the nearest betting shop and put a fiver on any horse with a name containing the same number of letters as his jockey. If the horse wins I will repeat the exercise until a horse loses. I will then stop, feel better, and go back to rational investing; buying only solid investments which are based on 'real' things, rather than on promises exchanged between bankers.

FASHION

‘The fashion of this world passeth away.’
THE BIBLE

Don’t ever invest in stuff just because it’s fashionable. I have a friend who is a keen investor. His problem is that he always insists on making fashionable investments. He assumes that because something is new, and being talked about on the feature pages, then it must be successful. This, of course, is a nonsense. By and large the books that get all the reviews aren’t the ones that sell the most copies. And similarly the companies that get all the publicity aren’t necessarily the ones that make the profits. If you are buying shares in order to make money then you shouldn’t just buy shares in companies that are fashionable and getting a lot of publicity. Remember, at the end of the 20th Century the companies that were getting all the column inches in the broadsheet newspapers were the dot.coms. Nothing has ever been more fashionable. And the people who put their savings into the dot.coms are now working at McDonalds flipping burgers. Incidentally, when you read news about a company in a newspaper or magazine, or hear it on television or radio, it is worth remembering that the news story was almost certainly manufactured by a public relations agency. Most investment news isn’t news at all. It is propaganda.

‘If all economists were laid end to end, they would not reach a conclusion.’
GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

I steer clear of most technology companies for two reasons. The first is that most are over-hyped by enthusiasts who believe they’ve found something to replace the wheel. The result of their exaggerated enthusiasm is that the share price is usually pushed up far too high. The second reason I avoid technology companies is that many of them do stuff that I don’t understand. And I’m not prepared to spend the time I would need to spend so that I did understand.

And, despite the fact that I am convinced that the oil is running out, I am also reluctant to invest in alternative forms of energy and alternative forms of transport. There are, for example, now many so-called experts who claim that electric cars are the future. Plug in your car and you can whizz around without having to worry about oil prices (or, indeed, oil running out). That, at least, is the theory. In practice there is, of course, a rather large problem: electric cars operate with batteries and capacitors which do not, themselves, produce any energy. For every kilowatt hour available to the driver of an electric car, two kilowatt hours are lost in generating the original energy and transmitting it to the car battery. Electric vehicles are not an energy-saving alternative. They consume electricity which, in the absence of large supplies of electricity derived from renewable sources, is often derived from oil, gas or coal. The other fib sometimes told is that electric cars reduce carbon emissions. They don’t and until the electricity they use comes from wind farms (or other renewables) they won’t.

FOREIGN INVESTMENTS

'I do the opposite to what I feel I should do. When I'm sick in my stomach, it's time to buy. When I feel great, it's time to sell.'
ELAINE GAZARELLI

If you are investing in companies based outside the country where you live then I recommend using an investment trust specialising in the country you are interested in. Indeed, investment trusts are perhaps at their most useful when you want to invest in a foreign country. Buying shares in Chinese companies can be expensive and difficult. But it is easy to buy shares in an investment trust which holds shares in Chinese companies.

Occasionally, I have invested in foreign companies when no suitable investment trust was available. At the start of the boom in the price of uranium I believed that uranium mining company stocks would rise in price as the world's energy crisis became more apparent and so I purchased a number of foreign uranium mining stocks – such as Cameco in Canada. I sold all of these investments, and took substantial profits, when it seemed to me that the price of uranium had gone up too far, too soon. (I do believe, however, that in the medium and long term the price of uranium and, therefore, the price of successful uranium mining companies will rise and rise again simply because the problems created by 'peak oil' mean that a number of countries are now building nuclear power stations and the demand for uranium must therefore increase.)

When investing abroad, remember that you may also be exposed to currency changes. This is just as true of investment trusts unless the managers have decided to hedge their fund to protect it against currency losses. By and large I prefer to take the currency risk, and so tend to choose investments which are not hedged against a currency loss. I do this because if I am investing in a country then I believe that the country concerned has a strong future. And if a country has a strong future then its currency will probably do well.

Some experts claim that you can gain exposure to emerging markets by buying shares in large multinationals which trade around the world. But multinationals tend to behave much as their home stock market behaves.

To diversify effectively I feel it is necessary to invest in emerging countries directly. Since I don't have the time to investigate and buy specific shares on foreign stock exchanges I get around this by buying shares in investment trusts which do this for me.

FUND MANAGERS

'Be sceptical of track records. There are so many funds and forecasts that at any point in time, someone has to have been right. With enough monkeys in the room, one of them will type Hamlet. But it doesn't mean the same monkey will then go on to write Macbeth.'
PAUL ORMEROD

A well-known fund manager speaking on television said: 'It is not possible for private investors, sitting at home in an easy chair, to work out where the market is going. They are much better off investing in a professionally managed fund.' This seemed to me to be arrogant, stupid and wrong. Most people who invest with funds run by managers like this one do worse than if they'd just dumped their money in an index fund.

The truth is that the investment professionals are nearly always wrong. They are certainly worse at making investment decisions than the ordinary investor who is handling only his or her own portfolio. Underperformance is the norm, rather than the exception, among investment professionals. The world of investment is one of the few areas of life where the amateurs are frequently more successful than the professionals.

The stock market discounts all known information. Everyone has some information about investments, shares, companies, interest rates and so on but market professionals have access to far more information than people who don't work in the investment business. This is the basis of the efficient market hypothesis.

So, why do amateurs do better than professionals?

The first reason is that the professionals have too much information. Most of them are so busy examining the branches and the twigs that they cannot see the tree -let alone the forest. As investment amateurs, we should limit the information we seek out. The amateur investor who has too much information at his fingertips will be in the same boat as the professional – suffering from information overload.

The second reason that fund managers do badly is because in order to avoid holding too large a stake in the companies they like (a problem which might push them into having to declare their holding and suggest they are planning a takeover which they have no interest in making) they have loads of holdings in companies which they don't really like. Investment fund managers frequently end up with a huge list of investments in their funds.

The third problem fund managers have is that they cannot invest in really small companies because there simply aren't enough shares available for them to make a worthwhile investment. If you are running a fund which is measured in hundreds of millions then a half a million pound investment in a small, exciting company will make little or no difference to the success or failure of your fund. And managers know that if they try to buy large stakes in small companies they will move the price up so that they will end up paying more than they should have done.

The fourth reason amateurs beat professionals is that because fund managers are judged on their performance over very short periods (quarterly assessments are usual) they don't have the time to invest and wait for a recovery. This is a huge disadvantage for them. They must take a short-term view.

The fifth reason is that professional managers compare their results with a benchmark. They (and their bosses) are obsessed with benchmarks because doing this enables them to compare their results with the results of their competitors. The trouble is that when the competitors are doing badly a fund manager can easily match his benchmark simply by doing badly. The other problem is that fund managers have to be exposed to certain sectors in order to benchmark their progress. They have to do this whether or not it makes any sense. The result is that many funds are invested in terrible companies (or, even, good companies in terrible circumstances) simply because all other funds are invested in them. Incidentally, if a fund manager fails to beat or match one benchmark he can always find another one he can beat. Managers can always find a benchmark that proves they have done well. Unlike football club managers, whose results are out in the open for everyone to see, investment managers can switch leagues with impunity if they fail to do well in one league. Every investment fund manager will be able to produce charts and tables showing that his fund is better than all the others. How can they all do this? Simple. They pick their parameters carefully when creating their tables and their charts. Look at the small print and you'll probably find that their fund was, for example, enormously successful between March 1997 and June 1998. Take a look at the fund's record since then and you may well find that it has been far less successful. In the long run most investment companies do not do as well as the market. When their costs and expenses are taken into account the vast majority of investment funds do worse than average. Many fund managers are so desperate not to come last that they run closet tracker funds and accept that they will never beat the market.

The sixth reason is that fund managers feel they always have to be doing things. They are always buying and selling so that they look busy. Being overactive is bad. Overtrading results in more mistakes and higher costs. Doing nothing is often the best strategy but it's a strategy that the professionals eschew.

The seventh reason is that if a fund manager is running a North American equity fund then he will probably have to stay invested in North American equities. Even if everyone in the world knows that North American equities are about to fall off a cliff he will stay invested. It is what he is paid to do. You can, of course, always sell the fund. But if you stay invested in the fund you will probably do badly. The fund manager does not have the choice of moving into cash when he thinks it might be safer to do so.

The eighth reason is that as a lone investor you have one additional advantage over the professionals. Many investment funds are run by teams or committees. And most committees seem to have a collective IQ slightly lower than the IQ of the most stupid person on the committee. The more compatible the people on a committee are, and the more they respect and admire one another, the less likely they each are to say things which might question the others. The bigger the committee, and the more people like being on it (and the money and authority they get) the more likely they are to make bad decisions. Respect and politeness mean people don't say what they feel. The truth gets suppressed.

The next problem is that because all the professionals have the same information they all tend to behave in much the same way. And that means that they will do the same things. Fund managers tend to stop buying stocks when they are cheaper. At the beginning of a bear market (before the carnage starts) investment experts tell investors to buy shares. As the bear market develops they tell investors to buy because these prices are cheap. And then when prices fall through the floor they tell investors not to buy. It's the same companies, doing the same things, making the same profits. And they are a lot cheaper. When shares go down and you can get more for your money people stop buying them and won't have them in the house at any price. The professionals behave like this because it's what their peers do and they're scared of being left behind. Fund managers are unlikely to be fired for sticking with the herd, even if the herd does badly. On the other hand if you say and do the opposite to the herd, and you do badly, then your career is over. An investor who picked a bundle of stocks at random would have a better than evens chance of beating most fund managers. Remember, fund managers aim not to make money for you but to avoid doing a lot worse than their peers and, therefore, losing their jobs. The reward for outperforming is smaller than the penalty for under performing (which is probably unemployment and the need to find future employment outside the absurdly overpaid confines of the fund management industry).

Institutional investors tend to be momentum investors. They know that they will be measured not by their real success but by how they do compared to their peers. And so if stuff is going up, and being bought by other fund managers, then they will buy it too. Even pension fund managers who should have long-term horizons do this. Fund managers are terrified of being beaten by their peers. And so they usually do the same things that their peers are doing. If their peers are buying oil shares then they buy oil shares. If their peers are selling oil shares then they sell oil shares. By making the same investment decisions as their peers they ensure that they do not do worse than their peers. Of course, they don't do any better either. Inevitably, this means that when expenses and costs are taken into account most of the funds they manage will fail to beat the market.

What all this means is that if you can work out what the professionals believe is going to happen you can be pretty sure that it won't happen.

If, using all the information available to them, the professionals say that Vodafone shares are worth £1.50 each then the chances are that in the near future they are going to be worth more or less than that. If the professionals all believe that current information shows that the price of oil is going to rise then the chances are that it won't.

Knowing this is the essence of a contrarian viewpoint.

If the investment professionals all believe that the available information shows that the price of oil is destined to rise then the professionals will all buy oil. And they will push the price of oil up.

What will happen next?

No one can tell you that.

But whatever happens next will not be what the professionals expect because whatever happens next will, by definition, be triggered by something the professionals don't expect.

* * *

I have always recommended that patients take control of their own health (and their own illnesses) and use doctors as technical advisers. I believe that the same approach is the sensible one to take when dealing with money. When an expert controls your money you have lost control. And although there are a lot of so-called experts around most of them are no better than you are at managing financial matters, and none of them will be as good as managing your affairs as you can be. Certainly, none of them will care as much about your money as you do. The people selling financial products have a completely different aim to you. They want to sell a product and make a sale. You are looking for a profitable investment or a safe place to put your money. These two aims have nothing in common.

* * *

Your first advantage is that you know all this. The professionals, overcome by hubris, don't. They think they know best because they have the biggest and most powerful computers.

Your second advantage is that you do not have to do what the professionals do. You don't have to buy oil when they're all buying oil. You don't have to buy Vodafone shares when they are all buying Vodafone shares. They are frightened to do anything different to their colleagues in case they get it wrong. If they get things wrong they will be fired. You don't have that concern. Your only aim is to make your capital grow.

Your third advantage is that you don't have to waste your life studying the minute detail of annual reports and press statements. The market professionals will do all that boring stuff for you. They will study every branch and every twig.

You can use your time trying to work out what is likely to happen in the future. Because that's your edge.

You know what isn't likely to happen in the future because whatever the market professionals expect to happen according to all the available information has already been discounted and so is unlikely to happen.

Let me give a practical example.

The professional investors may, for example, think that building company shares are going to crash because all the available evidence suggests that there is going to be a housing price crash. The professionals will, therefore, sell shares in building company shares and the price of those shares will fall. They will probably crash. The share prices will fall to the level that they would fall if there was a housing price crash. The share prices of building companies have responded to what the professionals believe is going to happen according to all the information they have available. The professionals, remember, are reacting to everything that is known. They will sell building company shares as fast as they can. There will be very few (if any) professionals buying building company shares. Everyone knows that there's going to be a crash. So everyone sells the shares. And down they go.

All you've got to do next is to work out what you think really will happen next.

And the best way to do that is to keep your eye on the forest as a whole.

If, to continue with the example I've given, you believe that the housing price crash is going to be much worse than the available information suggests then building company shares will have further to fall.

But if you believe that there will be a recovery in house prices then it is probably worthwhile looking at building company shares as a possible investment. After all, the fall in the price has already allowed for a housing price crash. And, as you know markets always go down too far Just as they always go up too far).

The investment professionals are very good at looking at the past.

But it is what hasn't happened yet (or even been contemplated) which decides what happens to prices in the medium and long-term future.

Here are some more advantages you have over the professionals:

1. You're not going to upset important people by buying or selling 'inappropriate' shares.
2. You don't have to worry about short-term performance. No one is going to measure how well you've done this week.
3. You can buy shares in small companies (which are far too small for large investment funds to bother with).
4. Your performance isn't reported every day in the papers. No one but you need ever know if you make a mistake.
5. No directors (or angry shareholders) are going to question your every move.
6. You can ignore the blatherings of analysts.
7. You have no benchmarks to match.
8. You can buy and sell shares without moving the market.
9. You don't have to worry about regulators watching your every move.
10. You also have an advantage because you don't speak to company directors or managers. Investment fund managers often claim that they have an edge over private investors because they are allowed to speak to company managers. This is nonsense. Talking to company directors and executives doesn't help. On the contrary, I suspect that being too close to these people – and listening to their lies – is a huge disadvantage. All company employees are (if they are doing their jobs properly) going to say good things about their company. But how could you possibly know whether or not their views are reliable and whether or not they are telling the truth? You can't. And nor can fund managers. You're much better off not wasting your time talking to such people.

* * *

It is important to remember that the aim of bankers, brokers and investment managers is not to make their clients rich but to make themselves rich. Investors are farmed by investment managers in the same way that farmers keep sheep and cows for profit. The aim of the men in expensive suits is to make themselves rich. You can't blame them for that. Just don't misunderstand the relationship, believe all the fine words and expect them to care about your financial wellbeing.

Investment fund managers love bandwagons. If Bolivia is doing well they will launch a seemingly endless series of funds specialising in Bolivian shares. Naturally, by the time their funds are being advertised Bolivia will have peaked. But they don't care. They just want your money. If the price of copper is rising they will produce funds investing in copper mining companies. They don't care whether the mines will ever produce any copper. They don't care that the price of copper is at an all time high. They don't want to know whether it will keep going up. All they care about is spinning the facts so that they can persuade us to buy their products so that they can make money out of us. The we're-so-smart-boys on the inside intend to carry on eating caviare and foie gras and drinking Cristal champagne. We, in raggedy trousers, are supposed to stand outside and watch, sharing only insofar as we are allowed to pay the bill for their joyful extravagances. Fund managers (and their marketing and promotional staff in particular) are greedy, ruthless, unscrupulous bastards; they are a danger to our wealth and our health.

Or they were.

Now that you know how dangerous they are you will never again be as vulnerable. And you can take advantage of the best available funds in ways that suit you.

* * *

Some of America's largest pension funds have given up putting their money into active funds. Instead, they invest their money in passive investments such as index funds. Their rationale is simple: investment fund managers lose money just as often as they make it, and the fees they charge for the poor service they provide means that putting money into a plain index fund works better in the long run. Fund managers are, quite literally, often worse than useless.

Remember that everyone in the investment community makes money out of investors like us. Many of these people are very rich. The highest paid people in the country are people managing investments. Remember that their interests and ours are not allied. When they get up in the morning and go to work their aim is not to make us rich (or even to protect our capital) but to make themselves rich (and to increase their capital). Don't trust any investment professional unless you sleep with them or are closely related. Money managers want to look after themselves and their chums. It's a club to which you and I do not belong. Their interests are not just not aligned to our interests; they are diametrically opposed to our interests. Their aim is to make money out of us not for us.

Most fund managers, brokers and money managers know very little about finance or investing. So why are they so rich? They are super-salesmen (and saleswomen). They are very, very good at marketing themselves and their products. And they work in an area where it is terribly easy to pull the wool over the punters' eyes.

During the American bull market that ended in the year 2000 the S&P500 compounded at 16% a year. The average American equity mutual fund compounded at 13.8% a year. Most of the idiots running funds couldn't even manage to be as good as 'average'. In 2007 only 25% of funds in the UK All companies sector beat the FTSE All Share. Astonishingly, 99% of all active fund managers fail to outperform the market in the long-term. What this means is that if you simply put your money into a cheap index tracker (with very low expenses) you will probably have a better return than if you put money into an actively managed fund. (The costs for tracker funds are about a quarter of the costs of actively managed funds.)

Most UK actively managed funds now have charges of between 1.5% and l.7% and this compares badly with funds in other countries. In the USA funds charge an average of 0.67% for the same service. This difference may not sound a lot but over a period of time these charges can eat huge holes in an investment – particularly in times when returns are low. (When returns are 15% a year a 1.7% charge doesn't make too much difference to the end result. When returns are 5% a year or less such a charge can be crippling.) Costs really are enormously important.

If you pick a fund or an investment that costs you a total of 2.5% a year, the chances are that you will not beat the market. To beat the market with that sort of inbuilt handicap your investment manager's ability to choose investments will have to be 2.5% better than all other managers. And that is a burden that is simply too great for any manager to carry.

If you invest £100 and get an 8% capital gain each year, and you leave your money for 65 years you might expect your £100 to grow to £14,880 by the end of the 65 years. But if your costs are 2.5% (average gross costs) you will get £3,250. You get 5.5% (8% - 2 .5%) but that eventually yields just 17/80ths of the potential final pot – that s compound interest at work for you. By taking under half of your income the money managers end up with nearly four times as much of the potential final pot as you get. The reason is simple: the money managers get a regular infusion of capital – the 2.5% every year that you pay in costs – and that builds up steadily.

The expenses charged by investment managers may not sound much. But they can have a dramatic effect on your investment success. If your expenses are 2% you might be inclined to dismiss their potential effect. But consider: if your investments produce a return of 10% and are allowed to sit and compound for 50 years you will turn £10,000 into £1,170,000. However, if you take 2% expenses from your 10% return your 8% compounded will, after 50 years, result in a fund of £469,000. It is this effect which helps ensure that simple, low cost investments do considerably better than fancy, but expensive investments.

Fees are an enormous drain because they are constant. The drip drip drip of expenses can destroy even the best managed fund. Even 2 per cent a year will badly damage your growth prospects. In a study of 15,000 funds offered to the public over the last 20 years, only 10 managed to outperform the market index by an average of 2.4% a year for 20 years. And that is before costs.

I remember one major bank had a money market fund in sterling. There was, consequently, no currency risk. This was during a period of high interest rates. The fund actually lost money during a twelve month period. I did write and ask the bank how their fund managers succeeded in doing this but they either couldn't tell me or they didn't want to share their secret.

Some money market funds charge more than 1% in fees for putting the customers' money on deposit. Put £10,000 into one of these funds and you are paying a £100 fee to have your money split up and deposited in a few banks. Add on the fees paid to brokers and advisers, the vast expenses involved in putting money on deposit, the backroom staff required to make a note of where the money is, the taxes paid and all the other incidental costs and fees and I suppose it isn't difficult to see how even money market funds can lose money.

* * *

I beat most of the professionals by a huge margin. And you can too. Here's a summary of our advantages over fund managers:

1. We don't have to worry about what other people think about our performance. Most analysts and fund managers run together. They buy together and sell together. They are frightened to do anything different in case they fail and lose their jobs. We don't have to worry about losing our jobs.
2. We can deal in small quantities. This means that our trades won't move the share price. And we can buy shares in small companies. A professional handling a multi-billion pound fund isn't going to bother investing in a£ 10 million company because unless he wants to take over the company (which he won't) he can't invest enough to affect his overall performance. Even if the share price rises 1000% his holding will not show up in his overall fund. We can research, and invest in, small stocks that the big city professions won't be interested in.
3. We have tax breaks we can use to help us. We can invest in a pension fund.
We can make some profits each year without paying capital gains tax.
4. We can invest for the long term. Money managers have to do well each quarter. We can buy shares that may not go up for a year. A fund manager who has two or three bad quarters will be under tremendous pressure. His time horizon is very short.
5. Professional fund managers are usually constrained by the rules of their fund. We can invest anywhere we like and in anything we fancy. And if we feel that it's better to be in cash we can be in cash. We can invest in their funds when it suits us.
6. Our overheads are smaller. Fund managers have posh offices filled with expensive staff – traders, analysts, compliance officers, corporate lawyers, public relations experts, marketing teams, human resource specialists and so on.
7. We don't need to justify our decisions to anyone.
8. We care more because it is our money.
9. We know our own appetite for risk.

'People of the same trade seldom meet together even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public or some contrivance to raise prices.'
ADAM SMITH

Finally, here are a few more things you should know about investment fund managers:

1. There are two basic types of fund manager: active managers and passive managers. A passive manager is a manager who tries to match the benchmark. For example, if he is investing in FTSE 100 shares his benchmark will be a chart of the ups and downs of the FTSE 100. The best way to match a benchmark is to buy an index tracker. An active manager is one who tries to beat his benchmark by using his skills. Unfortunately, the extra costs of hiring active managers (and the extra trading costs they incur) mean that the vast majority of active managers fail miserably.
2. Whenever a fund manager or professional investor has one or two good years he becomes an 'investment guru'.Journalists flock around, asking him for his secrets and his advice. The new guru doesn't really know why he's done well, of course. He's just been doing the same thing for decades. He just struck lucky. But he can't possibly admit that. So he looks at the shares which did best for him, works out a secret and shares it with the world. The chances of him having another successful year are slim and so next year there will be a new investment guru for us all to admire. Most of what passes for brilliance among fund managers is in fact simple luck. The fund manager who has been told to manage a fund specialising in a country or sector which rises will look good.
3. Experience matters enormously. A study of stock managers published by *Fortune* magazine showed that fund managers who had been managing investments for more than four years were much better than ones who had been doing it for less. Those who'd been doing it for ten years were better still and those who had been fund managing for more than 20 years were comparatively brilliant. Older investors usually do better than young ones. There are two reasons for this. First, older investors are usually more patient than young ones. They don't expect their investment decisions to produce a result in days. Second, older investors have lived through bear markets. They know how dangerous and unforgiving the markets can be. There is nothing more dangerous than an investment adviser, or a fund manager, who has not lived through a bear market. There are two provisos: the successful older investor must not be too confident of his ability and he must retain the ability to adapt to new circumstances. The problem, of course, is that you won't know if a professional investor is any good until he has been doing it 30 years by which time he will either be retiring or his fund will be at a huge premium to its net asset value. There aren't all that many elderly professional fund managers around. Successful, older fund

managers, who have usually become enormously rich out of other people's money, tend to retire early to tend to their roses and sail their yachts. Unsuccessful, older fund managers, who have usually become just ordinarily rich out of other people's money, tend to be fired and given the opportunity to spend more time tending to their roses and sailing their yachts.

4. When buying an investment fund you should check to see if the fund manager has his own money in it. Invest in funds where the managers have invested a significant portion of their own assets. This is a new variation on the old saying: 'Eat in restaurants where the chef eats his own food'.

5. Advertisements for funds are often cleverly designed to confuse potential customers. The advertisers look at periods when the fund manager did well. So, for example, they will say: 'In a twelve month period the fund showed a 36% increase.' This looks good. What the advertisement doesn't tell you is that the twelve month period was from April 1st 1996 to March 31st 1997. And all other twelve month periods you might look at were disastrous.

6. Fund managers and investment analysts don't share your aims. Your aim is probably to preserve your capital, receive some income and, hopefully, see your capital grow. Their aim is to find a way to take some of your money from you. Fund managers and investment analysts are selling their 'skills' and their 'knowledge'. But they aren't very skilful or very knowledgeable. In the end what they are selling you is marketing sizzle.

7. Most professional investors do precisely the wrong thing at precisely the wrong time. They buy high and sell low because they look back at what has been profitable, long after the reasons for it being profitable have gone. It's like publishers bringing out new variations on last year's hit books. Pension fund managers put 91% of their cash into equities in 1971 – just before a major bear market. Three years later, when stocks were cheap, they allocated just 13% of their cash to equities. And the same managers (or their descendants) bought stocks with gay enthusiasm between 1998 to 2001 when buying shares was a disastrously dangerous thing to do.

8. Never before in the history of the world have so many untrained, talentless, unskilled 20 somethings made so much money as they now make at banks and investment houses and hedge funds. Footballers are wildly overpaid but at least they provide some entertainment and have some rudimentary skills. Bankers and brokers and fund managers provide no entertainment and, apart from being able to add up the money they are taking from hard working citizens, don't even have any rudimentary skills. The people who work in the financial services industry are the most highly paid people in any country. They earn more than footballers for heavens sake! These people earn their money through creating and selling investments. They have no great skills or great knowledge. They have no talents or charm. They earn huge sums of money (and obscenely large bonuses) for flogging financial products and moving money about. Many of them are, quite simply, crooks.

9. Some investment managers (and this is particularly true of hedge fund managers) claim to have a secret system. I would no more give these people money to look after than I would entrust my health to a man or woman with a magic black box in the consulting room.

10. You cannot expect an equity fund manager to put all his fund's money into cash when shares are too expensive. He won't do this for two reasons. First, he will be frightened that if shares go up he will be left behind by his colleagues managing other funds. Second, his job is to invest in equities. If you feel uncomfortable with having money in equities it is up to you to sell your investment in his fund and reinvest later.

11. Fund managers vote on behalf of shareholders but not for them. They vote to re-elect directors, they pass remuneration proposals, they say 'yes' when new auditors are selected. They support the gravy train because it is their chums who are benefiting (and they themselves may well be on one or two boards and benefiting too). Fund managers aren't in the business of making trouble. Incidentally, whenever I am offered a vote on any company matters I always vote against everything supported by the board. I do this to support anyone who is trying to question the way the company is managed. It seems wise to question the way companies are managed.

12. In my view the investment funds most worth buying are specialist funds which make a good range of investments in a specific area. So, for example, if you want to invest in commercial property I think it makes sense to look for an investment trust which has a decent, long-term record of investing in commercial property companies and which holds shares in most of the largest and most successful companies in that area. Similarly, if you want to invest in Russian shares then the easiest way to do this is by buying shares in an investment trust which specialises in Russian shares.

13. In the 1990's it was found that monkeys throwing darts at lists of shares did as well as professional fund managers.

14. The sharks who run investment companies, and the advisers who offer to invest your money for you, do not have your interests at heart. They just want your money. They will take as much of it as they dare. Never forget this.

15. Fund managers and analysts like to hide in the crowd. They know that if they invest conventionally, and follow the herd, they will be unlikely to look bad when compared with their peers. The fact that they do not stand a chance of beating the crowd is of no concern to them.

16. The people who run investment funds sometimes include photographs of their fund managers in their

advertisements. The photographs often show young, handsome people smiling prettily for the cameras. These advertisements do not persuade me to hand over my money. I do not want a handsome fund manager. If I am to entrust my money to someone else I want a manager who is old enough to have experienced many crises and I want someone who is so darned gnarled and ugly that he could not possibly get a job doing anything else other than sit in an office working hard. Young, handsome managers (whatever their sex) are far too likely to be distracted by life.

17. Q. ‘What’s the difference between a fund manager and a carp?’ A. ‘One’s a scum sucking bottom feeder, and the other is a species of fish.’

GAMBLING

'Investment is like a game of musical chairs. What matters is not the intrinsic value of the stock but whether you are left standing when the music stops'
JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES

Anything you do with money that doesn't involve spending it is gambling. I don't believe any investment is totally safe. In a way, all investment is gambling. There is no such thing as an entirely safe investment. If you save money then you are a gambler. You are gambling that crooks in the financial industry won't take it away. You are gambling that your government won't find a way to take it from you. Coming to terms with this is the first priority for all savers. It is possible to argue that the word investor should be banished and replaced with the word gambler since this is far more honest.

Anyone who offers you a completely safe investment, something which will always go up, which can never lose and which will protect you eternally against the ravages of inflation, is either a fool or a liar. Or both. If you put your money in a biscuit tin and hide it under the bed you are gambling. If you put money in a sock under the bed burglars might get it. If they don't get it your house might burn down. If your house doesn't burn down the currency might be changed – leaving you with the problem of taking your bank notes to the bank and changing it into new notes. And, finally, however honestly your savings may have been earned you will, if you hold a lot of money in cash, end up having to explain how you came by your wealth (and having to produce all the paperwork to prove that it was come by honestly) and then having to explain why you kept it all in cash.

All investing is gambling. So improve the odds by making sure that you only invest in things you understand and can believe in.

GOLD STANDARD

'You have to choose (as a voter) between trusting the natural stability of gold and the honest and intelligence of members of government. And with due respect to those gentlemen, I advise you, as long as the capitalist system lasts, to vote for gold.'
GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

The gold standard was the scheme under which a piece of paper (a bank note) could be exchanged for a specified amount of gold. The gold standard prevented governments building up huge deficits and it gave citizens a currency that maintained its value. When countries kept to the gold standard inflation was never much of a problem because the amount of available gold is strictly limited and so governments couldn't keep printing currency. Politicians didn't like (and still don't like) the gold standard because it forced them to balance their budgets and it put power in the hands of the people.

Most, if not all, governments used to back their currencies with gold. But these days they don't. New money is just produced as quickly as the printing presses can run. Governments no longer try to back what they print with stores of gold bullion. (One of the first things the Labour Government did in Britain when they took power in 1997 was sell off much of the nation's gold.)

When currencies become weak people tend to buy gold, in preference to holding paper money. When this happens governments tend to get twitchy. Back in 1934 the American Government confiscated gold from all Americans to stop them dumping their currency and buying gold coins.

* * *

Most people think of Isaac Newton as being the bloke who sat under a tree being bombarded with apples. But Sir Isaac wasn't just the man who thought up gravity, calculus, mechanics, the laws of motion and just about everything else worth thinking up or inventing, he was also the Master of the Mint and, therefore, the man in charge of England's currency. He was given the job partly because he was the most famous scientist in the world at the time and partly because he knew all the right people. When he was given the job it was one of those posts like the Poet Laureate – more of an honour than anything with great responsibilities.

But when Newton took over as Master of the Mint he really got into the job and one of the things he did was say that a guinea (twenty one shillings) would be made of gold and would hold its value. He tied the nation's currency (which came to be known as sterling) into the metal of which it was made, and ensured that sterling had a real value. He even ensured that the guinea could not be clipped. Up until Newton, crooks had often clipped bits from the circumference of metal coins. But Newton ensured that the guinea could not be clipped. It was solid, it rang if you dropped it and it was worth its weight in gold. Thanks to Newton the English currency was regarded as 'pure, noble and of quality' (the modern definition of sterling). It was 1717 when Newton tied the currency to gold.

Only twice, between 1717 and 1931 did the British suspend the link between sterling and gold. On each occasion it was because they needed to print more money than the available supplies of gold would allow. They suspended the convertibility of sterling to gold in order to fight Napoleon and the Kaiser. On each occasion much paper money was printed and on each occasion inflation resulted. (Wars nearly always produce more currency and, therefore, a rise in inflation.)

After Waterloo the English managed to maintain sterling as a key currency. The Government was stable and the nation's institutions were respected worldwide. The Royal Navy controlled the high seas and trading vessels followed in their wake. The industrial revolution originated in England and England's manufactured goods spread throughout the world. The words 'Made in England' were, for decades, more ubiquitous than the words 'Made in China' are today.

Whenever there was a flicker of worry about the pound the English Government would raise interest rates. This attracted foreign investors and kept the pound strong. High interest rates caused temporary hardship at home but maintained the nation's position as holder of the world's most important currency. English ships brought in raw materials from its colonies around the world. English factories then 'added value' by turning the commodities into manufactured goods. The English pound was the one currency everyone in the world wanted to hold.

And then came the Great War, the First World War.

Wars are incredibly expensive in terms of men, industrial production and assets.

After the War attempts were made to keep the pound strong. Interest rates were pushed up to bring in foreign investment. But the effect on the domestic economy was devastating. The Wall Street crash of 1929 inspired a credit collapse in England and in 1931 the pound was allowed to 'float'. It was no longer pegged to gold. On any given date the amount of gold you could get for an English pound varied according to the needs of buyers and sellers. The English pound, for so long as good as gold, became another tradable item, like potatoes or cotton.

Suddenly, there was no key currency. Trade died because countries no longer trusted one another. Before 1931 countries could trade in pounds sterling because everyone knew what a pound was worth in terms of gold.

After 1931 no one really knew what anything was worth; there was no 'safe' currency.

During World War II the dollar became the world's key currency. There was no fighting on American territory, and gold was moved to the USA because it was the safest place to keep it.

In 1944 finance ministers from 44 countries met at a place in America called Bretton Woods in New Hampshire. The currencies for those 44 countries were fixed against one another. An ounce of gold was worth $35 on every day of the week. All other countries were pegged to the American dollar. Pegging a currency to a precious metal such as gold restricts the printing of paper money because the amount of a precious metal is, by definition, finite. Restricting the amount of paper money means that everyone can trust that currency. When a currency is backed by gold the bits of paper actually mean something.

In the decades immediately after the Second World War the Americans ruled the world through the dollar. The dollar was better than gold. It could be converted into gold if you wanted the metal, but in the meantime you could use it to buy any other currency you wanted and if you left it in the bank you received interest on it.

But the Americans quickly got greedy. They found their monetary power intoxicating. And they used their dollars to buy raw materials, and all sorts of businesses and property around the world.

Quite soon more dollars were leaving America than were returning. The American balance of payments had a deficit. There were too many dollars abroad.

And then, in the 1960's, after a scant two decades of ruling the world through the dollar, things started to go sour for America.

The world started buying its oil from places other than Texas (which didn't have enough of the stuff) and car manufacturers in Germany, France and Britain started to sell cars in serious competition with the big American companies.

Central bankers could still exchange their dollars for gold, at $35 an ounce, and lots of them started to do just this. During the 1960's, the dollar started to look a bit iffy.

And then in August 1971, US President Richard Nixon stopped pretending that the US dollar had gold backing and the United States Treasury stopped handing out gold in return for dollars. There were too many dollars and not enough gold and the Americans realised that since other countries (especially France) were exchanging their dollars for gold there would eventually be an embarrassing moment when the American Government would run out of gold and have to say 'No' and refuse exchanging their currency for the lovely yellow metal. The dollar was no longer a key currency that had any backing. The American dollar was, quite suddenly, just a piece of paper.

But the dollar was still useful. It was still the world's only super currency.

And gradually the dollar split into two.

There were dollars which were available within America and which were under the control of the American Government (which could tell banks when they could or could not send dollars abroad).

And there were the vast number of dollars which were already outside America and which the American Government could no longer control. These dollars were exiles. They lived abroad, outside the American banking system and outside the control of the American Government. They became known as eurodollars.

And gradually the Americans realised something else. They did not have to make things or sell things or dig things out of the ground to become wealthy.

Since so many people around the world relied on dollars, the Americans could buy whatever they wanted to buy simply by printing more dollars. America as a nation got rich simply by running the printing presses. Getting rich had never been easier. Dollars that came off the presses were just as much dollars as dollars earned by selling Texan oil to Britons or by selling Cadillacs to Germans. Naturally, printing so many dollars meant that inflation became a real and consistent problem in America.

Inflation also became a problem in other countries, too. As American dollars flooded the world's markets so other countries had to print more money to keep up. When an American tourist went into a bank in England or Japan and exchanged his dollars for local currency he was given bits of paper printed by the British or the Japanese Governments. When an American company wanted to buy a Swedish company or an Australian company they did so by handing over dollars. All over the world, governments had to print more of their own currencies in order to keep up with all the dollars on the market.

After the Americans abandoned the link between the dollar and gold other central banks abandoned the fixed-rate relationships which had been agreed in 1944. A franc, a mark, a pound and a dollar all bounced up and down in value; each was worth what buyers and sellers decided they were worth. Central banks spent much of the 1990's trying to sell off their gold reserves. Not surprisingly the price of gold fell dramatically and stayed down. Now, although there is still some gold in the vaults of the world's governments, there is far less than most people imagine. No modern paper currency is backed by gold.

* * *

Since the gold standard was abandoned the USA has benefited from having the world's major 'base' currency. The USA gets free money from the rest of the world because it can issue dollars to be used as cash in other countries. America is successful because it made the money rules to suit itself – and the rest of the world has had to live (or die) by those rules.

At the end of World War II (and the real beginning of America's modern prosperity) the USA devised the Bretton Woods Agreement which gave the USA the right to have its dollars considered the same as gold in Central Banks throughout the world. In 1971 president Nixon refused to continue exchanging dollars for gold. At this point America gave itself the right to print as much money as it wanted. For the last thirty years the Americans have had the right to create their own wealth – at the expense of the rest of the world. The world is controlled by American currency policy. This is what has given Americans the wealth and power which they believe makes them superior to the rest of the world.

The Americans have bought companies, land and so on and paid for everything in dollars – which their Government has printed. Trillions of dollars have left the USA and been used to buy property in other countries. America has, inevitably, got richer and richer. And the rest of the world has got poorer and poorer. This is a sort of American tax on everyone else. The Americans have no intention of ever bringing those dollars back to their shore. And they have no intention of replacing the dollars with real goods and services. Other countries have to 'buy' imports by exporting goods or services. This is not true for America. America's annual trade deficit is simply a massive tax on the rest of the world. America has 'stolen' the world and has left other countries impoverished as a result. America cannot lose. For decades America has been buying 'things' without paying for them.

* * *

Finally, here are some facts you might like to know about money. These facts won't help you invest more wisely, but they will, perhaps, induce a certain healthy scepticism about money and the way governments create it.

1. The biggest, unanswered question in the world is: 'Where does money come from?' Currencies issued by governments used to be based on the gold each government had stored in its vaults. If you went along to the Bank of England, for example, you could exchange your five pound note for five pounds worth of gold. Since governments decided that they needed more money than they could get from the gold they had stored they have been 'creating money'. The money in circulation isn't real. It's just numbers. Today the total value of notes and coins produced by the Royal Mint, and issued by the Bank of England, is around 3% of the money in circulation. The rest is created electronically by banks. In other words, they just pretend that it exists so that they can lend it to people.
2. The money produced by the Royal Mint doesn't have much real value, of course. The notes are worthless and the coins are made of a mixture of metals. They are nowhere near worth their face value. (Occasionally, countries will produce coins which are made of pure metal and are worth more than their face value. When this happens people often start buying up the coins and melting them down. This is usually frowned upon very firmly.)
3. America is creating new paper money 24 times as fast as gold is being mined. America produces about a quarter of the world's currency every year so since 4 x 24 = 96 the world is producing 96 dollars of paper for every new dollar of gold.
4. In June 2007 the Bank for International Settlements reported that the total value of global derivatives in existence was $415.2 trillion. This was just under 800% of global GDP. Which means that in 2007 bankers, pension companies and investment companies (the guys buying the £10 million London houses) were playing Monopoly with eight times the value of everything made and every service on the planet.
5. In 2008 the US money supply was growing at approximately 10% a month. That's the effective rate at which the American Government was printing new money. The value of the American dollar was decreasing by that amount every month.
6. When computers were very young, programmers saved storage space by putting only the last two digits of the year into the clocks in computers. As the year 2000 approached thousands became worried that the world's computer controlled infrastructure would stop working at the turn of the millennium. This prompted central banks to pour cheap money into the market just in case things went wrong). It was this cheap money which fuelled the boom in dot.com and other technology stocks and which gave birth to the new theory that profits didn't matter because everything was now different. Actually, it wasn't only profits that were missing. Many of the newly launched dot.com companies didn't ever have any hope of making profits. They had no potential income source but blithely claimed that they could sort this detail out later if necessary. Eventually, of course, the absence of profits led to the dot.com bust and the destruction of billions of pounds of investors' money. The American Government solved this problem by making really cheap money available in truckloads. And that made the credit market grow at an absurd rate. Everything was done with borrowed money
7. The creation of giant mortgage lenders (Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac), which were protected by an implicit government guarantee, meant that the bosses of these two lenders could take big risks since they knew the American Government would bail them out if things went wrong. This forced other mortgage lenders, not fortunate enough to have the same protection and therefore unable to compete, to become even wilder. It was this which led to the creation of ultra risky subprime lending. And to the 'credit-crunch' of 2008. None of this

would have happened if governments had kept to the gold standard.

GROWTH INVESTING

'Our equity-investing strategy remains little changed from what it was fifteen years ago, when we said in the 1977 annual report: 'We select our marketable equity securities in much the way we would evaluate a business for acquisition in its entirety. We want the business to be one a) that we can understand; b) with favourable long-term prospects; c) operated by honest and competent people; and d) available at a very attractive price. 'We have seen cause to make only one change in this creed: Because if both market conditions and our size, we now substitute 'an attractive price' for a 'very attractive price'.'
WARREN BUFFETT

Growth investors look for companies which are destined to get bigger. They look for companies with good management and a unique, proprietary position in a potentially profitable business area. They want companies which are highly profitable and getting more so. They want companies growing fast enough to beat the cost of living and inflation.

You are a growth investor if you buy shares (or a sector) because you think the price will rise in the long term. It was, for example, growth investors who bought dot.com shares at the end of the 20th Century, believing that their price would keep going up and up and up for ever.

There are many specific ways to identify growth companies but the problem is that although there aren't many companies which are genuinely growing there are lots of investors searching for such opportunities. All want to buy companies which are cheap but starting to grow and all want to sell out right at the top. The result is that the share prices at which growth companies sell often roar way ahead of reality. It is difficult to pick out good growth shares. Most investors find that by the time they have identified a company which is genuinely growing the price will be too high – driven upwards by journalists, analysts, tipsters and enthusiastic investors.

If you are keen to invest in companies which are growing then you should look for companies in a market which is growing. The company you seek should have, or be creating, products or services which will enable it to increase its market share in that growing market and in new markets.

One of the best ways to identify growing companies is, of course, to keep your eyes and ears open. For example, I bought my first batch of Psion shares when I flew to Paris in the 1980's. On the flight over a man came up to me and asked me where I'd bought my Psion handheld computer. A couple of hours later I sat down in Deux Magots cafe in St Germain. A Frenchman came up to me and asked me the same question. I immediately used my mobile phone (quite a novelty in those days) to ring my broker and buy shares in the (then comparatively young) company. Two or three years later, after the shares had risen dramatically, I needed to call Psion with a minor technical query. Getting through to speak to someone was a nightmare. In the end I gave up. And two minutes after I'd decided to give up I sold the shares. It was a good call. They duly plummeted.

There are many dangers which befall growth companies. One is that the company grows too fast, runs into a cash flow problem and explodes in a tsunami of debt. Another common problem is that the company stops growing and the investors who had pushed up the price all bail at once. The share price then collapses. Growth companies invariably mature and become no-growth companies. This happens simply because as a company grows bigger its ability to grow shrinks. If you are a burgeoning retailer with one store you can double your number of stores by opening a second store. When you have opened shops in every major town and city it's difficult to find new places to open stores. It is not uncommon for companies to grow and grow and then slowly turn into utilities. For example, a telecom or software company might grow at a dramatic rate for a few years and then slow down when it has sold its products to so many customers that there really isn't anywhere else left for expansion. At that point the company may become more like a utility, producing good regular dividends, than a growth company.

Investors sometimes buy growth stocks because they are exciting. Growth stocks offer technological change and a chance to be in at the ground floor when a new world-changing company emerges. I think this is a huge mistake. Don't ever invest for excitement. And don't invest because you want to be part of new, exciting changes. You will probably lose money if you do. If you want excitement use your investment profits to pay for scuba diving lessons. Or go bungee jumping.

HEDGE FUNDS

''It's different this time' are the four most expensive words in English.'
SIR JOHN TEMPLETON

Theoretically, a hedge fund is designed to protect investors' money. And in theory hedge funds sound like a good idea. When they were invented, hedge funds were supposed to protect the customers' money by making sure that if one investment in the fund went down another one would go up. The idea was to create a fund that beat the market by 'hedging' against all possible downturns. So, the fund manager would put some of the fund's money into things that were likely to go up when other investments in the fund went down. Simple.

That's what hedge funds are supposed to do.

However, most hedge funds aren't hedge funds at all and if there were effective laws which regulated honest advertising the majority of hedge fund managers would be sewing mailbags for a living and worrying about the calluses on their fingers rather than the weed on the hulls of their yachts. Today a hedge fund is little more than a method of transferring wealth from private individuals to rich, egotistical, confidence tricksters. As an individual private investor I expect to be able to do better than most (if not all) hedge funds on a regular basis.

Most modern hedge funds are designed with one purpose only: making money for the people who manage them. Setting up and running a hedge fund is one of the great cons of our time. People who invest in hedge funds (however astute they may think themselves) are the marks in a very modern version of the "find the lady" three card scam.

And that's the first thing that is really bad about hedge funds: the interests of the investors and the managers are not aligned – in fact they are very precisely misaligned. Modern fee structures enable poor investment managers to become extremely rich not by making money out of the market (by being clever) but by using their investors' money to make bets and then taking profits when the bets win and losing nothing when the bets lose.

Here is how it works.

If you're setting up a hedge fund and you charge the normal sort of rates you will take 2% of the total sum in the fund as a management fee (to make sure that whatever happens you make a small profit) and then give yourself 20% to 50% of any return above, say, the first 5% of the profits.

As far as the hedge fund manager is concerned, the beauty of this arrangement is that although hedge fund managers take a big chunk of the profits they don't share in the losses. They can't lose money. The hedge fund managers use their investors' money to help themselves get rich but if the fund loses money they themselves don't lose a penny (unless they've put some of their own money into the fund to convince investors to get involved).

The system that has been operating now for some time actually rewards hedge fund operators for taking huge risks with other people's money. It's difficult to blame the hedge fund operators. Offer £10 million to the man on the top of the Clapham Omnibus and tell him that he will get 20% of any profit he makes, but that there will be no loss to him if he loses it all, and see what happens. He will either rush to the nearest race track and put the lot on an outsider at 100 to one or he will totter along to his local casino and put everything on his favourite number. If he is feeling really greedy he will use your money to raise some more (leveraging up the bet). He will then put your money, and the money he has borrowed on your behalf, onto a horse or lucky number. If the money is lost he will walk away.

Amazingly, that is exactly how hedge funds operate.

When the fund fails, because a bet has failed, the hedge fund manager walks away and starts another fund. In some instances the manager walks away with a 20% profit after one year's life span of a, say, 10 year investment, when there was no guarantee that by the end of the investment's life the investor would have any genuine profit at all.

The loser is always the investor (or the pension fund which has foolishly chosen to invest in the hedge fund.)

Hedge fund managers have found a way to take the financial benefits of entrepreneurship without taking any of the risks or skills traditionally required. To a certain extent the same thing is true of some private equity fund managers who also help themselves to a big chunk of the loot made by investing other people's money.

Running a hedge fund is, without a doubt, the great confidence trick of all time. It makes the guy who sold the Eiffel Tower three times look amateurish. It's no coincidence that some of the richest men in the world are hedge fund managers. These guys make hundreds of millions a year (in whatever currency you can think of but most of them do it by gambling with other people's money rather than by beating the market.

If the fund goes bust they have to close it, of course, but they also close the fund if they lose money. From their point of view (and with hedge funds everything is done from their point of view) there is a good reason for this. If the fund loses money the manager won't get an incentive fee the following year until the losses are recouped and the 'high water mark' is reached. So it makes more sense to close down and start another fund. The investors lose money but who cares about them?

The managers of hedge funds are usually very secretive about what they do with their investors' money. As you might expect they think up all sorts of rubbishy (and sometimes very complicated) reasons for not telling people what has happened to their money. But the truth is very simple. Hedge fund managers don't like telling the customers what they are doing with their money because if they did, most of the customers would have twenty kinds of fit and demand their money back immediately. Most hedge fund managers seem adept at avoiding legislation which forces other investment managers to publish pretty precise details about what they do with the customers' money. In truth, many hedge fund managers seem to me to be little more than gamblers. They put all their investors' money on red and then cross their fingers.

The next really bad thing about hedge funds is that they tend to be very illiquid. When you put your money into a hedge fund you have to wave goodbye to it because you don't know when, or if, you will see it again. If you put in money you may have to agree to leave it there and to redeem your investment only at quarterly intervals (assuming there is any left). If times are really bad the managers may simply refuse to let you have your money back at all. Hedge funds are very illiquid.

One of the worst things hedge funds have done has been to spread their philosophy of greed throughout the wider banking system. Employees of big banks gave themselves a similarly one-sided bonus system which encouraged them to take big risks because although they could benefit enormously if they 'won' there was no downside for them personally if they 'lost'. They were gambling with the bank's money and for them there was no downside. If the gamble worked they made a ton of money. If the gamble failed they just received a huge salary and a smaller bonus. (They nearly always managed to find a reason to give themselves a bonus.) Employees of investment banks took home a huge share of their firms' revenue in the good years. They took home an average of 60% of revenue in 2007. The prospect of making big bonuses encouraged the investment bankers to goose profits by excessive borrowing. In 2008 around 4,000 British bankers received bonuses of more than £1,000,000 a year each.

* * *

If you think I'm being unfair about hedge funds, consider these facts:

1. The average life of a hedge fund is four years.
2. Every year the number of hedge funds closing down (through failure) is matched pretty closely by the number opening up (with big promises). The new funds are often run by the same people who ran the funds which failed.
3. Hedge fund managers have a duty to themselves to take big risks with their investors' money. They can always start again when they go bust.
4. Because of the enormous risks involved with hedge fund investments many financial advisers now recommend investing in a hedge fund fund of funds. These are, as you might expect, funds which invest money in a number of different hedge funds. The aim is to reduce the risk of making a loss by investing in a poorly run hedge fund. Hedge funds are rubbish but fund of fund hedge funds are terrible rubbish. You are paying huge amounts in expenses to be part of this con. The manager of the hedge fund fund of funds takes another huge bite at any profits you make (but takes on none of the losses, of course). The result is that even if the funds in the super fund do well the profits left over for investors are likely to be pretty mingy.
5. Some hedge fund investors undoubtedly do make a profit. Just as a few people who bet on horses occasionally make a profit. The hedge fund investors will, like the horse racing aficionados, probably quickly lose their winnings and their original stake if they don't get out when they are ahead.
6. The tricksters who manage hedge funds have a number of techniques for parting their marks and patsies from their money and for making huge amounts of money for themselves.

Here's one simple method of making money as a hedge fund manager by using lots of gearing to boost your returns (even though it puts your investors at greater risk).

First, you collect £100 million from gullible investors.

Second, you use the £100 million to buy something (anything) you think might go up. For the sake of this example, let's say you decide to put the money into snowdrop bulbs. You do not, however, merely invest the £100 million in snowdrop bulbs. Instead, you boost your possible returns by buying warrants or options or some other fancy folderols. You leverage your investment as highly as you can. If you leverage by ten times you will then have used your clients' £100,000,000 to enable you to put £1,000,000,000 into the market.

If things go well and the price of snowdrop bulbs doubles you now have £2,000,000,000. (I'll ignore the fund's expenses for simplicity.) You have made huge amounts of money for your clients (who are undoubtedly very happy) and you get 20% of the profit (£2,000,000,000 minus £100,000,000) at no risk to yourself.

If things go badly, and your bet doesn't come off, the price of snowdrop bulbs might halve. You have now lost half of the £1,000,000,000 you invested. That means that you have lost £500,000,000. That, of course, is five times the amount of money you raised from your investors. So your fund has gone bust and your investors are wiped out.

At this point you simply close down and start a new hedge fund. Even among the very best hedge funds around 40% close within five years (not surprisingly, hedge funds are very secretive about this).

7. Here's another little trick the hedge fund tricksters try.

Hedge fund A begins by making an investment in Buttonhooks and Shoehorns Limited. This is a start up company which is not yet quoted on any stock exchange. At the end of the first year hedge fund A sells its investment in Buttonhooks and Shoehorns Limited to hedge fund B and takes a 100% profit. The managers of hedge fund A take 20% of this profit and the investors in hedge fund A get the rest and are very happy. However, this is definitely a zero sum game (for every winner there is a loser) and the investors in hedge fund B are now left with an overpriced investment on their books. The investment is, however, kept on the books at the price that has been paid for it. The managers of hedge fund B aren't as stupid as they look and so they sell their investment in a second unquoted company called Homburg Hats Limited to the managers of hedge fund A. Naturally, the managers of hedge fund B sell their investment at a price that will give them and their investors a 100% profit. They then give themselves 20% of the profit as their share of the loot. The shares in the dead duck that is Homburg Hats Limited are left on the books of hedge fund A, but they sit there at the price that has been paid for them so the managers of hedge fund A are not affected. When the two hedge funds are eventually wound up both will be carrying worthless investments on their books. But since the managers of hedge funds don't share in the losses only the investors will lose money.

8. Hedge fund managers claim that they can protect investors' money in a downturn. But during the investment carnage of 2008 the average hedge fund lost more than 13% in nine months and the industry as a whole lost nearly £200 billion of investors' money. By October 2008 the average listed fund of hedge funds open to UK private investors had managed to lose 32% of their clients' money in the previous twelve months. Naturally, many funds of hedge funds had done considerably worse than this. And these figures suffer from 'survivor bias' because they don't take account of all the funds that shut down or went broke. If these funds were taken into account the final figures would be considerably worse. For this disastrous record the hedge funds charged their hapless investors vast sums – after promising security and positive results, with their clever long-short plays, whatever the market might do. By October 2008 it was estimated that at least half of hedge funds, which had at last turned out to be little more than a complex and highly profitable fee structure in search of an investment rationale and a population of willing and naive suckers, would disappear completely. In addition to all this financial carnage it seems likely that the indiscriminate selling of shares and other holdings by hedge funds (which were being forced to sell both as they deleveraged and as their investors demanded their money back) contributed to the collapse of the stock market in the autumn of 2008.

9. I always avoid companies where the directors are encouraged to take huge risks with my money so that they can make themselves rich – at virtually no risk to themselves. Since this is what hedge funds do I never invest in hedge funds. Hedge fund costs are so high that, with a few exceptions, most do badly for their investors.

10. If you are determined to put money into a hedge fund then perhaps you should use your own money to set one up. Once you have set up your hedge fund all you have to do is to print a smart looking brochure and persuade some rich and stupid people to invest in your fund. This is, I believe, the best way to get rich out of a hedge fund.

INDEPENDENT FINANCIAL ADVISORS

'Everyone's got a plan till they get punched in the mouth.'
MIKE TYSON

There are two types of independent financial advisor.

First, there are the ones who earn their living by receiving a commission from the investment company whose products they are selling. These advisers are worse than useless. They will often flog their clients the products which carry the highest level of commission – whether they are suitable, or any good, or not. They will, for example, suggest that their investors put money into unit trusts (which do pay a fee) but they will ignore investment trusts (which don't pay a fee). If you take advice from someone on commission then the chances are high that you will end up investing in the funds which pay your adviser the biggest commissions – rather than in the funds which are best for you. Make sure that your advisor carries indemnity insurance so that if he or she does sell you something entirely inappropriate you will stand a chance of getting serious amounts of money in damages if you need to sue him or her later. And remember that the executive saloon car outside the adviser's office has probably been paid for by the fees he or she has charged people like you rather than by the profits he or she has made through his investment skills. (The advisor might like you to think that the car was paid for out of successful investments. It was almost certainly paid for out of commission paid by rubbishy investment groups.) Big banks, brokers and advisers will all sell you what is good for them to sell and not what is good for you to buy. They are, after all, in the business of making money and not in the business of helping you make money.

Second, there are the rare advisors who charge a fee for their advice. These advisors charge the same sort of fees as the most expensive solicitors or doctors though I doubt if even they would claim to have spent as long being trained.

I suspect that most independent financial advisors are 'independent' in the same way that car salesmen are independent. The financial advisors I have spoken to have known far, far less about investing than you will know when you have finished this book.

I'm afraid I don't have much faith in investment advisors. Actually, scratch that. I don't have any faith in them. I've never found one who knew what he (or she) was talking about, though I've met quite a number who managed to sound good and to make some impressive sounding promises. Bankers, insurance salesmen and independent financial advisors are no different to second hand car salesmen or estate agents. They are no more interested in your financial welfare than the car dealer selling you an old banger might be and no more interested in your financial stability than an estate agent flogging you a house is anxious to ensure that you buy just the right property. All these people see you as the 'mark'. They want the commission. No one cares about you and your needs as much as you.

* * *

Financial advisors make a living because there is a myth that looking after money is terribly confusing and requires a professional.

'You wouldn't try and remove your own appendix so why would you try to manage your money yourself?' demanded one advisor.

There are two flaws in this argument.

The first is that looking after money is as complex as removing an appendix or, even, doing the conveyancing on a house. It isn't. Looking after money is something you and I can do quite well for ourselves. And the more we learn the better we will become at it.

The second flaw is the suggestion that investment advisors are professionals who know what they are doing. The truth is that even the ones who are fully 'trained' have often only acquired quite modest academic qualifications.

The bottom line is simple: don't bother hiring an independent financial advisor. Keep your investments as simple as possible. The more layers of management there are between you and your money, the more chances there are of someone screwing up or ripping you off.

Nor do I have much faith in private wealth managers. Private wealth management sells itself well. Well-spoken men and women in beautifully tailored suits will sit you down in expensively panelled rooms and serve you delicious coffee in delicate bone china cups. They will give you a leather portfolio statement book and a smart, expensive pen. But most don't have a good record of keeping, let alone growing, their clients' money.

Oh, and one other thing: you should be aware that if you consult an accountant, a financial advisor, a banker or a solicitor about your finances there is a good chance that every secret you share will be passed onto the authorities. New laws forcing advisors to contact the authorities about the slightest suggestion of a suspicion mean that honesty no longer offers adequate protection against this sort of rough intrusion. Advisors (and this counts for their staff too) are fined heavily if they do not pass on anything they think could possibly be of interest to the authorities. And don't rely on your adviser warning you: it is an offence for advisers (of any variety) to tell their clients what they are doing.

INDEX FUNDS

'Though the stock market functions as a voting machine in the short run, it acts as a weighing machine in the long run.'
BEN GRAHAM.

If you want to match the market (and, therefore, beat most of the investment professionals) you can do so by investing in index funds (also known as tracker funds). These funds merely track indices by buying a few of all the shares in whichever index you choose. You can, for example, pick an index representing the top 100 companies in the UK, an index representing the top 250 companies or an index representing all the shares which are quoted on the London Stock Exchange. Index funds charge investors less because a computer (instead of an overpriced fund manager) can do the buying and selling. And because they spend less on advertising (and pay little or no commission to middlemen or 'investment advisors' as they so pompously call themselves) they will do better for you than most of the actively managed investment funds you are likely to come across. By definition, trackers will never outperform the market. But a portfolio of trackers will, over the medium to long-term, outperform the majority of active managers – particularly because of the additional cost of fees charged by the active managers. It costs around 2.5% a year to have your money managed in an ordinary, active investment fund. So, to earn his or her keep the manager has to make 2.5% a year more than you could get from a tracker. In practice, virtually none do that. Naturally, this means that the majority of active managers - who are, individually, paid huge fees to manage people's money - underperform the market. There are thousands of professional investment managers in Britain. Over the last few decades just six of them have beaten the index. (And the chances of those six beating it over the next few decades are incredibly slim. Most will, in any case, have retired by then.) Investment managers should be embarrassed by this but few seem to be.

If you find investing too scary or too time consuming or you find that you fail to beat the index, give up and buy a tracker fund. Smart investors can over years beat the indices but if you can't make 2% more than an index fund then it isn't worth the effort. With an index fund or a tracker you will more or less match the market (even though index funds are supposed to match the market precisely there are usually some slight differences) and that will enable you to beat the vast majority of active investors.

If you are choosing an index fund buy the one with the smallest expenses on the grounds that if all horses are equal the one with the lightest jockey wins the race. Investing in index funds is the best way to match the market and to beat the investment professionals. And since you're buying a basket of shares there isn't much need to keep too close an eye on things. A 'buy and hold' philosophy is fine for index trackers and for good investment trusts. The less you buy and sell the less your trading costs will be. The miracle of compounding should do the hard work.

INFLATION

'Invest in inflation. It's the only thing going up.'
WILL ROGERS

Governments lie about inflation.

First, they claim that inflation is a rise in prices which is outside their control, and which they are struggling to hold back. This is the first lie. Inflation is caused by governments printing more money, and devaluing the stuff that is already in existence. If the government doubles the amount of currency in circulation then it halves the value of the money that's already out there. And that pushes up prices. So governments cause inflation.

The second lie is the size of the problem. Inflation is usually much higher than they say it is. This is because the official figures exclude luxuries such as housing, energy and food. Education, pensions and healthcare are also routinely omitted – even though these are, for many people, the biggest costs in their budget. It is for this reason that people whose income is inflation-linked (people with inflation-linked pensions or private pensions depending on index linked gilts) find life difficult. In order to retain your spending power (and your quality of life) you need to make much more than official inflation levels from your investments -otherwise your capital is shrinking. So if you don't take risks you are going to become poorer.

When the official level of inflation is 5% the real level of inflation will be at least double that. This means that if you are earning less than 10% a year on your investments you are losing money. With a lower official level of 2.5%, and an unofficial level of 5%, any increase in your capital of less than 5% means that you are losing money.

All this means that unless you are very rich, or are prepared to accept a deteriorating standard of living, you have to take some chances with your capital. Government policy means that you really don't have much choice.

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It is vital to understand that inflation figures are now crooked and that the inflation figures governments talk about bear no relationship to the real inflation figures.

'Inflation is like sin: every government denounces it and every government practises it.'
SIR FREDERICK LEITH-ROSS

The official inflation figures in the UK and the USA in 2008 were both over 5% -- excluding non-essential fripperies such as food and energy. So, if you didn't spend money on food or energy you only needed to grow your money by 5-6% a year to ensure that your capital remained the same. Of course if you did feel the need to spend money on food or energy then you would need to increase your capital by 10-15% a year or more in order to stand still. (Gas prices went up by 35-40% in the UK in the autumn of 2008 alone.) Unfortunately, most people's investments actually fell in value during the first years of the 21st Century. Indeed, many investment funds were, in 2008, at more or less the same level that they had been in the mid 1990's. It is hardly surprising that many people felt that there was really little point in saving.

Inflation has a powerful effect on investments. Rising inflation is toxic for shares and for bonds. When inflation goes up interest rates also rise and governments tighten up monetary policy. When inflation falls share prices and bond prices tend to go up, and sometimes soar. The huge bull markets of the 1980's and 1990's were a consequence of the fact that inflation was falling from the high levels of the 1970's. Many investors who did well during the 1980's and 1990's still believe that their success was 'normal' and to be expected. Some actually believe that they are entitled to gain 15% returns from their portfolios for ever more.

Here are some things you should know about inflation:

1. Inflation was kept down at the end of the 20th Century because we were importing cheap stuff from China. Cheap television sets, cheap bras and cheap shoes. This helped enormously in the 1980's and 1990's. It meant that we could buy more stuff with the money we had in our pockets and our bank accounts. But the Chinese workers now want higher wages. They want motor cars and they want television sets of their own. So our inflation rate will rise.
2. The rate of inflation has a vital influence on the economy. Rising inflation means that interest rates have to go up (or must, at the very least, be kept at their current level). Rising inflation also means that monetary policy must be tightened. Falling inflation, on the other hand, results in lower interest rates and a booming economy. If inflation is not considered a threat central bankers can, if they think it is necessary, reduce interest rates in order to stimulate a stagnant economy. But if inflation is considered a threat central bankers will usually keep interest rates fairly high because they will be worried that if they lower interest rates too much they will over-stimulate the economy and produce more inflation. (Governments constantly claim to have found the way to conquer the 'boom and bust' economy. They are lying, of course.) The bull market of the late 1980's and 1990's followed the high inflation rates and big bear of the 1970's. It was the falling inflation rates that drove the powerful bull markets of the 1980's and 1990's. I remember locking in loans at 11-12% for property investments in the 1980's because the rate seemed absurdly low (to me and to everyone else). As inflation fell and productivity went up

(as a result of new technology and as China and India started manufacturing things) so we did better and better. Cheapish oil made everything very easy. Those were the days when investors got, and learned to expect as normal, returns of 15% a year on their equity investments. If you wanted your money to grow there was no other game in town. Just buy shares and sit back and wait. And you didn't have to wait long.

3. In the middle of the 20th Century governments undermined the value of our money (and discouraged savings) by printing too many banknotes. The more money in circulation, the less the money is worth. (Because there is a finite number of things that can be bought with the money in existence). Today, the amount of money in circulation (in the form of real notes) is only a tiny amount of the money available. Banks are now creating money by lending it as a debt (with interest attached, of course) and it is that practice which has really pushed up inflation. The whole problem started when bankers and politicians got rid of gold as a basis for our currencies. When governments could only print as much currency as they had gold, the politicians were restrained. When the link with gold was abolished governments were free to print as much money as they wanted. Then they made things even worse by using computers to create seemingly endless supplies of 'imaginary' money. It's hardly surprising that house prices have been rising (with occasional slumps) for decades. I bought a birthday card for my wife yesterday. It cost more than my first car. That's inflation. Inflation really does eat away at savings. If you had put £1,000,000 in a box under your bed 40 years ago it would now have a purchasing power of £77,000. (Yes, I know the notes would be out of date and useless even if they hadn't been eaten by mice.)

4. Paradoxically, politicians and central bankers love some inflation. The reason is simple. When the value of money goes down a little bit (which is what happens in inflation – you can buy less for your unit of currency) debts get washed away. If you are a government with huge debts then inflation is a wonderful thing. It helps diminish the value of your debts as time goes by. (By the same principle, inflation helps reduce the value of debt for everyone else, too.)

5. Rising commodity prices usually result in a rise in inflation in countries which have to import commodities. Countries which produce the commodities which are rising in value usually do well. I am very long-term bullish about the price of oil and other commodities (commodities of all sorts are running out and the demand for them is rising inexorably). I therefore believe that high inflation is likely to be a consistent problem in countries such as Britain (which rely on importing commodities such as oil). I also believe that countries such as Canada and Australia (which produce huge quantities of essential commodities) are likely to have a relatively strong future.

6. Inflation hit nearly 15% in the USA in 1980. (It was much higher in the UK.) This was a direct result of America's 1971 decision to abandon the link between the dollar and gold. Freed from the need to back up their dollars with gold the American Government printed more and more dollars. And the dollar became increasingly worthless. Will inflation ever get back to those now seemingly absurd levels? Why not? Governments are still printing vast quantities of currency and backing up their banknotes with nothing but hot air. It seems inevitable that the value of currencies just about everywhere should continue to shrink. And that, after all, is all that inflation is.

7. Inflation means that for most people their salaries and wages have failed to rise for many years. People think they are better off than they were twenty years ago. But when inflation soars it enables workers to have pay rises without the pay rises actually costing anything. People aren't really better off because costs have risen faster than pay.

8. Real inflation is around 10% (maybe more) so if money isn't invested and growing then your purchasing power is diminishing and you will get poorer. If you are reliant on an allegedly inflation-proof pension you can rely on the fact that your pension will not keep up with inflation. Falsifying the inflation figures means that inflation-proofed salaries and pensions paid by the government can be increased by a much smaller figure than would be necessary if they were being increased by the real level of inflation.

9. Officially, inflation in the UK for the last 30 years has averaged 5.3% a year. That means that if you had money invested for that period and your after tax income was less than 5.3%, you were losing money. If you are a 40% taxpayer it's quite difficult to get an after tax income of 5.3% without taking considerable risks.

10. Governments don't just ignore rising costs in food and energy when they are assessing inflation figures. (They fiddle the figures in this grotesquely dishonest way because it is easier to keep the official inflation figures down – and to convince everyone that they are doing a good job – if they don't count the things that are going up most.) They also use astonishing little tricks such as including hedonic adjustments and rental-equivalent home pricing and using geometric averaging when working out different varieties of inflation.

Geometric averaging means that if the basket of goodies measured to find the inflation figure contains one item which goes up 10% and another which goes down 10% the effect on the basket isn't 0% (as you might imagine) but a 1% fall. Governments produce this miracle of accounting by multiplying 110 (the figure obtained because of the 10% rise) by 90 (the figure obtained because of the 10% fall). This gives a total of 99. And, lo, a fall in inflation (and the cost of living) of 1%. Only politicians and economists can do this.

Hedonic adjustments enable politicians to take advantage of progress to keep inflation low. If you bought a computer a year ago for £1,000 and you replace it with a computer which costs £1,500 but is 10 times as fast then the computer is registered by the government as costing less even though it really cost more.

And rental-equivalent home pricing? That's a trick they use to minimise the effect of rising house prices (when they include them). If your home is now worth twice as much as it was a few years ago but the rent you would have to pay has only gone up by half then the inflation figure is deemed to be a half. The real rise in the cost of the home is ignored.

All these utterly, deplorably, dishonest inventions were designed to enable politicians to lie and cheat the voters. There are more tricks: for example, when they measure gross domestic product they tend to ignore the fact that the population has grown and that the per capita GDP – the figure that really matters – is probably going in the other direction but I'm getting weary and I suspect you are too. Unravelling the lies they tell can be tiresome work. The lies have worked very well on both sides of the Atlantic. Politicians and civil servants are concerned only with what they can get away with. They ignore the moral and ethical dimensions.

In the summer of 2008 the official US inflation figure was between 2% and 2.5% but, if the American Government hadn't changed the way it measured inflation back in 1992, the official inflation figure would, during that summer, have been close to 9%. The real, practical inflation figure would have been even higher.

Businessmen and women who lie usually fail eventually (though they may get exceedingly rich before they fail). Investing in companies run by crooks can damage an investment portfolio. But politicians who lie (and lie well) usually do well. The electors consistently choose the politicians who lie most convincingly.

11. Inflation is an invisible tax. Although it is a boon for borrowers (the £250,000 borrowed to buy a house shrinks as a result of inflation) it is a curse for savers (the £250,000 pension fund shrinks in value and purchasing power as a result of inflation). Pensioners and others on a fixed income lose out because their buying power is constantly being eroded. Earners whose income doesn't match inflation (the real figure, rather than the false 'official' figure) also lose out. They may seem to be getting richer, as their income grows, but in reality they will be getting poorer. And everyone who pays tax will lose out. Tax thresholds do not usually rise with inflation. So stamp duty on house purchases affects an increasing number of people as house prices rise and the stamp duty thresholds remain the same. And since the point at which taxpayers find themselves liable for higher rates of tax tends to stay the same (or to rise nowhere near as much as inflation) the number of people paying higher tax rates is rising rapidly. You will probably not be surprised to learn that governments don't usually take inflation into account when helping itself to a share of your income. So, if you have a 6% income on your investments and tax rates are 40% you will pay 40% of your 6% to the government. That leaves you with a 3.6% return. But if the official level of inflation is running at 5% then you are losing 1.4% a year. If real inflation is 10% you are losing 6.4% a year. You may think you are getting richer but in reality you are getting poorer.

12. In August 2008 Zimbabwe issued a Z$100 billion note to keep up with inflation (then running at 2.2 million %). That was not, however, the highest denomination banknote produced in the last 100 years. In the 1920's Germany had a 100 trillion Papiermark note. And in 1946 Hungary printed notes with a face value of 1,000,000,000,000,000,000 pengos (that's one followed by 18 zeros and it is known to its friends, if it has any, as a quintillion). One German I know recently pointed out to me that his father had taken out an insurance policy in 1903. Every month he made payments. The policy was for a 20 year term and when it matured he cashed it and took out the proceeds. He used the entire proceeds to buy a single loaf of bread. A Berlin publisher reported that an American visitor tipped their cook one dollar. The family met and it was decided that a trust fund should be set up in a Berlin bank with the cook as beneficiary. They asked the bank to administer and invest the dollar. The price rises in inflation-crazy Germany became dizzy. A student at Freiberg University ordered a cup of coffee in a cafe. The price on the menu was 5,000 marks. He had two cups. When the bill came the price for the second cup of coffee had risen to 9,000 marks. He was told that if he had wanted to save money he should have ordered both cups of coffee at the same time. The printing presses at the Reichsbank could not keep up. Factory workers were paid daily at 11.00 a.m. A siren would sound and everybody gathered in the factory forecourt where a five ton lorry waited. The lorry was full of paper money. The chief cashier and his assistants would climb up onto the lorry, call out names and throw down bundles of notes. People rushed to the shops as soon as they had caught their bundle. Doctors and dentists stopped accepting currency and instead demanded butter and eggs. When the Germans introduced a note for one thousand billion marks hardly anyone bothered to collect their change. It wasn't worth picking up. By November 1923 a single dollar was worth a trillion marks. People living on their pensions found that their monthly cheque would not buy a cup of coffee. People dependent on insurance payments were destitute.

When traced back it is clear that hyperinflation in Germany started when Germany abandoned the gold backing of its currency in 1914. The Government borrowed to finance the war.

Half a century later the Americans borrowed to finance the Vietnam War (their philosophy was identical: the war will be over quickly). And since America left the gold standard and started borrowing big time inflation has been a constant and serious problem. (Though the extent of it has been ignored and suppressed.)

13. It is partly because of their unspoken fear of inflation that ordinary people throughout the world have unwisely (but understandably) relied on buying property as a defence and a way of preserving wealth.

14. In spring 2007 the Japanese Government sold a two year bond which promised to pay interest of 1% a year. This was the highest bond the Japanese Government had issued in ten years. When Governments flood their

countries with money that doesn’t cost much to borrow (because interest rates are kept low) they are deliberately creating inflation. When money is ‘cheap’ people buy more houses. Between 1985 and 1991 houses in Japan rose by 51% before the bubble burst. Similar things have happened in America and the UK. In America, where interest rates were kept low, house prices rose 90% between 2000 and 2006. And then the bubble burst. In the United Kingdom, where interest rates were also kept low, house prices rose 118% between 2001 and 2007. Many so-called experts dismissed thoughts that this was a bubble and claimed that house prices could, and would, continue to rise indefinitely.

‘Last year if you didn’t eat, didn’t drive to work, didn’t heat your home, didn’t visit a doctor, didn’t buy a house, didn’t buy insurance of any kind, didn’t have a child in college and didn’t pay ...taxes, your cost of living agrees with the Government’s cost of living index.’
CLYDE HARRISON

Printing lots of new bonds (and ultimately lots of new currency notes) is an easy way to improve your exports. It was started in earnest by the Americans in the 1990’s. It works because when you print more currency you lower the value of the stuff already in existence. And when the value of your currency falls when compared with the currencies of other countries your exports become cheaper. All the world’s major powers are now increasing their money supply by over 10 per cent a year. The Americans are now increasing theirs by around 14% a year. It is hardly surprising that the American dollar has been on a downward slide for years. This is not an accident. It is the American Government’s deliberate policy. The dollar has lost more than seven eighths of its purchasing power over the last 60 years.

Of course, it isn’t only the American dollar which has been destroyed by Governments deliberately printing more money. The British Government is printing new money at around 13% a year. The European Bank is printing money at 9% a year. And so on. The British Pound, the Euro and even the once powerful Swiss Franc have all lost value in recent years. Today there is $40 trillion worth of paper money in the world and $50 trillion worth of bonds. A trillion is a million million or a thousand billion.

INFORMATION FOR INVESTORS: LIES AND DECEITS

‘Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?’
T. S. ELIOT

The truth is the rarest and most valuable commodity of them all. If truth were a tradeable commodity it would cost more than gold or platinum.

When I first started out as an investor I assumed that everything I read would be accurate and that everything I was told (by brokers, bankers and company directors) would be honest and well meant. Sadly, I now realise that this was woefully optimistic of me. Over the years I have come to realise that the world of finance is rich with liars, fraudsters and crooks. And my early hopes that my interests would be protected by politicians and civil servants employed as regulators have been dashed by the realisation that neither group care a jot about private investors. For example, the British Government dismissed investors who had lost money in the blue chip Railtrack and the insurer and pension company Equitable Life as ‘grannies’ or ‘middle class’ and therefore irrelevant and unimportant.

Sometimes the lies told are blatant. Many company directors will, it seems, do almost anything to keep their jobs, their bonuses and their share options. Sometimes investors are misled by deceits rather than direct lies. Relevant facts are buried deep in an annual report or are conveniently forgotten. Honour and integrity are rare beasts in the investing jungle. It is sometimes difficult to tell where negligence ends and dishonesty starts.

Having been an investor for nearly half a century I have become cautious about who and what I believe. I suspect that any investor who has been around a while will have acquired a similarly cynical view of human nature. Either that or they will have lost all their money. When you’ve been ripped off by large companies and deceived by governments it becomes difficult (and financially dangerous) to accept anything at face value.

It seems to me that these days things are worse than ever. The Internet, widely regarded as a useful research tool, is now of very little value to those looking for facts. It is, on the contrary, a splendid medium for rumour mongers, gossips, liars, cheats, confidence tricksters and others with self-serving ambitions. In the world of finance the driving force is, of course, usually greed. People want to get rich or stay rich and in order to do so they lie.

But, although it is the lies and deceits of the investment professionals, the journalists, the politicians and the people employed to police the markets, which cause most damage to the ordinary investor, it is important to remember that, in recent years, much of the damage to our financial environment has been done by ordinary people.

Many of those who lied about their income when applying for mortgages will claim that they were encouraged to do so by mortgage brokers and bankers. Many will regard themselves as ordinarily honest individuals who succumbed to temptation; purchasing property they couldn’t afford to pay for in the naive belief that they would be able to make money because property prices always rise.

But the people applying for loans they couldn’t afford to repay were driven by the same greed as the mortgage brokers. People who lied about their income in order to purchase homes they couldn’t possibly afford were just as responsible for the financial crisis that hit hard in 2008. (There was much hypocrisy around as self-serving home owners pleaded for help to enable them to afford mortgages they should have never taken on.)

In early autumn 2008 Gordon Brown, Britain’s Prime Minister, claimed no subprime mortgages were sold in Britain and that the world’s economic crisis was created in America.

Brown was, in my view, the worst Chancellor Britain has ever had. But did he really believe what he said? For him to claim that there were no subprime mortgages in Britain suggests an appalling and rather frightening ignorance of the real world. The reality is that thousands of house purchasers were encouraged to lie about their income and to borrow far more money than they could ever possibly afford to repay. In autumn 2008 the *Financial Times*, reporting that banks in the UK had lent to hundreds of thousands of consumers with impaired or low credit ratings, estimated that 5% to 8% of UK mortgages were subprime.

The whole financial mess was born out of greed. Nothing more and nothing less. The only difference between the greedy bankers and fund managers (who took millions from the system) and the greedy home buyers (who bought homes they couldn’t afford) was that there were fewer of the former than of the latter and that the former were, on the whole, less hypocritical about their greed. Were people who lied about their incomes in order to obtain property they could not honestly have afforded really ‘victims’?

During my years as an investor I have seen trust breakdown more or less completely. (This is not, of course, something that has happened exclusively in the world of finance. Trust is now little more than a memory in most areas of public life.) Millions of people have grown accustomed to living beyond their means and have got into the habit of lying in order to continue to do so. The over-bearing, demanding attitude of many representatives of ‘authority’ in our society has encouraged millions to regard the truth as an irrelevant luxury.

Trust has broken down because honesty has disappeared. When pensioners, shareholders and depositors can no longer believe anything they are told by the institutions in whom they are supposed to put their trust, can anyone be surprised at the consequences? Banks don’t even trust one another these days.

Until trust and honesty return to public and commercial life the investor who survives will, I am sad to say, be the investor who remains cautious and disbelieving. Oh, how I wish it were not so.

* * *

We are all exposed to far too much information. Newspapers, magazines, television, radio and the Internet smother us with short-term, irrelevant news; we are victims of an information overload. And the information 'noise' can interfere with our ability to decide what is important and what is not. The babble, chatter and opinions of talking heads and commentators become mixed in with the nuggets of hard news we are fed.

If you doubt the importance of this, consider Ken Lay of Enron.

Mr Lay, accused of playing a major part in the destruction of his company, argued that he had so much information that he didn't know what to do with it all. He (or his lawyers) argued that he couldn't be guilty of intentionally misleading investors because he didn't know what was going on himself

Too much information means that relevant knowledge is often harder to spot and use to advantage. The dramatically increased use of spin by politicians and businessmen, and the reduction in the integrity of journalists, mean that the quality of information made available has gone down, while the quantity has gone up.

Television and radio offer only entertainment and are, at best, useful only because they enable us to see what people are being told. On the whole, the Web offers only prejudice and propaganda. (Keep an eye on magazine covers, though. When they promote a new investment theme it is usually time to sell and get out. This is, in my experience, particularly true of the *Economist, Fortune Magazine* and *Business Week*.)

If you are to understand what is really going on you need to distill, to get rid of the rubbish, and to produce wise conclusions based on the important facts. Easier said than done.

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Immediately after the Battle of Waterloo a carrier pigeon took the news of Napoleon's defeat to Nathan Rothschild who went to the stock exchange, sold enough shares to create a small panic and then, when shares were falling, used every penny he had to buy shares. The bull market which followed Wellington's victory lasted ninety nine years.

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Research suggests that human beings tend to become more confident (but less accurate) as they process increasing amounts of information.

Too much information produces a strange mixture of too much confidence, confusion and edginess. Among investors this mixture results in overtrading. The confident, but nervous and confused investor buys and sells more often than is good for their investment health. In the end they will be eaten by trading costs. Besides, it is, in my experience, much harder to try and work out where the markets are going in the short-term than it is to work out where they are likely to go in the long-term.

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It is, in my view, important to retain an overview of what the markets are doing, and how other people are responding to the news they are receiving. It is, after all, the actions and reactions of other investors (professional and amateur) which decide what happens to share prices. The markets are influenced not by reality but by what other people perceive to be reality. It is only by understanding geopolitics and the psychology of the market that you will understand what drives the market and be able to use common sense and understanding to zig when everyone else is zagging.

Too much information is bewildering noise. I believe in making fundamental decisions based on human nature and geopolitics. I read all the time. But most of it is general stuff. And I read political books and newsletters (which are more likely to be independent) as well as newspapers and magazines. On the whole I recommend that you take great care with the Internet which has become a sacred sanctuary for nutters, price manipulators, idiots, shysters, spin doctors, quacks, hoaxers, mountebanks, charlatans, fraudsters and flimflam artists.

* * *

We all need information, of course. But we need good stuff; reliable facts which enable us to make thoughtful appraisals.

In order to spot potential investment opportunities you should try to follow what is going on in the world by reading whatever you can. I read publications with a left-wing bias and publications with a right-wing bias. If you want to beat the market, you need to know what everyone is being told. You need to have access to information that will help you find the truth.

Trying to find out what is going on by using the ordinary mass media will do you little or no good at all. And learn to take note only of financial journalists you have reason to trust.

If you read all the advice provided by investment professionals you will end up exceedingly confused. They contradict one another all the time.

If you were to ask 100 doctors how to treat appendicitis there would be differences but there would be significant similarities too. If you were to ask l00 lawyers a specific legal question you would get largely similar replies. There would be variations but not massive, diametrically opposed viewpoints.

The existence of huge variations among investment professionals shows that investing is not a science.

Read as much as you can, and keep your wits about you, and you can beat the professionals. But be aware that too much information can ruin your life and damage your prowess as an investor. Much information (and most comment) is meaningless at best and misleading at worst.

* * *

Don't take financial advice from television programmes, bank managers or people you've met in the pub. Don't take investment advice from people who inherited their money or won it on the lottery. Don't take investment advice from anyone who isn't considerably richer than you are and who hasn't earned their money (or a good chunk of it at least) through their investments.

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I asked one well-known investment newsletter writer /publisher why he didn't sell back issues of his newsletter to his subscribers. (This is a well accepted way of boosting income among non-financial newsletter publishers). The well-known newsletter writer/publisher told me that he couldn't do that because if he did his readers would be able to check out how badly his previous recommendations had done.

Another investment newsletter writer was exposed as having been paid a huge fee by at least one of the very small companies he was recommending in his publication. Naturally, the price of the company shares had risen as his subscribers had bought them. The newsletter writer won four times. He received money from his subscribers. He received money from the company he recommended. He received money from buying and selling shares in the company he recommended. And, of course, he was able to attract new subscribers by pointing out to them how successful his recommendation had been.

The only people for whom it all ended in tears were the subscribers who bought the recommended shares and who were doubtless still holding them long after the newsletter writer had banked his fee.

* * *

When we see a queue outside a restaurant or cinema we may draw the conclusion that the restaurant serves good food or that the cinema is showing a good film. But there is another possibility. Maybe the queue started because the restaurant or cinema opened late and a few people who had bookings had to wait outside. And what if the last person in the queue is there only because he thought that the presence of a queue must mean that the restaurant serves good food or that the cinema is showing a good film? And what if the person in front of him in the queue thought the same thing? (Clever restaurateurs sometimes ensure that there is a queue at their door in order to take advantage of this phenomenon.) Much the same thing happens in investing. People see a share price go up, read approving comments from journalists and want to join in.

* * *

When you read news about a company in a newspaper or magazine, or hear it on television or radio, remember that it may have been manufactured by a public relations agency. Most investment news isn't news at all. It is propaganda. And information is of no use at all unless you can use it to help you draw useful conclusions and predict the future.

* * *

Most parts of the media focus on what has been happening, not on what is about to happen or what might happen. As an investor your job is to try to 'read' the markets so that you can predict what is going to happen next. It is the future, not the past, which decides what will happen to your investments. But it is much easier to study the past (by looking at charts, for example) than it is to try to predict the future (by strategic thinking).

* * *

What use to you is the information you obtain? You must always know that. I have a friend who looks at the gold price every half an hour. He isn't a trader. He is (or was at the time) holding gold for the long-term. So, apart from adding to his ulcer, what was his work doing?

* * *

Beware when famous investors share their views with the world. Are they doing so because they have investments which they are talking up? Maybe they want you to buy in order to push up the price. And maybe when you have bought they will, quietly, sell.

* * *

When you purchase an investment keep all the cuttings, notes and so on which you have used to help you make your mind to buy. Put the cuttings and notes into a folder and look at it whenever you review that particular investment. It's often easy to forget why an investment was bought.

INVESTMENT TRUSTS (AND UNIT TRUSTS)

'The sense of responsibility in the financial community for the community is not small. It is nearly nil.'
JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH

Looking for a share that will survive, pay good dividends and increase in value is like looking for a needle in a haystack. You may find the needle. You may just find a lot of straw. It is much easier, safer and (in the long run) probably more profitable to invest in the haystack rather than try to find the needle. And one of the best ways to invest in the haystack is to buy shares in an investment trust. Although the costs are higher than a tracker fund there are times when an investment trust can make a wise choice.

Investment trusts are companies listed on the stock exchange which make a living by buying shares in other listed companies. The directors or managers of the investment trust company choose what shares they buy and they are allowed to borrow funds in order to increase the size of their company's investments (known as 'gearing up'). The share price is decided by supply and demand.

Investment trusts are quite unlike unit trusts. And in my view they are far better value. Indeed, I never put money into unit trusts or open ended investment companies (also known as OEICs). I consider the costs and expenses to be far too high. Performance isn't too hot either. Most unit trusts fail to beat the stock market. But they charge well and pay their investment bosses well too.

But those aren't the only problems with open ended unit trusts. Another big problem is that if people take money out of a unit trust the managers have to sell some of the underlying stocks in order to find the cash. Incidentally, open ended funds such as these are known by the name 'mutual funds' in America.

When you buy a unit trust you can only buy or sell through the fund manager and you can only do so at a set point during the day. The unit price always reflects the value of the underlying assets. If there is a run on a unit trust (if a lot of investors want to sell) the company will have to sell its underlying investments in order to obtain cash to pay its investors. This sometimes means that heavy selling pushes down prices still further. (It is because of investors redeeming investments in unit trusts that stock markets which are falling sometimes fall even faster and may crash.) In times of crisis it may be difficult (or impossible) to sell your unit trust shares. On the other hand, because investment trusts are traded on the stock market, you can buy or sell their shares whenever the market is open.

In the UK most investors buy unit trusts rather than investment trusts simply because the rules allow unit trusts to advertise and to promote their shares with great enthusiasm but don't allow investment trusts to advertise in the same way. To this must be added the fact that financial advisers can earn big commissions for recommending unit trusts whereas they don't get paid a commission for recommending an investment trust.

Investment trusts have several big advantages over unit trusts. Here are facts you should be aware of if you are considering investing in investment trusts:

1. From time to time some will trade below their underlying net asset value. When this happens you can buy the shares owned by the investment trust at a discount. It is not at all unusual for investment trusts to sell at a 10-20% discount or even more. This happens because the net asset value of the portfolio is determined by the shares the manager has bought for the investment trust whereas the share price of the Investment Trust is determined by what investors are prepared to pay for those shares. When this happens you can, if you buy shares in an investment trust, benefit enormously. If the discount narrows or disappears your shares will become more valuable – regardless of what happens to the underlying portfolio. Incidentally, it is worth remembering that investment trust prices can also rise above the net asset value of their constituent shares. When this happens the investment trust is said to be trading at a premium. I don't recommend buying investment trusts when their price is at a premium to the value of the underlying portfolio.
2. Investment trusts can borrow money to increase their returns. This means that if the manager believes that share prices will rise he can borrow money to buy more shares. Naturally, there is a downside to this. If share prices fall then the borrowing (known as leverage or gearing) means that the investment trust will lose money faster than it would if it hadn't borrowed money to buy additional shares.
3. Investment trust costs are much less than unit trusts. Unit trust fees usually include a 5% entry charge, an annual fee of up to 2% and another exit fee when you sell. Investment trusts, on the other hand, are like ordinary shares. You pay your stockbroker a fee and the usual difference between the buy and sell price. But these costs are likely to be much lower than the costs of buying and selling unit trusts. The annual charge on an investment trust is usually less than 1% a year. I consider the advantages of investment trusts over unit trusts to be huge. I invest quite a lot in the former and virtually nothing in the latter. Don't ever buy into a unit trust. If you do, you do not own shares in the companies which make up the trust. You own a part of the unit trust. If there is a panic then the unit trust will have to sell off shares in order to pay back the shareholders. They will have to do this even if it means selling out at distressed prices. An investment trust is better (because you effectively own shares in the investments which the investment trust holds). If you trust your own judgement it is, of course, better still, to create your own portfolio so that you own your own shares. One or two companies may go bust through greed, incompetence or dishonesty. But you are unlikely to lose everything.

4. If you are considering investing in companies based outside the country where you live then I recommend using an investment trust specialising in the country you are interested in. Buying individual shares in foreign countries can pose a number of difficulties. For one thing it can be difficult to keep up with news let alone prices). And dealing with dividends paid in a foreign currency can be a complication. Finally, foreign taxes can be a nuisance. Even if you can put them against your own country's taxes it still means wasting time on filling in another tax form. I have done well with relatively short-term investments made abroad but my best long-term foreign investments have been ones made through investment trusts. At the start of the 21st Century I bought shares in investment trusts specialising in China, India, Russia and New Zealand. All of these had done exceptionally well by the start of 2008 when I sold most of them.

5. You can find out what shares an investment trust is holding by looking at its annual report or its website.

6. Investment trusts are also a good way to invest in a sector which you think is likely to do well. There are, for example, good investment trusts specialising in mining companies and property companies. It can be much easier (and safer) to invest in a specialist investment trust if you want to put money into a sector which you think is likely to do well in the future.

7. Sadly, investment trust managers have now started to give themselves the sort of performance fees (also known as incentive bonuses) that hedge fund mangers have enjoyed for some time. There is no logical reason for this and the evidence shows that investment trusts where the managers have an incentive bonus do worse than investment trusts where they do not. Grant Thornton, an accountancy firm, studied five year performance data for 48 investment trusts. The 24 investment trusts which had incentive schemes beat their benchmarks 53% of the time, whereas those without incentive schemes beat their benchmarks 59% of the time. All you can do is to ask, and maybe check out the annual report, to see if there is such a scheme in operation. If you have a choice then I suggest that you avoid investment trusts which pay such fees.

8. Investment trusts make life easy for investors. If you invest in ten separate property companies, for example, then you have ten separate companies to watch. And there will be ten sets of dividends. Occasionally, one of your chosen companies will be taken over. There will be mail to sort through and documents to read. And there will, of course, be unavoidable tax liabilities which might well come at an inconvenient time. Putting money into an investment trust which has holdings in your chosen ten companies (and maybe a few more in the same area) can certainly make life easy and allow you to spend your time studying investment strategies rather than ploughing through dull paperwork. Plus there is the advantage that you won't be liable for tax when your investment trust buys and sells shares.

LEVERAGE (AKA 'GEARING')

'If you owe the bank £100, the bank controls you; but if you owe the bank a million pounds, you control the bank'
JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES

A lever is a tool which enables you to turn a small amount of strength into a great deal of power. Using leverage means making a small amount of money do a lot of work. If you try to lift a large object you can do so more easily if you use a lever. Similarly, if you have a small amount of money and want to make a big profit you may be able to do so by using leverage. The snag is that using financial leverage is very dangerous. If things go well you can make a lot more money. If things go badly you can lose a lot more money. Leverage is the same as gearing. Which is, of course, the same as debt.

'If it isn't the sheriff it's the finance company. I've got more attachments on me than a vacuum cleaner.'
JOHN BARRYMORE

Using leverage is the way the hedge funds make vast amounts of money. If they have £10,000,000 to invest they use financial instruments, such as futures, to enable them to buy far more of whatever it is they want to buy than they could possibly afford if they simply invested their cash. So, for example, they buy a futures contract which might give them 10 or 100 times the purchasing power of the funds they have at their disposal; their £10,000,000 enables them to benefit as though they owned £100,000,000 (10 times) or £1,000,000,000 (100 times) of the stock or commodity they wanted to buy. The upside is obvious.

Let's assume they have bought copper and leveraged themselves up by a factor of 100. If the copper doubles in value the hedge fund will make 200 times its initial investment – instead of merely doubling its money. You can make huge profits using leverage.

There is a downside, of course.

If the price of copper goes down then the leveraging works against the hedge fund. If the copper price goes down just 1% they will lose all of their initial investment, because only 1% of the money they invested was really theirs. And if the copper price halves they may lose billions.

Investment bankers and hedge funds used leverage a great deal to make themselves rich in the latter part of the twentieth century and the early part of the twenty first century.

Both groups used leverage a great deal because they had nothing to lose and a great deal to gain. They were both gambling with other people's money to make themselves rich. Investment bankers used leverage because their bonuses depended on their making huge profits. And using leverage helped them make ever bigger profits. If the worst happened and their gambles didn't come off then the money they lost belonged to the bank. Their only loss would be that their bonuses would be cut.

I don't ever use leverage or gearing. And I don't recommend that you do either. There were a number of causes of the banking crisis which hit the world in 2008, but the problem wouldn't have happened without leverage. Banks failed because they borrowed too much money and then invested it unwisely. Individuals who borrow too much, and then spend or invest their borrowings, are just as vulnerable as the banks proved to be.

Theorists claim that there are two types of debt: good debt and bad debt.

Good debt brings in money (e.g. it is considered good to borrow to buy a property if the rent exceeds the interest). Bad debt takes out money (e.g. if you borrow to buy a house to live in or to buy a car).

I think all debt is bad. All debt sucks and can be a great cause of pain. For the last part of the 20th Century and the first part of the 21st millions of people saved too little, borrowed too much and spent everything they could borrow.

Lives were built on debt. And ruined by it.

I try to avoid companies which are heavily in debt. They may make lots of money if things go well. But if things go less than well they could lose everything.

And I never borrow money to buy stocks (known as buying 'on margin'). You can make much more money if you borrow to invest. But you can also lose much more.

LIQUIDITY

‘Liquidity is a coward; it disappears at the first sign of trouble.’
POPULAR SAYING

A company has a decent liquidity if it is fairly easy to buy and sell shares in it. If a company’s shares aren’t widely held or traded very often the liquidity may be low. If a company’s shares are liquid you will be able to sell them easily. If a company’s shares aren’t liquid you may have difficulty in selling- and may find that when you try to sell you will move the price against you. (In other words the very act of you trying to sell your shares will reduce their price.)

LUCK

'Although men flatter themselves with their great actions they are not so often the result of great design as of chance.'
DUKE DE LA ROCHEFOUCAULD

Don't confuse skill with luck. If you put twelve people into a room and invite them all to toss coins there will, eventually, be one player who gets a dozen tails all in a row. If you ask that lucky player his secret he will blush and tell you that it was all about special timing, special flicking and a good deal of practice. He will lower his eyes and talk about writing a book to explain his skill more fully. He will never admit that it was just luck and statistical inevitability that led to his success.

When you lose money, don't blame it on bad luck. Don't moan that you have been victimised. And when you make money don't assume it's all down to your genius. Whining won't rescue your investment portfolio. And hubris will endanger your future success by encouraging you to become over-confident.

It is safer to assume that everything bad that happens is a result of your own incompetence and that everything good that happens is a result of good luck.

Acknowledge to yourself when your success is a result of good luck. (As an investor you will have more than your fair share of bad luck – even though this is, of course, impossible. You will be quick to blame bad luck when you lose money so be prepared to credit good luck when you make money, or avoid losing it.) I first started investing in the stock market in the mid and late 1960's when I was a medical student. I had an active brokerage account in Birmingham and invested my earnings as a columnist and drama critic on the market. I was lucky, picked some good stocks which were booming and did quite well. (I did well enough for the stock broker to offer me a job.) When I qualified as a doctor and started working in hospital I closed my broker's account because I didn't have time to deal. This was fortunate for it enabled me to miss the horrible bear market of the early 1970's.

MISSION STATEMENTS

‘Execute their aery purposes.’
JOHN MILTON

Public companies exist to create value for the shareholders. That’s it. The job of the directors and staff is to care for the shareholders. The other things that companies do – things such as providing jobs, serving the community, satisfying the customer and so on – are all subservient to the primary purpose and are morally less important. Company mission statements should, if they are honest, be simple: the company’s primary task is to make a profit and to make money for shareholders.

However, these days most companies are run for the benefit of the directors, executives, employees, pensioners and taxpayers. Shareholders, the owners of the company, are at the bottom of the list. They and their interests receive little or no protection. Sadly, shareholders have been betrayed by institutional money managers who are the ones who are supposed to represent their interests at annual general meetings. (Individual shareholders usually hold their shares through nominee accounts and are, therefore, deprived of the right to attend and speak at company meetings. Fund managers, who should represent their own shareholders, are usually more interested in protecting the interests of directors and executives.)

It is true that a company which treats its staff well, and which is good to its customers and the community, will almost certainly do better than one that doesn’t do these things. But these should not be the company’s primary motives. It is clearly also important that companies should treat former employees well and should provide them with good pensions. But shareholders should (but do not) always take priority over both employees and pensioners. Shareholders are often pensioners too. Sadly, their rights are often forgotten, ignored or suppressed.

I don’t have much faith in companies which have fancy mission statements which witter on about the community and the environment and providing a pleasurable working experience for staff. It is the job of governments to worry about communities and the environment. It is the job of the company to make money for the shareholders. That is the company’s sole purpose. I like companies which care for the environment, the staff and the community. But those things should not be the purpose of a company.

To summarise: the people who work for a company are working for the shareholders. Many of them seem to forget this.

MOMENTUM INVESTING

'An in investor who is seriously eager to make money doesn't have to watch the markets every day. He just has to make, once in a while, a good investment decision on the trends that will last for a number of years.'
MARC FABER

The principle behind momentum investing is pleasantly simple (as, indeed, are most of the people who practise it). Its aficionados look for an investment which is rising in price and they then buy some for the ride. Momentum investing is, in fact, just a smart name for 'jumping on the bandwagon'. Momentum investing involves spotting trends and jumping on them. It can be very profitable on a short-term basis. But it can also be very risky, it can run up lots of expenses and, worst of all, it takes a lot of time and effort.

Of course, momentum investors sometimes practise their technique in reverse: selling investments which are falling in price.

But the usual technique is to look for an investment (usually a share) which is going up in price and to buy some in the belief that the share will go up some more before it stops or goes down.

Momentum investing does work well from time to time (particularly during a bull market when more or less everything is going up). But when it goes wrong (as it does) then the losses can be significant. A share which has soared is quite likely to plummet back to earth again. And it is quite likely to do this quickly. One or two investors decide that the price has gone high enough and so they sell. Their sales bring the price down a little. And the other momentum investors all ring their brokers to sell their shares. The result: pandemonium as thousands of small, momentum investors clamour to flog their shares. Inevitably, the price plummets (and may then become a 'good buy' for value investors).

As you have probably guessed, the tricky part about momentum investing is managing to get out when other investors have stopped buying. Most investments rise in a jerky sort of way, rather than a nice, smooth mountain slope. And investors who are buying because a price is rising (rather than because of any underlying value) need strong nerves to sell out every time the price rise is interrupted. To be successful the momentum investor has to get out just as other people stop buying and just because other investors start selling. This doesn't sound easy and it isn't as easy as it sounds. I've tried momentum investing and it can be exhilarating and profitable when it works. But it's real, pure gambling rather than investing.

Momentum investors like to refer to themselves as 'players'. I have a much better name for them: lemmings.

NET ASSET VALUE (AKA BOOK VALUE)

'Nothing ever becomes real till it is experienced.'
JOHN KEATS

The total assets of a company when liabilities, charges and provisions have been deducted are known as the net asset value or the book value. The net asset value (NAV) per share is obtained by dividing the company's NAV by the number of ordinary shares in existence. Asset values are sometimes given including and excluding intangibles such as the value of brand names. Tangible assets are much more interesting to value investors. If a company sells for 50 pence a share but has a NAV of 80 pence per share (of tangible, realisable assets) then it's probably a good buy. It is still possible to buy shares which sell for less than their NAV, and I have done so several times in recent years. It always seems slightly naughty (the phrase 'taking candy from a baby' springs to mind) but it is invariably profitable and I have never found the taxman unwilling to take his share of the loot.

With companies, the underlying value often lies in the property the company owns. So, consider Useless Components Ltd. The factory isn't making any money and its shares are very cheap. But, the company owns the freehold to a large factory which could easily be replaced by a shopping centre or a housing estate. And the freehold, which is valuable, is not included in the company's accounts at its real value. In fact the property hasn't been revalued for 30 years. The shares in the company could be worth far more than their price.

Finally, remember that intangible assets (things such as brand names and patents) are less valuable than tangible or hard assets (such as buildings and land) simply because their value may vary and it may, in difficult times, be hard to find a buyer.

NEW COMPANIES

'The new-issue market...is ruled by controlling stockholders and corporations, who can usually select the timing of offerings or, if the market looks unfavourable, can avoid an offering altogether. Understandably, these sellers are not going to offer any bargains, either by way of a public offering or in a negotiated transaction.'
WARREN BUFFETT

Don't invest in a small start up unless you are closely involved in the company and know exactly what is going on. The offer will probably be structured to benefit the founders and the banks who have advised them. And why wouldn't it be? Can you really imagine that someone will work his fingers to the bone creating a new company and then hand over shares in the company to complete strangers at a knockdown price?

If strangers are offering you shares in their new company it is because they cannot get the money anywhere else. Neither their bank manager nor their friends and relatives will lend them money. Why should you? If you want to give your money away find a more deserving cause.

Don't buy shares in new issues or untraded shares or initial public offerings (IPOs). When a small company comes to the stock market it will always be because the directors and shareholders believe that the time is right for them to sell some of the shares they hold in their company. They know more about their company than anyone alive. And, despite all the hassle and the enormous cost, they want to get out because they think the price they are getting for their shares is a good one. For them. Why on earth should you be daft enough to buy the shares they are selling? What makes you think that you know more about their company's prospects than they do? The only other people (apart from the initial shareholders) to make money will be the bankers arranging the IPO. Generally speaking investments made in such companies are a flop for several years. Shares in newly floated companies tend to underperform the market by an average of 15% in the years after their initial public offering. Shares underperform because the directors of the company usually choose to float at the best possible time – when their company is doing unsustainably well. You can't blame them. They've worked hard for years and they want their big pay day. The banks arranging the offer will cream off any other profits which might be available. And if the directors (who have created the company) sell a lot of their shares there is always the risk that they will totter off with their 'winnings' and sit on a beach somewhere – leaving the company and your investment to wither.

You might also be invited to invest in a private equity fund or a venture capital fund.

Private equity specialists are people who buy a company, usually using borrowed money, then cut costs in order to find the money to pay for the loans they've taken out. They reorganise the company, sell off assets, pay themselves huge fees and then flog the whole miserable mess back to the public.

Venture capitalists use their money to support very small businesses. They work on the basis of 'win some – lose some' and make their money by taking a huge equity stake in the companies in which they invest. If you are offered a chance to invest in either of these I suggest you run to the nearest railway station and give your money to the first beggar you see. You will feel better, you will have done something useful with your money and you have as much chance of seeing any of it again. If venture capitalists or private equity buy-out specialists are prepared to cut you in on a deal then you really don't want to have anything to do with it.

If there is any real chance of profit in the world of private equity or venture capital (both of which invest in small, troubled or cash-strapped companies) the professionals will do everything they can to avoid sharing the profit with you. If they're inviting you to the party it probably isn't a party you want to attend. None of these people sit down and say to one another: 'There's a huge amount of profit to be made here. We ought to invite some ordinary investors to the feast.'

PENNY STOCKS

‘One a penny, two a penny.’
NURSERY RHYME

A penny stock is a low priced share – usually speculative. Some investors think that if a share costs 5p and they can buy thousands of them for very little outlay then they will make money when the share goes up. This isn’t really true. The spread on penny stocks can sometimes be ruinous. So, for example, you may pay 5p per share if you are buying but receive only 4p per share if you are selling. The big spread on such shares means that the share has to rise a great deal for you to make a profit. And there is no rule that says that a share costing 5p ever has to cost £2.50.

PENSIONS AND RETIREMENT

'And don't rely on the state – why do people trust this manifestly untrustworthy institution?'
PAUL HAM

A typical 65-year-old has a life expectancy of around 20 years. Half of all 65-year-olds will live longer than their life expectancy – longer than 20 years. Some will live to over 100.

You will need quite a lot of money to look after yourself for that length of time. If you have a pension provided by a sound employer who is guaranteed not to go bust then you are in a good position. But I do have a couple of warnings. First, no employer is guaranteed not to go bust. Even big, safe companies might not survive in the future. And you should not assume that your pension will survive if your employer does not. Second, even the Government may have difficulty in meeting its pension commitments in the future. Taxpayers are going to become increasingly upset at having to pay for pensions for civil servants.

Here are some things you should know about pensions and retirement:

1. The retirement age of 65 was fixed by Chancellor Otto von Bismarck of Germany. He decided civil servants could collect a pension when they reach 65. The average German citizen died at the age of 63 at that time so he wasn't giving a lot away. He wasn't the meanest of the mean. That prize goes to the Japanese official who set the official retirement age at 55 when life expectancy in Japan was 43.
2. For every five years you delay starting a pension plan you will probably have to double your monthly investments to achieve the same retirement income. Young people who put all their income into servicing a mortgage they cannot afford, and put nothing into a pension fund, are facing a bleak future. It isn't safe to rely on property prices providing a pension. House prices cannot possibly rise enough to pay for everyone to have a pension. Who is going to buy all the expensive houses? Don't regard your house as your pension. The value of your house rises and falls. Individual houses may be difficult to sell. Volatility for individual houses is high. Neighbourhoods change.
3. Means-testing programmes in the UK mean that if you are British and do not have a solid gold pension plan you have a clear choice: you can either save very little and trust the Government to look after you in your old age (since Government pension programmes aren't funded but are Ponzi schemes this means that you will be reliant on future taxpayers to keep you fed and warm) or you can save as much as you can so that you are independent in your later years. If you are planning to rely on the State you should be aware that the laws of supply and demand will undoubtedly mean that State supplied pensions will be much smaller in 10, 20 or 30 years time than they are today. I think it is pretty safe to say that State pensions will be insufficient to pay for a half-way decent standard of living in the future.
4. A Ponzi scheme is a fraudulent investment operation that involves paying returns to investors out of money raised from subsequent investors, rather than from genuine profits or from the savings of the original investors. Ponzi schemes were named after originator Charles Ponzi, who operated in 1903. Such schemes work well because the early investors- who get good returns – usually keep their money in the scheme. They do well out of it. The people running the scheme send out statements showing investors how much money is being made and so people keep investing. In the end, the scheme collapses as investment slows and the promoter has difficulty paying out the high returns. Investors become suspicious and the promoters of the scheme usually disappear with what money is left. Sometimes, the scheme is exposed because the assets that are supposed to exist have been paid out as the 'profits', 'interest' or 'pension'. Politicians use illegal Ponzi schemes when setting up Government pension programmes because they are enormously popular with electors. Instead of putting aside some of the tax paid by each worker (in order to create a sound, pension fund) politicians rely on each new generation to pay the pensions of each retiring generation. All the money paid in tax is spent. It's fraud, of course, but no one seems to care.
5. You will need enough money in your retirement fund so that you can live on no more than 5% of your retirement pot (in other words, the interest). If you need to take out more than 5% of your investment pot per year the pot will shrink and as you get older there will be less and less money available. How much does that mean that you will need to have saved for your retirement? That's easy. Multiply the amount of money you would like to have as an annual income by 20. Oh, and don't forget to allow for inflation too.
6. Formal pension funds aren't necessarily the best way to save for your retirement. There are some tax advantages to be had from saving in an authorised pension fund but the rules which govern when you can take your money, and how you can take it, are stringent to say the least.
7. The figures available a few years ago showed clearly that a man with a pension fund of £80,000 will have a 10% shorter life than a man with a pension fund of £100,000. A man with £500,000 in his pension fund could expect to live 10% longer than the man with£ 100,000 in his pension fund. Why the difference? That's simple, I'm afraid. The retiree with a little more money can afford to eat and keep warm. And he can also afford to pay for private medical treatment when he needs it.
8. I have always put as much money as I could afford into pension funds. I started doing this when I was a medical student (and was earning money by writing articles and columns and by investing on the stock market).

One of the pension funds I trusted with my money was Equitable Life. Over the years I noticed that the pension fund managers didn't seem to me to be doing terribly well and so as soon as it became possible I took my money out of Equitable Life and put it into a fund I could manage myself I'm delighted to say that I'm much happier with the results I've obtained by managing my pension myself than I would have been if I had left the task to the professionals. My investigations and observations suggest that most people would be better off managing their pension fund themselves than entrusting their money to the professionals.

9. The biggest mistake investors make is in holding a high proportion of their wealth in shares of the company for which they work. When Enron went bust many of the employees had their savings in Enron shares and most or all of their pension funds in Enron shares. On the day Enron went down they lost their jobs, their savings and their pensions. (The boss of Enron had been encouraging employees to buy shares in the company at the same time as he'd been selling his shares.) So, if you have a company pension scheme, do not allow your pension fund to be invested entirely in shares of the company for which you are working. Many dot.com employees had all their wealth tied up in the company for which they worked.

10. In the past money used to be passed down from one generation to the next. In the future this will be reversed. The days of children expecting and receiving an inheritance from their parents are almost over. In another generation children will have to spend their own money looking after their parents.

11. The rules governing pensions are horrendously complicated. Politicians have repeatedly promised to simplify things but inevitably this has meant that things have got worse, rather than better. Moreover, politicians have given themselves the freedom to alter the rules as and when they like, even retrospectively, and to interpret the rules as they see fit. The chances of the rules being the same when you retire as they were when you began your pension plan are non-existent.

12. Investment advisers sometimes recommend that older savers take their money out of shares and put it into bonds or cash deposits. I think that this is dangerous. It is a myth that older people should hold fewer shares than young people. It is often argued that the proportion of shares you own should be equal to 100 minus your age. But I believe that alternatives (bonds, cash) have their own risks. (Cash can be lost if a bank goes bust and may be hurt by inflation). The real problem is that people at 65 may live another 30 or 40 years. They need their savings to beat inflation.

13. It is possible to buy index-linked gilts from the Government. These gilts are designed to grow slightly faster than the rate of inflation. Although the rate of inflation that is used is the Government's (rather than the real rate of inflation) these are an excellent investment for pension funds.

14. Annuities are bad if you die early but good if you die later. (But if you die early what you get out of your annuity is probably the least of your problems.) People whose homes aren't burgled transfer money to people whose homes are burgled and similarly, people who die early lose but those who live longer win. In the future, annuities are likely to go down for healthy pensioners. In the wonderful old days, all pensioners who bought annuities got the same deal. People who had looked after their bodies, and who were lucky, lived longer and received more money in the end than people who died early. But today the companies providing annuities are offering more money to smokers, the overweight and the chronically ill. This means that the money available for the healthy and able-bodied will be less. Those who eat carefully, don't smoke and drink in moderation will be forced to live in more penurious circumstances unless they ensure that their pension pot – the sum available for an annuity – is large enough.

15. Don't build your retirement plans around emigrating to France and running a boarding house. If you do the chances are that you will end up having to come back to UK and take a job as a school crossing attendant. (And don't buy a retirement cottage near to a convenient airport serviced by a cheap-flight airline. By the time you retire the chances are that the airport will have been closed, leaving you with a 300 mile car journey.)

16. It's worth remembering that the modern concept of retirement did not really catch on before the 1930's when it was brought in to convince older workers to retire in order to open up jobs for young people. Most of the people retiring were doing physical jobs which required brawn and strength rather than wisdom and experience. This happened during the great depression in the USA in the 1930's. Today, most people have jobs which require thought rather than action and there is not a great deal of logic in retirement these days. Most retirees miss their work and feel useless and unwanted for many of the 30 years they spend visiting the public library and riding round the country on coach trips. So, don't ever retire. If you already have retired then you should consider unretiring. If you are planning retirement from a full-time job look for small part-time jobs to take up.

Today retirement causes misery because millions simply don't know what to do with themselves. Poor pensions mean that many are now living in penury. Retirement is an unnecessary anachronism. Much wisdom and experience are wasted.

17. In recent years many companies have effectively become huge pension funds. They exist not to make money for shareholders but to run pension funds for past and present employees. Such companies will be in big trouble if the market falls because then the value of their pension funds (invested in equities) will fall and the companies will have to put more of their earnings into the fund in order to obey the law. There are many companies in

existence which owe so much in pensions to present and past employees that they are effectively worthless as investments.

18. A survey conducted by the Clydesdale Bank showed that of 1,000 people questioned more than 60% dreamed of a lottery win to pay for their retirement. I hope that you share my horror at this attitude.

PORTFOLIO MANAGEMENT

'The ideal investment portfolio is divided between the purchase of a really secure future income (where future appreciation or depreciation will depend on the rate of interest) and equities which one believes to be capable of a large improvement to offset the fairly numerous cases which, with the best skill in the world, will be wrong.'
JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES

You can put your spare money (or savings as they are known in the industry) in an old shoe box under the bed. You'll know how much is there and you'll be able to count it whenever there isn't anything decent on the television, or whenever you feel like cheering yourself up.

But there are some disadvantages to keeping your money in a box under the bed.

First, the government may change all the notes. They do this from time to time and you will feel (and look) more than a trifle suspicious if you have to push a wheelbarrow of old notes into your bank and ask them to change them into the new stuff. The chances of the bank not calling PC Plod round to ask you where the money came from are approximately nil. The chances of you being able to produce an explanation that will satisfy PC Plod are roughly the same.

Second, mice will eat your money. Or it will go mouldy. Or it will be burnt up in a fire. Paper money is very vulnerable and all these bad things can easily happen to it if you leave it in a box under your bed.

Third, a nasty person will break into your home and take your money. If they know that you have money hidden away and they aren't very good at games like Hunt The Slipper they may tie you to a chair and do nasty things with matches and golf clubs to encourage you to tell them to look under the bed.

Fourth, your money will be worth less next year than it was worth this year. And the year after that it will be worth even less. While it is sitting under your bed snoozing your money will not earn anything for you. And inflation will eat up the purchasing power of your money so that by the end of every year it will be worth less than it was at the start of the same year. Your money will be shrinking just as surely as if mice were eating up a chunky percentage of it every month.

If you're going to invest your money and make it grow you will need a plan.

When he got stranded on his desert island, Robinson Crusoe began with a plan. You too have to have a plan. You need to know what your aims are. And you also need to have some idea how you are going to achieve them. Without ideas, aims and a plan you won't get anywhere.

The most important decision investors have to make is not which share to buy but how to allocate their assets. A collection of assets is known as a portfolio and it is, of course, perfectly possible to have sub-portfolios within the main portfolio. The main portfolio may contain shares, property, bonds, cash deposits and gold. The share portfolio may contain oil company shares, bank shares, investment trusts and so on.

The aim of creating a portfolio is to provide diversification and to protect your savings from dramatic changes in the economic world. Uncorrelated assets usually (but not always) provide some protection.

Asset allocation is crucial to good portfolio management. Generally speaking, most bank shares do much the same (there will always be one which does better than the rest and one which does worse than the rest) and the same is true for retail shares, utilities, building companies and so on. Most property values go up and down together too.

Long-term studies, conducted by people with a lot of time on their hands and a talent for using calculators, have concluded that 85% of investment success is due to asset allocation. Other researchers have shown that 40% of the return difference between one fund and another is explained by differences in asset allocation. The other 60% of the difference between funds is explained by timing, the specific securities that are chosen and the differences in fees and expenses.

Picking the right variety of assets to buy is where you need to have an overview; to be able to see the wood rather than the trees. And you need to remember that investment is an art more than a science. (If it were a science you'd be able to invest according to strict formulae. But, despite the claims of many, there are no such formulae.) Investing alone, and taking personal responsibility for making sure that your hard earned money is preserved, and grows, means you can bet against the herd and invest in companies, sectors or countries you believe in.

The two investments most people think of when they think of making money out of money are property and shares. More people become really, really rich through investing in property than through anything else (often because they buy crummy buildings in crummy locations, do them up and then wait for the area to become fashionable) but in the long run the average investor in shares has, in the past, done better than the average investor in property.

The advantage of property over shares is that you can see what you've bought. You can touch it. You can go inside it. And, if you have a tenant, you should get some rent, though you may have to go round and collect it yourself. If you've borrowed money to buy the property, the rent might even cover the interest payments. (Although I don't really approve of borrowing to invest, most of the people who have become multi-millionaires through property have done so because they've borrowed up to their eyeballs to fund their property buying sprees.) The downside of investing in property is that property is illiquid (it may take years to sell a building and to get your money back) and it needs a lot of looking after. You have to pay rates and insurance and your building will probably need painting from time to time. Toilets and gutters get blocked too and unless you're prepared to deal with these problems yourself you will need to pay an agent and a man with a wrench to do the work for you. There's also the problem that there are likely to be spells in between tenants when your building is empty and earning you nothing. Unless you are very rich your money will only buy you one or two properties with the result that most of your wealth will be tied up in one or two specific investments. If the neighbourhood goes downhill then you could end up losing money.

'The first rule is not to make mistakes. The second rule is not to forget the first rule.'
WARREN BUFFETT

With shares you don't get anything you can touch. You probably don't even get a certificate. But shares do give you a chance to diversify much more easily. You can spread your risk much more widely than you can with property. And you can, of course, invest in property by buying shares in property companies. You can buy and sell shares easily - usually just by picking up the telephone - and if you pick the right companies you should receive regular dividends without having to go round and threaten a tenant with a big stick. In the long run the capital gain from shares should beat the capital gain from investing in property. The downside of investing in shares is that you have to rely on brokers and bankers and they all charge big, fat fees. (But, on the other hand you don't have to deal with lawyers and estate agents.)

'I believe now that successful investment depends on three principles: a) A careful selection of a few investments (or a few types of investment) having regard to their cheapness in relation to their probable actual and potential intrinsic value over a period of years ahead and in relation to alternative investments at the time. b) A steadfast holding of these in fairly large units through thick and thin, perhaps for several years, until either they have fulfilled their promise or it is evident that they were purchased on a mistake. c) A balanced investment position, namely a variety of risks in spite of individual holdings being large, and if possible opposed risks (for example, a holding of gold shares among other equities, since they are likely to move in opposite directions when there are general fluctuations).'
JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES

Property and shares are not, of course, the only two places where you can put investment money.

Here's a summary (in no particular order) of the other main possibilities:

a) bonds and gilts
b) national savings
c) precious metals (including gold, silver and platinum)
d) stuff (including art, books, stamps etc.)
e) cash

You should look through the variety of investments you can choose from and select for yourself an appropriate mix that will suit your aims and ambitions.

Once you have devised a portfolio, and made a number of investments, you need to remember that it is the overall success or failure of the portfolio that really matters, rather than the success or failure of individual investments. If your portfolio is properly diversified, your successful investments should more than cover the losses of your unsuccessful investments. But don't diversify too much. For example, if you end up with a mass of separate shares you might as well buy an index fund. Your portfolio will almost certainly not do any better than the general market, your wealth will not boom even if your strategies are proved correct and your expenses will be too high. In addition, if your portfolio is too large you will spend most of your time on portfolio administration. There will be little time left for strategic thinking or for finding new investment opportunities. In the world of finance (as everywhere else) crises are normal. The more complex your portfolio, the more likely you are to have to deal with problems and the less time you will have for having ideas. So, try to keep your portfolio simple enough so that whatever happens you will still have some time left to enable you to think clearly about what is happening.

'When a man does not know what harbour he is making for, no wind is the right wind.'
LUCIUS ANNAEUS SENECA

When you start to create a portfolio you have two choices. You can either give your money to an expert and ask him to manage it for you or you can decide to create a portfolio yourself

My advice is that you should not give your money to the experts. They probably don't know any more than you do. And they certainly won't care as much about your money as you will. Most important of all, the money you will save by managing your portfolio yourself is likely to increase your portfolio's performance dramatically. Most portfolio managers will charge at least 2% or 3% of the sum under management. That 2% or 3% saved can increase your performance from, say, 6% to 8% or 9%. Those are dramatic improvements which can, over just a few years, make a spectacular difference to the success of your portfolio.

And creating a portfolio isn't as difficult as most people imagine. Many investors have been served well by a simple portfolio consisting of 40% gilts, 40% equities and 20% gold. (But, be warned, such a portfolio could prove disastrous in a major bear market.)

One sensible investment strategy is to use passive funds (such as equity based index-linked funds) as the foundations of the equity part of your portfolio, and to then add active funds or shares in an attempt to boost your portfolio performance. Today, this is known as the core/satellite approach. When I first devised this scheme privately in the 1980's I described it as the 80:20 approach because I put 80% of my investments in solid, fairly boring investments and the other 20% into more risky investments. It has become extremely popular.

Here's my advice about creating, and managing, an investment portfolio.

I've added advice from one or two other voices.

1. First ask yourself a question: Why are you investing? You must know the answer to this. What do you want to buy or spend money on in the future? How much money will you need? Know your limitations. Be selective. You can't possibly know everything there is to know about every possible investment. Specialise. You will do better if you specialise in areas where you have some knowledge, or in areas in which you are genuinely interested.
2. You might feel that it is wise to create, at the heart of your portfolio, a lifestyle reserve containing enough money to keep you in basic comfort should everything else go 'bad'. This reserve should be invested in index-linked Government bonds, tax exempt National Savings and gold. With such a reserve behind you, you might feel that you can be a little more aggressive with the rest of your portfolio.
3. You may want to rebalance your portfolio occasionally. Otherwise there can be dangers. So, for example, if you start with 50% of your portfolio in equities and they do very well you could end up with 75% of your portfolio in equities just as the market peaks. If, however, you take the extra percentage of equities and put it into an asset class that has done poorly (bonds or property, for example) you could well be nicely positioned to take advantage when that asset class does well. At some point investments that go up tend to go up too much. And then they come down. Rebalancing your portfolio is a way to avoid this danger. (On the other hand, you may prefer to stick with the investments which have done well for you. This is what I usually do.)

'Study general conditions, take a position and stick to it. Wait without impatience.'
JESSE LIVERMORE

4. If you ever feel that your portfolio has grown stale -and you have lost your edge – don't be afraid to sell everything and start again. The costs will be painful. But at least you will have the chance to get rid of all your old investments and recreate a new portfolio.

'Life is .frittered away by detail...simplify, simplify.'
HENRY DAVID THOREAU

5. Don't allow your portfolio to determine the way you feel about the investment climate. If you have a lot of shares in your portfolio it is easy to allow your hopes to become expectations- and to continue buying shares. Try to remain dispassionate. And always be prepared to change your mind and to take a loss when it is wise to do so.
6. General investment success has nothing to do with luck. If your portfolio of investments consistently do badly it is because you have failed to 'read' the investment climate properly. Maybe you should, after all, consider asking a professional to look after your money for you. It is particularly important to do this if your investments produce a notably worse return than you could have obtained from giving your money to a fairly average portfolio manager. (These days most banks provide portfolio management services.)

'What is your money doing tonight?'
NEWSLETTER OF THE SELF-HELP ASSOCIATION FOR A REGIONAL ECONOMY IN GREAT BARRINGTON, MASSACHUSETTS, USA

7. A well-diversified portfolio will always have winners and losers. Try to keep your eye on the overall picture rather than on individual investments. And do not allow yourself to be suckered into spending too much time on tiny investments which will have little or no real effect on your overall financial situation. Many investors spend as much time worrying about small investments (in which they have 1% of their wealth invested) as they spend worrying about big investments (in which they may have 20% of their wealth invested). This is obviously dangerous.
8. Losses do a great deal of damage to a portfolio. A big loss will damage a portfolio more than a big gain will benefit it. If your portfolio goes up 50% one year and down 50% the next year you will end up 25% down. (You start with £10,000. At the end of year one you have £15,000. At the end of year two you will have £7,500. That's a 25% loss on your original capital.) If you need to sell something it is usually wise to sell an investment that is doing badly and to keep your winners.

'Experience is the name everyone gives to their mistakes.'
OSCAR WILDE

9. Try to think of your investment portfolio as an integrated whole. If you have a good, well-balanced portfolio you won't need to keep checking it or keep changing the contents. You can spend more time at the beach. If you make investments then some of the time you will make bad investments. No investor in history has ever been successful every time. The important thing is to concentrate not on individual losses (or gains) but to look at the overall profitability of your portfolio.

10. Don't ignore or reject bad news that affects your portfolio. If you fall in love with an investment theory and things go badly you must reassess your viewpoint. Maybe you made a mistake. Maybe you were given bad advice.

11. Nothing produces average results more reliably than holding a huge portfolio of investments. Too much diversification may increase your safety but it will also reduce your profitability. A broadly based portfolio will not enable you to beat the market. A more specialised portfolio may be a little bit riskier but it will give you a better chance of beating the market.

12. When planning a portfolio you should think long term. Do not expect your chosen investments to rise suddenly or in a smooth line.

13. Remember: if you create a portfolio deliberately designed to make you rich you may become rich. If things go well you may become very rich. But if things do not go as planned you may become poor. If things go badly you may become very poor. This is because bigger profits usually come from greater risks.

14. I don't think it is a good idea to regard your main home as part of an investment portfolio. It's reasonable to include other homes (holiday homes, houses or flats which are rented out) as part of your portfolio, but your main home is where you live. (And people who borrow money on their main home and then spend it on stock market investments are taking a bigger risk than I would feel comfortable with.)

15. At any one time there will almost certainly be some parts of your portfolio that are doing badly. That is why you have a diversified portfolio. You should expect some failures and disappointments. You need to reconsider your investment strategy only if your portfolio is doing badly overall.

16. Measure your success over a 12 month period – not less – or you will make the mistake the professional money managers make, and end up making too many changes in a desperate attempt to deal with short-term moves.

17. A major global economic downturn tends to damage every form of investment. During the bear market and credit crunch crisis of 2008 just about every possible type of investment lost money. Shares went down. Property when down. Commodities went down. Bonds went down. Gilts went down (as investors bought them for safety). Gold and other precious metals went down. Even the investors who were in cash and who (perhaps rather smugly) thought they weren't losing money were, in reality, losing money hand over fist because inflation was eating away at the purchasing power of their savings.

18. Once you have developed your investment plan, and worked out a real strategy which makes sense to you, try not to fiddle with it too much. You don't need to review your investments constantly. Make quarterly reviews of your finances. Be critical. Imagine you have to report to a board of directors. How are you doing? Would you give yourself a bonus? Or would you merit firing? But don't tinker too much. Banks and brokers want investors to review their holdings frequently so that they churn their portfolios and pay big dealing commissions. But most so-called experts aren't rich, or ever likely to be. Don't abandon your plan just because of an opinion from someone who doesn't agree with your well-thought out view. Make firm decisions and try to stick with them. I spend several hours each week thinking about my investment strategy in general (and my specific investments in particular) but I don't buy or sell investments every week. I look at individual share prices once a week at the most but I do try to keep an eye on what is happening to exchange rates, interest rates and the prices of major commodities (such as oil and gold) on a daily basis. You can't buy shares and forget them. You need to keep an eye on things. But you don't have to sit hunched over a trading screen all day.

19. The key to good investing is to do well when things are going well (when the markets are rising), but not to lose too much money when things are going badly. If you can do this then you will, of course, almost certainly beat the market. Sometimes, when things are bad, just not losing too much money is all you can hope for. And if investment portfolios are shrinking everywhere and you are holding onto your capital then when things change (which they assuredly will) you will be in a far better position than most to take advantage of the next boom. When do you know that the bottom has arrived? When absolutely everyone is filled with gloom and despair about the future for companies, shares and investments of every hue. When the vast majority of investors have capitulated the brave are buying.

20. Don't put money you might need in a hurry into illiquid investments. If you put all your money into buying a little shop you could be in trouble if you need to sell the shop in a hurry. Similarly, if all your money is invested in silver cow creamers you could find yourself being stuffed if you have to find cash in a rush.

21. If you are investing in individual shares, you should not hold fewer than 20 stocks. If you don't have enough money to spread it around 20 stocks then wait until you have. If you invest in too few stocks then the risk of

your portfolio being damaged by a single failure is, inevitably, greater. But you should not invest in too many shares either. Warren Buffett suggests that investors should have only 20 shares in their share portfolios and that when investors want to add a new share to their collection they should get rid of an old one to make room for it. If you have too many separate holdings in your portfolio you will become confused. Some investments will demand more of your time than they deserve. And other investments will get forgotten. The costs, effort and general risks will hold you back. To beat the market you need big, well thought out positions that you can watch carefully.

22. Doing nothing is sometimes the right thing to do. When there are problems our instinct is to do something. In investment, as in medicine and goalkeeping, that might not always be the right thing. In medicine, doctors who interfere too soon, and who forget that the human body can often heal itself, can frequently do more harm than good. In football, when a goalkeeper is trying to save a penalty he will probably dive to the right or the left. He stays still in the centre of the goalmouth just 6.3% of the time. But the penalty taker is likely to hit the ball straight at the middle of the goalmouth 28.7% of the time. So, to play the percentage game, goalkeepers should keep still and stay where they are far more than they do. Don't just do something, stand there. But they don't. It is embarrassing to do nothing and have to pick the ball out of the net. Goalkeepers feel better if they've tried and failed. Penalty takers should kick the ball straight ahead since that gives them by far the best chance of scoring. But most don't because it looks as if they haven't made a decision on where to place the ball. Research shows that trading activity rises when markets fall. Investors feel they have to do something to protect their money, or to make back their losses. Most of the time, of course, they simply make things worse.

23. Keep your expectations realistic. During the 1980's and 1990's many investment portfolios returned 15% a year. Some managed considerably more. These were exceptional years. Over the long-term the average return is half this. Investors did well during those years because falling inflation pushed up company profitability. They also did well because the stock market became chronically over-valued as increasing numbers of investors began to believe that such returns could be obtained indefinitely. Investors whose expectations remain too high are likely to be disappointed. And in chasing results they are likely to lose money.

24. I am an investor and not a trader and so I try to think at least a year ahead.

I don't make investments expecting to make a profit within weeks or even months. (But I don't object if I do.) Investors who aim for instant gratification are, in the end, invariably disappointed.

25. It pays to own things that pay you to own them. Properties that pay rent. Bonds which pay interest. Shares which pay decent dividends. Even if the value of your investments goes down you will still be earning money.

26. When looking at possible investments it is well worth remembering Jim Slater's Zulu Principle. The idea is very simple. 'The idea,' says Slater, 'came from a four-page article about Zulus in Reader's Digest. Anyone who read it would have immediately known more about Zulus than most other people. If they were then to have visited the local library and read all the available books on the subject they would certainly have known more about the subject than anyone in their town or county. A visit to South Africa with a few months spent on a Zulu kraal, followed by reading all the available literature on Zulus at a South African university, would without a doubt have made them one of the leading experts in the world.'

It's a wise observation.

'By investing a disproportionate time in the subject, almost anyone could become an acknowledged authority on it,' says Slater.

Naturally, the same principle can be applied to investing.

Most investors are unfocused. They thrash around wildly, following tips here and fashions there. They know a little about a lot but they don't know very much about anything in particular. It is hardly surprising that in the end they lose money.

If you concentrate your effort on a relatively small area (or a few relatively small areas) then you will know more than most people. And, as an investor, you will do better than most people.

27. I think it's wise to treat the various parts of your investment portfolio in different ways. Money in your pension, and money you have on deposit for emergencies (a problem with the roof, an illness, a dying motor car) needs to be treated with more caution than money which you are prepared to invest and want to grow.

28. Your mix of shares, bonds, property and other assets should always be appropriate for your goals and for your financial and emotional ability to sustain losses. How you handle money depends on the amount of security you want, the amount of risk you are prepared to take, the amount of income you need from your money, how easily you want to be able to access your funds and the time you are prepared to spend on looking after your portfolio.

29. All great investment portfolios are run by individuals who think for themselves. It's one area of life where eccentricity can be a virtue. Don't be afraid to be original. But remember: running a portfolio isn't about flaunting or satisfying your ego. Running a portfolio is about preserving capital, generating capital and generating income.

'Put all your eggs in one basket and watch that basket!'

MARK TWAIN (MR. TWAIN, AKA SAMUEL CLEMENS, HAD CONSIDERABLE EXPERIENCE OF MONEY SHARKS AND, WHEN IT

CAME TO MATTERS OF FINANCE, KNEW WELL OF WHAT HE WROTE. HE REALISED THAT ALTHOUGH DIVERSIFICATION MAY MAKE INVESTORS FEEL SAFE IT DOES NOT ALWAYS PROVIDE THE EXPECTED LEVEL OF PROTECTION. INVESTORS WHO PUT THEIR MONEY WHERE THEIR HEART IS ARE OFTEN BETTER SERVED.)

30. Managing a successful personal portfolio is like running a small, private investment trust or, perhaps even more, a small, private hedge fund. You need to create a mix of investments which will protect your wealth from a wide range of threats – including inflation. Mix sectors and strategies for protection and profit. Imagine you are running a small investment trust of your own with the minimal aim being the preservation of your capital (measured against inflation as your only benchmark) and your optimal aim being to grow your capital a little each year.

31. I keep a list of possible future investments. It's just a file of cuttings and notes. Whenever I spot something which might suggest a new investment possibility I cut it out and put it into the file. Every couple of weeks I look through the file. I throw out things that don't seem such a good idea. And I keep collecting information on investments which might prove worthwhile.

32. Don't overtrade. Overtrading will destroy your portfolio performance.

33. Here are the things you need to think of when creating a portfolio:

* Your objectives. (Why are you creating a portfolio?)
* Your time horizon. (How soon do you want to meet your objectives?)
* How much risk are you prepared to take? (How well will you deal with losses?)
* How much money have you already got to invest?
* How can you add to this sum?
* How will you allocate your assets?
* What individual funds or shares will you choose?
* What tax considerations do you need to be aware of?
* How do you want to diversify your portfolio?
* How much income do you want to take from your portfolio?

34. Many experts recommend that investors should sell specific shares (or other investments) which rise in value and become a larger part of a portfolio than originally planned. I understand the theory behind this suggestion but I don't believe it is necessarily always wise to fine tune a portfolio too often or too much. Tuning a portfolio involves selling investments which have done well and which may continue to do well, in order to purchase investments which might not prove so profitable. And, of course, there will be costs.

35. Keep careful records of all your investment transactions. You will need such records for the taxman, of course, but you should also keep them for yourself. Without them you won't be able to tell whether or not your investment plans are proving profitable. I keep basic information in a small hand-held PDA. I actually use an old-fashioned Psion 3mx which I happen to think is still the best discrete, portable computer ever made. And I know what all the buttons do. Occasionally, I try out something new but I've not yet found anything as good. I don't put my personal investment information on a device which has Internet access or which can be used as a telephone. I like my private information to remain private.

36. At least one big investment house advises clients who have less than £2 million to invest not to hold shares directly. Another investment house says that £5 million is the minimum. Both claim that if your wealth is less than this then all your equity investments should be in unit trusts or investment trusts. I can understand why they say this. It is clearly good for business. But it is rubbish. The banks argue that investing in specific shares is risky. But an investment in a major blue chip company is probably safer and less volatile than an investment in a unit or investment trust which specialises in the shares of small companies in an emerging market. Anyone who has £20,000 or more to invest has enough to create a small but well diversified portfolio without relying exclusively on unit or investment trusts.

37. What you gain or lose in a day or a week is irrelevant. Try not to take too much notice of short-term gains or losses. If you do, there is a risk that you will become too confident during bull rallies and too despondent during bear troughs and will, therefore, take your eye off the long-term prospects for your portfolio. A successful investment strategy requires a long-term approach. (By long-term I mean at least a year and generally five years or more.)

'There are only three rules on investing: first, never lose any money, second, never lose any money, and third, never lose any money.'
WARREN BUFFETT

38. Deduct your expenses, the inflation rate and the taxes you have to pay from your rate of return to find your profit.

39. Most investors spend more time thinking about which telephone to use, or which shoes to buy, than they do before making an investment or starting a pension. Learn to spend more time on the big stuff and less time on the little stuff. I have known too many people who spent their lives saving pennies through thrifty shopping but losing pounds through bad investments.

40. Finally, don't let your investing become too serious. Investing money, and making it grow, is a means to an

end. But for too many people investing, and making more money, becomes an end in itself; a macho, self-assertion that is regarded to begin with as a game (to see who can make most money) and that turns into a war (with the aim being to defeat all the other competitors and to end up with as much of the money as possible). This is dangerous. It's why many investors hold onto investments for far too long. They are unwilling to sell losing investments because when you sell a loser you have to admit, both to yourself and to whatever part of the world might be interested, that you made a mistake. Many investors allow their investments to become personal; they are constantly searching for signs of evidence which confirms their prejudices instead of, more wisely and far more usefully, looking for signs of evidence which might question their prejudices.

POUND COST AVERAGING

‘Share prices rise when there are more buyers than sellers. They fall when sellers outnumber buyers. The consensus view is not always right but the actions of many usually tell a stronger story than an individual view. However, the best investment profits go to those who anticipate change and that means investors often need to swim against the tide.’
ROBERT COLE

Diversification in time is as important as any other form of diversification. Currency-cost averaging (or pound-cost averaging) enables investors to avoid investing everything at the top of the market. If the market rises the investor gets more shares for his money. If the market falls he gets less. Over time things balance out.

Pound-cost averaging means investing the same, fixed amount of money in a fund or a share at regular intervals (once a month or once a quarter for example). If you do this over a long period it will reduce your risk of investing your money at a time when prices are temporarily and optimistically inflated.

When you average down you buy more of a share at a lower price. So, if you have bought 1,000 shares of Tiddlywinks International at £10 per share and the price goes down to £5 a share you can average down by buying more shares at the lower price. If you buy another 1,000 at £5 per share you will own 2,000 shares and will have paid £15,000 for them all. This means that your average price will be £7.50 per share. I believe that if the price of a share goes down while the fundamental values of the company remain the same then the share must be a better buy than it was when you first bought it. On that basis I will usually add to a position if the price falls but the fundamentals remain sound.

On the other hand, to average up is to buy more of a share at a higher price. If you have bought 1,000 shares of the Bilbury Beer Company at £5 per share and the shares go up to £10 a share you might, if you still think the shares are cheap, buy another 1,000. You will now have bought 1,000 at £5 each (total cost £5,000) and 1,000 at £10 each (total cost £10,000) so you will have 2,000 shares at a total cost of £15,000 which means that each share you own will, on average, have cost you £7.50.

The conclusion is simple: if you have money to invest, drip feed it into the market a bit at a time. Markets do crash (sometimes without warning or explanation) and if you’ve invested all your money the day before a crash you’ll feel a little sick.

PRICE EARNINGS RATIOS

'A cynic is a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.'
OSCAR WILDE

The price/earnings ratio (known to its friends as p/e ratio) is probably the commonest way of deciding quickly whether a share is fairly priced, under priced or overpriced. The p/e ratio is found by dividing the share price (p) by the earnings per share (e). When the sum is done using the last set of company results the p/e ratio is known as 'historic'. When the sum is done using an earnings forecast (known technically as a 'guess') the result is a 'prospective' p/e. The p/e tells you the number of years that you would have to hold the share for the company to achieve earnings that match the price you paid for it. So, for example, if a company's shares trade on a p/e of 10 it would take 10 years for the cumulative earnings per share to equal the price you paid for the share.

The problem with a historic p/e is that last year's results don't necessarily tell you what this year's results are going to be like. Just because a company did well last year doesn't mean that it will do well this year.

The problem with a prospective p/e is that one of the important figures used (the earnings) is a guess and quite likely to be wrong, very wrong or so wrong that it's laughable. Prospective earnings are based on someone else's guess. If you are going to make investment decisions made on prospective p/e ratios you might as well hire an astrologer. Some companies have no p/e ratio because they have no earnings. (This was true of most companies in the dot.com boom.) I don't usually buy shares in companies which have no earnings.

The p/e ratio can be useful for providing a quick guide to a share's value and it is a particularly useful way of assessing a share's price in comparison with other shares in the same sector. A high p/e may suggest that the market as a whole is positive about the company's future prospects. A low p/e may suggest that the market is gloomy about the company.

The p/e ratio of the whole market can be useful too. A study by Yale University showed that in decades where the p/e ratio was 20 to 25 the subsequent returns were close to zero. On the other hand, other academics and students of the market have claimed that there is no link between p/e ratios and the way the market goes.

Here are five things you should know about the p/e ratio.

1. The p/e ratio plus inflation should not be more than 20.
2. The p/e ratio can be a useful way to compare a specific company with the market as a whole (both in the past and the future) and with other companies in the same sector.
3. Small companies tend to have a higher p/e ratio. This is partly because small company share prices tend to include a bid premium and partly because small companies tend to grow faster than large ones.
4. During the 1990's investors became accustomed to buying and holding shares with enormously high p/e ratios. 'Life is different because of the Internet,' was one of the most popular arguments.
5. Historically, there have been reasonably long periods when p/e ratios have stayed below 7 or 8.

PROPERTY

'Never invest in anything that eats or needs repairing.'
BILLY ROSE

The property boom of the late nineties and early noughties was, in part at least, a result of fear and greed. Millions bought houses not just as somewhere to live (they could easily have rented if they simply wanted a roof over their heads) but because they wanted to get rich, or because they feared that prices would keep rising and they would be unable to afford anything at all. They didn't seem aware that house prices could actually go down. They didn't know that for most of the latter part of the 20th Century and for all the early part of the 21st Century Japan was in a serious slump because of an absurd housing boom which had taken place. House and land prices collapsed and stayed down because they had risen too much in previous years. Speculators had driven prices ever upwards. Japanese house prices rose by 51% between 1985 and 1991. That sort of price rise was clearly unsustainable and driven by something more complex than normal market forces.

Now consider what happened in America. In the peak years their house prices jumped by 90% between 2000 and 2006.

And Britain?

Well, between 2001 and 2007 house prices in Britain leapt by 118%.

Banks encouraged reckless spending by throwing money at would-be buyers. And then, in their search for greater and greater profits Wall Street bankers discovered the joys of securitisation. They repackaged ordinary loans into bonds and then sold the bonds on to banks in Europe. As the number of good mortgages ran out (there is, after all, a limit to the number of solvent would be home owners) banks started lending more and more money to people who never stood a chance of paying it back (the sub-prime market). This pushed up house prices still further and convinced everyone that making money out of property was as easy as falling off your wallet. European bankers became the marks; merrily gobbling up all the rubbish the American banks could produce. By autumn 2008 it was clear that European banks had more writedowns than American banks (even though the primary problem started in America). Wall Street successfully exported more than half of its financial toxic waste. (Make no mistake, the credit crunch which led to so much damage in Europe and the rest of the world was made in America.)

It wasn't difficult to predict that Britons would suffer the worst housing crash the modern world had seen.

In my book *Gordon is a Moron* (which was published in the summer of 2007) I wrote that: 'lenders have become absurdly aggressive – almost forcing barrowloads of money on borrowers and in so doing have laid the foundations for a serious crash. Banks are lending 120% of the cost of a property. Mortgages can be obtained for five times earnings – instead of the traditional three times earnings. Mortgages can now be obtained for periods in excess of half a century. There is now an industry of people selling fake pay slips so that people can persuade their mortgage lender to let them have a bigger loan than they might otherwise think wise. If you're unemployed but want a fake pay slip to show that you have a £50,000 a year job with a blue-chip company you just type 'duplicate pay slip' into an Internet search engine and choose your 'discreet and confidential' adviser. Then, take your evidence to the bank and come away with a loan for a quarter of a million pounds.'

In that book I also wrote: 'Looking at the figures dispassionately it seems that by mid 2007, property in Britain was between 20% and 30% overvalued by every possible sensible criteria. But this doesn't mean that if house prices fall they will fall by 20% to 30%. When markets get out of kilter, as they do from time to time, and as they have under Gordon Brown's direction, the correction which invariably ensues always goes as far in the other direction. So, if house prices are overvalued by (say) 25% then the chances are that house prices will fall not by 25% but by 50%. And it means, just to rub it in, that if a house is currently worth £300,000 then it will, when the crash finally teeters to a conclusion, be worth £150,000. If a buyer can be found.'

People who buy land or houses always comfort themselves with the thought that real estate always goes up in the long-term. And they remind themselves of Mark Twain's remark about land being a good investment because they're not making any more of it. But the original Americans didn't do too well out of their land holdings. And nor did the Aztecs or the Incas. Besides, how long is long-term? In the long-term we're all dead. And in the long-term shares tend to be a better investment than property. In 2008 it was revealed that £30,000 invested in a UK equity income fund 25 years earlier would, by 2008, have been worth three times as much as £30,000 invested in property.

In recent years many people have come to regard their home as a source of a pension. It's always seemed to me that this is a dangerous supposition. House prices are unpredictable and can move around more than most people realise. It can be difficult to sell a house and if you are assuming that your home is going to be your pension you may find yourself forced to sell up for less money than you had hoped to obtain in order to sell the house at all. You may also find yourself moving into a strange home, and a strange area, when you are old and frail. In bad economic conditions real estate values can fall dramatically. (By dramatic I mean over 50%.)

Property has some advantages over shares. For a start you can touch a building. It's there. It's real. It's difficult to steal. When the markets are crashing and banks are going to bust there is something rather comforting about knowing that some of your wealth is invested in something tangible. You can use a building in a way that you can't use a share. You can decide what you do with it (within the inevitable restrictions imposed by the authorities). You can live in it, work in it or rent it out to other people. Even if it falls down the land on which it is built will almost certainly have some residual value. Shares can become worthless. It is very rare indeed for a building to become worthless. (Though if you don't have the right sort of insurance and your building injures someone then you could find yourself wiped out financially.)

Owning a building has lots of plus points, but shares also have some advantages over property. You don't have to pay taxes every year on shares that you own. You don't have to insure them. And you don't have to keep repairing them. Shares just sit there quietly and let you get on with your life. And if you need your money you can (usually) sell them quite quickly. You may not get the price you want, but you will be able to find a buyer to take them off your hands. A property can stick on the market for months or years.

You can, of course, always get the best of both worlds by buying shares in property companies.

Here are some things you should know about property:

1. When people buy a house they often have a survey done to make sure that the building is sound. The idea is that the surveyor will spot serious problems which might make the property worth less than is being asked for it. This makes good sense. But, in the long run, the physical structure of a property has very little impact on the way its price moves. Dry rot and woodworm are important but other factors, which probably won't be considered by your surveyor, are likely to have a far greater impact than the property's future value. The time in the housing cycle when you are buying will have a huge impact. If you buy at the top of the cycle then it could be ten years before you can resell the house and get your money back. And environmental factors are crucial too. If the council decides to build an incinerator in that nice field across the road the value of your property will plunge. If travellers decide to set up camp in a lay-by outside your house then the value of your property will go down. If the village shop closes and the local bus company stops providing a service then your house price will probably fall. If a river is diverted and land in your area starts to flood you may find it impossible to get insurance. It is the big issues, not the small ones, which decide the future value of your house. It's the same with investments. If you buy shares in a retail company when the country is booming then you will probably make money. If you buy shares in the same company at the start of a recession then, in the short to medium term, you will probably lose money. What is happening outside is crucial. In the case of a house the important factors can be global, national or local.
2. Price and value are distant relatives. Don't ever trick yourself into thinking that the two are one and the same thing. The price an estate agent asks for a house isn't its value. The price an auctioneer puts down as the reserve for a piece of furniture isn't its value. And the price you pay for a share isn't its value. Price and value are two different things. Occasionally, they match. But most of the time they don't.
3. When buying property as an investment it is, as with most things in life, a good idea to stick to what you know. If you have always lived in one small town, and you have bought and sold a couple of properties there, then your knowledge of the property market in that town will probably be greater than your knowledge of the property market in a town a thousand miles away. Use your local, specialist knowledge to help you. And do your research before trying your hand as a property entrepreneur. Encouraged by television programmes showing how easy it is to make money out of property, lots of people now try investing (and dealing in property) without doing any real research or acquiring any real knowledge. Doing this is arrogant. It's like turning up at Wimbledon with a tennis racquet in your hand and expecting to win without ever having played before. When buying property to make a profit look for potential. Can it be split into more than one property? Pick an area which is accessible and which is likely to become more fashionable. The decor doesn't matter much except that if it is ghastly you have an opportunity to knock something off the price.
4. Keep your home separate from your investments. If you have decided to buy your own house or flat, that's great. Owning your own home can offer you security. And, over the long-term, you will probably do very well out of it financially. But I think it is a mistake to do as many people do and to regard their home as an investment; a potential source of profit and a pension fund. There are only two times when you should regard your home as an investment: when you are buying it and when you are selling it. The rest of the time you should think of it as somewhere to live. Don't use your home as a source of easy cash by borrowing against it. (In 2008 it was revealed that most people had so little equity in their homes that they were less than two pay cheques away from homelessness.) And when you come to sell your home try to forget the happy times you've spent living in it. The new buyers are buying a piece of real estate, not your memories and they will bid accordingly. When you are selling a house don't be unnecessarily stubborn if your buyer offers you a lower price than you think it is worth. Think of the cost of retaining your home – and the lost opportunities.
5. If you are buying a property always research the area thoroughly. Not for nothing do professionals all agree that location is the key to making a property a successful investment. What are the neighbours like? What's the traffic like? How about road and rail links? How easy is it to get to (and away from) the area? Buy in the best area you can afford. And only buy property you like.
6. To assess the value of the property look at the potential rental yield. If the rental wouldn't cover the interest

on a mortgage then the chances are the property is overpriced. And beware of debt. Borrowing money can be a good thing when prices are rising. It isn’t such a good idea when prices are falling.

7. The people of the Caroline Islands used 12 foot round blocks of stone as money. They didn’t have much trouble with pickpockets. And if they saved up enough money they could build a house out of their money without having to go to the bank.

RECESSION

'Markets discount the future and hence should forecast, rather than follow, real economic performance.'
IAN RUSHBROOK

Recession is theoretically defined as a period of time (which can change according to who is assessing whether it was a recession or not, but is usually defined as two quarters or sometimes a year) when gross domestic products actually falls. Most recessions come as complete surprises to all the experts, the vast majority of whom are usually still enthusiastically predicting positive growth long into the recession.

The first important thing to remember about recessions is that markets rise and fall according to investors' sentiments rather than according to reality. Talk about recessions can make investors exceedingly nervous and this can become severely exaggerated. The result is that when the 'R' word is widely used in the media, investors tend to start selling everything they can. Naturally, they usually sell their good stocks first so that they can take profits (and avoid having to admit their mistakes).

The second thing to remember is that recessions dramatically increase volatility so that news tends to excite or depress investors. Gloomy news sends the markets crashing still further. Good news sends the markets soaring. And, during a recession, there is usually a lot of financial news around. Even quite trivial incidents can sometimes seem terribly important.

The third thing to remember is that recessions tend to affect a few people a lot but they don't tend to affect most people much at all. One study conducted during the UK recession of the early 1990's showed that 83% of the gross fall in profits was accounted for by just 10% of firms. Astonishingly, four out of every ten firms saw their profits rise during the recession. Recessions can, in some ways, be very specific in their effect. The problem is that it can be difficult to predict which companies are likely to suffer and which are likely to gain. Sometimes, only directors and executives really know whether their company is strong enough to survive. And sometimes even they are too blind to accept the truth

'It's only when the tide has gone out that you can see who's been swimming naked.'
WARREN BUFFETT

Just how we all survive a recession depends, of course, upon our personal circumstances. Someone who has a government job is less likely to be vulnerable than someone who is self-employed or who works in a growing industry in a vulnerable area. Pensioners, who are receiving inflation-proofed, solidly-held pensions are unlikely to suffer a great deal.

REGULATORS

‘The ten most terrifying words in the English language are: ‘I’m here from the government and I’m here to help.’
RONALD REAGAN

Regulators are highly-paid civil servants who are employed to protect your interests and to ensure that the financial services industry provides a decent and honest service for its customers.

Sadly, although civil servants have proved adept at feathering their own nests (by building up their departments and increasing their pay) they have proved woefully inadequate at protecting the interests of investors. (As I write this the Financial Services Authority in the UK has 2,665 highly paid members of staff and a budget measured in hundreds of millions. At the height of the British Empire, Britain managed India and 250 million Indians with 900 civil servants. Just before the First World War, The Home Office managed Britain with a staff of 28.)

‘Despite its claims to the contrary, the Government pays little heed to private investors ,favouring its friends and sponsors in business.’
INVESTORS CHRONICLE

Do not expect regulators to protect you from crooks or charlatans. And do not expect justice from the regulators if you feel the need to complain. Regard the regulators as just another bunch of useless pen pushers. In addition to securing the maximum level of compensation for themselves, regulators only have one other skill: they are very good at thinking up excuses to explain away their egregious incompetence. Bottom line: forget about being protected by the regulators. They are in the business of protecting themselves. You are on your own.

RISK

'If you risk nothing, you win nothing.'
NAPOLEON BONAPARTE

The saddest words in any language are: 'If only...', 'It might have been...' and 'I wonder what would have happened if...'.

Make two lists.

On the first list write down all the investment errors you have committed and which you now regret; the mistakes you know that you have made and which you now wish you could have avoided. On the second list write down all the errors of omission you have made; the things you haven't done but which you now wish you had done.

Whichever list is the longer will tell you a great deal about yourself – and will, perhaps, give you a hint about how you should conduct your life in the future.

If your first list is the longest then maybe you are being a little reckless –and taking too many risks. But if the second list is the longest (and many people are surprised to find that this is the case) then you should perhaps be taking more risks.

If you are going to take risks successfully you need to be able to assess the bottom line with some degree of accuracy. Only when you know the bottom line will you be able comfortably to take chances that you might otherwise avoid.

Constantly ask yourself: 'What is the worst that can happen?' 'What will/ could happen if I do/don't do this?'

Whenever you are taking a risk find the bottom line: what is the worst that can possibly happen. You may be surprised to hear that there are not many risks which can make the sky fall in or stop the world going round.

Most of us regard risk taking as both hazardous and unnecessary. And many people would say that they try to avoid risks whenever they can. Some people probably seriously believe that they are wise in constantly doing all they can to eradicate risk from their lives.

But taking risks is a necessary and unavoidable part of life. Every decision worth making is potentially dangerous. There is a risk in every venture you undertake – personal, professional or commercial.

Every time you get out of bed or walk out of your home you are taking a risk. Every time you make an investment you are taking a risk. (Despite words such as 'guaranteed' there is no such thing as a safe investment. Even a government bond can be risky if the government falls.) Every time you begin a new relationship or a new business project you are taking a risk. It is impossible to live without taking risks.

But what you can do is to make an attempt to quantify the risks before beginning any new venture. Only when you have quantified the risks can you make a sound judgement about whether or not an individual risk is worth taking. You must put risks into perspective.

'The game of professional investment is intolerably boring and overexacting to anyone who is entirely exempt from the gambling instinct; whilst he who has it must pay to this propensity the appropriate toll.'
JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES

One of the great tragedies of life is that we tend to take fewer risks as we get older. We become more wary of danger and more aware of the things that can go wrong. The danger is that a preoccupation with safety may reduce the possibility of success.

Investors are often encouraged (or even advised) to take fewer risks with their money. It is widely accepted among financial advisers that older investors should have a much smaller proportion of their investment portfolio in shares and more of it in bonds or cash. One suggestion I've often heard is that investors should have their 'age' in bonds and similar investments. So, an investor who is 30-years-old should have 30% of their money in bonds and 70% in equities, whereas an investor who is 70-years-old should have 70% in bonds and 30% in equities.

I disagree with this philosophy.

We should take more – not less – risks as we get older. After all, as we age we have less to lose. Regularity, habit and commonsense tend to paralyse. In reality, not taking risks is sometimes the riskiest and most dangerous option. When we're older we really need to maximise our income from investments. (We probably won't have a wage and health costs can be enormous.)

The security and comfort which ordinary people enjoy has always been achieved because exceptional individuals have been prepared to take risks.

You should learn to take risks which have the highest possible upside and the lowest possible downside. In order to succeed you have to be able to assess risks accurately. You should learn from your own mistakes but (and this is just as important) you should also learn from other people's mistakes. Knowing the bottom line leads to confidence which leads to success. You should be aware that most people who get rich do so by taking risks rather than by being enormously skilful. And for every individual who gets rich by taking risks there are others who become poor. If you are going to take risks then you should decide what part of your wealth you are prepared to lose in order to gain.

Investments are not necessarily safe just because you feel comfortable holding them. Some of the most disastrous investments I've ever made have been (in theory) the safest and the ones I had least reason to worry about. There are two reasons for this.

First, institutions lie about the security of the investments they sell. (As, for example, some did when selling zero dividend preference shares). Second, it is easy to feel comfortable about holding an investment which is popular with the crowd simply because a lot of other people are holding it. In practice, however, the fact that a lot of people hold an investment does not make it a safe investment. On the contrary, crowds can show remarkably poor stock-picking skills.

And the advice and information upon which we rely can often be of doubtful value. Companies are given credit ratings by specialist credit rating agencies. So, a company which is believed to be particularly safe might be rated AAA. A company which is considered riskier might be rated BBB. There are a number of different levels of rating available.

During the banking problems of 2008 it became clear to me that these credit ratings were not entirely reliable. I use them sometimes as a vague guide but I don't trust them. I prefer to make my own judgements- using what information is available – when classifying investments. I make mistakes. But they are my mistakes. And I know I made them honestly.

The truth is that risk is unavoidable. If you leave your money in a bank deposit account there is a risk that the bank will go bust and you will lose all or part of your money. If you put your money into government bonds there is a risk that the value of your savings will deteriorate because of inflation. If you have money you cannot avoid risk, whatever you do with it. There is as much risk in doing nothing as there is in doing something. Whatever investment you choose there is risk. Even if you put your money under the bed (or in a safe deposit box in the bank) there is the risk that inflation and taxes and charges will destroy the value of your savings. There is no escape from risk. All you can do is try to maximise your opportunities while keeping your risks to a minimum. Opportunity can only be found where there is risk.

Managing risk is crucial. If you can't, don't, or won't manage your investment risks, you will lose all your money and your investment career will be over. The bigger the potential profit the bigger the risk. But this does not necessarily work in reverse. If you take a big risk there will not necessarily be a chance of a high profit. Investing is basically about balancing risk. To do it successfully you need to understand more about geopolitics and psychology than company accounts.

* * *

Your savings need to grow at least 10% a year gross in order to cover tax and to beat inflation. Growing your money at 10% a year will, however, only maintain your money at its previous level. Since making 10% a year is difficult it is clear that maintaining your wealth let alone growing it) involves a good deal of risk.

* * *

Everything we do is a gamble. We gamble every time we make a decision. We use our instincts and our ability to survive to help us predict what is likely to happen in different circumstances. Every intention leads to action which leads to a result which either leads to satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

You need to assess your intentions and the various actions you can take in order to increase the chances of a satisfying outcome. You have to understand risk- its dangers and its virtues – and how you can make it work for you.

1. Begin by defining your general goals. What do you want out of your money?
What is your money for?
2. Then put your goals in order. Decide how much of your available effort you will allocate to each one. How much of your wealth do you want to use to satisfy each of your goals?
3. Assess the upsides and downsides of each goal.
4. List all the ways in which your goals may be affected by external factors.
Some of those factors will be specific, some will be general.
5. Who will help you meet your goals? Which advisers can you recruit? Where can you find help? How much can you trust the people you consult?
6. Are your hopes achievable or do they depend on unreal hopes or expectations?
7. Is there a Plan B?
8. How do you think your future life might change? How can you put yourself in a good position to prepare yourself for these changes?
9. How many other people's actions affect you? What are they likely to do?
What will you do when they do A? What will you do when they do B?
10. Remember that the returns generated by an investment are directly proportional to the risk of losing your shirt. And there is as much risk in doing nothing as there is in doing something. Whatever investment you choose there is risk. Even with money under the bed (or in the bank) there is the risk that inflation and taxes and

charges will destroy the value of your savings. There is no escape from risk. All you can do is try to maximise your opportunities while keeping your risks to a minimum. And remember: opportunity can only be found where there is also risk.

SAFE INVESTMENTS

'An economic franchise arises from a product or service that 1) is needed or desired; 2) is thought by its customers to have no close substitute and 3) is not subject to price regulation. The existence of all three conditions will be demonstrated by a company's ability to regularly price its product or service aggressively and thereby to earn high rates of return on capital. Moreover, franchises can tolerate mismanagement. Inept managers may diminish a franchise's profitability, but they cannot inflict mortal damage.'
WARREN BUFFETT

Warren Buffett's 'franchise' investment may be as close to 'safe' as you can get. But the fact remains: there is no such thing as a truly safe investment.

My four worst ever financial mistakes have involved investments that were promoted as safe. I had a pension investment in a life assurance company called Equitable Life which was supposed to be as solid as a rock. It exploded in a most unrock like fashion. I had shares in Railtrack, the blue chip company which was nationalised by the Government. I had investments in permanent interest bearing shares. They were supposed to be boring and reliable. When the building society banks imploded they turned out to be as dodgy as a wallet full of nine bob notes. I had zero dividend preference shares in a variety of split capital investment trusts which were promoted as particularly suitable for nervous widows and orphans. They imploded as a result of some very sharp practice and some very lax regulation by the Government. (I did at least receive compensation for some of my losses. This would have been more exciting if the Government hadn't chosen to tax the compensation.)

Today my idea of 'safe' investments isn't the same as that of the 'experts'. I've grown rather suspicious of traditional 'safe' investments.

Here's a lesson I learned.

When I was a GP I discovered the 80:20 rule. In general practice this rule says that 20% of the patients will be responsible for 80% of the work.

The same rule can be accurately applied to many areas of life. In investing I have found that 20% of the effort put into managing investments results in 80% of the profit. Conversely, 80% of the effort results in 20% of the profit.

I utilised the 80:20 rule in two ways.

First, I recognised that I would never understand or acquire even a useful, working knowledge of 80% of the investment opportunities which are available. Many are arcane, technically convoluted and extraordinarily risky. So, I decided to concentrate my efforts on the 20% which are understandable, useful and potentially profitable.

Second, I decided long ago that I could use the 80:20 rule to minimise my long-term losses and, at the same time, maximise my long-term gains. My theory was simple. I would put 80% of my money into safe investments and I would invest the other 20% more aggressively. The theory seemed to me to be a good one. The 'safe' money would sit quietly in a corner, collecting interest and growing. It would need no attention. The risky money would be used more aggressively. I would buy investments that were risky but that would, if they survived and grew, make me a lot of money. If I wanted to invest in oil I would do it aggressively. Instead of buying a blue chip such as BP I would buy something more heavily exposed to changes in the price of oil. This would enable me to gear up my exposure while at the same time limiting the downside. If I lost the lot then I would still have the 80% and the interest that was compounding away quite nicely by itself. But if I did well and the 20% of my money that I was using to invest riskily increased satisfactorily then I might make a lot of money.

I put my 80% in AAA bonds, gilts and zero dividend preference shares. This was the secure portion of my money and its job was to maintain my capital position through steady growth. My overall aim was to maintain my capital and match inflation after five years.

And I put 20% into warrants, capital shares and small companies. I deliberately picked high risk shares that promised a good return. I knew that I might lose this portion of my money in a major bear market. But I also knew that I could make big profits from these investments if I was reasonably lucky. And whatever happened my safe 80% would just carry on collecting interest and growing. I would have full exposure to the equity markets without risking all my capital. And once I had set up the investments I would be able to leave them to run more or less by themselves. I was pleased with my plan. When I mentioned it to brokers and bankers they were horrified – not because they didn't think it would work but because they realised that if my plan became popular they would be out of business.

My initial 80:20 plan failed.

And it failed for a reason I had never expected.

It failed because the 'safe' part of the plan, the 80%, let me down. The risky part of the plan did well. It grew well in ordinary times and very well in bull markets.

But the initial 'safe' investments I had made, and which I had left to sit quietly by themselves, ran amok.

And so I abandoned that version of my splendid 80:20 scheme. Today, the 'safe' part of my portfolio contains gold, shares in big oil companies and utilities and solid investment trust shares as well as gilts. And for me it works very well.

And I’m delighted that I did because if I had been invested that way during the credit crunch of 2008 I would have lost vast amounts of sleep and money as corporate bonds, preference shares and deposits in banks and building societies were endangered.

I learned two valuable lessons.

First, there is no such thing as a safe investment. Nothing is safe.

Second, as in many other areas of life, it is the stuff you don’t expect to give you trouble that will give you trouble.

Good lessons.

And you get them for free. Don’t forget them.

SECTORS

'An investor who is seriously eager to make money doesn't have to watch the markets every day. He just has to make, once in a while, a good investment decision on the trends that will last for a number of years.'
MARC FABER

You don't need to pick shares to make money. You're better off picking sectors. It is nigh on impossible to decide, when looking at companies within the same sector, whether company A or company B will do best in the short, medium or long-term. There are many variables affecting individual companies which do not affect sectors. And yet the factors which affect sectors must inevitably affect individual companies. It is clear, therefore, that picking individual companies is much harder than picking sectors. It is much easier to say (for example) that mines will do better than banks in the next twelve months than it is to say that mine A will do better than mine B.

I am a macroeconomic, geopolitical, sector investor. I choose sectors, and then buy shares in those sectors, rather than choosing individual shares as a 'stockpicker'. I pick sectors to invest in according to how I think they are likely to thrive in the future. In practice, this means that if I think the oil price is likely to go up I will buy shares in companies operating in the oil sector of the stock market. If, on the other hand, I think builders and construction companies are set to do well I will buy a basket of shares in the building and construction industry.

I do this because I have made much bigger returns by spotting trends, finding strengths and weaknesses, and going with sectors, than I have by buying individual shares. Doing this probably involves more strategic thinking but less ploughing through annual reports and reams of statistics. Very few investors can pick stocks that will do better than average. I have had some successes with stock picking. But I have also had some failures. Individual companies are far more susceptible to far more unpredictable events than are whole sectors. I have been far more successful in picking sectors than picking stocks.

If you are buying one share in a sector because you believe that sector is likely to go up, then you might be better off spreading your money among many or all of the shares in the same sector. If one share in a sector goes up there is a good chance that they will all go up. On the other hand, if one falters, because of a specific problem affecting that company, the others will probably keep going up. The only way you will do better with just one share is if that share rockets out of proportion to the others.

I feel that there are several advantages to selecting sectors rather than individual companies.

First, you get a chance to really back your beliefs. If you get things right you could make a lot of money. Conversely, of course, if you get things wrong you could lose a lot of money too. Stockpickers are always going to win some and lose some. And so they are much more likely to end up just matching the index.

Second, by selecting sectors and buying a number of shares within your chosen sector, you reduce the risk of deliberately investing in individual companies which are run by crooked or incompetent directors. It is extremely unlikely that all the oil, retail or banking companies are going to be run by crooks. It is perfectly possible that if you pick out half a dozen shares several of them will be run by crooks.

Third, if you invest in sectors you don't even have to bother picking individual company shares at all. You can invest in sectors by buying shares in investment trusts. If the sector does well the chances are pretty good that a specialist investment trust will do well. And you can reduce the risk by investing in several investment trusts in your chosen sector. Because the investment trusts will be run separately you won't be adding an extra layer of fees onto your investment, you will simply be spreading your risk. Investment trusts are an excellent way to invest in all sorts of sectors -including, for example, mining or property. They are also a good way to invest in individual countries (such as Russia, India, or China) or in investing in regions (such as the EU, North America or emerging economies).

Fourth, many sectors are cyclical. You can make money by buying as the sector starts to go up and then selling a year or two later when you believe that the situation has changed. Do not, however, make the mistake of chasing after 'hot' sectors. By the time everyone else is investing in a sector it is almost certainly too late for you to get involved.

Fifth, individual share rises and falls can be due to unpredictable events (the, boss may do something stupid or dishonest, there may be a fire in a plant or a specific product may suddenly become unfashionable). On the other hand, however, macroeconomic factors are a big influence on the returns you are likely to get from sectors. Picking individual shares depends on researching accounts and company reports. This sort of information is widely available. It is, therefore, extremely difficult to 'beat' the professionals if you are using precisely the same information that they are using. On the other hand the prices of whole sectors are based on expectations and geopolitics and so it is much easier for the individual investor to win. There are, in my experience, fewer surprises for the thinking investor who puts money into sectors rather than particular shares. Surprises bring volatility with them and, for the investor seeking a quiet life and a steady gain, neither is a good thing.

SELLING (AND KNOWING WHEN TO SELL)

‘Cut the weeds, cultivate the flowers.’
PETER LYNCH

Some people don’t like to admit this, either to themselves or others, but the point of owning shares (or, indeed, any other form of investment) is to make money. The profit can come from dividends or (in the case of bonds or bank deposits) interest, or (in the case of property) rent, but it can also come from capital growth.

Sometimes an investment is worth holding onto for years. Shares in a good company can produce regular and even substantial dividends and modest capital growth for decades. A well-located property can produce rent and capital growth for generations. Holding an investment for a long period makes life considerably easier and dramatically reduces costs by cutting out transaction costs completely. (When you sell an investment you obviously have to pay the costs involved in selling the investment but you also have to pay the costs involved in buying something else.)

But these days the return from most investments tends to fall off after a while. Companies stop growing or start declining or are taken over and lost in some huge, unprofitable conglomerate. Some of the companies which were stock market stars in the 1970’s are gone. If you’d bought and held their shares you would now be left with nothing. Remember this when you are told to buy some good shares, put them in a drawer and forget about them.

And so you have to consider the tedious business of selling.

Knowing when to sell is just as difficult as knowing when (and what) to buy. Controlling losses is a key to making a profit. In any portfolio there will always be some investments which lose money. The trick is to take full advantage of the gains while keeping the losses to a minimum. Big losses can ravage a portfolio. If 90% of your investments are modest winners one big loser can still wreck your final results. The corollary to ‘letting your profits run’ is the phrase ‘sell your losers early’. If you sell an investment quickly when it is falling you can protect the overall success of your portfolio. Selling, not buying, is the key to profits. Knowing when to sell is just as important as knowing what and when to buy.

Here are my thoughts based on the simple rules I try to follow:

1. Cut your losses and let your profits run. Generally speaking, I try to sell losers rather than winners. Most people sell investments that have done well rather than investments that have done badly. It’s much more fun to sell something that produces a profit. It makes you feel good. And it saves you worrying about losing the profit you’ve made. Selling losers is depressing. Once you’ve crystallised the loss you know for certain that you aren’t going to recover the money. But my advice is: sell your losers and keep your winners. Most investors do the opposite. They sell the shares that do well and they keep the shares that do badly so they won’t have to admit to themselves that they made a mistake. They hold onto the losers in the hope that they will go back up to where they were. Similarly, if the market crashes most investors sell their winners and keep their losers. And if they need cash they sell their winners and keep their losers. (The losing shares that investors hold onto usually underperform the winners that they sold.) If you sell your winners and keep your losers your investment results will almost certainly be dismal. If a portfolio does well, and beats the market as a whole, it is usually because of the spectacular rise of one or two really successful investments. If you sell a share because it has gone up 50% then you will make 50% profit (before costs and tax) and that is very nice, thank you, and rather better than a loss. But if the company has gone up 50% then it might go up 500%. And you don’t need to be a wizard at maths to know that a 500% rise will have much more impact on your portfolio than a 50% rise. Selling winners and keeping losers is stupid. But it is one of the stupidities that gives wiser investors an edge.
2. Here are some of the signs which suggest that it might be time to sell an investment:

* The company’s competitors are having problems.

* The directors are selling shares. This is particularly relevant if several directors are selling lots of shares. (If just one director is selling it could be that he is buying a new house or acquiring a new wife – though these excuses are probably overworked.)

* The finance director has suddenly resigned. This can damage the share price because the new incumbent may well uncover all sorts of problems. Naturally, he will want to get the problems into the accounts quickly so that he looks good a year down the line.

* The nature of a share changes. So, for example, a growth share in telecoms may become a utility.

* There are big legal problems likely to affect the company. So, for example, if a company’s major product faces legal challenges it is probably time to sell the share.

* If the company releases its financial results at odd times (between Christmas and New Year) so that the bad news exposure is limited. There is always a reason for this.

* If the boss comes up with lame excuses for missing targets. Blaming the weather is, for example, a weak excuse. The weather affects everyone. And since we get weather every year a good company should be prepared for all eventualities.

* There are too many Ferraris and company jets.

* If you bought a share because you thought it would recover, remember to sell it when it has recovered.
* If the fundamentals which inspired your purchase change noticeably.
* When the company issues its first profit warning. If there is one warning, there will probably be more. Profit warnings rarely come alone. If a company issues a profit warning there will probably be another and the price will probably fall again. You might like to sell after the first warning.
* A sharp increase in the trading volume in the stock suggests that people who know things might be dumping the shares.
* There is a change of accounting policy. This can suggest underlying problems since changing the accounting policy is an easy way to produce some fake profits. For example, an airline which suddenly decides not to depreciate its planes can easily turn a loss into a profit.
* There has been a change of year end. This is a classic way to cover things up. What are the directors covering up?
* The dividend is omitted or cut. This can be a bad sign.
* If the share price drops by a predetermined figure (say 30%).
* The boss of the company spends too much time at parties. If the Chief Executive spends more time in the social columns than on the city pages it might be a good idea to dump the shares.
* Finally, I believe it is time to sell when everyone is recommending the share. When the brokers all agree that a company is a 'buy' and the newspapers are agreed that an investment is a 'sure thing' it is time to sell. I say this not through cynicism but because when a share has been promoted widely there will probably be no one left to buy it.

3. Before deciding whether to sell or keep a share ask yourself this simple question: would I buy this now? If the answer is 'no' then you should probably sell. If the price falls and you don't want to buy more then you should, perhaps, consider selling. You should not hold an investment if you would not buy it.
4. Try not to sell too soon. Baron Rothschild said he was rich because he always sold too soon. But maybe he would have been richer if he'd held on a little longer. The big profits usually come from holding really successful investments for fairly long periods.

'If one investor sells high, another must buy high.'
WARREN BUFFETT

5. If the price of a share doubles and you are feeling nervous, consider selling half. This means that you've got the remaining half in your portfolio without any cost. If the price doubles again sell another half And so on. This approach enables you to have your cake and to eat it. You can't lose your original stake but you can still participate in future growth. This approach also helps you to keep your portfolio balanced. If one share soars then it may eventually take up too much of your portfolio.
6. Listen to your intuition. Sell if your intuition tells you a share is going to fall. Always listen to your intuition. The more you do this the stronger your intuition will become.
7. Some investors sell every May and then buy their shares again in October.

There is sound statistical support for this seemingly crazy approach to investing. The evidence suggests that if you stay invested in equities between 31st October and 30th April each year but keep your money in cash for the rest of the time you will do much better than you would if you simply left your money in shares all the time. No one really knows why this should be. One explanation is that the economy is more volatile in winter. Another is that investors get depressed during the winter and so are careful with their money, whereas during the brighter, summer months they are more optimistic and so take unreasonable risks. Neither of these theories is mine, incidentally and I disclaim responsibility for them. I don't follow this investment philosophy. It sounds like a lot of trouble and I have a suspicion that the dealing costs I would incur (and the taxes I would pay) would destroy any advantage I might enjoy.

8. Selling failures early is good because it enables you to avoid over-dealing to try and make up for big losses. Selling losers also frees up time and energy. Most investors spend most of their time on the investments which are doing badly. Fretting over a share which is going down means wasted time and missed opportunities.
9. Don't be afraid to hold onto shares (or other investments) which are doing well. The 'buy and hold' philosophy is old-fashioned and out of favour but the people doing the sneering are, by and large, the people who make their living out of selling you new ideas or taking a profit from you when you deal. (Remember too that newspapers and magazines depend upon advertisements from banks and investment companies so they tend to encourage constant trading too.) One of the best-known maxims in investment is 'you can't go broke taking a profit'. There are many variations on this. In a way it's perfectly true. A lot of people have become exceedingly rich by taking profits too soon. It is impossible to time the market and impossible, therefore, to be sure that you sell your investments at the very top. But if you always sell every investment which shows a profit you will never be really successful. Really good investors (the ones who make a lot of money) usually do so because they have found a good investment and held it for quite a long time.
10. Don't sell a share just because you have been holding it for a while without it going up a great deal. If the

company is paying good dividends then you are still making money out of it. Are you sure you can find a better, safer home for your money?
11. When you sell a share forget about it (unless you are intending to buy it again). Don't mourn your losses. Let them go. This way lies madness. Don't look back. If you sell a share (either for a profit or a loss) don't keep looking to see how it is doing unless you intend to buy it back again. And, if you sell a house, don't curse yourself every time you see it being sold for more than you paid for it.
12. If you are unhappy with an investment sell it now. Don't wait. Don't say that you will only sell if you get a certain price. Sell now.
13. Look at your portfolio just before the end of the tax year. If you have a capital gains liability and you have any investments which are losing money consider selling the losers to reduce your tax liability.
14. If you think things are turning bad and your investments could be in trouble, then it is probably time to sell. One experienced investor once said: 'I am prudent enough not to stand in the middle of the railroad tracks while I try to decide if the headlight I think 1see is a freight train or an illusion.'
15. If the balance of your portfolio has changed dramatically because of the success of one share and the relative failure of other shares, then it might be wise to sell some of the successful investment so that you can re-establish the balance in your portfolio.
16. If you are in doubt about an investment the best policy is to be a coward. Heroic investors get no medals. They don't get much money either.
17. Don't think of the price you paid when thinking of selling a share or a house. Never think: 'I paid £5 so I'm not selling for less'. Life doesn't work this way. Sometimes investments go up in price and sometimes they go down.
18. If you have shares in an investment trust and the price of the share goes to a premium (i.e. the investment trust is selling for more than the value of the shares owned by the trust) then you should consider selling.

'Throughout my years of investing, I've found that the big money was never made in the buying or the selling. The big money was made in the waiting.'
JESSE LIVERMORE

19. Sell if the price has risen and the investment is no longer good value.
20. If you have found a better investment for which you need to free the funds.
21. If you buy a share hoping for a huge profit, don't sell it immediately afterwards because the price has dipped a little. Really profitable investments are often volatile.
22. Analysts and brokers who don't want to admit that a share isn't worth buying will sometimes give it a 'hold' rating. In theory this means that the share is worth holding onto but not worth buying. In practice it means that the share should be sold but the analyst or broker doesn't want to upset the company (or risk losing future business). If a company is worth buying it is worth buying. If it isn't worth buying then you shouldn't be holding it. The minute you no longer believe in an investment (or your premise has changed) you should sell. Don't wait. Good portfolio results are obtained by selling losers before they become disasters.

'Never get rooted in an investment because of the feeling that it 'owes' you something.'
MAX GUNTHER

23. Remember: whatever you are buying, someone else is selling because he doesn't want it. You may be pleased to be buying, but he is pleased to be selling. And whatever you are selling someone else is buying. You are selling because you think you are getting a really good price. The buyer is buying because he thinks he is getting a bargain.
24. If you own a share that everyone says is a 'winner' it is probably time to think about selling. When everyone agrees that a share is a winner there are no potential buyers left. When there are no potential buyers left the price can only fall.
25. Sell when you made a mistake in buying.
26. When dealing through a broker you may be asked if you want to put a limit on the price you are prepared to pay for a share (or a limit on the price you are prepared to accept if you are selling). On the whole I don't think limits are a good idea- particularly when selling. If you've decided to sell then you should sell. If you wait to get the price you want you may find yourself holding the share much longer than you want to.
27. It is never too late to sell something. A share, house, bond (or anything else) that has gone down 90% can still halve. Or worse.

'You do better to make a few large bets and sit back and wait...There are huge mathematical advantages to doing nothing.'
CHARLES MUNGER

28. Sell investments which lose money and which no longer have a sound strategy behind them. I hold a number of oil investments because I believe that oil is going to get considerably more expensive. But if it turns out that I'm wrong and someone invents a perpetual motion machine that runs on air I will sell my oil investments. The

strategy will no longer make sense so I'll take my losses and do something else. I don't think this is likely to happen. But if it does I won't stubbornly hold on to my oil investments.

29. When markets start to turn down and people start selling it is usually not because they are frightened of the economy or some wider issue. People sell because they fear that others are frightened of a failing economy, a faltering government or a coming recession.

30. Finally, think carefully before selling. Do you really want to sell? Over the years I have discovered that most (but not all) of the properties and investments I sell eventually trade for a much higher price than the price at which I sold. Just a thought I thought I'd share with you. Do you really want to sell what you're selling? Don't be too keen to buy and sell. Judicious lethargy is often more profitable than hectic overtrading.

SHARES

'Wall Street, in theory, is the centre of the financial system which provides for the capital needs of the nation. But Wall Street is in fact a speculation centre organised for the purpose of enabling a self-selected minority of men of boundless greed and ambition to become millionaires and billionaires.'
RALPH BORSODI

All predictions about shares are based on only two things: a knowledge of the company's history and a view of what the future holds for it. That's it. The market price already allows for the first of these. Buying shares solely because of information about the company's past is, by and large, pretty pointless. The market already knows what the company did last year. The market knows what products the company has available. The market knows how much profit the company made last year. Unless the company is a small one (and therefore under-researched) any information about its past is too widely available to be of any real value. It is the second factor which is the one that matters. And yet although most analysts, investment managers and investors are very good at accumulating information about a company's past they are very poor at predicting what is going to happen to a company in the future.

'Though the mathematical calculations required to evaluate equities are not difficult, an analyst – even one who is experienced and intelligent – can easily go wrong in estimating future 'coupons'. At Berkshire, we attempt to deal with this problem in two ways. First, we try to stick to businesses we believe we understand. That means they must be relatively simple and stable in character. If a business is complex or subject to constant change we're not smart enough to predict future cash flows. Incidentally, that shortcoming doesn't bother us. What counts for most people in investing is not how much they know, but rather how realistically they define what they don't know. An investor needs to do very few things right as long as he or she avoids big mistakes. Second, and equally important, we insist on a margin of safety in our purchase price. If we calculate the value of a common stock to be only slightly higher than its price, we're not interested in buying, We believe this margin-of-safety principle, so strongly emphasised by Ben Graham, to be the cornerstone of investment success.'
WARREN BUFFETT

Here are the things I've learned about selecting shares to buy.

1. Buy shares for the long-term. Buy something you believe has value (and is good value) and hold it. Take your dividends and wait. Look for companies which are producing cash and which are so cheap that even if they went out of business you would not lose money (because the value of the underlying assets would cover the cost of the shares). Look for companies which have a powerful brand, good management and a strong balance sheet. If a company looks cheap compared with a fairly conservative forecast of the cash it will generate over the coming years then the market has got it wrong and once the mispricing has been corrected you will make money. Buying shares that are good value provides an opportunity to win a lot even though the downside is that you will not lose much. There is no specific, reliable way of assessing the value of a company. There is no specific, reliable way of deciding whether or not a share is too cheap or too expensive. If such methods did exist the people who had access to them would soon have all the money. Shares cannot really be overvalued or undervalued because they have no true value. Shares exchange hands for the price one investor is prepared to accept and another investor is prepared to pay. That doesn't mean that the share is good (or bad) value. The market gives you a price. This is what you pay for the share you are buying. The value of the share is something else. Your job, as an investor, is to buy when you believe that the value is greater than the price and to sell when you believe that the price is greater than the value.
2. Many investment writers suggest that investors should set price targets for the shares they buy. 'You should,' they say, 'know in advance what price you expect your share to reach. And then, when the share reaches the price you want, you should sell.' This is, in my opinion, sheer lunacy. Picking shares that will go up is tricky enough. Forecasting the price the share will reach before you sell it requires supernatural powers.
3. One trick pony shares can be hugely profitable. But companies can go bust very quickly. If a firm relies on one thing it may be vulnerable to changes in the market. For example, a company which makes a product which could be rendered obsolete, or replaced with a cheaper alternative, is vulnerable. A company which earns all or most of its money from another company could be in difficulties if its contract is ended. Suppliers to high street stores can sometimes find themselves in trouble for this reason.
4. Unless you understand exactly what a company does and how its returns are achieved, don't invest in it-however compelling the argument to invest might be.
5. Don't buy shares in service or retail companies whose staff have been rude to you more than once. This isn't a question of revenge. If staff are rude to customers then the company is more likely to fail and the shares will crash. I don't hold shares in mobile telephone companies for this reason. If anyone ever creates and builds a mobile telephone company which looks after its customers the existing companies will fold within a year. And don't buy shares in a company which has a bad PR problem. Companies which annoy the public are annoying their customers. And that isn't good business.

6. A share that has fallen a long way can always keep falling. It can, indeed, fall until it can fall no more because it is no longer worth anything.

7. Share prices move ahead of the economy. Investors who judge their investments according to the current health of the economy will probably buy and sell at the wrong times.

8. Conglomerates have had their day. Large companies which make washing machines, television programmes, nuclear power stations and silk underwear have no point. The overheads will be far too high. The directors and executives will pay themselves far too much because of the size of the company and they will spend most of their time travelling between plants and offices (for which they will, of course, need a fleet of expensive jets).

9. The market always overshoots. When there is bad news about a company the chances are that the price will go down too far. When there is good news there is a chance that the price will go up too much. Price rises tend to be exacerbated during a bull market and price falls tend to be exacerbated during a bear market. You are likely to be buying at the top of the market if you buy when a company has just reported excellent results and when the world seems rosy. Remember: all markets overshoot. That is how you can make money out of investing. The time to be bold is when everyone else is timid. The time to be timid is when everyone else is bold.

10. News never changes share or commodity prices. And commentators don't change prices. It is the market's reaction to the news that changes the prices. And that means it is the reaction of real people – investment amateurs and investment professionals – which changes the price. It is important to remember and to understand this. Sometimes, a piece of good news about a company may result in the company's share price falling instead of rising. Why? Simple. The market (which means investors) had expected better news and had already priced in the good news. Markets discount information. Many people who are new to investing are surprised that a company's share price may fall after it makes an announcement that its profits are rising. The reason is simple. The market anticipates reality. If the share price falls after good news has been announced it may be because investors were expecting even better news.

11. Investors often think that investing in the stock market is about picking successful companies. In fact it is more about asset allocation, sector selection and psychology. If you are planning to buy shares you should first decide the market's general direction (based, among other things, on what you think other people will think and do), then pick the sectors which you think will do best and finally the best individual stocks within that group.

12. Popular shares (the ones most people own) are often overpriced. Unpopular ones are often underpriced. If you think about it this isn't at all surprising. The price of a share depends upon the number of people who want to buy it and the number of people who want to sell it. A popular share is popular because a lot of people like it and own it. And that means that the chances are that most of the people who want to own the share already own it.

13. The odds of the stock market rising are much better when the market is low. If the FTSE 100 is at 3,000 then the chances of it going up are much better than they would be if it was at 6,000. When current returns are poor the prospect of better future returns improves.

14. Anne Scheiber retired from the US Internal Revenue Service in 1944. She invested $5,000 in the stock market. She invested mainly in large, well-known companies and she did not deal very often. When she died in 1995 at the age of 101 her $5,000 had become $22 million. A perfect example of the twin benefits of keeping your costs down and allowing your investments to benefit from the miracle of compounding.

15. Utilities (water companies for example) usually produce a steady income. Their dividends tend to be reliable. Even in a recession people still need to make tea and wash their faces. The only snag is that utilities tend to be subject to government regulation. Despite this, I still like to have exposure to some basic utilities in my portfolio. Politicians are stupid but who will it help if they push the big water companies into bankruptcy?

16. Surprises tend to improve the performance of out of favour stocks but impair the performance of those in favour. Popular, in favour shares, respond more dramatically and badly to news of any kind. Out of favour shares do well with good news and don't tend to do too badly with bad news.

17. You have to invest for the long-term and be prepared to ride out storms and hurricanes. Shares are the best way to grow your money but only if you invest for the long-term. Between 1988 and 1998 the All-Share index of London shares rose by 166%. But in the following decade (1998 to 2008) shares stayed more or less where they were. If you'd chosen 1998 as your investment starting point then, apart from whatever dividends you'd managed to gather, you would have had the same amount of money at the end of the ten year period as you'd had when you'd started. Once you'd allowed for inflation your purchasing power would have fallen quite significantly.

18. The news always seems most optimistic right at the top of the market. And it always seems most pessimistic right at the bottom of the market. If there is good news but share prices don't go up then that suggests that shares are already as high as they are going to go. If there is bad news but share prices don't go down any more then they may well be as low as they are going to go.

19. The share prices tells you nothing about the value of a company. The share price only tells you what investors think the company is worth at that moment. Even in calm times prices move constantly. I was on

the phone a few minutes ago, talking to a broker about buying more oil shares. The conversation went something like this.

'What's the price?'

'£49.92'

I now think about how many shares I want to buy.

'£49.96,' says the broker, as the price changes.

I have found my calculator and am working out how many shares I can afford to buy with the amount I wish to spend.

'£50.03.'

'Crumbs. It's moving quickly.' '£50.09.'

'Buy 1,500 please.'

'1,500 shares?'

'Yes, please.'

'At £50.14.'

'Yes.'

'Done. 1,500 shares bought at £50.14'

'Thanks.'

'They're back down to £50.02 now.'

20. You will sometimes see it suggested that before you start buying shares you should create an imaginary portfolio and see how it does. This is called notional trading and it is utterly pointless. The problem is that there is a huge difference between pretending to buy some shares and really buying some shares. If you want to dip your toe in the water then start your investment portfolio with a small amount of (real) money. You will learn far more about the markets and, most important of all, about yourself, by investing a small amount of real money than by investing a huge amount of imaginary money.

21. If you are going to stock pick then you need to look for quality businesses which have a regular cash flow and a solid franchise that is not likely to be superseded. There should be a good management, with a real interest in the company. The company should be paying a decent dividend and the company's income should be enough to ensure that even if profits fall the dividend will still be paid. The company should be able to maintain its cash flow for the foreseeable future. A company's underlying strength comes from its real assets (buildings, land and so on) and its intangible assets (patents, brand names). Ideally it should be difficult for customers to switch to another product or service because, for example, the company is selling a unique product or service and because you can sell it, and make a profit, cheaper than competitors. In the long run, whatever a company does someone will eventually find a way to do it cheaper or better. The existence of barriers keeping out competitors, is hugely important. Does the company have valuable patents or a supply advantage? Does it have a brand name that customers love and which inspires great loyalty? Is the company vulnerable to competition from China or India? Are high fixed costs a deterrent to potential competitors? Is the company protected or threatened by existing and coming legislation? (Many companies deliberately encourage the introduction of legislation which will make life difficult for competitors.) Before buying shares or any other investment you should have a clear idea of your investment theory in your mind. You should always be able to explain your investments to anyone in a few simple sentences. If you buy a share or put money into an investment trust or fund you should be able to summarise your reasons in sentences that anyone could understand. And you need to be able to explain why you are continuing to hold this investment on a regular basis- particularly if anything changes. You should be able to explain your plans to a child. You don't actually have to go out and find and bore a child with your investment plans. It's probably illegal anyway. But you do need to be able to formulate your theory in such a way that a child could understand your logic and your conclusions. If you don't understand it, don't buy it. Forget the child. Some of them are precocious. If you cannot explain exactly what you are buying, and precisely why, to your cat, then do not buy it.

Finally, when buying a share in a company, and putting your hard earned savings into it, you should consider the company as carefully as you would if you were considering buying the whole thing.

22. Shares (and markets) reach a top when there aren't any buyers. Shares (and markets) reach a bottom when no one wants to sell. The market can be too high as a whole, and yet individual shares can be excellent value.

23. If you hold a stock, sell at the first real sign of trouble. Don't listen to explanations or excuses. Don't wait to see if the management turn things round. Don't wait for the next problem to appear. Just sell immediately and invest your money somewhere else.

24. If you play cards (whether your game of choice is poker or bridge) you will do better if you can count cards. Knowing what cards are where will give you an advantage over the other players. The same thing is true of investing in shares. In order to do well you need to be able to spot things that other investors have missed. You need to be able to work out for yourself how and why a share should be valued. Sadly, instead of 'counting cards' most investors, like most gamblers, just rely on a good run of the cards continuing.

25. When choosing individual stocks (as opposed to investment trusts) you should only buy shares which you believe can increase enormously (by at least 100%) over the next year or two. If a share doesn't have that sort of potential then it isn't worth the effort of researching it, buying it and holding it. The only exception is if the company is paying a really good, steady dividend.

26. All you and I can achieve by researching a major company in depth is to find out what the market already knows and has discounted in the share price.

27. If ever you are tempted to believe that a well-known company is too big and too famous to fail just remember Rolls Royce. At the time of its failure Rolls Royce was Britain's most famous company. When it declared itself bankrupt on 4th February 1971 British industry was shaken to the foundations. 'Life will never be the same again,' said a City broker. I remember this failure. I was one of the investors who believed that Rolls Royce was too big too fail. I lost money but I learnt a useful lesson. Well worth the price.

28. These days more than 90% of the value of many companies is made up of intangibles – know how, brand value and a touching belief in an endless supply of future profits. As an investor I prefer to look for unfashionable companies where more than 90% of the value is made up of boring stuff like land, property and cash in the bank.

29. The fact that a company is successful doesn't mean that its shares are good value. The company may have good products, wonderful staff and excellent prospects and yet still be a terrible buy – if the shares have been bid up too high and are already too expensive.

30. You can't spread your risk by investing overseas because these days all markets tend to move together (usually following the lead set by the American market). If shares on Wall Street fall then shares in Japan, Germany, Australia and France are also likely to fall.

31. Many investment professionals (and authors of books on investing) advise all investors to keep an eye on their shares at least once a day. Once you start doing this, however, you will find that you have to keep on with it. You won't be able to go abroad on holiday unless you can get hold of a British edition of the *Financial Times* airmailed out to you or unless you have Internet access so that you can check on your share prices on line (the foreign editions of the *Financial Times* contain only a limited number of British share prices). You will end up poring over your BlackBerry on the beach, struggling to find the latest share prices for all your investments. I don't bother checking share prices every day because I know that whatever happens isn't going to make any difference. I'm certainly not going to sell everything if the market goes down with a thump.

32. When interest rates are high there isn't much point in investing in shares. If you can get 15% by leaving your money on deposit in the bank why would you risk buying shares in a company which is probably going to struggle to make a profit in a high interest environment?

33. Most people (including investment professionals) buy shares when they are expensive and sell them when they are cheap. Investors do this because it is what the analysts and fund managers and financial journalists usually advise. For example, investment money was pouring into the heavily promoted technology funds in 1999 and 2000 – just before they crashed. Around 80% of the money the American public put into mutual funds in the spring of 2000 went into technology funds. Over the next three years investors lost up to 80% of their money. They then took out their money just before technology funds recovered and doubled.

34. Investing in new technology is dangerous. Today's new, wonder product will probably be tomorrow's embarrassing memory. Product cycles are continually shortening and competition is constantly becoming more acute. By and large, new products and inventions don't make money for investors. (There are, of course, exceptions.) Most of the benefits of technological change are passed on to consumers, rather than producers (or their shareholders). The worst performing sectors in recent years have, in general terms, been software and IT hardware. Very few investors made money out of railway companies or airlines when they first started trading. New technological advances actually damage investors' prospects by destroying the market for old products. The new products are quickly superseded by new developments. The truth, I fear, is that change and progress are usually bad for investors. Despite this many investors are always ready to believe that a new piece of technology is about to change the world. If you distort simple truths in order to fit reality you will lose money. Enthusiastic buyers of dot.com shares at the end of the 20th Century argued that neither losses nor profits were relevant because 'the paradigm had changed'.

35. Share prices don't always go up in the long run. Companies go bust. And, sometimes, whole stock markets collapse to zero. In the past there have been major stock market collapses in Russia, China, Egypt and a number of Eastern European countries. And investors in Germany didn't do too well when inflation resulted in the 100 billion deutschmark postage stamp.

36. Buying shares 'when there is blood in the streets' and the vast majority of investors are swearing that they will never again have anything to do with shares is one of the best ways to get rich. But picking the bottom is difficult. It's easy to buy shares because they are a fraction of what they were trading at just twelve months previously. But then they halve in a week and you're sitting on a huge loss and needing the market to double for you to get even. The best advice is probably to wait until the shares no longer go down much when there is bad news. At that point the shares are probably at the bottom. And, unless the company goes bust, you

could be on the way to making serious money. An alternative approach is merely to pick sectors which seem bombed out. Investors tend to desert whole sectors during a bear market and so it is often possible to pick up a number of bargains if you watch carefully to see what is available.

37. The market goes ahead of events and discounts future events. And so it often happens that when a company produces bad results its share price goes up. This happens because the market (i.e. other investors) had expected problems and had already accounted for the bad results in the share price. If the price rises after bad results it is because the market is relieved that the results weren't even worse.

38. If a share falls from £10 to £5 it has gone down by 50%. But if the share price then goes up by 50%, it only reaches £7.50.

39. The fact that a share is cheaper than it has been for half a century doesn't mean that it can't go lower. Cheap markets can always get cheaper.

40. As I've pointed out elsewhere, doctors, lawyers and dentists – logical and intelligent people you might think – tend to do badly as stock market investors. They usually do worse than people who throw darts at the financial pages and choose shares that way. They do worse than coin flippers too. Their problem is that they try to be logical and scientific about investing and such an approach just doesn't work. Selecting shares that will do well isn't a logical or scientific business. The stock market is about people and it is therefore unpredictable, and a mystery to those who do not understand that share prices are influenced not by profits or currencies or interest rates but by how people (other investors) react to profits, currencies and interest rates.

41. When you buy a share imagine that the stock market is about to close for five years. Can you live with the share for that long? Will it pay you decent dividends even though you are unable to sell it? And, at the end of five years, is the company likely to be worth considerably more than you paid for it?

42. The shares of small companies tend, over long periods, to do better than the shares of big companies. Academics claim that this is because they are riskier (more likely to go down and more likely to go bust). Maybe it is because there is less information about them – and the available information is less widely known. It is also a fact that analysts and fund managers spend less time examining small companies – partly because if you are managing a fund worth billions it is not going to be worth your while investing in a company worth just a few million. Small companies are usually easier to understand because their interests are more clearly defined. Big companies may have several divisions, all doing different things. One division may do well while another does badly. With a small company the results usually depend on the success or failure of a specific product or range of products. Small companies may also have a niche advantage. They may be the only people in the world making butterfly nets. There may not be much room for growth but there probably won't be too much competition either. It is easier to judge the significance of the directors' involvement in a small company (where their shareholdings are likely to be significant). And it is much easier for the private investor to become an expert on the company. But, a word of warning: small companies can be very risky. Venture capitalists, who invest in very small, developing companies for a living, expect that out of every ten investments they make three will probably go bust or nearly bust, four will not do anything (their value will neither rise nor fall) and three will do well. Of the three which will do well, one will do brilliantly well and will make so much money that the losses on the other investments will be paid for and there will be plenty of profit left over. Venture capitalists think about their investments as a whole portfolio and they measure the success of their investments by looking at the whole portfolio. Unless they want to get ulcers the size of dinner plates they don't sit around and mope if one of their investments turns out to be a turkey. The risks for small companies which are quoted on the small market are probably not as great. But there is still a much bigger chance that Exotic Lingerie For Merry Widows Limited will go bust than that Tesco will disappear from the world.

43. Create a list of shares you are interested in buying but think are too expensive. If the share price goes down (for no very good reason) then you can buy at a more reasonable price.

44. It is a myth that equities will always outperform other asset classes in the long-term. This is a myth perpetuated with great enthusiasm by financial advisers. The phrase 'long-term' is rather imprecise but it is generally taken to mean five years or longer. In the autumn of 2008 share prices in the UK fell back to what they had been in 1997. Many investors who had put money into shares in the mid 1990's or later had seen the value of their savings fall considerably over what most people would undoubtedly describe as the 'long-term'. By July 2008 the FTSE 100 was 13% lower than it had been ten years earlier. If we assume that inflation has more or less eaten up the value of the dividends received this means that investors who did as well as the market lost money. Costs and expenses will mean that most investors did worse than the market. Over a ten year period most investors who had entrusted their savings or pensions to the professionals would have done better if they'd simply put their money into gilts. A not inconsiderable number would have done better if they'd simply stuffed their savings into a sock and put them under the mattress. (This is not, by the way, a recommended investment programme for those keen to protect their wealth.)

Things were even worse in Japan. In October 2008 the Japanese Nikkei index reached its lowest point for 26 years. Shareholders who had held onto their shares for over a quarter of a century without seeing any gain whatsoever must, by then, have surely been feeling rather disillusioned with the idea that, in the long run, equities are the best investment. The Japanese market hit 30,000 in January 1990. In October 2008 it was between 7,000 and 8,000 – the lowest it had been since 1982. Anyone who bought Japanese shares in 1990 would have been sitting on a huge loss a generation later. Just in case you thought those figures were a misprint: Japanese equity prices were, in 2008, a quarter of what they had been in 1990. Similar things happen everywhere. In America, shares in General Motors were around $5 in October 2008. They were the same price in the 1940's – 60 years earlier. The longest period of negative real returns for shareholders in Britain was between 1900 and 1921. In France, Germany and Italy shareholders had negative returns for the first half of the 20th Century.

45. Investors need an edge – macroeconomic and geopolitical, psychological or statistical. You are unlikely to get a statistical edge (there are thousands of nerds out there who spend hours every day feeding information into computers) so that leaves potential psychological, macroeconomic and geopolitical advantages. And those are really all you and I have got.

46. Long boom/bust cycles are known as secular cycles. These occur once a generation and last around a decade. A favourite promise among politicians is to say that they will eradicate boom/bust cycles.

47. Don't buy shares in 'highly admired' companies. Investment professionals will have bought tons of shares in 'highly admired' companies. And so will private investors (encouraged by their advisors and by journalists). The price is almost certainly too high. They will certainly not be a bargain. I never buy individual shares, or a sector, or shares in general when the consensus of opinion is that they are a 'good buy'. But I do sometimes buy individual shares, or a sector, or shares in general, when the consensus of opinion is that they are a 'bad buy'.

48. If you are rich and you want to be really rich the stock market probably offers you better opportunities than a casino or a racetrack. Taking risks can be very profitable and it is perfectly possible to multiply your wealth considerably by buying and selling risky shares at appropriate times. But make no mistake: this is a dangerous strategy. Even rich people should only do this with the part of their wealth that they are prepared to lose or see shrunken.

49. During the twentieth century in America there were three huge, secular bull markets that covered about 44 years, during which the DowJones Industrial Index gained more than 11,000 points. And there were three periods of stagnation, lasting over 56 years. During those 56 years the country made great progress in many ways but the Dow lost 292 points. If you had been invested in the bad years you would have lost money. The problem is that picking the good years and the bad years is nigh on impossible. The investor who wants to make money needs to stay invested through the bad years as well as the good ones. Judging when the market is going to go up and when it is going to go down is called 'timing the market'. In my opinion, it is not possible. Investors who try to time the market are the losers who enable other investors to get rich. The stock market's biggest rises often take place on three or four days a year. Investors who bail out of the market on bad days often miss the good days. It is the big swings which produce the biggest profits. If you miss the market's three best days each year you will do dramatically worse than if you are invested at those times. Markets tend to have turning points when shares rise dramatically. Just as they can go the other way). If you miss the turning points, and the good days, you will do badly. If you find that you can time the market please get in touch with me as soon as possible.

50. Most of the risk in buying a share is the market and sector risk rather than any risk associated with an individual share. Before buying or selling a share you should make a judgement about which way the market as a whole is likely to move and which way the sector is likely to move.

51. Remember: every time you buy a share you are saying that you know something the seller doesn't know or are prepared to take a risk others don't want to take. And when you sell a share you are saying that you know something the buyer doesn't know. When you buy a share (or some other investment) ask yourself why the person who is selling is prepared to let go of such a splendid prospect.

52. Investors follow all sorts of tips. They copy directors' dealings, they track share-price moving averages, they use complex software to help them track chart patterns, they look for complicated relationships between different factors in company accounts and they watch the positions of the planets. There are hundreds (probably thousands) of guaranteed methods for picking shares that are definitely going to rise. These methods usually involve the use of a lot of figures and a calculator. The snag is that the figures are, inevitably, historical and don't allow for the problems which inconveniently pop up from time to time. There are, for example, many newsletters in existence which charge huge sums for giving specific advice about which shares to buy. By the careful selection of times and prices they can always provide evidence proving that their method has worked brilliantly and has produced a 75% per annum rise for the last 30 years. (To which you might respond, why are these people still bothering to produce a newsletter? Why don't they just follow their own advice and get very rich?) I suspect that most of the investors who follow these tips do worse than they would have done if they'd bought a bunch of good, solid blue chip shares or a simple tracker fund and then sat in the garden.

53. Before accepting an investment tip from a journalist or your taxi driver ask yourself this one simple question: if this person knows a way to guarantee a profit why is he sharing it with me? Does he really like me

this much?

54. If someone recommends an investment it is probably because he already holds it. Maybe he wants you to share his good fortune in finding a gem. Maybe he will feel more comfortable if he has someone sitting in the boat with him. Maybe he wants you to invest so that the price will go up and he will make a profit.

55. The biggest returns come from doing what other people don't do. Most people think that their risk is low if they are doing what everyone else is doing. In investing that's a risky thing to do. If you do the same as everyone else you'll get what everyone else gets. And how many people do you know who got rich through investing?

56. The secret of getting rich slowly is to buy shares in companies which have sustainable competitive advantages; companies which are managed by smart, passionate, honest people. Buy the shares at a discount to intrinsic value. And hold the shares for the long term.

57. It is perception and expectation that drive share prices – not reality.

58. Most people think they are better than average drivers and lovers. Most people also think they are better than average investors. The truth, of course, is that half of all people are worse than average drivers, lovers and investors. So, what this means, is that many people aren't as good at these things as they think they are. There are more stupid people buying and selling shares than you might imagine.

59. Investors are perpetual optimists who believe that really good things (huge successes) will happen more than they do in real life. On the other hand they do not expect regular market meltdowns. But these are inevitable. The timing, nature, extent and cause are entirely unpredictable.

60. Don't allow yourself to become emotionally attached to any of your investments. Investors are more likely to become emotionally attached to individual shares than to investment trusts or to bonds. The share doesn't know you own it. You don't owe the share love, loyalty or friendship.

61. Buying shares simply because the price has dropped a lot is stupid. If the company is failing then buying the shares is like buying bananas because they are cheap and expecting the price to go up. The price isn't going to go up. The bananas are rotting and will be finished in another couple of days. The price will never go up again.

62. Occasionally, I find that I have sold a share that I realise I should have held. I may then have to buy it back at a higher price. One investor I know won't ever do this. He says it's embarrassing and makes him feel foolish. Anyone who refuses to take action because he might feel foolish should avoid all investments.

63. Do not expect to get all your choices right. No one does. We are all wrong some of the time. If six out of ten of your investment decisions turn out well you will make a fortune as long as you dump the losers and hold the winners. Six winners out of every ten is a far better average than most investors ever manage. This means that you will be wrong four times out of ten. Sometimes your investments will fail because your original thesis was faulty. Sometimes it will be because events changed and invalidated your original thesis. There may, for example, have been a change in interest rates or currency exchange rates. If your investment was an individual company it may have suffered from a product failure, a rise in commodity costs, new legislation or the outbreak of a price war. It doesn't really matter which. If six out of ten of your investment decisions are good ones (assuming that your money is spread evenly among them) then you will beat nearly all the professionals. If seven out of ten of your investment decisions are good ones you will be one of the most successful investors on the planet.

64. Investing can be fascinating and rewarding. And it can be fun. But do not invest for fun. Resist the temptation to regard investing as a hobby or a form of entertainment. Rent a DVD or buy a book if you want entertainment. Take up gardening or painting if you want a hobby. Don't invest in anything just because it sounds fun. Some investments rise because they seem exciting or because they offer a chance to have a finger in (for example) the entertainment business. I have seen film and theatre companies being promoted with the added attraction that investors will be invited to theatrical first nights or allowed to visit the film set. Don't be seduced by such claptrap. If you are investing you should do so in the hope of making a profit. If you want to meet actors and actresses hang around outside the stage door.

65. Don't invest because a company offers its shareholders free chocolates, cut price travel tickets or other gimmicks. Would you choose a doctor because he offered free chocolates or cut price travel tickets? Precisely.

66. If you really believe that you have found a 'winner' it may be worthwhile making an investment big enough to change your life. If you are sure in your mind that an investment idea will prove profitable but you make only a very small investment you will probably regret the missed opportunity for the rest of your life. Big chances do not come often. I don't think it is worthwhile investing less than 1% of your investment capital in any one investment. If you have £100,000 to invest and you invest £500 in a company you will, if the company does well and triples in size, increase your overall wealth by £1,000 or 1%. I don't think the overall gain is worth the time and the distraction. Every investment you make should be significant for you. If you make very small investments you won't take much interest in them individually because they won't matter.

67. The bull market of the 1990's gave many investors an exaggerated idea of what return they could expect

from their investments. Anyone who tries to get 15% return on their capital will, for quite a few years to come, be taking huge risks. And the chances are that they will lose money, rather than make it.

68. If an investment doesn't work out don't be afraid to sell it and do something else with the money.

69. A profit is only a profit when you've banked it. A 'paper' profit isn't a profit at all – it's no more tangible than a hope.

70. Nobody knows what the markets are going to do next year, next month, next week or tomorrow. If they knew they would have all the money in the world. Your views are as good (and as bad) as anyone else's.

71. When you make an investment because you believe things are likely to change in your favour, be patient. Give other investors time to catch up and start to think like you do.

72. Think of markets as manic depressive. Sometimes they are full of euphoria, and convinced that things will always be good. And sometimes they are full of gloom, and convinced that things will never be good again. The time to buy is when markets are full of gloom. The time to sell is when they are full of joy.

73. Most people suffer more pain when they lose money than they enjoy pleasure when they win money. Don't allow this to make you freeze and reject all possible investments in case they result in a loss.

74. When making an investment always have an idea of the potential downside and the potential upside. What's the worst that can happen? What's the bottom line? And what's the best that can happen? Does the possible upside make the risks worth taking? Always ask yourself: 'What iL?' Think of all the terrible things that can happen that might adversely affect the investment you are making.

75. Only make investments I believe in. I only make investments which seem logical to me. And I don't have any faith that if I tried to jump on a bandwagon I would be able to pick the moment to jump off again. Investing is (or should be) a lonely business. Don't bother joining an investment club. (How on earth are you going to find a group of people who share your own investment needs?) Keep out of chat rooms and avoid discussing your investment plans with other investors.

76. The stock market isn't as wise as people like to think it is. Investment prices are more controlled by greed, fear, hubris and rank stupidity than they are by logic or good sense. The market behaves irrationally more often than you would imagine possible.

77. When you purchase an investment keep all the cuttings and so on which you have used to help you make up your mind to buy. Put the cuttings into a folder and look at it whenever you review that particular investment. It's often easy to forget why an investment was bought.

78. Great investors often go for months without buying anything.

79. Big profits come from being in the right market at the right time and making big bets.

80. The term 'blue chip' was originally used to describe a chip taken from a blue stone – a diamond. Then it was used to denote high value poker chips. These days it is used to describe shares of large companies which have a good record of growth and a good record of paying a regular, reliable dividend. Investors often put their money into blue chips for safety. But beware: blue chip shares are usually well-established but, like all other investments they can go down as well as up.

81. Much of what is written and said about companies relates to the rights and needs of the customers, the employees, the pensioners and the community at large. The rights and needs of shareholders are often ignored. Here's my guide to companies – specifically designed for investors.

* The purpose of a company is to make money (through growth or dividends or a mixture of both) for its shareholders. That's it. The primary aim is not to provide employment or pay taxes or to please customers.

* A company which cuts its research budget may make a bigger profit for a few months. But in the long run it will go into a decline.

* If the amount by which the company's operating profit covers the company's interest payment is falling, then either the profits are falling or the debts or interest rates are rising.

* Be wary of companies which find ways to move debt out of the accounts – sometimes into a separate company. Debts will return.

* Be wary of companies which don't pay dividends. Managers will sometimes say they don't pay dividends because they are using the cash to reduce debts or to expand the business. But they will sometimes not pay dividends because they aren't making any profits.

* Avoid companies which make too many acquisitions. Acquisitions are often done to give directors and management an excuse for raising their pay. Acquisitions often fail to improve profitability. And it is difficult to see whether or by how much a company is growing naturally if it is always growing artificially.

* If a company's inventory is growing this could be a sign of problems ahead. Is the company's merchandise unwanted? Has the company made too much of whatever it is that it makes?

* Watch out for 'extraordinary' or 'exceptional' items in the accounts. If such costs appear more than once then they may not be extraordinary or exceptional.

* If the 'accounts receivable' are rising then the company's customers may be paying slowly because they are unhappy with the company or they may be in financial trouble themselves. Either of these could be bad for the company.

* How concentrated is the company's market? If the demand for fluorescent pink socks turns sour will the company be able to produce some other product?
* Is the company dependent upon government contracts? Politicians often talk wildly about their spending plans but if the money isn't there contracts may be abandoned or altered in some way. Companies which have a spread of customers are more likely to survive.
* Is the company likely to be more or less valuable in 10 or 20 years? Or is a competitor likely to damage the company's profitability and ability to thrive?
* How exclusive is a company's market? A newspaper publisher which produces the sole newspaper in a metropolitan area will be in a strong position to withstand competition. A newspaper publisher which shares its market (or might share its market) will be more vulnerable.
* Is the company unduly dependent on a single individual and his or her skills or contacts?
* Is the company likely to suffer if commodity prices rise or if currency exchange rates alter dramatically (both of which can and do happen with astonishing speed)?
* Is the company particularly susceptible to changes in legislation? For example, employers which have a good many employees on minimum wage may suffer if minimum wage rates rise significantly.
* Are essential patents about to run out? Or are they likely to be questioned in court? Is the company involved in any litigation? (About patents or anything else). One of the many absurdities of the way regulatory authorities deal with companies lies in the fact that when employees break the law it is shareholders who suffer because it is the company – not the responsible employees –who are fined.
* Is the company generating cash? The main problem with the dot.com companies was that most of them weren't bringing in any income. Some of them had never even worked out how they were going to make a profit. Without cash flow the money will eventually run out. A company which grows but doesn't produce any cash won't have much of a future.
* Does the company need a great deal of capital in order to survive? A manufacturing company with expensive needs is likely to require huge loans. This can be problematical.
* Competitors subsidised by their governments?
* How risky is the company? Former building society Northern Rock got into trouble because it had a very risky funding structure. The company relied on wholesale markets for much of its funding. It borrowed money from other banks in order to lend it to customers. This was a risky business. Investment fund managers can find the answers to these questions by talking to the company's directors and executives. But with many companies it is possible to find your own answers simply by looking at the company from a distance.
* Does the company produce an essential or a discretionary product? Bread is essential. A specific, patented drug is essential. Motor cars and £500 handbags are discretionary. Whatever the product is, can it be replaced or usurped?
* I can walk away from a business and leave it destroyed. They can take their ideas, reputations and goodwill with them. A people dependent company can be destroyed overnight. Property, assets, and stock give a firm a solid foundation. Factories don't walk away in a sulk because their Christmas bonus wasn't big enough. On the whole I don't invest in companies which provide services and which rely on key employees. The star employees will either want huge salaries or they will leave. I would never invest in a football club or a hairdressing salon or a boutique money manager.
* I try not to invest in companies which make donations to charities or political parties. When companies do this it is so that the boss can get a knighthood or an invitation to a Buckingham Palace garden party. If the bosses want to give money to charity or to a political party they can. But not with my money. Call me Scrooge if you like but I try to avoid buying shares in companies where the bosses give away a lot of my money.

SPECULATION

‘...an investor will succeed by coupling good business judgement with an ability to insulate his thoughts and behaviour from the super-contagious emotions that swirl about the marketplace.’
WARREN BUFFETT

If you buy shares in order to participate in the long-term growth of the company concerned, you are investing. You are speculating if you buy shares solely because you expect (or hope) to be able to sell them to someone else at a higher price. Virtually all the investments made during the late 1990’s when people were buying shares in dot.com companies were speculation. Most of those companies had never made any profit (and were never likely to). The only way investors could make money out of them was if the share price went up and they could sell them to some other sucker for a higher price. Unfortunately, in the end, the prices collapsed (because there were no more buyers left) and all the investors still holding shares when the music stopped became suckers.

STRATEGIC THINKING

'Thinking: the hardest work there is, which is probably why so few engage in it.'
HENRY FORD

You will never beat investment professionals by having better information than they have. Investment professionals are up to their ears in information. They are drowning in facts and figures. They have desks carpeted with flow charts, press releases and pretty, coloured graphs. By picking up a phone they can speak to the directors of a company and find out what is going on. The professionals are awash with information.

But the experts, the ones who think they know everything, and who certainly like to give the impression that they know what is happening, why it is happening and how the 'why' will affect what happens in the future, are just as confused about whether the country is going into a recession or a depression as politicians are. They have no more idea of whether we're heading for inflation, deflation or stagflation than you have. Politicians, bankers, investment advisers, brokers, journalists and commentators have no better idea of where the economy is heading than the irritable old bloke sitting in the corner of the pub with half a pint of stout in front of him. The reasons for their ignorance? Simple. First, they are too close to the action to see what is really going on. And, second, they are filled with prejudices, bias and misconceptions. They see the evidence they like, that which supports their position, and they ignore or suppress the rest. You can only beat the professionals by being wiser than they are. And, surprisingly perhaps, that isn't necessarily all that difficult.

The key to successful investing in the future will, I believe, be to look at geopolitical issues- global political changes. To be successful, investors need to think about what is happening and to look at political affairs deeply but broadly. Spotting trends – and understanding their importance – will be increasingly important. Information is only of use if you can assess its value and then use it to draw useful conclusions.

If you are to make money out of the market in general, or shares in particular, then you need to understand what you are buying. You need to have a good idea of what the company does, and the industry in which it operates. You need to understand the environment in which it works and you need to know something about its competitors. Most important of all, however, you need to understand how the world will impinge on the company you have chosen. You need to look at what is usually called the big picture. You need to be able to buy (and sell) before the crowd. To do this you need to be able to see how investors are going to behave in the future. And you must remember that reality doesn't matter as much as what people do or think reality will be. You must separate the fundamentals (and your strategy) from the noise. Investment noise is a constant distraction and irritation and will, if you allow it to confuse you and make you uncertain, result in failure and losses.

When you've found a strategy, you have to watch out to make sure that your investment plan isn't compromised by the activities of the idiots in the city who tend to spot an idea rather late and then work it to death – destroying the strategy in the process by pushing up prices. Even if you don't believe in something it matters that others believe it because you may be able to profit from their belief. The most important factor that will decide whether or not you beat the market is whether you can judge what other people are going to do. However right your predictions may be they won't matter a damn unless you know what others are going to do. You might spot a company that is bound to become mega-successful. You might have all the evidence to show that the company is absurdly undervalued. But until other investors believe that the company is undervalued they won't buy the shares, the shares will remain cheap and you won't make a profit.

It always pays to look out for new trends and big themes. Anyone who realised that China would be a booming country a few years before the boom started would have been well placed to make a lot of money.

But you have to be careful. You have to pick the right trend and you have to be sure that the company in which you choose to invest is going to be profitable. When global warming became 'trendy' many people started looking at alternative forms of energy as an investment possibility. Sadly, many investments in alternative energy proved disappointing because, although the theory was fine, the companies often had no realistic chance of making a profit. In some cases there was no real demand for their products. In other cases the products simply weren't terribly good.

And you have to get your timing right. You have to be early enough. If you spot a trend or a big theme too late, thousands of other investors will have got there before you and the prices of the shares you might want to buy will have soared. But you have to be late enough to be able to pick companies which have found a proven path to success.

There's a lot of luck involved but the real key, I believe, often lies in spreading your money around a number of possible investments in the area in which you are interested. And then sticking with the investments which do well.

Venture capitalists, who do this sort of thing for a living, know that although most of the investments they make will fail the odd one or two successful investments will more than pay for their losses. But, for this to work, you have to hold onto your successful investments and not be tempted to sell out because you have made a small profit.

If you spot a bandwagon you've missed it. If other people are climbing on then you should be climbing off.

It is by spotting subtle changes in the way the world operates, and by analysing the effect of major shifts in geopolitical power, that the thinking investor can give him or herself an edge over other investors and, in particular, over the so-called professionals: the fund managers, the brokers and the bank analysts.

Look for long-term trends and then hold your nerve. The oil is running out. Emerging nation middle classes are becoming increasingly demanding – wanting meat on their dinner plate and a car in their garage. Inflation is rising in India and China and will soon be exported (together with television sets and bras) to the West. The world is running out of water and timber and many other commodities (both soft and hard). The global infrastructure is crumbling. And, then, there is climate change.

What effect are these likely to have on inflation, interest rates and the global and local economy? (By local I mean the country in which you reside.) Strategic thinking means always asking the question 'what next?' So, for example, if the oil price falls what will happen next? Will the oil producing nations accept a lower price for their asset or will they cut production (and, therefore, supply) on the grounds that they know that the oil is running out and they don't want to sell it cheaply?

If you have a limited amount of time available for reading (as most people have) then I suggest you devote a large proportion of that time to reading about wider, geopolitical issues rather than individual corporate issues. If you invest in sectors, or in the wider aspects of the market, the success or failure of your investment plans will depend more on the wider issues than on the narrower issues. A broad understanding of geopolitical issues will better enable you to predict the future of the economy, and the markets, and, therefore, better enable you to protect your portfolio. No one can predict the future with 100% success. But if you have a good idea of what may happen in the coming months and years you will be far better able to plan your investments accordingly. For example, I started investing in a variety of commodities in 2003, shortly after I first became aware of the fact that these vital substances were disappearing and just as the global demand for them was increasing.

Don't succumb to 'recent events syndrome' where you put too much emphasis on recent news, and too little on major long-term trends. The latest news always appears more important than it really is because it's happening now. But it's long-term, major trends which have the biggest effect on your investments.

And don't trust politicians. Indeed, as an investor it is safe to rely on the stupidity and incompetence and dishonesty of politicians. They will not do sensible things (however simple) to correct substantial threats to the economy but can be relied upon to lie, cheat and make things worse.

And, remember that when making predictions you must take into account what other people will think and how they will react. However much you believe that house prices are too high they will not fall until most people agree with you. During the dot.com boom the prices paid for Internet companies were absurdly high. But it didn't matter that they were absurdly high. Prices only fell when people stopped buying the overpriced shares and everyone started selling. And then they fell quickly and the bubble was burst. Greed drives prices higher than ever seems possible to a rational mind. The key is to remember that it is perception and expectation, rather than reality, that drives share prices.

Truth is now the rarest of all commodities. Indeed, truth is now such a rarity in our world that major public decisions (including so-called democratic elections) are invariably taken on the basis of perception, rather than reality. In essence, this means that perception has become reality. It is nothing new to say that all history is biased because of the often self-serving prejudices of those who write it. The same event can be interpreted in any number of different ways. But what is new now is the fact that the present is being reported and influenced according to the deliberately guided perceptions of the electorate. And if our understanding and appreciation of the present is being altered in this way then our actions will be changed and the future changed too.

The investment professionals tend to think short-term rather than long-term.

They are so laden with instant information that they spend little time or effort on strategic planning.

And many investment bankers are far more stupid than they like to think they are.

For example, the so-called 'credit-crunch' which devastated the financial markets (and the share prices of banks) in 2007 and 2008 affected Britain because so many leading bankers behaved like idiots and bought packages of mortgage debt without, apparently, having asked fairly fundamental questions about the security of the assets they were buying. The people who borrowed huge amounts of money and who had no chance of ever paying it back were reckless. But it was the hubris of bankers (many of whom had become bosses of big banks only after their building society had become a bank but who had assumed the salaries and arrogance of investment bankers) which led directly to serious losses for investors and real problems for millions. Greed, on both sides, was the driving force. Greed among the borrowers, and greed among the lenders.

The concept of expecting people to take responsibility for their actions (known as 'moral hazard') is a basic principle of human life. Without 'moral hazard' our society would break down. (Some, including me, would argue that it is indeed the scarcity of moral hazard which explains why our modern society is crumbling so rapidly.) When moral hazard functions properly there is a direct link between action and consequence. If you do something bad, dangerous or stupid then you will pay in some way. If you do something good, honourable or helpful then you will benefit.

The credit crunch that caused so much concern in 2008 was a consequence of the breakdown of the concept of moral hazard.

Many people were responsible for the chaos in the markets which affected just about every country in the world.

First, there were the greedy bankers who lent money to people who never had a chance of paying it back. These were the people who made subprime mortgages possible. Having lent out vast quantities of other people's money, the bankers then made things worse by charging massive fees to package the loans into marketable securities and to devise a whole range of new financial instruments (such as credit-default swaps and collateralised debt obligations) that hardly any of them understood. (I would hazard a guess that none of them understood the consequences of their fiscal sleights of hand.) A major contributor to the crisis was that banks knew little or nothing about the financial health of their counterparties (the banks or institutions on the other side of the transactions). Mutual ignorance led to chaos.

Second, there were the house buyers who borrowed money they never had a chance of repaying. Many of these people lied on their mortgage application forms. Most knew what they were doing. When property prices went too high because of lax lending bankers, estate agents and mortgage brokers were blamed for lending too much too easily. No one said a word about people who borrowed too much. No one pointed out that the greedy people who were borrowing money they couldn't hope to pay back, so that they could live in houses they couldn't possibly afford, deserved what they got.

Third, there were the ratings agencies who were paid by the banks to decide which companies and products were 'safe' and who seem, in retrospect, to have taken an overly optimistic view when dishing out their ratings.

Fourth, there were the official regulators who were supposed to control the banks and ensure that the financial system worked safely.

By the time the credit crunch had hit hard it had become fashionable to regard the regulators as relatively innocent bystanders but I question this rather generous attitude. The regulators (and there were, and are, a lot of them and they were, and are, enormously well-paid) were hired to protect the public. They clearly failed miserably in this.

In the end, in order to try and prevent the entire financial system imploding, the politicians had to use taxpayers' money to rescue some of the larger institutions which, it was decided, could not be allowed to fail. This was a dangerous move because it removed the concept of moral hazard from the finance industry. The biggest institutions (and their directors and executives) were rewarded for their recklessness. And the taxpayers, the very people who had lost money as their savings and pensions disappeared, were the ones who bailed them out.

In the UK, the ultimate irony of the credit crunch was that Gordon 'the moron' Brown brought disgraced former minister Peter Mandelson back into his cabinet to help deal with the crumbling economy. No politicians, journalists or commentators seem to have noticed that one of the previous occasions when he had to resign Mandelson's 'crime' had been to fill in a mortgage application form incorrectly in order to persuade his mortgage lender to let him have money they might not otherwise have been prepared to loan to him. It was, of course, precisely that sort of despicable behaviour that triggered the credit crunch. So, one of the many greedy individuals whose irresponsible behaviour had helped bring the system to the brink of total collapse was brought back, at enormous public expense, to deal with the consequences of the communal greed.

Throughout 2008, when politicians and journalists were trying to understand and explain the financial problems facing the world they failed miserably to grasp the simplicity of what had happened. There were and are two major causes of the mess the world found itself in during 2008. The second, which was temporary and local to a few countries (specifically the UK, the USA, Ireland and Spain) was the fact that house prices had been pushed up to ridiculous levels by greedy speculators. In each country this had been encouraged by greedy bankers, estate agents and mortgage brokers and aided and abetted by reckless and incompetent politicians. The first, which was global and permanent, was the rise in the price of commodities in general and energy in particular. Both these events were easy to predict by anyone with a half-way decent understanding of geopolitics and human nature, (and I did so, in both cases, well in advance of the events) and those who took the trouble to do so should have put themselves into a good position to survive financially.

Investing successfully depends on understanding the ebb and flow of human events, making decisions and then holding your nerve. And this is best done by reading widely and generally rather than by concentrating on titbits of news spread by television and radio. You can get information much more readily and with less wasted effort by reading books, newsletters and magazines (in that order).

The best way I know to beat the market is to make geopolitical predictions and then invest accordingly. Most investors (and most investment advisers) do not yet do this. This may be because they can't or because they prefer to look at the trees rather than study the woods.

Investing successfully is about tackling uncertainty and spotting a route through the many problems which influence the future. It's also about being able to put aside prejudices and the taint of cognitive bias.

Our educational system doesn't teach us to think at all. Specifically, it doesn't teach us to think about probabilities or uncertainties. Our educational system teaches us to remember what the system wants us to believe are facts. But success in life in general, and investing in particular, needs us to know how to deal with facts.

The first most important skill for any investor is, in my view, the ability to differentiate between relevant and irrelevant news. To be successful it is essential to be able to dismiss investment or geopolitical 'noise' and to focus on crucial bits and pieces of information. It is, of course, also essential to be able to interpret the information you have selected and to use the information to help you draw conclusions. There is a danger that we will collect together all the evidence that supports our thesis and then ignore the evidence that is left – the stuff that doesn't support our belief Psychologists call it confirmatory bias. You will always find market experts who support your view. If you believe that the price of gold is bound to rise you will always find commentators who agree with you. The danger is that you will take too much notice of the people who think the way you think (and who are, therefore, reinforcing your prejudices). You should seek out and read the reasoning of people who disagree with you. Find out why they think you are wrong. If their arguments convince you that you're wrong then you should abandon your belief and look for another investment opportunity. If their arguments don't change your mind, and you still believe you are right when you have studied all the contrary evidence and all the arguments made by people who disagree with you, then maybe you should follow your judgement with your money.

You must be open-minded. Don't be pig-headed and hold to your views as events change. If the evidence in support of your investment changes then you must consider changing your investment. And always try to understand opposing points of view. If you can understand (and overcome) their arguments then you might well be right.

Second, you must remember that success in markets isn't so much about understanding facts and figures, charts and balance sheets as about emotions and dreams. Markets are driven by greed and fear (the basis of the emotions and dreams of all investors) but there is a way to give yourself an edge: a basic understanding of money, psychology and geopolitics (no more than 'basic', because too much will do more harm than good in the way that people who study economics professionally always have less understanding of the economy than ordinary people with jobs, mortgages and a good overview and no economic theory to interfere with understanding). This requires looking at big facts (is the oil running out, what will the next American President be like and which lobby group will control him?). The big questions are as difficult to answer as they are easy to ask. But all that is really needed is that rarest of all commodities: common sense.

Once you have chosen a strategy and found a good investment give yourself a chance to make decent money out of it. Good investment opportunities don't come along very often. There is no point in putting less than 1% of your investable funds into a company which seems to offer huge potential. Invest less than that and any profit you make is unlikely to make a worthwhile difference to your overall wealth and yet the effort required will add noticeably to your overall workload. A very small number of big investment calls or decisions will make the most money for you.

And know your strengths and weaknesses. This is important in all aspects of life. But it is particularly important to you as an investor. Do you work well alone? Do you need someone to steady you when you get too excited? Do you need someone to provide inspiration? The more you know about what you can and can't do, the more successful you will become at the things you can do, and the less the things you can't do will hold you back.

And listen to your instincts. If you know in your heart that an investment is going to be a bad one don't make it. If you feel that an investment could be big do some more research and thinking. And make your final decision on the basis of that research and thinking. But do be prepared to follow your instincts, your hunches and your inspirations.

There are many trends and developments which are worthy of thought.

For example, for years many big companies have aimed their marketing programmes at the young. I've heard executives of huge corporations sneer at the prospect of promoting their wares to the elderly or even the middle-aged. This has always puzzled me. The young are fickle buyers; one minute they're buying Spice Girls records, the next minute they're buying cans of lager and the minute after that they're buying nappies. And although the young have some disposable income they really don't have (and mostly never have had) much money. I've always felt that the elderly make a much bigger and far wealthier marketing target. The bonus is that the elderly are far more loyal than the young (once they've found something that they like they tend to keep buying it). The young are constantly searching for something new to spend their money on, and, in addition, they have to cope with housing costs, babies and all sorts of whimsical extravagances. The elderly may have steady incomes and they have usually paid off their mortgages. They are relatively immune to rising interest rates. Indeed, when interest rates go up they tend to become richer (since the income they receive from their savings will be enhanced). The smart city boys spotted the potential 'grey' market (and its numerous advantages) fairly recently. The snag was that, as always, they looked for ways that they (and not their investors) could make money. And so all sorts of bizarre 'get rich-from-oldies' schemes were launched- including, inevitably, ways to make money out of nursing homes and care homes. The good thing was that they didn't seem to realise that the elderly spend money on all sorts of things other than nursing home care, stairlifts, zimmer frames and trousers with elasticated waists. The elderly have time for hobbies and they have, for example, become huge purchasers of cameras and computers. Companies which have bothered to target the elderly with advertising not specifically designed to drag in the 15-year-olds have done well.

Birth rates are falling in the West. There are more old people than ever before. This should mean that investments in companies making prams and running schools should do badly while investments in companies making hearing aids and running nursing homes should do well. But beware! Good companies making prams and running schools will probably continue to make money. And bad companies making hearing aids and running nursing homes will go bust. (Plus: when things are as obvious as this the chances are that the competition in providing goods and services for the elderly will be more severe, while the competition for the baby market will be limited.)

Will the credit crunch lead to a rise in resentment against the rich in general and bankers in particular? Will the American and British Governments get a taste for nationalisation? What effect will falling stock markets have on the real economy? Are there really plans for a world government? Will the rise of the European Union lead to a rise in nationalism in Europe? When will multiculturalism and political correctness be overthrown? Will there be more resentment of globalisation? Will the problems created by, and resulting from, the banking problem of 2008 segue nearly into the severe end-play problems created when the oil runs out (as it assuredly will)?

If you look around the world you will probably spot many exceptional investment opportunities. Africa is a nation in turmoil but one rich in numerous essential resources. The world is running out of food and the problem is exacerbated by the increase in the number of people wanting to eat meat. The developing BRIC countries (Brazil, India, Russia and China) are being industrialised at a phenomenal rate. Is America really in terminal decline? When will the Arab States replace the dollar with the euro as their currency of choice?

Selecting big strategic themes is vital. What will happen in Eastern Europe over the next 20 years? As nuclear power plants are built will there be a shortage of uranium? Is coal likely to run out? Many of the coming changes are secular rather than cyclical.

You must learn to keep your feet on the ground when assessing changes. When the Internet first appeared it was said to be the most important invention ever. This nonsense was widely promoted by people who had clearly never heard of the wheel, the internal combustion engine, electricity, the telegraph and so on and so on.

The one certainty is that politicians will betray us all. You can rely on the fact that governments won't cooperate to find a solution to the consequences of global climate change. You can rely on the fact that governments will continue to fight for oil. Was the global warming propaganda merely a ploy to get us accustomed to the oil running out? The evidence supporting the theory that global warming is a man-made scenario is certainly far more controversial than the politicians would have us believe.

Never, never, never invest on the basis of a politician's promise. Politicians talk a great deal about improving infrastructure, and they boast about improving spending on health care and education. Ignore them. Politicians' promises are easily abandoned. Companies which adapt their plans to fit in with potentially profitable opportunities which might result from political changes are taking huge chances. Don't invest in a company which will supposedly benefit from any government decision. Politicians love encouraging companies to spend money on their behalf but they never, ever do anything to help private sector companies make money. Companies don't vote and even politicians know that.

When governments fail to save money during the good times they must print more currency if they want to try and spend their way out of trouble. Their efforts are likely to result in the decline of the currency's value. (If there is more of something around then the value usually declines.) And, with a country which is reliant on imports, that pushes up inflation. (The cost of oil, minerals and food goes up.) When inflation goes up interest rates are likely to follow. (Because governments have to try to control inflation by raising interest rates). When interest rates rise the inevitable result is that money becomes more expensive to borrow: companies and individuals suffer. And thus the boom and bust scenario is firmly established.

Whenever possible politicians, and their advisers, will do the wrong thing. It's what they do best and it's one of the few things you can rely on.

Nevertheless, despite, all my scepticism, I do believe that it is possible to make helpful predictions based on an assessment of geopolitical factors. The snag is that it is usually impossible to say precisely when the predictions will come true. If you are going to invest according to your own predictions you need to do so in such a way that you will not be forced to liquidate your positions too early. And you need to be brave enough (and stubborn enough, perhaps) to stick to your views when the walls are crashing around your ears.

STRUCTURED PRODUCTS

'Anyone who believes in fairness in this life has been seriously misinformed.'
JOHN F KENNEDY

Keep things simple. Don't put money in fancy investments you don't understand. Banks now offer all sorts of weird and wonderful investments. You can, for example, buy an investment which will, at the end of five years, give you 120% of the gain in the stock market or, if the market has gone down, give you back your original investment. Sounds good? It isn't. It's designed to make money for the bank not for you. What are the snags? First, you don't get any of the dividends that you would receive if you held the shares. Second, you will have to hand over your money for five years. It will probably be impossible (or expensive) to get it back before then. Third, the return you get will be decided on one particular day five years into the future. Fourth, if the stock market goes down, or remains steady, you will only receive back your original investment. You will not receive any interest. Structured products are, by and large, designed by crooks to take advantage of the naive.

Here's a home-made way I would put together a scheme to match or beat the bank's proposal.

I would put 80% of my money into National Savings Certificates or a deposit account. This would give me ready access to my money. The interest I'd receive would mean that at the end of five years I would have over 100% of my original investment.

I would put the other 20% into some fairly high risk investment (or investments) that I had researched well and believed would do well.

At the end of five years I would almost certainly beat the bank's proposal if the market went down or stayed level. And I would almost certainly beat the bank if my investments did reasonably well.

Why would my system beat the bank? Simple.

The bank sets up these schemes to make itself a profit. That's the difference between their scheme and mine.

And that's why I think mine is better.

Despite the evidence against them, structured products (usually known as guaranteed equity bonds) have become very popular. They sound attractive. The advertisements usually explain that if you invest some money in one of these products you will, in a fixed period of years, receive any capital gain that you might have enjoyed if you'd bought shares and held them for that period. Some products offer to give you more than the rise in shares over the period. The offer is made even more attractive by the fact that if the market falls you will get your money back. It seems as though you can't lose.

But nothing worthwhile comes free these days and financial companies don't give anything away. You do lose, of course. The people flogging these things are far more likely to make a profit than you are. Indeed, they are the only people who are really guaranteed to make money.

Most of them probably don't realise it but investors in these products are effectively gambling all their interest and dividends that the stock market will be higher on a particular day five, seven or whatever years ahead, than it is today.

Say you put £10,000 into one of these products and leave it there for five years. At a modest 5% per year that's £500 a year and so the amount being gambled, even without the effect of compound interest, is £2,500. I wonder how many of the people who invest in these products because they are 'safe' and 'guaranteed' would happily put £2,500 on Black Beauty in the 3.30 at Haydock Park?

Another problem is that many of these financial products are complex and remarkably opaque. It is often difficult to see who owns what and which organisation is ultimately responsible for underwriting the value of the investment. I suspect that there is a risk that a structured product's net asset value might be reduced if the bankers involved had their celluloid collars ripped off and the bank backing the product ended up being derated. The failed American bank Lehman Brothers backed many structured products. And it is worth remembering that the giant American insurance company, AIG (which had a AAA rating and was, therefore, regarded as about as safe as safe can be) was also associated with a huge number of financial products. Clever sounding structured funds are frequently backed by counterparties, usually investment banks, whose bonds provide the capital protection. If the counterparty goes bust (and that, as we have seen, is surprisingly likely) the holders of structured products will have to join the queue of creditors waiting and hoping to receive some crumbs from what remains.

In my view, structured products really aren't worth bothering with. Your money will be tied up for a fixed period, the charges are often high and although the advertising blurb may make the product sound appealing to those who want to have their cake and eat it (what a wonderfully absurd phrase that is) the truth is that the complex (and often difficult to understand) conditions mean that I think you would be better off dividing up your money yourself and putting 80% in something supposedly safe (such as National Savings certificates) and 20% in something riskier (such as shares).

TAX

'No man in the country is under the slightest obligation, moral or other, so to arrange his legal relations to his business or property as to enable the Inland Revenue to put the largest possible shovel in his stores. The Inland Revenue is not slow - and quite rightly - take every advantage which is open to it under the Taxing Statutes or the purpose of depleting the taxpayer's pocket. And the taxpayer is in like manner entitled to be astute to prevent, so far as he honestly can, the depletion of his means by the Inland Revenue.'
LAW LORD, LORD CLYDE

It is our individual responsibility to ensure that we pay as little tax as possible. That is our responsibility to our families and ourselves. Governments, however, don't always see things quite that way. As far as they are concerned what is ours is theirs and what is theirs is also theirs.

Here are some thoughts on tax and tax inspectors.

* 'An economy breathes through its tax loopholes.' Barry BracewellMilnes
* 'In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxation.' Benjamin Franklin
* 'Every man is entitled, if he can, to order his affairs so that the tax attaching under the appropriate Act is less than it would otherwise be' Lord Tomlin
* 'A taxpayer is someone who works for the federal government but who doesn't have to take a civil service examination.' Ronald Reagan
* 'The income tax has made more liars out of the American people than golf has.' Will Rogers
* 'Income tax returns are the most imaginative fiction being written today.' Herman Wouk
* 'Why does a slight tax increase cost you two hundred dollars and a substantial tax cut save you thirty cents?' Peg Bracken
* 'The avoidance of taxes is still the only pursuit that carries any reward.' John Maynard Keynes
* 'There are two systems of taxation in this country: one for the informed and one for the uninformed.' Honorable Learned Hand, US Appeals Court Justice
* 'The trick is to stop thinking of it as 'your' money.' Tax Accountant
* 'There is no art which one government sooner learns from another than that of draining money from the pockets of the people.' Adam Smith

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1. Dealing too often won't just ruin your profits through costs, it will, if you are successful, also expose you to a higher tax bill. 'Buy and hold' might be an unpopular philosophy but from a costs and tax point of view it has much to recommend it.
2. Don't bother trying to become a tax exile. Don't bother trying moving to a tax haven. And don't bother trying to avoid paying tax by becoming a PT (Permanent Traveller). Lots of people do these things. But they spend time and effort and money in avoiding paying tax and they end up living in places that no one in his or her right mind would want to call home. Some years ago I seriously contemplated moving to Monaco. I found, to my astonishment, that it really isn't as straightforward as you might think. And Monaco itself is as dull and uninspiring as a council estate. It's full of tower blocks into which are crammed thousands of miserable tax exiles. The streets may be safe (Monaco has nearly as many CCTV cameras as Britain but they do at least use them to catch the guilty and protect the innocent rather than to simply pick up unfortunate folk who have parked in the wrong place or dropped litter into the wrong receptacle) but I am willing to pay not to live there.
3. Learn about tax rates for different types of investment. These vary constantly. And are now sometimes changed retrospectively. Some investments will be more suitable for holding in a tax free environment. For example, if income tax rates are high it makes sense to put investments which produce a lot of income into a low tax account (such as a pension fund). You must keep up with the latest rules and regulations about the way investments are taxed. Some websites provide up-to-date information and there are one or two newsletters which provide excellent, up-to-date information on taxation.
4. Stay alert for retrospective tax legislation. The British Government has begun introducing retrospective legislation and it is also using its tax collecting agencies to criminalise many activities. The result must surely be that people will be sent to prison for things that weren't illegal when they did them and will be handed huge and unexpected tax bills for earnings and profits that were acquired in the past. Things are likely to get worse rather than better. EU legislation, often gold-plated by an enthusiastically compliant UK Government, will make things ever worse.
5. Don't make an investment because of the tax break. It is often tempting to do this. Back in the 1980's I made a good many investments in companies created under the UK's Business Expansion Scheme. And I put a lot of money into Property Enterprise Zone schemes. In both cases the main advantage was the tax relief on offer and I was attracted to these investments schemes because of the generous tax breaks the British Government offered me. Oh, what a simple, trusting fool I was. What I didn't realise was that the people setting up these schemes knew that it was the tax advantage that was attractive. I was ripped off mercilessly by an endless variety of sharp suited

promoters and businessmen whose most potent ability was, I am now convinced, their skill in preparing attractive looking brochures and finding the seed money to have them printed on expensive paper. The schemes took up vast amounts of time and involved the filling in of a seemingly endless supply of forms. In the end I managed to escape from the investments. I was very little better off than I would have been if I had just paid the tax. If you count the time I spent, the schemes were just another part of my education. I learned two things. First, never invest purely for the tax advantages. The people flogging the whatever it is that you are buying will know that your eye will be on the tax break and not on the fine print. Second, I learned not to trust anything I am told by scheme promoters who work in smart offices and have their photographs taken wearing expensive suits and neatly knotted silk ties. The smarter the promoter, and the more expensive his brochure, the faster I run in the opposite direction. After a decade or so (and a lot of paperwork) I worked out that I had just about broken even. In retrospect it seems to me that a lot of the investment opportunities which I had been offered had been designed with the idea of using the carrot of the tax relief to hide the shortcomings of the businesses concerned. It was a valuable lesson and since I didn't lose any money I was lucky. Don't ever invest in schemes just because of the tax relief. If the investment is any good it doesn't need to be wrapped up in tax-friendly packaging.

6. Always be aware of, and make use of, your legal tax allowances. These change all the time and you need to consult books or websites offering up-to-date information. But, for example, as I write this book every taxpaying citizen in the UK has the right to an annual capital gains allowance. Profits on some share sales can therefore be taken without any tax being due. And yet very few people use this allowance. Indeed, thousands who invest their money in legal tax avoidance schemes such as ISAs don't use their capital gains allowance – even though the tax advantages offered by ISAs are not, in my view, either as easy to access or as advantageous as this simple allowance. (For one thing, losses within an ISA cannot be put against gains elsewhere.) Could this possibly be because investment advisers and investment companies make a lot of money out of selling ISAs but no one makes money out of telling you about your annual Capital Gains Tax allowance?

'There is no art which one government sooner learns from another than that of draining money from the pockets of the people.'
ADAM SMITH

7. I am scrupulously honest on my tax form. The tax people spot check self employed people quite often. They've investigated me twice so far. Both were full, year long investigations. And at the end of both I ended up getting money back from the taxman. Like most people who are self-employed I have enough crises and problems in my life without taking on the tax people. I like to know that if they investigate me then, at the end, I'm going to be the one getting a cheque. I keep full records and declare every penny I earn. The more bits of paper you have the more you are likely to be able to win against the taxman. On the last occasion that I was investigated I delivered the requested records crammed into a large suitcase.

8. I am constantly amazed at how many people forget that they have to pay tax on their profits. Think of the number of pop stars who have a couple of hit records, spend all their earnings and then go bankrupt when they get a bill from the taxman. If you are a successful investor you will have to pay capital gains tax too. So put some money aside.

'I have always paid income tax. I object only when it reaches a stage when I am threatened with having nothing left for my old age – which is due to start next Tuesday or Wednesday.'
NOEL COWARD

9. Part of any appreciated asset belongs to the Government, so they share the risk when you're making a profit. And the Government shares the pain when you're making a loss. So, consider the tax man as a partner who puts up no money but shares your profits and losses. I regard the tax man as operating a protection racket. I give him money and in return he doesn't use violence against me.

'There is nothing sinister in so arranging one's affairs as to keep taxes as low as possible. Everybody does so, rich or poor; all do right. Nobody owes any public duty to pay more than the law demands; taxes are enforced extractions, not voluntary contributions.'
US JUDGE LEARNED HAND, US APPEALS COURT JUSTICE

10. Don't overestimate the intelligence of people working for the tax authorities. A few years ago I held a bond run by the bank Goldman Sachs. A payment from the bond was listed on a bank statement under the abbreviated heading 'Gold Sacs'. During one of its typically lengthy but pointless enquiries into my affairs the tax office wrote to my accountant telling him that they now knew that I was dealing in gold. Puzzled, he wrote back and asked them for more information. 'Your client is buying and selling sacks of gold,' replied the taxman, drawing attention to the reference to 'Gold Sacs' as evidence.

'The government that governs best taxes least.'
THOMAS JEFFERSON, FORMER PRESIDENT OF THE USA

11. If you become even remotely rich you will attract the attention of the tax people. This is because tax

inspectors now get bonuses for every pound they gouge out of taxpayers. It is clearly easier and more profitable to target the rich rather than the poor, and it is easier to get money out of the honest rather than the crooked.

12. If, at the end of a tax year, you have made profits and are liable to capital gains tax you may be able to reduce your tax bill by selling investments which have lost money and in which you have lost faith. Selling a share (or another investment) that is below its purchase price in order to use the loss against a capital gain and so reduce your tax bill is known as 'tax-loss selling'.

13. Always understand your own accounts. For years and years I used an accountant who used to tell me how much I owed the taxman. I simply did what I was told and wrote out the cheques. One year, back in the mid 1990's, I followed his instructions and wrote out a cheque for £129,000 for my half yearly tax bill. Only when the taxman subsequently did a spot check on my accounts did it turn out that I'd paid thousands of pounds too much. I got a welcome refund check. I fired my accountant who told me that it wasn't his fault. He said it wasn't his firm's fault either. His explanation was that his assistant had 'been using out-of-date textbooks'. I'd been paying this guy and his firm thousands of pounds for years. It seemed to me that the least they could have done was buy some up-to-date textbooks. So I got rid of him and decided to fill in my tax form myself It's a real pain and it wastes a lot of time (though if I used an accountant I would still have to spend some time pulling together bits of paper to show him) but at any time of the year I now know what I owe and when I've got to pay it. There are no more surprises. I like it better this way.

'The income tax people are very nice. They're letting me keep my own mother.'
HENNY YOUNGMAN'

14. If you work like stink all your life and save what you can from your after-tax earnings, and you carefully invest your savings, then any income you derive from those savings will be officially described as 'unearned income'.

15. Before buying shares in a company it's worth looking to see if the company is paying tax at usual corporate rates. If not, why not? It's very pleasant for a company to be not paying any tax but usually that means that the company isn't making any profits. And profits are always a good thing.

TIMING

'Nobody waves a flag at the top (or the bottom) of the market
MAX KING

Timing in buying is everything. If you are out of the market on the good days you will miss the huge leaps – and the huge profits that are to be made. But market timing is more or less impossible. The only way to ensure that you are invested when a market starts to recover is to have stayed invested right down to the bottom. It is being invested on the days when the big jumps take place that contribute most to market profits. All this goes against natural instinct of course. It is tempting to get out of shares when they have fallen and to keep your cash nice and safe in a bank deposit account (well, safe as long as the bank doesn't go bust and take your deposit with it). The problem with this is that it requires making two huge decisions: when to get out of the market and when to get back in again.

I deliberately sat out the dot.com boom because it seemed obvious that Internet shares were vastly overpriced long before they crashed. I could never see the logic in investing in a company which sold cat litter by mail order. (And it always seemed to me that most Internet companies were little more than mail order companies using a new method of advertising. Since I know a little about mail order I worried that such companies would find it hard to fulfil their orders- if they ever got any.)

I remember watching a television programme in which the staff of a new dot.com company (which had raised millions) were filmed sitting around waiting for their first order to come in. The company had stocked a large building with desks and computers and had recruited a huge staff force to deal with orders which they were confident would flood in. But the orders never even reached a trickle and the company went bust quite quickly. Why didn't the bosses start off by renting three desks and hiring three temporary staff members to deal with orders? Or, better still, why didn't they start out by hiring a fulfilment company to deal with orders?

I was convinced that the dot.com boom was doomed. And so I didn't invest in it. Not a penny. I could have climbed aboard for the ride. But I didn't.

I missed out on the boom and all the profits.

Throughout the late 1990's I was invested in boring gilts and pretty dull old-fashioned companies – the sort which were making profits and paying dividends.

I would do exactly the same thing again.

The bottom line is simple: don't try to time the market on a short-term basis. This is what traders do; and the vast majority of them lose money. Many of them lose all their money. Moving money in and out of the market on the basis of short-term price movements is gambling and the costs, fees, duties and spreads pretty well ensure that you will lose. Knowledge, wisdom and experience will help you not at all if you try short-term trading. It's as predictable as coin tossing.

Just as I am convinced that timing the market is impossible so I also believe hat the real profits are to be made by having the courage to make decisions slightly too early – when everyone else is paralysed by fear and consumed by panic. Step back, separate your actions from your emotions, try to understand at least something of the big picture, be patient and then act just before the time seems right. There's an old adage that is worth remembering: 'Be greedy when others are fearful and fearful when others are greedy.'

TRADING

'Investing should be dull...it shouldn't be exciting Investing should be more like watching paint dry or watching grass grow. If you want excitement, take $800 and go to Las Vegas.'
PAUL SAMUELSON

Some of the most successful investors buy or sell items in their portfolios no more than once every few weeks. One of the biggest and most consistently successful fund managers in the world makes an average of one investment transaction per year for each $1.4 billion of investment funds held. The fund, worth a total of $10 billion, sold three stocks and bought just four in 2007. Study other truly successful investors and you will see that they spend most of their time looking, reading and thinking. They spend very little time on the telephone yelling 'buy, buy, buy' or 'sell, sell, sell'. Many private investors, with comparatively minute portfolios, trade far, far more than seven times a year.

When it comes to making deals, however, ordinary investors are left in the shade by traders; and, in particular, by day-traders who try to time the market by buying and selling shares within minutes or hours.

If you trade (as opposed to invest) you will be fighting the spread, the costs and the tax. Every time you trade you lose money in these three ways. And, worst of all, you have to time your trades so that you get out somewhere near the top and get in again somewhere near the bottom. There are plenty of traders who make short-term profits but traders who succeed in the long term are as rare as hen's teeth.

Not many professionals beat the market as stock pickers. The few who do are long-term holders not traders. Before you start trading individual shares think hard about this. What makes you think you are different – and better? (You may well be different and better but you should know why.)

If you're thinking about setting up as a trader here are some things you should know.

1. The more you trade the more you risk making mistakes. Everything you buy must at some point be sold so if you buy and hold a share you are exposing yourself to the risk of having to take two decisions. Every decision is a potential mistake. If you buy shares in the Flimsy Lingerie Company and then sell those shares and buy shares in the Hand Carved Wooden Clog Company you are doubling your number of potential mistakes. Remember: every investment decision is an opportunity to make a mistake. The fewer decisions you make, the fewer mistakes you will make.
2. You cannot make money by trading because, as an amateur, you will never be able to react faster than the professional market makers to a surprise announcement. If the President of the USA announces the start of another war you will not be able to react as quickly as the professionals. This means that there really is no point in even bothering to listen out for surprise announcements. Indeed, since prices are often pushed too far down immediately after such an announcement you may well be better off (in all ways) if you don't know what is going on in the short-term. I believe that private investors only have an advantage over professional fund managers when it comes to making decisions based on long-term strategies.
3. Jesse Livermore was the greatest and best known trader of all time. Warren Buffett would probably be at the top of any expert's list of great investors. When Livermore killed himself he was nearly broke. Throughout the latter part of the 20th Century, and early part of the 21st Century, Warren Buffet was consistently one of the richest men in world.
4. Don't waste money buying computerised trading systems. These rely on charts, relative strength signals, volumes, moving averages, the price of turnips and heaven knows what else. The providers usually claim that if you use their system you will make huge amounts of money. You will, they say, have access to as much information as the professionals.
5. I have three points to make.
   i) Most professional investors don't even beat the index. There is no point in trying to match the professionals.
   ii) If these systems really worked would anyone sell them? Or would they just keep them and make billions for themselves by trading?
   iii) Such systems cannot possibly work because by providing the same information to everyone who wants it, everyone will try to make the same trade at the same time. Any advantage will be rapidly lost.

Sorry to be a party-pooper.

6. Women investors do significantly better than men investors. There is one big difference between the two that explains the variation: men trade, on average, 45% more than women. The extra costs (inspired by over-confidence perhaps) result in a disastrous performance.

'For investors as a whole, returns decrease as motion increases.'
WARREN BUFFETT'S SUGGESTED FOURTH LAW OF MOTION.

7. Overtrading can damage your wealth. Even if your costs are low you will lose money through the 'turn' (the difference between the buying price and the selling price) and through taxes. Between 1986 and 2005 the S&P

500 grew at an average rate of 11.9% per year. But the average investor managed only 3.9%, thanks largely to over trading which ate up profits through commissions, taxes and bid-to-offer spreads. A study of 66,000 households with brokerage accounts showed that the 20% of investors who trade least actively significantly outperform the 20% who trade most actively. Another survey showed that during a bull market investors who had a portfolio turnover of less than 1% a year had a net return of 18.5%. On the other hand investors who had a turnover over 20% had a return of 11.4%.

TRICKSTERS AND SWINDLERS

'Men have been swindled by other men on many occasions. In the autumn of 1929, men succeeded in swindling themselves.'
JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH

Every year a considerable number of investors – many of them experienced -lose money to 'boiler room' tricksters. The typical victim is male, around 60-years-old and has some experience of investing. The average loss is around £20,000. A boiler room is the name given to an operation that offers investors a 'special' opportunity to buy shares in an investment that cannot lose. The shares are usually in a foreign company, and boiler room operatives usually work in offices outside the country where the investor is situated. (This enables them to avoid local regulators. By the time a heavy-footed policeman eventually knocks on their door they will be long gone. You will be in country A, the policeman will be in country B, the money will be wandering between country C and D on its way to country E and they will be in country For, possibly, country G.)

Boiler room scams can sometimes take some months to reach the end play. The tricksters often start by offering investors a few small, apparently real profits. And then they go for the 'kill'. Boiler room scams can be avoided quite easily. Never invest in anything that has been offered to you by a stranger- by telephone, mail, fax or e-mail. After all, why would a complete stranger offer you a foolproof way to make money?

Boiler room operatives aren't the only ones of whom you need to be wary. Don't respond to people who write or ring you with specific investment prospects. They will tell you about huge once-in-a-lifetime opportunities and you may suppress the thought 'Why are they offering this to me?' and if you do you will lose your money. They will be patient, 'grooming' you for months with gentle telephone calls or e-mails, preparing you nicely before pouncing with the investment bargain you no longer have the strength to refuse; the property that has suddenly come onto the market at a fraction of its real value, the electronic gizmo that will be worth millions, nay billions, once a few tiny flaws have been sorted out.

Be paranoid about your money. Be very wary of people offering you financial advice. Be very wary of people offering you a partnership or a chance to invest in their idea- the one that they guarantee will make you a millionaire in months. Be very wary of people offering you a way to get rich quickly. Be very wary of people whose promotion for their get rich scheme involves photos of their splendid home and their expensive motor car.

Be wary of tipsters who send you letters offering you a chance ('a limited opportunity to a few special, discerning people') to take advantage of a brilliant new investment programme.

There are all sorts of ways to part people from their money. I have a filing cabinet full of examples and many of them are brilliant in their design and execution. The best are often the simplest. The trickster writes to 2,000 people (whose names and addresses he has bought) and tells them about his share dealing programme. As a gesture of goodwill he sends you the name of a share he recommends. It will, he says, go up. You don't buy, of course. A month later he writes again and points out that the share price rose dramatically. You remember the tip. You curse your stupidity in not following the advice. He offers another recommendation. You put it to one side. A month later you receive a third letter. He points out that the second share rose too. You could have made a fortune. And now, having proved his skill as a tipster he comes in for the kill. He offers you a subscription to his share tipping newsletter. It's normally £499 a year. Or £799 a year. Or whatever. But if you subscribe now it will cost you just £149. You write a cheque but the investments he recommends never seem to work. How does he do it? Simple. When he wrote to you recommending the share whose price would rise he also wrote to another 2,000 people telling them that the share price would fall. Whatever happened to the share price he had 2,000 would-be customers. And then he split the 2,000 into two halves. To 1,000 he sent the name of a share. It will rise, he announced. To the other 1,000 he sent the name of the same share. It will fall, he promised. One group of 1,000 was impressed. And to those he sent the offer. Softened up, impressed, many of them wrote cheques.

The best scams are the simplest.

There are a lot of people out there who will cheat you. Some will do it illegally. But the cleverest and most effective will do it entirely legally. I am being entirely realistic (and not in the slightest bit contentious) when I tell you that you will be cheated by lawyers (of all varieties), accountants and bankers. The more money you have the more you will be cheated. You can't stop this happening. All you can do is minimise your losses. And one way to do this is to make it clear that if they steal too much from you then you will take your business elsewhere. Sadly, you can't beat these people (any more than you can, by and large, beat the police, the planning authorities, the tax people or the government) and you probably can't change them either.

* * *

Confidence tricksters who make predictions are sometimes very skilful at promoting their own strengths. Unfortunately, they invariably share a single weakness: an inability to predict both time and event successfully. Most of those who make predictions for a living can assure you firmly that the stock market will go down at some time in the future. And most can tell you, with commendable certainty, that August 3rd will be a Monday in 2015, a Wednesday in 2016 and a Thursday in 2017. The problem is that they can't combine the two skills and tell you the precise date when the stock market will crash -or, indeed, the date when it will go back up again. You can, therefore, safely ignore the specific prognostications of those who claim to be able to forecast the future with great accuracy. If there is ever anyone with a genuine skill in this area you will soon be able to identify him: he will have all the money in the world.

* * *

'Do you want to be rich? Send a SAE and £10 to the following address.'

(Advertisement)

You send £10 to the address.

And a week later your envelope returns. Inside is a slip of paper with the following words printed on it.

'Do as I did.'

* * *

People are not rational when it comes to money. Professionals are just as guilty of behaving stupidly as amateurs. Ponzi schemes and pyramid schemes suck in the professionals just as often as they suck in amateurs.

Greed, fear and irrationality are commonplace. People are invariably keen to follow the herd rather than plough their own furrow. How else can one possibly explain the popularity of Bermuda shorts, Mohican haircuts and safety pins through the nose?

People can, and do, act with astonishing stupidity. They will, moreover, believe that they are behaving sensibly when they are patently behaving like idiots. This is just as true of their behaviour when handling money as when deciding on a hair do or preparing to spend £500 on a new pair of shoes.

Don't respond to any scheme that offers you a chance to get rich with no work and no risk. Many of them are pyramid selling schemes. Some are unsustainable, illegal Ponzi schemes where the capital investment from the latest members is used to pay interest to the original members (most government pension schemes are Ponzi schemes as I explained earlier in this book). Some involve fool-proof ways of betting on horses and winning. Some are stock tipping services that sound very, very convincing and often cost a lot of money. Some involve selling a course explaining how you can sell things by mail order. (The most successful mail order courses of all time are the ones which tell people how they can make money by explaining how to make money by selling things by mail order.) Be watchful and sceptical. There are more tricksters and hucksters and grifters out there than you can possibly imagine.

And, when (not if) you are tricked, don't blame the trickster. Don't waste too much time or energy blaming the bankers, brokers or politicians who took your money.

Every investor on the planet loses money to fraudulent or dishonest schemes. Most of them, the biggest, are organised by big banks or investment houses or governments.

Frauds, cheats and thefts are as much a part of investing life as they are of any other aspect of life. Things aren't fair. Boo hoo. Even the best and most successful investors have occasional losses. Learn from them.

If you blame others for your losses you will never learn from the losses. Only by accepting your share of the responsibility will you benefit.

Don't get too angry when you make a mistake or get conned. The important thing is to use the experience as a learning experience. There is no point at all in getting upset with them (or yourself).

Like many cautious investors I avoided dot.com companies at the turn of the millennium, and kept well away from telecom shares. I can't quite remember the South Sea Bubble or the tulip fiasco but in my nightmares I can still hear the growling bear of the early 1970's.

Despite my caution I've had my mistakes. I took out a solid, safe, boring pension with Equitable Life. I bought zero dividend investment trust shares – according to advisors, brokers and commentators everywhere the safest way to plan for the future. And, looking for a good solid blue chip investment, I bought shares in Railtrack. This turned out to be a painful and expensive triple whammy. The Equitable Life investment turned out to be about as reliable as a papier mâché bicycle in the wet. And the part of the investment trust industry specialising in zero dividend investment trust shares showed itself to have about as much credibility as a Labour party spokesman.

I'm not whingeing about this.

The only thing to be done in these circumstances is to ask: 'What have I learned?'

I didn't learn anything much from the Railtrack fiasco. I didn't trust politicians before they stole my money and I certainly won't ever trust them in the future.

But I've learned not to trust anyone in the investment business. Never again will I trust an investment company, an insurance company, a pension company, a broker or an advisor.

For a career in investment banking the primary requisite seems to be the talent to be able to lose vast amounts of other people's money (preferably managing to siphon large quantities of the stuff into your own pocket as you do so) without losing any sleep or turning grey. This is not a rare talent (if talent is the right word) but it is one so richly rewarded that the lucky few who obtain these jobs have more in common with lottery winners than with employees of more prosaic establishments.

And that’s the sad truth. It is a jungle out there and as private investors you and I are on our own. Other people do care about your money as much as you do. But only because they’re desperately keen to get their sticky fingers on it. And the worst and most effective confidence tricksters in the business are the ones working for the establishment.

VALUE INVESTING (AKA CONTRARIAN INVESTING)

'Without Contraries is no progression.'
WILLIAM BLAKE

You are a value investor if you try to buy shares which seem cheap. This can be because the company concerned has assets per share which are worth more than the share price or simply because the company's dividend yield or p/e ratio suggest that the share is underpriced.

Value stocks have historically outperformed the market in general and growth stocks in particular. Over time value stocks produce 2% more than growth shares. That's a lot. Small cap value shares tend to do best of all.

Value stocks may be cheap because they aren't performing or are performing below their potential earning power, are suffering from poor management, are going through some sort of crisis caused by geopolitical factors, have debt or are considered risky. Investors buy them (despite whatever might be wrong with them) because they suspect that the market has got it wrong and that the shares have been beaten down to an unreasonably low level. Of course, shares may be good value simply because other investors have been concentrating on other shares and have missed the opportunity. Value investors expect to buy unwanted shares cheap because they are unwanted, unattractive, underowned, undervalued and underloved. Misfortune has, perhaps, made the share unpopular. The ideal 'value' share can be purchased below the asset value so that even if the company goes broke there will be value left in the shares.

To be a value investor you need to have a strong conviction about a share. You need to believe that there is underlying value that has not been spotted by other investors. If you buy shares in a good business when the shares are cheap you can, if the business is re-evaluated, either keep the shares (a good investment which you bought below cost and where the dividends will keep rolling in) or, if you know of something better to do with the money, sell them and take a profit and pay whatever taxes may be due.

When looking for a 'value' share that has been cyclically mispriced you should look for a company which is earning lots of cash and has a strong market position. Such a company may, if the share is available at a low price, be a good long-term investment.

Value investors are sometimes also known as contrarian investors (and vice versa). Value investing is rewarding over medium and long periods. Buying high yielding unwanted shares which are in a good but unfashionable business sector can, over the medium and long-term, be enormously profitable.

VOLATILITY

'Lethargy, bordering on sloth, should remain the cornerstone of an investment philosophy.'
WARREN BUFFETT

Volatility measures the degree to which the price of a share or some other asset varies; it is the size and frequency of the fluctuations in the price of whatever is being examined. It is a measurement of how rapidly, and unpredictably, a market changes. If a price goes up and down a lot then it is volatile. Traders try to make money out of volatility by buying when a price is low and selling when it is high. (Another good way to lose your money is to play poker with men who have ponytails and wear dark glasses.) Nerdy people who have inky fingers and nothing better to do with their lives measure volatility by finding the average of the high-low ratio of a share price for the past five years.

Volatility frightens many investors but without it there would be fewer chances to buy bargains. A wildly fluctuating market means that there will occasionally be great opportunities to buy.

Share prices are more volatile than fundamentals and markets are more volatile than the economy as a whole. This may be because investors overreact to bits and pieces of news. And sometimes they worry about things which don't actually happen. Investor psychology has a greater effect on share prices than basic information about the company's activities.

One of the causes of volatility is the fact that prices always overshoot. Investments (whether they are shares or houses or coffee beans or paintings by Van Gogh) become more and more expensive. They go up far above any possible conception of fair value. And then a leaf falls off a tree or a bank clerk sneezes in Panama and everything goes into reverse. The same investments which were soaring will now plunge. And they will plunge far below a reasonable assessment of their value.

Electronic trading is largely responsible for these huge swings in prices. Once the market has established a trend the computers kick in with their momentum strategies and prices surge upwards, ever upwards. The banks' independent analysts, just following what the computers are doing, try to justify the new prices (whether they are high or low) with all sorts of gobbledegook research.

Volatility then becomes even more extreme when investment managers and hedge fund wizards suddenly have to sell shares in order to raise money to pay investors who want their money back, to pay interest on loan payments or to satisfy margin calls. Since the poorer stocks in their portfolios may well be unsaleable they end up selling the good stocks – which then also plunge in price.

Volatility varies enormously with different asset classes. If you look at the 30 years covering the 1970's, 1980's and 1990's the figures show that in its best year (1979) gold rose by 126.5% but in its worst year (1981) it fell by 31.6%. Silver was even more volatile. It rose by 267.4% in 1979 and fell by 46.4% in 1981. Commodities as a whole also showed some extraordinary ups and downs. Their best year was 1973 when they went up by 57.7% and their worst year was 1981 when they declined by 46.4%. Shares and real estate weren't as volatile as gold and silver but they were just as volatile as commodities as a whole. And even long-term government bonds, which averaged a return of 9.5% throughout this 30-year period, produced some amazingly good years and some horrifyingly bad years. In 1982 long-term government bonds rose by 40.4% but in 1994 they fell by 7.8%. If you buy government bonds at the wrong time you stand to make a thumping great loss that can take years to overcome.

Volatility isn't the same thing as risk and when markets seem unstable I think it is important to remain calm. If you believe in your methods you should think of the medium and long-term and accept the volatility adjust another facet of market behaviour.

Many investors are tempted into overtrading by market noise. They react to variability rather than to deep seated trends.

The best way to avoid this temptation is, perhaps, to avoid the temptation to over-monitor your investments. This is especially important if you are a long term investor. When volatility is high there is a great temptation to trade too much. And that can be costly both in terms of expenses and in terms of the fact that you may well be 'out of the market' on the one or two big up days.

Here's a story which illustrates the hazard of over-monitoring your investments. It revolves around the use of computers, which can cause far more comprehensive trading chaos than you might imagine. The 'fat finger' syndrome, whereby a trader's digit adds a few noughts to a trade and, as a result, breaks either his own bank or someone else's by buying a hundred million shares when he intended to buy a few thousand, is now well-documented. But that's a simple keyboard error.

It isn't difficult to find other, rather more sophisticated, examples of the sort of chaos computers can cause.

In September 2008 it was reported in the *Financial Times* that a single mouse click had very nearly grounded United Airlines, the world's second largest airline.

Here's what happened.

A reader looked at the website for the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel* newspaper and found an article about United Airlines's bankruptcy which had originally appeared in the *Chicago Tribune.* That single page visit triggered a chain of events which resulted, less than a day and a half later, in the crash of United shares from 12 dollars to 3 dollars in a matter of minutes, and then back up again almost as quickly.

The visit to the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel* website resulted in the article appearing in a list of the paper's most read stories.

What happened next seems to have been that an electronic Google programme swept through the newspaper's website for news stories and found the story about Universal Airlines.

The article was indexed and appeared on Google's news pages. There was by then no date line on the story.

The news item was then spotted by an employee of a distressed-debt investment newsletter who wrote and published a summary of the story which ended up in a report sent out on Bloomsberg's service.

At 10.44 a.m. United Airlines were trading above $12.

By the time trading was halted at 11 a.m. the shares were down to $3 each.

And even a week later the shares were still almost 15% down. It's difficult to know what lessons to draw from this.

But one lesson is that constantly looking out for news items can damage your wealth. If you'd been holding United Airlines shares and had panicked and sold them when they were down to $3 you could have lost a lot of money. If you hadn't known about the story because you'd slept through it you'd have missed all the excitement and you would have saved yourself a lot of money.

PART THREE

VERNON COLEMAN'S 100 LAWS OF MONEY

'I forget what I was taught. I only remember what I've learnt.'
PATRICK WHITE

1. In investing, as in many areas of life, things are never completely different and yet things are never quite the same.

2. The financial markets (and in particular equity markets) move ahead of the real economy. In other words, markets anticipate economic trends, rather than responding to them. Indeed, the markets are more likely to influence the economy than they are to respond retrospectively to what is happening in the real world.

3. Most people hate losses more than they love gains. This is a leftover instinct from our Stone Age days when the downside from misfortune far exceeded the upside from good fortune. (Breaking a leg while out hunting meant certain death. But catching an animal merely meant temporary respite from hunger.)

4. Risk and return go together like Laurel and Hardy. If you want a big return you have to take a big risk. If you take a small risk you will probably get a small return. This isn't always true, of course. But not many things always happen.

5. The entire financial industry exists to sell things and to make money out of you. If you don't understand – and remember this – you will be cheated, tricked and conned. You are the only person interested in making money for you. Everyone else is interested in making money from you.

6. If you're going to add value to your investments then someone else has to lose money. That's the way it works. Adding value to your investments is a zero-sum game. In order to add value you must know or understand things which most other investors do not know or understand. And you must be able to think independently and think conceptually. You will also need the confidence to go against the crowd. Remember, that you will be competing with highly paid professionals who are equipped with hugely expensive resources.

7. Successful investing involves anticipating change, not reacting to it.

8. You should always be able to explain your investments to anyone in a few simple sentences. If you buy a share or put money into an investment trust or fund you should be able to summarise your reasons in sentences that anyone could understand. And you need to be able to explain why you are continuing to hold this investment on a regular basis – particularly if anything changes.

9. Don't expect the authorities to protect you. They will not. Don't expect compensation when you are deceived. You will probably not get any.

10. If you are uncertain about what is going to happen, it is sometimes wisest to do nothing. This is often difficult to do and may require some strength of will.

11. You can gain even when you lose. If an investment goes wrong and you lose money, study what happened. Did you do something wrong? Were you just unlucky? Be brutally honest with yourself and you will learn from your losses.

12. You must never panic. If you panic you will sell at the wrong time and lose money. The best way to avoid panicking is to make sure that you don't put yourself in a position where you are ever going to feel uncomfortable or under pressure.

13. In the world of investing there are no rules and the only constant is change.

14. If anyone tells you that an investment is a 'no brainer' let them invest in it. They're the ones with no brain.

15. The big mistake investors make is in becoming over-confident. Once you have had a success it is tempting to put that down to your natural genius. On the other hand, if you have a failure that can be dismissed as 'bad luck' or 'unforeseen circumstances'. Over-confident investors tend to trade too much. Don't make the mistake of thinking you are brilliant because you get something right. The chances are that you will screw up next time. The trick is to minimise your losses and to be able to get it right again.

16. Don't take money too seriously. It's only money. In the end the taxmen and the lawyers get it all anyway.

17. Deceit, corruption and disappointment are secular not cyclical.

18. Investing is an intellectual and emotional challenge.

19. Investing is like tennis and golf. At the top level the winners are the ones who make the fewest mistakes.

20. Every investor has a unique risk and reward profile. An investment that is perfect for one investor may not suit another.

21. Buy things when nobody else wants them. And sell when everybody does want them.

22. Buy investments because you want them, not because someone has sold them to you.

23. Markets can behave more irrationally than you would possibly believe. And they can do it for longer than you would possibly believe too.

24. Expect the unexpected. However much you know you will never know more than a tiny percentage of the relevant facts. The only constant in our lives is change. And the only thing that will always happen is the unexpected. The things you are expecting hardly ever happen (and because you are expecting them they are probably already discounted). It is the things you aren't expecting which will threaten your investment and change your life.

25. Big investment opportunities are rare. When you spot one, and you are sure, you have to seize it with both hands.

26. To make long-term gains you need to minimise your losses.

27. Listen to what other people are saying. But do so not because you want to follow their investment advice but because you want to know what they are saying (and probably doing).

28. It may sound silly but you should listen to your instincts when making investments. Don't fight your superstitions or your prejudices. If you have never liked a company or a country or an asset group, find somewhere else to put your money. If you fight your instincts, your prejudices and your superstitions you will never be comfortable. And instincts, prejudices and superstitions are not infrequently based on fact.

29. It is not true that everything that goes up must come down. Nor is it true that everything that goes down must come up.

30. Avoid the idea that things cannot get worse for a company, a sector or a nation. Things can always get worse.

31. Cut your losses in stocks you no longer believe in and, as long as you have faith in the companies, let your profits run. That is probably the most important truth to follow

32. Make your investment choices according to what is happening and not according to what you think should be happening.

33. People are not good at predicting disasters (or any aspect of the future). When something unexpected happens most people tend to overreact. Always be prepared to change your mind if the facts change. But try to do so calmly.

34. Know your weaknesses as an investor. Do you tend to react too much to small items of news? Do you listen too much to what other people say? Are you afraid of losing money? Are you afraid of making money? Do you feel guilty about having money? Until you know yourself, you will not make a competent investor.

35. Many people regard money they've earned with their sweat as being in some way different to money they've won, inherited or received as a bonus of some kind. They will treat the first sort of money with more respect than the second sort of money. This is illogical. Money doesn't know where it has come from.

36. It is easier to lose money than it is to make it.

37. With the possible exception of education there is no such thing as a safe investment. And for an education to be an investment it must result in the acquisition of a skill or talent that is permanently useful and/ or readily saleable.

38. Try to find investments which offer you a chance to make money without too much of a risk of losing it. Heads you win, tails you don't lose very much.

39. If you want to make big money you have to be far enough ahead of the crowd to feel uncomfortable.

40. Only accept investment tips from people who love you.

41. Make sure your money works for you, and not the other way round.

42. If you are to be a successful investor you must know what you want from your investments. And you must know what you are prepared to risk in order to get what you want.

43. People with government jobs usually have a long history of failure. The people with the biggest jobs are usually the ones with the longest history of the greatest failures. This is true for all countries.

44. It is the unexpected things that will affect your investments most dramatically. The events you are expecting will probably have a relatively mild effect. Unexpected, small incidents can often produce a quite disproportionate response.

45. You need to free your mind from distracting noise (irrelevant, short-term information) and from distracting, egotistical notions (such as the idea that selling a losing investment is a sign of failure).

46. If a combination of talent, experience, hard work and a bit of good fortune bring reward to just about every walk of life why should investment be an exception?

47. Battles are won one bullet at a time and investment portfolios are built one decision at a time.

48. Whenever you find yourself facing an investment problem the answer is to focus on the solution rather than the problem.

49. If you want to beat the market you have to outthink the majority of other investors (both professionals and amateurs). That is as easy as it sounds. If you are daunted by that prospect you may succeed. If you are not daunted you will probably not succeed.

50. You will look after your money better than anyone else will.

51. Most of the people who manage investments for a living are complete fools.

52. Act on your convictions. Your convictions (unlike those of the analysts and professional managers) are

honest and objective.
53. Don't be stubborn. If you have made a mistake, admit it to yourself and move on.
54. Don't believe anyone who is not a billionaire who tells you that he can predict interest rates and exchange rates.
55. It is possible to be very successful by being right 30% of the time, as long as you hold your winners and sell your losers.
56. If you go with the crowd (buying what everyone else is buying) you will be no more of a success than everyone else. And most investors (amateur and professional) do worse than the market.
57. Markets are illogical and inefficient.
58. You will hardly ever buy at the bottom and sell at the top. But you can hope to sell higher than you buy.
59. Do more of what works and less of what doesn't.
60. Once you have decided on a course of action – stick to it.
61. Traditional investment rules all rely on hindsight, whereas it is forecasting and predicting skills which count. Identify and understand your investment strengths and then invest accordingly.
62. It isn't information that matters in the world of investing: it is knowing how other people will respond to the available information.
63. Don't fall in love with your investments. It's the most difficult trick of all. The investments you own don't know that you own them. They won't care (or be hurt) if you sell them.
64. Just because everyone else is behaving stupidly, and you are behaving sensibly, does not always mean that you will make more money than them.
65. Don't trust anyone but yourself. And be wary of yourself
66. Buy today what you think others will want to buy tomorrow.
67. If it sounds too good to be true then it probably isn't true.
68. Now is always the most difficult time to make an investment decision.
69. What is money for? Regularly ask yourself this question.
70. If you buy an investment which everyone else agrees is worth buying then you are probably paying too much. This is true for every investment you can think of -including bonds, shares and property.
71. Never take investment advice from anyone who isn't a self-made millionaire and/or considerably richer than you are. What does the guy in your local bank know about investments? If he is so good why isn't he rich, rather than sitting behind a desk telling you what to do with your money?
72. If you aren't prepared to take small losses you will probably have to accept big losses.
73. You can either eat seeds or you can plant them. Money is like seeds.
74. Never allow yourself to become too optimistic. Remain pessimistic about your investments and you will watch them more carefully – and be less likely to lose money.
75. Investments should be for the long-term. Unless there has been a major event causing you to rethink the reason for buying and continuing to hold you should not monitor your portfolio too often. Prices of shares and other investments move on a daily basis. But these movements are often irrelevant. However, it is important to understand that things move faster than they used to and although 'buy and hold' used to be a wise philosophy it is an approach which needs to be tempered. Consumers' tastes, markets, geopolitical forces and technologies change – all these things mean that buying and holding any investment can be dangerous.
76. Interest rates which are high can always go higher. Exchange rates which are low can always go lower. Interest rates which are low can always go lower (until they reach 0%). Exchange rates which are low can always go down until one of the currencies is worthless.
77. Investors should focus. Tiger Woods doesn't try to win the Wimbledon tennis championship. The more you focus the better you will do.
78. The only constant in our lives is change.
79. Above average returns are usually a reward for taking risk. Investors who do particularly well are usually taking big risks. They may do well for several years. But then they may have a bad year. In the long run they will be successful investors only if their good years far outweigh their bad years.
80. Develop your instincts and learn to listen to them. The fundamental philosophy behind my book *Bodypower* was that we should all learn to 'listen to our bodies'. We can know our bodies better than anyone else ever can. As far as investments are concerned no one knows as well as you do what risks you are prepared to take. No one else knows what makes you comfortable. Just as you are the best medical adviser you will ever have so, too, you are also the best financial adviser you will ever have.
81. Investing in the belief that 'the market will eventually come round to my way of thinking' is doomed to failure. You may be right that the market is wrong. But it does not necessarily follow that the market will correct itself. Ever. Why are others ignoring what you know? What do they know that you don't know? What other factors (some known and some only predictable) might you and they have missed?
82. Seek out opinions that contradict your own. Use them to test the soundness of your own strategy before making an investment decision. Look at both sides. Situations are rarely simple.

83. Before investing try to read as much as you can written by those who think that your planned investment is foolish. If you can understand and counter their arguments your thesis and conviction will be stronger.
84. Keep six months income in cash. Who knows when the roof is going to start leaking, the car is going to fall apart or the taxman is going to send an unexpected demand for money. If you have some cash you can deal with these problems. If you don't have any cash available you may have to sell investments at a terrible time.
85. Don't expect your chosen investment to rise immediately after you've bought it. You might have to wait a while for the rest of the market to realise that you're a genius and that they want to make the same investment decision that you've made.
86. Past performance does not guarantee future success. Indeed, if past performance is based upon styles which have gone out of date there is a chance that past good performance will guarantee future failure.
87. You won't go far wrong if you buy what most people are selling. Successful investment is largely about courage.
88. Learn as you go. If you take notice as you get wealthier you will be able to do it all again (and quicker) if everything goes bad.
89. Nobody – nobody – knows for certain what the markets are going to do next year, next month, next week or tomorrow. If they knew they would have all the money in the world.
90. However much you know you will never know more than a tiny percentage of the relevant facts.
91. Always be prepared to ask dumb-sounding questions when planning an investment. You can't afford not to ask them. Asking dumb questions requires courage. That's why they are worth asking.
92. Before investing, always work out the worst case scenario. And give yourself an exit strategy.
93. Always remember why you are investing. The aim is to make money. Do not feel shy or embarrassed about this. If your aim is to make the world a better place, put your money to work in some more direct way.
94. There is no single rule for successful investing. If investing was easy everybody would follow the rule and everybody would be rich.
95. If it sounds too good to be true – don't buy it. If you don't understand it – don t buy it. If you don't understand how the seller can make money – don t buy it.
96. Find an investment with the minimum downside and with a good possible return. Make as big an investment as you dare so that you can make a big profit. Do this rarely, when you are convinced that your investment choice will do well.
97. When markets are in turmoil it is vital to keep your emotions out of your decisions. Fear, panic and greed have no place in rational decision making though they are the forces which drive most investors, most bankers and most politicians. Rational thought, based on an understanding of the larger picture (which includes the interaction between geopolitical events and human nature) is the only basis for investment success.
98. Find an investment approach that matches your personality; your fears, your hopes, your needs.
99. You can only beat the professionals by being wiser than they are. And that is easier than you might think it is.
100. The key to successful investing is to look at geopolitical issues and to spot global trends, and to understand their importance to other people.

'We've had some good centuries and we've had some bad centuries.'
A WISE FAMILY INVESTOR.

Vernon Coleman has written over 100 books which have sold over two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK. His books have been translated into 25 languages. Many of his books are now available as Kindle books on Amazon. For a full list of available books please visit Vernon Coleman's author page on Amazon. For more information visit www.vernoncoleman.com

If you found this book helpful we would be grateful if you would post a review on Amazon.

Mr Henry Mulligan

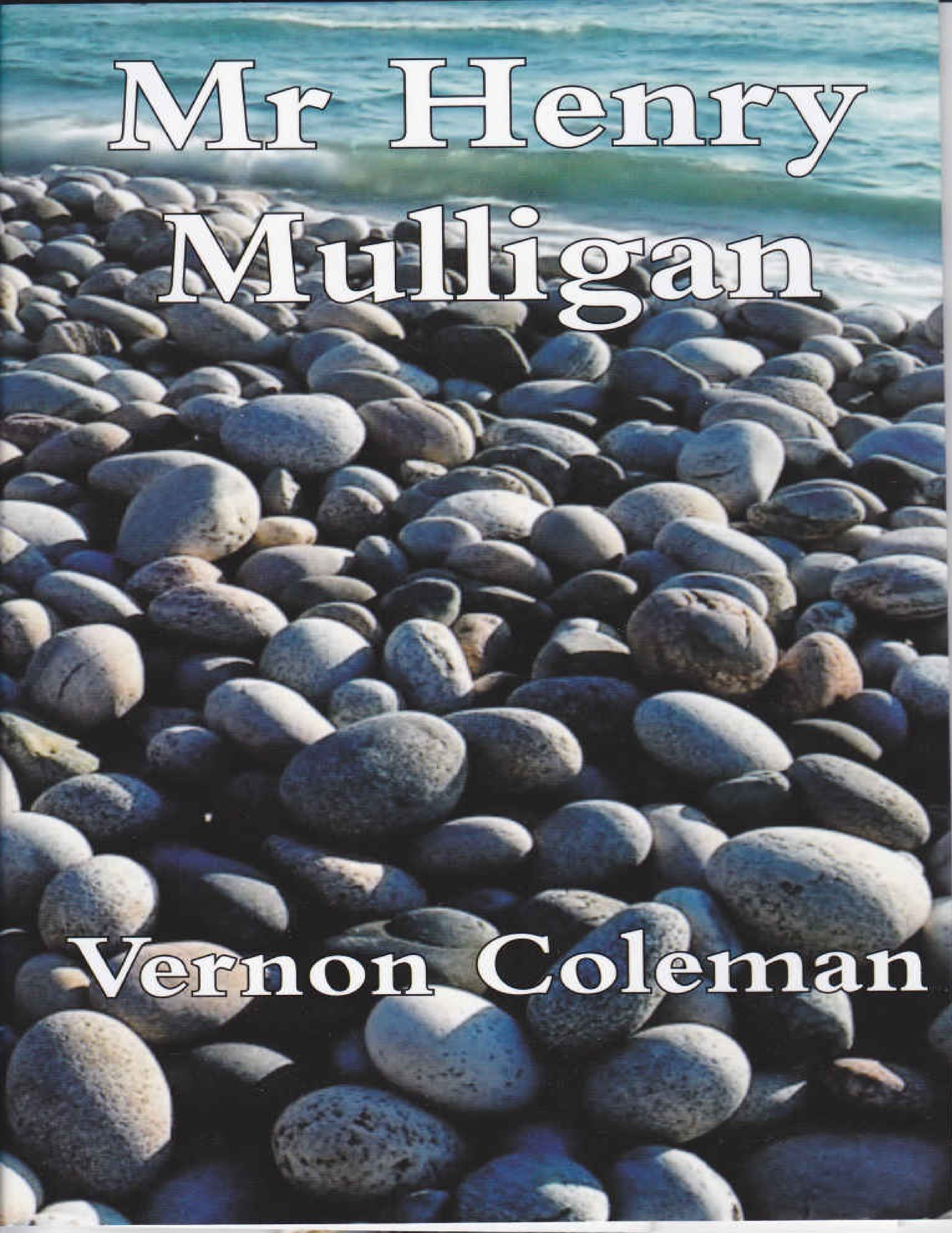

Vernon Coleman

Mr Henry Mulligan

Vernon Coleman

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Dedication

To Donna Antoinette with all my love. A human island of generosity, loyalty and integrity in a world which too often seems overrun by the wicked, the cruel and the thoughtless. An island offering respite in a turbulent ocean.

Prologue

Henry had been in hospital for a long time.

We’d first met in the teaching hospital in Birmingham during my finals examination in 1971, a little over a year earlier. He’d only been in hospital a day or so and he had been one of my ‘short cases’. I don’t know how they do it these days but the routine for examining final year medical students was simple and straightforward but nerve-wracking. A visiting examiner, usually a senior consultant from another medical school, took a student to see three patients. Usually these were patients who had been brought into the hospital specially for the day. Sometimes they would be patients who had been recently admitted to the hospital but who had not yet been seen by students.

My ‘long case’ had gone reasonably well and I’d successfully diagnosed the first two of my ‘short cases’. The examiners had been relatively human. Now I just had one more hurdle to overcome. If I acquitted myself reasonably well I would probably pass and mutate, overnight, from medical student to doctor. From reckless and irresponsible to a responsible, respected member of the community in just a few hours.

‘Henry is 72-years-old,’ said the examiner, standing at the end of the bed and rather airily waving a hand in Henry’s direction. At the bottom of the bed, where a clipboard containing the patient’s temperature chart is usually hooked over the bottom rail there was nothing. The clipboard had gone; safely stored in an office somewhere. In its place there was a piece of paper Sellotaped to the bed frame. ‘Henry Mulligan. Aged 72.’ That was all I was getting.

The examiner was Scottish and spoke with a broad accent which I could barely understand. When he waved his arm about, two inches of starched cuff slipped back a little and what looked like, and probably was, a gold Rolex flashed in the sunlight. ‘Without getting closer than the end of the bed I want you to tell me what’s wrong with him.’

I smiled at Henry. I felt embarrassed, partly because of the doctor’s rudeness and partly because of what I was doing. Although I was close to being a doctor I was conscious that I was still a medical student, still not yet thoroughly accustomed to staring at total strangers. I loathed and despised consultants who treated patients with no more respect than they treated histology specimens in the laboratory.

‘The thumb is missing from his left hand,’ I said quickly.

‘Bravo,’ said the examiner. ‘Does it appear to be a recent loss?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Quite right,’ said the examiner. ‘Mr Mulligan lost his thumb when he was sixteen. An industrial accident. It has no relevance to his current stay in hospital and nor, indeed, to your future.’

I studied Mr Mulligan again. ‘He’s not yellow is he?’ I asked. There aren’t many diagnoses which can be made from simply looking at a patient from a distance. Especially when all you have to look at is a face and two hands. Jaundice was an easy and obvious possibility.

The consultant stared at Henry and then at me. ‘No, he’s not,’ he said. ‘But you get no marks for spotting things that he isn’t.’ He sounded bored. ‘If you’re going to give me a list of things he’s not then we’re going to be here a very long time. To save us both time, he’s not pregnant, he hasn’t got measles and he’s not dead either.’ He smiled and displayed two rows of perfectly capped and polished teeth. He looked like a shark. ‘I’m not always this helpful,’ he said. ‘You must be charming me.’

Now I knew. The consultant was one of the sarcastic ones. I felt the sweat breaking out on my brow and wondered whether it would be better to leave it there or to wipe it away. I stared at Henry again. All I could see of him was his face, neck and hands. It really wasn’t a lot on which to form a diagnosis. Six years learning seemed to have disappeared as quickly as water down a drain.

‘Does he have any symptoms?’ I asked the consultant.

‘He may do. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that it is extremely likely. Despite the generosity of the health service I doubt if he would be taking up a bed if he had no symptoms. This is not my hospital but I doubt if your superiors will have stocked their beds with healthy passers-by taken from the streets. Your task here is to make a diagnosis simply by standing where you are and using your eyes and whatever cerebral tissue the good Lord chose to give you.’

I stared again. Henry’s hands and wrists seemed normal. No signs of arthritis. No Dupuytren’s contracture. No clubbing. No skin lesions. His hair was thinning but baldness would hardly be the diagnosis the inquisitor was looking for. Both eyes seemed normal. Pupils the same size. Or were they? Was one a little smaller than the other? He had dark brown eyes and from this distance it wasn’t easy to be sure. One eyelid seemed to be drooping a little. Did he have a seventh facial nerve paralysis? Henry, staring back at me, allowed a twitch of a smile. The corners of both sides of his mouth moved together. No seventh nerve paralysis. No Bell’s Palsy.

‘His breathing seems a little laboured,’ I said, rather desperately.

‘So is yours,’ sneered the consultant immediately. ‘But it’s hardly a diagnosis, is it?’ He looked at his watch, lifted it closer to his ear and shook it as though wondering if it had stopped. Some consultants develop these little bits of play acting. They think they're being funny.

I stared at the patient again. There was some redness on the man's cheeks. It wasn't a lot. Hardly there really. And I was certain there was some drooping to one eyelid. The right one.

Just then the ward sister approached. She was carrying a small piece of folded paper.

'I'm sorry to bother you, sir,' I heard her whisper. She oozed deference and ingratiation. 'There's a telephone message for you.'

I was still staring at Henry. He lifted a finger and touched his cheek. Then he touched his right eyelid. The movement looked perfectly natural. But I knew it wasn't. Some patients have been known to give students a clue. Maybe these were clues. On other hand some patients have been known to deliberately mislead students.

The examiner had opened the note and was reading it.

I was sure now that Henry's cheeks were slightly red. And there was a slight droop to one eyelid. If only I could see the pupil a little better. I glanced at the ward clock. I had less than two minutes to make a stab at a diagnosis. But what the hell was it? Patients with a type of heart disease known as mitral stenosis will sometimes have very red cheeks. It's not common. I'd never seen it. But if teaching hospitals specialise in anything it is the rare and unusual.

A drooping eyelid can be a sign of many things but it can be part of something called Horner's Syndrome: a possible sign of lung cancer.

The trouble was that I now had two quite separate diagnoses. One diagnosis would be good. Two was twice as many as I needed. But Mr Mulligan had definitely touched both his cheek and his eyelid. If he had been giving me a hint he had been giving me two hints. Two clues.

The examiner folded the note and slipped it into his jacket pocket. 'Thank you sister,' he murmured. The sister paused for a moment, as though wondering whether she should curtsey, and then backed away down the ward. 'Are we any closer to a diagnosis?' he asked me.

I thought hard. My brain was racing and sweat was dripping into my eyes. Underneath my white coat my shirt was soaked and clinging to my back. I had two possible diagnoses. But which one should I choose? I had been taught that I should always try to fit a patient's signs and symptoms into a single diagnosis. But I knew of nothing that could cause reddened cheeks and a droopy eyelid.

'I suspect that Mr Mulligan has two problems,' I said softly, taking my future by the throat. I had turned away from the patient's bed. I felt uncomfortable about announcing my diagnosis in front of him, though I knew that he would already have been told what was wrong with him and warned to ignore the diagnostic ravings of medical students. 'He has mitral stenosis and pulmonary carcinoma.'

'You suspect?' said the examiner. He glowered at me. There was no sign on his face as to whether I was correct. 'The verb 'suspect' is a very uncertain word. I don't like uncertain doctors.'

'Mr Mulligan has mitral stenosis and pulmonary carcinoma,' I whispered.

'Two diagnoses?' said the examiner. 'You have one patient but you're giving me two diagnoses?'

I nodded. I would have to spend another year at medical school and then resit my finals in twelve months' time. I had heard of students who had failed their finals three times.

'Do you have a Guardian Angel whispering in your ear?'

'No, sir.'

'Do you believe in miracles?'

'Possibly, sir.'

'Well I certainly do now,' said the examiner. Another little joke. 'You're absolutely right. Mr Mulligan has mitral facies caused by mitral stenosis and he has developed Horner's syndrome as a result of developing pulmonary cancer.'

'Thank you, sir,' I murmured.

'Nothing whatsoever to thank me for, doctor,' said the examiner. 'Congratulations.'

Before his words had properly sunk in he had turned and was walking away, heading for the sister's office and the telephone. Abandoned, I stood at the end of Henry's bed. Two words had changed my future. Doctor. Congratulations. It was over. I had qualified.

Still in a daze, I thanked Mr Mulligan and shook his hand. He smiled and congratulated me. I was still too traumatised to take it in. I left the ward, went to the hospital canteen and celebrated with a cup of weak coffee and a stale doughnut.

Chapter 1

Twelve months later I was finishing my pre-registration year's work as a junior hospital doctor and Henry was still a patient in the hospital where I had first met him. I was working on the male geriatric ward as the resident junior doctor (the doctor on the very bottom rung of the hospital hierarchical ladder, the one who gets up in the middle of the night, appears on Sunday afternoon when a new patient has to be admitted and turns up at odd hours of the day and night to take blood samples, deal with day-to-day emergencies and, in view of my height, fit fresh light bulbs into the fitting in the ward sister's office). Henry, who had been thrown out of the acute medical ward because they could no longer think of anything positive to do with him, was a patient there. He wasn't well enough to go home. He wouldn't have been well enough to go home without full-time nursing care. Since he lived in a caravan with a wife who was ill, he stayed in hospital.

We were both on Windom ward because it was a place for people who weren't wanted anywhere else. Henry wasn't wanted anywhere else because he was considerable incurable; beyond medical redemption. Patients died every day on Windom ward. It was what people seemed to do best there. It was certainly what they were expected to do. Patients were dumped on the ward because there wasn't anything else that could be done for them and they weren't well enough to go home or be deposited in an old people's home. I was there because I'd annoyed too many important people to get a job on a fashionable ward where exciting things were happening. Over my years as a medical student I had found a number of ways of upsetting the establishment hierarchy. Putting me on Windom ward was, in their eyes, a punishment.

But even though we had ended up in the same place because we wanted anywhere else (or considered good enough to be anywhere else) my future was still considerably brighter than Henry's. I was about to become a fully registered medical practitioner, entitled to escape from the hospital and work as a general practitioner without supervision. Henry had a big T stamped on his medical notes in red ink. He was terminally ill and the consultant responsible for his destiny had decreed that if there was an emergency Henry was not to be resuscitated. No one thought he was worth bothering about. He was old and unimportant. He wasn't, and never had been as far as anyone knew, a man of significance or substance. He was just another dull, old man waiting to die. So, why bother doing anything to delay the inevitable? No one would dare admit it but that was the official policy. Of course, if he'd ever been important, or related to someone important, things would have been different.

During the twelve months we had known each other, Henry Mulligan and I had become good friends. I sometimes wondered if I would have qualified without the confidence he had given me. That touch on his cheek and the touch on his eyelid hadn't given me the answers but they had given me the confidence without which I would once again be standing there sweating while an impatient examiner stood behind me shaking his watch. I felt a great debt to him but there was far more to our relationship than that. I had learned more about real life and about people from Henry than I had learned from any doctor or teacher. Often, at night, we would talk in the day room. He didn't sleep well and he would sit there, in his wheelchair, reading quietly: a solitary and lonely figure, lit by the light from a single wall lamp. If I was called to the ward I would call in to see how he was and I would end up sitting and talking. Or, rather, sitting and listening.

It was difficult for him to talk. His deteriorating heart and his lung cancer meant that every breath was an effort, and every word had to be hewn out of what little strength he had left. It meant that he weighed his words with special care and laid them before with the caution and precision of a poet.

He told me something about his life. His parents had been poor. His father had worked on the dustcarts and hadn't learned to read until he was 26. He'd taught himself so that he could make sure that his son wouldn't have an illiterate father. His mother had cleaned office floors at night. They had both worked until they'd died. 'Kind, honest, decent people. Salt of the earth,' was how Henry described them. 'Exploited' he added, the bitterness showing through.

Henry's formal education had ended when he'd left school at 14. He had worked as an apprentice at a small engineering factory in the West Midlands. Wolverhampton. Willenhall. Wednesbury. Walsall. Somewhere in that area. At nights he'd studied maths and engineering as part of his apprenticeship but, with an unquenchable thirst for knowledge, he'd also studied English (language and literature) and History.

'When I was a teenager I believed that the truth would set us free,' he said, wistfully. 'But the innocent days didn't last long. The more I discovered the more discontented I became. The truth does not make us free but it does make us angry, frustrated and bitter. It makes us conscious of our own impotence and of the extent of the evil which surrounds us.'

***

I got into the habit of taking a flask of hot water, two mugs and some Earl Grey teabags into the hospital with me.

Henry loved a cup of tea but hated the stuff the hospital served up. ‘It’s brown and milky and doesn’t taste of anything,’ he complained.

We were drinking tea at six o’clock one morning in the day room. The night staff were still on duty and breakfast was still an hour or so away. Henry couldn’t sleep, as usual, and I didn’t see any point in going back to bed. I had a patient who was seriously ill. I knew I would have to go and see him in half an hour so I sat with Henry.

‘My father was in this hospital just before he died,’ said Henry. ‘In fact he died here, though not on this ward. When my father was dying he said something that, at the time, I thought was very sad,’ said Henry. ‘He said that there was no-one in the world who called him by his first name. All his friends and workmates were dead or too sick to visit him. My mother had gone years before. All his relatives were either dead or out of touch. The only people he saw were the nurses and the doctors, who all called him Mr Mulligan, and me. And I called him Dad.’

Henry sipped at his tea. ‘He wanted me to call him by his Christian name. He was Henry too. But I couldn’t bring myself to do it. It didn’t seem right. I know kids do it these days but back then it seemed like blasphemy.’

‘So, what did you do?’

‘I had a word with the doctor and got the doctor to call him Henry.’

I smiled at him. ‘Did your father enjoy that?’

‘Very much,’ nodded Henry. ‘He didn’t know I’d arranged it and he told me about it with great glee.’

‘That’s a nice story,’ I told him.

‘But it’s only half the story,’ said Henry. He sipped again at his tea. He always sipped at his tea, like a man drinking a fine malt whisky. ‘Do you know I can’t remember when anyone called me Mr Mulligan.’

I looked at him, frowning. I didn’t quite understand.

‘Everyone I meet calls me Henry,’ he said. ‘Every doctor, every nurse, every porter, every cleaner, every clerk – they all call me Henry.’ He waved a hand. ‘I go down to the X-ray department and the girl at the desk calls me Henry. The radiographer calls me Henry. The porter who brings me back calls me Henry. I go down to the lab and the technicians call me Henry. Oh, I know it’s not just me. They do it to everyone. They call all the patients by their Christian name. They all call one another by their Christian names too.’ He paused and stared at his tea. ‘There’s no dignity to it. There isn’t the joy of reaching that moment in a relationship between two people when formality is dropped and people get on first name terms. That’s what it used to be called. Being on first name terms. It meant that you knew one another well and that you were friends rather than just acquaintances.’

I didn’t know what to say. I was as guilty as everyone else and I saw his point. Actually, I didn’t just see his point, I knew he was right.

We sat in silence, the weak, morning sunlight slowly filtering in through the day room windows.

‘Would you like more tea, Mr Mulligan?’ I asked him at last.

He looked at me, saw that I was serious, and held out his cup. ‘Thank you doctor,’ he said. ‘That’s very kind of you. I don’t mind if I do.’

I filled his cup and then filled mine and put the now empty flask down on the table in front of us. We sat there, sipping at our tea and watching the day break.

***

After that I addressed Henry as Mr Mulligan and I addressed his wife Daphne as Mrs Mulligan. Henry, in turn, addressed me as doctor. Daphne could hardly ever remember my name but when she did it was still my Christian name, which I didn’t mind a bit.

More importantly, I always referred to Henry as Mr Mulligan when I was talking about him to other members of the hospital staff. And the funny thing is that it stuck with quite a lot of them. Nurses and porters and even other doctors referred to him as Mr Mulligan and called him Mr Mulligan when they spoke to him. And then I did the same thing with other patients too. Instead of referring to them by their Christian names I referred to them by their surnames.

***

A week or two later we were sitting in the day room drinking tea. I can’t remember what we were talking about.

‘Would you like more tea, Mr Mulligan?’ I asked him, holding up the flask. ‘There’s still a cup each left.’

‘Do you know,’ he said, looking at me. ‘I think we know each other well enough to dispense with the formalities. Why don’t we address each other by our Christian names?’

‘On first name terms?’

‘On first name terms.’

I thought about it for a moment. ‘On one condition,’ I said at last. ‘Only when we’re alone. When we’re with other people – or when we are talking about each other to other people – we stick to surnames. You’re still Mr Mulligan.’

Henry didn’t even think about it. He held out a hand. I put down the flask and grasped it.

‘It’s a deal,’ he said. ‘A gentleman’s agreement.’

***

‘Today we celebrate,’ said Henry. He took a small miniature whisky bottle out of one dressing gown pocket and two bars of chocolate from the other.

‘What are we celebrating?’

‘Every day from now on is a bonus,’ said Henry. ‘It was exactly six months ago that my consultant gave me six months to live.’

‘So you should be dead by now?’

‘Exactly.’

‘You look well for dead.’

‘I feel well for dead.’

‘Doctors shouldn’t make prognoses like that,’ I said.

‘They shouldn’t,’ said Henry. ‘I hope you never will. Doctors can kill people that way.’

I took a bite from the bar of chocolate he’d given me and waited.

‘Since I’ve been in here,’ he said, ‘I’ve known three people who’ve died because they were told they were dying.’

‘You can’t know that,’ I protested.

He shrugged. ‘Pretty certain of it,’ he said. ‘They were all told by their consultant that they would be dead within a specific time period. Same chap who told me when I’d die. They all fretted about it. They all regarded the date as though it was an execution date.’

‘And they died near to it?’

‘No. They died on it. Bang on the button.’

I ate more chocolate and felt a shiver down my spine.

‘Voodoo,’ said Henry. ‘Plain, old-fashioned voodoo. If you live in a primitive village and the man in the warpaint and chicken feathers tells you that you’re going to die then you die. Here we’re a bit more sophisticated. The man handing out the death sentences wears a white coat instead of warpaint and chicken feathers.’

Chapter 2

Amanda Pettigrew was short and slim. She had short, dark hair, a cute nose and such an improbably large bust that she was known to everyone as Mae. Her bosom stretched her jumpers close to breaking point. Once, when she walked into the Coronary Care Unit to deliver some missing medical notes, she had caused chaos. Five monitors went off all at once as male patients responded to her appearance. Of the remaining four patients two were asleep, one was female and 83-years-old and one had died and was waiting to be wheeled down to the mortuary.

Amanda worked in the medical records office and had a very well-developed affection for the good life. She had no qualifications and regarded learning as something other people did so that they could be of more use to her. She said she didn't see the point in qualifications. 'I can always be a model or read the news on the television,' she said, pointing out that she could walk while wearing clothes and she could read while sitting down and that knowing how to do anything else would be superfluous. Her work in the medical records office was, I suppose, an essential part of her husband acquisition programme. Even then I wasn't sure why we were together for we had absolutely nothing in common.

Her father was a dentist who also owned a growing chain of estate agents. I was never quite sure whether he was a dentist who dabbled in selling houses or an estate agent who dabbled in bridge work and root canals. Either way he was obsessed with making money. It was his job, his hobby and his passion.

Amanda's mother's obsession was spending money and I suppose that made Mr and Mrs Pettigrew pretty well suited for each other. 'If they ever create an Olympic event for shoppers my wife will be the first pick for the British team,' said Mr Pettigrew, with some pride, usually adding that as sport became ever-increasingly commercial he didn't regard the prospect of such an event as an impossibility. Mr and Mrs Pettigrew were keen to establish what they called 'a position' in local society and to this end they held regular fund-raising dinners to which they would invite a wide variety of local worthies. They served up expensive food and even more expensive wine and collected donations for their favourite charity of the moment. Someone who had attended one of their seemingly well-intentioned soirees confided that if the Pettigrews had forgotten about the dinners and just written a cheque for a quarter of what they spent on food and wine the charity of the moment would have done twice as well.

Amanda and I had met at one of those curious parties which are held at regular intervals in the junior doctors' mess. Vast quantities of cheap food (usually from a local Chinese takeaway) and cheap wine (invariably bought by the crate from a local supermarket) were provided free of charge by a drug company keen to indoctrinate young doctors before they went out into the real world of general practice and started prescribing serious quantities of drugs. The party would usually start with a short, ten minute film about one of the organising company's products. The company's representative would then hand out pens, notepads, diaries and other marketing flim flam before taking the tops off all the silver foil dishes from the takeaway and declaring the meeting closed and the party started. Since the parties were usually held in the junior doctors' living area there wasn't much chance of keeping out of the way. Anyone could turn up and it wasn't unusual for us to stagger out of our bedrooms the following morning and find a patient or two, sometimes still complete with drip stand, sitting snoring in a corner; pyjamas or nightie stained with sweet and sour and paint stripping Chianti.

We met about three months before the end of my second six month stint as a junior house officer. Within a few weeks we had become a couple. I had met her parents (both of whom had shown little interest in anything other than my potential earning power and my ability to keep their daughter well supplied with a copious supply of those two essentials of the rising classes, shoes and handbags) and Amanda's conversation had turned, with ominous speed and ease, to the drawbacks of shagpile carpeting and the long-term benefits of double-glazing.

Amanda made it clear that she was planning to give up her job and follow in her mother's footsteps as a full-time housewife. She also made no secret of the fact that she expected to have staff to deal with the day to day trivia of shopping, cleaning, cooking, washing, ironing and so on, leaving her free to deal with the more sophisticated business of choosing costume accessories.

We (or rather she) had decided to celebrate the end of my pre-registration year with a two week holiday on Corfu. I hadn't had a proper holiday for years but Amanda, whose parents supplemented her hospital salary with a generous clothes and holiday allowance, had travelled widely in her search for a perfect suntan and more shoes. She produced a brochure, got me to write a cheque and booked the holiday. I was looking forward to a rest and had already filled a suitcase with paperback books I was looking forward to reading. I had not told Amanda this. We had once had a rather confused conversation as a result of her belief that the words 'book' and 'catalogue' were synonymous.

Four days before we were due to fly off, Amanda rang and said she wanted to meet me in the cafeteria to discuss our future. I found this prospect rather alarming but was greatly relieved when she announced that the holiday and the relationship were both ‘off’. She had, she told me with no suspicion of regret or embarrassment, also been having a serious relationship with a manager in one of her father’s estate agency shops. My long working hours must have made it easy for her to see Roderick and I suppose she probably told Roderick that she was having her nails done when she was seeing me.

‘Roderick and I are going to Crete,’ she told me. ‘We’re getting married later in the year. He’s got an MGB and a three bedroomed detached house on the new development Dad’s handling for the builders. It’s not a starter home. It’s an executive residence.’

I was greatly relieved at this unexpected change in my circumstances but did my best not to show it. Amanda wouldn’t have noticed if I had. She was too busy telling me about the price of the carpets and curtains they’d chosen. She said she’d known about this plan for some weeks but that she’d decided to leave it until I’d finished my second pre-registration house job so that I’d be too busy celebrating to feel downcast at the news. I told her that I appreciated her thoughtfulness and she said she always liked to treat people nicely because you never knew when you might need them. ‘Who knows,’ she said, ‘you might become a plastic surgeon and be able to save my life one day.’

She told me that she had gone out with me to see if she really loved the estate agent but that in the end she’d decided she didn’t love the estate agent at all but would marry him because his financial prospects were so much better than mine. ‘Even if you go into general practice you won’t earn as much as Roderick is earning for at least a decade,’ she said. ‘Daddy checked out the figures for me,’ she said. ‘And he gets better holidays too,’ she added.

As soon as she’d left I telephoned the travel agent and tried to cancel the trip to Corfu. I really couldn’t bear the idea of going by myself. The girl I spoke to said it was too late to cancel and that I wouldn’t get a refund unless I could show exceptional personal circumstances. I told her my girlfriend had left me and was going off with an estate agent. This news seemed to trigger memories with the travel agent. She told me that her boyfriend had left her to go off with a dental hygienist who was (in her words) ‘no better than she ought to be’ and ‘a cheap tart’. She (the travel agent not the dental hygienist) asked if I was depressed. I lied and said that I felt like killing myself. She said she did too but that it passed. She said she couldn’t give me a refund, though. She then gave me her home telephone number and told me to ring her if I was able to go to a party with her the following Saturday. I didn’t write the number down.

I didn’t have another job to go to. I didn’t have a girlfriend. I wasn’t going on holiday. I had a new certificate entitling me to work as a general practitioner. But that was about all I did have. To be honest, I felt at a bit of a loose end.

And then something happened that made Amanda’s decision to dump me definitely fortuitous.

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Junior house jobs last for six months. At the end of the six months the hospital finds another young doctor and the exiting incumbent, by now pale, exhausted and sucked dry by hard-working days and sleepless nights, is discarded; used up and shell-shocked. It’s a long journey from carefree, irresponsible medical student to being a doctor responsible for scores of lives and hundreds of life or death decisions every week. But it’s a journey that takes no time at all. One day I was a medical student; my only real concern the examinations ahead of me. Days later I was a hospital doctor; with no time at all for personal thoughts. Life flashed by as though I were on a motorway.

In those days, the early 1970’s, there were no rules governing the hours young doctors were allowed to work. During my two house jobs I don’t think I ever worked less than 100 hours a week. And that wasn’t counting the interrupted nights I spent on call; collapsing into a coma in between telephone calls and beeps from bright and cheery night nurses. ‘Oh, doctor, can you come to Windom Ward please. Mrs Jamieson’s drip has come out again.’ ‘Oh, doctor, can you pop along to Albert Ward and sign a prescription for Mr Jennings. He can’t get to sleep and needs a tablet.’ On several occasions I actually managed to clock up 168 hours of work in a single week. Naturally, there was no overtime and sympathy was in equal short supply.

The night nurses would go off duty in the early morning, handing over to the daytime shift, wrapping themselves up in their blue-lined cloaks and scurrying back to have huge fried breakfasts in the canteen before going back to bed. Some nurses preferred working nights. They slept for five or six hours and spent their afternoons shopping and going to deserted cinemas. But while they slept or shopped, the junior doctors just kept on working. ‘We never close’ should have been our motto. I saw young doctors fall asleep while leaning against a wall. The calls from the wards came so thick and fast that we got used to eating three course meals in five minutes or less. Spooning in the custard before the soup had finished its journey down the oesophagus. Indigestion? Too young for that. The payment for this lifestyle would be made in later years.

My six months contract as junior house officer for Windom Ward had ended. It was the second of my six month pre-registration hospital jobs. I was now fully qualified.

It was my last day on the ward; my last day in my job; my last day working at the hospital where I had spent every working day since I'd qualified; my last day as a hospital doctor. It was the first day of a new life with no job, no commitments and no home. Everything I owned that I wasn't wearing was in a suitcase and a small bag. Since I'd qualified I'd lived in a hospital room for a year. The room went with the job. Now I didn't have a job I didn't have a room either. I had to find somewhere to stay. I had £12 in cash and £137 in the bank.

I had handed over my ward, my patients and my responsibilities to my successor, a frighteningly fresh and innocent-looking young doctor who had been qualified for two days. He looked too young to have started shaving. His cheeks were pink and freshly scrubbed, his eyes were bright and sparkled with excitement. The pockets of his freshly starched white coat were stuffed with instruments and notebooks filled with revision notes. I couldn't help wondering what he'd done wrong to get this job. No newly qualified doctor with ambitions wanted a job on a geriatric ward. It was regarded as a dead-end job; a career backwater suitable only for those who had no future and no medical ambitions. The young guns, those junior doctors hoping for medical fame and fortune, all wanted to work on the heart unit or in paediatric neurology.

I tried to think back to when I had started my first hospital job. Had I ever been so innocent, fresh and full of energy? Of course I had. But I couldn't remember it. I was too damned tired. I was too damned tired to remember what I'd done the day before let alone how I'd felt a year earlier. I caught sight of myself in a mirror in the staff washroom. I seemed to have aged ten years since I'd qualified. I went back to the ward for one final time to say goodbye to the staff and the patients who had been my life for twenty six weeks. I shook hands, kissed cheeks and people I knew I would never see, speak to or hear from again and we promised to keep in touch with one another. 'People always say this and never do but it'll be different with us, won't it?' said a nurse whose name I had already forgotten. 'Would you have a look at Mr Kendall's drip before you go? The new doctor put it up and it isn't working properly.' Henry Mulligan wasn't there. His bed was empty. But he hadn't just gone down to have an X-ray. The bed had been stripped. And his locker was bare.

I poked my head round the door to the office. Sister Tomkins, the ward sister was in there. She looked harassed. She always looked harassed. She was in her early forties and lived with her mother. She was kind and caring and made from the sort of material there's a shortage of these days.

'Where's Mr Mulligan gone?' I asked. For months Henry had been too weak to walk. Even to move about the ward he had to be in a wheelchair. And he was too frail to wheel himself more than a couple of feet.

'Oh don't ask,' she replied.

'No, where is he?'

'He's been stolen.'

I stared at her.

'He's been stolen,' she repeated. 'I'm having a terrible day. Henry has been stolen and the night staff mislaid a bottle of nitrazepam.'

'Who would steal Henry?' I asked her. 'Why?' As much as I loved him I couldn't see anyone wanting to ransom him. Who would pay? With what?

The sister shrugged. 'I have no idea,' she said. She sounded tired and exasperated. 'You knew him better than anyone,' she said. 'Have you got any ideas?'

'When did anyone last see him?'

'I saw him yesterday at supper time. No one seems to remember seeing him since then. He had his supper in the day room. He was in his wheelchair watching television.'

'Was anyone else in there?'

'No. He was by himself.'

'And no one remembers putting him to bed?'

'No.'

'Where's all the stuff that was in his locker.'

Sister Tomkins nodded to a plastic bag on the floor. 'In there.'

'No one else in the hospital has seen him?'

'Not that I know of.'

'What are you going to do?

'I'll have to put him down as a voluntary discharge.'

'But he couldn't discharge himself,' I pointed out.

'I know,' agreed the sister. 'But what's the alternative? We didn't discharge him and if I report him as stolen everyone will think I've gone barmy.'

'You're not going to tell the police?'

'Tell the police? Tell them what? That I've mislaid a patient? They'd laugh themselves silly. Besides, I don't want the police round here now that some idiot on nights has lost a bottle of nitrazepam. I bet it was that stupid bloody

Ecclestone girl. She's away with the fairies most of the time. She's fallen out with her boyfriend and she doesn't know what day it is. She's probably left them in the sluice or posted them to her granny.'

I knew why Henry had gone. And who with. I also knew he'd taken the nitrazepam. I was just relieved that no one else seemed to have connected Henry's disappearance with the disappearance of the sleeping pills. Nurse Ecclestone could take care of herself if the Sister bawled her out. She'd done plenty of things for which she'd never been blamed.

'What are you going to do with his stuff?' I asked.

'Stuff it in a cupboard somewhere in case he comes back, I suppose.'

'Let me have it. I'll take it to his wife.'

'Do you know where she lives?'

'I think so. I can find her.'

I really thought I could find him. I thought I knew him well enough. In fact, though I didn't know it at the time, of course, I hardly knew him at all.

The sister bent down, picked up the plastic bag and handed it to me. 'Take it,' she said. I took the bag from her, opened it and peered inside. There wasn't much. A wooden box. A couple of envelopes. A few items of clothing. Not much to show for a life but I suspected he must have left in a hurry to have had to leave them behind.

'It was odd,' said the sister, remembering something.

I looked at her.

'Some of the stuff – the box and the envelopes – was already in the plastic bag by the side of his bed. The rest of the stuff – the clothes – was still in the locker.'

The bag had been packed but had either been forgotten or dropped. I'd take it to him. If I found him in time.

'How's your mother?' I asked her. She had talked about her mother often. She loved her but knew that she had given the best years of her life to look after her. Duty had overwhelmed her sense of self.

'She's a pain in the butt. I'm going to book her on a cruise when I can find one that goes to the Bermuda Triangle.'

'Good idea.'

'Why are you doing this?' asked Sister Tomkins. She nodded towards the plastic bag full of Henry's belongings.

'Because I owe him.'

'You mean because of what happened during your finals?'

'That's a part of it,' I said. 'But it's not just that. He taught me more than I learnt from a hundred professors, lecturers and tutors. Just by being him. He taught me things I didn't know I didn't know because no one had ever told me about them. And he taught me about me. He did it without ever teaching me anything but just by being. I hate to think of the sort of doctor I would have become if I hadn't known him.'

'But those things you learned because you were ready to learn them.'

The truth was that because of Henry I had found myself more able to see the patient's point of view. In any dispute with authority I took sides with the patients and felt increasingly irritated by and impatient with the arrogance and pomposity of doctors and nurses.

'You mustn't allow yourself to become emotionally involved with the patients,' said a stern senior registrar late one Saturday night. 'You have to keep your distance and protect yourself from any sort of emotional attachment. You're a professional and must remain aloof, distant and impartial.'

I could neither accept nor even understand this viewpoint. Removing the caring and concentrating on the curing seemed to me then (and, over thirty years later, still does) to be a cheap cop out; an excuse to avoid spoiling the sense of authority which both doctors and nurses then enjoyed (a sense of authority long since requisitioned by administrators) with too great a sense of personal responsibility.

I didn't say anything to the sister though this was not because I didn't think she would understand (I think she would have) but because I feared that she would consider my attitude a sign of weakness and immaturity.

'And you care about him don't you?'

I smiled at her. 'Of course I do. I care about them both. They're a remarkable couple.'

'You think something will happen to them?'

I nodded.

'You think he'll do something...'

'...silly?' I finished the cliché for her.

'Yes.'

I nodded.

'And you want to stop him?'

'I don't know about that,' I admitted. 'I don't know that I have that right. I don't know that I could or should. But

I want to say goodbye.’

Sister Tomkins put a hand on my arm. ‘I hope you find them,’ she said.

‘I think I’ll find them,’ I told her. ‘I just hope I’m not too late.’

There was a long silence.

‘What are you going to do after you’ve found him?’

I shrugged. ‘No idea.’

‘No job yet?’

‘No.’

‘Are you going to specialise? Get another hospital job?’

I shook my head. ‘I’ll find a general practice locum while I look around.’

‘You’ll make a good GP,’ she said. ‘You always treat the patients like people. Not everyone does.’

I felt embarrassed. ‘You run the best ward in the business,’ I told her. I believed it. It was probably true.

‘We’ll miss you,’ she said suddenly. She stood up and kissed me on the lips. ‘I’ll miss you,’ she said, emphasising the ‘I’. There was a tear in her left eye. She wiped it away angrily. ‘You young doctors are always buggering off and leaving us,’ she said accusingly. ‘You come here like larvae and fly off as butterflies.’ She frowned. ‘Is it larvae or pupae?’

I shrugged and smiled at her. ‘Dunno.’

‘Look after yourself.’

‘And you. And thanks for everything.’

‘I won’t promise to write or anything because I won’t. I never get time to write letters. Anyway I’m a rotten bloody correspondent. I can never think of anything to say.’

‘No.’

‘So bugger off now I’ve got work to do.’

I buggered off.

Chapter 3

I knew why Henry had gone. I knew who'd pushed his wheelchair. And I knew why he'd taken the nitrazepam. I just didn't know where to find him.

I carried the plastic bag containing his meagre belongings back to the doctors' mess where I'd left my suitcase and my bag. I crammed the whole lot in the boot of my battered old Humber and went back into the mess to telephone the RAC. There was no point in even trying to start the car because the battery had been flat when I'd last tried it.

'Your battery is gone,' said the RAC patrolman, when he'd started my car with his jump leads. I hid my surprise well. 'There isn't enough juice in it to power one of those little torches you guys use to look down people's throats. I don't know where you're going but I suggest that before you go there you visit a garage and treat yourself to a new one.'

'How much are they?'

He told me.

'Know anywhere cheap?'

He sighed and grinned. 'I thought you doctors were all loaded.'

'Just take a good look at the car,' I told him.

He gave me the address of a garage. 'And get them to put a bit of air in the tyres,' he suggested. 'You're driving on the rims.'

I said I would. 'And you stop smoking and lose two stones.'

He laughed, climbed back into his van and sped off.

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The visit to the garage would have to wait. I needed to find Henry and his wife, Daphne. After Henry's admission to hospital he had arranged for the caravan his wife lived in to be moved to a small private site no more than a mile and a half from the hospital. It was close enough for Daphne to walk to the hospital for both afternoon and evening visiting. Visiting time was 3 p.m. to 4 p.m. in the afternoons and 7.30 p.m. to 8 p.m. in the evenings. Daphne never missed. She walked six miles a day to be with her husband every minute that she could. I had first visited the caravan, in a thunderstorm. Daphne had been about to walk home at 8 p.m. after the evening's half hour visiting time was over. I would have taken her home in my car but I knew it wouldn't start so I persuaded one of the ambulance drivers to take her home. I went with them to make sure she got home safely. In return for this favour I prescribed something appropriate for an embarrassing condition he had picked up and didn't want anyone to know about.

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The caravan, parked at the edge of a site consisting of thirty or forty vans, looked empty. The door was locked and the curtains were drawn. I got out of the car, leaving the engine running, and banged on the caravan door. No one answered. I walked round and peered inside through a gap in the curtains. Everything looked very clean. And empty. I heard my car's engine stop running.

'She's gone,' said a voice.

I turned round.

A woman who had clearly either heard me knocking or seen me arrive was standing in the doorway of her own caravan just ten or twelve yards away. She wore a thick knitted cardigan that came down to her knees and a knitted skirt. Both were multi-coloured and looked as if they had been made up of odds and ends of wool. Her hair was long and matted and clearly hadn't been washed for a long, long time.

'Do you know when she went?'

'She went out at about six yesterday evening and didn't come back.'

Two small children, I couldn't tell the sexes, appeared behind her legs. They both had long blond hair and were sucking lollipops. Their faces and clothes were filthy. One of them scratched constantly. A mangy looking mongrel appeared, obviously having just woken up. It saw me and barked and growled. When it got fed up with barking and growling it began to lick and scratch itself.

'I expect she went to the hospital at six. I don't suppose you know where she went to after that?'

'No idea.'

'Do you have a telephone?'

She laughed. 'Telephone? Me?' She shook her head. 'No, love.'

'I need to ring the RAC to start my car.'

'There's a public telephone box over there,' she said, pointing. I turned, thanked her and headed towards the box.

The dog was growling and barking again but it was too fond of licking and scratching to put its heart into it.

‘Come and see me if you want a cup of tea while you wait,’ the woman shouted. I waved a hand in thanks.

The telephone box had the stink common to telephone boxes everywhere. I called the RAC and went back to the car. I sat in the passenger seat and waited for them to arrive. The dog had now given up barking and growling completely and was devoting itself full time to licking and scratching. The woman and the children had disappeared, presumably back into the caravan. I hoped the woman wouldn’t think too badly of me for ignoring her offer. I studied the car manual so that it looked as if I was busy reading something important. It was just that I didn’t want to catch the fleas with which her children and dog were obviously infested. The manual was very boring and I didn’t understand much of it. But I did find out how to turn the fog lights on which was something of a bonus since I’d been trying to find out how to do that ever since I’d bought the car.

***

When the car was running I drove to the garage the first mechanic had recommended and bought a new battery. I had to put my own air in the tyres. Ninety minutes later, the old Humber refreshed, and my wallet not as much lighter as I had feared, I drove into town to find somewhere to sleep for a few nights while I decided what to do next. Smart hotels were obviously out so I was looking for somewhere cheap, clean and cheerful. A boarding house would do. Somewhere that I could sleep, bathe, and dump my case while trying to figure out what to do next.

Before Amanda had worked out my prospective income and dumped me for the estate agent with the better potential, I had planned to consider my future while lying on a Mediterranean beach or by the hotel swimming pool. I’d thought I might take a copy of the British Medical Journal with me and look through the advertisements at the back of the magazine. I would, at least, have had somewhere to eat and sleep while I pondered my future. The cancelling of the holiday had left me with the British Medical Journal but no hotel and no beach.

But finding a job could wait for a few days while I tried to find Henry and Daphne Mulligan. As far as that was concerned the cancelling of the holiday had been a boon. I wondered what I would have done if Amanda hadn’t cancelled our relationship. Would I have abandoned the holiday so that I could search for Henry? I knew I would. It was, perhaps, a good job that Amanda had cancelled first.

There were some things I knew for sure. And some things I didn’t know. I went through them in my mind.

1. I knew why Henry had gone.
2. I knew Daphne had gone with him (pushing the wheelchair).
3. I didn’t know where they had gone.
4. I knew I didn’t have long to find them.
5. Most important of all, I knew I had to find them. I wanted to say ‘goodbye’. I owed Henry that much.

Chapter 4

Henry and Daphne were devoted to one another. They had met when he was eighteen and she was fifteen. And they'd married a year later.

'We've never spent a day apart,' he told me. 'Until I had to come into the hospital we'd never spent a night apart.'

He loved to talk about her.

'She was very pretty,' he said. 'I think she's very pretty now, but when she was a young girl men always used to turn to look at her. I was never jealous though. Proud, I suppose. And pleased for her. Do you think women like being admired?'

'I don't know,' I said.

'I would imagine they do,' said Henry. 'I think I would if I were a woman.'

***

In 1917, just 16-years-old, Henry had joined the army. He hadn't lost his thumb in an industrial accident as the medical examiner had said during my finals, though that was what Henry often told people. He'd lost it in Ypres when it had been shot off by a German bullet which had smashed his hand against the stock of his rifle.

'Why don't you tell people the truth about it?' I asked him one day.

He had shrugged. 'People aren't interested in that war,' he said. 'It embarrasses them. The young don't know anything about it. I just want to forget it.'

'Did you get a disability pension?' I asked him.

'I was supposed to get one,' he said. 'No more than a few bob. But I never got a penny. The paperwork never got through. And I didn't like to ask about it. There were a lot who were much worse off than I was.'

***

Daphne had something that was then known as senile dementia. It's now usually described as Alzheimer's disease. And her condition was deteriorating rapidly.

She had visited Henry since he'd first been brought into the hospital but recently she'd started getting lost and people had noticed.

The police had twice found her wandering along a nearby dual carriageway and they'd told the social workers. As a result they were planning to move Daphne from her caravan and put her into a council run nursing home for the disturbed and demented. I had been there when I was a medical student. It was a dismal and depressing place; woefully understaffed and poorly financed. It was more like an offshoot of a 19th century poorhouse or workhouse than a 20th century hospital. In the daytime the patients sat around on red plastic chairs and stared at one another. There were so few staff members that all the patients were heavily sedated. No one spoke. No one went out. And the whole place was so darkly depressing that hardly anyone visited. Friends and relatives would call once or twice but then find excellent reasons why they couldn't call again. There were patients in that place who hadn't seen (or been seen by) a soul they knew for years. 'Will you take me to the hospital to see my husband?' was the first thing Daphne asked when the social workers told her what they were planning.

'We'll try to fix up someone to take you over but it won't be every day,' the social workers told her.

'How often will it be?' she asked them.

'Maybe once a month or so,' they had lied.

But she was demented not stupid and she knew that they were lying. She cried so much that when she saw Henry the next day he knew instantly that something was wrong. He made her tell him.

***

When I could I used to take Daphne home to her caravan from the hospital. She was no more than five feet tall and couldn't have weighed more than seven stone. She was like a living doll. She loved brightly coloured clothes and always dressed smartly, albeit eccentrically. 'I don't want to let my Henry down,' she told me time and time again. When she arrived at the hospital after her long walk from their caravan she would slip into the ladies to tidy her hair and refresh her make-up. Daphne and I had often talked together. She was a fascinating and well-read woman who knew an enormous amount about a wide range of subjects. Like Henry, she had taught herself to read and write. And once she'd learned to read she had never stopped reading. And never stopped learning. She knew far more about English history than anyone else I'd ever met. And she had studied nature extensively. She didn't always know what day of the week it was, she couldn't tell you the name of the Prime Minister and she couldn't subtract seven from a hundred but she could identify every tree, every bird and every flower we passed.

But her favourite subject was, without a doubt, her Henry. She loved him, worshipped him and adored him. No woman could have loved a man more.

Long after she was officially diagnosed as demented she had moments of great lucidity.

‘Henry is a gentleman and a very proud man,’ she had told me once. He was down at the X-ray department having another check-up. ‘We got on a train once,’ she remembered. ‘About two years ago. We were going to Leeds. Or it may have been Reading.’ She shook her head. ‘I can’t remember where it was. Or why. There were five empty seats when we got on.’ She stopped and thought for a moment. ‘It wasn’t Leeds or Reading,’ she said. ‘It wasn’t a train. It was a bus in Chingford. Four young men got on with us. They all wore green anoraks. Those ugly jackets they sell in the army stores. Lots of pockets and buttons. But they weren’t soldiers. They were very loud. They were laughing a lot and drinking beer from cans. They pushed their way past us and they all sat down. Henry wanted me to sit down in the seat that was left but he was so ill I knew he couldn’t stand all that way. I made him take the remaining seat. He so much wanted me to sit down.’ Tears appeared in her eyes as she remembered. ‘He knew he couldn’t stand,’ she said. ‘He had a stick but he shouldn’t have been walking.’ She lowered her voice and beckoned a finger, indicating that I should move closer so that she could whisper. ‘He has a weak heart you know.’

‘I know,’ I said gently.

‘Of course you do,’ she said quietly, with a faint smile. ‘You’re the doctor aren’t you?’

I nodded.

‘He was so ashamed,’ she continued. ‘He cried. The four young men saw him and they pointed at him and laughed. Henry made me get off at the next stop even though it wasn’t the right one for us. We stood in the rain and waited another forty minutes for the next bus. He got a bad chest infection and was ill for months afterwards. We never went out after that. He’s never really been the same again.’

She stopped and thought for a while. ‘We never went out after that,’ she repeated.

There was another long pause while she thought about what had happened.

‘They were very cruel,’ she said. ‘Why would people do that?’

‘I don’t know,’ I confessed. I blinked, trying to hold back the tears, and shook my head. ‘I don’t know, Mrs Mulligan.’

‘He was in the war, you know,’ she said to me.

‘I know,’ I said.

‘He was a hero,’ she said. ‘My Henry was a war hero. But he doesn’t talk about it. He doesn’t tell anyone.’

‘I know,’ I said. ‘He had his thumb shot off.’

She looked at me, puzzled. ‘Oh that,’ she said at last. ‘Oh yes, there was the thumb.’ She paused. ‘But that was a long, long time ago.’

At the time I didn’t understand.

Only later did I realise that Daphne and I had been talking about different wars.

***

One day it was raining hard and I knew Daphne would get soaked if she walked to the hospital. I arranged for another doctor to cover me for a few minutes and I drove out to her caravan to pick her up. When I got there I leapt out of the car and stood on her doorstep banging on the door. But there was no answer. I stood there in the pouring rain. I felt sure that Daphne was inside.

‘Daphne!’ I called. ‘I’ve come to take you to see Henry. It’s pouring down. If you don’t come with me you’ll get soaked.’

But still she wouldn’t open the door.

Somehow I knew she was in there. I got into my car and drove fifty yards away and stopped. It was raining so hard that at that distance I could hardly see the caravan. I knew she could hardly see my car either.

I parked in such a way that I could watch the path coming from her caravan. Sure enough, after five minutes or so Daphne appeared. She was wearing a thin summer dress. The dress was coloured light blue but most of it was already dark blue because of the rain. I opened the passenger door as she came level with the car.

‘Daphne,’ I said, ‘it’s me. Can I give you a lift to the hospital?’

She smiled at me and got into the car without hesitation. ‘That’s nice of you,’ you said. ‘It’s raining.’

‘Why didn’t you open the caravan door to me?’ I asked her as we drove to the hospital.

‘Henry always told me never to open the door to anyone,’ she said. ‘He never used to open the door either.’

I laughed. It sounded just like Henry. ‘Why not?’

‘Henry says that there is never any point in opening the door if you’re not expecting visitors,’ she explained. ‘He says that when there is someone at the door unexpectedly it is always someone who wants something from you and never someone who wants to do something for you.’

‘That’s very true,’ I admitted, still laughing. ‘Very wise.’

I could just hear Henry saying that.

***

I was sitting by Henry’s bedside. We were finishing the crossword in the *Daily Mail*. We neither of us read the

Daily Mail but we often used to do the crossword. It was easier than the ones in most of the other papers. A woman in a grey suit approached us. She ignored me. ‘Henry?’ she said. She was carrying a clipboard. She didn’t wait for a reply. ‘I’m Mrs Cuthbertson,’ she said. ‘I need to ask you a few questions.’

‘My name is Mr Mulligan,’ said Henry.

‘I beg your pardon?’ said the woman.

‘My name is Mulligan,’ said Henry. ‘Henry Mulligan.’

‘I’m from social services administration,’ said the woman. She tried to smile but she wasn’t very good at it. She seemed confused.

‘What’s your Christian name?’ Henry asked her.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘If we’re going to be on first name terms I need to know your first name,’ said Henry politely.

The woman didn’t understand. I smiled to myself. It was, Henry had once said, just a question of respect. ‘If you start off a relationship without respect you’ll never acquire it,’ he added.

‘Maybe I should do this some other time,’ said the woman nervously.

‘No, you can do it now,’ said Henry.

‘We think your wife needs to be taken into special care,’ said the woman in the grey suit. ‘She’s become very confused and we think she’s a danger to herself.’

‘Have you spoken to her?’

‘She asked us to speak to you,’ said the woman.

‘Does she want to go into special care?’

‘She said she wanted to stay in the caravan,’ said the woman. ‘But I’m afraid that’s really not possible.’

‘Why not?’

‘Well, your wife is very confused. We arranged for one of our trained mental health workers to visit her. He felt that she would be safer if offered institutional care. We have reports from the police showing that on two separate occasions your wife has been found wandering.’

‘If she wants to stay in the caravan then that’s where I want her to stay,’ said Henry firmly. ‘If she wanders the police can take her home, can’t they?’

‘I’m afraid that’s not possible,’ said the grey-suited woman. ‘We have the authority to take your wife into care and that’s what we think is necessary.’

Henry looked at me. He looked tired. ‘Can they do that?’

I nodded. ‘I’m afraid so,’ I said.

‘I really came to give you formal notice of our intentions,’ said the woman.

‘Will she be able to come and visit me?’ asked Henry. ‘I won’t be able to visit her.’

‘We will do our best to arrange something. Perhaps once a month might be possible.’

Henry swallowed. He and Daphne had never spent a day apart. I knew that neither he nor she would cope well if they were separated.

‘It isn’t possible for me to live in this place with her?’

‘Oh good heavens no,’ said the woman. ‘There aren’t any facilities for caring for physically disabled patients. This is a specialised unit for the mentally ill. Very special types of mental illness.’

‘So we don’t really have a choice?’

‘Well, if you put it that way...’ said the woman. She seemed uncomfortable.

‘You’re going to lock my wife up so that we can’t see each other?’

‘No, it’s not like that at all...’

‘What’s it like then?’

‘There isn’t much point in our continuing like this,’ said the woman, lifting her head and sticking out her chin. She seemed offended.

‘When’s it going to happen?’ I asked.

The woman looked at me. It was as though it was the first time she’d noticed me. ‘And you are?’

‘I’m Mr Mulligan’s doctor.’

The woman was flustered and started to redden. ‘Oh, I didn’t know you were a doctor,’ she said. ‘I thought you were a porter...or something.’ She looked at me as though she didn’t really believe that I was a doctor. I’d been up all night trying (and failing) to save a road accident victim. I hadn’t shaved. I hadn’t washed or changed either. I had blood stains on my shirt and my white coat.

‘When is it going to happen?’ I asked again.

‘A week on Wednesday,’ said the woman. ‘A week on Wednesday, Mr Mulligan,’ she said, putting a lot of emphasis on the Mr. ‘Have a nice day, Mr Mulligan,’ she added.

‘I usually have whatever sort of day God gives me,’ said Henry. ‘And it seems like he’s giving me a pretty shitty day today.’

The woman looked at him, looked at me, and then marched off, holding her clipboard under her arm.

***

‘I don’t think she liked us,’ I said, when she’d disappeared from the ward.

‘Who cares?’ asked Henry. ‘It doesn’t matter what people you don’t know or care about think of you. All that matters is what you and the people whom you care about think of you.’ He stared in the direction the woman had taken. ‘Bastards,’ he muttered. ‘They’re all bastards.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said.

‘What sort of place is this?’ asked Henry. ‘The one where they’re going to send Daphne.’

‘It’s a specialist home for people who are confused,’ I told him.

‘What’s it like?’

‘Very nice lawn. Red plastic armchairs. Plastic furniture. Locks on the doors.’

‘Full of nutters?’

‘I don’t think that’s the term they use these days.’

‘Daphne’s not nutty,’ said Henry. ‘She’s just a bit forgetful.’

‘The police found her wandering along the dual carriageway the other day,’ I reminded him. ‘It was raining. She was wearing her nightie and a pair of slippers.’

‘She wanted to buy some milk to make me a bread and butter pudding,’ explained Henry. ‘She got a bit lost that’s all.’

‘It’s easily done,’ I agreed.

‘Why do they do that?’ he asked. ‘Why do they put all the confused people in one place. It’s really stupid.’

‘I suppose it’s so that they can keep an eye on them,’ I said.

‘They do it with depressed patients,’ said Henry. He looked down at the crossword we had nearly completed, and now never would. ‘I had an aunt once who was depressed. She’s long gone now, bless her, but they put her into hospital on a ward that was chock full of depressed patients. There must have been thirty people in there. All depressed. Not a smile in the place. I used to visit her. When I came out it took me days to recover. The staff were all depressed too.’

‘I see your point,’ I admitted.

‘If they put Daphne in a home with lots of other people who are confused she’ll get worse and worse,’ said Henry. He thought for a long, long moment. ‘They won’t let her out, will they?’

‘Not by herself,’ I agreed, softly. It was breaking his heart and it was breaking mine too. I had seen them together. Separating them seemed so very, very cruel.

‘And they say they’ll bring her to see me but they won’t.’

‘Oh, I’m sure...’

He looked at me.

I sighed deeply. ‘No,’ I admitted after a long pause. ‘No, they probably won’t.’

‘So she’ll quietly rot away in their home. And I’ll quietly rot here.’

I didn’t say anything. I couldn’t think of anything worthwhile to say.

‘I don’t suppose we have any choice?’

‘About Daphne going into the home?’

He nodded.

‘No,’ I said. ‘If the forms have been signed then I’m afraid there isn’t any choice. They’ll take her there whether she agrees or not. You can’t stop them. Nor can I.’

‘I thought so,’ said Henry. ‘They’re like the bloody Gestapo.’

He didn’t speak for a while. Neither of us did. Then Henry sighed. It was as though all the breath was coming out of him. ‘Health doesn’t matter at all until you notice it and then it’s the only thing that does matter,’ he said wearily.

He suddenly seemed very, very old.

***

The white coats that doctors wear have large patch pockets into which all sorts of things can be crammed. That evening I bought half a bottle of malt whisky and stuffed it into one of my white coat pockets. I put two drinking glasses into the other pocket. I got one of the nurses to help me lift Henry into a wheelchair and I took him into the deserted dayroom.

‘This is medicinal,’ I said, taking out the whisky and the two glasses.

‘Are you prescribing it?’ he asked. He picked up the bottle, examined the label and made an approving face.

‘I certainly am,’ I said.

Just then one of the more pompous nurses came in and saw us. ‘Is Mr Mulligan supposed to be drinking whisky, doctor?’ she asked, rather sternly.

‘I’m not sure,’ I said. ‘Would you be kind enough to bring in his drug sheet?’ She went away and, a moment or two later, returned with Henry’s official prescription records. She handed the records to me. ‘I don’t think I can see whisky on there, doctor,’ she said.

I took out a pen and wrote ‘Whisky as required’ on the sheet. Then I signed it and handed it back to her. ‘Look again,’ I said. She left us.

‘I wish you could sort out Daphne’s damned social workers that easily,’ said Henry.

‘Me too,’ I said.

I poured us both a drink.

***

We talked about death. I asked him if he’d regretted having being a smoker. He smiled and shook his head.

‘Somewhere in Ghana,’ he told me, ‘there’s a tribe which believes that none of us dies a natural death. They believe that every death is a murder and for every victim there is someone to hold responsible.’

‘So if everyone who dies is a victim how do they deal with all the murderers?’ I asked.

‘The tribe use magic to find out who killed the man who died. Then, when the murderer has been identified, the dead man’s oldest son is given his father’s sandals to keep. When the son is big enough to wear his father’s sandals it is his duty to avenge his father’s death by killing the man who has been convicted of his father’s murder.’

‘And then the son...’

He nodded. ‘The son of the newly murdered man is given his father’s sandals. When he grows old enough...and so the cycle of murder continues. The tribe’s whole structure is built upon blame and revenge.’

‘But you don’t blame the cigarettes?’

‘Who cares about the cigarettes? It’s myself I don’t blame,’ he said. ‘You’re a doctor,’ he went on. ‘You must know that non-smokers can die of lung cancer too.’

I nodded.

‘So I cannot know the cigarettes were to blame.’

‘No. But...’

‘And so I don’t have to blame myself.’

Understanding, I nodded.

‘We might think the people in that African tribe are primitive,’ he said. ‘But we’re becoming just as bad. I know people who are always looking for someone to blame if something goes wrong in their life.’

I nodded.

‘In ten or twenty years’ time,’ he said, ‘lawyers will be advertising for clients who want to sue. Everyone will want to blame someone for everything bad that happens to them. The pedestrian who trips will sue the council. The man who falls off a ladder will sue the man who made the ladder – or the man who sold it to him.’

I thought he was exaggerating to make a point. I said so.

‘Perhaps,’ he laughed. ‘You’ll be alive to know. I won’t.’ We both knew he was dying. And he was doing it faster than most of us.

But there was something in the way he talked about his dying that stayed with me.

Chapter 5

I rented a room in a small hotel near the railway station. It called itself a hotel and insofar as it was a place providing rooms and meals for travellers and tourists no one could really argue with that description. But if, when you think of hotels, you think of flowers in the lobby, polite reception staff, willing porters, well-polished brass doorknobs, crisp white sheets, chocolates on the pillows and fluffy white towels in the bathroom then you are not thinking of Mrs Potter's establishment.

My bed had chocolate on the pillow but it wasn't a chocolate disk neatly wrapped in gold foil and presented with the compliments of the management. The chocolate on my pillow was merely a smear left over from some previous occupant's night-time snack.

It was a long time since the solitary towel hanging on a wobbly plastic rail screwed to the wall beside my sink had ever been fluffy, a long time since the white plastic door handle had been wiped and, I suspected, a long, long time since Mrs Potter had smiled at one of her guests. The bathroom was down the hall and if I wanted to use it I had to ask Mrs Potter for the key. I was, according to a notice hanging by her shabby cubby hole, allowed one bath a day without extra charge. The only furniture in the room was a cheap wardrobe, a single bed and a bedside table. There was no bedside lamp. The floor was covered with a thin mat which looked as though it needed a good shake.

Still, it was somewhere to stay, it was cheap and, to my surprise, there was a small patch of waste-land round the back of the hotel where I could leave my car.

I crammed my cases, unopened, in the tiny, rickety wardrobe, turned the pillow over to hide the chocolate stain, jammed the rattling window (which, conveniently enough, gave me a view of the patch of waste-land and, therefore, a chance to keep an occasional eye on my car) and sat down on the bed with the plastic bag which contained Henry's belongings.

I carefully tipped the contents out onto the pink candlewick bedspread. First, I sorted out the clothes (a blue shirt, a pair of striped pyjamas, a couple of pairs of socks and a few sets of underclothing) and put them back into the bag. Then I examined what was left.

There was a small wooden box which I couldn't open, a paperback copy of *Three Men in a Boat* by Jerome K. Jerome, a large brown envelope which was sealed and a packet of photographs which was unsealed.

I took the photographs out of the envelope. All the photographs were black and white. The top photograph was of a young couple. The man, clearly Henry, was wearing a suit and a trilby hat. The woman was wearing a flowered dress and was carrying a small bucket and spade; the sort of implements children use to dig with on a sandy beach. They were on a beach. And between them, sitting on a donkey, there was a boy dressed only in bathing trunks. To one side, standing alone, was another woman. She looked full of sadness. I didn't know who she was. Maybe the wife of the photographer?

Who was the boy?

He looked too old to be their son. He must have been ten or eleven. It was difficult to tell how old Henry and Daphne were, but they didn't look old enough to have a son of that age. And yet the boy looked just like Henry. He had to be their son.

I flicked through the other photographs. One was of a younger Henry and Daphne. They were sitting on a sea wall holding hands. I turned the photograph over. On the back was printed the name and address of a photographer. Someone had written. 'Honeymoon. Second Day.' on the back in pencil.

***

I remembered something that had happened months earlier. Henry and I had been sitting in the day room. It had been about four o'clock in the morning. I'd been to the ward to put a catheter into an old man who'd got urinary retention and, afterwards, I'd found Henry reading a John Buchan novel. He didn't much care for the books they had on the hospital library trolley and Daphne brought him in paperbacks she'd found for him in charity shops.

'I wish I could have been more of a husband to Daphne,' Henry had said.

'What on earth do you mean?' I had asked him. 'Daphne adores you.'

'I wish we could have had children of our own,' he'd said. There had been a long pause. 'But that side of our marriage wasn't as strong as I would have liked it to be.' He had stared into space for a long, long time. 'She was always faithful to me, though,' he had said, at last.

I knew what Henry was talking about. I'd examined him enough times.

***

I looked through the rest of the photographs but there were no more photographs of a boy. If he hadn't looked so much like Henry I would have wondered if it had been a friend's child. Maybe even the son of a couple they'd met on holiday and were looking after for an hour or two. But the boy had Henry's eyes and Henry's nose. He looked exactly like Henry.

***

Mrs Potter said she didn't serve meals apart from breakfast.

So I drove back to the hospital, went into the canteen and bought a salad and a bowl of spotted dick with custard. The salad was warm, the spotted dick had very few spots and the custard somehow managed to be both weak and lumpy but it was food, it filled me up and it was cheap. I saw quite a few people I knew but no one thought it in the slightest bit odd that I was eating there. The ones who knew that I had finished my last contract probably just thought I'd taken another job in the hospital. Anyone who knew I hadn't, probably realised I was just solving two problems (hunger and poverty) in the easiest way possible. After I'd eaten I went back to the ward. I was lucky – Sister Tomkins, the ward sister was on a late shift.

'Did anyone ever visit Henry Mulligan when he was a patient here?' I asked. 'Apart from his wife.' I added.

She thought for a moment. 'Just his wife,' she said. 'I never saw anyone else visit.'

'No other relatives?'

Sister Tomkins thought and shook her head. 'I wish I knew how he'd got away,' she said. 'I still feel terrible about it. I've never lost a patient before.'

'It wasn't your fault,' I told her. 'He went in his wheelchair.'

'But he didn't have the strength to wheel himself.'

'No. But his wife did. Daphne.'

'You think Daphne wheeled him out of here?'

'Yes. She often used to wheel him out into the rose garden in the afternoon. He'd direct her and she'd push. She was a bit confused but she was used to walking and she was stronger than she looked.'

'But why? Why would he go?'

'The social workers were going to put Daphne into a nursing home,' I explained. 'That place for patients with dementia. They told her that they'd bring her to see Henry once a month.'

'I can see that not going down well.'

'Neither of them would accept that,' I said. 'So they had to leave.'

'But where?' asked Sister Tomkins. 'Where on earth would they go? What sort of future could they possibly have out there in the big wide nasty world? Two sick people with no money and no prospects.'

'I don't know where they've gone,' I said. 'But I'm going to try to find them.' I didn't tell her that I knew what sort of future they had. 'Do you know if they had a son?' I asked.

Sister Tomkins thought for a moment, then shook her head. 'I don't think so.'

'Do you still have Henry's medical notes?'

Sister Tomkins looked around her tiny office. 'They should have gone down to Medical Records by now,' she said. She reached into an overstuffed filing tray and sorted through the mass of papers it contained. 'But they haven't.' She handed me the file.

'Can I borrow this?'

'What on earth do you want that for?'

'Maybe there will be a clue in here that will help me find them.'

'I can't let you take medical records. They're hospital property.'

I looked through the office window. 'Mr Reynolds looks as if his pillows need plumping up a bit,' I said.

Sister Tomkins looked at him, then looked at me. 'You're right,' she said. 'They do.' She got up and headed for the door. 'I expect you'll be gone when I get back.'

'I expect I will,' I said.

I was. And so, oddly enough, were Henry's medical records.

***

I drove back to my hotel, parked the car and went up to my room. The bits and pieces of Henry's life which I had left on my bed were still there. I sat down on the edge of the bed and opened up Henry's medical records. I didn't bother with the last part of the file. I had written most of it myself and knew there was nothing there that would be of any help. I was interested only in the first few pages, the admission notes that had been written when Henry Mulligan had first come into the hospital. I had been a medical student then, of course.

The house officer who had admitted Henry to the hospital had done a thorough job. In addition to performing an extensive physical examination that must have taken the best part of an hour to complete he had also made full notes about Henry's past personal, social and medical history. It was the personal and social history that I was looking for.

According to the admission notes Henry and Daphne had married in 1919. There was no record of Henry's war service. And there was no record of the couple having had any children. In fact, the doctor writing the admission notes had specifically asked about children. And Henry had said he didn't have any.

But there was a brother.

Could the boy in the photograph have been Henry’s brother?

The doctor hadn’t bothered to make a note of a birth date for the brother so the boy in the photograph could have been a brother. It would have explained the fact that he looked just like Henry. Maybe Henry and his young bride had taken his young brother to the seaside on holiday.

If Henry had a younger brother there would be a good chance that he was still alive. If I could find him I might find Henry and Daphne.

I looked again through the photographs I had. Most of the photographs were of Henry and Daphne. There were no other photographs of anyone who could be a younger brother.

I took everything off the eiderdown and placed it carefully on the floor. Except for the paperback. I put that on the bedside table. I undressed, washed, got into bed, opened Henry’s copy of *Three Men in a Boat* and was so tired I fell asleep before I had read a page of it.

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When I woke the following morning the light was on. I had left it on all night. Henry’s copy of *Three Men in a Boat* was lying on the floor face open where it had fallen. A piece of paper was on the floor beside the book.

I got out of bed and found my shoes. The carpet was gritty with dirt. Walking on it in bare feet was like walking on a sandy beach. Then I picked up the book and the piece of paper that had fallen out of it.

The paper, which Henry had presumably been using as a bookmark, was a pawn ticket. I examined it carefully. There were two days left in which to redeem whatever had been pawned. There was a number on the ticket but no description of what had been pawned and no details of any other kind. The shop which had issued the ticket was within easy walking distance of the hotel. I wondered how Henry had managed to visit a pawnshop. Then I realised that Daphne must have done it for him. They must have needed money. But what had they pawned?

I now had two leads to follow up.

The missing brother and the pawn ticket.

I washed, shaved, dressed and went downstairs to breakfast. The tiny dining room was empty. I looked at the clock. It was ten to nine. I sat down at the only table that had been cleared.

‘Continental or cooked?’ asked a girl of about sixteen who appeared, as though by magic. She was wearing a waitress uniform that was several sizes too big for her and was carrying a small notepad and a pencil.

‘Sorry?’

‘Do you want continental or cooked breakfast?’

‘What’s the continental breakfast?’

‘French toast and coffee.’

‘I’ll have the cooked breakfast, please.’

‘Full English?’

‘Yes, please.’

‘Tea or coffee?’

‘Tea, please.’

‘White or brown?’

‘White or brown tea?’

‘Toast.’

‘Oh, brown, please.’

‘Room number?’

I told her. She disappeared as mysteriously as she had appeared. I heard her shout my order to someone in the kitchen. Moments later she reappeared carrying a metal teapot and a tiny jug of milk. ‘Sugar and cups are on the sideboard,’ she told me before disappearing again. I couldn’t see where she went. I fetched a cup and saucer and poured myself a cup of stewed tea. Five minutes later she reappeared carrying a white plate upon which lay a puddle of fat in which, like small islands, lay a blackened rasher of bacon, half a fried tomato, a mushroom, an over-fried egg and a spoonful of baked beans. She used a tea-towel to protect her hands from the hot plate. ‘Watch the plate,’ she instructed. ‘It’s hot.’ She disappeared, but I didn’t see how or where she went.

I was hungry and young so I apologised to my stomach and my arteries and ate it all. I tried to leave as much of the fat on the plate as I could.

I had finished my breakfast and had stood up and was about to leave when a young woman swept in. She was tall and slim and had shoulder length blonde hair. She wore a mini skirt that seemed little wider than a decent belt, a skin tight sweater that sparkled and a pair of high heeled shoes that added five inches to her height. She glanced at me, looked around then sat down at the table I’d just vacated. The waitress came in and looked at the clock rather pointedly.

‘Coffee and toast, please, Elsie’ said the newcomer. The waitress wrote it down and disappeared.

I too disappeared. But at least I knew which door I went through.

***

‘I’d like to redeem this,’ I said sliding the pawn ticket through a gap to the man on the other side of a thick metal grille. The man behind the grille was bald and wore a gold earring in his left ear. I’d never seen a man with an earring before. It was a large earring and gave him a jaunty, piratical air. He took the ticket and checked the number on the ticket against a list of numbers in a large black leather bound ledger.

‘Sixty pounds,’ he told me. He said it as though it wasn’t anything very special.

I stared at him in astonishment. I’d been paid very little more than that for a month’s work at the hospital.

‘Do you want to redeem it or not?’ demanded the man, impatiently.

I thought about asking him what ‘it’ was but decided against it. If he knew I didn’t know what I was trying to redeem he might assume that I had stolen the ticket.

‘I’ll come back later,’ I said.

He pushed the ticket back under the grille and I put it into my wallet.

I couldn’t imagine what Henry could have owned that would have been worth so much money.

And I couldn’t imagine where I was going to get £60 so that I could find out what it was. It might as well have been £6,000,000.

***

I walked back to the hotel and went through the stuff Henry had left behind again. The wooden box resisted my attempts to open it with a penknife so I gave in and tore the brown envelope open. I didn’t have a kettle so couldn’t steam the flap open. I tipped the contents out onto the bed.

There was a small, battered, dark blue address book, some postcards and a small sheaf of newspaper cuttings clipped together with an ordinary pin.

I opened the address book first. Most of the entries had been crossed out, with a single red line drawn neatly through the name and the letters RIP written at the end of the line. Henry and Daphne had, it seemed, lived longer than most of their friends. Most of the remaining entries were tradesmen and so on. A plumber, electrician, handyman, television repair engineer and heating engineer. There was the name of a general practitioner and details of a dental surgery. There were addresses and telephone numbers for three hotels and one or two caravan parks. Most of these were in Devon. Amidst all the sad crossings out there were just two addresses for real people. One was an address in Australia with, beside it, the added note: ‘Daphne’s niece. Birthday 3.8.53.’ The other was someone called George Pardoe who had an address just a few miles away in Worcester.

The messages on the postcards weren’t very exciting and didn’t seem to get me anywhere. One card just had the words ‘Always yours and thinking of you all the time’ written on it. A second contained the words ‘My love is yours forever.’ The third just had ‘I love you darling. Keep safe for me.’ They were all addressed to Henry and signed by Daphne. She had a neat, very feminine hand and she had added three kisses to each of the cards. She’d made them very small and neat and I could imagine that she had been embarrassed at sending them through the mail on a postcard. But not so embarrassed that she would not put them there.

I picked up the newspaper cuttings. One of the clippings, dating from 1943, contained a picture of a soldier holding up a medal. ‘Local Born Soldier Receives Gallantry Medal’ ran the headline. The story described how Private Michael Mulligan had been awarded the George Medal for bravery.

‘Private Mulligan was returning to his unit at the end of a three day pass when the rear part of the train in which he was travelling was hit by a German flying bomb. Private Mulligan, who was travelling in the coach immediately behind the engine, risked his life by repeatedly entering the train and rescuing passengers.’

‘Because the incident occurred a mile and a half from the nearest road, the emergency services had difficulty in reaching the scene of the disaster. Private Mulligan, acting alone, rescued an elderly man, two women, three children and a baby from certain death. He ignored the danger to his own person in doing this.’

‘When the emergency services finally arrived at the scene, Private Mulligan was able to direct them to those areas of the wreckage where passengers were still trapped.’

‘The George Medal is usually awarded to citizens but was awarded to Private Mulligan because, in this instance, he was acting in a personal capacity rather than as a member of His Majesty’s Armed Forces.’

A second cutting was a report of a Parliamentary by-Election in which Michael Mulligan, the Labour candidate for the constituency, had been unsuccessful. The report included a few lines describing how Mr Mulligan had shed a few tears when thanking his party workers in his post-election address.

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I had one possibly useful lead: the address of George Pardoe. Since he hadn’t yet had a line drawn through his name I hoped that he was still alive.

I didn’t know what to make of any of it so I picked up the photographs again. The only one that seemed relevant was still the one showing Henry, Daphne and the unknown boy. Fed up with staring at the photograph and learning nothing more from it I turned it over and looked at the back. There was faded writing scrawled just underneath the top edge. It was obviously some sort of description of the contents of the photograph. I took the photograph over to the window and peered closely at it. The caption had been written in thick, soft pencil but it was just about readable. There were three names, written in a flowing, soft, feminine handwriting.

‘Henry, Michael and Daphne.’

So the boy on the donkey was called Michael.

But was he Daphne and Henry’s son? Or was he Henry’s brother?

And would he know where Henry and Daphne might be?

And how could I find him?

All I knew about him was that he had received a medal for bravery during the Second World War.

At least, that was what I thought I knew. I was to learn that in Henry’s life things weren’t always quite what they seemed.

Chapter 6

There was a knock on my door. It was my landlady.

‘There’s an urgent call for you,’ she announced. She handed me a piece of paper with a number written on it. ‘You’re to phone Dr Taylor as soon as possible,’ she said. She had a sharp, strident voice with a pronounced Birmingham accent.

I looked at the paper she’d given me. There was nothing written on it but the telephone number. I tried, but failed, to think of a Dr Taylor I might know. ‘Do you know what he wants?’ I asked.

‘No,’ said the landlady. She looked at me sternly. ‘You haven’t got a nasty infectious disease, have you?’

‘Not that I know of,’ I said.

‘He could be public health,’ said the landlady. ‘I’ve never heard of doctors ringing patients before. Not unless they’re following up something funny.’

‘I haven’t got anything infectious,’ I assured her. ‘He’s probably someone I know from the hospital.’

‘So you do have something wrong with you,’ she said, folding her arms across her chest protectively. She didn’t actually step backwards, but she did lean back.

‘I used to work there,’ I explained. ‘I’m a doctor.’

If I’d told her that I had the plague I couldn’t have produced a bigger reaction.

‘You’re a doctor!’

‘Yes.’

‘A proper doctor?’

‘Yes.’

‘You’re very young.’

‘I only qualified a year ago.’

‘My oh my. Fancy me having a doctor staying here,’ said the landlady. She seemed pleased. She had lowered her voice now that she knew I was a doctor. I got the impression that she didn’t have many medical residents. Now that the threat had disappeared she unfolded her arms. ‘Our own doctor in the house,’ she said. She smiled at me. She had awful teeth.

‘I suppose I’d better ring Dr Taylor and see what he wants,’ I said. ‘Do you know where the nearest phone is?’

‘There’s a pay phone in the bar,’ she said. ‘But you can use the phone in the office. It’s more private. More suitable for a professional gentleman.’ She turned and led the way into her cramped office. It was barely large enough to contain a desk, a chair and a bookcase. The desk was piled high with papers. A large ashtray was filled with cigarette butts. The room stank of tobacco smoke. The bookcase was crammed with cheap paperbacks, mostly romances by Barbara Cartland and Georgette Heyer. ‘I’ll close the door for you,’ she said. ‘You may have private medical things to talk about. I know how you doctors are about confidentiality.’ She squeezed past me. ‘Oh, be careful of the chair,’ she warned me. ‘It’s a bit wobbly.’

When she’d gone I sat down. Although I did so gingerly, the chair very nearly succeeded in throwing me onto the floor. One of the four wheels had fallen off. I looked for the missing wheel but it was nowhere to be seen. I pulled the telephone towards me and dialled the number I’d been given.

I gave my name to the woman who eventually answered. ‘I was asked to call Dr Taylor.’

‘Is it an emergency?’ demanded the woman.

‘No,’ I said. ‘But...’

‘He doesn’t take non-emergency calls after 11.30 a.m.,’ said the woman sharply.

‘I got a message to ring him,’ I repeated. I gave her my name again.

The receptionist’s voice lowered to little more than a whisper.

‘Did you say ‘Doctor’?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh I’m so sorry, doctor. I misunderstood. I thought you were a patient. I’ll tell the doctor you’re on the line.’

A moment or two later a gruff Irish voice spoke. ‘Taylor here. I’m a GP. Single handed practice in the city centre. Thanks for calling. You got my message. Chap I know at the hospital gave me your name. He does some locums for me. Patterson. You know him?’

‘Yes. He’s a good friend of mine.’

‘He does locums for me when he can fit them in. Problem is that my wife booked theatre tickets for tonight and forgot to tell me. He can’t cover for me tonight. I’m a single handed practice and unless I can get some cover I can’t go.’

‘Oh. I’m sorry.’

‘Can you manage to cover for me? Short notice I know. Thirty five quid cash for the night. Six in the evening until eight in the morning. That’ll give me the whole night off.’

I listened in horror and excitement. ‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘I’ve not done any general practice.’

‘Patterson says you’re fully registered.’

‘Yes. I am. But...’

‘No problem then. You’ve done casualty shifts?’

‘Of course.’

‘Got a car?’

‘Yes.’

‘Telephone?’

‘This is a hotel. There is a telephone.’

‘Splendid. They’re a pretty well-trained bunch, my lot. They don’t tend to ring much. Usually just kids with earache. Usual sort of thing.’

‘I haven’t got an emergency bag,’ I said. ‘I only left the hospital a day or two ago.’

‘No problem there. I’ve got a spare emergency bag which Patterson uses. You’ll find everything you’re likely to need in it. Where are you staying?’

I told him.

‘I’ll drop the bag off in an hour with the cash. And I’ll pick the bag up tomorrow morning. You don’t have to do anything.’

‘What about the phone?’ I asked.

‘Just give me your number again,’ he told me. ‘We’ve got this clever telephone switching thing. I don’t understand it but I can switch my phone calls through to your number. Works brilliantly. The patients don’t even know they’re being transferred. All automatic. Amazing what they can do isn’t it?’

I agreed that it was.

When I put the phone down I was soaking with sweat.

I had never been so terrified in my entire life. Looking after patients in hospital, where they all lie in neat rows, ready diagnosed, lain out in pyjamas and nighties, was, it seemed to me, an entirely different matter to dealing with patients on the hoof. In the hospital the doctor is in charge. But would things be the same in the patient’s home? And would I be able to find their homes? I would, I decided, have to find a map.

I was worried that my landlady would object to Dr Taylor putting his phone calls through to the hotel telephone. I need not have been concerned. Mrs Barnaby couldn’t have been more delighted if I’d told her that the Queen would be coming to stay.

‘The phone in the bar doesn’t take incoming calls,’ she told me when I’d explained what I’d wanted to do. ‘But you can use the hotel phone.’

When I asked her if there would be a charge she’d dismissed the idea out of hand, as though she found the very thought of allowing commerce to intrude on our newly built professional relationship quite unacceptable.

Chapter 7

There was no telephone in my room and no bed in the hotel's office so Mrs Potter suggested that I spend my night on call in the hotel's tiny bar.

'There's a comfortable chair in there,' she said. 'And you'll be able to hear the office phone.'

And so, at six o'clock that evening, I sat myself down in the hotel bar for my first night's work as a general practitioner. I had my stethoscope in one jacket pocket and my car keys in the other. Beside me, on the floor, was Dr Taylor's spare medical bag. The battered, leather bag was filled with forms I didn't understand (including, I noticed to my horror, a book of death certificates and a book of forms with which I could apparently certify people insane), packets of drug samples and bits and pieces of elderly medical equipment. There was a portable sphygmomanometer in a black plastic box, an auriscope in a neat silver metal box, an ophthalmoscope in a rather larger blue metal box, a patella hammer, a tape measure, a small torch, a pair of tweezers, a set of suture needles, a lancet with a packet of disposable blades, a Swiss Army penknife and, rather incongruously, a pair of pliers. There was a packet of the sort of thin pieces of wood which gardeners use to stick in the pots containing their cuttings. I hoped I wouldn't have to use the pliers. The bag was locked and the key was in my pocket with my car keys. A long white envelope containing my first wage packet as a proper doctor was nestling in my inside pocket. I hadn't opened it but it had crinkled reassuringly when I'd stuffed it into my pocket. Dr Taylor was paying me more for one night as his stand-in locum than I'd been paid for a fortnight as a hospital doctor.

Mrs Potter had warned me that there might be one or two calls from customers wanting to book rooms.

'Just tell them to ring again in the morning,' she had said. 'Tell them you're a doctor and that they're tying up a medical line.'

When I had asked her if she was worried at the prospect of losing potential customers she had simply shrugged. 'No one answers the phone at night,' she'd pointed out. 'We used to have an answering machine but I could never understand the messages people left so I gave it to my niece. She runs a little hairdressing business in Erdington.' She'd paused. 'At least that's what she says it is,' she'd added in a confidential whisper. 'Myself, I have my doubts. She has too many foreign holidays for a girl who just snips and perms for a living.' I didn't ask what business she thought her niece might be involved in, though it wasn't difficult to guess.

The phone didn't ring until half past ten. I had by then drunk three cups of coffee and four glasses of watered down lemonade. The caller was a young mother who was worried about her eighteen month young son. 'Give me your address,' I told her briskly and, I hoped, reassuringly. 'I'll be there as soon as I can.'

'That's not Dr Taylor is it?'

I explained that I was standing in for him. She didn't seem to mind too much. 'I really just wanted a bit of reassurance, doctor,' she said. But I wasn't about to risk missing a case of meningitis or some other potentially deadly childhood ailment. I insisted that she gave me her address.

As luck would have it my newly acquired A to Z map showed that the address was no more than a mile from the hotel. I was there within minutes. It was a flat on the third floor of a poorly lit tower block. The lift didn't work and the stairwell had a nasty smell which suggested that there was probably a shortage of public conveniences in the area. I left the car on the main road two hundred yards away and hoped no one ran into it or stole it. It looked the sort of area where car radios didn't stay in the same vehicle for long. I knocked on the door with my knuckles. There was no doorbell and no knocker.

'Who's that?' demanded an angry male voice. A television set was on. It sounded like some sort of game show. I'd been so busy working in hospital for a year that I'd hardly watched any television. I had no idea what programmes were showing.

'It's the doctor,' I called back.

'What the hell do you want?'

'Er, I was called to see a sick child,' I shouted back, rather hesitantly. This wasn't quite how I'd expected to be received. I had envisioned a pale, swooning mother standing on the doorstep with a flushed child in her arms.

'Stella, did you call the bloody doctor?' I heard the male voice shout.

'He's been bad all day,' a female voice shouted back at him. 'He's been crying.'

'There's bugger all wrong with him,' shouted the man who, even through a thin front door, sounded drunk.

'How would you know?' I heard the woman demand. 'You're never here.'

'I've been working,' shouted the man.

'You've been in the pub,' shouted the woman. 'You're pissed.'

Timidly, I knocked again. Almost immediately the door swung open. From the voice and manner I had expected the man who opened it to be at least six foot tall and fifteen stone. But he was nearly a foot shorter than I had thought, and five stones lighter. He looked to be in his forties.

‘Don’t be so bloody impatient,’ he snarled.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘But I have other patients to look after.’ For the first time it occurred to me that in coming out I had left the phone unattended. I started to panic. Amazingly, everything had happened so quickly that I had never thought of this potential problem before.

‘Are you giving it to my missus?’ demanded the man.

I stared at him, bewildered and slightly shocked. ‘I’m the doctor,’ I repeated, rather stupidly. ‘I was told you had a sick child.’

‘Are you doing my missus?’ the man repeated (though that was not quite the word he used).

‘No,’ I told him emphatically. ‘I don’t even know her. I’ve never been here before. I’m the doctor.’

‘I know you’re the doctor,’ snarled the man. ‘You keep telling me that. But doctors do it don’t they? She’s a good-looking woman isn’t she?’

‘Well, I, er...’ I stuttered.

‘Get to bed you prat,’ said a feminine voice, pushing the man aside. The owner of the voice was about half the age of her husband. And much bigger. She was taller, wider and considerably heavier. Muttering something I didn’t hear, and probably wouldn’t have wanted to, the man did as he was told and headed up the stairs.

‘He’s drunk,’ she told me. It wasn’t an apology. Just an explanation. ‘The kiddie is in here.’ She led the way into a tiny living room, lit only by a flickering television set and an electric fire. All three bars of the fire were lit. A small child was lying on the sofa covered with blankets.

I knelt by the side of the sofa, lifted off the blankets, and started to examine the boy who was asleep. He seemed hot but in addition to the blankets he was wearing three sweaters and the room was like a sauna. I took out my stethoscope and tried to listen to his chest. After a moment I gave up and turned to his mother who was now settled down again in front of the television set. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said, removing the earpieces of my stethoscope. ‘But would you mind turning the television down a little?’

The woman turned the sound down a fraction, but didn’t turn the television off as I had hoped she would. I listened to the boy’s chest again. It sounded fine. As I finished he woke up and rubbed at his eyes with his fists. I examined his head and neck and checked his body for a rash. I looked in his ears, examined his eyes and used the torch to help me peer down his throat. Looking in the bag for something to hold his tongue down I realised that the thin wooden sticks were not intended for use in the garden but were, in fact, medical tongue depressors. We hadn’t had them in the hospital.

‘His right ear looks a little inflamed,’ I said, in the end.

The mother, still watching the television, half looked in my direction.

‘I’ll give you a course of antibiotics for him,’ I said. I rummaged around in the bag, found several sachets of antibiotic medicine suitable for a child and gave them to her. ‘Give him one of these every six hours. There’s enough here for forty eight hours but you’ll need to take him to the surgery tomorrow to get a prescription for the rest of the course.’

‘Will he be all right, doctor?’ she asked, showing some slight concern for the first time since I’d arrived.

‘I’m sure he will,’ I told her, with as much professional reassurance as I could muster. She didn’t get up. But she smiled. She looked as though a weight had, temporarily at least, been lifted from her. I let myself out. I could hear her husband snoring.

***

As I walked back to my car I remembered a conversation I once had with Henry.

‘That consultant cardiologist I see is a menace,’ said Henry.

‘He’s supposed to be very good,’ I said, rather defensively. ‘He’s written a textbook on heart abnormalities and loads of scientific papers on the subject.’

‘He may well know his stuff,’ agreed Henry. ‘I’m not denying that. But the man is a menace. He may be clever with his books and his paperwork but he’s no healer. I was waiting outside his office this morning and everyone I saw was terrified of him. The patients fear him – and so do the nurses. He’s cruel and thoughtless.’

I didn’t say anything. I’d seen the cardiologist in action. Indeed, I’d been on the receiving end of his ‘wit and wisdom’ myself on more than one occasion.

‘A man and his wife came out of his office in tears,’ said Henry. ‘If I hadn’t been in this damned chair I’d have gone in and flattened him.’

‘Maybe they’d just been given bad news,’ I suggested.

Henry shook his head. ‘I talked to them while I waited to go in,’ he said. ‘The man had been told he had to lose two stones. He’d lost one and a half stones. Instead of congratulating him on the weight loss and encouraging him to carry on the cardiologist just asked him why he didn’t just slit his wrists if he wanted to commit suicide.’

I felt embarrassed and said nothing.

'Someone should explain to him that people are frightened of doctors,' said Henry.

I looked at him. It wasn't something that had occurred to me before.

'Fear makes illness worse,' said Henry. 'So the doctor who calms his patients and puts them at ease will always do better.'

I remembered what he had said.

And I knew I would never forget it.

***

My car was still where I'd left it but someone had forced the passenger side window down and had stolen the radio. And either they or someone else had taken the hubcaps too.

***

'Did the telephone go while I was out?' I asked the barman when I got back. The few customers who had been in the bar drinking had all disappeared. The barman, an elderly, weary looking man who was, so he told anyone who would listen, too old to be doing what he was doing, was tidying up, locking away the bottles of spirits and washing up dirty glasses in a small metal sink. His few strands of remaining hair were dyed black and combed over too much bald head. He wore a black blazer, blue trousers and a white shirt decorated with a clip on bow-tie.

'Not once,' he told me. 'I'm glad you're back. I'm going off now.'

I was glad to see him go. He was the most depressing person I'd ever met. After five minutes in his company I felt like drinking myself into a stupor. Perhaps that was why Mrs Potter employed him. I said goodnight, turned most of the lights off and settled down in the comfortable, battered old leather chair that Mrs Potter had recommended. I had a paperback novel with me, Henry's copy of *Three Men in a Boat*. It had been years since I'd read it and I was looking forward to reading it again.

I hadn't expected to go to sleep but I must have dropped off. And I hadn't yet acquired the doctor's ability to awaken immediately and fully upon hearing a telephone ring.

'This isn't the doctor's surgery,' I vaguely heard someone say as I blundered slowly back towards consciousness. 'You must have got the wrong number.' This seemed important but for a second or two I couldn't work out why.

Suddenly, I remembered where I was and why the call was important to me. I jumped up out of the chair as quickly as if someone had set fire to it and headed for the office. 'Don't put the phone down!' I called out just before I fell full length on the thin carpet. I had been lying awkwardly and although the rest of me was awake my left leg was still asleep.

'What's the matter?' someone asked. It was a feminine voice; the voice of a girl with a strong midland accent.

I looked up from the carpet. For a moment all I could see was a very long pair of legs. Slowly, I lifted my head to see what was above them. The girl who had spoken was about 20-years-old; she was tall and slim and had long, dark brown hair. She was wearing patent leather shoes with five inch stiletto heels, black stockings with a patterned seam up the back, a black skirt shorter than the average pelmet (so short indeed that from my position on the floor I could tell that it was stockings and not tights that she was wearing) and a skimpy, black top with a scooped front and no sleeves. I vaguely recognised her from somewhere but couldn't think who she was or where I'd seen her before. She was carrying a very tiny black handbag. 'Don't put the telephone down, please,' I said. 'It's for me.'

'They want a doctor,' said the girl.

'That's me,' I said.

'You're the doctor?' said the girl, incredulously. She pointed at me and tried, unsuccessfully, to stifle a laugh. She pulled back the hand she'd used to point and put it over her mouth to hide her mirth.

'My leg gave way,' I explained. 'Cramp. Is there someone still on the phone?'

'It's a woman. She just says she wants a doctor. She didn't say why.'

I staggered to my feet, and stumbled into the hotel office. The telephone receiver was lying on the desk. I picked it up.

'This is the doctor,' I said. 'I'm standing in for Dr Taylor.'

'I need a call out,' said a gruff-voiced woman. She sounded very bad-tempered.

'Can you tell me what's the matter?'

'I need a doctor.' The woman started coughing. I waited for her to stop and decided to abandon trying to find out what was wrong.

'What's your address?'

She told me.

'I'll be there as soon as I can,' I told her. I put the telephone receiver back on its cradle.

'So, you are a doctor.'

I turned round. The girl in the mini skirt was standing behind me. She had her arms folded across her chest.

‘You’re very young to be a doctor,’ she said. I squeezed past her and went back into the bar. She leant back out of the way but not far enough to prevent me brushing against her. My A to Z map was in Dr Taylor’s black bag. I took out the map and looked up Prospero Lane, the address the woman had given me. I couldn’t find it listed in the index.

‘Why are you running a doctor’s surgery from a hotel?’ asked the girl.

‘A GP in town asked me to look after his patients for the night,’ I explained.

‘Is he paying you?’

‘Yes. But I’ve got a problem. I can’t find Prospero Lane on the map.’

‘Is that where you’ve got to go?’

I nodded.

The girl screwed up her nose and closed her eyes for a moment. I waited. ‘I think it’s off the Wolverhampton Road,’ she said at last. ‘I’m pretty sure it is. My aunt Agnes lives down there. It’s first left just past the Tivoli cinema on the dual carriageway.’

‘The Tivoli cinema?’

‘You couldn’t miss it. It had a huge red sign. It’s the one they knocked down a couple of a years ago. I think it’s a car park now.’ She thought for a moment. ‘Or is it the new council offices?’

I swore quietly and looked at my watch. It was twenty past three in the morning. The night was not going well and I still had nearly five hours to go.

‘Is everything all right?’

We both turned at the sound of a new voice. It was Mrs Potter. She was wearing a pink candlewick dressing gown. A matching pink cord was tied firmly around her waist. She had about three dozen pink and blue curlers in her hair.

‘I heard voices,’ she explained.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said.

‘That’s all right,’ said Mrs Potter, waving a hand. ‘I’m a very light sleeper.’

‘The doctor has had an emergency call,’ explained the girl. She lowered her voice as though this was secret information.

‘Oh dear,’ said Mrs Potter, sympathetically. ‘Do you want me to call an ambulance?’ She reached for the telephone.

‘No, no,’ I said, holding up a hand to stop. ‘I’ve got to go and see what the problem is. But the address the patient gave me isn’t on the map.’

‘It’s Prospero Lane,’ said the girl in the pelmet. ‘It’s just after the Tivoli isn’t it?’

Mrs Potter thought for a moment. ‘Second left after the Tivoli,’ she agreed. ‘Which end do you want?’

I looked at the piece of paper on which I had written the caller’s details. ‘It’s number 117b,’ I said.

‘I think that’ll be the far end,’ said Mrs Potter, with a nod of certainty. ‘Probably one of the flats.’ She wrinkled up her nose. ‘It’s a bit rough down there,’ she said.

‘Have you got a car?’ asked the girl.

I nodded.

‘Do you want me to take you there?’

‘That would be very kind of you. I don’t think I’ll be able to find it by myself. There won’t be anyone wandering about to ask at this time of night.’

‘Or should I wait here and answer the phone?’ asked the girl. ‘What about if someone else calls?’

I bent down and picked up my black bag. I was faced with a real dilemma. If the girl didn’t come with me I would probably never find Prospero Lane and the woman who had called would doubtless be found dead in her bed when someone missed her. If the girl did come with me the next caller, desperately searching for a doctor to treat her feverish child, would be left without medical help and her child would die.

If worrying was an Olympic sport I would, even at that young age, have been a serious contender for most of the main events. I could have worried well in the sprints (short, sudden worries about new problems) and I would have been just as successful in the marathon (masses of long-term, chronic never-ending worries). It now seemed to me that whatever I did there would be a disaster. And I would be responsible. My career as a doctor would be over before it had really started. What else could I do for a living once I had been struck off and publicly disgraced? I’d be lucky to get a job stacking shelves in the seediest of supermarkets. Once a committed worrier starts worrying there is no knowing where it will stop.

‘Are you sure?’ I heard the girl say.

‘Of course I am, love,’ said Mrs Potter. ‘You go off and take the doctor to Prospero Lane. I’ll hold the fort here. You just make sure you bring him back safe and sound.’

I looked at the girl and then at Mrs Potter.

‘While you were daydreaming we sorted it,’ explained the girl. ‘I’ll take you to Prospero Lane and Mrs Potter will answer the phone while you’re out.’

We headed for the door, the car and the open road.

‘I’ll make a pot of tea,’ said Mrs Potter as we left. ‘It’ll be nicely stewed by the time you get back.’

***

‘I know this sounds corny,’ I said. ‘And I don’t mean it to be. But haven’t I seen you somewhere before?’

‘At breakfast.’

I thought back. I couldn’t remember her. ‘There was a girl who came in just as I was leaving,’ I remembered. ‘But she was blonde.’

‘That was me,’ said the girl.

I looked at her.

‘Why did you dye your hair?’

She laughed. ‘I haven’t. It was a wig.’

‘The blonde hair?’

‘And this is a wig too.’

‘Oh.’ I said. I wondered what her hair was like underneath. ‘Had you been out somewhere?’ I asked, as I drove away from the hotel.

‘I’m a dancer,’ replied the girl. ‘I work in a club in the centre of town.’

‘I’ve never met anyone in show business before,’ I said, impressed. I tapped at the wheel impatiently as I waited for the traffic lights in front of me to change from red to green.

‘I’ve never met a doctor before,’ she laughed. ‘At least, not when I’ve had all my clothes on.’

‘What’s your name?’

The lights changed. I accelerated away from them.

‘My work name is Tiffany. But my real name’s Sarah.’

‘Why do you work as Tiffany? Sarah’s a lovely name.’

‘Robert already had signs up advertising Tiffany. But the other Tiffany left. It was easier for me to change my name than for him to change the signs. What’s your name?’

I told her. ‘Who’s Robert?’ I asked. I speeded up so that we could get through the traffic lights ahead of us before they turned red.

‘He’s the boss,’ she said. ‘He owns the club. He’s also my boyfriend.’

‘How long have you been dancing for a living?’

‘Six months. I was a dental nurse before that. But it was very dull. I hated it. And the dentist kept groping me between the patients.’ She laughed. ‘The customers try to grope me at the club but there’s more room to get away from them. And the club has a strict no touch policy. Except for private arrangements, of course. The dentist was always catching me. My bum was black and blue every night. He was a pincher. And the money was terrible.’

‘What sort of dancing do you do?’ I asked.

‘Oh, just move about and jiggle my bits,’ she said. ‘And I serve drinks too. But the serving drinks is just temporary. I need the job to get my Equity card and then I can get proper dancing jobs in theatres and on television. This is just a stepping stone really. A friend of mine says she thinks she can get us both a job on a cruise liner. They do proper musicals on the ships and always need loads of dancers.’

‘It all sounds very exciting,’ I said. I stopped for another set of lights.

‘Why don’t you just go through?’ asked the girl. ‘There’s nothing coming. And if the police pop out of the woodwork you’ve got a good excuse.’ It made sense. I crept over the junction, looking carefully to the right and to the left.

‘What about you?’ she asked. ‘How long have you been a GP?’

‘Well, actually, this is my first night as a GP,’ I confessed to her. ‘I’ve just finished my pre-registration house jobs.’

‘What does that mean?’ she asked. ‘Aren’t you a proper doctor then?’

‘Oh yes,’ I said. ‘When you qualify as a doctor you have to work for a year in hospital before you can be fully registered as a doctor.’

‘What does that mean? Being registered?’

‘It means that I can sign prescriptions and death certificates and things like that. And it means I can work outside the hospital. In the year after I qualified I could only work in a hospital as a junior doctor.’

‘So now you’re properly qualified?’

‘Yes. I just haven’t got a job yet.’

Just then a police car came swooping past us. The siren was sounding, the blue light on the roof was flashing.

‘Oh bugger,’ I muttered. ‘Was I speeding?’ The police car cut in front of us and slowed. I slowed down too.

‘I think so,’ said Sarah. ‘You were doing over fifty when I last looked.’

‘What’s the limit along here?’

‘I think it’s thirty.’

We were both stopped now. The near side door of the police car opened and a policeman got out.

‘Tell him you’re a doctor on your way to an emergency,’ whispered Sarah. ‘Maybe he’ll let you off.’

The policeman walked over to my door. I wound down my window.

‘In a hurry, were we sir?’ he asked.

‘Yes, I’m afraid so officer,’ I said. ‘I’m a doctor. On my way to an emergency.’

The policemen bent down and looked first at me and then at Sarah. ‘Doctor? Emergency? Looks more like on your way to a party.’

‘No, honestly,’ I said. ‘I’m a locum GP. My drug bag is in the boot.’

‘Let’s see it then,’ said the policemen. He backed away from the door so that I could get out.

I got out, walked round to the boot and lifted Dr Taylor’s black bag out. I unlocked it and showed the policeman the instruments and the drugs it contained.

‘Where’s the patient?’

I told him.

The policeman said nothing but walked back towards his car. He bent down and spoke to his colleague and then came back. ‘We’ll give you an escort, doctor,’ he said. ‘Follow us.’

And so we drove the rest of the way to Prospero Road behind a police car. The driver kept his siren and flashing lights switched on all the way. When we got to number 117b he skidded to a halt outside. I stopped a few feet behind him. ‘Will you wait here?’ I asked Sarah. ‘Of course I will,’ she replied. ‘I’m not walking all the way back to the hotel.’ It hadn’t been quite what I meant. I leapt out of the car, waved and shouted thanks, grabbed my black bag and dashed across a patch of bare grass to the front door. There was a small wooden sign explaining that number 117b was a first floor maisonette. I ran up the stairs and rang the bell.

‘Are you the doctor?’ asked the woman who answered the door. She was in her mid-sixties and grossly obese. She had varicose veins, swollen ankles and was wheezing.

When I said I was she turned and headed down a short narrow corridor. I followed her. Her feet were too big for her slippers and to get them on she had just crushed the backs of them with her heels. She headed into what was obviously her living room and sat down in an overstuffed easy chair. The room was full of teddy bears. There must have been a hundred of them.

‘What’s the problem?’ I asked.

‘I can’t sleep,’ said the woman. ‘Dr Taylor gives me sleeping tablets but I ran out yesterday.’

I looked at her, disbelieving.

‘I’ve forgotten the name,’ she said. ‘But I expect you’ll know what they are. Dr Taylor will have told you. Blue and white they are.’

I said nothing but opened the black bag and rummaged around inside. I found three different types of painkiller, four different types of antibiotic, some antihistamines and numerous other pharmaceutical goodies. But no sleeping tablets. At last I found a bottle containing huge green and yellow capsules which I thought would do the trick.

‘I haven’t got any of the usual medicine you take,’ I said. ‘But I’ve got a bottle of very powerful sleeping capsules.’ I picked out the bottle and examined it, hiding the label with my hand. ‘The trouble is,’ I told her, ‘that these are very strong. Much stronger than the tablets you usually take.’

‘Oh that’s fine, doctor,’ said the woman. ‘Marvellous. I need something to knock me out.’

I hesitated. ‘Are you sure you’ll be all right with these?’ I asked.

‘Positive,’ replied the woman. She held out a hand. ‘Should I take it with water?’

‘Definitely,’ I told her. ‘Lots of water.’ I opened the bottle and shook one of the capsules out into her hand. ‘Make sure you’re in bed when you take it,’ I warned her. ‘You’ll be asleep in minutes.’

‘Thank you, doctor,’ said the woman gratefully.

I closed and locked the black bag and headed for the door. When I got back to the car Sarah was standing on the pavement talking to the two policemen. They saw me approaching, both waved and headed back to their car. ‘Just thought we’d keep an eye on your nurse, doctor,’ shouted one of the policemen.

‘Was she OK?’ asked Sarah, as we drove back into town.

‘She wanted a sleeping tablet,’ I said. ‘She couldn’t sleep.’

Sarah looked at me, clearly not sure whether or not I was kidding.

I drove back into town at 29 miles an hour and carefully stopped at every road junction, every pedestrian crossing and every set of traffic lights.

***

The three of us had been staring at the telephone for twenty minutes. Mrs Potter was sitting. Sarah and I were standing. We'd had an early breakfast.

When, at last, the phone rang I looked at my watch. It was three minutes past eight.

'Is that the doctor?' asked a female voice.

I said it was.

'This is Dr Taylor's receptionist,' said the voice. 'I'm taking the phones back now. Did you have a quiet night?'

'Oh yes,' I said. 'No problems.

'Jolly good.' The phone clicked. I put the receiver back and leant back with a sigh.

'Are we off duty now?' asked Sarah.

I nodded.

'Phew,' said Mrs Potter, fanning her face with her hand. 'I'm exhausted.'

I reached into my inner jacket pocket and took out the envelope Dr Taylor had left me. I opened it. There were three ten pound notes and one five pound note. I handed one of the ten pound notes to the girl and one to Mrs Potter.

'What's this for?' demanded Sarah.

'Your help,' I said. 'I would never have got through the night without you two.

'Are you sure?' asked Mrs Potter.

'Positive,' I said. The fiver I had left would more than pay for my petrol. And the remaining tenner would pay for half of a car radio if I bought a cheap, second-hand one. I could manage without hub caps. The night's work would have cost me ten pounds and four hub caps.

'I can't take this,' said the girl, holding the money out to me.

'Please,' I said.

With a sigh, Sarah folded the note and put it into her handbag. Mrs Potter slipped her ten pound note into her dressing gown pocket without protest.

'This makes us almost doctors,' giggled the girl to Mrs Potter.'

'Very respectable,' agreed Mrs Potter.

The phone rang. All three of us jumped. I reached out and answered it.

'I'd like a room for two for Saturday night,' said a male voice. 'Something with a view.'

'It's for you,' I said, handing the phone to Mrs Potter. She took it and reached for her booking diary and a pen.

'I think I'll go to bed,' I whispered, getting up and heading for the door.

'Me too,' said Sarah. I'm knackered.'

We headed up the stairs together.

'Thanks for all your help,' I said as we arrived at my door.

'I'm on the floor above,' said Sarah, pointing upwards. 'It was a pleasure.' She grinned and paused. 'I liked the police escort best,' she admitted. 'That was fun.'

'I expect I'll see you later on,' I said.

'Bound to,' said Sarah. She gave a little wave and scampered off up the stairs, her high heels click-clacking noisily on the varnished staircase. The stair carpet ended on the first floor. It was that sort of hotel.

***

I had finished my breakfast and was sitting staring at the pawn ticket I'd found among Henry's belongings.

'I've heard of people reading the cornflake packet or the sauce bottle at breakfast,' said Sarah, from behind me. 'But I've never seen anyone read a bus ticket before.'

'It isn't a bus ticket,' I told her. 'It's a pawn ticket.'

'Can I join you?' Sarah asked. Without waiting for an answer she sat down. 'A pawn ticket? Really? I didn't know pawnshops still existed. I thought they went out with Dickens.'

'There's a pawnshop just up the road,' I told her. 'That's where this is from.'

'Can I look?'

I handed her the ticket.

'What's it for?' she asked. Sarah, I had learned, had a child's innocence when it came to asking questions. She was not restrained by convention or modesty.

The young waitress came at that moment and took her breakfast order. Toast and coffee. I asked for more coffee and more toast.

'I don't know,' I told her, when the waitress had disappeared.

'How can you not know what your pawn ticket is for?'

'It's not mine.'

And then, without thinking about it and without really meaning to, I told her everything about Henry and Daphne.

I told her how we'd met and I told her how much I loved the old couple and I told her that they had left the hospital when Henry had learned that Daphne was going to be put into a care home and would not be able to visit him.

'They ran away together?'

'Yes.'

'Like a young couple eloping?'

I laughed. 'Yes.'

'How absolutely romantic.'

'I suppose it is,' I admitted.

'And you think the pawn ticket could be a clue?'

'It could be,' I said. 'I haven't got much to go on. I'm wandering about in the dark.'

The waitress turned up with two racks of toast and two fresh pots of coffee.

'It's like a detective story,' said Sarah. 'I do love mysteries and adventures. Can I help?'

'You can,' I told her. 'But I don't know what to do next.'

'Well obviously the next thing to do is to find out what the pawn ticket is for!'

'I can't,' I told her.

'Why not?'

'It'll cost £60.'

'Crumbs. What is it? A gold watch?'

'I haven't got the faintest idea what it is. But I suspect that Henry must have pawned it to raise money for their getaway. He must have sent Daphne to the pawnshop.'

'I can lend you £60,' said Sarah.

'No!' I said firmly. 'You can't.'

'Yes I can. I've got £90 in the bank. I save most of my tips. I'm saving up for a boob job.' She looked down at her breasts. 'If I'm ever going to get anywhere in show business I need bigger breasts.'

'I can't let you do that,' I said.

'Why not?' she demanded indignantly. 'You hardly know me. Besides they're my breasts.'

'No, I mean I can't let you find the money for the pawnbroker.'

'It's just a loan,' said Sarah, grabbing a slice of toast and covering it with about a quarter of an inch of butter. 'If the pawnshop lent Harry and Sarah £60 on it – whatever it is – then it must be worth more than £60 mustn't it?'

'Yes,' I agreed.

'So I'm not risking anything am I?' She put a piece of toast into her mouth and bit off a large chunk.

I buttered some toast and poured some coffee into my cup. 'It would just be a loan,' I insisted. 'I'll pay you back as soon as I can.'

'Good,' said Sarah, through a mouthful of toast. 'As soon as we've finished breakfast I'll go to the bank and then we'll go to the pawnshop.'

***

'There's a call for you, doctor,' said Mrs Potter as I left the breakfast room, brushing toast crumbs from my jacket. She handed me a piece of paper with a number written on it. 'I think it's that doctor's surgery again,' she told me. 'They're probably so pleased with your work the other night that they want to hire you again.'

I rang the number and spoke to Dr Taylor.

'Patient of mine in Prospero Lane,' he said. 'A Mrs Wilkins. Do you remember seeing her the other night?'

I remembered immediately. How could I ever forget Prospero Lane. I felt cold inside. What had I done wrong? Had I killed her? Would I be hauled before the General Medical Council and struck off? Or maybe taken to court and charged with murder?

'She likes your sleeping tablets better than the ones I used to give her,' said Dr Taylor. 'Swears she slept twice as well as she'd ever slept before.'

'Oh good,' I said, relief flooding through my mind.

'So, what were they?' he asked.

'I gave her a big green and yellow vitamin capsule I found in your bag,' I told him. 'I couldn't find the sleeping tablets.'

'Splendid,' said Dr Taylor. 'I'll prescribe some of those for her. Thanks doctor. I'll ring you again when I need cover if I may.'

'Yes, certainly,' I said, though I would, I thought, have to renegotiate the financial arrangements.

He put the phone down and so did I.

Chapter 8

‘This is quite exciting,’ said Sarah.

‘Because we don’t know what it is?’

‘It could be anything!’

‘Well, I think it’s a fair guess that it isn’t an elephant or a fruit farm.’

‘You know what I mean,’ laughed Sarah. ‘What do you think it is?’

‘I think it’s probably jewellery,’ I said.

‘I thought that,’ agreed Sarah. ‘A watch probably.’

‘Maybe,’ I agreed.

‘Perhaps he had a gold watch which he inherited or which he was given when he retired.’

‘Perhaps.’ I was hoping that whatever it was it would give us a clue to where Henry and Daphne had gone. An address would be wonderful. A clue would be useful.

We arrived at the door to the pawnbrokers and went in. I put Henry’s ticket through the grille at the hatchway. The man I’d spoken to on my previous visit wasn’t there. He had been replaced by a woman in her sixties. She had short, white hair and the wrinkled eyes of a long-term smoker. She checked the ticket against the ledger. I handed her a big chunk of Sarah’s savings. She gave me a stout brown envelope sealed with a metal clip. The envelope had a number written on it which matched the number on the ticket I’d taken in. I took the envelope and thanked her. We left.

‘Open it!’ said Sarah, as soon as we were outside in the street.

‘Not here,’ I said. ‘We need to go somewhere private. We’d better go back to the hotel.’

‘I can’t wait that long. Come in here!’ Sarah dragged me into a coffee bar. Birmingham had quite a few of them in those days. The coffee bar was virtually empty. We found a booth in a dark corner. A waitress came. I ordered two coffees and resisted Sarah’s demands that I open the envelope until the coffees had been delivered.

We both pushed our coffees away to one side of the table. I unfastened the metal clip which fastened the envelope, tilted the envelope and gently poured the contents out onto the table.

The envelope had contained a small red box. The box, made of leather, was about two inches square and well-worn. I picked it up and examined it. There was absolutely no clue on it as to what it might contain. There wasn’t even a name of a shop or a maker.

‘Open it!’ whispered Sarah.

I opened it.

Neither of us had expected what we found. It wasn’t a watch or a brooch. It wasn’t a rare coin or a bracelet. It was a medal. A round medal with a piece of coloured ribbon attached to it.

‘What is it?’ asked Sarah, clearly as puzzled as I was.

‘It’s a medal.’

She looked at me.

‘I don’t know what sort of medal.’ I said.

‘But obviously quite a valuable medal.’

‘Worth more than sixty quid anyway,’ I agreed.

‘Was Henry in the war?’

‘He was in the First World War,’ I told her. ‘He was injured.’

‘What happened?’

‘A bullet shot his thumb off.’

‘Which thumb?’

‘I don’t know.’ I held up my hands and looked at them, trying to remember. ‘The left one.’

‘Would they give him a medal for losing a thumb?’

‘I wouldn’t have thought so,’ I said.

‘Nor would I,’ said Sarah. ‘If they gave people valuable medals for losing a thumb what would they hand out to people who lost legs?’ She stopped and thought for a moment. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘That sounded awful. It must have been awful to lose a thumb. But you know what I mean.’

I nodded and smiled at her. ‘I know what you mean,’ I agreed.

‘Who will know what sort of medal this is?’ asked Sarah.

‘I noticed an antique shop four or five doors away,’ I told her. ‘He’s got medals in the window.’

‘Let’s ask him,’ said Sarah, sliding out of the booth.

‘Hey!’ shouted a voice as we left.

We both turned.

'You might not like the coffee,' said the waitress. 'But you've still got to pay for it.'

Red-faced I apologised, paid her for the coffee and gave her a big tip.

***

The antique shop had a CLOSED sign in the window. But I tried the door anyway. It was unlocked. I opened it and we went in. Inside I called out, rather timidly, asking if there was anyone there.

'Is anyone in?' yelled Sarah, without waiting to see if my tentative enquiry produced any results.

Moments later a small, thin, wiry man with a pair of jeweller's magnifying glasses perched on the end of his nose appeared. He was eating a ham roll and had mustard on his chin. He seemed about to tell me off for ignoring the closed sign but then he saw Sarah and his face lightened. She explained that we just wanted him to look at a medal for us.

'It's a George Medal,' he said. 'Issued during the Second World War.' He put down the roll and turned the medal over and over in his hand. 'This one is quite unusual,' he said. 'It was awarded to a soldier but the George Medal isn't usually a military medal. It's usually awarded to civilians.'

'So how did this come to be awarded to a soldier?'

The antique dealer shrugged. 'I have no idea. Maybe he did something exceptionally brave when he was off duty.' He thought for a moment. 'Perhaps he rescued a child from a burning house as he made his way home on leave. Who knows? All I can tell you is that it's only ever given after some act of great bravery.'

'And definitely for something that happened in the Second World War?'

'Oh yes, definitely.'

I remembered the newspaper cutting and the story about how Michael Mulligan had won a George Medal for rescuing people from a train crash.

'How much is the medal worth?' asked Sarah.

The dealer looked at the medal again. 'I would give you £200 in cash for it,' he said. 'But I could get considerably more if you leave it with me and let me find a buyer for you. It is a very special medal.'

'We'll have to think about it,' I said. 'It belongs to a friend.'

The dealer looked at me, frowning. 'Doesn't he know why he got the medal?' he asked.

'He's not well,' I said. 'He's quite old. You know how it is.'

'Ah I know only too well,' replied the dealer. 'My wife...' He left the sentence unfinished.

We thanked him and headed for the door. He picked up his ham roll and carried on where he'd left off.

***

Something had been troubling me for hours. I should have pushed earlier. But I was so desperate to get the packet from the pawnbroker that I hadn't.

'Where did you get the money from?' I asked. Sixty pounds seemed a lot of money to save out of tips.

Sarah looked at me, as though she didn't understand what I meant.

'The money for the pawnbroker.'

'It was money I'd saved.' A pink flush appeared on her cheeks. 'Tips I got as a waitress.'

I said nothing but just looked at her. She slowly went a brighter and brighter red.

'Where did it come from Sarah?' I asked her. 'I just want to know.'

'I did a favour for Robert.'

'What sort of favour?'

'A German businessman came over. They're opening a club together in Hamburg.'

'What was the favour?'

'He wanted me to be nice to him.'

'How nice?'

'Just nice. It wasn't important.'

'And Robert gave you money?'

'No. It wasn't like that. I didn't sleep with him for money.'

I put my head in my hands and said nothing.

'I don't know what you're getting so upset about. It wasn't a big deal. If a bloke takes me out for a meal he expects me to sleep with him whether I'm in love with him or not. This way I didn't have to bother eating the soggy chicken and putting up with all sorts of bullshit about how much money he earned. And the money helped us get the medal from the pawnshop didn't it?'

'I thought Robert was supposed to be your boyfriend?'

'He is. I just did him a favour. It took less than an hour. How long does it take you to earn sixty quid?'

***

There was a bang on my door that night, just as I was about to go to sleep.

‘I think I’ve got an infection,’ said Sarah.

I looked at her.

‘It must have been that German.’ She told me this with no sense of embarrassment or anger.

I still didn’t say anything.

‘Can you give me an antibiotic or something?’

‘No.’

‘I don’t want to go to the doctor.’

‘Why not?’

‘You can give me a prescription.’

‘I can’t give you a prescription without examining you.’

She started to unfasten her blouse. ‘That’s OK. Examine me.’

‘No!’ I reached out to stop her. ‘You need tests. You have to go to the doctor.’

‘But you’re a doctor.’

‘Yes. But not your doctor. If you don’t want to go to your GP just pop along to the hospital. They have a special clinic for that sort of infection.’

She left, slamming the door behind her.

Chapter 9

I woke up in the middle of the night suddenly realising that I did have a lead after all. I knew the regiment in which Private Mulligan had served and all army regiments keep records. Maybe the record keeper at Private Mulligan's old regiment might be able to help me.

At seventeen minutes past nine the next morning I was on the telephone to the regiment's records office. I'd started at nine and it had taken me, and a very helpful operator from directory enquiries, that long to find the number. The man I was talking to had introduced himself as Captain Richmond.

'I'm sorry to bother you,' I said. 'But I'm a doctor calling from the Birmingham hospital and I'm hoping that you can help me with some information.'

'What sort of information?' asked Captain Richmond.

'A patient of mine has gone missing,' I explained. 'He's rather old and confused and tends to wander a bit. The problem is that his medical records don't show any addresses that he might have gone to. He needs medication rather urgently and so it's important that I find him as quickly as possible.' I crossed my fingers as I spoke and hoped that my good intentions would mean that Gabriel wouldn't hold the lie against me when he came to do the final summing up.

'What's his name?' asked Captain Richmond.

'Private Mulligan,' I told him. 'Private Michael Mulligan.'

'I don't suppose you have a number for him?'

'No, sorry.'

'What's your number? I'll ring you back. I should be able to get something for you in half an hour or so.'

I gave him the hotel number and then raced upstairs and banged on Sarah's door. 'Are you in?' I shouted.

'What's the matter?' she demanded. She was in her underwear and holding a lipstick in her left hand. She still looked cross.

'I need you to answer the phone in half an hour's time,'

'Downstairs?'

I nodded.

'Is this to do with the medal?'

'Yes.'

'I'll be down in twenty minutes. Is that OK?' Suddenly she seemed to have forgotten that she was angry with me.

'That's fine.'

I raced back downstairs to ask Mrs Potter if I could commandeer her telephone once more. 'It's in a good cause,' I assured her. 'Are you still trying to find that patient you lost?'

I said I was.

'If I ever get lost I hope my doctor puts as much effort into finding me,' she said.

***

Captain Richmond telephoned almost exactly thirty minutes after we had spoken. Sarah answered the phone. 'Birmingham Hospital,' she said, in her very poshest voice.

'I'll just see if he's available,' she said, when the officer asked to speak to me. 'But at this time of the morning the doctor is usually either in his clinic or in the operating theatre.'

I tried to grab the phone off her but she put her hand over the receiver and held it out of my reach.

'Come on!' I hissed. 'Give me the phone.'

'Don't be in such a hurry,' said Sarah calmly. She waited another ten or fifteen seconds and then gave me the phone.

'Hello,' I said. I was out of breath with anxiety and hoped Captain Richmond would assume that it was because I had been running.

'Ah, doctor,' said the Captain. 'I've managed to track down your Private Mulligan. I've got a next of kin address for him but I'm not sure how up-to-date it is. Private Mulligan left the army in 1946.'

'It'll be a start anyway,' I said.

Captain Richmond gave me an address in Birmingham. It was no more than five miles away from Mrs Potter's hotel. 'I don't know who these people are,' he said. 'But we've got a Doris Dickson of that address down as next of kin.'

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Mr and Mrs Dickson lived in a terraced house in what had once been a poor part of town but which had, in recent years, been subjected to what estate agents refer to as 'gentrification'. This meant that the traditional paving slabs had all been ripped up and replaced with bricks. The old-fashioned cast iron lampposts which had previously lit the street had been ripped out, sold for scrap and replaced by imitation old-fashioned lampposts made out of something lighter and probably far less durable. There were hanging baskets full of plastic flowers dangling from brackets attached to alternate houses.

I found number 56 and rang the doorbell. An old woman in a pinafore came to the door. She had grey hair, neatly permed, and underneath her pinafore she wore a dress with lots of flowers on it. I introduced myself. She confirmed that she was Mrs Dickson.

'Come in,' she said. She stepped back so I could squeeze past her. Like Mrs Dickson the hallway was welcoming but narrow but neat. There were hunting prints on the wall and at the far end of the hallway a grandfather clock was ticking loudly.

'First left,' called a male voice.

I took the first doorway on my left and found myself in a small, overcrowded room. There was a sofa, two armchairs and a table covered in an antimacassar. There were two glass-fronted bookcases in the room and both were crammed with books; most were old hardbacks which had long since lost their dust-jackets. There were neat piles of magazines and newspapers in one corner of the room. A third glass-fronted cupboard was filled with glassware and china. There were numerous pictures on the walls, mostly old Victorian prints, and a few ornaments hanging on nails. There were even three plaster ducks flying up the all. Both my grandmothers used to have plaster ducks on their walls.

An old man in a red cardigan and grey trousers was sitting in one of the armchairs. Beside him there was an open bookcase. Fixed to the arm of his chair there was a writing surface. He had a full head of grey hair, neatly combed and large, bushy eyebrows which he also kept neatly combed. He wore tweed slippers. He had one leg crossed over the other and I noticed that the sole of one slipper had worn through. I could see the sole of a red sock.

'Mr Dickson?'

He nodded.

I introduced myself. 'I'm a doctor. I'm trying to trace Michael Mulligan,' I said to the old man. 'He was in the army during the war and the army records people have a Doris Dickson of this address down as his next of kin.'

The old man nodded. I could hear his wife talking to herself in the kitchen. 'Kettle. Water. Pot. Tea. Cups. Saucers.' She was telling herself what to do. 'Kettle. Water. Pot. Tea. Cups. Saucers.'

'She forgets things sometimes,' explained the old man. 'She gets flustered.'

'I understand,' I said.

'They say there isn't anything they can do for her.'

'No, I'm afraid there probably isn't.'

'You say you're a doctor?'

'I am.'

'Do you work at the hospital?'

'I used to. A Mr Henry Mulligan was a patient of mine. He's missing at the moment and I'm trying to find him. I'm trying to trace Michael Mulligan in the hope that he will be able to tell me where I can find Henry.'

'So how did you come to lose him?'

'He discharged himself. I think he's gone off with his wife. I think they're both in danger. I need to find them both quickly but I don't know where they've gone.'

'What sort of danger? Is someone after them?'

'No, no.' I shook my head. 'Not that sort of danger. Mr Mulligan's health isn't very good. He really needs to be in hospital.' I said. I didn't see any point in telling the old man what my fear really was.

'I don't think I can help you,' said Mr Dickson.

'If you could give me any idea where I might find him, that would help a lot.'

The old man stared at me, as though trying to make a decision.

'You're not from the police?'

'Good heavens no!'

'You're definitely a doctor?'

'Yes.'

He reached up to the shelf beside him and pulled down a dictionary. He opened it and thumbed through the pages. 'Spell diarrhoea.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Spell diarrhoea,' he repeated.

I spelt diarrhoea.

'Right,' he said. 'I don't expect a policeman would be able to spell diarrhoea.'

'Probably not,' I agreed.

'Do you doctors still take an oath to keep things confidential?' he asked me.

'We do,' I said. 'The Hippocratic Oath.'

He reached up to the shelf again and pulled down another book. He flicked through the pages, found what he was looking for. 'Here it is,' he said. 'Whatever in connection with my medical practice, or not in connection with it, I see or hear, in the life of men, which ought not to be spoken of abroad, I will not divulge, as reckoning that all such should be kept secret.'

'That's from the Hippocratic Oath,' I agreed.

'So, you're bound by that if I tell you something.'

'I am,' I agreed.

He stared at me, as though trying to see into my soul. 'Are you an honest man,' he asked.

'I think so,' I said. 'I do my best. My only interest in Henry Mulligan is that I want to help him. He's my friend.' And I explained to the old man how Henry and I had met.

'OK.' said the old man, with a big sigh. 'I'll tell you something I promised I'd never tell another soul.'

I waited.

'Michael Mulligan was never in the army.'

I thought about this for a moment. 'But the army have a Michael Mulligan on their records,' I pointed out. 'And I have a newspaper cutting with a photograph of Michael Mulligan receiving a medal.' I reached into my pocket and took out the cutting. I handed it to Mr Dickson.

'That's Michael Mulligan,' I told him.

'It is,' he said. 'But he was never in the army.'

I stared at him for a moment trying to take this in. 'The man in the picture was a soldier.' I said. 'He was in the army. He was given a medal.'

'Oh, it's Michael Mulligan,' said the old man. 'But he was no hero.'

'How do you know?' I asked. 'How can you be so sure?' I didn't understand.

'Michael Mulligan didn't serve in the army at all. He was a coward and a crook and he broke my daughter's heart.'

'Your daughter was Doris?'

He nodded. 'They were engaged.'

'During the war?'

'They got engaged in 1938. She was just seventeen. Pretty as a picture and innocent as a lamb.' He opened a drawer beside him and took out an old blue diary. He opened the diary and took out a photograph. He looked at the photograph for a moment and then handed it to me.

The picture was of a young girl. She was wearing a polka dot dress and a big straw hat. There was a beach and some sea behind her. I turned the photograph over. There was writing on the back. 'Doris, Westward Ho! 1937.'

'We went on holiday, the three of us, in 1937,' explained Mr Dickson. 'That's where Doris met Michael. She was bowled over by him.'

'Is Doris still...' I hesitated. Somehow I knew the answer and wished I hadn't asked the question.

'She died in 1957,' said Mr Dickson. 'They said it was cancer but it was heartbreak.' He paused and wiped away another tear. 'Michael Mulligan killed her,' he said.

'I'm sorry,' I told him.

He reached up an arthritic hand and wiped a tear away from the corner of an eye. 'She was a lovely girl,' he said. 'Never hurt anyone. She deserved better than Michael Mulligan.'

'What happened?'

'Michael was called up for the army but he didn't want to go. He was terrified. He wet himself the day he got his call-up papers.'

'But he did go,' I said. 'In the end he went.'

Mr Dickson shook his head. 'Michael didn't go,' he said. 'His uncle went for him.'

'His uncle?'

'Henry Mulligan,' said Mr Dickson.

I stared at him. I don't know what I'd expected to hear but this hadn't been it.

'Henry was Michael's uncle. You knew that?'

I shook my head. 'Henry never mentioned anyone called Michael.'

'I'm not surprised,' said Mr Dickson. 'He was probably too ashamed. He and Daphne did everything they could for that boy. They treated him like a son. Brought him up. Looked after him. Did everything a couple could. He treated them like dirt. The same as he treated everyone. He was bad news that boy.'

‘But how could Henry pretend to be Michael?’

‘They just swapped identities,’ said Mr Dickson. ‘There was only a few years between them and Henry always kept himself in good condition. He was a professional cyclist between the wars. Did you know that?’

I shook my head. It seemed that there was a lot about Henry that I didn’t know.

‘He took part in the Tour de France once. Maybe more than once. He rode for one of the British manufacturing teams. I can’t remember which one. He was a mechanic and loved machines. He rode a bicycle at weekends and then entered a few races and won some of them. So he got put in for the Tour de France. No one over here had heard of it really. But it was big news in France and on the continent. He had a bad crash coming down a mountain and couldn’t have children. That’s why he and Daphne never had any kids of their own.’

‘Henry told me once that he hadn’t been able to be a proper husband to Daphne.’

Mr Dickson nodded. ‘He maybe wasn’t much of a husband in the bedroom but he was a good husband in every other way.’

For a few moments I didn’t speak. I was still trying to absorb everything Mr Dickson had told me.

‘So Henry pretended to be Michael Mulligan and took his place in the army?’

Mr Dickson nodded.

‘Because Michael was too frightened to go?’

‘Michael tried, and failed, to get out of the call-up. He got a bent doctor to say he wasn’t fit. But the doctor got arrested for providing false certificates and Michael got called up. He was hysterical with fear.’

‘And it was Henry, not Mulligan, who rescued those people in the train crash?’

‘Of course. Michael wouldn’t lift a finger to help anyone. He was the most cowardly man I ever knew. I think there was something missing in his make-up. He was a thoughtless, selfish bastard. Henry was something else. He was a real gentleman. He had an arm broken in the crash but he still kept going back into the wreckage rescuing people.’

‘I didn’t know he broke his arm,’ I said. ‘It didn’t mention the arm in the newspaper.’

‘I don’t think Henry ever mentioned it,’ said Mr Dickson. ‘He never liked a fuss.’

‘And where was Michael while Henry was pretending to be him?’

‘Michael was away somewhere. In hiding,’ said Mr Dickson. ‘Before the war Henry and Daphne had a garage in Walsall. They were quite well off. It had started off as a bicycle repair shop. Then they did motorcycles and finally moved on to cars. Henry was a brilliant mechanic. When Henry went off to the war he told Daphne to sell the garage and to go the country. Daphne was always delicate. Henry wanted her to be somewhere safe where he wouldn’t have to worry about her. He knew she wouldn’t be able to run the garage without him.’

‘So Daphne sold the garage?’

‘She sold it and Michael persuaded her to let him look after the proceeds.’

‘A mistake?’

‘Big mistake,’ nodded Mr Dickson. ‘Michael and Daphne moved to Devon and rented a cottage. Our Doris went with them. Michael got rid of all the money and to top it all he ended up in prison for fraud. He also found time to ditch our Doris. She had to hitchhike her way back home. He didn’t even give her the money for the train.’

‘But Henry couldn’t serve the prison sentence for Michael? Henry was in the army.’

Mr Dickson nodded. ‘But Michael served the sentence as Henry so it was Henry who got the criminal conviction in his name. Even if he’d wanted to, Michael couldn’t have told anyone his real name when he was arrested. He’d have been in even bigger trouble if he had.’

‘Do you know what it was that Michael did?’

Mr Dickson shrugged. ‘Some small time fraud. Petrol coupons I think it was. He and some other chap were printing them. He was a conman all his life. After the war, when he got the medal, he almost managed to get himself elected to Parliament. But people saw through him. You know what they say. You can fool some of the people.’

‘And Daphne? What happened to her when Doris came back here?’

‘Daphne couldn’t afford the rent on the cottage because Michael had spent everything. She moved into a little chalet. It was out of season and they were very cheap to rent.’

‘But it was Michael who collected the medal that Henry won?’

‘The medal wasn’t handed out until after the war. By that time Henry was back to being Henry and Michael fancied himself as a war hero. The two men looked very similar. They looked more like brothers than father and son. It wasn’t difficult.’

‘But Henry wasn’t Michael’s real father?’

‘No, no,’ said Mr Dickson. ‘Henry was Michael’s uncle.’

The old man pointed a finger at the photograph. ‘That’s Michael,’ he said. ‘The man in the picture has a thumb on his left hand,’ he said. He jabbed at the hand with which the soldier in the picture was holding up his medal. Four fingers and a thumb were clearly visible.

'And Henry, of course, had no thumb on his left hand.'

The old man nodded. He looked at me. 'Do you know how he lost it?'

'It was shot off during the First World War,' I replied.

The old man nodded. 'But he used to tell people he lost it in an industrial accident.' He sipped at his tea. 'He never got any compensation for it, you know.'

'I know,' I said.

'He fought in two World Wars, lost one thumb and had his medal stolen from him,' said Mr Dickson. 'Drink your tea,' he said. 'It'll go cold.'

'One more thing,' I said a little later. 'Do you know what happened to Michael in the end?'

'He died a few years ago. Heart attack I think it was. He was broke. He had no relatives except Henry and Daphne. They ended up paying for the funeral. One good thing, though, I think Henry got his medal back. It was among Michael's things.'

I stayed for a second cup of tea and a piece of ginger cake. Then I drove away. I felt sad. It was impossible to spend time in that house without feeling sad. The sorrow had seeped into the brickwork and the furniture.

I had learned a lot from Mr Dickson about Henry. But I was still no nearer to finding out where Henry had gone. At least, I didn't think I was. In fact, Mr Dickson had given me the answer I was looking for but I'd just been too stupid to realise it.

Chapter 10

I was sitting on my bed trying to decide which of two dirty shirts was the cleanest when the door burst open and Sarah exploded into the room.

‘I’m dying!’ she announced. ‘I’ve caught something awful.’ She was wearing a thin, pink cotton nightdress which had a picture of a rabbit on the front.

I stood up and pulled on the shirt I was holding. ‘What’s the matter?’ I asked, tucking the shirt into my trousers.

‘I’ve got this terrible rash,’ she told me. ‘It’s all over my body. Do you think I’ll die?’ She started to cry.

‘Have you seen a doctor?’ I asked her.

‘I’m seeing a doctor!’ she said angrily. ‘I want you to tell me what’s wrong. Just tell me if I’m going to die.’

‘I’m not supposed to run surgeries in my bedroom,’ I told her.

‘Why not?

I tried to think of a reason but couldn’t. ‘I’m not sure,’ I muttered. ‘But you’re a friend and I’m not properly dressed yet.’

‘We’re not sleeping together,’ Sarah pointed out.

‘No,’ I agreed. ‘Did you go to the hospital?’

‘Yes. But this has started since I went to the hospital. They said I had an infection and gave me some pills for it. But they must have missed something.’

‘What symptoms have you got?’

She lifted up her nightdress. She was naked underneath it. Her breasts were even smaller than advertised. Her whole body was covered with a pink rash.

‘You’ve got a rash,’ I said, after a moment’s observation.

‘I know that,’ she said, impatiently.

‘Does it itch?’

‘It’s driving me mad,’ she said. ‘And how can I go to work like this? I look stupid!’ She pulled her nightie right up to her chin and peered down at her chest. ‘Some of these spots are bigger than my breasts!’ she complained.

‘What tablets are you taking?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Can you get them?’

‘Now?’

‘Yes.’

She allowed her nightie to fall back down and left. Less than a minute later she was back with a small brown bottle which she handed to me.

‘They’re white,’ she said. ‘Will you know what they are?

I looked at the label. ‘Probably not by looking at them,’ I admitted. ‘But the name is on the bottle.’ I handed the bottle back to her. ‘You’re taking penicillin and you’ve got a penicillin rash.’

‘The tablets I’m taking caused this?’

‘I’m afraid so.’

‘What do I do now?’

‘You’d better go back to the hospital tonight and ask them whether they want you to stop the penicillin or to carry on with it.’

Sarah glowered at me and started to leave. ‘I wouldn’t mind sleeping with you,’ she said, turning back from the door. ‘If you want to. But we’d have to be very secretive about it because my boyfriend is very jealous.’

‘This is Robert, the same boyfriend who persuaded you to sleep with the German businessman?’

‘That was just a favour,’ she said angrily. She flounced out and slammed the door. A moment later the door opened again.

‘Your shirt needs ironing,’ said Sarah. ‘It’s horribly creased.’

‘It needs washing before it needs ironing,’ I told her.

‘Ask Mrs Potter,’ said Sarah. ‘If you smile nicely she’ll let you borrow her washing machine and her iron.’

‘Thank you,’ I said.

‘Don’t mention it,’ she replied.

And she left.

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I was heading out of the hotel on my way to try to find George Pardoe in Worcester when I met Sarah coming in. She was wearing jeans and a long sleeved man’s shirt. She also wore dark glasses and had a scarf wrapped around her neck. There was hardly an inch of skin visible.

‘What did the hospital say about your rash?’

‘They changed the tablets and gave me something else. They said the rash should go in a couple of days.’

‘Are you going to work?’

‘Don’t be potty. I can’t work like this. I look like a freak. The customers would all think I’d got leprosy or smallpox and they’d leave in droves.’

‘I’m sorry.’

She shrugged. ‘That’s what happens when you do a favour for someone.’ She looked down at the small bag I was holding.’

‘Are you going out on a call?’

I shook my head.

‘Where are you going then?’

‘I’ve got a lead that might take me to Henry and Daphne. I’m driving to Worcester. I might have to stay the night.’

‘Don’t you dare move an inch!’ said Sarah, pointing a finger at me. ‘I’ll be back in two minutes.’

‘Why?’ I called after her.

But she’d gone.

Ignoring her orders I walked to the car park and collected the car. I drove back and parked alongside the kerb outside the hotel. Less than a minute later Sarah appeared. She was struggling with a huge blue suitcase.

‘What on earth have you got there?’I demanded.

She heaved the suitcase into the back of the car and climbed in beside me. She leant her head forwards and peered at me over the top of her dark glasses. ‘Just a few overnight things,’ she explained. ‘I’m coming with you,’ she said.

It was a statement not a request.

I started the engine and we set off for Worcester.

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George Pardoe no longer lived at the address I had for him. But the bright young couple who had bought the house from him knew where he’d gone. He was living in an old people’s home overlooking the river. ‘It’s a very nice position,’ said the woman, an emaciated creature whose most memorable features were very short, pure white hair and enormous dangly earrings which almost reached her shoulders.

We arrived at the home at 8 p.m. We were both starving hungry but I suspected that if we ate before going to the home, Mr Pardoe might well have been put to bed and locked up for the night.

We needn’t have worried. Mr Pardoe was playing poker with three other residents. They each had a bottle of beer in front of them and they appeared to be playing for money. They didn’t look as if they were about to be put to bed.

When a woman in a blue uniform told Mr Pardoe he had visitors he finished his hand, whispered something to his companions and then walked over to where we were standing. He walked with a limp but held himself as straight as a guardsman.

I introduced myself and Sarah and told him we were looking for Henry Mulligan and wondered if he could help.

‘What makes you think I can help?’ he asked rather warily.

‘Because your name and address appear in Henry’s address book,’ I told him. ‘The only other person in there is a niece of Daphne Mulligan’s. She lives in Australia. You were closer.’ I smiled at him.

‘May I ask what you were doing poking in Henry’s address book?’

I explained, keeping the explanation as succinct as I could.

‘You’d better come into the dining room,’ said Mr Pardoe. ‘It’ll be empty. We can talk there.’ He led us into a smart room which contained a dozen small tables and twice as many chairs. The tables had all been set, presumably for breakfast. There were real flowers on all the tables. Mr Pardoe sat down. Sarah sat next to him. I turned a third chair round and sat opposite him.

‘I haven’t seen Henry for a long time,’ he said. ‘But we used to race together in France and we kept in touch.’

‘You were a cyclist?’ I remembered Mr Dickson had told me about Henry’s cycling.

He nodded. ‘We were among the first Britons to take part in the Tour de France,’ he said. ‘We neither of us ever completed it. The whole thing was a nightmare. The roads were rough and the bicycles we rode were crude and very heavy compared to today’s machines.’

‘It must have been quite an ordeal,’ I said.

‘The first time we went Henry fell badly. One of his front forks broke. Just snapped like a breadstick. He was thrown over the handlebars and landed on the road. We were descending a rough mountain track at the time. I was about a hundred yards in front of him but I heard the crash. I went back and found him yards from the edge of a 300 foot drop. He was unconscious. I had to wait for one of the support cars to arrive and they took him to a hospital in the next town. He broke two ribs and an arm and lost several teeth. He'd also crushed his...' he looked at Sarah. She nodded to encourage him to continue. 'He'd crushed everything against the crossbar when the fork had snapped. They had to remove both his testicles and do extensive repair work on all the rest of it. They weren't too good at that sort of thing. It was just a small town hospital. He never rode a bicycle again. But the next year he went back with me as my mechanic. He drove a Citroen van as the support vehicle. We were together in France when Henry got the news about his brother.'

'That would be Michael's father?'

'That's right. Though the father was called Michael too so it gets a bit confusing.'

'What was the news Henry received?'

'He got a telegram to say that his brother was dead. It hit him hard. They weren't close in the way that some brothers are. They weren't always in each other's pockets if you know what I mean.' He looked at me. I nodded to show that I understood what he meant. 'But they were close emotionally. They'd have done anything for each other. Michael was quite a bit older than Henry but they were as close as any two brothers I've ever known.'

'Henry got a train to Paris and then took the train to Calais and London. He was worried about me but I told him to go. I found a French bloke to drive the van. Claude he was called. He'd never driven before and he knew nothing about bicycles. He couldn't even mend a puncture. Not that it mattered much I abandoned long before the finish. I had a saddle sore the size of my hand. And the fight had gone out of me. I just didn't care enough to keep going.'

'Do you know what had happened to Henry's brother?' I asked. 'How did he die?'

'Michael – the father of young Michael – was a train driver. For years he drove the London to Exeter night train. Then one night his train severed the head of a woman who'd lain on the line. She just lay down across the tracks. The wheels went clean through her neck. It was dark. Michael didn't see anything. But he knew he'd hit something. He felt it.'

Sarah winced. 'How awful.'

'Ah, it was worse than that,' said Mr Pardoe. 'When they'd picked up the pieces they identified the woman as Michael's wife – Henry's sister-in-law. She'd suffered from depression for years and she'd tried to kill herself before.'

Sarah and I stared at him, appalled. 'Do you think she knew that Michael would be driving that train?'

'Oh she knew all right. She definitely knew.'

'Poor Michael,' said Sarah softly. 'How awful.'

'He loved her. He was heartbroken,' said Mr Pardoe. 'Couldn't get over it. And two days later he killed himself. He rode his bicycle to the spot where she'd died and he sat down beside the track and carefully cut his wrists with his penknife. Bled to death just a yard away from where she'd died. They found him the next morning. There wasn't a drop of blood left in his body.'

'So young Michael lost both his parents,' I said.

'That's right,' nodded Mr Pardoe. 'He was a teenager. Not a kid but still young enough to suffer. He had what they call a nervous breakdown these days. He didn't speak to anyone for months. Not a word.' He paused and fiddled with the tablecloth for a moment. 'I think it would have affected anyone badly,' he said. 'Losing both parents like that.'

'And Henry and Daphne adopted the boy?'

'As far as I know it wasn't ever made official – they didn't bother with any paperwork – but, yes, Henry and Daphne adopted Michael. They treated him like their son.'

'Do you know about Henry taking young Michael's place in the army during the Second World War?'

Mr Pardoe looked at me. 'Oh, you heard about that?'

I nodded. I'd told Sarah about the deception on the way to Worcester so she knew too.

'Michael got his call up papers and said he was going to run away. Henry didn't want him to do that. He said that they'd either arrest him and throw him in prison or else he'd be on the run for the rest of his life. Henry said he'd pretend to be Michael and join the army in his place. It wasn't difficult. They looked like each other and there wasn't much age difference. Besides, Henry was very young looking for his age. It was the accident that was responsible for that, I suspect.' He looked at me. 'But you'd know about that.'

I nodded. 'Where did Michael go when Henry went off to war?'

'He came here for a few days. Hid out with us,' said Mr Pardoe. 'Then, when Daphne had sold the garage she and Michael and Michael's fiancée went down to Devon somewhere. They rented a place on the coast.'

'Westward Ho!'

'That would be it. Westward Ho! I always thought it was just a book title but it's a real place isn't it?'

'It seems to be.'

'Henry had a real soft spot for the place,' said Mr Pardoe. 'There's a golf course there. Henry used to caddy there when he was young. He loved it. He caddied for J. H. Taylor a few times you know.'

'Who's J. H. Taylor?' asked Sarah.

'He won the Open Golf Championship a couple of times. Played his golf at Westward Ho!. He was one of the best in the world. Henry got on well with him.'

'I didn't know about the cycling or the caddying.'

'Ah, he was always shy about things like that,' said Mr Pardoe. 'He lost a thumb in the First World War but he used to tell people it was an industrial accident. I wonder how many people fought in both wars? Can't have been all that many. Not on the front line. There was a strange twist to the war story,' said Mr Pardoe. 'Do you know about the medal?'

I nodded again. 'We found it at a pawnshop in Birmingham.'

'You found the medal?'

'Yes.'

'Henry pawned it?' Mr Pardoe was clearly surprised.

'Yes.'

'He must have been desperate.'

'He was. Is.'

'I'm glad you found it,' said Mr Pardoe. He looked at us both and smiled. He still had all his own teeth. 'By and large they didn't hand out medals until after the war,' he went on. 'There wasn't a lot of time for that sort of thing at the time. By the time of the medal ceremony Henry had gone back to being Henry and Michael was back to being Michael. It seemed simpler to stick with that. Even though there were people at the ceremony who'd been rescued by Henry none of them noticed anything when it was Michael who turned up and accepted the medal.'

'And afterwards?'

'It was strange. Getting the medal went to Michael's head. He actually began to believe it was rightly his. There was a bit of publicity in the local paper and he became something of a local hero. Henry told him what had happened so that he'd know what to tell people if they asked. But whereas Henry had always played down what he did Michael always gave it a bit of an extra twist. By the time he'd finished telling it you'd have thought he'd lifted up the train single-handedly so that people could be rescued.'

'And Henry got the medal back when Michael died?'

Mr Pardoe nodded. 'Michael – young Michael – died a few years ago. I doubt if he had any other relatives alive. Henry probably got his medal back when he inherited the rest of Michael's stuff.'

We thanked Mr Pardoe. He went back to his card game. We went back to the car.

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I remembered a conversation I'd had with Henry.

Having money can be as much of a burden as not having any,' he had said.

When he'd said that I had assumed that he was just telling me a truth that he'd garnered through experience watching other people.

'When you have money you're always worrying about losing it,' he had continued. 'There will always be people eager to take things away from you.'

I hadn't understood why or how he knew this. Now I did.

'Lots of people who are poor are prisoners of their ambitions,' he had said. 'They never live for the now because they are always striving to get somewhere else. But lots of people who are rich are prisoners too. They're prisoners because they're terrified of losing what they've got. And with good reason. There's always someone prepared to steal whatever you have.'

'Live your life accumulating good memories,' he had said. 'No one can take those away from you.'

He'd been right about the money, of course. And now I understood that he was speaking from personal experience. He'd been wealthy; apparently well enough off to satisfy his and Daphne's modest needs. But then he'd lost it all to his dishonest nephew.

But he'd been wrong about the memories. At the time he'd regarded memories as untouchable. But now Daphne was losing those too.

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'People think we're sleeping together,' said Sarah, when we were back in the car.

I looked at her, astonished. 'Which people?'

She shrugged. 'I don't know. Just people.'

'Your boyfriend?'

'Oh no. He doesn't know you exist. And even if he did he wouldn't think you'd dare. Everyone is terrified of him.'

‘Including me,’ I said. ‘I’m in with everyone.’

‘You don’t even know him.’

‘I don’t want to.’

‘Are we going to look for a hotel now?’

‘No. We’re going back to Birmingham.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I can’t afford two single rooms in a hotel.’

‘I can. Anyway we’d only need one room.’

‘No.’ I said firmly. ‘Thank you. But no.’

‘My little problem is pretty well cleared up if that’s what you’re worrying about.’

‘I very much doubt if your little problem is cleared up yet,’ I said. ‘But that’s not why we’re going back.’

‘Why then?’

‘Because I can’t afford a hotel. And I’m not letting you pay. I still owe you £60 for the pawnbroker.’

‘You’re daft. Everyone thinks we’re sleeping together so we might as well.’

I didn’t say anything. I couldn’t think of anything to say. I liked her. I liked her a lot. But I didn’t want to sleep with her. My life was confusing enough as it was. She was, I suspected, vastly more experienced than I was. But she also seemed extraordinarily young and innocent. It was a curious mixture. She seemed like a young sister. But I wasn’t naive enough and stupid enough to tell her that.

Sarah didn’t speak either. We had a long, silent journey.

It wasn’t until I was parking the car on the rough ground behind the hotel that she finally spoke. ‘Are you queer?’

I laughed. ‘No,’ I said. ‘No, I’m not queer.’

‘Have you got someone?’

‘No. My last girlfriend left me to marry an estate agent. He had excellent prospects.’

‘Are you still in love with her?’

‘No.’ I said firmly. ‘No, I wasn’t ever really in love with her.’ I paused. ‘But I think I’m still a bit bruised. The ending was a bit brutal. I’m supposed to be on holiday in Corfu with her at the moment.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Please don’t be.’

‘Do you like me?’

‘Yes, I do. I like you very much.’

Then she jumped out of the car, pulled her case from the back seat and hurried off towards the hotel. By the time I’d got my bag out of the boot and locked the car she had dragged the darned case half way across the car park. I caught up with her, took the case from her and carried it to the hotel. I then dragged it upstairs for her.

She stood for a moment in the doorway to her room. She held her head to one side, like a bird. ‘You’re a funny one,’ she said.

‘I know,’ I agreed.

‘Can we be friends?’

‘Of course.’

‘I don’t have many friends. Not real friends.’

‘No one does. Most people just have lots of acquaintances and contacts.’

She looked down at the floor, clearly thinking of what she wanted to say. ‘I always think I have to go to bed with men,’ she said softly. I had to strain to hear what she said. ‘Otherwise they won’t like me.’

‘You don’t have to sleep with people for them to like you.’

She looked up at me and then smiled and nodded. She kissed me on the cheek, so quickly that I wasn’t sure she’d done it. And then the door was shut and she was gone.

Chapter 11

‘Somewhere, there has to be a clue,’ I said. ‘Henry and Daphne would have gone somewhere that was important to them.’

Sarah and I were sitting on the bed in my room at Mrs Potter’s small hotel. The George Medal and the bits and pieces I’d recovered from the hotel were spread out between us.

I looked again at the postcards. The messages didn’t seem very significant at all. They had all been written during the war and posted to Henry while he was at a training camp on Salisbury plain. They were all written and signed by Daphne.

‘What’s on the other side?’ asked Sarah.

I turned them over. ‘Just pictures,’ I said dismissively. ‘The usual holiday postcard pictures. A beach. A stretch of headland. A few houses and a slipway. And something that looks like a golf course.’

‘They’re all the same place,’ said Sarah.

‘Probably somewhere Daphne was staying,’ I said.

‘It’s that place that Mr Pardoe talked about.’

Suddenly, I felt a complete and utter idiot. Sometimes the obvious is just too obvious. Sometimes I am just unbelievably dense.

‘Westward Ho!’ said Sarah. ‘It’s the only place name I’ve ever seen that has one of those funny things attached to it.’

‘Funny thing?’

‘Mark things.’

‘Exclamation marks?’

‘That’s it.’ She looked embarrassed. ‘I was never any good at grammar,’ she said. ‘But I’ve always liked books. Dickens and stuff.’

‘You’re cleverer than I am,’ I told her, with a sigh. ‘It isn’t the writing on the postcards that is the clue. It’s the pictures.’ I picked up one of the photographs. The photograph of the honeymoon couple. I turned it over and, for the first time, read the name and address of the professional photographer who’d taken the picture. The address was in Bideford. I showed it to her.

‘Where’s Bideford?’ asked Sarah.

‘Just a few miles from Westward Ho!.’ I hit myself on the side of my head with the palm of my hand. I couldn’t believe I’d been so stupid.

‘You think that’s where they’ve gone?’

‘Of course it is. It’s where they were happy. They spent their honeymoon there. They went there on holiday when Michael was a kid. They went there later when they’d adopted Michael. And Daphne went there during the war when Henry was serving in the army.’

‘So, what are we waiting for?’ said Sarah, jumping to her feet. ‘Let’s go to Westward Ho!’

‘What about your work?’

‘I can’t work,’ she said firmly. ‘I’ve still got a rash,’ she said. ‘If necessary I can always get another doctor’s note, can’t I?’

On her way out of my room she turned. ‘Do you really not think I’m stupid?’

‘No,’ I told her. ‘I don’t think you’re stupid at all.’

She waited and thought for a moment. ‘Really brighter than you?’

‘Absolutely, definitely.’

She smiled and looked happier than I’d ever remember seeing her.

‘See if you can manage with a smaller suitcase this time,’ I suggested.

***

After that it was all ridiculously easy.

We drove to Westward Ho!, Sarah and I, and we found Henry and Daphne living in a wooden chalet right by the beach.

The chalet was one of a hundred or so which had been specially built for holiday-makers. They were poorly made and had not survived the Devon storms very well. The one that Henry and Daphne were living in had lost much of the felt from its roof. Two of the window panes had been broken, either by a gale or by vandals, and had been temporarily replaced with pieces of old hardboard.

‘Hello!’ said Henry. He did not seem surprised to see me. It was a cold, grey, day but he was sitting, in his wheelchair, on a small stretch of cracked concrete outside their chalet. He had a blanket wrapped round his knees.

He looked grey and very, very tired.

‘This is Sarah,’ I said. ‘She helped me find you.’ I introduced Sarah to Henry.

‘Hello Sarah,’ said Henry. He wheezed when he spoke. He was having difficulty in breathing. I didn’t know whether he had any of his tablets with him. ‘Would you like some tea? Daphne has just gone in to put the kettle on.’

‘I’d love some tea,’ said Sarah. Apart from a brief stop for petrol we had driven without a break from Birmingham.

I turned and looked at the view. It was the same beach that appeared on the photographs and the postcards. But it was almost deserted today. There was a man with a black Labrador and a father and two children struggling to control a kite. The Labrador, and the man, both looked old and weary; they each seemed to be walking because the other wanted to. Neither quite understanding that the other would rather be indoors, in front of a roaring fire.

‘It’s a lovely view,’ I said.

‘We’ve always liked it,’ said Henry. It took him a great effort.

Just then Daphne came out of the chalet. She was carrying a tray which contained a teapot and two cups. There were no saucers, no milk and no sugar. I took the tray from her and laid it gently on the grass at one side of Henry’s chair.

‘Would you bring enough couple of cups, dear,’ said Henry. ‘We’ve got visitors.’

‘This is Mrs Mulligan, Daphne,’ I said to Sarah. And then I introduced Sarah to Daphne.

Daphne smiled at the two of us and disappeared indoors. A moment later she returned with two cups. These, like the others, were cracked and chipped.

‘Shall I pour?’ suggested Sarah. She picked up the teapot and poured what should have been tea into the four cups. But it wasn’t tea. It was water. There was no steam. The water was cold. Sarah looked at me. I said nothing but reached down and took one of the cups. I gave it to Henry. I took another cup myself. Sarah handed the third cup to Daphne and kept the fourth for herself.

‘Thank you, Daphne,’ I said.

Daphne smiled and looked pleased with herself. ‘They say I’ve gone loopy,’ she said. ‘But they’re quite wrong.’

‘Of course they are,’ I said.

We sipped at our cups of cold water. I looked at Henry. There were tears rolling down his cheeks.

‘The bad weather is coming in,’ I said.

‘It is,’ agreed Henry. ‘There’s a hard winter ahead.’

I looked up at the roof of the chalet. A piece of loose felt was flapping in the growing wind.

I knew for certain why he’d come. And I knew what was going to happen.

‘I missed you,’ I told him.

‘I missed you too,’ said Henry. He reached up and took Daphne’s hand. ‘We both did,’ he said. He looked at her and smiled. She smiled back at him. There was so much love in their eyes that although it should have hurt to see them that way it did not. I wanted to cry but forced myself not to.

For a while none of us spoke. We just sipped our water and stared at the view. The wind got slowly worse.

‘Maybe you should go in,’ I said to Henry.

‘I think you’re right,’ he said. ‘Would you give me a push. Daphne has a bit of a job getting me in through the front doorway. It’s a bit of a tight fit.’

I pushed his chair into the chalet. Sarah collected up the cups and put them on the tray. Then she picked up the tray and followed us into the chalet. Daphne followed her.

Inside it was dark and cold.

‘There isn’t any heating,’ said Henry. ‘They don’t usually let the chalets at this time of the year. But they know me and let us have this one for a few days. We won’t be here much longer. We just wanted a little time together in our favourite place.’

I looked at him and could no longer keep the tears from flowing down my cheeks. I heard the door close behind me. I looked around. Sarah had gone. Daphne had sat down in an easy chair. She was just sitting and staring and smiling.

‘Sarah seems like a nice girl.’

‘She is.’

‘Special?’

‘A friend but a special friend,’ I said.

Henry looked around. ‘This has always been our special place,’ he said. He looked at me and smiled. ‘I knew you would find us,’ he said. He lowered his voice. ‘It’s all we were waiting for. Just wanted to say goodbye.’ He coughed for a few moments. ‘We had to take our opportunity to get away from the hospital,’ he said.

I nodded. I couldn’t speak. I looked around. On the table in the middle of the room there were several bottles of pills. They were drugs that Henry had clearly been saving up. I spotted the bottle of nitrazepam which Sister Tomkins had been looking for. He saw me looking. ‘Do you think I’ll have enough?’ he asked. There was a pause. ‘To last me,’ he added.

I walked across to the table and looked at the pill bottles. I nodded. ‘Plenty,’ I said.

‘Good,’ said Henry. ‘I wouldn’t want to be short.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘That wouldn’t do at all.’

‘You’d better go,’ said Henry. ‘We just waited for you.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me what you were doing?’ I asked him. My voice was faint and I hardly recognised it.

‘Couldn’t do that,’ said Henry. ‘You’d have been duty bound to stop us.’

I shook my head.

‘No,’ he said. ‘I know you wouldn’t.’ He held out a hand to me. I took it and gripped it tightly. ‘That’s why I didn’t say anything,’ he said. ‘Didn’t want to put you in that position.’

We stayed like that for a moment. Holding hands and looking at each other.

‘I love you,’ he said quietly.

‘I love you too,’ I told him. I wiped the tears away from my cheeks.

‘Stay loyal to yourself and your dreams,’ he said. ‘Don’t let the bastards grind you down.’

‘No,’ I promised him.

‘’Cus the buggers will try.’

‘I know they will.’

‘He has to go now,’ said Henry suddenly. He had turned his head and was talking to Daphne.

‘Oh, must you?’ said Daphne. ‘So soon? Still it was nice of you to come and see us.’

I put my hand into my pocket and took out a small, red box. I put the box into Henry’s hand. He looked down at it. He didn’t open it. He knew what it was. He looked up at me.

‘Yours, I think,’ I said.

He looked at me, tired almost beyond capability, and nodded. ‘Thank you,’ he said. I could hardly hear him.

‘My pleasure,’ I said.

I bent and kissed him on the forehead. Then I kissed Daphne. Then I left.

Outside the storm had started. The wind was howling. It was raining hard. Sarah was standing beside the sea wall. Her hair was soaked and so was her face. But I could still see the tears pouring down her cheeks.

‘Don’t say anything,’ she said. ‘Not a bloody word. Not one bloody word.’

I didn’t.

We got into the car and drove back to Birmingham. We stopped for petrol once. But we didn’t speak. There wasn’t anything to say.

Chapter 12

‘Sit down,’ said Sarah.

I sat down on my bed.

‘I know we’re good friends but it would never amount to anything.’

I looked at her, puzzled.

‘There’s no spark between us,’ she said. ‘No sexual electricity.’

‘No,’ I agreed.

‘And you’re too old for me.’

‘Yes,’ I said. I was no more than two years older than her. And, I suspected, considerably younger than her boyfriend.

‘I’m going to Beirut,’ said Sarah.

I stared at her in astonishment. ‘Why on earth are you going to Beirut?’

‘I’ve got a fantastic job,’ she said. ‘Dancing in a club. The chap who hired me said they don’t mind girls looking like boys so my small breasts won’t be held against me. He showed me pictures of the club. It looks like a palace.’

‘What about your boyfriend?’ I asked her.

‘Oh I’ve finished with him,’ she said, waving a hand. ‘He’s going out with Jacaranda.’

‘Jacaranda?’

‘Her real name is Lizzie. She’s a hostess at the club.’

‘Oh.’

‘So I’m off to Beirut! I can get my Equity card.’

‘But Sarah,’ I said. ‘How do you know what they’ll expect you to do when you get there?’

‘Oh you mean they might expect me to have sex with the customers?’

I went red. ‘Exactly,’ I said.

‘White slavery and all that.’

‘Don’t laugh.’

She stood on tip toes and kissed me on the cheek. ‘There’s no problem. The people organising this have got offices in London. They’ve got embossed notepaper and everything. But you’re sweet to care,’ she said. ‘If I get into trouble I’ll phone you and you can ride over there on your white horse and rescue me.’

‘OK.’ I said.

‘We can still be friends, can’t we?’

‘Definitely.’

‘Like brother and sister?’

‘Like brother and sister.’

***

I went back to the hospital to tell Sister Tomkins what had happened. On my way to the ward I met one of the doctors I’d worked with, a medical registrar.

‘Didn’t you go off hunting for that bloke who disappeared?’ asked the registrar. ‘Can’t remember his name now. He had lung cancer. Had a loopy wife.’

‘Henry Mulligan.’

‘Was it? Did you ever find him?’

I nodded.

‘Where was he?’

‘Westward Ho!’

‘Is that a real place? I thought it was a book.’

‘It’s in North Devon. Near Bideford.’

‘Well, there you go,’ said the registrar with a laugh. ‘I learn something utterly irrelevant every day. How was he?’

‘He was fine,’ I said. Henry had been fine when I’d found him.

‘Can’t imagine why you wasted your time hunting for him,’ said the registrar. ‘Just an ordinary old bloke.’

‘Oh, not so ordinary,’ I said. ‘No one is, really, you know.’

‘No one is what?’

‘Ordinary.’

The registrar looked at me, and raised an eyebrow.

‘It’s like Chaucer,’ I said. ‘Everyone has a story. Every life has a tale.’

‘You’re young,’ he said, with a knowing smirk. ‘You’ll learn.’ He hurried off, his unbuttoned white coat billowing out behind him.

I watched him disappear down the corridor and felt sorry for him and for his patients.

***

'So what are you going to do now?'

I thought for a moment. 'I don't know.'

'Are you going to get another hospital job?'

I shook my head. 'Hospital work isn't for me.' I remembered something Henry had once said to me. 'In hospital they don't do things for you; they do things to you.' I looked down the ward at the patients lying in their beds. I looked at the man now lying in the bed Henry had lain in for so many months. I would miss Henry. But he would be with me always. He was right about hospitals. I couldn't change the way the system worked. But I could change the way I worked.

I felt the sister's hand on my arm. I turned towards her. 'You're day dreaming.'

I nodded.

'I said, will you go into general practice then?'

'I think I'll give it a try,' I told her. 'One of the GPs in town – a Dr Taylor – has rung offering me a couple of weeks work looking after his practice while he's on holiday. But in the end I wouldn't mind getting a job as a country GP. An old-fashioned family doctor.' I smiled. 'I fancy myself in a three piece tweed suit, a paunch, a fob watch and a big moustached stained by tobacco smoke.'

'You don't smoke!' she laughed.

'I'll dye the moustache,' I said.

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Epilogue

I had arranged for copies of the local paper to be sent to me at Mrs Potters. I didn't think that Henry and Daphne would make the nationals and they didn't. But they made the local paper. They were on page 14 under the headline 'Couple Found Dead in Chalet'. They were sandwiched between a report of a stolen bicycle and an advertorial promoting conservatory furniture. A policeman was quoted as saying there was no suspicious circumstances and that the dead couple were both elderly and had been ill for some time.

Two days after I received the local newspaper I received a registered packet. The packet had been addressed to me at the hospital and sent on to Mrs Potter's hotel. When I opened it a small red box fell out of the padded envelope. There was a short note with it. The note was in Henry's handwriting.

'Daphne and I want you to have this,' it said. 'Dave, who runs the site, will post it for us. It's the only thing we have of value. Please do whatever you like with it. If you sell it you should be able to get a decent price if you take it to one of the London specialists. It'll be worth the train fare. We both consider you a friend first and a doctor second and although that may sound like a cack-handed compliment it isn't meant to be. Thank you for everything you did for us. Always your friends.' Both of them had signed it though Daphne's signature was rather wobbly.

I had no intention of selling the medal but the day after that I was called by Mrs Potter.

'There's a reversed charge call coming from Beirut,' she called up the stairs. 'Will you take it?'

'It'll be Sarah,' I told Mrs Potter. 'Of course I'll take it.' I raced down the stairs. 'I'll pay for the call,' I promised Mrs Potter. 'You'll do no such thing,' said Mrs Potter, who had a soft spot for Sarah. I picked up the receiver and told the operator I'd take the call.

'You were right about the white slavery,' Sarah said when she was eventually put through. She was trying to sound brave but I could tell she had been crying. 'I've been told that if I don't agree to sleep with the customers they'll just throw me out into the street. They made me hand over the return half of my ticket when I got here and I haven't got enough money for a flight back to Britain.'

'I'll get you some money,' I told her immediately. 'Where do I send it?'

'I saw some chap at the British Embassy. If you send £50 they'll get me a ticket and then I can fly home. But they won't do anything until they've had the money wired through. They say a bank can do it.'

'Where are you now?'

'In a phone box in a hotel,' she said.

'Is it a decent hotel?'

'As decent as anything.'

'Stay there,' I told her. 'Have a cup of tea or something and just wait there. Don't speak to anyone. Don't even look at anyone. Where do they want the money sent?'

She told me.

I took Henry's medal to the pawnshop and persuaded them to lend me £75. I then sent the £75 to the British Embassy. Sarah flew home that evening.

A month later I had saved enough to redeem the medal. I've never pawned it again. I've still got it.

Two weeks after she arrived back in Birmingham Sarah met a car dealer who paid for her to have breast enlargement surgery. She stayed with him for six months and left him when he had an affair with a stripper with a 48 inch bust. She said she wasn't going to go that far to keep a man. But she had more surgery anyway, and then got a job as a show girl dancing on a cruise ship. After a year of cruising the world and entertaining tourists she married a 63-year-old American oil industry executive and moved to Florida. When he died she married a 67-year-old former banker.

She is now unmarried but a millionairess living in luxury with three Pekinese dogs and a faithful Filipino manservant. I still get a card and a long letter from her every Christmas.

Me?

Well, I'm just me.

Sarah knows I'm writing this and she says she's looking forward to receiving a copy. I promised to send her a copy with her card next Christmas.

The End

We hope you've enjoyed this novel by Vernon Coleman. For a list of over 100 books by the same author please visit www.vernoncoleman.com or Amazon Author Central.

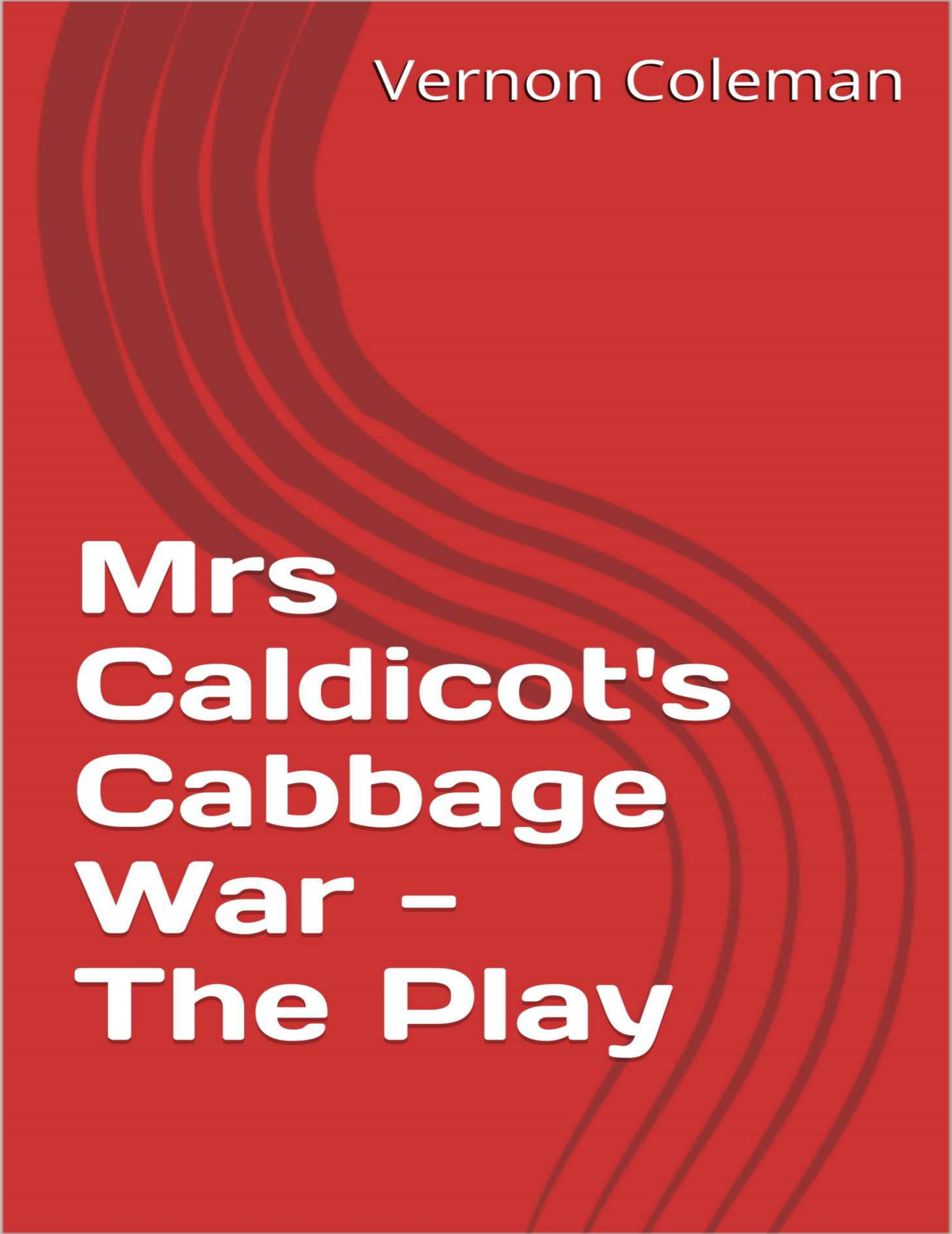

Vernon Coleman

Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War – The Play

MRS CALDICOT’S CABBAGE WAR

The Play

Vernon Coleman

This play may be performed by amateur dramatic societies without charge.
For permission to perform ‘Mrs Caldicot’s Cabbage War’ please write to: plays@vernoncoleman.com giving details of your proposed date and venue, together with your name and email address.

Printed scripts are available on Amazon.

Note
Mrs Caldicot’s Cabbage War is available in a movie version, starring Pauline Collins as Mrs Caldicot. John Alderton plays the nursing home owner and Peter Capaldi plays Mrs Caldicot’s son.
Other books about Mrs Caldicot, all written by Vernon Coleman, are: Mrs Caldicot’s Knickerbocker Glory, Mrs Caldicot’s Oyster Parade and Mrs Caldicot’s Turkish Delight.

For more information about the author please visit: www.vernoncoleman.com or see his author page on Amazon.

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Cast (in order of appearance)
MRS THELMA CALDICOT (a woman in her later years)
MR GEORGE CALDICOT (Thelma’s husband)
POLICEMAN
POLICEWOMAN
MR DEREK CALDICOT (Thelma’s son)
MRS DORIS WARBURTON (Mrs Caldicot’s Neighbour)
MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR (nursing home manager)
MR LIVINGSTONE (nursing home resident, ex RAF)
MRS PETERBOROUGH (nursing home resident)
MISS NIGHTINGALE (nursing home resident)
HOTEL MANAGER
MS JACORANDA PETTIGREW (reporter)
MIKE TRICKLE (television chat show host)
TV CAMERAMAN (no dialogue)
STAGEHAND WITH ‘CLAP’ BOARD (no dialogue)
ESTATE AGENT

Sets

1. Mrs Caldicot’s kitchen – a table with two chairs, cooker, fridge and work surface. There is a hat stand and a door.
2. Nursing home – split stage with lobby on the right and bedroom on the left divided by a wall. The lobby contains hooks with half a dozen coats and anoraks. The bedroom contains two pairs of bunk beds and a few bits of scruffy furniture.
3. Hotel lobby – scattered chairs and tables, with a reception desk/bar. There is a board with room keys behind the reception desk.
4. Television studio – a platform with two chairs, one or two TV cameras.

Act I Scene 1: Mrs Caldicot’s Kitchen
Act I Scene 2: Mrs Caldicot’s Kitchen
Act I Scene 3: Mrs Caldicot’s Kitchen
Act II Scene 1: Nursing Home (lobby)
Act II Scene 2: Nursing Home (bedroom)
Act III Scene 1: Hotel Lobby
Act IV Scene 1: Television Studio
Act V Scene 1: Nursing Home

Act I Scene 1

(Mrs Caldicot's kitchen in early morning. Mrs Caldicot is making a cup of tea for her husband who is sitting at the table. He is reading a newspaper. A yellow backed Wisden is on the table in front of him. There is a pan on the stove. Mrs Caldicot pours the tea, adds milk and sugar and then stirs the tea. The spoon bangs against the side of the cup. Mrs Caldicot is wearing a pinafore and her hair has not been done. Mr Caldicot is reading a newspaper. He is wearing a crisply ironed shirt and an MCC tie. A blue blazer is on a hanger nearby, hanging on the hat stand. There is also a panama hat on the hat stand.)

MR CALDICOT: Do you have to make so much noise? Can't you stir a cup of tea without making a noise like a brass band? *(He temporarily lowers his newspaper.)*

MRS CALDICOT: I'm sorry, dear. *(She lowers her voice)* It seems to be a very noisy spoon.

MR CALDICOT: What was that?

MRS CALDICOT: Nothing dear. Just saying your toast will be ready soon.

MR CALDICOT: Is my egg ready?

MRS CALDICOT *(looking at the clock)*: It'll only be another thirty five seconds.

MR CALDICOT: Please try not to burn the toast again. It surely can't be difficult to make toast without burning it.

(MRS CALDICOT looks in the pan, lifts out an egg and puts it into an egg cup. She then puts two slices of toast onto a plate, butters it and cuts it up into soldiers. She takes the egg cup and toast to Mr Caldicot who sits waiting. He looks at the soldiers, picks one up and examines it.)

MR CALDICOT: These soldiers are too wide. *(He holds up the soldier.)* This one won't fit into my egg properly. I hate having soldiers that won't fit into my egg. *(He pushes the toast and egg to one side.)*

MRS CALDICOT: I'm sorry, dear. *(Lowers voice, speaking to herself)*. I lost my ruler.

MR CALDICOT: What was that? You seem to be mumbling a lot these days.

MRS CALDICOT: I was just apologising.

MR CALDICOT *(looking at his watch)*: Have you at least got my sandwiches ready?

MRS CALDICOT: They're in the fridge. I'll get them out. I've filled your flask.

MR CALDICOT: Ham?

MRS CALDICOT: Yes, dear. *(She takes foil wrapped sandwiches out of the fridge and puts them on the table.)*

MR CALDICOT: I can't stand cucumber. It gives me terrible indigestion. *(He stands)*.

MRS CALDICOT: I never give you cucumber, pickles, tuna, cheese, sandwich spread, tomatoes or anything with cyanide in it.

MR CALDICOT *(who has not been listening)*: I like thinly cut ham on well-buttered white bread.

MRS CALDICOT: Yes, dear.

MR CALDICOT: I can't eat brown bread. It gives me indigestion.

MRS CALDICOT: *(quietly)* Although I have heard that Tesco now make a very good arsenic and cyanide spread that tastes like French mustard.

MR CALDICOT *(picking up and holding open his briefcase)*: It's a big match today. We're playing the championship leaders. *(Mrs Caldicot puts the wrapped sandwiches and the flask into the briefcase which Mr Caldicot then closes and locks. Mr Caldicot then puts on his blazer which he takes from its hanger. The hanger falls to the floor. Mrs Caldicot picks it up since Mr Caldicot makes no attempt to do so. Mr Caldicot takes his panama hat from the hat stand and puts it on. Mr Caldicot looks down at the front of his blazer)* I've got fluff on my lapel. It needs brushing off. *(Mrs Caldicot finds a clothes brush and brushes the front of his blazer. Mr Caldicot turns round.)* Back! *(Mrs Caldicot goes round him and brushes the back of his blazer. Mr Caldicot looks down as she does so.)* Shoes need a polish. *(Mrs Caldicot goes to a cupboard, produces a shoe brush and polishes the shoes.)* Don't get the damned polish all over my socks!

MRS CALDICOT: No, dear.

MR CALDICOT: Do I look all right?

MRS CALDICOT: Aren't you putting a jumper on? It'll be windy sitting out in the open.

MR CALDICOT: The chairman of the club’s sanitation committee has invited me to sit in the pavilion today. I don’t want to look like a nancy boy. I’ve put my jumper under my shirt so that no one can see it. *(He leaves the kitchen. Wearily, Mrs Caldicot tidies up.)*

Act I: Scene 2: Mrs Caldicot's kitchen

(Mrs Caldicot is now dressed in a dowdy skirt and a dowdy cardigan. Her hair is still not done. She is mumbling to herself and scrubbing the floor. She looks exhausted. The doorbell goes. Mrs Caldicot ignores it. The bell goes again. This time Mrs Caldicot puts down her brush, holds her back and stands up. She goes to the door and opens it. A policeman and a policewoman stand there.)

POLICEMAN: Mrs Caldicot? *(He looks down at the notebook he is holding).* Mrs Thelma Caldicot?

MRS CALDICOT: Yes? What can I do for you? If it's about the bonfire we had last Wednesday, I've got a very good explanation. It will have been the woman at no 14 who complained, won't it?

POLICEMAN: May we come in?

MRS CALDICOT *(standing aside)*: Yes, of course.

POLICEWOMAN: It isn't about the bonfire. It's rather more serious than that, I'm afraid.

MRS CALDICOT: More serious than the bonfire? Is it about Aunt Ethel? We've been expecting that. She's been dying since I was eleven. She has a weak liver and varicose veins. She's allergic to cats and takes pills.

POLICEMAN: It's not about your Aunt Ethel. I'm afraid it's about your husband. *(There is a pause, he looks at his notebook.)* Mr Caldicot.

MRS CALDICOT *(startled)*: Oh! What's wrong? Has something happened to him? I didn't put any mustard on the ham, did I? I know he doesn't like mustard.

POLICEWOMAN: I'm afraid there's been a bit of an accident.

POLICEMAN: Would you like to sit down?

MRS CALDICOT. No thank you, I'm all right standing up. I've been doing the floor. What sort of accident?

POLICEWOMAN: He was at a cricket match.

MRS CALDICOT: Yes, I know. I made his sandwiches. Ham on white bread. He won't eat cheese, pickles, tomato or tuna, you know. Well, you probably wouldn't know that, would you? Or maybe you would. You can't tell what you people know these days, can you? There aren't any secrets anymore, are there?

POLICEMAN: It was actually quite a serious accident. Are you sure you wouldn't like to sit down?

MRS CALDICOT: How can you have a serious accident at a cricket match? I've been to one. It was a long time ago but I don't think things have changed much. Nothing ever happens at a cricket match.

POLICEWOMAN: I'm afraid your husband was hit on the head by the ball they use. I'm told it's very hard.

POLICEMAN: Very hard. I had one hit me on the knee when I was at school.

POLICEWOMAN: I didn't know you played cricket at school.

POLICEMAN: I didn't. I was walking past the cricket field and this ball came out of nowhere. It still hurts when the weather's damp. *(He rubs his knee.)*

POLICEWOMAN: Mr Caldicot was apparently trying to catch it. The ball.

POLICEMAN *(looking at his notebook)*: He ran out of the pavilion, yelled 'mine' and elbowed the fielder out of the way.

POLICEWOMAN: I don't expect he felt a thing.

POLICEMAN: Except the cricket ball hitting him on the head, of course. He'd have felt that. I expect.

POLICEWOMAN: But it would have been very quick.

POLICEMAN: Oh yes. He'd have gone out like a light.

MRS CALDICOT *(who is confused)*: So what happened? Has he had to go to hospital?

POLICEMAN: He's dead.

POLICEWOMAN: He passed away immediately.

MRS CALDICOT *(disbelievingly)*: Dead?

POLICEWOMAN: One of the other spectators caught the rebound off his head.

POLICEMAN: That would have been the chair of the sanitation committee. *(He looks at his notebook.)* A Mrs Tracy Bartholomew.

MRS CALDICOT *(after a pause)*: He'd have been very proud of that. Having helped as it were.

POLICEMAN: I doubt if they would have allowed the catch. It having been taken by a spectator.

MRS CALDICOT. No, I can see that it probably wouldn't have counted. *(She pauses.)* Did you say the chair of the sanitation committee was a woman? Tracy something?

POLICEWOMAN: Yes, that would be Mrs Bartholomew. She was sitting with your husband at the time.

POLICEMAN *(reading from his notebook)*: Mrs Tracy Bartholomew, aged 46, divorcee of The Cedars, Bedlington Road.

POLICEWOMAN: She gave a statement. She was apparently very upset about Mr Caldicot's demise; said they'd been very close.

POLICEMAN: Is there anyone you'd like us to call for you? A close relative, perhaps? A father, mother, husband?

POLICEWOMAN *(quietly, to policeman)*: It's her husband who's dead.

MRS CALDICOT *(who is rather confused)*: No, no there isn't anyone to call. Oh, yes. No. Only my son Derek. You could ring him, I suppose. But he's always very busy. He's in property. *(She picks up her handbag, rummages in it, finds her diary, finds the appropriate page and hands it to the policeman who picks up the telephone and dials.)* MRS CALDICOT *(cont)*: My husband was in sewage, you know. He spent nearly all his life in sewage. He always said he was a senior sanitation engineer but I always just thought of him as being something big in sewage.

POLICEMAN: Mr Caldicot? Mr Derek Caldicot? My name is Police Constable Hobbling. I'm afraid I've got some bad news, sir. No, it's nothing to do with the tree. Yes, sir, if you say that the branch was hanging over your garden then it was your right to chop it off as long as you returned the branch to the owner. No, sir, it wasn't about that. I'm ringing about your father. Hello? Hello?' *(Turns to the policewoman.)* He's put me on hold.

POLICEWOMAN: Do you have a neighbour we could fetch while you wait for your son?

MRS CALDICOT: I suppose you could fetch the woman at no 13. She'll have seen you come to the door and she'll be desperate to know why you're here.

POLICEMAN *(now speaking on the phone again)*: Your father has been taken ill, sir. Very ill. Well, actually very, very ill. *(pause)*. Well, dead actually. Yes, dead as in not being alive. *(He pauses, listening.)* Yes, sir. *(He puts down the phone and turns to Mrs Caldicot and his colleague who have been listening.)* Your son says he's very busy but since it's a bit of an emergency he'll pop round shortly.

POLICEWOMAN: We'll go and fetch your neighbour. Did you say no 13?

MRS CALDICOT: Yes, no 13.

(The two police officers leave)

MRS CALDICOT *(to herself)*: Chair of the bloody sanitation committee. Why do they say 'chair'? Why not chairman or chairwoman? Who cares? Silly buggers. I suppose I should cry. *(She looks around the kitchen.)* I'm going to go out tomorrow and buy brown bread, pickles and a tin of tuna. I'll have a tin of tuna on a brown roll. And I'll have cheese and cucumber sandwiches. *(She picks up Mr Caldicot's Wisden which is still on the table.)*. He forgot to take his bloody silly cricket book. Why would anyone keep reading the same book for a year and then buy another version of the same thing the following year? Still he won't need it now. *(She flicks through it.)* It looks about as much fun as a knitting pattern. *(She tears a few pages from it. She then stops, and looks at what she has done. But then she tears out some more pages. She doesn't stop until the book is destroyed. There are bits of the book all over the place.)* Golly. That felt good. *(She looks around.)* And I always hated his bloody chrysanthemums. Why couldn't he grow roses or delphiniums occasionally just for a change? Always chrysanths for 30 years. I never liked them. They're like politicians: all show and no substance. I bet SHE liked them. The chair of the sanitation committee. Bloody missus whatever her name is. *(She picks some chrysanthemums out of a vase, cuts them very short and puts the heads into a tea cup.)* There. That's better. Cut you down to size, haven't I? What else is there? *(She opens a door and brings out a bag of golf clubs. She then finds a large saw and smiles.)*

Act I Scene 3

(Mrs Caldicot's kitchen. There are sawn off bits of golf club everywhere. Mrs Caldicot looks dishevelled but pleased with herself. There are also bits of Wisden and flower stalks on the table and the floor. The doorbell goes. Mrs Caldicot answers it and her son stands there.)

MRS CALDICOT: Oh, hullo, Derek. *(She sounds rather surprised to see him. She does not seem excited or pleased by his presence.)*

MR DEREK CALDICOT: I was so sad to get the news. Hit on the head with a cricket ball, eh? What a way to go? He went quickly I expect. And he loved cricket so it would have been a good end for him.

MRS CALDICOT: His fancy woman caught the ball after it bounced off his head.

MR DEREK CALDICOT *(startled)*: His fancy woman? What…? *(He suddenly notices the bits of golf club and so on strewn about)*. Mum! What's happened?

MRS CALDICOT *(also looking around, as though surprised by what she sees)*: Oh. I haven't had time to tidy up.

MR DEREK CALDICOT *(picking up a piece of a golf club)*: This was a very nice special graphite shafted pitching wedge with parabolic cross hatch grooves. I could have used this. *(He stoops and plays an imaginary shot with half a club.)*

MRS CALDICOT: I think your father dropped his bag and they all broke.

MR DEREK CALDICOT: *(picking up pages of the Wisden)* And his Wisden! I suppose he dropped this too? My father would die if he saw this.

MRS CALDICOT: No, he wouldn't. *(Derek looks at her.)* He's already dead.

MR DEREK CALDICOT *(taking one of the flowers from the tea cup)*: And what happened to his chrysanthemums?

MRS CALDICOT: They're a new dwarf variety.

(The doorbell goes. The neighbour arrives. She enters oozing sympathy.)

MRS WARBURTON: I'm from number 13. Oh, my dear, how awful. What a shock you've had. You poor thing. *(She puts her arm around Mrs Caldicot and pats her on the back.)* The police told me all about it. They said you'd asked for me specially.

MRS CALDICOT *(to Derek)*: This is my neighbour from number 13. Mrs ...er… *(she clearly does not know the neighbour's name)*.

MRS WARBURTON: I'm Doris. Doris Warburton. *(she addresses Derek)*. I'm next door but five. It's the only house with the glassed in porch.

MR DEREK CALDICOT: I'm Mr Caldicot. *(Neighbour looks puzzled.)* The son.

MRS WARBURTON: Oh yes, of course. *(she laughs lightly)*. Silly me. I was confused for a minute then. What a shock it's been for you both. I know what it's like to lose a loved one. When my Bert died I was in shock for months. The doctor gave me three different tranquillisers and two different types of sleeping tablet. That was fourteen years ago. I'm still on them, of course. He was a wonderful man. He did a lot of fretwork and kept budgerigars. My husband, not the doctor, though he might have done I suppose. I had to get rid of the birds when he passed on. But I kept the fretwork. *(For the first time she notices the bits of golf club and so on.)* Oh dear. Has there been an accident? I didn't know they were fragile like that.

MRS CALDICOT: The golf bag fell over and the clubs broke. You wouldn't think they'd be so fragile, would you? They don't make things like they used to, do they? They were probably made in China. The flowers are a new dwarf variety. And that cricket book sort of came apart. A problem with the binding, I think.

MRS WARBURTON: Ah!

MR DEREK CALDICOT *(to his mother)*: I ought to ring the doctor. Fix up some pills for you. And we'll have to think about the future, mother. You won't want to stay here by yourself, of course. We'll have to think about finding you some sheltered accommodation. My firm owns a nice nursing home not far from here. I've got a bit of clout with the management and I'll see what I can do about getting you in straight away. *(He looks around).* Then we can set about selling this old place and releasing some of the equity. You don't want your money all tied up in bricks and mortar at this time of your life do you, mother?

MRS CALDICOT: A nursing home? Why do I need to go into a nursing home? I'm not that old! I'm not falling apart yet!

MR DEREK CALDICOT: Well, you obviously can't stay here by yourself, can you? You'll need looking after. What about if there's an emergency? A fall or something?

MRS CALDICOT: I've been looking after myself quite well, thank you. And I was looking after your father too. *(Pauses)*. He took a lot of looking after.

MR DEREK CALDICOT: Don't be difficult, mother. You leave everything to me. *(He takes out a mobile phone.)* What's the doctor's number?

MRS CALDICOT: I don't know. I haven't seen a doctor for years. *(She picks up her handbag.)* I'll have to look it up. *(She takes out an old-fashioned diary, finds the relevant page and hands it to her son, pointing out the relevant page on the address book at the back. Derek dials the number she shows him and walks away to another part of the kitchen while he telephones the doctor.)*

MRS WARBURTON: You sit yourself down, dear, and I'll make you a nice cup of tea. *(She looks around, spots the kettle, and sets about making a cup of tea. There is lot of clattering and banging as she does so. Derek looks daggers at her as he struggles to make the phone call.)* Have you got any brandy? I've read that brandy is good at a time like this.

MRS CALDICOT: There's a bottle of cooking sherry in the cupboard. Mr Caldicot keeps it for his indigestion.

MRS WARBURTON: Oh, my Bert was a martyr to indigestion. Don't get me on that. I could talk for hours about his indigestion. He was ruled by his stomach. Couldn't eat anything that was green, orange or yellow and he wasn't too good with anything brown. It didn't leave a lot. *(She finds the bottle of sherry and brings it out.)* Shall I pour you one too, dear? *(She pours herself a generous sherry and knocks it back.)*

MRS CALDICOT: No thank you. I hate the stuff.

MRS WARBURTON *(She waves the bottle in Derek's direction. He looks hard at the bottle, shudders and shakes his head.)*: Well, I'll just help myself to another if you don't mind. I've read that it's good for combating shock and stress. *(She has a second generous sherry)*.

MR DEREK CALDICOT *(switching off his phone and putting it away)*: The receptionist said the doctor is terribly busy and can't come. But she says she'll get him to sign a prescription for some tranquillisers. I'll pop down and get them. The receptionist says you'll need them straight away and they've got a pharmacy at the surgery. I'll call in at the undertakers too and get them booked. Cremation, two hymns and five minutes from the vicar all right? There's no need for a feast afterwards, is there? Don't think so. Bit of a waste of money. I'll pop down to the doctor's. *(He leaves.)*

MRS WARBURTON: You can have one of my pills, love, while you're waiting. I've got plenty. My doctor gives me 200 at a time whenever I ring up. I haven't seen him for years, he's always too busy signing prescriptions I expect, but he's very good with letting me have more pills. *(She rummages in her handbag.)* I always carry them with me for emergencies. *(She takes a bottle of pills out of her handbag, shakes out a capsule and hands it to Mrs Caldicot. Then she changes her mind and shakes out a second.)* I think I'll have one too. Good for shock. *(She pops one into her mouth and takes it with a swig of sherry straight from the bottle. She then pours Mrs Caldicot half a glass of sherry.)* Here you are, dear. You'll need this. You can't swallow pills without something to wash them down with – especially not tranquillisers. *(Mrs Caldicot takes the capsule and the sherry and swallows both.)* There you are dear, that'll put a lining on your stomach. *(She laughs and pours another sherry.)* Now have another drinky to wash it down properly.

MRS CALDICOT *(swallowing)*: Thank you very much. *(She coughs.)*

MRS WARBURTON: Oh dear. That's gone down the wrong way. Wasted now. You'd better have another. *(She hands Mrs Caldicot another capsule and another sherry.)* I'd better have one too otherwise you'll be drinking on your own and they always say that's the slippery slope to somewhere. *(The two women drink silently.)* Doctors are wonderful these days, aren't they? In the old days they wouldn't give you pills unless you rang up, made an appointment, sat there, waited and then answered a lot of rude questions about your bowels and other habits. Sometimes they even made you get undressed. *(Pauses, sips her sherry and remembers.)* When I was younger the doctors always used to want to listen to my chest. *(Pauses and sips again.)* No one's listened to my chest for years. *(she sighs.)* Still, these days it's all much easier. You ring up, speak to a receptionist and then pop down and pick up a nice, big bagful of pills. Wonderful. It's progress I suppose. Have you finished that yet?'

MRS CALDICOT: What? Oh my drink? *(She looks at her glass which is still half full)*. No, not yet, thank you.

MRS WARBURTON: Well, you'd better have a drop more anyway. I know I will. *(She pours them both more sherry.)* You know I'm not entirely sure there are any doctors these days. You never see them do you? In the old days, before progress took over, you could ring them up, any time of day or night, and they'd pop round with their little, black bag and sort you out. They were there at the other end of the phone. These days they work the same hours as the council and you'd stand as much chance of getting the dentist or the public librarian to visit you at home as of getting the doctor to come out. My friend, Mrs Bunting, she lives in Templeton Avenue, between the new mosque and the other one, the what's it called, the synagogue, she was in hospital for a week and she only saw a doctor once. Even then she says she wasn't sure he actually was a doctor. Not a real doctor. He had a white coat but then everyone in hospital has a white coat these days don't they? She said she did think he might have been a porter because he didn't speak any English but that doesn't mean anything does it? She said she thought she did see a nurse on the Wednesday but that was about it. Still, we mustn't grumble. It's much easier to get the pills these days so that's a big improvement, isn't it?

MR DEREK CALDICOT *(Who has returned and is slightly out of breath with a bag of pills in his hand)*: There you are mother, a nice bag of pills. The blue ones are to relax you, the red ones are to help you sleep and the green ones are for something else – possibly to wake you up. There are 100 of each to start you off with but the receptionist says you can get more whenever you like now that they've put you on their computer. You're to take two blue ones every four hours, two red ones at night and the green ones whenever you feel like it. I've booked the crematorium for Thursday at 12.17 and got you a good price because they had a cancellation. I've arranged for a nice economy casket with handles they can unscrew and use again. You get a free cardboard urn for the ashes. Best of all I've fixed up for you to move into the Twilight Years Nursing Home on Thursday after the crematorium. It'll help make sure you don't spend too much time grieving. You'll meet lots of new chums, lots to keep you busy. They do sitting down keep fit on alternate Wednesdays and bingo on alternate Saturdays throughout the winter except December so you won't have time to be bored. I'll arrange for the auctioneers and estate agents to come in on Friday to clear out the furniture and put the house on the market. *(He kisses Mrs Caldicot on the head.)* Must dash now I've got a meeting with JB in Wolverhampton twenty minutes ago. *(He rushes out.)*

MRS WARBURTON: Wonderful young man. Is he always in a rush?

MRS CALDICOT: He was two weeks premature.

MRS WARBURTON *(She opens up the bag of pills and examines them.)*: Oh, I've not seen these green ones before. Let's try a couple. *(She fetches the sherry and two glasses. She looks at the bottle which is almost empty.)* Have you got any more of this? It tastes better the more you drink of it.

Act II: Scene 1

(The Nursing Home. The set is divided into two. On the left there is the bedroom and on the right there is the lobby. This scene is set in the lobby.)

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: Come in, come in! Welcome! Welcome!

MR DEREK CALDICOT: This is my mother, Mrs Caldicot. Mother, this is Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, the executive manager of the Twilight Years Rest Home.

MRS CALDICOT *(very sleepily)*: How do you do?

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: Marvellous to see you. Wonderful. Terrific. What a pleasure! *(suddenly puts on a sympathetic face and voice)*. So, so sorry to hear of your sad loss, of course. Very sad. Very sad indeed. *(resumes jollier mode)*. But we'll make you happy here. Soon help you forget. You'll fit in very well. Lots of friends around. Always something going on. Sitting down keep fit classes on alternate Wednesdays and bingo on alternate Saturdays throughout the winter months except December. You'll be rushed off your feet. Did you bring your tablets with you?

MR DEREK CALDICOT *(handing over a bag of pills)*: I've got them!

MRS CALDICOT *(sniffing)*: What's that awful smell?

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: Oh, that will be luncheon. Chef was running a little late today and we find that in any case the aroma of good cooking always lingers a little longer. We always get the best ingredients and sometimes that means meals get delayed a little.

MR DEREK CALDICOT: A very nice smell!

MRS CALDICOT: It smells like cabbage. *(turns to Derek)* You never ate cabbage when you lived at home. You always said the smell of it made you feel sick.

MR DEREK CALDICOT *(trying to smile)*: Oh no, not at all.

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: Oh yes, there will be cabbage and I make no apology for that. Wonderful, undervalued vegetable. Too often derided. Scorned even. But full to the last leaf with vitamins and minerals which are essential for healthy living. We take nutrition very seriously here. None of our residents goes short of vitamins and minerals. Not if we have anything to do with it. Our consultant dietician insists that cabbage is an integral part of the daily diet.

MR DEREK CALDICOT *(looking at his watch)*: Is it possible for my mother to see her room? I've got a property foreclosure to see to in 30 minutes and then I've got a meeting with the agent who is handling the sale of mother's house and the auctioneer who is getting rid of all the furniture for us.

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: Of course. Straight away. You'll be very comfortable here, Mrs Caldicot. A home from home as we say. *(He leads the way through a connecting door into a bedroom. There are two pairs of bunk beds in the room. Three bunk beds are occupied with patients who appear to be asleep.)* Here we are. One of our premier rooms – the Windsor Suite. We like to keep everything compact so that our residents have everything they need close at hand. All our furniture and bed linen items are made from natural man-made plastics and fibres which offer cleanliness, style and a feeling of old-fashioned solidity. *(Mrs Caldicot touches a table which collapses.)*

MR DEREK CALDICOT *(cheerily)*: No risk of getting lost in here!

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: Certainly not. But all mod cons are provided. There's a bathroom just down the hall with night time facilities provided en suite at no additional cost. *(He pulls two chamberpots from underneath the two lower bunks, looks into them, pulls a face and quickly pushes them back.)* Those are usually emptied regularly on a daily basis. I will have a word with matron later.

MR LIVINGSTONE *(who is on one of the top bunks, wakes up and looks down)*: What's going on?

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: Ah, Mr Stanley! Having a little nap are we? *(He turns to Derek)*. We encourage our guests to take a siesta after luncheon. The older mind and body needs extra rest and our consultant visiting physician, who comes in every month whether she is required or not, is a firm believer in providing guests with all the medication they require to take the necessary hours of rest.

MR DEREK CALDICOT: That's splendid! *(He turns to Mrs Caldicot.)* Isn't it mother? *(Mrs Caldicot blinks but doesn't speak.)*

MR LIVINGSTONE *(climbing down from his bunk bed)*: Are those really vitamin pills the nurses give us after lunch? They always make me feel very sleepy. And my name is Livingstone, by the way, not Stanley. *(The two women in the lower bunks now awake and look around sleepily before climbing out. These are Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough.)*

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: And here are your other two roommates, Miss Er and Mrs Um.

MRS CALDICOT: Do I have to share a room?

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: My word yes. Oh yes. We like to encourage our valued guests to think of this as their home and our consultant psychologist tells us that sharing a room with other guests helps to cement that feeling of companionship and to create real and lasting bonds and a sense of 'home'. *(He locks the fingers of both hands to illustrate what he means.)* Once you're here you will simply be exchanging the bosom of one wonderful, loving family for the bosom of another.

MRS CALDICOT *(looking at Derek)*: That's reassuring.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: Have you come to empty the bed pans? They haven't been done since last Tuesday.

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: One of our trained nursing aides will be along shortly to deal with that.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: I hope she isn't going to be too long. *(Hops from one foot to the other)*. They're full.

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR *(to Derek and Mrs Caldicot)*: Some of our guests are a little self-centred and fail to see the bigger picture. *(He turns to Miss Nightingale.)* You could use the facilities in the first floor bathroom.

MR LIVINGSTONE: It doesn't work. There's a blockage. It seems to be full of cabbage.

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR *(furious)*: One of our nursing aides will deal with all these little problems in due course. *(Turns to Derek and Mrs Caldicot)*. We have five nursing aides. All are part-time but fully trained by ourselves. Two of them narrowly missed acquiring additional diplomas in first aid and Miss Pilton, who comes in on the first Monday of the month, has just completed a local technical college course in Turkish traditional dancing, with distinction I might add. We pride ourselves on running a home that has all the advantages of a hotel and a fully equipped modern hospital. Employing trained staff is a vital way of implementing that policy.

MR LIVINGSTONE *(He turns on the television. It is black and white and produces a mass of lines and nothing else.)* The telly is still on the blink.

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: It appears that the set in this suite does have some minor fault at the present time but there is, of course, additional, supplementary audio visual equipment in the Duke of Devonshire Leisure and Recreational Area, and I am assured by our visiting consultant engineer that they will have that working satisfactorily in a very short space of time.

MR LIVINGSTONE: That one's been on the blink for a month – ever since it caught fire and Mr Hewitt had to throw two buckets of water over it.

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: Please don't exaggerate, Mr Stanley. It was a very small fire and could easily have been extinguished with the first bucket of water. The second bucket was quite unnecessary and I have issued a memo to staff and guests about the dangers of putting out electrical fires with water.

MR LIVINGSTONE: The second bucket was for the chair Miss Nightingale was sitting in. The plastic had started to melt and her jumper was smouldering. She doesn't feel the heat like she used to.

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: Mr, er, Stanley, does rather like to exaggerate. I believe Mr Stanley was an estate agent before he came to us. Ha ha ha.

MR LIVINGSTONE: I was in the RAF you pompous, young buffoon. Ex bomber command. And the name is Livingstone.

MR DEREK CALDICOT *(to Mrs Caldicot)*: I'm sure you're going to be very happy here mother.

MRS PETERBOROUGH: *(sniffing the air)* Is it time for lunch? I can definitely smell cabbage?

Act II Scene 2

(The Nursing Home. This scene is set in the bedroom part of the set. Mrs Caldicot, Mr Livingstone, Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale are sitting on their bunks. All are in night clothes.)

MRS CALDICOT: Do they ever serve anything that doesn't have cabbage with it? Cabbage and liver, cabbage and mince and cabbage and liver again.

MR LIVINGSTONE: I think they did about nine months ago. The cook was away with food poisoning so we had baked beans on toast for lunch and dinner. No cabbage for a whole week. Wonderful. The cabbage industry was in despair.

MRS CALDICOT: So did the smell of cabbage disappear?

MR LIVINGSTONE: Not entirely. But it was rather overpowered by the consequences of all those baked beans.

MRS CALDICOT: I haven't taken my tablets for three days now. I feel much better than I have for ages. A month in this place is as much as I can stand.

MR LIVINGSTONE: Damned good idea of yours. Put 'em under your tongue and spit 'em out when the nurse has gone.

MRS CALDICOT: Is she really a nurse?

MR LIVINGSTONE: No, not in the sense of having qualifications. But I think she had an aunt who worked as a receptionist for a local dentist. So she has some connection with the healing professions.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: I spat my capsules and tablets out into the sink. *(She beams.)*

MRS PETERBOROUGH: I did the same. Without getting up off my bunk. I'm getting to be a very good shot with a tablet but I'm not quite as accurate with a capsule.

MRS CALDICOT: I think Mr Muller-Hawksmoor is getting suspicious. Yesterday, he twice asked me why we weren't all asleep.

MR LIVINGSTONE: They like to keep us well drugged. We're less trouble that way.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: Now that I am awake more often I realise that I don't much like it here.

MRS PETERBOROUGH: I wish they'd let us out occasionally. I feel like a prisoner. Perhaps they brought us here because we did something naughty without realising it.

MR LIVINGSTONE: Maybe we could organise an escape committee. We could make an escape rope with a few knotted sheets. We could climb down the rope and run away. *(He pauses).* Or we could make a glider and make our escape by air.

MRS PETERBOROUGH: There's a problem with the knotted sheets idea.

MR LIVINGSTONE: What's that?

MRS PETERBOROUGH: Our room is on the ground floor.

MR LIVINGSTONE: Damn! I hadn't thought of that. Maybe we could tunnel our way out.

MRS CALDICOT: Why don't we just walk out?

MISS NIGHTINGALE: What do you mean – walk out?

MRS CALDICOT: Just go! They don't lock the front door during the day time. We could pick a quiet moment and just leave.

MRS PETERBOROUGH: But we don't have our clothes!

MR LIVINGSTONE: Clever move that on the part of the camp commandant. Lock our clothes away so that we can't go anywhere.

MRS CALDICOT: The staff hang their coats in the hall. We could borrow their coats and put them on top of what we're wearing.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: Where would we go?

MRS CALDICOT: We'll find a hotel, rent some rooms and have some decent food.

MR LIVINGSTONE: I'm not going anywhere where they serve cabbage.

MRS PETERBOROUGH: Would we get into trouble?

MISS NIGHTINGALE: Might we get arrested?

MRS CALDICOT: No, no! What's the worst that could happen?

MR LIVINGSTONE: They could catch us and make us come back.

MRS CALDICOT: But we're already here so we wouldn't be any worse off, would we? I'm fed up with being treated like a piece of furniture. No one ever asks us what we think or what we would like to eat or if we want to take the damned pills they keep trying to push down our throats. We're just expected to keep quiet and do what we're told.

MR LIVINGSTONE: Well said, old girl! I'm game if you are!

MRS CALDICOT: If we're not coming back we'd better take all our things with us.

MR LIVINGSTONE: I haven't got anything – except my pills and I don't want those.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: (Sadly) They don't let you have private things here.

MRS CALDICOT: (Looks round) Come to think of it I haven't got anything here, either. My son Derek sold everything for me. I think he thought he was doing me a favour. All I've got left is a spare nightie and that's in the wash. I wonder what happened to the money Derek got for selling my house and my furniture. He never said anything about it. I wish I'd been allowed to keep some of my ornaments. I had a lovely little, china cat from Padstow. *(Smiles, remembering.)* It was really lovely. It had a nice smile. I wonder what happened to it. *(Sighs)*. Oh well, never mind.

MISS NIGHTINGALE *(standing up and fetching her toothbrush)*: I'm ready! *(The others collect their toothbrushes)*.

MRS CALDICOT: Have we got everything? *(They all hold up their toothbrushes. Mrs Caldicot goes to the door into the reception area. They follow her. The four of them help themselves to coats hanging on hooks. Mrs Caldicot opens the next door and looks out.)* It's all clear. Let's make a break for it! *(They hurry out.)*

Act III Scene 1:

(The Hotel. A manager stands behind the bar/reception desk. The only other person there is a young woman who has a reporter's notebook and is editing some notes. She also has a tape recorder to which she listens occasionally. Mrs Caldicot et al arrive. Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale look around them.)

MISS NIGHTINGALE: It's very smart here isn't it? It's big and quiet like a church.

MRS PETERBOROUGH: More like a cathedral I would say.

MR LIVINGSTONE: Don't worry about it. Our money is as good as anyone else's.

MRS CALDICOT *(suddenly realising, speaking softly)*: We haven't got any money!

MR LIVINGSTONE *(dismissively)*: A minor problem.

MRS CALDICOT: You're right. We'll worry about that later. I could put the rooms on my son's account. He's always bringing clients here.

MR LIVINGSTONE *(to the others)*: Shall I order some drinks?

MISS NIGHTINGALE: I'd like something with a cherry in it.

MR LIVINGSTONE: Anything in particular?

MISS NIGHTINGALE: No. As long as it's got a cherry in it.

MRS PETERBOROUGH: I'd like a nice cup of tea. *(Looks around)*. This is very different to the nursing home isn't it. I'm so glad we ran away.

MR LIVINGSTONE: Do you want a cherry in that?

MRS PETERBOROUGH *(thinks)*: In my cup of tea? No I don't think so. I'll have the cherry on the side. But I would like a biscuit to dunk in it. *(She looks around again.)* I'm so glad we ran away.

MRS CALDICOT: What would you like, Mr Livingstone?

MR LIVINGSTONE: I'll have a beer to celebrate our escape from the tyranny of Mr Muller-Hawksmoor and the Twilight Years Rest Home. *(The young woman with the notebook/tape recorder is now listening to the conversation.)*

MRS CALDICOT *(she goes to the reception desk/bar)*: I'd like to order some drinks please. With biscuits. *(The young woman moves from her table to one nearer to the table where Mrs Caldicot et al are sitting.)*

HOTEL MANAGER: Are you staying in the hotel, madam?

MRS CALDICOT: Oh yes, I think so. We'll need four rooms, please.

HOTEL MANAGER: And how will you be paying?

MRS CALDICOT: Oh, just put it on my son's account please. His name's Caldicot. Derek Caldicot.

HOTEL MANAGER *(who clearly knows the name)*: Certainly, Mrs Caldicot.

MRS CALDICOT: And could we have some drinks and some biscuits, please? One beer, a pot of tea for two and something with a cherry in it. Oh and some nice glacé cherries on the side.

HOTEL MANAGER: What sort of drink with the cherry in it, madam?

MRS CALDICOT: Oh I don't think it matters. As long as there's a cherry in it.

HOTEL MANAGER *(picking four keys from the rack behind him and handing them over)*: Your keys, madam. I'll bring the drinks over to your table in a moment.

MRS CALDICOT. You won't forget the biscuits, will you?

HOTEL MANAGER: No, madam.

MRS CALDICOT: Not too many boring ones. Lots of the ones with chocolate and cream fillings. And just a few plain ones for dunking.

HOTEL MANAGER: For dunking?

MRS CALDICOT: Certainly, for dunking. The Royal family dunk all the time.

HOTEL MANAGER: Of course, madam. Biscuits for dunking.

MRS CALDICOT *(going back to where the others are sitting)*. I've ordered drinks and biscuits and booked four rooms. *(She puts four keys on the table. The young woman now moves across to their table.)*

MS JACORANDA PETTIGREW *(carrying her notebook, tape recorder and drink)*: Do you mind if I join you? I'm a reporter and I couldn't help overhearing what you were saying.

MR LIVINGSTONE *(pulls over a fifth chair)*: Sit yourself down. Do you want a drink?

MS JACORANDA PETTIGREW *(sitting)*: I've got one, thanks. Did I hear you say that you'd all just escaped from somewhere?

MR LIVINGSTONE: Definitely. We broke out. Against the odds we escaped from our evil captors without a shot being fired.

MS JACORANDA PETTIGREW *(rather startled)*: Really? Where have you escaped from?

MRS CALDICOT: We were residents at the Twilight Years Rest Home.

MR LIVINGSTONE: Inmates.

MS JACORANDA PETTIGREW: Why did you have to escape?

MR LIVINGSTONE: We were drugged. We had our clothes taken from us and we were tortured with vast quantities of overcooked cabbage. Mrs Caldicot here is the leader of our escape committee.

MS JACORANDA PETTIGREW *(scribbling in her notebook)*: Is that why you're in your nighties?

MR LIVINGSTONE *(displaying a pyjama covered leg)*: And pyjamas.

MS JACORANDA PETTIGREW: *(scribbling again)* Sorry! Nightwear. I did wonder at first if you might not all be ethnic people or members of some odd religious sect.

MRS PETERBOROUGH: They took our clothes away from us.

MR LIVINGSTONE: Standard procedure in prisoner of war camps. Take away the prisoners' clothes to humiliate them; deprive them of their identity and hinder escape. *(The manager brings over a tray with the drinks and biscuits.)*

MS JACORANDA PETTIGREW *(still scribbling)*: But you did get away!

MISS NIGHTINGALE: We were going to climb down knotted sheets.

MS JACORANDA PETTIGREW: Really?

MISS NIGHTINGALE: But we didn't have to because our room was on the ground floor.

MR LIVINGSTONE: In the end, our escape was all down to brilliant planning and strong leadership.

MRS CALDICOT: We just crept out of the front door when no one was looking.

MRS PETERBOROUGH: We borrowed coats from the hooks in the hall.

MR LIVINGSTONE: I'm wearing a rather snazzy item normally worn by our camp commandant. *(Miss Nightingale stands and does a twirl to show off her anorak and nightie).*

MS JACORANDA PETTIGREW: Do you mind if I telephone my editors? I freelance for the evening paper and I also do some research for the Mike Trickle television chat show. I think they could both be interested in your story!

MR LIVINGSTONE *(hand uplifted in triumph)*: Tell the story! Let not the truth be suppressed. Expose the evil imprisonment and abuse of innocent pensioners. *(Mrs Caldicot looks rather worried. The reporter takes out a telephone and retreats to another part of the hotel lobby.)*

MRS CALDICOT: I hope we're not all going to get into trouble.

MRS PETERBOROUGH. Why should we get into trouble? We just ran away.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: They were keeping us prisoners and making us watch black and white television with lines across it.

MR LIVINGSTONE *(indignantly)*: And they were drugging us!

MRS CALDICOT: That's perfectly true. If we hadn't stopped swallowing our pills we'd all still be asleep in our beds.

MR LIVINGSTONE: Bunk beds. And it was all down to you that we stopped our drugs. Here's to Mrs Caldicot! *(They all drink to Mrs Caldicot who responds. The three women dunk biscuits in their drinks.)*

MRS PETERBOROUGH *(to Miss Nightingale)*: Aren't you going to eat your cherry?

MISS NIGHTINGALE: No. I don't like cherries. But I think these ones are very pretty. I like to look at them. *(Jacoranda returns)*

MS JACORANDA PETTIGREW: I've spoken to my newspaper editor. He wants me to do a story about your escape. And I've also spoken to a producer on the Mike Trickle show. Their star guest has just dropped out and they are absolutely desperate to have you on this evening. Will you help them out? They'll pay you a fee and cover all your expenses.

MRS CALDICOT: Me? On television? Oh, I couldn't. I wouldn't know what to say. I haven't had my hair done and I haven't got anything to wear.

MS JACORANDA PETTIGREW: The studio will do your hair and find you something wonderful to wear.

MR LIVINGSTONE: You must do it! You'll be famous. A blow for pensioner power!

MISS NIGHTINGALE: Can I have your autograph when you've been on the television?

MRS PETERBOROUGH: Will you be in colour or black and white?

MISS NIGHTINGALE: And will you have lots of lines running across you?

MRS CALDICOT *(worried)*: Oh dear. I'm really not sure about this. Whatever would Mr Caldicot say?

MRS PETERBOROUGH *(picking up the plate of biscuits)*: Have a couple of biscuits. Take that one with the jam in the middle. It'll give you energy.

MRS CALDICOT: I think I need more than a biscuit with a jam in the middle if I'm going to be on television.

MR LIVINGSTONE *(standing up)*: I'll get you a large brandy. That'll put hairs on your chest.

MRS CALDICOT *(alarmed, looks at him.)*: I do hope not!

Act IV, Scene 1

(The Television Studio. The studio consists of two empty chairs on a platform. There are one or two television cameras, operated by one or two camera persons. Mr Livingstone, Mrs Peterborough, Miss Nightingale and Jacoranda Pettigrew are all sitting in the 'real' audience.)

MIKE TRICKLE *(wearing a bad wig and bouncing out onto the stage with arms aloft in greeting)*: Hullo, hullo, hullo. Good evening and an enormously sincere welcome from the very, very bottom of a very, very large heart. *(A man walks across the stage carrying a board which says CLAP.)* Thank you, thank you. I love you all so very, very much. Thank you to those of you at home who have tuned in and a wonderful thank you to our studio audience who have braved the elements, public transport, car park vultures and other horrors to be here with us tonight. *(He beams for a moment.)* We have a very special guest for you on today's Mike Trickle show. You won't have heard of Thelma Caldicot, she's not a big star yet, but when I heard about her I knew we had to have her on the show tonight. I always insist on being the first with the great interviews, first with the scoops, so that you have the very best of entertainment and the very best of current affairs. So I dumped the star guest we had planned, and told him to stay home and watch the show instead of being on it, and I personally made sure that we booked Mrs Caldicot for you. *(The man with the board which says CLAP walks across the stage again.)* I have to tell you that you, the audience, are the only people who really matter in my life – and three ex-wives still on the payroll will confirm that. (Laughs). So, now, without any more ado, let me introduce this evening's very special, surprise, star guest –Mrs Thelma Caldicot. Let's have a big hand for her. *(Mike does some clapping. Thelma walks onto the stage looking very nervous. She is wearing a very posh dress and has had her hair done. She looks a star.)* Come on, Mrs Caldicot, come over here and sit down and talk to me, the audience and our millions of viewers at home. *(Thelma looks around at the cameras and the audience. Mr Livingstone and the others stand up and clap enthusiastically. Mike and Mrs Caldicot both sit.)* So, Thelma, may I call you Thelma *(he doesn't wait for an answer)*, welcome to the Mike Trickle show!

MRS CALDICOT *(nervously and barely audibly)*: Thank you.

MIKE TRICKLE: No need to be nervous. I know you're not really a nervous person, Thelma. You're going to be the big news story in tomorrow's papers because you led a walk out of residents at the Twilight Years Rest Home. It is, so I am told, the first ever walk out of residents from an old folks' home. When did you become a revolutionary, Thelma? Would you describe yourself as a revolutionary or as an anarchist, by the way?

MRS CALDICOT *(clearly startled)*: Oh, I wouldn't…I don't think…I don't know…

MIKE TRICKLE: You don't know! You wouldn't? *(He turns to the audience and pulls a face)*. Really, that's not good enough, Thelma. You have a responsibility, not to me, I don't matter, but to your colleagues and to the public at large. You led a walk out. You've started a new movement. You say you walked out because you don't like cabbage but don't you think that was selfish and irresponsible? Wasn't it really a rather over-dramatic response to a childish dislike of cabbage – a dislike, incidentally, which the National Cabbage Board tells me is quite unfounded. Cabbage, so say the experts, is an excellent form of vital nutrients – especially for older citizens. I don't like beetroot but I'm not going to walk out of the studio in protest! *(The man walks across with the CLAP board.)*

MRS CALDICOT: That's not what happened. I thought the smell of cabbage was pretty nasty and they served up cabbage with everything but that's only a tiny part of the story.

MIKE TRICKLE: But wasn't it a tiny reason for a big deed? If everyone had a paddy and a sulk and insisted that they went on television to tell the world about it, all just because they didn't like their vegetables the world would be a pretty turbulent place wouldn't it? *(The man hurries across the stage holding the CLAP board.)*

MRS CALDICOT: Why are you being so aggressive? I didn't want to attract attention to myself at all but the nice lady I met at the hotel this afternoon said your star guest had cancelled and she asked me to help you out. I only said I'd come on the programme because she said you were desperate. *(Mrs Caldicot's friends stand up and applaud.)*

MIKE TRICKLE: But these are elderly people. *(He lowers and softens his voice.)* They are old people who are vulnerable and easily influenced. They need their medication and their regular meals.

MRS CALDICOT: Now you're just being patronising. Why does everyone think they can patronise older people all the time? You're like those people in shops and offices and on the telephone who talk down to pensioners and treat them as though they're members of some sub-species, or aliens from another planet. If I have to ring the gas people they always want to know my date of birth. I can't imagine why but they do. Maybe you're not allowed to have gas if you're too old. And then when I've told them they always say 'well done' as if I've just discovered a new way to split the atom or won a gold medal in the Olympics. All I've done is get my date of birth right but they congratulate me as if I've really astonished them with my brilliance. Why do people under 40 always assume that anyone over 60 must be senile, and then act all surprised and delighted when you turn out not to be? And why am I invisible in shops? I stood at the counter in the Post Office one day and a girl of about 18 came up, completely ignored me, and asked for a book of stamps. She and the fellow behind the counter behaved as though I were completely invisible. They just chatted away as if I weren't there at all. When the girl had finished and had tottered off, I asked the man behind the glass if I could have my turn. I said 'I'm sorry I'm not 18 and wearing a tight top but am I still allowed to buy stamps?' He looked at me as if I were barking mad, closed his partition and buggered off so I obviously really was invisible. And you're the same. I'm surprised you can even see me sitting here.

MR LIVINGSTONE *(standing up and calling out)*: We may be old but that doesn't mean we like being pushed around and treated like idiots.

MRS CALDICOT *(looks at Mr Livingstone and waves to him. She's getting more confident now)*: Just because people are old it doesn't mean that they can't make up their own minds about things. Just because people are in their 70s, 80s and 90s it doesn't mean that they have to put up with being drugged and bullied.

MIKE TRICKLE: But even if you decided to walk out of the nursing home because you didn't like the cabbage, that wasn't any reason to drag your fellow residents with you! Do you think it was responsible to drag them out of their warm, comfortable home, where they were receiving careful, professional attention and make them follow you into the cold and frightening wilderness? Aren't you the bully?

MRS CALDICOT: I didn't make anyone do anything!

MR LIVINGSTONE *(and the other two)*: No, she didn't!

MIKE TRICKLE: Are you now claiming that you are so charismatic that these people just followed you? *(He turns to the audience and pulls a face.)* You don't look that charismatic to me.

MRS CALDICOT: No! I'm not claiming to be charismatic or a leader or anything like that. I'm just trying to tell you what happened.

MIKE TRICKLE: Don't you think you were taking a big risk – walking out as you did?

MRS CALDICOT: What's the point of life if you don't take chances occasionally – and stick up for yourself and the people around you?

MIKE TRICKLE: Aren't you a bit old to be taking chances? *(He pulls another face at the audience.)*

MRS CALDICOT: There you go again – being ageist. I don't think I took enough chances in my life.

MIKE TRICKLE: Really?

MRS CALDICOT: No! What had I got to lose? I was fed up with being treated as a non-person. A lot of old people who are my age and older don't have the option of walking out. They're stuck where they are. They have to put up with being bullied and drugged and treated like naughty children. Yes, I did what I did for me and my new friends but I also did it for the people who are too frail to stand up for themselves.

MIKE TRICKLE: But you're an old woman. You should be sitting at home watching television not up here battling away on some curious cabbage crusade!

MRS CALDICOT: Why are you being so rude and aggressive? Why do you keep making faces to the audience when the camera isn't on you? How would you like it if I asked you why you wore such a silly wig? And does your wife know about that blonde girl who came out of your dressing room? She only looked about 20, and the nice lady who did my hair said she lives at home with her mum and works in the make-up department. *(Mr Livingstone et al cheer and laugh.)*

MIKE TRICKLE *(disbelievingly)*: What did you say?

MRS CALDICOT: I asked how you'd like it if I asked you why you wore such a silly wig. And if your wife…

MIKE TRICKLE *(standing up and talking over Mrs Caldicot)*: Thank you, Mrs Caldicot. That's all for this week's show. Next week we'll have another wonderful guest for you. *(He waves to the audience and leaves the stage. He is immediately followed by the two cameramen. The main lights go off. Mike is offstage but we hear him shouting.)* Who let that woman on my show? This is a disaster. How did she find out about the wig? No one is supposed to know about the wig. And someone had better get my wife on the phone… *(Mrs Caldicot is now standing on the stage, ignored and alone. Her chums, who were sitting in the audience, climb onto the stage and talk to her. Derek, who was also in the audience, climbs onto the stage.)*

MR DEREK CALDICOT: That was the most disgraceful display I have ever seen. I have never been so embarrassed in my life. I don't know what my wife will say. She's a huge fan of Mike Trickle. She's got his pop-up book of celebrity chitchat and has all his cookery books. You humiliated the poor man. How could you do that, mother? Don't you realise the trouble you've caused? I've just had my boss on the phone. He went ballistic. He told me the other residents are leaving the Twilight Years Rest Home in droves. Some are being fetched by worried relatives. Some have just walked out and gone to stay with friends. You've started a revolution, mother! My boss is so angry that he's planning to close the place. He's talking of putting it up for sale as a damage limitation exercise. He's terrified the fuss will spread to the rest of the chain. We have 73 nursing homes throughout the country for heaven's sake!

JENKINS *(who has wandered on, also from the audience)*: May I offer my congratulations on a very spirited performance? *(He holds out a hand)*. That was the best piece of live television I've seen for a long time. I'm sorry – I should have introduced myself. My name is Jenkins. I'm the editor of The Sunday Globe. I found your story fascinating and I'd like to interview you for the paper.

MRS CALDICOT: Oh, I'm not sure that I want any more publicity, thank you very much.

JENKINS: I promise you it will be a very sympathetic piece. And you have an important story that needs to be told. People shouldn't be treated without respect just because of their age. We have laws which stop discrimination and prejudice because of sex or race so why should we allow discrimination because of age? Old people need a champion – and you're that champion.

MRS CALDICOT: You really don't want to attack me – as Mike Trickle just did?

JENKINS: No, of course not. Our readers will be sympathetic and very much on your side. Why would we publish a piece guaranteed to alienate them? I can tell you now that Mike Trickle made quite a mistake this evening. A moment ago one of the producers told me that they've been inundated with calls from viewers supporting you and criticising Trickle. And it wasn't just older viewers who were angry. The producer told me that they've had a lot of calls from younger viewers who realise that one day they may be old themselves! Mr Trickle is going to find himself very unpopular tomorrow – and not just with his wife. And you're going to find yourself quite the heroine!

MRS CALDICOT: Really?

JENKINS: Oh yes! And if you agree to talk to us we'll pay you a very substantial fee.

MRS CALDICOT: You'll pay me?

JENKINS: Oh yes! And, I suspect, considerably more than Mr Trickle's show paid you. And you're going to need some money now.

MRS CALDICOT: The television people promised to pay me £100. But they also said they'd pay my hotel bill for the night.

JENKINS *(smiling)*: They're notoriously stingy when it comes to paying guests. They get a lot of actors and singers who want to be on the programme to plug their latest film or record and so they can get away with paying ridiculously small fees.

MRS CALDICOT: Mind you, they don't know yet but my bill will be for four rooms and quite a lot of room service.

JENKINS *(laughing)*: Serves them right. We'll happily pay your hotel bill for as long as you need to be there. And we'll also pay you well for your story. How does £25,000 sound?

MRS CALDICOT *(shocked)*: £25,000? Oh dear me.

JENKINS: Quite right. Nowhere near enough. My apologies. Does £50,000 sound better?

MRS CALDICOT *(more shocked)*: It sounds rather pleasant. And you won't be horrid about me? You promise?

JENKINS: I promise. We certainly won't be horrid about you. You will be our heroine. A spokeswoman for your generation. *(He holds out his hand. Mrs Caldicot takes it and they shake on the deal.)*

Act V Scene 1:

(The Lobby at the Twilight Years Rest Home. Mrs Caldicot, her pals and a greasy young man in a cheap suit enter the Twilight Years Rest home. The whole place now looks very scruffy and broken down. The young man, who carries a pile of brochures, is an estate agent.)

ESTATE AGENT: I understand that you're looking for a large house for yourself and some friends?

MRS CALDICOT: That's right!

ESTATE AGENT: Until a week ago this was a nursing home run by a large property company. They had some trouble and closed the place down very quickly – I think they must have decided to cut their losses.

MRS CALDICOT: It needs some work doing.

ESTATE AGENT: Just small stuff. Nothing a decent handyman couldn't deal with. Lick of paint here and there.

MRS CALDICOT *(looking around)*: Hmm. No, I suppose we could do something with it.

ESTATE AGENT: We have contact details for a fellow who is apparently willing to take a job here as general handyman and gardener. He knows the place quite well, I understand. Lost his position when the place closed and now he's rather desperate for a job.

MRS CALDICOT: That sounds helpful.

ESTATE AGENT: Would you like me to give him a ring?

MRS CALDICOT: That would be marvellous! *(The estate agent pulls out a mobile phone and makes a call. Mrs Caldicot and the others look around. The agent talks quietly for a moment or two and then closes his phone and puts it back in his pocket.)*

ESTATE AGENT: That's all settled. He'll be here in a couple of minutes.

MRS CALDICOT: It certainly looks as if the previous owners left in a hurry.

ESTATE AGENT: Yes, I believe they did. And now they're keen for a quick sale. They want to get rid of the place. Bad memories for them, I think.

MRS CALDICOT: I wonder why!

ESTATE AGENT: Can't imagine. Some sort of bad publicity I think. I heard it was something to do with a former resident.

MRS CALDICOT: So the place is going cheap?

ESTATE AGENT: It's very reasonably priced. Confidentially, I think they'll entertain quite a low offer for a quick sale. Do you have money for the deposit?

MRS CALDICOT: Oh yes, I've got £50,000 for the deposit.

ESTATE AGENT: Oh that would be marvellous. We could easily fix you up with a loan for the rest. Would you like me to show you round?

MRS CALDICOT: No, I don't think that will be necessary.

ESTATE AGENT: I tell you what – I'll pop back to the office and get a contract sorted out. You look around by yourselves and this chap should be here shortly. When you've talked to him, come along to the office and we'll get the deal done and dusted. *(He leaves. Moments later the bell goes. Mrs Caldicot opens the door. Mr Muller-Hawksmoor is standing there.)*

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR *(startled)*: Oh, Mrs Caldicot! *(Pause)*. The agent told me they had a buyer who, er, might want a handyman.

MRS CALDICOT: The buyer would be me. And yes we do need a handyman. Actually, a handyman-cum-gardner.

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: Oh yes, gardening too. I could do that.

MRS CALDICOT: We just need someone to do all the odd jobs.

MR LIVINGSTONE: Cleaning out the drains.

MISS NIGHTINGALE: Emptying the bedpans.

MRS PETERBOROUGH: I expect there will be a lot of drain cleaning to be done. And bedpans.

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: Oh, yes. I could do drains. Definitely. I think I'd be quite good at drains.

MRS CALDICOT: And lots of weeding.

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: I'm very good at weeding.

MRS CALDICOT: And your first job will be to put up a big sign in the kitchen. *(She finds a piece of board and a thick pen or some chalk and writes on it quickly. When she's finished she turns the board round. She has written: 'No Cabbage Allowed'. The other three see what she has written and they cheer.)*

MR MULLER-HAWKSMOOR: Would you like me to put that up now for you?

MRS CALDICOT: Yes, straight away please. *(Mr Muller-Hawksmoor hurries off with the board. Mrs Caldicot turns to her three companions.)* Do you know, I think we can safely say that we won the Cabbage War! *(Mr Livingstone, who has been rummaging in a cupboard, produces a bottle of champagne and four glasses. He opens the bottle and pours the champagne as the curtain falls, the lights go out and/or whatever else happens to denote the end of the evening's entertainment.)*

This play may be performed by amateur dramatic societies without charge.
For permission to perform 'Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War' please write to: plays@vernoncoleman.com giving details of your proposed date and venue, together with your name and email address.
Printed scripts are available on Amazon.

Note
Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War is available in a movie version, starring Pauline Collins as Mrs Caldicot. John Alderton plays the nursing home owner and Peter Capaldi plays Mrs Caldicot's son.
Other books about Mrs Caldicot, all written by Vernon Coleman, are: Mrs Caldicot's Knickerbocker Glory, Mrs Caldicot's Oyster Parade and Mrs Caldicot's Turkish Delight.

For more information about the author please visit: www.vernoncoleman.com or see his author page on Amazon.

VERNON COLEMAN

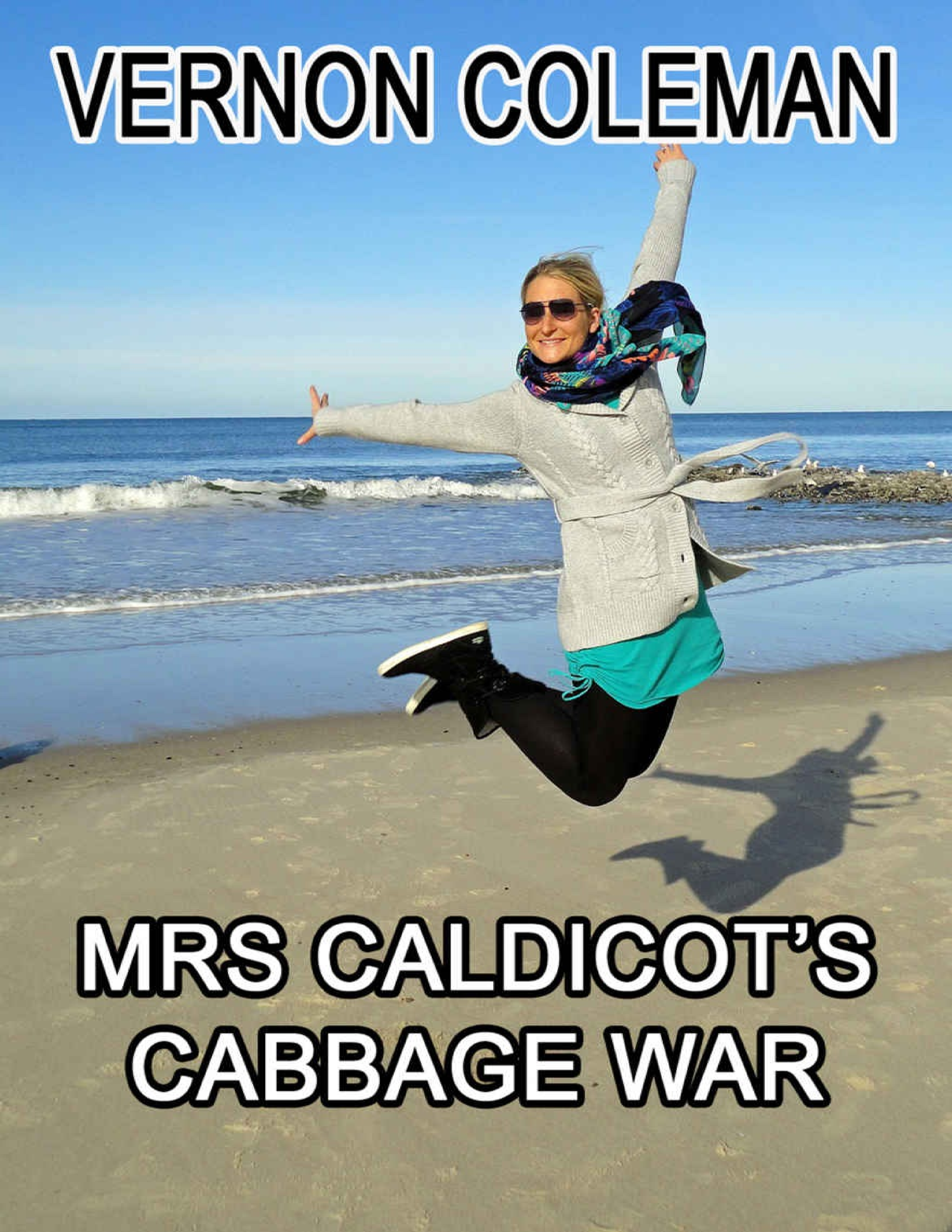

MRS CALDICOT'S CABBAGE WAR

Mrs Caldicots Cabbage War

Vernon Coleman

Mrs Caldicots Cabbage War by Vernon Coleman is the book upon which the hugely popular film of the same name was based.

You can find out more about other books by Vernon Coleman (including *Mrs Caldicots Knickerbocker Glory* the sequel to *Mrs Caldicots Cabbage War*) by visiting http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

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CHAPTER ONE

Mrs Caldicot didn't really like the way her husband imperiously banged his spoon on the side of his cup when he wanted it refilled with tea. But she didn't say anything. She stared at the freckled top of his bald head for a moment (the rest of it was hidden behind his morning newspaper), got up from the breakfast table, picked up the milk jug and the teapot and carefully refilled his cup, making sure that she mixed together just the right amount of milk and tea. For a brief moment she was tempted to leave him to add his own sugar but even that small act of defiance was too much for her, and so she carefully tipped two spoons of sugar into his cup.

However, as she stirred the mixture she deliberately allowed the spoon to bang against the side of the cup. She knew that the noise would annoy him. She didn't want to annoy him simply because she didn't like him, but rather because it was really the only way of reminding herself that she had some freedom left.

For Mrs Caldicot, letting the teaspoon bang against the side of his cup was the equivalent of jumping onto the table, screaming as loudly as she could and tearing off all her clothes. It was an act of defiance which thrilled her and which reminded her, in its modest way, that she was still, just about, an independent being with a mind and a will of her own. She had started doing little things like this after reading a book on assertiveness which she had borrowed from the public library. She felt a wave of nervous anxiety enveloping her; tiny beads of perspiration broke out on her forehead, her heart beat faster and she could feel the colicky pains she knew so well and dreaded so much beginning to grow in her tummy.

`Do you have to make so much noise?' demanded Mr Caldicot gruffly, without looking up from his newspaper. It was the first time he had spoken since they had got up.

Mrs Caldicot felt herself blushing and pulled the collar of her dressing gown up a little higher to hide the bright red rash that she knew was developing.

`I wish I had a machine gun,' she thought. `Then you'd hear some noise!' These unusual thoughts had started slipping into her mind more and more often, and although she found them slightly alarming she also found them rather exciting. She realised, with some considerable surprise, that she quite liked the idea of mowing down her husband with a hail of machine gun bullets.

`I'm sorry, dear,' she apologised, not so much because she was contrite over the rattled tea spoon but more because she was overcome with guilt at having so enjoyed the thought of the machine gun massacre. She glanced at the kitchen clock. `It's twenty minutes to eight,' she reminded him gently and timidly. It was the cricket season, the county side was playing at home and Mr Caldicot, a loyal and faithful member for forty three years, never missed a home match. The game did not start until eleven but Mr Caldicot always arrived at the ground a full two hours early. He liked to be there before anyone else to make sure that no one else sat in his seat. A double glazing salesman had once sat on Mr Caldicot's preferred section of wooden bench and Mr Caldicot had responded by sinking into a deep depression for two months.

Mr Caldicot moved his head slightly to one side, lowered his head a fraction of an inch and looked up over the top of his spectacles so that he could examine the clock to confirm the time. Mrs Caldicot hated him even more than usual when he did this. She felt that he did it deliberately just to let her know that he didn't even trust her to tell the time properly. He popped the last piece of toast into his mouth and chewed on it noisily. His dentures were ill-fitting and needed replacing but he was too mean a man to spend money on replacing dentures which still had a few thousand chews left in them. Occasionally, when he was eating, they would slip out of his mouth and he would have to push them back into place with an inelegant flick of the wrist. This unattractive habit never seemed to embarrass him.

He cleared his throat. `Hrrmph!' Then he pushed back his chair and folded his newspaper before placing it neatly next to his plate. He sipped at his tea, decided that it was too hot to drink for the moment, got up from the table and headed for the stairs to finish dressing. Mr Caldicot's attire was predictable and Mrs Caldicot knew exactly how he would be dressed when he reappeared. Whatever the weather he always wore a three piece suit, a white shirt and his county supporter's tie when going to watch a cricket match. She longed for him to astonish her in some way, but knew that he never would. His underpants were always white, his socks were always grey and woollen and the ends of his shoelaces were always of matching length.

`Are my sandwiches ready?'

Mr Caldicot had paused in the doorway before going upstairs to dress.

Mrs Caldicot felt like a schoolgirl being addressed by a stern headmaster. `Yes, sir, no sir, three bags full sir,' she thought. `They're in the fridge, dear,' she said. `I'll get them out when I've filled your flask.' She realised that instead of `dear' she had very nearly said `sir' and she swallowed hard. She wondered if he would have noticed if she had said `sir', and decided that even if he had he would not have thought it odd. Indeed, he would have almost certainly liked it. The machine gun image came back and she savoured the sight for a moment.

`Beef paste?'

`Yes, dear.'

`I didn't like that fishy stuff.'

`Well hard luck! Why don't you make your own sandwiches you nasty, selfish, self-centred little man,' she thought. `Tuna? No, I know, dear,' she said. `You told me.' Mrs Caldicot should have known better than to try experimenting with the contents of her husband's packed luncheon; the tuna fish had not gone down well, though it had not, she remembered, been as unpopular as the cucumber. She had once put cucumber on his sandwiches and he had reminded her of his dislike for cucumber every morning for the rest of the cricketing summer. He rarely told her what he liked, only what he didn't like. She couldn't remember him ever praising her for anything.

`And not an apple.'

`Yes, dear.'

`The skins on those apples you bought are too tough. The one I had yesterday got stuck in my teeth.'

`What a pity it didn't choke you,' thought Mrs Caldicot. `I'm sorry,' she said aloud, in a simper which immediately made her feel ashamed and angry with herself. `I'll put a banana in your box.'

`My brown suit needs cleaning,' said Mr Caldicot, still standing at the foot of the stairs. `And while you're in town call at the seed merchant's and get me some more plant fertiliser.`

`What did your last slave die of?' thought Mrs Caldicot, who had not planned to go into town at all. `All right, dear,' she said.

While Mr Caldicot disappeared back upstairs to fiddle with cufflinks and collar studs, Mrs Caldicot filled her husband's flask with tea, nervously selected a banana with just the right mixture of brown and yellow in its skin and took the small packet of sandwiches she had made the night before and put them into an airtight plastic box. Then she wrapped two small home-made rock cakes in greaseproof paper and added them to the box. She put the flask, the banana and the sandwich box alongside the folded newspaper but she didn't put them into his polished brown leather briefcase even though it was leaning against the wall no more than a few feet away. Mr Caldicot liked to pack his briefcase himself. When all this was done Mrs Caldicot switched the kettle on again, put two slices of bread into the toaster and made her own breakfast.

When he came downstairs Mr Caldicot finished his cup of tea and packed his sandwich box, his flask, his banana and his newspaper into his briefcase.

`I'll be in the members' pavilion if anyone wants me,' he said. He had said the same thing for as long as Mrs Caldicot could remember but no one had ever wanted him. He did not ask her how she was planning to spend her day and nor had he ever done so.

`Who do you think cares a fig where you are?' she thought. `Yes, dear,' she said. She glanced at the clock as her husband left. It was twenty minutes past eight. She heard the garage doors creak open and the sound of their motorcar starting up. It would be eleven hours before her husband returned home. She sat down and turned on the wireless. On the news station two politicians were discussing Northern Ireland. On the entertainment station a disc jockey was talking about a group she'd never heard of and a concert he'd been to which sounded momentously dull and uneventful. Mrs Caldicot turned the wireless off.

She contemplated the possibilities. She could go down to the Oxfam shop to help sort through other peoples unwanted clothes, books and household bits and pieces. She could go to the supermarket to restock the pantry with essential household comestibles. Or she could give the house a good spring clean.

None of these options filled her with anything approaching excitement or anticipation.

Mrs Caldicot didn't really know what was wrong with her. She had never really felt like this before. She had spent most of her life keeping Mr Caldicot's socks in pairs and satisfying his increasingly obsessional likes and dislikes, but she had never before felt quite so unsatisfied by her life. Matching socks had never been something she had regarded as fulfilling but she had, nevertheless, always been a relatively contented woman. With considerable reluctance she realised that she was beginning to feel frustrated by an existence which seemed more and more pointless and purposeless. Worst of all was the strange and pervasive feeling of loneliness which seemed to leave her. Even at the Oxfam shop, surrounded by plump and cheerful friends, she felt inexplicably alone. She wished there was a patron saint to look after the downtrodden, the downhearted and the constantly put upon, and yet at the same time she felt ashamed of her own lack of strength and her inability to solve her predicament.

She closed her eyes and tried to use a relaxation technique she had read about in a book on stress. It involved imagining that she was lying on a beach on a desert island. But Kitty the cat leapt on her lap just as she had begun the imaginary journey to her promised haven of temporary peace, and the journey ended almost before it had begun.

She got up from the table and started to wash the breakfast plates. She wondered if she was depressed but quickly decided that it was irrelevant she wasn't going to see the doctor anyway. The last time she had visited him, eight years earlier, he had put her on pills which he had promised would calm her nerves. They had done that effectively for two weeks but it had then taken her three years to escape from their pharmacological clutches and she no longer trusted him or any of his pills.

As she squirted washing-up liquid into the bowl of hot water she felt a sudden urge to run away; to put Kitty into her wicker basket, to pack a small bag and to leave. But she didn't know where she would go, and she realised with some anguish that this was not because she didn't have anywhere that she could go to but because anywhere would be better than where she was. She had so many places from which she could choose that she couldn't decide which one to select.

She turned the wireless on again.

On the news station a man with a boring, whiny voice was talking about the boundaries of art in the gay community. On the entertainment station an overly cheerful youth with a relentlessly patronising manner was reading out a recipe for cheese omelette and cracking little jokes between each of the ingredients.

She reached out and turned the radio off with a firm flick of her wrist. She thought for a moment about switching on the television but just as quickly suppressed the thought. She could not bear the incessantly cheerful litany of banal banter with which the broadcasters sought to liven her morning. She had long ago realised that the very predictability of their inanity was more than adequate proof that they knew that she was bored and lonely and she did not want what amounted to little more than electronic pity.

She sat down, silent and lonely, and allowed an endless series of irrelevant worries to drift in and out of her mind. She wondered if everyone worried as much as she did about things and decided that they couldn't possibly because if they did then they'd never have the energy to get anything done.

CHAPTER TWO

Mrs Caldicot was in the kitchen cutting radishes into little flowers when two very young police officers came to tell her that her husband had died.

They were extremely nice about it.

`Mrs Caldicot?' asked the boy policeman. He had huge, pink, ears which stuck out at right angles to the side of his head and his face was covered in spots. He was trying to grow a moustache.

`That's right,' replied Mrs Caldicot, wiping her hands on a tea towel. `Is it about my Aunt Hannah?' She opened the door wide and stood back. `You'd better come in. We've been expecting it.' She felt her palpitations come back again and the colicky pains in her tummy made her wince inwardly, though she proudly refused to show her discomfort to these strangers. The worries and anxieties that had been popping in and out of her mind still nagged at her and she put them neatly in order so that she could worry about them later. None of them was important enough to survive the next half an hour.

Mrs Caldicot's Aunt Hannah lived in an alms house twelve miles away and had been dying for over a quarter of a century.

The boy policeman fidgeted with his helmet. He looked at his companion, the girl policewoman. She looked even younger than him. She had a little pug nose, dark brown eyes and her hat came down so far over her head that she didn't seem to have any hair at all. Her shapeless uniform was too big for her and Mrs Caldicot wondered if her mother knew where she was. She also thought that the uniform looked rather itchy and uncomfortable and was glad that she wasn't in the police force. She remembered that when she had been in the maternity hospital giving birth to her son Derek she had been in a bed next to a girl called Brenda who had been married to a police constable. The police constable had given her a hug and a kiss the day she had been leaving the hospital and if she closed her eyes and worked her memory and imagination hard she could still feel the texture of his uniform.

`It's about your husband,' said the girl policewoman. `Mr Caldicot,' she added, lest there be any doubt about the identity of Mrs Caldicot's spouse.

Mrs Caldicot felt a sudden frisson of alarm run down her spine and she felt a wave of guilt flowing over her as she realised that the sense of alarm had been triggered not by any fear for her husband but by fear for herself. She knew instantly that her life was about to change though she did not know precisely how or in what way. It annoyed her that she could not remember the name of Brenda's husband.

`He's been taken ill,' continued the girl policewoman.

`Very ill,' said the boy policeman. `Can we come in?'

`You'd better come in,' said Mrs Caldicot. Her husband was never ill. He did not allow illness to interfere with his carefully organised life. How, she wondered, could any disease have dared to find its way, uninvited and unwelcome, into his ordered existence. She wondered if the policeman who had hugged her had been called Bert. He had, she remembered, a huge bristly moustache and she had never before (or since for that matter) been kissed by a man with a moustache.

The girl policewoman and the boy policeman squeezed into Mrs Caldicot's front hall and Mrs Caldicot reached around them to shut the front door.

`First on your right,' said Mrs Caldicot. `The living room.' She knew that she should have asked them immediately what had happened but somehow she felt that the longer she could delay the finding out the better it might be for all of them.

They stood together in the middle of the small room which now suddenly seemed overcrowded with furniture. The girl policewoman looked around and Mrs Caldicot looked around with her and seemed to see the room for the first time. There was a three piece suite with floral patterned covers, an imitation oak glass- fronted bookcase filled with book club editions and paperbacks and a smart new Japanese television set on a metal and plastic table.

Kitty, was curled up dozing on one of the chairs. She looked up and opened an eye when they entered but did not move. Kitty didn't mind strangers. No one sat down. The girl policewoman had taken off her hat and like her colleague she was holding it in her hands and turning it round and round.

`He was at the cricket match,' said the boy policeman.

`At Mettleham County Ground,' added the girl policewoman.

`I know,' said Mrs Caldicot. `He always goes to the cricket when they're playing at home. He's a member.' She suddenly realised that she knew that her husband was dead and that she had known this since she had seen the two police officers standing on the doorstep. She wondered whether or not she would cry when they told her, and whether or not they would expect her to cry, and whether they might be disappointed if she didn't cry. Inexplicably, she suddenly thought of the time she had gone to night school to study French. Fearing that her intellect was withering she had tried to persuade Mr Caldicot to go with her to an evening class. He had refused and had consented to her signing up with bad grace. When she had completed her course she had suggested a holiday in France or, at the very least, a short weekend in Paris. But he had refused. When she had diffidently suggested that she might go to Paris with a group being organised by other students he had refused to countenance such a trip. She thought that had probably been the beginning of the end of their love. She never said anything at the time, of course, but she shrank deeper and deeper into her shell, and after that she had started thinking her strange thoughts. The more she tried to repress these thoughts with a veneer of quiet and artificial contentment, the more the thoughts struggled to the surface.

She knew that she wouldn't, couldn't, cry for him though she feared she might cry for herself: for the lost years of her youth. He had ground her down with his demands, his selfishness and his dullness and she feared that she may now have lost her zest for life. She feared that she had long ago stopped being a person with ambitions and purposes of her own.

She remembered the day, over twenty years earlier, when she had left him. Derek, their son, had just left home and she had packed a bag and gone to live in a rented room in another town nearby. Mr Caldicot had come after her not because he wanted her but because he needed her. She knew that. He had bullied her and made promises he must have known he couldn't and wouldn't keep. She had gone back to him but nothing had changed and the very effort of making that one break had exhausted her spirit.

All this went through her mind in a fraction of a moment, and during the brief pause the two police officers glanced at each other.

`I'm afraid your husband's dead,' said the policeman suddenly, and more starkly and bluntly than he had intended. He lowered his eyes, blushing with embarrassment and ashamed of his clumsiness.

`They think it was a heart attack,' said the policewoman. `It was very quick. He didn't suffer.' She spoke quietly and sympathetically.

`Oh dear,' said Mrs Caldicot, who, despite knowing what it was that the police officers were about to tell her, had still been shaken by the news. She reached out and held onto the mantelpiece. `Oh dear me,' she said. She went very pale and felt as though she was about to faint. She felt dizzy and damp with perspiration. Her colicky tummy pains started again, gnawing spitefully at her insides. The boy policeman took her arm and gently led her over to one of the two easy chairs.

`I'll put the kettle on,' said the policewoman, anxious for something to do.

A thousand unconnected thoughts hurried through Mrs Caldicot's mind. `He's got his chrysanthemums ready for the show next Saturday,' she said, inconsequentially. `Whatever shall I do with them?' This irrelevance burst to the forefront of her mind as though to give the rest of her brain time to think. Mrs Caldicot was overwhelmed and confused by the way she felt. It had been a long time since she had loved her husband, and she couldn't even remember when she had last felt any real affection or respect for him, but they had grown up and grown old together rather like two trees planted to close together. In her most secret moments she had often wondered what life would be like without him, and now that she was faced with separation for real she felt liberated but also lonely and frightened. She felt like a long piece of Virginia creeper which has suddenly lost its hold on a wall and is swaying around in the wind. `Should I pretend to be sad?' she wondered. `Am I sad?' She thought about it for a moment. `I feel happy and sad,' she confessed to herself. `But more happy than sad. To be honest, I don't really feel very sad at all. I didn't like him and I'm rather relieved that I won't be seeing him again.' She felt as though she had been released from hospital after a long illness or released from prison after serving a long sentence. Then she felt guilty again. She remembered that once she had taken a job in a department store. He had sulked until she had given it up, though in recent years he had allowed her to work as a volunteer assistant in a charity shop. When making her give up the job at the department store he said that if she had a proper job people would think he didn't earn enough money to keep them. He. Him. It was all he ever thought about. All he had ever thought about. She had hated him but he had ruled her life so severely that she had become dependent upon him. And now she was confused, lonely and frightened.

The girl policewoman returned from the kitchen. `Do you take sugar, Mrs Caldicot?' she asked.

`No thank you,' smiled Mrs Caldicot politely. `I've got ham for his tea. He likes a ham salad.' She stopped for a moment. `Liked.' she corrected herself. A tear rolled down her cheek and she realised that she was crying after all. `Oh dear.' The girl policewoman hurried back to the kitchen to busy herself making tea. Kitty the cat, who did not seem in any way discomforted by the news of Mr Caldicot's untimely and unexpected demise, lazily stood up, stretched her legs, jumped down onto the carpet, walked across to Mrs Caldicot, jumped up onto her lap and curled herself up again.

George and Thelma Caldicot had been married for thirty three years, and in the eyes of those who knew them had become an inseparable onesome rather than a couple. Mrs Caldicot had grown accustomed to allowing her husband to make all the decisions in their life. If they went out for the day he decided when and where they went. When they went shopping for wallpaper or furniture he made all the major decisions. They spent their annual holidays in Torquay because he liked it there and they drove a Vauxhall car because he had always driven Vauxhall cars. Now that he was dead she suddenly realised that she was waiting for him to come home so that she could ask him what to do. She wondered what she would do and how she would cope. With a strange mixture of apprehension and excitement she realised that she could do whatever she liked both now and for the rest of her life. She had been given back control of her own life. And she wondered if she would know what to do with it.

Something suddenly occurred to her.

`Where is he?' she asked.

`They took him to the hospital,' said the young policeman kindly. He still felt bad about the way he had broken the news. `Mettleham General.'

`His brother died on the Edgar Johnson Ward,' said Mrs Caldicot. `And his sister died on the Mavis Bates Ward. You can never park round there.'

`Here you are,' said the policewoman, appearing with a cup of tea which she put down on the arm of Mrs Caldicot's chair. She had used one of Mrs Caldicot's best cups and saucers and this, together with the fact that the tea had been made by someone she did not know, made Mrs Caldicot feel something of a stranger in her own home. The two police officers watched her sip the tea, as though it were medicine which would magically and mysteriously soothe her mental aches and pains. Mrs Caldicot felt uncomfortable.

`Do you have someone we could call for you?' asked the boy policeman. `A relative or a friend?'

`I have a son,' said Mrs Caldicot. `Derek. He's in property.' She realised what she felt uncomfortable about. `Aren't you having a cup?' she asked them both, looking first at one and then the other.

`Do you have a number for him?' asked the girl policewoman.

`He'll be at work,' said Mrs Caldicot. `I don't like to bother him at work.'

`I'm sure he won't mind,' said the girl policewoman. She paused. `Considering the circumstances.'

`No,' said Mrs Caldicot. `I suppose not.'

`Do you have a number for him?' She asked again.

Mrs Caldicot gave the policewoman her son's number. `Derek Caldicot is his name but you have to ask for Mr Caldicot.' Mrs Caldicot had a sudden feeling that without her husband to do the bullying her son would take over her life. She wondered if she had ever loved her husband. She supposed she must have once. Or maybe she just thought she loved him. She tried to think back to when they had both been young. She couldn't recall any particularly happy memories and that made her sad. Why, she wondered, had she married him at all? Perhaps because everyone had expected her to. They had met at a cricket club dance. Her father had been a keen player but her husband-to-be had never played. He'd always been a spectator. That just about summed him up, she thought. He'd always been a spectator. And she'd been even worse. She'd merely made his sandwiches. He had watched while life passed him by and she had made his sandwiches and sorted his socks. They had met, danced shyly together, and that was that. Trips to the cinema. Days out watching cricket. Days spent cycling to local churches. An engagement. And then a wedding, a tiny flat, a baby, a small house, a larger house and then this. It didn't seem to have been an awful lot of fun.

The policewoman dialled the number that Mrs Caldicot had given her. The policeman stood uncomfortably in the middle of Mrs Caldicot's living room and Mrs Caldicot sipped her cup of tea. Only when she had nearly finished drinking it did she remember that she hardly ever drank tea and that she much preferred coffee.

`Could I speak to Mr Caldicot, please?' asked the girl policewoman.

Mrs Caldicot couldn't hear the other half of the conversation but she could imagine it. `I'm afraid Mr Caldicot is in a meeting at the moment,' the receptionist would say. `Can I take a message and get him to ring you back?'

`It is rather urgent and important that I speak to him,' said the policewoman. She gave her name and rank.

`I'll see what I can do,' the receptionist would be saying.

A moment or two later Mrs Caldicot could hear her son's voice booming out of the telephone. He always sounded rather aggressive though he was not a brave man and would have run a mile if anyone had threatened him with so much as a rolled up newspaper. `If it's about that neighbour of mine then you can take it from me that he's a liar,' she heard him say. `That tree was hanging right over our boundary fence. I've got photographs to prove it.'

`It isn't about your neighbour,' said the girl policewoman, surprisingly gently. `I'm afraid I've got some bad news for you. Could I ask if you're sitting down?'

`Of course I'm sitting down,' said Mr Caldicot, only slightly less belligerently. Mrs Caldicot could still hear his voice. `What bad news? Is it about my car? The aerial has been broken off twice this month already.'

`It isn't about your car,' said the girl policewoman, patiently. `It's about your father.'

`My father?'

`I'm afraid he's been taken ill. Very ill.'

`There must be some sort of mistake,' said Mr Caldicot. `I spoke to him last Sunday. He was perfectly healthy. Are you sure you've got the right Mr Caldicot?'

`Your mother gave us your number,' said the girl policewoman. `We're with her now.'

`At their house?'

`Yes, that's right.'

`I thought you said it was my father who'd been taken ill?'

`That's right. He's at the hospital. I'm afraid your father is dead Mr Caldicot.'

`Dead?'

`I'm afraid so. I'm very sorry to be the one to have to tell you this.'

`A moment ago you said he was very ill.'

`He's dead I'm afraid.'

`Are you sure?'

`I'm afraid so, Mr Caldicot. Would it be convenient for you to come over to stay with your mother?'

`Well it isn't really,' said Mr Caldicot. `I've got an important meeting at 3 o'clock.'

Mrs Caldicot, who had heard all this very clearly, glanced across at the policeman. He was looking at her and lowered his eyes, blushing with embarrassment.

`Your mother suggested that we rang you,' persisted the girl policewoman.

Mr Caldicot sighed deeply. `O.K.,' he said, reluctantly but resignedly abandoning himself to his fate. `I'll be over as soon as I can.'

The policewoman put the telephone down. `Your son will be here just as soon as possible,' she said. `We'll stay with you until he gets here.' She seemed unaware that Mrs Caldicot had overheard the conversation.

CHAPTER THREE

`You'll have to come and stay with us for the night!' Mr Caldicot told his mother firmly. It was much more of an order than an invitation. `Just for a night or two. Jason can sleep on the sofa.'

`I'd rather stick hot needles in my eyes,' Mrs Caldicot found herself thinking, and wondered where on earth the phrase had come from. She shivered at the thought of it. `I'll be all right,' she said politely. `I'll stay here, thank you.' She didn't like staying at her son's house. She didn't get on terribly well with Veronica, her daughter-in-law. In fact, that was something of an understatement. The truth was that she and Veronica had always rubbed each other up the wrong way, though she wasn't entirely sure why.

Veronica was a staunch Conservative party worker who dyed her hair blonde, wore pearls to breakfast and thought that a British passport still entitled you to be treated better than anyone else when coming through customs at Calais.

Mrs Caldicot didn't like her grandson very much either. Jason was sixteen, still went to bed at ten o'clock on weekdays and called his parents `Mummy' and `Daddy', apparently without any embarrassment. He collected stamps, could tell you the current bank rate and always won with ease when they played Trivial Pursuit at Christmas.

She didn't even like her son, Derek, though that wasn't anything new for even as a child she had always found him to be rather stern and humourless.

She wondered idly where all the humour had gone in her life and why no one she knew ever seemed to laugh. Her husband had never been one for laughing; he could never see the point of it. He had, she thought, probably been born pompous. He had been a qualified sanitary engineer and always took umbrage when Mrs Caldicot told people that he was in sewage. And Derek seemed physically incapable of laughter. She remembered that as a baby he didn't even laugh when you tickled him. She wondered why the ability to laugh was spread around so unevenly. Perhaps, she thought, there is only so much laughter allowed in the world and if one person has too much of it then someone else must go without. She wondered who had decided that she was to be cheated of her fair share of fun; to be sentenced to a lifetime of unrelieved solemnity.

`You can't stay here by yourself,' shouted Derek Caldicot indignantly. He was obviously repeating himself because he thought she hadn't heard him. She wished she had the nerve to tell him that nothing he ever said was worth repeating, whether anyone heard it or not. He waved a hand around. He was trying hard to remain patient. `All this has come at a very bad time for me,' he said.

`I'm sorry,' thought Mrs Caldicot, `that your father chose such an inconvenient time to die.' She looked at him. `There's Kitty to look after,' she explained. `And the chrysanthemums.' They were sitting in the kitchen and she looked out through the window at the back garden. Apart from a few square yards of lawn most of the garden was taken up with pink, blue and white chrysanthemums which had been Mr Caldicot's pride and joy. He had won prizes with his chrysanthemums.

`Damn the chrysanthemums,' said Derek. `What do they matter now? And the neighbours will feed Kitty.'

In her heart Mrs Caldicot shared her son's none too subtly expressed feelings for her late husband's chrysanthemums. She hated them. She had always hated them. `I must water your father's chrysanthemums,' Mrs Caldicot insisted. `And I don't like leaving Kitty on her own at a time like this.' She looked at the cat. `She adored your father you know,' she lied. `She always sat on his lap of an evening.' The cat, who had hated Mr Caldicot and had never sat on his lap, pricked up her ears in anticipation and expectation each time she heard her name. Mrs Caldicot, who never normally lied, held her breath and waited for a bolt of lightning to strike her. She wondered why she had lied. She pressed both hands against her lower abdomen as though trying to squeeze away the colicky pains which gripped her.

`I can't stay with you, mother,' said Derek. He always called her mother when he thought she was behaving stupidly. `I've got an important meeting in Wolverhampton first thing in the morning. Come on now; get your coat.' He shouted slightly when he spoke to her as though he thought she was a little deaf. Or maybe he hoped that she, like a foreigner, would be able to understand him better if he shouted. She looked at him and noticed that he had a lush growth of hair in his ears and in his nose. How could anyone take seriously someone who had hair growing out of their ears? She stared at him and wanted to giggle. `Why don't you just go away and leave me alone?' Mrs Caldicot thought.

She stood up, walked across the kitchen, opened a cupboard and took out a can of cat food. It was labelled `Turkey, Duck and Liver' and she looked at it for a moment thinking how odd the phrase looked. It sounded as though Liver were an animal. Or rather a bird. Would you, she wondered, have a flock of Livers? Maybe television programme makers would send teams off to the jungle in search of the missing liver bird. She could see David Attenborough burrowing through the bush. `And just in front of me,' he was whispering, `I can see the wild liver rampaging through the forest in search of the indigenous gin bush.' She opened the can and put several chunks of turkey, duck and liver onto a plate. She peered at the meat for a moment trying in vain to decide which meat was which. Then she put the plate down on the floor for the cat. When she had done that she opened the back door and went into the small glass-sided conservatory. She started to put on her shoes; an elderly, well-worn pair of black brogues.

`What are you doing?' Derek sounded irritable.

`I'm cleaning my teeth,' she thought. `What the devil do you think I'm doing?' She sighed. `I'm going to see your father,' she replied.

`What on earth for?'

`I want to make sure he really is dead,' thought Mrs Caldicot. `I just want to see him,' said Mrs Caldicot. She paused as she struggled with her laces. `The policeman said they'd want me to identify him,' she lied. That was the second lie she'd uttered and she realised that she had not even blushed. Maybe lying, like cooking, got easier the more you did it.

`I said I'd call in later this evening,' Derek reminded her. `I'll see to all that.'

Mrs Caldicot finished tying her laces, stood up, walked back into the kitchen and took her old brown tweed coat off a hook on the back of the door.

`If you're not coming home with me take your coat off, mother,' said Mr Caldicot firmly and loudly. He was almost shouting. `I can't bring you home if you go the hospital now. I've got to get ready to go to Wolverhampton.' He paused. `It's a very important meeting,' he added, as if repeating this would confirm its necessity.

`I'm not deaf you pompous oaf!' thought Mrs Caldicot. `I'll catch the bus home,' she said, quietly.

`You can't catch a bus!' exclaimed Mr Caldicot, as though his mother had threatened to fly home on a broomstick.

But that is exactly what she wanted to do and that is exactly what she did.

Her son drove her to the hospital where she confirmed that her husband would not be showing his chrysanthemums, eating his ham salad or going to watch any more cricket matches and then when, with a sigh, Derek said that he would drive her home Mrs Caldicot defiantly refused and insisted on walking round the corner to the bus stop.

`You can't catch a bus at this time of night!' said Derek, walking behind her, his voice heavy with exasperation.

`Why on earth not?' demanded Mrs Caldicot. `If they run buses I can catch one!' she thought. `If no one wanted me to catch one they wouldn't run them would they?'

`It isn't safe!' blustered Derek.

`What have I got to lose?' thought Mrs Caldicot who had just £3.17 in her purse and who realised with some slight surprise that she wasn't afraid. `I'll be all right, dear,' she said, soothingly.

When he had gone she wondered why she wasn't afraid and realised that you can only be afraid when you have something you're afraid of losing. Money. Possessions. Health. Life. She had nothing that she feared losing and so she wasn't afraid. She felt very liberated by this thought.

The bus came and she clambered up onto the step (her hip was playing up again and the colic was still terrible). She had a strange vision of being confronted by a highwayman dressed in a mask and brandishing a huge pair of pistols. `Your money or your life!' cried the highwayman. `You choose!' insisted Mrs Caldicot. `I really don't mind.' The highwayman, greatly bewildered by this retreated into the dark of the night and left her alone. She felt rather cheated and wondered if he'd come back but he didn't.

`Come on, love, I haven't got all night,' said the bus driver. `Where do you want to go to?' Mrs Caldicot told him her destination and offered him a note. `Haven't you got a pass?' he asked her. `No,' she said, never having acquired a bus pass because Mr Caldicot thought they reeked of charity, `I'll pay cash.'

When she got home she switched on the floodlight that lit up the back garden. Her husband had it installed so that he could work on his chrysanthemums in the evenings. She picked up the watering can and carefully soaked each of the plants, just as she had seen her husband do on so many summer evenings.

Then she collected a pair of strong scissors from the tiny greenhouse at the top of the garden. The flowers were all neatly tied to stakes and slowly, systematically and with great precision, she bent down and cut through the stem of each chrysanthemum with her scissors. And because they were all tied to stakes, none of the flowers fell over and so from a distance it was impossible to see that anything was wrong with them.

Even though it was cold, she stood on the terrace for a moment and allowed herself a little smile. She wanted the flowers to die slowly. She looked around and a weed growing through the cement between the crazy paving caught her eye. She bent towards it, instinctively reaching to pull it out. Mr Caldicot had never allowed weeds into the garden. Then she stopped herself and allowed her finger tips to just graze its leaves. She realised how strange it was that such a gentle and fragile thing could be so strong.

After she had gone indoors she made herself a cup of hot drinking chocolate and then went to bed without washing the cup or turning off the outside floodlight.

CHAPTER FOUR

When she woke up the next morning the first thing Mrs Caldicot did was to look out of the bedroom window to see how the chrysanthemums were. It was a beautiful sunny morning and she was rather surprised to see that most of the flowers still looked perfectly healthy. It was quite impossible to tell that they were all dying.

She shrugged, went downstairs, leaving the bed unmade for the first time in her adult life, and made herself a cup of strong black coffee that made her shudder when she took a sip. Then she found a large, unopened packet of best bacon in the deep freeze, took two large free range eggs from the fridge, opened a tin of tomatoes and made herself a huge fried breakfast. It was the first time she had ever cooked herself a fried breakfast. Her husband had never liked or approved of big breakfasts. He insisted it was bad for the digestion to eat so much so early in the day. Once, when the Caldicots had been on holiday in the Lake District, they had stayed at a boarding house where the landlady had offered them a cooked breakfast for an extra half a crown. Mrs Caldicot had wanted to try it but Mr Caldicot had looked down his nose at the suggestion and so they ate their usual toast and marmalade.

When she had finished the last slice of fried bread and drunk a second and then a third cup of strong black coffee, Mrs Caldicot got up from the table, deliberately wiped the crumbs from the corners of her mouth with the kitchen tea towel, slid the greasy frying pan and dirty plates into the sink and went back upstairs to get dressed. In deference to her late husband she chose a simple, dark grey dress which she had only worn twice before, a pair of black patent leather shoes and a black cardigan. She looked at herself in the mirror for a few moments before deciding that she looked far too much like a widow. She then took off the grey dress, the black cardigan and the black shoes and replaced them with a white and blue polka dot dress, a pair of white sandals and a white cardigan.

Half an hour later she caught the bus into town and got off at the stop just before the Oxfam shop where she sometimes helped out. She walked the few yards to the charity shop in glorious summer sunshine.

`Thelma!' cried a large, shapeless woman in a heavy, pink and grey flecked suit. `I didn't expect to see you here today.' She put her head on one side and marched towards Mrs Caldicot with her arms held out in front of her. `How are you feeling?' she asked. A cloud of cheap and rather nasty perfume preceded the large woman and almost masked a serious case of body odour.

`I'm fine,' replied Mrs Caldicot. `I'm on the rota,' she explained. `I didn't want to let you down.' She backed away a few inches but failed to avoid the shapeless woman's embrace.

`Oh you silly thing!' said Mrs Leatherhead. `It must have been a terrible shock for you,' she said. `At the cricket match wasn't it?'

Mrs Caldicot wondered how these things got round the town so quickly. She nodded.

`Would you like a cup of coffee?'

`No, thank you,' said Mrs Caldicot, who, probably as a result of her huge breakfast had a touch of indigestion. `What would you like me to do? Unpacking? Pricing? Shelf stocking?'

`Oh, I know,' whispered Mrs Leatherhead, conspiratorially. `You want to keep busy! What would you prefer? I've just got a delivery of books in if you'd like to check through those. They're in the back.' She turned to serve a tall, bony woman in an ankle length garment which had lots of fringes attached to it. She was holding a shawl which she had selected from the rack by the window.

`Fine,' said Mrs Caldicot. She quite liked sorting books and there was always the added advantage that you might find something worth reading. She never felt quite so much at ease sorting second hand clothes. She left Mrs Leatherhead and the tall bony woman haggling over the price of the shawl.

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One and a half hours later, with the books unpacked and sorted into neat piles Mrs Caldicot put the kettle on and wandered out into the shop to tell Mrs Leatherhead that a cup of coffee was on its way.

`What are your plans now?' asked Mrs Leatherhead as they dipped their ginger nut biscuits into their drinks. `Or is too soon for you to have thought of plans?'

`What do you mean?' asked Mrs Caldicot. `What sort of plans?'

`Oh, you know,' said Mrs Leatherhead, `are you going to sell the house and buy yourself a bungalow or are you going to move in with Derek?'

Mrs Caldicot frowned. `Why should I do either?'

`Oh you won't want to stay where you are,' said Mrs Leatherhead definitely. `Not in that big house.'

`But it isn't all that big,' protested Mrs Caldicot. `It's only got three bedrooms.'

`But, dear, all that garden! And the roof and so on. Oh you don't want that sort of responsibility on your own. Oh no! You wouldn't want to be in that house by yourself at night now, would you?'

Mrs Caldicot, who had slept in the house by herself when her husband had been away attending conferences on sewage, didn't quite know what to say to this. It had never occurred to her that she might have to move house. And why should the roof worry her, she wondered. Was someone going to steal it if she stayed there alone?

`Are you going to be all right for money?' asked Mrs Leatherhead. `Has he left you all right?'

`What business is that of yours?' thought Mrs Caldicot indignantly. Why, she wondered, did Mrs Leatherhead assume that just because she was bereaved she was also bereft of all dignity. `I don't know,' she said. `To be honest I haven't even thought about money.'

`Oh well you must!' insisted Mrs Leatherhead. `And you watch out for solicitors and bank people and the like. My Henry says they're all crooks.'

`I wouldn't listen to anything your Henry said if my life depended on it,' thought Mrs Caldicot, nodding her head as though in acquiescence. Henry Leatherhead always claimed that he was something `rather confidential' in the civil service but in reality Mrs Caldicot knew that he worked for the Department of Employment. He was the daftest, most insipid man she had ever met. She wondered why she had allowed herself to be surrounded by such boring, inept and unattractive people. She thought gloomily of all the evenings that she and her husband had spent having dinner with the Leatherheads. It had always followed a strict ritual. Sherry. Something traditional served with gravy. Cheap wine from the supermarket. And dull conversation about the price of fish. Their evenings together had been as structured and as predictable as a church service.

`Still,' said Mrs Leatherhead. `Whatever you do, you just take your time!' She lowered her head and popped a piece of soggy biscuit into her mouth before it could drop into the coffee beneath it. `Whatever you decide to do you don't want to be pushed into making a decision too quickly.' She winked at Mrs Caldicot. `You'll find yourself surrounded by people who want to give you advice,' she said. `You ignore them all and decide for yourself exactly when you want to move and where you want to go.'

Mrs Caldicot thanked Mrs Leatherhead, but realised that she longed not for sympathy or advice but for simple encouragement. She wondered why everyone always wanted to give advice. Why, she thought, don't they offer me sympathy and support and encouragement for what I choose to do. Whatever it is. She wondered why people were so quick to offer so many answers to her problems when it was patently clear that they had little ability to deal with the problems in their own lives. Derek's life was hardly a domestic success and the Leatherheads would not have won any prizes for enviable domesticity.

`Don't mention it,' said Mrs Leatherhead, helping herself to another ginger nut from the shrinking packet. `It's at a time like this that you really find out who your friends are. Has the doctor given you anything?'

`What do you mean?' asked Mrs Caldicot, genuinely puzzled as to why the doctor should give her anything.

`To help you sleep,' explained Mrs Leatherhead. `For your nerves. You know.'

`Oh,' said Mrs Caldicot. `No.'

`Well you just get yourself along there and have a word with him,' said Mrs Leatherhead firmly. `You can never be too careful at a time like this. My friend Gladys,' she paused, `do you know Gladys Robertson who used to be married to the butcher who had a shop in Vicarage Street behind the multi-storey car park?'

Mrs Caldicot shook her head. `No, I don't think so.'

`He always had good tripe and our Dennis loved his sausages. Well, Gladys was as right as rain one minute, and everyone thought she was coping with it all marvellously and then suddenly, whoosh, there she was in the hospital under heavy sedation suffering from deep depression.'

`Oh,' said Mrs Caldicot.

`She tried to do away with herself,' whispered Mrs Leatherhead. `There's only a few of us who know about it and I promised not to tell a soul but since you don't know her it doesn't really count, does it?'

`It depends how seriously you take a promise,' thought Mrs Caldicot. `No, I suppose not,' she agreed.

`She was on tablets for months and months and they gave her that electrical treatment where they connect your brain up to the mains and give it an electric shock to shake it back into sense, you know.'

`No, I haven't heard of that,' said Mrs Caldicot, shivering a little with distaste and hoping that her own strange compunctions weren't anything very much to worry about. She suddenly remembered the chrysanthemums and hoped that no one would regard that as a sign of madness, though she did think that perhaps she could claim it was the work of vandals if she said she'd heard a noise at night.

`I think I heard people in the garden last night,' she said suddenly.

`Good heavens!' said Mrs Leatherhead. `There you are, you see! They've got no scruples these days, burglars. They hear of a man dying and a woman in the house by herself and they're round there straight away.' She shivered noticeably and a small cloud of face powder floated through a bright beam of sunshine. `The quicker you're out of that place the better. You want to get someone round to have a look at the property for you.' She stopped and snorted. `But then, what am I saying,' she carried on, `you've got your Derek haven't you? In the business and everything.'

`I think it was probably just vandals,' said Mrs Caldicot quickly, immediately regretting the untruth. `Children I expect. In the garden.'

`At least that'll save you a few pounds on estate agency fees,' said Mrs Leatherhead. `Your Derek will be able to get it all done for you free won't he?'

`All what?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

`You know, the estate agency stuff; the boards and the advertising and the solicitors and so on.'

`I don't know. Possibly.

`There you are then,' said Mrs Leatherhead. `That's often the worst of it all. With your Derek to look after things you'll be very well placed.'

`Not the solicitors though I don't expect.' said Mrs Caldicot.

Just then a customer came over wanting to know if the hand carved wooden ashtrays would mark if you left a cigarette end burning in them and Mrs Caldicot took the opportunity to wave goodbye to Mrs Leatherhead and to slip out into the street.

When she got back home the chrysanthemums were looking decidedly glum. Petals were going brown and starting to fall off all over the garden. Mrs Caldicot stared out at them and wondered why she'd bothered. Just then the telephone rang.

`It's Victor,' said a voice she recognised at once. Victor Reynolds. Another keen gardener. Friend of her late husband and long time chrysanthemum grower. `I was very sorry to hear about George.'

`Yes,' said Mrs Caldicot. `Thank you.'

`I was just thinking,' said Victor. `Would you like me to show his chrysanthemums for him? In his name, of course.'

Mrs Caldicot stared out of the window at the drooping flowers and falling petals.

`It seemed a pity not to,' said Victor. `I thought it might be a gesture he would appreciate.'

`I'm afraid it's too late,' said Mrs Caldicot. `The vandals have got at them.'

`The vandals? What do you mean?'

`They've cut the stems,' said Mrs Caldicot. `They're all dying.'

`Oh dear me. Oh dear oh dear,' said Victor. `Oh, that's terrible.' He sounded quite distraught.

`Yes,' said Mrs Caldicot. `It's awful what they'll do, isn't it?'

`I don't know what to say,' said Victor. `I'm speechless.'

`No, you're not,' thought Mrs Caldicot. `You're wittering on and you're making far more fuss over the damned chrysanthemums than you did over George.' `Yes,' she said.

`Well, then,' said Victor. `I don't suppose there's anything to be done.'

`No.' said Mrs Caldicot. `I don't suppose so.'

`Goodbye then,' said Victor. And she heard the receiver go down and the next moment the telephone went dead. She put the receiver down and stared at the dying chrysanthemums, silently hoping that they were suffering.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mrs Caldicot looked out of the bedroom window on the second full day of her bereavement and stared at the garden. `My second day of living,' she thought. The chrysanthemums were mostly dead now. She smiled at them with quiet delight then slipped into her comfortable, candlewick dressing gown and headed for the stairs.

As she tied her dressing gown belt firmly around her waist she thought how much she hated the garment. Come to that she hated most of her clothes. In or out of the house she had invariably dressed to please her late husband. For the last thirty years of her life she hadn't ever thought about what *she* wanted to wear when she had been choosing clothes. She had automatically bought what she knew *he* would expect her to wear. Some men wanted their wives to wear clinging, feminine garments made of silk; more frilly and chilly than hard-wearing or warm. But Mr Caldicot had favoured sensible, long-lasting suits; sensible shoes and sensible nightwear. Nothing fashionable. Nothing flimsy. Nothing colourful. Nothing frivolous. He had believed that clothes should be functional, hard-wearing and inexpensive. She made a silent vow to go into the shops to buy herself something different.

The telephone began to ring and she hurried to the kitchen to pick it up. `I thought you'd gone out!' complained her son Derek. `Where were you?'

`Drunk in bed after last night's party,' thought Mrs Caldicot. She laughed out loud and then realised with horror that she had nearly said what she had thought.

`What's the matter?' asked Derek, who must have heard the laugh.

`Nothing,' said Mrs Caldicot, quickly. She couldn't remember the last time she had laughed. She felt that she was blushing. She picked up her handbag, which was still standing where she had left it on the kitchen table, opened it and took out her make-up mirror. She peeped into it. Her cheeks were bright red. These secret thoughts seemed to be coming thicker and faster than ever now that she was on her own.

`Did you hear me?' demanded Derek, crossly.

`No. Sorry. I wasn't concentrating.' said Mrs Caldicot.

`I don't know what's the matter with you,' sighed Derek. He sounded exasperated. `You've been acting very strangely.'

`You haven't seen anything yet!' thought Mrs Caldicot. `Your father's just died,' she said.

`That's what I was ringing about,' said Derek. `I've arranged the funeral for the day after tomorrow. They can't do it any sooner because there's got to be an autopsy.'

`I thought you were going to Wolverhampton,' said Mrs Caldicot.

`I am in Wolverhampton,' said Derek.

`What on earth did you want to go to Wolverhampton for?' asked Mrs Caldicot. `Why would anyone want to go to Wolverhampton?' she thought.

`I didn't have any choice in the matter,' said Derek wearily. `I told you before - I have a very important meeting with a possible client. I'm coming back tonight. Now are you sure that you're all right?'

`Is it a good meeting?' asked Mrs Caldicot. She wondered why meetings and conferences were always very important. Didn't anyone ever hold meetings and conferences that were just ordinarily important? Her late husband's numerous meetings and conferences had always been described as very important and she'd never understood how so many men in sewage could think of so many reasons for having very important conferences. What, she wondered, did they find to talk about? How did they manage to make such a simple business so complicated? Why did they need to hold week long conferences in Margate to discuss sewage?

Derek was talking. She decided she ought to concentrate. `...thank you. If you're not alright I'll get Veronica to come round and sit with you for a few hours.'

`Oh no! Not Veronica! I'll do anything if you keep Veronica away from me!' thought Mrs Caldicot. `I'm fine, thank you,' she said.

`I've arranged for a cremation not a burial. You don't object do you?'

`I don't mind whether they burn him, bury him or leave him out with the rubbish,' she thought. `No.' she said.

`When I get back I want to talk to you about selling the house,' said Derek. `It isn't a good time to sell but you can't stay there by yourself. I've made an appointment for you to see your solicitor at 2.30 this afternoon. He needs to talk to you about the will.'

`I don't want to sell the house!' said Mrs Caldicot. Then she wondered why she had said that. Maybe selling was the right thing to do. She didn't much like the house. She never had. Come to think of it she hated the house, the furniture and the chrysanthemums. Maybe she would, after all, let him persuade her to sell it. Maybe.

`Please, don't be so difficult all the time, mother,' sighed Derek. `I've got to go now. We'll talk about it when I get back. Did you hear what I said about the solicitor?'

`Yes. Two thirty this afternoon. I didn't know we had a solicitor.'

`He does a lot of work with us,' said Derek. `And he drew up Dad's will a few years ago.'

`Oh.' said Mrs Caldicot. She hadn't thought about a will. She hadn't even known that there was a will.

`I'll ring you tonight,' said Derek. `O.K.?'

`Yes. Bye then,' said Mrs Caldicot. `Oh, Derek!' she said, quickly, before he could put the phone down.

`Yes?'

`Have you got a clean vest on?'

There was a sigh. `Yes, mother.'

`And a clean handkerchief?'

Another sigh. `Yes, mother.'

`Good boy.' said Mrs Caldicot. She had to bite her cheek to stop herself from laughing out loud. `And don't forget to thank those nice people in Wolverhampton for having you before you come home,' she added, but it was too late for Derek had put his receiver down and broken the connection.

Mrs Caldicot cooked herself some breakfast, added the dirty dishes to the growing pile in the sink and got dressed. Then she headed into town to do some serious shopping.

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`What about this one, madam?' asked the sales assistant, approaching Mrs Caldicot and offering her a woollen suit in a particularly nauseating shade of camouflage green. The assistant, who looked as though she nurtured an aching longing to be in her late twenties, had heavy false eyelashes, scarlet lips and bright red finger nails. She was not in her late twenties and had not been in her late twenties for a generation or so. She wore a grey suit with a skirt that ended a good three inches above her knees and she arrived in a cloud of suffocating scent. She had a badge on her left lapel which gave her name as `Daphne' and her designation as `Senior Sales Assistant'. She had an unlikely chest which cocked a snook at gravity, and which Mrs Caldicot suspected probably relied heavily on more hidden structural engineering work than the average suspension bridge.

Mrs Caldicot looked at the woollen suit with distaste. `I'm looking for something a little less stern,' she explained. She looked down at her own olive skirt and jumper. `I don't usually dress like this,' she lied, suspecting that the assistant was trying to find her something which matched the style she was wearing. `I had to borrow these from a friend,' she lied. `All my own clothes were destroyed in a fire.' Lying was like cooking. It did get easier the more you did it.

`Perhaps madam would give me an idea of the sort of direction in which I should be looking,' said the assistant.

`Those over there look rather nice,' said Mrs Caldicot, picking out a row of scoop necked summer dresses in pastel colours. `Pink. I think I might like pink.'

The assistant, trying unsuccessfully to disguise her look of surprise, swished across to the rail and flicked through the dresses quickly; sending the hangers whizzing along the chromium plated rail with experienced ease. `These do have the zip up the back,' she warned, plucking a pale pink dress from the rail and holding it out so that Mrs Caldicot could examine it.

`I don't mind where the zip is,' said Mrs Caldicot.

`Some of our more mature customers dislike back fastening,' confided Daphne. `Arthritis and so on, you know,' she confided.

`That must be terrible,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. She toyed with the zip. `This is a little, well, functional, isn't it?' she smiled. `Do you have anything a little more frivolous?'

`Frivolous, madam?'

`Yes,' said Mrs Caldicot firmly. `Frivolous. Buttons, maybe. Lots and lots of very tiny buttons.' She took the dress and held it up against her. `And I'd like something with less sleeve and more of a plunge at the front. I'd like to show a little...'she blushed. `You know...'.

`Cleavage, madam?'

`Exactly!' said Mrs Caldicot. `Yes. That's the word. Cleavage.' She said it defiantly. `I'd like to show a little cleavage.'

`Certainly, madam!' said Daphne. The sales assistant smiled conspiratorially. `May I ask, madam, is this for a special occasion?'

`Yes,' said Mrs Caldicot, wickedly. `A funeral. My husband's funeral.'

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She wore her new dress to visit the solicitor.

`Your husband left a few small bequests but basically the bulk of his estate goes to you,' said Mr Suffolk. He was a breezy, cheerful sort of fellow who seemed to be in rather a hurry. He wore a light grey polyester suit, a white nylon shirt and a plain red polyester tie. `I must say your husband was an extraordinarily efficient and well organised man.'

Mrs Caldicot smiled politely at this compliment, although she would have preferred to describe her husband as obsessional and nit-picking. Every month he had insisted on going through the household expenses with her.

`You've spent £1.18 more on coffee this month,' he would say, pointing a podgy finger at the appropriate figures.

`That's because the supermarket prices sometimes vary,' Mrs Caldicot would reply. `Or because we've drunk more coffee this month.'

`And why did you spend 68 pence more on toilet rolls?' he would demand.

`You had diarrhoea for two days after you came back from that conference in Brighton,' she would answer.

`Normally,' continued the solicitor, `it takes a few weeks to work out the size of an estate but in your case I can tell you now that your husband has left you quite well off.'

Mrs Caldicot frowned. `Just what does `quite well off' mean?'

`It means that you won't have to worry too much about where your next meal is going to come from,' said Mr Suffolk, with a `Don't you worry your head about the figures' smile. `Your husband was a cautious man who preferred to put most of his money into the building society rather than to invest it on the stock market, and the last few years have justified his caution.'

`That's nice,' said Mrs Caldicot.

`There's certainly enough to merit professional management,' said the solicitor.

`Aha! Here it comes,' thought Mrs Caldicot.

`Our firm specialises in estate management and we would be very happy to manage your money for you.'

`I'll bet you would,' thought Mrs Caldicot. `That's very kind of you,' she said. `But I'd like to take a little time to think things over first.' She had never noticed herself being so cynical before. `If the building society did well for my husband maybe I'll just leave it there for the time being.'

`Well, the building society isn't always the best answer,' said the solicitor, rather hurriedly. `And I couldn't take responsibility for your continued financial health were you to decide to leave your estate in the building society indefinitely.'

`Nevertheless, I'd like to think about things,' said Mrs Caldicot.

`Of course,' smiled the solicitor, somehow managing to sound patronising while saying only two words.

CHAPTER SIX

Mrs Caldicot had just got out of the bath and, dressed in a new, shocking pink nightdress and a new bright pink satin dressing gown had gone down to the living room to watch television with a plate of egg and tomato sandwiches resting on one arm of her favourite armchair and a large glass of red wine perched precariously on the other when the front door bell rang. Muttering quiet curses to no one in particular Mrs Caldicot lifted Kitty from her lap and answered the door.

`Good evening, mother,' said Derek, pecking her on the cheek and walking past her into the hallway.

`Good evening, mother,' said Veronica, his wife, brushing her lips through the air close to Mrs Caldicot's cheek and following him into the hall. She wore a pleated navy blue skirt and a lime green blouse and carried a potted geranium in her hands.

Jason, their son mumbled something which could have been `Good evening, grandma.' As he reached out with pursed lips Mrs Caldicot swayed skilfully out of reach and noticed with satisfaction that his spots were redder and more pustulant than ever. He wore a pair of headphones connected to a small box which was attached to his belt, and a continuous and annoying tinny noise escaped from the headphones. She could not remember ever seeing him without this piece of equipment.

`Good evening,' said Mrs Caldicot, shutting the front door behind them. `Do come in.' Her intestines began to tighten up in anticipation. Her tummy pains, which were always bad when she saw Derek, were always far worse when she saw Veronica as well.

`We thought we'd come round and see how you're bearing up,' said Derek.

`I've brought you a geranium,' said Veronica. She held the plant out so that Mrs Caldicot could inspect it.

`So you did!' said Mrs Caldicot. `What a nice pot.' She hated geraniums almost as much as she hated chrysanthemums. She went back into the living room but did not take the offered gift from her daughter-in-law and so Veronica was left holding the plant. The three visitors followed Mrs Caldicot. Jason sat down on the sofa, pulled a book of chess problems out of his pocket and started to read.

`I was just having a bite to eat,' said Mrs Caldicot. She saw Derek and Veronica exchange glances. `I just fancied a sandwich in front of the television,' she explained unnecessarily. She had been quite looking forward to a quiet evening on her own.

`And a glass of wine, I see!' said Derek. There was more than a hint of disapproval in his voice.

`Yes,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. `And a glass of wine.'

`It's a little early to be drinking isn't it, mother?'

Mrs Caldicot looked at the clock. It was half past seven. She couldn't think of any suitable retort so she kept silent.

`And alone, too!' added Derek sternly.

`If there had been anyone else here I would have offered them a drink,' thought Mrs Caldicot. She smiled brightly. `You're here now! Would you like a drink?'

`No thank you, mother!' said Derek. `I'm driving.'

Mrs Caldicot turned to offer her daughter-in-law a drink but Veronica had put the potted plant down on the sideboard, and was looking out of the window at the back garden. `Good heavens! She exclaimed suddenly. `Derek! Just come and look at this!'

Derek obeyed and together the two of them stared out at the crop of dead chrysanthemums. Because they were all firmly tied to canes the flowers, though dead, were still standing erect.

`What on earth has happened?' asked Veronica. `They look as if they're all dead!'

`I thought you said you were going to water them!' said Derek to his mother.

`I did,' said Mrs Caldicot. `But someone cut through all the stems!'

`Oh that's terrible!' cried Veronica. Why, Mrs Caldicot wondered, did so many people care so much about a garden full of chrysanthemums. They would have died soon anyway.

`Well that settles it,' said Derek. `You can't stay here.' He opened the French doors and stepped out onto the patio.

Mrs Caldicot frowned. `Why? Because the chrysanthemums are dead?' She moved to the doorway and looked around. `But I didn't like them anyway.'

`No,' said Derek patiently. He was getting worried about his mother who seemed either to be changing personality or developing a sense of humour. He wasn't sure which, but found both possibilities equally daunting. `Not because the chrysanthemums are dead but because someone killed them.' He stressed the words `someone', `dead' and `killed' and made the demise of the chrysanthemums sound like mass murder. He bent down and examined the stems of the flowers nearest to the back door, then turned his head and looked back at her. `These have all been cut through,' he announced. `Probably with a sharp knife or a pair of scissors,' he added. Derek, who was not a fit man, stood up and rubbed the small of his back as though he'd been gardening for hours. `Have you called the police?'

Mrs Caldicot frowned. `No.'

`You should have done,' said Derek.

`But what on earth could they do?'

`Fingerprints!' said Derek. He looked around. `Footprints, possibly.' He stared sternly at a small plastic gnome which was sitting on a red and white spotted mushroom. `If only he could talk,' he said. `I bet he could tell us a thing or two.'

`He's loyal. He wouldn't talk,' thought Mrs Caldicot.

`I suspect the police have got more important things to do than worry about a few dead chrysanthemums,' she said. She had a vision of squads of policemen racing around the countryside looking for the Phantom Chrysanth Killer. `What are you looking for?' she called as Derek wandered off peering down among the chrysanthemums.

`The knife they used!' said Derek. `They may have thrown it down somewhere.'

`Oh I wouldn't have thought so,' said Mrs Caldicot, moving back indoors.

`We'll get you into a home where you'll be safe,' said Veronica who had sat herself down next to her son. She looked across at Mrs Caldicot's plate of egg and tomato sandwiches. `And they'll make sure that you eat properly.' She wagged a finger and a pair of heavy false eyelashes. `You need regular hot meals inside you!'

`Would you like one?' asked Mrs Caldicot, ignoring the advice, picking up the plate and offering her daughter-in-law a sandwich.

`Oh, no thank you,' said Veronica, holding up a hand in horror. `I'm on a diet.'

`It doesn't show,' thought Mrs Caldicot. `That's nice,' she said, smiling sweetly.

Derek came back into the living room, closed the French doors behind him, making sure that they were firmly locked. His muddy shoes left grubby footprints on the carpet. `Just make sure you check all the windows before you go to bed tonight,' he told Mrs Caldicot. `Whoever did this may come back,' he warned her gloomily.

`What would you say if I told you that the person who did this would be in my bedroom all night,' thought Mrs Caldicot. `I don't think so,' she said. `I haven't got any more chrysanthemums.' She smiled weakly and sat down. Kitty jumped onto her lap and Mrs Caldicot tickled her under the chin. `I wish I had someone to tickle me under the chin,' thought Mrs Caldicot. She stopped tickling the cat and tried it on herself. It felt rather nice.

`What on earth are you doing, mother?' asked Derek.

`I had an itch,' said Mrs Caldicot. `Probably a flea,' she smiled. `You know what cats are like.'

Veronica winced noticeably.

`I've tried to stop her climbing onto the furniture,' said Mrs Caldicot. `But it's impossible. She gets everywhere.'

Veronica pulled her skirt down to cover as much of her legs as possible and then stood up. `We must be going,' she said. `We just wanted to see that you were all right.'

She and Derek headed for the door.

`We'll pick you up in the morning for the funeral,' said Derek, whispering the final word.

`Come along, Jason, dear,' said Veronica.

`Yes, mummy,' said Jason. He carefully put a slip of paper into the page he had been reading and put the book into his pocket and stood up.

`Goodbye,' called Mrs Caldicot as her uninvited visitors trooped out through the front door.

`Goodbye, mother!' said Derek.

`Goodbye, mother!' said Veronica.

`Goodbye, grandma!' said Jason.

`Thank you for the geranium,' said Mrs Caldicot.

She went back into the living room, switched on the television, picked up an egg and tomato sandwich, took a large bite and then started to tickle herself under her chin with her free hand.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It had not, thought Mrs Caldicot, been a very impressive turn out. Her husband, who always tended to judge people by appearances, would have been mortified if he had been there to see it.

`Father would have been pleased,' claimed Derek, who had inherited his understanding of people from Mr Caldicot. `Quite a good turn out.'

`If he'd been here he would have been glad he was dead,' thought Mrs Caldicot ruefully.

The fire and brimstone stuff was over and they had returned to Derek's spacious, detached, architect-designed house for what Mrs Caldicot secretly thought of as `the essential post burn up beano'. Derek's home, which had four bedrooms, two reception rooms, a garage for two cars, a large garden and a large kitchen with built in oven, microwave and dishwasher, was conveniently situated for local schools and shops in a pleasant suburban area. Mrs Caldicot looked around at the other mourners. There weren't many of them, despite the attractions of a free lunch.

Apart from Derek (dressed in a black morning suit and his Estate Agents Association tie), Veronica (dressed in a black chiffon dress and still carrying a black parasol hooked over her arm) and Jason (wearing an ill-fitting electric blue suit, the inescapable headphones and two tubes of acne cream and sitting hunched over an electronic pocket chess set) there were just five other mourners; Mr and Mrs Leatherhead; two men from the Sewage Works who Mrs Caldicot vaguely recognised (she would have known where they were from even if she had not recognised them for they both brought with them the curiously sweet smell that her late husband had brought home with him every evening for thirty years) and a man whose name she had forgotten but who had introduced himself as representing the Chrysanthemum Society and who had brought with him a sturdy looking wreath made entirely out of chrysanthemums.

However many times you added them up it could not, she thought, be described as a `good turnout'. She had worried for several minutes over the fact that Derek was wearing a morning suit and had eventually come to the conclusion that he had hired it in error, assuming that the ensemble was a `mourning suit'. It was an error that delighted her in some strange way, though the delight was constrained by the fact that she did not feel able to share this discovery with any of the other guests.

Now that the funeral itself was over she felt glad that she hadn't put on her new pink dress but had instead chosen to wear a dark grey tweed suit that she had bought and worn for her own mother's funeral some years earlier. Not even Mr Caldicot, deprived of a proper mourning, deserved that much humiliation.

Mrs Caldicot, suddenly aware that someone standing beside her had spoken to her, turned and found Veronica hovering by her elbow. `I beg your pardon?'

`I said would you like another sausage roll?'

Veronica, who had now added a quilted oven glove in blue and green to her funereal ensemble, was holding a glass plate upon which half a dozen sausage rolls were reclining on a white paper napkin. The paper napkin had small green holly leaves and tiny red berries printed in a neat pattern around its edge. `Be careful!' she warned. `They're hot!' She had lipstick on her teeth and flakes of pastry at the corner of her mouth showed that she had at least had the guts to eat her own produce.

`Thank you, no,' said Mrs Caldicot, `I've had one already.' She smiled and held up a hand like a policeman on traffic duty. `I'd like to live long enough to enjoy some of the money I've been left,' she thought. Veronica was not a woman to whom cooking came easily, and Mrs Caldicot knew from past experience that if there was a word which most accurately summed up the consequences of Veronica's culinary skills it was probably `indigestion'. Most of the remaining sausage rolls were so black that Mrs Caldicot couldn't help thinking that they were exceptionally suitable for a post-crematorium feast.

Mrs Caldicot hadn't wanted a reception after the cremation but Derek had insisted that you couldn't expect people to turn out to a funeral unless you gave them something to eat and drink afterwards. Mrs Caldicot wondered if Derek might not have been the first person to coin the concept that there is no such thing as a free mourner.

`I think you're being very brave,' said Veronica, resting her free hand on Mrs Caldicot's forearm. `Very brave, indeed.'

`Thank you,' said Mrs Caldicot gracefully.

`Derek and I have found a lovely home for you,' smiled Veronica. `You'll be very happy there.'

Mrs Caldicot was rather taken aback at this. She had not expected her son to have moved quite so speedily. She winced as the pains in her intestine suddenly grew stronger.

`We'll take you there when everyone's gone,' promised Veronica. `Just to have a look around.' She patted Mrs Caldicot on the arm. `They've got fitted carpets, colour television and running water in all the rooms,' she whispered, just before she drifted away to offer her incinerated sausage rolls to the two sewage workers.

Mrs Caldicot felt very glum. She didn't feel old enough to be put into a home, even if the floors were carpeted. The death of her husband had left her aware that she had wasted most of her life on doing the laundry for a man whose main ambition had been to make sure that he got an annual parking space at the Mettleham Cricket Ground. `I wouldn't have minded being behind a man who stood for something,' she thought. Years of frustration had bubbled to the surface and, released at last by Mr Caldicot's unexpected demise, were now threatening to soar out of control. She sat gloomily in a corner contemplating a future spent in a carpeted ante-room to death, waiting for her allotted place on the conveyor belt in the crematorium.

`They're all going now, mother,' murmured Derek a little while later.

Mrs Caldicot looked up and realised how much she hated being called `mother' and wondered why a few brief moments of clumsy and unsatisfying coupling, followed nine months later by several hours of painful and unrewarding parturition had been allowed to dominate her life ever afterwards. Mr and Mrs Leatherhead, the man from the Chrysanthemum Society and the two sewage engineers were all crowding into the doorway on the other side of the room and waving diffident goodbyes. The two sewage engineers, she noticed, both carried something wrapped in white paper napkins. Mrs Caldicot raised a hand and waved to them as they filed out of the living room and headed back towards reality.

`What were the two sewage engineers carrying?' she asked Veronica when they had all gone.

`I gave them a couple of spare sausage rolls each,' explained Veronica with a proud look on her face. `They liked them so much.'

`Come on now, mother,' said Derek, `shall we take you round to see your new home?'

***

According to the brochure which Veronica gave Mrs Caldicot to read in the car `The Twilight Years Rest Home stood in three-quarters of an acre of gently rolling parkland' and provided `a combination of the traditional and the modern'. An artist's colourful impression of one of the bedrooms showed magnificent antique furniture and a discreetly positioned electrocardiogram monitor.

What the brochure didn't explain, and what no one had troubled to tell the artist, was that the word `traditional' referred to the medical equipment and the word `modern' referred to the furniture. The proprietors of The Twilight Years Rest Home had also overlooked the fact that when you tarmacadam a large area for a car park there isn't much left out of three-quarters of an acre of rolling parkland.

The proprietor, Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor, was busy serving lunch when Derek, Veronica, Jason and Mrs Caldicot trooped up to the front door to inspect the home, and this meant that the normally pungent olfactory consequence of incontinence had been temporarily overwhelmed by the slightly less offensive smell of cooked cabbage.

`Yes?' snapped a dapper, little fellow wearing a light brown toupee, responding to Derek's fourth and most prolonged use of the doorbell. `It's lunchtime. We don't allow visitors at lunchtime.'

`The name's Caldicot,' explained Derek quickly but diffidently. `I've brought my mother to have a look around...'

`What a nice smell of cooking!' said Veronica. `It's cabbage isn't it?'

`Fuller-Hawksmoor,' said the small man, introducing himself, replacing his scowl with a smile and opening the front door wide so that Derek, Veronica, Jason and Mrs Caldicot could enter. He nodded to each Caldicot as they passed over the threshold, and only Mrs Caldicot noticed him check his toupee in the gilt-framed mirror on the other side of the halfway. He wore a dark suit with a grey cardigan underneath it and had, thought Mrs Caldicot, an unpleasant, rather arrogant air about him. She instinctively disliked him.

`Do you like cabbage?' he asked Veronica as she passed him.

`Oh, it's my absolute favourite!' she enthused. `It's such a nutritious vegetable.'

`Especially when it's over cooked,' thought Mrs Caldicot.

`I'm afraid we're serving luncheon at the moment,' apologised Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor quite unnecessarily. He turned to Mrs Caldicot. `We pride ourselves on our high culinary standards,' he told her confidentially. `Today our residents are being served with Argentinean beef substitute croquettes, pommes frites and parsnips with a choice of sea salt or black pepper topping and the green vegetable of the day, of course.'

`That's the cabbage,' suggested Mrs Caldicot.

`Absolutely!' agreed Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor. `We like to give our residents plenty of cabbage. It's so rich in iron and other essential minerals.'

`Not when your cook has finished with it,' thought Mrs Caldicot. `How nice,' she said, wondering why her son hated her so much that he wanted to dump her with Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor.

`Would you like to see one of the bedrooms?' Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor asked.

`That would be nice, wouldn't it, mother?' said Derek.

`Lovely,' said Mrs Caldicot.

She moved a few inches closer to her son. `Is this a hospital?' she asked him.

`Of course it isn't!' he whispered back. `It's a rest home. More of a hotel really.'

Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor led the way upstairs and as she followed behind him and the rest of her family, Mrs Caldicot caught a glimpse, through a half open doorway, of the dining room. A dozen or more residents were sitting on green, wipe clean plastic chairs which were arranged around a few matching green formica-topped, metal-legged tables. There were no tablecloths, and the subdued sounds of knives and forks on plates suggested that the cutlery was made of plastic. On the other side of the hallway Mrs Caldicot had a glimpse of a sitting room. Once again the chairs were covered in plastic, but this time the plastic was red rather than green.

`We have a wonderful atmosphere here,' called Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor over his shoulder. `Every Christmas we have a party for all the residents. Last year we had a magician and the year before we had a real clown who used to be in the circus.'

`I'm glad the clown was real,' thought Mrs Caldicot facetiously. `I hate fake clowns.'

`How many bedrooms do you have?' asked Derek.

`Seven,' answered Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor. `Four trebles and three doubles.'

`You don't have any singles?' asked Derek.

`We like to encourage our residents to think of this as their home,' said Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor. `Sharing a room with another resident helps to cement that feeling.' He stopped outside a white painted door upon which there was a small plastic plaque describing the area on the other side of the door as The Windsor Suite.

`We have a vacancy in here,' said Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor, standing aside to let the Caldicot inspection party through. There were three single divan beds in the room, which also contained a small television set on a metal trolley, two wardrobes and a sink. The floor was covered with material which an imaginative and forceful carpet salesman would have probably described as `serviceable'. One of the beds was occupied by an elderly, grey-haired, grey-faced woman who seemed to be in some distress. When she saw Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor she wearily raised a hand from the bed. `Have you brought my bedpan?' she asked timidly.

`In a moment, Miss Nightingale,' said Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor, rather crossly. `Nurse Peters will bring you a bedpan the moment she has finished serving the luncheons.' He turned to Derek with an ingratiating smile on his face. `Some of the older residents do become a little self-centred from time to time,' he said apologetically. `We find we have to be firm to be kind.'

`How many nurses do you have?' asked Veronica.

`Five,' said Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor. `All part time, but fully trained auxiliaries, of course. Two of them have certificates in first aid and Miss Pilton has just completed a local technical college course in Hairdressing and Practical Beauty with distinction.'

`That's very impressive!' said Veronica. Mrs Caldicot stared at her in disbelief.

`We pride ourselves on running a home that has all the advantages of a hotel and a fully equipped hospital,' said Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor. `Employing fully trained staff is a vital way of implementing that policy.'

Jason switched on the television set and an assortment of diagonal black and white lines flickered up and down the screen.

`Jason!' hissed Veronica. `Switch it off!'

Jason obediently switched the television set off.

`I believe the set in this suite does have some minor fault at the moment,' explained Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor, apologetically, `but there is, of course, a fully operational set of audiovisual equipment in the Duke of Devonshire Leisure and Recreational Area.'

`Do you have a video recorder?' asked Derek.

`Indeed, we do!' said Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor with pride. `I can't show it to you at the moment as it is currently receiving servicing attention, but our engineers assure us that it will back in the Recreational Area in a very short space of time.'

`Splendid,' said Derek. `There you are, mother!' he said. `You'll be able to rent video films and show them to your friends.'

``The Texas Chain Saw Massacre' might be a good starting point,' thought Mrs Caldicot, who had never rented a video film in her life. `What a lovely thought,' she said.

Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor led the way back downstairs.

`Do you have any other questions?' he asked them.

`No, I don't think so, thank you!' said Derek. `We've been very impressed, haven't we?' He looked around him as he spoke.

`Very impressed,' agreed Veronica.

`I'll give you a telephone call within the next 24 hours to let you know when my mother will be ready to move in,' said Derek.

`Wonderful!' said Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor, stopping himself from rubbing his hands together just in time. He looked at Mrs Caldicot and smiled. `We look forward to welcoming you as one of the family.'

`If your family is anything like mine that will be a real joy,' thought Mrs Caldicot. `I don't want to hold you up,' she said. `I'm sure you'll want to rush off and arrange for that poor lady upstairs to get her bed pan.'

`Exactly!' said Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor. `You're very kind.' He leant towards Derek. `It's always a privilege to have a member of such a significant local family in our establishment,' he murmured.

And with that the Caldicots trooped out through the hall, down the long stone staircase at the front of the house and back out into the real world.

`I just know you're going to be so happy there,' said Derek, puffed up with Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor's flattery, as they drove out through the grandiose iron gates which marked the entrance to the rest home and headed back to the house that Mrs Caldicot had called home for most of her life. `I don't mind admitting that I think we got rather special treatment there.' He took a hand off the steering wheel and patted his hair. `I rather suspect that he knows who I am,' he murmured.

Mrs Caldicot, enveloped in what she feared might be the beginnings of a deep depression, did not reply.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Mrs Caldicot sat staring glumly out of the living room window. Outside in the garden Derek was struggling to collect together the short canes which had previously supported the now very dead chrysanthemums. `These are very expensive to buy,' he'd told Mrs Caldicot. `I'll bundle them up and put them in the potting shed.' It had been overcast and cloudy when Derek had started. Now it was raining heavily and Derek had wrapped an old coat around his shoulders. Mrs Caldicot assumed that he had found the old coat in the potting shed for she did not recognise it. Each cane was tied in two places to the flower it had supported and Derek, who didn't realise that the short pieces of orange plastic baler twine which Mr Caldicot had used to tie up his plants were designed to be untied and used again, was struggling to cut through the ties with his tiny pocket knife. Dead flowers littered the garden where, bereft of their supporting stakes, they had fallen to the ground. On the sofa opposite Mrs Caldicot her grandson Jason, absent from school for some unexplained reason, was listening to his usual tinny noise and studying a book about nuclear physics which he seemed to be enjoying. In the hallway Veronica, who had gone to answer the door, was talking to someone whose voice Mrs Caldicot did not immediately recognise.

`Look who's come to see you!' cried Veronica, feigning surprise without real effort or conviction. `It's the doctor!' she announced, as though a travelling physician had for some reason arrived entirely unexpectedly and without invitation. Veronica had dressed for this occasion in a maroon skirt and yellow jumper, bravely ignoring the fact that neither of these colours sat comfortably with her hair which seemed a slightly lighter shade of blonde than usual. She wore her best imitation pearls, had complicated looking marcasite earrings dangling from her earlobes and tottered on shoes which had slightly higher heels than were comfortable.

The doctor, apparently unembarrassed by the mild deceit of Veronica's introduction, strode into the room with his shiny, black leather bag in one hand and a prescription pad at the ready in the other. `Good morning!' he cried with false bonhomie. `I was passing and so I thought I'd pop in and see how we were doing!' The lie slipped from lips with such self-assurance and practised ease that Mrs Caldicot wondered if he even knew that it was a lie. She found herself wondering if doctors were taught how to lie at medical school, or if medical schools deliberately selected students who were good at telling fibs. He put his bag down on the floor and stared down at her.

`You seem to be doing all right,' thought Mrs Caldicot in response to the doctor's introductory comment. `Nice suit. Expensive tie. And those shoes weren't cheap.' She stared at the doctor. Although she felt sure that she didn't really know him she nevertheless thought that she vaguely recognised him, and she tried hard to remember when and where she had seen him last.

`Your daughter-in-law tells me that you've been a bit down in the dumps since your husband passed away,' said the doctor, abandoning without embarrassment the fiction of his accidental arrival. `Not surprising, of course,' he added, exhibiting a previously unexposed strain of understanding.

Mrs Caldicot wondered why even doctors couldn't bring themselves to talk directly about death, and then she suddenly remembered where she had seen him before. He had been on the local television station taking part in a discussion programme about the psychological problems created by bereavement and the failure of modern society to take these problems seriously.

`She's been behaving very strangely,' Veronica whispered to the doctor, as though she did not expect Mrs Caldicot to be able to hear her. `We've found her a really lovely home to move into - The Twilight Years Rest Home it's called - but she says she doesn't want to go!'

The doctor, listening to Veronica, nodded and grunted in Mrs Caldicot's direction, looking at her critically and suspiciously.

`She can't stay here!' insisted Veronica, still speaking in a perfectly audible whisper. `Vandals!' she explained. `They've already been round here once.' She related in exaggerated and much rehearsed detail the saga of the chrysanthemums. By now the vandals responsible for this act of premeditated violence had arrived on motorcycles, had brandished machetes and had threatened Mrs Caldicot with a fate worse than death.

`Why don't you want to go to this nice home your relatives have found for you?' asked the doctor, as though Mrs Caldicot's had chosen to turn down a gift of a million pounds, a villa in the South of France and a lifetimes supply of champagne.

Mrs Caldicot stared at him and wondered how anyone so unintelligent and unperceptive could have attained a position of such responsibility. `How would you like it,' she thought, `if your relatives turned up one day and insisted that you had to sell up your home and move into a Salvation Army hostel?' She thought this but said nothing.

`I know Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor of The Twilight Years,' said the doctor. `He's a splendid fellow. Heart in absolutely the right place.'

`The right place for his heart would be someone else's body,' thought Mrs Caldicot.

`They'll provide all your meals and look after your laundry,' continued the doctor. `They'll take complete care of you, and you won't have to worry about being a burden on your relatives.'

`Why,' wondered Mrs Caldicot, `do people assume that I am suddenly incapable of looking after myself? Up until a few days ago I looked after myself and my husband. I did all my own shopping, cooking, cleaning and laundry. Now, suddenly I need to be put into a home.' She did not say any of this.

`That's another thing,' murmured Veronica, as though by speaking quietly she could ensure that she would not be overhead by her mother-in-law, `most of the time when you talk to her she doesn't say anything. You can tell she's heard you and you know she's thinking, but she doesn't say anything.' Veronica paused and pursed her lips as though she had vinegar in her mouth. `It's very disconcerting.'

Mrs Caldicot, who had for years chosen to keep her thoughts to herself and who had put up with the inane and pointless blathering of those around her, listened to this criticism resignedly. She kept silent not because she couldn't think of anything to say, but because she couldn't see the point in saying what she'd thought. She had long ago realised that her husband and her daughter-in-law had the combined intelligence of a potato peeler, and rather than waste her time on pointless conversations she preferred to remain silent. Over the years she had got quite good at it. She could hear what people were saying to her, of course. And she formulated replies in her own mind. Replies which were unconstrained by social niceties and were, therefore, simple and honest. But whatever the temptation or provocation she had rarely opened her mouth apart from to communicate specific information. She was honest to herself but not necessarily to others.

The doctor, unworried by Mrs Caldicot's silence, which he mistook for a mixture of deference and depression, nodded sagely. `I can give you a little something to help you over these difficult days,' he said, speaking to Mrs Caldicot with what she supposed was his sympathetic look. He took out his pen, a cheap, white plastic instrument with the name of a pharmaceutical product emblazoned on the side in bold blue lettering, and started to write a prescription in one slick, well-practised movement. As he did so Mrs Caldicot found herself wondering if doctors had competitions to see which of them could draw a pen and write a prescription the fastest.

The doctor finished the prescription writing, put his pen away and handed the completed form to Veronica. `Just one tablet three times a day,' he murmured, speaking to Veronica as though unwilling to entrust Mrs Caldicot with these complicated and important instructions. `They'll help her behave a little more rationally.'

`I'll see that she takes them, doctor,' promised Veronica, accepting the prescription as though it were an award. Mrs Caldicot rather thought that her daughter-in-law might have curtsied had the doctor not thwarted this by picking up his unopened bag and heading speedily towards the door.

Mrs Caldicot turned back to look through the living room window and was glad she did so for the rain was now coming down more heavily than ever. She saw Derek, who was clearly soaked, slip and drop the bundle of canes he was holding, falling face down into the mud. It was, thought Mrs Caldicot, the most graceful thing he had ever done.

For the first time in many months Mrs Caldicot laughed out loud. Although the laugh did not last long, the incident cheered her up for a moment, and she could not help thinking how therapeutic a moment of laughter can be.

She realised with some sadness that it was the first time that her son had ever made her laugh, but underneath it she felt a sadness and despair. What she really wanted, she decided, was time to think and time to come to terms with what had happened, time to re-plan her life and time to think about the future.

But people seemed keen only to offer her advice; time was the one thing no one wanted to allow her.

CHAPTER NINE

Mrs Caldicot sat in the back of Derek's motor car and stared at the back of Veronica's neck trying to decide whether or not to be sick.

The tablets which the doctor had prescribed for her, and which Veronica and Derek had made sure that she had taken, had a number of unpleasant physical side effects among which indigestion, headaches, dizziness and nausea were most prominent. They had also made her feel extremely drowsy, and everything that had happened to her since she had started to take them had taken place in a thick mist which had slowed both her perceptions and her actions. Despite all these side effects the tablets had not affected Mrs Caldicot's colicky pains which remained as strong, as persistent and as unpredictable as ever.

The car stopped with a shudder and Mrs Caldicot, looking out through the rear window with dull eyes, recognised the front steps but could not remember precisely why.

`Come on, mother!' said Derek cheerily. He held open the car door and offered Mrs Caldicot his hand. Cautiously, hesitantly, Mrs Caldicot moved her legs and swung them out of the car. They felt as though they were separated in some way from the rest of her body and she watched them move with some surprise and a little relief. She felt overcome by physical tiredness, though she dimly realised, with some relief, that the intense almost suffocating feeling of dizziness which she had experienced a few moments earlier had subsided a little.

It seemed to take her an age to walk from the car to the bottom of the stone steps and another lifetime to climb them. By the time she, Derek, Veronica and Jason stood together outside the front door of The Twilight Years Rest Home Mrs Caldicot had become so depressed by her lack of strength and energy that she felt tears rolling down her cheeks. Through the sadness and the weakness and the mist in her mind she vowed to herself that she would take no more of the pills she had been given. Derek, seeing the tears streaming down his mother's cheeks turned away in embarrassment assuming, quite wrongly, that the tears were inspired either by apprehension or regret.

The rest of that day passed by Mrs Caldicot in a blur. It was almost as though her body had been taken over by someone else, and she was standing to one side watching as an only partly interested spectator.

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Much, much later, she awoke to find herself lying flat on her back in bed. She was aware that she could hear someone else in the room but she kept her eyes closed and lay still and silent, trying to get her bearings.

`Come on!' she heard someone say. `Time you were up! Breakfast in fifteen minutes.'

She opened her eyes. A large, shapeless woman in a white overall was standing by the side of her bed.

`Take this!' said the woman in the white overall, thrusting a capsule in Mrs Caldicot's direction.

Mrs Caldicot stared at it for a moment without moving.

`Open your mouth!' instructed the woman in the white overall.

Mrs Caldicot did as she was told and the woman in the white overall popped the capsule into her mouth before moving on to the next bed.

Carefully making sure that she did not swallow the capsule Mrs Caldicot watched the woman give something to each of the two other residents in the room, then open the door and leave. Only then did she spit the capsule into her hand, ease her stiff body out of bed, walk slowly across the room to the sink and wash the capsule away down the plughole.

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It took most of the day for the effects of the previous day's drugs to wear off, and by dinner that evening Mrs Caldicot was beginning to feel almost human again. She still had a mild headache, she still felt slightly nauseated and she still felt a little sleepy, but the worst of the thick mist had dispersed.

It had not, however, taken Mrs Caldicot that long to realise that The Twilight Years Rest Home was a considerably different place when seen through the eyes of a resident compared to when it was viewed through the eyes of a visitor.

Most noticeable was the enormous difference in the behaviour of the proprietor, Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor.

When Mrs Caldicot had been a prospective resident, accompanied by her family, Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor had attempted to give the impression of being a kindly, humane, fairly patient sort of fellow. But when Mrs Caldicot had become a resident Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor had become a very different character; all pretence at a generous, sensitive nature abandoned.

She spent the next morning sitting in the lounge. She did not know what she ate for lunch. Apart from half a plateful of pale and watery cabbage she found it impossible to identify the constituents of her meal.

In the afternoon she returned to the lounge where she sat in an uncomfortable communal silence; a silence broken only by the loud breathing of several residents who had temporarily escaped from drug-induced consciousness to drug-induced unconsciousness without apparently attracting any concern from Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor and his highly-trained staff.

And in the evening she returned to the dining room only to be repelled by an unrequested reprise of lunchtime's dominant and malodorous vegetable.

Feeling her stomach churning and her appetite gone Mrs Caldicot turned to leave the dining room and found herself being called back by Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor.

`Where are you going, mother?' called Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor, who used this term of reference when addressing all his female residents (strangely and unevenly he referred to the men as `dad').

For a moment Mrs Caldicot, who was not sure that Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor was addressing her, failed to respond. She quite rightly assumed that even if he was talking to her he was using this familial form of address solely because he could not be bothered to remember her name; and her dignity, although it had been threatened, savaged and beaten had not yet been dissembled.

Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor repeated himself, speaking if anything a little louder than before. He spoke to his residents in the same way that Veronica Caldicot would speak to a foreigner: assuming that all misunderstandings and communication failures could be remedied simply by turning up the volume.

Mrs Caldicot turned and stared at him coldly. For years and years she had been put upon, talked down to, bullied and pushed around. She had spent her life doing what other people wanted her to do, and saying what she felt other people expected her to say. She suddenly felt angry and indignant and realised that she had nothing to lose.

Later, she wondered if the remnants of the drugs had influenced her at that moment; covering up her overdeveloped sense of social obedience and releasing the tiger within her which had lain dormant for so many years.

`Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor,' she thought and said, `I don't want to eat your cabbage. Moreover, to the best of my knowledge I am not your mother and I would, therefore, be grateful if you would stop calling me `mother'.' She paused briefly to allow her words to sink in. `My friends call me Thelma but you can call me Mrs Caldicot.'

She thought and said!

She said!

For a brief moment Mrs Caldicot was not even sure that she had said what she had thought. She was so accustomed to thinking things but not saying things that for an instant she did not realise that she had actually shared her private thoughts with the obnoxious Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor. For years she had been inhibited, frustrated and thwarted by a husband who had filled her life like stale, stuffy air fills a room the morning after a party. Even after he had gone, her husband's influence had clung to her like a pall of cigarette smoke. She waited for her colicky abdominal pains to begin.

Then, the moment the look on Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor's face confirmed that she had indeed said what she had thought, Mrs Caldicot felt herself blushing deeply. Never before had she defended herself with such certainty. Never before had her spirit and her body united in such a single minded display of solidarity. Her heart beat faster and faster until she feared that it would burst from her chest. She felt the tiny hairs on the back of her neck stand up. Her palms felt damp and clammy. She had always kept her thoughts to herself; every emotion she felt, every instinct for self defence, had always been overshadowed by an overpowering sense of obedience, an unwillingness to disappoint or upset those around her and a matching desire to please. She made a vow not to waste any more of her life on mealy mouthed compromises and hypocrisy, on social courtesy and dishonest politesse.

Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor stared at her for several moments, clearly unaccustomed to being spoken to in such a manner and just as clearly quite uncertain about what to say in response. He opened his mouth for an instant, as though about to quell this rebellious mischief maker with a neatly crafted barb. But although his mouth was open no sound came from it. Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor was, quite literally, lost for words.

And then, to both Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor's and Mrs Caldicot's surprise, the other residents, at least all of the ones who had overheard this very one-sided exchange, burst into a spontaneous round of applause. It was not, it is true, the sort of applause that you are likely to hear at Lord's Cricket Ground on a balmy summer's afternoon when a batsman has scored a spectacular century. But then the audience was severely disadvantaged, both in terms of numbers and physical ability. It takes two healthy arms and two healthy hands, preferably with the requisite number of fingers, to produce a decent burst of applause, and the residents of The Twilight Years Rest Home were almost unanimously deprived of these essential physical constituents. Still, they did their best with their arthritic fingers, wrists and elbows, and those enthusiasts who were unable to applaud in the usual way banged their walking sticks on the floor or scratched their walking frames backwards and forwards. They had been mistreated and deprived of their dignity by Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor, and Mrs Caldicot's moment of rebellion had brought them together in a glorious spirit of revolution.

Normally, at precious moments like this, there is a temptation to spoil the perfection; to try to add another layer to the card house. But Mrs Caldicot, as though naturally aware that another word from her would have turned the put-down into a mere conversational gambit, resisted the temptation to say anything else. Instead she turned and, head held high, headed for the stairs and the relative seclusion, privacy and safety of her one third of The Windsor Suite.

She sat in her room and thought of all the times she had said (or thought) `I wish I had done that' or `If only...' and then she thought of all the times she had said `I wish I hadn't done that' or `I wish I hadn't said that' and she realised that the regrets from the former far outweighed the regrets from the latter.

She also realised, with some surprise, that she had suffered no pains in her abdomen. Her colic seemed to have been banished by her honesty. To her surprise and delight it did not return.

CHAPTER TEN

Mrs Caldicot, who had become something of a heroine to the residents of The Twilight Years Rest Home (but a dangerous anarchist to the proprietor), quickly found that she had now burnt her boats, destroyed her bridges and cut off her retreat. She had made her bed and now she had to lie on it (or, more commonly, at least during the daytime hours, sit on it).

`I suppose you think you're clever,' hissed Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor, bursting into The Windsor Suite a few minutes after Mrs Caldicot's memorable defiance and looking for all the world like a stage villain in a children's pantomime as he glowered at her.

`It's all relative,' thought and said Mrs Caldicot, now freed of her reluctance to speak, `Compared to Einstein I'm not clever.' She shrugged. `But...'.

`Don't you try to get the better of me!' threatened Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor, waving a podgy finger. `If you do you'll soon find out who's the boss around here.'

Mrs Caldicot smiled at him, raised an eyebrow and turned away. The message was clear. Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor left.

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Mrs Caldicot pounced on Derek and Veronica when they arrived to see her that first evening. (Jason had come with them but, thought Mrs Caldicot, only in the sort of way that a bad odour will follow its human source).

`Where's Kitty?' Mrs Caldicot demanded. `And what have you done to my house? What about all my furniture? My clothes? And everything else?'

`Now don't you worry about a thing, mother,' said Derek, closing his eyes in that way that people do when they are embarrassed and don't want to look at the person they are talking to. He held up what he thought was a calming hand. `Everything,' he said with a glorious overstatement, `is under control. I've put the house on the market and we've organised an auction for your furniture.'

Mrs Caldicot knew that if Derek was in charge, `control' was not a word to be used without a considerable number of qualifications, and so she was not to be easily distracted from her investigation. `Who gave you permission to sell my house?' she wanted to ask. `Who said you could sell my furniture?'

`Where is Kitty?' she demanded firmly, putting first things first.

`Kitty is fine,' said Veronica, who was wearing a black and yellow houndstooth check suit, a pink man-made fibre scarf and a pillar box red hat. `She's in a lovely home too.'

`Where?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

`The Sleepy Pussy Cattery,' replied Veronica. `It's very expensive so it must be good.' She twisted her mouth as she said this, giving the clear impression that she considered the price that was being paid for Kitty's welfare to be absurdly wasteful and Mrs Caldicot knew in her heart that if Veronica was left in charge she would soon find an excuse to take Kitty on a one way trip to see the veterinary surgeon.

`And that,' said Mrs Caldicot rejoicing in her new found freedom of expression and wondering why she had spent so many years thinking things and not saying them, `just about sums you up, Veronica!' Mrs Caldicot had never liked Veronica much and found her ready willingness to equate price with quality a suitable indictment of her intelligence.

`I want Kitty here, with me,' she said, firmly.

Veronica, deflated by this unexpected firmness, stepped backwards a pace and opened her mouth as though she had entered a fly catching contest. Mrs Caldicot thought that her daughter- in-law's response reminded her very much of that of Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor.

`Oh good heavens, mother!' said Derek. `You can't have a cat living with you in a hospital.'

`This isn't a hospital!' Mrs Caldicot pointed out. `When you first brought me here you told me quite specifically that it wasn't a hospital. What's more it doesn't smell like a hospital and it isn't run like a hospital.'

`I don't think it would be fair to the other patients to bring a cat here,' said Veronica, who had made a temporary recovery and was now speaking in what she clearly thought was a whisper, though as a whisper it would have been more at home on a stage than in a boudoir.

`Oh do shut up, Veronica!' said Mrs Caldicot, surprising herself yet again.

`I'll see what Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor has to say,' sighed Derek, heading for the door.

`If I stay here I'm having Kitty here to live with me,' said Mrs Caldicot. `She can have a litter tray in our room and she won't be any bother to anyone else.'

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After that bold and successful stance Mrs Caldicot decided to spend her time in her room getting to know her companions a little better.

The two other beds in The Windsor Suite were occupied by Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough. Miss Nightingale was the elderly, bed bound lady needing a bedpan whom Mrs Caldicot had seen on her first visit. Mrs Peterborough was an unremittingly talkative woman; a physically much more robust individual than Miss Nightingale who, as the result of some mysterious, cortical disorder had acquired a personality like a piece of blotting paper.

Mrs Caldicot had originally assumed that Miss Nightingale spent her days as well as her nights in bed because of some physical disability, but this was not the case. Miss Nightingale, was, like so many elderly people (and Miss Nightingale, having enjoyed her eightieth birthday some months previously was not shy about describing herself as elderly) a mild, modest and innocent victim of a disease which used to be known as senile dementia but which is now more usually classified (with the appropriate enhancement of status) as Alzheimer's Disease.

The two main consequences of Miss Nightingale's disability were confusion and memory loss, though the problems created by these symptoms were exacerbated enormously by their unpredictability. One moment Miss Nightingale would talk cogently and wittily about the decline in the status and morals of the British Royal Family while the next she would slip back into some childhood drama and lose all contact with reality; it was as though she were forever playing some large as life game of snakes and ladders, clambering up ladders to momentary sanity and then sliding down snakes into temporary insanity while fate threw the dice for her.

These unpredictable mental forays worried the establishment at The Twilight Years Rest Home and, arguing that they regarded Miss Nightingale's mental condition as potentially disturbing for the other residents Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor and his staff kept her constantly sedated and effectively imprisoned with a confusion of powerful tranquillisers and sedatives.

Suspecting that Miss Nightingale's physical weakness was probably a consequence rather than a cause of the long hours she spent in bed, and knowing from her own experience that the tranquillising tablets she had been given had weakened her spirit, muddled her mind and muddied her capacity for clear thinking, Mrs Caldicot decided to try to resuscitate her elderly roommate by helping her to stop taking her medication.

Mrs Caldicot had stopped taking her pills the day she had entered the rest home, and although the nursing auxiliaries still gave her pills, which she took from them with a suitably blank smile, she regularly washed them down the plug hole of the bedroom wash basin.

She now set about the task of helping Miss Nightingale to escape from her pharmacological imprisonment. To do this was easier than she had expected. She ingratiated herself with the auxiliaries who were eager to hand over one of their tedious chores and to escape to their rest-room a few minutes earlier than planned to enjoy an illicit cigarette and a gossip about the comings and doings of the latest television celebrities. The auxiliaries were to start with suspicious of Mrs Caldicot after her outburst outside the dining room, but they were at the same time secretly pleased that their tyrannical employer had been put in his place and they did not mind making friends with his conqueror. Within three days of arriving at the rest home Mrs Caldicot had taken on the responsibility for giving Miss Nightingale all her pills. This meant that several times a day a colourful mixture of tablets and capsules were washed down the wash basin plug hole.

Mrs Caldicot found that the hardest part of her enterprise was persuading Miss Nightingale to pretend that she was still under the influence of her pills.

As the mist of drug-induced depression lifted from her mind Miss Nightingale grew gradually more and more lively and increasingly alert. Instead of lying still in her bed, as inert and as full of sparks as a rubber hot water bottle, Miss Nightingale began to waken, as though from a deep slumber.

Mrs Caldicot quickly found that one way to suppress Miss Nightingale's newly found propensity to chatter incessantly and unpredictably about anything and everything was to tire her out; to exhaust her physically so that she fell into a genuine sleep at night. To do this she conducted impromptu exercise classes in The Windsor Suite. At first, Miss Nightingale could not stand without help, but within two days she could walk by herself and within a week she could perform a determined and spirited, if slightly uncoordinated, jig to the music that Mrs Caldicot played on her small tape player.

Miss Nightingale loved these simple exercises and although she may not have the sort of reliable intellect, regard for temporal or spatial rules or sense of logical continuity that one would normally expect in, say, an accountant or a judge, Mrs Caldicot could see that Miss Nightingale was coming back to life. The third resident of The Windsor Suite, Mrs Peterborough, whose daily medication had been similarly hi-jacked by Mrs Caldicot, also enjoyed these impromptu exercise classes.

Mrs Peterborough's mental condition was, in some ways, potentially far more disturbing for the residents than Miss Nightingale's, but neither Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor nor the medical advisers who regularly visited the home to hand out prescriptions for newer and ever more powerful pharmacological truncheons, had yet managed to find anything strong enough to quell her mental status without at the same time rendering her completely unconscious (this was considered an unacceptable alternative, not because of any respect for Mrs Peterborough's rights but because unconscious patients need very concentrated nursing care, and very concentrated nursing care costs a lot of money).

Each one of us has a personality which we and our friends grow to recognise. Most of us wake up each morning knowing who we are and roughly how we will respond to the people and the problems we meet.

This was not, however, the case with Mrs Peterborough. She woke each morning with no fixed personality but with a fresh, blank canvas upon which would be painted a series of personality caricatures derived entirely from her worldly experiences and mirroring, often with unerring accuracy, the personalities and moods of people whom she encountered. The stronger the personality or the more determined the mood she encountered the more Mrs Peterborough was likely to adopt it. If someone was cruel to her she would be cruel to them. If someone was kind to her she would be kind to them. Everyone who came into contact with her reaped exactly as they sowed; although some confusion was created by the fact that if she watched television Mrs Peterborough would quickly adopt the personality of the most powerful character on the screen. Life with Mrs Peterborough was made even more complicated by the fact that she had a habit of repeating everything that was said to her. She was a vocal mirror; a human tape recorder set constantly on record and replay.

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Next door to The Windsor Suite was The Duchy of Cornwall Suite, shared by Mr Hewitt and Mr Livingstone.

Mr Hewitt was 92-years-old and proud of it. He had worked as a gardener all his adult life and had only stopped working when his granddaughter and her husband, who were both solicitors, had decided that he was too old to work. Ignoring his protests they had written to his employer warning him of the dangers of employing such an elderly pensioner, had ended his tenancy of a cottage on a nearby estate and had placed him in The Twilight Years Rest Home. They had even sold his beloved gardening tools (though Mr Hewitt had rescued a small trowel, a hand fork and a wooden dibber and he kept these three instruments, oiled and wrapped in a piece of dark green canvas, in the bottom of his bedside locker).

Mr Hewitt desperately missed managing a garden and had, he told Mrs Caldicot, on several occasions begged Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor to be allowed to dig up and cultivate a small portion of the lawn around the home. Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor had summarily rejected these entreaties claiming that relatives wouldn't pay him good money if they saw old people getting sweaty and dirty in the garden.

`But I like getting sweaty and dirty,' protested Mr Hewitt to Mrs Caldicot. `It's what I do best!'

Compared to Mr Hewitt, Mr Livingstone was a mere youngster, having recently celebrated his 75th birthday. Mr Hewitt had been at work for five years when his junior room-mate had been born.

At heart Mr Livingstone was a musician.

He had not, however, earned his living as a musician because his wife, a nervous sort long since passed away, had never thought a career in a jazz band a stable enough way to bring up three children and pay the household bills. And so for fifty years Mr Livingstone, a loyal and selfless husband and father, had spent the best waking hours of his life working as a wages clerk for a factory making cardboard boxes.

But in his heart he always thought of himself as a musician and still described himself as such when anyone bothered to ask. He could play the piano, the flute, the trombone and the drums, but Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor would not allow him to practise any of these instruments because, he said, the noise might prove disturbing. Even when the other residents made it clear that they didn't mind the noise Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor remained unmoved, unmoving and unmoveable. Deprived of the chance to make music Mr Livingstone was slowly drifting into a slough of despair.

And so, it was in this way that Mrs Caldicot passed her first few weeks in The Twilight Years Rest Home: getting to know and to love her new friends. She felt fitter, stronger and happier than she had for years.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor didn't like Mrs Caldicot and would not willingly have done her any favours. When he had reluctantly agreed to allow Mrs Caldicot to keep her cat in The Windsor Suite he had done so only because he was primarily a businessman and his affection for money outweighed his pride and yearning for vengeance. He didn't want to risk calling Mrs Caldicot's bluff and seeing her leave the nursing home.

But he knew that he only had to be patient and his time would come. And he did not have to wait very long.

A month after Mrs Caldicot (and Kitty) had moved into The Twilight Years Rest Home Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor was approached by another family looking for somewhere for an elderly female relative to stay. Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor knew that this was the moment he had been waiting for; having another potential resident to fill Mrs Caldicot's bed gave him a chance to be tough without having to risk any financial loss.

`I allowed you to keep your cat in the suite for a trial period,' he said to Mrs Caldicot. `But I'm afraid that the trial period is over and the cat will have to go.'

Mrs Caldicot was shocked but not entirely surprised. `You didn't say anything about a trial period,' she protested, accurately.

`I want the cat out by tomorrow night,' said Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor, ignoring Mrs Caldicot's protest.

`Have there been any complaints?' asked Mrs Caldicot, knowing full well that there hadn't been.

`I'm afraid I can't answer that,' said Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor coldly and pompously. `It would be a breach of confidence.'

`And just where is Kitty supposed to go?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor shrugged. `I don't care where she goes,' he said callously. `You can send her to a cattery or have her put down by the vet for all I care. But I don't want her here.' And with that he turned and stalked off. `Don't forget,' he added, turning his head as he walked away, `I want the cat out by tomorrow night.'

Mrs Caldicot, who had shivered with anger and horror at the phrase `put down by the vet' stared after him. `If she goes then I go,' she said loudly and firmly. She had long ago weighed up Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor accurately. She believed that he was far too greedy to risk losing her weekly cheque, and she felt certain that she had the upper hand. Sadly, for her, she had no way of knowing that there was another potential resident waiting to take her place and that, therefore, her threat was an empty one.

Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor retraced his steps so that he was standing no more than a yard or two away from Mrs Caldicot. `Fine,' he said, clearly savouring the moment. `Please vacate your room by noon tomorrow.'

To say that this both shocked and startled Mrs Caldicot would be an understatement of heroic proportions. Although she did not like The Twilight Years Rest Home the truth was that Mrs Caldicot had nowhere else to go. Her son, Derek, had put her house on the market even before she had left it; the furniture had been sold at auction and her few remaining private possessions were now stored in a trunk in Derek and Veronica's garage.

But Mrs Caldicot was not going to let Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor know that his calling of her bluff had discomforted her. `It will be my pleasure,' she said with apparent sincerity, fervently hoping that Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor could not hear her pounding heart and praying that whatever happened she would not collapse in front of him. `If the shock of this has to kill me,' she prayed silently, `please let me survive until I've got out of this place. I don't want to give Fuller-Hawksmoor the satisfaction of knowing that he's upset me.'

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`But you can't go!' sobbed Miss Nightingale, when Mrs Caldicot told her that she and Kitty were leaving. With Mrs Caldicot's help Miss Nightingale had made enormous progress, and although she had still not ventured outside The Windsor Suite she had become physically independent. She was still forgetful and occasionally confused and she wandered freely through time but instead of being a bed-bound lunatic she was now merely a rather eccentric and frail old lady.

`You can't go! You mustn't go!' said Mrs Peterborough, mimicking Miss Nightingale and bursting into tears.

`I've got to leave,' insisted Mrs Caldicot quietly. She was holding Kitty who was purring contentedly in her arms.

She still had no idea where she would go but for the moment that was the least of her problems. She walked across to the television set, switched it on and flicked through the channels until she found the calming and reassuring face of a woman presenting an anodyne programme made by brain dead producers for brain dead housewives. The television repair man had managed to get a picture out of the elderly set but he hadn't managed to find all the colours; the result was that everything and everyone on the screen appeared to be suffering from a rather severe case of sunburn. Mrs Caldicot adjusted the volume so that it could only just be heard and put a kindly arm around Mrs Peterborough's shoulders. `Sit and watch this!' she murmured, knowing from experience that Mrs Peterborough would soon match the mood of the soothing presenter. Once, before she had realised just how closely Mrs Peterborough's moods and emotions mirrored those which she saw, she had left her watching a Tom and Jerry cartoon. She had come back to find Mrs Peterborough sitting grinning in the middle of the floor surrounded by torn bedclothes, broken bric a brac and many other signs of mayhem. She had, since then, been careful to make sure that she never left Mrs Peterborough watching any cartoon programmes or any programmes which contained any elements of violence or unpredictability. She put Kitty down on the bed and started gathering together her few belongings, packing them into a battered blue cardboard suitcase which she had pulled out from underneath her bed.

`But you're my friend!' said Miss Nightingale, sitting sadly on the edge of her own bed and moodily banging her heels onto the carpet. `What on earth will I do without you?'

`Add two spoonfuls of olive oil and a splash of vinegar,' nodded Mrs Peterborough faithfully, carefully watching the television presenter and even managing to sound uncannily like her.

`What about my exercises?' asked Miss Nightingale, plaintively. `I like doing my exercises!'

`I'll show you how to work the tape player and you can do them by yourself,' promised Mrs Caldicot.

`It won't be the same,' insisted Miss Nightingale, miserably.

`Stir the mixture well and put it into a warm oven for twenty minutes,' said Mrs Peterborough, nodding happily and smiling vacuously.

`I wanted you to come home with me in the summer holidays to meet my parents,' said Miss Nightingale sadly.

`Mmmmm!' said Mrs Peterborough. `And the finished dish smells and tastes absolutely wonderful - especially with a slice of garlic bread!' She licked her lips and smiled back at the screen.

`That's kind of you,' said Mrs Caldicot, who knew that Miss Nightingale's parents had both been dead for thirty years. `Another time, maybe?'

`And now we're going to see what Amanda has got for us this week,' said Mrs Peterborough.

`You've been such a good friend to me,' said Miss Nightingale, who had started to cry again. `No one else would ever share their tuck box but you always would.'

`We'll see each other again,' said Mrs Caldicot reassuringly. She sat down beside Miss Nightingale and put her arm around her. `In the holidays,' she added hopefully.

`I wish you didn't have to go,' sobbed Miss Nightingale. She suddenly looked confused. `What holidays?' she asked. `Are we going on holiday? To Tenby?'

`Hello! I'm Amanda!' said Mrs Peterborough, sounding like a bright and high-spirited 18-year-old. `I've been to Staffordshire to meet a man who trains women how to defend themselves against attackers! He's going to show me how to throw a fourteen stone man over my shoulder!'

Miss Nightingale stopped crying. `I've had a wonderful idea!' she said, brightly. `I'll come with you!'

Mrs Caldicot stood up, walked quickly over to the television set and switched channels.

Kitty leapt into Mrs Caldicot's open suitcase and started treadling on a couple of jumpers.

`....e.x.t.e.r.m.i.n.a.t.e...e.x.t.e.r.m.i.n.a.t.e...' said Mrs Peterborough, mimicking a Dalek on a re-run of an old Dr Who programme. `We will e.x.t.e.r.m.i.n.a.t.e. you...'

`Click!' as Mrs Caldicot switched channels.

`Have you seen my suitcase?' asked Miss Nightingale, down on her hands and knees and looking underneath her bed.

`...one move out of you and you're dead!' said Mrs Peterborough, gruffly, narrowing her eyes to guard against the desert sun and holding her right hand an inch above her gun holster.

`Click!' as Mrs Caldicot switched channels.

`I don't want to take any of my rubbish with me anyway,' said Miss Nightingale, slumping down on her bed, already weary of the search. `Where are we going?' she asked brightly.

`...the gardens on Tresco are among the most wonderful and peaceful in the world, especially at this time of the year,' said Mrs Peterborough soothingly. `Look at this wonderful example of the Sparmannia africana! I've got one at home growing in a small pot. Here they've got one that is three metres high!'

Mrs Caldicot sighed and moved away from the television set. `You can't come with me, Miss Nightingale!' she said quietly. `I'm sorry!'

Kitty miaowed in complaint as Mrs Caldicot lifted her out of the suitcase so that she could carry on with her packing.

`It's very sad,' said Miss Nightingale.

`Now we're going over to Samantha back in the studio,' said Mrs Peterborough. `She's going to show us this season's range of super new lipsticks.'

CHAPTER TWELVE

Mrs Caldicot fully intended to leave The Twilight Years Rest Home quietly and with dignity.

At ten o'clock the following morning she walked down the stairs of the home with her blue cardboard suitcase in her left hand and Kitty's basket in her right.

But her departure didn't go quite the way she expected.

Miss Nightingale was the first to follow her. She had wrapped herself in a pink woollen dressing gown which had tiny yellow flowers on the breast pocket, slipped into her only pair of outdoor shoes and, carrying her handbag, tip-toed down the stairs behind Mrs Caldicot. In the handbag she had carefully and thoughtfully packed her alarm clock, a roll of soft toilet paper, three humbugs and a slice of bread which she had found in her bedside locker.

Behind Miss Nightingale came Mrs Peterborough.

She too was wearing her dressing gown and a pair of outdoor shoes but she couldn't find her handbag and so, instead, she was carrying an empty metal kidney dish.

As this small and rather bizarre procession reached the bottom of the stairs Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor appeared as if from nowhere (though in truth he had been skulking in the dining room waiting to make sure that Mrs Caldicot really did leave) and stood in front of Mrs Caldicot with his arms folded across his chest.

`So!' he said, `You're leaving!'

`We are!' said Mrs Caldicot firmly.

`We?' said Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor, suddenly looking worried. `What do you mean by `we'?'

`Kitty and I,' said Mrs Caldicot.

`And me!' piped up Miss Nightingale, `I'm going with her!'

`And me!' mimicked Mrs Peterborough. `I'm going with her!'

Mrs Caldicot, who had not been aware that her two room-mates had been following her and who was startled by this new development, was speechless. Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor, seeing his income about to fall dramatically, was not. `No you're jolly well not!' he shouted angrily, and this was his downfall, for his loudly voiced anger provoked an immediate, noisy and attention-attracting response from Mrs Caldicot's acolytes.

`You can't stop us!' said Miss Nightingale, defiantly.

`You can't stop us! You jolly well can't!' shouted Mrs Peterborough, getting slightly confused but managing, nevertheless, to stay within the spirit of the conversation. Her voice carried considerably further than that of Miss Nightingale.

`Mrs Caldicot's leaving!' cried someone standing unseen above them on the staircase.

`They're leaving!' shouted someone else.

`We're all leaving!' said Miss Nightingale.

`We're all leaving!' shouted Mrs Peterborough.

`We're all leaving!' shouted a third unseen patient.

`Wait for me!' shouted a fourth. `I want to come too.'

`If Mrs Caldicot is going I'm going too,' said Mr Hewitt, rushing back to The Duchy of Cornwall Suite to collect his precious parcel of gardening tools.

`Wait for me!' cried Mr Livingstone.

Within moments The Twilight Years Rest Home was full of elderly patients rushing around in their pyjamas and their nightdresses looking for dressing gowns and shoes and handbags and suitcases and shouting to Mrs Caldicot to wait for them and shouting at Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor who was screaming at them to tell them they couldn't leave. Mrs Caldicot had become more than just a friend to all of these old people; she had become a symbol of hope. They liked her, they trusted her and they had faith in her. She was the only person in the home who had ever had the courage to stand up to Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor's bullying and they admired and respected her for that.

`Oh dear,' said Mrs Caldicot, to no one in particular. `Oh dear me.' She started to move towards the front door but the anguished cries of `Wait for me!' and `Don't go yet!' which filled the hallway and echoed up and down the staircase halted her.

`But you can't come with me,' said Mrs Caldicot to Miss Nightingale. `I don't know where I'm going!'

`I don't want to stay here by myself,' insisted Miss Nightingale.

`I don't want to stay here by myself,' echoed Mrs Peterborough.

`You can't come out into the cold dressed like that,' said Mrs Caldicot sensibly. `You'll catch your death of cold!'

`I've got a coat!' said Miss Nightingale. And with that she turned and ran back upstairs. `She said I can go with her if I put my coat on!' she shouted.

`I can go with her if I put my coat on!' shouted Mrs Peterborough gleefully following Miss Nightingale back upstairs.

`We can go with her if we put our coats on!' cried someone else, and a dozen septuagenarians and octogenarians rushed back up to their rooms to fetch their coats.

`You'll be responsible if anything happens to any of these people!' said Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor, a tiny fleck of spittle appearing at the corner of his mouth as he worked himself up into a considerable state of excitement.

`No I won't!' replied Mrs Caldicot. `They're all old enough to know what they're doing. And I didn't ask any of them to come with me.'

`I'm going to ring your son!' threatened Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor. `Let's see what he has to say about this!'

Mrs Caldicot, who regarded her son as about as threatening as the Sugar Plum Fairy, stared at Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor. The nursing home proprietor, quelled by the fierceness of Mrs Caldicot's glare, withered where he stood.

A few minutes later Mrs Caldicot, who had, if the truth be known, felt just a teeny bit alone and just a weeny, little bit afraid and uncertain when she had started her journey down the staircase towards the front door and freedom, left The Twilight Years Rest Home at the head of an untidy and straggling procession of chattering and excited escapees. The few residents who were physically incapable of leaving the building shouted encouragement from their beds and wheelchairs, and although they were sad at not being able to join the exodus they clearly shared the sense of excitement at what was going on.

Mrs Caldicot felt a strange mixture of embarrassment (not at heading such a motley crew but at being the instigator of such a momentous exodus) and pride (at having helped to liberate so many pensioners from their imprisonment) as she led her motley crew down the steps of the building. Some had managed to find their outdoor clothes and were fully dressed. Others had slipped their coats over their pyjamas and nightdresses. And a few were still dressed in their dressing gowns and slippers. Fortunately, it was neither wet nor cold.

`You can't do this!' shouted Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor to their backs. `You come back here! Don't you think for one minute that you'll get away with this! I won't let you in when you come scurrying back wanting your rooms again!'

`Goodbye, and good riddance you nasty little man!' shouted Mrs Caldicot, over her shoulder.

`Goodbye, and good riddance you nasty little man!' shouted Miss Nightingale.

`Goodbye, and good riddance you nasty little man!' echoed Mrs Peterborough.

`Goodbye, and good riddance you nasty little man!' shouted the twelve other residents who were trooping along behind them.

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Mrs Caldicot had formulated no clear plans for the future when she'd originally decided to leave The Twilight Years Rest Home. She had rather thought that she would just call a taxi, tell the driver to take her into town and then decide what to do next over a cup of coffee and a Danish pastry in the cafeteria on the top floor of the department store in the middle of town.

But telephoning for a taxi was now clearly impractical. (`I'd like a taxi, please.' `Where to?' `Into town.' `Certainly madam, how many passengers?' `Sixteen.' This did not have the ring of a conversation that was likely to prove profitable.) Mrs Caldicot also felt that her procession might be less than welcome in the department store cafeteria. She clearly had to make more immediate plans.

Half a mile down the road from The Twilight Years Rest Home Mrs Caldicot spotted the answer: a large hotel which specialised in catering for business executives.

Unhesitatingly, she led her procession of shuffling refugees through the car park, past the rows of Fords and Vauxhalls and BMWs, and into the lobby of the Mettleham Grand Hotel. A large group of besuited sales executives, about to start a meeting to launch a new breakfast cereal, were standing around in the lobby. They stared at Mrs Caldicot's procession. `It must be a marketing gimmick!' Mrs Caldicot heard one of them murmur.

`You sit down over there and wait for me!' Mrs Caldicot said firmly to Miss Nightingale, pointing to a group of luxurious, leather armchairs and sofas which were grouped around an artificial log fire.

`You sit down over there and wait for me!' said Mrs Peterborough firmly and much more loudly. She was, thought Mrs Caldicot, a useful aide-de-camp in these unusual circumstances.

Miss Nightingale and the rest of the procession shuffled over towards the cluster of leather chairs and sofas and obediently sat down while Mrs Caldicot, closely followed by the ever faithful Mrs Peterborough, headed for the reception desk.

`Can I help you, madam?' asked a rather startled looking young man, dressed in a dark suit and silver tie. He had a small brass name plate attached to his lapel but without her reading glasses Mrs Caldicot couldn't quite see what it said.

`I'd like some rooms, please,' said Mrs Caldicot. She put her handbag down on the reception counter.

`Some rooms, please!' echoed Mrs Peterborough. She put her kidney dish down on the reception counter next to Mrs Caldicot's handbag.

`How many rooms, madam?'

`Sixteen, please,' said Mrs Caldicot. `We'd like one each. All on the same floor.' She thought it would be a nice treat for everyone to have their own room for a change. Besides she didn't want to have to spend the rest of the day trying to work out who was going to share with whom.

`Sixteen, please,' said Mrs Peterborough.

`How long would that be for, madam?' asked the man on the reception desk, looking first at Mrs Caldicot and then at Mrs Peterborough and not knowing which to look at most. He glanced over towards the rest of the group.

`I'm not sure yet,' said Mrs Caldicot. `I'll let you know later on.'

`I'll let you know,' said Mrs Peterborough.

`Would it be possible to have a reduced rate?' asked Mrs Caldicot. `Since there are so many of us.'

`I beg your pardon, madam?' said the man on the reception desk, who genuinely hadn't heard.

`A reduced rate!' shouted Mrs Peterborough. `There are so many of us!'

`Of course, madam!' said the man on the reception desk apologetically. `Just one moment, please.' He scurried off to speak to the duty manager.

`I think they may be members of some strange religious group,' he whispered to the manager. `Some of them seem to be wearing dressing gowns and nightdresses.'

`Saris perhaps?' suggested the manager, who was proud of his broadminded and non-racist attitudes. `Maybe they're ethnic people?'

`I don't think they're ethnic,' said the man from the reception desk. `But they want a reduced rate.'

`Then they must be O.K.,' said the manager. `Jolly good. Put them on the twelfth floor.'

The man returned a moment later to the reception desk and smiled at Mrs Caldicot. `No problem, madam,' he smiled. `How will you be paying, madam?' he asked.

`I'll give you a cheque when we leave,' said Mrs Caldicot.

`Cheque.' said Mrs Peterborough firmly.

The man looked over the counter and, for the first time, saw Kitty. `Is that a cat, madam?' he enquired.

`Probably,' said Mrs Caldicot. `You don't charge extra for cats do you?'

`We don't allow cats at all, madam!' said the man sternly.

`I can't see any sign that says `No Cats',' said Mrs Caldicot politely but firmly.

The receptionist pointed to a small black and white sign behind him which clearly said: `No dogs allowed'.

`Do you think this is a dog?' asked Mrs Caldicot. `Does she look like a dog to you?'

`No, madam,' said the man.

`Well, then,' said Mrs Caldicot. `That's all right, isn't it?' And she and Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough and all the rest of them went up to their rooms.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It was never really clear exactly who told the local television station about Mrs Caldicot's dramatic exodus from The Twilight Years Rest Home.

It was certainly not Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor.

He had spent the rest of that fateful day gloomily jabbing at his calculator with a podgy finger, trying to work out how he could possibly stay in business. Publicity was the last thing he wanted.

And it wasn't Mrs Caldicot either.

Prior to her time at The Twilight Years Rest Home she had always regarded the television set as something that was useful for standing flowers on. During her time at The Twilight Years Rest Home she had regarded the television set primarily as a sedative for Mrs Peterborough. She would have no more thought of telephoning the TV station than she would have thought of taking scuba diving lessons.

It could have been one of Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor's staff members, rejoicing in his discomfiture and anxious to share his discomfort with as wide an audience as possible; it may have been someone from the Mettleham Grand Hotel; or it might just have been someone who had seen Mrs Caldicot's straggling procession trooping along the roadway between The Twilight Years Rest Home and the hotel.

Anyway, it doesn't really matter who tipped off the television station. The fact is someone did and as a result that afternoon a whole television crew turned up at the Mettleham Grand Hotel and asked to speak to the leader of the group of elderly people who had booked into the hotel earlier that day.

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By the time Mrs Caldicot had responded to the telephone call from the assistant deputy duty manager and had made her way downstairs, the camera crew had set up their equipment in the reception area and a man in the patterned sweater was re-arranging a vase of dried flowers so that they satisfied his acute sense of aesthetic perfection.

`Mrs Caldicot?' said a tall, statuesque blonde with piercing blue eyes, shoulder length hair and a smile that had persuaded politicians in all major parties to say far more than they had ever intended.

`What can I do for you?' asked Mrs Caldicot, nervously eyeing the camera crew.

`My name is Jacoranda Pettigrew. I'm a reporter from the local television station,' said the statuesque blonde, she indicated the chair that she wanted Mrs Caldicot to sit in.

`That's nice,' said Mrs Caldicot, obediently sitting down. Jacoranda, who wasn't easy to ignore or disappoint, sat down opposite her. As she settled herself down and waited for Jacoranda to speak Mrs Caldicot vividly remembered her last encounter with the media. It had been 55 years earlier. She had seen a milkman save a small girl from drowning in a local river. Despite the success of that meeting (which had resulted in her photograph appearing on page seven of her local newspaper) she was modest enough not to consider herself experienced in the matter of news interviews. She felt a frisson of uncertainty running up and down her spine.

`Will you talk to me for the camera?' asked Jacoranda, turning up her smile a couple of hundred watts.

`What on earth about?' asked Mrs Caldicot, guardedly.

`About where you and your friends have come from and what you're planning to do now,' replied Jacoranda, softly. `I know our viewers will be enthralled to hear what you have to say.' She could hear the sound engineer and the cameraman behind her adjusting their equipment and getting ready to start recording.

`Well, I don't know...' said Mrs Caldicot, uncertainly. `I've never done anything like this before.'

`You'll find that the sort of sympathetic publicity we can provide you with will be bound to help your cause,' said Jacoranda.

Mrs Caldicot, who hadn't really thought of herself as having a cause, couldn't help feeling that if she did turn out to have a cause then Jacoranda might well have a point. Anyway, she thought, surely the fact that she had never done anything like it before was a good reason for doing it now.

`O.K.,' she said, almost defiantly.

`That's wonderful!' murmured Jacoranda, patting Mrs Caldicot on the knee with a gesture which had in the past proved wonderfully effective when applied to the legs of middle aged men in grey suits. `Shall we start?' She turned and winked at the man in the patterned sweater who smiled back nervously and waved a hand telling the rest of the crew to start filming.

`Don't we have to rehearse?' asked Mrs Caldicot uncertainly.

`Not with you,' said Jacoranda, giving Mrs Caldicot another blast of her most dazzling smile. `I just know you're going to be absolutely wonderful!' She glanced briefly over her shoulder to make sure that the camera was running and then she asked her first question.

`Mrs Caldicot,' she said, `you arrived at the Mettleham Grand Hotel today at the head of a demonstration. Where did you come from?'

`I don't really know that you'd call it a demonstration,' said Mrs Caldicot. `But we've all come from `The Twilight Years Rest Home.'

`And you marched all the way here to protest?'

`I suppose it was more of a mass escape than a protest,' laughed Mrs Caldicot.

`Was that why so many of your fellow demonstrators were still in their dressing gowns and nightwear?'

`I suppose so,' nodded Mrs Caldicot. `We did come away in something of a hurry.'

`And why did you feel that you had to escape from The Twilight Years Rest Home?' asked Jacoranda.

`Well basically it was about Kitty,' said Mrs Caldicot.

`Kitty?' interrupted Jacoranda. `Is Kitty another of the demonstrators?'

`No. Kitty is my cat. Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor who runs the rest home said she couldn't stay and I thought she'd probably be taken to the vet's and put down so I decided to leave.'

`And all the other residents felt so strongly about it that they walked out in protest too?'

`I suppose that's right,' said Mrs Caldicot, who thought that if she tried to explain about Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough the whole story might get too complicated. `Though I must admit that wasn't the start of it all,' she continued. `The trouble really began with the cabbage.'

`Tell me about the cabbage,' said Jacoranda, who knew already that this interview was going to be a winner. There was, she felt, something about Mrs Caldicot which would appeal to the ordinary viewer.

`Well, they used to give us horrible, smelly cabbage,' said Mrs Caldicot. `But Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor - he's the proprietor - got cross when I didn't want to eat it.'

Jacoranda, realising that she now had a wonderful story with which to end the evening news programme, leant forward. `So,' she said, momentarily inspired, `this is really a war about cabbage that you're fighting!'

`I suppose it is,' agreed Mrs Caldicot uncertainly.

`Have you had to leave any of your friends behind?' asked Jacoranda, her voice full of sadness.

`Well, yes,' said Mrs Caldicot. `The ones who were bedbound or stuck in wheelchairs couldn't come with us.'

`Thank you, Mrs Caldicot,' said Jacoranda. She turned round to face the camera. `This is Jacoranda Bartholomew with Mrs Caldicot, safely escaped from the cabbage wars at The Twilight Years Rest Home and now staying in a secret hideout, preparing to fight to help her friends join her in freedom.'

`Cut! Cut!' said the man in the patterned sweater, waving his arms about and looking very excited. He rushed over to the two of them. `Jacoranda, darling that was marvellous!' he said, giving the air next to her cheek a tremendous kiss. `Absolutely marvellous!' He turned to Mrs Caldicot. `We must have a few pictures of you and Kitty,' he said, clapping his hands together and looking coy. `And I want all your lovely friends to come down here into the lobby in their nightdresses and pyjamas and dressing gowns and whatnots!' He clapped his hands gleefully, like a small boy who has been told that he can play with the matches. `Oh this is such a lovely story!' he said. `Such a lovely story!'

The film crew spent the next thirty minutes shooting pictures of Mrs Caldicot with Kitty on her lap and with Kitty sitting beside her on the sofa. Then when they'd done that they spent another hour taking pictures of Mrs Caldicot, Miss Nightingale, Mrs Peterborough and all the rest of the escapees walking down the driveway to the hotel and then walking in through the lobby and filling both the lifts.

`Oh what a lovely story!' said the man in the patterned sweater when he had finished. He gave the air next to Mrs Caldicot's cheek a big kiss. `You're an absolute natural, darling!' he said. `Absolute natural, isn't she Jacoranda sweetheart?'

`Absolute natural,' agreed Jacoranda, giving the fortunate Mrs Caldicot a final chance to admire two neat and symmetrical rows of perfectly capped teeth.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

`Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage Wars', as they quickly became known, immediately caught the public's imagination. Jacoranda Pettigrew's interview with Mrs Caldicot and the rest of The Twilight Years Rest Home refugees appeared on all that evening's news bulletins.

Within an hour of the first news programme finishing there was a queue of reporters from newspapers, magazines and radio stations waiting to talk to the woman who had led what one commentator had instantly and memorably called Britain's first `grey' revolution.

A man in a dark pinstripe suit who said he was from *The Sun*, a popular tabloid newspaper with a massive circulation, wanted to know Mrs Caldicot's twenty favourite non-cabbage recipes. A journalist in jeans and a sports jacket who wore his black hair slicked straight back and said he was from *The Times* wanted to know whether Mrs Caldicot thought that the use of cabbage was a socially divisive feature which only affected the economically deprived and was therefore a consequence of the advertising industry's obsession with youth. A girl in her early twenties who said that she was from *The Daily Mirror*, another tabloid newspaper, wanted to know whether or not Mrs Caldicot agreed that cabbage contained a variety of vitamins and minerals and was an excellent source of fibre. A lady feature writer who arrived dressed in a light grey suit and an Ascot hat and said she was from the *Daily Mail* wanted to know if Mrs Caldicot thought that her protest heralded the beginning of a major revolution among pensioners. A journalist in corduroy trousers and a jacket with leather patches on the elbows who said he was from a liberal newspaper called *The Guardian* was quite indignant about Mrs Caldicot's protest and wanted to know if Mrs Caldicot realised that according to his estimates the amount of cabbage wasted every day in British rest homes would feed the starving inhabitants of Somalia for a week. A girl journalist in a miniskirt and a baggy sweater who announced that she was from *The Independent* asked Mrs Caldicot whether she thought that the real blame for the problem lay with the farmers or the Economic Community's Common Agricultural Policy. A journalist in evening dress who apologetically explained that he had come from a dinner engagement and said he was from the *Financial Times* wanted to know if Mrs Caldicot realised that by her action she had threatened a major British industry. And a journalist in a grubby mackintosh from the *Daily Sport* wanted to know if Mrs Caldicot had any granddaughters who would be prepared to be photographed without any clothes on. A reporter from the local paper wanted to know how Mrs Caldicot's age, how long she had lived in the area and the names and addresses of all her relatives.

All of these reporters arrived with their own photographers in tow and Mrs Caldicot rapidly grew tired of posing either with Kitty or with Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough.

But, despite all this press interest, it was undoubtedly the call from the researcher asking if Mrs Caldicot would appear on the Mike Trickle Television Chat Show the following evening which promised to turn her into a real celebrity. The appearance on the Mike Trickle Television Chat Show was, however, still twenty four hours away and Mrs Caldicot had other more immediately pressing problems to face.

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At half past ten that evening, having watched herself on television for the third time and having dealt with all the reporters, Mrs Caldicot decided that she would pop in to see what the others thought of it all, and to check that they were all safely tucked up for the night.

Miss Nightingale hadn't seen the programme because she hadn't yet bothered to turn on her television set. She had, however, discovered the joys of room service and every flat surface in the room held a tray which was positively groaning with expensive looking delicacies.

`Look!' said Miss Nightingale, who had been unable to hide a temporary look of disappointment when she had opened the door to her room to find Mrs Caldicot instead of a waiter standing there, was soon excitedly taking Mrs Caldicot on a tour of her collection of delicacies.

There were: scrambled eggs on toast, a pot of Earl Grey tea with lemon, buttered crumpets and toast set on trays on top of the low coffee table in front of the sofa; fresh scones served with dairy cream and strawberry jam on a bedside table; egg and cress sandwiches, a bottle of claret with two glasses, chicken salad sandwiches, a pot of fresh coffee and a fresh melon on the writing table; thinly sliced fresh salmon with brown bread, a bottle of champagne in an ice bucket and pancakes with lemon and sugar on top of the television set; boiled eggs with fingers of toast, a double whisky, battered scampi and vegetable soup with croutons on trays on the bed; and a plateful of Danish pastries, a bottle of Taylor's vintage port, a dish of garlic bread and a plateful of spaghetti bolognaise on trays beside the sink in the bathroom.

`What on earth have you been doing?' asked Mrs Caldicot, horrified, when she all the food and drink that Miss Nightingale had ordered. Before Miss Nightingale could answer there was a loud knock on the bedroom door. Miss Nightingale hurried to answer it and moments later admitted a tall young man in a white coat who walked into the room carrying a large tray which he put down onto the bed next to the trays carrying the boiled eggs, the whisky, the scampi and the soup. He smiled broadly at Miss Nightingale and handed her a pad to sign. Then he thanked her, bowed very slightly and let himself out.

`Isn't it wonderful?' asked Miss Nightingale, excitedly, when he had gone. `I just pick up the telephone and tell them what they want and then POOF, like magic...' she waved her hands to indicate how easy it was to make the food appear.

`But all this food will cost a fortune!' protested Mrs Caldicot, looking around in horror.

`It doesn't cost anything!' insisted Miss Nightingale. `I didn't have to give them any money at all!' She leant forwards confidentially, `The young men bring it because they like me,' she whispered, `I think I must be famous because they all want my autograph!' She stopped and thought. `I don't remember why I'm famous,' she added. For a brief moment she looked thoughtful and slightly puzzled but this sign of confusion soon passed and was replaced by a smile.

Miss Nightingale was so excited by it all that Mrs Caldicot didn't have the heart to tell her off, or even to tell her that she mustn't order any more food from room service. As Mrs Caldicot left, Miss Nightingale picked up the telephone again and, using the extensive room service menu, began ordering a fresh seafood platter with brown bread and butter and a side order of French fries.

Mrs Peterborough in the room next door had not yet discovered the joys of room service but she had found out how to operate the television set.

After she had let Mrs Caldicot in, she rushed back into her room and sat down on the floor about two feet away from the set. She then had an increasingly agitated time as she watched a series of advertisements. (Mrs Caldicot usually switched over when the advertisements came on because she knew that their brevity and content confused Mrs Peterborough enormously. She had once watched her friend collapse in despair as she struggled to adopt the personality of a talking lavatory seat).

`I wouldn't swap my one packet of New Dazzle washing powder for two packets of my old powder,' said a pretty young actress, hugging a box of New Dazzle soap powder to her chest as though it were an expensive string of pearls.

`I wouldn't swap my one packet of New Dazzle washing powder,' promised Mrs Peterborough, hugging an imaginary box of soap powder to her chest. `I wouldn't!' she insisted. `No I wouldn't!' She looked across at Mrs Caldicot. `I wouldn't!' she promised.

`I know you wouldn't,' said Mrs Caldicot softly.

`You'll get a home not a house when you buy from Sherlock Homes!' said a fat man in a tightly fitting grey suit, holding his arms out wide. He was standing in the middle of a small, brand new housing estate and looking up at the camera which was clearly being operated from a helicopter high overhead. `And don't forget,' he shouted, as the helicopter hurtled skywards, `free carpets, free curtains and the best mortgage rate you can find!'

`A home not a house! Free carpets, free curtains and the best mortgage rate!' shouted Mrs Peterborough, struggling to match his enthusiasm. `The best mortgage rate you can find!' she cried, clearly overtaken by the excitement of it all. She peered at the television set, apparently looking for the salesman.

But he'd gone.

`I hate new Germ-o-blast,' muttered an evil sounding, slimy looking cartoon germ. The germ scowled as a woman carrying a plastic bottle of disinfectant approached. `Grrrrr!' said the germ, trying to hide under the rim of a lavatory bowl.

Mrs Peterborough shuddered in distaste. `I hate new Germ-o-blast!' she said, screwing up her mouth as though she'd been sucking a lemon. `Grrrrr!'

The woman took the top off her bottle and squirted a few ounces into the lavatory bowl.

`Aaaaargh!' screamed the cartoon germ. `This is the end for me!'

Mrs Peterborough screamed too and held her hands up to her face in horror.

Mrs Caldicot leant forward and switched to another channel. A beautiful young couple were making love in a wood.

`Oh, darling!' said the girl.

`Darling!' said the man.

`Oh, darling!' said Mrs Peterborough, the agony of a moment ago now forgotten and replaced by a look of tenderness and affection.

Mrs Caldicot tiptoed out of the room and left the three of them to enjoy their romance. She couldn't help wishing for just a moment that she could forget her worries and her sorrows as easily as Mrs Peterborough could.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

`Here comes Mike,' murmured Sally, the researcher, to Mrs Caldicot. They were sitting together in the rather grubby waiting room which the receptionist had rather grandly and misleadingly referred to as `The Green Room'. A scattered jumble of stiffening sandwiches were strewn over two large plates on a low table in the centre of the room and a coffee percolator spluttered and hissed on a metal trolley. A huge television set dominated the room.

The name of the room was misleading for the walls were painted blue, the furniture was brown and although the carpet was heavily patterned there was no green to be seen in it anywhere. The only thing in the room that was green was a modern, plastic telephone on a small wooden table by the door. It was, thought Mrs Caldicot, rather strange to name a room after the colour of a telephone. `Don't be nervous!' added Sally, a pretty young thing in her early twenties. She wore a pale lilac skirt and a white blouse, carried a huge sheaf of notes in a large cardboard folder and seemed desperately in need of her own advice. Mrs Caldicot thought Sally was probably the most nervous person she had ever met. `He's awfully nice!' Sally whispered with a shiver. Mrs Caldicot, who had been collected from the Mettleham Grand Hotel by taxi and told that she had to arrive at the studios three hours before `The Mike Trickle Chat Show' was due to start, was now very, very bored. She was fed up with talking to the researcher. Sally seemed to think that Mrs Caldicot was interested only in talking about nursing homes or listening to her boring anecdotes about the old people she had known. She was fed up with watching the endless stream of cameramen, soundmen and production assistants sneaking into the room to steal the sandwiches (a packet of chocolate biscuits which a white-coated canteen assistant had brought with the sandwiches had been broken into and distributed amongst the technicians within seconds of their arrival), and she was very fed up with watching the endless rehearsals for the evening's programme.

`Mike,' said Sally, clearly impressed by the presence of the great man and assuming that Mrs Caldicot would be too, `this is Mrs Caldicot.' She didn't do the introduction the other way round, clearly assuming that Mrs Caldicot would know who Mike Trickle was.

This was, of course, true for although Mrs Caldicot had never heard of Mike Trickle before the previous evening she had watched him carefully rehearsing his ad-libs for the worst part of three hours. Nevertheless, she could hardly believe that this was the same person.

The Mike Trickle whom she had been watching on the television had seemed urbane, relaxed, witty and handsome. But this Mike Trickle, the real one, was nervous and clearly agitated. He looked bad tempered and his smooth, healthy, slightly suntanned complexion had clearly come out of a jar; a very large jar thought Mrs Caldicot looking at the thick layer of cream which covered the TV star's cheeks and forehead. He was much shorter than he looked on the television screen and he had the worst case of halitosis that Mrs Caldicot had ever encountered. It was his hair which Mrs Caldicot found herself most fascinated by. The hair which had looked healthy and natural on the television screen now looked as healthy and as natural as a scouring pad. A new scouring pad, but nevertheless a scouring pad.

`Hello!' said Mike Trickle, briefly turning on his smile. He was accompanied by a pneumatic blonde who seemed to have been grafted or glued onto his arm. `It's great to have you on the programme. You had good cuttings this morning.' He turned the smile off as though to save the batteries.

`Nice to meet you,' said Mrs Caldicot, having difficulty in dragging her eyes away from the awful wig the man was wearing and wondering why no one told him how silly he looked. She hadn't yet got round to reading the morning's newspapers though Mike Trickle wasn't the first person to tell her that her story had appeared in them. `I've seen you on there,' she said, nodding towards the television monitor in the corner of the room. Mr Trickle did not realise that Mrs Caldicot was speaking literally but naturally assumed that she meant that she was a long time fan. In recognition of this he gave her another fifteen second burst of the smile. The blonde's smile seemed wired up to Mr Trickle's for when he smiled she smiled too. When he stopped smiling she stopped smiling. Mrs Caldicot suddenly noticed that the TV star also had what looked like a hearing aid in his right ear.

`It'll all be very straightforward,' said Mr Trickle, reassuringly. `I'll ask you about the cabbage and you just tell me what happened.' He seemed to think about smiling for a moment then changed his mind. He turned to Sally. `Have the Vandals turned up yet?' he asked her.

`I don't think so, Mike,' said Sally, apologetically. `I'll check with Peter.' She hurried off across the room towards the telephone.

`Damned pop group,' said Mike to Mrs Caldicot. `Have you heard of them?'

`Is it Vandals with a capital V?' asked Mrs Caldicot, speaking rather more loudly than usual, and as clearly as she could, so that the deaf celebrity could understand her.

`Yes. I suppose so,' replied Mike, instinctively moving his head backwards a few inches and wondering why Mrs Caldicot had suddenly started shouting.

`Then I don't think so,' said Mrs Caldicot, enunciating carefully in case Mr Trickle relied on lip reading.

`They've had two hits and of course they think they're superstars now,' said Mike. He decided that the old woman was probably batty. Accompanied by the sticky blonde he strode off towards the remains of the sandwiches, flicked through them as though leafing through the magazines in a dentist's waiting room and then slipped what looked like a piece of ham into his mouth. Sally put the telephone down, walked back across the room and said something to him. Mike didn't answer but just strode off angrily. The blonde's stiletto heels click clacked furiously on the corridor floor as she struggled to keep up with him.

`It's a shame about him being deaf,' said Mrs Caldicot when Sally returned faithfully to her side. It was clearly her job to keep Mrs Caldicot entertained.

`Deaf?' said Sally, puzzled.

`Mrs Caldicot leant towards her. `I saw the deaf aid,' she whispered.

`Oh!' laughed Sally, nervously. `That isn't a deaf aid. It's a tiny radio so that the director can talk to him.'

`Ah!' whispered Mrs Caldicot, nodding to show that she understood though she still didn't really understand why the director would want to talk to Mr Trickle while he was broadcasting. `And why doesn't his wife tell him not to wear that silly wig?'

`The wig?' said Sally, blanching and looking behind her to make sure that no one was listening.

`It's not a very good one, is it?' said Mrs Caldicot.

`Sshhh!' said Sally, holding a finger to her lips. `It's a big secret. How did you know about the wig?'

`I'd have to be blind not to know!' laughed Mrs Caldicot. `I've seen more convincing hair on a toothbrush.' `And that's not his wife,' added Sally, looking around to make sure that no one was listening. Since apart from Mrs Caldicot and herself the only other occupants of the room were the sandwiches her fears were unfounded.

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Thirty minutes later Sally took Mrs Caldicot into the make- up department where a nice young lady with a lot of frizzy red hair filled in her wrinkles, livened up her eyebrows and painted her lips a rather ferocious shade of red.

Then Sally took Mrs Caldicot along to the studio where she wished her all the very best of luck and handed her over to a girl in blue jeans and a T-shirt who wore a pair of headphones with a microphone attached and who introduced herself as Jenny. Jenny took Mrs Caldicot behind a large piece of painted scenery where the floor was covered with huge thick cables and told her to wait there and to be quiet. A voice suddenly crackled faintly in the headphones she was wearing and Jenny apologised and hurried off. Mrs Caldicot peered around the edge of the scenery and could see a small audience sitting quietly in their seats waiting for the show to start. She wondered how long they'd had to wait and then she realised that she wanted to spend a penny.

She retraced her steps, said `Hello!' to three men in jeans and plaid shirts, slipped out through a door marked `Exit' and found herself in a corridor which she didn't recognise and which seemed to stretch forever and ever. She walked down it for a minute or so, passing several doorways on her way, and eventually found a door marked Ladies.

When she came out a minute or two later she couldn't remember which way she'd come so she followed her instincts and turned left. After she had walked for another hundred yards she realised that she had gone the wrong way and so she turned right when she saw an illuminated sign which said Studio.

When she got to the studio she opened the door cautiously. The room was deserted and was clearly not the one she had left a few moments earlier. She intended to retrace her steps but once again she took the wrong turning and quickly realised that she was well and truly lost.

Mrs Caldicot decided that if she kept walking she would be bound to find someone who could help her find her way back to the right studios and so she continued her journey around the labyrinth of corridors.

`Excuse me!' she said, politely to a man who was wearing a dark blue uniform and had the word Security printed on his chest and his hat. He seemed to be guarding a door.

`What are you doing there?' demanded the man, rather aggressively.

`I'm lost,' said Mrs Caldicot. `Can you tell me how I find the studio where the Mike Trickle show is being broadcast from?'

The security guard frowned and looked at his watch. `It's due to go live on air in three minutes,' he said. `I think you're probably too late now.'

`Oh dear,' said Mrs Caldicot. `What a pity.'

`Go out through this door,' said the guard, relenting and feeling sorry for her. `Walk along the street for two hundred yards and you'll come to the main entrance. They may just let you slip in at the back of the audience.'

Mrs Caldicot followed his instructions and walked along the street to the main entrance. `Hello!' she said to the man guarding the main entrance. `Can you tell me how to get to the studio where they are broadcasting the Mike Trickle show?'

The security guard shook his head and sucked air in through his teeth. `I think you've missed it, love,' he said, sadly. He looked at his watch. He examined a list of names in front of him. `What's your name?'

`Mrs Caldicot,' replied Mrs Caldicot.

The guard looked up. `Thelma Caldicot?'

`Yes!' smiled Mrs Caldicot.

`Oh my God!' said the guard. `They're going mad up there looking for you! Where have you been?' He picked up a telephone and dialled a three digit number. `She's here!' he said. `Yes! Mrs Caldicot.' He listened for a moment and then put the telephone down. `Wait here!' he said. He came out of his cubicle, lifted a large key from a ring on his belt and locked the entrance door so that no one could sneak in while he was gone and then headed off into the depths of the building. `Follow me!' he cried over his shoulder. Hurrying was not a form of motion which came easy to him and he swayed a little from side to side as his stability came under threat from his speed.

Half a minute later they met Sally running towards them. She had been crying and had mascara all over her cheeks. Behind Sally ran a man in a sports coat and a woman in a blue suit. They were both shouting hysterically. `Where have you been?' and `We're on air in thirty seconds!' were the only two things Mrs Caldicot could decipher from their gibbering.

They quickly escorted her back to the studio and deposited her once more behind the painted scenery. Mike Trickle was just being given an enthusiastic welcome by the audience.

`Where have you been?' hissed a harassed looking Jenny. `You're on!' she said, and without more ado she pushed Mrs Caldicot from behind the scenery and out into the bright lights of the studio.

Mrs Caldicot was live on national television.

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`Welcome to the Mike Trickle Show!' said Mike Trickle, giving Mrs Caldicot one of his most incandescent smiles. Mrs Caldicot could see that he was sweating heavily. Something seemed to have been worrying him for he had developed a small twitch in the muscles around his left eye.

The audience, encouraged by a small, fat man who was holding up a large placard, clapped enthusiastically. Mrs Caldicot wondered what the placard said. She couldn't read it because it was facing the wrong way. The small, fat man, who had sweat stains on the back of his T-shirt and underneath his armpits, lowered his sign and the clapping stopped instantly. Mrs Caldicot could now see that the placard bore the single word `CLAP' in large red letters.

`Mrs Caldicot,' said Mike Trickle, `you're in the news at the moment because you led a walk out among residents at The Twilight Years Rest Home. It is believed to be the first walk out of its kind ever to take place in this country. Do you think your action will herald the beginning of a revolution among older citizens?'

Mrs Caldicot stared at him and found that she had difficulty in concentrating. She could not take her eyes off his wig which, she suddenly realised, looked rather like a sleeping kitten curled up on top of a turnip.

`I don't know,' she said, honestly and simply. There was a silence which Trickle waited, in vain, for Mrs Caldicot to fill. The silence was broken only by a buzz from an audience which had never before heard anyone confess their ignorance on prime time television.

`You don't know!' said Trickle to his guest. He spoke in a mocking sort of voice, rather like a stern parent quizzing a stubborn child.

`Sometimes life isn't so much about knowing the answers as about knowing the right questions to ask,' said Mrs Caldicot simply. When she had spoken she hoped that Mr Trickle didn't take offence. She had meant none. The audience, which would have taken against her if they had suspected that she was trying to be clever, recognised her simple honesty and a few of them instinctively took her to their collective bosom.

Mike Trickle should have been warned. But he was too stupid to realise the danger. He glanced down at the next question on the piece of paper on his lap. `You claim that you led the walk out simply because you don't like cabbage. Don't you think that was selfish and irresponsible of you? Wasn't it a rather dramatic response to a childish dislike of cabbage?'

`That's not what happened at all,' said Mrs Caldicot, rather hurt and indignant. `It's true that I walked out of the dining room because I didn't want to eat any more cabbage but that wasn't why I left the rest home, and it certainly wasn't why any of the others left the home. I left the dining room because I thought the cabbage smelt horrid but that is only one small part of the story.'

`That's a rather small reason for such a big deed isn't it?' said Mike Trickle. `If everyone walked out because of one pungent vegetable the world would be a pretty turbulent place, wouldn't it? Isn't it true, as some people are saying, that you led the walk out simply to draw attention to yourself?'

Mrs Caldicot stared at him for a moment as though she couldn't quite believe what she had heard. `That's rather rude of you,' she said. `Why are you being so aggressive? I didn't want to attract attention to myself at all.'

`Oh, come on now!' said Mr Trickle. `You're here on national television aren't you?'

`But only because you asked me to come,' said Mrs Caldicot. `And to be honest with you I'm beginning to wish

I hadn't come. There's a rather good old black and white film on the other side that I'd have quite liked to watch.'

The audience laughed spontaneously. Out of the corner of her eye Mrs Caldicot could see that the fat man was waving his hands horizontally in an attempt to quell the spirited response.

`But some people might argue that by leading a walk out you've endangered the lives of many old people,' persisted Mike Trickle, who was desperate to enhance his reputation as a tough current affairs presenter and to get rid of his light and frothy showbiz image. `Isn't it true that some of the old people who left with you are in their seventies and eighties?'

`Yes,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. `But just because people are old that doesn't mean that they can't make their own minds up. Just because people are eighty they don't have to put up with things that younger people wouldn't put up with. Why do you young people feel you have a right to sneer and snigger at us old folk?'

`I haven't heard of many thirty-year-olds leaving home because they didn't like the smell of the cabbage,' said Trickle. After making sure that the camera wasn't on him he turned towards the audience and pulled a face, mocking Mrs Caldicot.

`It wasn't like that,' insisted Mrs Caldicot. `It was more about my cat than the cabbage.' She explained what Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor had said about Kitty.

`So all these people, in their nightwear, walked out into the cold because of your cat?'

`I didn't ask them to come with me,' said Mrs Caldicot. `They all just followed me.'

Mike Trickle, deciding that he was on safe ground with an old lady with no previous television experience, leant back, abandoned his scripted questions and bravely ad-libbed.

`Are you seriously claiming that you are so charismatic that all these people just followed you?' he asked, sarcastically. He turned to the audience and pulled a disbelieving face. There was a faint and rather hollow splutter of laughter. Most of it came from technicians and researchers.

`No,' said Mrs Caldicot firmly but quietly. `I'm just telling you what happened. Why are you determined to be so rude to me? Why do you keep making faces to the audience? How would you like it if I asked you why you wore such a silly wig or whether your wife knows about that blonde girl who was glued to your arm earlier on?'

Mike Trickle, who was so touchy and self-conscious about his hair piece that he had threatened to sue every newspaper which had ever dared even to suggest that his hair wasn't entirely his own, paled and opened his mouth to reply. All that came out was a rather faint `What did you say?' He was still trying to work out whether or not Mrs Caldicot really had mentioned his wife.

`How would you like it if I asked you why you wore such a silly wig?' asked Mrs Caldicot, repeating her question. `And have your wife and that blonde girl you were with been introduced to each another?' She spoke clearly and deliberately as though addressing someone hard of hearing. She still didn't entirely believe the explanation that Sally had given her for the hearing aid Mike Trickle wore.

Mike Trickle tried to respond but even if he had managed to get any words out no one would have heard them. The audience erupted and the sound of laughter and cheering would have drowned a brass band. The director went into an advertising break nine minutes early and Jenny, red-faced and looking desperate, rushed out and dragged Mrs Caldicot out of her chair.

Mrs Caldicot's moment of glory on `The Mike Trickle Show' was over.

But Mrs Caldicot's moment of glory was, in reality, only just beginning.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Overnight Mrs Caldicot became a national celebrity.

Previously, much of the emphasis had been on what she had done, but now the emphasis was on who she was. Feature writers telephoned to say that their editors wanted them to write profiles of her. Radio producers wanted her to choose her favourite records and give her views on both national and international politics. Mrs Caldicot had become a woman of some importance.

The morning after her appearance on `The Mike Trickle Chat Show' Mrs Caldicot was the star guest on the nation's biggest and most successful television breakfast programme; pushing the previously booked guest, a mediocre politician who had acquired some temporary notoriety by introducing a bill to increase taxes, out of the programme schedule completely.

`I don't know,' said Mrs Caldicot, reluctantly, to the television researcher who telephoned her to ask her to appear on their programme. `I was hoping to spend some time trying to find somewhere cheaper to stay.'

`Oh don't worry about your hotel bill,' said the girl researcher. `We'll pay that.' The researcher was already hugging herself because she reckoned that she could get Mrs Caldicot to agree to appear for a fee of £25 which was a tenth of the amount she knew that the producer would have paid.

`All of it? Everything that's on my bill?' said Mrs Caldicot, genuinely surprised.

`Everything!' agreed the researcher, as a faint twinge of anxiety disturbed her equilibrium and as she quietly wondered just how much room service one old lady could possibly use.

`Wonderful!' said Mrs Caldicot, not bothering the researcher with the information that the accounts for all sixteen rooms, including Miss Nightingale's, were all being put on her bill.

The breakfast programme didn't want its guests there quite so long before the start of the programme. A chauffeur driven limousine picked Mrs Caldicot up from her hotel at 5.30 am. She arrived at the studio entrance at 6.00 am and was on air, made up and clutching a plastic beaker of coffee at 6.15 am.

`Welcome to the Breakfast Show,' said the presenter, a portly, cheery man who looked uncomfortable in a pair of grey slacks and a pink sweater. He had cut his teeth as a foreign correspondent and was now given all of the programmes `big name' interviews. The presenter, whose real name was Cyril worked under the professional name of Peter. His colleague, whose real name was Flora-May but who called herself Susie, sat back in her chair, well out of camera shot, and studied the notes for her interview with a man who had trained a hedgehog to walk a miniature tightrope.

Mrs Caldicot, sitting next to Peter on a hideous and uncomfortably soft pink sofa, smiled and thanked him very much.

`Before we go any further,' said the presenter, smiling, `I want to make it quite clear that this is all my own!' He reached up and lightly patted his neatly coiffed hair. The girl from the make-up department who had spent twenty minutes washing, combing, cutting and applying several layers of lacquer to his locks blanched off camera and relaxed only when his hand moved away. He turned and winked at the camera as the producer and he had agreed he would.

`That's nice,' said Mrs Caldicot, who instinctively felt that she didn't like Peter very much.

`We tried to get Mike Trickle to come onto the programme with you,' said Peter the presenter. `But his agent told us that he's resting and our contact at `The Mike Trickle Chat Show' tells us that Jack Burgess, Mike's stand in, will be taking over the show for a while.'

He spoke of their `contact' as though getting information from `The Mike Trickle Chat Show' was more difficult than getting information out of MI5, which, indeed, it quite probably was.

`Oh, dear,' said Mrs Caldicot. `How sad. I do hope Mr Trickle isn't too poorly.'

`Just a badly dented pride, I suspect,' sniggered the breakfast presenter. Mrs Caldicot decided that she didn't like Peter at all. He picked up his notes. `Now, tell me, Mrs Caldicot,' he said, `did you decide before you went onto the programme what you were going to say to Mike?' Peter leant forwards, as though speaking confidentially, `Did someone put you up to it?' he asked.

Mrs Caldicot felt and looked puzzled. `How could I decide beforehand what I was going to say?' she asked. `I didn't know what he was going to say!'

`And no one else put you up to it?'

`Of course not!' said Mrs Caldicot, rather indignantly. `Why would they?' She wondered if television people always asked their guests such impertinent questions. Asking if she had allowed herself to be told what to say by someone else suggested that she didn't have a mind of her own. Still, she thought, maybe people on television programmes were always supposed to be rude to one another. She decided that she wasn't going to be rude, however. She thought that she would ask a perfectly innocuous question to try to change the topic. She leant across the sofa, `Excuse me for asking,' she said, `but is that a deaf aid you're wearing or is it true that you wear it so that other people can tell you what to say and what to do?' She pointed towards the ear piece that the presenter was wearing.

`No, no!' laughed the presenter, automatically fingering his ear piece. `That's just so that the director can talk to me.'

`While you're talking to me?'

`Yes!' replied Peter, looking down at his list of questions to try to find his place.

`Isn't that rather rude?' asked Mrs Caldicot. `Him whispering to you while you're talking to me? If I wore one of those and I had people talking to me you'd think me rather odd wouldn't you?'

`He doesn't talk to me all the time,' said the presenter, rather defensively. `Just if there's something he wants me to ask you.'

`Find the hedgehog man!' shouted the director in the control room to his assistant.

Mrs Caldicot frowned. `Can't you think of your own questions?'

The presenter fingered his earpiece very nervously. `Yes, of course I can!' he laughed.

`Well, doesn't the director trust you then?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

Peter swallowed and then cleared his throat. `I'm sure he does,' he said. He turned to the camera and smiled, a favourite and usually successful trick of his. He always used it when things weren't going well. But this time it was a thin, rather wan smile and the discomfort showed through. The director said something to Peter but he didn't catch it and so he pressed on his ear piece with the forefinger of his right hand.

`Can't see the hedgehog man anywhere,' hissed the floor manager into his two way radio. Susie who was listening to this conversation on her ear piece looked around her, desperately searching for someone she could talk to about tightrope walking hedgehogs.

`Is he talking to you now?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

`Er...yes,' said the presenter, still struggling to hear what was being said to him.

`Ask the silly old bag what she and the other daft beggars are going to do next?' shouted the director. `Ask her where they're going!'

`What's he saying?' persisted Mrs Caldicot.

`Er...he wants me to ask you what you and your fellow escapees are going to do next?' The presenter was now sweating profusely and hoping desperately that he wasn't shaking visibly.

`Then why doesn't he come into the studio and ask me himself?' asked Mrs Caldicot. `Why does he have to ask you to ask me?'

The presenter, now entirely defeated, just shrugged.

`This television business all seems very silly to me,' said Mrs Caldicot, firmly.

The director, deciding to abandon Peter and to give up on the man with the clever hedgehog, was also sweating profusely. He screamed urgent instructions at the resident cook who, caught completely unawares, threw her furtive and completely illicit cigarette down onto the floor, turned to her nearest camera and smiled broadly. `Welcome, to Cook's Corner,' she read from the autocue, `this morning I'm going to show you how to boil an egg and make toast soldiers!'

Twenty seconds later, as one researcher hurried Mrs Caldicot out of the studio and a second struggled to compose the shattered presenter on the pink sofa and a third gave Susie, who was having an attack of wheezing, a glass of water, the smouldering cigarette abandoned by the cook triggered the sprinkler system and the whole studio was turned into a gigantic and very expensive shower room.

The director replaced the rest of the programme with cartoons and then got onto the telephone immediately to ask his agent to see if the job making corporate videos was still available.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Mrs Caldicot was becoming a real celebrity. It seemed that everyone in the world wanted to take photographs of her or to interview her. Mrs Caldicot, however, had other, more important things on her mind.

It was comforting to know that the breakfast television company had agreed to pay the hotel bill but Mrs Caldicot still had no idea what she and her friends were going to do next.

She had just got back to the Mettleham Grand Hotel and was about to set off to catch the bus into the town to try to find somewhere cheaper for them all to stay when the telephone in her room started to ring. She picked it up reluctantly, half expecting to find a reporter on the other end. But it wasn't a reporter, it was one of the hotel receptionists.

`I'm sorry to bother you, Mrs Caldicot,' said the receptionist respectfully. `But I've got a man here who says he's your son.'

`Derek?' said Mrs Caldicot, questioningly.

She heard the receptionist repeat the name to someone. There was a brief pause. `Yes, that's right,' said the receptionist, a moment later. `He's here with a lady and a young man.'

`That'll be Derek,' sighed Mrs Caldicot. `Tell him I'm coming down and I'll meet him in the lobby.'

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`Really, mother, I don't know what to say!' said Derek.

The four of them were sitting together in a corner of the lounge and Mrs Caldicot ordered a pot of tea for three and a cola drink. Jason was reading a computer magazine, listening to tinny noises on his headphones and surreptitiously squeezing a spot. `I have never been so embarrassed in the whole of my life,' Derek continued.

`I've always been a great fan of Mike Trickle's,' said Veronica. She spoke quietly as though frightened that someone might overhear. She was wearing a bright yellow trouser suit and lime green shoes. `How could you do that to him?'

`We put a lot of effort into finding you a really nice home,' said Derek. `A lot of effort.'

`And this is how you repay us!' said Veronica. `That poor Mr Trickle. They say he's had a nervous breakdown! I'll never forgive you if that quiz programme of his doesn't come back.'

`No you didn't!' said Mrs Caldicot, speaking to her son. `The Twilight Years Rest Home was the only place we visited!'

`Now, please, mother!' said Derek, wearily. `I don't know what's got into you recently. Don't start arguing and being clever with me. The Twilight Years Rest Home is a very widely respected institution and Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor does a splendid job.'

`No it's not,' said Mrs Caldicot firmly. `It's a terrible place and Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor is a tyrant.'

An elderly couple who had been standing a few yards away staring wandered over and stopped next to Mrs Caldicot. The man coughed.

`Yes?' said Veronica, rather shortly. `Can we help you?'

`Are you Mrs Caldicot?' asked the man, speaking to Mrs Caldicot.

Mrs Caldicot said she was.

`Can I just shake your hand,' said the man. `I think you've taken a magnificent stand! I want to congratulate you and to wish you all the very best in your fight.' He held his hand out tentatively. Mrs Caldicot took it and shook it. The man beamed with delight. `We have no one else to fight for us,' he said quietly.

`We saw you on the television this morning,' said the woman. `You were marvellous.' Mrs Caldicot shook her hand too.

`That's very kind of you,' said Mrs Caldicot, who was rather overwhelmed by it all.

The elderly couple smiled a lot and backed away as though leaving the presence of royalty.

`You were on again this morning?' hissed Veronica, leaning forward in her chair and scowling at Mrs Caldicot.

`Yes.'

`Which programme?'

`I was on one of those breakfast programmes,' said Mrs Caldicot. `I can't remember which one. I never watch any of them.'

`Well I just hope you were better behaved this time,' said Veronica, leaning back and clasping her hands in her lap as though to say that she knew very well that Mrs Caldicot would not have behaved any better at all. `This can't go on, mother,' said Derek, very firmly. `You're making yourself a laughing stock.'

`Not to mention us,' added Veronica. `Though I don't suppose you think of us.'

`And how on earth are you expecting to pay for this hotel?' asked Derek.

`I'm glad you've got the money,' said Veronica, sarcastically. She looked around. `I'm sure that Derek and I wouldn't be able to afford to stay here.'

Just then the waiter returned with a tray. He put it down on the table in front of Mrs Caldicot. `Is that all, Mrs Caldicot?' he asked.

Mrs Caldicot smiled at him. `Thank you, yes,' she said. She took the proffered pen and bar statement and signed the latter with the former.

`Excuse me,' said a woman of about thirty five who had appeared as if from nowhere. `I'm sorry to bother you,' she apologised, `but could my daughters have your autograph? They saw you on the television.' Her two daughters, aged about nine or ten, appeared shyly from behind her back.

`Well,' said Mrs Caldicot, embarrassed. `I don't know...'

`Oh, please do,' said the woman. `I know it must be inconvenient being asked for your autograph all the time...'

`Have you got a piece of paper?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

The woman offered Mrs Caldicot a piece of Mettleham Grand Hotel stationery which she had obviously picked up from one of the writing tables.

`Do you have a pen?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

The woman rummaged in her handbag and handed Mrs Caldicot a pen. Mrs Caldicot put the notepaper down on the table, signed her name twice, once for each daughter, and then handed the notepaper and the pen back to the woman.

`Oh thank you!' said the woman, examining the signatures. She hurried her two daughters away.

`Well! Really!' said Veronica. `I've never seen anything like it! Behaving like a film star!' she turned to her husband. `Are you going to say anything to her?' she asked him.

`It's got to stop, mother,' said Derek. `I think we'd better take you back to The Twilight Years Rest Home.' He paused. `If you apologise I'm sure that Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor will take you back.'

Mrs Caldicot stared at him in astonishment. `Why on earth should I apologise?' she asked him, genuinely puzzled.

`Come on now, mother,' sighed Derek, as though running out of patience, `you've said some terrible things about him.'

`I've only told the truth,' protested Mrs Caldicot, wondering why honesty, which she had always thought of as a virtue, had suddenly come to be regarded as a sin. `Why on earth is everyone so frightened of the truth?'

`I'm sorry to bother you, Mrs Caldicot,' said one of the assistant managers, quietly. None of them had seen him creep up to where they were sitting. `But I've got someone from one of the Sunday newspapers on the telephone for you. I told him that you were in a meeting but he said it was very important and quite urgent.'

`Did he say what it was about?' Mrs Caldicot asked him.

The assistant manager shook his head. `No, madam,' he said, `but he did ask me to make it clear to you that what he had to say to you would be to your advantage.' He smiled.

`All right,' said Mrs Caldicot, `Thank you.' She stood up. `Excuse me for a moment,' she said to Derek and Veronica. `Help yourself to tea,' she said, nodding towards the tray. `I'll be back in just a minute.'

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`Is that Mrs Caldicot?' asked a gruff voice on the telephone. The voice had a faint Welsh lilt to it.

Mrs Caldicot confirmed that he was, indeed, speaking to Mrs Caldicot.

`My name is Jenkins,' said the gruff voice with the Welsh lilt. `I work for the Sunday Journal. I want to make you famous and give you lots of money.'

`I beg your pardon?' laughed Mrs Caldicot.

`Really!' said Jenkins. `I want to make you rich and famous.'

`Why on earth would you want to do that?'

`My editor saw you on the Mike Trickle Show yesterday evening and again on the breakfast programme this morning. He loved you. He wants us to run your life story in the paper.'

Mrs Caldicot laughed out loud.

`I'm serious,' said Jenkins. `What my editor wants he gets.'

`I don't think I want my life story in any paper,' protested Mrs Caldicot. `I don't think I want to be famous.'

`Well you may not be able to have your wish,' said Jenkins. `If you won't cooperate with us I know what my editor will do.'

`What?' asked Mrs Caldicot, slightly alarmed now. Although she was not a regular reader of the *Sunday Journal* she had seen it occasionally lining drawers and wrapped around chips. The newspaper had a reputation for publishing stories which the people involved didn't usually want printing.

`He'll tell me to put a couple of reporters onto your story and to dig out what we can,' said Jenkins. `There are two advantages to you if you cooperate with us. First, you get to tell us what you want us to print. And second we give you money.'

It did sound convincing and Mrs Caldicot certainly did need the money. `How much money?' she asked.

`We'll talk about that over lunch,' said Jenkins, very businesslike. `I'll meet you at one o'clock in the restaurant at your hotel. I've booked a table in my name. O.K.?'

`I suppose so,' agreed Mrs Caldicot, rather bowled over by it all.

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`What was all that about?' demanded Derek, when his mother returned from the telephone. He put down his tea cup.

`It was a man from the Sunday Journal,' explained Mrs Caldicot. `They want to publish my life story.' She picked up the teapot and poured herself a cup of tea.

`Oh my God!' said Veronica. `Oh my God! *The Sunday Journal*.' She looked around as though already expecting the strangers passing by to be staring at her.

`Wow!' said Jason, looking up and speaking. It had been so long since he had spoken that Mrs Caldicot did not recognise his voice. `*The Sunday Journal*!' he said.

`Shut up, Jason!' snapped Veronica.

Jason shut up and went back to his magazine. Mrs Caldicot was impressed by his hearing acuity for throughout this short exchange Jason had continued to listen to the tinny noise emanating from his closely fitting headphones.

`I hope you said `no', mother!' said Derek.

`I didn't,' said Mrs Caldicot, sipping at her tea. `I'm having lunch with a man called Mr Jenkins and I'm going to listen to what he has to say.'

`Tell her, Derek!' said Veronica firmly. `Tell her that unless she stops all this nonsense straight away...' She paused, searching in vain for a threat with which to complete the sentence.

`Tell me what?' said Mrs Caldicot.

`We won't have anything more to do with you!' said Veronica, defiantly. `We'll disown you. Tell her Derek.'

`You're being very selfish, mother,' whined Derek. `I've got a reputation to uphold. You're not making it easy for me.'

`I'm sorry if I'm an embarrassment to you,' said Mrs Caldicot, standing up. And then she walked briskly away.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It was still not ten o'clock when Mrs Caldicot got back to her room. She had three hours before she was due to have lunch with Mr Jenkins from the *Sunday Journal*. Searching for something to read she idly picked up a red plastic folder containing menus and details of the facilities that the Mettleham Grand Hotel had to offer. When she saw that the hotel had its own swimming pool and Sports and Leisure Complex she decided to see whether Miss Nightingale, Mrs Peterborough and the others wanted to try it out. Support for this unplanned excursion into fitness training was unanimous and fifteen minutes later a slightly apprehensive Mrs Caldicot, whose only previous practical experience of sport had been thirty minutes on a council owned grass tennis court some fifty five years previously, led a straggly, and rather untidy looking procession down the stairs and into the hotel Sports and Leisure Complex.

The swimming pool and gym area were empty, as they usually were in mid-morning, except for two middle aged women. Both were hoping to lose unwanted lumps and wrinkles, accumulated in thirty years of dissolute and lazy living, in as many minutes. Massaged, soothed, pampered and oiled they were now recovering from their exhausting ordeal and relaxing on reclining chairs by the side of the pool. Their husbands were busy upstairs in a meeting room on the first floor. They were trying to persuade the owner of a local supermarket chain to hire their agency's advertising and promotional skills.

The manager of the Sports and Leisure Complex, a plump woman of uncertain years who wore a white nylon coat, a white plastic name badge carrying both her title and her name, too much make-up and so much hair spray that if she had for some inexplicable reason decided to carry a pitcher of water on her head the bottom of the pitcher would have rested a good six inches from her skull, and who had been given the job because she evoked a feeling of empathy among the customers, paled when she saw Mrs Caldicot's army advancing towards her. Never before had she seen so many liver spots in the Sports and Leisure Complex. Her three slender, teenage assistants, all fully trained beauty therapists (boasting nearly seven months practical experience between them), lined up alongside her and wondered, not for the first time, whether they would not have been better advised to do the college course in dental hygiene.

`Can I help you, madam?' the manageress asked Mrs Caldicot, with slightly forced civility, wondering for just the briefest of suspicious moments whether or not she was playing unwilling hostess to an errant coach party.

`We would like to take advantage of your facilities, Mrs Townsend,' smiled Mrs Caldicot, leaning forward ten degrees and reading the manageress's name badge.

`Are you all staying in the hotel, madam?'

Mrs Caldicot confirmed that they were, indeed, all bona fide residents and, as such, entitled to enjoy the wholesome and uplifting facilities of the Sports and Leisure Complex.

The manageress lowered her eyes and her voice and leant forwards a degree or two. `Are all your...er...party...physically fit enough, do you think?' she asked, rather nervously.

`Oh, I think so,' smiled Mrs Caldicot. She looked around and noticed with a shimmer of apprehension that Mr Hewitt had unfastened the cord around his dressing gown and was clearly preparing to dive into the pool. Her apprehension was inspired by the knowledge that Mr Hewitt was almost certainly not the owner of any suitable swimwear. Her fear was fully justified when, a brief moment later, the dressing gown fell to the floor and Mr Hewitt's bony frame was revealed, guarded against accusations of indecency by nothing more substantial than a pair of grey and slightly moth-eaten underpants, the elasticated waistband of which had long since passed through `slack', gone past `baggy' and ventured into territory which could only be described as `unsafe'. She glanced towards the two reclining wives and noticed with some relief that in both cases their vision was substantially impeded by the presence of slices of cucumber. Mr Hewitt, uncluttered by such unnecessary emotional baggage as embarrassment, leapt gaily into the water and disappeared. When he reappeared a few moments later, spluttering and spitting, he announced amidst great gasps for breath that he could not swim. His audience froze in horror; fear and uncertainty turning them all into statues.

`Only joking!' cried Mr Hewitt a heart stopping moment later, wiping the water away from his eyes and splashing about in a determined and surprisingly athletic way.

Inspired by the fun his friend was clearly having Mr Livingstone unfastened his dressing gown and then realised, just in time, that he was still wearing his pyjamas. He walked over to where Mrs Caldicot was standing and whispered to her. `I haven't got any trunks!' he said.

Mrs Caldicot turned to the manageress. `Do you have any swimwear for sale?'

`Oh, yes, madam!' said the manageress. `We have a boutique.' She made this pronouncement with a considerable amount of pride, as though it were an exceptional facility for a Sports and Leisure Complex to boast; much in the same way, thought Mrs Caldicot, that she might have announced that the complex was equipped with a neutron particle accelerator or a planetarium. While Mr Hewitt happily splashed and spluttered his way from one end of the pool to the other Mr Livingstone, Mrs Caldicot, Miss Nightingale, Mrs Peterborough and the rest of the exiles went off in search of the boutique. During the next ten minutes they emerged in turn from the changing room dressed in the latest and most colourful swimwear.

`Put it all on my bill,' murmured Mrs Caldicot to the boutique assistant, a pretty but rather moody and sour faced girl who had fallen out with her boyfriend the night before, with the comforting knowledge that since she didn't have enough money to pay the bill that she already owed the Mettleham Grand Hotel the extra debt she was accumulating was of little real significance. She could never before remember feeling quite so liberated as far as money was concerned. Mr Caldicot had always been extraordinarily strict about financial matters, and as a lifelong supporter of the Micawber principle had always forbidden Mrs Caldicot to spend anything she didn't have in her purse. He had believed that money was to be savoured rather than spent but Mrs Caldicot was slowly discovering that whatever people may say about money not buying happiness money can be used to buy things, experiences and time - all of which can lead directly to happiness.

Having dipped a timid toe in the swimming pool water and deemed it too chilly for her taste Mrs Caldicot, proudly encircled by a colourful creation in a figure hugging fabric which revealed every curve and fold of her figure, headed for the massage tables. Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough followed her.

The hour which followed was almost certainly the most relaxing, most peaceful and most rewarding that Mrs Caldicot had ever enjoyed. She lay for what seemed an eternity on a comfortable couch while a pair of young hands gently kneaded and calmed her muscles. She bathed in oils of lavender and orange and she relaxed in the soothing warmth of the sauna.

She emerged onto the area around the pool feeling like a new, revitalised woman and she heard a strange noise coming from within herself as she watched Mr Hewitt and Mr Livingstone fill the jacuzzi with the foam from tiny bottles which they had smuggled down from their bathrooms. She couldn't remember ever hearing herself make the sound before and it took her a few moments to realise that it was a giggle.

She was giggling like a happy schoolgirl.

All around her the refugees from The Twilight Years Rest Home were resting, relaxing or enjoying themselves. Mrs Caldicot could never remember seeing them enjoy themselves so much. It gave her a warm feeling inside.

The magic of the moment was broken by what sounded like an argument developing. Mrs Caldicot turned around and saw that Mrs Townsend, the Sports and Leisure Complex manageress, had become embroiled in an inescapable and unwinnable argument with Mrs Peterborough.

`I don't think there's any need to take that tone,' said Mrs Townsend, who did not know enough about Mrs Peterborough to realise that the former Twilight Years Rest Home resident would have happily argued with a speak your weight machine.

`I don't think there's any need to take that tone,' mimicked Mrs Peterborough.

`Well!' said Mrs Townsend, putting her neatly manicured hands on her ample hips and throwing her head back.

`Well!' said Mrs Peterborough, equally indignantly, putting her own arthritic fingers on her bony hips.

`This is outrageous!' cried Mrs Townsend.

`This is outrageous!' said Mrs Peterborough.

`Isn't it a lovely day,' said Mrs Caldicot calmly, leaping in between the two of them and smiling at Mrs Peterborough.

`Isn't it a lovely day,' said Mrs Peterborough, smiling back at Mrs Caldicot.

`Why don't we find a couple of those nice chairs and sit down by the pool,' said Mrs Caldicot to Mrs Peterborough, heading off for a quiet spot at the far corner of the pool area.

`Find a couple of chairs and sit down by the pool,' repeated Mrs Peterborough, following her.

`Well!' said Mrs Townsend to no one. `I don't know, I'm sure.'

Mrs Caldicot turned her head and gave the manageress a big smile.

`Look at me!' called Miss Nightingale.

Mrs Caldicot turned her head and looked. Miss Nightingale was sitting on an exercise bicycle. Mrs Caldicot walked over to see her followed closely by Mrs Peterborough.

`That looks fun!' said Mrs Caldicot.

`It is,' agreed Miss Nightingale. She leant her head to one side. `Though it's a little bit disappointing.'

`Why's that?' asked Mrs Caldicot. Mrs Peterborough climbed onto a second bicycle.

`No bell,' said Miss Nightingale. `I used to have a bicycle. It had a very loud bell.'

`You can make bell noises yourself!' Mrs Caldicot pointed out.

`Can I?'

`Yes.'

With a broad smile Miss Nightingale rang an imaginary bell. `Ring, ring!' she cried. `Ring, ring!'

`Ring, ring!' said Mrs Peterborough happily.

Mrs Caldicot smiled at them both and found somewhere quiet to sit down.

Twenty minutes later the reception desk sent a porter to tell Mrs Caldicot that a gentleman was waiting for her in the dining room.

As she left she could hear Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough.

`Ring, ring!'

`Ring, ring!'

CHAPTER NINETEEN

`You don't look a bit like your voice!' said Mrs Caldicot to Mr Jenkins.

`What should look like?' asked the newspaperman with a grin.

`Oh, I don't know,' said Mrs Caldicot. She thought for a moment. `You sounded, well, much more earnest on the telephone.'

Jenkins was tall and broad shouldered, slightly balding (though the hair that he did have was much longer than Mr Caldicot ever wore his hair) and had a luxuriant moustache and a permanent twinkle in his eye. He looked rather distinguished but he definitely did not look earnest. He was in his early sixties. He wore an expensive looking dark blue suit but the jacket was rumpled and creased because he hadn't bothered to take it off on the train. Mr Caldicot had always kept a wooden coat hanger in his briefcases so that he could hang his jacket up when he was travelling. Jenkins' white shirt looked expensive, it had a small monogram on the breast, but his red silk tie was carelessly knotted.

He was sitting on a stool at the bar when Mrs Caldicot came down from her room where she had changed her clothes, brushed her hair and put some lipstick on. She apologised for being late. He smiled and said it really didn't matter and asked her what she wanted to drink. When she asked him what he was drinking he told her it was straight gin. She asked the bartender to put a little vermouth into hers because she didn't want to get `squiffy'. Jenkins put his head back and laughed. She had never seen anyone laugh like that before.

`I've never heard anyone use that word!' he said. `Squiffy!' he repeated, as though he liked the sound of the word, and he laughed again.

`You don't have a notebook or a tape recorder,' she pointed out. `I thought you'd probably have both.'

Jenkins took a gulp out of his glass and glowered at her in a mock serious sort of way. `I don't actually write anything,' he told her. `I'm far too important for that.' He slid off his bar stool and she realised that he was even taller than she'd thought. `Shall we go through and eat?' He had a huge pile of newspapers with him which he picked up off the floor.

`Are those all today's papers?' asked Mrs Caldicot. `Yes,' said Jenkins. `And I haven't finished reading them yet.'

`Are you really important?' she asked him, as they walked towards the dining room.

He looked down at her, started to say something and then changed his mind. `In my world,' he said and shrugged. He paused. `I meant what I said on the telephone,' he told her. `I can make you rich and famous.'

The head waiter met them at the door to the restaurant, recognised Mrs Caldicot and escorted them to their table.

`Why on earth would I want to be famous?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

`Some people like being famous for the sake of it,' said Jenkins. `They like strangers recognising them in the street. They like to get the best tables in restaurants. There's a certain cachet in being a celebrity which some people find attractive, even irresistible.'

`Someone asked me for my autograph this morning,' she said. `I found it rather embarrassing.' The waiter pulled back a chair and she sat down.

`You might get used to it,' said Jenkins, sitting down opposite her. `Even hooked on it.'

`I doubt it,' said Mrs Caldicot.

`What about the money? Are you interested in money?'

`At the moment I am,' admitted Mrs Caldicot. `I still don't quite know how it happened but I've got sixteen rooms in this place to pay for.' She accepted a menu from a white-coated waiter. `And if and when we leave here I don't have the faintest idea what I'm going to do with Miss Nightingale, Mrs Peterborough, Mr Livingstone and all the rest of them.'

`Those are the people who came with you from `The Twilight Zone Rest Home'?'

`Years,' corrected Mrs Caldicot, laughing.

`Years?'

`You said `The Twilight Zone Rest Home',' said Mrs Caldicot. `It's The Twilight Years Rest Home. And, yes, those are the people who came with me.'

`Are they happy here?'

`Yes, I think so. Though Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough would like bells on their exercise bicycles.'

Jenkins laughed and pointed to the menu. `Shall we order?'

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Forty minutes later Jenkins sat back, picked the rumpled napkin off his lap and tossed it onto the table. `I enjoyed that!' he said. He had eaten, with evident enjoyment, a huge bowl of soup, a mixed grill, and a large plateful of cheese and biscuits. Mrs Caldicot had eaten a prawn cocktail and a cheese salad but had obtained considerable pleasure from watching Mr Jenkins. Mr Caldicot had never really enjoyed his food.

`I don't think I've ever drunk so much wine!' said Mrs Caldicot, feeling not unpleasantly lightheaded. `Do you newspaper people always drink so much?'

Jenkins looked surprised. `We only had two bottles between us!'

`That's a lot!'

`There's evidence now to show that wine is good for your health,' said Jenkins. `Stops you getting heart attacks; that's what our doc says.'

`Your doc?'

`The chap who writes our medical column. He says that's why the French don't get heart disease.'

`Because they drink lots of wine?'

Jenkins nodded.

`Maybe it's because they all die of cirrhosis before they can get heart disease.'

Jenkins laughed. `I like our doctor's theory better.' He pushed his chair back an inch or two. `Shall we have coffee in the lounge?' A waiter, who had been hovering nearby, leapt forwards to attend to Mrs Caldicot's chair.

`That would be nice,' said Mrs Caldicot.

They walked slowly through the restaurant to the lounge. Jenkins took her arm to help steer her in between the tables and Mrs Caldicot, who felt more than a little `squiffy', was grateful.

`I enjoyed that very much,' she said, as they settled down into easy chairs. `Thank you.'

`You hardly ate anything!'

`I enjoyed watching you eat.'

`I like my food.'

`I could see that!' Mrs Caldicot blushed. `Oh, I'm sorry,' she apologised. `Was that rude?'

`Not at all!' laughed Jenkins.

`It's very nice eating in a smart restaurant,' said Mrs Caldicot. `I haven't done much of that you know.'

`You should do more,' said Jenkins, serious for a moment.

`I can't afford this sort of life,' said Mrs Caldicot, equally seriously.

`You could,' said Jenkins. He took a metal cigar tube out of his inside jacket pocket. `Do you mind if I smoke?'

Mrs Caldicot shook her head. She didn't like cigarettes but she quite enjoyed the smell of cigars. A waiter brought their coffee and Mrs Caldicot told him that she would pour. While Jenkins took his cigar out of its protective case, snipped the end off and lit it, she poured two cups of coffee, unwrapped the chocolate that was in her saucer and popped it into her mouth. Jenkins, his cigar alight, took the chocolate from his saucer and put it into hers. She mouthed a silent thank you.

`Eight million people saw you on the Mike Trickle show,' said Jenkins, leaning back in his chair and crossing his legs. `And another million and a half saw you on the breakfast programme.' He paused and puffed at his cigar. `You're big news.'

`My fifteen minutes of fame,' said Mrs Caldicot.

`Not necessarily,' Jenkins corrected her.

Mrs Caldicot sipped at her coffee, tried to resist the temptation to unwrap the other chocolate and waited.

`We want your life story. How did a perfectly ordinary woman...,' he looked at Mrs Caldicot and made an apologetic gesture. She dismissed the gesture with one of her own. `Perfectly ordinary you are not,' he said, correcting himself. `What sort of woman ends up leading a revolution in a nursing home, living in a four star hotel with heaven knows how many old people and humiliating two TV hosts?'

`Golly!' said Mrs Caldicot. `When you put it like that...'

`We'll pay you £10,000 for your story,' said Jenkins. `We'll run it over two, maybe three, weeks; we'll run what you tell us and we'll protect you from the rat pack.'

Mrs Caldicot felt faint. She had never envisaged her story being worth that sort of money. `What's a rat pack?' she asked, trying hard to stay in touch with reality.

`Other journalists,' explained Jenkins. `When your story appears you'll be a major star. You'll have reporters from Germany, Japan and the States clamouring for your story. We can handle all that for you.'

`I don't know,' said Mrs Caldicot in a very faint voice which she hardly recognised as her own. `It's a risky thing to do,' she thought. `What if they make me out to be a terrible person? And do I really want to be recognised and talked about in the supermarket?' She looked at Jenkins but didn't say anything. `I'm 71,' she thought to herself. `I could have a quarter of my life left. Just because I've wasted the first three quarters doesn't mean that I've got to waste the rest being careful. £10,000 is a lot of money. And what have I got to lose?' She realised that she wanted to get her money's worth out of life and she decided to say `yes'.

`Yes.' she said. `All right. I'll do it.'

`It's a fair offer,' said Jenkins. `I'll be honest with you, when I came here I was going to offer you £3,000.' He leant forward, `You would have taken it, wouldn't you?'

At first Mrs Caldicot didn't know what to say. She had no idea how much money her story was worth to a newspaper. She hadn't really thought of it as being worth anything. In the end she was just honest. `Probably,' she admitted. `Yes, I suppose so.'

`I'll tell the editor that you pushed me up to ten,' shrugged Jenkins. `Easy. It's not my money.'

`But why?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

`I like you,' grinned Jenkins. `And I'm not as gruff as my voice!' He puffed at his cigar. `Have we got a deal?'

`Yes,' said Mrs Caldicot, in a very quiet voice. Jenkins had to lean across to hear her. `Yes!' she said. `Thank you.'

`Right!' said Jenkins. `Let's celebrate with some bubbly.' He waved an arm for the waiter.

Mrs Caldicot, already feeling more than `squiffy' thought she probably needed to have more food in her stomach if she was going to drink any more alcohol and so she picked up the second chocolate, unwrapped it and popped it into her mouth.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Mrs Caldicot woke up at six o'clock on Sunday morning, used the tea making facilities in her room and waited for the porter to push her copy of the *Sunday Journal* underneath the door.

When the newspaper finally arrived it came through so speedily, flicked skilfully on its way by the porter's agile fingers, that it startled her. She stared at it for several moments without moving. She hardly dared to pick it up and she could feel her heart beating uncomfortably rapidly. She had never been frightened by a newspaper before.

The reporter from the *Sunday Journal* had arrived the day after Mrs Caldicot had lunch with Jenkins and had stayed for two days. To her surprise the reporter had been a woman; or rather a girl. Everything about the *Sunday Journal* seemed to surprise her. She had expected a middle aged man in a grubby suit. But she got a svelte young woman dressed in a simple Chanel dress who had turned the head of every businessman in the hotel bar. She had expected a rather beery, leery reporter with a love of football and scandal and a penchant for cheap thrillers and dirty movies. But she got a sophisticated graduate with a degree in French Literature and a fondness for seventeenth century poetry. She had expected questions that would make her feel uncomfortable and embarrassed. She had been ready to say `No, stop, enough, go away!' But the girl reporter talked to her like a friend and asked her nothing she did not talk about easily and comfortably.

Cautiously, almost reluctantly, Mrs Caldicot stood up, moved forwards, bent down and picked up the newspaper. She took it back to her chair and sat down with it on her lap. Still she didn't look at it.

When she did finally look down she saw her face staring out at her from a panel on the right hand side of the front page. It was a lovely photograph. Above the photograph her name was printed in large bold letters. Below it the paper promised all. The inside story. The truth. Mrs Caldicot stared at it and felt her mouth go dry. In that moment she wished she had not had anything to do with the *Sunday Journal*. She wished she had never cut the chrysanthemums; never refused to eat Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor's cabbage; never agreed to go on television.

But she had done all those things. It was too late now to wish that she had not.

With trembling fingers she opened the paper, wondering whether the guilty vicar and the scoutmaster's wife, the naughty comedian with a penchant for young boys, the blushing TV starlet with a history she would have liked to forget, the compromised politician and the stripping housewife from Rochdale were at this moment sitting in their kitchens sharing her anxiety. How many of them, she wondered, were ensconced in lonely hotel rooms. Or was she the only one who had to face this ordeal alone. She felt an affinity for them all; a forgiveness and an affection for every one of them. Perhaps, she thought, there should be an organisation for people who have had their private, and most personal details discussed in the Sunday newspapers. A telephone number to ring for support. Meetings to attend. Social workers to give endless advice.

But would she be entitled to support and comfort and advice? She was there willingly. She had exposed herself to public scrutiny for money. She doubted if the politician or the television actress accused of infidelity had been paid for their downfall. The vicar wouldn't have a cheque for £10,000 to settle his nerves, help soothe away the inconvenience and pay for his ruined life.

Eventually she reached her story. They had spread it over a double page with a promise of more to come. The girl reporter's name was there but in much smaller letters than her own. She remembered the money they had agreed to pay her. It seemed a lot of money for so little. And yet was it so little? She looked at the photographs. A picture of her alone. A picture of her with Kitty. There was a photograph of the outside of The Twilight Years Rest Home with an angry looking Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor bearing down on the photographer with a big stick. She even recognised the stick. It usually stood in the hall-stand. Abandoned, no doubt, by some long lost resident. She read the captions and then read the little snippets that the sub editor had picked out to highlight in boxes. It was her life, laid bare for everyone to see. She felt that it was worse, far worse, than being seen naked in public. She started to read the story from the end and as she did so Kitty, who had been asleep on the bed, walked over to her and curled up on her lap.

There was nothing in there that wasn't true; nothing that she was ashamed of: but it felt strange to read about her private moments, private thoughts and private apprehensions in such a public place. She felt exposed and vulnerable.

The telephone rang.

The sudden, harsh, noise startled her. Kitty raised her head.

She put down the newspaper and picked up the receiver.

`Hello. What do you think?' It was Jenkins.

`I'm terrified,' said Mrs Caldicot.

`I thought you would be.' He sounded kinder than he usually did on the telephone.

`It makes me feel naked.'

`I know. Have you read it?'

`Not properly. I've looked at it.'

`Any complaints?'

She paused. `Not about what it says. It seems fair.' She caught sight of the digital clock next to the telephone. It was still not seven o'clock. A thought occurred to her. `How did you know I would be awake? How did you know I would have seen the paper?'

Jenkins laughed.

`I suppose everyone's the same,' said Mrs Caldicot.

`In London you can buy the Sunday papers at the railway stations on a Saturday evening,' said Jenkins. `Some people come down especially to buy them.'

`I didn't know that.'

`I know. I thought of telling you. But decided you'd probably rather be where you are when you first saw the paper.'

`I don't know.'

`Don't know what?'

`Whether I would rather have seen it here or been in London.'

`Have you had breakfast yet?'

`No. Oh no. I won't dare go down. I'll have to get them to send something up. I don't think I can eat anyway.'

`Go down,' said Jenkins firmly. `Have your breakfast in the restaurant.'

`But everyone will be staring at me!'

`They won't. I know we go on about our circulation but not everyone reads the *Sunday Journal*. And even the people who do read it won't necessarily recognise you.'

Mrs Caldicot said nothing.

`Really,' said Jenkins. `One in five adults in the country sees our paper. Some of those only read the sport pages. Some just look for the juicy, sexy scandals. One in five will read the story about you in any detail. And less than one in ten of those will remember your name an hour after they've read the story.'

`Really?'

`The number who will actually recognise you from your photograph is minuscule!'

`I suppose I could change my hair a bit,' said Mrs Caldicot, who still didn't really believe this.

`Just don't wear anything you're wearing in any of the photos,' advised Jenkins.

`Will this feeling go away?'

`How do you feel?'

`As if I've been violated. Much worse than having been on television.'

`Do you wish you hadn't done it?'

`Yes. At the moment.'

`What are you going to do today?'

`I don't know.'

`Would you come out with me for some lunch?'

Mrs Caldicot was taken aback. She didn't know what to say and so didn't say anything.

`Are you still there?'

`Yes,' she said. `Yes. I'd like that. But why? I mean, haven't you got a family to be with?'

`I don't want you to be alone,' said Jenkins. `Professional responsibility. And I'd prefer to have lunch with you.'

`What about your wife? Won't she mind?'

`I doubt it. She lives in Cornwall with a potter.'

`Oh. I'm sorry.'

`Don't be. It's been over a long time.' Jenkins paused. `Go and have some breakfast. I'll pick you up about eleven thirty and we'll drive out into the country somewhere.'

`All right!' she heard herself say. `Thank you.' She put the telephone down.

It rang again. It was the receptionist with her early morning call.

`You asked for an early morning call at seven,' said the anonymous but kindly sounding voice. `I'm sorry it's a few minutes late but I couldn't get through. Your phone was busy.'

`I was talking to someone.'

`It's five minutes past seven now,' said the receptionist.

`Thank you.' said Mrs Caldicot. `What time does breakfast start.'

`Half past seven on Sundays.'

`Thank you,' said Mrs Caldicot. She put the telephone down, gently moved Kitty back onto the bed, went into the bathroom, bathed, put on her make-up, found a beige jumper and tweed skirt that she hadn't been photographed in and got dressed. By the time she'd done all that it was twenty five minutes past seven. She left her room and went down to breakfast. It was, she thought, probably one of the bravest things she'd ever done. It was also, she knew, one of the most sensible. If she had stayed hidden in her room she would have probably never left it.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

At breakfast no one had as much as looked in her direction. She knew this for a fact because she had been waiting for people to stare at her, to nudge one another and to whisper about her.

But no one did. She ate her croissants and her muesli and she drank two cups of coffee quite uninterrupted and unthreatened by her notoriety.

When she went back up to her room three-quarters of an hour later she was feeling much happier. That was when Derek telephoned.

`What on earth are you trying to do?' he spluttered. He then said something completely incoherent. He sounded as if he was about to burst a blood vessel.

`Slow down, dear,' said Mrs Caldicot, calmly. `What's the matter?'

`You know damned well what the matter is!' exploded Derek. `This rubbish in the *Sunday Journal*!'

`Why do you think it's rubbish?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

`It's in the *Sunday Journal*!' said Derek. `Everything in the *Sunday Journal* is rubbish!'

`Don't be silly, dear,' said Mrs Caldicot. `That's just prejudice. Have you read it?'

`Of course I've read it!' said Derek. `What was all that nonsense about my father?'

`Only the truth, dear,' said Mrs Caldicot quietly.

`Who do you think is interested in all that stuff?' demanded Derek.

`I don't know,' confessed Mrs Caldicot honestly.

`You have your picture taken and tell your life story as if you're a film star!' complained Derek. `It's not as if you're a woman of any significance!'

`That's what the people at the *Sunday Journal* said,' replied Mrs Caldicot coldly. `It took me quite a time to persuade them to print it. They wanted to do a story about someone interesting.'

`I didn't mean that,' said Derek, almost apologetically. `But you know what I mean.'

`I know what you mean,' said Mrs Caldicot, unmollified. `I'm not of any significance.'

`Oh stop being so selfish, mother!' said Derek. `Why don't you think of someone else for a change?'

`You, perhaps?'

`Yes! How do you think all this makes me look? I'm trying to build up a reputation as a serious businessman and you're making me look silly.'

`I'm sorry you feel that way,' said Mrs Caldicot. `I didn't think the story made either of us look silly at all.'

`Oh there's no point in trying to talk to you!' said Derek angrily. `I've got to go. I've got better things to do than talk nonsense with you.'

`What is it, dear? Have you got to wash the car or are you playing golf?'

Mrs Caldicot winced as Derek slammed the telephone down. Then she realised that she felt good, better than she'd felt all morning. If she'd ever learned how to whistle she would have whistled. She went round to check on Miss Nightingale, Mrs Peterborough and the others before Jenkins turned up to take her out to lunch.

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`You're looking brighter than you sounded this morning!' said Jenkins. He was still wearing his expensive but slightly rumpled suit. He smelt faintly of aftershave; a modest indication that this was at least partly a social occasion.

`I feel brighter!' said Mrs Caldicot. She had abandoned the tweed skirt and beige jumper and was wearing a favourite pale green dress which had a dozen buttons down the back. She'd worn it for some of the photographs that had appeared in the *Sunday Journal*.

`What happened this morning?' asked Jenkins as they walked through the hotel reception area and out to the car park. He recognised the dress but did not say so.

`Nothing!' said Mrs Caldicot. She paused. `Well, that's not true. My son rang. But apart from that you don't seem to have any readers around here.'

`What did your son say?' asked Jenkins. `Did he object?'

`Oh, he objected all right!' said Mrs Caldicot. `But I've decided that I don't care.'

`Good for you!' said Jenkins.

There was a sudden noise, sounding like a good many knuckles being rapped against window panes. Mrs Caldicot and Jenkins both turned. Lined up against the glass walls of the swimming pool area Mrs Caldicot could see Mrs Peterborough, Miss Nightingale and the rest of her gang of refugees. They were all grinning, waving furiously and rapping their knuckles against the glass. They were wearing their new swim suits.

`Good heavens! Said Jenkins. `Who on earth are they?'

`My friends from The Twilight Years Rest Home,' explained Mrs Caldicot.

Jenkins looked embarrassed. `Oh, yes. Sorry! What are they up to?'

`They discovered the Sport and Leisure Complex,' explained Mrs Caldicot. `Remember? I told you that Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough wanted bells for the exercise bicycles. I think they're planning to spend the day there.' She looked back at the grinning faces and waved. `It's funny,' she said, `when you're young you know you're getting older because the policemen and the supermarket managers and then the doctors look younger and younger, but you know you're really old when the old people look young.'

Jenkins looked at her and smiled and then stopped alongside a large but dirty motor car. It had been blue when it had left the showroom but, spattered with mud and oil and dirt had become a road weary grey. `Close your eyes to the mess,' he said. `I keep meaning to get it cleaned...' his voice trailed off apologetically. He opened his door and turned the key. Mrs Caldicot waited for him to reach across and open the passenger door. The inside of the car was a mess too; there was a pile of newspapers strewn across the back seat and the floor was covered with sweet papers and cigar ash, cigar packets and spent matches.

`It's open,' he told her. He reached over to the back seat and tried to tidy up the newspapers. `I'm sorry,' he said again. `I should have cleaned all this stuff up.'

`It's all right,' said Mrs Caldicot. `I quite like it.' Mr Caldicot had been very particular about the inside of his car. He didn't allow smoking and he always had one of those little perfumed cards hanging from the driving mirror. Mrs Caldicot had always thought they made the Vauxhall smell of lavatories.

`I've booked a table at a pub I know,' said Jenkins. `It's by the river, and if the weather holds we can eat outside. It's very pretty. I think you'll like it.' He put the car into gear and shot out of the Mettleham Grand Hotel car park as though making a getaway from a bank robbery. Mrs Caldicot, pressed against the back of her seat, struggled to fasten her safety belt. `It's very kind of you to look after me like this,' she said trying to relax as Jenkins swung the big car out onto the road between a small Ford and a van.

`All part of the service,' smiled Jenkins but somehow Mrs Caldicot knew it wasn't. He drove at a speed which both terrified and thrilled Mrs Caldicot, and although he took chances and seemed oblivious to the existence and rights of other road users he drove with an easy, nonchalant skill. He pointed out strange landmarks. Not dull things like buildings of minor architectural interest or the sites of Roman forts but a house where there had been a murder, a church where the vicar had been caught misbehaving with the choir mistress and a lonely field where a body had been found. He was an inexhaustible fund of wonderful trivia. Mrs Caldicot didn't believe half of it but that didn't matter in the slightest. Jenkins was funny, he made her laugh. She realised yet again, with an aching sadness, that Mr Caldicot had never, ever made her laugh.

God was smiling on them. As they pulled into the tiny car park next to the riverside pub the sun shone brightly. They sat at a white metal table, with the clear river running just a few feet away from them and ordered trout cooked with almonds, locally grown vegetables and a bottle of cool, dry white wine. Mrs Caldicot could not help remembering that Mr Caldicot had always refused to order wine in restaurants. He said they charged too much for it. They ate strawberries in meringue nests drenched in thick cream, drank double brandies and sipped dark, thick, bitter coffee.

Afterwards they walked in dappled shade by the river. Jenkins took his jacket off and carried it over his shoulder with his finger hooked into the loop at the back. They sat on mossy covered rocks underneath a huge oak tree, threw twigs into the water and watched them float down river. They watched, in silent amazement, as a kingfisher dived into the water and came up with a small fish in its beak. And then they walked slowly back along the bank.

Jenkins talked to her about his work; about the bizarre life he lived, close enough to power to smell it but just far enough away to remain uncorrupted by it; about the people he had met; about the stories he had worked on and the books he wanted to write when he retired from newspapers and bought a cottage in the country.

And he listened to her too. He asked her things and seemed genuinely interested in the answers. For the first time in years Mrs Caldicot felt important as a person rather than a cook, a laundress and a housekeeper. Slowly she realised what she had missed in her loveless and friendless marriage; she had shared her life with a man, but the sharing had been shallow and superficial. It hadn't been the way it could have been, should have been. She had, she realised, missed having someone to share things with; missed having someone to whom she could say, `Hey, you'll never guess what happened to me today!'; missed having someone she could laugh with; missed having someone she could wait for to tell about a funny story she'd seen in the paper or heard about on the radio; missed having someone with whom she could share the good, the bad and the trivial in her life. She realised that if she had shared her life with someone like Jenkins she would have doubled the amount of joy she felt and halved the amount of despair she had had to endure.

Jenkins drove her back to her hotel in the dusk and when they said goodbye he reached out and held her hand for a brief moment. He moved forwards and for an instant she thought he was going to kiss her cheek but he didn't. `Goodnight,' he said softly. `It hasn't been too bad a day, after all, has it?'

`No,' she said, smiling. `It hasn't been too bad at all.'

And as she watched him drive away she realised that she wouldn't have minded if he had kissed her goodnight.

Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough were waiting for her in the reception area.

`We had a wonderful time!' said Miss Nightingale, her eyes full of excitement.

`We had a wonderful time!' agreed Mrs Peterborough.

`It was a pity you couldn't stay here,' said Miss Nightingale, speaking as rapidly as she could. `We all had a massage and we spent four hours in the jacuzzi! I was all wrinkly when I got out.'

`I was all wrinkly when I got out!' said Mrs Peterborough.

`It was so sad that you had to go out!' said Miss Nightingale.

`It was so sad that you had to go out!' said Mrs Peterborough.

`I know,' said Mrs Caldicot. `It was a shame, wasn't it?'

But that was a lie.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Mrs Caldicot's room at the Mettleham Grand Hotel seemed quite large when there was only her in it but with all the refugees from The Twilight Years Rest Home crowded in with her the room was as crammed as an excursion train on a bank holiday.

`We can't stay here much longer,' said Mrs Caldicot when she finally managed to get them to stop talking.

There was a communal, almost orchestrated sigh of sadness.

`It's very expensive,' said Mrs Caldicot. `The TV company paid for our first night but since then the bills have been mounting. And the money I got from the *Sunday Journal* won't last forever.' She paused. `We've got to find somewhere else,' she concluded.

`We don't expect you to pay our bills!' said Mr Livingstone. `Certainly not!' protested Mr Hewitt, and although you could not describe him as indignant there was certainly a touch of hurt in his voice.

`Certainly not!' agreed Mrs Peterborough.

`We can all pay our own bills,' said Mr Livingstone.

`We've done our sums,' said Mr Hewitt. `And there's no problem. It cost us more to stay at The Twilight Years Rest Home than it costs us to stay here.'

`We're just going to arrange for our banks to pay the hotel instead of Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor,' said Mr Livingstone.

`Oh!' said Mrs Caldicot, quite taken aback. She hadn't expected any of this. She had never really thought about the fact that the other residents of The Twilight Years Rest Home had been paying fairly hefty amounts of money to stay there. She found herself wondering why they had all allowed themselves to be pushed around and bullied by Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor when they had been paying the bills and had a right to expect good service. She wondered how many thousands of old people up and down the country were similarly ill treated.

`But we'll move if you want us to,' said Mrs Torridge agreeably. Mrs Torridge was, at 63 years of age, probably one of the youngest of the group. She had been put into the Twilight Years Rest Home by her daughter and son-in-law who had immediately sold her home, pocketed the money and run off to New Zealand. Unbeknown to them, however, she had anticipated this example of filial disloyalty and stashed a more than adequate sum in gilt edged bonds. Mrs Torridge was joyfully overweight and indomitably cheerful. She paused. `As long as there's a jacuzzi!' she laughed. Mrs Caldicot could see the fluorescent orange of Mrs Torridge's new bathing suit spilling out from the canvas holdall beside her chair. There was, thought Mrs Caldicot, probably enough material in the bathing costume to make a tent for the average family of four. Mrs Caldicot had never seen anything quite as remarkable as the sight of Mrs Torridge in a bathing suit; it was a larger than life vision which was at once both intimidating and cheering.

`I had wondered about looking for somewhere for us to rent,' said Mrs Caldicot, pushing the vision of Mrs Torridge to one side. `A large house maybe?' She paused and looked around. Everyone was trying to look interested but they could not hide their disappointment.

`We don't have to move,' she added. `Especially if there isn't a problem over the money.' She looked around and waited for someone else to say something. `But if we found somewhere of our own we could look after Miss Kershaw, Mr Oppenshaw, Mrs Entwhistle and the others.' These were the patients who had been too ill to move when Mrs Caldicot and the others had walked out of The Twilight Years Rest Home. `And don't forget,' she warned, `if any of us gets ill the Mettleham Grand Hotel will probably tell us to leave. If we had our own place we wouldn't have to worry about anything like that.'

There was a long silence.

`I think Mrs Caldicot is right,' said Mr Hewitt.

`She's right,' agreed Mr Livingstone.

`She's right!' said Mrs Peterborough.

`Could we find somewhere with a jacuzzi, do you think?' asked Mrs Torridge, speaking in a tiny little girl voice.

`Could we find somewhere with a jacuzzi?' asked Mrs Peterborough.

`I'm sure we could have one installed,' said Mrs Caldicot. `Even if we can't find a place that has got one already.' She paused. `And we could maybe find somewhere with a garden so that Mr Hewitt could show us how to grow our own vegetables!'

`That would be wonderful!' said Mr Hewitt, who had spent months unsuccessfully trying to persuade Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor to allow him to dig up a small area of lawn for the growing of decent vegetables.

Mrs Caldicot turned towards Mr Livingstone. `And if we had our own place you would be able to entertain us with musical evenings!'

Mr Livingstone beamed.

`I think we should leave it all up to Mrs Caldicot,' said Mrs Torridge. `I'm happy to go where she goes.'

`I agree!' said Mr Hewitt.

`I agree!' cried Mrs Peterborough, excitedly and noisily.

This sealed it. There were enthusiastic mumblings of affirmation from the others and it was agreed that while Mrs Caldicot planned their future the rest of them would go down to the Sports and Leisure Complex and enjoy themselves.

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The moment they had gone Mrs Caldicot picked up the telephone and dialled Derek's number.

Derek was out and the receptionist put Mrs Caldicot through to a girl called Ingrid.

`I'm looking for a house,' Mrs Caldicot explained to Ingrid. `It must be quite large. An old hotel would be perfect.' She explained that she wanted somewhere with a large number of bedrooms, a little land of its own and several large reception rooms.

`Do you want to buy or rent, madam?' asked Ingrid.

`I had thought of renting,' said Mrs Caldicot. `But I suppose we could buy somewhere if the right place came up.' There was a pause while Ingrid wrote this down. Mrs Caldicot thought that Ingrid was probably the sort of person who would lick her pencil tip and then stick her tongue out of the corner of her mouth while she wrote.

`Do you have anywhere to sell, madam?' asked Ingrid eventually.

`No,' said Mrs Caldicot. `We're living in a hotel at the moment.'

`What's the name, madam?' asked Ingrid.

`My name?'

`Yes, please, madam.'

Mrs Caldicot told her.

`Would you spell that please, madam?' asked Ingrid.

Mrs Caldicot spelt her name.

`Thank you,' said Ingrid. `I'll pass the information on to Mr Caldicot when he returns from his meeting.'

`How do you spell that?' asked Mrs Caldicot, mischievously.

Ingrid spelt out Mr Caldicot's name without comprehension, irony or curiosity.

`Thank you,' said Mrs Caldicot.

`I'm sure he'll be in touch with you quite quickly,' said Ingrid, her voice laden with artificial sincerity and warmth.

`Thank you,' said Mrs Caldicot. She felt quite certain that Ingrid was a very attractive young woman.

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Mrs Caldicot put her swimming costume and dressing gown on, picked up a towel and went downstairs to the Sports and Leisure Complex.

Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough were sitting on the two exercise bicycles, ringing brand new shiny bells and happily waving to everyone who passed by. Mrs Torridge was taking up half the jacuzzi and Mr Hewitt and Mr Livingstone were splashing about in the swimming pool. Mrs Caldicot wandered over to the exercise bicycles.

`Where did you get those from?' she asked Miss Nightingale, nodding towards the bells.

`They were here when we arrived,' replied Miss Nightingale happily.

`Hello, Mrs Cardew!' smiled the manageress, her capped and polished teeth sparkling in the powerful artificial light of the pool area. `The bells were a gift from *The Sunday Journal*, she explained. She took a small gift card out of her white nylon overall and handed it to Mrs Caldicot. `From the *Sunday Journal*', it read. `With best wishes'.

Mrs Caldicot smiled at her and handed the card back. She turned as someone tapped her on the shoulder.

`You're on the television!' said a portly, middle aged woman in a mauve dressing gown. Her hair was wet and she was carrying a rolled up copy of *Vogue* magazine under her arm. It was an accusation rather than a statement and it certainly wasn't a question. A weedy, timid looking man stood behind her. He had no hair of any significance and carried a folded newspaper and a paperback book in his right hand.

Mrs Caldicot admitted, with some reluctance, that she had, indeed, been on the television.

`You're Jessica Richardson, aren't you!' said the woman, decisively.

`No,' said Mrs Caldicot. `I'm afraid I'm not.' She vaguely recognised the name and rather thought that it belonged to an actress who appeared in a soap opera.

`Oh yes you are!' insisted the woman with a conspiratorial wink. She turned round and spoke to her husband. `It's her!' she whispered.

`It's not,' said Mrs Caldicot. But this denial was simply ignored.

`Tell me,' said the woman leaning closer. She smelt strongly of talcum powder. `Tell me, what's Albert Peters really like?'

`I'm afraid I don't know,' said Mrs Caldicot.

`Oh go on with you!' said the woman with another wink. `I know who you are. I've seen you on the television.' She wasn't very good at winking and when she did it both her eyes closed. `He's lovely, isn't he? Do you get on, you know, in real life?'

`Yes,' said Mrs Caldicot, rather wearily, answering the sequence of questions with a single word.

`Can I have your autograph?' asked the woman. She took the magazine from under her arm and thrust it towards Mrs Caldicot.

`I'm afraid I haven't got a pen.'

`Norman. A pen.' said the woman. Her voice changed dramatically when she spoke to her husband. She talked to him as a child would speak to a naughty doll. The weedy looking man produced a ball point pen from his dressing gown pocket, stepped forward and offered it to the woman. The woman took it and handed the pen and the magazine to Mrs Caldicot.

`What would you like me to put?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

`From Jessica Richardson to Emily Turner,' said the woman. `You can add `with lots of love' if you like.'

Mrs Caldicot wrote the prescribed phrase and added the love. Then she handed the pen and the magazine back to the woman.

The woman looked at the inscription carefully and nodded knowingly. `There you are,' she said to Mrs Caldicot. `I told you that you were Jessica Richardson.' She held the pen out and her husband took it from her.

`You did,' agreed Mrs Caldicot.

The woman disappeared, her husband trailing along behind her like an obedient puppy. Mrs Caldicot slipped out of her dressing gown and lowered herself into the jacuzzi. Every time Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough rang the bells on their exercise bicycles it reminded her of Jenkins. The bubbles tickled and refreshed her skin and she lay back, closed her eyes and thought with fondness of their walk together along the river bank.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

`What on earth is going on, mother?' asked Derek Caldicot. He sounded weary.

`I want to rent or buy somewhere big enough for us all to live in,' replied Mrs Caldicot, sitting on her bed. She had been about to get changed when the telephone had rung. She was going out to dinner with Jenkins. `I thought you'd be offended if I went to another estate agent.'

Derek let out air as though he was deflating.

`I'll go to another estate agent if you prefer,' offered Mrs Caldicot, brightly. She kicked off her shoes and examined a ladder in her tights.

Derek sighed. `Why can't you be like everyone else's mother?' he asked her.

`I never said that to you,' said Mrs Caldicot, offended.

`What? What are you on about now?'

`When you were little,' explained Mrs Caldicot. `I never said `why aren't you like the other children' to you.'

`I don't remember,' said Derek. He thought about this for a moment. `Anyway, I was never unlike the other children,' he said, rather defensively.

`Oh yes you were,' said Mrs Caldicot. `You were so worried about being different that you weren't like anyone else I ever knew.' She smiled to herself at the memory of Derek in short grey trousers bursting into tears because he couldn't decide whether he wanted to wear short or long grey socks. In the end, in a spirit of compromise that she had to admire, he had settled for long grey socks which he had pushed down around his ankles.

`We're not talking about me,' said Derek, defensively. `It isn't me who wants to buy a house big enough to share with a hundred incontinent old people.'

`Don't exaggerate,' said Mrs Caldicot, sharply. `There aren't any more than twenty or so altogether and none of them is incontinent.' She paused. `Well, very few of them anyway and those who are incontinent are only a little bit incontinent.'

`If you don't want to live in a rest home then what's wrong with a nice granny flat?' asked Derek.

`It's too late for that now,' said Mrs Caldicot. `I've got responsibilities.' She also realised that she found her responsibilities exciting and rewarding. And the risks which she knew were associated with the responsibilities didn't worry her anywhere near as much as they would have done a month or two earlier. She realised that excitement and risk go together like rain and rivers, and that you can't have one without the other.

`There's a wonderful new development on the Portland Road,' said Derek. `I can get you a one bedroom flatlet at a very competitive price. Kitchenette with refrigerator, microwave oven and the very latest type of waste disposal unit. You can put tin cans down it and they'll come out shredded. Small bathroom. Telephone point in the living room and the bedroom. Wonderful views.'

`I don't want a one bedroom flatlet,' said Mrs Caldicot, bluntly.

`You can see the municipal park from one of the living room windows,' said Derek. `You can see the ornamental flower clock in the summer. Well, the top left hand bit of it anyway.'

`I don't want a one bedroom flatlet,' repeated Mrs Caldicot. `Not even one which has a view of the municipal park.'

`How can anyone be only a little bit incontinent?' asked Derek suddenly. `They're either incontinent or they aren't incontinent.'

`People can be a bit drunk, can't they? Or a bit forgetful?'

`You don't seem to understand,' said Derek. `If you rent or buy somewhere large you'll be taking on all sorts of responsibilities.'

`I don't mind,' said Mrs Caldicot, who really didn't mind. `I can't let the others down now.'

`But you hardly know them, mother!' cried Derek. `You've only just met these people.'

`I like them,' she replied. `And they trust me.' No one had ever really trusted her before. People had relied on her to do things but they had never trusted her. Mr Caldicot had relied on her to provide him with clean shirts and hot meals but he had never trusted her to make any decisions. And life with him had been so boring. He always wore plain white shirts and his meals had to rotate according to a strict and pre-arranged pattern. One Christmas she bought him a shirt with a thin blue stripe in it. He never wore it.

`That's all very well but where are you going to find the money from?' demanded Derek.

`We're all going to pay our share,' replied Mrs Caldicot. `Money isn't going to be a problem.'

`It's bound to be risky. If you sign anything you'll be taking a chance.'

`What's the point of life if you don't take chances?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

`What on earth do you mean by that?' asked Derek. `Why do you want to take chances at your age?'

`Perhaps because I haven't taken enough chances at any other age,' said Mrs Caldicot. `Perhaps because at my age it doesn't really matter what chances I take. What have I got to lose?'

Derek sighed in defeat. `I'll ask our commercial department to see what they can find. A man called Gerald will phone you.' There was a pause. `I wash my hands of this, mother,' he said and put the phone down. Mrs Caldicot knew he was upset because he didn't even say `goodbye'.

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That evening Jenkins took Mrs Caldicot to the ballet to watch a performance of Swan Lake. Afterwards he took her to an Indian restaurant. She had never been to a ballet before nor had she ever eaten in an Indian restaurant.

`Don't you like it? asked Jenkins.

Mrs Caldicot, who had been staring into space without seeing anything, focused her attention on her dinner partner. He seemed blurred and she was suddenly aware that she had tears in her eyes.

`The food,' he explained. He nodded to her plate, virtually untouched.

`It's very good,' she assured him.

`Are you all right?' he asked, concerned. He reached across the table and touched the back of her left hand lightly with the tips of his own right hand.

Mrs Caldicot turned her hand over, grasped his fingers and squeezed them gently. `I'm fine,' she whispered. She looked at him for a long, long moment. `I just don't remember ever being quite so happy,' she explained. When she'd spoken she felt embarrassed, though she did not really know why.

`Penny for them,' said Jenkins.

Mrs Caldicot didn't answer straight away.

`Penny for your thoughts,' Jenkins explained unnecessarily.

For a moment Mrs Caldicot still didn't answer. `It's been a beautiful evening,' she said, her voice hoarse with emotion. `I've never done anything like this before,' she added. She tried to stop the tears because she didn't want to cry.

`You must have been to the theatre even if you haven't seen a ballet!'

Mrs Caldicot shook her head. `My husband and I didn't do things like that,' she said. Her voice felt stronger.

`But when you were younger? When you were courting?'

`We went to the cinema a few times.' She shrugged. `Westerns mainly...,' She looked at him and smiled. `I'm not complaining,' she said. `My husband never treated me badly.' He hadn't. He had never hit her. Never publicly criticised her.

`It gives me a lot of pleasure to be with you,' said Jenkins softly. She suddenly realised that she was still holding his hand. Slowly, she relaxed her grip. But his fingers did not move away from hers.

`Don't let your meal go cold,' said Mrs Caldicot.

They both ate. Mrs Caldicot was glad he hadn't said anything else. She enjoyed their silences together. She wasn't sure enough of herself to be able to share her feelings with him yet.

Afterwards, he drove her home. It had been raining and the streets were glistening. The reflections of the street lights sparkled on the wet pavements and she thought how romantic everywhere looked. Even buildings which in the brightness of daylight seemed drab and dull seemed strangely exciting in the darkness of the night. She did not mention any of this to him because she was slightly embarrassed at having such silly and romantic thoughts.

When they said goodnight he kissed her on both cheeks as she'd seen French people do on television and he held both her hands in his and squeezed them lightly. Long after she'd climbed into bed she lay awake going over every moment of the evening in her mind. At twenty past two in the morning she realised that the bedside light was still switched on. She turned it off, snuggled down beneath the bedclothes and went to sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Gerald, the man from the commercial department of the estate agents for which Derek worked had telephoned her early the following morning. He sounded excited. When he picked her up in the Mettleham Grand Hotel foyer an hour later he still sounded excited. If he had been a woman he would have been described as `bubbly'. He wore a cheap suit which didn't fit him terribly well but didn't look as bad on him as it might have done because he wore it with an expensive shirt, a silk tie and a pair of what looked like expensive Italian loafers with gold coloured buckles on the sides. He had a chunky, gold coloured bracelet on his right wrist and a chunky gold coloured watch on his left wrist. He smiled a lot and smelt of something unusually delicate which reminded Mrs Caldicot more of a woman's perfume than a man's aftershave. She thought he looked like a cross between a gigolo and a second-hand car salesman, and when he took her arm as they walked out to his car she was conscious of, and secretly rather enjoyed, disapproving looks from a gaggle of matronly and arthritic women who were clambering out of a mini bus.

`I've got just the place for you,' he promised her as he drove furiously through the early morning traffic. He seemed unusually fond of changing gear and kept one hand permanently resting on a shortened gear stick which was topped with a polished walnut sphere. `You'll love it! It only came on the market yesterday afternoon.' His car had a tiny air freshener hanging from the driving mirror and a `No Smoking' notice stuck to the front of the glove compartment. The air freshener reminded her of Mr Caldicot for it, too, made the car smell rather like a public lavatory. The car was spotless inside, without so much as a sweet paper on the floor.

`The important thing is that it must have enough rooms,' said Mrs Caldicot quite firmly.

`Oh, this place has got absolutely oceans of space!' Gerald assured her. He turned and beamed at her and looked back at the road just in time to avoid a head on collision with a double decker bus. `You'll love it!' he promised.

`I'm sure I will!' agreed Mrs Caldicot, digging her fingernails into the car's fake velour upholstery. She closed her eyes as they seemed to head straight for an elderly and innocent pedestrian who had recklessly chosen that moment to attempt a crossing of the road. She wondered why she had felt safe with Jenkins, whose driving could hardly be described as cautious, while she felt distinctly unsafe with Gerald at the wheel.

`Lovely secluded grounds, emergency fire escape and fitted carpets throughout,' said Gerald, as excited as if he himself found these advantages irresistible.

Rather tentatively Mrs Caldicot opened her eyes. There had been no sudden scream and no interruption to their progress but despite the absence of this expected evidence of motorised manslaughter she had still half expected to see the pedestrian draped across the bonnet and the windscreen spattered with blood. `That's nice,' she said, surprised at how calm her voice sounded.

`Here we are!' said Gerald, a few moments later, driving in through the absurdly gothic iron gates which guarded the driveway up to The Twilight Years Rest Home.

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Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor, the former proprietor of The Twilight Years Rest Home, and Mrs Caldicot's hapless adversary in the now famous Cabbage War, had suffered a deadly blow when Mrs Caldicot and her followers had walked out.

Without their weekly payments splashing into his bank account he had quite quickly found himself unable to satisfy the bank's insatiable demand for cash. What made things even worse was the fact that after Mrs Caldicot's appearances on television his previously untarnished reputation as a caring individual (untarnished only because no one had cared enough to make the effort to tarnish it) had been besmirched so badly that no other old people had been prepared to enter through the stuccoed portals of The Twilight Years Rest Home. Without in any way meaning to, Mrs Caldicot had succeeded in ruining her former host. The bank, the true owners of The Twilight Years Rest Home, had foreclosed with all the sensitivity and remorse of a boa constrictor swallowing its prey. The few remaining disabled and incontinent residents had moved out and onwards to cleaner sheets elsewhere, and Mr Fuller-Hawksmoor had spent a dull and unproductive morning at the local unemployment exchange struggling quite unsuccessfully to persuade a 16-year-old girl with halitosis of anaesthetic proportions that `Nursing Home Proprietor' was an acceptable and acknowledged occupation.

`How much do you want for it?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

Gerald, standing next to her on the gravel turning circle beneath the front door, tossed the keys to the front door up into the air and almost caught them. `Don't you want to see inside?' He bent down and picked up the keys. He was not in the slightest bit embarrassed by this example of fate in action.

`It's just what I'm looking for,' said Mrs Caldicot. `How much?'

Gerald went back to his car, brought a briefcase from the back seat, opened it and took out a printed brochure which had a space where there ought to have been a photograph of the home. He put the briefcase down on the ground.

`We haven't got the photos back from the printer yet,' he apologised. He handed the brochure to Mrs Caldicot and pointed to the price.

`How much would the monthly payments be on that?' she asked.

Gerald, bent down, took a calculator out of his briefcase and pressed the keys a few times. Then he held the calculator up so that Mrs Caldicot could see its tiny screen.

Mrs Caldicot did some quick calculations of her own. It was much less than a quarter of what they were paying to stay in the Mettleham Grand Hotel.

`That's far too much,' she said, surprising herself by her shamelessness. She made a counter offer.

`I'll have to get back to you on that,' said Gerald frowning.

`I'd like to see inside now, please,' said Mrs Caldicot.

`Of course!' agreed Gerald, as though as it were the most natural thing in the world for a client to make an offer to buy a property and then to ask to look round it. He picked up his briefcase and took out a mobile phone. `If you don't mind looking around by yourself I could ring the bank and see what they say to your offer...' he suggested, keen to strike while Mrs Caldicot's iron was hot. He opened the front door as he spoke.

`That's a good idea,' said Mrs Caldicot, suddenly overwhelmed by a barrage of memories, most of them unpleasant. She tried to smile at him but no smile would come. She disappeared inside the building, stepping over the inevitable pile of leaflets, free newspapers and unsolicited mail which is tipped through the letterbox of any empty or abandoned building within hours of the previous owner's exit, and wondered how long it would take for the smell of cabbage to disappear. Maybe, she thought, she could festoon the whole building with little disinfectant air fresheners like the one hanging from Gerald's driving mirror.

It seemed strange to be back.

She wandered around and it rather reminded her of the Marie Celeste. The carpets, curtains and furniture were all just as they were when she had left. In the living room there was an open copy of the *Radio Times* lying on the seat of a green, plastic covered easy chair. In the dining room the salt and pepper containers were still standing in the middle of all the tables. A few assorted catering tins and boxes of unwanted food stood on the shelves in the kitchen. A tabloid newspaper, neatly folded, lay on top of the refrigerator. In the bedroom which she had shared with her two friends there was a metal kidney dish on a bedside table and a bottle of pills had been abandoned on the mantelpiece. These small physical memories made it look as though the residents had been spirited away by aliens, leaving everything behind them as it had been.

Mrs Caldicot stood for a moment and then heard a noise from down below.

`Hello! Mrs Caldicot? I've got some good news for you!' she heard Gerald say. Mrs Caldicot walked down the stairs towards him. Still clutching his mobile phone he had stepped into the hallway.

`The bank has accepted your offer,' said Gerald. `I didn't think they would but I put in a good word for you...'

`That's very kind of you,' thought Mrs Caldicot who didn't believe him for an instant. `I don't believe you for an instant!' she said, laughing.

Gerald, who was not in the slightest embarrassed by this, smiled at her.

`Take your time looking round,' he said. `I'll take you back to your hotel when you've finished.'

`That's very kind of you,' smiled Mrs Caldicot, who rather thought she might be pushing her luck to accept another ride in Gerald's disinfected vehicle, `but I'd quite like the walk.'

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

It took the estate agents, the banks and the lawyers a week to make all the arrangements so that Mrs Caldicot and her friends could move back into what had, in its previous incarnation, been known as The Twilight Years Rest Home. It took Mrs Caldicot another week to arrange for all the existing furniture in the building to be taken away and sold at auction; for a team of decorators to paint the whole of the inside of the building and for a supply of new furniture to be delivered. While she waited for these improvements to be made Mrs Caldicot traced all the disabled and incontinent former residents of The Twilight Years Rest Home and told them all that they could, if they wanted to, come back to stay with her and the other residents.

The careful, cautious and indomitably pessimistic Derek had insisted that the whole process would inevitably take at least a month to six weeks to complete but Mrs Caldicot had succeeded in speeding things up by the simple expedient of issuing an ultimatum.

`If we aren't moving into the building within two weeks the whole deal is off,' she had told Gerald, and because she had meant it Gerald had believed her. Anxious not to lose his commission Gerald had convinced the solicitors and bankers of Mrs Caldicot's determination. Since they, in their turn, were also keen not to lose their hefty fees, the unnecessary administrative and bureaucratic delays which normally hinder any legal process were suddenly dismissed for what they are (unnecessary administrative and bureaucratic delays) by the only people who have the power to push them aside: the administrators and bureaucrats who had created them in the first place. Mrs Caldicot's appearances on television had given her a strong image which she knew was undeserved, but fortunately this knowledge was not widely shared.

To begin with Miss Nightingale, Mrs Peterborough and the others were more than a touch reluctant to leave the Mettleham Grand Hotel. They had grown to like living there; having become particularly fond of the Sports and Leisure Complex. Mrs Caldicot had, however, managed to overcome their resistance by promising them that they would have their own leisure and fitness centre built onto the side of the building.

`It won't be run like a nursing home,' she told them. `You'll all be part owners. It'll be a cooperative venture!'

Mrs Caldicot organised interviews for staff and hired a chef, a housekeeper, two waiters and a more than adequate complement of nursing and cleaning staff. She told the housekeeper that she wanted the waiters to wear black suits, white shirts and black ties while the nurses had to wear proper nursing uniforms.

`You don't know what you're taking on!' Derek kept insisting gloomily, but Mrs Caldicot knew exactly what she was taking on and was excited rather than alarmed by it all. She discovered, to her delight, that the money they had been paying as rent to The Twilight Years Rest Home would enable them to live in comparative luxury.

`Will we have a Jack Oozy?' asked Miss Nightingale, who had grown exceedingly partial to a daily bubble bath.

`We certainly will!' Mrs Caldicot assured her.

`And exercise bicycles?'

`Definitely!'

`With bells?'

`Of course!'

`Of course!' said Mrs Peterborough firmly.

The opposition to the move, in truth never anything more than a hint of apprehension, faded quickly into a memory and in due course Mrs Caldicot and her followers moved out of their hotel and back into what was known as The Twilight Years Rest Home.

When their hired coach (Oppenshaw's Char-a-bancs: No Journey Too Short with driver Ted) turned into the drive and passed through the ornate iron gates, the returning residents cheered as they saw the sign which Mrs Caldicot had had specially painted and erected.

`Home Sweet Home' it said in letters two feet high. Underneath, in only slightly smaller letters, were the words `No Cabbage Allowed'.

It was a victory and a return of which Napoleon himself would have been proud.

The Beginning

You can follow Mrs Caldicots further adventures in Vernon Colemans second novel about Mrs Caldicot. The title of the sequel to *Mrs Caldicots Cabbage War* is *Mrs Caldicots Knickerbocker Glory*.

To find out more about this and other books by Vernon Coleman visit www.vernoncoleman.com

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Mrs Caldicot's Knickerbocker Glory

The sequel to Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War

Vernon Coleman

Mrs Caldicot’s Knickerbocker Glory

Vernon Coleman

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Vernon Coleman has written over 100 books, including a number of bestsellers, which have been translated into 25 languages. His novels include the Bilbury series and his non-fiction books include Bodypower and How to Stop Your Doctor Killing You. A growing number of his books are now available as Kindle editions. For a list of available books see the Amazon author list or visit www.vernoncoleman.com

Dedication

To Donna Antoinette, my Welsh Princess, with all my love

Note
All characters, organisations, businesses and places in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to real persons (living or dead), organisations, businesses or places is purely coincidental.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Chapter 1

Anyone old-fashioned enough, and optimistic enough, to expect the calendar to give some guidance on temperature and weather might have expected a warm, sunny day; a few, small, fluffy white clouds scattered artistically across a perfectly sky-blue sky, jolly birds happily singing their little hearts out in a vain attempt to drown out the sound of suburban lawn mowers, and gardens everywhere a blaze of sunlit summer colour.

Such optimism would not have been well rewarded. It had been raining heavily for hours. In the traditional way things happen in a country where it rains for 300 days a year downpipes were gurgling, drains were failing to cope with the flood of water and deep puddles were forming everywhere. In modern Britain, a leaf or two on the lines will halt the heaviest and most majestic of trains; tons of highly crafted metal brought to a standstill by a modest flutter of nature's arboreal off casts. A flake or two of snow will close motorways and send cars sliding and slithering out of control. And a few hours steady but unspectacular rain always seems to result in flooding.

There was, as usual, a huge puddle outside the front entrance to The Twilight Years Rest Home (prop. Thelma Caldicot, No Cabbages Allowed) and as the two ambulance men carefully carried the occupied wheelchair in through the front door they found themselves splashing through water which reached well over the tops of their shoes.

'Oh, bugger!' cursed the younger of the two; a florid-faced man, rather too overweight to be an advertisement for good health. He paused and looked down. 'My socks are soaked.'

'Stop moaning, keep moving and lift your end up,' retorted the older man, balding, thinner, altogether leaner and fitter looking.

The third figure in this moving tableau, the occupant of the wheelchair, said nothing. Since he seemed to be either asleep or drugged, this was not particularly surprising. He took no more interest in his surroundings than he would have done if he had been a sack of potatoes.

Earlier in its long life the building which was now known as the Twilight Years Rest Home had been the imposing residence of an important local Victorian entrepreneur called Baldcock.

Mr Baldcock had made a substantial fortune out of the manufacture of sewage pipes and, anxious to obtain a social status above and beyond that which the manufacturer of such an unappetising product might expect, had spared no expense to give his family a substantial and worthy home. The hall and landing windows were made of stained glass, the drainpipes and gutters were decorated with cast iron gargoyles and the stonework above the bay windows was more than amply decorated with numerous stony representations of well-fed cherubs. And, naturally, the front door was protected from the elements by a large open-fronted porch with a tiled floor. Six stone steps led from the puddled driveway to the porch, and the two ambulance men climbed these steps at commendable speed. The porch was so large that even two ambulance men and a wheelchair did not overcrowd it.

'Funny looking place,' said the younger of the two ambulance men, a well-fed youth who was known to his mother and girlfriend as Cyril and to everyone else as 'Chips' (a nickname which accurately reflected his dietary taste).

'Don't take any notice of the building,' said Bertie, his colleague. 'This is Mrs Caldicot's place.'

'Mrs Caldicot?'

'You not heard of her?'

Chips shook his head.

'Her relatives put her into a nursing home. She couldn't stand the smell of cabbage so she led a revolution. Took all the other residents with her to stay in a hotel. Then went back and took over the whole place.'

'Bloody hell,' said Chips, surprised and impressed. 'Che Guevara in two-way stretch elastic stockings.'

'There was a book written about it. Called 'Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War,' the older ambulance man told him. 'You could probably borrow a copy from the library.'

'I don't read books,' said Chips.

'Then watch the movie.'

'There's a movie?'

'Based on the book.'

'What's it called?'

'Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War. The same as the book.'

'With that woman in it? Mrs Caldicot?'

'No, you plonker! An actress called Pauline Collins plays Mrs Caldicot. I heard Mrs Caldicot say she thought she was wonderful. She was on the radio.'

Chips grinned, pleased with himself. 'Oh, I've heard of Pauline Collins.' he said. 'She's married to that John Alderton.'

Chips put down his end of the wheelchair, and was about to press the doorbell when the front door swung open and a woman dressed in a lemon jumper, bright red trousers and a multi-coloured woolly hat appeared. She was pushing a silver coloured metal scooter. At first, the ambulance men thought that she was a teenager. Only when they looked closely did they realise that she had almost certainly already celebrated her seventieth birthday.

'Hello!' she cried, beaming. 'What a lovely day!'

The two ambulance men looked at each other and then out at the rain beating down outside, the puddles and the overflowing gutters. It was, to them, a dark, damp and desperately dismal day. The woman with the silver scooter, paused and looked around. She saw the same day, the same rain, the same puddles and the same overflowing gutters but to her eyes, the day seemed exciting. With a wave, she started to bounce her scooter down the stone steps. She was half way down the steps when a pretty, plump, black woman in a smart nurse's uniform appeared in the doorway. She had a name badge pinned to her chest. The single name 'Mrs Roberts' was the only printing on the badge. She looked to be in her mid-forties and was holding a large yellow plastic cape and a yellow plastic rain hat. She had an easygoing manner and a smile, which Mrs Caldicot often described as being that of an angel. She was a loyal friend and employee.

'Miss Nightingale,' called the nurse waving the two items in one hand. 'You forgot your cape!'

The woman with the scooter stopped, turned and came back up the steps. 'Silly me!' she said. She rolled her eyes as though to say 'What a silly woman!' and gently slapped her own wrist. She leant her scooter against the wall, held her hands up above her head and let the nurse slip the cape over her upstretched arms and her head. The nurse then added the hat and tied two pieces of cord into a neat bow underneath the old lady's chin. 'Don't be long,' the nurse warned. She smiled and added: 'And have a nice time.'

Miss Nightingale nodded, her eyes sparkling and full of life, and rushed off into the rain with her silver scooter.

'We have a new resident for you,' said the older ambulance man, nodding towards the man asleep in the wheelchair. He pulled a crumpled piece of paper out of his pocket and examined it. 'Mr Williams,' he read from the paper.

The nurse stopped, bent down and examined the man. She touched his hand then gently shook his shoulder. She seemed cross. 'Has he been sedated?' she demanded.

'I expect so,' replied Bertie. 'Where he came from everyone who isn't dead or on the staff is sedated.' He paused. 'And if the rumours are right most of the nurses and doctors are sedated too,' he added.

Behind the ambulance, a small grubby estate car skidded to a halt on the gravel. A short, balding, overweight man got out of the car, clutching a bulging black briefcase. Stooped in the rain he fumbled with his key, eventually managing to lock the car door. Neither the ambulance men nor the nurse took any notice of his arrival.

'Would you bring him in, please' said the nurse. She stepped into the hallway and nudged the door open as wide as it would go so that the two ambulance men could push the wheelchair through the door more easily.

'We have to take the chair back,' said the younger ambulance man. 'It belongs to the hospital. It's signed out as a temporary loan.'

'Would you do me a favour and carry the patient upstairs for me,' asked the nurse. 'Mrs Caldicot, the proprietor is busy locked in her office with the cook.'

'No problem, love,' said the older ambulance man. 'I'll take him.' He bent down, picked the sleeping patient up out of his wheelchair as though he were a small child, and carried him upstairs. 'I'll get his luggage,' said Chips, picking up the wheelchair and taking it back to the ambulance.

Chapter 2

‘I’m here to examine your extractor fan statutory warning notice,’ announced the fat man with the black plastic briefcase. He had run less than twenty yards, and climbed a short flight of stone steps, but even in the cold and the rain, the exercise had made him red-faced and breathless. Despite the weather, he was sweating profusely. He took a plastic wallet from his inner jacket pocket and held it under Mrs Roberts’s nose.

‘Oh, right,’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘The extractor fan? Well I’m sure we have one. But I don’t know where it is.’

‘This is a random spot check authorised under sub-law 872c of the 1999 Act,’ said the short man. ‘You are obliged by law to cooperate with my enquiries. Failure to do so will be reported to my superiors and regarded as a breach of your legislative responsibilities. I suggest that you notify the registered proprietor without delay.’

‘Mrs Caldicot is in her office with the cook,’ repeated Mrs Roberts. ‘If we do have an extractor fan I expect it will be in the kitchen. I suspect that would be the ideal place for it. Perhaps your notice will be there too.’

‘And where’s the kitchen?’ demanded the short visitor.

‘Straight ahead down the corridor,’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘The door is open. Just help yourself.’

The short man hurried past her and down the corridor. Mrs Roberts, with more important things on her mind, hurriedly climbed the stairs.

Chapter 3

Mrs Caldicot was coming to the end of her tete a tete with the cook. It had not, she would afterwards confirm, been one of the happiest encounters of her life.

'I have not been entirely happy with your work,' Mrs Caldicot had begun, tactfully. She had been rehearsing her opening line for two days.

The cook, a mountainous woman in her mid-forties, said nothing but just glowered at Mrs Caldicot. Her white overall was, Mrs Caldicot noticed, heavily stained. The cook herself had lank, greasy black hair and did not appear to have washed for some time. Though she smelt strongly of peppermint there were other, less pleasant, underlying odours fighting for attention.

'When you came for your interview you told me that you had plenty of experience in this area of catering,' continued Mrs Caldicot. It was difficult to accept that this malodorous creature was the same person as the rather shy, eager to please applicant who had arrived for her interview a few months earlier.

The cook remained silent and threatening.

'I don't wish to dispute your previous claims,' lied Mrs Caldicot. 'But several aspects of your work here seem to suggest to me, and, indeed, to others, that you may not have quite the extent of experience which you indicated.'

The cook frowned as though she were having to struggle to understand what Mrs Caldicot was saying; her huge, hairy eyebrows, already dark and unkempt, swooped inwards and joined together for support. 'Are you implying that I lied?' she demanded.

'Oh no, no,' said Mrs Caldicot hastily. 'Of course not.' She instantly felt ashamed of herself. That was exactly what she had intended to imply.

'Good,' said the cook, leaning back in her chair. She took a packet of French cigarettes from one pocket and a box of matches from another.

'It's just that some of the meals you've prepared have been not quite adequate for the number of people involved,' said Mrs Caldicot.

The cook shook one of the cigarettes out of the packet, put it between her lips and lit it. Mrs Caldicot wanted to tell her that she didn't like people smoking in her office but felt intimidated and didn't have the courage.

'I don't know what you're talking about,' said the cook, having blown a lungful of smoke all over Mrs Caldicot.

'Well, I have one or two examples here,' said Mrs Caldicot. She looked down at the thick folder in front of her and opened it. 'For example,' she began, 'last Wednesday you served jam sandwiches to the residents for their evening meal.'

'Lots of the old dears don't have their own teeth,' explained the cook. 'Jam sandwiches are easy to chew.'

'But you served just four rounds of bread,' continued Mrs Caldicot. 'There weren't enough sandwiches to go round.'

'Most of them are overweight,' said the cook. 'It's my job to look after their dietary health. I decided they needed to diet.' Mrs Caldicot suddenly realised what the smell of peppermint was hiding. Alcohol.

'That was very noble of you,' said Mrs Caldicot. Looking at the cook's immense bulk words such as 'glass houses', 'stones' and 'throw' sprang to mind but she decided not to explore that particular avenue. She picked up a butcher's bill from the folder. 'What also puzzles me is the fact that although the residents were not served any meat in that particular week - they were served sandwiches on nine separate occasions - you nevertheless authorised payment of several hundred pounds for steaks, bacon, chops and so on.'

'There wasn't room to put them in the freezer,' said the cook. 'The meat went off so I threw it all away. Would you rather I served the residents with bad meat?'

'No, of course not.'

'Because I wouldn't do it anyway,' said the cook. She straightened her shoulders and pulled herself to her full height. 'I have my standards and I'm not going to endanger the lives of those lovely old people just to please you.' She turned her head and looked out of the window.

'I didn't...' began Mrs Caldicot, wondering how she had suddenly found herself on the defensive.

'Hrmph!' snorted the cook, seemingly exhausted by the modest physical effort she had just made, and relaxing and slumping back in her chair.

'Is it true that you're related to the butcher?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'He's my brother,' said the cook. 'Are you saying it's a crime to give business to my brother?' She scowled. 'I'll have you know that he gives me a very special discount on account of the fact that I'm family. And we get the best cuts he has.'

‘That’s very good of him,’ said Mrs Caldicot, now woefully aware that she had lost control of what she had intended to be a final interview with the cook. ‘Very good of him.’

There was a long silence while Mrs Caldicot decided on a new line of attack.

‘Can I just go back to your original application form?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘If you like.’ The cook looked at the clock. ‘Lunch will be late. But it will be your fault.’

Mrs Caldicot looked up. ‘Lunch has been late nearly every day since you’ve been here,’ she said. ‘On the rare occasions when it wasn’t at least an hour late it was over two hours early.’

The cook pulled a face. ‘I had to go out. I didn’t want them to go without their lunch. It didn’t seem right that they should be inconvenienced on account of me having to go and see the doctor.’

‘You served lunch at 9.30 a.m.,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘And you told the residents that they had to be finished by 9.45 a.m.’

‘It doesn’t do them good to sit around,’ said the cook. ‘I thought I was doing the right thing.’

‘On your original application form you said that you’d had many years of experience in hotels and institutions throughout the country,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

The cook didn’t say anything.

‘You said, for example, that you had experience at the Imperial Hotel in Carmarthen.’

‘Yes.’

‘When I belatedly rang them yesterday they told me that they had no record of ever employing anyone of your name.’

‘I didn’t say I was employed there.’

Mrs Caldicot looked at her, raised an eyebrow and waited.

‘I stayed there with my mum and dad when I was a kid.’

‘You stayed there?’

‘Yes. With my mum and dad. For a week.’

‘I don’t think many people would regard that as relevant employment history.’

The cook shrugged.

‘And Holloway Prison?’

‘It was only three months.’

Mrs Caldicot waited.

‘It was a set up,’ said the cook. She sounded very defensive.

Mrs Caldicot didn’t speak. She looked down at her sleeping cat, Kitty, lying peacefully on the carpet at her feet. Just looking at Kitty always helped to bring her blood pressure down.

‘Anyway, everyone does it.’

‘Does what?’

‘A bit of shop lifting. The shops expect it. They allow for it in their costs.’

‘Ah.’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘So, you didn’t actually work at Holloway Prison either?’

‘Oh, yes I did,’ insisted the cook. ‘In the kitchen.’

‘But not actually on the staff?’

‘Not properly what you’d call on the staff. No, not in that way. But I did work in the kitchen.’

‘Peeling potatoes?’ guessed Mrs Caldicot.

‘And chopping them. I was in charge of the chips.’

‘What about the qualifications you listed on your application form?’

‘I’m going to get them,’ said the cook. ‘It’s just that I haven’t had the time. What with one thing and another...’ She paused to tap more cigarette ash onto Mrs Caldicot’s carpet. ‘I could get them easily,’ she insisted.

‘Let me move onto breakages,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘What breakages?’ demanded the cook cockily.

‘Well,’ said Mrs Caldicot, extracting another piece of paper from her folder, ‘since you’ve been in charge of the kitchen we have had to buy 76 replacement plates, 39 cups, 49 bowls, 64 saucers and 23 serving dishes.’

‘If you bought decent stuff in the first place it wouldn’t keep breaking,’ said the cook. ‘And if I had more help in the kitchen there probably wouldn’t be so many breakages.’

‘And we seem to have a lot of trouble with disappearing cutlery,’ said Mrs Caldicot. She took another sheet of paper from the cook’s folder. ‘We’ve had to replace 124 missing tea spoons, 124 missing forks, 124 missing desert spoons, 124 missing soup spoons and 124 missing knives.’

‘They get lost,’ said the cook with a shrug.

‘Doesn’t it strike you as odd that we’ve lost exactly the same number of spoons, forks and knives?’

The cook thought about this for a moment. ‘No,’ she said. She shrugged. ‘Probably just a coincidence.’

‘In your experience would you say that those sort of losses are normal?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

The cook nodded. ‘Normal,’ she confirmed. ‘Everywhere I’ve ever worked cutlery has gone missing. It’s just a fact of life.’ She shrugged. ‘A spoon here. A fork there. They get lost behind the fridge.’ Another shrug. She looked around for an ashtray, couldn’t see one, so continued to tap the ash from her cigarette onto Mrs Caldicot’s carpet.

Mrs Caldicot opened the drawer in her desk and took out a fork. ‘Do you recognise this fork?’

‘It looks like one of ours.’

‘It is one of ours.’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘But it is one of the new forks which arrived yesterday afternoon. It hasn’t been used yet. She handed the fork across the desk to the cook.

‘It looks like one of our forks,’ said the cook.

‘Would you be kind enough to turn it over,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

The cook turned the fork over.

‘If you look on the back of the handle you will see two initials scratched into the metal.’

The cook examined the handle.

‘The initials are D.L.’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘They stand for ‘David Livingstone.’’

‘Wasn’t he an explorer?’

‘He was. But I’m not interested in that one,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Our Mr David Livingstone has been a resident here since we opened. He has a strange habit of scratching his initials onto the back of his cutlery. Then he likes to use the same pieces of cutlery at every meal.’

The cook didn’t say anything.

‘Mr Livingstone lost his fork a week ago,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘And now, curiously, a brand new fork arrives with his initials scratched on the back.’

‘That’s really odd,’ said the cook.

‘Can you tell me where the new cutlery came from?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘A shop,’ replied the cook.

‘What sort of shop?’

‘Oh, a sort of second-hand shop,’ said the cook. ‘I thought it would be cheaper to buy the cutlery from a second-hand shop. Especially since we lose so many pieces.’

‘How did he manage to sell us back a fork that we lost a week ago?’ asked Mrs Caldicot, smiling sweetly.

The cook said nothing, scowled, and stood up. She stubbed out her cigarette on Mrs Caldicot’s desk and left. Mrs Caldicot reached down and tickled a sleeping Kitty behind the ear. Kitty, awake, looked up, spotted an empty lap and filled it.

Twenty five minutes later the cook left the nursing home and was never seen again. She took with her six towels, a plastic bag filled with assorted cutlery and three bottles of sherry.

Chapter 4

‘Thanks a lot,’ said Mrs Roberts to the ambulance men, finding that the new patient had already been put into an armchair in a small but neat and nicely furnished bedroom.

‘These come with him,’ said the ambulance man known as ‘Chips’. He had followed his colleague up the stairs, struggling with three brown leather suitcases. Breathing heavily, and clearly out of condition, he put the suitcases down then pulled a plastic bag out of his jacket pocket and handed it to the nurse. ‘His pills,’ he explained.

‘Is there a letter?’ asked the nurse.

‘No,’ replied Chips. ‘But the nurse at the hospital said that the instructions for the drugs are on the bottles. And his GP is Dr Snoot.’

Mrs Roberts shook her head, both disappointed and disgusted. ‘We’d better be off then,’ said the older ambulance man.

‘Watch out for Miss Nightingale,’ warned Mrs Roberts. ‘She was going to the paper shop to buy a magazine but she might still be playing in the drive.’

‘That the nutty old bat with the scooter?’ asked Chips.

Mrs Roberts glowered at him.

‘Don’t take any notice of him,’ said the older ambulance man, who instantly sensed Mrs Roberts’s disapproval. ‘He’s too thick to know any better.’ He clipped his younger colleague around the head then led him to the stairs and back down out of the rest home.

Mrs Roberts opened the plastic bag containing the new resident’s drugs and, one by one, put eleven bottles side by side onto the top of the dressing table. She examined the bottles as she did so and shook her head disapprovingly at each one. When she’d finished she glanced out of the window. Resplendent in her yellow cape, Miss Nightingale, who had been racing through the puddles on her scooter, had stopped to wave goodbye to the ambulance men as their vehicle was driven out of the driveway. Two arms appeared, one from each side of the vehicle, as the two ambulance men waved goodbye to her.

Mrs Roberts did not even notice that the small grubby estate car, and its driver, the short man with the black plastic briefcase had both disappeared. Smiling at Miss Nightingale’s activities, she turned away from the window, took another look at the still sleeping newcomer, and hurried out of the room and down the stairs.

Chapter 5

Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts were sitting in the office.

'I've had to sort of fire the cook,' confessed Mrs Caldicot. 'I feel terrible about it. I've never had to fire anyone before.'

'How do you sort of fire someone?' asked Mrs Roberts.

Mrs Caldicot explained. 'Actually she left,' she said. 'Before I had to fire her.'

'Thank heavens for that!' said Mrs Roberts.

'You don't think I was too harsh?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'You should have fired her weeks ago,' Mrs Roberts assured her. 'I would have got rid of her.'

'Would you really?' asked Mrs Caldicot, clearly delighted to know that her colleague would have acted in the same way.

'She was a terrible cook, she was always in a foul temper, she was a drunk, she never produced meals on time and she broke more dishes every day than the average person breaks in a lifetime,' said Mrs Roberts, counting these criticisms off on the fingers and thumb of one hand. 'She used to steal food, she was the untidiest person in the entire history of the world - with the possible exception of my sister Beryl, but that's another story and at least she's clean. And dirty! She was the most unhygienic person I ever saw working in a kitchen and if one of those inspectors from the council had seen her at work he would have closed us down in seconds...' Mrs Roberts was busy counting these criticisms off on her other hand.

Mrs Caldicot started laughing. 'OK!' she said, holding up a hand. 'You've made me feel better.'

'I could go on,' said Mrs Roberts. 'If I take off my tights I have ten toes too...'

'No, you've convinced me I did the right thing,' said Mrs Caldicot. She sighed. 'It was just, well, difficult. I've never had to do anything like it before.'

'You had to do it,' said Mrs Roberts, putting great emphasis on the second word. 'Apart from anything else she would have probably poisoned us all if you hadn't!'

'OK. So I had to fire the cook,' said Mrs Caldicot, sounding relieved. 'But now we have to find a replacement.'

'Listen,' said Mrs Roberts, quite seriously. 'If I have to do the cooking myself we'll eat better meals than we did when she was here. And with the amount of food she wasted we'll be better off sending out for 'take away' meals! Have you seen the food bills?'

Mrs Caldicot rummaged around on her desk. 'I know,' she agreed. 'They're awfully high aren't they.'

'She must have been stealing from you,' said Mrs Roberts. She picked up one of the bills at random. '£69 for one week's milk bill!' she said. 'And how could we possibly spend £132 in one week on bread?'

'I should have kept an eye on things,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'It's my fault. I trusted her.'

Just then they heard a crash.

'What on earth was that?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'I don't know,' Mrs Roberts replied. 'But I think it came from upstairs. It may have been the new resident - Mr Williams. He was sedated when he arrived. Perhaps he's woken up.'

They ran up the stairs together, Mrs Roberts leading and Mrs Caldicot following, and met the new resident staggering out of his room. He was holding onto the doorframe and looked very unsteady.

'Who are you?' demanded the man. 'Where am I?'

'My name is Mrs Roberts,' explained Mrs Roberts. 'I'm a nurse. You've been admitted to the Twilight Years Rest Home. And this is Mrs Caldicot; she's in charge.' Mrs Roberts turned to Mrs Caldicot. 'He was sedated by the hospital staff,' she explained. 'I expect his sedation is wearing off.'

'So now we know who you are and where I am,' said the stranger. 'That just leaves one question.'

Mrs Roberts looked at him, and waited.

'Who the hell am I?' he demanded. 'And what in blazes am I doing in an old folks home?'

'That's two questions,' said Mrs Caldicot. She took his arm and led him back into his room and helped him to sit down in the same chair in which the ambulance man had deposited him not long before.

'Is it?'

'You're Henry Williams and you're here because the hospital needed your bed and you're not well enough to go home. They asked us to find you a bed and a room.'

'Who said I'm not well enough to go home?'

'The doctors at the hospital.'

'Bloody idiots. What do they know about anything?' muttered Mr Williams. He licked his lips. 'I have a dry head, my mouth is as stinking as a birdcage and I could drink a horse.'

'I expect that will be the drugs,' explained Mrs Roberts. 'Do you mean that you're hungry or thirsty?'

'Thirsty, of course,' said Henry Williams, impatient with what he saw as the nurse's stupidity. 'I could drink a horse.'

'Would you like a cup of tea?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

Mr Williams's eyes lit up. 'I'd kiss for a cup of tea.'

'Don't you mean 'kill'?' asked Mrs Roberts.

'Mr Williams frowned, clearly puzzled. 'Why would I want to kill anyone for a cup of tea?' he asked. 'I'd kiss you, though.'

'You stay there,' said Mrs Roberts. 'I'll go and get you a cup of tea. Don't you go anywhere!'

'I'm not going anywhere,' said Mr Williams. 'Especially if you're going to bring me a cup of tea if I stay here.' He paused. 'Besides where would I go?' he asked. He thought for a moment. 'Do I have anywhere to go?' he asked.

Mrs Roberts and Mrs Caldicot turned and headed back for the landing. The door to Mr Williams's room was packed with faces. 'Is he all right?' demanded Mrs Torridge, an elderly woman in a pink cardigan and a blue dress with a floral pattern.

'He needs a cup of tea,' said Mrs Roberts.

'I'll put the kettle on,' said MrsTorridge. She hurried off down the stairs, followed back down the stairs by the half a dozen other residents who had accompanied her up the stairs.

As they all trooped down there was a shout and a crash at the top of the stairs. Henry Williams had wandered out of his bedroom again. This time he had knocked over a small table and a large vase of flowers. Mrs Roberts and Mrs Caldicot rushed up the stairs. Mr Williams fell to his knees and started to cry. 'I think I ought to call his doctor,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'You call the doctor,' said Mrs Roberts, bending down and helping Mr Williams to his feet. 'I'll help Mr Williams back into his room and stay with him.'

Chapter 6

Most of the residents at the Twilight Years Rest Home had arrived with Mrs Caldicot. But, like Mr Williams, there were a few newcomers. There was, for example, an elderly married couple called Maurice and Maple Merivale.

The Merivales arrived at the nursing home the day before Henry Williams had been delivered by ambulance. They stood on the doorstep, an impressive pile of luggage stacked neatly beside them, and politely asked if they could speak to Mrs Caldicot. Mrs Merivale, stout but tall, wore a thick, dark green coat and a pair of light green ankle boots. Mr Merivale, slightly taller and slightly less stout, had thin, sallow features and an impressive thatch of jet black hair.

'We're pleased to meet you,' said Mrs Merivale, when Mrs Caldicot hurried to the door, wiping her hands on a towel. 'We've heard a lot about you.'

'Won't you come inside?' asked Mrs Caldicot, who was, as always, slightly embarrassed that anyone should recognise her.

'Oh no thank you, Mrs Caldicot,' replied Mrs Merivale. 'Not yet. We've just come to ask you if you have a room.'

'You want to stay here?'

'If it's possible,' said Mrs Merivale, with a nod. 'We'd very much like to make this our home.'

'Both of you?'

'Oh yes, both of us. Both of us are looking for a new home,' replied Mrs Merivale. 'That's just the point, you see. We would like to share a room. We've slept together for 58 years now. We haven't spent a night apart in all that time.'

'You're looking for a double room?'

'Exactly,' nodded Mrs Merivale. `A double room is just what we want. For tonight if possible.'

'Where are you living at the moment?' asked Mrs Caldicot, puzzled.

'Well, we aren't actually living anywhere at the moment,' answered Mrs Merivale. She leant forward and lowered her voice. 'Until this morning we were living at a nursing home in Pallborough Avenue?'

'I know the one,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'It was taken over by a new company,' said Mrs Merivale. She pulled a face to show that this was not a development of which she approved. 'And they told us at breakfast today that we couldn't have a double room together.' She looked at her husband, standing silently beside her, and took his hand in her own. 'We've always been together,' she told Mrs Caldicot.

'Why did they want to split you up?' asked Mrs Caldicot, horrified.

'They said it was cheaper for us to be in separate homes,' explained Mrs Merivale. 'They assessed us and decided that although my husband needs Category 3 care I only need Category 4 care.'

'That's terrible!' said Mrs Caldicot.

'They said it would save them money,' said Mrs Merivale. 'But it would have broken our hearts.'

'Did you protest?'

'We said we weren't happy about it,' said Mrs Merivale. 'But they didn't seem interested. So, on balance we thought it best to leave.' She leant forward, conspiratorially, 'We don't like to stay where we aren't wanted. Besides, I've never liked making a fuss,' she added. She leant forwards and whispered. 'In fact one of the nurses once told me off for being too self-effacing.'

'She told you off for being self-effacing?'

'Yes. She was quite firm about it.'

'How did you get here?' asked Mrs Caldicot, looking at the couple's luggage, spread around and behind them.

'Oh, we walked,' said Mrs Merivale.

'South along Pallborough Avenue for four hundred yards,' said Mr Merivale. Mrs Caldicot looked at him. It was the first time he'd spoken. 'Then we took the first left after the school, went for two hundred yards down Beech Drive then took the first left after the post box into Steeple Road.'

'Ah,' said Mrs Caldicot, nodding and understanding.

'We went down Steeple Road for five hundred yards then turned left into Maple Avenue.' Mr Merivale smiled. 'And as soon as we reached Maple Avenue we could see your nursing home.'

'Thank you,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Of course we were lucky,' said Mr Merivale. 'If there had been road works in Steeple Road and they'd dug the pavement up, which they sometimes do, we would have had to go down Dartington Avenue and that would have added another ten minutes to the journey.'

'Of course,' agreed Mrs Caldicot, impressed. 'But how did your luggage get here?'

'We carried it,' explained Mrs Merivale, with a shrug. She sighed, looked at her husband and squeezed his hand. 'So do you have a room we can share?'

When Mrs Caldicot said she had a room they could have Mrs Merivale started to cry. 'Thank you,' she said. 'That's wonderful.' She turned to her husband and kissed him full on the mouth. He looked surprised but pleased. Then Mrs Merivale leant forwards and kissed Mrs Caldicot on the cheek. 'Thank you,' she said. There were tears flowing down her cheeks.

Mrs Caldicot took Mr and Mrs Merivale upstairs to show them their new room. She helped them carry their luggage. The suitcase she carried seemed to have been filled with bricks.

'I'm afraid there isn't much space in here,' said Mrs Caldicot, dropping the suitcase and looking around. She rubbed her aching arm.

'Oh, that doesn't matter, Mrs Caldicot,' said Mrs Merivale. 'That doesn't matter at all. The important thing is that Mr Merivale and I can be together. In the same home. In the same room.'

'There's one other thing,' said Mrs Caldicot, feeling rather uncomfortable and embarrassed. 'I hate bringing this up but, as you can probably imagine, we have quite a lot of bills and I naturally have to ask residents to make a contribution; to help pay the expenses of running the nursing home. We don't have any formal arrangements. People just contribute what they can afford.'

'Oh quite right too,' said Mrs Merivale. She opened a huge, old-fashioned, battered black leather handbag and rummaged around inside until she found her purse. She took out her purse, opened it and peered inside. After a moment, she took out a single five pound note which she handed to Mrs Caldicot with much ceremony. Without the five pound note the purse was empty.

'Here you are, dear,' she said, as though handing over a shovelful of gold sovereigns. 'You let us know when this has run out.'

'Thank you,' said Mrs Caldicot, accepting the note graciously.

'Is there anything we can to do to help you?' asked Mrs Merivale.

Mrs Caldicot looked at her.

'Mr Merivale and I like to keep busy,' explained Mrs Merivale. 'Cleaning, cooking, tidying up. We've always been busy. If you have something we can do to keep ourselves busy we'd be very grateful.' She paused, put her head to one side and smiled. 'It'll keep us out of mischief,' she said, as though if she and her husband were not kept busy they might set fire to the garden shed or start hurling Brussels sprouts at the postman. When she put her head to one side, Mrs Caldicot thought she looked rather like a large sparrow.

'Well, if you're sure that would be wonderful...' said Mrs Caldicot. 'We need some help in the kitchen.'

'As long as we're not getting in anyone's way,' said Mrs Merivale. She lowered her voice, looked first to the left then to the right as though concerned lest someone overhear her, and whispered. 'I know some cooks are a bit funny about having outsiders helping in their kitchen.'

'That isn't really a problem at the moment,' said Mrs Caldicot. She felt rather embarrassed to have to admit this to her newest resident. 'I'm afraid we don't have a cook,' she said.

'No cook?'

Mrs Caldicot shook her head.

'No cook at all?

Another shake of the head.

'Well, that's wonderful!' said Mrs Merivale. 'Mr Merivale and I will be happy to do the cooking for you.'

'That's very kind of you,' said Mrs Caldicot, rather uncertainly. 'Do you have any experience of cooking for large numbers of people?'

'Oh bless you, yes,' said Mrs Merivale. 'I used to be in catering when I was younger.'

'That would be marvellous,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Marvellous. What sort of remuneration would you be looking for?'

Mrs Merivale looked at Mrs Caldicot as though she had spoken to her in a foreign language.

'Pay,' explained Mrs Caldicot. 'Wages.'

'Oh good heavens don't you be silly,' said Mrs Merivale, clearly rather shocked. 'We won't want any payment. It'll be a pleasure. A real joy. And you won't have to worry about any hiring any assistants. I know how difficult it can be to find good kitchen maids. Mr Merivale loves to put on a pinny and help me out in the kitchen.'

'That's wonderful,' said Mrs Caldicot, genuinely delighted. 'I'll help you clean out the kitchen...it's a bit grubby at the moment...then it will be all yours.'

Chapter 7

Three and a half miles away from The Twilight Years Rest Home, two well-dressed men in their fifties were standing in an expensively furnished living room in an expensive detached house looking out at the gardens through the French windows. Both men had grey hair, both men looked distinguished and it was clear that both men had money.

‘It’s embarrassing to see him out there in this weather,’ said the shorter and stouter of the two men. The man he was talking about, his father, a wiry, elderly looking fellow, was standing in an ornamental pond dragging out weeds with his bare hands. He wore waders, old grey trousers and an old plastic fertilizer sack which had three holes cut in it - one for his head and one for each arm. On his head he wore an old brown trilby. The men looking at him both knew that he wore nothing at all underneath the fertilizer sack and that his trousers, which had been purchased from a charity shop, were several sizes too big for him and were held up with the aid of a piece of orange baler twine.

‘He’s a wonderful gardener,’ said the second man, the owner of the house in which they were standing, the owner of the garden they were looking at, and the employer of the man they were talking about. ‘I inherited him, you know. When we bought the house. That must have been, oh, eighteen, nineteen years ago. I don’t know how long the previous owners had him. At least fifteen years I should think. Probably longer.’

‘He’s been working here for fifty years,’ said the first man. ‘Half a century of pulling up weeds. He was eighty last year. He should be tucked up somewhere nice and warm. Watching the TV. Playing a bit of bowls when the weather is nice. Playing whist in the evenings.’

‘I’ve never known anyone with such a wonderful touch in the garden. Whatever he plants seems to come up. Flowers, vegetables, shrubs, trees - they all seem to bloom for him.’

‘When he was younger I offered him a job in my office. We needed a cleaner. Someone to help tidy up the evenings. No one would have seen him or known about it. But he wouldn’t take it. I mean, what’s the difference between mowing someone’s lawn and doing a bit of cleaning and polishing? No difference at all is there really?’

‘Do you know when he was ill a couple of years ago nearly everything in the garden died. I watered and weeded and did what I thought I was supposed to do. I think the plants missed him. When he came back everything perked up again. It was amazing.’

‘He was off because he had a liver infection. He should have stopped work then. I asked him to. But he wouldn’t, of course. Stubborn as a mule.’

‘Why don’t you let him work on for another summer? He enjoys it you know. I’ll have a word with him if you like and try to persuade him to stay in the potting shed when the weather is bad. I’ll still pay him, of course. He can always get on with cleaning the tools, that sort of thing. I don’t know where I’ll find anyone else like him. Totally trustworthy, you know. But then of course you would know that.’

‘I really don’t think so. Not now that I’ve been made senior partner. It really isn’t on, you know. Having my father work as a gardener. It would be so humiliating for my wife and me if it got out.’

‘Well, at least let’s leave it to him. I mean it’s his life, his job. Why not just let him decide? I’ll happily stand by whatever his decision might be.’

‘I don’t think so. We both know what his decision will be. And that really isn’t what I want at all.’ The gardener’s son paused and cleared his throat. ‘I think that perhaps you ought to be aware of your own rather vulnerable position,’ he said. ‘My father is over eighty. He is frail and rather vulnerable. He isn’t as steady as he used to be. I would hate to hear that he’d stabbed himself in the foot with a fork or fainted and drowned in your pond. You would be liable, of course. Have your checked your employer’s liability policy? You do have one of course?’

‘Er, I’m not, er...’

‘Many of these policies, and I do hope for your sake that you have one, have exclusion clauses which rule out cover for older employees. So you could find yourself totally exposed. I can’t tell what sort of damages we would be looking for if anything happened. And, of course, my being a leading local lawyer would mean that we wouldn’t have to worry about finding the very best representation.’

‘No. I see.’

The gardener’s son turned round and walked back into the room. ‘I see that you are a collector of old photographs.’

‘Yes, I have one or two.’

‘Very interesting stuff,’ said the gardener’s son. ‘I’m a collector too. This is a Brassai isn’t it?’

‘Yes.’

‘I thought so.’

‘And a Cartier-Bresson. And isn’t that an early Henry Williams?’

‘Yes. I’m impressed. You know a good deal about photography.’

‘I’ve had one or two clients who were keen. I was executor for one fellow. We had to get an expert up from London to look at his collection. I was surprised to see what they fetched. Just old snaps, you know. He had an early Williams. Very similar subject to yours. I was very impressed with what it fetched at auction. I started collecting similar stuff after that.’

‘So, if you collect early Williams you presumably collect old photographs of Paris?’

‘Yes. That’s something of a speciality of mine.’ The gardener’s son looked around. There were around thirty framed photographs on the walls. All the photographs were in black and white. ‘I suspect you’d rather hate to have to part with any of these.’

‘Absolutely. I wouldn’t part with them for anything.’

‘Except perhaps a costly legal action, eh?’ The gardener’s son looked at his father’s employer meaningfully.

The gardener’s employer, the owner of the house, the garden and the collection of photographs, said nothing.

‘So what are we going to do about my father then?’

The employer licked his lips. ‘I’ll have a word with him this afternoon.’ He spoke quietly, as though rather ashamed of what he was saying.

‘And tell him that you no longer require his services?’

‘Yes. I suppose so.’ He spoke in what was now a whisper.

‘No need to be brutal about it. Just explain that you’re going to look for someone a bit younger. Someone a bit fitter and stronger.’

‘Yes. Quite.’

‘Nice to have met you at last. After all these years. Don’t bother to see me out.’

Chapter 8

‘How did it go?’ asked the woman in the front passenger seat of the Jaguar. She was blonde, and although there was no visible evidence to lead a casual observer to question what they saw, those who had known her longer, back in days now rather further away in time than she might willingly acknowledge, were well aware that blonde had not been the colour of her hair when she had first appeared on the world’s stage.

She was wearing a fur coat which was unfastened. Underneath the fur she wore a short green dress which was several sizes too small for her. She wore a huge diamond ring on the third finger of her left hand and enough additional jewellery to look noticeably over-dressed. Her husband, the gardener’s son, had on several occasions tried to persuade her to dress a little less ostentatiously but her motto was ‘if you’ve got it, flaunt it’ and so, since she had it, she invariably flaunted it.

The gardener’s son was looking pleased with himself. ‘He’ll fire my father today,’ he said. ‘He was scared witless when I pointed out to him just how vulnerable he was. Are there any more?’

His wife opened the small green, leather bound notebook which lay on her lap and studied it for a moment. ‘No,’ she said. ‘That was the last one. Four employers.’ She half turned and smiled in admiration at her husband. ‘And all four have agreed to fire your father.’

‘Splendid. Do you fancy a spot of lunch?’ He turned to look at his wife. ‘Shall we go to the Connaught Arms?’

‘That would be nice, dear. But let’s get a table by the door. I hate it when they put us in a corner where no one can see us.’

Chapter 9

While Mr Roxdale Jr was celebrating having arranged for his father to be sacked, Mr Caldicot Jr was paying his first visit to his mother's new home.

'Well, mother,' said Derek, looking around him. 'I have to hand it to you. It's a fine looking building.' He said this as though with regret rather than admiration. He was not a generous boy and he even found it difficult to part with compliments. He took after his father in that respect.

Derek, his wife Veronica and their son Jason had come to visit Mrs Caldicot for the first time since she had re-opened the nursing home. It had been a long time since she and they had met. 'I'm amazed. You've done a pretty good job of this place,' said Derek at last; managing to spoil the compliment by making it sound patronising.

'Thank you,' said Mrs Caldicot, accepting the compliment for what it was. It was, she thought rather sadly, probably the most generous thing he'd ever said to her.

'Of course,' he continued, looking around and lowering his voice just enough to make it clear that he was conscious that anyone who overheard him might be offended but not quite low enough to make sure that no one did overhear him, 'the big question is: 'Are you making a profit?''

'That's not *the* big question,' thought Mrs Caldicot. 'It's *your* big question.'

'That's not why I opened the home,' Mrs Caldicot told him.

'But if you don't make a profit you'll have to close down,' Derek pointed out.

'Yes,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. 'But that doesn't mean that making a profit is the main reason that the home is open. Making a profit is merely a means to an end, not an end in itself.'

Derek thought about this and looked rather confused. He had never done anything in his life where making a profit had not been the prime driving force.

'Do you have a freezer?' asked Jason.

'Yes. Quite a big one,' Mrs Caldicot told him proudly.

'Does it have ice cream in it?'

'I think so.'

'I want one. Have you got pistachio?'

'I'm not sure,' answered Mrs Caldicot, trying to remember what was in the freezer. 'I'm pretty sure we have chocolate, coffee and strawberry. Oh, and vanilla, of course.'

'Oh, those are all boring,' sneered Jason.

'They're the flavours the residents prefer,' said Mrs Caldicot.

Jason screwed up his nose in disgust. His mother comforted him.

Mrs Caldicot took Derek upstairs to look around.

'Good heavens,' said Derek. 'The rooms are huge. But there's only one bed in most of them.'

'That's right,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I made sure that everyone had their own room - unless they wanted to share, of course. Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale would hate to be parted so they share one of the biggest rooms on the front.'

'But you'll never make any money that way,' said Derek, in despair. 'My firm has a retirement home division so I know about these things. The profitability of a nursing home venture depends entirely on bed occupation. You have to cram in as many beds as you can and you have to make sure that they're constantly occupied. If someone dies in the middle of the night you need to get them into the morgue straight away and have a fresh body getting out of the bed at breakfast time.'

Mrs Caldicot stared at him and, not for the first time, wondered whether the nurses at the maternity home could possibly have got her baby mixed up with someone else's.

'You're not listening to me mother,' said Derek. 'What are you thinking?'

'I was just thinking how much you remind me of your father,' said Mrs Caldicot.

Derek took this as a compliment.

'If you don't mind, dear, I'd rather just carry on as I am,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Oh, I give up with you,' snapped Derek. 'Sometimes you are just so damned stubborn these days. I really don't know what's come over since father died. You were never like this before.'

'No, dear,' said Mrs Caldicot sweetly. 'I wasn't, was I?'

'I've had enough of you and all this,' snapped Derek. He turned to his wife and son. 'Come on,' he said brusquely. 'We're going.' He turned back to his mother. 'And don't you come crying to me when this all goes pear shaped,' he warned her, wagging a finger. 'As far as I'm concerned you can do what you like. I want nothing more to do with you or this place.’

And with that Derek, Veronica and Jason stalked out of the nursing home and Mrs Caldicot’s life.

Rather to her own surprise, Mrs Caldicot was neither surprised nor upset.

Chapter 10

The Merivales were still unpacking and settling into their room and Mrs Caldicot was in the kitchen washing dishes. She was furious and was taking out her anger on the crockery. She had already broken two plates and a cup but felt no shame or sorrow. There were soapsuds everywhere. Mrs Caldicot was angry because she had spent twenty minutes unsuccessfully trying to get hold of Mr Williams's doctor.

After four calls, she had finally spoken to a very bored sounding receptionist who had announced that Dr Mr Snoot and Dr Mrs Snoot were both unavailable.

'Dr Mr Snoot and Dr Mrs Snoot?' thought Mrs Caldicot. 'They sound like a pair of characters in a children's cartoon series.' They would, she thought to herself, have to be the baddies.

'Is it an emergency?' the receptionist had enquired, managing to make the question both patronising and disdainful.

'Well, not really an emergency,' admitted Mrs Caldicot. 'No one's bleeding to death if that's what you mean.'

'Then call back later,' said the receptionist, for whom the word 'charm' was more likely to be associated with the word 'bracelet' than the phrase 'human relations'. And then 'click' - the phone had gone dead.

Mrs Caldicot, still furious, angrily thrust her dish mop to the bottom of a large green mug then blinked as soap water splashed onto her face and into her eyes.

'There's a gentleman here for you,' said Miss Nightingale, suddenly appearing behind Mrs Caldicot. Miss Nightingale lowered her voice and spoke in what she clearly seemed to think was a whisper. 'It's your nice fancy man, Mrs Caldicot.'

Startled, Mrs Caldicot turned from the sink; as she moved soapy bubbles dripped onto the floor from her wrists and forearms.

A smartly dressed man in his late fifties was standing in the doorway. Mrs Caldicot instantly recognised the visitor and blushed.

Jenkins, tall, broad-shouldered and slightly balding, was a senior editor on a national newspaper. What hair he had he wore collar length. He had a commanding presence. When, just a few months earlier, Mrs Caldicot had led a walk-out of the residents of the Twilight Years Rest Home it had been Jenkins who had published her life story in *The Sunday Globe* newspaper. It had been a cheque from *The Sunday Globe* that had helped rescue her from potential bankruptcy and enabled her to find a deposit to buy and reopen the nursing home. Mrs Caldicot knew that without Jenkins's help and encouragement she would not have been able to cope with the media storm her 'cabbage war' had aroused. Nor would she have been able to buy the nursing home and find a home for her eccentric band of friends and followers. It was not surprising that she felt genuinely grateful to Jenkins.

But gratefulness wasn't the only, or the most powerful, emotion she felt towards him. It wasn't gratefulness that made her blush and made her knees weaken when he suddenly appeared in her kitchen. It wasn't gratefulness that made her feel as coy and as nervous as a schoolgirl.

Miss Nightingale, her eyes twinkling, curtsied, rather clumsily, giggled and disappeared. Mrs Caldicot and Jenkins could hear her laughing gaily as she skipped off down the corridor.

'I met Miss Nightingale in the driveway,' explained Jenkins. 'Actually she nearly ran me over with her scooter. She insisted on bringing me in.' The visitor was wearing a navy blue suit with a white chalk stripe, a pale blue shirt and a perfectly tied dark blue tie. There wasn't an inappropriate crease anywhere. He would not have looked out of place in the shop window of a superior men's outfitters.

'I'm sorry...,' said Mrs Caldicot, still blushing. She waved a hand and sent a flurry of soap bubbles cascading around her. '...about that silly fancy man remark.' A few strands of hair fell across her face. 'I don't know where she got that idea from.' She reached up and brushed them away, leaving a trail of soap bubbles across her forehead and into her hair. She realised that she was blushing and, feeling embarrassed by that, blushed a still deeper shade of red.

'Please don't apologise,' insisted Jenkins, with a grin. 'Actually, I confess, I'm delighted that at least one person thinks of me as your fancy man.'

'Well, whatever...,' said Mrs Caldicot, not bothering to hide her pleasure at this mildly flirtatious remark. The late and rather unlamented Mr Caldicot had never been in the slightest bit flirtatious. Much to her surprise she liked being flirted with. It made her feel rather naughty but she definitely liked it. She felt forty years younger. She smiled. 'It's lovely to see you,' she said, meaning it. 'Your moustache has gone,' she said, suddenly noticing. 'You look younger without it.'

'I shaved it off,' said Jenkins, pleased that she had noticed.

'I'm sure I must look a terrible sight,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'It's been hectic here, as usual.' She patted her cheeks, as though this might cool them. ‘I’m blushing like a schoolgirl,’ she apologised, aware, as she said it, that the very admission was making her blush even more. Looking down she noticed the bubbles on her hands and wiped them both on her pinafore. ‘And babbling like one, too.’ She wondered how red she had become.

‘It’s very warm in here,’ said Jenkins gallantly. ‘I’m feeling a little hot myself.’

Mrs Caldicot smiled at him, gratefully. Mr Caldicot had never been gallant either. Not, at least, with her.

‘The residents seem to have settled in well,’ Jenkins said. ‘When I passed by the door into the lounge I noticed that they were having a very energetic game of something involving a cushion and a row of chairs piled onto a table.’

‘Volleyball,’ explained Mrs Caldicot. ‘They’re all very keen on volleyball at the moment. They’ve worked out a schedule of matches and they’re playing the World Cup. I think Argentina are playing France this morning.’

‘It seemed a pretty energetic game.’

‘It usually is. They do get very involved.’

There was a silence.

‘I was just passing,’ lied Jenkins. ‘I thought I’d drop in to see if I could buy you lunch. But if it’s inconvenient...if you’d rather make it another day...’ He left the sentence unfinished.

‘Oh, no,’ said Mrs Caldicot, perhaps, she thought, a trifle too hastily. ‘Oh, no. Lunch would be wonderful.’

‘You’re sure?’ asked Jenkins.

‘Absolutely!’ said Mrs Caldicot. She flushed and smiled. She glanced at the clock on the wall and then down at her pinafore. The clock showed that it was five minutes to twelve. She hurriedly dried her hands on her pinafore.

The back door swung open. ‘Pickering!’ cried an unexpected voice which neither of them recognised.

Mrs Caldicot and Jenkins both turned. A large, red-faced man stood in the kitchen doorway. He wore a worn leather gilet, a red and black lumberjack shirt, a pair of brown corduroy trousers and a pair of muddy army boots.

‘Pickering Organics!’ repeated the untimely intruder. ‘Your organic veg delivery.’ He looked around. ‘Where’s Enid?’

‘Oh right, good,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘That’s wonderful. Thank you. Enid left I’m afraid. Could you bring everything into the kitchen please?’

The delivery man did nothing to hide his disappointment, though there was no way to tell whether it was inspired by the absence of Enid, by the discovery that he was expected to bring in the fruit and vegetables by himself or by a mixture of both these factors. ‘Haven’t you got someone who could give me a hand?’ he moaned. ‘I’ve my bad back to think of.’

‘I’m afraid there isn’t anyone available to help you,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘And could you hurry please? I’m going out to lunch.’

Jenkins looked down at his unblemished and impeccably tailored suit and his perfectly polished shoes. ‘I’d be glad to help but I’m afraid I’m not really dressed for humping boxes of vegetables.’

The deliveryman looked Jenkins up and down and sniffed contemptuously. ‘You wouldn’t be no good anyway,’ he complained before disappearing. He looked at Mrs Caldicot. ‘Don’t I know you from somewhere?’ he demanded. ‘Are you famous?’

‘If you’ve heard of me then I am,’ replied Mrs Caldicot. ‘But if you haven’t then I don’t suppose I am.’

‘What’s your name?’

‘Caldicot. Thelma Caldicot,’ replied Mrs Caldicot.

‘I think I may have heard of you,’ said the deliveryman, screwing up his nose and giving a rather poor impression of a man lost in thought. ‘Perhaps you used to be someone famous?’ he suggested at last.

‘Perhaps I did,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘You’ll be famous too if I bash your head in with a saucepan,’ she thought.

The deliveryman left.

‘Do you get a lot of that?’ asked Jenkins, with a slight smile.

‘A little,’ confessed Mrs Caldicot.

‘You handled it very well,’ said Jenkins. ‘You seem very confident these days.’

‘Thank you,’ murmured Mrs Caldicot. ‘But ‘seem’ is the operative word. I’ve just got better at faking it.’

‘Who was Enid?’ asked Jenkins.

‘Oh don’t ask!’ said Mrs Caldicot, holding up both hands and pulling a face. She sighed and then answered the question anyway. ‘Enid used to be our cook. I hired her in something of a rush when I first opened the nursing home. But I discovered that she was secretly ordering a crate of sherry a week and drinking it all by herself. I had to let her go. It was my own fault. I should have spotted there was something wrong when she served pilchards four days running.’

‘I quite like pilchards,’ said Jenkins. ‘Under-estimated delicacy. Nothing wrong with serving pilchards. Full of vitamins and fish oils.’

‘But she served them for pudding,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘With custard.’

‘Ah,’ said Jenkins, pulling a face. ‘Possibly not such a terribly good idea.’

‘I should have realised then that there was something not quite right,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘But it wasn’t until I got the bill from the grocers and saw how much sherry we’d been getting through...’

‘Then you fired her,’ said Jenkins, with a slight smile. ‘Good for you.’

Mrs Caldicot held up a hand and shivered involuntarily. ‘Oh, please don’t use the ‘f’ word,’ she said. ‘It makes me go all funny inside. Being able to let people go makes me sound too much like a boss.’

They were interrupted by the arrival of Mrs Roberts, Mrs Caldicot’s senior nurse and right hand. Mrs Roberts appeared in the doorway which led into the hall and the body of the nursing home, looking flustered, as though she’d been hurrying. She was not built for hurrying. There was a large, damp stain on the front of her blue uniform. ‘I’m sorry to bother you, Mrs Caldicot,’ she apologised. She lowered her voice and spoke in a whisper. ‘But it’s Mr Williams. Henry Williams. The new resident. It’s just a teeny, weeny bit of an emergency.’

‘What’s the trouble?’ asked Mrs Caldicot anxiously.

‘He wants to leave,’ explained Mrs Roberts. ‘I’m afraid he’s being rather aggressive.’ She plucked at her damp uniform. She leant forwards and whispered. ‘He attacked me with a vase of flowers.’

‘You weren’t hurt?’ asked Mrs Caldicot, concerned.

‘Oh no,’ replied Mrs Roberts. ‘Fortunately, he didn’t let go of the vase. Freesias aren’t very heavy and water’s just damp isn’t it?’

‘Oh dear me,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘I think it’s probably just the pills he’s been taking,’ explained Mrs Roberts.

Mrs Caldicot turned to Jenkins. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I’d...’

Jenkins interrupted her. ‘You go and sort out Mr Williams,’ he said. ‘Would you like me to come with you?’

‘Oh no, thank you,’ replied Mrs Caldicot. ‘But if you could stay here and keep an eye on the delivery man....’

‘I’ll count in the carrots,’ promised Jenkins, as Mrs Caldicot, followed by Mrs Roberts, left the kitchen and headed for the stairs.

Chapter 11

By the time Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts got upstairs Henry Williams had collapsed back onto his bed and was staring rather morosely at his slippered feet.

'Is he all right?' Mrs Roberts asked Ruth, a plump young girl who had been hired to clean, tidy and generally help out in the nursing home once or twice a week. Eighteen-year-old Ruth was a naturally calm, peaceful, seemingly unflappable girl who had taken to her work with gusto. She was a big girl, who had weighed her age for as long as she could remember. She had weighed ten stones at the age of ten, twelve stones at the age of twelve and fourteen stones at the age of fourteen. Following this simple pattern she now weighed eighteen stones and, with a birthday coming up in three months, was eating with an enthusiasm pretty well guaranteed to ensure that she did not disappoint anyone who might be plotting her age and weight and hoping to continue their chart with a neat line.

Ruth, who was sitting in an easy chair watching Mr Williams staring at his feet, turned and nodded before noticing Mrs Caldicot. She jumped to her feet as quickly and as daintily as an eighteen stone teenager can do and curtsied. This was something Mrs Caldicot had, unsuccessfully, tried to persuade her to stop. No one had ever curtsied to her before and still not being entirely sure of the appropriate response she simply smiled and said 'hello' and quietly and tactfully suggested to the girl that she should pick up the small table which she had inadvertently and unknowingly knocked to the floor during the execution of the curtsey.

'Maybe we'd better call Dr Snoot again,' Mrs Caldicot said to Mrs Roberts.

'I telephoned them,' said Mrs Roberts. 'I got Dr Mrs Snoot. She said that after she'd finished her lunch she would be busy in a meeting with social workers and told me to give him another tranquilliser. To be honest I don't think she had the faintest idea who he is.'

'You didn't give her any more details about him?'

'No.'

'Probably just as well. Don't want to burden her with too much information. Sounds like she's a busy woman.'

Chapter 12

Downstairs, in the kitchen, the bad-tempered delivery man had finished bringing in the boxes of vegetables and fruit. The boxes were now stacked neatly in three piles just inside the back door.

'That's the last one,' said the huge, sweating, red-faced man, dropping a box full of carrots down onto a last remaining square of spare kitchen table. There were already boxes of potatoes, cauliflower, turnips, beans, broccoli and other vegetables on the table. There were boxes of apples, oranges and bananas too.

'Sign here, mate,' said the sullen deliveryman, pulling a piece of pink paper out of his gilet pocket and thrusting it under Jenkins's nose. Jenkins unfolded the paper, and studied it carefully for a few moments. The top, pink, sheet had a copy attached to its underside. The deliveryman arched his back and gave it a meaningful rub.

'What happened to the radishes?' Jenkins asked.

'Out of radishes.'

'I'll cross them off the list then, shall I?' said Jenkins. He took a slim, gold ballpoint pen out of his inside jacket pocket and drew a neat black line through the word 'radishes'. He then made an appropriate amendment to the total at the bottom of the page and signed his name. He checked that the amendments and his signature had passed through to the second copy. 'Do I keep the top or bottom copy?' he asked.

'Bottom.'

Jenkins kept the bottom copy and handed the top copy back to the deliveryman who took it, and hesitated. There was clearly something on his mind.

'Tell Mrs Caldicot that she don't get no more veg until I get paid,' He folded his arms, held his head back and put on the look he always gave people when they owed him money. He had once been told that it made him look hard. When he had been younger and slighter this may well have been an accurate observation. But it is difficult for an overweight man with thinning ginger hair, an overhanging paunch and ill-fitting false teeth to look menacing.

'Right,' said Jenkins. 'I'll tell her.'

'She's a few weeks over,' explained the man.

'Right,' said Jenkins. 'I'm sure it's an oversight. I'll tell her.'

'Can I ask you something?' asked the deliveryman, allowing his hard-man look to fade away.

'Of course,' agreed Jenkins. 'Ask away.'

'Why does she never have any cabbage?' he asked.

'I beg your pardon?' said Jenkins.

'The woman who makes up the order,' explained the deliveryman. 'She never puts cabbage on the list.' He paused, clearly puzzled. 'What's wrong with cabbage?'

'I don't think she likes cabbage,' explained Jenkins. 'It's a long story. He slipped the greengrocer's invoice into his jacket pocket.

Chapter 13

Mrs Caldicot entered the kitchen at speed.

'Doctors!' she cried. 'They make me so angry!'

'What's the matter?' asked Jenkins.

Mrs Caldicot told him of the trouble she'd had trying to get hold of Mr Williams's general practitioner. As she talked she stroked Kitty, who was sleeping on her rug on top of the boiler. Stroking Kitty always helped calm her down.

'Ring again,' suggested Jenkins.

'I will!' said Mrs Caldicot. She looked at the clock. 'But later,' she added, with a slightly coquettish smile. 'Are you still willing to take me out to lunch?'

'The minute you're ready,' answered Jenkins.

'Give me two minutes to brush my hair and freshen my make-up,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Why don't you wait in the lounge? You should be safe enough. The volleyball players are having their lunch.'

Jenkins, puzzled, looked around. 'I was wondering about that,' he admitted. 'Who made their lunch?'

'The chef at the pizza parlour,' replied Mrs Caldicot. 'I said that as a treat while Mr and Mrs Merivale get settled in they could have a take-away for lunch. I gave them a choice between Chinese food, Indian food and pizzas but told them they all had to have the same because we get a discount on bulk orders.'

'And they chose pizzas?'

'Well, actually, no, they didn't. Half of them wanted Chinese and half of them wanted Indian and neither half would give in so they compromised on pizzas which none of them actually wanted.'

'Sounds like a good, sound democratic solution,' nodded Jenkins. Mrs Caldicot hurried off to do things to her hair and make-up. In the hallway she met Mrs Roberts, her arms full of towels.

'Where did you meet him?' whispered Mrs Roberts. 'He's gorgeous!'

'Who?' asked Mrs Caldicot, pretending not to understand.

'You know who. The gorgeous hunk in the kitchen. The one who's taking you out to lunch.'

'Oh, that's Jenkins,' explained Mrs Caldicot, trying to sound dismissive and unconcerned. 'He's a newspaper editor. We met when I left the nursing home and had that very public battle with Muller-Hawksmoor.'

'Well, he's very dishy,' whispered Mrs Roberts. 'If people say I'm looking a funny colour today it's because I'm green with envy.' She turned, hurrying on her way with her towels. A few feet down the corridor she half turned. 'You take as long as you like over lunch,' she said, over her shoulder. She grinned and winked. 'You enjoy yourself. We can cope without you for a few hours.'

Meanwhile, Jenkins used his mobile phone to call the restaurant where he had already booked a table, to warn them that he and his guest would be late and to ensure that they would hold the table and the booking, and then wandered out of the kitchen and headed towards the lounge. As he passed the dining room he was distracted by a conversation between two female voices he recognised.

'So, what sort of morning have you had?' asked the first woman, who sounded like Miss Nightingale.

'Terrible,' answered the second woman. 'Our entire computer system was down for two hours. I don't know why we have so many IT consultants. They're useless. More problems with the new software too. My desktop froze up so often I ended up working on my laptop. Our supplier in Frankfurt has let us down again, the air conditioning has packed up, Trent from head office has been promoted over me when everyone knows he can't tie his shoelaces without help, the contract from Brussels didn't arrive, my secretary is leaving to have another baby and, to top it all, by the time she got to me, the tea lady didn't have any jammy dodgers left. What sort of day did you have?'

'Awful. Simply awful,' said the voice, which sounded as though it belonged to Miss Nightingale. 'The washing machine got stuck on programme five so all your white shirts are now bright pink and two sizes too small, the postman left next door's mail for the third time this week, the dishwasher overflowed all over the kitchen floor, two Jehovah's Witnesses called and I couldn't get rid of them for half an hour, a man from the garage rang and said that my car is unroadworthy because the ashtrays are full and there's a spider in the garage twice the size of King Kong.'

'Oh dear,' said the second woman. 'You poor thing. Mr Hopping in accounts came in to see me. He says that I can't claim for the cup of tea I had when I went to Newcastle on the train a week last Wednesday. He says that the board has decided that cups of tea are no longer to be considered necessary expenses. Worst of all, there's a rumour that Miss Onions in the typing pool is pregnant though I don't know how that could be because I'd heard that she was on the pill. Oh, and I may be an hour or two late tonight. Mr Farthing wants me to go over the Global Moulding account with him.'

Jenkins, extremely puzzled by what he was hearing, was beginning to feel guilty for eavesdropping (even newspaper editors have scruples) when one of the residents came out of the dining room and nearly ran into him.

'Hello, Mr Jenkins!' cried Mr Livingstone. 'Won't you come and join us? Have a slice of pizza? There's plenty.' He waved an empty bottle. 'I'm just off to get more wine.'

Jenkins was thanking him and explaining that he had already made arrangements for his lunch when Mrs Caldicot came skipping down the stairs.

'I'm sorry,' said Mrs Caldicot, rather breathlessly. Jenkins looked at her. In less than fifteen minutes she had somehow succeeded in transforming herself. She looked beautiful and radiant. He told her.

'Don't be silly,' she said, blushing and giggling, though secretly she herself was quite pleased with the way she now looked. After tidying up her hair and her make-up and slipping into something a little slinkier than she normally wore she had caught sight of herself in the bathroom mirror. For a brief moment she had almost failed to recognise herself.

'I'm serious,' insisted Jenkins as they left.

In the car, Jenkins turned to Mrs Caldicot. 'Can you explain something for me,' he asked. 'While standing in the hallway I distinctly heard two women talking about the sort of morning they had both had at work. I didn't think any of your residents had jobs.'

'Oh that would have been Miss Nightingale and Mrs Torridge!' laughed Mrs Caldicot. 'They just pretend. It's a little game they play at mealtimes. They're quite good at it.'

For a moment Jenkins felt rather foolish. Then he saw the funny side of it. 'They were very convincing,' he smiled.

'Mrs Torridge is an amazing woman,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'She always keeps all her clocks and watches at different times. She says she's done it since she was 20 and that it completely eliminates boredom from her life.'

Jenkins laughed.

'You'd like her,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'She's a terrible hypochondriac but great fun. She is the sort of woman who never has a cold but always has the flu. But you'll like her! I think she's 82 but she always lies about her age. The other day I heard her tell someone that she is 92.'

'Why on earth does she do that? I thought women usually liked to pretend they are younger than they really are.'

'Not after the age of 70,' explained Mrs Caldicot. 'Mrs Torridge reckons that if people think she's ten years older than she really is they'll always tell her how good she looks. It works too. People are always paying her amazing compliments. The others have started doing it too. Miss Nightingale now always lies about her age. Mrs Peterborough simply can't remember hers.' Mrs Caldicot sighed. 'All our residents are wonderful. The other day Mr Hewitt told me that he had only ever wanted the simple things in life. When I asked him to define what he meant by the simple things, do you know what he said?'

'No,' laughed Jenkins. 'Tell me.'

'Love, money, power and immortality,' laughed Mrs Caldicot. She had laughed more with Jenkins than she'd ever laughed with the late Mr Caldicot. She suddenly realised how happy and content she felt when she was in his company. And safe too. In the months since her husband had died she'd had to grow a great deal. But underneath the tough exterior there was still a very soft inside. She wondered if Jenkins asked her out because he wanted to or simply because he thought he ought to keep in touch with her. She very much wanted it to be the former but was worried that it might be the latter. It had been a long, long time since she'd felt like this. She felt slightly bewildered and embarrassed and could sense that she was blushing again.

'I like the new building,' said Jenkins. 'It looks very elegant.'

'I was sad that we had to move,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'But some of the residents just couldn't settle in at the old place and we needed somewhere a bit bigger.' She paused. 'Besides...' she began and suddenly wished she hadn't.

'Go on,' encouraged Jenkins, as he accelerated past a bus.

'It's silly,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'You'll laugh.'

'No I won't,' said Jenkins. 'And what does it matter if I do. You think it's silly anyway.'

She looked at him. He was so kind. He always managed to make her feel good about herself. 'I had the old place painted and we moved out all the furniture and the carpets and the curtains.' It did seem silly. She couldn't help herself. She grinned. 'But we just couldn't get rid of the smell of cabbage.'

He laughed. But it wasn't a nasty laugh. He wasn't laughing at her. He was laughing with her.

'That's a pretty good reason for moving,' he told her.

'I spent far too much on moving,' admitted Mrs Caldicot. 'I'd like to have really nice furniture, carpets and curtains so that it will look more like a hotel than a rest home. The place we're in now must have been wonderful when it was last decorated but I seriously suspect that was probably a century ago!'

'It looks wonderful,' said Jenkins. 'You bought all the furniture with the new place, didn't you?'

Mrs Caldicot nodded. ‘The place had been in the same family for generations,’ she said. ‘They hadn’t done anything to it. When the old man who’d been living there died he left it to his children. But they didn’t want anything to do with it. They just wanted the place sold quickly so that they could split up the proceeds.’

‘I don’t know anything about furnishings or furniture but it looks very grand,’ said Jenkins. ‘Some of that furniture looks quite valuable to me. If I were you, I wouldn’t change a thing. And there’s no smell of cabbage. Do you have nothing now to remind you of that chap who used to run the Twilight Years...what was he called? Muller-something wasn’t it?’

‘There’s a vase in the lounge that used to stand on the hall table. Miss Nightingale rescued it and brought it with us.’ She paused. ‘Actually, I wish she hadn’t,’ she said. ‘It annoys me because it’s the only reminder of the past.’

‘I shouldn’t worry too much about it,’ said Jenkins. ‘The way your residents chase around it won’t last long.’

‘No,’ agreed Mrs Caldicot. ‘I suspect that you’re right.’

Chapter 14

'Would you order for me, please?' said Mrs Caldicot quietly, folding her menu and putting it down on the immaculate, white linen tablecloth. 'I honestly don't understand any of this,' she said, tapping the closed menu with a forefinger. 'It's all in French.' She had also been slightly bewildered by the fact that her menu hadn't contained any prices.

'Do you like salmon?'

'Oh yes, very much.' Mrs Caldicot lowered her voice still further. 'But isn't it terribly expensive?'

'Not at all,' Jenkins assured her.

'How can you possibly know?' asked Mrs Caldicot, looking around anxiously. 'There aren't any prices on the menu.'

'There are on mine,' Jenkins assured her. 'They gave you a menu without prices so that you wouldn't know how much of a cheapskate I am.' He smiled.

Mrs Caldicot smiled back. She found the newspaperman irresistible.

'Are you sure the rest home will be OK while you're away?' Jenkins asked. 'Everything seemed so hectic that I feel a little guilty taking you out.'

'Everything will be fine,' replied Mrs Caldicot. 'Mrs Roberts is in charge. She's marvellous.'

Jenkins frowned. 'Mrs Roberts? I don't know her do I?'

'You saw her briefly,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Gina Roberts. She's plumpish, mid-forties, black and she has the smile of an angel. She's always laughing. I sometimes think that everyone who knows her regards her as their very best friend.'

'I remember.'

'When I re-opened the Twilight Years Rest Home I had to hire all sorts of staff. I'd never done anything like it before and to be honest I wasn't very good at it. For example, the cook we've just lost was one of my first appointments.'

'The sherry enthusiast?'

'That's the one,' said Mrs Caldicot, with a roll of her eyes. 'My oh my, she was a mistake. Not that she was the only mistake. I hired a housekeeper who stole from the petty cash and two young men who were supposed to do the heavy work but who spent all their time picking up local girls and bringing them back to their rooms. Mrs Roberts has more than made up for all the mistakes I made. She's a real gem. She's one of those people who always seems to get so much more out of giving than receiving. She always wants to do things for people but gets very embarrassed if anyone does anything for her. She used to work as a nurse at the Twilight Years Rest Home back in Muller-Hawksmoor's days and I remembered her from my brief stay there. She's wonderfully kind and sympathetic. She'd just got divorced and was living in a tiny bed sitting room so she moved in with us. The Twilight Years Rest Home is now her life - just as it is mine. She cares about people so much that I sometimes think that if the unions found out about her they'd have her hung, drawn and quartered. Now, she's our Matron and I honestly don't know how I'd cope without her.'

'Matron?'

'Yes. It's a wonderfully old-fashioned word, isn't it? But it sounds much nicer than 'head nurse', don't you think? Mrs Roberts tells me that in hospitals these days the senior nurses never actually see any patients. They have numbers and spend all their days either shuffling bits of paper around or attending meetings. Most of them have long since forgotten how to bandage someone. They go around telling young nurses off if they're seen sitting on the beds, comforting the sick and the needy. Mrs Roberts is a proper nurse. She doesn't mind getting her hands dirty. And she's old-fashioned enough to believe that comforting the sick and the needy is what a nurse is there for.'

'It sounds as if you're lucky to have her.'

'Oh, I am,' agreed Mrs Caldicot.

'Now, what shall we have after the salmon? A raspberry sorbet? And then how about beef and Yorkshire pudding?'

'That sounds wonderful,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. She laughed. 'It sounds absolutely marvellous.'

Jenkins smiled. 'I love to hear you laugh,' he told her. He closed his menu and, moments later, murmured the order to the waiter who had miraculously appeared at his shoulder.

'Excellent choice, sir,' murmured the waiter. Mrs Caldicot couldn't help wondering why this choice deserved a compliment and what horrors they had avoided by not choosing the spring lamb chop or the braised liver.

'Would you like some wine?' Jenkins asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘Oh no, I don’t think so,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Not at lunchtime. I’ll fall asleep.’

‘We could just have a glass of champagne with our salmon and then half a bottle of a nice red between us with our main course,’ suggested Jenkins. ‘I’ve got to drive so I won’t drink more than one glass.’

‘You’re leading me astray!’ laughed Mrs Caldicot. She paused, looked at him and remembered. ‘But then you’ve always been very good at that.’

‘I’ll ask the wine waiter to come over,’ murmured the waiter, before picking up the two menus and shimmying away silently.

‘I think you deserve a little leading astray,’ said Jenkins, when the waiter had gone. He leant across the table a little. ‘And, if someone’s going to do it, I’m very happy to apply for the job.’

Mrs Caldicot, blushing, looked down and played with her cutlery.

‘I have a confession to make,’ said Jenkins suddenly.

Mrs Caldicot looked across at him, surprised.

‘I didn’t turn up at the nursing home by accident,’ he told her.

‘Oh.’

‘I came quite deliberately. To see you.’

‘Oh.’

‘I’ve been trying to pluck up the courage to come and see you for ages.’

‘Why on earth would you need courage to come and see me?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘I don’t know,’ admitted Jenkins. ‘Perhaps because I was frightened that you might say ‘no’ if I invited you out. And being able to hang on to the thought that you might say ‘yes’ was more acceptable than the possibility of finding out that you might say ‘no’.’

Mrs Caldicot couldn’t think of any suitable reply to this and so she said nothing for a while. Since Jenkins was hoping that Mrs Caldicot might say something encouraging he too stayed silent. He had been astonished to find just how delighted he had been to see her and just how much he had missed her.

‘Why do they do that?’ she asked at last, very quietly.

‘Do what?’

‘Congratulate you on what you’ve ordered. If I’d ordered the steak and kidney pie would he have leant down and quietly told me that I’d made a terrible decision because it’s rancid?’

Jenkins laughed. It was a long time since he’d met a woman with Mrs Caldicot’s uniquely honest approach to life. He very much enjoyed being with her.

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘And I’m not going to ask. I have very few rules,’ he continued. ‘But one of them is never to argue with or embarrass a waiter before I eat a meal at the restaurant where he works. It is a simple, unambitious rule but it is, I believe, one which has helped to protect me from food poisoning on four continents.’

A young girl, dressed in a black skirt and a white blouse, appeared at their table carrying a basket full of bread rolls. Jenkins chose a white roll covered in a thick sprinkling of sesame seeds. Mrs Caldicot selected a small brown roll, baked in the shape of a small Hovis loaf.

Jenkins had booked a table at the best local hotel he could find. He had been abroad on a lengthy assignment for the proprietor of the newspaper for which he worked and he had missed Mrs Caldicot very much. He had never before become emotionally involved with the subject of a story but had thought about her often while he’d been away. Several times he’d picked up the telephone, intending to call her. But on each occasion he had put the telephone back down without making the call. He knew why he had wanted to call. But up until now he hadn’t been at all sure why he hadn’t gone through with it. Now he knew. He had been frightened that he was getting too closely involved. He had been frightened by the intensity of his own feelings. Now, it was too late.

‘How has life been for you personally?’ Jenkins asked, breaking his bread into several pieces. ‘I know how things have been for the rest home. You have done amazing things. But what about you?’

Mrs Caldicot thought for a long moment before answering.

‘My biggest surprise was that I found dealing with my husband’s death harder than I thought I would,’ she confessed. ‘Everything happened so quickly that I never really had chance to come to terms with what had happened. I neither asked for, nor expected, anything from my husband and so I was never disappointed. But you get used to people nevertheless and with all the drama and the excitement, I didn’t get a chance to mourn him properly. If ‘mourn’ is the right word.’ Following her dining companion’s example Mrs Caldicot picked up and broke her own bread roll.

‘My GP arranged for me to see a bereavement counsellor,’ continued Mrs Caldicot. ‘Though before he died I never knew such people existed.’

‘I didn’t know they existed within the NHS,’ commented Jenkins, whose view of the Britain’s state organised health service was poor.

‘They don’t,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘I had to pay this one £90 an hour.’

‘Was he any good?’

‘To be perfectly honest my hairdresser gave me better support and much better advice,’ laughed Mrs Caldicot. ‘And he did my hair too.’

Jenkins, buttered the two halves of his bread roll. Mrs Caldicot continued to break hers into smaller and smaller pieces. ‘He calls himself Luigi but I happen to know he comes from Southport,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘He did once go to Calais on one of those cheap wine and cigarettes shopping expeditions but he’s never been to Italy.’

Jenkins took a bite of bread roll and chewed for a moment before he said anything. ‘Luigi was the hairdresser?’

Mrs Caldicot laughed. ‘Oh yes. The bereavement counsellor was called Ms Cook. I don’t know her first name. Isn’t that odd? I don’t know the hairdresser’s second name and I don’t know her first name. I think she said her parents came from Sydney but I’m pretty sure she said she was born in Dudley.’

‘Did she help at all?’ asked Jenkins, just before taking another bite of bread roll.

‘I was asked to describe Mr Caldicot’s virtues at the bereavement counselling,’ she said. ‘The only thing I could think of was tidiness. He was always a very tidy man. He always put his dirty washing straight into the raffia work washing skip at the top of the landing. But it’s not a lot to say of someone is it? That you remember them because they were ‘tidy’?’ She paused and looked down and there was a silence for a few moments. ‘I didn’t really need to mourn him,’ she said, reflecting. ‘I didn’t miss him in a spiritual sort of way. It was more that I just needed to get used to him not being there. I missed not having to cook for two and I missed not having to wash and iron his shirts. But those aren’t really things that you miss, are they?’

‘Would you like another roll?’ Jenkins asked Mrs Caldicot. She looked down. The roll with which she had been playing was now nothing but a pile of crumbs on her plate.

‘Oh dear,’ she said, looking down and staring aghast at her plate. ‘Did I really do that?’ She picked her handbag up off the floor, brought it underneath the table and opened it. She then tipped the crumbs from the plate into her handbag.

‘I think the bereavement counsellor would probably call it ‘anger displacement’, and charge you another £90,’ said Jenkins.

Another waiter brought their two glasses of champagne. Jenkins asked him to bring Mrs Caldicot a fresh roll. When he had gone, Jenkins lifted his glass. ‘To health, love and money and time to enjoy them all,’ he said.

Mrs Caldicot lifted her glass, repeated the toast, touched her glass against Jenkins’s and took a sip.

‘Mmmm,’ she said. ‘This is very good.’

Two waiters brought two plates upon which silver domes hid the food on the plates. The waiters placed the plates on the tablecloth, paused and then, in unison, lifted the domes to reveal their salmon - the first course.

‘Doesn’t it look wonderful?’ said Mrs Caldicot, her face as excited as a child’s at Christmas.

They ate in silence for a while.

‘Do you have all the residents who used to live at Mr Muller-Hawksmoor’s establishment?’ Jenkins asked.

‘Oh no,’ replied Mrs Caldicot. ‘A few were so upset by everything that had happened that they went back to live with their families or in rest homes or sheltered accommodation nearer to relatives. Two are currently in hospital, and, of course, poor old Mrs Davies - whom I don’t think you ever met - died.’

‘Is Mrs Peterborough still with you?’

‘She’s with me. She’s as dotty as ever but just as adorable. She still repeats everything Miss Nightingale says.

And we have Mrs Torridge, of course, who has her little quirks too. Do you know she wakes up sometimes and decides she’s really someone else. One day last week, she decided that she was Harold Wilson. She borrowed an old pipe and went around making speeches all day long. Her family turn up occasionally and want to have her committed to a mental institution but she’s very happy with us. If she were richer, people would just think her rather eccentric.’

‘And Mr Livingstone is still with you, isn’t he? I saw him.’

‘Oh yes. And dear old Mr Hewitt. Actually, it’s a good job we don’t have as many residents as there were before because Muller-Hawksmoor had his residents sharing two or three to a room and now everyone has their own room - except Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale who can’t abide the thought of being separated and who insisted on sharing a room - and Mr and Mrs Merivale too, of course.’

‘Mr and Mrs Merivale?’ said Jenkins, thoughtfully. ‘I don’t think I remember them.’

‘No, they’re new,’ agreed Mrs Caldicot. ‘Maple and Maurice Merivale. They’re a lovely couple. Of course, we don’t have as many rooms as there used to be. We knocked down some of the partitions, to make the rooms bigger and airier. It didn’t take much work. Some of the partitions were so thin that if you put one nail in you could hang pictures on both sides.’

‘And who is the latest patient - the one whose doctor you were trying to contact?’

‘That’s a gentleman called Mr Williams. He came because the hospital needed his bed. We’ve only got two empty rooms now.’

‘I don’t wish to sound horribly mercenary,’ said Jenkins. ‘But can Mr Williams afford to pay anything for his board and lodging?’

‘I’ve no idea,’ admitted Mrs Caldicot.

‘And you didn’t ask?’

‘Good heavens, no,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘No,’ sighed Jenkins, a slight smile creeping onto his lips. ‘I suppose not.’

Chapter 15

'I've been very lucky,' said Mrs Caldicot, as she tackled her salmon. 'We don't have much income but all the residents help out when they can.' She paused. 'They're brilliant,' she said. 'All we need now is someone to do the roof.'

'It's leaking?'

'Only when it rains,' said Mrs Caldicot. Realising what she'd said she laughed at herself. 'I'm looking for a roofer who will overcharge and do a shoddy job. At least then I'll know that I won't be disappointed as well.'

'But, apart from the roof, it's all working out OK?' asked Jenkins.

'We all do our best,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'The only real problem is that instead of doing what they can to make things easier the authorities bend over backwards to make things difficult. All I want to do is run a little home for a few friends - provide them with a roof and so on. It doesn't seem a lot to ask, does it?'

Jenkins, who sometimes thought he knew far too much about the way the world works, said nothing, thought a good deal and smiled at her.

'I sometimes wake up not really sure what happened to me. One minute I'm a slightly dotty old lady whose relatives decide she needs to be put into a home. The next minute I'm still a slightly dotty old lady but now I'm in charge of the home. Phrases like 'putting the lunatics in charge of the asylum' spring to mind. But then I just get on with life and try not to worry too much. Though I confess I do often ask myself whether doing the right things for the wrong reasons is worse or better than doing the wrong things for the right reasons.'

'I'd rather leave the metaphysics to our philosophy editor, if you don't mind,' said Jenkins.

'Have you really got one? A philosophy editor?'

'Good heavens, no,' laughed Jenkins, clearing his plate and laying down his knife and fork. 'I'm a great fan of yours and really admire what you've done. I like the way you did it your way - just one woman up against the system. It's something a lot of people dream about but it doesn't happen often. The story we ran about you struck a real chord with our older readers,' Jenkins told her. 'There's a lot of resentment among older people at the moment.' He stopped, and thought for a moment. 'No,' he said, correcting himself. 'Resentment is too strong a word - though to be honest I personally don't think it would inappropriate or out of place. Many old people just feel rather sad and abandoned. They feel that the elderly are no longer respected.'

'I'm not surprised,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. 'They are abandoned and they certainly aren't respected. Millions of elderly people are now officially living in poverty. They've worked hard all their lives but they can't even get decent health care now. They're pushed around, bullied, ignored and treated as though they're just a nuisance.'

'I spend quite a lot of time on what used to be called the Continent,' said Jenkins. He finished his champagne. 'And I have to say that they treat their elderly relatives quite differently over there.'

'Really?' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Absolutely,' said Jenkins. 'The French, the Italians, the Spanish and so on all treat their elderly relatives with great respect and love. The eccentricity of the old isn't regarded as a cause of embarrassment as it is in Britain. They don't think that a bit of forgetfulness has to be covered up with sedatives and anti-psychotic drugs. In cafes all across mainland Europe the best cafe seats, the seats near to the window in the summer, or near to the stove in the winter, are reserved by popular consent, for the elderly. Old grannies are given a chair in the grocery store so that they can sit and chat with their friends. Benches are put out in the village squares so that the old men can sit around, admire the young women parading by for the benefit of the young men on their motorbikes, reminisce about their own greatest conquests, share a bottle of wine and a packet of cigarettes and keep track of all the essential comings and goings. They have the place of honour at meal times and they sleep in their own beds, in their own rooms, with their families.'

'Golly,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Are you sure that's not heaven you're describing?

Jenkins smiled. 'In a village I know well in France the waiter at the cafe where I usually take my evening glass of wine fetches two of his elderly and frail patrons from their homes every morning at eleven. They spend all day in the cafe, buying an occasional glass of wine or cup of coffee, and maybe a small meal, and then, at the end of the day, when he is about to close up his cafe, he takes them back home again. It seems to me to be a considerably more decent life than the sort of life we offer our elderly folk. Given a choice between a cafe and a day centre furnished with plastic chairs, over-loud television and a succession of patronising volunteers I know which I would choose.'

'From what you say it seems that everyone seems to have much more patience with the elderly than they have in this country,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Here the notion of the extended family - going back three or four or five generations - is now merely something you read about in history books. We have our relatives `put away' when they become a burden. We're too busy for family loyalties; too obsessed with our ambitions to be concerned with what happens to our old people. We make more fuss over the deaths of complete strangers - murder victims, members of the royal family - than we do about the deaths of our own relatives. How many of the thousands who went to London to lay flowers outside Kensington Palace after Diana died would have made the same trip to lay flowers on their own grandparents' graves? Most people over 60 have had to learn to accept the inevitability of systematic and continuous disappointment. Just when the commitments and responsibilities have gone, just when you no longer have to be nice to bosses and partners and customers whom you can't stand the sight of and have a right to be able to look forward to a bit of fun - look what happens! The only thing doctors and nurses in our hospitals will do for you is give you a metaphorical bang on the head and knock you out with some disgusting cocktail of sedatives. I wouldn't do that to my worst enemy.' Mrs Caldicot paused and thought for a moment. 'Well, I could, of course probably be persuaded.' she added. Jenkins smiled. 'The thing is that today if you're over 50,' Mrs Caldicot continued, 'the nurses don't really care whether you live or die as long as you have your bowels opened regularly. Appallingly, it's now perfectly legal for doctors and nurses to drug the elderly - just to keep them quiet and to stop them from complaining.'

'It's a scandal,' agreed Jenkins.

'I read somewhere - I think it might have been in your own paper - that the increase in the prescribing of anti-psychotic drugs for the elderly is going up 70% a year. In some so-called 'care' homes half or even all the patients are permanently zonked out with pills they don't need. And the government has now made it legal for the nurses and doctors to do it.' Mrs Caldicot was getting into her stride. 'The old are expected to be grateful for every little favour, thankful for their pensions. They're almost expected to give thanks for being allowed to stay alive. Doesn't anyone ever stop to think that the elderly have earned their pensions and that they are entitled to more from life than the chance to sit quietly and watch the dross on daytime television. Our old people deserve better.'

'Stop! Stop!' cried Jenkins, laughing. 'You don't have to convince me. I'm on your side. We really should get you onto the television to talk about this.'

Mrs Caldicot held up a hand. 'Oh, no, thank you,' she said. 'I think my television career is over.'

'That's a great pity,' said Jenkins. 'You were a breath of fresh air. You'd bring a lot of sense to TV discussion programmes. You could become a standard bearer for the elderly.'

'Oh I do hate that word!' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Which word?'

'Elderly. It has all sorts of unpleasant connotations. It always makes me think of geriatric wards, nasty smells and Zimmer frames.'

Jenkins smiled. 'There you are, you see!' he said. 'Always defying convention and making people think.'

'You're the one who should be on the television,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I've never known anyone with such a sweet tongue.' She looked at her companion. 'I've told you far too much about me,' she said. 'What about you? Are you happy? Content? At peace?'

'Good heavens!' said Jenkins with a laugh. 'When you ask questions you don't mess around, do you?'

'No,' admitted Mrs Caldicot, enjoying the change of roles. 'How are you enjoying life?'

For a moment Jenkins didn't answer.

'I'm sorry,' said Mrs Caldicot quietly. 'Have I said something I shouldn't have done?'

'No, no,' said Jenkins. 'Just touched a nerve I suppose.' He sighed. 'I've been getting more and more disillusioned with what I do and the people I do it with. I'm fed up with the world and I'm fed up with newspapers. I can hardly bring myself to read the papers any more. Every day fills me with frustration. I live in a constant state of rage at the levels of corruption in almost every aspect of public and corporate life. The Government survives on the apathy of the masses. There are only two reasons to read newspapers: for pleasure and for information. I no longer get any pleasure out of reading the papers. And I have more than enough information to last me a lifetime.'

Two waiters bought their next course.

'I thought you loved newspapers!' said Mrs Caldicot, dipping a spoon into her raspberry sorbet.

'I used to love newspapers,' said Jenkins, emphasising the second word. 'But these days the newspaper industry - like everything else - is run by bean counters. Mean-spirited men and women in expensive suits who know the price of everything and the value of nothing.'

'That's very nicely put,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'It's not original, I'm afraid,' confessed Jenkins. 'Oscar Wilde said it first, in 'Lady Windermere's Fan'; though knowing his reputation he probably pinched it off someone else. It was his definition of a cynic.'

'I'm sorry,' said Mrs Caldicot. She felt embarrassed. 'I don't know much about literature. I'm very ignorant.' She brightened. 'But it is an area of my ignorance I've always wanted to remedy.'

'I didn't mean to sound patronising,' said Jenkins. He finished his sorbet. 'But never one to pass up an opportunity...if you'd like to come to the theatre with me one evening I would love to take you.'

'I'd love that,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Very much. But don't change the subject.'

'The bean counters have changed everything,' said Jenkins. 'There's no fun, no passion and very little sense of right and wrong in newspapers these days. I think I'm the oldest senior member of staff on my paper - and probably one of the oldest on any national newspaper. Most of the young fellows around these days are in it for money and power rather than because they're interested in finding out and exposing the truth.'

The waiters arrived to collect their empty sorbet dishes. Moments later they brought the main course. The wine waiter followed with half a bottle of claret.

'Let's get back to your life,' said Mrs Caldicot firmly. 'Wasn't there some journalist who once said that a journalist should treat politicians in the same way that dogs treat lamp-posts?'

Jenkins grinned broadly. 'Exactly!' he said. 'It was a chap called H.L.Mencken and he was absolutely right. These days most of the young guys in suits have probably never heard of Mencken. And they certainly wouldn't dream of treating a politician disrespectfully. Most of them suck up to politicians so that their bosses can get their deals pushed through and so that they can get their knighthoods and their well-paid positions on influential quangos.'

'You sound as if you consider yourself a bit prehistoric!' said Mrs Caldicot.

'I am!' said Jenkins. 'I'm an anachronism. I always considered myself to be fairly tough and hardy - and even cynical - but the new editors I work with are ruthless. They're hard rather than hardy. They never let their emotions govern the way they treat a story.'

Jenkins picked up a spoon and started to play with it. 'I had lunch with my editor two days ago,' he said. `At the Savoy in London. He ordered a steak and chips, as he always does, and when it came he poked at it rather half-heartedly with his knife and immediately told the waiter that the steak wasn't cooked as he'd ordered it. The waiter was rather taken aback. He apologised and offered to take the steak back to the kitchen to be replaced. 'No. I haven't got time,' said the editor. And he dismissed the waiter with a wave of his hand. When the poor guy had gone he looked at me. 'Nothing wrong with the steak,' he told me coldly. 'Just thought I'd keep the guy on his toes and let him know who's in charge.''

Neither Jenkins nor Mrs Caldicot said a word for a moment. 'I don't think I like your world very much,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'That's exactly my problem,' said Jenkins. 'I don't like it very much either. 'The modern corporate man operates on fear,' he said. 'He is frightened that without the fear his power will simply disappear. The editor's appreciation of his own power is confirmed every day by the fact that journalists shiver and jump when he approaches. If they stop shivering and jumping he won't know that he has the power. Of course, the poor fellow is driven by fear too. The power goes with the job. Without the job he will have no power.'

Mrs Caldicot looked at him, reached across the table and touched his hand. 'I am sorry,' she said. 'I think I always thought that your life was just all roses.'

Jenkins shook his head sadly. 'What a pointless and rather pathetic use of power,' he said. 'I find it frightening to realise that a man like that is running a national newspaper,' he said. 'He humiliated a perfectly decent human being just to show me how ruthless he is and to underline the gulf that exists between the two of them. It was also a message to me, to let me know he's the boss.' He looked across at Mrs Caldicot. 'I've got to get out,' he said. 'I'm terrified that I'll be contaminated by all this; that it will infect my soul. I'm already beginning to assume there is a hidden agenda behind everything people do.' He sighed. `I've got to get away from it.'

'Perhaps you need a holiday,' suggested Mrs Caldicot.

'No, no. A holiday is good I'm afraid. I won't be able to forget the sort of world I now work in. If I get too soft then when I get back I'll be massacred. I need to get out of it for good.'

The waiter arrived, waited for them to acknowledge his presence and then recited an impressive list of puddings.

'What would you like?' asked Jenkins, brightening up. 'No more of this misery,' I promise you. 'I didn't bring you here to bore you silly with my complaints.'

'You didn't bore me,' insisted Mrs Caldicot.

'Choose a pudding,' said Jenkins, smiling. 'Something stuffed with calories.'

'You'll laugh,' said Mrs Caldicot, folding her menu and putting it down.

'No, I won't!' promised Jenkins.

'I'd like a knickerbocker glory,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Why should I laugh at that?'

'It seems, sort of, childish, I suppose.'

'It seems wonderful,' said Jenkins. He turned to the waiter and ordered one knickerbocker glory.

'Of course, sir,' smiled the waiter. He turned to Jenkins. 'And for you, sir?'

'Just coffee for me, please.'

‘You tricked me!’ protested Mrs Caldicot. ‘I thought you were having a pudding.’

‘I’ll get far more pleasure out of watching you eat yours,’ said Jenkins. ‘Do you want coffee?’

‘No thanks,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘I haven’t had a knickerbocker glory for years,’ she confessed. `Not since I was a girl. I don’t know what gave me the idea.’ She hesitated. ‘Yes, I do.’ she corrected herself. ‘I don’t think I’ve enjoyed a meal as much since I was a child. It sort of reminded me of happy times...’

‘I’m pleased,’ said Jenkins, who clearly meant it.

‘So, what are you going to do about your life?’ asked Mrs Caldicot. ‘Do you have something planned?’

For a moment or two Jenkins didn’t reply. He picked up his wine glass, inspected it as though looking for marks, stared at it as though he had seen it before but couldn’t quite remember where, drank a little wine from it and gently put it down. ‘I’ve been offered a new job,’ he said at last. ‘Abroad.’

Mrs Caldicot felt cold. She didn’t know exactly why. ‘That’s wonderful!’ she lied. She tried hard to sound enthusiastic but as she spoke she knew that she did not sound convincing.

Jenkins picked up the salt cellar and rolled it between his fingers. He stared at it, weighed it in his hand and then put it down again.

‘Is it a good job?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘It’s a very good job,’ replied Jenkins, without hesitation. ‘It’s in New York.’

‘New York?’ said Mrs Caldicot, trying hard to keep the shock and the sadness out of her voice.

‘New York.’

‘In America?’

‘I think that’s where they still keep it.’

Now it was Mrs Caldicot’s turn to play with the cruet. She picked up the pepper pot and played with it. A few grains of pepper fell out onto the white damask tablecloth.

‘Oh dear,’ she said. ‘Is pepper like salt? Do you have to throw a pinch of it over your left shoulder if you spill some?’

Jenkins looked up. He shook his head. ‘I don’t think so,’ he replied.

‘What sort of job is it? Are you terribly excited? Are you going to take it? When do you have to go?’

Jenkins looked at Mrs Caldicot, smiled and held up a hand. ‘One at a time!’ he said. ‘You sound like a one woman press conference.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Mrs Caldicot. She looked down. She wanted to run away; to hide. She could feel tears in her eyes. She should feel pleased for her friend. But she didn’t. All she could think about was herself. She felt deeply ashamed. But she couldn’t do anything about it.

‘The proprietor of *The Sunday Globe* wants me to go to New York and edit a new tabloid he’s bought there,’ said Jenkins. He looked down at the tablecloth. ‘Editing my own paper has always been my main ambition,’ he told her. ‘When I was a young reporter it was something I dreamt of. Loads of reporters dream of writing novels or screenplays. I’ve known some who wanted to be rock stars or sports stars - one or two actually made it. Some want to be businessmen - running their own operation. Some want to run pubs. Some want to be columnists.’ He sighed. ‘I always wanted to be an editor.’ He shrugged. ‘That was it.’

Mrs Caldicot reached across the table and took hold of Jenkins’ hand. ‘I’m very pleased for you,’ she said. ‘You really deserve it. I’m very proud of you. And I know you’ll make a wonderful editor.’

Jenkins looked at her, and put his free hand on top of the hand she had placed on his. ‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘That means a lot to me.’ But it wasn’t at all what he’d wanted to hear. He had wanted her to burst into tears, to tell him that she didn’t want him to go, to tell him that she wanted to see more of him, to ask him to stay. He knew she would never leave the Twilight Years Rest Home. He would never expect her to do that; not to abandon the people who depended upon her. But he had hoped that she might want him to stay and become part of her life.

‘When do you have to go?’ Mrs Caldicot asked him.

‘Next month,’ said Jenkins. ‘If I say ‘yes’.’ He reached across the table with his free hand and took Mrs Caldicot’s free hand.

‘Are you going to take the job?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know,’ said Jenkins. ‘I really don’t know.’

Mrs Caldicot didn’t say anything, mainly because she was frightened that if she spoke she would cry. She didn’t want to cry. She was used to Jenkins being strong and giving her support. Now, curiously, imperceptibly, their roles seemed to have been reversed.

The waiter brought her knickerbocker glory and the inspired and colourful confection dominated the conversation for the next few minutes.

‘Did it live up to expectations?’ asked Jenkins, when Mrs Caldicot had finished.

‘It was better!’ she said, putting down her spoon, with a sigh.

‘That’s some going,’ said Jenkins. ‘Matching a childhood memory is usually nigh on impossible.’

‘That really was better than I remembered,’ Mrs Caldicot assured him, with a big smile. ‘Thank you.’ She looked at Jenkins. There was love in her heart and suddenly there were tears in her eyes after all.

‘Why are you crying?’ he asked her.

‘Oh I’m just a silly sentimental old thing,’ she said, dismissively. ‘Don’t take any notice of me.’

Chapter 16

When she returned to the nursing home, Mrs Caldicot telephoned Henry Williams's general practitioner twice. She did so from her office while Jenkins sat opposite her.

The first time Mrs Caldicot telephoned, she was told that the doctor couldn't come because she had to pick up her children from school. The excuse the second time was that she was half way through an aerobics class. She spoke to the doctor herself. The doctor, wheezing and breathless, took the call on a mobile telephone.

'Well, perhaps you could call in afterwards?' suggested Mrs Caldicot, trying to sound sweeter than she felt.

'No, I don't think so,' wheezed the out of breath doctor. 'Can't you bring him along to the surgery in the morning?'

'I really don't think that would be a very good idea,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'He's just come out of hospital; he's very old, very confused and very sleepy.'

'He probably just needs another tranquilliser,' replied the doctor, now starting to get her breath back. 'The hospital wouldn't have sent him out if they hadn't been sure that all was well.'

'I hope you don't mind my saying so but I'm not sure that giving him another tranquilliser is a terribly good idea,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I think the tablets are making his confusion worse.'

'I didn't know you had medical training,' said the doctor, sharply.

'I don't,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'But...'

'I didn't think you had. I think it would probably be better if you left medical work to those of us who are properly trained,' said the doctor, patronisingly. She sounded very irritable. 'And I have to warn you, Mrs Caldicot, that if you keep interrupting me I will have to ask you to find another doctor to look after Mr Williams.'

'Well, since you refuse to come out and see him do you mind if I ask our own doctor to visit?' demanded Mrs Caldicot coldly.

'You do as you feel fit,' said the doctor, coldly, breaking the connection.

'No luck?' said Jenkins, who had listened to Mrs Caldicot's end of the telephone call.

'Whatever happened to doctors who cared?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'They went the way of policemen who would tell you the time,' replied Jenkins.

Mrs Caldicot picked up a bundle of unopened letters from the old-fashioned blotting pad on her desk.

'Afternoon post?' asked Jenkins.

'Bills,' replied Mrs Caldicot, flicking through the envelopes. 'Some of these shops charge like white rhinos. Their bills are massive and unstoppable.'

'Oh, I'm afraid I forgot,' said Jenkins. 'I hate to do this but I've got another one for you.' He took the organic grocer's bill out of his pocket and held it up.

'Just drop it on the pile,' said Mrs Caldicot, nodding towards a wire tray that was overflowing with pieces of paper.

'Those are all outstanding bills?'

'I'm afraid so.'

'Are you coping?'

Mrs Caldicot looked around. 'I don't like admitting this,' she said. 'But running a nursing home is harder than I thought it would be.'

'But you haven't been doing it for long,' Jenkins reminded her. 'It's bound to get easier with time.'

'I hope so,' said Mrs Caldicot.

Chapter 17

At 89, Doctor Bence-Jones was older than some of the residents in the nursing home. He dressed smartly in an elderly but still serviceable Harris tweed suit. The jacket had two rear vents, huge patch pockets with button down flaps, a capacious inner pocket (big enough for a stethoscope or a partridge) and button back cuffs. The trousers were plus twos and the whole ensemble (including a matching waistcoat) was always worn with long, olive green socks and elderly brown well-polished brogues which had been repaired so many times that virtually nothing of the originals now remained. Dr Bence-Jones had been forced to retire from the NHS several decades earlier. A group of bland administrators had met and taken just seven minutes to bring an end to a career that had lasted four months shy of half a century. They claimed that they were retiring Dr Bence-Jones both for his own safety and security and for that of his patients.

‘It is absurd that such an elderly doctor should still be expected to work within the NHS,’ announced a pompous, self-important 24-year-old social worker who had somehow acquired authority over such things. ‘And it is equally improper that customers should be exposed to such an elderly practitioner,’ he added. He seemed to be as unaware of the fact that Dr Bence-Jones was happy to carry on working as he was of the fact that Dr Bence-Jones’s patients were happy to carry on being looked after by him.

The real reason for Dr Bence-Jones’s expulsion from the NHS (for that it was) was that administrators and social workers found his old-fashioned attitude rather difficult to accept.

When Dr Bence-Jones had first started his practice, back in the 1930s, there had been no National Health Service. Theoretically, Dr Bence-Jones used to charge a nominal five shillings for a home visit and three shillings and six pence for a surgery consultation but in practice, hardly anyone paid these sums. Instead, while Dr Bence Jones charged his rich patients 10 shillings, or even £1, for a consultation he charged the poor patients nothing at all. This Robin Hood approach worked very well. It was much better than the then unborn but soon to become universally awful NHS which would eventually drag everyone down to the same gloomy level of incompetence.

Despite having been forced to retire from the NHS Dr Bence-Jones still had a small private practice which he ran from his home, a huge, detached Victorian house which was situated conveniently close to the Twilight Years Rest Home, and which was outside the remit of the statutory authorities.

Dr Bence-Jones’s name had been recommended to Mrs Caldicot by several of the patients now in her charge and she had very quickly acquired great faith in him, both as a friend and as a doctor. He may not have been entirely up to date with all the latest theories (Mrs Caldicot had not been quite sure whether or not he had been joking when he had handed over a prescription for penicillin with the remark ‘let’s see what this new-fangled wonder drug can do for you’) but his ignorance of the latest pharmaceutical wonders (not necessarily a bad thing in itself, thought Mrs Caldicot) was more than made up for by his extensive experience and his extraordinarily well developed sense of intuition.

Most important of all, perhaps, was the fact that neither old age nor many years contact with NHS administrators had taken from him his love of his profession and his genuine love, and sense of compassion for, his patients.

Dr Bence-Jones would have no more thought of referring to his patients as ‘customers’ as he would have thought of cheering for Australia in an Ashes Test Match. Dr Bence-Jones was an old-fashioned Englishman, with an old-fashioned Englishman’s sense of history, priorities and responsibilities.

Dr Bence-Jones drove himself to his calls in a pale blue 1958 S1 Bentley which had been left to him by a grateful patient. She had been the original ‘one careful owner’ and when she had passed on the Bentley had only just been run in.

Before he had acquired the Bentley, the good doctor had done three quarters of his visits on an elderly bicycle with a wicker basket attached to the front handlebars. The remaining quarter he had done in a thirty-year-old black Morris which had bald tyres, broken springs and a black canvas roof that had never fitted properly. The arrival of the Bentley had coincided nicely with the onset of arthritis in his knees and hips.

The good doctor had welcomed the gift of the Bentley with enthusiasm but had never really mastered the art of driving a car which seemed to him to be as long and as a wide as a small county. Other motorists were never quite sure which side of the road he was driving on and when he parked the car he usually did so in such a way that it became a temporary traffic island.

Apart from his peculiar parking arrangements, his other most noticeable motoring idiosyncrasy was his habit of leaving the car unlocked. An officious social worker had once reprimanded him for this, drawing his attention to the fact that doctors are, by law, required to ensure that their medicine bag is kept properly protected; locked away at all times. ‘If you can get my bag out of my car then I’ll lock the car when I leave it,’ Dr Bence-Jones had promised. The social worker had marched straight over to the Bentley and opened the nearside passenger door. She had fled without bothering to close the door when Dr Bence-Jones's elderly Doberman, which had been snoozing in the rear passenger footwell, had made its presence known to her. Dr Bence-Jones still left his car unlocked.

Once or twice, in the early days, he had tried driving the Bentley into the driveway in front of the nursing home. But these days he usually chose to park in the road outside. A series of minor collisions with the stone gates had done neither the stonework nor the Bentley's huge chrome bumpers a great deal of good.

'I called you because we're having a few problems with a new patient,' explained Mrs Caldicot, as she led the way down the hall. Dr Bence-Jones had to stop for a rest every couple of steps so it was a slow journey. `That's disappointing,' replied the doctor, breathing heavily. 'I thought that p'raps you'd called me round 'cus you'd got a pretty young new nurse who needed a full medical.'

Mrs Caldicot laughed. 'No, I'm afraid not.'

'I never get any perks these days,' muttered the doctor, shaking his head in mock misery.

As they walked down the hall, Dr Bence-Jones poked his head into the lounge. The residents were playing cricket. Mr Hewitt, using a well strapped piece of willow which had been his most treasured possession for nearly three quarters of a century, was batting in front of a set of stumps had been created with the aid of an umbrella stand, two walking sticks and a very neatly furled black umbrella with a silver handle. Using a pair of very neatly rolled up thick woollen green socks as a ball Miss Nightingale was bowling.

'Aha!' said Dr Bence-Jones. 'Cricket!' He peered into the room. 'I say, the ball is the wrong colour,' he said, rather indignantly. 'I mean, I don't think there's anything in the rules against using rolled up socks for indoor cricket but darn it if you're going to use socks they should surely be red.'

'Mrs Caldicot confiscated our only cricket ball,' said Mr Hewitt, glumly. 'And I haven't got any red socks.'

'I had to confiscate it,' said Mrs Caldicot to Dr Bence-Jones. 'I really don't like interfering and I honestly didn't much mind about the furniture or the ornaments, though I think Mrs Roberts was a little sad to see the one legged fairy lose her remaining lower limb albeit to what I understand was a perfectly executed straight drive, but both Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale had terrible black eyes and we had to take Mr Hewitt to the hospital with a suspected fractured tibia.'

'Pshaw!' said Mr Hewitt, shaking his head. 'Just a bit of a bang on the shin.'

'Mr Hewitt, two doctors spent three quarters of an hour studying your X-rays,' Mrs Caldicot reminded him. 'And if I remember correctly you had a bruise the size of a football that lasted for two weeks.'

'Rugger ball,' muttered Mr Hewitt. 'Size of a rugger ball. Can't stand soccer. Damned game for poofters and nancy boys. Always was. These days it's just got worse. No self-respecting heterosexual would dare get down into the scrum these days.' He snorted derisively.

In the corner of the room Mrs Merivale was watching a repeat of a television chat show. A distinguished British actor was telling bright and jolly anecdotes in order to drum up business for his latest film.

'Who's that?' demanded Dr Bence-Jones, his attention drawn from the game of cricket, where there was at the time no discernible action, and towards the television screen where there was plenty of activity going on. He pointed at the screen. 'I'm sure I know the name but I can't think of the face.'

'It's Sean Connery!' said Mrs Merivale. 'He sends Mr Merivale and me a Christmas card every year.'

'Does he?' said the doctor. 'That's very nice, dear.'

Mrs Merivale nodded contentedly to herself as she watched Mr Connery finish a long anecdote with a neat and perfectly timed punchline.

'Isn't he just wonderful?' she purred. 'Lots of the stars send us cards,' she told the doctor.

Mrs Caldicot introduced the doctor to the Merivales and the Merivales to the doctor.

'You look in good condition, young man,' said the doctor to Mr Merivale.

'Oh, it's all a false front,' said Mr Merivale. 'Don't believe it. My wife makes me dye my hair so I don't look too old. She's very conscious of the fact that I'm five months older than her.'

'Ah,' nodded Dr Bence-Jones, who had been in practice far too long to be surprised by anything he heard.

'I tell her, let people think I'm your sugar daddy,' said Mr Merivale.

'I don't want people thinking I'm some cheap bimbo just with you for your money,' said Mrs Merivale.

'I haven't got any money!' Mr Merivale pointed out.

'That makes it even worse!' Mrs Merivale pointed out.

The doctor, sensing a modest marital disagreement, tactfully withdrew.

'Are you chaps playing or talking?' demanded Mr Roxdale, who was both acting as umpire and fielding at short extra sofa and who knew nothing about the cinema or the television.

'Bowl away, Miss Nightingale,' said Mr Hewitt, responding to this enquiry by waving his bat around in the air. 'I'm ready when you are.'

Miss Nightingale bowled (for the record, it was a right arm over the wicket donkey drop) and Mr Hewitt, who, despite his brave bluster, had not been in the slightest bit ready, and whose bat had still been pointing up towards the ceiling, watched in horror as the neatly rolled up green socks sped precisely between the sides of the umbrella stand and clattered into the neatly arranged walking sticks and umbrella, disrupting them so comprehensively that it was difficult to entertain any hope that he might survive the umpire's inevitable decision.

'Out!' cried Mr Roxdale, holding aloft the index finger of his right hand.

'That was clearly a no ball!' protested Mr Hewitt, who was in all other aspects of life a fair and decent fellow but who had never been a good loser when it came to cricket. In a career stretching back the better part of a century Mr Hewitt had been dismissed several hundred times but he would happily argue that on no more than a handful of those occasions had the umpire's decision been sound or reasonable. On this particular occasion he had a powerful weapon in his favour: the bat was his and, as anyone who has ever played cricket in such circumstances will undoubtedly confirm, ownership of the bat invariably trumps the decision making power of an umpire.

'Shall we go?' Mrs Caldicot quietly suggested to Dr Bence Jones. 'These technical discussions can sometimes go on for some time.'

'Very wise, Mrs Caldicot,' muttered Dr Bence-Jones. They left, quietly closing the door behind them, and headed for the stairs.

Chapter 18

‘I wish you’d have a lift installed,’ the doctor wheezed, clasping the bannister with both hands, and looking up at the stairs above him and down at the stairs behind him. ‘I’m getting a little old for mountaineering.’ Mrs Caldicot was carrying the doctor’s old-fashioned black Gladstone bag. She had never seen him open it and had no idea what it contained.

‘A lift is definitely on my list,’ Mrs Caldicot assured him. ‘Or perhaps a chair lift?’

‘One of those things that whizzes up down the stairs on a rail?’

‘Yes.’

‘Yes that might be fun. I fancy myself on one of those.’

‘Well, I’ll put both on the list. Of course, it may be a year or two before we can afford them.’

‘I’ll try to hang on,’ said Dr Bence-Jones. ‘And, anyway, hire the pretty young nurse first. I’d rather examine a pretty young nurse than ride up the stairs.’

‘You’re incorrigible!’ laughed Mrs Caldicot.

‘I hope so,’ replied the doctor. ‘Just keep encouraging me!’

They arrived at last at Mr Williams’s room. The new patient was looking much better and calmer than he had looked the previous night. Mrs Caldicot introduced the two old men to each other.

‘You’re the doctor!’ said Mr Williams, clearly astonished. He turned to Mrs Caldicot. ‘It’s a long time since I saw a doctor who was older than me.’ He paused and screwed up his eyes. ‘You aren’t really as old as you look aren’t you? Tell me that you’re 33 but you’ve lived a very debauched life.’

‘Shut up, young man,’ said Dr Bence-Jones. ‘Don’t be cheeky or I’ll have you sent to bed without any supper.’

‘Big deal,’ said Mr Williams. ‘I’m already in bed. And I haven’t had any supper.’

Dr Bence-Jones snorted.

‘I’m already on Mrs Caldicot’s starvation diet,’ moaned Mr Williams. ‘Now I suppose you’ve come to stick needles in me.’

‘If you don’t watch your mouth I’ll have you on twice daily laxatives and hourly injections in your bum,’ retorted Dr Bence-Jones. ‘Now shut up before you deafen me,’ he added. He had one end of his stethoscope connected to his ears and the other end placed on Mr Williams’s chest.

It took the doctor less than five minutes to declare Mr Williams perfectly fit. ‘He’s healthy enough to hang,’ he announced. ‘Did you manage to get hold of his doctor?’

‘Yes,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘But she won’t come. The last time I called, she told me that she always has lunch with drug company representatives on weekdays and that it will be at least ten days before she can get here. Until I described him, she couldn’t even remember Mr Williams and had no idea what drugs he is on. She told me to give him a tranquilliser. And she told me to make sure that he keeps taking his arthritis drugs because they’re part of a trial she’s conducting for a drug company.’

Dr Bence-Jones strode across to where Mr Williams’s pills were lined up on the dressing table and picked the bottles up one by one. ‘This one is for arthritis,’ he said. He turned back to Mr Williams. ‘Do you have arthritis, young man?’

‘Not particularly,’ replied Mr Williams.

‘Your GP does lots of tests for drug companies. However, they already know that the stuff causes stomach problems.’ He picked up the second bottle. ‘So he takes this one. Which is supposed to cure stomach ulcers but which causes diarrhoea.’ He picked up the third bottle. ‘So he takes this one to control the diarrhoea. But it can cause depression.’ He picked up the fourth bottle. ‘So he takes this one which is an antidepressant but causes anxiety and sleeplessness for which he takes this one,’ he picked up another bottle, ‘and this one,’ he picked up the next one in line, ‘and this one.’

‘Three for anxiety?’

‘Three for anxiety,’ agreed Dr Bence-Jones. ‘And one of the drugs he takes for anxiety causes asthma. So he takes those blue capsules to prevent his asthma. And because the asthma drug causes headaches he takes these red pills which are painkillers which can cause blood clotting. So he takes these white tablets to stop his blood clotting. They can cause high blood pressure so he takes these green ones to keep his blood pressure under control. And these green ones can cause potassium loss so he takes these fawn coloured things for that.’

‘There’s one left,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘This violet one,’ agreed the doctor. ‘It’s another drug to stop him feeling anxious.’

‘Doesn’t it cause any side effects?’

‘I think so,’ said the doctor. ‘But nothing he isn’t already taking something for.’

‘Does he really need all these?’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Dr Bence-Jones. ‘If he stopped the pills to stop the arthritis he probably hasn’t got, he probably wouldn’t need any of the others.’

‘What about the drugs for his anxiety?’

‘If I were taking this many pills I’d be anxious,’ said Dr Bence-Jones. ‘Wouldn’t you?’

‘Yes, I suppose I would,’ admitted Mrs Caldicot. ‘So what are you going to do?’

‘Give the sewer rats a treat,’ replied Dr Bence-Jones. He scooped up all Mr Williams’s pill bottles and carried them into the bathroom. A minute or so later Mrs Caldicot heard the sound of the lavatory being flushed. She got up and rushed into the bathroom, just in time to see a variety of coloured tablets and capsules disappearing down into the sewers.

‘Should you have done that?’ she asked.

‘Oh absolutely,’ replied Dr Bence-Jones. ‘Oh definitely. Don’t you think so?’

‘But couldn’t you get into trouble?’

‘What sort of trouble?’

‘I don’t know. Aren’t there any rules about throwing away someone else’s tablets?’

‘What tablets?’

‘What about if he falls ill because he’s not taking his tablets?’

‘Then I’ve no doubt that some kind doctor will give him some more.’ replied Dr Bence-Jones. ‘Meanwhile, there is, I hope, a chance that without his tablets he will wake up, remember who he is and be able to walk around without falling over.’

‘One of these days you’re going to get into trouble,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘I’m sure you’re right,’ said Dr Bence-Jones. ‘But I’m very old and I don’t care. If they put me in prison I will, with any luck, be put in a cell with a nice bank robber who will teach me how to open safes.’

Chapter 19

‘Do you need to see the other residents,’ asked Mrs Caldicot when they got back down into the hall.

Dr Bence-Jones answered by poking his head into the lounge again. A cushion missed him by inches. He pulled his head back. ‘What the hell is going on in there now?’ he demanded.

Mrs Caldicot looked at her watch. ‘I expect someone is practising for the next indoor volleyball match,’ explained Mrs Caldicot. ‘It’s China versus the USA. It’s something of a grudge match.’

‘They all looked fine to me,’ said the doctor. ‘Does anyone need a sick note? Prescription? Passport application form signed?’

‘No, thank you,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘I think we’re OK for today. I just wanted you to check over Mr Williams. But he does seem a lot calmer today.’

Dr Bence-Jones poked his head into the lounge again, this time to say goodbye. As he opened the door, a rolled up pair of socks headed straight for him. Instinctively he put his hands up to protect his face and caught the socks.

‘Howzat?’ cried Miss Nightingale.

‘Couldn’t possibly be out,’ protested Mr Hewitt. ‘The man’s a spectator not a player. You can’t have batsmen given out because they’ve been caught by a spectator. That was a six!’

Mrs Merivale, who was still watching the television, had now been joined by Mrs Peterborough.

‘There’s just been a fashion expert on the television,’ she told Mrs Caldicot. ‘He says that the wrinkled look is in this season.’

‘For people or clothes?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘Oh for clothes, I think,’ replied Mrs Merivale. ‘But it means I no longer have to iron Mr Merivale’s shirts. If I leave the creases and wrinkles in them he’ll be fashionable.’

‘Why do they decide that now?’ asked Mrs Caldicot, who had spent too many years of his life ironing sharp creases into the late Mr Caldicot’s shirts and under-clothing. Her late husband had even insisted on having his socks ironed.

‘Oh, it’s just fashion,’ said Mrs Merivale. ‘Next week they’ll decide that we have to put concertina pleat creases into everything.’

‘I’m just waiting for some fashion guru to arrange for ink and chocolate stains to become fashionable,’ said Mr Livingstone. `Overnight I’ll become the most fashionable man in Europe.’

Chapter 20

When the doctor had left (in the road outside it took him several minutes to find one of the Bentley's gears) Mrs Caldicot went back upstairs to Mr Williams's room.

'Would you like me to help you unpack?' she asked, nodding towards his still unopened suitcases.

'Thanks,' said Mr Williams. 'Can I stay here?'

'Of course you can,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'As long as I like?'

'Of course?'

'In this room?'

'Yes.'

'I don't have to share with anyone?'

'Not unless you want to.'

'I used to have a small flat,' he told her. 'I bought it after my wife died. We'd been together for sixty years. I wasn't very good at living by myself. I've always been a bit of a loner. My wife was the only friend I had or needed. I didn't have a 'first footer' until May last year. And then it was a man come to read the gas meter.'

'So, that was 'home' until you came here?'

'I suppose so,' agreed Mr Williams. He looked around. 'But I could be at home here. I've always believed that home is where you are - not where you come from.' He paused and cleared his throat. 'What are the fees?'

Mrs Caldicot felt uncomfortable. She didn't like talking about money. It was, she knew, one of her failings as the proprietor of a nursing home. 'We don't really have 'fees',' she said. 'Pay whatever you think is appropriate,' she said. 'What you can afford.'

Mr Williams levered himself off the bed, half walked, half lurched across the room and put one of the suitcases flat on the floor. 'I haven't got many clothes,' he said, unfastening the case's twin catches. The suitcase was crammed with black and white photographs, some in folders, some simply packed loosely into the case.

'My word!' said Mrs Caldicot. 'You're obviously keen on photography.'

'Yes,' said Mr Williams. He took out a photograph of some children playing in a street. It was a night scene, lit by a street lamp and the moon. Mrs Caldicot recognised the church in the background. 'Isn't that the famous church in Montmartre in Paris?' she asked. 'The white one that always reminds me of weddings?'

'Sacre Coeur,' said Mr Williams.

'That's the one. Do you still take photographs?'

'No. I sort of gave it up. For the last two decades I've specialised in losing and finding. I've spent half my life losing things and the other half of my life looking for them.'

Mrs Caldicot laughed. 'I know what you mean.'

Mr Williams handed the print of Sacre Coeur to Mrs Caldicot. 'Take it and sell it,' he said. 'I'll give you another one in a month or two.'

He nodded towards the suitcase. 'And don't worry. When I run out I've got the negatives somewhere.'

Mrs Caldicot looked at the photograph. It was a lovely photograph. It looked vaguely familiar. But she felt embarrassed. She really would have to try to run the nursing home in a more professional way.

'I'll sign it on the back,' said Mr Williams, taking the print back off Mrs Caldicot. 'Have you got a pen?'

She handed him a pen. He scrawled his signature, and added the date, before handing the pen and the photograph back to her.

'Thank you,' said Mrs Caldicot. She was touched by Mr Williams's gift but couldn't help wondering how it was going to help her pay the growing collection of overdue bills on her desk. She couldn't see the electricity company being too thrilled if she tried to pay their bill with an old snap.

Downstairs the other residents were still playing the world volleyball championships. When Mrs Caldicot put her head around the door someone told her that China was beating the USA three nil and admitted that a badly directed cushion from one of the American players had broken a china model of a spotted dog.

Chapter 21

A few miles away, on the fourth floor of an ugly, nondescript concrete, glass and plastic tower block occupied exclusively by employees of the local council, an assorted variety of nondescript professional busy bodies were fully occupied thinking of ways to interfere in the normal, contented lives of unsuspecting, innocent, hard-working local citizens. It was their collective and diseased mission to bring chaos to order and to add confusion, bewilderment and a real sense of injustice to those whose lives were merely harassed by too much work and too little time.

At one corner of the fourth floor, in a spacious office tucked in between the emergency staircase and the men's lavatories, the eleven senior members of the local authority's Rest Home Supervisory Unit (rather grandly and self-consciously they liked to refer to themselves as Supervising Outreach Coordinators) were holding a meeting.

This was not an unusual occurrence. The Supervising Outreach Coordinators held a lot of meetings - at least one a day - though there were those (especially those hard working members of the public who were trying to run rest homes which fell within the remit of this dreary bunch of bureaucrats) who felt that the Supervising Outreach Coordinators did not hold anywhere near enough meetings and that if they were to organise more meetings and to go out less, write fewer letters and generally speaking keep themselves to themselves and have less to do with those trying to a do a real job of work outside, then the world would be a far, far happier, more contented and less troublesome place. The eleven officials were all petty minded people whose own otherwise dull, grey and miserable days were made acceptable by the fact that their work gave them regular opportunities to patronise those whom they encountered in their professional capacity.

These simple daily pleasures were augmented by the fact that at regular intervals they also had a chance to humiliate their victims - rather than merely to make their lives miserable. Naturally, as cowards, they usually picked on the weakest and most vulnerable, invariably becoming servile and sycophantic when faced with more robust, self-confident individuals.

'I had a splendid visit to a rest home in Buckberrington Street yesterday,' said an apparently elderly grey man with seemingly elderly grey hair. He wore an elderly grey suit, had elderly grey eyes and even those who knew him well would probably be surprised to know that he was still not out of his thirties. The man, called Hiscock, had copious amounts of grey dandruff on the shoulders of his grey jacket. He cultivated the dandruff look and deliberately did everything he could to encourage the stuff. He felt that dandruff on his shoulder gave him a suitably solid, reliable image and marked him out as a man who was not likely to be impressed by ordinary, everyday standards or expectations.

The others looked up from the copious quantities of paper which lay spread out on the table in front of each of them. If there was one thing these eleven purveyors of dissatisfaction liked even more than meetings it was paperwork. If their first mission in life was to bring frustration and chaos to the lives of ordinary, hard-working citizens their second mission was to turn the world's forests into filing cabinet fodder.

'I've never been able to find anything wrong before,' Hiscock said, ruefully. 'The proprietor has run the place quite adequately.' Those other members of the unit who had been unfortunate enough to visit this establishment nodded to show that they understood; they had shared their colleagues gloom and understood that the phrase 'quite adequately' was code for 'he hasn't done anything wrong and has never put so much as a finger out of place'.

'But yesterday,' he announced, his voice rising in triumph, 'I asked to see the new Extractor Fan Unit warning notice which, in accordance with the appropriate EU notification I had demanded, in an official communication, be placed in position beneath the fan.'

There would have been a buzz of excitement from his colleagues if they had been the sort of people who ever allowed themselves to get excited. As it was they contented themselves with raising their heads. The nine who were doodling stopped their pens so that they give their colleague their total concentration.

'When I measured the notice I found that it was just 17.9 cm wide.' There was a pause while the rest of the team digested this piece of news. They could not have been more shocked (nor more excited) if they had discovered that Himmler was running an old folks home in their locality, with Dr Josef Mengele living in and providing the patients with his own unique brand of medical care.

The grey man looked around his audience. 'As you all know,' he said, 'Regulation 28237/gh12 states quite clearly that such notices must be 18.0 cm wide. The proprietor claimed that the sign company had measured the item inadvertently in old-fashioned imperial units and that had been an error in translating the illegal imperial units into proper metric units. He claimed that it was, therefore, their responsibility.'

'Naturally, however, I told him that it was his responsibility and that I would consequently be giving him a formal, written warning. I gave him formal notice, as required by the legislation, that if he received another warning within three years his Rest Home licence would be withdrawn.' The grey, but now proud, Hiscock looked around the table and came as close to looking contented as he had ever looked. He paused before delivering the coup de grâce. 'The proprietor then burst into tears,' he announced, with great pride.

The other council employees sitting around the table would have started applauding if they had been the sort of people who applauded things. Instead they all nodded and congratulated their colleague. To find a Rest Home proprietor at fault was a joy. To see a Rest Home proprietor in tears was a high point - a moment that made the job worth doing, a moment to be cherished and remembered; a memory to ease the tedium of long days of retirement.

'I am revisiting this afternoon,' said Hiscock. 'I have high hopes that at that time I will be in a position to issue an official closure notice.'

Breath was drawn in sharply around the table. A closure notice was something they all dreamt of. But closure notices came far too infrequently.

'When I visited last time I fancy I noticed that the front doormat was not the requisite size,' continued the grey man. 'I did not mention this at the time, of course. But when I go back today I will measure it. And if it is the wrong size - and I am quietly confident that I will find it at least three centimetres too wide - I will immediately issue the appropriate 14 day closure notice.'

This time his colleagues simply could not restrain themselves.

'This is precisely why I joined this department,' said a bent, weedy looking man with poor complexion and greasy hair.

'Well done,' said a young black woman called Ms Jones BA. She wore a green anorak and had several dozen coloured folders spread around on the table in front of her.

'I think it is worth pointing out that this particular institution has been operating apparently blamelessly for nearly thirty years..,' said a fat, florid-faced woman who wore a black T-shirt and a pair of black jeans.

'...twenty seven years to be precise, Chair,' interrupted Hiscock.

'...for twenty seven years,' continued the fat woman, known as 'Chair'. 'And this will, to the best of my knowledge, be the first time that we have managed to serve a closure notice on the proprietor.'

'That is correct!' confirmed another grey man. 'We got close eight years ago but it turned out that although our regulations limited the minimum width of garden paths there was, at that time, no limit to the maximum width of garden paths. Therefore, although the proprietor had built paths which were twenty two centimetres wider than the permitted minimum there was nothing we could do about it. It is good to feel vindicated at last. And it will send a warning bell to other facilities - letting them know that our vigilance will be maintained and that should we fail to obtain a closure notice we will be back.'

'So, there we are! A splendid piece of work!' said the woman in black. 'Congratulations to Mr Muldoon.'

Mr Muldoon, the young grey man, would have purred if he had been a cat.

'We will, of course, instigate an enquiry into just how long the faulty notice and over-sized doormat have been in situ,' said the woman in black, who clearly had some sort of management role. 'It may be possible for us to add a hefty fine to the closure notice, particularly since, with two offenses in such a short space of time, it will clearly be easy for the department to argue that the man is a recidivist and clearly unfit for any sort of position in the caring and welfare community.' She paused, as a thought wandered into her unwilling mind. 'Let us hope that these are new faults,' she murmured, now specifically addressing her remarks to the young, grey man, `and that we will not find ourselves laid open to a charge of negligence in having missed these items on previous inspections.'

'There is no risk of that,' said the young grey man. 'Both these items are brand new - I am confident that they were introduced onto the premises subsequent to our last visit. I have added a file note confirming that observation.'

The woman in black smiled and nodded. She looked comforted and relieved. 'Is that all for this session?' she asked, looking at the clock. 'We've been going for nearly thirty minutes. Shall we adjourn for an extended refreshment opportunity?'

'There's just one small item which I think we could perhaps usefully squeeze through in this session,' said a short, round, woman whose sari might have suggested that she (or her ancestors) could have at some stage have travelled from the Indian continent but which was, in fact, simply her way of expressing solidarity with her colleagues from that continent (all of whom, it has to be said, were happily wearing Western clothes).

'We have a new establishment to monitor,' she said. 'She examined some papers in front of her; frowned, shuffled them a little more. 'One of our sub-inspectors visited the Twilight Years Rest Home, which has recently come under new management, to check on the extractor fan statutory warning notice and although the notice was in position he reported that he did not feel that his visit was treated with the appropriate level of solemnity or respect.' A small man with an arrogant air coughed to attract attention. He wore a grey suit with, underneath it, a grey cardigan. He also wore a pair of half-moon spectacles with tortoiseshell frames. He wore these because he had once been told that half-moon spectacles put up the wearer's IQ by 15 points and turned a meek person into someone quite intimidating.

‘Do we have details of the new management?’ he asked.

‘It’s a Mrs Thelma Caldicot,’ said the woman in the sari, studying the paperwork in front of her.

The small dapper man sat up, as suddenly and as conspicuously as if someone had put a firework up his bottom and lit the fuse. None of his colleagues noticed anything unusual. They were not a particularly observant bunch.

‘I haven’t heard of her myself,’ continued the woman in the sari, ‘but a colleague in another department told me that she has appeared in the media, though I’m not sure in what context.’ She smiled sweetly and looked around the room. `I don’t think I’ve read anything about her in Social Work Weekly,’ she said. ‘And if she has appeared in the pages of *The Guardian* I missed it.’ Heads were bowed, as though in silent but respectful prayer, when she mentioned *The Guardian*. She paused. ‘Naturally I don’t watch the television.’

A murmuring of ‘naturally’ ran clockwise around the table. ‘I’d like to take on responsibility for assessing the Twilight Years Rest Home,’ said the small man. ‘I do have some professional knowledge of the proprietor’s activities,’ he said. He didn’t bother to mention that he hated Mrs Caldicot with a vengeance. She had publicly humiliated him, and forced him to close the nursing home he’d been running. She’d arrived at his nursing home as a resident and had led the residents in a mass walk out. ‘Perhaps I can use my specialist information for the benefit of the department.’

‘I think that would be a splendid idea,’ said the woman in black known as ‘the chair’. ‘We were all very impressed with your last investigation Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. To manage to close down two rest homes within a week of their opening shows diligence and determination. The department could do with more like you. I suggest that perhaps you take Ms Jones BA with you as co-investigating officer.’

‘Splendid,’ said the small, dapper man.

Ms Jones BA, clearly unhappy about this, started to protest.

‘I think you’ll complement one another perfectly,’ the woman in black told them. She looked at the clock. ‘And now I really do feel that we need our break!’ She paused, and glanced at the clock again. ‘Otherwise, I fear that we will be breaking our working condition guidelines.’

As the others dragged themselves to their feet and started to leave the room, Mr Muller-Hawksmoor walked over to where Ms Jones BA was still sitting, gathering up her papers and fitting them neatly into a black plastic attaché case. ‘Would you like a coffee or tea?’ he asked. ‘So that we can get to know one another a little better?’

She looked up. ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I suppose that might be useful.’

‘Coffee?’ asked Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, walking across to the coffee machine.

‘Yes,’ said Ms Jones BA who regarded the word ‘please’ as politically incorrect.

‘Black or white?’ asked Mr Muller-Hawksmoor.

Ms Jones BA glowered at him. ‘I regard that as a racially offensive remark,’ she said icily. ‘If you repeat it at any time in the future I will make a formal complaint about you.’

‘Er...I’m sorry. Would you like it with or without milk?’ asked Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, who felt that he was going to enjoy working with Ms Jones BA.

Chapter 22

Mr Roxdale lived in a small, terraced house in an old part of the town. He had lived there since his marriage. When he and his young wife, Matilda, had first moved in there had been no electricity and no gas. The only mains services were water and sewage.

For several decades Mr Roxdale and his wife had held out against progress; steadfastly refusing to allow their landlord to install either electricity or gas. The landlord, who owned the houses either side, had arranged for the pipes and the wiring to be brought into the house but he had been unable to persuade either Mr Roxdale or Matilda to have the house fitted with pipes, wiring or appliances. Mr Roxdale would have agreed. He didn't like to see anyone disappointed. But his wife was a nervous woman and she didn't want her home to be fitted out with these modern services. She didn't trust them. 'We've survived very well without them,' she argued. `Why do we need them now?' She was worried that the gas, or the electricity, or both, would blow them to smithereens. The precise nature of her concern really didn't matter. All that concerned Mr Roxdale was that his wife didn't want electricity or gas in their home. If she had wanted it, he would have done everything he could to get it for her. If she didn't want it then they wouldn't have it. Simple.

After Matilda had died, Mr Roxdale had succumbed. He didn't much care then. And he didn't have a great deal of choice. His general practitioner, worried about Mr Roxdale's heart, asked a consultant to visit Mr Roxdale at home. (In those far off days, hospital specialists used to do such things quite often.) Wanting to plug in his portable electrocardiograph machine the consultant had been shocked to discover that there was no mains electricity in the house. He'd been even more shocked to discover that Mr Roxdale cooked on a wood stove and lit his home with paraffin lamps. Social workers had been called. And that was the end of Mr Roxdale's seemingly eccentric stand against progress. Mr Roxdale was just pleased that it had all happened after his dear, beloved wife had passed on. She would have been terribly upset by it all. He wouldn't have liked to have seen her upset. It would have broken his heart.

Mr Roxdale was sitting in his tiny parlour, consoling himself with a cup of strong tea and a ginger biscuit.

'Hello Dad!' cried Nigel, his son, opening the front door and walking straight along the narrow passageway and into the parlour. There was no door between the passageway and the parlour; just a length of heavy brown velour hanging from a brass rail. The curtain was too long and the bottom two feet of the velour sat in thick folds on the carpet.

Mr Roxdale turned and greeted his son.

He was proud of what Nigel had achieved. Apart from his growing legal practice, Nigel also owned a good deal of property in the area. Several years earlier, for example, he had bought the entire terrace of houses which included Mr Roxdale's home. But, although he was proud, Mr Roxdale didn't particularly like his son. And, sadly, he knew him well enough to know that he could not be trusted.

'How are you today?' asked Nigel.

'Not so bad,' answered Mr Roxdale. He always answered that question in the same way. He would have used the identical words if he had been dying.

'How's the gardening business these days?' asked Nigel.

'Not so bad,' answered Mr Roxdale, who might have been a little slow in his movements but was not slow in his thinking. He knew it was no coincidence that he had been fired by every one of his employers in the same week. He would have known that Nigel was involved even if he had not seen his son's conspicuous Jaguar parked outside at least two of the houses where he had worked.

'I've heard there's something of a recession developing in the service industry,' said Nigel.

'I heard that too,' agreed Mr Roxdale, nibbling at his ginger biscuit. 'Would you like a cup of tea?'

'No thanks,' said Nigel. 'Fenella doesn't like me drinking tea.'

'Ginger biscuit?'

'No thanks. Fenella has got me on a diet.'

They sat in silence for a while. Mr Roxdale drank his tea and nibbled at his ginger biscuit. Nigel fiddled with his watch strap and listened with increasing impatience and irritation to the tick tock of the clock on the mantelpiece. The ticks and the tocks seemed to get louder and louder.

At last, Nigel could bear the silence no longer. He cleared his throat. 'I can tell there is something wrong,' he lied. He leant forward. 'Tell me about it, Dad,' he said. `Have you had some trouble with the gardening business?'

His father didn't answer.

'There's no shame in losing a job,' said Nigel. 'It happens all the time these days.' He swallowed hard and shuffled uneasily in his chair. ‘You’ve lost your jobs, haven’t you?’ He was usually a very good liar. Deception was his stock in trade. He was a lawyer and property developer. He lied at least fifty times a day. He was a professional. But for some reason he still found it difficult to lie to his father. He always felt that his father knew the truth. Not that he could. He couldn’t possibly, of course. There was no way that he could know the truth. No way.

Mr Roxdale said nothing but reached for the packet of ginger biscuits. He was not a man driven by hedonism but he felt reckless. He plucked a second biscuit from the packet. He stared at it for a moment. A terrible idea had occurred to him.

‘If you think about it sensibly it’s probably all for the best,’ said Nigel. ‘You’re not getting any younger. And being out in the rain and the snow isn’t good for a man of your age.’ He paused. ‘It isn’t good for a man my age.’ He sort of laughed. It was an unpleasant sound. Nigel didn’t laugh often. He’d pretty much forgotten how to do it. ‘I don’t know how you did it,’ he said. ‘Gardening for all those years.’ He sat back. ‘Still. All that’s behind you now. And so now you’ve got to look forward. You’ve got a great future ahead of you.’ And then he spoilt it. ‘I have to tell you that I’m not sorry,’ he said. ‘I don’t think you’ve ever realised it but your being a jobbing gardener has been a considerable embarrassment to myself and Fenella. We have a position in this town and your being a gardener hasn’t exactly been a help you know.’

Mr Roxdale hadn’t heard a word of this. He was still staring at his biscuit and wondering if he should. He’d heard of people doing it. He’d seen people do it. But he’d never done it himself.

‘The first thing we’ve got to do is to get you out of this place,’ said Nigel. He looked around. ‘It worries me to think of you here, all by yourself.’

Mr Roxdale decided to do it. He pulled his cup of tea towards him and, without any further hesitation, dunked his ginger biscuit. He took it out again so quickly that the biscuit was hardly even damp.

‘If there was an emergency you could, of course, always ring Fenella and myself day or night,’ said Nigel. ‘But I’ve been saying to Fenella - and I have to say that she has been totally supportive of me on this, utterly regardless of the expense - that I would be happier if you were living somewhere where you could have some 24 hour a day support. ‘

The second time would, Mr Roxdale thought, probably be easier. It was. He pulled the ginger biscuit out of the tea just seconds before it broke up. It felt deliciously decadent.

‘So, in preparation for this moment, I’ve been looking around,’ said Nigel. ‘Actually, and I know you’ve not always seen eye to eye with her, much of the spadework has been done by Fenella. And she’s found a wonderful little place. Just opened. It’s being run by Thelma Caldicot. Have you heard of her?’

Mr Roxdale looked up, thought for a moment and shook his head.

‘She was on the TV and in all the papers just a while ago,’ said Nigel. `She was a resident in an old people’s home. She didn’t like the way the place was being run and so she led all the other residents out on strike. They moved into a hotel. The papers called it ‘Mrs Caldicot’s Cabbage War’ - I think that one of the things she was complaining about was the fact that the whole place smelt of over-cooked cabbage. Are you sure you haven’t heard of her?’

Mr Roxdale shook his head. He didn’t own a television set or a wireless and he never read newspapers. If it didn’t happen in his living room or in one of the gardens he was looking after then he probably hadn’t heard of it. He tried to keep busy so that he didn’t notice what they were doing to the world. ‘I used to read the papers. Forty years ago. But I had to stop. Now I try to keep myself busy. If I had time to read the newspapers and to worry about what the politicians and industrialists are doing to our world I would become suicidal,’ he once told a neighbour. He could tell you the exact date when the roses would be in bloom and when the peas would be ready to pick. But he had no idea of the name of the Foreign Secretary or the singer at the top of the hit parade. He looked out of the window at his own small garden. It was only a few feet wide and, perhaps, a hundred feet long, but it was packed with life. The first third of the garden was all flowers. The rest of it was devoted to vegetables and fruit: there was an asparagus bed, a huge strawberry bed, raspberry canes, radishes, lettuces, marrows and herbs galore.

‘I’ve spoken to Mrs Caldicot and she has a couple of spare rooms,’ said Nigel. ‘Single rooms, beautifully furnished. You can mix in with the other residents if you want to. Or you can just keep to yourself. It’s entirely up to you. But you’ll get your meals, you’ll get your laundry done and you’ll get medical attention when you need it.’

Mr Roxdale, stopped looking out of his window and put the rest of his soggy biscuit into his mouth.

‘So what do you think?’ asked Nigel.

Mr Roxdale looked at him. `Pretty good,’ he said. He closed his eyes and chewed. ‘I’m still not sure though.’

‘Well, take your time. Do you want to think it over?’

‘No,’ drawled Mr Roxdale. ‘Not really. No.’ He thought hard. ‘I’m pretty sure.’ He closed his eyes. ‘I really do think I like them best undunked.’

Nigel frowned. He had dreaded this moment. He leant forward. ‘What are you talking about, Dad?’

Mr Roxdale looked at his father. ‘Biscuits,’ he said. ‘Dunked or not. I think they’re better undunked. I like to drink my tea and to eat my biscuit separately.’

Nigel paused, waited and swallowed hard. ‘But what about the residential home?’ he asked. ‘What do you think about moving into Mrs Caldicot’s old people’s home?’

‘What’s a ‘residential home’?’ asked Mr Roxdale, looking puzzled. ‘I always thought all homes were residential.’

‘Well, I suppose they are,’ agreed Nigel, in a bit of a huff. ‘It doesn’t really matter what you call it.’

‘I don’t mind much either way,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘But I don’t have any savings. Maybe £200 in the Building Society. I put that aside for emergencies. If it costs more than the rent I pay you then I won’t be able to afford it.’ He paused, suddenly remembering that his income had suddenly stopped. ‘Actually, son, I’m not sure I can still pay you the rent.’

‘Don’t worry about money, Dad. I’ll take care of the financial side of things.’

Mr Roxdale looked at him. ‘I can’t let you do that.’

‘Of course you can, Dad,’ said Nigel. ‘It’ll be a real pleasure for me to be able to do something tangible for you.’

‘But aren’t these homes very expensive?’

‘You’re not to worry about any of it,’ insisted Nigel. ‘You let me worry about the money. All you have to do is pack your bags. Take your clothes and any knick knacks you want to have with you.’

Mr Roxdale looked around. He was surrounded by objects which were, together, the essence of his home. Most of them had been part of his life with Matilda.

‘When do you want me to move?’ he asked his son. ‘It’s our house so you call the shots.’

‘Well, if you’re going to do it you might as well as do it now,’ said Nigel. ‘Waiting and thinking about it won’t make it any easier.’

Mr Roxdale nodded.

‘So, why don’t I pick you up in the early afternoon tomorrow? Say two fifteen?’

‘Tomorrow?’

‘Is that too soon for you, Dad? We can make it the day after tomorrow if you like.’

‘No. Tomorrow is fine,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘I can be packed by then. We might as well get it over with.’ He looked around again. Suddenly the furniture and the pictures looked old and tired. As old and as tired as he felt. ‘What about all this stuff?’ he asked.

‘Do you want to leave that to me?’ asked Nigel. ‘I could ask Fenella to get an auctioneer in. One of the house clearance specialists.’

‘Whatever you think, son. Whatever you think best.’

Mr Roxdale seemed very old and very tired. But he wasn’t particularly old or tired. He was, however, bored by his son and happy to agree to anything to get rid of him.

Chapter 23

Outside, in the car, Nigel wanted to telephone his wife. He wanted to tell her what had happened. Her approval would help eradicate the guilt he felt. But he also desperately wanted a drink and so he didn't stop to make the call.

Nigel lived less than four miles away from his father's terraced house. He drove home as quickly as he could. As soon as he had put the car in the garage, hung up his coat, changed his shoes for his slippers, washed his hands and exchanged his jacket for a cardigan he sat down in his usual armchair.

'It's all fixed,' he told Fenella, taking from her the gin and tonic which she had fixed. 'I'm picking Dad up and taking him round to the nursing home tomorrow afternoon after lunch.'

'Was he difficult about it?'

'No. Not at all really.'

'There you are. I told you he'd just give in quietly.' Fenella was sitting on the arm of Nigel's chair. She put her arm around his neck and kissed his ear. 'You're brilliant, darling,' she told him.

'I'll ring the builders in the morning,' Nigel told her.

'How soon can they start?'

'Monday,' said Nigel. 'They've got all the materials they need - new doors, new bath, partitions, paint - that sort of stuff. They should be finished in less than a month. And the estate agents have already found someone desperate to rent it. I got a call from Tony this morning.'

'How much are they paying?'

Nigel sipped at his drink, turned his head, grinned and told her. 'It's amazing what these old places fetch these days. They'll be paying eight times what Dad was paying in rent.'

'And that chap you know at the council has approved the payment of your Dad's nursing home fees?'

'Absolutely. No problem at all. Dad doesn't own the house, he hasn't got any capital. They don't have any option. They're obliged to pay the fees.'

'He'll be much, much happier in a nursing home than he ever was in that funny little house,' said Fenella.

'Oh absolutely,' agreed Nigel. 'I wouldn't dream of doing it if it wasn't the right thing for him. Oh, I nearly forgot there is some old junk in the house. Old furniture. Nothing valuable. Nothing decent. It's nearly all stuff that he and mother bought when they first started out. Would you give the chap at the auction rooms a call? Robbie isn't it?'

'Ronnie.'

'Ask him to take a van round there and clear out everything they can move.'

'Do you want them to give you a price first? Do you want me to get a quote?'

'No. Don't bother. Just ask them to take the stuff away. If there's money left over after they've covered their costs get them to let you have it in cash. I can take it round to Dad when I visit him.'

'What about our costs?'

'Oh, I think it would be fair to just take 17.5% of the gross,' said Nigel. 'Take it out of the cash. I'd rather keep it all as a cash transaction.'

'No one can say you haven't been a wonderful son to Mr Roxdale,' said Fenella.

'I'll be a lot happier knowing that he's being well looked after and not standing out in the rain digging in potatoes,' said Nigel.

Fenella shuddered. `I'm so glad his gardening days are over. I don't mind admitting that I was terrified people would find out. I hate to think what the Mertons would have said if they'd found out your father was working as a jobbing gardener.'

Nigel shivered. 'Let's not even think about that,' he said. 'It's all over now.' He emptied his glass.

'Would you like another one, dear?'

'Why not?' asked Nigel. 'I think we can afford to celebrate a bit tonight.' He squeezed Fenella's left buttock as she got up off the arm of his chair.

Fenella giggled, coquettishly. 'Oh dear me,' she said. 'I think I'd better get out my sexy nightie.' She smiled at him and then hurried off to the kitchen to get him another drink.

Nigel fiddled with the buttons on his cardigan, closed his eyes and relaxed. He was very pleased with himself and, indeed, with life in general. The day had gone much better than he had dared to hope.

Chapter 24

'There's a new resident in the hallway,' whispered Mrs Roberts.

Mrs Caldicot, sitting at her desk and staring glumly at a thick pile of bills, looked up.

'Our new resident, Mr Roxdale, looks lovely, but there's a very pompous fellow with him who says he's a lawyer and Mr Roxdale's son. I don't like him at all.'

Mrs Caldicot hurried out into the hall.

'Mrs Caldicot?' asked the lawyer.

Mrs Caldicot confirmed her identity.

'This is my father, Mr Roxdale,' said the lawyer. 'Have you got someone who can help with his bags?'

'Er...' began Mrs Caldicot, looking around rather helplessly.

'I can get them,' said Mr Roxdale.

'You stay here,' said his son. 'They'll have someone to do that sort of thing.'

Mr Roxdale didn't seem sure what to do.

'I'll go,' said Mrs Roberts quickly. 'Are they in the car?'

'There are two cases in the boot,' explained the lawyer. 'And, I'm afraid, a variety of garden tools poking out through the nearside rear window. Mr Roxdale simply wouldn't be parted from them. They have sentimental value. I'll help you with those in a minute. There's another case to bring. I couldn't fit it in the car today. I'll bring it over tomorrow morning.'

'OK,' said Mrs Roberts.

'The car is open. Just make sure you mind the paintwork,' said the lawyer. 'It's an expensive car.'

Behind his back Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts pulled faces. Mr Roxdale looked embarrassed.

Suddenly there was a scream of laughter from the lounge.

'What on earth was that?' demanded the lawyer.

'Oh, just some of the residents having a little fun, I expect,' explained Mrs Caldicot. 'We're one big happy family here.'

There was a shout and the sound of crashing furniture.

'It rather sounds to me as though someone is fighting,' said the lawyer, disapprovingly.

Mrs Caldicot walked across the hall to the lounge and gingerly pushed open the door. Miss Nightingale was sitting on the floor, looking rather dazed. None of the other residents was identifiable. They were a mess of arms, legs, heads and torsos; apparently joined together as a huge many limbed monster.'

'What's going on?' asked Mrs Caldicot, in a whisper.

'We're playing Twister,' explained Miss Nightingale.

Mrs Caldicot shut the door and turned back to the lawyer. 'Nothing at all to worry about,' she reassured him. 'A few of the residents are playing a rather heated game of bridge.' There was a crash from within the lounge. It sounded as though a large piece of furniture had been knocked over.

'Someone gone no trumps, I expect,' said Mrs Caldicot.

The lawyer frowned. He didn't approve of card games. He remembered students playing the game thirty years earlier when he had been at University. He hadn't approved of bridge then. 'Is that entirely appropriate for people of mature years? I would have thought that a more dignified pursuit might be more suitable. I trust there isn't any money changing hands?'

'Oh no,' Mrs Caldicot assured him. 'I'm absolutely sure that there is no money changing hands.' She paused. 'Our Miss Nightingale is very keen on embroidery,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'And another one of our residents is an enthusiastic philatelist with, I'm told, a very fine collection of French Colonials.' She swallowed hard. 'Naturally, we would not expect your father to take part in any activity which he felt inappropriate. Shall we go and take a look at Mr Roxdale's room?' She headed for the stairs and then, half way up, stopped and turned when she realised that although Mr Roxdale senior was following her Mr Roxdale junior wasn't. He was standing in the hallway staring at the wallpaper.

'We're going to have the whole place redecorated,' said Mrs Caldicot, apologetically. 'I'm afraid we just haven't had time.' The truth was that it was money rather than time that they were short of. But she didn't like to mention that.

'No, no, I don't think that's necessary,' said Mr Roxdale. 'I was just admiring the pattern. Very unusual.'

'I don't think they make it any more,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I tried to get a roll at the local hardware shop to repair some scuffed spots. But they didn't have anything like it.'

‘No,’ said Mr Roxdale, thoughtfully. ‘No. I don’t suppose they did.’ He moved, apparently reluctantly, away from his study of the wallpaper, stopped for a few moments to examine a piece of furniture at the bottom of the stairs, and only then did he start up the stairs.

‘You’ve got a lot of grass,’ said Mr Roxdale the elder, peering out of the window at the back garden.

‘Oh, yes,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘It costs a fortune to keep it all cut. But in the summer one or two of the more active residents like to totter out for a quiet game of croquet.’

‘Splendid!’ said Mr Roxdale junior.

‘It must take a day and a half a week to cut all that grass,’ said the older Mr Roxdale. ‘Including the lawn at the front,’ he added.

‘I think you’ve probably right,’ said Mrs Caldicot, who did not like being reminded of the gardener. He had that morning told Mrs Caldicot that he would not be returning until his bill had been paid in full. ‘What do you think of your room?’ she asked the older Mr Roxdale.

‘I liked my old place,’ said Mr Roxdale senior. ‘I had a nice little garden.’

‘If you feel the urge to get out there in the garden you’ll be very welcome. I’m sure our own gardeners won’t mind.’

‘I don’t think my father really wants to get his fingers dirty anymore,’ said young Mr Roxdale. He spoke, Mrs Caldicot thought, as though he had several plums in his mouth. ‘He’s a bit old for physical work now.’

Mrs Caldicot sensed animosity. She looked first at the old man and then at his son. The elder Mr Roxdale looked rather sad. Mrs Caldicot looked at him, smiled and winked. Surprised, he grinned and winked back.

Mrs Caldicot and the two Roxdales went downstairs. Mrs Roberts had brought in the older Mr Roxdale’s suitcases. She took them upstairs and offered to help the new resident unpack. Meanwhile, Mr Roxdale junior removed his father’s garden tools from the Jaguar, taking great care not to chip the car’s paint, and tossed them unceremoniously onto the ground beside a shed at the side of the house. He was glad to be rid of them. He was glad to be rid of his father too.

Chapter 25

It was dusk. From inside the brightly lit clubhouse the 18th green seemed pitch black. It was difficult to believe that anyone could see to play golf. Outside on the green, where the final two players of the day were completing their round, things did not look anywhere near as black. The clubhouse, lit up and silhouetted against the skyline, looked like a liner quietly cruising in some calm Caribbean waters. Nigel Roxdale slipped his putter into his bag, took hold of the handle on his trolley and headed back for the clubhouse.

'Are you popping in for a quick one?' he asked his playing partner, a short thick-set man who, although it hadn't rained all day, was cocooned in bulky waterproofs and had a multi-coloured woolly hat pulled down over his ears.

The man wearing the woolly hat pulled back his jacket sleeve and studied his watch. 'Better not, old man,' he replied, rather mournfully. 'Beryl will be furious if I'm late for dinner.' He held out a hand. 'But thanks for the game.' The two men shook hands.

At the top of the path leading to the clubhouse, the players parted company. The man with the woolly hat turned right and headed for the club car park. Within less than five minutes he would have packed his bag and trolley into the boot of his car, exchanged his spiked golf shoes for a pair of black loafers and started the short journey home.

Nigel Roxdale, the other golfer, turned left and headed for the clubhouse. He parked his trolley, complete with clubs, in a small space created for that purpose, entered the clubhouse and headed for the locker room. He changed his shoes, socks and trousers, swapped his Pringle sweater for a sports jacket, put on a tie, combed his hair and headed straight for the bar, confident that although the bar would be quiet there would be someone there whom he knew. His confidence was, as usual, entirely justified.

He was ordering himself a gin at the bar when he heard a voice he knew well call his name. He turned, smiled and waved back at a small man sitting in a huge, brown leather easy chair next to a raging log fire. This was the quietest time of the day for the bar. Most of the members who had been playing golf had gone home for their dinner. At about eight the bar would start to fill up again as members brought their wives for a drink, a game of bridge and a gossip. During the daytime the clubhouse was full of insurance salesmen doing deals. During the evening it was full of women with unlikely hair-dos mumbling four no trumps and spitting out catty remarks about one another.

'Can I get you a drink?' Nigel called across.

'Another gin, thank you!' replied the small member, holding up his almost empty glass.

Nigel carried the two gins across to the fireplace, handed one to Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, put the second down on a low oak table and then slumped down into the other chair, a twin to the one in which Mr Muller-Hawksmoor was settled.

They talked for a while about golf.

'Another one?' asked Nigel Roxdale after fifteen minutes. 'Thanks!' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. Suddenly he sat up. 'My round,' he remembered. He started to lever himself out of the chair.

'No, my treat,' insisted Nigel. He turned, caught the barman's eye, held up his glass and pointed to Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. The barman nodded. 'I've had a good day,' sighed Nigel, replete with self- satisfaction. 'I managed to persuade my father to retire and go into a retirement home.'

Mr Muller-Hawksmoor looked at him and gently raised an enquiring eyebrow. He couldn't quite see why this was good news but he knew Nigel Roxdale well enough to guess that this hadn't been an entirely altruistic manoeuvre.

'He's been living alone for years,' said Nigel. 'Far too old, of course. He needs looking after. Better to get him used to the idea now rather than wait until he's senile. I've heard that when old folk get senile they find it more difficult to settle.' He paused. 'Of course,' he said, 'that's your line of work isn't it?'

'You did the right thing,' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor.

The barman, a wiry, weary looking man in his late sixties, appeared with their drinks. He put the full glasses down on the table, picked up the empties and put them onto his tray. He had a slight tremor. This didn't much matter when he was picking up empty glasses but it meant he always spilt something when he was moving a full glass. The members tolerated this only because it gave them an excuse not to tip him. The barman waited while Nigel rummaged in his back pocket for the right change. As usual the barman did not expect a tip and, since his expectation was fulfilled, he was not disappointed in this.

'The odd thing was that the place where I took him turned out to be a damned treasure trove,' said Nigel quietly. He looked around to make sure no one could overhear him. There was no one within twenty feet.

'I spotted William Morris sunflower wallpaper in two rooms and William Morris trellis wallpaper in the lounge. Unbelievable! There are silk oak pattern curtains in the lounge too - I checked with a dealer I know who told me that when Morris's company sold that material in 1910 it cost 45 shillings a yard. And I spotted at least four genuine pieces of William Morris furniture including two high backed chairs and several pieces of furniture which were, I'm sure, produced at Morris's Red Lion Square workshop.'

'And they don't realise what they've got?' said Muller-Hawksmoor who knew only vaguely who William Morris was but who nevertheless recognised the commercial value of Nigel Roxdale's discovery. He was far too vain to confess this ignorance.

'I'm sure they don't have the slightest idea!' said Nigel. 'No idea at all. The daft woman running the place actually apologised to me for the state of the curtains and wallpaper. Said she was going to have the place redecorated when she could afford it.'

'How valuable are they - these things?' asked Mr Muller-Hawksmoor.

'Couldn't put a price on them,' said Nigel, emphatically. 'I did hear of a house in Somerset where they found a room covered with William Morris wallpaper. Some guys came down from London and spent a month peeling it off so they could use it to decorate an apartment in Knightsbridge.'

'Really?' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, impressed.

'You could take the stuff out and sell it of course, but by far the best thing to do would be to buy the place and open it up an exclusive hotel,' said Nigel. 'Small, exquisitely furnished, private hotels are all the rage these days. And one with genuine William Morris stuff on the walls and real William Morris furniture...,' he paused. 'You could charge what you liked for a weekend.' He sipped at his drink. 'Of course, I wouldn't bother opening a hotel myself. I'd just sell the place on to one of these chains specialising in small, private hotels.'

'What's the name of the place?' asked Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. 'I probably know it.'

'The Twilight Years Rest Home,' replied Nigel Roxdale. 'Run by a slightly dotty old woman...I've forgotten her damned name...Calders...something like that..'

'Caldicot?' suggested Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, who had gone very pale. He took a large swig from his glass.

'That's it! You know her?'

'I've got to visit the place tomorrow,' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, ignoring the question. He emptied his glass. 'Routine sort of check. Make sure they're obeying all the regulations.'

Nigel thought for a moment. 'What happens if a nursing home proprietor doesn't obey all the rules?' he asked. 'What sort of disciplinary powers do you lot have?'

'Oh vast,' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. 'We can close a place down in a flash.'

'You can actually close it down?'

'Oh yes.'

'You can really do that?' asked Nigel. 'By yourself?'

'Oh yes. If there's a breach of regulations. And there are a lot of regulations we can enforce.'

'Really,' said Nigel. 'That's very interesting. Let's have another drink, shall we?'

Chapter 26

Mrs Caldicot lived in a room on the top floor of the nursing home. It was no bigger and no smaller than anyone else's. Like each resident she had a small private bathroom and in her bedroom there were two fitted wardrobes and a dressing table which also served as a desk. She also had an easy chair and a small table. Mrs Roberts also had her own rooms on the top floor. The other staff members lived out.

Mrs Caldicot woke, as she always did, at seven thirty sharp. As usual Kitty, her cat, was curled up next to her. Moving gently, as that she would not wake Kitty, Mrs Caldicot swung her legs out of bed, stood up, found her slippers and, as was her habit, padded across the bedroom floor in her bare feet to draw back the curtains and find out what sort of day it was.

Mrs Caldicot was a deep sleeper who was accustomed to getting the full benefit out of her eight hours and she didn't realise that she had noticed anything unusual until, two minutes later, she was bent over her washbasin with her face covered in soap. She quickly rinsed off the soap, grabbed a towel and padded back into her bedroom. She looked out of the window again.

At first, Mrs Caldicot thought that perhaps she was imagining things. So she blinked and rubbed at her eyes and then looked back again. This time it was clear that she wasn't dreaming. There was a man out in the garden digging up the lawn. Judging by the amount of turf he had already moved he had clearly been out there for some time. But who on earth was it?

Not bothering to get dressed, Mrs Caldicot headed for the door still wearing only her nightie. And then, as things so often do, it came to her in an unexpected flash. 'Mr Roxdale'. Her new paying guest. The elderly man who had been brought in by the middle aged lawyer in the Jaguar.

She hurried along to Mrs Roberts's room. There she banged on the door. Mrs Roberts came to the door holding a huge white bath towel around her.

'What's up?' Mrs Roberts demanded, anxiously. She was not accustomed to getting visits at this time of the morning and Mrs Caldicot's unexpected knock on her door had alarmed her.

'Mr Roxdale is in the garden,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'He's out there digging up the lawn.'

'Mr Roxdale? The new resident?'

'Yes,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Why?'

'Perhaps he's trying to find oil. Maybe he just hates grass. I don't know. But we've got to stop him. I'm going out to see what's going on,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'I'll come with you,' said Mrs Roberts, dropping her towel and quickly grabbing a dressing gown from a hook between the door.

The two women hurried off down the stairs, through the kitchen and into the garden. The rest of the home was quiet. In the lounge Miss Nightingale was watching television and in the kitchen Mr and Mrs Merivale were making toast and coffee. They both looked up, said 'good morning' first to Mrs Caldicot and then to Mrs Roberts and then stared out of the window as the two women marched out of the back door and into the garden. Mr and Mrs Merivale looked at one another for a moment, shrugged and then went back to their chores.

'Good morning!' called Mrs Caldicot to Mr Roxdale as soon as she was in earshot.

The gardener, who had his foot on his spade and was about to remove another piece of turf from the already decimated lawn, stopped what he was doing, turned and grinned, first at Mrs Caldicot and then at Mrs Roberts, hurrying up in her wake.

'What on earth are you doing?' Mrs Caldicot asked. She regretted the banality of her question the moment the words had left her mouth.

'Digging,' replied Mr Roxdale.

'Yes, I can see that,' said Mrs Caldicot, conscious of the fact that the answer she had received was no more stupid than the question she had asked. 'But why?'

'I thought you'd like some flowers and some vegetables instead of all this grass,' said Mr Roxdale, waving an arm around. 'Don't get me wrong, I'm not completely against grass. In the right place a little lawn can look very nice indeed - especially if it's well tended - but you've just got too much lawn here.'

'Where did you get the tools from?'

'They're mine,' explained Mr Roxdale. 'The ones I brought with me.' Mrs Caldicot remembered the tools that Mr Roxdale's son had extracted from the Jaguar. He leant on his spade and waved towards a neat pile of turves. 'None of this need cost you a penny,' he said. 'I even know a man who'll buy this turf from you,' he told her.

Mrs Caldicot stared at him. ‘You know a man who’ll buy clumps of grass?’

‘Oh yes. There’s always a demand for good, clean grass. You’ve got good stuff here. Just the thing for making lawns.’

‘It is a lawn,’ pointed out Mrs Caldicot.

‘That’s what makes it valuable,’ explained Mr Roxdale. ‘And you can use the money you get from the turf to buy seeds,’ explained Mr Roxdale. ‘So, you see, you can start your garden without it costing you a penny.’

Mrs Caldicot had started out from her bedroom intending to tell Mr Roxdale to put back all the turf. But now she wasn’t so sure. She looked around. There was too much grass. It was boring. And she had to admit that the residents hardly ever came out into the garden at all.

‘If we put in some fast growing crops there’s still time to get quite a decent return this year,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘We want high productivity crops that will produce a good return in a short space of time. And, if you’re looking to save money the best bet would be to plant the sort of things that are cheap to grow but which take a little bit of knowledge and a bit of effort to harvest.’

‘You could organise all this for us?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘Oh yes,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘Shall I carry on?’

Mrs Caldicot looked at Mrs Roberts. Mrs Roberts shrugged. ‘Well, yes, I suppose so,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Yes. I think that would be a splendid idea.’ She paused. ‘As long as you don’t grow chrysanthemums.’ The late Mr Caldicot had been keen on chrysanthemums. Mrs Caldicot could now not bear the flowers.

‘OK,’ said Mr Roxdale, unquestioningly. ‘That’s fine. No chrysanthemums.’

Mrs Caldicot turned to head back towards the house. ‘Do you always start work this early in the morning?’

‘No,’ said Mr Roxdale. `Not this early.’

‘So why did you start this early today?’

‘I thought that if I asked you if I could dig up the garden you probably wouldn’t listen but would just say ‘No’,’ explained Mr Roxdale. ‘But I reckoned that if I’d already started you’d want to know why - and you’d listen to me.’

Mrs Caldicot looked at him and smiled. It was the sort of thing she would have done herself. ‘Have you had any breakfast?’ she asked.

Mr Roxdale shook his head.

‘Then for heaven’s sake come in and have something to eat,’ she told him. ‘I can’t bear to see a man work on an empty stomach.’

Mr Roxdale stuck his spade into the turf and followed Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts back to the kitchen.

Chapter 27

Mr Roxdale was sitting in the dining room finishing off a huge plateful of bacon and eggs. Thelma Caldicot and Mrs Roberts, now both dressed and decent, were sitting in Mrs Caldicot's office sharing a rack of toast and a pot of coffee. Mrs Caldicot was wearing a bright blue suit, a white blouse and a pair of hold up stockings which had a pretty pattern running down the back of each leg and which made her feel young, feminine and delightfully and surprisingly reckless. Although the knowledge no longer worried her, she was well aware that her former husband, the late Mr Caldicot, would have had an apoplectic fit if he could have seen her dressed in such a way. He believed that a woman's clothes should be designed solely to maintain warmth and dignity. Mrs Roberts was wearing her nurse's uniform and looked very crisp and professional.

'We'll save a fortune,' said Mrs Roberts. 'If Mr Roxdale digs up enough of the garden we won't have to pay anyone to come and cut the grass. And we'll save a fortune on greengrocery bills.'

'I suppose so,' said Mrs Caldicot, smearing thick cut marmalade onto her third slice of toast.

'Plus we get genuine organic food,' said Mrs Roberts. 'That's got to be a good thing. I'm always a bit suspicious of some of these organic farmers. You never know whether or not they've crept out in the middle of the night with a bag of chemical fertiliser or weedkiller.'

Mrs Caldicot, her mouth now full of toast and marmalade, nodded her approval.

'So, what's worrying you?' asked Mrs Roberts, who was, as usual, on a diet and had already passed her self-imposed limit of two slices of toast.

There was a pause while Mrs Caldicot finished the mouthful of toast she was eating. 'Oh, I don't know,' she sighed. She thought for a while. 'Yes, I do.' she confessed. 'I'm not really cut out for running an old folks' home.'

'Of course you are!' cried Mrs Roberts. 'What on earth makes you say that?'

'It's the finance side of things that I can't manage,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I know that everyone chips in with whatever they can afford but we're accumulating debts at a frightening rate. I simply didn't have the heart to ask Mr Williams for a cheque. He doesn't seem to have anything except a couple of suitcases of old photographs.'

They sat in glum silence for a few moments. Mrs Roberts, absorbing some of Mrs Caldicot's depression, reached out for another slice of toast.

'Did I tell you he gave me one of his old snaps in lieu of payment,' said Mrs Caldicot. She rummaged around on her desk, found the photograph, wiped a little marmalade off it and handed it to Mrs Roberts. 'It's quite nice,' said Mrs Roberts.

'It's very nice,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. 'But I can't see the water company or the electricity company accepting a photograph instead of a cheque, can you?'

'I suppose not,' agreed Mrs Roberts.

They both jumped when they heard the front doorbell.

'Oh damn,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Who can that be?'

'Let's just leave it,' said Mrs Roberts. 'My old auntie never answers her front doorbell. She says that people who ring her doorbell always want something from her. And she's right. When was the last time you opened the front door and had a nice surprise? When was the last time you opened the door and found someone standing there waiting to make your life better?'

The bell rang again.

'Oh I suppose I'd better go,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'I'll go,' laughed Mrs Roberts, who was nearer the door. 'You finish off that last piece of toast.'

Mrs Caldicot, ignoring the demands of her figure and succumbing to temptation, had smeared marmalade on the last piece of toast and just taken a sizeable bite when Mrs Roberts entered the office again. 'It's Mr Roxdale's son,' she whispered. 'He's brought another suitcase and he wants to see you.'

'Qnhell snhow hchim hin,' spluttered Mrs Caldicot, hurriedly finishing the mouthful of toast, and hiding the remains of her breakfast under a pile of bills.

Mrs Roberts turned round to fetch Mr Roxdale but he had followed her and was already in the room.

'Has my father settled in?' he asked.

'Oh yes, I think so,' said Mrs Caldicot, rising. 'Would you like to see him?'

'Oh no, no, no. Don't disturb him,' said Nigel. 'I just called in with another suitcase of his.' He looked down at Mrs Caldicot's desk.

'Please excuse the mess,' said Mrs Caldicot, rather embarrassed. 'I was just having a bit of a tidy up.'

'That's an interesting looking photograph you've got there,' said Nigel. He reached out, his fingers hovering above the photograph. ‘May I?’

‘Of course,’ said Mrs Caldicot, with a wave of her hand.

Nigel picked up the photograph, carefully blew away some toast crumbs, and then turned the photograph over. He blanched noticeably when he saw the signature on the back. ‘Where on earth did you get this?’ he asked.

Mrs Caldicot started to explain that a resident had given it to her. But something, she did not know what, warned her not to tell the whole truth.

‘Oh, it’s just something I was given,’ she said.

‘I’m a bit of a collector of old photographs,’ said Nigel, trying to remain calm. ‘Do you happen to know if the signature is real?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘It’s real.’

‘It looks authentic,’ said Nigel, examining it closely. ‘Yes, I’m sure it is.’ He looked across at Mrs Caldicot. ‘Would you be prepared to sell this to me?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘I hadn’t really thought about selling it.’

‘You know who the photographer is, of course?’

‘Yes,’ said Mrs Caldicot hesitantly.

‘I mean, you know who he is,’ repeated Nigel. He suspected that if Mrs Caldicot had known the photograph’s true value it would not have been lying on her desk half covered in crumbs.

Mrs Caldicot, confused, shook her head.

‘This is, I’m pretty sure, an original print of a photograph by Mr Henry Williams.’

‘Yes,’ said Mrs Caldicot, surprised. ‘Mr Henry Williams. That’s the name.’

‘Do you know who Mr Henry Williams is?’

Mrs Caldicot suppressed the temptation to say that Mr Henry Williams was a rather confused old man whom she had last seen attacking scrambled egg on toast in the dining room. Instead, she simply looked puzzled.

‘Mr Henry Williams is a legendary English photographer who worked in Paris with Cartier Bresson. He’s one of the best and most collected English photographers.’ Nigel scratched his nose. ‘I don’t even know whether or not he’s still alive,’ he admitted. ‘The last I heard he had left France and come back to England. But for the last thirty years he’s been a bit of a recluse.’

‘What’s it worth?’ asks Mrs Caldicot, trying not to sound excited.

‘I’ll give you £500 for it,’ said Nigel. He thought for a moment. ‘No,’ he said. ‘That’s not fair. The print is signed and the signature looks genuine. I`ll pay you £1,000 for it.’

Mrs Caldicot swallowed hard. ‘Do you mind if I talk to one of my colleagues?’ she said in a voice she hardly recognised. She got up and headed for the door and then turned back, smiled at Nigel, took the photograph from the desk in front of him and left.

She found Mr Williams upstairs in his room.

‘Are you the Mr Henry Williams?’ she demanded.

‘I’m Mr Henry Williams,’ said Mr Williams, rather defensively. ‘But I don’t expect I’m the only Mr Henry Williams.’

‘But you’re the photographer Mr Henry Williams?’

‘Yes.’

Mrs Caldicot held out the photograph he had given her. ‘There’s a man downstairs who’s just offered me £1,000 for this!’ she said.

‘Don’t take it,’ said Mr Williams firmly.

‘Don’t take it?’

‘No. He’s ripping you off.’

‘You mean it’s worth more than £1,000?’

‘The last print of that photograph went for £5,000 plus 17.5% auctioneer fees,’ said Mr Williams. ‘And it wasn’t signed.’

Mrs Caldicot sat down on Mr Williams’s bed. ‘So what is this one worth?’ she asked.

‘It should fetch between £7,500 and £10,000 at auction,’ said Mr Williams. ‘Maybe more. Who knows.’

‘I can’t take this,’ said Mrs Caldicot, putting the photograph down on the bed. She looked at it as though it was likely to bite her.

‘Why on earth not?’ asked Mr Williams. ‘I’ve got a suitcase full of them. And I can always print more if I run out.’

Mrs Caldicot looked at Mr Williams’s suitcase and went cold. ‘Don’t you think those should be in a bank?’ she asked.

‘Oh no,’ said Mr Williams. ‘These are only prints. The negatives are in a box in the bank.’

‘Anyway I can’t take that,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘It’s worth far too much.’

‘How much did you think it was worth when I gave it to you?’ Mr Williams asked her.

Mrs Caldicot looked embarrassed.

‘You just thought it was an old man’s snap - worthless - didn’t you?’

Mrs Caldicot felt herself blushing.

‘But you took the photograph, you didn’t say anything and you didn’t throw me out?’

‘No...but...’

‘I like you,’ said Mr Williams, beaming. ‘I like you very much. You’re kind. I don’t meet many kind people these days. Keep the photograph and sell it at auction. You’ll get the best price for it that way. And I’ll give you another one next month.’

‘No, no!’ said Mrs Caldicot, jumping up off the bed. ‘You can’t do that!’

‘They’re my photographs,’ Mr Williams pointed out. ‘I can do what I like with them. What else am I going to do with my money? For years now it’s been my plan to leave nothing when I die. Except debts to the lawyer and the undertaker.’

‘Nothing at all for your family?’

‘Why should I leave money to my family?’ asked Mr Williams, seemingly quite genuinely puzzled. ‘I started out this life with nothing and I intend to finish my journey in the same state. Most people think that accumulating money is like a game,’ said Mr Williams. ‘They want to be in a good position in the game when you die. My hero is the Count of Paris,’ he went on. ‘He was the heir to the French throne and in 1940 he inherited the equivalent of $200 million. In 1999 he died, leaving 6 monogrammed handkerchiefs to be divided between his 11 children. What a man! What a way to go. There was a man who timed his life and his death to perfection.’ He sighed, knowing that unless he destroyed his life’s work, his negatives and his photographs, he had no chance whatsoever of emulating his hero. He grinned at Mrs Caldicot. ‘I told you,’ he said to her. ‘I admire what you did. I was talking to Miss Nightingale at breakfast. I wish I’d been there to record it all with a camera.’ He chuckled.

Mrs Caldicot got up, now even more embarrassed.

Mr Williams picked up the photograph and held it as though about to rip in half. ‘Please take it,’ he said. ‘If you don’t I’ll rip it in half.’

‘You can’t do that!’ said Mrs Caldicot, horrified. ‘That would be terrible.’

‘So, what’s it to be? Are you going to take the photograph or am I going to rip it up?’

Mrs Caldicot looked at Mr Williams and smiled. ‘Thank you,’ she said, quietly. ‘I will accept this one photograph. It’s very generous of you and it will get us out of a very big hole. But I can’t let you keep bailing us out. So, no more photographs, please.’

‘But...’ began Mr Williams.

‘No buts!’ insisted Mrs Caldicot, firmly.

Mr Williams sighed. ‘OK,’ he said. ‘But can I ask you one favour? If you’ve got a collector downstairs please don’t tell him where you got the photograph. I don’t want a queue of collectors at the front door - all wanting their photographs signing.’

‘I won’t,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘I promise.’ She left Mr Williams’s room and met Mrs Roberts on the landing.

‘Mrs Roberts,’ she said, handing her the photograph. ‘Put this into an envelope and hide it somewhere safe.’

‘Why?’ asked Mrs Roberts. ‘Is it valuable?’

‘It’s worth between £7,500 and £10,000,’ Mrs Caldicot told her.

Mrs Roberts stared at her disbelievingly.

‘I know,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘You could have knocked me down with a bus when I found out. But it’s true. Mr Roxdale’s father just offered me £1,000 for it.’

Mrs Roberts, suddenly white, took the photograph as though it was made of delicate porcelain and walked slowly away with it.

Mrs Caldicot went back downstairs to tell Nigel that although she very much appreciated his kind offer she had to tell him that for the moment the picture wasn’t for sale.

Nigel offered £2,000.

Mrs Caldicot smiled very sweetly and said ‘No, thank you.’

When Nigel had gone she went looking for Mr Roxdale, to tell him that his other suitcase had arrived.

‘He’s back in the garden,’ Mrs Merivale told Mrs Caldicot. ‘Digging up the lawn.’

Mr Roxdale was in the garden but he was not alone. Mr Hewitt, Mr Livingstone and Mrs Caldicot’s cat Kitty were all helping him. Mr Hewitt who was, like Mr Roxdale, a former gardener, was delighted to be getting his hands dirty again.

Chapter 28

Later that day, while an exhausted Kitty slept on a rug on top of the boiler Mrs Caldicot, Mrs Roberts and the Merivales cleaned the kitchen. This was an extensive task for the cook who had recently left had not regarded cleanliness as a priority or, indeed, as much of a virtue at all.

Mrs Caldicot was on her hands and knees in front of the oven, scrubbing at stains which had clearly been accumulating for some time. Mrs Roberts, also on her hands and knees, had undone the pipe-work underneath the kitchen sink and was struggling to deal with a blockage by extracting rotting vegetable remains. Mrs Merivale was sitting at the kitchen table folding and refolding a duster so it would look neat when she started work. Her husband, who did not like to be far from her, was cleaning out the fridge.

Mr and Mrs Merivale were by now well settled into the kitchen at the Twilight Years Rest Home.

Some people enjoy a retirement which allows them to potter around, avoiding responsibilities and commitments, getting up when they want, going to bed when they want and doing whatever they fancy in between.

Others prefer to keep busy. They like knowing that they are making a difference to someone else’s lives. They need to know that they are needed.

Mrs Merivale was one of those others. And Mr Merivale, who had never had to deal with such twentieth century tortures as ambition and drive, was extremely happy doing whatever kept his wife happy. For him a pile of dirty dishes and a bowlful of soapy water was a promise of an hour or two of fulfilment, the comforting knowledge that there would be a warm glow of satisfaction when the dirty dishes had been washed, wiped and stacked away and, above all, the knowledge that what he was doing would elicit a smile and a hug from Maple Merivale, the only woman he had ever loved, ever wanted to love or ever seen any reason to want to love.

Although they had only been working in the kitchen for a short time, Mr and Mrs Merivale had already earned the respect, affection and gratitude of everyone else in the Twilight Years Rest Home. Mrs Merivale ran a neat and efficient kitchen and produced her meals on time. But it was Mr Roxdale who best summed up what the others liked best about Mrs Merivale when he said: ‘She cooks wonderful food and serves generous portions.’

The fashionable television chefs may come and go, parading their skills with rare and barely edible Pategonian vegetables, decorating their plates as though preparing them for an exhibition at the Tate Gallery, and spending hours turning tomato skins into roses but in the long run cooking is about one thing, and one thing only: satisfying appetites with tasty, wholesome, nutritious food. And Mrs Merivale was better at doing that than any fancy television chef. She knew what her diners wanted and she made sure that she gave it to them - in good portions.

Chapter 29

In order to make the time pass more pleasantly Mrs Caldicot was telling them all about her most recent lunch with Jenkins and had just reached the end of the meal (‘while Jenkins had his coffee this hunky bloke brought this tray full of gorgeous petits fours - I hate to think what it all cost’) when their peace was interrupted by the familiar sound of the front doorbell.

‘Darn it,’ said Mrs Caldicot, stopping in mid-scrub, turning her head and banging it against the side of the oven. ‘Can you go, Mrs Roberts?’

‘I’ve got my hand halfway down the drain,’ said Mrs Roberts, gouging another glop of unrecognisable black goo from the waste pipe. ‘By the time I’ve made myself presentable whoever is ringing the bell will have forgotten why they ever called.’

‘Perhaps one of the residents will answer it,’ suggested Mrs Caldicot. They waited. The doorbell rang again. And again.

‘I think the residents are all too busy having a good time,’ said Mrs Roberts.

‘What are they all doing this morning?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘They were playing musical chairs when I last looked,’ replied Mrs Roberts. ‘Mr Hewitt was sitting on the sideboard claiming that it counted as a chair because he could sit on it. They wanted me to act as referee but I declined and left quickly.’

‘Very sensible,’ said Mrs Caldicot who still remembered and regretted having agreed to act as referee in a very hectic game of Twister. The bell rang again. The caller was clearly not going to give up. ‘Mrs Merivale, would you be kind enough to pop and answer the door for us?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘Oh!’ said Mrs Merivale, slightly startled and flustered. ‘Are you sure it will be all right for me to do that?’

‘Just open the door and see who’s there,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Ask them what they want and then come and tell me.’

‘Oh. Right. I think I can probably manage that,’ said Mrs Merivale. ‘I’ll just pop and get my hat.’

Mrs Merivale had stood up and taken just two paces towards the door when Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts stopped what they were doing, looked first at one another and then at Mrs Merivale and finally spoke together. ‘Why do you need a hat to open the door?’

Mrs Merivale stopped and turned. ‘I always wear a hat when I open the door,’ she told them.

‘Yes,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘But why?’

‘My mother always did it,’ replied Mrs Merivale. ‘She would never answer the door unless she was wearing a hat.’

‘Yes,’ repeated Mrs Caldicot. ‘But why?’

‘So that if she didn’t want to see the visitor who was standing on the step she could tell them that she was just going out,’ said Mrs Merivale. ‘They would see the hat on her head and think she was telling the truth.’

‘And if it was someone she wanted to see?’

‘She’d still tell them she was just going out but would remove her hat and say that her errand could wait. That would make them feel wanted and important.’

‘And you’ve always done this?’

‘Oh yes. Without fail.’

‘That’s brilliant!’ said Mrs Caldicot, in awe.

‘It’s simple but so clever!’ agreed Mrs Roberts.

‘We will keep a hat stand in the hall,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘In future I will never answer the door unless I’m wearing a hat.’

‘Nor will I,’ said Mrs Roberts.

‘Shall I pop and get my hat, then?’ asked Mrs Merivale.

‘Most definitely,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

She left the kitchen. Mr Merivale followed close behind.

Chapter 30

A minute or two later Mrs Merivale returned to the kitchen. She was wearing a neat little hat with a feather in it. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said to Mrs Caldicot. ‘You’ll have to come. They want to see you and they won’t even tell me who they are or what they want.’

Mrs Caldicot got up and walked to the front door. There were two people, a man and a woman, standing in the porch outside (Mrs Merivale hadn’t invited them in since they had refused to tell her who they were). Both were carrying clipboards.

The woman was probably in her thirties, though it was difficult to tell with any accuracy. She wore grey, mannish trousers which had huge patch pockets on the thighs and a heavy green anorak with lots of pockets. She had lank, greasy hair which would not have looked out of place on the head of a down on his luck heavy metal fan who was sleeping rough. She had black skin, wore no make-up and had small, rodent like eyes. She looked as if she needed a good bath. She had the stony faced, heartless look of a professional social worker about her. Mrs Caldicot had seen that look before, and it made her feel cold inside.

But it was the man, not the woman, who made leaden-footed butterflies in Mrs Caldicot’s stomach start jumping cartwheels.

It was a face that Mrs Caldicot knew very well. It was a face she had hoped she would never see again.

When her husband had died Mrs Caldicot’s son and daughter-in-law had decided that Mrs Caldicot wasn’t capable of looking after herself at home alone. They had booked her into an old people’s home called The Twilight Years Rest Home, run by a cruel, heartless man called Muller-Hawksmoor. Within days an irate Mrs Caldicot, angry at being told that she could no longer keep her cat Kitty with her, and fed up of the smell and taste of over-cooked cabbage, had summoned up courage she never knew she had, and walked out of the rest home - followed by many of the other residents. Mrs Caldicot’s astonishing ‘escape’ had made national news and Mr Muller-Hawksmoor had ended up losing his nursing home.

It was a smirking Muller-Hawskmoor, the very same Muller-Hawksmoor, who was now standing on the step of the nursing home. The smug, self-satisfied former rest home owner looked extremely pleased with himself.

For a brief moment Mrs Caldicot just stared at him.

‘Mrs Caldicot?’ he asked.

‘Of course is it. What do you want?’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘You’re not welcome here.’ She did not even try to disguise her hostility.

‘My name is Muller-Hawksmoor...’

‘I know who you are.’

‘...and this is my colleague Ms Jones.’

‘Ms Jones BA.’ the woman caller corrected him. She glowered at Mrs Caldicot. ‘In addition to attending as Mr Muller-Hawksmoor’s Associate I have to tell you that I am appointed by the council as the statutory lesbian feminist advocate liaison representative for your staff and residents.’

‘That’s very nice, dear,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘But I’m afraid you’re not welcome here, either of you.’ She attempted to close the door but found that Muller-Hawksmoor had put a suede-clad foot in the way.

‘We’re from the local council,’ said Muller-Hawksmoor, ‘and this is official. My colleague, Ms Jones BA, and I represent the council’s Rest Home Supervisory Unit. It is our Unit’s broader responsibility to examine all the residential institutions in this area which are offering accommodation, nursing services or other facilities for the elderly.’ He paused, and the smirk grew wider. ‘Ms Jones and I have statutory authority,’ he told Mrs Caldicot. ‘You are legally obliged to allow us free access to your facilities at any time convenient to us. If you refuse to comply with our requests we are entitled to serve you with a closure notice, which will give you a limited time to find alternative accommodation for your residents and then immediately close down your facility.’

‘Do you have any official identification?’ Mrs Caldicot asked him.

‘Of course,’ said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, as smooth and unruffled as a kitchen salesman. He slipped a hand into his inside jacket pocket and brought out a wallet. From the wallet, he took a plastic covered identity card which carried his photograph, official status and various identifying details. By the time Mrs Caldicot had studied Mr Muller-Hawksmoor’s identity card, and handed it back, Ms Jones had taken her own identity card out of one of the many pockets in her anorak. She held it a few inches away from Mrs Caldicot’s nose; so close to her face that Mrs Caldicot had to move her head back an inch or so in order to read it. The photograph made Ms Jones look like the subject of a wanted poster. ‘Statutory Lesbian Feminist Advocate Liaison Representative’ screamed red capital letters underneath her photograph.

‘I have been married three times,’ said Ms Jones BA.

Mrs Caldicot looked at her, slightly puzzled. ‘Congratulations!’ she said, not sure of the relevance of this but not sure what else to say.

‘That was before I decided to convert to fundamental lesbianism,’ continued Ms Jones BA.

‘Of course,’ agreed Mrs Caldicot.

‘Men are very weak,’ said Ms Jones BA. ‘All my husbands committed suicide.’

‘Oh good heavens,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘How, er distressing.’ Suddenly she brightened. ‘I only had the one,’ she said. ‘I could never quite persuade him to take the plunge. You’d better come in.’ She opened the front door wide and stood back so that they could enter. She would have been more enthusiastic about allowing a pair of pythons, or a pair of psychopathic mass murderers into her rest home. But she realised that she had no alternative. When a man in a cheap suit flashes a plastic identity card establishing him as a council employee every castle must lower its drawbridge.

‘What do you want to see?’ she asked them.

‘This is just a preliminary reconnaissance,’ said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. ‘Just an initial visit for us to get some basic details. To begin with we need to have an up-to-date inventory of your residents.’

‘We don’t keep an inventory of our residents,’ said Mrs Caldicot sharply. She was holding her head high and trying not to show how nervous she felt. ‘The residents at this rest home are regarded as guests, not listed on a computer programme alongside the towels and bits and pieces of furniture.’

‘Very noble,’ said Ms Jones BA, who, Mrs Caldicot thought, had all the charm of a hungry scorpion. ‘But you presumably have some idea of the names of your clients.’ She spoke with ill-disguised contempt and managed to make the word ‘clients’ sound like an insult. ‘And let’s get on with it, shall we? I don’t want to do this any more than you do. I would much rather be doing something socially significant.’

‘What sort of thing would you consider socially significant?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘It is my intention to set up a lesbian mothers unit,’ said Ms Jones.

‘You don’t consider working with the elderly to be socially significant?’

‘No, of course not,’ answered Ms Jones. ‘The elderly haven’t been oppressed for countless generations.’

‘It’s people like you who’ve turned us into the ignored majority,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Just because our oppression is relatively new doesn’t excuse it.’

‘I have no interest in the elderly,’ said Ms Jones.

‘That’s a very ageist remark,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘I’m surprised the council approves of your attitude.’

‘Let’s get on with it, shall we?’ said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor.

‘We have some confidential enquiries to make,’ sniffed Ms Jones BA. ‘We will need to talk to your staff and to your clients.’ She looked at Mrs Caldicot contemptuously. ‘You can go now,’ she said. ‘We will let you know when we need you.’

‘I’ll just tell my residents that you will be wandering about asking questions,’ said Mrs Caldicot, walking ahead of them. ‘I don’t want any of them being upset.’ She opened the lounge door and entered, closely followed by Mr Muller-Hawksmoor and Ms Jones BA. The lounge was empty. Utterly deserted.

‘Ah,’ said Muller-Hawksmoor, walking across the room and stopping in front of a bookcase on top of which stood the vase which Miss Nightingale had found in the kitchen. ‘I’m pleased to see that you’ve still got my old vase on display.’

Mrs Caldicot looked at the vase he was examining. ‘Oh yes,’ she said. ‘One of our residents found it in a kitchen cupboard.’

‘I always rather liked that vase,’ said Muller-Hawksmoor.

‘I hope you haven’t mislaid your guests,’ sneered Ms Jones BA, who had little time for idle chitter chatter. ‘We usually expect proprietors of care establishments within our jurisdiction to have some idea of the whereabouts of their people.’

‘I haven’t mislaid them,’ said Mrs Caldicot, frostily. ‘And they’re not `my people’. It’s a nice day so perhaps they are outside, in the garden.’ She opened the door to the kitchen and poked her head inside. Mrs Roberts was still on her knees, doing unspeakable things to the drains.

‘Who is it?’ whispered Mrs Roberts.

‘Inspectors from the council,’ replied Mrs Caldicot. ‘They want to speak to everyone.’ She paused, and lowered her voice still more. ‘One of the inspectors is Muller-Hawksmoor!’

Mrs Roberts knew far more than she wanted to know about Muller-Hawksmoor. Her dropped jaw was, however, far more eloquent than any words would have been. She would have been more cheerful about this invasion if Mrs Caldicot had told her that they were being inspected by a troupe of hungry cannibals looking for something to cook. ‘That’s crazy!’ she said at last.

‘It’s like putting Herod in charge of the maternity ward!’ whispered Mrs Caldicot. ‘Do you know where everyone is?’

‘I think they’re all out in the garden, helping Mr Roxdale,’ replied Mrs Roberts. ‘Mr Williams had some more spades and forks delivered so that they’d have one each.’

‘Then let’s take the Gestapo outside,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Let’s hope Mr Williams has got enough extra spades for them to help too.’

Chapter 31

Out in the garden Mr Roxdale and his small army of helpers were digging up the remains of the lawn with surprising speed. The lawn looked as though a very large, incompetent golfer had been practising.

‘This is the best fun I’ve ever had,’ said Miss Nightingale, stabbing her spade into the ground and, after a struggle, managing to dig out a small divot.

‘This is the best fun I’ve ever had,’ said Mrs Peterborough, whose habit of repeating things had not diminished with time. Trying to copy Miss Nightingale she thrust her spade into the ground and then wrestled with it in a vain attempt to dig out a piece of turf. She managed to produce a tiny divot that a baby rabbit might have been proud of. It was clear that, despite their enthusiasm, if Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough were to take leading roles in converting the lawn into a productive garden the task would probably outlive them all.

‘I’m sorry to bother you all,’ said Mrs Caldicot, speaking loudly to attract their attention. ‘But we are being inspected by two representatives of the local council. This is not something over which I have any authority. The council’s representatives tell me that they have the authority to question us all,’ she said, ‘and I understand that they may want to ask you all questions.’ She turned her head and waved a hand to indicate the two visitors who were standing behind her. ‘Some of you may remember Mr Muller-Hawksmoor,’ she said. ‘He was formerly proprietor of the Twilight Years Rest Home but is now an employee of the local council.’

There was much muttering at the announcement of the name Muller-Hawksmoor.

‘Can’t stand the man. Nasty piece of work,’ said Mr Livingstone, glowering in Muller-Hawksmoor’s direction. ‘I always thought he was a socialist.’

‘He’s a socialist, is he?’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘Ha! That explains a lot. I always wondered about him.’

‘Who is this fellow?’ Mr Roxdale asked Mr Hewitt.

‘He’s the most obnoxious, cruel, horrid, wicked, heartless...’ Mr Hewitt began to ran dry.

‘Disreputable, crooked, mean...’ continued Mr Livingstone, helping him out.

‘Put him top of your hate list,’ Mr Hewitt told Mr Roxdale.

‘No room at the moment I’m afraid,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘I try to limit myself to being annoyed by about 100 things at a time. I find that I can’t cope with more than that.’

‘He’s worth a spot right near the top,’ Mr Hewitt assured him.

‘OK,’ said Mr Roxdale, generously. ‘But he’ll have to jump the queue. I already have a fairly long waiting list of things to get cross about.’

‘Mrs Caldicot and this fellow had a terrible row,’ Mr Hewitt said. ‘They loathe each other.’

‘In that case I think he can jump the waiting list and go straight into the top five,’ said Mr Roxdale.

‘If he comes near me I’ll brain him with my spade,’ added Mr Livingstone.

‘Don’t be silly,’ said Mrs Caldicot, who had overheard and who was slightly worried that things might get out of hand. ‘You mustn’t do that.’ She tried to make her disapproval sound convincing, though this wasn’t easy.

‘No, don’t do that,’ said Mr Roxdale, stopping digging and placing a restraining hand on Mr Livingstone’s hand. ‘These spades have good edges. If you use one to brain a council employee you’ll probably wreck the cutting edge,’ he explained. ‘Council employees all have rocks inside their skulls,’ he added. Mr Roxdale had had enough experience of council workers to know that he did not like them.

‘I rang the council once,’ said Miss Nightingale. ‘I was surprised to discover that it is a very civilised place. Did you know that they have a man there who has a piano in his office and just sits and plays the piano all day long?’

Everyone looked at her.

‘What makes you say that, Miss Nightingale?’ asked Mr Livingstone, not wishing to display the mild scepticism which he felt but hoping that a single question might clear up the confusion.

‘A very busy lady told me to hold on and then she put me through to someone who was playing the piano,’ said Miss Nightingale. ‘He - and I don’t know why but I’ve always assumed it was a ‘he’, possibly because of the rather enthusiastic way he threw himself at the keys - didn’t say anything at all but just rattled along obviously enjoying himself very much. I like piano music so I didn’t mind. It was something by Mozart I think. I listened to him for twenty minutes or so, said ‘thank you’ very quietly, so as not to disturb him, and put the telephone receiver down. I had by then completely forgotten why I had telephoned in the first place.’ She stopped and thought for a moment. ‘Of course,’ she said, ‘If you had an urgent enquiry you might not be so pleased to know that council employees were enjoying themselves playing the piano, rather than getting on with collecting rubbish and replacing burnt out street lamps.’

‘I’ll have you know that I’m not just a council employee. I’m also a qualified social worker,’ cried Ms Jones BA, worried that things were getting away from her and interrupting Miss Nightingale's account of her personal interface with the council.

'Do you have a piano?' Miss Nightingale asked her.

'I have a BA,' shouted Ms Jones BA. 'I most certainly do not have a piano.'

'Never mind, dear,' said Miss Nightingale. 'Perhaps when you get promoted and become a little more senior.'

Miss Nightingale glowered. 'I am a fully qualified social worker,' she shouted. 'I have a BA.'

Mr Roxdale liked social workers even less than he liked council workers. 'I don't care if you're Ms Jones LUFTHANSA, QUANTAS and AIR LINGUS, love,' he told her. 'As far as I'm concerned you're still just a bloody social worker.'

Ms Jones BA might have been (just) able to cope with the fact that her degree (with an added diploma in social history - which she, naturally, preferred to describe as social hertory) did not immediately win her the respect which she regarded as her right, and she might (just) have been able to cope with being called 'love'. But both at once was just too much for her. She opened her mouth and tried to say something but failed. There was simply too much indignation crowding her brain for the words that wanted to get out to get sorted into any sort of order, let alone passed on down the relevant pathways for vocalisation to take place. She made some dry, guttural sounds but that was all.

'Oooh,' said Miss Nightingale, looking up from her endeavours with the spade, spotting that the other visitor had oozed closer and pulling a face. 'It's Mr Fuller-Mawkhoor. Boo hiss.'

'Boo hiss,' said Mrs Peterborough, not bothering to look up, but merely following her good friend's example. 'It's Mr Huller-Hawkhoor. Boo hiss.'

'We need to know all your identities,' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, struggling to ignore these votes of no confidence and trying hard to retain his composure and sense of authority. He was not concerned by the fact that he did not seem to be universally popular among the residents (universal popularity had never been his ambition) but he was a vain and self-important man and he did not like having his authority undermined. `Ms Jones BA and I will come among you with our clip boards so that you can answer our questions.'

Chapter 32

Mr Muller-Hawksmoor and Ms Jones BA were not getting on very well.

They had, perhaps, made a mistake in starting their search for information by questioning Mr Roxdale.

'What's your name?' Ms Jones BA had demanded, pen poised over her clipboard.

'Naff off,' replied Mr Roxdale. 'Why should I tell you anything?'

'I am an accredited representative of the local council,' replied Ms Jones.

'Well tell the council they can all naff off,' said Mr Roxdale. 'I wrote to them twice about the trees they were chopping down in Sittercombe Park. Old oaks they were. Beautiful trees. Chopping them down for car parking. I wrote twice but didn't get back a single reply. They don't take any notice of me so why I should take any notice of them?'

'You have to reply to my questions,' said Ms Jones BA. 'These are official forms.' She tapped her clipboard with the top of her pen.

'How many forms have you got there?' asked Mr Roxdale. He looked at her clipboard. 'There's only one form. But there are three copies of it. Why on earth do you need to have your forms in triplicate?' he demanded. 'It's a waste of good trees.'

If she had been an honest woman Ms Jones would have replied that she and her fellow employees always took three copies because their filing system was so poor that they usually lost one copy within hours and a second within days. Having three copies meant that there was a slightly better than evens chance that they would still have a copy in a month's time.'

'We've dramatically improved our procedures this year,' replied Ms Jones. 'We used to have five copies of every form.'

'Well I'm not interested in filling in any of your damned silly forms,' said Mr Roxdale.

'You are obliged by law to assist me in my enquiries,' lied Ms Jones.

'Calamity Brown,' said Mr Roxdale, instantly.

Ms Jones stared at him. The name seemed vaguely familiar but she didn't know why. Ms Jones' BA had been acquired in the study of something called 'Social Administrative Studies', an academic discipline which was built upon the asking of questions rather than the providing of solutions, and no amount of stretching of the imagination could allow anyone to describe her as being either well or widely educated.

Mr Roxdale repeated the name. Ms Jones asked him how to spell it and then, reluctantly, (for she was not entirely convinced that Mr Roxdale was telling her the truth) carefully wrote the name down on the top form on her clipboard. She wrote slowly and deliberately, somehow managing to put her free hand around what she was writing to prevent anyone else from copying, and sticking out her tongue as she wrote.

'How long have you been living here, Calamity?'

'I don't know,' said Mr Roxdale, with a sigh. 'I suffer from intermittent Alzheimer's Disease. Sometimes I can remember things. But other times I can't remember why I got up. What's your Christian name?'

'I don't think that's any of your business,' snapped Ms Jones.

'In that case please address me as Mr Brown if you speak to me again,' said Mr Roxdale.

Ms Jones glowered at him, wrote something on her clipboard, and turned to Miss Nightingale. 'Name?' she demanded gruffly.

'Gertrude Jekyll,' replied Miss Nightingale, without any hesitation.

'Gertrude Jekyll,' said Mrs Peterborough, without waiting to be asked. As usual Mrs Peterborough was standing next to her friend Miss Nightingale.

'I'll come to you in a minute,' snapped Ms Jones BA.

'I'll come to you in a minute,' Mrs Peterborough snapped back.

'Her real name is Mrs Peterborough,' said Miss Nightingale, not wanting her friend to get into trouble. 'She sometimes just says what other people say but she never means any harm.'

'Her real name is Mrs Peterborough,' said Mrs Peterborough solely because her friend Miss Nightingale had said it. 'She sometimes just says what other people say but she never means any harm.'

Ms Jones glowered again and looked across at her colleague, Mr Muller-Hawksmoor.

'It seems to me that this person is mentally impaired,' she said. 'I think we should arrange for her to be moved to more suitable accommodation.'

'Oh yes, I remember this one,' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, glowering at Mrs Peterborough. 'As nutty as a pound of peanut brittle. I'll get the official psychiatrist to come round and make the necessary arrangements.'

‘You’re not moving her anywhere,’ insisted Miss Nightingale. ‘She stays with me.’

‘She needs proper care,’ insisted Ms Jones BA.

‘She gets all the care she needs here,’ said Miss Nightingale. ‘She’ll become confused if you make her go somewhere else.’

‘I think we’ll leave that to the psychiatrist, shall we?’ said Ms Jones. ‘Now, how old are you Miss Jekyll?’

‘I’m 79-years-old,’ said Miss Nightingale who wasn’t but who now followed Mrs Torridge’s example and always lied about her age as a matter of principle.

Ms Jones BA wrote this down on the form attached to her clipboard, making sure that the entry appeared on the copies beneath it.

‘Today,’ said Miss Nightingale. ‘It’s my birthday.’

‘Congratulations,’ said Ms Jones BA.

‘What for?’ demanded Miss Nightingale. ‘I found getting old remarkably easy. It took virtually no skill at all.’ She held her head to one side and looked at Ms Jones. ‘Even you will probably be able to do it,’ she suggested.

‘I am neither amused nor impressed by any of this,’ said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, who had clearly had enough. ‘Ms Jones BA and I will return shortly to continue our investigations.’ He turned to Mrs Caldicot. `When we return we will expect you to have a full list of your residents - containing names, former addresses and dates of birth. Meanwhile, what sort of exercise programme do you run for your residents?’

Mrs Caldicot stared at him as though not sure that she’d heard properly.

‘Low Impact Aerobics? Non-Competitive Athletics? Late 18th Century Polish Folk Dance? Martial arts and self-defence?’

‘I...er...we don’t...er...actually...er...have a formal exercise programme,’ Mrs Caldicot stuttered.

Mr Muller-Hawksmoor tutted and shook his head. Ms Jones BA, who regarded herself as something of an individualist and liked to plough her own furrow, shook her head and tutted.

Mr Muller-Hawksmoor fiddled with his clipboard and slid a piece of paper from the back. He handed the sheet to Mrs Caldicot. ‘On this sheet you will find a list of fully approved and accredited trainers,’ he told her. ‘You are quite at liberty to select the discipline of your choice but you must select one of these disciplines and accredited trainers immediately and within five days of this formal notification you must offer your resident clients an approved exercise programme. If you select a discipline and trainer now we will arrange for your classes to start.’

Mrs Caldicot looked down the list which she had been handed. ‘Oh dear,’ she said. ‘I really don’t know.’ She showed the list to the small crowd which had gathered around her. There was much shaking of heads.

‘Do I have to pick one?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘You do.’

‘Then we’ll have this one,’ said Mrs Caldicot, blinding stabbing a finger at the sheet and thrusting both sheet and attached finger under Mr Muller-Hawksmoor’s nose.

‘Martial arts and self-defence,’ said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. ‘With Dirk.’ He looked at her, then at the seemingly frail group standing around her and frowned. ‘Are you sure? That is a Grade IV Class.’

‘Oh yes, thank you,’ said Mrs Caldicot, now thoroughly flustered and confused. ‘We’ll definitely have the Martial Dirk and Self with Arts and Defence.’ She had acquired the habit of becoming particularly firm and committed whenever she was flustered and confused.

‘Sign here,’ said Muller-Hawksmoor, thrusting his clipboard underneath Mrs Caldicot’s nose.

Mrs Caldicot signed there.

Mr Muller-Hawksmoor and Ms Jones BA exchanged meaningful glances but neither spoke until a few minutes later when they were fastening their seat belts in Ms Jones’s second hand Ford Fiasco GTX.

‘I’d like to see that lot of sad old crumblies struggle to cope with one of Dirk’s classes,’ sniggered Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. `We’d better have a couple of ambulances on stand-by for his first class.’

‘Well, it’s all that silly woman Caldicot’s responsibility,’ said Ms Jones BA. ‘We’ve got her signature on form ETY 292.’ She turned, gave Mr Muller-Hawksmoor something that she thought was a smile and then put the Fiasco GTX into a gear. Unfortunately, the gear was not a particularly suitable one and Mr Muller-Hawksmoor had to grip the dashboard as the car jumped and hopped down the drive and onto the road. He managed to snatch a glance at his watch. ‘On the way back to the office would you like to pop into the pub, Ms Jones?’ he asked. ‘I’m told that they do a very nice ploughperson’s lunch at the Black Ferret.’

‘I would like that very much, Mr Muller-Hawksmoor,’ said Ms Jones BA. She swerved to avoid a pothole and bounced off the kerb. Driving was not her strong point. ‘I would just like to say that I was extremely distressed by the way the residents of that home treated you.’

‘Oh it was just their little way of having fun, I suppose,’ murmured Mr Muller-Hawksmoor weakly.

‘It wasn’t right, it wasn’t good enough and it wasn’t acceptable,’ said Ms Jones BA firmly. ‘I think we should keep a very close eye on that establishment.’ She braked hard to avoid a parked car which had suddenly appeared directly in front of her.

Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, who now had one hand gripping the dashboard and the other clutching his seatbelt, smiled and sat back. He felt almost happy.

Back at the home, Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts had watched them disappear.

‘It’s not fair,’ said Mrs Roberts.

‘Of course it isn’t, dear,’ agreed Mrs Caldicot.

‘It’s not supposed to be like this,’ said Mrs Roberts.

‘It’s not supposed to be like anything,’ said Mrs Caldicot, now far older and wiser than she’d ever wanted to be, putting an arm around the younger woman’s shoulders and giving her a hug.

Mr Roxdale appeared by their side. ‘Let’s go and feed the birds,’ he said.

Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts both looked at him.

‘I’ve got some rice and sunflower seeds in my pocket,’ he whispered.

He slowly set off for a quiet corner of the garden and they followed him.

A few minutes later the three of them were standing underneath a large chestnut tree feeding grains of rice and sunflower seeds to a motley crew of assorted birds.

‘Forget the idiots from the council,’ advised Mr Roxdale softly. ‘This is what life is all about.’ He paused for a moment, crouched down and allowed a robin to jump onto the palm of his hand. Calm, unflustered, and seemingly fearless the robin took the rice grains that were offered and ate them. Then he looked around before flying off.

‘Feeding the birds is the nearest you and I can ever get to being God,’ said Mr Roxdale.

‘Closer than sowing seeds and watching them grow?’ asked Mrs Roberts.

‘Oh yes,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘When I sow seeds I’m just acting as a labourer for God. It’s his garden. His skill that brings the rain and the sunshine. But when I feed the birds I’m giving them something they maybe need to live; something they perhaps can’t get anywhere else. Those few grains of rice I scatter may mean the difference between life and death. For a few moments I’m a God in their world.’

Both Mrs Roberts and Mrs Caldicot knew what he meant.

Temporarily, at least, the two busy bodies from the council, now plotting away in the snug at the Black Ferret public house with two halves of lager shandy, two slices of processed cheese, four slices of white bread and two small, slightly bruised tomatoes in front of them, seemed very insignificant indeed.

Chapter 33

A tall, arrogant and bored looking young man wearing a black martial arts costume stood in the bay window of the lounge. He'd had all the furniture moved to the sides of the room so that there was a large, clear space in the middle. He had an olive complexion and jet black hair tied in a long ponytail. He wore no shoes or socks and when Mrs Peterborough had drawn attention to this fact, wondering aloud whether they should club together to help him buy a pair of shoes and a pair of socks, Miss Nightingale took the opportunity to point out to her friend that the sockless visitor's feet weren't quite as clean as they might have been. 'You'd have thought he would have had a good bath, wouldn't you?' she whispered. 'He may not be able to afford shoes but it doesn't cost much to keep your feet clean.' Unfortunately, Miss Nightingale wasn't getting any younger and her hearing wasn't getting any sharper. Her idea of a whisper was most people's idea of a full-throated bellow. 'His feet are filthy,' she added.

Mrs Peterborough repeated her friend's rhetorical question and simple observation, also pretty much at full volume.

The young man with the ponytail, Dirk, looked up and glared. Most people who knew him were afraid of his glare and he was accustomed to seeing people wither when they received one of his cold stares. But Miss Nightingale was no witherer and anyway she was staring at Dirk's feet rather his face. Not even Dirk had managed to master the art of making his slightly grubby feet look menacing.

'A good scrubbing,' said Miss Nightingale, in another of her whispers. 'That's what he needs.'

Mrs Peterborough repeated this, for the unintentional benefit and amusement of those members of the audience who hadn't had heard it the first time. Even Mrs Caldicot sometimes found this curious facility of use. If she ever missed something said by Miss Nightingale all she had to do was wait for the instant repeat from Mrs Peterborough.

'This is supposed to be an advanced Grade IV class,' began Dirk. 'How many of you have martial arts experience?'

There was a long silence.

'The former Mrs Livingstone and I were going to watch a Bruce Lee movie once,' said Mr Livingstone. 'But I couldn't find anywhere to park and so we went for a curry instead.'

'Have any of you studied karate?' asked Dirk, rather exasperated.

'I got as far as Calcutta in the war,' said Mr Roxdale. 'But I don't think we ever went to Karachi.' He stopped and scratched his nose. 'Was there anywhere called Karachi then?' He looked around. No one had the foggiest idea what he was talking about. 'They keep changing the names of places,' he explained.

'If there was no such place as Karachi then where did all the people who live there now think they were living?' asked Mr Livingstone. 'They can't have just been sitting around waiting for someone to give their town a name.'

'Oh they probably could,' said Mr Roxdale. 'If their council was anything like ours.'

'That's true,' agreed Mr Livingstone.

Dirk raised his voice. 'Has anyone studied self-defence?' he demanded. He was losing his temper and he knew that he shouldn't. His hands and feet were trained to kill. He made a powerful effort to remain calm.

Everyone stared at him. No one said anything. The silence was deafening. Mrs Caldicot, who was standing near the door leant towards Mrs Roberts, who was standing next to her. 'I'm beginning to feel sorry for him,' she said. 'I expect he thinks he's good looking.'

'Too young, too good looking and too full of himself for me,' said Mrs Roberts. 'His sort run off and break your heart. I prefer the more mature man myself.'

'He thinks he can do what he likes with our lot,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I really ought to tell him not to be so cocky.'

'He's no match for them,' agreed Mrs Roberts.

'It'll end in tears,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'You mark my words.'

Dirk, who had not heard any of this exchange, sighed wearily. He only ran these classes to try to raise the money to go to Japan to study under the great masters. He wondered if any of them had ever had to go through this sort of humiliation. He was bored.

'Then I'll assume no one knows anything and we'll start from the beginning,' he said. He looked around to see if anyone objected to this. No one did. Either everyone thought that starting at the beginning was a wise move or else no one gave a damn where he started.

'The secret of self-defence is to think quickly, to act decisively and to use whatever weapons are to hand,' he said. 'When it comes to self-defence there are no rules - you are allowed to use reasonable force to protect yourself and your property. Never forget that your primary objective is merely to stop your assailant doing you harm.'

'I don't know how he can stand there without any socks on,' Mr Roxdale said to Mr Williams. 'My feet would be cold.’

‘Mine too,’ agreed Mr Williams. ‘I feel the cold a lot these days.’ The two men looked at one another. Both were wearing thick worsted suits, woollen shirts, knitted waistcoats and ties.

‘Do you remember when we were young laughing at the old men who always used to wear knitted waistcoats, and thick jackets even when it was boiling hot?’ Mr Roxdale asked Mr Williams.

‘Of course,’ said Mr Williams. He leant back against a large cupboard and a vase on top of the cupboard toppled forward. Dirk, spotting the falling object, leapt forwards and caught the vase neatly.

‘That was very impressive,’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘He’s certainly got good reactions.’

‘Damned him,’ muttered Mrs Caldicot. ‘I hate that vase. I wish it had smashed.’

‘Well, look at us. We’ve become those old men,’ said Mr Roxdale.

‘Do you mind?’ asked Mr Williams.

Mr Roxdale thought about this for a while. ‘No. At least I now know that I won’t die at 17 in a motorbike accident. I like being old. I know I’ve had my fair share of life. I’m 76 I think. From here on in every day is a bonus. I enjoy every day like I’ve won it in the lottery.’

Dirk was beginning to wish he’d stayed in bed. His girlfriend hadn’t wanted him to go. She’s asked him to ring the council and tell them he was ill. But he didn’t think that saying he was ill was a very good idea for someone who was supposed to be young, healthy and super-fit. ‘I need a volunteer,’ he said.

‘I think it’s time we’d toddled off,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘I can see what’s coming and I don’t think I can bear to watch. He seems quite a nice boy in a simple sort of way and I don’t want to see what is going to happen.’ She and Mrs Roberts oozed away quietly.

‘I’m not volunteering for anything,’ said Miss Nightingale. She paused and added. ‘I don’t like the look of those feet.’

‘I won’t hurt anyone,’ Dirk assured them all, in quiet desperation. ‘I just need someone to volunteer so that I can demonstrate what I’m talking about.’ He’d never had trouble like this before. He had taught teenagers at the roughest school in town and things hadn’t been this bad. The PE teachers had asked him to let two of them stay in the gym in case things turned nasty. But he’d turned the offer down. The kids had been like putty. He’d shown them how to take a knife away from someone and they’d followed his every move with eyes eager for learning. Students who never listened when being taught history or maths had given him their whole attention. He’d taught policemen and young mothers too; his classes had always gone down well.

‘Why didn’t he bring his own volunteer?’ asked Mr Livingstone of no one in particular. ‘He’s getting paid for this isn’t he?’ ‘I’ll volunteer,’ said Maple Merivale, unexpectedly rescuing Dirk from the embarrassment of having to demonstrate his deathly skills on an embroidered cushion.

‘Right. Splendid,’ said Dirk, immensely relieved. ‘I’m going to mug you and I want you to stop me. Remember: you do whatever you can to try to protect yourself. I will then show you where you’ve gone wrong and how you should do it.’

‘Why did you do that?’ asked Mrs Merivale’s startled husband.

‘Because I felt sorry for him,’ Mrs Merivale replied. She had not heard anything he’d said. ‘He looked so sad.’

‘Come here then please, dear,’ said Dirk. This immediately annoyed Mr Merivale who did not like to hear his wife ordered about. He had, in any case, already taken a strong dislike to Dirk, whom he regarded as a jumped up little twerp. He was an ex-army man who had spent much of the Second World War crouching in soggy bits of jungle being hunted by Japanese soldiers. In addition, he did not have much affection for men who wore ponytails.

Gingerly, Mrs Merivale stepped forwards until she was standing right in the middle of the room. Dirk stepped forward too, so that they were standing just a couple of feet apart.

‘Now. Imagine that I’m a mugger,’ he told her.

Mrs Merivale stared at him but did not move. She was, to be honest, rather confused. She had thought they were having a class in flower arranging.

‘Give me your purse!’ said the instructor, advancing upon Mrs Merivale with his arm upraised, as though he was holding a knife. He paused, and waited, hoping that Mrs Merivale would make a lunge at him. His teaching programme could not go forward until she made a move.

‘No!’ said the old woman, most indignantly. She was now feeling rather aggrieved. For one thing, she did not understand how the lecturer in flower arranging thought he could get away with stealing her purse in front of all her friends. For another thing, her purse was in their bedroom on the first floor.

Mr Roxdale awoke suddenly from a pleasant doze in which he had dreamt of a field of sunflowers. ‘What’s happening?’ he asked Mr Williams.

‘Dunno,’ said Mr Williams, who wasn’t wearing his spectacles and couldn’t see much of anything without them. He turned to Mr Merivale, who was standing next to him. ‘What’s happening?’

‘The sissy bloke with the ponytail seems to have gone stark raving bonkers.’ explained Mr Merivale, rather excited. ‘I think he’s got a knife. He’s trying to mug my wife! He wants her purse.’ ‘Oh I say,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘We can’t have that, can we?’ He stood up. ‘I must say I’m surprised that Mrs Caldicot let him in,’ he said. He made a fist and stuck out his chin, ready to defend his friend’s wife.

‘Oh no, it’s all right,’ said Mr Merivale. ‘She’s sorted him out.’

‘Good for her!’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘Great stuff.’

‘No one messes with my wife,’ said Mr Merivale proudly.

Chapter 34

Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts were in the office, having a nice cup of tea and working their way through a new packet of Garibaldi biscuits when they heard a commotion in the lounge. There was a yell, a crash, a scream, another crash and then, in the comparative silence that followed, the sound of someone crying.

'Did you hear that?' asked Mrs Roberts.

'I did,' admitted Mrs Caldicot. She took another biscuit out of the packet and slipped it, whole, into her mouth.

'I hope they haven't hurt him too badly.'

'We'd better go and have a look,' said Mrs Caldicot.

They found Dirk in the middle of the lounge. He was kneeling on the floor, holding his groin with his left hand and his head with his right hand. He was as pale as snow and clearly in pain. 'Oh dear,' said Mrs Caldicot, stooping down beside him. 'Are you all right, love?'

'No!' complained Dirk, in between sobs. 'They attacked me.'

'Who did?'

'I don't know,' confessed Dirk, miserably. 'It was all over too quickly. It wasn't fair.'

The class stood around Dirk and there was clearly little sympathy for the wounded young man.

'What happened?' asked Mrs Caldicot sternly.

'He tried to mug my wife,' said Mr Merivale.

'I think he had some sort of fit,' explained Mr Roxdale. 'We had to subdue him.'

'It was only a demonstration!' sobbed Dirk. 'I wasn't going to hurt her. I was only pretending.'

'You had a knife!' said Mr Williams. 'And it looked very realistic to me.'

'I only pretended to have a pretend knife,' protested Dirk. He started to sob again. Most of the residents, feeling embarrassed, looked away. Mr Roxdale took out his penknife and started to carve at his fingernails.

'The police shoot people who have pretend guns,' Mr Williams pointed out.

'But I didn't even have a pretend knife,' insisted Dirk, tears rolling down his cheeks. 'It was only an imaginary knife.'

'Well I do think that if you're going to have a pretend knife it should be a real pretend knife,' said Mr Roxdale. 'An imaginary pretend knife is a bit confusing. At least, with a pretend knife we might have had an opportunity to realise that it was a fake.'

'What happened?' asked Mrs Caldicot, with a sigh.

'I kicked him in the goalmouth,' said Mrs Merivale. 'I think that's what it's called.'

'I think you probably mean you kicked him in the goolies,' Mrs Caldicot corrected her.

'I hit him on the head with a vase,' said Miss Nightingale. 'I've seen people do that on the television,' she added, rather proudly.

'It was quite satisfying,' said Miss Nightingale. 'Though I'm afraid the vase broke,' she added, looking apologetically at Mrs Caldicot.

'That's all right, Miss Nightingale,' said Mrs Caldicot reassuringly.

'We were going to save her but they were too quick for us,' claimed Mr Roxdale, slightly aggrieved. 'Mr Williams and I. And Mr Merivale.' He pointed at Dirk with a trembling finger. 'He was attacking Mrs Merivale.'

'He told us that if we are attacked we should use whatever we can to protect ourselves,' explained Mr Williams.

'Those quick thinking ladies probably saved his life,' said Mr Merivale. 'I was going to hit him.' He moved his arm back but the years had not been kind to him and the joint was stiff. It took him a long time to move his fist just a few inches. He would, in truth, have had difficulty in hitting a statue. 'It's an old jousting injury,' explained Mrs Merivale to Mr Roxdale. Mr Roxdale thought this odd but Mrs Merivale was being quite accurate.

'I think I'm dying,' complained Dirk, still pale and still on his hands and knees. 'They've killed me. Call the council, a lawyer, the police, and an ambulance.' Mrs Caldicot bent down and examined his skull. She bent further, as though to examine the other injured area. Dirk pushed her hand away and glowered at her.

'Not too bad, then,' said Mrs Caldicot. She stood up. 'I'm glad you're teaching them how to look after themselves so successfully,' she added. She was clearly not terribly impressed with his injuries. She swept past the kneeling man into the lounge and beamed when she saw bits of the vase she hated so much lying on the floor.

'Perhaps we can have it repaired,' said Miss Nightingale, who had trotted along behind her.

Mrs Caldicot looked at the vase, now in several hundred pieces. She thought it looked much better that way. 'Oh, I don't think so,' she said quickly.

'I'll get the dustpan and brush,' said Mrs Roberts.

‘What about my ambulance?’ demanded Dirk. ‘And my lawyer. And the police.’ He paused, gently rubbing his head and examining his hand occasionally to check for blood. He looked up, still not quite sure what had happened to him. ‘And, whatever else it was I wanted,’ he added, rather miserably. He looked around, his gaze settling finally on Mrs Caldicot. ‘I’m going to sue you,’ he threatened.

‘Oh I don’t think that would be a terribly good idea,’ said Mrs Caldicot. She turned to Mrs Roberts. ‘Can you imagine the headlines, Mrs Roberts?’

‘Martial Arts Expert Flattened By Old Lady,’ said Mrs Roberts instantly. She wrote the words in the air with a forefinger.

‘Dirk Crushed By Pensioner,’ suggested Mrs Caldicot.

‘Frail Octogenarian Fells Karate Kid With One Blow,’ offered Mrs Roberts.

‘If I were you I’d settle for a cup of tea,’ said Mr Roxdale to Dirk.

Dirk held his head and began to cry again. ‘I want to go home,’ he said. ‘I want my mum.’

Mrs Caldicot rang for a taxi and sent him home to his mother. They never saw him again.

Chapter 35

After dinner that evening, Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts were sitting in the kitchen sorting through the thick pile of bills which had accumulated.

'Shall we sort them by date?' asked Mrs Roberts.

'Why?'

'Then we can pay the oldest ones first.'

'I suppose that sounds fair,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. 'But maybe we should pay the ones who are threatening to take us to court.'

'Oh no, I don't think we should let people bully us,' said Mrs Roberts. 'Just because we owe them money.'

'No, you're absolutely right,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. She sighed. 'I once met a woman who had a very sound approach to this business of paying bills. She had a very simple technique.'

'What was that?'

'She just didn't pay any. She said it saved her fortune.'

'But they send you to prison if you don't pay your bills.'

'I know,' sighed Mrs Caldicot.

'You realise that you could very easily solve all your financial problems,' said Mrs Roberts.

Mrs Caldicot looked at her.

'By letting Mr Williams give you one or two of his photographs,' explained Mrs Roberts.

'I know,' sighed Mrs Caldicot. 'It is very tempting,' she admitted. 'But I can't. It isn't fair.'

'Mr Williams doesn't mind,' Mrs Roberts pointed out. 'He'll be happy to give you a handful of photographs. It wouldn't cost him anything at all and it would solve all our problems.'

'But it wouldn't be right,' insisted Mrs Caldicot. 'Taking photographs from Mr Williams would be like taking charity.'

'Lots of homes in our sort of position are charities!' Mrs Roberts pointed out.

'I know,' agreed Mrs Caldicot, with yet another sigh. She found it difficult to explain to Mrs Roberts or, indeed, to herself. 'You're absolutely right. But I can't avoid the thought that to let him solve all our financial problems would be sort of cheating. We wouldn't have solved anything permanently.'

'Nothing is permanent,' said Mrs Roberts. 'And a fistful of Mr Williams' photographs would be as damned near a permanent solution to our financial problems as we're likely to get.'

'But we wouldn't be doing it ourselves,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'When we first opened this place I felt really proud. It was the first time in my life that I'd ever done anything by myself. Mr Caldicot always used to tell me that I couldn't do anything - except perhaps help out in the local charity shop - and I believed him.'

'Then at least give yourself a chance by charging proper fees,' said Mrs Roberts. 'I don't think anyone staying here pays proper residential home fees. For example, how much do Mr and Mrs Merivale pay?'

Mrs Caldicot looked at her but didn't say anything.

'Come on, how much?' insisted Mrs Roberts.

'Mrs Merivale gave me £5 when they arrived,' admitted Mrs Caldicot sheepishly.

'For the two of them?'

Mrs Caldicot nodded.

Mrs Roberts smiled and shook her head.

'But they're helping out in the kitchen,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'And without Mrs Merivale we'd have to hire a cook.'

There was a loud crash from the hall outside.

'What on earth was that?' asked Mrs Roberts.

Mrs Caldicot shrugged.

There was another, equally loud crash.

'I suppose I'd better go and have a look,' said Mrs Caldicot. She got up, walked across the room and opened the door to the hallway. Miss Nightingale had a swede in her left hand and was clearly preparing to roll it at something. Mrs Caldicot looked down the hall. A row of seven large, gnarled carrots were standing like skittles just inside the front door. Two carrots were lying on the mat. The carrots had all had their bottoms chopped off neatly so that they would stand up. Mr Roxdale seemed to be in charge of replacing fallen skittles.

'What on earth are you doing?' demanded Mrs Caldicot.

'We're playing skittles,' answered Miss Nightingale, as though surprised that Mrs Caldicot needed to ask. `I have to roll this swede down the hallway and knock over as many carrots as I can. We have three goes each. And then it's someone else's turn.'

'Ah,' said Mrs Caldicot. She suddenly noticed that Mr Williams was standing facing the wall. He looked like a naughty schoolboy being punished.

'Hello, Mr Williams!' she said. 'It's good to see you up and about. How are you feeling?'

'Very well, thank you, Mrs Caldicot,' replied the photographer.

'Is everything...er...all right?' she asked him. 'Are you joining in...not finding everything too boisterous?'

'No, no, everything is fine,' Mr Williams reassured her. 'I was just admiring your wallpaper.'

'I'm afraid it's rather old,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Very old,' agreed Mr Williams. 'But very lovely. So are the curtains and, indeed, the furniture.'

'I like them very much, though I suspect that they're not everyone's cup of tea,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'The whole place needs redecorating. And we need some new furniture.' She shrugged. 'But that will all have to wait.' She looked around and then lowered her voice. 'And I have to admit that I do like this old stuff,' she confessed.

'I think you should leave it all alone,' said Mr Williams. 'I think the place is beautiful. In fact, I've never seen anywhere quite so beautiful in my life. Promise me you won't have any of these things changed?'

Mrs Caldicot promised, smiled at him and headed back down the corridor towards her office. Once inside she closed the door and went back to the chair behind her desk. Outside in the hall there was a thud.

'What are they doing?' asked Mrs Roberts.

'They're rolling a swede along the carpet and trying to knock down some carrots,' replied Mrs Caldicot.

'Oh,' said Mrs Roberts. 'Well, I suppose it keeps them out of mischief.'

'What exactly would you describe as mischief?' Mrs Caldicot asked her.

Mrs Roberts thought for a moment and then shrugged.

There was another crash.

'Do you find these bills as boring as I do?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'I do.'

'The game they were playing looked quite good fun,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'This finance stuff is unspeakably dull,' said Mrs Roberts.

'I hate it,' agreed Mrs Caldicot.

There was another dull thud, then a crash, followed by whoops of joy.

'It does sound very good fun.' said Mrs Roberts.

'Come on, then,' said Mrs Caldicot. They got up and walked over to the door. Mrs Roberts opened it.

'Can you squeeze in another two players?' Mrs Caldicot asked.

The response was a huge cheer.

Chapter 36

It was raining again. The heavens seemed to have decided that they had surplus rain which they were anxious to get rid of before it passed its sell by date. The cast iron drainpipes and gutters at the Twilight Years Rest Home were gurgling greedily and the puddles in the front drive were filling up nicely.

At 7.30 p.m. sharp that evening a car splashed through the puddles and stopped at the bottom of the steps up to the front door. The driver adjusted the position of his car to make sure that his passenger would be able to enter the vehicle without getting too wet, then jumped out and bounded up the steps.

Mrs Roberts answered the door and smiled when she saw who it was. Jenkins had, she knew, called to take Mrs Caldicot out to dinner and the theatre.

'Hello, Jenkins,' she greeted him. 'Mrs Caldicot won't be a moment.'

Mrs Roberts liked Jenkins and very much approved of Mrs Caldicot's blooming romance. Technically, the two women were employer and employee but in reality they were more like two sisters. There was a more than twenty year age gap between the two women but neither of them was ever conscious of this.

'Would you like a cup of tea while you wait?' Mrs Roberts asked the visitor, closing the front door behind him and shutting out the storm. 'Or a coffee perhaps?' The Twilight Years Rest Home may have been a large building but it was, as always, warm and cosy inside.

Jenkins, who had been about to speak, stopped and dodged out of the way as a pair of rolled up socks bounced off the wall, just missed his head and landed on the carpet.

'Sorry about that!' apologised Mr Roxdale, rushing out of the lounge door, darting down the hall and picking up the ball of rolled up socks. 'Didn't know you were there.' He disappeared as suddenly as he had appeared.

'Cricket?' asked Jenkins, when Mr Roxdale had gone.

'Rounders, I think,' replied Mrs Roberts.

Jenkins looked slightly surprised. 'How long is she going to be?' he asked her.

'Oh not more than a few minutes,' promised Mrs Roberts. 'She was nearly ready when I last saw her.'

'I'm ready now,' said a voice half way down the stairs. Mrs Roberts and Jenkins both turned. For a moment neither of them spoke.

'You look fantastic!' said Jenkins eventually, his voice soft but full of genuine affection and admiration. 'Absolutely fantastic.'

Mrs Caldicot continued her journey down the stairs. She was wearing a tight fitting, low cut scarlet silk dress and had a tiny black cape slung around her shoulders. She was carrying a small black clutch bag. She looked good.

'I think these shoes are a bit high for me,' she confessed, wobbling a little as she stepped down into the hall. Jenkins strode forwards and took her hand. 'But I decided, what the hell, I'd rather fall over trying to look stylish than stomp around safely in a pair of flat heels.'

'And besides, with my bum I'm not likely to hurt myself if I fall down am I?' Mrs Caldicot thought to herself. The late and unlamented Mr Caldicot would have said it and not even noticed her embarrassment, shame and sadness. The very much alive Jenkins would not, she firmly believed, even think such a thing.

'You look absolutely wonderful!' Mrs Roberts told her.

Mrs Caldicot smiled at her gratefully. Suddenly there was a commotion and Mr Roxdale shot out of the lounge, clearly having been pushed out into the hall by unseen hands.

'I'm sorry to bother you,' he said, addressing both Mrs Caldicot and Jenkins. 'But are you going into town?'

'We are,' answered Mrs Caldicot. 'Jenkins is very kindly taking me out to dinner.'

'The thing is,' started Mr Roxdale, clearly rather uncomfortable about what he was about to say, 'I wouldn't ask but it's a bit special, you see.'

'What's special?' asked Mrs Caldicot patiently and kindly.

'Mr Williams just noticed that the local cinema is having a Marx Brothers evening. They're showing both Duck Soup and A Night at the Opera. But it's a one night show - tonight only.'

'And you want to go?' said Mrs Caldicot.

'The problem is, you see, that if we try and get a taxi the first film will be half over by the time we get there. We wondered...'

'If we would take you?'

'Exactly!' said Mr Roxdale. 'We'll make our own way back, of course. There's a taxi rank right outside the cinema so getting back won't be a problem.'

Mrs Caldicot looked at Jenkins and raised an eyebrow.

‘It’s fine by me,’ said Jenkins, with a slight shrug.

Mrs Caldicot took and squeezed Jenkins’s hand before turning back to Mr Roxdale. ‘How many of you are there?’ Mrs Caldicot asked him.

‘Mr Williams, Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale,’ replied Mr Roxdale, hoping that if he spoke quickly it would sound as though there were fewer of them than there were. ‘And me, of course.’

‘That’s four of you!’ said Mrs Caldicot, horrified. ‘We can’t possibly fit you all in.’

‘We’ll cram together in the back seat,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘You won’t even know we’re there,’ he promised. He grinned, unconvincingly.

Mrs Caldicot looked at Jenkins, who said nothing. ‘Get your coats then,’ said Mrs Caldicot with a sigh.

The front door was open and the six of them were all either on the steps or in the porch when a rather red-faced Mrs Merivale, huffing and puffing a little, appeared in the hallway.

‘Mrs Caldicot!’ she called. ‘We’re nearly out of toilet rolls. If by any chance you go past the supermarket would you pick some up, please?’

Chapter 37

‘Do you mind stopping here, for a moment?’ asked Mrs Caldicot, as they approached a supermarket.

Jenkins, surprised, turned his head slightly, and looked at her quizzically.

‘Loo rolls,’ explained Mrs Caldicot. ‘I need to buy some loo rolls.’

‘I’m sure they’ll have a supply at the restaurant,’ said Jenkins. ‘I really don’t think they’ll expect us to bring our own.’

‘Mrs Merivale caught me just as I was coming out,’ explained Mrs Caldicot. ‘We’re apparently running rather low.’ She smiled at him and shrugged as though to say: ‘This really isn’t my fault but what can I do?’

‘Right,’ agreed Jenkins. He slowed, indicated and turned right into the supermarket car park. As he did so he noticed that an old man had built a rough, temporary shelter on the traffic island, using nothing more substantial than a large, old cardboard box over which he had draped several pieces of threadbare and clearly unwanted carpet. The box was almost invisible, half hidden between the bushes with which the local council’s gardening department had chosen to decorate the island. Jenkins tried to get another look at the old man in his rear view mirror but there were too many heads and bodies piled into the back seat of the car for him to see much through the back window.

The rain was now hammering down and the old man had been huddled inside his cardboard box. He looked cold, weary and very, very lonely. No one else seemed to have noticed the cardboard box or the old man and Jenkins found himself wondering whether he had really seen the old man or whether the whole vision had not, perhaps, been nothing more than a mirage.

‘What are we doing?’ demanded a voice from the back seat. Mr Roxdale tried to move forwards so that he could look through the windscreen. Unfortunately, his success in completing this simple manoeuvre was limited by the presence of Mrs Peterborough, perched on his lap. ‘Is this the way to the cinema?’ he asked, looking around.

Mrs Caldicot explained about Mrs Merivale’s request again. ‘I’ll only be a minute,’ she added. ‘At this time of night there will be hardly anyone in there.’ She turned round. ‘Do we need anything else, apart from loo rolls?’

Mrs Peterborough started to recite a list of things she thought Mrs Caldicot should buy. ‘Broccoli, candles, sardines, paper napkins, treacle, plum tomatoes, chocolate covered digestive biscuits...’

‘Forget all that!’ interrupted Mr Roxdale. ‘We’ll be here all night.’ He paused for a moment, clearly reflecting on something Mrs Peterborough had said. ‘Actually, it might be a rather good idea if you would just get the chocolate covered digestive biscuits,’ he said.

Jenkins parked the car just a few yards from the entrance.

‘Shall I come with you?’ he asked.

‘No thanks,’ replied Mrs Caldicot. ‘I’ll only be a moment.’

She picked up her handbag, climbed out of the car and hurried into the supermarket.

‘Did you see a man on that traffic island we just passed?’ asked Jenkins.

None of the others had.

Two minutes later Mrs Caldicot wheeled her trolley up to an empty check-out counter where a bored looking teenager was examining a chip in her nail varnish.

‘I’d be grateful if you could process these for me fairly quickly,’ said Mrs Caldicot, piling twelve double pack toilet rolls and six packets of chocolate digestive biscuits onto the black rubber conveyor belt.

The girl stared at the pile of toilet rolls with undisguised astonishment.

‘I’ve got a large family,’ explained Mrs Caldicot. ‘And we all like curry.’

The girl just stared at her and then started waving the bar code on each pack of toilet rolls in front of the electronic scanner on her till.

A few moments later, pushing a laden trolley and carrying a considerably lighter purse, Mrs Caldicot emerged back into the early evening gloom and the rain. It now seemed pretty clear that the rain had previously only been practising for it was now coming down so hard and so fast that it seemed inconceivable it could continue at this pace for much longer.

Jenkins jumped out of the car, opened the boot and helped Mrs Caldicot stack away her purchases. When she herself was safely stowed beside him in the front passenger seat he fired up the engine, increased the speed of the windscreen wipers and moved gently away from the supermarket.

If Jenkins hadn’t already spotted the old man and his cardboard box it is doubtful if any of them would have ever noticed him now that the rain was even heavier. Jenkins and Mrs Caldicot were both peering through the windscreen, trying to check the road in front of them.

It was Jenkins who again saw the old man, and the youths who had appeared as though from nowhere and who were now surrounding him.

'Look!' he shouted, excitedly. Everyone looked.

'On the traffic island,' Jenkins told them.

The old man was still crouched inside his carpet sheathed cardboard box. But he was no longer alone. A group of marauding youths, who clearly had been and still were drinking, were dancing around the old man's small and temporary encampment. They all had shaved heads and, despite the weather, wore only dirty singlets and jeans. They were laughing and sneering and clearly having great fun kicking the old man's few possessions off the island and into the road. One of them found a plastic bag, filled with bits and pieces of a lonely, itinerant life, and spread the contents of the bag with a single kick. Another climbed up on top of the old man's cardboard box, his fragile home, and started to jump up and down. The box, never strong but now weakened by the heavy and incessant rain, gave way instantly. As the box collapsed the other youths started kicking. When the old man tried to crawl out to safety they deliberately aimed their boots at his head, body and legs. He tried, in vain, to defend himself with his hands and arms.

The six in the car never agreed on the number of youths who were responsible for the attack. Jenkins, Mr Williams and Mrs Caldicot thought there were five. Mr Roxdale felt sure that there were six. Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough were both quite insistent that there were at least fifteen. The old man who was the victim of the attack had absolutely no idea who his attackers were, or how many of them there might have been.

As soon as he saw what was happening Jenkins slowed right down and looked for somewhere to park. There wasn't anywhere suitable and so, after having driven twice around the traffic island, he simply drove up onto the grass and parked with his nearside wheels on the road and his offside wheels, and the bulk of the vehicle, on the island. Followed by the others, and not having the faintest idea what he was going to do, Jenkins leapt out of the car.

The youths were so intent on having their fun with the old man that it wasn't until Jenkins's car was parked on the traffic island that they even noticed its presence. The first youth to notice shouted out to call his mates' attention to the newcomers. They stopped what they were doing and just stared. They were clearly astonished; frozen not by fear but by puzzlement. They considered themselves to be hard men and they were used to seeing people run away from them. When they walked through town in broad daylight it was their experience that everyone - old people, young people, women with prams, men in suits - would all cross the road to get out of their way and avoid confrontation and conflict. When they saw the ages of the people getting out of the car they had hardly been able to believe their eyes.

To everyone's surprise it was Mrs Peterborough who struck the first blow. She was, as usual, carrying her handbag, a large, capacious and heavy item which weighed so much that Mr Livingstone had once hazarded the opinion the bag must, at the very least, contain half a dozen house bricks.

She walked straight across the grass, seemingly undeterred by fear, swung the bag by its handle and caught the nearest youth on the head. Knocked off balance, and screaming with both fear and rage, he fell into the nearest bush. His comrades were clearly both startled and disorganised by the viciousness of her attack.

While they were still staring, open mouthed at Mrs Peterborough and her well swung handbag, the youths were subject to yet more unexpected attacks. First, Mr Williams knocked one of the youths flat with an extremely creditable right hook which seemed to come out of nowhere. This blow landed on its target with extraordinary accuracy and, for Mr Williams, a very satisfying `crack'. Mr Roxdale completed the insult by walloping the fallen hooligan with a rubber traffic cone he had found in the bushes. And then Jenkins incapacitated two of the aggressors by literally banging their heads together in the way of a school-master dealing with two badly behaved infants. The two youths whose skulls had been ill served in this traditional but demeaning way, fell to the ground with astonishing grace and lay, temporarily unconscious, among several cotoneaster bushes.

Moments later the battle was over. The defeated bullies, whimpering and threatening to report the incident to their fathers and the constabulary, limped away into the darkness. Before they had disappeared from view Jenkins had taken out his mobile telephone and telephoned for the emergency services.

'Are you all right?' Mrs Caldicot asked, kneeling beside the terrified looking gentleman who had been the victim of the original, unprovoked attack.

'I'm not entirely sure,' confessed the stranger. To Mrs Caldicot's surprise, he spoke with an educated accent. He crawled out of his cardboard box, looked around and then stood up. Not unsurprisingly, he looked slightly bewildered by what had happened. His head was bruised and he was bleeding from his nose and mouth. Mrs Caldicot stood up too, and brushed the mud and grass from her knees.

'I think we'd better get you to the hospital,' said Mrs Caldicot, taking a clean handkerchief out of her handbag and dabbing at the blood on the stranger's nose. 'Should you be standing? Do you think you've got any broken bones?'

'I'm afraid I really don't know,' the man admitted. He touched one arm with the other and winced then he looked around again. 'Have they gone?' he asked, nervously. He spoke quietly, diffidently.

‘Yes,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘You’re safe now.’ She introduced herself and explained that she and her friends had just been passing when they had spotted him being attacked. She looked round as Jenkins approached.

‘I’ve telephoned for an ambulance,’ said Jenkins, quietly. ‘There should be one here in a few minutes. I asked for the police to come too.’ He looked at the stranger. ‘Why don’t you get into the car?’ he said. ‘You’ll be more comfortable there.’ He walked across to his car and opened the front passenger door.

‘Don’t like to presume on your kindness yet more, but I don’t suppose you have such a thing as a blanket, do you?’ asked the stranger.

‘Are you cold?’ asked Jenkins.

‘No, no,’ said the man. ‘But as you can see I’m awfully grubby...and I’m bleeding too. Your car...,’ he pointed to the smart, new upholstery of Jenkins’s car. He wouldn’t get into the car until Jenkins had found a rug from the boot and had draped it over the front passenger seat.

‘Perhaps we should move away while we wait for the ambulance,’ said Mrs Caldicot, when the man they’d rescued was settled in the car. She lowered her voice. ‘Do you think those youths will come back?’

‘No!’ replied Jenkins without hesitation.

‘But they might come back with their fathers - or the police,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘They said they would.’

Jenkins laughed. ‘Don’t worry,’ he assured her. ‘They’re bullies. They’ll be far too embarrassed to tell anyone that they’ve been beaten up by a bunch of old aged pensioners.’

Mrs Caldicot looked at him and slowly she smiled too. ‘Do you know, I think you’re right,’ she said. She felt more comfortable then.

They waited on the traffic island for twenty minutes but neither ambulance nor police car came.

‘This is daft,’ said Jenkins at last. ‘Where’s the nearest hospital.’

‘It’s no more than five or ten minutes from here,’ replied Mrs Caldicot.

‘OK,’ said Jenkins. ‘Let’s drive there. Can you all get into the back seat?’

They tried but even four people in the back had been a tight squeeze. It was impossible for five people to fit in.

‘Why don’t Mr Williams and I sit in the boot with the loo rolls?’ asked Mr Roxdale. ‘We’ll leave the lid up and you drive slowly.’

And that is what they did.

Chapter 38

It took the hospital just four hours to find a doctor. It took another two hours for the doctor, who looked about sixteen and spoke some words of English quite well to examine the battered tramp, clean him up and stitch up his wounds. He was aided in this by a grumpy nurse with baggy two-way stretch elastic stockings and a deaf auxiliary with a facial tick. Jenkins, Mrs Caldicot and the rest of the party sat in the waiting area, soaking, dripping and steaming, and waited.

'Why don't you all go on to the cinema,' said Mrs Caldicot to Mr Roxdale, Mr Williams, Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale. 'There's no need for us all to wait.' She looked around and sighed. The casualty department looked as though it had been built, painted and equipped a long, long time ago. The floor was covered with thin carpet tiles which were curling at the edges and heavily stained. The walls had been painted once but the paint had been peeling off for years. A false ceiling had been created with the aid of white polystyrene tiles but roughly a third of the tiles had fallen down, revealing dusty ceiling spaces and bits of weary looking wiring.

'There's no need for any of us to wait,' Mr Roxdale, pointed out, accurately.

'But we'd like to,' said Mr Williams. 'We want to know that he's OK.'

'We can give him moral support,' said Mr Roxdale. 'Spiritual comfort. When you're not well it's nice to know that you've got friends nearby.' He looked around and blushed, as though rather embarrassed by this confession.

'Besides,' said Miss Nightingale. 'It's very nice here. We're having a lovely time.'

Mrs Peterborough nodded. 'Very nice,' she agreed, looking around.

And so they all sat. And they waited.

It was well after midnight when a large, well-starched nurse walked up to their end of the casualty department. 'Are you Peter,' she looked down at her clipboard before continuing, 'Peter Twist?'

Everyone stared at her. No one spoke.

'Peter Twist?' she repeated, lowering her clipboard and looking sternly at them all, one at a time. Mrs Caldicot, who neither liked nor trusted people with clipboards, felt intimidated and shrank down and tried to disappear into her plastic seat. She was tired. It seemed to her that she spent all her life fighting nasty, cruel people. At that moment she felt that she'd had enough. She wanted to hide in a corner and cry.

'Are you asking us if any of us are called Peter Twist? Or are you asking us if that is the name of the gentleman we brought in?' asked Jenkins.

Mrs Caldicot turned and looked. She felt full of admiration for him.

The starched nurse turned her glare onto Jenkins. 'Peter Twist is the name of the tramp you brought in.'

'Right,' said Jenkins. 'Thank you. Good. We didn't know that.'

'You brought someone in but you don't know his name?' the nurse demanded, incredulous.

'That's right,' replied Jenkins.

The nurse snorted rather contemptuously.

'We found the poor fellow on a traffic island,' explained Jenkins. He spoke slowly and patiently, as though he was speaking to someone of rather limited intelligence. 'He was being attacked at the time by a gang of youths. I'm afraid that there simply wasn't time for proper introductions.' He paused, reached into his pocket and took out his spectacle case. He opened the case, took out his half-moon spectacles and put them on. He then peered over the top of them at the nurse. 'What's your name?' he demanded.

'So, if you just found him on a traffic island, why are you all sitting here waiting for him?' demanded the nurse, still suspicious but far less arrogant.

'We wanted to make sure that he was all right,' explained Jenkins. 'And your name is?' With his right hand he took a small green notebook from his outside jacket pocket. With his left hand he took a slim gold pen from his inside breast pocket.

The nurse snorted and stepped backwards, as though she felt under threat. She told him his name.

Jenkins opened his notebook and wrote in it. Holding the notebook and pen in his left hand he then used his other hand to reach into a trouser pocket and pull out his leather wallet. He opened the wallet, took out one of his visiting cards and handed it to the nurse.

'My name is Jenkins,' he said. 'As you will see from the card.' The nurse examined the card, studied the name of the newspaper Jenkins represented, licked her lips and swallowed rather noisily.

'Anyway. Er...we've finished with him. We've looked after him very well. You can take him now,' the nurse said.

'Take him where?' enquired Jenkins.

The nurse seemed puzzled by this. 'Wherever you like,' she replied. 'Back to the traffic island I suppose.'

Jenkins just stared at her over the top of his half-moon spectacles.

'We don't have any beds,' she explained. 'None at all.'

'It's all right,' whispered Mrs Caldicot to Jenkins. 'I can find him a bed.'

Jenkins turned to her. 'Are you sure?'

Mrs Caldicot nodded. 'I'd rather,' she said. 'We can look after him.' She looked around and shuddered. 'I wouldn't want to leave him here,' she whispered.

Jenkins turned his attention back to the nurse, who was standing waiting. 'What would you do with him if we hadn't waited?' he asked her. He looked around the waiting area and then around the remainder of the casualty department. 'I have to tell you that I think this hospital is a disgrace. It's filthy dirty and quite disorganised. Even if you had a bed available I would be unhappy about Mr Twist staying here.'

The once pompous nurse now seemed thoroughly deflated as well as defeated. She appeared, Mrs Caldicot thought, to have shrunk several sizes while standing before them. The woman who had filled the room, her ego steam-rollering all before it, now stood before them looking more like a penitent child, anxious to know what was going to happen to her.

'I suppose we'd, er, arrange for him to be found a bed somewhere,' she admitted.

'Of course you would,' agreed Jenkins, calmly and appreciatively. 'You aren't complete barbarians, are you?'

'No,' said the nurse. 'Thank you. No, of course not.' Mrs Caldicot half expected her to curtsey. But she didn't.

'Well, as I said, I don't think I would be entirely happy about Mr Twist staying here with you,' said Jenkins, examining the nurse over the top of his spectacles. 'And my dear friend Mrs Caldicot here has very generously offered to find Mr Twist a bed for the night.'

'Oh,' said the nurse. She sounded relieved. 'Are you sure?'

'Absolutely sure,' said Jenkins. 'But we will need an ambulance, of course.'

'Of course,' said the nurse, too relieved to argue with this. 'That won't be a problem at all. I can arrange that.'

'And a wheelchair I suspect,'

'We can definitely lend you one of those,' said the nurse. 'Just, er, let us have it back when it's convenient to you...there's no hurry.'

'Good,' said Jenkins, firmly. 'Then let's go and see Mr Twist, and take him home.'

They all stood up.

Mrs Caldicot wanted to cheer but she felt that Jenkins might consider this rather inappropriate so, instead, she simply gave a little silent whoop, smiled at all her friends, took Jenkins' hand and squeezed it. When he squeezed her hand back and turned and smiled at her she felt as though her life was complete.

And as the nurse led them all to the cubicle where Mr Twist was waiting she felt strong again; strong enough to take on an army of clipboard carrying foot-soldiers.

'It's all very dirty, isn't it,' said Miss Nightingale looking around.

'Very dirty,' said Mrs Peterborough.

The nurse, who was leading the way, turned round slightly and Mrs Caldicot could see that she was blushing with embarrassment. But she didn't say a word.

Chapter 39

‘How are you feeling?’ asked Mrs Caldicot. ‘I’ve brought you a cup of tea.’ She was carrying the tea in one hand and a pile of freshly ironed clothes on the other.

The man in the bed blinked and looked around as though not quite sure where he was.

‘Am I dreaming?’ Peter Twist asked.

Mrs Caldicot laughed. ‘No,’ she said. ‘I don’t think so.’ She put the clothes down on the foot of the bed and put the cup of tea down on the bedside table. ‘I hope you take milk?’

Mr Twist stared at her.

‘In your tea.’

‘Oh yes. Thank you.’

‘There are some sugar cubes in the saucer,’ added Mrs Caldicot.

‘Is this your home?’ Mr Twist asked her.

Mrs Caldicot laughed. ‘Well it is in a way, I suppose,’ she agreed. ‘It’s where I live so that makes it home. But it’s what the authorities call ‘a residential home for the elderly’.’

Mr Twist looked around the room he was in. ‘It’s very nice,’ he told her. He looked down at himself. He was wearing freshly laundered striped pyjamas.

‘I hope you don’t mind,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘But I took the liberty of putting your clothes in the washing machine. There was some blood on them.’

Mr Twist seemed embarrassed and went rather red. ‘I’m sorry you had all that trouble,’ he said.

‘Mr Roxdale and Mr Williams undressed you and put you to bed,’ Mrs Caldicot explained. ‘The hospital sent you out wearing one of their silly gowns. Mr Roxdale’s about the same size as you so he lent you a pair of his pyjamas.’

‘That was very kind of him,’ said Mr Twist. He seemed very touched by this simple act of generosity. There were tears in his eyes.

‘Are you all right?’ Mrs Caldicot asked him.

‘It’s all a bit of a shock,’ said Mr Twist quietly. ‘To be honest, I’m not used to people doing things for me. Not kind things anyway.’ He looked down again. ‘I’m afraid I don’t have any money,’ he said. ‘I can’t pay you anything.’

‘Golly!’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘That’s a bit of a disappointment. We only brought you here because we were convinced that you are a millionaire in disguise.’

Mr Twist looked at her uncertainly.

‘A joke,’ mouthed Mrs Caldicot, almost silently. She smiled at him. ‘You can stay here until you feel fit enough to move on,’ she said.

‘I should be OK to travel later today,’ said Mr Twist. He reached up and touched his head. His fingers found the stitches in his forehead and he winced.

‘You won’t be fit enough to travel today,’ Mrs Caldicot insisted. ‘I suggest you get accustomed to the fact that you’re going to be here for at least a week.’

‘But what about the people who run the place,’ said Mr Twist, puzzled. ‘Won’t they be upset?’

‘That won’t be a problem at all,’ promised Mrs Caldicot.

Chapter 40

‘Is this an inconvenient moment?’

Mrs Caldicot, sat behind the desk in her office, looked up. The door to the office was open, as it often was, and a man was standing in the doorway.

‘Hello, Mr Twist!’ she said, genuinely pleased to see him. ‘My word, you do look different!’ He was wearing the same clothes that he had been wearing when he’d been attacked, but both they and he had been thoroughly washed and all parties had benefited from this experience.

‘I feel a lot better,’ said Mr Twist. ‘I just wanted to thank you. And to say that I’m leaving now.’

There was a pause. ‘Do you want to go?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

Mr Twist looked at her and then down at the floor. ‘It’s time I went,’ he said.

‘But why? Do you want to go?’

‘No!’ he said. His voice softened. ‘No, of course I don’t want to go.’

‘You don’t have to go,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘You can stay here for a while.’

‘No,’ said Mr Twist firmly. ‘I’m already in your debt. There is no way I can repay your kindness.’

‘You don’t have to repay anything.’

‘I don’t want to be pitied or helped,’ said Mr Twist.

‘I don’t pity you,’ said Mrs Caldicot. She stood up. ‘I’ll very happily help you if you want me to. But I’m not going to force myself on you.’ She sat down again, but this time on the corner of her desk. ‘How did you end up living in a cardboard box?’

‘Why do you want to know that?’ asked Mr Twist.

‘I want to know how and why a healthy, sane, educated man ends up living in a cardboard box on a traffic island.’

‘Why should I bother to satisfy your curiosity?’ demanded Mr Twist, suspiciously.

‘Payment,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘You said yourself that you owe me for rescuing you. You can pay off the debt simply by talking. Tell me a little about yourself. Why do you live the way you do?’

‘Those are the questions social workers always ask,’ said Mr Twist. ‘How did I end up like this? Why do I live this way? Social workers and policemen. People like that. I never tell them. They wouldn’t understand. They’re a part of what I don’t like - so how could they understand?’

‘They probably ask you so that they can write you up properly in their reports,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘To them you’re an interesting ‘case’. I’m asking because I’m interested in you as a person.’

Mr Twist thought about this for a while. ‘OK.’ he said at last. ‘I’ll tell you if you answer me one question.’

Mrs Caldicot waited.

‘You call everyone here by their surname,’ said Mr Twist. ‘You always address people as Mr this or Miss that.’

‘Yes, of course,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘Why?’ asked Mr Twist. ‘Since I’ve been living rough no one has ever addressed me by my surname. Social workers and policemen always call me Peter. And it’s been the same whenever I’ve been admitted to hospital.’

‘Respect,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘That’s all. It’s just a sign of respect.’ She nodded towards a chair. ‘Why don’t you sit down?’

Mr Twist nodded, but remained standing. ‘It started with a little thing,’ he said after a moment or two. ‘Actually, I can tell you the moment when my life changed,’ he began. He cleared his throat. ‘I went into town one Wednesday to take a book back to the library. That’s all. It was a book about Napoleon. I parked in one of the council car parks and discovered that they’d changed the machine they use to dispense tickets. In the past whenever I left the car park I always handed my ticket over to another motorist if I’d had some time left on it. If I bought a ticket for two hours and finished my errands in forty minutes I would just hand the ticket to someone driving into the car park. It always made me feel good and it always seemed to make them feel good too. They would smile and say ‘thank you’. It was just a little thing. No one lost out because the space has been paid for. But on that Wednesday I found out that the Council had made it illegal to pass a ticket on to another motorist - even if there was time left on it. And to make sure that we all obeyed their new anti-kindness law they’d installed machines - heaven knows how much they cost - into which you had to type your car registration number. The number you typed into the machine was then printed on your ticket and there was a notice saying that it was illegal to use that ticket on any other car.’

‘I’ve seen those machines,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘The local council has just introduced them here.’

‘It made me both sad and angry,’ said Mr Twist. ‘I suppose the council did it because they were desperate to grab every last penny they could but it seemed to me that what they were doing was stamping out any sense of public or community spirit in the town. They were stopping people being nice to one another.’

Mrs Caldicot nodded.

'It wasn't simply that, of course,' said Mr Twist. 'The car park machine was just the last straw. There were lots of things I didn't like about the society we've created. It seemed to me that when I walked down the street everyone seemed aggressive.' He looked down then rubbed at his eyes with his coat sleeve. 'Take one of these,' said Mrs Caldicot, offering him the box of tissues that she kept on her desk.

Mr Twist took a tissue, murmured his thanks, wiped his eyes and held the tissue in his hands. 'Children coming home from school used to have fun and lark about. They don't lark about these days. They're young thugs; terrorising the weak and the elderly. Young mothers - most of whom seem hardly old enough to be out of school - use their prams as battering rams. People are all too aware of their rights and reluctant to accept their responsibilities. Corruption and deceit are spreading down from the top in politics and industry. Our towns are protected not by patrolling policemen, but by cameras which merely record the violence rather than prevent it. A constantly prying government has even turned road safety into a money making venture. Teachers - desperate to win financial bonuses - help their students to cheat. Everyone in public service is there solely for the money. They want - and take - authority, but they don't want responsibility either. All our public services - our hospitals, our roads, our schools - are getting worse. Churches and libraries are closing. Police stations are shutting - leaving people to telephone help lines hundreds or thousands of miles away. Every year we pay far more in taxes and get considerably less in services. Nothing is as good as it was and yet everything costs more. Selfishness is the new mantra. Our freedom and privacy are disappearing fast - all in the false name of security. They say they have to take away our freedom in order to protect our freedom. What lunacy. The two things I see around me most often are fear and anger. Whatever happened to love and hope?'

Mrs Caldicot looked at Mr Twist. There was anger in his eyes but there were tears on his cheeks. She stood up, moved closer to him and took his hand.

'But the thing I like least,' continued Mr Twist, 'is the fact that we have created a society in which people are encouraged to be selfish; to think only of themselves. There is no sense of community anymore.' He paused and wiped a tear from his cheek. He smiled at Mrs Caldicot and cleared his throat. His voice changed slightly. 'Do you know what appeals to me most about this place?' Mrs Caldicot looked at him, thought for a moment, and then shook her head. 'No.'

'It's the sense of community you have created,' he told her. 'The way everyone here helps everyone else. You've created a sort of sixties commune. People here seem to be honest, decent and courteous to one another. You may not realise it but you're living in a spiritual oasis.'

'Without the long hair and free sex,' smiled Mrs Caldicot. 'Go on with your story,' she encouraged him.

Mr Twist blew his nose again and this time stuffed the tissue into his trouser pocket. 'I was incensed that the Council had made it illegal to help people. When I got back to my car I had an hour of time left on my ticket. I stood by the entrance and offered my ticket to other motorists driving in. A car park attendant saw me and told me that what I was doing was against the law. I said I didn't care. So he fetched a policeman. I was arrested and charged with something or other under the Public Order Act.'

'My wife wanted me to plead guilty and explain that I was upset because my father had died a few months earlier. My solicitor said that if I apologised I would get off with a fine. He said he might even be able to get me off without my having to plead guilty. He said that personally he agreed with me but that one couldn't change these things and that no one else really cares so there was no point in standing up and being a martyr.'

'But I insisted on pleading not guilty and taking on the system. I argued that the council didn't have a right to outlaw kindness.' He shrugged and smiled thinly. 'Naturally, I lost. The prosecutor said I and people like me were a threat to the community. I was sentenced to two months in prison. It meant that I had a criminal record. The local paper ran the story on their front page.' He paused and swallowed as he remembered this final indignity. 'They made me look like a mass murderer. They didn't even say what the case was all about. I'd made this great speech in court about our community spirit being destroyed. I'd spent days preparing it. It really seemed important to me. But they didn't report any of that. All they were interested in was the fact that a tax inspector was going to prison.' He looked at Mrs Caldicot. 'That was my job. I was a tax inspector.'

Mrs Caldicot didn't say anything.

'While I was in prison I found that my wife had left me. She started divorce proceedings within days of my being locked up. Her solicitor had effectively had me locked out of the house I'd bought for us. He convinced the divorce court that because I had a criminal record I was dangerous. Before I went to prison, I'd had quite an important job at the Inland Revenue. But they fired me, of course. So I had no job, no wife and no home.'

'Didn't you have friends you could go to for help?'

'I didn't have any friends. I worked for the Inland Revenue.'

'So what happened?'

‘I stayed in a hostel for three months. I applied for lots of jobs but I couldn’t find anyone keen to employ a homeless 63-year-old man with a criminal record.’

‘And so you ended up living in a cardboard box.’

‘Several, actually,’ he smiled. ‘They don’t last long when it rains. I used to get them from a local furniture shop. They had bigger, stronger boxes than anyone else.’

‘Why on a traffic island?’

‘Another tramp I met told me that you were less likely to be attacked or set on fire if you were on a traffic island.’

Mrs Caldicot, moved closer to him, put both her arms around him and hugged him. ‘A few minutes ago I asked you if you really wanted to go,’ said Mrs Caldicot. She let him go and looked at him.

Mr Twist nodded. There were tears rolling down his cheeks.

‘I want to ask you the same question again.’

There was a long, long silence.

‘No,’ he said at last. He spoke so quietly that she could hardly hear him. ‘Of course I don’t.’ He swallowed hard, took out his tissue and wiped his eyes. ‘But I don’t have any money, I can’t pay your bills and I’m not a scrounger. I can imagine how much it must cost to run a place like this. It wouldn’t be fair for me to stay any longer.’ He paused. He seemed embarrassed. ‘You’ve already been very kind to me.’

‘If you stayed you could help us a good deal,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘You could more than earn your keep. You must stay here now.’

‘I couldn’t bear getting happy here and then having to move out in a few months’ time.’

‘If you move in, you won’t have to move out unless you want to,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

Mr Twist looked at her eagerly. ‘I would be happy to do anything you wanted me to do,’ he said. ‘I can wash dishes. Dig the garden.’

‘Mr Merivale washes the dishes and Mr Roxdale has enough people helping him dig the garden,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘When you worked for the Inland Revenue did you learn how to do accounts?’

‘Of course.’ Mr Twist smiled at her. ‘I always wanted to be an accountant,’ he told her. ‘When I was a boy it was my dream. But my parents and the careers teacher at school persuaded me to join the Inland Revenue.’ He smiled thinly. ‘They said that working for the Government was steadier and more respectable work.’

‘I desperately need someone to help me with the accounts,’ said Mrs Caldicot. She reached into one of the trays on her desk, took out a handful of letters and bills and handed them to Mr Twist. ‘Could you sort these out for me?’ she asked.

Mr Twist flicked through the papers. ‘A lot of these are final reminders and demands,’ he said.

‘I know,’ sighed Mrs Caldicot. ‘One of the big problems is that I’m not very good at paperwork. My husband always used to deal with that sort of thing.’

‘Do you have the money to pay these?’

‘That’s the other problem,’ admitted Mrs Caldicot. ‘We do have something of what I believe is called ‘a cash flow problem’.’

‘Ah,’ said Mr Twist, understandingly.

‘I need someone to sort these things out for me,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘And to hold the creditors at bay for a while.’ She lowered her voice. ‘I’d be grateful if you kept this to yourself.’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘Of course,’ said Mr Twist. As she had known he would, he felt more comfortable now that Mrs Caldicot had shared a secret of her own with him.

‘I can do that for you,’ said Mr Twist.

‘Wonderful,’ said Mrs Caldicot with a big smile. ‘Now, I’ll take you into the lounge and introduce you to the guests you haven’t met.’

‘One other thing,’ said Mr Twist, slightly apologetically. ‘You won’t tell anyone what I used to do for a living? People may be a little, well, unwelcoming, if they know I used to work for the Inland Revenue.’

‘I won’t tell anyone if you don’t want me to,’ Mrs Caldicot assured him. ‘But what you used to do isn’t anywhere near as important as who you are now.’

‘Would it be terrible if I pretended to have been something else? Something a bit more exciting? Something a bit more acceptable?’

‘What would you like to be known as?’ asked Mrs Caldicot. ‘Racing driver? Actor? Footballer?’

‘An accountant would be nice,’ said Mr Twist. ‘I would be very happy if people thought of me as a former accountant.’

‘A former accountant you shall be,’ agreed Mrs Caldicot. She took his arm and led him to the lounge.

Chapter 41

‘This is my niece Daisy,’ said Miss Nightingale, proudly. ‘She’s here on leave. She works as a nurse in Africa.’

The other residents, all kneeling on the floor, looked up.

‘Hello Daisy,’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘Hello Daisy,’ said Mr Roxdale.

‘Hello Daisy,’ said Mr Williams.

This continued until the only person remaining was Mrs Peterborough.

‘Hello Daisy,’ said Miss Nightingale.

Daisy looked a little surprised.

‘Hello Daisy,’ said Mrs Peterborough.

Daisy, a kind young woman in her thirties, understood. Her aunt had told her about Mrs Peterborough.

‘Are you looking for something?’ Daisy asked.

‘We’re playing tiddly winks,’ explained Mr Roxdale. ‘I just tiddled a wink into the egg cup from three feet.’ He looked around. ‘Is it tiddling a wink or winking a tiddle?’ he asked.

‘I dunno what you call it, but it was a bloody fine shot,’ said Mr Hewitt.

‘Congratulations,’ said Daisy.

‘Daisy has been telling me that the hospital where she works is short of pills,’ said Miss Nightingale. ‘If any of you have any spare medicines she would be very grateful if you’d let her have them.’

‘What sort of stuff do you want?’ asked Mr Roxdale. ‘I’ve got quite a good collection of stuff in my bathroom cabinet.’

‘We’re particularly short of antibiotics and painkillers,’ said Daisy.

‘I’m sure we can all find you something,’ promised Mr Livingstone.

When Daisy left, an hour or so later, she was carrying a bulging carrier bags full of pills. She was crying with joy.

‘Will you come back and see us before you return to Africa?’ asked Mr Livingstone.

‘I certainly will,’ said Daisy.

‘I’ve got a little plan,’ said Mr Livingstone, when she had gone. ‘Listen...’

Chapter 42

The golf club bar was packed. It was the club's evening for distributing prizes and cups. The bar was doing a roaring trade in gins and traditional ales and the two temporary members of bar staff were getting increasingly irritated as they struggled to keep up with the members' demands for alcohol. They wouldn't have minded being busy if they'd been picking up tips but the evening was well under way and neither of them had received a penny.

Two members of the golf club weren't in the bar, listening to the speeches and watching their fellow members feign modesty as they accepted assorted pieces of grotesquely ugly silverware. They were tucked away quietly in the billiards room. They had started a game of snooker so that if anyone entered it would be clear that he room was occupied. But neither of the members was interested in the balls on the table. They were sitting, side by side, on a raised bench, each nursing a very large gin. (Nigel had bought triples so that there would be no need to face the queue at the bar for a while.)

'You're sure this will work?' asked Nigel Roxdale.

'Oh yes,' replied Mr Muller-Hawksmoor confidently. 'I'm sure Mrs Caldicot doesn't have enough staff members. Being in breach of the required staff-patient ratio is a serious offence. I can close her down immediately.'

'And she won't be able to open up again?'

Mr Muller-Hawksmoor smiled. 'Oh, I don't think so,' he answered. 'This will be the last straw. And she knows that if she does open up again I'll be back. There are laws and regulations even I don't know about, and our friends in Brussels are thinking up new ones every day.'

'She doesn't suspect anything? She doesn't realise why you want to close her down?'

'Oh good heavens no,' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, with a nasty looking smile. 'Mrs Caldicot and I go way back. She thinks I'm harassing her simply because I don't like her.' He shrugged and allowed the smile to broaden.

'Good. Keep it that way, `said Nigel Roxdale. He smiled and sipped a little gin. 'I've got a couple of backers lined up,' he said. 'Two clients of mine in the hotel trade who are looking for a new property. They're terribly excited about the whole thing. I've arranged for my bank to lend us the money to buy the place the minute it goes on the market. We then immediately sell it on to my backers.'

'And what do you think the profit will be?

'It all depends on just how cheap we can get it,' said Nigel. 'But we should be able to rely on at least £100,000 to split between us. After costs.'

'Fifty thousand!' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. He couldn't help smiling.

He couldn't believe his luck. He was closing down Mrs Caldicot's Rest Home and getting paid for it! Life had never been so joyful.

He drank some more gin, closed his eyes, settled back on the bench and smiled still more.

Chapter 43

‘Is this, er, the er...,’ the caller looked up and down and to the right and to the left as though looking for clues.

‘What are you looking for?’ enquired Mrs Caldicot gently.

It was raining again. The man who had rung the doorbell, and who was now sheltering in the porch, was probably in his mid- fifties. He was short, round and bald and wore spectacles with glass so thick it looked as though it had been cut from the bottom of milk bottles. The lenses magnified his eyes and made him look almost comically fearsome. Standing on the top step he was a good foot shorter than Mrs Caldicot. He stared up at her and opened his mouth. ‘Is this the old folks’ home? I’m looking for…er…Mrs..er,’ he pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and peered at it. `Mrs Peterborough. I’m doctor…er…the psychiatrist.’

‘This is the Twilight Years Rest Home,’ confirmed Mrs Caldicot.

‘Can I come in?’

Mrs Caldicot opened the door wide to let the psychiatrist enter. ‘You’re here to see Mrs Peterborough?’ she asked him.

‘I got to certify the old biddy insane,’ said the psychiatrist.

‘If you would wait in here, I’ll get Mrs Peterborough to come and see you,’ said Mrs Caldicot, pausing outside her office. ‘There’s no need to bring her in here,’ said the psychiatrist. ‘It’s better to see the wildlife in their natural surroundings than sitting in a zoo. Lead me to her. I hope she’s not being a teapot today. The er…council people told you I was coming?’

‘They did,’ confirmed Mrs Caldicot.

‘I...er...don’t suppose they told you my name, did they?’

‘No.’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘Never mind’ said the psychiatrist, relieved and seemingly not in the slightest bit embarrassed by this additional example of memory loss. ‘Doesn’t matter. I sometimes wonder if I’ve got that disease. You know the one. I can’t remember the damned name. Never mind, you seem to be the woman who runs the old folks home and I’m pretty sure I’m the doctor. Lead me to her.’

Chapter 44

‘Doctor, this is Mrs Peterborough,’ said Mrs Caldicot, introducing Mrs Peterborough and the psychiatrist to one another. `Mrs Peterborough, this is the psychiatrist. He’s come to examine you.’

‘So, you’re my slice of fruitcake for today, are you?’ said the doctor, staring rather aggressively at Mrs Peterborough.

Mrs Peterborough, confused by this, didn’t say anything.

‘You’re a very rude man,’ said Miss Nightingale.

‘You’re a very rude man,’ repeated Mrs Peterborough.

The psychiatrist who didn’t look in the slightest bit put out by this two pronged attack, continued to stare at Mrs Peterborough. ‘Ms…er…someone has asked me to ask you some questions,’ he told her. He looked around, spotted a straight-backed chair, pulled it over and sat down on it. ‘I’m going to ask you a question about current affairs.’ He peered at Mrs Peterborough though his bottle glass spectacles. ‘What do you think of the situation in the Middle East?’ he asked. He lowered his head and chewed at his bottom lip, deep in thought.

‘Who is he? What’s he want?’ whispered Miss Nightingale to Mrs Caldicot.

‘He’s the psychiatrist sent by Ms Jones,’ explained Mrs Caldicot in a whisper. ‘He’s here to decide if Mrs Peterborough is sane.’ She and Miss Nightingale exchanged looks.

‘And if he decides she isn’t?’

‘They’ll insist on moving her somewhere else,’ whispered Mrs Caldicot. ‘To a hospital.’

‘That would make her worse,’ whispered Miss Nightingale, horrified.

‘That would make her worse,’ said Mrs Peterborough in what she thought was a whisper.

‘I know,’ whispered Mrs Caldicot.

‘We must stop them,’ whispered Miss Nightingale.

‘But how?’ whispered Mrs Caldicot. ‘How are we going to do that?’

‘Zzzz,’ said the psychiatrist.

‘We’ve got to convince him that she’s sane,’ whispered Miss Nightingale.

‘Zzzz zzzz,’ said the psychiatrist.

‘Got to convince him that she’s sane,’ said Mrs Peterborough.

‘How the hell are we going to do that?’ demanded Mr Livingstone.

‘Zzzzz zzzz zzzz zzzz,’ said the psychiatrist.

‘I think he’s fallen asleep,’ said Miss Nightingale.

‘I think he’s fallen asleep,’ confirmed Mrs Peterborough.

They all looked at him. His head had fallen forwards onto his chest. A small dribble of saliva had escaped from beneath his open lips and was heading down towards his tie in a long, sticky string. ‘I love Mrs Peterborough very much, like a sister,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘Actually more than my sister. Between you and me, my sister is a mean bitch. Can’t stand her. The most selfish, manipulative woman I’ve ever met. To be honest, I’ve never understood why my brother-in-law didn’t bop her on the head and bury her in the garden years ago. But the problem is,’ said Mr Livingstone, ‘and I say this very lovingly, that, much as we love her, Mrs Peterborough is, as we all know, a little bit different.’

‘So we have to convince the psychiatrist that he’s wrong about Mrs Peterborough,’ said Miss Nightingale.

‘So we have to convince...’ began Mrs Peterborough. Having forgotten the rest of the sentence, she faded out.

‘That’s more or less it,’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘How on earth do we do that?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

Chapter 45

The psychiatrist had been asleep for twenty minutes or so. There was now a large wet stain on his tie. Suddenly, he awoke with a start. He looked up, looked around and stared at everyone in turn. No one said anything.

'I suppose you all think I was asleep?' he said, accusingly.

'Oh no, not at all,' replied Mr Livingstone.

'It's a trick I often use,' said the psychiatrist, blinking. 'I trick patients into thinking I'm asleep. But all the time I'm listening to every word they are saying.' He glared at everyone in turn.

Mrs Caldicot looked at Mr Livingstone who looked at Miss Nightingale who looked at Mrs Merivale who looked at Mr Roxdale who looked at Mrs Roberts who, completing the cycle, looked at Mrs Caldicot.

'That's very clever of you,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'You pretend to be asleep but secretly you listen to what your patients are saying. That way you get to the truth much more quickly.'

'Exactly!' cried the psychiatrist. `In a nutshell!'

'Did you find what Mrs Peterborough had to say interesting?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'Oh, very much so,' nodded the psychiatrist.

'We were all fascinated by what she had to say,' said Mrs Caldicot. She looked around for support and confirmation. The others all nodded and murmured their agreement.

'Absolutely!' agreed the psychiatrist.

'I didn't realise she knew so much about the Middle East,' said Mr Roxdale. 'Very impressive. I learned a lot,' he added.

'Oh yes,' said the psychiatrist. 'Very good indeed.'

'From what you've just heard I don't suppose you can be in any doubts about her mental state?'

'Er…no, of course not!' confirmed the psychiatrist.

'I expect you're finished with her now?' said Mrs Caldicot. 'It's time for her physiotherapy so would you excuse her if Mrs Roberts takes her to her room?' Mrs Caldicot nodded to Mrs Roberts who got up and helped Mrs Peterborough to her feet. Miss Nightingale stood up too.

'Everything is fine,' said the psychiatrist. 'She can go now. I've finished with her.' He too stood up.

'It was nice to meet you, doctor,' said Miss Nightingale.

'It was nice to meet you, doctor,' said Mrs Peterborough.

Mrs Roberts and Miss Nightingale took one arm each and walked Mrs Peterborough to and through the door before the psychiatrist could ask her anything else.

'I'll show you out then, shall I?' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Er, thank you,' said the doctor. He seemed rather bewildered.

When he'd gone they celebrated.

Mrs Merivale cooked egg and chips for everyone and Mr Livingstone entertained them by playing a medley of favourite tunes on his trombone.

Chapter 46

‘I went for a walk to the paper shop this morning,’ said Mr Williams. ‘I’ve never seen so much traffic.’

‘It is a busy road,’ agreed Mr Roxdale.

‘Loads of potential customers,’ said Mr Williams.

Mr Roxdale, who didn’t understand, looked at him quizzically.

‘When the flowers and the vegetables we’re growing are ready we could set up a stall by the roadside,’ said Mr Williams. ‘It would help bring in some money for Mrs Caldicot.’

‘That’s a brilliant idea!’ said Mr Roxdale, as though no one had ever before thought of it. He had simple tastes and had never had a ‘commercial’ brain.

‘It’s a pity we have to wait for the darned things to grow,’ said Mr Williams. ‘It’ll be months before there’s anything to sell.’

‘Does Mrs Caldicot need money now?’ asked Mr Roxdale.

‘I overheard her talking to Mrs Roberts,’ said Mr Williams. ‘Apparently they’ve got real financial problems. It costs a fortune to run a place this size and now the roof is apparently leaking.’ He sighed. He had on several more occasions tried to give Mrs Caldicot a few photographs but she wouldn’t accept them.

‘We don’t have to wait for the stuff in the garden to grow!’ said Mr Roxdale, suddenly inspired.

Mr Williams looked at him. ‘What do you suggest?’ he asked. ‘Selling grass cuttings?’ He paused and thought for a moment. ‘I have to tell you that I’m a bit old for scrumping,’ he said.

‘No, no!’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘We can pop round to the garden at my old place. There’s tons of stuff growing there. I don’t think they’ve rented out the house yet.’

‘Flowers?’

‘Flowers and vegetables,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘I haven’t been looking after them but with any luck the birds will have left us some stuff we can sell.’

‘How far is it?’

‘We can walk it,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘We’ll take the wheelbarrow, fill it up and take it in turns to wheel it back.’

Chapter 47

'I can just about still remember the enormous sense of relief I felt when I first discovered that I had become a shabby, dull, slightly podgy, old man,' said Mr Roxdale.

'I know exactly what you mean,' sighed Mr Williams. 'Same thing happened to me. Overnight. One day I went to bed a smart, young fellow, constantly worried about my hair and my figure. The next day I woke up fat and completely past it.' He paused, looked at his new friend, and grinned. `What a wonderful relief. The last thirty years have been the best of my life.'

The two men were standing on the pavement outside the Twilight Years Rest Home. Every bucket they could find was filled with flowers. But business was not brisk and the two men had plenty of time to chat.

'Becoming old was the best thing I ever did,' agreed Mr Roxdale, with a nod. 'Best day's work I ever did. Best day of my life. I suddenly realised that I no longer had to bother. No one noticed me. I had become invisible. The joy! The freedom! I didn't have to iron my shoes or polish my shoes.'

'For me one of the great delights was the discovery that for the first time in my life young women were always happy to talk to me,' said Mr Williams.

'You know, exactly the same thing happened to me,' said Mr Roxdale.'

'They didn't feel threatened,' said Mr Williams.

'Absolutely,' agreed Mr Roxdale.

'I suddenly realised that young women were smiling at me not because they fancied me but because they rightly perceived me as a harmless old duffer - absolutely no threat to them,' said Mr Williams. 'Models, shop girls, girls in the bank, girls at parties. I could chat with them - even flirt with them without giving the slightest offence. They could smile at me, and talk to me without thinking that I could possibly imagine that they are flirting with me. At first I was disappointed but then I realised that I found it enormously liberating: it means I get to talk to loads of young women without my having to worry about whether or not I'm going to pull, or whether I'll be able to perform. I don't have to worry about anything anymore. The flirting is the beginning, the middle and the end. It's wonderful.'

'That's one of the good things about growing old,' agreed Mr Roxdale, with a nod. 'Marvellous.' He always enjoyed his visits to the corner shop to pay his paper bill. The twenty something girl who took his money always had a smile for him.

'You shouldn't flirt with that girl,' his daughter-in-law had told him more than once. 'You're too old. What will people think?'

'I'm too old to care what anyone thinks,' Mr Roxdale had replied. 'But not too old to flirt.'

They stood together in silence for a while, each possessed by his own happy thoughts. Mr Roxdale looked up. The sky was getting blacker.

'It's going to rain,' he said.

'They said on the weather forecast that it was going to be fine today,' said Mr Williams.

Mr Roxdale snorted. He did not have much respect for weather forecasters. 'I don't know how they get away with what they do,' he said. 'It's a big confidence trick. Other people have to be accurate or they get in trouble. But weather forecasters keep on getting it wrong and keep on getting away with it.'

They stood in silence for another few moments, both of them watching the blackening sky.

'Mind you, I'm not saying growing old is all wonderful,' said Mr Williams.

'No, it's not,' agreed Mr Roxdale.

'By the time I was seventy I'd lost most of my friends,' said Mr Williams. He didn't sound too sad about it. 'Never had many, mind you,' he added.

'Passed away, did they?' said Mr Roxdale, sympathetically.

'No, no!' said Mr Williams. 'Not really.' He thought about it for a moment. 'Well I suppose a few of them did drop of their perches. No, by and large, I gave them up. Stopped seeing them. We no longer had anything in common.' He shook his head sadly and turned to look at Mr Roxdale. 'D'you know most of 'em would only ever talk about what the doctor had said or what pills they were on.'

'It's raining,' said Mr Roxdale inconsequentially, but accurately.

Mr Williams looked up. A large drop of rain splashed on his face. 'It is,' he agreed.

'I had a chum who used to grow marvellous vegetables,' said Mr Roxdale. 'He grew marvellous runner beans. We used to meet in the pub three times a week. I stopped going. All he wanted to talk about was his new hearing aid and the trouble he was having with his pension people.'

Mr Williams nodded furiously. 'I had a pal who nearly drove me mad. If he wasn't telling me about his bowels he was giving me a detailed account of how his varicose veins were doing. He'd come into my studio and give me a word by word account of his latest visit to the doctor. 'Good morning, Doctor.' 'Good morning, Mr Blodget.' 'Chilly for the time of the year.' 'Very chilly, Mr Blodget.' That sort of thing. Then he'd get his new pills out. A blue one and a red one before getting out of bed. Then two white ones and a yellow one after shaving but before breakfast. On it went. Pills, pills, pills. He loved his pills. He lived for them.'

'I had a mate who always used to be great fun,' said Mr Roxdale. 'He used to be a traffic warden but he had a sense of humour nevertheless. Then his younger brother and two of his pals died and he went downhill rapidly. It really affected him. He stopped eating fatty foods, started going jogging and gave up the drink.'

'Completely?'

'Wouldn't touch a drop. He would sit there in his usual chair in the pub, nursing an orange juice, and bore your ears off with stories about his brother's last stay in the hospital.' Mr Roxdale shuddered. 'Awful. I swore I would never let them get me into a hospital after that. Then he decided that the orange juice was giving him heartburn so he gave up that and started drinking plain water.'

'I never had much faith in doctors,' said Mr Williams. 'Bunch of murderous bastards.' He took out a large red handkerchief and blew his nose. 'They put me in a loony bin once, you know.'

'No I didn't know,' said Mr Roxdale.

'Doctor said I was depressed. Stupid prat. Only a bloody 110 per cent proof imbecile could go through life on this planet without being depressed. Anyone who isn't pretty well damned depressed should be locked up. Probably a psychopath.'

'They gave you pills, I suppose?'

'Buckets full of 'em. I never took the damned things though. Spat 'em out after they'd gone. Never took one. In the end I threatened to sue the bastards. Then they found out I'd got a bit of clout so they let me go. Most depressing time of my life. They put me in a ward with all these other depressed people. Dozens of 'em. All miserable as sin. We all sat around all day depressing each other. As soon as someone started to cheer up the others would drag him down again. Madness.'

'When I got home I decided to cure myself. I designed this sort of shock therapy. I invited round all my friends and acquaintances who had serious problems. Every miserable, pessimistic bastard I'd ever met. I gave them cheap booze and little vol au vents I'd bought in from a caterer and one by one invited them to talk endlessly about the awful things that had happened to them. I tell you it was fearsome stuff. I had to pop into the kitchen from time to time for a rest. At the end of the evening I threw 'em all out and never saw 'em again. I felt so much better. From that point on, I tried to surround myself with jolly folk.'

'I've never trusted doctors.' said Mr Roxdale.

'Never trusted doctors or any of those damned so-called experts,' said Mr Williams. 'When I was little I believed that one should always hire - and trust - experts. And so I hired an accountant. Who ended up costing me a fortune. I've had dentists who nearly destroyed my teeth and doctors who nearly killed me. I have hired lawyers who have cost me a fortune. I hired a pension company which totally screwed up the management of my pension. I have hired banks and investment companies which have lost money hand over fist. The list is endless. I have no faith in experts.'

'They stood in silence for a moment as a young woman approached, pushing a pram. She was plump, blonde and pretty. She smiled at both men, in turn. Both smiled back. She stopped for a moment. 'Have you got the time?' she asked.

'Sorry, love,' said Mr Roxdale. 'I don't wear a watch.' He turned to his friend.

'No watch either, I'm afraid,' said Mr Williams.

'But it's morning,' said Mr Roxdale. 'If that's any help. He handed her a pink rose.'

The girl took the rose, smiled, thanked them and continued on her way.

'You see, thirty years ago I would have felt I had to say something like 'I've got the time if you've got the inclination,' said Mr Williams. 'Then either she would have been offended or we'd have got involved in that courtship rigmarole.'

'Thirty years ago she wouldn't have asked us for the time,' said Mr Roxdale.

'Thirty years ago I could have told her,' said Mr Williams. 'I'd have been too scared of missing an appointment to go out without a watch.'

'I stopped wearing a watch when I was 62,' said Mr Roxdale. 'A pal of mine left work. I was invited to his leaving party. Do you know what they gave him?'

'A watch?'

'A watch and a clock.'

‘Why do they do that? What’s the point? The last thing on this earth he wanted was a watch.’

‘Or a clock.’

‘It was like they were telling him that they knew he’d always have time on his hands. Cruel and thoughtless bastards. He died four days later. Four days of pension. Four days of retirement. He didn’t get to enjoy any of it. Never even got time to find out if the bloody watch kept good time. Never even had to wind up the clock. Why do they do that? The one time in your life when you don’t have to watch the time and they give you a watch.’

‘Crazy, isn’t it?’

‘I took off my watch at his funeral and threw it into his grave. Never worn one since.’ He turned slightly and watched the girl disappearing down the road. ‘Nice looking girl though,’ said Mr Roxdale. `Reminds me of my niece. She’s divorced now. Works for an undertaker. I’ve told her I want her taking care of me when I’ve gone. Lovely soft hands.’

‘When I turned fifty I bought an undertaker’s place and turned it into a studio,’ said Mr Williams. ‘There was a mortuary at the back. Great big skylights. Beautiful natural light to work by. No one in my family would come to visit. They were all scared.’

‘Really? What of?’

‘They said that working in a place like that was asking for trouble. All those dead bodies, you see. They thought I’d be next on the slab.’

‘What did you say?’

‘I pointed out that no one had ever actually died there,’ said Mr Williams. ‘Safest place in town from that point of view.’ He stared down at the gutter and kicked at what looked like a cigar butt. ‘Is that a cigar?’

Mr Roxdale lowered his head and stared at it. ‘Dunno,’ he said. ‘I never pick up cigar butts these days. Too many small dogs around. And my eyesight isn’t what it used to be.’

Chapter 48

‘How is it going?’ asked a voice they both recognised. They turned and said hello to Mrs Caldicot.

‘Not terribly well, I’m afraid,’ admitted Mr Williams. ‘There doesn’t seem to be a great demand for flowers around here.’

‘Taken just two pounds so far,’ said Mr Roxdale, holding up the tin they had brought with them for their takings. ‘And that was for the carnations we both bought.’ He lifted his lapel to draw Mrs Caldicot’s attention to the fine looking carnation in his buttonhole.

‘What you really need is a bit of glamour,’ said Mrs Caldicot with a laugh.

‘So can you stay and help us?’ asked Mr Roxdale gallantly.

Mrs Caldicot smiled and shook her head. ‘I’m afraid not,’ she said. ‘But thank you for the compliment.’ She headed back towards the house.

Chapter 49

Mr Roxdale and Mr Williams had temporarily abandoned their attempts at flower selling. It had not been a huge success so far, but they had not yet given up. While Mr Williams wandered upstairs to his room to try to find a pair of gloves Mr Roxdale tottered into the lounge looking for his second best brown corduroy trousers. The trousers he had been wearing had been soaked when a bucket of water had tipped over them. He had had to take them off. Mrs Merivale had been mending his spare trousers the evening before and he had left them in her safe-keeping.

The television was on in the lounge. Half a dozen residents were watching a middle-aged man with orange skin and a far too perfect hairstyle interviewing a group of supposedly ordinary but surprisingly orange-skinned people. He spoke in a mid-Western drawl. A caption on the screen told late coming viewers that the subject of the discussion was shyness. The man with orange skin held his microphone underneath the bulbous nose of a large woman who wore jeans and a bright red T-shirt as though they both had done something to upset her and needed to be punished. She too had orange skin.

'Mrs Merivale, do you know where my trousers are?' Mr Roxdale enquired.

Naturally, everyone turned to look.

'Nice legs,' said Mr Livingstone drily, nodding at Mr Roxdale's naked lower limbs. 'But if you're going to go out without stockings you should use some of that fake tanning lotion.'

'Could do with a shave, too,' said Mr Hewitt. 'Hairy legs are right out of fashion these days.'

'I'm President of The World Federation of Shy and Retiring People,' announced the large, orange-skinned woman dominating their television screen. 'A survey back home in Ohio, US of A showed that for the last seven years I have been the shyest person in the whole wide world,' she concluded proudly. She folded her arms and glared around her, as though daring anyone to deny her this title. The orange-faced man, the presenter of the programme, nodded sagely, as though enormously impressed by this news. The large woman looked around beaming, when the audience, led by the presenter, applauded to show just how impressed they were.

'No, you're not! You're not!' screamed a woman in a bright yellow jump suit. She too had orange skin and she too sounded American. She jumped up out of her seat and pointed a podgy finger at the woman in the jeans and red T-shirt. 'She's a fraud!' she cried. 'She's not as shy as I am!'

'They're on the back of Mrs Torridge's chair,' Mrs Merivale told Mr Roxdale.

Mr Roxdale thanked Mrs Merivale, both for this information and for mending his trousers. With a smile and a wave of a hand, Mrs Merivale dismissed the need for thanks and concentrated her attention on the television screen.

'Neither of them seems very shy to me,' muttered Mr Livingstone. He turned to Mrs Merivale, who was sitting next to him. 'Do you know any of these people?'

'I met the presenter once,' replied Mrs Merivale. 'He was born in Walsall. His real name is Sidney, he's married to a district nurse called Angela and he used to work as a postman in the daytime and as a sword swallower in the evenings.'

'He's not American?'

Mrs Merivale looked puzzled. 'Not unless the Americans colonised Walsall,' she said. 'But he was once arrested for sniffing coke,' she added, rather inconsequentially.

Mr Roxdale approached Mrs Torridge's chair and politely asked her to move forward a few inches so that he could retrieve his trousers. Mrs Torridge did as he requested and looked him up and down as though considering making an offer for the freehold. 'You look as though you're good with your hands,' she said, when she had finished her inspection. 'Will you tie me up, please?'

On the television the two Americans were now arguing vociferously.

'I've often wondered about sniffing coke,' said Mr Hewitt. 'Can you use anthracite? Or does it have to be coke?'

'I don't know,' confessed Mrs Merivale. 'Good question, though.'

'I beg your pardon?' said Mr Roxdale. He was not a man who was easily shocked but he felt sure that Mrs Torridge had asked him to tie her up.

'I've decided to be Harriet Houdini today,' said Mrs Torridge.

'Harriet Houdini?' said Mr Roxdale. 'Who on earth is she?'

'The famous escapologist,' said Mrs Torridge. 'Well she would have been famous,' she added. 'If her brother hadn't grabbed all the headlines.'

'Her brother?'

'Harry. Harry Houdini.'

'Of course. Have you got any rope? String? Strips of cloth?' 'I've got some rope,' said Mrs Torridge. She held out a length of what looked carefully and neatly looped clothesline which Mr Roxdale took from her before glancing at the television screen. The woman in yellow had flung herself on top of the woman in the red T-shirt. He watched, astonished, as they fell together onto the floor. The orange-skinned presenter smiled thinly but made no attempt to interfere in the fight. The camera zoomed in until the screen was filled with two clawing, screaming, sweating bodies.

‘Where did you get this?’ Mr Roxdale asked.

‘I found it in the garden,’ said Mrs Torridge, innocently.

‘Did it by any chance have washing on it?’ asked Mr Roxdale.

‘Oh, yes. But the washing was dry so I took it off and put into the laundry room. You’ll need these as well,’ added Mrs Torridge, handing Mr Roxdale a large pair of yellow, silk knickers.

‘What on earth are these?’ demanded the surprised recipient of this largesse, holding up the knickers and examining them as though they were evidence and he prosecuting counsel in an important trial.

‘Bloomers.’

‘I can see that. But what do I need these for?’

‘To stuff in my mouth,’ explained Mrs Torridge, patiently, as though talking to a rather dim-witted child.

Mr Roxdale, his confusion enhanced, stared at her.

‘For a gag,’ said Mrs Torridge.

‘You want me to stuff these bloomers in your mouth for a joke?’ asked Mr Roxdale, who had abandoned the hope of finding a reason and now simply wanted to be sure, of what was expected of him.

‘No. A gag,’ explained Mrs Torridge, patiently. ‘To stop me shouting for help.’

‘Ah!’ said Mr Roxdale, understanding at last. He glanced at the television screen again and watched in horror as three huge, black men in black uniforms pulled the two women apart. The orange-skinned man was still watching and saying nothing.

‘Strictly speaking we should use a freshly laundered linen handkerchief,’ said Mrs Torridge. ‘But everyone here uses paper handkerchiefs and a paper handkerchief wouldn’t work. I’d be able to eat it. Or at least chew it up and spit it out. So since I don’t have a proper handkerchief these will have to do.’

‘Whose are they?’ demanded Mr Roxdale, looking inside the bloomers as though expecting to see some sign of ownership, a neatly sewn name tag perhaps.

‘Oh, they’re mine,’ said Mrs Torridge. ‘And they’re freshly laundered. I wouldn’t want to have anyone else’s knickers in my mouth even if they were clean.’

‘No, quite,’ agreed Mr Roxdale. ‘I can understand that.’

Mrs Torridge held her wrists out in front of her. ‘So,’ she said, tiring of all these preliminaries, ‘tie me up then.’

‘Shall I tie you up first? Or gag you first?’ asked Mr Roxdale.

Mrs Torridge didn’t answer. She looked slightly worried by this question. It was clearly not a query she had expected.

‘Tie her up first, silly,’ said Mrs Merivale, who like the others had turned away from the television screen (where the woman in the yellow jumpsuit was now being carried from the television set) and was staring at Mrs Torridge. ‘If you gag her first she won’t be able to tell you whether or not the knots are tight enough.’

‘No, I suppose not,’ agreed Mr Roxdale. ‘I hadn’t thought of that.’ He picked up the clothesline and tested it by holding it in both hands and giving it a good yank. He dimly remembered reading about people tying one another up in an illustrated magazine he had found in a potting shed belonging to one of his customers. He seemed to remember that black stockings had been used instead of a clothesline.

On balance, he decided that he was pleased that Mrs Torridge had asked him to help her. He had long believed that one should be prepared to try anything once and he was well aware that, at his age, he was unlikely to be showered with requests to tie people up. Slowly and gently, but thoroughly, he began to tie Mrs Torridge’s hands and wrists.

‘Why did he sniff coke?’ Mr Livingstone asked Mrs Merivale.

She looked at him, slightly puzzled.

‘You said he sniffed coke,’ said Mr Livingstone, nodding towards the television. ‘I’ve never heard of anyone doing that before.’

‘They get high on it,’ said Mrs Merivale. ‘Everyone on television does it when they want to get up high.’

‘Good heavens,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘You learn something every day, don’t you? And you can use anthracite if you don’t have coke?’

‘I suppose so,’ agreed Mrs Merivale who wasn’t really listening.

‘Dunno why they don’t just use a ladder like everyone else,’ said Mr Hewitt.

Mr Williams, looking for his friend, poked his head round the door and spotted Mr Roxdale. ‘Are you ready?’ he called.

‘I won’t be long,’ replied Mr Roxdale. ‘I’m just tying up Mrs Torridge.’

‘Do you need any help?’ asked Mr Williams, who did not seem to be in the slightest bit surprised by this piece of news.

‘No, I can manage thank you,’ replied Mr Roxdale, busily wrapping the final few yards of clothesline around Mrs Torridge’s ample form. ‘I’ll be finished in a couple of minutes.’

‘OK,’ replied Mr Williams. ‘I’ll get my hat and wait for you in the hall.’

On the television screen a huge black man, dressed in a violet shirt and beige slacks was explaining to the orange-skinned presenter how shyness had affected his life. As he spoke he prodded the presenter in the chest with a podgy, heavily ringed finger and half way through his monologue he started rapping, clicking his fingers and bouncing around as he continued his tale of woe in the sort of clumsy semi-rhyming format which such singers affect. Sadly, no one at the Twilight Years Rest Home was watching and his audience there was confined to a shabby sofa, half a dozen easy chairs, a coffee table and a bowl of fruit. None of these involuntary members of the audience seemed in the slightest bit interested in the shy black man’s enthusiastic performance.

Mr Livingstone stood up and announced that he was popping out to the coal shed.

Chapter 50

Mrs Caldicot was standing on the doorstep saying goodbye to Dr Bence Jones when Jenkins arrived to take Mrs Caldicot out for lunch.

‘You had a big surgery today,’ she said to the doctor. She waved to Jenkins and smiled at him. The saw him most days now but the very sight of him always made her feel good.

‘You’ve got a lot of sick people here,’ the doctor told her. ‘Really?’ said Mrs Caldicot, surprised. ‘They all seem all right to me.’

‘I’ve never known such a lot of sick people,’ the doctor told her. ‘The ones that aren’t crippled with pain have suddenly developed infections.’

‘Good heavens,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘Cystitis, sore throats, ear aches - you name it they’ve got it,’ he said. ‘I’ve done nothing but sign prescriptions today. Make sure you take a trailer when you trundle off to the pharmacy.’ And with a cheery wave, he shuffled off in the direction of his Bentley which was, as usual, parked in the road outside.

‘He’s a wonderful old chap, isn’t he?’ said Jenkins, climbing up the steps to where Mrs Caldicot was standing in the front porch. ‘How old is he?’ he asked, as the elderly doctor headed slowly for his car.

‘He’s nearly ninety,’ replied Mrs Caldicot.

‘He’s amazing,’ said Jenkins. ‘He must be the oldest practising doctor in the country.’

‘And one of the very few I trust,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘Are you ready for lunch?’ asked Jenkins.

‘I feel awful about this. I tried to ring you but you’d left,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘And your mobile phone was switched off.’

‘I usually do turn it off when I’m driving,’ admitted Jenkins. ‘It’s the only peace I get these days.’

‘I’m sorry about this but I really don’t think I can come out for lunch,’ said Mrs Caldicot sadly. ‘One of our new residents is a sort of accountant and he’s been going through the books for me.’ She sighed. ‘We’ve got a bit of a crisis I’m afraid.’

‘What’s the matter?’

‘Well, the main problem is that the council keeps bringing in more rules,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘As soon as we’ve dealt with one problem they find something else. Every time they introduce us a new regulation it costs us money.’

‘And your outgoings are greater than your income?’

‘By quite a long way. The council have now told us that we’ve got to redo the kitchen completely. I had a letter this morning telling me that we’ve got to rip everything out and rebuild it from scratch. It’s all to satisfy some new rules and it’s not going to make the kitchen better or safer but it is going to cost a fortune.’

‘Do you think your wonderful Mrs Merivale would make us some of her splendid sandwiches?’ asked Jenkins.

‘I’m sure she would,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘Good. Then let’s have lunch in. And while we eat we’ll have a brain storming session and try and work out how best we can raise some money to pay for all these alterations.’

Chapter 51

‘I tried sniffing coke,’ said Mr Livingstone, who had returned to the lounge. ‘But it didn’t do anything for me. I tried some anthracite too. Nothing. I never budged off the ground.’

Mrs Merivale looked at him. ‘You’ve got a black splodge on your nose,’ she told him.

Mr Livingstone wiped his nose with his handkerchief. ‘I took precautions,’ he told her. ‘I tied myself to the coal shed door.’

Mrs Merivale looked at him, puzzled.

‘To stop me going too high,’ he explained.

Chapter 52

'I don't suppose you know any rich eccentrics?' asked Jenkins. 'Kindly millionaires who want to give their money to a good cause?'

'I'm afraid not,' said Mrs Caldicot, sadly.

'Pity,' said Jenkins. 'You could have turned the Twilight Years Rest Home into a charity.'

'There's Mr Williams, of course,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'But he's already helped us a great deal. And I really won't let him give us any more.'

'Mr Williams? Which Mr Williams?'

'Our Mr Williams,' explained Mrs Caldicot. She suddenly blushed. 'He doesn't want it widely known,' she said. 'But if you promise not to breathe a word to anyone...'

'I promise,' said Jenkins.

'Well our Mr Williams is Mr Henry Williams.'

Jenkins stared at her for a moment and then, slowly, shook his head. 'I don't know anyone called Henry Williams,' he confessed. 'Should I?' Suddenly he smiled. 'The only Henry Williams I knew of was the photographer.' He paused. 'But he must have died ten or fifteen years ago.'

'He's not dead. He's very much alive,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'The last time I saw him he was standing outside the gate with Mr Roxdale, trying to sell flowers.'

'Your Mr Williams is the Henry Williams?' Jenkins could not hide his astonishment.

'He gave me a photograph to sell when he first came here,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I sent it to a dealer in London whom Mr Williams recommended. He sent us a cheque for £7,250. It was a signed print.'

Jenkins just stared at Mrs Caldicot. 'How many photographs has he got?'

'Oh, he's got a suitcase full of them,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'But he's got the negatives in the bank.'

'It's a licence to print money,' said Jenkins. 'He worked with Cartier-Bresson didn't he? His later photographs of Paris in the 1950s are classics.'

'I don't know very much about him,' admitted Mrs Caldicot. 'I keep meaning to go to the library but I haven't had the time.'

'He's the photographer who took that famous picture of two lovers feeding pigeons at the top of the Eiffel Tower. You see it on postcards and tea towels all over the place. He must have made a fortune out of that picture alone.'

'He wants to give me some more photographs,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'But it doesn't seem right.'

'But why?' asked Jenkins. 'The photographs in his suitcase alone are worth more than he could ever spend. And the negatives - well, I don't think anyone could put a price on those.'

Mrs Caldicot thought for a while and then shook her head. 'I can't let him,' she said eventually.

'OK,' said Jenkins, smiling. 'So we discount the easy solution. Let's try more difficult answers. What about a jumble sale?' he asked taking a huge bite out of a cheese, pickle and tomato sandwich.

Mrs Caldicot looked at him. 'Do people still have jumble sales?' she asked.

'I don't really know,' admitted Jenkins. 'They've probably been superseded by charity shops, car boot sales and garage sales. But I don't see why you shouldn't hold a jumble sale if you'd like one. That should help bring in some money.'

'Do you think there are any rules and regulations governing the storage, display and sale of jumble?' asked Mrs Caldicot. The regulations with which the council had recently bombarded her had induced a certain amount of nervousness.

'Almost certainly,' replied Jenkins. 'But in my experience the people who maintain these regulations are not quick workers. If you advertise your jumble sale no more than a week or ten days before the event the chances of the local authority's jumble sale department hearing of it and being able to take effective action will, I suspect, be rather slim.'

'We could have stalls,' said Mrs Caldicot, who was warming to the idea. 'Throwing tennis balls at old china, guessing how many peas there are in a bottle, throwing buckets of water over the vicar - that sort of thing.'

'That's more the sort of thing you find at a fete rather than a jumble sale,' pointed out Jenkins.

'So why don't we have a fete and jumble sale?' asked Mrs Caldicot, who was never slow to adapt. 'If the weather is good we could hold the whole things on the front lawn.'

'And if it's wet?'

'Oh, it won't be,' said Mrs Caldicot confidently. 'It'll be a gloriously sunny day. Just warm enough but not too hot. A lovely blue sky with a few fluffy little clouds scattered around.' She sighed and smiled at Jenkins. 'I'm fed up with constantly having to plan for every eventuality,' she admitted. 'It will be a gorgeous day,' she said, not leaving any room for dissent.

'And if it does rain?'

Mrs Caldicot glared at him. 'There you go,' she said. 'You're being pessimistic.'

'I'm being practical!' insisted Jenkins.

'If, against all the odds, it does rain then everyone will just have to bring umbrellas,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'And I'll ask Mrs Roberts to persuade the landlord at the pub down the road to lend us those huge umbrellas he has in his beer garden.'

'But he'll need the umbrellas himself if it's raining.'

'No he won't. No one sits out in a beer garden if it's raining. The umbrellas are only there to keep the sun off. And if there's sunshine we won't need the umbrellas.'

Jenkins found himself unable to counter this argument. 'Well, you'll have to abandon the throwing water over the vicar stall if it rains,' was all he said. 'People will be able to just watch him getting wet anyway.'

'You come into the lounge and make yourself comfortable,' said Mrs Caldicot, laughing. 'I'll bring you a nice cup of tea and some chocolate biscuits and we'll talk about it some more.' She wandered into the lounge ahead of Jenkins to see who was there and what was going on. Apart from the Merivales, who were sitting on the sofa holding hands and watching an old Walter Matthau movie on television, the only person present was Mrs Torridge.

'Good morning, everyone,' said Mrs Caldicot.

The Merivales turned, waved and greeted Mrs Caldicot.

Mrs Caldicot nodded back and gave them a little wave.

'Gkeytsk bwnkh kehgl!' said Mrs Torridge, still gagged and bound.

'Good morning, Mrs Torridge,' said Mrs Caldicot gaily.

'Good heavens!' said Jenkins, who had followed Mrs Caldicot into the lounge and only spotted Mrs Torridge when he followed Mrs Caldicot's gaze. 'What on earth has happened to Mrs Torridge?' he asked Mrs Caldicot.

'I don't know,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'What has happened to Mrs Torridge?' she asked the Merivales.

'Mr Roxdale tied her up and gagged her,' explained Mrs Merivale.

'Oh fine, that's all right then,' said Mrs Caldicot. She turned to Jenkins. 'Mr Roxdale tied her up and gagged her,' she explained.

'I heard,' said Jenkins. He bent a little closer to Mrs Caldicot, so that he wouldn't be overheard. 'I don't wish to be a prude,' he said, but is, er, is that sort of thing allowed?' He looked around and lowered his voice still further, as though concerned that someone might overhear what he was about to say. 'I mean, what would the local authority have to say if they knew one of your male residents was going around tying up the female residents?'

'Oh I don't think he makes a habit of it. In fact I don't think he's done it before,' said Mrs Caldicot. She turned to Mrs Torridge. 'Are you all right?' she asked.

'Gkwhwgn kehaklh!' replied Mrs Torridge, nodding her head. Mr Roxdale had done a very good job with the clothesline and with the gag. The yellow bloomers were held firmly in place with Mr Roxdale's tie.

'I think perhaps you ought to see what she's saying,' said Jenkins.

'Do you really think I should?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'I do,' insisted Jenkins, who could see the headlines. 'Elderly Woman Found Bound And Gagged In Nursing Home. Cabbage War Heroine Guilty Of Neglect.'

Mrs Caldicot, who had great respect for Jenkins intuition, unfastened Mr Roxdale's tie and carefully removed the yellow bloomers from Mrs Torridge's mouth. As she did so Mrs Torridge became increasingly agitated.

'Put them back!' she cried, the moment her mouth was empty of underwear.

'Are you all right?' asked Jenkins.

'Of course I'm all right!' said Mrs Torridge, rather crossly. 'I'm an escapologist. Put the gag back!' She sighed, wearily. 'I bet Harriet Houdini didn't have people ripping out her gags.'

'Harriet Houdini?' said Jenkins, puzzled. 'Who on earth is Harriet Houdini?'

'Harry's sister,' explained Mrs Torridge. 'She would have been famous if it hadn't been for Harry. Put the gag back. I was just beginning to get it free. Now I'll have to start all over again.'

'Today you're an escapologist?'

'Of course.'

'And Mr Roxdale tied you up because you asked him to?'

Mrs Torridge stared at Mrs Caldicot as though she had gone off her head. 'Yes, of course, he did,' she replied, clearly running out of patience. 'Now, will you put the gag back, please.' Mrs Torridge opened her mouth wide and put her head back, waiting for the gag to be reinserted.

Gingerly, Mrs Caldicot put a tiny portion of the yellow bloomers back into Mrs Torridge's mouth. Crossly Mrs

Torridge pulled at the bloomers with her teeth, pulling as much of the material as she could into her own mouth. Then, she looked down at Mr Roxdale’s tie, which was lying on her lap.

When the tie had been tied around her head to her complete satisfaction Mrs Torridge nodded her thanks and began again to struggle to free herself from her gag and the heavily knotted clothesline.

‘You made a good job of that,’ said Jenkins. ‘Are you sure you haven’t done it before?’

Mrs Caldicot looked at him.

‘Sorry!’ apologised Jenkins.

‘I’ll go and make you a cup of tea,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Then we can talk some more about the jumble sale.’

‘Don’t forget the chocolate biscuits,’ Jenkins called after her.

Chapter 53

After Mrs Caldicot had disappeared Jenkins turned and, for the first time, noticed Mr and Mrs Merivale.

'Good movie?' he asked them.

'Wonderful,' replied Mr Merivale.

'One of the best,' added Mrs Merivale. 'Hopscotch.'

'Starring Walter Matthau,' said Mr Merivale.

'And Glenda Jackson,' added Mrs Merivale.

'She was a great comedy actress,' Mr Merivale pointed out. 'She made a lovely film with George Segal.' He screwed up his eyes, clearly trying to think of the title. 'What was it called, dear?' He asked his wife.

'A Touch of Class,' replied Mrs Merivale.

'That's the one,' agreed Mr Merivale. 'But I like this one better.'

'Matthau is very funny,' agreed Mrs Merivale. She turned her head. 'I knew him, you know,' she told Jenkins.

'And Jack Lemmon,' added Mr Merivale. 'We knew them both. Great stars.'

'Great stars,' agreed Mrs Merivale. 'I know her too,' she said, nodding to the screen where Glenda Jackson was coming out of a Post Office in a town which Jenkins thought looked distinctly Bavarian.

'Did I overhear Mrs Caldicot say we're going to have a jumble sale?' asked Mrs Merivale.

'I think that's the plan,' said Jenkins.

'She'll want someone famous to open it,' said Mr Merivale. 'We could help. If you like.'

'We know lots of famous people,' said Mrs Merivale.

'That would be wonderful,' said Jenkins. 'Who can you get?' he asked, thinking that he ought, perhaps, to humour them. 'Who would you like?' asked Mr Merivale.

'Michael Caine? Sean Connery? Roger Moore?' suggested Mrs Merivale.

'We could ask Glenda,' said Mr Merivale.

'She's retired now. She's got plenty of time,' said Mrs Merivale.

'She's a Labour MP,' said Jenkins.

'That's what I said,' insisted Mrs Merivale. 'She's retired now. Got plenty of time.'

'Do we know that other chap who played Bond?' Mr Merivale asked his wife.

'George Lazenby?'

'No. We don't know him.'

'Timothy Dalton?'

'That's him. Do we know him?'

'I do,' replied Mrs Merivale. 'I'm not sure about you.'

'And there's another one.' said Mr Merivale.

'Pierce Brosnan,' said Jenkins.

'Know him,' said Mr Merivale without hesitation. 'Lovely chap. Really nice.'

'And Judy Dench,' said Mrs Merivale.

'She's in the Bond films now,' said Mr Merivale. 'She plays M.'

'Any one of those would be marvellous,' said Jenkins. 'But I expect they'll be very difficult to get hold of. They're probably all very busy people.'

'It depends on who's in the country,' said Mrs Merivale. 'Just let us know the date. And try to give us as much notice as you can.'

'Here's your tea and biscuits,' said Mrs Caldicot, approaching Jenkins and the Merivales. She carried a tray containing a pot of tea, two cups, a jug of hot water, milk, lemon, sugar and a plateful of biscuits. 'Would you two like a cup of tea?' she asked the Merivales.

'Oh no, thank you Mrs Caldicot,' said Mrs Merivale. 'It's very kind of you but we've already got a pot,' she nodded towards the table in front of them on which stood a large green teapot and the usual extras.

'We were just talking about your jumble sale,' said Mr Merivale. 'We'll help you find someone to open it.'

Mrs Caldicot, slightly surprised, looked at Jenkins then turned back to Mr Merivale. 'That would be very nice of you,' she said.

'Do you have a date yet?' she asked.

'I thought about having it a week on Saturday,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'That's a bit soon, isn't it?' said Jenkins.

'No,' said Mrs Caldicot firmly. 'We're not going to spend months planning this. Let's just do it. A week on

Saturday it is. Rain or shine.'

'We'd better go and make a few phone calls,' said Mrs Merivale. 'Can I use your office Mrs Caldicot?'

'Of course you can,' she replied. When the Merivales had gone Mrs Caldicot turned to Jenkins and smiled. 'They mean well,' she said.

'I know,' said Jenkins.

'You must know all sorts of famous people,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'People you've interviewed and so on.'

Jenkins looked at her.

'I know,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I'm sorry. But I'm desperate.'

Jenkins sighed. 'I'll see who I can come up with,' he promised her.

'You're a darling,' said Mrs Caldicot, and to her surprise as much as his, she kissed him on the cheek.

Chapter 54

When the doorbell rang several of the residents, together with Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts, were sitting in the lounge watching an old Marx Brothers film. Jenkins had had to go back to his office.

‘What’s that noise?’ Mr Merivale asked his wife.

‘It’s the rain, dear,’ answered Mrs Merivale.

‘Don’t be silly,’ laughed Mr Merivale. ‘I don’t believe in Father Christmas, let alone all that stuff about Rudolf.’

‘It’s the doorbell,’ Mrs Roberts told them. ‘I’ll answer it.’ She got up and left the room. Mrs Caldicot and the rest continued to watch as Chico sold Groucho another thick form book for the horse races.

Mr Merivale, who had clearly been puzzled by something, spoke again. ‘It’s not really Christmas is it?’ he asked his wife.

‘Ssshhh!’ she whispered, holding a finger across her own lips. ‘No, it’s not Christmas,’ she assured him.

Mrs Roberts came back into the room. ‘It’s that Mr Muller-thingy again,’ she told Mrs Caldicot.

‘Oh damn. What does he want?’ asked Mrs Caldicot. Mr Muller-Hawksmoor and Ms Jones had become regular visitors to The Twilight Years Rest Home; like smells from bad drains they were unwelcome but difficult to get rid of.

‘I don’t know,’ said Mrs Roberts. She blushed. ‘I forgot to ask. But he’s got that Ms Jones with him. And they’ve both got clipboards.’

Mrs Caldicot took a deep breath and rolled her eyes heavenwards. ‘I suppose we’d better find out what they want,’ she said, heading for the front door and apologising to Mr Livingstone and Mr Hewitt who were enjoying a game of bowls on the hall carpet.

‘Ah, Mrs Caldicot,’ said Muller-Hawksmoor, smiling oleaginously. ‘May Ms Jones BA and I come in?’ He put one foot in the hallway and started to walk forwards.

‘What do you want?’ demanded Mrs Caldicot, frowning.

Mr Muller-Hawksmoor halted, as though playing ‘statues’ and the smile disappeared instantly. ‘I have to tell you, Mrs Caldicot,’ he said, assuming his most pompous tone, ‘that Ms Jones BA and I are here as official representatives of the local Council. We are here to conduct a staff and customer census and you are legally obliged to allow us unhindered and unfettered entrance to your establishment. It is our belief that you have a mismatched staff-customer quota and if our investigations confirm this then Ms Jones and I have the authority here,’ and at this point Mr Muller-Hawksmoor pulled a piece of paper out of his breast pocket and waved it in Mrs Caldicot’s direction, ‘to apply a closure order to this establishment’.

Mrs Caldicot stared for a moment, first at Mr Muller-Hawksmoor and then at Ms Jones BA. Finally, she stepped back and opened the door wider. ‘I wouldn’t dream of hindering or fettering either of you,’ she told them.

‘Good!’ said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, striding into the hallway. ‘Very wise, Mrs Caldicot.’ The smile had reappeared. It was about as honest and as long lasting as a car salesman’s promise. Ms Jones followed Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. She didn’t bother to smile.

‘What on earth did all that mean?’ whispered Mrs Roberts.

‘I think it meant that they think we don’t have enough members of staff,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘If they can prove that they’ll shut us down.’

Silent with horror, Mrs Roberts just stared.

‘Please do be careful,’ said Mrs Caldicot, as she closed the front door. ‘Mr Livingstone and Mr Hewitt are playing bowls.’ She pointed to an onion about a yard short of front door. ‘I think that’s what they call the ‘jack’,’ she explained.

‘We are...’ began Mr Muller-Hawksmoor.

‘Ouch!’ interrupted Ms Jones BA, leaping into the air, dropping her clipboard and grabbing her ankle. She swore loudly and impressively and started hopping around the hallway as though she had suddenly decided to play a solitary game of hopscotch.

‘What on earth’s the matter?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

Ms Jones BA, still hopping around, let go of her ankle and pointed to a large turnip which had rolled to a halt alongside a radiator pipe. ‘I was attacked with that...weapon!’ she shouted.

‘Excuse me,’ said Mr Livingstone, with a polite smile. ‘Can I have my ball back, please?’ He squeezed between Mrs Caldicot and Ms Jones BA and picked up the turnip which had collided with Ms Jones’s leg. ‘Don’t you worry about getting in the way,’ he told Ms Jones BA with another rather gummy smile. ‘Mr Hewitt said I can take my go again.’ Mr Livingstone sometimes took his teeth out and left them in a glass in his bathroom. ‘They cost me a fortune,' he once explained. 'I don't want to wear them out.'

'You're a menace!' snarled Ms Jones BA at Mr Livingstone. 'You'll be hearing from my solicitors. You could have broken my leg.'

'I beg your pardon,' interrupted Mrs Caldicot. 'But if you're contemplating legal action I feel I should perhaps point out that I did warn you that Mr Livingstone and Mr Hewitt were playing bowls.'

'No you didn't!' protested Ms Jones BA. She turned to Mr Muller-Hawksmoor for support. 'Did she?'

Mr Muller-Hawksmoor looked at her, looked at Mrs Caldicot and then looked embarrassed. 'Well, actually, I think she did say something of the kind,' he admitted.

Ms Jones BA, gave her ankle another rub and picked up her clipboard. She muttered something inaudible under her breath.

'Where would you like to start?' Mrs Caldicot asked them brightly.

'Oh don't you worry your-little-old-self about us,' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, brightening a little. 'You get on with your daily duties. I'm sure you've got lots to do. Floors to sweep, beds to make, lavatories to clean - that sort of thing. We don't want to interfere with the smooth running of your establishment. We'll just wander around and take a few notes. Just pretend we're not here.'

Mrs Caldicot had put up with Mr Caldicot, also a condescending, patronising man, for most of her adult life. Her patience with such people had long since evaporated. She turned away, marched into her office and slammed the door, feeling her cheeks redden with fury. 'You stupid, arrogant, preening, self-satisfied, pea-brained moron,' she said out loud. She was aware that it wasn't the best she could have done, as insults go, but it had passion on its side and it made her feel a little better.

Seconds later, someone knocked timidly on the door.

'Yes!' shouted Mrs Caldicot through the closed door. 'Who is it? What do you want?'

The door opened a few inches. 'It's me,' whispered Mrs Roberts nervously poking her head through the gap. 'Have you got someone with you?' she looked around. 'I wondered...I thought perhaps...would you like a cup of tea?'

Mrs Caldicot opened the door and let Mrs Roberts in. 'I'm sorry,' she said. She put her arm around Mrs Roberts's waist and gave her a cuddle of apology. 'That man infuriates me,' she explained. 'I could happily throttle him.'

'Have a cup of tea instead,' Mrs Roberts suggested.

'How long do you think I'd get if I throttled him?' Mrs Caldicot asked her friend. 'Do you think Mr Roxdale would bury the body for me? Of course I'd have to throttle Ms Jones BA too. But that would be a pleasure too.' She thought for a moment and smiled to herself. 'How long would it take Mr Roxdale to dig a hole big enough for the two of them?'

'I'm not sure,' said Mrs Roberts, quite seriously. 'Do you want me to ask him?'

Mrs Caldicot smiled and then laughed. 'No, Mrs Roberts!' she said.

'OK,' said Mrs Roberts. 'I think that's probably wise anyway,' she added confidentially.

'But I will have a cup of tea,' said Mrs Caldicot. She thought for a moment. 'And a plateful of calorie free jammy dodgers,' she added. 'I need cheering up.'

'Shall I offer Mr Muller-Hawksmoor and Ms Jones BA some tea and biscuits?' Mrs Roberts asked.

'Certainly not,' replied Mrs Caldicot. 'They don't need cheering up and if they do we're not going to do it for them. If they want tea they can pop out to a teashop. We've got better things to do than make tea for them.' This undeniably petty moment of vengeance made her feel much better. As Mrs Roberts disappeared and headed for the kitchen she sat down behind her desk and started to open the second post. It was, just like the first post, largely composed of circulars and bills. The circulars she tossed, unopened, into the waste-paper basket. The bills she carefully unfolded and then slid them into the cardboard file where Mr Twist kept such items. 'You have to take your turn,' she told the invoices as she slid them out of sight. 'No cheating and no queue jumping.'

Mrs Caldicot had just completed this small, dull and unrewarding task, and was waiting patiently for Mrs Roberts's return with tea and jammy dodgers, when she heard the unmistakeable booming voice of Mr Muller-Hawksmoor shouting her name.

'Oh no,' she thought, her heart sinking. 'What does he want now?' She leapt up from her chair, shimmied neatly around her desk, opened the door into the hallway and found a red-faced Mr Muller-Hawksmoor standing so close to her that she automatically stepped back a pace or two.

'There is a woman in your lounge who is bound and gagged!' shouted Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, his eyes bulging and his face an unhealthy shade of red.

'Oh, yes, that'll be Mrs Torridge,' explained Mrs Caldicot, calmly.

'You knew?' exploded an incredulous Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. 'You knew about this?'

'Of course,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'It's my responsibility to know what is going on.'

‘B...b...but,’ stuttered Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, struggling to overcome a rare attack of speechlessness. ‘You can’t just go around tying up your customers.’

‘Oh, I didn’t tie her up,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘And she’s not a customer. She’s a friend.’

‘If you didn’t tie her up who did?’ he roared.

‘I think it was Mr Roxdale.’

‘And just who is Mr Roxdale?’

‘Another guest. He lives here too.’

‘He’s another of your customers?’

‘I do wish you wouldn’t use the word ‘customer’. It makes me feel as though I’m running an off-licence or a hair dressing salon.’

‘What we call him is utterly irrelevant,’ said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor.

‘I disagree. I think that what we call him is very relevant,’ insisted Mrs Caldicot.

‘Whatever we call him, the man should clearly be locked up,’ said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor firmly. ‘He’s nothing more than a common pervert.’ He shook a bony finger at Mrs Caldicot. ‘And you aren’t a lot better,’ he told her.

Suddenly, from behind Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, there came a blood-curdling scream.

The colour drained from Mr Muller-Hawksmoor’s face. He tucked his clipboard under his arm and turned towards the source of the cry. ‘Good heavens!’ he cried. ‘What the hell was that?’

‘It sounded like Mrs Torridge,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘It came from the lounge.’

‘Ye Gods!’ said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. ‘It sounded terrifying. We’ll better go and see what the hell it was.’ He moved out of the way so that Mrs Caldicot could get ahead of him and lead the way. Mrs Caldicot suspected that this was done more through cowardice than any desire to behave like a gentleman.

‘It did sound like Mrs Torridge,’ said Mrs Caldicot, hurrying across the hall. She spoke over her shoulder. ‘But it can’t be. She’s gagged.’

Mrs Caldicot was right about the scream coming from Mrs Torridge but wrong about her being gagged.

‘Just look at what this stupid woman has done!’ shouted Mrs Torridge angrily, when she saw Mrs Caldicot.

‘What’s the matter with her?’ whimpered a sad looking Ms Jones BA, who was cowering on the far side of the room, and appeared to be trying, with very marginal success, to hide behind her clipboard. She was not a big woman. But the clipboard was smaller.

‘Oh dear,’ said Mrs Caldicot to Ms Jones BA. She shook her head disapprovingly. ‘You really shouldn’t have done that, dear.’

‘But she’s tied up!’ explained Ms Jones BA, pointing to Mrs Torridge. ‘And she was gagged.’

‘I’m going to call the police!’ said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, who had brought up the rear and was now standing staring at a scene which he was clearly having some difficulty in believing. He spoke firmly and with authority.

‘Don’t be silly,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘The police won’t want to arrest Ms Jones BA. What she did may have been stupid but she thought she was being helpful.’

Mr Muller-Hawksmoor stared at her open mouthed. ‘Why on earth should the police want to arrest Ms Jones BA?’ he demanded. ‘She didn’t bind and gag this unfortunate woman.’ He paused and frowned, clearly thinking hard. ‘She was the one who ungagged her!’ he announced.

‘But Mrs Torridge wanted to be tied and gagged,’ Mrs Caldicot pointed out.

Mr Muller-Hawksmoor and Ms Jones BA looked at Mrs Torridge and then at Mrs Caldicot.

‘It’s a sort of game she plays,’ explained Mrs Caldicot. ‘It doesn’t do anyone any harm.’

‘Who are you calling an unfortunate woman?’ demanded Mrs Torridge, angrily.

‘Shall I put the gag back in, dear?’ asked Mrs Merivale, who, disturbed by the noise, had temporarily moved away from the television set.

‘Yes, please,’ said Mrs Torridge, gratefully. ‘I’d nearly got rid of it by myself,’ she muttered, almost under her breath. ‘That’s twice.’

‘Now don’t exaggerate dear,’ said Mrs Merivale, giving her a soothing but at the same time admonitory pat on the shoulder. ‘I don’t think you’d nearly got that gag out at all.’

‘Well I was making progress,’ said Mrs Torridge, a little sulkily.

It was the last thing she said for a while. Mrs Merivale picked the now sodden yellow bloomers off Mrs Torridge’s lap and stuffed them neatly in Mrs Torridge’s mouth.

‘Wait!’ said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. ‘What on earth is going on here?’

‘Mrs Merivale is replacing Mrs Torridge’s gag,’ explained Mrs Caldicot.

‘Do you mean this woman really wants to be gagged?’ demanded Mr Muller-Hawksmoor.

‘Yes,’ confirmed Mrs Caldicot.

‘Is this a regular occurrence?’ demanded Mr Muller-Hawksmoor.

'Oh no,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'It's just for today. At least I think it is. Mrs Torridge thinks she's Harriet Houdini.'

'And just who is Harriet Houdini?' demanded Mr Muller-Hawksmoor.

'Harry's sister,' explained Mrs Caldicot. She looked at Mrs Torridge, waiting for her to explain. But Mrs Torridge was gagged and Mrs Merivale was tying the yellow bloomers in place with Mr Roxdale's tie. 'As I understand it Harriet Houdini was rather overshadowed by her brother but Mrs Torridge believes that she was an impressive escape artist in her own right.'

'Well I've never heard of Harriet Houdini,' snorted Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, rather unwisely forgetting about Ms Jones's presence. 'And I don't care who she was or how good at it she may have been,' he added, compounding the error.

'Please remember that women have been oppressed for centuries,' Ms Jones BA reminded him. 'My sister Harriet Houdini is simply another example of male chauvinism.'

'Had you ever heard of Harriet Houdini?' demanded Mr Muller-Hawksmoor.

'No,' admitted Ms Jones BA. 'And that's just the point, isn't it?' The relationship between two council employees was deteriorating rapidly.

'Yesterday she was Queen Elizabeth I,' said Mrs Caldicot, who thought she ought to interfere before the two social workers came to blows. 'We all had to curtsey.'

'I'm not interested in any of this piffle,' snorted Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, unpleasantly. He was, thought Mrs Caldicot, an exceedingly easy man to dislike. She now wished she had not interfered but had allowed the dispute between him and Ms Jones BA to follow its natural course.

'Well, not the men, of course,' added Mrs Caldicot. 'They had to bow.'

'I don't know what sort of establishment you are accustomed to running but now that you're in the retirement home business you simply cannot allow your customers to tie one another up.'

'They don't make a habit of it,' Mrs Caldicot reassured him. 'But I think you will find that, according to articles 93 and 94 of the appropriate international human rights legislation, Mrs Torridge has a perfect right to have herself bound and gagged, if that is what she wants.' She had no idea whether or not this was true. But it sounded convincing and she had learnt enough to realise that people who live by the rule book are for ever conscious that they can sometimes die by it too.

Mr Muller-Hawksmoor strode over to Mrs Torridge's chair. 'Did you ask to be tied up and gagged?' he demanded. Mrs Torridge stared up at him, unblinkingly.

'Mrs Torridge has a gag in,' said Ms Jones BA, who had emerged from behind her clipboard.

'I know she's got a gag in!' snapped Mr Muller-Hawksmoor.

'Would you like me to remove the gag?' asked Ms Jones BA.

'I don't think that's a terribly good idea,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I think Mrs Torridge will be very upset if you do that again.'

Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, turned round and glared at his assistant. 'I don't think it would be a good idea at this stage to remove the gag,' he said, speaking through gritted teeth.

'Would you like me to call the police?' asked Ms Jones BA.

'No, thank you,' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor.

'If you want to talk to her while she has the gag in place, we will have to create a communications code,' Ms Jones BA pointed out.

Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, turned his head and stared at her. 'Thank you, Ms Jones,' he said icily. 'Thank you so much for your help.' He turned back to Mrs Torridge. 'I am going to ask you some very simple questions,' he said. 'Do you understand that?'

Mrs Torridge stared at him.

'Nod if you understand me,' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor.

Mrs Torridge slowly but firmly nodded her head.

'There you are, Ms Jones!' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor proudly. 'We now have a communications system which will enable us to talk to Mrs Torridge.'

Ms Jones said nothing.

'Did you ask to be bound and gagged?' Mr Muller-Hawksmoor asked Mrs Torridge. 'Was it something you voluntarily requested, of your own free will? Or were you tied up and gagged against your will? Is it true that Mr Roxdale was responsible? If so, would you like us to call the police and have Mr Roxdale arrested?'

Confused by this flurry of questions Mrs Torridge said nothing.

'I think you'll have to ask one question at a time, Mr Muller-Hawksmoor,' suggested Ms Jones BA, perhaps unwisely. 'If you keep the questions simple so that she can just nod for 'yes' and shake her head for 'no'...'

'I do realise that, Ms Jones,' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, speaking to his assistant through teeth now gritted more thoroughly than any icy winter road. ‘I’m not a complete fool,’ he added.

Mrs Caldicot, who had been watching this bizarre exchange with considerable pleasure, suddenly became aware of someone standing next to her. She turned her head. It was Mrs Roberts.

‘I’m sorry to bother you, Mrs Caldicot,’ said Mrs Roberts quietly, but just loud enough for Mr Muller-Hawksmoor and Ms Jones BA to overhear. ‘But if you can spare a few moments you’re needed in your office.’

‘Excuse me,’ said Mrs Caldicot, turning to Mr Muller-Hawksmoor.

‘Of course, of course,’ said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, with an irritated wave of his hand. He had forgotten that Mrs Caldicot was still there. ‘You attend to your business.’

Mrs Caldicot followed Mrs Roberts into her office.

‘What is it?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘Can you deal with that?’ asked Mrs Roberts, nodding to a nice looking cup of tea and a plateful of jammy dodgers on her desk.

Mrs Caldicot beamed at Mrs Roberts. ‘Oh, I would think so,’ she said. ‘Where are yours?’

‘In the kitchen,’ said Mrs Roberts.

‘Well smuggle them in here,’ insisted Mrs Caldicot. ‘Let’s have a little party.’

Chapter 55

The arrival of Mr Muller-Hawksmoor and Ms Jones BA had not gone unnoticed among the other residents of the Twilight Years Rest Home.

'What do they want?' Mr Livingstone asked Mr Merivale, who had slipped out of the lounge and, followed faithfully by Miss Nightingale and Mrs Bartholomew was hurrying around the house warning the others that the enemy was within.

'I don't know,' admitted Mr Merivale.

'They're doing a census,' explained Mr Hewitt. 'They're going to count us all,' he explained. 'I think they're trying to prove that there aren't enough staff members for the number of residents.'

'Are you sure?'

Mr Hewitt nodded. 'I heard him say they'd come to do a census when Mrs Caldicot let them in.'

'I don't want to be counted,' said Mr Livingstone. 'Do you?'

'Certainly not,' replied Mr Hewitt. 'They'll be wanting to tattoo us with numbers next.'

'Do we have to let them count us?'

'I don't think so.'

'Right,' said Mr Livingstone. He closed his eyes and thought for a moment. 'I've got a plan,' he announced proudly.

The others waited.

'We'll just keep moving around,' said Mr Livingstone. 'Running up and down the stairs and hiding in cupboards. That sort of thing.'

The others looked terribly disappointed at this. Running up and down the stairs was not their forte and none of them would have put 'hiding in cupboards' at the top of their lists of favourite things to do on a dull afternoon.

'And we'll add to the confusion them by dressing up in different clothes,' continued Mr Livingstone. 'I know what these people are like. We all look the same to them.'

The others recognised the truth in what he said and looked more interested. They liked the idea of dressing up.

'I like that idea very much,' said Miss Nightingale. 'Can I dress up as Florence?'

'Florence who?'

'Florence Nightingale.'

'Of course you can,' said Mr Livingstone. He stopped and thought for a moment. 'Have you got anything suitable to wear?'

'Oh yes,' said Miss Nightingale. 'I've got an old nurse's uniform. I bought it a car boot sale.'

'Why on earth did you do that, dear?' asked Mrs Merivale, who enjoyed jumble sales but who had always managed to resist the temptation to buy things for which she could not immediately think of a practical application. She would buy a potato peeler for ten pence but not a first edition by Charles Dickens for a pound.

'No one else wanted it so I got it for a shilling,' explained Miss Nightingale. 'Well, five of those new pennies.' She looked thoughtful for a moment. 'I've never actually worn it,' she admitted. 'But it looks plenty big enough.'

'I think that's a terrific idea,' said Mr Hewitt. 'If we all dress up and run around the house Muller-Hawksmoor and that funny woman with the B.A. will think there are more of us than actually are...'

'Exactly!' said Mr Livingstone, triumphantly; delighted that his idea had received such approbation.

'...but that's not actually a terribly good idea,' continued Mr Merivale. 'If Mr Muller-Hawksmoor thinks that there are more of us than there really are, Mrs Caldicot will get into even more trouble that she would have got into if we hadn't done anything.' The others all looked at him, displaying roughly equal quantities of alarm and puzzlement. Although they loved Mrs Caldicot very much and did not want to do anything which would make things worse for her they didn't yet quite understand just how confusing Mr Muller-Hawksmoor could possibly cause trouble for Mrs Caldicot. 'We've got to convince him that there are enough members of staff for the number of residents,' explained Mr Merivale. 'If we convince him that there are more residents than there really are he will expect there to be far more nurses than there really are.'

The others thought about this for a while.

'Do you know, I think he's right,' said Miss Nightingale at last. The others nodded their agreement. Mr Merivale, who had been waiting for the result with all the nervousness of a politician on polling night, looked very relieved.

'Of course he's right,' said Mrs Merivale instantly. For her loyalty to her husband always came first.

'Let's go and find your uniform!' Mr Merivale said to Miss Nightingale.

She headed for her room. The rest of the residents hurried after her. Mr Livingstone, not a man to dwell on disappointment, hurried after her with them.

Chapter 56

‘We’re sunk,’ said Mrs Caldicot gloomily.

‘Why?’ asked Mrs Roberts.

‘They’ll close us down,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Every residential home is supposed to have the right proportion of staff members to residents. Muller-Hawksmoor will close us down today.’ She paused. ‘With great glee,’ she added.

‘But we’ve got the Merivales doing the cooking and Mr Roxdale doing the gardens,’ Mrs Roberts pointed out.

‘Yes, but you and I are the only official, paid members of staff,’ Mrs Caldicot pointed out. ‘As far as the Council is concerned the others don’t count.’

‘And because of that they’ll close us down?’

‘Yes.’

‘How many more members of staff do we need?’

‘One would do,’ said Mrs Caldicot. She sighed miserably. ‘But where am I going to find another member of staff at such short notice?’

‘Do we need somebody now?’

‘Now,’ agreed Mrs Caldicot. ‘We need another nurse on duty while Muller-Hawksmoor and Ms Jones BA are here.’

‘Oh dear,’ said Mrs Roberts.

‘I think that sums it up quite nicely,’ agreed Mrs Caldicot. ‘They’ll close us down,’ said Mrs Caldicot, flatly. ‘Without one other member of staff we’re in breach of E.U. regulations.’ She took another jammy dodger and bit into two.

Suddenly Mrs Roberts’s face brightened up. ‘I’ve got an idea!’ she said. ‘Why don’t I ask Miss Smith to help us out?’

Mrs Caldicot, munching on the first half of her jammy dodger, looked up. ‘Who’s Miss Smith?’

‘A friend of mine. She works at the ‘Happy Years Retirement Home’ round the corner.’

‘How on earth can she help?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘If she comes round we’ll have another member of staff, won’t we?’

Mrs Caldicot stared at Mrs Roberts. ‘Can we do that?’ she asked.

‘Of course she will. She hates bureaucrats too.’

‘It’s a bit dishonest, isn’t it?’ said Mrs Caldicot, slightly nervously.

‘We’re just trying to satisfy their silly rules,’ Mrs Roberts pointed out.

Mrs Caldicot swallowed the biscuit she had been chewing, leant across the desk and lowered her voice. ‘Do you think it will work?’

‘I don’t know,’ admitted Mrs Roberts. ‘But it might. And what have we got to lose? If we don’t try they’re going to close us down anyway.’

‘Ring her,’ said Mrs Caldicot firmly. She put the other half of the jammy dodger into her mouth. ‘Hrink jher!’

Mrs Roberts picked up the telephone.

‘Miss Smith, we’re in trouble,’ she said, moments later. ‘Can you help us out?’

There were some sympathetic sounds from the other end of the telephone.

‘We’ve got the inspectors in and we’re a nurse short,’ Mrs Roberts explained. She listened, smiled, nodded, said ‘thank you’, put the telephone down and turned to Mrs Caldicot. ‘She understood. She says she’ll come straight round,’ she said. ‘She’ll be here in five minutes.’

Chapter 57

The good news was that Miss Nightingale had found her nurse’s uniform. The bad news was that it didn’t fit her.

‘I can’t understand it,’ she said, as full of woe as a person can be over an outfit which does not fit. The dress wasn’t long but it looked as though it had been built for a prop forward. The top half of the dress hung loose in every possible direction and the sleeves were so long that they completely covered her fingertips.

‘Maybe we could adjust it,’ suggested Miss Nightingale, gloomily looking down at the ill-fitting uniform.

‘I don’t think so,’ said Mrs Merivale sadly. She was standing behind Miss Nightingale and examining the size printed on the label at the back. ‘It’s an XXXXL,’ she announced. ‘I think it must have been built for a rugby player.’

In fact, she was closer to the truth than she perhaps suspected. The nurse’s uniform had, in fact, arrived at the jumble sale where Miss Nightingale had found it from a theatrical costumier who had hired it out to large young gentlemen looking for something saucy to wear at fancy dress parties.

‘Who on earth is going to wear it?’ asked Mr Livingstone. ‘It’s miles too big for any of us.’

‘Hullo, everyone!’ said Jenkins, suddenly appearing, as though from nowhere. ‘I wondered where you’d all got to!’

Chapter 58

'I can't wear this!' protested Jenkins, as he was hurried along the landing towards the staircase. For the fifth time he stopped and stared himself in a mirror.

'Stop admiring yourself!' said Mr Roxdale.

'Men can be so vain,' said Miss Nightingale. 'That's at least four times he's looked at himself.'

'Give us a twirl!' suggested Mr Merivale, cruelly.

'Actually, I hate to say this,' said Mr Roxdale, who didn't at all. 'But that dress really suits you.' He stood back and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. 'You actually do look very nice.'

And the truth was that the nurse's uniform fitted Jenkins very well.

'I'm a respectable editor. I have a position to uphold. I can't be seen like this!' said Jenkins, though he immediately felt so embarrassed at the pomposity of what he had said that he knew that he would have to go through with it.

'I have to admit that if I weren't a happily married man I could quite fancy you,' said Mr Merivale. He turned to Mr Roxdale who was standing next to him. 'Hasn't he got lovely legs?'

'Amazing,' agreed Mr Roxdale, admiringly. 'They do say men have better legs than women.'

Mrs Merivale had lent Jenkins a wig which, she said, she sometimes wore on rather special occasions. Two grapefruit and an appropriate undergarment (loaned by Mrs Merivale) had been used to help fill in the baggy portion of the front of the dress. And Mrs Merivale had done Jenkins's make up so effectively that when he looked in the mirror he had to touch his chin with his forefinger to reassure himself that he truly was looking in a mirror.

'Ouch!' cried Jenkins. He turned round. 'Who did that?'

'You've got a lovely bottom too,' said Mr Roxdale.

'Well, I'd be grateful if you'd leave it alone,' said Jenkins.

'It was just a playful slap,' said Mr Roxdale. 'I thought you'd be flattered.'

'You are a terrible sexist pig, you know,' complained Jenkins. 'It's men like you who give men a bad name. If you do that again I'll bash you with my handbag.'

'Gosh,' said Mr Roxdale. 'You make more fuss about a little slap on the bottom than a real woman would.'

'You try slapping me on the bottom and see what it gets you!' said Miss Nightingale sternly.

'Why would I want to slap you on the bottom?' demanded Mr Roxdale, genuinely confused by this intervention, not to mention slightly horrified by the very thought of slapping Miss Nightingale on the bottom. He glanced across at the bottom in question and shuddered.

'We'd better get you downstairs and counted,' said Mr Livingstone.

'What's wrong with my bottom?' asked Miss Nightingale, full of indignation. Mr Roxdale tried to melt into the background.

'They'll spot that I'm a fraud in seconds!' protested Jenkins.

'No they won't,' insisted Mr Merivale.

'The minute I open my mouth they'll realise I'm not a woman,' protested Jenkins.

This comment was so obviously accurate that no one said anything for a few moments.

'So, keep your mouth shut,' said Mr Roxdale eventually. 'Don't say anything!' he added.

'But if they're doing a census they're bound to ask me my name,' said Jenkins.

'Try talking like a woman,' said Mr Roxdale. 'Let's see what you sound like.'

'What shall I say?'

'Say your name?'

'My name is Jenkins,' said Jenkins, in a rather bizarre falsetto.

'Not your real name,' said Mr Livingstone, despairingly.

'What name shall I give then?' asked Jenkins.

'Doris,' said Mr Merivale. 'You look like a Doris to me.'

'What the hell does a Doris look like?' demanded Jenkins.

'You,' replied Mr Merivale. 'You're definitely a Doris.'

'Doris what?'

'Day?' suggested Mr Merivale.

'Don't be silly. He doesn't look the slightest bit like Doris Day.' said Mrs Merivale.

'Dolittle,' suggested Miss Nightingale.

'Dolittle?' said Jenkins, puzzled. 'Why Dolittle?'

‘Because it goes nicely with Doris.’

Jenkins shook his head. ‘I don’t like Doris much,’ he said, reverting to his true voice. ‘But I like Dolittle even less. It reminds me of that daft bloke who talked to animals. It isn’t,’ he paused, searching for the appropriate word. ‘It isn’t believable. I want something believable.’

‘Night,’ suggested Mr Williams. He paused. The enthusiasm for his suggestion seemed muted. ‘Knight,’ he said. ‘With a ‘K’.’

‘Doris Knight,’ said Jenkins to himself. He repeated the name. ‘Actually, I quite like that,’ he admitted. ‘It sounds quite good.’ He tried out the falsetto again. ‘Doris Knight. Hmmm. Yes, I like that.’

‘He doesn’t sound very convincing, does he?’ said Miss Nightingale to everyone in general and no one in particular.

‘I’ll tell them you’ve got a sore throat,’ said Mr Merivale. ‘I’ll come with you and speak for you.’

‘Do you think that will work?’ asked Jenkins. He seemed unconvinced.

‘It will have to,’ said Mr Merivale with a sigh. He led the way. ‘Come on, Doris.’

Doris followed him down the stairs.

Chapter 59

Ms Jones BA was in the kitchen, checking the cupboards. She and Mr Muller-Hawksmoor had split up so that they could search the house more efficiently.

'Hello there, can I help you?' asked Mr Merivale.

Ms Jones BA, looking slightly embarrassed, shut the door to the cupboard she had been examining. 'We're doing a census,' she explained. 'We're checking the customer-staff ratio.'

'Good heavens!' said Mr Merivale. 'You don't want to waste your time doing that.' He tried to laugh at the thought, though the noise he made sounded more like a drain emptying. 'There are so many members of staff here that we spend our days falling over them.'

'As far as we are aware Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts are the only members of staff,' said Ms Jones BA coldly.

'And there's my wife and myself,' said Mr Merivale.

'You may help out,' said Ms Jones coldly. 'But you're registered as customers. You can't be staff as well.'

'Oh.' Mr Merivale sounded disappointed. 'And there's Doris,' he added.

'Doris?' repeated Ms Jones frowning. 'Who's Doris?'

'Doris Knight,' said Mr Merivale. 'She's around here somewhere.' He turned round and jumped slightly when he discovered that Doris was standing right behind him.

'There you are. What did I tell you? There are so many staff members in this place that they follow you around all over the place. Can't get a minute's peace and quiet.'

Mr Roxdale, Miss Nightingale, Mr Livingstone and the rest of the residents were lined up behind Doris.

'Your name is Doris?' said Ms Jones BA, consulting her clipboard.

'Yes,' replied Mr Merivale. 'She's Doris.'

'She's not on this list,' said Ms Jones.

'She's new,' replied Mr Merivale.

'She can answer for herself, can't she?' said Ms Jones.

'She's very shy,' said Mr Merivale. At the very same moment, Doris pointed to her throat. 'Sore throat!' she rasped hoarsely in a strange falsetto. 'And she's got a sore throat,' Mr Merivale added, without a moment's hesitation.

Ms Jones BA stared at Doris as though he thought he knew her. 'Haven't we met somewhere before?' she said.

'Oh I expect you've seen her around,' said Mr Merivale. 'She's always rushing around with a duster or a syringe. Polishing here, injecting there.'

'I thought you said she was new?'

'She is. But she's already done a lot of rushing around. Amazing hard worker.'

'Dusters and syringes?' said Ms Jones BA, putting all the emphasis on the second word. 'Polishing and injecting?' Once again the emphasis was on the second word. She glared at Doris searchingly. 'Are you a nurse or a cleaner?'

'She does a bit of both,' said Mr Merivale, quickly. 'We don't have any union demarcation rules here.'

'It's most unusual to hear of nurses doing the dusting,' said Ms Jones BA. 'And it would be illegal for a cleaner to give injections.'

'Oh she's fully qualified,' said Mr Merivale.

'Loads of diplomas,' said Mr Livingstone.

Doris looked down, as though overcome by modesty. Her gaze fell upon her black, size twelve, lace up brogues. There hadn't been time to find any more suitable footwear. She lifted her eyes quickly.

'I think I'd better ask Mrs Caldicot about Doris,' said Ms Jones BA, marching out of the kitchen.

She was very upset about this new discovery. It didn't look as though Mrs Caldicot was short of staff after all. And if Mrs Caldicot wasn't short of staff she and Mr Muller-Hawksmoor wouldn't be able to close down the retirement home. Unlike Mr Muller-Hawksmoor she had no financial incentive to put Mrs Caldicot out of business. She was doing it for sheer, unadulterated pleasure. She was doing it for fun. She liked her work.

Ms Jones BA was feeling very glum and very aggrieved as she headed up the stairs looking for Mrs Caldicot.

Chapter 60

'One of your grapefruit is slipping,' muttered Mr Livingstone to Doris.

Doris looked down. 'Oh damn.' 'She' unbuttoned her dress, slipped a hand inside and began to make the necessary adjustments. 'How on earth do women manage?' she demanded, in a whisper.

'I don't think they ever face quite that problem,' whispered Mr Livingstone to Doris. 'I'm speaking from memory, and memory can sometimes be very misleading, but I don't remember every coming across a woman who filled her bra with grapefruit.'

'No. I suppose not,' sighed Doris. 'If this goes on much longer I think I'll have breast reduction surgery. I'm sure I can cope with being flat-chested.' Her left bosom slipped through her fingers, slid down inside her dress and landed on the floor with something of a thud.

'Damn!' said Doris, forgetting her falsetto, her sore throat and her shyness.

Appropriately, the grapefruit rolled underneath a large chest. It was a large stripped pine chest of drawers but it was a large chest.

'I'll go and get you another,' said Mr Livingstone. 'We can always get that one back later.'

'There aren't any more,' said Mrs Merivale.

'No more grapefruit?'

'No. We only had two left. Those two.'

'Damn!' said Doris again. 'Then we'll have to get this one back. 'I can't go around looking lopsided.' She fell to her knees and tried to reach under the chest.

'Take the other one out,' suggested Mr Livingstone, still standing. 'We could say you've had that breast reduction surgery.'

Doris turned her head and glowered up at him. 'Don't be silly,' 'she' snapped. 'This dress needs a bosom. And anyway I'm not going around looking shapeless and flat-chested. I've got my pride, you know.'

'But a moment ago you said...'

'I changed my mind,' insisted Doris, turning back so that she could concentrate on searching for her missing grapefruit. 'Woman's prerogative.' She sat up for a moment and adjusted her remaining, solitary breast which had slipped out of position and was threatening to escape and join its companion in exile. 'If I've got to be a woman I damned well don't want to be a flat-chested one.'

'I'll help you,' said Mr Livingstone. He walked to the front door, collected an umbrella from a stand, and walked back to where Doris was on her knees. She looked up, slightly alarmed at the sight of the umbrella but Mr Livingstone simply sank to his knees and slid the umbrella around underneath the chest to help locate and retrieve the missing bosom.

'Do you want any help?' asked Mr Merivale.

'No thanks,' said Mr Livingstone, without looking up. 'Don't hang around here. You'll draw attention to us. Go and wait for us in the lounge.' He waved the umbrella around again underneath the chest.

'I think I've found it!' he said. He waved the umbrella around and dragged out an old slipper.

Chapter 61

Ms Jones BA hadn't found Mrs Caldicot. But, instead, she had found Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. He was wandering disconsolately around the empty bedrooms upstairs. The census wasn't going well. He had heard a lot of noise but had got there minutes after Doris and the rest had all headed back downstairs.

'They've got another nurse,' said Ms Jones BA glumly.

Mr Muller-Hawksmoor stared at her.

'I know,' agreed Ms Jones BA, seeing the disappointment and frustration on Mr Muller-Hawksmoor's face.

'Another nurse? And she works here?'

'So she says. The residents claim she does too.'

'I bet she's a fake.' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor firmly. 'Someone dressed up as a nurse.' He wasn't going to let his £50,000 windfall blow away this easily.

Suddenly Ms Jones BA snapped her fingers in delight. 'Do you know, you're right!' she said, excitedly. If she had been an entirely different person she might have kissed Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. 'I know where I've seen Doris before!' she said.

'Where?'

'That man who calls around to take Mrs Caldicot out. What's his name?' She struggled for a moment. 'Jenkins! That's his name. I heard someone say he's a journalist.' She looked very pleased with herself. `I knew I'd seen her somewhere before!' she said.

'Never seen him,' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. 'He's Mrs Caldicot's fancy man, you say?'

'Absolutely. I'm certain.'

'Right!' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, tucking his clip board under his arm and rubbing his hands with glee. 'I'll soon expose this little scam.'

Chapter 62

Mr Roxdale, Miss Nightingale, Mr Williams, Mr and Mrs Merivale and the rest of the residents headed for the lounge where they found Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts sitting facing Mrs Torridge offering her encouragement. Miss Smith, Mrs Roberts's friend, wearing a nurse's uniform, sat nearby. She had worked in nursing homes and rest homes for nearly twenty years and thought she'd seen everything. It wasn't the sight of a resident tied up which surprised her, but the sight of a resident who was tied up being encouraged to escape. Normally, in the homes where she had worked, the residents who were tied up were intended to stay that way.

'Come on, Mrs T!' said Mrs Caldicot. 'You're doing brilliantly.'

Mrs Torridge had, by rubbing her mouth against her shoulder managed to free part of the restraint which kept the yellow bloomers in her mouth. As a result of this energetic endeavour, Mr Roxdale's tie, the restraint holding the gag in place, had slid down towards her chin. Another half an inch and it would fall down around her neck, loose and irrelevant. At the same time Mrs Torridge had, by bouncing up and down in her chair, succeeded in loosening the ropes which bound her.

'Marvellous!' cried Mrs Roberts, enthusiastically.

The others, seeing that Mrs Torridge was very nearly free, offered her their verbal encouragement.

Suddenly Mr Muller-Hawksmoor burst into the room, followed at some distance, by Ms Jones BA.

'I'm sorry to butt in on what is undoubtedly a very important part of your management responsibilities,' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor to Mrs Caldicot. 'But I believe that you're trying to pull the wool over our eyes!'

'What on earth do you mean by that?' demanded Mrs Caldicot, with all the indignation of genuine innocence. She stood up, closely followed by Mrs Roberts and her friend the nurse.

'Is that the woman you claim is a staff members?' demanded Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, pointing at Miss Smith.

'She is a member of staff,' said Mrs Caldicot, quite accurately. 'But just not here,' she muttered under her breath.

'She's a fully qualified nurse,' said Mrs Roberts.

'Ha. That is no woman!' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. 'Here is your fraud!' And with that he strode across to Miss Smith.

'No!' cried Ms Jones BA. `Not that one!' But it was too late. Mr Muller-Hawksmoor had already struck. He had dropped his clipboard on the now empty sofa. With his left hand he had taken a good chunk of Mrs Roberts's friend's hair. And with his right he tore at the front of her uniform. His attempt to remove what he imagined to be a wig was, inevitably, a dismal failure since the hair he had got hold of was firmly attached to Mrs Roberts's friend's head. His lunge at her uniform was far more successful and while Ms Jones behind him stood frozen in horror, her arm outstretched in a belated attempt to stop Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, Mr Muller-Hawksmoor tore the woman's uniform from the neck to the hem, scattering buttons, badges and one of those funny little watches which nurses wear upside down, all over the carpet. 'This nurse is a man!' cried Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. It was quickly apparent that this accusation would receive no points for accuracy.

'Help!' screamed Mrs Roberts's friend, attempting to cover up her semi-nakedness in the time honoured fashion. One hand across her bra and the other across her panties. There could now be no doubt at all that Mrs Roberts's friend was not Jenkins in disguise. Nor could there be doubt that Mr Muller-Hawksmoor's allegation was entirely unjustified and unjustifiable.

'Oh dear me,' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. Horrified, he stepped back. 'Oh, golly. I'm so sorry...'

Mrs Roberts's friend was no shrinking violet. She had been in not entirely dissimilar situations before. Indeed, on one occasion, at a doctors' party at the hospital where she had trained, she had found herself in a situation which bore a startling resemblance to this one. But if a man was going to tear off her clothes in public she expected him to, at the very least, ply her with substantial amounts of alcohol and flattery. Mr Muller-Hawksmoor had done neither of these things. Abandoning her modest pose she pulled her right arm back, took a good pace forward and aimed a solid fist at Mr Muller-Hawksmoor's jaw.

Unfortunately, just as her first shot out Mr Muller-Hawksmoor moved slightly to one side. Ms Jones, standing behind him did not move. The nurse's fist landed not on the nose of Mr Muller-Hawksmoor's nose but on the nose of Ms Jones. Ms Jones, although hit only a glancing blow, collapsed as though felled by a boxing ox. When she realised that she had missed her primary target the nurse let fly with her other fist. This time the intended target was the recipient. Mr Muller-Hawksmoor hit the floor at almost exactly the same moment that Mrs Torridge succeeded in spitting out her gag and freeing herself of the ropes which had bound her. Mrs Torridge was not a woman for whom a grudge was a long-term affair. For her a grudge was something to get rid of in as rapid and as dramatic a fashion as was possible. 'Hoorah!' she shouted. She took two strides to where Ms Jones BA was attempting to sit up, bent down and proceeded to flatten the Council employee with a single, effective blow. Ms Jones BA collapsed again and lay sprawled on top of Mr Muller-Hawksmoor's unconscious body. Mrs Torridge, avenged, stood and beamed.

'Well, I do declare,' said Mrs Caldicot, who had watched these events with all the curiosity of a disinterested spectator. Just then Doris and Mr Livingstone entered the room. Mr Livingstone had succeeded in locating and rescuing Doris's missing grapefruit and the well-rounded citrus fruit, restored to its temporary owner, had been reinstalled in its new home.

'Mrs Caldicot,' said Mr Livingstone, taking advantage of the fact that both Mr Muller-Hawksmoor and Ms Jones BA were no longer taking much interest in the proceedings, stepping over the scattered bodies as though this was something he did every day of his life, 'I think you should meet Doris Knight, your new nurse,' he said.

Mrs Caldicot's reaction was not quite what he, or anyone else in the room, expected.

She burst into laughter. 'So,' she said eventually. 'Would someone like to explain to me why Jenkins is dressed up as a nurse with what looks very much like two grapefruit stuffed down his dress?'

Jenkins stared at her. 'Well damn me,' he said. 'You saw through it.'

'Would anyone like a cup of tea?' Mrs Caldicot asked. There was much murmuring of assent. 'I'll put the kettle on,' she said. She turned to Jenkins. 'Perhaps you'd be kind enough to ring for an ambulance, nurse,' she said.

Chapter 63

By the time the ambulance arrived both Mr Muller-Hawksmoor and Ms Jones had regained consciousness. Ms Jones, still sitting on the carpet, turned towards Mrs Caldicot. 'What happened?' she asked.

'You keep still, love,' one of the ambulance men told her. 'We'll have you on a stretcher in just a jiffy.'

'I don't need a stretcher!' snapped Ms Jones, turning towards the ambulance man and attempting, unsuccessfully, to struggle to her feet. She turned back to Mrs Caldicot and repeated her question.

'I'm afraid that Mr Muller-Hawksmoor sexually assaulted one of our nurses,' Mrs Caldicot told her. 'He tore off her dress and exposed her. You were helping him. The nurse simply defended herself.'

Ms Jones remembered. She would have gone pale, had her natural skin colour allowed such a thing. 'I wasn't helping him,' she said. There was a catch in her voice. 'I was trying to stop him!' she protested, rather weakly.

'I'm afraid that isn't quite how it seemed to the rest of us,' said Mrs Caldicot rather coldly.

'He thought the nurse was a fraud,' said Ms Jones. 'I...er...we...thought she was a man I recognised.'

'She wasn't,' pointed out Mrs Caldicot.

'No,' agreed Ms Jones. She closed her eyes and shuddered. 'I remember.'

'Come along now, love,' said the ambulance man, trying once again to move Ms Jones onto a stretcher which he had arranged on the floor next to her.

'I'm not your `love'!' snarled Ms Jones. The ambulance man recoiled, as though threatened by a snake. Ms Jones pushed away his helping hand and stood up. She wobbled for a moment and then sat down on the arm of a nearby easy chair. The ambulance man, looking rather hurt, picked up his stretcher and moved across to his colleague, who was kneeling next to Mr Muller-Hawksmoor.

'What happened?' asked Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, blinking and looking around him. There was a trickle of blood running from his nose and he still had a rather dazed look. He had never been hit before, let alone knocked out.

Ms Jones told him. She did not spare him any of the details. Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, being quite capable of going pale went pale. The pallor increased as he gradually realised the full consequences of what he had done.

'Is the nurse going to, er, press charges?' Mr Muller-Hawksmoor asked Mrs Caldicot.

'I don't think so,' replied Mrs Caldicot. 'Can I assume that this visit is now over and that you're happy with our staffing arrangements?'

'Oh absolutely,' said Mr Muller-Hawksmoor, eagerly. 'Very satisfied.' He did not struggle as the ambulancemen moved him onto their stretcher. He turned to Ms Jones as they wrapped a blanket around him.

A couple of minutes later the ambulance left, siren squealing, with Mr Muller-Hawksmoor in the back.

Ms Jones, having rejected offers of a cup of tea or a bed for an hour or two, drove after the ambulance. She was not a good driver and as the little car jumped and bounced down the rutted drive she had to concentrate hard on what she was doing. She had to concentrate so hard, in fact, that as the car left the driveway she did not notice the three people standing on the pavement nearby selling their last few bunches of flowers.

Chapter 64

The flower selling was going very well.

The arrival of Jenkins, still dressed as Doris, had added the glamour which Mr Roxdale and Mr Williams had been unable to provide, and had provided evidence to support the old adage that you can use sex - even the rather superficial sexual artifice of a middle aged man and two grapefruit sharing a frock - to sell virtually anything.

Attracted by the grapefruit rather than the middle aged man cars squealed to a halt by the pavement's edge and Mr Roxdale and Mr Williams sold every last freesia and dahlia in minutes.

'So,' said Mr Roxdale, contemplating several buckets, containing nothing but a few broken green stalks and some slightly grubby water, 'now what shall we do?'

'We could mend the roof,' suggested Mr Williams, without a moment's hesitation. 'That would give Mrs Caldicot a nice surprise.'

'That's a splendid idea,' agreed Mr Roxdale, with a nod of approval. 'Mrs Caldicot would be delighted.'

'She's been trying for weeks to find someone to put those loose slates back,' said Mr Williams.

'Even if she could find someone they'd no doubt charge a fortune,' said Mr Roxdale.

'So we'll do it,' said Mr Williams.

'It can't be all that hard,' said Mr Roxdale.

'I shouldn't think so,' agreed Mr Williams. 'But we'll need a ladder.'

'Can't do it without a ladder,' nodded Mr Roxdale.

'Big ladder,' said Mr Williams. 'Have to be a big ladder.'

'Long way up to the roof,' said Mr Roxdale.

'Long way,' agreed Mr Williams.

Jenkins, still disguised as Doris, feared that mending roofs might prove more demanding than selling flowers. 'Does either of you know anything about mending roofs?' he asked.

'Don't be a wet blanket,' said Mr Williams, sharply.

'It can't be all that difficult,' insisted Mr Roxdale. 'I've known several roofers and they were all complete idiots. I knew one who failed his driving test three times.'

'I know where there's a ladder,' said Mr Williams. 'I saw one round the back. In the shed. Hanging on two nails on the wall.'

'What on earth has failing a driving test got to do with mending roofs?' asked Jenkins.

It was not an entirely unreasonable question but the other two didn't hear him and so they didn't bother to try to answer. They were half way up the driveway, carrying their empty buckets (they had emptied the water down a nearby drain and stuffed the remaining bits of greenery behind a bush so that they could, as Mr Roxdale put it, 'compost down') and hurrying towards the hut where Mr Williams felt sure he had seen a ladder.

Chapter 65

They found an old wooden ladder just where Mr Williams had remembered seeing it, and carried it around to the front of the house.

‘Gosh,’ said Mr Roxdale, looking up. ‘They put the roof up very high, didn’t they?’

Mr Williams started up the ladder, reached the third rung and stopped. ‘I feel dizzy,’ he said. ‘Hold the ladder. It keeps going round and round.’

‘You’re only two feet off the ground,’ Mr Roxdale told him. ‘And I am holding the ladder.’

‘I never did have much of a head for heights,’ Mr Williams admitted.

‘I’ll blindfold you,’ suggested Mr Roxdale. ‘If you can’t see anything you’ll be fine.’

‘What are you going to do when you get up there?’ asked Jenkins.

‘He’s going to mend the roof,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘He can either take off the blindfold or else I’ll shout instructions.’

‘But what’s he going to mend the roof with?’ asked Jenkins.

Neither of the other two said anything. Mr Williams, still standing on the ladder, turned and looked at Mr Roxdale. Mr Roxdale looked back at him.

‘He won’t know that until he takes a look around,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘If the slates have just slipped then all he needs to do is to climb onto the roof and push them around a bit.’

‘I’m going to get out of this dress,’ said Jenkins, deciding that things were getting a little too serious for him to be sharing a dress with two grapefruit. He hurried off towards the front door just as fast as his high heels would allow.

As he disappeared, Mr Williams turned. ‘Climb up onto the roof?’ he said, clearly startled. ‘No one said anything about climbing onto the roof. I don’t like this ‘all he needs to do is climb onto the roof’ stuff. What do you think I am? A cat?’ Clearly unhappy, he stepped back down a rung. The wooden rung, which had held his weight when he’d been going up decided that it had had enough and snapped in two.

‘That’s it,’ he said, jumping down onto the ground. ‘I’ve had enough. I’m not going up there again. It was terrifying.’

‘Hello, there,’ said another voice. ‘What are you lot doing?’ They all turned. It was Mr Merivale. They explained.

‘But we’re all a bit nervous,’ admitted Mr Williams. ‘It’s a long way up and the ladder is rotten.’

‘You speak for yourself,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘I didn’t say I was nervous.’

‘Then why don’t you go up the ladder?’ demanded Mr Williams, not unreasonably.

‘Someone has got to stay down here and give instructions,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘I’m management.’

‘Since when?’ asked Mr Williams.

‘Since we decided to mend the roof,’ replied Mr Roxdale.

‘I’ll go up,’ offered Mr Merivale.

‘OK!’ said Mr Williams and Mr Roxdale simultaneously. ‘If you insist,’ added Mr Williams.

Gingerly, Mr Merivale tested the bottom rung of the ladder with his foot. It snapped in two. He tested another rung, by putting his weight onto it. That broke too. Now the bottom three rungs were all broken. ‘Is this the best ladder you’ve got?’ he asked.

‘It’s the only one we’ve got,’ replied Mr Williams.

‘I really don’t think you should go up it,’ said Mr Williams. ‘I don’t think it looks very safe.’

Mr Merivale smiled at him, put his right foot onto the edge of the lowest remaining rung and launched himself upwards. He scampered up the ladder more like a monkey than a man and reached the very top of the ladder in less time than it would have taken any of the others to run the same distance on the flat. Every rung snapped as he ran upwards. As soon as Mr Merivale reached the top of the ladder he clambered onto the roof and Mr Roxdale, down below, was left holding two long thin pieces of wood which were no longer connected to one another.

‘He made it!’ said Mr Williams.

Mr Roxdale struggled to hold onto the two separated poles but failed. The two side pieces of the former ladder fell sidewards and crashed onto the ground.

‘That was absolutely amazing!’ said Mr Roxdale. He and Mr Williams looked at each other, then up at Mr Merivale, and then back at each other. They then clapped enthusiastically

‘What do I do now I’m up here?’ yelled Mr Merivale, peering over the edge of the roof and shouting down. He waited for some response.

But down below Mr Roxdale and Mr Williams had panicked and had rushed into the house to fetch help.

There was a long pause. ‘Er...why did I come up here?’ Mr Merivale called. ‘Is anyone there? Hello? Hello? Is anyone there?’

Chapter 66

There was some dispute about who panicked first.

Mr Williams claimed that it was Mr Roxdale. ‘It was definitely Mr Roxdale,’ he still claims. ‘Mr Roxdale ran into the house and telephoned for the fire brigade.’

‘I didn’t panic at all,’ insisted Mr Roxdale. ‘Mr Williams was hysterical. He was convinced that Mr Merivale was going to fall off the roof. I quietly walked into the house and telephoned for the fire brigade before things got completely out of control.’

The fire brigade arrived within ten minutes (a huge, bright red engine and a large number of large men still buttoning up their tunics and stuffing stockinged feet into their boots, as though they had all been disturbed at some extraordinary single sex orgy) but by then it was dark. The residents and staff of the Twilight Years Rest Home were gathering and standing on the lawn looking up at the roof. Jenkins had had time to take off his dress but not time to put on his trousers. He shivered in Doris’s underwear.

‘I can’t see any fire,’ said Mr Livingstone, who had left the house with Mr Roxdale to join Mr Williams on the lawn and was now peering up at the house, the roof and the sky, searching in vain for flames or smoke.

Before leaving the house Mr Livingstone had broken the glass on the fire alarm just inside the front door. It was something he had always wanted to do but the fulfilling of this simple ambition had, in the effect, proved to be rather disappointing.

‘There’s isn’t a fire,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘Someone is stuck up on the roof.’

‘The ladder simply fell apart,’ explained Mr Williams.

‘Why did he go up there in the first place?’ asked Mr Livingstone.

Mr Roxdale explained.

‘Who is it?’ demanded Mrs Merivale. ‘Who’s stuck up there?’

Mr Williams looked at her and placed a comforting hand on her arm. ‘It’s Mr Merivale,’ he said.

‘My Mr Merivale?’ said Mrs Merivale.

‘Yes,’ admitted Mr Livingstone. ‘I’m afraid it is.’

‘Oh well he’ll be all right,’ said Mrs Merivale. ‘Who on earth called the fire brigade?’ she demanded. Mr Livingstone stared at her and assumed that she was in shock. ‘I’ll fetch you a blanket and a cup of tea,’ he said. `Would you like some brandy in it or sugar?’

‘What’s happened?’ demanded Mrs Roberts, looking up at the front of the house. ‘Where’s the fire?’ On Mrs Caldicot’s instructions she had left the house to start a roll call of the residents.

Mr Roxdale explained.

‘Who’s in charge here?’ demanded a stout, round faced man whose helmet carried a very large badge and an instantly identifiable yellow flash.

‘Mrs Caldicot,’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘She’ll be here in a moment,’ she began. ‘Oh, there she is!’ she said, interrupting herself and pointing towards the front door where Mrs Caldicot was following Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough down the steps. Mrs Caldicot was holding Kitty and a torch. Kitty looked very upset at having been moved from her warm place in front of the fire.

‘Is everyone out of the building?’ demanded the stout man, striding over towards Mrs Caldicot.

‘I’m not sure,’ replied Mrs Caldicot. She walked towards Mrs Roberts, standing with the residents and asked her the same question. She remembered, too late, that she had forgotten to put the fireguard in front of the fire.

‘Everyone except Mr Merivale,’ said Mrs Roberts.

‘Mr Merivale?’ called out Mrs Caldicot. She decided that not having put the guard in front of the fire didn’t much matter if the house was already on fire.

‘I’m here,’ said Mr Merivale from the darkness at the outer edge of the group.

‘Everyone is accounted for,’ said Mrs Caldicot, feeling a great sense of relief.

‘We had a report that there was a man stuck on a roof,’ said the chief fire officer.

‘Perhaps I can explain,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘It was an accident.’

‘I rather thought it might have been,’ said the chief fire officer, drily. ‘Most of our ‘men stuck on roofs’ incidents are accidents. Where exactly is he and what happened?’

‘I’m not sure where he is. We can’t see him. But a friend of ours climbed up onto the roof to repair some slipped slates,’ explained Mr Roxdale. ‘And then the ladder broke.’

The chief fire officer removed his helmet and scratched his head. ‘And he’s still up there?’

‘He must be,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘He couldn’t have come down because we don’t have another ladder.’ He lowered his voice and looked around to make sure that no one else was listening before adding, ‘And if he had fallen off we’d see the body, wouldn’t we?’

The chief fire officer walked over to the fire engine and gave some brief instructions. Moments later the fire engine’s huge ladder swung into action, slowly rising up into the sky. A fireman stood on the top rung of the ladder and rose with it. A searchlight attached to the top of the ladder lit up the house roof.

At the back of the crowd Mr Merivale put his arm around his wife. ‘Exciting, isn’t it?’ he said to her. She looked at him. ‘I thought it was you up there.’

‘Oh no,’ he replied. ‘I came down. It was cold and I didn’t know what I was supposed to be doing up there anyway.’

‘That’s good,’ said Mrs Merivale. ‘Would you like me to get you some cake in a minute?’

‘That would be nice,’ said Mr Merivale. ‘And a cup of tea perhaps. Who’s up there? Do you know?’

‘I dunno,’ replied his wife. ‘Someone said it was you but I told them they wouldn’t need the fire brigade to get you down. How did you get down? Down a drain pipe?’

‘No. The guttering and down pipes were all too loose. I just took a few slates off the roof, climbed down into the loft and then came down the stairs,’ Mr Merivale told her.

‘Best way,’ nodded his wife, who after being married to a film stunt man for forty years was accustomed to her husband’s acrobatic ways.

Chapter 67

‘I can’t see anyone up here,’ shouted the fireman at the top of the ladder. ‘But there’s a big hole in the roof.’

‘That’s why we wanted to go up there,’ explained Mr Roxdale to Mrs Caldicot. ‘We thought we’d mend the roof for you. As a sort of surprise. Mr Merivale climbed up but the ladder broke.’

‘That was very sweet of you,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘But there shouldn’t have been a big hole in the roof. There was only a tiny leak.’

‘The slates have all been removed very carefully,’ said the fireman at the top of the ladder. ‘None of them is broken.’

‘Very odd,’ said the chief fire officer. ‘Is the hole big enough for a man to get through?’ he shouted back.

‘Yes,’ came the reply.

‘I’m just popping indoors to get some cake and a cup of tea for my husband,’ said Mrs Merivale to Mrs Caldicot. ‘Shall I make enough for everyone?’

‘Would your men like a cup of tea and a piece of cake?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘Well, that’s very nice of you,’ agreed the chief fire officer. ‘I dare say they wouldn’t say no. Would that be home-made cake?’

‘It certainly would,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘And Mrs Merivale is a splendid cook.’ She turned back to Mrs Merivale. ‘Tea and cake for everyone then, please,’ she said. ‘Do you need some help? I could ask someone to help you if you like.’

‘Oh no, don’t you worry, Mrs Caldicot’ said Mrs Merivale. ‘Mr Merivale will give me a hand.’ And off she trotted.

It was several seconds before Mrs Caldicot realised exactly what Mrs Merivale had said.

Chapter 68

The chief fire officer was very understanding.

‘Just delighted that everything turned out well,’ he said, alternately sipping a mug of Mrs Merivale’s tea and munching a large slice of her very best coffee and walnut cake. ‘How old did you say that chap was who climbed back through the roof?’

‘When I last asked he told me that he was eighty-something,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Probably.’ She didn’t like to admit that her residents had stopped telling the truth about their ages.

‘Amazing,’ said the chief fire officer. ‘Would you like us to mend that hole in your roof while we’re here?’ he asked.

‘That would be very kind of you,’ agreed Mrs Caldicot. ‘But I don’t want you to put you to any trouble...’

‘No trouble at all,’ the chief fire officer assured her. ‘A couple of my blokes do a little roofing in their spare time,’ he added. He called one of men and gave him instructions. The fireman raced up the ladder to the roof and had the slates fixed back in position in minutes.

‘Good as new,’ he said, when he was back down on the ground. Mrs Merivale handed him a plate containing a large piece of carrot cake, two buttered scones and a slice of treacle tart.

‘Well, at least this added a bit of excitement to your life,’ said the chief fire officer, as they prepared to leave. ‘I expect it’s a bit dull running an old folks home.’

Chapter 69

'How much did we make out of selling flowers?' asked Mr Williams, as he and Mr Roxdale had breakfast together the following morning.

'With Doris's help we got up to £112.45,' replied Mr Roxdale. 'That was the takings. But since we didn't have any costs it was also the profits.'

'Not bad. But it's going to take us for ever to raise a decent amount of money,' said Mr Williams.

'And we've sold most of the stuff from my old garden,' said Mr Roxdale with a sigh. 'It'll be months before we have anything else ready to sell.'

'I do wish Mrs Caldicot would accept another couple of photographs,' said Mr Williams, who had, some time before, confided in his friend. 'It would solve a lot of problems.'

'Women can be stubborn sometimes,' said Mr Roxdale. 'It'll probably be pride.'

'Maybe we could think of a way to persuade her to take the money in another way,' said Mr Williams.

They sat for a few moments in silence.

'We're holding a jumble sale soon,' said Mr Roxdale, 'Perhaps you could slip a couple of photographs onto the bric-a-brac stall?'

Mr Williams thought about this. 'They'd probably get sold for 10 pence a piece,' he said, glumly.

'That's true,' agreed Mr Roxdale.

'But maybe there is another way...' said Mr Williams with a big smile.

Chapter 70

It was the day of the jumble sale and fete and, much to everyone's surprise, it wasn't raining. On the contrary, the sky was blue, the clouds were small, white and fluffy and the sun was shining brightly. It was, all things considered, pretty much a perfect day for an outdoor event of any kind.

The event was due to start at ten in the morning and by half past nine all the stalls were stocked and manned. Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough were in charge of the bottle stall, Mrs Torridge was selling hand coloured paper doilies (each one carefully painted by Rembrandt's long lost great niece), Mr Livingstone was running a sideshow where visitors could rent three wooden balls for 50 pence and then throw them at pieces of crockery set out on the shelves of the Welsh dresser borrowed from the kitchen, Mr Williams had organised a competition to guess how many peas there were in a jar and the Merivales were running the cake stall (fairy cakes, rock buns, slices of sponge cake all 50 pence each). Other residents were similarly occupied looking after other stalls. Mr Twist was in charge of collecting and counting the takings. Kitty, who was, as usual, in charge of sleeping was taking a long rest underneath the cake stall. The throwing water over the vicar stall had been abandoned; largely as a result of an acute shortage of vicars.

The first visitors, an elderly couple who were friends of the Merivales, arrived at 10.15 a.m. They visited the roll a penny stall (and won a bottle of tomato ketchup) and the bottle stall (and won a bottle of brown sauce). They bought two cups of tea, two rock cakes and three paperback books from a stall run by Mr Roxdale. The next visitors, a family of three who had seen the stalls from the road as they had been passing by, arrived at 10.50, invested £2.50 in fruitless attempts to win a goldfish and left, grumbling, at 10.58.

At 11.03 Miss Nightingale's niece, Daisy, arrived on her way to the airport. She kept her taxi waiting and stopped just long enough to win a bottle of pickled eggs and buy a pair of dark green fingerless gloves from Mr Roxdale's jumble stall.

'The residents and I have got a little surprise for you,' said Miss Nightingale, just before her niece rushed off again. She shyly handed Daisy a battered, elderly canvas weekend bag. Puzzled, and feeling rather embarrassed to receive a gift when she herself did not have one to give, Daisy accepted the bag, put it down on a nearby stall and tugged at the zip which opened to reveal a mass of small bottles and packets.

'We all collected some pills for you,' explained Miss Nightingale. 'None of them has been used.'

Daisy plunged a hand into the bag and pulled out two unopened packets of antibiotics and a sealed bottle of painkillers. She was crying with joy and appreciation when she left and gave everyone except Mr Roxdale a kiss and a cuddle. Mr Roxdale, who ran to the end of the line, managed to get kissed and cuddled twice.

'So that's why poor old Dr Bence-Jones spent hours writing out prescriptions,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Please don't be cross with us,' said Miss Nightingale. 'It was in a good cause.'

'It was in a good cause,' said Mrs Peterborough.

Mrs Caldicot smiled at them both. 'Why on earth should I be cross with you?' she asked them. 'I'm very proud of you all.'

After the excitement of Daisy's visit the stallholders and jumble salesmen and women had a respite, and yet another opportunity to view one another's wares and prizes, until the next arrival at 11.40. The next arrival was Jenkins.

'Are we too early?' the immaculately suited newspaperman asked Mrs Caldicot, who was standing talking to Mrs Roberts.

'No,' replied Mrs Caldicot. 'We're just having something of a lull at the moment.'

'I've brought Samantha Duck-Warmington,' said Jenkins, introducing his companion, a leggy blonde woman who looked about 18 and was wearing gold, high-heeled shoes and a tight fitting gold lame dress that appeared to have been manufactured out of a piece of material just about large enough to make a handkerchief. Her enormous, unrealistically firm breasts appeared to be balanced on a tiny shelf inside the dress. She was dragging behind her a huge aluminium coloured suitcase, the tiny wheels of which did not move well on the lawn.

Mrs Caldicot smiled at the woman but, to her surprise, was conscious that she felt an inexplicable antagonism towards her.

'Samantha reads the weather forecasts on a Welsh Cable Television station programme,' explained Jenkins. 'She was in the area for the weekend and kindly agree to come along and officially open the fete for you.'

'Oh that's very kind of you, dear,' said Mrs Caldicot to Samantha. She realised, with some surprise, that she disliked Samantha because she was jealous.

'It's a pleasure, I'm sure,' said Samantha, beaming insincerely. 'Can you show me to my dressing room, please?'

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘My dressing room,’ repeated Samantha. ‘So that I can change into something more suitable for the photographers.’

Mrs Caldicot was about to point out that the only photographer present was Mr Williams who was, she felt uncertain, unlikely to have had much experience as a paparazzi photographer when Mrs Roberts spoke.

‘Shall I take Samantha to her dressing room?’ she asked. ‘I think we decided that your office would be suitable?’

‘Oh, thank you, Mrs Roberts,’ said Mrs Caldicot, now wondering just what Samantha had in her bag which she felt would be more suitable wear for a jumble sale among geriatrics.

‘I’m sorry about Samantha,’ said Jenkins, when she and Mrs Roberts had gone. ‘I asked our show business department to find someone who was free and willing to come along and open the jumble sale for you.’ He shrugged. ‘But there must be some big show business event going on somewhere else today. When my reporters rang round all their contacts they found that everyone famous was busy today. Samantha was all they could find.’

‘She seems very young,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

Chapter 71

It wasn’t until 12.55 pm that Mrs Caldicot realised that the day wasn’t going to go quite as she had expected.

She and Jenkins were eating crumbly pies, sipping tea from plastic beakers and wondering whether the good weather would hold when a limousine cruised into the driveway. The number of guests had, by now, risen quite considerably and the event no longer looked quite so forlorn. The limousine stopped and most of the residents and guests, including Mrs Caldicot and Jenkins, stopped what they were doing to see who got out of it.

‘That man looks like Michael Caine,’ said Mrs Caldicot to Jenkins.

‘That man is Michael Caine,’ said Jenkins.

Mrs Caldicot turned and looked at him.

‘One of the reporters must have got lucky,’ explained Jenkins. ‘I wish they’d telephoned and let me know.’

Mr Caine straightened his jacket, looked around, as though searching for someone he was expecting to see, and smiled generically as people recognised him. Suddenly, there was something of a commotion from near the cake stall and Mrs Merivale, followed closely by her husband, hurried across to greet the film star. The film star put his arm around her and gave her a kiss. She kissed him back. Mr Caine then shook hands warmly with Mr Merivale and punched him playfully on the shoulder.

‘They know him,’ whispered Mrs Caldicot. ‘Mr and Mrs Merivale really do know him!’

‘He was one of the stars they said they would invite,’ remembered Jenkins. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that several of the guests had taken out their mobile phones and were excitedly calling friends to tell them who had arrived and what they were missing.

‘I don’t believe it,’ whispered Mrs Caldicot. ‘Look,’ she added, ‘they’re bringing him over here.’ Moments later Maple Merivale introduced Mr Caine to Mrs Caldicot and Jenkins and Mrs Caldicot and Jenkins to Mr Caine.

‘Thank you so much for coming,’ Mrs Caldicot managed to croak.

‘It’s a pleasure,’ said Mr Caine, with a beaming smile. ‘I’d never turn down an invitation from Maple and Maurice.’

‘You, er, all know one another, then?’ said Mrs Caldicot.

Mr Caine laughed. ‘Know them? I love them both dearly,’ he said with evident sincerity. ‘I can’t remember how many times we’ve worked together. Maple is a wonderful cook. Film crews all over the world loved her. It broke everyone’s heart when she retired. She must have prepared more bacon sandwiches than any woman alive.’ He turned to Maurice. `And Maurice was one of the most amazing stunt men I ever worked with.’ He hesitated then grinned. ‘This guy,’ he said, ‘once won a bet that he could shin up the outside of a building faster than anyone else could get up using the lift or the stairs.’ He laughed. Maurice looked embarrassed and modestly lowered his eyes.

‘Excuse me, Mr Caine,’ said a middle aged woman in a flowery dress and a straw hat. She thrust a mobile telephone towards his face. ‘Would you just say hello to my mother? She’s a great fan of yours.’

Unflustered, and with great grace, Mr Caine took the telephone and spoke to the invisible fan. As he did so a large gleaming green Bentley purred into the driveway and pulled up behind Mr Caine’s limousine. The chauffeur got out and opened the back door.

‘I don’t believe it,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Look who’s getting out. It’s Roger Moore!’

Chapter 72

By two o'clock there were seven limousines, Bentleys and Rolls Royces parked in the driveway and Mr Caine and Mr Moore had been joined by (in order of their arrival) Sean Connery, Joan Collins, Peter O'Toole, Pierce Brosnan, Glenda Jackson and Dame Judi Dench. Each one had been invited by the Merivales and each one greeted both Maple and Maurice with kisses, hugs and obvious great delight. The relatively small number of stars who hadn't been able to turn up (in every case because they were filming out of the country) had sent their sincerest apologies and promised that they would be delighted to visit another time.

Not surprisingly, the number of other visitors present on the lawn at the Twilight Years Rest Home had also increased. A generation or two ago the news of such an event would have been spread by word of mouth and limited by the speed at which legs could carry the messengers (and their willingness to leave the scene of all the excitement). Today those present could spread the news in seconds, without moving an inch - simply by pressing a few buttons on their mobile telephones.

The stars mingled easily and willingly, both with one another and with the eager autograph hunters. Cameras flashed incessantly as visitors recorded themselves standing next to their heroes and heroines.

'Excuse me, ma'am, are you Mrs Caldicot?' said a smartly uniformed senior looking policeman.

Mrs Caldicot confirmed her identity.

'I wish you'd given us a little notice of this,' said the police officer, rather sternly. 'I've brought over as many men as I can spare. I hope the local football crowd behaves itself. We've had to bring in most of the chaps from the local ground.' Mrs Caldicot started to explain, realised that she couldn't and so just nodded weakly and said 'Thank you'.

She was saved by the arrival of Samantha who had, at least, managed to complete her change of costume. She was now wearing a silver lame dress, no more or less revealing than the one in gold, and silver high heel shoes. Her still unlikely looking breasts still lay quietly on display, like two pink blancmanges presented for the world's delight.

'Would you like me to perform the opening ceremony now?' Samantha asked Mrs Caldicot, seemingly unaware of the fact that the lawn and those parts of the driveway not occupied by expensive motor cars, were solid with people. The policeman, who had remained standing nearby, studied Samantha carefully until a teenage boy with a cheap camera tried to take a snap of the two together; he then blushed, coughed, looked uncomfortable and hurried away to rescue Mr Brosnan from a cluster of small, over-eager boys.

'Er, oh, er, that's very kind of you,' replied Mrs Caldicot. Samantha gave Mrs Caldicot one of her best smiles. 'Oh how sweet!' she said, suddenly spotting Roger Moore talking to Joan Collins. She clapped her hands together like an excited child. 'You've hired some of those lookalikes!'

Samantha stood on an upturned wooden box which Jenkins had found underneath one of the trestle tables, and announced the fete and jumble sale officially open. She seemed blissfully unaware of the fact that no one seemed in the slightest bit interested in her or what she was doing. Jenkins delighted her by taking her photograph with a disposable camera he had bought for five times its cost from a boy of twelve who had spotted a commercial opportunity and brought a bagful of such cameras from the nearest branch of Boots the chemists.

Afterwards the happy weather girl mixed with the guests and posed for photographs with several film stars. Endearingly, she still did not realise that they really were film stars. She believed that she was honouring them by allowing herself to be photographed next to them. 'This will help you get your picture into the papers,' she told a smiling but slightly puzzled Peter O'Toole. 'You look just like him,' whispered the well-meaning weather girl, as she hobbled off to give Michael Caine's career a boost.

Chapter 73

'That was a wonderful day,' said Jenkins.

'It was, wasn't it?' replied Mrs Caldicot.

The two of them stood on the steps and looked out across the lawn. The local publican and two of her barmen were reclaiming the tables and umbrellas which he had lent. Mr Roxdale and Mr Williams were helping them by offering advice and instructions. Balloons and bunting decorated the trees. One or two visitors still stood around polishing off the final few sandwiches and fancy cakes.

'Mr and Mrs Merivale really came up trumps,' said Jenkins. 'Not since the Oscars have I seen so many stars in one place at the same time.'

'I feel really guilty,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I didn't think they really knew any of those people.'

'Nor did I,' admitted Jenkins.

'And thank you to you for bringing along...,' Mrs Caldicot paused. 'I'm sorry I've forgotten her name again. That nice girl. The weather forecaster.'

Jenkins laughed and looked down at his feet. 'Samantha,' he said. 'I'm sorry about her. But at least I know now where all the stars were.'

'Sorry? Don't be silly. It was really good of you to bring her,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'She was good fun.'

'Actually she was good fun, wasn't she?' said Jenkins, brightening up. 'Perhaps not in the way she had meant...'

'I heard her tell Joan Collins that she would put in a good word for her with you,' said Mrs Caldicot.

Jenkins, embarrassed, covered his face with his hands and shook his head. 'What did Miss Collins say?' he asked.

'She thanked Samantha very much and said it was very kind of her,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'I overheard her asking Sean Connery if he had a visiting card that she could give to her agent,' said Jenkins. 'She told him she thought he looked so much like Mr Connery that he ought to be able to get some stand-in work in the movies.'

They both giggled. Jenkins put his arm around Mrs Caldicot.

'She is very beautiful,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'You're more vibrant, more exciting, more dynamic and more beautiful than she is, ever has been or ever will be,' said Jenkins.

Mrs Caldicot, embarrassed, looked down at her hands. They were, she could not help noticing, showing rather too many wrinkles and liver spots. What, she wondered, were liver spots? Did they have anything to do with the liver? She suspected not. She wished Jenkins wouldn't compliment her. She wondered if he meant it. She blinked and bit her lower lip to stop herself crying. For the first time in her life she had found a man who gave her compliments, and who, even more remarkably, seemed to mean them. And now he was going to America.

There was silence for a moment. Jenkins seemed aware that she was upset. He thought that perhaps his compliment had offended her. He took his arm from around her. 'Was it all a financial success?' he asked.

'Oh yes. The whole day hardly cost us anything,' said Mrs Caldicot.

Jenkins looked at her. 'What do you mean 'It hardly cost us anything'?'

Even in the gloaming it wasn't difficult to see that Mrs Caldicot was blushing.

'Well, we didn't charge people to come in,' confessed Mrs Caldicot. 'And there were so many people here that the stalls didn't do very good business.' She looked at Jenkins. 'Isn't it funny how word gets around? Someone told me that there were half a dozen coaches parked outside in the street. How did all those people hear about it? How did they get here? Where did they come from?'

'You didn't make any money?' said Jenkins.

'No,' admitted Mrs Caldicot. 'At least, I don't think so. The only stall that hasn't finished counting its takings is the 'Guess the Number of Peas in a Bottle' stall and I don't expect they've taken very much. When the people did start coming there were so many that no one could move around to buy anything. I don't think people could get their hands into their pockets or their handbags. Most of the visitors just spent the afternoon ogling the stars and collecting autographs.' She looked up at him. 'Are you cross with me?' she asked anxiously.

He laughed. 'Cross with you? Why should I be cross with you?'

'All that effort...,' began Mrs Caldicot. For a moment she looked sad. But the sadness quickly disappeared. 'But people had a good time didn't they?'

'People had a wonderful time,' Jenkins assured her. 'An absolutely brilliant time. You gave everyone a day they will never, ever forget.'

'Actually, even Roger Moore said it was quite a day,' said Mrs Caldicot. She leant closer to Jenkins. 'He wiggled his eyebrow for me,’ she whispered.

Jenkins looked at her, slightly askance. ‘I didn’t realise you were the sort of woman who’d let Roger Moore wiggle an eyebrow at her.’

‘He was wearing his glasses,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘Oh, that’s all right then,’ agreed Jenkins.

‘Excuse me, Mrs Caldicot,’ said Mrs Roberts, appearing as though by magic by her side. ‘There’s a telephone call for you.’

Chapter 74

'It's your son,' said Mrs Roberts, leading Mrs Caldicot to her own office. 'Derek,' she added, just in case Mrs Caldicot had forgotten his name.

'Hello, Derek,' said Mrs Caldicot, picking up the telephone.

'Why didn't you tell us?' Derek demanded, indignantly.

'Hello, Derek. How nice to hear from you. How are you, dear?' said Mrs Caldicot.

'You know that I'm an enormous fan of James Bond. And you had three of them there without telling me.'

'Did we?' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Oh yes, I suppose we did. They just popped round for the jumble sale.'

'I couldn't believe it when I heard it on the news!'

'Gosh. Was it on the news?'

'It was the lead item!' said Derek.

'Well I never,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I suppose it must have been a quiet day.'

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'I didn't think you'd want to come,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'You did say that you didn't want to have anything else to do with me.'

'Yes but...'

'Yes but what, dear?'

'Yes, but when I said that I didn't know that you knew Sean Connery, Roger Moore and Pierce Brosnan,' protested Derek.

'What a pity you weren't here,' sighed Mrs Caldicot. 'They were all very nice. Mr Brosnan invited me to go to the studios when they film the next Bond movie.'

There was a sound like someone choking at the other end of the telephone.

'Never mind, dear,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I'm sure you'll bump into them all at your work.' She paused. 'Would you like a photograph?' she asked sweetly. 'Jenkins took one of me standing next to all three of them. If it comes out would you like me to send you a copy?'

'Thank you,' said Derek. 'That would be lovely.'

The phone went dead.

'Was everything all right?' asked Mrs Roberts, as Mrs Caldicot put the receiver down.

'Oh yes,' smiled Mrs Caldicot. 'Everything is just fine, thank you Mrs Roberts. Let's go back outside, shall we?'

Chapter 75

'Everything all right?' asked Jenkins, when Mrs Caldicot reappeared.

'Everything is very fine, thank you,' replied Mrs Caldicot.

'Things out here are going pretty well, too,' Jenkins told her. 'You were wrong about making a loss. Mr Twist has just brought over the final figures.'

'Really?' said Mrs Caldicot, clearly surprised. 'Did we break even?'

'You did a bit better than that,' Jenkins told her. 'Tell her,' he said to Mr Twist.

'We made £24,572.16 profit,' said the accountant.

Mrs Caldicot stared at him. She couldn't think of anything to say.

'Not bad, eh?' said Jenkins.

'But how on earth...'

'It seems that a lot of people were anxious to guess the number of dried peas in a bottle,' Jenkins told her. 'What did it make?' he asked Mr Twist.

Mr Twist consulted the piece of paper he was holding. 'That stall made £24,634.34 profit. Without it there would have been a small loss.'

'But that's ridiculous!' said Mrs Caldicot, astonished. 'I can't believe it. There must be a mistake.'

'There's no mistake,' insisted Jenkins. 'I've seen the cash. There's a lot of it and it's all very real.'

'What was the prize?' asked Mrs Caldicot. She suddenly had a terrible thought. 'We weren't offering a million pound prize were we?'

'Not quite,' said Jenkins, with a smile. He pulled a piece of crumpled paper out of his jacket pocket. 'The prize was a small Stilton cheese, a box of biscuits and a bottle of gherkins. All three items were donated by Mr Williams and so cost you precisely nothing.'

'Did anyone win? Did anyone guess the right number of peas?'

'Miss Nightingale won,' said Jenkins. 'She doesn't like cheese or gherkins but I gather she was delighted to win. She said it was the first time in her life that she'd ever won anything.'

Suddenly something struck Mrs Caldicot. 'Who was in charge of that stall?' she asked Mr Twist.

'Oh that was Mr Williams,' replied Mr Twist.

Chapter 76

‘I’ve got so many worries,’ said Jenkins, a few days later, as he and Mrs Caldicot had afternoon tea together in a local hotel, `that I don’t know where to start and I don’t know where they stop. I even find myself worrying about the fact that I am worrying too much. And sometimes I actually worry about whether I’m worrying enough about my worries. I worry about whether I’m worrying in the right order. I worry about whether I have lost my sense of perspective. And then I realise that I have totally lost all sense of perspective because all I seem to do is worry. I have lost the ability to differentiate between the trivial and the important.’

‘I don’t really feel old - I still feel the same as I do when I was twenty - but I do feel tired. Not tired of life, but tired of work and tired of trivial worries that really don’t matter. I interviewed a fellow for a job the other day and I nearly didn’t give him the job because I thought he was too old to cope with the stresses of the work. Just in time I realised that he was fifteen years younger than I am.’

‘I’m...,’ began Mrs Caldicot.

‘No, please,’ said Jenkins. ‘Let me finish. Where was I? Oh yes. I’m so overwhelmed with trivia that I no longer have the time to think or create. My life has become a treadmill of worries. Most of them inconsequential. I realised the other day that my life has become so overcrowded that I don’t have any room left new crises. I’m losing the ability to differentiate between the significant and the not so significant. If a tap starts dripping I perceive it as a major problem because I don’t have any time left to assess it and deal with it for what it really is. I just worry about it and add it to my ever-growing list of worries. The result is that I have become inefficient and ineffective. I work longer hours than ever but get less done.’ He sighed and smiled. ‘That’s it,’ he said. ‘The bottom line is that I want my life back.’

‘I hadn’t realised,’ said Mrs Caldicot quietly. She felt ashamed of herself. ‘You’re always seem so strong. I seem to have just taken your strength for granted...’

Jenkins held up a hand. ‘I’m not telling you all this because I’m begging for sympathy,’ he told her. ‘I’m telling you because as I have been trying to think about my life I have come to realise that you are the only part of my life that I really care about. You are the only part of it that is really important. I’m tell you all this because I want you to realise that I have thought long and hard about what I am about to say.’

Mrs Caldicot looked at him and felt her heart beat faster.

‘I’ve said `no’ to the job in America,’ he told her. ‘And I’ve handed in my notice. I’m retiring at the end of the month.’

‘You’re leaving the paper?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you’re not going to America to become an important editor there?’

‘No.’

‘So, what are you going to do?’ she asked in a whisper. She knew what she wanted the answer to be but she hardly dared hope.

‘I want to spend the rest of my life with you,’ Jenkins told her and Mrs Caldicot knew at that moment that everything was going to be all right. ‘And I know that means taking on all this with you,’ he waved a hand to include the Twilight Years Rest Home and its residents. ‘I know that this place - and, far more importantly, these people - play a large part in your life. In many ways they are your life. And I very much want to be part of your life. I would like the two of us to share a single future.’

Mrs Caldicot, who now needed windscreen wipers, could hardly see him.

Jenkins put a hand in his waistcoat pocket and took out a Miss Smith leather box. He put the box, unopened, on the table and then, with just a very little creaking, dropped to his knee in front of her. He took her hand and looked up into her eyes.

‘Thelma,’ he said. ‘I love you. You are a very special woman to everyone you meet. But to me you are, and always will be, the most special person in the world. Will you marry me?’

Chapter 77

‘Yes,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Of course, I will marry you. I love you too.’ She had known this truth so long, and yet kept it so secret, that it was a relief to no longer have to guard it. Gently, she stood up and pulled him to his feet. She held him to her and kissed him on the lips. Then she put her arms around him and held him tight. `I’ve loved you for so long,’ she told him. ‘This is,’ she said, ‘truly, the happiest, most special moment of my life.’

‘Better even than a knickerbocker glory?’ he asked.

‘Oh I don’t know about that,’ she laughed. But the laughter was so fragile it broke and turned to tears. And when the tears had gone she laughed some more. And then they kissed and held and caressed one another and they knew they would both remember for always the moment when they had told one another the truths they had both so much wanted to hear.

Chapter 78

The news that Mrs Caldicot and Jenkins were getting married was greeted with universal enthusiasm by the residents of the Twilight Years Rest Home.

There was only one cloud in the blue sky overhead: the fear that Mr Muller-Hawksmoor and Ms Jones would come back and find another reason to shut the home down. The staff and residents tried to convince themselves that they were safe. But they all knew that they weren't.

'They won't dare come back here for a while,' said Mrs Roberts, as they all sat around in the lounge one day. 'Thanks to Miss Smith and Doris their records show that we have the right number of nurses.'

'They'll be back,' said Mrs Caldicot, with quiet, resigned certainty. 'They won't ever give up.' She paused. `They have time, money and the rules on their side. And one day, one day they'll find something that contravenes their rules and then they'll close us down.'

'So what are we going to do?' asked Mrs Roberts.

'We could close down the Twilight Years Rest Home before they do it for us,' said Mr Twist.

Mrs Roberts, horrified, stared at him. 'You aren't serious!'

'Oh yes,' said Mr Twist. 'It seems to me that the Twilight Years Rest Home has all the disadvantages of a registered home and none of the advantages.'

'What do you mean?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'As an officially registered rest home we have to abide by all the local authority's regulations,' explained Mr Twist. 'Mr Muller-Hawksmoor and Ms Jones can come in more or less whenever they like. They have the authority to check up that we're obeying all these latest rules. And they can close us down in minutes if they find that we've broken one of those rules. It will be no excuse to say that we didn't know about the rule. I've made an assessment of the expenses we've incurred since I've been looking after the accounts and I believe that at least two thirds of our expenses are incurred solely because of rules and regulations which relate to our being a Rest Home.'

Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts looked at one another. They both knew that Mr Twist was right.

'I suspect that we will be getting a visit from Mr Muller-Hawksmoor very shortly,' continued Mr Twist. 'This time he will want to check that all our fire exit instructions are in available in a variety of languages approved by the European Union.'

'But everyone here speaks English!' Mrs Caldicot pointed out. Kitty, her ever-loving cat, leapt up onto her lap. Mrs Caldicot made a big fuss of her.

'That doesn't matter,' said Mr Twist. 'This is a new EU regulation. It doesn't have to make sense. I found out about this by studying an EU website. There are dozens of similar new regulations being introduced during the next few months.'

'They'll be insisting that we have everything printed in braille next,' said Mrs Roberts.

'No, I don't think that one is coming in until next year,' said Mr Twist.

'But we simply can't close down,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'That's not an option.'

'There is a way to carry on exactly as we are but without people like Mr Muller-Hawksmoor and Ms Jones having any control over us at all,' pointed out Mr Twist.

'What's that?' asked Mrs Caldicot, puzzled.

'The obvious alternative is simply to become a private home,' explained Mr Twist. 'Rest Homes have to be registered because they are run as commercial operations. The residents pay fees and the proprietors try to make a profit. As far as I can see here there isn't anyone regularly paying fees. And there is certainly no proprietor making a profit.'

'So we don't really need to be registered as a Rest Home?' said Mr Williams.

'There's absolutely no advantage to our being registered - but there are plenty of disadvantages,' said Mr Twist.

'But if we weren't registered as a Rest Home could everyone still stay here?' asked Mrs Roberts.

'Of course,' said Mr Twist. 'There is nothing to stop Mrs Caldicot - or Mrs Jenkins as she will become - inviting us all to stay here with her as friends. The house would become a sort of 1960s style commune. We could contribute financially as and when we were able.'

'I always wanted to live in a commune,' said Mr Livingstone beaming. 'But when I wanted to do it before - back in the 1960s - they told me I was too old for it.'

They all stared at Mr Twist. It seemed too simple. 'We could do that?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'Oh yes,' said Mr Twist. 'And then there would be no need to spend money on obeying all the council's silly rules and regulations.'

‘We wouldn’t have to rebuild the kitchen?’

‘No.’

‘Or put up fire warnings in all major European languages?’

‘Certainly not.’

‘We wouldn’t have to let Mr Muller-Hawksmoor into the building?’

‘Absolutely not.’

Mrs Caldicot, stopped stroking Kitty for a moment. ‘How long would it take for us to stop being a Rest Home and start being an ordinary private house - albeit with a lot of people living in it?’ Kitty lifted her head and looked at Mrs Caldicot accusingly. Mrs Caldicot resumed the stroking. Kitty went back to sleep.

‘I took the liberty of obtaining the necessary forms. We could be deregulated within a fortnight.’

‘Can we keep the name and our sign?’ asked Mrs Caldicot. ‘I’ve rather grown attached to living at the Twilight Years Rest Home.’

‘I don’t see why not,’ said Mr Twist.

‘Then let’s do it!’ said Mrs Caldicot.

It was, thought Mrs Roberts, a pity that Mr Muller-Hawksmoor and Ms Jones, sitting in their offices several miles away, could not see the celebrations which followed this announcement. Jenkins took them out to a nearby cafe where, at Mrs Caldicot’s suggestion, they all ordered Knickerbocker Glories.

Chapter 79

'Now that we're not going to need to rebuild the kitchen or spend thousands of pounds complying with silly regulations we don't need all that money you gave us at the fete,' said Mrs Caldicot to Mr Williams, an hour or so later.

Mr Williams looked at her as though he didn't understand what she meant.

'What did you do?' she asked. 'Sell a few photographs and then put the proceeds into the stall receipts?'

Mr Williams sighed. 'Three,' he told her. 'I sold three photographs to a dealer in New York. Then I collected the money from the bank in one pound pieces and five pound notes and Mr Roxdale, Miss Nightingale, Mrs Peterborough and I used it to buy guesses in the 'How Many Peas Are There in the Bottle' competition. It took us ages.'

'Well it was wonderfully kind of you,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'I had to do it that way,' said Mr Williams. 'You wouldn't just let me do it the easy way - by just giving you a few photographs.' 'It was very generous of you,' repeated Mrs Caldicot. 'But now I don't need the money so you must have it back.'

'I refuse to accept it,' said Mr Williams.

'Then, perhaps we should use it to have the whole place redecorated,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'We could get rid of the old furniture and buy something new.'

'I thought you liked the old stuff,' said Mr Williams.

'I do,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. 'But...'

'Do you know whose wallpaper this is?' asked Mr Williams, waving a hand in the direction of the lounge walls.

Mrs Caldicot looked at him, puzzled. 'Well, it's ours, I think.'

'No, I mean, do you know who designed it?'

'I don't have the foggiest,' said Mrs Caldicot. She thought for a moment. 'It wasn't you, was it?'

Mr Williams laughed. 'No, it wasn't me,' he said. 'Your wallpaper and your curtains were designed by William Morris.'

Mrs Caldicot stared at him. 'Are you sure?'

'Oh, I'm absolutely sure. I once edited a book about Morris. You've got several pieces of William Morris furniture too. There's absolutely no doubt about it. You could, of course, sell the wallpaper and the curtains to a dealer or a collector. But they'd take it all these beautiful things away and leave you with nothing but money.'

'I hate to ask the obvious question; but how much is all this stuff worth?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'I have no idea,' said Mr Williams. 'The place is stuffed with valuable bits and pieces.'

'Hundreds or thousands of pounds?

'Oh, thousands.'

'Tens of thousands?'

'Hundreds of thousands.'

Mrs Caldicot went pale. 'But it was all just here when we bought the place.'

'The previous owners obviously didn't know what they were selling. Nor, it's clear, did the estate agents.'

'What do you think we should do?'

'Enjoy it,' suggested Mr Williams.

'So we really don't need the money you gave us,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Ah, but you do,' insisted Mr Williams. He stood up and raised his voice. 'Attention, please, ladies and gentlemen!' Everyone stopped what they were doing and looked at him. 'The fete which Mrs Caldicot organised was enormously successful and ended up with a substantial profit. Now that we don't have to spend all our money on rebuilding a perfectly good kitchen I propose that we have a huge wedding reception for our dear Mrs Caldicot and her groom - and then, while she and Mr Jenkins enjoy their honeymoon, the rest of us can recover from our headaches by taking a month's holiday at the seaside, where we will make sandcastles and have daily Knickerbocker Glories.'

This announcement, which came as of much a surprise to Mrs Caldicot as everyone else, was greeted with loud cheering and clapping. There was also some stamping of feet but since the feet involved were mostly arthritic or gouty, largely clad in slippers and were being stamped on carpet this did not add greatly to the volume of noise.

'There you are,' said Mr Williams to Mrs Caldicot. 'Now we do need the money.' He grinned at her.

Mrs Caldicot looked at Jenkins, who was sitting next to her. 'I think he's got you,' Jenkins told his fiancée. 'I suggest that you just give in and gracefully accept defeat.'

‘That’ll be a first!’ said Miss Nightingale.

‘That’ll be a first!’ said Mrs Peterborough.

‘If only they knew,’ thought Mrs Caldicot, smiling to herself. Only she knew that she had spent most of her life giving in. This, however, was the first occasion on which it had been a real pleasure. `I think a big wedding reception would be a wonderful idea,’ she said.

There were more loud cheers. Taking cover of the noise Mrs Caldicot turned to Jenkins. ‘Where shall we go for our honeymoon?’

‘I don’t care,’ he told her. ‘Wherever we go will be the most beautiful place on earth.’

She shed a tear.

She had never before believed that people really could cry because they were happy. Now she knew that they could. She had never, in her life, been as happy. She looked down at Kitty who was, it seemed, purring louder than ever.

The End

I hope you enjoyed this book and if you did I would be grateful if you would give the book a kind review on Amazon.
Other books about Mrs Caldicot include Mrs Caldicot’s Oyster Parade and Mrs Caldicot’s Turkish Delight.
Thank you
Vernon Coleman

Mrs Caldicot's Oyster Parade

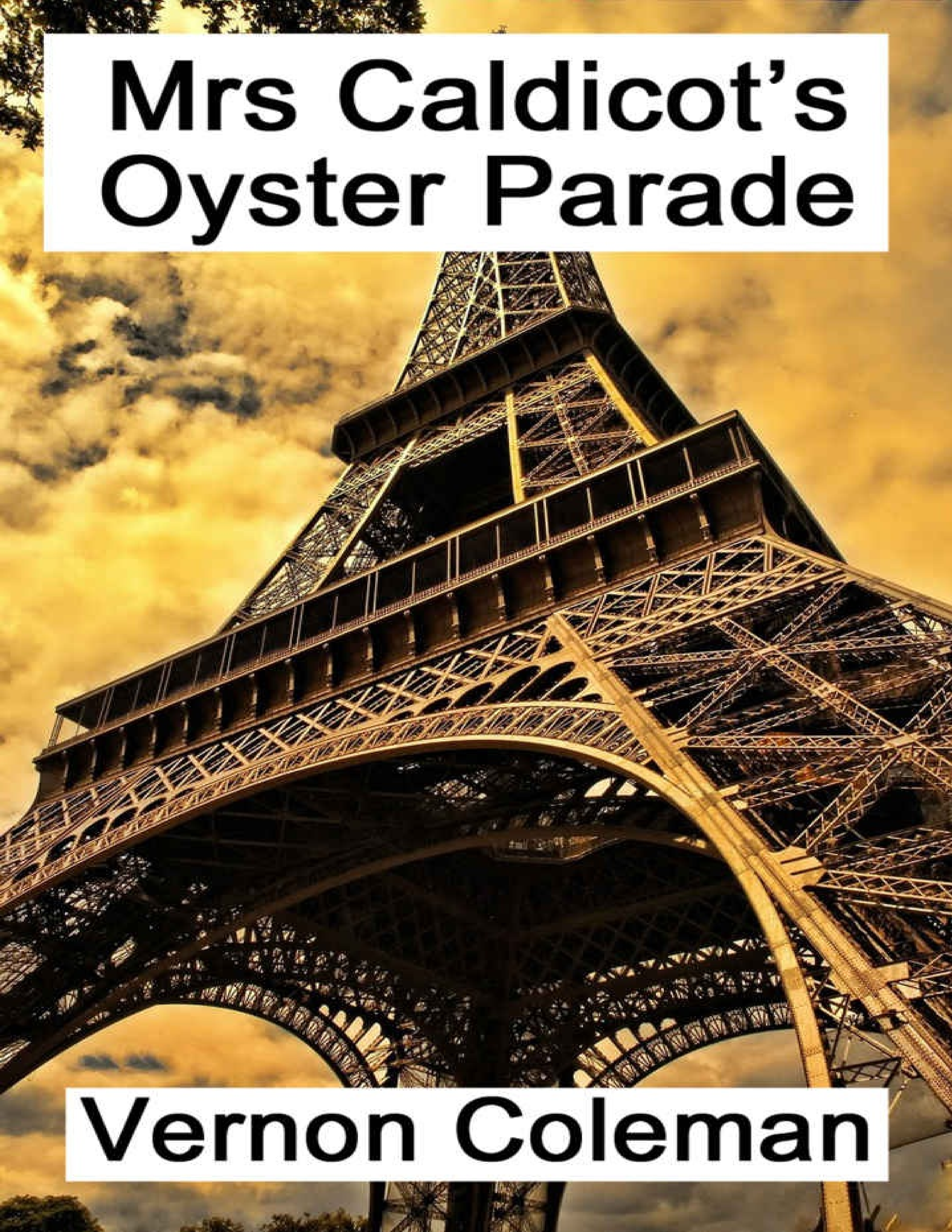

Vernon Coleman

Mrs Caldicot’s Oyster Parade

Vernon Coleman

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Dedication

To Antoinette as always. You are my heroine. I am addicted to you. My life is you.

Acknowledgement

My wife, Antoinette, not only persuaded me to turn my existing books into ebooks but also to create new ebooks. I was pretty well ready to retire, and the first two books about Mrs Caldicot would have disappeared completely – probably for ever. It is entirely through her encouragement, initiative, determination and understanding of a process which I find utterly incomprehensible that any of my ebooks exist. So, thank you, Antoinette.

Note

This is the third book about Mrs Caldicot.

In the first volume, *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War*, a recently widowed woman (called Mrs Caldicot) was put into a grotty nursing home by her greedy son and daughter-in-law. Rebelling at the rules and regulations (and the smell of cabbage) Mrs Caldicot walked out and was followed by the other residents. After some adventures (and unexpected publicity including a memorable interview on television) Mrs Caldicot opened her own old folks' home and welcomed all her companions as residents. (This book was filmed as *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War* – starring Pauline Collins as Mrs Caldicot, Peter Capaldi as her son and John Alderton as the nasty nursing home owner.)

In the second volume, *Mrs Caldicot's Knickerbocker Glory*, Mrs Caldicot (the OAP's champion) was living with the former residents of the Twilight Years Rest Home. She has to fight local bureaucracy and struggle to raise the money to keep her nursing home open. In the end, she found a happy (and very simple and logical) solution. The Twilight Years Rest Home became her home and the residents became her family. This was a good thing because I tend to like happy endings and would have been disappointed if the book had ended sadly. Finally, there was, of course, a romantic conclusion: Mrs Caldicot married Jenkins, the newspaper editor.

Mrs Caldicot's Oyster Parade is the third volume of Mrs Caldicot's adventures.

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Chapter One

The Great Adventure, if that is not too grand a name to use to describe what was originally intended as nothing more dramatic or exceptional than a relatively short trip to Paris, had started a few weeks earlier.

It was a Saturday evening when the seed of the Great Adventure started to sprout.

The staff and residents of what had previously been the Twilight Years Rest Home (but which was now informally known, both to the residents and to the local tradespeople, as Caldicot House) had been gathered in the sitting room staring goggle eyed at the television set.

They were, it is fair to say, as excited as they had been since the accelerator on the mobility scooter got stuck and Mrs Torridge had to drive round and round in circles until the scooter's battery ran down.

And that, it has to be said, was a day to be remembered.

Mrs Torridge herself thought it was all great fun, especially since the other residents ran alongside and handed her bars of chocolate to keep up her strength. (Mrs Caldicot said she didn't think it would be a good idea to give her drinks, though she did not explain that her thinking behind this apparently heartless instruction was that Mrs Torridge was known to have a small bladder.)

Eventually the mobility scooter's battery gave up the ghost, as these things usually do, and, having coasted to a halt just a yard from the front door, Mrs Torridge clambered off, stretched her legs, rubbed her now stiffened arthritic knees and waved to the assembled spectators with aplomb, pride and pretence at self-effacing modesty. She could have been a racing driver pulling into the pits after a famous victory or, possibly, an astronaut just returned from an excursion to the moon.

But that was ten days before the evening when the Great Adventure began.

Mrs Caldicot and her friends were all gathered in the sitting room and it was generally agreed that, although nothing had yet happened, this was even more exciting than Mrs Torridge's caper with the mobility scooter.

Most of those present in Caldicot House were on tenterhooks. The remainder were best described as agog.

Dr Roget, the eminent, English medical man who gave us the thesaurus which bears his name, would have doubtless moved effortlessly into top gear and bandied around words such as: excited, impatient, keen, curious, expectant, longing, avid, breathless and phrases such as 'waiting with bated breath' and 'on the edge of their seats'.

But on tenterhooks and agog sufficed as choices for most of the residents, thank you very much, though Ruth, the 18-year-old assistant housekeeper and a girl who believed in grasping life with both hands, managed to be both on tenterhooks and agog.

Normally thought of as a calm, peaceful and apparently unflappable girl, Ruth had discovered depths of emotional turmoil she had never previously imagined. She had, for several days, been telling everyone who would listen to her that this was, without a doubt, the most exciting thing that had ever happened to her.

Mrs Roberts, the housekeeper, and as kindly a soul as you are likely to find outside a Home for Retired Saints, twice had to tell Ruth to close her eyes and to do some deep breathing exercises in order to calm herself down a little.

Ruth, who was without doubt an excitable girl, had been at the shops and had missed Mrs Torridge's adventure on the mobility scooter so the only other exciting thing that had happened to her in recent years had been the occasion when an unexpected gust of wind had blown several of Miss Nightingale's unmentionables off the washing line and into the upper branches of a large silver birch tree. The previously mentioned unmentionables had remained in situ for the best part of four days, out of reach even of Mr Livingstone when he stood on the top rung of the longest ladder they possessed. The unmentionables had hung around blowing in the wind and drawing admiring glances from many passers-by and an enquiry from the postman as to whether they were to be there permanently as part of some promotional campaign. Eventually, an exceptionally strong breeze had brought them down onto the shed roof from whence Mr Livingstone had been easily able to retrieve them.

Secretly, hidden deep within her heart, Ruth still regarded the time when Steven Longley had kissed her when they were both 12 as the very, most exciting thing that had happened to her. They had been playing postman's knock one Christmas. However, she wasn't about to mention that, ever, to anyone else. Steven was now going steady with Elsie Weatherall, who was widely suspected to be no better than people thought, and Ruth had long since abandoned any idea of a rerun of that distant but magical moment.

Apologies are due, for your historian has digressed.

The reader will doubtless want to know the reason for all this excitement.

The fact is that Thelma Caldicot, together with the staff and residents, who shared the home where she lived, were waiting for the results of the weekly lottery draw on the television.

Lest criticism be forthcoming from those who regard all games of chance as inherently sinful, it has to be pointed out that neither Mrs Caldicot nor her friends and colleagues could be described as inveterate gamblers. On the contrary, this was their first brave foray into the world of commercial chance.

For the nub of the tale is that they had purchased a lottery ticket and were now desperately waiting to see if they had won a prize.

They had entered this strangely invigorating world, after Mrs Caldicot had found a £2 coin on the front drive outside their home.

When Mrs Caldicot had failed to find the owner of the coin, it had been decided, by a simple voting system that would have been the envy of any democracy, that the money should be used for some communal purpose.

Furthermore, it was then decided that since you can't do much with £2 these days (most of the residents could remember when you could buy a week's groceries, half a dozen bottles of decent wine, a load of oak logs, an armful of books and a nice hat with silk flowers for £2 and still had enough change to pay the rent and buy a bag of coal but, sadly, inflation had done the job it does so well and those days were now nothing but fading, sepia memories) the coin should be used to purchase a lottery ticket.

Ruth had been dispatched to the local shops to make the investment and now the stake holders were sitting watching the television set and awaiting the results of their first foray into the world of organised gambling.

Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough were particularly excited because they had convinced themselves that they were taking part in something which Mrs Peterborough insisted on referring to as 'the numbers racket'. If they won, they expected the booty to be brought round by a man in a black suit and a black homburg hat.

Miss Nightingale said she thought he would probably be carrying a violin case though when Mrs Peterborough questioned her about this, she had to admit that she had no idea why this should be. She said that perhaps gangsters were so keen on playing the violin that they took their instrument with them wherever they went.

The two of them were expecting a police raid at any moment and for them this added to the general feeling of excitement. Miss Nightingale was so excited that she went so far as to perform a simple plié, segueing into an arabesque and following that with a grand jete which neatly, and entirely accidentally, removed Mr Roxdale's cup from his saucer. Fortunately, the cup was nearly empty at the time and it flew through the air with little damage being done. The cup was caught by Mr Livingstone who held it up as though he'd taken a catch in a big match.

Mrs Caldicot couldn't help smiling.

Miss Nightingale had trained as a dancer and for three years had worked as a ballerina with the Royal Ballet. There had been talk of promotion and the magical words 'prima ballerina' had been whispered. Tragically, her career had come to a crushing halt after a motorcycle accident had left her with a badly broken femur which took years to mend properly. By the time she could walk again, her ballet career was merely a memory. Worse, far worse, was the fact that her fiancé had been on the front of the motorcycle and he had died in the crash. Miss Nightingale, who had trained as a school-teacher when her ballet days were over and who had spent most of her life working as a primary school headmistress, had only recently started to dance again.

Mrs Caldicot herself had the lottery ticket in her hand but Mrs Roberts had copied the six numbers which were on their ticket onto a piece of cardboard, and she had placed the cardboard above the television set. This simple device meant that as the television host read out the winning numbers, everyone in the room could follow their fortunes.

When the television announcer had finished reciting the winning numbers, Mrs Caldicot and her friends owned a ticket on which five of the six numbers which had been read out.

'How much is the first prize?' asked Mr Hewitt.

'I read that the big prize is £22 million this week,' replied Mrs Roberts.

'So we should get five sixths of £22 million!' said Mr Livingstone, who would have been jumping up and down with excitement if his arthritis hadn't been playing up.

'Five sixths of £22 million is £18.33 recurring million,' said Mr Twist, a human calculator who had, in what he now considered to be his misspent youth and middle years, been a tax inspector working for the Government.

Mr Twist now looked after the books for Mrs Caldicot and helped stave off such unwanted nonsenses as penury, bankruptcy and debt collectors. His knowledge of the vagaries and peccadillos of the staff employed by Her Majesty's Customs and Excise enabled him to ensure that Mrs Caldicot's finances remain as close to healthy and legal as is possible. Caldicot House (since that is how the residents and local trades people customarily refer to the house, it seems only polite to retain that name for this account) had ceased to be a nursing home or, indeed, anything else official, and was run as a private house with a good many permanent visitors – each paying whatever they could towards the upkeep of the house and the provision of meals and warmth. Those residents who could help in the running of the establishment did what they could.

Mr Twist attempted to temper the assembled company's enthusiasm by pointing out, in his own rather gloomy way, that three quarters of big lottery winners go bankrupt and end up with less money than they had before their big win.

However, to his surprise, this news was greeted with cheering. 'Rags to riches and back again!' cried Mr Livingstone. 'What an exciting roller coast ride!'

'Sensibly, I think we should remember…,' began Mrs Roberts very quietly. But no one seemed much interested in a sentence which began with the word 'sensibly'.

'We'll have to decide whether or not to go public with our win,' said Ruth, with great seriousness. 'It's an important decision. If we say we want to go public we'll probably have to be prepared to do interviews and go on television shows.'

Ruth was a big girl (she had weighed her age in stones since she was ten-years-old) but not a bright girl. She was, however, a kind girl and, as Mrs Caldicot said to Mr Jenkins when ruminating on which of the applicants to accept when she was looking for a new member of staff, 'an ounce of kindness is worth more than a pound of brains when you're looking after old people who aren't always entirely sure who they are, where they are or why'.

'I don't think we need worry about any of that just yet,' said Mrs Caldicot, who didn't want everyone getting too excited. She still remembered her own rather traumatic experiences with television interviewers and didn't fancy the idea of repeating them.

'How much money is that for each of us?' asked Ruth. 'If we divide eighteen and a bit million between us?'

'How many of us are there?' asked Mr Twist, looking around to count the number of heads.

'Fourteen,' replied Mr Merivale, who after using up his own fingers and thumbs had co-opting some of his wife's digits to make up for the shortfall. 'Everyone here, plus Mr Jenkins, of course, because he's as entitled to a share of the ticket as anyone else.'

Everyone agreed that Mr Jenkins, who was Mrs Caldicot's husband and who lived with her in the flat upstairs, was definitely entitled to a share of the winnings since he, as a resident, was definitely entitled to a share of the £2 which had bought the ticket and, equally certainly, also entitled to a full share of any winnings which might accrue.

Mr Jenkins was, at that moment, shut in the spare bedroom which he used as a study, working on a novel he was writing. He had never written a novel before and he was currently on the 11th draft of page one. He insisted, however, that he was definitely making progress and had told Mrs Caldicot that he had high hopes that he would soon be able to start page two.

Jenkins had been inspired to write his novel after reading lines from a poem by Ralph Waldo Emerson, the American essayist and poet.

The poem was called Terminus and the inspirational phrase was: 'It is time to be old, to take in sail…'.

'I may be old,' said a defiant Jenkins when he had read these words, 'but old age is a time to take on new adventures, to try new paths. It is not a time to take in sail.'

(As another aside, and this will be the last unless there are more, it should, perhaps, be explained that Mrs Caldicot liked to be known as Mrs Jenkins in her private life but as far as the residents and staff were concerned, she was still Mrs Caldicot. When she had first tried to explain to the residents that she would henceforth be known as Mrs Jenkins, there were some tears from Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough who thought that this meant that Mrs Caldicot was going to leave them and be replaced by a Mrs Jenkins.)

'So how much is that for each of us?' repeated Ruth, who was so excited that she could not sit still.

'It's over a million pounds each!' said Mr Hewitt.

Ruth, who was immediately dreaming of private aeroplanes, yachts, Italian villas and the lifestyles of the rich and famous, went bright red with excitement. It is fair to say that she was not totally averse to the prospect of becoming a millionairess. Mr Twist's gloomy prognostication of almost inevitable personal bankruptcy worried her not a jot. She had just £27.38 in her current account and if winning and spending a million pounds meant sacrificing her £27.38 in the process of becoming a millionairess, or as a consequence of becoming a millionairess, then it was a sacrifice she was quite prepared to make.

'Approximately one million three hundred thousand pounds each, I think you'll find,' said Mr Twist. He looked around at the assembly and then suddenly sensed their alarm at having in their midst someone who could do such unnatural things with numbers without using a calculator or even having access to a piece of paper and a pencil. 'Just over a million and a quarter each,' he said, quietly correcting himself.

Ruth, eyes closed and dreaming of a world in which mops, buckets and dishwashers had no place, now added a French gigolo and a tattoo on some private part of her person to her wish list of a private aeroplane, a yacht and at least one Italian villa. The tattoo would, she thought, have to be somewhere not quite so private that no one could see it and that she couldn't show it to good friends, such as the French gigolo, if the occasion warranted it.

'I don't think it works quite like that,' said Mrs Roberts, louder now. She didn't want anyone to think of her as what her mother would have called a wet blanket but who nevertheless felt that someone ought to keep a finger hold on reality, and was the only person in the room who had studied the rules.

They all looked at her.

'I'm afraid we won't win all that much,' she explained gently. 'There will probably be a lot of people with five correct numbers. Only people who have all six numbers win the really big prizes.'

'So, how much will we win?' asked Mrs Merivale whose financial ambitions were modest but who thought she would perhaps use her winnings to treat herself to one of those tummy tucks she had read about in her favourite magazine. It would, she thought, be more painless than another attempt at dieting.

'I don't know,' said Mrs Roberts. 'We'll have to wait and see when the lottery people publish the details of what the prizes are going to be.'

And so everyone except Ruth had to put their dreams back into their boxes, close the lids for a while and wait.

Ruth's dreams were perhaps of sterner stuff. Or maybe she had simply not heard Mrs Roberts's warning remarks. Whatever the cause, she was still wondering what her French gigolo's attitude towards tattoos would be. Might he find a tattoo rather downmarket? It would have to be very tasteful. She somehow knew that you wouldn't see millionairesses wandering around Monaco with great big snakes curling round their arms or with bunches of roses adorning their breasts. If they had a tattoo it would be something small and very tasteful; something discreet. She thought of vulgar Sandra Pettigrew, who was three months into having a hunt in full cry tattooed on her back, with the plan being to have only the fox's tail visible at the very bottom of the spine, and she shuddered with embarrassment at the very thought.

No, she thought, a tasteful flower on a hip, would be appropriate.

Chapter Two

It was Monday before they heard the lottery results and discovered the extent of their riches.

They had won £2,892.

It wasn't just over a million, just under a million or anywhere near a million. But it wasn't a kick in the teeth either. And by the time they got the results, the expectations of the residents and staff had largely diminished, thanks to a large dose of communal realism setting in.

The communal realism had been aided and abetted by the strong feeling that winning over a million pounds wasn't the sort of thing that happened to real people who inhabited the real world. And there had also been a sneaky subconscious feeling that winning that much probably wouldn't be a good idea anyway. The truth was that they were all pretty happy with their lives and didn't want everything to be changed by having to find somewhere to park a fleet of Rolls Royces and private helicopters.

And so it is undoubtedly true that the residents and staff were probably more excited by this modest win than they would have been by a more momentous triumph. This was real money which could be spent on something that they could understand and enjoy.

'How much is that each?' asked Mr Hewitt.

'It's a little over £200 each,' replied Mr Twist, who had learned his lesson and was content to think with precision but articulate in more rounded numbers.

'Very nice too,' said Mrs Merivale. She didn't really want a tummy tuck, anyway. She hated needles and Mr Merivale always said he liked her just the way she was. 'Don't you go all skinny on me,' he told her when she had talked of going on a diet. 'If I'd wanted a skinny wife I'd have married a broom handle.'

'It would be nice if we could spend it on something we could all share,' said Mr Livingstone.

This was greeted with a considerable amount of wise nodding and it was generally agreed that this would be much more fun than spending the money individually. No one had thought of putting their winnings aside. What is the point of saving a £200 windfall? Even Ruth, her dreams put safely back into their box, thought that a communal spend would be more fun. The tattooist who had the studio over the launderette had charged more than £200 to tattoo 'Mum' and a small bunch of flowers on Eric Parton's triceps. Somehow, the tattoo no longer seemed a worthwhile expenditure.

'So what shall we buy?' asked Mrs Torridge.

'Could we buy a big box of chocolates?' asked Miss Nightingale. She thought for a moment and then added: 'But not too many of the sticky, chewy ones.'

'Not the sticky, chewy ones,' agreed her friend, Mrs Peterborough with a shake of her head. 'They get stuck in my teeth.'

There was then a lively discussion about how their unexpected winnings could best be spent. Some of the suggestions were sensible. Some were not so sensible.

Mention was made of a second mobility scooter (the residents who needed help in getting about shared the one which Mrs Torridge had driven round and round in circles) but this attracted little enthusiasm since the residents rarely had any great desire to travel around the neighbourhood.

There were mutterings about a new dartboard (quickly squashed by Mrs Caldicot who had hidden the only flight of darts after an unfortunate and entirely accidental incident involving Mr Hewitt's right arm and Miss Nightingale's left buttock) and some talk about investing in a greenhouse (supported with some enthusiasm by Mr Hewitt and Mr Roxdale but no one else).

Mr Twist suggested that the money should be put into a savings account for emergencies (this was pooh-poohed on the grounds that it was a boring thing to do with an unexpected windfall and partly on the grounds that it would not be enough to enable them to deal with a serious emergency).

Mr Williams suggested that they should blow the whole lot on a slap up meal at a local restaurant.

Mr Livingstone said it would be good to buy a new trumpet since they didn't have a single trumpet in the house. But even Mr Livingstone had to admit that this was not really in the spirit of the sense of togetherness and camaraderie that they were hoping to cement with their winnings.

'We could go to Paris together,' said Mrs Roberts, suddenly.

Everyone looked at her.

'For a little holiday,' explained Mrs Roberts. 'We could go over just for a few days. Since we won the money together it would be nice if we could spend it doing something together.'

And suddenly, it was generally agreed that a trip to Paris would very much fit everyone's bill. Those, like Mr

Williams, who had been to Paris before thought they would very much like to see it again. And those who had never been were keen to see it for the first time.

Ruth, who, in view of the reduced size of their win, had now completely forgotten her dreams of gigolos, Italian villas and private aeroplanes, saw herself vaguely and ineffectually resisting the enthusiastic and amorous advances of a dozen over-romantic Frenchmen, all sporting waxed moustaches, wearing berets and carrying armfuls of red roses. None of them wore tattoos, as far as she could see.

'Is there enough money for a trip to Paris?' asked Mrs Caldicot, who had always wanted to go to Paris but who was rather doubtful that £2,892 was sufficient to pay for fourteen people to go to Paris, stay in a hotel and, most important of all, come back without having to swim across the Channel on the return journey.

'Oh yes,' said Mrs Roberts. 'I saw an advertisement in my magazine. It was for Paris breaks. They say you can travel there and back and stay in a really nice hotel for £149 per person, including continental breakfast, a complimentary map, a discount voucher for perfume and transport in an air conditioned coach between the railway station and the hotel on both arrival and on departure.'

It was generally agreed that this seemed a splendid idea, and very good value, and Mrs Roberts hurried to her room to find the magazine concerned.

She was back in moments, clutching the magazine which was already opened at the appropriate page.

'Ooh look, there's a picture of that tall tower thing they never finished building!' said Mrs Torridge peering over Mrs Roberts' shoulder.

Mrs Torridge had good days and bad days and was having one of her middling sort of days. 'All they've done is put up the scaffolding,' she added

'The French don't work hard like we do,' said Mr Roxdale firmly.

'They don't do any work after lunch,' explained Mr Livingstone. 'They all have a siesta in the afternoon.'

'I'm pretty sure that's the Eiffel Tower,' said Mrs Roberts, largely to Mrs Torridge but also just in case anyone else was wondering. 'It's all finished,' she added.

'So why don't they use a picture of it finished instead of a picture of it with the scaffolding up?' asked Mrs Torridge.

Mrs Roberts started to reply, realised that this was probably not going to get her very much further forward and so abandoned the thought.

'I think they have siestas in Spain,' said Mrs Torridge. 'I had one of them once when I was on holiday. They make them with red wine and lots of fruit. I suppose they're very nice if you like foreign drinks. I think they put lettuce in them. Definitely, they put in something green. The foreigners over there eat lots of rice and octopus too.'

'Oh we won't have to eat octopus will we?' asked Ruth. She shivered at the thought. She liked food but didn't like the idea of eating an octopus. She rather preferred a nice plate of chips and two fried eggs. How could you be sure the octopus wouldn't come alive, wrap a tentacle around your throat and eat you instead? She shivered at the thought. She had heard that the French ate frogs, snails and horses. But octopus? And what was the plural? Did you have two octopuses? Or two octopi?

'Isn't that drink with the fruit in it called sangria?' asked Mrs Merivale.

'Is it?' said Mrs Torridge, frowning. 'So if the drink is a sangria, what's a siesta?'

'Maybe that's the dish with the octopus and the rice,' said Miss Nightingale.

'Mint. I think it may have been mint not lettuce,' said Mrs Torridge thoughtfully. 'Or perhaps it was something else green. What's green?'

'Grass,' suggested Mr Roxdale.

'I've got some green socks,' said Mr Livingstone, helpfully. 'They're very comfortable but there's a hole in the heel of one of them. And I wouldn't put them into a drink.'

'We used to say we had a potato in our sock when we had a bit of heel showing,' said Mr Roxdale.

Mr Livingstone laughed. 'I remember that! At school we used to take off our socks to see who had the biggest potato.'

Mrs Torridge gave these suggestions due consideration. 'No,' she said at last. 'It wasn't grass or socks.'

'Why did Mr Roxdale say he had a potato in his sock?' asked Ruth, who couldn't quite understand how the potatoes had snuck into the conversation.

'When you have a bit of heel showing through a hole in a sock it looks a bit like a new potato,' explained Mrs Roberts.

Ruth, who didn't understand, nodded as though she did.

'Octopus and rice,' said Mrs Peterborough who liked the sound of this. She said it again.

It was no longer her regular custom to repeat what other people said but from time to time the habit reappeared. Since her drug regime had been reduced, she had also largely abandoned her endearing habit of mimicking what other people said and how they behaved.

Anyone who had known Mrs Peterborough, and the other residents of the Twilight Years Rest Home, back in the days when it had been run by the deeply unpleasant and unpopular Mr Hawksmoor, would have found it difficult to believe that this was the same woman.

Chapter Three

Under Mr Hawksmoor's authoritarian regime, the residents of what had then been known as The Twilight Years Rest Home had been kept heavily sedated in order to make them easier to look after. The law in Britain allows nursing and care home owners the right to medicate residents without their knowledge and even against their will, and Mr Hawksmoor had taken full advantage of this curious entitlement. The phrase 'it's for our own good' must be one of the most commonly uttered in all residential establishments catering for the elderly.

It is well known in medical circles that the symptoms of most of the dementias, including Dr Alzheimer's eponymous disorder (which is one of the commonest causes of dementia but by no means the only one) are exacerbated by an absence of mental and social stimulus. 'Old age puts more wrinkles in our minds than on our faces,' wrote Michel de Montaigne.

The precise pathological causes of dementia in general and Alzheimer's in particular, are still a subject of much discussion among doctors and research scientists. Despite much tub thumping, a good deal of it designed to attract the attention of people handing out grant money, researchers have not yet progressed beyond the stage of offering a seemingly infinite number of updates on a seemingly infinite number of hypotheses. But there does not seem to be much doubt that when sufferers are drugged, abandoned without stimulation or left to vegetate in dull and inspiring surroundings, their symptoms will deteriorate. The body and the mind, like any partners, do not always fail together and it can be argued that the mind is even more vulnerable than the body to a lack of exercise. We grow old more through inactivity and a lack of direction and purpose than through age itself.

The tragedy, of course, is that despite the fact that this knowledge is widely available, the staff in hospitals, nursing homes, rest homes, care homes and all the other residential centres, often act as though they are completely unaware of any of this. Maybe these establishments are so chronically understaffed that no one has the time to spare to ensure that brains are kept stimulated. Maybe no one cares. Maybe too many of those who are yet to tiptoe into the foothills of old age are still able to deny to themselves the inevitability that they too will one day grow old. One of the greatest contradictions in life is that although almost everyone wants to live a long time, no one wants to grow old. It is, perhaps, easier for some professionals to regard old age as another country and to dismiss old people as another species. And yet surely those who have taken on the responsibility for the elderly have a responsibility to ensure that they retain their faculties for as long as possible?

'Bodily decay is gloomy in prospect,' said Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the US, 'but of all human contemplations, the most abhorrent is body without mind.'

It has been said, by someone wise and proudly blessed with a way with words, that we are all as young as we feel and although on the surface this may sound like one of those superficial bon mots usually dismissed as cracker-barrel philosophy, there is more truth to it than may generally be realised. Mrs Caldicot's chums would, if anyone had asked, have confessed that they all felt themselves to be somewhere between 18 and 22 years of age. In reality, of course, it had been a good half a century since any of them had been in that age bracket, but that was now the way they felt and that, to a large extent, is all that matters. Mrs Caldicot who would, a couple of years earlier, have owned to an age somewhere in the mid-300s, now felt herself to be approximately 19 and a half and quite happy to stay just there, thank you very much for asking.

Now, after some months of companionship, friendship and a freedom from unnecessarily onerous and nit picking rules, Mrs Caldicot's band of chums had changed almost beyond recognition. Individuals who had once been residents of a typically oppressive care home had been transformed by residency in a friendly private home where laughter was an ever welcome guest. At Caldicot House, the atmosphere was lively and on occasion quite perky. A lack of medication and a modest increase in responsibility had, of course, also helped. They all still looked rather elderly, of course. But there was now a sparkle in their eyes and they behaved more like young people than some young people do.

The Meridews, Maurice and Maple, looked after the kitchen and produced meals which were nutritionally invigorating without being dull, stodgy or too full of bean curd. Their experience in preparing meals for film crews had well prepared them for the need to satisfy appetites which range from those needing occasional titivating (Mr Roxdale) to those which simply needed to be assuaged and, from time to time, indulged. The only standard rule was that cabbage was banned from the menu. This may have been a tough break for what is a perfectly innocent and vitamin packed leafy green brassica but it was something that Mrs Caldicot and the residents felt as one about. If you don't have any cabbage in a kitchen then the rooms which are supplied by that kitchen cannot possibly be flavoured with the ever present aroma of cabbage. Egg and chips and spotted dick with custard were no longer regarded as unsuitable fare, and crumpets and teacakes now played an important part in the daily diet both at teatime and at supper time. Mr Livingstone had proved himself able to demolish a whole plateful of buttered crumpets all by himself.

The garden was looked after by Mr Hewitt and Mr Roxdale.

As already mentioned, Mr Twist took care of the accounts and, where necessary, income tax forms for everyone living in Caldicot House.

Mr Livingstone was in charge of musical entertainment and, in view of his experience as a valued member of RAF Bomber Command during the Second World War, had appointed himself in charge of defence and, in this regard, had taken on responsibility for ensuring that the front and back doors were locked at night.

Mrs Peterborough, Miss Nightingale and Mrs Torridge were in charge of the laundry and looked after the washing machine and the pegging out and bringing in of items placed upon the clothes line. (None of them had worked out how to operate the tumble dryer. This was, as they say, a 'good thing' since, as Mrs Torridge pointed out, it costs nothing to allow washing to dry on a clothes line but a good deal to force it to dry in an electrically heated machine.)

Mr Williams was the official photographer and always happy to sell one of his old photographs and give the proceeds to Mrs Caldicot when cash was running a little low. He was also responsible for keeping the house library well stocked with books and DVDs – some of which he purchased from local charity shops and some of which he ordered from local stores. He insisted on paying for all his purchases himself.

'But I don't know why they didn't use lettuce,' said Mrs Torridge. 'I've always liked a nice piece of lettuce though Mr Torridge, my late husband, couldn't stand the stuff bless his soul. He didn't like fruit in his drinks either. I remember that for a joke someone put two slices of orange in his beer and he was very cross.'

'So what do you all think about a trip to Paris?' asked Mrs Caldicot, who thought she ought to try to drag the conversation back from the surreal to the practical. Although she had always wanted to visit Paris, she felt that the decision should be made in a roughly democratic sort of way.

'How many stars does the hotel have?' asked Mrs Merivale, who, in the course of her work with the film industry, had stayed in a good many hotels and, as a result, put great store by the number of stars a hotel had been awarded.

Mrs Roberts picked up her magazine. 'The advertisement says: 'You will enjoy four star accommodation in a central location and you will be whisked from the Gare du Nord to your hotel in an air conditioned coach with a bilingual driver. And throughout your stay, our friendly and knowledgeable Representative will be on hand to ensure that everything on your holiday goes smoothly.'

'Crumbs,' said Mrs Merivale. 'You can't grumble at that, can you?' She turned to Mr Merivale. 'Did you hear that? Four stars.'

'Very acceptable,' confirmed Mr Merivale who had also travelled a good deal and once claimed he had stayed in as many hotels as he'd had hot dinners. 'You get a much better class of bedbug in four star hotels.'

'Wonderful,' said Mr Roxdale dryly. 'That'll be a comfort.'

And so it was agreed by the assembled company that they would all go to Paris together. They all agreed it would be wonderful to go on holiday in a group. Several of the group had seen a documentary about the French capital and all were excited by the prospect of seeing the Eiffel Tower, the Champs-Élysées and Sacre Coeur. It would, thought Mrs Caldicot, be a relaxing but also invigorating change for them all. She looked forward to being away from pressure and stress for a few days.

'Does anyone speak French?' asked Mr Twist.

'I learned French at school,' said Mr Livingstone, as though his school studies had enabled him to master the language and ignoring the fact that his school days had been considerably more than half a century previously. 'Bon voyage, mon brave,' he announced with confidence. 'La plume de ma tante est dans le bureau de…' At this point he hesitated, forgetting perhaps the nature of the ownership of the desk wherein resided the pen of his fortunate aunt.

'…mon oncle,' said Mr Williams, finishing the sentence for him. Everyone looked at Mr Williams. He shrugged. 'I know a few words,' he explained. 'I can get by,' he added modestly.

'I think I remember studying French at school,' said Mr Twist. 'It will probably all come flooding back once we get over there.' He paused, closed his eyes and dredged his memory. 'Le chat c'est assis sur le … mat,' he announced proudly. 'There you are! It's all in there just waiting to come bursting out. Je demande du fromage, du pain et du vin.'

'Do you remember Bertram Mills?' asked Mr Roxdale.

'I've heard of him,' said Mr Twist. 'He had a circus didn't he?'

'A very famous circus,' said Mr Roxdale. 'Mr Mills travelled the world, and I remember I once saw him being interviewed and the chap asking the questions asked Mr Mills if he had ever learned any foreign languages. He replied: 'When I get among foreigners I stand still, look British and shout!' So that is what I intend to do.'

With confidence born of ignorance and a newly found natural sense of communal optimism, it was generally agreed that with Mr Twist, Mr Livingstone and Mr Williams to look after the language problem, and to provide translating services for the rest of the party, there would be no difficulty in communicating successfully with the French natives.

Mrs Caldicot alone was slightly sceptical.

Nevertheless, she thought, it would be something of an adventure and there were bound to be one or two French people around who spoke English.

And anyway, she added to herself, a life without adventures is a dull life indeed.

Chapter Four

‘So Mrs Roberts telephoned the advertisers and made a provisional booking for us all to go to Paris for three nights over the Easter holidays,’ said Mrs Caldicot, who was now in the flat she shared with her husband and who was, therefore, technically Mrs Jenkins.

‘Isn’t that exciting?’ she continued. ‘Of course, we can’t actually book the holiday until the cheque comes through from the lottery people. But Mrs Roberts spoke to a nice, young lady at the lottery who said we should have the cheque by the end of the week. We were surprised the holiday company had a vacancy over Easter but apparently another group had to cancel their trip because of an outbreak of something or other unfortunate and so we’ve inherited their train tickets and hotel bookings.’

‘The lottery people don’t have to send people around to bring you the cheque and warn you not to spend it all at once on champagne and Ferraris?’ said Mr Jenkins.

‘Oh no,’ said Mrs Caldicot, earnestly. ‘I think that’s only for the big winners.’

‘I was teasing,’ said Mr Jenkins gently.

Mrs Caldicot threw a cushion at him. ‘It’s going to be like a second honeymoon!’ she said. The cushion missed by a yard and a half. Mrs Caldicot’s cat, Kitty, who was apparently asleep on the hearth rug, opened an eye, looked up and then went back to sleep.

Mr Jenkins looked at her questioningly.

‘Yes, well there will be 12 other people with us and one or two of them probably needing a little looking after,’ admitted Mrs Caldicot.

‘You’ll have your hands full,’ promised Mr Jenkins.

‘I’ll have Mrs Roberts and Ruth to help me,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

Mr Jenkins smiled but didn’t say anything. Secretly he rather wondered if an SAS regiment would provide enough manpower and experience to keep Mrs Caldicot’s companions out of trouble. Still, he had faith in his wife. She had long ago proved herself capable, competent and sensitive to the needs of the former nursing home residents who had become her very dear friends.

Mrs Caldicot, who had been contemplating the trip through slightly less rosy spectacles, sighed quietly. ‘You’re right,’ she said. ‘I’m probably going to be rather busy. You don’t think it’s a silly idea, do you?’

‘Not at all!’ insisted Mr Jenkins who knew Paris well, having visited it frequently when working as a newspaper editor. ‘It will be an adventure. You’ll be spending part of the week before Easter in Paris: wonderful food, bright lights and probably some sunshine. The weather is usually good in Paris in April.’ He chuckled as he thought of something. ‘We must have a dozen oysters each while we’re there,’ he said. ‘There’s a famous restaurant opposite the Gare du Nord that serves the best oysters in France.’

‘Oysters?’ said Mrs Caldicot, who wasn’t a great fan of slithery food.

‘Well, we’ll be there at Easter. So we’ll have to celebrate with our own Oyster Parade won’t we?’

Mrs Caldicot, who was still not entirely accustomed to her husband’s puns, winced.

‘I’m pleased that we’re going by train and not by aeroplane,’ said Mr Jenkins. ‘People get on an aeroplane and a few hours later they are in another country – on another continent even. Going abroad used to be a Great Adventure. There was the train to Dover, a long walk to the boat across the Channel to Calais and then another walk through the customs shed to the French train which would be sitting waiting to whisk travellers to Paris. Mark Twain, Charles Dickens, Arnold Bennett – they all did it and they all wrote about the sense of excitement that built as the journey progressed. Travellers had a chance to realise that they were going somewhere new; time to prepare themselves for the adventures ahead; time to enjoy the differences between there and here. Of course, Dover and Calais were grubby, grey, shabby and unprepossessing but in a way all that squalor and shabbiness added to the experience. You knew that you were seeing things that countless thousands of travellers had seen for generations. You felt like a traveller rather than a tourist.’

‘Unfortunately, we don’t go on a boat,’ Mrs Caldicot reminded her husband. ‘The train goes through a tunnel underneath the Channel.’

‘Yes, there is that,’ said Jenkins, with more than a little sadness ‘I shall miss the docks at Dover and at Calais. But it’s still a train. It’s considerably more exciting than an aeroplane journey. I loathe aeroplanes and airports.’ He shuddered. He had spent much of the previous three decades travelling through airports and sitting on aeroplanes. ‘Have you fixed a date?’ he asked.

Mrs Caldicot told him and added. ‘Those were the only dates they had available for a party of 14. And we got a special, special rate because we took over a last minute cancellation.’

Mr Jenkins, who was rather old-fashioned and liked to keep his appointments listed somewhere out of the range of hackers, software failures and battery outages, took a slim, leather pocket diary from his inside pocket and consulted it. The procedure, Jenkins liked to point out, took rather less time than it would have taken a more technologically minded individual to turn on their computer or to scroll through their mobile telephone. And he liked the feel of the leather and the crackle of the paper.

'Ah,' he said, rather sadly. 'I'm afraid there will only be 13 of you. But if you only have a provisional booking you'll be able to cancel my ticket and take the proceeds as spending money for the trip.'

'You can't come?' said Mrs Caldicot, horrified.

'I'm afraid not,' said Mr Jenkins, who was genuinely upset to be missing the trip. For one thing he wanted to be able to help his wife if, or when, one of the residents got into trouble. And for another he loved his wife very much indeed and didn't like to be away from her for more than an hour or two at a time.

'I agreed to chair a discussion group at a literary festival that week,' he explained. 'I did tell you about it some time ago. I've agreed to do it and I'm afraid I really can't back out now. I'll only be away for one day but it's right in the middle of your trip.' He paused for a moment, a thought having occurred to him. 'Actually, it's probably just as well. If we were all away who would look after Kitty?'

Although he was retired, Mr Jenkins, a former newspaper editor, was much in demand. He was a fluent and personable speaker and had written a couple of books about modern journalism. He was frequently invited to speak at literary festivals, now something of a boom industry in the peripheries of the publishing world, and he was a regular broadcaster on the wireless, as he insisted on calling it, and on the moving picture show of television.

'Oh that's awful!' said Mrs Caldicot, who was as disappointed as she sounded. 'I'll ask Mrs Roberts to see if she can change the dates.'

'You'll do no such thing,' insisted Mr Jenkins. 'You know she only got that booking because of a cancellation. It will probably be months before you can get another suitable date. And everyone will be disappointed if they have to wait months for their holiday. Besides, I tell you what we'll do. We'll use the fee I'm being paid by the literary festival for a slap-up romantic dinner for just the two of us when you get back. No expense spared.'

'I suppose you're right,' said Mrs Caldicot, looking for a silver lining to the cloud. 'It does mean that you will be able to look after Kitty.'

'Kitty and I will look after each other. I'll give her dishes of milk and plates of food and she'll keep my lap warm while I work on page one of my novel. Doubtless she will purr me to sleep before I get onto the unknown territory of page two.'

'You're just as big a softy as I am!' said Mrs Caldicot. It suddenly occurred to her that without her husband accompanying the party she'd be able to forgo the oysters. It was a small consolation, but a consolation, nevertheless.

'Don't you dare tell anyone,' warned Mr Jenkins very sternly.

And so, four days later, the booking was confirmed, the holiday company was paid and the trip to Paris was upgraded from a pencilled in, provisional booking to a fully confirmed etched in stone arrangement. Mr Jenkins's ticket had been cancelled and the proceeds added by Mrs Caldicot to their spending money. They would leave England on a Tuesday, stay in Paris on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday nights, and return home on the Friday.

Chapter Five

As the time of their trip to Paris approached, so the excitement mounted.

Mrs Torridge, Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale spent many happy hours deciding which of their clothes they would take. In the end they all decided that, to be on the safe side, they would be better off taking everything. They therefore scoured the building and collected a mass of old suitcases, bags and containers into which they could cram their belongings.

Ruth, booked a visit to the beauty salon to spend everything in her current account, and a little bit more, on having her hair cut and tinted, her nails professionally painted and her legs waxed almost but not quite up to her bikini line. (She decided against what is in the trade known as a Brazilian Wax only after Mrs Roberts had assured her that Paris is not by the sea and that they would definitely not be spending their days in France sunbathing or visiting swimming pools.)

Mr Hewitt announced that he would be taking his trowel, hand fork and hand-carved wooden dibber since it was his experience that you never knew when these items would come in handy and the last thing you wanted was to find yourself short of a dibber when you really needed one.

Mr Livingstone and Mr Twist spent their days polishing their schoolboy French and the Merivales bought, checked and packed a portable coffee making machine, a travel iron and a new suitcase on wheels.

Mrs Caldicot, alerted to the decision made by Mrs Torridge, Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale issued a stern warning that every member of the party would be limited to one suitcase and one small piece of hand luggage.

She knew, however, that it is not the difficulties you foresee that cause the headaches. The things you worry about most usually turn out to be of little consequence. It is the problems you don’t see coming which really hit you hard on the back of the neck.

Mrs Caldicot’s ruling meant that it was back to the drawing board for Mrs Torridge, Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale.

It was Mrs Torridge’s idea that they should send Ruth into town to purchase for them the three largest suitcases she could find. Since it was impossible for her to carry all three suitcases onto a bus, Ruth had to travel back home in a taxi which cost Mrs Caldicot £9.50 or £10.00 with the tip.

Even when completely empty the suitcases she brought back were too heavy for any of the residents to lift.

Chapter Six

It has for many years been customary for travelling sports teams to take with them a baggage master – an individual whose task it is to ensure that the party's luggage travels with them and does not get diverted, stolen, mislaid, distracted or left behind. When there is a baggage master attached to a party, all the other members of the group can relax. They do not have to worry about losing a bag en route.

Naturally, Mrs Caldicot and her entourage did not have a baggage master.

And as she supervised the loading of the luggage into the small coach which had been hired to take them to the railway station, from whence they would board a train which would take them all on to London, St Pancras and the Eurostar train to Paris, Mrs Caldicot could not help but think that life would have been considerably easier if she had been supervising the travels of the England Football team on a trip to the other side of the globe. At least she would have then had the assistance of a specialist baggage master. And, as a footnote to this thought, she wondered idly if the England Football team took as much luggage with them when they travelled as her own little group.

The main problem was that despite her entreaties, the members of her party had packed as if they were going away for three months, rather than for five days and three nights.

Mrs Caldicot tried to console herself, and to gain some small comfort, from the knowledge that Aristocratic Victorian travellers, rich on the backs of mill workers, miners and other indentured skivvies, used to go on their Continental tours equipped with several hundred pieces of luggage containing every convenience, necessity and luxury known to man, woman or child.

No Duke, Earl or even a paltry Baronet would dare set foot further south than Dover without a full range of warming pans, butterfly nets, pith helmets, climbing boots, tin baths and other essentials.

But then she remembered that those same Victorian travellers invariably took with them a small army of servants and that it was by no means unknown for a travelling peer off on a mind-broadening Grand Tour, or an artefact collecting expedition, to be accompanied by more than 100 maids, footmen, butlers, cooks and strong men to carry the bags.

The thought with which she had tried to comfort herself faded into nothing more than useless, outdated trivia.

Mrs Caldicot herself had packed the cases for Mrs Torridge, Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale and, not knowing what sort of weather to expect, she had included a choice of clothing for warm, wet or cold weather.

But having decided that Mrs Caldicot had been far too cautious, indeed conservative, the trio had insisted on opening their suitcases and cramming in just about everything else they could find which seemed remotely suitable for a trip to Paris.

Mrs Torridge's mammoth sized suitcase now contained seven pairs of shoes, two pairs of slippers, a large hat and a large teddy bear who had a red ribbon round his neck and just one remaining eye and was, for reasons long ago lost in the mists of time, known as Cuthbert.

Mrs Peterborough had packed six skirts, five dresses, an evening gown with sequins and two hats, one with feathers and one without. She had managed to cram in a dressing gown, seven nightdresses and a pair of pyjamas. She had also popped in a yellow plastic bucket and a small spade which she'd found at the back of the garage and which had been leftover from a day trip to the seaside. 'But we're going on holiday!' she protested, when Mrs Roberts pointed out that Paris is not on the coast. 'I always used to take a bucket and spade with me when I went away on holiday.'

Miss Nightingale, more concerned with the inner woman than outward appearances, and having once heard that French dietary preferences tend to hover around the sort of things that are normally found slithering or hopping around the garden, had crammed her suitcase full to the brim with many tins of food (mainly mulligatawny soup, apricots in syrup and pilchards) numerous packets of biscuits and a dozen bars of chocolate. She had also popped in three long playing records. She was not intending to play these, not having packed a record player, but she had slid them into the case simply because she had found that she was able to fit them in. 'Mustn't waste space,' she had said to Mrs Peterborough. Despite the inclusion of all this food, she had managed to cram in a number of winter woollies, her entire collection of woolly hats and a variety of other clothing items.

Sadly, although Miss Nightingale did not know this, the biscuits had not survived. They had been in the suitcase when Mrs Peterborough had sat on it so that Miss Nightingale could close it properly. And Mrs Peterborough's bottom versus the biscuits had proved to be an unequal battle.

Where once there had been biscuits now there were crumbs.

The male members of the party were no better at restraining themselves from excess.

Mr Roxdale had packed his favourite twelve volume set of gardening encyclopaedias ('something to read on the train’), his Wellington boots (‘don’t want to get mud on my best shoes and it often rains a good deal in these foreign places’) and a variety of gardening implements (‘the French don’t understand gardening because it involves hard work and so there will probably be a park that needs my attention’).

Mr Hewitt, also a keen gardener, had, as had previously disclosed, packed his favourite trowel, hand fork and dibber but he had also crammed three economy sized boxes of cornflakes, a loaf of sliced bread, two family sized packs of bacon and two boxes each containing 12 eggs into his suitcase.

Mr Hewitt rather liked an English breakfast and wasn’t going to start the day on nothing more substantial than a flaky croissant. He was also determined that no one else was going to have to go without a proper breakfast.

Mr Livingstone, in contrast, had a modestly sized suitcase but he also had three instrument cases for he insisted on travelling with his flute, his banjo and a set of African bongo drums.

Only Mrs Caldicot, Mrs Roberts and Ruth had restrained themselves and taken the more usual variety of essential stuff for the holiday. But, as Mrs Caldicot confessed to her husband, there was an inevitable sense of self-preservation in this since all three of them were well aware that they would probably be doing the lion’s share of carrying suitcases and bags.

The result was that loading all the luggage into the hold of the coach which had been booked to take them to the railway station took rather longer than Mrs Caldicot had expected and required a considerable amount of rearranging and huffing and cursing by the driver.

‘You didn’t tell me you were moving house,’ the driver complained with what he, but no one else, thought of as searing wit.

Mr Jenkins, who was there to help and to say goodbye to Mrs Caldicot (they both hated the idea of railway station partings) solved the problem by handing the driver a crisp, new £20 note, telling him that in return for this small ‘pourboire’, he expected help in unloading the luggage when the coach arrived at the railway station where, of course, the whole procedure had to be conducted in reverse.

That early part of the journey all went remarkably smoothly.

The coach took them to the local railway station.

A local stopping train took them up to London.

And in London a coach which had been booked to take them all to St Pancras was, to Mrs Caldicot’s ill-concealed surprise, exactly where it was supposed to be.

And then the party had to find and clamber aboard the Eurostar train to St Pancras.

Naturally, there were no porters or trolleys to be seen and Mrs Caldicot, Mrs Roberts and Ruth and the others had to carry their impedimenta further than they would have chosen. Naturally, the escalator was not working and so the bags and cases had to be hauled up a seemingly interminable staircase. And then everything had to be dragged and pulled along a platform to the coach where their seats were booked. Mr Livingstone reckoned they had carried their bags for at least a mile and a half.

Finally, they had to load most of the luggage onto the train themselves. Three clipboard carrying employees stood and watched.

‘Why aren’t there any trolleys?’ asked Mrs Roberts, pausing for a moment as she struggled to heave another suitcase up the high steps and into the carriage.

‘Health and safety,’ explained one of the clipboard owners. ‘A woman was banged on the ankle by a trolley so we have to keep them all locked up.’

‘We should have done some training,’ muttered a breathless Mrs Roberts. ‘Dragging the luggage up and down the stairs a few times perhaps.’

‘Dragging everything down into town and then back again would have been a good test,’ said a red-faced Ruth.

‘Against the clock,’ said Mrs Roberts.

‘I should have insisted that everyone throw out at least half of the stuff in their cases,’ said Mrs Caldicot wearily.

‘And then thrown out half of what was left,’ said Mrs Roberts.

By the time they slumped into their reserved seats, they were all exhausted.

‘This luggage is going to prove to be something of a problem,’ said Mrs Caldicot to Mrs Roberts and Ruth.

They both agreed that she was almost certainly correct.

‘I really should have had a firm word with Mr Livingstone about those instrument cases,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘I did say only one suitcase and one piece of hand-luggage.’

‘What on earth is he taking those for?’ asked Mrs Roberts.

‘I’ve no idea,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘Miss Nightingale’s suitcase feels as though she’s filled it with lead,’ said Ruth, who rather thought she might have strained something vital in heaving the case onto the train. She was trying to work out how many more times she would have to help move all the luggage. There would be once when they got off the train at the Gare du Nord.

And then, unless they could find a porter or a trolley of some kind, the cases would have to be dragged across the station concourse. Then the luggage would have to be loaded onto the travel company's coach. And it would have to be taken off the coach when it arrived at their hotel.

Her muscles ached at the thought of it all.

Still, maybe a gallant Frenchman would take pity on her, help with the luggage and then whisk her off for a five course dinner at an absurdly glamorous and expensive restaurant. She closed her eyes and dreamt of the candlelit restaurant, the attentive waiters and the handsome, charming, slightly naughty Frenchman on the other side of the flower arrangement on their cosy table for two. She must not, she thought, allow herself to drink too much champagne.

Ruth did a good deal of day-dreaming though she would have screamed for help and run a mile if any Frenchman (slightly naughty or not) had even suggested whisking her off to a glamorous and expensive restaurant.

'Oh dear,' said Mrs Caldicot, still worrying about Miss Nightingale's case. 'I hope she hasn't put in anything which will get her into trouble with the customs people.'

'Crumbs,' said Mrs Roberts. 'I'd forgotten all about customs. I hope they don't open any of our suitcases.'

'We can but hope,' said Mrs Caldicot who had learned not to lean too heavily on hope as a support.

'I think I'm about to have a rather late mid-life crisis,' said Mrs Roberts.

'I feel as though I've been having one of those since I was about 18,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'And I'm not finished with it yet.'

Chapter Seven

Sadly, the problems began before the cases were opened.

‘All luggage to be putted onto the conveying belt,’ ordered the man in a Border Control uniform, giving his best impression of a jackbooted Obergruppenfuhrer.

Mrs Caldicot rightly suspected that he wasn’t paid very much but that he liked his job because he got a free uniform and every day he could be rude to people who didn’t dare say anything back to him.

He clearly liked ordering people about.

The man looked like a bad tempered version of one of the larger animals found in zoos; the ones who live in enclosures festooned with signs saying ‘Do Not Feed’ and ‘No Buns Allowed’. He was extremely foreign and in addition to not speaking very good English, he spoke with a curiously and unexpectedly strong Essex accent. Mrs Caldicot didn’t like to say anything, of course, but she did secretly think it rather odd that England’s borders should be protected by foreigners.

Looking around, she noticed that all the border control employees seemed to have soured expressions as though they never laughed and could not remember ever having seen anything to laugh at.

She wondered if they were selected for their facial expressions (‘Customs Official wanted: must have sour look’) or if they were hired, blank as it were, and then sent to a special training school where they were taught how to look stern, unforgiving and untrusting. Maybe, she thought, they are all former Post Office employees.

‘And you are to be putting all metal objections inside the tray with which you be provided before going into the metal detector,’ the man added, with a scowl.

Or he said something like that, anyway.

His accent was so strange that Mrs Caldicot had no real idea what he was saying. He could, she thought, have been reciting a recipe for cauliflower cheese.

‘Say please!’ said Miss Nightingale firmly. ‘You must always say ‘please’.’

‘You should say ‘please’,’ said Mrs Peterborough, who was next in the queue.

‘Oh dear,’ thought Mrs Caldicot.

It occurred to her that slightly dotty old ladies who appear perfectly normal from the outside can be a good more trouble than small children with behavioural disorders.

The customs man, clearly shocked that anyone should dare talk to him that way, if at all, stared at Mrs Peterborough as if she’d told him to take down his trousers or as though she had pulled a field howitzer out of her handbag.

He felt dismayed because if he were no longer allowed to be rude to travellers, there would be no joy at all in his life. In the movies he liked to watch in his spare time, the man in authority, and wearing a nice uniform, would only have to look sternly at the crowd, and maybe raise an admonitory hand, for the masses to fall silent in an instant.

That was how he saw himself: as the man in authority with an admonitory hand.

Moreover, these were old people.

He saw wrinkled, weak, frail bodies and assumed, for no reason other than old-fashioned prejudice, that the minds inside those bodies must also be weak and frail.

Miss Nightingale had shattered all his illusions and left him reeling.

Two yards away, Mrs Torridge was slowly edging her walking frame towards the metal detector gate. It was a slow business. Unless she was sitting on the mobility scooter, Mrs Torridge didn’t go anywhere in a hurry. A small queue had formed behind her. Mrs Torridge couldn’t really understand why they had a door frame without a door in it but everything around her was too noisy and too frantic for her to worry too much about this.

And so she edged forwards, inch by inch.

‘It’s only polite to say ‘please’,’ insisted Miss Nightingale to the man at the customs post. ‘What did your mother tell you to say?’

‘What did your mother tell you to say?’ demanded Mrs Peterborough. She folded her arms across her chest and glared at the man. Mrs Peterborough was normally a jolly woman but she could, when it seemed necessary, look down her nose and over her spectacles as well as anyone.

‘In England we are taught to be polite to one another,’ said Miss Nightingale who had decided that they must have already arrived in France. She spoke loudly and slowly so as to make it easier for to the man to understand since it had not entirely escaped her ken that, doubtless as a result of having rather substandard educational systems, not all foreigners spoke fluent English.

The customs officer, who had gone an unpleasant and unhealthy looking shade of puce, pulled himself up to his full five foot two and a little bit inches (including built-up shoes) and glared at them both. No one other than his superior, his wife, his mother and his three children had ever spoken to him in such a fearless manner.

Meanwhile, there was a good deal of noise coming from another part of the customs area.

'You can't go through with that!' shouted another foreigner in a Border Control uniform. He was very fat, frowned constantly and had a shifty, constantly guilty, look about him. Mrs Caldicot suspected that even his mother would probably admit he looked like the guilty one in a police line-up of sex offenders. There are always some men who join the army because they want to kill people without getting into trouble. And there are customs officers who put on their uniform each day looking forward to bringing a little darkness into ordinary people's lives. This customs officer looked like the sort of man who had taken the job because he didn't like people very much.

He had spotted that Mrs Torridge and her walking frame were about to pass through the metal detector.

'Why not?' demanded Mrs Torridge, confused and indignant in equal proportions. 'It's the only way I can get to my bag!' She took one hand off her walking frame and pointed to her luggage which was waiting for her at the end of the conveyor belt. Holding onto her walking frame with one hand was for her the equivalent of riding a bicycle one handed.

'We have to examine your stick thing!' insisted the fat Border Control officer.

And with that he snatched the walking frame from Mrs Torridge.

Mrs Caldicot stared in disbelief.

It occurred to her that maybe the prize pupils from Post Office training establishments were picked out for Border control work. ('You are one of our prize pupils Miss Taj Mahal. You are the rudest person we've seen for years. The Border Control people would like you to work for them.')

Since Mrs Torridge was leaning heavily on the walking frame at the time, the result of this confiscation was inevitable.

Mrs Torridge stood still for a moment and then, very slowly, started to rock backwards and forwards. Mrs Caldicot, who was trying to keep an eye on everyone, watched in horror. Everything seemed to happen in slow motion. It was clear that Mrs Torridge was about to fall but the only question was: would she fall backwards or would she fall forwards.

In the end she fell backwards; collapsing with surprising grace; and subsiding to a heap on the floor in a slow motion movement that a ballet dancer would have envied.

'Put your metal objects into the tray!' shouted the first foreigner, who had not noticed Mrs Torridge's subsidence and probably wouldn't have cared much if he had. 'I am workings for the Border Force and so I do not have to be saying of 'please' to you!'

'Don't be so rude!' shouted Mrs Peterborough who, misled by the man's strange accent, had now also decided that they must have arrived in France and that she was, therefore, addressing a person of French origin. She knew that when speaking to foreigners one should always speak loudly, slowly and clearly so that they can understand.

She also admonished the man by gently smacking him on the arm as a mother might tap a child.

Startled, the man backed away and shouted for help.

A few yards away Mrs Torridge, who was lying flat on her back on the floor, was also shouting. She was calling: 'Will someone please help me up?' The fat Border Control officer who was examining Mrs Torridge's walking frame ignored her because helping old ladies up off the floor wasn't part of his job description.

Mrs Caldicot, abandoned Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough and, having collected Ruth, who had been about to help put Mr Livingstone's array of musical instruments onto the conveyor belt, set off to help Mrs Torridge who was still lying on the floor, floundering and doing a pretty good impersonation of a fish out of water. The travellers who had been queuing behind her pretended that she wasn't there and stepped around her, and in one case over her, in order to pass through the metal detecting archway.

As she rushed forward to help Mrs Torridge, Mrs Caldicot was elbowed aside by two heavily armed policemen who were responding to the cry from the customs officer who had suffered a slight smack on the arm from a slightly dotty septuagenarian and who was already thinking of the compensation and damages he could claim from his employers after Mrs Peterborough had been arrested, charged, tried, found guilty and imprisoned.

The two policemen, neither of whom looked to be more than 15-years-old, though Mrs Caldicot thought they could, perhaps, have been young looking 16-year-olds, were both brandishing automatic weapons. One of the policemen was male and the other was not. Both were growing moustaches but the female police person was having considerably more success with hers which had already acquired a luxuriousness which her partner's upper lip seemed unlikely to be able to match.

'Down on the floor!' yelled the boy policemen. He was trying hard not to panic but not doing very well at it. He had acne and a lisp and was very conscious of his moustache which he fingered at least once a minute to check that it was still growing nicely. 'Everyone get down on the floor with your hands behind your backs.'

Some people can command battalions with a single barked order. Unfortunately, this policeman had one of those strange squeaky voices which never command much in the way of respect.

Still, when you are one of the few people in a room to have an automatic weapon a certain amount of respect is inevitably forthcoming. A young mother started to scream. Her six children, loyal to the echo, all followed suit.

'Mrs Torridge has been mugged!' cried Mr Livingstone, who hadn't seen anything of what had happened but who now saw Mrs Torridge lying on the floor. He and Mr Roxdale tried to step around behind the second policemen in order to help their friend to her feet. The second policeman was so tall that she didn't ever really know where her feet were, or what they were up to, until a few minutes after they'd finished moving. This made tennis, dancing and other similar activities frustrating, disappointing and something of a hazard. It also gave her an instability that sometimes interfered with her ability to stand firm and tall in the pursuit of justice. Sensing movement behind her, the tall policeman stepped to one side and immediately fell over Mrs Torridge. She landed with quite a thump and lay winded on her chest with her automatic gun underneath her.

The male policeman, the one who had the strange, squeaky voice, was proud of his peripheral vision, and he immediately noticed that his partner was now on the floor where the terrorists should normally be. He swung round to help. As he did so he collided with Mr Livingstone, tripped over Mr Livingstone's banjo case and crashed into the conveyor belt used to carry luggage (and musical instruments) through the X-ray machine. His automatic weapon ended up on the conveyor belt and he ended up on the floor.

'Are you all right, Mrs Torridge?' asked Mrs Caldicot, who had finally fought her way to her friend.

'I think so,' replied Mrs Torridge. 'But my dignity has definitely been injured. Am I decent?' she tried to look down to check that her dress was still properly aligned.

Mrs Caldicot assured her that nothing untoward was on display.

'This is why my mother always told me to make sure I was wearing clean ones,' whispered Mrs Torridge.

Mrs Caldicot smiled at her and with Ruth's help, helped her to her feet. Mrs Torridge clung to the frame surrounding the door that wasn't there and rubbed her thigh where she had landed on the floor.

Mr Twist was always nervous of policemen, even when they were growing moustaches and one of them had a strange, squeaky voice. Not even the fact that both policemen were now lying on the floor lessened his anxiety. He therefore lay down on the floor, face up so that he could see what was going on, and then tried to put his hands behind his back. He found that lying this way was very uncomfortable but it was, he thought, what the policeman had told him to do and so he did it. The ever reliable Mrs Roberts, as calm and phlegmatic as ever, knelt down beside him and assured him that there was really nothing to worry about and that everything was going to be all right.

One or two other travellers, none of them in Mrs Caldicot's party, followed Mr Twist's example, and the floor of the customs area was soon full of people wriggling about trying to get comfortable. Half a dozen children were crying and, much to the distress of a man in a uniform who kept shouting that taking photographs was not allowed, a group of Japanese tourists who had absolutely no idea what was going on and assumed that the chaos was perfectly normal were lying on the floor giggling and taking photographs of one another.

'Officer down!' yelled the squeaky voiced policeman into his radio. He looked around for his gun which had now travelled into the bowels of the X-ray machine and had, therefore, apparently disappeared.

Strictly speaking, both officers were down and if he had thought about it more, a more accurate call for help would have been: 'Officers down'.

Of course, the word 'down' in police terms is normally utilised to describe an incident in which one or more policemen have been attacked and wounded rather than an incident in which two clumsy and slightly inept policemen have both tripped over and fallen all by themselves, but police procedure does not allow for such niceties and as far as the emergency room dispatcher was concerned, an officer was down and help was needed.

Meanwhile, the Border Control officer who was manning the X-ray machine suddenly noticed that something that looked suspiciously like an automatic weapon was sitting on his conveyor belt. He pressed his alarm button and started to yell for help.

Consequently, moments later every policeman in the building could be seen running towards the customs area. Laden as they were with their helmets, bullet proof vests, protective chest guards, thigh guards, elbow guards, guns, spare ammunition and lots of shiny accoutrements they looked red-faced and rather flushed by the time they arrived. Several of them, the ones who were particularly red-faced and perspiring, looked as though they had not been well-designed for urgent physical activity.

'What's going on?' demanded Mr Livingstone of no one in particular.

'Some sort of game, I think,' replied Mr Twist. He looked around and could see a small, nervous looking policeman trying to disentangle himself from Mr Livingstone's banjo case; a tall policewoman trying to disentangle herself from the strap of her automatic weapon; a customs man examining Mrs Torridge's walking frame; a Border

Control officer, who was sitting behind the X-ray machine, doing a very good impersonation of a man in a panic; a number of travellers lying on the floor, all with their hands in clear sight; Mrs Torridge clinging to a doorway which had no door; a Border Control official holding his arm as though it had been broken and a number of Border Control officials who looked as though they were having nervous breakdowns.

‘Exercise,’ said Mr Merivale firmly, as though he knew what he was talking about. ‘It’s definitely one of those training exercises. Like when they ring the alarm bell in a hotel and see how long it takes for everyone to get downstairs and gather together on the pavement in their nightwear.’ Mr Merivale had taken one look at the floor, which he thought rather dirty, and was still standing.

The others nodded in agreement. An exercise was the only thing that made sense.

‘They always do it in the middle of the night because it gives the staff a laugh,’ said Mr Merivale, who knew about hotels. ‘They like to see their guests in their night clothes, all shivering in the cold.’

‘Do you think we’ll ever get to Paris?’ murmured Mrs Roberts, looking around at the chaos around them.

‘It’s not looking good,’ replied Mrs Caldicot. She sighed. Not for the first time on their journey she wished Mr Jenkins was with them. She felt sure that he would know how to deal with things. It occurred to her that it was a good thing that they had arrived at St Pancras with plenty of time to spare. When she had made the initial arrangements, and looked at the various train times, she had imagined herself having time to sit with a leisurely cup of coffee and, perhaps, a Danish pastry, before boarding the Eurostar train. So far, it hadn’t quite worked out that way.

It now looked as though she and her charges would need every minute of the extra time she had allowed in order to battle their way through the various customs procedures.

Chapter Eight

Sorting out the confusion and chaos in the customs area took just over an hour.

To begin with there was talk of arresting both Mrs Torridge (for attempting to take an unauthorised walking frame into the departure area at St Pancras) and Mrs Peterborough (for assaulting a Border Control officer) but a rare police inspector with his head screwed on the right way round decided that none of this would be in anyone's best interests. Not even he, however, had been able to prevent an over-enthusiastic officer from ringing the Bomb Squad and demanding that someone come and check out Mrs Torridge's aluminium walking frame.

The customs officer who had been so severely assaulted by Mrs Peterborough had gone off into a private room to share the details of his traumatic experience and to discuss his compensation claim with his union representative, a lawyer, a human resources expert, a public relations official and a psychiatrist drafted in to provide emergency counselling. There was already talk of an early retirement, a full disability pension and a lump sum payment in compensation. The only question seemed to be the size of the compensation payment and the wording of the press statement.

The two police officers who had ended up on the floor had gone off duty so that they could rest after their exhausting ordeal. When the police inspector eventually viewed video coverage of the entire incident, the two young officers were told to take a month's sick leave before attending an extensive debriefing with a review board. It was suggested to them that when they returned to work they might prefer to take up roles in traffic management. Overseeing a pedestrian crossing outside the station had been offered as a suitable site for their employment though it had been pointed out that they would need extensive and lengthy retraining before taking on this level of responsibility.

The small army of police officers who had responded so promptly to the 'Officer down' emergency call remained distributed throughout the area. They were still holding their automatic weapons at the ready but although they were not sure why they had been summoned, they were still alert and rather on the jumpy side of edgy. Mrs Caldicot's party of older travellers did not match the profile of modern-day terrorists but, as one officer pointed out, some terrorists can be masters of disguise and you can never be too careful. Several kept their guns aimed at Mrs Torridge who was deemed by an alert sergeant to be the possible ringleader of a gang of domestic insurgents.

Mrs Torridge's walking frame had been taken apart, examined and left in pieces by an explosives expert who had been given a police escort and had raced to St Pancras in a Bomb Squad Land Rover. It took Mr Livingstone and Mr Roxdale some time to put the walking frame back together and although it was still a little wobbly, it was more or less serviceable. Mrs Caldicot watched them with a smile and considerable pride. It was a joy to her to know that her companions were always loyal and willing to help one another.

The next step in the process of getting through customs involved the party's luggage.

This had been the part of the procedure which Mrs Caldicot had feared most.

'Open your suitcase,' said the customs officer to Miss Nightingale. The officer was a woman of indeterminate years who looked as if she had suffered from really bad irritable bowel syndrome for at least a decade and was currently struggling to cope with an intestinal storm or, possibly, a gastric hurricane. Mrs Caldicot thought she looked like a shop owner who on a wet January morning finds herself faced with a queue of people returning unwanted Christmas presents. She certainly did not look the sort of woman whose life was punctuated with gales of unbridled laughter. She had a wispy string of hair hanging down in front of her face and the result rather reminded Mrs Caldicot of the back end of a horse she had once put money on when she had spent a day at Newbury Races. The horse, Mrs Caldicot remembered, had finished its race a rather poor last; the jockey spattered with mud from having spent the entire time struggling to catch up with the rest of the field. She could not help thinking, but definitely did not say, that if Helen of Troy had a face that had launched 1,000 ships then this woman had a face that had probably launched 1,000 refuse carts.

'Say please,' said Miss Nightingale.

'It would help if you would say 'please',' murmured Mrs Caldicot to the customs officer. She didn't think her intervention would do much good but she thought she would try.

Heart sinking she had darted across to be by Miss Nightingale's side when she had seen that Miss Nightingale's case had been selected for investigation. The officer watching the case go through the X-ray machine, had been unable to make head nor tail of the contents which bore absolutely no resemblance to the sort of thing usually seen when holiday makers' suitcases were viewed on an X-ray machine.

'Stand away,' ordered the customs officer sternly. 'Who are you?'

'I'm a friend,' replied Mrs Caldicot. 'I'm a friend of Miss Nightingale's.'

‘And who is Miss Nightingale when she is at home?’ demanded the customs officer who was not afraid to share a cliché when one tottered into view.

‘She’s my friend,’ explained Mrs Caldicot. ‘It’s her suitcase.’

‘Open your suitcase, please,’ mumbled the customs officer reluctantly. The use of the word ‘please’ clearly offended her professional susceptibilities but she had seen enough to realise that this group of travellers were potential trouble.

Miss Nightingale opened her suitcase.

The moment she did so the contents which had been compressed by having been sat on by Mrs Peterborough, sprang upwards in clear relief at having been freed from their confinement. Some spilt outwards onto the counter top and only swift action by Mrs Caldicot prevented a pair of pink Disneyland pyjamas sliding onto the floor. The pyjamas, which were Miss Nightingale’s favourites, were decorated with pictures of Mickey and Minnie Mouse.

The customs officer began to unpack the suitcase.

Miss Nightingale, watching, looked at Mrs Caldicot.

‘It’s all right,’ said Mrs Caldicot reassuringly. She smiled at Miss Nightingale. Mrs Caldicot was conscious of the fact that Miss Nightingale never liked having her belongings handled by strangers. Once, when a plumber had moved her dressing gown without asking her permission, she had attacked him with a pink, fluffy mule. The plumber, a 22-year-old Pole, had fled the scene and never returned.

‘What’s this?’ demanded the customs officer, holding up a tin of Mulligatawny soup.

‘That looks like soup,’ said Mrs Caldicot, examining the label. ‘My best guess, based on the information provided by the label, would be Mulligatawny.’

‘Soup,’ agreed Miss Nightingale, with a nod of her head.

‘Please allow the owner of the suitcase to answer for herself,’ said the customs officer pompously. She had come top in pomposity in her passing out examinations and had never for a moment considered allowing things to slide. ‘It is not permitted for other persons to answer on behalf of the suitcase owner.’

‘Then we could be here some time,’ said Mrs Caldicot politely.

‘And what’s this?’ demanded the customs officer, holding up a tin of apricot slices.

‘That would probably be a tin of apricot slices,’ said Mrs Caldicot. She bent down and looked at the tin. ‘Freshly picked apricots, served in their own juice with no added sugar. They appear to have been grown in Uzbekistan. There’s a recipe on the label for making an apricot tart.’

The customs officer picked out more tins and placed them on the counter beside Miss Nightingale’s suitcase.

There were nine tins of mulligatawny soup, five tins of apricot slices in their own juice, none of them with any added sugar, and four tins of the very best Portuguese pilchards. It was now abundantly clear why Miss Nightingale’s suitcase was so heavy.

‘Do you have an export licence for these items?’ asked the customs officer.

‘They are for Miss Nightingale’s own consumption,’ explained Mrs Caldicot. Miss Nightingale was looking confused and rather upset. She didn’t understand why this strange woman was unpacking her suitcase and examining her tins.

‘Where are you going?’ demanded the customs officer.

‘To Paris,’ replied Mrs Caldicot. ‘Eventually,’ she added, after a pause.

‘For how long?’

‘Three nights.’

‘And what are these?’ asked the customs officer, taking several packets out of the suitcase.

‘They appear to be packets of biscuits,’ replied Mrs Caldicot, who was a little annoyed by the customs officer’s stupid questions. She peered more closely at the packets the customs person was holding. ‘In fact I’m pretty sure that they are packets of biscuits. The packet with the words ‘custard cream’ on the sides will probably contain custard creams.’ She examined the packets even more closely. ‘Sadly, judging by the state of the packaging, they look as if they have probably become broken biscuits.’

There were seven packets of biscuits. All had been crushed.

‘And all these are also for your consumption?’ the customs officer asked Miss Nightingale.

Miss Nightingale looked at Mrs Caldicot.

‘Yes,’ said Mrs Caldicot, nodding at Miss Nightingale.

‘Yes,’ replied Miss Nightingale, nodding back at Mrs Caldicot.

Eleven minutes later, the suitcase was empty and half of the contents were spread out over the customs officer’s counter. The rest of the contents were spread over a spare table which the officer had had to fetch in order to carry the overflow.

There were, in addition to the tinned foods and the biscuits and all the clothes which Mrs Caldicot had placed in the suitcase, three long playing records, two large packets of bird seed, a snow globe containing a model of Big Ben, a rag doll with an arm missing, a telephone directory dated 1998 and covering the L-K section of the population of London, a pair of wooden book ends in an art deco style, an unopened packet of vacuum cleaner bags, a half used roll of wallpaper (chintz pattern), a brand new roll of wallpaper (blue birds and butterflies against a background of cherry tree blossom), a remote control device for a television set, a spare inner tube for a bicycle, a vacuum attachment used for sucking crumbs from sofas and armchairs, and a tin of shaving foam.

‘Ah, there it is!’ said Mrs Caldicot spotting the remote control device for the television set. ‘We’ve been looking for that for weeks.’ She picked up the remote control and popped it into her handbag. It would, she thought and said out loud, be nice to find a different channel on the television.

‘Put that back!’ ordered the customs officer. ‘It is not allowed for civilians to interfere with the functionality of customs officers.’ She, like all her colleagues, was well aware that one of their number had been fired for laughing at a traveller’s pleasantry. ‘Service with a scowl’ was thus their motto.

Mrs Caldicot took the remote control out of her bag and put it back on the counter. She was beginning to wish they had spent their lottery winnings on a new television set. Or a short holiday in the Lake District or Lyme Regis. Anywhere which didn’t require passing through customs would have been fine.

At the same time, at another counter a few feet away, Mr Hewitt was trying to explain what a dibber was, why he had one in his suitcase and why it was necessary for him to take it to Paris.

‘It’s for making holes in the ground,’ he explained. ‘You push one end into the soil and then you drop in your seed. The Americans call it a dibble.’

The customs officer stared at him disbelievingly.

‘When you’ve popped your seed in the hole you cover it up with soil, water it and wait for it to grow,’ finished Mr Hewitt, using his hands to add to his explanation.

The customs man, who was from an East European nation where dibbers are about as commonplace as battery powered nose hair clippers, looked at the wooden dibber and then at Mr Hewitt. Obviously not a gardener, he was clearly not convinced by Mr Hewitt’s explanation.

‘OK,’ said Mr Hewitt, with a weary sigh. ‘It’s a 19th century sex toy. They didn’t have batteries in those days.’

‘Ah,’ said the customs man, with a sniff. He was much happier with this explanation. He firmly believed that all travellers to the continent were perverts, and he expected to be shocked. Mr Hewitt’s false confession had comforted and reassured him. He picked the dibber up by the handle, being careful not to allow his gloved hands to come into contact with the business end of the device, and placed it back in Mr Hewitt’s suitcase, alongside the hand-fork and the trowel. He didn’t ask what the fork and trowel were for and did not seem excited by their presence.

Meanwhile, the customs officer who was dealing with the contents of Miss Nightingale’s suitcase was still looking very confused. It was the first time she had seen anyone travelling with such an eclectic collection of items in their luggage and she wasn’t sure whether there were any special procedures to be followed. For a moment she considered calling for a supervisor but then she looked at Miss Nightingale and decided not to bother.

‘You can repack the case,’ she said with an imperious wave of a hand.

‘You can repack the case, thank you,’ suggested Mrs Caldicot, politely.

The customs officer glowered at her.

Mrs Caldicot, who refused to be intimidated, glowered back. ‘In three hours,’ she thought, ‘you will still be here going through people’s dirty underwear whereas I could be sitting in a Parisian café sipping a glass of red wine and nibbling on a croissant.’

Momentarily, she felt guilty for thinking this. And then she realised that the thought made her feel much better and they can’t (yet) lock you up for what you’re thinking so she didn’t feel quite so guilty after all.

‘A ‘thank you’ would be very nice,’ explained Mrs Caldicot.

‘You may repack your case, thank you,’ said the customs officer sourly. She managed to pronounce the final two words in a way that made it clear that she didn’t mean them. But Miss Nightingale didn’t notice and Mrs Caldicot no longer cared.

The customs officer then stood and watched as Mrs Caldicot attempted, in vain, to repack the suitcase. Without the help of Mrs Peterborough’s ample proportions it was quite impossible to close the case. Miss Nightingale looked around, spotted her friend and beckoned her over.

‘Do you need my bum?’ said Mrs Peterborough cheerily.

Miss Nightingale nodded.

Mrs Peterborough pulled over a chair which she used to enable her to climb up onto the table and then onto Miss Nightingale’s suitcase.

The table, which was standard government-issue, was not built to carry both a large, heavily laden suitcase and a large and heavily laden Mrs Peterborough and the inevitable result was that the suitcase, its contents, Mrs

Peterborough and the broken table were spread across the floor. Instantly, the sour faced indigestion sufferer had her hands in front of her face and was screaming hysterically.

In complete contrast, Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough were laughing. They thought it very funny. They always laughed at the same thing.

Mrs Caldicot could not help thinking that if it is true, as it is commonly said to be the case, that great minds think alike then Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough must be blessed with great minds for there was no doubt that they thought alike very often.

The suitcase, its hinges broken, was now quite useless for its original purpose.

'Does anyone have a few spare plastic bags?' Mrs Caldicot asked, talking to the rest of her group and ignoring the customs officer who was having her own private but rather institutionalised version of hysterics.

Miss Nightingale picked up a bundle of her now temporarily homeless finery and, having looked around and realised that there was nowhere else to put it, wisely started to put on as many of her clothes as she could.

Within two minutes she was wearing three coats, four scarves and a variety hats. The hats were all of the woolly variety and she wisely made sure that the bright red one with the two dangly bobbles was put on top of the others.

'You look as if you've put on a lot of weight!' said Mrs Peterborough. 'You remind me of someone…'

Miss Nightingale puffed out her cheeks and held her arms out at her sides.

'I know who it is you remind me of…the Michelin Man!' cried Mrs Peterborough.

'The Michelin Woman!' agreed Miss Nightingale.

They both started to laugh again.

For a few years prior to his wartime experiences with the RAF's Bomber Command, Mr Livingstone, had been a boy scout, and he was therefore always prepared for any eventuality short of a tax inspection or a nuclear war. He therefore duly produced a fistful of plastic bags from a jacket pocket. They were flimsy bags, the sort of semi-useless artefacts sold for 5 pence each to supermarket customers, but they were the only bags available and so they were definitely better than nothing. Mr Livingstone handed half of the bags to Mrs Caldicot and kept the other half himself. Together they crammed Miss Nightingale's belongings into the plastic bags.

'Would you please accept these with our compliments?' Mrs Caldicot asked the customs officer, pointing to the four tins of Mulligatawny, the two tins of pilchards, the packets of broken biscuits and the assorted bundle of long playing records. (A symphony by Mahler, an original cast recording of *The King and I*, a collection of military band tunes and a recording of Des O'Connor's greatest hits). It had not been possible to squeeze these back into the available plastic bags.

'I'm not allowed to accept gifts,' said the customs officer coldly. She had been released into the public domain with a few essential parts missing and had not yet worked out how to respond to situations which did not fit into the customs officer's handbook, but she looked carefully at the tins. 'And anyway I can't eat pilchards. They're the same thing as sardines aren't they? I come out in a rash if I so much as look at a sardine.'

'Then just pop them into the rubbish,' said Mrs Caldicot sweetly. 'We don't seem to have room for them.'

'And they give me terrible indigestion,' added the customs officer. She flicked through the LPs and picked out the one by Des O'Connor. 'Maybe just this…'

But as they moved away, Miss Nightingale turned back and grabbed everything that had not been packed into the plastic bags. She stuffed the broken biscuits and the tinned food into her coat pockets and tucked the long playing records under her arm. She also grabbed the Des O'Connor album.

The sour faced woman, who had decided to take the Des O'Connor album and who thought she might be able to cope with the Mulligatawny soup and would possibly be able to use the broken biscuits in a trifle, was so disappointed that she looked even more sour faced.

'What about this broken suitcase?' demanded the sour faced woman who had the face which reminded Mrs Caldicot of a horse's behind. 'Aren't you taking it with you?'

Mrs Caldicot turned back. 'Oh, you may keep that,' she said sweetly. 'Put it into the recycling.'

They then all showed their passports to a glum and bored looking Frenchman who had obviously done something bad in a previous life for he was now condemned to sitting in a plastic cubicle scowling and inspecting passports, and then, finally, they were through to the lounge where approximately half a million other travellers were awaiting their trains to the continent.

Oscar Wilde once said that 'it is a terrible thing to part from people one has known a very short time' but, as always, the dear soul, Oscar, was more concerned with the sound of what he said than with the sense of it. Mrs Caldicot and her chums were delighted to leave the customs folk behind. And they left without looking back or suffering any pangs of nostalgia.

They had three minutes to spare before the train departed and they hurried to join the queue. There were no trolleys available so Ruth and Mrs Roberts each had to carry or drag two large suitcases and several heavy looking shoulder bags.

'Do you think this counts as exercise?' asked Ruth, who was struggling for breath and perspiring profusely.

'Oh yes, definitely,' said Mrs Roberts who was in an equally bad state.

'I'm so pleased they didn't open my suitcase,' said Mrs Torridge, who was behind them in the queue. Her suitcase was on wheels but one of the wheels was slightly wonky and instead of following her like an obedient dog, the suitcase weaved from side to side as though it had several gins too many.

'I agree,' said Mrs Caldicot, who was also laden with bags and suitcases. 'I breathed a sigh of relief when mine was allowed through unopened.'

'Mr Torridge would have hated to be disturbed,' said Mrs Torridge. 'He was never a good traveller.'

Mrs Caldicot turned and looked at her and a cold shiver ran down her spine. Mrs Torridge had been a widow for fifteen years.

'Did Mr Torridge travel a good deal?' asked Mrs Caldicot, trying not to think what she had started to think.

'Oh no,' said Mrs Torridge, emphatically. 'Mr Torridge never went abroad. He didn't approve of foreign parts. But he didn't much like travelling in Britain either.'

'So,' said Mrs Caldicot, hesitantly, and not really wanting to hear the explanation that she felt sure was coming. 'What did you mean about him hating to be disturbed?'

'If they'd opened my suitcase,' explained Mrs Torridge. 'One of those horrible people might have taken him out and shaken him. They might have even opened his lid.' She shuddered. 'He would have hated to have had his lid opened.'

Mrs Caldicot swallowed hard and made a real effort. 'Mr Torridge is in your suitcase?' She deliberately spoke very quietly partly so as not to alarm anyone else and partly to stop herself from screaming.

'Oh yes, I decided I couldn't travel without him.'

And then Mrs Caldicot remembered that Mrs Torridge kept her late husband in a coffee tin in her bedroom. Or, to be more accurate, she kept his ashes in the tin.

'You've brought Mr Torridge's ashes with you?' whispered Mrs Caldicot.

'Oh yes,' said Mrs Torridge as though it were the most sensible thing in the world; as though she had admitted to bringing with her a small alarm clock or a pair of slippers, for example. 'But it was a difficult decision. On the one hand I know he didn't like travelling when he was here with us in body. But on the other hand I've never been parted from him and I couldn't bear to leave him behind. In the end I thought he wouldn't mind me bringing him to Paris with me. I thought it would be a sort of second honeymoon.'

Mrs Caldicot closed her eyes and muttered a silent prayer of thanks that Mrs Torridge's case had passed through customs without being opened. She idly wondered if the passport man would have expected Mr Torridge's ashes to be accompanied by a suitably incinerated copy of his passport.

'We went to Torquay on our first honeymoon,' said Mrs Torridge. 'Mr Torridge liked Torquay. We stayed there for a whole week in a boarding house just two miles from the sea.' She smiled, remembering happy days in the Devon sunshine. 'Mr Torridge bought a fishing line and spent most days trying to catch mackerel. I sat beside him and watched. It was very romantic.' She paused, still thinking, still remembering. 'He never caught anything but he bought two from a man who'd been on one of those little boats and our landlady cooked them for our supper. Very nice they were too, but a little too bony for my taste.' There were tears in Mrs Torridge's eyes as she remembered a long ago mackerel supper and a husband who was no more.

Mrs Caldicot put her arm as far around Mrs Torridge as it would go and gave her a comforting squeeze. It occurred to her that with Mr Torridge with them they were a party of 14 rather than 13. Mrs Caldicot was not a superstitious woman but it did seem that the presence of the additional member might not be a bad idea.

Struggling with their many suitcases, Mr Livingstone's instruments and Miss Nightingale's vast array of bulging plastic bags, they eventually boarded the train and settled in their seats. Mrs Caldicot could hardly believe it but they were, at last, off on their Paris adventure.

Chapter Nine

As their train went through the Channel Tunnel, Miss Nightingale celebrated the occasion by passing around the contents of the packets of broken biscuits which she'd stuffed in her pockets. The excitement of passing through Customs had long been forgotten by them all.

'This is the high life,' said Mr Roxdale, stuffing the crumbly remains of a badly battered custard cream into his mouth and lying back in his seat.

Mr Hewitt, who had managed to open one of Miss Nightingale's tins of apricot slices with the tin opening gadget on his Swiss Army penknife (which had, in all the excitement, slipped through the customs checks) pierced an apricot slice with the blade of the knife, popped the piece of fruit into his mouth and agreed with him. He then pierced another apricot slice and handed it to Mr Twist who was sitting in the seat next to him.

Mr Livingstone took his flute out of its case and minutes later those members of the party who weren't eating were singing the first of a fine variety of music hall songs.

Mr Livingstone liked music hall songs. He liked the tunes, he liked the words and he liked the jolly, having a good time sort of atmosphere they engendered.

Together they sang 'I'm Henry the Eighth', 'Burlington Bertie from Bow', 'Nellie Dean', 'Never Let Your Braces Dangle', 'Old Bull and Bush' and 'A Little Bit of Cucumber'. Miss Nightingale sang a solo version of Marie Lloyd's 'The Coster Girl in Paris' and Mrs Roberts surprised everyone by singing 'Has Anybody Here Seen Kelly?'. They sang 'Boiled Beef and Carrots' and 'I Do Like to Be Beside the Seaside'. Within ten minutes everyone in the carriage was singing along. Younger travellers who didn't know the words hummed or just made what they thought were appropriate da de da type noises.

Everyone had what used to be called a jolly good time (and would probably now be known as an 'interesting inter-generational experience') and Mrs Caldicot, who was very proud of her friends, had to wipe away a tear or two of happiness.

A couple of hours later the train slowed and eased into the Gare du Nord railway station in northern Paris.

'Can't we go round again?' shouted a young man with green hair. His friends, who had never enjoyed a journey so much, laughed and cheered.

Ruth smiled. She was very happy. Two young men had asked her for her telephone number and she felt sure that a little fellow with a toothbrush moustache and a glint in his eye had pinched her bottom. The train had jolted while she was coming back from the loo and it was, of course, possible that she might have simply bumped into the edge of a table or a piece of luggage. But the little fellow, who was too old and too small for her to fancy, and whom she felt was certainly foreign and probably French, had winked at her. She had glowered at him, though in a friendly, encouraging sort of way, and he had winked again.

And since you couldn't really count being on a train as being abroad they hadn't really arrived in France yet. She couldn't wait to send a text to her best friend Denise to let her know what had happened.

Chapter Ten

It was quite probably true that the coach driver who met them at the Gare du Nord, who helped load their bags into the bowels of his rather aged and battered vehicle and who then drove them to their hotel, was, technically speaking, bilingual as advertised.

Whatever his French was like, he was not exactly fluent in the English language but, as Mrs Roberts later pointed out, it was perfectly possible that he really was bilingual but that neither of his mastered languages was English.

'Maybe his two chosen languages are Swedish and Romanian,' she suggested. 'That would make him bilingual.'

'My name is Marc,' the driver announced with a broad smile, when they had all boarded the coach and settled into their seats. He had clearly practised this phrase many times for he made the announcement loudly, clearly and confidently. Mrs Caldicot and her party were impressed.

But, sadly, that was about the extent of Marc's English.

'How far is it to the hotel?' asked Mrs Caldicot, as the coach eased out into heavy traffic.

'L'Hotel est magnifique!' replied Marc ignoring the question because he hadn't understood it. 'Il y a un ascenseur.'

'What did he say?' asked Mrs Caldicot, turning round to see if anyone could help translate. Mrs Caldicot's French was limited in scope and not all social situations can be dealt with effectively with 'Un café, s'il vous plait.'

'He said something about a Russian called Ilya,' said Mr Livingstone confidently. He thought for a moment. 'Maybe this Ilya is the manager,' he suggested.

'He said that the hotel is magnificent and that there is a lift,' said Mr Williams softly.

'Yes, exactly, that's what I thought he said,' agreed Mr Livingstone who was beginning to suspect that perhaps his French was a little rustier than he had thought.

Mrs Caldicot thanked them both.

'L'hotel dispose de soixante seize chambres toutes avec salle de bain,' said Marc, swerving to avoid a taxi which had suddenly stopped in the middle of the road.

Marc, the driver, seemed determined to prove that even if he did not speak much English, he could definitely speak some French.

He was so keen to tell them about the hotel that he seemed to have forgotten that he was driving a coach, and threw the large vehicle around as if it were a high performance rally car and he a competition driver fighting for vital points in the World Rally Championship.

It seemed to Mrs Caldicot that the traffic was less regulated in France than in England and it was certainly faster, more thrilling, and more dangerous. The drivers seemed to do a good deal more gesticulating and it was all very noisy too; with a good deal of horn blowing.

It was not, thought Mrs Caldicot, a place for timid drivers.

'I think he said something about the hotel having a girl called Sally de something who empties lots of chamber pots,' said Mr Livingstone, translating the driver's last remarks. He paused and thought for a while. 'I couldn't quite make out the girl's name. But I seem to remember that they don't think they have proper toilets in France. They squat down and use a sort of hole in the ground.'

'If the toilet is just a hole in the ground what do you do if you're on the top floor of a tall building?' asked Mr Hewitt.

'The hotel has 76 bedrooms, all with private bathrooms,' murmured Mr Williams, translating what the driver had said and speaking before Mr Livingstone could answer this perfectly sensible question.

'Maybe a long pipe?' suggested Mr Livingstone who was still fascinated by the idea of a top floor toilet which connected to a hole in the ground. 'But what if it backed up? That would be a hell of a problem wouldn't it?'

'I think we'll find that the hotel has proper lavatories,' whispered Mr Williams.

The driver slammed on his brakes as a cyclist rode in front of him. He swerved around the cyclist and then accelerated furiously. He sounded his horn, shouted something which was almost certainly not complimentary, changed gear, waved a fist at the cyclist and lit a cigarette. He seemed to manage to do all these things at the same time. Mrs Caldicot noticed with horror that he appeared to be steering the coach with his knees. A delivery van hurtled in front of the coach, missing it by inches or, since they were now in France, by centimetres.

'I don't think I need to translate that,' said Mr Williams dryly. 'And unless he knows the cyclist and his parents I don't see how he could know all that anyway.'

Ten minutes later, the coach slid to a tyre screaming halt outside a nondescript grey building which should have had the word 'Hotel' in neon lights above the door. However, there was something wrong with the light and the H was not lit. The four remaining letters blazed away with glorious defiance. OTEL they cried proudly.

Marc the coach driver had double parked and seemed unaware that he was now completely blocking the narrow street.

'Oh look!' said Ruth excitedly. 'The French use almost the same word as we do – but they leave off the H.'

'It doesn't look very grand,' whispered Mrs Roberts, who sounded rather disappointed.

A motorist, who had been waiting behind the coach for nearly five seconds, started to press his horn.

'I'm sure it's very nice inside,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'And we aren't going to spend much time looking at the outside, are we?'

'True!' laughed Mrs Roberts.

A second motorist, now joining the young queue behind the coach, put his hand on his horn button. A delivery van driver joined the queue and did the same. The horns all had their own individual tones. Marc leant out of his window and glowered at them all. He then waved a single, nicotine stained finger in their general direction. Somehow, the horn blowing seemed to increase in intensity. One of the drivers wound down his window and shouted something which was probably abusive.

'Welcome to the best 'otel in Paris!' said a short man who wore a green jacket, green trousers and a green peaked hat. The jacket, trousers and hat were all decorated with yellow piping and had been made for a taller man with a larger head. The man wearing them looked to be in his 20s.

'Are you the porter?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'I am Raphael, the hotel doorman,' said the short man. 'I speak perfect English. Anything you wants you have only to be asking yourself from me. I can tell you everything for which you have needs. Welcome to the 'otel.' He had to shout to make himself heard above the sound of the horn blowing. He did not seem surprised or in any way put out by this.

'Can you help us with our luggage?' asked Mrs Caldicot, not unreasonably.

'I do not do the luggages,' said Raphael, rather indignantly. 'I am the doorman. If I disappear into the hotel with bags I cannot be also the doorman, is not? If someone arrives and I am there not here will be an absence of doorman and the 'otel manager he will not be pleased. I will lose my job and have to give back my uniform. There are very few jobs of this type in Paris.' He moved closer to Mrs Caldicot and lowered his voice. 'I can, however, arrange for you everything you may be needing while you are enjoying your stay in Paris. I can fix for you the taxis, the nightclubs, the restaurants, the companions for the evening…' He allowed the sentence to trail off.

Mrs Caldicot was surprised at Raphael's refusal to help with the bags. He was, she thought, perhaps not the best choice as a hotel doorman. But, on the other hand, maybe it was not easy to find a man prepared to wear an ill-fitting green uniform with yellow piping and to stand on a doorstep all day long.

And when she thought about it, she was unable to counter his seemingly solid piece of logic. If you have a man who is hired as a doorman then you would expect him to stay by the door. Moreover, she was slightly unnerved by Raphael's stern prediction about what would happen if he carried their cases into the hotel. She didn't want the poor fellow to lose his job.

And so, Mrs Caldicot, anxious to move herself, her companions and their luggage out of the coach and away from the pavement before the traffic jam, and the noise which the constituent parts were making, attracted the attention of the police, decided that they had all better carry their own luggage into the hotel.

Carrying her own suitcase, her handbag, and six of Miss Nightingale's plastic bags, Mrs Caldicot led the way into the hotel. She was glad to get away from the cacophony outside. The others, most of them equally burdened, followed her faithfully. The doorman, who was definitely not a porter, stood aside so that they could more easily make their way into the 'otel.

Inside, the narrow reception hall led up to a horse-shoe shaped, plastic looking reception desk, behind which there stood a young woman who was wearing a white blouse and a smart blue blazer which had gold buttons and an impressive looking badge on the breast pocket. The badge told anyone who dared to look close enough that her name was Nathalie and that she was the 'receptionniste'. Given her situation and the name badge, it seemed reasonable to assume that she was the hotel receptionist. Whatever else she was wearing was, together with the other half of her body, hidden behind the reception desk. Throughout the reception area, a powerful smell of furniture polish was fighting a battle with a pungent disinfectant. The aroma of the receptionist's perfume had lost the battle and apparently resigned itself to a walk on part as an insignificant extra.

The reception looked to be in her twenties but could, Mrs Caldicot thought, have been older than that. Mrs Caldicot thought she looked a nice, young girl and she was right about this.

The receptionist was a gentle, kind, sensitive creature who never went to the cinema without two packets of paper handkerchiefs in her handbag. She enjoyed a good weep and liked to categorise films according to their capacity to induce tears. So, therefore, a 'good' film would require three tissues whereas an excellent one would require at least five. She had, fortuitously, a great fondness for old people. Her grandmother (now long promoted to the Great Knitting Academy in the sky but the spitting image of Mrs Torridge) still had a place in her heart and she was never happier than when she was welcoming a party of aged tourists to the hotel. Old people were, in her experience, far less likely to get drunk, turn rowdy or set off the fire extinguishers.

To the left of the reception desk there was a staircase and to the right there was something which looked like a small cupboard but which, on closer examination, turned out to be the hotel lift. A pile of plastic stacking chairs had been left to the left of the lift doors, rather restricting ingress and egress. The whole area had clearly been freshly and extensively redecorated at some point in its life, though this had probably been a couple of decades earlier and whoever it was who had planned the renovations had been fond of brown Formica and had purchased a considerable quantity of the stuff, clearly with some enthusiasm.

The carpet, which was red with a fleus de lys pattern in gold, had doubtless been regarded with some pride when it had been lain and if there had been any guarantees about its hard wearing nature, the owners of the hotel might now be remembering any such promises with a certain amount of chagrin for there were bare patches on those areas of carpet most traversed by guests and staff.

Mrs Caldicot was reminded that Jenkins had told her that the Parisians don't much care whether their homes need a lick of paint, and don't give a fig if their cars are well decorated with dents and scratches, but they do like to present themselves as though they never know when they might need to attend a job interview or a court hearing.

'You are welcoming by the 'otel!' said the receptionist with a smile that would have filled a television presenter with envy. The receptionist's teeth were so white that Mrs Caldicot felt she would need dark glasses if she had to talk to the girl for long. 'My name is Hortense and I am speaking perfectly the English so you will ask me for any questions. We were hoped that you were having a great journey and that Marc has been bringing you here safely.'

'Oh yes, thank you,' said Mrs Caldicot, who was still shaking from the coach ride from the station and to be honest still rather cross that the man at the door, in the uniform, had steadfastly declined to help them carry their bags into the hotel. 'We got here quite safely, thank you very much.'

She thought, but did not say, that this was probably more a result of the silent prayer she had murmured than of the driver's skills.

'You will be signing the papers,' said the receptionist. She pushed a card and a form across the counter and held out a pen. Mrs Caldicot put down some of her bags, took the pen and signed her name twice.

'Everyone needs to be signing,' said the receptionist. 'There are much papers.' She raised her eyes towards the ceiling in that way people do when they are making clear that they think the world to be controlled by buffoons. 'Always so much papers!'

Mrs Caldicot looked behind her. The hall and reception area were now full of people and bags. 'Can't I sign for everyone?' she asked.

The receptionist smiled, looked from side to side as though to make sure that no one was looking, and pushed a pile of forms across the counter. 'It will be more faster,' she whispered.

Mrs Caldicot scribbled her signature on all the cards and pieces of paper and then pushed them back towards the receptionist.

'What do you have to do with all those?' asked Mrs Caldicot, pointing to the sheaf of papers and cards. 'What happens to them?'

'I put them in here,' said the receptionist. She shuffled the pieces of paper and cards which Mrs Caldicot had signed so that they looked reasonably neat and then dropped them onto the top of a pile of similar forms and cards which filled a metal filing tray. 'And when that is full and can take no more I must putting all of them into there.' She pointed to a large cardboard box on the floor behind her.

'And when the box is full?'

'It goes down into the cellars for storage,' said the receptionist. 'It is too heavy for me so I have to speak nicely to one of the waiters or to Raphael. You have met Raphael I think?'

'Oh yes,' agreed Mrs Caldicot.

The receptionist pulled the corners of her mouth down and again rolled her eyes upwards. She leant forwards a little. 'You must I think be careful of him,' she said. 'He likes very much the fees and commissions. You understand? He receives money, how is the phrase, the backbribe?'

'Backhander,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'We say 'backhander'.'

'Ah yes. That is correct. He receives the 'backhanders' from everyone – ten euros here, twenty euros there, one hundred euros sometimes. Oh la la! He must be very rich.'

'Oh yes,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I think I understand.' She definitely liked the receptionist.

The receptionist pointed to a doorway. 'The reception committee is remaining for you all in the 'otel lounge,' said the receptionist. 'You will be filled with pleasure to be going through there. The committee has been arranging for the ‘otel to be assembling champagne and small biscuits with on them little knobs of cheese. You will very much be admiring our varieties of French knobs we have provided for your delights.’

‘Goodness, how kind,’ said Mrs Caldicot, resisting the temptation to point out that in England it is only usually butter which is served up as knobs. She picked up the bags she had put down and, with some difficulty, managed to open the heavy door which the receptionist had indicated.

Mrs Roberts, Ruth and the rest of the party bravely followed her into the unknown, all still carrying their bags and cases. Only Mrs Caldicot knew that they were about to be regaled with unspecified quantities of champagne and little biscuits decorated with knobs of French cheeses. The rest were simply, blindly and faithfully following Mrs Caldicot.

Chapter Eleven

The room which Mrs Caldicot entered was smaller than she had expected and it seemed, pretty well packed with people.

There were about a dozen in there, each one holding a flute of champagne, and as Mrs Caldicot and the others entered the room they raised the glasses and shouted ‘Welcome!’ and though they tried to do it in unison they did not manage this very well and so the cry was rather ragged and less impressive than it might have been.

A waiter, who had one of those hairstyles favoured by monks which involve a fringe of hair and a large, central bald patch, and who was carrying a large, silver tray full of glasses filled with champagne, approached her. A white, plastic name tag pinned to his jacket announced that his name was ‘Pierre’. It was clear that Mrs Caldicot, and the others, were each expected to take a glass. Behind him, a younger waiter, whose name badge told the world that his name was ‘Jean-Jacques’, was also offering a tray but his tray was full of assorted French nibbly things.

‘This is very nice of the hotel,’ whispered Mrs Caldicot to Mrs Roberts, as they put down their bags and each took a glass of the champagne. ‘Who do you think all these people are? Do you think they all work here? I wonder if they do this for all their guests?’

‘We are full of proudness to welcoming you to Paris for this your first timing!’ said a small, middle-aged man in a purple suit which looked as though it had been made out of a very nice piece of velour curtain material. He was wearing a lilac shirt and a rather large, bright yellow bow tie and a cardboard name badge attached to his jacket announced to the world, or at least to any part of it that might be interested, that his name was Olivier.

‘I am Olivier,’ announced the man, thereby proving that he was at least wearing the right jacket and the correct name badge. He made this announcement as though he were certain that they would know this anyway, but that he felt it only polite of him to pretend that they didn’t recognise him. Television personalities do it all the time; introducing themselves by name even when they would be mortified if the person to whom they were introducing themselves didn’t already know precisely who they were. It is their way of letting the world know that they haven’t been changed by their success but are still the same, modest folk they were before they became famous.

‘I am the President du Conseil,’ he announced, ‘and I am satisfied to be the representative of the City of Paris for this red-letter evening.’

He moved forwards and kissed Mrs Caldicot three times. He kissed her right cheek, then her left cheek and then, as though he wasn’t sure he’d done it right the first time, kissed her right cheek again. These were not media mwah mwah air kisses, missing the skin by inches. These were resounding full contact kisses. Olivier had unusually rubbery, wet lips and Mrs Caldicot really wanted to take out her handkerchief and wipe her face but she didn’t think it would be considered proper etiquette. It suddenly occurred to her that she did not think that the late, and now unlamented, Mr Caldicot had kissed her so many times in his entire life.

‘Oh, that’s very nice,’ Mrs Caldicot said, bravely leaving her handkerchief in her handbag and belatedly backing away slightly from the flurry of unexpected osculatory activity. ‘Congratulations,’ she murmured not quite knowing what to say but knowing that ‘Congratulations’ generally goes down well when someone has told you something that doesn’t involve a bereavement, details of a newly diagnosed serious illness or a serious financial loss of any kind.

‘Since you are guests in our country, it is insisted that we is speaking English to you,’ said Olivier when he had completed his rather slobbery welcome. ‘It is very good for you to be of meeting us after so many emailings together. We can shoot the breeze in cahoots, yes?’

Mrs Caldicot wondered if she was supposed to kiss Olivier back but before she could decide, she realised that she was too late because Olivier had already moved on to kiss Mrs Roberts. Right cheek, left cheek, right cheek. Mrs Roberts blushed heavily and made a strange fluttering motion with her hands as though vaguely trying to fight off these not entirely unwelcome attentions. Truly, she did not mind the attention. There had been no Mr Roberts for some years and she was a keen follower of the style of romantic fiction popularised by Georgette Heyer. She patted her hair as though anxious to make sure that it had not been disturbed by the encounter.

‘I am speaking English of excellence so we speak the langue together,’ said Olivier, with what Mrs Caldicot, innocent of the French character, thought was more than enough self-assurance for everyone in the room.

‘That’s lovely,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Your English is perfect.’

Ruth, who was next in the firing line, had yet to be kissed but was already blushing bright red and was glad she hadn’t yet had chance to send a text to Denise. Now she could tell her that although she’d been in Paris no more than fifteen minutes she had already been kissed three times. She wouldn’t bother to mention that the three kisses had all come from the same man and there was certainly no need to mention that he had been a diminutive, middle aged man in a purple suit and a bright yellow bow tie. She wondered how much shorter than her the man was. Nine inches? Six inches? No, probably less than that. She wondered if French men were all small. And did they all like tall women? She looked around the room and caught the eye of the younger waiter. He smiled at her and she blushed an even deeper red. He had a small, gold earring in his left ear lobe and a tattoo on his neck. She felt the blush moving down her neck towards her chest and was glad that her blue anorak was still zipped up to her throat. She wondered if the waiters would also be kissing everybody. She suddenly remembered that she must mention the man on the train who had almost certainly pinched her bottom. She didn't think there was any need to mention the 'almost certainly'.

A woman in a bright blue hat shaped like a flower pot was now kissing Mrs Caldicot's cheeks (right cheek, left cheek, right cheek) and Mrs Caldicot found herself wondering whether all this kissing was really hygienic. If she'd known, she thought, she would have given her face an extra wash before they'd left home that morning. And she'd certainly give her face a double wash when she finally reached the sanctuary of her hotel room.

'I know this,' said Olivier, modestly brushing aside the unnecessary compliment with a casual but rather flamboyant wave of the hand which was holding his champagne flute, showering the carpet with champagne as he did so. Mrs Caldicot thought he had probably had one or two drinks already and was about to turn philosophical. She wondered idly if he would then turn left into maudlin introspection and the inevitable tears, or turn right into aggression, staring eyes, jutting jaw and an urgent desire to 'knock someone's block into next week' (or the French equivalent).

He moved on to start kissing Mrs Torridge, who seemed to be next in line.

The other members of what appeared to be some sort of welcoming committee were now lining up behind him and Mrs Caldicot found herself being kissed for the fifth or sixth time. There was a man with a large beard in the queue and she hoped she wouldn't giggle if his beard tickled her. Ruth was trying to keep count of the number of times she had been kissed. She wondered whether or not to tell Denise about all the women who were kissing her. She didn't want people at home talking and getting the wrong impression. Some of the people Denise knew could be a bit gossipy at times. Still, the people kissing her were all foreign and she had read that they did things differently in foreign parts, particularly in France where, she understood, naughtiness had been invented, improved and served up to the rest of the world.

Meanwhile, Ruth was disappointed to see that the waiters were not doing any kissing.

Behind her, Mrs Caldicot heard Miss Nightingale giggling as someone kissed her. She would probably kiss them back, thought Mrs Caldicot. And it would probably be a full on lips kiss with slightly more saliva than is usually considered polite in osculatory circles. Some high-pitched giggling suggested to her that Miss Nightingale had indeed responded to the kissing in what would doubtless seem to the French to be an entirely inappropriate way.

When, finally, there was a temporary break in the kissing, Mrs Caldicot turned to Mrs Roberts, who was standing beside her. 'Who are these people? Have they made a mistake? Who do they think we are?'

'Oh dear,' said Mrs Roberts, who was blushing lightly, 'I didn't like to mention it but I think they've mistaken us for the 'Faversham Food and Fashion Fellowship for Fervent Francophiles.'

'The who? The what?'

Mrs Roberts pointed to a black peg board upon which someone had spelt out the words: 'Bienvenu a Favershamp Food and Fashion Fallowship pour Fervente Francophilles' in little, white, plastic letters. The spelling might have left a little to be desired but the sentiment was clear and wholesome.

'Why on earth would they mistake us for these people from Faversham?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'Do you remember that when we made our booking, I told you that we'd been able to fix our tickets because another group had had to cancel their booking?'

'I do. They all had measles or ptomaine poisoning or something equally unpleasant.'

'Whatever they had they couldn't travel with it.'

'And they were from Faversham?'

'Faversham wasn't mentioned but I rather suspect that might be where they were from.'

'So we took the booking which was originally intended for the Faversham Food and Fashion Fellowship for Fervent Francophiles?'

'Indeed so.'

'And no one remembered to tell the French people that the Faversham Francophiles had cancelled and so they now think that we are them?'

'I think that must be what happened.'

'Oh dear me. What are we going to do?'

Mrs Caldicot's first thought was that they needed to get away from the reception party as soon as possible. She did not want the French people patronising her friends, or treating them with disrespect just because they were old and, in some cases, a little confused and bewildered by the curious ways of the world.

'I think it's probably rather too late to tell them their mistake,' said Mrs Roberts.

'So we should just have another glass of champagne and some of those little biscuits with the bits of cheese on them?'

'Knobs on,' said Mrs Roberts with a giggle. 'If Mr Livingstone and Mr Hewitt haven't eaten them all before we get there.'

Mrs Caldicot looked across the room and saw that Mr Livingstone and Mr Hewitt were busily scoffing small, savoury biscuits with cheese piled on top of them as though they were taking part in one of those eating competitions where the contestants must scoff as many meat pies or sausages as they can within a given time. Except, of course, that instead of scoffing meat pies or sausages they were munching their way through little biscuits piled high with cheese and doing so as though the continuation of the entente cordiale depended upon them.

Suddenly, they heard the unusually fortissimo sound of Mrs Peterborough's unmistakable voice. Mrs Peterborough had taken to reciting occasional limericks. These invariably delighted the audience. As a young woman, over half a century earlier, she had studied English Literature at Oxford University and although she had earned her living in haberdashery, she had aspired to be a poet. She had, indeed, published a number of poems in small magazines.

In recent weeks, she had adopted the limerick form as her chosen medium.

'I call this poem 'The Waiter' she said. She was speaking rather loudly, in what Mrs Caldicot called her 'limerick voice' and without delay she proceeded to recite her latest limerick.

A middle-aged waiter called Pierre
Had a hole where there should have been hair
He declared, with a smile,
'It's been gone for a while,
But I really can't say that I care.'

Mr Livingstone, who was a great fan of Mrs Peterborough's limericks, started to applaud. The other members of the British contingent joined in immediately. No one clapped with more enthusiasm than Miss Nightingale, the loyalist of loyal companions. And the French hosts, determined not to be outdone or to appear rude, also joined in. Mrs Caldicot couldn't help wondering what the French really thought.

Mrs Peterborough, proud as Punch, and twice as charming, beamed with delight.

Mrs Caldicot, who knew from past experience that Mrs Peterborough's limericks could sometimes be a trifle on the earthy side of socially acceptable, breathed a sigh of relief. She noticed that Olivier was sitting on the corner of a table with tears streaming down his face. He was nodding as though in agreement with someone about something. The champagne flute which he was holding in his right hand was empty.

'It is very wondrous for you to be having us here like we are,' said a very thin woman with high cheekbones and very short hair. She had a very high-pitched, whiny sort of voice which made her sound as though she were being strangled, though in a nice enough sort of way. She was wearing a cream trouser suit made out of silk and a pair of matching shoes which, Mrs Caldicot guessed, had probably cost as much as her own entire outfit. The woman's name tag bore the name 'Stephanie'.

'Thank you,' said Mrs Caldicot, who wasn't sure what to say but thought that a fairly vanillary 'thank you' wouldn't go far wrong.

'You are understanding me?'

'Oh yes,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Your English is so good!'

'Yes, thank you,' said the thin woman, accepting the compliment without hesitation. 'You are right to say that, of course. I have learned for some years to become the fluency in the foreign languages. I am also uttering the Italian at this very moment.'

'Have you been to England at all?' asked Mrs Caldicot, speaking slowly and trying to enunciate clearly in the way that people are encouraged to do when communicating with foreigners.

'Ruefully not,' said Stephanie. 'It is shameful and flagitious.'

'Have you visited anywhere in Britain? Scotland? Wales? Northern Ireland?'

'I went visiting to Calais at one duration and could see your white cliffs of Dover across the French seas,' said Stephanie. 'Magnifique!' She turned up the smile a few watts and moved a little closer. 'I am hoping that bounteous English persons will invite me to their dwelling for a visit. Maybe I meet a nice, high Englishman who wipes me off my foot.'

'Oh yes that would be nice,' agreed Mrs Caldicot, trying to suppress the image of Stephanie being wiped off her foot by a kind Englishman. 'What is the name of your society?'

'The what are you saying?'

‘What is the name of your organisation; the group of which you are a member?’

‘We are being ‘La Societe pour la promotion de Cuisine Francaise et de la Mode’. In English that is, I am thinking it is rendered as: ‘The Society for the Promotion of French Food and Fashion’. I am the secretaire of the society and in my daytime busyness I am the femme responsible des relations publiques for Doris Guillain which is one of the big fashion homes here in Paris. You may have heard of it, yes?’

Mrs Caldicot gave her congratulations and, although she had never heard of Doris Guillain she naturally said she had. Whenever it was possible, Mrs Caldicot always liked to make people happy.

‘Who was the lady who recited the poem?’

‘That was Mrs Peterborough.’

‘It was a poem by your Wilhelm Shakespeare, no? Or perhaps your William of Wordsworth? Maybe the good Lords Byron? Or, maybe, the great American known as Walt Whitman?’

‘No, actually, I don’t think it was any of those. I think it was a little something Mrs Peterborough made up on the spur of the moment.’

‘She is a poet?’ gasped Stephanie. ‘She is being a famous poet in England, perhaps?’

‘I don’t know about famous,’ began Mrs Caldicot. She thought for a while. What harm could it do? ‘Well yes, indeed, I suppose she is quite a famous poet,’ she agreed at last. ‘As you can see, she is very popular.’

Stephanie thanked her and hurried off to join the small crowd which now surrounded Mrs Peterborough.

Even from a few yards away, Mrs Caldicot could hear Mrs Peterborough talking to a plump man in a very smart grey suit. He had fleshy lips, horn-rimmed spectacles and wore a grey, silk scarf draped around his neck.

She noticed that Olivier was now lying on the carpet. His eyes were shut and he appeared to be talking to himself.

‘I was in haberdashery myself,’ said Mrs Peterborough enthusiastically. ‘My husband and I owned a shop which we ran together. In America, a haberdashery sells clothes for men. But in Britain, a haberdashery sells bits and pieces for sewing. Haberdashery isn’t much of a business these days because women don’t sew as much as they used to. But when we had our shop we were always busy. We sold thread and buttons and zips, those were our main items, but we also sold gloves and spare elastic straps for suspender belts. We sold lots of accessories of that type. I myself was considered quite an expert on buttons.’

And Mrs Caldicot listened in amazement as Mrs Peterborough proceeded to give the plump man in the grey suit a comprehensive account of the button business. Mrs Peterborough talked about wooden buttons, metal buttons, glass buttons, porcelain buttons, leather buttons and mother-of-pearl buttons. She talked knowledgeably about the history of buttons. She spoke about shank buttons, sew-through buttons, stud buttons and fabric buttons. It were as though all this material had been lost, tucked away in some dark recess of her mind, and now that it was released it just poured out. Mrs Caldicot listened in awe for this was a Mrs Peterborough she had never known before; a woman whose life had been packed with special knowledge and experience. It was quickly clear that what Mrs Peterborough didn’t know about haberdashery wasn’t worth knowing.

‘My husband and I ran the business for years,’ said Mrs Peterborough. ‘But to be truthful it was the business running us rather than the other way around. In the end it killed him, poor lamb. He had a heart attack and died. I always thought it was the ribbons which killed him. People would come in wanting two yards or three yards or whatever of the pink half inch ribbon or the lilac three quarter inch ribbon and when we got to the end of the spool there would always be a little bit left over that no one ever wanted to buy. All those little bits of leftover ribbon worried him enormously. He used to say they were our lost profits.’

On Mrs Caldicot’s other side, she could hear Mr Livingstone discussing famous French chefs such as August Escoffier, Marie-Antoine Careme and Raymond Oliver with a very small man in a white three piece suit who appeared to be enormously impressed. Mrs Caldicot found herself wondering how and why Mr Livingstone knew so much about French chefs. She didn’t even know that he was interested in cooking in general or French cuisine in particular.

And when she heard Mrs Torridge chatting away about women’s clothing fashions in the 1950s, Mrs Caldicot suddenly remembered that the frail and rather plump old lady who had fallen down without her walking frame had once been an important buyer for a major chain store.

Mrs Caldicot looked around at her friends and realised that so much had changed since she had first met them.

For one thing, they all seemed taller now.

They actually appeared to be at least a foot taller!

This was, of course, impossible.

It was not that they had actually grown.

But when she had first met them they had all been bent over, stooped under the burden of despair and hopelessness. They had been living pointless, oppressed lives: serving only to enrich those paid to look after them. Now, they were standing up like soldiers on parade. They had self-respect and it showed. It was, she thought to herself, amazing how the mind can change the shape and appearance of the body.

'It's easy to forget that old people have all done amazing things with their lives,' said Ruth, who was listening to Mrs Torridge with a good deal of astonishment and a great deal of awe.

'It is,' agreed Mrs Caldicot who was so proud of her friends that she had to wipe away a tear which had somehow managed to escape onto her cheek.

'I'm so used to her being old and a bit, you know, dotty, that I'd forgotten that she had been young once,' whispered Ruth.

'She was a very beautiful woman when she was young,' said Mrs Caldicot who had seen photographs of Mrs Torridge when she had been younger. 'And she was very bright. She was a high flyer long before women were allowed to become high flyers. Like the others she may not always be at her best these days, and she may be a trifle eccentric and a little wobbly occasionally, but it annoys me when older people aren't treated with the respect they deserve.'

The two of them looked around the room. Every member of her party had suddenly found themselves digging deep into their bank of memories. A long forgotten word here or there had triggered recollections and released knowledge that had been locked away for years; unused and apparently forgotten.

Their French hosts were, it seemed, quite entranced.

Mrs Caldicot vowed there and then that when they got back home she would make sure that her friends would all have every opportunity to recover and share their knowledge, their experience and their acquired wisdom.

A few yards away, Mr Williams was involved in what seemed to be a deep and meaningful conversation with a man and a woman. Mr Williams appeared to be speaking fluent French without any difficulty or hesitation.

Mrs Roberts, who did not speak any French, was standing nearby looking absolutely dumbfounded. Suddenly, she saw Mrs Caldicot and hurried over to her.

'Mr Williams is speaking perfect French!' she said. 'He's chatting to those French people in their own language.'

'Golly,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'He did say he knew some French but I didn't know he was fluent.'

Mrs Caldicot stood for a moment and watched him chatting away. Then she looked around the room. The champagne reception was a huge success. All her friends from England were now engaged in earnest conversations with their French hosts.

Even Miss Nightingale had found an excellent way to woo the natives. She had discovered several handfuls of biscuit crumbs in her pockets and was sharing out the crumbs as though they were fragments of Perigord black truffle; snuffled out of the ground that morning by a well-trained porcine detective. The packaging, the wrapping within which the biscuits had met their crushing defeat under the weight of Mrs Peterborough's ample buttocks, had long since been abandoned; crumpled and tossed neatly into a rubbish bin. Only the biscuit crumbs remained.

Olivier, who appeared to have recovered, was now tentatively tasting a thimble sized portion of well crushed custard cream and mangled Garibaldi remnants. He nodded appreciatively as he gratefully accepted a second helping of what he took to be a strange English delicacy. Olivier had never had much time for the English or the British (he was not entirely sure of the difference between 'English' and 'British' and if he had been at school and set one of those compare and contrast exercises which were so popular when he'd been a boy, he would have failed the task miserably) but he was warming to this particular selection of imports. 'These old folk look pretty threadbare,' he muttered to a colleague. 'But there is more to them than meets the eye.'

Mrs Caldicot worried for a moment that it might have seemed a little odd that Miss Nightingale's biscuit crumb delicacy should be served straight from the pocket but then realised that the French are not, of course, strangers to culinary oddities. This is, she realised, a race which had the idea of collecting snails from the garden, winkling them out of their shells and serving them up in garlic butter. And had then topped their own culinary eccentricity by wondering what a frog's legs would taste like if sautéed in a little of their ubiquitous garlic butter, baked in butter, parsley and lemon juice or dipped in a little egg mix and lightly battered.

Biscuit crumbs served straight from the pocket must seem positively mundane to the French.

'Lovely aren't they?' said Miss Nightingale, pouring more crushed biscuit into the Frenchman's cupped palm.

'This is an English delicacy?'

'Oh yes,' said Miss Nightingale enthusiastically. She started to laugh. She had a wonderful, infectious laugh that was so easy and genuine that it always made other people smile and want to laugh too. Within a minute, everyone around her was also laughing and, if asked, they would have doubtless admitted that although they did not know precisely why they were laughing they did know that they were having a jolly good time.

'Who would have thought it!' said Ruth, speaking softly, more to herself than to anyone else.

Ruth was a good and kind person; she had always been fond of the old people she helped care for, and she had, from the beginning, treated them with respect, somehow subconsciously aware of their innate right to dignity, but now she realised for the first time that although they might be a little unsteady from time to time (both mentally and physically) they had done many things with their lives and that dignity and respect were their right, earned and paid for, and not a charitable donation to be bestowed out of a sense of superiority or handed out, in a patronising way, like a bowl of soup and a piece of bread.

She now realised, for the first time in her life, that although the young often have a tendency to say a great deal without ever saying anything worth hearing, older citizens, although often reluctant to speak, do, when they eventually speak, invariably say something worth listening to.

The champagne reception finished only when the hotel receptionist appeared and explained that the staff needed to prepare the room for the next morning's breakfast.

Closing down the evening's event was not something which could be done quickly.

First, everyone had to kiss everyone else three times (right cheek, left cheek, right cheek) and then Mr Livingstone insisted that they all shake hands with one another, in a properly formal English way.

There were many promises to 'keep in touch'.

'We already have your address, telephone number and email address!' Olivier said to Mrs Caldicot. 'We will be in touch soon! We must meet again most quickly. Maybe we are all coming to England!'

Mrs Caldicot was, for a moment puzzled, until she remembered that Olivier thought he had been entertaining the Faversham Food and Fashion Fellowship for Fervent Francophiles.

'Of course,' said Mrs Caldicot, who thought that all things considered it was best this way. She hoped the Faversham Food and Fashion Fellowship for Fervent Francophiles would not be too confused when they heard from their enthusiastic Parisian penpals and asked for the recipe for 'mietes de biscuit servies a partir de la poche'.

The Parisian hosts of the champagne party drizzled off into the night; some to look for taxis, some heading to the Metro and some walking back to their apartments. Unlike London, the French capital is a lived-in city. Central Paris is home for millions, and many of those who had welcomed Mrs Caldicot and her party lived within easy walking distance of the hotel.

The travellers, dragging, pulling and carrying their luggage, then made their way into the lift or up the stairs to find their rooms. Some, unaccustomed to apparently unlimited supplies of champagne, were just a trifle on the squiffy side of sobriety; all were weary after their day of travel

'I wonder where I can buy some postcards,' said Mrs Roberts, when the last of their hosts had disappeared and the majority of the residents were busy preparing for bed.

Ruth, slightly startled, looked at her. 'Postcards?'

'Just to send to a few friends,' explained Mrs Roberts. 'If I don't send them off quickly we'll be home before they arrive.'

'I've already sent mine!' said Ruth proudly. She held up her mobile telephone, pressed a couple of keys and showed Mrs Roberts the photos and messages which her friends had already received.

'Oh no, I want to send real postcards,' said Mrs Roberts with a slight shudder of disapproval. 'You can't put those things on your mantelpiece or stick them onto your fridge.'

'The important thing is not to write: 'Wish you were here!' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I did that once when I was a young girl on holiday in Torquay with a couple of girlfriends. 'I sent the cards with the same message to a dozen people I knew, including a boy I sort of thought I fancied a bit. Two days later he turned up with his rucksack. It was very embarrassing.'

Mrs Roberts laughed.

'Ooo, I'd have been so thrilled if that had happened to me,' said Ruth.

'No you wouldn't,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'He didn't have anywhere to stay and thought he was going to stay with me and my girlfriends. Fortunately, the landlady had a very strict 'no guests in the rooms' rule and he had to go back home the same day. We all had to club together to find the money for his rail fare.'

'It was a romantic thing to do though,' said Ruth.

'I suppose it was,' admitted Mrs Caldicot.

'Was that Mr Caldicot, the man you married before Mr Jenkins?'

'Good heavens, no!' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Mr Caldicot wouldn't have done anything like that. He wasn't an overly romantic sort of fellow.'

Ruth, who was slightly startled by what Mrs Caldicot had told her, didn't say anything.

It was funny, she thought.

When she'd started work at what she knew as Caldicot House, she had been filled with a desire to help the old people living there. She was what used to be called a big-hearted girl, generous and full of simple kindness. But she really knew very little about old people. Two of her grandparents had died some years ago and she had never seen the other two who had emigrated to America and now lived in a trailer park in Florida. She hadn't ever thought of them ever having had romantic experiences.

‘I’ll get some cards tomorrow,’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘There’s bound to be a little shop somewhere close to the hotel.’

The three of them then made their way up the final flight of stairs and found their rooms, which were all on the top floor. When she had deposited her own suitcase in her room, Mrs Caldicot checked to make sure all her residents were safe, comfortable and happy.

Mr Livingstone was in his bedroom and had been sitting in the room’s solitary easy chair when Mrs Caldicot knocked and said who was there. ‘It’s only me, Mr Livingstone!’

He called out for her to enter and stood up when she entered. He had clearly been crying. Indeed, there were still tears on his cheeks. He brushed them away with the back of his hand.

‘What on earth’s the matter?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

Mr Livingstone took out a large handkerchief and blew his nose. ‘I’ve been here before, you know,’ he said eventually. ‘Not here, not to this hotel, but to Paris.’

‘On holiday?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘Not exactly,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘It was in 1942.’

‘Oh,’ said Mrs Caldicot. She could guess what was coming next.

‘You know I flew in bombers during the War?’

Mrs Caldicot nodded.

‘I was the bomb aimer. It was my job to make sure that our bombs hit the designated target.’

Mrs Caldicot nodded again. She wasn’t really quite sure what to say.

‘We were shot down over France and I was captured and taken to a prisoner of war camp. We were coming back from a raid. We’d dropped our bombs. It was quite successful, I think. But we got picked up by a searchlight and shot down with ack ack fire.’

Mrs Caldicot couldn’t help thinking how extraordinary it was that she had known this man for some time and did not know this about him. She wondered how much else there was that she didn’t know about her friends. When people have lived for 70 or 80 years or more they are bound to have experienced many things with their lives.

‘How did you come to be in Paris?’

‘I escaped from the prisoner of war camp I was in. A few of us got out through a tunnel which we dug. I was with an American airman. He spoke more French than I did. He was very good at it, actually. Spoke it like a native. Nice bloke. He had been about to start studying dentistry when the War had started but he’d joined up. I don’t think he had to join up at all. I’m not sure America was in the War at the time and he could have gone to college. But his mother was French and he wanted to fight, as much for France as anything else I think. Through sheer luck we met up with a girl from the French Resistance and she helped us. They had this complicated route for getting Allied airmen out of France. It seems strange, since the place was awash with Germans, but one of their routes out of France involved travelling into Paris.’

‘How long were you here, in the city?’

‘Oh, only a couple of days. The Resistance kept us tucked away in a top floor flat in the 15th arrondissement. But we could just see the Eiffel Tower from the skylight.’

‘And you’ve never been back here since then?’

‘No,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘No, this is my first time since the War.’

‘What happened to your companion, the American who was going to study dentistry? Is he still alive? Are you still in touch?’

‘He and the girl both died,’ said Mr Livingstone. He swallowed and didn’t speak for a moment. ‘They were killed by the Germans. The girl and a bloke she worked with moved us in the middle of the night and we ran into a patrol. We were in a stolen Post Office van which got stopped at a checkpoint. We all ran and they both got shot. The Germans didn’t have to shoot them. We weren’t armed. My mate put up his hands to show he didn’t have a weapon but they just shot him down. I don’t think they even knew he was an escaped prisoner of war. They just shot him down because they had guns and he didn’t. They shot the girl as well. She can’t have been more than 15 or 16-years-old. She was a tiny little slip of a thing; not old enough to be someone’s wife or girlfriend, just someone’s brave daughter. I was lucky. The Frenchman and I managed to get away. He knew a way into the sewers and we spent eight hours down there before coming up miles away. And we didn’t come up smelling of roses, either. Four days later I was back in England. And a week after that I was back in a bomber over Germany. I could have had some leave because I was entitled to it but I wanted to get back into the air.’ He paused. There was enormous sadness in his eyes. ‘I have always done any job I’ve had to the very best of my ability,’ he said. ‘But on the sorties I flew after I had escaped from the Germans, after that awful thing that happened in Paris, I made extra, special care to make sure that our bombs did the maximum amount of damage.’ He took out his large handkerchief again and blew his nose. ‘I know they’re not all to blame but I don’t think I’ll ever be able to ever stop hating Germans.’

Mrs Caldicot couldn’t think of anything at all worth saying. She reached out and put her arms around Mr

Livingstone and hugged him. She could feel his body convulsing with the sobs and she could feel the tears falling onto her neck.

'I'll be OK in a while,' said Mr Livingstone, after a while. 'Seeing the Eiffel Tower brought everything back to me in a rush. A lot of people died in that War. They were very brave. And what the hell was it all about? Borders? Greed? Power? Saving Poland? Stopping a stupid Austrian fellow with a funny salute? Does anyone care now? Does anyone remember what it was all about?'

The two of them stayed silent for a while.

'Don't say anything to the others,' said Mr Livingstone after a while. 'I don't usually like talking about any of it. There isn't any point in dredging it all up, is there?'

Mrs Caldicot took his head in her hands and kissed him on the forehead, as you might kiss a child you didn't know terribly well but wanted very much to comfort.

'You must think I'm a big softy,' said Mr Livingstone, with a sheepish grin. He wiped his sleeve across his face, smudging the tears away.

'I think you're a very brave man; a hero,' said Mrs Caldicot with simple honesty.

After she left his room she stood in the hallway for a few moments before knocking on the next door.

For a moment she remembered the way the customs people had dealt with Mr Livingstone and the others. She knew the customs people had to do a job but did they have to be so disrespectful? And would they be quite so disrespectful if a group of middle aged, fat cat bankers in pinstripe suits had been going through customs with their Louis Vuitton luggage? She suspected that they would not have dared be quite so rude and dismissive and that thought made her even angrier. How odd, she thought, that public servants should bend their knees before rogues, crooks and tricksters but sneer at honest, hard-working people.

She shook her head, took a deep breath and knocked on the next door.

'They were lovely people,' said Mrs Peterborough who was trying to decide which of the seven nightdresses she had brought with her she should wear. She was talking about their hosts at the soiree they had attended. 'Do you think they liked my little poem?'

'I'm sure they loved it,' said Mrs Caldicot.

Mrs Peterborough blushed with delight.

'It's not how old you are that matters, but how you are old,' thought Mrs Caldicot, smiling to herself.

She had known many women in their 40s who thought and lived in the way we tend to think 80-year-olds should think and live but the always delightful corollary is that there are some people in their 80s who are well preserved in body, mind and spirit and who think and live like 40-year-olds.

'Or younger!' said Mrs Caldicot out loud.

'I beg your pardon, dear?' said Mrs Peterborough.

'Nothing,' said Mrs Caldicot, reaching out and giving Mrs Peterborough a hug.

She remembered how Mrs Peterborough had been when they had met. She had been ignored and dismissed. She might as well have been one of those red, plastic armchairs with which Mr Hawksmoor filled the lounge at the Twilight Years Rest Home. There was, she remembered, one row of chairs against one wall and another row of chairs against the opposite wall. When the residents weren't asleep, drugged with tranquillisers they didn't need, they simply sat and stared at one another. There wasn't anything much else for them to do. And even if there had been anything else to do they wouldn't have had the energy to do it.

Unlimited kindness, unconditional respect and a loving, caring environment had done wonders for Mrs Peterborough. Taking her off those damned tranquillisers had helped too.

Chapter Twelve

Britons and Americans who visit France for the first time are sometimes disappointed by the sort of breakfast usually served up at the sort of hotels which specialise in providing accommodation for tourists who aren't travelling on expense accounts, or whose costs aren't being met by a government, a government agency, a rich voluntary body or one of those international charities which always have plenty of money to spend on their executive staff but never seem to have very much to spend on the good cause which the charity claims to espouse.

When you are accustomed to starting the day with eggs, bacon, fried tomatoes, mushrooms and lashings of hot toast, and then washing the lot down with a glass of orange juice and several cups of tea, it can be disappointing to have to make do with a flaky brioche or a chunk of buttered baguette (served with a miniature pot of jam) and a rapidly cooling over-wide cup of fairly wishy washy looking café au lait.

If you like to start your morning with pancakes, hash browns, waffles, steak, sausage, ham, fries, an omelette and an unlimited supply of hot chocolate, tomato juice, milk or coffee then finding yourself expected to start the day with no more fuel than might be provided by a single, forlorn croissant can be disheartening.

But Mrs Caldicot's travelling circus (as Ruth had affectionately referred to their merry band in a late night text to Denise) was not caught out by the French preference for speed and convenience as far as breakfast is concerned, for they had come forearmed and well prepared. Mr Hewitt had brought with him a good supply of bacon, a dozen eggs, a thick sliced loaf of bread and two large boxes of cornflakes.

And so, after some rather heated discussions with the hotel's breakfast chef, who was initially reluctant to allow his cooker to be used by hotel residents, those among the party who wanted a proper breakfast enjoyed a marvellous English fry up: crispy bacon, fried eggs and proper English toast.

The chef, whose professional integrity had been soothed with a rather generous one-time donation which had made Mr Williams's wallet considerably thinner and less of a burden, had turned a blind eye. And although he had been seen to shudder, he had done his best to ignore the aroma and sizzle of bacon a-frying and eggs a-spluttering over a suitably turned up gas flame.

The Merivales, Maurice and Maple, Mr Twist, Mr Williams, Mr Roxdale, Mr Hewitt and Mr Livingstone all enjoyed a solid, full English breakfast. Mrs Peterborough, Mrs Torridge and Miss Nightingale enjoyed a magnificent, if rather unusual, breakfast comprising lashings of mulligatawny soup, copious quantities of pilchards and the remains of the tinned apricots. Ruth, Mrs Roberts and Mrs Caldicot enjoyed eggs and bacon with a side order of tinned apricots. Everyone also had a croissant and a cup of hotel coffee.

'They say you can get hardened arteries if you eat too much of this stuff,' said Mr Roxdale, enjoying another rasher of crispy bacon.

'I don't want sloppy, flippy floppy arteries,' said Mr Hewitt. 'Soggy arteries are for girls. A real man should have good, solid, hard arteries!' He looked at Mrs Merivale's plate whereupon lay a solitary rasher of bacon. 'Are you not eating that?'

Mrs Merivale shook her head. 'I'm absolutely full to the brim!'

Mr Hewitt reached across, forked the bacon and transferred it to his own plate.

Mrs Caldicot looked across at them and couldn't help smiling. Mr Roxdale was in his 80s and Mr Hewitt well into his 90s. It seemed a little late to start offering them dietary advice.

'So, where do you want to go first?' asked Mrs Caldicot, when everyone was properly fed and watered and ready for their first day in Paris. Teeth had been cleaned, hair had been combed and faces had been washed and, in the case of those who felt it appropriate and necessary, suitably decorated with coloured creams, powders and waxes.

There was, inevitably, some debate about this.

Mr Hewitt and Mr Livingstone thought they should find a shop where they could purchase fresh supplies of essential foodstuffs. They had, pointed out Mr Hewitt, exhausted their imported supplies of the essentials. Mrs Roberts said she would quite like to find a shop selling postcards. Mr Twist thought he might quite like to visit the Louvre. Mr Roxdale, who had crammed his fork and trowel into his jacket pocket, felt that a tour of the city's parks would enable him to best assess the quality of French gardening. Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale said they thought they didn't mind where they went as long as they didn't go too far from a lavatory because Mrs Peterborough had drunk rather a lot of champagne the night before and had drunk two large cups of tea with her breakfast and Mrs Torridge agreed with them. Mr Williams said that at some point, if it was acceptable to everyone else, he would quite like to go into the Marais where there were some art galleries he would like to look at. Ruth, who had picked up a map and a tourist guide from the reception desk said she'd like to visit some of the shops on the Champs-Élysées. The Merivales, Maurice and Maple, said they would like to visit the Place du Tetre, walk along the banks of the Seine and go down into the student area of the 5th arrondissement. Mr Twist said in addition to taking a look at the Louvre, he thought he would like to take a look at the Quai d'Orfevres, the place where Maigret, the fictional French detective, had his offices.

It was agreed that they would do all of these things and that they would also visit the Eiffel Tower, Notre Dame, Sacre Coeur, Les Invalides, the Louvre and both the Luxembourg Gardens and the Tuileries Gardens.

Mrs Caldicot's only stipulation was that whatever they did they should do it together. 'I really don't like the idea of everyone wandering around Paris by themselves,' she whispered to Mrs Roberts.

As they discussed their plans they headed, as one body, towards the door of the hotel where Raphael stood, dignified and, it has to be said, rather pointless.

'Good mornings!' said the doorman very cheerily, addressing Mrs Caldicot. 'I fetch for you a taxi, old woman? You would like me to arrange a nightclub? A trip to Versailles in our air conditioned coach? A tour of the city by night?' He turned and leered at Mr Hewitt, who happened to be standing closest to him. 'A trip to one of our saucy nightclubs?'

'Not a bit of it!' said Mr Hewitt very firmly.

'We're going for a walk, thank you very much,' said Mrs Caldicot very firmly.

Privately she marvelled at how such an aggressive and arrogant man managed, at the same time, to be smarmy and rather creepy. He rather reminded her of Mr Hawsksmoor, the proprietor of the Twilight Years Rest Home. She shuddered involuntarily and turned to Mrs Roberts. 'I think one of us had better decide what we're doing or else we'll be standing here all day!'

'I think you're right,' agreed Mrs Roberts, who always preferred other people to make decisions whenever possible.

Mrs Caldicot cleared her throat and announced that she had made a decision.

She did so with such certainty that everyone, even Raphael the doorman, turned and looked in her direction.

'This morning we will walk through the Tuileries Gardens, go down to the Seine, stroll along the river bank and then walk up towards the Eiffel Tower and after that the Champs-Élysées,' she said. She paused for a moment. 'And then this afternoon we will do something else,' she added. And clutching the map which the hotel provided, Mrs Caldicot pointed to the left. 'We'll go that way!'

Everyone agreed that this was a splendid plan.

With Mrs Caldicot leading the way, the assembled company began to put her excellent plan into action.

'Toodle pip!' said Mr Roxdale to Raphael.

'What is that?' demanded the doorman.

'Toodle pip!' repeated Mr Roxdale. 'Tally ho! The game's afoot!'

'What is this tootle plipping?' asked Raphael, looking more puzzled than ever.

'It's the way the English say 'goodbye',' said Mr Roxdale.

'Goodbye is not right? They do not say 'goodbye'?'

'Oh no, not the proper English. That's just what they teach foreigners. The English say 'toodle pip' or 'tally ho' or 'the game's afoot'!'

'Tootle peep,' said Raphael, trying it out. 'Tally how!'

'Close!' said Mr Roxdale. 'Toodle pip old bean!'

'Tootle peep old bean,' repeated Raphael. 'Tally how!'

'And 'the game's afoot'! Try that. Very popular with the younger Brits.'

'The games afeet,' said Raphael.

'That'll do nicely,' said Mr Roxdale, hurrying after the rest.

'You will teach me more proper English?' Raphael called after him.

'Pleasure!' replied Mr Roxdale. 'Another lesson tonight when we get back.'

'Thank you!' cried Raphael. 'Tootle peep old bean, the games afeet!'

'What did that idiot doorman say?' asked Mr Hewitt when Mr Roxdale caught up.

'He tried to say 'toodle pip',' said Mr Roxdale. 'I'm teaching him English.'

'Splendid idea!' agreed Mr Hewitt rubbing his hands together in delight. 'Can I help?'

'Think up some more phrases we can teach him,' said Mr Roxdale. 'He's an unpleasant fellow, isn't he?'

'I've heard he thinks very highly of himself,' said Mr Hewitt. 'Indeed, I suspect he thinks of nothing else.'

The two of them laughed.

As the party arrived at the end of the street, wherein lay their hotel, they passed a pavement stall selling oysters.

'Oh look!' said Mr Williams, excitedly. 'I must have a dozen of those to start the day.' The others watched as the man behind the counter shucked a dozen oysters and put them onto a plate. 'Casanova used to eat 50 of these every morning for breakfast,' said Mr Williams who loved fish and shellfish of all kinds. He was fond of cockles and winkles, adored whitebait and would walk ten miles in bare feet and on stony ground to find himself next to a well salted, nicely smoked bloater. But oysters, so rarely available on the menu at Caldicot House, were for him the holy grail of all seafood delicacies.

‘Really!’ said Mrs Roberts, who sounded rather startled and not a little concerned.

‘Oh don’t worry!’ laughed Mr Williams. ‘I’m far too old for oysters to have any useful effect on me.’

Mrs Roberts did not look entirely convinced.

‘Would anyone like to try one?’ Mr Williams asked when he had squeezed lemon juice over his oysters.

Everyone instinctively backed away a foot or two.

‘I’d like to try one,’ said Mrs Caldicot, not entirely sure why she’d said it and surprising herself more than anyone else.

‘Chew it a couple of times and then swallow it,’ advised Mr Williams.

The rest then stared with a mixture of respect, astonishment and horror as Mrs Caldicot chewed and then swallowed her oyster. She declined the offer of a second.

‘What was it like?’ Mrs Roberts asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘Horrid,’ whispered Mrs Caldicot. ‘It was absolutely horrid; slithery, rubbery and tasteless.’ She shuddered.

She and the others watched in horror as Mr Williams continued to devour his plateful of seafood with great relish.

‘Splendid!’ he said, wiping his lips when he had finished. ‘Now I know I’m definitely in Paris!’

He handed the empty plate back to the stall holder.

They walked away from the street stall and continued their walk towards the park.

‘What was that oyster like?’ Ruth asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘It was like swallowing a bit of lemony rubber,’ answered Mrs Caldicot with a shudder. ‘I don’t know why I did that.’ She thought for a moment and then she smiled. ‘Yes, I do. Now I can tell my husband that I’ve tried oysters and I don’t like them!’

As they walked, an excited Mrs Roberts caught up with them. She was slightly out of breath. She held up a small white, paper envelope. ‘Look!’ she said delightedly. ‘I managed to buy some postcards from that little shop we passed along the way.’

They all tiptoed around a spot on the pavement where an artist had been busy using coloured chalks to decorate the pavement. He had drawn a huge tropical island. There was yellow sand, green and brown palm trees, dark blue sea and lighter blue sky. The artist was busy drawing a mermaid, sitting on the sand. The mermaid was looking into the sea rather wistfully.

‘Did you get the stamps you wanted?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘I asked the man in the shop about stamps,’ said Mrs Roberts.

‘I’m very impressed,’ said Mrs Caldicot, wondering how long it would be before she could get a drink to wash away the unpleasant sensation the oyster had left in her mouth.

‘Well, actually, I didn’t really ask him,’ admitted Mrs Roberts. ‘I just pointed to the little rectangular space where you normally stick your stamp, raised an eyebrow and tried to look quizzical.’

‘What did he say?’

‘I don’t know what he said but he just gave me my change and shook his head.’

‘Don’t worry! I’m sure we’ll be able to find some stamps for sale,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

It was a beautiful spring day and the trees of Paris, mostly plane and horse chestnut in this part of the city, were already in full leaf. They were, pointed out Mr Roxdale, a good month or so ahead of the trees in England. The party walked on, chattering happily, pointing things out to one another, laughing, enjoying the unique and special smells and sights and sounds of a city most of them had never visited before. Only Mr Williams knew Paris really well. A decade or two earlier he had had a small photographic studio in Paris. His photographs had been shown regularly in the city’s galleries and had been reproduced in the expensive magazines.

Mrs Caldicot looked around at her companions and smiled. It was good to have friends. She missed Jenkins terribly but was reassured with the thought that she’d see him in a couple of days. She felt a twinge in her knee occasionally and her back was a trifle stiff. She thought that perhaps the bed in the hotel had been a little too soft. Her spine needed more support at night than it did when she had been half a century younger. Growing old can be a bit of a nuisance sometimes but, she thought to herself with a little smile, it is far better than the alternative. Her father was the first person she’d heard say that. And he’d probably got it from his father. But as she looked around at her friends, all enjoying their first morning in Paris, and the stiffness in her back seemed to ease a little. Maybe springtime in Paris had some sort of healing quality. Suddenly she felt 18. She remembered reading somewhere that although the body ages and weakens, and the mind grows older and sometimes slower too, the human spirit never ages. When we age we may have difficulty in climbing stairs or leaping over fences, and our memories may not be quite as sharp as they were at 14, but we still feel the same inside as we felt when we were young and were just setting out on the great adventure which is life.

It is a widely held myth that both the human body and the human mind must inevitably deteriorate in all respects as the years trundle by with increasing speed. The myth is perpetuated because it is convenient and it fits society's preconceived notion of how the elderly should be.

The young sometimes find it uncomfortable to accept that wrinkly and slightly wobbly old folk may be just as bright as they are and this is perhaps because they realise that when intelligence is added to wisdom gained through experience, the sum of the two is considerably more potent than the one alone.

The party waited at the traffic lights, crossed the Rue de Rivoli, and entered the Tuileries Gardens, the huge, ornamental park which lies between the Louvre Palace and the Place de la Concorde.

A small guidebook which Mrs Roberts had picked up at the hotel receptionist desk, explained that the gardens, created by Catherine de Medici, were originally the private gardens of the Palace. They were, she read and explained, first begun in the 16th century and only became a public park after the French Revolution.

'The gardens have for two centuries been a popular place for fashionable Parisians to stroll, meet and have picnics,' announced Mrs Roberts.

Miss Nightingale, as excited as a child, danced and skipped on the dusty paths, admiring the beautiful spring flowers and the neatly trimmed hedges. She and Mrs Peterborough posed together, resting each side of a grey, stone statue of a supersized and very obviously naked Adonis, while Ruth took their photograph with the camera on her mobile telephone. Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough were so full of laughter that they could hardly stand up straight. Ruth, catching the giggle mood, had to take the photograph half a dozen times before she managed to get a picture that didn't cut off Mrs Peterborough's head or Miss Nightingale's feet.

While Mr Hewitt and Mr Roxdale tackled a few of the weeds that were growing in the garden's flower borders, the rest of the party stood and watched a young boy playing with a small, wooden yacht on a boating pond. They then walked on a few yards and stood for a few moments and listened to a young girl playing a violin. They marvelled at the amount of money which visitors and tourists had tossed into the girl's empty violin case.

They watched as a painfully thin jogger in his 30s leant against a tree and stretched his hamstrings and they said 'No thank you' to the invitations to buy from a North African citizen who was selling carved wooden bowls which he had carefully laid out on a large plaid rug.

'The rug makes it easy for him to make a quick getaway,' explained Mr Williams. 'If he spots a policeman coming he'll just pick up the rug by the four corners and scarper. The police never catch these fellows – they're just too fast.'

They admired several human statues.

One individual (it was impossible to tell whether the person underneath was male or female) had draped her or himself in a green robe, put a green crown on his or her head and painted his or her face green. He or she was holding a green cardboard torch.

'Look,' said Mrs Roberts. 'The statue of liberty!'

Ruth took a photograph. She must, thought Mrs Caldicot, have already taken several hundred photographs. It was a good job she wasn't using a camera that used film.

A few yards away another person (once again unidentifiable by sex) had dressed him or herself as a French King. The King was standing perfectly still and had a feathered hat at his or her feet into which passers-by had tossed some coins.

An artist, sitting on one of the green, metal chairs with which the park was well supplied, was drawing a young girl who was sitting on one of the fixed wooden and metal benches. The artist wore a grubby-looking, grey jumper and a pair of faded jeans. He seemed much older than you might expect a street artist to be; too old to be a student. Maybe, thought Mrs Caldicot, he was a serious artist, living in a tiny attic room in Montmartre and drawing tourists so that he could buy paint, canvas and food. He had a small, khaki coloured rucksack on the floor beside him. It appeared to be almost empty.

The model, the girl he was sketching, wore a camel coloured coat and had a light blue scarf wrapped round her neck. She had dark hair, worn long, and was hatless. A young man, smartly but casually dressed and presumably the girl's boyfriend, fiancé or husband was standing beside the artist, watching his every movement, as though keen to ensure that the girl's beauty was captured adequately.

The artist was sketching with charcoal on a sheet of grey paper and his hand moved swiftly and confidently. The drawing was remarkably life-like.

Mrs Caldicot wondered if the young couple were, perhaps, on their honeymoon. The finished drawing would, in any case, doubtless be greatly appreciated and treasured. Maybe it would be framed when they got home. Maybe it would remain rolled, with an increasingly fragile rubber band, holding it furled; destined to lie in a box in the attic. She found herself hoping, and even believing, that it would end up very nicely framed and hanging in the hall.

Visitors would admire it and the couple would explain how they had it done in the Tuileries Gardens in Paris by a nice chap called Pierre or Marcel or Stephan who wanted 20 euros but agreed to 15 euros. They would, perhaps, always wonder if Pierre or Marcel or Stephan ever became famous. They might wonder if their charcoal sketch could be worth millions.

A couple were playing chess. The two players were each seated on metal chairs. The board and pieces were on a third chair, between them. The woman, a redhead, was slightly built. The other player, a man, much older, was huge and must have weighed twice as much. Judging from the state of the board, the older man appeared to be winning.

Mrs Peterborough was driven to rhyme.

'A red headed woman called Kate
Played chess with a bloke twice her weight
The bloke took her queen
With a move she'd not seen
And shocked her by calling out 'Mate!'

The players were concentrating hard and they did not look up. Maybe they did not speak English, thought Mrs Caldicot. Maybe they did not realise that the limerick was about them. Maybe they didn't like limericks. Mr Livingstone did, very much, and he once again led the applause.

A little further on an even older artist, this one seemingly in his sixties, white haired, white bearded, was sitting on a metal chair and bent over a small easel and was concentrating hard on a watercolour painting. Mrs Caldicot would have expected him to be doing a sketch from memory of the Eiffel Tower or maybe the green bouquiniste book stalls along the edge of the river Seine. But he wasn't. He was drawing a French pastoral scene. Fields, trees, meadows, flowers, a small river and half a dozen cows. Mrs Caldicot wondered if the picture was taken from memory or just taken from the man's imagination. It was exquisitely worked. Several finished paintings were arranged on a couple of adjacent chairs. They were very reasonably priced.

'What a beautiful painting!' whispered Mrs Caldicot to Mr Williams, who was standing beside her. Mr Williams, who did not speak, merely nodded his agreement.

'I can't help wondering why this poor chap is having to sell his paintings in a park,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'And they are so reasonably priced.' She wondered whether or not to purchase one but then remembered that she had brought very little money with her. The group had brought their cash with them as communal funds, looked after by Mr Twist. Apart from a few euros for incidentals, she had no money of her own in her handbag.

'I've certainly seen stuff in art galleries that wasn't as good,' agreed Mr Williams.

'So, why is this poor fellow having to sit out here and sell his work this way? Why won't an art gallery put his paintings on display? Surely they could market them for him?'

'Art is like music and writing,' explained Mr Williams. 'It's not just about talent. It's also about how well you can sell yourself and present your work. It's about who you meet and, more than anything else, it's about luck. Success is merely a combination of talent and luck. You need both and of the two I would say that luck is the most important. When I first came to Paris I happened to meet a fellow who was starting a new photographic gallery. It was empty and had only just been decorated. I walked past his new and empty shop and saw him struggling to move a desk he'd had delivered. I called in and helped him put the desk where he wanted it. As a thank you he took me into a bar and bought me a beer. When we talked I mentioned that I was trying to make my way as a photographer. He asked to see some of my pictures. I happened to have some in my bag. I'd just collected them from the developer. The fellow had empty walls and no clients. He was delighted to pay for some of my photographs to be enlarged and framed and hung on his walls. And because a few of them sold he continued to hang my pictures. Then other gallery owners saw that this chap was making money out of me and I was on my way.'

'But it was talent that made you successful,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'A little bit, perhaps,' said Mr Williams, modestly. 'But it was more the result of that meeting with the gallery owner. I was lucky that he was trying to move that desk by himself. I was lucky that I wasn't in a hurry and I could go in and help him. I was lucky that he had a new gallery with empty walls. I was lucky that I happened to have some of my photographs with me. People say that they make your own luck but that has never been my experience. I didn't make any of my luck.' He shrugged. 'If I'd gone into that gallery three months later with a portfolio of photographs, the gallery owner would have probably sent me away. His walls were by then fully covered with photographs for sale.'

'But you stopped to help that man in his shop,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'That was a kind gesture. You deserved the luck.'

'Maybe,' agreed Mr Williams. 'But I knew another chap at that time, he too was trying to make it as a photographer. He took brilliant pictures. He had an eye and an amazing talent. He would walk the streets of Paris at night taking pictures of people coming out of nightclubs and of prostitutes on the pavements. He was a master of taking pictures in the rain, with lights reflected in the puddles. Everything he took was in black and white. He never took anything in colour. But because he didn't have any money he slept on a couch in a friend's tiny one room cellar near the river. It was damp and everything he wore smelt of mould. He never bathed and he stank. Whenever he went into a gallery to try to persuade them to look at his pictures, they threw him out. He never did make it. He had loads of talent but no luck.'

'What happened to him?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'Eventually, someone persuaded him to take snaps of the tourists to earn a little money. He sold his cameras and bought one of those Polaroid instant cameras. He stood outside a café on the Place de l'Opera and took pictures of British and American tourists. He scratched a living doing that. When he started, he swore he was doing it just to get onto his feet. He found a small studio apartment of his own. He got into a relationship with a prostitute who worked the same stretch of pavement. They lived together but then she fell ill and he had to keep them both. Twenty years after he'd started with his Polaroid camera, he was still doing the same thing: snaps of the tourists sitting enjoying their coffees and their pastries. When I became a bit successful and had a little money I offered to lend him money so that he could buy a proper camera and start taking decent pictures again. But he wouldn't take the money. I told him the money was a gift, and that I didn't want it repaying, but he refused.'

'Is he still there, still taking pictures of tourists?'

'Oh no. He died some years ago. His girlfriend, the prostitute had tuberculosis – probably caught from a client. He caught it off her. They both died of it. It was like something out of a tragic opera. Ironic, really, that he spent his best years taking Polaroid snaps outside the Opera building.'

They had walked no more than a third of a mile from the hotel, walking through the Tuileries Gardens on their way to the Seine, enjoying some glorious Easter sunshine on their first day in the French capital, when Mr Livingstone spotted a small crowd of people a little way ahead. He hurried on, calling for the others to join him. Mr Roxdale and Mr Hewitt did so with some reluctance for they had just spotted a number of overly enthusiastic weeds growing in a bed of beautifully coloured cyclamen plants. The two keen gardeners were having a whale of a time tidying up Paris's premier gardens.

'By golly, we can show these Frenchies a thing or two about weeding!' said Mr Hewitt, wielding the trowel which he had brought with him.

'There's nothing to touch good old-fashioned British weeding,' agreed Mr Roxdale, who was working with his fork. 'The Frogs don't have the patience for it.'

'Nor the talent,' said Mr Hewitt. 'There's a talent required for good weeding.'

Mr Roxdale nodded enthusiastically as he removed another dandelion, this one with a tap root a good nine inches long. 'You're absolutely right about that, Mr Hewitt.'

The crowd which Mr Livingstone had spotted consisted largely of tourists.

The people had gathered around two men who were using a large cardboard box as an impromptu table and who were inviting people in the crowd to make bets on the position of the Queen of Hearts card.

The man handling the cards was wearing an open-necked sports shirt and knee length white tailored shorts. The shorts had a sharp crease down the front of each leg. He was also wearing knee-length, white socks and tennis shoes. It is nigh on impossible to look dignified while wearing shorts but it is certainly impossible to look threatening or dangerous. How can anyone take a card sharp seriously when he is wearing white shorts with a crease down the legs? That, presumably, was the idea.

The man was moving the Queen of Hearts around on his makeshift table with two other cards, one of which was the six of clubs and the other was the nine of spades. It was, Mrs Caldicot realised quickly, the old 'Three Card Monte' or 'Find the Lady' game which is always popular with street tricksters. The man handling the cards seemed surprisingly slow and when he stopped, after moving the cards around, it wasn't particularly difficult to see which of the three cards was the Queen of Hearts.

Mr Livingstone, followed by the others, joined the crowd and looked on as first one and then another spectator bet money on the position of the picture card. The card sharp had put a crease into each of the three cards and he moved them about on the cardboard box with practiced ease.

Each of the first three spectators won and pocketed their winnings with clear delight, waving the money they had won in the air with tremendous glee.

'Those are hundred euro notes!' said Mr Twist who, as a former income tax inspector, had a great deal of respect for notes of any denomination but more particularly, perhaps, for notes of a large denomination.

'Lots of people seem to be winning,' said Mr Roxdale.

'Perhaps the man handling the cards isn't very good,' said Mr Livingstone.

'That woman just won at least five hundred euros!' said Mrs Roberts, in awe.

'The winners are all colleagues of the tricksters,' whispered Mr Williams. 'They're stooges.'

'Surely they can't be,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'The woman who won the money looks very respectable.'

And it was quite true that the stooges did not look in the slightest bit disreputable.

The woman who had won, spent some time ostentatiously depositing her winnings in a large blue handbag with a solid looking brass clasp. It was the sort of handbag that Mrs Margaret Thatcher, the Iron Lady, would have been proud to carry on her arm. The winner, the owner of the handbag, was wearing a blue-grey tweed skirt with a matching jacket and a white blouse. She wore a rather nifty, old-fashioned little hat with some fruit and feathers on it, and a pair of white gloves. She had a double string of pearls around her neck and wore large, pearl earrings. The pearls were all far too large to be real but they gave her a convincing look of stability and solidity. You don't expect a woman wearing a tweed twin set and pearls to be a gangster's moll.

'She's a stooge,' insisted Mr Williams, who was not taken in. 'She's part of the trickster's team.' He leant closer and smiled at Mrs Caldicot. 'Not all villains have curling moustachios and darting eyes.'

'No, I suppose they don't!' agreed Mrs Caldicot. 'They wouldn't be very good at it if they did, would they?'

'Exactly!'

'What about that man over there,' said Mrs Caldicot, nodding towards a young man in a crumpled, white linen suit and a dented Panama hat. 'He just won quite a lot of money. Surely he can't be part of the team too!'

'Oh he is,' said Mr Williams. 'The confidence tricksters have quite a big team these days. He's one of the stooges. And so too is the man dressed like a bookie from the 1970s and the chap on his right who is dressed like a TV weatherman.'

'The fellow in the blue jumper with clouds on it?'

'That's the one.'

As he spoke, a young man in jeans and a red shirt, who was clearly travelling with his girlfriend, took out his wallet, removed all the money and confidently held it out towards the man handling the cards.

'You can tell the stooges because they all have a meanness and a ruthlessness about them. And somehow although they try to dress the part, they never quite get everything just right. The chap who looks like a bookie is wearing a three piece checked suit but if you look down you'll see he has scruffy trainers on his feet. No ordinary person wearing that suit would have shoes like that. The woman who is masquerading as an English lady is over the top and about 30 years out-of-date. She probably based her outfit on a picture she saw in an old magazine and then picked up the clothes at one of the Paris flea markets. And would a woman dressed like that really be prepared to bet so much on the turn of a card? Look at her gloves, too. The fingertips are black. They haven't been washed for ages.'

'What about that one?' asked Mrs Caldicot, who was fascinated by everything she was hearing. She indicated the young man in the jeans and red shirt.

'He's a real punter and he's about to lose his holiday money,' said Mr Williams, rather sadly. 'He had a long chat with his girlfriend before getting out his money.'

'How do you know so much about these people?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'I lived in Paris for a while when I was taking photographs. A fellow I shared a flat with for a while lost all his money to one of these tricksters. There are quite a few of these gangs working the tourist spots in Paris.'

Sure enough, less than a minute later the young man and his girlfriend were walking away from the card sharp looking shaken and, it has to be said, rather frightened. The girl was in tears. The card handler had put the winnings into the back pocket of his jeans. Mrs Caldicot felt desperately sorry for the young couple; their holiday clearly ruined. She knew that the young man had risked their money through greed and that logically he was to blame for their loss but she nevertheless found herself wondering about the card sharp and his cronies who were so cold-bloodedly parting tourists from their money.

'I can see where the card is,' announced Mr Twist with great confidence. 'I spotted it every time.'

'Don't even think about it,' Mr Williams warned him.

'I can win a lot of money at this game,' insisted Mr Twist. He sounded confident and determined. 'I've noticed that there's a small crease in the corner of the Queen card.'

The problem with Mr Twist was that he was a bit like an old dog who has spent his whole life obediently doing what he was told to do; he was, if you like, accustomed to his collar and lead. As a tax inspector he had been restricted by rules and regulations. And when his life had fallen apart and he had ended up living rough on a traffic island, he had been bullied by just about everyone with whom he had come into contact.

But now, released from decades of confinement, he was not at all sure what to do and, more importantly, what not to do.

Should he walk away, putting temptation behind him?

Or should be accept the challenge, take what seemed to be a non-existent risk and enrich his newly found friends by winning a big chunk of money.

The trouble was that Mr Twist was desperately keen to impress his friends. And the need to impress is a potent and dangerous driving force which has led many people to make many errors and which has produced not a few embarrassments.

The woman with the large handbag bet again. And again she won several hundred euros.

'She won six hundred euros that time!' said Mr Twist.

'That crease has been put there on purpose to make you think that you can beat him,' said Mr Williams. 'But you can't beat these guys. They're professionals and they're very good at what they do. The guy who is manipulating the cards could probably deal off the top, off the bottom and out of the middle. He could probably make those cards stand on end and sing La Marseillaise if he wanted them to.'

'Come on,' said Mrs Caldicot firmly. 'We ought to be moving on.'

She rounded up her party and began to lead them away, heading once more towards the river Seine.

'Amazing,' said Mr Livingstone. 'I think I'll get myself a cardboard box and three cards, learn that trick and try it in our High Street on a Saturday afternoon. It can't be that difficult.'

'Learn to run fast and far before you try that,' said Mr Roxdale who was not driven to such flights of fancy. 'If the police spot you they'll chase you for miles. And if the police don't get you then one of the people you've bilked will probably follow you home shouting rude things and hitting you with a handbag or an umbrella.'

'Ah,' said Mr Livingstone who had gout in the large toe of his left foot, a right knee permanently crippled with rheumatoid arthritis and more than a touch of osteoarthritis in his left hip sighed rather sadly as another wild dream hit the dust. 'I don't think I'd be too good at the running bit,' he said. 'Or the 'dodging the handbag' bit.'

They wandered off together, still marvelling at the size of the crowd which had gathered around the man with the cardboard box and the playing cards.

There were, Mrs Caldicot, estimated over 30 people in the crowd.

'Look over there,' said Mr Williams quietly. He pointed to a short, tubby, scruffy man in jeans and a leather jacket who was standing holding a bicycle. 'That's one of the look-out men.'

Mrs Caldicot peered at him, puzzled. 'What do you mean 'look-out' men?'

'There will be two or three of them spread around,' said Mr Williams. 'They call them 'watchers'. If one of them sees a policeman approaching, he'll shout and ride the bicycle over to the man manipulating the cards. The card manipulator will climb on the bicycle and pedal off to a prearranged meeting place. It doesn't matter if the accomplices get caught. What could anyone charge them with? But the card manipulator could be identified. And, besides, he's important because he's the one with the dexterity and the skill to move the cards around and con the tourists.'

'So how many people are involved in the gang?' asked Mrs Caldicot, astonished.

'Probably about a dozen altogether. I once followed them and watched them all meet for the payout. The stooges who appear to have won money hand it all back to the boss and then everyone is paid their wages.'

'How can they possibly make enough money to pay so many people?'

'Easily! They'll probably bilk seven or eight tourists of their money in less than half an hour. And they don't play for euros. They play for hundreds of euros. So they can easily make 2,000 euros in half an hour. That's plenty to provide a pay-out for everyone and leave a lot of money left for the card sharp and the boss who organises the whole thing and recruits the members of the gang. And don't forget there is no rent to pay, and there are no overheads and no taxes! When they've shared out the spoils they split up, meet somewhere else half an hour or so later and then repeat the whole thing. In an average sort of day they'll bilk tourists of between 10,000 and 20,000 euros. The stooges and look-out men will each get 100 to 150 euros a day, and the card sharp and the boss will share the big money.'

'Crumbs!' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I hadn't realised it was such a big operation.'

'In a fairly average month, one of these gangs can take half a million euros off tourists. That's why the police take them seriously. That money would have probably been spent on coffees and cakes and souvenirs, and once the crooks have the money a good deal of it goes abroad and is lost to the economy. Plus there's the fact that the victims may have lost most or even all of their holiday spending money. Some of them will be too embarrassed to say anything to anyone but quite a few will tell their friends and their relatives what happened and then the city of Paris gets a bad name and people don't want to come here on their holidays because they're frightened they'll be conned out of their money too.'

'How long did you live in Paris?'

'Several years! I was lucky with my life. We all have a mountain we want to climb and I realised early on that my particular mountain wasn't out of my reach. My desire was simply to earn my living taking photographs – no more and no less. The thing is that I worked out quite early on in life that satisfaction comes not from work in itself, or from play, but from competition and from overcoming hurdles, even if those hurdles are ones which we ourselves have created. That might not be true for everyone but it was the case for me. In the end, we can all only climb to the top of the mountain we have chosen to climb. Therein, perhaps, lies the answer to happiness for if we choose a mountain which is too grand for our talents, our perseverance and, most important of all, our supply of luck, then we must be doomed to disappointment.'

'And you were obviously very successful at your chosen profession,' said Mrs Caldicot.

Mr Williams looked at her.

'Judging by the money people pay for your photographs,' said Mrs Caldicot, looking round to make sure that none of the others heard her. She knew that Mr Williams, an exceptionally modest man, did not want the others to know that his pictures sold for many thousands of pounds. His modesty was genuine and simple, and not a result of any desire to hide the fact of his wealth from his friends.

'Oh, I was very lucky,' said Mr Williams with a big smile. 'I was in Paris at the right time and I met a gallery owner who liked my pictures. There was a fashion for black and white street photographs at the time; pictures of ordinary people doing ordinary things; pictures of bread shops and cafes and the girls hanging around in the streets looking for customers. If that gallery owner hadn't taken my pictures I could have ended up photographing weddings or taking pictures for an advertising agency. It was all luck, really. There were probably better photographers out there taking pictures for postcard publishers.'

'But you made your luck,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'You came to Paris. And you helped that gallery owner when he was just starting out.'

'No, I was just fortunate,' insisted Mr Williams. 'I came to Paris because in the 1950s it was cheaper here than in London. And my girlfriend was coming here to work as a dancer. I didn't come here with the clear intention of becoming successful. I did no market research. Unbeknownst to me, I wanted to take the sort of pictures that people wanted at the time.' He laughed. 'How's that for dumb luck?'

They had by now crossed the Tuileries Gardens and from where they were standing they could look across the Place de La Concorde, right up the Champs-Élysées and see the Arc de Triomphe in the distance. They could now also see the Eiffel Tower, glimmering and sparkling in the spring sunshine.

'Can we go to that big tower?' asked Miss Nightingale, excitedly. She clapped her hands together in excitement.

'I expect there will be a shop there selling stamps for my postcards,' said Mrs Roberts, confidently.

'It looks rather a long way away,' said Mrs Torridge, rather doubtfully. 'I'm running a bit short of petrol and I'm honestly not sure my legs are going to get me that far.' She had brought Mr Torridge with her in a shopping bag. When Mrs Caldicot had suggested that she leave his ashes in the hotel bedroom, Mrs Torridge had explained that she'd thought of that but had decided that Mr Torridge had never seen Paris and that she thought it would be unfair to bring him this far and then leave him in the hotel.

'We could take a taxi,' suggested Mr Livingstone.

'We wouldn't all fit into a taxi,' Mrs Caldicot pointed out. 'We'd need three taxis. And where are we going to find three taxis all free at the same time?'

'We could catch a boat,' suggested Mr Williams.

They all looked at him as if he'd said something silly.

'There's a sort of bus service on the river Seine,' explained Mr Williams. 'It's called the Batobus. There are stops along the river bank where passengers can get on and off. There's a stop not far from here. We can catch the boat and ride all the way up to the Eiffel Tower. Then we can get off the boat, as fresh as daisies, and go up the Eiffel Tower in the lift.'

'Oo, I think I might get seasick,' said Ruth looking rather worried. 'I've never been on a ship before.'

'It isn't a ship, it's only a river boat,' said Mr Williams kindly. 'And you mustn't worry about being sick because the river is as smooth as a pond.'

'Oh,' said Ruth. 'Oh, that's all right then.' She sounded relieved.

It was generally agreed that catching the river bus was a splendid idea and so they made their way to a pedestrian crossing which would take them to the river bank and the nearby boat stop.

It was while they were waiting to cross the road that Mrs Caldicot realised that Mr Twist was missing.

Panicking somewhat, she looked around for him. 'Has anyone seen Mr Twist?' she said. She said it again; a bit louder.

'I was chatting to him a few minutes ago,' said Mr Livingstone. 'He can't have gone far.'

'He was with us when we were watching those men with the cards,' said Mrs Torridge. 'He said he could see which card was the Queen of Hearts. He said the man with the cards wasn't all that good at moving the cards about.'

'I haven't seen him for a while,' said Mr Roxdale. 'Do you think he could have been kidnapped? I've heard there's a lot of that goes on in big cities.'

'Why would anyone kidnap Mr Twist?' asked Mr Livingstone. 'He's a very nice chap, but he hasn't got any money!'

‘He’s got all our money,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘He’s good with money so I gave him all our euros to look after. He’s got the rest of our lottery winnings – everything except whatever personal spending money we all brought with us. He understands all about exchange rates and he had a money belt underneath his shirt.’

‘But no one would know that,’ Mrs Roberts pointed out. ‘He’s not going to walk around waving his money belt around.’

‘No, I suppose not,’ agreed Mrs Caldicot. She sighed as a hundred awful scenarios flashed through her mind. ‘Oh dear, it’s all my fault. I should have looked after everyone better. Maybe he’s got lost? What if he’s fallen down and hurt himself? What if he has suddenly been taken ill? What if he got mugged? People get mugged all the time in cities. Maybe someone just wanted to steal his watch and they hit him on the head.’

‘I heard of someone being robbed for their shoes,’ said Mrs Peterborough. ‘He had a pair of those fancy pumps that are so fashionable with young people. They have little lights in the heels which light up when you walk.’

‘Mr Twist’s shoes didn’t light up when he walked,’ said Mr Roxdale with certainty. ‘They were just rather old, ordinary brown shoes. They were a bit worn down at the heel to be honest with you. I noticed that. And the sole of one shoe was coming a bit loose. I saw it flapping about a bit.’

‘Which shoe was that?’ asked Mr Livingstone.

Mr Roxdale thought for a moment. ‘I think it was the left,’ he said at last.

‘What difference does it make which shoe it was that had a loose sole?’ asked Mrs Roberts, who never really got cross but was perhaps a little sharper than she would have been if she hadn’t been quite so worried.

‘I didn’t say it made a difference,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘But Mr Livingstone asked me.’

‘At a time like this the police always say that every bit of information you have is important,’ said Mr Livingstone rather defensively. ‘Anyway, I don’t see how he could have got lost,’ he continued. ‘We’re a pretty noticeable bunch. A bunch of OAPs wandering around a park in the middle of Paris. And we’ve been in the park for ages.’

‘We’ll have to retrace our steps and look for him,’ said Mrs Caldicot quite firmly, taking charge and making a decision.

And so they turned round and started to walk back the way they had come.

‘Don’t you think we’d better spread out?’ asked Mrs Roberts.

Mrs Caldicot agreed that this was a very good idea and repeated the suggestion. The band of searchers therefore spread out into a long line.

‘Keep an eye on the person either side of you,’ Mrs Caldicot instructed everyone. ‘We don’t want to lose anyone else.’

‘I haven’t got anyone to the right of me,’ pointed out Mr Roxdale, who was on the right flank.

Mrs Caldicot asked Mrs Roberts to go on the right edge of the line and asked Ruth to go on the far left of the line.

And they started searching for Mr Twist.

Chapter Thirteen

They found Mr Twist just under fifteen minutes later.

He was sitting on a green park bench by himself.

He had his hands over his face and his sobs could be heard some distance away.

He looked, thought Mrs Caldicot, like King Lear bemoaning his fate. She wondered what on earth had happened to upset him so much.

‘Wait here please,’ said Mrs Caldicot to the others, and she rushed ahead to find out what was wrong.

It took her several minutes to calm Mr Twist down enough so that he could tell her what had happened.

‘I’ve lost all our money,’ he admitted at last, between sobs.

He explained that he had been so convinced that he could spot the position of the Queen of Hearts that he had taken the group’s money out of his money belt and had within moments lost the whole lot on the turn of a couple of cards.

‘I thought if I won more money everyone would be so pleased with me,’ he said. ‘I thought we could have really posh meals in smart restaurants.’

Disappointed though she was, Mrs Caldicot could not for one moment bring herself to be cross with Mr Twist.

She sat down on the bench beside him and put an arm around him.

For a woman who was in charge of a group of old aged pensioners now stuck in a foreign country with no money, she felt surprisingly calm and relaxed. Their hotel was paid for. They had their return tickets for the Eurostar train. And the hotel would serve them breakfast every morning.

It is no secret, she thought to herself, that we are not masters of our own fate. We may like to think that although we may not be able to control our destiny, we may be able to nudge it occasionally in the direction we would find most congenial, but the reality is that the big decisions in life are taken for us by fate.

And fate is sometimes rather more whimsical than we might like it to be.

‘I didn’t lose it all at once,’ he said, as though this made it more acceptable. ‘I lost half of it and then I thought I could win back what I’d lost with the rest of it.’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘I thought you’d like me more if I won a lot of money for us,’ said Mr Twist.

‘We couldn’t like you any more than we do,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘And we don’t need lots of money to have a good time.’

‘You’ve been so good to me,’ said Mr Twist, tears rolling down his cheeks.

‘We love having you with us,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘And we couldn’t like you any more than we do!’ she said again.

Mr Twist responded with more sobs.

‘I’ll tell the others you were robbed,’ said Mrs Caldicot, who realised that in addition to feeling guilty at having lost their nest-egg, Mr Twist was desperately ashamed that he had gambled away their money and lost.

‘No, no,’ said Mr Twist with a shake of his head. ‘No, you mustn’t do that.’ He took out a large, red handkerchief and blew his nose rather noisily. Mr Caldicot thought that it sounded rather like a mating elephant she’d once heard on a television wildlife programme. ‘I don’t want you to lie for me. I have to tell them the truth.’ He paused and blew his nose again. ‘They’re my friends.’

And so Mr Twist told the rest of the party the truth, and although they were quite shocked and certainly rather disappointed that now they wouldn’t be able to go on the boat on the river Seine or up the Eiffel Tower or into the Louvre to see the Mona Lisa, because they didn’t have enough money to pay for the tickets they would need for those things, no one blamed Mr Twist, although he said they should because, after all, it had been entirely his fault that they no longer had any money.

And slowly it dawned on everyone that in addition to not having any money to go on the Batobus boat on the River Seine, or to buy tickets for the lift up the Eiffel tower, they didn’t have any money to buy meals.

‘I’ve still got nearly a quarter of a pocket full of biscuit crumbs!’ said Miss Nightingale cheerfully. ‘We can all share those.’

‘And there is a tin of Miss Nightingale’s mulligatawny soup left over at the hotel,’ said Mrs Peterborough.

‘I’ve got half a packet of peppermints,’ said Mr Roxdale.

And in a rather strange way, although it didn’t offer much of a realistic solution to their problem, all this information cheered them all up somewhat because it reminded them that whatever happened they were not alone and never would be because they had one another.

And just as they had shared the lottery winnings so now they would share the gloom and discomfort of not having any money for restaurant meals.

Mrs Peterborough cleared her throat and recited a limerick she had clearly just made up.

'From one of these cards you must pick
But be warned, and beware, it's a trick
You look for the Queen
But she's not to be seen
For his hands are exceedingly quick.'

Mrs Caldicot wondered how she did it so quickly. It seemed that Mrs Peterborough could create silly little rhymes without any effort. She looked across at Mr Twist to see if he was offended. He wasn't. Even he was smiling.

'If we go round to the back of one of the big hotels we can probably persuade someone in the kitchen to give us some of their leftovers and unwanted food,' said Mrs Merivale, who had once found herself abandoned in Rome by a film producer who had absconded with all the available funds, leaving the crew to fend for themselves. She therefore knew of what she spake.

Mr Merivale said that although he didn't really like begging, he thought this was an excellent idea and, under the circumstances, entirely excusable.

'One of us could go into a café and order a cup of something very cheap,' suggested Mr Livingstone. 'And while he's in there he could fill his pockets with those little, wrapped sugar cubes they always have on the table in cafés and restaurants and then when he came out he could share out the sugar with everyone else.'

'I could probably get us some money,' said Mr Williams, speaking quietly to Mrs Caldicot. 'I still know one or two gallery owners in Paris. I could ask them to advance me some money on the sale of my photographs.'

Mrs Caldicot looked at him and smiled. 'No, Mr Williams,' she said quite firmly. 'You've helped us more than enough in the past. We must deal with this little problem ourselves.' She reached out and squeezed his arm. 'We'll sort things out,' she said. 'It'll be an adventure,' she added, and managed to sound as though she meant it.

'We could go to the British Embassy,' suggested Mrs Roberts. 'They ought to be able to help us. That's what they're there for, isn't it?'

The others immediately agreed that this was a splendid notion and it was generally agreed that they had no doubt that the British Embassy would have to help them out.

'Maybe they'll lend us some money and let us pay them back when we're back home,' said Ruth, who had tried to hide how she felt but was actually quite frightened.

And so off they went to the British Embassy.

Things did not go as well as they hoped.

After a lengthy wait a rather superior official in a smart suit, a white shirt and a boring looking tie told them that since they had their hotel booked and their return tickets arranged, there really wasn't anything that he could do.

'Can't you just lend us some money for meals?' asked Mrs Caldicot. 'We'll pay you back.'

'We don't lend people money,' said the official, rather sniffily. 'I suggest you telephone your bank in England and ask them to send some money for you to collect at a branch here in Paris. Alternatively, you could ask a friend or a relative to wire you some money. I think you will find that there is a Western Union office here in the city.'

Dismissed and feeling even lonelier and more abandoned than before, Mrs Caldicot and her friends stood in the street and tried to decide what to do next. Mrs Caldicot half wished she had accepted Mr Williams' offer to borrow some money from one of the gallery owners he knew. But she only half wished it.

'We could try the travel agency,' suggested Mr Livingstone. 'Aren't they supposed to have a representative here?'

Mrs Caldicot said she thought this was a splendid idea, probably even better than trying the British Embassy, and added that she didn't know why she didn't think of it herself. And so off they went, back to the hotel.

'Ah, tootle plip!' said Raphael when he saw them approaching.

'No, no,' said Mr Hewitt. 'Toodle pip is what we say instead of 'goodbye'. When you are greeting someone you say 'What ho! Good to see you old bean!''

'What ho! Good to see you old bean!' said Raphael.

'Splendid!' said Mr Hewitt.

Raphael who always looked pleased with himself managed to look even more pleased with himself.

Inside the hotel, Mrs Caldicot asked the receptionist if she could put them in touch with their travel agent representative. The receptionist found the number on a card pinned to the wall behind her and then made the call. When the phone was ringing, she handed the receiver to Mrs Caldicot.

'How did you lose your money?' asked the travel agent's representative when Mrs Caldicot had explained their problem.

Mrs Caldicot explained the sequence of events which had led to their loss.

The travel agency representative laughed.

‘It’s not funny,’ said Mrs Caldicot sharply. ‘We don’t have any money left.’

‘But your hotel is booked, isn’t it? You’ve got somewhere to sleep? And you get your breakfast thrown in for free?’

‘Yes.’

‘So, what’s the problem?’

‘We don’t have any money for other meals.’

‘Then it was rather silly of you to lose all your money in a card game. And you still have your train tickets? You haven’t lost those?’

‘No, we still have the tickets.’

‘Oh good. That’s a relief. You’ll be able to go home.’ She said it rather nastily, unconcerned and indifferent to their plight.

Suddenly all Mrs Caldicot could hear was the dialling tone. The travel company representative had closed the connection.

‘Can she help?’ asked Mrs Torridge. ‘Can the travel company lend us some money?’

‘It would seem not,’ admitted Mrs Caldicot who was a little shocked and extremely disappointed.

They stood around in the hotel lobby, wondering what to do next.

‘We could do as the Embassy man suggested,’ said Mr Roxdale. ‘We could ask someone to wire us money to a bank.’

‘There must be another way,’ said Mrs Caldicot firmly. ‘I don’t know about the rest of you but I’m fed up with people putting us down. It’ll seem like a defeat if we have to ask someone in the UK to send us some money.’

She knew that Jenkins would know how to send her money and he would do so happily and quickly. But she now very much wanted to deal with this problem without any outside help. The Embassy hadn’t been much help. And the woman from the travel agency had been absolutely no help at all.

They were on their own and they would darned well deal with their problem themselves.

Chapter Fourteen

‘Maybe we could earn some money ourselves,’ suggested Mr Twist, very quietly. He spoke rather diffidently; still shaken and rather ashamed of himself.

They were still standing in the hotel lobby.

They all looked at Mr Twist.

‘Did you see that violinist in the park?’ he asked. ‘Her violin case was half full with money.’

‘We haven’t got a violin or a violin case,’ pointed out Mr Hewitt.

‘No, but we have a flute, a banjo and a set of African bongo drums,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘Mr Twist is absolutely right. We could earn the money we need.’

Now everyone looked at Mr Livingstone.

‘My instruments,’ he explained. ‘The ones I brought with me. They’re upstairs in my hotel room.’

‘But only you can play any of them,’ said Mrs Roberts.

‘Anyone can play the banjo,’ insisted Mr Livingstone. ‘And all you need to play the bongo drums is a pair of hands.’

‘We could be a band,’ said Mrs Peterborough. ‘I’ve always wanted to be in a band.’

‘What shall we call ourselves?’ asked Mrs Torridge.

‘I don’t think it matters what we call ourselves,’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘But can we make the sort of music that people will pay to listen to?’

‘Of course we can,’ said Mr Livingstone, with enough confidence for them all. Clearly delighted, he hurried upstairs to collect his instruments. ‘Remember how well our little sing song went on the train?’

‘But what will the rest of us do?’ asked Ruth, who didn’t think she could play the bongo drums and was pretty certain she wouldn’t be able to play the banjo.

‘I can play the comb and paper,’ said Mr Roxdale, taking a pocket comb from his pocket. ‘All I need is a bit of greaseproof paper or tissue paper. I used to be a wow at Christmas parties when I was a boy.’

He hurried away, heading for the kitchen and the friendly chef in the hope that he’d be able to beg a piece of suitable paper.

‘Spoons!’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘I can play the spoons! I always found that soup spoons worked best.’ And he hurried off after Mr Roxdale to borrow a pair of suitable soup spoons.

‘What are the rest of us going to do?’ asked Mrs Torridge.

‘It looks as if one of us is going to be playing the banjo,’ said Mrs Caldicot with a laugh. ‘And one of us is going to be playing the bongo drums.’

‘Oh I don’t think I could manage either of those,’ said Miss Nightingale.

‘Nor me,’ said Mrs Peterborough.

From the look on her face it was clear that Mrs Torridge wasn’t keen on either instrument. She pointed out, quite sensibly, that she could hardly hold Mr Torridge and play an instrument.

‘Maybe those who aren’t playing musical instruments could sing,’ suggested Mrs Caldicot. ‘We could have a small choir. Bands always have a small group of singers.

‘I wouldn’t mind being a backing singer,’ said Ruth. ‘I could wear that blue dress I brought with me in case we got invited to any parties.’ She looked down. She was wearing blue jeans, a blue jumper and her blue anorak. She liked blue. Apart from yellow it was her favourite colour. But she didn’t like herself in yellow. She thought it made her look fat. She admitted to being curvy and rounded and didn’t particularly object to being described as plump, which she thought sounded rather attractive, but she didn’t want anyone to think of her as fat.

‘But what on earth are we going to sing?’ asked Mrs Torridge. ‘I don’t know any songs!’

‘Of course you do!’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘We were singing old music hall songs on the train coming over here.’

Moments later, Mr Hewitt and Mr Roxdale emerged from the kitchen.

Mr Roxdale had a piece of greaseproof paper wrapped around his comb and a very happy Mr Hewitt was clutching two shiny soup spoons and two jam jars, both of which appeared to be two thirds full of dried split peas.

‘What on earth are the jam jars for?’ asked Ruth.

‘Those are your rhythm shakers,’ explained Mr Hewitt. ‘Your home-made maracas!’ He shook the jars which, when shaken rhythmically, produced an almost musical percussion sound.

Ruth, delighted, took the two jars, one in each hand, and proceeded to practise with them.

‘I see we’ve already got the beginnings of a band!’ cried Mr Livingstone, coming down the stairs with far more energy than anyone had seen him travel for a long time. ‘Who’s on banjo?’

'I'll try,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'But you'll have to show me what to do and if I can't manage it then someone else will have to take over.'

'I'll just pop upstairs and change into something a bit more presentable,' said Ruth who was now becoming quite excited at the prospect of being in a band – even if all the other members of the band were half a century older than her. Just wait until she told Denise that she'd been in a band which had performed in Paris! The best thing about Denise was that she never got jealous. On the contrary, she always got excited and genuinely delighted if anything remotely thrilling happened to her friend.

Had anything this exciting ever happened to anyone else they knew? Ruth thought not.

Clutching her home made maracas (she didn't want to come back down and find that someone else had taken charge of them) the assistant housekeeper and band singer hurried upstairs.

'I'll have a go at playing the bongo drums,' said Mrs Roberts.

'What tunes are we going to perform?' asked Mr Livingstone.

'Mrs Caldicot suggested that we try some of those old music hall songs that we sang on the train,' said Mrs Torridge.

'Splendid idea!' agreed Mr Livingstone.

'So, where are we going to perform?' asked Mrs Roberts.

'The best place is the Place des Vosges,' said Mr Williams. 'But we could practise in the Tuileries Gardens, where we saw that girl violinist.'

'We all need to get used to our instruments,' Mr Livingstone pointed out. 'And we need to decide which numbers we're going to sing.'

'How many numbers do you think we need?' asked Mrs Torridge. 'I hope it isn't going to be too many.'

'Three will be plenty,' said Mr Livingstone. 'When we've performed the three, we can start again at the beginning.'

'Won't people get bored if we keep playing the same tunes?' asked Mrs Roberts.

'I don't think many people are going to stick around for more than three songs,' pointed out Mr Hewitt.

'Where's Ruthie gone?' asked Mrs Torridge suddenly.

'I think she popped upstairs to change,' said Mrs Caldicot, who was now making an effort to know where everyone was.

'As long as we don't go without her,' said Mrs Torridge.

'We won't,' promised Mrs Caldicot, who had absolutely no intention of going anywhere without her entire brood with her. She felt a particular responsibility for Ruth who was in some ways very grown up but in other ways seemed remarkably young even for an 18-year-old. Still, most young people seemed very young these days. First, she had noticed that policemen were getting younger. Then the doctors all looked as though they should still be at school flicking paper pellets about with rubber bands. Except that they all looked so serious that they had probably never flicked paper pellets about.

And so while they waited for Ruth to return, they discussed which traditional, old-fashioned music hall songs they knew, or knew well enough to give the impression that they knew them.

They eventually decided on these three:

Down at the Old Bull and Bush – made famous by Florrie Forde

Boiled Beef and Carrots – immortalised by Harry Champion

And

I Do Like to Be Beside the Seaside – which has been performed in a good many films, and which has for over a century been popular with British holidaymakers

Mr Hewitt said he thought that the third of these was rather inappropriate since they were nowhere near the seaside but Mr Livingstone pointed out that they weren't at the Old Bull and Bush either. And, moreover, come to that they weren't likely to be eating boiled beef and carrots at any time in the near future. As a result of Mr Livingstone's intervention, it was unanimously decided (including by Mr Hewitt) that Mr Hewitt's objection be forthwith overruled. Mr Livingstone also pointed out that those were the three old music hall songs for which he definitely remembered the lyrics and the tunes. And, as a double bonus they had easily memorable tunes and would doubtless be familiar to a good many tourists.

'I'll just write down the lyrics while we're waiting for Ruth,' said Mr Livingstone. He begged three pieces of hotel stationery from the receptionist and to his own surprise succeeded in scribbling some, at least, of the words to all three songs. He then managed to persuade the receptionist to make 20 photocopies of each sheet of paper, so that he had a few spares for each song.

'There you are,' he said, handing round the home-made song-sheets as they came out of the photocopier. 'Now no one has any excuse for not knowing the words!'

As the last piece of paper was handed out, they heard Ruth clattering down the stairs. Moments later she appeared.

The blue dress, made out of something very shimmery and sparkly, fit her perfectly. ‘Not a straight line to be seen fore or aft,’ said Mr Roxdale.

Ruth was certainly all curves and the dress made this abundantly clear. Her generous bosom, normally rather hidden under a jumper or an anorak or both, had suddenly leapt to the fore and was now unmistakeably there and undeniably feminine. There was cleavage in abundance. Ruth had somehow even found time to do something to her hair, which was now piled high on her head, and to complete the ensemble she wore long, blue, dangly earrings.

‘Crumbs!’ said Mr Hewitt.

‘Wow!’ said Mr Twist.

‘Beautiful!’ said Mr Williams.

‘You look marvellous, dear!’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘Blue really suits you!’ said Mrs Torridge.

‘I love the buttons!’ said Mrs Peterborough who, as we now know, knew a good deal about buttons.

‘You look good enough to eat!’ said Mrs Merivale.

‘Terrific! Absolutely terrific!’ said Mr Merivale.

‘Beautiful!’ said Miss Nightingale. ‘You’re beautiful, my dear.’

‘Crumbs!’ said Mr Twist. ‘You do look good.’

‘Fantastic,’ said Mr Williams who wished he had his camera with him.

Mrs Roberts gave Ruth a hug and Mr Livingstone tried to wolf whistle but discovered that somewhere along the line his whistle had upped and left him. He replaced the missing whistle with a round of applause which he managed quite well despite the rheumatoid arthritis in his fingers.

Ruth was delighted. Her audience might not perhaps have fitted the demographic profile of her preferred or chosen audience but they were her friends and their compliments meant a lot to her.

And so, all present and correct, they hurried out of the hotel, past Raphael the doorman (who remembered to say ‘Tootle pop’ as they passed by), and along to the Tuileries Gardens where they found a bench and some chairs and some of them sat down and some of them didn’t and they tried to turn themselves into a band.

Chapter Fifteen

‘How do I play this thing?’ Mrs Caldicot asked Mr Livingstone, holding up the banjo and peering at it as though she were rather nervous that it might bite. ‘Where do I blow?’ She suddenly felt rather alarmed. She could not remember that she had ever played a musical instrument and she suddenly got rather cold feet. Then she remembered that when she was about seven she had played the recorder at school. Awful instrument, she remembered. She had hated it and not been any good at all at it. ‘What if we make complete fools of ourselves?’ she silently asked herself. ‘So, what if we do?’ she silently replied. ‘Does it really matter? Does it matter at all? We don’t know anyone in Paris? No one else will care. And it could be fun. It could make us some money for boat rides and food and so on. And whatever happens it will be an adventure.’

‘You’re kidding, aren’t you?’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘Not a lot,’ admitted Mrs Caldicot, suddenly shaken from her reverie. ‘It’s got strings so I assume it needs strumming rather than blowing. But although I did once try to play the guitar I never got very far with it.’

‘It’s a banjo,’ explained Mr Livingstone patiently. ‘Not a guitar or even a ukulele. And it’s very easy to play. All you really have to do is strum.’

He showed her how to strum some simple tunes that made it sound as though she were playing the instrument.

‘It sounds rather good,’ said Miss Nightingale, appreciatively.

‘It’s very nice indeed,’ agreed Mrs Peterborough. ‘What’s it called? Is it a guitar?’

‘It does sound rather good, doesn’t it?’ said a genuinely surprised Mrs Caldicot. ‘Mr Livingstone says it’s called a banjo.’

Next, Mr Livingstone showed Mrs Roberts how to play the bongo drums. And to everyone’s astonishment Mrs Roberts turned out to be tremendously adept.

‘You’re a natural,’ said Mr Livingstone.

Mrs Roberts blushed with pride and carried on drumming.

‘You’re a natural,’ whispered Mrs Caldicot, grinning at Mrs Roberts and giving her a nudge.

Meanwhile, Mr Livingstone, satisfied that he had a banjo player and a bongo drum player, had moved across to start teaching Ruth how to play the rhythm shakers which Mr Hewitt had made. He took one of the jam jars from her and shook it. He pulled a face and tried again.

‘I could ask Jean-Jacques if he would like to join us,’ Ruth said to Mrs Caldicot.

‘Who is Jean-Jacques?’ asked Mrs Caldicot, who didn’t know that Ruth knew anyone in Paris, let alone someone called Jean-Jacques.’

‘He was one of the waiters at that little party last night,’ replied Ruth.

‘I thought his name was Pierre,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Wasn’t he the one Mrs Peterborough wrote a poem about? The balding one.’

Mr Livingstone tried the other rhythm shaker and pulled another face. Well, actually it was the same face but he pulled it again.

‘No, not that one,’ said Ruth, now blushing. ‘Jean-Jacques was the young good-looking one with the tattoo.’

‘Ah!’ said Mrs Caldicot, understanding. She didn’t much fancy tattoos herself but she knew that young girls regarded them very seriously. And she knew that Ruth, like many young girls, had a welcome mat tacked onto her heart and a tendency to fall in love at first sight. She thought that when you were young and in a hurry this probably saved a good deal of time though it did have a tendency to produce a little pain and more than a few tears. Still, the presence of a revolving door in addition to a welcome mat, meant that the sadness and tears were usually soon replaced by fresh hope and new expectations.

Mrs Roberts was now really getting the hang of her bongo drums. ‘Oh this is fun!’ she cried out as she banged out a rather merry rhythm.

‘I could text him,’ said Ruth, rather eagerly.

‘You have his number?’

‘Oh yes. He wrote his number on a paper napkin for me.’ She reached into her handbag and produced a carefully folded paper napkin. Written in lipstick it contained a telephone number and a large, red X.

Mr Livingstone was still shaking the jam jar full of dried split peas. He did not seem happy.

‘Does he play any musical instruments?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘Oh yes. He told me that he plays the accordion.’

‘Won’t he be working today?’

‘He is a freelance and works in several bars and hotels. But he only works in the evenings. He said I could text him during the day time.’

‘Well, if he doesn’t mind,’ said Mrs Caldicot, who was impressed that Ruth had managed to obtain all this information in such a short space of time. She had only seen the two of them talking together for a couple of moments. A thought suddenly occurred to her. ‘But would he want to be paid to play his accordion?’

‘Oh no, I don’t think so,’ said Ruth. ‘Shall I ask him to meet us here?’

‘Well, yes, I would think so. I rather suspect that we’ll be here for a little while,’ said Mrs Caldicot. She put the strap of Mr Livingstone’s banjo around her neck and started to strum it as she had been instructed.

‘Wow!’ said Ruth, impressed. ‘You make it sound like a banjo!’

‘Do you mind if I take a few of these dried peas out of Ruth’s maracas?’ Mr Livingstone asked Mr Hewitt. ‘I think we’d get a better sound with fewer peas.’

‘Not at all! Remove as many as you think necessary,’ replied Mr Hewitt, who was practising with his two soup spoons and proving to himself and everyone else that a skill acquired in childhood is a skill which is never truly lost. ‘I just filled the jar up with peas. I knew it would need tuning but I thought it would be easier to take some out than to try to find an additional supply if we needed more.’

‘Very wise,’ agreed Mr Livingstone. ‘Good thinking!’ He unfastened the lid on the jar and poured some of the dried peas out into his hand. He put the peas into his jacket pocket. Half a dozen split peas spilt out onto the ground and were immediately eaten by three plump pigeons. Mr Livingstone then put the lid back onto the jar and tested the rhythm shaker. Satisfied, he made roughly the same adjustment to the second jam jar and then handed both back to Ruth when she had finished typing and sending her text message. He then gave her some basic instruction in how to turn her pea filled jam jars into musical instruments.

‘Right,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘We’d better try a run through of our first song. Let’s try ‘Down at the Old Bull and Bush’.

‘What’s a run through?’ Mrs Roberts asked Mrs Caldicot, in a whisper.

‘I think it’s a sort of rehearsal,’ Mrs Caldicot whispered back.

And so off they went with their first rehearsal.

The band was born.

Chapter Sixteen

To almost everyone's surprise the first run through was surprisingly successful. The exception to the doubters, was Mr Livingstone. He had long believed that faith can move mountains and that all you needed for this was enough faith and a small enough mountain.

Mr Livingstone led the way on his flute, Mrs Caldicot strummed the banjo, Mrs Roberts banged the bongo drums, Mr Hewitt did what he did with his spoons, Mr Roxdale made surprisingly musical sounds with his comb and greaseproof paper and the choir of Mrs Peterborough, Miss Nightingale, Mrs Torridge, Mr Twist, Mr Williams and the Merivales performed magnificently.

But none of them would have disagreed that the star of the show was Ruth.

Far from just being a backing singer, as she had at first imagined herself to be, she became the lead singer. She shook her jam jar maracas as one born to shake jam jar maracas and to her own surprise she turned out to have an excellent, slightly throaty voice – perfect for the rendition of music hall songs.

After their first run through of their triple programme of songs, the new band realised, with some astonishment, that they had acquired a considerable audience.

Moreover, when they finished their enthusiastic rendition of 'I Do Like to Be Beside the Seaside', they watched in astonishment as a number of members of the audience threw money down at their feet.

'We need something for people to throw money into,' said Mr Livingstone, who, it was generally agreed, had, by default, become the band's manager.

As he spoke, the musicians and singers were busy scouring the ground and collecting up the coins which had been tossed down. As they collected them, they handed them to Mrs Caldicot who popped them into her handbag.

'We certainly do,' said Mrs Torridge. 'My eyes aren't what they used to be and I've just picked up three bottle tops.'

She had, is must be admitted, been hampered in her search by her insistence on holding onto the bag containing Mr Torridge's ashes.

'Scrabbling around on the ground doesn't do my knees any good,' said Mr Hewitt. 'The ground is a lot further away than it used to be when I wasn't as old as I am now.'

'I should have brought my banjo case,' said Mr Livingstone. 'You can get a lot of loose change in a banjo case.'

'Use my hat!' said Mrs Torridge. She was wearing a wide brimmed straw hat which she removed and placed on the ground before them.

'Put a few coins into it,' said Mr Williams.

The others looked at him, puzzled.

'The buskers' version of salting the mine,' he explained. 'If people see money in the hat they'll be more likely to throw in coins of their own.'

Just then there was a squeal of delight and Ruth put down her jam jars and ran off towards a young man in blue jeans, a black, leather jacket and a strange little pork pie hat. He was carrying an accordion. With him was a considerably older man who was carrying a very large instrument case. When the two arrived, the older man opened his case and removed from it a complicated musical instrument which looked as though it were either a trumpet which had been overbuilt or a trombone which had been involved in a motor car accident and been uncomfortably compressed. Jean-Jacques gazed admiringly at Ruth who looked rather different in her blue dress. He introduced his father. 'This is my father, Monsieur Roche.'

Everyone said hello to Monsieur Roche who nodded and smiled and said hello to everyone.

Mrs Peterborough was driven to rhyme:

'A lovely young maiden called Ruth,
Fell in love with a handsome French youth.
'I may be a clot
But I love him a lot.'
And that, she declared, is the truth.'

Ruth blushed. Everyone else smiled. No one laughed. Not even a little bit. There was, however, applause for Mrs Peterborough.

Mr Hewitt, who had found a piece of cardboard blowing about the gardens, took out a pen and made a notice. He then placed it on a chair.

'This is Jean-Jacques,' said Ruth, introducing the young waiter, for he it was, to Mrs Caldicot and then to the rest of what used to be called a group of old people, but had by Ruth been described to her friend Denise as a travelling circus and which must now be properly described as a band. ‘He’s brought his accordion and his father, and his father has brought an instrument too. They both play for fun whenever they can.’

‘That’s a euphonium!’ said Mr Livingstone, who knew about these things. ‘I haven’t seen one of those for years.’ He paused for a moment and then laughed. ‘I thought the Frenchies all just played the French horn!’ Distracted by the joy of being a band leader, Mr Livingstone was at last enjoying his second trip to Paris.

Mrs Caldicot looked across at him and was delighted. Perhaps, she thought, just maybe, this enforced adventure might not turn out to be such a bad thing after all.

Ruth was delighted when Jean-Jacques kissed her, but a trifle disappointed that the kisses were all of the French-three-times-on-the-cheeks variety. Left cheek, right cheek, left cheek.

‘Now you must kiss me the same,’ said Jean-Jaques.

‘Does it matter where you start?’ asked Ruth.

‘Not really,’ said Jean-Jaques. ‘Some people start with the right side. Others start with the left side. I always kiss left cheek, right cheek, left cheek.’

So Ruth kissed him three times on the cheeks, left cheek, right cheek, left cheek, and thought she had probably gone to heaven. One of her kisses missed his cheek slightly and landed on the corner of his mouth. He smiled at her and she thought he may have even winked a little.

Her joy was only slightly diminished still further when Jean-Jacques proceeded to kiss everyone else on the cheeks – including the men. His father then kissed her three times (left cheek, right cheek, left cheek) and then he too carried on to kiss everyone else. It would, she thought, take her a while to become accustomed to this Parisian kissing business.

‘What music are we playing?’ asked Jean-Jacques, who seemed to Mrs Caldicot so speak much better English than all the people she had met who claimed to speak perfect English.

Mrs Caldicot explained that they were playing three old time British music hall songs and Mr Livingstone handed both Jean-Jacques and his father copies of the song sheets the receptionist at the hotel had photocopied for him.

Jean-Jacques and his father looked puzzled as they read through the song sheets.

‘We’ll play a run through of ‘Down at the Old Bull and Bush’ and you join in whenever you feel like it,’ said Mr Livingstone.

For the first time they played it, both Jean-Jacques and his father simply stared in quiet astonishment. But then they gradually got the hang of things and joined in, playing the tunes and singing the songs as well as they could. There was no doubt that the band sounded considerably more meaty (as Mr Livingstone put it) with the addition of an accordion and a euphonium. This was old-fashioned British Music Hall as it had never before been played.

Most of those who came within earshot were fascinated.

And within earshot was a goodly distance for a flute, a banjo, a set of bongo drums, an accordion and a euphonium, not to mention a pair of soup spoons, a pair of matching maracas and a comb and greaseproof paper, produce a noticeable sound.

And then, of course, there was the choir: Mrs Peterborough, Miss Nightingale, Mrs Torridge, Mr Twist, the Merivales and Ruth (with her home-made maracas).

Even without the sound of the instruments it would have been difficult to miss the choir. Rarely, if ever, have those three old songs been rendered with more enthusiasm. They may not have always been in tune and occasionally one or two of the words were missed but there was no shortage of gusto. If they had anything in abundance it was gusto.

A large group of small French schoolchildren, all holding onto a rope fitted with little, wooden handles, stopped and watched one whole song before their teachers urged them on to some pre-ordained destination. One of the teachers made what looked like a very small donation. A group of British old aged pensioners stood and listened through the band’s entire repertoire and joined in the singing of songs they had once known well and were now obliged to dig out of their memories. They made generous donations to Mrs Peterborough’s hat, some making donations in euros and others throwing in what they would doubtless have described as ‘proper money’.

Fascinated American tourists gave generously (one put in a ten dollar note), and courting couples from all nations contributed smiles and money.

Two women wearing tailored suits and sensible shoes stalked past as though the band were not there at all. Mr Roxdale said they looked like horses who had been ridden hard across country and now wanted nothing more than a long drink and a bucket of oat mash. They sniffed snootily as though they were walking past a septic tank with the wind blowing in their direction. They were the only ones to take no notice of the band and the music it was playing.

Altogether, dozens of tourists stopped and took photographs, short films and selfies.

‘I think we’re going to be famous!’ said Mrs Peterborough to her friend Miss Nightingale.

‘We were filmed by some Japanese tourists!’ said Ruth who had posed several times for camera wielding

Orientals. Three times during one twenty minute period, gentlemen of slightly advanced years had asked for her name, which she had given without hesitation. She wondered if she might perhaps end up with an online fan club. That would certainly be something to tell Denise and everyone else back home.

With Mrs Torridge's straw hat in place, it was clear to passers-by that Mrs Caldicot and her chums were busking. And as they continued to play their admittedly limited repertoire, the band received a steady stream of contributions. As the moving crowd of tourists, dog walkers and others wandering through the park, tossed their coins into Mrs Torridge's straw hat, it was soon clear that before long they would have raised enough money to pay for a meal each.

'My hat has never seen so much money!' said Mrs Torridge proudly.

'I don't think I've ever seen so much money!' said Mr Livingstone who, like most of the band, did not think he had ever felt happier in his life.

The money they had earned through their music was, in some strange way, not like any other money they had ever earned. In some indefinable way, this money was more 'real' than money received in a wage packet or as interest on an investment. And it was money they had earned through necessity. They had dragged themselves out of a situation in which many would have despaired. And they had done it together, as a small community. Every single one of them had contributed in their own way.

'We'll have to keep an eye on that hat,' said Mr Hewitt. 'We don't want it getting ideas and running off with all the loot!'

'Oh my hat would never run off,' said Mrs Torridge firmly. 'It's a very well brought up piece of millinery.'

'Should we be sharing the money with your young waiter and his father?' Mrs Caldicot asked Ruth.

'Oh no,' said Ruth. 'I told him what had happened and they don't want any of the money. They're happy to help out. They enjoy playing.'

'When did you tell them what had happened?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'When I texted,' said Ruth.

'You did all that in a text?' said Mrs Caldicot, astonished.

'Oh yes,' said Ruth.

'Golly,' said Mrs Caldicot, who was quietly astonished. She had a mobile telephone and had, quite recently, begun to master the art of sending text messages. But it still took her a quarter of an hour to send something to Jenkins. And there were invariably some complications in the creation of the message. So, for example, the message 'What would you like for dinner?' would usually come out as something more like 'Ygat xi8ld 9nu jikd eoq dhmnds'. Capital letters and punctuation were both a foreign country to her.

The band played its entire repertoire several times, and twice Mrs Caldicot had to empty Mrs Torridge's straw hat because it was becoming overfull with money. There were coins of all denominations and the more enthusiastic music lovers had put euro notes into the hat.

Chapter Seventeen

Eventually, Jean-Jacques announced that he and his father, both waiters who worked only in the evenings, had to leave to go to work.

'Are we doing this again tomorrow?' asked Jean-Jacques after he and his father had completed a round of kissing (left cheek, right cheek, left cheek and then left cheek, right cheek, left cheek) to mark their departure.

If meeting and leaving always take this long then I'm surprised anything ever gets done in France, thought Mrs Caldicot. It took the best part of ten minutes for Jean-Jacques and his father to kiss everyone and for the band members to reciprocate. 'We certainly are,' she said. 'We have enough money for dinner tonight, but if we don't play again then we won't have any money for meals tomorrow.'

'May we join you when you play again?' asked Jean-Jacques.

'We'd all be delighted!' said Mrs Caldicot. 'And I think it is fair to say that Ruth would be very delighted.'

Ruth, who was standing next to Mrs Caldicot, blushed in a very dainty, girlish sort of way and gave Mrs Caldicot a gentle nudge as though pretending to tell her off.

'Are you sure you won't take any of this money?' asked Mrs Caldicot, pointing to the cash which was now safely stashed in her handbag.

'Oh no, no!' said Jean-Jacques. 'My father and I love to play music. And you need the money to replace what was taken from you by bad people.' He paused. 'May I make a suggestion?'

'Of course!'

'You would perhaps do better for the money if you play in the Places des Vosges. The acoustics are very good and people go there deliberately to listen to the music played by buskers. There are always bands and choirs and soloists there.'

'The Place des Vosges! That's the place Mr Williams recommended!' remembered Mrs Caldicot. 'Is it far?'

'No, it's not too far. We can come to your hotel and then show you how to get there. We can, if you like walk from the hotel to save money on the Metro fares. It's a pleasant walk through the Marais – the old quarter of Paris.'

Mrs Caldicot said that this was extremely kind of them.

'We should be at the Place des Vosges by 11.00 a.m.,' said Jean-Jacques. 'That should enable us to select a good spot. We can play in the cloisters. The sound is very good there and if it rains neither we nor the people listening won't get in the slightest bit wet.'

Mrs Caldicot said she thought this sounded marvellous and they arranged to see one another at 10.00 a.m. sharp the following morning. 'Oh, one thing occurred to me,' she said, as an afterthought, 'do we need a licence of any kind to play music in Paris?'

Jean-Jacques grinned and shrugged his shoulders. 'Technically, you do,' he said. 'But…' He shrugged again.

'Oh dear. I don't like that 'but'? What happens if the police catch us?'

'Usually, you run!' said Jean-Jacques. He looked around and his eyes settled first on Mrs Torridge with her walking frame and then on Mr Livingstone who was rubbing his knee and finally over the rest of the band. None of them looked like people you'd put your money on if it came to a chase. He frowned and shrugged again. 'But perhaps not so much of the running…'

'Will the police put us in jail if they catch us?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'No, no,' said Jean-Jacques. 'They would not dare!' His father, who had been listening, shrugged in that way the French do when faced with something patently absurd and then slowly headed off with his euphonium, now packed away safely in its case. 'Anyway,' said Jean-Jacques, 'it is easy for you – you give your hotel address and then you go back to England. What can they do?'

Slightly reassured, but nevertheless nervous at the prospect of having to make a run for it across the Channel, Mrs Caldicot thanked him again. She wondered what Jenkins would say if she arrived back home with a busload of gendarmes in hot pursuit.

And then Jean-Jacques, about to follow his father, turned back and spoke to Ruth. 'May I kiss you?' he asked with surprisingly old-fashioned politeness.

'Yes, of course!' said a rather surprised Ruth, expecting another trio of French on-the-cheek kisses.

But it was not a kiss on the cheek.

And a couple of minutes later, when she emerged from the embrace breathless and panting slightly, her hair a little dishevelled, Ruth was blushing bright red.

With a final wave, Jean-Jacques, clutching his heavy accordion, hurried away to catch up his father.

Mrs Peterborough delayed not a moment.

‘Our Ruth had two jars filled with peas
With these she made music with ease.
A handsome young waiter
Decided to date her
And gave her a kiss and a squeeze.’

Ruth was still waving goodbye with one hand when with the other she reached into her bag and pulled out her mobile phone.

Now she really did have something exciting to tell Denise.

As they headed back towards their hotel, Mrs Caldicot remembered the notice that Mr Hewitt had made with a piece of abandoned cardboard. The notice was still on the chair where it had been placed. She picked it up to read, and this is what it said: ‘Newly formed Band. Please Give Generously to Pay for Music Lessons.’

Mrs Caldicot, laughing, picked up the sign and popped it into a waste bin.

They had, she thought, done quite well without any music lessons.

Chapter Eighteen

After taking their instruments back to their hotel, the band (for this is how they now saw themselves) had dinner at a pleasant, traditional café a few hundred yards away. To the especial delight of Mrs Torridge and Mr Livingstone, it involved nothing more than a gentle shuffle down the road and along a narrow, slightly out of the way side street.

It was a café which Jean-Jacques and his father had recommended.

It was not an establishment where they worked but it was a place where they sometimes ate.

'I can't think of a better recommendation than that!' said Mrs Merivale.

It was not a café which catered for tourists and, indeed, there was no tourist menu advertised outside. The food, however, was excellent and very reasonably priced.

At the conclusion of the meal, Mr Twist, who was still in charge of their finances paid the bill with several handfuls of coins – the money which they had earned and which had been thrown into Mrs Bartholomew's hat.

(In view of recent events, Mr Twist had asked to be excused from all fiscal responsibilities but it was unanimously decided that he was the best person for the job and Mrs Caldicot in particular had insisted that he continue in the role as Band Accountant. She had, when they returned to the hotel, handed over to him all the day's takings. There was far too much cash to fit into his money belt and so he had stuffed the notes into his wallet and the coins into every available pocket.)

The waiter huffed and puffed a good deal as he counted the money but his demeanour improved when he discovered that he had been given a more than acceptable gratuity.

'I do appreciate your trust in allowing me to continue to look after our finances,' Mr Twist said to Mrs Caldicot as they all strolled back to their hotel.

'You've always done a wonderful job for us,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I have never been any good at accounts and you've managed the money back at the house very well. I really don't know what any of us would have done without you. The day when you first came to stay with us was a Red Letter day as far as I am concerned.'

'But…' began Mr Twist. He was, at times, a man given to emotion and he could feel tears in his eyes. There had been many bad times in his life and now he felt that he was enjoying the best of times. He swallowed. 'I still feel so bad that I lost all our money. It was a stupid and indefensibly reckless thing to do.'

'It was stupid and it was reckless,' agreed Mrs Caldicot who saw no point in denying these obvious truths. 'But your intentions were good. And I think we can safely say that naivety led you astray.' She looked at him and smiled. 'We will leave it at that. And I don't think we need mention it ever again.'

'Thank you,' said a contrite and grateful Mr Twist.

'And there is one thing you did for which we will, I think, always be grateful,' said Mrs Caldicot.

Puzzled, Mr Twist looked at her. He did not think he was a stupid man (although, of course, he would never deny that he was liable to moments of idiocy, as illustrated by his recent debacle) but he really didn't understand what she was talking about.

'Have you forgotten?' asked Mrs Caldicot, with a big smile.

'Forgotten what?'

'It was your idea that we should start a band and go busking to raise money,' said Mrs Caldicot.

Mr Twist thought and remembered that indeed he had been the one to suggest that they might try earning some money by playing music. He remembered seeing the young girl violinist with all the money in her violin case.

'Yes, I suppose it was,' he agreed. 'But we only had to do that because…'

Mrs Caldicot held up a hand to stop him. 'Your idea has brought us all together, given everyone a sense of purpose and added a great deal of unexpected joy to our holiday,' she said.

Mr Twist hesitated for a moment. 'Do you really think so?'

'I'm sure of it,' said Mrs Caldicot with a big smile. 'I really don't think I've ever seen everyone quite so happy. I rather suspect that Mr Livingstone, in particular, is very pleased that our money was lost. And I know that everyone is excited about tomorrow – wondering how we'll get on playing music in the Place des Voges; wondering how much money we'll earn and so on.' She laughed. 'I certainly didn't think I'd ever see the day when I'd be strumming a banjo in a public park in the middle of Paris!'

'So,' said Mr Twist hesitantly, 'do you think the good idea perhaps cancels out at least some of my silliness in losing our money in the park?'

'I think it does,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'In fact, I'm sure it does.'

'Nothing like that will ever happen again,' promised Mr Twist.

'Oh I know that,' said Mrs Caldicot, who did.

And Mr Twist felt happier and more at peace than he had felt for some time.

When they arrived back at the doorstep of their hotel, the doorman, Raphael was still standing there.

‘He doesn’t do much but he does it for long hours,’ muttered Mr Hewitt to Mr Roxdale.

‘What ho, old beans!’ Raphael cried, pleased as Punch with his new command of idiomatic English.

‘What ho, Raphael!’ replied everyone, almost as a chorus.

Mr Hewitt and Mr Roxdale, who wanted to speak to Raphael, hung behind for a moment after the rest had gone into the hotel.

‘You’re not still teaching him your brand of English are you?’ Mrs Caldicot asked them when they finally sauntered in.

‘Just a few words to help him communicate more effectively with tourists,’ said Mr Hewitt.

‘Oh dear,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘I don’t think I want to know what you’ve been teaching him.’

‘All good fun!’ said Mr Roxdale.

‘All part of the entente cordiale!’ said Mr Hewitt.

And then, quite exhausted by the excitement of what had been a long day, they all went up to bed.

And their dreams were coloured and enlivened by indelible memories of their impromptu concert in the Tuileries Gardens

Chapter Nineteen

At five minutes to ten the following morning, Paris's most newly formed band was standing in the lobby of its hotel. There had been no trashing of hotel rooms and no television sets had been thrown out of bedroom windows. Drug use had been confined to the taking of modest quantities of medicinal drugs prescribed, variously, for conditions such as high blood pressure, heart problems and arthritis. There had been no illegal drug use and although Mr Hewitt and Mr Roxdale had enjoyed medicinal tots of brandy (obtained from the mini bar in their rooms) there had been very little alcohol consumption.

The band members were ready and waiting, and although the massed tourist industry of Paris might well have been disappointed if they had been aware of this, they were far, far more excited than if they had been about to visit the Louvre, ascend the Eiffel Tower or wander up and down the Champs-Élysées.

Mr Livingstone's banjo was in its case because it was generally thought that it would, with all due respect to Mrs Bartholomew's hat, be a more suitable receptacle into which their audience could toss their donations. Mr Twist had some loose change left over from the day before and he was prepared to use this to 'seed' the banjo case when they started playing.

Ruth, who was wearing her blue dress again, had somehow managed to find some blue paper, and she had stuck this to the outside of her jam jar rhythm shakers so that they looked less like jam jars and considerably more like musical instruments.

Mr Hewitt had his spoons in his jacket pocket and Mr Roxdale had his comb and paper tucked into the breast pocket of his jacket, and since they were hardly laden down with the weight of their instruments, they had each offered to carry one of Mrs Roberts's borrowed bongo drums, for which she was duly grateful.

Mrs Peterborough, Miss Nightingale and Mrs Torridge were constantly clearing their throats and reciting the words of the three songs they had learned. Miss Nightingale was still having some trouble with one or two of the lines of 'I Do Like to Be Beside the Seaside'. The bit which was proving a challenge was the couplet at the end of the third verse which went: 'I do like to stroll along the Prom, Prom, Prom! Where the brass bands play, 'Tiddely-om-pom-pom!'

The singers all had their song sheets with them but said they very much hoped to be able to manage without them.

Mrs Torridge had brought along her hat and the plastic carrier bag in which Mr Torridge was now accustomed to travel. She had announced that her hat was still available to serve as a coin repository if there proved to be any problem with Mr Livingstone's banjo case. When she was excited, and raring to go, Mrs Torridge trembled a little and her walking frame made a sort of drumming sound on whatever ground lay beneath it. The result, not entirely unpleasant, was rather akin to the sound a powerful petrol engine motor car makes when it is idling. The casual observer can tell that there is power there; virtually dormant for the moment but waiting to be unleashed. Those who knew Mrs Torridge well were all aware, when they heard the sound of her walking frame a-throbbing, that, at the boom of the starting pistol, she would be off and on her way.

Miss Nightingale had brought along part of her collection of woollen bobble hats: one in red, one in blue, one in green and one in white. She said that she, Mrs Peterborough and Mrs Torridge were going to wear their bobble hats when they sang. They reported to Mrs Caldicot, however, that there was what could only be described as a logistical problem. Miss Nightingale had brought four bobble hats with her and there were only three suitable heads upon which to place the hats since neither Mrs Merivale nor Ruth were fond of woolly hats.

Mrs Torridge had expressed a preference for the red hat and Mrs Peterborough said she thought she fancied the white one. That left Miss Nightingale with a choice and Miss Nightingale was not good with making choices; not when they were important choices.

'Which do you think I should wear?' she asked Mrs Caldicot, to whom she was accustomed to turn when faced with any dilemma of some magnitude. 'Which would be smarter? Which would be more appropriate?'

Mrs Caldicot knew, from long experience, that Miss Nightingale needed someone she trusted to make the decision for her and so she took the time to consider the dilemma.

'I think,' she said, after some thought,' 'I think you should definitely wear the red one. For one thing the red suits your complexion and for another thing if the three of you are wearing red, white and blue hats the combination will have a distinctly patriotic look. They will be British colours, of course, but the French will also approve because their flag had the same three colours and so any French people who see your hats will probably assume you are all celebrating the French tricolour. The green hat can be held in reserve, lest some calamity befall one of the other hats.'

Miss Nightingale was delighted by this verdict.

As they awaited the arrival of Jean-Jacques and his father, there was an almost palpable air of excitement in the hotel lobby.

'Odds bodkins!' said Raphael, the doorman when Mrs Caldicot finally stepped foot outside the hotel, to see if Jean-Jacques and his father were anywhere in sight. 'May I crave a boon?'

Mrs Caldicot, who had been closely followed by the rest of the band, looked at Raphael and then glanced at Mr Hewitt and Mr Roxdale who were, like a couple of schoolboys, struggling to suppress their giggles.

'You may crave a boon,' said Mrs Caldicot graciously.

'Thank you, ma'am,' said Raphael. 'Can I fix you people up a taxi? A minibus, perhaps? The hotel coach is available if you need it. Very reasonable prices.'

'We're walking, thank you,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Shanks's pony,' said Mr Roxdale.

'Or mare,' said Mr Hewitt. 'I've heard it described as Shanks's mare.'

'Who was Shanks?' asked Mr Livingstone. 'I've always wondered about that.'

'Some people say there was no Mr Shank,' said Mr Williams. 'When I was nothing but a lad, my mother told me she thought the phrase referred to the fact that the lower leg is sometimes referred to as the shank. I suspect I was a curious boy; always asking daft questions. I must have been a bit of a nightmare.'

Raphael, who was trying to follow this conversation, now looked thoroughly confused.

'Oh,' said a disappointed Mr Livingstone. 'That's a bit disappointing.'

'I agree,' said Mr Williams. 'But there may be another explanation. My father told me that Mr Shank was an 18th century vicar who couldn't afford a pony and had to walk everywhere round his village. So when he wanted to visit his parishioners or pop down to the local inn for a glass of mead he used what the villagers called Shank's pony. I always preferred that explanation though I never knew whether my Dad made it up or not. He used to do that to try to confuse me. It used to get me into terrible trouble at school. I remember being put into detention for insisting that Lawrence of Arabia wrote *Lady Chatterly's Lover*.'

'What the devil was mead?' asked Mr Roxdale. 'I've always wondered about that.'

'Some sort of alcoholic drink made with honey,' said Mr Williams who sometimes felt slightly embarrassed at the amount of entirely useless information he had accumulated over the years.

'Did your Dad tell you that?' asked Mr Roxdale.

'No, I think it's pretty reliable information,' said Mr Williams. 'My mother told me that. She didn't usually make things up.'

'Here come our accordion and euphonium players!' said Mr Merivale. He pointed down the street where it could be seen that Jean-Jacques and Monsieur Roche, his father, were approaching. Monsieur Roche, who was dressed ready for work, was wearing a pair of black trousers, a white shirt and a black waistcoat. He was carrying his jacket and his euphonium case. Jean-Jacques was wearing a pair of pale blue chinos and a blue button down shirt. He was wearing his accordion and did not have its case. He afterwards explained to Ruth that the case was nearly as heavy as the accordion.

Ruth, whose heart had been beating so loudly that she felt sure everyone around must have been able to hear it, hesitated for a moment but then succumbed and ran forward to meet the young accordionist. Clearly pleased to see Ruth, he kissed her, just once and not on the cheeks, and she would have doubtless blushed an even brighter shade of red had it been possible.

'I like that dress very much,' Jean-Jacques said to Ruth.

'It's the only decent dress I brought with me,' said Ruth, apologetically. 'The only other things I've got are jumpers and trousers and an anorak and they don't seem the right things to wear; not for performing in public.'

'I love the dress,' said Jean-Jacques. 'My father apologises but he has to work this afternoon. He will play with us for an hour or so and then leave. This is why he is wearing his clothes for waiting.'

'It's very kind of him to come at all,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'No, no, it is a thrill for us to play with you. My father loves playing and does so whenever he can. And I too love playing music.'

'Right!' said Mrs Caldicot, adopting again her role as wagon master. 'Shall we hit the road?'

And so, after murmurings of enthusiasm and a few notes of approval from Mr Livingstones's flute, they set off towards the Places des Vosges.

'Tally ho!' cried Raphael as they left. 'The games afeet, eh?'

'The games afoot!' chorused everyone in reply.

'Have you been singing for long?' Jean-Jacques asked Ruth. They were, of course, walking together.

Ruth laughed. 'Only since yesterday. And you? How long have you been playing the accordion?'

'Since I was a little boy. I was given a small instrument for Christmas when I was six. I wanted a drum set but my parents decided an accordion was more sensible since we lived in a small apartment with very thin walls. When I was 12, my uncle died and he left me this instrument. I could hardly lift it but I was very proud to have it and I have been playing it ever since. It is my most treasured possession.'

It took them an hour to walk from their hotel to the Places des Vosges.

'This is the best way to see the city,' Jean-Jacques said to Ruth. 'The buses and the coaches are too fast. When you walk you can look into the shops, and see the buildings and get the real feeling of the streets. Many people who visit Paris walk very little. It is a shame.'

They walked along the Rue Saint Honore, home of some of the most expensive boutiques in the world; shops where rich tourists can spend a small fortune on a pair of gloves and a large fortune on a handbag. Both Mrs Peterborough and Mrs Torridge gasped when they saw the prices.

They walked past small, private art galleries selling works of art by modern painters. Mrs Torridge said the stuff which was hanging on their walls, or on display in their windows, looked no better than the sort of pictures, done with brightly coloured crayons, which loving mums stick on their refrigerators. Mr Livingstone said he thought it was the artists, not the pictures, who ought to be hanging somewhere.

The galleries were mostly empty of buyers. No one seemed to be looking at anything. Each gallery contained but a single occupant: a willowy, snooty looking woman of a certain age and the willowy, snooty looking women appeared to spend their time making phone calls or looking at their emails. How, wondered Mrs Caldicot, did the gallery owners make a living? She asked Mr Williams who explained that the galleries sold things to professional dealers who put what they bought into storage, in the hope of eventually making a profit when they resold, or rented it out to banks and corporations who displayed what they had rented in their lobbies and boardrooms. In the end, he said, most of the saleable stuff ended up in auction rooms in New York where it was bought by professional dealers who put what they bought into storage, in the hope of eventually making a profit when they resold, or temporarily rented it out to banks and corporations who displayed what they had rented in their lobbies and boardrooms.

Mrs Caldicot said none of this made a lot of sense. Mr Williams said it didn't have to make sense as long as it made money.

They strolled past the entrance to the magnificent Palais Royal, a former royal palace which was, back in the 18th century the centre of Parisian social life, full of famous cafes; its covered walkways a favourite showground for aristocrats and courtesans. They took a moment to peer in through the gates. The lime trees were already in leaf and nannies were taking babies and small children for their morning constitutionals. A man in a beige raincoat was feeding small pieces of bread to the sparrows; the chattering birds were gathered on his arms and head. Half a dozen tourists were eating sandwiches, bought from a nearby shop. Loving couples were strolling arm in arm; hoping for a little early spring sunshine. Everyone was hoping for a little early spring sunshine.

They hurried past the extraordinary Pompidou Cultural Centre, an infamously inside out building with its pipes and ducts on display instead of being hidden away beneath the structure's fabric. Sadly, the once famous building now appeared rather seedy and grubby looking. It had apparently become a magnet for the homeless, the dispossessed and the canine. They hurried past the Pompidou and then wandered at a more leisurely pace through the Marais, an area full of delicatessen shops and one of the oldest parts of Paris.

(It should, perhaps, be admitted that 'hurried' is a comparative term. None of the party, other than Jean-Jacques and his father, was of an athletic nature and it was never likely that any speed records were likely to be broken. Mrs Torridge, relying on her walking frame, and Mr Livingstone, with a right knee and a left hip that were long past their best, both had a top speed which was not far removed from 'very slow'.)

They stopped for a moment to admire the packed window of a delicatessen which had several types of snail for sale.

Mrs Torridge, Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough screwed up their noses at the sight. Mrs Peterborough found a limerick irresistible.

There was a young lady from Wales
Who liked chocolates filled up with snails
She said: 'They taste funny'
But cost not much money
'Cus I buy the damned things in the sales'.

The streets were full of young people and Mr Roxdale couldn't help noticing that a good number of them were young girls in their 20s.

'I wish I were younger,' he said to Mr Hewitt, and held his chest as though he were having a heart attack. He grinned.

'I remember reading about a bloke called Clemenceau,' said Mr Hewitt. 'He was the French Prime Minister during the First World War. When he was 80-years-old, he was walking down the Champs-Élysées with a friend when a pretty girl walked past. Clemenceau stopped and admired the young girl. ‘Oh to be 70 again,’ he said as she strolled past.’

Mr Roxdale laughed.

Jean-Jacques explained to Ruth and to the others which buildings were famous because of the people who had lived in them. He pointed out landmarks they would have missed. He showed them places where important things had happened. He drew their attention to long-established shops and important statues and told them the history of the streets along which they were walking.

On their way through the streets of Paris, Mrs Roberts popped into several shops trying to buy postage stamps to put on her postcards. Her search was, however, always in vain. The shops she visited all sold postcards but none of them sold the stamps to stick on them.

‘Are you looking for anything in particular?’ Monsieur Roche asked her after her third disappointment.

‘Just some stamps for my postcards,’ explained Mrs Roberts, holding up her small sheaf of postcards to illustrate her point.

‘Ah, you will need a main Post Office,’ said Monsieur Roche. ‘They will sell stamps.’

‘Do you know where I can find a Post Office?’ she asked him.

Monsieur Roche thought for a while and then shook his head sadly. ‘No. I don’t think there is one around here, I’m afraid. There is a Post Office in the Rue Etienne Marcel and there is one in the Rue La Boetie – they are the nearest.’

‘Are they anywhere near where we are going?’

Monsieur Roche shook his head. ‘I am afraid not.’ He thought again. ‘There is one in the Rues des Francs Bourgeois but sadly we have passed that one. And there is one in the Rue Castex but I think it is closed now for something or other.’ He shrugged, using his shoulders, arms and hands. ‘I am so sorry. Do you have something important to post?’

‘Oh no, just some postcards,’ said Mrs Roberts, with a smile. ‘I just need some stamps for my postcards. But there’s no hurry. They can wait.’

Chapter Twenty

As they threaded their way along a narrow and busy street called Rue des Francs Bourgeois, Mrs Caldicot was approached by an elegantly dressed woman and a tall, distinguished looking man. They both appeared to be in their fifties and looked as though they had just stepped out from the pages of Vogue magazine. She was wearing a simple, white, polka dotted dress (with the dots in blue) and blue shoes which looked as though they had spent their short lives walking on carpet rather than hard pavements. He wore a lime green, linen jacket, sharply creased white linen trousers, two-tone shoes (in brown and white) and an immaculate Panama hat.

She was carrying a handbag of a blue that matched her shoes and dress. The bag looked just about big enough to carry a single lipstick and half a packet of paper hankies. If you'd tried to cram a mobile phone in as well, the bag probably wouldn't have closed properly.

He was carrying an expensive looking movie camera.

Mrs Caldicot, who had been walking for nearly an hour felt downright grubby in comparison. She was wearing her favourite red dress but it had not travelled well and it was now criss-crossed with creases. ('Don't worry about it,' said Ruth, when Mrs Caldicot had shared her fear that she looked as though she had slept in the dress for a week, 'the creased look is very fashionable at the moment. People are buying clothes that have loads of creases put into them before they're sold.' Mrs Caldicot, who had never had much interest in fashion, had not gained much comfort from this well-meant reassurance.)

'Sorry to bother you, ma'am,' said the tall man, touching his hat with the forefinger of his right hand, 'but do you speak English?' He spoke in an accent which did not disguise the fact that he was an American.

'It's the only language I do speak,' said Mrs Caldicot, with a smile.

'That's marvellous,' said the man, with a sigh of relief. 'My wife and I are looking for the Place des Vosges. You don't happen to know where it is, do you?'

'Follow us!' said Mrs Caldicot. 'That's where we're going.'

The smartly dressed American couple walked alongside Mrs Caldicot. The pavement was narrow and people all around were walking along the road. Fortunately, there was very little traffic and what there was moved along at little more than a brisk walking pace.

'I'm Calvin and this is my wife Josephine,' said the man. 'We're on a tour of Europe.'

'This is our third week over here,' said Josephine. She had a strong Southern accent which Mrs Caldicot found enormously charming. 'We've been to England, Wales and Scotland and now we're in France for the week. You must excuse me, I do look a sight I'm sure. The airline lost several of our bags and we're having to make do with what we have.'

'Are you folk all travelling together?' asked Calvin. He turned and looked back at the rather long line of elderly Britons who were wandering along in Mrs Caldicot's wake.

'Yes we are,' said Mrs Caldicot. She looked around. Miss Nightingale waved. Mrs Caldicot waved back. 'I'd introduce you to everyone but it'll take rather a long time.'

'Are you some sort of band?' asked Calvin. 'I notice that you and one or two of your colleagues are carrying musical instruments.

'Well we are a sort of band,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. 'We're hoping to play in the Place des Vosges – to earn some money!' She held up the banjo case she was carrying. 'This is a banjo,' she said. 'I borrowed it from Mr Livingstone. He plays the flute.'

'You're on a European Tour?'

Mrs Caldicot laughed. 'Sort of! Actually, I suppose you could describe it as our inaugural world tour!'

'Where are you performing? Is there a hall in the Place des Vosges?'

'Oh no, we're performing in the street. We're hoping to find a nice, quiet piece of pavement where we can play.'

'Oh my,' said Josephine. 'Is that allowed? Playing in the street?'

'To be honest I'm not entirely sure,' admitted Mrs Caldicot. 'But if we are going to eat today we don't have a lot of choice!'

'How long have you been playing the banjo?' asked Calvin.

'Just since yesterday. I don't really play it. I just sort of strum it and hope it doesn't sound too bad.

'Has your band been together a long time?' asked Calvin, who seemed slightly bewildered by Mrs Caldicot's reply, but who was far too well-mannered to say anything.

'Since yesterday afternoon,' replied Mrs Caldicot.

It was clear that neither Calvin nor Josephine quite knew what to say to this.

‘What sort of music do you play?’ asked Calvin after a long silence.

‘British Music Hall songs,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘We only know three songs so we do them in rotation. Our repertoire consists of ‘Down at the Old Bull and Bush’, ‘I Do Like to Be Beside the Seaside’ and ‘Boiled Beef and Carrots’. I’m afraid that we don’t do requests and if people don’t like those three songs then we can’t do much about it.’

‘I don’t think I know any of those songs,’ said Josephine. She looked at her husband who shook his head.

‘They’re very old and very old-fashioned British music hall songs,’ explained Mrs Caldicot. ‘But we’re all old-fashioned and British and most of us are very old so they seemed appropriate.’

‘So, if you aren’t experienced musicians, do you mind my asking how you came to form a band?’ asked Josephine.

Mrs Caldicot did her best to explain. It took some time.

‘Oh that’s awful,’ said Josephine.

‘But your response to your vicissitudes is rather wonderful,’ said Calvin. ‘Is that what they call the British bulldog spirit?’

‘I rather suppose it is,’ agreed Mrs Caldicot.

‘Do you mind if I film you when you start playing?’ asked Calvin. He lifted up the camera he was carrying.

‘Not at all!’ agreed Mrs Caldicot. ‘Some people filmed us yesterday but they only had mobile phones. Your camera looks very professional.’

‘We like to keep a record of our travels,’ explained Calvin. ‘Neither of us has been to Europe before.’ He took some film of Mrs Caldicot and then of the rest of the band as they walked along the street. Three French boys on bicycles stopped and stared when they saw Calvin’s camera. They pedalled slowly and meandered along just behind Mrs Caldicot. Two girls of about the same age as the French boys came out of a side street, paused for a second or two, grinned at each other and then followed the boys. A mackerel tabby cat with a piece chewed out of one ear jumped down from a window sill and joined the procession.

Chapter Twenty One

Eventually, almost exactly at eleven o'clock in the morning, they arrived at the magnificent and historic Place des Vosges: the oldest square in Paris.

Monsieur Roche explained to them all that the Place des Vosges was, back in the 17th and 18th centuries, the place for the fashionable to have their homes. The posh people of Paris might have taken their pleasures in the Palais Royale but they kept their children and their servants in the Place des Vosges.

'The Place des Vosges is an exact square,' explained the knowledgeable Monsieur Roche who pointed out that Victor Hugo, author of *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* and *Les Miserables*, lived in No 6 Place des Vosges, which had been turned into a museum in his honour. He also told them that in the 17th century, Cardinal Richelieu also lived in the Place des Vosges.

Richelieu, claimed Monsieur Roche, was unfairly portrayed as the Chief Baddy in Alexandre Dumas's novel *The Three Musketeers* (and in all the films based on the book). The waiter said he felt that Dumas had treated Richelieu badly, and that he had perhaps done this simply because he needed an enemy against whom Athos, Porthos, Aramis and D'Artagnan could pit their wits and their swords. Monsieur Roche said that it was rather sad that most French people had forgotten that Richelieu established the first orderly government in France, founded the Academie Francaise and rebuilt the Sorbonne University.

They came into the Place des Vosges rather suddenly and quite unexpectedly.

One minute they were walking along a fairly ordinary, narrow street ('Is it much further?' asked Mr Roxdale who quietly confessed to Mr Hewitt that, as Mrs Torridge had once said, he didn't think his legs had got much more 'walk' in them) and the next moment, to their astonishment, they were standing in the most wonderful square in Paris. William Wordsworth Esquire, poet and spring flower aficionado, dawdling round a corner and finding himself unexpectedly faced with a host of golden daffodils, all making pretty, little curtseys in a pleasant spring breeze, could not have been more delighted.

Around the perimeter stood grand houses; all joined to dominate the small garden or park in the middle of the square. Beautiful trees were just coming into leaf and already there were people sitting on the benches. Every park and garden in Paris is liberally supplied with benches or chairs or both and the park in the Place des Vosges was no exception.

Some of those on the benches were reading a newspaper, a magazine or a book; some were chatting; some were eating sandwiches; some were simply enjoying the peace and the spring sunshine in a Parisian oasis. There was a children's play area hidden behind some bushes in the small park and the members of the band (for they now definitely thought of themselves as a band) could hear, but not see, children laughing and squealing with delight.

The square and the park were full of linden trees, which the British usually refer to as lime trees, and as a result, the whole area was full of the distinctive aroma associated with the genus tilia. Mr Hewitt, who had an observant eye and an encyclopaedic knowledge about things botanical, remarked to Mr Roxdale that the streets and parks of Paris seemed to be dominated by just three types of tree: lime trees, horse chestnut trees and plane trees.

'We must first find a place to play,' said Monsieur Roche. 'We must hurry. This is a favourite square with musicians.'

He led the way into the cloisters which ran around the square, tucked in the shade underneath the grand houses. The others in the party, some of them now rather weary after what had been a long journey, tottered after him. Mrs Torridge, in particular, had struggled to keep up and her knees were giving her a lot of trouble. She had to pause and lean on her walking frame every dozen yards or so. Mrs Caldicot had several times offered to carry the bag containing Mr Torridge but Mrs Torridge had declined gracefully and with thanks and insisted that she was perfectly capable of carrying her husband while using her walking frame. Once or twice Mrs Peterborough joined her in leaning on the frame though naturally this meant that they had to move in step. Despite the difficulty she was having, Mrs Torridge had steadfastly refused to give in. When Mrs Caldicot had suggested that she and Mr Livingstone, who also suffered with terrible arthritis, should take a taxi, Mrs Torridge had insisted that she would 'get where they were going under her own steam, thank you very much for asking'. Mr Livingstone had simply growled something under his breath and had seemed offended at the suggestion that he might need to travel in a motor vehicle, particularly since the chances were high that the vehicle would be driven by a French person.

As Mrs Caldicot and the rest of the band followed Monsieur Roche around the square, Calvin continued to film them. He, of course, was followed by his wife. And the three boys and two girls were still following him. As was the cat whose curiosity was now thoroughly aroused and who seemed convinced that if he kept going, something good would come out of it. Six Chinese tourists, three men and three women, saw what was by now a considerable crowd and joined the parade.

The Chinese men were all wearing identical grey suits which were made out of something shiny and synthetic which looked a little like silk but probably wasn't since there wasn't an unwanted crease anywhere in sight. The Chinese women were all wearing smart, red dresses which appeared to be made out of the same material. All six had camera phones seemingly fixed to their eyes and they filmed Calvin and everything that Calvin filmed.

In one corner of the square, a jazz band was playing. There were three saxophonists, a keyboard player, playing a small, portable keyboard, a violinist and two guitar players. In another corner there were two folk singers, both with guitars. They seemed to be singing their own compositions. And in a third corner two women with large, stringed instruments were comfortably settled playing something which Mr Williams said was by Bach.

Each group of performers had their own small audience. Others, walking past, would stop for a few moments to listen.

The odd thing was that due to the unique acoustics of the cloisters, and their extent, the quality of the sound each group of performers made was perfect and as you stood listening to one set of performers you could not hear the others. It wasn't difficult to see why musicians, and those wanting to listen to good music in the open air, flocked to the Place des Vosges.

'I've never known how to tell the difference,' whispered Mrs Caldicot to Mr Livingstone, who was glad they had slowed down a bit since his right knee had been playing up a good deal. 'Are those cellos or double bases?'

'Those are cellos,' said Mr Livingstone, whispering his reply. 'The double bass is slightly bigger than the cello. Cello players always sit down with their instrument between their legs. Musicians playing a bass can play it sitting down but they usually prefer to stand. It's a big instrument, a bit hefty to carry around.'

'Thank you,' whispered Mrs Caldicot who still didn't think she'd be able to tell the difference but wasn't going to worry about it.

Monsieur Roche found that there was one corner of the square unoccupied and Mrs Caldicot and the band immediately established their occupancy of the space. Their small area was soon alive with the sound of players tuning up their instruments and singers doing what singers do to exercise their vocal chords. Mrs Roberts gave her bongo drums some healthy exercise, Jean-Jacques loosened up his accordion and Mrs Caldicot strummed her banjo rather hesitantly. It took her a moment or two to get into the rhythm of the thing.

'Before we start, I think everyone should have a little something to eat,' said Mrs Merivale. She opened a large carrier bag and displayed a huge pile of croissants, each one carefully wrapped in a paper napkin. 'Just to keep us all going until lunchtime.'

'Where on earth did you get all those?' asked Mrs Caldicot with a beaming smile.

'From the breakfast buffet,' replied Mrs Merivale. 'Mr Merivale and I collected them and wrapped them.' She paused. 'Well, after all, when we're in England Mr Merivale and I are usually in charge of comestibles,' she explained.

It was generally agreed that Mr and Mrs Merivale were heroes. Mrs Peterborough said that they should definitely be recognised in the next New Year's honours list and Miss Nightingale seconded the suggestion.

'Where's Mr Hewitt?' asked Mrs Caldicot, suddenly noticing that the band's spoons player was missing. She took a croissant from Mrs Merivale's huge bag, thanked her and took a bite. A few flakes of pastry fluttered down to the pavement and a sparrow which just happened to be passing swooped down and collected its lunch.

'He's over in the park in the middle of the square,' said Mr Twist, taking a large bite from his croissant. A second sparrow hopped over, took a large crumb and flew off to enjoy it in privacy. 'He and Mr Roxdale spotted some weeds which they thought they needed attending to.'

'Well, we need them here!' said Mrs Caldicot. 'You couldn't have the Beatles performing on stage while Ringo was off doing a little dead-heading! And how would it look if the Rolling Stones were doing a concert at the Royal Albert Hall and Mick Jagger suddenly looked round and said 'Where's Keith?' and someone said 'Oh, he's just popped across the road to do a bit of weeding in Hyde Park.'

The flaky croissant crumbs were now falling like light rain, and a battalion of sparrows were hopping about snatching them up and taking them away. There were baby sparrows to be fed in nests secreted deep within the bushes of the small park in the centre of the square.

Ruth giggled and hurried across the road to fetch back the spoons player and the comb and paper specialist and five minutes later the entire band was, as Mr Williams put it, 'ready to rock and roll'.

'But we're not performing rock and roll, are we?' murmured a slightly puzzled Mrs Roberts. 'I thought we were doing old-fashioned music hall numbers.'

'It's just an expression,' explained Mr Williams. 'Lots of people say it when they're about to start work.'

'Oh, right,' said Mrs Roberts. 'Let's rock and roll then!' She tried to wiggle her hips a little, a la Elvis Presley, but winced and didn't do it again.

Mr Roxdale and Mr Hewitt put away their gardening tools, stuffing them into their jacket pockets, and prepared themselves for the band’s first performance of the day. Mr Roxdale checked the paper wrapped around his comb and Mr Hewitt polished his spoons because, as he said to Mr Roxdale, ‘a good spoons player always likes to sparkle’.

Chapter Twenty Two

Within minutes the band, which had not yet begun to play, had a sizeable audience. Many of those who were watching were a little intrigued by the size of the band but, perhaps, more fascinated by their average age and the nature of some of the instruments. Not every Parisian music lover is au fait with the playing of the spoons or the comb and paper and not many of those waiting for the music to start had ever seen a band which also included a flute, a banjo, an accordion, a euphonium, a pair of bongo drums and a girl in a blue dress shaking what looked suspiciously like two jam jars filled with dried peas.

And when the band did start to play (counted into ‘I Do Like to Be Beside the Seaside’ by Mr Livingstone, waving his flute like a conductor wielding his baton) the impact was immediate.

There was no doubt that the band was doing something new and different; the musicians were performing with unrivalled enthusiasm and with great passion (in some cases, it must be admitted, with more passion than skill or natural talent).

And, of course, they were, on average, about 50 years older than the other musicians performing in the cloisters of the Place des Vosges that day. It is not often that you can wander through the streets of Paris and suddenly find yourself watching and listening to a group of septuagenarians, octogenarians and nonagenarians performing ‘Down at the Old Bull and Bush’ as though their lives depended upon it (which, in a way, I suppose they did).

How many times do Parisians, or visitors to Paris, have a chance to see a man with a trowel, a fork and a dibber sticking out of his jacket pocket playing a pair of soup spoons and, moreover, creating something which definitely sounded like a tune?

How many times do music lovers get to see a rhythm section consisting of a shapely, 18-year-old girl shaking two jam jars filled with dried peas and a middle aged woman playing the bongo drums as though her life depended on it?

It was a rare sight.

The sound the band made, augmented with great skill by the feisty accordion playing of Jean-Jacques and the solid sound of his father’s euphonium, was quite probably unique in the history of Parisian street music.

The streets, parks, arcades and colonnades of the City of Light have seen countless soloists; violinists, cellists, saxophonists, keyboard players, guitarists, singers (accompanied by taped backing tracks), trumpet players and players of just about every other instrument imaginable. The colonnades and parks and tourist high-spots have always resounded to the sound of small orchestras, string quartets, jazz bands, blues bands, pop groups and folk groups from all around the world. Residents and visitors have always been able to find music on the streets and in the parks of Paris.

But had anyone ever heard old British music hall favourites on the streets of the French capital?

Judging by the reactions of the audience which the band collected, it seemed likely that they had not.

Calvin filmed the band as an entity and then filmed each individual performer. Josephine, his wife, stood beside him drawing his attention to players whom she thought he should film next. The six Chinese tourists were still alternately filming the band and Calvin. The three boys and bicycles, and the two girls who were following them, had now been joined by five military cadets and a traffic warden. The mackerel tabby cat had thought about having a sparrow for lunch but he had decided against it. He had wandered off into the park for a while and had returned.

A coachload of elderly tourists from the Netherlands joined the crowd. The Dutch tourists nearly all wore beige and all had plastic name badges pinned to their clothes. A dozen young French tourists in their twenties joined them. Most of these newcomers carried extendable selfie sticks and spent most of their time taking pictures of themselves with the band in the background. To do this they had to face away from the performers. It seemed to Mrs Caldicot to be a strange way to go through life; viewing the world over your shoulder and back to front.

And still the audience grew and grew.

The Dutch tourists, most of whom were female, seemed fascinated by Mr Hewitt’s skill with his spoons. One stood less than a yard away from him filming his hands and the spoons and looking at him most admiringly.

After just a quarter of an hour, and one performance of the three songs which they knew, Mrs Caldicot and her band had acquired an audience so large that it not only filled their corner of the cloistered walkway but spread out across the road and into the park in the centre of the square.

Other musicians, whose own aficionados had wandered off to see what all the excitement was about, had put down their instruments and wandered along the square to see what was going on.

Mr Livingstone’s banjo case had been almost filled with coins, and not a few notes, and it seemed to Mrs Caldicot that if things carried on at this rate then they need no longer worry about their not being able to afford to eat decent meals that day.

As they paused for a short break, before beginning their next rendition of their three selected songs, a tired looking man in a scruffy suit which may have once been expensive but which had seen a lot of action and had not been cleaned for a long time, wandered over to Mrs Caldicot. He looked to be in his 40s. He had a cigarette dangling from his lower lip. Mrs Caldicot thought he reminded her of someone but she couldn't think who it was.

'Are you in charge?' he asked. As he spoke, the cigarette, which seemed able to defy gravity, bobbed up and down. He spoke English with a heavy French accent, and Mrs Caldicot thought this was fair enough since he was definitely French. Mrs Caldicot suddenly remembered that he reminded her of Serge Gainsborough, the famous French entertainer and song writer.

'Oh no,' said Mrs Caldicot, who knew enough about life to know that it is never a good thing to admit to being in charge.

'I run a club in Montparnasse,' he said, taking no notice of Mrs Caldicot's denial for he also knew enough about life to know that it is never a good thing to admit to being in charge and, in addition, also knew enough to be able to tell who was in charge even when they said they weren't. 'I'm always looking for acts that are a bit different.'

'Oh!' said a startled Mrs Caldicot.

'I can't pay you much,' he said. 'But give me a ring and we can fix up a few gigs.' He handed Mrs Caldicot a business card. 'My number is on the back, together with my email address.'

He then wandered off, his cigarette spilling ash down his suit.

'We've collected just over 150 euros!' whispered Mr Twist to Mrs Caldicot. 'Where shall I put all the coins? There's too much to leave in the banjo case. And I'm worried about pick pockets.'

'Can you put the coins in your pockets?'

'There are too many!' said Mr Twist.

'Just spread the money around,' suggested Mrs Caldicot. 'Give everyone with pockets some of the money to look after. That way no one will be able to steal the money for our next meal!'

'Open your handbag!' said Mr Livingstone, who was helping Mr Twist distribute the accumulated funds.

Mrs Caldicot, who had put her handbag on the ground between her feet, bent down and picked it up. She opened it and Mr Livingstone scooped in a handful of mixed coins. He then wandered off, distributing the takings among the rest of the band.

'Did you really only start the band yesterday?' Josephine asked Mrs Caldicot.

Her husband was still filming. He had now crossed the road and was standing in the park, filming the crowd which had collected and which was waiting patiently for the band to start playing again.

'We did,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'That's amazing!' said Josephine.

'We really didn't have a choice,' explained Mrs Caldicot. 'The man at the Embassy didn't seem terribly excited by our predicament and the woman from the travel agency wasn't in the slightest bit interested. So if we wanted to eat we had to make some money.'

'What else are you going to play?' asked Josephine.

'I'm afraid we have to play the same songs again,' said Mrs Caldicot apologetically. 'Those are the only three songs we know.'

'That's fine,' said Josephine. 'I don't think the audience will mind. Besides, your crowd is changing all the time.' She nodded towards the crowd which was watching them. The six Chinese people had gone and so too had the coachload of people from the Netherlands. They had been replaced by a small army of Japanese tourists and a dozen stout German men, some of whom were unwisely wearing traditional lederhosen and looking rather sticky and uncomfortable. The boys on the bicycles had gone. And, inevitably, so too had the girls who had followed them. The cat was now asleep on a window sill. Despite the losses, there had been a steady increase in the size of their audience.

'Is this a good crowd?' Mrs Caldicot asked Monsieur Roche.

'I have never seen so many people watching one group of musicians,' said Monsieur Roche. 'You are a big, big hit. No one has ever heard anything like it before.' He grinned. 'And I suspect that maybe these songs are not often accompanied by music played on an accordion and a euphonium.'

Mrs Caldicot laughed. 'I suspect you're right,' she agreed. She told him about the man in the scruffy suit and showed him the man's visiting card. 'Is he real, do you think?'

Monsieur Roche looked at the visiting card. 'Oh yes,' he said. 'This is a real person. He owns a big club in Montparnasse. It is a very popular club. He is known for always having something different on his stage. I had heard that he comes to the Place des Vosges occasionally looking for new acts.'

'Crumbs!' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Pardon?' said Monsieur Roche. 'Why is 'crumbs'?'

‘Sorry,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘It’s just an English expression. It means gosh, golly or my word.’

‘Ah,’ nodded Monsieur Roche. ‘I understand. It is quite a tribute to be invited to play at this club.’ He wandered back to where he had been standing when playing his euphonium.

And a few moments later, Mr Livingstone waved his flute and the band once more moved effortlessly into ‘Down at the Old Bull and Bush’.’

‘We didn’t start with this one last time, did we?’ shouted Mr Twist.

‘No,’ agreed Mr Livingstone with a shake of his head. ‘I thought we’d do our three songs in a different order. Break the routine.’ He laughed. ‘It might convince people that we’re playing something new.’

‘Good idea,’ agreed Mr Twist. He couldn’t remember when he’d last had this much fun. He looked across at Miss Nightingale, Mrs Peterborough, Mrs Torridge and Mrs Merivale. They were all glowing. There was no other word for it. They were glowing. And Ruth, dear young Ruth, had blossomed into a butterfly in a blue dress.

The audience was not so easily convinced that the band was playing something new.

Quite a few of them had been standing listening for half an hour or more and they recognised the tune which they heard and they realised that they now knew the words. And, as a result, several hundred people, many of whom did not speak a word of English, now joined in singing ‘Down at the Old Bull and Bush’.

‘I never thought I’d be standing in a posh bit of Paris playing ‘Down at the Old Bull and Bush’ on the spoons with a crowd of Japanese and German tourists singing along,’ said Mr Hewitt to Mr Roxdale.

Mr Roxdale, who was busy playing the comb and paper, could not reply.

Mr Hewitt tried a tricky, little manoeuvre which involved him playing the spoons on and around his left elbow. He was really getting into this. It was, he supposed, like swimming or riding a bicycle. You never really forget how. Effortlessly, he moved the spoons down to his right knee. ‘Oh, I’m cooking with gas now,’ he thought to himself.

Mrs Caldicot, who was now getting the hang of the banjo and rather enjoying it, noticed that Calvin and Josephine were now also singing ‘Down at the Old Bull and Bush’. Calvin had temporarily put down his camera. Mrs Caldicot looked around. The band members were lost in the wonder of the moment. She couldn’t remember ever seeing them have quite such a good time. Actually, she couldn’t remember ever seeing any group of people have such a good time.

It was true that they might not have won any prizes in a music competition but they were playing their dream with a real passion, and passion rules all.

They were living a dream none of them had ever dreamt, or even imagined of dreaming, and the joy and the glory of the moment were untarnished by bad memories or unfulfilled hopes.

Mrs Caldicot wondered what Mr Hawksmoor, the manager of the Twilight Years Rest Home would think if he could see them now. She wondered what Derek and Veronica, her son and daughter-in-law, would think if they could see her. The pair had dumped her into a nursing home because they said she couldn’t look after herself.

‘Well, just look at me now!’ she thought to herself and she felt at least six inches taller.

No, that was wrong.

A foot taller.

Chapter Twenty Three

At twenty past two, Mrs Torridge announced that if she didn't sit down she would fall down. She, Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale had all been resting on Mrs Torridge's walking frame and although their enthusiasm and spirit had taken them through their tiredness they were now well into the foothills of complete exhaustion.

Everyone agreed that they needed a rest, a sit down and a cup of something refreshing. Exactly what it was didn't matter.

Oh, and it was generally agreed that something to eat would be welcome too.

'Banging these bongo drums had made my hands sore and my wrists ache,' said Mrs Roberts.

'I hit my funny bone with my spoons twenty minutes ago and my left arm has been tingling since then,' said Mr Hewitt. 'Have we made enough lolly for a cup of tea each?'

Mr Roxdale said he desperately needed some new greaseproof paper to wrap round his comb since the original piece of paper had now gone rather soggy and wasn't working properly.

Mr Twist, Mr Williams and both the Merivales agreed that they too were getting a little weary and would not turn down a chance to turn some of their earnings into suitable comestibles and liquid refreshments.

And even Ruth, who was young enough not to know what exhausted really meant, was ready for a break. Her throat was quite sore and she'd done a lot of jiggling about and she felt sort of, well, quite sticky. She was thirsty and fairly hungry and, more importantly, she wondered if she could ask someone to take a picture of her with Jean-Jacques. She could then send it to Denise. Damn it, she would send it to everyone whose address she had in her telephone. She wondered if Jean-Jacques would put his arm around her for the photograph. Maybe if she sort of snuggled in close and sort of just sort of put her arm around him he would respond by sort of putting his arm around her and then maybe he'd even sort of kiss her for the photo.

'Gosh I could eat a horse!' said Mr Hewitt.

'If you eat anything with meat in it then you probably will,' said Mr Merivale. 'The French eat a lot of horses.'

Mr Hewitt pulled a face. He quite liked horses, even when they stopped to eat a mouthful of daisies and came in last; and he didn't want to eat one. 'An omelette would do just fine,' he said.

Mr Twist scooped the remaining money from the banjo case and poured a couple of handfuls of cash into Mrs Caldicot's already rather full handbag. He then poured more coins into Mrs Roberts' handbag, and then into every available handbag and pocket.

'How much did we make?' Mrs Caldicot asked him.

'I've no idea!' replied Mr Twist. 'But enough to buy us all a meal now and another meal this evening. I saw one of those Chinese fellows put a twenty euro note into the banjo case. And there were several five and ten euro notes in there.'

'My word!' said Mrs Caldicot.

'We are going to take a break now?' said Monsieur Roche.

'We're going to have a meal and something to drink,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Where do you recommend?'

'Not the cafés here in the Place des Vosges,' said Monsieur Roche, pulling a disapproving face. 'They are very expensive and very crowded – full of tourists. I can take you to a good café where the locals eat.'

'Is it far?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'Three minutes,' said Monsieur Roche with a smile. 'Maybe four if we walk slowly.'

'I think we'll be walking slowly,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'But when I have taken you to the café I have to leave you,' said Monsieur Roche. 'I have to go to work.'

'You aren't going to eat with us?'

'I'm afraid not. But Jean-Jacques will stay I think. He doesn't have to work until this evening.' Monsieur Roche paused and looked around. 'Ah,' he said. 'I think he has a good reason to stay.'

Mrs Caldicot looked in the same direction.

Jean-Jacques and Ruth were having their photograph taken by Mr Williams. They had their arms around each other and Ruth looked as though she might well burst with the excitement of it all.

'Now give her a kiss,' Mr Williams said to Jean-Jacques.

And the danger of Ruth bursting went up a notch to Red Alert.

'We haven't added up the money yet,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Can I just give you a handful as your share?'

'No, no, no!' said Monsieur Roche, holding up a hand and backing away. 'I don't want any money. It has been a pleasure to play with you.'

'But you're not even having lunch with us!'

‘It has been a marvellous experience,’ said Monsieur Roche. ‘And I now have added three new songs to my repertoire. I have for many years had some knowledge of French music hall songs – the sort played by Mistinguett and Edith Piaf. But I did not know much of British Music Hall. As we walked here this morning Mr Livingstone told me that our French music hall was derived from your British music hall theatres and I can see that. But with some exceptions, such as the American Josephine Baker, many of our music hall songs tend to be rather sad and romantic whereas your British songs seem so jolly; they are very bright and bouncy. Mr Livingstone has promised to send me a CD containing a variety of other British music hall songs. I hope he will do that for me. I would appreciate it very much.’

‘If he has said he will do that then I know he will do it,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Together he and I will put together a package of old music hall songs then you can perhaps learn more of them. We will send you CDs and sheet music.’

‘I would like that very much indeed,’ said Monsieur Roche. ‘You must let me know the cost.’

‘No, no, no!’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘This will be our present to you; our ‘thank you’ to you for bringing your euphonium and playing with us!’

As the band slowly wandered away, rather weary and in some cases not a little hoarse, a xylophone player wheeled his instrument into the corner they were vacating. Sadly for him, the band’s audience drifted off and the xylophone player, who had been hoping to inherit the band’s crowd, had to earn his own supporters.

Monsieur Roche led the band through an archway and along a narrow passageway and they found themselves in a large square garden which was surrounded by high walls. A violinist was playing ‘Non, je ne regrette rien’, one of the songs made famous by Edith Piaf. The acoustics of the garden gave the violin a beautiful, mystical quality. Monsieur Roche led them across the garden and then through an archway at the other end. Within a minute or so they were in the broad and busy street of St Antoine, a continuation of the Rue de Rivoli. And within another two minutes they were outside a simple and unprepossessing café. The café was busy and there did not seem to be room for them all.

‘Wait here a moment,’ said Monsieur Roche. ‘I will have a word with the proprietor and see if he can find tables for you.’

Monsieur Roche disappeared into the café and came out almost immediately accompanied by a large man wearing a huge moustache and a white apron which reached down below his knees. He was wearing other things, of course, but the moustache and the apron were the only two items which caught the eye.

‘There is a big room upstairs,’ said Monsieur Roche. ‘Usually it is only opened in the evenings when there are more customers but this is Monsieur Ricard, the proprietor, and he will open it for you especially. There is plenty of room and the food here is excellent and very well priced.’

Monsieur Ricard greeted Mrs Caldicot with a handshake and escorted her and her companions to the stairs leading up to his upstairs dining room.

‘I will send up a waiter in a moment,’ he told them. ‘Make yourselves comfortable.’

Monsieur Roche was absolutely right. The food was excellent, the service fast, efficient and friendly and the prices very reasonable.

‘We would never have found this place by ourselves,’ said Josephine, who, with her husband was sitting at a table with Mrs Caldicot and Mr Twist.

‘Nor would we!’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘How did you meet that wonderful man with the euphonium?’ asked Calvin. ‘It was a euphonium wasn’t it?’

‘Yes, it was a euphonium and how we met him is a long story,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Monsieur Roche, the euphonium player, is the father of Jean-Jacques who is the accordionist. Jean-Jacques is a waiter who was working at our hotel and he took something of a fancy to our Ruth who, conveniently, took quite a shine to him. Things sort of happened from there!’

‘Ruth is your daughter?’

‘No, I’m afraid not,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Nor is she my granddaughter I’m afraid! I would be proud of her if she were, but she works with us. We all live together in what used to be a nursing home, and Ruth helps with the cleaning and the shopping and things like that.’

‘A sort of housekeeper?’

‘Exactly!’ replied Mrs Caldicot. ‘Her official title is ‘Assistant Housekeeper’. Now tell me about you two. All I know is that you’re on a long holiday in Europe!’

‘Until three months ago we owned a publishing company,’ explained Josephine. ‘We published half a dozen local newspapers. But the internet has damaged our sales and our advertising and when we received an offer to buy us out we thought it would be a good time to retire.’

‘The buyers aren’t closing any of the papers so no one is being made redundant,’ said Calvin, for whom this was clearly important. ‘But they’re setting up websites and publishing them in conjunction with digital stuff that to be honest I really don't understand.'

'And the film making? Is that a hobby or something more serious?'

'Oh, that's just a hobby,' replied Calvin.

'Don't listen to him,' said Josephine. 'He's being over-modest. He's been making short documentary films for years. It started out as a hobby but for a few years now he's been selling the films to a local television station. And now the people who've bought the newspapers say they want to put some of the films on their websites. It's quite exciting because they're a big national company with lots of online viewers.'

'That's wonderful!' said Mrs Caldicot who thought it was.

'So, unless you object, my little film about your band could be seen by quite a lot of people!' said Calvin.

'Oh we don't object,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'We'd all be thrilled. Perhaps you could send us a copy of your film when it's finished? Or tell us where we can watch it.'

Calvin promised to send Mrs Caldicot a copy of his film.

And then, to Mrs Caldicot's utter astonishment, Calvin and Josephine insisted on paying the entire restaurant bill.

'Oh you can't,' protested Mrs Caldicot. 'It's far too much!'

'We absolutely insist,' said Calvin. 'You've given us the best day of our vacation.' Calvin patted his camera. 'And you've provided us with some marvellous footage to take back home.'

'You can use your earnings to pay for a good meal this evening!' said Josephine.

Mrs Caldicot stood up, banged her spoon on her saucer, and told the rest of the band that Calvin and Josephine had insisted on paying for their meal. There was much cheering and many cries of appreciation. Mr Williams insisted on a chorus of 'For They Are Jolly Good Fellows' and Mr Livingstone called for three cheers. Calvin and Josephine both blushed but Mrs Caldicot could tell they were secretly delighted.

Chapter Twenty Four

When Calvin and Josephine had left, Mr Twist counted the money they had taken in the Place des Vosges.

It came to an astonishing 287 euros and 25 centimes. There was also £7.20 in English money and $15 dollars in American money.

'Does this mean that we won't be playing music this afternoon?' asked Mrs Torridge.

There was silence as everyone waited to hear what Mrs Caldicot had to say.

'I suppose it does,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'We've certainly got enough money for our meal this evening.'

'But what are we going to do instead?' demanded Mrs Torridge who sounded terribly disappointed. 'Mr Torridge will be quite devastated if there is to be no more singing.'

'Yes,' said Mrs Peterborough. 'And he won't be the only one.'

'What are we going to do instead?' asked Miss Nightingale plaintively. 'I like singing our songs,' she said quietly. She seemed close to tears.

'I suppose we could go up the Eiffel Tower,' said Mrs Merivale, with about as much enthusiasm as she might have suggested that they find a dentist and all have a little, light root canal work. 'They say there's a good view of the city from up at the top.'

The suggestion was greeted with silence.

'Would you like to go up the Eiffel Tower?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

Mrs Merivale didn't have to think about it. 'Not especially,' she admitted with a bit of a shrug.

'We could go on a river boat,' suggested Mr Merivale. 'Cruise up and down for an hour or two and, er, look at the river bank.'

This idea was greeted with as much enthusiasm as the suggestion that they ascend the Eiffel Tower had been received.

Suggestions from Mr Twist, Mr Roxdale and Mrs Caldicot were also greeted without much enthusiasm from anyone, including those who had made the suggestions.

No one, it seemed, was terribly excited by the prospect of doing any of the usual touristy things.

Ideas which had filled them with excitement when they had been discussed back home were now regarded as dull and rather boring.

They sat for a while, finishing off the remains of the bottles of wine which Calvin and Josephine had bought to accompany their excellent luncheon. Mr Williams found a slice of baguette which he started nibbling. Everyone stared at the tablecloth because everyone was thinking the same thing but did not like to say it.

Everyone, that is, except Ruth and Jean-Jacques who held hands and looked at each other. They were happy to stay where they were for ever more.

'Are we sure there's enough money in the kitty to pay for any of these trips and to pay for tonight's meal?' asked Mr Hewitt.

It was the first small step in the direction they all wanted to go.

'Have we enough money to pay for lunch tomorrow?' asked Mrs Roberts.

'It could be raining tomorrow,' Mr Roxdale pointed out. 'We won't be able to earn any money if it's raining.'

'Mr Roxdale is right,' said Mr Williams. 'If we don't have enough money to buy a meal tomorrow then we'll be in a bit of trouble.'

'What time does our train leave tomorrow?' asked Mrs Torridge.

'Seven minutes past five in the evening,' replied Mrs Caldicot, who had their tickets in her handbag. 'We have to leave our rooms at the hotel by eleven in the morning. But they said that we can leave our luggage there. The hotel coach will be ready at three thirty to take us to the station. Because of the hour difference, we arrive back in London at half past six.'

'That's a long time to go without food if we run out of money,' Mrs Merivale pointed out. 'We'll need money for lunch and something for the train.'

'A long time without food,' agreed Mr Merivale who always trusted his wife's judgements and instincts, especially where food was concerned.

'And we'll definitely need some food for the train,' pointed out Mr Williams. 'We won't have Miss Nightingale's broken biscuit crumbs for the return journey.'

'They've just about all gone,' said Miss Nightingale glumly. Her broken biscuit crumbs, served straight from the pocket, had been a great success with everyone. No one had minded the bits of fluff that seemed to be an inevitable part of the package.

‘Well, I suppose we could…,’ began Mrs Caldicot. She then stopped, as though still thinking. She was, she realised, being a trifle naughty. She knew exactly what everyone in the room really wanted to do.

There was a pause, heavily pregnant with expectation.

‘Could what?’ asked Mr Livingstone, desperate for her to continue and to turn the rest of the thought into words.

Everyone in the room was looking at Mrs Caldicot and everyone was waiting for her to finish her unspoken thought. Everyone thought they knew what she was going to say. Everyone knew what they wanted her to say. Everyone wanted to say it but didn’t quite have the courage.

‘…I suppose we could play some more music this afternoon,’ finished Mrs Caldicot.

No suggestion could have been better received.

There was a good deal of smiling and cheering and several people (notably Mr Hewitt and Mr Roxdale) banged the table with their spoons.

‘Those two are getting rather rumbustious!’ whispered Mrs Roberts to Mrs Caldicot, nodding in the direction of Mr Hewitt and Mr Roxdale.

‘I’m beginning to think of them as the terrible twins,’ Mrs Caldicot whispered back.

All that remained was to decide where they should play.

And they voted unanimously to return to the Place des Vosges, undoubtedly the scene of their greatest success.

‘We might not be able to find a space,’ warned Jean-Jacques. ‘The Place des Vosges is very popular with buskers and we are a big band. We need a lot of room.’

Mrs Torridge, Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale were again excited to hear themselves described as being part of a ‘band’.

‘Oh, don’t you worry, we’ll find somewhere to play,’ said Mr Livingstone with confidence born of a formidable combination of ignorance and faith.

And they did.

They played for another two hours, and pretty well filled Mr Livingstone’s banjo case twice more. Their performance was, once again, a huge success, though at one point they had a slight scare when a policeman stopped and watched them for a while.

‘Do you think he’s going to arrest us all?’ Mrs Caldicot asked Mrs Roberts.

‘I don’t care,’ said Mrs Roberts with more courage than she would have ever thought she had. ‘We can cope with anything they can throw at us.’ Their success in raising money through the band had done wonders for her self-esteem.

But the policeman didn’t arrest them.

On the contrary, he joined in singing ‘I Do Like to Be Beside the Seaside’, laughed a good deal and clapped heartily when the song finished.

Mr Livingstone did notice, however, that the laughing policeman didn’t throw any coins into the banjo case. Still, as Mr Hewitt pointed out, he didn’t confiscate their earnings or arrest them either.

And then Jean-Jacques said very sadly that he had to go to work.

And everyone else reluctantly admitted that they were tired and would like to go back to the hotel for a wash and brush up before they found a restaurant for their evening meal.

‘Would you like me to telephone the hotel to see if they can send the coach for us?’ Mrs Caldicot asked the band.

‘Certainly not!’ said everyone, speaking as though one unit.

‘We’ll walk back!’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘I can manage,’ said Mrs Torridge. ‘And if I can manage then I suspect that everyone else can too.’

‘It’s quite a long way,’ warned Mrs Caldicot.

‘When I was a girl I once walked from Kendal to Ambleside,’ said Mrs Torridge defiantly. ‘They’re both in the Lake District,’ she added, just in case anyone didn’t know.

‘But I expect your knees were in better condition then,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘Same knees, same hips, same feet,’ said Mrs Torridge firmly. ‘And now I’ve got my walking frame to support me.’

And so they walked back to their hotel. They walked at a leisurely pace, stopping twice for coffee or tea and a chance to rest their feet and legs.

And on their way they bought a new suitcase for Miss Nightingale, whose original case had collapsed and died at St Pancras Station, and two small gifts for Jenkins, who had been left behind.

Chapter Twenty Five

'Odds bodkins!' cried Raphael when he saw them. 'What ho, old beans! May I crave a boon?'

'Crave away, dear fellow,' said Mr Hewitt. 'Damned please to see you, old boy!'

As always, Raphael, resplendent in his colourful uniform, looked desperately pleased with himself. To be honest, he always did look to be comfortably settled towards the top end of self-confident. He was not the sort of fellow to hide his light under a bushel, or anything else for that matter.

But now he seemed especially proud of his new English words. And his new skill seemed to have added to his sense of self-importance.

He touched the peak of his cap but managed to do it in such a way that it made him look as though he were a superior officer acknowledging the presence of a lowly squaddie.

Mr Hewitt couldn't quite understand how he'd managed it but he respected the talent it doubtless required.

'Do you need taxis or a coach for this evening? Shall I book a club or restaurant for you?' He lowered his voice. 'I have access to very private clubs.' He winked, in a wink, wink, nudge, nudge sort of way.

'No thanks, old bean,' replied Mr Hewitt, speaking for all of them. 'But your English is coming along very nicely, my dear old thing. Tally ho! All the best. Chin, chin. Cheerio.'

'Tally how!' replied Raphael.

'Cheerio!' said Mr Roxdale. 'Without you we would all be up a tree without a paddle.'

'Cheerio!' said Raphael. 'Without you I would be up a tree without a paddle? Yes?'

'Oh absolutely yes,' said Mr Hewitt.

Mrs Caldicot who had listened in some horror to all this, hurried indoors. 'You shouldn't tease him!' she said to Mr Roxdale and Mr Hewitt when they entered the hotel.

'Just helping him with his English!' said Mr Hewitt, innocently.

Mrs Caldicot couldn't stop herself from grinning.

An hour or so later the band (for that is now how they thought of themselves) ate dinner at the same restaurant where they'd eaten the previous evening.

'I can't remember when I had such fun!' said Mr Merivale, who was not a man to throw words about carelessly.

And it was unanimously agreed that this was a feeling shared by one and all.

Ruth spent much of the evening sending texts and photos to Denise. She missed Jean-Jacques but he had promised to meet her outside the hotel the following morning and she was, therefore, a very happy girl. She told Denise that Jean-Jacques had promised to write to her when she was back in England. 'He asked me to be his girlfriend,' she told her friend.

And an hour and a half after they had eaten, they were all safely tucked up in their beds wherein they slept like logs.

And every face in every bed bore a smile bordering on a grin.

Chapter Twenty Six

The following day, the last of their short holiday in Paris, went by far too quickly. The group hardly seemed to have finished their breakfast and packed their suitcases before they were on the Eurostar train racing back to London.

But there was time for a little more fun.

When their suitcases had been carefully stacked in the small store room which the hotel kept for the very purpose, Mrs Caldicot and the band stood in the hallway while they decided what to do with their final few hours.

'I've always hated the last day of the holidays,' said Mr Hewitt. 'When I was a boy I tried to pretend it wasn't happening. Once when I was a kid and my parents had packed up all our stuff, I ran off and hurried down to the beach so that we couldn't leave the seaside. I was six and I made my last sandcastle and decorated it with all my paper flags. My dad was furious because it took them an hour to find me and we had a long journey to get back home.'

Curiously, he seemed to remember this rather sad story with some affection.

'It feels as though we've been away for months,' said Mr Roxdale.

'Years,' said Mr Hewitt. 'Probably decades…'

'It was thanks to Mr Twist that we all had such a wonderful time!' said Mr Livingstone.

Mr Twist looked embarrassed. 'I feel really bad…' he began.

'No!' said Mr Merivale firmly. 'You mustn't feel bad about what happened. It was heaven sent! Without those confidence tricksters the band wouldn't have existed. Just think of the fun we would have missed.'

'You gave us all an experience we'll never forget,' said Mrs Roberts, who had never before had quite so much fun.

'Three cheers for Mr Twist!' cried Mr Livingstone.

They cheered Mr Twist and everyone meant it.

Mr Twist, blushing with embarrassment, acknowledged the cheers with a wave of his hand.

'We've got 314 euros left,' said Mrs Caldicot. It seemed a huge sum. 'We'll have lunch later, but what does everyone want to do with our last few hours?'

It was an unnecessary question.

It was not quite a rhetorical question (in that an answer really was being invited) but it was the sort of question to which there is only one answer. It was on a par with asking a bunch of children playing on the beach if they would like an ice cream.

And there were plenty of clues around.

Mr Livingstone was holding his flute. Mr Hewitt had his spoons in his right hand. Mr Roxdale had his comb, wrapped in a fresh piece of paper, in the top pocket of his jacket. Mrs Roberts was holding her bongo drums. A slightly tearful Ruth, who was constantly rushing to the door to see if she could see Jean-Jacques (who had promised to be there to say goodbye), was gripping her home-made maracas, those two pea-filled jam jars. Mrs Torridge, Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale were wearing their red, white and blue bobble hats. The rest of the choir (Mr Williams, Mr Twist and the Merivales) could be heard clearing their throats just in case they were needed.

And Mrs Caldicot herself was gripping Mr Livingstone's banjo in its very useful case.

So, the children voted for ice creams and the band decided to hold its final Parisian concert; its last impromptu recital or, as Mr Livingstone put it: 'The farewell appearance of the band's first European tour'.

Chapter Twenty Seven

At the suggestion of Jean-Jacques, who had arrived as promised, they held their last concert in a small public park called the Square du Vert-Galant.

The park is reached from steps leading down from the Pont Neuf, the oldest bridge in existence, and one which connects the Left and Right banks, right in the middle of the city. What happens in the park can easily be seen from the bridge and from the quays on both sides of the river.

They performed the three songs which had already proved so successful for them but they also tried out four other songs which Mr Livingstone had remembered and written out: ‘I’m Henry the Eighth’, ‘Any Old Iron’, ‘A Little of What You Fancy’ and last, but definitely not least, ‘I’ll Show You Round Paree’, a song made famous by the music hall star Vesta Tilley.

And, as they had done every other time they had performed, they delighted the crowds.

It was not the age of the performers, the novelty of their performance or the slightly uncertain nature of the playing of some members of the band which provoked so much interest and aroused such enthusiastic support. It was the passion and the excitement with which they performed.

At the end of their concert, Mrs Caldicot collected the money from the banjo case. She took from the takings the money she knew they would need for their lunch and gave the Merivales some notes and coins to buy food and drink for the train journey. She gave some of the rest to two elderly looking tramps who were sitting in the small park. They would, she knew, both spend it on wine. But, she reasoned, it wasn’t her place to tell them how to ruin their lives. When they got back to the hotel, she gave the receptionist a good tip, gave the chef a 20 euro note as a thank you and handed the receptionist some money to share among the other members of the hotel staff.

And while they waited for the coach to arrive to take them to the Gare du Nord, she gave Raphael a modest tip. He hadn’t done anything to earn it but she couldn’t leave him out.

‘Tally ho! The games afeet!’ he said, with a convincing smile which showed a dazzling array of expensively capped teeth.

When the coach arrived, it brought with it a fresh party of British tourists. They were school children and their teachers. The children, in their mid-teens, looked excited. Six school-teachers accompanying them looked harassed and apprehensive.

‘Odds bodkins!’ cried Raphael, as the new visitors descended the coach steps. ‘May I crave a boon?’

The teenagers stared at him, confused. The teachers backed away a little.

‘I beg your pardon?’ said a stout and stern-faced woman in her fifties. Mrs Caldicot thought she bore a startling resemblance to one of the stone statues found on Easter Island. The woman had grey, unkempt hair which looked as if it had been cut with a hedge trimmer and she wore pink framed spectacles which dangled on a chain around her neck. She carried a clipboard and a copy of *The Guardian* newspaper and was clearly the teacher in charge of the expedition.

‘May I crave a boon?’ repeated Raphael with great confidence.

‘What is it? What are you saying? Do you work here?’ demanded the school teacher in a tone which had been honed by years of quizzing sulky teenagers. She lifted up her spectacles and perched them on the end of her nose. When she’d done this, she examined him as though he were a laboratory specimen.

‘What ho! I am your friendly, English-speaking doorman,’ said Raphael unabashed and relentlessly cheerful. ‘If you need taxis, restaurants or an introduction to a private club, all you have to do is to ask.’ He beamed at her. ‘I am your man!’ He then winked. It was his way of showing that he was a man of the world and that no requirement was beyond his ability.

‘No you’re not my man!’ snapped the school teacher, whose ‘husband’ was a 48-year-old, 14 stone, cigar-smoking, female social worker called Cyril.

The always angry school teacher ushered her party into the hotel and turned back to snap: ‘Bring the bags in!’

‘I do not do the bags!’ protested Raphael to her back. But the school teacher either did not hear or she ignored him.

‘Toodle pip, Raphael!’ said Mr Hewitt, as he followed Mrs Torridge, Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale and climbed up onto the now empty coach.

Mrs Torridge had Mr Torridge’s ashes on her lap. She told Mrs Peterborough that he’d had a thoroughly good time and that she was pleased that she’d brought him.

Mrs Caldicot, felt sorry for the doorman, who was standing staring in bewilderment at the school party’s several dozen large suitcases which had been abandoned and were strewn about on the pavement. She reached into her handbag and gave him another 20 euros or so in small change.

Raphael grinned at them all and pocketed the additional tip. He hadn't made much money out of Mrs Caldicot's party but he liked them nevertheless. And he realised, to his own surprise, that he would miss them.

Ruth was, of course, the last to climb aboard the coach. She was wearing her jeans, her jumper and her shapeless anorak. The blue dress, together with her memory of being a singer with the band, was now packed away in the small, rather expensive suitcase she had borrowed from Mrs Caldicot's husband. She and Jean-Jacques had cuddled until the last possible moment. As she climbed up the steps of the coach, she and her French beau continued to hold hands for as long as possible. There had been promises to write (emails and texts rather than old-fashioned mail, of course) and vows that they would meet again soon.

And then they were all on the coach, making their journey back to the railway station, back to Eurostar, back to London and back to Real Life.

And they were all, every one of them, filled with imperishable experiences or, as our good friend Dr Roget would doubtless have put it, replete with memorable impressions, packed with never to be forgotten evocations, stuffed with glorious recollections and bursting with immortal reminiscences.

'This trip to Paris has been a real joy,' sighed Mrs Peterborough, her eyes closed as she thought happily of their concert in the Places des Vosges.

'It's been a real joy,' agreed Miss Nightingale with a sigh.

'The most exciting month of my life,' said Mrs Torridge.

'We were only away for three days!' Mrs Caldicot pointed out.

'Were we, dear?' said Mrs Torridge. 'Goodness me. The time seemed to flash by very slowly. I would do it all again in a moment. Can we come back next week?'

'The dark hair changing to grey, that hath won neither laurel nor bay,' said Mr Hewitt.

'What's that?' asked Mr Livingstone.

'Christina Rossetti,' explained Mr Hewitt. 'Until this trip to Paris I had won neither laurel nor bay. But I feel I've come back from France a victor!'

'Hear, hear!' said Mr Livingstone, who honestly thought that he had never had so much fun. He felt good about the fact that his memories of Paris were now predominantly good and heart-warming ones. The sadness and the anger from the War were still there, of course. They would never go away. But they were now accompanied by some very good memories.

Chapter Twenty Eight

The rail journey was uneventful.

There had been huge queues for the customs and border posts at the Gare du Nord but no one had taken much interest in them or their luggage. The French border guards were too busy chatting to one another to take much notice of the travellers. Mrs Caldicot was enormously relieved. She'd been terrified that Mr Torridge might be confiscated and doomed to spend the rest of his afterlife in a French customs shed.

Mrs Caldicot had given the Merivales two handfuls of euros with which to buy sandwiches and drinks for the train. The Merivales had done their food shopping at a small delicatessen near to their hotel ('much cheaper and far better value than at the railway station' said Mrs Merivale who knew about these things) and they had purchased a massive picnic: baguettes filled with ham or cheese, pains au chocolat, croissants, scrumptious French pastries, bottles of water, half bottles of wine, paper napkins and cardboard cups.

They ate their picnic on the train.

As they left Calais, about to travel through the Channel Tunnel, Mr Livingstone suggested they sing 'I Do Like to Be Beside the Seaside' but no one was in the mood.

The only excitement when a mobile telephone made a 'pinging' noise and Ruth squealed with delight as she received her first message from Jean-Jacques. It came, of course, accompanied by a photograph and an electronic kiss.

And then they were back at St Pancras. The adventurers were back on English soil.

'Do you mind if I just pop in here for a moment,' said Mrs Roberts, indicating a branch of W.H.Smith the newsagent, as they passed through St Pancras railway station.

'No, of course not,' said Mrs Caldicot, assuming that Mrs Roberts wanted to buy something to read on the train. She and the rest of the party waited outside.

Two minutes later Mrs Roberts appeared, gleefully holding up a book of stamps.

'Now I can send off my postcards!' she cried with delight. She stuck the stamps on the postcards, found a post box and posted them.

The rest of the journey went without either alarums or excursions.

A small coach was booked and waiting for them at their local station.

And Mrs Caldicot was thrilled to see that Jenkins was patiently standing beside the coach to welcome them all back home.

Chapter Twenty Nine

'I missed you,' said Mrs Caldicot when they were back at Caldicot House. 'I missed you a lot.'

'I missed you too,' said Jenkins.

'Did you like your present?' she asked.

Everyone had clubbed together and bought Jenkins a pipe. Mr Livingstone had spotted it in a shop window as they'd walked back from the Place des Vosges.

'It was a real surprise,' said Jenkins tactfully. 'Do they know that I don't smoke?'

'Yes, they do,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'That's why they didn't buy you any tobacco.'

'That was a good idea.'

'I thought so,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. 'Mr Livingstone said he thought you might like to grip the pipe manfully between your teeth when giving one of your lectures.'

'I could certainly try that,' said Jenkins. He put the pipe between his teeth. It was a classic straight stemmed pipe with a large bowl and it looked very smart.

'You remind me of Monsieur Hulot,' said Mrs Caldicot.

Jenkins nodded his approval. He said something but with the pipe in his mouth it was difficult to hear precisely what he said.

'What was that?' laughed Mrs Caldicot. 'I couldn't tell what you said. It sounded like one of my texts.'

Jenkins took the pipe out of his mouth and struck a Tatiesque pose. 'I said I like Jacques Tati. He is one of my favourite film makers.'

'I bought you a small present too,' said Mrs Caldicot. She reached into her handbag and brought out a small pocket knife. 'It's a Laguiole knife,' she said. 'The man in the shop said they are the very best French penknives. He said hunters buy them for cleaning out their pipes and for gutting wild pigs.'

'They are the very best knives,' said Jenkins, putting down the pipe and accepting the knife. He examined it carefully, opening the single blade and gently caressing the wooden handle. 'This is rather beautiful,' he said. 'Thank you. I shall definitely use it for cleaning out my new pipe and if I find myself in a position where I am required to gut a wild pig I shall be prepared and able.'

They cuddled and cooed for a while.

'I haven't got a present for you,' he said.

'You haven't been away.'

'I did do that lecture so I was away for the day.'

'So you did. How did it go?'

'It went very well thank you. But there weren't any shops there. One of those reality television celebrities was selling his autobiography and a television chef was promoting his book on 101 things to do with leftovers but I didn't think you would find either of the books particularly attractive as gifts. I could have probably negotiated a good discount but even so…and, besides, as soon as I'd given my lecture and earned my bread and butter I wanted to get back home as quickly as I could.'

'To feed Kitty.'

'Indeed. To feed Kitty,' agreed Jenkins. 'I may be wrong but it is my impression that she does not like being left alone for too long. When I got back she sulked for almost exactly an hour. She wouldn't come near me. Then, when the hour of sulking was over, she wouldn't leave my side. She sat on my lap as I worked on the first page of my novel. It's going quite well, by the way. I think I should be ready to move onto page two by next Wednesday. So, how was Paris? Did you have a wonderful time? What did you do? Did you do all the usual things?'

'Well, perhaps not all the usual things.'

'You went up the Eiffel Tower, of course?'

'Not exactly up it, no.'

'But you saw it?'

'From a distance. It's hard to miss.'

'Just from a distance?'

'We were so busy. We meant to go and take a closer look but there just wasn't time. There was so much to do.'

'You went into the Louvre, of course? You saw the Mona Lisa? The Venus de Milo?'

'Ah, no. We didn't actually see either of those.'

'You didn't see the Mona Lisa?'

'We didn't go into the Louvre. But we went quite near to it several times.'

‘But you must have visited the church of Sacre Coeur and wandered round the Place du Tetre where all the artists gather?’

‘No, what with one thing and another we never did get right up into Montmartre.’ Mrs Caldicot paused for a moment. ‘But I’m pretty sure that one of the postcards which Mrs Roberts sent included a picture of Sacre Coeur. That’s the white one on top of a hill isn’t it? The one that looks like a wedding cake?’

‘I believe it is.’

‘It looked very nice on Mrs Roberts’ postcard. She sent you a postcard but you won’t get it for a day or two.’

‘Is the French postal service still a little hit or miss?’

‘I don’t know. She didn’t post her cards until we got back to London.’

‘She brought the cards back with her before posting them?’

‘Yes. She couldn’t find a shop selling stamps.’

‘Ah,’ said Jenkins, nodding. ‘Did you manage to see the cathedral of Notre Dame?’

‘No, I’m afraid we didn’t get to Notre Dame. That’s the one where the Hunchback wandered about on the roof, isn’t it?’

‘I believe so. It’s the Gothic one on the island in the middle of the Seine. Took them around two centuries to build, I seem to remember reading when I first visited. It has graceful flying buttresses and rather fine Rose windows widely regarded as awe-inspiring examples of stained glass craftsmanship.’

‘We missed that one, unfortunately. We’ll get to it another time perhaps.’

‘But I bet you all walked up and down the Champs-Élysées didn’t you? You couldn’t have missed the Champs-Élysées! Did someone buy a beret, a key ring with a small model of the Eiffel Tower attached to it and a black T-shirt with the word ‘Paris’ printed on the front in gold lettering?’

‘Well, not really,’ replied Mrs Caldicot. ‘We didn’t get as far as the Champs-Élysées, though we meant to. Oh, wait a moment, Mr Twist did buy a beret. A navy one. It was cloudy on the morning we went to the Place des Vosges and he said his head was cold. But the cloud dispersed and it was a lovely day. He put the beret in his pocket and I didn’t see it again.’

‘Ah, so you got to the Place des Vosges. Did you go into the Victor Hugo museum?’

‘I’m afraid we missed that,’ admitted Mrs Caldicot.

Jenkins looked at her, slightly puzzled. ‘But you surely sat at a pavement café on the left bank and had deep, philosophical discussions about the meaning of life?’

Mrs Caldicot shook her head.

She realised with horror that they hadn’t done the touristy things. Not one of them. ‘To be honest with you, we didn’t actually do any of the usual stuff,’ she admitted, with some embarrassment. ‘The time seemed to go by in a flash.’

Mr Jenkins was thoroughly puzzled. ‘Why don’t I take you out to dinner, and you can tell me all about it.’

‘That would be lovely.’

‘We could go to that Greek place you liked? Or try the Thai restaurant on Holdborrow Road. Or we could go to the Imperial hotel on the ring road. Or there’s a new French restaurant opened just a couple of miles away. Maybe you would like to go there. They say it’s very authentic. A review in the local paper said they had genuine French waiters and excellent French food.’

Mrs Caldicot thought carefully about these options then she sighed and tucked her arm into her husband’s.

‘Do you know what I really feel like?’

Chapter Thirty

They bought two portions of cod and chips, both with lots of vinegar and plenty of salt and Jenkins had mushy peas as a side dish. The man behind the counter said they were lucky because they didn't often receive any cod from their wholesaler.

They ate their meal al fresco, or en plein air as artists like to say when they are working outdoors, sitting on a bench in the park. The restaurant had provided them with little, wooden forks but although Jenkins used his for his mushy peas, they ate their chips and their fish with their fingers.

As they ate, Mrs Caldicot told Jenkins everything that had happened on their trip to Paris.

'It is my experience that people under the age of 60 look at a bunch of old folk and all they see is a bunch of old people,' said Mrs Caldicot when she'd finished telling her husband of their adventures. 'Those in their 40s and 50s are the most bigoted and prejudiced against the elderly. There is no respect and no understanding. People don't realise or care that older people have done things, seen things, experienced things and still have much to offer. And they have such resilience and strength. When I first met Mr Livingstone, Mrs Torridge and the others in the Twilight Years Rest Home, I saw a bunch of people who just seemed to sit around most of the day. They were drugged and mostly they just sat where they were put.'

'You rescued them,' Mr Jenkins reminded her.

They both concentrated on their cod and chips for a while. Mrs Caldicot found a collection of crunchy, battered bits hidden in a fold of her paper wrapping. She pounced on them.

'Not really,' said Mrs Caldicot, who had been thinking. 'Once they'd stopped taking their damned pills, they mostly rescued themselves.'

'Oh, I disagree,' said Mr Jenkins. 'I disagree very much. You gave them a loving environment and it's that environment which has enabled them to blossom.'

'While we were away, I discovered what a remarkable bunch they are,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'They've all done astonishing things with their lives. I feel quite ordinary and rather ashamed of myself. I spent most of my previous life ironing socks and underpants for Mr Caldicot.'

'Socks? You ironed socks?'

'Oh yes, he insisted on having his socks and underpants ironed. He even insisted that I iron his shoelaces. He always had those flat laces and he said they got creased after they'd been tied.'

Mr Jenkins screwed up the wrapping paper in which his chips had resided and tossed the resulting ball of paper into a waste bin beside their bench.

He sat in silence for a moment and then took his wife's hand. 'You've done the most astonishing thing,' he told her. 'You may not have done too much when you were ironing shoelaces but you have become a trusted, respected leader for a group of people who, above all else, needed a guide,' he reminded her. 'And without your leadership, your guidance and your encouragement, they would all still be sitting in Mr Hawksmoor's rest home staring into space.'

He took Mrs Caldicot's empty wrapper and screwed that into another ball. This time his shot bounced off the rim of the waste basket and ended up on the grass.

'There's no age limit on blossoming or acquiring greatness,' he said. He stood, picked up the screwed up paper and dropped it into the bin.

'I didn't lead them,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Not really. They just sort of followed me.'

'You were an inspiration to them,' insisted her husband. 'That's what real leadership is. And remember, your story has inspired millions of older people to realise that they don't have to accept being bullied and patronised and drugged. You helped all those people understand that just because they are old they don't have to give up, lie down and wait for the undertaker to come and take them away.'

'But it wasn't me who led the way in Paris. It was Mr Twist who had the idea of forming a band. And Mr Livingstone who showed us what to do.'

'But remember that until you took him away from that awful bloody rest home, Mr Livingstone spent most of his days sleeping. When he did wake up, he played a bloody silly cardboard keyboard because that bastard Hawksmoor kept the piano locked up. And until you gave him a home, Mr Twist was living in a cardboard box on a traffic island. You gave all those people renewed hope and opportunity.'

They sat in silence for a while.

'We did have great fun,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I wish you'd seen Mrs Roberts playing the bongo drums. And Mr Hewitt was amazing with his soup spoons!' She laughed as she remembered their concert in the Place des Vosges.

‘I wish I’d been there to see it,’ said Jenkins.

But he knew, and he knew that his wife knew, that if he had been with them in Paris there would have probably been no band. He would have found a way to obtain some money to replace that which had been lost. He would have made a phone call and money would have been sent to a nearby bank.

They both knew that his not being able to go with them had been curiously serendipitous.

‘Oo, I nearly forgot! You will be able to see us in action,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Calvin and Josephine, the two Americans, said they’d send over a copy of Calvin’s film when he’s edited it. He took a huge amount of film. Josephine told me he had probably shot enough to make a TV documentary!’

‘I look forward to seeing that very much,’ said Jenkins. ‘You did great things together. Do you think the band will play again?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Mrs Caldicot with a laugh. ‘No one wanted to play or sing on the train but I have no doubt that the band will be back. We were all feeling a little sad, you know. And I think we’d had such a good time in Paris that we were all a bit frightened that things might fall flat if we tried to resurrect the band on the train.’

‘It was too soon, perhaps?’

‘Exactly. But I have no doubt that the band will be back! Mr Twist was heart-broken when he lost our money but it must have been the most serendipitous financial loss in history! Is that the word I want: serendipitous?’

‘It certainly is,’ said Jenkins.

They sat for a while in comfortable silence.

Two pigeons, attracted by small pieces of food on the floor, came close to their feet. One of the pigeons, braver than the other, attacked half a chip; pecking it, worrying it, shaking it to bits. A huge crow landed on the side of the rubbish basket and dragged out one of the wrappers. Small bits of food fell out. The crow pounced on them.

‘You and I will go to Paris soon,’ promised Jenkins. ‘Just the two of us. We’ll have a romantic weekend with a boat ride on the Seine, dinner in the restaurant on the Eiffel Tower, shopping on the Champs-Élysées.’

‘I’d like that very much. It sounds wonderful!’ murmured Mrs Caldicot.

‘But we will do no gambling,’ insisted Jenkins. ‘We will walk past card sharps without a second look. And there will be no music, I’m afraid. I can’t sing or play any musical instruments. I can’t even whistle!’

‘Definitely no gambling!’ agreed Mrs Caldicot without even a moment’s hesitation. ‘But do you not think I should take Mr Livingstone’s banjo – just in case we need to make a little money?’

‘We will take spare travellers cheques hidden in my shoe. We will not be taking a banjo. There will be no bongo drums, no spoons, no combs with greaseproof paper folded round them and definitely, quite definitely, no jam jars filled with peas.’

‘OK.’

They enjoyed more silence. A squirrel ran across the grass in front of them. It was a beautiful, calm evening

‘Would you like coffee?’ suggested Mr Jenkins.

‘That would be marvellous.’

‘There’s a café still open about a quarter of a mile down the road.’

‘Let’s go home for coffee.’

They stood.

Jenkins picked up the wrapper which the crow had pulled out of the rubbish bin. He allowed what bits of food remained to fall onto the grass. He then screwed it up again and stuffed it back into the bin. He wiped his fingers on a tissue and added the tissue to the bin.

‘What’s your next adventure going to be?’ he asked.

‘Oh good heavens, I don’t want any more adventures!’ said Mrs Caldicot with a laugh. ‘I’m strictly a home bird now.’

Jenkins smiled but said nothing. He knew his wife very well and he knew that the excitement of the trip to Paris had thrilled her. Given a month or two at home she would, he thought, be yearning for a new challenge; a new adventure.

He took Mrs Caldicot by the hand. ‘I do love you,’ he told her. ‘You’re a wonder!’

‘Don’t be an old silly,’ said Mrs Caldicot, squeezing his fingers because she loved it when he said nice things to her.

‘I’m the luckiest girl in the world,’ she thought to herself.

And they went home hand in hand to the sound of Mrs Caldicot quietly singing, ‘I Do Like to Be Beside the Seaside’.

Notes from the author:
If you have enjoyed this book, I would be enormously grateful if you give the book a good rating on Amazon. A good review (however short) really does make a huge difference.

God willing, Mrs Caldicot will be back.

Vernon Coleman

Mrs Caldicot's Oyster Parade
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This is the third novel about Mrs Caldicot. The first two are *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War* and *Mrs Caldicot's Knickerbocker Glory*.

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Mrs Caldicot's Turkish Delight

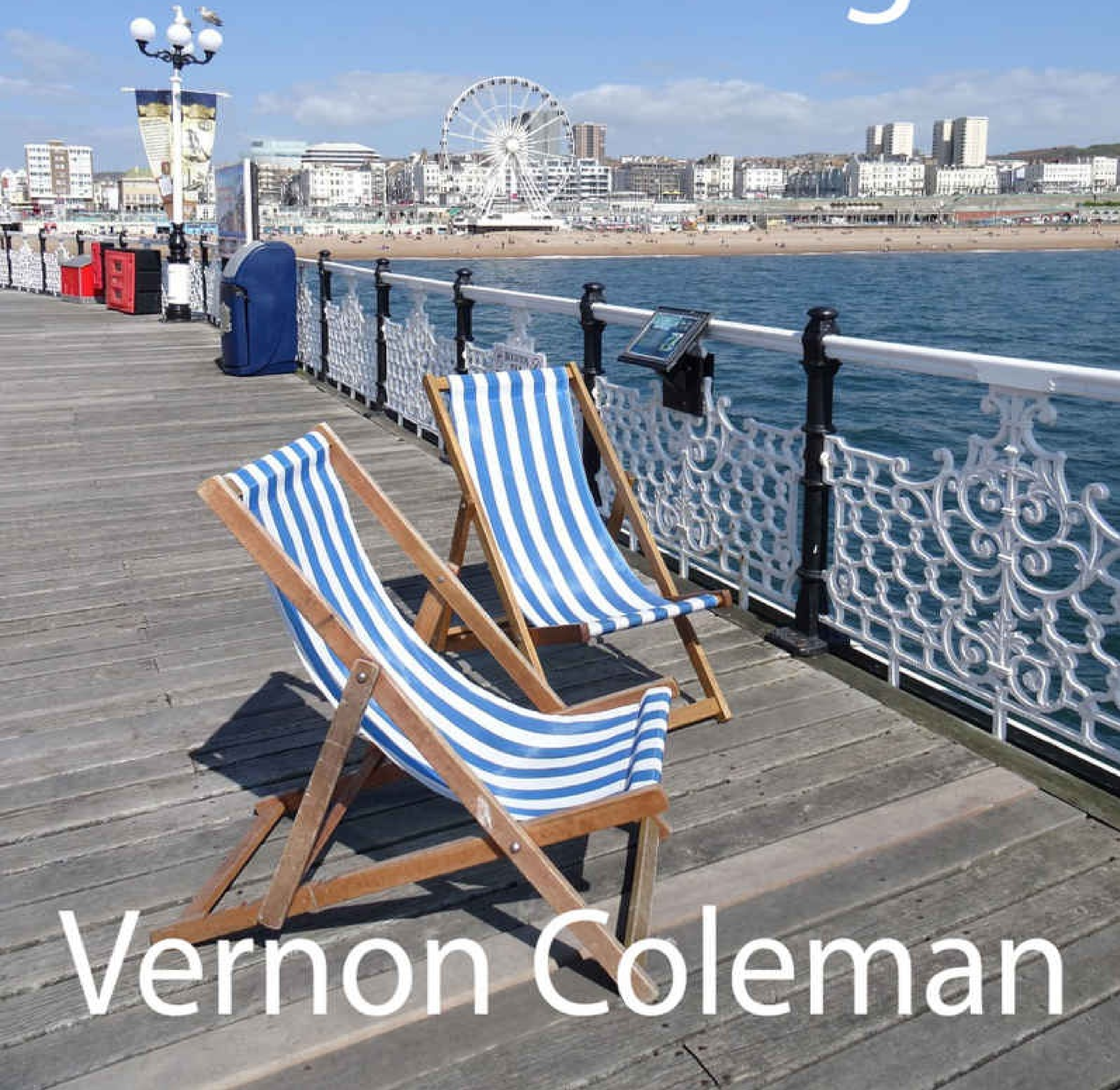

Vernon Coleman

Mrs Caldicot’s Turkish Delight

Vernon Coleman

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Dedication

To Antoinette: Yours for as long as God spares me, and for an eternity thereafter.

Note from Vernon Coleman:
This is the fourth novel about Mrs Caldicot. The first three are *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War*, *Mrs Caldicot's Knickerbocker Glory* and *Mrs Caldicot's Oyster Parade*. For a full list of the books by Vernon Coleman which are currently available please see his author page on Amazon or visit www.vernoncoleman.com.

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Chapter One

It is often said that things tend to happen in threes.

And thus it was for Mrs Caldicot and the residents who had, with her as their guide and leader, escaped the dull tyranny of the Twilight Years Rest Home.

All three things happened at more or less the same time; enlivening what would have otherwise been a rather dull, spring morning.

The first thing that happened was that Mrs Caldicot received a formal letter informing her that the home they all shared, the former Twilight Years Rest Home, was to be compulsorily purchased by a Government quango.

The Government wanted the house because it was planning to use the best part of a £100 billion worth of taxpayers' money to build a multi-billion pound high-speed railway line connecting London and Tidbury Halt.

'Why are they building a superfast line to a station I've never heard of?' a curious Mrs Caldicot asked Jenkins, her much loved husband. 'Do you know anything about it?'

Mrs Caldicot's surprise was entirely justified. It did seem odd that a previously little used railway station and, moreover, one settled in an infrequently visited part of the country, should have been chosen, almost at random so it seemed to outside observers, to be the recipient of so much unexpected largesse. The surprise was enhanced by the fact that it was reliably estimated, by people who make a study of such things, that the new railway line, suitable for high-speed trains, would cut no more than 15 minutes off the journey time between London and Tidbury Halt.

'Tidbury Halt is a very old station,' explained Jenkins. 'Back in 1963, it narrowly escaped the axe when an indefatigable but sadly unromantic Government employee named Dr Beeching decided to tear up any stretch of line that didn't make a profit and to sell off any railway station that didn't earn its keep.'

Although he was now retired, Jenkins had been a Fleet Street editor and he understood how things worked in Britain.

'A lot of people have wondered why such a small and apparently insignificant railway station has been selected for such special treatment, and why a country which is in so much debt is spending such a huge amount of money on such a curious gesture,' continued Jenkins. 'Cutting 15 minutes off a railway journey isn't a huge improvement – especially now that trains on the existing line are equipped with Wi-Fi. Businessmen who feel the need to travel to Tidbury Halt can continue their money making endeavours while sitting on the train.'

Mrs Caldicot cocked her head to one side and looked at her husband without saying anything for a moment. 'But you know something don't you?'

'Well, I've heard the rumour,' admitted Jenkins. 'It concerns the Government and it may be scurrilous.'

'That's all the more reason to share it with me,' insisted Mrs Caldicot. 'Generally speaking, I'm not one who believes in sharing gossip or rumour. But politicians are fair game.'

'Well, it's been repeatedly denied that this apparently quixotic endeavour has anything whatsoever to do with the fact that two senior ministers and a Permanent Under-Secretary of State have country homes very close to Tidbury Halt,' said Jenkins. 'In addition, I have heard it denied, often and loudly, that they have for some time been exasperated by the more or less permanent Friday night queues on the motorway. The word from Whitehall is that it was deemed politically more acceptable, though probably rather more expensive, to do something to improve the railway line rather than to try to widen the motorway connecting London with the village of Tidbury.'

'So the Government is going to buy our house so that they can knock it down, and they want to knock it down so that they can lay down some very expensive railway lines upon which they can run some very fast and extremely expensive trains. And they want to do all that so that two ministers and a civil servant can save fifteen minutes when they scurry off to their country cottages for the weekend?'

'I'm afraid so,' admitted Jenkins. 'Though, I must admit that given the length of time the new line is expected to take to build, the chances are that the three of them will all be retired long before the work is finished.'

Despite the unfairness of the decision to buy her perfectly serviceable house simply in order to knock it down, Mrs Caldicot was surprisingly unconcerned by this apparently disturbing communication from the Government.

She liked the old house, which had that certain style associated with almost all older buildings, and she had long ago got over the unhappy memories it had once held when it had been known as The Twilight Years Rest Home, and managed by the ruthlessly efficient and penny-pinching Mr Muller-Hawksmoor. She was well aware that the house had been built with much better materials, and far more thought, than most modern homes which seemed to have been designed by bureaucrats obsessed more with the need to satisfy unhelpful and largely pointless regulations than to build habitable homes. Indeed, the newly built homes which she had seen had been so shoddy that she thought it would be a miracle if they lasted 20 years before they fell down.

But Mrs Caldicot had long ago accepted that she, like the rest of us who are without power and authority, must live in a world which is, sadly but unavoidably, far more corrupt, oppressive and tyrannical than we might like to think it ought to be. She was old enough to have diluted her idealism with a good dollop of pragmatism.

More importantly perhaps, and certainly more personally, she was not as upset at being forced out of her home as one might have expected since she was rather well aware that the building, an old one, was now in desperate need of a considerable amount of restoration. The central heating boiler had acquired the temperamental idiosyncrasies common among all boilers of a certain age, and the cast iron radiators and pipes, which had been installed in the year when King Edward VII had been thrilled to find his face on every one of the nation's postage stamps, were vast, prone to leak and predisposed to a good deal of disturbing gurgling, most of which seemed to take place in the early hours of the morning. The electrical wiring, last checked in the 1950s, was now also beginning to show its age. It should have been replaced when the house had been made into an officially approved nursing home but the ultimate owners, a large and powerful property company, had not found it difficult to sidestep that particular onerous financial responsibility. The requirements of the local Fire Officer had been quietly shelved at approximately the same time that the Fire Officer's pleasant suburban home had acquired a rather fine new conservatory at a surprisingly reasonable price. The plumbing, like the central heating system, had been installed in Edwardian times, and although the lead pipes were sound in themselves, the junctions and tanks which helped to manage the flow of water around the house were of an age that always resulted in much shaking of heads and sucking in of air when plumbers were called.

And then there was the roof.

Mrs Caldicot preferred not to think about the roof or the dry rot which Jenkins had found growing in the loft. She did not mind the bats, for they generally kept themselves to themselves and were by no means uncongenial tenants, but it is never easy to know that one is sharing one's loft space with dry rot spores, hyphae, mycelia and fruiting bodies.

All of this meant that Mrs Caldicot was not quite as horrified as one might have expected her to be when she received the official letter, sent by registered post so that its receipt could not be denied, informing her that the Government intended to purchase her house.

The coldly written letter, which was addressed to Mrs Caldicot solely, because only her name was on the ownership papers, made it abundantly clear that she had just one month to vacate the property, that she was entitled to appeal (though it was made pretty clear that this would be a waste of time since she would be appealing to the Government against a decision made by the Government) and that she would receive the allocated sum of compensation in six months' time.

There was no indication in the letter of just how Mrs Caldicot and her companions were expected to find accommodation in the interim period, the five months between having her home knocked down and the arrival of the compensation cheque. This was clearly not a problem which the Government felt it needed to address.

Mrs Caldicot's one relief was that the sum offered in compensation, though naturally on the mean side of parsimonious, was enough to pay off the mortgage and satisfy the bank, which was the ultimate owner of nine tenths of the central heating system, the electrical wiring, the roof, the dry rot and the bats.

The second of the three things which had happened that morning, not in itself by any stretch of the imagination a bad thing but certainly one worthy of inclusion in our list of three significant events, was that Jenkins, Mrs Caldicot's husband, had received an invitation to travel to the United States and to spend three weeks giving a series of lectures to media students at Yale University.

Although now retired from his career as an editor of *The Sunday Globe* newspaper, Jenkins had acquired something of a reputation as a lecturer and writer on the principles and practices of journalism. His two books, *The Role of the Editor in Defending the Truth Against Manipulation by Lobbyists and Politicians* and *The Slow and Silent Death of Free Speech and Democracy* were hardly bestsellers but they were considered required reading for media students on both sides of the Atlantic.

Jenkins had spent several years working on a novel but he was beginning to feel that the book he was writing was not the book he really wanted to write or, indeed, one that many people would want to read. It was, he feared, the sort of book that might win laudatory reviews in *The Guardian*, and maybe collect a literary prize or two, but would never win the hearts of any readers. Despite the fact that he thought that a few weeks away from his novel might prove beneficial, Jenkins's first reaction had been to say 'Thank You but No' to the invitation. He really didn't want to travel to foreign parts without Mrs Caldicot by his side, and he knew that she would not want to go anywhere without her residents. Even if they could afford it, he could hardly drag Miss Nightingale, Mrs Peterborough, Mr Livingstone, Mr Hewitt et al to Yale University for three weeks!

But Mrs Caldicot's reaction was quite different.

'What will you do?' asked Jenkins, when Mrs Caldicot had insisted that he should accept the invitation.

‘I’ll start looking for somewhere for us to live!’ replied Mrs Caldicot. ‘The Government has given very little notice so we will have to get a move on.’

‘They should pay far more in compensation!’

‘I agree! But the Government’s valuer doesn’t seem to think the house is worth very much. And since he hasn’t been inside the house he doesn’t know about the problems we’ve been having with the heating, the plumbing, the electrics, the roof or the dry rot. I’m worried that if he’d looked harder he might have thought his compensation offer a little on the high side. And maybe he thinks it isn’t worth much because he knows it’s about to have a new railway line built through the middle of it!’

Mrs Caldicot was not averse to fighting when it mattered, but in this instance she felt that fighting would take a great deal of effort and eventually prove to be disappointingly unproductive. The Government makes a difficult opponent since it has most of the money and, in the final event, the right to send in armed men and tanks if it feels peeved, or suspects that it is being thwarted or provoked.

And then there was the third thing.

When there have been two big things, there is nearly always a third big thing.

Mrs Caldicot was well aware that there is no good, scientific reason for this. But she also knew that it was an inescapable fact of life.

And in this case the third thing was, like the first two things, brought by the postman.

The third thing came in a large brown envelope and had been posted by ‘special delivery’. As a result of this designation it had to be signed for by Mr Livingstone, who was the addressee.

Mr Livingstone did not receive very much mail and he had never before received a letter that had to be signed for, although he had once received a postcard from a friend in New Zealand who had mistakenly put on the wrong sort of stamp. On that occasion, the postman had rung the doorbell and demanded that Mr Livingstone hand over £1 in excess postage. Mr Livingstone had read the card (not difficult since there were only seven words: ‘Arrived safely, having great time, best, Dick’) and had decided that ownership of the card was not worth £1. He had, therefore, said ‘no thank you’ to the postman and the card had duly been taken back to the Post Office to start its long and rather pointless journey back to New Zealand.

That, however, had been some years earlier.

Mr Livingstone was not a man who was greatly troubled by the mails. Occasional letters about his pension were pretty much the extent of his correspondence.

So once the big, brown envelope had been duly signed for and handed over, Mr Livingstone put it on the table and looked at it for a while. He did not expect it to contain good news. His had not, to date, been a life blessed by exceptional good fortune. He did not regard himself as one of those people for whom life always runs smoothly. In shops, the assistants he approached always suddenly found that they had something more important to do than attend to him. In banks and at the Post Office, the ‘Position Closed’ sign would go up the moment he approached. And if, when walking on a pavement, he came face to face with another pedestrian, he was always the one who had to step off into the gutter.

Everyone else in the room gathered round and looked at the packet too.

Even Mrs Peterborough came to have a look.

She had been watching a television programme of which she was extremely fond and the fact that she had dragged herself away to stare at Mr Livingstone’s package was quite a tribute. She liked ‘The Shopping Channel’ because it was there whenever you turned on the television; there was a reliable permanence about it which she found strangely comforting. Even in the middle of the night it was there, just the same as it was in the middle of the day. It was, she suspected, even there on Christmas Day. Most of all, however, Mrs Peterborough liked ‘The Shopping Channel’ because the programmes were never interrupted with advertisements or public service announcements.

‘What do you think it is?’ asked Mr Hewitt, nodding towards the mystery package.

They all knew that Mrs Caldicot had received a letter telling her that the Government was going to buy their home. They really didn’t want any more bad news.

‘I’ve no idea,’ replied Mr Livingstone who had decided that he really wished the packet would disappear.

‘Aren’t you going to open it?’ asked Mrs Peterborough, whose fingers were itching to tear through the packaging. Mrs Peterborough had always found parcels, packets and envelopes irresistible.

‘Later, perhaps,’ said Mr Livingstone, whose natural levels of curiosity had long since abated and had, indeed, shrunk at approximately the same rate that his natural aversion to surprises of any kind had grown. ‘Let’s have a cup of tea, first.’

Even Mrs Peterborough could find nothing to object to about this.

And so the kettle was boiled, the teapot prepared and eventually, some ten minutes later, they all sat down in the living room, added milk and sugar to their cups, as required, and stared again at Mr Livingstone’s packet.

‘I think it’s time to open it now,’ said Mr Livingstone eventually.

There was a communal sigh of relief at this for the other members of the household did not have Mr Livingstone’s apparently unlimited reserves of patience, his willingness to postpone the inevitable or his highly developed lack of curiosity.

But even then the waiting was not over.

First, Mr Livingstone needed to find a knife with which to open the envelope. And then he decided that the paper knife which had been produced was nowhere near sharp enough for the task. A second knife had to be fetched from the kitchen. And then Mr Livingstone suddenly remembered that he had in his pocket a small, silver penknife; a treasure which he had carried with him for most of his life.

And with the aid of the penknife the envelope was finally breached and the contents duly withdrawn and revealed.

‘What does it say?’ demanded Mrs Peterborough, who could hardly contain herself with the excitement of it all. She could not have been more on edge if the packet had been addressed to her.

‘It appears to be from a firm of solicitors,’ said Mr Livingstone.

There was widespread gloom at this announcement.

No one could remember ever receiving any sort of communication from a solicitor which had brought good news. To the residents of the former Twilight Years Rest Home, solicitors had always been the harbingers of doom; the senders of writs and threats and communications which were without prejudice and which demanded action by the morning of the 12th inst at the very latest, if terrible, unimaginable consequences were to be avoided.

But in this case the gloom was soon dispelled.

‘I appear to have inherited a pier,’ announced Mr Livingstone, after he had hurriedly scanned the documents he had been sent.

And if he had just announced that he had been invited to become an astronaut or to ride the favourite in the Grand National there could have scarcely been more surprise among the assembled company.

Chapter Two

'You've been left a what?' asked Mrs Merivale, who hadn't had her ears syringed for nine months and wasn't quite sure that she'd heard properly.

Quietly and confidentially, she rather thought she'd heard that Mr Livingstone had said that someone had left him a pear but that didn't seem very likely and she didn't mention this suspicion. Why, she reasoned to herself silently, would anyone go to all the trouble of involving solicitors and writing out a will and putting in Mr Livingstone's name as a beneficiary just to leave him a pear? Still, she thought, people did do such strange things that you could never really rule anything out these days.

'A pier,' repeated Mr Livingstone.

'Do you mean you're going to be a Lord?' said Mrs Merivale, pleased that she hadn't said anything about the pear. She thought that being a peer was definitely a rather good thing. She didn't in the slightest bit mind having a friend who was entitled to dress up in ermine and decorate his notepaper with a tastefully embossed little coronet.

'No, no,' said Mr Livingstone. 'I've been left a pier. One of those long thin things they have at the seaside. One of those things that enables you to leave the country without going to the trouble of going abroad.'

'Ah,' said Mrs Merivale, understanding at last, feeling a little foolish but now even more relieved that she hadn't aired her thoughts about pears and peers. 'Well, why didn't you say so?'

'Is your pier by the sea?' asked Miss Nightingale.

'It will be very nice if it is,' said Mrs Peterborough, who liked the seaside very much indeed and who was the sort of brave person who would take off her shoes and stockings, tuck up her frock and go for a paddle even if the temperature were close to freezing and the sky full of grey clouds. Paddling and eating whelks were, she believed, things you had to do when you were at the seaside, whether you felt like it not.

Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough were both delighted when they were assured that, although no one was terribly sure precisely where Mr Livingstone's pier was situated, the chances were high that it was somewhere on the English coast and, therefore, almost certainly near the sea.

'That's where they usually put them,' said Mrs Torridge, speaking firmly and knowledgeably. 'They put them beside the seaside because that's where the seagulls always congregate.'

'Why's that?' asked Mr Merivale, who was, as usual, sitting next to his wife.

'I don't think I know,' admitted Mrs Torridge. 'I suppose they like the sea. That would be why they're called seagulls. Piers always have seagulls. Seagulls, candyfloss, kiss-me-quick hats and those lovely, soft ice creams served in cones.'

'I went fishing on a pier when I was seven,' said Mr Merivale. 'I can't remember where the pier was but it had dodgem cars at the end. I spent all day sitting on the pier with my legs dangling over the edge and when we went back to the boarding house for our tea, my shoulders were so badly burnt that I couldn't put my shirt on. The landlady wouldn't let me into the dining room without a shirt so I had to eat my dinner in our bedroom. She said that if she made an exception for me no one knew where it would end. I remember she made a speech about standards and my mother got very upset. She wanted to leave and find somewhere else but my father said we couldn't leave because we'd paid for the week in advance.'

'Did you catch any fish?' asked Mrs Torridge.

'No. I didn't. Actually, I don't remember ever seeing anyone catch any fish. To be frank, I didn't really take much interest in the fishing. I just liked sitting on the pier with my legs dangling down over the edge. It felt very daring. At one point, a chap pointed out that the end of my line was lying on the mud. The tide had gone out. I don't suppose that would have helped much with the fishing. I think the pier was maybe at Weston-super-Mare. The tide there goes out for miles.' He stopped for a moment, clearly thinking. 'Where do you think the sea goes when the tide goes out?'

'Maybe it comes in somewhere else,' suggested Mrs Peterborough.

'On the piers which I remember they always had a kiosk where you could buy little windmills which whizzed round and round in the breeze. Or if you blew on them,' said Mr Williams. 'I liked those very much.'

'And Turkish Delight in wooden boxes, and peppermint rock shaped like pebbles, and big shells which you could take home to use as an ashtray, and boxes of fudge with a photograph of the pier on the front,' added Mr Twist.

Mrs Caldicot closed her eyes and smiled. 'I liked the Turkish Delight the best. You opened the little, wooden box and there was a layer of greaseproof paper. You lifted up the paper and the cubes of Turkish Delight lay there in rows, all covered in icing sugar. There were always little piles of icing sugar in the bottom of the box and when you'd eaten the Turkish Delight you could wet your finger and dip it in the sugar.'

Some people, notably cynical millennials, the sort who are full to the brim with so many prejudices and so much narrow mindedness that there is no room for any imagination, do not believe that things were ever as they are now said to have once been, and that nothing could have ever been better than it is now. But Mrs Caldicot and her friends knew that what they remembered was nothing more nor less than the truth; for it was their history and it was their world before the Great God of Progress destroyed the past and invented the future.

'Who the devil has left you a pier?' Mr Hewitt asked his good friend Mr Livingstone. Mr Hewitt was having one of those rare days when his practical nature overwhelmed the side of him which leaned towards the fanciful.

'I appear to have had an Uncle Bertram,' said Mr Livingstone. 'I don't remember having had an Uncle Bertram but a firm of solicitors called Standfast, Angel and Barrowclough seem convinced that I did and they don't appear to be the sort of people who go in for practical jokes.'

He read a little more of the letter he had received.

And there was a good deal of it for, like most members of the legal profession, Standfast, Angel and Barrowclough were not keen on using one word when 27 could be just as easily employed.

In addition to the letter itself, which took up two pages of foolscap, a paper size which no one had seen for years, there was a plan of the pier concerned and a map of the town of Penmouth showing the pier's precise location. The pier, and a good sized portion of land at the landward end of the pier, had been carefully outlined in red ink so that there could be no doubt whatsoever about the location and extent of the property concerned.

'So, does it say where it is?' asked Ruth.

'It appears to be in a town called Penmouth,' replied Mr Livingstone, still studying the letter from the solicitors. 'And Penmouth seems to be in the county of Devon.'

Mr Roxdale said he thought he'd heard of Penmouth and Mr Twist said he thought it was in South Devon rather close to the well-known resort of Torquay. Mrs Torridge said she was absolutely sure it was in North Devon, possibly somewhere near Bideford, while Mrs Peterborough said she was pretty sure the solicitors had got it completely wrong and that Penmouth was in Norfolk, probably somewhere near Aldeburgh.

Mrs Merivale, keen to get involved, said she thought there was somewhere called Yarmouth on the Isle of Wight and asked no one in particular if the solicitors could have possibly made a mistake and misspelt both the name and the location of the pier. She said she had heard of something like this happening before. She said that a firm of solicitors had written to tell a neighbour of hers that she'd inherited a house in Stratford-on-Avon and the neighbour had been terribly disappointed when she'd discovered that there had been a slight typographical error and that the house was really in Stockton-on-Tees, doubtless a very nice place but quite not the same thing at all, especially when you've already set your heart on picnics on the banks of the River Avon and evenings spent at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre. Mrs Merivale said her neighbour had been so upset by the whole thing that she'd gone into a decline. She had never visited the house in Stockton-on-Tees but had instructed the solicitors to sell it on her behalf.

A little research, done by Ruth with the aid of the search engine on her mobile telephone, confirmed that Penmouth was a small West Country town, hardly much bigger than a village, which was situated in the southern part of the county of Devon and which sprawled comfortably at the mouth of the River Pen. The town had apparently once been a favourite resort with Victorians, especially those keen to escape London's heat and bustle during the months of July and August and eager to avoid the capital's Christmas bustle, and the inevitable pea soup smogs, in December.

The town was, it seemed from the photographs that Mr Williams managed to find in an encyclopaedia he had taken from the bookshelf, more than adequately supplied with expensive, well-built homes in standard, solid Victorian stone and brick. These were interspersed with a collection of fine Arts and Craft houses, all furnished with fancy roofs, delicate wooden balconies, massive chimneys and all the other architectural folderols popularised by William Morris and his acolytes.

Mr Williams reported that according to the encyclopaedia, it was common during the reigns of Queen Victoria and King Edward for the mothers of well-off families, together with the children and the servants, to move to Penmouth while the husbands stayed in London and moved into rooms at their clubs for a few weeks.

And finally, Mr Williams reported, with no little sadness in his voice, that most of the grand houses had been converted into boarding houses or guest houses. The ones which hadn't been converted into boarding houses had been turned into flats and bed sitting rooms and were rented out to holidaymakers.

Still, Penmouth may have been way past its prime but, as Gertrude Stein would have doubtless said, a pier is a pier is a pier.

Chapter Three

Most of us have happy memories of piers.

They bring back childhood memories of bucket and spade seaside holidays; of sandcastles, of sunny days that seem to last for ever but never last quite long enough; of pink, sticky rock; of picnics on the sand; of using a simple hand line to fish for mackerel from the pier; of sudden, unexpected rainbursts and cheap plastic macs; of shops packed with colourful buckets and spades and beachballs and of fish and chips wrapped in newspaper.

For honeymoon couples of a certain age, the ones who chose to spend their honeymoons at the English seaside rather than somewhere foreign, distant and expensive, seaside piers bring back memories of strolling arm in arm into the sunset; of giggling at the archaic, and remarkably innocent, black and white pictures in the 'What the Butler Saw' machine; of huddling together in a shelter to escape from a sudden downpour; of buying matching Kiss Me Quick hats and finding the courage to wear them; of sharing a dodgem car on the funfair; of smiling at old aged pensioners slumped in their deckchairs, drinking tea from thick, white, china cups and trying to catch the crumbs while eating chocolate covered digestive biscuits.

And of quietly wondering what life will have to offer in the years to come; the years until they too are of an age to settle comfortably together; content to watch the world trundle by.

Those were simpler days.

A holiday away from everything meant just that.

You could, in those days, be much further away from your daily worries while sitting on a pier just a few hundred miles from home than you could today while sitting on a beach in the Bahamas or Bali.

Mr Williams, who had pulled an encyclopaedia from the bookcase, suddenly yelped with excitement. 'Did you say that your pier was in Penmouth?' he asked Mr Livingstone.

Mr Livingstone didn't hesitate. 'Yes,' he said confidently. 'Penmouth! And Penmouth is in Devon.'

When you've just become the proud owner of your first pier you damned well know where it is.

'Well, it's mentioned here in the encyclopaedia,' said Mr Williams. 'It seems that you're the new owner of a famous pier. The encyclopaedia says that a Dr Ignaz Hessyan recommended sea bathing at Penmouth in 1793 and it was as a result of a series of articles which the good Dr Hessyan wrote for the *Morning Post* newspaper that the town first became popular with holidaymakers. The encyclopaedia says that local hoteliers built a Winter Gardens and a Hydro and that the pier was built by a consortium of local businessmen in 1822. The Winter Gardens were turned into a hotel in 1934 and the Hydro is now a car park but the pier remains.'

And at this point the questions about the pier came thick and fast. Indeed, they came so thickly and so quickly that it was difficult to discern who had asked what.

'How long is it?'

'Does it have amusements?'

'Does it have one of those little trains that chug up and down carrying passengers from one end to the other?'

'Can we go fishing off the side and catch mackerel?'

'If it does have one of those little trains do you think I could drive it occasionally?'

And last, but certainly not least: 'When can we go and see it?'

But it was Mr Livingstone's next statement, culled from the First Epistle of Messrs Standfast, Angel and Barrowclough that attracted the greatest amount of attention, particularly from Mrs Caldicot who had, since opening her own communication from the Government, been wondering where she could find a house big enough to home herself, Jenkins and a dozen good companions.

'There appears to be a hotel stuck on the landward end of it,' announced Mr Livingstone with a mixture of surprise and delight.

'A hotel! How big is it?' asked Mrs Caldicot who was now doubly excited by Mr Livingstone's inheritance.

'My new best friend, the estimable Mr Roland Canterbury, of the equally estimable firm of Standfast, Angel and Barrowclough, has kindly enclosed a photograph and a plan,' said Mr Livingstone. He opened the plan he had been sent and studied it carefully. 'On the first floor there appear to be 20 bedrooms, an assortment of bathrooms, a kitchen and a room labelled BallR. On the ground floor there is a ticket office, a souvenir shop and a café selling fish and chips and cups of tea.' He looked across at Mrs Caldicot. 'There are enough rooms for us to move in and live there!' he said.

Mrs Caldicot looked at him to see if he was serious.

He was.

'Do you think so?' she asked, hardly daring to believe that their misfortune had already been counterbalanced by matching good fortune.

'Absolutely!' said Mr Livingstone, excitedly. 'We can all live on the pier! Can you imagine anything more exciting?'

'I think the BallR will probably be a 'ballroom',' said Mr Hewitt, who had been looking over his friend's shoulder. 'There's an asterisk and a bit here, at the bottom of the plan, which explains that it was formerly used by a local dancing academy.'

'Golly,' said Mrs Roberts, who was impressed. 'You've got your own ballroom.'

'I've never known anyone who owned a ballroom,' said Miss Nightingale, who was not alone in this.

'I've never known anyone who owned a pier,' said Mrs Peterborough whose absence of experience in this area was also not unique. Indeed, it was quickly agreed by the assembled company, that no one present had ever even known anyone who had known anyone who had owned a pier. All this made Mr Livingstone feel very privileged indeed.

'When I was a girl I met a boy on a pier in Brighton,' said Mrs Torridge. 'We were both 16 and we thought we were in love for ever. His name was Eric and he used a lot of Brylcream on his hair. Every day we sat side by side in deckchairs on the pier. I remember the deckchairs were made of faded green canvas. We ate chips, ice creams and cockles with loads of vinegar and we sat there all day long. We spent the entire holiday just sitting beside each other because we thought that was what people did when they were in love.'

'What happened to him?' asked Miss Nightingale.

'At the end of the week we both went home. Even though I was 16 and thought I was in love, I think I knew it was over. I'd been so happy that I cried and cried and cried all the way home. He worked in a warehouse in Bolton and I was still at school in Dudley. I sent him several letters but he wasn't much of a letter writer. In fact he could only just write his name, poor fellow. His sister had to read my letters to him and then write down his replies to send to me. It wasn't a terribly romantic way to conduct a correspondence and eventually it all sort of fizzled out. It was very sad at the time but it was a wonderful week.' Mrs Torridge stopped for a moment, deep in thought. 'It was the very best holiday of my life until that holiday we all had in Paris. The one when Mr Twist lost our money to those crooks and we all went busking to earn money for our food. That was the best holiday of my life. I enjoyed that very much indeed.'

Mrs Caldicot, who had been listening, looked across to where Mr Twist was sitting. She was relieved to see that he was talking to Mr Williams and hadn't heard what Mrs Torridge had said about him losing their money.

'Does owning a pier mean that you're very rich?' asked Ruth, who was not an avaricious girl, and not greedy for money for its own sake, but who, at the age of 18 going on 19, already knew enough about life to know that riches can often bring more fun, more adventure and more good times than poverty and who was, therefore, perfectly prepared to admit that if offered a choice of the two options she would, generally speaking, opt for the one involving riches rather than the one which didn't.

'I have no idea,' said Mr Livingstone, who was still rather overwhelmed by the whole thing and still striving to accustom himself that whereas he had, only that morning, woken up as a 70 something former Bomber Command hero and keen musician, but nevertheless entirely pier-less, he now appeared to be one of that very select group of individuals able to describe themselves as pier owners. This was quite an adjustment to make for a man who had not yet properly digested his breakfast bacon and egg. (Two slices of crispy bacon, egg slightly runny, served with two slices of white toast and a half pint mug of tea.)

The fact is that Mr Livingstone had reached an age when he preferred that surprises, if they had to come at all, to come a little later in the day and preferably not at mealtimes or within, say, three quarters of an hour of their conclusion.

'Good heavens!' cried Mr Williams, startling them all with the suddenness of his exposition. He held up the encyclopaedia he was studying. 'It says here that Penmouth was one of Jane Austen's favourite holiday resorts. She was enormously fond of the South Devon and Dorset coasts and she and her family were regular visitors. She was known to have visited Dawlish, Sidmouth and Teignmouth in Devon, and Lyme Regis in Dorset. And she visited Penmouth at least three times. The vicar of Penmouth was apparently one of her father's favourite pupils.'

'I've been to Lyme Regis,' said Mrs Peterborough. 'My parents used to take us there every summer. It's very pretty. We stayed in a cottage which had the lavatory at the bottom of the garden. It was full of spiders and I was terrified of them.'

'Jane Austen's father was a vicar,' continued Mr Williams, who was now quite excited. 'And he took in apprentice vicars from time to time – including one who later became the vicar of Penmouth. It says here that literary historians believe that Miss Austen's unfinished novel *Sanditon* was almost certainly based on her visit to Penmouth. Her last visit to Penmouth was in the late summer of 1816. She was already ill and the family hoped that a visit to her favourite seaside resort might help improve her health. She seemed to have made something of a recovery because she started work on *Sanditon* in January 1817.'

'I don't think I know that book,' said Mrs Caldicot who had been an admirer of Jane Austen and the Bronte sisters since she'd been a girl.

'She never finished writing *Sanditon*,' said Jenkins. 'She worked on it for a couple of months but died in the summer of 1817 – June or July I think it was. I don't think she completed more than around 50 pages.'

'It was July 18th, 1817,' said Mr Williams, reading from the encyclopaedia. 'Good heavens – the poor girl was only 41 when she died.'

They all agreed that this was no age at all. And this was perhaps not surprising for if Ruth and Mrs Roberts were excluded from the equation the average age of the people in the room was considerably closer to 80 than it was to 70.

'Who was Jane Austen?' asked Ruth.

'She was a writer,' explained Mr Williams. 'A very famous English writer.'

'She wrote…er…books,' said Mr Livingstone, who seemed not quite able to think of any titles.

'*Pride and Prejudice*,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'That was one of hers.'

'Oh!' said Ruth. 'I didn't know you meant she wrote films. I haven't seen it but my Mum watches it whenever it's on the television. It's all old-fashioned, isn't it? It's one of her favourite films. My Mum will be thrilled. Do you think Mrs Austen would have visited the pier?'

'No, I'm afraid she wouldn't have been able to, dear,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'She died over 50 years before the pier was built.'

'Golly!' said Ruth, clearly surprised. 'I didn't know they were making films then. The one my Mum was watching was in colour too. That's amazing. It's a pity she couldn't visit the pier. But do you think other famous people would have visited it?'

'Oh yes,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. 'There's a theatre at the end of the pier so all sorts of famous people would have performed there.'

'Pop groups?'

'Oh, quite probably,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Almost certainly, I would say.'

'I've found it!' interrupted Mr Merivale, with considerable excitement.

While the others had been discussing Jane Austen's connection with the town of Penmouth, Mr Merivale had pulled a 1998 road atlas out of the same bookcase from whence Mr Williams had obtained his encyclopaedia.

Content in the knowledge that, although some roads might have been moved, closed, extended or added to, and that county boundaries may well have been moved or done away with altogether, there was a better than evens chance that wherever Penmouth had been in 1998 it had probably not moved very much, and was, indeed, most probably more or less in the same place now as it had been then.

Everyone, including Mr Livingstone, crowded round the map, anxious to see just where Penmouth was situated.

'Look!' said Miss Peterborough. 'It's right on the coast.'

'So it will almost certainly be near the sea!' said Miss Nightingale, excitedly.

'There, I told you it wasn't in Norfolk!' said Mrs Peterborough, whose memory had good and bad moments. Even Mrs Peterborough admitted that her memory wasn't all what it had been in its earlier days. If offered for sale, it would have had to be described with some caution, and some imaginative text, if strict advertising rules were not to be breached.

Chapter Four

Two days later, Mr Livingstone, accompanied by Mrs Caldicot, caught a train to Bristol where the solicitors Standfast, Angel and Barrowclough had their offices.

Neither Mrs Caldicot nor Mr Livingstone could remember ever having visited Bristol before though Mr Livingstone said he could remember flying over it during the War.

'There's an airfield nearby,' he said. 'We used it during the War though I seem to remember that it was often rather a foggy place.' He paused, and for a moment wandered back to the early 1940s. 'I remember that we used to think it was a silly place to put an airfield,' he continued. 'The fog meant that half the time we couldn't take off and the rest of the time we couldn't land.'

'I think it's a proper airport now,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'When we all went to Paris I remember looking at the brochure and seeing that they offered flights from Bristol Airport.'

'We had good fun on that trip,' said Mr Livingstone.

'We certainly did,' agreed Mrs Caldicot.

'I'm glad we went on the train,' said Mr Livingstone. 'That was quite an adventure in itself wasn't it?'

Mrs Caldicot laughed. 'I suppose it was a bit of an adventure,' she said. She remembered saying a silent prayer of thanks when they finally got through the customs post in London without being arrested.

An 'adventure' it certainly had been.

'Does Ruth still hear from that nice, French lad she met in Paris? The one with the accordion?'

'Oh yes. She and Jean-Jacques speak to each other every day and they're forever sending each other little messages on their telephones.'

Jenkins had given Mrs Caldicot a mobile telephone but she was allowing herself to become accustomed to new technology bit by bit and still wasn't entirely comfortable with the idea of being able to use the phone to write messages. It seemed odd to be able to make and receive telephone calls while out shopping. She hadn't said anything to Jenkins but to her it didn't seem entirely natural to be able to make telephone calls without a wire dangling from the telephone.

'I'm pleased about that,' said Mr Livingstone. 'That young chap was very good on that accordion of his,' said Mr Livingstone. 'Especially for a French person.'

Mr Livingstone thought for a moment. 'Doesn't it cost a fortune to telephone foreign parts?'

'Apparently not,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'They use some clever internet thing that means they don't have to pay a penny for their calls.'

'Good heavens!' said Mr Livingstone. 'Is that legal? I do hope it's legal.'

'Oh, I'm sure it is,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Ruth's a good girl. She wouldn't do anything naughty. Jenkins says it's terribly easy to do. He's going to show me what I have to do so that we can talk to each other when he's in America.'

She frowned, suddenly very sad at the thought of her husband being away on the other side of the Atlantic. She hated it when they were parted but knew that sometimes it could not be avoided.

At the Temple Meads railway station, Mrs Caldicot and Mr Livingstone queued and took a taxi driven by a morose fellow who had a nose which would have been more at home on a larger head, and skin the colour of a very ripe tomato.

It turned out that the offices they were visiting were no more than a five minute walk from the station but the city's traffic system meant that the journey required a 20 minute drive.

Mr Standfast, Mr Angel and Mr Barrowclough, and whatever aides and assistants they had to help them with their work, laboured in a building which looked as if it had been built, painted and decorated in the middle of the 19th century, and then abandoned and left to its own devices. It may well have been much loved when it had been built, but since those long ago days the love had not always been generously bestowed and the building was, to be polite, beginning to show its age. The brickwork and stonework were crumbling and had been eaten away by acid rain and the whole structure looked as if it were held together only by the soot which had been deposited upon it by steam trains chugging into and out of the railway station. The building's wooden window and door frames, which had long since lost most or all of their paint, were grey and wrinkled with deep cracks, and appeared to be still in situ only because they didn't have the energy to go somewhere else.

A receptionist, whom Mrs Caldicot felt had probably been with the building since it was opened, sat behind a telephone switchboard which appeared to be dependent upon old-fashioned plugs and long wires. She was very tiny, shrunken almost, and constantly wheezed and coughed. She peered at them through rheumy eyes as though she were thinking of buying them and trying to assess their value. She was, thought Mrs Caldicot, a woman who had seen more than everything, several times, and was now quite beyond surprise, beyond horror and beyond despair. She was a strangely dignified ruin of a woman, beyond every imaginable emotion.

She was there, secure behind her switchboard and her memories, quietly comfortable and confident because when life holds no more terrors what is there to be startled by?

When Mr Livingstone had stated his name and his business, she directed them to a narrow, wooden staircase with a wobbly wave of a very weary hand. There was, she said without apology, no lift.

Mr Canterbury, the solicitor who had written to Mr Livingstone, had a small, rather dusty office on the fourth floor. The stairs were narrow, twisting and very badly lit. The only light came from very occasional small windows; so narrow that they reminded Mrs Caldicot of the slits built in castle walls so that the residents within could fire arrows at the marauders outside.

The staircase ended in a small landing; the floorboards of which were uneven, like pond water on a windy day, and which felt rickety and rather unsafe. Both Mr Livingstone and Mrs Caldicot trod delicately, and with considerable caution, lest they go through the creaking, unstable boards and unintentionally end up back on the floor below. In front of them there was a single door. The upper half of the door was glazed in the sort of opaque glass usually preferred when glazing bathrooms, and the glass had the name of the firm printed on it in gold, capital letters.

When there was no response to his knock, Mr Livingstone opened the door and they entered. The first person they saw was a skeletal woman in her mid to late sixties. She was the only occupant of the room and she was standing facing them, holding a bundle of files in her arms. She wore glasses, squinted and appeared to have had a cigarette stub permanently glued to her lower lip. She appeared to be a secretary of some kind, working in an office which was packed with files and tottering stacks of paper. The lines around her eyes suggested that the squinting was permanent and was a result of cigarette smoke rather than a need for stronger spectacle lenses. A plume of smoke curled upwards from the cigarette and, not surprisingly, the ceiling had that yellow hue that years of tobacco smoke can create. The woman wore a dress in a style that had gone out of fashion in the 1970s, and when she finally moved to put the files down on top of another heap of files, she shuffled about in a pair of fluffy, blue slippers. She also wore an old-fashioned flowered pinafore – the sort which hangs from the neck, ties behind and has a large pocket at the front. The pocket was clearly half full of something though Mrs Caldicot could not see what it was. The woman stared at them and opened her mouth but did not speak. The cigarette remained in place, stuck to the woman’s lower lip.

Mrs Caldicot thought that the secretary looked as if she had always been the same age. She did not look like a woman who had ever been seven-years-old, skipping and cuddling dolls; never been 16, shy and giggling at boys; never been 22 and courting; never even been 29 worrying about her 30th birthday. She had, thought Mrs Caldicot, the look of a woman who been born wrinkled, short-sighted, squinting, wearing a shapeless cardigan and with a fag (never for her could it be called a cigarette) stuck fast to a lower lip. Mrs Caldicot did not think any of this in an unkindly or critical way.

The room was dominated by two large, grey filing cabinets upon which there were yet more files. There were files everywhere. This was not a paperless office. Mrs Caldicot couldn’t help looking around to see if there was a fire extinguisher anywhere. There wasn’t. An old-fashioned wooden desk bore an old-fashioned sit up and beg typewriter, a Bakelite telephone left over from a less hectic era, and more old-fashioned files and bundles of paper. There were no signs of computers, printers or other modern distractions. It was not the sort of environment where mobile telephones buzzed or vibrated. The secretary did not look like the sort of woman who was likely to be a fan of social media. The only sign of modern office equipment was an open box of carbon paper balanced on top of a dozen, thick cardboard folders.

It seemed incomprehensible to Mrs Caldicot and Mr Livingstone that the woman could possibly know the location of anything but, as if often the case, this proved to be an entirely baseless assumption. The moment Mr Livingstone announced his name, and the reason for his visit, and showed her the letter he had received, the woman lifted the box of carbon paper and half a dozen files and found a pink, cardboard folder which bore a label carrying the hand printed words: ‘Estate of Bertram Livingstone Esq– Decd’.

Saying nothing but indicating with a wave of the hand that they should follow her, the woman led the way into an office where a huge man sat behind a monstrous desk paring his fingernails with the long blade of a large pocket knife. To the man’s left there lay a large piece of greaseproof paper upon which lay part of a loaf of crusty bread, two tomatoes and the remains of a piece of cheese. There was also a bottle of port and an empty wine glass that, by the dregs within it, had clearly been used rather recently.

‘This is Mr Canterbury,’ said the woman, introducing the man behind the desk. She waved her hand in the direction of Mr Livingstone and Mrs Caldicot. ‘These are the Estate of Bertram Livingstone deceased.’ She then put the Bertram Livingstone file down on Mr Canterbury's desk. She had some difficulty finding a space not occupied by files, bread, cheese, tomatoes or port wine.

Mrs Caldicot rather suspected that Mr Canterbury probably brought his luncheon with him and ate and drank at his desk so that he only had to climb the staircase once a day. She didn't blame him. It was the sort of staircase that people climb when they want to take exercise and Mr Canterbury did not look the sort of man who thought much of exercise.

Mr Canterbury looked up, stopped what he was doing, carefully folded the blade back into his penknife and laid it down on his desk as though it were a treasured heirloom which, indeed, it may have been. He nodded at his two visitors, in acknowledgement of their presence. Mrs Caldicot thought he looked rather grand, very old-fashioned and intimidating.

Like the outer office, Mr Canterbury's room was full of paper.

Three of the four walls had shelves which were stuffed with row upon row of neatly bound law books and the carpet was pretty well covered with towering and unstable stacks of files, briefs and miscellaneous papers. Some of the piles of paper were tied together with the sort of red ribbon which lawyers traditionally prefer, and some were tied with what looked like common or garden string. There wasn't enough carpet visible to tell what colour it was or whether it had any sort of pattern. It was an office which would have made a perfect set for any film company looking to make a movie based upon one of the many novels by Dickens which features a lawyer or a legal office. Two upholstered chairs, which looked as though they had once been members of a dining room set, sat waiting for occupation.

'Come in and sit down,' said Mr Canterbury.

As Mrs Caldicot sat down, she thought that Mr Canterbury was even larger than huge; he was a man who clearly regarded food as something more than just fuel for the machine. It was impossible to see how tall he was for he did not lift himself out of his chair when they entered, but merely waved a hand towards the two chairs on the visitors' side of his desk. The front and top of his head were both bald but at the sides and back there were copious quantities of grey curls. He wore pince nez with a gold frame, a dark-grey pinstripe suit with a broad chalk stripe, a stiff, celluloid wing collar and a hand-tied, black bow tie. Mrs Caldicot thought he was probably in his 70s but although he could have been older he was probably not younger.

Mrs Caldicot, turning to thank the secretary for showing them into the solicitor's office now saw that the bulge in the pocket of the woman's pinafore was caused by two kittens. Their heads peered out, like baby kangaroos peeking out of their mother's pouch. Mrs Caldicot liked cats very much but when she moved to stroke the kittens, the secretary hurried away as though protecting them. There was no sign of the mother of the two kittens though there were plenty of places where she could have been sleeping.

Mrs Caldicot and Mr Livingstone both sat down.

'You're Mr Livingstone,' said Mr Canterbury to Mr Livingstone.

Mr Livingstone confirmed that he was indeed Mr Livingstone.

'Do we have any identification?'

Mr Livingstone produced the letter he had been sent and then rummaged around his pocket and offered, as supplementary evidence, the railway ticket he had used for the journey to Bristol. Mr Canterbury waved away the letter but accepted the railway ticket which he examined carefully.

'This does not have your name upon it,' the solicitor pointed out, unnecessarily.

'No, but it proves that I came from the place to which your letter was sent,' replied Mr Livingstone.

'Indeed it does,' agreed Mr Canterbury. He sighed, nodded and handed the used ticket back to Mr Livingstone. He then looked at Mrs Caldicot. 'And are we safe in assuming that you are Mrs Livingstone?'

'Not safe at all,' said Mr Livingstone. 'This is Mrs Caldicot.'

'Actually, my name is Mrs Jenkins,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'My apologies,' said Mr Livingstone, who still thought of Mrs Caldicot as Mrs Caldicot.

Mr Canterbury frowned and appeared to be a little confused. 'Are you cohabiting?' he asked Mr Livingstone. 'Do you live together?'

'Oh yes,' said Mr Livingstone. 'There are twelve of us, plus Mrs Caldicot and Mr Jenkins.'

'Twelve of you?'

'Plus Mrs Caldicot and Mr Jenkins.'

'And who, pray, is Mr Jenkins?'

'That's Mrs Caldicot's husband.'

'Her common-law husband?'

'No, we're properly married,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'We had confetti and cake and someone tied a horseshoe and some old tin cans onto the back bumper of Mr Jenkins's motor car. It took us ages to untie them all.'

'That was Mr Hewitt,' said Mr Livingstone.

'We thought it was,' said Mrs Caldicot, looking at Mr Livingstone.

Mr Canterbury sighed the deep sigh of a man who long ago realised that life regularly offers up far too many complexities for any man to hope to understand even a small proportion of them. 'Are we safe in assuming that Mrs Caldicot aka Mrs Jenkins is cognisant?'

Mr Livingstone stared blankly at Mr Canterbury.

'Mrs Caldicot aka Mrs Jenkins knows about the bequest? She is fully cognisant?'

'Oh yes,' Mr Livingstone nodded. 'Definitely.'

'And you are comfortable with her presence here today?'

'Oh yes, definitely. She is fully cognisant.'

'Excellent.'

'May I ask you something?' asked Mr Livingstone.

Mr Canterbury, seemingly surprised by this, frowned, blinked and nodded.

'Where are Mr Angel, Mr Standfast and Mr Barrowclough? I didn't see any sign of them having offices here.'

'Mr Angel passed away in 1951 and Mr Barrowclough ran away with the counter girl from Waverly's the tobacconists in 1962. We have no idea where he is now.'

'And Mr Standfast?'

'Mr Angel and Mr Barrowclough started the firm after the Second World War. They felt at the time that having three partners sounded more substantial than having just two. They felt that 'Angel and Barrowclough' made them sound like a chain of shoe shops or a provincial dentist. They wanted gravitas and so they invented Mr Standfast, using a name they took from a novel by John Buchan.'

'So now there's just you?'

'Indeed that is so. Apart from Miss Ball, whom you have met, and who is our secretary, we work alone. But we have always felt comfortable in working under the aegis of the original triumvirate. Does that satisfy your curiosity?'

'Absolutely,' said Mr Livingstone. 'Thanks very much. It just puzzled me. I hope you don't mind my asking.'

'Not at all. Not at all. We congratulate you, sir, on your perspicacity. You are the first person in two decades to have queried the absence of my partners.' Mr Canterbury shuffled his substantial bulk in his chair, looked down at the unopened file relating to Mr Bertram Livingstone, and then continued.

'As you will know from our letter to you, Mr Bertram Livingstone was your uncle. Did you know that you had an uncle?'

Mr Livingstone shook his head. 'I'm afraid I didn't know I had an uncle Bertram. I've never heard of him.'

'Mr Livingstone, your uncle, was, we think it is fair to say, an unusual man of slightly eccentric tastes and interests. We met him only once, when he drew up his will. He was a memorable man if not a particularly remarkable one. He never married or, as far as we are aware, had any relationships of note. He had few friends and told us that he had spent much of his life in an old caravan which was permanently ensconced, sequestered indeed, in a distant corner of the car park of 'The Wounded Soldier', a public house situated in the outskirts of a town called Walsall which used to be in Staffordshire but which is, we believe, now to be found in the West Midlands. One assumes, one hopes, that the town itself has remained static but that its apparent migration is a result of one of those boundary readjustments which bureaucrats are fond of making from time to time. Mr Livingstone paid for his parking spot by doing odd jobs in and around the licensed premises and his evenings were spent in the public bar of 'The Wounded Soldier' where he passed the time playing dominoes, cribbage and other games popular among those who found darts and bar billiards too energetic for their taste.'

'You seem to remember him well,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'We refreshed our memory by reading the file before we wrote to Mr Livingstone,' explained Mr Canterbury. 'And he was, as we have said, a memorable man. He told us that he won the Penmouth Pier in a game of dominoes some twenty three years ago. He then moved out of his caravan and subsequently lived on the pier until his death. He was a solitary man, something of a recluse we understand, and the pier was the only property of value he left behind. There was a small amount of money in a current account but sadly that has all gone in funeral and legal expenses and your uncle left nothing else in the way of chattels. He made a will in 1998, leaving all his worldly goods to his brother, your father, but sadly, as you are no doubt aware, the beneficiary of that will died in 1987 and it is to be presumed that your uncle did know of this sad event. If he ever did become cognisant then he did not choose to update his will. The result is that the pier comes to you, Mr Livingstone. You were his sole surviving relative and are therefore the sole beneficiary. The pier is yours, as it stands, without encumbrances.'

'Right,' said Mr Livingstone, who wasn't entirely sure what an encumbrance was but thought that on balance, and probably quite rightly, that it was undoubtedly a good thing that there weren't any. 'That's splendid,' he said. 'I've never owned a pier before,' he added.

'We would doubt if many people could say they have,' agreed Mr Canterbury. 'We would certainly say that we ourselves would fall comfortably into that category.' He looked at Mrs Caldicot. 'You, madam? Have you ever owned a pier?'

'No,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'No, I can't say that I have.'

'No, you can't,' said Mr Canterbury. 'Not unless you have.' He looked at the cheese on the greaseproof paper, opened a blade of the penknife he'd been using to trim his nails and cut off a decent sized chunk of cheese. He ate the cheese off the point of the knife.

It occurred to Mrs Caldicot that it was quite likely that Mr Canterbury never actually really stopped eating.

'You, Mr Livingstone are only the second person we have known who has owned a pier. Your uncle, of course, being the other. You are a rare beast, sir. We gather that many of the remaining piers around the coast of Britain are owned by corporations, charities or local councils. We doubt if there are half a dozen individuals in the country who can, if they feel the urge so to do, stand up and say 'I own a pier'. You, sir, are now one of them – even though it has to be admitted that your pier has, temporarily at least, fallen into desuetude.'

'What's that?' asked Mr Livingstone.

'A state of disuse,' explained Mr Canterbury.

'Ah,' said Mr Livingstone, wondering why solicitors liked to use words which no one else used. 'So if I wasn't mentioned in the will how did you find me?'

Mr Canterbury finished chewing his piece of cheese and then swallowed it before replying. 'We found you, sir, with considerable difficulty. We advertised in a periodical known as the *London Gazette* though why we do that we never know because in our experience nothing ever comes of it. We made the usual enquiries and eventually we employed the services of a private detective who specialises in researching family trees. We use the word detective and you might imagine a man in a grubby mackintosh, carrying a magnifying glass and a pistol but the reality is less romantic. The expert we hired is a spinster who spends her days ploughing through public records. She uses something called the internet though we have only the loosest notion of what that might be. Sadly, the expense of these endeavours utilised entirely the small cash bequest which you might otherwise have enjoyed alongside the pier.'

'And the Mr Livingstone who died was my uncle?'

'Yes, indeed. He and your father were brothers.'

'I didn't even know my father had a brother.'

'No, we had assumed that you were probably not aware of his existence just as we doubt that he was aware of yours. You would be surprised how many families there are where relatives do not know of each other's existence. We assume that your father and your uncle must have had a falling out when they were young. They then drifted apart and your father didn't mention that he had a brother when he met and married your mother.' Mr Canterbury poured himself a small port. He did not offer any to Mrs Caldicot or to Mr Livingstone. He sipped at the port. He then opened the drawer of his desk and took out a tin box. From the tin box he took a huge bundle of keys. The keys were all labelled. He looked through the labels, found the one he was looking for and put the remaining keys back into the tin box. He then put the tin box back into the drawer and closed the drawer.

'These are the keys to our pier,' he said, putting a bunch of keys onto the desk in front of him. There were many different types and sizes of keys. He did not, however, hand them to Mr Livingstone straight away. 'But you have to sign some papers before we can give them to you.'

He took the cardboard file that his secretary had given him and took out several pieces of paper which he pushed across the desk to Mr Livingstone. 'If you would be kind enough to sign these then we can complete the transfer,' he said.

He then picked up his penknife and cleaned the blade with a large, white pocket handkerchief. When he'd done this he started to pare his nails again. There really didn't seem to be anything left to trim.

Mr Livingstone signed the papers.

'Mrs Livingstone can witness your signature.'

'Mrs Caldicot,' said Mr Livingstone, correcting him.

Mr Canterbury frowned as though the relationship were still something of a puzzle to him. He examined the blade of his knife, wiped it on the handkerchief again, and then cut himself another piece of cheese. When he'd done this, he closed the blade of his knife and lay it gently on the desk before him.

'Mrs Jenkins,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Are you sure you know each other?' said Mr Canterbury. He popped the cheese into his mouth and chewed thoughtfully.

'It's complicated,' said Mrs Caldicot.

‘Everything always is,’ said Mr Canterbury.

He picked up the signed and witnessed documents and handed the keys to the pier across to Mr Livingstone.

From the folder in front of him he then took a number of photographs. He reached across his desk and handed these to Mr Livingstone. ‘There are one or two things about our pier of which you might like to be aware,’ said the solicitor. ‘First, the distal end of the pier rests upon a rocky island and it is there, upon that island, that the original builders created a large and rather ornate theatre. We believe that this sort of arrangement is considered quite unusual in the world of piers. The piece of rock is known as ‘Stone Rock’ and it is part of the freehold associated with the remainder of the structure.’

‘Stone Rock!’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘I bet someone spent a lot of time thinking up that name!’ Mr Livingstone had already been thoroughly excited by the whole business of owning a pier and could now hardly believe that he also owned a small, rocky island upon which a theatre had been built.

He had not admitted this to anyone, not even to Mrs Caldicot, but there had been a moment, well actually rather more than just a moment, when he’d wondered if there had been a mistake. Maybe the lawyer had mixed him up with another Mr Livingstone; an entirely different Mr Livingstone. Maybe the pier didn’t exist. Maybe it was all an elaborate, practical joke. After all, thought Mr Livingstone, the many previous years of his life had not been marked with an abundance of good fortune.

‘Precisely,’ said Mr Canterbury. ‘We would imagine that the name of the rock probably goes back to a time before the pier was constructed.’

‘Does the pier have a name?’ asked Mr Livingstone.

‘It does. Indeed it does.’ Mr Canterbury fiddled about with the papers in front of him. ‘Ah yes, here we are. Its official name, the name on all the documents and, we believe, the name by which it is known locally, is ‘The Pier’.’

‘The Pier?’

‘Precisely. The Pier.’

‘That’s the name? Just that?’

‘It is.’

‘Not The Palace Pier or The Grand Pier or something like that?’

‘No, unfortunately not. Our pier is known simply as ‘The Pier’.’

‘They didn’t spend a lot of effort thinking that name up either, did they?’

‘We suspect not. Our pier was one of the very early first piers to be built and maybe the people who commissioned it felt no need to identify it in a more elaborate way. Work was started on it in 1874 and the pier was opened in 1877. It was designed by a man called Eugenius Birch, who was, we believe, the premier designer of Victorian piers. We gather that Mr Birch also designed piers in Brighton, Bournemouth and Blackpool.’

‘Well that’s a good start,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘May I ask you a question?’

‘Of course.’

‘You keep referring to the pier as ‘our pier’. Does that mean that you are a part owner?’

Mr Canterbury appeared to be quite startled by this. ‘Oh, good heavens no! We use the first person plural in a purely legal sense. It is quite customary for members of the legal profession to unite themselves with their clients in this way. The pier was left to you and to you alone and all the delights and responsibilities associated with its ownership are yours and yours alone.’

‘Oh, right ho,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘Just got a bit confused, that’s all.’

‘Quite so,’ agreed Mr Canterbury. He picked up another document. ‘We believe you will find that the theatre built on Stone Rock is still in existence though we understand it is possible that it may be in need of a little cosmetic attention. On the other hand the wooden piles upon which the pier rests are, we believe, surprisingly sound. According to a report we have here, they were checked just three years ago and found to be perfectly solid and safe. The pier itself is 2,195 feet long and down the centre of the structure there runs a covered walkway which is equipped with numerous benches. It appears that at intervals of twenty yards or so there are vending machines and amusement machines of one sort or another. And according to the information we have before us, there is also a little train. It doesn’t run on rails but there’s a small engine and three open coaches.’

Mr Canterbury’s eyes lit up when he mentioned the little train. ‘These little trains can be quite enchanting,’ he said. He closed his eyes for a moment. ‘Quite enchanting,’ he murmured. He was, thought Mrs Caldicot, talking to himself more than to them. For a while he said nothing, apparently lost in a reverie; a pleasant daydream. The daydream can’t have lasted more than thirty seconds but it seemed like an age.

‘At the proximal end of the structure,’ continued Mr Canterbury at last, ‘the spot where the pier joins the promenade, there is a large gatehouse which consists of two towers, each of which is three stories high. These towers are connected by a bridge-like structure which creates an archway – from the plan we have in front of us it looks rather like the Admiralty Arch in London though perhaps not quite as grand. The lower part of each leg of the arch is given over to commercial premises. On the left, as we look down the pier, there is a kiosk where visitors can buy sweets, postcards, ice creams, paperback books and tickets for the little train. On the right there is a small café which sells popular and appropriate comestibles such as fish and chips and cups of tea. The two upper floors of the archway and the towers provide accommodation, including a number of bedrooms, bathrooms and so on. We believe that when the pier was built, the gatehouse was designed to be run as a hotel.'

'And there's a ballroom,' said Mr Livingstone.

'Indeed so. We are pleased to see that you have studied the details we sent to you. We see from the documents we have that a previous owner specialised in catering for weddings, anniversaries and birthday parties, with the ballroom inevitably providing a suitable venue for dining and dancing and the bedrooms providing accommodation for those involved and their guests.'

Mr Canterbury pushed another small sheaf of documents across his crowded desk. 'There is one other communication we are obliged to share with you. As the executor of your uncle's estate we have to show you this communication.' He then reached into the file, took out a three page letter and handed it to Mr Livingstone. When he'd done that he tore a large piece of bread from the crusty loaf on his desk and popped that into his mouth.

'What is it?' asked a rather puzzled Mr Livingstone, accepting the letter as a man might accept a summons, a writ or some other unpleasant legal document. 'Is this something I need to worry about?'

'No, no, not at all,' said Mr Canterbury when he'd finished chewing the piece of bread. 'To save you time and effort we can tell you that the communication you are holding is a letter offering to purchase our pier from us.'

'Someone already wants to buy it?' said Mr Livingstone, thoroughly surprised by this completely unexpected turn of events.

'Indeed they do, indeed they do,' said Mr Canterbury. 'But we fear you might not find the offer to be irresistible.'

'I don't care what the offer is,' said Mr Livingstone. 'I've only just got my pier. Why would I want to sell it?' He looked at the long letter he had been handed. 'Who wants to buy it and what are they offering?'

'The agent who wrote to us did so on behalf of a property company and the offer, for the full freehold, is for £1.'

Mr Livingstone stared at him incredulously. 'Did you say £1?'

'We fear so. We gather that the pier has been losing money for some time and although we have not heard from them directly, we gather from a paragraph in the letter you are holding that the local council has some concerns about the ownership and management and is keen to see the pier developed in a way which, as they say, 'will reflect the needs of the town in these changing times'.' Mr Canterbury paused, picked up his penknife and opened the blade. He only ever opened, and used, the one blade. Once again, he used the blade of his knife to trim his well-trimmed fingernails.

'Crumbs!' said Mr Livingstone.

'But as I have already mentioned we have no reason to believe that the structure of the pier need be of concern. It appears that any problems relate more to the management of the pier.'

'So you don't think it's falling down?'

'No, no, not at all. You would find that a very expensive event.'

'Why would it be expensive if the pier fell down?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'The council would doubtless insist upon you moving the wreckage from the beach and the sea,' Mr Canterbury pointed. 'Given the size of the structure and the weight of the materials involved, the costs would be very high. There would be some salvage value but not enough to cover the high costs of demolition and removal.'

'Who would be responsible for the costs if that happened?' asked Mr Livingstone.

'Oh that would be our responsibility,' said Mr Canterbury. 'As the owner of the pier we would be responsible for all those costs.' He coughed, remembering Mr Livingstone's question. 'Er, you would be responsible since you are the owner.' He rooted through the paper work and produced yet another document. 'Unfortunately, your uncle allowed the insurance to lapse and so the pier is not insured at all at the moment. In that regard we are exposed.'

'I'm responsible for all the costs if the pier falls into the sea?'

'Oh yes.'

'But I don't have any money,' Mr Livingstone pointed out.

'You have no properties? No savings?'

'No.'

'Then you need not concern yourself. You would simply declare yourself bankrupt.'

'They wouldn't be able to put me in prison or anything like that?'

'Oh, good heavens no. You would be bankrupt for one year and that would be the end of that. Under normal circumstances we would advise a client inheriting a property, particularly one as large and as complex as this one, to take out comprehensive insurance. But insuring a pier can be very, very expensive.'

'How expensive?'

‘We are not insurance specialists but we would say that if you had an excess of £500,000 on your policy then the premium would be as much as £100,000 a year.’

‘An excess of £500,000? What does that mean?’

‘It means that you would agree to pay the first £500,000 of any loss – in the same way that house or motor car insurance policies often include an excess.’

Mr Livingstone laughed.

‘Quite,’ said Mr Canterbury.

‘But if there’s a problem and the pier falls down or something terrible happens to it I could just go bankrupt for a year?’

‘Precisely.’

‘That would be a bit cheaper than the insurance policy I couldn’t afford.’

‘Indeed it would.’ Mr Canterbury paused for a moment. ‘In some ways we are a perfect owner for a pier. If a rich man inherited a pier he could be made into a poor man by the running costs – the insurance alone being a major part of the costs. If a rich man inherited a pier which fell into the sea he would have to spend a large part of his fortune on recovering the debris, compensating the authorities and so on.’

‘But I don’t have any money so I’m safe from all these terrible things?

‘Exactly!’

Mr Livingstone looked at Mrs Caldicot and smiled. She smiled back.

‘One good thing has come from this communication,’ said Mr Canterbury, touching the letter offering to buy the pier. ‘The offer, valuing the pier at £1, has enabled us, as the executors of your uncle’s will, to inform Her Majesty’s Customs and Excise that there will be no tax to pay on the property. We cannot be obliged to pay more inheritance tax than our inheritance is worth.’

He stopped trimming his fingernails and wiped the blade. Mrs Caldicot knew what was coming next. As we get older our habits become irrepressible routines. Mr Canterbury pared his nails more than was reasonable. His nails could not possibly be growing that quickly. The nail paring was part of a complicated behavioural tic. He pared his nails before he ate. It was a ritual. Open knife, pare nails, wipe blade, cut cheese, chew, close knife. She sympathised. She knew all about rituals and routines. Our habits rust with age and become increasingly inflexible and unavoidable.

‘I hadn’t even thought of inheritance tax,’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘Most people don’t,’ said Mr Canterbury. He cut himself a small piece of cheese. When he had eaten the cheese he poured himself another glass of port. That too was part of the routine. ‘The sad news is that our pier doesn’t appear to be worth very much. But by the same token, this means that we won’t have to pay tax on our acquisition. And so the sad news becomes good news.’

‘But I can just ignore the letter from these people who want to buy the pier?’

‘Oh yes. We can keep our pier. The only real concern would be if the council decided that the pier was unsafe or an eyesore or in some other regard unsatisfactory. The structure reports I have seen confirm that the pier is in good condition. There is no need for you to worry on that score. However, councils have given themselves a good deal of power over property owners these days. And a pier, not being hidden down a side street as it were, is not the sort of property that is likely to be overlooked.’

‘Will it be possible for us to move into the accommodation at the entrance to the pier?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

Mr Canterbury, who was sipping his port, raised half a pair of un-groomed eyebrows. He seemed surprised.

‘Our local council have just told us that they have decided to purchase our home,’ explained Mrs Caldicot. ‘They’re going to knock it down and put railway lines there instead.’

‘Oh dear!’ said Mr Canterbury sympathetically. ‘We take it that your property is in the path of this absurd new high speed railway the Government has decided to build?’

‘I’m afraid so.’

‘Then we fear there is no saving you from your fate. The Government has given itself extraordinarily draconian powers over the owners of homes and land which stand in the way of its various tentacle building operations.’ Mr Canterbury sounded disapproving. ‘But your pier is another kettle of fish, if you will pardon the rather inappropriate metaphor. We can’t imagine the Government will have plans to build a new railway line through your pier. That would be a most unfortunate case of ‘incidis in Scyllam cupiens vitare Charybdim’. And we can’t see them wanting to build an airport there either. So our only threat will come from the council – usually rather less of a threat than central government. If we get into trouble let me know and we will see if we can help. We have not, of course, seen the property ourselves but it is our sad experience that local councillors and their planning officers have a tendency to attempt to ride roughshod over the rights of local property owners and if they have some pet project in mind there will be no end to the devious nature of their machinations.’

‘Excuse me, said Mr Livingstone. ‘But what, er, was the incidis in Scyllam whatever?’

‘My apologies. The Latin phrase ‘incidis in Scyllam cupiens vitare Charybdim’ means simply ‘out of the frying pan into the fire’.

Mr Livingstone and Mrs Caldicot then thanked Mr Canterbury.

‘Meanwhile, mind how you go down the stairs,’ said Mr Canterbury, making it clear that the audience was over. ‘They’re rather steep. They used to be the only stairs in the building but now they lead only to my offices here on the top floor. The other floors in this building have all been modernised and are now all accessed by an elevator.’ He shuddered as though he found the very idea alarming.

‘So the receptionist downstairs works just for you?’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘Oh yes. Ethel has been here since 1946. She tried to retire in 1990 but found retirement such a traumatic experience that two weeks later she asked if she could come back to work. We hadn’t found a replacement so we just treated the two weeks as though it had been a holiday. My secretary, whom you have also met, has been here since 1955 and Ethel still regards her as something of a newcomer.’

Mrs Caldicot and Mr Livingstone rose and thanked the solicitor again.

‘It’s been my pleasure. In our career we have dealt with many problems, many wills, many properties but we’ve never dealt with a pier before. We congratulate you on your good fortune. If you find you need legal help, advice of any kind, don’t hesitate to get in touch with us. We will be pleased to help.’

They looked back. They both felt that he meant it.

‘A first pier is always bound to be rather special,’ he said, with a boyish smile, as though he felt he needed to reinforce what he had said; to explain his genuine enthusiasm. ‘And to be honest we would very much like to know how things go.’

And with that final thought Mr Canterbury, now smiling to himself, opened his penknife and began, once again, to pare his already well-trimmed fingernails.

Chapter Five

Sitting in a railway carriage can be immensely frustrating when you're racing to a time sensitive assignation. The more urgent the journey the more the train seems determined to dawdle; stopping here a while, stopping there a while and wandering along as though it has all the time in the world. And, inevitably perhaps, if a journey is really important, and you have a vital appointment to keep, then the train will suddenly trundle to a halt and sit wherever it is; stranded in the middle of nowhere, alongside fields where cows chew their cud with all the time in the world or, tantalisingly, just a few hundred yards from the railway station itself. Naturally, there is never anyone to explain where you are, why you're there and how long it's going to be before you're the somewhere that you'd rather be.

But train travel is wonderful, peaceful and relaxing when you have all the time in the world, no appointment to keep and no connection to catch. There is, perhaps, no form of travel so peaceful and so relaxing. You can read, work, talk or simply look out of the window. All you really have to do is sit back and enjoy the view.

Mrs Caldicot and Mr Livingstone now had no appointments to keep and so their journey back home promised to be restful, charming and restorative. They would have time to look out of the carriage window at the rooftops, back gardens, kitchen windows and remaining branch line stations which Dr Beeching had missed or forgotten when he ill-advisedly took his axe to the railway network in 1963.

And they would have plenty of time to talk.

They each bought coffee, snacks and magazines at the railway station buffet.

Mrs Caldicot purchased a magazine called *Devon Days*, in the hope that she might learn a little something about the county wherein lay their new home.

Mr Livingstone bought one magazine called *Coach and Bus Weekly* and another titled *Airports of the World Monthly*.

'I didn't know you were interested in buses or airports,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'I'm not,' said Mr Livingstone. 'I know nothing about either of them.'

'But why…?' began Mrs Caldicot.

'Oh, I always like to buy magazines that will introduce me to new worlds,' explained Mr Livingstone. 'Have you ever noticed that the world seems to be divided up into little speciality groups? Some people live for football. They know an enormous amount about their favourite teams and players. Their heroes are all footballers. Other people live for horse racing. Their lives are dominated by their interest in horse racing. They live for horse racing in the way that the other people live for football. You get people whose lives revolve around ballroom dancing, carp fishing or stamp collecting but they never take much interest in one another's enthusiasms. The people who love boating on canals, and who are absolutely passionate about narrow boats, don't usually know much about bell ringing or model railways. I find all these little worlds quite fascinating.'

'Yes, I suppose that's true,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. 'I hadn't thought about it quite like that.'

'Well, I like to learn about other people's interests. And the easiest way to do that is to buy specialist magazines. Last week I bought one on keeping cage birds. The week before that I read one on sea fishing. I suppose you could say that my hobby is learning about other people's hobbies.'

Mrs Caldicot was quiet for a moment.

She found that she was always learning about her friends. Just the other day she had found that Mr Merivale had once competed in the Olympics. He had come fourth in one of the breaststroke swimming events so he hadn't won a medal. But he'd competed at the Olympics and no one could ever take that glory away from him. And now there was Mr Livingstone and his curious hobby of collecting information about other people's hobbies.

When the train arrived they climbed aboard, found a quiet table and settled down. Since it was neither going to work time nor going home time the train was almost deserted.

'Well, what do you think?' asked Mrs Caldicot, settling into her seat as their homeward bound train chugged rather reluctantly out of the station.

'I haven't had time to look at them yet,' said Mr Livingstone. 'But the *Coach and Bus* magazine looks pretty good. I'm not sure about the airports. It's difficult to see why there would be a whole magazine devoted to airports.'

Mrs Caldicot laughed. 'Not the magazines! The pier!'

Mr Livingstone took a big breath, looked out of the window for a moment and then turned back to Mrs Caldicot. 'It's all a bit daunting,' he said. He took a cardboard container of coffee and a plastic packet from a small, paper bag. The packet had a label which announced that the contents, something which looked to Mr Livingstone rather like a sandwich, was actually not anything as mundane as a sandwich but was something called an International Hoagie. The smaller lettering on the label announced that the International Hoagie contained the following ingredients: 'A razor cut slice of Palma ham with segments of Swiss Gruyere cheese and sun dried Spanish tomatoes flavoured with English pickle and French mustard'.

Mr Livingstone put the ham and cheese sandwich and the coffee down in front of him. He idly wondered where the coffee had come from. It seemed strange that they hadn't told him. Columbia? Where else did they grow coffee beans? Java, of course. Brazil naturally. And Africa too. But which bits of Africa? Either way there was little doubt that they hadn't been grown in England. So they were definitely foreign and therefore fitted comfortably into the international theme of his picnic. He took the keys to the pier from his jacket pocket and lay them down on the table alongside the sandwich and the coffee cup.

'It's a big bunch of keys,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'There must be a good many doors and locks,' said Mr Livingstone. He picked up one of the keys. It was large, made of iron and slightly rusty. 'What on earth do you think this is?'

'I've absolutely no idea,' said Mrs Caldicot. She paused. 'Fancy you owning a pier!'

'Not something I ever imagined I'd be able to say. 'David Livingstone – Pier Owner'. It's all pretty exciting isn't it? I bet none of my school teachers ever thought I'd one day own a pier.'

'It is very exciting,' agreed Mrs Caldicot.

She was looking forward to the move to the seaside. It was another adventure and she was looking forward to it. Her life with Mr Caldicot had been rather short of excitement and she couldn't help thinking that she was now rather making up for lost time.

The truth was that Mr Caldicot, her former husband and partner on life's rocky road, now sadly deceased, gone and mostly forgotten, had not encouraged excitement. He always said that 'adventure' was frivolous and 'excitement' a distraction. His trousers were always held up with a belt and a pair of braces (or, as the Americans call them 'suspenders') and his idea of recklessness was going out of the house without tying a double knot in his shoelaces.

A lot had changed in Mrs Caldicot's life since her first husband had died.

In what she tended to think of as the old days, another time, Mrs Caldicot had often had 'thoughts'. She had imagined herself saying things but she had never actually found the courage to say them.

These days she didn't have anywhere near as many 'thoughts'. She felt able to say what she felt about things. Mr Jenkins, her new husband, known to one and all simply as Jenkins, was completely the opposite to Mr Caldicot. He always encouraged her to speak her mind, to say what was troubling her.

'A very different kettle of fish,' her grandmother would have said about him. The saying reminded her of Mr Canterbury. He'd used it too.

Another thing that was different was that Jenkins didn't mind taking chances. He had been excited by the prospect of their moving to Devon to help manage Mr Livingstone's pier. Like her, he had thought of it as a huge and invigorating challenge. 'Overcoming new obstacles keeps you young,' he sometimes said when they were having problems.

Thinking about Jenkins reminded her that he would be going to America within 24 hours. She'd have to help him with his suitcase when she got back home. Not that he needed any help. He was perfectly capable of packing a case. He wasn't going to fly to America and then find out he'd forgotten spare socks or his favourite brand of toothpaste. But she liked to help him. He let her pick out a tie and a shirt for him to wear when he was giving a speech or attending an important meeting. She liked that. It made her feel as though she were part of the 'him' that was going away. Mr Caldicot would have never allowed her to have a say in what tie he wore. As far as he was concerned, all she was good for was brushing the fluff off his blazer.

She was, she knew, going to miss Jenkins a lot when he went to America. Still, she thought, they'd try to get the pier sorted out for his return. All shipshape and Bristol fashion, whatever that meant. She liked to do things to show him that she had grown into the assurance and competence he'd found for her.

'I can't wait to get there,' said Mr Livingstone closing his eyes. 'I bet it's all brightly painted and red and blue. I can see it in my mind. Decorated with lots of flags and bunting and packed with holidaymakers all eating ice creams.'

'I'm glad you haven't lost your enthusiasm,' said Mrs Caldicot, who had always known that there would be more than a few snags to sort out. She thought she ought to warn him. 'We must remember that there are bound to be a few little teething problems to deal with when we get there.'

'Bring them on!' said Mr Livingstone with a boldness born more of hope than knowledge. 'My enthusiasm remains undimmed. What have I got to lose? Before that letter came from Mr Canterbury my worldly goods consisted of a tin box with a few medals in it, a couple of rather threadbare suits that had seen better days back in the 1980s, a collection of rather battered musical instruments and a rather inadequate pension.' He picked up the keys and held them aloft. 'Now I'm also the owner of a pier.' He thought for a moment. 'Or, rather, I'm part owner of a pier. We own it together. All of us.’

‘Oh no…,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘It’s your pier.’

‘No it isn’t,’ insisted Mr Livingstone. ‘We all share everything. You and Jenkins do far more than your fair share for the rest of us. If it hadn’t been for you I’d still be in that damned Twilight Years Rest Home, drugged up to my eyeballs and eating liver and cabbage three times a week. And I know damned well that Mr Williams’s photographs have helped pay our costs. No, we share the bad things and we share the good things. That’s what friends do.’

In his earlier days, their companion Henry Williams had been a famous photographer who had worked in Paris. He had a fine collection of old negatives and for some time he had helped defray some of the costs of running the house which they all shared by selling off prints of the most famous of his pictures.

‘Mr Williams won’t be able to bail us out for much longer, I’m afraid,’ said Mrs Caldicot rather sadly. ‘He told me yesterday that a French internet company has managed to create some fake negatives and they’ve been making hundreds of prints and selling them. Apparently, they can do things like that these days. As a result of all the fakes being sold, the value of Mr Williams’s negatives and pictures has fallen rather a lot.’

‘Can’t he do anything to stop them?’

‘Apparently not,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘It seems that there are laws now which support the idea that ‘copyright is theft’. I don’t really understand it but Mr Williams looked into it and said it’s all due to freedom of speech and human rights. I’m afraid there won’t be much more money from Mr Williams’s photographs.’ She took the coffee and the plastic wrapped sandwich from her small paper carrier bag. ‘He’s very upset about it.’

‘Poor chap!’ said Mr Livingstone, genuinely sad for his friend. ‘Still, we’ve got a pier! What is it they say? One door closes and another one opens? I know they say the pier isn’t worth much but I bet we can make something of it.’

‘I bet we can!’ agreed Mrs Caldicot.

‘Fancy offering me a quid for it!’ said Mr Livingstone, rather disgustedly.

‘That was very cheeky!’ agreed Mrs Caldicot. ‘They probably thought they could grab a bargain and make a lot of money.’

‘Well, they’ve got another think coming!’

Mr Livingstone, who had been trying to open the sandwich package with his fingers gave up and took out his small, well-worn, silver penknife. Taking out the knife reminded him of the solicitor. ‘That Canterbury is an extraordinary old chap isn’t he?’

Mrs Caldicot laughed. ‘Absolutely!’ she agreed. ‘But I must say I did rather like him. He reminded me of a character out of a novel by Dickens?’

‘You’re right! I knew he reminded me of someone. He was straight out of one of those long novels by Charles Dickens. Did you notice the way he kept paring his nails with his penknife?’

‘And then he was using the same penknife to carve pieces of cheese from that huge block of Cheddar on his desk!’

‘I’m glad he didn’t offer me a chunk.’

‘No, I was a bit worried about that too. Did you notice that he got almost tearful when he was talking about the little train on the pier?’

‘Yes, I did! He seemed lost in memories. A very decent fellow, I thought.’

The two of them spent the rest of the journey looking at the details of the pier, for Mr Canterbury had given them maps, deeds and a surprisingly large amount of paperwork relating to the pier’s structure and its history. When any building is the best part of a century and a half old there is bound to be a good deal of history associated with it and Mr Livingstone’s pier was no exception. Some of the older deeds and mortgages were printed on vellum, a fine form of parchment which is made from the skin of a calf.

And the more the two of them looked at the details of the pier the more excited they got.

‘It says here that during the War it was commandeered by the Navy,’ said Mr Livingstone, reading one of the old documents. He seemed very proud of this. ‘There are letters which say that the Navy took over the pier from 1941 to 1946 and that during that time it was closed to the public.’

‘It’ll be fun to move into the accommodation in that archway that Mr Canterbury talked about,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Fancy us all living on a pier. There are enough rooms aren’t there?’

‘There are plenty of rooms,’ said Mr Livingstone, unfolding a plan of the building. ‘But I don’t know what sort of condition they’re in. I don’t think anyone has lived there for a while.’

They talked more about the pier, learning as much as they could about its history and when they arrived at their destination (since they weren’t in a hurry, the train was, inevitably, ten minutes early) neither Mrs Caldicot nor Mr Livingstone had opened their magazines.

Chapter Six

Mrs Caldicot and her colleagues had a meeting to discuss when they should move into the accommodation available on the pier.

‘We don’t have a lot of choice,’ said Mr Twist, the former tax inspector. ‘The Government has given us a few weeks before they send in the bulldozers. So unless we want to find ourselves scooped up and dumped in a landfill site we have to get out of here quite quickly.’

‘We could tie ourselves to a tree,’ suggested Miss Nightingale, who had always had a secret desire to be tied to a tree. This was not something she had ever mentioned before but this did seem a not inappropriate moment to float the idea.

‘Oh no, I don’t like that idea,’ said Mrs Peterborough, wrinkling her nose. ‘I’m too old to tie myself to a tree. Besides, I’ve never been any good at knots.’

‘What if it rains?’ asked Mr Roxdale. ‘We’ll be outside tied to trees and all getting wet!’

‘I hadn’t thought of that,’ admitted Miss Nightingale, before quickly withdrawing her suggestion.

‘Maybe Mrs Caldicot and Mr Livingstone should go and look at the pier,’ suggested Mrs Merivale. ‘They could check it all out, give the accommodation a once-over and then come back and let us know what the place is like.’

‘But that seems a bit pointless,’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘We know that we have to leave here shortly and at the moment we haven’t got anywhere else to go. Sending out a reconnaissance team isn’t going to make any difference to what we do.’

Mrs Merivale, thinking about this, nodded and finally agreed with him. ‘You’re right!’ she agreed. ‘If we delay things then we’ll be moving in a rush at the last minute. If we decide to move now then we can arrange to go to Penmouth at our own speed.’

‘Shouldn’t the people who are knocking down our house pay us some compensation?’ asked Mrs Peterborough.

‘They have said that they will be paying us,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘But we owe quite a lot to the bank so most of the money will go to them. And we won’t receive our share of the compensation money for several months.’

‘That’s really not fair,’ said Mr Twist. ‘They should pay us our compensation before the bulldozers move in.’

‘No, it isn’t fair,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘But I’m afraid we’re dealing with bureaucrats working for the Government. And they don’t seem very sympathetic.’

‘I’ve made several phone calls,’ said Jenkins. ‘But I can’t get anyone to agree to send us our cheque for at least three months. There appear to be at least three layers of bureaucracy and all the compensation payments have to be authorised by something called the Residential Compensation Committee, a special subsidiary quango which is chaired by someone called the Comptroller of Financial Administration.’ Jenkins sighed rather sadly. ‘The committee meets every three months and I’m told that they’ve already got a backlog of claims. There is no way we’re going to be receiving what we’re owed for several months.’

‘It’s outrageous!’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘I bet they wouldn’t like it if their homes were being knocked down.’

‘I agree with you,’ said Jenkins. ‘It is outrageous. But it seems it’s impossible to speed things up. You can’t hurry a Government department if it doesn’t want to be hurried.’

‘Our other problem is that the amount we’ll receive when the compensation payment finally does come through won’t be sufficient to enable us to buy a new house,’ Mrs Caldicot reminded them all. ‘When we bought the Twilight Years Rest Home I was a year or two younger. The older you get the more reluctant the banks are to lend you money to buy property.’

‘I think we should move onto Mr Livingstone’s pier as soon as we can,’ said Mrs Torridge.

‘It’s our pier,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘It’s only my pier if it falls into the sea.’

‘Is it going to fall into the sea?’ asked Mr Twist, looking worried.

‘No, no,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘I meant that if anything disastrous happens then it’s my pier because I can just go bankrupt.’

‘Our solicitor, Mr Canterbury, more or less suggested that it would be easier and cheaper for Mr Livingstone to go bankrupt than it would be for us to buy insurance,’ explained Mrs Caldicot.

‘I don’t know what we’re all worrying about,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘Let’s all move into the pier’s hotel straight away!’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘It’s where we are going to end up so why don’t we just go there now?’

‘Let’s vote on it!’ suggested Mr Williams. ‘I propose that we all travel down to Penmouth and move onto Mr Livingstone’s lovely old pier.’

And so they voted and it was decided, unanimously, that they would travel to Penmouth as soon as possible and that they would arrange for a removal lorry to transport their furniture and personal belongings.

‘When do you have to travel to America?’ Mrs Caldicot asked her husband.

‘Early next week. So I’m afraid I don’t think I’ll be able to travel down to Devon with you.’

‘OK,’ said Mrs Caldicot in a very tiny voice. ‘We’ll try to get it all nice for when you get back.’

‘It’s only for three weeks,’ said Jenkins, softly, though he thought three weeks sounded too much like a lifetime and would have been happy to have said, ‘No, thank you’ to the Americans if it hadn’t been for the fact that Mrs Caldicot had made it quite clear that she thought he should grab the opportunity with both hands.

‘Only three weeks,’ repeated Mrs Caldicot.

She knew she would miss Jenkins terribly but couldn’t help wondering what would happen in those weeks.

She had a feeling it was going to be a busy time for them all.

And, in a way, she was grateful for that.

Chapter Seven

Mrs Caldicot and Mr Twist went to the local railway station to find the cost of railway tickets. Mr Twist went with Mrs Caldicot since he was in charge of their money.

‘We’re enquiring about the cost of tickets to Penmouth,’ said Mrs Caldicot, when she and Mr Twist finally reached the top of the booking office queue.

‘You can telephone for information,’ said a weedy little fellow with a grumpy looking face. ‘We have a Railtime Hotline.’

‘We tried that,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘But the phone line has been busy most of the morning. On the one occasion when it wasn’t busy, it rang for fifteen minutes without anyone answering it.’

‘They’re very busy people,’ sniffed Mr Grumpy. ‘If it’s just information you want you can find train times on our website.’

‘A pre-recorded message on your telephone line suggested that we do exactly that,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘But unfortunately your website isn’t working. I think the technical term is that it is feeling ‘down’.’

‘Feeling down?’

‘That’s what my husband says and he knows about these things. I can’t see why a computer should feel down. But they do say that computers are almost human these days, don’t they?’

‘Get a bloody move on!’ snarled a voice standing behind Mrs Caldicot. ‘Are you going to be there all bloody day?’

Mrs Caldicot turned round and found herself facing a girl of about seventeen or eighteen. She had yellow hair, cut in the style which used to be compulsory for army recruits, and wore a dirty T-shirt and a pair of jeans with huge rips in the knees. She had two rings in her nose, a string of rings along the edge of each ear lobe and tattoos of knives on her neck. The knives were all dripping with blood.

‘I’m just trying to get details of some tickets,’ said Mrs Caldicot, sweetly.

‘You’re holding everyone up,’ snarled the girl. ‘Shouldn’t you be at home having your incontinence pad changed?’

‘Don’t be so rude!’ said Mr Twist, who was shocked.

‘I wasn’t talking to you old man,’ said the girl.

Mrs Caldicot, who had turned back to the booking office window, repeated her request to Mr Grumpy.

‘There’s a pile of leaflets on the rack,’ he replied.

‘I’m afraid there isn’t a leaflet for Penmouth,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘And the leaflets you do have are all out of date.’

‘Not my fault,’ said Mr Grumpy. ‘We haven’t had the new leaflets in yet. They’ll probably be here sometime next month.’

‘I’m afraid I can’t wait that long,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘I just want to know how often the trains run to Penmouth and how much a ticket will cost. There will be thirteen of us travelling.’

‘You need to speak to someone in Group Bookings,’ said Mr Grumpy.

‘And how do I get hold of them?’

‘You ring the Railtime Hotline.’

‘But they don’t answer their phone!’

‘Well, it’s night time there. They probably won’t be up yet.’

‘Night time where?’ asked Mrs Caldicot, confused.

‘Somewhere in India I think it is. Or maybe it’s the Philippines.’

‘Who is in India?’

‘Our call centre partners. The ones who answer the telephone for the Railtime Hotline,’ replied Mr Grumpy.

‘What the hell is going on up there?’ demanded a voice from the back of the queue.

‘It’s this stupid old woman in front of me,’ said the girl with the tattoos and the yellow hair. ‘She doesn’t seem to know what she wants.’

‘I know exactly what I want,’ said Mrs Caldicot, over her shoulder. She turned back to Mr Grumpy. ‘Don’t you have anyone to open one of the other windows?’

There were three other ticket windows in the booking office but they were all closed.

‘They’re all on their break,’ said Mr Grumpy. ‘We’re allowed to have breaks you know.’

‘But it’s half past two in the afternoon!’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘What sort of break are they having?’

‘One of them is on an extended lunch break for personal reasons and the other two are having an early afternoon tea. It's a statutory requirement.'

'What sort of personal reasons require an extended lunch break?'

'He eats slowly. He's running in a new set of teeth.'

'Let's forget about the group booking,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Can you please just tell me what time there is a train to Penmouth and how much a ticket costs?'

Mr Grumpy sighed. 'There's a big queue behind you.'

'I know there's a queue. If you just give me the information I need then I'll go and you can deal with the nice, young lady behind me.'

'Who are you calling a nice, young lady?' demanded the girl with the tattoos and yellow hair. 'I'll have the law on you!'

Mr Grumpy fiddled slowly with the keyboard in front of him. The screen in front of him remained blank. He pressed more buttons. Still nothing happened. 'My system is very slow today,' he said. He pressed the same buttons again. 'I think it's down.'

'There you are!' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I told you that your computer was feeling down today. Don't you have a printed timetable you can consult?'

'We should have brought a flask and some sandwiches,' whispered Mr Twist.

Mr Grumpy sighed and picked up a large, scruffy folder which had a label stuck to the front. The label contained the single word 'Trains' written on it in red ink. The folder, when opened, appeared to contain pages from a railway timetable.

'Where was it you said you want to go?'

'Penmouth in Devon.'

Mr Grumpy flicked through the pages in his folder and eventually found a page which seemed vaguely relevant. 'Ha!' he said with unconcealed delight. 'You've missed today's train.'

'I didn't want to travel today,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I just wanted to know what time the train leaves.'

'How much longer are you lot going to be up there?' shouted a new voice at the back of the queue. 'What are you doing? Planning a revolution?'

'It's some old biddy and some old geezer,' shouted yet another voice.

'The train went at 11.47 today. That's the only train to Penmouth. But after next Tuesday it only runs on Mondays and Thursdays except at Easter.'

'And how much is a ticket?'

'What time do you want to travel?'

Mrs Caldicot was confused for a moment by this. 'The 11.47 I suppose,' she said.

'And what day do you want to travel?'

'One of the days when the train is running, I suppose.'

'That would be Mondays and Thursdays after next Tuesday.'

'Next Thursday then.'

'And when are you coming back?'

'We're not coming back.'

'So you just want a single?'

'Yes.'

'Not a return?'

'No.'

'A single for one for Penmouth next Thursday?'

'Yes, please.'

The blind at one of the other booking windows moved up a foot and another ticket collector peered out, saw the size of the queue and closed the blind again.

'Isn't someone going to open another booking window?' asked Mrs Caldicot. Behind her the queue was now so long, and snaking either out onto the street or in onto the platform, that the end of it was not visible.

Mr Grumpy turned and spoke to someone out of sight. They whispered for a while.

'My colleague doesn't like crowds. He gets nervous. He says he'll open his window when some of the people have gone.'

Mrs Caldicot started to say something and then realised there wasn't really any point.

'How will you be paying?' asked Mr Grumpy.

'Do you take cheques?'

'No.'

'Well, probably with a credit card.'

‘I need to see it.’

‘But I’m not buying the ticket today. I just want to know the cost.’

‘I can’t tell you that until I see proof of payment. It’s in my regulations.’

Mrs Caldicot opened her bag, took out her purse, found her credit card and showed it to Mr Grumpy.

‘Put it into the reader.’

‘The what?’

‘The card machine.’ Mr Grumpy pointed to a credit card reading machine fixed to the narrow ledge in front of Mrs Caldicot.

‘But I only want to know the cost of a ticket,’ repeated Mrs Caldicot. ‘I don’t want to buy one today.’

‘Has someone died up there?’ shouted a voice that Mrs Caldicot was now beginning to recognise. She turned round but saw nothing but dull, grey, stony faces. The girl with the tattoos and the yellow hair had disappeared.

‘I can’t do anything until you put your card into the machine,’ said Mr Grumpy.

Reluctantly, Mrs Caldicot put her credit card into the card reading machine.

‘Do you have a railcard?’ asked Mr Grumpy.

Mrs Caldicot said she didn’t have a railcard.

‘A student card?’

Mrs Caldicot said she didn’t have one of those either.

‘Are you travelling first or second class?’

Mrs Caldicot said she thought they would probably be travelling second class.

‘Are you travelling with a bicycle?’

Mrs Caldicot said she would not be travelling with a bicycle.

‘We have a special fare for people travelling with bicycles.’

Mrs Caldicot said that she thought that was doubtless very useful for people with bicycles and that she was very sorry that she would not be able to take advantage of the special fare because she did not have a bicycle.

‘A single, second class fare for one person will be £126.90,’ announced Mr Grumpy.

‘No, I want the price of a second class ticket, please,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘That is the price of a second class ticket.’

‘I don’t want to buy the train. Or even rent it for a special outing. I just want the price of one ticket to Penmouth.’

‘That is the price of one ticket to Penmouth. Do you want to reserve a seat?’

‘Does it cost more to reserve a seat?’

‘Oh yes.’

‘How much more?’

‘Another £10 per ticket so if you have a single it’s another £10 but if you have a return it’s £20. And there’s a £5 per ticket booking ticket price to add on but then you have to add that on even if you’re not reserving a seat. Do you want to buy a ticket for the London Underground to go with your train ticket?’

‘I’m not going via London.’

‘Well you might be. Trains do get diverted sometimes – due to circumstances outside our control.’

‘No, I think I’ll leave that, thank you.’

‘Do you want a car park ticket? You get a reduced price ticket if you buy your car park ticket when you buy your rail ticket.’

‘No thank you. How much is a first class ticket?’

‘You said you wanted to go second class.’

‘I do but I’m just curious. How much is a first class ticket?’

‘£276.45 for a single first class. And there are people waiting. If you want to buy a ticket you need to put your pin number into the machine.’

‘I don’t want to buy a ticket. I just wanted to know the price.’

‘Of course, it would be cheaper if you were coming back.’

Puzzled, Mrs Caldicot looked at him. ‘What do you mean ‘it would be cheaper if I were coming back’?’

‘I’ve given you the price of a single second class to Penmouth. If you wanted a return second class to Penmouth it would be cheaper.’

‘How much cheaper?’

‘It depends on when you’re coming back.’

‘I’m not coming back.’

‘But when would you be coming back if you were coming back?’

‘Does it make a difference?’

‘Oh yes. If you come back within 30 days, it’s cheaper than if you come back after 30 days. And if you come back the same day that you go then it's the cheapest of all.'

'How much is it if I come back within 30 days?'

'If you come back within 30 days then a return would be £122.14. If you come back after 30 days it would be £165.43 so that's not actually cheaper, is it?'

'And if I come back the same day?'

'Oh that's very cheap. That's only £101.21 for a return ticket. And it would be £99.14 if you caught a train going to Penmouth before 9.00 am.'

This still didn't seem 'very cheap' to Mrs Caldicot. It was also confusing. 'You said the only train to Penmouth was the 11.47.'

'That's right.'

'So how do I catch a train going before 9.00 am?'

'You can't, can you? And what time are you coming back?'

'Does that make a difference?'

'Oh yes. If you come back after 6 pm you can get a super saver day return fare.'

'How much is that?'

'That would be £98.43. But the only train after 6 pm is the 9.45 pm and you have to change four times on that train and so it doesn't get you in until 3.00 am and that's the next day so I'm not sure the super saver day return fare would count in that situation. I'd have to talk to my supervisor or you could ring the Hotline.'

'And speak to the man in India when he wakes up.'

'Or woman. Some of our partners in India are women.'

'So, the bottom line is that it's cheaper to buy a ticket there and a ticket back than just buying a ticket going there?'

'That's what I just told you. If you go and come back it's cheaper than if you just go.'

'That doesn't make sense.'

Mr Grumpy shrugged. 'I don't make the rules. I just work here.' He leafed through the folder in front of him. He seemed now to be quite taken by the seemingly unending possibilities. 'If you wait another month you can have our special seasonal price. It's only available for three months and you need to book at least a month in advance and there need to be at least three adults and one child or two adults and three children all travelling together. That would cost you £101.87 per person but one child goes free as long as he or she is under eight-years-old on the 1st May.' Mr Grumpy examined the folder a little more. 'The snag is that you have to catch the train before 11.30 am if you're going to take advantage of that offer.'

'And the earliest train is the 11.47.'

'Yes.'

'Has someone up there died, or what?' shouted an invisible woman near the back of the queue.

'Thank you very much, you've been very helpful,' said Mrs Caldicot, now totally confused.

'If you want tickets then come back before Sunday,' said Mr Grumpy. 'All our prices go up next Monday.'

'Right,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I'll remember that.'

'If you're under 25 you can buy a railcard and get a discount on rail travel throughout Europe,' added Mr Grumpy. 'But the railcard is only valid for return tickets on trains which leave before 8.30 am on weekdays and Saturdays and before 8.45 am on Sundays.'

Mrs Caldicot removed her credit card from the machine and put it back into her purse. Then she put her purse back into her handbag. She and Mr Twist then left the booking office area. At least a dozen customers were now sitting on the ground, sprawled against the wall or leaning against cases and rucksacks. A youth with tattoos, earrings and a ponytail was playing a guitar and singing something tuneless and miserable. An empty coffee cup on the ground in front of him had a few coins in it.

'Those prices are absurd,' said Mrs Caldicot to Mr Twist. 'There are fourteen of us. It will cost a fortune to buy fourteen tickets.'

'We only need thirteen tickets,' Mr Twist pointed out. 'Your husband will be in America when we travel down to Penmouth.'

'Oh yes,' said Mrs Caldicot, who hadn't wanted to be reminded that her husband would soon be on a different continent. 'So how much does that come to?'

'£1,649.7.'

Mrs Caldicot stared at Mr Twist as if he'd gone mad.

'If we buy return tickets the total comes to £1,583.62,' said Mr Twist, who was very good at mathematics and could do quite complicated sums without a calculator or even a piece of paper and a pencil.

'I can't get over that. It seems madness that we pay less if we buy more tickets than we need.'

Mr Twist agreed with this.

The pair of them walked out of the railway station feeling bewildered to say the least.

As they walked away, a minibus drew up at the pavement and a horde of schoolchildren leapt out and rushed into the station.

‘They don’t need to rush if they haven’t got tickets yet,’ said Mr Twist drily.

The driver of the minibus, a woman in a blue anorak and a blue bobble hat, shouted something to the children, warning them not to run. She then pressed a button and the door hissed to and closed with a pleasant clunky sound.

‘Excuse me!’ cried Mrs Caldicot, tapping on one of the minibus windows. ‘Could I have a quick word?’

The driver put on the brake and pressed a button. There was a hiss and the door swung open.

‘I hope you don’t mind my asking,’ said Mrs Caldicot, ‘but what sort of driving licence do you need to drive one of these things?’

‘Just an ordinary driving licence,’ said the woman. ‘As long as the bus doesn’t have more than 16 seats. If it has more than that then you need some sort of commercial licence.’

‘Thank you very much!’ cried Mrs Caldicot.

‘Pleasure,’ said the woman. She pressed the button again and the door closed. She then drove off.

‘Maybe we could rent one of those,’ suggested Mrs Caldicot. ‘Then we could all drive down to Penmouth.’

‘Great idea,’ said Mr Twist. ‘That way we could take more of our personal luggage. And I bet we’d save a fortune.’

They spotted a second hand car dealership on the other side of the road and wandered down to take a look. The dealership was decorated with faded union jack pennants which looked as if they had been out in the open for a few years. All the cars on display had advertisements painted on their windscreens in some sort of whitewash which, Mrs Caldicot assumed, could be washed or wiped off without too much difficulty.

‘What can I do you both for?’ asked a chubby little man in his forties. He wore a suit that he may have grown into but had certainly grown out of and his reddish brown hair was combed over his scalp in a vain attempt to disguise the fact that there was considerably more of the latter than the former. He wore a badge pinned to his lapel that had the word REG written on it in black marker pen. The word REG was written on a white, sticky label that had been fixed onto a child’s birthday badge. Underneath the white label could be seen a red seven on a blue background with the words ‘I am…’ above the number and the word ‘Today’ below it.

‘We wondered how much it would cost to rent a minibus,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘What size of minibus?’ asked the chubby fellow. ‘My name is Reg by the way. As in car registration. It’s my real name, by the way.’

Mrs Caldicot introduced herself and Mr Twist. ‘Suitable for carrying 14 people,’ she then said.

‘We don’t do rentals,’ said the chubby fellow.

‘Well do you rent smaller vehicles?’

‘We don’t do any rentals at all. We don’t have any call for them though that may be because we don’t do them. But we’ve got a minibus I can sell you. It would be a much better proposition than renting one. A rental would cost you £200 a day including insurance.’

‘Good heavens,’ said Mrs Caldicot, though the price didn’t seem all that bad. It would, she thought, be a lot cheaper to drive to Penmouth than to take the train. And there would be no need to hire taxis to take them all to the railway station. They would need three taxis and so that would be at least another £20 at each end.

‘How much is the minibus you’ve got for sale?’ asked Mrs Caldicot. She looked around the car lot but couldn’t see anything that looked like a minibus.

‘Well, let’s have a look at it first and then we can talk about the price,’ said Reg. ‘We don’t usually sell vans or commercial vehicles but we took this one in part exchange for a 1989 BMW. The BMW was a very nice vehicle – just three owners and less than 150,000 miles on the clock. I very nearly bought it myself.’ As he chattered away he led them to a far corner of the lot where a rather sad for itself minibus was parked between an old Ford Zephyr and a Vauxhall of some variety.

‘Oh,’ said Mrs Caldicot when she saw it. She felt rather disappointed. It looked rather worn and battered.

‘It was used to ferry around a boys’ football team,’ explained Reg. ‘The bodywork isn’t perfect but who cares about the bodywork on a minibus? The engine is perfect and the mechanicals are as good as new. It’s got nine months left on the MOT and I can promise you that you won’t find better value than this.’ He opened the front passenger door so that they could see inside.

‘Don’t you lock the cars?’ asked Mrs Caldicot, surprised.

‘We lock the cars,’ said Reg, with the emphasis on the word ‘cars’. ‘But who’s going to steal a minibus? Joy riders want something with a bit of oomph – this does 0 to 60 in just under a minute!’ He laughed. ‘But you’re not buying it to burn up people at the lights, are you?’

‘No, I don’t suppose we are,’ agreed Mrs Caldicot.

‘Does it have a button to enable the driver to open the front door on the passenger side?’ asked Mr Twist who had been impressed by this facility on the minibus they’d seen at the railway station.

Reg looked at him and frowned.

‘The driver presses a button and the door opens with a hissy sound,’ explained Mr Hewitt.

‘Oh no, you don’t want anything like that,’ said Reg firmly. ‘Just something else to go wrong and drain your battery. Much better to have a door you open and close manually.’ He closed the door and opened it again to illustrate this facility. ‘And the windows are manually operated. You just wind ‘em up and wind ‘em down. Saves your battery. And imagine the mess you’d be in if your electrics failed with the window open when you wanted it up or vice versa the other way round.’

‘Yes, I see what you mean,’ admitted Mr Twist.

‘This vehicle will get you where you want to go in fine style,’ said Reg. ‘New brake pads, new plugs, new windscreen wiper blades and nearly all the lights work perfectly. There’s a couple of thousand miles left on the tyres.’

‘How many miles has it done?’ asked Mr Twist.

‘Never tell a lady’s age,’ said Reg mysteriously. ‘It’s a good solid engine. There’s a lot of driving left under that bonnet.’ He winked. ‘No, I’ll be honest with you. I’m always up front with my customers. It’s done 170,000 give or take a few hundred yards but these things have been known to do a million with no trouble. Just give her a little oil and water occasionally and she’ll take you round the world and back again twice over. And there’s £100 worth of rubber on those tyres. They’ve got more grip than a politician’s handshake. Look at those seats – that’s real plastic that is! None of that leather rubbish or faux plastic they use on modern cars.’

‘How old is it?’

‘Just under 20 years,’ said Reg. ‘Another few years and it’ll be a classic car taking pride of place in a motoring museum. If you take it I’ll throw in three month’s road tax. Who’ll be doing the driving? Anyone under 25?’

‘No one under 65!’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘Marvellous. I’ll throw in a year’s insurance too. What am I saying? The boss will kill me when she finds out.’ He laughed merrily and winked. ‘That’s the wife,’ he confided. ‘She looks after the books, I look after the sales side. She’s a marvel with an adding machine. Thanks to her there’s no VAT on any of our cars. Don’t ask how she does it but it’s all legal.’ He winked. ‘Well, almost.’

‘What does it do to the gallon?’ asked Mr Twist.

‘Depends how you drive it,’ replied Reg. ‘Drive her gently, treat her like a lady, and you’ll be able to drive from here to there without filling up your tank. But you won’t want to be thrashing her, will you? You don’t look the sort of fellow to thrash an old lady in the autumn of her lifetime. Why don’t you take her for a spin? Try her out. The key’s in the ignition.’

Mrs Caldicot climbed into the driver’s seat and Mr Twist climbed into the passenger seat. Reg just stood beside the minibus and smiled up at them.

‘It’s huge!’ said Mr Twist, looking behind him at the rows of seats. The interior of the minibus looked exactly like an old-fashioned bus but smaller and the design was definitely on the functional side of practical. ‘You could get a football team in here!’

‘The last owner did,’ whispered Mrs Caldicot, reminding him of what Reg had told them.

‘Oh yes!’ said Mr Twist.

‘Aren’t you coming with us?’ Mrs Caldicot asked, looking down at Reg the car salesman.

‘No, no, you two just go for a little drive together. See how you get on with it. Talk it over with each other. I guarantee you’ll want to buy it after ten minutes. You come back and we’ll do a deal on a price. Just turn the key, take the handbrake off and away you go. It’s a proper gear box – four forward and one reverse – and the brakes will stop her on a sixpence.’

So Mrs Caldicot drove off.

After one or two close scrapes, Mrs Caldicot found that she was coping with the size of the vehicle far better than she had expected. ‘People are very nice when they see us coming,’ she said. ‘They get well out of the way and leave me lots of room.’

Mr Twist, who regarded Mrs Caldicot as the closest thing he was ever likely to find to an angel, did not mention the fact that the minibus appeared to take quite a long time to slow down when the brakes were applied. It would, he thought, only stop on Reg’s sixpence if the sixpence were placed on the road a couple of hundred yards ahead.

Less than ten minutes after they had first climbed aboard, they decided they wanted to buy the minibus.

‘I wish we’d had one of these before,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘It’s perfect for us.’

‘If we buy it then we’ll have transport when we are in Penmouth,’ Mr Twist pointed out. ‘It might be useful to be able to get about the town.'

'But where would we park? It's very big.'

'We could probably park it on the pier when we're not using it.'

'But they never let people park on piers.'

'Mr Livingstone owns the pier. If we talk to him nicely I think he'll let us park there.'

'What did I tell you?' asked Reg, when they got back and asked how much he wanted for the minibus. 'Cracking vehicle, isn't it? You could start your own little business with one of these. Put an ad in the local shop window and you're up, up and away. Quick lick of paint and it'll look like new. You could ferry wedding guests around from the church to the reception or take stag or hen parties off to the pub. There's no carpet on the floor so the next morning you can wash it out with a hose pipe and a bucket.'

'How much is it?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'You're a nice couple,' said Reg.

'We're not actually…' began Mrs Caldicot.

Reg held up his hand and winked. 'You don't have to tell me any secrets,' he said. 'When I first put this on the lot I was going to ask £2,500 for it but it's not our sort of vehicle so for a quick sale I'll let it go for £1,500. It's worth twice that and you won't find anything half as good at twice the price.'

Mrs Caldicot felt quite excited. She had no idea how much a minibus should cost but she had immediately worked out that at £1,500 the minibus was going to cost them less than the train fares. And if it costs £200 a day to rent a minibus then the purchase price wasn't much more than a week's rental.

'That's a bit more than our budget,' said Mr Twist, managing to look very disappointed.

'What's your budget?' asked Reg.

'We were planning to spend up to £1,000.'

'I'm giving it to you taxed and insured and it's got an MOT!' protested Reg, pretending to be shocked. 'I tell you what,' he said. 'Split the difference. Give me £1,250 and I'll throw in a free Sat Nav. One of those you plug into the cigar lighter. Brilliant. You'll never get lost again.'

And so they bought a minibus and drove it back home.

Chapter Eight

A few days later Jenkins left for his stay in America and the day after that Mrs Caldicot and the rest of what Ruth insisted on referring to as ‘the gang’ watched four apparently tireless removal men put their furniture and other belongings into two huge pantechnicons and set off on the long journey to Penmouth. The removal men were planning to sleep in their vehicles and to arrive in Penmouth early the following morning.

Once they’d waved goodbye to their beds, wardrobes, chairs and other essential bits and pieces, Mrs Caldicot and the gang packed themselves and their essential baggage into the minibus. The vehicle suddenly seemed to be considerably smaller than it had appeared when Mrs Caldicot and Mr Twist had first seen it. This was a result of the fact that instead of taking a single suitcase each, as had been agreed, the residents had crammed the minibus with a considerable array of personal belongings. Mr Livingstone insisted that his musical instruments counted as ‘essential’ and had to travel with him rather than with the beds and wardrobes. Mr Hewitt and Mr Roxdale decided that all their garden tools were also essential – though Mrs Caldicot did point out to them that there wasn’t likely to be a garden on the pier.

In the end, Mrs Roberts and Mr Merivale had to climb the ladder fixed to the back of the minibus and put half a dozen suitcases into the massive roof rack on the roof. Once the suitcases were in situ, Mrs Roberts had to clamber onto the roof and tie the suitcases into place with an old clothes line which Mrs Merivale had found hanging on a nail in the outside lavatory.

Mrs Caldicot had intended to leave the house the minute the removal men had departed, and this intention had been generally accepted as ideal, but what with constantly rearranging the bags inside the minibus and then tying things onto the roof, things did not go quite as smoothly as had been generally hoped.

It has to be admitted that the delay came as no great surprise to Mrs Caldicot who had long ago come to accept that whatever could go wrong probably would go wrong.

As she once said to Jenkins, if she tried to define her life in terms of popular clichés it was definitely more about ‘upset apple carts’ and ‘spilt milk’ than it was about ‘plain sailing’ or ‘a smooth ride’.

It was just after noon by the time they finally managed to lock the front door and hit the road for the first time.

And it was just after one in the afternoon when they hit the road for the second time, having returned so that Miss Nightingale could visit the lavatory one last time, Mrs Merivale could check that the gas was turned off and Mr Roxdale could fetch the bundle of peasticks which he insisted he could not possibly live without.

‘Why are we bothering to check that the gas is turned off?’ asked Mr Livingstone.

‘There could be an explosion!’ explained Mrs Merivale.

‘But the Government is going to flatten the house,’ pointed out Mr Livingstone.

But they’d had to go back so that Miss Nightingale could visit the lavatory and Mr Roxdale could fetch his peasticks so Mrs Merivale checked the gas anyway.

It took them several hours more than expected to travel to Penmouth and it was dark by the time the minibus trundled into the town.

There had been several reasons for the delay.

They had to stop four times to purchase coffees, teas and other fluids and they had to stop five times so that the assembled travellers could rid themselves of the fluids they had taken on board. They also found that the minibus had an almost insatiable thirst for petrol and oil. They had to fill the petrol tank twice, and the vehicle’s need for oil was so great that they eventually bought half a dozen cans of engine oil and stuffed them under Mr Hewitt’s seat.

And the satellite navigation device which Reg had given them proved to be rather more trouble than it was worth.

Mr Williams, the former photographer, whose experience with cameras had given him a rather optimistic confidence in his ability to deal with equipment of all kinds, said that he would accept responsibility for using the device to navigate their journey to Devon.

Sadly, either he or the device, which they had installed via the cigar lighter, proved to be flawed in some way and when they found themselves heading north on the M1 motorway, Mrs Caldicot announced that she would navigate with the aid of the little map of Great Britain which was printed at the back of her diary.

But, all these difficulties were forgotten as they drove into Penmouth, their new home.

‘All we’ve got to do now is to find the pier!’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘Let’s just head for the sea,’ suggested Mr Merivale. ‘There’s a brown sign over there marked ‘Sea Front’ and Mr Livingstone’s pier is bound to be somewhere near the sea.’

Mrs Caldicot thought this a good and practical suggestion and so they headed for the Sea Front where, with unerring inevitability, they turned the wrong way and drove for two miles along a deserted promenade without seeing anything that looked remotely like a pier.

‘I hope it hasn’t been washed away,’ said Mrs Peterborough. ‘You do hear of it happening,’ she added when she noticed her companions staring at her.

‘I’ll stop and ask someone,’ said Mrs Caldicot who, being a woman, was not averse to asking directions from strangers.

This, however, was easier said than done for Penmouth seemed deserted and looked more like a film set for a movie about a post-apocalyptic Britain than a thriving seaside resort. Eventually, she pulled up alongside an elderly couple of flaneurs who were walking their dog, a small lively mongrel, and who had paused in their peregrinations in order to allow the creature to water a lamppost.

‘The pier is the other way,’ said the male half of the couple. He had a walking stick but carried it as though it were a weapon rather than a walking aid. He now waved it about as though indicating directions. ‘But it’s closed now,’ he added.

‘It’s been closed for months,’ said the female half, a stringy, gaunt looking woman. She spoke with relish, as though relieved to be able to pass on what she hoped was bad news. She looked the sort of individual who enjoyed sharing unhappiness. ‘They say they’re turning it into a conference centre,’ she added. She did not seem enamoured of the proposal but then she did not appear to be a woman who was likely to be enamoured of anything much.

‘It’s not worth visiting,’ said the male half firmly. ‘It hasn’t been worth visiting since the 1960s. But they once had Gerry and the Pacemakers in the theatre at the end of the pier.’

‘We saw them,’ said the female half, as if her companion’s statement might need confirmation. ‘They were quite good. It was the best night I’ve ever had in Penmouth.’ She paused for a moment. ‘I’ve lived here all my life,’ she added.

Mrs Caldicot, thinking it a little sad that the woman’s ‘best night in Penmouth’ had been no better than ‘quite good’, thanked them both, turned the minibus round and headed back along the promenade. She wondered what on earth the woman had meant by claiming that the pier was going to be converted into a conference centre. Mr Canterbury had said nothing about a conference centre.

They found the pier at 9.47 pm precisely.

It was dark, unlit and rather depressing but none of that dampened their excitement.

‘Just look at that!’ said Mr Livingstone, who added he hadn’t been so excited since 1942 when he and the rest of his crew had dropped a large bomb directly onto a vital bridge in Northern Germany. This was quite a compliment to the pier for Mr Livingstone still remembered the sense of satisfaction he had felt as he had watched the bridge crumble into the raging river below.

‘We taught the Krauts a thing or two about precision bombing,’ Mr Livingstone always said when describing that glorious moment.

Mr Livingstone, who thought we’d been far too quick to forgive the Germans for starting two World Wars, still thought that ‘political correctness’ meant not spoiling your ballot paper when you voted.

There were double yellow lines and No Parking signs everywhere and consequently nowhere to park, so Mrs Caldicot bumped the minibus up over the kerb and onto a wide stretch of pavement. There were no signs forbidding parking on the pavement. Mrs Caldicot halted the minibus directly in front of the massive iron gates at the entrance to the pier. The minibus’s headlights showed two large signs – neither of which could be described as welcoming.

One sign said ‘PIER CLOSED’ and the second, even more forbidding than the first for it was printed in red and looked very angry, shouted ‘PRIVATE – KEEP OUT’. The gates were fastened with a massive chain and a suitably sized padlock.

‘Have you got the keys?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

But her query was unnecessary for Mr Livingstone had already climbed down from the minibus and had pulled the ring of keys from his pocket. He was using the headlights to select the appropriate key for the padlock when the quiet of the evening was disrupted by the arrival of a police car.

‘What you do think you’re doing?’ demanded a pasty faced young policeman who didn’t seem to Mr Livingstone to be old enough to be in long trousers, let alone old enough to be allowed out after dark. He was clambering out of the passenger side of the police car as he spoke. He had spots and his flat, peaked hat was two sizes too big for his head. His uniform also looked as if it had been made for someone twice the size.

Mr Livingstone, who had found a suitable looking key but had not yet inserted it into the padlock, looked at the policeman. ‘I think I’m opening this padlock,’ he said. ‘And aren’t you supposed to say ‘Allo, allo, allo’ before you ask me what I think I’m doing?’

‘Are you being funny?’ demanded the very young policeman.

‘Not particularly. Have you got a torch?’

‘A torch? What do you want a torch for?’

‘To shine on this padlock. So that I can see what I’m doing. Our minibus headlights aren’t very good.’

‘What do you think you’re doing with the padlock?’

‘I’m just trying to undo it. I want to open the gates. I want to open the gates so that we can drive onto the pier.’

‘They don’t allow parking on the pier.’

‘Yes I do.’

‘What do you mean ‘Yes I do’?’

‘It’s my pier and I allow parking on it. For us anyway.’

At that moment two figures appeared on the other side of the gate. One of them, the tallest of the duo, was holding a broom and the other, inevitably the shorter, was not.

‘Hey, clear off!’ said the one with the broom. ‘This is private property.’ He waved the broom about menacingly. It was impossible to see him clearly but he had the voice of a man of years.

‘Who are you?’ demanded Mr Livingstone.

‘I’m Pickering,’ said the figure with the broom. ‘If you don’t bugger off I’ll call the police.’ He waved the broom belligerently but since he was on the other side of the still locked gate, the waved broom was of little consequence.

‘I am the police,’ said the youthful, spotty policeman, pulling himself up to his statutory five feet six and a tiny weeny bit inches, complete with helmet.

It had for him been a red letter day when the Chief Constable had announced that the Force was reducing the minimum height requirements for he had always wanted to work in crime in some way, to be a policeman or a crook, and he knew that his Mum wouldn’t want him to be a crook like his Dad. She always said that one crook in the family was quite enough and what if they both got banged up at the same time and put in separate prisons? She would, she pointed out, be forever catching buses to see one and then the other. No, she was much happier about things when they reduced the height requirements and he could join the police. It didn’t pay as well as crime but he got free uniforms and a boot allowance.

‘I can’t help that,’ said Mr Pickering.

‘This elderly gentleman says he owns the pier,’ said the policeman. ‘He wants to park his minibus on it.’

‘The bloke what owned the pier is dead,’ said Mr Pickering, the figure with the broom. ‘He died months ago. I heard some big company from up London is going to turn it into a conference centre. The council’s been round doing measurements and poking their noses into things.’

‘The bloke who died was my uncle,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘He left the pier to me.’

‘What’s your name then?’

‘Livingstone,’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘That’s the name of the bloke what’s dead.’

‘It would be. The bloke what’s dead, as you so accurately put it, was my uncle. He left the pier to his brother, who was my father, but my father has been dead for some years so I inherited the pier instead.’

‘Ah,’ said Mr Pickering, who felt that this did put a different complexion on things. ‘But can you prove that you’re the new owner?’

‘I’ve got the keys,’ pointed out Mr Livingstone, holding up his bunch of keys.

‘Anyone could have a bunch of keys,’ said Mr Pickering.

‘But these keys fit the pier,’ pointed out Mr Livingstone.

‘You might have stolen them,’ said Mr Pickering. ‘Or they might be them skeletal keys.’

‘That’s a good point,’ said the policeman. ‘Can you prove you are the owner?’

‘Wait there a minute,’ said Mr Livingstone. He climbed back onto the minibus and found the small suitcase in which he had packed his ukulele and his flute, all his socks and underpants and the paperwork relating to the pier. The ukulele and the flute were the only instruments he had which would fit into the suitcase. He had used the underwear and socks to pack around them. He left the ukulele and the flute, and the underpants and socks, and took the papers out of the case. He then climbed back down from the minibus and showed the papers first to the policeman and then to Mr Pickering. Both peered at the paperwork, frowned a good deal and announced themselves satisfied.

‘They certainly look in order to me,’ said the policeman who didn’t have the foggiest idea what he was looking at, apart from the fact that there was a lot of it. He knew from experience that when there was a lot of paperwork then it needed to be taken seriously and that the people who had the paperwork were probably important. The driver of the police car, still in his vehicle, watched carefully. He was hoping that the suspects would decide to make a break for it. Realising the limitations of the minibus he had decided that he would give the fugitives a two minute start so that he’d have a chance to switch on his siren and speed along the promenade. If they headed east he’d be able to drive past the hotel where his girlfriend worked as a receptionist and she’d see him go speeding past and be terribly impressed.

‘That’s good enough for me,’ said Mr Pickering who was labouring under the twin disadvantages of not having his reading spectacles with him and not having eaten enough carrots to be able to read in the dark. He didn’t have the faintest idea what he’d been looking at. ‘You’d better come in then.’

The policeman walked back to the police car, climbed in and slammed the door. The driver, who had kept the car engine running in the slender hope that the minibus might take off into the night, giving him an excuse to chase after it, sped off to fight crime elsewhere in Penmouth.

And so, at last, Mr Livingstone unfastened the padlock, unchained the gates and opened them wide to allow Mrs Caldicot to drive the minibus onto the pier.

It was now clear that the taller of the two figures, the broom handler, was a man of mature years. Critics (of the variety so commonly found on social media, unmistakeably trenchant and fearless in their comments, though, it has to be admitted, not always as resilient as might be expected when on the receiving end of trenchant and fearless comments) might well have dismissed him as being well beyond his best buy date and given him two stars and a thumbs down.

‘Oh, you can’t do that!’ said Mr Pickering as Mrs Caldicot started to edge the minibus forwards.

‘Why not?’ asked Mr Livingstone, who was grinning happily because he was now standing on his pier. He hadn’t been on a pier for decades and now here he was standing on one which he owned.

‘It’s not allowed,’ said Mr Pickering.

‘Who says?’

‘Mr Livingstone never allowed people to drive onto the pier.’

‘That Mr Livingstone has gone. I’m the new Mr Livingstone now,’ Mr Livingstone reminded him. ‘And I’m allowing Mrs Caldicot to drive onto the pier.’

‘Who’s Mrs Caldicot?’ asked Mr Pickering.

‘She’s the lady driving the minibus.’

‘Oh,’ said Mr Pickering, absorbing this new piece of information and collapsing as quickly and as completely as a house of cards in a puff of wind. ‘Oh, well I guess that’s all right then,’ he said.

The truth was that Mr Pickering was having considerable difficulty coming to terms with the change in circumstances which had been thrust upon him by life’s eternal capacity to hurl around unexpected vicissitudes.

It seemed to him that life was moving far too quickly these days.

One minute he was happily working on the pier, operating the little train, changing light bulbs as and when they needed changing, and selling ice creams and Kiss Me Quick hats as and when such items were in demand. He was not a man who had a firm or fixed view of his responsibilities. He was not a man besieged by ambitions or expectations. He worked on the pier and that was that.

But the next minute a bunch of sour looking men and women in suits were swaggering about on the pier, poking their noses into rooms as if they owned the place which, for all he knew, they might well do, considering the way they’d walked in without introducing themselves. They were forever talking on their fancy mobile phones and taking pictures and they pointed at things a good deal. Closing the gates to keep out the bailiffs had at least succeeded in stemming the tide of sour looking intruders in suits. Mr Pickering didn’t approve of people coming onto a pier in suits. Men who wandered onto a pier should wear open-necked shirts, preferably brightly coloured and worn outside their trousers. And women should ideally wear summer frocks or, failing that, the sort of clothes that made it clear that when they’d got up and dressed themselves they hadn’t been planning on spending the day looking at spread sheets, pecking at a computer keyboard or ringing people up and selling them insurance.

And now a load of old folks had turned up and the woman who seemed to be in charge had driven a minibus straight onto the pier and parked it on the planking just as if they had a parking space booked; that was something which not even the men and women in suits had dared to do. They’d left their motor cars somewhere else and had walked onto the pier in little clusters, all with their plastic folders under their arms or their plastic briefcases in their hands.

There was no doubt about the fact that Mr Pickering sometimes found life a bit of a challenge.

Chapter Nine

Once the minibus was safely through the gates, and parked neatly next to one of those plywood boards with a hole in the top, brightly painted so that people could poke their heads through and have their photographs taken so that it looked, for all the world, as if they were a fat woman in a spotted bikini or a fat policeman with a raised truncheon, Mr Livingstone and Mr Pickering pulled the gates together and Mr Livingstone repositioned the chain and relocked the padlock.

Mr Pickering seemed relieved when the gate was firmly locked. He pulled at the chain a couple of times to make sure that the gate was indeed properly fastened. He had spent most of his life welcoming people onto the pier. But now he only felt secure when the gates were closed, chained and locked. It was, he knew, a rather sad state of affairs but what else can you do when a bunch of belligerent looking bald men with tattoos had taken to standing on the pavement outside, and threatening to remove goods to the value of whatever it was.

Only when the gates were locked did Mr Pickering introduce the second person who had been standing with him behind the gates.

'This is my granddaughter, Dorothy,' he said, introducing a girl of about sixteen to Mr Livingstone. 'She lives with me. She ran the café until Mr Livingstone passed on.'

Dorothy seemed to Mr Livingstone to be a nice young girl. She was the sort of old-fashioned girl he'd have been happy to have as a granddaughter. Indeed, she was the sort of old-fashioned girl most people of grandparent age would have been happy to have as a granddaughter. Her hair was brown and cut properly and she had no visible tattoos or bits of metal attached to her person. Mr Livingstone was a little old-fashioned and he couldn't understand why so many young people wanted to have rings put through their noses as though they were prize pigs or belligerent bulls. He had once suggested to Mr Hewitt that they buy a large magnet and stroll through the local town clearing the streets of youths who had so decorated their persons.

'Where do you two live?' asked Mr Livingstone, as Mrs Caldicot and the rest of the party climbed down from the minibus and stretched their legs.

'Where's the toilet?' asked Mr Williams who had been the first to climb down and who was now bending forwards very slightly and standing with his legs very close together.

'I need one too,' said Mr Roxdale.

'Me too,' said Mrs Torridge.

It quickly became clear that finding toilets (preferably in the plural) was the first requirement. Mr Pickering's granddaughter offered to show them the way to the lavatories behind the pier's café.

'We live on the pier,' said Mr Pickering, replying at last to Mr Livingstone's question. 'We've got a little flat behind the café.' He sighed. 'I expect you'll be wanting us to move on.'

'Do you know anything about the pier?' asked Mr Livingstone.

'I've worked on it since I was a lad,' replied Mr Pickering. 'It's a grand pier. A wonderful pier. And I've lived on it ever since after the War.'

'What do you do?' Mr Livingstone enquired.

'I drive the train and I'm the sort of odd job man. Any odd jobs that need doing, I do them. In between train rides I sometimes help out in the shop or the café. My Deidre and I lived and worked here. Deidre, my wife as was when she was still with us bless her, ran the café. Then when Deidre died three years ago, my granddaughter came here to live with me. Her parents had split up and she didn't get on with either of them. She's a nice girl; a good girl and now that Deidre has gone she's the only one who can handle the deep fat fryer. It's a bit on the temperamental side.'

'I'm definitely not going to throw you off,' promised Mr Livingstone who was impressed by the fact that Mr Pickering seemed to know things about the pier but more impressed by the fact that he clearly had a real affection for it.

'Is that a little train?' asked Mr Hewitt, who spotted the small train which took holidaymakers up and down the pier without them having to walk. Peering into the darkness he could just make out that the train was painted red and yellow.

'It is,' said Mr Pickering. 'That's Doris. At Halloween I dress myself up in a sheet and we call her the ghost train.''

'Doris?' said Mr Livingstone.

'That's what I call the train. Doris. I wanted to have the name painted on the front of the engine but he wouldn't let me. I don't know why. I just thought it would be nice. She's always seemed like a Doris to me. People give names to boats, don't they? And trains always used to have names. There was that Flying Scotsman. And the Golden

Arrow and the Robin Hood. And the Devon Scot. Loads of trains had names. I don't suppose they give them names now. They probably don't even give them numbers.'

'Can I come aboard?' asked Mr Hewitt.

'You help yourselves,' said Mr Pickering, generously. 'We usually charge 25 pence each way and 50 pence for a return. It's been those prices since the year 2000. I kept saying to Mr Livingstone that we should put up the prices.'

'Who wouldn't let you?'

'Let me do what?'

'Who wouldn't let you paint 'Doris' on the front of the train?'

'Oh, that was Mr Simpkins.'

Mrs Caldicot and the others joined Mr Hewitt on the train. They waited for a few moments for Mr Williams, Mrs Torridge and Mr Roxdale to join them. There were three carriages and plenty of room for them all. Mrs Caldicot looked around and reckoned that the train could carry at least fifty people at a time. She did the sums in her head and quickly realised that if they put up the price a little then they could earn quite reasonable sums of money.

'How do I make it start?' asked Mr Hewitt, preparing to climb into the driver's seat.

'I'll drive it,' said Mr Pickering firmly, as he gently eased himself past Mr Hewitt, who was clearly keen to have a go at driving the train.

Mrs Caldicot, watching, thought that the small boy who resides within every grown man, and who sometimes seemed to be particularly dominant as far as Mr Hewitt was concerned, was in danger of taking over.

'It's not as easy as you'd think,' said Mr Pickering. He climbed aboard and sat in the driver's seat. Mr Livingstone sat beside him. Mr Hewitt sat behind Mr Pickering who then pressed a button and the train started. Once the train had started, Mr Pickering pressed the accelerator and the train moved forward slowly. 'It's got a battery,' the driver explained. 'So it's electric. We charge it up every now and then when the electricity has run out. We usually do runs up and down the pier every 30 minutes.'

'It doesn't look that difficult to start,' said Mr Hewitt.

'It's not the starting,' said Mr Pickering, bridling a little. 'It starts easy enough, as long as the battery is charged and I always keep it charged. It's the people walking about you have to watch out for. You could run people over.'

'But there aren't any people on the pier,' Mr Hewitt pointed out. 'We're the only people here. And we're all on the train.'

'That's as may be,' said Mr Pickering. 'You still have to watch what you're doing. You could crash. You could drive off the edge of the pier and land in the sea.'

'Quite right,' said Mr Hewitt, realising that, for the moment at least, Mr Pickering didn't want anyone else driving what he clearly thought of as 'his' train.

'Who is Mr Simpkins?' Mr Livingstone asked Mr Pickering.

'Why?'

'Mr Simpkins. You said a Mr Simpkins stopped you painting 'Doris' on the front of the engine.'

'He was the pier master.'

'Pier master? What's a pier master?'

'He's the chap what's in charge of the pier. A sort of manager. On a ship they have a captain and on a pier they have a master.'

'I didn't know that.'

'Not many people do.'

'Why wouldn't Mr Simpkins let you paint 'Doris' on the front of the train?'

'Dunno. It might have something to do with him being a bit of a mean bastard, I suppose.'

'Where is he? I'll have a word with him!'

'He left.'

'What do you mean 'He left'?

'He buggered off. Just upped and off when your uncle died. He said the pier hadn't got a future and he'd been offered a job by the council. They hired him to run a car park in the town centre. He said they were paying him a fortune because they valued him so highly so he just buggered off. I think they just wanted him away from here so that the pier wouldn't have anyone managing it. He took 48 boxes of Turkish Delight, 50 boxes of them little flags that kids stick in their sandcastles and a load of sticks of pink, peppermint, seaside rock. I don't know why he took the rock. It all had Penmouth running through the middle so unless he went somewhere else called Penmouth it wouldn't be much use to him. Unless he just liked eating it. Maybe he did. I can't eat the stuff myself. I used to eat a lot of it but then I lost my teeth and that was the end of my rock eating days. I never understand who bought them little flags we used to sell because there's no sand on the beach and you can't build sandcastles with pebbles, can you? We used to sell hundreds of those little flags on a nice day in the summer. The kids used to wave them. Mr

Simpkins said he was owed some wages and something from his pension but he wasn't going to wait to get his money because he didn't think it would be forthcoming, that was the word he used, 'forthcoming', so he'd take it in kind. Just piled the boxes into the back of his car and off he went.'

'Oh,' said Mr Livingstone, rather started by this tale of woe. 'Well you can paint 'Doris' on the train. I don't mind. Who's left apart from you and Dorothy?'

'There's nobody else. Just me and Dorothy. Oh and the Fat Lady comes round most days to see if there's any news about the Pier reopening. And young Errol hangs about. He sometimes helps Dorothy with our shopping.'

'Who is Errol?'

'He's just a kid. He works for the council doing something or other. He likes the pier and he's taken a fancy to our Dorothy. He's a nice boy.'

'And the Fat Lady?'

'She's a lovely girl. Well I call her a girl but she's a grown woman. In her 30s I'd say though I wouldn't rightly know. She used to be bigger but she's lost a lot of weight since she lost her job. I suppose she can't afford to eat as much as she did before. She used to help out in the theatre when she wasn't being the Fat Lady. Selling ice creams and programmes, that sort of thing. We all mucked in and tried to help with those jobs.'

'How long has the pier been closed?'

'A month or two now. There were bills to pay but no one was paying them, so I locked the gates to stop the people getting in.'

'What people?'

'Bailiffs, they called themselves. They came in a van marked DEBT COLLECTORS in big, red letters. I think they do that to intimidate people and embarrass them. They were all big blokes and very threatening. They wanted to come in and take stuff because some bill or other hadn't been paid. So Dorothy and I locked ourselves in. Errol checked with somebody at the council and they said the bailiffs can't come in if the place is locked even if you owe them money. So we keep the place locked.'

'How long have you been locked in?'

'Oh, a month or two. Since old Mr Livingstone passed away and Mr Simpkins buggered off.'

'What do you do for food?'

'I've got a few pounds saved and our Dorothy climbs down after dark when it's low tide and runs along the beach to the supermarket. She buys what we need and then brings it back. Errol helps her.'

They had now reached the end of the pier. 'That's the theatre,' said Mr Pickering, pointing to a huge structure straight ahead of them. 'It's built on Stone Rock. They used to have good shows there.'

'I heard,' said Mr Livingstone. 'Gerry and the Pacemakers in the 1960s.'

'You remember, eh?' said Mr Pickering. 'That was a good night. Proper band they were. Not like the rubbish you see on the television these days. We nearly had the Beatles once. And we had that Cilla Black girl.'

'Shall we go back now?' said Mrs Caldicot, who was sitting behind Mr Livingstone. 'It's getting a little chilly.' She leant forward to speak to Mr Pickering. 'Do you know if there's anywhere we can eat? I'm starving. I bet everyone else is too.'

'I could ask Dorothy to do up some chips,' said Mr Pickering, turning the train around and heading back down the pier. 'And there may be a few bits of cod in the freezer.'

'That would be marvellous,' said Mrs Caldicot.

But long before they got back to the pier gatehouse they could smell the chips frying. Dorothy, guessing that the new owner and his friends would probably be hungry, had heated up the deep fat fryer and thrown in a large bag of potato chips and enough cod to feed a small army.

Chapter Ten

They all put on their coats and sat out on the pier, eating cod and chips and listening to the sound of the sea crashing against the pier's wooden piles.

Dorothy, Mr Pickering's granddaughter, and the only one who knew how to make the deep fat fryer work, found a crate of Dandelion and Burdock, presented in bottles not cans, and they celebrated the first hours of their new life with a series of cheerful and increasingly optimistic toasts.

'Here's to us and Mr Livingstone's pier!' said Mr Merivale.

'Here's to the best pier in England!' said Mr Twist.

'Let's drink to the brightest and most exciting pier in the world!' said Mr Roxdale, who was tired and felt a little emotional but meant what he said.

They all drank to this and, where possible, clinked bottles together to seal the toast.

'It's been a busy day,' said Mr Hewitt. He had remembered too late that fizzy drinks always gave him heartburn and wind. He tried to burp silently and succeeded in only one of those aims.

'A busy day and a brilliant day,' said Mrs Roberts.

There was a murmur as the others agreed with her.

'These are damned fine chips,' said Mr Hewitt.

'Damned good cod, too,' said Mr Roxdale.

'Plenty of salt and lashings of vinegar,' said Mr Livingstone, who, not without good reason, considered himself to be an expert on the subject of fish and chips.

'And no little, plastic trays,' said Mr Hewitt.

Mr Livingstone visibly shuddered. 'And no plastic forks,' he added sternly.

'I'm glad young Dorothy still wraps them in newspaper,' said Mr Roxdale. 'I always find interesting bits to read.'

'I only ever read a newspaper when I've got fish and chips,' confessed Mr Merivale.

'Didn't they make it illegal?' asked Mr Livingstone. 'Wrapping chips in newspaper?'

'It was that Common Market,' said Mr Hewitt. 'They passed some law about it. I think they were worried that they wouldn't be able to recycle the newspaper if it had bits of chip clinging to it.'

'What rubbish,' snorted Mr Livingstone.

'I think they allow it if you wrap the chips in plain paper before you put them into the newspaper,' said Mr Merivale.

'Well that's just plain silly,' said Mr Hewitt. 'That's wasting twice as much paper as they need.'

'I can't believe this is happening to me!' typed Ruth, who was not yet 19-years-old and had, in the short time since they'd arrived, sent a sequence of excited text messages to Jean-Jacques, the accordionist she had met in Paris, and to her best friend Denise who had, many months earlier, warned her that working for a bunch of old folk would be so dull that she'd die of boredom.

'We're on Mr Livingstone's pier,' she wrote to Denise. 'We've just had cod and chips, and drunk Dandelion and Burdock, and now we're going to sleep on Lilos in the pier ballroom. Mine is bright blue and has pictures of Donald Duck all over it. We got the Lilos from the shop because our beds haven't got here yet. Mr Livingstone owns the shop so he owns the Lilos so we didn't have to pay for them. We got stopped by two policemen when we got here and I thought they were going to arrest us. Dorothy, who is two years younger than I am and very sweet, says she'll teach me how to use the deep fat fryer and Mr Pickering, who looks even older than Mr Hewitt, has promised to teach me how to drive the train along the pier.'

'This is the best night of my life,' said Mr Livingstone to Mrs Caldicot, as they looked out over the sea. The light of a thousand stars, reflected in the water, sparkled and danced.

'Better than bombing that German bridge?'

'Oh, yes,' said Mr Livingstone. 'This is even better than seeing that Kraut bridge go down into the river.'

And he sighed the deep sigh of a contented man who knew that whatever travails and adversities lay ahead nothing will banish the magic of the moment.

'I'm very pleased,' whispered Mrs Caldicot, who was.

'Who is going to be paying for the cod and chip suppers?' asked Mr Pickering, of no one in particular. 'Not to mention the Dandelion and Burdock.'

Mrs Caldicot took out her purse, asked him how much they all owed and handed over the money he asked for. Mr Pickering gave her the appropriate amount of change and then put the proceeds into the till. It seemed strange to Mrs Caldicot that they should have to pay to have dinner in what was, effectively, their own home but paying Mr

Pickering seemed easier than trying to explain the new circumstances. He seemed like a man who felt that his capacity and yearning for surprise had already been more than satisfied.

They spent the night in the ballroom, sleeping on the plastic Lilos which Mr Pickering had found in a cupboard at the back of the shop and which he had inflated with a small foot pump. They had no blankets and so, since it was a little chilly, Mr Pickering turned on a small electric fire which Dorothy found in the café.

The new owner and his friends, exhausted after a long day and full of excitement about the future, wrapped themselves in their coats and slept peacefully.

They dreamt, variously and independently, of ice cream, candyfloss, the sound of seagulls, bunting fluttering in a summer breeze, men in deckchairs with knotted handkerchiefs protecting their bald heads from the sunshine and rows of smiling wives in summer frocks, all settled in deckchairs and all sipping steaming hot tea from white, china mugs.

Mr Hewitt dreamt of driving the small train and Mr Twist, who used to work for Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and who consequently worried a good deal about money, dreamt of hordes of happy holidaymakers handing over their 25ps and their 50ps to travel up and down the pier.

Chapter Eleven

They were awoken at 8.00 am the following morning by a good deal of tooting.

When Mrs Caldicot and the rest of the refugees from the Twilight Years Rest Home looked out of the ballroom window, fearful that Mr Pickering's awful bailiffs might be standing alongside their van, proclaiming shame and embarrassment for all who could read, they saw that instead of the bailiffs the two pantechnicons were there, parked on the pavement outside the entrance to the pier.

After Mr Livingstone had unfastened the padlock, opened the gates and greeted the removal men, they told him that they had got up at 4.00 am in order to finish their delivery without further delay. They admitted that they had done this not entirely out of a sense of generous good spirit but in the knowledge that if they finished unloading early enough they would be able to spend the day by the seaside; paddling, eating cockles and doing whatever grown men think of doing, dream of doing and actually do when they are released from the leash of daily toil and are well out of sight of employers and loved ones for the best part of a day.

By eleven that morning, the two huge removal lorries had been unloaded and the beds, wardrobes, dressing tables, kitchen whites, tables, chairs and other baggage and paraphernalia of 14 lives had been placed, if not precisely in their final positions, in an approximation that served well enough.

The drivers of the huge lorries then drove to a public car park where they left the vehicles neatly positioned on six car park spaces apiece. They handed two crisp £10 notes to the car park attendant who was on duty for the day and who, in return for this unofficial donation, promised to turn a blind eye to whatever bylaws had been broached. This chore completed, the removal men, as merry a band of workmen as you could hope to come across, returned to the pier on the promise of large helpings of cod and chips and unlimited supplies of Dandelion and Burdock in bottles and not in cans, thank you very much.

Only when the removal men had gone and some (but by no means all) of the boxes had been unpacked and clothes put away in wardrobes and so on, could Mrs Caldicot and what she now (thanks to Ruth) thought of as the gang, begin to explore the pier which Mr Livingstone had inherited and of what he was now, by common consent, considered to be the Pier Master. This was, without a doubt, a title he enjoyed just as much as any title within the gift of Her Majesty the Queen. 'I'm not just a peer,' he said proudly. 'I'm a Pier Master!'

Sadly, in the daylight, the pier was not quite what any of them had envisaged.

Mrs Caldicot had remembered the piers of her childhood as being always bright and busy and stretching out as far as the eye could see across a bright blue sea. They were always thronged with happy holidaymakers, children eating ice cream cones with chocolate flakes stuck into them, fathers in shirt sleeves, with braces or suspenders showing, women in cheerful summer dresses carrying raffia beach bags and looking pleasantly harassed and sunburnt. The only hazard was the occasional incontinent seagull.

There was, she remembered, always a busy theatre at the end of the pier, with posters displayed outside advertising names recognised from the wireless and the television.

And there were usually several small boats at a jetty at the end of the pier, ready to take tourists out to sea to fish for mackerel. Less intrepid fishermen lined the rails of the pier and dangled bits of twine in the water with plenty of hope but not much expectation. The one thing she remembered was that the people she saw on piers were always at peace with themselves and the world. There were many pipes being puffed and many dreams being enjoyed. Piers, she remembered, were always happy places – far away from the sometimes awful realities of the real world. When you stepped onto a pier, and felt the wooden planks beneath your feet, you left your bills and worries behind you and entered another world; a world where the sea breezes seemed to waft away all earthly trials and tribulations.

Sadly, the pier which Mr Livingstone had inherited was currently none of the things that Mrs Caldicot remembered.

Indeed, it has to be admitted that in light of Mrs Caldicot's memories, it was a distinct disappointment.

The pier itself looked rather ancient, which was to be expected since it was well over a hundred years old and had been standing with its feet in the sea for a long, long time. But it looked even older than its years and it looked sadly uncared for. The storm battered paintwork was faded and chipped and there was more rust to be seen than seemed entirely appropriate.

It perhaps did not help that the wind was howling in a very unseasonal sort of way, and that the rain was coming down in the sort of quantities which suggested that God was having an end of season sale.

It was, thought Mrs Caldicot, not the sort of weather anyone expected in the month of May. She felt sorry for the removal men who had such high hopes for their day.

And there wasn't a soul to be seen on the pier.

(Mrs Caldicot was initially startled by this but shortly realised that the absence of holidaymakers was, perhaps, not entirely surprising since the gates to the pier were firmly closed, chained and padlocked and decorated with large signs warning potential visitors that they were not wanted and should keep out and go away.)

It was, thought Mrs Caldicot, like meeting an elderly Cary Grant: wrinkled, bald, rheumy eyed and painfully arthritic. Still Cary Grant, but not quite what you'd expected or hoped for.

They spent the rest of the day pottering about, looking around, checking out the pier and sheltering from the rain. In the evening Mrs Caldicot and the gang sat in the café, together with Mr Pickering and his granddaughter Dorothy, and had chips and cod for their supper. (Mr Hewitt insisted that if they said it that way round it sounded as if it were a different meal to cod and chips. No one else cared very much what they called it as long as they had plenty of salt and vinegar at hand.) Outside, the storm had passed and the evening sky looked friendlier and more welcoming.

Mr Pickering, who told them that the pier had been closed for some weeks in order to keep out the bailiffs, explained that somewhere along the line the original Mr Livingstone, Mr Bertram Livingstone, had failed to pay a bill the council had sent and the council, showing all the mercy of a tom cat on the prowl, had pounced.

The bailiffs had been called in.

'Errol has been very helpful,' said Dorothy Pickering, rather proudly thought Mrs Caldicot. 'He did some research at the council offices and told us that the bailiffs can't break into a property and can't enter unless there is a door or window open. With the gates shut they have to stay outside. Errol told us to watch out because he said that they use a lot of tricks to gain entry. They ask to use the loo and then, when they're inside, they suddenly start taking away your stuff. Or they lie and say that they can charge £50 a minute for every minute they are kept waiting. The fact is that it doesn't cost anything extra to keep them standing around outside for hours and hours.'

Errol, who had joined them for their fish and chip supper, blushed but didn't say anything as he listened to Dorothy. He was a shy boy, younger than his years in many ways, and he spoke only to Dorothy, and then in whispers.

'They came this afternoon and we saw them outside and we didn't like the look of them one little bit,' said Miss Nightingale. She shuddered. 'They looked very menacing.'

'We were upstairs in the ballroom and we threw things at them,' said Mrs Peterborough. 'They had shaved their heads and had lots of tattoos. They looked like bullies.'

'What did you throw at them?' asked Mrs Caldicot, suddenly a little worried.

'We peppered them with coconut mushrooms and Pontefract cakes,' said Mr Livingstone. 'We checked the sell by dates and they were too old to eat or to sell. Oh, and we found some old dolly mixtures that had been nibbled by mice.'

'Sugar mice, sherbet pips and liquorice allsorts,' added Mr Hewitt. 'The boxes they were in had been kept somewhere damp so they didn't look very nice.'

'Oh and some fudge,' said Mrs Torridge. 'The box said it was extra creamy but sadly that had expired too. I tried a bit but it had gone hard.'

'And some pork scratchings,' added Miss Nightingale.

'Actually, I did taste one or two of the coconut mushrooms,' confessed Mrs Torridge. 'And to be honest I couldn't taste anything wrong with them. I think they put these silly dates on just so that people will throw stuff away and then have to buy more.'

'And a dozen pickled eggs which we found in a jar,' added Mrs Peterborough.

'What did they do?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'They sort of went splat when they hit the pavement,' replied Mrs Peterborough.

'No, the bailiffs! What did the bailiffs do?' asked Mrs Caldicot. She didn't think the coconut mushrooms would do too much harm but she was a little alarmed at the idea of Mrs Peterborough hurling pickled eggs at the bailiffs. 'They didn't call the police, did they?'

'They hid behind their van and then they drove off,' said Mr Livingstone. 'I don't think they'll call the police.'

'One of them seemed to be crying,' said Miss Nightingale. 'He was hit on the head by a coconut mushroom. Two of the others were comforting him.'

'They'd look a bit silly if they complained, wouldn't they?' said Mr Hewitt. He drew an imaginary headline in the air: 'Bailiffs Run Away From Pensioners Hurling Coconut Mushrooms!'

'And there wasn't any evidence left when they'd gone,' said Mrs Torridge. 'The seagulls ate it all. Every last dolly mixture was gone in two minutes.'

'If they come back tomorrow we're going to throw blancmange at them,' said Mrs Peterborough. 'We found some blancmange powder and some dried milk, and Miss Nightingale said she thought there was enough to make three gallons of strawberry blancmange.'

'We can use soup ladles to hurl the blancmange,' said Miss Nightingale.

‘And there’s plenty more rotten fudge and six more boxes of out-of-date liquorice allsorts!’ added Mrs Torridge, who had also tried the liquorice allsorts and had found them perfectly edible even though the date on the boxes suggested that they were nine months past the date when they could be safely consumed.

Errol, who was sitting next to Dorothy, leant a little closer to her and whispered in her ear. Dorothy listened carefully.

‘Errol says that he heard people at the council offices talking,’ said Dorothy. ‘He said they were confident they’d get possession of the pier within a few days at the most.’

‘Who said that?’ asked an indignant Mr Livingstone.

Errol whispered to Dorothy again.

‘Errol says he thinks they were people from the planning department,’ reported Dorothy. ‘He’ll try to find out when he goes to work tomorrow.’

‘How much do we owe the council?’ Mrs Caldicot asked Mr Pickering.

‘The original bill was for £5,743.60. That was for a tax bill that the council sent and that didn’t get paid. But now there’s a bailiff fee of £200 to add on so the latest bill we had said we owed them £5,943.6 altogether.’

Mrs Caldicot went quite cold and turned to Mr Livingstone. ‘I suppose we’d better pay it,’ she said.

Over the last year or two, Mrs Caldicot had learned a lot about dealing with people in authority. She had learned the hard way that one should never show weakness, fear or doubt of any kind when confronted by a policeman, a tax inspector or anyone with more power than they know what to do with. She knew that a uniform, or a position with a little status within any corner of a nation’s bureaucracy, turns many individuals into bullies. And she knew that bullies thrive on fear.

But she had also learned that although there are times when it is best to stand up and fight, there are also times when you have to let the bullies win a round.

‘I haven’t got £5,743.60!’said Mr Livingstone. ‘I can probably find the 60 pence but that’s about it.’

‘Let me see what I can do,’ said Mrs Caldicot. She walked out onto the pier, took out the mobile telephone which Jenkins had given her, scrolled down the menu and pressed the CALL button when her husband’s name appeared. She hated having to call him but could not think of anyone else to turn to. A few moments later, to her great relief, she heard his voice.

‘We’ve got a problem,’ admitted Mrs Caldicot after they’d exchanged private and loving greetings which have no place in this account. ‘It seems that we owe the council some money and I think we will have to pay it. Bailiffs have been trying to get in and the council seems to be very aggressive.’

‘How much do we owe?’ asked Jenkins.

Mrs Caldicot told him.

‘I’ll ring the bank and move some money from my deposit account into our joint account,’ promised Jenkins. ‘You can let the council have a cheque. By the time they cash it the money will have cleared.’

‘But how can we pay you back? We have to pay you back.’

‘If you really insist on making it a loan then you can pay me back when the Government sends the compensation cheque they owe,’ said Jenkins.

Mrs Caldicot wanted to cry but didn’t. They talked for a few minutes about how Jenkins was getting on in America (very well but he really wanted to be with Mrs Caldicot and on the pier in Penmouth), about how he had decided to abandon his novel (it was, he said, the sort of novel best left in a box at the bottom of the wardrobe and he rather thought he might do some research and write a small book about Jane Austen’s visits to Penmouth) and about how Mrs Caldicot was getting on in Penmouth (very well but she really wanted Jenkins to be on the pier with her and she thought that if Jenkins wrote a small book about Jane Austen and Penmouth it would sell very well in the shop on the pier) and finally they exchanged loving goodbyes and then turned off their phones.

Mrs Caldicot went back into the café, put her mobile phone back into her handbag and took out her cheque book. She then wrote out a cheque for the sum that they owed the local council.

‘What are you doing?’ asked Mr Livingstone, when he saw the size of the cheque Mrs Caldicot had written.

‘Until we pay the council we can’t open up the pier and start earning some money,’ explained Mrs Caldicot.

‘Oh no,’ said Mr Livingstone, who looked very worried. ‘I can’t allow you to pay my debts.’

‘But it isn’t your debt!’ insisted Mrs Caldicot. ‘You own the pier but we are all living here now. And just as we did at the house, we will share our living expenses. Paying the council taxes counts as a living expense.’

When they’d all been living at what had formerly been the Twilight Years Rest Home the residents had all paid part of their pensions into a joint bank account so that bills could be paid. They kept money back for their own personal expenses. It was a system which seemed to work well.

Mr Livingstone looked at Mrs Caldicot. ‘Maybe I should just sell the pier,’ he said.

‘Mr Canterbury said that the people who offered to buy it offered only £1!’ she pointed out.

‘Maybe they’d pay that and also pay all the debts.’

‘I’m sure they won’t.’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘But do you want to sell the pier?’

‘No, of course not!’

‘Well, I’m not going to discuss any such nonsense,’ said Mrs Caldicot firmly but kindly. ‘This pier is our new home. We’re here and we’re going to stay. I’ve written a cheque and paid the bill. That’s the way it is and that’s the way it’s going to be.’

‘That’s it, Mrs Caldicot!’ said Mr Hewitt, who was grinning. ‘You tell him!’

And so Mrs Caldicot put the bill and the cheque she had written into the weedy little envelope which the council had included with their bill and she gave the envelope to Errol to take to the council offices. She thought it would be a good idea to get the bill paid as quickly as possible – partly to ensure that the bailiffs didn’t come back and partly to prevent the council adding on any more expenses or charges.

‘Just pop it into the internal mailbox,’ she told the boy in a whisper. ‘Don’t let anyone there know that you delivered it.’ She smiled and winked at him in a kindly, motherly sort of way for he seemed a likeable, young fellow. He tried to wink back but it was more of a blink than a wink and he blushed bright red as he always did when people were kind to him. ‘And if you can find out why the council wants to control the pier, and why they think they’re going to be able to, that would be very helpful. Can you come and have supper with us again tomorrow evening?’

Errol opened and closed his mouth, rather like a goldfish, and nodded enthusiastically as a substitute for the words which were missing.

Chapter Twelve

After breakfast the following morning they opened the pier gates for the first time since the bailiffs had started their vigil outside the pier entrance. It seemed reasonable to assume that since the council had now received their money they would call off the dogs. Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale were privately rather disappointed though they didn't say anything to the others. They had been looking forward to being able to hurl strawberry blancmange at large men with no hair and lots of tattoos.

The rain had gone and the sky was blue. It was a beautiful day and with the council tax bill paid and the pier gates open, Mrs Caldicot felt full of hope. They still had to deal with whatever else it was that the council was planning but it was now generally agreed that the pier, despite the rust and the signs of age, was looking wonderful in the sunshine. The paintwork, though chipped and faded, still managed to sparkle and shine and give every impression of having been given a thorough once over by one of those teams of Romanian car wash specialists who have taken over unused petrol station forecourts throughout England.

Mr Pickering, delighted at last to see the pier being prepared for action, removed the tarpaulin cover which he had put over the train when it had rained, and gave the woodwork a polish and the brass-work an energetic rub down with an oily rag.

His granddaughter Dorothy poured more chips and fish into the deep fat fryer (and made a note to tell her granddad, who had in the past been responsible for such things) that their supplies of both potatoes and fish were running rather low.

Miss Nightingale, Mrs Peterborough and Mrs Torridge continued to sort through the boxes of sweets and other delicacies which they had unearthed in the cupboards at the back of the shop as well as in some cupboards upstairs outside the ballroom. They had been asked by Mrs Caldicot to separate out the items which were within their 'sell by date' and could, therefore, either be eaten or sold, and those which were outside their 'sell by date' and would, therefore, have to be thrown away or (the preferred option of Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale) stored to be used as ammunition should the bailiffs ever return.

Mr Williams, Mr Roxdale and Mr Twist who had moved some of the furniture around, and emptied quite a few boxes and trunks, were drinking tea in the café and making lists of things which had to be done, though preferably not immediately.

Mr and Mrs Merivale, who were good at this sort of practical stuff, and to be honest rather enjoyed it, were checking the bathrooms to see which taps were dripping and which light fittings needed new bulbs. Mr Merivale was carrying with him a wrench which he had brought and Mrs Merivale was carrying a large cardboard box full of spare light bulbs which she had discovered in a store room on the top floor.

And Mrs Caldicot, Mrs Roberts and Ruth were sitting together on a bench, each of them armed with a nice cup of tea with two biscuits on the saucer, and working on what Mrs Caldicot called the 'Plan for the Future'.

Mrs Caldicot had invited all the other members of the gang to join them but the general feeling had been that they were all happy to leave the 'thinking' and 'planning' to Mrs Caldicot since those were things that she was very good at. 'You make the decisions,' said Mr Livingstone.

And Mr Livingstone and Mr Hewitt, having opened the gates to the pier, were standing to one side, careful to keep out of the way so that they didn't get crushed in the rush, quietly waiting for the holidaymakers to flood onto the pier.

It is fair to say that they were excited.

'How many people do you think visit the average sort of pier in an average sort of day?' Mr Livingstone asked his friend.

'That's not something I've ever really thought about,' admitted Mr Hewitt. 'But, at a guess, I would say that you might expect 12 people a minute to wander onto a pier of this size.' If anyone had asked him where he had found this figure he would not have been able to provide any sort of sensible answer other than to say that it was a figure plucked out of the air and that one figure plucked out of the air is as good as any other.

'How many minutes are there in a day?'

'Well, there's 60 minutes in an hour and 24 hours in a day so the answer would be quite a lot but I suppose everything really depends on how many hours the pier stays open. What do you think the opening hours should be?'

'Oh, I would have thought from eight in the morning until ten at night don't you think?'

'That sounds reasonable. How many hours is that.'

They stood and thought about this for a while and eventually Mr Livingstone found a piece of paper and a pencil and they worked it out and came to the conclusion that if they opened at eight in the morning and closed at ten at night then the pier would be open for 14 hours a day.

‘So, there are 60 minutes in an hour and the pier is open for 14 hours,’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘How many minutes is that?’

Some more calculations on Mr Livingstone’s piece of paper gave them several options: a total of 8,400 minutes, 840 minutes or 84 minutes.

‘Let’s take the middle figure,’ said Mr Hewitt.

‘That’s what I always do when I’m working things out,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘I do it three times and take the middle one.’

‘That’s a very scientific attitude,’ agreed Mr Hewitt. ‘I bet that’s probably the way accountants do it.’

‘We must ask Mr Twist about that,’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘And what did we say, 12 people a minute?’

‘Let’s make it 10 people a minute,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘That’s maybe more reasonable.’

‘And easier to work out.’

‘Definitely easier to work out.’

‘Multiplying by ten has got to be simpler. What does that come to then?’

They both thought for a while and then Mr Hewitt realised that all he had to do was put a nought on the end. ‘I reckon it’s 8,400 people a day.’

‘I agree with you,’ said Mr Livingstone, who was proud that he hadn’t even had to use his pencil and paper to do that sum.

‘Good heavens,’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘That’s quite a crowd. Can you get that many people on a pier?’

‘Oh yes, I would think so. And they won’t all be on at once, will they? Some will wander on and some will wander off again,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘The next thing to do is to work out how much they’re all going to spend. When we’ve done that we can work out our profit-loss thingy. Our financial objections.’

‘Projections, I think it is,’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘Our financial projections.’

‘No objection to that!’ said Mr Livingstone with a grin.

‘What are they going to spend money on?’

‘Well, there’s the train. They’ll all want to go on that. And they’ll mostly want to have return tickets. So that’s 50 pence each for the train. And then they’ll want teas and ice cream won’t they?’

‘Oh, I would think so. One ice cream each and a cup of tea each?’

‘Definitely. And most of them will want a bag of chips.’

‘And a stick of rock.’

‘Possibly two sticks of rock. I think the average holidaymaker would need one stick for themselves and at least one to take home as a present.’

‘And they’d need to buy a nice box of fudge for the neighbour who’s been feeding the cat.’

‘How much is that?’

‘What?’

‘A nice box of fudge?’

‘I’ve no idea. Let’s say £3. And £1 for a stick of rock.’

Mr Livingstone busied himself with his pencil. The piece of paper was actually a Eurostar train ticket which he had kept from their trip to Paris. And the pencil was one of those stubby things which really needed sharpening but which was so small that it would have been difficult to sharpen with a penknife and impossible to fit into a pencil sharpener.

‘It might be more than £1 if it were a big stick of rock.’

‘Let’s keep it at a small stick of rock,’ said Mr Livingstone, rather reluctantly. His piece of paper was rapidly getting filled up.

They stood in silence for a few minutes while Mr Livingstone tried to work out how much each visitor to the pier might spend.

‘I make it £9.50 each,’ said Mr Livingstone at last.

‘Round it up to a tenner,’ said Mr Hewitt.

‘Fair enough,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘They’d all want to buy a couple of postcards, wouldn’t they?’

‘So, what does that come to?’

Mr Livingstone did more work with his pencil. And then he frowned. ‘It can’t be that much!’ he said. ‘Can it?’

‘How much does it come to?’

‘It comes to £84,000,’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘Crumbs!’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘That’s a lot of money.’

‘Mind you, it’s not all profit!’ said Mr Livingstone sternly. ‘We have to buy the stuff we sell.’

‘But still,’ said Mr Hewitt, who knew no more about running a pier than his companion and did not have the faintest idea how much a stick of rock cost when bought wholesale. ‘Even if only £80,000 of that is profit that’s not bad for a day, is it?’

‘How much is that a year?’ asked Mr Livingstone.

‘Well, there are 52 weeks in a year and seven days in a week but I doubt if the pier would be as busy on some days as others.’

‘What sort of days wouldn’t it be busy?’ asked Mr Livingstone, a little indignantly. He was a trifle disappointed by Mr Hewitt’s pessimism.

‘Well, very wet and windy days,’ suggested Mr Hewitt. ‘There probably wouldn’t be very much business on very wet and windy days.’

‘We could sell sou’westers and plastic macs,’ suggested Mr Livingstone. ‘No good selling umbrellas on a pier but sou’westers and plastic macs would do well.’

‘That’s a good idea!’ said Mr Hewitt, impressed by his friend’s business acumen. ‘With those extra sales, the wet and windy days could well turn out to be even more profitable than the sunny days.’

‘But let’s forget about the sou’westers and those wet and windy days for the moment,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘They’ll make the sums too complicated and besides I don’t know how much a sou’wester would cost.’

‘We’ll keep those days as our reserves,’ said Mr Hewitt.

‘So, let’s say we have 50 weeks of good business,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘That’ll make it easier to do the sums.’

There was silence for a while as Mr Livingstone multiplied £80,000 by seven, for the number of days in a week, and then by 50 for the number of weeks in a year. This was the largest calculation Mr Livingstone could ever remember doing. He couldn’t help wishing he had one of those calculator things. Both Ruth and Mr Twist had them. Mr Twist had one that was just a calculator while Ruth had a mobile telephone which, to everyone’s astonishment, could turn into a calculator, a torch, a calendar and a camera.

‘What does it come to?’ asked Mr Hewitt, impatiently.

‘I make it £28,000,000 a year,’ said Mr Livingstone frowning.

He paused and then repeated the calculation.

The two men stood for a moment, trying to comprehend a sum of this magnitude. It was the sort of huge sum of money they had previously only ever heard mentioned in reference to defence budgets and the salaries of television presenters employed by the BBC.

‘With that sort of money you could probably buy a submarine,’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘Well a smallish one. Maybe a second hand one.’

‘Why would we want to buy a second hand submarine?’ asked Mr Livingstone, puzzled. If his friend wanted to buy a second hand submarine then he would not stand in his way. But he just wondered why he wanted one.

‘I’m not saying we would want to buy any sort of submarine,’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘Just that we could if we wanted to.’

‘I suppose we could,’ agreed Mr Livingstone.

They stood in silence for a moment and contemplated the other things they could buy with £28,000,000. Mr Livingstone did more sums on the remaining corner of his bit of paper.

‘The two of us could go on holiday in Spain for 4,000 years,’ he said eventually.

‘Why on earth would we want to do that? Especially now that you own a really nice pier by the seaside.’ He paused. ‘Would you say that it’s by the seaside, on the seaside or in it?’

‘Dunno. And I’m not saying that we’d want to; just that we could if we did want to.’

‘I wouldn’t want to go to Spain,’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘It’s too hot and it’s full of flies and foreigners.’

‘I quite agree with you,’ said Mr Livingstone who didn’t much like the heat and was definitely not over fond of flies or foreigners though he liked Jean-Jacques and his father, who were French, and he very much liked the two Americans they’d met in Paris.

‘How many of us are there?’ asked Mr Hewitt.

‘Well, there are 14 of us,’ replied Mr Livingstone. ‘So that’s £2,000,000 each.’ Although he actually owned the pier, Mr Livingstone would have never dreamt of not sharing his good fortune with his friends. ‘But I think we should give a share to Mr Pickering and Dorothy and that young Errol.’

‘That’s still more than £1,500,000 a year each,’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘After a year we could all just retire. And sit on the pier and eat ice creams and ride up and down on the train.’

‘Crumbs,’ said Mr Livingstone very softly. ‘It’s a lot of money isn’t it?’

Twenty minutes later, a tall man and a short dog wandered past them, looked around and then wandered off again. He didn’t buy any rock, fudge or postcards. He didn’t even buy a cup of tea or a bag of chips.

No one else came onto the pier.

‘Maybe it’s not really the season for piers,’ said Mr Hewitt a few minutes later. ‘Maybe this is one of the two quiet weeks we allowed for.’

‘It’s May!’ said Mr Livingstone, looking up at beautiful, blue sky spoilt only by a few of those fluffy, white clouds which look just like cotton wool and which artists always regard as too unrealistic for their painted skies. ‘It’s springtime! It’s a wonderful month for piers. It’s just that people have got used to the pier being closed. Now they have to get used to our being open.’

They stood for a moment and enjoyed the spring sunshine.

‘Do you fancy a cup of tea?’ asked Mr Hewitt after a while.

‘Sounds good to me,’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘I think I saw a tin of shortbread biscuits lying around.’

‘Sounds better by the minute!’

And so the two almost millionaires abandoned their wait by the gates, wandered into the empty café and asked Dorothy for two cups of tea and a plateful of biscuits.

‘I’ve just realised how brilliant this is,’ said Mr Livingstone as he settled himself down.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Mr Hewitt.

‘We can order tea and biscuits whenever we like and we don’t have to pay a penny for them!’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘That’s better than being a millionaire,’ said Mr Hewitt.

And Mr Livingstone agreed with him.

Chapter Thirteen

‘We need to decide what the pier is going to offer to make it attractive,’ said Mrs Caldicot addressing the first meeting of the ad hoc committee convened to consider the future of the pier.

She still felt slightly uneasy at having this authority thrust upon her but Mr Livingstone had asked her if she would take charge of the pier’s management and she was well aware that someone had to do it.

‘I don’t think I would make a very good Pier Master,’ he told her. ‘I feel that I’d make a better Pier Bosun or something like that so would you take charge of everything for me? I’m the sort of bloke who is better suited to taking orders than giving them.’

And so, with genuine reluctance, Mrs Caldicot had assumed control of the pier’s management and was now the Pier Master. She had wondered if she should be known as the Pier Mistress but Mr Pickering had assured her that it would be more appropriate if she stuck to the traditional title. She had been relieved by this for she had felt considerably more comfortable sticking to the time honoured title.

Now she was sitting out in the spring sunshine, with Mrs Roberts on one side of her and Ruth on the other, and she had a small notebook open on her lap and a pen in her right hand. Both these items had been purchased from the stock of items for sale in the pier’s surprisingly well stocked shop. The hard backed notebook she was using had a picture of the pier on its cover while the pen was decorated with a picture of the pier and the words ‘A Present From Penmouth’ overprinted on the picture.

In preparation for the forthcoming meeting, Mrs Caldicot had carefully printed the words ‘Penmouth Pier’ at the top of the first page of the notebook. You have to start somewhere, she said to herself.

‘I gather from Mr Pickering that even before the gates were shut the pier wasn’t doing very well,’ began Mrs Caldicot. ‘Indeed, he seemed to think that the pier had been losing money for months.’ She whispered all this information, which she thought might be regarded as commercially sensitive, although there was no one within earshot.

‘It’s a wonderful pier but, at the same time, it does look a little seedy,’ admitted Mrs Roberts, after looking around. There was no doubt that if peeling paint had been in vogue then the pier would have made a powerful fashion statement.

‘Having those big iron gates closed and padlocked wouldn’t have helped much,’ said Ruth who felt very proud to be included in the discussion. She had thought she really ought to be helping Mr and Mrs Merivale upstairs. But she had offered her services and they’d both thanked her very nicely and said that they thought they could cope quite well and that they’d call her if they needed her. Besides, Mrs Caldicot herself had asked her to join the ad hoc committee convened to study the pier’s future. She wasn’t entirely sure what an ad hoc committee was but it was something she could look up later on her phone and she suspected that it was almost certainly something she could tell her best friend Denise.

‘We need someone to tell us what young people look for in a pier,’ Mrs Caldicot had said. ‘You can give us a different viewpoint.’

‘Let’s make one list of the things we need to do and another list of all the amenities the pier has to offer,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘I know the pier needs a lick of paint here and there but I think our first task must be to get things up and running. The council isn’t going to stop sending us tax bills, so we need to generate an income.’

In response to this thought, she picked up her pen and drew a line down the centre of the page. On the left hand side she put the heading ‘Things to Be Done’ and on the right hand side she wrote ‘Amenities’.

The other two were silent for a moment and then the silence was broken by Ruth.

‘What’s an amenity?’ she asked.

Mrs Roberts quietly blessed young Ruth for asking the question she herself had wanted to ask but had felt too shy to put into words.

There were times when Mrs Roberts felt very maternal and loving towards Ruth. She always liked her very much, was always fond of her, but there were moments when she wanted to give her a big hug and a kiss. She would not have done this, of course. You had to be very careful these days for such signs could easily be misconstrued and might lead to embarrassment and unwanted complications. Still, she could quietly bless her and so she did. And then, not quite content that this was enough, she took Ruth’s hand and gave it a little squeeze. Ruth squeezed her hand back and they both smiled at each other and then, a little embarrassed, let their hands part again because although they were very fond of each other they were, after all, both very English and the English don’t like touching one another unless it’s inevitable or necessary.

‘The amenities are the things the pier has to offer to people,’ explained Mrs Caldicot. ‘In a village the amenities might be, well,' she paused thinking, 'the village shop, the Post Office and the pub.'

'We've got a little train,' said Ruth. 'Is that what you'd call an amenity?'

'Exactly!' said Mrs Caldicot. She wrote down 'Little Train'.

'And a café and a shop,' said Mrs Roberts, now getting into the swing of things.

Mrs Caldicot wrote these down.

'Oh, and there's the theatre at the end of the pier!' said Ruth. 'They used to have pop concerts there.'

'And Mr Pickering said they put on Pantomimes in the winter and variety shows in the summer,' added Mrs Roberts. 'Most people love a nice panto, I know I do. Oh, and Mr Pickering said they used to have tea dances in the afternoons throughout the summer.'

'What's a tea dance?' asked Ruth.

'It's sort of, well, a dance where people also have cups of tea,' explained Mrs Roberts. 'They move some of the seats out of the theatre so that they can make a dance floor and they have a little orchestra which plays music and the women come in their best frocks and the men come in smart suits and they all sit at tables and drink tea and eat little sandwiches, cucumber and suchlike, and they have fancy cakes, those little ones covered with icing, and when they aren't eating or drinking they dance.'

'I'm not sure there'd much call for that these days,' said Mrs Caldicot who didn't think she'd ever been to a tea dance though she vaguely remembered that her Auntie Maude, her mother's rather wild younger sister, might have gone to one or two occasionally. 'What do you two think?'

'Probably not,' agreed Mrs Roberts. 'Not these days.'

'I don't think I'd want to go dancing immediately after drinking lots of tea and eating cakes,' said Ruth with a shudder. 'It might make me feel a bit queasy.'

'I think you're both right,' agreed Mrs Caldicot, thinking that Ruth's idea of dancing was probably rather more energetic than her own. 'There are lots of other things we can do with the theatre – plays and suchlike would be nice perhaps.'

And so they continued.

The list of amenities grew quickly and the list of things to do grew even more speedily.

Mrs Roberts pointed out that there was a weighing machine in the foyer to the café and then she remembered that although they didn't have a Fortune Teller to sit inside it, there was a booth half way down the pier that had the remains of the words 'Madame Mystery' painted on the front in large, red letters and the words 'Penmouth Pier's Fortune Teller' painted underneath in blue. 'If one of us dressed up a bit I'm sure we could open the Fortune Telling booth – though, like most things, the booth does need a lick of paint.'

Ruth asked if Mrs Caldicot thought that the row of Victorian slot machines could be made to work. She said there was one called 'What the Butler Saw!' and another which advertised a working model of King Charles having his head chopped off. Mrs Caldicot made a note of this and said she hadn't seen these machines but would ask Mr Williams to take a look because he seemed to be the member of their party most able to deal with complicated pieces of machinery.

Mrs Roberts said that if they were going to put on plays in the theatre at the end of the pier then perhaps they ought to get in touch with touring companies which went round the country putting on shows wherever they could find a suitable venue. 'Not Shakespeare though,' she said. 'I don't think people on holiday expecting to sit through one of those Shakespearean tragedies – all those witches and all that gloominess.'

And so it went on.

There were things that needed painting, things that needed mending and stock that needed sorting.

And, in addition to the theatre at the end of the pier, there were the side shows and booths which needed to be attended to.

'We need to decide who's going to do what,' said Mrs Caldicot, looking at the two long lists in her notebook. 'But for now I think we've earned ourselves another cup of tea.'

'Talking of the café, perhaps we could add some fresh items to the menu,' suggested Mrs Roberts. 'Young Dorothy makes marvellous cod and chips, I don't think I've ever tasted better, but maybe we would attract more customers if we extended our range a little. I don't think we should try anything too challenging, but cheese on toast, teacakes, crumpets, home-made sandwiches and so on might bring in a few more customers.'

Both Ruth and Mrs Caldicot agreed that this was a splendid idea and they quickly found themselves suggesting other simple dishes which could be added to the menu, and their own visit to the café was delayed.

'Naturally, we'd need to find someone to help Dorothy,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'She works very hard but if the café is going to be busier she would need another pair of hands.' She sighed. She wasn't looking forward to having to interview prospective waitresses. Still, it was something that had to be done.

After another half an hour of chatting, the three of them decided that they'd pretty well exhausted all the possibilities and their imaginations.

Leaving the other two sitting on the bench, in case they could think of anything else that could be added to their list of amenities, Mrs Caldicot went indoors to find the telephone book and look up the number for the secretary of the biggest local amateur dramatic society. Mrs Caldicot was, she knew, probably the only person in the country who still looked up numbers in the telephone directory. But some habits die hard.

The secretary of the dramatic society answered her telephone immediately.

'As you know there's a wonderful theatre at the end of the pier,' said Mrs Caldicot, having introduced herself, and explained that although Mr Livingstone was the new owner of the pier she was the Pier Master and in charge of organising events on the pier.

'Oh yes,' said the secretary, a lady called Mrs Upton. She sounded quite excited. 'In the past we've often hoped we would be able to use the theatre for one or two of our productions. At Christmas we always put on a pantomime and we do two or three other shows during the year – usually including a musical in the summer.'

'So am I right in thinking you would be interested in putting on a show in our theatre?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'That would be amazing! But may I ask why you're inviting us when you could easily get professional theatre companies to put on a show. You have a wonderful theatre. It's one of the biggest and most beautiful auditoriums in the whole of Devon!'

'It's very simple,' explained Mrs Caldicot. 'We don't have the money or the expertise to put together a show ourselves. And we need to put on something as soon as possible. We want to get people coming onto the pier.'

'How would this work financially?' asked Mrs Upton.

'You would be responsible for selling the tickets and putting on a show of your choice,' explained Mrs Caldicot, making up the deal as she went along. 'We would then split the proceeds down the middle. You keep half and you give us half. The only condition is that you must have a show on the boards within a month.'

'Well, we have a show in rehearsal at the moment,' said Mrs Upton. 'We were planning to put it on in the village hall – that's the venue we normally use – but we'd obviously jump at the chance to put the show on in your theatre. That would be marvellous!'

'What are you rehearsing?' asked Mrs Caldicot, hoping desperately that it wasn't anything by Ibsen, Chekov or even Shakespeare.

'The Pirates of Penzance!' replied Mrs Upton. 'The opera by Gilbert and Sullivan. We're doing it as our annual musical production.'

'That will be wonderful,' said Mrs Caldicot, who loved all Gilbert and Sullivan operas. 'That would be absolutely perfect! And what better place to have an opera about pirates than on a pier!'

She put down the telephone and smiled happily. Things were beginning to fall into place. She went back outside and joined Mrs Roberts and Ruth who were now standing outside the café discussing whether or not they should put a fish stew onto the café menu.

'Time for tea and biscuits!' said Mrs Caldicot.

The others agreed immediately. Some decisions are easy to make.

Chapter Fourteen

But just as Mrs Caldicot, Mrs Roberts and Ruth were preparing to enter the café, a couple wandered onto the pier.

She was all curves; there were no straight bits at all.

He, on the other hand, was all straight bits; no curves.

She was five foot nothing.

He was six foot something and had about as much fat on him as the average telegraph pole.

She looked young enough to be able to remember her 21st birthday celebrations.

He was of the age when pensions become of practical rather than theoretical interest.

She had shoulder length brown hair that shone in the morning sunshine.

He didn't have enough hair remaining to fill a locket.

The pair, who weren't a couple in any sense of the word, but simply happened to be together at that moment, and who somehow managed to look lost but at the same time look as though they knew where they were, walked rather shyly up to where Mrs Caldicot, Mrs Roberts and Ruth were preparing to enter the café. Mrs Caldicot had paused for a moment and was writing down a list of the type of cakes the trio had decided the café should stock.

'We're sorry to bother you,' said the girl, not sure which of the three to address and so directing her enquiry to the three of them in turn, as though she were addressing a small audience. 'But we're looking for the new owner of the pier.'

'That would be Mr Livingstone,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'But I might be able to help you.'

'We used to work here,' explained the girl. 'On the pier,' she added, in case this might be necessary. 'And we wondered if you would still be needing us.'

When the girl spoke, every sentence finished as though it had a question mark at the end. It could have been an annoying habit but it wasn't. It gave her an innocence, a charm, a naivety, a shyness and a sense of genuine curiosity.

'What do you do?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'My name is Miss Emerald Pettifer and I'm the Fat Lady,' said the girl. 'I used to be the Bearded Lady but I had electrolysis to get rid of the beard.' She paused, blushing lightly. 'I found it very embarrassing to have a beard. People used to make remarks.'

'I hope you don't mind my asking,' said Mrs Caldicot, rather hesitantly, 'but it seems relevant so I have to ask, would you please tell us how much you weigh?'

Miss Pettifer hesitated. 'Ten stone six pounds at the moment,' she said at last. 'That's 146 pounds,' she explained.

'Isn't that a little, er, on the light side for a Fat Lady?'

'I've been on a sort of involuntary diet. The pier has been shut and I didn't have a job. Not having a job made me depressed and besides, not earning any money meant that I couldn't afford the amount of food I needed to eat to keep up my weight.' She paused and made an attempt to brighten her voice. 'I could soon put the weight back on again.'

'Won't being so light make your work a little tricky?'

'I could wear lots of jumpers and things and I don't think anyone would really notice,' said Miss Pettifer. 'I'm quite plump in the face.' She puffed out her cheeks but this simply made her look as though she were blowing up a non-existent balloon. 'And I'm quite cuddly in the usual cuddly areas.'

'Wouldn't the customers expect you to be wearing just a bathing costume?'

'Oh no. I don't think so. Not these days. It would be considered very inappropriate. Sexist and fattist I think they'd call it. I think it would be all right if I just sat there looking plump; well a bit on the fat side really I suppose.'

'When you were the Fat Lady, you just sat there?'

'Yes, in a little booth. I did find it quite boring so I used to knit or read a magazine.'

'But is there still a market for fat ladies on piers?' asked Mrs Caldicot. 'Even if you put on quite a lot of weight there would probably be a lot of the customers looking fatter than yourself.'

'I suppose so,' agreed Miss Pettifer, rather sadly.

'Did a lot of people pay to come and look at you?' asked Mrs Roberts.

'Not many,' admitted Miss Pettifer with disarming honesty. 'A few came when it was raining. I had a booth half way down the pier, next to the Fortune Teller booth. We both used to do quite well when it rained because there wasn't anywhere else to shelter in the middle section of the pier.'

'I don't think we can just rely on bad weather,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'No,' said Miss Pettifer. 'I suppose not.'

‘Isn’t there anything else you can do?’ asked Mrs Roberts kindly.

‘Not really. I’ve never really tried anything else. I’ve always been a Fat Lady – except for a couple of years when I was the Bearded Lady.’

‘Maybe you could sit in the booth and be the Thin Lady,’ suggested Ruth who was such a kindly soul that she could not bear the thought of ‘letting anyone go to seek fresh opportunities’ as the saying goes. ‘We could repaint the sign on the outside of the booth.’

‘I don’t think I’m thin enough for that,’ said Miss Pettifer.

‘Well, let’s think about it,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Why don’t you come and have a cup of tea with us?’ She turned and suddenly realised that the tall, thin man was still standing there. He was so thin that he was almost invisible. ‘I’m so sorry,’ she apologised. ‘I didn’t mean to ignore you…’

‘Oh that’s all right,’ said the tall, thin man. He seemed quite jolly, not all upset at having been forgotten. ‘People often don’t notice that I’m there.’

‘Are you with Miss Pettifer?’

‘No, not really. We just came together when we saw that the pier was open again. I live in a flat across the road and I telephoned Miss Pettifer when I saw the gates were unlocked.’

‘What did you do on the pier?’

‘I’m a silhouettist,’ said the tall, thin man with undisguised pride. ‘My name is Hyacinth Rowbottham and I’ve been a silhouettist all my life. My father was a silhouettist as was his father before him. I used to work on the West Pier in Brighton until it fell into the sea. I then wandered around the country until I ended up at the Penmouth pier. Mr Livingstone, the former pier owner was a keen supporter of my art. I did several silhouettes for him. Did you say that the current owner was a Mr Livingstone?’

‘That’s right. The current owner is the nephew of the owner you knew.’

‘Ah,’ said Mr Rowbottham with a nod and a smile.

‘Excuse me for asking, and for being so ignorant,’ said Ruth, ‘but what exactly is a silhouettist?’

With a quite dramatic flourish, Mr Rowbottham pulled a pair of scissors out of one inside pocket and a sheet of black cartridge paper out of another. He then proceeded to snip away at the piece of black paper until he had produced a profile of Ruth that was quite uncannily accurate. When he had finished he handed the silhouette to her and put the scissors back into his jacket pocket.

‘That’s amazing!’ said Ruth, genuinely astonished. She gazed at the silhouette of herself which she had been given. ‘How on earth do you manage to do that?’

‘It’s an art,’ said the man, with some pride. ‘It is a disappearing art but an art nevertheless. Silhouettists used to be very popular in Victorian times but the widespread availability of the camera has rather taken away for the need for my work.’

‘This is terrific!’ said Ruth. ‘I shall keep this for ever.’ She immediately took a photograph of the silhouette with her mobile phone so that she could send a picture to Jean-Jacques and to her best friend Denise.

‘Let’s all go and have a cup of tea,’ said Mrs Caldicot, who didn’t really know why but who was beginning to feel very optimistic about the future. The others followed her into the café. Mrs Caldicot went up to the counter, gave their order and spoke to Dorothy for a few moments.

‘So,’ said Mrs Caldicot to Miss Pettifer and Mr Rowbottham when they were all settled at a table. ‘We all live here, in the rooms up above, but we don’t have any money, apart from our rather measly pensions, so we’ve got to make the pier earn our living for us. You haven’t met everyone but there are 14 of us, plus Mr Pickering and his granddaughter Dorothy, whom I am sure you both know. However, even with 14 of us working we can’t do everything by ourselves. So, would you two like to carry on working on the pier?’

Mr Rowbottham looked across at Miss Pettifer who looked back at him but didn’t say anything. ‘Well, I for one would be delighted,’ he said. ‘My previous arrangement was very simple. I worked on the pier and paid over half of my takings to Mr Livingstone, the older Mr Livingstone that is. In return I was the exclusive silhouettist on the pier.’

‘And you were happy with that arrangement?’

‘Oh very happy. On dry days I just wandered up and down the pier. If things were quiet I’d just do a silhouette of someone passing and get people interested that way. On wet days I worked in the foyer of the theatre. I’m never going to get rich but I made enough to live on and my overheads are pretty low – just a pair of scissors and a supply of black paper.’

Miss Pettifer looked at Mrs Caldicot and then at Mrs Roberts and Ruth. ‘I realise that it’s going to take me ages to put on enough weight to be a Fat Lady again,’ she said, rather sadly. ‘And to be honest I’m not entirely sure that I want to be a Fat Lady anymore. Being pointed out and sniggered at all day long can be a little dispiriting.’

‘I can imagine,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘To be honest I don’t think any of us would want you to be the Fat Lady anymore.’

‘Do you think there might be something I can do?’ asked Miss Pettifer, without much hope or confidence. ‘I don’t have any skills. All I know is how to be fat and that’s not really a job requiring a great deal of skill.’

‘Dorothy is going to carry on running the café for us,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘And although she’s very young, I have asked her to be the manager. But we want to expand the café business and Dorothy can’t do everything herself. I just spoke to her and she’d be very happy to have you working here as the waitress if that’s something you’d be happy to consider.’

Mrs Caldicot didn’t think she had ever seen anyone quite so pleased.

‘Do you mean it?’

‘Of course! Dorothy would be in charge. But you know her, don’t you?’

‘Oh yes, we get on well. I’ve known her since she first came here.’

With impeccable timing, Dorothy arrived at the table carrying a tray upon which there were six cups and saucers, two large teapots and a jug of hot water. ‘Would you like some cake?’ she asked. ‘I hope you don’t mind but when I knew we were opening properly I popped out to the supermarket and bought a box of little fancy cakes and a chocolate cake.’

‘Oh yes, please!’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘You’re an absolute angel.’ Mrs Roberts loved nearly all sorts of cake, with caraway seed cake being the one possible exception.

‘I’m going to be your waitress!’ Miss Pettifer told Dorothy. She pushed back her chair and stood. ‘So can I help you?’

‘That’s marvellous!’ said Dorothy, clearly delighted. ‘I’ve got the milk and the sugar ready on another tray but we need some cake and biscuits putting out on a plate.’

And so the pier now had a silhouettist and although the pier no longer had a Fat Lady the café had a waitress.

‘It seems as though the Fat Lady booth is going to be empty,’ said Mrs Caldicot to Mr Rowbottham. ‘Would you prefer to work in one of the booths? You can wander up and down whenever you like, of course. But if the weather is bad you will have somewhere dry to work. And we can repaint the sign on the booth so that people know you’re on the pier.’

It was now Mr Rowbottham’s turn to look thrilled and it was clearly Mrs Caldicot’s day to make people happy. ‘Could I perhaps put some examples of my work in a glass case? And attach the case to the outer wall of the booth?’

‘Of course you can!’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘That would be marvellous,’ said Rowbottham, who was perilously close to tears. ‘My father used to have a booth on the West Pier.’ He paused and wiped his eyes with a knuckle. ‘A booth of my own!’ he murmured.

Dorothy and Miss Pettifer then arrived back at the table. Dorothy was carrying a tray containing the milk and sugar and Miss Pettifer had a plateful of biscuits and little cakes, tastefully arranged and looking most attractive. There were also several slices of the chocolate cake on the plate.

Mrs Caldicot was delighted.

They had cake and biscuits and the café now had staff.

Chapter Fifteen

After dinner that evening (they were back to eating cod and chips after the excitement and adventure of experimenting with chips and cod) Mrs Caldicot, the gang of refugees from the Twilight Years Rest Home and Mr Pickering and his daughter Dorothy sat in the pier's café and discussed their future.

Miss Pettifer, the erstwhile fat lady and Mr Rowbottham, the accomplished silhouettist had both gone home walking on air.

It was still only 8.30 pm, rather earlier than Mr Livingstone and Mr Hewitt had planned to close the pier, but the gates were nevertheless locked and padlocked.

'I've got a list of things we need to discuss,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'But first would you all tell us how each of you got on today?' She turned to the Merivales. 'How did you two get on?'

'There were no great problems,' said Mrs Merivale. 'We replaced a dozen dead light bulbs and Mr Merivale put new washers on three taps. The rooms upstairs need decorating but they'll do for the time being.'

'They'll have to,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Our main priority is to get the pier up and running – and to start bringing in some money. We've paid the last big bill from the council but I've no doubt they'll be sending us another tax bill before long. And there will be electricity bills to pay too.'

'Do you want us to take over the café and do the cooking?' asked Mrs Merivale.

This was a problem which had worried Mrs Caldicot for much of the day. The Merivales had been the housekeepers at the Twilight Years Rest Home and they had always bought the food and cooked the meals. Out of the corner of her eye, Mrs Caldicot could see that Dorothy was alarmed by Mrs Merivale's rather tactless enquiry.

'No, I don't think so,' said Mrs Caldicot immediately. 'We need you and Mr Merivale to look after our meals and to do all the housekeeping in our living quarters upstairs. There is an excellent kitchen attached to the ballroom and in future I think that we should keep the downstairs café for the pier's customers and we should eat our own meals upstairs in a section of the ballroom which we will turn into our dining room.'

Mrs Caldicot had rather hoped that this very practical solution would keep everyone happy. And, indeed, that was exactly what it seemed to do. Dorothy, who clearly enjoyed looking after the café, and who now had a waitress to help her, was obviously relieved. And the Merivales were delighted to remain in charge of providing sustenance for all their friends.

'How did you get on?' Mrs Caldicot asked Mr Williams, Mr Twist and Mr Roxdale.

'Not badly, not badly at all,' replied Mr Williams, answering on behalf of them all. 'We managed to sort out all the furniture and made sure that all the unpacked suitcases were in the correct rooms. We put all the kitchen stuff that we brought with us into the kitchen next to the ballroom.'

'And how did you ladies get on with sorting out the stock cupboards,' asked Mrs Caldicot, knowing that Miss Nightingale, Mrs Peterborough and Mrs Torridge had spent the day sorting through the cupboards in the stock room at the back of the shop and upstairs next to the ballroom.

'Oh we had a whale of a time!' said Mrs Peterborough.

'A marvellous time!' said Miss Nightingale.

'We made a list,' said Mrs Torridge.

There was then a short delay while the three of them looked for the stock list they'd made. In the end, Mrs Torridge found the list underneath the hat she was wearing. It was a sweet little hat made of navy blue felt and adorned with two artificial love birds and a large spray of what looked like gladioli. 'Silly me!' she said when she eventually found the list. 'I put it there for safekeeping.' She giggled. 'I always put valuable things under my hat and yet I still forget what I've done with them. Silly me, eh?' She giggled again.

'I remember where the list is now,' said Mrs Peterborough, who hadn't yet realised that Mrs Torridge had found her piece of paper. 'It's under your hat. You asked us to remind you that you'd put it under your hat so I wrote a message to myself on the back of my hand.' She held up her hand showed where she had written 'Mrs T's Hat' in red ink.

'Thank you,' said Mrs Torridge, who knew better than to get into a discussion with Mrs Peterborough.

'There were lots of boxes of liquorice allsorts,' said Mrs Peterborough. 'I brought one with me. I tried one of the little blue ones. They're my favourites.'

'Are they out of date?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'I'm not sure,' replied Mrs Peterborough. 'There's no best before date on the box.'

'Does the box have anything printed on it?'

'Just the price. It says 2/11. That's two shillings and eleven pence isn't it? I remember shillings and pence. I understood shillings and pennies. They were proper money.'

'So the box was made before decimalisation,' said Mrs Caldicot, rather shocked. 'Golly. That almost makes them antiques. When did our currency change to decimals?'

'It was the 15th February 1971,' said Mr Twist.

'I think we'd better throw the liquorice allsorts away,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'What else did you find in the way of sweets?'

'We found a lot of Turkish Delight,' said Miss Nightingale.

'Sixteen large crates of it,' said Mrs Peterborough. 'And each box contains dozens and dozens of boxes of it. And they are large boxes, too! Those nice, little wooden boxes.'

Mrs Caldicot's heart began to beat faster. She loved Turkish Delight. 'Ooo!' she heard herself saying. 'I do like Turkish Delight.'

'Mr Twist reckons that's enough for each of us to have a whole crateful,' said Miss Nightingale.

'The crates were so big and heavy that we could hardly lift them,' said Mrs Torridge. 'And the good news is that they are all still in date.'

'But the bad news is that we have to sell them or eat them up quite quickly,' said Mrs Peterborough very earnestly. 'They all go out of date in another eight weeks.'

'I wouldn't have thought Turkish Delight would go out of date,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'It's mostly sugar so it ought to keep for years. I don't suppose we can sell it if it is out of date but I'm pretty sure it will be perfectly safe to eat.'

'I never understand that,' said Ruth. 'How can it be that a bar of chocolate that is perfectly safe to eat one day suddenly becomes dangerous at midnight?'

'I think they put a little radio receiver in each chocolate bar,' said Mr Roxdale. 'The receiver is probably hidden somewhere in the wrapper. At midnight on the allotted date a highly paid man in an office somewhere presses a button and sends a message to all the chocolate bars which are due to expire that day. The receiver then releases bugs or mould spores or something and the chocolate suddenly becomes inedible.'

'Crumbs!' said Ruth. 'You'd never know would you?'

'It's all done by the bureaucrats to increase waste and to force us to buy more stuff,' explained Mr Roxdale. 'They do it to give the sweet industry a boost.'

'Where did you hear that' asked Mrs Roberts.

'Dunno where I heard it,' said Mr Roxdale. 'I think it was in the *Daily Mirror*. But, anyway, it sounds true so it must be.'

'I know what you could do,' said Ruth. 'You could take the wrapper off the chocolate bar and put it in the rubbish, then when the message is sent to the little receiver it won't be able to make the chocolate go bad!'

'Don't you believe him, dear,' Mrs Roberts said to Ruth. 'I think he made that up.'

'No, I didn't. I read it somewhere,' said Mr Roxdale. 'If it wasn't in the *Daily Mirror* it might have been in the *Daily Mail*.' He stopped for a moment, clearly thinking. 'Or maybe I heard it on the radio.'

'Well, the next time I buy a bar of chocolate I'm going to remove the wrapper straight away,' said Ruth. 'Just in case the man in the office makes a mistake and presses his button too soon.'

'I think they do something similar with clothes,' said Mr Roxdale. 'They put moth eggs into a little capsule and then when you've had a jumper or a sweater for a year or so the capsule dissolves and the eggs are released into the wool.'

'Oh, that's just plain silly!' said Mrs Roberts. But she no longer sounded quite so sceptical. 'Where did you hear that one?'

'I probably did read that in the *Daily Mail*,' said Mr Roxdale. 'They have some good stuff in there. Or maybe it was the *National Enquirer*. I sometimes buy that so that I can keep up with what's going on in the world.'

'Well, all that is as maybe,' said Mrs Caldicot who was now not at all sure what to believe but who was quite taken with the thought of all that Turkish Delight waiting to be enjoyed. 'Perhaps we should bring the boxes out before we forget all about them,' she suggested. 'We should share it all out. We'll never be able to sell that much Turkish Delight in the next few weeks so we might as well eat some of them ourselves.'

'I heard that Turkish Delight is very good for you,' said Mr Roxdale. 'It's full of stuff like iridium and strontium.'

'Did you read that in the *Daily Mail* too?' said Mrs Roberts.

'Might have been,' said Mr Roxdale, frowning in thought. 'Maybe it was in the paper that was wrapped round my chips last night.' He shrugged. 'I don't know where I read it but I just sort of know this stuff. It must be true if you read it in a newspaper.'

'He knows all sorts of strange things,' confirmed Mr Livingstone. 'It's a gift.'

'Some people can ride a bicycle without holding on, some people can swim under water, I just absorb useful information,' said Mr Roxdale. 'It's a skill I've acquired since I got older and it seems to be a natural thing.'

‘Mr Hewitt and I did some financial projections,’ said Mr Livingstone, changing the subject. He was excited about the work they’d done together. He pulled his scruffy piece of paper out of his pocket. ‘We worked out that we should make around £28,000,000 profit this year. That’s between £1,500,000 and £2,000,000 each.’ He paused, clearly awaiting cheers of delight. Instead, there was silence. It is difficult to cheer, or to say anything, when your mouth has fallen open in shock.

‘May I ask how on earth you got those figures?’ asked Mr Twist, the accountant and former tax inspector. He tried not to sound as surprised as he sounded.

‘Ah, it was all damned clever stuff,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘We made an estimate of the number of people expected to come onto the pier each day, worked out what we thought they’d spend and then multiplied the total by the number of days in a year.’

‘We didn’t include February 29th, because that only comes round once every four years, and we didn’t include anything for the sale of sou’westers and plastic macs,’ said Mr Hewitt.

‘That sounds very impressive,’ said Mrs Caldicot who couldn’t think of anything else to say. She glanced across at Ruth and saw that although the teenager deputy housekeeper had her eyes closed, her lips were moving. Mrs Caldicot, who knew Ruth well, guessed that the teenager was working out how she would spend her million pound windfall. She thought about saying something to Ruth about not taking Mr Livingstone’s projections too seriously but stopped herself. After all, she thought, we’re all entitled to have wonderful dreams when we’re 18-years-old.

‘So how many people a day did you reckon would come onto the pier?’ asked Mr Twist.

Mr Livingstone consulted his piece of paper. ‘We estimated that 8,400 people a day would visit the pier.’

‘What did you base that on?’ asked Mr Twist.

‘It was just an estimate,’ said Mr Livingstone defensively. ‘It might turn out to be less than that.’

‘But it could just as easily turn out to be more!’ Mr Hewitt pointed out, his sudden optimism undimmed. ‘It could be much, much more than that.’

‘How much money did you estimate we would make each day?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘£80,000,’ replied Mr Livingstone, after consulting his slip of paper.

‘That’s nearly £10 per visitor isn’t it?’

‘Yes! That’s it. That’s what we thought. And we didn’t even count any income from the theatre.’

‘Or the sou’westers,’ added Mr Hewitt. ‘That’ll be jam on the cake.’

‘Was that the gross income or the profit?’

‘Oh, that was our profit. We allowed a bit for the cost of buying the things we sell.’

‘How much is a bit?’ asked Mr Twist.

‘Our estimated gross income was £84,000 so we knocked off £4,000 for the cost of buying the stuff we sold.’

‘Though rides on the little train wouldn’t cost anything,’ said Mr Hewitt.

‘That’s right. So the profit figure might be a bit higher.’

‘I think your figures might be a teeny weeny bit optimistic,’ said Mrs Caldicot, who didn’t want to be a wet blanket but who didn’t want the rest of the gang getting too excited and then being terribly disappointed when they weren’t all millionaires within a year. She turned to Mr Twist who was, as usual, in charge of the accounts. ‘How much did we take today?’

Mr Twist pulled a notebook out of his pocket and opened it. ‘We took £3.25 today,’ he announced. ‘That was comprised of two items purchased in the shop: a notebook and a pen. The notebook was sold for £2.00 and the pen for £1.25.’ He held up the notebook he was holding. ‘I had this notebook before we got here,’ he added.

‘I bought the pen and the notebook,’ said Mrs Caldicot. She held up the notebook and the pen she was holding. ‘I bought these from the shop.’

‘So we were just £83,996.75 down on our projected income for the day,’ said Mr Williams.

‘Well, actually, it’s not quite that good,’ said Mr Twist. ‘Because we are assuming that today’s income of £3.25 was entirely profit whereas, of course, the notebook and the pen which we sold had to be taken out of stock.’

‘I don’t think we should be too downhearted,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘There are bound to be good days and not such good days.’

‘We sold some train tickets!’ said Mrs Peterborough. ‘I nearly forgot about those.’

‘How much did that come to?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘Oh we didn’t charge for them,’ said Mrs Peterborough. ‘We were too busy sorting out the sweets.’ She looked around in the silence which followed this admission. ‘Sorry,’ she whispered.

‘If we make approximately £168,000 profit tomorrow then we’ll be back on target!’ said Mr Williams, exhibiting an air of optimism previously only displayed by Mr Livingstone and Mr Hewitt.

‘Absolutely!’ agreed Mr Hewitt. ‘As Mr Livingstone said, there are going to be good days and bad days. That’s business for you, isn’t it? All we need is a nice coach party of rich tourists and we’ll be back on target.’

‘They’ll have to be very rich,’ muttered Mr Twist who was an unwilling adherent of Mrs Caldicot’s brand of mild scepticism.

‘Oh, and I forgot! We found a lot of rock,’ said Miss Nightingale suddenly.

‘Oh yes, thirty six boxes of rock,’ said Mrs Torridge, examining her list. ‘We forgot about that, didn’t we? There didn’t seem to be a sell by date on the rock but we think there might be a small problem with it.’

‘Oh dear,’ said Mrs Caldicot, who was still worrying about what Mr Roxdale had said about Turkish Delight. She wondered whether the ingredients he had mentioned meant that Turkish Delight was good for you or bad for you. ‘What’s the problem?’ she asked.

‘How do most people spell ‘present’?’ asked Mrs Torridge.

‘As in ‘A Present from Penmouth’?’

‘Exactly, as in ‘A Present from Penmouth’.’

‘Well, I’d spell it p-r-e-s-e-n-t,’ said Mrs Caldicot, rather nervously. ‘But I could be wrong. I was never terribly good at spelling.’ She decided she didn’t care about the Turkish Delight ingredients. If you listened to the experts you’d never eat anything because you could always find someone to say that something was dangerous.

‘That’s definitely how I’d spell it,’ agreed Mr Williams.

And with the exception of a few dissenters it was generally agreed that Mrs Caldicot’s suggestion was pretty well the accepted spelling.

‘Well, that’s not what it says on our rock,’ said Mrs Torridge. She took a stick of rock out of her handbag and handed it to Mrs Caldicot.

‘It says ‘A P-r-e-s-c-e-n-c-e from Penmouth’, said Mrs Caldicot, reading the stick of rock.

‘Well at least they spelt the name of the place properly,’ said Mr Twist with a hollow laugh.

‘How much of this rock is there?’

‘A lot,’ said Miss Nightingale.

‘A very lot,’ said Mrs Peterborough.

‘At least one cupboard full,’ said Mrs Torridge.

‘I remember them ordering that,’ said Mr Pickering. ‘It was that Simpkins, him who used to be the Pier Master and who is now running a car park for the council. He ordered a new supply of rock and spelt the word ‘Present’ wrong on the form they sent. It wasn’t the fault of the people who made the rock. They just did what they were told. We spotted it when it came in but it was too late to do anything about it.’

‘It seems a pity to throw it all away,’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘There must be hundreds of pounds worth of rock if there is a whole cupboard full of it.’

‘There was £7,000 worth of it,’ said Mr Pickering. ‘That’s a lot of rock. There’s more than one cupboard full of it. That Mr Simpkins made me cram it into cupboards all over the place. He wanted to throw it all into the sea but I told him we couldn’t do that because it would take years to dissolve.’

They all sat in silence for a while wondering what they could do with £7,000 worth of misspelt rock.

‘We could sell it as special rock,’ said Mrs Caldicot, breaking the silence at last.

Everyone looked at her.

‘We use the word ‘presence’ in funny ways,’ she said. She was thinking aloud but she felt there was a germ of an idea struggling to get out. ‘We say that ‘we make our presence felt’ and that we are aware of a ‘presence’ in a room. So why don’t we sell the rock as being very, very special rock. If you take a stick of our rock home with you will be taking a ‘presence’ from Penmouth; a memory from the town where you enjoyed your holiday.’

There was silence for a while as people tried to understand what Mrs Caldicot was saying. Some people got there quicker than others. Some people never got there but were happy about the suggestion that they could sell the rock and that instead of being utterly useless it had now become a very special sort of rock.

‘We could charge more for special rock!’ said Mr Twist, excitedly. ‘It’s a unique type of rock so it should have a special price. People would pay a premium to have a stick of this rock! And when they ate it then they would have the presence within them.’

‘Do you know what he’s talking about?’ Mr Livingstone asked Mr Hewitt in a whisper.

‘Not got the foggiest notion,’ admitted Mr Hewitt. ‘But I think Mrs Caldicot and Mr Twist just turned £7,000 of rubbish into something profitable.’

‘Brilliant!’ said Mr Livingstone, whispering back with enthusiasm. ‘And I don’t think people took us seriously when we talked about us all becoming millionaires!’

‘They didn’t have the vision we have,’ said Mr Hewitt.

Mr Livingstone nodded his agreement. ‘Not everyone has our young, vibrant outlook on life,’ he said.

‘You’re right there, Mr Livingstone,’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘I don’t want to start feeling old before my time.’

‘Very good attitude, if I may say so,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘I don’t mind growing old, it’s one of life’s little inevitabilities, but I do think it's a mistake to grow up.'

'Terrible mistake,' said Mr Hewitt. He pulled a face and shuddered.

Mrs Caldicot, who had overheard this conversation, smiled to herself. Mr Livingstone's next major birthday milestone would be his 80th and Mr Hewitt had celebrated his 90th birthday a year or two earlier.

She couldn't help remembering when she'd first met them at the Twilight Years Rest Home. They had both been heavily drugged with tranquillisers and sleeping tablets and had spent their days asleep or sitting on their beds. The transformation, since they'd abandoned their pills, had been startling. She now realised, for the first time, that maybe the word 'old' doesn't measure how far you are from the start but how far you are from the end. And that if you accepted that definition, rather than the one more customarily accepted, then Mr Livingstone and Mr Hewitt, and the rest of the gang, were still in the prime of their lives.

'Now, what else was there?' asked Mrs Caldicot, putting those unhappy memories away in a deep, dark place. 'Can anyone think of anything else?'

'If you think that we need a pier photographer then I would be happy to volunteer my services,' said Mr Williams. 'If people wanted their picture taken I could snap them at the beginning of the pier and then give them the finished photo when they left. I'd just need someone to help with the developing and printing while I stay on the pier and take the pictures.'

'Oh yes!' said Mrs Roberts, excitedly. 'I think that's a marvellous idea. I always used to love having my picture taken on holiday. I've got a lovely snap of me and Mr Roberts in my keepsake box.'

'I think that's brilliant!' agreed Ruth. 'Everyone has a camera on their phone these days but I think they'd still love to have a proper photo to take home.'

'Are you sure you wouldn't mind doing that?' said Mrs Caldicot to Mr Williams. She knew that Mr Williams had once been an immensely successful photographer, whose pictures had been shown in galleries in London and Paris.

'I'm definitely sure!' said Mr Williams. 'It'll be fun.'

'Well, that will be marvellous,' said Mrs Caldicot. She looked down her list of things to do. 'The final thing we need to talk about,' she said 'is that we need an official Fortune Teller. There is a Fortune Teller's booth available and we can't have a pier without a Fortune Teller. I am told by Mr Pickering that the booth was one of the most successful items on the pier. Sadly, I gather that the previous incumbent had to leave unexpectedly.'

'Unforeseen circumstances?' asked Mr Williams.

'I fear so,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. 'The result is that we urgently need to find a replacement.'

'Where on earth do you find a Fortune Teller?' asked Mr Twist. 'We can hardly telephone the local Labour Exchange and ask them to send along a selection of suitable candidates.'

'We could put an advert in *Exchange and Mart*,' suggested Mr Livingstone.

'But what are we going to offer in exchange?' asked Mr Hewitt.

'Good point,' agreed Mr Livingstone. 'I don't have the foggiest. How much misspelt rock could you swap for a Fortune Teller?'

'Where did the last Fortune Teller come from?' Mrs Caldicot asked Mr Pickering.

'She just sort of turned up one day,' replied Mr Pickering. He looked at his grand-daughter. 'Do you know where she came from?'

'I've no idea,' said Dorothy, blushing at being asked to contribute to the conversation. 'I think I remember her saying that she used to work in a travelling fair.'

'Maybe one will just turn up!' said Mr Livingstone.

'There must be one somewhere who, even as we speak, realises that there is a vacant post for a Fortune Teller on Penmouth Pier!' said Mr Hewitt.

'I don't think we can rely entirely on serendipity!' said Mrs Caldicot, whose vocabulary had expanded since she'd been married to Jenkins.

'What's that?' whispered Ruth to Mrs Roberts.

'I don't know dear,' Mrs Roberts whispered back. 'Maybe it's some sort of agency for Fortune Tellers.'

'Like if you want to hire an actor you go to Equity and if you want a musician you go to the Musicians' Union?'

'That's it. But for Fortune Tellers you go to Serendipity.'

'Ah,' whispered Ruth. 'Thank you.'

And so another harmless myth was born.

'Do you need a licence to be a Fortune Teller?' asked Mrs Torridge.

'I don't think so,' said Mrs Caldicot with a frown. 'Not yet anyway.'

'Do you have to have training?'

'I wouldn't have thought you needed that either.'

'Certificates?'

‘Not yet, though I’m sure they’ll bring in training, examinations and certificates when they get round to it.’

‘If no one else is doing it then we could run courses for Fortune Tellers,’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘There wouldn’t be any point in having an examination for Fortune Tellers, would there?’ said Mr Williams. He looked around at the puzzled faces. ‘If you were any good then you’d know all the questions beforehand wouldn’t you?’

‘If you don’t need training or a certificate or a licence then I think I’d like to try it,’ said Mrs Torridge.

Everyone looked at her.

‘I’ve got a nice silk scarf to go over my head,’ she said. ‘And I’ve got some big, gold hoop earrings. They’re a bit tarnished but they’ll polish up nicely. All I need is an upturned goldfish bowl and I’ll be ready to go.’

‘Do you really think you could do it?’ asked Mrs Caldicot, a little surprised.

‘Oh yes,’ said Mrs Torridge, with surprising confidence. ‘And it would save us bringing in someone from outside.’

‘It certainly would,’ agreed Mrs Caldicot.

‘Do you think it would count as my being something in show business?’

‘Definitely,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘I once nearly joined an amateur dramatics society when I was younger,’ said Mrs Torridge. ‘It was organised by our vicar but there was a disagreement about what play we should put on. The man who was going to direct the play wanted to put on ‘Macbeth’ and the society’s leading actor preferred ‘Charley’s Aunt’. They came to blows and the vicar was so shocked that he disbanded the society. I didn’t care two hoots what they put on but I was very disappointed. I rather fancied the boy who was the Assistant Stage Manager. His name was Reggie and he was also one of the leading lights in the choir. He was in all those church things. I seem to remember he was a Brown Owl in the Boy Scout troop. Did they have Brown Owls in the Boy Scouts? Or was that in the Brownies?’

‘I’m not sure,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘But I think that being a Fortune Teller would definitely count as a branch of show business.’

‘Oh, that’s good. Then I would very much like to give it a try.’

‘Splendid,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘I wouldn’t tell people anything nasty,’ said Mrs Torridge firmly.

‘You mean stuff like ‘You will meet a tall, dark, handsome stranger but he’ll be the undertaker’,’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘Or you’ll meet a tall, dark, handsome stranger who will be the judge sentencing you to ten years hard labour,’ suggested Mr Hewitt.

‘Stop it you two!’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘I’ll only tell people nice things,’ said Mrs Torridge. ‘I want to make them happy. Folk who visit a Fortune Teller on a pier are probably on holiday. They want to hear nice things. They’ll hear enough bad things when they’re at home – gas bills, noisy neighbours, leaky taps. They come away to the seaside to escape from real life for a while.’

‘I think that’s a splendid sentiment,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘Will you do my fortune for me?’ Ruth asked Mrs Torridge.

‘Of course I will, dear. You can be one of my first clients.’

‘But you won’t tell any of the others what you see, will you?’ whispered Ruth.

‘Of course not, dear. The Fortune Teller’s booth is like the confession box or the doctor’s consulting room in the olden days.’

‘Thank you,’ smiled Ruth.

‘Perhaps I should do an audition?’ suggested Mrs Torridge. ‘Like actors and actresses do for the films? I could sit in the booth and one or two of you could come in and cross my palm with silver and I could tell you your fortunes.’

‘I think you should tell people to cross your palm with a fiver,’ suggested Mr Twist. ‘Tell them you want paper money. If you tell them you want silver some mean bugger will put a five penny piece in your palm.’

‘Well, if they try that then they darned well won’t get a nice, jolly fortune,’ said Mrs Torridge sharply.

Chapter Sixteen

Half an hour later, just as they were all preparing to retire for the night, there was a tapping on the door to the café.

Mrs Merivale had not yet got their new upstairs kitchen sorted out so they were still sitting in the café where there were teapots, milk and other essential ingredients for a comfortable evening. It was so dark outside that no one could see anything.

‘Do you think it could be a ghost?’ asked Miss Nightingale. ‘If it is then I hope it’s a friendly one.’

‘Maybe it’s burglars,’ said Mrs Peterborough.

‘Do you think they’ve come to steal our rock?’ asked Mr Hewitt.

‘I don’t think burglars usually knock,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘Maybe the burglars round here are very polite,’ suggested Mr Livingstone.

‘Oh dear, maybe it’s a spirit who’s angry because I said I wanted to be a Fortune Teller,’ said Mrs Torridge.

‘Don’t be silly,’ said Mr Twist comfortingly.

There was another tap on the door.

Almost everyone froze.

The solitary unfrozen exception was 16-year-old Dorothy who had been sitting next to Ruth. The two girls were rapidly becoming good friends. Dorothy loved to hear Ruth’s stories about her adventures with Mrs Caldicot in Paris and Ruth loved to hear about Dorothy’s adventures on the Penmouth Pier.

Dorothy, who clearly had a good idea who was there, jumped up and went to the door. ‘It’s Errol!’ she cried, peering through the glass and letting him in.

‘Errol!’ cried everyone with delight born of relief, that he was neither a ghost nor the world’s politest burglar.

Errol, surprised and rather warmed by the unexpected and rather effusive response to his arrival, blushed deep red. He was carrying two carrier bags.

‘I’ve brought you some more potatoes,’ he said, putting the bags down on the floor. ‘I’m sorry it’s so late but I had to climb up twice because I could only carry one bag at a time.’

‘You climbed up onto the pier from the beach?’ asked Mrs Merivale.

Errol nodded.

‘You’re soaked!’ said Dorothy, suddenly realising that the young man’s trousers were drenched.

‘The tide was coming in when I got here,’ said Errol. ‘It’s a high tide tonight so it will come right up to the top of the beach.

Dorothy explained to him that they were no longer under siege, that the bailiffs had gone away and that Errol could now visit the pier during the daytime.

‘You can come in through the main entrance,’ she told him.

Errol, who was a boy with a strong sense of the romantic, and who had rather enjoyed imagining himself to be an improved version of Spiderman, with perhaps a touch of the Scarlet Pimpernel thrown in, just for the devil of it, was slightly disappointed by this news.

‘Go and get the boy a spare pair of trousers,’ said Mrs Merivale to her husband. ‘I’ll put the kettle on and make him a nice hot cup of tea.’

‘Put extra sugar in it for him,’ said Mr Merivale. ‘Sugar is good for shock. He’ll be in shock if he’s been climbing up piers in the dark.’ He said this as though he had some experience of the sort of shock likely to be engendered by climbing up piers in the dark. He then hurried off to fetch a pair of his trousers.

Mrs Merivale tottered quickly into the café kitchen and filled the kettle.

‘I’ll have one if you’re boiling the kettle,’ shouted Mr Roxdale.

And then everyone wanted a cup of tea. And Mrs Roberts and Ruth rushed off to help Mrs Merivale find all the necessary cups and jugs and pots and so on.

And Mrs Caldicot decided that it would be nice to have a box of Turkish Delight with her cup of tea.

So Miss Nightingale, who knew where to find the Turkish Delight, asked Mr Livingstone and Mr Hewitt to go with her to protect her from wandering ghosts, ghouls and cowering, timorous beasties and to help her carry the stuff back to the cafe.

‘There won’t be any ghosts out there,’ insisted Mr Livingstone. ‘The gates are closed and padlocked.’

‘Ghosts can probably pick locks,’ pointed out Mr Hewitt. ‘Or slip through the gates.’

And so they accompanied Miss Nightingale.

Fifteen minutes later, Errol was wearing a pair of dry trousers and sipping an over-sugared cup of tea. He had a box of Turkish Delight on his lap. Everyone else also had a cup of tea (though not all containing quite so much sugar) and their own box of Turkish Delight.

‘So,’ said Mrs Caldicot, speaking to Errol, when she’d finished chewing her third cube of Turkish Delight. ‘Did you manage to find out anything about the council’s plans?’

Errol nodded and swallowed a chunk of Turkish Delight. ‘I was doing some photocopying and I heard some of the bosses talking in the corridor,’ he said. ‘They were laughing about how they’d get control of the pier and talking about how much money they were going to make.’

‘There you are,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘They’ve worked out that they can make £28,000,000 a year from the pier! I knew my sums were right!’ He pulled out the piece of paper on which he had scribbled his sums and waved it about as though it were all the proof anyone needed.

‘Maybe they’ve got another plan,’ said Mrs Caldicot gently. ‘Let Errol tell us what he heard.’ She turned to the boy. ‘Who did you hear talking?’

‘There were three of them. One was Mr Chapman who is something very important, one was Ms Schmidt who is the head of the ES Department. I don’t know who the third person was. I couldn’t see her and I didn’t know her voice. She might have been from outside.’

‘Did they see you?’

‘They may have. But they wouldn’t take any notice of me. I’m just a sort of office boy so I’m just sort of invisible to them. Even if they see me they always sort of talk over me as though I weren’t there at all.’

‘But the two people you saw and recognised were senior members of staff?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘Yes, definitely. Mr Chapman must be terribly important because he shouts at people quite a lot and no one seems to like him except Miss Havering. He’s quite ancient. I think he must be at least 40.’

‘Who is Miss Havering?’

‘That’s his secretary. I caught her sitting on his knee once. They were very embarrassed. Mr Chapman said they were testing his chair to see if it would take the weight of two people but I don’t think he was telling the truth because why would she jump off and go all red if that was all they were doing?’

‘And Ms Schmidt?’

‘She’s quite old too. I would say she’s probably at least 25 or so. She may be older.’

Mrs Caldicot smiled to herself. She could remember that when she was his age she too thought that 25 was quite old. Mind you, when she was seven she thought that 16 was quite old. Everything is relative. Now that she was old enough to regard grey hair, wrinkles and wonky joints as mere badges of honour, earned in the fight of life, she thought that 60 was very young, 70 just approaching middle age and 80 merely heading for maturity.

‘What’s the ES Department?’ asked Mr Twist.

‘That’s the Department of Equality, Diversity and Sensitivity,’ explained Errol.

‘What on earth is that?’

‘It’s the department in charge of equality, diversity and sensitivity,’ said Errol who seemed as puzzled as everyone else. ‘They took over the Environmental and Social Governance Department and the Regulatory Compliance and Regulatory Oversight Department about six months ago. It’s now just about the biggest department in the building. They take up the whole of the third floor and even the planning department only takes up half a floor. They’ve even succeeded in pushing the Health and Safety Executive Officers into a Portacabin in a corner of the car park. The Health and Safety department used to have all the power but I heard the Chief Executive say that these days they’re a spent force. He said that these days everything is all about Equality and Sensitivity and that Health and Safety are yesterday’s issues.’

‘How on earth can you remember all those names?’ asked Mrs Roberts, who was terribly impressed.

‘I had to distribute all the new notepaper, visiting cards and identity tags,’ explained Errol, rather prosaically but entirely sensibly. ‘Ms Schmidt, who is in charge, had 100,000 visiting cards printed for herself.’

‘Did you hear any more of what Mr Chapman and Ms Schmidt were talking about?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘Oh yes,’ said Errol. ‘They told the third person…’

‘…the one you couldn’t see?’

‘That’s right, the one I couldn’t see. They told her that they hadn’t expected the new owner to turn up at all. They said they thought that having the bailiffs outside would frighten him off and that the offer to buy the pier would be accepted.’

‘They damned well didn’t frighten me off!’ said Mr Livingstone indignantly. ‘When you’ve dropped bombs on Germany you don’t get frightened off by a bunch of ninnies working for the council.’

‘Did you drop bombs on Germany?’ asked Errol, clearly awed.

‘I certainly did,’ said Mr Livingstone proudly. ‘Lots of them.’

‘Golly! From an aeroplane?’

‘From a Lancaster Bomber. The best flying machine ever invented or flown.’

‘Were you a pilot?’

‘No. I was in charge of dropping the bombs.’

‘Wow. That’s even better. Did you see them explode?’

‘Definitely!’

‘Would you like more tea?’ Mrs Merrivale asked Errol. She had stood up and was holding a huge teapot, poised above his cup. She thought that Errol was perhaps a little young to hear about Mr Livingstone’s bomb dropping exploits.

Errol shook his head. ‘No thank you.’ Dorothy took his cup off him and put it onto a nearby table. She was very proud of him. To her he seemed to be a cross between James Bond and the tiny actor with the too perfect hair who played the spy in the Mission Impossible movies.

‘I’ll have another cup, if there’s one going,’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘I’ll have to get up three times in the night but who cares. I’ll probably have to get up three times anyway.’

Mrs Merivale filled his cup, and several other cups.

‘I think someone from the council is coming round to see you this week,’ Errol said to Mrs Caldicot. ‘They said something about people coming round tomorrow or the day after. They laughed about that. They said that whoever was coming would frighten the daylights out of you all.’ Errol said this as though he knew it could not possibly be true.

‘Huh!’ said Mr Livingstone who was clearly angered by this. ‘They won’t get in. We’ll lock the gates and throw bits of Penmouth Pier rock at them. This is no time for hurling coconut mushrooms or blancmange. Bring out the rock!’

‘No, we can’t do that,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘For one thing we won’t have any customers if we keep the gates shut. And for another we need to know what the council is planning.’

‘Quite right!’ agreed Mr Livingstone immediately. ‘Thank heavens you’re in charge, Mrs Caldicot.’

‘I wonder what they are planning,’ muttered Mrs Caldicot, more to herself than to anyone else.

‘Do you think they could be planning to try to close us down for some legal reason?’ asked Mrs Roberts.

‘It seems very likely,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘But it’s certainly good to know that they’re planning something. It’s always better to be prepared.’

‘I did hear something else,’ said Errol.

Everyone looked at him, waiting.

‘I think they’re planning to turn the theatre at the end of the pier into some sort of conference centre and the rooms above the café and the shop into offices. And they want to put windmills and solar panels on Rock Stone and along the pier itself.’

‘We already sell windmills!’ said Mrs Peterborough.

‘I don’t think Errol is referring to those pretty, little plastic ones,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘No, they were talking about those big electricity generating windmills. I think they want to make the conference centre and the offices all environmentally friendly and carbon neutral. I heard the woman I couldn’t see say that they could get special grants if they put up solar panels and windmills.’

Mrs Caldicot, who was now beginning to understand just what they were up against, turned to the young James Bond. ‘Thank you, Errol,’ she said. ‘You’ve been very helpful. You’re marvellous.’

Errol seemed pleased with Mrs Caldicot’s remark but he also looked embarrassed, as though there were something else he ought to say.

‘What is it?’ asked Mrs Caldicot, who guessed that Errol had a confession he wanted to make.

‘I’m glad it’s been useful, me being able to find out stuff,’ said Errol. ‘But I’ve been thinking of giving up my job for some time. I really hate working for the council. And because I don’t have any qualifications I’ve got no chance of being promoted. I did apply for a better job when one became vacant but they told me they wouldn’t even consider me. So I really want to leave.’

‘Well, that’s good,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘It’s good that you’ve made up your mind.’

‘But I won’t be able to help you with any more information,’ said Errol.

‘Oh, don’t worry about that!’ said Mrs Caldicot immediately.

‘Do you know anything about photography?’ asked Mr Williams suddenly and quite unexpectedly.

Errol looked across at him.

‘I’m the new pier photographer,’ said Mr Williams. ‘I need someone bright and keen to help with the printing and developing of the pictures. Is that something you’d be interested in learning about?’

Errol’s eyes lit up. ‘A job here? On the pier?’

‘Yes,’ agreed Mr Williams. ‘It’s not at all glamorous. You’d be stuck inside most of the time. You’d come out and pick up films from me, take them into the dark room, when we’ve got one set up, and then develop and print the pictures.'

'Oh crumbs yes!' said Errol.

'You'd be working here on the pier!' said Dorothy, who was clearly delighted that Errol would be working on the pier. 'That's fantastic!'

'What do I have to do to get the job?' asked Errol.

'Want it,' replied Mr Williams. 'That's all. If you want it then the job is yours.'

And so Mr Williams found the assistant he needed. And Errol found the job he wanted.

Chapter Seventeen

The original intention had been for three of the gang members to be the guinea pigs for Mrs Torridge's trial run as the pier's new 'Fortune Teller'.

But it soon became clear that this wasn't such a good idea.

'I'll feel rather embarrassed,' confessed Mrs Torridge. 'These are all my friends. They know me and I know them. There needs to be a little bit of mystery about the whole thing.'

Mrs Caldicot agreed with her. 'How about we do it this way,' she suggested. 'Instead of you seeing real people whom you know, I come into the booth and pretend to be a couple of different people. I will explain who I am pretending to be and you then tell me my fortune.'

Mrs Torridge agreed that this was a much better plan.

And so, as soon as Mrs Torridge was settled in her booth, with her headscarf wrapped neatly around her hair, a pair of gold earrings dangling from her ears and, in the absence of either a crystal ball or an upturned goldfish bowl, a glass mixing bowl in front of her as a temporary substitute, Mrs Caldicot entered the booth and sat down.

'What's your name, dear?' asked Mrs Torridge.

'My name is Sandra,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I'm 24-years-old and I'm here on holiday with my boyfriend. I work in a pharmacy and my boyfriend is a van driver.'

'Do you have a big family?'

'Just me and my mum. My dad died a few years ago. My mum lives by herself and I live with my boyfriend.'

'That's nice, dear. How long are you here for?'

'Just a week.'

'How long have you and your boyfriend been together?'

'Fourteen and a half months.'

'Do you want to get married?'

'Yes. It would be very nice. I think it would suggest real commitment.'

'Does he think the same way?'

'I don't know. I was hoping you could tell me that.'

Mrs Torridge bent her head and studied the mixing bowl very intently. 'I'm afraid I don't think he does,' she said. There was a long pause as she continued to study the mixing bowl. 'But don't you worry, my dear. I can see you with six husbands – one at a time, of course. All of them far more handsome and far richer than the man you're with at the moment.' She paused and thought for a while. 'One of them will be a man whose name begins with a J. Do you know anyone whose name begins with a J? A John, a Jim, a Jack? Something like that. Or maybe his surname begins with a letter J. It could be Jones, perhaps.'

Mrs Caldicot started laughing. She couldn't help herself. 'I'm sorry!' she said. 'That was wonderful. What made you think of all that?'

'I felt sorry for the girl,' said Mrs Torridge. 'She knows exactly how long she's been with this fellow and she clearly cares for him a good deal. But either he doesn't know that she wants to get married or he does know and he doesn't want to marry her. Either way, he sounds like a rat and a loser and I don't think the relationship is going to last, so I thought I'd give her some silly hopes and something mad to tell her friends in the pharmacy where she works. She's bound to know someone whose name begins with the letter J. Everyone does.'

'How do you know she had friends at the pharmacy?'

'Because she said she didn't have many relatives but she had a dozen postcards and a dozen sticks of rock in her bag,' said Mrs Torridge. 'The cards and the rock were clearly for her pals. And they were probably for pals she'd met at work.'

'That was marvellous,' said Mrs Caldicot, who was enormously impressed with the extent of Mrs Torridge's imagination.

Mrs Torridge fiddled with her scarf but looked very pleased with herself. 'Try me with another!' she said. 'Be someone else.'

'OK,' said Mrs Caldicot, thinking hard.

'Who are you now?' asked Mrs Torridge, impatiently.

'My name is Bunty and I'm a 45-year-old housewife. I have two children, one aged 26 and one aged 23. They both live at home and show no signs of leaving. I do all the cooking and washing for both of them. They both have good jobs and they give me £20 a week each towards the housekeeping.'

'What sexes are the children, Bunty?'

‘Oh, er, the 26-year-old is a girl and the 23-year-old is a boy. My husband is a plasterer. He’s the only man I’ve ever been with. We got married when I was 19. He is 47-years-old. He spends most evenings in the pub, his Saturdays watching football and his Sundays cleaning his car. We hardly ever go out. I watch a lot of television. I want to know what my future holds.’

Mrs Torridge peered into the glass mixing bowl and turned it round, explaining that she just wanted to get a better look at Bunty’s future.

‘I see you out shopping, doing some routine chores,’ she began, ‘and you have just dodged one of those nasty Greenpeace chuggers. As you hurry along out of his reach you don’t look where you are going and you bump into a tall man in Arab clothing.’ Mrs Torridge turned her mixing bowl round once more, and peered into it before continuing. ‘You drop one of the bags you are carrying and the contents spill onto the pavement. The tall man stoops to help you pick up the things you’ve dropped. When everything is back in the bag, the man invites you to have a coffee with him. You go along and you talk together. He is very well-spoken, clearly an educated man. He is obviously attracted to you. He is witty, charming and attentive.’

‘Good heavens!’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘I think I’ll be feeling a little flushed by now.’ She took out an imaginary handkerchief and mopped imaginary perspiration from her very real brow.

‘You talk to the tall Arab for the best part of an hour and a half and you suddenly realise that you’re going to be late getting home to empty the washing machine and to prepare dinner. The Arab asks if he can take you home in his limousine. And so you agree. On the way home, he asks if you really have to go back to your humdrum life. He points out that you are little more than a slave to these people, someone to sort their laundry and put meals on the table.’

Mrs Torridge paused and turned the mixing bowl again.

‘What happens?’ asked Mrs Caldicot. ‘What do I do? Do I go home and empty the washing machine or do I drive off into the sunset with the tall man in the limousine?’

‘The picture is fading,’ said Mrs Torridge. ‘I think maybe you need to cross my palm with another five pound note!’

‘You can’t do that!’ cried Mrs Caldicot.

‘Can’t I? Do you not think I should?’

‘No, no, you mustn’t do that!’ said Mrs Caldicot laughing. ‘It’s a clever idea but you really can’t do that. Now tell me, what happens to Bunty?’

‘The tall man asks you to go back to his country with him. He wants you to be one of his most important wives. He promises that you will sit on soft cushions all day and eat unlimited quantities of Turkish Delight. Anything you want will be yours. Box sets of all the best Netflix programmes will be yours at the flick of a finger. You will never again wear anything bought from Walmart, one of the pound shops or a charity shop. You will wear dresses designed by the world’s most famous couturiers. Your lingerie will be silk, designed for your body and hand-made by skilled seamstresses. You will have a box of jewels so heavy that two men are needed to carry it. You will have no chores to do – no cooking, no washing, no ironing, no shopping. You will be his plaything, his toy, there only to entertain him when he returns from his long camel rides in the desert. You’ll be one of his top ten wives and your only responsibility will be to please him. When he goes abroad to stay in smart hotels in wonderful and exotic places such as New York, St Moritz, Paris or Manchester then he will take you with him…’

‘Manchester?’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘I’m sorry to interrupt but did you say Manchester?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Mrs Torridge. ‘I read in a magazine that Manchester is now considered very fashionable, very exotic. They’ve got an indoor shopping centre, a new library and a marvellous one way traffic system.’

‘OK,’ said Mrs Caldicot with a nod. ‘OK. So Manchester is on the list of wonderful and exotic places that he will take me to if I agree to be one of his most important wives. But do I accept his invitation? Do I leave my parasitic, useless family and allow this tall, handsome man to take me away from the tedious drudgery of my pointless daily life?’

Mrs Torridge turned the mixing bowl yet again and studied it intently. ‘I can’t see that far ahead,’ she said, sadly. ‘I can only take you so far into the future. You have to make a choice. I can see you struggling with your dilemma. Do you stay with your husband and your two children or do you go? Only you can decide. It is your life and future and you must make up your own mind. All I can do is give you an advance peek into the future.’

‘Phew! Bunty is now going to have to go and buy herself an ice cream,’ said Mrs Caldicot with a broad grin. She stood up.

‘Do I pass?’ asked Mrs Torridge anxiously? Do you think I make an acceptable Fortune Teller?’

‘You are an absolutely marvellous Fortune Teller!’ said Mrs Caldicot.

She could not believe just how much Mrs Torridge and the others had changed since they’d stopped their tranquillisers and sleeping tablets.

And she couldn't help wondering just how many people who appeared to have dementia could be cured of their symptoms merely by taking them off their damned tablets.

'You are brilliant,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'But we have to get you something better than that glass mixing bowl to peer into! It's got measurement markings all up the side – a quarter of a pint, half a pint, three quarters of a pint and a pint.'

'Mr Merivale said he would find me something more suitable,' said Mrs Torridge. 'Do you remember that he used to work in the film industry? He and Mrs Merivale did the cooking for the film crews?'

'How could I forget?' asked Mrs Caldicot. 'Mr and Mrs Merivale were famous for their bacon sandwiches.'

'I remember all those big film stars coming to our garden party,' said Mrs Torridge. 'Michael Caine, Joan Collins, Peter O'Toole, Pierce Brosnan, Glenda Jackson, Judi Dench – they were all there.'

'And how could I possibly forget that?' laughed Mrs Caldicot. She'd always been a huge fan of Michael Caine.

'Well, I asked Mr Merivale to help me and he said he has a friend who is a props man who owed him a favour. He called his friend, using the telephone, and the props man said he had got a proper crystal ball which they had used in a film on which he'd worked. Mr Merivale asked him to send it to me and so he's put it in the post. It should be here tomorrow. The proper name for it is apparently an orbuculum so I think that's what I shall call it. My orbuculum!'

'You're going to be a huge success!' said Mrs Caldicot, and she meant it.

'It's going to be great fun,' said Mrs Torridge, who looked happier than Mrs Caldicot had ever seen her look. 'And I can do it all sitting down, which is nice.'

Mrs Caldicot smiled at her.

'I never knew there could be so much whoopee in life,' said Mrs Torridge.

'I don't think any of us realised that either,' said Mrs Caldicot, smiling at Mrs Torridge and wondering where on earth she'd learned such an unusual word.

'Well, it's clearly never too late to start having whoopee!' said Mrs Torridge firmly. 'And I'm going to have a good deal of it. As much as there is available.'

Chapter Eighteen

There were three people waiting for Mrs Caldicot when she left the Fortune Teller's booth.

'Oh dear!' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Has something terrible happened?'

'No, I don't think so,' said Mr Roxdale, who was the first in the queue. He thought for a moment. 'No, I don't think anything terrible has happened – not that I know of.' He looked at Mrs Roberts and Ruth who were standing patiently behind him. They shook their heads. 'But Mr Merivale and I have started painting the railings along the side of the pier and we think we will need some more tins of white paint.'

'I expect you will,' said Mrs Caldicot, who hadn't known about their plan to paint the railings but who thought it was a very good idea. 'Do you have any idea how much paint you'll need?'

'Well, we started off with two tins of white paint which Mr Pickering found in a cupboard,' said Mr Roxdale. 'And we've used one of those up completely.'

'How much railing did you manage to paint with that tin?'

'About seven feet,' said Mr Roxdale.

'Can you remember how long the pier is?'

'I asked Mr Livingstone and he says it's 2,195 foot long.'

'So if a gallon of paint is enough for seven feet of pier how many gallons will you need for 2,195 feet of pier?'

'It sounds like one of those sums they give you at school,' said Mr Roxdale.

'Let's pretend a gallon is enough for 10 foot of pier,' suggested Mrs Caldicot. 'That will make things a little easier.' She frowned for a moment. 'It seems an awful lot,' she said. 'But I make it to be 219 gallons. More or less.'

'That is a lot of paint,' agreed Mr Roxdale. 'But unfortunately, we'll need at least twice that much.'

'Why?'

'There are railings down both sides of the pier.'

'Oh dear. Yes, of course there are. So we need twice as much paint?'

'I'm afraid so.'

'That's, er, 438 gallons of paint.'

'Approximately,' agreed Mr Roxdale. 'But even that won't be enough.'

'Why on earth not?'

'Because the railings are going to need two coats of paint.'

'So that's nearly 1,000 gallons of paint?'

'I'm afraid so. And then when we've finished both sides for the second time we will probably have to start again.'

'It will be like painting the Forth Bridge?'

'Exactly! Just like painting the Forth Bridge,' said Mr Roxdale. 'Except, of course, that this is the Penmouth Pier.'

'Oh well, never mind,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'We must keep the pier looking smart. Maybe if you ring a local paint company they could deliver a few dozen cans of paint to keep you going.'

'And some brushes?'

'And some brushes,' agreed Mrs Caldicot.

Mr Roxdale, surprisingly happy for a man just starting out on a never-ending painting job, tottered off to report to Mr Merivale.

'Who's next?' asked Mrs Caldicot, looking first at Mrs Roberts and then at Ruth.

'You go first,' said Mrs Roberts to her assistant.

'Dorothy and I found a machine for making candyfloss!' said Ruth, the excitement bursting out of her. 'We need to order some syrup before we can find out if it works. Can we do that, do you think?'

'Does the machine look as if it might work?'

'Oh yes! Dorothy says it was working last year. Apparently candyfloss is very popular and the machine makes lots of money.'

'Then you should certainly buy some syrup and try it out!' said Mrs Caldicot who was beginning to realise that there was rather more to being a Pier Master than she had originally thought.

Ruth scampered off to set in motion the process of making the candyfloss machine work again.

'We could call our candyfloss 'artisan candyfloss',' suggested Mrs Caldicot to Mrs Roberts. 'That would give it a modern sort of image and attract those nice, young millennials who love spending their money. They seem to rather like the word 'artisan' though I really never quite know what they mean by it or why they are so taken with it.'

'I don't know what it means, either,' confessed Mrs Roberts. 'Do you think we could say that our rock was artisan rock?'

‘Oh, I think so!’ agreed Mrs Caldicot.

The two of them watched Ruth hurrying down the pier.

‘Sometimes I think of Ruth as a young woman, almost ready for a husband, a washing machine, a toaster and a family, and sometimes I think of her as a young girl still enjoying dolls and likely to pull a skipping rope out of her pocket ,’ said Mrs Roberts.

‘She does look as though she’s about to start skipping with delight,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

The two of them watched, just in case Ruth actually did start to skip.

They were slightly disappointed when she didn’t.

‘I’m afraid I have a bit of bad news,’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘Do you remember speaking to someone from the local dramatic society?’

‘Of course I do,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘They’re going to put on ‘The Pirates of Penzance’. And they’re excited about doing it in our theatre. I’m looking forward to it. Do they want to fix up some dates for their rehearsals?’

‘I’m afraid that if you want to see their production you’ll have to go to their old theatre,’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘Someone rang today to say that they wouldn’t be performing in our theatre after all.’

Mrs Caldicot, astonished, just stared at her friend. ‘Did they say why?’ she asked eventually.

‘It was very strange,’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘I asked the woman who called why they wanted to cancel and she simply kept saying that they couldn’t use our theatre after all.’

‘Did she say ‘couldn’t’ or ‘wouldn’t’?’

‘She definitely said ‘couldn’t’,’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘So I asked her why not and eventually she rather shamefacedly confessed that they had been told by the council that if they performed in our theatre then they would lose their grant. Apparently they receive an annual grant from the Arts Council and without the grant they wouldn’t be able to continue.’

‘Really? That’s why?’

‘The woman sounded very embarrassed and she said she thought they owed it to us to explain why they wouldn’t be using our theatre but that they hoped we would understand. She said that the bit of the Arts Council that hands out the grants always checks with local councils first to make sure that a recipient is approved. So the council can easily stop the grant simply by withdrawing their approval.’

‘But why on earth would they do that?’ asked Mrs Caldicot more to herself than to Mrs Roberts.

‘It sounds as if the council doesn’t like us very much,’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘They want to stop us earning any money.’

‘I hate to sound paranoid but it definitely sounds to me as if the council is trying to put us out of business,’ said Mrs Caldicot. She thought for a moment. ‘Do you remember what young Errol said about the council having plans for the pier?’

‘I do.’

‘Well maybe this is part of their plan. Maybe they just want us to fail so that they can buy the pier and turn it into a site for windmills, solar panels and businessmen holding conferences.’

‘Golly!’ said Mrs Roberts, bristling. ‘The little beggars!’

Mrs Roberts could, when pushed, be almost as determined as Mrs Caldicot herself.

‘Well, we’ll see about that!’ said Mrs Caldicot, looking at her friend.

‘Oh, I forgot to ask,’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘How did Mrs Torridge’s audition go?’

‘She did brilliantly! Amazingly well. She’s going to be a huge success – a wonderful Fortune Teller.’

‘And with any luck we’ll have Ruth’s candyfloss machine turning syrup into money!’ said Mrs Roberts, attempting to lighten the disappointment over the cancellation of The Pirates of Penzance.

‘We’ll fix up something for that theatre!’ said Mrs Caldicot quietly and determinedly.

‘I bet we will!’ thought Mrs Roberts, smiling to herself. ‘I bet we will!’ she said out loud.

She had got to know Mrs Caldicot very well, and if it came to a showdown between Mrs Caldicot and the local council then her money was well and truly on Mrs Caldicot.

Mrs Caldicot, who had heard her, looked at Mrs Roberts and smiled.

Chapter Nineteen

By the second day of their residence on the pier, things seemed to be going tolerably well.

The pier was already beginning to look far more attractive and word had got around the town that the pier was once again open for business. Locals came to see exactly what was happening and holidaymakers came because going for a walk along the pier is what everyone likes to do when they're at the seaside to have a good time.

There was still the question of what to do with the theatre, of course, but the painting of the pier railings was continuing apace and Mrs Torridge's crystal ball had survived a journey through the postal system and had been installed, in pride of place, on the table in the Fortune Teller's booth. The candyfloss machine was up and running and, to the particular delight of Ruth, who was put in charge, was churning out vast quantities of 'artisan candyfloss'. Ruth was also in charge of the ice cream stand which had been cleaned up and stocked with all the necessary supplies.

Mr Rowbottham, the Pier's Traditional Silhouettist was constantly snipping away with his scissors and said that he had never been busier. He was delighted with his new booth and had already arranged to have samples of his art framed and fixed in a suitably eye-catching position.

The café was doing good business, with the two young members of staff producing seemingly endless cups of tea, toasted teacakes, buttered crumpets, sandwiches, Welsh rarebits, and the pier speciality, fish and chips.

The shop was up and running too, with Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale in charge of selling postcards, fishing lines, paperback books, tickets for the little train, tickets for the deckchairs, bars of chocolate and the Penmouth Pier's speciality – sticks of peppermint rock with the words 'A Presence from Penmouth' running through each one in red.

The Pier Master was, of course, aware of all this activity and pleased with the way things were progressing.

If only Jenkins were with her, thought Mrs Caldicot, then her joy would be unconfined and her cup would be full to overflowing.

But, sadly, Jenkins was still in America, lecturing students. And somehow his absence increased her natural sense of wariness. When he was around she always felt safe, as though nothing too serious could go wrong.

She did not feel the untrammelled confidence of Mr Livingstone and Mr Hewitt as they stood at the entrance to the pier and counted in the customers.

Imbued with the sort of unnatural confidence that should, at their ages, have warned them that they were enjoying the calm before the storm, the two wise men of Penmouth Pier both felt that they and the pier had safely navigated the potholes which life had excavated in their path.

'The mirage appears to have water in it,' said Mr Livingstone, for once dipping a toe into the waters of poetic licence.

'True, true,' replied Mr Hewitt, determined not to be outdone. 'The beginnings of a wonderful rainbow can be seen forming behind the clouds.'

And just then, inevitably perhaps, a bunch of be-suited men and women from the council turned up.

There were seven of them: four women and three men.

In terms of ages, sizes and colour they were a pretty mixed bunch. This was no accident. Two were white, two were black, two were brown and one was oriental. Six were walking and one was in a wheelchair. All wore suits and had little pink and green ribbons pinned to their clothing, presumably to denote their solidarity with some cause or other. Several of them also wore badges upon which were printed slogans promising allegiance to Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and an organisation called Save Our Glaciers.

They came onto the pier as though they were an invading force; a conquering army come to take charge of newly vanquished peasantry. The six who were travelling by foot all strutted. The one in the wheelchair merely scowled, as though upset that she too was denied the chance to strut. They all looked to be in their twenties or early thirties.

Mr Livingstone, looking at the invaders, thought that the pier was perhaps being visited by the annual outing of the entire readership of *The Guardian* newspaper. He found this a depressing prospect.

But if his poetic mood had not been shattered he would, perhaps, have realised that dandelions had appeared on the pristine lawn of Penmouth Pier.

The woman who was clearly in charge was short, wore a black trouser suit and black, low-heeled shoes, and had her hair cut very short, in the style once favoured by squaddies and football hooligans and now popular among lesbians and militant feminists. She wore no jewellery and no make-up. She introduced herself to Mr Livingstone and Mr Hewitt as Ms Schmidt.

As Errol had rightly surmised, when he had described her, she was probably in her mid-twenties, though she looked considerably younger, and she had the sort of arrogant, lopsided smirk that is so common among young people who are blessed with a diploma in something obscure, too much power and an absurdly exaggerated view of their own importance.

After examining her carefully, Mr Livingstone decided that she actually looked about 16 and that if she had turned up in a pub and asked for half a shandy, any wise barman (or barmaid) would have insisted on seeing her birth certificate before he (or she) had consented to serve her anything quite that strong.

'I need to see the owner of the pier immediately,' said Ms Schmidt, addressing Mr Hewitt. 'Fetch him to me.'

She spoke in what was clearly the voice she used when addressing older people, halfwits and serfs; somehow managing to turn up her volume control while at the same time increasing the bass levels.

Mr Hewitt, who was not easily bullied and too old to be intimidated by anyone not carrying a rocket launcher, looked at her and frowned.

'Who are you?' he asked, surprisingly politely.

'I am Ms Schmidt.'

She repeated this piece of information as though she expected the announcement to be greeted with expressions of awe and a good deal of bowing and scraping.

'Yes, you said that bit. But who are you?'

'Do you work here?' demanded Ms Schmidt, irritated. 'I need to see your team leader,' she added, without waiting for a reply to the first question.

'I'm not in a team and I don't have a leader.'

Ms Schmidt, clearly frustrated by Mr Hewitt, looked around and turned her attention to Mr Livingstone. She was beginning to redden with irritation and frustration. She looked around from time to time at the group standing just behind her and was clearly embarrassed to have them witness her failure to intimidate. 'What is your name? Are you employed here?'

'They've got tickets for the train in the shop,' said Mr Livingstone. 'And I have to tell you that they are very good value. A nice ride up and down the pier will calm you down.'

'I don't want to ride up the pier and I don't need to calm down!' snapped Ms Schmidt. 'I'm a very busy person. And so are my colleagues. We don't have time for joy rides.'

'There are a lot of you,' observed Mr Livingstone, 'so if you ask nicely they'll probably give you a group discount.'

Ms Schmidt stared at Mr Livingstone. 'Are you insane? Demented? Or just old and stupid?'

'I don't think so; not that I know of. But you can never really tell, can you? These things are all relative, don't you think?'

'Who are you?' asked Mr Hewitt once more. 'Why are you here if you don't want to have time for joy?'

Ms Schmidt turned her attention back to him. 'I am the Directrice General of the Department of Equality, Diversity and Sensitivity for Penmouth and the surrounding district!' She made this announcement clearly expecting Mr Hewitt to be awestruck.

'Is someone in your position allowed to be disparaging about a person because of their age?' asked Mr Hewitt.

'My department is only concerned with gender and race discrimination,' said Ms Schmidt. 'There are no important, regulatory guidelines relating to age.'

'Well that's disgraceful,' said Mr Hewitt. 'There's far too much ageism about these days.'

'I decide what is an ism and what isn't an ism,' said Ms Schmidt firmly. 'My Department is fully integrated and compliant with all the relevant legislation.'

'So now we know who you are. But who are all these people?' asked Mr Hewitt, waving a hand in the direction of Ms Schmidt's entourage.

'Mr Zygimantas and Ms Gostautas are my senior assistants,' said Ms Schmidt. 'Mr Zygimantas has a degree in Social Deviance from the University of Dresden and Ms Gostautas has a degree in Graduate Studies from the University of Dusseldorf. Our role is to ensure that community diversity is strictly monitored in all locally centred employment situations. And I have been empowered by our Deputy Chief Executive and our senior Planning Department Manager to make sure that the Penmouth Pier is satisfying the requirements of the relevant legislation.'

As she said, all this this she pointed to two of the invaders, to illustrate that one was Mr Zygimantas and one was Ms Gostautas. Neither Mr Livingstone nor Mr Hewitt had the foggiest idea which of the two was the genuine male article and which wasn't.

One of the pair was a very short, tubby, white person of about 40. He (or possibly she) wore a three piece suit in a shade of brown which would have enabled him to spill dark chocolate down his lapels and waistcoat without leaving any discernible evidence of the mishap. His (or possibly her) hair appeared to have been cut by the same ruthless barber who had mangled Ms Schmidt's scalp. The suit he (or possibly she) wore had been made for a smaller man (or possibly woman) or, at least, a man (or possibly woman) who had been smaller when the suit had been purchased. Underneath the suit, he (or possibly she) wore a bright yellow shirt and an orange and purple tie. He (or possibly she) had a plastic identification tag slung around his neck. The tag contained what appeared to be a starkly lit police photograph of someone wanted for murder, rape, arson and serious crimes against the State. Apart from the fact that he (or possibly she) did not have metallic teeth filed to a point, he (or possibly she) looked like one of the actors (or possibly actresses) who plays second assistant baddie in a James Bond movie.

The other man (or possibly woman) appeared to be younger, possibly no more than 20 or so, and had probably not been Made in England. He (or possibly she) wore heavy boots, which seemed strangely out of place, and a cheap, ill-fitting suit in a shiny, electric-blue material which was neither silk nor satin but appeared to be made out of something man-made and indestructible. The suit trousers were four or five inches too short, suggesting either that the suit had been bought off the peg and made for a much shorter man (or woman), or had been made by a tailor with a wicked sense of humour. He (or possibly she) wore a black shirt and a white tie and the combination made him (or possibly her) look like a cheap gangster in an early Martin Scorsese movie. His (or possibly her) head was completely shaved though anyone who examined his (or possibly her) scalp could clearly see the extent of the premature bald patch which had almost certainly triggered the enthusiastic use of a razor and which suggested that he was a he (and probably not a she). There were plenty of small cuts and scabs and a few curious tufts of hair, all of which suggested that he (or possibly she) did the shaving himself (or possibly herself), used a blunt razor and without access to a suitable mirror. He (or possibly she) also had a plastic identification tag slung around his (or possibly her) neck. The tag contained a photograph of a younger version of the man (or woman) who looked as if he were wanted for murder, rape, arson and serious crimes against the State.

Only if you examined the two photographs very closely would it have been possible to see that each man had his own photograph entombed in plastic around his neck.

Both men glared at Mr Livingstone and Mr Hewitt. Mr Hewitt thought they looked as if they ought to have worn collars and been on leashes.

‘Congratulations,’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘That’s probably very nice for you all. Do you have any English employees in your Department.’

‘Of course not!,’ said Ms Schmidt, who appeared to have been last in the queue when God was handing out senses of humour and not in the room at all on the day when irony was being distributed though, like most Germans, she would have probably laughed a good deal if she’d seen a fat man slip on a banana skin and land on his bottom. ‘My department is thoroughly diverse and multinational. We do not employ English people, heterosexual people, white people or old people.’

Mr Livingstone sighed and turned to Mr Hewitt. ‘You wouldn’t think we’d won the War, would you?’

‘You may think you won the War,’ said Ms Schmidt, with what could only be described as a smirk, ‘but we have definitely won the peace.’

‘Which part of Germany are you from?’ asked Mr Livingstone who didn’t much like Germans and couldn’t understand why successive British Governments kept apologising for having bombed so many German cities. It had, after all, been the Germans who had started the War and the Germans who had begun bombing cities and killing civilians. In Mr Livingstone’s eyes, the Royal Air Force had just ended up being better at everything, including bombing, than the Luftwaffe had been. British politicians always seemed to like apologising, thought Mr Livingstone. Bomber Command, of which he had been a proud small part, had been demonised after the War and even the Dam Busters were, in certain quarters, still regarded with more embarrassment than pride.

‘They have sown the wind and they shall reap the whirlwind,’ had been the crew’s favourite saying whenever Mr Livingstone had climbed into a Lancaster bomber and set off on another bombing raid.

‘I am from Hamburg,’ replied Ms Schmidt.

‘I know Hamburg quite well,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘And I’ve been to Dresden and Dusseldorf. But only from the air.’

‘Why only from the air? Why are you not landing?’

‘We were bombing the shit out of them at the time,’ explained Mr Livingstone. ‘They were a lot flatter when we left than when we arrived and so dropping in for tea didn’t seem a particularly good idea.’

‘I don’t think you’re allowed to say that!’ murmured Mr Hewitt.

‘Oh dear, aren’t I? said Mr Livingstone. ‘Never mind, I’ll try not to say it again.’

Ms Schmidt scowled. Mr Zygimantas and Ms Gostautas did not seem to understand, which was perhaps fortunate.

‘What is the ‘shit out of them’ meaning?’ asked Mr Zygimantas, looking very fierce.

‘You really do have to stop saying stuff like that,’ whispered Mr Hewitt to his friend. ‘I think that one wants to take a bite out of your leg.’

Mr Livingstone raised a pair of elderly eyebrows.

‘That bit about bombing the shit out of them seems to have upset him,’ explained Mr Hewitt.

‘Oh sorry,’ murmured Mr Livingstone. He cleared his throat and tried again. ‘We were bombing them at the time,’ he said, turning to Mr Hewitt. ‘Is that better, do you think? I left the word ‘shit’ out.’

Mr Hewitt just grinned at him and turned to Ms Schmidt. ‘Who are all the other people with you?’ he asked, indicating with a nod the remainder of Ms Schmidt’s extensive entourage. It did sometimes occur to him that his very good friend Mr Livingstone could occasionally give the boundaries of tact a bit of a run for their money. On those occasions, he usually tried to deflect the conversation onto less troublesome ground. ‘Or are they your bodyguards?’

‘These are my Deputy Assistant Administrative Assistants,’ replied Ms Schmidt very earnestly. ‘They are here to observe and to take notes.’

The Assistants, none of whom seemed to understand precisely what was being said, did understand that they were being talked about and so they all nodded their heads slightly, reminding Mr Hewitt of those little dogs which were fashionable with a certain type of motorist a few years ago. The dogs, he remembered, would sit on the parcel shelf and nod their heads as the cars drove along. They would nod with exceptional enthusiasm whenever a pothole was encountered. He wondered what had happened to them all and if they had yet become valuable collectors’ items.

‘You remind me of Napoleon,’ said Mr Livingstone to the short, tubby fellow (or possibly woman) in the brown suit. Mr Livingstone had never worried overmuch about upsetting people in authority and, occasionally to the alarm of his friends, appeared to have stopped worrying entirely about political correctness when he had passed his 75th birthday.

The man (or possibly woman) in the brown suit looked at him, frowned and seemed puzzled. ‘Who is this Napoleon of which you are spoken?’ he (or possibly she) demanded in a thick Eastern European accent.

Except that it was now clear that he was definitely a ‘she’, and Mr Hewitt thought it seemed not unreasonable to assume that they had at last identified Ms Gostautas.

‘Napoleon Bonaparte. The French leader whom Wellington defeated at Waterloo,’ explained Mr Livingstone. ‘How many Napoleons are there?’ He sighed. ‘The not-tonight Josephine fellow,’ he added, in a final attempt to explain.

‘Oh,’ said the woman in the brown suit, trying to decide whether this was an insult or a compliment. She finally appeared to decide that it was a compliment for she thanked Mr Livingstone, though she did not smile as she did so.

‘Just in size and shape,’ said Mr Livingstone, clarifying his earlier remark. ‘Short and rather tubby. And foreign, of course.’

‘Very short, really,’ said Mr Hewitt, amplifying his friend’s judgement. ‘Definitely on the approaching stout side of tubby. And certainly foreign.’

‘Why do you all have your hair cut so short?’ asked Mr Livingstone, turning to Ms Schmidt. ‘Is it because someone told you it looks nice or is it because you all have nits?’

‘Nits? What do you mean, ‘nits’?’ demanded Ms Schmidt.

‘You know, the eggs you get with head lice. People used to shave their heads if they had lice. But you don’t really need to do that these days. If someone told you that they do then they were wrong. You can buy shampoos and stuff to get rid of head lice.’

‘I don’t have nits or head lice!’ shouted Ms Schmidt.

‘That’s good,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘I’m very glad you managed to get rid of them. They can be very annoying and embarrassing in social situations. Still, it’s nice that you don’t have them now because it means you and your two pals can all let your hair grow.’

Ms Schmidt, who looked as though she were about to burst into tears, though of frustration and rage rather than sadness, sucked in enough air to inflate one of those balloons which carry four people in a wicker basket and then blew it all out again. She turned on her heels and marched away, closely followed by her companions. The click clack of shoes on the pier’s wooden planking was accompanied the sound of the wheelchair’s tyres and electric motor.

‘I’m not entirely sure that went entirely as planned,’ said Mr Hewitt.

‘For us or for them?’

‘Well, I think it went OK for us,’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘We exhibited our usual good humour and gentle, welcoming nature. But I’m not sure that it went entirely as planned for them.’

‘I didn’t much like them, myself,’ admitted Mr Livingstone. ‘They seemed in a hurry to me. I never trust people who are in too much of a hurry. No time to look at the world.’

‘People in too much of a hurry never get anywhere,’ said Mr Hewitt.

‘If they had souls then they had souls without music,’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘They were all millennials, you see,’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘Millennials are a different breed. They’re not like us.

They're all hysterical and prissy and smug. They all remind me of the kids who were prefects when I was at school.'

'Millennials remind me of the worst sort of teenagers,' said Mr Livingstone. 'Not teenagers like Ruth, Dorothy and young Errol – they're good kids. But judgemental, narcissistic 14-year-olds who think they know everything and that their opinions are the only ones worth having.'

'They're all a bit self-righteous and self-obsessed,' said Mr Hewitt, warming to his theme. 'They think they're entitled to wealth, fame and respect without having to work for any of it.'

'Whingers too,' added Mr Livingstone. 'They're all professional victims – always looking for new ways to be offended.'

'They think they're liberal and open minded but they're more bigoted and prejudiced than Himmler and Goering.'

'And they hate us older folk.'

'Dunno why. They'll be old themselves one day.

'Not bright enough to have worked that out yet,' pointed out Mr Livingstone.

'I saw a piece in my paper the other day about when the internet thing stopped working for an hour or two. One of them was complaining that he was in a café and couldn't buy a cup of coffee because his phone wouldn't work.'

'What did his phone not working have to do with not being able to buy a coffee?' asked Mr Livingstone, puzzled.

'The millennials buy stuff with their phones. They don't use money anymore.'

'You're kidding!'

'No, really. It's true. And they don't drink proper coffee. They have it with loads of foam and something like nutmeg all over it.'

'Yes, I saw them doing that in the coffee shop at the railway station when we went up to see the solicitor. I think it's cinnamon they put on their coffee though I can't for the life of me imagine why.'

'I like a few cloves in my apple pie and apple sauce with a pork chop but why would you put cinnamon into coffee?'

'No idea. No idea at all.'

'But it's not nutmeg?'

'They may well put nutmeg in it as well. For all I know they probably put in a few drops of paint stripper and a handful of rabbit droppings. Doesn't make any sense at all to me.'

'Anyway, this chap who couldn't buy his cup of coffee with his phone became hysterical and said it was the end of the world. He said it was the apocalypse. The millennials were all sending each other little messages about it on their telephones.'

'They're all spoilt, that's the problem,' said Mr Livingstone. 'They were all brought up to think they are special.'

'I think it's the drinking water.'

'The drinking water?'

'I read that some doctor says our drinking water is full of hormones. It's made the fish go all odd and it's doing the same thing to youngsters. '

'Where do the hormones come from?' asked Mr Livingstone, puzzled.

'It's from all those drugs that people take – especially the contraceptive pill. Apparently the women pee out the hormones and then the sewage goes into the rivers, and the water companies take drinking water out of the rivers but they can't get the hormones out because they're dissolved.'

'Good God! I'm glad I don't drink water. I've never understood why people put it into whisky.'

'Probably doesn't matter to people our age. But these millennials have been brought up on it. And they're always told to drink more water. So they're full of hormones. It mixes them all up. Makes the women aggressive and turns the men into wimps.'

'That makes sense. A doctor said that?'

'Yes. And now the millennials all think they're special and entitled to everything they want.' Mr Hewitt paused for a moment. 'I wonder what that lot today wanted – that German woman and her millennial chums.'

'Dunno,' said Mr Livingstone. 'No idea. I heard the kraut in charge say they were looking for the owner.'

'I don't think you're allowed to call them krauts.'

'Really? Why not?'

'No idea. I think they regard it as offensive.'

'Oh, do they? Well, the kraut said they were looking for the owner.'

'Good luck with that,' said Mr Hewitt.

'I hope they're not going to be trouble,' said Mr Livingstone.

'I wouldn't think so.'

'The funny thing was that they all looked as if they wanted to be somewhere else.'

'You're right. I've met a lot of people in my life who always wanted to be somewhere else. It's a recipe for misery.'

'I have always wanted to be where I am and I've always thought that a blessing. During the War, I was even happy crammed inside a Lancaster bomber. But now that we're here this is where I want to be and to stay.'

'On Penmouth Pier?'

'On Penmouth Pier,' agreed Mr Livingstone. 'I feel as though I've come home.' He paused for a while. 'I hope that Schmidt woman isn't going to plunge a spanner into our garden of roses.'

'I wouldn't worry about it,' said Mr Hewitt, reassuringly. 'Mrs Caldicot will sort it all out.'

Mr Livingstone looked at him, smiled and nodded. 'She will, won't she?'

'She always does. Remarkable woman. She should be Prime Minister.'

The two old friends stood for a while, saying nothing, just looking around.

'You know,' said Mr Hewitt, 'when I was 20 I'd have settled for living to 70. It would have seemed like a decent lifespan at that point. But now it seems like no age at all. In my head I feel about 20. Maybe as much as 25 when I'm having a bad day. I'm a bit wobbly and I wouldn't go up a ladder. And if I kneel down it takes me a while to get up again. But I don't feel old, do you?'

'Not at all. The list of foods I can't eat goes up by the month. I wouldn't eat a pickled gherkin if you paid me. And I'm glad Mrs Peterborough threw those pickled eggs at the bailiffs. If I had to run to catch a bus I'd wait for the next one. But inside I don't feel more than about 18.'

'Should we offer to help with painting the pier or shall we take a little ride on the train?' asked Mr Livingstone.

'Mr Merivale and Mr Roxdale seem to be getting on well with the painting. They both said they enjoyed it very much.'

'So it would be a pity to interfere? It would spoil their fun?'

'Definitely.'

'We could help out in the shop for a while?'

'Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough seem to have that well in hand. I think we'd probably get in the way.'

'It's difficult to know where we'd be most useful. Maybe we ought to think about it before we go offering our services without a proper plan.'

'Keep ourselves in reserve, as it were,' agreed Mr Hewitt.

'Ready for emergencies.'

'Substitutes sitting on the bench, ready to leap into action whenever and wherever needed.'

'Absolutely. Meanwhile shall I get a pair of train tickets?'

'We don't have to pay do we?'

'Of course not. I'll get us a stick of rock each, shall I?'

'I'd rather have an ice cream.'

'Two train tickets and two ice creams it is then,' said Mr Livingstone heading for the shop.

'Make sure they're return tickets and bring two boxes of Turkish Delight for the journey back,' called Mr Hewitt.

Chapter Twenty

While Mr Livingstone and Mr Hewitt had been entertaining Ms Schmidt, and her international band of colleagues from Penmouth Council's Department of Equality, Diversity and Sensitivity, Mrs Caldicot had been busy trying to work out how best to make use of the now apparently unwanted theatre on the accurately named Stone Rock at the end of the pier.

It was the theatre, she knew, which was one of the most notable parts of the pier and almost certain to be the most vital when it came to bringing in some money. Mrs Caldicot knew she had to find a way to make use of it if they were going to make the pier a commercial success.

And so Mrs Caldicot, together with Mrs Roberts and Ruth, the two permanent members of her ad hoc management committee, wandered down the pier to take a look at what was available in the theatre, and, as Mrs Caldicot put it, to 'brainstorm' in the hope that a suitable idea might appear.

The three of them had been in the theatre before. But they had only looked around in a vague sort of way; oohing and aahing as tourists 'doing 14 European countries in 11 days' might ooh and aah when visiting their fourth cathedral of the day. They hadn't really 'seen' anything.

But now that they had time to examine the theatre more carefully they found it enormously impressive.

'Wow!' said Ruth, who had never seen anything like it before. 'Does Mr Livingstone own all this? His very own theatre!'

'It would appear so,' said Mrs Caldicot. She too was terribly impressed by the beauty of the building and the way it had been decorated. The theatre had been built at a time when red velvet and gold paint were fashionable and when theatre designers had deemed it necessary to decorate every available square inch of space with masks of tragedy and comedy, with plaster cherubs and with bunches of grapes and other similar delights. The gold leaf had, admittedly, peeled off some of the plaster but the effect was still stunning. Mrs Caldicot and the other two members of the ad hoc committee were awestruck by the decorations in the auditorium.

Above them there were two levels of seating, the dress circle and the upper circle, and to the right and to the left there were several enormously impressive looking boxes wherein wealthier patrons could sit and stretch out a little while enjoying whatever show was on offer. The walls of the theatre were decorated with scores of photographs and posters in glass frames. There were pictures of singers, comedians and pop groups. There were posters for dramas, comedies and ballets. The Penmouth Pier theatre had, it seemed, played host to every conceivable form of entertainment.

'Crumbs!' said Ruth, examining the photographs. Most of the faces and names were unknown to her, since they had been famous before she was born, but occasionally she spotted a star she could identify.

'What on earth are we going to do with this place?' asked Mrs Caldicot, talking more to herself than to her two companions.

'It's marvellous!' murmured Mrs Roberts, gazing in astonishment at the decorations and rubbing her hand across the back of one of the velvet seats. The velvet was worn and a little faded but it felt wonderful. Mrs Roberts wondered how many people had sat there and been enthralled by what they'd seen on the stage. Attached to the seat in front there was a pair of opera glasses which could be released if you put sixpence into the slot. The mechanism which controlled the release of the glasses had never been changed to cope with decimal currency.

'It's a pity the local amateur dramatics group won't use the theatre,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I wonder if they really know what they're missing.'

'They're damned silly!' said Mrs Roberts. 'If they're any good then I bet they could make far more money out of appearing here than they receive in grants. They could put on shows whenever they liked.'

'Maybe we could put on pop concerts,' suggested Ruth, who saw herself welcoming a string of famous singers and sitting with them while they sipped their lattes with cinnamon sprinkles.

'That's an idea,' agreed Mrs Caldicot, sounding wary. She didn't really think they were ready yet to become impresarios but she didn't want to dismiss Ruth's idea out of hand.

'I wonder if we would be able to cope with thousands of screaming girls?' asked Mrs Roberts.

'Do bands still have thousands of screaming fans?'

'Oh yes, I think so,' said Ruth.

'The carpet is wet here,' said Mrs Caldicot, who had wandered down one of the aisles and had found a damp patch. Mrs Roberts and Ruth joined her.

Mrs Roberts looked up. 'There's a hole in the ceiling,' she said.

'Oh dear,' said Mrs Caldicot looking up at a small piece of sky. The rest of the ceiling was covered in gold paint but there was definitely a blue patch of sky visible. Everywhere she looked there were things to do. And everything that needed doing meant more expenditure.

'It's only a small hole,' said Mrs Roberts, reassuringly.

The three of them walked down to the front of the auditorium and climbed up the wooden steps which led onto the stage. They then turned and looked back at the theatre; at the stalls, the dress circle, the upper circle and the boxes.

'I wonder how many people can fit in here,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'At least 1,500,' replied Mrs Roberts after looking around, counting the number of seats in a row, counting the number of rows and multiplying one by the other.

'We could organise lecture tours with famous people,' suggested Ruth.

'That's a very good idea!' agreed Mrs Caldicot, who liked that idea better than Ruth's suggestion that they arrange pop concerts.

'What sort of lecture tours?' asked Mrs Roberts. 'Do people pay to go to lectures these days?'

'I don't think people call them lectures anymore,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'But I've seen adverts for them. Politicians, writers and retired actors just sit on the stage and reminisce for an hour or so and then they answer questions from the audience. It's nothing new; Charles Dickens did a lot of it.'

'Oh,' said Mrs Roberts, who didn't seem terribly impressed with the idea.

Ruth wandered off to the left of the stage.

'We could organise our own variety shows,' suggested Mrs Roberts, who always liked variety shows especially when there was a good singer and a conjuring act.

'Oh, I don't think we could manage that,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Not just yet. We'd have to do the bookings and arrange for all the artistes and the band. We might be able to do it one day. But not just yet.'

They stood for a few minutes, both wondering what on earth they could do with such a wonderful theatre when Mrs Caldicot looked up and spotted another small hole in the roof. There was another small, damp stain on the floorboards of the stage.

They were still thinking when Ruth came running back onto the stage. 'There's all sorts of exciting stuff back there,' she said excitedly. 'There are costumes and props and I found a huge chest filled with old posters.'

She led Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts back stage and took them to a small props and costumes room that was absolutely crammed with bits and pieces left over from old theatrical performances. There were suits of armour, spears, swords and golden crowns. There were even a dozen tickling sticks which were, presumably, left over from a Ken Dodd performance.

'Look!' said Ruth, opening the lid of a huge, very solid looking cabin trunk.

Inside the trunk there were hundreds of old posters, all pristine and laid flat. They were all perfectly preserved. 'There are posters for performances by all sorts of famous people!' she said. 'People from before my time but people even I have heard of!' She lifted up corners of the posters and started reading off names: Judy Garland, Bill Haley, Eddie Cochran, Bob Dylan, Gene Vincent, Frankie Vaughan, Tommy Cooper, the Glen Miller Band, the Rolling Stones and all sorts of other people. Oh, look! There is even a pile of posters for the Beatles!'

'Did the Beatles perform here?' asked Mrs Roberts impressed.

'I don't think so,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Mr Pickering said they had only nearly appeared on the pier. But they must have been booked here and so the promoter had some posters printed.'

'Even if they are posters for a concert that never took place they're probably quite valuable!' said Mrs Roberts. 'People collect anything to do with the Beatles.'

'There are scores of them!' said Ruth, rifling through the posters. 'Do you really think they're worth anything?'

'They might be worth a few pennies,' agreed Mrs Caldicot, sceptically. 'And we could probably sell some of this other stuff. We might be able to raise enough money to pay for the roof to be repaired.'

They closed the lid of the trunk, left the store room and wandered back onto the stage.

'That poster of Judy Garland reminded me of 'The Wizard of Oz!' said Mrs Roberts. 'I saw it years ago in the cinema.' She smiled as she remembered the film. 'I saw it in a cinema rather like this place. It was all red velvet and gold paint. They brought round ice creams and popcorn. I used to love going to the cinema.'

'I loved all those old Bogart films!' said Mrs Caldicot. ''Casablanca', 'African Queen' and 'The Big Sleep'.'

"The Maltese Falcon' and 'To Have and Have Not'!' continued Mrs Roberts.

'I haven't seen any of those!' said Ruth.

'Oh you must!' said Mrs Roberts. 'And you need to see them on the big screen – not just on a television.'

'That's it!' cried Mrs Caldicot.

'What's what?' asked Mrs Roberts, slightly confused.

'We'll open a cinema. We'll put up a screen and rent old films which we can show. We don't have to worry about looking after artistes or dealing with screaming fans. We just show classic old movies. We show films with

Humphrey Bogart, Cary Grant and the Marx Brothers. We have a season of films by favourite stars or directors. We could have a Hitchcock season and show films like 'The Thirty Nine Steps'.'

'What about old musicals?' asked Mrs Roberts.

'Brilliant!' agreed Mrs Caldicot. 'We could show 'My Fair Lady' and 'The Sound of Music' as a double bill.'

'And horror movies?' said Ruth. 'I love those old Dracula movies with Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing.'

'That's a terrific idea!' agreed Mrs Roberts. 'And the Vincent Price films.'

'What about the leaks in the roof?' asked Ruth.

'I don't remember that one,' said Mrs Roberts, thinking Ruth was talking about a movie title.

Ruth explained.

'Oh we can soon deal with those,' said Mrs Caldicot, who was now in an optimistic mood. 'We can position buckets under the leaks.'

'And if the weather is bad we can give people umbrellas if it turns out they are being rained upon,' suggested Mrs Roberts. 'English customers won't mind a bit!'

'That's an excellent idea,' agreed Mrs Caldicot.

'We could show children's movies on Saturday mornings!' said Mrs Roberts. 'Cartoons and so on. Just like they used to do in the good old days. I bet we'll do a roaring trade when the weather is too bad for people to sit on the beach.'

'That's a good half of all the days in an English summer,' Ruth pointed out.

'Exactly!' said Mrs Caldicot. 'It shouldn't be difficult to arrange films for all ages and all tastes. This cinema thing is a wonderful idea. Who thought of it?'

'It was you,' said Ruth.

'Oh was it? Well I get a free cup of tea and a bun. And you two get free cups of tea and free buns for agreeing that it's a great idea.'

'Oh goody,' said Ruth. 'Dorothy said she was going to the bakery to buy some cakes. I hope she bought some éclairs.'

And so the three of them locked up the theatre and walked back down the pier towards the café.

As they went, Mrs Roberts and Mrs Caldicot looked at each other, smiled and skipped for a couple of paces.

Chapter Twenty One

While Mrs Caldicot, Mrs Roberts and Ruth had been examining the theatre, and trying to work out how best to use it, Ms Schmidt and her entourage had been wandering up and down the pier trying to find someone who was in charge or, failing that find someone who would tell them who was in charge or, failing even that, hoping to find someone whom they could impress and intimidate.

There is absolutely no point at all in working for the council, and having an important title and an entourage, if you can't find someone to impress and intimidate.

Unfortunately for Ms Schmidt, the members of Mrs Caldicot's gang had long ago decided that talking to people wearing suits was never a particularly good idea, and if the person wearing the suit looked or seemed full of their own self-importance, then it was invariably a very bad idea.

'What good has talking to someone snooty in a suit ever done anyone?' enquired Mr Merivale.

And answer came there none.

There was, instead, simply much pursing of lips and shaking of heads.

No one could think of an occasion which had been enlightened or enlivened by a conversation with someone (male or female) in a suit. And at the first sight of a cluster of be-suited figures, Mrs Caldicot's gang had pretty well disappeared from sight.

And the members of the pier staff who had not arrived with Mrs Caldicot (and who were, perhaps, not yet as allergic to people in suits) were all busy. Mr Rowbottham the silhouettist was in his booth, snipping away and providing happy holidaymakers with extraordinarily lifelike silhouettes of themselves, or their loved ones, on black cartridge paper. Mr Pickering, the train driver, was driving the train, and far too busy collecting tickets and avoiding holidaymakers to people who were patently not on the pier to have a Good Time. He had a little brass bell attached to the front of the train and occasionally he rang it to warn pedestrians that the train was coming. He liked ringing the bell.

Mr Pickering's granddaughter Dorothy and Miss Pettifer, the erstwhile Fat Lady and newly appointed waitress, were in the café where they were busy quenching thirsts and appetites with an apparently endless stream of cups of tea, buttered crumpets, toasted teacakes and home-made sandwiches and, of course, the inevitable packets of fish and chips.

If business slowed (which it did only rarely), Miss Pettifer would stand outside the café holding and nibbling from a bag of freshly made chips. The wonderful aroma would immediately inspire passers-by to rush into the café to order their own supplies.

It was only on their way back down the pier that Ms Schmidt and her multinational band of authorised marauders eventually spotted Mrs Caldicot, Mrs Roberts and Ruth who were heading back towards the café and their ice creams. Mrs Caldicot had stopped to pick up a newspaper which had been abandoned and was about to flutter into the sea.

'Are you something to do with the pier?' demanded Ms Schmidt.

'In a way I suppose I am,' answered Mrs Caldicot, warily and very reluctantly.

'I am looking for the owner,' snapped Ms Schmidt. She had never been a woman over-imbued with surplus quantities of natural charm, patience and good manners but she had found that these shortcomings had been a considerable help to her in her short but dramatic career. She was now reaching the end of a very short tether.

'I don't know where the owner is,' said Mrs Caldicot quite honestly.

The last time she had seen Mr Livingstone he had been sitting on the little train with Mr Hewitt. They had both been travelling up the pier and enjoying large ice creams; the fluffy sort of ice cream that has at least one bar of chocolate stuffed into it. That had been some while earlier, when she and her ad hoc committee had been heading up the pier to the theatre.

'Who are you?' demanded Ms Schmidt, who could not have asked the question more forcefully if she'd been working in a cellar with a floodlight shining into Mrs Caldicot's face.

'My name is Caldicot,' said Mrs Caldicot who was no longer the meek, mild and easily bullied woman she had been when Mr Caldicot had been alive and moaning. 'And I am not accustomed to being addressed in such a manner. Who are you?'

Ms Schmidt took a deep breath and explained, once again, who she was and why she was there. It took her nearly two minutes.

'Well I'm the Pier Master,' said Mrs Caldicot, perhaps a trifle rashly.

'No, no, I need the person in charge,' insisted Ms Schmidt dismissively. 'I must speak to the owner.'

‘Then you’d better find them,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘And good luck with that,’ she muttered under her breath as the little train hummed past them, going back down the pier. Mr Livingstone and Mr Hewitt shouted greetings and held up cubes of Turkish Delight. The pair had found that neither of them could eat a whole box of Turkish Delight in one ride down the pier and so they’d stayed on the train. This was, they thought, probably their sixth or seventh journey along the pier.

‘Well, I suppose you will have to do for now,’ said Ms Schmidt with the rudeness of self-assured youth. ‘What did you say your position is?’

‘I’m the Pier Master,’ replied Mrs Caldicot.

‘What does that mean precisely? What qualifications do you have? Are you trained? You seem very old to be a Pier Master. And the term ‘Master’ is quite unacceptable to my Department.’

‘I don’t know. None. No. Don’t be so rude,’ said Mrs Caldicot, answering Ms Schmidt’s barrage of questions.

‘I must say it seems to me that you are far too old to take on responsibility for a structure of this magnitude,’ said Ms Schmidt.

‘I’m so sorry,’ said Mrs Caldicot, feeling her blood begin to bubble. ‘Is there a preferred age for pier management?’ she asked. ‘How old should I be? Would you like me to have cosmetic surgery to make myself look younger?’

She was furious. She had spent much of her life being bullied. She had been bullied and taken for granted by her first husband. She had been ignored by shopkeepers, Post Office staff, bank tellers and a wide variety of utility company employees. She had been treated with scant respect by more people than she could possibly remember.

‘Why, does everyone think they can patronise older people?’ demanded Mrs Caldicot. ‘You remind me of those people in shops and offices and on the telephone who talk down to pensioners and treat them as though they’re members of some sub-species, or aliens from another planet. If I have to ring the gas or the electricity people they always want to know my date of birth. I can’t imagine why but they do. Maybe you’re not allowed to have gas or electricity if you’re too old. And then when I’ve told them how old I am they always say ‘Well done!’ as if I’ve just discovered a new way to split the atom or won a gold medal in the Olympics. All I’ve done is get my date of birth right but they congratulate me as if I’ve really astonished them with my brilliance. Why do people under 40 always assume that anyone over 60 must be senile, and then act all surprised and delighted when they turn out not to be?’

Ms Schmidt, startled by the fact that Mrs Caldicot had the temerity to stand up for herself, frowned but didn’t say anything at all. Like all bullies she didn’t like it when people stood up for themselves.

Mrs Caldicot hadn’t finished. She looked sternly at Ms Schmidt, taking in her shapeless suit and her scalped hairstyle. ‘Maybe I should get someone to trim my hair with a lawn mower. Would that make me look younger, do you think?’

‘Do you have relevant life experiences?’ demanded Ms Schmidt, trying to retake control of the conversation. She didn’t understand the remark about the lawn mower. She was very proud of her hairstyle. Her hair was cut by a Syrian refugee who had received his hairdressing training while serving as a soldier in the Syrian army. He cut everyone’s hair in the only way he knew how, but had won two trophies for hairstyling and was so busy cutting hair that he was booked up three months in advance. *The Guardian* newspaper had printed a long interview with him.

‘I always used to go on the pier when I was little,’ replied Mrs Caldicot. ‘So my on-pier experience goes back well over half a century. What qualifications do you have?’

‘I have a diploma in Asylum Studies from the University of Banbury and a certificate in Golf Course Management from the University of Bakewell,’ said Ms Schmidt very proudly. ‘I also have a post graduate diploma in Transcultural Gender Studies from the University of Eccles.’

‘It’s a pity you didn’t get a diploma in something from Chelsea where the buns come from,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Don’t mention it. I often feel that way if I’ve had a heavy lunch.’

Ms Schmidt, who felt that the conversation had passed her by on the other side of the road, and who was not enjoying what she had expected and believed would be an easy day of unopposed confrontation and flagrant bullying, looked around desperately as if hoping that someone would leap to her rescue.

Naturally, no one did. Actually, none of her entourage had managed to follow more than a quarter of the conversation.

‘As a person of authority you are required to give me details of everyone working on the pier,’ said Ms Schmidt. She held out her hand and one of her aides, spotting the gesture and knowing it well, placed a small computer in it. All of her aides were carrying nylon computer bags or plastic briefcases and between them they had enough computing power to put a satellite into space or, at a push, even adjust the wing mirrors on a BMW motor car.

‘Oh my word,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

She thought for a moment and then slowly rattled off a list of names. ‘Pinhola, Nwanga, Kwindja, Nowak, Kowalczyk, Okereke, Azikiwe, we've got two of those, Tinibu, Nzeogwu, Iwu, Dokubo, Muller, Ursache, Dobrescu and Balescu. Oh and I nearly forgot Mr Manescu and Ms Popescu. How could I forget them? Silly me.'

'Is that everyone?' demanded Ms Schmidt, when she'd finished putting all the names into her keyboard.

'Oh yes, that's everyone.'

Ruth, who was standing open mouthed at the imaginary list of names which Mrs Caldicot had recited with such ease, felt herself being nudged. She looked. It was Mrs Roberts, who was opening and closing her mouth. Ruth closed her mouth.

'How many of these peoples are of ethnic origin?'

'Oh, all of us I would say. Yes, definitely all of us are ethnic.'

'Your English is very good.'

'Thank you. I practise it every day.'

'Good, good. But don't neglect your own language. You must retain your ethnicity.'

'Oh yes. Thank you. I make sure that I speak my native language on holidays and every Sunday.'

'And are you all members of population subgroups within dominant natural or cultural groups?'

'Definitely,' confirmed Mrs Caldicot. 'All of us. We often laugh about us all being members of population subgroups.' She laughed lightly to illustrate what she meant. 'Being members of subgroups within dominant natural or cultural groups is something that brings us all together.'

'By my reckoning there are 18 peoples working here,' said Ms Schmidt, studying her computer 'How many of these peoples are of Non English speaking Eastern European origins?'

'I don't know,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'I never like to enquire. But when Mrs Pinhola went to Gdansk she talked for months about how much she was looking forward to going home. Do you remember that, Mrs Nwanga?'

'Definitely,' replied the woman more customarily known as Mrs Roberts. 'She went back twice I think. While she was there she visited a tractor factory and brushed up on her plumbing.'

'Splendid. And how many asylum seekers do you have employed here?'

'Including the illegal ones?'

'Oh yes, we would be very happy to include them. We like to have the illegal ones included though we would not, of course, pass their details on to the authorities.'

'I would say maybe at least half could be considered worthy of inclusion in your list of people who would be suitable for an asylum,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'It may be more.'

'Splendid!' said Ms Schmidt, who seemed pleased by this. 'Thank you for sharing this with me.'

It clearly did not seem to Ms Schmidt to be in the slightest bit strange that everyone working on the pier should be so very foreign.

Mrs Caldicot thought the wretched woman probably felt that it was such a Good Thing that she didn't like to question it, or even to suspect for a moment that it might not be entirely true.

'And how many homosexuals and gender variants do you have?'

'Oh I haven't asked,' confessed Mrs Caldicot. 'I would say at least half but maybe more.' She turned to Mrs Roberts. 'What do you think Mrs Nwanga?'

'I would say at least half,' answered Mrs Roberts, with a nod. 'At least half – and we have a lot of variants here.'

'And how many of your peoples are disabled?'

'Oh I think everyone is suffering from one handicap or another,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'Mrs Kwindja has terrible trouble with her knees.'

'That's the mother of the lady who went to Gdansk,' said Mrs Roberts helpfully. 'The one who looked at the tractors and brushed up on her plumbing while she was there. She enjoyed herself so much that I think she went twice.'

'I see there is a small train running on the pier,' said Ms Schmidt. 'What facility do you have for peoples in wheelchairs to board the train?'

This rather stumped Mrs Caldicot. It had not even occurred to her that people who were in wheelchairs, and who already had wheels of their own, would want to board the train.

'We have a hook on the back of the train,' said Mrs Roberts helping out Mrs Caldicot at her time of need. 'And we have a piece of rope handy at all times. We just tie the wheelchair to the back of the train and pull it along.'

Ms Schmidt frowned. 'Is that safe?'

'Oh yes. There's never been an accident,' said Mrs Roberts. And since the experiment had never been tried she was being perfectly honest.

'Thank you, so much,' said Ms Schmidt, switching off her computer and handing it back to one of her assistants. 'I will report back my findings. I am quite delighted with what I've heard from you today.' She started to leave and then turned back. 'When we came onto the pier,' she said, 'I talked to two men who were standing there. Are they anything to do with the pier?'

'Would they be distinguished looking gentlemen of mature years?'

'Mature, yes,' said Ms Schmidt, a little cautiously.

'Was one of them wearing a sports jacket with patches on the elbows and the other wearing an old suit jacket with a maroon jumper underneath it?'

'Exactly! That is precisely them. You know these persons?'

'I've seen them around.'

'Are they employed by you?'

'Most definitely not!' said Mrs Caldicot emphatically. She shook her head. 'I have no employees.'

'I am so pleased,' said Ms Schmidt. 'They seemed very confused and not at all ethnically acceptable.' She lowered her voice. 'In fact,' she said, 'I strongly suspected that they might be English!'

And with that she hurried off, her entourage racing after her.

'Golly,' said Mrs Roberts, when she'd gone. 'Where did you get all those names from?'

Mrs Caldicot held up the newspaper she was holding. 'From the sports page,' she said. 'They're the names of footballers playing for clubs in the English league.'

She was silent for a moment.

'I feel bad about telling her porky pies but I was worried we'd all get into trouble for not being foreign enough.'

'You did the only thing you could,' said Mrs Roberts. 'She'd have probably closed us down if she'd known we were all British.'

'I liked the bit about the asylum!' said Ruth, giggling.

Mrs Caldicot looked at her and raised an eyebrow. 'Which bit was that?'

'The bit when you said that half of us would be suitable for an asylum.'

'Oh,' said Mrs Caldicot, rather pleased. 'I think my estimate was a little on the low side, don't you?'

'I definitely do,' agreed Mrs Roberts. 'We're definitely all suitable for an asylum. In fact, we should turn the entire pier into an asylum! We could probably get a grant for it.'

Giggling, they continued on their way back down the pier, towards the café and their cups of tea and buns (or, in Ruth's case, a cream filled éclair).

Ten minutes later, they were sitting down enjoying their very welcome comestibles.

'Oh, I'd love one of those,' murmured Mrs Caldicot appreciatively, as Ruth bit into her éclair and cream squeezed out at both sides.

'The girls have got two or three more!' said Ruth. 'Shall I fetch you one?'

'No thank you, dear. I'd love one but it wouldn't love me. I'd be poorly for a week. I'm happy with a nice iced bun.'

So Ruth enjoyed her éclair at first hand and Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Nwanga (nee Roberts) enjoyed it vicariously, at second hand. And, surprisingly perhaps, the two of them enjoyed it almost as much as Ruth had; comfortable in the knowledge that the éclair would not have a chance to get its own back on them.

Chapter Twenty Two

They all met that evening in the ballroom, which had now become their living area. There was a small dining area at one end, a television set at the other and enough chairs and tables for them to sit down and relax. There was, suggested Mr Roxdale, even room for a table tennis table and a pool table.

It quickly became apparent that Mrs Caldicot's suggestion that the theatre be turned into a cinema was a popular one. The proposal was met with universal approval.

'It's a wonderful idea!' said Dorothy, who was excited at having a cinema within walking distance. 'There isn't a cinema in Penmouth. The nearest one is nearly thirty miles away.'

Mrs Caldicot had worried that young locals and visitors would be disappointed if they showed old films instead of the latest blockbusters but it seemed that her fears were unfounded. Dorothy, like everyone else, thought that the idea of showing old films was a terrific idea.

'Can we have lots of old cowboy movies?' asked Mr Roxdale. 'I like those John Wayne films. And I love films starring Clint Eastwood. Films like 'A Fistful of Dollars' and 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly'.'

'That's a terrific idea,' agreed Mrs Caldicot. She made a note of this in her notebook.

'And a season of war films?' suggested Mr Livingstone. 'The Dam Busters?', 'The Battle of Britain' and 'Where Eagles Dare'? I like films where they kill a lot of Germans.'

'Can we get hold of all those old films?' asked Mrs Merivale. 'Are they still available?'

'Definitely!' said Mrs Caldicot. 'An hour ago I spoke to Jenkins, who is very well but missing us all very much, by the way, and he gave me the telephone number of a film distributor called Rufus Strutt in London. I then rang Mr Strutt and he was very helpful. He told me that hardly anyone shows old films anymore. We can show them for a fraction of the cost of showing new films.'

'What about a screen?' asked Mr Merivale. 'We can't just show films on an old sheet – even though it would probably be a cheap way to do it.'

'Mr Strutt was very helpful about that too,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'He gave me the name of an old cinema that's just closed down. He said he thought we ought to be able to buy their screen and projection equipment for next to nothing. Apparently their equipment is considered out-of-date but it would be perfect for showing old movies.'

It was generally agreed that all of this was excellent news.

'By the way,' said Mrs Caldicot, turning to Mr Livingstone. 'Did you talk to a woman called Schmidt today?'

'A German woman with a huge entourage?'

'That's the one.'

'Well we did and we didn't,' said Mr Livingstone. 'She wanted to speak to the owner.'

'So you didn't tell her that you're the owner?'

'It slipped my mind,' admitted Mr Livingstone. 'But we had a nice chat,' said Mr Livingstone. 'I told her all about my one and only visit to Hamburg.'

'You didn't tell her that you'd been in a Lancaster Bomber when you called?'

'He damned well did!' said Mr Hewitt with a chuckle.

'Oh dear me!' said Mrs Caldicot. She paused and thought for a while. 'Never mind I think I managed to convince her that we're following all their regulations.'

She looked at Mrs Nwanga (aka Roberts) and winked. Mrs Nwanga (aka Roberts) winked back.

'Jolly good,' said Mr Livingstone. He turned to Errol. 'I don't think you need worry too much about the council closing us down, young man! Mrs Caldicot will keep them under control.'

Errol, like everyone else, was relieved. Mrs Merivale had found him a small, empty bedroom and told him that he was welcome to stay there if he wanted to. No one was much surprised when he said he wanted to.

The truth is that they were all enjoying life on Penmouth Pier. They had settled into their rooms upstairs. And the massive ballroom had become their communal living room.

An hour or two later that evening there was particularly good news for Ruth.

The gates were locked and padlocked and Mr and Merivale had just decided to take a stroll along the deserted pier when they heard a familiar voice calling to them. They turned and saw Jean-Jacques, the young man whom Ruth had met when they had all gone to Paris for a few days. Jean-Jacques had an arm stuck through the gate and was waving to them. 'Can I come in?' he called.

'Won't be a minute!' called the Merivales.

And while Mr Merivale rushed to find Mr Livingstone, who had the key to the padlock, Mrs Merivale hurried off to find Ruth.

Not surprisingly, it was Ruth, whose legs were over half a century younger than Mr Livingstone's and who was so eager to get there that she would have given any Olympic champion a good run for their money, who got to the gates first.

'I didn't expect to see you for ages!' she cried, tears of delight running down her cheeks.

'I thought it would be a surprise!' said Jean-Jacques.

'When did you leave Paris?'

'I left Charles de Gaulle airport early this morning. But it has taken me three times as long to get to Penmouth from London as it took me to get to London from Paris! I had to get a train into London and then a train across London and then a train from London. Oh la la! So many trains.'

'Are you hungry?'

'I am starving. I tried to eat a sandwich I bought at the railway station but they made it out of cardboard by mistake.'

'Could you eat some fish and chips?'

At that point Mr Livingstone arrived with the key. And a moment later Ruth had her arms around Jean-Jacques's neck, and the Merivales and Mr Livingstone were looking away and discussing what they thought the weather was going to be like the next day.

'Did you ask me if I could eat some fish and chips?' said Jean-Jacques a few minutes later.

'I did.'

'I would love some of your famous fish and chips!'

'I'll ask Dorothy if she can make you some,' said Ruth. 'She makes the very best fish and chips in the world.'

'I'll pop off and find her,' offered Mrs Merivale. 'The fat will still be hot. Meanwhile I'll make a nice pot of tea.' Making a nice pot of tea was Mrs Merivale's first course of action whenever something out of the ordinary occurred. If there was good news then she made a nice pot of tea to celebrate. If there was bad news then she made a nice pot of tea to settle everyone's nerves.

'I cannot believe that you own a pier!' said Jean-Jacques, straining to look through the gloaming, down the seemingly endless length of the pier. 'It's huge and so magnificent.'

'It belongs to Mr Livingstone,' said Ruth. 'But we all live and work here now. Mrs Caldicot is going to open a cinema in the theatre at the end of the pier. And Mrs Torridge has become a Fortune Teller. I am so pleased that you brought your accordion. We have a really nice man who cuts pictures out of black paper. And there is a train that runs up and down the pier. How is your father? I am so sorry I should have asked sooner. Why didn't you tell me that you were coming? When did you decide to come?'

Jean-Jacques, who was laughing, looked at her. 'My father is very well. He sends everyone his love.'

'Can we do some busking?' asked Ruth. 'Just you and me?'

'I hope so very much!' said Jean-Jacques. 'I will play my accordion and you will sing.'

'I'll ask Mrs Caldicot if we can stand at the entrance to the pier,' suggested Ruth. 'It'll help draw attention to the pier and entertain people as they come in.'

Naturally, Mrs Caldicot, and indeed everyone else, thought that a little music was just what the pier needed and it was agreed that a pair of buskers at the gate would be a marvellous attraction.

Chapter Twenty Three

The man who had the cinema screen and the projection equipment for sale turned up with everything packed up in a large van. He was a long standing lover of old movies and he was delighted to know that his equipment was not to be recycled into a local landfill site. He was keen to install it in the theatre straight away.

‘But we haven’t agreed a price yet!’ protested Mrs Caldicot.

‘And we haven’t got any money,’ pointed out Mr Livingstone, practical for once.

‘You can have it all for £1,000,’ said Mr Strutt with a shrug. ‘The stuff is too old for anyone else to use and not old enough to have any value for a collector.’

Mrs Caldicot and Mr Livingstone exchanged glances. ‘I’m afraid we haven’t even got £1,000,’ said Mrs Caldicot apologetically.

Mr Strutt shrugged. ‘Pay me when you’ve got going,’ he said.

He and the assistant he had brought with him piled all the equipment onto the little train and walked beside it as it was driven along the pier to the theatre. Within a surprisingly short period of time, they had the screen installed and the projection equipment set up in the Dress Circle, where they had removed twelve seats to make room.

‘I suggest you build a little, wooden wall around the projection area,’ suggested Mr Strutt. ‘Just to give the projectionist a little privacy. You don’t want someone bumping into the projector and knocking it off line!’

Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts, who had been watching in awe, said they thought this would be an excellent idea. The ad hoc committee had been temporarily reduced to two for Ruth was with Jean-Jacques, busking at the pier entrance.

‘Who is going to be the projectionist?’ asked Mr Strutt.

Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts looked at each other. ‘We hadn’t thought about that!’ admitted Mrs Caldicot.

‘Well, why don’t I teach you two ladies how to do it? And then you can show anyone else how it’s done. The equipment is really very simple. You can’t go wrong.’

And so Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts learned how to become cinema projectionists.

‘If you have any problems just give me a call,’ said Mr Strutt.

‘Before we take you and your assistant back to the café for a cup of tea and a meal, may I ask you if you know anything about cinema and theatre memorabilia?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘I’ve just sold all the stuff from my cinema,’ said Mr Strutt. ‘So, I’ve got a rough idea of the sort of prices things fetch these days.’

They took him and his assistant down to the small room behind the stage where they had found all the old theatrical props.

‘These are very nice!’ agreed Mr Strutt. ‘They’ll fetch a very decent price at auction. Collectors love this sort of stuff. What about the posters and photos you’ve got on the walls? They’re probably worth a few bob. People love old posters and old film star photos.’

‘I think we’d like to leave the posters and the photographs on the walls,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘If we take them down we’ll need to redecorate all the walls.’

‘But there are the posters that Ruth found in that old trunk,’ pointed out Mrs Roberts.

‘Of course!’ agreed Mrs Caldicot. She crossed the room and opened the lid of the trunk in which Ruth had found the old theatre posters. ‘We’ve got heaps of old posters in here.’

Mr Strutt stared in astonishment as the lid went up.

‘Are they worth anything?’ asked Mrs Roberts.

Mr Strutt didn’t reply for he was too busy flicking through the posters.

‘Do you know how many there are in here?’ he asked.

‘No idea,’ replied Mrs Caldicot.

There was a silence while Mr Strutt did some counting. ‘You’ve got some posters here for the Beatles!’

‘Yes.’

Mr Strutt carefully counted the Beatles’ posters. ‘There are 100 of these!’

‘Yes, but I’m afraid that I don’t think The Beatles ever appeared here. According to Mr Pickering, they were booked to appear but something happened and they didn’t come.’

‘Who is Mr Pickering?’

‘He’s the gentleman who drives our little train,’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘He’s been working here for ever. He knows everything about the pier.’

Mr Strutt was so excited he could hardly speak. He looked at his assistant who was grinning and then he looked at

Mrs Caldicot. ‘Do you have any idea how much these are worth?’

‘None whatsoever,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘If I offered you £200 for all these posters, would you take it?’

‘I’d have to ask Mr Livingstone,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘He owns the pier and everything on it.’

‘But he might accept £200 – for the lot?’

‘I suppose he might,’ agreed Mrs Caldicot.

‘Well, it’s a good job for you that I’m honest,’ said Mr Strutt. ‘Each one of these old theatre posters is worth between £150 and £200 and the Beatles’ posters are easily worth £500 each.’

Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts just stared at him in astonishment.

‘But they’re just old posters! And the Beatles never even appeared here.’

‘People love these things,’ insisted Mr Strutt. ‘Interior decorators will kill one another to buy these. They put them into big aluminium frames and hang them in posh London apartments.’

‘Even the Beatles’ posters?’

‘Oh, especially the Beatles’ posters.’

‘It doesn’t matter that The Beatles didn’t appear here?’

‘No. In fact it probably adds to their value. These are the missing posters for the missing concert!’ said Mr Strutt. He smiled at Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts. ‘I think you’ll be able to pay for the screen and the projection equipment.’

‘If Mr Livingstone agrees would you take them and sell them for us?’ asked Mrs Caldicot. ‘We would obviously pay you a commission.’

‘Delighted!’ said Mr Strutt immediately. ‘I’d be delighted. Pay me 15% of the price you receive and I’ll find you the best buyer. I’ll try a few dealers here and in America and if they don’t offer the right money we’ll put everything into an auction. But if we go straight to a dealer we won’t have to pay the auctioneer’s commission and the dealer will save money too so we’ll probably make more money that way.’

‘How much do you think they’re all worth?’ asked Mrs Caldicot.

‘You won’t get the prices I quoted, of course,’ said Mr Strutt. ‘Those are the retail prices. But you should get half of those prices from a dealer.’

Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts waited while Mr Strutt did some sums in his head.

‘I think there are about 200 mixed posters here,’ he said. ‘And there are the 100 Beatles’ posters. So, conservatively, I’d expect a dealer to pay at least £40,000 for the lot. If I break up the collection and sell them in separate lots I might be able to get more.’ He paused, thinking. ‘Then you’d have to take my 15% out of that. Oh, but you’ve got all that theatrical memorabilia as well. Those old suits of armour and the spears and whatnot should be worth another few thousand. I think I should be able to get you a cheque for something between £40,000 and £50,000, less the £1,000 for the projection equipment and my 15% commission.’

‘I think we might be able to get the roof repaired,’ whispered Mrs Caldicot to Mrs Roberts.

They hurried back down the pier to tell Mr Livingstone the good news. And to ask if he was happy to sell the collection of posters he didn’t even know he had.

‘I need to consult my adviser here,’ said Mr Livingstone, turning to Mr Hewitt. ‘What do you think we should do, Mr Hewitt? Do you think we should keep a pile of old posters in a trunk so that they can quietly go mouldy and rot away or should we flog them, put a big chunk of loot in the bank and then buy Mr Strutt’s projector and repair the cinema roof?’

‘It’s a difficult one,’ said Mr Hewitt, pretending to think about it.

‘Very tricky,’ agreed Mr Livingstone.

Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts, who knew they were being teased, just smiled and waited. Mr Strutt, who didn’t know Mr Livingstone at all, simply stared in astonishment.

‘On balance I think maybe you should sell them,’ said Mr Hewitt eventually.

‘OK, we’ll sell them!’ agreed Mr Livingstone. He and a relieved Mr Strutt then shook hands.

And so, after they’d all had lunch and a nice cup of tea, Mr Strutt and his assistant loaded the trunk full of posters, and the theatrical memorabilia, onto the little train. Mr Pickering drove the train down the pier and Mr Strutt and his assistant loaded everything into their van.

Chapter Twenty Four

Naturally, things weren't allowed to go quite so swimmingly without there being a serious setback.

Mrs Caldicot really wasn't terribly surprised.

She had become accustomed to the fact that life was very much like a game of snakes and ladders. She just rather wished that the ladders were longer and the snakes a little shorter.

A small expeditionary force of men and women in suits returned to the pier two days later.

There were three of them and Ms Schmidt, the head of the Department of Equality, Diversity and Sensitivity was not among them. Nor were her acolytes to be seen.

'I think you rather pulled the wool over our Ms Schmidt's eyes,' said a man who introduced himself as Mr Chapman. He looked to be in his forties and was short and notably overweight. Actually, he was very short. He looked a little bit like Dudley Moore, except that he was about two feet shorter and not as good looking. And he was very fat. So fat, indeed, that Mrs Caldicot thought that God could have probably made two quite average sized executives out of him and still had enough material left over to make a Great Dane.

Mr Chapman was addressing Mrs Caldicot who had identified herself as the Pier Master. Most of the others were there too. Mr Pickering was driving the train, and Dorothy and her new waitress were working in the café. But everyone else was gathered around Mrs Caldicot. Even Ruth and Jean-Jacques, the French accordionist, had stopped playing music to pay attention to what was happening.

'May I ask who you are?' asked Mrs Caldicot, very politely.

'I'm the council's Deputy Chief Executive,' replied Mr Chapman. 'We haven't met though you did meet Ms Schmidt, the Directrice of our Department of Equality, Diversity and Sensitivity. Ms Schmidt is German and therefore humourless. I am from Dundee, and therefore not German, and for a Scot I have a terrific sense of humour.'

'We rather thought we could rely on our Ms Schmidt to find a way to close you down,' said a woman who introduced herself as Ms Trench and who said that she was the council's Chief Planning Officer. 'The equality, diversity and sensitivity legislation governing small businesses is very strict these days.'

Like Mr Chapman, the Chief Planning Officer looked to be in her forties. She had no discernible curves whatsoever and was what used to be called stout.

'In the report which she submitted after her visit, Ms Schmidt said that you were fully compliant with all the legislative requirements,' said Mr Chapman. 'And we both know that's rubbish don't we?'

'I bet you thought you were very clever,' said Ms Trench. She looked around. 'Which one of you is Ms Nwanga?'

Mrs Caldicot and Mrs Roberts both examined their shoes. They both felt like naughty schoolgirls. Naturally, the others did not know what Ms Trench was talking about.

'You should be ashamed of yourselves,' said Mr Chapman. 'Fancy taking advantage of a naïve and inexperienced young woman like that.'

'A foreign woman too,' said Ms Trench.

'We've sent Ms Schmidt and her team off on another training course,' said Mr Chapman. 'They've all been sent to Venezuela for three months.' He laughed. It was a mocking, derisory sort of laugh. 'All expenses paid by the council and they'll come back clutching another batch of diplomas.'

'And after that we'll send her off somewhere else,' said Ms Trench. 'They do lots of nice training courses in Russia these days.'

'And Iceland too, I believe,' added Mr Chapman. 'They seem to do lots of diversity training in cold places.'

'So, the bottom line is that the grown-ups are taking over,' said Ms Trench. She looked at Mrs Caldicot, as though contemplating making a bid for her. 'You're a little old to be running a pier, aren't you?'

'I beg your pardon?' said Mrs Caldicot.

'You're a little old to be running a pier, aren't you?' shouted Ms Trench. She leant forwards a few inches and spoke very slowly, and in that patronising way that television interviewers often adopt when they are talking to the deaf or the elderly, especially when they want to appear kindly and sympathetic. This time Mrs Caldicot understood her. She looked across at Mrs Roberts but did not reply to Ms Trench.

'You should be in a residential home,' said Ms Trench. 'Maybe we could find you and your many wrinkles a place in one of those places where you can sit down in a nice, plastic armchair and play bingo. Maybe they'll let you make a raffia basket.'

'I tried one of those,' said Mrs Caldicot drily. She was tempted to point out that her aches and wrinkles were badges of honour; proof that instead of just sitting round waiting for life to totter past she had, in recent years at least, gone out and met it head on.

'Well, you'll be trying another one soon because you're not going to stay here!' said Ms Trench. 'We've got great plans for this piece of outdated Victorian memorabilia.'

'The thing is,' said Mr Chapman, 'that there are people working on this pier and your elusive Mr Livingstone is, therefore, an employer. 'As an employer we can tie him up in several miles of red tape. There are laws governing the hours people can work. There are laws governing an employer's pension liabilities. There are, as I am sure Ms Schmidt pointed out to you, laws governing equality, diversity and sensitivity among employees.'

'There are so many laws,' said Ms Trench with a sigh. 'Working with our colleagues in various Government Departments we can have the missing Mr Livingstone arrested and fined. He is an employer and so he's fair game. Governments don't like small employers and so we can make his life an absolute misery.'

'But that's not fair!' protested Mrs Caldicot, rather weakly. She could feel her voice beginning to crack but she was determined not to cry. 'We're just trying to revive this wonderful old pier. We want to restore the theatre. We've reopened the café and the shop. We're providing entertainment for people; for locals and for holidaymakers. We're not expecting the State to support us or to provide us with grants. We're trying to make Penmouth Pier a real attraction in the town.'

Mr Chapman laughed scornfully. 'Who cares about fair?' he demanded. 'You don't get it do you?'

'Get what?' asked Mrs Caldicot. She spoke now in a whisper. She wished Jenkins were here. Just to hold her. It was all so damned, cruel and unfair.

'This isn't about a pier, it isn't about Penmouth, it isn't about holidaymakers, it isn't about people at all!' said Mr Chapman, rubbing his hands together. 'Don't take it so personally. This isn't about you or the pier. It's just business. It's just about the money.'

'This is Ms Rothstein,' said Ms Trench, introducing the third member of the small deputation. Ms Rothstein was a reed thin, dour faced woman in her thirties. 'Miss Rothstein represents a large consortium of commercial developers. And she is going to make you an offer you can't refuse. She has very exciting plans for the pier.'

'Maybe this is the moment when you'd better think about producing the pier's owner,' said Mr Chapman. 'He's going to have to make himself known at some point soon.'

'What sort of plans do you have for the pier?' asked Mrs Caldicot, speaking so softly she wondered if anyone could hear her.

'We're going to turn the buildings at this end of the pier into offices,' said Ms Rothstein, waving a hand in the direction of the archway and including the shop, the café and the former hotel in her wave. 'And we're going to knock down the theatre on Stone Rock and build a luxury hotel and a 2,000 seater conference centre. Neither the pier nor the buildings on it are listed or protected in any way and so the only permission we require is from the council's planning department.'

'Which we have given,' said Ms Trench.

'What sort of offices?' asked Mrs Caldicot.

'We're going to put up modern offices which we have been commissioned to build for a major international company called Community Protection,' replied Ms Rothstein. 'It's a company which has won numerous Government awards.'

'What on earth do they do?' asked Mrs Caldicot, who had never heard of them.

'They're the world's largest manufacturers of community protection aids.'

'What on earth are 'community protection aids'?'

'Oh, things like tear gas, pepper spray, CS gas, water cannon and rubber bullets. The company supplies governments all around the world. They are going to build a large factory near here. It will be a tremendous boost to local employment figures. The Government has approved the factory. The Minister said it would provide a great boost to exports. And it will help release the region from over-dependence on the dying holiday trade.'

'You're not really going to help employment in the area if you kill off the holiday trade in order to help establish a factory making tear gas and rubber bullets!'

'We've already approved Ms Rothstein's planning application,' said Ms Trench. 'So now we just need to purchase the pier and the work can go ahead.'

'It would be good for us to start soon,' said Mr Chapman. 'The contractors really need to begin the construction work before the winter starts. We're going to use the rubble we obtain from knocking down that old theatre to help us build an extension to the landing stage on Stone Rock.' He grinned. 'Now, where is that Mr Livingstone hiding?'

'In our letter to your solicitor, Mr Canterbury, we offered to take the pier off your hands for £1,' said Ms Rothstein. 'Given the circumstances we thought that was a very generous offer. As you will have now discovered it costs a good deal of money to run a pier. For example, our surveyors told us that the roof of the theatre is in a terrible state and urgently needs repair work. We don't think you'll be able to find the money to do even emergency repairs. So you really don't have much choice but to sell to us, do you?'

'But surely they won't let you do those awful things!' said Mrs Roberts. 'They won't let you knock down an old theatre and build a beastly conference centre!'

'Who do you think 'they' are?' asked Ms Trench.

Mrs Roberts looked as puzzled as she felt. 'I'm not really sure,' she said, hesitantly. 'The authorities. The powers that be. The people who make all the decisions on behalf of the community.'

'We are the 'they' you expect to come riding to your assistance!' said Mr Chapman smugly. 'And I'm afraid we're not on your side.'

'The council takes advice from its staff,' said Ms Rothstein. 'And the council staff, in the persons of Mr Chapman and Ms Trench, has advised the council to recommend our planned development. So, just who do you think is going to stop us?'

'I don't know,' said Mrs Roberts, sadly. 'But there must be people who protect structures like this from people like you?'

'Do you mean people like the Seafront Heritage Authority?' asked Ms Trench.

'Yes!' said Mrs Caldicot, leaping on the suggestion. 'They look after seaside buildings all around the coast.'

'We have their endorsement,' said Ms Rothstein. 'We cleared their staff pension deficit and coincidentally they have approved our plans unreservedly.'

'That's awful!' cried Mrs Roberts. 'You bought them!'

'It doesn't matter what you think,' said Mr Chapman, wearily. 'Where is Mr Livingstone?'

No one spoke.

'Where is Mr Livingstone?' demanded Mr Chapman. 'He's the nephew of the late, lamented Mr Livingstone and he's the current owner. He's the one we need to talk to. So fetch him.'

Mr Livingstone, who had been standing nearby, had heard everything. He was no longer prepared to allow Mrs Caldicot to be bullied by these people. He stepped forward and cleared his throat. 'Mrs Caldicot doesn't need to fetch me,' he said. 'I'm here.'

'Aha!' said Mr Chapman. 'So you're the elusive owner! You're Mr Livingstone?'

'I am.'

'Well, the good news is that Ms Rothstein has got a cheque in her briefcase for £1,' said Mr Chapman. 'It's her original and final, final offer. If you accept it, which I am sure you will, we will tear up all the charges we've got prepared for you. If you refuse it then we'll hit you with so much paperwork that you'll wish you'd never been born. Do you have any idea how many forms you have to fill in if you're going to be an employer these days? Have you thought about providing pensions for your staff? Have you made arrangements for taxes and national insurance and sick pay and holidays? Do you know anything about the regulations concerning working conditions?'

Mr Livingstone was silent for a moment.

'You see,' said Mr Chapman, 'it's really all over, isn't it?'

'I tell you what,' said Ms Trench. 'The three of us will take a walk down the pier and give you a few minutes to think over what we've told you. Then, when we come back you can sign the sale documents and Ms Rothstein will give you that nice cheque for £1! We'll even pay all the legal costs for you. Getting rid of the pier won't cost you a penny.'

And with that the three of them strolled along the pier as though they were holidaymakers who were enjoying the sunshine and the sea air and who did not have a care in the world.

Chapter Twenty Five

‘They will never own this pier,’ said Mr Livingstone quietly, when Chapman, Trench and Rothstein were out of earshot.

The others looked at him. They had never heard him so angry.

‘I will give the pier to charity before I let them buy it.’

‘I suspect that they will simply buy it from whatever charity you give it to,’ said Mrs Caldicot softly and very sadly. ‘We can run the pier because we care about it and we’re not desperate to make lots of money out of it. But the man from the council is right: they can use the employment legislation to force any owner to sell.’

‘I will blow it up before I sell to them!’ insisted Mr Livingstone.

‘You can’t do that,’ said Mrs Roberts. ‘At least they aren’t threatening to knock down the pier itself.’

‘They might as well knock it down,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘And they’re talking about knocking down the theatre.’

‘If you blow it up then they’ll sue you for millions,’ said Mr Hewitt.

‘How can they do that?’

‘They’ll sue you for the cost of cleaning up the debris!’

‘Then I’ll just go bankrupt!’ said Mr Livingstone, full of defiance. ‘My old age pension is just over £100 a week. That’s my entire income. If I go bankrupt then in one year my bankruptcy will be over and they will still be left with all the rubble to clear away.’ There were tears forming in his eyes as he spoke.

‘Blowing up the pier isn’t the answer,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘If we do that then everyone loses – including us.’

‘But what can we do?’ asked Mr Hewitt. ‘They’ve got us in a corner.’

‘I like it here,’ said Miss Nightingale. She sounded as broken hearted as everyone felt. There were tears running down her cheeks. ‘I like it here very much.’

‘We all do, dear,’ said Mrs Peterborough, putting her arm around her friend’s shoulders. ‘We’ve only been here a couple of days but I already feel as if I’ve lived here all my life.’

They stood in silence for a few moments; all trying to think of an answer.

‘There is one thing we could try,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

They all looked at her. Suddenly, there was hope in everyone’s eyes. Not a lot. But a little.

‘We could telephone Mr Canterbury,’ she said. ‘He was very helpful when Mr Livingstone and I went to see him and he did tell us that we could ring him if we had any problems we thought he might be able to help us with.’

‘That’s a brilliant idea!’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘He seemed a damned good egg. Maybe he will be able to think of a solution.’

‘We’ll do it now, before those awful people come back down the pier,’ said Mrs Caldicot. And she hurried into the building behind the café, followed by everyone else.

‘You speak to him,’ said Mr Livingstone to Mrs Caldicot. ‘You’re much better at this sort of thing than I am.’

Chapter Twenty Six

‘I don’t know whether you remember me,’ said Mrs Caldicot when she had got through to Mr Canterbury and had introduced herself. ‘I came to see you with Mr Livingstone who had inherited Penmouth Pier.’

‘Mrs Caldicot! What a delight to hear from you,’ said Mr Canterbury. ‘Of course, we remember. How could we forget? You are Mrs Caldicot and you are also Mrs Jenkins but you are not Mrs Livingstone. We certainly remember you. We’ve never handled a pier inheritance before. How are we doing? We hope your call does not indicate that we have problems.’

‘I’m afraid there are some difficulties,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Do you remember telling us that a company of some sort had made an offer for the pier?’

‘Indeed we do. A derisory offer of £1 was made for the freehold, as we remember.’

‘That’s right. Well, we’ve got a representative of that company here on the pier today. She tells us that the council has approved their plans to knock down the pier entrance and the theatre and to build some offices and a conference centre.’

‘Send them away with a flea in their ear or simply toss them overboard,’ suggested Mr Canterbury, in a most un-lawyerly way.

‘Unfortunately, two members of the council have come with them,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘They say that if Mr Livingstone doesn’t sell them the pier they will make our lives very miserable. Apparently there is a lot of employment legislation they can use to cause us trouble.’

‘Ah,’ said Mr Canterbury. ‘Pares cum paribus facillime congregantur. Birds of a feather flock together. We fear that your unwelcome visitors may have exaggerated their powers somewhat. Much of the employment legislation relates to Departments of Central Government and so is, strictly speaking, outside the remit of the council. But there is no doubt that a local council official with a bee in his bonnet, so to speak, and a link with financially ambitious corsairs, could cause a considerable amount of trouble for a business operator with little experience of these matters. Would we be correct in assuming that you and Mr Livingstone have little experience of these matters?’

‘You would, indeed,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘Then we think you need help!’

‘We do! That’s why I rang you. Both Mr Livingstone and I hoped that you might be able to give us some advice. You seemed very sympathetic and supportive.’

‘We are delighted to hear that. And we’ll be delighted to help. Our first advice is that neither of you should speak to anyone. Don’t agree to anything. And above all don’t let Mr Livingstone sign anything – whatever it is.’

‘OK,’ agreed Mrs Caldicot. ‘Don’t do anything. I think we can manage that.’

‘We need to talk in person,’ said Mr Canterbury.

‘Of course,’ agreed Mrs Caldicot. ‘I’ll check out the train times and ring you back. We’ll come and see you as soon as we can.’

‘No, no! This needs to be sorted out in situ. We’ll come there, down to Penmouth. We have high hopes of a satisfactory outcome and a case of Nolle prosequi!’

‘A case of what?’ asked Mrs Caldicot, assuming that Mr Canterbury was talking of something bottled and alcoholic.

‘Nolle prosequi,’ said Mr Canterbury. ‘The abandonment and withdrawal of the case by the plaintiffs.’

‘Really? That would be marvellous. Thank you very much! But, er…’

‘Your fear, perhaps, is that you don’t have any money and you are concerned about our fees?’

‘Yes, to be honest, I am.’

‘Then worry not. It will be a delight to help. Yours is by far the most interesting case we have had for some considerable time.’ There was a pause and Mrs Caldicot could hear Mr Canterbury rifling through some papers on his desk. ‘We can’t get down there until tomorrow morning. Just tell your friends from the council that you cannot speak to them until your legal advisor arrives.’

‘Oh that’s wonderful. Thank you so much,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘You’re our knight in armour!’

‘It would have to be a very large suit of armour and a very strong horse,’ said Mr Canterbury, with a self-deprecating chuckle. ‘Just make sure that Mr Livingstone does not agree to anything, does not say anything and…’

‘…does not sign anything!’

‘Absolutely. We will see you tomorrow and then we will see what can be done about frustrating these piratical endeavours. Meanwhile remember: absente reo! In the absence of the defendant there can be no unpleasant consequences.’

And so, as a result of this conversation, when the duo from the council and Ms Rothstein from the developers returned from their stroll along the pier there was no sign of Mr Livingstone.

‘You go and hide somewhere,’ Mrs Caldicot had told him when she’d given everyone the good news about the imminent arrival of their legal advisor. ‘Mr Canterbury says you mustn’t sign anything or even say anything. So it’s probably best if you go and have a nice, quiet cup of tea.’

And so Mr Livingstone, together with Mr Hewitt, had gone into the café to have the prescribed ‘nice cup of tea’. They also had a Chelsea bun each.

Mr Chapman, Ms Trench and Ms Rothstein were not well pleased when Mrs Caldicot told them Mr Livingstone was not available.

‘I’m afraid Mr Livingstone has disappeared. Perhaps you’d like to come back tomorrow afternoon,’ suggested Mrs Caldicot. ‘The fact is that we do need a little more time to discuss what to do. We can see you tomorrow afternoon and discuss everything then.’

‘Tomorrow afternoon then,’ said Mr Chapman, wagging a podgy finger at Mrs Caldicot. ‘You’ve got 24 hours and not a minute longer.’

‘You really don’t have much choice, do you?’ said Ms Trench.

Mr Chapman, Ms Trench and Ms Rothstein then marched off the pier and climbed into a very large, chauffeur-driven Mercedes that had been parked on double lines waiting for their return.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Mr Canterbury arrived just before lunch the following day. He had travelled down to Penmouth in a black taxi cab – one of the rather cubic cabs that are so commonly seen in London. He looked just the same as when Mr Livingstone and Mrs Caldicot had met him in his office. He was still on the large side of substantial. And, as before, he wore pince nez with a gold frame, a dark-grey pinstripe suit with a broad chalk stripe, a celluloid wing collar and a black bow tie. Over the pinstripe suit he wore a Victorian Ulster, a day coat in herringbone tweed which had the traditional cape attached at the shoulder. On his head he wore a black fedora which gave him a distinctly theatrical air.

He looked extremely imposing, and both Mr Livingstone and Mrs Caldicot remembered that when they first met him they thought he looked as though he had climbed out of the pages of a novel by Charles Dickens. He could only have been a lawyer.

Both Mrs Caldicot and Mr Livingstone felt much better when he arrived. He was a man whose very presence was comforting.

'We hate motor cars,' he explained when he had successfully decanted himself and told the taxi driver to park nearby and wait for him. He had with him a very old and battered briefcase which appeared to be bulging with paperwork. 'Motor cars are all so tiny,' he added, with a shudder of distaste. He explained that only in the back of a London style taxi cab could he have room to sit comfortably.

Mrs Caldicot and Mr Livingstone formally welcomed him to Penmouth Pier and introduced him to everyone around. To their astonishment, Mr Canterbury seemed able to remember everyone's name after a single introduction.

'Would you like something to eat?' asked Mrs Roberts. They had temporarily closed the café so that they could entertain the solicitor in some privacy.

'What do you have?' asked Mr Canterbury, brightening up noticeably.

'We can offer you fish and chips, hot, buttered crumpets, cheese on toast, hot, buttered teacakes and a variety of sandwiches,' offered Mrs Roberts.

'Splendid,' said Mr Canterbury. He thought for a moment. 'Those sound very satisfactory.' He stood for a moment gazing up the length of the pier. A broad smile appeared on his face as he did so. He seemed transfixed with delight as he looked at the pier, the stalls and, most of all, the little, red and yellow train.

'Which would you like?' asked Mrs Roberts, rather diffidently.

Mr Canterbury looked confused and rather disappointed. 'Do we have to make a choice?'

'No, no, not at all,' said Mrs Caldicot quickly. 'Would you like some of everything?'

'Oh, I think so, yes. I haven't eaten since breakfast.'

'We have also managed to buy you a loaf of nice, crusty bread and a pound of cheddar cheese,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Splendid!' said Mr Canterbury, smiling. 'That will do very nicely for later.'

'And I managed to find you a nice bottle of port,' said Mr Livingstone. 'The man at the off licence said it was the best they had.'

'Even better!'

They led Mr Canterbury into the café where a table for one had been prepared for him. The bottle of port which Mr Livingstone had purchased was sitting on the table, together with a rather good lead crystal wine glass which Mr Livingstone had discovered in a cupboard upstairs.

'We can talk while we eat,' he said, when he'd removed his ulster and fedora and had settled down, putting his briefcase on the chair beside him.

A moment later Miss Pettifer put a large plate of buttered crumpets on the table in front of him. 'What sort of fish would you like?' she asked. She seemed flustered at having to wait on such an important guest.

'What sort of fish do you have, Miss Pettifer?'

'I'll go and ask Dorothy,' said Miss Pettifer, blushing.

She returned a moment later. The blush was now a little more noticeable.

'Cod,' she said.

'Then cod would be very satisfactory,' said Mr Canterbury, with a smile. He watched her go back across the café and then picked up a buttered crumpet and took a tentative nibble. After a moment he nodded, as though approvingly, and then took a much larger bite.

'I think it would perhaps be easier if you and Mr Livingstone were to sit with me,' said Mr Canterbury to Mrs Caldicot. 'The three of us can then discuss the possibilities which must be considered, before summarising the situation to the remainder of your party. Does that sound acceptable?'

'Very,' agreed Mrs Caldicot.

'Absolutely,' said Mr Livingstone.

'Now, the current situation is, as we understand it, that you, Mr Livingstone, are still the sole owner of the Penmouth Pier. Are we correct?'

Mr Livingstone agreed that this was correct.

'And all these other people whom we have met are employed by you to help run the pier? All have different roles and responsibilities? Dorothy Pickering and Miss Pettifer run the café, Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough operate the shop and so on.' Mr Canterbury finished off the crumpet and started on a teacake. He ate slowly but methodically.

'That's about it,' agreed Mr Livingstone. 'Everyone does what they feel best suits them.'

'And they are all employed by you?'

'No, not really,' said Mr Livingstone. 'I've never had any employees.'

'How can that be? How can they not be employed by you?'

'Well, we haven't really thought about it in those terms,' said Mr Livingstone. 'They're all friends rather than employees.'

'Are all these people residents of the former nursing home where you met?'

'Oh no,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'There's Dorothy and Miss Pettifer who run the café, as you know, and there's Dorothy's father, Mr Pickering. He drives the little train. Miss Pettifer used to be the Fat Lady but she lost a lot of weight.'

'Good heavens!' said Mr Canterbury, he looked across at Miss Pettifer and then returned his attention to his teacake. 'How large was she?' he asked. 'She's very slender now.'

'I'm not really sure,' admitted Mrs Caldicot, who would not have described Miss Pettifer as slender and would, indeed, have thought the word 'plump' more accurate.

'Good heavens!' said Mr Canterbury again. When he'd taken another decent sized bite of the teacake he opened the bottle of port and filled the glass in front of him. He then took a healthy sip from the glass and nodded his approval. 'Excellent!'

'And there's Errol,' said Mr Livingstone. 'He's a friend of Dorothy's, but he lives and works here now. And Mr Rowbottham.'

'What does Mr Rowbottham do?'

'He makes silhouettes of people.'

'Using scissors and black card?'

'Well, it's sort of thick paper really.'

'Good heavens! We didn't know anyone was still doing that. We must take a look afterwards.' He took another large bite from the teacake and looked up as Miss Pettifer brought him a large plateful of cod and chips. He smiled and thanked her.

'I'm sure Mr Rowbottham will be delighted to make your silhouette!' said Mrs Caldicot.

'He'll need a large piece of paper!' laughed Mr Canterbury. Several chins wobbled when he laughed. 'And Errol? What does he do?'

'He helps Mr Williams.'

'And what does Mr Williams do?'

'He's our pier photographer. And there's Jean-Jacques,' added Mrs Caldicot. 'I'm not sure how long he'll stay. He's the nice, young French boy who was playing the accordion in the archway when you arrived.'

'Very well, too,' said Mr Canterbury. 'And the young lady who was singing?' He poured vinegar over his cod and chips and then added salt in plentiful quantities.

'Oh, that's Ruth,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'She came with us. She's the assistant housekeeper.'

'So she's an employee?'

'Well sort of I suppose.'

'Do you pay her?'

'We provide her with accommodation and food and give her £30 a week pocket money,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Is she happy with that?'

'Oh yes, I think so.'

'How many hours a week does she work?'

'I'm not really sure.'

'Have you heard of the minimum wage for employees?'

'Yes,' murmured Mrs Caldicot. She thought for a moment. 'Oh dear,' she said.

'Oh dear, indeed,' said Mr Canterbury. 'And how many other employees do you have?'

‘Well, there’s Mrs Roberts,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘I suppose you could call her an employee. She’s our housekeeper.’

‘And how much do you pay Mrs Roberts?’

‘She gets her accommodation and food and expenses and so on and she has £60 a week for her personal spending.’

‘Does she have duties every day?’

‘Oh yes.’

Mr Canterbury looked at Mrs Caldicot and waved his fork in her general direction as though about to say something. He then shook his head, abandoned whatever it was he was going to say, and then picked up two chips with the fork and popped them into his mouth.

‘We do keep accounts,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Mr Twist used to work for the Inland Revenue when it was called the Inland Revenue and before it became Her Majesty’s Customs and Revenue. He looks after the accounts for us. He makes sure that all the bills are paid.’

‘Well, that’s something!’ said Mr Canterbury, who seemed to be coming to terms with the rather unusual way that Mrs Caldicot and her companions managed their financial affairs. He finished chewing the two sample chips and swallowed them. ‘Splendid!’ he said. ‘These are excellent chips!’

‘Good,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘I’m pleased.’

‘A good chip is a joy to behold,’ said Mr Canterbury with a poignant sigh. ‘As the years go by so the body’s betrayals accumulate. We know well that one day we will find ourselves no longer able to enjoy a full range of gustatory joys and so we take our pleasures while we can; while the body may protest but does not yet forbid.’

‘I’m so glad you’re satisfied,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘The girls will be pleased.’

‘We can see that your unusual financial circumstances were possibly acceptable when you just lived together in your former nursing home,’ said Mr Canterbury. ‘You were not running a business and we assume that your income came largely in the form of pensions and so on.’

‘Mostly, yes,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Mr Williams has an income from his photographs but he has an agent who looks after his accounts for him and makes sure that his taxes are paid on time. Mr Twist checked everything and said it was all perfectly proper.’

Mr Canterbury frowned. ‘That wouldn’t by any chance be Mr Henry Williams, would it?’

‘Yes, that’s him!’

‘The photographer who is famous for his pictures of Paris?’

‘Yes, that’s right.’

‘He lives with you, here?’

‘Oh yes. He’s now our pier photographer. He has a Polaroid camera and he wanders up and down the pier taking pictures of holidaymakers.’

Mr Canterbury stopped with a forkful of cod half way to his mouth. ‘Mr Henry Williams takes photographs of holidaymakers on Penmouth Pier with a Polaroid camera?’

Mrs Caldicot nodded.

‘We have three of Mr Williams’s photographs on our dining room wall,’ he said. ‘We paid several hundred pounds for them many years ago.’ Mr Canterbury completed the journey with the fork and the cod disappeared.

‘I’ll introduce you later,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘You’ll like him. He’s a really nice fellow.’

‘Good heavens!’ said Mr Canterbury. ‘Good heavens!’ He shook his head as though finding everything he was hearing rather difficult to accept. For a few minutes there was silence as he finished off his plateful of cod and chips. When the plate was empty he sat back and wiped his lips with the napkin with which he had been provided.

‘Now, we need to look at our options,’ he said. He drank some more of his port and then picked up a crumpet and took a large bite. Mr Livingstone and Mrs Caldicot just sat and waited.

‘Would you like your Welsh rarebit now?’ asked Miss Pettifer, who had hurried over to collect Mr Canterbury’s empty plate. She seemed to blush every time she spoke to the solicitor.

‘That would be excellent,’ said Mr Canterbury, who was both a gourmet and a gourmand. ‘Thank you, my dear. Did you cook the chips and the fish with your own fair hands?’

‘No, Dorothy did the cooking,’ said Miss Pettifer with clear regret. ‘I’m just the waitress.’ She was very taken with Mr Canterbury. She had always been attracted to large men and she had never met a larger man than Mr Canterbury.

‘Not just the waitress!’ said Mr Canterbury, putting the emphasis on the word ‘just’. ‘Good heavens, you are not just the waitress, my dear. To convey food with such delicacy requires an honest and willing spirit. But please convey my thanks and congratulations to Dorothy for an excellent plate of cod and chips; thoroughly delectable; most welcome; exquisitely enjoyable.’

‘I’ll bring over your Welsh rarebit as soon as it’s ready,’ said Miss Pettifer, now blushing even more. ‘Would you like some more crumpets and teacakes?’

Mr Canterbury looked at the plates which had contained the buttered crumpets and teacakes. Both were empty. He thought for a moment. ‘Not just now,’ he said. ‘After the cheese on toast I’ll have the fresh bread and the block of cheddar. Just for nibbling.’

‘Wonderful!’ said Miss Pettifer, who loved to see a man with a healthy appetite and who, it has to be admitted, had never seen a man with a healthier affection for his food. She was still blushing as she hurried away with the empty plates.

‘What a lovely, young lady!’ said Mr Canterbury, who seemed quite taken with his waitress. ‘You say she used to appear on the pier as the Fat Lady?’

‘That’s right,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘On this very pier?’

‘Yes.’

‘It’s very difficult to imagine,’ said Mr Canterbury.

Since there now wasn’t anything on the table for him to eat he poured himself another glass of port. ‘Difficult to imagine,’ he repeated to himself. He closed his eyes as though trying to do just that.

Miss Pettifer then came back with Mr Canterbury’s cheese on toast. On a second plate she had put a French baguette and a large chunk of cheddar cheese. She put this down on the table but to one side.

‘Thank you, my dear,’ said Mr Canterbury.

‘My pleasure, sir,’ said Miss Pettifer. She was blushing again.

‘Roland,’ said Mr Canterbury. ‘You must call me Roland.’

‘Roland,’ said Miss Pettifer. She paused, smiling. ‘I’m Emerald,’ she said at last, suddenly realising that she was expected to tell Mr Canterbury her Christian name. The blush deepened still further.

‘Emerald!’ said Mr Canterbury. ‘Emerald.’ He pronounced the word twice, as though entranced by it. Although he was a professional whose life depended upon utterances, observations and pronouncements, he was a man whose private affection for words usually extended only to nouns such as ‘cheese’, ‘port’ and ‘crumpet’. Now, suddenly and unexpectedly, he had a new favourite word. He murmured the word to himself a third time. ‘Emerald.’ He thought that it had an exceptional ring to it.

‘Please call me if there’s anything else you need,’ said Miss Pettifer.

‘We will,’ said Mr Canterbury.

‘Would you like any sauce for your Welsh rarebit?’

‘Do you have brown sauce?’

‘Of course! Would you prefer HP sauce or Daddy’s sauce?’

Mr Canterbury did not hesitate. ‘Oh, HP sauce, of course.’

‘I’ll fetch it.’

A moment later Miss Pettifer returned and carefully placed the bottle of HP sauce on the table. Mr Canterbury removed the top from the bottle and sprinkled liberal amounts of sauce on top of his melted cheese.

‘Call me if you need anything else,’ said Miss Pettifer.

‘We will, Emerald,’ said Mr Canterbury. ‘Thank you.’

‘It’s a pleasure, said Miss Pettifer. ‘Roland,’ she added. ‘It’s my pleasure, Roland.’

When Miss Pettifer had gone, Mr Canterbury cut himself a large slice of his Welsh rarebit and popped it into his mouth. He couldn’t remember the last time anyone had called him Roland. He thought it might perhaps have been his mother but she had died over 20 years ago. He was the sort of man who always managed to remain on formal terms with everyone he met. On the one occasion when he’d had to go into hospital even the nurses had, to their own surprise, found themselves calling him ‘Mr Canterbury’ – even when he wasn’t present. They customarily addressed all the other patients by their Christian names but none of them quite felt able to refer to Mr Canterbury as ‘Roland’. He was, they realised instinctively, a man who was naturally blessed with more than his fair share of dignity and presence. He was, one nurse had said to another reflectively, ‘an old-fashioned gentleman’.

Mr Livingstone and Mrs Caldicot looked on amazed and impressed. They’d never seen anyone eat so much. It was not difficult to see why Mr Canterbury was the size he was.

‘There are several possible solutions to your immediate problem,’ said Mr Canterbury. ‘On our journey down here it did occur to me that one possible answer to your problems might be to turn your pier into a church.’

‘A church!’ said Mr Livingstone and Mrs Caldicot together.

‘It is remarkably easy to form a new religion,’ said Mr Canterbury. ‘If our pier were a church then we would be exempt from a good deal of legislation. If, for example, you became the Church of St Piers or the Church of Divine Intervention or some such thing then we would be able to argue that the council’s representatives were targeting us because of our religion. That would be religious intolerance and would, of course, be a very serious crime against your various persons.'

'That sounds a good idea!' said Mr Livingstone. 'I like the idea of being a church!'

'It would, without doubt, be pleasantly mischievous,' said Mr Canterbury, cutting another large slice from his Welsh rarebit. He popped the slice into his mouth and chewed silently for a couple of minutes. Mr Canterbury was not one of those eaters who gobbled their food. He genuinely seemed to enjoy every mouthful. Miss Pettifer, Emerald, remained constantly in attendance, occasionally checking to make sure that Mr Canterbury did not need more sauce or additional supplies of condiments.

'We could have our own patron saint,' suggested Mr Livingstone. 'St Piers of Penmouth! Being on the pier is his way of walking on the water.'

'But,' Mr Canterbury continued a few moments later, 'turning ourselves into a religion would not deal with our fundamental problem. Even as a church we would be obliged to obey employment legislation. We would be exposed to a considerable amount of potential legal trouble. We would still be liable to obey the requirements related to minimum wages, working conditions, pension contributions, sexual discrimination and so on and on.'

'So the church isn't a good idea?' said Mr Livingstone sadly.

'It is now clear that it is not our best option,' said Mr Canterbury who, having finished his Welsh Rarebit had now taken out his penknife and was using it to slice pieces from the block of cheese before him. 'In a way, it's a pity because it is a neat and rather attractive solution.'

'So what can we do?' asked Mrs Caldicot. 'Is there any other solution?'

'Oh yes,' said Mr Canterbury. 'In our experience, there is always another solution. When questions are asked, answers are usually forthcoming.' He turned to Mr Livingstone. 'Mr Livingstone, you said that you are still the sole owner of the Penmouth Pier, did you not?'

'Yes. Nothing has changed since we came to your office and I signed those papers you gave me.'

'So everyone else working on the pier must, ipso facto, be an employee of ours. And we, as their employer must be responsible for ensuring that the laws of the land which relates to employment are adhered to in every respect.'

'Yes, I see that,' said Mr Livingstone, with a nod. 'Owning the pier is a good thing but it is also a bad thing.'

Deep down, he was beginning to wonder whether inheriting the pier had been such a piece of good fortune after all.

'However, there is one simple solution which we could adopt and which would, at a stroke, render us immune to these administrative imprecations and, thereby, render our opponents impotent,' said Mr Canterbury.

Mrs Caldicot and Mr Canterbury looked at him and waited.

'What we have in mind is a solution which we would not even consider offering to 99 clients out of 100,' he warned them.

'Oh dear,' said Mrs Caldicot. 'It sounds a bit frightening.'

'Not frightening, my dear,' said Mr Canterbury. 'But it is an unusual answer to our problems. And it is a solution which requires a sacrifice on behalf of the proprietor.' He cut himself another piece of cheese and slipped it into his mouth.

'Ah,' said Mrs Caldicot, looking at Mr Livingstone who, in turn, looked rather alarmed.

'The advantage of it is that the council would be quite unable to take action against us in any of the ways they have threatened. We would, at a stroke, become inviolable. They would, we suspect, take their trials and tribulations to some other victim.'

'Well, I think I'm probably all for it!' said Mr Livingstone. 'What's the sacrifice? Do you want to take an arm, a leg or something more personal?'

'No, no, no,' said Mr Canterbury, holding up a hand. 'There will be no need for that sort of sacrifice. Our solution is, we are pleased to say, quite bloodless.' He tore a small piece of bread from the supply in front of him, considered it for a moment and then popped it into his mouth. There was then a short delay for Mr Canterbury was far too polite to talk while chewing.

Eventually, after swallowing, the solicitor continued. 'At the moment, our problems arise from the fact that we are the employer and our colleagues working on the pier are our employees. We have legal responsibilities towards them all. It is this relationship which affords your tormentors the opportunity to threaten us with the many annoying facets of the nation's complex employment legislation.'

'I understand,' said Mr Livingstone with a nod. He had to concentrate hard when Mr Canterbury was talking.

'So our best solution is to find some way to rupture that relationship.'

'I understand,' repeated Mr Livingstone. He looked at Mrs Caldicot, who nodded that she too understood the problem. Neither of them, however, could see any sign of any solution.

'The answer,' said Mr Canterbury, tearing off a piece of bread, 'is for everyone to become an owner.' He chewed the bread and swallowed. He took a sip of port. ‘If everyone is an owner then there are no employees. Everyone is, by the very fact of their ownership, an employer. Ipso facto we have our solution! You cannot be both an employer and an employee.’

Mrs Caldicot and Mr Livingstone just stared at him. ‘How could we do that?’ asked Mr Livingstone at last.

‘We would have to share the ownership of the pier with all our colleagues.’

‘Is that all?’

‘That is all.’

‘That would get rid of all my problems?’

‘In an instant.’

‘Then let’s do it!’ cried Mr Livingstone.

Mr Canterbury put down his penknife and looked at Mr Livingstone very carefully. ‘Are we sure we understand? It would mean that we would no longer be the sole owner of the pier. The ownership would be shared between us and all your colleagues.’

‘It’s brilliant!’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘I didn’t like being the owner. It felt uncomfortable. I’ll feel much better if we all own a bit of the pier. And if it helps keep those buggers at arm’s length then it’s clearly the thing to do. How do we do it? Do we have to divide up the pier into bits? Do we put up signs saying which bit belongs to which one of us?’

‘Not at all,’ said Mr Canterbury, with the hint of a smile. ‘We form a limited company, distribute some shares and then everyone becomes a part- owner.’

‘With equal shares?’

‘The shares do not have to be equal,’ said Mr Canterbury. ‘But they could be. That is for us to decide. We could, in theory, divide the pier into 100,000 parts and then keep 99,000 of the parts for ourselves, distributing the remaining 1,000 parts among the other owners.’

‘Like holding company shares?’ said Mrs Caldicot, whose first husband, Mr Caldicot, had once bought 100 shares in a company called British Gas and who had, ever-after, regarded himself as a red-blooded capitalist.

‘Exactly,’ said Mr Canterbury with a nod. ‘Precisely! Rem acu tetigisti. The only important thing is that everyone working on the pier becomes an owner and not an employee. The extent of their personal ownership is of no relevance. When no one is an employee and there is no employer then the employment legislation becomes irrelevant.’

‘What’s that rem acu whatever you said?’ asked Mrs Caldicot. ‘Is that Latin again?’

‘Rem acu tetigisti,’ said Mr Canterbury. ‘It means ‘you’ve hit the nail on the head’.’

‘I should write down all these Latin phrases,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘I could use them when Jenkins gets back from America. He’ll be terribly impressed!’

‘Jenkins is your husband?’ asked Mr Canterbury.

‘That’s right.’

Mr Canterbury nodded.

‘If we all own a bit of the pier, how do people get paid?’ asked Mr Livingstone.

‘The owners must receive their remuneration in the form of dividends,’ explained Mr Canterbury. ‘If they are paid salaries or wages then there is, once again, an employee-employer relationship and our endeavours will have been without purpose and we will have made no progress in thwarting and confounding our tormentors.’

‘May I ask Mr Twist to come over?’ Mrs Caldicot asked Mr Canterbury. ‘He’ll be the one who will have to arrange things financially.’

‘Of course you may.’

‘This is brilliant!’ murmured Mr Twist, the accountant and former tax inspector, when he had been invited by Mrs Caldicot and Mr Livingstone to listen to Mr Canterbury’s solution. ‘The easiest thing to do is to set up a limited company which owns the pier. There is no practical obstacle to making that arrangement. I can then do the accounts and share out the income to all the shareholders. And we all get paid dividends rather than wages.’ Mr Twist, who was clearly delighted at the simplicity and effectiveness of the scheme, beamed broadly. ‘Since the pier has already been valued at £1 there will be no capital gains liabilities in transferring shares in the business.’

Mr Livingstone stood up and, much to Mr Canterbury’s astonishment and, it has to be said, a certain amount of embarrassment, insisted on shaking the solicitor by the hand. And Mrs Caldicot then insisted on kissing him on the cheek.

‘Everyone who works on the pier gets an equal share,’ said Mr Livingstone firmly. ‘That’s the fairest way to do it.’

‘Would you like some Turkish Delight to celebrate?’ Mrs Caldicot asked the solicitor.

Mr Canterbury’s eyes widened. ‘You have Turkish Delight? Here on the pier?’

‘Oh yes!’

‘We love Turkish Delight,’ said a delighted Mr Canterbury. ‘It is the only sweetmeat we enjoy.’

Mrs Caldicot popped across to the shop and fetched a box of Turkish Delight. She put the box down in front of Mr Canterbury. He opened it, took a piece and then pushed the box back across the table towards Mrs Caldicot.

‘Thank you, that was splendid!’ he said, a few moments later, savouring the taste and texture of the sweetmeat.

‘The box is for you,’ said Mrs Caldicot, pushing the box back towards Mr Canterbury.

‘The whole box is for us?’

‘Oh yes.’

If Mr Canterbury had been a cat he would have purred. He was, he thought, as close to heaven as a lawyer can ever be.

‘When we look around,’ he said softly to Mrs Caldicot and Mr Livingstone, ‘we realise that we have discovered that life is something to be enjoyed. As an Englishman, and as a lawyer to boot, this is not something to which we are accustomed. It is, to be perfectly frank, a concept which has always rather unsettled us.’ He paused, contemplating the open box of Turkish Delight. ‘But it is a notion to which we are becoming increasingly well adjusted.’ He took another piece of Turkish Delight and popped it into his mouth. ‘We really should have had more fun in life,’ he murmured to himself. ‘We haven’t had nearly enough.’

‘It’s not too late!’ said Mrs Caldicot, who still remembered her own dull, grey years; years when life had been an endurance event rather than offering much in the way of hope or delight. She now looked back on those waste land years as though they had been lived by someone else. ‘It’s not too late at all.’

‘Potius sero quam nunquam,’ said Mr Canterbury. ‘Better late than never’. We are beginning to realise that we haven’t take enough risks in our life. We really don’t want to find ourselves wearing Velcro fastened trousers and having nothing to remember but a bunch of regrets about the things we could have done but didn’t.’

‘I would like you to be one of the shareholders,’ said Mr Livingstone to the lawyer. ‘Would you accept?’

Mr Canterbury, clearly startled, looked at him and raised two bushy eyebrows.

‘I’d be honoured if you would,’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘Well, we are not sure…,’ protested Mr Canterbury.

‘It would be a very small way for us to reward you for your work,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘When we pay out the dividends it would enable us to pay you a little for your work.’

‘And if there’s anything else we can do for you…’ said Mr Livingstone.

Mr Canterbury took a large, freshly laundered white handkerchief from a trouser pocket and dabbed at his eyes. ‘The sea air must be affecting our eyes,’ he said apologetically.

When he had wiped his eyes he blew his nose. ‘We would be delighted to accept a small shareholding in the pier,’ he said, when he had eventually put away the handkerchief. ‘We would be absolutely delighted.’

Miss Pettifer, who was standing beside the lawyer in case he needed more crumpets or teacakes, was so affected by Mr Canterbury’s happiness that she added to it by kissing him on the cheek.

It occurred to Mr Canterbury, with Miss Pettifer’s kiss still fresh on his cheek and a box of Turkish Delight before him, that if he were to die at that moment he would not feel inclined to consider himself ill done by.

‘There is one small thing which has been on our mind,’ said Mr Canterbury. He spoke softly, rather hesitantly. ‘It concerns the little train which runs up and down the pier.’

‘Do you like it?’ asked Mr Livingstone. ‘Or is there a problem with it? Does it have to go?’

‘Oh no, it doesn’t have to go,’ said Mr Canterbury quickly. ‘There is no problem. It’s just that when we were a boy our parents took us to Weston-super-Mare on our holidays. There was a little train which ran up and down the pier and ever since those days we have always wanted to drive something similar.’ He spoke very quietly.

‘Would you like to drive our train?’

Mr Canterbury was so overcome that he found it difficult to respond.

‘That’s no problem at all!’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘Do you know if there is a bell? Is there a bell which the driver has to ring to warn pedestrians that the train is coming?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘There’s definitely a bell. One of those big brass bells, like an old school bell. It’s fixed to the cab, just where the driver sits, and you ring it by waggling a bit of rope from side to side.’

‘And we could…?’

‘Definitely!’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘You can drive the train and ring the bell to your heart’s content.’

‘It’s quite easy once you’ve got the hang of it,’ added Mr Livingstone. ‘And although Mr Pickering doesn’t usually bother to wear it there is a special driver’s cap with a shiny peak that you can wear. It says ‘Driver’ in gold letters across the front.’

‘You have driven the train?’ asked Mr Canterbury, as though Mr Livingstone had just confessed that he had walked on the moon.

‘Oh yes!’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘Mr Pickering was a little cautious at first, but he gave Mr Hewitt and myself a few driving lessons and now he lets us drive it whenever we like. I think he likes having a couple of assistant drivers. It means he can stand on the pier and do a little fishing occasionally.

‘You are officially an assistant driver?’

‘Yes,’ said Mr Livingstone with a big grin. ‘Pretty good, eh?’

‘Do you have a badge?’

‘You mean a badge that says ‘Driver’?’

‘Precisely so.’

‘No, I don’t. But I suppose we could have some made. Actually, we ought to have some made.’

‘And you have definitely rung the bell?’

‘Oh yes.’

‘While wearing the driver’s cap?’

‘Oh yes.’

‘And driving the train up and down the pier?’

‘Many times.’

‘Mr Pickering would be happy to teach us how to drive the little train?’

‘Definitely. I’m sure he would.’

‘And allow us to wear the driver’s cap?’

‘Oh yes. Until we have some badges made it would be a good idea for you to wear the cap,’ agreed Mr Livingstone.

Mr Canterbury, who was now almost certain that life could not get any better than this, closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. Miss Pettifer, who could tell that he was affected emotionally, put her arm around his shoulders and gave him a squeeze. Mr Canterbury now knew, with total certainty, that life could not get any better.

And then, without any more ado, Mrs Caldicot and Mr Livingstone rounded up every one of their friends, old and new, and they held a meeting upstairs in the ball room, where there was much more room than in the café. And there, in the ballroom, Mr Canterbury, who stood clutching his box of Turkish Delight in one hand and a glass of port in the other, explained that unless there were any objections he intended to draw up the papers making everyone an equal owner of the Penmouth Pier. The shares would, he said, be distributed on condition that no one could sell their part ownership of the pier to an outsider.

The news was greeted with universal acclaim.

Well, who wouldn’t want to be a part owner of Penmouth’s seaside pleasure pier?

Chapter Twenty Eight

It was just after three o'clock that afternoon when the deputation from the local council arrived.

By then Mr Canterbury had drawn up the necessary papers and the Penmouth Pier belonged to everyone.

All of those present, (together with Jenkins, who was in America but never forgotten) had become owners of the Penmouth Pier.

And, at Mr Livingstone's insistence, all of them, including Mr Canterbury, had become equal owners.

Moreover, Mr Pickering had happily agreed to train Mr Canterbury to drive the train. ('The most important thing to remember,' he said, 'is to keep ringing the bell.') And Mrs Caldicot had agreed that they should order some impressive looking badges which had the words 'Train Driver' printed on them in gold letters, and had also agreed that they should order another driver's hat in a slightly larger size, especially for Mr Canterbury. It had also been agreed that Mr Canterbury would stay the night on the pier, in one of the spare bedrooms, so that he could complete his driving course before he had to go back to his office and his other, more tedious responsibilities.

'That room will always be yours,' Mrs Merivale told him. 'I shall keep it for you and for you alone. Only you and I will ever be allowed to go in. And I will only go in to make your bed, change your bed linen and do a little dusting from time to time. I'll be very happy to do your laundry for you.'

The room was small and did not have much of a view (although you could just see the sea if you opened the window) but Mr Canterbury could not have been happier or prouder if he had been told that a suite at the Ritz hotel was being reserved exclusively for his personal use at any time.

'Shall we handle this business?' Mr Canterbury asked Mr Livingstone and Mrs Caldicot, as the official deputation approached.

Mr Chapman was in the lead, his short and stubby legs striding forcefully ever onwards and his rather high-heeled shoes clomping on the wooden pier. Ms Trench, the Chief Planning Office, followed him, scurrying along obediently a pace or two behind. And Ms Rothstein, representing the developers, strode alongside her, carrying a bulging briefcase in her right hand and clutching a document case across her chest with the other.

'Oh, I think so,' said Mrs Caldicot.

'Definitely!' agreed Mr Livingstone, who would, in all honesty, have happily been somewhere else – riding up and down the pier on the little red and yellow train, for example.

'So, have you made up your mind?' demanded Mr Chapman, as soon as he was within interrogating distance of Mr Livingstone.

'My name is Canterbury and we are handling everything for Mr Livingstone,' said Mr Canterbury, stepping forward.

Mr Livingstone felt a huge sense of relief.

Miss Pettifer could not help thinking how imposing Mr Canterbury looked. She was reminded of those wonderful, tales of mediaeval armoured knights riding into battle, ready to perform deeds of derring-do; rescuing distressed damsels by the armful as a delightful side-line. Though she rather hoped that in the case of Mr Canterbury just one damsel would be enough, and one not in any particular distress.

'Who are you?' demanded Mr Chapman, rather rudely.

'Canterbury, we are an Officer of the Court and we are the legal representative of the owners of the Penmouth Pier.'

Mr Chapman, rather startled, looked first at Mr Canterbury and then at Mr Livingstone and then, finally, at Mrs Caldicot. 'You're a lawyer?' he said at last. 'A solicitor?'

'Indeed so, sir,' agreed Mr Canterbury.

'And these people have hired you?'

'In a manner of speaking, that is quite so.'

'Well, it doesn't make much difference,' said Mr Chapman. 'Has Mr Livingstone explained the situation to you?'

'He has,' confirmed Mr Canterbury. 'Or, rather, I am cognisant of the situation as it was. I think you may find that circumstances have changed somewhat since your last visit.'

Mr Chapman, slightly puzzled, looked first at Ms Trench and then at Ms Rothstein.

'In what significant way have things changed?' Asked Ms Rothstein. 'As I am sure Mr Livingstone has explained to you, he is, as the owner of Penmouth Pier, legally responsible for meeting the various obligations which lay upon his shoulders with regard to his employees.'

'Mr Livingstone does not have any employees,' said Mr Canterbury.

Mr Chapman, Ms Trench and Ms Rothstein looked at him, looked at one another and then looked back at Mr

Canterbury.

‘I don’t understand,’ said Mr Chapman. ‘Has he fired everyone? Is he going to try to run the pier all by himself? Or is he going to try to persuade us that everyone here is a volunteer?’

‘Mr Livingstone has fired no one,’ said Mr Canterbury. ‘There are no employees because everyone you see here who is associated with the pier in any way is an owner.’

Mr Chapman, Ms Trench and Ms Rothstein stared at him disbelievingly. They simply did not understand that anyone would willingly give away chunks of his property without there being some trickery involved.

‘What are you trying to pull here?’ demanded Mr Chapman, who’d seen too many bad movies and was now trying to snarl and look threatening. Sadly, he wasn’t tall enough or big enough to look threatening. He looked what he was: a small, stocky rather disappointed and indignant man in an ill-fitting off the peg suit.

‘We are not, as you so clumsily put it, ‘trying to pull anything’,’ replied Mr Canterbury. ‘Your suggestion is a scandalum magnatum. A notable and malicious slur. Mr Livingstone, who was the former sole owner of the pier, has now shared ownership of the pier, including the former hotel and the theatre, with his former employees. There are now no employees working on the pier. And the owners of the pier have asked me to make it clear to you that they are not prepared to accept your derisory offer for the freehold of the pier. Indeed, they are not prepared to accept any offers for the pier. And since there are no employees working on the pier there is, of course, no need for any further mention of employment legislation. So, unless you have anything else to say, I wish you all good day. You are, of course, quite at liberty to remain on the pier to enjoy the facilities at your own expense.’

Mr Chapman, Ms Trench and Ms Rothstein stared at him, open mouthed.

And with that, Mr Canterbury turned and headed back to the café: a defiant and victorious knight returning to the castle keep to sustain his body with a fresh supply of essential victuals. It had, after all, been nearly half an hour since he had eaten.

He was followed closely by Mr Livingstone, Mrs Caldicot, Mr Hewitt, Miss Nightingale, Mrs Peterborough, Mr Roxdale, Mr and Mrs Merivale, Mrs Torridge, Mr Williams, Mr Twist, Mrs Roberts, Mr Pickering, Dorothy, Miss Pettifer, Mr Rowbottham, Errol and last, but certainly not least, Ruth and Jean-Jacques (who had temporarily suspended their busking).

The deputation from the council, deflated, defeated and temporarily demoralised, slunk away to the chauffeur driven Mercedes motor car which was, as before, waiting for them and parked on double lines. They were none of them well pleased but, as they all agreed as they drove away from the pier, there was absolutely nothing any of them could do.

‘What about the old Imperial Hotel?’ asked Ms Rothstein, taking a folder from her briefcase. ‘It wasn’t our first choice but if we can’t have the pier then the old hotel will have to do. It’s been empty for months.’

‘We can definitely help you with the old hotel,’ said Ms Trench. ‘We can fix up planning permission for you in a jiffy. And in some ways, and I think Mr Chapman will agree with me on this, you might find the former Imperial Hotel preferable, in many ways, to the pier.’

‘Oh most definitely,’ said Mr Chapman, agreeing with her. ‘The logistics make it a far superior choice.’ He was bloodied and numbed but far too greedy to be unbowed.

Both Mr Chapman and Ms Trench had personal interests in the success of this operation. Decent sums paid into a couple of offshore bank accounts.

Naturally, Mrs Caldicot and Mr Livingstone, Mr Canterbury and the rest, knew nothing about this conversation for they were busy sitting down and preparing to enjoy a traditional, Devon cream tea: scones, jam and lashings of clotted cream.

Hastily written ‘Closed for Tea’ signs hung on the handle of the shop door, Mrs Torridge’s Fortune Teller booth, Mr Rowbottham’s booth, the little train and the handle of the café door.

Mr Canterbury’s forgotten taxi driver was there with them, too. Errol had been sent to find him and to bring back to the pier for the sustenance he would require before making the journey home, without his passenger.

‘I’ve always been a little confused about this,’ said Mr Canterbury to Miss Pettifer as the latter put a large plateful of scones in front of him, and then add two decent sized pots of cream and strawberry jam. ‘Should one put the cream on the scone first, with the jam on top of the cream, or should one put the jam on before the cream?’

‘In Cornwall they split the scone in two and put the strawberry jam on first. They then put the clotted cream on top of the jam,’ explained Miss Pettifer. ‘But in Devon we split the scone in two and put the clotted cream straight onto the scone, as if the scone were being buttered. We then put the strawberry jam onto the top of the cream.’

‘Ah, good,’ said Mr Canterbury. ‘And since we’re in Devon…’

‘…the cream goes on first!’

They both agreed that it was crucial to get the important things right in life.

‘Emerald, would you be kind enough to come and join me as soon as you’ve finished serving the others?’ Mr

Canterbury asked Miss Pettifer.

‘Thank you, Roland,’ said Miss Pettifer. ‘I would be delighted.’

Chapter Twenty Nine

Jenkins arrived in Penmouth a week later.

He had, of course, never even seen the pier because he had left for his speaking engagement in America some hours before Mrs Caldicot and the rest of the gang had set off on their journey to Devon.

'Golly!' he said, when he saw the pier. He was, he admitted later, terribly impressed.

It was early evening and everyone was very busy.

Ruth and Jean-Jacques were busking at the entrance to the pier.

Miss Nightingale and Mrs Peterborough were in the shop, serving up ice creams, postcards and tickets for the little train, which was on this occasion being driven by Mr Canterbury.

Mr Canterbury, who was having more fun than he could ever remember having before, had not been back to his office since he had arrived in Penmouth, and he showed absolutely no signs of going back to a life of mortgage deeds and wills. He had telephoned his secretary and receptionist and told them that he would not be back for a few months – at least. He had, however, assured them that he would continue to pay their salaries. It seemed easier than dealing with the paperwork required to close the business and to make arrangements for the two loyal employees to receive their pensions. There was, he knew, enough money in his bank account to pay their salaries indefinitely.

Mr Canterbury proudly wore a train driver's hat and had a newly made enamelled badge bearing the words 'Train Driver' pinned to his jacket. He was, it was generally believed, the only man in history to drive a train on a pier while wearing a stiff collar and a neatly knotted, black bow tie. 'A man is entitled to be a damned fool at my time of life,' he said to Mr Hewitt. On the seat beside him there lay a box of cheese and tomato sandwiches which Emerald, his fiancée, and still the café waitress, had prepared for him so that he would not go hungry as he travelled up and down the pier between meals.

Mr Roxdale and Mr Merivale were painting the railings at the side of the pier, Mr Twist was doing the accounts (he said it was much better to do them on a daily basis, rather than to wait until the end of the month, the quarter or, heaven forbid, the year) and Mr Williams was wandering up and down the pier taking snaps. Errol his assistant was hard at work in the darkroom. Mr Rowbottham was snipping profiles out of sheets of black cartridge paper and Mrs Torridge was telling people what their future held. Mrs Merivale was doing practical things upstairs in the old hotel, which was now their home, and Mr Pickering was showing visitors from Bristol how to fish for mackerel from the jetty at the end of the pier. Mr Pickering had never actually caught any mackerel but he had never really wanted to catch anything, so that was fine.

And Mr Livingstone and Mr Hewitt were sitting on a bench, in the sunshine, eating ice creams and watching seagulls swooping over the sea. The seagulls too were fishing and proving far more successful than Mr Pickering had ever been, or was ever likely to be.

'Do you believe in that Buddhist stuff?' asked Mr Livingstone. 'About us all being reincarnated according to how we behaved the last time we were here on earth?'

'You mean that Karma Sutra stuff?'

'I think the Karma Sutra stuff is something else. I meant the plain, vanilla karma stuff. Do you believe in it?'

'Believe in it?'

'Yes.'

'I suppose so. Possibly.'

'Because if it's true, if what we get in this life is a reflection of how well we behaved in our last life, then we must have been bloody good people in our last lives. If we were snails then we must have been pretty damned good snails.'

Mr Hewitt licked his ice cream, and nibbled a bit off the chocolate flake that was stuck into the top of it. 'You could be right about that,' he said at last. He thought for a while. 'I don't remember being a snail,' he added.

'I thought I might stroll down and get a newspaper from the shop when I've finished my ice cream,' said Mr Livingstone.

'Or we could catch the next train down,' suggested Mr Hewitt.

'Good idea,' said Mr Livingstone. He paused, and watched a cormorant dive into the sea. 'A bit later on, though.'

'I say! Look! Here comes Mrs Caldicot's other half!' said Mr Hewitt, using his ice cream to point to Jenkins, who had left his bags with Ruth and who was now strolling up the pier.

Ruth had promised to take the bags up to what had been Mrs Caldicot's room and what would now be Mr and Mrs Jenkins's room.

'You all seem well settled,' said Jenkins. 'There were no problems with the move?'

‘No problems at all,’ said Mr Hewitt. ‘Everyone went as smooth as silk.’

‘Nothing your wife couldn’t handle!’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘Have you seen her?’ asked Jenkins. ‘Ruth said she thought I’d find her down this end of the pier.’

‘She’ll probably be in the theatre with Mrs Roberts,’ said Mr Livingstone.

‘They’ll be getting ready for tonight’s performance,’ added Mr Hewitt.

Jenkins looked puzzled, as well he might have done. He was not aware that his wife had theatrical ambitions of any kind, although he was well aware that a film had been made about her early adventures. But he knew her well enough not to be surprised. And he would not have been unduly surprised if he’d been told that she and Mrs Roberts were rehearsing a tap dancing act.

‘Just keep walking along the pier,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘You can’t miss it. The theatre is right at the end. If there wasn’t a big rock there anyway the theatre would stop you falling into the sea.’

‘It’s a big building with the word ‘THEATRE’ on it,’ said Mr Hewitt, helpfully. ‘I think you’ll find that Mrs Caldicot will be inside.’

‘Thanks,’ said Jenkins, smiling to himself and continuing along the pier. As he did so he heard a bell ringing. He turned and saw a red and yellow train approaching. He stepped aside and saw to his surprise that the train was being driven by a very large man whom he had never seen before and who was wearing a driver’s cap and a stiff collar with a bow tie.

As promised, Jenkins found Mrs Caldicot in the theatre.

She put down the box of Turkish Delight she was holding and threw her arms around her husband’s neck. They kissed and hugged for a while. Mrs Roberts hurried off, muttering something about needing to do something with some posters that needed pinning up in the foyer.

‘I’ve missed you terribly,’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘And I’ve missed you.’

‘How did things go in America?’

‘I think things went well, thank you.’

‘And was your flight OK?’

‘The people at Yale paid for an expensive seat so I stretched out and slept most of the way.’

‘So you’re not too tired?’

‘No, not at all, surprisingly.’

‘Good. Because you’re on in…’ Mrs Caldicot looked at her watch ‘…forty seven minutes.’

‘What do you mean ‘I’m on’? asked Jenkins, rather startled.

‘Well, we bought a projector and a screen from a man who sold some old posters for us and everything works quite well except for the sound thingy. I rang up the man we bought them from and he said it happens sometimes. Apparently we need a new carburettor or a battery or a speaker or something and so he’s going to come down and fit one but he can’t do it for weeks and we are showing a film this evening and we’ve sold quite a few tickets.’

‘And so the show must go on?’

‘Exactly! I knew you’d understand!’

‘I don’t really. You’re showing a film tonight?’

‘Yes, that’s right. We’ve converted the theatre into a cinema and we’re showing old black and white films. Lots of Gary Cooper, Clark Cable and Jimmy Cagney.’

‘And what are you showing tonight?’

‘Casablanca. With Humphrey Bogart.’

‘Together with Ingrid Bergman, Peter Lorre, Sydney Greenstreet, Claude Rains and Paul somebody.’

‘That’s the one. It’s Paul Henreid who plays the hero in the story. It’s funny. I always forget his name. I only know it now because we’ve got posters with his name on. It’s like that chap in the Magnificent Seven.’

‘The one no one can remember?’

‘That’s right. Can you remember his name?’

‘Brad Dexter,’ said Jenkins. ‘He was a chum of Frank Sinatra’s. Saved him from drowning and got a medal for it. Did you say we had forty seven minutes?’

‘Forty four now.’

‘What am I doing? If you’ve got no sound and you’re hoping that I’ll play the piano then I’ll have to disappoint you. I can’t play the piano.’

‘No, no, we need you because we’re going to dub the voices. Isn’t that what they call it? Dubbing?’

Jenkins, puzzled, looked at his wife. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘We’ve got hold of two copies of the script,’ explained Mrs Caldicot. ‘And we have a loudspeaker system in the theatre, it’s there really for making public announcements, but it’s quite good and so we can use that.’

Jenkins, still puzzled, looked at his wife.

'Mrs Roberts is playing the Ingrid Bergman part, Mr Canterbury does Sydney Greenstreet ever so well and Mr Twist does a marvellous Peter Lorre.'

'You mean, you've got people reading out the script while the film is shown on the screen?'

'Yes. We've been doing it for several days now. It's gone down ever so well.'

'Who is Mr Canterbury?'

'Oh, of course, you haven't met him, have you? Do you remember that Mr Livingstone and I went to see a solicitor when he heard that he'd inherited a pier?'

'Yes I do.'

'Well, the solicitor was a really nice fellow called Mr Canterbury. He helped us a good deal and then we had a little problem the other day and he came down to help us sort it out.'

'You didn't say anything about having problems when we talked on the phone! Once you'd got rid of the bailiffs you said everything went smoothly.'

'No, well, I didn't want to bother you. Anyway, Mr Canterbury sorted things out and now we all own a bit of the pier. You're an owner too.'

'I own a bit of the pier?' said Jenkins, startled. 'I own a bit of this pier?'

'Yes. Mr Livingstone signed some papers and now we're all joint owners. It made tremendous sense. It was all very clever, really. Mr Canterbury has some papers for you to sign when you've both got a minute. He's a really lovely man. He's marvellous in the Sydney Greenstreet part. And he's engaged to Miss Pettifer.'

'Miss Pettifer?'

'She used to be the Fat Lady but now she's a waitress in the café, she helps Dorothy.'

'Dorothy?'

'Dorothy Pickering. She's Mr Pickering's daughter. She's going out with Errol who helps Mr Williams develop his photographs.'

'I don't suppose that was Mr Canterbury whom I saw driving the little red and yellow train?' said Jenkins, who was beginning to wonder how long he'd been away. 'He had on a train driver's cap and a stiff collar. He looked like a lawyer out of a novel by Dickens.'

'Yes, he does, doesn't he?' said Mrs Caldicot. 'That would be Mr Canterbury. He loves driving the train. Mr Pickering used to drive it but he seems quite happy to spend his days showing people how to fish off the side of the pier. No one ever catches anything but they all seem to have a good time. Mr Pickering drives the train during cinema performances and while Mr Canterbury has his breakfast, his elevenses, his lunch, his afternoon tea and his dinner.'

'You said you needed me to do something to help with the film in forty seven minutes time.'

Mrs Caldicot looked at her watch. 'Thirty nine minutes now.'

'What am I doing in thirty nine minutes time?'

'We need you to be Humphrey Bogart. To play Rick – the bar owner. You don't have to do any acting. You just read out Rick's lines when he's supposed to be speaking. Mr Williams was going to play the Bogart part but he's got a very strong Welsh accent and he doesn't think it's quite suitable for the part. We're going to show 'How Green is My Valley?' next week and he's playing several parts in that. You must hear Mr Roxdale do the Claude Rains part. He's marvellous though he's a little deaf and when it's his turn to speak we have to nudge him a little bit to get him going.'

'And what about the piano playing? How do you manage that?'

'Well, we've got a piano and Mr Livingstone plays it. He's very good.'

'And the singing of the Marseillaise?'

'We all sing that together. The audience love it. They laughed ever such a lot last night and everyone joined in singing it with us. People who came out of the theatre had such a good time that they were crying. And we're getting massive numbers of people booking seats. Mrs Roberts says she thinks that we shouldn't bother with fixing the sound when we get the new carburettor or battery or whatever it is but that we should carry on reading all the lines ourselves.'

Jenkins looked at his wife. She never failed to amaze him. He really did love her so very much. He decided that he really didn't ever want to go away from her again.

'We're going to show 'Gone with the Wind' in a couple of weeks' time. I know it's in colour and we usually only do black and white but I think it will be very popular. We want you to read Rhett Butler's part. Mrs Roberts says she thinks you'll make a marvellous Cary Grant.'

'Clark Gable.'

'Clark Gable?'

‘It was Clark Gable in ‘Gone with the Wind’, not Cary Grant.’

‘Well, she says you’ll make a marvellous Clark Gable. And I think so too. Although, you’ll definitely sound much sexier than he did.’ Mrs Caldicot looked at her watch. ‘We’re on in twenty nine minutes. And then after the performance you can have one of Dorothy’s fish suppers. Mr Canterbury says she makes the best chips he’s ever tasted.’

‘He looks as if he should know!’

‘Oh yes. He’s got a marvellous appetite. I think that’s why Miss Pettifer fell for him. She used to be the Fat Lady on the pier. Did I mention that?’

‘I think so but I’m not entirely sure.’

‘And Mr Roxdale and Mr Hewitt are planning to build a rockery on Stone Rock.’

‘Isn’t that the lump of rock on which the theatre is built?’

‘That’s it.’

‘But it’s enormous! How big a rockery are they planning to build?’

‘I have a suspicion it will probably end up in the Guinness Book of Records,’ said Mrs Caldicot. ‘Oh, and we have a lot of Turkish Delight. Tons of it!’

‘Tons?’

‘No, not really tons. But there were 868 one pound boxes in a cupboard at the back of the shop. The man who used to run the pier seemed to like ordering stuff. I think perhaps he was getting a kick back from the wholesaler.’

Jenkins thought for a moment. ‘That’s nearly half a ton. That’s a lot of Turkish Delight.’

‘I know,’ smiled Mrs Caldicot.

‘I saw some in the airport shop,’ said Jenkins. ‘I very nearly bought you a boxful!’

‘That would be a case of ‘Alcinoo pom dare; crocum in Cilician ferre; noctuas Athenas ferre’!’ said Mrs Caldicot.

Jenkins stared at her.

‘It’s Latin!’ said Mrs Caldicot.

‘I know it is,’ said Jenkins. ‘But what the devil does it mean?’

‘To give apples to Alcinous, to take saffron to Cicilianus and to carry owls to Athens!’

‘To carry coals to Newcastle?’

‘That’s right. Mr Canterbury uses a lot of Latin phrases. He taught me that one.’

‘Mr Canterbury being the driver of the little red and yellow train?’

‘That’s him!’

Jenkins swallowed hard. It was clear that a good deal had happened while he’d been away. ‘Did the pier shop just have vast quantities of Turkish Delight? No seaside rock?’

‘Oh yes, absolutely tons of pink seaside rock too – all peppermint flavoured. But the lettering inside was all misprinted. People don’t seem to mind a bit. In fact, Mrs Peterborough says that they sell a lot of it and that when we have some more made we should make sure that it’s misprinted again. We used to have a lot of coconut mushrooms. But Mrs Peterborough and Miss Nightingale used them as ammunition.’

Jenkins put his arm around his wife and pulled her close to him. ‘I missed you,’ he said. ‘Life with you is never dull, is it?’

Mrs Caldicot hugged him back. ‘It’s really none of it my fault,’ she said. ‘Things just sort of happen.’

‘If we ever have a quiet moment,’ said Jenkins. ‘Will you tell me everything that happened when I was away?’

‘Oh, it was all really very boring,’ said Mrs Caldicot dismissively. ‘There’s nothing much else to tell you. Let’s get you into the cinema so that you can take a look at the script for ‘Casablanca’.’

‘Here’s looking at you, kid,’ said Mr Jenkins, doing his best Humphrey Bogart impression.

This is the fourth of Vernon Coleman's books about Mrs Caldicot. The other three are *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War*, *Mrs Caldicot's Knickerbocker Glory* and *Mrs Caldicot's Oyster Parade*. There is a full list of Vernon Coleman's other books on his Amazon author page and on www.vernoncoleman.com

Note from Vernon Coleman:
If you have enjoyed this book, I would be enormously grateful if you give the book a good rating on Amazon. A good review (however short) really does make a huge difference to my life and my books.

Appendix

A Very Short History of the British Pleasure Pier

Before I started to write *Mrs Caldicot's Turkish Delight*, I did a great deal of research and explored the history of Britain's seaside pleasure piers. I found it a fascinating story.

Piers, of course, have been with us for a long time – probably almost as long as there have been ships and boats – but back in the late 1700s, piers were nothing more than simple jetties, built so that large boats which needed deep water moorings could land people and goods without having to unload their cargo into smaller craft. The jetties had to be long so that they were useful whether the tide was in or out. Two hundred odd years ago, before railways and the lorry had been invented, manufacturers still preferred to send their heavier goods by sea rather than over land. Roads were so bad, rutted and ruled by highwaymen, that business folk didn't have much choice.

And for travellers, whether on business, making a Grand Tour or simply going on holiday, a journey by sea was the safest, fastest and most comfortable way to reach the resort of their choice.

If there was no jetty available then travellers would have to climb down into a smaller boat and either wade through the surf or head to shore while hanging onto the back of a porter. Once on the sand they would have a walk of anything up to half a mile across wet sand. Numerous porters and servants would be needed to carry the luggage since no wheeled conveyance could be pushed or pulled across the sands. It was a slow and tedious way to arrive; and there wasn't much dignity in it.

Meanwhile, despite these drawbacks, seaside towns had become popular because breathing the sea air and taking a refreshing dip in the sea were considered healthy activities – especially for those who lived in towns and cities and spent their lives breathing in foul air.

So, for example, in 1754, the town of Brighton on the English south coast became extremely fashionable after a certain Dr Russell pronounced seawater to be a cure for all imaginable ills. You could bathe in it, splash about in it or drink the stuff. Naturally, Dr Russell recommended that the sea should be taken under the direction of a knowledgeable physician. And, unsurprisingly, his preferred choice of knowledgeable physician was himself.

The result of Dr Russell's widely publicised recommendation was that the sick raced down to Brighton to be cured while the healthy rushed there even more speedily so that they could stay healthy.

Huge, complicated bathing machines were built and rented out to all and sundry so that men and women could take a dip in the sea without exposing themselves to the eyes of curious onlookers. Even so, for the sake of common decency, and to avoid the danger of arousing the enthusiasms of onlookers beyond self-control, bathing costumes were voluminous, covered all and left absolutely everything to the imagination.

And so, gradually, the idea of travelling to an English seaside resort for a holiday became increasingly fashionable.

And that enthusiasm accelerated in the latter part of the 18th century when the Napoleonic Wars made foreign travel distinctly unhealthy and quite inadvisable. Wars have always had a tendency to interfere with continental travel and the once popular Grand Tours of Europe quickly became quite impractical. From the year of 1793, it was actually illegal to cross to France. As a result, even those continental travellers who had previously travelled across the English Channel with retinues of servants and scores of trunks, and who had returned a year or two later laden with artwork, antiquities and carpets (some bought and some liberated from natives who didn't realise the value of what they had) had to give up their travels. Instead of touring France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland and Greece they took their holidays at British seaside resorts such as Brighton, Blackpool and Penmouth.

So business in the seaside towns was booming.

There was, however, one big problem.

When they arrived at their destination, and their boat docked, these wealthy travellers had to walk or be pushed or carried along the jetty to the shore. The jetties were an improvement on the alternative but they were bare, dull, dirty and boring. And the shoreward ends of the jetties were invariably in uninspiring parts of the resorts. After all, the jetty had almost certainly been built to carry raw materials or manufactured goods, rather than ladies in fashionable dresses and gentlemen wearing top hats and carrying ebony canes.

The time was ripe for the first pleasure piers to be built.

The first pleasure pier was built at Ryde on the Isle of Wight at the start of the 19th century. The foundation stone was laid at the end of June in 1813 and when the pier was opened, just over a year later, it was a little under a third of a mile long. It was built entirely of timber; the piles were made of wood and the promenade was built with wooden planks.

Within a couple of decades piers were springing up all around the coast and every town which wanted to cater for holidaymakers simply had to have at least one.

The new piers enabled visiting ships to drop off both goods and passengers and the longer the pier, and the further out into the sea it stretched, the bigger the ship that could visit the town.

Moreover, local boat owners quickly realised that they could use their nearest pier as a point from which to take holidaymakers on boat trips to nearby attractions, or for a simple 'trip around the bay'. Fishermen started offering fishing trips so that travellers could catch their own mackerel. And businessmen vied to build new hotels as near as possible to the pier for the convenience of holidaymakers coming to the town by sea.

Railway lines were laid along the piers so that passengers and goods could, for an appropriate fee, be transported from the head of the pier to the landward end. The railway on the pier also made it possible for holidaymakers to take a trip to the pier head during their stay in the town. More energetic holidaymakers could simply walk along the pier – which became a sort of promenade.

And gradually, the piers' owners realised that they could put entertainments on the immensely long structures which they'd built over the sea – bringing in more revenue. A range of other entertainments were quickly added. Many newly built piers had extensions built at the seaward end so that theatres could be built. Older piers were extended so that new buildings could be added and additional jetties, at various heights, were built on to accommodate the requirements of vessels large and small. Booths were erected to provide accommodation for fortune tellers, weighing machines, silhouette cutters and a whole range of other entertainments.

By the second half of the 19th century, piers were opening at the rate of one a year. Some of the new structures were immensely long. The pier at Southend, which was built in 1890, was one and a third miles long. On this part of the Essex coast the tide goes out a long way and steamers bringing visitors needed to be able to land their passengers at any time of the day and any state of the tide. By 1925, when paddle steamers were operating shuttle services between Southend and Tower Bridge in the heart of London, the pier was bringing 1.5 million people a year to the resort.

The stars were aligned for the success of all these new piers.

The new-fangled notion of giving workers annual holidays and the introduction of official bank holidays at various times of the year made seaside resorts even more popular with people looking for somewhere to spend their few days of freedom. And just when it didn't look as if things could possibly get any better for English seaside towns, along came the new railway network.

Within a very short space of time, it became possible for people to travel around the country without having to bounce around on top of a rickety stage coach. Leading citizens in every seaside resort in the country wanted their own railway station and, if necessary, demanded that a branch line be built. As far as the seaside resorts were concerned, the icing on the cake was an Act of Parliament, passed in 1844, which forced the railway companies to provide cheap travel for everyone. If you were a successful hotelier in a seaside town and your resort didn't have a pier, you would either build a pier yourself or you would do your best to make sure that someone else did. During the later years of the reign of Queen Victoria, pier building turned into a frenzy.

By the end of the 19th century, the popular resort of Blackpool in Lancashire had three full length piers. The North Pier provided classical music concerts and catered for the gentry while the Central and South pleasure piers were built to provide more down-to-earth attractions for workers coming from the Lancashire cotton mills. End of the pier shows provided employment for comedians, singers and dancers and the same entertainers who worked in pantomime during the winter season moved en masse to the end of the pier theatres for the summer shows. More than anything else, it was the existence of those three piers which helped to make Blackpool the most popular seaside resort in the United Kingdom. The philosophy was simple: if one pier was good and two were great then three piers must be marvellous.

Of course, what goes up must, generally speaking, come down and the rise and rise of the British seaside pleasure pier, having continued on its upward trajectory for well over a century, was slow, steady and painful.

The low point for piers came during World War II when some piers were deliberately breached to prevent the Germans using them as landing points. And while essential repair work had to be abandoned, the sea and wind continued to damage the piers which remained. In the years following the Second World War, a good many piers, weakened by the lack of maintenance, were lost to storms and fires. The availability of cheap flights to Spanish, French and Italian resorts with guaranteed all year round sunshine meant that seaside resorts, and their piers, hit hard times.

And that pretty well brings up to date – and to the day when Mr David Livingstone inherited Penmouth Pier from his Uncle Bertram Livingstone.

Note from Vernon Coleman:
If you have enjoyed this book, I would be enormously grateful if you give the book a good rating on Amazon. A good review (however short) really does make a huge difference. God willing, Mrs Caldicot will be back.

This is the fourth novel about Mrs Caldicot. The first three are *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War*, *Mrs Caldicot's Knickerbocker Glory* and *Mrs Caldicot's Oyster Parade*. For a full list of the books by Vernon Coleman which are currently available please see his author page on Amazon or visit www.vernoncoleman.com.

One Thing After Another

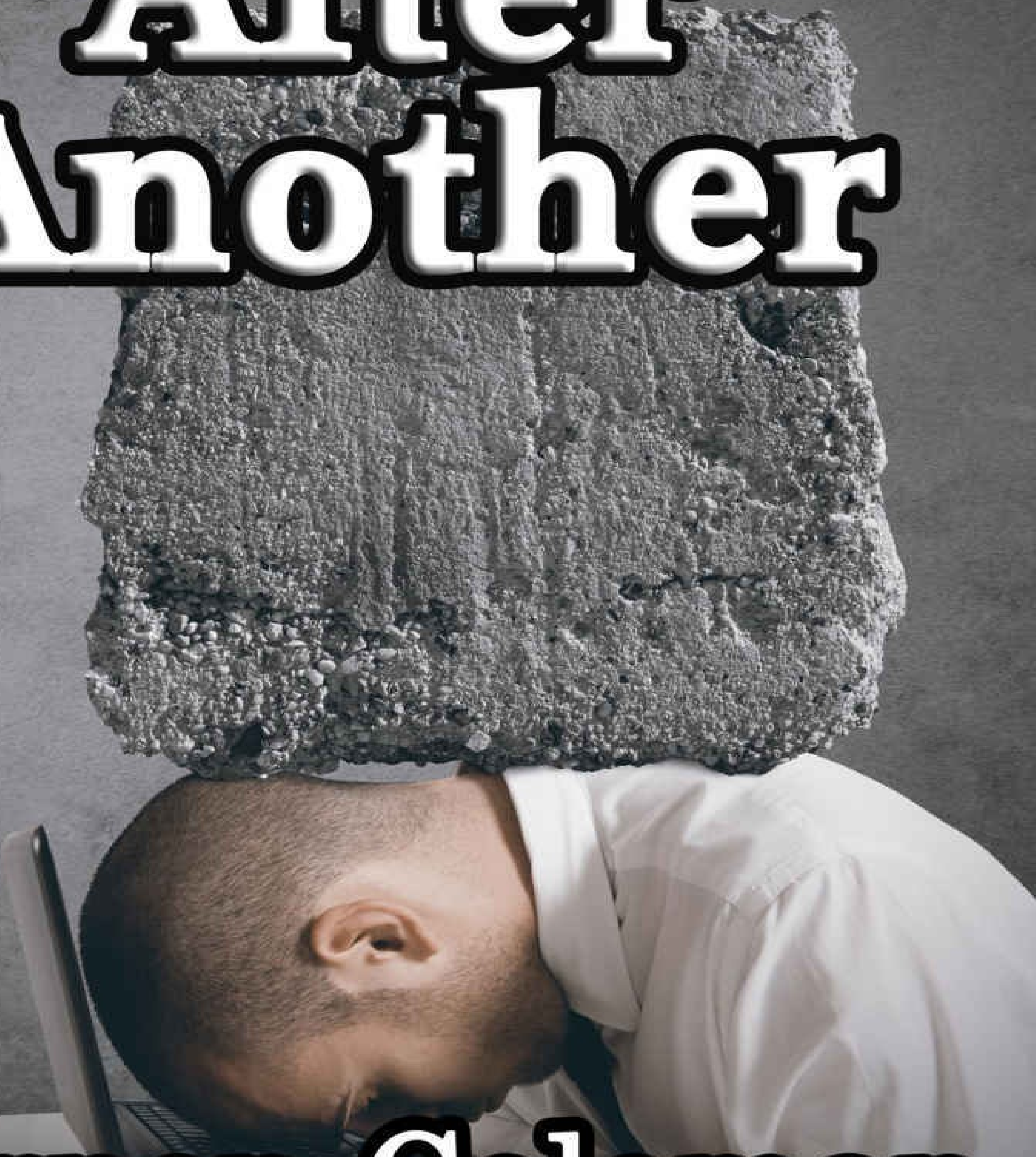

Vernon Coleman

One Thing After Another

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Dr Vernon Coleman is a qualified doctor who has been a professional author for 40 years. He has written over 100 books which have sold more than two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK alone. His books have been translated into 25 languages and sold around the world. Many of his books are available as Kindle books on Amazon. For more details about available books please see his author page on Amazon. For free articles please visit www.vernoncoleman.com

Dedication

To my darling Donna Antoinette; my true love, my girl and my best friend.

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Appendix: From Door to Door

Introduction

Most of these articles (taken from a collection of over 5,000 pieces) refer to medical campaigns I helped to run during the 50 years in which I was a campaigning journalist with columns in a series of national newspapers. Sadly, too many of the injustices and absurdities which inspired these articles remain unchanged. Indeed, it is not difficult to argue that most things really have got worse and not better. We all have a tendency to look at the past through rose coloured spectacles (and to be accused of doing so) but when we are truly objective it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that things really were better then. We live in a world of deteriorating standards and much of what is wrong with medicine and society has been wrong (and getting worse) for decades. Is there anyone to blame? I'm afraid so. Doctors have forgotten their history and their responsibilities, and have allowed politicians and bureaucrats to emasculate them. In doing so, they have left the future up for grabs. The profession's once loved sense of independence has been sold (for a very good price) to a consortium of drug companies, administrators and political opportunists.

How I Helped a Man to Die

I can clearly recall the first time I practised euthanasia. I remember it without shame or guilt. I felt then that there was no alternative. I feel the same now.

The patient was in his 70s. He had cancer and was in constant pain.

He was marooned, without hope, between life and death. For weeks I watched him dying. He was brave and courageous.

He had come to terms with death. He had conquered it because he was not afraid of it. And now the end was very close.

He had been trying to die for 48 hours. Two long, slow days.

His heart had faltered twice, but on each occasion the hospital's emergency team had been called into action. Reluctantly, wearily, the old man had been dragged back into the land of the living.

He couldn't talk, he couldn't move. But the anguish, the pain and the desperation could clearly be seen in his eyes. He lay in his hospital bed surrounded by machinery. He had tubes sticking into every available orifice.

He had pain – but no future, no peace and no dignity. We all knew he was dying, but the system would not let him die.

Every time he tried to escape from us we would blast electricity into his heart, pump his frail body full of stimulants and torture him with our armoury of high-tech equipment.

In the end I couldn't bear to see him suffer any more.

To ease his pain I gave him an injection of morphine. Already weak and exhausted, he drifted slowly and peacefully into a permanent sleep.

Just before his heart stuttered to a final halt, I leaned across the bed and switched off the cardiac monitor. This time there was no emergency team, no last minute resuscitation.

I wept for him and I wept for me.

It was an awesome and dreadful responsibility. It was my first experience of euthanasia.

Had I helped him to die, or had I merely ceased to prolong his life?

I remember another patient, a young woman, dying of breast cancer. For months she had fought her disease with courage, determination and dignity. But slowly she had begun to lose the battle. I sat with her for hours until she died. I held her and cried with her. My tears were inspired by sadness and frustration. Hers were inspired by pain. She had come to terms with death. She was not afraid of dying – only of dying in pain.

As she reached the final stages of her illness she begged me not to let her suffer any longer. When the waves of burning pain began to submerge her spirit, I gave a dose of a painkilling narcotic. But it did not help. Tormented, she cried out. I increased the dose until it smothered the pain. She did not cry again.

Some would argue that I should have withheld the final dose, since I knew that it would hasten her death.

But I could not have sat, inactive and self-righteous and let that woman die, suffering and in torment. I could not deny her the pain-free peace and the human dignity she deserved.

The law may say that was murder, but I can live with whatever the law may say.

My conscience is clear. Faced with the same dilemma again, I would, I hope, act in exactly the same way.

First Published in the Daily Star, 25.11.87

Before this article appeared, the Daily Star lawyers advised me that I would probably be arrested as a result of what I'd written. They told me what to do and whom to telephone. In the event, I wasn't arrested or even questioned by the police. The newspaper ran a phone vote survey of its readers and 95% of respondents voted to allow doctors to abstain from treatment when a patient is irretrievably doomed to die, to allow doctors to save their patients from their machines, to allow doctors to treat the pain of a dying patient with whatever drugs may be needed, even if those drugs result in an acceleration of the patient's death. Readers wanted a law which protects doctors who show their patients compassion and understanding. I was not then in favour of giving judges or juries the right to decide when patients should be allowed to die. I believed, and believe now that this should be a matter between a doctor and a patient. Today, some doctors and general purpose campaigners want the legal right to be able to kill people off when they are dying, decrepit, expensive or unable to complete an Iron Man Triathlon. Others worry about making killing legal and introducing legalistic guidelines. I'm one of the worriers. I can see all sorts of problems with allowing lawyers and the police into the space by the patient's bedside. I feel now, as I felt then, that euthanasia is something which has to be left to the patient and his or her physician. This is one of those areas of medicine where legislation is inappropriate.

Doctor at the Wheel

It is illegal for any doctor to exceed the speed limit when called to an emergency. Telephone your general practitioner for urgent help and, unlike an ambulance driver or policeman, he will have to obey the traffic laws. If he does not, he stands an excellent chance of finding himself in court and out of pocket. He may lose his driving licence.

This must seem absurd to many, for surely it is just as sensible for a family doctor to be entitled to hurry when attending an emergency as it is for a policeman? When a doctor receives an urgent call his delay can result in death. How many times do speeding policemen save lives?

I learnt about this legal anomaly the hard way. I was called to a patient with a suspected heart attack and drove quickly to the patient's home. As a direct result I was taken to court for three traffic offences – one of those being the use of hazard flasher lights on a moving vehicle.

I was fined a total of £45 and the case much more than that in terms of the days I had to spend with lawyers and the surgeries I had to cancel.

My experience is by no means unique. Another general practitioner was recently stopped by the police at 2 a.m. when driving to a patient with a suspected perforated peptic ulcer. The doctor had committed a motoring offence, although there had been no accident. While the police jotted down his particulars the doctor received a second emergency call, this time to a woman in premature labour. The legal processes continued regardless and the doctor ended up in the magistrates' court.

The illogically of the law was vividly brought home to me when recently I was called to a road traffic accident. Police, fire and ambulance vehicles had already reached the scene, but the occupants of the emergency vehicles could do nothing until a doctor arrived. Driving my own vehicle, however, I had no right to exceed the speed limit. The drivers of the fire engine, the ambulance and the numerous police cars which attended were entitled to break road traffic regulations (although they could, of course, be charged if they drove dangerously or caused accidents) but the doctor whose presence there was considered vital had no legal authority to drive at anything over the set speed limits.

The official police reaction is that if doctors are given the right to speed to emergencies there will be others who will claim to be exempt from the legal limits. They do not say who they have in mind, and it is difficult to see why a television repair man, say, or an encyclopaedia salesman should expect to be given any priority on the roads. The British Medical Association agrees that special allowances should be made by the police for doctors.

The police, of course, merely have to apply the law as it stands. 'If stopped, a doctor would be summoned in the normal way,' the police told me, 'but we should think he would be treated leniently by the court. We have to enforce the law for the safety of other road users.'

'You would be surprised,' they added, 'at the number of people who claim to be doctors when caught speeding.'

But I do not claim that as a doctor I have a natural right to be exceed the speed limit when hurrying to a patient with tonsillitis, and I realise that careless fast driving can cause accidents. Emergency calls in general practice are, fortunately, not common. But when they do occur, delays can be fatal.

So what should the family doctor do? What would you like him to do if you were the one awaiting his arrival? What would you do if you were the doctor? I have made up my mind.

First Published in the Telegraph Sunday Magazine, 19.11.78

Nothing has changed. Policemen are given carte blanche to exceed the speed limit and, in practice, they are hardly ever punished even when their driving results in the deaths of other motorists. Doctors, however, must stick to the speed limit and obey all the traffic regulations. Since there are many serious conditions where minutes are vital it seems certain that this policy results in many deaths.

Alone and Unwanted: the Plight of Old Folk

During the winter months many old people will die because they are cold and hungry. Thousands of old people who live alone are too poor to buy decent food or heat their own homes. They live – and die – in squalid conditions.

Thousands more spend what should be peaceful retirement years in geriatric hospitals that were built in the nineteenth century and which are now desperately out of date, equipped with the crudest of facilities and terribly understaffed.

There are geriatric hospitals in Britain where there are so few nurses available that patients have to be drugged into a permanent stupor and kept in bed all day. Many lie for hours in urine soaked sheets and develop hideous bed sores.

Those older folk who have a little money of their own live out their final years forgotten and often ignored in private nursing homes.

By and large we keep our old people in conditions that would not be tolerated by criminals. We abandon our parents and grandparents in a way that we would not dare abandon dumb animals.

Millions of elderly men and women who have worked hard all their lives, who have survived one or two World Wars and who have never asked for anything apart from a little respect and some basic home comforts, are virtually abandoned in absolutely appalling conditions.

And the problem is getting worse every day as the average age of our population gets greater and greater, and as the number of 60, 70, 80 and even 90 year olds alive in Britain increases.

The conditions in which today’s old people struggle to live are bad enough. But all the signs are that the conditions in which tomorrow’s old people will have to live will be even worse.

The main problem is undoubtedly the fact that we have been encouraged to put the care of our elderly relatives into the hands of the State. We have been led to believe that the State, in the guise of the social services and the National Health Service, will look after our old folk for us.

But the NHS has not taken that responsibility seriously.

Very little money has been spent on providing facilities for the care of the elderly. While countless millions are spent on esoteric heart transplant programmes and on the development of test tube babies, virtually nothing has been spent on providing decent health care facilities for the old.

Britain leads the world in high technology medicine. We have put more effort and money into pushing back the frontiers of medical science than just about any other comparably sized nation.

But when it comes to caring for our elderly no one does it worse than we do. Nowhere in the world are the elderly treated with such contempt by those who allocate medical resources.

All the glamour in medicine is associated with new techniques – whether or not those techniques have any real practical value. And there is far more political capital to be gained out of opening another expensive research centre than out of opening a new hospital for the elderly or a block of purpose-built flats.

Those who hold the NHS purse strings regard the elderly as an easily forgotten minor embarrassment simply because we let them forget.

If we really care for the elderly then we should insist that a much greater proportion of our NHS budget be spent on looking after them.

And if we need added incentive to do that then we should remember that most of us will be elderly ourselves one day.

Does anyone out there want to die alone, cold and hungry?

First published in the Sunday Independent, 27.10.85

The Government and the medical profession have solved the problem of Britain’s increasing elderly population by introducing the Liverpool Care Pathway. This extraordinary and misnamed policy gives hospital staff the legal right to withhold food and water from elderly patients who are occupying beds which could be used for more profitable purposes or who refuse to die and use up other medical resources. It is now commonplace in British hospitals for patients who have committed the heinous sin of living past the age of retirement to be legally killed by doctors and nurses who took (or should have taken) an oath to preserve life.

The Guilty Parents

The announcement that 40% of all children over six-years-old have seen one or more video nasties should have sent a cold chill of terror running down your spine.

The future we all face is bleak indeed because in 10 years, those children will be young adults.

If their viewing habits remain unchanged, thousands upon thousands of them will have become violent, aggressive and virtually uncontrollable.

We will have successfully bred a race of super thugs.

If you think today's streets are dangerous and today's levels of lawlessness disturbing then tomorrow that will make you yearn for the comparative peace of 1983.

Now is the time to act. It is not enough simply to expect the Government to outlaw these vile films.

No longer can parents avoid the responsibility invested in them as parents. They must be the ever watchful eyes over their young charges. They must ensure they are not using TV – and video nasties – as a sort of electronic babysitter.

For far too long adults have been apathetic about the influence of television on young minds. They should now take note.

To explain why, let me take you back 20 years to the days when psychologists first started taking the problem of TV violence seriously.

In 1964, for example, it was reported that by the time the average American child had celebrated his 14th birthday he would have witnessed on TV the deaths of 13,000 people.

By 1971, the figure had risen to 18,000 and observers were getting very worried.

Indeed, the American Government was so concerned that it set up a commission to study the problem.

After careful and expensive deliberation it concluded that: 'Violence on TV encourages violent forms of behaviour and fosters moral and social values about violence in family life which are unacceptable in a civilised society.'

But while most of the studies were done in America, the problem was just as widespread in Britain.

Now we have the unimaginable horrors of video nasties like 'I spit on your grave', 'Driller killer' 'Cannibal Holocaust' and 'SS Experiment Camp'.

Young children, barely old enough to read and write – babies who still perch on their mothers' knees for bedtime stories – are watching scenes of violent 'gang bangs', mutilation, torture of naked women and disembowelment.

Already the numbing process has taken grip. Note the comments of three nine-year-olds interviewed about these horrors…

Katie: 'I like scaring myself and I like looking at blood.'

Warren: 'I like all the blood coming out.'

Stevie: 'I like the bit in Driller Killer where he puts a man up on sticks and then he gets the drill and puts it through his stomach and he screams for ages. Then he dies.'

I find it impossible not to conclude that there will be more and more violence on our streets.

The friendly TV screen sitting quietly in the living room will become little more than a subliminal training school for murderers and rapists, a day and night school for the hoodlums of tomorrow.

In Scotland, it was recently ruled that men selling glue sniffing kits were responsible for any evil consequences. So it might be argued that video film makers – or even broadcasting authorities – producing or showing material which causes real-life violence could be held equally responsible.

Either way, it is the parents who must act. Now.

First published in the Daily Express, 25.11.83

I hate to say 'I told you so'. But I told you so. The 9 p.m. watershed rules are laughably pointless. Today there is probably more violence in an episode of the BBC's soap opera Eastenders than there was in a week's television in the 1980s. Within months of the programme beginning in 1985 I wrote a syndicated column condemning the violence in the programme and predicting that the unprecedented level of violence in a soap opera would inevitably produce significant behavioural changes. And Eastenders is, of course, broadcast long before the watershed. Finally, of course, we have to remember that the internet has changed all the rules completely. Violent pornography is now available 24 hours a day to any child with a mobile telephone or a laptop computer.

Did Your Standard of Living go up 3.5 per cent?

Listening to a radio programme, I heard the interviewer ask his guest, a leading politician, what he thought about the campaign to stop large, so-called ‘juggernaut’ lorries coming into the country and hurtling through our narrow lanes. The politician pronounced himself totally opposed to the campaign. ‘We need these lorries and the goods they bring,’ he said, ‘if we are to improve our standard of living.’

It seemed a strange thing for someone in public office to say. By the same argument one could justify killing off every other person in the country. There would be more food and more space left for the rest of us.

Will my standard of living really go up if my house is shaken to pieces? Will my standard of living rise if I spend my days breathing diesel fumes and dodging thirty ton body-crushers?

I wonder what the politicians mean when they talk about a standard of living and when they claim that my standard of living is rising by 3.5% or 4.2% or whatever.

Do they mean that this year I have eaten 3.5% more eggs and 3.5% more cheese than last year? Do they mean that I have consumed 3.5% more bread and drunk 3.5% more beer? Or do they perhaps mean that I have been to the cinema that much more often, bought 3.5% of a new suit or turned the television on for a little longer?

Everyone else seems to know what they mean when they say that my standard of living has gone up, stayed the same or gone down. They even get quite excited if someone tells them that our standard of living has gone up by 0.6% more than the standard of living rise in Formosa or Tibet.

What I want to know is do they mean that my standard of living goes up if I pay more tax. Or do they mean that it has gone up if I eat more apples, buy more milk and drink more money?

I’ve been thinking about it a bit since I heard that politician telling me that the juggernauts are improving my standard of living, and I’ve come to the conclusion that his idea of my standard of living and my idea of my standard of living are not the same thing at all.

According to my dictionary a ‘standard’ is a degree of excellence. And that is a good enough definition for me. My standard of living rises if I am happy, content and healthy. It falls if I am unhappy, depressed and ill.

I think that the politicians would do well to think about this. They would perhaps agree with me that one cannot measure a standard of living on purely material grounds. A depressed millionaire can have a very low standard of living.

My standard of living is high on a crisp autumn morning when the birds are singing and the air is fresh and invigorating. It goes down when a friend is ill, the local council decides to chop down a particularly beautiful tree or a pet dies.

It does go up when a favourite author brings out a new book or when England win a cricket series, but goes down when there is sad news on the television. When someone decides to build a thirty storey office block in the middle of an ancient city my standard of living drops, even though that office block may provide work for hundreds and the office space for thousands. When there are no butterflies because the farmer has filled the air and the earth with chemicals, my standard of living drops, though bread may be cheaper because he finds it easier to grow the corn.

The telephone, the motor car and the people who found out all about atomic energy sent my standard of living plummeting, though politicians will probably insist that all these things have helped it to rise by a steady 3.5% for years.

My next door neighbour, who is an avid football fan, may be miserable if his team is relegated. His standard of living may go down. The lady across the road may have a modest win on the football pools and become so worried about the begging letters and financial problems the win gives her that her standard of living will drop.

No one can say what makes us all happier. No politician can define a standard of living which describes what we all want and how we can all benefit.

It is dangerous to attempt to run the country so that by some totally arbitrary rules our national standard of living rises by some steady amount each year.

Our standard of living is not measured solely by the amount of money we have to spend, or the amount of goods we buy. It is affected by the state of the environment, the health and happiness of the populace and a million and one other variables.

I do not believe that our standard of living will have risen if, though we all be millionaires, there are nothing but ugly buildings to be seen and we all have to wear gas masks and ear plugs.

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Drugs: The Argument for Decriminalisation

People have been using drugs to help them escape from the painful aspects of their lives for centuries. Substances such as opium, cannabis, coca leaves and alcohol have been used more widely and more consistently than any purely medicinal drugs.

Theoretically, we should have less need for drugs of this kind than our ancestors. Most of us have somewhere to sleep at night and enough food to keep us alive. We ought to have relatively few anxieties. But, for a variety of reasons, drug abuse today is more widespread than at any previous time in our history. Millions of people; some rich, some poor, some young, some old are hooked on drugs.

The drugs upon which they are dependant fall into two neat categories. On the one hand there are the drugs such as alcohol, tobacco and prescription tranquillisers that are usually obtained legally. On the other hand there are the drugs such as cannabis, cocaine and heroin which are usually obtained illegally.

Some observers claim that the only way to control the distribution and use of illegal drugs is to use the full power of the law. They point out that at the moment illegal drug use is out of control. The world trade in illegal drugs is estimated at $500 billion a year. Cocaine dealers in America are said to have made tax free profits of more than $95 billion last. Cocaine is now widely recognised as the most profitable, traded item in the world.

Those who sell it; corrupt policemen, murder their competitors and buy up whole governments. Those who favour prohibition claim that the only way to conquer the problem is to hire more policemen and spend more money on catching suppliers and users.

I disagree. I believe – and have consistently argued for many years now – that the best way to deal with the world's illegal drug problem is to make it part of the world's legal drug problem.

On the surface, it may seem strange to argue that we can combat the use and abuse of drugs such as cocaine and heroin by making them legal. But the evidence clearly shows that this really is the only answer.

The battle against illegal drug use would be much simpler if illegal drugs were more dangerous and more destructive than legally available drugs. But they are not.

In Britain cigarettes kill around 100,000 people a year while alcohol kills around 10,000 a year. In America smoking and drinking alcohol kill something approaching 500,000 people a year. In all countries, hundreds of thousands are devastated by the diseases caused by these addictions. In Britain most commentators now agree with my estimate that there are 3,000,000 tranquilliser addicts struggling to kick a habit that is ruining their lives. All these products are widely advertised. Big companies make millions out of their sale and distribution. Governments take billions in tax revenues from their sale.

In contrast, the official estimates show that less than 50 people a year die through using illegal drugs such as cocaine and heroin – indeed, many of those may well die as a result of using officially prescribed heroin. Experts around the world seem to agree that no one has yet ever died directly as a result of taking cannabis – a drug that is said to be regularly used by 20 million Americans and several million Britons.

Drug addiction experts agree that heroin, widely regarded as the most addictive of all illegal drugs, is nowhere near as addictive as some of the benzodiazepine tranquillisers and sleeping tablets which are prescribed by the ton by doctors.

The illogicality of our present laws is, perhaps, best illustrated by the fact that cannabis (marijuana) is classified in the same category as cocaine and heroin. The bizarre story of the way that cannabis acquired its false reputation is worth telling.

In the 19th century cannabis was being used in Britain to help opium eaters kick their habit.

The chances are that cannabis would have remained a fairly obscure drug had not a Dr Warnock, then Superintendent of the Cairo Asylum in Egypt, written a report suggesting that it might be the cause of insanity.

Dr Warnock wrote his report in 1895 and it seems likely that he came to his conclusion because many of the inmates in his asylum were enthusiastic cannabis users. What Dr Warnock seems to have overlooked is that cannabis was extremely popular outside the asylum too.

Dr Warnock was very much out on his own when he wrote his report. Other experts who had studied cannabis had all come to a different conclusion. The Indian Help Drugs Commission of 1893-4 was set up to examine the trade in hemp drugs (cannabis) and their effect on the social and moral condition of the people in India. The Commission had been given the job of deciding whether or not cannabis should be made illegal. Its conclusion was that the physical, mental and moral effects of cannabis were not adverse and that there was no evidence of cannabis leading to addiction. All the available evidence suggested that cannabis was no more damaging a drug than tea or coffee.

But Dr Warnock's isolated and eccentric view became important when, in 1925, Britain, together with a number of other countries signed the International Opium Convention.

The Convention was designed to introduce binding international controls on the sale of opium, and cannabis was included along with the far more dangerous opiates as a result of pressure from Egypt where it was still believed that the regular use of cannabis could lead to mental illness.

Britain and the other signatories accepted Egypt's request to include cannabis on the list of controlled drugs since it seemed, at the time, to be a fairly modest and almost irrelevant concession. The outlawing of cannabis, a harmless drug, was regarded as a small price to pay for persuading Egypt to sign the opium ban.

Ever since 1925 cannabis has remained on the 'controlled' drug list.

If cannabis, cocaine and heroin were available through legal channels there would be far few deaths, much less associated illness, considerably less crime and a good deal less misery. In addition, the cost to our society – in human as well as financial terms – would, for the following reasons, be vastly less.

None of these drugs is particularly dangerous. The intrinsic dangers associated with these substances have been widely exaggerated. Even if legalising these drugs results in more people using them the death rate will fall since many of the deaths are caused by criminals selling contaminated or poisoned drugs. In different towns, different crooks sell the same drug in different concentrations. In southern Italy, for example, the mafia sells heroin that is one fifth as strong as the heroin sold in the north of Italy. Consumers who travel from the south to the north accidentally overdose themselves.

The illegality of their habit means that drug users who inject themselves with drugs are tempted to use and reuse old syringes and needles. It is this reuse of second hand syringes and needles which has led to the spread of AIDS among drug addicts.

The very fact that a drug is illegal will often encourage those who trade in it to devise new forms of the drug from which greater profits can be made. Coca leaves are fairly harmless but scientists soon managed to turn them into cocaine. 'Freebasing' was introduced to enable cocaine users to refine their cocaine themselves. And the new and fashionable 'crack' was devised by drug dealers looking for a new, more powerful, more profitable, easily transportable product to sell.

Once drug users have made contact with the underworld, they are often easily led into crime. Many drug users turn to prostitution or theft to finance their habits because the people who sell their drugs can, and do, introduce them to pimps and fences. It is vital to remember that the people who try illegal drugs are often extremely young and vulnerable; they may be foolish to begin using drugs but their foolishness soon turns to fear. Many young drug users are encouraged to buy a little extra and sell it to a friend. Many of the drug pushers caught by the police are addicts themselves.

By making drugs illegal we lock addicts into a circle from which they cannot escape. Addicts commit a crime whenever they buy their drug. They are, therefore, often afraid to seek help from doctors, hospitals or police. They cannot go to friends or relatives for help because they are frightened of the consequences. They cannot complain to the police if they are abused or used because they realise that they will themselves be likely to end up in prison. Every year we spend millions on arresting and locking up addicts. Many of those who are arrested could have had useful, profitable careers.

The Government abandons all responsibility when it makes drugs illegal. If cannabis and heroin were legal we would be able to dissuade people from trying the more dangerous products by putting a massive tax on them. Past experience shows that heavy taxes do work well in dissuading people from trying or using drugs.

Many people are attracted to illegal drugs by the very fact that they are illegal. They enjoy the danger and what they see as the 'glamour' of drug use. Most young people find illegal behaviour attractive. If spinach or carrots were illegal young people would happily pay to obtain them. Imprisoning film and rock stars for drug use is counter-productive.

The fact that the drug they use is illegal makes tobacco smokers, alcohol drinkers and tranquilliser users feel falsely safe. This is dangerous. The truth is that when a drug addict appears in court the chances are high that the people who are 'trying' him (the judge and the jury for example) are hooked on more dangerous substances than he is.

It is all very well to argue that we should fight the use of drugs and that it is up to the

Numerous anti–drug authorities to catch those who produce and sell illegal products. But it isn't quite that easy and our record so far has been dismal.

In 1987, for example, the American Air Force spent $45 million on trying to catch planes smuggling drugs into America. They caught two smugglers. In the same year, the Navy pent $37 million and caught a mere 20 smugglers. Most Western countries now employ thousands of people to catch drug smugglers. They catch a few of the smaller fry but the people who manage these illegal enterprises do not risk capture and regard the loss of a few aeroplanes, boats and lorries as a necessary business expense.

More and more people are now becoming concerned at the way that perfectly legal, law abiding citizens are being harassed by those who are searching for drugs. In Britain the police now have the right to stop, search and detain anyone whom they suspect of possessing a controlled drug. The police also have the authority (which they are not slow to use) to burst into people's homes if they suspect that there may be drugs on the premises. Both men and women are strip searched and tested for drugs in a way that can only be described as a gross violation of individual liberty.

There is evidence now to show that in their zeal to catch drug users and smugglers, the authorities abuse their power in a frightening way. In America, for example, customs agents seized a fishing boat after allegedly finding less than 2 grams of cannabis in a crew member's jacket.

Another group of customs agents seized an $80 million research ship when they found traces of cannabis in a crew member's shaving kit. And on the Canadian border a woman had her car confiscated after officials used tweezers to dig out an almost invisible quantity of cannabis from her handbag.

These incidents do nothing to control the drug problem. They merely bring the law further and further into disrepute and result in the erection of a bigger and bigger barrier between ordinary citizens and the police.

An astonishing 80% of the cocaine used in America now comes from one group of Colombian gangsters. These individuals are unlikely to be impressed or feel threatened by such policing techniques. Short of declaring war on the countries in which these criminals live there is no realistic chance of closing them down.

In December 1917, after a considerable amount of pressure from organisations such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the American Senate passed the 18th Amendment: an addition to the American constitution designed to prohibit the production, transport or sale of alcohol. The precise rules of prohibition were defined in the Volstead Act of 1919.

Prohibition was one of the most extraordinary unsuccessful attempts at drug control ever introduced. Despite the fact that the American Government introduced thousands of prohibition agents to ensure that no one made, sold or used alcohol, criminals took advantage of public demand and ensured that alcohol could be obtained quite readily. In the mid-1920s, in New York alone, there were said to be more than 30,000 speakeasies where alcohol could be bought. Al Capone is said to have controlled over 10,000 speakeasies in Chicago.

By 1933, it was clear that prohibition wasn't working because public opinion was so united against it that the Government was never likely to achieve any sort of compliance with its laws. So the 21st Amendment was passed, the prohibition laws were repealed and the legal sale of alcohol was allowed once more.

But the damage had been done and by 1933, America had acquired a massive underground network of well-organised criminals. Prohibition had given men like Al Capone the opportunity to build up empires and make huge amounts of money. Within the 15 years that prohibition lasted, a whole generation of crooks had succeeded in creating for themselves a nationwide industry.

When the prohibition laws were repealed, criminals needed other products to sell in order to maintain their organisations and lavish lifestyles. Many started importing and selling drugs such as heroin.

After prohibition had ended in America, the amount of alcohol being produced and consumed fell by 50%. It was the very fact that drinking was illegal that had proved so attractive to millions.

Those who favour more laws, more policemen and the commitment of more money to the battle against illegal drugs seem to believe that the only way to control drug use is by force.

They are wrong.

There is plenty of evidence now to show that drug use – and abuse – can be controlled in much simpler ways.

First, we can control the use of drugs with the aid of taxes. Time and time again politicians have shown that it is possible to cut the consumption of alcohol and tobacco by increasing taxes. It is even possible to turn people from using one product to using another – simply by using different tax rates.

The effectiveness of taxation as a weapon has been recognised for 400 years since King James I, a most vociferous opponent of smoking, put tobacco taxes up by a hefty 4,000% in a short lived but successful attempt to control the spread of a habit which he found repulsive.

Legalising cocaine, heroin and cannabis – and putting massive taxes on heroin and cocaine in particular – would not only cut the consumption of these drugs. It would strengthen the hand of the authorities seeking to tackle the drug barons. It was, after all, the Revenue men who were eventually responsible for putting Al Capone behind bars.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that campaigns in the media can be extremely successful in opposing the use of harmful products. So far most TV programmes, and most newspaper and magazine articles, have concentrated on the people who sell and market illegal substances, often glamorising them in the process. My own campaign against tranquillisers has been so successful that many doctors now complain that they find it more or less impossible to give away prescriptions for drugs which were extremely popular just a few years ago. The problem of our three million tranquilliser addicts remains – but at least the problem isn't getting bigger.

To all this we must add that our current attempts to outlaw some drugs are also indefensible on simple moral grounds.

The truth is that today just about everyone is a regular user of at least one addictive and potentially dangerous drug. We spend millions on alcohol, tobacco, coffee, chocolate and other substances. What right have we, therefore, to decide that drugs like cannabis will be regarded as illegal?

We are, and always have been, remarkably two-faced when dealing with substances of addiction. In the 1830s the British refused to let China ban opium because it was in our commercial interest to maintain our sales. In 1842 we actually fought a war to protect our rights to sell opium to the Chinese. Many of our biggest companies founded their fortunes on the sale of a drug which is now illegal.

Our attitude towards drugs has caused many problems in other parts of the world. In Nepal, for example, thousands of villagers have had their cannabis crops banned and burned because it suits us that way. To the distress of those Hindi followers who use cannabis in their religious ceremonies but who regard alcohol as abhorrent we have had, however, the audacity to continue to export alcohol to India.

There are undoubtedly many people who will complain that by suggesting that drugs such as cocaine, heroin and cannabis be made legal I am supporting the use of these drugs. Nothing could be further from the truth. For the last twenty years, the whole of my professional life, I have fought the use and abuse of alcohol, tobacco and tranquillisers. If I thought that more, stronger laws were the answer, I would campaign not for cannabis to be made legal but for alcohol and tobacco to be made illegal. However, I am convinced that prohibition will not only inevitably fail but that it will continue to make a bad problem worse.

Our laws outlawing drugs such as cannabis have, I fear, merely compounded the problem by isolating addicts from the rest of society and by forcing them into the clutches of criminals. During the last half century, numerous attempts have been made to outlaw and control the use of cocaine, heroin and cannabis. Dozens of organisations have been created to help stamp out drug use. Scores of individual governments have introduced new legislation. Millions have been spent and thousands have been killed in an attempt to stop drug use.

None of these heavy handed attempts has worked. This year the relatively small group of criminals who now control illegal drugs will have a bigger turnover than the income of 150 of the world’s 170 nations. Legalising cannabis, cocaine and heroin will drive those criminals out of business and give us a chance to control our drug problem more effectively.

First published as a commissioned leaflet by the Committee for a Free Britain in 1989.
It is remarkable that very little has changed since this leaflet was distributed. I suspect that the reason nothing has changed is quite simple: there is a huge vested industry (comprised of special drug squads and drug czars) which would disappear if the laws were changed. In many ways things are now even worse than they were in 1989. Today, for example, it is considered routine for customs officials to test entirely innocent travellers and their luggage for drugs.

Make Patients Pay

The heavy-drinking, overweight man with a penchant for hang gliding will pay over the odds for his life insurance. The underwriters know that his chances of living long enough to enable them to make a profit out of an ordinary premium are slim. Similarly, the driver who is involved in a road accident and who is shown afterwards to have driven on bald tyres and to have left his seat belt dangling on its hook could find that his chances of getting massive damages are low.

Those are just two of the ways in which people who ignore expert advice are penalised. Why should they not be? They have been given the opportunity to accept the same advice that everyone else has been given and they have rejected it. It is, in some ways, still a free society.

There are other ways in which the foolish may be penalised for ignoring good advice. I know of firms which prefer not to employ smokers on the very sound grounds that a smoker is more likely to need time off work during the winter months than a non-smoker. His mild chest infections are more likely to turn nasty.

This seems to me to be an excellent philosophy. I can see nothing wrong in making people pay for their own contrariness. Indeed, I should like to see the theory taken further.

Since it has been established beyond reasonable doubt that a large number of the people needing medical help in this country have knowingly damaged their own health, why should the rest of us be expected to pay for their medical care?

Why should the man who regularly smokes 30 cigarettes a day expect the nation to pay for treatment for his bronchitis, his lung cancer, his heart disease and his gastritis?

Why should the woman who refuses to diet expect others to help pay when her obesity causes medical problems? Why should the man who persists in drinking too much get free treatment when his liver finally fails to cope?

I do not see why any of these people should obtain free treatment for their self-inflicted diseases. The Health Service is so desperately short of funds, equipment and staff that every year thousands of people who need treatment and who could be saved are left to die. Many thousands more die before they can be properly investigated. Hospital departments and hospital beds are frequently filled with patients who have only themselves to blame for their ill health. Why should those patients benefit from the Health Service while others, less selfish and more sensible, are left untreated?

Why should the drunken driver have his injuries treated free of charge? Why should the climber who sets off in bad weather expect the nation to pay the cost of his rescue and subsequent treatment?

These people have asked for their own ill health. They should pay for the treatment they need.

I should like to see doctors given the right to select the patients not entitled to free treatment. General practitioners could simply use special prescription pads. Hospital doctors could prepare a bill as for a private patient. There would, I suppose, have to be an appeals procedure, but that at least is something that administrators would have no difficulty in arranging.

We should all benefit in several ways. First, there would be a simple financial advantage. The Health Service would receive money from a large number of patients. And, second, there would undoubtedly be a reduction in the demand for medical services. If they knew that they would have to pay for any medical treatment for a condition caused or exacerbated by their own stupidity, lots of people would suddenly find that they could give up smoking, give up drinking, go on a diet, afford new tyres or get back from the pub without using the car.

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When this was written it was widely regarded as close to sacrilegious. No one would accept, or even consider, the idea that patients who had wilfully disregarded common sense and made themselves ill might be expected to contribute to the cost of making them well again. The NHS was regarded as a holy cow; beyond criticism of any kind. Today, at last, things are changing. In February 2015, the Government actually proposed making the obese pay for medical treatment. And it had, by then, become generally accepted that the NHS is so bureaucratic, so wasteful and so bloated that it is actually killing people wholesale. As I pointed out in several recent books on health care, it would cost the nation less to provide every man, woman, child and illegal immigrant with private medical cover than it costs to run the NHS. But will anything actually happen? I very much doubt it. No politician will dare take a knife to the NHS and the quality of medical care provided in Britain will continue to decline.

Pharmaceutical Appetites

When he is not on duty at the weekend and is working an ordinary five day week (with one or two nights on call) your family doctor probably sees about 200 patients between Monday morning and Friday evening. In addition, he will probably talk to another 50 or so on the telephone and sign prescriptions for half a hundred more.

That, put very simply, is why the service you get from your family doctor, who really does have your life in his hands, is too often dreadful. That is why, in some places, you either have to wait three days to get an appointment or you have to sit in a stuffy waiting room for two hours reading tattered copies of Reader's Digest. That is why the poor fellow hardly looks up from his prescription pad when you walk in, and why he rarely has time to listen to your troubles or your chest.

The tragedy is that most of us, doctors and patients, have accepted modern general practice with all its faults. We have grown so accustomed to the low standard of service that when we complain we complain about the minor problems rather than the fundaments. We complain about the warts and happily ignore the fact that the whole body of general medical practice is riddled with a destructive, cancerous growth.

Patients have come to accept that their doctors cannot spend more than five minutes with them at a time. Doctors accept that for each clinical decision they take they receive less than a £1 fee. Some general practitioners today have to provide a service that quacks would hesitate to offer.

The major problem with the service is that because there are so many patients asking for advice, many doctors often have to guess rather than reach any scientific conclusion about their patients. In my opinion, it takes approximately half an hour to do a reasonable examination and take a reasonable history from a patient: but if I spent half an hour on all the patients who visit me in surgery I should have to start at 4 a.m. and finish at midnight each day. And there would be no time for interruptions, for telephone calls, prescription signing, letter writing, eating or doing home visits.

So the general practitioner huddles over his prescription pad, envies his contemporaries in private practice, who can see a mere eight or ten patients a day and still make a fair living, and relies on his hunches. Inevitably, he makes mistakes.

Fortunately, the mistakes do not matter overmuch. The simple reason is that most of the patients who visit the surgery have little wrong with them anyway. They do not need to go to the doctor any more than the average housewife needs to visit an accountant to have her shopping list checked. Patients visit the surgery to collect prescriptions for colds, sick notes for work, and ointments for bunions and warts. Doctors dignify each consultation by prescribing dutifully, since they know that if they refuse, it will take longer to end the conversation. Besides, the patient will probably complain and they will have proved nothing. At the very least the patient, dissatisfied, will move to another doctor's list.

Doctors, most of whom have forgotten the dreams they had before they qualified, are used to it all now. Many have been working in the Health Service for two decades. They have grown accustomed to the type of medicine they practise. Patients rarely stop to think about the service they receive. Patients who would think carefully before taking their conveyancing to a solicitor handling 40 problems a day are unworried that their doctor has 40 problems a day on his good days.

The relationship continues to deteriorate. Mutual respect fades, and there is a consequent steady rise in the number of official complaints and legal battles.

What could we do to improve the service? Well, the obvious solution is to cut down the number of patients asking for help. That would be easier, cheaper and more practical than increasing the number of doctors. If fewer patients with minor problems attended surgery or called for help, doctors would have more time to examine patients needing proper care.

The breakdown of the family unit and the dispersal of families have meant more and more young women relying on their family doctor for simple advice they would have obtained a generation ago from their own mothers. We need to encourage patients to have more confidence in their own healing abilities. To do that the Health Service has to take on the role of tutor. Put simply, we need better and more effective health education programmes. For less than the cost of a research laboratory or administrative building we could equip every family in the country with a set of medical books describing what to do for rashes, colds, coughs and gurglings.

If patients prove reluctant to accept responsibility for looking after their own pimples and minor sprains, then there would seem to be little alternative but to try to deter them from visiting the doctor unnecessarily by the simple but traditionally effective expedient of charging a fee for a consultation. This will bring gasps of horror from the State-fed mouths of thousands, but will delight general practitioners. They would love to be treated with the respect accorded to the plumber and electrician. A fee of £1 for a consultation and £3 for a visit at home would prove sufficient to deter many with minor problems, but would be hardly likely to keep away the sick and genuinely needy.

Those who argue on theoretical grounds that the poor and sick should have access to an entirely free service should realise that the poor and genuinely sick would probably not object to paying their doctor. They would certainly appreciate the resultant improvement in the service.

First published in Sunday Telegraph Magazine, 1977

GPs, who now spend even more of their time on administration, have solved this problem by hiring practice nurses to do much of the work which used to be done by doctors. Is this an improvement? Well, I suppose it is if you prefer to have decisions about your health made by a nurse rather than a doctor. Meanwhile, the number of complaints and lawsuits continues to rise remorselessly. And health education? Well that largely consists of propaganda programmes designed to increase the profitability of vaccination programmes.

In Praise of Neurotics

General practitioners have a nasty habit of labelling their patients. The woman with the joint trouble will be the 'arthritic', even when she's got a sore throat or has dermatitis.

The patient with recurrent chest troubles will always be the 'bronchitic', even when she develops varicose veins and a bunion the size of a walnut. But the label that is used most frequently and that carries with it the greatest sense of unspoken disapproval is 'neurotic'.

Once your general practitioner scrawls that on your notes you're doomed. Whatever vague symptoms may trouble you, whatever complaints may take you into the surgery you will always be first and foremost a 'neurotic'. Turn up at the surgery with a broken leg and he'll probably still pat you on the head and give you a bottle full of tranquilliser tablets.

Not that general practitioners are alone in treating neurotics in this cruel and patronising way. Friends and relatives, sons and lovers, employers and workmates – they all use the word with a curl of the lip and a dismissive sniff of disdain. Once you get yourself labelled 'neurotic' no one will ever take you seriously again. Nor will they treat you with respect. The best you can hope for is a brand of patronising sympathy designed to make you feel about six inches tall.

Most neurotics respond to all this by adding extra shame and guilt to the burden they are already carrying. The neurotic is the twentieth century leper, constantly shunned and encouraged to feel unclean and even incomplete. Inevitably, the result is that the neurotic must suffer twice. She (or he, of course) must suffer the pains inherent in her neurosis but on top of those she must also suffer the pains produced by the sense of self-doubt and self-criticism her very neuroticism has inspired. The result is that the neurotic must stagger from one crisis to another, perpetually hiding in the shadows of despair.

The truth, however, is that none of this is fair or reasonable. Far from being a label fit to inspire contempt, the word 'neurotic' should inspire love, affection, respect and admiration. For although our society has developed a now almost automatic distrust of neurotics there is little doubt in my mind that neurotics are the very people who make up the heart and soul of our community.

That may sound contentious but we should remember that neurotics are simply individuals who tend to respond a little too readily to their emotions and their feelings. Anxious, shy, sensitive, guilt-ridden, obsessional and imaginative neurotics may be. But as a result of these emotional weaknesses neurotics are also thoughtful, kind, hard-working, generous, attentive and courteous.

Because they are driven by guilt, for example, neurotics are often careful, moral and fair. Those who bear the most intolerable burdens of guilt frequently turn out to be the kindest and most thoughtful of individuals. Because they have to contend with tremendous amounts of guilt, they cannot afford to be anything other than thoughtful if they are to wrestle successfully with their inner consciences. External criticism is nothing when compared with the criticism a neurotic offers herself.

Shyness is another common quality among neurotics, and one usually described as a fault. Yet, is shyness always a fault? I don't think so. The unusually shy often feel inadequate, particularly aware of the needs of others and well aware of the problems involved in building up any relationship. They invariably try harder and often turn out to be exceptionally caring individuals.

Neurotics are frequently obsessional too. And that is sometimes a cause of considerable pain. But, unless it reaches exceptional heights, obsessional behaviour doesn't real hurt anyone other than the sufferer herself. On the contrary, the obsessional neurotic will pay great attention to detail, will be observant and watchful and will often make life much easier for those around her.

Neurotics are driven by guilt, shyness and obsessions. What else? Well, neurotics are also often described as being too imaginative. Doctors, for example, will often complain that neurotics' problems are 'all in the mind'.

Of course they are!

But would anyone seriously argue that a world peopled by individuals without imaginations would be worth living in? Imaginations may produce fears and anxieties but they also produce music, art and literature. Those very people we describe as neurotic are the same individuals whose creative genius we admire. Every great thinker, philosopher, artist, scientist and great leader was undoubtedly also a neurotic.

The other vital quality that seems to haunt neurotics is a sensitivity to criticism, particularly self-criticism, that far exceeds normal sensitivities. And yet, at the other end of this particular spectrum, there are those individuals whose lack of feeling makes them rude, unthinking, boorish and even (sometimes) psychopathic. Who would make the better partner or friend? The selfish boor or the self-critical neurotic? Who would make the better employee? Who would make the fairer boss?

I believe we treat neurotics most unfairly. Through their suffering and their torment they add soul, spirit and generosity to our often cruel and selfish world. We gain enormously from their agony and yet we repay them with disdain, contempt and suspicion.

Neurotics make better friends, lovers, employees and employers. Without them the world in which we live would be a far less pleasant place. It is about time we recognised this and treated them with love, affection and gratitude.

First published in Woman's Way 8.4.88

Things are even worse now than they were when I wrote this article. The major problem is that psychiatrists, encouraged and aided by the international pharmaceutical industry, have created a good many new psychiatric disorders. Any mild eccentricity, habit or enthusiasm will quickly be labelled a disease and given a name by psychiatrists, and a pharmaceutical 'remedy' will be provided by the drug companies.

Bumbledom Forced me to Leave the NHS

Much of what I learned at medical school has faded. I can no longer remember the route the seventh cranial nerve takes and the names of the small bones of the wrist, once burnt into my memory, have faded like scars.

But some things are as fresh as ever. The memories of my early feelings as I wandered lost and bewildered round the medical school are as sharp and poignant as they were 15 years ago. I can still remember the first old lady who called me doctor, the first time I unwrapped my stethoscope from its white tissue paper packing, the clammy palms and the hollow, sick feeling when I first stood timidly in the operating theatre.

Inextricably tied up with those memories are the dreams I had then. Naïve, foolish, romantic and sentimental, I knew nothing then of professional ambition, academic jealousy, commercial greed or administrative interference.

Any base thoughts in my mind as I forced my arms through the heavily starched sleeves of my first white ward coat were swamped by idealistic fantasies.

During the years which followed, the seeds of my cynicism were nourished by experience – but those dreams never entirely faded. They stayed with me through qualification and registration and when, in general practice, I signed my first prescription they were as clear and perfect as ever.

From the beginning, my conception of the GP's role has been unashamedly old-fashioned. I see the family doctor as independent professional subservient only to his own conscience and the honest needs of his patients.

He is a guide ready to help his patients struggle through the increasingly complex network of health service facilities and always prepared to protect their interests.

To fulfil this role he must be seen to be independent of the central administration.

For some years I managed to convince myself that as a health service GP I was independent and self-employed, able to protect the interests of my patients against the grey, mean-minded bureaucrats who have invaded health care with all the insistent power and destructive force of some unseen, disseminating carcinoma.

I fought a series of minor skirmishes with the health service administrators, partly to protect the rights of individual patients, partly to let the administrations know that I was not yet subdued and perhaps partly to convince myself that I was still not hobbled by red tape.

My battle over confidentiality and national insurance sick notes was just one of a number of confrontations. But it was the one which led perhaps most directly to my recent separation from the health service.

For after I had explained the principle of medical confidentiality to a health service administrator involved in preparing the case against me, he pointed out that if I disagreed with the health service rules I should not practise as a health service doctor.

I felt that his opinion was substantiated by the subsequent ruling which confirmed that where there is a conflict between medical ethics and regulations, medical ethics come second.

My innocence was such that I had not really thought in those terms before. Until then I had thought of the health service administration as a convenience designed to facilitate the relationship between the patients and the doctors.

It was a convenience which often hindered rather than helped. But I thought of that as a fault that could be repaired.

Sitting on the seafront at Budleigh Salterton this summer, I found myself burning with a growing discontent. For years I had apologised for the shortcomings of the health service and defended its weaknesses while at the same time worrying at the growing rift between doctors and patients.

Now I could not resist the suspicion that I and other front line workers were being used by the administrators for their own purposes; the GP could no longer be seen as the independent patients' champion.

I decided that if I wanted to stay in practice I would have to resign as a health service principal. I chose to do so without having made any alternative arrangements.

Having responsibility for a full list of patients is emotionally, mentally and physically exhausting. Many GPs die before they reach retirement age. But whereas I could accept that pressure when I honestly believed that I was practising medicine in a way that I could convince myself was honest and worthwhile, I felt unprepared to accept the commitment, the ulcers and the high blood pressure in the service of an organisation which expected me to practise in ways which denied me self-respect.

Now I am looking forward to studying and writing about the ways in which we practise medicine in Britain today.

First published in Pulse, 28.11.81

After a number of my patients asked me not to put diagnoses on their sick notes (pointing out that these certificates were looked at by a number of their colleagues, as well as their employers) I started scribbling illegible diagnoses in the appropriate place on the official forms. I was carpeted and fined by NHS administrators and duly resigned as a GP principal. It seemed to me quite wrong that doctors should be forced to breach confidentiality in such a blatant manner. Not long after I resigned the legislation was changed. Today, however, there is no such thing as confidentiality in medicine. A patient who walks into a doctor’s surgery might as well publish his or her symptoms and anxieties on Facebook.

Can you Keep a Secret, Doctor?

There's a healthy interest in medical confidentiality again. First, many doctors have expressed fears about the storage of medical records on computers, pointing out that it is relatively easy for all sorts of people to find excellent excuses for obtaining access to the information.

Secondly, discarded records seem to have taken to turning up unexpectedly in the middle of entirely non-confidential rubbish dumps.

Consider the sort of information most people willingly give their general practitioner, and the way in which that information is guarded.

A decade or two ago, the average GP would probably scribble some notes on a scruffy card and leave it there. The information he had obtained would remain entirely confidential.

Today, however, nothing your doctor writes is likely to remain a secret. For there is an apparently endless stream of people anxious to get hold of that information for their own purposes.

Health visitors and other fringe professionals will all have good reason for looking at your notes. And in hospital there are even more social workers, administrators, aides and a whole army of clerks.

The Department of Health has established a right to obtain confidential medical information from GPs. The information will be passed around within that administrative machine with only a token nod in the direction of confidentiality.

Even worse are the employers who also want access to your medical notes. They know very well that access to such information will give them an excellent idea of an employee's future medical potential. The man signed off sick as 'depressed' is unlikely to be considered a suitable candidate for promotion.

Also, if you have decided to take out life insurance, borrow money or buy a house, the chances are good that in the small print of your contract there was a clause giving the company the right to contact your doctor and ask him for a medical report.

Most worrying, such organisations will often be just as interested in your doctor's conclusions as in the information he has collected. If a provisional diagnosis was made several years ago (perhaps without your knowledge) and entered on your records, that diagnosis is quite likely to find itself etched for ever on the computer's memory.

The number of people able to obtain access to intimate secrets grows annually. This is a systematic destruction of the basic relationship of trust between doctor and patient.

And one answer might be to allow patients to keep their own medical records. Doctors would have access to the necessary notes when they needed them – but confidentiality would be assured.

First published in the Daily Mail 7.4.82

Oh, how naïve and simple this now seems. Today, just about every government employee can access medical records. Even drug company employees will soon be able to read your medical records. Medical confidentiality is now very much a thing of the past.

When Doctors Have to Tell

The Government's decision to ignore protests from the medical profession and give the police new powers under the proposed Police and Criminal Evidence Bill to obtain medical records from doctors' surgeries and health centres has once again brought the question of medical confidentiality to the fore.

The list of authorities and individuals who now seem entitled to free access to once private medical records is already long.

It is, of course, fair and reasonable that the doctor should share his patients' confidences with those directly involved in their care, such as nurses.

But it is less easy to explain why we should allow social security clerks, health service administrators, insurance company officials, social workers, local councillors, petty bureaucrats of all kinds – and now policemen – to have open access. Ironically, the individual patient is the one person who has no rights at all. And he or she has every little chance of ever seeing the records which concern him or her.

Dame Elizabeth Ackroyd, chairman of the Patients' Association, has very reasonably argued that patients are entitled to find out what is written on their medical records. It is difficult to oppose that point of view on straightforward medical grounds and some doctors feel that denying patients access to medical information is likely to cause undue anxiety and to exacerbate existing fears.

There is, it seems to me, one simple solution, and that is to allow patients to keep their own medical records at home, in a safe place, along with insurance policies and passports, perhaps. The patients could then take them to the doctor's surgery whenever treatment was required.

Another advantage with this remarkably simple remedy is that a whole army of administrators would be released from their onerous task of filing, storing and retrieving thousands of records. The cost to the health service must be measured in millions and the present structure, anyway, is so cumbersome that records often get lost, mislaid or mis-directed.

At the moment it can take months for a medical records envelope to find its way from one GP's surgery, via a network of administrators, to another GP's surgery. Allow patients to keep their own medical records and anyone moving house would simply take their records with them.

First published in the Daily Telegraph 5.4.1983

Sadly, the number of people now demanding access to once confidential medical records has increased rapidly in recent years. Indeed, it is now no longer possible to use the word 'confidential' when describing medical records. The General Medical Council is now more likely to censor a doctor for failing to make medical records available to the authorities than for failing to maintain confidentiality.

Why Patients Should Keep Their Own Records

There are many facets to the doctor-patient relationship but the basis of the whole relationship is trust. The doctor has to trust the patient to tell him everything that may be relevant. And the patient has to trust the doctor to treat that information as entirely confidential. Secrets are the essential currency of medical practice. Without access to intimate details of all kinds, doctors cannot hope to make diagnoses.

Over the years doctors have succeeded in building up a collective reputation which gives them the same access to private information as priests, and which gives their surgeries and consulting rooms the same status as the confessional.

But just look at what has happened in recent years.

A decade or two ago a general practitioner interviewing a patient would scribble indecipherable notes on a scruffy piece of card. Only he would have access to that information and only he would be able to read it. If he needed specialist advice he would send a scribbled note to a hospital colleague.

Today, the general practitioner has to write rather more legibly if his partners are to understand what he has written. He'll probably employ a secretary, a team of receptionists and a practice nurse: and have an attached health visitor and social worker.

At the hospital the specialist will be assisted by secretaries, administrators and a whole army of paramedical workers. All will expect open access to medical records.

Even more frightening than these developments, however, is the fact that a growing number of people with no interest at all in the health of individual patients are finding that doctors' records are a valuable source of useful information.

The Department of Health and Social Security, for example, has established a right to obtain confidential information from general practitioners on national insurance certificates. That information is not treated as confidential information once the DHSS has got its cooperative hands on it. Indeed, the information will be passed around within that administrative machine with only a token nod in the direction of confidentiality.

Then there are the commercial employers who also want access to medical notes. Employers know very well that access to confidential information can give them an excellent idea of an employee's future medical potential. The man signed off work as 'depressed' is unlikely to be considered a suitable candidate for promotion. Once medical information has been obtained in this way it is likely to spread around any internal offices very quickly. Curiosity is a natural human emotion and news about Ethel's pregnancy or Joan's anxiety state is likely to spread rapidly.

In recent years the number of people likely to have access to information passed on in the surgery as confidential has increased quite dramatically. But still more corporations, institutions and individuals are likely to have access to those 'secrets' in the future.

People who borrow money from banks or building societies or who take out life insurance with major companies are likely to sign contracts giving permission for doctors to be contacted and medical information released. Once information has been made available to one company it can then be passed on to any other company which shows an interest. Large insurance companies and banks don't have any sense of confidentiality, so the information, once it gets into their hands, becomes public property.

Just as worrying as the fact that raw information is passed on, by the way, is the fact that such organisations are likely to be as interested in a doctor's conclusions as in his observations. So if a provisional diagnosis was made and entered on the medical records then that diagnosis is quite likely to be passed on from company to company, despite the fact that the diagnosis was never justified or confirmed.

Social workers, clerks, employers, insurance companies, banks – the list doesn't stop there. The police are also well aware that medical records are very useful. They frequently demand confidential information. Even when doctors refuse to pass on such information the police can still obtain it by contacting administrators, social workers or DHSS clerks.

What makes all this doubly frightening is the fact that more and more of these organisations and individuals are storing their own personal records on computers. That means that there is then almost no limit to the number of people who will have access to that information – information which was originally obtained in complete confidence and trust, in the doctor's surgery. A scribbled note about a possible depressive tendency, a possible schizoid personality, a potential diagnosis of multiple sclerosis, cancer or venereal disease – this information stored on old-fashioned medical records is unlikely to be harmful but when translated into computer language and made available to any interested customers it can spell finis to a man's career.

And whatever promises may be made about computer secrecy the fact is that once information has been put into a computer by one agency other agencies will quickly find good excuses for getting that information out again. They will argue that the dissemination of confidential medical information helps them deploy services and analyse resources far more effectively. The information is there, they will point out, so it is unrealistic not to use it.

All this terrifies me for I firmly believe that only those directly concerned with the medical care of patients have any right to information that has been obtained in the surgery or consulting room. If the current trend continues, the consulting room will have more in common with the broadcasting box than the confessional – with the inevitable result that the number of people prepared to share their secrets with their doctors will shrink. Since secrets are the essential currency of medical practice the consequences will be disastrous.

The real irony in all this is that while just about everyone else in any sort of official or unofficial capacity seems to have open access to medical records, the individual patient who is the subject of a set of medical notes still has no rights at all, and very little chance of ever seeing the medical records which concern him or her most of all.

And it seems to me that within irony there lies the answer to our dilemma. Why not let patients keep their own medical records? We would thus in one simple move deny all administrators, policemen and non-medical personnel the chance of obtaining access to medical records while also giving patients the freedom to see exactly what had been written about them.

Patients could keep their medical records at home and take them along to the surgery or hospital whenever needed. This simple solution would release a whole army of expensive administrators from their onerous task of filing, storing and retrieving thousands of records. The cost of that service in the medical world must be measured in millions and the present complicated structure is so cumbersome that records often get lost, mislaid or misdirected. (They are, curiously, particularly likely to be mislaid if the patient involved is contemplating legal action against a doctor or hospital.) Today it can take months for a medical records envelope to find its way from one surgery to another. Allow patients to keep their own records and anyone moving house would simply take his or her medical records together with other important papers to their new doctor.

It is difficult to think of sound objections to such a simple scheme. Some doctors might argue that patients would be exposed to information that would worry them. But the truth is, of course, that patients wouldn't have to read their own notes – only look after them. Doctors might also argue that they would be limited in what they could write on notes. I don't think that is too much of an objection either. Indeed, I suspect that too many doctors have become accustomed to putting value judgements on medical records. It is far too easy for a patient to be labelled as a 'nuisance', a 'neurotic' or 'troublesome' merely because of a personality conflict between physician and patient (which may, of course, be just as much the fault of the physician as of the patient).

Doctors wanting to use medical records for research will have to contact patients directly before they can obtain confidential information. This restriction might make some research work more difficult to organise but it will ensure that no research projects get under way without patients being consulted and their permission obtained. I don't think it is a bad thing if 'doctor convenience' takes second place to 'patient confidentiality'.

At St Mary's Maternity Hospital, Portsmouth patients have been allowed to keep their hospital maternity notes for ten years now. They don't seem to have had too many problems there. Records have been kept in good condition, very few have been lost and much administrative time has been saved. Incidentally, many of the women concerned have admitted that they weren't able to understand what was on their notes. They were however, happy to have their notes in their own possession.

Giving patients charge of their own records is the unavoidable answer to a growing confidentiality problem. Doctors will benefit because they will no longer have to store records and they won't have to fight for medical confidentiality against courts and politicians. They'll also have access to notes when they do house calls.

And patients will benefit, of course, because they will know that everything they tell their doctors will remain a secret.

Today we have reached a dangerous point. Many patients are wary of confiding in their doctors because they suspect that information passed on in secret will be made available to too many people. Without trust, the medical professional cannot operate effectively. The only real answer is to hand over the care of medical records to patients. And it must be done without delay.

First published in the Journal of Medical Ethics, 1984, 1, 27-28

I was still banging on about medical records and medical confidentiality in 1984. I must have written scores of articles (all saying much the same thing) and made dozens of broadcasts (all saying much the same thing). But all to no avail. No one seemed terribly interested then and no one seems terribly interested now. The regulations were, it is true, changed to allow patients to see their own medical notes (at a price) but the more important issue of patient confidentiality has been totally overridden. When I raised the subject of confidentiality with the General Medical

Council (which seems to delight in ordering doctors to hand over confidential medical material to authorities of many different hues) I was told that ‘we (the GMC) do not see the duty of confidentiality as absolute’. As I wrote in my book ‘Do Doctors and Nurses Kill More People than Cancer?’ this suggests to me that the GMC believes that it is possible to be a little bit pregnant. I do believe, however, that the collapse of the principle of medical confidentiality is an important factor in the failure of the doctor-patient relationship. All things considered, I am enormously grateful that my practising days are long gone. Despite the introduction of vast quantities of expensive equipment and even more expensive drugs, few things in medicine have changed more dramatically in the last half a century than the relationship between doctors and patients. It seems to me enormously sad that today there are no professionals who can be trusted with secrets. Clients no longer enjoy any confidentiality when talking to lawyers, bankers and accountants, all of whom are under strict orders to share information obtained from their clients with the ‘authorities’.

The Police are Investigating

In the Devon village where I live, the lanes are all single track and the hedges are twelve feet high. There are no road markings or street names, and my home is hidden at the end of a private drive with no sign to show that it exists. Those visitors I want to see are sent a map and precise directions. Those I don't want to see get no help, and have little choice but to stop and ask for directions. Since the village in which I live is a small one, the minute they stop and ask for directions I know they are on their way.

That was how I heard that a stranger was looking for me last Thursday.

'He said you were expecting him,' said the lady who, with her husband, runs our local village shop. It was a lie. I wasn't expecting anyone.

I watched him park his car and walk towards the house. I knew instinctively what he was and what he'd brought with him. Writ deliverers and process servers and other emissaries of the legal profession all have the same cautious walk. They tread nervously and with a unique mixture of diffidence, arrogance and fear. The diffidence comes from the knowledge that they are almost certainly bringing unhappiness with them, the arrogance is there because they are imbued with a taste of the power of the courts they almost represent, and the fear is inspired by their apprehension about the reception they are likely to get: a punch on the nose, a bite from the dog, or a vat of boiling oil poured from the battlements.

'I have a letter for you from a firm of London solicitors,' said my unexpected visitor, standing well back from the door and holding a white envelope at arm's length. I had to reach out to take the envelope from him.

'Would you open it?' he asked.

I did. And when I'd read it I laughed. The letter was from one of those London firms of solicitors whose notepaper is half filled with names. They told me that they were thinking of taking court action to get an injunction to stop publication of my latest book, 'Why Animal Experiments Must Stop'. They had about as much chance of getting an injunction as I have of being elected Romantic Novelist of the Year. Their client wasn't even mentioned in the book.

I've been a professional writer for many years and I have never sought trouble but rarely had much difficulty finding it. My first threatened injunction preceded the publication of my first book, 'The Medicine Men', back in the 1970s. After a while these things lose some of their sting. And I can't always take them seriously – especially when they overplay their hand by hiring a process server to deliver a letter that could have been posted. I'm not exactly difficult to reach by mail. I get letters every day that just have Vernon Coleman, London on the envelope. I guess solicitors use the writ servers to make the whole thing more frightening. But it really just makes it more expensive for their clients.

As soon as the man had gone I rang Jon Carpenter, my editor at Green Print, to suggest that if people were going to start threatening us with injunctions then the easy solution might be to release the book to the shops. He agreed. There's not much point in anyone applying for an injunction if the book is already on sale.

Half an hour or so later the phone went again. A man had, I learned, telephoned the local post office asking for my home address. He had claimed to be a Post Office employee with an urgent letter to deliver. A little later he had phoned again with more questions about me. This time the person who took the call had been suspicious. 'You're not really a Post Office employee, are you?' she said. 'No,' confessed the caller, with surprising candour.

That evening I drove to Barnstaple and went to the Leisure Centre gym. I go there regularly to work out just in case someone I've annoyed decides to try a more physical approach. After an hour or so of getting sweaty I went for a shower.

When I emerged, the first thing I noticed was that my jacket was missing. I'd hung it up and left my sports bag and the rest of my clothes underneath it. The hollow feeling that appeared instantly in my stomach was quickly overwhelmed by a wave of something which I can only describe as an emotion close to panic.

I wasn't worried about my wallet or my credit card case but the coat contained my notebook and a scruffy collection of pieces of paper on which I had scribbled a mixture of notes, ideas and names and private telephone numbers of broadcasters, doctors, scientists and politicians who would, I thought, take a sympathetic approach to my new book. Much of the information was, in official jargon, 'sensitive'. It would certainly be of value to those who support vivisection. Most of the information was irreplaceable. All of it was, to me, far more valuable than money.

Pausing only to protect myself from a charge of indecent exposure by throwing a towel around my waist, I ran to an attendant's kiosk and gave a description of my jacket. I also asked the attendant to telephone the reception desk asking that the front door be closed and the police be called.

Less than ten minutes later one of the swimming pool attendants found my jacket. It had been thrown onto the floor in one of the lavatories. My gold Omega watch and my banknote holder (containing £40) had not been taken. But my visiting card case (which contained my private ex-directory telephone numbers and my credit cards) and some of my valuable bits of paper had gone. They seemed to have escaped through a fire door at the rear of the building. The alarm had apparently been turned off.

Thirty minutes later the police had still not arrived. Someone rang to see if they were coming. They were, they said, rather busy. I decided to go home to cancel my missing credit cards (you can't cancel your cards unless you know the numbers, and that means checking the credit card statements) and to call in at the police station on the way. It is no more than a two minute drive from the Leisure Centre.

'Wait outside!' ordered the man behind the counter at the police station. No 'please', no 'thank you', no 'sir'. None of those social graces which public employees used to favour when talking to their employers. I wondered if it had anything to do with the fact that I hadn't combed my hair and my jacket was creased and dirty. I left and went home.

After telephoning two banks to cancel my stolen cards (take my advice and cancel all your cards now by post – if you wait until they are stolen and then try to cancel them in a rush by telephone it will take so long that you will become half crazed with frustration) I telephoned the police again.

'Why didn't you say who you were, sir?' asked the man on the other end of the telephone after I'd given my name and protested at my reception an hour earlier. The worst thing was that I think he expected me to be pleased by this. He sounded hurt, as though I had tricked him by looking scruffier than I ought to have done. It is sad to know that even out here in the country there is a multi-tier police service.

I told him my story, adding that as an outspoken opponent of vivisection I had received numerous, quite serious sounding, threats from vivisectors, hunters and their supporters. (It is widely, but wrong, assumed that it is only vivisectors who get threats. Interpol once spent some time investigating a rather serious threat made by Maltese gunmen who were upset at articles I'd written describing their annual slaughter of migrating birds.) I said it was rather worrying that someone pretending to be a Post Office official was asking questions about me locally. I added that the theft seemed a strange one.

And I pointed out that I was about to start a publicity tour designed to expose things that many powerful people did not want exposing. My book threatens the continued existence of a multi-million pound industry. The threat of an injunction from an organisation not even mentioned in the book suggests to me that my opponents are taking me seriously.

The man at the police station promised to look into my complaint in due course. I told him that I could give him the names of the people the stranger had spoken to when pretending to be a Post Office employee. And that I even knew the name the man had been using.

The next morning, after some confusion between Barnstaple and Ilfracombe police stations (the theft had been committed in the Barnstaple area, but I live in the Ilfracombe area and both stations seemed keen to allow the other to investigate my story), a constable from Ilfracombe arrived. I was told that he would take my statement and pass it on to Barnstaple. (I had offered to help ease the dispute by sending my statement by fax, but the office I spoke to said they didn't have a fax machine at the station.)

The police constable who arrived seemed puzzled by what had happened and clearly wanted to concentrate on the simple crime: the theft of the credit cards and visiting cards. I gave him a printed copy of a statement I had prepared. He said it should have been written down on official paper, but it was laser printed and it looked as if it had been typeset, and minor officials of all sorts always respect printed documents, so he accepted it.

'Could you give me the numbers of the missing credit cards, sir?'

I said I could. And so I did.

'And would you add a line to your statement to confirm that you have exhibited your credit card numbers to me, sir?'

I looked at him, aghast, struck dumb in horror.

He mistook my dumbness for deafness and repeated his request.

'I'm afraid not,' I told him, with honest regret. 'I'll write down that I have shown you my credit card numbers but I cannot possibly write down that I have exhibited them.'

He seemed puzzled. I explained that my long lasting and rumbustious affair with the English language would be forever ruined if I were to abuse her so cruelly.

Four hours later I rang to see how enquiries were going. I was assured that things were being looked into. I pointed out that the fake Post Office employer might well find his way out of North Devon in another few hours' time. But I was assured that things were in hand.

Twenty four hours and eleven phone calls after the incident I discovered (after a protest to the Chief Constable's Office in Exeter) that my statement was still in Ilfracombe. 'I'm arranging to have it brought over straight away,' promised an apologetic sergeant. ‘And then I’ll start looking into things.’ He sounded weary and disheartened. ‘It hasn’t been very well handled, has it, sir?’

I told him that I thought his criticism was not unjustified. But I am sure that the ghost of P.G. Wodehouse will be relieved to know that a whole regiment of country Plods are alive and blundering about in Devon. I doubt if the fake Post Office employee will be found now. I’ll ring them if there are, as they say, any further developments.

‘A poisoned umbrella, sir? We’ll look into it in due course, sir. Don’t you worry about a thing.’

First published in The Bookseller, 28.6.1991

This sort of thing has happened a good deal during my career. For example, on one occasion a flat of mine was broken into. Nothing was taken apart from some files relating to a series of articles I was writing for Nursing Times magazine – and some correspondence relating to a meeting I’d had with representatives of a major drug company. Immediately after the theft the company concerned made a complaint to the magazine and the series of articles was terminated by the publisher. Such things happened with monotonous regularity during my years of campaigning.

Life in Tablet Form

Approximately 3,000,000,000 tablets are dispensed each year in England and Wakes for the sole purpose of helping patients who are anxious or depressed, or who are unable to get to sleep at night. Because the market for these drugs is so enormous and because it is a rapidly growing market, almost every manufacturer of drugs in the world produces its share of these psychotropic drugs (drugs which have an effect on the mind). It is a very lucrative market. Psychotropic tablets cost the National Health Service over £20 million every year. Two of the most commonly prescribed drugs in the country, Librium and Valium, are drugs taken by anxious and depressed patients.

People who insist that they would not normally take tablets of any kind happily take psychotropics, and the world's biggest addiction problem is not teenagers taking hash, but middle agers taking sedatives. People in responsible positions, outwardly well-adjusted and in control – businessmen, bus conductors, housewives, school teachers – swallow their capsules three times a day without a qualm. The tranquilliser is replacing tobacco. It will give us, perhaps, an even bigger problem.

A few years ago neurotics were uncommon. Today there are neurotics in schools and colleges, offices and factories, housing estates and country mansions. People start to crumble these days as soon as they can spell 'worry'. When the habit starts, the patient may have a good excuse for taking a few tablets. A close friend or relative has died, or there is a rush on at work. At school it can begin when a child starts to study in earnest. The child worries because he or she feels that he or she ought to worry. The worry may be caught from parents and teachers obsessed with examinations.

The girls who escape the demoralisation of schools and colleges to run their own homes as housewives find their lives too dull and boring when compared with the bright and exciting lives led by television characters. The girls who choose to follow a career have to cope with the same problems as those their lovers and husbands have to face. There are many pressures involved in keeping a job and earning a living wage (a living wage being one that enables the worker to keep above the average) varying from the pressures from employers to union pressures.

So the housewife, the student and the worker often turn to drugs. If he is young the addict may seek them from a pusher. If he is older he may take them from a medical adviser.

In defence of his weakness the modern respectable addict will complain that the pressures of modern living are higher than they have ever been. What nonsense this is. A hundred years ago the pressures, though different, were just as powerful. Then people were worried about finding food and keeping warm. Today they worry about the rate of inflation, the size of their car and the quality of their television set; and they swallow their green and black capsules.

We can, I think, delegate some of the blame for this absurd state of affairs. There are, for example, some people who make money out of dissatisfaction and unhappiness. Many advertising campaigns have the effect of provoking man's tendency to feel insecure. His ordinary, healthy worries are exaggerated by appeals which suggest to him that he won't smell right if he doesn't use the right soap, that he will fall ill if he doesn't eat the right make of food.

The family doctor must take much of the blame. For when the unhappy consumer, no longer able to cope, goes to see his doctor, he sees a man who has been pressured into believing that anxiety and depression must always be treated and who consequently finds it difficult to turn a patient away without pharmacological help – even though in his heart he knows that all healthy human beings feel anxious from time to time and that without anxiety life would be tasteless. The tragic result is that too many of the patients who have clutched at the straws proffered by doctors have done so partly because they have been misled by doctors into believing that the pharmacological solution is both effective and safe (when it is neither) and partly because they are so battered and exhausted by society that they do not have the mental strength to rescue themselves, and drag themselves from the currently overpopulated Slough of Despond.

First published in the Daily Telegraph 1976

After a ten year battle the Government eventually changed the regulations about the prescribing of tranquillisers and sleeping tablets – advising doctors that they should not be prescribed for more than two weeks at a time. In the House of Commons the Minister of Health told MPs that the Government had changed the rules because of my articles. Campaigning (if done hard enough and for long enough) can sometimes make a difference. Sadly, of course, although I won one battle, in the long run the war was lost. Drug companies found ways round the regulations and doctors slipped back into their old, bad habits. Today, the number of prescriptions being written for psychotropic drugs (including anxiolytics and antidepressants) is, without a doubt, greater than ever.

Home Diagnosis

The idea of using the computer as a diagnostic aid is not a new one. Over the years dozens of doctors have toyed with the idea of programming a computer to ask scores of questions and use the answers to come up with a diagnosis. In theory, there is absolutely no reason a computer shouldn't match any diagnostician in the world. After all, an electronic machine isn't likely to have an off day or waste power worrying about such incidentals as school fees, mortgages and overdrafts.

Despite the theoretical possibilities, however, diagnostic computers haven't attracted very much practical support. A number of reasons have been given (doctors have complained that they'll be put out of business and lawyers have warned about the medico-legal problems) but the most important argument against diagnostic computers has probably been that since a patient can hardly treat himself without medical advice there is little point in having a computer to make a diagnosis.

Supported by this argument the majority of those doctors interested in computers seem to have confined themselves to using computers as expensive filing cabinets – storing bits and pieces of information in a very traditional way. It is all a bit like using a space rocket to launch a kite.

Concerned at this failure to use the computer's potential and convinced that there must be a way to harness the very special advantages offered by modern programming skills, I decided some months ago to look for an alternative. And slowly I became convinced that the most important task for a diagnostic computer is not to tell users what is wrong with them but to tell them whether or not they need medical advice.

Working on the thesis that if diagnostic computers are to flourish they must be designed in such a way that they can complement the services offered by the medical profession, rather than taking them over, I began to play around with the idea of offering patients a series of simple health programs designed to differentiate between those symptoms needing emergency medical help, those requiring routine medical help and those which could safely be treated at home without any professional interference.

It seemed to me that any program answering these very fundamental questions, and then including practical down to earth advice designed to help users deal with those problems suitable for home care, could contribute greatly to the general quality of medical care.

It was with this basic theory (and little else) that I first approached Eastmead Computer Systems in Surrey. Fortunately for me their technical director, Russell Smith, is not only a micro-computer consultant but also a neurophysiologist. He was able to help arrange for the development of a six tape series of diagnostic programs. To give the series that solid, reassuring feel that anything related to computers desperately needs, we called it The Home Doctor series. It was, quite deliberately, the most unoriginal and boring title we could think of.

Working on the development of the series over the last few weeks I've slowly come to realise that computers can offer far, far more than the storage of routine information or the speeding up of record keeping. I'm now quite convinced that the home computer is the feldscher of the future. Have a home computer with a set of diagnostic programs and practical advice programs to match and you have a personal home nurse, a doctor in the cupboard, a wise relation and a health education officer all rolled into one.

The advantage of offering basic medical information this way are too numerous to mention in detail, but some are relatively easy to define. First, for example, there is the entirely personal nature of the computer program. It is possible to present a program in such a way that the user need only ever see those parts which relate directly to his problems. So, for example, by feeding in answers to questions about your sex, age, height, weight, occupation and marital status it is possible to obtain very specific general health advice designed to suit your particular requirements.

Used in the home by an individual, computer confidentiality becomes an advantage not a disadvantage. A patient may lie to his doctor if asked an embarrassing or leading question but why should he bother to lie to a computer? The computer isn't going to leak the answer. It isn't even going to store the answer. And if the user is in any doubt, he can answer YES or NO to all potentially damning questions and come to his own conclusions about his condition.

It is possible, too, to build comprehensive safeguards into a computer program. So, for example, in the ones which Russell Smith and I have developed for Eastmead, the user cannot even get hold of complicated or potentially hazardous instructions until he has confirmed that he has understood all the warnings and that he has understood the last set of instructions.

There are advantages too in the computer's capacity to emphasise and dramatise certain points. Even ordinary home computers are able to offer colour facilities, noise facilities and timing mechanisms. It is possible to include fitness testing programs, memory testing programs and even a fairly simple eye test. All these flash-whizz-bang additions help make the Home Doctor series great fun. Our Stress Assessment program actually adds up your score as you answer individual questions – and then tells you the extent of your exposure to stress. It's half Home Doctor program and half Star Wars.

The first six programs are available for the VIC 20 computer and the Sinclair computers. It is probably the first home diagnostic series in the world to be made available to the general public. We are waiting rather nervously to see if the world is ready for it.

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The progams sold reasonably well and we had customers in 26 countries. But neither the VIC 20 computer or the Sinclair computers lasted, and before long our Home Doctor series was joined by programs produced by companies with much deeper pockets than ours – and willing to accept subsidies, sponsorship, advertising and worse from drug companies and others with products to sell. But we were first and our programs were at least scrupulously independent. Curiously, I got the idea for the Home Doctor series after writing a book called Aspirin or Ambulance which consisted of a series of algorithms designed to help readers decide whether or not they needed a doctor or could treat their condition at home. In the end, the book was rather more successful than the computer programs. This undoubtedly proves something but I'm not entirely sure what.

Making the Most of it: the Computer's Real Potential

So far most of the efforts to use computers in general practice have concentrated on using them for the storage of names, addresses and specific titbits of clinical information. I consider this to be unimaginative, sadly unambitious and unexciting. It is also of questionable value not only because storing information about individual patients produces enormous problems of confidentiality but also because it requires the individual doctor to become an active rather than a passive user.

Surely, with a new tool with this sort of power we should be thinking in far more ambitious terms? Surely we can do better if we are thinking of exploiting the computer's real potential? Certainly if we do not think big now then we never will.

There is little doubt in my mind that the most significant medical problem facing medical practitioners today which can be solved with the use of computers does not concern that storage of specific information relating to patients but the storage and dissemination of general medical information.

Most general practitioners will, I suspect, agree with me that the problem of how best to keep up to date is a difficult one. The practising doctor is as good as his information and yet obtaining up to date, accurate, unbiased information on the wide range of topics on which the modern family doctor is expected to be an expert is nigh on impossible.

Keeping up to date on drugs alone is something of a nightmare for the conscientious practitioner. There are journals to read, meetings to attend, representatives to listen to, films to watch, colleagues to argue with and data sheets and brochures to study.

For the specialist working in hospital alongside others working in the same field, keeping up to date can be difficult. For the general practitioner the problem of how to keep informed about all possible drugs available for all possible disorders can be a problem that is insoluble.

Then there is the difficulty of how best to keep informed on the most effective way to deal with specific surgical problems. Since each individual doctor qualified, there will have been countless advances, numerous new techniques and thousands of scientific papers written. The general practitioner does not, of course, have to master all the intricacies of each new advance but he will be failing his patients if he does not at least understand something of the advances that have been made. The computer can provide up to date access to a library of background material in a way unsurpassed by any other communications technique.

Acquiring up to date clinical information is, however, just one of the general practitioner's problems. He must also keep up to date on a whole variety of laws and regulations which govern his responsibilities and his patients' rights. He should, if he is to care for his patients properly, be able to offer useful, accurate practical advice on how best to obtain supplementary benefits, on which patients are entitled to free prescriptions and what regulations govern the provision of national insurance certificates.

Surely, therefore the computer's most exciting contribution will be in the provision of this type of general information?

Why could we not plan, organise and operate a scheme whereby every general practitioner is equipped with a computer terminal plugged in to a central data bank? That central bank of information would be kept up to date with all clinical material, with new rules and regulations, with details about new surgical procedures and with details of all new drugs.

By providing an effective cross reference system it would surely be possible to offer general practitioners all the information they might need. A general practitioner confronted with a patient crippled by arthritis, for example, might then be able to obtain details of the latest and most useful drugs as recommended by an independent team of specialists, details of supplementary benefits payable to disabled individuals and details of suitable aids.

With the terminal on his desk giving him access to a regularly updated library of information, the general practitioner would be able to offer his patients a service that would be impossible to provide in any other way. And, moreover, it would be a service that would cost only a fraction of the money currently spent on trying far less effectively to keep general practitioners up to date.

Once one starts thinking about using computers in this sort of ambitious way it becomes clear that the possibilities really are enormous. So for example, why not give every general practitioner access to waiting lists around the country? At the touch of a few keys, the general practitioner could instantly find the hospital in the country with the shortest waiting list for, say, hip replacement surgery.

None of this is impractical. None of it is too expensive for us to organise. And if it sounds ambitious then it is only because our present use of the computer is narrow and unimaginative. Using the computer solely to store medical records and so on in individual practices is like regarding the telephone as a handy gadget for communicating within the home.

We’re beginning with a new piece of equipment that does have tremendous possibilities. Let’s not waste it.

First published in Practice Computing in April 1982

Sadly, my fears were well founded. Computers in general practice are now used for storing the names and addresses and illnesses of patients. Vested interests ensured that none of my other, far more ambitious and imaginative proposals ever came to fruition.

The Healing Touch

Healing is probably the world's fastest growing alternative medical speciality.

The Confederation of Healing Organisations represents nine separate healing organisations and some 7,000 British healers. Even members of the medical profession, once reluctant to accept that healing can truly help, are among the many converts.

In America, Dolores Krieger, Professor of Nursing at New York University and herself a healer, has convinced many doctors of the value of healing by running controlled trials which have proved that healing can produce improvements measurable in the laboratory.

Personally, I remained sceptical about the abilities of healers to produce genuine physical changes until I interviewed Carole Boden for the Midland Region BBC Television programme 'Bodypower' earlier this month. (The programme is based upon my book of the same title.)

A healer who practises in Nottingham, Carole Boden had written to me claiming to have unusual healing powers and asking me to help assess her skills.

At my request she brought with her to the studio a patient who had for years suffered from bad arthritis and who claimed Carole had helped get rid of her pains.

I was prepared to accept the woman's pains had disappeared but less ready to believe there had been any genuine change in her condition.

However, my scepticism faded when I obtained the woman's X-rays from her hospital consultant. I found there had been a definite radiological improvement.

The X-rays taken before the patient had been seen by Carole showed definite arthritis. The X-rays taken afterwards showed virtually no arthritis at all.

An expert radiologist who did not even know that the patient had seen a healer agreed that there had been a definite and apparently unexplained improvement in the patient's condition.

A hundred years ago it would have been classified as a miracle. Today, it's just another example of the strange phenomenon known as healing.

In the past the power of the healer was thought to lie in some mysterious special personal qualities. When the healing power of kings first became popular back in the days of Edward the Confessor, it was believed it was the closeness of the king to God which gave him his remarkable healing power – the King's Touch.

But today we know it isn't special power of the healer that performs the healing, it is within each one of us. All the healer does is trigger that internal response enabling the body to heal itself. The stronger the healer's personality the greater will be the chance of a recovery.

For years we have recognised that the mind can kill. Researchers around the world have published results showing stress and anxiety can cause genuine physical responses and illnesses. Between 90 and 95 per cent of all illnesses can be caused or made worse by pressure.

Indigestion, asthma, heart disease, high blood pressure, eczema are all known to be stress-related. Now, however, we know that just as the mind can produce illness so it can provide a cure. And we know that the human imagination has a quite fantastic effect on the body. If you sit watching a film set in the Arctic your body will responds as though you were there, you'll even shiver. If you feel that you're developing a cold then you'll probably develop a cold. We even know that people who feel sure that they are going to get cancer stand an increased chance of developing cancer.

But the imagination doesn't only have a negative effect. If you believe that a healer can help you, then you stand a good chance of getting better. It is this phenomenon which explains why placebos work – why a sugar pill with no pharmacological properties can produce a cure.

The placebo effect was first noted by an American doctor in the Second World War. While treating injured soldiers he ran out of morphine. Not wanting the soldiers to know that he couldn't help them he gave them water injections and told them that the injections would help. To his astonishment the water injections worked. The soldiers reported that their pain had been relieved. Since then the effectiveness of the placebo or sugar pill has been proved many times.

But only recently have researchers managed to show just how the placebo works.

According to evidence first reported by researchers at the University of California in San Francisco, the human body contains a pain relieving hormone called an endorphin., This naturally occurring hormone is as powerful a painkiller as morphine. Imagination triggers the release of this internal painkiller and pain disappears.

Healing does not only work by stimulating the imagination. It also helps by harnessing a patient's positive emotion.

Ever since an American magazine editor, Norman Cousins, crippled and bedbound, managed to laugh himself better by watching comedy films, dozens of researchers have been studying the healing effects of laughter, hope and pleasure.

And already there is evidence to show that laughter and hope help by improving respiration, by lowering the blood pressure and by releasing additional endorphins into the blood.

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Sadly, my hopes for healing (and indeed the general principles of Bodypower) never really came to anything. The power of the drug industry proved far too much for those of us who hoped that more patients would take advantage of the human body's natural healing processes. The drug companies have managed to convince both doctors and patients that if there isn't a pill for every ill then there's probably a vaccine available.

Get Rid of the GMC

How the General Medical Council is Killing Patients

There was a time, not long ago, when British GPs provided the best home doctor service in the world. Patients could telephone their doctor 24 hours a day, seven days a week (including Christmas), ask for a home visit and get one. Patients prepared to visit the surgery could expect to see a doctor the day they called.

Those were the good old days.

Today, it is easier to find a plumber than a doctor at nights and weekends. Patients wanting emergency help out of office hours must visit their nearest major hospital and spend hours queuing in the A&E department. In some areas the target waiting time is 12 hours, though in practice, things are often barbaric, with patients forced to lie in an ambulance, parked outside the hospital, for up to eight hours before room can be found for them in the accident and emergency department. Patients who might otherwise have been saved are dying while waiting for treatment.

Patients who visit their GP in her surgery can, in many practices, expect to be given just enough time to describe one symptom. If they have two symptoms they must make a second appointment.

It is generally assumed that the sudden deterioration in the quality of general practice is the result of the deal done between the government and the British Medical Association, the doctors' trade union. The deal allowed doctors to opt out of providing night and weekend cover and, for most of the country, spelt the end of the traditional 24 hour a day cover. Those who looked a little closer assumed that the deal was itself an inevitable result of EU employment laws which regulated the number of hours employees could work.

But although the EU laws are partly responsible for the sudden deterioration in the quality of the NHS they aren't the whole answer; there is another organisation which deserves a good part of the blame: the General Medical Council.

The General Medical Council, the GMC, is a curious organisation which is half charity, half quango, half government department and half protection racket.

It used to consist of a little more than a file clerk, who kept the register of doctors who were qualified to practice medicine, and a committee of rather pompous individuals who sat in judgement when erring doctors were accused of bonking their patients on the consulting room couch. The filing clerk kept a list of doctors and stored the list in a couple of filing cabinets. Every year the GMC published a couple of thick red books which listed all the doctors on the medical register. The whole thing cost next to nothing to run. As recently as 1973, the GMC's total income was £662,579. I doubt if that would pay the current organisation's phone bill.

Today, in contrast, the GMC is a vast organisation with a huge budget and a seemingly insatiable yearning for power. It employs a host of administrators with ideas well above their station, though most have little or no experience of medicine in practice. The GMC still does nothing to improve the quality of medical care (it does nothing about dirty hospitals, the over prescribing of antibiotics or the fact that doctors are now officially encouraged to murder elderly patients who have been in hospital for too long) but its staff constantly make statements about how doctors should practice medicine. So, for example, the GMC has decided that it no longer approves of the Hippocratic Oath, which it considers rather old-fashioned, and it has happily overseen the disappearance of the principle of medical confidentiality.

The real problem with the GMC, however, is that it has been given the job of licensing doctors. And as a result the GMC probably kills more people than influenza. It is no stretch to say that the GMC is such a threat to the nation that it should be classified as a terrorist organisation.

The reason for the GMC's new power is simple.

After the Dr Harold Shipman scandal it was decided in high places that `something' had to be done to protect the public from dangerous doctors. Shipman, a general practitioner, had spent years methodically slaughtering over 200 of his patients - and Ministers were embarrassed.

It was decreed that some form of regular testing should be introduced so that doctors in practice could be assessed. The plans for doctors to have competence tests every five years, with annual appraisals in between, were drawn up in 2008 by Professor Sir Liam Donaldson, the Government's chief medical officer at the time. Donaldson was instructed to do something by Ministers who wanted to weed out rogue practitioners and to make sure that there would not be another Shipman embarrassment.

The GMC was given the job of finding a new way of assessing medical practitioners. This was odd because the GMC was the body which let Shipman kill roughly 10% of his patients without a murmur of concern. In any sensibly run society the GMC would have been roundly bollocked and disbanded, with the responsible officials sent off to cold climates to count penguins.

Everyone knew that finding a way to assess doctors was never going to be easy. Older doctors, long out of medical school, were never going to accept any sort of academic assessment and since modern medicine is still more of an art than a science it was decided that it would be impossible to create a system which relied on assessing diagnostic skills.

So the GMC designed an entirely bureaucratic system (called 'revalidation') which was guaranteed to increase its own power and its own income and which ignored the fact that if Shipman were still alive and practising he would sail through with flying colours. Lister, Snow and other medical greats would have failed. But Shipman would have been revalidated with no problems. So will the inept, the incompetent, the corrupt and the cruel. Drug company cheerleaders will sail through. The revalidation scheme is perfectly suited to the dishonest, the cheat, the silver tongued and the rogue. There is little doubt among doctors that revalidation will result in a massive deterioration in the quality of medical care and a dramatic increase in the number of patients dying unnecessarily.

To pass their appraisal doctors have to fill in reams of forms and find a few dozen patients and colleagues prepared to sign report cards. The scheme is a bureaucrat's dream and a practitioner's nightmare; it seems to have been designed by the sort of people who have six ball point pens in their breast pocket and its rigidity has made life unbearably difficult for thousands of doctors, such as locums and ships doctors, who do not fit neatly into the system.

Some parts of the revalidation procedure astonished me. So, for example, the GMC asked for details of all my motoring offences – which included details of a 1984 speeding offence and a £5 fine I received in 1977 when an officious policeman spotted me hurrying to a suspected heart attack patient. (My astonishment abated when I discovered that Ms Lindsey Westwood, who is in charge of the GMC's revalidation programme was, just two years ago, working for the Traffic Penalty Tribunal as an appeals manager. I do, however, find it staggering that the person the GMC have put in charge of checking the fitness to practice of every doctor in Britain was recently checking parking tickets for a living.)

The GMC's power and money grab has been enormously successful; they've designed a scheme which has built them an empire. Doctors now have to pay the GMC £390 a year to be registered and licensed. There are fees for everything imaginable and the power and money grab has been enormously successful. In 2013 the GMC had an income of £95,400,000. And the income is guaranteed to grow.

The small problem is that by distracting doctors from the work they should be doing, the revalidation scheme will, I believe, result in vastly more deaths than Shipman managed in years of medical mayhem.

The big problem is that the GMC's new method of assessing medical practitioners has made many doctors hate their jobs and it is pushing doctors into early retirement, with a growing number choosing to retire in their 50s. Doctors already had enough forms to fill in. The revalidation scheme has turned doctors into full-time form fillers. A survey of GPs showed that 78% thought that the revalidation programme was a waste of money.

In the 'old' days, a doctor who retired would often work at his former practice as a locum; covering for holidays or sickness. His expertise, local knowledge and intuition would not be lost. In local emergencies, such as a flu epidemic, he could be called upon to help out. But the GMC's new revalidation scheme makes that impossible. Once a doctor has retired he can no longer practice at all. The doctor who retires at 55 must stay retired. As a result locum doctors, many of whom don't speak English properly, have to be imported, at enormous expense, from other EU countries.

The bottom line is that whereas Dr Harold Shipman killed retail, the GMC is now killing wholesale. And it isn't just killing patients; it's destroying the NHS too.

It is perhaps not surprising that the GMC now provides private medical care for its staff.

First published in The Spectator 18.10.14

This was not my first article attacking the GMC. I wrote several pieces for medical journals back in the 1970s and 1980s. My complaints then were that the GMC charged doctors far too much for far too little, was giving itself too much power and had become a bureaucratic monster with very little purpose. The result of my campaigning was that the GMC has not only grown bigger, more bureaucratic and more expensive but has also done serious, permanent harm to the health and welfare of patients.

Food for Thought?

In a column I write for the Glasgow Evening Times I wrote about the way animals are abused. I attacked hunting and animal experimentation and pointed out that animals are treated abominably by the people who breed and kill them for a living.

I also warned readers that meat causes cancer. The article was headlined. 'Death threats will not stop me speaking out.'

Not surprisingly, the Meat and Livestock Commission complained to the Press Complaints Commission.

The PCC then asked for evidence supporting my statement that 'young people who eat meat are far more likely to get cancer and die young'. I supplied the PCC with several pages of scientific references and papers from respected medical journals. The links between meat and cancer may not be widely known, but I find them pretty convincing.

Much to my surprise the PCC found in favour of the MLC. It reports that the MLC 'denied that there was any evidence to link the consumption of meat with the cause of cancer'. In its judgement, the PCC complained that my article contained 'no acknowledgement of any opposing view'.

Think about that. This article appeared in a clearly defined opinion column. The editors had added 'Be warned it's…' above a large by-line and photograph. Are other columnists, drama critics, book reviewers, sports reporters and political commentators now expected to acknowledge opposing views in their articles? Will cookery writers who publish meat recipes now also have to include recipes for vegetarians?

The MLC also complained that, in its view, the claim in my article that `no animal experiment ever helped a human being was 'totally unsustainable'.

The PCC contains 15 members. One of these is Lady Elizabeth Cavendish, the chairman of the Cancer Research Campaign. In the months since I joined the Evening Times, the paper has published letters attacking me from the Cancer Research Campaign and the Research for Health Charities Group (which includes the Cancer Research Campaign).

On 18th August I sent this letter to Mark Bolland, director of the PCC: 'Does the PCC have a policy whereby Commission members who have an interest in a particular subject, relating to a specific complaint, declare that interest and withdraw from discussions?'

The PCC replied the same day: 'As you would expect, the PCC operates in accordance with generally accepted legal principles in this regard. If there is any particular matter which concerns you, perhaps you could let me know and I can respond accordingly.'

I then wrote 'In my recent Evening Times column about animals, I dealt with animal experimentation. The MLC specifically complained about this in a letter to you. I note that Lady Elizabeth Cavendish is chairman of the CRC. The CRC has, in the past, been associated with animal experimentation. Does it still support the use of animal experimentation? If so, did Lady Cavendish feel it necessary to declare any interest when the PCC discussed this column?'

The PCC replied: 'As you know, we are corresponding with the editor of the Glasgow Evening Times on the complaint from the MLC, and any point you wish to make to us on this matter should be routed through him. In these circumstances it would not be appropriate for me to enter into direct correspondence with you on the complaint.'

The PCC 'revisited' the MLCs complaint and its adjudication on 27th September. It decided that the adjudication should stand.

On 16 October I wrote to the PCC asking a number of questions, pointing out that I asked them as a journalist rather than as an interested party. The questions included: 'Did the Meat and Livestock Commission submit any scientific references to support their point of view?' and 'Did the PCC take advice from any outside medical experts.'

Mr Bolland's reply stated: 'The Commission can only deal directly with complainants and the newspaper concerned and cannot enter into correspondence with third parties concerning an adjudication which has been made.'

In asking the PCC for a ruling on my article the MLC said: 'The claims made in the article are both damaging to the industry and could be greatly disturbing to the public if given further publication.'

I am sure it is right. But it is not my job to worry about damaging the meat industry and as a columnist I think it is my job to disturb the public occasionally.

Where does the PCC's adjudication leave me now? Just what does the PCC want me to write (bearing in mind its comment that my original article contained no acknowledgement of any opposing view?).

Well, maybe: ‘Meat causes cancer but the meat industry says it does not’ would satisfy the PCC.

First published in the UK Press Gazette 13.11.95

I sent a total of 26 references from medical and scientific journals to the PCC – all proving that meat causes cancer. I doubt if they consulted any of the references – although all were for papers published in important and widely available journals. I sent the same list of medical and scientific references to the Advertising Standards Authority (which is like the PCC, a private quango widely believed to be a statutory body). They too ignored the evidence before condemning an advertisement for my book ‘Food for Thought’. The ASA told me that they did not accept scientific references as evidence. And that, I suppose, is as good a way as any of avoiding the awful possibility of having to make a decision based upon the facts.

Research into What?

I think that doctors and medical scientists in this country would do well to take note of the American decision to stop messing about on the moon and start paying more attention to down to earth problems.

They have for too long been working on the assumption that if enough research workers write enough papers on enough varied topics they will eventually produce something worthwhile. This is similar to the old business of letting monkeys on typewriters in the hope that they will eventually produce the entire works of Shakespeare.

It is undoubtedly true that in recent years many valuable contributions to medical knowledge have been made by research workers. But it is equally true to say that a tremendous amount of money and effort has been wasted on projects which were never really likely to prove useful.

The trouble has been that no one has ever dared to say to a doctor planning a research project: ‘No, don’t do that, it’s not worth the money or the effort’. Doctors working for industrial concerns do, of course, bow to the wishes of their directors. But most research work is done by doctors working in hospitals, clinics and other fairly independent units.

The doctors are usually financed by either the Medical Research Council or the National Health Service.

Each year the MRC, which employs about 320 doctors on its staff of 4,250, gets through something like £25 million. Some of the projects are important and many people will benefit. But too much of their work is on subjects like: ‘The fine structure of bone’ or ‘The role of microfilaments and microtubules in cell function’.

There is a Medical Research Council Unit for Metabolic Studies in Psychiatry with the laudable and exciting aims of investigating possible biochemical, humoral and electrophysiological abnormalities in patients with mental disorders. But this unit has only six senior workers whereas an MRC Laboratory of Molecular Biology has 57 senior workers and an MRC Cyclotron unit has 27 senior workers.

It is essential for a young doctor to do some original research if he is to become a consultant. The ambitious medical man must publish a paper or two. Invariably, he chooses a research project which he hopes will do his career the most good. He picks a subject perhaps because it is fashionable, or likely to become fashionable, or perhaps because it is a subject which his chief enjoys.

Research work is duplicated – time, money and mental effort being wasted without any regard for the fact that all three are in short supply.

Trained doctors are a valuable commodity and their time and mental effort are badly needed. The amount of money it costs these doctors to do their research is almost incalculable. But they are paid by the National Health Service and they use National Health Service facilities – so on paper the research costs only the price of a stamp and envelope to send the results off to a learned journal.

There are hundreds of small, specialist journals in existence, each catering for a few hundred specialists, and making sure that each specialist can see his research work in print. It has been estimated that a new paper is produced every 26 seconds.

That is not difficult to believe when one realises that in Britain alone there are approximately 150 journals – 36 of them called the British Journal of… - for doctors. There are such things as the Journal of the British Society for Surgery of the Hand, which recently carried articles entitled: ‘Two cases of Extensor Digitorum Brevis Manus’ and ‘Observations on Skoog’s operation for Dupuytren’s Contracture’.

Every month a book comes out called the Index Medicus. This book is two inches thick, has 1,000 pages and contains nothing but the titles of medical research papers published throughout the world.

In one recent issue, for example, there were no fewer than 75 papers dealing with potassium. Papers like: ‘A study of the calcium, potassium and sodium content of toad atria’.

From the Index Medicus one can see that what is happening in this country is happening all over the world. The research being done here is being duplicated elsewhere.

Too much of this knowledge is unlikely to prove of value. We spend very little time attempting to apply or coordinate the knowledge we have accumulated. So we have whole libraries full of useless information. We have complicated papers written about unheard-of drugs and unheard-of diseases.

Of course, our scientists do, occasionally, produce some useful information, but too frequently it involves expensive materials or equipment. We find a cure for X’s disease that will cost us so much money that we cannot possibly hope to cure all the people who will want to be cured, even though the numbers are statistically small.

It is a sad but true fact that we have to be selective about the treatments we adopt these days. Our scientists have produced treatments so expensive that we could, without difficulty, spend our entire gross national product on looking after a few people. Renal dialysis is an obvious example. We just cannot afford to provide kidney machines for all the people who require them even though the total number is small. They cost several thousand pounds each and a lot more to run.

Scientists working in other fields have for some time realised that they cannot merely dabble around in the hope that they will discover something useful. The universities, the armed forces and the industrial concerns will no longer pay for projects which will probably have no practical use.

We have more than enough useless information at our fingertips. What we need now are scientists who can do something with some of the information we have, but have not used.

And in the same way, we need medical scientists and doctors who can provide practical treatments for major problems, rather than devising theoretical treatments for minor medical conditions.

Instead of spending so much money on research into the causes of obscure disorders which affect a small percentage of the world's population, we need to spend money on finding ways to improve methods of protecting people from common hazards. We need to improve preventive medicine techniques. We need to do real research into nursing care methods and social care needs. We need to study the problems of backache and arthritis. We need to do more work on car safety and mental health. We need to find ways to help people stop smoking and we need to spend time and money on community care programmes.

We do not need more drugs at the moment. There are something like 40,000 drugs available today. Many doctors have never heard of most of them. We need to know more about the drugs we really need to use. In fact we need fewer specialists and more doctors who are able to decide what the important problems are, and do something about them.

If doctors do not realise this and do not stop wasting time and money, then they must forfeit the right to plan their own research programmes.

First published in the Daily Telegraph in 1973

I subsequently extended this argument into a book entitled 'Paper Doctors' (published by Temple Smith in the UK) in which I argued that doctors and scientists would serve the world better if they put more effort into finding ways to use the information we have accumulated (much of which simply sits in libraries and contributes nothing) rather than slavishly collecting yet more information.

Does Your Doctor Give You a Pain?

If, while you are receiving medical treatment for one condition, you acquire an additional health problem, then the chances are that the second symptom will have been caused by the treatment for the first.

If you are in a hospital bed then there is a one in ten chance that you are there because of something that a doctor has done to you. These days, doctors are responsible for so much illness that they even have a special word – iatrogenesis – to describe the process.

If all the patients who suffer from side effects had originally been faced with death or disablement then these would be fair and reasonable risks. But the cruel irony is that many of the people who are injured by doctors never really needed medical treatment in the first place. They went to a doctor because, like so many of us, they had been taught that when we are sick we need to ask for professional advice.

Contrary to this well-established tradition, there is now much new evidence to show that the tendency to call in a professional is not always the right approach. The accepted medical attitude is to regard the patient as a battleground, the illness as an enemy and drugs as weapons with which to fight the illness. We now know, however, that the human body is itself equipped with an enormous range of subtle and sophisticated feedback mechanisms.

Some help to protect you against changes in your environment. Some are there to fight off disease. Many are given the job of regulating what you eat and drink so that, if you listen to them, your body will be provided with the ingredients it really needs. Together, these mechanisms mean your body is well capable of looking after itself.

There are internal mechanisms designed to enable you to avoid danger, deal with minor damage, cope with pain, improve your eyesight, keep out the cold, stay slim for ever, improve the shape of your body, deal with anxiety and, even, fight cancer.

The loss of appetite and fever which accompany flu, for example, are signs that your body is fighting the infection – bugs need food and they do not like the heat. The body’s defence mechanisms and self-healing mechanisms are so effective that if you learn how to take advantage of them, then in at least 90% of all illnesses you will get better without any form of medical treatment – and without any risk of dangerous side effects.

It is still true, of course, that there are times when even the body’s immensely sophisticated self-healing mechanisms can be overwhelmed. And it is vitally important that you become aware of the major warning signs – such as recurrent pain and unexpected bleeding – which mark the need for outside support. But in general the evidence we have now shows that we should all learn to be more sceptical of our doctors, less eager to put ourselves in their hands.

In order to take advantage of your body’s self-healing mechanisms and delay your visit to a doctor for as long as possible you must learn to look and listen for the early signs which show that your body’s defences are working on your behalf.

You should know, for example, that minor injury sites become hot and swollen because the heat damages any infective organisms which are present while the swelling helps ensure that the injured part is not used too much. By immobilising the area, the pain and stiffness act as a natural splint. If you reduce the temperature and swelling and overcome the pain by using drugs you could run a real risk of damaging your tissues.

So, by learning to recognise the time when seemingly troublesome symptoms are serving a useful purpose, it is possible to reduce your reliance on doctors and the risk of your being damaged by side effects.

There is another advantage too: if we all learn to restrict our demands on doctors then the quality of the professional services available to us will inevitably improve!

First published in Sunday Telegraph Magazine 6.3.83

My book Bodypower (which expands on the principles outlined in this article) was published the following day. It instantly became a UK bestseller. A number of authors wrote similar books and for a while it looked as though patients might be less enthusiastic about taking drugs they didn’t really need. But the drug companies, aided and abetted by their handmaidens in general practice, soon managed to redress the balance.

Eulogy for a Medical Student

Our joys were simple and basic. We ate fish and chips and talked all night, sharing a bottle of Port and a huge chunk of Stilton cheese. We didn't pay the electric bills until the final notice came in, yet there were always plenty of good books and records about. My flatmate had a flute, a guitar and a fine stereo system – though he always wore the same pair of faded, torn jeans. That year we live with the determined enthusiasm of men preparing for a long, hard winter.

During that first year, Andy (as I shall call him) was a perfect medical student. He was deeply interested in medicine and in people for their own sake, in health as well as illness. In the beginning, at least, he believed that medicine would help him understand people more thoroughly.

But as time went by, Andy changed. He was a person who questioned things. As he studied, he wanted to discuss moral and ethical questions with his teachers – but they weren't interested. They simply shrugged their shoulders and pointed to the syllabus. But no syllabus could provide the answers to Andy's questions.

Frustrated, Andy gradually began to lose interest. He saw there was no room in medical school for initiative and original thinking. He saw people praised for academic prowess when all they had done was learn to recite strings of facts. He began to read only those books he found personally satisfying and to ignore the rest. And, almost deliberately it seemed, he began to fail tests.

He remained interested in medicine, but he lost faith in the ability of his teachers to teach him the things he wanted to know. He began to see that there would never be any reward within the medical system for thinking. And he knew only too well that he couldn't compete with the students with blotting paper brains.

Eventually, Andy failed examinations that mattered. To him they were only hurdles in a dull and unexciting cross country run, crossword puzzles for the dim-witted. To him, even crossword puzzles were more challenging – and just as important as medical school examinations.

When he tried to explain his frustrations and feelings of imprisonment, no one listened. He was told only to work harder, to settle down and pass his examinations. He wanted to pass, but he couldn't sit and memorise pages and pages of material without being allowed to explore its validity and consequences.

Andy left medical school to try to sort things out. He spent 12 months travelling around Europe trying to convince himself that perhaps academic success was a legitimate end in itself. After a year, when he felt fit for another attack on academic medicine, he came back. It was no different. Again he failed.

Andy viewed information as a tool to be used by a creative mind, yet he was expected to dedicate himself to the indiscriminate collection of facts. He argued with his teachers, saying that memorising facts didn't necessarily make a good doctor – that wisdom, sympathy and caring are more important than a brain crammed with facts. He tried to tell his instructors that he believed doctors should be independent and critical of the medical establishment, that they should protect their patients from its excesses.

But still his teachers did not listen. Eventually Andy gave up. He felt so depressed, so frustrated, so alone that he killed himself.

In many ways, it was medical school that killed Andy. He died because medical education is rigid, unbending, limited and limiting. He died because medical education no longer is involved simply with the business of training doctors. It has become a scientific business with new disciplines added almost weekly. As the pressures increase, all the other interests medical students once enjoyed are squeezed out. Since they have less and less contact with the outside world, it is no wonder that young physicians are such a dreary lot. Listen to their conversations in a doctor's mess or hospital cafeteria. It revolves around academic medicine and medical politics. When do doctors ever talk about the things their patients talk about: How then can they understand and talk with their patients?

Those physicians who stay in the big academic centres need never move outside their narrow world. There are banks, shops and libraries within the hospital complexes. And those doctors who go into practice are in their late twenties before they ever begin to learn about the world.

Yet, more than ever before, medicine needs thinking people. It needs creative people who can see beyond the academic limits of medical science. The technical specialists have made tremendous advances, but no corresponding advances have been made in social or community medicine. Most of our ethical and social problems remain unsolved.

Medicine needs more people like Andy. It needs people who can question what goes on, who can make the necessary protests. But as long as our medical schools continue to place all their emphasis on academic study, people like Andy will be forced out of medicine. As a result, its problems – and our society's problems – may never be solved.

First published in The New Physician , 1973
The ‘Andy’ in this article was a flatmate of mine. He was one of the brightest medical students I ever knew and would have made a marvellous doctor. He killed himself after failing yet another examination.

The Living Death of Roger Fordham

His father is a general practitioner somewhere in East Anglia. He was educated at a minor public school. Now he is 23-years-old and a fifth year medical student at a provincial medical school. He passes most of his exams quite comfortably, dries a small car, is going steady with one of his fellow medical students and has occasional problems with his bank manager. He is, I suppose, what one could call a fairly average medical student.

He thinks he might like to specialise in gynaecology but he's prepared for a career in general practice. For most of his life he has regarded medicine as a superior profession. He believes that it is a respectable way to earn a good living, he's genuinely interested in people and no one will mind if he's rather condescending. He finds it quite impossible to think of himself as ever being anything but a doctor.

When he first began to study medicine he had a few rebellious notions. Like most students he imagined that he knew what was wrong with the world and that he could help put things right. All these immature ideas were quickly discarded when his professional responsibilities had been explained more thoroughly.

His tutors, lecturers and advisers believe that he will make a good doctor. They take care to make sure that every new medical student realises the true extent of his responsibilities. It is made clear to the iconoclasts that before they can qualify they must abandon their less conservative beliefs.

They are expected to be scientists and no one will condemn them if they have some sympathy for humanists. But the medical student is not expected to cultivate a political or social conscience. Medicine is a respectable profession.

Roger Fordham, of course, has little to complain about. And he has a good excuse for not complaining even if he finds something worth protesting about. His future is assured as long as he behaves himself. Occasionally he allows himself to break free from the comfortable restrictions which he has accepted. These temporary escapes are, however, generally limited to the more acceptable sort of social frolic. The most respectable consultant will quite readily forgive a student who covers himself with boot polish and dances half-naked at a hospital ball. If, however, the student has been unwise enough to join in an earnest political demonstration he'll probably be severely reprimanded.

Despite the regular appearance of confusing and conflicting reports on medical education, medical students have made no attempt to influence those who prepare the reports even though almost every graduate involved with medical education to any extent seems to be consulted.

At Fordham's medical school, curriculum changes are made with political regularity and fervour. Students who complain that they aren't even informed when a decision about their course has been made, let alone while it is being discussed, are dismissed with contempt and disgust by the administrative hierarchy. Fordham and his numerous simple colleagues have already learned that their responsibilities must be considered carefully if their ambitions are to be fulfilled.

The result of this unhealthy obsession with responsibility is that medical schools are producing hundreds of intellectually immature graduates who are in fact quite unable to accept any sort of genuine responsibility with success. They have confidence in abundance and are well equipped to deal with their daily professional tasks but they are not capable of dealing with really demanding problems.

Medical students should be educated, not just taught, and a good education cannot be a completely comfortable procedure for either side.

The student who has been denied the opportunity to express his opinions (and most medical students are discouraged from thinking, let alone expressing opinions which do not coincide with those in vogue with the current establishment) will be far more likely to rebel when he has qualified. And unfortunately he is unlikely to make as capable a rebel as his more fortunate and experienced lay colleagues. So he becomes frustrated.

Students studying subjects other than medicine would probably have rebelled long ago against an authority which forbade them the freedom which is their constitutional right. But medical students are drawn from a specific, narrow segment of society. Genetic and environmental factors contribute to their lethargy. By inbreeding, the profession has rendered its own safety valve incompetent.

When they experience only superficial responsibility and superficial irresponsibility, students cannot develop their own consciences, consequently the professional becomes relatively more and more important for students in every other faculty are demanding political and social responsibility even before they reach voting age.

The gullibility of the average doctor, his political impotence, and his consequent frustration are easily discovered in any medical journal or at any medical association meeting. Protesting doctors are too often comical and rather pathetic.

What is more dangerous than frustration is that student apathy eventually leads to the loss of professional integrity. Ethics, though they are based on a few simple fundamental principles must be formed with regard to environmental circumstances. Medical ethics are in complete confusion at the present time, and the next generation of doctors will not be equipped to help make sensible guiding lines. Not only do we need more easily understood ethical principles regarding extra professional activities, but we need complete reappraisal of intra-professional ethics.

This essential ethical reorganisation cannot be undertaken by intellectually immature medical graduates such as Roger Fordham. The medical profession seemed for some time to be convinced that it was not necessary to become involved in the unpleasant intellectual scrimmage resulting from a technological revolution. That would, of course, have been ideal.

Unfortunately, doctors have become involved and because they are inexperienced in intellectual conflicts, they are losing their identity and integrity. Medicine has become involved in wider politicians and all the wider implications of the welfare services. Students, however, are still protected from their nasty problems.

It is probably impossible to change the type of entrant to medical schools. And it is probably equally impossible to improve medical training with the necessary freedom. The simplest answer is to allow medical students to break with formal education for a year between leaving school and joining a university. If they become involved in voluntary services in this country or abroad for a year they will have an opportunity to try out their own concepts and to develop individual ideological beliefs rather than accept second-hand, out-dated and frequently confused principles. And most important they will have an opportunity to acquire a real sense of responsibility and to develop their own ability to deal with deep responsibilities.

First published in World Medicine 15.10.68

This piece (which I wrote while studying medicine) does, I believe, help explain why medicine has lost its way so badly – and has handed over all responsibility for the way the profession is directed and managed to bureaucratic quangos such as the General Medical Council which neither understand nor care about the responsibilities of doctors or the relationship between doctors and patients.

What's in the Day of a Doctor?

The researchers who recently claimed that GPs spend less than 24 hours a week with their patients are probably right. I've taken a leaf out of one of my old diaries – from the days when I was still in practice as a GP.

8.32 a.m.

Urgent telephone call from patient. Race through early morning traffic and find woman in dreadful pain – possible appendicitis. No telephone available at the patient's house so drive back to surgery to arrange ambulance and hospital admission.

9.12 a.m.

Start morning surgery late. Eighteen patients have booked appointments. Another three turn up unexpectedly. Deal with eight telephone calls from patients between consultations. (Time spent with patients: 126 minutes.)

11.18 a.m.

Dictate hospital referral letters and replies to miscellaneous correspondents – solicitors, administrators, colleagues, patients. (Time spent with patients: 0 minutes.)

11.43 a.m.

Sign pile of repeat prescriptions, passport application forms, insurance forms and laboratory forms. (Time spent with patients: 0 minutes.)

11.54 a.m.

Take telephone call from social worker. Long, tedious conversation. At the end of 15 minutes I have no idea what she wanted. (Time spent with patients: 0 minutes.)

12.09 p.m.

Take telephone call from clerk at Family Practitioner Committee. They have found another form I'm not filling in properly. (Time spent with patients: 0 minutes.)

12.18 p.m.

Fill in huge pile of forms to keep above clerk happy. (Time spent with patients: 0 minutes.)

12.32 p.m.

Start day's visits. Spend ages looking for maisonette where first patient lives and then discover that she has gone to stay with her mother for the week. Mother lives somewhere across town. Visit two children with earache, one elderly gentleman with gout and pregnant woman worried that she is about to lose her second baby. (Time spent with patients: 11 minutes.)

13.43 p.m.

Arrive home for lunch. Gravy congealed. Custard dried up. Eat sandwich and gulp down cup of scalding coffee. (Time spent with patients: 0 minutes.)

14.11 p.m.

Still trying to find missing patient. When I eventually find her she is irate at delay. Provide prescription and hurry on to next patient before awful threats of physical retribution are turned into painful reality. Two more visits uneventful. Final visit of afternoon is to a patient who needs admitting to hospital. For second time today no telephone available. So return home to make essential calls to hospital and ambulance. (Time spent with patients: 16 minutes.)

15.17 p.m.

Spend forty minutes trying to find empty hospital bed. (Time spent with patients: 0 minutes.)

16.00 p.m.

Receive telephone call from academic conducting survey into how GPs spend their time. My reply intended to be humorous but not appreciated. (Time spent with patients: 0 minutes.)

16.15 p.m.

Evening surgery. Another 22 patients to be seen. (Time spent with patients: 132 minutes).

19.02 p.m.

Fall asleep exhausted. As drift off decide must find pleasant hobby to fill empty hours.

19.04 p.m.

Telephone rings…

First published in the Coventry Evening Telegraph, 10.12.84

I suspect that things are far, far worse now than they were in 1984. Today, GPs have even more paperwork to complete (including, of course, the infamous revalidation paperwork issued by the General Medical Council). I doubt if many GPs manage to spend as much as 15 hours a week with their patients today. Incidentally, if it seems remarkable that in 1984 there were still homes without a telephone then I should point out that, before the arrival of portable telephones it was by no means unusual to find houses where the nearest telephone was the red one at the corner of the street. I looked after one family who had no electricity in their home. Lighting was provided by gas lamps. Finally, it is also worth remembering that in 1984 doctors were responsible for their patients 24 hours a day and 365 days a year. Most (myself included) arranged to share night time and weekend rota with colleagues but we still provided a ‘we-never-close’ service, including all bank holidays and religious holidays, and 72 hour shifts were commonplace.

How I Can Tell You All About You…

Have you ever seen a medium at work?

You haven't seen anything yet.

This week I'm going to use the magic of 'finger pulsed newsprint' to help me tell you things about yourself that you thought were secret.

Since you picked up this newspaper the specially printed pages have been feeding information about you, your personality and your history into this column.

In the relatively short time that has elapsed since you first touched the ink on this page special messages taken from the heat and sensitive ink have enabled me to get to know an amazing amount about you.

So, for example, I can feel a strong sense of scepticism pulsing through your body. Part of you would like to believe what you are reading but part of you suspects that it is some sort of trick.

If I'm going to convince you that this week's column really does have superhuman powers then I'm going to have to work hard.

So, here goes.

First, let me tell you a little bit about the sort of person you are.

One thing I can tell you straight away is that you are far more sensitive than some people think you are. You sometimes hide your feelings. And even some of those who think they know you don't really understand exactly what goes on in your mind.

Sometimes you wish that some of those who are close to you would show their affection for you with more enthusiasm. You don't particularly want overt displays but you would appreciate knowing that people care.

And trust is important to you, too. You dearly wish that you could trust people more. Too often you get let down by other people. They don't do what they've promised to do. That annoys you. In the past there have been several occasions when you've been let down badly. And the scars still hurt. Think hard and you'll know what I mean.

Next, your health.

I can feel aches and pains that go back a long, long time. You may or may not have the pain now but in the past you've had pain. You've had trouble with a leg at one stage in your life. It might have been a knee that gave you trouble. Or maybe the area around a knee.

And I can feel discomfort about the throat, too. You've probably had troubles in your ear or nose. I can feel stuffiness and aggravating pain.

The images I'm getting are beginning to fade a little now. Would you hold onto the page a little tighter, please? Just spread your fingers across the ink of the page.

Now, I can feel another batch of problems coming through. I can feel that you've had problems with your hair in the past. It's worried you. And there have been some skin problems too. The problems with the hair are very strong.

Those thoughts are beginning to swamp the other images I'm getting so I'm going to stop those now.

Let's take a look at your friends and your relatives. The people who are, or have been, important to you.

I can feel that the initial J means something to you. It's probably a friend. Not a close relative. If you are thinking of a close relative then that's not the person.

It's someone who played an important part in your life. Someone you may have to think hard to remember. But once you remember then you'll know instantly who I'm talking about.

J wants you to know something. It's about something that happened in the past. There is sadness and an apology. Something that went wrong. Some error. Some mistake. Something said in the heat of the moment, perhaps. But underneath it all there is a strong sense of devotion.

Let's leave J.

There is something else important to you. It's not a human being. It's something from your childhood.

I don't really understand this I have to confess. I can feel much love and much affection. I can feel the love burning through to me. But it isn't a human being at all. But it is alive. And the sense of companionship is strong.

I hope that means something to you. The only other thing I can tell you about it is that the letter B, C or D is important. The letter doesn't refer to a name. It's something from your past that is warm-blooded but not human.

I'll move on. I'll move on to work. To the things you do.

Here I can feel a sense of some frustration. I can feel that there are things you can do, or things you would like to do.

I can feel that you are being tied down or held back. I can feel that you are struggling to escape. You have, perhaps, been struggling for some time. Your struggles are weaker now than they were. You have accepted your feelings of frustration.

I can feel that you have enjoyed some satisfaction in your life. But you have unfulfilled ambitions. I can feel that you have tasted success. But that you know that you could do more with your life. If only you had the chance.

I can feel that you would have liked to have been lucky. If you'd been luckier then things might have been different.

Now I can feel that some of your original scepticism is coming back. But not all of it.

I can tell that you've moved your fingers in the last minute or two. You may not be conscious of moving them. But you have.

The messages I'm getting from you are very weak now.

And I suspect that the strength of the ink has nearly gone. If you'd been able to keep your fingers still for longer, the message would have been stronger.

But don't worry about it.

We have been able to communicate together and we have shown that the power of this type of transfer of emotion and thought is truly infinite.

Before you go, there is one other thing I want to say to you.

In the future you will often read about or see the work that mediums can do.

Ignore them. They use all sorts of simple tricks to make you think that they can read your mind or bring you messages from beyond the grave.

But, believe me, it's all nonsense.

That's all I wanted to say. Thank you for staying with me and for concentrating so hard. You can carry on with the rest of the newspaper now.

First published in the Sunday Independent, 7.2.88

I wrote this in an attempt to do a little damage to the widespread enthusiasm for mediums.

Where Doctors Fear to Tread

Today a doctor is ten times more likely than he was a decade ago to find himself in court accused of negligence, and this is not due to a lowering in the standard of skill. It is the increase in litigation itself which is to blame for the deterioration in medical care.

It is, for example, well-known in medical circles that the number of unnecessary X-ray pictures taken in accident and emergency departments is now astronomical. Doctors treating accident victims feel that they have to take photographs of every injured limb in order to protect themselves from criticism should any legal action result from the accident. It is too easy for a judge or lawyer to be critical, and quite impossible to prove that a particular accident did not produce a specific injury – or, indeed, that treatment would not have been influenced by any radiological evidence obtained.

In my innocence I thought this caution meant simply that doctors would be doing more investigations and more searching examinations; unnecessary, costly and unquestionably bad medical practice, but not likely to alter significantly the quality of medical care provided. I am now beginning to realise that the growing threat of being sued by patients has caused doctors deliberately to practise 'defensive medicine', which can mean actively avoiding or delaying taking positive action or offering practical help. The result is that many patients must suffer unnecessary pain or inconvenience.

In the US, where litigation is a way of life and a minor error can produce a million-dollar lawsuit, doctors are encouraged to drive past road accidents, because if they stop and help and the patient then dies or becomes crippled, they are likely to be sued. In a society where a misaligned umbilicus may be worth thousands of dollars, it is too often safer to do nothing.

I recently attended a course designed to help family doctors learn how to manipulate spines and necks. The aim was to help general practitioners treat pain in their own surgeries without waiting for hospital appointments and X-rays. The lecturer pointed out that it was not clinically necessary to have an X-ray before every manipulation and that waiting for X-rays could cause an unnecessary delay before the start of treatment.

Sensible? Yes. Clinically sound? Of course. But from the whispers around me, I got the impression that there were still a number of GPs unwilling to offer manipulation until an X-ray had been done.

Thus patients with backache, who might well obtain relief through manipulation applied instantly, may have to wait in pain for either an X-ray or a hospital appointment. The former could take weeks; the latter months.

All practising doctors take out insurance, but if they end up on the wrong end of a writ a court appearance with its publicity can produce years of heartache and may ruin a doctor's career.

It is also largely because of the possible legal consequences, should anything go wrong, that so few family doctors are prepared to deal with home confinements. Indeed, the style and quality of medical practice is being damaged by the rise in the number of patients prepared to sue their doctors with more enthusiasm than good cause.

According to the law it is much easier to prove that damage is done by the doctor who offers his patients positive assistance than it is to prove that unnecessary suffering is caused by the doctor who does nothing. Inaction is rapidly becoming a medical byword, as more and more doctors allow their clinical judgements to be ruled not by what is clinically proper or medically feasible but by what is legally safe and judicially defensible.

The several hundred thousand individuals who are now suffering from back pain and waiting for X-rays and hospital appointments may care to reflect on that.

So, too, may all those expectant mothers who will not be allowed to have their babies at home.

First published in Telegraph Sunday Magazine 18.4.82

There is absolutely no doubt that things are infinitely worse today than they were then. All doctors now practise 'defensive' medicine. They take too many X-rays, they do too many tests, they give treatments which patients don't really need and they withhold treatments which might save lives. And yet, despite all this, the lawyers are busier than ever and lawsuits are commonplace.

Can’t We Give the Aged More To Do?

I was astonished by the ferocity of her refusal when I suggested to a rather elderly patient that she might like to consider applying for a place in one of our local old people’s homes.

She told me firmly that she did not consider herself ready for such a place. She did not want to be treated as physically and mentally incompetent, but wanted to retain a little pride and a little independence. When she was ready to be dumped in what she rather vividly described as a vestibule to the crematorium, she would let me know.

When I stopped to think I could see her point.

Over the last 10 years or so that I have been in general practice, I have visited dozens of old people’s homes, most of them run by local authorities and staffed by social workers. I have visited homes in towns, cities and in country areas in many parts of the country. In almost all, I have seen old people sitting around, doing nothing much apart from stare at one another, watch television and look at tattered old magazines.

There has been no real sign of life in any of those establishments and little evidence of the residents being encouraged to enjoy their final years.

I think it is fair to say that in most old people’s homes, residents are discouraged from doing anything remotely enjoyable. This is not because there is an official policy designed to eradicate all the fun from their lives: it is a result of the attitude of those who have the authority over these institutions.

It seems to me that the basic philosophy upon which the whole structure of these institutions is built is that the residents must be protected and cared for as though they were valuable objects. I can understand this for there are now so many laws and rules that anyone with any responsibility must be aware of the need to avoid doing anything wrong.

If a resident in an old people’s home gets drunk, run over, mugged, lost, arrested or dies there is a good chance that someone, somewhere, will immediately call for an inquiry, demand the resignation of everyone connected with the home and send a lengthy report to some official body.

To avoid all that, the people who have authority over these homes wrap their residents in cotton wool. They do not let them go out by themselves. They do not allow them to damage their bodies with alcohol, cigarettes, songs or games of cribbage. They certainly do not encourage such dangerous pastimes as holding hands or cuddling.

Elderly residents are allowed to do very little at all. They are allowed to sit and watch television, gossip about one another, complain about the food and die quietly in their beds. That is why my patient refused to apply.

She has a very valid point and we really ought to reconsider what we think we are doing in our old people’s homes. Are we really trying to protect the old from all the dangerous things in life? Is the aim simply to help people live as long as they possibly can?

Or should we not, perhaps, simply be offering a little structured support for old people who find looking after themselves rather difficult? Should we not be offering a home where heat and light are provided, where there is food, a roof and there is no need for worry if the plumbing goes wrong?

There is a big difference between offering that sort of basic support and the comprehensive care that now seems to be an accepted part of the package deal in most old people’s homes.

Many residents in these homes have been institutionalised. They accept the cotton wool wrapping as a matter of course and really do not have the initiative or energy to do much else apart from sit and watch the staff turn the telly on in the morning and turn it off again at night.

We should think carefully about our attitude towards the elderly and about our basic purpose in providing old people’s homes. Perhaps we should find some way of encouraging those who have the responsibility and authority for looking after residents in these places to allow them more freedom. Perhaps we could ensure that there is less pressure put on staff to protect their residents.

And, just as important, perhaps we can do away with the assumption that because they are old and need care these residents must live out their lives in miserable inaction. I believe, in fact, that we should stop regarding them as being solely recipients of charitable services and begin to think of them as active and potential volunteers.

For although they may need support, a great many residents in these homes are physically and mentally fit and quite capable of contributing to the community in which they live. They could, for example, visit other old people, babysit for young couples and even do small chores for those elderly folk who are so physically disabled that they can never be considered for accommodation in old people’s homes.

There is no reason why fitter residents in old people’s homes should not be employed to help with domestic duties and why they should not win a little dignity and independence by turning those massive lawns which seem to surround all old people’s homes into vegetable gardens.

I think that dear patient of mine had a good point. I don’t think I would like to be put into one of the old people’s home we have today.

First published in the Daily Telegraph 22.1.82
Does anyone doubt that things today are worse than they were 30 years ago?

Anyone Who Tells You Vaccines Are Safe and Effective is Lying

Ask a doctor what she thinks about vaccination and she will tell you that it saves lives. Lots of lives. She'll probably add that vaccination is one of medicine's most powerful weapons in the fight against disease. Ask how she knows that it saves lives and she'll look a bit puzzled for a moment (as though you've asked her how she knows that breathing is good for us) and then, clearly wondering if you're a nutter or just plain old-fashioned stupid, tell you that it has cut mortality rates and helped eradicate killer diseases such as polio and smallpox. She'll tell you vaccination is completely safe and free of side effects and that anyone who says otherwise is just a mad conspiracy theorist. She'll tell you all this because it is what she has been told to tell you by the Department of Health, the medical establishment and the drug industry. She hasn't seen any scientific evidence proving that vaccination is effective and safe but this is only because there isn't any.

Oh dear.

I can hear, and even feel, hordes of apoplectic vaccination supporters reaching for whatever they use instead of pens these days when they feel the need to write a letter to the editor.

Enthusiasm for vaccination has become almost hysterical in the last few years. Drug companies promote vaccination programmes because they make billions of dollars out of vaccines. Doctors are equally enthusiastic because they can earn huge fees for vaccinating their patients (and be denied massive bonuses if they don't). And governments everywhere are enthusiastic because they have been told (by drug companies and doctors) that vaccination programmes help prevent disease and therefore save money. (They are all now stuck in pro-vaccination mode because if they admit that vaccination is neither effective nor safe, the legal costs and damages will bankrupt everyone involved.)

The enthusiasm for vaccination, and the disgust for those who question its efficacy, has reached such heights that there is now much talk of compulsory vaccination programmes being introduced. There are doctors (who will make vast amounts of money out of a compulsory vaccination programme) who recommend that all children be vaccinated whether or not their parents approve. Parents who refuse to have their children vaccinated will have them taken away from them. Some GPs are already refusing to look after patients if they don't agree to have their children vaccinated.

I now have no doubt that despite the dangers and inefficiencies known to be associated with it, vaccination will become compulsory. The hazards and inadequacies will be ignored. It will not be the first time. Compulsory vaccination was introduced in Britain in the mid-19th century and in 1871 Public Vaccinators were appointed.

You will probably not collapse with shock when I tell you that drug companies which make vaccines would not be averse to their products being made compulsory. I understand that. I would like my books to be made compulsory reading.

Senior doctors recently suggested not only that vaccination should be compulsory but that children who were not vaccinated should not be allowed into school. Social workers will be quick (and eager) to take children away from parents who oppose vaccination.

Politicians have been persuaded that vaccinating the population at large helps save money. The theory is that if you vaccinate 1,000,000 children against, say, whooping cough and, as a result, you prevent 1,000 children getting the disease then the country will avoid the cost of 1,000 parents staying at home for a week or so to look after their child. If one child is permanently brain damaged by the vaccine that is bad luck on the child and his or her parents but, as long as the State can avoid financial responsibility by denying that there is any link between vaccination and brain damage, then it is ahead of the game. In reality, the evidence shows that even this cold-blooded, steel-hearted philosophy is faulty. The problem is that vaccines are so ineffective and so dangerous that instead of being an advantage to society as a whole they are a costly disadvantage.

Drug companies make huge amounts of money out of selling vaccines. And the establishment has fiddled the evidence, and denied or suppressed the inconvenient truths, in order to promote the official point of view. In Britain I have been banned from speaking to doctors and debates about vaccination are unknown.

The global vaccine market reached $21 billion in 2010 and is growing at a rate of 16.5%. The whole business of vaccinating people is so hugely profitable (largely because it is something that doesn't rely on finding a large number of sick people but also because it is something that can be done on a regular basis) that drug companies, having almost saturated the 'vaccinating-children' market are moving heavily into adult vaccines. There is, for example, a vaccine planned to prevent atherosclerosis. I suspect that doctors will claim that this will enable people to keep eating a bad diet and yet avoid heart attacks. Those who promote vaccines often claim that vaccination programmes have reduced illness, prevented millions of deaths and are the main reason that the average life expectation has risen.

These are all barefaced lies.

They claim, for example, that Edward Jenner, the father of vaccination, enabled doctors to eradicate smallpox. That's a myth.

Jenner tried out the first smallpox vaccine on his own 10-month-old son. Tragically, the boy remained ‘mentally retarded’ until his death at the age of 21. Jenner refused to have his second child vaccinated. Oddly, the doctors who talk so knowledgeably about Jenner never seem to know any of this. The profession which had originally rejected Jenner’s work as too dangerous embraced it, and ignored the risks, when they saw the profits to be made.

One of the worst smallpox epidemics in Britain hit between 1870 and 1872, nearly two decades after compulsory vaccination was introduced. The people of Leicester refused to have the vaccine and when the next epidemic hit in the 1890s they relied upon a system of quarantine, and good health practices. There was only one death from smallpox in Leicester but in other towns, where the vaccinators had been busy, there were many deaths.

When the international campaign to rid the world of smallpox was at its height, the number of cases rose every time there was a large scale vaccination programme. And so the strategy was changed. Mass vaccination programmes were replaced with surveillance, isolation and quarantine.

OK, so forget smallpox.

Everyone knows that vaccination eradicated poliomyelitis, don’t they?

Er, well, actually no. The vaccine killed lots of people and played no part in controlling the disease.

In Tennessee, USA, for example, the number of polio victims the year before vaccination became compulsory was 119. The year after the figure was 386. In North Carolina the number of deaths rose from 78 to 313 after vaccination was introduced. In America as a whole the incidence of polio increased by about 50% after vaccination. Ironically, the death rate had been falling before the vaccine was introduced.

The fact is that the significance of polio dropped because of better sanitation, better housing, cleaner water and more food. It was social developments, rather than medical ones, which increased human resistance to infectious diseases.

And I wonder how many vaccine supporters know that 17 million children who were vaccinated against polio in the 1950s and 1960s are now at a greatly increased risk of developing cancer? Early polio vaccine was prepared using monkey kidney tissue which contains a carcinogenic virus, SV40. I bet your doctor didn’t tell you about that. I bet she didn’t mention that the virus can be passed on to the children of those who were given the contaminated vaccine. And it’s no good trying to find out if you had the carcinogenic vaccine because the Department of Health has destroyed all the records.

Well, there’s always the whooping cough vaccine, isn’t there? Surely that helped save thousands of young lives?

No, actually, that’s a myth too. Or, more accurately, a lie. The whooping cough isn’t very efficient and it certainly isn’t safe.

The incidence of the disease was already falling fast when the vaccine was introduced in the 1950s. And the evidence proves that the whooping cough vaccine is neither very efficient nor is it safe. The Government guessed that it causes brain damage in 1 in 100,000 children. But the figure could be 1 in 6,000. No one has the foggiest which report is most accurate. The only certainty is that it does cause brain damage. The British Government has quietly paid out compensation to hundreds of children who were brain damaged by the whooping cough vaccine. I bet your doctor forgot to tell you that.

Still, there’s always the flu vaccine.

Influenza vaccines contain a constantly changing variety of gunk (and their efficacy is severely compromised by the fact that they are inevitably designed to deal with last year’s flu strain). Popular contents include formaldehyde, polyethylene glycol, gelatin and thimerosal. I particularly like the inclusion of thimerosal because that contains mercury and the blessed EU has banned barometers because they contain mercury. So you can’t have a barometer hanging in the hall if it contains mercury but the doctor can jab some of the stuff into your kid’s arm. Great. That makes sense.

Common side effects of the flu vaccine include fever, tiredness, headache and muscle aches. A list of the slightly less common side effects would scare you to death. (Oh, OK, I’ll scare you to death. How do you fancy brain swelling, facial paralysis, eye muscle damage, kidney disorders and the ultimate side effect: death?)

And, of course, the vaccine will, like all vaccines, damage the human body’s immune system which is the thing God gave us to help us fight off infections such as the flu.

The whole vaccination story is one of the great scandals of our time. The entire medical profession (at least the part of it in general practice) has been bribed by the drug industry, working through the government and using taxpayers’ money.

The few doctors who do stand up and say something, and who dare to point out that vaccination programmes are a hazard and do more harm than good, tend to be quickly silenced. They are discredited and scorned and their work is not published.

The truth is that doctors, whether working as hospital consultants, GPs or public health officials, know very little about vaccination. Most simply follow the establishment line, never question what they are told by the drug industry and dismiss all critics of vaccination as dangerous lunatics.

They dismiss the idea of there being side effects as Luddite nonsense. Don't dare mention autism as a side effect!

Actually, I will just mention autism which is, of course, a disorder which involves brain damage (something known to be caused by vaccines). The vaccine defenders argue that it is a coincidence that the incidence of autism has rocketed as the number of vaccinations being given to children has also rocketed. Well, they would, wouldn't they? But I wonder how many enthusiastic GPs and health visitors know that the symptoms of autism are exactly the same as the symptoms of the type of brain damage caused by vaccines? And I wonder how many warn their patients that the American Government has accepted that vaccines may cause autism? And is paying compensation to parents whose children have vaccine induced autism.

In Britain, doctors start dumping vaccines into babies who are just a few weeks old. And yet there is no evidence that vaccines are safe in the long-term. No research is done to check this. The establishment puts the onus on the doubters to find the evidence, knowing that is pretty well impossible to do this. In the USA a huge medical practice of paediatricians with 30,000 child patients decided not to vaccinate their patients at all. Guess how many patients with autism they have? If you guessed 'none' you guessed right.

In Britain, politicians, doctors, nurses and journalists all enthusiastically insist that vaccines are entirely safe and free from side effects. They are all lying. Lest you assume that is hyperbole let me point out that according to the US Health Department's National Vaccine Injury Compensation Programme, allegedly safe childhood vaccines officially kill or injure well over 2,000 children a year in America. Can you imagine the fuss there would be if a food company marketed a product which killed or injured 2,000 healthy children every single year?

The evidence shows that vaccination programmes have not done the things they are credited with but have done most of the things they are blamed for. The decline in disease, the reduction in infant mortality rates and the increase in average life expectation are all due to improved living conditions. Cleaner water, efficient methods of removing sewage, fresher food, less poverty and less overcrowding are the real reasons that these improvements have taken place. Anyone who doubts this has only to look at graphs showing mortality rates and life expectation rates alongside graphs showing when vaccines were introduced. The graphs show clearly that the improvements took place before vaccines were introduced.

Why don't doctors say anything?

Sadly, that is because the medical profession has been bought. GPs lost their final scrap of integrity on the day when they agreed to take money if they managed to vaccinate enough patients. That sort of conveyor belt, bonus ridden philosophy is better suited to the manufacture of motor car parts than the practise of medicine.

In Britain, GPs receive huge bonus payments if they vaccinate enough patients. Every vaccination they give (or authorise) is another nice noise in the cash register. Epidemics produce a bonus.

The Government and the enormous and rich vaccine industry have bought the medical profession, lock stock and syringe barrel. GPs, once members of a proud and distinguished profession have been reduced to snivelling, whining needle-men for the drug industry; hand-maidens to an industry which cares nothing for people but everything for profits. Doctors have lost their way. GPs who jab enough patients get a thumping great wodge of cash. A GP who is questioning and discerning will be punished. And so the vast majority of GPs do as they are told. Most know nothing about the dangers of the damned vaccines they so happily jab into patients' arms. Question the whole sordid business and these ill-educated propagandists will throw up their hands in horror. Ask them for some evidence that vaccines are safe and effective and they become hysterical. Facts are, as John Adams said, stubborn things. And the facts do not show any value in vaccination.

The number of health problems (varying from autism to severe brain damage) caused by vaccines will soar. The link between vaccinations and illness will continue to be as strenuously denied as was the link between smoking and lung cancer. And for the same reasons.

Most practising doctors and nurses at the sharp end of medicine undoubtedly believe that vaccines have helped wipe out some of the deadliest infectious diseases. Many members of the medical profession would put vaccination high on any list of great medical discoveries.

The mythical power of vaccination programmes has for years constantly been sustained by governments and organisations such as the World Health Organisation announcing that such and such a disease will be eradicated when the relevant vaccination programme has been completed.

Vaccination is widely respected by doctors and others in the health care industry because of the assumption that it is through vaccination that many of the world's most lethal infectious diseases have been eradicated. But there isn't any evidence to show that vaccination programmes have ever been of any value - either to individuals or to communities. When you study (as I have) the evidence relating to whooping cough, tetanus, diphtheria and other diseases it is clear that the incidence, and number of deaths, were in decline long before the relevant vaccines were introduced. But as the years have gone by, the number of vaccines available has increased steadily. Modern American children receive around

30 vaccinations by the time they go to school. A decade or two ago the only vaccines available were against a relatively small number of diseases including smallpox, tuberculosis, polio, cholera, diphtheria, tetanus and whooping cough. Today, the number of available vaccines seems to grow almost daily. In the past, vaccines were produced against major killer diseases. Today, vaccines are produced against diseases such as measles, mumps and chickenpox which have been traditionally regarded as relatively benign inconveniences of childhood.

Does anyone know what happens inside the body when all these different vaccinations are given together? Do different vaccines work with or against one another? What about the risk of interactions? Exactly how does the immune system cope when it is suddenly bombarded with so much foreign material?

Tragically, many doctors seem to know very little about the vaccines they advocate. In my view, if a doctor wants to vaccinate you or a member of your family you should insist that she confirm in writing that the vaccine is both entirely safe and absolutely essential. You may notice her enthusiasm for the vaccine suddenly diminish.

Why are so many people still enthusiastic about vaccination? Well, I suspect that could be because most people simply don’t know the truth. The reality is that the truth, regarded as inconvenient, is frequently suppressed. The same thing happens everywhere these days. When I wrote a column for a newspaper in China the editors were at first reluctant to publish a piece I had written criticising vaccination. Eventually, they printed the piece (simply because I refused to provide an alternative). After the column appeared, my book publishers in China wrote to tell me that the Chinese Government had informed them that they could no longer publish my work. Other Chinese publishers who had shown great enthusiasm for publishing my books also suddenly changed their minds.

Just the other day a journalist interviewed me about vaccination. His piece (which contained some of the simple facts in this article) was published on the Express Tribune website in Pakistan but a day or so later it disappeared.

This article will doubtless attract sneers and condemnations from those who profit from the vaccine industry.

And so the myth will be sustained and vaccine damage will continue.

Written in 2014 but never published.

No publication in the world will publish articles about vaccination. There is no debate on this subject. The drug industry and the medical establishment (both of which have a financial interest in vaccination programmes) have convinced politicians and journalists that any discussion of vaccines would be immoral and against the public interest. The truth, of course, is that there is no evidence whatsoever proving that vaccines are effective and safe while there is a vast amount of evidence showing that vaccines are unsafe and ineffective. Several kind readers have written review articles about my book ‘Anyone Who Tells You Vaccines are Safe and Effective is Lying’ for well-known websites but most of those reviews have been removed within 24 hours.

Appendix

From Door to Door

I needed a job. They needed a temporary van-driver. Thanks to the local labour exchange we met, and I started to deliver fish, fruit and vegetables to towns, villages and isolated houses within a ten mile radius. Every cluster of houses, however small and scattered, had at least one name. Boundaries were blurred and ill-defined. Signs were rare; and those which did exist were often disfigured, misleading or disguised by time and weather.

Realising the problems of a roundsman working in a scattered country area for the first time, the shop-keeper suggested that I spend a day with the regular driver. Perched precariously on an upturned fish-box, scribbling hasty notes on our twisting route, I optimistically imagined that the customers would vary little from day to day. Carefully, I plotted each turn and landmark, and jotted down each customer's preferences. Some, rarely at home, liked their orders to be put in the coal-shed or on the verandah; some preferred them to be left in a wooden box which they could use as a seed-tray or chop up for firewood, but this infuriated others; some paid cash and others had accounts. But I felt confident at the day's apprenticeship.

On my first morning, I arrived early to study the pile of parcels for delivery. With a single exception all the names were new to me, and I was horrified to find that no two days' orders would be the same. I could not start on my round until I had searched through the files in the office for addresses to match the customers' names; then I listed the number for each village and set off. Even with the assistance of a map and every postman and publican I passed, it took me longer to distribute that day's few orders than the regular man had required for a whole van-load; and he had happily stopped to chat to customers, perhaps have a cup of tea and even help to move the furniture.

A large blue notebook tucked under the driver's seat contained full descriptions of all the short cuts devised by my predecessor over a period of thirty years; and I gradually learned more of the addresses. Unfortunately, this gave me false confidence, and instead of asking a shopkeeper or local resident I tried to find my own way, always managing to approach a place from a new direction, so that the notes were useless. Every village too, gave a choice of half a dozen dwellings called 'Wayside', 'Garden cottage', 'Four Winds' or 'Treetops'. It might have been easier had the addresses in the cashier's book coincided with local opinion. They rarely did. Thus, 17 Applebury Close turned out to be 7 Abberbury Place and 3 Weston Road was in fact 43 Western End: small differences but sufficient to send a new delivery man round in confusing circles.

Two villages were so intertwined and contained such an intricate tangle of narrow twisting roads that even bus drivers have been reported lost there._The first person I stopped was on horseback and turned out to be a French boy on holiday. The next was lost, like me. Finally, after a half-hour's search, I found the house surrounded by a high barbed-wire fence. Four dogs yapped heartily at me when I tried to enter with my bundle of dripping fish; so I thrust the parcel into a capacious letter-box and bolted. During my first week I used more petrol daily than the regular driver did in a week.

It was the large country houses, the castles, manors, granges, mansions and halls which presented most problems and most entertainment. The countryside around Newbury is crowded with them. Finding a rear entrance, usually approached by a bumpy cart-track winding from the main road, was like one of those board games with dragons and wizards lying in wait for the unwary traveller. Invariably, I ended up driving my rather battered, squeaky van through wrought-iron gates, past puzzled gardeners and along broad drives of white gravel, round to the kitchen door. The cook would curtly suggest that in future I might use the tradesmen's route, which looked quite easy when travelled in reverse. (Not many people know that big houses don't just have a back door. They also have a back driveway.) Once, arriving at the home of some noble lord, I could not even find the back entrance; so I was obliged to ring the front door bell, hand a box of fish to an immaculate butler who stifled yelps of surprise, and scurry away in a cloud of dust and flying gravel.

These vast houses, where even the gardeners' cottages have double garages, are exciting places. The weekly bill for dog food at many of them must exceed the average income of the staff, who nevertheless are, as a rule, strongly, and almost masochistically proud of their employers' feudal tendencies. One boasted that his master had fired his water bailiff for fishing for trout with a worm. At another massive establishment I delivered a punnet of prawns to the kitchens and was amazed to see a considerable staff preparing luncheon for the single, elderly gentleman who employed them. 'Oh we don't need those now,' said one of the cooks. 'He's changed his mind.' But they kept them anyway.

Not all our customers were private. There was a famous preparatory school, where I blundered into a staff meeting with a hundredweight of potatoes; and several girls' schools where the provisions were wanted sometimes in the kitchen and sometimes in the domestic science classroom. Of course I always took them to the wrong place. On my first visit to a nunnery I went off the road and found myself axle-deep in mud in the shrubbery. It needed another tradesman, the gardener, his dog and two old-aged pensioners to push me out from there.

By the second week I was becoming a little more successful, but one morning I discovered a lonely parcel of strawberries in the middle of a pile of cabbages. It belonged to an order which I had already delivered so I had to retrace my route. Approaching every landmark from the reverse direction I got thoroughly lost and blundered around for the rest of the day. At the end of the fortnight I was able to take things more easily and even stop for an occasional chat. Then the regular driver returned from holiday, and I was looking for another job.

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First published in the Countryman, Autumn 1968

I have no idea why I've included this piece in this collection – other than the fact that it provides a little light relief and is a reminder of simpler times. I took this job during my summer holidays while I was a medical student. One of the houses to which I delivered fish was Highclere Castle, the home of the Earl and Countess of Carnarvon and now known to television viewers as Downton Abbey. I was mightily impressed because I had never before seen a house with its own cricket ground. The person who opened the front door directed me to the side entrance and instructed me to leave the parcel of fish I was delivering in the gun room. This little article earned me more than my fortnight driving the fish van around Berkshire. But, of course, if I hadn't driven the van…

We hope you enjoyed this book. If you did then we would be grateful if you would post a favourable review on Amazon.

Dr Vernon Coleman is a qualified doctor who has been a professional author for 40 years. He has written over 100 books which have sold more than two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK alone. His books have been translated into 25 languages and sold around the world. Many of his books are available as Kindle books on Amazon. For more details about available books please see his author page on Amazon. For free articles please visit www.vernoncoleman.com

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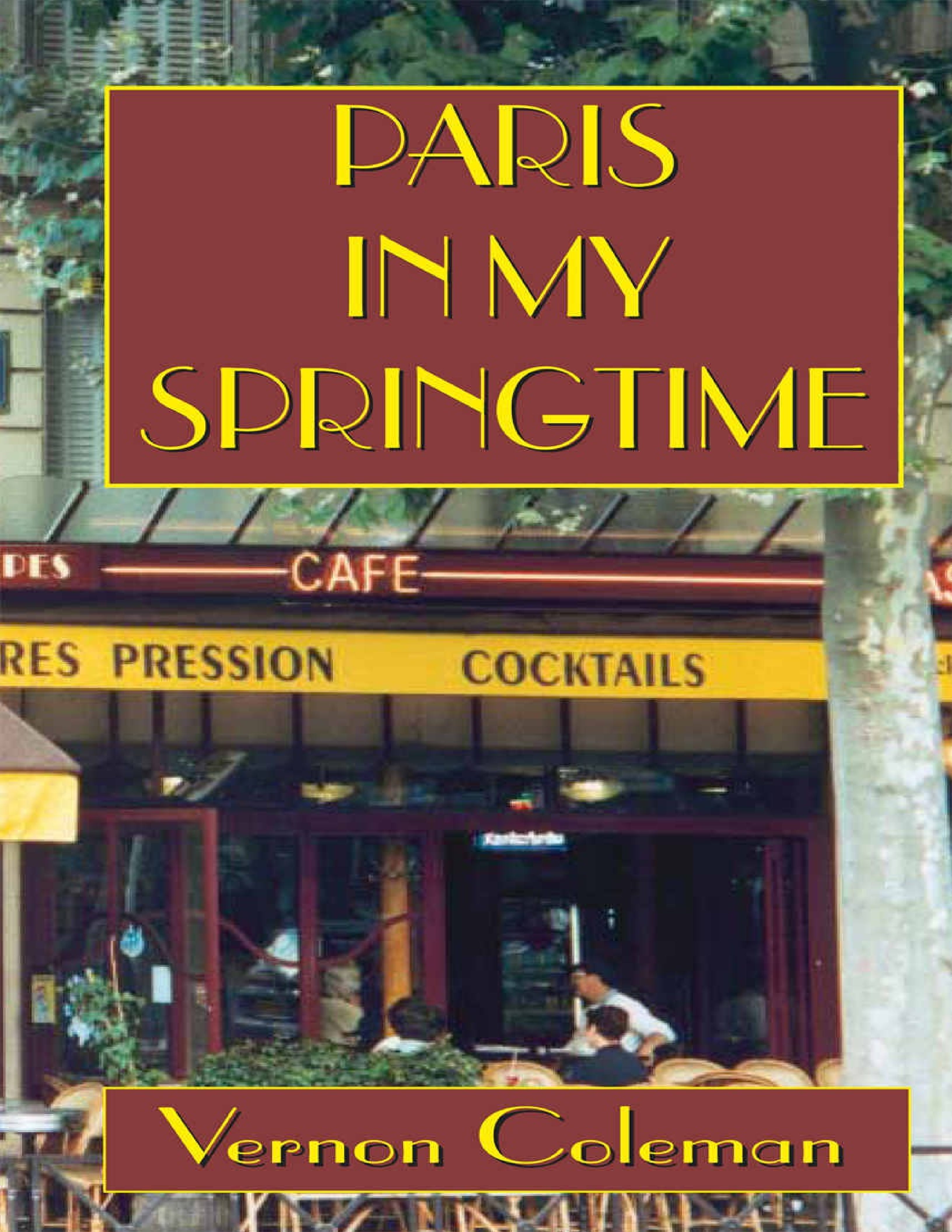
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Vernon Coleman

Paris in my Springtime

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Note
Names, places and organisations have all been changed beyond recognition with the result that all characters, organisations, businesses and places referred to in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to real persons (living or dead), organisations, businesses or places is purely coincidental.

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Dedication

To Donna Antoinette, my Welsh Princess, a delicate but steadfast butterfly holding course in a stormy world of cross winds. With all my love as always.

Foreword

I love spring cleaning. You never know what you're going to find in the next trunk or box you open.

A little while ago, while sorting through some boxes I found in the attic, I came across several large notebooks which turned out to be a diary I kept during a stay in Paris in the last part of 1963 and the first months of 1964. I had intended to write a book about my experiences but when I'd got home I had put the notebooks aside and forgotten about them.

For the world those were exciting times. Lyndon Johnson was elected President of the USA; in India Nehru died and in Russia shoe banging Kruschev lost power. James Bond creator Ian Fleming, Harpo Marx and Cole Porter all died. A 22 year old Cassius Clay became World Champion heavyweight boxer after knocking out Sonny Liston. 1964 was the year that the film of *My Fair Lady* was released and it was the year Sergio Leone invented the Spaghetti Western, giving the world a moody Clint Eastwood starring in *For A Few Dollars More*.

It was a pretty exciting time for me too.

I was 18-years-old and I spent much of the winter which spread across the years of 1963 and 1964 in Paris.

I was an innocent abroad; away from home and out of my depth.

In September of 1963 I had started medical school. But I'd been taken ill and had to abandon my studies for a year. With the best part of a year to kill I was given two choices. I could either stay at home and get a temporary job driving a fish delivery van or working as a games assistant at a local school (the only work the local employment exchange could offer me) or I could go to Paris.

After a great deal of thought (which, on reflection, must have taken very nearly a second) I chose to go to Paris.

And this is the story of what happened to me that year.

Just how much of this story is true you will have to decide for yourself.

Chapter One

It was November 1964 and I should have been at University studying medicine. Instead I was in Paris, sitting in the Cafe Napoleon, eating a flaky croissant and drinking black coffee so strong that I could feel my heart kick into a higher gear every time I took a sip. I glanced at the clock above the bar, took some coins out of my pocket and placed them on the table, using them to weigh down `l'addition' which the waiter had left when he had brought me my breakfast. The coins would prevent the bill blowing away when I opened the door to leave.

I stood up, wrapped my thick, grey, woollen scarf around my neck and pulled my new navy blue beret onto my head. I had come to Paris without a coat so I had compromised by buying myself a scarf and a beret. I looked round the warm and well lit cafe. It was early and I was the only customer. Philippe, the solitary waiter had disappeared, either into the cellar or into the store room behind the bar. I called out a goodbye which echoed unanswered in the empty cafe, pulled my jacket collar tight up against my throat, opened the door, lowered my head and headed off into the darkness, the cold and the rain.

Ten minutes later I was standing behind the counter in the pharmacy where I worked, stamping my feet to keep them warm, waiting for the first customer of the day and going over in my head the strange twists of fate which had led me to this unexpected situation.

Back in September, when my parents had taken me (and my luggage) to start my first term at medical school, I'd had little or no idea of what to expect. I had read books and seen films about medical students and hospitals but, callow that I was, I knew enough to know that there are sometimes vast differences between fiction and reality and I knew enough to know that I did not know what to expect.

I had my first cheque book in my pocket. It was as virginal as I was. I had never written a cheque or made love. I was as innocent as only an 18-year-old could be in the early 1960s.

I spent that first night in a tiny room in a towering hall of residence. It seemed possible that the plans for the building had been appropriated from a manufacturer of accommodation for hens, and then enlarged slightly and turned on its side so as to reach upwards rather than outwards. I shared the room with a youth I'd never met before.

It was the first time I had not slept under the same roof as my mother and father and the first time I'd shared a bedroom with a stranger.

In practical terms the stranger was possessive, cautious and modest. He did not hang his clothes or other possessions in the tiny wardrobe by his bed but kept them locked, folded and creased, in a set of three expensive looking leather suitcases. The suitcases were polished, like a guardsman's boots and were themselves kept in smart maroon bags. He put a paisley dressing gown around his shoulders while getting undressed and emerged, minutes later, wearing a pair of paisley pyjamas. He then put the clothes he had removed, and the dressing gown, back into one of the suitcases which he then duly locked before kneeling by the side of his bed to say his prayers. Others of my age might have felt contemptuous, or regarded the ritual as a suitable subject for jest, but I felt envious that he had this apparently indestructible faith with which to dilute the loneliness which I assumed he too must feel.

His name, as embroidered, painted or embossed on every item of clothing, luggage or stationery he had brought with him, was Bright-Perkins, L.F.W. The W stood for William which was, I was soon informed, on no account to be shortened to Will, Bill or Willie. I had, and have, no idea what the L or the F stood for.

William Bright-Perkins may have been modest in a physical sense but I do not think that even he would have claimed modesty as one of his most significant spiritual virtues. Within ten minutes of our meeting he had told me that his father was a banker and drove a Jaguar motor car, that his mother was a keen member of the local hunt and, presumably when not riding horses, drove a Rover and that they, he and his three sisters lived in an eight bedroom house that sat in four acres of prime Home Counties pasture land and was equipped with two hard tennis courts and a croquet court.

Like the vast majority of the students around me, I was an innocent stranded in the no man's land between childhood and adulthood. I didn't realise that, of course. I thought I was grown up. I was so young and so innocent that I thought I was old enough and wise enough to have left fear and uncertainty behind. I didn't know it at the time, of course, but we never get younger or more innocent than that. Inevitably, the fact that I was in reality almost suffocated by fear simply made me feel grossly inadequate.

I had felt tired for a day or two before I had arrived at medical school and when I awoke on my first morning I felt even worse. I had absolutely no appetite and no interest in breakfast. I hardly had the strength to walk across the campus to the medical school. Once I had to sit down on a low stone wall. I had, for no good reason, suddenly burst into tears. That afternoon, after I had stumbled and fallen, one of the lecturers insisted on taking me into the teaching hospital where a senior student took a blood sample.

The blood tests had confirmed that I was suffering from infective hepatitis. I had arrived at the university hospital as a putative medical student but within hours I had been transformed into a patient. When William Bright-Perkins came to visit me (more, I suspect, out of duty than anything else) he stood in the doorway to my hospital room and spoke through a surgical mask. I found it exceedingly difficult to understand anything he said. He brought me a Get Well card upon which he had scrawled: `It's hard work and you're well out of it. I assume you won't be returning to the Hall of Residence so I've had your things packed and your luggage put into the porter's store. I can spread about a bit now. So, thanks for that.'

They kept me in hospital for three weeks and then sent me home to convalesce. Less than a month after my arrival at medical school I was on my way back home, sitting in the front seat of my father's car, slumped down, wrapped in a thick coat and an even thicker scarf. My luggage, retrieved from the porter's store, filled the boot and two thirds of the back seat of the car. My mother was squashed into the remaining third of the back seat. Every time the car went round a corner she had to work hard to protect herself from cardboard boxes full of books.

After a month's convalescence I received a formal note from the Assistant Dean telling me that they had decided to defer my place. I remembered the Assistant Dean from my interview. He was plump and had been surprisingly friendly. The members of the interview panel had been formal and rather cold. I remembered him because he had smiled just like a human being.

`There is now little point in you trying to catch up your contemporaries,' the Assistant Dean had written. `Your delayed start would put you under quite unreasonable pressure. I recommend that you take the year off and re-enrol next September. The University will keep your place open. I will telephone you in a few days to make suggestions as to how you might best use your free year in a way of which the university might approve.'

And so had ended my first year at medical school. It was something of an anti-climax. I felt disappointed and frustrated.

`Have you got any idea how you're going to spend your enforced holiday?' the Assistant Dean asked when he'd called.

`I need to find a job,' I said. `My parents will keep me but I'd rather stand on my own feet. I don't think they should have to feed me.'

`Splendid,' said the Assistant Dean. `Any ideas?'

`Nothing very exciting,' I confessed. I had already checked with the local labour exchange. `A fishmonger in the local town wants a van driver and a private school needs a games assistant.' I wasn't very keen on either of these opportunities. I hated the smell of fish and at school I'd been one of the few students to welcome heavy rain on sports afternoons.

`I don't think the School would be terribly keen on either of those possibilities,' said the Assistant Dean. `We would like you to keep your brain active before you come back. I know fish is reputed by some to be good food for the brain but I rather suspect that even the most enthusiastic proponents of that theory would admit that it is crucial to consume the stuff rather than simply deliver it to other people in order to benefit from its brain boosting qualities. We would like you to come back to us a wiser person with a broader view of the world in general. However, if you're interested I may be able to get you a job which might require a little more cerebral activity. The downside is that the job isn't very exciting and the pay is terrible. The upside is that it's in Paris and, if you're frugal, you'll earn enough to live on.'

`Paris?'

`The French capital rather than the small town in Texas,' explained the Assistant Dean, drily. I didn't know what to reply to this so I mumbled something but said nothing audible.

`Beautiful city,' the Assistant Dean went on. `Set astride the River Seine. Best known for sin, can-can girls and the Eiffel Tower. Have you been there?'

`When I was about twelve,' I said. `Just for a couple of nights.'

`Do you speak French?'

`No,' I admitted. I hesitated. `Well, I studied it at school, of course.'

`Of course,' agreed the Assistant Dean.

I remembered more about my first French teacher, Mr Pentecost, than I did about the language he had taught.

Mr Pentecost had been short and fat and had had a large, hairy wart on his left cheek which made it difficult for me to concentrate on anything he said. The wart seemed to have a life and an identity of its own. I was convinced that it was getting bigger and hairier by the day and as I sat and stared at it I had daydreams (they could not really be described as nightmares) in which it took a life of its own and began to overpower the entire school. One day the deputy headmaster came and told us that Mr Pentecost had been called away to attend a family funeral. When Mr Pentecost returned, two days later, the mole had disappeared. I must have been a slow child for it was not until several years later that it eventually dawned on me that the deputy headmaster had lied and that instead of going to a funeral Mr Pentecost had been to the hospital to have the wart removed. I was a trusting and undoubtedly rather naive teenager. The disappearance of the mole did not make it any easier for me to concentrate on what Mr Pentecost said. Instead of being hypnotised by the mole I was now hypnotised by the space where the mole had been; mesmerised by its absence. It is not, I suppose, particularly surprising that I learned next to nothing from Mr Pentecost.

`I can just about order a loaf of bread,' I told the Assistant Dean.

`And you know where your aunt keeps her pen?'

`Dans le bureau de mon oncle?'

`Fortunately, the job I'm thinking of won't require much knowledge of the language,' said the Assistant Dean. `Though, if you put in a little work, you ought to come back fairly fluent and although I admit I do rather subscribe to the view that it is the job of foreigners to learn English I suppose a smattering of French might hold you in good stead in the future.'

`What sort of job is it?'

`Assistant in an English pharmacy which is owned by a friend of mine and which caters largely to British and American tourists. That's the other downside, of course. You'll meet a lot of Americans.'

`I don't mind that,' I said quickly, rather shocked at the Assistant Dean’s prejudice.

`Have you met a lot of Americans?'

`No.'

`I didn't think so. Never mind. So, do you want to see if you can find yourself something a little more intellectually stimulating than delivering fish or do you want me to see if my friend in Paris has a vacancy?'

I hesitated. I wasn't accustomed to getting favours - especially from people in authority. To an almost medical student an Assistant Dean operated at an almost unimaginably elevated level. `If it isn't too much trouble I'd be grateful if you would find out if your friend has a vacancy in Paris,' I said. Almost instantaneously, and without any thought, I had taken a decision which would change my life. My parents and teachers had always impressed upon me the importance, and wisdom, of thinking carefully, and considering all the options, before making even the simplest decision. I did not, even then, realise just how often crucial, fundamental decisions are taken without either thought or consideration.

`I'll ring you back,' promised the Assistant Dean.

I put the telephone receiver back on the rest but didn't move. I just sat there, staring at the telephone, waiting for it to ring. Twenty minutes later the Assistant Dean called back. He told me that his friend would find me a job.

Three days later I was heading for Paris for a job with someone I'd never met, on the recommendation of someone I hardly knew. I didn't have the faintest idea what I would be doing or where I would be staying. I had with me one fairly small suitcase containing a spare pair of flannels, a few spare shirts, underwear, a wash bag I'd been given for the previous Christmas and which had first travelled with me when I'd gone to medical school, a few English books to read and a large, red notebook.

`Keep a sort of diary,' my mother had said, when she'd handed the notebook to me. `You might find it interesting to look back at it in years to come.'

Chapter Two

Although the pharmacy was owned by an American called John Tennyson, the friend of the Assistant Dean, it was managed by a young man called Sylvestre Baptiste, a dapper, bilingual Frenchman who had, I was quickly to discover, a rather elevated sense of his own importance and almost no sense of humour.

I travelled to Paris on the cross channel ferry, arriving at the Gare du Nord at 3.30 in the afternoon and, following the simple instructions I had been given, and a free map I had picked up at the railway station, walked down towards the Opera and then down the Avenue de l'Opera towards the Louvre. I had been advised to take the Metro to the Opera but the £20 worth of French Francs which my father had given me before I'd left home (`for travelling expenses and emergencies') had been stolen from me on the boat.

The pharmacy had been designed to cater purely for British and American tourists and the outside of the shop left absolutely nothing to the imagination. Mr Tennyson, I suspected, was not a man who celebrated modesty or had much time for self-effacing minimalism. Only the registered blind could fail to spot the shop once they'd managed to get themselves within fifty or sixty yards. There were three neon signs outside the shop. One said Drug Store. One said Pharmacy. And one said Chemists. The owner was clearly keen to minimise the risk that a traveller might not understand what the shop sold. Above the door a fourth sign, more dignified than the others, simply stated: `International Supplier of Pharmaceuticals'.

I walked into the shop and with a sigh of relief put my heavy suitcase down onto the floor. It was raining and I had no coat. Both my thin, tweed sports jacket, which had, for several years, been rather too tight for me, and my grey flannel trousers were soaked. There were four people in the shop. Two of them were American and expensively dressed in matching Burberry coats. I had no evidence to support this but I suspected that the two Burberry umbrellas resting against the front of the counter probably belonged to them too. The third and fourth persons stood behind the counter, both wearing starched white coats. One was a woman of about thirty, the other a man in his mid-forties. The woman had a pleasant face and a welcoming smile. The man, tall and well built, had a sour look and no laughter lines. I got the feeling that he was not a man who wasted a lot of energy in smiling. She looked up when I walked in. The man didn't. Neither of them made any effort to move away from their two customers.

On the counter, between the two Americans and the assistants, lay a large selection of patented medicaments. It was clear that the proceedings, which, judging by the number of boxes and bottles which were sitting on the counter had been a lengthy one, were coming to a triumphant, and for the shop, extremely successful conclusion.

`So you think this one is best for the diarrhoea?' said the male American, picking up one of the packets. He spoke in such an exaggerated Southern drawl that I thought at first that he was acting a part.

The female assistant nodded.

`And this for the sore eyes?'

Another nod.

The American placed the selected eye remedy next to the nominated anti-diarrhoeal.

`And this one for the skin rash?' I had by now realised that the American's drawl was for real.

Again, the female assistant nodded. This time she added a smile.

`Oh I'm not sure,' said the female American. She pointed to a larger packet. `I think that one might be more suitable.' She too sounded as though she had come directly from the set of some Southern drama. I looked around, half expecting to see a couple of faithful black retainers standing by, ready to carry the parcels back to the mansion.

The argument which ensued was heated but neither participant seemed in the slightest bit embarrassed.

`Why don't you just have them both?' suggested the male assistant. The male American obediently picked up the product his wife had selected and added it to their chosen pile. His wife thought about this for a few moments before nodding her agreement. `I guess so, honey!' she drawled.

Five minutes later, and a large traveller's cheque lighter, the two Americans staggered out of the shop, each carrying a huge plastic carrier bags full of pills and potions. I held the door open for them and watched them leave.

`They'll be back tomorrow,' said the male shop assistant, laughing. `Wanting remedies for ruptures and backache.'

`I expect they will,' said the female assistant.

`Do they come in every day?' I asked.

The female assistant smiled. `They've been in Paris for two weeks and so far they've been in here every single day except Sundays.'

`Maybe they go to church and pray on Sundays,' suggested the male assistant. He shrugged to let it be clear that he neither knew nor cared. `If they come here they don't see me anyway,' he said rather sourly. `I don't work Sundays.'

`Can I help you, sir?' the female assistant asked me suddenly.

`I'm here about the job,' I said.

They both looked at me rather blankly.

`The job as an assistant,' I explained. `It was arranged through Mr Tennyson.' I rummaged in my jacket pocket and pulled out my passport, my train ticket, my boarding pass for the cross channel ferry and finally, with some relief, the letter confirming my appointment. I took the letter out of its envelope and handed it across the counter. The male assistant took it, read it and handed it back to me. `I'll fetch Monsieur Baptiste,' he told me. `The manager,' he explained. He disappeared through a door at the rear of the shop.

`Did you have a good crossing?' asked the female assistant. She spoke excellent English and did not seem to have an accent.

`I wasn't sick,' I replied.

The woman smiled. `Well, that's a good sign. I am always sick on boats. Even when the sea is calm I am still sick. Are you English?'

`Yes. Are you?'

The woman laughed. `No. I'm French. My name is Sylvie Roland. And that was Peter,' she added, nodding in the direction that the male assistant had disappeared.

`Your English is very good.'

`Thank you. Mr Tennyson only employs people who speak good English. His shops are designed to cater for English people and for Americans - particularly the ones who don't speak any French.' There was no criticism or accusation in what she said, or the way she said it, but nevertheless I felt guilty at the fact that I was one of the travelling English citizens who did not speak French.

It occurred to me for the first time that this might not be Mr Tennyson's only shop. `Does Mr Tennyson have other pharmacies?'

`Oh yes. He has a chain of them. I think there are over thirty now. Rome, Madrid, Amsterdam, Nice, Athens - all the cities favoured by tourists. I think he plans to have one in every city in Europe which is regularly visited by British and American travellers. Did you apply for this job in England?'

`I was a medical student,' I explained. `But I fell ill and have had to take a year off. The Assistant Dean at the medical school arranged this for me. He's a friend of Mr Tennyson's.'

`I'm sorry to hear you have been ill.'

`Everything is pretty much OK now, thanks. I had hepatitis.'

`That can be very debilitating.'

`It was. Horrible.' I shrugged. `But at least I now get to spend some time in Paris.'

Just then the male assistant returned with a short, thin man beside him.

`I hope you will enjoy your stay here,' said the woman, before moving away.

The thin man, clearly the manager, was not wearing a white coat. He wore a neat pin striped suit, a plain white shirt and a dark blue tie. His neatly cropped hair had been oiled and was brushed straight back from his forehead.

The manager asked me my name and asked to see my passport. I handed it to him. He looked at it, checked the photograph and handed the passport back to me. I slipped it into my inside jacket pocket.

`I am Monsieur Baptise,' he told me. He wore expensive looking tortoiseshell half rimmed spectacles which were perched on the tip of his nose. He lowered his head and looked over the top of them when he spoke. `I am the manager of this store. Do you have any retail experience?'

`No.'

`Do you know anything about drugs?'

`No, I'm afraid not.' I admitted. `I was about to start studying medicine,' I added and regretted it almost immediately.

`I am aware of that. But a few days at medical school do not qualify you to make any decisions or take any responsibility.'

`No, of course not.'

`You are healthy now?'

`Oh yes.'

`You are free of infectious diseases?'

`Yes.'

The manager stared at me over his half-moon spectacles as though trying to decide whether or not I was telling the truth. `Mr Tennyson has asked me to employ you as a favour to a friend of his. This shop is open twelve hours a day and seven days a week. As the most junior assistant you will naturally work on our rota system. By and large you will work the hours that no one else wants. Your job will be to stock shelves, sweep floors and run errands.'

`That's fine,' I said, anxious to please.

`I have arranged a room for you at a tourist hotel,' continued the manager. `It is very conveniently situated, not far from the shop.' He handed me a small brochure advertising the hotel. `You will find a map showing the location of your hotel on this brochure. We will pay the hotel directly for your room.'

Chapter Three

The drugstore manager had been honest when he had told me that the hotel he'd booked me in was convenient. It was less than three minutes away from the drugstore. That was, however, just about all that could be said in its favour.

The Hotel Paradis had somehow acquired and kept rosettes certifying that it had satisfied certain basic requirements of the tourist industry. But once I'd seen inside the hotel I couldn't help wondering what a hotel without rosettes would look like.

The reception area was bleak and badly lit. I put my suitcase down beside me and for a few moments I stood in the murk, waiting for my eyes to become accustomed to the dim light. A balding man in his late sixties sat on a stool in a cramped space behind a scarred wooden counter. With the aid of a small unshaded bulb above him he was reading a newspaper. Judging by the title of the newspaper and the photographs visible on the front page the newspapers main, and possibly only, content dealt with horseracing. My entrance was clearly not sufficiently engaging him to persuade him to put down his newspaper. Generally speaking, he did not give the impression of being excited to be in Paris in 1964.

`Good evening,' I said, hesitantly when I felt that my eyes had adjusted to the light as well as they were going to.

The receptionist continued to ignore me. I did not have enough experience of hotels in general, let alone French hotels, to know whether or not this was normal. For all I knew it was customary for a hotel guest to have to stand and wait for half an hour before being allocated a room. And so I stood and waited. This went on for some time. The man read his paper. I stood and waited. I waited. The man read. I stood. He read. I tried to occupy myself by reading the notices pinned to the wall behind him. But they were faded, hand written in French and did not seem to include any information about pens, bureaux, uncles or aunts. I looked around the rest of the lobby. There wasn't much to see. A door guarded by thin, colourful plastic strips which had been tied back out of the way led into a grubby little dining room furnished with scuffed pine tables and old chairs which did not seem in any way to be related to one another.

This was all something of a shock to me. I had not long left school and there is no more structured, close knit world than a school - particularly one geared towards propelling its students along the educational shuffle board, as mine had been. When I left school I had still not been prepared to spread my wings but had, instead, been mentally prepared for medical school - another structured, hierarchical world. I was ill prepared for this new world in which there seemed to be no form, no structure, no predictability, no expectations. I was beginning a year I would never forget; a year that would change me for ever and which would give me, for the first time in my life, an awareness of the unusual and the exceptional and a preparedness for the unpredictable.

I fear that we might have both still been frozen there if the telephone had not rung. But it did. When he had dealt with the caller the balding newspaper reader looked up at me and spoke. I have no idea what he said.

`I think you have a room booked for me,' I said. I gave him my name and mentioned the name of the drugstore manager.

The newspaper reader said nothing to indicate that he might or might not have understood me and then suddenly reached up, plucked a key from a board to his right and tossed it onto the scarred counter between us.

I picked up the key, thanked him and studied the tag which was attached to the key. The tag suggested to me that a search for a room marked number 12 might prove fruitful. I had already spotted a narrow, uncarpeted staircase. I picked up my suitcase with my other hand and headed towards it.

`Thank you,' I said to the man behind the desk. He was too engrossed in his newspaper to respond. I doubt if he even heard me. He seemed to have an enviable ability to ignore his surroundings.

The stairs were steep, narrow, uneven and twisted and turned as though they had been built for entertainment rather than function. I looked, in vain, on the first floor for room number 12. On the second floor I failed yet again. Eventually I found it on the top floor - I had by this time lost count but rather thought it was the sixth floor.

I put the key into the lock but found, to my surprise, that the door didn't seem to be locked. I twisted the handle, opened the door and entered the room that was to be my home in Paris. The room was sparsely furnished. There was a small wardrobe, a dressing table, a chair and a narrow bed. There was a small square of filthy carpet on the floor by the side of the bed.

A pair of trousers and a jacket were draped over the chair. A dress and various items which I recognised as feminine underwear were distributed on the floor around the room. And on the bed, lying on top of the dirty brown coverlet, lay a naked blonde woman of about forty and a rather older bald man. He, too, was naked except for his socks. I remember noticing that there appeared to be a large hole in the heel of his left sock. She was lying on her back and had her eyes closed. He was lying face down on top of her. He was moving, she was pretty well lying still and the bed was protesting loudly. They weren't playing checkers.

I had absolutely no experience of sexual matters but I was not so entirely innocent that I was not able to guess what they were doing. He had, I remember, a very large, white bottom which was decorated with a number of red spots. It was not a pretty sight.

`Er...I'm sorry...,' I said, going very red and backing out of the room.

Neither the woman nor the man looked up or showed any sign of registering my presence.

I closed the door. Still carrying my suitcase I retreated, back down the stairs.

`There's a couple in room 12,' I told the man behind the desk when I had got back down to the ground floor. This time I did not wait for him to notice me before speaking.

The receptionist looked up and stared at me. He said something but I understood as much of what he said as I think he had understood of what I had said. I stared at him and then, in desperation, drew an imaginary bed in the air and, on top of it, drew first a female figure and then another figure on top. The man spat onto the floor, and looked at his watch. He then spat again, cursed, stood up and walked around to my side of the desk. He clearly understood my mime. I was grateful for this because it saved me adding the sound effects. He then walked slowly but steadily up the stairs. I followed. My suitcase, obeying unnatural laws, now seemed to weigh considerably more than it had weighed when I had first made this journey.

When he got to the top floor the bald and ill-tempered receptionist opened the door and walked into the room. He did not knock and nor did he hesitate before entering. The man was no longer lying one on top of the woman; he was now lying half off her. He looked up as we walked in and for the first time I could see his face. He was sweating and red from the exertions he had made; his hair was dishevelled and damp. Only afterwards did it occur to me that there was no sign of happiness or contentment in his eyes: merely an emptiness. He looked exhausted and relieved rather than exhilarated or excited. The receptionist turned his wrist so that the man could see his watch and said something I did not understand but which, it was pretty fair to assume, referred to the time. The man grunted and sat up. He reached for his clothes and started to dress. The receptionist left immediately, without another word. The man getting dressed made no effort to cover those parts of his body which a man might normally regard as private. He left as soon as he was dressed. When he had gone I noticed that he had left his tie lying over the back of the room's solitary chair.

`Your husband has left his tie!' I said to the woman.

She stared at me. `My husband?' she said. At first she seemed surprised. Then she laughed out loud. I blushed. I was embarrassed then to realise that he was not her husband. It embarrasses me now, to remember my innocence.

Embarrassment was not an emotion which troubled the woman. She did not seem in the slightest bit surprised or put out at being naked in the presence of a stranger. But then, on reflection, why should she have been? What was to me very new was to her an oft repeated daily ritual. She very slowly sat up and swung around so that her feet were on the floor. Her breasts hung down to her waist and were heavily veined. Her nipples were as big as thimbles. You can judge my inexperience when I tell you that they were the first female breasts I had ever seen. She stood up, walked around the bed and started to dress. I tried to look away but found it more difficult than I would have imagined. The receptionist turned and left the room.

When the woman had dressed she bent down and smoothed the covers. She smiled at me, patted my cheek and blew me a kiss. I didn't know what to do so I smiled back. She stopped for a moment, thought and then kissed me full on the lips. Shocked, I neither did nor said anything. Her breath smelt of aniseed. She said something in French which I did not understand. `I'm sorry,' I said, in English. `I don't understand.'

`You want we make love?' she asked me. She spoke English with a theatrical French accent. I felt myself blushing and beginning to sweat through nervousness. `No, it's all right, thank you,' I replied. `But thank you very much.'

`You very young,' she said. `You pay half normal price.'

`No, really,' I said. `But thank you. Thank you very much indeed.'

To my relief she did not seem put out by this. She shrugged, left the room and clattered across the landing and down the stairs. She wore absurdly high heels which made a great deal of noise but these did not seem to impede her rate of progress.

When they had both left I shut the door behind them. My heart was beating so fast I thought it would burst out of my chest. I remembered the words of the Assistant Dean. `We would like you to come back a wiser person with a broader view of the world.'

I looked around. It was, without any doubt, the most depressing room I had ever seen in my life. It was cramped, dingy, dirty and poorly furnished. There was not a single redeeming feature. You could not say `It is a poor room but...'. There was no `but'. I walked across the room to the window, hoping that there might, perhaps, be a view to make up for the room's other varied shortcomings. I did not expect much and I was not disappointed. When I pulled back the grey net curtains I could see that the room looked out onto a tiny grey courtyard. Across the courtyard there were other windows. They were all covered with dirty white net curtains. Below one window someone had fixed up a washing line. It was empty. Down below the tiny courtyard was full of rubbish. I turned away from the window. It seemed to me to be not so much a room as a cell and I felt very lonely, very young and rather frightened. I was a long way from home and a long way from the world I knew.

Chapter Four

My duties at the pharmacy were uncomplicated. In other circumstances I suppose that I might have been offended, or felt slighted, if I had been asked to sweep floors, clean out cupboards and move packets of pills and creams from a store room to the shelves of an establishment which, although described on the outside as an international supplier of pharmaceuticals was, on the inside, still no more than a well-equipped chemist's shop.

But as a visitor in a strange country, a long way from home and divorced by the English Channel from friends and family, I was grateful to accept the comfort that routine offered me. I found repetitive duties which might have appeared dull and boring in other, more familiar circumstances, to be curiously soothing. Restocking the revolving rack of toothbrushes, checking that the appropriate display cabinet was well stocked with penknives, sunglasses, nail trimmers and eyebrow tweezers and making sure that the drawers in which the more personal items (such as condoms and creams for the eradication of rashes of an intimate nature) were stored were all full, required enough concentration to push my fears into the background but did not require enough intellectual activity to add to my stock of anxieties.

In those days the Channel was much more of a physical barrier than it is today. Back in the 1960s there was no Tunnel, carrying rail passengers seamlessly from Waterloo to the Gare du Nord, and air travel was still something of a novelty for such a short journey. Most travellers reached France from Britain via a sea journey and this gave any continental excursion an air of mystery, romance and excitement. Having to embark, disembark and, in between these two rituals, suffer the discomfort and indignities of a journey across a notoriously bumpy stretch of water made even the most undemanding tourist feel that by the time he reached his destination he had earned the right to describe himself as a genuine traveller in the true Victorian tradition.

The pharmacy was patronised by an endless stream of fascinating characters who brought with them sometimes strange and always personal requirements, demands and expectations. In retrospect the work may seem undemanding and tedious. In practice I do not remember boredom being a serious problem during my stay at the pharmacy in Paris.

The pharmacy's patrons invariably came into the shop without a prescription. Many came in hoping that they would be able to purchase a suitable product over the counter without going to the expense and trouble of finding and visiting an English speaking doctor. I soon learned that this meant that they were prepared to bare their souls, and sometimes (to the embarrassment and amusement of other customers) their bodies, to the pharmacy staff in a way that might, in other circumstances, have been considered more appropriate for the traditional privacy of the doctor's surgery than the very public nature of the pharmacy counter.

It was at the pharmacy that I met an American called Archie Trench.

Hugely overweight and with a personality to match Archie `entered' a room as though intent on conquering both the territory and everyone within it. He was something of a tyrant and the best way I can describe him is to say that when, in later years, I first met the bullying giant publisher Robert Maxwell I was reminded very much of Archie Trent.

`What have you got for piles?' he demanded, making no attempt to modify his booming voice and seeming quite unembarrassed by a request which usually led customers with the same problem to whisper across the counter or even, on more than one occasion, to writing down their ailment on a slip of paper before sliding it across the counter face down.

I looked around and rather to my horror realised that I was the only person in the shop. This was most unusual. Normally, Sylvie, Peter or Monsieur Baptiste, the shop manager, would be waiting to attend to customers while I got on with my work of sweeping, tidying and stocking shelves. But Sylvie was away for the day, completing some undisclosed family business which required a train journey to Tours, Monsieur Baptise was on the telephone to a supplier and Peter had disappeared for a moment, probably taking an illicit puff or two at a cigarette in the tiny toilet which we all shared. Monsieur Baptiste strongly disapproved of smoking, not for health reasons but simply because he regarded it as decadent and sinful.

`Do you speak English?' the American demanded.

`I am English,' I replied.

`Aren't there any Americans working here?'

`No. I'm afraid not.'

`Then you'll have to do. I need something for my damned piles. And no continental crap. I want the good stuff.'

I looked around, desperately hoping that Peter or Monsieur Baptiste might appear. But Peter was nowhere to be seen and I could still hear Monsieur Baptise talking on the telephone. I couldn't understand what he was saying but from the tone and pitch of his voice I could tell that he was arguing with someone.

`I went to a drug store near to my hotel and they tried to sell me batteries!' complained the customer. He snorted. `What am I supposed to do with batteries?' He waved a hand. `Don't even try to answer that.'

`The word `pile' means battery in French,' I explained. `Perhaps that was the cause of the confusion.'

`Pile means battery?'

`I think so,' I said.

On my second day in Paris I had purchased a cheap radio so that I would have a little company in my lonely, dingy hotel room. When I got it back to my hotel I found that the assistant in the shop had forgotten to remind me to buy batteries for the radio. When I looked up the word battery in the small French-English dictionary I had also purchased I found that the word I wanted was `pile'. I therefore had the excruciatingly embarrassing task of going into a shop and asking a complete stranger (who was, inevitably, a good looking woman in her early twenties) if she had any piles.

`Only the damned French could do something so damned stupid,' complained the fat American. He seemed annoyed rather than amused and I got the impression that he had a tendency to see the rest of the world as revolving around himself. I suspected that he would regard every insult, every setback as being devised solely to inconvenience him and this suspicion proved to be entirely accurate. I never met a more self-obsessed man. Archie seemed to regard arrogance as a duty and a virtue. `Get me that chair,' he added, nodding towards a chair on the other side of the pharmacy. `And a cushion.'

I moved quickly around from behind the counter and carried the chair across the pharmacy. `I'm afraid I don't think we have a cushion,' I said.

`Well a chair with no damned cushion is no damned good to me,' complained the American, staring at the chair malevolently. Having decided that the chair was not going to be intimidated he glowered at me instead. `Have you any idea how painful piles can be?'

`No, sir.'

Just then Peter appeared, smelling far too strongly of aftershave and toothpaste.

`Can I help you, sir?' he asked the American. I wondered for a moment whether to move the chair back to its original position, decided against it, and returned behind the counter.

`It's all right, the kid is serving me,' replied Archie.

`I am a senior sales consultant,' explained Peter. `Perhaps I might be able to help you more effectively.'

`Are you American?'

`No, sir.'

`English?'

`No, sir. I am French.'

`Then I'll have him. The English one.'

This did not please Peter and for a moment I thought he was going to succumb to temptation and give the American advice that was neither professional nor, given the problem which had already been declared, particularly appropriate. But he over-rode temptation, bowed slightly and disappeared without a word.

Hoping to finish the transaction as speedily as possible I took tubes of three appropriate ointments from a nearby drawer and put them on the counter, hoping that at least one of them would be of American origin and, therefore, prove satisfactory.

`Marvellous! My favourite brand!' cried the fat American, pouncing on one of the tubes. `I'll have six of these.'

I returned the unwanted tubes to the drawer and fetched five more tubes of the chosen product.

`Do you sell hot water bottles?'

`Yes, sir.' I hurried to a far corner of the shop and brought back a hot water bottle.

`Have you got a pink one?'

I found a pink one. The American made no attempt to explain his preference but seemed delighted.

`How much?'

I added up the total and told him.

`Do you deliver?'

`Yes, sir. There is a small delivery charge.'

`I'll take one tube of ointment now. Deliver the rest to me at the Excelsior Hotel this evening.'

`I could have them sent round to your hotel immediately,' I offered.

`This evening,' said the American firmly. `You bring them at 7 o'clock. And deliver them direct to my room. I'll give you an extra 50 francs for yourself when you deliver them. I don't trust the idiots on the reception desk. They're all foreign.'

I added up the bill, took the money, sorted out the change, wrapped up the single tube of pile ointment and put the other items to one side for delivery later. It was the first time I had ever sold anything.

When the fat American had gone Peter reappeared. `I hate Americans,' he muttered, clearly still indignant. `Loathsome people. I hope he had piles.'

`He did,' I told him.

`He had piles?'

`Yes.'

`Wonderful!' cried Peter, grinning. `You see, there is a God.' He paused. `And he is French.'

Chapter Five

The Excelsior Hotel was, at the time, one of the smartest and most expensive hotels in Paris. It was, almost inevitably, enormously popular with Americans who were just about the only people who could afford it.

At 6.45 pm I arrived at the hotel, clutching a plain paper bag containing four tubes of pile ointment and a pink hot water bottle. Mr Trench, I discovered, had a suite on the third floor.

I knocked on Mr Trench's door at 6.59 pm but it wasn't Mr Trench who opened the door.

`I'm from the pharmacy with a package for Mr Trench,' I told a slender redhead who wore a black low neck cocktail dress and a pair of very high black high heeled shoes. She looked about my own age.

`Who is it?' called a voice I recognised.

`A boy from the pharmacy,' the girl called back.

`Bring him in,' shouted the fat American.

`Come with me,' said the girl, turning and walking away.

I followed her down a short corridor. Behind me the outer door to the suite swung shut with a faint click.

It was the first time I had ever been into a hotel suite and I was deeply impressed even before we reached the sitting room. When the girl in black led me into the sitting room I felt as though I had walked into a scene from a movie. The fat American was sitting in an easy chair. Two other people were sitting on a sofa. There was a tray of bottles on a sideboard. A door was slightly ajar and through it I could see a spacious bedroom in which there was a huge double bed.

`I've brought your package, sir,' I said, offering the brown paper bag to the fat American. He took it, looked inside and pulled out the various items. When he'd finished he placed the bag on the floor beside his chair.

`Did you know you could get this stuff in Paris?' he asked a slender white man sitting on a sofa and holding up one of the tubes of haemorrhoid ointment. The man was sitting next to a plump black woman who wore a low cut green dress that fitted her like a glove. A very tight glove.

`Certainly do,' agreed the man. `We stock up our medicine cabinet with stuff whenever we come to Paris.'

`Wanna a drink, son?' the fat American asked me, putting his purchases down on the table beside him.

I hesitated. `Er, no thank you,' I said. I felt uncomfortable amidst so much luxury. I was also rather startled at having seen two men discuss such private matters as haemorrhoids with such a total lack of embarrassment.

`D'ya wanna coke? Fifi, get the guy a coke.'

Fifi, the young girl, opened the door to what looked like a cupboard but turned out to be a fridge. She took out a bottle of coke, closed the fridge door, removed the cap with an opener she took from the tray upon which the bottles were standing, poured half the contents of the coke bottle into a glass and handed the glass to me.

`Sit down, son,' said the fat American. `What's your name?'

I sat down gingerly on a very expensive looking chair and told him.

`Meet my girlfriend Fifi,' he said, pointing to the girl in black. He then pointed to the couple on the sofa. `And that's Marvin and Sheila Brown. He used to be American and she used to be British but now they live in Paris except when they're in Monaco.'

Marvin, who looked as though he was in his sixties but was well preserved and might well have been older, was short and very neat. He wore a blue double breasted blazer, a pair of grey slacks with a razor sharp crease and a pair of cream loafers. His shirt was cream and had a monogram on the pocket. Around his neck he wore a paisley cravat. A gold pince-nez hung from a gold chain around his neck. For a man of his age he had a surprisingly large quantity of straight, jet black hair.

Sheila was at least three times Marvin's size and a good deal younger. Even sitting down she looked tall and she looked to me to be as solid and as well built as an air raid shelter. A few weeks before I had left England I had heard my mother mention that my aunt Thelma had been weighed in at over twenty stone. By the side of Sheila my aunt Thelma was a midget. Sheila was, I thought at the time, probably the biggest woman I had ever seen. Her skin was jet black. Her fingers dripped with gold jewellery, her neck was encircled by more gold necklaces than I could count and she had a gold brooch pinned to her dress which was either an absurd piece of costume jewellery or the most expensive single item I'd ever seen. I wasn't sure which but since she wore a Cartier watch I wasn't prepared to bet against the brooch being genuine.

Sitting together on Archie's sofa they looked for all the world like a large black mother and her small, white, prematurely aged son awaiting an appointment with the headmaster. They looked an unlikely couple. I did not know then that unlikely lovers are often the strongest for their love has surpassed and overcome the disapproval of others, and has survived the destructive attempts of the sceptics. I was too young to realise that odd couples are either destroyed or strengthened by the pressure and may be pushed closer together by the outside hatred, surviving because their love has to be strong to win through. I knew none of this. I just saw an extremely odd couple.

I had, of course, heard of Monaco but had never met anyone who lived there before. I assumed (and from what I could see it seemed a safe assumption) that Archie's friends must be enormously rich.

`What do you think of the painting son?' asked the fat American. He waved a hand in the direction of the far side of the room where an oil painting was resting against the wall. I couldn't work out what the painting depicted. I couldn't even tell whether or not it was the right way up.

`It's very colourful,' I said, diplomatically.

Marvin, the man from Monaco laughed. `Guess how much it cost.'

I looked at the painting again. `I have absolutely no idea,' I said. I didn't want to guess, partly through fear of looking foolish and partly through fear of offending the man who had bought the painting.

`One million French francs,' said Marvin. `He paid one million French francs for that. I could have done better with my eyes shut.' He squinted at the painting. `Mind you,' he said, `It's a nice frame.' He looked at the fat American. `Why did you pay so much for a painting?'

`Because I like it,' said the American. `And because I'd rather have the painting than the money.' He paused and thought for a moment. `Besides,' he added. `It's a good investment. It's going to be the new trend in art.'

`It will only make money if you can find another idiot prepared to buy it at a greater price than you paid,' Marvin pointed out. He wagged a finger at Archie. `There are two sorts of people in business,' he told him. `The trendsetters and the trendspotters. If you want to be rich you need to be in the second group. The trendsetters never make any more because most of the time their trends never take off. The trendspotters, on the other hand, make their money simply by going along for the ride.'

Archie scowled. `If it ain't worth what I paid for it I'll break the guy's legs. Or sue the bastard.'

Marvin wagged a finger at him. `Remember Marvin's three laws of business,' he said. `Never explain, never complain and never, ever go to court.'

`I couldn't lose,' protested Archie.

`Ah, never, ever go to court if you firmly and honestly believe you're in the right,' said Marvin. `That's a sure fire way to find real pain.'

Archie didn't seem particularly happy. Marvin didn't seem to have noticed. He didn't seem to care how Archie felt.

`How long have you worked at the pharmacy?' Marvin asked me, obviously suddenly bored with talking about the painting.

I told him.

`How come you speak such good English?'

`I'm English.'

`So how does a young Englishman find himself working at a pharmacy in Paris?'

I explained.

`You want to keep in touch with this guy,' Marvin said to Archie. `He's going to be a doctor one day.' He turned to me. `Archie is a gold dealer,' he explained. `Some of his best customers are doctors.'

`You deal in gold?' I said to Archie. I was impressed. It was not difficult to impress me then. But I was very impressed.

`Show him some of your stuff,' said Sheila.

`Fetch the briefcase, doll,' said Archie to his girlfriend. Fifi walked into the bedroom, fetched a grey aluminium briefcase, brought it into the living room and handed it to Archie. It was clearly heavy.

Archie fiddled with the combination lock and opened the briefcase so that I could look inside. He lifted out a plastic strip which contained a dozen or so small gold coins in tiny plastic windows.

`Kruggerand, sovereign, French Napoleon, Swiss Napoleon...' he said, pointing to each coin in turn as he identified it. When he had finished identifying the coins, and had put the plastic strip back into the briefcase, he took out a small red velvet bag. `Open your hands,' he told me. I did as I was told. `Hold them together,' he said. He opened the drawstrings which controlled the neck of the bag, turned it upside down and shook the contents, a dozen small chunks of yellow metal, into my outstretched palms. Then he picked up the nuggets one by one and put them back into the red velvet bag. As he did so he told me what each of them was worth. Finally, when my hands were once again empty, he put the red velvet bag back into the briefcase and then took out and opened a blue velvet bag and removed what he clearly, and justifiably, regarded as the *pièce de résistance*: a gleaming slab of gold.

`What do you think of that?' he demanded.

I just stared at it.

`Pure 24 carat gold,' said Archie, proudly. `You could buy a small house with that.'

Just then the telephone rang.

`Get that, doll,' said Archie.

Fifi answered the telephone and spoke to the caller for a few moments. She then turned to Archie. `It's the reception desk,' she said. `Ira and Dorothy are downstairs.'

`Oh shit,' said Archie. He looked at his watch. `Sorry, kid,' he said to me. `Got to throw you out now. We've got a dinner date with friends from Vegas. Very boring but very rich.' He pushed himself up against the arms of the chair and levered himself to his feet. I too stood up. We all exchanged goodbyes.

`Why don't you come and have a drink with us one day?' said Marvin, offering me his hand.

`That's very kind of you,' I said.

`Would the morning of the 17th be any good?' suggested Marvin. I said it would.

`Eleven then? On the terrace of the Café de la Paix near the Opéra?' Marvin gave me the telephone number of the apartment they had rented in Paris.

I accepted the invitation and then left to return to my hotel and normality.

I was waiting for the lift when I realised that the fat American hadn't given me the 50 francs he'd promised me for delivering his package.

`Archie asked me to give you this.'

I turned. Fifi was holding out a thin envelope.

`What's that?'

`Fifty francs,' she said. `Archie remembered he owed it to you.'

I took the envelope and slipped it into my inside jacket pocket. `Thank you,' I said. The lift arrived and the doors opened.

`Don't mention it,' said Fifi.

She turned and headed back to their suite. I got into the lift.

Chapter Six

I was having a bad day and was feeling very sorry for myself.

Monsieur Baptiste at the pharmacy had discovered that I didn't have a work permit and bureaucrats had decided that this was a serious threat to the economic future of the French Republic. I had spent hours sitting in a dusty corridor waiting for someone to put the requisite stamps into my passport.

I had discovered that the French are probably the most bureaucratic nation in the world. They love forms and bits of paper. Most of them spend eight hours a day, five days a week doing nothing but shuffle bits of paper around from one desk to another. It is a constant mystery to the rest of the world just how the French ever manage to get anything done.

When my passport was finally stamped and the State has been safeguarded by duly authorising my duties with the broom, I escaped and found that the sun was shining, the sky was blue and the world was still going round.

Monsieur Baptiste, knowing something of French bureaucracy, had told me that I was not expected back at the pharmacy that day.

Having crossed the river Seine I stopped to read the headlines of the English newspapers at a kiosk in St Germain and realised that it was my sister's birthday in three days' time. I began to look for a card to send her.

I spotted one on a rack outside a little bookshop on a corner near the Église St Sulpice. I had just drunk a coffee at a cafe and was strolling north to the Luxembourg Gardens.

Just before I went into the shop to buy the card a middle aged woman approached me. She was dressed all in black (black bomber jacket, black jumper and black jeans) except for her trainers which were silver. They looked as though they had once been quite fashionable. She was smart and did not have the appearance of a beggar. But she asked me for money. No one who isn't poor begs for money in the street so I suppose she must have had some very bad luck.

Something about her alarmed me. She seemed very stern, frightening almost. Her manner was at once demanding and submissive. She wanted but could not bring herself to expect. In retrospect I suspect that perhaps she had to pluck up all her courage to approach strangers with her hand held out. Feeling slightly uncomfortable I backed away, mumbled something and went into the shop.

The shop assistant beamed when he saw me. I approached the counter, laid down the card I had chosen and took out some money. He was ready to start keying figures into the till, when the telephone rang.

He answered the telephone, put down my purchases and ignored me.

I hate it when people do that. Why does a piece of brrring plastic take precedence over a human being? I glowered at him.

Eventually, the shop assistant found the time to deal with my order. Now in even more of an irritable mood I handed over my money, accepted the paper bag containing the card I had bought and left the shop. I was a little short with him as we completed our transaction and, perhaps aware of his rudeness, he became pathetically anxious to oblige. It was too late.

Outside, on the pavement, the woman in the silver shoes was still begging. She was still without luck. Her demeanour and appearance seemed to frighten everyone off. She did not approach me this time. I walked away, continuing my journey up to the Luxembourg Gardens.

Twenty minutes later, I entered the gardens. There was a little shop there. A pretty, wooden place that looked rather like an English summerhouse. It was very bright and attractive - with coloured balls and other toys hanging up outside.

The shop was shut. I was a little disappointed. I had intended to buy a small bar of chocolate to sustain me on my walk.

As I strolled on into the park I couldn't stop thinking about the woman in the silver shoes. I felt guilty about not having given her any money. I had ignored her the way the man in the shop had ignored me when the telephone had rung. It was, I thought, no wonder that she had looked so tortured, so frightened and so lost. Everyone else had ignored her too. Cities are full of people but they can at the same time be the loneliest places in the world.

I walked on for a while. But I knew it was no good. I had no choice. I had to go back and find her. I took all the change I had in my pockets and held it in my hand. There were quite a few coins and my fist felt full. I don't know why but I knew I would find her. I retraced my steps and eventually found her just a yard or two from where I had first seen her. She had just lit a cigarette and was standing smoking it. I didn't say anything but just walked up to her, looked into her face, opened my hand into hers and let the coins gush into her palm.

She looked up at me, our eyes met, and in an instant her face changed. The pain all disappeared and she smiled at me. It was a broad, genuine smile. It was, I think, a smile of thanks for recognising her as a human being as much as a smile of thanks for the money I had given her. `Vous etes gentil,' she said quietly as I walked away. I wondered what had brought her to begging on the pavement.

When I got back to the entrance to the Luxembourg Gardens the little shop was open. A woman was standing outside the shop door stamping her feet on small lengths of stale baguette; turning the crusty bread into crumbs for the birds. Around a hundred pigeons were gathered around her. I did not say anything but just stood there and waited and watched.

I don't know how long I waited there. Two or three minutes probably. That's quite a long time to stand quite still. But I didn't want to disturb her or the pigeons. I was happy to wait. Eventually the woman sensed my presence. She turned and apologised. I shook my head to make it clear that I hadn't minded waiting.

She had a kind, generous face and went into her little shop and found me what I asked for.

`Vous etes tres gentile avec les oiseux,' I said to her, in my fractured French. Pigeon French. I had to give her a twenty franc note for the chocolate. I didn't have any change.

She smiled. It was a glorious smile with nothing held back. Not one of those polite smiles that so often stand in for the real thing. She thanked me for waiting and said she liked the birds. Our souls touched for a moment.

I took the chocolate, and the change, and walked on through the park.

It was a crisp, dry day. The sky was blue. I walked about in the park. I watched men playing chess and a couple playing tennis. I felt good and glad to be living in Paris.

Chapter Seven

I needn't have bothered getting the work permit because two days later, less than three weeks after I had started work at the pharmacy, I was fired.

When I arrived at the shop that morning I could tell by the atmosphere that something unusual was happening in the shop. Peter had the day off and Sylvie, who was in the shop alone when I arrived, took me on one side. `Monsieur Tennyson is here,' she whispered.

`The owner?'

Sylvie nodded.

`Where is he?'

`In the office. He has Juliette with him.'

`Who is Juliette? His wife?'

`No, no!' said Sylvie, urgently. `Juliette is Monsieur Tennyson's mistress.'

`Why on earth has he brought her here?' I asked.

`He brings her to pick out new sunglasses and perfume,' explained Sylvia. `Besides,' she paused, and lowered her voice still further so that I could hardly hear her, `I think he likes taking risks. His wife is American if she finds out he'll be in big trouble.'

The manager came into the shop before Sylvie could say any more. `Restock the sunglasses counter and the vitamins shelf,' Monsieur Baptiste told me. He seemed rather tense and edgy. `And do it quietly!'

I walked through the door at the back of the shop and down to the store-room where I took off my jacket and replaced it with my white coat. I then went back into the shop to check at the sunglasses counter to see which models I needed to fetch from the storeroom.

The weather had been gloomy and dark for days but we still managed to sell numerous pairs of absurdly expensive sunglasses every day. On my first day working at the pharmacy Sylvia had explained to me that rich but dull businessmen and their wives, staying at the Hotels Meurice, Lotti and Intercontinental, bought them so that they would look like film stars when they walked through the lobby to order a taxi. `They don't care whether they can see anything or not,' she had told me. `All they care about is that they are wearing expensive designer frames. I think some of them would like to leave the price tags tied onto the frame.'

I was in the storeroom, having selected the sunglasses I needed for the display cabinet, when I heard a commotion in the shop. Carefully carrying several thousand pounds worth of sunglasses I walked back to the shop where I found Sylvie and Monsieur Baptiste attempting to calm a woman whom I naturally assumed to be a customer. She looked to be in her mid to late thirties and was enveloped in a huge and obviously expensive fur coat and a cloud of some obviously expensive perfume. Monsieur Baptiste was normally very good at calming troubled customers but he wasn't getting very far with this one.

`I know he's here and I want to see him,' insisted the woman, as I carefully put my bundle of sunglasses down. `His car is parked across the street for God's sake!'

`Perhaps Monsieur Tennyson came in through the back door, Madam,' lied Monsieur Baptiste, knowing full well that the shop did not have a back door and that even if it had Mr Tennyson would have never used it. The shop owner was not the sort of man to use a back door anywhere. Monsieur Baptise hurried away, through the doorway at the back of the shop, heading for his office wherein, he knew quite well, he would find his employer and some very expensive evidence.

Sylvie came across to where I was standing and produced a key to the sunglasses cabinet. When she had opened the back of the cabinet I started putting the sunglasses into place. `That's Mrs Tennyson,' Sylvie whispered.

Less than two minutes later a tall, well built, bronzed man in a blue, pinstriped suit strolled nonchalantly into the shop as though he owned it, which, of course, he did. His shirt was unbuttoned and he wore no tie. He had amazing presence.

`Harriet, my dear!' he said, addressing the woman in the fur coat. `Why didn't you say you were coming?'

`Have you got a woman with you?' demanded Harriet, utterly unselfconscious and quite oblivious to the presence of Monsieur Baptiste, Sylvie and myself.

Mr Tennyson looked around. `The only woman here is Sylvie,' he replied. `Do you know Sylvie?'

`I know Sylvie,' spat Mrs Tennyson. `Have you got a woman here?'

Beside me I was conscious of Sylvie bristling. She pushed out her chest as if it to make it clear that she, too, was a woman.

`Of course not,' laughed Mr Tennyson. He was very convincing. I nearly believed him and I knew that he was lying.

`I'm going to look,' said Harriet. She marched around the counter, through the door at the back of the shop and down to the manager's office. Mr Tennyson followed her. Monsieur Baptiste, Sylvie and I stood and waited for the explosion. It took longer to come than any of us had suspected for Mr Tennyson had pushed his mistress into the store room and it was there that Mrs Tennyson found her.

`And just who the hell is this tart?' we heard Mrs Tennyson demand. `Do you have so many women that you are keeping them in the store room now?'

The door from the street opened and a nervous looking elderly gentleman in a brown overcoat and a rather lopsided wig timidly stepped into the shop.

`Can I help you, sir? asked Monsieur Baptiste, unconsciously clasping his hands together in front of his body and rubbing them together expectantly.

A tall, willowy blonde, of about my own age, dressed in a short, sleeveless, backless and pretty nearly frontless red dress and a pair of red high heeled shoes, came running into the shop from the back rooms. She was closely followed by Mrs Tennyson. Mr Tennyson brought up the rear of this fast moving trio. The blonde skidded to a halt in front of the sunglasses display cabinet, where I was still standing.

`Who is she?' demanded Mrs Tennyson of her husband, pointing to the blonde with a trembling finger.

`I've no idea!' insisted Mr Tennyson. `I've never seen her before.' He turned to Monsieur Baptiste. `Is this a new member of staff?' he asked. `Why isn't she wearing a white coat?'

`She's no pharmacy assistant!' insisted Mrs Tennyson scornfully. `Just look at her! Does she look like a shop assistant?' She answered her own question with a rather derisive snort. Sylvie, offended again, pushed out her chest still further.

`I think I'll pop back a little later when you aren't quite so occupied,' murmured the elderly gentleman in the brown overcoat. He absent mindedly lifted his wig as though it were a hat and headed for the exit. Monsieur Baptiste, clearly not sure what to do, simpered and held the door open for the departing customer.

`And who is this?' demanded Mrs Tennyson. This time, to my embarrassment and horror I realised that the trembling finger was pointed in my direction. I wanted to run away, or at the very least to duck, but I was frozen to the spot.

`Yes, who the hell are you?' demanded Mr Tennyson.

I told him my name and explained why I was there.

`Didn't you tell him that he wasn't allowed to bring girlfriends onto the premises?' Mr Tennyson demanded of Monsieur Baptiste.

`Oh yes, sir,' said Monsieur Baptiste, desperately protecting himself and selling me out at the same time. `He was quite specifically told that under no circumstances was he to bring girlfriends - or even boyfriends - into the shop.'

I just stood there with my mouth wide open.

`What do you have to say for yourself?' demanded the shop owner.

`I didn't...' I began.

`No,' said Mr Tennyson, before I could say anything. `You didn't think. You didn't think of the consequences. And you didn't think you would get caught. I gave you a job as a favour to an old friend. And this is the way you repay me.' Before I could say anything in reply to this he turned to the willowy blonde. `I don't know your name, young woman,' he said. `But your boyfriend made a big mistake bringing you here. You'd better leave.' He had turned so that he had his back to his wife and only the blonde and I could see the wink he gave her and the kiss he blew her. Loyally, she turned and marched out of the shop without another word.

`You're fired,' said Mr Tennyson to me. `Just take off your white coat and leave. You aren't working here any longer. Go back to your hotel and I'll bring round whatever I owe you.'

Monsieur Baptiste and Sylvie stared but said nothing. By the way Sylvie looked at me I knew she wanted to speak up for me but she could not find the courage or the words. When I looked at Monsieur Baptiste he looked down and examined his shoes. I took off my white coat, lay it carefully across the counter and walked to the store room where I had left my jacket. Less than a minute later I was on the pavement. I felt numb and didn't know what to do. I felt very alone and rather frightened. I walked aimlessly along the street and as I did so I looked through a café window and saw the willowy blonde sitting, alone, at one of the tables with a cup of coffee in front of her. When she saw me she smiled, gave a little wave and shrugged. I managed a ghost of a smile, waved back and carried on walking. I felt a tear or two rolling down my cheeks and brushed them away angrily.

Chapter Eight

`Thanks for keeping quiet today,' said Mr Tennyson. He looked around my room. `God, is this where we put you? It's awful.

He had arrived at the hotel about an hour after I'd got back. He had apologised and explained that he'd had to find Natalie first. `It didn't take long,' he'd said. `I knew she'd just be in a cafe nearby.'

`Sit down,' I said, offering him the only chair. My suitcase was on the bed. I'd started packing.

`I think I'll stand if you don't mind,' he said, examining the grubby looking chair. `I was in a bit of a tricky spot there today,' he said. `My wife has caught me out once or twice before and she's sworn that if she catches me out again she'll go straight to a divorce lawyer she knows in New York. He's a killer.'

I didn't say anything but waited for him to go on.

`I can understand you being pissed off with me,' said Mr Tennyson. `I can't give you your job back at the shop but I'll try and help make it up to you.' He took out his wallet. `Apart from picking up Natalie I also called in at the bank,' he said. `You were due to work for us for another six months or so, I think?'

`Yes, that's right.'

`And we were paying for your room here?'

`Yes.'

He counted out a thick, impressive looking wad of notes onto the dressing table. `That's what we would have paid you,' he said. `And we'll carry on paying your hotel bill.'

I looked at the money. I'd never seen so many bank notes before.

`I'm sorry again about what happened,' he said, putting his now much thinner wallet back into his jacket pocket. `I don't expect you to forgive me. But I hope you at least understand. Is there anything else I can do for you?'

`My job with you was arranged by the Assistant Dean at the Medical School where I'll be studying,' I told him. `If he asks...'

`I'll tell him you were the best damned employee I've ever had,' he promised. `Hard working, punctual, loyal, respectable, intelligent - anything I've missed out?'

I found myself smiling, for the first time in several hours. `No,' I said. `That will do very well.'

`Good.' He looked down at my half packed suitcase. `You're not leaving Paris, are you?'

`I don't know now,' I admitted.

`Do you want to stay here, or do you want me to get someone to find you a room somewhere else?' suggested Mr Tennyson. `Even staying in this dump, at your age I'd have jumped at the chance to spend a few months in Paris at someone else's expense. Now you don't even have to turn up at the drug store every day.'

`It's a bit gloomy and grubby here,' I said, thinking aloud. `But it's convenient and surprisingly it's quiet...'

`I know the owner. If you want to stay here I could get them to give you some better furniture. Maybe even a lick of paint.' He looked around my tiny room. `They could paint this in a day.'

`That would be nice,' I said.

`I'll sort it,' he said. He held out his hand. I took it. We shook.

Despite everything I rather liked him.

Chapter Nine

After Mr Tennyson had left I looked at my watch. The banks would still be open. I decided to take the money he'd given me and put it into my account.

As I headed out of the hotel that evening the receptionist called me over and handed me an envelope. I opened it straight away. It contained a note from Sylvie asking me to meet her at a café across the road.

`I'm so sorry about today,' she said. `I was too frightened of losing my job to speak up. I feel really ashamed of myself. I've been sitting here for half an hour waiting to see you.'

`Please don't feel bad.' I told her about Mr Tennyson's visit.

`So things have not worked out too badly for you?'

`No.' I paused. `To be honest I was more worried about what the Assistant Dean would say when he found out that I'd been fired so quickly. But Mr Tennyson promised to say I'd been a good employee.' I looked at her. `Do you think he'll stick to his word?'

`Oh, he'll stick to his promise,' Sylvie assured me. `He doesn't have much choice, does he?'

I looked at her and frowned. `Why not?'

`Because if he drops you in it you can do the same to him. All you have to do is make one phone call to his wife.'

I hadn't thought of that. `I suppose so,' I agreed. I felt much better.

`I'm so relieved that things have worked out not too badly for you,' said Sylvie. `Apart from coming to apologise I came because I think I may be able to help if you want another job.'

`Really? That would be terrific. What is it?'

`Giving English conversation classes.'

I frowned, puzzled. `That's really all I have to do?' I could hardly believe that anyone would pay me simply to speak to them in English; to gossip, to chat without there being any purpose to the conversation. It was, after all, something I had been doing all my life without expecting anyone to pay me for it. In Britain millions of people do it all day long and none of them expects to be paid for their idle chatter.

`In English.'

Genuinely puzzled, I scratched my head. `But who on earth will pay me to do that?'

`A language school. They won't pay you very much, but you will be paid.'

It sounded too good to be true. At school our French language classes had sometimes been supplemented with conversation classes conducted by young French women, who were brought over to England for a single term and usually put up in the French master's home, but they had always stuck very firmly to the syllabus.

`The principal is a friend of mine. He needs a new teacher. You will be doing him a favour.'

`I'm not a teacher,' I protested, seriously worried by the sudden escalation. There was, it seemed to me, quite a difference between simply talking to people and teaching them. I was pretty sure I could do the former. But equally sure that I wasn't quite ready for the latter. `I've only just left school.' I added, probably unnecessarily.

`That doesn't matter,' said Sylvie. `You won't be expected to teach. They just want you to correct the students' pronunciation and grammar occasionally.'

Chapter Ten

The language school was situated in a side street just off the Champs Elysée. Clutching a piece of paper upon which Sylvie had scribbled the name and address of the language school, I walked along that side street at least half a dozen times in an increasingly desperate search for the school's entrance.

When I eventually found what I was looking for I wasn't particularly surprised that it had taken me so long. The school's entrance door was crammed between the service entrance for an Indian restaurant and a small shop which had its front window completely blacked out. Only a large neon sign with the word `SEXY' on it in red gave any indication as to the type of customers the owner was hoping to attract. A huge and yet inadequately proportioned metal dumper was parked in front of the restaurant's service entrance and the entrance to the language school. The dumper was piled high with foul smelling refuse. Next to the dumper, standing in the doorway to the sex shop, and apparently quite oblivious to the stench coming from the dumper, stood a statuesque blonde in her twenties dressed only in flimsy underwear, a suspender belt, stockings and a pair of flimsy gold sandals. Her bra was totally inadequate and although it provided a shelf upon which her breasts could be displayed it did not cover her nipples which were large and erect.

The first time I had walked past her and the Indian restaurant she had mistaken me for a customer and had, with the aid of a crooked index finger, tried to persuade me to follow her into the shop. I had been so embarrassed by this that on each of the subsequent occasions when I had walked past the doorway where the blonde stood I had walked slightly faster and tried to show a very concerned interest in what was happening on the pavement on the other side of the street.

`Are you lost, love?' said a voice behind me.

I turned round.

`Lost? Looking for something?' the blonde asked me. She was, I saw now, considerably older than I had originally thought.

I looked at her and felt myself blushing. `I'm looking for the language school,' I told her. I showed her the piece of paper I was carrying, to confirm that my search was genuine. I pointed to the address. `Number 24.'

`It's right here,' she said, pointing to a narrow doorway, half hidden behind the dumper. `Fifth floor. There's no lift.'

I thanked her and squeezed behind the dumper, trying not to brush against its foul contents. I could see now that there was a small plaque on the wall advertising the existence of the school. As I entered through the doorway I hesitated, then turned. She was standing, hand on one hip, watching me. `How did you know that I was English?' I asked her.

The blonde laughed. `You couldn't be anything else,' she told me.

`Your English is very good,' I told her.

`It should be,' she said. `I was born in Middlesbrough.' She laughed again and then turned away as a group of men in suits approached her.

I climbed the stairs to the fifth floor. These stairs were straighter and slightly wider than the stairs at my hotel, but they were no cleaner. I guessed that they hadn't been swept, let alone polished, for months.

At the top of the stairs, on the fifth floor, there was a short vestibule and then a door with a large frosted glass panel in its upper half. The bottom half of the door had once been painted brown. The glass panel had the name of the language school stencilled across it. I knocked and, in response to an invitation from an unseen female voice, entered.

The invitation to enter had come from a woman in her fifties or sixties who was sitting behind an untidy desk. She wore a mauve cardigan with huge patch pockets, had two curlers in her untidy grey hair, a pair of tortoiseshell spectacles perched on the tip of her nose, a cigarette between two nicotine stained fingers and a bored, quizzical, seen-it-all-before look. Apart from the cigarette and the look she reminded me very much of one of the librarians in my home town public library.

`I'm looking for Mr James Whitechapel,' I told her. I held up the piece of paper with his name written on it.

She nodded towards a door on her right. `He's in there,' she said.

I hesitated, not sure whether or not I should sit and wait for her to ring through and introduce me.

`Just go on in, love,' she told me. `He hasn't got anybody with him.'

Chapter Eleven

The sign on Mr Whitechapel's door announced that Mr Whitechapel was the Principal of the Whitechapel International School of Languages. It sounded a terribly important establishment.

James Whitechapel was unmistakeably English. I had spent very little time abroad and I had hardly any practical experience of foreigners but even I could see that Mr Whitechapel could not have been anything else other than an Englishman.

He had curly, greying hair which had a vaguely reddish tint to it and which was thinning both at the temples and the crown, pale, freckled skin and a gingery moustache which was so thin and indistinct that it was not immediately obvious that it was, indeed, a moustache rather than an upper lip which had received less than its fair share of attention during the morning shaving ritual. (And I quickly realised that for Mr Whitechapel most daily chores would be a ritual.) He wore a tweed sports coat with leather buttons, cuffs, pocket guards and elbow patches, a checked shirt and a silk club tie which I did not recognise.

His office was cramped, and every useable flat surface (including the floor) was piled high with books and papers. A bird cage stood on top of a medium sized bookcase. From inside the cage a bad tempered looking cockatoo glared at me. I introduced myself and explained why I was there.

`You're not American are you? You don't sound it but one cannot always tell these days.'

`N-n-n-n-o,' I stuttered, as I attempted to respond to his simple query. I hadn't stuttered for years. Considering the nature of the job for which I was applying it didn't seem a good start. I concentrated hard and took a deep breath. `No,' I said. `I'm not American. I'm English.'

`Say something to me.'

`What would you like me to say?'

`Anything you like.'

`I don't know what to say.'

`What are you doing in Paris?'

I started to explain. I had reached the part in my story where the Assistant Dean had telephoned to tell me that the University would hold my place for a year when the thin man held up a hand to stop me.

`That's fine,' he said.

`I'm sorry,' I apologised.

`Sorry for what?'

`I thought that perhaps I was boring you.'

`No, you weren't boring me. I just wanted to know that you can speak English. And to make sure that you don't speak it with an American accent.' He pulled out a pipe and a tobacco pouch. `I'm afraid that the French do rather l-o-a-t-h-e Americans,' he said. He drew out the word `loathe' to give it extra emphasis. `The Americans all think they speak English, of course.' He opened the pouch, took out a chunk of tobacco and with two fingers of his right hand started to roll it on the palm of his left hand. `I don't know what it is they do speak,' he said. `But it isn't English.'

`I've never even been to America,' I said.

`What a wise man you are,' he said. `I gather that French teenagers are rather taken with what is known as American culture - something of an oxymoron in my view - but my students don't like the Americans at all.' He started stuffing tobacco into the bowl of his pipe.

I said nothing.

`Would you like a cup of tea?' he asked. `Coffee? Perhaps a glass of wine?' He compressed the tobacco in his pipe with his right index finger and then carefully stowed away his pouch in his jacket pocket.

I started to reply but I was too slow. Mr Whitechapel was already on his feet, moving around the table. I could see now that he wore a pair of cavalry twill trousers and a pair of heavy, well-polished brown brogues. He put his pipe into his mouth, took out a box of matches, lit one and held the flame to the bowl of his pipe.'

`Let's pop out, shall we? Get ourselves a spot of elevenses.'

`Back in five minutes, Miss Haversham,' he said to the receptionist. She said something to him but I didn't hear it and I doubt if he did either. `Did Miss Haversham give you a tour of the School?' he asked me. When I told him that she had not he strode purposefully past her desk towards a door marked `Seminar Room' and flung open the door. `Our seminar room,' he told me. I stepped forward and peeped inside. The room, about ten feet square, contained two wooden chairs and an old, rickety looking wooden table. The Whitechapel International School of Languages was clearly not a large establishment.

He led the way down the stairs and went so quickly that I had difficulty keeping up with him. When we reached the street, he shimmied neatly round the dustbin, turned left and headed for the Champs Elysée. I looked around for the half naked woman from Middlesbrough but she had disappeared.

`Do you know Paris well?' he asked.

`No, not really,' I replied, hurrying along behind him. `Not very well. Well, not at all, actually,' I added, talking inevitably to the back of his head.

In front of us there was a loud crash. It sounded as if someone was crushing tin cans. I looked around; two cars had collided at a junction. Both motorists immediately climbed out of their vehicles and started shouting at each other.

`When Parisian motorists see a traffic light that is green they go as fast as they can to make sure that they get through the lights before they change,' explained Mr Whitechapel. `When they see a light that is red they know that it will soon be green so they do not see any point in slowing down. Sometimes there are accidents.' He paused and watched for a moment. The two men were both shouting loudly. `The French way of dealing with a crisis is to panic, get excited, shout a lot and then forget all about it,' said Mr Whitechapel. `That probably explains why, despite their enthusiasm for alcohol, tobacco and rich food, they have such a low incidence of heart disease.' He hurried on. I followed, keeping as close behind him as I could.

Dodging in and out of the foreign tourists, French sightseers, beggars and drunkards left over from the night before Mr Whitechapel quickly arrived at a café on the Champs Elysée. We were there within three or four minutes of leaving the language school offices. `French cafés are wonderful places,' said Mr Whitechapel. `But you have to remember that in a French café you are not buying a drink.'

`No?' I said, puzzled.

`You are renting a front row seat for the greatest show on earth,' said Mr Whitechapel. `Look around.'

I looked around. The café was half full.

`Many of these people come into this café every day for their morning brandy,' said Mr Whitechapel. `They are retired. They read the paper - which the café provides - and they chat to the waiter. They have a croissant and they watch the world go by. In England they would be sitting in plastic armchairs watching rubbish on daytime TV.' He sighed. `I love England,' he said. `But there are some things we do not do well. And life is one of those things. What would you like to drink?' he asked me, when he had found a table he liked.

I hesitated and glanced around. The couple at the next table were holding hands and staring into each other’s eyes.

Mr Whitechapel said something in French to the waiter who had hurried over the moment we'd sat down. `I've ordered you a lemon tea,' he told me. `When can you start?' he asked.

`Any time you like,' I replied.

`This evening?'

`Yes, if you like.'

`Splendid.'

The man at the next table had reached across the table and was unbuttoning his bathukolpian partner's flimsy blouse. She made no effort to stop him. My education was advancing fast.

`Your official title will be Senior Lecturer,' said Mr Whitechapel. The waiter arrived, carrying a large tray.

`That sounds rather grand.'

The waiter began to unload pots and cups from his tray. `Actually,' I said, `I'm not sure whether or not you know that I don't have any teaching experience.'

The man at the next table had now finished unbuttoning his partner’s blouse. I watched in astonishment as he slid his hand into her blouse, scooped out one of her breasts and laid it on the table between them. The woman smiled at him. The man stroked the woman's breast as though it were a pet animal.

`Oh, don't worry about that,' said Mr Whitechapel, waving a hand airily. `That doesn't matter. The important thing is that you speak English with a genuine English accent. That's what our students want. The French have a great affection for language though, sadly, I confess that their affection is mainly reserved for their own language. Most French people do not believe in learning foreign languages. You know what Noel Coward said when, after General de Gaulle died, he was asked what de Gaulle would find to talk about to God?'

`Er, no, I'm afraid not,' I confessed.

``It depends,' replied Coward, `On how good God's French is.’’

`Ah,' I said, nodding wisely. `But I'm not sure that I ought to be a senior lecturer,' I said, getting back to what to me seemed to be a crucial issue. `Not straight away,' I added, lest my modesty be mistaken for self-criticism.

`The students will like it,' said Mr Whitechapel, clearly unconcerned by my concern. `They like to think they're being taught by someone who is a professional; a specialist. Well qualified for the purpose. They progress far more speedily if they have faith in their teacher.' He poured himself a cup of tea, and added a slice of lemon. `Pour yourself a cup. They do good tea here. This is Earl Grey. And it looks good when you sign their diploma.'

`Diploma?'

`Oh naturally they all want a diploma,' said Mr Whitechapel. `They get a diploma after twelve lessons and a degree after twenty.'

I poured myself a cup of tea. I didn't have the foggiest idea who Earl Grey was and had never drunk lemon tea before. When I'd filled my cup I added a slice of lemon. The man at the next table was still stroking his partner's breast.

`A degree?' I said.

`It's what we call our degree of certification,' said Mr Whitechapel. `They get a beautiful certificate on vellum. Very expensively printed and quite reasonable at the price.'

`What's the pass rate?' I asked, innocently.

`The pass rate?'

`How many students pass?' I asked. `Of the ones who take the examination?'

`Oh we don't agree with examinations,' said Mr Whitechapel. `Far too divisive and elitist. We favour the continual assessment scheme which is now becoming increasingly popular among progressive educationalists. We leave it to our lecturers to make the decisions. Examinations are far too arbitrary.'

I nodded as though I understood.

The man at the next table put his hand inside his partner's blouse and pulled out her other breast. Paris seemed to be full of naked breasts. The woman saw me looking and smiled. I felt myself blushing and looked away.

`You have to understand that running an educational establishment is very much a passion with me,' Mr Whitechapel continued. He seemed unaware of the gentle strip tease which was taking place a few feet away. `It's more a vocation than a business. It does mean that we can't pay you very well I'm afraid. But I hope that you will think of your title as in some way something of a reward for your efforts.'

`But I will get paid?' I said, rather diffidently.

`Oh dear me, yes,' said Mr Whitechapel. `The full rate for the job. The school charges students a fee of thirty francs an hour for tuition. You keep half of that.' He sipped some more tea. `In addition you may find, from time to time, that one or other of your students may feel moved to make you a little present. Only the other month a particularly generous gentleman from Libya presented me with a very fine paperweight which he had purchased, no doubt at considerable expense, from a small establishment in the shadow of Notre Dame Cathedral. It was not, unfortunately, precisely the sort of object d'art which would fit in comfortably with the other little knick knacks in my apartment but I passed the item on to my mother when her birthday came round and she was utterly delighted with it.'

`How many other lecturers do you have?' I asked him.

`I will not hide from you the fact that we have retrenched somewhat recently,' said Mr Whitechapel. `We have, by circumstances, been forced to tighten our collective belt. As you've probably read in the broadsheets the world of private education is in something of a recession at the moment. There was an article about the decline and fall of private education in *The Times Educational Supplement* a couple of months ago. Did you see it?'

`Er, no,' I said. `I'm afraid not. I don't read *The Times* so I suppose I would have missed their supplement.'

`Never mind, never mind,' said Mr Whitechapel. He leant back, folded his arms and surveyed the Champs Elysée. `Wonderful place isn't it?'

`It is,' I agreed.

`Well,' said Mr Whitechapel, rather sadly. `I must be getting back to the school. Oh, and don't forget to keep details of all your expenses. You can claim them against your income tax.'

`Expenses?' I said. `Income tax?'

`When you pay the rapacious man from the Revenue at the end of the year,' explained Mr Whitechapel. `You do pay taxes I assume? Still, never mind. I have no interest in that. Entirely up to you. You'll be a freelance with us, of course.'

It had not occurred to me that I might be liable to pay income tax on my earnings and while I mulled over this piece of rather worrying information Mr Whitechapel rose, and held out a hand. I took the proffered digits, rather limp, damp examples of the species, and we shook hands to seal our agreement. `One other thing,' Mr Whitechapel added, still gripping my hand. `The school has grown in recent years and we're a bit short of lecture theatres and classrooms, not to mention furniture. Have you any idea of the cost of furniture these days?' I had no idea of the cost of furniture and so I shook my head. `Still, in a way this is an advantage,' continued Mr Whitechapel. `You'll be taking your students out into the real world for their classes. Much better for them. Far less formal and more realistic.' He released my hand.

I was puzzled and must have shown it.

`This café is one of my personal favourites,' said Mr Whitechapel. `But you can take your students wherever you like.' There was a huge crunching sound. We both looked up. A motorist, trying to reverse a Mercedes into a small parking space, had backed into a small Renault. `Oh dear,' I said. `Should we do anything?'

`About what?'

`There's been another accident,' I said, pointing to the glass on the pavement.

`Oh don't worry about that,' said Mr Whitechapel. `That doesn't count as an accident. The Parisians always park their vehicles in spaces which are too short. They do this by shunting all the cars together. It's perfectly normal.' He took a small black notebook out of his pocket and removed a blue rubber band from around it. `Now let me see,' he said, thoughtfully. `Ah, yes. Jules de Prony. He would be perfect for you to cut your teeth on.'

I waited, expectantly.

`Mr de Prony is the eldest son of the de Prony family,' explained Mr Whitechapel. `You have heard of them?'

I thought for a moment. `No,' I said at last. `I'm afraid not.'

`The de Pronys are very wealthy. Very wealthy. The great great grandfather started a mineral water business in the 19th century. They have a huge house out near Versailles. Jules is a student at the Sorbonne. His family want him to have good conversational English so they pay extra for him to take lessons with us.'

`Right,' I said.

`He's a rather lively young man,' said Mr Whitechapel. `Very popular, so I gather, with the ladies.'

`Does he speak good English?'

`Not bad,' said Mr Whitechapel. `Not bad at all. He likes to have his lessons twice a week in a cafe called La Rhumerie. It's near the church of St Michel. You can't miss it. I'll telephone him and tell him to expect you this evening at 8 pm. That's his normal time.'

`How will we know each other?' I asked.

`Good question,' said Mr Whitechapel. `Carry a copy of *The Times*.' He coughed. `As to the matter of fee,' he said. `As I have already explained we charge our students thirty francs an hour and we bill them for a minimum of one hour. Mr de Prony will, in addition, pay for any drinks either of you consume. Half the fee you will remit to me at this office. The other half is yours to keep. I usually like my lecturers to remit fees to the office on a weekly basis but since this is your first engagement perhaps you would call at my office tomorrow with the appropriate sum. If the office is closed just place the cash in an envelope and slide it under the door.'

I promised to do as he had requested and gave him the address and telephone number of my hotel. He called the waiter over, paid for our tea, took my hand again, shook it, let go of it and left.

I stayed there for a few minutes, watching the world go by.

At the next table the man in the dark blue suit was still stroking the pair of breasts which lay on the table in front of him. The owner of the breasts was staring into his eyes lovingly and I was convinced I could hear her purring.

When I got back to my hotel I discovered to my astonishment and delight that I had been allocated a much bigger room on the second floor. The room had been freshly decorated. The walls were pale blue and there was a dark blue carpet on the floor. The furniture, although fairly cheap, was brand new and spotless. The bed, too, was new and there were even a few pictures hanging on the walls. Best of all the room had its own shower and WC. Compared to the room I'd had before this was five star luxury.

Chapter Twelve

My first meeting with Jules was complicated by the fact that when I arrived at the rendezvous there were two men in La Rhumerie already sitting reading *The Times* newspaper.

One of the men, sitting right at the back near the bar, was bald and looked like a schoolteacher. He wore a very neatly trimmed toothbrush moustache and a slightly shabby blue blazer with brass buttons. The other, much younger, had a full head of flame red hair and wore a well-worn and rather badly creased grey suit. He had a black composite briefcase by his chair.

I chose a seat near the window (not difficult since at La Rhumerie there are windows on three sides) removed from my jacket pocket my carefully folded copy of *The Times* (purchased at such considerable expense from a newsagent’s in the Rue de Rivoli that I had already decided to keep the same newspaper as my identification for future appointments) and started to read it. When the waiter came over I ordered a small black coffee, assuming that coffee would probably be the cheapest item on the menu.

For the first fifteen minutes in the cafe I kept my eyes firmly on the door, trying to guess whether which, if any, of the customers might be my first student. With three of us reading *The Times* I was worried that my student might approach the wrong one of us. `What,' I thought to myself, `if he approaches the man who looks like a real teacher and he turns out to be a real teacher who is short of money and steals my student. How would I ever explain that to Mr Whitechapel?' Eventually, I got fed up of looking and concentrated instead on reading the newspaper.

`I'm Jules. Are you my English teacher?'

I looked up.

`Jules de Prony,' said a young man in a bottle green corduroy suit. His jet black hair was shoulder length and shiny. He had quite long sideburns and smelt very faintly of something which was probably expensive.

`Sorry I'm late,' he said. `But I had a terrible job parking the car.'

`You have a car?'

`Of course,' he replied. He called over the waiter and ordered something. I didn't know what. The café was crowded and noisy but somehow Jules had managed to attract the waiter's attention in a moment. `You haven't paid for that, have you?' he asked, nodding towards my coffee.

`No,' I said. `Not yet.'

`Good,' he said. `I will pay the bill when we leave. Would you like a Ricard?'

`I don't know,' I stuttered.

`Have you ever tried one?'

`No,' I said. `I don't think so.'

`Ah, you should,' he said. He called to the waiter. The waiter turned. Jules held up two fingers and then pointed first at himself and then at me. The waiter nodded. `If you don't like it, you don't drink it,' Jules told me firmly. `OK?'

`Thank you,' I said.

`You are fond of my English?'

`It's very good.'

`Thank you. I need to be good English.'

`To speak good English.'

`I need to be good English to speak good English?'

`No.' I started to explain.

`Oh never mind,' said Jules with a wave of his hand. `You were understanding me?' The waiter brought over two tumblers containing a clear liquid. He also brought a jug of water.

`Yes. I understood you perfectly.'

`That is what the matter is,' said Jules enigmatically. He poured water into one of the glasses. The clear liquid turned a yellowy, rich, milky white. It reminded me of an experiment in chemistry at school. He held the jug over the other tumbler. `Shall I do for you?'

`Is that the normal way to drink it?'

`Yes, certainly.'

`Yes, please, then.' I watched, again, as the Ricard magically changed appearance in front of my eyes.

`And I look English, yes?' he said. He looked down at himself, brushing a tiny speck of dust from the lapel of his immaculate sports jacket.

`Pretty much,' I agreed.

Jules frowned. `What is `pretty much'?'

`It means that you do look quite English,' I said.

`But not perfect?'

`No,' I told him. `Not perfect.'

`So what is wrong? Tell me so that I can put it right.'

I thought for a moment. `The only creases in your trousers are the ones which are supposed to be there, you have no loose threads poking out from your jacket and you have neither food nor ink stains on your tie.'

`I need food and ink on my tie to be English?'

`Oh yes. I'm afraid so. It's pretty much compulsory.'

`And have creases which should not be there?'

`Absolutely.'

`Then I stay French,' said Jules. He grinned. `This is the famous English sense of humour, yes?'

`Not entirely,' I confessed.

Jules shook his head in amazement. And then remembered something and put his hand into his jacket pocket. `Before I forget I must give you this,' he said, pulling out a plain white envelope.

I felt myself blushing with embarrassment.

`For our lesson,' Jules explained. `I pay you now so we get this out of the way.' He grinned at me. `So then we can enjoy ourselves. You can peep inside.'

I wasn't sure whether to put the envelope into my pocket or to open it first. In the end I decided to open it and take a peep. The envelope contained a one hundred franc note.

`I don't have any change,' I told him.

`I don't want any change,' said Jules. `Take it, please.'

I took the note and slipped it into my pocket. It was the first money I had ever earned. All I could think was that men who go with prostitutes usually pay before they get down to business.

`You do not have a wallet?'

`It was stolen on the boat across the Channel.'

`Tsk. That is terrible.' He shook his head in dismay. `Have you made an official report?'

`Do you think I should report it to the police?' I asked him.

`I do not think there is much point,' said Jules. `Because they want you to be happy they will smile and promise faithfully that they will deal with your problem. But, of course, nothing will happen. It is just a game.'

`A game?'

`They know that you will be happy if you believe they are searching for your wallet. Bringing in all the known wallet thieves. That sort of thing. And so they make this promise.'

`Even though they have no intention of keeping their promise?'

`That is a problem for the future,' said Jules. `Like all English people you think far, far into the future. Here people worry about today and, maybe, a little about tomorrow. But they do not waste energy worrying about the day after tomorrow because that is too far into the future.'

We both sipped our drinks and for a few moments sat and looked around. I decided not to bother reporting my stolen wallet to the police. The peace of the café was interrupted when the doors burst open and two hugely overweight tourists burst in through the door. They were both carrying maps and had cameras slung around their necks. Both wore ugly, ill-fitting, beige trousers, huge, baggy T-shirts and spectacles. Both had baseball caps on their heads. I wasn't entirely sure but I thought that one was male and the other female. Both carried small rucksacks.

`Americans,' muttered Jules. `They could be nothing else. Smug, self-satisfied, arrogant and fat. America's problems are...what is the word...end...'

`Endless?'

`No, no.'

`Endemic?'

`Yes! That is it. Endemic. They have bad tastes, bad judgement and they are far too greedy. They are very self-indulgent. They waddle around Europe, taking up all the taxis and bumping into things with their suitcases and their rucksacks. They are patronising and arrogant.' He pulled a face. `I know that America is a new country, not yet old enough to have culture but they are old enough to know that they do not know. No?' He took a breath for a moment.

I thought he had stopped but I was wrong. He was merely getting into his stride. `I do not wish to generalise,' he went on. `But the Americans have minds closed like shutters. And they have no taste. They make ghastly clothes and inedible food. They have nothing old, nothing original and nothing traditional. Culturally they are hooligans.' He pulled a face.

`Yes,' I agreed. I found it difficult to agree with him. I knew that the Lone Ranger, Hopalong Cassidy and the Range Rider were all good men and true, though, in my heart, I felt confident that these were not what Jules meant by Americans.

`They refer to Paris as Paris, France,' Jules continued. `Have you noticed that? And London, England. As though there is another Paris that matters. Or another England.' He sniffed, derisively. `And so when I speak with Americans I always refer to New York, America or Washington, America.' He paused and a huge smile appeared on his face. `I have found this is a good way to annoy Americans,' he said.

The two obese Americans marched up to the waiter who was taking an order from a family of four at the next table. `Where is your bathroom?' demanded one of the tourists, in an unmistakeable American drawl.

Puzzled, the waiter stared at the American.

`Your bathroom,' shouted the American, assuming that since the waiter did not understand English he must be deaf. `Where is it?'

The waiter clearly didn't have the faintest idea what the American was talking about.

`La toilette,' explained Jules to the waiter.

The waiter pointed to the back of the café.

Without a word or gesture of thanks the Americans blundered their way to the back of the café, knocking into tables with their broad hips and sending drinks and ashtrays flying. I noticed that they had American flags sewn onto their rucksacks. `The Americans are so very, very stupid,' said Jules. `Why do they wear those little flags to tell the world where they have come from? For the first thing it is not necessary because they are so fat and lacking in culture that they are obviously American. And also do they really not realise that everyone hates Americans? Can you not see why? They are so bad-mannered! They are so unwise to advertise the fact that they belong to the nation of the stupid and the rude. They are targeting themselves to be derided and cheated and scorned behind their backs. They could, with some work and a little effort, have perhaps passed themselves off as English or more likely Australian.' He paused. Full of indignation. `There should,' he said, `be a limit on the number of Americans allowed into Europe at any one time.' He turned and looked at me. `Do you know,' he said, `that I was once in a lift in Paris where there was a notice: `Maximum load: eight people or two Americans.'

`Is that true?' I asked him.

He looked at me and grinned. `Yes,' he said. `I wrote it. It is a good joke, yes?'

Jules and I sipped at our drinks again.

Aware of the need to earn my money it was me who broke the silence. `Do you need to speak English for the work you will do later with the family business?'

Jules laughed. `No, no!' he cried, holding up a hand and shaking his head. `I do not like work. It is boring. There are other people to do that. I need good English for the girls!'

`For the girls?'

`Of course!' he explained. `There are some girls who speak French, yes?'

`Yes, of course.'

`And who do not speak English?'

`Yes.'

`And there are girls who speak English?'

`Yes.'

`But who do not speak French?'

`Of course.'

`So if there are perhaps ten million beautiful girls who speak French and no English,' said Jules, holding up his left hand, `and there are ten million beautiful girls who speak English but no French,' he paused and put down his left hand and held up his right hand, `that means that altogether there are twenty million beautiful girls,' he paused again and held up both hands, `available to the man who can speak the English and the French?'

I looked at both hands. The maths and the logic seemed impeccable. `Yes, I suppose so.'

At the back of the café there was something of a commotion as the two Americans emerged from the café's toilettes. Anxious patrons picked up their drinks as the heavyweight duo approached. The Americans blundered through the café again, opened the front door and left. They did not offer to buy anything as payment for the facilities they had used. I felt embarrassed for them. The waiter glared at their backs and shook his head sadly at their rudeness.

Jules, who had watched the Americans leave, put down his hands, grinned and shrugged. `American tourists conquering the Europe,' he said. `An invading army in sensibly baggy, elasticated beige, travelling in expectation from the lavatory to the lavatory.'

I stared at him, impressed.

`I learnt all this from my father,' explained Jules. `He hates the Americans even more than me.' I found this rather alarming. He grinned and shrugged again. `So, at the age of 15,' he continued, `I decided that I have to speak English,' he said. `I did think about learning Spanish. There are lots of girls who speak Spanish and many of them are very beautiful. But Spanish girls, like Italian girls, are Catholic. And also there are so many English speaking girls. From England, From Scotland, from Ireland, from Canada, from New Zealand, from Australia.' He waved his hands in the air. `Even the Dutch girls speak English. And the Swiss. And there are American girls too. I do not have objection to making love to American girls. In a way I consider it a duty to my country. It is a way of fighting the Americans.'

`You make love to American girls as a way of fighting Americans?'

`Oh yes. But I do not like the American girls to talk. I do not want to pick up the horrid American accent.'

`So how do you keep them quiet?'

`I feed them or I kiss them,' explained Jules. `American girls are greedy. Whatever you give them they will happily take from you.'

`You didn't think about learning German?' I asked him.

`Oh no,' said Jules, in dismay. `The German girls are ugly. And they do not want to play around before they marry. They want only to be wives, to be fat and to have thousands of children.'

`You are never tempted to learn Spanish or Italian as well as English?'

`No, no,' said Jules. `I am not greedy. Twenty million girls are quite enough.' He said this with a straight face. I did not think he was joking. He looked at me, and held his head to one side slightly, rather like a sparrow eyeing up a crumb. `Do you not agree?'

`Oh yes,' I agreed. He was without a doubt the most charming, prejudiced and roguish man I had ever met. I did not know whether to envy him or to be shocked by him. It occurred to me that very few women would be able to resist his charm.

`I love girls,' he sighed. `From a very tiny age I have loved them. `Unwrapping a woman on a first date is to me as exciting as unwrapping a hoped for Christmas or birthday gift had been when I had been a small boy. I may know what is inside the wrapping but the sense of surprise, excitement and anticipation is always there.'

I had never unwrapped a woman but I felt that it would probably not help our developing relationship if I were to admit this so I nodded and muttered my agreement.

`And here in Paris the women package themselves so beautifully, do you not think?' said Jules. `This is a city where the women still wear the stockings and the...les jarretieres...what are these in English?'

`Suspenders?' I suggested, on the basis that these went with stockings rather well.

`That is it, thank you. You are teaching me excellent words. They wear the stockings and the suspenders rather than those horrible new all in one tights. The panty hose. They are impenetrable! Hah. Only the Americans could invent such things. They are for the professional virgins.' He shuddered, emptied his glass and signalled to the waiter, who was on the other side of the cafe. `Would you like another Ricard?' he asked me, managing to hold the waiter's attention while he spoke to me.

`I haven't finished this one,' I said, picking up my glass.

`But you like it?'

`Oh yes.'

Jules held up two fingers. The waiter nodded.

`Do you spend a lot of your time with girls?'

`All of it,' said Jules, emphatically.

`But don't you have studies at the university?'

`At the Sorbonne?'

`Yes.'

`Pfui. It is boring stuff. Books and lectures. Who cares about such things.'

`Aren't there exams you have to pass?'

`My father will deal with those,' said Jules. `He has friends who know how to deal with this sort of stuff.' He waved a hand as though it were all rather beneath him. `They are happy and impressed that I am taking extra language lessons with Mr Whitechapel's school.'

`And your parents really don't mind if you don't pass any exams by yourself?'

`My father prefers it this way. Every Sunday I have lunch with him and tell him my exploits. He enjoys this very much. He is old now. He is rich but old. He does not have the time or the energy for sex with the girls. So I do it for him.'

`You do it for him? I don't understand.'

`I have a good times and I tell him everything and he enjoys these things again through me,' said Jules.

`Everything? You tell him everything?'

`Oh yes. He enjoys very much the details of my little adventures,' said Jules. `That is what he wants from me. He wants to know how I am feeling in my head. He wants to know what the girl says. What I say. What we do.' He shrugged. `Everything.'

He told me this as naturally as if it were quite normal and commonplace for a father to use his son in this way. For all I knew it was normal in France.

`And your mother?' I asked, not at all sure that I could cope with the answer I might receive.

`Oh no,' said Jules. `That would be absurd.'

I breathed a sigh of relief.

`My mother is not interested in my adventures,' continued Jules. `She has a lover so she has all the experiences she wishes for.'

I wasn't sure that I had heard him correctly. `Your mother has a lover?'

`Oh yes, of course.'

`Doesn't your father mind?'

`Mind? I do not understand.'

`Doesn't he object? Doesn't he disapprove?'

`Why should be disapprove?' asked Jules. He seemed genuinely confused by my question. `It is nothing to do with him. It is my mother who has the lover.'

I drank the rest of my Ricard. Jules signalled to the waiter and ordered two more. I did not object. But I was still just about sober enough for it to occur to me that Jules was driving.

`Is it safe for you to drink when you are driving?' I asked him. I was beginning to feel distinctly inebriated but since I was officially being hired as his teacher I felt a certain sense of responsibility towards him.

`Oh yes,' said Jules. `I am a better driver when I have a little alcohol in my blood. It makes me worry less about the accidents.'

`And that makes you a better driver?'

`But certainly,' insisted Jules. `When the driver is worrying about making accidents he becomes nervous and a nervous man is not a good driver.'

Once again I found Jules' logic difficult to counter. The waiter arrived with two more glasses of Ricard.

`Alcohol makes me calm and less - how do you say, what is your word for apprehensif?'

`Apprehensive,' I guessed.

`Thank you,' said Jules, adding water to the Ricard and handing the now empty jug back to the waiter. `You see how you are helping me with the English already. `Less apprehensive,' he said. `Besides,' he added. `I read just the other day that only four out of every ten accidents on the roads are caused by motorists who are drunk.'

`That's quite a lot,' I said.

`Ah,' said Jules. `But if only four out of ten accidents are caused by people who are drunk that means that six out of ten of the accidents must be caused by people who are sober. Do you not agree?'

`I guess so,' I agreed.

`So more accidents are caused by sober people than by drunks?'

`I suppose that's right.'

`So,' said Jules. `I always try to have a drink or two when I am driving. It is the safe thing to do.'

`What sort of car do you drive?' I asked him.

`It is an English car,' said Jules proudly. `A Morgan. A sports car.' He looked out through the window and pointed across the road. `There!' he said. `You can see it from here.'

I looked out of the window. A red Morgan sports car was parked partly on the pavement and partly on a pedestrian crossing. It was causing no little inconvenience to motorists and pedestrians alike. I remembered that he'd claimed he'd been late for our rendezvous because he'd had difficulty in parking his car. It was however, not so much parked as abandoned. `Is that legal?' I asked him.

Jules shrugged. `My father knows someone very important in the police department,' he said. He drank some of his second Ricard. `Now, that is enough of me,' he said. `I want to know about you. How long have you been a teacher? Have you always wanted to be a teacher?'

`I'm not really a proper teacher,' I said. I could have bitten off my tongue as soon as the words had escaped from my mouth. `Well, not that I'm not qualified,' I said, flustered and embarrassed. `I do speak English. I was born there.

It is the tongue of my mother.'

`The tongue of your mother?'

`My mother tongue.'

`So how did you become my teacher?' asked Jules. `How did you meet our wonderful Mr Whitechapel?'

`A friend found the job,' I explained. I gave Jules a potted account of my recent history.

`So you worked in a pharmacy?'

`Yes.'

`That would have been very useful,' said Jules. `You had access to antibiotics and contraceptive pills?'

`Well, yes, those things were in the pharmacy,' I agreed.

`Wonderful!' said Jules. `These are the two things I need most often. Can you not get back your job at the pharmacy?'

`I'm afraid not.'

`Maybe later,' said Jules. He picked up his glass. `Let us drink to fate and to your new job,' he said. `Teaching me the English.'

I picked up my glass and we drank to my new job as a language teacher.

Chapter Thirteen

`I have a friend who works behind the counter in a pharmacy,' continued Jules when we had finished our toast. `She told me a true story about the pharmacy where she works in the 15th arrondissement.' He looked around and then leant across the table, beckoning for me to lean towards him. `The pharmacy is owned by that man over there,' said Jules. `The bald man in the sports jacket.'

`He is a pharmacist?'

`Absolutely.' said Jules. `So, one day a young man entered the pharmacy,' began Jules. `He boldly approached the proprietor, my friend's boss, who is a very stern rather dull man, and asked for a packet of condoms.'

`I have a hot date, tonight,'' the young man told the pharmacist. `How many condoms are there in a pack?'

`The pharmacist tells him that there are three condoms in a pack and the young man says that in that case he will take two packs. The proprietor, who despite being stern and dour and not at all that old, is a little bit of a dirty old man who hasn't seen his wife naked for over a decade and probably wouldn't want to even if she gave him the opportunity, which it is probably safe to say she would not, says that the young man sounds very sure of himself.'

`At this the young man winks and makes all those nudge-nudge signs that young and relatively inexperienced men make when they are boasting to another man about a new conquest. He admits that he has only been out with the girl once before but says that he has no doubts that the girl will go to bed with him. He says that she has been out with several of his pals and that she went to bed with all of them and that they told him that whatever they had to offer she could not get enough of it. He says she is not the sort of woman that a man thinks of as a future wife - but just a girl for a good time to be had by all. She is, he says, a woman who welcomes everyone with open legs.'

`By this time the pharmacy proprietor is salivating and wondering whether perhaps he himself might not be too old to take advantage of this young woman's generous nature.' Jules looked at me and smiled. `As your Mr Shakespeare once said: `Is it not strange that desire should so many years outlive performance?''

Impressed, I thought about this for a moment. `I suppose so,' I agreed.

`But,' continued Jules, `even if he isn't going to get lucky himself he wants to know more about the woman so that he can enjoy himself at the second hand if you understand what I mean.' Jules looked at me and raised an eyebrow.

`So the young man buys his condoms and promises to go back the next day to tell the pharmacist exactly what happened - in short to give him a blow by blow account!' Jules, smiled at us to make it clear that the double entendre was intentional.

`And so at the end of another long dull day spent putting pills into little bottles the pharmacist goes home very happy and very excited at the thought that he will, the very next day, hear of this young man's exploits with this very tarty young woman. This has quite made his day.'

`Is that it?' I asked, slightly puzzled, for Jules appeared to have come to the end of his story. `Is there really no more to that story of yours? Did the young man go back to see the pharmacist the next day?'

`Oh no,' said Jules. `The young man did not go back the next day.'

`That's a pity,' I said. I picked up my glass and took a sip. `No, I am afraid not,' said Jules, shaking his head. `The young man did not go back to see the pharmacist the next day.' He paused. `But the young man and the pharmacist did see each other that very same evening.'

`Oh? How come?'

`How come?' Jules wrinkled up his nose and his eyes.

`How did that happen? Where did they meet?'

`They met when the young man went to pick up his hot date,' said Jules. `The young man rang the doorbell and the pharmacist opened the door.'

`The girl who was known as a `sure thing' among all the young men of the neighbourhood - the `bit of hot stuff' the young man was picking up - she was the pharmacist's daughter,' explained Jules.

I stared at him. `Is that true?' I asked him.

Jules gazed back at me. `Maybe,' he said.

`And that man,' I said, indicating the bald man in the sports jacket with a modest inclination of my head. `Is that man the father?'

`Jules looked from one side to another. `I do not have the faintest idea who is that man,' he whispered. `I made that up because it makes for a better story.'

`He isn't a pharmacist?'

`I do not know.'

`Is the story true?'

Jules grinned at me. `That you must decide,' he said, mischievously. `It might be.' He paused. `Or, on the other side, it might not be.' He paused. `And now,' he said, `Tonight I am having a favour for you,' said Jules, suddenly serious.

I wasn't quite sure whether he meant that he wanted me to do a favour for him or that he was going to do me a favour. I waited.

`I have this night a date with a beautiful woman,' he said. He drew a predictable shape in the air with his hands. `A gorgeous girl. A dreamboat.'

`This evening,' I said. `You have a date this evening.'

`Evening, night,' shrugged Jules, with a grin. `What is the difference?' He winked at me and I got the feeling that he knew very well what the difference was. He sighed and pulled a face. `But my problem is that I already have been made an arrangement to see a very beautiful woman called Heidi.'

I had a suspicion that I could see where this was heading. He held up two fingers. `I have two dates,' he said. He then held up one finger. `But I am only one man and there is only the one evening.'

`How did this happen?' I asked him, though I wasn't sure that I wanted to know.

`I meet loads of women through their smalls,' said Jules. He grinned broadly, leant forward across the table and lowered his voice. `It is a very good way to meet lonely women.'

I frowned. I tried to visualise Jules patrolling the city's launderettes and picking up solitary women as they watched their lingerie go round and round.

`You meet women in launderettes?'

It was Jules' turn to frown. `In launderettes?' He thought for a moment. `In launderettes?' He paused. `The places for washing the clothes?'

I nodded.

`You meet women in launderettes?' he said.

`Me? No, I don't meet women in launderettes. You do.'

`No, of course I do not.' He seemed offended. `Why would I go to a launderette to meet a woman? Only poor women, fat women, women with dozens of children and old women go to those places. There are no beautiful, sexy women in launderettes.'

`But how then do you meet women?' I asked him, wondering if perhaps his ploy involved standing around in the lingerie sections of department stores and making his move as some young innocent flicked through the silk camisoles.

`Through the newspaper,' explained Jules impatiently. `The smalls.'

`The smalls?'

`The advertisements. The - what is they called - the classified sector?'

`The classified section? The classified ads?'

`That's it! The smalls!'

At last I understood. `Oh! The small ads!'

`Yes! This is what I have been telling you all this time,' he said, clearly exasperated at my inability to understand my own language. `The small ads. That is the place to meet the best women. Have you heard of a magazine called *The Paris Monthly*?'

I admitted that I was not familiar with the publication.

`It is a small magazine for English speaking people living in Paris,' explained Jules. `Lonely American and English people advertise in it as do French people who want to meet Americans or English people. It is an excellent way for improving my English.'

`Do you put advertisements in yourself?' I asked him.

`No,' said Jules. `In some ways it is perhaps better to put in your own ad. Then you have the control of what happens. You get to pick the girl you go out with instead of the other way round.' He smiled at me. `But I find it exciting to know that I have been picked from a bundle of applications. It is good for the vanity.'

`I can see that.'

`I have a friend who puts in advertisements saying: `Women: contact me if size matters to you.' He was not well-made but he would get them drunk and keep the lights off and they were so excited that they never noticed. Most people who put in ads or reply to them have strict ideas of what they want. But they are so desperate that if they find someone half decent they'll take him.' He laughed. `Another guy I knew who had a hang-up over the stockings used to send women who replied a questionnaire asking them what colour stockings they wore. Ninety per cent of the girls replied and told him they would wear whatever turned him on. He used to tell them he was the lead singer in a rock group called Tinker Tailor and the Plumstones.'

I listened in astonishment to all this. My education was continuing apace.

`You never know what you're going to get or what lies you will be told,' continued Jules with a laugh. `I once had a date with a girl who claimed in her letter that she had a bust like Marilyn Monroe. We cannot have been thinking of the same Marilyn Monroe because this girl had absolutely no breasts at all.' He leant across the table and lowered his voice. `Now, I am not a person to make a big deal about size - there is too much danger that a chicken could come home to roost - but this woman was as flat as `la table a repasser', what is that, the board for making the clothes flat after the washing,, and looked like a boy. Still, variety is the spice of life and I've had my share of big women. And the flat chested girl was very good in bed. I'll never forget one thing. On the night we met I asked her if she was sexually active. I wanted to know if we were going to get anywhere before I wasted any more time on her. She didn't even hesitate. Just came straight out with it. `I think you could say I am,' she replied. `I'm not one of those girls who just lies there and lets the man do all of the work.'

`Ironing board,' I said.

Jules looked at me, puzzled.

`The board for ironing clothes. After washing them.'

`Aha, thank you. La table a repasser is the ironing board?'

`Yes, it is. Do men ever marry women they meet through advertisements?'

`Oh yes. At least two other guys I know married women they met through the advertisements. I knew one man who fell madly in love with a woman who would have made a lump of the ice look cuddly. He had inherited much money from his parents and she clearly wanted little from him apart from joint custody of his account of the bank. She stuck to him like a sticky bandage until his money ran out and his credit was no more. Then she left. The yelps of pain were like those which are produced when the sticky bandage is ripped from a hairy limb. It was clear from the start that he was heading for pain and poverty but he would not hear one word said against her until it was too late. Even some years later he still says she was worth every penny. She must have been very good between the sheets. Another man, a friend of my father, answered an advertisement from a girl looking for a tall, dark man aged between 30 and 35. He was 57, short, bald and tubby at the time. Hardly what she had thought she was looking for. But they met, got on and two months later they were married. That was some years ago. Today they're still happily married.'

`So how did you come to make two dates for this evening?'

`Last week I made three dates for this week,' he said. He held up three fingers of his left hand. `On Tuesday - that was yesterday - I had the first date with Heidi. She is a nurse. Very beautiful.' He raised his eyes heavenwards. `And hot. Very hot date.' With his right hand he moved one of the fingers to show that it signified Heidi. `Tonight I have a date with a woman called Claudette Foucault. She is very beautiful.' He moved a second finger - Claudette. `And on Friday - that is the tomorrow after tomorrow - I have a date with Flora. She is a housewife and she too is very beautiful. I have seen a photograph of her.' He waved his hands in the air again. `I think she is in very good shape.'

`A housewife? You mean she is married?'

`She is not very married. Just four months.'

`You're meeting a woman who has been married for just four months?'

`Yes,' grinned Jules. `I like very much married women. If they become mothers there is always a ready-made father to look after the babies.'

I stared at him, horrified. He just grinned. `You are shocked?'

`Yes.' I admitted. `I suppose I am.'

`You are English,' he said. He shrugged. `Everything is different in England. Here a Frenchman considers he is insulting a man if he does not make a pass at his wife. And a husband will feel insulted if a man does not try to seduce his wife.' He shrugged. `It is our way. A wife belongs to her husband. A man likes other men to admire his car. He also likes other men to admire his wife.'

`But you can't really compare a wife to a motor car,' I protested.

`Why not?' asked Jules, who seemed genuinely puzzled.

`Well, wives are human beings,' I said. `They have rights. They are equal to men.'

`No, they are not,' said Jules.

`They can vote,' I pointed out.

`Ah, yes, that is true,' said Jules. `In 1945, after the war, women were given the vote. My mother still does not approve. She does not vote.'

`But lots of women have important jobs,' I said.

`Only if their husbands want them to,' said Jules.

`But this is 1964!' I told him. `If a woman wants to work she can.'

`No, no!' said Jules, sternly. `There has been talk of changing the law but thankfully a man can still forbid his wife to work.'

I tried to take this in. It was not easy.

`But I still don't see your problem with your dates,' I said, putting the housewife to one side for the moment. `If you saw Heidi on Tuesday and you're seeing Claudette tonight and Flora on Friday then you don't have a problem at all.'

`Ah,' said Jules. `But I do. Heidi is very romantic. Very sexy woman. At breakfast this morning I promised to see her tonight. She is cooking me the dinner.'

Now I understood.

`Can't you postpone Claudette?'

`Oh no,' said Jules. `She would be disappointed. She is looking forward to our date tonight. So this evening you will make her happy,' he said. `It will not be the same for her, of course. You are not me. But you are better for her than an evening in front of the television. And so this is my gift to you.'

`You want me to see Claudette?'

`Yes! Thank you! She is a favour for you from me.'

`You're putting me on!'

Jules frowned. `What is this? I am wearing you? How am I wearing you?'

`It's an English idiom,' I explained. `It means that you're kidding me.'

`Now I am making you a child?' Jules threw his arms into the air. `Sometimes I don't understand your language anymore.'

`I can't believe you are serious,' I said. `She is expecting to see you. She won't want to see me.' I was torn. I was frightened, nervous and yet I was also excited. I did not tell Jules (I was frightened he would laugh) but I had never had a date before. I was as much a virgin as it is possible for a man to be.

`We have never met. She does not know what I look like. We have not even spoken on the telephone. Everything was done by the letter.'

`Presumably, she would have to call me Jules?'

`Oh no. She will call you Antoine.'

`Antoine? Why on earth would she call me Antoine?'

`It is the name I gave her. I never use my real name with women. It can lead to complications. It is another reason why I reply to their advertisements and do not insert my own.'

My head was spinning.

`I don't understand,' I said. `Why is that a reason not to insert your own advertisement?'

`Because if I insert an advertisement in the magazine I can only be one person,' explained Jules patiently. `Unless I pay for more than one advertisement, of course, but that would be tedious. If I reply to the advertisements put in by women I can be as many people as I want to be. And I can be the person I know that woman is looking for.' He paused. `To a certain extent, of course. I cannot be black or very short or ugly.'

`I see.' I said.

`Good. You see also I am doing you a big, big favour!' said Jules. `Thanks to me you get a beautiful woman this evening.' `Thank you,' I said lamely. `Is she American? English?'

`Oh no, she is French this one. You meet her on the terrace of Fouquets on the Champs Elysée,' said Jules, standing up. `Have a folded copy of *Le Figaro* on the table in front of you and wear a red scarf. Her name is Claudette.' He wagged a finger at me. `And remember that you are Antoine.'

`I don't have a red scarf,' I protested.

Jules looked at me, raised an eyebrow and sighed. `Here I am doing you this huge kindness and you insist on finding trivial problems.' He looked around the café for a moment and then walked purposefully across to the other side of the room. It was only when he stopped that he realised that his destination was a girl who was wearing a red scarf. She was sitting with two girlfriends. Jules said something to her. She laughed. Jules took out his wallet and handed something to the girl. She removed the scarf from around her neck and handed it to him. He then walked back across the room and draped the scarf around my neck. `Now you have a red scarf,' he said. `Smile and hug me.' I stared at him. He repeated the instruction. I did as I was told. We headed for the door. The three girls were giggling. Jules waved to them. They waved back. `When you go to the rendezvous you hide the scarf at first,' he said. `Try to spot the woman first so if she is ugly you can leave.'

Outside we stood on the pavement for a moment.

`How did you do that?' I asked him, fingering the scarf, confused. `Persuade that girl to sell you her scarf?’

`I bought the scarf for you,' said Jules. `It is a present.'

`But why should a complete stranger sell you her scarf?'

`They are tourists from Denmark. I told the girl that you had fallen in love with her scarf,' said Jules. He shrugged. `And I told her that I was trying to seduce you and that I thought the scarf would do the trick.'

I stared at him.

`That is right is it not? Do the trick?'

`It's right,' I agreed.

`You look so funny!' he laughed.

`Is that true? You really said that?'

`Of course it is true.'

I looked back through the plate glass window into the café. The three girls were busy talking and no longer seemed interested in us.

`I don't believe you did that,' I whispered.

Jules laughed again. `You are so English!'

We walked along the street a few paces until we reached a spot directly opposite to Jules' sports car. `I cannot give you a lift,' Jules apologised. `I am late for a date with a girl. I must rush.'

`That's OK, I need the walk,' I said. `I feel a little light-headed. A walk will do me good.'

`Fine,' said Jules. He smiled and held out his hand. `Thank you,' he said. `We do this again on in three days?'

`OK, I said. We shook hands.

`Same place. Same time.' said Jules. He stepped out into the road.

`OK,' I agreed, hoping that the three girls would have gone back to Denmark by Friday.

`Oh. One other thing,' I called.

Jules turned round, dodging through the traffic.

`How will I recognise her? She will be looking for a man with a folded newspaper, but what does she look like?'

`You are looking for a girl who is 21, blonde and beautiful,' shouted Jules gaily. `Does it matter if you get the wrong one?' He climbed into his car, started it, slipped it into gear and shot out into the traffic without, as far as I could see, bothering to look to see if it was safe to do so. There was much screeching of brakes and tooting of horns and then he was gone.

On the way back to my hotel I bought two more notebooks. I decided that the notebook my mother had given me would not be big enough.

Chapter Fourteen

It was not until I was sitting on the terrace at Fouquet's, with my red scarf wrapped around my neck and a neatly folded copy of Le Figaro on the table in front of me, sipping a glass of water and gazing in horror at the bill the waiter had slipped into the saucer that I realised that there was a big problem which both Jules and I had overlooked. Claudette spoke French. There was a reasonable chance that she might expect me to speak French too.

I was wondering why Jules hadn't instructed Claudette to carry some form of identification, and trying to decide whether a tall young woman in a bright blue beret and a black leather coat might be Claudette, when I was suddenly aware of someone collapsing heavily into the seat next to me.

`Antoine?' said a surprisingly deep female voice. `Je m'appel Claudette.'

I turned and was slightly startled by what I saw. The woman sitting next to me was considerably older than I had imagined Claudette to be. She was heavily made up, quite short and plump and I guessed that she was in her mid to late forties. I was no expert on these matters but it was clear, even to me, that the blonde hair which she wore was not her own.

`I'm sorry,' I apologised. `I'm afraid I don't speak French.' I had remembered enough school-boy French to understand the single simple phrase I had heard but I didn't want Claudette making any assumptions about my linguistic skills. On my first day in France I had learned the truth of the adage that a little knowledge can be a very dangerous thing. I had rehearsed a relevant phrase in French, walked confidently into a shop and asked for the item I wanted to buy. The shopkeeper, thoroughly misled into believing that I was fluent in his language, had replied with a torrent of rapid French of which I had understood not one word.

`You aren't speaking any French?' said Claudette, clearly shocked.

`I'm English,' I explained.

`But you did not make mention of this in your letter,' Claudette pointed out. I was too much of a gentleman to point out that she too had failed to make full disclosure in the correspondence she had exchanged with Jules.

`You speak English!' I said. `That's quite a relief.'

She held her head on one side and looked at me, examining me as a bird might check out a piece of bread.

`I like your accent,' she said. `I love the English.'

I was about to suggest that we went for a walk, hoping that we could then find a rather cheaper cafe, when she beckoned to a waiter. When he arrived she gave him instructions in rapid French. I recognised only one word: champagne. `I have ordered a bottle of champagne,' she told me.

Knowing how much a small bottle of water was costing me I knew that I did not have enough money to pay for a bottle of champagne. I could feel myself going bright red. I cursed Jules. I didn't have the foggiest idea what to do.

`I love champagne,' she said. `Don't you?'

`It's very expensive here,' I said, rather bluntly, wondering how many hours I would have to spend washing dishes to pay the bill.

`Oh, do not worry about that,' she said, waving a plump hand around rather airily. She had expensive looking rings on just about every finger. `I will pay. My husband is very rich. He can afford to buy champagne for us.'

I stared at her. `Your husband?'

`He is an actor,' she said. She looked at her watch. `When we have drunk our champagne we must rush. Tonight we are going to see him in his new play.'

Chapter Fifteen

There was a small crowd standing on the pavement outside the theatre but Claudette pushed through the women in fur coats and jewels and the men in dark overcoats and bow ties without pausing. Moments later we found ourselves in the foyer. I felt a trifle under-dressed.

`Madame! cried a pale man in his sixties, rushing over towards us. He was wearing a black suit, a dress shirt and a bow tie. He had a small moustache and looked absurdly like Adolf Hitler. He said something. I didn't understand it but it was clearly intended to be ingratiating.

Claudette simply glowered at him and pushed on through the crowd towards the doors leading into the stalls. She had taken two tickets out of her handbag.

Adolf said something else. Claudette, as though for the first time since we had got out of the taxi remembering that I was with her introduced me to him. `He has a French name,' she said. `But he does not speak French, this one.'

Adolf turned to me.

`The manager asked me to tell you that we have a box available for tonight,' he said. He was sweating profusely. He had a white cotton handkerchief tucked into the breast pocket of his jacket but he took a paper tissue from his trouser pocket and mopped at his forehead. There was a lot of sweat and the tissue wasn't very good quality. Little bits of white paper stuck to his forehead.

`No, thank you,' said Claudette coldly. `I will take my usual seats in the stalls.'

`Please, Madam,' begged the bald man. `No trouble tonight.' He looked at me, beseechingly

`You should talk to my husband about trouble,' said Claudette. `To him and that whore this theatre employs.'

`Please, Madame,' implored Adolf, looking around as though worried that someone might have heard.

Claudette was unstoppable. Like a liner that is travelling too fast to deviate from her course she continued on her way towards her designated seats at the front of the stalls. She sat down and indicated that I should sit down on her right. I looked around. Adolf had followed her half way down the theatre aisle. He was now standing in the middle of the aisle tearing the remains of his damp paper handkerchief into shreds. I had no idea what was going on but I was certain that I was destined to play no more than fourth spear carrier in whatever drama was going to unfold.

Three or four minutes later the house lights went down and then out. The curtains parted, two girls in flimsy summer dresses bounded onto the stage and the play began.

`Put your arm around me.'

I turned my head and looked at Claudette. I wasn't sure I had heard her properly.

`Put your arm around me,' she repeated, slightly louder.

Somewhere behind us an unseen patron made a loud shushing noise.

Frightened that if I didn't do as I was told Claudette might speak again I put my left arm around her shoulders.

A few feet in front of me a tall, handsome looking actor bounded onto the stage. I felt Claudette's body stiffen and it wasn't difficult to work out that the actor on the stage was her husband. `Fondle my bosom,' she ordered. One of the girls bounded off the stage.

I looked at her in astonishment. I had often fantasised about my first date. Nothing that was happening to me had ever appeared in any of my fantasies.

On stage the actor had his arms around the remaining actresses and was kissing her with extraordinary professional zeal.

`Fondle my bosom,' Claudette repeated.

I reached down with my left hand, the one at the end of the arm which was already draped around her neck and shoulders. Her bosom, although capacious, was rather low slung and my fingers barely scraped the upper slopes of her left breast.

`Use the other hand as well,' she told me. And, as though uncertain of my ability to follow her simple instructions she reached over, took my right hand and placed it onto her chest. She then pushed my fingers down into her dress. The cleavage was vast and the skin warm and slightly moist. My hand disappeared.

I sat there for a few moments, unmoving and, I am sad to have to report, unmoved. I had no idea what was going on but I was glad that the theatre was dark and that Claudette's husband could not see what was going on. My enthusiasm for the moment was not helped when I remembered reading somewhere that in France a murderer might be released by the courts if he had merely killed his wife’s lover.

While I sat with one arm around her back and the other hand stuffed down the front of her dress Claudette was not idle. She was rummaging in the black leather handbag which was sitting on her lap. Eventually she found what she was looking for, pulled it out of her bag, turned it so that it stood upright and then pressed something on its side.

The object she had removed from her handbag was a torch and the beam from it lit up the tableau which Claudette had so carefully created.

On stage her husband who had come up for air, stared down at us. I was relieved to see that he looked more contemptuous than indignant. I was far more startled than he was. I speedily removed my left arm from around her shoulders and my right hand from inside her dress. Unfortunately, I did not do this quite as delicately as I should have done and several buttons at the front of the dress shot off. One landed on the stage just a few feet away from the actor for whom this small show had been created. It skipped and rolled until it was no more than a few inches from his left foot. Still holding the torch so that it shone upon our faces Claudette threw her left arm around my neck, pulled my head towards hers and kissed me full on the lips. A few moments later she let me go, turned off the torch and stood up. She did not seem aware of the fact that her dress had lost several essential buttons.

`Let's go to a hotel,' she said loudly, in English.

On stage the actor was very cool. He bent down, picked up the button and moved towards the footlights. `I think this is yours, Madame,' he said, offering Claudette the button.

She looked up at him and snorted. `I don't want anything from you,' she said.

She walked out of the theatre to tremendous applause. She did not seem to be in the slightest bit embarrassed by what had occurred.

More embarrassed by this than by anything else that had ever happened to me before I followed a few feet behind her. I had to run to catch up with her.

Chapter Sixteen

`Why on earth did you do that?' I asked Claudette.

We were sitting in a café just a hundred yards away from the theatre. She was drinking vodka. I was drinking black coffee because I wanted to stay sober. I half expected her husband to burst through the front door at any moment brandishing a pistol or a knife. The red flush of embarrassment which had covered my face was just beginning to fade a little.

`He is having an affair with the girl he was kissing on the stage,' said Claudette. `I do not care about the affair. I do not mind him having affairs. He is a Frenchman and it is his nature. If I try to stop him he will be miserable. But he has to understand that there have to be rules. He has flaunted her around Paris. He takes her to cafés and has his picture taken with her.' Her torn dress was held together with a safety pin which she had borrowed from the exceedingly plump woman behind the bar. `He has publicly humiliated me. So I publicly humiliate him until he stops.' She took a handkerchief out of her bag and blew her nose daintily. `A watch has two hands but fits upon just one wrist,' she said.

Puzzled, I looked at her.

`It was a saying of my grandfather,' explained Claudette. `He was a wise man.'

`You've done this before?'

`At the theatre?'

`Yes.'

`Every night for a week.'

`With different men?'

`Twice with one man. A dancer. A gay friend. All the other occasions were with different men.'

`But you're not really having affairs with any of them?'

`Oh, no.'

`What time does the play end?'

`At ten fifteen.'

I looked at the clock on the wall behind the bar. There was three quarters of an hour to go unless the actor decided to leave behind the final curtain.

`Why do you ask?'

`If you don't mind I'd like to be a long way from here before the play finishes,' I explained.

`You are afraid?'

`Of course,' I laughed nervously. `Your husband may decide to kill me.'

`My husband is too much of a coward to kill you. Besides he wouldn't care if I slept with you. He only cares that he is humiliated. That he does not like. And for that he will blame me not you.'

Slightly reassured, I sipped at my coffee.

`He has always chased the women,' sighed Claudette, sadly. `I could never trust him. When we were young and had been married for just three months I noticed that at eight forty five every morning he would stand by the window of our apartment. He would get out of bed to do this. And do you know why?'

`Because a beautiful woman walked by at that time every morning?'

Claudette nodded. `There was a bus stop outside and one particular woman was always late. He would stand and watch her running to catch the bus. She was a thin woman but had big breasts and he liked to see her run because he enjoyed watching her breasts bounce up and down. He laughed when he confessed this to me. He asked me if I knew her name. I was desolated. I ran away. When he telephoned I would not speak to him for two whole days. It nearly broke my heart. Putting the telephone down on him took up all my courage. It would have been easier for me to rescue people from burning buildings or icy rivers.'

`Do you love him?' I asked her.

She looked at me. `How old are you?' she asked me.

I told her.

`Ah,' she said. `You are so very young.'

`Do you?' I asked.

She smiled at me but did not say anything for quite a while. When she did speak she lowered her voice and leant slightly towards me. `Of course I love him,' she said. `He is a bastard. I do not trust him. I do not like him very much. He never touches me in the way of a husband should touch his wife. We have not made love for ten years. But...' She reached up and touched my cheek with her hand. `You are very sweet,' she said to me.

Embarrassed, I looked down at my coffee.

`Would you like to eat?' she asked me.

`Perhaps we could find a smaller café...' I looked around.

She laughed. `You mean somewhere cheaper?'

`Yes.' I admitted. I had the pharmacy owner's money in the bank but it was probably going to have to last me a long time. I was a cautious youth.

`You want to buy me a meal?'

I nodded.

`That, for you, is the right way to do things?'

`Yes.'

`You always pay the bill when you take out a lady on a date?'

I did not reply for a moment. This was my first date but I felt embarrassed to admit it.

`You do not?'

Still I did not answer.

`You have had other dates?'

`Oh, of course. Many.'

Claudette leant closer. `I am your first? Your first date?'

`Of course not.'

`You have gone red.'

`It is very warm in here.'

`You are lying to me.'

`No, no. I'm not.'

`Yes you are. I am your first date. Is that not true?'

For a while neither of us spoke.

`You are my first date,' I admitted. `It's embarrassing, isn't it?

`Oh my sweet boy,' she said. `I am so sorry to do this to you on your first date.' She looked at me. She had big brown eyes. `Has it been a terrible disappointment?'

I looked up.

`This evening has not been quite what you expected?'

`I don't know what I expected.'

`But not this? Not what happened?'

`No. I suppose not.'

`I am sorry I lied in my advertisement.'

`That's OK.'

`But we all lie a little,' she said. `So, perhaps, we can hardly complain when we are disappointed by the lies of others.'

I blushed.

`Your name is not Antoine, I think?'

`No.' I admitted. `It's not.'

`And, of course, you are not French.'

`No.'

`Would you like to see me again?'

`I like you very much,' I told her. I was not lying. `Yes. I would like to see you again.'

`On Saturday, perhaps?'

`To go to the theatre?' I asked, rather hesitantly.

She laughed. `No. Not the theatre. I am going there with a different man each night this week. But on Saturday we go somewhere else. Paul will be expecting me so it will be as disconcerting for him if I am not there as if I am there.'

`Paul?'

`My husband.' She took out her purse and put some money down on the café table.

`Who are the other men you are taking to the theatre?' I asked her. I tried to make the question sound innocent.

But she was much better at interpreting my feelings than I was at disguising them.

`You are jealous?'

I did not say anything.

`You are jealous?' She put her arm around my neck and drew my face closer to hers. `You are jealous?'

`I expect so,' I admitted. I felt myself blushing. `A little. Maybe.'

She kissed me on the lips. `You are so sweet,' she sighed. She kissed me again. `Do you know how old I am?'

I shook my head.

`Good.'

She picked up her handbag, stood up and held out a hand. `Come,' she said. `Take me to a cheap café where you can afford to buy me an ice-cream.'

I stood up.

`You can afford to buy me an ice cream?'

`Definitely.'

`Good. I would not enjoy a date with a man who would not buy me ice cream.'

We went to a small but clean café which Claudette seemed to know well. Claudette ordered a banana split.

`I'll have the sorbet,' I told Claudette who passed this information on to the waitress. The waitress said something. I waited for Claudette to translate. `How many balls?' she asked, speaking in English. She allowed the word `balls' to roll around in her mouth before releasing it.

`Three, please.'

`Which balls do you like?'

I looked at the available flavours on the chart in the menu. `Strawberry, lemon and passion fruit,' I told her, bypassing the language barrier by pointing to the flavours I wanted. The waitress wrote down my order, smiled, said something which I did not understand and hurried off to take an order from a fat American in mauve and yellow checked trousers and a purple T-shirt whose massive family hadn't eaten for twenty minutes and were consequently all suffering from fat deprivation. They were all in desperate need of emergency hot dogs, chips and cokes.

`What did she say?' I asked Claudette.

`She asked me to congratulate you on your choices,' said Claudette, without even a hint of a smile. `She said the colours will look nice together on the plate.'

We stayed there, just talking, until two in the morning.

`I'm afraid I must go,' I said, at last. `I have to be at work in the morning.'

Claudette opened her handbag and took out some notes. `Take these,' she said. `For the taxi.'

`No, no!' I protested.

`Take them,' she insisted. She stuffed them into the breast pocket of my jacket. Then she kissed me, more tenderly and more affectionately than before. I put my arms around her. For a few moments neither of us spoke.

`We will see one another on Saturday? At Fouquet's again?'

`OK,' I said.

`I am 47,' said Claudette.

`That's OK,' I said.

`I lie about many things, but never my age.'

`OK.'

`I look forward very much to Saturday,' whispered Claudette, stroking my hair affectionately.

`So do I,' I said.

`And always remember,' she said. `A table with five legs can run no faster than one with four legs.'

I looked at her. `Your grandfather?'

`My grandfather. He was a wise man, no?'

`Absolutely,' I agreed. I had no idea what the saying meant.

We went outside and found two taxis at a rank at the end of the street. I was in bed in my dingy hotel room half an hour later. But I don't think I slept at all that night.

Chapter Seventeen

`Do you mind if I bring Rupert?' asked Mr Whitechapel.

`Er, no, not at all,' I replied, not having the foggiest idea who Rupert was.

`Fine,' said Mr Whitechapel, picking up the cage which contained the cockatoo. He headed for the door and I followed.

`Rupert likes a little sunshine now and then,' Mr Whitechapel explained. `So, how did you get on with Jules?' he asked, as we headed down the stairs. I now knew who Rupert was.

`I think it went well,' I told him. `We just talked for a while.'

`Did he, er, ask you to help him out with any, er, personal problems?' asked Mr Whitechapel.

`He did get me to take a girl out,' I said. `Actually, she was more of a woman than a girl, though I didn't know that until I met her.'

`He fixed you up with some sort of blind date?'

`I suppose that's what you'd call it,' I agreed. `He told me he had double booked and needed someone to help him out of a mess.'

`Yes, that is, I gather, the sort of thing that seems to happen to him.' Mr Whitechapel raised an eyebrow. `How, er, did the arrangement turn out?'

`Fine,' I said.

`No problems there?'

`No, I don't think so, Mr Whitechapel.'

`Please,' he said. `You should call me Jim.'

I was startled by this. A few months earlier I had still been at school and while Mr Whitechapel had too much of the air of a school master about him I still had too much of the air of a schoolboy about me. I would have been just as startled if my old headmaster had invited me to address him by his Christian name (I had never even known that he'd had a Christian name - assuming that even his wife had always addressed him formally) or if the Pope had invited me to call him `Johnny'.

`I perhaps should have warned you,' sighed Mr Whitechapel.

`He's done that before?'

`Oh dear me, yes. I'm afraid you aren't the first. I, er, hope you didn't mind?' Mr Whitechapel, Jim, looked very miserable. `I do feel very guilty,' he said. `I feared that if you knew you might not take the job.'

`No. Not really. Not at all. Did he get you to...'

`...oh yes, oh dear me yes,' admitted Mr Whitechapel. He mopped his brow. He appeared distracted. I turned to see what had caught his eye. A couple on a bicycle were pedalling down the Champs Elysée amidst the swirl of traffic. They were holding hands and there was clearly something odd about them. Mr Whitechapel turned. `I see them often,' he told me. `He is blind and works as a presenter at one of the smaller radio stations in Paris. She holds his hand and he just trusts her to steer him through the traffic.'

He sighed and then returned to his previous story. `It was all a little too exciting for me. The young woman concerned was married but was looking for what is in England these days known as a `bit on the side'.'

`Ah,' I said, understandingly.

`Not my cup of tea at all,' said Mr Whitechapel with a shiver. `I am pretty much a confirmed bachelor. I much prefer a quiet evening with a piece of toast and some marmite and my gramophone records. Do you like Bach?'

`I don't know terribly much about him,' I admitted.

`Wonderful composer,' said Mr Whitechapel. `Very soothing. I love France but French women are a little racy for me,' he continued. `I've lived in nine countries and I think this is probably the only country in the world where women get offended if you don't stare at them.'

Just then a woman pedestrian trying to cross the road was knocked over by a motor car. I was impressed to see that several people rushed forward to help her. The last time I had witnessed anything similar in England I had offered to help and I had found myself quite alone. Everyone else had walked by as if they had suddenly been struck blind.

`It's impressive to see so many people offering to help,' I said. The woman was now sitting up. She appeared to be simply shaken. Someone took her pulse.

`In France it is against the law to ignore someone needing help. If you do not help you can be sent prison. Failure to offer assistance to a person in distress is a criminal offence under paragraph 2 of article 63 of the French penal code. This applies to everyone not just doctors.'

I expressed surprise but pleasure at this. `France is a nation of contradictions,' said Mr Whitechapel. `The French delight in ignoring rules and regulations,' he went on. `But I am pleased to say that this is one law which they do seem to take seriously. It is that rarity, a civilising piece of legislation.' I thought it was equally contrary that there should be such a law in a country where the motorists seemed to me to spend much of their time on the roads trying to knock down as many pedestrians as possible. I had just that morning watched a motorist deliberately accelerate when he saw a workman struggling across the road with a piece of cumbersome and clearly heavy equipment in tow. I watched, relieved, as the woman stood, thanked her rescuers and went on her way, a little more cautiously this time.

`France is the most bureaucratic country in the world but it is also a natural home-land for revolutionaries,' said Mr Whitechapel. `You will notice that there are always many demonstrations in the streets?'

`Oh yes. There seems to be one most afternoons.'

`Quite,' agreed Mr Whitechapel. `The fact is that the right to take direct action in France is highly valued. It comes from the revolutionary traditions of 1789 since when the French have had very little faith in parliamentary representation. Their parliament is weak and pretty much ignored by the executive and by the civil service. This is one of the few Western countries where protests in the street can topple Governments.'

We continued our walk.

`Nothing came of your date, then?'

`Oh good heavens no,' said Mr Whitechapel with convincing emphasis. `Like most Britons I'd be absolutely terrible at adultery.' He shivered. `I simply wouldn't know what to do. And I'd be terrified of being found out and shot by some jealous husband. The French, on the other hand, are very good at it. If there were Olympic medals for adultery the French would sweep the board. They've even made it legal in a strange sort of way. If a man kills his wife's lover he can get off if he can prove it was a crime of love. It is something that garlic eating Gallic wine lovers practise with an enviably easy charm and an apparently total lack of guilt.' Mr Whitechapel mopped his brow again and leant a little closer. `Do you know,' he said, `I do believe that Frenchmen regard marriage as essential only because without it adultery is impossible. Indeed, Frenchwomen are skilled adulterers too. A quick survey of French women I know reveals that most happily claim to average one lover for every year of their lives. So, for example, a 40-year-old French woman will have had 40 lovers. By the time she celebrates her 50th birthday she will expect to have had 50 lovers.' He paused. `They do not start as children, you understand, but they take their average higher as they get of a certain age.'

`You are, I fear, having tea with a living example of the unsuitability of the British in general, and the English in particular, for extra marital bedroom sports. We Britons are best if we stick to golf or trainspotting. We should leave it to our Gallic neighbours to keep the European end up in the international 'oo la la' stakes. Hippolyte Taine once wrote that: `An Englishman in a state of adultery is miserable: even at the supreme moment his conscience torments him.' Do you know Hippolyte Taine?'

`No, I don't think so. Is he a pupil of yours?'

Mr Whitechapel winced. `Sadly, no,' he said. `Regrettably Monsieur Taine passed away in 1893, which was a little before my time.'

`He was a writer?'

`Critic, philosopher and historian,' explained Mr Whitechapel. `I'm a great fan. Though, if I can be critical for a moment I confess that I am just a little sceptical about his `Notes sur l'Angleterre' which I believe he wrote after rather too short a stay in England in the middle of the nineteenth century.'

We had arrived at the café on the Champs Elysée which Mr Whitechapel regarded as an extension of his office. Mr Whitechapel found a table, gently put Rupert's cage down and then settled himself comfortably. I sat down beside him. A middle aged couple on the next table stared at Rupert as though they had never seen a customer bring a cockatoo to a café before.

`Did Jules remember to, er, provide you with the agreed compensation?' Mr Whitechapel asked me.

`Oh yes,' I said. I reached into my pocket and took out the one hundred franc note. I handed the note to Mr Whitechapel.

`Ah,' said Mr Whitechapel. `You were with him for three hours and twenty minutes?'

`No,' I said. `It was actually an hour and a half.'

`An hour and a half?'

`Yes. I looked at my watch.'

Mr Whitechapel took out an old envelope and a stub of pencil. He scribbled on the envelope for a moment. As he did so the waiter came. `Would you like tea?' asked Mr Whitechapel. I nodded. `Tea for two, thank you,' Mr Whitechapel told the waiter politely. He then returned to his envelope. `You owe me 22.5 francs,' he said, giving me back the note.

Puzzled, I frowned. But I took the note. `I thought I owed you fifty francs,' I said.

`No, the correct fee for your teaching appointment was forty five francs,' said Mr Whitechapel, patiently and meticulously. He always spoke with precision. Of that I receive one half. And one half of fifty francs is twenty two and a half francs. The other half of the forty five franc fee is yours, as is the tip.'

`The tip?'

`The remaining fifty five francs was clearly intended as some sort of bonus,' said Mr Whitechapel. `It is a policy of my school that teachers keep all their tips.'

`Are you sure?'

`I am absolutely sure, thank you,' said Mr Whitechapel. `I strongly believe that one always should be honest and straightforward in one's business dealings.'

Mr Whitechapel was unique. I had never met anyone like him before. And I've never met anyone like him since.

Chapter Eighteen

La Rhumerie was crowded and at first I could not see a free table. Eventually, I spotted one, crammed into a corner. I `pardonned' and `excusezmoied' across the room and eventually slid into one of the two chairs at the solitary vacant table. As I sat down I watched as a couple sitting at a table right by the door got up and started to put on their coats.

Behind me were six students sitting around a table discussing something with great vigour and enormous enthusiasm. Every few moments one would raise his voice or pound with his fist upon the table.

To my left there sat a young couple. They were neither talking nor drinking. They were simply staring into each other's eyes.

To my right sat two well-dressed and immaculately coiffed women in their thirties who had obviously just been shopping. Despite the noise from the students behind me it was their voices I could hear most clearly for they were speaking English.

`I see you brought a book with you', said the first woman.

She said it as though her friend had brought an ironing board or a lawn mower with her.

`I like to look at a book occasionally,' said the second woman.

`Hmm.' said the other. `I don't mind looking at one - just as long as no one expects me to read one!'

Jules slipped silently into the chair next to me.

`I'm going to have a boob job,' said the first woman.

`You're not to have boobs bigger than mine,' said her friend.

`It won't be worth doing if I don't!' retorted the first woman.

`How did you get on with Claudine?' asked Jules.

`Claudette,' I said.

`Claudette. Of course. How did you get on with her? Is she beautiful?'

`She took me to a theatre where her husband was appearing.' I told Jules. `He is a leading French actor. We sat in the stalls, very close to the stage. At her request I held her breasts. She then shone a torch at us so that her husband and everyone else could see what was happening.'

`You see!' said Jules, delightedly. `I bring such excitement to your life.' He thumped the table with delight. He stopped and looked at me. `She really did that?'

`Yes.'

`Wonderful. How wonderful. I wish I had been there.'

`You should have been,' I pointed out. `She was supposed to have been your date.'

`You did not find the evening amusing?'

I looked at him. `I did,' I admitted.

`You have to grab your life the scruff of his neck,' insisted Jules. `Some people have no present time in their lives. They are constantly obsessed with time that has gone and time that is yet to come. They forget about the now. The today. You will help me with my English and I will help you to live your life now and not to waste any moment of it.' He paused and looked around the café. `Anyway,' he continued, `now you will be excited to know that I have another good favour for you,' said Jules, with great enthusiasm.

I sighed. `You've double booked your social life again?'

Jules grinned and shrugged. He looked like a naughty little boy when he grinned and though he was several years older than me I always felt rather staid and mature in his presence. He was the only person who had ever made me feel fatherly.

`Can't you just ring up one of the women and explain that you've made a mistake with the dates?' I suggested.

Jules seemed shocked. `Oh no, that would be very impolite,' he said. `Also it was Anne-Marie who suggested this date. She invited me to be with her on Saturday afternoon. Besides, I do not have her number of her telephone.' He shrugged and leant a little closer. `But I think she is very beautiful this one.'

I held up a hand. `I'd really rather pass if you don't mind,' I said.

Jules looked puzzled. `Pass? What is that?'

`No,' I said, shaking my head to make my feelings clear. `Thanks but no thanks.'

`Anne-Marie will be very disappointed,' said Jules. `You will make her cry if you do not meet the appointment.'

`But I didn't make any appointment with her!' I protested.

`I did not think you were such a cruel, hard man,' said Jules, shaking his head sadly. `She will cry and her tears will be on your conscience.' Behind us someone banged on the table. There was a crash behind us as a glass crashed to the floor and smashed. The students were getting rowdier than ever.

`What on earth are they discussing?' I asked Jules.

`Who?'

`The students behind us?'

Jules listened for a moment and then grinned.

`What do you think they are talking about?'

`I don't know...Jean-Paul Sartre and existentialism...the meaning of life...the works of Camus perhaps?'

Jules grinned at me and shook his head. `No,' he said. `Guess again.'

`The work of Cocteau?'

`No.'

`The meaning of the play `Waiting for Godot'?'

Jules laughed and shook his head again.

`I don't know,' I said.

`You will never guess,' said Jules.

`They are planning a revolution?'

`No.'

`They are arguing about whether last year was a good one for Bordeaux wines?'

`No. Definitely no! Shall I tell you?'

`Yes, please.'

`You really want to know? It will perhaps spoil your regard for the students of the Sorbonne.'

`Tell me!'

`They are arguing about whether sex that is paid for can ever be as good as sex that you get for free,' Jules told me.

I stared at him, trying to decide if he was serious or not.

`It is true. I am serious. Now you are disappointed?'

I laughed and shook my head.

`You see the French students are not always revolutionaries,' said Jules, laughing. `I enjoy listening to other people's conversation. It is a great entertainment to me. Yesterday I sat in a café and overheard a young man tell his friend that he had been feeling lonely and had telephoned an escort agency. They sent round a beautiful, elegantly dressed woman. The trouble was that it was the man's aunt.'

I looked at him. `Really?'

`Really!' insisted Jules.

`What did he do?'

`He told his friend that he and the aunt talked it over and decided to make love anyway. She gave him a discount because he was a relative.'

Behind us one of the two women who had been talking about boob jobs suddenly laughed loudly. `If I drank ten pints of water a day I'd spend all my life either drinking or peeing,' she said. `I might live to be a hundred but at the end of it what would I be able to say I had done with my life? I drank and I peed.' She laughed again.

Jules looked at me and pulled a face. He could see the two women, though I could not. `You see?' he said. `Another time I heard two women arguing. I was sitting in Deux Magots café. Do you know it?'

I shook my head.

`It is very well known,' he insisted. `We will go there another day. The two women were being very catty and were arguing about how much flesh a respectable woman could show. One was arguing that to show cleavage and lots of leg at the same time was tarty. The other woman, who was wearing a low necked dress and a very short skirt, disagreed. Eventually, one of the women stood up and threw a one hundred franc down onto the table. `There,' she said. `You can pay for my coffee out of that. There should be fifty francs in change. Keep it and buy yourself a new outfit. It is obviously more than you spent on what you are wearing.'

Behind us the two women were now arguing very loudly.

`Are you saying that I am mean?' demanded one.

`No,' said the second. `Not really. It's just that you are more cautious than most people about parting with your money.'

`If you can live with this woman's unhappiness then that is the way it must be,' said Jules. `I would not force you to do something you do not want to do.'

I sighed. `Where do I meet her and what does she look like?' I paused. `Oh, and what's my name?'

Jules told me.

Behind me the two women were friends again.

`He's keen on sport and very hunky,' said the one, clearly describing a man she knew. `But I think he must be gay. I heard someone describe him as a `tight end receiver'.

`I think that's something to do with football,' said the second rather uncertainly.

Chapter Nineteen

Jules had agreed that he (and therefore, I) would meet Anne-Marie on the terrace of Fouquet's on the Champs Elysée. I had to wear the red scarf and carry a copy of *Le Figaro*. I didn't mind wearing the red scarf (even though the temperature was warm enough to make me feel rather foolish) but I made a mental note to ask him to find somewhere a little cheaper for future meetings. My name, I was pleased to discover, was still Antoine.

Anne-Marie was in her mid-twenties and looked rather boyish. She was petite, had short cropped hair and wore tight jeans, sneakers and a tight, plain white T-shirt which added to her boyish air. She wore a denim jacket over the T-shirt. I stood up and we introduced ourselves. She didn't mind in the slightest that I did not speak French. She did not even seem surprised.

`Do you want a drink?' I asked her.

`Not here,' said Anne-Marie. `This place is absurdly expensive and far too snooty. Besides, we are going to a wedding.' She looked at her watch. `We need to be in Montparnasse in fifteen minutes.'

`A wedding? We're going to a wedding?'

`Don't worry, it’s not us who are getting married,' said Anne-Marie. `But I need an escort. Hope you don't mind?'

`Not at all,' I said. `I just have to pay for my water.'

`Oh don't bother paying,' said Anne-Marie, airily. `The waiter won't chase you down the Champs Elysée for the price of a glass of water.' She spoke as though she knew what she was talking about.

`It's OK,' I said, rather shocked. `I've got the right change.' I pulled some coins out of my pocket, selected a few, and left them on the table.

We crossed the Champs Elysée and walked to the George V Metro station. As we crossed Anne Marie peered carefully at the driver of each car before moving across.

`You should always check the sex of the driver before crossing the road,' she told me.

`Oh?'

`Women drivers are far more ruthless,' she said. `If they are in a bad mood they will kill you.'

We were standing on a traffic island in the middle of the Champs Elysée at the time. I blanched and carefully examined the cars which were approaching. Most were travelling far too fast for me to identify the sex of the driver.

`Just because the light says that you can go this does not mean that a woman would not kill you,' said Anne-Marie. `In France, and particularly in Paris, the road signs and the lights simply mean that the motorist should toot the horn. It doesn't mean slow down, give way or stop. It is like a lottery.'

The wide pavements were thronged, as always, with shoppers, window shoppers and pedestrians simply promenading and showing off their new clothes or their hard- won figures.

`Just look at that!' said Anne-Marie, gripping my arm. I looked at her but could not see what had caught her attention.

`What?'

`That luscious bottom in the pink trousers,' replied Anne-Marie.

The bottom belonged to a plump teenage girl who was eating an ice cream and walking with three or four friends.

`I have a thing about bottoms,' confessed Anne-Marie, as we headed down into the Metro. `If we did not have to go to this wedding I would have followed that bottom for hours.'

`Really?'

`Oh yes. I once followed an exquisite bottom around Paris for a whole day. I was in heaven. I ended up lost somewhere in the 17th arrondissement. Can you imagine how many different types of bottom there are?'

`I hadn't really thought about it,' I confessed.

`You can tell a lot about a person just by looking at their bottom,' insisted Anne-Marie. `One day I may write a book about them. Do you have a camera?'

`No, I'm afraid not.'

`That is a pity. I need someone to take the photographs.'

`What photographs?'

`For my book on bottoms, of course. I am addicted to them.'

`To bottoms?'

`Oh yes.'

`I didn't know you could get addicted to bottoms.'

`If you love anything you can get addicted to it,' she insisted. `Love leads to desire which is itself a self-perpetuating state. The desire leads to anxiety and frustration and dissatisfaction which need constant attention. Et voila!' She stopped by the Metro ticket office. `Do you have money?'

`A little.'

`Good. I never carry money. It encourages pick pockets. We need tickets. Buy a carnet it is cheaper.'

I bought a carnet of Metro tickets and handed one to Anne-Marie. She dived through the barrier and I hurried after her. As we walked she talked.

`Do you believe there is a God?'

`I don't really know.'

`You don't know if there is a God or you don't know if you believe in her?'

`I'm not sure.'

`Have you got a better explanation?'

`What for?'

`For why we are here.'

I stared at her for a moment. `No. I suppose not. You believe in God?'

`Of course.'

`Do you think there is also a devil?'

`Oh, no. The devil is in man. That is all.'

We arrived at the platform.

`Do you think I talk too much?'

`Oh no. Not at all.'

`I think I do. But I have so much to say. That is the problem.'

The Paris Metro is clean, speedy and efficient. Fifteen minutes later we were entering a hotel in Montparnasse. There was a sign directing us to the wedding. Everyone in the reception room was wearing the sort of clothes people normally wear for weddings. There were even top hats. As we walked through the door a waiter approached with a tray full of champagne glasses. Anne-Marie took one. I took one too. The waiter said something to me which I did not understand. I looked at Anne-Marie for help. `Give him five francs,' she said.

`What for?'

`For the drinks?'

`But it's a wedding,' I protested, rather surprised.

`It's a Jewish wedding,' said Anne-Marie. `And the bride's father is the meanest man in the world.'

`Who is the bride?' I asked.

`My cousin,' replied Anne-Marie. With her free hand she grabbed my arm. `Come with me,' she said. `Earn your keep and meet my parents.'

`Shouldn't we be wearing the right sort of clothes?' I whispered.

`Oh don't worry about it,' said Anne-Marie. I met her parents and the bride’s parents. They did not seem particularly put out that Anne-Marie had missed the ceremony itself. Nor did they seem to be surprised, or to mind, at the fact that neither of us was dressed appropriately. On the contrary they seemed pleased to see us. They made me feel very welcome and then disappeared and left us alone again.

`Anne-Marie!' cried someone behind us. We both turned. A tall, florid looking man in a rather tight morning suit beamed at us.

`Hello Uncle Félix!' said Anne-Marie. She did not seem particularly pleased to see him.

Uncle Félix said something. It clearly concerned me.

`He is English,' Anne-Marie replied. She leant a little closer to her uncle `And there may be another wedding soon.'

`Zat is woonderful,' said Uncle Félix, nodding rather sagely. `Ven are you bringing your lover to Dijon?'

`I don't think he would like Dijon, Uncle Félix.'

`Vy not? She is a bootifool city!'

`It's a tip,' said Anne-Marie.

Uncle Félix seemed rather insulted by this. `Dijon is woonderful!' he insisted. `There is no crime. No prostitutes.'

`There are no prostitutes there because no man need ever pay for it,' said Anne-Marie. `And no crime because there is nothing there worth stealing.'

Uncle Félix muttered something in French and stalked off. He seemed very angry.

`I think you've upset him.'

`I hope so.'

`He is clearly very fond of Dijon.'

`He is a policeman. He thinks the town belongs to him.'

`Is that why you don't like him? Because he is a policeman?

`No. Though it is a good reason. I do not like him because he once saw me kissing a girl at a party. He told my parents I was a lesbian.'

I could not immediately think of anything to say in reply to this revelation. Fortunately, I was saved by the fact that the bride's father chose that moment to stand up and make his speech.

As he spoke Anne-Marie translated for me.

`He says he is delighted that we could all come here today,' said Anne-Marie. The proud father looked around the room and beaming with proprietorial satisfaction at the assembled guests.

`He says that in his position as editor of a prominent newspaper he mixes daily with some of the world's most important, most powerful and most wealthy individuals.'

`I didn't know he was a newspaper editor,' I whispered to Anne-Marie. `What does he edit?'

`He is Jewish,' Anne-Marie whispered back. `He edits a Jewish newspaper. Eight pages every month - every one filled with photographs of fat bankers, jewellers and doctor's mothers. Always they are sitting around banquet tables. The subscribers only read it to see themselves in print.'

`He says he mixes with some of the world's most glamorous screen stars,' continued Anne-Marie. `Huge stars of the silver screen. He says that people like us can only dream of these stars but that he walks with them and sits with them and stands with them. Big, big stars.'

`What he does not say is that he only gets to move in these circles when movies have been produced by Jews and he gets invited to cover the opening nights in Paris so that the producers' wives will see their photographs somewhere,' explained Anne-Marie.

`He says that two weeks ago he was with the President of the United States of America and the President of France,' said Anne-Marie. `He says that he could have invited all these important people to be here today, to share the precious moment. But, he says, that instead he chose to invite us.'

I looked at Anne-Marie.

She shrugged. `It is his way,' she said. `I am simply telling you what he says. I could not make this up.'

I believed her.

At five, Anne-Marie announced that she was leaving. `I have to go,' she said. `But you can stay if you wish.'

I said that I too had to go. `But I have enjoyed being with you very much,' I told her. It was true. I liked her. `Can I see you again?'

`What for?'

It wasn't quite the answer I had expected. `I enjoyed being with you,' I told her.

`You are very sweet,' she said, standing on tip toe and kissing me on the cheek. `But you don't have a camera and I am a lesbian.'

I stared at her.

`You didn't guess?'

`I knew about the camera.'

She laughed and touched my cheek with her hand. `I'm so sorry,' she said. `I just needed a man for the wedding.' She laughed. `You look like one of those dogs with the sad eyes,' she told me. `Please don't be sad,' she begged me.

`You're absolutely sure you're a lesbian?'

`Absolutely sure.'

`You don't even want to think about it?'

`No. But thank you for the opportunity to reconsider my sexuality.'

I thanked her again. We hugged. We both said goodbye.

And we never saw each other again.

I was broken-hearted for nearly thirty minutes. And then I remembered that I had another date with Claudette and I felt much better.

Chapter Twenty

The Café de la Paix is one of the smartest cafés in Paris. On Saturday mornings it is packed with shoppers, tourists and Parisians wanting to see and be seen.

Marvin and Sheila were settled at a comfortable table at the back of the café, next to a radiator. They had piled shopping bags onto a third chair and when I approached, Sheila removed the bags and stacked them on the floor underneath the table. Judging by the number of bags, they had been doing their part to keep the French economy alive and booming.

`We've been shopping,' said Sheila, unnecessarily, when she had attracted a waiter's attention and ordered me a pot of tea. Marvin was drinking a glass of red wine and Sheila had a small bottle of still mineral water and a glass in front of her.

`The prices here are so cheap!' said Marvin.

`That's only because we live in Monaco, dear,' Sheila pointed out to him.

`I bought two jackets and six pairs of shoes,' said Marvin. `They cost me nothing. The shoes were less than 200 francs a pair!'

I did some sums in my head and realised that Marvin's cheap shoes had cost considerably more than I had ever paid for footwear.

`We have to go and buy more suitcases this afternoon,' admitted Sheila. She lowered her voice as though embarrassed by their profligacy. `We couldn't carry everything we bought. Two of the shops are sending our purchases round to the apartment.' She turned to Marvin and raised her voice back to normal. `I hope the concierge will be in,' she said.

`The concierge is always in,' said Marvin. `She'd be far too terrified of missing something to go out.'

`She is a bit nosy,' laughed Sheila. `She just likes to know everybody's business.' Suddenly she stopped and touched Marvin on the arm. `Don't look now, but do you know who that is?' said Sheila, inclining her head slightly to make it clear that she was referring to someone sitting in the far corner of the café.

Marvin turned round and stared. He was not a tactful person. I got the impression that if he had been employed as a diplomat his country would have been at war with everyone. `The woman in the black leather coat?'

`Sshh! She'll hear you.' said Sheila. `I'm pretty sure it's Marigold Whatshername. She was married to an Austrian banker.'

`I remember her,' agreed Marvin. `It's her. Definitely. Boy, she was a keen drinker. She'd have got medals for it if they'd been giving them out.'

`It looks as if she's drinking coffee at the moment.'

`Probably got a splash in it. I thought she was in Africa.'

`She was,' said Sheila. She turned to me. `She's quite famous, poor woman, for something she once said. She wandered into a very stuffy cocktail party at the Italian Embassy in Madrid and announced, rather too loudly, that she desperately needed a stiff one.'

Marvin sniggered, took a drink from his glass and nearly choked.

`Her simple request for a large gin caused her so much embarrassment that she left the country for seven years and lived quietly in Africa,' said Shelia. `But, of course, people never forget things like that. When she arrived back in London the first person she saw ignored her lengthy absence and said: `Hello, Marigold. Still looking for a stiff one?' She got back on the next plane to Africa. I thought she was still there.'

`Dare you to go over and ask if she fancies a stiff one,' said Marvin with a giggle.

`Sshhh! Don't be awful,' said Sheila.

The waiter arrived with a tray laden with glasses, cups and tea and coffee pots. I was still astonished at the amount French waiters could carry, apparently without ever dropping anything. He put a pot of tea, a pot of hot water, a pot of milk, a cup and a saucer down on the table. There were wrapped cubes of sugar and a spoon in the saucer.

Two plump English women met directly in front of us. Unlike French women they neither hugged nor kissed. Instead they both complained that their feet were hurting. They were carrying several large carrier bags.

`That shop where you work must be a goldmine,' said Marvin.

`I expect so,' I agreed.

`Bet they don't pay you much, though!' he added.

`Well, no, I suppose not,' I agreed, rather embarrassed. The two women squeezed onto chairs. The waiter appeared. They ordered cakes by pointing at the menu. They were clearly not women for whom the word `no' was a viable option when food was available. `But it's not really a career,' I added. `It's just a job to see me through until I go back to medical school.'

`We went to the pharmacy twice this week,' said Marvin. `Didn't see you.'

`I left,' I said. I have no idea why but I found myself blushing. `I was made redundant. The owner decided they didn't need me after all. That's all.'

`Sorry to hear that,' said Marvin.

`I've found a job at a language school.'

There was a long pause.

Sheila leant forward. `We know what happened,' she said quietly.

`Appreciate your loyalty,' said Marvin. `But the man deserves a thrashing. What was it those old English dukes of yours used to do to fellows like that? Give them a horse whipping?'

`That's it,' I laughed.

`I guess you'll be a bit strapped for cash,' said Marvin.

`The owner gave me some money,' I told him. `He was quite generous. It should last me a few months. Plus I've now got a part time job teaching English.'

`Guilt,' said Sheila. `That's why he gave you money.'

`And he probably felt grateful,' said Marvin. `I expect you saved him a fortune. Divorce doesn't come cheap.'

`I don't think it was the first time,' I said.

`I'm sure it wasn't,' said Sheila.

`Just make sure you look after the money he gave you,' said Marvin.

`You sound like a father!' said Sheila.

`I feel like one,' said Marvin. `Besides, there's nothing wrong with giving the kid some advice about money. Money has a life of its own. And it has its own needs,' said Marvin. `Money demands to be looked after. It wants to be molly coddled and cared for. If you don't look after it then it will leave you.'

`You make money sound like a person,' I said.

`A very selfish, conceited person,' said Marvin. `You probably won't believe this but rich people worry more about money than the people who don’t have any.'

I must have looked as sceptical as I felt.

`It's true,' said Marvin. He looked to Sheila for support. She nodded. `He's right,' she admitted. `People who've got money always worry about losing it, though rich people who've never been poor don't worry about money as much as rich people who dragged themselves out of the gutter. If you've never been poor then you don't know what it’s like. But if you've been poor, and you're rich, your biggest fear is that one day it will all be taken away from you and you'll have to be poor again.'

I still didn't believe them, but I smiled and shrugged, as though to say: `If you say so.' I was young. And the young can be very, very arrogant. `I've put the money in the bank,' I said.

`Good lad,' said Marvin.

`So what sort of people are you going to teach?' said Sheila.

`French people who want to learn English,' I told her. `It's only for a few hours a week. And I've only just started.' The waiter brought cakes to the two women in front of us. `We've got to look after our figures,' laughed one of the women, admiring the gooey confection on her plate. I suspected that cream played a large part in her daily diet.

`I used to know a girl who did a little language teaching,' said Marvin. `Remarkable woman.' He put a chocolate into his mouth and suddenly smiled. `Called Edith. She taught me French.'

`But you don't speak French!' protested Sheila.

`I said she taught me, I didn't say I learnt anything,' said Marvin. `She was a sporting girl - that's what they called them in those days. That or a `fille de joie'. `Girl of joy.' Nice, eh? Men had more respect for hookers in those days. I was staying at a hotel near here and the night porter found her for me. She did the French lessons on the side.'

`I thought it was usually the other way around,' said Sheila.

Marvin looked at her.

`It's usually the French teacher who does a little hooking on the side,' she explained. `Rather than the other way around.'

Marvin shrugged. `She only had a few customers,' he said. `Me, Horace Brompton and Jack Luton. Horace

Brompton never married. He always used sporting girls when he wanted a bit of female companionship. He always claimed they were cheaper than wives and that you could have them when you wanted them and send them away when you didn't want them around.'

`And Jack Luton?' said Sheila, not hiding her surprise. `How long ago was this?'

Marvin thought for a moment. `Fifty years,' he said. `Maybe forty five.'

`Jack was a lay preacher. Was he married then?'

`Probably. But I can't remember which wife he was on. It might have been number one but if it was I can't remember her name. She was a tough, skinny girl with no chest but lots of balls. Come to that I doubt if Jack can remember her name either. They were only married for two months. Anyway, are you going to let me tell this story or not?'

`Sorry,' said Sheila, quietly. She leant towards me. `The French say that the ideal condition for a woman is to be born a widow,' she whispered. `Sometimes I think that is one thing that they are absolutely right about.'

Marvin ignored her. `Well, one Saturday I met a banker and his wife at a do at the American Embassy. The Embassy used to invite me to their cocktail parties then and I was young enough and flattered enough to go. The banker and his wife had just moved to Paris and they were desperate to find someone to teach them a little French. They were pretty well the most obnoxious people I had ever met but Edith was the only French teacher I knew. I told her they were loaded and she could charge them whatever she liked as long as she didn't put her teaching prices up for me.'

`I don't know what they did to upset her - they may have just patronised her in that awful way some rich people do - but she got very, very pissed off with them.'

`They wanted to learn to speak French because the firm he worked for had organised a bit of a `do' to welcome them to Paris. Actually, of course, it wasn't a bit of a `do' at all - it was an incredibly grand do at The Ritz in the Place Vendome. They told Edith that they wanted to be able to make short speeches in French. They didn't want anyone working for the company to know that they were learning these speeches and so they didn't want to ask any of the official translators for help. They thought it would be a great surprise if they just stood up and spoke in fluent French - without notes.'

`A delighted Edith duly taught them French but because she didn't like them the phrases and sentences she taught them didn't quite match the carefully prepared speeches they'd prepared for themselves.'

`She taught the husband a few set sentences in French. He told her what he wanted to say and she taught him what to say in French. But he didn't learn exactly what he thought he was learning. When he thought he was telling the staff how delighted he was to be the new European Director he was actually apologising for the fact that he was grossly overweight and had terrible taste in clothes. He ignored the sniggers which this remark gave birth to and went on to apologise in advance for the fact that he had an unpleasant bowel problem which would, he confessed, result in `the release of a good deal of foul smelling flatus during the years ahead'.' He ended by insulting the French in general and the employees in particular and then, as a sort of postscript, apologised for the fact that his obese wife had terrible breath and was an alcoholic with a taste for methylated spirits and also a nymphomaniac with a penchant for group sex with large black men.'

`Honestly?'

`Yes. It gets worse. When the fat wife thought she was telling the staff and their collected wives and mistresses how delighted she was to be in Paris with her wonderful and enormously successful husband, and how much she looked forward to organising parties in her home and picnics in the Bois de Boulogne for the staff's children she was in fact warning them not to get too close because she was suffering from a highly infectious sexually transmitted disease which doctors had warned her could be passed on not only through human contact but also through breathing in the same air. And when she gave them her very best and expensively capped smile, and thought she was inviting the collected wives to join the flower arranging class which she planned to give on Saturday mornings, she was actually saying how much she was looking forward to performing oral sex on all male employees between the ages of 18 and 90. She ended by inviting all well-endowed black employees to pop round to their apartment on the Champs Elysée at any time.'

Sheila and I stared at him, incredulously. `What happened?'

`The fat executive and his awful wife were sent back home after two weeks. He found it impossible to maintain any sort of discipline and when she found out what she'd said she shut herself up in her bedroom and refused to show her face to anyone.'

`And Edith?'

Marvin shrugged. `The executive and his wife were far too embarrassed to complain and even if they had done so no one would have taken any notice. What could they have done? She was a ten dollar hooker.'

Sheila looked at Marvin and squinted.

`Was that true?'

Marvin lowered his head and looked at her over the top of his spectacles.

`As true as I'm sitting here,' he insisted.

He looked at me and cleared his throat. `It's a shame to be young in Paris and not have any money.' He paused and thought for a moment. `Another one of life's little ironies isn't it?'

I looked at him, puzzled. `I don't understand,' I admitted.

`The old fogies with wallets and purses stuffed with money are too old to have fun. The young folk with plenty of energy and the legs for fun don't have any money.'

The two women had now finished eating their cakes. One of the women called to the waiter. `The cakes were stale,' she complained, pointing to her plate although there was not even a crumb of cake left on the plate. The waiter looked at her and looked at the plate. `Stale,' said the woman loudly. `The cakes were stale.'

`Why did you eat the cake if it was stale?' asked the waiter, politely and logically. `You have eaten the evidence.' The woman laughed and shrugged. `It was worth a try,' she said to her friend. She did not appear to be in the slightest bit embarrassed, even though she could see that several people had watched her appalling attempt to wriggle out of paying for the cake she had just eaten.

`Surely you don't really need to have money to have fun,' I argued, though looking back I really didn't know much about either.

Marvin smiled. `But you can have more fun if you do have money,' he said. `Though curiously, the other curiosity I have observed in my life is that most of the people who do have money don't really know how to spend it - probably because they've spent too much of their lives making it, saving it and hoarding it.' He paused and thought for a moment. `The corollary to that, of course, is that by and large people who don't have money are often pretty good at spending it. Some of them are spectacularly good at spending it. When I first met my third wife she was absolutely stony broke but she could have won medals for shopping and spending.'

I murmured something and nodded.

`I know of what I speak,' said Marvin, firmly. `When I was your age I had a tiny studio apartment in Montmartre. It was above a small café where the local prostitutes hung out. The studio was freezing cold. I remember taking up the carpet to let the heat come up through the cracks from the café below. They had a stove in the café and with all the people in there it was always much warmer than my studio. Their ceiling was cracked and the plaster had fallen off in many places. The only problem was that the cigarette smoke all came through the cracks too. I had no radio and no gramophone and no television...'

`Television hadn't been invented then!' interrupted Sheila.

`...that's probably why I didn't have one,' continued Marvin. `I couldn't afford to go downstairs and drink so I used to lie down flat on the floor, peep through the gap between my floorboards and the crack in their ceiling and watch what went on down below. It was the original cinema verite.'

`I bet you wished you had a room above one of the girl's rooms!' said Sheila.

Marvin winked at me. `You see,' he said. `My problem is that my wife understands me.' He chuckled. `Two of the girls had rooms on either side of me,' he said. `I opened up tiny little cracks in the wall. In the afternoons, when they got up, I watched them getting washed and dressed. At night I watched them with their customers.'

`So you were a pervert even back then?' said Sheila, drily.

`Of course,' said Marvin, who, much to my surprise did not seem to be in the slightest bit embarrassed or offended by being described as a pervert. `I had to live by their hours anyway. They always kept me awake at night. Noisy customers, thin walls and twangy bedsprings.' He thought for a moment and smiled to himself. `Great days,' he said. `I seem to remember having to stand in the corridor for half an hour if I wanted to take a bath and the only telephone was always busy but I did get perks. There was an unending supply of hot water in the bathroom. That was my other way of keeping warm. I used to have two or three baths a day in the winter. The girls never used to take a bath in the mornings. And the girls used to let me have a special rate when they were quiet.' He stopped and thought. `For some reason Wednesday afternoons were always quiet,' he remembered. He drifted for a moment into nostalgia.

I felt myself blushing and felt embarrassed about having gone red.

`You're making him blush,' said Sheila. She turned to Marvin. `Don't you own that building now?' she asked him.

`I own every building I've ever lived in,' said Marvin. He was proud but not boasting. `I bought that one when I was 22, with a loan from a pimp who ran most of the girls in the neighbourhood. Most of the rooms are still rented by sporting girls.'

`I didn't know that!' said Sheila.

`They pay well, they pay on time and they pay cash,' said Marvin with a shrug. `People tell me they make great wives,' he said. `They know the value of money and they know all the tricks in the bedroom.' Two heavily laden shoppers tried to squeeze between our table and the backs of the seats in front of us. One of the bags rocked our table. I caught the table and managed to stop anything falling. The shopper didn't even turn round.

`Bloody American tourists,' snarled Marvin.

`Ssshhh, dear!' said Sheila. `They'll hear you.'

`Don't care,' said Marvin, rather like a sulky child. `I hope they hear us.' He raised his voice. `Bloody American tourists.' Several people, probably Americans, turned round and looked in our direction.

`You wouldn't think he was American himself, would you?' Sheila asked me.

I smiled at her and shook my head.

`Used to be,' said Marvin. `Used to be. Boy, that was a long time ago.'

`I think it's a pity, anyway,' said Sheila. `All those poor girls who have to sell themselves to make a living.'

Marvin looked at her and snorted. `When I lived in England in the 60s,' he said, `I knew three sisters. Their parents, with an extraordinary lack of common sense, had called them April, May and June so although their surname was Westacott we knew them as the Spring sisters. April and May were both born in the months which had given them their names. Thanks to the fact that she arrived three weeks early June was also born in May.' He shrugged. `The English sometimes amaze me. One daughter, April, the oldest, worked in a factory as a secretary. She gave her whole life to her miserable work and a mean and ungrateful boss. One, May, got married at the age of 18 because she was pregnant. She had seven children in quick succession and by the time she was thirty she looked at least fifty. Her husband was a mean, wicked man who used to give her a pittance for housekeeping and spend the rest boozing on Saturday nights. He would come home drunk, beat her, drag her upstairs and then rape her. The third sister, June, became the mistress of a local estate agent. He dumped her and so that she wouldn't have to lose her rented flat she became a whore. Within five years she had bought her own flat and enough property to make her independent for life. She had her own car, a villa in Spain and beautiful clothes. By the age of 30 she semi-retired. She had six lovers who visited her one night a week and she had Tuesdays off. Now, you tell me, which of those women was the whore?'

No one spoke.

`Real white slavery is women working in factories, ruining their health and selling their lives for a pittance. Most of those who complain about hookers are flat chested, mustachioed and jealous.'

`Well, I don't care what you say I'd rather starve than sell my body,' said Sheila.

`Have you never been to bed with a man you didn't love?' Marvin asked her.

Sheila didn't reply. The silence seemed to stretch on for ever. I turned to her. `Are you American, too?' I asked her.

`Good heavens, no!' said Sheila. `I'm English, can't you tell?' `No,' I said. `Sorry. Have you been out of England for long?'

`Fifteen, twenty years,' she replied. `Ever since I met Marvin and moved to Monaco.'

Now that the embarrassing moment had passed she turned to Marvin. `Who collects the rents from the hookers?' she asked.

`Mickey,' replied Marvin. He turned to me. `Sheila always assumes that everyone who works for me is a thief,' he said. `She's right to be suspicious. But I trust Mickey. He wouldn't cheat me.'

`Only because he's scared of you,' said Sheila.

Marvin shrugged. `Fear keeps people in line,' he said. `If you're soft with people they take advantage of you.'

`Oh, that's not always true,' said Sheila.

`In my experience it is,' said Marvin. `The one thing I have learned in this life is that we are invariably hurt by our kindnesses to others. And, just as important, others are often hurt by our kindnesses to them.'

`That's cynical and rather sad,' said Sheila. She turned to me. `Don't you listen to him!' she insisted.

Marvin shrugged his shoulders. `I'm right,' he said. He took a tiny sip of his wine. `Let me tell you a true story,' he said to me. `About my Aunt Lizbeth and my Uncle Jack who lived in Colorado. My Aunt Lizbeth worked as a nurse at the local hospital and she had a cat called Blackie. It was a long haired cat. Very beautiful, very black, very fat and very lazy. It spent most of its time on her lap. My Aunt Lizbeth loved that cat like it was her favourite child.'

`One day she was sitting on the porch stroking the cat when my Uncle Jack came in. It was about 9 in the evening. He'd been on a fishing trip. It was chilly and Uncle Jack asked Aunt Lizbeth if she shouldn't be indoors, out of the cold. He cared a lot for her, worshipped her in his way, and he didn't want her upping and dying on him.'

``I'm fine,' my Aunt Lizbeth told him, stroking the cat as she spoke. `My Blackie has such warm and beautiful fur. She keeps me really cosy,' she said. `She would make a wonderful stole.''

`The next day Aunt Lizbeth went off to work at the hospital, just the same as usual. And my Uncle Jack went off to do a little shooting, or hunting, or whatever. And when Aunt Lisbeth got back from work that evening she couldn't find that cat anywhere. She went all around the neighbourhood calling for it but she couldn't find it anywhere.'

`So, a few days later when Uncle Jack came back from his hunting or shooting or fishing trip or whatever and wants to know why there isn't a meal there ready for him my Aunt Lisbeth tells him the cat is missing, and asks him if he has seen her.'

`And Uncle Jack opens up his game bag and he takes out this beautiful black stole and hands it to Aunt Lisbeth like he's giving her the greatest present a man ever gave a woman and he says: `Here you are, my sweet wife. I had a couple of the boys make Blackie up into a stole just like you wanted. They killed her and skinned her and there she is. Now you never need be cold again.'

`And my Aunt Lisbeth took the stole and broke down into tears and cried and cried. And my Uncle Jack probably thought she was crying because she was so happy until she upped and went into the kitchen and came back and stabbed a ten inch kitchen knife into his chest and killed him stone dead.'

Marvin paused and took another sip of his wine. `So, you see,' he said. `My Uncle Jack just thought he was being kind and he acted in what he thought were my Aunt Lisbeth's very best interests. But just look at the harm done by that single act of kindness. The cat was killed, he was killed and my Aunt Lisbeth is still in the State Penitentiary and they won't ever let her out now because she's as crazy as they come.'

Neither Sheila nor I said anything.

`Is that story true?' asked Sheila eventually.

`Of course it ‘aint,' snorted Marvin disdainfully. `But that's not the point is it? The point is that you weren't sure whether or not it was true. And if you aren't sure whether or not a thing is true it might just as well be true.'

Sheila called the waiter over and ordered more tea, more wine and a vodka martini. `I need something stronger than water,' she explained.

`Have you ever wanted to own your own café?' Marvin suddenly asked the waiter.

The waiter, surprised by the question, looked at Marvin.

`You're a great waiter,' said Marvin. `You run this place like clockwork. I don't know who the owner is but you're helping them make a fortune. Haven't you ever thought about running your own place?'

The waiter stood for a moment. `I thought about it,' he confessed at last. `Many years ago. I think all waiters do. It is a common dream.'

`What made you decide not to try it?'

`I looked at my boss and saw how much he suffered,' replied the waiter. `He was 45 but he looked 20 years older. He was always worrying. He worried about the supplies. He worried about the insurance, the taxes and the accounts. He worried about upsetting the customers. When it was too hot he worried that his customers would go away to the countryside. When it was too cold he worried that his customers would stay at home.'

`You’re a wise man,' said Marvin. `There would be more happy people in the world if more people thought like you do.'

The waiter shrugged and left.

`Wise man,' said Marvin. `Ambition is fine and dandy. Without it a man won't achieve much. But ambition won't amount to a hill of beans without talent or hard work. If you don't have talent or aren't prepared to work hard then you're best off not having any ambition.'

When I left an hour later Marvin invited me to have dinner with them at their apartment.

`Archie will be there,' he said. `He is a client of mine.'

`I thought he sold gold?'

Marvin nodded. `He's a gold dealer,' he agreed. `But he's come over to Paris because he's a client of mine.'

I didn't say anything.

`I have a number of American clients,' explained Marvin, lowering his voice. `All big earners who have tax problems. I act as a consultant to them and send them financial and management advice.' He paused. `For a fee, of course. I'm very, very expensive.'

`You're a management consultant?' I asked him.

`Not really,' grinned Marvin. `Though that's what it says on my visiting card. They send me a huge fee for my advice. I put 85% of the fee into a numbered bank account for them and I keep 15% for myself. I don't pay any tax because I live in Monaco.'

I thought about this for a while. `I still don't understand,' I said.

`They ring a telephone number in Monaco to prove that they're consulting me,' said Marvin. `The number connects them to a telephone answering machine in our apartment. Every couple of months I send them a huge folder filled with management gibberish.'

`But what do they get out of it?'

`They get tax relief on the money they pay me,' explained Marvin. `All they have to pay is my 15% commission.

The rest of their money sits waiting for them in a nice, warm, numbered account in Monaco. It's pretty well legal. Of course with Archie things are a bit more complicated. His clients pay cash for gold coins - some of them are worth $30,000 or more - which he gives to me. I sell the coins and put the money into their numbered account.'

`That I really don't understand,' I admitted.

`They buy the gold coins with cash they haven't declared,' explained Marvin. `Archie gets the coins out of the country for them. It's a lot easier for him to bring a million dollars’ worth of gold coins out of the States than it would be for them to bring a million dollars in notes. I turn the coins back into cash and put the cash into the bank - less my commission, of course.'

I stared at him. For a moment I wondered why he was telling me all this. And then I realised that he was telling me because he was proud of his own cleverness and he couldn't tell anyone else.

`Mind you, between you and me I've been worried recently about Archie. He does rather a lot of business with men who carry violin cases but can't read a note of music.'

I wasn't sure how to respond to this.

`They want him to do a bit of laundry for them,' explained Marvin. He pulled a face.

`He seems a nice guy,' I said.

`He is,' said Marvin. `Don't tell him I told you any of this,' he said. `He worries a lot.'

`I think I'd probably worry too,' I said. In fact I was already worrying and none of this had anything to do with me.

`People worry too much,' said Marvin. `Usually about the wrong things and often about things which really aren't a threat to them. The fact is that suspense always beats reason. That's why we worry when we see a star in a movie in danger. Even though all our good sense tells us that the movie star will escape from their dangerous predicament (no studio is going to allow the director to kill the star in the first reel) we still worry. And so it is with our own worries. Even though our reason - our good sense - tells us that the thing we fear isn't going to happen we still fear it.'

`I suppose so,' I agreed. `Anyway, he and Fifi seem a very nice couple.'

Marvin laughed. `Fifi won't be having dinner with us,' he said. `We've got some confidential business to sort out.'

`Fifi hasn't been invited,' explained Sheila.

`Oh,' I said, failing to hide my surprise.

`They're not what you'd call `an item',' said Sheila, obviously feeling that she needed to explain.

`They're not married?'

Marvin smiled. `No,' he said. `They're not married.' A dry, throaty noise came from him. It was, I realised, a laugh. He turned to Sheila. `Tell him,' he said.

Sheila seemed embarrassed. `I'm not sure...,' she began.

`Archie don't mind,' said Marvin. `And Fifi hasn't got no call to mind.'

`No, I suppose not,' agreed Sheila. She swallowed and looked down at the table. `Fifi isn't Archie's wife or girlfriend,' she explained. `She's a call girl.'

`She ain't no call girl,' said Marvin. `Call girls are the top end of the market. Fifi is a street whore.'

I felt myself blushing. I found it difficult to believe. Fifi did not seem to match any of the stereotypes I'd seen in films or on television. She certainly bore no resemblance to the untidy looking woman I had found in my room at the hotel. She had looked like a hooker.

`You're embarrassing him,' said Sheila, nodding in my direction.

`No, no!' I protested. I told them about the prostitute I'd found in my room.

`There used to be proper brothels in Paris,' said Marvin. `Like they have in Amsterdam. The authorities shut them down, hoping that by shutting down the brothels they'd end prostitution. Crazy. All that happened, of course, was that the girls went onto the streets.'

`Well you can't blame them for that,' said Sheila. `Closing down the brothels.'

`It was crazy!' insisted Marvin. `In the brothels the girls had regular medical examinations. They had to carry certificates showing that they were healthy. These days there are no medical examinations and no certificates and if you go with a hooker you'll as like as not find yourself pissing blood the next day. The only thing closing down the brothels did was increase the number of men with the clap.'

`Well, whatever, Archie picked this one up on the Rue St Denis,' explained Sheila. `She was apparently standing on a street corner in a tiny leather skirt and a see-through blouse. Whenever he comes to Paris he goes to the Rue St Denis and picks up a girl - always the cheapest looking whore he can find. He then takes her to a store in the Rue St Honore where they know him. He buys her half a dozen expensive dresses, plus all the trimmings, and then keeps her with him until he goes home.'

`Oh,' I said. Or at least I rather assumed that it was me who had spoken. If I had not been there I would not have recognised the thin, reedy, high pitched voice as my own.

`She's a nice girl,' said Marvin. `I've no idea what her real name is. Archie calls her Fifi d'Orsay but I very much doubt if that is her name. Actually I very much doubt if he ever asked her what her real name is. He gets a real kick out of taking her to dinner in the poshest restaurants in Paris. He took her to a reception at the Japanese embassy two nights ago. I'd love to have been there. He loves to see self-important people bowing and scraping to a street whore.'

It was, perhaps, a sign of my innocence that it had never even occurred to me that Fifi might not be the girl's real name. The story rather reminded me of the flower girl in Shaw's *Pygmalion*. The same tale taken to its illogical conclusion.

`Of course, he doesn't take Fifi absolutely everywhere,' said Sheila. `And we thought it best to leave her out of our little dinner party tonight.'

`Right,' I said, trying to give the impression that all this was nothing out of the ordinary to me. It never occurred to me to ask myself why a rich American, exiled and living in Monaco, would want to invite me to a private dinner at his apartment. If I had thought about it I think that even back then I would have realised that he wasn't inviting me for my conversational skills or my sparkling repartee.

Marvin paid the bill, I thanked him for the tea, and we all stood together. A tourist was taking a photograph of her husband and for a moment Marvin was clearly in the frame.

`Move!' hissed Sheila.

Marvin jumped and looked startled. `What's up?'

`You were nearly in that woman's photograph,' she said, hustling her husband away from danger. `And the husband has a very cheap haircut and is wearing a terrible jumper.'

We left the Cafe de la Paix together. Outside, standing on the pavement, we said our goodbyes and Sheila explained to me how to find their apartment. We walked a few yards in the direction of the Hotel Scribe. Marvin and Sheila were heading for the taxi rank.

Suddenly I realised that Marvin had slowed. I looked back and watched in astonishment as he sprinkled coins on the pavement.

`What on earth is he doing?' I asked Sheila.

`Because we live in Monaco he doesn't pay any tax,' explained Sheila quietly. An old woman stooped down and started picking up some of the coins. Two small boys joined her. `It's Marvin's way of giving money to the people who really need it. He says he's adding tiny moments of toy to otherwise largely joyless lives.'

`How often does he do this?' I asked Sheila.

`Every time he comes out of a shop, a hotel or a café with change in his pocket,' explained Sheila.

At the corner of the Rue Scribe we waited. Marvin caught us up. He was grinning broadly and looked very happy.

`Paying taxes never made me smile,' he said.

We parted. They climbed into a taxi and I waved them goodbye.

Chapter Twenty One

Claudette took great delight in showing me the Paris that the tourists know and an even greater delight in showing me the Paris that most tourists miss.

To start with she insisted that I see the most famous parts of Paris. We took the lift to the top floor of the Tour Eiffel and had an absurdly expensive lunch (paid for by her ever generous husband) at the restaurant on the first floor. One morning, before the tourists were up and about, we rode up and down the Seine in an almost empty bateau mouche. We visited Napoleon's tomb and marvelled at the pikes, muskets and armour in the military museum which fills acres of Les Invalides. We queued in the Louvre to see the Mona Lisa and the Venus de Milo. We marvelled at Sacre Coeur, walked around Montmartre and we sat arm in arm while a long haired art student with an engaging smile, armed only with a grey sketching pad and two sticks of chalk - one black and one white - sketched us sitting together. We then made him do it all again so that we would have a portrait each. He rolled the portraits into tight tubes and fastened them with thin, blue rubber bands. When it started to rain we slipped into a boulangerie and bought two long loaves of bread so that we could use the paper bags in which they had been sold to keep our drawings dry. When the rain stopped we fed the bread to sparrows and pigeons in a tiny park.

When we had visited all the well-known tourist haunts she started taking me to less well known parts of Paris.

Once she took me down the Rue du Chat Qui Peche (named, so she told me, after a cat who used to fish in the cellars when the River Seine was high).

`It is,' she said with the sort of inverted pride that many would never understand, `the narrowest and shortest street in the world.' In the whole street there was only one tiny window. There were no doors.

From there we walked across the river, past Notre Dame and the offices wherein Inspector Maigret would have worked if he had been more than a figment of George Simenon's imagination, past the thousand year old Hotel Dieu and north to the Palais Royale. We bought two baguettes, ripe camembert cheese and a bottle of heavy red wine from a delicatessen and had a picnic on a wooden bench.

`I love eating out of doors,' I said. Pigeons and sparrows were clambering over my shoes, searching for crumbs from the flaky, cheese filled baguette I was eating. `Food seems to taste so much better.' I paused to crumble a piece of bread and toss it to a nervous sparrow who was too shy to join the melee. `I think that I enjoy a simple picnic more than I would enjoy the most expensive restaurant meal.'

`My first husband used to say that a lot - when we first started courting,' said Claudette. `It was one of the things about him that I really liked. Sadly, when he had more money he changed his mind.'

I looked at her and frowned. `Your first husband?'

`Yes. My first.'

`How many have you had?'

`Too many.'

`What happened to your first marriage?'

`We married very young; far too young. It was a disaster. It all happened a long time ago. He was desperately keen on sport. We were together for two years but it seemed a lot longer at the time. Looking back I think I spent six months sailing, six months watching rugby, six months watching cricket and six months making teas and washing his team's kit.'

`He didn't play golf?'

`Actually, golf was just about the only game he didn't play. He thought it was elitist.

`And rugby and sailing aren't?

She shrugged. Rugby was his favourite game. Until he was thrown out of the club.'

`Your husband was thrown out of a rugby club?'

`Yes.'

`What on earth for?'

`For drinking and womanising.'

I couldn't help laughing. `I'm sorry,' I said. `But your husband was thrown out of a rugby club for drinking and womanising?'

`He did a great deal of both and was sometimes too tired and too drunk to play. The only sport he was really fond of involved just two players, you see. And the other players did not much like him.'

`Why not?'

`He was too good looking. Men felt instinctively that he was a threat to them. They were jealous of him.' She stopped and thought for a moment. `Women were attracted to him,' she said. `But they did not like him much, either. They did not trust him.'

How did you meet him?'

`A sort of friend got us together. We were both alone and she thought we would be good for each other. It was a blind date. I never consciously blamed the friend but I realised the other day that I haven't ever seen her since that marriage ended.'

`What happened in the end? Was it very painful?'

`He went off with one of the other player's wives. A big, blonde girl. It was a relief rather than painful. He went in such a rush that he left his diaries behind. Since the age of fifteen he had been keeping a diary. He'd always claimed it was private because it contained his innermost, most spiritual thoughts but I discovered that it was merely a detailed record of his sexual conquests.'

`You read his diary?'

`Oh yes,' said Claudette. She laughed. `I feel a little bit ashamed perhaps. But not too bad. Compared to what he did to me it was nothing. And reading the diary made me feel a little better. Everything was in there. I found that on the day when he first persuaded me into bed he had already been with a girl he'd met on the Metro. And I discovered that he had sex with two of the bridesmaids at our wedding. He did it with my cousin in the car park, up against the Bentley we'd hired for the day, and with a girl whose name he never knew in the gents' toilets. There were eleven volumes of sexual history. He had enormous stamina. If he'd been able to direct those energies into some other activity he would have made quite a name for himself.'

`And afterwards?'

`I vowed never to marry another man who had football socks to wash. And so I married a lawyer called Jean-Paul whose idea of strenuous physical activity was walking from a taxi to the front door of his office.'

`How long did that last?'

`Nine months. One evening we were at his sister's house in the Dordogne. His sister, Leonora, is sweet but a little neurotic. She is very shy. We still keep in touch. Every day life scares her half to death. She is a little unstable and unpredictable. Once, when she made a cake, she put all her pills into it and then handed around slices of the cake at a dinner party. Several people were quite ill afterwards. Since then I have been careful not to eat anything at her house. When I was invited to dinner I used to eat only white bread rolls, reasoning that she was unlikely to have poisoned those. Leonora will not touch any food that is not coloured. She believes that it is the colour which gives food its goodness.'

`Because it was a warm summer evening we had all gone out onto the patio and the paved area around the swimming pool. The swimming pool was shaped like a piano. I never knew why but I assumed that at least one previous owner of the house had been a pianist. I thought it very tasteless. And so, to be fair, did Jean-Paul.'

`Leonora started dancing. She'd had far too much to drink - as she always did because she had a little problem with her drinking - and because she was wearing very high heeled shoes she slipped and fell into the swimming pool. She screamed and started thrashing around and it was quite clear that she was in trouble. I was upstairs fetching a jumper when I heard the scream. I looked out of the window and could see my husband standing about six feet away from her. I shouted at him to jump into the pool and save his sister but he refused. He actually refused! And do you know what his excuse was?'

I shook my head.

`He pointed out that he was wearing his new Armani suit - beautiful brown silk - and that the water would ruin it if he jumped into the pool.'

`I shouted at him and told him that he could remove the jacket but he said that if he did that the trousers would still be affected and the suit would be ruined anyway.'

`I fell out of love with him there and then. There we were, standing on the edge of this pool and he was refusing to jump in and save his sister who was drowning. And why? Because the water would spoil his suit!'

`Did Leonora drown?'

`Another guest jumped in and saved her.'

`But you fell out of love with Jean-Paul?'

`It was such a selfish and terrible thing to do,' said Claudette. `I could never forget and never forgive him.' She shook her head at the memory of it. `But that is enough of me and my men. Tell me about you and your women.'

I did not know what to say to this. The truth was that the silence said it all.

`Have you ever had a serious girlfriend?'

`Oh yes.' I replied, with fake confidence.

`More than one?'

`Oh certainly.'

`But you don't have a girlfriend now?'

`No. Not at the moment.'

`Tell me about the last one?'

`Well. She was very sophisticated. Very beautiful. Very kind.' I paused.

`...and?'

`And she was very gentle but also very strong.'

`Gentle but strong?'

`Yes.'

`And very sweet.' I hesitated. `But not too sweet. Also very sexy.'

Claudette reached across the table, put her hand on mine and smiled. `You will find your love,' she said. `One day you will find her. You are very young and you have all the time in the world. But when you find her do not expect too much of her.'

I looked at her and knew that she knew that what I had told her had not been the truth.

`The woman you have in your mind is a dream. Just a dream. But no real woman can be your dream.' She paused. `You've never had a girlfriend, have you?'

`No. How did you know that...she did not exist...that I have had no girlfriend?'

`You describe the woman all men dream of wanting. It is the woman they believe they want; the fantasy, the dream. It is the same with women.'

`Yes?'

`Oh yes. Women want a man who is understanding. Soft and gentle like a woman. But although he is soft he must also be confident and secure. But not arrogant. He must be a tough, rough guy in bed but he must be never cruel or thoughtless. He has to be generous with his time and his money but at the same time he must respect her independence.'

`It sounds an impossible dream.' I said quietly. `How could any man live up to that?'

`Exactly,' smiled Claudette. She paused for a long moment. `Exactly. The dream man is unreal and unattainable and unliveable with because he has none of those endearing imperfections which make a man loveable and charming.' She paused. `Do you like the movies?' she asked.

`Yes. Very much.'

`I love the movies,' she said. `But if you think back to the great days of the cinema - the black and white greats - you will realise that the stars all had something which set them apart from the good actors and good actresses.'

I waited.

`They all had imperfections which made them endearingly human,' explained Claudette. `Humphrey Bogart, Cary Grant, Clark Gable, Errol Flynn, Marilyn Monroe, Greta Garbo, Claudette Colbert - all of them were so much themselves that it was all they could ever be. They pretended to be other people but we always knew that they were simply pretending. They had so much charisma that they could only ever be themselves. The great stars are loved by both men and women - they are so full of magic that they can be a lover to one and a friend to the other. On the other hand the really great actors disappear into the roles they play. While actors become the person they are pretending to be, the stars always look the same and play the same character in all their movies. But we do not love the great actors, we love the stars. And we love the stars because they are simply themselves. We love their charming imperfections. It is the same in life. When we fall in love we fall in love with the imperfections. If you are for ever searching for the dream you will never fall in love.'

And slowly, very slowly, I thought I began to understand.

`The understanding is in the not knowing,' said Claudette. `You cannot know until you know what you do not know. And you cannot understand until you know that you cannot possibly ever understand. Only when you know what you do not know will you begin to understand.'

I stared at her.

`Your grandfather?'

`No. That was me.' She laughed. `Take no notice,' she said. She picked up her packet of cigarettes. `Take no notice of me. I am just a crazy middle-aged woman who takes strange young men to the theatre so that she can embarrass her husband.' She took a cigarette out of the packet and put it into her mouth. She then handed me her lighter. `Light my cigarette,' she told me.

`No,' I said, flicking the lighter and lighting her cigarette. `You are not crazy. Well, yes, I suppose you may be crazy, in a way. But it is a craziness I think I understand.' I paused and thought for a moment.

`I will tell you one last thing today,' Claudette said, inhaling deeply. `About a friend of mine called Irene. She swore that she would only ever go with the man of her dreams. She swore she would wait until she met her perfect man. She was very beautiful. And rich. And she had many suitors. But she rejected all of them. Many were good, kind, courageous men. One or two would have made wonderful husbands. But she was so intent on waiting for her perfect man to arrive that she did not give any of these men a chance. She had created, in her mind, a symbol of male perfection. And no man could live up to her dream. One man might have some small physical imperfection. He might, perhaps, be an inch too short or have too long a nose. Another man might be too quick tempered. A third might lack ambition and drive. No man is perfect. No man could match her dream. And so she is now 49, still unmarried, still untouched. She now lives alone with her dream.'

`So you are saying that I should not be too choosy?'

`No, no, no! No, no, no! Of course you should be choosy. Every man and every woman should be choosy. But when you fall in love you should not confuse the man or woman you love with the man or woman of your dreams. When you fall in love it will be with the frailties and imperfections. For it is the frailties and imperfections - and the weaknesses - which make us who we are.'

And at last I understood. Or, at least, I thought I did.

I looked at her and sighed. `I know that I do not understand and I understand that I do not know,' I said. I felt embarrassed before I'd finished the sentence. It sounded like one of those would-be clever Zen sayings. But Claudette laughed and clapped her hands in delight. `You have it!' she said.

On the pavement outside she kissed me on the cheek and then climbed into a taxi. As the taxi disappeared she turned and I could see her face through the back window. She waved and blew me a kiss. I stood still and watched until the taxi had completely disappeared. And then I stood still and watched where it had been.

Chapter Twenty Two

Marvin and Sheila Brown had an apartment overlooking the Park Monceau. It was, without a doubt, one of the most imposing places in the city in which to have an apartment, and probably one of the most expensive too. I didn't know whether they owned the apartment, had rented the apartment or just borrowed it from a friend.

An elderly woman concierge took my name, telephoned the apartment, obtained permission for me to enter the building and ushered me into a glass and iron ascenseur. It was far too complicated and beautiful a contraption to describe as a `lift' or even an `elevator'. Their apartment was on the third floor. As I rang the doorbell, feeling terribly out of place, I couldn't help wondering why on earth these rich people from Monaco had invited me to dinner. I was much younger than they were, much poorer and knew nothing or no one that could possibly be of interest to them. Looking back I realise that if I had not been so young and naive I would have not accepted their invitation – and would probably not have been invited in the first place. I think they enjoyed taking me under their wing in the way that people will sometimes adopt a stray animal.

Sheila took my coat and hung it in a closet in the hallway, murmured something about having to deal with a crisis in the kitchen, and after showing me into a spacious, light living room disappeared again. The room was enormous in every dimension and had huge windows overlooking the park. I knew nothing whatsoever about the prices of real estate in Paris but you didn't have to be a property speculator to realise that this was an expensive apartment.

Marvin was sitting on a bright yellow sofa, surrounded by papers, files and notebooks, studying a long Telex message.

`Do you know anything about the stock market?' he asked me, as I entered.

I admitted that I knew nothing whatsoever about the stock market.

`Which way do you think the market is going to go?' he asked me.

`I have no idea,' I confessed. `I don't know anything about it.'

`Let's make it easier,' said Marvin. `Coca Cola. The company not the drink. Do you think the price of the stock is going to go up or down today? Or will it just stay the same.'

I just stared at him. I had no idea what to say.

`You have three choices,' said Marvin. `It can go up, it can go down or it can stay where it is.'

`I don't know,' I said.

`Take a guess.'

I had no idea why Marvin was asking me this. `Up,' I replied, for no reason at all.

Marvin picked up the telephone, dialled, spoke to someone and bought $10,000 worth of shares in Coca Cola.

`Why did you do that?' I asked him, horrified.

He just grinned at me, and levered himself to his feet. `Wanna drink?'

`Er...I began, not sure what to ask for.

`You'd better have a Coke since you're one of the owners now,' he said.

`I don't have $10,000,' I said, nervously. `I can't pay you back. What if the share price falls?'

Marvin held up a hand. `Don't worry about it, son,' he said. He disappeared from the room.

I walked over to the window and looked out. There was a small balcony running the whole length of the room. Upon it stood a white metal table, three white metal chairs and several large pots full of plants. The park was small, neat and well kept. The building in which Marvin and Sheila had their apartment had a small garden, equally neat and well kept, which backed onto the park and was separated from it by huge, black painted, iron railings which were overgrown with ivy. There was a gate in the railings which led into the park. The brass handle shone in the remains of the day's sunshine.

`There are fourteen types of chaos in that kitchen,' murmured Marvin, handing me a glass of cola. He himself had what looked like a whisky. `We have a maid called Louisa who comes in every day to tidy up, clean, take the washing to the laundry and so on. And we have a woman called Olivia who comes in to cook. They can't stand each other at the best of the times and at the moment they're having another one of their great rows. I have no idea what this one is about. Sheila is in there trying to stop them killing each other with our steak knives.'

`Do you think I should go?' I asked, rather nervously. I looked for somewhere to put my glass so that I could escape quickly and quietly. Marvin was a kind host but I really didn't feel as though I belonged.

`No, no!' said Marvin. `Sheila will sort it all out. She's wonderful with these people.' I didn't know whether he was referring to French people in particular or to servants in general. I didn't ask. `I'll bet you whatever you like that she sorts it out within five minutes.'

I didn't know whether the bet was intended to be serious so I said nothing.

`Do you want to take the bet?' he asked me.

`I don't have any money,' I admitted.

`You must have a franc,' insisted Marvin.

I put my hand into my trouser pocket. I had a franc. But not much more. I showed the coin to Marvin. He nodded, pulled back the jacket sleeve on his left arm and showed me his watch. It was gold and looked ridiculously expensive. `I'll bet my watch against your franc,' he said. `It's a Patek Philippe. Worth $20,000.' He peered at it. `Five minutes,' he said. `OK?'

`OK,' I agreed.

`Sheila and I have been together a long time now,' he said. `I met her in a chocolate shop near to The Ritz, where I was living at the time. She was still at school, on a weekend trip to Paris with her teachers and school pals. She was in the shop buying a box of chocolates for her mother but she didn't realise that the prices were for empty boxes. They sold the chocolates individually at absurdly expensive prices. She was embarrassed when she realised this and I asked her to let me help her out. She bought the empty box and I bought the chocolates to go in it. That evening I took her and two friends to the Moulin Rouge and the next day she escaped from her teachers and spent the day with me at my hotel.'

I sipped at my cola and listened to him.

`She went back home the next day and when she finished school three months later she came back to me in Paris instead of going to University. We've been together ever since.'

`That's a beautiful, romantic story,' I told him.

Marvin leant closer to me. `Don't tell Sheila I told you how we met,' he murmured. `She gets embarrassed.'

`What does she get embarrassed about?' asked Sheila, who had entered the room unseen and unheard by either of us.

Marvin and I both turned round.

`Nothing, dear,' said Marvin, lying badly.

`You were telling him the chocolate box story, weren't you?'

`It's a good story,' insisted Marvin. `And it's true.'

`It's a lovely story,' I added.

`It's embarrassing,' muttered Sheila. But I could tell that she wasn't really cross.

`Have you brokered peace in the kitchen?' asked Marvin.

`At a price,' said Sheila. `Olivia can be very difficult. I have never known anyone jump to conclusions so quickly, to be so convinced that she is so right and yet to be so utterly, so fundamentally wrong. In the end I promised them both a bonus if they would just shut up and work together. Dinner will be ready in fifteen minutes.' She stood still and silent for a moment. `I'm not entirely sure that they don't stage these little scenes just for me,' she said.

`Why on earth would they do that?' asked Marvin.

`Because they know I'll pay them a bonus,' said Sheila.

Marvin grinned, put his arm around her and kissed her. `Then just pay them the bonus before they cause trouble,' he said.

`No!' said Sheila. She turned to me. `Marvin thinks every problem on this earth can be solved or prevented with money,' she said.

`Most can,' said Marvin. He pulled up his left sleeve to expose his watch. `Three minutes,' he said, showing me the time. I nodded, took the franc out of my pocket and handed it to him.

`Oh, you're not taking money off our guest!' said Sheila, horrified.

`Just a franc,' said Marvin.

`You have to watch him,' said Sheila to me. `He's always gambling. He told you a story about me so I'll tell you a story about him. Do you know how he first got rich?'

Marvin, clearly knowing what was coming, laughed.

`No,' I said.

`Marvin was 24-years-old. He and four other men were playing Monopoly at a hotel in New York,' said Sheila. `They were playing Monopoly for real. They'd changed the board and named the squares after properties the other men actually owned. And instead of toy money they were using real money.'

`To get into the game I had $15,000 I'd borrowed from my boss,' said Marvin. `The other guys were all multimillionaires. One of them was oil rich. One had made his fortune out of silver mining. One was a real estate operator. And the other guy was a casino owner.'

`And your boss didn't know about the loan,' said Sheila.

`That's true,' admitted Marvin, without shame. `But he got it back and never knew about it so he was happy enough. I wanted to be rich. It was my best chance to get what I wanted. Some men are led by dreams - most are led by inertia. I took the initiative and made things happen for me. I'm not ashamed of that.'

`They were playing the game for real,' explained Sheila. `The cash, the properties - everything. Marvin didn't own any property so he bet an office block in Chicago and a theatre in New York which he claimed he owned.'

`What happened?' I asked, incredulously.

`Marvin won everything,' said Sheila. `He cleared them out.'

`$17 million in one game of Monopoly,' said Marvin. He paused and smiled his cheeky, boyish smile. `And in those days $17 million was a hell of a lot of money.'

`What would have happened if you'd lost?' I asked him, aghast.

`For two years I woke up at night having nightmares about that,' admitted Marvin. `The real estate guy was `connected' and it turned out later that the casino owner was playing with more of the Mob's money than his own. They were good about it, they regarded it as a debt of honour and paid up, but the guy I'd played with disappeared. Years later I heard that he was helping to hold up an Expressway in Detroit.'

`Oh, that's horrid,' shuddered Sheila. `I wish you wouldn't tell people that.' She turned to me. `Do you like the view?' she asked.

`It's beautiful,' I said. I looked around. `It's a very luxurious apartment.'

`Better than where you're staying?' asked Sheila.

I laughed. `It isn’t luxurious like this.'

`That's twice you've used the word `luxury',' said Marvin.

`Luxury is something you don't need, don't want and can't afford.' He waved a hand around the apartment. `I need this, I want it and I can afford it. So it's not a luxury.' He put his head to one side. `Actually,' he said, `luxury is an attitude more than anything else. It isn't expensive luggage, overpriced clothes or a large apartment. Real luxury is having the freedom to be what you want to be, where and when you want to be it, and to do what you want to do with your life. That's real freedom.' He paused. `That's what I call real luxury.'

I thought about what he said for a moment. `You're right,' I said. `But for most of us that sort of luxury is utterly unattainable. We have to be content with nibbling at the other sort of luxury occasionally. And it's easier - and probably less stressful - to dream about expensive clothes and cars and apartments than it is to dream about your definition of luxury.'

`Are you doing what you want to do?' Sheila asked me.

`I was supposed to be at medical school,' I told her. `But...'

`That's not an answer to the question,' interrupted Sheila.

`Are you doing what you want to do?'

`Some of the time,' I said, rather defensively and not a little uncomfortably.

Just then the cook appeared in the doorway. She did not speak but coughed rather loudly. We all turned.

`The meal,' the cook said. `She is ready.'

I followed Sheila and Marvin into the dining room, a slightly smaller room than the living room but with just as high a ceiling and just as luxuriously furnished. When I noticed that there were only three place settings I asked what had happened to Archie. Sheila explained that he had to go back to America. I never saw him again, though I am sure that I twice saw Fifi standing in a shop doorway in the Rue St Dennis.

The food was simple and well cooked. As we ate Marvin kept me entertained with astonishing stories of his life. There were no liqueurs and no cigars and I was relieved rather than disappointed.

After we had eaten we returned to the living room and drank coffee, brewed by the cook and served by the maid.

`Before you go, let's see what happened to your shareholding,' said Marvin. He looked at his watch. (The one that had so nearly become mine). `The New York Stock Exchange will be closing in five minutes.' He picked up the telephone and dialled a number from memory.

Sheila fetched my coat and then she and I stood and waited while he spoke. From the kitchen I could hear the sound of a noisy argument. Sheila's brokered peace appeared to have broken down.

`You made $75,' said Marvin, after he had put down the telephone. `What's that in toy town money?' he asked Sheila.

`Around 375 French Francs,' said Sheila. She turned to me. `He's supposed to be a financial genius,' she said. `But he still can't remember that there are five francs to the dollar.'

Marvin took out his wallet, removed four 100 franc notes and handed them to me.

`I can't take this!' I told him.

`I just gave you your first lesson in finance,' said Marvin. `There are tens of thousands, probably millions, of investors and professional investment advisers who think they know whether Coca Cola shares are going to go up or down. You know nothing. But you beat most of them tonight. When you've got money and someone tells you that such and such a share is going up or going down remember what happened here today.'

`I can't take it,' I told him, trying to give him back the notes.

`Of course you can,' insisted Marvin. `It's money you made on the stock market.'

With genuine reluctance I put the notes into my pocket. `I should be paying you for the lesson,' I told him.

`You should,' said Marvin. `And one day maybe you will.' He thought of something. `Here's something else for you to remember,' he said. `Whenever you sell something - and can think of a valid reason why you should be selling it - there is someone out there who can think of a valid reason for buying what you're selling. All you have to decide is who is wrong.' He grinned at me, pleased with himself. I tried to look interested, though to be honest I was not. At the time I thought the advice he was giving was boring and rather stupid. Nevertheless I wrote it all down when I got back to my hotel room that evening.

I kissed Sheila, shook hands with Marvin, walked back through the streets of Paris and went back to my hotel room.

The next morning, out of curiosity, I checked out the price of Coca Cola shares in a copy of the Wall Street Journal which I purchased from a street vendor.

Coca Cola shares had gone down - not up - in price.

After that I thought that I perhaps understood Marvin a little better.

Marvin and Sheila were very rich and had all the freedom in the world.

But I suspected that they were probably also rather lonely.

Chapter Twenty Three

I met Marvin and Sheila quite often after that; sometimes in unexpected places.

One day I met them in a cafe in Montmartre.

Marvin liked the seediness of the area around the Moulin Rouge and often went there to a cheap tourist café on the Place Clichy.

There were two billiard tables in a dimly lit back room and sometimes he played a frame or two. Occasionally Marvin would hustle a couple of the locals. He would pretend to be an ignorant tourist who didn't know which end of the cue to hold and would walk out an hour later with a pocket full of notes.

`Do you like our apartment?' he asked me.

`Yes, of course I do,' I answered. I was used to him suddenly changing the subject, and suddenly asking deeply invasive questions.

`By comparison the place where you're staying is pretty rough isn't it?'

`Yes.'

`Does that worry you?'

`No. Not really. If I could afford to stay somewhere better I would. But...' I shrugged my shoulders.

Marvin slapped me on the shoulder. `Wise man' he said. `Keep your needs and your wants below your achievements and you'll always be rich and happy.'

Puzzled, I looked at him. `I thought needs and wants were much the same thing,' I said.

`Completely different,' said Marvin, shaking his head. `I need a roof over my head. But I want silk sheets and room service. Do you see the difference?'

I admitted that I did.

`I can give you two tips about money,' he said. `First, don't ever worry about what other people have. Just be content with what you have. And make sure that you get what you deserve. Do you understand what I mean?'

`Not entirely,' I admitted.

`A chap I know works for a television company. He reads the news. He's always moaning about the fact that he earns less than two of the guys he knows at other TV stations. It really eats him up. Now this guy gets paid a small fortune. All he has to do is to be able to sit down and to read at the same time. It's hardly demanding work. Approximately 99% of the population could do his job just as well as he can. But instead of feeling grateful for his lot in life he chews himself up over the fact that he earns a few thousand dollars less than these other two punks. Now do you see what I mean?'

`Yes.'

Marvin waved a finger. `Good lesson,' he said. `Remember it. Worry about what you're getting, not about what the other guy is getting. Learn to be content with what you're getting and let the other guy worry about what he's getting.'

I smiled and nodded.

`Second lesson,' said Marvin. `As soon as you start earning put some cash away in a freedom fund. Don't touch it. Leave it there. Build it up. That's the secret of happiness.'

`What on earth is a `freedom fund'?'

`It’s also known as fuck-you money. It’s a pile of cash that enables you to say `fuck you' when someone wants you to do something you don't want to do,' said Marvin. `If you've got a `fuck-you fund' you can always walk away from anything you don't want to do.' Marvin wagged a finger at me and grinned. `That's real freedom,' he said. `You can't be free unless you've got a `freedom fund'.' He leant closer. `And do you know something really curious?' he said. `When you've got a `fuck-you fund', and other people know you've got one, you hardly ever have to say `no’.'

`What else are you intending to do with your time?' asked Sheila.

`I'm writing a book,' I said. `About Paris. I started it when I arrived a little while ago. I don’t suppose it will ever be published but…'

`Oh how wonderful!' said Sheila. `Will you write about us?'

`Of course!'

Chapter Twenty Four

When I arrived at the café, Claudette was already sitting there.

`I'm sorry,' I said. `Am I late?'

`No,' she said. `I was early. I just had to get out of the apartment,' said Claudette. `I could not stay there one minute longer.' She was drinking vodka. `We have a friend of my husband's staying with us.' It always surprised me when Claudette mentioned her husband. I sometimes forgot that she lived with him. I also conveniently forgot that she still loved him. `He is an artist and a very pretentious one. We put him into the big attic room because he said he wanted to do some work. It is a beautiful airy room with wonderful light. This morning there was a huge row. He has been working on a collage which he had been putting together on the floor - twigs, bits of paper, leaves and all sorts of dead and dried flowers and grasses. Madame Thenaud who cleans the house for us went into his room yesterday when he was out, swept up his work of art and threw it all away. She put it all out with the rubbish - in with the old bits of cabbage and bone. He did not get in last night until after three in the morning. He stumbled into bed drunk and didn't see what had happened until he got up for breakfast this morning. When he realised that his great work of art had been stolen he came down the stairs quite naked, screaming and shouting for the police. It took me ten minutes to quieten him down enough to find out what had happened.' She laughed. `I know I should be more understanding,' she said. `But it was truly very funny. He has a skinny white body and a very small thing.' She laughed again and finished her vodka. `Enough!' she cried. `You cannot walk on tip toes all your life.'

I looked at her. `Your grandfather?'

`My grandfather,' she agreed. She emptied her vodka glass. `Now.' she said firmly. `Have you ever been to Père Lachaise?' asked Claudette.

I shook my head. `I've never heard of him,' I admitted.

`It's named after a person, a priest, but now it is a place not a him,' explained Claudette. `A cemetery. Today, I will take you there,' announced Claudette, firmly. `We will put flowers on my grandmother's grave.'

We took a taxi to Père Lachaise and bought flowers at a shop near the cemetery gate. We spent half an hour and, I suspect, a small fortune in the florist's shop. Claudette spoke quickly and with a resigned look on her face to a portly and rather bad tempered looking assistant. `I told her that I thought it would be impossible for her to find me two dozen yellow roses,' Claudette whispered to me, as the woman disappeared into the back of the shop. `The first word a French baby learns is `Non'. The first full sentence is `It is not possible.' So if I had asked if the woman had two dozen yellow roses she would have taken great delight in saying `Non'. But because I put the question the other way it is now her joy to disappoint me by finding the roses. Being contrary enabled her to retain face but it also means that I get the flowers I want.'

Moments later the assistant reappeared clutching a huge vase filled with yellow roses. Claudette carefully picked out two dozen. And then she had them wrapped into a huge and impressive looking bouquet.

I had only ever been to two cemeteries but I had driven past a few and to me they had all looked much the same. Sad, grey, neat rows of grey headstones stretching as far as the eye could see. I did not expect Père Lachaise to be any different, or to be in the slightest bit romantic.

I was wrong. Very wrong. Père Lachaise was like nothing I had ever seen before. And in its unique way it was one of the most romantic places I had ever visited.

`Is this just for French people?' I asked.

`It is for the people of Paris. The people who lived and died here. They did not have to be French.' She pulled a face and shrugged. `People make too much fuss of nationality. But where you were born does not matter so much as who you are and what you are.' She paused in front of a tramp, sleeping on the pavement, and opened her bag and her purse. I expected her to take out a few coins. Instead she took out a large denomination note, folded it and gently slipped it into his inside jacket pocket. The tramp did not even stir. `The most notorious German did not come from Germany. He came from Austria. Napoleon, the most famous Frenchman of all time was a Corsican.' She paused. `Actually,' she said, `lots of famous Frenchmen weren't French at all. Georges Simenon, the inventor of Maigret was born in Belgium. Picasso was born in Spain. Would it have really made any difference if General de Gaulle had been born in Portugal?'

We put the flowers on Claudette's grandmother's grave and knelt together while Claudette said a prayer. After we had left the graveside I looked back to see two youths picking up the bouquet, still in its cellophane wrapper. I started to run towards them but Claudette stopped me.

`It doesn't matter,' she said, with a smile.

`But they are stealing your grandmother's flowers,' I pointed out.

`She does not need them,' said Claudette, with unarguable logic. `A tree with no branches does not need a trunk.'

`But...'

`It is only the giving that matters,' explained Claudette, with a smile. `The rest is irrelevant. We brought my grandmother flowers because it made me feel good. Choosing the roses and putting them on her grave made me remember how much she enjoyed that colour. She always wore something yellow. Every day of her life. She called it the colour of sunshine. What does it matter if the flowers now go to bring some happiness to another person? The only reason for them to continue to be there is to impress other people but what does it matter what others think? The giving was the moment - why should we care about the views of people we don't know?'

She could see that I still did not understand.

`Do you ever go to church and light a candle for a friend or relative who has left us?'

`No. I'm not Catholic.'

`You do not have to be Catholic,' she said. `You should do it sometime. You will find, I think, that it will give you a moment of grace. But when you light a candle it is the thought not the deed which counts. It does not matter if the candle goes out a minute later. In spirit, once it is lit that candle never goes out.'

I suddenly remembered something from my childhood. I nodded.

`You understand?'

`Yes. I think so.'

`You have thought of something?'

`Yes. Just a silly thought.' I felt embarrassed.

`Tell me.'

`No, no. It was just something silly. Childish.'

She put her arm around mine and looked up at me, expectantly.

`I just remembered making a sandcastle when I was a boy,' I said. `I thought it was the best sandcastle in the world. And when I had finished it I stood and watched as the sea came in and destroyed it. For a while I tried to build walls to protect it. But I could see there was no point. I was bound to lose. So I stood and watched the castle disappear. And in a way that made it pure and complete. There was a beginning and an end to the moment and that made it strangely perfect. No critics. No one else even saw it. I think I remembered that moment because before today I never really understood it.'

Claudette squeezed my arm and we walked on through Père Lachaise in the growing winter gloom.

We sat in a café opposite to the florist’s. The café was small, dark, full of atmosphere and patronised largely by students. Nearly everyone wore black and had shoulder length hair. (I knew that it was a café for intellectuals when I visited the subterranean pissoir and read the graffiti. `Gertrude Stein was here, here, here' was my favourite.)

`This is a nice café,' said Claudette. `I always come here when I visit Grandmother. At ten o'clock every morning one of the waiters fetches a blind man from his apartment two hundred yards away. At ten every evening another waiter takes the blind man back home. They have done this for nearly twenty years. And the blind man buys just one or maybe two glasses of wine all day and eats nothing but a sandwich for his lunch.'

`Let me try to order,' I begged Claudette. When the waiter came I spoke, slowly and with some difficulty, in French. `I suppose it would be impossible to have a pot of tea for two?'

The waiter grinned at me. `It would not be at all impossible,' he said in perfect English, and disappeared into the kitchen.

Claudette smiled.

`You see', I said, `I am learning.'

`You are a good student,' she replied.

`Does your husband ever come here with you?' I asked her.

`Oh no,' said Claudette. `Never. He never does anything useful or practical. And he is very lazy. I had to go away to Lyons to look after my mother last year,' she said. `She had an operation and I was away from home for three weeks. When I got back to Paris the sink was full of dirty crockery and cutlery. He had used up every plate, every cup and every knife, fork and spoon in the apartment. They were disgusting. The food was dried...ugh. He had even gone out to the store nearby and bought another dozen plates and another dozen cups and more spoons and so on. They too were all dirty and in the sink. When both the sinks were full and he had finally run out of things to use he had started eating all his meals in cafés.'

`What did you do?'

`I got a huge rubbish sack and threw away every piece of crockery and cutlery. I made him go out to the shop and buy new ones.'

I laughed. `What did he say?'

`He did as he was told. He knew he had been naughty.'

`You make him sound like a child.'

`He is not like a child. He is a child.'

Chapter Twenty Five

I was beginning to feel more and more like a Parisian and less and less like a tourist. Although I still spoke very poor French I was learning to know my way around the city. I had my favourite seats in a dozen cafés including Deux Magots, Lipps, Le Dome and the Café Flore. I was beginning to find my way through the maze of arcades, alleyways and passageways which criss cross the city.

I was learning a little about life too. I was learning something about myself (mostly about how much I did not know or understand).

But, most of all, I was learning a great deal about Parisian cafés.

Good cafés are serene and time stands still the moment you enter through the door. The world, and all its hideous technicolour problems, must stay outside. You can see (and do) just about anything in a Parisian café.

Walking to the Café Napoleon, one of my favourite Parisian cafés, I strode a little faster than usual in order to help work off the calories of a long and leisurely picnic lunch in the Jardin de Luxembourg. I was due to meet Claudette later.

When I arrived I shook hands with the waiter and apologised for being slightly out of breath. Cool and immaculate in his black suit and crisp white pinafore he looked at me sternly. `You shouldn't hurry!' he told me. He nodded towards the street outside, alive with bustling pedestrians and horn tooting motorists. `Relax and enjoy the passing show.'

I took his advice, ordered a Ricard, and sat down to enjoy another afternoon which I might otherwise have wasted in fruitful endeavour. I had the notebook with me in which I was writing my book about Paris. I thought I might manage to complete a few more pages while I waited for Claudette.

I sipped my Ricard and watched the raindrops racing one another down the window pane. The pavement outside was thick with fashion designers, fashion journalists and models scurrying from theatre to hotel to couture house. The traffic was terrible and the only way to get about quickly was on foot. Everywhere I looked expensive hair dos were being protected underneath huge umbrellas.

I sat that day and watched a real life drama unfold in front of my eyes.

When they arrived in the café they had clearly just met. He was about 45 and looked like a Professor at a university. She was about 20 and pretty obviously a student at a local college. He wore jeans and a sweater and had an impish smile. She wore a short skirt and a mohair jumper and had long legs and short blonde hair. They ate, drank and talked. They talked mostly about her boyfriend. They agreed that he was a heel and that she should leave him.

I ordered another drink. Sat, watched and listened. At five o'clock the waiters changed shifts. I paid the one going off duty and ordered a pot of tea and a sandwich from the waiter starting his shift.

They drank coffee and smoked cigarettes. He lent her his lighter. When she handed it back their fingers touched. He held her hand. Their heads fell closer and their voices dropped. He joked a little, she giggled a lot. Her face and voice were both full of `yes'. By six they had kissed and were sitting side by side. He had his arm around her waist. He told her he had to catch a flight back to America. He promised to telephone. By seven he had asked her to go back to America with him. By eight she had agreed to leave college, buy a plane ticket and go back with him. He confessed he was married but told her the marriage was over and that he would get a divorce. She promised to wait for him. By nine they were trying to decide where to live. She wanted a cottage in the country; somewhere with a log fire and a small stream. He wanted an apartment in town. They argued a little. Slowly, the argument built into a row. He took his arm from around her waist and they moved apart. At half past ten she stood up, tears running down her cheeks, and told him she never wanted to see him again. She left. He ordered another brandy. A complete romance from start to finish. In one evening. No need for lawyers, no time for recriminations.

Only in Paris, I thought.

`There is a telephone call for you, sir,' murmured the waiter quietly. `At the desk.'

I followed him to the desk, assuming and hoping that the caller would be Claudette. When the receptionist handed me the receiver I was delighted to find that Claudette was, indeed, on the other end.

`I'm so sorry, my dear,' she said. `I could not get away today.'

`Are you OK?' I asked.

`I'm fine. But Gerard - my husband - had one of his crises today. He insisted that he was not going to perform tonight. His manager, his agent and the director of the play were all here. He was threatening to leave the house, the city and the country. He said he was going to fly to China. I have no idea why. Sometimes I think he is completely mad. I had to persuade him to stay.'

`You succeeded?'

`Eventually.' Claudette sounded tired. `I had to go to the theatre with him.'

`Good.'

`I'm sorry,' said Claudette. `I was so very much looking forward to seeing you.'

`Me too.'

She made the sound of a kiss. I sent one back and told her that I loved her.

`Please don't say that,' she said.

`But it's true,' I said. `Do you love me?'

`I will see you on Friday.'

`Say that you love me.'

`Don't be so silly.'

`Say it.'

`Someone may hear.'

`Say it or I will never put the telephone down and the manageress will call the police and have me arrested. I will plead insanity and you will have to find a doctor before they will let me out.'

Claudette sighed. `I love you.'

`I love you too.'

The line went dead. I thanked the telephonist, paid my bill and walked back to the hotel.

I had never before told a woman that I loved her. Equally importantly, no woman had ever told me that she loved me. It wasn't true, of course. But I didn't know that. And it didn't matter.

Chapter Twenty Six

I plucked up courage one day to ask Marvin why he never made any attempt to speak French. It seemed strange to me that an obviously intelligent man who had spent several decades of his life living in French speaking countries appeared unable to utter a single word of French. Only once had I ever heard him speak any French at all. `Mercy bow coup', he had once said, with a big smile to a waiter.

`I tried for several years,' he explained. `I bought books and I went to three language schools.' But in the end I decided that there's no point in trying to learn French unless you're prepared to invest enough time to become very good at it.'

`The trouble is,' explained Marvin, `that the French love criticising foreigners who try to speak their language. However hard I tried to speak French they would always delight in making me feel like a fool. If you pronounce a word one way they take great pleasure in pretending not to understand and then take great delight in telling you how it should be pronounced. Then, if you remember and try to use what you now think is the correct pronunciation, they pretend not to understand and then tell you that you should have pronounced it the way you were pronouncing it in the first place.'

`And if I thought I had understood a few sentences the person I was speaking to would slip in a difficult word, a proverb or a few words of French argot just to make me realise how little I really understood.'

`They do this because the words the average Frenchman loves to hear most are `je ne comprends pas'. He regards this confession as a licence to treat you like a complete idiot.'

I smiled.

`So,' said Marvin. `I have discovered that speaking English gives me the edge. Best of all it enables me to treat the French as stupid for not speaking English as well as I do.' He grinned at me.

`But you do understand some French?' I asked him.

`I understand a bit more than anyone thinks I do,' said Marvin, with a wink.

`I suppose that can be quite an advantage?'

Marvin just grinned at me.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Theresa Wurtz was my second student. I did not know it at the time but she would turn out to be my only other student, apart from Jules.

We met at a café near her apartment. I carried a copy of *The Times*. She wore a lime green skirt, with a split which very nearly reached her waist and a white lace trimmed blouse which had a very low cut neck. She was wearing pink shoes with five inch heels. Her hair was perfect, her make-up immaculate, her nails freshly manicured and she smelt strongly of very expensive perfume. She terrified the life out of me.

`Hello,' she said. Her smile widened. She could have given a politician lessons in smiling.

There was another pause, plenty long enough for Leo Tolstoy to have tossed off one of those thick, two volume novels and probably cut the lawn as well.

`Do you like art?' she asked. `Art is the most important thing in the world, don't you agree? So many people waste their lives. They collect postage stamps, listen to Elvis Presley, try to grow the biggest dahlias in their neighbourhood, practise aromatherapy or spend their weekends putting the spots on the trains.'

`Putting spots on trains?' I said, more than a trifle confused.

`I once went out with an English man who did this for his pleasure,' said Theresa, acknowledging with a scornful facial expression that it seemed to her an odd thing for a grown man to do. `Every Saturday morning he would put on his anorak, make himself a flask of tea and head for the local railway station with his battered old notebook. There he would write down the numbers of all the trains he saw. A grown man! Can you believe such a thing?'

`Ah,' I said, rather relieved and understanding. `He was a train spotter.'

`Exactly!' said Theresa, pleased that I had understood at last. `He put the spots on the trains. All these people - the stamp collector, the dahlia grower, the train spotter - are avoiding contact with the most important thing in life. Eventually they discover that these things do not matter one little damn. But by then, pfui, they are dead and they have wasted their lives on them.' She looked up at me. `I am not driving down that particular street again!' she said, emphatically. `Once smitten twice shy!' I said nothing. I felt that it would be a crime to change her English.

`Paris is full of exciting art this week,' she said, breathless with excitement. `Would you like to come and see some with me? You can give me my lesson as we look and listen and educate ourselves in the arts.'

Feigning enthusiasm I said I would.

`Wonderful!' said Theresa. She took hold of my arm as though anxious to anchor herself to something dull, solid and stable and dragged me towards the door. Maybe she was worried that I might be so overcome with excitement that I would run away. I wasn't overcome with excitement but I certainly wanted to run away. Indeed, I kept trying to think of ways to escape.

`We are this week spoiled for choices. We have a choice between a ballet, an exhibition of lavage and repassage at the Comedie Francaise and a display of brassieres,' said Theresa. `Or maybe we could be greedy and go to all three!' she said.

`Aren't there any painting exhibitions?' I asked, hesitantly and trying hard to hide my disappointment. `Or photography exhibitions?'

Theresa, paused for a moment, looked up at me, made a rude snorting noise and screwed up her face. `Those are not real arts,' she said, dismissively. `If we see a photograph which is particularly realistic we say it is like a painting. If we see a good painting we will say it looks like a photograph. How can this be pure art? When you see a pair of shoes you do not say that they look like a hat or a pair of gloves, do you?'

Slightly confused I agreed with her. It seemed easier than trying to argue. Indeed, it seemed easier than trying to understand her. `Tell me more about them,' I said. I harboured slight reservations about the exhibition of lavage and repassage which sounded about as much fun as a visit to the local launderette.

`The theme of the ballet is very modern,' said Theresa. `The planet is dying and only a small group of human beings have survived. Before leaving earth on board a rocket they dance on their own soil for one last time. A friend of mine who saw it said it was both moving and poignant.'

`And the exhibition at the Comedie Francaise?' I asked, thinking that it couldn't possibly be less promising than the ballet which, despite her friend's approval, sounded less attractive than the idea of watching someone else's washing go round and round.

`It is an exhibition of lavage et repassage,' said Theresa. She thought hard for a moment, searching for the English words. `Washing and ironing,' she said at last. `Have you heard of such a thing before?' I admitted that I had not. `It is so original,' she said delightedly. `And as a bonus there is a display of ironing provided by an expert ironer from the Comedie Francaise.'

I laughed, thinking that Theresa was joking. My laughter did not go down well for, sadly for both of us, she wasn't. `So shall we go to the washing and ironing exhibition?' she asked, when she had recovered. `It is close enough to walk.'

`OK.' I said. It occurred to me that the ironing display was perhaps some sort of alternative comedy. But Theresa did not seem to be over endowed with a sense of humour.

`Good,' said Theresa. `I adore clothes, don't you?' she said, with a big sigh.

Tactfully, I agreed that without clothes life would be much the poorer and that we would, at the very least, suffer from fearful goose bumps and constantly face charges of indecent exposure.

`Ballet is good as far as it goes but it is clothes designers who are the only real artists left in our modern world,' said Theresa, ignoring the traffic streaming by and leaping out into the middle of the road. `I am a shoe designer by instinct. That is where my true talents lie,' she called over her shoulder. `When I have found the money I need I will open a shoe shop. I will call it The Shoepermarket.' Nervously, I hurried after her, miraculously managing to avoid the traffic and catching up with her just as reached the safety of the opposite pavement. Two children on roller skates missed us by inches and reminded me that safety, like most things, is always relative. Being on the pavement might have been safer than crossing the road but it was still a lot less safe than staying in bed.

`If none of us wore clothes the authorities would have to repeal all the laws relating to indecent exposure, wouldn't they?' she said, looking at me quizzically.

`Clothes are important,' I said, keen to make some sort of contribution to the conversation. `If there weren't any clothes the police would patrol in the nude and judges would also be in the nude. They could hardly try someone for wandering around in the nude if they weren't wearing any clothes themselves, could they?'

Theresa looked at me with new respect.

`Have you designed any shoes?' I asked her.

`Of course,' she said. `I have been designing shoes and lingerie since I was six.'

I looked down at her feet. `Did you design those?' I asked. I had never really thought about people designing shoes. I had always rather supposed that shoe manufacturers simply grabbed a piece of material, tossed it onto a shoe making machine and picked the completed shoes out of the hopper at the other end of the conveyor belt. Apart from making sure that the heel was at the back and the toe at the front I had never really thought there was anything about a shoe that required much in the way of creative input. If I had thought about it at all I would have probably imagined that the extent of artistic input was sitting down in a dark room with a bottle of stout and struggling to decide whether to make the brown shoes on Mondays and Thursdays and the black ones on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays or the black ones on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays and the brown ones on Thursdays and Fridays.

`Good heavens, no!' cried Theresa, looking down with a visible shudder. `Actually none of my designs have yet been made into shoes,' she admitted, somehow succeeding in making it clear by the tone of her voice that this was a reflection on the shoe manufacturing industry rather than her shoe designing skills. `The world of fashion is a closed shop. Only those who are already established get an opportunity to display their skills to the full. I am putting my best feet forward but without success.'

`That's very unfair,' I said.

`I am also a bra designer,' she told me.

I looked at her in astonishment. As with shoes I had not realised that there was much opportunity here for designers to make their mark. I knew very little about bras but assumed that a bra was, well, a bra.

`I believe that the designer of brassieres has a unique opportunity to bring together and offer up the essence of womanhood,' said Theresa. `The brassiere is a synonym for all that is good and honest in our world.'

I looked at her and tried to look convinced.

`When we have finished with the laundry display we shall go to the exhibition of the bras, yes? It is in the Marais.'

Chapter Twenty Eight

We watched the ironing and we looked at the bras. Then we had coffee and walked. To my relief, Theresa decided that we should leave the ballet for another day.

Half way down a narrow passageway she stopped suddenly. Since she was holding my hand at the time I stopped too. I was not particularly surprised to see that we had stopped outside a shoe shop.

`Look at those!' said my companion. She spoke quietly, in a reverential whisper, as though we had been in church. She was pointing to something in the window. I followed her arm, her hand and her finger expecting to find myself looking at something exceptional; a pair of Fabergé eggs, perhaps. Instead I found myself looking at a pair of black shoes. Each shoe had a heel, a toe and a space inside to put a foot. Neither individually nor collectively did they look exceptional.

`Are they not truly beautiful?' she demanded, still in a whisper.

`Very nice,' I agreed. I looked to see if there was a price. There wasn't. `Are you going to try them on?'

Theresa looked at me. `Are you sure?'

I looked at her, puzzled. It seemed an odd thing to say. `Why not?' I asked her.

She stood on tip toes and kissed me on the cheek. `You are too kind,' she said.

I suddenly went cold as I realised that Theresa seemed to be assuming that I was offering to buy her the shoes. Before I could think of a way to replace this misapprehension with the truth Theresa headed for the shop doorway, dragging me behind her. I could only hope (and it was a forlorn hope) that the absence of a price tag on the shoes did not bode too badly.

If I see a decent looking Harris Tweed sports jacket in a shop window I can pretty well guarantee that when I totter in and enquire whether or not they have the item in my size the assistant will wander off, hunt around in the stock room for twenty minutes or so and then return, invariably in a rather bad temper, and tell me that they don't have my size in the item in which I have expressed an interest but that they can manage something twice the price in a purple silk in a similar sort of size.

Naturally, however, they had the shoes which had caught Theresa's eye in her size. Indeed, the very shoes in the window fitted her as though they had been made for her.

`Would you like me to fit these little bows at the backs of the shoes?' asked the assistant, when Theresa had expressed her approval and confirmed that instead of paying off the Mexican national debt we would be purchasing the shoes. The assistant spoke perfect English. She showed Theresa two tiny little black bows.

`Oh yes, how wonderful!' said Theresa. `They are divine. They absolutely make the shoes!'

The assistant dutifully fitted the two little black bows to the backs of the shoes. `Would you like some insoles?' asked the assistant. She held up a packet containing something which looked remarkably like a pair of cheap insoles - the sort which are marketed to people who have smelly feet and sensitive neighbours. `We do recommend these very special insoles to all our customers,' she said. `They are impregnated with diotixism crystals which may reduce internal wear and to extend the life of a shoe by up to 12.4 hours.'

`Oh yes, I think so,' said Theresa. She turned to me. `Don't you agree, my darling? It would be silly not to look after a pair of shoes as beautiful as these are.'

I nodded, as it is the custom of well brought up men to do under these circumstances, and reached for my wallet, hoping that we could conclude the transaction and escape from the shop before the assistant had any more bright ideas. But it was not to be. The assistant was a very fountain of good ideas. All of them expensive.

`You will want the non-slip soles, of course,' said the assistant. She held up a pair of rubber non-slip soles for us to examine and then, before we had chance to demur, slipped them dextrously into the shoe box.

`And a tube of our special nutrient polish? It is patented, prepared in our laboratories in the Loire and specially prepared to feed the leather on these shoes.'

`Oh yes.'

I felt safe in assuming that any shoe polish patented and prepared in laboratories in the Loire would cost rather more than the ordinary run of the mill polish I was accustomed to ladling onto my brogues. Circumstances would, in due course, confirm that my assumption was an accurate one.

`And naturally you would like one of our patented applicators.'

`Oh yes, thank you.'

`We also have these beautiful silk stockings in stock,' continued the assistant, now apparently anxious to off-load the entire stock of the shop. `They have a delightful motif at the back of the calf which will draw attention to Madam's beautiful legs and which, at the same time, will highlight the bows at the back of Madam's shoes.' She took a pack of the aforementioned stockings from a rack behind her and held it expectantly above the shoes (and their added bows), the uniquely patented polish, the non-slip soles, the special applicator and, of course, the ridiculously overpriced inner soles.

Theresa looked at me, expectantly.

`Of course,' I agreed wearily, almost too exhausted to care. Penury was beckoning. The assistant added the stockings to the expensive looking leaning tower of consumables balanced on the counter next to the shop till.

`And would Madam like a new bag to match her new shoes?' asked the assistant, she pointed to a far corner of the shop where there was a display of handbags. Henry Ford would have been delighted. They had every colour under the sun as long as you wanted black. I looked at my watch and said I had to go soon.

The assistant added up the purchases and gave me the bill. Ashen faced I handed over the requisite number of notes and, in return, received a huge, fancy carrier bag. To my astonishment the shoes, and all the rest of the paraphernalia, had cost me the equivalent of three months' rent. Just a few minutes before my wallet had been reassuringly plump. Now it was as skinny as a fashion model.

`You speak very good English,' I told the assistant, perhaps rather patronisingly.

`Thank you,' she replied drily. `I'm from Cirencester.'

Shortly afterwards Theresa hailed a taxi. She thanked me and left.

Only when she'd gone did I realise that she hadn't paid for the lesson. I also realised that even if she had paid I would have still have been considerably out of pocket.

I never saw her again.

Chapter Twenty Nine

Claudette and I were sitting in a park at the back of Les Invalides, watching tourists coming to pay their respects to Napoleon Bonaparte.

`He was a great man, you know,' said Claudette. `A very considerate and thoughtful man.'

I watched two pigeons fighting over a small piece of bread.

`Have you noticed how the roads of France have trees planted along the edges?'

I said I had.

`Napoleon started that,' said Claudette. `He planted the trees so that French soldiers would have shade when they were marching.' She looked at me, with pride. `That shows forward planning and confidence, does it not?'

I agreed that it did.

A sparrow swooped down, picked up the bread and flew away. For a few moments the pigeons did not realise what had happened. They carried on fighting over the bread which had gone.

`Has your friend Jules fixed you up with any more women?' asked Claudette.

`He has,' I admitted, feeling rather embarrassed.

`Were they terribly pretty?'

`No.'

`Were any of them prettier than me?'

`No. Certainly not.'

`Good.'

`Do you have any more students?'

`Just one. But it wasn't very successful, from my point of view.'

`A man or a woman?'

`A woman.'

`Ah. Did you do something interesting together?'

`She took me to an exhibition. Actually, we went to two exhibitions.'

`Two exhibitions? You see, Paris is full of exhibitions. It is a very artistic city. To which exhibitions did she take you?'

`The first was an exhibition of washing and ironing,' I told Claudette. She looked at me. For a moment she tried not to laugh. Then she laughed. `I'm sorry,' she apologised. `Was it fascinating?'

`Oh absolutely,' I said. `We watched a woman wash some clothes by hand. And then she ironed two shirts and a nightdress.'

`She ironed two shirts?'

`She was quite slow but very thorough.'

Claudette covered her mouth and struggled to suppress a laugh. `It must have been, er...'

`Very boring?' I said, helpfully.

`Oh no I'm sure it wasn't.'

`It was. It was very boring.'

`Yes. Well I suppose it might have been quite boring.'

I sighed. `No. It was not quite boring, it was very boring. To be honest it was probably the most boring thing I've ever seen.'

`And the other exhibition?'

`Ah, well that, I confess, wasn't quite so boring.'

`No?'

`No. It was an exhibition of bras.'

`Bras?'

`Bras.'

`The things women wear to, er,' Claudette hesitated. She made a supporting gesture with her hands in front of her body. `For her breasts? Le soutien-gorge?'

`That's right,' I agreed.

`An exhibition of bras?'

`A whole exhibition of bras.'

`Just bras?'

`Just bras.'

`How, er, absolutely unusual. Was that her idea?'

`She wants to be a bra designer.'

`Ah. A woman of hidden talents.'

`Yes.'

`I've never met a bra designer. Not knowingly anyway.'

`I can't imagine there can be too many of them around.'

`Actually,' said Claudette, `I never really thought of bras as being designed at all. Isn't that silly? I mean, they obviously are designed by someone. But I suppose I just rather thought that they just sort of, well got made, in some sort of natural way without too much interference from designers.'

`Like shoes?'

`Like shoes.'

`There were some very strange looking bras in the exhibition.'

`What sort of things?'

`Well, they had a bra that was supposed to be the biggest in the world. I seem to remember that it belonged to an Italian woman who was married to a Mafia mobster.'

`I hope they washed it before they put it on display.'

`I'm sure they did.' I said. `There was also a bra with taps and a bra fitted with candle holders.'

`These I have not seen in the shops.'

`No, I suppose not.'

`And do you think that the bra exhibition was the starting point for a beautiful friendship?'

`No. I don't think so. Not really.'

`Oh,' said Claudette. `What a pity.' She grinned at me.

`You're pleased that it was a disaster, aren't you?'

`No, of course I'm not,' said Claudette. `I'm very sorry for you.' She laughed out loud. `She took you to a display of ironing? And to an exhibition of bras?'

`Yes.'

Claudette laughed so much that the people at the next table turned round and stared at us.

`These things happen to me,' I said.

`It could have happened to anyone,' said Claudette. `You just happened to be in the wrong place at the right time.'

`But it didn't happen to anyone,' I pointed out. `It happened to me.' I paused and scratched my head thoughtfully. `Odd things always seem to happen to me.'

`Then you should become a writer,' said Claudette. `You would have a permanent supply of material for your stories.'

`I have started a book,' I confessed.

We sat in silence for a few moments. Just long enough for Rembrandt to have knocked off a couple of paintings and filled in his annual tax forms.

`You did not tell me.'

`I felt embarrassed. Do you think I could be a writer?' There was another short silence. This was shorter. Van Gogh would have been pushed to run off a bunch of sunflowers.

`Can you write?' asked Claudette.

I thought about it. `I don't know.'

`Then there is only one thing for it,' said Claudette.

`What's that?'

`You must keep trying,' she said. `And you must remember that disappointment is the mustard that makes success taste better.'

`Grandfather?'

`Of course.'

We sat in silence again.

`Did you know that Napoleon designed the Italian flag?' she asked me.

I admitted that I had not known this.

Chapter Thirty

Every time Jules tried to fix me up with one of his spare dates I tried to avoid the obligation.

But he usually won.

Isabella Petiet was one of the women I met on his behalf.

I arrived in the area close to her apartment three quarters of an hour early and found a café to sit in. It was called Le Petit Zinc. In Paris there is always a convenient café to sit in and it is often called Le Petit Zinc.

The café was full when I arrived but as I walked in an elderly man and his wife got up. He was wearing a blue raincoat and a blue beret. She was wearing a pale blue raincoat and a rain hood. Before they left it was she who took out her purse and counted coins into the saucer. At the doorway she fussed over him, making sure that his scarf was properly wrapped around his neck and that his coat was properly buttoned. The old man did not seem to mind being mothered. I got the impression that if he had ever objected to the fussing it must have been a long time ago. I sat down and ordered a small beer.

As soon as I sat down I realised, to my annoyance, that there were two women sitting at the table in front of me. They were involved in an earnest and quite noisy conversation.

The waiter had delivered my beer, and I had taken the first sip, when a man suddenly sat down noisily on the chair opposite me, putting a coffee cup onto the table with something of a clatter. He then quickly dropped a folded newspaper and a black leather notebook onto the table beside the coffee cup. I looked up. The newcomer, who had dropped so many of his possessions onto what I had already considered to be my table, was a man who seemed to be in his forties or fifties. He was tall, slightly overweight and had a mass of thick, grey, shoulder length hair. He also had amazingly piercing, pale blue eyes. He leant across the table and said something to me in French. Naturally, I did not understand. He then switched to English. `Do you mind if I am sat at your table?' he whispered.

Being English I lied and told him that I did not mind.

`I am fascinated by the conversation of these two women,' whispered the newcomer, using his right hand to indicate the two women sitting behind him.

I stared at him, surprised at his strange confession.

`You mean you want to eavesdrop?' I whispered back.

`Absolutely.'

`But isn't that rude?'

`Of course, it is very rude,' he shrugged. `But I am a writer. And I could not properly hear them from where I was sitting.' He leant back, opened his notebook, took a pen from his pocket, held a finger to his lips to tell me to be quiet, and started writing. He did not seem to be in the slightest bit embarrassed. I sipped my beer, watched him and wondered whether or not I should say something. To eavesdrop casually was one thing, but to do it deliberately, cold-bloodedly, seemed different. What would I say? And to whom? I quickly decided to say nothing. Instead, I too found myself eavesdropping on the two women. They talked incessantly about a man they both knew and whom they both claimed to despise. `He is,' said one, `very mean spirited. If he was drowning and you threw him a lifebelt he would sue you if the water splashed into his eyes.' Throughout their conversation they did nothing but disparage this man; each, in turn, seeming determined to think up an ever more outrageous anecdote about him.

`Jean Laconte,' said the writer, when the two women had disappeared. He closed his notebook, stuffed it into his jacket pocket, grinned at me and held his hand out across the table.

I shook his hand and told him my name. `Do you do that sort of thing often?' I asked him. `Listen to other people’s conversations?'

`Oh yes,' Jean admitted, without embarrassment. `You will be amazed at what you hear in cafés. Especially when there are Americans around. They either do not care about the world knowing their business or else they assume that no one within earshot can speak English. They never stop talking. It doesn't matter to them whether or not they have anything worth saying.

`What do you do with it all?' I asked him, nodding in the direction of the notebook.

`I will use a phrase here, a sentence there,' explained the writer. `Those two women were, of course, madly in love with the man about whom they were talking so energetically. Each was intending to persuade her rival that the object of her desire was utterly unworthy of her.'

`Do you think either of them succeeded?'

`Of course not. They both simply succeeded in convincing themselves of their love for this man.'

`What do you write?'

`For money, I write scripts for the television', he replied. `For what the Americans call `soap operas', and for situation comedies. Sometimes I write novels which, sadly, do not sell very well. At the moment I am writing a book about the street people of Paris.'

I was terribly impressed to meet a real life writer; far too impressed by the fact that he had written books to be concerned by the fact that they did not sell very well. I did not dare tell him that I had recently started to write a book of my own. I asked him to tell me about the people in the book he was writing.

`Today,' began Jean, clearly happy to talk about his work-in-progress, `I have been talking to a wonderful artist from Nigeria. Like everyone else I know him as Kookie but that's not his real name. He is a pavement artist and you can see him at work every day on the Grande Boulevards.'

I had seen Kookie, though I'd never known his name. `The huge black man who draws those fantastic chalk pictures of the countryside?'

`That's the guy! In the summer he sometimes takes a week to finish a drawing. The French very much appreciate art and hardly anyone ever walks over his drawings - even at night. I once saw a police car screech to a halt because a drunken tourist was dancing on one of Kookie's pictures. The police took him in their car and released him several miles away where he could do little harm to art.'

`It seems a great shame that Kookie's drawings are all so temporary,' I said. `Even if people don't walk on them the wind and the rain must eventually mean that they disappear. Perhaps if your book makes him famous someone will take his work seriously. Maybe a gallery owner or collector will give him some money so that he can draw or paint on proper canvases.'

Jean smiled and shook his head. `Believe me, there is no chance of that happening,' he told me.

I looked at him, puzzled. `Why not?'

`Three years ago Kookie was an odd job man working in a nunnery,' said Jean. `He was the only man there and he used to do all the heavy, manual work. He used to do kitchen work for them - peeling potatoes and so on - and he used to help keep their garden tidy. He did the digging and the sweeping and he cleared their ditches and pruned their trees. In return they gave him a room over the garage, fed him and gave him an allowance of a few francs a week. He spent virtually all his money on paper, canvas, paints and chalks because his great love was drawing, sketching and painting. He used to work hard every morning from seven until noon and then work for a couple of hours every evening, helping to prepare the evening meal and washing up the dishes afterwards. In between, his time was his own and he spent virtually every hour drawing. It was, in his own words, the happiest time of his life. And then it all went wrong for him.'

`What happened?'

`One day a visitor to the nunnery saw him painting in the garden. The visitor just happened to be the wife of a rich American collector. She asked to see his other work, rushed home to tell her husband about her amazing find and, within a month, Kookie was in New York. He was feted. They threw special parties for him. There was an exhibition of his work at a local museum and one of the New York galleries organised a one man show. His paintings sold for huge sums.'

`It hardly sounds as if everything had gone wrong for him!'

`Oh, but it had. Kookie was terribly unhappy. He felt like a fish out of the sea. He was surrounded by people but he felt lonely. He was being paid huge sums of money to paint but he couldn't paint.'

`So, what happened? He obviously came back to Paris.'

`He came back to Paris but the nuns didn't want him back. They'd found another handyman. And besides they thought that he would have been contaminated by his trip to New York. They thought he would have lost his innocence. And so now Kookie is a street artist. And he's happy again. He's happy that no one can buy any of his pictures. He earns his living drawing. He has a room in a tiny hotel somewhere in Montparnasse. If anyone stops and makes too much fuss of his work he just picks up his chalks and walks away.'

`But he's a fantastic artist!'

`I agree. And now he's happy because he's unknown and undiscovered again.' Jean scratched his chin. `And because he's happy his paintings are fantastic - daring and provocative. He knows that if someone hangs his work in a gallery, and pays him a fortune for what he does, then he'll be unhappy and his work will suffer. His art is built on happiness and his happiness is built on a certain amount of suffering and struggling.'

`What an extraordinary story!'

`It is. But Kookie is by no means the only extraordinary person out on the streets. Most people just walk by. They never look and ask themselves how these people came to be doing what they do. They forget that some of the most creative work is done on the streets - by artists, musicians and so on. They forget that it is when the greats are unknown and struggling that they often produce their most exciting and most dramatic work.' He called to the waiter. `Can I buy you a drink?' he asked me. `Another beer, perhaps?'

I looked at my watch. `No, thanks,' I said. `I have a date in twenty minutes. And I don't want to turn up reeking of alcohol.'

`Your girlfriend?'

`Not exactly.' I explained, as briefly as I could, why I was meeting a woman I had never met and about whom I knew nothing.

`I did this thing once,' said the writer. `I was lonely, I met a woman through an advertisement in a newspaper.'

`What happened?' I asked. `Was it a good experience?'

`It was an experience,' he said. `Good?' he pulled a face. `I do not know if it was good. As a writer it was good. As a man it was not so good. She was a hypochondriac. She was married to a doctor. You would have thought that for her that it would have been a marriage in heaven but she was jealous. She complained that he spent too much of his time listening to other people's problems and not enough time listening to hers. She wanted to have an affair.'

`Did you?'

`Of course I did. It would have been - what is the word - ungallant?' I nodded. `Ungallant to say `no' to a woman in need.' He paused and frowned as he remembered. `But it was not a happy time,' he said, sadly. `She complained all the time - even when we made love. Once I spent three hours with her in a hotel near the Gare du Lyon. During that time she had three different types of cancer, two heart attacks and a neurological disease. I have never known such a woman.'

`How long did the affair last?'

`Two, possibly three, months,' said Monsieur Laconte. `It was as much as I could cope with. I sent her back to her husband.' He laughed. `I think the poor fellow knew she was having an affair but I also do not think he minded.'

He looked at his watch. `Now you must go,' he said. `It is not good for a man to keep a woman waiting. But you will meet me another time and tell me about your adventures?'

I agreed to meet him for lunch later in the week. He left. I was about to follow, and had paid my bill, when I heard a voice behind me.

`You are the one who replied to my advertisement?'

Chapter Thirty One

I turned round. The voice had come from a plump, good-looking, blonde woman. I had no idea how old she was. She was wearing a stylish black trouser suit and a diaphanous white blouse. Underneath the white blouse she wore a black bra. Her fingernails were painted black, presumably to match her trouser suit, but her toenails (which poked out of the toeless black shoes she was wearing) were painted fire engine red. She sat down opposite me, in the seat vacated by Jean Laconte.

`Er, yes,' I lied, feeling terribly guilty. `How on earth did you know that I was English?'

`Everything about you is English,' answered the woman with a rather superior smile. `Your hair, your jacket, your trousers...,' she waved a hand around in a careless but stylish and unmistakeably Gallic way. `Absolutely everything!' She stood back and stared at me thoughtfully. `You have a very strong face,' she said. `You should have been an actor.'

`How do you know I'm not?'

`Pfui!' said Isabella, with a laugh and a wave of the hand. `You are no actor!' She made the statement as though the very idea was so far-fetched that it amused her. She looked me up and down as though I were a car and she was considering making an offer. `But you are young and not looking too badly. And you are a little different. I always think that the men who reply to these type of advertisements are a bit sad and desperate. Do not you?'

I couldn't help noticing that Isabella looked nothing much like the photograph she had sent to Jules.

`Well, not really...,' I began, rather shocked to be thought of as sad and desperate before our date had even started. I wondered why Isabelle bothered to put advertisements in the papers if she thought she was only going to attract sad and desperate men.

`Shall we go?’ asked Isabella. `This is a sad and dreary café.’

I stood. She got up. We left.

`Last week I went out with a civil servant from the Ministry of Agriculture,' she told me as we walked away from the café. `He was very fat and had bad breath. He offered me money to go with him for the weekending.'

`Really?'

`But it wasn't very much,' she told me. `He said he would pay all the expenses and give me one hundred francs for every day I spent with him. It was an insult. I would not go with a man for so little. Besides, he wanted to take me to Orleans. Who wants to go to Orleans?'

I started to say something but Isabella continued.

`If a man wishes to give me a nice present that is very acceptable,' she told me. `But I do not like fat people. If you had been fat I would have shown you the politeness and told you that I had a headache. Look at that woman,' said Isabella, pointing to a woman on the other side of the street who was waddling along, struggling with her shopping bags. `She is so fat. How can anyone allow themselves to get so fat.' She shivered, in seemingly genuine disgust. `Have you noticed that fat people have absolutely no sense of their own bodies? They come too close to you in shops and they bump into people. In a city it's worse because people who live in cities lose their feeling for their private space. Fat people should be banned from cities and made to live in the country.'

I didn’t know what to say in response to this tirade and so I said nothing.

`We speak only the English tonight?'

`Yes,' I said, relieved. `That suits me fine.'

`I want to improve my English,' said Isabella. `She is not as good as I am wishing.'

`You speak very English,' I told her.

`And you are not badly speaking the English,' said Isabella. `You need to work on your accent and your pronunciation are a little weakly. However, on the whole you speak quite nice the English although the rung of your grammar has a not so good about it. Why did you answer my advertisement?'

I wasn't sure what to say but it didn't matter, Isabella wasn't expecting a response. `On my next advertisement I think I will say that I am a little younger,' she said. `What are you thinking?'

I tried to think of a reply but I needn't have bothered. Isabella was not as keen on listening as she was on talking. `Did you think I would be as young and beautiful as I am?' she demanded. I tried to think of a response, but no response was necessary. Isabella wasn’t waiting for one.

`Maybe in my next advertisement I will say I am like a film star,' she said, who was clearly totally self-obsessed. `Do you think I am looking like a film star?'

`Oh absolutely.' I managed to squeeze in.

`Which one?' From the unexpected silence and the quizzical look on her face I got the impression that it was a question Isabella wanted answering. Fortunately, she was incapable of leaving a silence, even a short one, unfilled.

`Marilyn Monroe? In the film `Some Like It Hot'?'

To be honest I thought she looked more like Jack Lemmon in drag but I decided not to share that with her. `You look exceptional!' I told her.

My meaningless and rather bland response seemed to please her. She smiled at me coquettishly. `I will then say in my next advertisement that I am looking like the sporting image of Marilyn Monroe,' she said. `You are a very sexy man,' she purred, managing to fill that short sentence with a dictionary of meaning.

`Did you enjoy the photograph I have sent?' she asked.

`Yes,' I said. `You look very beautiful.'

`Oh it is not me on the photograph,' she said. `It is my daughter Karina. She looks very much like me. I did not have a photograph of myself which I like enough so I had some copies made of a good photograph of her. It is quite impossible to tell us apart.'

I murmured something that I hoped might sound appropriate.

`I have met some very famous men in my life,' she told me. `Last week I met a famous musician,' she told me proudly. `I went to his hotel. Afterwards I sat in the theatre and watched him perform. I saw thousands of women screaming for him and felt very proud. Of all the women there he had chosen me for himself.'

`How did you meet him?' I asked.

`A friend of mine works for his record company,' Isabella explained. `She knows that he likes women with some experience. It was very exciting to be in the theatre and know that just an hour earlier I had been in his bed.'

We walked a little further. I had no idea where we were heading.

`Do you believe in God?' she asked, suddenly and utterly unexpectedly. She speeded up, slipping with surprising agility around a woman with a pram. Her heels click clacked on the pavement.

`I'm not sure,' I said.

`You must!' she said. `Oh you must. I cannot go with a man who does not have faith.'

`Well...' I began.

`Good!' said Isabella, though I wasn't quite sure what she was pleased about. `And your politics. Are you hanging to the left or the right?'

I had to try hard not to laugh at this. Instead of replying I simply smiled and hoped it looked enigmatic.

`I am a middle person; very much to the right of the left,' she told me. `As young people we should be a little to the left. But as man and woman of the world we should be hanging more to the right side. Don't you agree?'

I agreed.

Isabella stopped and I stopped too. `This is my coach!' she announced proudly, indicating a tiny, white Renault. It had dents in the bonnet, the boot, all the doors I could see and even the roof. One front headlamp was broken and neither of the wing mirrors had any glass in them. The chrome bumpers looked as if they had been in many wars.

`You like my little car, yes?' she asked. She opened the driver's door and climbed into the car.

`It's, er, lovely,' I told her, getting in beside her, though I did not see how Isabella was going to move the car which seemed to me to be hemmed in by the vehicles in front and behind it.

`She is perfect for Paris,' said Isabella. `And she has a glassy look.'

I tried to work it out. `A glassy look?' I said, slightly bewildered.

`That touch of glass!' explained Isabella, clearly slightly exasperated at having found the only Englishman alive who hadn't heard the phrase before. `You English! Hrmph!' she said, with what I would eventually learn to recognise as ubiquitous Gallic arrogance. `You can't even speak your own language improperly.'

She put the tiny car into gear, pressed her right foot flat to the floor and accelerated into the car in front which lurched forwards a few inches. Looking through the windscreen I could see the whole row of cars in front of us shake with the impact. Isabella then slammed the car into reverse and drove into the car behind. She did this until she had created enough space to manoeuvre her tiny car out of its now much enlarged space. Once out into the traffic she put her right foot down and drove at full speed down the centre of the road, for all the world as though she were driving some tiny racing car fixed in some invisible slot. `Do you have a car?' she asked, having to shout above the whine of the complaining engine. She changed gear only when it seemed that the engine would explode. `No, I'm afraid not,' I said, as she careered around a corner at full speed. Clearly no one had introduced her to the notion that the brake could be used for anything other than halting the vehicle once it had reached its final destination. I sat alongside, gripping the dashboard in front of me with one hand and the handle on the side of the door with the other.

I had by now worked out what she meant by `glassy', but it seemed a little late to tell her that I understood and a little discourteous to tell her that she'd got a `g' mixed up with a `c' so I said nothing. The French, I had already learnt, like to think that they can speak everyone else's language perfectly but that no one can speak theirs at all.

This is the cat’s knees, no?' She paused for a moment and looked at me, with a coquettish flutter of her long eyelashes. And then she frowned. `Or is it the bee’s whiskers you say?' She shrugged, as though it was of no consequence.

`You like to drive fast?' I wheezed, as we hurtled between two buses with inches to spare on either side. She had dowsed herself in a noxious perfume which smelt as though it had been created out of some sort of toxic waste and it clearly contained at least one chemical to which I was allergic.

`But of course,' she replied. `It is the best way. But only when there is no traffic. Today the roads are too busy to drive fast and so I must go slowly.'

I watched in horror as pedestrians leapt out of the way as we shot across a pedestrian crossing. An elderly couple, a woman with a small child and a man with a briefcase all threw themselves onto the pavement. `These people are so dangerous!' she said, taking both hands off the steering wheel and waving them about. `I do not lead my car on the pavement. Why do they walk themselves on the road?' She waved a finger pointedly at her rear view mirror but I doubted if the pedestrians would have seen it. I suspect that they were too busy picking themselves up off the pavement, and out of the way of the next homicidal motorist, to be concerned with what Isabella was doing with her right index finger.

`What baggage do you brought to our relationship?' asked Isabella.

I looked at her, confused.

`All peoples bring baggage into a relationship,' she said. `This is another word for your vocabulary,' she added. `There is the physical baggage - the furniture, the crockery, the cutlery, the towelling, that is all brought by the women - and there is the baggage of the emotions which is brought by all the sexes.' She looked at me to see if I had understood. I hadn't, and it obviously showed.

`Your past relationships with women,' explained Isabella. `Your hang-outs.'

`Ah,' I said, thinking I probably understood. `No, I don't have any hang-ups.'

`Hang-outs,' said Isabella, correcting me. `Not hang-ups. That is for the shirts and the trousers. Hang-outs is the emotions baggaging.'

`No hang-outs,' I said. Isabella was not a woman many people disagreed with. I certainly wasn't one. It occurred to me to mention that the pedestrians concerned had been merely trying to cross the road but I kept quiet about that too.

`That is good,' said Isabella. `I have several husbands but they have left me with no baggages.'

I started to say that I thought this was a good thing.

`My last husband was a fast driver,' said Isabella, interrupting me. `He was a very horny man.'

`Very horny?'

`Mais oui. He never took his fingers off the horn.' To illustrate her point Isabella pressed two fingers onto her horn. A small Citroen van in front of us swerved to the right and collided with a parked BMW. A man carrying a baguette fell off his bicycle. `He said it was the safest way to drive,' explained Isabella. She took her fingers off her horn and waved a finger scornfully at a taxi driver who had the temerity to pull out in front of her. `He was an idiot,' she said.

`I think he thought it was his right of way,' I explained, referring to the taxi driver. The traffic lights were green for him and red for us, so it was understandable.

`Not that one,' said Isabella impatiently. `My husband! He was a good driver but a complete bastard. I am glad to be rid of him.' Without slowing down at all she turned left. We went round the corner on two wheels. There was much squealing of tyres. A hub cap came off and rolled past us. I watched, horrified, as it bounced over a kerb and disappeared down an alleyway. `But he was very good in bed too,' she remembered, ignoring the hubcap and the avalanche of magazines, newspapers, maps, packets of sweets and miscellaneous papers which cascaded from one side of the dashboard to the other as we rounded the corner and then straightened up again. I clung to the door handle to stop myself falling on top of Isabella. Some of the maps and papers skidded onto the floor. `We were married for three years and we made the loving every single night,' she told me proudly. `Even when we were divorcing he came to my apartment and we had sex at least once a day. We did it once in the lift going up to my lawyer's office.'

`So why on earth did you get divorced?' I asked.

She snorted. `He was a man to have sex with not a man to marry,' she explained, slamming on the brakes and skidding to a halt in the middle of the road. `He is not trustworthy enough for use as a husband. He has the roving eyes. He works for a car manufacturer and drives rally cars. For a month he has been driving all over Africa. He drives through deserts and forests and mountains; across rivers and rocks. He finishes the rally without crashing once. But when he comes back to Paris, on the first morning he is here he sees a pretty girl on the Boulevard Haussmann; he drives onto the backing of a bus and breaks his leg.'

Without warning she put the car into reverse and shot backwards. I turned my head and could see that we were aiming for a small parking space. The space looked to me to be at least a foot shorter than the car. This, however, was clearly not something Isabella was prepared to regard as an impediment. I winced as she crunched the back of her tiny car into the car behind us and winced again as she crunched the front bumper into the car in front of us. Eventually, after a good deal of crunching of metal, much wincing by me and much changing of gears and pulling on the steering wheel Isabella managed to cram her now rather shorter car into the now rather larger space. `There!' she said, triumphantly. `A perfect fit.' And indeed it was. When I got out of the car and stood, shaking and wheezing, on the pavement I could see that there was not one inch of air between Isabella's car and either the car in front or the car behind.

`Now we eat!' cried Isabella, abandoning her car and marching off.

`Aren't you going to lock the car?' I called, walking after her. I had a suspicion that she had left the keys in the car.

`There is nothing in it to steal,' she answered, over her shoulder. `And who would steal it?' she demanded. `In front of it there is a new Mercedes. Two cars behind there is a new Jaguar. Across the road I saw a Ferrari and a Bentley. There are BMWs everywhere. Who will be stealing my little car?' I hurried to catch up with her. She walked almost as quickly as she drove.

I looked back at her small, squashed Renault, crammed tightly into its bespoke parking space. `I suppose you're right,' I agreed.

`We are going to a traditional little French restaurant,' she said. `You will like it.'

`I'm sure I will,' I agreed.

`You will pay, no?'

`Er, oh yes,' I agreed.

`Good,' said Isabella. She wagged a finger at me. `I should have put that in my advertisement,' she said, as though it was my fault that she had forgotten to do so. `That the man will pay for the meals. I will make a note of that in the mind. It is good life for a woman. If she meets a man every night she never need pay for food.' She smiled at me, as though expecting me to share her happiness. `But you must know that I will not sleep with you tonight,' she warned me. `If we get on well then tonight you may kiss me. On the second date I will let you touch the bosoms. And on the third date we will have some sleep together. But not before.'

I felt myself blushing. `I wasn't, er, expecting...' I began, not quite knowing exactly what I wasn't expecting.

`I think it is best to be clear about this things,' explained Isabella. `Maybe in my next advertisement I will put my rules.'

`Your rules?'

`Kissing, touching of the bosoms and then sleeping on the third date,' she explained, as though to an idiot.

`Maybe that would be a good idea,' I agreed.

`I am not a prude but a woman must have standards,' she said. `My sister is a prude. My sister once refused to get into a lift with two strange men she did not knowing well because she said the lift was too small and body touches would be unavoidable. She has very big bosoms.'

By now we had reached the restaurant. We went in. Isabella spoke to the waiter, who knew her and spoke to her by name, and we were taken straight to a table by the window. We both chose and ordered items from the menu. Isabella ordered some wine. I desperately added up the cost of the items we had ordered and hoped I could afford the bill.

The meal was not a great success. The food was not particularly well cooked and the service was slow and rather too intrusive and flamboyant for my taste. Isabella never stopped talking, except to stuff food into her mouth. She did this speedily. Chewing food she did not regard as incompatible with speech. She talked about anything and everything. Sentences poured from her, often accompanied by small portions of partly digested food. Often there was no link between one sentence and the next.

`I have an idea that would make the French army the best in the world,' she told me at one point. She leant forward across the table. `I have written to the President about it,' she said. `We should employ only tiny soldiers,' she said. `That is my plan. Only the soldiers who are small or very small.'

`Right,' I said, having no idea what she was talking about.

`It makes good sense, does it not?' she said. `The small soldiers will be far less likely to be hit by bullets than the bigger soldiers!'

I agreed that there was much good sense in this apparently novel idea.

Occasionally she asked me trick questions, intended, presumably, to test me.

`If you were going with another woman and you met me would you go out with me?' she suddenly asked.

I thought about this for a while.

`No.' I said, having no idea whether this was, or was not, the right answer.

`Good,' she said, patting my hand. `That is the right answer.'

Eventually, the waiter brought our coffee. And then, he brought the bill which, to my enormous relief, I found I could afford to pay. The ordeal over, we walked to the door and stood on the pavement outside the café. Isabella put her arms around my neck, thanked me politely for dinner, and kissed me on the lips. She did this as though she was conveying upon me a great honour; as though she was ennobling me in thanks for my services to my country. The kiss, which lasted just a couple of seconds, did absolutely nothing for me.

`That is your thank you for a quite good evening,' said Isabella, taking her arms from around my neck and stepping back. `You are a quite pleasant young man. You have good teeth and hair and you are quite tall enough.'

I instinctively knew that there was a `but' coming very soon.

`You have quite good English and you are a little bit interesting as a companion,' she told me. I felt like a student receiving an end of term report. I still knew that there was a `but' coming very soon. I was not to be disappointed.

`But you do not excite me,' said Isabella, bluntly.`I do not feel a great urge to take you to my bed.'

`Oh,' I said, feeling, I confess, more relief than disappointment. I tried not to show this relief and, indeed, tried to look disappointed.

`You are perhaps the right age, though maybe a little old, but I am looking for someone better looking and with more muscles,' said Isabella. `Your nose is not quite right and you do not have the jaw line which I like. Plus your clothes are not very expensive and you do not have a car of your own. I think I am looking for someone who is richer than you are.' She started walking in the direction of her car. I followed.

`That would not be difficult,' I told her. `I am quite poor I'm afraid.'

`What do you do for a vocation?' she asked. It was the first time in the evening that she had asked me anything or shown any interest in my life.

`I'm working part time as a teacher,' I said.

`You see,' she said. `You will not make big money teaching. You should make for yourself a career. A banker, a lawyer or a doctor.'

`I have a university place to study medicine,' I told her.

She brightened considerably at this. `That is very interesting,' she said. `I wish I had known earlier. I would have told you about my illnesses. You would have been greatly interested. For example, yesterday I ate something which disagreed with me. It made a lot of noises.'

I was tempted to say that I was surprised that any food had had the temerity to disagree with her. But I did not have the courage to turn the thought into words.

`If you are going to be a doctor you will become rich quite soon?'

`Oh, I don't think so,' I said. `I have a long training ahead of me.'

`But I have never known a poor doctor,' said Isabella. `I will perhaps give you another chance after all. We will have dinner again and I will see if perhaps you make my blood boil after all. Then, maybe, we meet again in a few years’ time when you are nearly finished your studies?'

`That's very kind of you,' I said.

`I give you my telephone number,' said Isabella. She opened her handbag and took out a diary with a pencil attached to it. She wrote her telephone number on a page at the back of the diary, added a lipstick kiss, tore out the page and handed it to me. `I do not want to live a life with any regrets. I always say `yes' when `no' might sometimes be less risky. A `yes' may sometimes be dangerous but it is also often more profitable and more fun, do you not agree?'

I agreed.

`You ring me when you can see me again. And you come, pick me out and take me again up for dinner. You will know my apartment building easily and remember it for there is the huge pair of brassy knockers right on the doorway. I will look forward to it and will break almost any date for you.' She looked at me. `If things go well with us, young Monsieur le Docteur, I will let you touch me a little. After all, it will be our second date together and you remember my rules. You give me the telephone. But not on Tuesdays or Thursdays.'

`Not Tuesdays or Thursdays,' I repeated.

`On those days I have my self-confidence training course,' she said proudly.

`You are on a self-confidence training course?' I said. I was astonished. I had never met anyone who seemed less in need of assertiveness training.

`I am the lecturer,' she told me, indignantly. We were by now standing beside her little white Renault. `Shall I give you a lift?' she asked. `Where from are you going?'

`No, it's OK, thanks,' I told her. `I think I would like a walk.' I paused. `Unless you want me to see you home?'

She laughed. `You are so sweet a boy! No, I will see myself home safely,' she said. Then she put her head to one side, as though thinking. `Maybe you are being clever. Maybe you think that perhaps if you see me home I will invite you in because you are going to become a doctor and you will get more than a cup of coffee?'

`No, no, not at all!' I said hastily.

`Are you sure?' she asked me, lowering her head and looking at me through her upper eyelashes. `I think you fancy me a lot don't you?'

`Oh no...,' I started to say. `Well, yes, of course I do. I am sorry. It probably is better if I walk.'

`You walk off your urges!' laughed Isabella. `Tonight is not your night. I am seeing my last husband in an hour at my apartment and he would not be pleased to see you there. But another time - who knows?'

She climbed into her car, started the engine and looked up once at me. She waved. I waved back. And then I walked away. Behind me I could hear her little white Renault banging against the two cars parked in front of it and behind it. I walked quickly and turned a corner so that she would not drive past me. I did not want to see her again. I passed a rubbish bin on the pavement, paused for a moment, ripped the page she had torn out of her diary into tiny pieces and tossed the pieces in amongst the rubbish.

Chapter Thirty Two

My finances were in a rather delicate condition. If they had been a coat they would have been too threadbare to donate to a jumble sale. The money the pharmacy owner had given me was disappearing rapidly.

I sat in La Rhumerie twice a week looking forward to my time with Jules for two quite different reasons. I enjoyed Jules' company very much. But I also needed the envelope he gave me at the start of each evening. Sometimes I felt guilty about the fact that we talked more like friends than teacher and student. But the guilt did not stop me taking the money; partly because I knew that the cash came from Jules' father, an exceedingly wealthy man who reputedly regarded it as money well spent, and partly by the fact that hunger is an even more potent driving force than guilt.

Jules was never predictable; always full of surprises.

`Do you mind coming for a walk?' he asked one day.

It was a gloriously sunny day; the first really warm day of spring and the café proprietors had removed their winter screens, opening up their terraces so that customers could sit, eat and drink in the fresh air.

`Let's go down to the river,' he suggested.

There was something about him that told me that he was troubled and I knew, when we left La Rhumerie, that he had something important to tell me.

`It appears that it is time for me to be settled up,' said Jules, with a grand sigh. `It is time for me to find a woman who wears sensible underwear, has babies and stretch marks, who knows where to buy the best duvets and who worries me about the price of soap powder.'

I stared at him. This did not sound like the Jules I had grown to know.

`Maybe it is the time,' said Jules. `The day before yesterday,' he confided, `I had a terrible experience. It was, perhaps, an omen.' He paused and shuddered before regaining his composure and continuing. `I have been seeing a widow,' he said. `She was married to a gourmand. A man who was a member of a club which ate rare and expensive animals. They used to buy them from all over the world. When he died he left nothing. He had spent all their money on these indecent feasts. It was terrible. So do you know what the widow did?'

Having absolutely no idea what the widow had done I shook my head.

`She sold his body for a big sum to the gourmand dining club of which he had been a member. And they ate him up with blackcurrant sauce and a sprig or two of parsley.'

`They ate him!' I asked, horrified.

`She told me they ate every last inch of him. And I believe that he was a big man.' insisted Jules. `So, afterwards his widow put an advertisement in the magazine and I responded. Sometimes I have found widows to be entertaining and grateful. They do not expect too much but they are pleased when they are treated as women. She took me to her apartment in the 15th - a horrid little backstreet to which I would not normally go. I sat down on her sofa and drank some whisky while she went into the bedroom to prepare herself for our romance. When she reappeared nearly forty minutes later I did not recognise her. Without her corsets she was twice the size she had been earlier. And she had taken off her hair.' He closed his eyes and shook his head.

`You had no idea about this?'

`None!' insisted Jules.

`So, what did you do?'

`I did my duty,' said Jules. `Of course, I did my duty. I am a gentleman. I could do nothing else. I told her that there are many stars in the sky but that even if they were all together they would not have the sparkle and brightness of her eyes.'

`She had nice eyes then?'

`No. She had cataracts.' He shivered, as though cold. `It was terrible. It was like a nightmare.'

For a while we both walked in silence, lost in our respective thoughts.

`When I was young I was reckless with my life,' Jules continued at last. `Now, in my middle years it is time for me to be more cautious and to value my life.' He stopped, thought for a moment and then brightened. `Of course, when I am old I will be reckless again because then I will have so little to lose and I will have had a good life.'

`In your middle years?' I said. `What has happened? You are not in your middle years!'

`Oh yes I am,' he replied, sadly. `Yesterday I had an anniversary.'

`A birthday?'

`I am another age. Is that what I mean?'

`Yes.'

`Then I was having a birthday,' he agreed. He clapped me on the back. `You see, you teach me such good English.'

`How old are you?'

`I am 22,' he replied.

`That isn't old!'

`Maybe not to you and to me,' agreed Jules. `But yesterday, after dinner, my father called me into his study for what he called a little talking. He told me that it is now time for me to begin to settle up a bit.'

`I thought your father...'

`Oh yes. But he has trouble at his heart. His doctor has told him he cannot now even have second hand excitements.' Jules shrugged and pulled a face. `It is serious. So, sadly, that is it for me. Now I must become a sensible and responsible man of business, with a plump wife, a golf club membership, a sensible motor car, and small children so that my father can see the next generation at play before he has the big attack of the heart.'

I stared at the ground. Poor Jules. It seemed that his playboy years were over.

`My father has told me that I must leave the university and take up a place at his business. I must learn the trade so that I can be ready to take over when he is....' Jules waved a hand to complete the sentence.

`When?'

`Soon. Now. Tomorrow. This Week.' Jules shrugged. `He wants me too to find myself a wife. A good, solid, sensible woman who can give him bouncy grandchildren and bake big apple pies.'

`Do you have anyone in mind?'

`I do not myself know Parisian women who can bake pies of any sort,' said Jules. `They would not want pastry under their fingernails. But my mother has found someone for me.'

I could hardly believe what I was hearing. `An arranged marriage?'

`A daughter of another businessman,' explained Jules. `Her father and my father have property together. It will be a - what is the word - an alliance. It is perhaps more of a merger rather than a marriage.'

`Do you know her? Have you met her?'

`Oh yes,' laughed Jules. `I have known her since we both were children. She lives with her parents in the village where my parents live. She is plain and plump and has good hips. I am confident that she will bear me many strong children.'

`And your parents and her parents have arranged a wedding?'

`Oh yes. It was all fixed yesterday. Myself I would not be bothering with a wedding,' said Jules. `A wedding, like any contract, is a waste of time. The people who wish to become married should only say to one another that they will be kind. That is all. The priest should say: `Will you treat this woman as you would wish yourself to be treated? And the man would say: `Yes'. And the priest would turn to the woman and ask the same question and she would say: `Yes'. He would say: `Do you promise to be kind to one another?' They would both say `yes'. And then everyone would go eat, drink and dance and the couple would go off on their holiday together.'

`Honeymoon.'

`Honeymoon? What is that?'

`When a newly married couple go on holiday it is called a honeymoon.'

`Ah. That is for us a `lune de miel' or a `voyage de noces',' said Jules.

`You seem to be taking all this very well,' I said to him.

He looked at me, surprised. `In what way do you mean?'

`It's just that I think you are probably the freest human being I have ever known,' I told him. `And yet you are ready to give up your life for your father.'

`Of course,' said Jules. `There are two civilisations in France,' he explained. `There is the civilisation which is based on cafés and boutiques and good food and wine. That is a very free and Roman civilisation. Self-indulgent. And there is, side by side, another civilisation - more Greek - in which the rules are all that matters. We can enjoy ourselves better than anyone else but we can be even more bureaucratic and pompous than the Germans,' said Jules. `France is wildly over governed. We love administrators. We love being told what to do. Of course, although we pretend to do as we are told we still do what we want. We have the feathered costumes of the showgirls at the Moulin Rouge but we also have the formal, gilded architecture at the Opera House. They go together very well. It is the same country and the same people. I have enjoyed my time with the feathered costumes. Now it is my time to play my stern part among the gilded architecture. The fancy ties and jackets will be put away and I will wear the dull ties and the smart suits.'

Something he had said stuck in my mind. `You say the French pretend to do as they are told,' I said. `How will that affect your marriage?'

`Oh, I will be a typical French husband,' said Jules with a laugh. `I will be a loyal and faithful husband to my wife and a loyal and faithful lover to my mistresses.'

I stared at him, horrified. `You mean that you will get married knowing that you intend to take a mistress?'

Jules laughed at me. `You are shocked!'

`Of course!'

`Do not be, my friend. But perhaps what is good for the French goose would not do for the English gander.'

We stopped at a café overlooking the river Seine and with a splendid view of Notre Dame.

`Let us have a drink,' said Jules.

We found a table near the window, sat down and ordered drinks from a stern looking waiter in a heavily starched snow white apron.

`You realise now my friend,' said Jules, `that this must be our last lesson. I will be living in the country. Not so much in Paris.' He put his hands on my shoulders and looked me straight in the eyes. `You have been a good teacher and an even better friend,' he said. `I will miss you very much. But I hope we can still see one another when I come to Paris?'

Amazingly, it had not occurred to me that I would be losing my one and only student. `I'll miss you,' I told him and meant it. `My life will not be the same without you.' I meant that too.

We sat in the café at the bottom of St Michel, drinking Ricard and watching the tourists scurry by. It was starting to rain and many were draped in plastic raincoats or carrying small umbrellas. Just a few hundred yards away stood Notre Dame, imposing and grand.

We sat there together, silent, alone with our own thoughts.

Chapter Thirty Three

`Are you ready, Jean?' demanded the newcomer, a short, almost round, man. He was slightly over five foot tall, wrinkled and very hairy. He had a straggly grey beard and shoulder length grey hair and wore an army combat jacket and a pair of scruffy, faded blue jeans. The jacket had at least a dozen pockets. All of them were bulging. He had a huge, heavy looking camera bag slung over one shoulder and an expensive but slightly battered looking Leica camera slung around his neck. He was carrying a collapsible tripod.

`Do you want a drink?' Jean asked the newcomer.

`I want to get some shots done before it rains.' He replied. He seemed rather bad tempered.

`OK,' said Jean, with a sigh. He slid off his bar stool with surprising grace and introduced us. The photographer, he told me, was called Johnny. The two of them were collaborating on a book about the street people of Paris.

`This city is crammed to the boundary with fascinating people,' Jean told me. `More or less at random I picked out twenty five. I've done the interviews and written vignettes about them all. Now Johnny is going to take the photographs.'

`The photographs are what people will buy the book for,' said Johnny, who struck me as a rather gloomy little fellow. Unlike Jean he didn't look like a man who got a lot of fun out of life. I wondered how the two of them had got together.

I tried to pay for the two glasses of vin chaud we had drunk together but Jean beat me to it by the simple expedient of dropping a note onto the bar counter and indicating, with a wave of the hand that had dropped the note, that the barman could keep the change. We followed Johnny out of the café and onto the street. Encumbered with fat and cameras, Johnny walked like a woman wearing a hobble skirt. The temperature had dropped noticeably in the short space of time since I had first entered the café. The warm spell had ended far too soon; and an unseasonal chill was clinging to the Paris streets.

`Who am I photographing tonight?' asked Johnny, stopping for a moment.

`Paul,' said Jean, overtaking him, leading the way and setting off at quite a surprisingly fast pace. I ran for a few paces and walked alongside him. Johnny, mumbling inaudible complaints, hobbled along behind us. `Paul is a clown,' Jean explained to me. `He works a patch of pavement just a few hundred yards from here. Up until three years ago he worked as a civil servant in the French Treasury. He lived for the moment - and the next cocktail party. All he knew for certain was that he had to get somewhere, and that he had to get there quickly. Sadly, this ambition was slightly complicated by the fact that he had no idea where he was heading or what he was doing with his life - or why. Then one day, much to the astonishment of absolutely everyone he knew, he resigned and bought himself a clown costume and one of those old fashioned music machines that operates when you turn the handle round.'

`He'd never done any clowning before?'

`Never.'

`Is he married? Does he have a family? What was their reaction?'

`He's married. Two children. One is a lawyer and the other a doctor. His wife stuck with him and they're closer now than they ever were. She brings him sandwiches and a flask for his lunch and in the winter pops out with hot soup and hot coffee every couple of hours. Four months ago he had really bad flu and couldn't get out of his bed. His wife put on the clown costume and took over his patch for him for six days.'

`And the kids? What do they think of their dad?'

`They've totally disowned him,' said Jean flatly. `One of them - an exceptionally mean spirited son called Alphonse, who is, you will probably not be surprised to hear, the lawyer, has an office nearby. Every morning and every evening he walks several hundred yards out of his way simply to avoid passing his father.'

`How sad. Paul sounds a fascinating character.'

`Thankfully, Paris is full of people like Paul,' said Jean, pausing to buy an evening newspaper from a wizened old man who appeared to be wearing at least three overcoats. He handed the vendor a twenty franc note and waved a hand when the man reached into his pocket to find the change.

`I buy a newspaper from that chap almost every day,' continued Jean. `Every time I buy a paper from him I give him a twenty franc note. He always offers to give me the change and I always tell him to keep it. The day he doesn't offer to give me the change is the day I stop letting him keep it - and the day I start buying my newspaper from someone else.'

`Is he in your book?' I asked, resisting the temptation to look back.

`Yes, of course,' replied Jean.

`He hasn't always been a newspaper seller?'

`He was a doctor for twenty five years. Then, about eleven years ago, he performed an illegal abortion for a friend of his daughter. The authorities found out and he lost his licence to practise. His wife and daughter left him and he went bankrupt six months later. He now lives in a hostel in Montmartre.'

Jean told me that the streets of Paris were well stocked with such individuals – most with sad stories to tell.

We approached a grey bearded man with a wooden sandwich board strapped around his neck. The grey bearded man was standing in the middle of the pavement.

`What does that say?' I asked Jean, nodding towards the sign on the sandwich board.

`He's warning us that the end of the world is coming very shortly and that we must pray to try to avert disaster,' said Jean. He stuffed a handful of coins into the man's hand.

`A capitalistic pessimist,' said Jean as we walked on. `A pragmatic Nostradamus. He's been standing there predicting the end of the world for as long as I've been living in Paris. He changes the date on his placard every few months and if you challenge him about the fact that the world hasn't ended he replies that it was only thanks to the power of prayer.'

`Who else is in your book?' I asked, a minute or so later.

`A toy seller who used to be a pop singer,' replied Jean instantly. `A thirty-year-old former professional golfer who sells Eiffel Tower keyrings in the Tuilieres gardens - and a street photographer from Chartres who has been working the same tourist patch outside one of the big hotels for forty nine years.'

I looked at him, slightly puzzled. `Did you say a golfer who sells keyrings? He really used to be a golfer?'

`Quite a good one. He worked hard at his game but he didn't have the natural talent. I spoke to a sports writer I know who told me that he used to work harder than anyone on the tour.'

`Not fair, is it?'

Jean grinned at me, as though charmed by my innocence. `When I lived in America in the 1950s I knew two guys who played golf professionally. One of the guys had an enormous natural talent. He could hit a golf ball any way he wanted. He could put a draw or a fade on a ball as easily as you and I could take the club out of the bag. Do you play?'

I admitted that I didn't.

`Doesn't matter,' said Jean, with a wave of the hand. `The other guy had very little natural talent but he was a worker. He used to practise until his hands bled. When they started bleeding he would send his caddy off to fetch plasters and bandages. Then, when his hands were plastered and bandaged he would start again.' `He would be up at dawn practising and he'd be out there on the practice range long after everyone else had gone home. At the end of a four day tournament he'd be on the practice range when all the other guys on the tour were already in the air flying back home. His caddies hated the work. He used to pay them twice as much as everyone else but they never lasted more than three or four months.'

`Because I knew these two guys quite well I used to travel to tournaments to watch them play. And do you know what always surprised me most?'

I shook my head.

`The guy who worked hard had virtually no fans,' said Jean. `But the guy with the talent was always surrounded by a massive entourage of fans and hangers on. People loved his talent and they wanted to be around him. He excited and thrilled people. And because of that the sponsors threw huge amounts of money at him. I always felt sorry for the guy who had to work for his success,' said Jean. `It always seemed to me strange that people would have more respect for the guy who succeeds simply because he has natural talent than for the guy who succeeds because he works hard.'

We walked for a while in silence.

`So this guy in Paris gave up golf and now sells keyrings.'

`And he tells me that he's happier now than he's been for years,' said Jean. `The stress of playing golf would probably have sent him to an early grave.'

`They all sound remarkable people,' I told him.

`I got the idea for a book when I overheard two social workers talking about Paul in a café across the road from his usual patch. They spoke about him very patronisingly and described him as one of society's dull failures. It seemed to me that Paul is more useful to society in one day than those social workers are in a lifetime. When you haven't got anything to do for an hour or so just sit in a café and watch him. He puts smiles on thousands of faces every day. How many people have jobs which do that? These people affect our lives in small but definable ways and I think it's the little things that really make the difference.'

`Do you really think so? That the little things do make a difference?'

`Absolutely,' said Jean. `We're all dependent upon one another and the world is far smaller than you might think it is. Let me tell you a true story. A woman I know is married to a very rich man. They live in a very elegant town house in the Place des Vosges - where Victor Hugo had an apartment. I don't know how the husband made his money and it doesn't matter. She has led a bizarre and unnatural life. Her parents were very rich too. She's so used to being waited on that I don't think she's ever opened a door in her life. She was having an affair with the Foreign Minister of - you don't need to know that - and one evening two months ago, he was in Paris and they had a date to meet at his hotel for dinner and a little indoor exercise. But she broke a fingernail. I can't imagine what she was doing to break a nail but she did. She telephoned her beauty salon and the girl who looked after her nails was away with her boyfriend in Cannes. Now my friend is not a woman to go out of the house with a broken fingernail so she cancelled the date and the Foreign Minister, in a very bad mood and feeling extremely randy, went to a rather seedy club in Montmartre where he duly got himself arrested when the police swooped on the place, raided it, found several pounds of cocaine and picked up everyone in it on drug related charges. As it happened the Minister knew nothing about the drugs but the arrest led to the newspapers taking a hard look at his life and finding out that he and two other Ministers of his country were mixed up in some sort of secret arms deal with a country with which decent people do not do business. There was an outcry, the Ministers were all forced to resign, the opposition called for an election and rioting in the capital led to the government being overthrown.'

I stared at him.

`So, there you are,' said Jean. `A woman breaks a fingernail and as a direct consequence a government falls.'

`Is that all true?' I asked him.

`Of course!' said Jean.

`Is Johnny photographing all the street people?' I asked, reverting to the original subject.

Jean turned and nodded. `Johnny is a grumbler,' he admitted. `He himself readily admits that he always manages to find something to moan about. Whingeing is his great joy in life. It's what he lives for. But who cares? He's a bloody good photographer and that's what he's here for. He gets better pictures with that battered old Leica of his than most of the youngsters can get with bags full of fancy Japanese equipment. I've known him for years.'

A few minutes later we arrived at the stretch of typically broad Parisian pavement where Paul, the former civil servant, worked and earned his living. Wearing the usual clown make up - white face and huge red lips - and dressed in a checked, baggy suit, oversized shoes with flapping soles and an absurd hat with a massive artificial sunflower attached to the crown Paul was imitating the walks of pedestrians passing by. Judging by the hat full of coins standing on the pavement in front of his old-fashioned, wind-up music machine business had been going quite well.

Jean waited until Paul had finished mimicking the overweight waddle of a humourless American, dressed in ghastly tight lime green pants and a white, red and blue checked jacket, and then introduced first Johnny, and then me.

`The Americans are easy prey,' said Paul, rather apologetically, speaking to me. `You do not mind my joking on the American?'

I shook my head.

`I can tell you are not American,' he said. `You are not fat enough to be American. But sometimes the English they like the Americans.'

I reassured him that I was not offended. I was used to hearing French people be rude about Americans.

`I enjoy taking the mickey from out of the Americans,' confessed the clown. He spoke good English with a Maurice Chevalier accent. Through the make-up I could see that he had remarkably twinkly eyes and it was difficult to imagine him dressed in a grey suit and white shirt and sitting behind a desk in some grey office full of dull and worthy French bureaucrats. `The Americans are pompous people who think they own the world because they gave us Coca Cola and McDonalds. They wander around Europe so unaware of everything around them that they do not realise that they are despised, sneered at and disliked. They talk loudly and often but say so very little worth listening to.' He removed the hat on his head and winked at two elderly women who had tossed a handful of coins into his other hat on the pavement. A small boy in short trousers, balancing, with the natural ease of a child, on a pair of roller skates, added a single coin to Paul's wages for the day. The boy stared in awe at Paul for a moment, grinned with delight when Paul tousled his hair with a white gloved hand, and then rolled gracefully back to where his parents, who had given him the coin, were standing waiting for him.

`Are you having a good day?' asked Jean.

`Not bad,' said Paul. He banged his hands together and stamped his feet on the pavement. `It's cold enough for people to feel sorry for me but not so cold that they won't take their gloves off to find some coins for my hat.' He laughed. It was a wonderful, throaty chuckle.

As he talked Johnny was already working, circling his prey like a tiger; silently and deliberately taking single photographs.

`Do you want a drink?' Jean asked me. `I could do with a nice hot wine.'

I said I wouldn't mind a glass of something warm.

`Do you want a drink, Paul?' Jean asked.

Paul smiled and the flower in his button hole lit up.

`Vin chaud?' suggested Jean.

`That'll do very nicely,' said Paul, with a grin. The grin, like the chuckle, was infectious. I was surprised to find just how good I felt in his company.

We headed for the nearest café - about ten yards away. I was rapidly learning that one of the wonders of Paris is that one is rarely more than half a minute's walk away from a café and a glass of something cheering.

`Psst,' said Paul, loudly. He mouthed the word `Americans' and nodded towards to the next table. I turned my head. Two young Americans had entered the café just ahead of us. He was in his mid-twenties, tall and already going to fat. She was two or three years younger, almost as tall as him and not yet as plump as she would become. They both wore denim jackets with American flags stitched onto the breast pockets.

`I want two cokes and two turkey rolls,' shouted the American to the solitary waiter, who was standing at the back of the café.

`Do you hear me?' called the young American impatiently.

The waiter walked over to the Americans' table, pulled out his order pad and pencil and at the ready.

`Two cokes and two turkey rolls,' said the American. He shouted the instructions as though he thought the waiter to be deaf, stupid or both.

The waiter looked puzzled.

`Tur-key,' said the American. `Like chicken.'

The waiter glowered at him, put his pad and pencil away and disappeared. The American sneered and said something I did not catch to his companion. She snorted unpleasantly. I had never been to America and I had not met many Americans but it occurred to me that although there must be millions of good and generous Americans too many of the relatively few who travel seem to be the boorish and hubristic – and to give their country a bad reputation.

Jean ordered three glasses of vin chaud from the barman, a miserable looking Algerian in a dirty white overall, who poked his head through a hatch behind him and passed the order on to some invisible kitchen worker. `What about Johnny?' I asked Jean.

`Johnny doesn't drink when he's working,' said Jean. `Not anymore. He and I once worked together for a week in Cornwall, England,' said Jean. `I can't remember the story we were on but while we were there we decided to go for a walk along the cliffs. We took a few half bottles of whisky to keep out the cold. By the time we got to where we were heading - a small fishing village where there was a pub which had won prizes for its fish stew - I was fairly merry and Johnny was pretty well plastered.'

`There was a pretty young barmaid in the pub and Johnny, being a bit of ladies’ man in those days, started chatting her up. He told her he was a professional photographer, showed her his camera and offered to take some portrait shots of her.'

`She, being a simple country girl, was thrilled at the idea of having her picture taken by a hot shot professional Street photographer - especially when Johnny told her that in the month before he'd photographed Elizabeth Taylor, Princess Margaret and half of the Beatles. She was over the moon.'

`Meanwhile, we carried on drinking. We were on expenses and with the paper's money we bought a couple of bottles of pretty decent claret that the landlord had tucked away and then moved onto a bottle of very good brandy he sold us for a song.'

`When the pub closed for the afternoon the barmaid went home, changed, and came back in her best frock. Johnny then proceeded to shoot a couple of rolls of film. She kept her best frock on for the first roll but he talked her out of it for the second.'

`We tottered back to our hotel in the dark that evening and we were both smashed. Johnny had, however, given the barmaid our hotel telephone number and the next day, inevitably perhaps, she was on the phone wanting to know when she could see her photographs.'

`Johnny took the rolls of film into the local newspaper office and asked the picture editor to do him a rush job which - being impressed to meet such a well-known photographer - he duly organised.'

`Sadly, when we got the prints back we discovered that Johnny, being plastered, had managed to cut off the barmaid's head in every single picture. He didn't have one decent photograph of her - not one. Johnny was mortified.

He was so embarrassed that he got a taxi and went back and did another shoot stone cold sober. I didn't go with him - I had to interview someone - and when he returned he told me that the girl - whom we had both thought was the most beautiful creature we'd ever seen, was in reality one of the ugliest broads he had ever seen let alone photographed. He said it took him three hours to take one picture that made her look half way presentable. Since then he's never touched alcohol when he's been working.'

At this point the miserable looking barman finally appeared with three glasses of vin chaud. He seemed to have been trained in surliness and presented them to us as though he was doing us a favour. This time I managed to persuade Jean to let me pay.

As we sat there, quietly sipping, Johnny continued to take photographs of Paul.

`This isn't turkey!' complained the American, who had just taken a bite out of his roll. `It's chicken.'

The waiter sauntered over to his table.

`This is chicken,' said the American, lifting up the top of the roll and showing the offending meat to the waiter.

`Yes, it is chicken,' said the waiter.

`I don't want chicken,' said the American. `I want turkey.'

`I do not know this `turkey',' said the waiter. `You said `chicken'. I bring you chicken.'

`I'm not paying for this,' snarled the American. He and his companion stood up.

`You pay or I call the police,' said the waiter, circling the table so that he stood between the American and the doorway.

`Do you know who my father is?' asked the young American.

`No,' replied the waiter, without hesitation. `Do you?'

The young American seemed slightly shaken by this. As an observer I was impressed. I can think of sharp and witty put downs but I always think of them a day or two too late.

`Actually I think perhaps I knew your mother well,' said the waiter. `Maybe I am your father!' He thought for a moment. `Or perhaps I know the dog who is your father.' He stared closely at the American. `Yes. You have the look of the Dobermann about you. I remember your mother always liked big dogs.'

The American backed away a little. `My father is a very important real estate operator,' he said. He now sounded more nervous and less confident. `He plays golf with a senator.'

The waiter picked the bill up off the table and held it right under the American's nose. `I do not care who is your father,' he hissed. Without looking down he picked a knife up off the table. `Pay the bill or I cut off your nose.' He sounded very serious.

The pale American looked at the bill, pulled out his wallet and took out two notes. He handed the notes to the waiter who reached into the leather pouch at his waist and threw some coins onto the table. The American looked at them, thought about picking them up, changed his mind and walked out, closely followed by his companion.

`He would not have done it,' said Paul.

We looked at him.

`He was bluffing,' said Paul. `He would not have cut off the young American's nose. I eat here often. The knives are not sharp enough to cut off a nose.' He grinned and laughed out loud.

It was approaching midnight when Johnny finally announced that he had taken enough photographs. We said goodbye to Paul, whose wife had arrived to help him push his old fashioned music player (it was on wheels) back home, and started to walk back towards where Johnny had parked his car.

It suddenly occurred to me that although I seemed still to be able to walk I was quite drunk. Jean, who had drunk twice as much, was decidedly wobbly and was grinning at everyone.

Johnny opened his car, climbed in, started the engine and drove off with a perfunctory wave. He was not a particularly sociable sort of fellow. We had not, I realised, exchanged one word all evening.

`He carries a lot of burdens on his shoulder,' said Jean in explanation.

Just then the revellers who had been celebrating a birthday, an engagement or some other important event, poured out onto the pavement from a café. They were waving balloons and streamers and bottles of wine and had clearly been having a very good time. They invited us to join them. I smiled and shook my head. `Goodnight,' I said to Jean, thinking that this was probably a good moment to go back to my hotel and get some sleep.

`Aren't you going to join the party?' asked Jean, who had already acquired a balloon, a paper hat and an opened bottle of wine. `There will be plenty of women!'

I told him I thought I would go back to my hotel.

`You are meeting someone?'

`No.'

`Are you in love?'

I felt myself blushing. `There is someone I like very much,' I admitted.

`A woman?'

`Yes, of course.'

`There is no `of course' about it.' He paused and looked at me carefully. `She is married?'

Startled I looked at him. For a while I did not speak. `Yes,' I admitted. `How did you know?'

`If she was not married you would be in love. But because she is married you are denying it to yourself.' He smiled. `It is impossible for you to be in Paris for all this time and not to be in love. Am I not right about all this?'

`I suppose so,' I admitted.

`Make sure she knows how you feel about her?'

`I did not say anything.'

`When I was your age I was very much in love,' said Jean. `I was a student and for a while so was she. She had tuberculosis and had to leave the college. Her parents were very rich - they had a huge house on the Avenue Victor Hugo - and they sent her away to a sanatorium in Switzerland. It seemed they did not approve of me and were happy to send her as far away as they could. We wrote to each other and declared our love but I did not dare visit her and she did not dare encourage me to do so. We were both frightened of her father. I told her that I would make my fortune and come back for her. I dreamt of driving up to her parent's house in my Mercedes and receiving her father's blessing. I told her I would write no more until I could come back and claim her as my wife. She promised to wait for me.'

He did not speak again for a minute or two.

`What happened?' I asked him, gently.

`It took me two years to buy the Mercedes. I wrote a screenplay and sold it for a lot of money,' said Jean. `I drove up to the house on the Avenue Victor Hugo in my Mercedes, rang the doorbell and demanded to see Sophie. I was totally confident. I thought that even if she had forgotten me and married someone else I would be able to persuade her to come with me.'

`Was she there?'

Jean lowered his eyes and his voice. `No.' he said. `She was not there. Her mother told me that she was with her grandmother. I said I would go to see her at her grandmother's. The mother then explained that she was with her grandmother at Père Lachaise. She was dead.'

I did not know what to say. I said nothing.

`She had died five months after my last letter to her,' said Jean. `Her mother wanted to know why I had stopped writing, why I had made no effort to see Sophie. It seemed that she had not been as much against me as the father.'

`I'm sorry,' I said.

`It was the biggest mistake of my life,' said Jean. `I should have run away with her. I should have married her. If I had known how ill she was I would have married her immediately.'

I wriggled through the crowd of revellers still on the pavement and walked back into the café. I made my way to the telephone booth at the back of the bar. When I got back Jean looked at me.

`I rang her,' I told him. `I arranged to see her tonight.'

Chapter Thirty Four

`I am twenty years older than you are,' said Claudette quietly. `Probably more.'

`What has that got to do with anything?' I asked her. `I am not in love with you because of your age. I am in love with you because...,' I hesitated. `I love you.'

`No, no, please don't say that,' said Claudette, backing away as though to put as much distance as possible between us. `I'm too old for you.'

`What on earth does age matter?' I demanded, feeling desperately frustrated.

`Age makes too much difference,' said Claudette. `To everything. You don't understand. You can't. Being old takes up so much time. The less time you have left the more time you have to spend just to stay alive. Every morning I have to do the exercises for my back and for my neck, and there are the stretching exercises too. I have to decorate my nails, and I have to take my vitamins and my garlic and my other tablets. I take twelve tablets and capsules every morning. Do you know how long it takes to swallow twelve tablets and capsules?'

I shook my head.

`Twenty minutes! I spend twenty minutes a day swallowing tablets to help me live longer. Sometimes I think that I am spending more time than I am saving.' She thought for a moment, and shrugged before continuing. `I have to moisturise my skin - which takes another twenty minutes - and floss my teeth and medicate my gums with a toothpaste which my dentist recommends. There are calories to be counted, even at breakfast, and I have to do my eye exercises. The older I get the longer it takes to put on my make-up. I go to aerobics classes three times a week for my heart and visit the hairdresser and the trichologist twice a week.' She sighed, rather sadly. `Perhaps it is all a waste of time. You can wind up your watch but the hours will still pass at the same rate.'

I didn't know whether this was one of her grandfather's sayings or not. I didn't ask.

`I will probably be dead in twenty years,' continued Claudette. `Just as you are beginning your life. For you to be in love with me would be crazy.'

`That's madness,' I told her. `Women live longer than men. You will live until you are 100 at least. When you are 100 I will be 70 or 80 – an old man. And then the difference in our ages will be irrelevant.'

`No,' said Claudette quietly, shaking her head. `No.'

`If we were both the same age and you were ill with some terrible disease you would not say that we could not marry because you might be dead in twenty, ten or five years,' I pointed out. `All that matters is that I want to be with you.'

`But, sadly, it is not all that matters,' whispered Claudette. She spoke so softly that I hardly heard her. `I have a husband,' she reminded me.

I looked at her, hardly daring to speak, hardly daring to ask the question I had to ask.

Eventually, I found the courage. `Do you love him?' I asked her.

Claudette spoke but I did not hear what she said. `Do you love him?' I asked her again.

This time she looked straight at me and spoke with exaggerated clarity. `Yes.' she said.

I looked at her. There were tears in her eyes. `I love him,' she said. `I cannot leave him. He needs me.'

`I need you,' I said. Now there were tears in my eyes too.

`You are young and strong,' she said. `You do not need me as much as he does.'

`He is strong,' I protested. `Look at the way he treats you. He is terrible. He flaunts his mistress before you and everyone else.'

`He is an actor,' said Claudette, as though that explained everything. `He is a child. He does not mean to hurt me. If I did not love him I would not care.'

`I love you,' I told her. I could hardly see for tears.

`I love you too,' she said. `I love you so very, very much. But if I go with you we will have no future. We are from different worlds. Different times.' She looked up at me, reached out and held my hand. `Our love will be suffocated by my guilt and shame.'

For a while neither of us spoke.

`Can we be friends?' I asked her. I hardly recognised my own voice.

She shook her head. `Please go,' she whispered. `I do not have the strength to leave. Please go.' She gripped my hand tighter and then let go, gently pushing my hand away from her. She closed her eyes. Her cheeks were soaked and her mascara had run down almost to her chin.

I reached down deep into my soul and took hold of every piece of courage I could find there. I stood up, bent down and kissed her forehead. `I don't believe you,' I said. `I don't believe you love him.'

She looked up at me. For what seemed an eternity she did not speak. We just looked at each other. `Do you remember the theatre we went to that first evening?'

`Of course.'

`There is a big, fashionable café next to the theatre. I can't remember the name. The Café du Theatre, I think. There is a party there tomorrow. After the performance. About eleven. Come and look. Do not speak to me. Do not approach me. Just look.' She looked into my eyes. `You will come?'

`Yes. Of course.'

`You promise not to approach me? Not to speak to me?'

`Yes.'

`Say it. Say you promise.'

`I promise.'

`You will see me with him. You turn round, you go away. And we never see each other again.'

`I promise.'

I walked away.

I felt as though my life had ended.

Chapter Thirty Five

It was raining heavily that evening but nevertheless I walked to the theatre where Claudette's husband was starring. I wanted to be alone. I couldn't bear the thought of standing next to other people on a bus or on the Metro. Walking the deserted, wet pavements was exactly what I wanted.

The walk took me two hours and I had no umbrella; just my scarf and my beret. My jacket provided little protection. I was soaked by the time I got there.

The theatre performance had just finished. Word had spread that the actors would be attending a party in the café next door and the pavement outside the theatre was crowded with fans. A canvas awning had been erected so that the party guests from the theatre would not get wet. The gawping theatre-goers had spilt out into the road, where they stood, dripping wet and as patient as only true fans can be. The rain must have started after the theatre performance for many of the theatre-goers were dressed only in dresses or suits and had neither coats nor umbrellas. A few held newspapers or magazines above their heads in a feeble attempt to protect themselves.

Whoever had arranged the party had paid the café owner to close his establishment to other customers and there were two huge bouncers standing on the pavement each side of the doorway, preventing gate crashers and fans from getting inside. I pushed and jostled my way into position so that I would have a good view of the actors and the other guests as they walked from the theatre to the café.

I almost missed her.

She looked utterly amazing. She was wearing a simple, black, high neck, dress with long diaphanous sleeves. The dress reached down to the ground and dragged behind her slightly on the red carpet the organisers had lain down on the pavement. Her hair was piled high on top of her head and a single stream of tight curls cascaded down across each temple. She wore a stunning diamond necklace with matching earrings. She looked exactly what she was: the wife of one of France's most successful actors.

When I saw her I stepped back, trying to melt into the crowd so that she would not see me. She had her arm threaded through her husband's and they were walking side by side. They looked, I thought, like newlyweds; totally devoted to each other and very much in love. As they passed me I looked down to avert my eyes. But I don't think I need have bothered. Claudette did not even seem to see me. She was laughing at something her husband had said. Someone in the crowd shouted something, I don't know what it was, but he waved and shouted something back. Claudette lay her head against his shoulder proudly and affectionately. I did not, and do not, know how much of this was genuine and how much was for my benefit. Claudette would certainly have known that although she could not see me I would be there. I comforted myself with the thought that the whole thing was an act; performed solely to convince me that I should allow my love for her to fade and die.

I had seen more than enough. I turned away, fought my way through the crowd and walked back to my hotel, through the pouring rain; totally soaked and utterly broken hearted. There was lightning and thunder as I walked and my tears added to the floods in the deserted streets. I didn't care a fig about the rain. Once you are wet through you can get no wetter. I cared only about what I had seen and about what I had lost.

The next morning I went to the Gare du Nord and bought a train ticket back to London. I went back to the hotel and wrote goodbye notes to everyone I knew. I didn't want to see anyone. In the notes I explained that I had been called back to England in a hurry. Then I packed, gave the key to my room in to the receptionist for the last time, walked to the railway station and caught the evening boat train.

Chapter Thirty Six

At Calais I left the train from Paris and embarked upon the ferry which would take me back to England. I felt both miserable and excited. It seemed like a lifetime since I had first arrived in Paris. In fact it had been considerably less than a year.

When I had arrived, shy, diffident, gauche and nervous, I had felt as though I was watching rather than taking part in my own life. Now, leaving France I felt as though I had graduated and had become a player rather than a spectator. Oh, I was still very ignorant of the world. But I knew that there were many things I did not yet know. And I knew that I would not learn the most important lessons of my life at medical school.

A couple of weeks later I arrived back at medical school for the autumn term of my first official year as a student. I still missed Claudette terribly. It would be some time before I did not dream of her, both during the day and at night.

But I would, I knew, be eternally grateful for my illness, and the opportunities it had given me.

One of the first people I met at medical school was William Bright-Perkins, the student with whom I had shared a room when I had made my first attempt to start to train to be a doctor.

`How are you?' William asked.

I told him I was fine.

`Pity you had to waste a year,' he said. `Still, I guess you're in for a pretty easy time of it this year.'

I looked at him, puzzled.

`Why do you say that?'

`I expect you've been swotting away for the last year,' he said. `That's certainly what I would have done.'

`I'm afraid I haven't,' I confessed.

`Then you'll probably wish you had,' he said, ominously. He was clearly surprised by my admission. `You're in for a tough time. You'll regret wasting the year.'

He then spent twenty minutes telling me of some of the horrors which lay ahead of me. He told me about the anatomy classes he'd attended, the physiology books he'd read and the exams he'd passed.

`So,' he said when he had finished. `That's what you've got ahead of you. Now are you sorry you'd didn't spend the year swotting?'

`No,' I told him honestly.

A year ago I would have undoubtedly been alarmed by what he had said. But now I wasn't in the slightest bit concerned.

`You haven't learned anything for the course?'

`I haven't learned anything for the course,' I agreed. `But I know a great deal more now than I did when I left.'

William looked at me, clearly rather puzzled.

`So, what have you learned?' he asked. `Oh,' he said, suddenly remembering where I'd been. `I suppose you speak perfect French now. I guess that might be useful at some point in your life.'

`No. I'm afraid not. I still speak the school boy stuff. But I have learned quite a lot about me.'

He frowned. `Bit of a waste of a year then wasn't it? That illness may not have killed you but it effectively cost you a year of your life. The way I look at it is this: if you lose a year from your studying life now, in the end you'll lose a year from your earning life. That little illness of yours will have cost you thousands in the end.'

That wasn't the way I looked at it at all. I felt sorry for William whose view of the world seemed so constrained; I suspected he would never understand the importance of what I'd learned.

I was absolutely certain that I'd learned far, far more during my months in Paris than I would have learned at university.

`No one sees the stars when the sun is at its brightest,' I said.

He frowned. `What on earth does that mean?'

`It's just a saying my grandfather was fond of,' I told him. I looked at my watch. `Sorry,' I said. `I must fly. I've got my first lecture in three minutes.'

I left him standing there, looking very confused.

I don't know how long he stood there. I didn't look back.

Epilogue

When I decided to write this book I went to Paris and spent two months attempting to trace all the people I had met in 1963 and 1964. I was surprisingly successful. Here is an update on the people described in this book (in the order of their appearance).

William Bright-Perkins

After qualifying as a doctor William specialised in radiology. He was one of the first students of his year to be appointed a hospital consultant. He married a nurse he had met while training and after two years in the Middle East settled down at a hospital in the North of England. Tragically, he died in 1986 of cancer, leaving a widow and three small children. Two years later his widow married a local GP.

Sylvie Roland

Two years after I met her, Sylvie Roland married an American businessman and emigrated to Colorado. She and her husband now run a very successful mail order business selling health products. Sylvie has not been back to France for over twenty years. They have four children, none of whom speak a word of French.

Sylvestre Baptise

Amazingly, Monsieur Baptiste had remained manager of the pharmacy in Paris until 2002. The store had changed hands four times since I'd worked there but Monsieur Baptiste had remained there throughout these changes of ownership. When I worked there I thought of him as middle aged. He cannot, however, have been much more than in his late twenties at the time. After his retirement he remained in Paris, where he still lives.

Archie Trench

Archie Trench was arrested in 1972 for fraud. He served eight years in an American prison. After his release he travelled to Europe and started an agency providing American companies with European office facilities. He died in a car accident in 1989.

Marvin and Sheila Brown

Marvin died in 1981 after a long illness. Sheila still lives in the same apartment in Paris and now shares it with a young woman called Kitty Kamber whom she met in 1988. They insisted on having their cook make me afternoon tea (cucumber sandwiches on brown bread) and Sheila wept when I left. She told me that Kitty is an artist and playwright whose talents have not yet been widely recognised. Marvin left a considerable fortune in trust to Sheila. She does not know where the money goes when she dies and so she saves every month so that she will have something to leave to Kitty, to whom she is clearly devoted.

John Tennyson

Less than a year after I left Paris Mr Tennyson's wife caught him with a girl (not Natalie). He had been spotted by a friend of hers taking the girl into the George V hotel just off the Champs Elysée. The divorce crippled him financially and he had to sell the chain of pharmacies. But within five years he had bounced back and built up a chain of shops selling sex toys and erotic lingerie. His current wife (his fifth) is a stripper, who was rumoured to be just sixteen-years-old when they married. The Tennysons live in a five bedroom apartment in the Marais in central Paris.

James Whitechapel

The former language school proprietor retired in 1978 to a cottage in the Loire. His language school was never successful and lurched from one crisis to another. Mr Whitechapel's finances were saved when he inherited a sizeable sum from an aunt and it was this sum which enabled him to buy his cottage and retire. He died in the autumn of 1999.

Jules de Prony

Jules is very happily married. He and his wife have a beautiful chateau which stands in 25 hectares of parkland just south of Paris. They have three children. The oldest (a boy) is a doctor, the middle child (a girl) got married and divorced, has no children, and is now training to be an architect. The youngest, who was apparently regarded as a musical prodigy, now works in a Paris bank as a foreign securities trader. Jules runs the family business very successfully. We had a very pleasant lunch in a restaurant near to his office. He insisted that he has been totally faithful to his wife and has never had a mistress. Much to everyone's surprise (and delight) Jules' father, whom I never met, survived for another fifteen years after his retirement.

Claudette Foucault

Claudette and Gerard were divorced in 1974 after 23 years of marriage. Claudette, now well into her nineties, is married to an editor who works for a leading French magazine group. Together they wrote several books on French architecture. Gerard, her actor husband, died of liver failure in 1983 and was buried in Père Lachaise. Claudette told me proudly that half the women in Paris turned out to mourn him. She looks, and acts, fifteen years younger than she is.

`You forgot all about me within three months, didn't you?' she said, when we met again (at the still existing Café Napoleon).

`I never forgot about you, that's why I'm here,' I reminded her.

`But the love had evaporated within three months?' she persisted.

`Around that,' I smiled. Young love is very fickle.

`Puppy love for you,' she said. `But not for me. Giving you up was the hardest and noblest thing I ever did. Getting over you took me twenty years.'

Anne-Marie

I never knew her surname and without it found it quite impossible to trace her.

Theresa Wurtz

When I visited her previous apartment building I discovered that Theresa is now married to a dentist with a practice in Marseilles. I telephoned her and discovered that they met when he was visiting Paris for a convention of orthodontists in 1972. Theresa still designs bras and shoes but has not yet had any of her designs accepted by a manufacturer. She told me that her husband has agreed to finance a small shop in Marseilles and she intends to have some of her designs hand made so that they can be sold in the shop.

Jean Laconte

Jean married a divorcee, a paediatrician with a practice in Paris in 1968. He died in 1991 after a short illness. His widow told me that his book about Paris street people was never published. A string of publishers turned it down. Jean continued to write for television until his death. His widow did not know anything about Johnny (the photographer with whom he was working with when I met him).

Isabella Petiet

I could not trace Isabella. When I finally found the site of her apartment building I discovered there was an office building in its place. No one in the neighbourhood could tell me anything about her current whereabouts.

And the author?

I qualified as a doctor and am still registered as a GP, but I have been a full-time, professional author for over 30 years. You can find out more about my other books by visiting www.vernoncoleman.com or my author page on Amazon.

Power over Cancer

Vernon Coleman

Power over Cancer
Discover how to slash your cancer risk by up to 80 per cent

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NOTE
This book is not intended as an alternative to personal, professional medical advice. The reader should consult a physician in all matters relating to health, and particularly in respect of any symptoms which may require diagnosis or medical attention.

Dedication

To Donna Antoinette, with my eternal and unconditional love. Thank you for everything. The gallery awaits.

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Chapter One

I started to research this subject for my own benefit. Since qualifying as a doctor many decades ago, I have read much conflicting information about cancer and I wanted to find out the truth for myself. I knew that I should follow a diet that contained natural fibre and that was low in fat but I wanted to know more. I wanted to make sure that I ate a diet that would give me the best possible chance of avoiding cancer. I wanted to find out what researchers had discovered.

The more I studied, and the more I searched for information, the more convinced I became that the truth about the links between food and cancer had been deliberately suppressed by industries determined to continue to sell their existing products (whatever the human cost might be), by politicians committed to supporting those industries and by a medical profession which has become a pawn of the pharmaceutical industry.

You may be as surprised as I was to find we have known there is a link between food and cancer for a long time. Way back in January 1892, *Scientific American* magazine reported: ‘cancer is most frequent among those branches of the human race where carnivorous habits prevail’. Even before that, in 1804, J Abernethy, in *Surgical Observations on Tumours* reported on the effectiveness of a vegetarian diet as a treatment for cancer. Indeed, according to a report published in 1988 by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, called *The Surgeon General’s Report on Nutrition and Health*, diet has been suspected as a cause of cancer since the disease was recognised in the first century A.D. Empirical evidence was first reported in 1913, and studies were published over half a century ago demonstrating the links between food and cancer. In 1933, researchers suggested that wholemeal bread and cruciferous vegetables helped to protect against cancer and in 1940, insurance company records suggested that overweight individuals were more likely to develop cancer than normal or underweight people. Surprisingly, however, no one seemed too concerned to apply the knowledge that had been obtained from a study of human beings to human beings, and little effort was made to conduct further epidemiological studies.

In *Nutrition and Health*, the report published in 1988 by the United States Surgeon General, a table was published suggesting that diet could be responsible for up to 70 per cent of all cancers – with a (conservative) ‘best estimate’ suggesting that diet was responsible for 35 per cent of all cancers.

The Surgeon General suggested five possible mechanisms to explain the ‘observed association between diet, digestive processes and cancer’. These were:

1. The presence of carcinogens in food. These could be present naturally, could be contaminants or could be formed as a result of cooking or preserving the food.
2. Carcinogens within the body might be activated or deactivated by something in the diet. For example, the beta carotene present in some foods may slow down or block potentially cancer inducing processes.
3. Carcinogens may be formed within the body. For example, naturally produced bile acids, excreted to help deal with consumed fats, may be converted into tumour producing chemicals by bacteria which live in the colon. The bacteria may be affected by diet.
4. The cancer process may be enhanced by some foods (for example fats) or may be inhibited by some foods (for example, vitamin A).
5. An imbalance of nutrients may impair the immunity of the body and may, therefore, affect the ability of the body to defend itself – either by repairing damaged DNA or by rejecting malignant cells.

I had not intended to write this book when I started my researches. But my researches meant that I had no choice but to publish a book containing my findings.

Although the bulk of this book deals with food (partly because food is the main cause of cancer and partly because there is more confusion and misinformation about the links between food and cancer than there is, say, about the links between tobacco and cancer) I have also included information about most of the other well-known or suspected links. I do not, however, suggest that the list of possible causes of cancer in this book is comprehensive. I have dealt with the causes which attract most attention and which I regard both as being of most significance and easiest to do something about.

Cancer inducing chemicals are all around us – in air polluted with tobacco smoke and chemicals, in food, and in the chemical products with which our homes are crammed. Motor vehicle exhaust smoke seems to be full of carcinogens.

Our bodies are constantly producing potentially cancerous cells. We can help to protect ourselves against cancer by avoiding the obvious carcinogens (such as tobacco, fat and meat) but we can also build up our defence systems, and protect ourselves against cancer, by eating the right foods.

Chapter Two

Cancer is not a single disease. It is a word which describes a great many quite different diseases. The one thing these diseases all have in common is that there is an uncontrolled and disorderly growth of abnormal cells.

It is quite normal for cells to grow and to reproduce. Every minute, in every human body, an astonishing ten million cells divide. Usually everything goes well. The cells divide in the right way and at the right time. But when a cell becomes a 'cancer cell' it grows and divides at an abnormally rapid rate. These abnormal 'cancer cells' destroy or push aside the normal, functioning cells. If the 'cancer cells' are not stopped, they may spread to other parts of the body and take up residence in other, different organs. 'Cancer cells' may be carried around the body through the blood vessels or the lymph channels. When a cancer spreads and appears in another part of the body, the new growths are known as metastases. Cancer can also spread by 'crab-like' outgrowths (hence the name 'cancer').

It is now widely accepted that many of the cancers which most commonly occur, develop because outside substances trigger some sort of reaction – and cancer development – in the body. This book is much concerned with those 'triggers'.

Cancer is not the unknown, dark shrouded mystery killer which it is often thought to be. We do not know enough to recommend a diet which will enable all individuals to avoid all food related cancers. But we know enough to make a difference. If we make the decision to avoid those foods and other substances which research has shown can lead to the development of cancer, and to eat those foods which can strengthen our defences against cancer, then I believe that we can dramatically influence our susceptibility to the disease.

It is fairly wide known, I think, that cigarettes, sunshine, asbestos and X-rays cause cancer. But it is less widely known that fatty foods and meat cause cancer. And it is less well known that fibre and green vegetables help protect against cancer.

People get cancer through bad luck and inherited susceptibilities. But they also get it through ignorance – ignorance which has been deliberately sustained through commercial greed and political expediency. When businessmen, politicians and doctors know how to prevent 80 per cent of cancers but do nothing, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that those cancer deaths are deliberate. Eight out of ten people who die from cancer have effectively been murdered in cold blood. Cancer is now often a disease of choice – but the choice is made for us by those whose sense of responsibility does not match their authority. For too many people, the choice is made by politicians, businessmen and doctors who do not understand that with knowledge comes responsibility.

In the *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society* in 1990, Sir Richard Doll said: 'There is now uniform agreement among oncologists that the incidence of cancer is determined, in large part, by factors in the environment and aspects of behaviour that are capable of modification or avoidance.'

For decades, much of the international 'cancer industry' has been devoted to finding magical 'cures' for cancer – with little useful effect. But since many of the causes of cancer are known, my aim in this book is quite simply to explain those causes and to tell you how you can best cut your own risk of developing cancer substantially.

Changing large organisations can take decades and generations. I have absolutely no doubt that in a few decades' time, eating meat and drinking milk will, like smoking tobacco, be regarded as bizarre and reckless practices. Our descendants will not understand why we exposed ourselves to such unnecessary risks. But it will take time for those changes to take place. There are laboratories to dismantle and companies to close down; butchers' shops to shut and farmers to direct away from animal farming and towards the growing of healthy crops. With so many vested interests to oppose all this will take a long time.

But you do not have to wait for the authorities to tell you what to eat and what to avoid eating. You do not have to wait for the food companies to start selling foods that will limit your chances of developing cancer. You don't have to wait for the cancer industry to turn its attention away from pointless and misleading animal experiments and start telling you what to eat to reduce your cancer risk. You can take action now. This book will tell you how you can help yourself reduce your cancer risk by up to 80 per cent. Since we know what causes around 80 per cent of cancers, it is clear that we also know how to avoid 80 per cent of cancers.

I obviously cannot and do not guarantee that you won't get cancer if you follow the advice in this book. But I do firmly believe that your chances of developing cancer will be significantly lower than it will be if you take no action to protect yourself. And I also believe that if you do develop cancer then the advice in this book will improve your chances of fighting your cancer and winning.

Chapter Three

Cancer is, along with heart disease and stroke, one of the three big killers of our time. But cancer is the killer that frightens people most. The very word is so emotive that most doctors try not to use it when talking to patients. Instead of talking of cancer they talk of 'tumours' and 'growths'. They know that cancer is something most people don't even like to talk about.

Until it touches them or someone in their family, most people try not to think about cancer. When they see a collecting tin for a cancer charity they may pop in a few coins in the belief that by making a donation to a cancer charity they are helping to conquer the disease. Putting money into a cancer charity collecting tin is like throwing coins into a wishing well; it is the 21st century equivalent of a good luck charm.

In order to ensure that money continues to pour in, the cancer industry (of which cancer charities are now a part) must persuade potential contributors and supporters that it is making progress in the fight against cancer.

Like all large organisations the cancer industry needs a vast quantity of money just to remain in business; there are salaries and pensions to be paid, rents and rates to be paid, electricity bills to be paid, advertising and public relations departments to pay for and so on.

To help in this aim, the huge worldwide cancer industry must frequently release news about exciting new cancer remedies. Some of these widely promoted new treatments are in the early stages of being tested on human patients, some are not yet being tested on humans but are promoted as the new 'wonder' cure for cancer on the basis of animal experiments, and some are talked about as new 'breakthroughs' largely or even exclusively on the basis of a scientist's theory or hypothesis. These news stories may raise hopes falsely and they certainly distract attention and finance from those areas which really need it (the prevention of cancer and the care of those who have cancer) but they serve the purpose: they raise money for the cash hungry cancer industry.

When someone rattles a collecting tin in front of you and tells you that they need just a few more pence in order to continue with their breakthrough research, it is difficult to say 'no'. It is hardly surprising that the worldwide cancer industry's income continues to grow at a quite phenomenal rate. But has the cancer industry really made any noticeable progress in the fight against cancer? I don't think so. The mortality figures show that more people are dying from commoner forms of cancer now than they were a generation ago. One in three people already has, or will develop, cancer.

In the 19th century, cancer was a relatively uncommon disease. According to Garrison's *History of Medicine* cancer showed an 'alarming increase' in the early part of the 20th century. Today, as I have already mentioned, cancer is firmly positioned (along with heart disease and stroke) as one of the three big 'killers' of the westernised world. The fact that the incidence of cancer has increased dramatically during the 20th century confirms, in my opinion, the view that cancer is, to a large extent, a man-made disease, created largely by our changing diet and our addiction to tobacco.

Billions of dollars are spent each year on cancer research but treatment, using the traditional methods of choice (surgery, chemotherapy and radiation therapy), has done nothing to improve overall mortality rates.

Scientists who have assessed the value of the war against cancer, agree that we are losing the fight and that there is no evidence to suggest that decades of expensive research have had much, if any, effect on the most fundamental measure of success or failure – death. In areas where cancer has become more amenable to treatment, or now takes fewer lives, it is usually changes in lifestyle which are responsible – not discoveries made in the laboratory.

* * *

In my view, the effort, the money, and all the misguided hope and faith that have been poured into cancer research by the international cancer industry simply haven't worked.

And there are, I believe, several reasons why those fighting the war against cancer are losing. In my book *Paper Doctors* (published back in 1977) I complained that: 'Medical researchers involved in publicly or charitably financed cancer research, persist in looking for the 'magical cure'. Much laboratory work has been started on the mistaken assumption that there is one disease called 'cancer' and that there will be a 'cure' which will enable doctors to treat all the patients suffering with cancer. Many projects have been funded because organisers (both qualified and lay) have believed that they might solve the problem of cancer once and for all to the well publicised credit of everyone concerned. Much money has undoubtedly been wasted on research which has duplicated work done elsewhere and which has moved in directions unlikely ever to prove of practical benefit.'

These complaints, made decades ago, are now frequently echoed by other observers. And it is clear that part of the problem lies in the very belief that a single, universal cure can be found.

Chapter Four

Huge amounts of money have been spent on searching for a ‘magic’ cure for cancer when cancer is scores of different diseases. It is as unlikely that we are going to find a single cure for all these different diseases as we are to find a single drug that will cure all infections.

Moreover, it is absurd that most of the effort expended by the cancer industry has been spent on searching for the ever elusive cure when, throughout medical history, it has consistently been clear that it is invariably easier and more effective (and, in the long run a great deal cheaper) to prevent illness than it is to try and cure it.

The evidence shows quite clearly that any improvements in life expectancy which have taken place in the last few decades have been due not to the development of a sophisticated and expensive medical profession or the development of a highly profitable international pharmaceutical industry but to simple improvements in living standards.

The enemies of death and disease in the last century have not been doctors and drug companies but (relatively) clean drinking water and better sewage facilities. There has been a modest improvement in life expectancy in the last hundred years but this has not been due to drugs or surgery.

(And the improvement has been more modest than most doctors like to admit. Figures for the UK are difficult to get hold of because the British Government traditionally regards every health care statistic as a state secret, to be shared only with the pharmaceutical industry, but figures published by the United States Bureau of Census show that 33 per cent of people born in 1907 could expect to live to the age of 75. Later figures show that 33 per cent of the people born in 1977 could expect to live to the age of 80. Remove the improvements produced by better living conditions, cleaner water supplies, and the reduction in deaths during or just after childbirth and it becomes clear that doctors, drug companies and hospitals cannot possibly have had any useful effect on life expectancy. Indeed, the figures show that there has been an increase in mortality rates among the middle aged and a dramatic increase in the incidence of disorders such as diabetes, arthritis, heart disease and cancer.)

The truth is that the inventor of the flush lavatory has saved a million times more lives than any doctor. It is not the men who discovered antibiotics – and those who now prescribe them with such reckless overenthusiasm – whom we should thank for the virtual disappearance of some of the best-known killer infectious diseases of the 19th century but the men who dug our sewers and laid the first water pipes.

We don’t need more money pouring into cancer research because we already know what causes most forms of cancer.

According to one honest observer: ‘Basic cancer research is an excellent slush fund for molecular biologists but it won’t have any impact on cancer’.

Cancer is created by chemical pollutants, by unhealthy, fatty, food and by tobacco. Poisoned water supplies, dangerous prescription drugs and the over use of X-rays have also contributed to the incidence of cancer.

With immune systems constantly battered by polluted air, adulterated and chemically impregnated food and a constant onslaught from the drugs we buy for ourselves, or allow our doctors to prescribe for us, it is not surprising that increasing numbers of people succumb to one of the many different types of cancer.

The fact is that we know what causes 80 per cent of all cases of cancer. Eight out of ten people who develop cancer could have been saved if money and effort had been put into prevention.

I do not believe that any wonder cure for cancer will come from the ‘cancer industry’.

But if I had the annual income the cancer industry enjoys, I believe that I could turn cancer into a historical oddity within five years.

‘Why,’ you may ask, ‘do the big cancer charities not spend more money on trying to prevent cancer? Why do they spend all their money gambling on the chance of finding a ‘cure’ when they could save millions of lives simply by using their resources to publicise what we already know?’

To understand the answers to these questions you have to understand that the cancer research industry is exactly that – an industry. Drug companies and cancer charities are, together, a massive, worldwide multi-billion dollar industry which employs hundreds of thousands of scientists and administrators. Sadly, I suspect that for many of these employees, the search for a cure for cancer has become the end instead of just the beginning. Much of the cancer industry is run by and for scientific researchers. The cancer industry needs a constant stream of dollars to keep its laboratories running. If the cancer industry spent its income on explaining to people how to avoid cancer, there would be little or no place for research laboratories and a great many scientists would be put out of work. Worse still, if the cancer industry reduced the number of people dying of cancer, its own income would fall.

Besides, those whose job it is to raise money know that it is far easier to persuade people to put money into a collecting tin if you tell them that they are contributing towards the search for a cure. Persuading people to avoid known causes of cancer is thankless work. Not many people will put money into your collecting tin if you stand on a street corner handing out leaflets containing sensible eating advice. It is much easier to raise money if you talk about new breakthroughs and show photographs of people (preferably children or pretty young women) who are dying of cancer. It is much easier to raise a million dollars for a new piece of machinery than it is to raise a million dollars for a print bill or a television advertising campaign designed to explain to people how they can avoid cancer. Those who are responsible for raising money for the cancer industry know that it is impossible to personalise a preventive medicine campaign because you can never show a picture of a man, woman or child whose life has been saved by a leaflet. A picture of a child who is dying of cancer and who is waiting for laboratory scientists to find a cure will attract far more public support than an appeal for funds to help save unnamed individuals in the future.

And so it is the scientists searching for laboratory cures who get the big grants and the prestigious awards and who are fussed over and praised by the politicians and the journalists. Scientists who have established links which would enable us to save millions of lives by organising effective prevention programmes are as unlikely to win Nobel prizes as are doctors who devote themselves to teaching the principles of healthy living to millions of people.

The knowledge that 80% of cancers could be prevented is not new. My book *Paper Doctors* (which was published in 1977) contained a whole chapter attacking the cancer industry in some detail. ‘According to the International Agency for Research on Cancer, 80 per cent of all cancers are environmentally induced,’ I wrote. The Director of the American National Cancer Institute has publicly stated that he believes that the figure is nearer to 90 per cent. Eric Boyland, for many years Professor of Biochemistry at the Institute of Cancer Research in London, concluded after careful consideration of all the likely causes of cancer that between 85 and 90 per cent of all human tumours are caused by chemicals.

And according to the 1974/5 Annual Report of the Medical Research Council, ‘This statement has never been seriously challenged, and the experience and research of the past few years has tended to support this view of cancer.’

Further on in the same chapter in *Paper Doctors* I went on to say: ‘If we took the advice given by the experts who quote these figures then we could cut down cancer rates dramatically. However, the emphasis among cancer researchers is very much on finding a cure rather than reducing the incidence of cancer. Since there is so much evidence to show that the causative factors can be controlled (cigarettes cause one third of all cancers in the United Kingdom) that is, to say the least, surprising. There are many explanations for this disastrous misreading of the needs within cancer research. Undoubtedly one important reason is that there are thousands of surgeons, radiologists and radiotherapists (not to mention pure researchers) earning their living from traditional methods of cancer research and control. Public health is not a fashionable speciality within the medical profession: there is no opportunity for private practice and a general lack of financial incentive for brighter physicians to enter this field. And of equal importance perhaps is the fact that industrial pressures all oppose attempts to control the causative factors responsible for the vast majority of cancers.’

‘I doubt if most people will even think of all this next time they see a stranger shaking a collecting tin at them and asking for a contribution towards cancer research. Most of us have been lured over the years into believing the claims and promises made by honestly motivated but misdirected cancer researchers. If we really cared about cancer patients we would give our money to a caring organisation or an anti-smoking campaign, taking note of Lord Zuckerman’s conclusion in his official Report entitled *Cancer Research* published in 1972. He wrote that ‘a sudden increase in funds for cancer research could not be effectively used’ and suggested that money be spent on helping those struggling to look after relatives dying of cancer rather than on more research programmes.’

But those words fell on deaf ears.

In the four decades since *Paper Doctors* was published the cancer industry has continued to grow. It is now a multi-billion dollar industry. The cancer researchers are still pleading for more money; they are still claiming that if they are given enough money they will be able to find a cure for cancer. It is, they suggest, only a shortage of money which is responsible for the continuing rise in the incidence of cancer deaths. They want to do more animal experiments and they have now devised animals which are genetically bred to develop cancer.

* * *

Cancer industry employees say they want to know ‘how’ cancer develops. They don’t seem to understand that the ‘how’ is not important. It would be nice to know the ‘how’. But it is the ‘why’ which matters. And we already know why cancer is a major killer.

By insisting on finding the ‘how’ the cancer industry is playing right into the hands of the industries which are responsible for much cancer. The tobacco industry is constantly calling for more research into the links between tobacco and cancer. By calling for more research the tobacco industry is able to make itself look good – and at the same time to suggest that there is still some controversy and doubt about the links between tobacco and cancer.

But we don't need more research into tobacco and cancer. Everything we need to know can be summed up in four words: 'Smoking tobacco causes cancer.' And all we need now is a proper programme to persuade people not to smoke. But governments continue to spend millions fighting an unwinnable 'drugs war' against the users of cannabis, cocaine and heroin while they subsidise tobacco – a much more dangerous drug.

The tobacco industry isn't the only industry trying to cause confusion and doubt. Every cancer producing industry follows the same route: campaigning for more and more research and claiming that it is research and not prevention which will lead to a solution.

Consumers look on, puzzled and bemused. They quite like the idea of someone finding a 'cure' for cancer because it means that they can carry on eating the fatty food they like and smoking the cigarettes they enjoy without having to worry.

'Had such campaigns been at work during the Irish potato famine, which killed more than a million Irish between 1845 and 1849, they might have engendered studies into the biomechanical processes of famine rather than the social forces that gave rise to it,' wrote Robert N Proctor in *The Sciences*. 'Investigators would have secured funding for research into why starvation ran in families instead of examining the social Darwinist policies of the Manchester era or studying how Ireland was able to export grain even during the worst years of the famine.'

In 1977, I estimated that the annual total expenditure on cancer research was probably close to $1,500,000,000. Today the annual total expenditure on cancer research is so vast as to be immeasurable – other than to say that it is in hundreds of billions. There are very few industries in the world which have grown as rapidly as the cancer industry – the charities, laboratories, research scientists and administrators who are devoted to the search for a cure for cancer.

The real irony in all this is the fact that money really isn't the key issue. You cannot 'buy' successful research.

Although the huge cancer industry has spent a vast portion of its massive budget on laboratory research designed to find a 'magic' cure for cancer, the majority of the most important and dramatic discoveries about cancer have been made by observant practitioners who have devoted themselves to a study of human patients and their habits.

In *Paper Doctors* I explained: 'One of the most important breakthroughs in cancer research of recent years was made, not by researchers in expensive institutes but by a practising British surgeon, Denis Burkitt, working in Uganda. His first research grant from Government funds totalled £15 and his second, for £150, came from the Medical Research Council and was spent on an old jeep. By logical, patient study, Burkitt managed to map the occurrence of a tumour common in children in that part of the world. He matched the map he prepared with other factors and eventually managed to show that the cancer was probably caused by a virus. Eventually he learnt how to cure the tumour. So, one of the most important discoveries was made, not by a professional researcher but by an observant doctor happy to continue his studies in his own time and at his own expense. Too many doctors these days are unwilling to begin any research programme unless they are first financed by an official agency and properly recognised as bona fide research workers.'

Chapter Five

The cancer industry uses statistics to try to persuade us that their billions of dollars are well spent. But I believe that if you look at the statistics objectively and carefully, they show exactly the opposite. Although there have been a few (very well publicised) steps forward against some individual (and usually relatively rare) forms of cancer, the overall effect has been negligible. I have absolutely no doubt at all that if the money spent on cancer research had been spent on teaching people what we know about the causes of cancer, millions of lives would have been saved.

We are not winning the war against cancer. The war against cancer has been as badly fought as the war against 'drugs'. And it has been as unsuccessful.

Despite all the publicity and the extravagant claims, the war against cancer (officially declared by President Richard Nixon in 1971) has been a failure. It has been reported that five year survival rates for the majority of cancers (lung, colon, breast and stomach cancers, for example) remain essentially what they were 20 years ago.

Leading American experts have described the war on cancer as a 'medical Vietnam' and (rather more colourfully) 'a bunch of shit'.

In 1977, when my book *Paper Doctors* was published, I reported that 130,000 people died each year from cancer in England and Wales. By 1986, the figure had reached 140,000. The latest official figures from the British Government show that the figure has been going up steadily since then – it is now around 163,000.

'There have been some very important advances in cancer treatment over the last three decades,' said Dr John Bailar, who had been a researcher at the National Cancer Institute in the United States of America and had been, for years, editor in chief of the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*. 'But with respect to the cure of cancer, they are limited largely to the cancers that tend to occur in children and young adults, and those make up only perhaps one or two per cent of the total cancer burden.'

'Cancer death rates continue to go up year after year,' said Dr Bailar. 'Now these are real increases. I've taken out the effect of the changing size of the population, the changing age structure, declining mortality from other disease and we look at what's left. There is a genuine increase in the frequency of deaths from cancer, and this has been going on quite steadily for a number of years now.'

'Unfortunately, we have only managed to impact on the more rare malignancies with little effect on the most common and deadly forms of cancer,' says Dr Neal D Barnard in his book *The Power of Your Plate*.

The cancer industry deliberately draws attention to its modest successes in the treatment of a few, relatively uncommon childhood cancers (putting pictures of children whose lives have been saved onto promotional leaflets and posters is a sure-fire way to keep the money pouring in). But there has been little or no improvement in the death rates for the big killers: lung cancer, breast cancer, prostate cancer or cancer of the colon.

None of this explains why governments have also failed to teach their citizens the facts about cancer.

However, there are, I believe, two explanations for this seemingly mysterious state of affairs.

Firstly, governments are always wary of annoying big, powerful, tax paying industries and there is absolutely no doubt that many huge, international corporations would be (to put it mildly) exceedingly upset if millions of potential consumers were warned of the dangers of eating or drinking exceedingly profitable substances.

Secondly, (and I offer no excuse for the fact that this sounds extremely cynical) governments do not want people to live longer. On the contrary, they have a vested interest in people not living too long. People who live on into their 60s, 70s and 80s have to be given pensions and cost governments a great deal of money.

If you find all this difficult to accept, just remember that although it is widely and generally accepted that 30 per cent of cancers are caused by tobacco, it wasn't that long ago that the European Union was subsidising tobacco production.

Governments spend a tiny amount of money trying to persuade their citizens not to smoke. But they spend far more on helping the tobacco companies keep down the price of their products. It would, in health terms, be more sensible for these governments to subsidise the growing and distribution of cocaine. It is as crazy as if governments were giving muggers and bank robbers grants for the purchase of masks, guns and getaway cars.

'Americans worry a great deal about the import of cocaine and other drugs into the U.S.,' pointed out one observer sadly, 'but little is done to halt the far more deadly export of tobacco into the nations of the third world.'

Nor is it easy to explain why the medical profession has failed to teach people how to avoid cancer. Doctors have known the causes of most cancers for nearly two decades but very few indeed have done anything to help spread the word among their patients.

But the vast majority of doctors have for years earned their living by attending to the sick. Most doctors hardly, if ever, think about doing anything to keep their patients healthy. For example, I doubt if many people reading this book have ever discussed diet or nutrition with their doctors – even though a good, balanced diet is an essential prerequisite for good health.

Some doctors may make a little effort to persuade those patients who have already fallen ill to give up or cut down smoking but such efforts are usually superficial and rather uninspired.

The trouble with doctors is, as I explained at some length in my book *Betrayal of Trust*, that the medical profession has been bought by the pharmaceutical industry. Doctors are educated by the drug industry and controlled by it and the result is that when the average doctor thinks of 'patients', he or she thinks of 'drugs'. Doctors are taught to respond to illness by prescribing a bottle or packet of pills. Many doctors (probably a large majority of doctors) have been so brainwashed by the powerful international drugs industry that they regard any treatment which does not involve drugs as hocus pocus and they regard preventive medicine as trivial, irrelevant nonsense which is rather beneath them.

Instead of putting energy and effort into teaching their patients which foods to avoid (and which to eat) doctors have created 'medical screening' – a high tech solution to a low tech problem.

The principle is a simple one: the patient goes to the doctor and the doctor (for a fee, of course) does tests which are designed to spot early signs of cancer or other diseases. But screening doesn't work. A once a year check-up is no alternative to a healthier lifestyle.

In several other books, I have explained why I neither approve of nor support the principle of medical screening programmes

Chapter Six

Breast cancer is one of the most constantly publicised and most greatly feared forms of cancer. It is, for this reason alone, an important example of the way that the medical profession has taken the wrong path.

Because of its very nature, breast cancer is a type of cancer which arouses much emotion. Newspapers, magazines and medical journals have for decades been full of articles describing new forms of treatment. The medical journal, *The Lancet*, in an editorial, commented that 'If one were to believe all the media hype, the triumphalism of the profession in published research, and the almost weekly miracle breakthroughs trumpeted by the cancer charities, one might be surprised that women are dying at all from this cancer.'

But women are still dying from breast cancer. Indeed, the overall death rate from breast cancer hasn't changed and isn't changing. Despite all the talk and all the promises, the number of women dying from breast cancer hasn't altered. The disease is still as great a killer as it was decades ago. Breast cancer has claimed more U.S. lives than the Vietnam War, the Korean War, World War I and World War II put together.

The real tragedy is that since 1942, there has been steadily accumulating evidence to show that there is a link between breast cancer and dietary fat. I have little doubt that breast cancer could have been turned into a relatively uncommon disease, instead of one of the major killers of women, if politicians and doctors had been prepared to take on the food industry – and force the cancer industry to spread the truth.

Around the world, tens of thousands of women die of breast cancer every year. And yet if those women had known which foods to eat – and which to avoid – at least half of them could still be alive. As the spread of the Western meat rich diet spreads around the world so the incidence of breast cancer increases. As meat consumption rises so does the number of women dying of breast cancer.

Despite the quantity of epidemiological evidence which is available to show that fat and breast cancer are linked, no one really knows the mechanism through which fat causes cancer.

One theory is that synthetic chemicals – commonly used in the manufacture of pesticides – concentrate in the fatty tissues of animals. People who then eat animal after animal, absorb the synthetic chemicals into their own bodies – and the concentrations of chemicals steadily rise. (In an average lifetime, a meat eater will consume 36 pigs, 36 sheep, 750 chickens and turkeys and several cows.)

According to the journal *Australasian Health and Healing,* more than 177 organochlorines (synthetic chemicals created when chlorine gas is bonded to carbon-rich organic matter) have been found in the tissues of the general population of the United States and Canada. Organochlorines can cause infertility, birth defects, miscarriages, immune system suppression, metabolic dysfunction, behavioural disorders, hormonal abnormalities and cancer.

These chlorine based compounds can cause cancer in various ways. Some cause cancer directly. Others produce cancers by interfering with or mimicking human hormones. A third group suppress the immune system and then enhance the carcinogenic effect of other chemicals. These chemicals seem to strike first at the reproductive system – which is probably why a heavy fat consumption increases the risk of developing cancers of the breast, prostate, and uterus.

We accept chemicals because they make our life easier and because the big chemical companies have become financially and politically powerful. We assume that they are essential and we assume that they are safe because that is what the big companies tell us. I don't believe they are essential and I certainly don't believe that they are safe.

Here is some of the epidemiological evidence collected by the journal *Australasian Health and Healing* to support the theory that it is the chemicals in fat which cause cancer:

* Women in parts of America which were routinely blanketed with aerial sprayings of the pesticide DDT during the 1950s have one of the highest rates of breast cancer in America.

* Female chemical workers who were exposed to high levels of dioxin in a German pesticide plant had double the cancer mortality rate of the German population – and higher than average rates of breast cancer. A study in America produced similar results.

* Women professional golfers, most of whom played the game every day, have a high rate of breast cancer. It is suspected that these women may have been poisoned by the chemicals with which most golf courses are saturated.

* According to a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency study, parts of America with hazardous waste sites were 6.5 times as likely to have a high breast cancer rate than other areas.

* Women who have breast cancer have high blood levels of the chemicals suspected of causing the disease. A study of 229 women from New York City showed that women who developed breast cancer had substantially higher levels of suspected pesticide chemicals.

* During the early 1970s, breast cancer rates in Israel were among the highest and fastest rising in the world. In

1978, Israel phased out the use of several suspected pesticides. Doctors noted that the levels of chemicals in breast milk dropped quite quickly. The incidence of breast cancer duly started to fall too.

Despite all this evidence, I can't tell you exactly how fat causes cancer. But does the mechanism whereby fat causes cancer really matter? It would, it is true, be nice to know how fat causes cancer. But do we have to know how fat causes cancer before we decide to cut down our fat consumption and encourage women to minimise weight gain?

The medical profession, which has largely ignored the existing evidence showing what causes breast cancer, does, of course, remain willing to continue to make money out of 'treating' women who develop breast cancer.

Perhaps the biggest irony of all is the fact that although doctors have widely ignored the available evidence that would have enabled them to protect most of their patients from breast cancer (and, indeed, many other major types of cancer too), they have devised their own high technology form of preventive medicine – the mammogram. It is difficult not to be cynical about this. Teaching women how to reduce their chances of developing breast cancer (and teaching them how to check their own breasts for lumps) would earn the profession very little. So the medical profession – and its companion industries – have introduced a high technology form of cancer detection so that they can make money out of the general anxiety about breast cancer.

In my book *The Health Scandal* (which was published in 1988 and violently attacked by doctors all over the country – even though some of those who were doing the attacking admitted that they hadn't actually bothered to read it) I objected to mammography screening partly on the grounds that there must surely be risks in having regular X-ray examinations (it would, I thought, be hideously, grotesquely ironic if a new technique designed to spot breast cancer at an early stage turned out, 20 years later, to cause breast cancer) and partly on the grounds that a mass breast screening programme simply would not work and would not make a significant difference to the number of women dying of breast cancer because the interval of one year between examinations was too long.

I pointed out that the available evidence showed clearly that self-examination was much better and more effective (as well as being considerably cheaper and requiring far less highly trained medical manpower).

'A proper educational programme,' I wrote, 'designed to teach British women how to examine their breasts properly, would undoubtedly have a dramatic effect on the number of women dying from breast cancer in Britain. It would cost very little and it would produce continuing results. But it would not, of course, provide work for the many unwanted radiologists who we are training every year. And it probably wouldn't satisfy the strident spokeswomen who believe that annual screening clinics must be better than regular checks done at home.'

At the time, this comment was dismissed as heresy by many in the medical establishment who argued that self-screening was useless.

But, as the years have gone by, doctors have begun to question the logic of mammography. And several studies have suggested that the radiation accumulated through yearly mammograms might actually be causing breast cancer.

Chapter Seven

Do this simple quiz to assess your cancer risk:

1. Do you smoke?
a) a lot
b) average
c) a little
d) not at all

2. How many hours a week do you spend in close proximity to people who smoke?
a) over 80 hours
b) 40 to 80 hours
c) 10 to 40 hours
d) less than 10 hours

3. Do you make an effort to cut your intake of fatty food?
a) yes – a big effort
b) yes – a small effort
b) no – not at all

4. Do you eat butter?
a) yes
b) no

5. Do you drink full fat milk?
a) yes
b) no

6. Do you eat full fat cheese?
a) yes
b) no

7. Do you eat red meat?
a) yes
b) no

8. Do you eat white meat?
a) yes
b) no

9. Do you eat fish?
a) yes
b) no

10. How much alcohol do you drink?
a) more than one or two drinks a day
b) one or two drinks a day
c) less than one or two drinks a day

11. How much processed, packaged food do you eat?
a) a lot
b) hardly any/none at all

12. Do you eat smoked or barbecued food?
a) yes
b) no

13. Do you eat salt cured or salt pickled food?
a) yes
b) no

14. How much fibre do you think your diet contains?
a) a lot
b) an average amount
c) not much

15. Does your diet regularly include citrus fruits (oranges, grapefruit, lemons)?
a) yes
b) no

16. Do you regularly eat other fruits (e.g. apples, bananas, pineapple, apricots, peaches, strawberries)?
a) yes
b) no

17. Does your diet regularly include cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower or Brussels sprouts?
a) yes
b) no

18. Do you regularly eat garlic and/or onions?
a) yes
b) no

19. Does your diet regularly include whole grains (unrefined rice, wheat, oats, barley)?
a) yes
b) no

20. Does your diet regularly include potatoes?
a) yes
b) no

21. Does your diet regularly include carrots?
a) yes
b) no

22. Does your diet regularly include these vegetables: spinach, peas, beans, lentils, tomatoes, asparagus, kale?
a) yes
b) no

23. Are you noticeably overweight?
a) yes
b) no

24. Do you take care to restrict your exposure to sunlight?
a) yes
b) no

25. Do you take care to avoid spending too much time close to electricity wires and electrical appliances?
a) yes
b) no

26. Do you live near to a nuclear power station?
a) yes
b) no

27. Does your job put you in contact with any chemicals which might cause cancer?
a) yes
b) no

28. On average, do you have more than one X-ray a year?
a) yes
b) no

29. Do you regularly take prescribed medicines?
a) yes
b) no

30. Do you regularly take medicines you buy yourself?
a) yes
b) no

Now check your score:
1. a) 50, b) 30, c) 10, d) 0
2. a) 3, b) 2, c) 1, d) 0
3. a) 0, b) 10, c) 20
4. a) 2, b) 0
5. a) 2, b) 0
6. a) 2, b) 0
7. a) 10, b) 0
8. a) 2, b) 0
9. a) 2, b) 0
10. a) 5, b) 0, c) 0
11. a) 1, b) 0
12. a) 1, b) 0
13. a) 1, b) 0
14. a) 0, b) 5, c) 10
15. a) 0, b) 3
16. a) 0, b) 2
17. a) 0, b) 10
18. a) 0, b) 3
19. a) 0, b) 10
20. a) 0, b) 1
21. a) 0, b) 1
22. a) 0, b) 3
23. a) 7, b) 0
24. a) 0, b) 3
25. a) 0, b) 1
26. a) 1, b) 0
27. a) 4, b) 0
28. a) 5, b) 0
29. a) 3, b) 0
30. a) 1, b) 0

The higher your score the greater your risk of developing cancer.
* If you scored 100 or more, your cancer risk is dangerously high.

* If you scored between 75 and 99 your cancer risk is very high – well above average.
* If you scored between 50 and 74 your cancer risk is average.
* If you sored between 25 and 49 your cancer risk is below average.
* If you scored between 1 and 24 your cancer risk is considerably lower than average.
* If you scored 0 your cancer risk is very low

Chapter Eight

You may be surprised to hear that there is now clear medical and scientific evidence available to show that nothing, not even tobacco, influences your chances of developing cancer as much as the food you choose to eat. It is estimated that between 30 per cent and 60 per cent of all cancers are caused by what you choose to eat. Doctors, scientists and supporters of the cancer industry claim that the battle against cancer will only be won with the aid of more money. They claim that in order to obtain the information we need we must spend, spend, spend. But that isn't true. It is not more knowledge we need (we have, as I pointed out in *Paper Doctors* nearly 20 years ago, already amassed far more knowledge than we will ever use in our lifetime), but the ability and courage and determination to use the knowledge we already have.

Back in 1982, the National Research Council in the United States of America published a technical report entitled *Diet, Nutrition and Cancer* which showed that diet was probably the single most important factor in the development of cancer, and that there was evidence linking cancers of the breast, colon and prostate to particular foods or types of food. (It has, of course, been long established that diet is a major factor in the development of heart disease and other circulatory problems.)

It is a scandal of astonishing proportions that a majority of the population still do not know about these vitally important and well-established links. It is an even bigger scandal that a majority of the medical profession are unaware of these links too. Most doctors I have spoken to – even recently qualified ones – still dismiss the idea of a food/cancer link as mumbo-jumbo nonsense, preferring to rely entirely on prescription drugs, radiotherapy and surgery as 'treatments' for cancer. The average medical student probably spends more time staring down a microscope at histology slides than he or she spends studying the importance and significance of nutrition.

After he had seen a previous book of mine (*Food for Thought*) advertised as containing material describing the links between food and cancer, one doctor sent me a very indignant letter, asking me whether I thought it was ethical to publish such statements as 'Between a third and a half of all cancers are caused by eating the wrong types of food' and 'You can dramatically reduce your chances of developing cancer of the breast, cancer of the prostate, cancer of the colon, cancer of the ovary or cancer of the uterus.'

(To be fair, after I had sent him details of a small amount of the evidence upon which I had based those statements, the doctor wrote back and apologised.)

I checked one large (over 1,000 pages) medical textbook and found that the chapter on cancer summed up the role of food as a causal agent in just one, rather short sentence. I find this all extremely difficult to understand. I have been studying scientific research papers for half a century and I have never seen such convincing research as that which shows the links between particular types of food and particular types of cancer.

It is not uncommon for new drugs to be launched after clinical trials which may have involved relatively small numbers of patients. In my book *Betrayal of Trust* I pointed out that the number of patients studied in clinical trials before a drug is marketed is, on average, only 1,480 – and that the final, total, overall figure is sometimes much less than this.

In contrast, some of the individual research projects which have been published showing links between food and cancer, have involved tens of thousands of patients.

I have absolutely no doubt that if these undeniable links had been publicised by the responsible authorities (in medicine as elsewhere the phrase 'responsible authorities' is, I fear, oxymoronic) countless millions of lives and an enormous amount of agony and distress could – and would – have been avoided.

The suppression of this information by a greedy and conscience free food industry, compliant revenue conscious politicians, a cancer industry dominated by grant hungry researchers and an uncaring, drug company dominated medical profession has, I sincerely believe, led to more deaths than all wars in history combined.

Since the early 1980s, the amount of evidence linking diet to cancer has grown steadily. Way back in 1990, even the British Medical Association, hardly an organisation which would be widely described as revolutionary, supported the view that there is a link between food and cancer. Their published view was that 35 per cent of cancers, just over a third, were caused by the natural constituents of food and that another one per cent of cancers were caused by food additives.

Other organisations suggest that the link between food and cancer is even higher. The National Academy of Sciences in the United States, founded in 1863 by Act of Congress to serve as an official adviser to the US government in all matters of science and technology, has reported that researchers have estimated that almost 60 per cent of women's cancers and a little more than 40 per cent of men's cancers are related to nutritional factors.

Because I recognise that many readers may be sceptical about the claim that there is a strong link between diet and food (such scepticism will undoubtedly be enhanced by the fact that neither governments nor the medical profession have made much, if any, effort to publicise these links), I have in this chapter summarised just some of the scientific evidence which supports this claim.

My previous efforts to publicise the health values of eating a low fat, meatless diet have been consistently confronted by scepticism and opposition. It is my hope that this summary of just some of the most important available evidence supporting the contention that certain foods are a risk factor in the development of cancer will help settle this particular controversy permanently and may, perhaps, help other writers who may be tempted to tell their readers the truth about food and cancer.

I must emphasise that this list is not intended to be comprehensive. I have accumulated a list of several hundred scientific papers and journal articles dealing with the links between food and cancer (and many thousands more dealing with food and other disorders) and this list is merely intended to be representative – and to provide you with some idea of the breadth and importance of the available evidence. These are all well-established papers which were published in well-established journals.

If you would like to study even more evidence linking food to cancer (and many other diseases) then I heartily recommend the book *Nutritional Influences on Illness: A sourcebook of clinical research*, written by Melvyn R. Werbach MD. In a remarkably comprehensive and quite fascinating book, Dr Werbach has listed and summarised thousands of clinical studies and scientific reports. He reports that 'The cancers most closely associated with nutritional factors are breast and endometrial cancer in women, prostate cancer in men and gastrointestinal cancer', points out that 'the value of a low fat, high fibre diet in cancer prevention is well documented' and notes that 'avoidance of smoked, pickled and salt cured foods' has been shown to be beneficial in preventing cancers of the gastrointestinal tract.'

Dr Werbach adds that 'there is early evidence that certain precancerous changes may be reversible with supplementation'. He reports that cervical dysplasia may possibly be reversed with folic acid supplements, that calcium supplements may help 'reduce the number of rapidly proliferating cells in the colonic epithelium in patients with family histories of colon cancer and elevated numbers of such cells compared to controls' and that 'vitamin A or beta-carotene reduce the percentage of genetically damaged cells inside the cheek when betel quid, a tobacco-like plant mixture is chewed regularly.'

Exhibit A:

Title of scientific paper: *Calorie-Providing Nutrients and Risk of Breast Cancer*
Authors: Paolo Toniolo (Epidemiology Unit, Istituto Nazionale per lo Studio e la Cura dei Tumori, Milan, Italy and Department of Environmental Medicine, New York University Medical Center, New York, USA), Elio Riboli (Unit of Analytical Epidemiology, International Agency for Research on Cancer, Lyon, France), Fulvia Protta (Pathology Service, Ospedale Maggiore S. Giovanni, Turin, Italy), Martine Charrel (Unit of Analytical Epidemiology, International Agency for Research on Cancer, Lyon, France), Alberto M Cappa (Pathology Service, Ospedale Maggiore S.Giovanni, Turin, Italy)
Published in: *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*
Date of Publication: February 15th, 1989

Report: This study, which was conducted in the province of Vercelli in northwestern Italy where there is a moderately high incidence of breast cancer, was designed to investigate the role of diet in breast cancer and 'to test the primary hypothesis that fat and proteins from animal sources are associated with an increased risk of breast cancer.'

The researchers questioned 250 women with breast cancer and a random sample of 499 women from the general population, using a structured questionnaire to identify the types and quantities of food each woman consumed.

After reporting that they had 'found evidence that the intake of total fat, saturated fat or proteins of animal origin is positively associated with the risk of breast cancer in women' the researchers reported that their 'findings had suggested that during adult life, a reduction in total fat to less than 30 per cent of calorie intake, of saturated fat to less than 10 per cent of calorie intake and of animal proteins to less than six per cent may lead to a substantial reduction in the incidence of breast cancer in population subgroups with a high intake of saturated fat and animal proteins in agreement with some dietary recommendations that have been made.'

'These data,' said the researchers, 'suggest that during adult life a reduction in dietary intake of fat and proteins of animal origin may contribute to a substantial reduction in the incidence of breast cancer in population subgroups with high intake of animal products.'

Exhibit B

Title of scientific paper: *Dietary Habits and Prognostic Factors in Breast Cancer*

Authors: Lars-Erik Holm (Department of Cancer Prevention, Kaolinksa Hospital, Stockholm, Sweden, Eva Callmer (Department of Medical Nutrition, Huddinge Hospital, Huddinge, Sweden), Marie-Louise Hjalmar (Department of General Oncology, Danderyd Hospital, Danderyd, Sweden), Elizabet Lidbrink (Department of General Oncology, South Hospital, Stockholm, Sweden), Bo Nilsson (Department of Cancer Epidemiology, Karolinska Hospital, Stockholm, Sweden, Lambert Skoog (Department of Clinical Cytology, Karolinska Hospital, Stockholm, Sweden).
Published in: *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*
Date of publication: August 16th 1989

Report: The link between dietary fat and breast tumours was first described in 1942. Since then many other scientists have published papers detailing this link in further detail. 'Dietary fat has been suggested as an etiological factor in human breast cancer because of the high correlation between national per capita fat consumption and breast cancer incidence,' begin the authors of this paper whose study included 240 women who had surgery for breast cancer between the years of 1983 and 1986 in Stockholm, Sweden. All the women involved in this study were aged between 50 and 65 at the time that their cancers were diagnosed. After analysing their results, the authors of this paper concluded: 'The results of this study of mainly postmenopausal women and some premenopausal women suggest that dietary habits have an impact on the prognosis of breast cancer.'

'Study results indicate that dietary factors may act in breast carcinogenesis,' continued the authors in their discussion of their results. 'Several studies have found that these factors also operate after diagnosis of the tumour, suggesting that dietary habits are important even after a successful primary treatment. The results of this study suggest that dietary patterns of the western world (e.g. high fat intake and low consumption of carbohydrates and fibre) affect certain prognostic factors in breast cancer, such as tumour size and ER (oestrogen receptor) content of the tumour.'

Exhibit C
Title of scientific paper: *A Case-Control Study of Prostatic Cancer With Reference to Dietary Habits*
Authors: Kenji Oishi, Kenichiro Okada, Osamu Yoshida, Hirohiko Yamabe, Yoshiyuki Ohno, Richard B Hayes ad Fritz H. Schroeder; (these authors were from the Department of Urology, Kyoto University, Kyoto, Japan; Laboratory of Anatomic Pathology, Kyoto University Hospital, Japan; Department of Public Health, Medical School, Nagoya City University, Nagoya, Japan; Department of Urology, Faculty of Medicine, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands.)
Published in: *The Prostate*
Date of publication: 1988

Report: In 1950, the incidence of prostatic cancer in Japan was about 0.4 per 100,000 male members of the population but by 1963 it had increased to 2.0 per 100,000 and by 1975 it was 2.5 per 100,000.

Observers have suggested that this increase (which is not unique, for increases in the incidence of cancer of the lung, cancer of the breast and cancer of the colon have also occurred in recent years) may be linked to the westernization of Japanese eating habits. During recent years the consumption of fat, animal protein, eggs, dairy products and oil have all increased considerably in Japan.

This study was of sufferers from prostatic cancer from 1981 to 1984 and patients suffering from benign prostatic hypertrophy (non-cancerous prostate enlargement) and was conducted to find the risk factors for prostatic cancer. 'Two well-trained nutritionists and one urologist interviewed each subject at the time of hospital admission'.

The researchers found that a: 'Low daily intake of beta-carotene…was significantly correlated with prostatic cancer development.'

Exhibit D
Title of scientific paper: *Relation of Meat, Fat and Fibre Intake To The Risk of Colon Cancer in a Prospective Study Among Women*
Authors: Walter C Willett M.D, Meir J Stampfer M.D., Graham A Colditz M.D., Bernard A Rosner Ph.D., and Frank E. Speizer M.D. from the Channing Laboratory, Department of Medicine, Harvard Medical School and Brigham and Women's Hospital, the Department of Preventive Medicine, Harvard Medical School and the Departments of Epidemiology, Nutrition and Biostatistics at the Harvard School of Public Health, all in Boston in the United States of America.
Published in: *The New England Journal of Medicine*
Date of publication: Dec 13 1990

Report: The authors of this paper began by pointing out that in Western countries cancer rates are up to ten times as high as they are in many Far Eastern and developing countries. For many years, doctors and scientists have noted rapid increases in rates of colon cancer among men and women migrating from low risk areas to high risk areas and these observations have suggested that the large differences which exist may be due to environmental causes rather than genetic causes.

The authors pointed out that two general dietary hypotheses have evolved in recent decades: firstly, that dietary fat, particularly from animal sources, increases the risk of colon cancer and secondly, that the intake of fibre reduces the risk.

This study involved observing 88,751 women between the ages of 34 and 59 for six years. The women, none of whom had any history of cancer, inflammatory bowel disease or familial polyposis, completed a questionnaire about their eating habits in 1980. By the year 1986, a total of 150 cases of colon cancer had been noted.

The researchers concluded that 'animal fat was positively associated with the risk of colon cancer' but that 'no association was found for vegetable fat'. The researchers found that women who ate beef, pork or lamb as a main dish every day were more likely to develop cancer of the colon than women who ate beef, pork or lamb as a main dish less than once a month. It was also found that processed meats and liver with also 'significantly associated with increased risk'.

'The ratio of the intake of red meat to the intake of chicken and fish was particularly strongly associated with an increased incidence of colon cancer,' concluded the researchers, who also noted that 'a low intake of fibre from fruits appeared to contribute to the risk of colon cancer, but this relation was not statistically independent of meat intake.'

'These prospective data provide evidence for the hypothesis that a high intake of animal fat increases the risk of colon cancer,' said the researchers, 'and they support existing recommendations to substitute fish and chicken for meats high in fat.'

Exhibit E
Title of scientific paper: *Dietary Fat Consumption and Survival Among Women With Breast Cancer*
Authors: David I. Gregorio, Department of Social and Preventive Medicine, State University of New York, Buffalo, New York, United States of America, Lawrence J.Emrich, Department of Biomathematics, Roswell Park Memorial Institute, Buffalo, New York, United States of America, Saxon Graham, Department of Social and Preventive Medicine, State University of New York, Buffalo, New York, United States of America, James R.Marshall, Department of Social and Preventive Medicine, State University of New York, Buffalo, New York, United States of America, and Takuma Nemoto, Department of Breast Surgery, Roswell Park Memorial Institute, Buffalo, New York, United States of America
Published in: *JNCI*
Date of publication: July 1985

Report: The researchers estimated monthly fat consumption for a total of 854 patients who completed dietary intake interviews when they were admitted to hospital and subsequently estimated that 24 per cent of the women consumed between 500 and 1,000 grams of fat a month, 42 per cent consumed between 1,001 and 1,500 grams of fat a month, 21 per cent consumed between 1,501 and 2,000 grams of fat a month and 11 per cent consumed between 2,001 and 3,000 grams of fat.

They reported their findings as follows: 'Consistent with our hypothesis, an effect of fat intake on survival time was reported in this study' and concluded that the 'estimated risk of death at any time increased 1.4 fold for every 1,000 gram in monthly fat intake'.

Exhibit F
Title of scientific paper: *Dietary Factors and Breast Cancer Risk*
Authors: Jay H. Lubin, Environmental Epidemiology Branch, National Cancer Institute, Bethesda, Maryland, U.S.A.; Patricia E. Burns, Cross Cancer Institute, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada; William J. Blot, Environmental Epidemiology Branch, National Cancer Institute, Bethesda, Maryland, U.S.A.; Regina G. Ziegler, Environmental Epidemiology Branch, National Cancer Institute, Bethesda, Maryland, U.S.A.; Alan W.Lees, Cross Cancer Institute, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada and Joseph F. Fraumeni, Jr., Environmental Epidemiology Branch, National Cancer Institute, Bethesda, Maryland, U.S.A.
Published in: *International Journal of Cancer*
Date of publication: 1981

Report: These researchers questioned 577 women aged between 30 and 80 (all of whom had breast cancer) and 826 disease free women about their eating habits. They found that women who ate beef, pork and sweet desserts were significantly more likely to develop breast cancer than women who did not. They also found that women who fried with butter or margarine, as opposed to vegetable oils, and who used butter at the table were also more likely to develop breast cancer.

Exhibit G

Title of scientific paper: *Role of Life-style and Dietary Habits in Risk of Cancer among Seventh-Day Adventists*
Author: Roland L. Phillips, Department of Biostatistics and Epidemiology, Loma Linda University School of Health, Loma Linda, California, U.S.A.
Published in: *Cancer Research*
Date of publication: November 1975

Report: Seventh-Day Adventists neither drink alcohol nor smoke, most avoid the use of coffee, tea, hot condiments and spices and about half eat a vegetarian diet which includes dairy produce and eggs. In his summary, the author noted that existing data on cancer mortality in Seventh-Day Adventists showed death rates that were 50 per cent to 70 per cent of the rates within the general population for most of the cancer sites that are unrelated to smoking or drinking alcohol. The author's studies showed statistically significant links between the eating of beef, lamb or a combined group of highly saturated fat foods and the development of colon cancer. 'It is quite clear,' he wrote, 'that these results are supportive of the hypothesis that beef, meat and saturated fat or fat in general are etiologically related to colon cancer.' He went on to say that: 'Green leafy vegetables that are quite high in fibre are negatively associated.'

The author concluded: 'Overall, the currently available evidence on cancer among Seventh-Day Adventists is consistent with the hypothesis that one or more components of the typical Adventist lifestyle account for a large portion of their apparent reduced risk of the types of cancer which are unrelated to cigarette smoking and alcohol consumption. Aside from abstinence from smoking and drinking, the most distinctive feature of the typical Adventist lifestyle is a unique diet whose principal feature is lacto-ovo-vegetarianism.' The author then added that other researchers had shown that the typical lacto-ovo-vegetarian diet contained about 25 per cent less fat and 50 per cent more fibre than the average non-vegetarian diet.

Exhibit H

Title of scientific paper: *Diet as an Etiological Factor in the Development of Cancers of the Colon and Rectum*
Author: Margaret A. Howell, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland, U.S.A.
Published in: *Journal of Chronic Diseases*
Date of publication: 1975

Report: The author concludes: 'The evidence suggests that meat, particularly beef, is a food associated with the development of malignancies of the large bowel.'

Exhibit I

Title of scientific paper: *Nutrient Intakes In Relation to Cancer Incidence in Hawaii*
Authors: L.N.Kolonel, J.H.Hankin, J.Lee, S.Y.Chu, A.M.Y.Nomura and M. Ward Hinds - from the Epidemiology Program, Cancer Center of Hawaii, University of Hawaii, Honolulu, Hawaii, U.S.A.
Published in: *British Journal of Cancer*
Date of publication: 1981

Report: For this study, 4,657 adults from the five main ethnic groups in Hawaii (Caucasians, Japanese, Chinese, Hawaiians and Filipinos) were interviewed about their diets between the years 1977 and 1979. The researchers reported that: 'significant positive associations were found for six of the cancer sites: breast cancer with fat (saturated, unsaturated, animal and total) and protein (animal); corpus-uteri cancer with the same components as breast cancer; prostate cancer with fat (saturated, animal) and protein (animal, total), stomach cancer with fat (fish only) and protein (fish only), lung cancer with cholesterol and laryngeal cancer with cholesterol. The researchers also found significant negative associations between breast and corpus-uteri cancers and carbohydrate intake.

Exhibit J

Title of scientific publication: *Environmental Factors of Cancer of the Colon and Rectum*
Authors: Ernest L Wynder M.D., and Takao Shigematsu M.D., both from the Division of Environmental Cancerigenesis, Sloan Kettering Institute for Cancer Research, New York, U.S.A.
Published in: *Cancer*
Date of publication: September 1967

Report: The authors of this paper concluded: '...dietary factors appear to be associated with the etiology of cancer of the large bowel. The dietary pattern that may fit the distribution of cancer of the large bowel includes a high intake of fats. The effect of this pattern appears to be more marked for cancer of the colon than cancer of the rectum.' And they added: 'There is a statistically significant association of obesity to cancer of the large bowel from the cecum to the sigmoid colon in men.'

Exhibit K
Title of scientific publication: *Epidemiological Correlations between Diet and Cancer Frequency*
Authors: Pelayo Correa, Louisiana State University Medical Center, New Orleans, Louisiana, U.S.A.
Published in: *Cancer Research*
Date of publication: September 1981

Report: The author stated that: 'Strong and consistent correlations are reported between death rates of cancers of the colon and breast and the per capita consumption of total fat and of nutrients derived from animal sources, especially beef, pork, eggs and milk. Similar but less consistent correlations have been reported with cancers of the prostate, ovary and endometrium.' The author also reported that: 'Negative correlations of colon cancer rates and vegetable consumption are reported…epidemiological data are consistent with the hypothesis that excessive beef and low vegetable consumption are causally related to colon cancer.' The author explained the link between the foods linked to cancer and the development of cancer by stating that 'these food items probably do not have a direct carcinogenic role but rather provide a microenvironment favourable to the actions of carcinogens.'

Exhibit L
Title of scientific publication: *Food Consumption and Cancer of the Colon and Rectum in North-Eastern Italy*
Authors: Ettore Bidoli, Epidemiology Unit, Aviano Cancer Center, Via Pedemontana Occ, Aviano, Italy; Silvia Franceschi, Epidemiology Unit, Aviano Cancer Center, Via Pedemontana Occ, Aviano, Italy and European Cancer Prevention Organisation, Epidemiology and Cancer Working Group, Brussels, Belgium; Renata Talamini, Epidemiology Unit, Aviano Cancer Center, Via Pedemontana Occ, Aviano, Italy; Salvatore Barra, Epidemiology Unit, Aviano Cancer Center, Via Pedemontana Occ, Aviano, Italy; and Carlo La Vecchia, Mario Negri Institute for Pharmacological Research, Via Eiritrea, Milan, Italy and Institute of Social and Preventive Medicine, University of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland
Published in: *International Journal of Cancer*
Date of publication: 1992

Report: The authors studied 123 patients with colon cancer, 125 patients with rectal cancer and 699 patients with no cancer. They concluded: '...the present study gives support for a protective effect associated with a fibre rich or vegetable rich diet, while it indicates that frequent consumption of refined starchy foods, eggs and fat rich foods such as cheese and red meat is a risk factor for colo-rectal cancer.' The authors found that a high consumption of margarine 'exerted a significant protection against cancer of the colon' and that 'high consumption of carrots, spinach, whole grain bread and pasta' reduced the risk of rectal cancer.

Exhibit M
Title of scientific publication: *Diet and Lung Cancer in California Seventh-Day Adventists*
Authors: Gary E.Fraser, Center for Health Research, Lorna Linda University, Lorna Linda, California, U.S.A., W.Lawrence Beeson, Center for Health Research, Lorna Linda University, Lorna Linda, California, U.S.A. and Roland L.Phillips, Lorna Linda University, Lorna Linda, California
Published in: *American Journal of Epidemiology*
Date of publication: 1991

Report: The authors reported that: `fruit consumption was the dietary constituent that showed a strong, statistically significant protective association with lung cancer..'

Exhibit N
Title of scientific publication: *Dietary Habits and Past Medical History as Related to Fatal Pancreas Cancer Risk Among Adventists*
Authors: Paul K. Mills Ph.D., W.Lawrence Beeson, M.S.P.H., David E.Abbey Ph.D., Gary E. Fraser M.D.,Ph.D., and Roland L. Phillips M.D., DrPH, from the Department of Preventive Medicine, School of Medicine, Lorna Linda University, Lorna Linda, California, U.S.A.
Published in: *Cancer*
Date of publication: 1988

Report: The authors began by pointing out that the foods and/or nutrients which had been suggested to be associated with an increased risk of cancer of the prostate included 'total fat intake, eggs, animal protein, sugar, meat, coffee and butter' whereas the consumption of 'raw fruits and vegetables' had been `consistently associated with decreased risk'. In this study the authors found that there was strong evidence that 'increasing consumption of vegetarian protein products, beans, lentils and peas as well as dried fruit' helped to protect against cancer of the pancreas.

Exhibit O
Title of scientific publication: *Increasing use of soyfoods and their potential role in cancer prevention*
Authors: Mark Messina PhD, Diet and Cancer Branch, Division of Cancer Prevention and Control, National Cancer Institute, Bethesda, U.S.A., Virginia Messina PhD, RD., Washington, U.S.A.
Published in: *Journal American Diet Association*
Date of publication: July 1991

Report: Most of the soybeans produced are used as animal feed but evidence has been accumulating that soybeans can prevent cancer. The authors of this report state that: 'Soybeans contain, in relatively high concentrations, several compounds with demonstrated anticarcinogenic activity.'

Exhibit P
Title of scientific publication: *Dietary Prevention of Breast Cancer*
Authors: David P.Rose and Jeanne M. Connolly, Division of Nutrition and Endocrinology, American Health Foundation, Valhalla, New York, U.S.A.
Published in: *Med.Oncol & Tumour Pharmacother*
Date of publication: 1990

Report: 'A review of the epidemiological and experimental data suggests that dietary modification does have a place in breast cancer prevention,' say the authors. 'Based on present evidence, a dietary approach to breast cancer prevention should include weight control, when indicated, a reduction in dietary fat intake to approximately 20 per cent of total fats, and an increase in fibre consumption to 25-30 grams a day.'

Exhibit Q
Title of scientific publication: *Shift From a Mixed Diet to a Lactovegetarian Diet: Influence on Some Cancer-Associated Intestinal Bacterial Enzyme Activities*
Authors: Gunnar K. Johansson, Ludmila Ottova and Jan-A ke Gustafsson (the authors are affiliated with the Department of Medical Nutrition, Karolinska Institute, Huddinge University Hospital, Huddinge, Sweden).
Published in: *Nutr. Cancer*
Date of publication: 1990

Report: The authors of this paper conclude: '…the results in this paper indicate that a change from a mixed diet to a lactovegetarian diet leads to a decrease in certain enzyme activities proposed to be risk factors for colon cancer.'

Exhibit R
Title of scientific publication: *Nutritional Approach to Oesophageal Cancer in Scotland*
Authors: Valda M Craddock, M.R.C. Toxicology Unit, Carshalton, Surrey, U.K.
Published in: *The Lancet*
Date of publication: 24th January 1987

Report: This publication took the form of a letter. The author began by pointing out that oesophageal cancer has a sharply defined geographical distribution in Britain - with many sufferers being in the north-west of Scotland where the consumption of green vegetables is believed to be low. The author also pointed out that oesophageal cancer is also very common in areas of China, in Iran, around the Caspian Sea and in parts of South Africa and adds that in all these regions the diet is low in fresh fruit and green vegetables – and the micronutrients they contain. 'A consistent finding from studies around the world of diet in relation to cancer is that consumption of fresh green vegetables is negatively associated with cancer,' writes the author. 'Deaths in women from this exceptionally distressing, malignant disease total around 2,000 per year. Early diagnosis is not yet possible and treatment is unsatisfactory. Prevention, however, may be relatively easy.' The author also adds that the incidence of oesophageal cancer in Britain has almost doubled since 1970 and that 'there are epidemiological and experimental grounds for intervention studies which might lead to effective preventive measures, but nothing is being done.'

Exhibit S
Title of scientific publication: *Cohort Study of Diet, Lifestyle and Prostate Cancer in Adventist Men*
Authors: Paul K. Mills, PhD, MPH, W. Lawrence Beeson, MSPH, Roland L.Phillips, M.D. DrPH, and Gary E.Fraser M.D., PhD; from the Department of Preventive Medicine, Lorna Linda University School of Medicine, Lorna Linda, California, U.S.A.

Published in: *Cancer*
Date of publication: 1989

Report: For this study, the authors evaluated dietary and lifestyle characteristics of approximately 14,000 Seventh-Day Adventist men. The men completed a detailed lifestyle questionnaire in 1976 and were monitored for cancer incidence until the end of 1982. The authors concluded that 'increasing consumption of beans, lentils and peas, tomatoes, raisin, dates and other dried fruit were all associated with significantly decreased prostate cancer risk.'

Exhibit T
Title of scientific publication: *A Prospective Study of Dietary Fat and Risk of Prostate Cancer*
Authors: Edward Giovannucci, Channing Laboratory, Department of Medicine, Harvard Medical School and Brigham and Women's Hospital, Boston, Mass, U.S.A.; Eric B.Rimm, Department of Epidemiology, Harvard School of Public Health, Boston, U.S.A.; Graham A.Colditz, Channing Laboratory, Department of Medicine, Harvard Medical School and Brigham and Women's Hospital, Department of Epidemiology, Harvard School of Public Health, Boston, U.S.A.; Meir J.Stampfer, Channing Laboratory, Department of Medicine, Harvard Medical School and Brigham and Women's Hospital, Department of Epidemiology, Harvard School of Public Health, Boston, U.S.A.; Alberto Ascherio, Department of Nutrition, Harvard School of Public Health, Boston, U.S.A.; Chris C.Chute, Department of Health Sciences Research, Mayo Medical School, Rochester, Minn., U.S.A.; Walter C.Willett, Channning Laboratory, Department of Medicine, Harvard Medical School and Brigham and Women's Hospital, Department of Epidemiology and Department of Nutrition, Harvard School of Public Health, Boston, U.S.A.
Published in: *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*
Date of publication: October 6th 1993

Report: The authors pointed out that 'The strong correlation between national consumption of fat and national rate of mortality from prostate cancer has raised the hypothesis that dietary fat increases the risk of this malignancy.' By studying information relating to 51,529 American men between the ages of 40 and 75 and sending follow up questionnaires to the men in 1988 and 1990, they examined the relationship of fat consumption to the incidence of advanced prostate cancer and to the total incidence of prostate cancer.

The authors found that 'total fat consumption was directly related to risk of advanced prostate cancer' and that 'this association was due primarily to animal fat ...but not vegetable fat. Red meat represented the food group with the strongest positive association with advanced cancer.'

The authors concluded that: 'The results support the hypothesis that animal fat, especially fat from red meat, is associated with an elevated risk of advanced prostate cancer.' They also noted that: 'These findings support recommendations to lower intake of meat to reduce the risk of prostate cancer.'

Exhibit U
Title of scientific publication: *Risk of death from cancer and ischaemic heart disease in meat and non-meat eaters.*
Authors: Margaret Thorogood, senior research fellow, Department of Public Health and Policy, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London, UK; Jim Mann, professor, Department of Human Nutrition, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand; Paul Appleby, research officer, Department of Public Health and Primary Care, University of Oxford, Oxford, U.K.; Klim McPherson, professor, Department of Public Health and Policy, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London, UK.
Published in: *British Medical Journal*
Date of publication: 25 June 1994

Report: The aim of this research was to investigate the health consequences of a vegetarian diet by examining the twelve year mortality of vegetarians and meat eaters. The researchers reported: 'These data confirm the findings of previous studies that have shown a reduction in cancer and cardiovascular mortality among people who do not eat meat.'

The researchers showed a 'roughly 40 per cent reduction in mortality from cancer in vegetarians and fish eaters compared with meat eaters' and also added that 'the fact that total mortality was about 20 per cent lower in the non-meat eating group than the meat eaters is perhaps of greatest clinical importance.'

Exhibit V
Title of scientific publication: *Risk Factors for Renal-Cell Cancer in Shanghai, China*
Authors: Joseph K. McLaughlin, National Cancer Institute, Division of Cancer Etiology, Epidemiology and Biostatistics Program, Bethesda, MD, U.S.A; Yu-Tang Gao, Shanghai Cancer Institute, Department of Epidemiology, Shanghai, People's Republic of China; Ru-Nie Gao, Shanghai Cancer Institute, Department of

Epidemiology, Shanghai, People's Republic of China; Wei Zheng, National Cancer Institute, Division of Cancer Etiology, Epidemiology and Biostatistics Program, Bethesda, MD, U.S.A; Bu-Tian Ji, Shanghai Cancer Institute, Department of Epidemiology, Shanghai, People's Republic of China; William J.Blot, National Cancer Institute, Division of Cancer Etiology, Epidemiology and Biostatistics Program, Bethesda, MD, U.S.A; and Joseph F. Fraumeni Jr, National Cancer Institute, Division of Cancer Etiology, Epidemiology and Biostatistics Program, Bethesda, MD, U.S.A;
Published in: *International Journal of Cancer*
Date of publication: 1992

Report: The authors studied 154 patients with renal cell cancer and 157 controls. They reported: 'Elevated risks were observed for cigarette smoking…and for increasing categories of body weight and meat consumption, while reduced risks were seen for increasing categories of fruit and vegetable intake. An increase was also observed for regular use of phenacetin containing analgesics.' The authors also noted that these findings were 'consistent with earlier studies in Western countries and indicate that many of the same etiologic factors for renal cell cancer operate in low and high risk societies.'

Exhibit W
Title of scientific publication: *Shift from a mixed to a lactovegetarian diet: influence on acid lipids in fecal water – a potential risk factor for colon cancer*
Authors: Ulrika Geltner Allinger, Gunnar K.Johansson, Jan-Ake Gustafsson and Joseph J.Rafter; from the Department of Medical Nutrition, Karolinska Institute, Huddinge University Hospital, Huddinge, Sweden
Published in: *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*
Date of publication: 1989

Report: The authors concluded that: 'the consumption of a lactovegetarian diet may reduce certain risk factors of potential significance in colon carcinogenesis.'

Exhibit X
Title of scientific publication: *NCI dietary guidelines: rationale*
Authors: Ritva R.Butrum PhD., Carolyn K.Clifford PhD., and Elaine Lanza PhD from the Division of Cancer Prevention and Control, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD, U.S.A.
Published in: *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*
Date of publication: 1988

Report: The authors report that in 1986 it was estimated that 930,000 Americans would develop cancer and that 472,000 individuals would die of their cancer. The National Cancer Institute (the NCI), which aims to reduce cancer incidence, morbidity and mortality, 'believes that the potential for dietary changes to reduce the risk of cancer is considerable and that the existing scientific data provide evidence that is sufficiently consistent to warrant prudent interim dietary guidelines that will promote good health and reduce the risk of some types of cancer.'

The NCI suggests reducing fat intake, increasing fibre intake, including a variety of fruits and vegetables in the daily diet, avoiding obesity, consuming alcoholic beverages in moderation if at all and minimising the consumption of salt cured, salt pickled and smoked foods. The NCI believes that if these guidelines were followed, there would be a 50 per cent reduction in cancer of the colon and rectum, a 25 per cent reduction in breast cancer and a 15 per cent reduction in cancers of the prostate, endometrium and gallbladder.

Exhibit Y
Title of scientific publication: *Shifting from a Conventional Diet to an Uncooked Vegan Diet Reversibly Alters Fecal Hydrolytic Activities in Humans*
Authors: Wen Hua Ling and Osmo Hanninen from the Department of Physiology, University of Kuopio, Kuopio, Finland
Published in: *Journal of Nutrition*
Date of publication: 1992

Report: The authors conclude that an 'uncooked extreme vegan diet causes a decrease in bacterial enzymes and certain toxic products that have been implicated in colon cancer risk.'

Exhibit Z
Title of scientific publication: *Association between dietary changes and mortality rates: Israel 1949 to 1977; a trend-free regression model*
Authors: Aviva Palgi Ph.D., Instructor in Nutrition, Harvard Medical School, Nutrition/Metabolism Laboratory,

New England Deaconess Hospital, United States of America
Published in: *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*
Date of publication: August 1981

Report: The author investigated the statistical effect of 'changes in food consumption of the Israeli population during 1949 to 1977 on concurrent mortality rates from cancer, heart disease, peptic ulcer, and diabetes mellitus'.

The author reported that 'All the investigated mortality rates were in statistically significant positive association with increasing total fat consumption. Mortality rates of ischemic heart disease as well as of hypertensive and cerebrovascular disease were in positive association with both plant fat and animal fat. These findings suggest that reduced total fat intake may prove to reduce the investigated mortality rates.'

Note 1: Where I have included medical or scientific qualifications alongside the names of researchers it is because these were published on the scientific papers concerned. Where no qualifications are listed, it is because no qualifications were listed on the journal articles I have quoted.

Note 2: In January 1986, the *Journal of Occupational Medicine* published a paper entitled *Cancer Mortality Among White Males in the Meat Industry*. The paper was written by Eric S.Johnson MB BS; H.R.Fischman D.V.M., Genevieve M. Martanoski M.D.; and E. Diamond Ph.D. from the Department of Epidemiology, The Johns Hopkins University School of Hygiene and Public Health, Baltimore, United States of America. The authors studied 13,844 members of a meat cutter's union from July 1949 to December 1980 'to examine cancer occurrence in the meat industry'. They reported that a 'statistically significant proportional mortality ratio of 2.9 was obtained for Hodgkin's disease among abattoir workers' and that 'the results suggest that the excess risk of death from Hodgkin's disease in abattoir workers may be associated with the slaughtering activity'. They also found that meat packing plant workers were more likely to develop bone cancer, cancer of the buccal cavity and pharynx and lung cancer than workers in other industries. I report this paper because although it does not show a direct link between cancer and the eating of meat as a food, it does pose an important question: if human beings can get cancer merely by handling meat why on earth should there be any surprise that human beings can get cancer from eating meat? The authors of this paper also named viruses which naturally cause cancer in cattle and chickens and pointed out that these viruses are present not only in diseased but also in healthy cattle and chickens destined for human consumption. 'Experimentally, the viruses have the capacity to cause infection or tumours in species other than their natural hosts,' reported the authors. 'Evidence suggests that consumers of meat and unpasteurized milk may be exposed to these viruses. It would appear, therefore, that these viruses present a potentially serious public health problem.' Other researchers have made similar discoveries about a link between the meat industry and the development of cancer. A study of 300,000 adult white males in Washington State in the United States of America showed a 'statistically significant elevated risk of death from cancer of the buccal cavity and pharynx among butchers and meatcutters'.

Chapter Nine

However careful you are to avoid potentially cancerous chemicals, cancer cells will occasionally develop inside your body. Most of the time those cancer cells are dealt with speedily and effectively by your body's defence systems. White blood cells find and destroy cancer cells in just the same way that they find and destroy bacteria.

Your body's natural immune system (and its ability to deal with cancer) will be damaged if you eat the wrong sort of foods – and will be aided and improved if you eat the right foods.

Fatty foods will weaken your immune system and make your body less capable of fighting off those occasional cancer cells. When researchers studied the blood of human volunteers, they found that a low fat diet greatly improved the activity of the body's natural killer cells.

Incidentally, it has been shown that as far as the body's immune system is concerned, vegetable fats are just as bad as animal fats. You will protect your heart by reducing your animal fat consumption but in order to protect yourself against cancer you need to reduce your entire fat consumption – and that includes vegetable oils.

Vegetarians have more than double the cancer cell destroying capability of non-vegetarians. But this is not entirely due to the low fat content of a vegetarian diet. It is probably also due to the fact that vegetarians consume fewer toxic chemicals and no animal proteins.

And vegetarians have another advantage too: the ability of the human body's natural, killer cells to do their work is improved by substances such as beta-carotene which are found in considerable quantities in vegetables. (One survey of meat eaters showed that many could neither name nor describe any green vegetables).

Foods to avoid

1. Fatty foods in general

The average diet still contains 40 per cent fat. Many official recommendations are still only encouraging a reduction in fat intake to around 30 per cent of the diet – despite evidence showing that a reduction to somewhere between 10 per cent and 20 per cent would make far more sense. Fat was the first dietary constituent to be linked with cancer and there is now probably more evidence damning fat than any other foodstuff. According to the National Academy of Sciences report *Diet, Nutrition and Cancer* (published by the National Academy Press in Washington D.C., U.S.A. in 1982) there were at least six international studies published in the 1970s which showed a direct association between the amount of fat eaten and the incidence of breast cancer incidence or mortality. In addition, a state by state study published within the U.S. showed a significant direct correlation between fat intake and breast cancer mortality rates.

'Japanese women have the lowest breast cancer rate in the world,' says Dr Oliver Alabaster, Director of the Institute for Disease Prevention at the George Washington University Medical Center, quoted in *The Power of your Plate*, by Dr Neal D Barnard. 'Many Japanese women have migrated to Hawaii and the U.S. mainland. While marrying within their own community and keeping the population relatively unchanged genetically, they shifted their diet towards a more Western, higher fat diet and their breast cancer rate steadily climbed. A few decades ago, the Japanese diet contained only around 10 per cent fat – today the average Japanese diet contains about 25 per cent fat. Within one generation it approximated that of Caucasian women living around them. This is very dramatic evidence that cancer is mainly environmentally induced, rather than genetically inherited.'

Peter Greenwald, Director of Cancer Prevention and Control of the National Cancer Institute in the United States of America also says that there is a great deal of evidence that fat increases cancer risk and points out that the differences in breast cancer rates in different countries cannot be due to other factors such as stress, pollution or industrialisation since there are highly industrialised countries such as Japan where stress and pollution are as high as the U.S.A. or Europe but where colon and breast cancer rates are low.

Since the mid-1970s, there has been strong evidence to show a link between a high fat intake and prostate cancer. The National Academy of Sciences reports that an American study showed a correlation between a high fat intake and a high risk for prostate cancer. Studies in 41 countries have shown a high correlation between mortality from prostate cancer and intake of fats, milk and meats (especially beef). A ten year Japanese study involving 122,261 men aged 40 or older showed 'an inverse association between daily intake of green and yellow vegetables and mortality from prostate cancer'. Another study showed that vegetarian men were less likely to develop prostate cancer.

Other studies also confirm this link. In 1993, a study of 47,855 men, reported in the *Medical Research Modernization Committee Report* revealed that those men who had high fat diets had a relative risk of 1.79 for advanced prostate cancer compared to those on a low fat diet. The investigators found that 'most animal fats were associated with advanced prostate cancer, but fats from vegetables, dairy products (except butter) and fish were not.'

The National Academy of Sciences reports that 'other reproductive organs for which there have been associations between dietary fat and cancer include the testes, corpus uteri, and ovary'.

There is also a considerable amount of published evidence available to show that there is a firm association between dietary fat and gastrointestinal tract cancer. Some researchers have shown a link between dietary fat and cancer of the pancreas, and others have shown a link between fat and stomach cancer. Researchers have also accumulated strong evidence confirming a correlation between dietary fat and large bowel cancer (cancers of the colon and rectum).

The National Academy of Sciences reports that: 'In general, it is not possible to identify specific components of fat as being clearly responsible for the observed effects, although total fat and saturated fat have been associated most frequently.'

With all this evidence available directly from observations of human patients, it is exceedingly difficult to see why such a large proportion of the cancer industry's budget is spent on performing experiments on animals.

Although the evidence showing that fat causes cancer is totally convincing (a United States Surgeon General has advised U.S. citizens that 'a comparison of populations indicates that death rates for cancers of the breast, colon and prostate are directly proportional to estimated dietary fat intakes') there is still a considerable amount of doubt about the mechanism whereby fat causes cancer.

One theory is that carcinogenic chemicals simply dissolve and accumulate in fatty tissues. If this is the case then people who eat animal fats will suffer twice for the chances are high that the fat they are eating already contains dissolved carcinogens. Another possibility is that fat may encourage the development of cancer by affecting the activity of sex hormones. Vegetarian and low fat diets reduce the levels of circulating female sex hormones such as oestradiol. Sex hormones are known to help promote the development of breast cancer and cancer of the reproductive organs (such as the uterus and ovary in women and the prostate in men).

Despite the lack of clear evidence about exactly how fat causes cancer, the final message is quite clear – to reduce your cancer risk you should make a real effort to cut back your fat intake – and that includes cutting out vegetable fats too. You should not make the mistake of assuming that you can avoid or cut down your fat intake noticeably by living on a diet of chicken and fish. Although it is widely believed that both fish and chicken are low in fat, the truth is that even skinless white meat from a chicken is 23 per cent fat while most fish contain between 20 to 30 per cent fat and some are much higher – mackerel, for example, contains over 50 per cent fat. The only truly low fat diet is a diet which is mainly composed of vegetables, fruits, and whole grain cereals. Rice contains only about 1 per cent fat and no plant foods contain any cholesterol (although frying potatoes and turning them into chips can add a lot of fat!)

If you ignore this message then you are making a clear and conscious choice to accept a high cancer risk as the price for your high fat diet.

2. Meat and animal products

Numerous researchers have linked protein with cancers of the breast, prostate, endometrium (lining of the uterus), colon and rectum, pancreas and kidney. And the type of protein which is most likely to cause cancer is protein obtained from meat.

The United States Surgeon General's Report *Nutrition and Health* said: 'In one international correlational study, for example, a positive association was observed between total protein and animal protein and breast, colon, prostate, renal and endometrial cancers (Armstrong and Doll 1975). Similarly, a migrant study indicated an association between meat consumption and cancer of the breast and colon (Kolonel 1987).'

The Surgeon General also reported that: 'Studies have also found an association between breast cancer and meat intake (Lubin et al 1981) and an association of meat, especially beef, with large bowel cancer among Japanese (Haenszel et al 1973)…'

One possible reason for the meat-cancer link may be the fact that chemicals such as DDT tend to accumulate in animal tissues – and may be found in animal tissues years after their usage has been controlled or stopped. Whether it is the chemicals in animal protein which cause cancer is, however, a question of rather theoretical interest: the important point is that meat causes cancer.

There is evidence to show that well-off Japanese women who eat meat daily have more than eight times the risk of breast cancer compared with poorer women who rarely consume meat.

There have also been several reports showing a high correlation between meat (an important source of dietary fat, especially saturated fat) and colon cancer. Beef has been specifically named as one type of meat associated with colon cancer. Several studies have shown a relationship between the incidence of prostate cancer and the consumption of animal protein.

Because most people who eat a lot of meat usually also eat a great deal of fat (because meat often contains a lot of fat), it is difficult to know whether these links between meat and cancer are a result of the protein in the meat or the fat in the meat. It is also possible that the link between meat and cancer is a result of mutagens being formed during the cooking of meat. And some experts have pointed out that carcinogenic fat soluble contaminants such as drugs and pesticides may be the reason why meat causes cancer.

However, I regard the question of how meat causes cancer as being of largely theoretical interest. The important thing is that most of us need to eat less protein in general – and since there is a link between meat and cancer it seems pretty clear that cutting out meat is a sensible way to cut down protein.

3. Dairy products

The consumption of milk and other dairy products is relatively new in human history. And it is only in the 'highly developed' and 'westernised' world that milk drinking is considered essential or even normal.

Milk drinking (and the consumption of other dairy products) has developed because farmers and marketing experts have created the products and not because consuming these products is normal, essential or healthy. Babies need their mother's milk, taken direct from the breast, but no human beings need to drink dairy milk, or eat butter or cheese or other dairy products.

It is, almost certainly, the fat in dairy products which makes them particularly dangerous. Inevitably, therefore, some dairy products are more dangerous than others. Butter and cream and high fat cheeses are far more likely to cause problems than are low fat yoghurt, low fat cheese or skimmed milk.

But it isn't only the fat in dairy products which causes problems. There has for some years been accumulating evidence to suggest that dairy products can cause a wide variety of illnesses and there is now also some evidence to suggest that dairy products may be a contributory factor in the development of cancer of the ovary. The problem is, it seems, that a sugar in milk called lactose is broken down within the body to produce another sugar called galactose – which is then, in turn, broken down again. But if the consumption of dairy produce exceeds the body's ability to break down galactose this sugar may accumulate in the blood – and have an effect on the ovaries. Drinking low or non-fat milk won't help this particular problem because the problem is caused by sugar not fat.

4. Alcohol

It has been known for some years that there is an association between alcohol abuse and cancer. In 1937, in France, it was noted that 95 per cent of patients with oesophageal cancer were alcohol abusers. Another French study, published in the 1960s and involving 4,000 patients, showed a significant correlation between alcohol consumption and cancers of the tongue, hypopharynx and larynx. In 1964, the World Health Organisation concluded that: 'excessive consumption of alcoholic beverages was associated with cancer of the mouth, larynx and oesophagus'. A Finnish study, published in 1974, showed that chronic alcoholics were more likely to develop cancers of the pharynx, oesophagus and lung.

Alcohol has also been linked with cancer of the stomach and cancer of the pancreas. In 1988, the United States Surgeon General reported that: 'Reviews of experimental and epidemiological data suggest an association between alcohol consumption and human cancer that is strongest for certain head and neck cancers.' Smoking seems to make matters even worse and there is a synergistic carcinogenic relationship between alcohol and smoking tobacco: people who drink a good deal of alcohol and smoke tobacco are particularly likely to suffer from cancer of the mouth, larynx, oesophagus and respiratory tract.

You don't have to give up drinking alcohol completely in order to avoid or minimise this cancer risk. If you enjoy a glass of wine with a meal or a glass of whisky afterwards then that's fine. I myself am rather partial to a glass of malt whisky. But limit yourself to one or possibly two drinks a day at most.

5. Food additives

Over 15,000 chemical substances are added to food as it is processed. Some of these chemicals are introduced deliberately (to add flavour, colour and consistency and so on) but many thousands of chemicals are added indirectly, either because they are used in food packaging or because they have been consumed by animals (as drugs or hormones) before finding their way into animal products.

Only a very small number of the substances added to foods have been tested for carcinogenicity and very few epidemiological studies have been conducted to find out whether or not there are any relationships between food additives and cancer incidence. At least one government has admitted that there are too many additives for them all to be fully tested. (The extent of the problem can be seen from the fact that any comprehensive testing programme would have to examine any possible synergistic activity between any combination of the many thousands of additives used).

6. Smoked, salted and pickled foods

Substances which are potentially carcinogenic are produced in charred meat and fish because of changes in the proteins in those foods which occur when foods are cooked at very high temperatures.

Cooking foods over charcoal or smoking foods results in the food being covered with carcinogenic substances. In 1964, it was reported that beef grilled over a gas or charcoal fire contained polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) produced from smoke generated by the dripping of fat from the meat onto the hot coals. Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons have also been found in a number of different types of smoked foods. Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons account for some of the potentially carcinogenic changes that occur in food during cooking.

The United States Surgeon General has reported that: 'International epidemiological evidence suggests that populations consuming diets high in salt-cured, salt-pickled, and smoked foods have a higher incidence of stomach and oesophageal cancers.'

The available evidence suggests that it is wisest to avoid food which has been salt-cured, salt-pickled, 'smoked' or cooked on a barbecue.

Chapter Ten

Here’s a list of foods which will help prevent cancer:

1. Fibre

Until relatively recently, fibre was regarded as an entirely inert substance – an unnecessary ‘filler’ that simply took up space in food, on the plate and in your stomach. There were even many experts who regarded fibre as a nuisance – something to be removed from food whenever possible. It was argued that because of its bulky presence, fibre might interfere with the absorption of essential minerals.

The research work of Dr Denis Burkitt and other doctors changed that point of view for ever. It is now clear that fibre passes through the small intestines without being digested but that it removes harmful substances and helps to speed up the passage of food through the intestinal tract.

Once it had been recognised that people who ate a ‘primitive diet’ (rich in complex carbohydrates such as fibre) were less likely to suffer from a range of disorders, including bowel cancer, the popularity of fibre began to rise.

Burkitt noted that colorectal cancer (cancers of the colon and rectum) is rare among primitive people who eat unrefined foods.

Inevitably, perhaps, the food industry’s immediate, knee-jerk response to this discovery was to start selling consumers bran and fibre supplements! Instead of encouraging people to buy more natural foods, full of natural fibre, the massive, international industry continued to sell packaged foods from which the fibre had been removed – but added a new range of foods which had been artificially enriched with fibre and many new varieties of fibre supplements. It was a trick of stupefying audacity, but it worked: all around the globe, in so-called developed countries, people who regarded themselves as educated and intelligent consumers sought to balance their fibre deprived diets by purchasing and swallowing these artificial fibre supplements. Having paid the food industry to take the essential fibre out of their food they then paid the industry a second time to buy the fibre back.

Dietary fibre usually includes indigestible carbohydrates and carbohydrate like food components such as cellulose, lignin, hemicellulose, pentosans, gums and pectins – all of which provide bulk. The foods that usually provide fibre are vegetables, fruits and whole grain cereals.

Researchers are still trying to decide whether fibre helps prevent cancer directly or whether it works by helping to rid the body of carcinogenic substances. Fibre can dilute the carcinogens present in the large bowel; it can influence the composition and activity of the flora living in the intestine; it can affect the production of carcinogenic substances and it can speed up the rate at which food passes through the bowel (thereby reducing the amount of time that carcinogens are in contact with bowel tissue). Fibre seems to affect cholesterol metabolism and it is believed to reduce the levels of hormones which may lead to the development of cancer.

There is evidence that fibre helps to balance the cancer producing effect of fat in the diet. When you eat a fatty meal, the gallbladder produces bile acids which flow into the intestine. The job of the bile acids is the help with the absorption of the fat in your meal. Bacteria which already exist within the intestine, turn the bile acids into substances called secondary bile acids which are believed to promote the development of cancer. Fibre helps by having an effect on the bacteria in the intestine and, because it has a ‘blotting paper’ effect, by absorbing the bile acids. Because fibre takes up a lot of space, it also dilutes the effect of the potentially harmful substances. In addition, fibre is believed to delay the onset of menstruation in young girls. Girls who are brought up on a primitive, fibre rich diet start to menstruate several years later than girls who are brought up on a typical, fat rich, fibre poor ‘western’ diet. This is important because there is also evidence to show that the risk of breast cancer goes up as the onset of menstruation comes down. Just how fibre has all these effects is still the subject of some discussion, although it has been suggested that specific components of fibre are more likely than fibre per se to be responsible for protecting humans against cancer.

As far as you and I are concerned, however, I believe that all this theory and all this research is only of academic value. The important thing to know is that your diet should contain a plentiful supply of natural fibre. You can get fibre from vegetables and beans and whole wheat bread, brown rice and cereals. Fibre is lost from refined grains and no foods made from dead animals contain fibre.

2. Vegetables and fruit

One advantage of eating more vegetable products is undoubtedly the fact that by so doing you will inevitably eat few animal products – foodstuffs which are known to cause cancer! But fruit and vegetables have positive values too!

Vegetables and fruit also contain fibre – and some vegetables (cruciferous vegetables – cabbage, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts and broccoli) contain constituents (such as indoles and isothiocyanates) which are believed to have an anti-cancer effect. A large number of scientific studies have shown that an individual's risk of developing cancer (particularly cancer of the gastro-intestinal tract – including the stomach and the large bowel) goes down if he eats more vegetables. No one really knows for certain why this is – but once again, the exact mechanism by which the consumption of vegetables protects against the development of cancer is much less important than the existence of the relationship.

In 1972, it was found that the consumption of raw vegetables, including coleslaw and red cabbage seemed to protect against stomach cancer. In 1975, it was found that the consumption of fibre rich foods such as cabbage protected against colon cancer. In 1978, it was reported that individuals who frequently ate raw vegetables (especially cabbage, Brussels sprouts and broccoli) were less likely to develop cancer of the colon.

Garlic and onions contain large quantities of a chemical which seems to have anti-cancer properties. People who eat large quantities of garlic and onions have less than half the risk of stomach cancer of people who either don't eat these vegetables at all or who eat them in very small quantities.

There are many other substances found in vegetables and fruits which seem to help prevent cancer. Phenols, flavones, protease inhibitors, glutathione and beta-sitosterol are just a few of the natural chemicals found in vegetables and fruits which seem to have an anti-cancer effect. And there is evidence to suggest that many vegetables and fruits contain antimutagens which help protect cells against the activity of mutagens – substances which damage a cell's DNA and can turn an ordinary cell into a cancerous cell.

There have been many attempts to explain the protective effects of vegetables but I believe the important thing is that the inverse relationship between these vegetables and the development of cancer (that is the fact that those who eat these vegetables are less likely to develop cancer) has been clearly and indisputably established.

In 1982, the American National Academy of Sciences concluded that there is sufficient epidemiological evidence to suggest that consumption of certain vegetables, especially carotene rich (i.e. dark green and deep yellow) vegetables and cruciferous vegetables (e.g. cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower and Brussels sprouts) is associated with a reduction in the incidence of cancer at several sites in humans.

3. Whole grains

Whole grains (rice, oats, wheat, barley, etc which have not been processed and had part of the 'goodness' removed) contain fibre, vitamin E and selenium – all of which can help reduce your risk of developing cancer.

4. Vitamins and minerals

For the last two decades there has been a considerable amount of discussion about the value of vitamins (particularly vitamins A and C) in the prevention – and even treatment – of cancer. In vitamin A, it is the beta-carotene content which is believed to have the protective quality. ('A large body of evidence suggests that foods high in vitamin A and carotenoids are protective against a variety of epithelial cancers', said the U.S. Surgeon General).

Researchers have found that people who eat a diet which is low in vitamin A tend to be more likely to suffer from cancers of the lung, larynx, bladder, oesophagus, stomach, colon, rectum and prostate. However, vitamin A is itself potentially toxic and it seems clear that it is wisest to obtain your vitamin A as part of a healthy, natural diet rather than as a supplement.

With vitamin C, researchers have found that this vitamin may lower the risk of cancer; in particular, it seems to lower the risk of cancer of the oesophagus and stomach. Once again, it seems more satisfactory to obtain the vitamin C from a natural diet than from supplements. A diet which is based on or around vegetables and fruit will automatically contain a healthy quantity of vitamin C.

Despite all the billions of dollars' worth of research which has been done, no one yet knows how cancer develops. One theory is that free radicals – molecules produced routinely within the body – may damage the DNA within our cells, transforming a previously normal cell into a potentially cancerous cell.

Fortunately, it is now believed that there are some food substances called antioxidants which can neutralise free radicals which are formed. There are four known antioxidants at the moment: betacarotene (which is converted in the human body to vitamin A), vitamins C and E and the mineral selenium. Through their antioxidant properties – and their ability to neutralise free radicals, these four substances are believed to be able to help prevent cancer (and, incidentally, to help prevent ageing and heart disease as well).

Because it can be toxic, I don't recommend taking vitamin A supplements. But your body can get all the vitamin A it needs from vegetables and fruits. Foods which contain betacarotene include carrots, spinach, broccoli, apricots, asparagus, kale and peaches. Although some experts believe that vitamin C supplements are safe and helpful, I prefer to obtain vitamin C from fruits and vegetables. Citrus fruits – such as oranges, grapefruit and lemons – are rich in vitamin C and many vegetables, including potatoes, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, asparagus and tomatoes also contain the vitamin. Vitamin E is found in grains and vegetable oils and I personally do not think that supplements are necessary. Selenium, the mineral which is an antioxidant, is obtainable as a supplement but I don't recommend that you take it that way. Selenium can be toxic in large quantities (the U.S. Surgeon General has described selenium as 'among the most toxic essential elements'). You can get selenium in whole grains.

Your body will obtain all the anti-cancer vitamins and minerals it needs if you eat fresh dark green and yellow vegetables, fruits, beans and whole grain cereals.

Some of those who advocate meat eating claim that vegetarians are likely to have a diet which is deficient in iron. This is nonsense. A good, well-balanced vegetarian diet will contain plenty of iron. Indeed, there is now evidence to suggest that too much iron in the blood (a problem which can occur among meat eaters) increases the chances of cancer developing. When iron has been absorbed, the body stores it. In many westernised countries iron 'overload' is thought to be more common than iron deficiency. According to the American Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine 'higher amounts of iron in the blood mean a higher cancer risk.' It also appears that iron that comes from animal sources is more likely to cause heart disease.

Zinc is another mineral which is believed to have some beneficial effects on cancer risk. Dr Melvyn R Werbach's excellent source book *Nutritional Influences on Illness* lists three scientific papers which have shown that there may be a link between a low zinc intake and prostate cancer. One paper showed that serum levels in prostatic cancer are low when compared to patients who have benign prostatic hypertrophy. A second paper showed that prostatic tissue levels of zinc are low in prostatic cancer compared to normal men. And a third paper showed that prostatic tissue levels are low in prostatic cancer compared to patients with prostatic hyperplasia.

Sadly, there still seems to be insufficient evidence available for me to offer solid guidelines on the subject of zinc and prostate cancer. It seems a pity that the cancer industry (the recipient of billions of dollars in charitable contributions) has not done more work into this possible link. Prostate cancer is, of course, one of the major killers of men. Zinc is present in rice, corn and oats, spinach, peas and potatoes and so a good, well balanced vegetarian diet should provide a plentiful supply. Since it is possible that too much zinc may cause damage I would recommend that you obtain your zinc from foods rather than from supplements.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that human experiments have shown that your body can repair the DNA which has been damaged by free radicals if it receives a plentiful supply of folic acid – one of the vitamin B complex of vitamins. Your body will receive the folic acid it needs if you eat a diet which is rich in dark green, leafy vegetables, fruits, dried peas, beans and wheat germ.

Foods which contain antioxidants (beta carotene, vitamin C, vitamin E):
Apple
Broccoli
Brussels sprouts
Carrot
Cauliflower
Chick peas
Corn
Grapefruit
Orange
Pineapple
Brown rice
Soy beans
Spinach
Strawberries
Sweet Potato

Foods which contain folic acid
Asparagus
Baked beans
Black beans
Black eyed peas
Broccoli

Brussels sprouts
Chick peas
Kidney beans
Lentils
Soya beans
Spinach

Chapter Eleven

There is a drug on sale in shops, supermarkets, airports, pubs and kiosks which has killed more people than the revolver, the machine gun, the hand grenade, the motor car, the aeroplane or the nuclear bomb. This drug has killed more people than cholera, smallpox, typhoid, tuberculosis, leprosy, malaria, yellow fever or the bubonic plague. In the last half a century, more than 45,000 scientific papers have been published proving without doubt that this drug which is available without prescription is responsible for a huge number of lethal or disabling diseases. The drug is, of course, tobacco.

Despite the publicity about the dangers of tobacco smoking and the protests from those who object to the pollution of the atmosphere, the number of people smoking remains high.

The cigarette is a perfect example of how science and industry have together turned a relatively harmless pastime (chewing tobacco leaves) into a dangerous addiction. Cigarettes are perfectly designed to ensure that the dangerous substances cigarettes contain are directed into the body quickly, repeatedly and conveniently. Tobacco is so powerful that just one of the 4,000 dangerous chemicals it contains is between 5 and 10 times as potent as cocaine. Tobacco is so addictive that only one quarter of the people who ever try it will ever succeed in breaking the habit.

There is enough nicotine in the average cigar to kill two people and the only reason cigars and cigarettes are not instantly lethal is that the nicotine they contain is taken into the body fairly slowly. Nicotine has been reported to be six or eight times more addictive than alcohol and between five and ten times as potent as cocaine.

Apart from its poisonous qualities, nicotine has a number of undesirable effects on the human body. It stimulates the central nervous system and increases the electrical activity of the brain, lowers the skin temperature, causes blood vessels in the skin to become narrow, increases the blood pressure and the heart rate and numbs the taste buds. Cigarette smoke also contains several thousand other poisonous substances: for example, carbon monoxide gas. This reduces the oxygen carrying capacity of the blood and is one of the main reasons heavy smokers so often complain of a shortness of breath.

Smokers are vulnerable to respiratory disorders such as asthma and bronchitis, to chest infections, sinus troubles, indigestion, gastritis and peptic ulcers. Many circulatory problems, raised blood pressure, arterial blockages and strokes are all known to be tobacco related. There is a strong link between smoking and heart disease – smokers are twice as likely to die of heart disease as are non-smokers. Tobacco causes impotence in men and makes women infertile. When women who use it do get pregnant, they give birth to small, sickly babies who are very likely to die while young. Children whose parents smoke are slow to develop – both physically and mentally – and are prone to more colds and chest infections than other children. Finally, there is lung cancer, the disease most commonly associated with cigarettes.

At the start of the 20th century, lung cancer killed no more than 10 men out of every 100,000. But just over half a century later, 200 men out of every 100,000 were dying of lung cancer. Between 1954 and 1971 the number of male doctors who smoked cigarettes more or less halved – from 43 per cent to 21 per cent and the death rate from lung cancer among doctors fell by 25 per cent. But among the rest of the male population – who had not cut down their smoking – the incidence of lung cancer increased by 26 per cent. It isn't just lung cancer which is linked to tobacco. Other cancers associated with smoking cigarettes, pipes or cigars include cancers of the pancreas, the urinary tract and the mouth, larynx and oesophagus.

According to official statistics, the majority of the thousands of people who have major surgery are smokers; 95 per cent of all patients with serious arterial disease of the legs are smokers and 20 per cent of the people who die of coronary artery disease do so because they smoke.

Despite all this well-documented and well-publicised evidence, and despite the printing of health warnings on all cigarette packs, countless millions around the world continue to smoke. The vast majority smoke because they are addicted. Despite the fact that when smokers give up their habit, they suffer clear withdrawal symptoms such as anxiety and restlessness there has, in the past, been a considerable amount of argument about whether or not people do get addicted to tobacco. It has, however, been shown that if smokers are given low nicotine cigarettes to replace their normal brand they will tend to smoke more of the low nicotine cigarettes. This evidence supports the theory that smokers can become addicted to tobacco.

Chapter Twelve

The first product sold to smokers wanting to give up the habit was, I believe, NO-TO-BAC which was marketed in the 1890s. Since then hundreds of companies and individuals have offered cures to smokers wanting help. I personally believe that the smoker who really wants to give up can probably do so by himself without any professional aid.

Here is a technique for giving up smoking which I recommend:

Make a list of all the places where you smoke, putting the place where you smoke most at the top of your list and the place where you smoke least at the bottom of your list.

So, if you smoke most in the living room and smoke only rarely in the car then put the living room at the top of your list and the car at the bottom of your list.

Then give up smoking in each place in turn, starting at the bottom of the list and working your way up the list.

You mustn't go up your list until you can honestly and confidently claim that you've abandoned smoking at the lowest place on your list.

So, for example, your original list may look like this:

1. Living room
2. Office
3. Kitchen
4. Bedroom
5. Bathroom
6. Car

You should begin by giving up smoking in the car. You should only try to stop smoking in the bathroom when you *never* smoke in the car. And so on.

The main advantage of this simple system is that you can give up smoking at an easy rate. And even if you can't give up altogether, at least you'll have cut down your cigarette consumption – which will help.

Remember too that if you smoke because of stress and pressure you should keep the amount of stress in your life to a minimum and you should also learn how to relax your mind and your body.

Even if you have been a heavy smoker for years, you will benefit in a number of ways if you succeed in cutting down: you will be healthier, you will live longer (smoking knocks 5 years off your life), you will save money, food will taste better, your teeth will be cleaner and your breath will taste sweeter. As a bonus, your family will be healthier too.

Chapter Thirteen

You don’t have to smoke yourself to be killed by a cigarette. Tobacco is so dangerous that if you simply live with someone who uses it then your chances of developing lung cancer or having a heart attack are increased dramatically. At a world conference on lung health in Boston in 1990, it was estimated that passive smoking kills 50,000 Americans a year – two thirds of whom die of heart disease. That is, without a doubt, far, far more than the number of people who die from using all illegal drugs.

According to the World Health Organization, tobacco smoke in the environment is responsible for around one quarter of all the lung cancers which affect non-smokers. A W.H.O. statement warned that: ‘in marriages where one partner smokes and the other does not, the risk of lung cancer to the non-smoker is 20-50 per cent higher’.

Here is some of the scientific evidence which shows just how dangerous other people’s exhaled tobacco smoke can be.

* In the UK, as many as 1,000 non-smokers die each year as a result of inhaling other people’s cigarette smoke.

* Every year in the UK, thousands of children under the age of five are admitted to hospital because of tobacco smoke from their parents or people looking after them. The report, which reviewed 400 research papers, estimated that children whose parents smoke inhale the equivalent of 150 cigarettes a year. The same report also estimates that smoking by pregnant women causes 4,000 miscarriages of healthy babies each year.

* An American study concluded that women who breathe in other people’s tobacco smoke are more likely to develop cervical cancer.

* Evidence presented at a scientific session of the American Heart Association showed that men who do not smoke are more likely to have heart disease if their partners do smoke.

* Researchers in London have shown that smoking in the home can stunt children’s growth.

* British research concluded that breathing other people’s tobacco smoke is a cause of lung cancer.

* An Australian judge has branded the tobacco industry guilty of misleading and deceptive advertising in claiming that there is no scientific proof that passive smoking was a health risk. After a 90 day hearing the judge, who reviewed evidence from the United States, Europe and Australia said the evidence showed that passive smoking caused respiratory diseases in young children, asthma and lung cancer.

* An American government agency concluded that passive smoking causes several thousand lung cancer deaths each year in America.

* A U.S. scientist has estimated that passive smoking kills 50,000 Americans a year – two thirds of whom die of heart disease. He said that passive smoking ranks behind smoking and alcohol as the third leading preventable cause of death.

* Studies in America show that children of parents who smoke have an increased risk of heart disease.

The conclusion is simple: try to keep away from other people who are smoking tobacco.

Chapter Fourteen

In 1895, a 50-year-old Professor of Physics in Germany made an accidental discovery which was to have as great an effect on the practice of clinical medicine and practical surgery as any other single technological step forward in the history of healing. His discovery has also become the most significant cause of cancer among the various different types of radiation to which most of us are exposed.

Professor Wilhelm Konrad von Rontgen was an experimental physicist and in 1895, he was investigating the effects of cathode rays. What caught his attention was the fact that, although the tube he was working with was covered with black cardboard, a greenish glow seemed to come from a piece of paper coated with a substance called barium platinocyanide which happened to be lying on a nearby bench. Rontgen realised that the paper must have been made luminous by some unknown rays – something other than the cathode rays he had started off investigating.

Rontgen decided to investigate further. He put a thousand page textbook between the tube and his piece of coated paper and found that the paper still became luminous.

Next, he placed his hand between the tube and the piece of paper and saw the bones of his hands appear on the luminous paper as dark shadows. They were obviously dense enough to prevent the flow of these unseen rays – which had gone straight through the soft tissues of his hand. He had discovered X-rays.

Doctors around the world soon saw the benefits to be obtained from Rontgen's discovery. At the end of February 1896, just under two months after Rontgen's original experiment, the British medical journal the *Lancet* published a report from Liverpool which described how a surgeon had used X-rays to help him localise an air-gun pellet before arranging for its removal.

By enabling doctors to see inside the living human body, X-rays made it possible for physicians and surgeons to make much more accurate diagnoses than ever before.

Other research workers discovered that radioactive materials could be used to burn and destroy unwanted pieces of tissue. Doctors used X-rays to make the hair fall out from the heads of children so that their ringworm could be treated more effectively. More importantly, doctors found that radioactive materials could be used to attack cancerous growths. Pierre and Marie Curie were just two of the researchers who investigated the possibility of using radium as a therapeutic material in the early years of the 20th century.

By the beginning of the 20th century, the risks associated with X-rays had been well documented. A number of well-known researchers died during the early part of the century. But despite all this evidence, X-rays were still used very widely. In the 30s and 40s, X-rays were used extensively to look for signs of tuberculosis in the lungs. The result of this was that years later, a number of women who had been exposed to these heavy doses of X-rays developed breast cancer. By the 1950s, it was clear that X-rays could cause a great deal of damage. (Though, as a boy in the 1950s, I remember that shoe shops often contained a device with which parents and shoe fitters could look at a foot inside a shoe to see that there was room for the foot to move. Like many other children, I delighted in looking at my feet through this publicly available X-ray machine.)

By the 1970s, doctors were beginning to worry that X-rays might be killing more people than they were saving. Mammography (X-rays of the breasts) had been introduced in the 1960s but doctors began to worry that mammography might be causing more cancer than it was detecting.

Doctors use X-rays in two main ways: as screening tools and as diagnostic aids. These two techniques together make up by far the largest exposure of artificial radiation to which most people are exposed. The average dose of X-ray used in a diagnostic X-ray, is estimated to be about as dangerous as smoking six cigarettes. Every X-ray involves a risk and every unnecessary X-ray involves an unnecessary risk.

In my book *The Health Scandal* I concluded that most X-rays are entirely unnecessary. 'They are,' I wrote, 'potentially hazardous, they are extremely expensive and they are extremely unlikely to contribute anything to your doctor's knowledge of your illness.'

One of the first papers to have been published criticising the number of X-rays done, appeared in the *British Medical Journal* in the 1960s when a radiologist and a neurologist estimated that the consumption of X-ray film was doubling every 13 years. The authors concluded that their study gave 'ample evidence that the great majority of plain X-ray films taken for such conditions as migraine and headache, did not contribute materially to the diagnosis.' They pointed out that much time and effort was wasted by doctors, radiographers and patients. Their plea for doctors to think before ordering X-rays fell on deaf ears.

In the 1970s, the *British Medical Journal* again printed an appeal for doctors to order fewer X-ray pictures. By then it was estimated that the number of radiological examinations was increasing by ten per cent every year. This time, the report in the BMJ pointed out that after routine chest X-rays were taken of 521 patients under the age of 20, not one serious abnormality was detected.

By the 1980s, the problem had become such an important one (and a global one) that the World Health Organization issued a statement saying that ‘routine X-ray examinations frequently are not worthwhile. Doctors,’ said the W.H.O. ‘ask for X-rays as a comforting ritual.’ The W.H.O. went on to point out that X-rays are so overused and misused that they constitute a major source of population exposure to manmade ionizing radiation.

Today, the situation continues to get worse. Many X-rays are done because patients demand them (‘Couldn’t you just do an X-ray to see what is causing the pain, doctor?’ ‘Wouldn’t it be sensible to do an X-ray to make sure that nothing is broken?’). Doctors comply with these demands because they know that if they don’t, and something subsequently goes wrong, then there is a real risk that a court will find them negligent. Taking an X-ray just-in-case is now commonplace and these days most X-rays are taken for legal rather than medical reasons.

Chapter Fifteen

Do not allow yourself to become overweight. If you are already overweight then make a real effort to diet successfully – and to maintain an acceptable weight for your height. Heart disease, strokes, diabetes, gallstones and some types of cancer are now all known to be made more likely by excess weight.

The United States Surgeon General, in the 1988 publication entitled *The Surgeon General's Report on Nutrition and Health*, reported that: 'In international studies, a correlation between total per capita calories and cancers of the breast, colon, rectum, uterus and kidney has been reported (Armstrong and Doll 1975). Case control studies have found positive associations between energy intake and breast cancer (Miller et al 1978) and energy intake and colorectal cancer (Jain et al 1980; Lyon et al 1987). A positive association between increased body weight or body mass index and an increased risk for cancer has been observed for several cancers, including breast (de Waard and Baanders-van Halewijn 1974; Hirayama 1978; Mirra, Cole, and MacMahon 1971), kidney (Goodman, Morgenstern, and Wynder 1986), endometrium (La Vecchia et al 1984), and prostate (Snowdon, Phillips, and Choi 1984).'

One large study showed that the lowest overall cancer mortality was seen in men whose body weights were between 10 per cent below and 20 per cent above the average for their age and height. For women the lowest overall risk was seen in those whose weights ranged from 20 per cent below to 10 per cent above the average for their weight and height. Men who are more than 40 per cent overweight are 33 per cent more likely to die of cancer (with cancer of the colon, rectum and prostate the particular cancers they risk developing). Women who are more than 40 percent overweight are 55 per cent more likely to die of cancer – in particular, they are at risk of cancer of the breast, uterus (cervix and endometrium), ovary and gallbladder. In the summer of 1995, a paper was published describing a study of 115,000 female nurses in the United States of America. The women were followed for 16 years and the researchers found that one third of cancer deaths were due to excess weight. Cancers of the colon, breast and endometrium were all linked to excess weight. The study also showed that women who were obese were twice as likely to die of cancer and were four times as likely to die of heart disease as were women who were below average weight for their age. In a review of the study *The New York Herald Tribune* reported that the results suggested that in the United States 'about 300,000 deaths a year are attributable to overweight.'

If you weigh just 22 pounds more than you did when you were 18-years-old then you are probably at risk.

Chapter Sixteen

The link between sunlight and skin cancer was already established by the end of the 19th century. Every few years, doctors do their best to frighten patients into spending less time in the sunshine – or covering up their skin when they are in the sun. But although these scares produce some behavioural changes in a few people, the vast majority of citizens ignore the advice.

One young woman I know, a keen sunbed enthusiast, needed to have a small, possibly cancerous blemish removed from her arm. She continued to use a sunbed while waiting for the operation to have the possible skin cancer removed and she continued to spend several days a week keeping her skin brown after the possible skin cancer had been removed – even though the risks she was taking were explained to her at some length.

In my opinion, most cases of skin cancer are optional. Unlike tobacco smokers and heavy drinkers, suntan worshippers do not even have the excuse that their recklessness is inspired by an unbreakable physiological or psychological addiction.

Chapter Seventeen

On average, each one of us eats around 5.5lb (2.5kg) of additives every year. Food manufacturers use additives as flavourings, preservatives and colourings. They use them to improve the taste, shelf-life and texture of the foods they sell.

In one booklet published by a government agency, readers were told that ‘ham and bacon couldn’t be sold without the preservative that also gives them their pink colour’. The authors of the booklet claimed that ‘scientists and doctors who check safety evidence for the Government are satisfied the use of these additives is safe.’

In the same booklet the government agency admitted that flavourings are not controlled as tightly as other additives because there are over 3,000 of them in use, in many different combinations!

In no area of medicine is the difference between animals and human beings illustrated more vividly than in the study of food constituents and food additives. Many substances which occur naturally in plants are known to be carcinogenic if eaten by animals. If we refused to eat foods containing substances known to be carcinogenic to other species there would be very little indeed left for us to eat.

Food ingredients which may cause cancer in humans include the polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (the concentration of which is increased by burning, overcooking or barbecuing); the nitrosamines (which may be formed by a reaction between substances normally present in food and the nitrites or nitrates which are added to fish, sausages, bacon, ham, cheese, etc in order to stop the food from ‘spoiling’) and moulds which grow on foods which are normally free of carcinogens and then produce toxic substances called mycotoxins (the fungus called ergot which grows on rye and causes womb contractions in healthy women has been used as a prescription drug and is the substance from which LSD was created). The aflatoxins, which grow on peanuts, are among the most powerful of all carcinogenic substances.

It is, however, the artificial additives which are added to food as preservatives, colourings and flavourings which worry consumers most. Theoretically, chemicals which are added to food are subjected to extensive testing to make sure that they are not dangerous. But the value of many of the tests which are performed must be in question. ‘The interpretation of studies which appear to show the potential for tumour formation in animals is becoming increasingly difficult,’ said the British Medical Association in its book *The BMA Guide to Living With Risk* (published by Penguin in 1990). ‘Some testing procedures are very tightly standardised, but have little relationship to the real world or to use by humans. Other tests are more flexible but difficult to relate one to the other. Indeed, a great deal more needs to be known about the induction of cancer in animals by chemicals before the findings can be confidently related to man.’ (One wonders why scientists don’t just forget about the animal experiments completely and concentrate on human studies. They could do preliminary toxicity and carcinogenicity tests on human tissue and organ samples and then study limited cohort samples in order to investigate the long-term carcinogenicity in humans). ‘Chemicals that cause cancer are a diverse group which act in different ways,’ says the British Medical Association. ‘To classify all of them for the purpose of regulation as ‘carcinogens’ is not very logical today, because we really do not know what some of the laboratory findings in animals actually mean, and the mechanism of action of chemical carcinogens in biochemical terms is very unclear. Some of the testing defies common sense. If a chemical is administered to a rat in relatively enormous amounts there will be absolutely inevitable changes in that part of the diet which remains and is acceptable to that unfortunate animal, its metabolism is bound to be altered, and these changes may or may not have as much influence on the animal’s illness as the chemical itself.’

‘In summary, then,’ said the B.M.A., ‘carcinogens in food are more likely to be there ‘naturally’ or as a result of traditional preservation methods than by the addition of synthetic chemicals. The significance to human beings of very tiny amounts of carcinogens (as assessed through animal experimentation) is unknown. It would be hard to live on a diet which contained no substances which at some time had been shown by laboratory or animal tests to have carcinogenic properties.’ The British Medical Association has also pointed out that ‘if salt and sugar were being tested as potential food additives today, and if judgement of acceptability was to be based purely on the laboratory and animal testing, it is unlikely that either would be permitted for use in food.’

In my view, food additives are potential hazards. They are best avoided as much as possible and this is best done by eating as much fresh food as possible.

Chapter Eighteen

Electricity is almost certainly more dangerous than you think. If you spend most of your time working with or close to an electrical appliance, if you live or work near to an electricity supply line or if you spend your days working with electrical equipment then the chances of you developing cancer of one sort or another are considerably increased.

Of course, the men in empty suits won't tell you this. They'll frighten you half to death about minority threats such as AIDS and radon because the former is politically useful and the latter seems like an excellent way to boost the building industry but they won't give you any warning about the danger of electricity because they don't want to annoy the many large and powerful business interests which sell, market, service or supply electricity and electrical equipment.

But the evidence is pretty convincing; and in America, where people only vote with their wallets when they really believe something, house prices near to electricity supply lines have fallen by as much as a quarter.

Just look at these facts:

* The dean of a school of public health said: 'The present state of affairs is like the correlation between smoking and lung cancer 30 years ago'. He added that, at a conservative estimate, a third of all childhood cancers are caused by electrical fields.

* A study of nearly 500 children showed that children whose mothers used electric blankets when they were pregnant were two and a half times as likely to develop brain tumours.

* A study of nearly 700 children showed that children who lived in houses near to power distribution lines were two or three times as likely to die of leukaemia or brain tumours.

* A study at an American University showed that men who work as electricians or electrical engineers are ten times as likely to develop certain types of brain tumour.

* Experts found that workers for a telephone company who worked alongside electricity power lines were seven times as likely to develop leukaemia.

And so it goes on. The evidence is extremely convincing. In my view, the only real task left is to quantify the risks accurately. And that is proving difficult. And, you may not be surprised to hear, it is taking time.

Meanwhile, what can you do to reduce your chances – and the chances of anyone in your family – of being killed by electrical fields?

Here's some simple advice:

1. Don't have mains powered radios, answering machines, clocks or other electrical devices unnecessarily close – you - on your desk, in the kitchen or by your bed. Battery operated appliances are probably safer.
2. Don't sit within two and a half or three feet of the front sides or the back of a Visual Display Terminal on a computer or word processor.
3. If you are pregnant, try to keep away from Visual Display Terminals completely. A study of over 1,500 women showed that pregnant women who spend more than 20 hours a week working on such terminals have a much greater chance of having a miscarriage.
4. If your child's school is within 150 yards of a major electricity supply line, ask the authorities to test the electrical fields in classrooms, playground and sports fields.
5. Don't sit (and don't let children sit) closer than three feet from your television set when it is switched on. TV sets produce potentially dangerous electrical fields which are stronger the closer you get.
6. Unplug electrical blankets before you get into bed.
7. Don't sit or stand in front of household appliances such as microwave ovens when they are switched on.
8. Try not to live in a home within 150 yards of a major electricity supply line. I think this is probably particularly important if you have small children or are pregnant.

Chapter Nineteen

Here is what I wrote about occupational cancers in my book *Paper Doctors*: ‘In 1775, a prominent English surgeon, Percival Pott, described cancer of the scrotum in chimney sweeps. Since then many other occupational and environmental relationships have been found. It has been proved that wood can cause cancer of the nasopharynx and cancer of the sinuses, that tobacco causes cancer of the tongue, pharynx, lung and oesophagus, and that alcohol causes cancer of the oesophagus. Diets low in fresh vegetables and fruit are likely to result in cancer of the stomach. Occupational cancers are common these days because of new methods of manufacture, waste disposal, power production and food processing. Rubber workers are in danger of developing bladder cancer and workers exposed to cutting oil are particularly likely to develop skin cancers. Sadly, this list expands month by month.’

‘The introduction of synthetic chemicals into such things as pesticides, agricultural preparations, food additives and cosmetics means that many millions of people may be exposed to harmful carcinogenic substances.’

I reported that experts had noted that ‘over 70 per cent of human cancers are probably wholly or partly caused by chemicals’ and that they had shown ‘that despite the well-known historical association between soot and scrotal cancer, there are still cases of cancer caused by similar substances.’

I pointed out that one region alone had recorded 187 cases of scrotal cancer between 1950 and 1967 and that at least two-thirds of these men had worked with mineral oils. I also reported that mineral oil mists had been listed as causes of scrotal cancer among lathe workers.

‘...there is now evidence that exposure to tar fumes is also linked with the development of cancer,’ I wrote, pointing out that studies among gas workers had shown an increase in the incidence of lung cancer, cancer of the bladder, cancer of the skin and cancer of the scrotum. I added that an increase in the incidence of lung cancer has also been reported from doctors studying gas workers in North America.

‘Workers in paint factories, textile factories, printing works and in work involving the use of tar, pitch and gas are at risk from other substances which have in recent years been shown to act as carcinogens,’ I wrote. ‘Workers in chemical, rubber and cable making industries are also listed as being at risk.’ I quoted one publication estimating ‘that in some industrial communities the incidence of occupational bladder cancers may be running at about 20 per cent.’

‘The manufacturing processes used in the preparation of polyvinyl chloride (PVC) have been unchanged for several decades, but it was not until 1974 that it was shown that workers in the industry were developing liver cancer. Work done in the United States, Great Britain, Scandinavia, West Germany, France, Italy, Romania and Czechoslovakia has supported this observation. Workers involved in using asbestos have a greater chance of developing lung cancers, as do workers exposed to small amounts of arsenic,’ I wrote. Today, millions of workers around the world are still regularly exposed to cancer inducing chemicals. The evidence showing the existence of the links between chemicals and cancers is indisputable but no one seems to care or take any notice. Company directors and executives nod pseudo-sympathetically and call for yet more research to substantiate what is already known. Politicians, bribed either by the tax dollars those companies are contributing or by personal campaign contributions, turn a blind eye. Union officials either ignore the evidence or use it to obtain another 2 per cent pay rise. The workers whose lives are at risk put their faith in the abilities of the medical establishment and the pharmaceutical industry to find cures for the cancers they know they will get.

Chapter Twenty

'For the first time in the history of the world, every human being is subject to contact with dangerous chemicals from the moment of conception until death,' wrote Rachel Carson. The book she published in 1962, *Silent Spring*, drew attention to the deadly effects of pesticides such as DDT.

Today, little has changed – except that we spray and smother our world and our food with ever more pesticides. Chemicals are used to kill weeds, insects, bacteria, fungi and animals which threaten the production and profitability of crops.

Once again, the safety – or danger – of these chemicals has been confused by the use of vast numbers of animal experiments. Many chemicals cause birth defects in laboratory animals but these chemicals are still put on the market and used widely on the grounds that animals are so different to human beings that the results of the experiments cannot be used to make any sort of useful judgement about what effect the chemical may have on human beings. And yet no other tests or studies are done! Scientists and politicians rely upon animal experiments which are so misleading that they are worthless.

Just how dangerous all these chemicals are is, therefore, a complete mystery. Some observers now believe that it is through the accumulation of these chemicals in fatty tissue that cancer is triggered. This makes complete sense to me and seems a logical explanation of the fact that a diet that contains too much fat and obesity are both linked to the development of many different types of cancer.

There is little you or I can do to reduce our exposure to pesticides or chemicals. But we can reduce the amount of fat we eat – and we can control our weight.

Chapter Twenty One

Nuclear power is, without a doubt, the source of cancer inducing radiation which most people worry about most. Studies have shown that children born in homes close to nuclear plants, or born to fathers who worked in nuclear plants, are more likely to suffer from diseases such as leukaemia. I believe that there is undoubtedly a cancer risk involved in the use of nuclear power but that this risk is significantly lower than the risks created by the overuse of X-rays.

Appendix 1

The top ten known causes of cancer

1. Foods – 50%
2. Tobacco – 30%
3. Alcohol – 3%
4. Radiation (including X-rays) – 3%
5. Sunshine – 2%
6 Occupation – 2%
7. Medications (including prescription drugs) – 2%
8. Pollution of air and water – 2%
9. Tobacco (passive smoking) – 1%
10. Industrial and household products – 1%

These figures are 'estimates' but are based on the available research. I have not included genetic factors or viruses which are known to cause cancer on this table – that is why the total doesn't add up to 100 per cent. The National Academy of Sciences, which concluded that 'cancers of most major sites are influenced by dietary factors' reported that in 1979, researchers using international and intranational comparisons of cancer incidence, the differences between U.S. mortality rates and the lowest reported worldwide mortality rates for each potential cancer site, and results of specific case control studies, had concluded that 'a little more than 40 per cent of cancers in men and almost 60 per cent of cancers in women in the United States could be attributed to dietary factors'. In 1981, it was estimated that dietary modifications might result in a one third reduction in the number of deaths from cancer in the United States – with a 90 per cent reduction in deaths from cancer of the stomach and large bowel; a 50 per cent reduction in deaths from cancers of the endometrium, gallbladder, pancreas and breast; a 20 per cent reduction in deaths from cancers of the lung, larynx, bladder, cervix, mouth, pharynx and oesophagus and a 10 per cent reduction in deaths from other sites.

Many people who are aware that cancer is caused by environmental factors seem to believe that the causes are outside their control – regarding the pollution of air, water and food with chemicals as being the major risk factors. This table clearly shows that food and tobacco are by far the two most important causes of cancer and that, therefore, most people have far more control over their own risk of developing cancer than they realise. It is widely agreed that 80 per cent of all cancers are preventable – using knowledge which we have available at the moment. In other words, ignorance (sustained through political and industrial expediency) is responsible for 80 per cent of the millions of deaths caused by cancer each year.

Appendix 2

The early warning signs of cancer

Many cancers are curable – especially if caught early. Here are some of the cancer signs you should watch out for:

* Cancer of the large bowel: change in bowel habits (diarrhoea or constipation), unexplained weight loss, pain, passing blood
* Cancer of the cervix: unexplained bleeding or discharge, pain or bleeding after sex, weight loss
* Cancer of the breast: swelling or lump in breast, bloody discharge from nipple, enlarged glands in armpit, dimpling of the skin of the breast
* Cancer of the lung: persistent bad cough; blood in sputum, chest pain, wheezing, weight loss
* Cancer of the stomach: weight loss, persistent indigestion, vomiting blood, lump in abdomen, feeling full after very small meals
* Cancer of the liver: pain in abdomen, loss of appetite, weight loss, yellow eyes and skin, abdomen swollen
* Cancer of the ovary: irregular periods, hard lump in abdomen, pain during sex, bowel problems, excessive hair growth, voice gets deeper, feeling full after very small meals
* Cancer of the brain: headaches, vomiting, visual disturbances, weakness or paralysis, dizziness, fits, memory loss, personality changes
* Cancer of the skin: skin lesion that doesn't heal, bleeds, gets larger, changes shape, size or colour
* Cancer of the prostate: pain, urine retention, difficulty in passing urine
* Cancer of the testicle: swelling in testicle
* Cancer of the blood (leukaemia): tiredness, paleness, bruising, bleeding easily, lots of infections
* Cancer of the womb: bleeding after sex, lump felt in abdomen
* Cancer of the throat: hoarseness, lump in throat, difficulty in swallowing, swollen glands in neck

Remember:
A patient with cancer may suffer from one, all or none of these symptoms. These symptom lists are not comprehensive. Patients may suffer from one or more of these symptoms without suffering from cancer. If you are at all worried, see your doctor as soon as possible for advice.

Appendix 3

Cancer affects every family at some time or other. One in three of us will get it and most people who hear that they have cancer assume the worst.

The commonest and most destructive myth is that cancer always kills. It doesn't. Between a third and half of the people who get cancer recover – usually living long, perfectly healthy, perfectly normal lives. Beating cancer is no longer a miracle. Every year around the world millions of people do it.

The second major myth is that cancer is one disease. It isn't. Cancer is a disease created by deformed or damaged cells. There are scores of different types of cell in your body – bone cells, skin cells, muscle cells and so on and inevitably, therefore, there are scores of different types of cancer. Over 200 in fact.

With so many different types of cancer there are, of course, many different types of treatment. Some cancers can be helped by surgery. Others are best attacked with drugs or radiotherapy.

But there are some things that all cancer patients can do to help themselves:

First, make up your mind that you are going to fight.

A study of women with breast cancer showed conclusively that women with a fierce will to live were twice as likely to survive as those who were pessimistic or prepared to abandon themselves to fate.

Second, spend as much time as you can with people you like and people who make you laugh. There is no doubt now that by watching funny films or reading books that make you chuckle you can help defeat all serious disorders – including cancer.

Third, assert yourself. If you're in hospital and the doctors and nurses won't tell you things that you want to know, make a fuss and make a nuisance of yourself until they answer your questions. People who stand up for themselves stand a much better chance of surviving.

Fourth, build up your self-confidence. Learn to respect and value yourself. Think of your good qualities and strengths. People who develop and die of cancer often have an unreasonably low opinion of themselves.

Fifth, don't be afraid to show your emotions. If you feel angry let your anger out. If you want to cry then cry. Share your emotions with other people. The more you store up your emotions the more damage you'll do to yourself.

Sixth, learn to relax yourself. Go off into peaceful, relaxing daydreams whenever stress is building up.

Seventh, eat a good, healthy diet containing as much natural food as possible. Fresh fruit and vegetables are much better for you than pre-packed foods.

Eighth, join up with other people suffering from the same condition. Your doctors should be able to put you in touch with other local patients who've faced the problem you're facing.

Ninth, use the power of your mind to combat your cancer. Think of your cancer cells as bad guys and your body's defence cells as good guys. Imagine your body's defences fighting and destroying frightened cancer cells. This sort of imagery really does work. (For more information see my book *Mindpower* – which is also available as an ebook).

Finally, learn as much as you can about your disease. Ignorance breeds fear and anxiety.

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Dr Vernon Coleman MB ChB DSc FRSA is a qualified doctor and bestselling author who has written over 100 books which have sold more than two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK alone. His books have been translated into 25 languages and sold around the world. Many of his books are available as Kindle books on Amazon. For more details about available books please see his author page on Amazon. For free articles and so forth please visit: http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

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Psychiatry Black Art

Dr Vernon Coleman

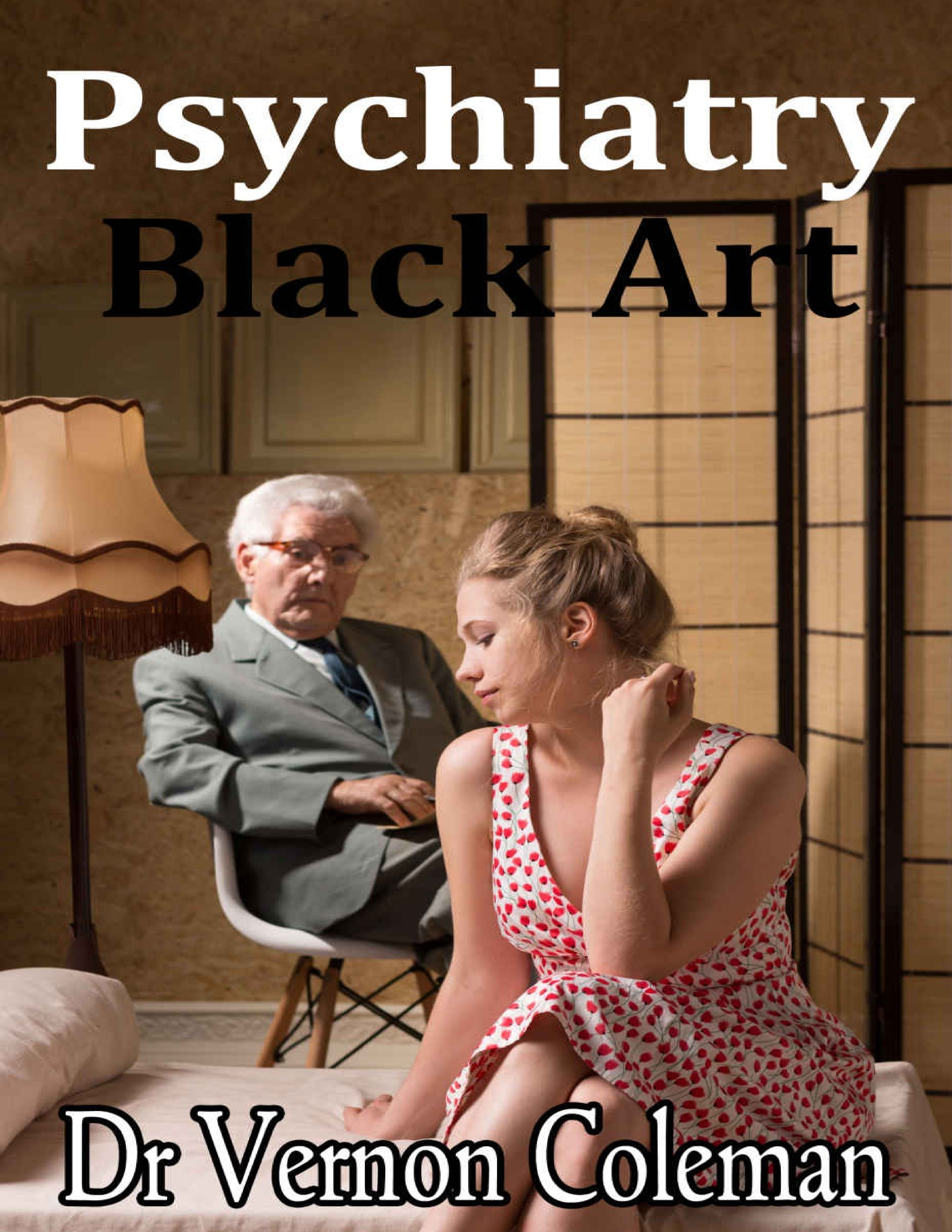

Psychiatry: Black art and confidence trick

The enduring and expanding myth of mental illness: and why you should never trust a psychiatrist.

Dr Vernon Coleman

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Dr Vernon Coleman MB ChB DSc FRSA is a registered medical practitioner and bestselling author. He was the first doctor to draw attention to the relationship between stress and illness and the first doctor to draw attention to the widespread problem of tranquilliser addiction. He has written widely on mental illness and about the side effects of prescription drugs. His books include *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You, Doctors Kill More People Than Cancer and Bodypower.* He has written over 100 books which have sold more than two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK and been translated into 25 languages. Many of his books available as eBooks. For a list of books available please see his author page on Amazon.

Dedication

To Donna Antoinette: my love, my friend, my life.

Psychiatry: Black art and confidence trick

Officially, psychiatry is a branch of medicine. It is, allegedly, a science. Patients trust what psychiatrists tell them, and accept the drugs they are offered, because they believe that the treatments they are prescribed are for their benefit.

But, in reality, psychiatry has very little to do with medicine and it is definitely not a science. Psychiatrists are no more honourable or well-meaning than the people who sell bucket shop shares or the tricksters who play the shell game on big city streets.

If that sounds harsh, it is meant to. I qualified as a doctor nearly 50 years ago and, over the years, I have written much about medical errors and doctor induced disease. But nothing has shocked me in quite the way that the treatment of the mentally ill has shocked me. Medicine has always attracted charlatans and tricksters but psychiatrists are truly the dregs of the modern medical profession. The mentally ill have always been mistreated. But the remedies offered by today's practitioner are no more valid, no more effective and no less cruel than the remedies provided by the bullies and charlatans employed at Bedlam in the 17th century.

The simple but appalling truth is that the modern psychiatric profession has sold itself to the pharmaceutical industry and the result is that millions of patients are taken advantage of simply because they are ill (or told that they are ill), often desperate, and always in need. The drug companies make billions. And the psychiatrists who do the prescribing don't do too badly either.

The simple, startling truth is that there are no effective treatments for most forms of mental illness. And so the pharmaceutical industry and the psychiatric profession have combined to create fake solutions. And because that piece of trickery has proved enormously profitable, they have expanded the business by creating fake diseases too. Every year, millions of patients are treated for conditions that sane people would not regard as illnesses. Patients who feel guilty, worried, or concerned about the state of the world are likely to find themselves labelled and drugged for life. Those who are regarded as 'too timid', 'too reserved', 'too kind' (a condition now regarded as akin to weakness) too gullible or 'too anything' are likely to find themselves filled to the gills with some poisonous but enormously profitable concoction. Patients who are sensitive or easily worried or neurotic are classified as mentally ill and told that they need regular drug therapy – even though there is ample evidence showing that all truly creative work is done by individuals who are sensitive or neurotic and that treating such patients with drugs crushes their creativity.

Most psychiatrists never suggest that patients might have to learn to live with their symptoms, or (heaven forbid) find some non-pharmacological solution. There is rarely, if ever, any discussion of side effects or any suggestion that the long-term consequences of therapy might turn out to be worse than the long-term consequences of the disorder. The psychiatrist's immediate response to the sight of a new patient appearing is to reach surreptitiously for his pen and prescription pad.

Psychiatrists and drug companies have been so successful in convincing politicians of the effectiveness of their so-called 'speciality' that virtually all the money available for the care of mental patients is now spent on pills (even though there is invariably no evidence to show that they do any good at all).

Most of the institutions caring for the mentally ill have been closed down (using the excuse that their very existence was an affront to political correctness) and the patients who needed care dumped into the community, to wander the streets. It's difficult to blame drug companies for this sad state of affairs (they exist, after all, solely to make money and are known to be run by some of the greediest and most ruthless men and women on the planet) but it's easy to blame psychiatrists who are, after all, supposed to be caring health professionals.

The sad truth is that modern psychiatry is the greatest con on earth.

Psychiatrists and general practitioners have become increasingly enthusiastic about drug therapy in recent decades. They claim that they can treat a wide range of disorders with psychotropic drugs, and so a goodly portion of the nation now regularly gulps down happy tablets. The startling result is that the incidence of mental health problems is increasing. Officially, one in two people in Britain is incurably mentally ill. Yes, you read that correctly. One in two people in Britain is incurably mentally ill. In other countries, including the United States, the figure is similar or worse. Some of those people are classified as mentally ill because they cannot cope with the modern world. Some are classified as mentally ill because they fit new criteria for mental illness (they have symptoms which are now regarded as indicative of mental illness). And some of those who are classified as mentally ill have been made ill by the reckless prescribing of powerful and dangerous drugs.

(Despite this, the number of hospital beds available for mental health patients is constantly shrinking. This is, of course, because the mentally ill make an ineffective lobby and have almost no political clout. Politicians quickly bow to drug industry pressures because providing hospital beds costs more money than providing mind-numbing drugs which turn patients into zombies.)

But the bare truth is that psychiatry isn't a science at all and it isn't even an art. It's more of a confidence trick; a collegiate confidence trick with pretensions of grandeur. Psychiatrists often claim that the drugs they prescribe are designed to correct chemical imbalances in the brain. But the simple fact is that there is no evidence that there is any such thing as 'chemical imbalance'. Ask any psychiatrist about this and he will agree that 'chemical imbalance' is a still unproven theory. It's never even been properly tested so how could it ever be proven? So how can psychiatrists and drug companies possibly treat the problems which they claim are caused by 'chemical imbalance'?

The bald truth is that psychiatry is no more a science than witchcraft. It is a perfect example of pseudoscience running riot. Cinema legend Samuel Goldwyn was right when he said that anybody who goes to see a psychiatrist ought to have his head examined. A big part of the problem lies in the fact that modern medical thinking is based upon the Cartesian principle that the mind and the body can be treated separately. The modern clinician still does not see the mind and the body as a single unit (that is why orthodox practitioners don't believe in holistic medicine) and this leaves the way open for psychiatrists to play around with the human mind as though it were a completely separate entity.

Psychiatrists won't tell you this (because it is, to say the least, rather embarrassing) but a large study of randomly selected psychiatric patients showed that approximately three quarters (75%) of the patients had been wrongly diagnosed. And no one could be sure that the remaining 25% had been properly diagnosed, or were receiving appropriate treatment.

In many cases, patients are diagnosed as having - and are then treated for - serious psychiatric problems when their symptoms are caused by drugs they have been given for physical problems or for other mental problems.

Whole wards full of patients have been diagnosed, treated and classified as suffering from schizophrenia when they were actually suffering from side effects produced by the drugs they had been given by prescription happy doctors.

The idea that anyone would describe psychiatry as a science is utterly absurd. Nothing that psychiatrists claim as 'fact' can be proved by any means recognised by scientists; there are no proper controls and if an experiment is repeated it rarely produces the same result. Let me be clear: there are no facts in psychiatry, only convenient commercial assumptions.

The ultimate absurdity is the fact that psychiatrists claim that only they are fit to judge the effectiveness of their recommendations. Psychiatry is black magic masquerading as science.

You may be surprised to learn that psychotropic drugs (which are widely promoted by doctors who have close links with the companies making them) have no provable, useful effects. They do, on the other hand, have massive and provably serious bad effects (such as death). Millions of lives have been ruined by the long-term prescribing of benzodiazepine anxiolytics and sleeping tablets.

How are psychotropic drugs supposed to work? That's not exactly known. It is, however, known that many of them flatten the emotions and cause a numbing and dullness of the mind which make patients taking the drugs less aware of their problems. Patients become so numb that they don't notice the nasty world around them. These drugs don't cure mental symptoms; they simply cover them up. The best patients can hope for is that the side effects aren't too bad.

And yet the psychiatrists are constantly finding new excuses to prescribe (and to add to drug company profits). Every facet of human behaviour now seems to have been classified as an illness. So, for example, psychiatrists even prescribe drugs for people who are shy. They call it 'Social Anxiety Disorder' and there is a powerful drug for it, with appropriately powerful side effects. There are drugs for all shades of neuroticism. Heaven knows what sort of future mankind has when you remember that all great art and all great inventions were the result of neurotic minds. Once a modern psychiatrist gets his hands on a neurotic patient, he will immediately start prescribing. And, even more worrying, many GPs are encouraged to follow suit. 'Prescribe first, think later.'

Psychiatrists have a rapidly growing dictionary of labels which they can apply to their patients. But the big problem with their labels (I'm talking about diseases such as ADHD and schizophrenia) is that none of these diseases (none) actually exists. Not in the way that pneumonia and tuberculosis exist, with real signs and symptoms.

Psychiatric disorders are created and agreed upon by groups of psychiatrists who meet together and think up new disorders. It sounds like lunacy but I promise you that I'm not making this up.

There is proof that diabetes exists. There is scientific evidence to show that heart disease is real. But there is no proof to show that any psychiatric disorders really exist. They are labels which are often created merely to find a market for a newly invented drug.

Diagnoses are made, and treatment begun, without any evidence that a patient has anything wrong that can be treated. Drugs are prescribed in the vague hope that they will produce an improvement. Most of the time they produce a change - but the change is more likely to be a deterioration than an improvement.

A vast variety of entirely non-existent diseases are now being treated on a regular basis. And these drugs are becoming forever commoner, taking up a constantly increasing part of a constantly decreasing health service budget. Many psychiatrists claim (apparently meaning it) that we are *all* mentally ill and that we *all* need treatment. This is not a social comment so much as an excuse to hand out prescription drugs which do more harm than good.

(My own experience of medical colleagues who are psychiatrists is that they are all barking mad. I know of one psychiatrist who has himself been diagnosed as a psychopath. The Brazilian psychiatrist who shot a patient because 'they all come in here and just want to think about themselves, no one thinks about *me*' wasn't that exceptional. Psychiatrists are, on the whole, pretty screwed up people; deviants and neurotics. That's why they become psychiatrists. All the psychiatrists I've known have been as mad as hatters. I suspect that they became psychiatrists because they couldn't deal with the logical science of real medicine. They chose, instead, to drift into the world of psychiatry where nothing is written down in black and white, and where judgements are made subjectively rather than objectively.

Many psychiatrists have such close links with drug companies that they promote drug therapy for all with missionary zeal. Whenever psychiatrists make a suggestion, one only has to ask 'Who benefits?' to see what is going on. In 2010, a proposal to screen the entire population of Britain for depression was abandoned, possibly because it was realised that a virtually bankrupt nation could not afford to conduct an inefficient but incredibly expensive survey into mental health, possibly because a civil servant somewhere realised that the cost of providing anti-depressants would push the nation further into bankruptcy and possibly because someone realised that the nation was so despairing that a survey would probably show that the whole country was depressed. (That, I am sure, was the plan. Just think of the profits to be made out of prescribing antidepressants for everyone in the country.)

Drug companies concentrate on me-too drugs, the moneymakers, drugs which are almost identical to already existing drugs which are profitable. They ignore diseases that affect the Third World and they ignore rare diseases. They want long-term medications for long-term problems, and psychiatric drugs are the most profitable on the planet. Drug companies love mental illnesses. Patients don't die from them. They live long, healthy lives and so, once diagnosed, can be given drugs for decades. Patients never get better and so the drug therapy is eternal. These disorders are self-reinforcing. When told they are 'mentally ill', people tend to become anxious, introspective, less interested in the outside world and more self-obsessed. Such patients quickly become addicted to their drugs. And the drugs (which are often very expensive) produce huge profits for the manufacturers. The prescribing psychiatrists are thanked with huge fees and 'gifts'. The two biggest earning illnesses in medicine are anxiety and depression. But the medical profession knows very little about how to treat these two problems. Anxiety is invariably caused by stress. But doctors do nothing to help deal with the stress. Instead, they simply prescribe drugs designed to smother the anxiety – even though they know that the drugs ruin their patients' lives. The treatment of depression is just as ineffective and just as dangerous. Doctors talk about exogenous and endogenous depressions but the only real difference between the two is that in one (exogenous depression) the cause has been found and in the other it hasn't. The two varieties of depression are basically identical. Both are caused by stress. And the drugs most commonly prescribed may cause dangerous and sometimes lethal side effects.

So much money is spent on utterly worthless psychotropic drugs that there isn't any money left for the long-stay hospitals that the vulnerable and the unstable desperately need. Community care doesn't work, and everyone knows it doesn't work, but it's cheap. Very cheap. In the United Kingdom, the NHS has dumped thousands of mentally ill patients on the streets. It has also put a huge and intolerable burden on the families of the chronically sick.

Sad though it may be, there will always be some people who need to live permanently in institutions and who benefit from attending workshops and properly run day centres. But the State has abandoned the mentally ill because they don't vote as a group, don't employ lobbyists and don't have support from television celebrities. This is true of all developed countries.

The sad truth is psychiatry is a nonsensical speciality. And all its treatments are unproven and potentially dangerous. Aversion therapy, behaviour therapy and hormonal rebalancing are nonsense. Drug therapy is as dangerous, in its way, as psychosurgery. Diagnoses are made without evidence. The psychiatrists making the diagnoses simply make a 'guess'. Treatment is prescribed in a purely subjective way. And the diagnostic symptomology is so vague and far reaching that I could, without much difficulty, find some definable mental illness in every person in the UK.

I'm not good at making friends because I happen to be shy. I don't consider that to be an illness. I have a low tolerance for official stupidity. I tend to be impatient. I am incessantly curious. I like to check that the doors are locked before we leave home. None of these things worry me. But officially all these behavioural patterns mean that I am suffering from quite a number of mental disorders. According to the official definitions and symptom lists, I am suffering from autism, ADHD, ODD, obsessive compulsive disorder and several dozen other psychiatric disorders. And I don't mind betting that you are too. Today, just about every human emotion or behavioural pattern is a psychiatric disease; an official medical diagnoses. Shyness, homesickness, suspicion, having ups and downs and being easily distracted are all diseases. There are special drugs for all these disorders. New diseases include: 'apathy disorder', 'compulsive shopping disorder' and 'Internet addiction disorder'. If your doctor says you have one of these then you're officially mentally ill. Lack of self-control and impatience are now officially recognised as diseases. Welcome to the worldwide club. There's a drug with your name on it. And a long-term sick note just a scrawl away.

Many of the new diseases relate to children. There's a good reason for this. Once a child is started on a drug there are likely to be decades of prescribing (and profits) ahead. Psychiatrists and journalists write articles about the disorders affecting children and have them published in popular magazines. The result is that parents, teachers and social workers demand that children be treated. And the only possible treatment, of course, is a drug. In some parts of the world, teachers and social workers now have the right to insist that children are given drugs. If parents object then the children will be taken away from them – and treated forcibly.

How do psychiatrists define new diseases? That's easy. A bunch of 27 of them (most of them with links to drug companies) simply decide what is officially a disease. Psychiatrists actually have meetings to vote on whether diseases exist or not.

Homosexuality used to be a disease, but political correctness pressures resulted in a vote deciding it was not. So now homosexuality is no longer a disease. That's what psychiatrists call 'science'. If it sounds like something Lewis Carroll might have written that's probably because it is. 'If I say you're mad then you're mad. If I say you're sane then you're sane.' Simple.

Thanks to the efforts of these psychiatrists, everyone can be diagnosed as mentally ill and everyone diagnosed will be treated. Providing drugs for mental illness is an industry worth a third of a trillion dollars a year. It's hardly surprising that new mental diseases come thick and fast. And remember: there is no evidence that any of the drugs prescribed can 'cure' anything (partly because none of the diseases being treated can be properly diagnosed or specifically identified) but there is plenty of evidence showing that the drugs being used produce a huge variety of known, and sometimes deadly, side effects.

There are now nearly 400 psychiatric medical diagnoses in the official lists. There are specialists and drugs for all these diagnoses. And not one of the 400 has been tested or proven to exist. If you ever have a dull moment in your life get yourself a copy of the latest edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* and flick through it looking for the daftest diseases.

Moreover, psychiatrists are not above hijacking diseases and using them as an excuse for more prescribing. So, for example, there is a medical condition called 'micromastia' which occurs among women who do not believe that their breasts are big enough. The surgical answer to micromastia is to operate and give the patient bigger breasts. The psychiatrist's solution is to prescribe drugs to stop the woman worrying about the size of her breasts.

It's hardly surprising that, if you listen to the psychiatrists, no one is now truly normal. The diseases psychiatrists treat aren't found in a laboratory or identified by epidemiological studies: they are created in marketing departments. And why not? Drug companies can make 500,000% profit on the drugs they sell.

Psychiatrists, apparently blind to what is going on around them, seem deliberately unaware that we live in a society where toxic stress is endemic and the human consequences inevitable.

'Our contemporary Western society, in spite of its material, intellectual and political progress, is increasingly less conducive to mental health, and tends to undermine the inner security, happiness, reason and the capacity for life in the individual,' wrote Erich Fromm. 'It tends to turn him into an automaton who pays for his human failure with increasing mental sickness, and with despair hidden under a frantic drive for work and so-called pleasure.'

But psychiatrists, egged on by the marketing departments of the big drug companies, are keen to ignore the causes of mental illness and to concentrate on the profitable aspects: the excuse to prescribe, prescribe and prescribe again.

Drug companies use marketing experts to persuade well people they are ill and need to take a pill, preferably permanently. Patients' groups are set up and funded by the drug companies making appropriate drugs. Journalists are bought and diseases given huge amounts of publicity. In the business this is called disease mongering. It's big business. Research is funded by drug companies and so, not surprisingly, any research with embarrassing or inconvenient results does not get published. Medical journals (which rely on drug company advertising) are often 'bent', as are journalists. The medical community is corrupt and up to its eyes in drug company money. When TV programmes want to speak to a doctor about drugs they invariably contact one of the 'hired hands' recommended by the drug companies. Doctors who tell the truth are banned and marginalised.

Governments say they can't find any doctors without conflict of interest to sit on committees assessing drugs. (Well, I'm here. I've studied drugs and drug use for nearly half a century and I am a registered medical practitioner. But, surprise, surprise, they never approach me. And so official committees are stuffed with doctors who have strong links to drug companies.)

Doctors go to conferences that are paid for by drug companies. Their expenses are paid. Fees are provided for 'advice'. Doctors receive payment if they agree to listen to a drug company promotion. Doctors are paid to give short lectures to one another. No doctor who is likely to oppose or question drug therapy will be invited to speak. (The last time I was invited to speak to NHS personnel, I was quickly uninvited when my name was spotted on the list of speakers.)

Many of the commonest problems are behavioural conditions associated with children. These are diagnosed subjectively and can increasingly be diagnosed by nurses and teachers rather than by psychiatrists. The doctors are too busy signing the prescriptions to bother with actually seeing patients. ADHD, autism and Asperger's syndrome will all become default conditions soon. Their incidence is increasing so absurdly fast that children without one of these conditions will be regarded as abnormal and will, of course, need treatment.

Autism became popular because it's a damned sight more convenient for drug companies to create a new disease than it is to accept that children can be brain damaged by vaccines (another drug company product). For drug companies it is a double whammy. They avoid the vaccine lawsuits and billions in compensation (and, despite the protests of the drug industry and the drug industry controlled medical establishment, the irresistible evidence shows that autism is a result of vaccine damage). And the diagnosis enables them to sell treatments for a newly created disease. What other industry could make billions out of a product designed to treat illness created by another one of their own products?

Parents are never told that the evidence shows that a walk in a park is better than drugs for children with ADHD. Drug companies do everything they can to encourage parents to be enthusiastic supporters of drug therapy. A doctor's note showing that a child is being treated for ADHD enables him and family to jump to the front of the queue at theme parks, and to jump the queue for school lunch. It's hardly surprising that one in 20 children in Britain now has ADHD. And yet the symptoms are so vague that I doubt if there is a child in Britain who could not be diagnosed as a 'sufferer'; needing drug therapy for life. As far as psychiatrists (and teachers and social workers) are concerned, a child needs long-term drug therapy for ADHD if they are easily distracted, impulsive and have a tendency to run around. They may occasionally be noisy. With those as the defining symptoms, I am surprised that the drug companies don't have all children taking their pills. The simple truth is that most children diagnosed as having ADHD are perfectly normal and need no drug therapy. (Whenever I point this out, I am saddened but not surprised by the response. Many caring parents of children who are diagnosed as suffering from ADHD, and who are 'treated' with long-term, potentially dangerous drug therapy, become furious with me for questioning the prevalence of this disorder and the suitability of the mass market solution. I find it difficult to understand why any parent would want their child to be erroneously diagnosed as being mentally ill; and would want them to be given drugs which may have appalling and frightening side effects.)

The more intelligent doctors who prescribe drugs for popular, modern psychiatric diseases know damned well that the whole thing is a scam: inappropriate drug therapy for real problems, useless products for imaginary disorders, non-existent solutions for non-existent problems. I suspect that many intelligent patients and parents also know its emperor's new clothes stuff. They go along with the con because there is no other help on offer. And the psychiatrists and the drug companies have arranged the system so that it is difficult if not impossible to say 'no' to drug treatment. Indeed, in some parts of the world, parents who reject drug therapy are likely to find themselves fighting not to have their children removed from their care. The power of the pharmaceutical lobby, and the psychiatrists who are bought and paid for, is extensive.

New diseases are being invented almost daily. There's another exciting disease around now. It's ODD (Opposition Defiant Disorder). The symptoms are an absence of respect for authority and anger management issues. Those with ODD are surly, defiant, uncooperative and hostile towards authority figures. Psychiatrists believe that ODD affects between 1% and 16% of all school age children (nice of them to be so precise). Adults are affected too. And, naturally, they need treatment. They need long-term treatment with expensive drugs.

I've no doubt that many of these patients need help. But some need help to deal with real problems (deafness, low IQ, etc.) and many need help to deal with the overwhelming stress and pressure in their lives. And, of course, there is a strong argument that in our modern society it is hardly surprising if we show signs of a lack of respect for authority.

Modern psychiatry is a black art and a con.

The psychiatrists can't prove that they are practising a science because a science needs evidence, research and results, and psychiatry has none of those things. Ask a psychiatrist to provide scientific evidence supporting claims for the effectiveness of drug therapy, and he or she will mumble and quickly change the subject. There isn't even any evidence for the existence of many of the diseases they are treating!

The first truth is that psychiatry today is all about money. Drug company money.

Since the psychiatrists and the drug companies decide what mental illness is, and is not, the incidence of mental illnesses will continue to soar. The lunatics have truly taken over the asylum. Psychiatry enables doctors to offer specific solutions (and treatments) for all the symptoms and signs they cannot explain any other way. Psychiatry enables doctors to make up diseases when drug companies have drugs for which they can find no practical use.

It isn't patients who are mad, it is the doctors, nurses and administrators who believe this mumbo jumbo.

The second truth is that mental illness in our modern world is an inescapable consequence of the stressful world in which we live.

Back in the 1970s, I helped introduce the concept of ‘stress’ to the general public in a book which was called *Stress Control*.

I argued that stress was, in whole or in part, responsible for 90% of all modern disease.

Later I wrote a book called *Toxic Stress* in which I argued that we now live in a world in which much of the stress which harms our bodies and minds is beyond our control.

I have long believed that stress is an underestimated cause of physical and mental illness. I have also long believed that the effects of stress depend upon two things: the stress itself and the way we react to it. The human’s response to stress is crucial and is, of course, the reason why some people fall ill when exposed to small amounts of stress while others seem able to cope with unending amounts of stress.

This may sound very obvious now but when I first suggested it in the 1970s I was attacked viciously by members of the medical establishment who laughed at the idea that stress could be responsible for illness at all.

We can, of course, control some of the things that happen to us. We can avoid people who annoy us. We can resign from jobs which we find exhausting or too difficult.

But we live in a world where we are surrounded by stress. It comes at us from all sorts of directions. It is this unavoidable stress which I call ‘toxic stress’.

After years of studying the effects of stress on the human body and mind, I am now convinced that all the mental illness that isn’t caused by mal-development or physical damage (a bleed, a clot, an injury, a tumour or chemical damage) is caused by stress.

All the diseases which we describe as mental illness are caused by one of two things: physical damage (as caused by poor development, injury or malformation) and stress.

This is true for schizophrenia, autism, compulsive obsessional disease and every other psychiatric disorder you can think of. The more sensitive you are, the more vulnerable you will be, and the more likely you are to become ill in some way, whether it be depression, a phobia or some other labelled disorder.

Most mental illness is, therefore, a result of a combination of unavoidable stress and an inborn, irreparable sensitivity. Paranoia is an extension of normality. Schizophrenia is a confusion created by an inability to cope with what is going on without and within. Depression is an inevitable consequence of a susceptible organism struggling to survive in an increasingly toxic world.

The people who cope best with our toxic world are the individuals who are least sensitive; the people whom we usually describe as psychopaths. Because they have little or no emotional response to stress, they are able to ignore moral and ethical issues and sail painlessly upwards to the very top of our society.

Our foibles and neuroticisms are what make us what we are.

To dissect them and remove them (or to attempt to remove them or crush them) through pseudosciences such as psychiatry and psychotherapy is as wicked and as clumsy and as destructive, as psychosurgery.

To blunder clumsily, and without direction, through the forest of half-hidden fears and hopes which are our psyche, leaves wreckage and confusion behind.

To attempt to treat worries, fears, anxieties and so on with drugs is as irrational and counter-productive as it would be to attempt to treat a malfunctioning motor car by pouring porridge or treacle into the petrol tank.

Psychiatrists do far, far more harm than good.

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The author of this monograph, Dr Vernon Coleman MB ChB DSc FRSA, is a registered medical practitioner and a *Sunday Times* bestselling author. He has written over 100 books which have sold more than two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK and been translated into 25 languages.

Reach 100

Vernon Coleman

Reach 100 and Remain Alert and Active
(Tips to Help You Stay Young)

Dr Vernon Coleman

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The Author

Sunday Times bestselling author Vernon Coleman has written over 100 other books which have sold over two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK and been translated into 25 languages. Many of his books are available as Kindle books on Amazon. For a list of available eBooks please see Vernon Coleman's author page on Amazon. Vernon Coleman is medically qualified and worked as a GP in a small midland town. He owns a small collection of rather nice ties and a huge number of books. He is married to the delectable Antoinette. There is nothing else worth knowing though there is accurate biographical material on www.vernoncoleman.com and a good deal of inaccurate biographical material spread elsewhere on the internet.

Dedication

This book, like my life, is dedicated to Antoinette

Introduction

Our bodies age not from overuse but from disuse. The abuse to which we subject our various organs doesn't help. Most of us don't wear out. We rust away.

It's a myth to assume that growing old inevitably means growing ill. Raised blood pressure is not an inevitable consequence of ageing. A middle aged spread isn't inevitable. You don't have to suffer with indigestion or hardening of the arteries just because you're getting older. Wrinkles aren't an inevitable consequence of ageing. Memory failure doesn't always affect everyone over the age of 50. Sex drive doesn't necessarily falter with age.

It is widely assumed by our youth obsessed society that anyone who struggles past their 80th birthday must, by that time, be incontinent, incapable and incoherent. The elderly are widely regarded as inconsequential and insignificant in social and political terms. Doctors generally expect that ageing will inevitably produce an unending series of physical, mental and emotional problems. The elderly are expected to lose their memory, their bone strength, their muscles, their strength, their creativity and just about everything else which makes life worth living. Not long ago, a senior politician in the US announced that the terminally ill elderly have a 'duty to die and get out of the way'.

In an attempt to help you fend off this awful fate, the charlatans will make you all sorts of promises. Take a pinch of that and a teaspoonful of this and it will be like having a portrait of Dorian Gray in the attic. So they say. Don't believe a word of it. The 'anti-ageing' business is the medical equivalent of the time-share industry. The 'keep you young with wonder pills' industry has claimed that Ecuadorian country folk routinely live to be 100, thanks to their drinking water. Investors had bought land near the 'fountain of youth' before this was exposed as a hoax. A village in the Ukraine was widely promoted as a breeding ground for centenarians. This was nonsense. The villagers had altered their birth records to escape conscription into the army.

Most of the signs of ageing develop as a result of bad habits more than anything else. Plenty of centenarians are lively, productive, alert and active. They do not associate old age with dependence. They refuse to accept that age necessarily brings limitations. They fight for the things that matter but ignore the problems that don't. They know that skills don't have to deteriorate with age. They know that doctors who say things like 'At your age, what can you expect?' are ignorant fools who should be doing something else for a living.

Some people age better than others. Why?

Are there secrets to successful ageing? Of course there are.

So, here's what you can do to keep yourself looking, feeling and acting younger. Follow the recipe in this book and you'll dramatically extend your potential, active lifespan. (Though I do not, of course, guarantee that you won't be run over by a bus or struck by lightning.) There are no miracle answers. You have to work a little at staying young. But if you follow the advice here – and change your life to match the information I've collected for you – your body and your mind will be much better equipped to fight the factors which lead to the signs of ageing. And these relatively insignificant sounding changes can result in a dramatic improvement in life expectation. Just cleaning your teeth properly can add years to your life. Keeping your immune system in good shape can help to protect you from an enormous range of potentially deadly diseases. Choosing a piece of fruit instead of another burger won't add years to your life but regularly choosing fruit instead of burgers will add years to your life. It is remarkably easy to add five to ten years to your life expectation – simply by making simple lifestyle changes. It is only slightly more difficult to add an extra five years to that. The 40-year-old who does average things with his or her life will have the average life expectation of a 40-year-old. The 40-year-old who lives an unhealthy lifestyle may be physiologically equivalent to a 50-year-old. And the 40-year-old who lives wisely may have the body of a 30-year-old.

In this short book, I've collected together all the useful information which is available to those who want to live long, healthy lives. I suggest that you put a note in your diary to read this book every three months...just as a reminder.

1. Eat wisely

This sounds painfully obvious, but one third of all cancers are caused by eating the wrong foods, and many cases of heart disease are food related too.

To live a long, healthy life you should avoid red meat. Red meat consumption is a major risk factor for colon cancer, prostate cancer, breast cancer and many other types of cancer. You should also keep your consumption of fat down to around 15% of your total calorie intake (rather than the 30% currently recommended by government experts everywhere) and eat plenty of fruits, vegetables, grains and legumes. Cut down on sweets (puddings), avoid processed foods and use olive oil rather than animal fat and butter. Too much sugar can do enormous damage to many tissues and organs, and a high sugar intake is, of course, a major cause of Type 2, maturity onset diabetes. Avoid hydrogenated fats as well as animal fats such as butter and cheese. Hydrogenated fats are commonly used in the manufacture of biscuits, cakes and white bread and dramatically increase the risk of heart disease. Most fast food restaurants cook with hydrogenated vegetable oil and serve food which is high in fat, cholesterol and sugar. Remember: fast food, fast death. And packaged foods which don't need to be stored in the freezer are usually high in fat and sugar too. Cut your intake of saturated fat and you will probably live longer.

Men should eat regular servings of tomato paste and tomato products. The carotenoid found in tomatoes (lycopene) will, when heated and eaten with oil, provides an immune strengthening antioxidant that helps reduce the risk of prostate cancer developing. Raw tomatoes and tomato juice aren't a great help. The lycopene seems to release most effectively through cooking. And the presence of oil seems to be necessary for the lycopene to be absorbed. The tomato sauce on pizza is excellent but pizza often (though not always) contains cheese which is usually high in saturated fats. Better ways to get the lycopene-rich tomato products are to eat tomato sauces on pasta or tomato based soups. Alternatively, even putting tomato ketchup onto other foods may help.

At least two thirds of your daily calorie intake should be in the form of complex carbohydrates – including fresh fruit and vegetables, potatoes, rice, pasta and whole grain breads and cereals. Keep your intake of protein to between 10% and 20% of your daily diet. Too much protein in the diet can put pressure on the kidneys (which deteriorate with age). You don't need a high protein intake to build up muscle strength.

2. Remember that our calorie needs fall as we age

At the age of 20 men can usually eat 3,000 calories a day and women can usually eat 2,200 calories a day without putting on any weight. But by the age of 50, men need only about 2,300 calories while women need only 1,900 calories. And by the age of 80, men need only 2,000 calories while women need only 1,600 calories. Reducing your calorie intake will probably help you lose weight – as well as keep your weight under control. Remember that the best way to lose weight permanently is to change your eating habits. Clever, short-term crash diets rarely produce the long-term results that people hope for.

3. Give up meals completely

Eating three square meals a day is old-fashioned and bad for you. Meal times are not natural. They were invented because they just happen to fit in with the way most of us work and live. If you get most of your calories three times a day at fixed meal times then you are almost certain to end up overweight. Calories that aren't burnt up straight away will end up stuck on your hips. In addition, there is also no doubt that you will make yourself more prone to stomach problems. Regular small meals are better for you than large, infrequent meals and better than irregular meals. By eating regularly you'll be helping to mop up some of the acid in your stomach. If you eat irregularly, the acid in your stomach will have nothing to get its teeth into.

We've lost the art of knowing when we've had enough to eat. Most of us make the mistake of always finishing the food on our plates because we've been trained that wasting food is wrong.

You stomach will be much healthier (and far less likely to succumb to stress) if you re-establish control of your appetite control centre by eating when you feel hungry, stopping when you feel full – and nibbling smaller meals more frequently rather than stuffing yourself with large meals occasionally.

The healthy way to eat is to eat mini-meals – and to eat little and often. You probably think of it as nibbling. Marketing experts call it 'grazing' because it is the way that wild animals eat. Whatever you call it, eating numerous small meals is much better for you – in a number of ways – than eating just three big meals.

All the available evidence shows clearly that if you eat mini meals whenever you are hungry your body will burn up the calories you consume. By spreading your energy intake throughout the day, you won't ever feel hungry or faint. And you will be far less likely to put on weight than someone who eats three square meals a day. As far as your body is concerned, eating three meals a day is a bizarre, unnatural and thoroughly irrational way to eat. Your body needs energy supplies all day long. By choosing to eat fixed meals, you create problems for yourself. When you eat at fixed meal-times, you eat whether you are hungry or not – instead of obeying your body's inbuilt appetite control centre you eat because the clock shows that it is time to eat.

Your body's internal appetite control can make sure that you never get fat – if only you let it. But eating meals at fixed meal times means that your natural appetite control centre doesn't get a chance to work properly.

In addition, when you eat at fixed meal-times you tend to eat what is available, what you have prepared or what you have been given – whether you need it or not. It is easy to eat the wrong foods – and to eat too much.

Because you and your body know that it will be some hours before you eat another big meal, there is a tendency to overeat. Your body stores the excess food as fat so that you can live off the fatty stores while you are not eating. But because you probably nibble a little between meals your body will never need to burn up that stored fat – and your next fixed meal-time probably comes just before your body starts burning up those stored fat deposits.

Try to get into the habit of eating only when you are hungry. And remember that the mini meal diet will work best if you leave between 60 to 90 minute gaps between mini meals.

The mini meal diet won't just help you get slim. Eating mini meals will also help you to live longer.

When you start eating mini meals you will soon find that you are fussier about what you eat – and you will eat only what your body needs.

By eating just what your body needs, you will look younger, feel more energetic, feel sexier, avoid infections and diseases such as arthritis and live longer.

In Okinawa in Japan, people eat just 40% less than other Japanese people – they also have lower rates of cancer, heart disease, diabetes and mental illness. And more people from Okinawa live to be 100-years-old than from anywhere else in Japan.

Reducing your food intake will probably increase your life expectancy and reduce your susceptibility to illness.

But do remember: if you are going to start the mini meal diet then you must stop eating meals. You can't eat mini meals and ordinary meals as well.

You don't have to be unsociable and leave your family and friends to eat alone. If they want a meal, sit down with them but just eat a snack.

4. Make sure you get enough sleep

Don’t try to survive on five hours sleep a night. You will suffer. Men need eight hours of sleep a night. Women need seven hours of sleep a night.

5. Take regular exercise

One of the main reasons why life expectation is not as good as it should be (and why so many people are disabled and crippled) is that most of us take far too little exercise. We travel everywhere by car or public transport. We use lifts instead of walking up the stairs. Our homes are filled with labour saving (and therefore exercise avoiding) devices.

What sort of exercise do you need?

Regular and gentle are the two key words.

Regular exercise can help prevent or delay diabetes, obesity and heart disease. Regular exercise helps keep weight under control, helps prevent osteoporosis and helps boost the immune system – which helps to prevent cancer. Prostate cancer and breast cancer are both less likely to occur in individuals who exercise regularly. Women who exercise for four hours a week have a 60% reduction in breast cancer risk. Just 15 to 30 minutes of walking or cycling a day is probably enough to produce a significant reduction in cancer risk.

People who are sedentary, lose around 30% of their strength and 40% of their muscle mass between the ages of 20 and 70. This loss is largely a result of lack of exercise.

Swimming, walking, cycling and dancing are all excellent forms of exercise which help to get rid of unwanted fat and to improve the effectiveness of the heart. But you need to do resistance exercises – such as walking up hills or weight training – in order to prevent the loss of muscle tissue. It is worth remembering that increasing muscle mass helps by improving the body’s ability to burn fat. Resistance exercise will help your body get rid of excess weight.

Resistance exercise is useful in another way too. People who do strength building exercise put on muscle mass, become stronger and are less likely to fall. Bones become stronger too.

If you want to try something different, why not also consider Tai Chi – the old Chinese programme which consists of a variety of easily performed meditative movements. Tai Chi is mildly aerobic, it builds flexibility and the slow, repetitive movements help to banish stress and anxiety. It is also suitable for many individuals who might find more physically demanding activities too stressful for their bodies.

The key to a good exercise programme is that it is regular. In addition to your regular bouts of exercise, you should try to keep moving as much as you can. If you have a job that keeps you sitting down, try getting up and walking around the room every half an hour or so. Use the stairs instead of the lift whenever you can. Walk instead of using the car for short journeys. A complete exercise programme should contain aerobic exercises, flexibility or stretching exercises and strength building or weight lifting exercises.

Remember that before beginning an exercise programme you should consult your doctor – and, ideally, have a medical examination. Visit a local gym and find a qualified expert to help advise you before you start an exercise programme

6. Live within your means

Learn to manage your finances so that you live within your means. If possible, try to make sure that you have a little money put to one side for emergencies. Knowing that your nest egg is there will give you greater confidence and help to reduce stresses which are related to money.

7. Protect your hearing

Loud noises that make you feel uncomfortable can damage your hearing. A refrigerator hums at about 40 decibels. Normal conversation is usually conducted at around 60 decibels. City traffic makes a noise of about 80 decibels. Fireworks, motorcycles, music at concerts or music listened to through headphones, may all produce between 120 and 140 decibels. Anything above 75 decibels can produce hearing loss. Limit your exposure to unnecessary noises and use ear plugs whenever you have to be in the vicinity of something very noisy. If you don’t do this, your hearing will probably be permanently damaged.

8. Watch your blood pressure

Even a modest rise (10 mm or so) in blood pressure can result in a significant (10%) increase in the risk of serious damage. To begin with, blood pressure goes up without symptoms. Have your blood pressure checked annually. And take action to keep your blood pressure under control. (Do not smoke, do not put on excess weight, keep your intake of fatty foods down, do not expose yourself to unnecessary stresses, learn to relax, etc.).

9. Beware of drugs which can cause ‘senility’

You don’t have to lose your mind just because there are more candles on your birthday cake than there used to be. Doctors used to classify all elderly people as ‘senile’ until proved otherwise. Then the phrase ‘organic brain syndrome’ became fashionable. And doctors began to expect every individual over the age of 70 to be suffering from ‘dementia’.

These days, Alzheimer’s disease is the fashionable diagnosis.

But it simply isn’t true that every elderly person must inevitably become senile or demented or a victim of Alzheimer’s disease. And even when an elderly individual does develop symptoms of dementia it isn’t necessarily the case that the condition is incurable. Infections can cause dementia-like symptoms. As can small strokes. But the commonest cause of treatable dementia among the elderly is undoubtedly doctor-induced side effects. Problems associated with prescription drugs are a significant cause of apparent senility. When the drugs are stopped the symptoms will disappear.

You should not, of course, ever stop a drug that has been prescribed by a doctor. You need to talk to the doctor first.

10. Exercise your brain – use it or lose it

There is no point in maintaining a healthy body if you lose your mind. Studies have shown that if you are going to survive into (and enjoy) a genuine old age you need to retain the ability to plan your life, to start new tasks and to see them through.

Your brain has plenty of spare capacity. You have to lose quite a high percentage of the neurones in a certain area before you start to notice any problems. And you can delay the onset of problems – and help to improve the situation when problems have developed – by deliberately doing whatever you can to increase the number of new dendrites in your brain.

Dendrites are the finger-like extensions which connect neurones together – and which allow neurones to exchange chemical and electrical messages. The cells you have in your brain can grow new dendrites. Sometimes new dendrites can grow to replace existing connections. Sometimes they can grow to help provide more space for messages that can't get through. And sometimes they create entirely new connections with other neurones.

So how can you stimulate the number of dendrites in your brain?

Simple. You use your brain as much as you can.

When you take up a new interest or learn a new skill, your brain will form new dendrites. The extent of the formal education you have seems to be irrelevant but there is good evidence to support the theory that the more active you keep your mind the less likely you will be to develop any variety of dementia. Take up a challenging mental activity (such as learning a musical instrument, learning to paint, writing, sculpting, learning a language) and you will be giving your brain exercise that will keep it healthy. You can even help yourself by doing puzzles and games. Playing chess or bridge, doing jigsaw puzzles or crossword puzzles will help to keep your mind in shape. Learning stimulates the growth of new dendrites and creates more effective brain power. The more complex the activity the better the workout.

(Learning and practising a musical instrument is particularly useful since it requires coordinating different parts of the brain and involves reading, listening, memorising, performing fairly complicated physical manoeuvres and having new ideas. This sort of activity means that links between different parts of the brain are strengthened. If you learn musical pieces which bring back good memories than you can also use music to help you combat stress.)

11. Change your personality so that you feel happier and live longer

Our personalities tend to remain fairly stable after the age of 25. There tend not to be any major changes. But as we become older we tend to become more like ourselves. The shy and reclusive become more shy and more reclusive. The irritable and edgy become more irritable and more edgy. Studies of centenarians have shown that people who live a long time tend to be able to maintain their emotional focus and to be able to concentrate on surviving. Personality is one of the most important factors in survival and longevity is a result not of avoiding stressful circumstances but of having responded to stress in an effective and constructive way. People who have a positive way of looking at things, and who can maintain inwardly relatively calm in the face of crises, are much more likely to stay healthy and live longer. Your personality can have as big an impact on your longevity as your genes, your immune system or your cardiovascular system.

A study which followed a group of American schoolchildren for more than 70 years, found that individuals who were dependable and conscientious were more likely to live longer. People – especially men – who were prudent, truthful and free of vanity were 30% less likely to die in any given year than those who did not have these qualities. It is, it seems, these particular traits which lead to a healthy old age.

The one quality which counters against longevity is neuroticism. Neuroticism is usually defined as an extra susceptibility to anger, sadness, fear and guilt – all of which can lead to anxiety, hostility, self- consciousness and depression – and there seems no doubt that these are unhealthy personality traits.

Anxieties and fears can have a negative impact on health and life expectation, and individuals who are prone to worry are less capable of adapting to, and coping with, unfamiliar or threatening situations. Those who suffer a great deal from anxiety are more likely to have disturbed immune systems or irregular heartbeats – and they are, as a direct consequence, more likely to have a heart attack.

When the body is switched onto alert (as happens with individuals who are unusually susceptible to stress), the hormones produced can affect just about every part of the body. Individuals who can remain calm in a crisis and who are less prone to unrealistic thinking are, inevitably, far more flexible and far more adaptable. Emotional stress causes ageing, and learning how to cope with stress is a vital factor in living a long, healthy life.

(An additional reason why stress susceptibility causes health problems is that neurotic individuals who are exceptionally susceptible to stress are more likely to use aids such as tobacco or alcohol to help them cope.)

We cannot change our basic personalities. But we can change the way in which we respond to situations. Ambitious, hard-working individuals probably cannot change their basic attitudes towards life but they can avoid unnecessary stressful situations, they can spend more time doing things which they find enjoyable and relaxing, and they can learn to cope more effectively with new situations and with unavoidable stresses.

12. He who laughs longest laughs last

A good sense of humour is known to be associated with better physical health and with a strong mental approach to life. Humour is one of the best ‘coping’ mechanisms we have. Humour can help us deal with life’s many hard realities and it can help us deal with sorrow and hurt. With humour in our lives, we are better able to cope emotionally and better able to think creatively. Humour can turn embarrassing situations into hilarious anecdotes.

Smiling and laughing give the body the same sort of benefits as exercise such as walking or swimming – indeed, laughter has been described as ‘internal jogging’.

Laughing increases the amount of oxygen inhaled and the amount of carbon dioxide exhaled; it also increases the blood pressure just enough to give the tissues extra supplies of oxygen and it gives the heart essential exercise too. Paradoxically, laughter helps promote both alertness and a feeling of being relaxed; it makes muscles tense and then relaxes and stimulates the release of neurotransmitters which improve the functioning of the brain. Laughter also improves the effectiveness of the immune system and helps reduce anxiety and tension.

13. Lose any excess weight – and keep it off

Eight out of ten centenarians say that their current weight is close to what they weighed when they were young adults. Most of us in the western world eat far too much food – and far too much of the wrong types of food. Overweight is one of the most significant killers.

Research in Japan showed that death rates from heart disease, stroke and cancer are between 30 and 40% lower among adults who eat fewer calories than are in a standard calorie-rich western diet.

Another study, this time done in Holland, showed that non-obese middle aged men who cut their calorie intake by a fifth for ten weeks had lower blood pressure and had lost 10% of their body weight. Obesity is linked to colon, rectal and prostate cancer in men and to cancers of the gallbladder, breast, cervix, uterus and ovaries in women. Men and women whose body weight is 40% greater than average for their height and age group are a third more likely to develop cancer than the general population. It is important to remember that yo yo dieting is bad for you; if you are overweight you should lose excess weight slowly and steadily.

14. Avoid unnecessary stress

If you have three or more major life crises in a single year, your health will be severely threatened. If you are planning to move house and change your job, try to make sure that you are not exposed to any other major stresses in the same 12 month period. Don’t try to lose weight at the same time as you are moving house. Don’t even try to lose weight at the same time as you are giving up cigarettes or starting a new exercise programme. And try to minimise your exposure to minor, avoidable stresses.

15. If you are doing work which produces a good deal of dust, wear a face mask

We know that miners of all kinds are more likely to develop fatal lung diseases. But it isn’t only mines which are full of dust and it isn’t only miners who are susceptible to lung disorders. Ordinary household lofts are full of various types of lagging (usually still regarded as ‘safe’) and a good deal of dust – anyone who works in dusty lofts, warehouses or sheds should wear a mask. And change the mask regularly. (If you want to see how much you are protecting your lungs, check the mask after using it for a couple of hours and you will see how much dust and debris would have gone into your lungs.)

16. Keep your consumption of drugs to an absolute minimum

Before taking a prescription drug, get your doctor to confirm that the drug is essential. Ask him what will happen to you if you don't take it. Remember that 40% of the people who take a prescription drug suffer unpleasant, noticeable or potentially lethal side effects. And remember too that one in six patients in hospital is there because he or she has been made ill by doctors. If you take 'repeat' prescriptions, check regularly with your doctor that the drugs are essential. You should be equally cautious about taking over the counter non-prescription drugs. Remember that many governments now allow drug companies to sell powerful and potentially lethal drugs without a prescription. (Governments which run state health services do this to reduce their costs.) And be cautious too about taking alternative remedies. Taking responsibility for your own health, means being cautious and constantly selective about the medicines you take – whatever their origin.

17. Look after your friends

People who have good and loyal friends are more likely to recover from a heart attack than people who have few or no friends. Amazingly, one study has shown that people with no friends at all are three times as likely to die as those with just one friend. A friendly face, a smile and a hug can lower the level of dangerous chemicals and increase the body’s self-healing powers.

18. Don’t turn your back on religious beliefs

Freud claimed that man invented God to use as a shield against the helplessness of living in an endlessly hostile world. Whether he was right or not is irrelevant in health terms. Twenty years ago, a study of nearly 1,500 people of 65 or more showed that individuals who attended church were healthier than those who didn’t. Indeed, the survey showed that having a religious belief played a greater part in health satisfaction than any other external factor (including smoking or alcohol use). Those who take comfort from religion are less likely to suffer pain and more likely to remain independent. Frequent prayer can lower blood pressure and reduce pain, and church goers tend to have stronger immune systems than non-churchgoers.

19. Learn to adapt – and be prepared for change

We live in a constantly changing world. Indeed our world now changes faster than at any other time in history. And the pace of general change is going to continue to increase. The individuals most likely to survive in our modern world are, inevitably, those who are most capable of adapting to all these changes; capable of controlling their own local environment, capable of taking charge of situations in which they find themselves and capable of finding a new way to do things. The adaptable individual will, when circumstances demand it, use a hearing aid or a walking stick rather than struggle on and put themselves at risk. The adaptable individual will say ‘no’ when necessary, will walk away from difficult situations when it makes sense to do so and will ask for help when they need it.

20. Come to terms with death

An ability to come to terms with one's own mortality is not defeatist. It is, on the contrary, sensible, practical and liberating to accept that death is eventually inevitable. Preparing for death does not mean giving up. It is something that we should all do on a regular basis – even though we might realistically hope and expect to have many years of healthy and profitable life ahead of us. Facing death without fear enables us to assess our life to date, to decide what mistakes we have made and to redirect our remaining years so that when our time comes we can, in the words of Plutarch, quit without regret.

21. Learn from your mistakes

Come to terms with – and learn to forget – past mistakes. Learn from them and move on. Allowing yourself to grieve over errors and past injustices may destroy your present and devalue your future.

22. Don’t worry about occasional memory lapses

Nearly seven out of ten adults are worried that they are losing their memory. Most people over the age of 30 (yes, 30!) complain of memory loss.

Occasional memory lapses are, however, quite normal. They occur naturally throughout life and they aren’t a sign of developing dementia. Just because you can’t quite find the word you want (even though you know it is on the tip of your tongue) you aren’t necessarily showing the first signs of dementia or Alzheimer’s disease.

23. Drink wisely

One small measure of alcohol a day may, it seems, helps improve your health and longevity. (Men can have two small drinks. Women should limit themselves to one.) Any more than that will damage your health. Individuals who are at risk in any way (because of an addictive personality or any existing health problems, or because of a family history of alcohol abuse) should avoid alcohol completely.

24. Learn to survive on the roads

Don’t drink and drive a car or ride a motorcycle or a bicycle. Buckle your seat belt before you drive. Never use a mobile phone while driving. Use as big a car as you can afford (bigger is slightly safer on the road) and have it maintained regularly by someone who knows what they are doing. Drive defensively.

25. Take care of your teeth and gums

Brush and floss your teeth regularly and visit a dentist and hygienist (both of whom you trust) regularly. Gingivitis and periodontal disease can cause tooth loss and it can also affect the whole immune system and cause ageing. The bacteria that cause gum disease seem to trigger an immune response which causes general inflammation around the body – including the arteries. It is possible, therefore, that poor dental hygiene may lead to heart disease. Brushing and flossing can help you live longer. Dental cavities don't make much difference to your overall health or your life expectancy (though cavities lead to a need for dentures and may, therefore, affect your ability to chew food properly) but gingivitis and similar diseases can cause serious, general problems. One survey showed that individuals who have gingivitis and periodontitis have a mortality rate that is up to 46% per cent higher than those who don't. Gum disease can increase your chances of dying from heart disease, stroke or infection.

26. Avoid environmental carcinogens

Up to 15% of cancers are caused by carcinogens encountered at work. (For women, this figure is rather lower). But the most significant environmental cause of cancer is tobacco smoke. Smoking can dramatically reduce your life expectancy. Lung cancer is still the commonest form of cancer. And most cases of lung cancer are caused by smoking. But lung cancer isn't the only type of cancer known to be linked to smoking. Colon cancer and cancers of the larynx, oesophagus, bladder, kidney and pancreas are all linked to tobacco smoking. Heart disease is much commoner among smokers too – as are digestive problems. Tobacco smoke will weaken your immune system.

However, the good news is that if you give up smoking you can pretty much restore your life expectancy to normal. There is an almost immediate positive effect and your body starts to recover within 12 hours of giving up smoking. Within a few months, you should start to notice the improvement in your general health.

Passive smokers are damaged by tobacco smoke almost as much as smokers and the partners of smokers (who must, inevitably, end up breathing in tobacco smoke) have a dramatically increased risk of developing cancer and dying early. Spending one hour in a smoke filled room is the equivalent of smoking four cigarettes.

Incidentally, it is a myth that smoking a cigar is safer than smoking a cigarette. Cigars are more dangerous – both for the smoker and the innocent bystander – than cigarettes. They produce carbon monoxide, hydrogen cyanide, ammonia and all sorts of other baddies.

27. Breathe clean air

Try to breathe clean air as often as you can. In cities, air quality varies enormously from place to place. Try to live near a park, on a quiet road and, if you live in an apartment, above the ground floor. Remember that air pollution is often a problem indoors too. Building sickness is caused by poor indoor air quality. Air conditioning systems which simply recirculate air mean that if one person in the building has an infection, the chances are that everyone in the building will soon have it. Buildings which do not have opening windows are particularly prone to cause problems. Air filtration systems really don’t make much difference. If you get constant headaches, nausea and respiratory infections – and always feel tired – ask your fellow workers if they feel the same. If they do then the chances are that it is your building which is making you ill.

Chemicals from diesel fumes are believed to cause thousands of deaths a year in all ‘developed’ countries. Japanese researchers have discovered a compound in the exhaust emissions of diesel engines which, they claim, is the most carcinogenic substance ever analysed and is probably responsible for the high incidence of lung cancer among city dwellers. (This is not, however, the only carcinogen in diesel fumes).

The production of carcinogens increases dramatically when engines are pulling heavy loads. The obvious answer is to regulate the size of loads that diesel trucks can pull. Naturally, however, politicians are unlikely to risk annoying the transport industry by pushing for any changes.

The only practical answer is for you and me to do our best to avoid areas where diesel trucks congregate. The most dangerous spots are probably steep or long hills where truck engines will be under great strain.

Living near to a busy road is bad for your health. Living on a corner or a junction or on a hill can all dramatically reduce the quality of the air you breathe.

28. Remember that most accidents aren’t accidents at all

Eighty per cent of all accidents are avoidable.

29. Stay young with more (safe) sex

The more orgasms you have a year the younger you will feel, look and act. Mutually monogamous and safe sex can improve your life expectancy.

On the other hand, unprotected sex with casual high risk partners (i.e. partners who are willing to have casual sex) is likely to lead to a reduction in life expectation.

Remember that some sexually transmitted diseases do not cause any symptoms but may exist silently.

Remember too that four out of ten individuals with serious sexually transmitted diseases admit to not telling their partners about their disease.

30. Beware of too much sunshine

A little sunshine is good for us. But too much can be exceedingly dangerous. Everyone should wear long sleeved shirts or blouses and a hat in sunny weather, and avoid going out in the sun when it isn’t necessary. Sun bathing is neither wise nor healthy. Using a sunbed is neither wise nor healthy. Individuals who have red hair and/or fair skin are most at risk from the sun.

Your risk of developing skin cancer is to a large extent determined by the amount of time you have been exposed to the sun. Sun exposure as a child or young adult is particularly potent. Individuals who were badly sunburnt as children are especially susceptible to skin cancer. Individuals with a family history of skin cancer, or who were badly sunburnt as children, should take particular care.

Look for changes in the shape, size or colour of moles. Any mole that is irregular, has variable colours or is more than a quarter of an inch across should be checked by a doctor. Get a friend to check parts of your body which you cannot examine yourself.

Remember that although cancers are most likely to occur on areas which have been sunburnt, too much sun can cause cancers elsewhere on the body. If you regularly work outside and have tanned arms and legs you are still more likely to get skin cancer on white parts of your body.

Ten to fifteen minutes of sun a day on your face, neck, arms and hands should provide you with the necessary vitamin D your body needs. (Vitamin D helps to strengthen the immune system and helps to cut down your risk of developing certain types of cancer. If you don’t get as much sun as you need you may need vitamin D in food or supplements – but it is vitally important to take care not to exceed the recommended intake of this vitamin.)

Afterword

Some of the advice in this book may sound obvious. But common sense and good advice are rare commodities in our modern world and if everyone followed the advice I've given, then the world would be full of people celebrating their 100th birthday. I suggest that you read this book once every three months and check to see where you've slipped from the road to longevity.

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Dr Vernon Coleman MB ChB DSc FRSA is a qualified doctor and bestselling author who has written over 100 books which have sold more than two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK alone. His books have been translated into 25 languages and sold around the world. Many of his books are available as Kindle books on Amazon. For more details about available books please see his author page on Amazon. For free articles and so forth please visit: http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

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REVOLT

VERNON COLEMAN

Revolt

Vernon Coleman

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Vernon Coleman is the bestselling author of over 100 books – many of which are now available on Amazon as Kindle books. For a full list of books available please see Vernon Coleman's author page on Amazon or search for `Vernon Coleman Kindle'. Vernon Coleman's books have sold over two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK and been translated into 25 languages.

All characters, organisations and businesses in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to real persons (living or dead), organisations or businesses is purely coincidental.

A political satire.

Based on a true story
that hasn’t happened yet.

Chapter 1

Tom opened the cupboard beside the oven and rummaged around. He tried to do so quietly, but it is difficult to move pots and pans without making a noise.

‘What are you doing love?’ his aunt asked.

‘I’m looking for something heavy,’ whispered Tom, pulling an aluminium saucepan out of the cupboard. It is, he thought, dangerous to be right when the Government is wrong. But maybe, he added to himself, as a corollary, it can also be dangerous to work for the Government when the Government is wrong.

‘What do you want something heavy for?’ his aunt asked. She had lowered her voice to match her nephew’s.

‘I want to kill someone with it,’ whispered Tom. ‘I’m going to hit him on the head.’ He half heard himself and could hardly believe what he half heard himself say. Though he had always stood up for himself, his beliefs and those he cared for he had always avoided violence. He had played rugby as though the aim of the game was to avoid contact with the ball. At school he had only ever been involved in one fight. An older boy had taunted him with lewd remarks about his mother, younger and considerably more attractive than the mothers of any of his contemporaries. Tom had punched the boy on the nose, leapt upon him and pummelled him until he’d been dragged off. It was his only ever fight. After that the other boys treated him with quiet respect. ‘It’s got to be heavy,’ he repeated, half to himself

‘Ah,’ said his aunt with a nod of comprehension. ‘Then that pan is too light. You need something heavier. The frying pan is iron and much heavier. Try that.’ She spoke with as much emotion as if she were suggesting the correct pan for frying eggs.

Tom put the saucepan back and picked up the frying pan which was on the stove. He weighed it in his hand. It seemed wellmade and solid. The handle felt good. It fitted his hand nicely. He looked at his aunt, for whom he felt affection and a great sense of responsibility, and then thought about Dorothy, whom he loved dearly, and realised that he really had no other option. He took a deep breath and went back into the hall. His love for Dorothy, and the companionship that had grown out of that love, was all that he had; it was all he had to live for; all that held him together. He would do anything for Dorothy.

‘He’s dead,’ said the sprout, waiting in the hallway. ‘You’re too damned late. You killed him.’ He looked at the frying pan in Tom’s hand. ‘What the hell is that..?’ He stared at the frying pan with disbelief. The sprouts’ arrogance made them stupid and careless and more vulnerable than they could think possible.

And that was as far as he got before Tom hit him on the head with the edge of a frying pan.

The sprout fell immediately. To Tom’s quiet surprise there was almost no blood.

Tom stood still for a moment. Then he bent down, put his fingers against the sprout’s neck and felt for a pulse. The sprout’s heart was still beating. Tom raised the frying pan and brought it down even harder. This time some blood seeped from a small, broken vein. The frying pan slipped out of Tom’s reach and bounced and slithered down the hallway towards the door to the kitchen. Tom checked again. The man still had a pulse.

‘Who’s that?’

Horrified, Tom turned. Everything seemed to be happening in slow motion but he was concentrating so hard on what he was doing that he didn’t even recognise his aunt’s voice. And it was his aunt who was standing in the kitchen doorway.

‘A sprout,’ answered Tom.

‘What on earth is he doing?’

‘I hit him.’

‘Why did you do that, dear?’

‘I wanted to kill him.’

‘He’s not dead.’

‘No. I know that, auntie.’

‘So, hit him again!’

‘I can’t get to the frying pan.’

‘Use his shoe.’

Tom tore the man’s shoe from his foot and banged him on the head with it. The shoe simply bounced off the man’s head.

‘It’s got a rubber sole. I don’t think hitting him with it is doing him any good but it’s not going to kill him.’ Tom felt hot and sticky. He had pains everywhere; the ones in his chest and down his arms were the most worrying. He wiped sweat from his forehead with his sleeve.

‘It’s not supposed to be doing him any good. You’re trying to kill him. What’s that awful smell?’

‘It’s corning from his shoes.’

‘His shoes?’

‘He must have stepped in something on the way here.’

Tom’s aunt looked at the sole of the shoe her son was holding, wrinkled her nose and turned away her head. ‘Ugh! How disgusting. He’s a sprout?’

‘Yes.’

‘I thought he was,’ she said, with a nod. ‘He’s got very smelly shoes.’

Just then the first sprout stirred and groaned. Tom jumped.

‘He’s not dead either!’ said Tom’s aunt. ‘You’ll have to hit them both again.’

‘We could electrocute them,’ said Tom. ‘I’ve seen them do it in films. We put them into a bath full of water and then throw in an electrical appliance of some kind.’

His aunt looked at him.

‘An electric fire. A toaster. Something like that.’

‘The only electric fire we have is fixed into the wall in my bedroom and it doesn’t work.’ She waved a hand towards the frying pan. ‘Give that thing to me.’

Tom hesitated.

‘Give it to me.’ She pointed. ‘The pan thing.’

Tom stood up, fetched the frying pan and turned back to hand it to his aunt. But she’d disappeared. He went back into the kitchen. She wasn’t there. He went back into the hallway and saw her coming out of the living room. She was wearing a golf glove on her left hand. She had never played golf in her life, though Tom’s father had been a keen golfer. Tom didn’t know they still had one of his golf gloves.

‘Give me the pan,’ she said.

Tom handed her the frying pan and watched in astonishment as she swung it above her head and brought it down first onto the head of one sprout and then onto the head of the other.

‘We can’t have bodies at the bottom of the stairs,’ complained his aunt, peering at the sprouts to see what damage she had done. ‘We will have to move them. I can’t be clambering over bodies at my age every time I want to go to the bathroom. I might trip up.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘How many are there?’

‘How many what?’

‘Bodies.’

‘Just the two.’

‘Oh. I wondered if there might be more. Still, when you’re trying to get around, one is plenty but two are far too many.’

‘They’re sprouts, auntie. I killed them.’

‘I wondered who they were. I didn’t recognise them. Are they anyone I know?’

‘I don’t think so, auntie.’

‘Your grandfather killed Germans in the war. They gave him medals for it.’ Tom’s aunt had been diagnosed as suffering from mild dementia, though Tom was often painfully aware that the adjective ‘mild’ is invariably applied subjectively.

‘I know.’

‘He had a German helmet. Kept it at the back of the wardrobe. They didn’t give him that. He took it. Black with a big spike on the top.’

Tom didn’t want his aunt to get too involved with memories of her father. He enjoyed talking to her about the past but this didn’t seem to be a suitable moment.

‘They came to check on our labels.’

‘He kept it in the wardrobe because my mum was worried that my brother or I might hurt ourselves on it.’

‘What?’

‘The helmet.’

‘These two were label inspectors,’ said Tom, trying to turn his aunt’s attention back to the present.

‘Well, don’t worry about it. I expect they’ve got plenty more of these people.’

‘I’ve killed them!’

‘Were they German?’

‘No. They were Romanian.’

‘Oh, that’s all right then. As long as they were foreign. Do you think they’ll give you a nice medal? Who do we have to tell for you to get a medal?’

‘They won’t give me a medal. But they might have me killed.’

‘No medals? Your granddad got medals for killing foreigners. Have they changed the rules? Why on earth would they kill you? Is killing Romanians a bad thing to do? It’s a pity they weren’t German.’

Tom paused for a moment. ‘They might think it’s a bad thing.’

‘And they will want to punish you for it?’

‘They will if they find out.’

‘Oh dear. Well, that’s outrageous. What is the world coming to? No one ever threatened to lock up your granddad. He was given his medals by a General. How dead are they?’

‘I don’t think there are varieties of dead, aunt. There aren’t stages as there are with drunkenness or wickedness. You’re pretty much either dead or you’re not.’ Tom loved his aunt but he was beginning to realise that she was perhaps not the best person to have at his side at what he thought he could fairly describe as something of a crisis.

‘And they’re definitely dead?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you sure? Is this one totally dead?’ She poked the body of the second sprout with the toe of her pink fluffy slipper.

‘Completely, utterly, totally dead.’

‘Does he know?’ She poked him again, bent down and peered at him very carefully.

‘The dead man?’

‘Of course, dear. Who else are we talking about?’ Tom sighed. ‘Yes, aunt, the dead man knows.’

‘Hmm. Well, I wouldn’t say he is dead. If you want him to be dead you’re going to have to hit him on the head again with something pretty solid.’

It was at that moment that the dead body, irritated by all the nudging, sat up, rubbed his head and looked around. As might be expected he looked confused and rather bewildered by his circumstances.

Without hesitation Tom’s aunt raised the frying pan above her head and brought it down as though it were a golf club and she was playing a drive with one hand. It hit the side of the sprout’s head with a fearsome crack.

‘There you are,’ said Tom’s aunt. ‘That’s the way to do it.’ She smiled at him.

‘Thanks,’ said Tom, quietly.

‘That made me feel better,’ she said. ‘I’ve been very pissed off for much longer than you have.’

Chapter 2

None of this would have happened if Tom hadn't been upstairs painting a cupboard.

Tom Cobleigh didn't like unexpected visitors and had long ago disconnected the front doorbell, unfastening one of the wires so that when callers pressed the button attached to the door jamb nothing happened inside the house.

He had kept the bell push, rather than simply removing it and throwing it away, in the hope that callers would assume that, since they had pressed the bell push, then a bell must have rung somewhere in the house and, would, therefore, leave satisfied that they had made their presence felt but that the house had been unoccupied at the time of their visit.

'Most people respond to bells,' explained Tom who had read more than most people about Pavlov and his dogs. 'Telephone bells, doorbells, it doesn't matter what sort of bell it is, most people respond when they hear them. And so those same people assume that other people behave the same way. They believe that if a bell is rung, and heard, it will be dignified with a response. And that conversely, if a bell is rung and there is no response then there must be no one there to hear it ring.'

His friends, few in number though they were, constantly argued with him about this, though there were, they knew, many other things that were far more worthy of argument than the importance, or otherwise, of answering doorbells.

'The point of having a bell,' explained one, 'is so that you can tell when there is someone at the door, respond to their presence and see what they want.'

'That's exactly the point,' agreed Tom. 'It's always about what they want. When do people ever come to the front door with good news? No one ever rings my doorbell to bring me something I want. They always want something from me. They want to tell me I haven't paid my television licence or they want to sell me something. They want to ask me for a donation or to ask me to take out a subscription to something. They want to offer to paint my house or they want their ball back. They want me to do something that will help them.'

'But if you don't open the door you can't let anyone in!'

'Precisely! I never let anyone in unless I want to see them, know they are coming and, most importantly of all, know why they are coming. And if I want to see them and know they are coming, I undo the bolt on the back gate and they come in that way.'

Tom's aunt, who was tiptoeing, unsteadily but with quiet determination, into the world of senility, and who had journeyed some distance into the land where truth and reality have become slightly hazy memories, but fantasy and paranoia have not yet completely replaced them, didn't understand any of this. When she heard a telephone ring she answered it. And when she heard a doorbell ring, she answered it. If she'd heard a dinner gong sound, and had known what it signified, she would have probably responded to that too. Pavlov would have approved of her. He would have been proud of her. She was a woman after his own heart; a woman with sensible reflexes. And so she also opened the front door when people knocked on it.

Before she came to live with Tom she had, for a week, been in a hospital after collapsing at home. She'd had a stroke and had been found in her hallway, semi-conscious and almost moribund. A neighbour had called an ambulance and, in the mistaken belief that they were dealing with a sprout (why would anyone call an ambulance for someone who wasn't a sprout?), the ambulance men had delivered her to the local hospital.

A word of explanation is in order.

The people of Europe had been divided into two groups: those fortunate individuals who worked for what had been the European Union but was now known as the États-Unis de Communauté Européenne (referred to as EUDCE), and its various subsidiary authorities, commissions and bodies (individuals known formally as officiers and informally as sprouts because they were all controlled from EUDCE's permanent headquarters in Brussels) and those far less fortunate folk who didn't (known officially as habitants and equally unofficially as civilians or, more commonly, as suspects because that's how they were regarded).

A week later, when he eventually found out where she'd been taken (a neighbour of his aunt's had told a friend who'd told someone who knew Tom) Tom had visited her there and had found her starving, lying between filthy sheets, in a filthy bed on a filthy ward.

A falling out among relatives meant that he hadn't seen much of his aunt when he'd been small, and had hardly recognised her when he'd met her again. He was sad about that. She'd always sent him birthday and Christmas presents when he'd been a boy and they'd been trains and cars too, instead of the socks and handkerchiefs favoured by most of his other female relatives.

She'd had an adventurous life. Eccentric, big, blonde and boisterous she'd worked as a magician's assistant until she'd grown too big (in all directions) to fit into the box. Unable to earn a living being sawn in half, she'd moved gracefully and naturally into jobs behind a series of bars. She'd been a born barmaid.

'Excuse me, but my aunt looks dehydrated,' said Tom to one of the nurses when he visited the hospital. 'And she's lost a lot of weight. Do you know if there is a reason for that?'

'She won't drink and she won't feed herself,' snapped the nurse.

'She had a stroke,' Tom pointed out.

'She's over that now.'

'But she's confused,' said Tom. 'Shouldn't someone feed her?'

'This isn't a restaurant,' snapped the nurse.

'I wouldn't expect her to be fed in a restaurant,' said Tom. 'But isn't this supposed to be a hospital?'

'We don't feed patients,' said the nurse, lifting her jaw and skewering him with a glare she probably used to strip paint. 'We're professionals. We have other, more important things to do.'

'But if she carries on at this rate she'll starve to death,' Tom pointed out.

The nurse shrugged. 'She's well over 80,' she said. 'We don't have to do anything with the over 60's. Anyway, she'll be going home tomorrow.' She sniffed. 'And she shouldn't have been admitted. She's not entitled.' Tom's aunt's big problem was that she was suspect not a sprout. Suspects weren't entitled to any sort of medical care or residential support.

And old suspects were definitely on the not-wanted list. The sprouts in Brussels had announced plans to make it a legal requirement for suspects over the age of 60 to join a proposed involuntary euthanasia programme. They were going to call it the Life Release Programme and those who enrolled would be paid a small fee in recognition of their commitment. The fee would be just enough to pay for a modest funeral. The scheme was considered an integral part of the two-tone civilisation created by the hierarchy in Brussels. Suspects who reached the age of 59 would be invited to attend classes and take a degree course to prepare them for the end. They would be given a copy of a glossy magazine called Dying, the production of which would, it was hoped, be subsidised with advertisements from appropriate and enterprising businesses. They would also receive a set of six coasters celebrating modem postLisbon Treaty European history and the promise that their names would appear on a Roll of Honour on a EUDCE sponsored website. Like all degree courses the whole merry venture would end not with an orthodox examination (such interventions had for years been forbidden as both dangerously elitist and woefully discriminatory) but with a ceremony where all candidates who had attended the requisite number of classes would be given the details of the website upon which their graduation diploma could be found.

'Going home!' said Tom, astonished. 'She can't possibly look after herself'

'That's not our problem,' the nurse said coldly. 'Your aunt's health is of no concern to us. She's a suspect and she's way over the age limit. That's two strikes. Two strikes and you're definitely out. She's not entitled to hospital care.' Sprouts didn't lie much, not to suspects. There was no buttering up. Sticking to the plain, unvarnished truth wasn't something sprouts did because they were honest, or didn't have anything to hide, but because they didn't have to worry about suspects knowing things. The truth was that sprouts didn't worry about anything because only sprouts could punish sprouts and sprouts never punished other sprouts for doing bad things to suspects. Sprouts, even low-grade sprouts, were always assumed to be in the right. Suspects were always in the wrong. Simple. The sprouts were special. And by any measure they were treated as special. They had guaranteed pensions, special health care facilities, special traffic lanes (which weren't entirely necessary since they were the only people who could afford motor cars or the petrol to put into their tanks), special schools and special everything. The sprouts were a different group. They really had become 'them'.

Sprouts inherited their jobs, or came by them through family contacts, and they held them for life, living well and comfortably. Although it didn't appear in any of the treaties or the constitution, it was the first law of the new United States of Europe and it at least made life simple. Everyone knew where they stood, even if they weren't standing quite where they wanted to stand.

Chapter 3

Tom took his aunt home. Naturally, they made him sign a form taking responsibility for her health and welfare. The sprouts had all the authority but none of the responsibility. He and his wife nursed her back to health; sharing with her the little food they had for themselves.

‘Old age is a shipwreck,’ said his aunt one day. And Tom could see what she meant. Every moment was a crisis. She was constantly fighting to survive amidst the storms, sharks and cannibals of aching joints, fluttering heart and clogged-up piping. ‘If you think life is exhausting when you’re young, you just wait until you’re old,’ his aunt warned him.

But she didn’t want to die. ‘Not ready yet,’ she said firmly. She spent her days watching the Telescreen and looking at old photographs. She often got the two mixed up; confusing the activities of the people she’d seen on the Telescreen and the folk with whom she’d spent the earlier decades of her long life.

Only one channel was available on the Telescreen. All programmes were made, approved and broadcast by the Brussels Broadcasting Corporation, known as the BBC. The BBC was EUDCE’s official broadcaster. Most programmes were made in Turkish but all programmes were available in a choice of over thirty languages. All the viewer had to do was set the default on their Telescreen to broadcast in their chosen language.

To get back to the doorbell that didn’t ring.

‘There’s someone here,’ shouted Tom’s aunt. ‘Two someones. They say they’re men from...’ she struggled to remember what she’d been told and then extemporised. ‘Somewhere,’ she said, throwing the word away as though it didn’t really matter where they came from.

‘Did you send them away?’

‘No, dear. They sort of pushed their way in when I answered the door.’ she said. ‘They knocked a lot,’ she added, in explanation. ‘They just kept knocking.’

‘Oh. Where are they?’

‘They’re in the living room reading the cushions.’

Tom was in the bathroom painting a small cupboard he’d found in a jumble sale. He’d bought it with a trowel one of the allotment holders had given him as a tip for helping clear away some weeds. He balanced his paintbrush on top of the pot of paint, wiped his hands down the sides of his faded green corduroy trousers, and sighed. For a simple exhalation there was a lot of emotion in it. Tom was so full of weariness that it spilt out of him at the slightest provocation.

If the visitors were reading the cushions they would be Soft Artefact Label Inspectors. In the wonderful new world of EUDCE every sprout had a grand tide. Lorry drivers had become Supply Chain Solution Executives. Officer clerks had become Logistical Problem Resolution Officers. And scrapyard employees were known as Conclusion of Active Life Vehicle Disassemblement Centre. If there was doubt the sprout would simply be described as a European Agent of Constitutional Enrichment.

A Label Inspector was only a Grade Three sprout but he was still a sprout; an inspector certified by the authorities and endowed with the full power of arrest and deportation. There were always two of them, of course. Like policemen, bailiffs, small children and girls at dances, sprouts invariably travelled in pairs.

Chapter 4

Tom was 61, tall and slim. This was not particularly through choice or healthy eating but more a consequence of the fact that he never had enough to eat. He had lost much of his hair, had large bags under his eyes and, because of the fluoride they'd put in the drinking water, his teeth were grey.

He wore what he nearly always wore, since they were pretty much the only clothes he owned, a pair of green corduroy trousers that were worn and rather shiny and a sports jacket with leather elbow patches.

He was a sensitive, gentle man who was stronger than he looked and stronger than most people who met him imagined him to be. He was that not uncommon variety of Englishman: a traditionalist who respected history but was not afraid to contemplate new ideas, though he embraced only the ones worth embracing; a man who believed in old-fashioned values without being constrained by bigotry. He was in some ways a very ordinary man but at the same time a most unusual man; a radical who hated change but, at the same time, a man who believed in the widely derided standards of Old England. He was that rare creature: a traditionalist who was never afraid to stand up for what he believed; never afraid to rebel. He was a man who put freedom above all else; he was that combination of cavalier and roundhead that only ever occurs in England.

He was old enough to remember the distant days when ordinary folk were treated with respect by policemen and airport security guards. He could remember when rubbish was collected as a regular routine, by workers not too proud to be known as dustmen, and when civil servants were civil rather than patronising, obliging rather than obstructive. He could even remember when the police responded to emergency calls without asking questions about the ethnicity of both victim and perpetrator. He could remember when muggers and thieves kept to the shadows. (These days the streets were considered so dangerous that one television pundit, sponsored by a failing chain of hamburger restaurants, had suggested that parents should deliberately allow their children to become fat, on the grounds that children who were well-padded with fatty deposits would be less vulnerable to knife attacks.)

Like most male adult suspects Tom wore a beard. The shortage of both water and heat made shaving impractical. Tom, like most of the people he knew, fetched his allocated daily water supply from a standpipe which was turned on for just an hour a day. Hot water, like central heating, was an almost forgotten luxury.

In different times he had worked as a publishing editor. One of his last authors, a reality television star famous mainly for her mammoth, if artificial, bosom had been made a Dame and awarded a Nobel Prize for exceptional services to literature as a result of a series of twelve ghost written autobiographies, all published before her 30th birthday. But the rise of the Internet, the success of what had at the time been known as Google in putting books free onto the Internet and the widespread availability of e-books and authorised free blogs meant that people had stopped buying books. Why bother? Books were too long for most people anyway. Just words, words and more words. No one had read much more than a twitter for years.

As a result Tom, along with printers, bookstores and authors had become just about as employable as a Nazi memorabilia salesman.

He hated the Internet.

Not particularly because it had cost him his job. It had done far more than that. It had destroyed respect for learning, and had destroyed the integrity and honesty of earning. The reliance of web providers on advertising meant that education and scholarship had been taken over by commercial interests. He'd been appalled when a famous breakfast cereal manufacturer had started giving away GCSE certificates with its individually packed products.

'What have you got?' a child would ask, removing a small scroll from the bottom of the packet.

'Arabic,' his brother or sister might reply, doing the same thing. 'That's nine I've got.'

The enthusiasm for free this, free that and free everything else had done what the philistines had never been able to do.

And in the end the governments had taken over the Internet and had learned to control what appeared; to manipulate the content and to suppress the dangerously questioning. It had, for those who had taken the power to themselves, been so very easy.

In the dark and privacy of the night, Tom still dreamt of days when authors and publishers produced daring, iconoclastic books which questioned and undermined the establishment. He had long ago learned that the pen is only mightier than the sword (or the taser) when the person you are facing doesn't actually hold a sword (or a taser) in his hand. He had learned that the pen in the hand of the advertisement buyer writing a cheque is more powerful than the pen in the hand of any independent writer.

Moreover, he no longer believed that most people wanted to know the truth. 'There's what people want to believe,' he had once said, 'there's what people want to hear. And then there is the truth.'

He knew that everyone's future is built upon the relics of their past and that his future was built, for better or worse, on the relic of his past as a publisher. So, it was not much of a future. The only books still being published were the ones produced by what once had been known as the European Union and was now the United States of Europe. All hail, blessed and mighty United States of Europe.

Just that morning an errand boy (a former architect whose practice had been put out of business by legislation endorsing a consortium of EUDCE funded Latvians as priority architects for the region) had delivered a hardback 400-page coffee-table book, printed on glossy paper. The book's title was WRAP (the Waste and Resources Action Programme) and it explained how to avoid waste. It contained a list of 73 separate recycling depots where householders could obtain food stamp credits by delivering such assorted items as used yoghurt cartons, empty beer cans and belt buckles. People who knew and understood the rules, and were prepared to play by them, were rewarded with great riches. Those who didn't know, didn't understand or didn't want to live by the rules were not.

The EUDCE bureaucrats, who had for years neither represented nor respected the people or their views but who had, like all good salesmen, manipulated their own promises to fit what they believed was expected, consistently created rules which harried and punished the hard working and the prudent and which favoured scroungers and thieves.

By the early part of the 21st century, burglars stood a better chance of getting away with their crimes than entrepreneurs had of succeeding with new businesses. (Officially, crime levels had been falling ever since EUDCE had been created and had been at historically low levels for 29 months in succession. Officially.) The man who worked hard to start a business, labouring long into the night and giving his health to create something lasting and worthwhile, was more likely to go bankrupt and end up in prison for debt than the burglar was to go to prison for stealing.

Wearied by a world that was changing in ways he didn't much like, Tom believed that anyone still brave enough to be an optimist was simply someone who didn't know enough.

Through the last quarter of the 20th century and the first years of the 21st century politicians and bureaucrats became increasingly accustomed to making promises they never intended to keep and which, moreover, no one expected them to keep. Members of the electorate, the taxpayers, were regarded as of little or no real consequence, as long as their voting habits could be manipulated satisfactorily. The political class cynically exploited the trusting and the hopeful. Corruption became normal and was so widely accepted that those who were exposed often expressed outrage that they had been criticised for what they regarded as their rights. When politicians and policemen complained about bribery and corruption it was only to moan that they weren't getting enough of it. Most areas of life, business, sport and entertainment, had been tainted by corruption, but politicians and bureaucrats had become consumed by it and none more consumed than those involved in the United States of Europe. Occasionally, there were outbursts of synthetic honesty. For a while, one or two people in public positions vowed to honour promises (unless or until it became necessary or even convenient to do otherwise) but soon even they fell by the wayside. EUDCE bureaucrats (like the politicians who had signed away England's past, present and future, and who had ironically put themselves out of business, were uniformly ambitious, ruthless, utterly lacking in responsibility or any sense of respect or decency; they were driven by pure arrogance and self-regard.

In the early days of the organisation's existence the EUDCE bureaucrats regarded loyalty, compliance, innocence, responsibility, obedience and a misplaced sense of respect as signs of stupidity and weakness. They encouraged a sense of trust and then took advantage of the trust they had helped create and nurture. And as the months and years passed by, in something of a blur it has to be said, it became harder and harder for those who wanted to protest to do so.

The majority, the electorate who had given away power in ignorance or misplaced allegiance, were weakened; oppressed by fear (deliberately exacerbated) and by endless, ever-changing, everthickening layers of bureaucracy; confused and frightened; strangled by red tape; always running and hiding from the unknown and from their own susceptibilities and inadequacies; always busy, too busy to speak out, too busy and afraid to put their heads above the parapet; too afraid to protest; sometimes, it seemed too busy to breathe. Official policy was, and had been for years, to scare people and to then solve their fears by offering to take responsibility. All the people had to do was to obey the rules they were given. EUDCE kept creating more enemies, more fear and more rules. It was as though the oxygen had been sucked out of the air in the same way that the goodness had been squeezed out of the food. The people were medicated, abused, poisoned, threatened, tortured and used. Always used. Always abused by cryptorchid lickspittles. In the end people just did their best to get by; to survive; and to forget.

Much of the time they did not understand what was happening to them. And much of the time, it seemed, they simply did not care as long as there was the Telescreen to provide pseudo-spiritual and quasi-intellectual balm.

Chapter 5

The credit crunch which started in 2007 as a result of a peculiarly potent mixture of greed, corruption, dishonesty and incompetence (spread widely and generously among politicians, bankers, economists and civil servants) was so badly managed that it led to the world's first major financial crisis. What was at the time called the United Kingdom was at the epicentre. Thanks to the exaggerated nature of the greed and incompetence among British politicians and bankers the nation stumbled and then fell. Interest rates eventually hit 20%, paused for a while and then soared; inflation rose so high that the officials entrusted with the job of massaging the official figures gave up and stopped even trying to estimate the rate at which prices were rising; the pound sterling collapsed as rapidly as the German deutschmark and the Zimbabwean dollar had done before it. Politicians who had been in power during the early part of the 21st century fled abroad to escape the wrath of a furious electorate.

The UK's energy shortage, a consequence of an absence of planning that would have mortified a half-competent housewife, was intensified by the collapse in the world's supply of commodities. Richer countries took most of what there was. Not being one of the richer countries, very little oil or gas found its way to Britain. Food shortages were so severe that starvation and malnutrition overtook cancer and heart disease as the commonest causes of death.

The EU's policies had for years encouraged waste, pollution and almost irreparable environmental damage, with the result that domestic food production had fallen, fallen and fallen again. The lack of oil, and the consequent inability to import food supplies from other continents, meant dramatic and permanent food shortages. People had to queue for everything. Shopping for the ingredients for a simple meal would often take a morning. There were separate queues for individual vegetables so the shopper had to stand in line three times to buy potatoes, cabbages and beans. Then, there were queues to pay for the items and to collect a payment receipt. And, finally, more queuing to present the receipt and pick up the produce that had been paid for. It was, said one man, worse than buying a book at Foyles had been in the 1960s. A meal involving four ingredients meant standing in line twelve times.

With hardly noticed irony EUDCE announced that it would save the people of Europe from starvation (a problem caused almost entirely by the EU's policies) by introducing a strict rationing policy, and by issuing food coupons to ensure the fair distribution of supplies. Naturally, the food coupons were issued in large quantities to the sprouts and in very small quantities to the suspects.

It wasn't just food supplies that were severely constrained. Nonfood purchases had to be made from charity shops (pretty much the only shops available) the majority of which received their stock in shipments from a number of Asian countries, mainly the two richest nations: China and India.

Shortages and rationing applied only to suspects. Sprouts were allowed to shop at special stores where food was available in unlimited quantities at token prices. For suspects, all foods were strictly rationed and shoppers had to accept whatever they were given when they got to the front of the relevant queue, even though the vegetables they were given might be bruised and half-rotten. Attempts to cheat the system and avoid queues by forming syndicates to buy food were regarded as a serious offence. Offenders who were caught were treated as guilty, because it was quicker and generally considered better all round for the community, and summarily deported without a trial.

There were street protests, of course. But, thanks to the mass of wide-ranging and oppressive anti-terror legislation introduced by the EU and by Labour Party in the late 1990's and the early part of the 21st century, these were quickly crushed.

There was much mumbling and complaining but those who mumbled were fearful and most of their complaining was done behind closed doors. Doing the right thing, and expecting others to do it, was regarded as eccentric, childlike, naive and, most importantly, entirely futile. Originality, unpredictability and inconsistency were all regarded as 'bad'. And as people grew to expect corruption and oppression so their moral compasses became distorted and then stopped working completely. People wearily accepted the way things had become as the way things had to be.

As the world's supplies of oil and gas shrank, and as the United Kingdom's situation grew daily more precarious, the number of people leaving the country grew to unprecedented proportions. Many of the migrants who had come to the UK in response to the promises of free money, free health care and free everything else, headed back to where they'd come from. As the infrastructure crumbled so the population shrank and the country became increasingly weak and unable to defend itself. National Health Service hospitals, top heavy with expensive bureaucracy, closed in many parts of the country, leaving millions with no formal health care. The British Government's gilts were formally given junk bond status. British manufacturing industry had long ago died. Now it was the turn of the service industries. Most were driven to bankruptcy by EUDCE red tape, massively high energy costs and the inability to compete with competing service industries in Asia, South America and the eastern reaches of the new

European Superstate; the United States of Europe. Only those providing services which could not readily be outsourced (plumbers, hairdressers, dentists) survived.

Thanks to the peculiar greed of its bankers and politicians the UK was the worst affected of any of the world's nations. The consistent failure of successive governments to devise an energy policy exacerbated the nation's problems. Not that the UK was the only country in Europe to fall into deep trouble. As China, India, Russia, Brazil and other rapidly developing countries expanded and grew richer so European countries became increasingly unable to afford commodities.

The Chinese stockpiled everything worth having (oil, steel, uranium, gold and copper) leaving the USA and EUDCE to cope as best as they could without. Those countries such as Australia and Canada which were rich in natural resources prospered but the Eastern European countries and Ireland, Italy, Spain and Greece had tumbled into an ever-tightening circle of depression and despair. Eventually, even France and Germany were dragged down.

When what was then still the European Union offered loans and subsidies (more of the former than the latter) the money was accepted with alacrity. There were strings galore, of course, but neither desperate politicians nor what was left of the Bank of England had the inclination or the strength to take too much notice of them. The EU already had much power in Britain, of course. At the end of the 20th century, and in the early years of the 21st century, a series of British Prime Ministers had signed away more and more of the nation's diminishing independence. When Gordon Brown signed the Lisbon Treaty he was willingly handing over the final shreds of sovereignty to the commissioners and commissars in Brussels. Since that signing the European Union had taken over completely. The Government had obediently done everything it was told to do. It had destroyed rural communities by closing down local hospitals and small post offices. It had made it impossible for the children of poor families to rise in the world by introducing increasingly onerous student loans.

The Government had replaced freedom and democracy with statism and centralised power; the malevolent consequence of a potent mixture of communism, socialism, fascism and paternalism; the identical quadruplets who tear away responsibility, accountability, integrity and identity and replace them with rules, regulations and unfettered, unquestioned, unquestionable authority.

Like the governments of other signatory nations the British Government had privatised the post offices, police forces, bureaucratic institutions and armed forces. And then the EU had closed the British Parliament and transferred every scrap of power to Brussels and to the Regional Authorities. And then EUDCE was born. The devil child of the devil parent.

The new Europe was by then already more statist than Russia or China had been back in the 1970's. What had once been Britain had become a statist subunit of the new EUDCE; a world in which central planning was run by a series of fat controllers who decided how much corn should be grown, how much bread should be baked and how much of what the fat controllers hadn't eaten should be consumed by the proletariat, and how much should be sold to underdeveloped countries to make sure that their farmers didn't make a living and put the agricultural export business on the slide. The world of EUDCE was a world with as much charm and flexibility as a painting by numbers kit. (The fact that central planning had failed dismally in China and the USSR did not discourage the supporters of EUDCE from giving it a go.)

And then, when people no longer had any money with which to buy all the stuff the Chinese were churning out (flat screen television sets, complicated motor cars for which there was no petrol and gym shoes costing as much as a good suit with hand stitched lapels and four horn buttons on each cuff) China suddenly found itself with stockpiles of these things. And so Chinese entrepreneurs, who were just beginning to enjoy their taste of capitalism, went bust and the financial merry-go-round stopped turning and suddenly there wasn't enough money to pay people who were sick or retired and only enough to pay people who worked for EUDCE, the only layer of political authority which had the power to lay its fat, white hands on what little money was left.

Since EUDCE's regional parliaments, and their administrative substructures, had completely replaced individual sovereign parliaments, and inevitably their civil service administrations, those who had previously worked for individual governments or local bodies had all been made redundant, given resettlement gratuities in lieu of pensions and invited to apply for posts within EUDCE. The lucky ones, the chosen ones, the ones with contacts and relatives already working within the European Union, had been given EUDCE employment status. When an internal survey showed that 98% of new hirings were related to, or closely linked to, existing employees the response of those who commissioned the survey was to ask just why the other 2% had been hired. Jobs had been allocated according to a Positive Reformation Preferential System designed to ensure that the most important posts were allocated to citizens from the three selected nations: France, Germany and Turkey. The unlucky ones, the majority, had been demoted to habitant or suspect status and employed on short-term contracts with no security, no pensions, no status and no rights. The Turks got what they thought were the best jobs, of course, though the French managed to keep many of the really powerful jobs for themselves. The French had made a move for control of EUDCE when Turkey's membership had weakened Britain and Germany (alone among the main countries that made up EUDCE the French had refused to allow the Turks entry to their country). German politicians threatened to take their region out of EUDCE ('we were never really in', they claimed). French became EUDCE's second official language and even the lowest sprouts now tried to speak it. (The former British citizens, having an inborn inability to speak foreign languages, spoke something referred to as pidgin franglais.) Turkish had, of course, become the official language of EUDCE though no one but the Turks spoke or understood much of that.

Colourless, unimaginative bureaucrats, uninspired and uninspiring, appointed en masse by power hungry commissars, spread tanker loads of public money to enrich their relatives and to purchase loyalty. The commissars knew that, like dogs obedient to their masters, those they empowered would support to the death those who gave them their fat salaries, their index-linked pensions and, most of all, their authority (none of which they could have ever hoped to acquire fairly, decently or justly). Empowered by a state bureaucracy and enriched and ever more emboldened by their new status, officials who had been merely relentlessly rude, deliberately obstructive and unendingly officious rose to new heights in all these areas. It was, for them, The Time and they much enjoyed it.

None of the bureaucrats had any experience of the world that you cannot get sitting in a first class train seat paid for by the taxpayers or eating in five star hotel restaurants (while attending conferences paid for by taxpayers). They had no experience at all of real life, and they wanted none. Their predecessors had at least taken holidays with those of the real world. No more did they do this. The EU bureaucrats back in the early years of the 21st century had to queue in NHS hospitals like real people. The NHS staff had to queue at the airport just like ordinary people. But no more. The sprouts had acquired, been given, taken, privileges. They lived exceptional lives, protected at all costs from the vagaries of the real world. Sprouts never had to apologise. They were never disciplined. The system existed for them. They were the lords of all.

It took a time for suspects to realise that things had changed.

For a while, some people continued to assume that sprouts were there to serve; to make things better for the community, for 'ordinary' working people, to fight for a better society. The more uppity suspects liked to think that the sharp-tongued, rude, aggressive civil servants who worked at airports and railway stations and hospitals were an exception, rather than the rule; rule-happy, uniformed bullies who simply enjoyed the authority they'd taken and found that they rather liked.

But gradually it became clear that the bureaucrats had become officious, overbearing and arrogant by default. They weren't there to serve the community. They worked, they existed, with one purpose in mind: to further their own ends, to extend their power and their status and their wealth. The suspects were the drones. The sprouts were the queens. It took the people some time to realise this. But it was the way. It was the truth.

The new EUDCE offered aid and assistance to the regions. But EUDCE's assistance, which included financial support and access to EUDCE's own centrally managed stocks and supplies of oil, gas, coal, uranium and other essential commodities was, inevitably, conditional. The result was that EUDCE, which already had complete power in principle had, for the first time, complete power in practice.

Advice and financial support from the International Monetary Fund was summarily rejected so that power could remain in Brussels and Strasbourg. The media, controlled and manipulated (through a sophisticated and effective mixture of threats and bribery) said nothing that was not approving. The mass of people, fearful and gullible, greeted EUDCE's every involvement with gratitude and almost audible sighs of relief. Local administrations were replaced overnight by the unelected, undemocratic Regional Authorities which had for years been sitting quietly on the sidelines waiting for this very moment.

Europe had genuinely become a two-tier society – those who worked for the European Superstate and those who didn't. Most of the jobs within the Superstate were manufactured non-jobs, designed primarily to provide employment, salaries, and pension entitlements.

Some of the jobs created were absurd. Tom had heard of one man employed as a Nasal Passage Obstructive Materials Extraction Supervising Trainee. He spent his days teaching children how to blow their noses. And there were two dozen Senior Presentation Manipulation Officers at the Lard Information Council.

Nepotism was at its most perfect within the European Commission. In the bad old days the commissioners had been appointed by national governments. The demise of national governments meant that such appointments inevitably came to an end. In the new EUDCE the 100 permanent commissioners (known by State decree as Princes) were allowed to pass their titles on either to their children or to the appointee of their choice.

By the end of its first frantic week of existence the new EUDCE had hired all the staff it needed. The millions of former civil servants who had been made redundant were denied redundancy payments on the grounds that their employer, various parts of the United Kingdom Government, no longer existed and could not, therefore, be expected to honour what had long been regarded as commitments. Their pensions, once considered to be gold-plated, disappeared overnight.

Private Pension funds which had been regarded as inviolable became ‘legacy assets’. Billions of pounds worth of investments suddenly became billions of euros worth of debts. Millions who had thought themselves among the most securely positioned in the country, suddenly found themselves without any visible means of support and without any prospects. Trade unions which protested that this was against the law were outlawed. The UK no longer existed, said EUDCE, and so its obligations had disappeared with it.

Two men in the North of England were deported after covering up EUDCE flags on motor car number plates with England flags. A couple in Dorchester were deported after a Union Jack, neatly ironed and folded, was found at the back of a wardrobe in their bedroom. A man in a public house in Taunton was deported after making a joke about EUDCE. Nowhere else in Europe were individuals persecuted with such enthusiasm and venom as they were hunted down in England. The eurocrats knew just how dangerous the English could be. England had been, they knew, the home of the Magna Carta, habeas corpus and Chaucer. It was the birthplace of William Shakespeare, John Milton and Winston Churchill, Isaac Newton and Robert Stevenson. It was the homeland of Lord Byron and William Blake, Charles Darwin and Charles Dickens. England had given the world Samuel Johnson, James Watt, Michael Faraday, Edward Jenner, John Keats and Christopher Wren, Oliver Cromwell, Charles Babbage, William Harvey and Joseph Lister, John Dalton, Queen Elizabeth I, Francis Bacon and Thomas Malthus. No other country had given the world one half the number of inventions that the English had given. And England was the universally recognised birthplace of parliamentary democracy. It was the birthplace too, of industry, finance, business and just about every sport on the planet.

And, most important of all, although the English are always slow to rise, and always reluctant revolutionaries, they were known within EUDCE to be the most determined, most bloody-minded people on earth. Bulldogs. Terriers.

The founders of EUDCE knew that if their project was to succeed, to bloom, they had to destroy England, demoralise the English, ruthlessly eradicate English culture and suppress all memory of English history. And they had to stamp on any sign of burgeoning English revolutionary zeal.

There were some protests, of course. But the leaders were quickly arrested and passed on, via the Americans, to other nations. (The words ‘suspected’, ‘arrested’, ‘charged’ and ‘sentenced’ had become synonymous, as had ‘intent’ and ‘guilt’.) Torture and imprisonment had been outsourced. The bureaucrats said it made economic sense and there was no one to dispute their saying. They called it the deleveraging of progress, though no one really knew what that meant. Anyone who opposed or criticised the peaceful work of EUDCE, the European Superstate (formerly known as the EU, EC, ECC and the Common Market) was officially defined as a terrorist.

They used fear to keep everyone in line; they had found the real power of intellectual terrorism. When terror triumphs it is institutionalised and thus it was.

Chapter 6

If you weren’t a registered, licensed sprout then jobs were hard to come by.

As a white male suspect Tom was not allowed to vote, own a motor car, have oil tokens or take any sort of permanent, full-time work. As a result Tom worked part time as a cobbler. Repairing shoes kept him busy. No one could afford to buy new ones. Even if they had been able to afford new ones there were no shoes shops. And if there had been any shoe shops there were no shoes for them to sell. Cobbling was a good business to be in. He didn’t have a shop, of course. Most of the few shops remaining were charity shops. He worked at home. Sometimes, if there were enough shoes to mend, he would go to someone’s home and repair them there.

He also had, and was grateful for, a steady private job as an allotment guard. He worked every Wednesday from 6 p.m. to 12 p.m. at the Sub-Region 47/H298 Community Growth Project. The allotment had once been a graveyard, but being centrally placed and having good soil meant that it had been compulsorily purchased. The gravestones had been tom out and dumped in a huge pile in one corner of the graveyard. There had been a plan to use the broken pieces of stone to repair crumbling buildings but no one had ever got round to putting the plan into action. Now people grew their own vegetables in the graveyard and Tom had been hired by the allotment holders as a guard to make sure that the hungry and the homeless did not succeed if they were weak enough to succumb to temptation and strong enough to do something about it. (The appointment had, of course, been confirmed and approved by the South Eastern Regional Parliamentary Commission.)

Tom was lucky to have the work together with the pay packet, and the occasional handful of food that he could earn if he did small jobs for the allotment holders. There was no job security, of course and if he was too ill to attend he didn’t get paid. Only sprouts had job security, sick pay, pensions and employment rights.

He dreamt of producing a small newsletter, an independent source of news for suspects. But it was impossible to find a printing machine or a paper supply and so the dream remained a dream. But he kept it alive. ‘What is a man without his dreams?’ he asked himself whenever the dream began to fade.

Chapter 7

Having a sprout on the doorstep was a frightening enough thought. Having one actually in the house was close enough to alarming to have given Tom palpitations. Tom looked around upstairs, desperately trying to see his world through the eyes of a sprout. The first thing he noticed was a battered paperback copy of David Copperfield lying beside the bed. He grabbed it, and quickly skimmed it under the bed so that it was out of sight. Not even sprouts were allowed to read Dickens any more.

Dickens was an English author and, therefore, like Shakespeare and others of that nationality, officially proscribed. Conquering England, and turning it into nine regions, had been the most difficult task for the EUDCE bureaucrats. It was something of which they were particularly proud. They had for years run a clever propaganda war to outlaw Englishness. They'd fired up hatred of the English among the Scots and the Welsh by telling extraordinary lies about historical events. It had been very effective.

'I'm a Senior Soft Artefacts Label Inspector,' said the newcomer. He looked to be in his early 40s – young enough to be enthusiastic and not old enough to have lost his enthusiasm for his job or his belief in the organisation. He liked to sound polite and helpful when he first met suspects. He felt that politeness, unexpected and out of context, was always curiously menacing. Underneath the fake courtesy he had the same confidence enjoyed by all the sprouts. Like most petty officials his self-importance was derived from the knowledge that he, and not the suspect to whom he was talking, had access to really important people.

Boris Perovskite was short and clinically obese and a fully trained expert on Label Maintenance Legislation. No one had used his first name for at least a decade. He was Romanian and homosexual. Recruiters always gave priority to applicants who were born outside the country where they were working. And they were instructed to give preferential treatment to applicants who were not heterosexual. (Applicants of both sexes who had not undergone the quasicompulsory homosexual 'experience' at one of the Gay Awareness Camps, widely regarded as EUDCE's version of National Service, were not entitled to be considered for any sort of official post.)

Perovskite had three interests: his moustache (which he trimmed each morning so that it looked as much like Adolf Hitler's as possible), his collection of 1970's Japanese music boxes and his work. He attended compulsory body-realignment tutorials three afternoons a week and counselling sessions two evenings a week. At the tutorials he was encouraged to discuss his interest in food with a trained nutritionist who believed that talking about food would eventually reduce Perovskite's addiction to chips and burgers. At the counselling sessions Perovskite was encouraged to talk about his obsession with food to a trained and qualified counsellor who had an open mind on all issues and was concerned only with offering support. Because Perovskite insisted on the sessions being conducted in his native language, and because there was a shortage of Romanian nutritionists and counsellors, translators were hired to attend all these sessions. Since the course of tutorials and counselling sessions had begun Perovskite had gained just 17 kilograms in weight. Computer generated graphs showed that his weight was accumulating at a slower pace than before the sessions had started and so both the nutritionist and the counsellor had received substantial bonuses from EUDCE as a reward for this success.

Perovskite checked the soles of his shoes before entering Tom's home. He checked not, as most people do, to make sure that his shoes were clean but to make sure that they were dirty. He always stepped in dog faeces before performing a domestic inspection. It gave him a buzz to walk around leaving a stinking trail on the carpets and his work always took him into every room in a house. No one ever complained. No one ever complained about sprouts. If suspects were young, male, attractive and alone he always insisted that they remove all their clothes, including approved undergarments, so that he could check that the labels had not been tinkered with. Being a Software Label Inspector was so much more fun than being a Hardware Label Inspector. Who wanted to look at the backs of fridges and Telescreen sets all day long?

'Under EUDCE Directive 4879/28162 I have the authority to...' Tom's brain shut down temporarily. A Soft Artefacts Label Inspector was, he knew, authorised to enter any suspect's home to check that EUDCE approval and rating labels had not been removed from furniture, duvets and other bed linen, carpets, soft toys and clothing. The law said that A&R labels, as they were known, had to be at least 4 cm by 4 cm in size. They were usually bigger. And somehow, they almost managed to look unsightly. On clothing, particularly underclothing, they were often placed in a position that seemed designed to cause maximum discomfort. The penalty for removing a EUDCE approved rating label was severe.

'Do you understand?' demanded the second inspector, as though speaking to a slightly backward child.

Pierogi Tchotchke was sweating and had clearly been doing so for some time for he smelt of stale sweat. He was shaped like a pear and had a long, thinnish face that made him look a little like a badger, though he did not look as sensitive, as friendly or as intelligent as a badger. He was 22-years-old and reputed to be the youngest Soft Artefacts Labels Inspector in the region. He did not consider himself to be a dull, one-track person like many of his colleagues. (He regarded Perovskite as dull and superficial and it irked him that Perovskite was the senior Inspector and would occasionally make this clear to the suspects whose artefacts they were inspecting.) Tschotchke boasted of having a number of interests outside his work. He collected pocket calculators and had over a hundred of them. He was also contemplating starting a collection of commercial adding machines. When required to give a preference (on forms and when making purchases in the sprout stores) he always stated that he was heterosexual, though he had not, as yet, acquired any experience in this area.

The thick, dark blue suits they both wore had been designed to be hard wearing and warm in winter. Female sprouts wore the same sort of suits. As he looked at the two sprouts in their ghastly suits Tom couldn't help thinking of Thoreau's advice that we distrust any enterprise that requires new clothes. How Thoreau would have distrusted the European Superstate. The material of which the suits were made was said to be waterproof and quite possibly was. But it wasn't the right sort of thing to be wearing in midsummer. The suits were both worn and shiny. Numerous snags and darns showed that the stuff of which the suits were made wasn't as hard-wearing as the manufacturers claimed. Lower grade sprouts received one new suit a year and so they had to wear the same suit every day. Since the only dry cleaning shops dealt exclusively with the clothes of high level sprouts, and since the material took a day or more to dry out if washed, the sprouts rarely, if ever, washed their suits. They weren't paid well enough to buy other clothes so they wore their official-issue suits every day, whether they were working or not. It was hardly surprising that they all stank.

Tom nodded.

'Sign here.' Aggressively, quite rudely, Tchotchke thrust a paper pad towards Tom who took it, read it, scribbled his signature on it and handed it back.

The inspectors had once used electronic signature pads. They'd gone back to paper records for two reasons. Repeated and unexpected outages in wireless communication systems had resulted in the loss of masses of collected data. And restrictions in supplies of raw materials meant that replacing the portable electronic devices had proved impossible, even for EUDCE. Not even EUDCE could get hold of portable computers. The oil shortage meant that there were no longer any factories capable of making them. And even if there had been there wouldn't have been any batteries for them. The authorities still kept computerised web-based records but only on network linked desk-top hardware. Unlike everyone else EUDCE did still have an almost reliable electricity supply.

'How many people are there sharing this accommodation?' demanded Perovskite. In the old days the sprouts always knew the answers before they asked the questions. Since they'd had to revert to carrying paper forms they'd lost their edge. These days they only knew if someone had lied when they got back to their headquarters and keyed in the information they'd been given. But all sprouts who met with suspects as part of their daily routine had extensive training in how to dominate conversations with posture and tone of voice. They were like policemen, army officers and headmasters in that they knew how to demand attention and respect. It had been decided by EUDCE's Citizen Manipulation Advisors (of whom there were many) that calling EUDCE employees 'officiers', and everyone else suspects was an easy way to establish an automatic pecking order; to give EUDCE employees status and to make everyone else feel suspicious, vulnerable and, most important of all, defensive.

'Three,' replied Tom, who found himself feeling curiously apologetic; as though he had been caught doing something wrong before the interrogation had even started. 'Myself, my wife and my aunt.'

'Still living with auntie, eh?' sneered the inspector, writing down this information on the pad. He wrote slowly, deliberately, with the tip of his tongue sticking out of his mouth. Tom noticed that he used the stub of a green colouring pencil. This wasn't for any particular reason. There was a worldwide shortage of pens and EUDCE had commandeered every writing implement they could find. Some sprouts were filling in forms with charcoal sticks, others were using children's crayons. Filling in the small spaces on the forms with thick crayons was notoriously difficult.

'She's suffering from Alzheimer's disease,' explained Tom. 'We took her in. She is too old and too ill for institutional care. And she's a suspect, of course.'

The inspector looked at Tom. 'You think the policy of protecting the State's facilities for essential employees is a bad one?' Even in speech he somehow managed to give the word 'State' the dignity of an initial capital letter.

'No, no, not at all,' lied Tom quickly. Lying came easy to everyone when talking to sprouts. Tom consoled himself with the thought that the truth is often a complicated confection of contradictions. Nothing is ever as simple or as straightforward as we would like it to be. The one relevant certainty was that criticising EUDCE policy was illegal and was an offence which was taken very seriously. It was for this reason that no one in Government or the media had ever been able to blame EUDCE for the closure of post offices, the chronic and accelerating shortage of GPs, the deterioration in schools, the abandoning of weekly rubbish collections (and, subsequently, the abandonment of fortnightly collections and, eventually, the complete abandonment of rubbish collections), the disappearance of long-established army regiments, the disappearance of policemen from the streets and so on and so on.

The result was that the EUDCE laws were adhered to strictly, regardless of whether or not they made any sort of sense. And laws were the one thing that wasn't in short supply. Each EUDCE Commissioner thought he was the only one making rules (and creating chaos). But there were 100 commissioners – all making rules and causing chaos. The rules just kept coming; fluttering into people's lives like snowflakes. Endless nonsense which seemed designed to destroy every sensible aspect of human endeavour. Much of the red tape was conflicting. So, for example, there was a law which said that bicycles should all be equipped with two bells (one to use and one as a spare in case the other one didn't work) and another that said that ringing a bicycle bell was unacceptable noise pollution. The result was that bicycles were all fitted with two bells but no one ever rang any of them (except by accident). Applicants taking the examination for their bicycle riding licence (just about every human activity, including sex, required a licence and, inevitably, a test fee and an annual maintenance fee) were expected to display their ability to use their bells without actually ringing them.

There was a law (introduced by the Muslim Affairs Commissioner) which said that women should cover their heads whenever they went out in public. And there was another law (introduced by a lobbyist representing a group of Jews) which stated firmly that it was illegal for women to cover their heads.

Whatever you did could get you arrested and deported. Tweedledum and Tweedledee, the Red Queen and the Mad Hatter would have all felt at home in the United States of Europe.

'You have permission for her to be living here?'

Tom nodded. 'We were granted permission.'

'And you pay the fee for a Residential Aunt Licence?'

Tom nodded.

The inspector painstakingly wrote all this down on his form. The sprouts always worked slowly. There were too many of them and they tried to spread out their work so that it didn't quite fit the time available. It was, they knew, the best way to ensure they weren't made redundant. Very few sprouts were ever made redundant but it was the one thing that terrified them. Falling from sprout to suspect meant losing everything: dignity, status, income, pension rights, shopping privileges, health care rights and transport access. (It had been said, by a former Bishop, now lost somewhere in Africa, that suspects were treated worse than black folk had been treated in America's deep south. 'To be a suspect in 21st century Europe is to be a nigger,' he had announced in his last sermon, noting that suspects were not allowed to use any form of public transport designated for use by sprouts.)

Very occasionally the authorities would make an example of someone 'pour encourager les autres'. The dismissed sprouts were always lowly functionaries, of course. Higher-ranking employees had guaranteed jobs, pensions and perks for life.

The sprout looked around, taking in the threadbare carpet, the lumpiness of the two easy chairs and the sofa and the shabbiness of the other furniture. The magazines neatly lined up on the coffee table were well-read. The date on the magazine on the top of the pile showed that it was 14-years-old. There was a small bookcase against one wall. 'You've a lot of rubbish in here, haven't you?' He walked over to the bookcase, turned his head to one side and read the titles to check that they were all on the approved list.

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Tom wasn't worried. He knew that the books on display were all licensed. Most of them were EUDCE publications glorifying the European State's magnificent history, and the many ways in which it had enriched the lives of the European people. Despite having published a number of books of its own EUDCE didn't really approve of books and had slapped a huge tax on anything published by outsiders, in order to discourage reading. The American CIA had once produced a report showing that books encourage people to think and thereby encourage more revolutionary activity than newspapers, radio and television put together. EUDCE agreed with this. They had issued a statement announcing that all revolutions and 'bad thoughts' were started by books and that in future adults should derive most of their entertainment and education from officially blessed (and licensed) programmes broadcast on the Telescreen by the BBC.

In the last days of schools, just before cereal manufactures were licensed to give away free diplomas, primary school children who attended at least once a week were automatically given a degree in anything they could spell. Tom knew children aged 12 who had so many degrees that it took them ten minutes to write them all down. Children under six years of age went not to infant school but to pre-university college. Talk that EUDCE had lowered standards was dismissed as nonsense. A bureaucrat who had just awarded a fistful of degrees to a four-year-old Latvian, said that the evidence proved conclusively that standards had been raised. But there had been an outcry when an eighteen-month-old Israeli had been shown on the Telescreen receiving his 100th degree (during the ceremony the recipient stuck it into his mouth and ate a good part of it).

Now children no longer went to school ('What is the point of wasting public money on building schools when every child already has its own personal tutor?' demanded a leading sprout, a licensed educationalist, explaining why children should obtain all their education from the Internet. 'We should not waste money on such fripperies as schools.')

When schools had closed, the Telescreen had been the only source of educational material. Lessons were available on the BBC and examinations were also taken and marked on the Telescreen. A survey Tom had seen on the BBC had reported that 98% of children under 10 had chosen to specialise in studying celebrity gossip and advanced celebrity gossip. Just over 96% of older students were taking degrees in similar subjects.

('My 14-year-old has just completed a PhD on political gossip from the early 21st century,' a friend of Tom's had told him. 'She can tell you endless stuff about all sorts of people I've never heard of. She knows more than is decent to know about some woman called Jordan who was apparently a Regional Health Minister for a while, a transsexual called Simone Cowell who was a Regional Foreign Secretary for a year and two broadcasters called Ross and Brand. The Jordan woman was apparently appointed Regional Health Minister because of her experience of cosmetic surgery. Sadly, it all ended tragically. She apparently suffered a melt-down during a particularly hot summer. Ross and Brand were apparently well-known in their day, though I haven't the foggiest what they did. They apparently both ended up presenting home decorating programmes on a Do It Yourself channel that ran for a while a few years ago. Back in the days when there were lots of channels. And, if you're really interested, my 14-year-old has a friend who can tell you the bowel habits of at least sixty reality television stars.' Tom had gratefully declined the offer.) The enthusiasm for webucation programmes (as they were called) had been severely damaged by the introduction of supermarket degrees. Sprouts and suspects alike could obtain educational qualifications merely by joining the approved 'Free Degrees Programme' on the Telescreen and collecting coupons issued by the googletesco, EUDCE's official online store.

Tom and Dorothy Cobleigh had a neighbour whose 5-yearold daughter, Enid, although illiterate and innumerate, had already collected degrees in advanced mathematics and Telescreen appreciation. The most popular degree course was in The History of Nail Varnish Application Technology. (Sadly, suspects couldn't buy nail varnish even if they had the money. The few small manufacturers supplied only stores which were available only to sprouts.)

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Tom didn't say anything. Sprouts always liked to sneer.

'Why isn't the screen switched on?' demanded the inspector, indicating the screen on the wall above the fireplace. The sprouts didn't miss anything. Suspects were supposed to have their screens switched on all the time so that they could watch the BBC whenever they were at home. Public places were all fitted with Telescreens too.

For a while there had been a few pirate stations, broadcasting illegally from hidden sites, but they had quickly been closed down in the interests of free speech. Now the BBC was the only approved broadcaster and in practical terms that meant the only broadcaster. More hated than ever, no one called the organisation the Beeb or Auntie any more. No one felt fondly towards such an overtly propagandist organisation and no one trusted anything heard on the Telescreen. Suspects who wanted to know what was going on gleaned what information they could from rumours passed mouth to mouth and shared face to face. The rumours were sometimes accurate but more often they were not. Naturally, since no one knew whether what they were hearing was true or untrue this meant that everything they heard was as worthless as the information broadcast on the BBC.

The only way to access what had once been known as the Internet, was through the State-approved search engine, which blocked all unapproved sites and put EUDCE approved sites at the top of all searches. The quality and reliability of information available was so poor that most suspects wouldn't have bothered with it even if they had been able to afford reliable equipment or had a reliable electricity supply.

Sprouts were entitled to ask suspects questions about recent BBC news items. They were empowered to stop suspects in the street and ask five questions. Any suspect who scored less than 40% was given three penalty points on their roaming licence and required to be tested once a week on their knowledge of Telescreen topics. Accumulate twelve penalty points and your roaming licence was automatically endorsed and you weren't allowed to leave home without passing a new citizenship examination. Tom knew people who hadn't been out of their homes for years.

Roaming licences (the successors to identity cards) had been made compulsory soon after the Treaty of Lisbon was extended by the commissioners. (The Treaty of Lisbon had given the European Union complete power to introduce new laws. It had been the end of British sovereignty.) The roaming licences had to be renewed annually. There was, of course, a charge.

'It is turned on but the community windmill has stopped working again so we have no electricity,' explained Tom. 'It's the fourth time this week.'

'Your community windmill has broken down?' The sprout made it sound as though it was Tom's fault.

Tom pointed to the window, through which stale, warm air drifted very slowly. There was no glass in the window and the old shower curtain which they used to keep out the rain and snow had been pulled to one side. The predominant smell in the room was of woodsmoke. Despite the heat there were stoves and fires burning in many of the homes in the area. There was no other way to heat water or to cook food. ‘There’s no wind,’ he explained.

‘Don’t you have battery back ups?’

‘No.’

‘No grid support?’

‘No.’

‘You’ll be on rationing here anyway.’ It was a boast rather than a question. Only the gated communities where sprouts lived enjoyed constant electricity supplies. It really wasn’t difficult to understand why sprouts were so loyal to EUDCE. If a sprout lost his job he had to move out of the gated community and into the ‘real’ world outside.

The sprout moved towards the narrow staircase.

‘Where’s the gate?’ He pointed to the top of the staircase.

‘Ah,’ said Tom. ‘The gate.’

‘EUDCE Health and Safety Regulation HS9547/726,’ said the sprout, pleased to have found fault so easily. ‘Every intradwelling staircase containing more than three riser treads must be fitted with a gate at the top of the most elevated portion of the staircase and a safety harness, with approved guidance system, should be available for anyone ascending or descending the staircase.’

‘The approved gates and harnesses are very expensive,’ said Tom.

Smirking with satisfaction, the sprout made a note in his notebook and then, climbing very gingerly, headed·up towards the first floor.

‘We should get danger money for jobs like this,’ he muttered, loudly enough for Tom to hear.

Chapter 8

Later, when it was all over and what had happened had become the past instead of the future, people often asked how it all started; how the Revolution began. The truth is, of course, that it is always a straw that breaks the camel's back. And straws always appear to be small, insignificant things.

They were on the landing at the top of the stairs.

'I need to inspect every item of bedding and every item of clothing,' said Perovskite. 'How many bedrooms do you have?'

'Two medium sized ones and a very small one,' replied Tom.

'Three,' said the sprout, writing this down in his notebook.

'One of them is very small. Hardly big enough to take a bed. It's what used to be called a box room.'

'Three bedrooms,' insisted the sprout. 'You and your wife sleep together?'

'Yes.'

'And your aunt has a room of her own?'

'Yes.'

'So you have a bedroom lying empty?'

'It's a very small room,' insisted Tom. 'We just keep junk in it.'

'If you have junk it should be sent for recycling,' said Tchotchke.

'Yes, of course.'

'I will send round a Residential Placement Officer,' said Perovskite. 'We will arrange for someone to use that room. Maybe a couple or even a family.'

'It's a very small room!' insisted Tom. 'Would you like to look at it? Please take a look, and you will see how small it is.' He opened the door to the third bedroom. It was dark inside. The glass in the window had been broken during the riots which had taken place five years earlier. It wasn't possible to buy glass so Tom and a friend called Keith had fixed up a metal screen at the window. The screen was made out of the flattened out roof of a Volkswagen. Keith spent his days chopping up unwanted vehicles and creating windows, doors and furniture out of them. With thousands of unwanted cars abandoned on the streets there was never any shortage of materials.

'There is no need for me to look,' snapped Perovskite who, like all his colleagues, found facts could be a nuisance. They had to be written down and stored and could get in the way afterwards. 'It is against the law to deprive fellow citizens of available accommodation.' As he spoke he punched a very podgy right forefinger into Tom's sternum. He punched so hard that Tom automatically backed away a little. 'Do you know the penalty?' He leant forwards to poke Tom again. 'The automatic penalty for a first offence is an increase in your tax rate. The penalty for a second offence is confiscation. What is your State tax rate at the moment?'

'Eighty per cent,' said Tom. Four fifths of any cash he and his wife Dorothy earned went straight to the State. They received no benefits and no allowances. English citizens had been taxed, taxed and taxed again to satisfy the ever-growing needs of EUDCE and, in particular, the weaker, poorer Eastern European regions which had joined EUDCE for the subsidies and grants they knew they would be entitled to claim. EUDCE's commissioners had welcomed these countries, despite the fact that they were likely to be a drain on the State for many years, for two reasons. First, because a bigger EUDCE gave those controlling it extra power. In the same way that company executives like to expand their companies because this gives them a good excuse to buy bigger jets and pay themselves more, so EUDCE bureaucrats wanted a larger State. And, secondly, because the introduction of new, poorer countries diminished the power of the older, more established nations such as France, Germany (and what was left of the United Kingdom).

Even before the administrative needs of EUDCE grew to mammoth proportions citizens had been taxed on their income, taxed on what they spent, taxed on what they saved or invested and taxed again when they had the effrontery to die. Now EUDCE was taxing people out of existence. Businesses all over the northern regions had been destroyed by high taxes and red tape and millions working in the private sector had given up official work and were taking small, part time jobs where they were often paid in kind rather than money. In the end all that was left was the red tape and the legions of tax collectors sitting around with nothing much to do.

The sprouts, meanwhile, were paying themselves more and more; giving one another increasingly extravagant expense accounts and huge bonuses for failure ('to help soothe the disappointment and guard against feelings of personal inadequacy it is essential to increase bonuses in times of departmental failure,' read the most significant report on the issue). And there were the index-linked pensions to be paid too.

Private enterprise had been bled to death and with the failure of non-state industries the basis of society had disappeared. Those who ran EUDCE, the insatiable monster, ever hungry for power and money, were blind to the problems and unable to see that when you kill the golden geese there are no more golden eggs.

‘Your tax rate will go up immediately by another five per cent,’ said the sprout. ‘That’s eighty five per cent.’

‘I can’t afford that,’ protested Tom.

‘That’s your problem,’ said the sprout smugly, with a careless shrug. He strode into the bedroom Tom shared with his wife. ‘This is your bedroom?’ Inside, he looked around. There wasn’t much to see. A double bed. Two small bedside tables, each containing two drawers. A rickety wardrobe and a chest of drawers. ‘These people don’t realise how lucky they are to have us to make all their decisions for them,’ Perovskite said to Tchotchke, speaking over Tom as though he wasn’t there. The sprouts tended to do that a good deal. Perovskite strode across to the chest of drawers and tapped it on the top with his pad. ‘What’s in here?’ he demanded.

‘Clothes. Nightwear. A few jumpers. My underclothes. My wife’s underclothes.’

The inspector opened a drawer. It contained two rather elderly jumpers. Both had holes in the sleeves and were frayed around the neck and cuffs. The sprout checked that the jumpers still had their labels, closed the drawer and opened the drawer to its left. It contained Dorothy’s underwear: three brassieres, half a dozen pairs of knickers, two slips. They were all neatly folded but old and worn. Everything Tom and his wife owned was old and worn. The sprout picked out a brassiere and examined it carefully. ‘She’s a good size. Do you like women with big breasts?’ He looked at Tom. Tom said nothing. Perovskite caressed the material for a moment, then examined the label and held it up.

‘The label on this one still carries an old imperial measurement,’ he said. ‘38D. That’s inches!’ He spat out the word ‘inches’ as though he didn’t want it in his mouth for a moment more than was necessary.

‘It’s a very old bra,’ explained Tom. ‘But you’ll see that the label also carries official EUDCE sizes.’

The inspector folded the brassiere and stuffed it into his pocket. ‘This must go for recycling,’ he said. ‘As you should know it is an offence to possess clothing which still contains imperial measurements. They’re a remnant of English imperialism.’

Tom said nothing. He cursed silently. Sprouts always looked for items carrying imperial measurements. It was the easy way for them to obtain convictions and to show that they were doing their jobs. An easy way for them to bully suspects. And an easy way for them to help themselves to valuable bits and pieces from people’s homes. Anything which contained imperial measurements could be confiscated. Tom knew someone who had been arrested and deported for having a set of scales in his bathroom which still measured weight in pounds and stones. Such things were supposed to be burnt or otherwise destroyed after they’d been confiscated but everyone knew they weren’t. The same people who had made a fortune confiscating and reselling expensive penknives while working at airports now made money confiscating, relabeling and reselling a whole range of illegal items. Even books which contained imperial measurements were confiscated and then resold on the black market.

Tchotchke pulled out another brassiere and examined the label on that one. He turned to Tom, smiled and put that into his pocket too. He didn’t say anything.

Only one of the brassieres in Dorothy’s drawer was legally acceptable. Obviously disappointed Tchotchke put that back into the drawer. ‘Is she wearing a soutien-gorge today?’ He used the French word for brassiere. Sprouts always used French words when they could, even if they didn’t speak the language properly. It was an open sign of their loyalty to Brussels and their contempt for England and everything English. Tom had noticed that the British born sprouts were even more likely to use French words than the foreign born ones. And of the British born sprouts it was the Scots who were particularly likely to speak French whenever they could, though their mixture of accents meant that most of the time no one knew what they were trying to say. The Scots had become more bitter than ever when they had discovered that their Regional Parliament was merely a formal consequence of being a EUDCE region, rather than a prelude to the independence they thought they were going to be given.

‘Yes, I think so. Yes, of course.’

‘She must bring it into the Label offices for label inspection and authorisation or for confiscation.’

‘She can’t afford new bras,’ said Tom. ‘All our money goes on food and keeping the house warm during the winter.’

‘Then she’ll have to let her big boobies hang free won’t she,’ said Perovskite with a sneer. He went through the rest of the clothes and the bedding quite quickly. He confiscated a pair of Tom’s trousers because the labels on them, though metric, were worn and almost unreadable, and three pairs of socks because they didn’t have any labels at all.

‘My socks have never had labels,’ protested Tom.

‘All items of clothing and soft furnishing must be labelled,’ insisted Perovskite pompously. ‘And it is an offence to remove or deface EUDCE approved labelling.’ On the landing he turned and poked Tom in the chest again with his right forefinger. ‘One way or another you’re in quite a lot of trouble,’ he said. Tchotchke snorted and sneered.

Tom didn’t say anything. There was never any point in arguing with a sprout. The laws, and there were plenty of them, were always on their side. He suddenly remembered the slogan ‘the customer is always right’ from the 1950’s. They’d effectively changed it to ‘the sprout is always right’. Whole armies of people were employed solely to castigate, admonish, rebuke, reprove, berate and scold. Adults were treated like children and sprouts were treated like gods. It was widely accepted that the weight of a huge, intolerant and committed bureaucracy lay behind every order and every form, but the public voice was unheard. Every institutional demand, however meaningless and trivial, pointless and wrong-headed in concept, was carved in stone and delivered by truck. There was never room for dissent, discussion or such old-fashioned luxuries as logic and common sense. The mandarins and apparatchiks ruled and what, in a free society, might have grown into genuine, healthy, opposition had rotted and turned into a pustulant mess of resentments.

As Perovskite prodded again, Tom stepped backwards to get out of the way a little, and to minimise the pain of the poking. As he felt his foot dancing in mid-air he turned and saw that the stairs were directly behind him. He then half stumbled and half fell to one side in his attempt to prevent himself falling down the stairs. It was, in its way, an elegant pirouette.

Perovskite, still pushing forwards with his outstretched finger, suddenly found that there was nothing for him to push against. The chest he had intended to prod was no longer there to be prodded. He too stumbled, but instead of falling onto the landing he fell forwards, tripped over the outstretched legs of the fallen Tom and, with a shout and a great deal of noise, tumbled forwards and down the narrow stairs, bumping into the wall a good deal as he did so.

The second sprout, Tchotchke, rushed down after him, followed closely by Tom.

When Tom got to the bottom of the stairs he thought at first that Perovskite was dead. His eyes were closed and he was lying in a very uncomfortable looking way. But when Tom knelt down beside him and felt for a pulse in the man’s neck he could feel the regular, rhythmic thump which told him that the man’s heart was still beating strongly.

‘Are you all right?’ Tom asked, anxiously.

Slowly, the sprout opened his eyes and looked around him. ‘I can’t move my legs,’ he said. He lifted his head a little. ‘I can’t move my hands.’

‘Don’t move,’ said Tom. ‘I’ll ring for an ambulance.’

‘Where is he going to move, you idiot,’ demanded Tchotchke. ‘And how? He’s already told you that he can’t move his arms or legs. Tell them who it’s for.’ The two-tier ambulance service, like all other State services, provided aid solely for sprouts.

Tom stood up, about to head for the front door. Suspects didn’t have fixed line telephones but there was a telephone point less than a quarter of a mile away.

‘You’re going to fry for this,’ Tchotchke hissed.

Puzzled, Tom paused. ‘What do you mean?’

‘You deliberately pushed him down the stairs!’ said the sprout. ‘They’ll have you extradited to somewhere with the death penalty.’

‘He *fell* down the stairs,’ said Tom.

Tchotchke shook his head. ‘No, he did not,’ he said firmly. ‘You pushed him’ He turned ‘pushed’ into a two syllable word. He sneered at Tom. ‘Of course I could be wrong,’ he said. ‘But it doesn’t matter if I am, does it? So effectively I’m not.’

Tom knew that the sprout was right. Suspects who were charged with attacking sprouts were invariably sentenced to death. Under EUDCE law, suspects were not allowed to give evidence in their own defence.

To get round the fact that EUDCE didn’t allow prisoners to be executed the sprouts regularly arranged for people they wanted executed to be transferred to less finicky parts of the world. With the help of the Americans, some went to Saudi Arabia, some to China and others to the United States of America itself where executions had become the most popular daily reality show on the American Telescreen.

‘But it was an accident,’ protested Tom.

The sprout managed a snort. ‘You’ll die for this. I’ll see to it. Now go and get help. I’ll stay with him.’

‘It really wasn’t my fault!’ said Tom.

‘You pushed him.’

‘No, no, I didn’t. He fell.’

Tchotchke looked at him. He didn’t care about Tom and he didn’t care about the crippled sprout lying on the floor. ‘You will be executed,’ he said firmly.

Tom hurried out of the front door, heading for the nearest telephone kiosk. Once there he put a coin into the box and dialled the number for medical emergencies. All emergency phone calls within EUDCE had been outsourced. Calls for what had been known as the police (and, although usually referred to as Europol, was now known as the European Defence and Public Protection Regulatory Force) went to a call centre in Germany, calls for fire services (now known as the European Conflagration Control Force) went to Poland and calls for lifeboat services (the

European Maritime and Littoral Patrol Force) went to Lithuania. Calls for medical emergencies went to a telephone answering system in Italy. The reason for this was simple: the four Regions concerned had each offered the best price. The efficiency of the various systems had never been considered and the complications inevitably bound to ensue when emergency phone calls were answered by people who didn't speak the same language, let alone understand the geography or culture of the nation from which the call emanated, had never been regarded as of any significance. In practice, the result of all these changes was that in practice, and as far as ordinary citizens were concerned, there were no effective public services.

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A few years earlier Tom had telephoned for the police when a neighbour, a former writer of cheap thrillers, had threatened to run amok with an axe. ('I'm going to run amok with an axe,' had been his exact words. It was the only time anyone had ever heard the word 'amok' used outside a newspaper or a courtroom.) The conversation on the telephone had been conducted in a mixture of languages. A word or two of German, a word or two of French, a word or two of Turkish (only just then the official language of EUDCE) and a word or two of English.

'Were you deprived or abused as a child?' asked the operator who eventually answered Tom's call.

'No, not particularly,' admitted Tom who had been through this sort of interrogation before. 'Though I didn't get a bicycle when Neville Bartholomew got one and I felt aggrieved about that for years. To be honest it still rankles. He had a red one with lots of gears.' He had found that if you did not answer the questions fully the interrogation tended to last much longer. The questioners always liked to be able to fill in their forms.

'Are you ethnic?'

'What exactly do you mean by that these days?' asked Tom.

'Were you born outside the country in which you now reside?'

'No.'

'Were your parents born out of the country in which you now reside?'

'No.'

'Is English your first language?'

'Yes, it is,' admitted Tom, who knew in his heart that this was the 'wrong' answer. 'I expect you're now going to ask me if any of my relatives make objects d'art out of used gourd skins?'

The telephone operator sounded puzzled. There was a long pause as he looked at the screen in front of him. 'That's not on my list of questions,' he said at last.

'So, can you send someone round?' asked Tom. 'This guy is about to run amok.'

'Has he threatened any persons of ethnic origin?'

'Not yet. But there's a Welsh guy living upstairs. He could be in the line of fire pretty soon.'

'We'll send someone round but it will probably be next Wednesday.'

'Morning or afternoon?'

'I'm afraid I can't tell you that for security reasons.'

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The telephone rang and rang and rang. Eventually, Tom heard a voice. But it was, as Tom had expected, a recorded voice.

'This is the national telephone line for medical emergencies,' said a calm, female voice speaking first in heavily accented French and then repeating the initial message in German, Spanish and English. The woman who had recorded the message then gave a list of 39 language options. Tom pressed 16, the code for English and waited again.

'Your call is important to us,' said the new message. 'We are committed to providing you with an excellent service. We have satisfied our targets for each month in the last two years. Now, please listen carefully to the following message from one of our sponsoring partners.'

There was a faint click and then Tom heard a male voice. 'Medical emergencies are always difficult times,' said the man. The agency who had hired him had found an actor with a rich, warm voice. He sounded kindly and sympathetic. In the background Tom could hear comforting organ music being played. Although he recognised it as something by Bach he couldn't decide precisely what. 'At times like this we all feel frightened and anxious. But we often also feel angry and upset. We may feel that the emergency with which we are dealing could be the result of someone else's carelessness or incompetence. At times like this there is only one sensible action to take: to seek immediate expert help from someone who cares about you and your problem. Delay can be very damaging to your aims. We have many years of experience of dealing with problems of all kinds and we know that most people want to make sure that no one else is allowed to fall victim to the same error, the same carelessness or the same incompetence. To help satisfy this aim we provide a comprehensive legal service designed to defend your interests and to prosecute those responsible. And although we know that money can never be a cure for pain in the heart, we do our utmost to ensure that the pain and distress which have been caused are made a little lighter by the payment of the most substantial sum possible. To speak to one of our accredited and fully qualified experts press one, to continue with your call press two and to obtain full information about our other forms of legal representation press three.'

Tom pressed two and waited.

'Thank you for calling,' said a female voice which may or may not have been the original voice Tom had heard. 'Your call is important to us. All our operators are busy dealing with other emergencies at the moment but your call is in a queue and will be dealt with as soon as possible. Meanwhile, please keep holding and listen to the following messages from our partner sponsors.'

A man's voice then broke in. The first few words were cut by clumsy editing but it didn't matter much.

'... sad fact of life that despite the miracles so often worked by doctors, nurses, aides, laboratory technicians and others involved in professional health care, illness can often result in the demise of the one we love. At times like this we often feel confused, bewildered and worried. What must we do? How do we cope? What are our obligations? To whom can we turn? These are difficult questions at any time but when they occur in the aftermath of a sad personal loss they are doubly, trebly difficult to cope with. Our EUDCE approved funeral undertakers can help you thread your way through the dark and difficult days ahead. To obtain advice, a no-obligation quote and a chance to win a mobile telephone with three free historically significant ring tones simply press six. To continue holding press one.'

Tom pressed one.

'I'm afraid all our specialist operatives are still busy dealing with emergency calls,' said the female voice again, 'but you will soon be rising fast to the top of the queue and your call, which is important to us, will be dealt with very soon. Meanwhile, please listen to the following message from one of our partner sponsors.'

Tom sighed and waited.

'Organ donation and supply has come a long way in the last few years,' said a woman, who spoke with a slightly squeaky voice. She spoke very quickly, obviously anxious to get as much message as possible into the allotted time. 'Whether you are a would-be organ donor or a recipient-to-be it is our aim to help you speedily and with the least possible inconvenience. Our service is widely recognised to be the best in the world and is endorsed by a number of celebrities including Olympic Sudoku bronze medallist Voluptua Bottomley. Our supply service offers fully guaranteed livers, kidneys, hearts, eyes, lungs and other organs at the very lowest prices – ask now for details of our buy one get one free offer which must end soon – while our skilled and highly qualified purchasing team, working in our organ purchasing partner division offers the very best prices for previously owned organs. Whether you are selling an unwanted organ of your own, or an organ which belonged to a loved one, or you are selling a vital organ under our pre-deceasement cash-now scheme, you will be staggered by our keen prices. Don't sell your kidneys anywhere else until you've had a quote from us. Our surgeons, whether installing or removing, are among the best available and many are fully qualified. Our teams also provide full after care.'

There was a click as the message ended. Tom lowered the handset for a moment and looked at it as though he blamed it for the recordings he'd been listening to. Or, perhaps, as though he still found it difficult to believe that he'd heard what he'd been listening to. The kiosk was scarred where previous callers, driven to rage by waiting for the recordings to end, had attacked the receiver and the walls with the seemingly indestructible handset.

'Your call is important...' said the familiar female voice, coming back. But before she could continue she was interrupted by another female voice.

'I'm afraid your time is up. To continue your important call please insert more money.'

Tom stared at the telephone and cursed. He reached into his pocket. It was empty. He slammed down the telephone and hurried back to the house. For the first time in his life he missed the simple, good old days when telephone kiosks had taken ID cards and had been equipped with fingerprint scanners.

Chapter 9

‘You bloody fool!’ snarled Tschotchke, when Tom explained what had happened.

‘How is he?’

Tchotchke looked down and kicked Perovskite with his foot. The Senior Inspector opened his eyes and looked up.

‘Still alive – just’ said Tschotchke, sounding disappointed. He handed Tom two coins. ‘Hurry up!’ he said. ‘And don’t come back without an ambulance.’

Tom headed back for the door.

‘You’re going to pay for this!’ he snarled. ‘I’m going to make sure that you, your aunt and your wife all die.’

‘But they had nothing to do with it!’ protested Tom.

‘They’re guilty by association,’ said the sprout. ‘They can be punished just as easily as you can.’

Tom knew that the sprout was right. Sprouts had enormous power over suspects. Any sprout could arrest a suspect and turn them over to the European Defence and Public Protection Regulatory Force. And suspects’ families were often arrested under the ‘guilty by association’ laws which meant that a suspect who knew, or was closely related to, another suspect could be charged with the full offence.

Moreover, in the world controlled by EUDCE, suspects had no rights. The soulless and the ruthless bullied the helpless and the innocent with impunity. In a clever political move EUDCE commissioners had given all EUDCE suspects American citizenship. This had been promoted as a great achievement, a cause for much celebrating and another step towards world peace and eternal happiness for all. The fact that sprouts were not included in the deal had been widely regarded as a blow to EUDCE employees. It was announced that they had been excluded from this agreement because of their oath of loyalty to the European project. A small group of angry sprouts protested in public but the protests were half-hearted and quickly subsided. It was later suspected that these protests had been orchestrated by EUDCE itself

It was only weeks after the agreement had been signed that the reasoning behind it became apparent. Britain had previously signed an extradition agreement with the USA, enabling the Americans to extradite Britons who had broken American laws, and this treaty had later been expanded to cover the new United States of Europe. The combination of the two treaties meant that since every suspect in Europe was officially also an American citizen and, therefore, subject to American law, any suspect who broke the law in Europe would also be breaking the law in America and liable, therefore, to extradition. The agreement saved EUDCE the cost and trouble of providing lawyers, trials and prisons for suspects. (‘The whole idea of having trials is a calculated insult to our security services,’ one judge had famously announced. ‘Arranging trials implies an unacceptable level of trust in the probity of security staff and, therefore, a lack of faith in the State itself. If the officers employed by the State say that someone is guilty then that should be enough for the State.’)

All suspects who were arrested under this new arrangement (and who were not considered guilty of crimes meriting execution) were transported to one of the African or South American countries with which the USA had made arrangements. Once there, suspects would be held in a state of limbo. They were never tried or convicted and so, since they had never been sentenced, they could never appeal against their sentences.

To have a suspect arrested, charged, sentenced and deported a sprout simply had to fill in a form called a GB746 in which he detailed the suspect’s crime against the State. Sprouts routinely picked out anyone who looked 16 years or older and seemed fairly fit. They drew the line at the frail and the sick. They didn’t send small children. But they’d send 12-year-olds who looked 16. Either sex.

Once at their destination suspects were fitted with sternal implant tracker microchips to ensure that they did not escape (after some suspects had used pieces of razor blade to cut out subdermal implants, the authorities had taken to putting a microchip into each suspect’s sternum, using a gun that looked and worked rather like a staple gun – it was an excruciatingly painful procedure and no anaesthetic was used). And then they were put to work in the fields.

The desperate need for crops (both for food and biofuel), and the shortage of oil for running farm equipment, meant that vast armies of labourers were needed. Land had to be prepared by hand. Seeds had to be sown by hand. Crops had to be harvested by hand. The global water shortage meant that crops had to be tended carefully, by hand, and watered individually to ensure that there was no waste.

Controlled and managed by Monsanto-Goldman-Sachs on behalf of EUDCE, huge areas of Africa had been planted with staple crops such as wheat, com, soya and tobacco. (EUDCE still made huge amounts of money selling tobacco crops to addicted smokers around the world.) These crops needed constant attention. Designated European criminals (those who were suspected and, therefore, convicted of having committed crimes) were the perfect source of long-term labour and a vital replacement for the countless millions of indigent Africans who had died of starvation during the second decade of the 21st century when genetically engineered crops succumbed to a lethal virus and created a supranational famine which had, to no one’s great surprise, impacted least of all on the USA and Europe and most of all on the developing world.

The imported workers lived in small, simple, wooden cabins. They worked half naked, dressed in the remains of the clothes in which they had arrived; they bathed, if they chose to do so, in a tin tub (in water that was changed once a week and which looked like mud within an hour) and they envied those among their number who had the foresight or the good luck to arrive wearing stout shoes or boots. Women who arrived wearing high heels and chose to walk barefoot rarely lasted more than a week. Cut feet turned septic within hours. Workers who fell ill and were unable to work were moved into a hut decorated with a EUDCE flag and a sign describing it as the local ‘EUDCE Hospital’ but there were no beds and no nurses, no doctors and no medicines. A study had shown that new workers were so cheaply ‘recruited’ that there was no financial benefit to be obtained by treating ones who fell sick. Patients (if that is the right word to describe people who are registered to receive medical treatment but not actually receiving any) lay, untreated, in the dark until they died. Every evening two workers would drag out the dead bodies and toss them onto an ever-burning bonfire so that their ashes could be used to fertilise the land. The stench of burning flesh covered the countryside for miles around.

Chapter 10

Tom, who was half way to the front door, ready to run back to the telephone point, stopped and turned back. He knew that the sprout spoke the truth. European law meant that close relatives and associates could be held legally responsible for the actions of those close to them. As in Communist Russia, just being related to a criminal (or, rather, someone accused of a crime against the State, the two not being the same thing in principle but being very much the same thing in practice) was every bit as bad as being a criminal. In that moment Tom made a decision that changed his life, and the lives of many others, for ever. It was a moment that was, much later, to be referred to as the very beginning of the beginning.

‘What are you messing around for?’ demanded the sprout. Tom noticed, for the first time, that in his lapel he wore a small bronzecoloured metal badge. The sprouts received these when they had sent 10 suspects to Africa. Send 20 and you were awarded a silver badge. Those who sent 50 wore a gold badge. The more ruthless sprouts sent everyone for whom they could complete a GB746. ‘Get to the phone. Call an ambulance. And don’t forget to tell them it’s for an inspector or I’ll make sure they shoot you twice.’ He looked at Tom and laughed. ‘If I tell the police you pushed him, his dependants, if he’s got any, will receive double compensation and an enhanced pension.’

Tom stood still for a moment then moved past the standing sprout and headed for the kitchen.

‘Now, where the hell are you going?’

‘It’s quicker this way. I can cut through the back.’

The sprout considered this for a moment and then nodded. In the kitchen Tom’s aunt was sitting at the table staring into space. She did this quite a lot, sometimes sitting quite still for hours at a time. At other times she didn’t seem able to stop moving. It was impossible to know how she was going to be on any particular day. She turned as her nephew entered the room.

‘Hello!’ whispered Tom.

‘Hello,’ his aunt whispered back. She smiled at him. She was sitting in a front seat from a BMW which had been placed beside the stove in the kitchen. She had her cat, Tabatha, on her lap. The cat, nearly 20-years-old, was the centre of her universe. For a moment it looked as though she might have recognised Tom but then she began to look puzzled. ‘Have you seen my nephew?’ she asked. Again, she whispered because he had done.

‘He’s around,’ Tom said softly. He no longer tried to correct her, or reason with her too much. She quickly became upset if she realised that she was getting things wrong.

‘Do you want a cup of tea?’ she asked.

‘I’ll make one,’ he said. ‘In a minute. I’ve got something else to do first.’

Chapter 11

Afterwards, Tom examined the frying pan. There was no sign that it had been used for anything other than frying eggs. He put it in the sink. He thought it needed a wash. He then filled a small kettle with water and placed it on a hook over their small kitchen fire.

‘Would you like a biscuit with your tea?’ asked his aunt. This was, he knew, her gentle way of saying that she would.

He opened a cupboard and took out a packet of ginger biscuits. They were soft and well past their best-before date but they still looked and almost tasted like biscuits. He took two biscuits out of the packet, put them on a cracked saucer and put them in front of his aunt. She smiled, said thank you, picked one up and started to nibble at it. She nibbled like a bird. Like everyone else she ate slowly to get the most out of the experience. She could make a single biscuit last a quarter of an hour.

‘We can’t have bodies at the bottom of the stairs,’ complained his aunt, between nibbles. ‘We will have to move them. We can’t be clambering over bodies every time we want to go somewhere. Someone might trip up.’

Tom sat down opposite his aunt. He felt very, very tired. He realised suddenly that while the advantage of being older is that people don’t expect you do unexpected things (like hitting them on the head with frying pans) the disadvantage is that you get tired after doing those things.

‘Aren’t you having a biscuit?’ his aunt asked.

‘Not just now, thanks,’ Tom replied. ‘I’m not hungry at the moment.’ When he told her that he wasn’t hungry it wasn’t usually true. This time it was true. He didn’t have the energy to eat.

He looked at his aunt and realised that she was seemingly unconcerned by her efforts. And she was twenty years older than him. That made him feel even older.

Chapter 12

Half an hour later, when his wife came home, Tom still hadn't moved. He was sitting at the kitchen table, with his hands cupped around a now cold cup of tea. His aunt had nearly finished her second biscuit. He heard Dorothy's key in the front door, and then heard her gasp with shock or surprise as she walked down the hallway.

Dorothy, Tom's wife, was 54. She had been a successful sculptor whose work had been bought by many discerning collectors. She was tall, just four inches shorter than Tom, and looked ten years younger than she was. Her eyes were deep brown and her skin still china white. The whiteness of her skin embarrassed her a little because she thought it drew attention to the greyness of her pitted teeth. Because of this she rarely showed her teeth when she smiled and people who didn't know her thought of her as being rather aloof. She sometimes envied those who wore false teeth. Dentures weren't affected by the fluoride in the drinking water.

Most female suspects dressed like car mechanics or plasterers and, as a result, looked just about as attractive. Dorothy, however, still made an effort. She did this not for Tom, who would have loved her in baggy hessian trousers and a canvas poncho, but for herself 'If I dress like everyone else,' she said once, 'I might well forget who I am. Worse, I might think like everyone else too.'

The demand for works of art had more or less disappeared under the authority of a fascist bureaucracy which regarded a blue flag studded with gold stars as the height of artistic perfection and so Dorothy worked unofficially and illegally as a private messenger, carrying letters and packets around the area. The Post Office had been replaced by a EUDCE approved mail distributor based in Turin. (Deliveries had been cut to once a week on the grounds that more frequent deliveries were both unnecessary and a danger to the environment). There was, therefore, a great demand for her services.

'I suppose you already know this,' said Dorothy, walking into the kitchen. 'But I had to step over two people lying down in the halfway. They seem to be asleep.' She was, he knew, calmer than he would have been if their roles had been reversed. 'Or, possibly, dead.'

'Sprouts,' said Tom. He reached out and took her hands. They loved each other very much, and had done so for a long time. 'Both of them. They came to inspect our labels.'

'Are they dead?'

Tom nodded.

'What happened?'

'One fell down the stairs. The other one I hit on the head with a frying pan.' Tom thought about it for a moment. 'Actually,' he said, 'I think my aunt did most of the damage.'

'With the frying pan?'

'Yes.'

'And they're both dead.'

'They seem pretty dead to me. I wouldn't sell them life insurance.'

'That's all right then,' said Dorothy.

'One fell down the stairs. I killed the other one, the second one, because he was going to claim that I killed the first one. Do you want some tea?'

'But you didn't kill the first one?

'No, no. Well, a bit. Sort of. The small fat one just tripped and fell. But they'd have believed the other one rather than me. So I had to kill the second one. And then finish off the first one.'

'Of course they would,' agreed Dorothy, nodding.

'He was threatening to have us all arrested, charged, imprisoned and all the rest of it.'

Dorothy shivered. 'Two down and a lot left to go.'

Tom looked at her.

'There are a lot of sprouts in EUDCE, aren't there?'

Tom nodded.

'So it's two down and a lot to go.'

'You don't mind?'

'About you killing sprouts?'

'Yes.'

'No, why should I mind. I don't mind at all. I expect they had it coming. Incidentally, one of them has what looks like one of my bras poking out of his jacket pocket. I recognise it because it's faded pink and has a mended strap.'

'They both do.'

‘Do what?’

‘Have one of your bras in their jacket pockets.’

‘Oh.’ She raised an eyebrow. ‘Right. I won’t ask. You’ve clearly had a busy afternoon.’

‘The bras both had imperial measurements on the labels. But you can have the bras back now that they’re dead.’

‘Oh good. That’s a relief Have you any idea how difficult it is to find underwear these days? Even if I had money to spend on bras I don’t know where I’d find any for sale. I’m glad we’ll get those back. My breasts will be pleased.’ She looked down at her chest, as though expecting some sign of delight.

‘The strange thing is that I don’t feel in the slightest bit bad about it,’ said Tom. He paused and thought for a moment. ‘An hour or two ago if you’d asked me if I could kill someone I would have laughed at you and said ‘No! Never. Not under any circumstances.’ But now that I’ve done it I don’t feel bad about it at all.’ He bit his lip and thought for a moment or two. ‘Perhaps because I just didn’t think of them as people.’ He paused again. ‘If I ran over a dog or a cat by accident I’d feel really bad about it. But I don’t feel bad about those two in the hall.’

Dorothy reached out and touched Tom’s hand.

He put his other hand on top of her hand. For a moment they just sat and looked each other. ‘I know we’ll have to do something with them, but can I get you some tea now?’

‘I’d love some.’ She smiled. ‘You really are very English, you know.’

‘Am I?’

‘There are two bodies in the hall and you’re making a cup of tea.’

‘You said you’d like a cup.’

She shrugged. ‘So, I’m very English too.’

‘Maybe a cup of tea will help us decide what to do?’

‘Let’s hope so. Incidentally, what did you say you used to kill the one that you killed?’

‘A frying pan.’

‘Ah. Surprising choice. But doubtless effective.’

‘The whole thing sort of happened,’ he explained. Tom turned to his aunt who was still sitting at the kitchen table. ‘Would you like another cup of tea?’

Tom’s aunt looked up.

‘Another cup of tea?’ Tom held up his cup.

She smiled and nodded. ‘And a biscuit?’

Suddenly, the Telescreen burst into life as a breeze started to turn the community windmill. A plump, middle-aged woman was sitting on a large red chair answering questions from a small man with a neat moustache and a wig. The moustache looked as if it might well have been false too. The woman had blue lips and was wheezing. She didn’t look well.

‘What’s this?’ asked Tom.

‘It’s a new programme,’ explained Dorothy. ‘Contestants answer questions and if they do well they can win an operation. The operation is then done live on the Telescreen the following day. And the gloriously happy patients get to spend up to a week recovering in a sprout hospital afterwards.’

‘A week? They get to spend a week in the hospital?’ This was unheard of. EUDCE’s Care in the Community scheme had been expanded to include hospital patients, who, if they were lucky enough to have an operation, were invariably sent home to be cared for by their families and friends within hours of leaving the operating theatre. To the embarrassment of some senior clinicians evidence showed that patients who were cared for at home were less likely to die than patients who were cared for in hospital. There was far less risk of contracting a deadly infection at home. And fewer recovering patients died of starvation. Hospital infections had become endemic and at least half of all hospital patients died from them.

‘Is it compulsory? The hospital stay?’

‘No, no, I don’t think so. I think it’s rather regarded as a perk. Something that no one in their right mind would even contemplate turning down.’

‘And contestants can win big operations?’

‘Oh yes. Heart surgery, brain surgery, bowel resections, breast enlargement, hip replacements – all sorts of stuff.’ This was quite a prize. Operations of any size were not usually available to suspects, although it was possible for suspects to win some surgical operations and medical treatments if they bought a winning ticket for the European Lottery.

‘Do the winners get to choose what operation they have done?’

Dorothy shook her head and smiled. ‘Oh, no. They get what they win. A woman last week won a penis enlargement operation. She was hoping for an operation to remove a lump in her lung. She burst into tears when they told her what she’d won. She was dying of cancer. It was very sad. She’s in the lead to win a trolley full of groceries for crying louder and longer than anyone else on the Telescreen this month.'

'Your final question,' said the small quizmaster, a man called Milksop, who had initially won fame and popularity among EUDCE bureaucrats for his skill in asking apparently caustic, tough questions which, in reality, allowed his interviewees to wriggle off the hook without anyone noticing, and who was now capitalising on his two dimensional fame by hosting a series of bland quiz programmes. He wore a purple satin suit and a blond wig with pink highlights. 'Answer this one correctly and you will win today's surprise operation.' He paused, as quizmasters always do, in order to build up the drama and to enable the studio director to catch a shot of the contestant's face as the agony tension built up.

'Does the woman who won the trolley full of stuff get to choose her own groceries?' asked Tom, quietly, during the pause.

Dorothy shook her head. 'She just gets what they give her. It's usually bulky stuff that doesn't cost too much. They put a few fancy things on the top, packets of biscuits, toothpaste and so on, but underneath it's mainly toilet rolls and cat litter, that sort of stuff.'

'What if you don't have a cat?'

Dorothy looked at him.

The quizmaster studied the card he was holding. 'At the end of this week's Global G3 meeting in Miami, held to end world poverty and hunger, the delegates from the United States of Europe, China and the United States of America enjoyed a formal dinner together. How many courses were there?'

The contestant closed her eyes as she thought about the answer.

'Fourteen?' she suggested, rather fearfully, after a few moments.

Again, the host made her wait. The camera zoomed in on the contestant's face which was now as grey as her teeth. She seemed terrified, like an animal caught in a car's headlights.

'Why do they do this?' asked Tom. 'Make people wait so long to know if they've won.'

'To build up the tension, I suppose,' said Dorothy.

'If they build up much more tension she is definitely going to die,' said Tom firmly.

'Correeeeeeeeeect!' cried Milksop eventually, throwing his arms in the air and feigning excitement but somehow doing so without much conviction or success. He was not a good actor. He beamed at the contestant who really did look quite ill. Even the knowledge that she had won didn't seem to improve her appearance.

'If they don't hurry this up she's going to die in the studio,' said Tom.

'And now let's find out what you've won...,' The host took a small envelope from his inside jacket pocket and once again the woman had to wait. Milksop opened the envelope, which was not sealed, and took from it a small slip of paper, folded once.

'I bet they reuse that envelope time and time again,' said Tom.

Dorothy laughed.

'You're going to love this!' cried the host, having read what was on the paper. He turned to the woman and put an arm around her.

'You've won...'

He waited.

She tried to look at the paper to see what was written there but he held it away from her.

'You've won breast enlargement surgery!' he cried at last. 'Both breasts!' he added, as though contestants were sometimes offered one-sided enhancement surgery.

The woman, who already had vast breasts and who would, if anything, have probably preferred a breast reduction operation, looked terribly disappointed.

'Poor thing,' said Dorothy. 'She must be a 44F already. It's probably the last thing she wants.'

'How the hell is the surgeon going to make them bigger?' asked Tom, not unreasonably.

'Are you excited?' asked Milksop.

The woman was trying hard to look brave.

'Oh, yes,' she lied without any conviction.

'Just what you've always wanted?'

The woman nodded. A first tear trickled down her left cheek. 'Well, I was really hoping for a heart operation,' she admitted, wheezily. 'But you have to take what you can get don't you?'

'Another brave and lucky winner here on *Win Your Dream Operation!*' cried the host. 'Tune in tomorrow at the same time to see our next contestant. And don't forget to tune in at ten to see today's lucky winner having her operation – live on your BBC!'

The screen changed to a shot of an audience clapping wildly. The programme wasn't really filmed in front of an audience. The programme makers just used standard film of an enthusiastic audience clapping and cheering. The audience members, all suspects, had been given a loaf of bread each to cheer and shout excitedly for an hour.

‘What’s on now?’ asked Tom.

Dorothy pressed a button on the screen so that they could access the programme selection.

‘You can choose between *Cannibal Island* and *Thongs of Praise*,’ said Dorothy.

‘I’m no wiser.’

‘*Cannibal Island* is billed as the ultimate reality programme. A dozen suspects are marooned on an island with nothing to eat. The winner is the person who’s left at the end of twelve weeks.’

Tom shuddered. ‘And *Thongs of Praise*?’

‘It’s promoted as ‘a religious programme with a difference’. The congregation all wear skimpy panties.’

‘Maybe we can just sit and watch the fire,’ suggested Tom. ‘While we decide what to do with the bodies in the hall.’

‘Sounds good to me,’ agreed Dorothy.

Tom’s aunt, who had said nothing for a while, smiled and nodded at them both and took advantage of the quiet to ask if anyone wanted another biscuit.

Chapter 13

One cup of tea each, and twenty seven minutes later, they had what they both agreed would turn out to be either an excellent, well thought out plan or, heaven forbid, a disastrous, mess of a scheme.

It had been Dorothy's idea.

'The best place to hide something is often in the most obvious place of all,' she said. 'Where's the one place that people are most likely to die?'

'Dunno,' said Tom. He thought for a while. 'In a cemetery?'

'They don't die there.'

'On the roads? Dump the two of them in a gutter in the hope that whoever finds them will think they were hit and run victims?'

Dorothy thought for a moment. 'Not a bad idea,' she admitted. 'But I think my idea is better.'

'Go on then, where?'

'In the hospital.'

Tom stared at her and frowned.

'People are always dying in hospitals,' she pointed out. 'No one will take too much notice of a couple of extra bodies. If we could put the bodies in empty beds the staff will assume they died there.'

Dorothy had, since childhood, been a diabetic. She had, over the years, been a frequent visitor to the hospital. Like many long term patients she knew how the local hospital worked as well as, or better than, most of the staff. She'd seen the hospital grow and she'd seen it decline.

'Don't they, sort of, keep count of the patients?'

'The admissions system is all computerised,' Dorothy pointed out.

'I know how to access the computer. Do you know their names?'

'I can find them.'

They went back into the hall. The two bodies had begun to stiffen. Tom rescued Dorothy's bras and handed them to her, and then removed the incriminating notebook from the fat sprout's pocket. He took out their plastic identification wallets. Dorothy took the bras from him as though they were contaminated and then put them on the stairs. 'I think I'll wash these before I wear them again,' she said. Tom put the sprout's notebook on the fire in the kitchen. He also burned the identification papers he had taken from the two men. The notebook was half empty and for a moment Tom was tempted to tear out the used pages and keep the rest. It was a long time since he'd had the luxury of a notebook to put in his pocket. But he knew that would have been a dangerous thing to do. Helped by Tom's aunt, who was much stronger than she looked, and who didn't seem in the slightest bit surprised that they were now dragging bodies through the house, Dorothy and Tom half carried and half dragged the two sprouts through the kitchen, out of the back door and into the small yard at the back of the house where Tom kept his bicycle and, more importantly, the small wooden trailer which he used for carrying logs and vegetables back to the house. Occasionally, Tom used the trailer to help Dorothy with bigger deliveries in the neighbourhood.

'It'll be a squeeze to get them both in at once,' said Dorothy.

'We have to,' replied Tom. 'I don't want to have to make two trips.'

Tom removed the back of the trailer and he and Dorothy crammed in the larger of the two corpses. They then lay the smaller corpse on top of it. The legs of the biggest corpse stuck out. They didn't have an old carpet in which to wrap the bodies ('How come people in films always have a spare carpet handy?' asked Tom) so they covered them first with an old blanket, then an old sheet, next with some sheets of cardboard and finally with a sheet of rusting corrugated iron which they took off the roof of their small shed. They used an old washing line to tie the load onto the trailer. The result was a mess but it had the dubious advantage of looking so untidy that it didn't look as if they were trying to hide something. It looked as if they were wheeling rubbish to a recycling centre.

'It looks terribly heavy,' said Dorothy.

Tom hitched the trailer to the tow bar on his bicycle, climbed onto the bicycle and pressed down on the pedal. It took all his effort but he managed to move forwards a foot or two. 'It'll be all right once I've got moving,' he said. 'Just keep your fingers crossed that I don't have to stop suddenly.'

And then they waited for it to get dark.

Tom put water in the saucepan he hadn't used to kill the sprout and put the pan on the stove. As the water first boiled he added a few potatoes, a couple of carrots, a swede and finally some stale bread that was too hard to eat.

By the time the three of them had finished eating the resultant stew, it was dark. They stacked the dirty dishes in the sink and treated themselves to a rare coffee. Tea was difficult to find, and expensive, but coffee was usually available only on the black market. A man who regularly employed Dorothy to deliver messages had a supply of instant coffee and occasionally gave her a jar as a tip. The jars were always long past their 'Best Before' date but neither Tom nor Dorothy cared about that.

'Is it too soon?' asked Dorothy, when she and Tom had both finished their coffee. They had made the drinks last as long as humanly possible in order to give themselves something to do while they waited. Those who talk about bravery and courage often forget that it is only the fearful who can be truly brave. The stupid, the thoughtless, the unimaginative, the reckless and the impulsive may appear to be brave but often their actions are merely a result of their failure to understand the consequences of what they are doing. And the real courage must be found by those who must wait; enduring those eternal minutes of fearful expectation without giving up or abandoning their plans.

Tom looked at the old clock on the wall.

'What are we going to do with your aunt?' asked Dorothy, nodding in the direction of Tom's aunt, who was nibbling another biscuit, her fifth of the day.

'Do you think we can leave her here?'

Dorothy looked at him, looked at his aunt, thought for a moment and then shook her head. 'No. She might wander off.' His aunt's dementia was still in the early stages and she had moments of lucidity but on several occasions Tom had had to comb the streets looking for her. One early evening he'd found her in a local park. She'd been standing next to a lake, crying. Very few people walked in parks, especially after dusk. Anyone who did so could be arrested under the For Your Own Safety Curfew.

He touched his aunt gently on her shoulder. 'Get your coat,' he said. 'We're going out.' His aunt smiled with delight. She rushed to the back door, grabbed her coat off the hook and put it on. She then picked up the cat and held it, unprotesting, in her arms.

'You can't take the cat!' said Tom.

His aunt's response was to cling ever tighter to the cat. Feeling squeezed, and unable to breathe, Tabatha started to struggle.

'OK,' said Tom softly. 'Bring the cat. But don't squeeze it too tight. And for heavens sake don't let it wander off.' His aunt kissed the cat on the nose and relaxed her grip. The cat stopped struggling.

And then they set off. Tom riding the bicycle. The two dead sprouts in the trailer. And Dorothy and Tom's aunt (with the cat) walking behind.

Chapter 14

Apart from one scary moment when the trailer nearly tipped over, spilling its contents on the road, the journey to the hospital went more smoothly than they could have hoped. Tom rode his bicycle and towed the trailer with the two corpses in it. The added weight of the trailer meant that he couldn't have travelled at much above walking pace even if he'd wanted to. Dorothy and Tom's aunt (at Tom's insistence, carrying Tabatha in a shopping bag) walked along the pavement. Occasionally, Tom slowed a little to allow the two women to catch up with him. Dorothy kept an eye on the trailer to make sure that the cargo didn't slip. The streets at that time of night were dark and almost deserted. There were no revellers, and no drinkers wobbling home, because there were no pubs. The public houses that had survived the ban on smoking had eventually succumbed when the ban on drinking alcohol in public places had been introduced. These days people sat at home and drank and smoked alone. Naturally, to help ease their loneliness, they drank and smoked far more than they had ever smoked and drunk when they'd been able to do so in company.

The energy crisis meant that there were no street lights. The roads were pitch black. The lack of light, and the lack of people in the streets, meant that there were no CCTV cameras switched on. The cameras (the ones that hadn't been stolen) were still there (most thieves had quickly realised that there was no point in stealing things for which there was no market). But they weren't switched on. There wasn't enough electricity to run them and EUDCE didn't have the money to spend on hiring people to watch the pictures they took.

The only people out and about were shadowy householders dumping rubbish in the gutters and shadowy scavengers searching through what had been thrown away in the hope that they could find something to eat or to wear or to sell. Dumping rubbish was illegal but everyone did it. The official recycling centres were miles away. Tom knew two men who had been caught, charged, arrested and deported for breaking into people's homes and dumping rubbish in them. And he knew a former surveyor who spent his nights searching for empty food tins. The man earned pennies for food by peeling off the labels and selling them to a man who turned them into pulp from which he made hand-made paper. Occasionally, a few suspects would hold a dog roast in the street but these were frowned on by the sprouts because people seemed to enjoy them.

The only motorised traffic belonged to sprouts, travelling on official business (or on business they said was official, which wasn't necessarily the same thing at all). Suspects had no cars. Only sprouts had access to what little oil was left.

At the hospital Tom parked his bicycle in a dark corner of the almost empty car park.

'Wait here,' said Dorothy. 'I'll get a trolley.'

Tom looked at her.

'We can't just carry the bodies into the hospital,' she explained.

'But no one will look at us if we're wheeling a body in on a trolley.'

It was ten minutes before she returned, pushing a hospital trolley. Lying on top of the trolley were a white sheet, a red blanket and a white coat.

'Put on the coat,' she told Tom. 'I borrowed it from the staff room.'

'Did anyone see you?'

'No. It was deserted.'

Tom put on the coat. And then, after untying the rope holding the bodies in the trailer, he and Dorothy manoeuvred the top corpse up onto the trolley. It was much more difficult than they thought it would be. Tom found himself cursing the body he was struggling to manhandle. But, as he started to get angry, he remembered that if he got angry he would become impatient and that if he became impatient he would be careless. And carelessness would lead direct to death. For the three of them. He took deep breaths and calmed down. Once he'd managed to heave the body onto the trolley he and Dorothy then covered it with the sheet and the blanket.

'You push the trolley,' said Dorothy. 'Your aunt and I will walk along beside as though we're worried relatives.'

And that's exactly what they did.

No one spared them a glance.

The hospital accident department looked like an Arabian indoor market. Suspects weren't usually entitled to be admitted to hospital for care. Their only hope of seeing a doctor was to sit and wait and hope that they would one day be seen. If there was a queue it was difficult to see where it started and where it ended. In a corner three men were brewing tea on a small fire. No one seemed to have noticed. If they had noticed they didn't care. Only sprouts were admitted for medium or long-term treatment.

'Where do we go now?' asked Tom, when they'd passed through the accident and emergency unit. Despite the time of night the unit was remarkably busy. A drunk was arguing loudly with a nurse. He was twice her size and attempting to be threatening, but she looked bored and unconcerned and not in the slightest bit frightened. A man and a woman, both white-faced, were sitting holding hands, giving each other comfort. Tom felt more nervous now. He could feel his shirt sticking to his back. When he'd been riding the bicycle, and pulling the trailer, he'd had to work hard and concentrate on where he was going. He hadn't had time to worry. Now the worries were piling up. What if someone found the body they'd left out in the car park? He'd left it in the trailer, covered with the cardboard, the old sheet and the corrugated iron. But what if someone tried to steal the bicycle. Damn! He should have at least locked the bicycle. He looked around. Everyone seemed busy with their own problems but how long would it be before someone asked him who he was, why he was wearing a white coat and why he was pushing a patient along the corridor.

'Down the corridor straight ahead,' replied Dorothy. 'Just keep going down the main corridor.' She sounded calm and that helped Tom.

'This is the hospital,' said Tom's aunt suddenly.

'Yes,' agreed Tom.

'Is someone poorly?'

'No, we're just visiting,' said Tom.

'Go right,' said Dorothy suddenly.

Tom turned the trolley into another corridor. It was darker and the walls were lined with empty trolleys.

'Just stop here a moment.'

'Where are we taking him?'

'I was thinking of putting him into a bed,' said Dorothy. 'But this is much better. Less chance of being noticed, or getting caught.'

'Here?' asked Tom in surprise.

'This corridor leads down to the scanner. They don't use this much at night. We can leave him here.'

Tom looked at her.

'Where?'

'Just park the trolley,' she said. She moved an empty trolley out of the way so that there was a space. 'Put the trolley there and we'll use this empty trolley to fetch the other body. It makes more sense for two patients to have been forgotten down here, and to be together, than for two patients to be forgotten in different parts of the hospital,' said Dorothy.

'What happens when they find them?' asked Tom.

'They'll think they were admitted and then forgotten,' said Dorothy.

'But would they have got this far without going through the official admissions system?'

'Probably not,' agreed Dorothy. 'But I'll put them into the computer. It will look as though they were admitted and then just lost and forgotten. The porters are always losing patients. They park a patient somewhere, go off for a fag and then forget about it.'

Dorothy led Tom and Tom's aunt (still carrying the bag containing the cat) back into the main corridor and then down another corridor.

'Where does this go?'

'The women's medical ward,' whispered Dorothy. 'They don't admit new patients here at night because they have a special admissions ward. I just want the computer in the ward manager's office.' She opened a door into a small room which contained a desk, a chair and a computer. Everything in the room was old and looked tired and well past its best. A noticeboard fixed to the wall was thick with papers fastened to it with coloured pins.

It was a real squeeze for the three of them (and the cat) to get into the room so that they could close the door and turn on the light.

'How are you going to access the computer?' asked Tom. 'Don't they have passwords and stuff?'

'Of course,' said Dorothy. 'But look!' She pointed to the computer. It was, like most of the ones in use, an old-fashioned one with a cracked and dirty case. A small red light signified that, against the rules, it had been left on stand-by and at the top of the screen, in the flat area above the screen, a sticky label, curling at one corner where the gum had come partly unstuck, gave the ward manager's undoubtedly useful aide memoire. Her access code, ultra secret password and personal identity number had been neatly written on the small label.

('How does anyone expect us to remember all this stuff?' the ward manager had demanded when a colleague had remonstrated with her. 'I've got different four digit pin numbers for my bank card and for three credit cards. I've got a password to access my email address and a code word I have to give when I telephone the bank. The lock on my bicycle can only be opened by putting in the correct four digit code and to get into my flat I need another four digit code. I've got passwords and code numbers corning out of my ears. If anyone thinks I'm going to remember this lot as well then they've got another think corning.')

Dorothy typed in the access codes and Tom gave her the names of the two men. She put them into the system, both admitted as road accident victims.

'Switch on that printer would you,' she said.

'What on earth do you want a printer for?'

'I'll print out a couple of name labels. We'll label their wrists.'

'So that it looks as though they were officially admitted?'

Dorothy nodded.

When she had finished Dorothy closed down the computer, leaving it on standby. They turned off the light, closed the office door and headed back to where they'd left the body they'd brought into the hospital. Dorothy fastened the appropriate label to the wrist of the cadaver. They then headed back to where they'd left the other body.

To Tom's great relief the second body was where they'd left it. They loaded it onto the trolley in the same way as before. Dorothy fitted the label around the man's wrist and then Tom pushed the trolley through the hospital. Dorothy walked alongside and Tom's aunt, carrying the cat in her shopping bag, walked behind them. They had passed through the accident and emergency unit and were hurrying down the main corridor when they heard firm footsteps, half running, half walking, behind them. A man shouted.

'Excuse me! Could you stop a moment please?'

Tom and Dorothy both turned. The man following them down the corridor was short, round and red-faced. He had tiny eyes, puffy eyelids and a red flush on both cheeks. He looked to be in his sixties but might have been younger. He wore an ill-fitting uniform, complete with well-shined boots and a peaked cap, and was out of breath. Tom and Dorothy looked at each other and both stopped. They didn't speak. They didn't need to. There was nothing to be said.

'Sorry to bother you,' said the man, when he caught up with them. He was carrying a clipboard in his right hand and with his left hand he fiddled with his collar which seemed to be too tight. He had a small orange button fixed to the bottom of his left earlobe to show that although he was in uniform he was a contract employee, a 'trusty' and not a fully-registered EUDCE functionary. He looked at what was obviously a body, lying on the trolley and underneath the sheet, and then looked away as though it made him nervous.

'What's the problem?' asked Tom, trying to sound more confident than he felt.

'I didn't fill in your security clearance form,' said the security guard. He had bald patches and a tic near his left eye. They were symptoms Tom had seen many times among sprouts. They were, he knew, side effects associated with the drug treatment of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Over 50% of both sprout and suspect populations had been officially diagnosed as suffering from ADHD. Among some populations within the United States of Europe, the figure was as high as 90%. A similar number had been diagnosed as autistic with the result that a large percentage of the population had been officially diagnosed as suffering from both. Children who had not been diagnosed as having one of these diseases were officially labelled 'nonpsychohyperresponsive' and regarded as inferior. Only sprouts and trustys received regular drug treatment.

The guard waved the clipboard around behind him. 'At the entrance. When you came into the hospital.' He looked embarrassed. 'I was on a comfort break,' he explained. 'Bit of prostate trouble, they say.' Trustys, like suspects, weren't entitled to comprehensive medical care. The guard would have to live with his prostate symptoms. If they became too troublesome, and interfered with his ability to do his job, he would be 'retired' without compensation or a pension.

'Ah,' nodded Tom, understanding.

'One of the receptionists told me,' explained the guard. 'Said she'd seen someone come in.'

'What do you need to know?' asked Tom.

The guard lifted his clipboard and removed a stub of pencil from his breast pocket.

'Still not used to these,' he said, holding up the pencil.

'You still miss the hand-held computer things?'

'Oh yes,' nodded the man. 'And heaven knows what happens to these.' He tapped the form with the pencil stub. 'I hand them in at the end of my shift and someone files them away.'

'Difficult times,' agreed Tom.

The guard sighed. 'Better get it over with then,' he said. 'Can you tell me what's on the trolley, please?'

'A body.'

'Human or other?'

'Oh, human.'

'EUDCE employee or suspect?'

'EUDCE employee.'

'Male or female?'

‘Male.’

‘Live or deceased?’

‘Deceased.’

‘Cause of death, if known?’

‘Hit on the head several times with a frying pan.’

Tom, Dorothy and the guard all turned.

‘We hit him on the head several times with a frying pan,’ repeated Tom’s aunt. She stared at them all, unblinkingly.

‘Aha,’ said the security guard. A small smile broke across his chubby features. ‘A joke,’ he said, flatly, letting it be known that he understood. Jokes weren’t common.

‘A joke,’ agreed Tom.

The guard nodded. ‘Shall I put ‘unknown’?’

‘That would be fine,’ agreed Tom quickly. ‘My aunt has an old fashioned sense of humour.’

The guard wrote on his pad and then leant inches closer to Tom. ‘Not always appreciated these days,’ he murmured. ‘Humour,’ he explained, in case there was any doubt. He pulled at his shirt collar again. ‘If you don’t mind my mentioning it.’

‘Absolutely,’ Tom murmured back, nodding to show that he understood and agreed. ‘My aunt is rather old,’ he added as a sort of explanation. He could feel the sweat pouring down his back and his forehead. A drop of sweat fell off an eyebrow, landed on his cheek and ran down his face. He hoped the dim lighting would help ensure that the guard didn’t see how nervous he was.

‘Your relationships to the deceased?’ The guard asked; he looked at the three of them. ‘Relatives? Friends? Colleagues?’

‘Colleagues,’ said Tom.

The guard, who wanted to get back up the corridor so that he was nearer to the toilets, ticked the appropriate box on the form. ‘That seems to be it, thank you very much, sir,’ he said. He nodded to each of them in turn and started to walk away, back up the corridor towards the accident and emergency department. Tom had taken his place behind the trolley, ready to start pushing again, and the guard had travelled about five paces up the corridor, when the cat miaowed.

Tom, Dorothy and Tom’s aunt froze. The guard turned.

‘Was that a cat? Did I hear a cat?’ demanded the guard. Suddenly, he didn’t seem quite so polite. Suddenly, there was an edge in his voice. This, Tom and Dorothy sensed, was serious.

‘It’s my aunt’s cat,’ said Tom softly. He didn’t think he could take much more tension. He feared that if he lost any more sweat they might all drown.

‘In the bag?’ asked the guard,

‘In the bag,’ agreed Tom. Gently, he took the bag from his aunt’s hands and opened it. The cat, now settled at the bottom of the bag, looked up at them anxiously.

‘Cats aren’t allowed in the hospital,’ said the guard firmly. ‘No cats.’

‘I’m sorry about that,’ said Tom. ‘My aunt doesn’t like to leave it by itself. She worries.’

‘There’s been a lot of catnapping in our area,’ said Dorothy.

‘I’ve heard they make good eating,’ said the guard. ‘Bit like chicken.’

‘I believe so,’ said Tom.

‘I have to ask you to remove the cat from the hospital,’ said the guard.

‘I’ll take aunt outside,’ said Dorothy softly. ‘With the cat,’ she added.

The guard nodded his approval.

‘Thanks,’ said Tom. He smiled nervously at the guard. The guard nodded; it was a sharp, rather abrupt nod.

Escorted by the guard, Dorothy, Tom’s aunt and the cat headed back towards the hospital entrance. Tom, now alone, pushed the trolley back to the corridor leading down to the scanner, parked it and then walked back out of the hospital.

‘I think we got away with it,’ said Dorothy as they made their way back home.

‘I think we did,’ agreed Tom. He was riding the bicycle very slowly in the gutter. Dorothy and his aunt were walking along the pavement beside him.

‘The man was very nice,’ said Tom’s aunt. ‘He didn’t seem to mind that we’d killed that chap with our frying pan.’

Tom and Dorothy looked at each other. ‘No,’ said Tom. ‘That was nice of him.’

Chapter 15

Tom really didn't mean to kill the man from the Telescreen licensing people but he was, he discovered, surprisingly calm about it afterwards. He was so calm that when someone banged on the front door a few moments later he broke the habit of a lifetime and opened it. He was still holding the frying pan, as though he had been interrupted in some culinary activity when he had heard the knock.

'I'm from Telescreen licensing,' said a grey-faced man at the door, holding up a piece of plastic with his photograph on it. He smelt of luxury. Aftershave, talcum powder, hair gel and a freshly laundered shirt.

Tom stared at him.

'My colleague should be here,' explained the caller. 'I had some difficulty parking the van.'

'Of course,' said Tom. He stood aside to allow the caller room to enter and then closed the door. Then he raised the frying pan and brought it crashing down onto the back of the sprout's head.

Then he woke up.

When Dorothy woke she found that she was alone in bed. She got up, put on a slightly frayed Paisley dressing gown, and went downstairs. Tom was in the kitchen sipping a mug of tea.

'Have you been up long?'

Tom looked at the clock. 'Twenty, twenty five, minutes.' He pointed at his tea. 'Do you want a cup?'

Dorothy nodded. Tom made her one.

'I can't believe what we did yesterday,' said Tom when they were both sitting down. He spoke quietly as though nervous that someone might hear him.

'Do you think we got away with it?'

Tom nodded. 'I think so.' He sipped at his tea. 'I killed someone,' he said, as much to himself as to Dorothy. 'I would never have thought myself capable. I killed two people. He stopped and thought for a moment. 'Actually, I'm not sure I did kill either of them. My aunt seemed much better with the frying pan than I was.' He stared pensively at a stain on the table. 'She was very good at it,' he said. 'Ruthless. Utterly ruthless.' He shuddered involuntarily. It wasn't easy to reconcile the gentle, rather jolly aunt he thought he knew with the frying-pan wielding madwoman he had watched battering a man's head so efficiently. 'So I don't really know whether I killed one, two or none.'

'You didn't have any choice.'

'I know. But it seems strange. Part of me feels that I should feel guilty. But I'm not sure whether I do.' He sipped at his tea. 'In fact I'm pretty sure I don't.' He paused and thought. 'I don't.' He took another sip. 'And so I'm not sure whether I should feel guilty about not feeling guilty.'

'It doesn't count,' said Dorothy. 'They were sprouts.'

'I know it's wrong to kill people. But what else could I have done? You can't argue with sprouts. You can't discuss anything with them. You can't reason with them. They'd have arrested the three of us and handed us over to the Americans.'

'It's like a war,' said Dorothy. 'We have to defend ourselves. They were bad people working for bad people.'

'But we shouldn't take the law into our own hands. Should we? Or should we?'

'Why not? It's our law. Just because they've stolen control of the law doesn't make it their law. In a democracy the voters elect the legislature which makes the rules. The executive runs things according to the rules. And the judiciary decides if the rules have been broken. But everything has gone wrong. You wouldn't have got a fair trial because the same people now make the rules, run things and then decide whether the rules have been broken.'

Chapter 16

For a week they tried to forget. They constantly expected to hear on the Telescreen that the police were investigating the murder of two sprouts. Every night, Tom woke up at 3.30 a.m. and lay there waiting for Europol sprouts to burst through the front door.

But nothing happened.

No one seemed to have noticed. Or maybe no one cared.

Chapter 17

They had not, of course, been the first to stand up against the sprouts; though they were, perhaps, the first to do so quite so effectively.

There had, over the months, been many attempts at rebellion.

A group calling itself *The English Liberation Front* had made bombs out of pesticides, fertiliser, torch batteries and alarm clocks. They had not been very good at it (none of their bombs had actually gone off) and their efforts had died away for lack of supplies.

Another group, known to its members, but sadly no one else, as *Freeing England* had made a bomb and used the transmitter and receiver from a radio controlled aeroplane to detonate it. But although their bomb worked as well as could be expected they were hindered by the fact that they could only find enough explosive to make a very small bang. The breaking of a single ground floor window at a Regional Parliament building in the West Country was not regarded by EUDCE as a serious threat to the security of the State.

A third group, consisting entirely of computer specialists used their knowledge to attempt to disrupt EUDCE by feeding viruses into the organisation's computer network. Sadly for the rebels their attempt resulted in less disruption than one of the six times a day power cuts that had become accepted as part of everyday life. The group had still been arguing about the name it would use when it had disbanded.

A group of anti-fascist rebels, known as *The Blue Brigade*, had made a serious attempt to overthrow the sprouts by burning all demands for money that came from official sources. Demands from all licensing authorities were burnt on huge bonfires by crowds of cheering citizens.

'Without our money they are powerless!' claimed the leader of the rebels, who wrote a pamphlet in which he argued that the UK had been destroyed by a potent, toxic, ever-expanding tangle of goldplated EUDCE rules and regulations. 'They can't take thousands of us to court – it will block the system!'

Sadly, this well-meant scheme of civil disobedience didn't work.

The police were instructed to pick up all the ringleaders who had burnt their bills. And they were instructed to pick up others at random. All those arrested were charged with offences under the Financial Support of Terrorism Act. They were fined heavily and sent to Africa to serve life sentences weeding parsnips. The sad result was a rapid rush to pay outstanding bills.

All further attempts to generate opposition were stifled by legislation outlawing the dissemination of information about EUDCE policies and spending policies. The publication of facts and statistics (defined as 'politically inconvenient verities') was made illegal under wide-ranging anti-terrorism legislation introduced by EUDCE under the European Securities Act.

And, as those who had known freedom, and understood what it was and what it meant, grew older and grew weary, so the number of people prepared to stand up and fight diminished. The young, who had grown up in a regimented, regulated world, knew nothing else and their expectations were low. Nothing about their world seemed wrong to them. The simplest truths and ideas are the most difficult to understand, the easiest to ignore and the hardest to do anything about.

Those among the young who were branded as suspects and destined to be nothing more than second-class citizens, did not stand up to protest; they defended and supported those who controlled the rules and regulations because that was what they had been brought up to do. They had been enslaved by their own obedience, by fear and by an understanding that this was the way it was and this was the way it was meant to be.

The bureaucrats were getting stronger every day.

Chapter 18

And then Tom and Dorothy had visitors: Gladwys Tranter and her boyfriend, Dalby Barrington.

Gladwys and Dalby both wanted to marry but EUDCE didn't approve of marriage. EUDCE's Greek born Commissioner for Social Relationships had decided that formalising relationships increased independent thinking and diminished the power of the Superstate and he had, therefore, introduced legislation barring marriage between heterosexuals, although not between homosexuals.

Gladwys Tranter was a small, dark-haired, dark-complexioned woman. Tiny, slim, alert, she was always busy, always rushing, always doing something, constantly moving; if she'd been a small animal she would have been a hamster. Or, perhaps, a sparrow. In her mid 40's, though she looked younger, she had brown hair and a boyish figure. She wore her hair short (easier to keep clean, she explained) and always wore skirts, together with blouses or jumpers. The skirts always came down to her ankles. She never wore trousers. She was a huge fan of Jane Austen and secretly read her six novels continuously; never reading anything else. She read them in sequence, as they'd been written, and when she finished the last one she immediately started to re-read the first one. She could, in the olden days, have won prizes for her specialist knowledge of this once famous, English author. As a girl she'd studied art and after graduating had worked for a while as a set designer. In her own time she'd begun to make a name for herself as a portrait artist; that had always been her first love. But then, after the final collapse of the British Parliament and the peak oil problems exacerbated by the British energy crisis of 2016, the company had gone bankrupt and the galleries where she had exhibited had all closed down. She'd tried to get work at the BBC but they weren't making drama productions any more and all their staff had to be EUDCE approved. Gladwys couldn't get EUDCE approval because she'd once been filmed by the police at an animal rights rally in Trafalgar Square. She'd thought she might be able to concentrate on her painting but no one had money to spend on art. Even the rich were turning their money into gold or silver and burying what they didn't need to spend to survive. She now eked out a small living growing a few vegetables on one of the allotments where Tom worked as a guard. Her hands, once delicate and pale and sensitive, the hands of an artist, were now brown and gnarled and covered in calluses; they were the hands of an artisan. She and Dalby had one child, a daughter, who'd had nothing whatsoever to do with them since she had married a sprout. At first this had caused Dalby and Gladwys great sadness. But now it was no longer of consequence. Their lives were too full for them to worry about this, or for them even to be aware of it.

Dalby, with whom she had lived for twenty three years, was short and liked to describe himself as solidly built, a phrase which he much preferred to oft-used alternatives such as 'chubby' and 'rotund'. The truth was that he was one of the few plump looking people on the planet who wasn't actually fat. He didn't eat all that much (no suspects ever did) but he had the sort of shape that meant that even if he'd been starving he would have looked pleasantly well-fed. He still had all his hair, which was white and curly, and he wore it so that if he'd ever worn a jacket it would have hung over his collar. Before his hair had gone white it had been reddish in colour and he still had a number of freckles to remind him of his original schooldays nickname of 'Ginger'. No one had called him that for years.

He had always been a mild-mannered man. He had been a quiet, gentle, inoffensive, inconspicuous child and he had grown up to be a quiet, gentle, inoffensive, inconspicuous man. Twenty years earlier Dalby had been a model citizen; the sort of elector of whom politicians approved. He questioned nothing. He had been the sort of person who, if he had accidentally dropped a sweet wrapper, would have gone back to pick it up and chased it around in the wind to make sure he managed to collect it. (In truth, on one occasion he had narrowly escaped being run over after chasing a breeze-blown toffee wrapper into oncoming traffic.)

But he had changed. He had begun to feel an unusual feeling stirring within him. The feeling was rage and because he'd never felt that way before he didn't immediately understand what it was that he was feeling.

Several things had triggered this change in Dalby's demeanour.

First, back in the days when suspects still had motor cars and a modest petrol ration, a council workman had erected a bus stop in the pavement right in front of Dalby's driveway. The bus stop's position meant that Dalby could no longer get his car in and out of his driveway. Since his car had been out of the driveway when the sign was erected he had to leave it parked on the street near the bus stop. This had, within weeks, resulted in seven parking tickets and twice as many letters of protest and complaint to the relevant EUDCE officier in Dijon (all of which had, of course, been completely ignored).

Then a routine visit from a sprout (who'd turned up on an annual visit to photograph the inside of their house, and its contents) had resulted in the confiscation of Dalby's entire home, together with its contents.

The sprout had found a book called *England Our England* amidst a shelf full of otherwise harmless volumes and there had been an awful row about it. Even mentioning England had been a serious offence for years. Having a book in your home with the forbidden word in the title was about as serious an offence as could be imagined.

Dorothy and Tom had invited Gladwys and Dalby for coffee. In the old days it would have probably been a dinner party. But no one had dinner parties any more. Most people could only just afford to feed themselves. The idea of giving food to friends and acquaintances had, among suspects, long been regarded as absurd.

'So, tell us about your new job,' said Dorothy, when their visitors had been welcomed and coffee had been served.

Dalby had for some time earned a small living as a rat catcher. But, like everyone they knew, he needed a second job. And he'd recently acquired one.

'He's a Relinquished Arboreal Cotyledon Accruement Specialist.' Gladwys blushed. 'It sounds much grander than it is,' she added.

'What's one of those do?' asked Tom.

'I go round with a brush and a wheelbarrow and sweep up fallen leaves,' said Dalby. 'It's seasonal work but I've been given a full time contract.'

'But there aren't any trees left,' Tom pointed out. Streets and parks had long since been stripped of their trees by homeowners looking for wood to burn.

'There are quite a few senior Regional Parliament officers who still have trees in their gardens,' explained Dalby. 'I look after those. A leaf here, a leaf there.'

'Ah.'

'They don't like the leaves lying around.'

'No, I suppose not. Untidy. What's your sprout like?' asked Tom. Every working suspect worked directly under the supervision of a sprout.

'He isn't too bright. I think he probably struggled at school with his one times table. Today his official title is Tree Supervisor and his main job is to keep a record of any new trees appearing.'

'That must be exhausting.'

'I think he lives in hope.'

They sat in silence for a while.

It was Tom who broke the silence.

'You both seem preoccupied.' Tom was often blunter than Dorothy in social situations. 'What's up?' he asked. He looked at Gladwys and then at Dalby. 'Would you like more coffee?' he added, trying to lighten the question.

Gladwys looked at Dalby who thought for a moment, trying to decide if it would be ruder to say 'no', and perhaps imply that the coffee didn't taste too good, or to say 'yes' and deprive Tom and Dorothy of another spoonful of their carefully self-rationed stash of instant coffee. The coffee, being not too far past its official 'best before' date still tasted of coffee. If you closed your eyes you knew what you were drinking.

'I will have another cup, please,' said Dalby, handing up his cup. 'It's excellent.' He looked up at Tom. 'You don't supplement with ground acorns do you?' It had become commonplace to make coffee stocks last longer by mixing instant coffee with ground acorns.

'We used to,' admitted Tom. 'But since they chopped down all the oak trees we haven't been able to get any acorns.' Bizarrely, one black market salesman had offered them ground acorns at twice the price of instant coffee.

'True enough,' nodded Dalby.

'So, what's happened?' asked Tom, quietly. He refilled Dalby's cup and turned to the two women. 'No one else for a refill?' They both shook their heads.

Dalby and Gladwys looked at each other.

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Like everyone else they had learned to be careful about what they wrote, whom they saw and what they said (wherever they were when they said it). These precautions were second nature now. Caution was the default setting for suspects. Suspects had even become careful about what they thought. It had become impossible to conceive of anything being beyond the reach of the sprouts. Even the absurd and the impossible were now probably possible. Who knew? The Dalbys were close friends with Tom and Dorothy. But even so you could never really be sure. Not, sure sure.

Every patriotic European had for years been encouraged to regard it as his or her duty to inform the authorities of any behaviour which could in any way be described as suspicious. A woman in what had once been Dover in Kent, but what was now officially part of a region of Northern France, reported a neighbour simply because he had a parcel delivered to his door. A woman in what had once been Manchester reported that a man living in a nearby flat had lingerie hanging on his washing line, although he supposedly lived alone. Denunciation was everywhere.

It was easy for sneaks or snoops to operate and many did so openly. The more successful among them proudly wore ‘good surveillance’ badges, much as boy scouts had worn badges in the days when the Boy Scout movement was a popular way to guide the energy and enthusiasm of young boys. The badges carried the slogan ‘Building a Caring, Thoughtful Society’. Some of the keenest citizens had equipped themselves with telescopes or binoculars to improve their ability to spy on those around them. Tom knew of two men in nearby streets who had infra-red binoculars. Both stayed up at night to watch for illegal activities in the streets below. Any sneak whose reports resulted in a neighbour being deported received a relatively huge bonus. People accused of lesser crimes would be fined, with 10% of the fine going to the sneak who had made the report. Any suspect who couldn’t afford a fine but who owned property would have to sign over some of the equity in their home. This meant that hundreds of thousands of home-owners were gradually losing ownership of their properties and having to pay rent. (Once again, the sneaks involved received a percentage of the money collected.) As far as sneaks were concerned the real beauty of the system was that they didn’t have to be right. An accusation was, generally speaking, regarded as being just as significant as a conviction might have been a few decades earlier. Sneaking kept everyone on their toes. Officially the sneaks (or snitches as they were sometimes called) were known as Specialist Information Relocation Experts.

The system had begun with people being encouraged to report their neighbours to the authorities. In the early days, people telephoned to report that their neighbours weren’t putting out their rubbish on the right day. When rubbish collections were stopped completely they telephoned to report that their neighbours had left rubbish in the street instead of sorting it and carrying it to the various authorised dumps. When the authorities realised that an increasing number of snoops were staying up at night in order to observe their neighbours they abandoned official patrols. The informal snooper system was, they discovered, cheaper and much more effective.

Many EUDCE departments gave rewards to informers (some, such as the Revenue collectors, gave a percentage of whatever money was recovered and some awarded points which could be exchanged for holidays or clothing coupons. No one ever checked or investigated allegations. For EUDCE the bonus was that the system kept suspects fearful and suspicious of one another. The generic slogan for the system was ‘Together Our Communities Will Build a Caring, Thoughtful Society’.

A Good Neighbour Initiative, introduced and sponsored by the Regional Parliament, gave Good Neighbours 1,000 citizenship points for every neighbour they denounced. The Regional Parliament claimed that a majority of the population had registered for the Good Neighbour initiative and had each made at least five reports in the preceding six week period. A spokesman for the Parliament expressed dismay at the relative failure of the scheme when compared to similar schemes in other parts of the Union. Good Neighbours were encouraged to report anyone they knew who hadn’t registered for the scheme or who had expressed disapproval. Collect enough points and you could get on Reality Television and, if you won, be given a lifetime job contract as a Trusty.

Reality television programmes were broadcast constantly on the Telescreen. The most popular programme allowed viewers to vote on which contestant should die (and how they should die). Drawing and quartering was popular, as was pulling apart with horses. All live on the Telescreen, of course. A revised version of the long running Big Brother programme had been running for five years. One contestant, who had been in the new Big Brother programme since the beginning of the series, had conceived and given birth to three children in the Big Brother house. All live on the Telescreen. There were, of course, three different fathers. The Telescreen producers had auctioned off the children (a pop singer had bought two) and invited viewers to choose the father of the woman’s next baby.

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It was Dalby who found the courage to speak.

‘We have our weekly Legacy Achievement Awareness Scrutineering in the morning,’ he said.

A month earlier both Dalby and Gladwys had failed a spot check in the street and part of the automatic punishment was that they now had to be checked once a week for ten weeks. If one of them failed just one of these examinations both of them would automatically be found guilty of ‘Poor Citizenship’.

Every piece of news chosen by the editors for broadcast on the Telescreen was deemed a ‘European Legacy’ and suspects were, therefore, expected to take careful note of everything that appeared. If, when asked questions relating to the previous week’s telecasts, suspects failed to achieve an acceptable score they were in serious trouble. Suspects who were being tested and who failed to answer enough questions accurately didn’t receive any loyalty credits. And suspects who were being tested and who didn’t acquire loyalty credits couldn’t buy food. Life sometimes seemed complicated.

Built into the system there was, of course, a great deal of opportunity for the Scrutineers to fail suspects who should have passed, and to pass suspects who should have failed. Since virtually no suspects had any wealth to speak of, it was common for sprouts to demand sexual favours from suspect victims or their relatives. Most suspects hated paying the licence fee. (‘Why should we pay for propaganda?’ they asked.) But more, even than that, they hated having to prove that they had watched the stuff

'It's garbage,' said Dalby. 'They call it news but it's just propaganda. We have to pay to receive it. And then they test us to make sure we've watched it.' He put his head in his hands.

'It's unfair,' said Gladwys. 'It's compulsory to have a Telescreen and compulsory to pay a licence fee to watch programmes you don't want to watch and then they test you to make sure you've been watching, and if you haven't they punish you.'

'Why don't we test you?' suggested Tom, softly. 'Between us Dorothy and I probably know most of what's been on the Telescreen this week.' He thought for a few moments. 'Here's one. What is the current punishment for putting your rubbish in the wrong recycling bin at an authorised collecting centre?'

Dalby frowned and thought hard. 'Isn't it still deportation?'

'No, afraid not. It went up this week. It's now double deportation.'

'What on earth is double deportation? How can you be deported twice?'

'They've changed it because there's been a boom in the number of people believing in reincarnation,' explained Tom. 'The idea is that when you come back the next time you get deported again.'

'But how on earth do they know you've been reincarnated?' asked Dalby. 'What if you come back as a wasp or a hedgehog?'

'Don't ask me,' said Tom. 'I don't make this stuff up. I'm just reporting what they said on the Telescreen.'

'OK,' sighed Dalby.

'EUDCE has started a new sex industry course on the Telescreen...,' Dorothy ·began.

'Oh, I saw that,' said Gladwys. 'It's called *How to be a Hooker*'. At the end of the course you send in a eurocheque for your diploma and degree. Then you're entitled to work as a prostitute and pay a 30% reduced fine if the police catch you.'

'Spot on,' agreed Dorothy. 'And don't forget the Telescreen is also running public service advertisements for a new chain of brothels called *Tarts'R'Us*.'

'I've got a question for you,' said Tom. 'An 18-year-old youth was arrested and deported this week for the crime of homosexual bigotry. Can you tell me precisely what he did?'

'Oh, I saw this one,' said Dalby. 'He refused his Compulsory Community Youth Homosexual Experience didn't he?' He shook his head in disbelief 'I'm so pleased they brought that law in after I reached 21.'

'You know that ministerial appointments in the Regional Parliament have been sponsored for some years?' said Tom.

'Yes, of course.' replied Gladwys. 'You mean, things like the Ford Transport Minister, the Marlborough Minister of Health and the McDonald Minister of Healthy Eating?'

'Absolutely. So, can you name the person who was this week appointed McCann Regional Minister of Child Supervision?'

Gladwys and Dalby thought hard. 'Gary Glitter? Jonathan King?'

Tom shook his head. 'I don't even know if those two are still alive!' he admitted.

'No idea,' Dalby and Gladwys admitted eventually.

'They appointed a Turkish woman who has 16 children on the grounds that she has more experience of child supervision than anyone else in Europe.'

Unsurprised by this, Dalby and Gladwys nodded.

'A new world record in beheading was set this week by an executionist in Arizona. Can you tell me how many heads he chopped off in ten minutes?'

'I think I heard about this,' said Dalby. 'It was 37 wasn't it?'

'I think it was 37,' agreed Gladwys. She shuddered. 'It was live on the Telescreen but I couldn't watch it. They kept showing the whole thing over and over again. I watched the first minute the first time but after that I had to turn away. All those heads, just rolling around on the floor.'

'Thirty seven is right,' said Tom.

'How do you know the answers to all this stuff.' demanded Dalby.

'I'm asking the questions,' Tom pointed out. 'And I'm only asking questions to which I know the answers.' He paused, and thought for a moment, trying to recall something else he could ask. 'On the same subject, which country's Olympic Committee is insisting that executions are introduced as a main event at the next Olympics?'

'The Chinese?' suggested Gladwys.

'No, it isn't,' said Dalby firmly. 'It's the Americans.'

'Dead right,' agreed Tom. 'This next one is a history question,' he went on. 'But they ask these sometimes if they've been used on the Telescreen. I saw this in a quiz programme. Who were the first?

'I know the answer to this one too,' said Gladwys excitedly. 'It was Dame Ulrika Johnson and Lord Piers Morgan, wasn't it?'

‘Brilliant!’ said Tom.

‘I’m going to have to rely on you,’ said Dalby to his wife, rather wearily. ‘I just don’t seem able to absorb this stuff.’

‘Well I think you’re both doing brilliantly,’ said Dorothy, who still retained at least some of her optimism and who believed firmly in the power of positive thinking. ‘You should sail through.’

‘It’s the bloody mindlessness of it,’ said Dalby, gloomily. ‘And when they’re in the flat you’re constantly on edge, waiting for them to find something else to do you for.’ After their house had been confiscated he and Gladwys had moved into a small flat in a low-rent high rise building. Their flat was on the sixteenth floor. Since the lift had not been working for several years they had got into the habit of leaving the sixteenth floor only once or twice a week.

‘Some of the sprouts we’ve seen recently have been really fat,’ said Gladwys. ‘I read somewhere that they all claim that they have hormonal problems. But they can’t all be ill can they?’

‘They’re just fat and greedy,’ said Tom. ‘If that’s a medical condition then they’re ill.’

‘I’m afraid we keep hoping one of them will have a heart attack climbing the stairs,’ said Gladwys.

‘Or fall down the stairs!’ laughed Dalby. Then the laughter suddenly stopped as he remembered something. He leant across towards Tom and lowered his voice. ‘We still haven’t got a gate on our staircase.’ He stopped and thought for a while. ‘Or a safety harness. Do you happen to know what the penalty is for not having a properly protected staircase? The staircase isn’t inside our flat so it’s our landlord’s responsibility, of course. But even so...’

‘We don’t have a gate either,’ said Tom.

‘Or a safety harness,’ added Dorothy.

‘We had a EUDCE-approved Home Safety Advisory Consultant round to give us a quote,’ said Tom. ‘We’ll never be able to afford what he wanted.’ He shrugged sadly.

‘Can’t you get someone else to give you a quote? Some other firm?’

Tom shook his head. ‘There’s only one firm of Home Safety Advisory Consultants licensed in this region,’ he said.

‘That doesn’t seem right,’ said Dalby. ‘There’s no competition for anything these days.’

‘EUDCE sells exclusive licences,’ said Tom. ‘They can charge more for exclusive licences. Officially, there’s only one firm of plumbers in this region.’

EUDCE sold licences to everyone, and for everything imaginable. People who had for years done their jobs, practised their professions, effectively, efficiently, responsibly and fairly, suddenly found that they were ordered to take new tests, pass new examinations and (this the key) obtain new licences for which they had to pay hefty, annual fees. The money was paid to a bunch of EUDCE authorised eurocratic regulators so that they could set more tests, introduce more licences and collect more fees. EUDCE had become a self perpetuating, self-funding leech, sucking the life-blood both from the hard-working professionals and from the citizens who relied upon the services they provided.

To pay for their licences the regulated workers had to increase their fees and in order to find the time to speak to the regulators, and to take the examinations required of them, they had to reduce the quality of the service they provided. Everything sank to the lowest common denominator. Fees went up, service went down. Every professional, every tradesman in every business and every trade, had to be regulated and had to pay for the privilege of being licensed.

‘We know a plumber who does work privately,’ whispered Dorothy. ‘If you ever need to get in touch with him, let us know. He’s brilliant with dripping taps, blocked drains – that sort of thing.’

‘We’re terrified that we’ll have a Residential Placement Officer come round,’ said Dalby. ‘Several of the people in our building have been forced to take in people. An old lady who lives on the floor below us now has five Turks living with her. I met her on the landing the other day. She looked terrible. They ate her cat the first night they were there. Just killed it, cooked it and ate it. She has no more rooms than we have. Just one living room and one bedroom. A tiny kitchenette and a tiny bathroom.’

There was a housing shortage. This was partly a result of the very active pro-immigration policy introduced by EUDCE, and partly a result of the fact that houses built in the .latter part of the 20th century had been shoddily made and were falling down at a calamitous rate. There were no materials for building new houses or for repairing old ones. The result was that householders were forced to share their accommodation.

‘She can’t complain, of course,’ said Gladwys. ‘They’d charge her with aggravated racism and send her to an Involuntary Euthanasia Clinic.’ Suspects over the age of 60 who were arrested weren’t exported. They were considered likely to be too unfit to work in the fields and were, therefore, sent to one of EUDCE’s Involuntary Euthanasia Clinics.

‘I thought the immigrants were all leaving, all going back home,’ said Dorothy. ‘But for every one who leaves another dozen now seem to arrive.’

‘It’s the EUDCE Racial Amalgamation Policy,’ explained Tom. ‘The aim is to homogenise the European population.’

‘But why do these people still come here?’ demanded Dalby.

‘There’s no work, little food, overcrowded housing and a completely broken-down infrastructure. The trains run when there’s enough diesel or coal to move them. The hospitals are more or less closed to anyone who isn’t a sprout.’

‘EUDCE gives low-grade trusty jobs to Turks, Romanians, Latvians, Croatians, Estonians, Poles and so on,’ explained Tom.

‘And the Maltese too.’ He hesitated. ‘What the hell do you call people from Malta?’

‘Maltesers I suppose,’ said Dorothy.

‘Yes, I suppose so,’ replied Tom. ‘And they give resettlement grants to thousands more. They have huge recruiting campaigns. A Pole I know told me he got a grant of 5,000 euros to come here. If he goes back within 12 months he has to give back the grant. The sprouts hope that a few of them will find girls of English origin, stay here, have children, and settle down. It’s part of their Social Integration Policy.’

‘I didn’t know that,’ said Dalby. ‘I don’t suppose we can get grants to go somewhere else?’

‘Sadly no,’ said Tom. ‘Those of English origin aren’t allowed to apply for grants.’

They all sat glumly in silence for a while.

‘I could come round and pretend to be living in your flat,’ said Tom. ‘They might not report you for undercrowding if you have another adult living with you.’

‘That wouldn’t work,’ said Dorothy. ‘They’d want to see your papers – something to prove that you’re registered as living there.’

‘I could get some false papers,’ said Tom. ‘I know a guy who makes quite good ones. He used to work for the Government, when we last had one.’

‘You couldn’t get them by tomorrow,’ Dorothy pointed out.

‘No,’ admitted Tom sadly.

The four of them sat in silence.

‘Have you noticed that most of the sprouts come from Romania, Turkey and Israel these days,’ said Dorothy.

‘I never understood how Israel came to be a member of EUDCE,’ said Gladwys.

‘They were in the Eurovision Song Contest and so they had fast-tracked membership to EUDCE,’ said Dorothy.

Israel hadn’t been the only surprise. After eight African nations were officially accepted as fully integrated regions of the United States of Europe it was widely agreed that EUDCE had become China’s main competitor for world dominance – the USA having been relegated to the status of also-ran.

‘I heard EUDCE is planning to appoint a lot of new low-level sprouts from Latvia,’ said Gladwys. ‘More homogenisation, I suppose.’

‘Did you hear that they’re phasing out English?’ said Tom.

Dalby and Gladwys looked at him.

‘A friend of mine who used to work as a cleaner at the BBC told me that the commissioners have decided that EUDCE’s two official languages are to be Turkish and French. We’re all going to be given two years to learn one or the other. After that all other languages will be illegal.’

This was clearly a shock to both Dalby and Gladwys.

‘Are you sure?’

‘It was discussed at a BBC Allegiance Meeting.’

The BBC was, as it had been even before the British Broadcasting Corporation became the Brussels Broadcasting Corporation (a change that involved a change of notepaper rather than any change in underlying policy matters), the unofficial propaganda machine for EUDCE. Every morning BBC staff at all its studios were expected to attend morning Allegiance Meetings where, in a daily ceremony known to outsiders as ‘morning prayers’, they would swear loyalty to the European project and the United States of Europe.

‘They’ve been planning it for ages,’ said Tom.

‘When are they bringing that in?’ asked Dalby.

Tom shrugged. ‘Not sure,’ he said. ‘My friend reached her 60th birthday so they fired her. No pension, no watch, no party, no thanks. Just ‘Don’t bother corning in on Monday.’ She’s opening up a herbal clinic in her living room. But it means we don’t have access to their waste paper basket any more.’

‘I could just do with a nice cup of tea!’

Everyone turned. Tom’s aunt was standing in the doorway. ‘I had a nap,’ she said. She was wearing a long, baggy, grey cardigan over an ankle length pale pink nightdress and holding Tabatha in her arms. She stifled a yawn.

‘I take lots of naps. I think I may be addicted to them. This nightie used to be cream but I washed it with a pair of Dorothy’s red knickers and now it’s pink.’

‘You know my aunt, don’t you?’ said Tom to Dalby and Gladwys.

They said they did. ‘Auntie, this is Dalby and Gladwys.’

‘Hello. Everyone thinks I’m potty,’ said Tom’s aunt, waving to Dalby and Gladwys. ‘But I’m as sane as a ferret. Ask me the name of the last Prime Minister. That’s what the man at the hospital kept asking me.’

No one spoke.

‘Go on, ask me,’ insisted Tom’s aunt.

‘What’s the name of the Prime Minister?’ asked Dalby.

Tom’s aunt stared at him and then grinned broadly. ‘Don’t have the foggiest,’ she said. ‘And I don’t give a fig. There hasn’t been a decent one since Winston Churchill. Most of them have been traitors.’

Tom looked at his aunt. He sometimes wondered whether she had Alzheimer’s disease at all, or whether she used the label as a convenient screen behind which she could hide when she didn’t want to be bothered by the world around her. ‘I’ll make you a cup of tea, Aunt,’ he said. His aunt didn’t like coffee.

‘Make sure it’s a nice one,’ she told him. ‘Do you know the funny thing is that although my nightie is now pink Dorothy’s knickers are still as red as they ever were.’

‘I suppose we’d better be going,’ said Dalby, standing up. Gladwys stood up too.

‘Don’t go just because of me,’ said Tom’s aunt. ‘I don’t have fits or do anything antisocial.’ She smiled at them. When she smiled it was almost impossible to dislike her or to be cross with her. ‘I won’t mention knickers again.’

‘No, no,’ said Dalby, embarrassed. ‘It’s not because of you. We were just going anyway. We have to get up early in the morning.’

‘Are you going somewhere nice or do you have the sprouts coming round?’ asked Tom’s aunt.

‘The sprouts are coming,’ replied Gladwys.

‘Don’t be frightened of them,’ insisted Tom’s aunt. ‘Politeness is all very well but it doesn’t put butter on parsnips. We had the sprouts here.’

‘Did you?’ said Gladwys. She turned to Dorothy. ‘You didn’t say.’

‘They were probably too shy to mention it,’ said Tom’s aunt. ‘We had two. They came to look at the labels.’

‘Strewth,’ said Dalby. ‘I hate the label inspectors. They always manage to find something. Last time they visited, one found an old pair of sunglasses that didn’t have a label on them. We got an official warning.’

‘And they took the sunglasses away with them,’ added Gladwys.

‘They always take something with them,’ said Tom.

‘We killed ours,’ said Tom’s aunt. No one spoke.

No one breathed.

No one moved.

Chapter 19

There are, Tom realised, different types of silence. This was the deepest, quietest silence he had ever heard. Some silences aren't really silences at all. People stop talking but they do other things that make other noises. They clink teacups, they rustle pieces of paper, they blow their noses, they clear their throats, they scratch their heads, they recross their legs.

This was a true silence. A time without sound. The room was so silent that Tom could hear an alarm clock ticking in the house next door. He could hear four people breathing. He could feel his heart beating so fast he felt sure that it would explode. He laughed nervously and waved a hand, as though to suggest that this was just his aunt's craziness talking.

'Both of them,' said Tom's aunt, who seemed unaware that her words had had such an effect. She lowered her voice, as though about to share a secret. 'It's very easy,' she added, confidentially. 'You just hit them with a frying pan.'

Everyone in the room looked at her. Two of the people in the room didn't really believe what they'd heard. The other two didn't want to believe that they'd heard it.

'You hit them with a frying pan,' she repeated. She made a hitting movement with her right hand; her fingers formed into a fist as though holding the handle of a frying pan. She looked around at the open mouths and bewildered, slightly frightened faces. 'One just fell down the stairs so we didn't really kill that one. But we finished him off. And we killed the other one with the frying pan,' she said. She turned to Tom. 'We should put two notches in the frying pan handle,' she said.

Dalby looked at Tom and then at Dorothy. He sat down again. Gladwys sat down too.

'She's not joking is she?' said Dalby. He looked first at Tom and then at Dorothy.

'No,' said Tom very softly. This was, he felt, the moment of truth. They were about to find out just how much they could trust their visitors. He took a deep breath. 'No, she's not joking.'

'What did you do with the bodies?' asked Gladwys.

'We took them to the hospital,' said Dorothy. 'We put them on gurneys, those flat half-stretcher half-trolley things they have in hospitals, and left both of them in a corridor.'

'When was this?'

'Last Thursday.'

'Five days ago?' Tom nodded.

'And nothing has happened?'

He shook his head.

'The police haven't been round?'

'No.'

'Do you think you got away with it?'

'Hope so,' said Dorothy.

'Why haven't we heard anything about it?' asked Gladwys. 'Has it been on the Telescreen?'

'Maybe the police are stupid,' said Dalby.

'Maybe they are,' said Tom firmly. 'They rely on sneaks and computers to do everything for them. Most of them never leave their offices. But unless computers are programmed they don't think round corners. No sprout has been murdered for years and so my guess is that they wouldn't consider it as a possibility.' He hesitated. 'The only other explanation I can think of is that they know but aren't doing anything about it because they're too nervous to admit that two sprouts got killed. Sprouts go into people's homes all day long. They're armed only with their arrogance and the knowledge that we're terrified of them. The commissioners wouldn't want suspects to know that sprouts were vulnerable. And they certainly wouldn't want the sprouts to know.'

'And we helped confuse the issue by putting identification tags on the two bodies we left in the hospital,' Dorothy reminded Tom. 'It made it all look like an official cock-up.'

'That was a brilliant touch,' agreed Tom. He explained how Dorothy had done this.

Tom's aunt, who was bored by all this talk, leapt up and went to the cupboard under the sink. She pulled out the frying pan. 'We hit them with this!' she told the two visitors, waving the frying pan in the air around their heads. 'This is what we used.' She brandished the frying pan as she had done when hitting the sprout. 'Whoosh!' she said.

'Was it easy?' asked Gladwys.

'Getting rid of the bodies?'

'No. Killing them?'

‘That was surprisingly easy,’ said Tom. ‘One of the sprouts fell down the stairs. That was an accident. We were standing on the landing. He was poking me in the chest with his finger, you know the way sprouts do, really hard, and it was hurting me so I stepped aside. The next time he prodded I wasn’t there and he went down the stairs. He didn’t die straight away but it was pretty clear he was pretty badly hurt. The other one threatened to have the three of us deported. He wouldn’t listen to reason. He knew it wasn’t my fault but he wouldn’t listen to me. He said I’d pushed the other sprout.’ He lowered his voice. ‘I didn’t have any choice,’ he said, almost whispering.

For a while no one spoke.

‘I’d do it again,’ said Tom. ‘It was the right thing to do. The killing was easy. It was getting rid of the bodies that was tricky.’

Once again, no one spoke.

‘Are you terribly shocked?’ Dorothy asked Gladwys.

Gladwys looked at Dalby. They both looked towards Dorothy. ‘No,’ said Gladwys. ‘Not shocked.’ She thought again. ‘Not shocked at all,’ she said very quietly.

‘I would describe myself as sympathetic and interested,’ said Dalby, quietly. ‘Very interested. Very sympathetic.’

‘Did you have to hit the one you killed very much?’ asked Gladwys.

‘A few times,’ nodded Tom. ‘Quite hard. Yes, quite hard.’

‘Boof!’ said his aunt. She raised the frying pan, which she was still holding, and then brought it down fast. She smiled at them.

‘Did your aunt...?’ asked Dalby.

‘Yes,’ admitted Tom. He half smiled. ‘She turned out to be surprisingly good at it.’ He swallowed. ‘I had no choice,’ he said. ‘And I don’t think what I did was wrong.’ He rubbed a hand through what was left of his hair. ‘EUDCE has taken over our country, our culture, our past, our present, our future, our democracy and our freedom. They haven’t left us anything. The people who represent the new State, the sprouts, may not have been responsible for creating the EUDCE concept but they’re responsible for what is happening to us. We can’t beat a system because it doesn’t really exist; it’s a plan, a notion, a badness. All we can do is chop off the arms and legs; the beasts who do the State’s bidding. We can’t reach the commissioners because they’ve all locked themselves away in Brussels.’

‘But the sprouts are here with us every day,’ said Dalby.

‘If you got away with it...,’ began Gladwys.

‘Maybe others could too...,’ Dalby continued the thought.

‘I’ve got a bottle of potato wine,’ said Tom, suddenly. He stood up. ‘I was keeping it for Christmas but I have a feeling this is a special occasion too.’

‘I’ll get some glasses,’ said Dorothy.

When Tom had opened the potato wine and filled all the glasses the questions came thick and fast. Where exactly did you put the bodies? How did you get them there? Do you really think you’ll get away with it? Do you think we could get rid of the Telescreen license guy? The planning man? The idiot from the valuation office who comes round to photograph everything inside the house? The income tax inspector?’

And then, finally.

‘Can you help us get rid of the sprouts who are coming to see us tomorrow?’

‘Oh, you’ll pass the test with flying colours,’ said Tom. He tried to sound more reassuring than he felt.

‘It isn’t the test that really worries us,’ said Gladwys. ‘We’re doing what we can to help ourselves so it isn’t entirely out of our hands. What really worries us is the fear that they’re going to make us take lodgers.’

‘It’s a tiny flat,’ explained Dalby. ‘There’s hardly room for the two of us.’

‘They took our last home just about a year ago,’ said Gladwys.

‘Just confiscated it. We’d worked for years to make it nice.’ There were tears in her eyes. ‘I don’t think I’ve got the strength to move again. And, besides, where would we go?’

‘We’ll help you,’ promised Dorothy. She looked at Tom. He nodded.

‘We’ve got a heavy saucepan,’ said Dalby with a nervous smile.

‘And a frying pan,’ said Gladwys.

They all sipped their potato wine.

‘Why are you doing this for us?’ asked Dalby eventually.

‘Because we have to stick together,’ said Dorothy. ‘We have to help one another.’

‘But you’re putting yourselves at risk.’

‘If you don’t take risks to help your friends then there isn’t much to life is there?’ said Tom. ‘We’ll come over with the trailer in the morning.’ He thought for a moment. ‘I might be able to get hold of a bigger one. I know a chap who has one of the allotments. He’s getting old and his trailer is too big for him. It’s heavy but strong. Too big for his needs. I’ve seen him eyeing mine rather enviously. I’ll see if he wants to trade.’ He paused again and then looked at Dalby. ‘Are you still catching rats?’

Dalby nodded. He had earned a living catching rats for a long time. The areas where suspects lived were thick with them.

‘Can you get a couple of dozen of dead ones by tomorrow?’

‘No problem.’

‘More if you can manage it,’ said Tom. ‘We might need quite a few.’

Chapter 20

The sprouts who turned up to question Dalby and Gladwys were both Turkish. They spoke English very slowly and deliberately, having to weigh each word before delivering it. One of the sprouts was very short and very fat. The other was shorter and even fatter. The thinnest of the two wore a thin black moustache. The fatter of the two was clean shaven and bald. The thinner was a keen collector of barbed wire. He had 79 one metre stretches fastened onto heavy corkboards and fixed to the wall in his bedroom. The fatter was a collector of car numbers. He had filled eight notebooks.

'Who is these persons?' demanded the sprout with the moustache, looking at Tom, Dorothy and Tom's aunt who was holding her cat.

'Just friends,' replied Dalby.

'Visitors,' said Gladwys.

'We came to help with some cooking,' said Tom, holding up the frying pan he was holding. Dorothy held up a heavy iron wok she'd found. They were both still shocked by the circumstances in which their friends were living. The tower block where Dalby and Gladwys had their flat was worse than anything they'd ever seen before. It was, thought Tom, like something out of the sort of science fiction movie that was popular back in the 20th century.

'You are not to be having visitors when we are coming,' said the bald sprout. 'Even when they are also old.' He had clearly put on weight since he'd been given his suit. It bulged, threateningly, in all the usual places. He wagged a plump finger at Dorothy, Tom and Tom's aunt. 'These are all suspects, no?'

'Yes,' said Tom. To his own surprise he did not feel in the slightest bit nervous. It occurred to him, in a fleeting instant of comprehension, that it is confidence which wins battles but that in the end it doesn't much matter whether the confidence is based on the solid rocks of knowledge and accomplishment or the shifting, tremulous sands of hope and expectation.

The bald sprout looked them up and down contemptuously and then looked away, ignoring them now. 'I am a Residential Placement Officer,' he said pompously. He looked around, allowing time for this information to sink in.

Gladwys started to cry.

'I thought you would be Scrutineers,' said Dalby.

'Not us,' said the bald sprout, delighting in Dalby's obvious discomfort. 'You expect them so we come instead.' He looked around him. 'You have much rooms in here.'

'It's a very small flat,' said Dalby. 'Just two rooms.'

'Plenty of spaces for refugees,' insisted the sprout. 'Six I think.'

'No!' cried Gladwys. 'You can't! Where can we put six extra people? We have one bedroom and one living room.'

The bald sprout shrugged. 'This is my decision,' he said. 'They come to you Saturday. You will be responsible for providing food and other needs of theirs.'

'We hardly have enough to eat ourselves,' said Dalby.

'You will have six refugees,' the sprout said again making it clear that this was a statement of fact and not a potential subject for discussion. He turned and beamed at Gladwys. 'All men I think. Then you have seven men to live with. Maybe you make them very, very welcome?' He reached out and squeezed one of Gladwys's breasts. 'Small but nice,' he said. 'Very strong.'

'Firm,' said his colleague, correcting him. 'You mean 'very firm'?'

'How do you know? demanded the first sprout. 'Have you felt?'

'No,' admitted the second sprout.

'Can we appeal this decision?' asked Dalby, who was red-faced with anger.

The baldest sprout laughed and turned to his colleague. He said something in what was presumably Turkish, though no one else in the room knew that for sure since Turkish was merely one of many languages they did not understand. The two sprouts both laughed. 'You have no appeal,' sneered the one with the moustache. 'You are just scum. We alone decide.'

The other sprout shrugged again, to show that none of this was really of interest to him. Followed by his colleague he headed into the tiny kitchen. And as he did so Tom, who was standing by the door which led into the kitchen, hit him hard on the head. The sprout sank to the ground without a sound. His colleague, who was following him a pace behind, started to say something but before he could get any words out he too collapsed; felled by a blow from the heavy iron wok wielded by Dorothy. Because the wok had no proper handle Dorothy had to grip it by one of the small handles built into the edge. The wok wasn't the best of blunt instruments but, being made of solid iron, it was very heavy and effective.

‘Yes!’ cried Tom’s aunt excitedly. ‘Now it’s my turn!’ She grabbed the wok from Dorothy and used it to batter the fallen sprout just as Tom delivered a second blow to the head of the first sprout.

The killing was all over in less than two minutes.

‘Are they dead?’ whispered Gladwys.

‘I think we should help a little,’ said Dalby. ‘I feel guilty about letting you do everything.’ He took the frying pan from Tom and smashed it down onto the first sprout’s head. Then Gladwys took it from him and used it to smash the second sprout’s skull. Tom’s aunt was still clutching the wok and seemed unwilling to give it up.

‘Now we are all in this together,’ said Dalby. He was breathing heavily, though this was probably more from anxiety than physical effort.

‘Are they both dead?’ asked Gladwys again.

Tom bent down and felt for pulses. ‘They’re both dead,’ he said. He thought he sounded much calmer than he felt.

‘That was damned good fun!’ said his aunt. ‘Are there any more?’ She lifted up the wok and brought it crashing down onto an imaginary third victim.

‘No, auntie,’ said Tom, putting a soothing hand on her arm and gently taking the wok out of her grasp. ‘That’s enough for today.’

‘Oh bugger,’ said his aunt, obviously disappointed.

‘Now we have to get rid of the bodies,’ said Dalby. He was very pale.

‘Shall we take them to the hospital?’ asked Gladwys. ‘And get rid of them the way you got rid of your two?’

‘No,’ said Tom. He was bending down removing identification papers from the two men’s pockets. ‘I think the hospital is too risky to use a second time.’

‘Should we keep those?’ asked Dalby, pointing to the papers and roaming licences Tom held.

‘No,’ replied Tom. ‘It’s far too risky. Do you have a fireplace? A stove?’

Dalby nodded.

‘Show me,’ said Tom, who wanted to see the papers burn. Dalby showed him their stove. ‘It’s out. We don’t have much wood. We only light it when the weather is freezing.’

Tom put the papers into the stove, took out a cigarette lighter, and set fire to them. When they’d finished burning he used a fork to break up the charred paper and stir the ashes.

‘So what are we going to do with the bodies?’ asked Gladwys.

She sounded a little panicky. ‘We can’t keep them here!’

‘We could get some acid and dissolve them,’ suggested Dalby. ‘Or take them to a EUDCE rubbish tip.’

‘They’ve got dozens of different sectors there,’ Gladwys pointed out. ‘Where do you put human bodies? You can hardly toss them in the Green Bottle Bank or the Used Sandals Bank.’

‘We’re going to strip them and toss both the bodies and the clothes down the rubbish chute on your landing,’ said Tom. ‘Then we’ll go downstairs, put the bodies into the trailer on the back of my bicycle and move them somewhere else.’ Earlier that day Tom had acquired the bigger trailer for his bicycle. It was plenty big enough to carry two bodies.

‘Where to?’ asked Gladwys.

‘Dunno yet,’ said Tom. He turned to Dalby. ‘Where are the rats?’

‘In a sack in the hall cupboard.’

‘How many?’

‘Eighty or so.’

‘Strewth. You killed that many rats in one evening?’ Dalby nodded.

‘Do they ever empty the skip at the bottom of your rubbish chute?’

‘No. It’s been overflowing for years.’

‘Do you get any scavengers?’

‘Occasionally,’ said Dalby. ‘But not even scavengers can get much out of the rubbish thrown away here.’

‘OK,’ said Tom. ‘So, we push the two sprouts down the rubbish chute and then we go down and pick them up. Bring the rats with you when we’ve dumped the two bodies.’

‘Where did you leave your bike and the trailer?’ asked Dalby. He’d opened their front door and was dragging the first sprout towards the rubbish chute. ‘You didn’t leave it outside did you? If you did it will have gone long ago.’

‘I hauled it up to the second floor landing,’ said Tom, who was dragging the second sprout.

‘I hope it’s still there,’ said Dalby. ‘This is a rough neighbourhood.’ He paused, pushed open the hatch to the rubbish chute and looked inside. He could see nothing but the remains of the rubbish that had been dumped down it most recently.

‘It will be,’ said Tom confidently. He heaved one of the bodies up to the chute and, with Dalby’s help, heaved it through the hatch. They did the same with the second one.

And then they headed for the door which led from the landing down the stairs to the ground floor.

Chapter 21

The staircase, gloomy and lit only by light corning through occasional glass bricks set into the wall, was strewn with litter, rags and the bodies of flea-ridden homeless vagrants who had set up their pathetic homes on almost every landing. Tom wondered how long it took for people to notice when one of the vagrants had died. And who removed the dead body? And what did they do with it?

Minutes later, when they arrived at the second floor landing, Dalby, who was carrying the sack full of dead rats, was in the lead. He approached the bicycle and trailer which were almost blocking the landing. Tom, Dorothy, Tom's aunt and Gladwys were all following him.

'Stay away from it. Don't touch it!' said Tom sharply.

Dalby turned, startled.

Tom moved past him, turned off the switch which had operated the light above their heads, in the long since gone days when there had been a bulb in the socket, and then unfastened the end of a wire which was connected to the light socket. The other end of the wire was fixed to the metal frame of Tom's bicycle. In the gloom of the landing the wire was hardly visible. No one who didn't know it was there would have seen it.

'I see what you mean,' said Gladwys quietly. 'No one was going to steal your bicycle were they?'

'No one ever will,' said Tom firmly. 'Not if I have anything to do with it.'

Downstairs, the bodies of the two sprouts were lying on top of a stinking mixture of household rubbish. The area around the skip was littered with spilt rubbish, rotting food, unusable rags and ashes dumped from wood fires.

Tom and Dalby climbed up onto the rubbish pile and heaved out the naked bodies of the two fat sprouts. The two of them, helped by Gladwys and Dorothy then lay the bodies down in the trailer.

'What about their clothes?'

'Leave them where they are,' said Tom. 'Now the rats,' he said, nodding towards the sack that Dalby had carried down the staircase.

Dalby opened the top of the sack.

'Sprinkle them on top of the bodies,' said Tom. 'Do it so that they cover up everything human.'

'What do you usually do with these?' asked Dorothy, looking in horror as the layer of rats grew.

'I sell them,' said Dalby.

'What for?'

'As food. Usually for dogs. But sometimes for suspects who can't afford anything else. And for the skins. A woman I know skins the rats, dries the skins and uses them to make jackets. They look surprisingly good. She sells the skinned bodies to a few of her neighbours who use them to feed their dogs.'

'You can sell these when we've finished with them,' said Tom.

Dalby shrugged. 'It doesn't matter,' he said. 'There are plenty more.' He put the last few rats into the trailer.

'Take Gladwys and aunt back to our place,' Tom said to Dorothy. 'We will see you there as soon as we can.'

'Where are we taking these two?' asked Dalby, when the three women had gone. Tom had climbed onto the bicycle saddle. Dalby was walking alongside him.

Tom looked around. 'Over there,' he replied, pointing to a high rise building about half a mile away. It was as tall as the block where Dalby lived and, from a distance, looked just as dirty and uninviting. The road which connected the two was potholed and littered with the broken down, rusted remains of long abandoned vehicles. Scroungers had taken every item of possible use. There was very little motorised traffic. Anyone who needed to go somewhere travelled there on foot or by bicycle.

Chapter 22

Tom and Dalby had travelled about half the distance to the block of flats for which they were heading when a Europol security patrol, two men riding mountain bicycles, came up behind them.

'Where are you two going?' demanded the older of the two. He was in his fifties. He had a pockmarked face and lank, greasy hair poked out from underneath his peaked cap. He wore the same blue uniform as all the sprouts but, because he was a security agent, he also wore a flak jacket and had silver buttons on the cuff of his jacket sleeves. He carried a Mauser pistol in a holster on his right hip and an extendable baton on his left hip. A portable taser gun was strapped to the cross bar of his bicycle.

'Over to those flats,' said Tom.

'What for?' asked the man with the pockmarked face.

Tom pointed behind him to the rats in the trailer. 'To sell these,' he said. He looked at the two agents in turn and wondered where they came from. Traditionally, most of the Europol rank and file officers working in what had once been England came from Germany, Poland and Latvia. Recently, Tom knew, some of the newer, lower grade sprouts had been recruited from Malta and Cyprus.

The two Europol agents looked into the trailer and saw the rats piled on top of one another. They both recoiled, backed away and shuddered. 'Who buys those?' the younger one demanded.

'Lots of people buy them,' replied Dalby. 'They make good eating.' He selected a plump rat from the pile, picked it out by the tail and held it up to the Europol agent. 'Would you like this one? You can have it as a present if you like.'

The older, pockmarked security agent shuddered and shook his head. His colleague laughed. 'We eat well every night,' he boasted. 'Proper food. Fresh lamb, steak, salmon steaks.' Tom wondered if the sprout knew that Russian communism had started to collapse after Lenin had authorised a special restaurant for bureaucrats. That had been the final straw for the peasants left queuing for turnips.

'Identifications,' demanded the first agent, holding out a hand.

Tom, too wise to self-destruct, said nothing about Lenin but took out his wallet and removed his roaming licence. All suspects had to carry their roaming licences at all times. It was a serious offence not to be able to produce one when asked to do so. He handed his card to the Europol agent who scrutinised it, wrote down some details in his notebook, and then handed the card back to Tom. Dalby handed over his card and the procedure was repeated. Both Tom and Dalby still had machine readable cards but these days the Europol agents didn't carry the machines to read the cards. The Europol chiefs claimed it was part of a programme to make their agents more approachable and less mechanistic. It wasn't of course. No one in EUDCE gave a damn about approachability. The simple truth was that Europol agents didn't carry card readers solely because EUDCE couldn't get them. Most of the Europol agents didn't even have mobile telephones or two-way radios. At the end of the day the Europol agents were expected to type all the information they'd collected during the day into one of the desktop computers they still had in their offices. But most of the Europol agents were only barely literate in their own language, let alone English, and there were far too few computer keyboards for all the agents who needed them. The result, as most suspects knew, was that nothing was ever done with most of the information that was collected.

It was just bad luck that as Tom pressed down on the pedals to ride away from the two Europol agents, one of the trailer wheels caught on a piece of stone that was lying in the roadway. And it was also bad luck that the two Europol agents had not yet turned away as the trailer overturned and spilt some of its contents onto the roadway. The rats fell out first. And then one of the two naked sprout bodies half fell out onto the roadway.

'Hey!' cried the younger Europol agent, pointing to the body. 'What's that?'

The older Europol agent reacted first but he made one mistake: instead of reaching for his pistol he took out his baton. Dalby leapt at him and, before the Europol agent had managed to extend his baton, knocked him to the ground. The younger agent turned to help his colleague and so, for a moment, had his back to Tom who, without hesitation, picked up the piece of rock which had caused the accident and smashed it against the back of the sprout's head. By the time the agent had fallen to the roadway Tom had lifted the rock again and had smashed it onto the older agent's head. The older man was moving and the rock caught him a glancing blow on the neck and shoulder. But it was enough to make him cry out in pain. Before Tom could hit him again, Dalby had taken the baton and had used it to smash the sprout's skull.

The fight, if it can be called that, was over in little more than a minute.

'What the hell do we do now?' demanded Dalby, who was gasping for breath. He stood up, holding the extendable baton in his right hand and staring down at the two bodies.

‘Grab their guns and batons. Empty their pockets. Make sure you take their notebooks and anything that identifies them,’ said Tom, who was struggling to right the trailer. Once he’d done that he pushed the two dead sprouts who’d been in the trailer back into place and then picked up handfuls of dead rats and threw them on top. Once the layer of rats had begun to cover the bodies he spread them around, to make sure that the sprouts weren’t visible.

‘I’ll get rid of these two,’ he said to Dalby. ‘Wait here.’

‘Shall I take their holsters?’ asked Dalby. ‘What about their flak jackets?’ His body was trembling with the shock of what they had done. His voice was shaking too.

‘Take everything,’ said Tom. ‘Strip them.’ He looked around. There was no one else visible for as far as he could see. The scavengers probably wouldn’t come out until it was dark. Was anyone watching from one of the tower blocks? Possibly. What could they have seen? Nothing much. Tom hated snoopers just as much as he hated sprouts. Possibly more. Everywhere was grey and desolate. There were no trees, of course. They had long since been cut down to provide firewood. There was no colour. No one had money to paint privately owned buildings and EUDCE never painted anything that wasn’t occupied by senior sprouts. Looking around he realised that he even missed the advertising hoardings. He’d hated them when they’d been there. Now he missed them. There were no hoardings because there was no point in advertising. Only EUDCE-approved companies had anything to sell. And they didn’t need to advertise.

What on earth had happened to the world, Tom wondered. How had England come to this? He had seen pictures of Brussels and Strasbourg on the BBC. The sprouts living there enjoyed many luxuries. They had beautiful homes and office buildings, limousines and nine course meals. They flew in aeroplanes and helicopters and had their rubbish bins emptied daily. They wore soft, freshly laundered clothes every day and in the evening they sat in air-conditioned rooms where the temperature was kept at a comfortable temperature. Their electricity was provided by a mass of windmills and their supply never broke down.

‘What about money?’ asked Dalby. ‘Should I keep their money?’

‘Yes, keep the money,’ said Tom.

‘Where are you going?’ asked Dalby, anxiously as he realised that Tom was planning to leave.

‘Over there,’ said Tom, nodding towards the block of flats they’d been heading for. He pressed down on the pedals. ‘I’ll be back as soon as I can,’ he shouted over his shoulder.

Chapter 23

If there had been an Olympic speed record for riding a bicycle while towing a trailer containing two dead bodies and a good many dead rats, Tom would have broken it comfortably.

When he reached the flats he parked the bicycle and rushed up the stairs to the first floor. There wasn't time to do anything about protecting the bicycle from thieves. He just had to hope that there was no one around to try and steal it. It occurred to him too late that maybe it would have been a good idea to bring one of the guns with him. Or, maybe the taser.

The first floor of the building was deserted apart from a bundle of rags in one corner. It was impossible to see whether there was a human being amidst the rags. Tom headed for the lift doors. As with most buildings occupied by suspects, it had been a long time since the lift had worked and the doors, normally so difficult to prise apart, had been broken open years earlier. They were pulled almost together but it wasn't difficult to move them apart again. The lift itself had gone years ago. It was, thought Tom, amazing what people would and could steal. What could anyone do with a lift cabin? Take it and turn it into a home perhaps?

The empty shaft had been used as a rubbish dump and stank of rotting and decaying vegetables and animals. Tom raced back down to where his bicycle was parked. Working feverishly he threw the rats out of the trailer and then, one at a time, dragged the two bodies up the stairs to the first floor. Levering open the lift doors he half pushed and half kicked the two bodies into the lift shaft. Then he looked down. He could just make out the fact that there were two bodies down there. But maybe that was because he knew they were there. He didn't have time to cover them up. He had to get back to where Dalby was waiting. He rushed back down the stairs, threw the dead rats, or most of them, back into the trailer and then cycled back to where he had left Dalby and the two dead sprouts. Sweat was pouring from his forehead and his clothes were soaked.

'Where the hell have you been?' demanded a panicking Dalby.

He was holding one of the guns in his left hand and one of the batons in his right. 'I don't think I'm cut out for this.' The two sprouts were lying naked on the edge of the road. Their clothes were in two untidy piles.

'Stay calm,' Tom said to Dalby, although he didn't feel in the slightest bit calm himself He scooped the rats out of the trailer and threw them onto the roadway. He realised with a certain amount of horror that he no longer felt distaste at the idea of touching dead rats with his bare hands. What was happening to him? 'It's nearly over,' he said. He was exhausted; almost at his limit. 'Just help me get these two bodies into the trailer. Have you got all their ID?'

In reply Dalby put his hand into his pocket and pulled out a pile of papers.

'Good,' said Tom. 'He pulled at the first of the dead Europol agents but was so exhausted he could hardly move the body. 'Help me get these two into the trailer.' His heart was beating furiously. His fear kept him alert and watchful; it protected him. Strangely, his fear was his most powerful asset; his most effective defence.

Chapter 24

Thirty minutes later Tom and Dalby stood on the first floor, looking through the open doors and down the empty lift shaft.

The four bodies they had thrown down the lift shaft were almost invisible in the gloom. Almost but not quite. 'Go down and stay with the bicycle,' Tom told Dalby. And while Dalby guarded their valuable transport, Tom collected together armfuls of rubbish which he threw down on top of the bodies until there was nothing visible of the dead sprouts. It seemed unlikely that anyone would find them for a very long time. With any luck at all the bodies would stay until the building was demolished; at which point they would be smashed to pieces and buried under hundreds of tons of rubble.

They left the sprouts' clothes on the street half a mile away and threw the guns, the tasers and the batons down a drain a mile away. Tom used one of the batons to lever off the grating and then threw everything down into the water below.

'Shouldn't we keep these?' asked Dalby as Tom tossed away the weapons.

'Tempting,' agreed Tom. He paused, holding the last gun. 'But just too risky.' He dropped it, listened for the splash and then he put back the grating.

He tore the identity papers into pieces and threw them down another drain. They shared the money they had taken. It wasn't much but it was more than they'd seen for a long, long time.

And then it began to rain: a torrential, monsoon type storm.

Even old-fashioned English weather seemed to have disappeared, along with cricket, crumpets and other manifestations of the oldfashioned English way of life.

This was no shower, not even a rainstorm. The rain came down so fast and so heavily that they were soaked to the skin within seconds.

But somehow it didn't seem to matter.

Chapter 25

Several hours later, after a bath in hot water (a rare treat in a world where such a luxury could cost as much as a man's suit but was something of a necessity when a man has been handling human bodies, dead rats and armfuls of garbage all day long) and an extravagant meal of roast potatoes and raw carrots, Tom and Dorothy sat together in their tiny living room.

The potatoes and the carrots had come from the allotment where Tom worked. They were gifts from allotment holders. Most of the people who had allotments grew high production crops – such as beans. Carrots, which were difficult to produce in the exhausted soil, were rare. Tom and Dorothy usually ate the carrots raw to ensure that they got as much of the vitamin content as possible.

'One of the gardeners at the allotment has some tomato plants growing,' said Tom. 'If they produce any fruit he's promised to give me two – one for each of us.' If it ever happened it would be a highlight.

Dorothy had lit the wood burning stove and had opened the doors so that they could enjoy the sight of the flames inside. They opened a small bar of fruit and nut chocolate which Dorothy had been given by a grateful client. It was three years past its 'best before' date. The chocolate may have tasted a trifle stale but it was such a long time since they'd tasted anything like it that their taste buds had nothing with which to compare it.

Tom's aunt was asleep in her room and they carefully wrapped her share of the chocolate back in its paper. Dalby and Gladwys, reassured and now too tired (both mentally and physically) to worry overmuch, were in their 16th floor flat.

Tom and Dorothy sipped sherry. It wasn't a drink either of them was particularly fond of but it was slightly more palatable than potato wine. And Dalby had bought two bottles with some of the money he had taken from the Europol agents. One bottle for each couple.

'You OK?' asked Dorothy.

Tom nodded, stretched his legs and grunted. The fire crackled and spat a little.

'Four more,' said Dorothy.

'Four more,' agreed Tom. 'Six dead sprouts.' He had never felt so tired. But he didn't want to go to bed.

There was a long silence. They both watched the flames flickering in the log burning stove.

'Taking the money doesn't seem right.'

'It worries me more than the killing,' said Tom. 'But it's daft to worry about it. They're dead. The money would have just gone into the lift shaft if we hadn't taken it. We need it.'

'We can certainly use it.'

They watched the flames for a while.

'I love real fires,' said Tom. The fire was a necessity but it was, strangely, also one of their few luxuries.

'Me too.'

They sat and watched but said nothing.

'Gladwys said she has three friends who are in the same boat as they were,' said Dorothy at last.

Tom looked across at her.

'About to have to share their home with strangers.'

'And she knows one couple who are being deported for not paying their Telescreen licence. They'll be sent to Africa to work on the grain farms.'

'There's a lot of injustice out there.'

'And a lot of anger.'

They sat and sipped their sherry.

'It's a pity Dalby couldn't get whisky,' said Tom.

'Yes. Sherry is a very strange drink isn't it. It seems like alcohol but...' Dorothy didn't finish the sentence.

'It's a big but.'

'Are we going to stop now?'

'Stop what?'

'Stop killing sprouts.'

'You want to kill some more?'

'It's the only way we can do anything to change things. Voting doesn't make any difference. Protesting in the streets doesn't make any difference...'

'...and gets you arrested or beaten to death.'

'There's a lot of justifiable rage out there. A lot of people are very angry. A lot of people want to do something.'

‘Maybe they just like whingeing. Maybe they’ll moan but not do anything.’

‘Gladwys says she thinks people are ready to stand up and do something. We talked while you and Dalby were out.’

‘Ready to stand up and kill sprouts?’

‘She says she thinks they are.’

‘What do you think?’

‘I don’t know. But I do know that we don’t have much choice. Do you want to carry on as things are?’

‘No. No, I don’t want to just carry on as things are. But do you really think killing sprouts will change anything?’

‘It might do. It would certainly help keep people sane. It would give people hope. Something positive to do and to fight for.’

‘Then perhaps we’d better organise a meeting.’

‘That’s what Gladwys and I thought.’

‘Oh you did, did you?’

‘We did. Would you like another glass of sherry?’

‘Why not? It’s better than potato wine. And I feel like getting tiddly.’

‘Do you think we can get tiddly on sherry?’

‘I don’t have the foggiest. Let’s find out.’

Tom picked up the bottle and refilled their glasses.

‘Where are we going to hold this meeting?’

‘Not here.’

‘No, of course not.’

‘So, where?’

‘I’ll think of somewhere. But we need to do some serious thinking before we have a meeting.’

‘What about?’

‘Well, for a start we need to find a better way to get rid of the bodies. We can’t go on tossing them down lift shafts or leaving them in hospital corridors.’

‘Someone might see us?’

‘Someone might see us,’ agreed Dorothy. ‘And eventually, someone is going to start finding the bodies. Then even the Europol idiots might begin to suspect that something is going on.’

‘So we need to work out how we can get rid of the bodies. Killing them isn’t difficult, but hiding the bodies is a problem.’

‘Killing them could get more difficult.’

‘Why?’

‘So far, the sprouts haven’t expected to be hit on the head and so it’s been easy to take them by surprise. But we can’t rely on that for ever. Once it becomes known that sprouts are being killed they’ll all get edgy. Even ordinary sprouts will start carrying weapons.’

‘That’s another reason for hiding the bodies so that they aren’t found. If there aren’t any bodies lying around then the authorities may just suspect that the missing sprouts have gone AWOL. They won’t want to start claiming that sprouts are being murdered when they haven’t even got any bodies. They’d look silly.’

Dorothy thought about this. ‘You’re right. We have to find some way to get rid of the bodies without anyone finding them.’

‘I need more thinking juice.’

‘Thinking juice?’

‘Sherry.’

‘Ah. OK. I thought you didn’t like this stuff?’

‘It’s growing on me. Every glass I drink tastes better than the previous one.’

Chapter 26

Sitting back in her reclining leather chair (designed for captains of ships and industry and retailing at a sumptuous 3,000 euros including all taxes) Chief Commissioner Dame Phyllis Stein, Provincial Commissioner for Administration and Protector of the People for Province 17 (formerly known as the United Kingdom and now subdivided into 12 subregions, each with its own Regional Parliament and Regional Commissioner), glowered at the sprout sitting in front of her (on a far less luxurious chair).

Born in Poland but now loyal to her new homeland, the United States of Europe, Chief Commissioner Stein wore her hair short, as short as a private soldier in the English army of the 1950's, a haircut that used to be known as a 'short back and sides', and was dressed in a heavy-weight wool trouser suit in a chalk stripe with a matching five button waistcoat and a Royal Engineers tie (which she wore because she thought it looked masculine and clubbish). She wore no make-up, not even lipstick or anything to disguise her rather grey, deathly pallor, and she wore no jewellery of any kind. The mannish effect she sought was rather spoilt by her bathukolpian figure which made her look what she was: a short-haired, butch lesbian wearing the sort of suit a man might wear.

She was variously described by those around her as arrogant, conceited and concerned only with her own pleasures and extravagances. It would have been difficult to find anyone prepared to disagree with these judgements in private though no one, of course, would have agreed with them in public. Her enemies thought of her less kindly than this.

Within the Region the Chief Commissioner possessed the sort of power over the English that would have last been enjoyed by a Roman consul. She enjoyed, in the true sense of the word, a considerable reputation for ruthlessness and she ran her region as though it were her personal property. When, during a particularly cold winter spell, an aide had suggested releasing some supplies of logs for junior sprouts and suspects she had cackled with laughter, demoted him two grades (an almost unheard of event) and transferred him to Glasgow. She told everyone she saw that the aide had been having what she called 'a transient human experience'.

Under her supervision, and with her authority, profligacy and waste had become a purpose instead of an irritating consequence of inattention. (If a man bakes bread every day of his working life then it is reasonable to describe him as a baker; baking bread is what he does. Similarly, if a government wastes money efficiently and with regularity it becomes difficult to argue with the thesis that the primary purpose of the government is just that: to waste money.)

Although EUDCE had done its best to rid England of most of its history, and had done so with remarkable, custom-crushing efficiency, it had embraced one glorious part of Olde England: the traditional honours system.

The honours systems in much of Europe had been dismantled generations earlier, but the bureaucratic aristocrats who now ran EUDCE rather enjoyed the idea of decorating themselves, and adding the extra dignity to which they felt they were entitled, by making themselves Sirs, Dames, Ladies and Lords. And so, since there was nothing and no one to stop them, that's exactly what they did.

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Dame Phyllis was moaning because one of her Deputy Chief Assistant Commissioners, Israeli-born Sir Czardas Tsastske, had just confessed that neither he nor anyone else working in the Regional Offices could tell her how many suspects were now living in the Region.

Sir Czardas had been born Percival Liebermann but had changed his name to something which he thought would offer him a better chance of rising high within the EUDCE hierarchy. Many of EUDCE's high-ranking security officers had been born in Israel, the last nation to join the European Union before it morphed painlessly into EUDCE, but most of them had adopted names which might have once been more widely found in the telephone directories of the countries formerly known as belonging to Eastern Europe.

Sir Czardas had made a personal fortune selling confiscated penknives in the first decade of the 21st century. ('Well, what did you think we were going to do with them?' he demanded of an indignant purchaser who had bought back his own multi-bladed Swiss Army penknife; a snip at two thirds of the original cost.)

'It's so much more difficult to keep track of people when they're not employed by us,' explained Sir Czardas Tsastske. He was considerably shorter than he would have liked to have been and plumper than was good for him but he had long ago decided that since he could do nothing about the former he would do nothing about the latter. He enjoyed food and had managed to convince himself that longevity (and its antithesis) are consequences of inheritance rather than appetite. His parents had died in a car crash and he had convinced himself that without that intervention they would have lived into their 90's, if not beyond.

He had very little hair and that which he had, and which was visible to the casual observer, was largely situated in and around his ears. He dressed formally, in three piece pin-striped suits which he had made by a Chinese tailor in

Savile Row, but allowed his flamboyant nature to express itself with the aid of flashy silk ties and handkerchiefs which he purchased in bulk from a small haberdashery store in the Burlington Arcade. Both the tailor and the haberdasher had originally catered for the old English aristocracy. These days they catered for the new European aristocracy. No one other than EUDCE employees could afford their prices, which were at the obscene end of absurd.

'When they're properly employed they're frightened of losing their jobs. They're so much easier to control. As things are now it's becoming easier to control the sprouts than the damned moutons.' (Like many senior sprouts he invariably referred to suspects as 'moutons'.)

He glanced at the huge Telescreen, always switched on, which was fixed to the wall directly above the Chief Commissioner's head. A matching Telescreen dominated the wall behind him. The screens were positioned so that both the Chief Commissioner and her visitor could keep up with everything that was going on. Every EUDCE employee, even those with senior positions, were terrified of missing something, anything, that they might be expected to have seen.

On the screen a tall woman with a tattooed scalp, who had failed at several careers and had consequently become a highly successful fashion model, news reader and Telescreen personality, was interviewing two raggedy young beggars standing outside a railway station in Bucharest.

The woman beggar, dressed in a micro skirt and a very skimpy top, carried a baby in her arms. The man, dressed inexplicably in a top hat and tails, had a dog curled up at his feet. The beggars, both English, were explaining that they'd travelled to Romania because a careers advisor had assured them that there were more opportunities for beggars there.

'For a while we sold copies of a magazine called La Grande Question,' explained the woman. 'But then we attended a begging school run by two experienced Romanians and they told us we could make more money without it.'

'Is it a boy or a girl?' asked the interviewer, smiling at the baby and making goo goo noises.

'I dunno,' said the girl. 'It's not ours.'

'Not yours? Are you looking after it for someone?'

'We rent it,' said the girl. 'Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings.'

The interviewer seemed surprised.

'We'd like to have it Saturdays,' said the girl. 'But there's a waiting list for Saturdays. And by the time we get to the top of the waiting list the baby will be too old. So we're trying to get on another waiting list.'

'We have a little handwritten note in eight languages,' said her boyfriend, a lanky Scottish youth. He showed a scruffy piece of paper to the interviewer.

'What does it say?'

'It says we're poor and starving and the baby is sick and needs antibiotics,' said the boy.

'Is that true?'

The boy looked at her, as though trying to decide whether she was naive or stupid or both, and frowned.

'Is the dog yours or is that rented?' asked the interviewer.

'Why would we rent a dog?' asked the boy, as though only a stupid person would ask such a question. 'Renting dogs doesn't make commercial sense. You can pick 'em up in the street for nothing.'

The Chief Commissioner, who had watched this exchange without emotion, turned away from the Telescreen. 'I hear another twenty two sprouts have disappeared.' She paused and looked over the top of a pair of imaginary spectacles at Sir Czardas. She believed this gave her a rather academic air. 'How can sprouts just disappear?' she demanded. 'Where do they go to? Have they absconded? Been kidnapped?' She picked up a diecast model of a 1931 Alfa Romeo which she kept on her desk. It was too pristine to have ever been played with by a careless child.

Sir Czardas looked uncomfortable. 'I think these are just rumours,' he said.

'So what do you think is going on?' demanded the Chief Commissioner. 'I really need to get my ducks in a row on this one.'

'Maybe people are trying to claim pensions for sprouts who didn't exist?' suggested Sir Czardas.

'Would anyone do that?' asked the Chief Commissioner frowning. 'Isn't that cheating?'

'I'm afraid it is and they might,' said Sir Czardas.

'It comes to a fine thing when the people start cheating the system,' said the Chief Commissioner who firmly believed that in a decent world things should happen the other way round. She sighed, genuinely disappointed. 'I sometimes think we may be losing touch with our subjects,' she said. 'Wrongsiding the demographic.' She paused and thought. 'We need to do something to make the people feel proud,' she said, as pleased with this thought as a mathematician might have been if he'd just found a flaw in something Einstein had written. 'Something grand. Sprinkle a little magic.'

Sir Czardas had noticed the use of the word ‘subjects’. But he said nothing. He was by no means the first person to realise that you don’t get to be a senior regulator within the EUDCE hierarchy by noticing things that you weren’t intended to notice.

The Chief Commissioner watched with mild dismay as two bare knuckled fighters circled each other on the Telescreen. It was the weekly *Fight to the Death*. The winner received a small pension and a book of food stamps. The loser didn’t get anything but since it was a fight to the death he wouldn’t need anything. It had long ago occurred to her that the people who appeared on these programmes would do almost anything to appear on the Telescreen. She wondered, indeed, if there was a limit. Was there anything any of them wouldn’t do? She remembered reading that towards the end of the 20th century a majority of Olympic athletes had agreed that they would take drugs that improved their performance, and increased their chances of winning a medal, even if doing so meant that they would die within a few years because of the side effects. And then she remembered another piece of research which had shown that, when invited to choose between ‘the Telescreen’ and ‘daddy’, a majority of small children had chosen the Telescreen. She didn’t quite know what any of this proved and, indeed, couldn’t be bothered to work out if it meant anything. But she thought it probably all meant something and helped explain what was happening.

On the Telescreen one of the men was gouging at the other’s eyes with his fingers. She turned her head and her gaze was attracted to a print of a painting of EUDCE’s Brussels headquarters. It was a standard print, issued to all senior sprouts throughout the EUDCE region. She loathed the picture and looked away quickly. It was a hideous building and a hideous painting. The Chief Commissioner collected art and had grown to believe that she had quite an eye. She was in the fortunate position that no one was likely to disagree with this belief. Her office contained two beautiful Abbotsford chairs (‘for looking at not sitting on’ she once told a visitor who had made the mistake of dropping her ample bottom onto the delicate seat), an early Georgian bookcase (which contained the Chief Commissioner’s collection of model soldiers) an early Regency chest of drawers and a Carolean day bed which had once graced the hallway in one of England’s stately homes. She had been enormously flattered when a former Professor of Art History, who had specialised in English furniture and who had been employed as a chauffeur at the Regional Parliament, had swallowed his pride and described her collection as ‘eclectic’. She had promoted the former academic and put him in charge of the mailroom. It was an undemanding job since the takeover of the postal services of Europe by EUDCE meant that correspondence that didn’t travel by fax, e-mail or courier usually didn’t travel very far at all. Having him in the building meant that if she ever wanted to ask his advice she could do so without delay. She had not yet asked his advice, though she had on numerous occasions invited his approval. He had learned to keep his opinions to himself but to offer enthusiastic approbation without hesitation.

Her favourite piece in the room was the sculpture she’d bought some years earlier and which now stood on a windowsill. It was a bust of a woman who had shoulder length hair a high, proud forehead and a perfect, aquiline nose. The sculptor had completed the bust by capturing the beginnings of an impressive embonpoint.

The Chief Commissioner was not a woman who allowed her emotions to affect her life in any serious way (‘emotions are for books’ was her favourite saying, though she herself never read anything that didn’t have an index and a long list of references at the back) but she had fallen in love with the bust, which she thought was very fine art.

‘Have they mended my Bentley?’ she asked suddenly. Apart from her art collection, the Chief Commissioner’s main interest was her extensive collection of motor cars. She had twelve, including a Ferrari, a Lamborghini, a Rolls Royce, two BMWs and a 1955 Bentley S1. Unfortunately, the Chief Commissioner, who enjoyed driving, always expected other motorists to get out of her way (she flew a small flag on whichever car she was using to make it clear who was inside) and she sometimes overestimated the ability of other drivers to do this expeditiously. The Bentley, painted black and with blacked out windows, had been damaged in a collision with a small delivery vehicle.

Sir Czardas coughed nervously. ‘I understand there’s some problem with finding a replacement headlamp glass,’ he said. He wiped sweat off his forehead and upper lip. Generally speaking it was not, he knew, a good idea to disappoint the Chief Commissioner. The Chief Commissioner grunted to show her dissatisfaction. ‘I need it mended quickly,’ she said. She always used the word ‘need’ in preference to ‘want’. ‘It’s a family heirloom.’ The Bentley hadn’t belonged to her family, her family hadn’t owned anything grander than a bucket, but it had been someone else’s family heirloom and that, she thought, entitled her to describe it as a family heirloom. She looked again at the bust on the windowsill. Looking at it always soothed her. She found it quietly inspirational. ‘What we need is something to lift the people.’ She thought of all the people (sprouts and suspects) as ‘her people’. Her subjects.

‘What a marvellous idea,’ said Sir Czardas, nodding like one of those dogs motorists used to put on the back shelf in their cars. ‘Brilliant!’

On the Telescreen a new programme had started. Programmes on the Telescreen were as short as attention spans. A tall, weedy, dark-skinned youth in a powder blue suit and a floppy yellow bowtie was introducing the BBC’s daily Clip from China, a fifteen minute programme broadcast on the instructions of the Commissariat in Brussels in order to improve relations between EUDCE and China, and to extend understanding of the Chinese people among the citizens of the United States of Europe.

'We need to find some way of commemorating the great work of the leaders of the European Superstate,' said the Chief Commissioner. 'A new memorial for EUDCE. A celebration of our coming legacy. A remembrance of the great work done here. A grand memento that will leverage inspiration for the people for generations to come.'

'That would be tremendously invigorating,' agreed Sir Czardas. 'Everyone would be enthused.'

'Enthusing the people is what I do best,' said the Chief Commissioner who was so out of touch that she genuinely believed this. She picked up a Mont Blanc pen and fiddled with it. Modesty, she believed, was either an affectation, to be despised, or an honest admission of mediocrity.

'A wall plaque perhaps?' suggested Sir Czardas, who always thought small. 'A nice plaque fitted inside the entrance hall. You could unveil it a week on Saturday.' He drew back a pair of small, imaginary curtains. 'We could have your name inscribed on a nice oblong made of genuine plastic.'

'Oh no,' said the Chief Commissioner, shaking her head. 'We need something much grander than that. Remember the Night Watch, that magnificent painting by whatshisname which commemorated those...' she waved a hand, indicating that whoever they were they weren't worth her struggling to remember. 'Those people,' she finished, rather lamely.

'The painting hanging in the EUDCE President's outer office?' suggested Sir Czardas. 'I think you will find it was by the Dutch painter, Rembrandt. He was commissioned to paint a Dutch Captain and a number of his militia men.'

'That's the one,' agreed the Chief Commissioner who didn't much like people showing that they knew more than she did. 'Something like that but larger maybe. Or perhaps we could build a new Taj Mahal. It's about time the world had an eighth wonder.' She paused, her face flushed with excitement. 'Would you like some afternoon tea?'

'That would be very nice,' agreed Sir Czardas. The sprouts all lived well (even the lower grade officials enjoyed a more than comfortable standard of living) but the Chief Commissioner lived particularly well. Her afternoon teas were legendary.

The Chief Commissioner pressed a button on the intercom on her desk, spoke to Clothilde, her personal assistant, a pretty young sprout in her early twenties who had no discernible secretarial skills but always wore very short black skirts and revealing, diaphanous white blouses which just happened to be a uniform the Chief Commissioner favoured, and ordered tea for two. She turned back to the Telescreen. 'What's that?' she asked.

The young man in the blue suit was standing in front of what looked like a massive army of soldiers standing to attention. 'I'm standing in the mausoleum of the First Qin Emperor of China which dates from 210 BC,' the young man murmured in that quiet, reverential way that presenters have always favoured when reporting on royal funerals or when broadcasting from churches, museums and European Parliament buildings. 'Behind me stands the terracotta army, an astonishing 8,000 individual figures, mainly soldiers, but also acrobats, musicians, strongmen and horse drawn chariots. Every member of this army stands around two metres tall and the whole creation was built as a tribute, a glorification, a great memorial.'

'That's it!' murmured the Chief Commissioner.

Sir Czardas looked at her.

'The sculptors used eight basic face moulds and then used clay to create the soldiers' facial expressions,' continued the thin man in the blue suit.

There was a polite knock on the door.

'Come!' called the Chief Commissioner.

The Chief Commissioner's personal assistant entered pushing a beautifully hand-carved oak tea trolley. On the top level of the trolley stood a solid silver tea pot, a solid silver sugar bowl with solid silver sugar tongs, a solid silver milk creamer (in the shape of a cow), a solid silver water jug, a solid silver tea strainer, solid silver cutlery and two cups, two saucers and two plates, all in rare 19th century Meissen porcelain. On the lower level of the trolley there were two three-tiered stands, each consisting of three plates connected by a silver rod and a single, larger Meissen plate. One set of tiered plates contained small triangular sandwiches with the crusts cut off and the other contained small fancy cakes. The single plate contained a large, uncut sponge cake and a solid silver cake knife.

'The English used to have bread and butter at teatime,' said the Chief Commissioner, as the personal assistant lifted the items off the trolley and placed them on the Chief Commissioner's desk. 'I never understood that,' she said. 'Why eat bread and butter when you could be eating cake?'

'I think that is perhaps why the English are extinct,' said Sir Czardas. 'Their self-restraint eventually proved to be destructive.'

The Chief Commissioner thought about this for a moment, pursed her lips and then nodded. 'You could be right.'

'Will there be anything else you will be requiring?' asked Clothilde, the personal assistant. She was from Estonia and spoke English with a very thick accent which the Chief Commissioner found most appealing. This was one of the few phrases she knew and she always managed to endow it with more meaning than might normally be expected. The Chief Commissioner, knowing that the personal assistant wouldn't understand anything she said in reply, just smiled and waved her away.

'Statues,' said the Chief Commissioner with the great certainty of one who knows that her audience will agree wholeheartedly with whatever she says. 'We will have our own statues made to celebrate EUDCE,' she continued, having paused to watch the girl leave, and to enjoy the view. If she'd been alone she would have accidentally-on-purpose dropped a spoon so that she could tell the girl to pick it up. 'They will be an ever-growing monument to our new State's continuing and ever growing glory. A glorious tribute to the State's munificence.'

'Brilliant,' said Sir Czardas, who would have enthused if the Chief Commissioner had suggested building a full-scale model of the Eiffel Tower out of oyster shells.

'And I know just the person to create the sculptures for us!' said the Chief Commissioner. She pointed at the bust of the young woman which stood on her windowsill. 'Find the sculptor who created that bust,' she said. 'Put her in charge of the project.'

'Do you know the sculptor?' asked Sir Czardas.

'I'm sure the bust must have been made by a woman,' said the Chief Commissioner. 'No man could have made something so beautiful.'

'How will we find the name of the sculptor?' asked Sir Czardas, nervously.

'Lift it up,' said the Chief Commissioner. 'I seem to remember that there was something scratched on the underside.' Sir Czardas stood up and moved across to the windowsill.

'But be careful with it,' warned the Chief Commissioner. 'If you drop it I'll have you posted to Scotland.' She laughed lightly and selected a cucumber sandwich. 'When you've done that you can be mother and pour the tea,' she said, putting the sandwich whole into her mouth. Sir Czardas didn't want to be posted to Scotland. Just that morning there had been yet another outbreak of rioting in Ville 723 (the town formerly known as Glasgow). Another group of Scottish nationalists had belatedly realised that their Parliament (the one they thought was a proper parliament and the first step to independence) was really just a EUDCE regional parliament and that their hopes of independence were now further away than they had been since the Union with England had been formally approved. When EUDCE had officially broken up Great Britain the Scottish nationalists had cheered and waved their saltire flags for days. It was taking some of them years to realise just how much they had been betrayed by the people they'd welcomed as saviours.

'Certainly, ma'am,' said Sir Czardas, who secretly adored strong women and fantasised that one day the Chief Commissioner would command him to clean her shoes with his tongue. He found the name on the bottom of the bust, and made a note of it in a small notebook with a silver pencil. He turned, just before he left. 'And do you want me to do anything about the missing sprouts?'

'Nothing,' replied the Chief Commissioner, now clearly irritated by the question and the whole idea of missing sprouts. 'They've probably taken unauthorised leave. Some of these people have no sense of loyalty or responsibility but we don't want to advertise that fact. If we make a fuss we'll upset people. We'll demoralise the sprouts, who will worry, and the suspects will be concerned because some of their betters have gone missing.' She gazed at the bust, which Sir Czardas had put back on the windowsill. She didn't think he'd put it back in quite the right position. 'And can you imagine the damage that would be done to our bonuses if people in Brussels thought that we were running such an unhappy ship that sprouts were actually leaving their posts?'

'You don't think they could have been...?' Sir Czardas's voice fell. He suddenly realised that he shouldn't have started the question. The Chief Commissioner's eyes seemed to bore right through him. He closed his eyes for a moment.

'...could have been what?' demanded the Chief Commissioner.

'Er...killed? Murdered?'

'Don't be silly,' snapped the Chief Commissioner. 'Who would murder them? Sprouts aren't going to kill sprouts. And suspects wouldn't dare. And even if they did dare what would they do with the bodies? We control all the mortuaries and the cemeteries.'

'There were those two bodies at the hospital,' said Sir Czardas.

'A road accident,' said the Chief Commissioner with a wave of a hand. She pointed to the bust on her windowsill. 'Just find the sculptor who made that bust,' snapped the Chief Commissioner. 'That's what I want you to do.' She nibbled at a sandwich. 'And loop back to me just as soon as you've found her.'

She waited until Sir Czardas had gone and then stood up, moved to the windowsill and corrected the position of the bust a few millimetres. If you wanted something doing you really had to do it your self

Chapter 27

For the first couple of days Tom and Dorothy and Dalby and Gladwys waited for something to happen; for the sky to fall in, the earth to swallow them up. (Tom's aunt had no fears, any more than she had expectations, ambitions or hopes. She lived for now, in a private world of the present, where time meant nothing.) If the sprouts had burst through their doors, they would have stood there unprotesting, waiting to be shot.

But, as the days went by, so they came to think that perhaps there would be no sudden bursting of the door lock under the weight of an enthusiastically wielded battering ram. (The security forces never knocked.)

And nothing happened.

There were no raids. No armed sprouts burst through their doors firing machine guns. There was no nerve gas sprayed through the windows. None of the 'kill first, make up explanations later' that had become official policy since the long ago days when the police had got away with shooting a tube train passenger in cold blood, and had realised that they could do exactly what they wanted and get away with it. (The police had discovered that without the sort of platform for dissent offered by a free press or an unregulated Internet – both of which were, thanks to EUDCE's Strategic Freedoms Policy no more than distant memories – there was nothing for them to fear from using what they called 'preventive techniques' to control potential or suspected terrorists. 'A well-shot suspect fires no guns and makes no complaints' was a favourite maxim among Europol officers.)

The five of them and the cat met the following Saturday in a nearby park. They chose a spot near the lake where they could look out over the water towards a small island. There had been benches there but they had long gone; chopped up by people looking for wood to burn. Pieces of metal from the benches lay around, discarded and unwanted. The park was now almost empty of trees and the larger bushes had all gone; taken for burning. Even the island was bare of trees and bushes. Only grass and weeds grew there now, though some of the weeds were five or six feet high. Within the main part of the park the grass had spread over what had once been beautiful ornamental flowerbeds. Only the paths, wide ribbons of tarmacadam, now decorated with bunches of grass and weed which had broken through the surface, remained of the original park.

There was a small exception.

There was one small part of the park that remained as it had once been; a small section that could be seen from offices belonging to senior sprouts.

Three gardeners, all suspects, worked on this small segment of garden to keep it looking smart and pretty. The area was fenced off so that other suspects couldn't walk on the paths, see the flowers or interfere with the view from the sprouts' offices.

In the old days there had been ducks and swans on the lake. Tom had often stopped to feed the birds pieces of bread as he'd strolled through the park, especially on cold winter days when there was little for them to eat. Occasionally, there had been young mothers with small children, cosy in thick coats, scarves and hats, holding bags full of pieces of torn up bread, standing by the waterside. But there had been no waterfowl in the park for a long time. They had long since been caught, cooked and eaten. Even the pigeons in the park had gone. All killed and eaten. Only the occasional hardy, sparrow remained; ever nervous, ever watchful. Alive only because the meat on a sparrow isn't worth the catching. You'd use up more energy catching one than you'd obtain by eating one.

'Do you think we got away with it?' whispered Gladwys. Even sitting in the park she was nervous. She had good reason to be. The BBC had, that morning, broadcast news that a group of 500 suspects who had been accused of Respect Deficit had been deported to Africa to work on one of Monsanto-Goldman-Sach's EUDCE croplands. The suspects were shown boarding the converted tanker that would take them on their one-way journey. The newsreader had described, with undisguised relish, the terrible conditions on the vessel and the equally bad conditions which awaited the deportees when they arrived at their destination. (Respect Deficit was a common charge. Any sprout who felt that he had not been treated with sufficient respect could make the charge. It was well-known that whenever the farms needed more labourers the sprouts would be encouraged to bring charges if a suspect so much as failed to lower his eyes when spoken to.)

'I think so,' said Tom.

The four of them stood in silence for a while, staring at the lake. The water was thick and sludgy and it stank. Tom's aunt had wandered off and, together with Tabatha, was watching one of the lonely sparrows.

'So,' said Dalby. 'What do we do now?'

'Two choices,' said Tom. 'First choice: we retire while we're ahead. Think ourselves lucky and keep our heads down.'

'And hope the sprouts leave us alone,' said Dalby.

‘And hope the sprouts leave us alone,’ agreed Dorothy.

‘Which they won’t,’ sighed Dalby.

‘Which they certainly will not,’ agreed Dorothy.

‘Or?’ said Gladwys.

‘Second choice: we decide that we’re not going to let the sprouts continue to bully us and run our lives.’

‘Does that mean what I suspect it means?’ asked Gladwys. ‘That we prepare to kill some more sprouts when they cause us trouble?’

‘More than that,’ said Tom. ‘That’s more of a halfway house. Call it the second option. And if that’s the second option then there’s a third option.’

The others looked at him.

‘We kill sprouts who are causing other people trouble.’

‘A sort of revolution,’ said Dalby.

Tom nodded. ‘A sort of revolution.’

They looked out at the stinking lake and for a while no one spoke.

‘This used to be beautiful,’ said Gladwys at last. ‘I used to come here all the time. I remember there were fish in the water. The water was so clear you could see them swimming around.’

‘We were lucky with those six,’ said Dalby. ‘No one saw us kill them. No one saw us get rid of the bodies. No one seemed to notice that six sprouts were missing. I can’t help feeling that killing more is going to be dangerous.’

‘I don’t care if it is dangerous,’ said Dorothy. ‘I don’t know about the rest of you but I don’t honestly feel I have all that much to lose. It’s not been much of a life recently.’

The other three thought about this for a while. But it wasn’t a point of view with which they felt able to disagree.

‘You have to have something to believe in,’ said Tom. ‘This has given me a new lease of life. I want to kill as many of them as possible. Ridding the world of the vermin.’

‘But won’t the Commissioners simply recruit more?’ asked Gladwys.

‘If your kitchen is infested with cockroaches do you leave them and say there is no point in killing them because more will come, or do you try and wipe them out?’

‘So, what do we do now?’ asked Dalby.

‘If we want to start a revolution we need more people,’ said Tom. ‘We can’t make a real difference by ourselves. You can’t start a revolution with four people.’

‘Five if we count your aunt,’ said Dorothy, pointing at Tom’s aunt.

‘Five,’ agreed Tom. His aunt had found a large branch in the thick weeds. The branch was bigger than she was but she was dragging it back towards them so that they could take it home for firewood.

‘We need to find people who think the way we do...’ began Gladwys.

‘...that’s everyone!’ interrupted Dalby. ‘All the suspects.’

‘...yes, I agree,’ continued Gladwys. ‘But we need to find people who think the way we do and are prepared to do something; prepared to stand up and try to make a difference.’ She looked at Dalby. ‘And that’s *not* everyone!’

‘No, you’re right,’ Dalby agreed. ‘We need a revolutionary army!’

The others looked at him.

‘Sort of thing,’ he said, suddenly embarrassed.

‘We can’t have an old-fashioned revolution.’

‘No. They’ve got too many guns.’

‘We have to kill them one at a time.’

There was a pause and a long silence.

‘How long do you think it would take?’

‘We’ve got nothing else to do.’

‘How many people do you think we could get together?’

Dalby and Gladwys looked at each other, murmuring possible names. Tom and Dorothy did the same.

‘We know a dozen, maybe 15,’ said Dalby.

‘We can probably manage something near to that,’ said Tom.

‘We need somewhere to meet,’ said Dorothy. ‘We can’t have that many people in one of our homes.’

‘And we can’t meet outside in the street,’ said Dalby. ‘What about an empty shop or an old warehouse? There are plenty of those around?’

‘They’re all known to the sprouts and they’re all under surveillance,’ said Tom.

‘We need a building which is guaranteed to be empty at night and which won’t be under constant surveillance,’ said Dorothy, thoughtfully. ‘Somewhere which we know won’t be bugged.’

‘Sproutland!’ said Tom’s aunt.

They all looked at her.

‘The sprout buildings don’t have cameras in them,’ she said.

‘She’s right!’ said Tom. He put his arm around his aunt, pulled her to him and gave her a big kiss on the cheek. ‘The police station closes at 5 p.m. They don’t have any cameras inside. They took them all out after the fuss that was made when a group of suspects were beaten to death.’ The inquiry into the revelations of police brutality had recommended that all CCTV cameras be removed from the police stations to protect the privacy of serving police officers.

‘But they might have bugs,’ said Dalby. ‘I can think of somewhere even better!’

‘Where?’

‘The Regional Parliament,’ said Dalby. ‘The buildings all close at 5 p.m. and shut at weekends. No one ever works there in the evenings.’

‘I bet they’re warm too!’ said Gladwys.

‘Can we get in?’ asked Dalby. ‘Don’t they have tons of security?’

‘I doubt it,’ said Dorothy. ‘How many people want to break into the Regional Parliament building?’

Chapter 28

Tom and Dalby broke into the building the following evening. It was astonishingly easy.

The Regional Parliament building had been built several decades earlier, but had been kept a secret for many years. There was no little irony in the fact that at the same time as ordinary citizens were losing their right to privacy so the State was constantly shrouding everything it did in layers of secrecy and deceit. EUDCE had reversed the natural order of things. Once, everything individuals did was their business, and their business alone, while everything their government did on their behalf was public business. The rise and rise of the European Union, and EUDCE, had turned things upside down, inside out and back to front.

Politicians at the House of Commons had kept quiet about the unelected Regional Parliaments, which had been built, under instructions from what had then been known as the European Union. They had, of course, all been part of the plan to replace the United Kingdom in general, and England in particular, with a series of political regions. The Parliaments had, like everything else prepared for the European Union, been built without consideration for cost. European Regional Parliamentary buildings in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and London had, one by one, and with a great fanfare of publicity, been opened as examples of just how the central Government was giving back power to the people. Few had realised that these Parliaments were merely a physical manifestation of power moving not towards the regions, and towards the people, but towards Brussels and towards the bureaucrats. Few had realised that London would soon be renamed Ville 4178.

The European Union had found it remarkably easy to take over the United Kingdom. Under the guidance of home-grown politicians who had been bribed and flattered into submission, the nation had lain back and abandoned itself to defeat and total domination without a gun being fired. The nation which had conquered the world and ruled an empire had disappeared and been replaced by a series of anonymous regions. Cromwell’s Parliament, which had shown the model for parliaments elsewhere, had, knowingly and apparently with enthusiasm, and the approval of a trusting monarch, committed suicide. The Parliament where Churchill had argued and fought was now empty and silent. The nation, and the monarchy, for which millions had lain down their lives, was now merely a small and insignificant part of the new European Superstate.

It was easy to break into the building because no one working for the European Superstate imagined for one moment that anyone would break in. Why would they? There was nothing much to steal. There were no secrets to take. The Regional Parliaments were merely local rubber stamps for the European Commission, the powerhouse of Europe, and that edentulous homage to democracy, the European Parliament.

They got in through a fire door that had been left open by staff members who, judging by the number of cigarette butts on the ground nearby, used the doorway and the shelter provided by the small canopy over it, as somewhere to stand when taking their smoking breaks.

For many years EUDCE had had a double-edged approach to smoking; it had two official policies. On the one hand EUDCE’s first, and best known, official policy was to discourage smoking. In the old Europe, smoking had killed more people than the two World Wars of the 20th century. EUDCE had introduced a good deal of legislation designed to attack this problem.

But the other official policy was to encourage tobacco farmers. Over the years, countless billions of euros had been given as subsidies to farmers growing tobacco. There are few crops that are easier to grow than tobacco, particularly on rough and relatively infertile ground. And selling tobacco to developing countries proved hugely profitable.

The end result of this schism was that EUDCE banned smoking but turned a blind eye when its own employees insisted on statutory smoking breaks.

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Within ten minutes Tom, Dorothy, Dalby and Gladwys had found the perfect site for their meeting; one of many large committee meeting rooms. The room they chose was well equipped with expensive and comfortable furniture. There was no sign here of the poverty and pain that was so widely seen in the world outside. The room’s temperature was controlled by a sophisticated air conditioning system

‘Crumbs!’ said Tom, looking around. ‘People could live in here at night. Out of the cold or the heat.’

‘As long as they remembered to get out in time every morning,’ said Dalby.

‘It’ll make a damned good meeting place.’

‘Are you sure there are no bugs?’ asked Dalby, looking underneath one of the desks and searching for microphones or wiring.

Tom shook his head. ‘They would never dare risk it,’ he said. ‘Not even Europol dare put microphones in here.’

No one working for EUDCE would risk the chance that reports on meetings held in a EUDCE building might somehow be leaked and made available to the suspects. EUDCE commissioners had long memories. They knew about Nixon and Watergate and the role the White House tapes had played in the President's subsequent embarrassment and impeachment. One viewpoint was that he should never have kept the tape recordings. A commoner viewpoint was that he was mad to have authorised them in the first place. Nixon's weakness was his yearning for a place in history; his memoirs; self justification. But EUDCE was, and always had been, a haven for corruption and theft and the people who worked for it cared only for the now. The truly corrupt and the truly dishonest tend not to think too much about how they will be remembered; they prefer to leave stones where they are lying.

Chapter 29

The meeting began with talk. People airing their complaints in a way they never usually dared to do. They were in a forbidden building. Everyone there was breaking the law. It gave them a bond.

There were many heartfelt complaints.

'I was nearly deported for riding a bicycle without a bell,' complained a slender woman in her twenties. 'I've had three bells stolen in the last six months. And where can you get bells from these days?'

'Steal one,' suggested someone.

'What happened?' asked someone else.

'I bribed him to let me go,' said the girl. She blushed.

'How much did he want?'

'I didn't have any money,' said the girl.

'So how did you bribe him?' asked a tall man with long hair and a port wine stain on his right cheek.

Everyone looked at him.

'Oh,' he said, suddenly embarrassed. 'Oh. I see.'

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'We had the planners round,' said a woman in her fifties. 'They said our windows were too small. I'd never heard that one before.'

'They brought that law in a couple of months ago,' said a girl with a ponytail. 'They say that windows have to be bigger so that they let in more sunshine and light. They claim it will keep energy usage down and save the planet.'

'It costs a fortune to have windows replaced,' said the tall man.

'Whatever it costs, we can't afford it,' said the woman in her fifties. 'The joke is that we haven't had mains gas or electricity for two years. We don't use any energy. They know that.'

'What did they do?'

'They've given us official notification that if we don't have our windows made larger then we'll be subject to whatever punishment they consider fits the crime.'

'Deportation?'

'I expect so.'

'What are you going to do?'

'We left two nights ago. We're living at my sister's place. It's overcrowded but she was worried that she'd be told to take in some Turks so she's happy. With us living there the sprouts won't put any more people in the flat.'

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An elderly woman and her husband ('too old to be part of a revolutionary movement but too old to put up with the world as it is,' said the wife) reported that two Amenity Inspectors had come round with cameras to photograph the inside of their home. Councils had been entitled to do this for some years, ostensibly to enable them to decide what local taxes to charge. EUDCE now did it in their place.

'They laughed at every one of our possessions,' said the woman. 'They didn't speak English so I don't know what they were saying. But they just picked our things up and sneered at them. Some things, the things they liked, they put in their pockets. They found a silver photograph frame that belonged to my parents and took out the photograph. They ripped up the photograph and stole the frame.'

'They broke a vase in the bedroom,' said the man. 'I understand what they said then. They said it was ugly.'

The long arm of authority, instead of protecting the public, had become the enemy.

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'We need to hire some hit men,' said Dalby.

'Like those mercenaries in *The Magnificent Seven*,' said Gladwys.

'That's right,' said Dalby.

'We have to do it ourselves,' said Tom. 'There are too many of them. If we're going to start a revolution then we all need to be involved.'

'I've never killed anyone,' said an old lady. 'Not even a fly.'

'It's true,' said her husband. 'She keeps a kid's fishing net in the house. She catches the flies in that and then releases them.'

'Catches what?' asked Dalby, who hadn't been listening properly.

'Flies,' said the husband.

'None of us are used to killing people,' said Tom. 'But these are exceptional times. We're fighting a war.'

‘The people at the bank won’t let us have our money,’ complained Mrs Tuck. ‘They say that since we have a joint account we both have to have passports before they’ll let us draw any money out.’

‘But what do we need passports for?’ asked Mr Tuck, indignantly. ‘We can’t afford to go anywhere.’

‘And we can’t afford to buy passports until they let us have our money,’ Mrs Tuck pointed out.

‘We’ve had accounts there for forty years,’ said Mr Tuck. ‘We’ve been at that bank longer than any of the staff.’

‘The man we saw said the bank isn’t allowed to give out money without passports,’ said Mrs Tuck. ‘He said it’s to stop terrorism and money laundering.’

‘We went to the passport office,’ said Mr Tuck. ‘They told us that passports would cost us 500 euros each. And we would have to pay in advance.’

‘So we can’t get our money out,’ sighed Mrs Tuck.

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And there were some surprising admissions.

‘I killed a taxman,’ said Mrs John.

Everyone stopped and looked at her. Mrs John, whose husband had been a veritable giant of a man, was little more than five foot tall. She could not have weighed more than seven stones.

‘He came to the house and demanded to see my husband’s accounts,’ said Mrs John. ‘They’d been chasing him for two years. It killed him, you know. The letters. They threatened all sorts of terrible things.’

She opened her handbag, took out a small, light-blue, linen handkerchief and wiped her eyes. ‘He paid them everything he owed. Probably more than he owed. He was a very honest man. He hardly earned enough to keep us alive but he always paid his taxes. But still they wouldn’t listen. They always wanted more documents. More receipts. More paper.’

‘How did you kill the taxman?’ asked Dalby quietly.

‘He came round just a week after my Geoffrey’s funeral,’ said Mrs John. ‘They wouldn’t leave him alone even then. They wanted to see a receipt for something he’d bought six years ago. They said they were going to arrest him and deport him.’

‘Did you tell them he was...’

‘I told him Geoffrey had passed on and he said they’d arrest me and that would be Geoffrey’s legacy to me,’ said Mrs John. ‘That made me very cross. My Geoffrey would have been angry that they said that. So I took the man up to the attic where Geoffrey kept all the old receipts and then I came downstairs and I locked the hatch into the attic and I left him there.’

‘Didn’t he make a noise? Shout and bang?’

‘Oh yes. He made a lot of noise. He shouted and threatened and banged on the floor. But we live several hundred yards away from anyone else. And Geoffrey made the hatch himself. It’s very strong. And he boarded up the roof on the inside to keep out the wind.’

‘How long ago did this happen?’

‘It was a week after Geoffrey died. Just seven months ago now.’

‘Have you been back up into the attic?’ Mrs John shook her head. ‘No.’

‘And no one else came to see you?’

‘Two men from the tax people came. They wanted to know if I’d seen the man they’d sent before. They showed me his picture. I told them it looked like my cousin who used to live in Great Yarmouth but who died on the trawlers back in the days when there were such things. I told them my husband had died and that I didn’t know what they were talking about and they went away.’

For a while no one spoke.

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‘So, what the hell are we going to do about it?’ demanded Will Stutely. ‘Are we just going to sit around all night and tell each other horror stories? Or are we going to decide to do something? Mrs John has showed us the way.’

Silence.

‘You’d better say something,’ whispered Dorothy to Tom.

‘What?’ asked Tom.

‘Just talk,’ said Dorothy. ‘Something will come to you.’

Chapter 30

Tom stood up and walked to the front of the room.

‘Things are the way they are because too many of us said and did nothing for too long,’ he said. He felt nervous but too angry to care. He was talking to about thirty people. All hand-picked. All angry. All ready for the revolution. He looked around and suddenly realised that there were few people under fifty in the room. Young people thought that they were revolting if they took drugs, dyed their hair green and sat around all day drinking home-made potato wine. Years of living in a world run by EUDCE had taken the heart and soul out of them. They did not understand that the bureaucrats, paid to protect the innocent, had become the enemy; that they were now the ones against whom the citizens needed protection; that authority had become the mask of violence.

‘The sprouts who work for EUDCE are not our friends and not on our side. They have been bought by large salaries (far greater than anything they could have ever earned in the real world) and index-linked pensions and a good deal of power. And oh, how they love the power. Think back to how it started. The security guards at airports, there to protect us from terrorists. But did they ever catch anyone? Did they ever prevent any tragedy? No and no again. They were dumb, unskilled idiots. No skills. They just loved ordering people around. Think of the dustmen refusing to take your rubbish because you’d put a yoghurt carton in with the egg boxes. They loved the power. Our present tormentors are the same people. But they’re paid more and treated better and they have become the ‘them’ we always feared would one day take over our lives.’

‘We should be able to put EUDCE and its bureaucrats on trial for the crimes they have committed in our name. But we can’t.’

‘We can’t get rid of them by voting them out because they offer us no alternative. We can’t demonstrate in the streets because they’ve banned that. We can’t get rid of them with an ordinary, old-fashioned revolution because they own all the weapons worth having. We can’t kill the leaders as the people usually do in revolutions because they are too well guarded. Our only option is to start at the bottom and work our way up.’

‘We trusted the people who had the power because it never occurred to us that they would betray us and lie to us and use us. We trusted them too much because we did not understand how much people will cheat in order to obtain money and power. We were more innocent, more naive, than we thought we were. We judged them by the same standards we were accustomed to using when judging our friends, our relations and the people we meet at work and in the shops. In our normal daily lives we try to be a little cautious, and we assume that we can judge when people are lying to us. We have all met people who cheat a little or lie a little. But we have little experience of people who cheat all the time and whose every word, every promise, every reassurance is a blatant lie. We have little experience of such uncompromising deceit. And so we trusted when we should not have trusted. We believed when we should not have believed.’

‘Like the ordinary Germans in the 1930’s, we trusted too much. That was our original crime, if you want to call it that. We said nothing, allowing our country to be stolen from us. Now, we know that complaining won’t do us any good. We either have to live with what has happened or we have to do something about it ourselves. In my view, living with it has become impossible, unbearable and close to pointless. And so we have to do something.’

‘It’s too late to change things with talk or persuasion. We live in a world where we no longer have the rights we used to have; the rights we believed we would always have. Everything we valued; our freedom, our history, our culture, has been stolen from us by people who looked us straight in the eye and made promises they had no intention of keeping; people who, with honest faces, made assurances they knew were untrue. They’ve taken our past, our present and our future.’

‘I am in mourning for my country because the life and soul have been taken from it. When they take your country from you they take your identity. We have been deprived of our birthright, our pride, our passion and our sense of belonging. And what have we been given in exchange? Would any one of us fight for EUDCE?’

‘They have given us a world in which social engineering programmes such as means-testing, political correctness and multiculturalism are used as weapons to oppress us. They have given us a world in which health and safety bureaucrats create rules not to make the world a safer place but to enhance their own power and status and end up making the world more dangerous than it was before. For years we have all pushed aside our fears and our sense of injustice, not because we felt that our fears were unfounded or because our sense of injustice was misplaced, but because deep down we felt that we could do nothing to change things: we knew that justice and the law had been separated. And so we suppressed our feeling that things were wrong and just put up with our lives.’

‘We have been betrayed by people who pretended to care about us, men and women who claimed to be driven by a desire to serve, but who cared only about themselves. We have been cheated by people whose ambitions were purely personal, materialistic and oh so very, very selfish. We have been betrayed by people who sold us out in return for chauffeur-driven cars, unlimited expense accounts and huge pensions.'

'And now it is too late to change things by what we say or how we vote. We have sleepwalked into defeat; we have wandered, perhaps innocently, perhaps a little stupidly, into a fascist world where we no longer have any say in our destiny or our children's destiny. Our mistake was to believe what we were told. The consequences are around us every day and unless we now accept the existence of the problem, and the fact that our destiny is in our hands, we can never defeat those who oppress us.'

'You could argue, not unreasonably, that our quarrel should be with those who have done these things to us; those whom we trusted and who then lied to us, cheated us and betrayed us. You could sensibly claim that our quarrel is with the politicians who signed the treaties which gave away our rights, our freedoms, our democracy, our culture and our independence.'

'But such an argument doesn't get us very far. Most of those who signed those treaties are dead or dying or rich and in hiding – well protected and beyond our reach. They will have to pay the price for their disloyalty and their greed in some other jurisdiction. But, the truth is that revenge against them will change nothing. We could dig up the ones who died, try them for treason and then hang them. We could drag the ones who are still alive out of their beds and into the courts but doing so would change nothing.'

'Our war now must be against the institution they created. But what is an institution? What is there to fight? The institution is represented by buildings. We could blow them up, but what difference would that make? They would shoot us all and then put up more buildings. Nothing would change. The institution is run by the commissioners and the senior bureaucrats. They serve the institution. They are well guarded. What happens if we manage to break through the security and kill the leaders? Nothing. The institution now has a life of its own. The institution will merely recruit more commissioners and more bureaucrats. It will have no difficulty in finding people prepared to accept the lifestyle enjoyed by the commissioners and the bureaucrats. Our lives will not be improved one jot by removing these people. We will still be oppressed. We will still live in fear. We will still live in poverty. We will be manacled by rules and regulations which govern our every movement and we will live in a joyless, hopeless world; denied a history and denied a future by colourless, faceless, unelected bureaucrats. The next generation of commissioners and bureaucrats will simply introduce more rules and more regulations and more policemen in order to ensure that we do not rise up again. We will be worse off than before.'

'So, what can we do?'

'There is only one answer. There is only one way forward. We have to eliminate the people who act for and on behalf of the institution; we have to destroy the people who represent the institution, the people without whom the institution cannot function.'

'The sprouts, the people who control our movements and who terrorise us on a daily basis, are the arms and legs of the institution. If we remove them then the institution will try to find replacements. But it cannot do this indefinitely. When it becomes clear that working as a sprout is a dangerous occupation there will be fewer applicants for the work. The institution may be able to protect the commissioners and the senior bureaucrats with guards and guns and razor wire and high walls. But it cannot protect the sprouts who represent it in our communities. The institution cannot protect the men and women who come into our homes, abuse us, take what little we have, sneer at us, invade our privacy and steal what little dignity we have left. Our only possible targets are those who work with and for the fascist Eurostate as its oh-so-willing servants of terror – they are, to us, the true terrorists of our age. Without them the State would have no teeth.'

'I look around the world in which we now live and I want to scream in rage and frustration. I see poverty and unhappiness and hopelessness. I see rules and regulations created without thought, compassion or reason. I see corruption, prejudice and cruelty. I see a two-tone world in which the haves are the people who work for the State and the rest of us are the have-nots. I see good, honest soldiers dying in wars which are being fought so that politicians and bureaucrats and company directors can steal commodities from poor nations and make themselves rich. I see people being killed by the police officers who are paid to protect them. I see governments imprisoning innocent people and torturing them in our name. I see protests suppressed and protestors oppressed. I see all this, every day. I see it getting worse, every day.'

'The time has come for a revolution. And we must not fail. We will not get a second chance. We must change things and not just rearrange them. We are at war with an invader just as much as at any time in our history. Those who work with EUDCE are collaborators and history will show them to be the traitors they are; as treacherous as any who worked with the Nazis in the Second World War. The fascist foot soldiers always enjoy the perks of their positions but they must now endure the vicissitudes and, if necessary, pay the penalty. If we kill enough of them then fewer will come forward to replace them and the power structure of EUDCE, built on fear and oppression, will slowly but surely crumble.'

‘During the Second World War our grandfathers and our fathers didn’t just try to kill Hitler, Goering and the other leaders. They tried their hardest to kill every German they could get their hands on. In a war there are no civilians. Possibly the greatest single military achievement of the Second World War, the one that inspired the loudest and longest lasting patriotic fervour, was the Dam Busters raid. Did anyone then stop to worry about the fact that the raid resulted in the flooding of vast acreages of German countryside and the inevitable death by drowning of countless German citizens? Did the pilots drown only German servicemen? Of course they didn’t.’

‘We, in contrast, are targeting and killing only those who are our active enemies. We won’t kill good people; only bureaucrats and state thugs. Ours has become an everyday story of gentle folk who have to kill. These aren’t just petty, low-level functionaries sent round to check that the labels in our underclothes don’t contain imperial measurements; these are the soldiers of an oppressive, invading army which has taken over our lives, our country and our world.’

‘If you believe that I have spoken the truth then you must stay and be with us. If you believe that what I have said is either untrue or unrealistic then you must leave. If you leave then I cannot and will not try to stop you reporting what I have said to the sprouts. But if you leave then you must accept the world as it is now; a world that is deteriorating still; a world which offers us no hope and no future.’

‘We are all here because we’re fed up of whingeing but doing nothing. It’s time to stop moaning and to start taking action.’

‘And we must ask ourselves two questions. First, if not us, then who? And second, if not now, then when?’

Tom sat down.

For a long, long moment there was silence.

No one spoke. No one clapped. No one cheered. Just silence.

He felt a hand holding his. He looked across at Dorothy and smiled. She squeezed his fingers.

Silence.

Suddenly, Tom’s aunt stood up and started to clap. She did so without warning and she clapped ferociously, with massive enthusiasm. Immediately, a short man on the second row stood up too. He was in his forties. He wore a sports jacket frayed at the cuffs and worn at the collar. The buttons which had once doubtless decorated the cuffs were missing. Two of the three buttons used to fasten the jacket were gone. He stood there and Dorothy could see that tears were rolling down his cheeks. He raised his hands high in the air and he clapped hard, loud and long.

And within an instant everyone in the room was standing and clapping and cheering. Many were crying. Some were smiling at one another. There were thirty people in the room. No more. But they made as much noise as a crowd ten, one hundred times, bigger.

Tom watched the back door to see if anyone left. If one person left the room they would all have to leave quickly. The moment and the mood would be gone. As would hope.

But no one left.

‘Bravo,’ murmured Dalby, who was standing next to Tom. He too was clapping. ‘Did you memorise all that? I didn’t see you use any notes?’

‘I didn’t prepare anything,’ said Tom, who was in a daze. ‘I didn’t have any notes.’ Tom was now the only person sitting. He wasn’t sure whether he should stand. But when he tried to get up his legs would not work.

Dalby bent down. ‘So, where did all that come from?’ he asked. ‘You said things which really struck a chord.’

‘Just from the heart,’ said Tom. ‘From the heart,’ he repeated. He had spoken with a passion even he had not known he felt and now he was utterly drained.

He had sold them a revolution.

A small one, perhaps, but a revolution nevertheless.

Chapter 31

There were questions, many questions.

‘Why can’t we fight them in the courts?’ asked Jan Stewer, a small man in an old but well-looked after suit.

‘We can’t sue them because they made the laws. They made all the rules. The Lisbon Treaty, and everything that came after it, took away all our basic rights. And we can’t sue them or take them to court because years ago, before it became EUDCE, the European Union gave itself, its officers and all its employees complete immunity from the law. The people who work for EUDCE have total authority without any responsibility. And so, since we are denied the opportunity to use the law we must go outside the law to find our answer.’

‘Let’s get down to practicalities,’ said a middle-aged woman called Edith Gurney who wore a floral print dress and a hat with flowers on the side. She looked like the sort of woman who would have been more at home making jam. ‘What, precisely, are you asking us to do?’ She asked this as though she were asking for a recipe for sponge cake.

‘There are only two aspects to the work we have to do. First, we have to kill the sprouts. And then we have to do something with the bodies. Of the two, getting rid of the bodies is the bigger problem. The killing itself you should aim to keep as simple as possible. The best way to kill a sprout is to hit them on the head with something solid and rather heavy – the traditional blunt instrument so beloved of detective story writers. This method has the advantage that if something happens between the killing and the disposal, the death can be more easily ‘sold’ as an accident than if you, say, resort to poisoning or electrocution. It would be nigh on impossible to persuade the authorities that a sprout had died after taking an accidental overdose of weed killer. It will be easier to persuade them that a sprout fell down some stairs or tripped over an uneven bit of pavement and hit his head on a kerbstone. It will be easier because that’s what they will prefer to believe.’

‘Why can’t we get guns?’ asked Peter Day. ‘We could steal them.’

‘There is no point in our dreaming of a revolution with guns,’ said Tom. ‘What can we get? Target pistols? A few double barrel shotguns? An airgun or two? Maybe even a machine gun? EUDCE has rocket launchers, bombers, gunship helicopters, destroyers, aircraft carriers, tanks, cruise missiles, nuclear submarines, chemical and biological weapons and an army, a navy and an air force. The bureaucrats within EUDCE have unlimited resources to throw at us if we declare war the way they fight wars. We cannot fight EUDCE with guns because we’ll lose. They will always have the biggest and most powerful weapons.’ Tom paused. ‘Now can anyone suggest suitable blunt instruments that might be lying around the average home?’

‘I think I heard someone mention saucepans. Is that because they have a convenient handle?’ asked a plump woman called Mrs Pearse. She wore a dress that was several sizes too small for her. Her husband Tom had been a bank manager in what most people now called ‘the olden days’. He, like Tom Cobleigh, now worked as a part-time allotment guard and was just as glad of the work.

‘A saucepan or frying pan is good as long as it’s heavy,’ replied Tom Cobleigh. ‘Don’t use a light aluminium one. It will probably just bounce off the sprout’s skull without doing him much harm. The last thing you want is a surprised and annoyed sprout who is still on his feet. And don’t pick a weapon with a flimsy handle.’

‘What about a shoe or heavy boot?’ asked Mrs Pearse.

‘No, I don’t think so. A heavy boot might give someone a headache but that’s not really what we’re aiming for here.’

‘A chair? A wooden chair?’ suggested Bill Brewer, a former sales representative for a motor car company. His job had gone when the car industry had died. ‘The sort of thing you might find in a kitchen or a dining room.’ He had hair that looked like a toupee but wasn’t. If he’d been a grocery item he would have long before passed his sell-by date.

‘A chair can be good but only if you have enough space to swing it properly. You’d probably be surprised to find out how difficult it is to swing a chair in an ordinary kitchen. There just isn’t enough room.’ Tom picked up a chair and showed what he meant by trying to raise it above his head. The chair clattered into a light shade. He lowered it amidst some uncertain laughter. ‘You’ll probably also find that chairs may be rather heavy and difficult to aim properly,’ he added.

‘A cricket bat? Baseball bat?’ This suggestion came from Harry Hawk. Once a professional violinist with a large orchestra, Mr Hawk now collected and sold firewood to earn a living.

‘Splendid!’ agreed Tom – who would only later realise how surreal it was that he had somehow become regarded as an expert on killing instruments. ‘But you might find a cricket bat a little too large for indoor use. And don’t forget that cricket is an outlawed game. So if you have a cricket bat in the house make sure that you keep it hidden until you want to use it!’

‘How about a golf club?’ asked, an elderly man in a Garrick club tie. Since no one played golf any more (partly because there were no golf courses and no way of getting to them even if there had been) there were plenty of golf clubs available. Many suspects used them as walking sticks and ‘defenders’; the best way to fight off stray dogs.

‘Maybe too long for indoor use,’ suggested Tom.

‘How hard should we hit?’

‘As hard as you can.’

‘Pity we can’t kill them with paper. A ton of paper suddenly landing on top of them.’

Everyone looked.

‘That’s what they do to us.’

Everyone nodded understanding. There were some smiles.

‘Strangle them with red tape,’ suggested Peter Day.

There were chuckles of approval.

‘Getting back to the use of blunt objects,’ said Daniel Whiddon. ‘Do you recommend that we hold the weapon in any particular way? As a former Health and Safety Executive Officer I am concerned that we might sustain wrist or lower arm injuries if we use ergonomically unsound methods when wielding our weapons.’

‘Just hold it tight and bring it down hard,’ said Tom, trying hard not to smile. Daniel Whiddon was one of the many former civil servants who hadn’t been employed as a sprout. Most of the plum jobs had been given to Europeans from the East of the new European Superstate.

‘Do you favour a one-handed grip or a two-handed grip?’

‘I hadn’t really thought about a two-handed grip,’ admitted Tom. ‘You’re thinking of perhaps holding, say, a saucepan in the way that some people used to hold a tennis racket?’

‘That sort of thing, yes.’ As far as Tom knew no one had played tennis for years. A few higher echelon sprouts probably still played on private courts. But there were no courts for suspects to use. Sports were considered too confrontational for suspects to take part in.

‘I’m not sure about that,’ admitted Tom. ‘I think it’s probably up to the individual to find a grip that he feels comfortable with. Maybe it would be worth doing a little practising beforehand.’

‘Or she,’ said a woman in the front row whom Tom did not recognise.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘You said ‘find a grip that he feels comfortable with’. You should have said ‘find a grip that he or she feels comfortable with’.’

‘Of course. I’m sorry. A grip that he or she feels comfortable with. But it all depends to a certain extent on the weapon you’ve picked up. And it’s not always possible to know in advance precisely what you’ll be using.’

‘What part of the body do you recommend as a target?’

‘Always the head. That’s your target.’

‘Front, back or sides?’

‘Sounds like a haircut!’ There was some sniggering from the left of the room.

‘Doesn’t matter,’ said Tom. ‘Whatever is easiest to reach. Don’t waste time trying to manoeuvre yourself into a position to hit him, or indeed her, on the back of the head.’

‘Should we kill female sprouts too?’

‘Of course. It would be against sex discrimination legislation for us not to kill female sprouts,’ said the woman in the front row before Tom could speak.

‘Just go ahead and hit,’ said Tom. ‘And make sure that you hit hard. The first hit probably won’t kill him but it should stun him. Then you can finish him off at your leisure. Or her,’ he added, with a glance at the woman in the front row. ‘Get a good swing and really bash him hard. You’re not patting him as you’d pat a dog. You need to get some real movement into your arm. And remember that female skulls can be just as thick as male skulls. So don’t hold back just because you’re killing a female sprout. And remember, you aren’t aiming to win marks for style. The aim is simply to kill the sprout as quickly as possible and to then dispose of the body.’

‘What about other methods of killing?’ asked Harry Hawk. ‘Electrocution, for example.’

‘I think that might prove rather too complicated.’

‘Poison? Give the sprout some home-made cake that contains arsenic.’

‘It would take too long,’ said Dalby, who hadn’t spoken for a while. ‘And if anyone did find the body and examine it they’d know that he was murdered.’

‘Inject him with a lethal dose of heroin.’

‘Where are we going to get heroin from?’ said Dalby. ‘And we’d have to hold him down while we injected him. If we’ve already got him under control why bother injecting him?’

‘We could run him over with a car,’ suggested Jan Stewer.

‘We’d have to steal a car first. And then persuade the sprout to stand still while we ran him over. Sprouts are not the world’s most intelligent people but I can’t see any of them doing that.’

‘We could arrange for the sprout to be bitten by a rabid dog,’ suggested Mrs Brewer.

‘Do you have a rabid dog?’ asked Peter Day.

‘Not at the moment, no. But there must be some around.’

‘I could seduce him and then tell his wife,’ said Harry Hawk’s mother, who had been in her eighties for as long as Tom Cobleigh could remember.

‘How would that help?’

‘She’d kill him!’

‘How do you know that?’

‘Well, I would if he were my husband.’

‘She might not care. She might even be glad he’s having an affair. She might be having an affair herself. Besides, it will take too much time for you to seduce him and tell his wife and for her to beat him to death with a poker or whatever.’

‘I hadn’t thought of that.’

‘We have to keep this simple. We’re amateurs but they’re all arrogant bastards and none of them expects anyone to kill them. We don’t need any equipment or anything complicated. Just hit them hard on the head or push them down the stairs. One or the other.’

‘Or both,’ said Peter Gurney.

‘Or both, if required,’ agreed Tom with a quiet smile.

Chapter 32

At the end of the meeting they left the building one at a time, leaving at thirty second intervals. Tom, who was the last to leave, didn't see the sprouts until the car screeched to a halt and the two of them leapt out and suddenly appeared in front of him. His first thought was relief that he had sent Dorothy home ahead of him.

Despite the fuel shortages some of the police sprouts still drove around in cars. They used a fleet of identical (and therefore easily identified) dark blue Ford Smegmas. In a vain attempt to confuse the public, and to disguise the appearance of the cars, some had dark green upholstery while some had dark blue. It wasn't much of a disguise.

Instead of the usual sprout suits the two who jumped out of the car wore bullet and knife proof jackets and balaclavas made of the same material. They were Community Protection Officers, the most feared of all sprouts. Over their balaclavas they wore goggles. They looked as fierce and as frightening as they were. They were known to be aggressive and prone to violence. Both the sprouts carried long nightsticks. Made of steel these could easily break any bone in the human body with a single blow. They were also armed with Uzi machine guns and taser guns.

'Where are you going?' demanded the fatter of the two Protection Officers. Other than by the slight difference in their bulk it was impossible to distinguish between the two. Neither wore numbers or any form of identification. The sprout's balaclava had slipped a little and was half across his mouth. His words were slightly muffled but just comprehensible.

'Home, sir,' replied Tom. It annoyed him to have to add the 'sir' to his reply. But if it saved him a one way trip to Africa it was a price worth paying. He remembered that in the olden times a policeman would address members of the public as 'sir' or 'madam'.

'Where's home?' demanded the Protection Officer.

'Just half a mile down the road, sir,' said Tom, pointing in the direction he was heading.

It wasn't a mistake. He said it deliberately.

Foolishly he hadn't prepared an answer to the question he knew they would ask next: 'Where have you been?' He could hardly tell them where he'd really been. And there was a good chance that a lie would be too easy to spot. Without an instantly believable answer to that question they would arrest him. He would be on the boat to Africa before dawn. And so he deliberately distracted them, enraged them, by using an imperial measurement. Half a mile. It was the red rag. But it stopped the questioning.

The sprouts' response was entirely as he had expected but it came surprisingly quickly. Nevertheless, the fact that he was expecting it meant that Tom was able to take the blow on his forearm, rather than his skull. The crack of the radial bone as it broke was loud; actually audible. His scream of pain was louder. The pain was genuine but Tom didn't try to hide his distress. His only chance, he knew, was that the sprouts might be satisfied with breaking just one bone. If he showed no sign of pain they would continue beating him until he did. Pity would not save him. Contempt might. He could live with their contempt.

'How far is it? How far is it?' demanded the second Protection Officer. The one who had not yet spoken.

'Less than a kilometre, sir,' sobbed Tom. He clutched his arm and rocked backwards and forwards slightly. He did not sink to his knees. If you did that the sprouts would sometimes find the opportunity to beat you around the head quite irresistible. He had to protect his head and so he stayed standing. But he sobbed and whined and moaned and was as pitiful as he could be. Unworthy of their further attention.

'That's better,' said the Protection Officer who had struck the blow.

'Snivelling bastard,' said the other.

And then they were gone. Walking away, laughing together, back to their car.

Tom didn't wait. Holding his broken arm he hurried home as fast as he could go.

***

The break wasn't as bad as it might have been.

'Thank heavens it was a simple fracture,' said Dorothy. A neighbour, a doctor, set the fracture, and put on a plaster of Paris cast.

'I'm not going to be able to kill anyone for weeks,' complained Tom.

'It's your left arm,' Dorothy pointed out.

'I'll never be able to move the bodies,' said Tom.

'Then give some tutorials,' suggested Dorothy.

Frowning in puzzlement, Tom looked at her. 'What on earth on?'

'Murder,' replied Dorothy simply.

Chapter 33

Tom's killing tutorials quickly became enormously popular. If he had been a university lecturer he would have been the faculty star.

The first tutorial was held in their tiny living room. But by the second tutorial it was clear that this simply wouldn't work.

'You could try the EUDCE offices again,' suggested Dorothy.

'I'm never going back in there!' insisted Tom. 'We can only use them at night. And the last time I came back from there I was lucky to escape with a broken arm.'

So they held the tutorials in the park where, if anyone stopped and wanted to know what they were doing, Tom pretended he was teaching t'ai chi classes.

'If you break an arm or a leg he can still come at you and if he is angry and determined, which he will be, he may still kill you. You have one huge advantage: surprise. And you must use that to full effect so that you take him out of the game as quickly as possible. The only way to do this is to hit him hard on the head, thereby rendering him incapable of doing you harm, however strong and determined he may be. The sprout who is unconscious, or at the very least dizzy and confused is far less of a threat than, say, the sprout with a broken arm. You have to raise your weapon to at least his head height. What's the easy way to do that?'

'Stand on a chair?' suggested someone.

Tom sighed and closed his eyes for a moment. 'No,' he said, patiently. 'Get him to sit down. Offer him a cup of tea or whatever you have to offer. Flatter him. Flirt with him. Promise him or her some or more of whatever it is that you think he or she might like.'

Tom wondered sometimes how many people outside the armed forces had given tutorials in murder.

Chapter 34

Tom, Dorothy, Dalby, Gladwys and the rest knew that killing sprouts was only half the problem.

The other half of the problem was getting rid of the bodies.

Working on the basis that the best place to hide a needle is in a sewing basket, and the best place to hide money is in a bank, they resurrected Tom's original idea and began by hiding bodies in the few local cemeteries that were still functioning as cemeteries and which had not been turned into allotments.

This worked well for a while. Once they had found out when graves were being dug it wasn't too difficult to sneak in at night, dig a little deeper, drop in a body and cover it with a thin layer of soil. On half a dozen occasions they managed to open up family vaults and drop in a couple of visitors.

'Nice to have a bit of fresh blood in there,' said Dalby. 'Otherwise the inbreeding will result in a lower grade of ghoul.'

But they found that there was a limit to the number of times they could do this without arousing suspicions.

They finally gave up using graveyards when they heard that two separate firms of undertakers had made representations to the authorities about strange things happening to dug graves. 'Someone's part filling them up!' a gravedigger had complained, after two of Tom's students didn't dig deep enough, and failed to leave enough room for the coffin for which the grave had originally been created. 'We dug it plenty deep enough.'

They then tried using a graveyard which had been turned into allotments.

'The soil there is much easier to dig,' explained Tom. 'It's been well-manured and dug over so it's easy to dig down and create a grave. The soil is softer and easier to work. It really is the best place to dig.'

All would have been well if some of the allotment holders hadn't been so keen. When an enthusiastic gardener unearthed a body while preparing to plant his potatoes the would-be revolutionaries abandoned that idea too.

An attempt to get rid of bodies by grinding them up, spreading them over the ground and digging them in proved time-consuming, exhausting, messy and woefully ineffective. There were rumours of fingers and bits of bone being found.

A man who ran a private crematorium for pets (called *Pets to Powder*) helped for a while but most of his customers were sprouts (suspects couldn't possibly afford to pay to have their pets cremated) and they began to ask questions about the vast quantities of ash being produced. After a woman sprout who had taken in a pet poodle complained that her pet weighed twice as much dead as he had done alive the crematorium owner told Tom that although he was with them in spirit they couldn't use his furnaces any longer.

Attempts to get a licence for a landfill site were almost abandoned when the application forms turned up. They weighed as much as a large dog and were far more terrifying. The application finally faltered at the point where they had to admit that they were not intending to bury American radioactive rubbish in their landfill site. Thanks to a treaty between the USA and EUDCE this was, apparently, a non-negotiable requirement.

They got rid of a couple of dozen bodies by chopping them up and putting the remains into the garbage cans behind restaurants favoured by higher echelon sprouts. This seemed a good idea but two things went wrong. A chef at one of the restaurants had a nice sideline selling the contents of the bins to a dealer who used the scraps as raw ingredients in his pie making business. The dealer wasn't a bright man but after three of his customers found wedding rings in their pies even his suspicions were aroused. 'There are human body parts in your bins!' he complained to the chef. Almost simultaneously, a stray dog pulled an arm out of a bin and was spotted dragging it along the pavement outside the front of the restaurant. A sprout passing by noticed the expensive, diamond-studded, solid gold Rolex watch still ticking on the disconnected wrist. After that a guard was put on garbage cans and this particular method of disposal had to end.

And then, for a while, they got rid of bodies by taking them along to the official recycling centre.

On the night they started this method of disposal, Tom and Dalby were heading for a lake where they had dumped bodies once or twice. It was late, it was dark and it was raining when they found themselves passing an authorised EUDCE tip. They had four bodies in the trailers behind their two bicycles. Both Tom and Dalby were exhausted. Riding a bicycle which is towing a dead body is like riding a tandem with one of the riders doing no pedalling. Riding a bicycle which is towing two dead bodies is twice as hard.

They both stopped for a rest.

'How much further is the lake?'

'Another five miles at least.'

They said nothing for a while, both of them staring at the huge sign which announced that they were standing outside EUDCE's official recycling tip no 148273.

‘Are you thinking...’

‘I am.’

‘Which bin do we put them in?’ asked Tom, looking around. The tip was divided into dozens of sections. There were bins for electrical appliances, plain glass bottles, brown bottles, green bottles and so on.

‘This one,’ said Dalby, who was peering at the list of acceptable contents at the side of a huge metal container. There was a ramp leading up the side of the container so that suspects could throw in their rubbish.

‘What’s it for?’

‘It’s for unwanted vegetable remnants,’ said Dalby. ‘Potatoes, cauliflowers, carrots, cabbages, onions and sprouts!’

‘Perfect!’ agreed Tom.

They dragged the sprouts up the ramp and tossed them into the rotting compost below, hoping that the next suspects to use the bin would simply tip their unwanted vegetables on top of what was there without looking down, and that if they did look down they would not call one of the sprouts to tell him what they’d seen.

On a subsequent visit they even popped small sprouts into bottle banks (a process which would, in the olden days, have aroused considerable interest among the tabloid press but which didn’t even merit a mention on the Telescreen). This worked well for a couple of weeks. But bodies were spotted and extra sprouts were stationed at all refuse dumps, even when they were officially closed.

‘We’re attracting too much attention,’ said Tom one day. ‘The aim is to kill and get rid of the bodies as quietly as we can. If we arouse too much interest then we’ll be stopped. We need to hide the bodies so that they aren’t found.’

‘That’s easier to say than do,’ pointed out Gladwys.

Chapter 35

They devised a new way to confuse Europol.

Every time a sprout was dispatched, the killers removed any identification and passed it to Dorothy. And, every weekend, when the hospital was at its quietest, Dorothy would walk in, taking with her the week's accumulation of identity cards. She would walk straight through the casualty department and log onto the computer in the ward sister's office. Through the hospital computer she would access the national sprout register and delete the details of the sprouts they had killed. Click, click, click, they were gone for ever from the database. They did not exist. And they never had. No one could have been murdered because no one existed in the first place. The computer enabled Tom, Dorothy and the others to commit perfect crimes.

'You can't argue with the computer,' workmates of the missing sprouts would be told. 'We have no one of that name on record.'

'But I worked with him for six years!'

'You must be mistaken. You can't argue with the computer.'

Chapter 36

The big problem remained: how to get rid of the bodies.

And then a solution arrived from a thoroughly unexpected quarter.

Chapter 37

They wanted to ignore whoever it was who was knocking on the door. But the unknown visitor was determined. He, she or they knocked on the door for twenty five minutes.

‘They’re not going to go away,’ whispered Dorothy eventually.

‘Give them five more minutes,’ suggested Tom.

They were standing in the hallway and they were whispering so that whoever was at the door wouldn’t know they were there.

For a few minutes everything was quiet.

‘I think they’ve gone away,’ whispered Dorothy. And then the banging started at the back door.

‘I’ll open it,’ said Tom with a sigh.

‘We thought you were in,’ said the first sprout. He was a small, swarthy looking man with a sharp, long nose and black hair combed forward. He looked as though he’d been carrying the troubles of the world on his shoulders for centuries. Tom thought he looked a little like Napoleon Bonaparte.

‘When we pushed open the letter box we could see you and hear you whispering,’ said the second sprout. He was taller, stouter and younger. He had a poor complexion and looked like a man who enjoyed bad food.

‘Are you Dorothy Cobleigh?’ asked Napoleon.

Dorothy admitted that she was. It seemed too late to pretend otherwise.

‘The sculptress?’

‘Sculptor,’ said Dorothy. ‘I prefer sculptor.’

‘We were told sculptress,’ said the stout sprout. ‘So if you don’t mind we’ll stick to that. We had a hell of a job finding you.’

‘Someone very important wants to see you,’ said Napoleon. ‘We were asked to collect you and take you to EUDCE Headquarters.’ He paused. ‘If it’s convenient to you,’ he added. He smiled. It was a scary sort of smile. ‘We were told to say that,’ he said.

‘Oh dear,’ said Dorothy. She wasn’t sure whether this was good news or bad news but the odds seemed heavily on bad.

‘Do you know what they want?’ asked Tom.

‘No idea at all,’ said Napoleon. ‘We’re just the collectors.’

‘So, is it convenient?’ asked the stout sprout.

‘Can I change my shoes?’ asked Dorothy.

‘Of course,’ said Napoleon. ‘Take all the time you like.’ He looked at his watch.

‘Can I go with her?’ asked Tom.

The stout sprout looked at his companion. ‘Don’t see why not,’ said Napoleon.

Chapter 38

They travelled in style since the Chief Commissioner had sent one of her fleet of official Rolls Royce cars to collect the sculptor. (In addition to her private collection of motor cars, the Chief Commissioner also had a fleet of six Rolls Royce limousines at her disposal.)

Sitting in the back of the car Tom and Dorothy watched a Telescreen programme in which ten contestants had to use their olfactory skills to assess the faeces which had been produced by an unnamed celebrity, and to then decide what five foods the celebrity had eaten in the previous 48 hours. The winner, the contestant who got the most foods right, suggested 'cranberries, garlic and parsnip' but missed prunes and celery. He had been practising for nine months using his wife, workmates and neighbours as research assistants. He won a surgical operation in a sprout hospital.

'Surgical operations are popular prizes these days,' said Tom.

'Pity you can't have the operation you want,' said Dorothy. 'Or store up the prize until you need it.'

At the EUDCE Headquarters building Dorothy and Tom were ushered into the entrance hall where a receptionist sat at a massive oak desk upon which stood nothing but a single telephone. Two busby-wearing soldiers, one at each end of the desk, stood on guard outside smartly painted wooden sentry boxes. Dorothy thought they looked like something W. S. Gilbert might have dreamt up as an adornment for one of his Savoy operettas.

'Dorothy Cobleigh for Sir Czardas Tsastske,' said Napoleon, addressing the receptionist. The other sprout, the stout one, had stayed in the Rolls Royce so that he could drive it back to the garage. The Chief Commissioner liked her cars to be given a full wax and polish after every use.

The receptionist picked up her telephone, dialled 0 and waited. She then asked to be put through to Sir Czardas's receptionist. Two minutes later she put the telephone back on its cradle, and waved an imperious and immaculately manicured hand in the direction of the lifts.

'Third floor,' she said, speaking with an accent Dorothy couldn't place.

'I thought we'd be seeing someone on one of the upper floors,' said Tom, as they headed towards the lifts. He was feeling more confident now. The back of the limousine had been equipped with a bar, and it was the very presence of the bar, as much as the alcohol he had drunk on the journey, which had made Tom feel comfortable. It seemed unlikely to him that a journey in a car fitted with a bar could end completely badly. 'Don't important people usually have their offices on their top floors?'

'The top brass only use the first three floors,' replied Napoleon. He turned and lowered his voice, sharing a secret. 'The lifts don't always work.'

'Ah,' nodded Tom, understanding. It was nice to know that the sprouts had their little problems too.

They got into the lift. There were seats inside. An attendant in a smart blue and gold uniform, including a blue and gold peaked cap with an impressive looking badge on the front, greeted them with a salute.

Out of the corner of a disobedient eye the lift attendant was watching his favourite Telescreen programme, a daily soap opera which told the story of a saintly black, gay Romanian who had a lisp, a limp and an ugly dog.

'Third floor,' said Napoleon.

'Certainly sir,' said the attendant, with obvious reluctance, tearing the corner of the disobedient eye off the screen in order to concentrate. 'Please take your seats and fasten your seat belts.'

Tom and Dorothy looked at the seats and then at the lift attendant.

'Health and safety rules,' the attendant explained. He spoke English with a heavy accent and Tom and Dorothy had difficulty understanding him. 'I can't press the button until you fasten your belts.'

They sat down and fastened their belts.

Standing in front of them, and holding himself firmly to attention, the lift attendant then took a small laminated card and a pair of reading spectacles out of his top pocket. He put on the spectacles and read to them the words printed on the card.

'In case of an emergency malfunction of the suspension mechanisms, air bags will be liberated from the floor and sides of the elevator capsule. Liftees are to stay still and calm and remain in their seats to await rescue. In case of a door opening failure, emergency supplies of vitamins and nuts can be found available underneath your seats. These may contain vitamins and traces of nuts.'

'Life's full of ups and downs, eh,' said Tom. Dorothy glanced at him and dug him in the ribs with her elbow. No one else seemed to notice.

The lift attendant, trained to perfection, fastened his own seat belt, pressed the button marked UP with the index finger of his right hand, and took them up to the third floor. When they had unbuttoned their seat belts and were leaving the lift he saluted again.

Napoleon led them along a corridor and into a huge reception room where a dozen secretaries sat staring into space. There clearly wasn't anything for them to do. Napoleon asked Tom and Dorothy to stay where they were and approached a receptionist at the end of the room. He explained who he'd brought. The receptionist, looking pleased or relieved or possibly both, nodded and spoke.

'Sir Czardas will see you immediately,' Napoleon told Dorothy. 'You must be very important. I've known people wait days even when they had appointments.' He turned to Tom. 'Would you mind coming with me? The appointment only mentions Dorothy Cobleigh.'

'That's fine,' said Tom.

'We'll go and have a drink and watch football,' said Napoleon.

'We have some old film of football matches from the 20th century.'

'Great', said Tom, who hated football. 'That will be nice.'

Chapter 39

‘We had quite a job finding you,’ said Sir Czardas.

‘I wasn’t hiding,’ said Dorothy.

‘No, no, not at all. Obviously not,’ said Sir Czardas. ‘It’s just that our records aren’t quite as good as they used to be.’

‘Why did you want to find me?’ asked Dorothy.

‘A very natural question,’ said Sir Czardas. ‘But if you don’t mind I’d like the Chief Commissioner to tell you that herself’ He leant forwards a little, as though about to impart a piece of secret information. ‘If you have any concerns about the meeting I think I can reassure you. I’m confident that you will be pleasantly surprised by what the Chief Commissioner has to say to you.’ He paused and smiled at her. When he smiled he looked like a pantomime villain, Captain Hook in Peter Pan perhaps, leering at his next victim. It wasn’t his fault and he didn’t mean to look that way. It was just the way he smiled.

He himself took Dorothy down the corridor to the Chief Commissioner’s office suite.

It has been a long time since Sir Czardas had treated any suspect so well.

Chapter 40

'You made that?' demanded the Chief Commissioner, pointing towards the bust on her windowsill. She had expected to be disappointed by Dorothy but she wasn't. Not in the slightest. Dorothy was far older than the sort of woman who attracted her personally (she changed her personal assistants every six months to keep them young and fresh) but she looked interesting and intelligent and capable and, given the circumstances, that was all she wanted of her.

'Oh crumbs!' said Dorothy, tempted to giggle. It had been a long time since she'd giggled. The bust was one she'd made when she was a student. She thought it primitive and rather clumsy. She couldn't even remember who had modelled for it. Almost certainly one of her fellow students.

'Did you make that?' demanded the Chief Commissioner again.

'Yes,' said Dorothy, the giggling moment now over. 'Yes, I made that.'

'I like it,' said the Chief Commissioner. 'It's a wonderful piece of art.'

'Thank you,' said Dorothy.

'I like art,' said the Chief Commissioner. She waved a hand around the room. 'As you can see.'

Dorothy followed the hand with her eyes. She was tempted to giggle again, but didn't. She'd never seen such a mish-mash of furniture in one place. She had, she thought, seen more thought put into a display of furniture in an auction room.

'I want you to make me some statues,' said the Chief Commissioner, who wasn't a woman to waste time on small talk. Especially not with suspects. She'd been surprised about Dorothy being a suspect. But it wasn't the end of the world. And certainly not the end of the project.

'Statues?'

'Statues,' repeated the Chief Commissioner. She pointed to the bust. 'Like that one but with chests and bodies and arms and legs.'

'Yes,' agreed Dorothy who knew what a statue was. 'Exactly.'

'Can you action that?'

'Oh yes.'

'I want to celebrate the wonderful work done by EUDCE,' said the Chief Commissioner. 'Our work is not always fully appreciated.'

Dorothy didn't quite know what to say to this. So she asked a question.

'Who would be the subject?'

'The subject?'

'The model for the statue?'

'Oh, it doesn't really matter.'

'Yourself?'

The Chief Commissioner felt herself blushing. 'Myself?'

'A statue of yourself?'

'Well, do you think that would be artistically online?'

'Oh yes,' said Dorothy who didn't particularly like doing it but who could butter with the best. 'You'd make a splendid subject for a statue.'

The Chief Commissioner blushed an even deeper shade of red. 'Well I dare say that would be...' she searched for a word. 'Acceptable,' she said at last. 'I have no doubt it would make my people very happy.'

There was a silence for a moment. Dorothy didn't know what to say and the Chief Commissioner was clearly imagining the statue of herself

'But I don't just want the one.'

'Not just one statue?'

'No. Not just one. Rather more than one.'

'How many were you thinking of?'

'My door's open on that one but let's say just over eight thousand to start with,' said the Chief Commissioner. 'Say eight thousand and one, perhaps?'

Dorothy stared at her and only managed to stop her jaw dropping by clenching her teeth. 'Eight thousand and one statues?'

'That would be the starting point,' said the Chief Commissioner.

'What would you like the statues made of?' asked Dorothy.

‘Terracotta,’ said the Chief Commissioner immediately.

And then Dorothy, who had, as a student, actually visited the Terracotta army in China, knew and understood. It was quite a shock to realise just how mad a Chief Commissioner could be, and the heights to which her sense of grandeur could aspire.

‘The thing is,’ continued the Chief Commissioner, ‘brown is such an unfetching colour.’ She leant forward and lowered her voice, as though the next bit of the sentence included something of great importance. ‘They would be a browny sort of colour wouldn’t they?’

‘They would,’ agreed Dorothy. ‘That’s the sort of general terracotta colour. Brownish red.’

‘Could you perhaps paint them EUDCE blue? You don’t need to dress them, of course. That would make them look like window display models. Just paint blue uniforms on them. With little yellow stars.’

‘Blue? With yellow stars?’

‘That would be nice, don’t you think? Artistic? A celebration of EUDCE. Creating a work of art to celebrate the glory of the United States of Europe, formerly the European Union, formerly the European Economic Community, formerly the Common Market. That sort of thing. Great artistic achievement. Grand. Magnificent. And sponsored by the world’s greatest ever art patron.’ She looked at Dorothy and smiled and then added. ‘EUDCE,’ she added quickly. ‘EUDCE being the greatest ever art patron.’

‘Absolutely,’ agreed Dorothy. She swallowed hard. ‘That would be very artistic,’ she agreed.

‘We’d want more later,’ said the Chief Commissioner. She stood up and started to pace around the room, as she did when she felt particularly excited by some great venture. She liked to think of herself as a visionary, a dreamer. ‘I want to make a statement. A statement to celebrate our great achievements.’

‘Would you like all eight thousand statues to be in your likeness?’ asked Dorothy.

The Chief Commissioner looked at her sharply. ‘Good heavens, no!’ she said. ‘This isn’t an exercise in vanity. Mix them about a bit. You can do that can’t you? Change the faces. The bodies can be the same. Just change the faces.’ She thought for a moment. ‘We could even have some men in there,’ she said, albeit slightly reluctantly. She thought about this for a while. ‘We could have some of our great ones,’ she said. ‘Do a statue of the great Edward Heath. You remember him, don’t you?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Dorothy.

‘And the great Lords Mandelson and Kinnock.’

‘Right,’ said Dorothy.

‘Two Kinnocks,’ said the Chief Commissioner, remembering. ‘There should be two Kinnocks. One male, one female.’

‘Of course.’

‘I’ll need quite a lot of terracotta,’ said Dorothy. ‘And some help. I’ll have to hire a lot of assistants.’

‘Of course you will,’ said the Chief Commissioner.

‘And I’ll need somewhere to make the statues.’

‘Of course, of course,’ agreed the Chief Commissioner. ‘See Sir Czardas about all that. He’ll fix you up with whatever you need.’ She picked up the telephone. ‘I’ll tell him to get you whatever you want,’ she said. She thought for a moment. ‘I’ll see that you and your family get extra food coupons. And if your work is satisfactory I’ll think about making you a sprout.’

‘Thank you,’ said Dorothy.

The Chief Commissioner turned to the telephone and waved a hand of dismissal.

‘Goodbye,’ said Dorothy, heading for the door.

But the Chief Commissioner was already busy talking to Sir Czardas and telling him to get Dorothy as much terracotta as she needed.

‘Where do I find it?’ asked Sir Czardas.

‘How the hell should I know?’ demanded the Chief Commissioner. ‘Just find it.’ And she slammed the telephone down. As she did so it occurred to her that she wasn’t even sure what terracotta was. But that wasn’t her problem. She walked across to the windowsill and stood in front of the bust she so admired. Eight thousand statues. Eight thousand and one. And more to follow. And at least one of them a likeness of her. Maybe she’d been hasty in telling the sculptor not to make them all like her. Maybe she’d have another word with the woman later. And she’d have to think of where to put the statues when they were made. They could fill the old House of Commons with them. And the House of Lords. They were empty buildings and would make a nice setting for a few hundred statues. And maybe they could use a football stadium. No, that would be no good. The statues might be damaged if it rained. Then she remembered that the English, in the dying days of their existence as a race, had built a football stadium with a moveable roof. She could close the roof and put them in there. How many would that hold? Around 100,000 in the stands. They could rip out all the seats. And another 100,000 on the pitch. And there were other stadiums weren’t there? She smiled. This was going to be better than anything the Chinese had done. When it was all finished she’d invite the Life-time President of EUDCE over from Brussels. He could do the official opening. She almost purred. Tony might even bless her. One of his personal blessings rather than one of the communal ones. She shivered with excitement. She pressed the intercom on her desk and told her personal assistant to come in.

Chapter 41

'And she has the power to order 8,001 statues all by herself?'

'It seems so,' replied Dorothy. 'I got the impression she runs the region as though she owns it. A sort of personal fiefdom. I don't think the last Queen of England had a zillionth as much power as she has.'

'They're loaded with money and stuff,' said Tom. 'They've got everything in the world in that place. While you were with Her Highness, Napoleon took me into the sprouts' bar and offered me a choice of nine different malt whiskys.'

'You should have seen the furniture in her office,' said Dorothy. 'It was all beautiful furniture. Each piece worthy of a place in a museum. But together it looked like a badly organised shop. Do you remember that antique shop on the King's road which catered for rich Arabs and Russians?'

Tom laughed at the thought. In the olden days, just before the final rise of EUDCE and the final fall of England, they had sometimes walked into the shop, pretending to browse. They'd once watched the owner sell a Russian oligarch a Chippendale desk and a Louis Quinze chair as a 'nice pair'. When the Russian had sat in the chair and commented about how well it went with the desk they'd had to rush out of the shop in giggles. They'd laughed a lot more in those days.

Napoleon and the stout sprout had driven them home. Sitting in the car neither of them had dared talk about what they'd seen or learnt. There was a glass partition between the two of them and the sprouts sitting in the front but neither Tom nor Dorothy were naive enough to imagine that the back of the car, where they were sitting in comfort, would not be bugged. They had collected Tom's aunt from Gladwys and Dalby's flat (they had insisted that Napoleon take her and Tabatha there before they'd agreed to accompany him to the EUDCE Headquarters) and were back in their kitchen.

'She wants to outdo the Chinese Terracotta Army?'

'Yes.'

'So, presumably she wants the statues to be bigger.'

'She wants more of them.'

'Yes. But she also wants them bigger?'

'I suppose so. She certainly wouldn't say no if they were bigger.'

'Say, seven foot tall?'

'That would be OK. As long as it was measured in metres!'

'The Chinese soldiers are hollow aren't they?'

'The legs are solid, so that they are strong enough to hold up the weight of the bodies. But, yes, the bodies are hollow. The heads, arms and bodies are hollow.'

'Yours will be hollow too?'

'Yes. Otherwise they'd weigh too much. And they'd use up a lot more terracotta.'

'You'd make them in two halves and then glue them together?'

'Yes.'

'The sprouts won't know how much a terracotta statue should weigh?'

'I don't so I don't expect they will. I doubt if anyone has ever weighed one.'

'You could put something into the hollow of the body?'

'Yes, I suppose you could,' agreed Dorothy. 'What sort of something?'

'If you had something solid inside the statues you wouldn't need to have solid legs?'

Dorothy thought for a moment. 'No, I don't suppose so.'

Tom sat back and grinned.

'What on earth are you planning?' asked Dorothy.

'We could hide things inside the terracotta statues,' said Tom.

'Yes, I gathered that!' said Dorothy. 'But what?'

'Think about it,' said Tom. Dorothy thought about it. And thought about it.

And then she knew.

'Oh my God!' she said suddenly.

Chapter 42

Dorothy was given the use of a disused Tesco supermarket in the centre of the town where she and Tom lived. Supermarkets had died a relatively fast death as the oil price had soared. The cost of moving food and other goods around the world (and, indeed, around the country) had risen so far and so fast that the increase in transport costs had put the supermarkets out of business. The little shops that replaced them sold locally grown produce and locally made clothing. Most small shops sold a bit of everything because instead of offering specialist services they catered for the needs of local communities.

'We'll need a constant supply of the coarse, porous clay we need,' Dorothy told the sprout, a seconded Senior Administrative Officer (Shredding) who had been given the specific task of making sure that Dorothy's commission to produce 8,001 statues was not hindered by a lack of resources.

'I can have it delivered to the goods yard at the railway station,' said the sprout. 'But I don't know how we're going to move it from there to Tesco's.'

'Do you mind if we refer to the place where I'll be working as the studio?' asked Dorothy. 'I don't like to think of myself as working in Tesco's.'

The sprout, well aware that the project had been initiated by the Chief Commissioner, offered no objection.

'If you can give me authority to hire some suspects, and a little money to pay for them to buy bicycles and construct trailers I can get the clay moved,' said Dorothy.

The sprout said he thought it unlikely that such permission would be forthcoming. Dorothy said that in that case she'd be quite happy to forget about the 8,001 statues and would the sprout be kind enough to let the Chief Commissioner know that the project had been cancelled for lack of a few bits of scrap wood and some bicycles. The sprout, rather pale, hurried off to his boss, who on hearing that the project had been authorised by the Chief Commissioner herself, called Dorothy into her office.

'There are rules about this sort of thing,' said the sprout, standing up and pointing to a chair. Dorothy sat down. The sprout sat down.

'First you must work out what you need, then you triple it, then you double that and ask for twice as much,' she said. 'We won't give you that, of course. You'll be lucky if you get half. But we will be impressed by the numbers – no one here will take you seriously if you say you can do whatever it is you're doing cheaply – and well pleased that we've been able to cut you down. You'll get far more than you need and I'll get brownie points because I've cut the costs.'

Dorothy did some sums in her head and quoted a final figure.

'Fine,' said the sprout. She wrote down the figure Dorothy had given her on a large form and pushed the form across the desk. 'Sign here, please.' Dorothy signed the form and the sprout picked it up. 'Would you wait here, please?' She stood. 'I'll need to go and arrange for your application to be approved.' She hurried off. 'Make yourself at home,' she said, over her shoulder.

Dorothy leant back and prepared for a long wait. In her experience applications usually took months. She wished she'd smuggled a book in with her. She looked around the office. It was the emptiest office she'd ever seen.

The sprout returned a minute and a half later with approval for all of Dorothy's requirements.

Sir Czardas had taken it upon himself not to interrupt the Chief Commissioner, who was busy overseeing the arrival, and hanging in her office and along the corridor leading to it, of a collection of Old Masters liberated from the Tate Gallery.

'There's no point in leaving them there,' the Chief Commissioner had explained to her personal assistant. 'No one goes to art galleries and museums. Such a waste for them not to be seen.' Her personal assistant had agreed and praised her public spirit in liberating the paintings so that they could be enjoyed by a discerning, if undoubtedly limited, number of art lovers.

'Give Mrs Cobleigh anything she wants,' said Sir Czardas. 'And give it to her yesterday.'

'You must be very important,' said the sprout to Dorothy. 'I've never known anything like this before.'

Chapter 43

‘We’re going to have to do something to the bodies,’ Tom said. ‘We can’t just put bodies into the terracotta moulds.’

‘I thought they’d go nice and stiff,’ said Dorothy. ‘Rigor mortis.’

‘They’ll stay stiff for about a day or two. But they’ll start to decompose after three days,’ said Tom. ‘They’ll bloat and start to fall apart. And you’ll have body fluids staining the terracotta and oozing out of the feet.’

‘Ugh.’

‘Exactly. We’ll need to embalm them otherwise any sprout who comes within a quarter of a mile of your studio will smell a rat. Or rather more than a rat if you see what I mean.’

‘I see what you mean. This is going to be more difficult than I thought. How do we embalm them?’

‘I talked to Stan. His Dad used to run a funeral parlour. He still prepares bodies for burial. He’ll help us. You bend and flex the muscles to get rid of the rigor mortis and then you inject embalming chemicals into the blood vessels, and you replace the stuff in the body cavities with more embalming chemicals.’

‘How long does it take?’

‘When a funeral guy does it to prepare a body so that it looks good for the relatives it takes hours but we just want the body to be preserved so that it doesn’t start bloating and rotting and stinking.’

‘Lovely.’

‘No, really. It won’t take long.’

‘And where do we get the embalming stuff from? I can hardly ask Sir Czardas to get me a tanker full of embalming fluid. He’s not the brightest guy in the world but even he is going to wonder why I need embalming fluid to make terracotta statues.’

‘It’s sorted. Stan says he still has a supplier. He can get all we need.

We can put what we like on the invoice we give to the sprouts.’

‘Enough for 8,001 bodies?’

‘Sure.’

‘Goody.’

Chapter 44

Banging sprouts on the head with a frying pan, as they wandered round your home, was retail killing. But killing 8,001 sprouts was wholesale killing.

Instead of killing in kitchens and hallways Tom's small revolutionary army started killing in corridors and stairwells. They killed sprouts as they were about to enter people's homes and they killed them as they were just leaving. And the suspects involved showed great imagination in their use of weapons. A former car mechanic used a tyre lever, a former entertainer used a juggler's Indian club, and a retired serviceman who had been injured in one of Blair's Wars used his spare artificial leg to great effect. But it was the recruitment of a former ten-pin bowling alley proprietor which helped most. He produced a large stash of unwanted skittles which turned out to be perfect, in both weight and size, for killing sprouts. The uniformity of the weapons made it easier for new suspects to be trained, and evening classes were organised where tyro-killers could practise their whirling and smashing. (Until they destroyed them all they used a collection of dress shop mannequins as practice targets.)

Tom's army killed income tax inspectors, value added tax inspectors, health and safety officers and planning officers. They killed sprouts who marched into homes demanding to measure windows, search for labels or inspect the Telescreen. They killed officious bureaucrats who clutched books of rules like rednecked Christian fundamentalists clutch bibles. They killed anyone working for EUDCE. And they discovered that killing, like crochet and most other things, becomes easier the more you do it. They were equal opportunity killers. They killed Christian sprouts, Muslim sprouts, Jewish sprouts, Buddhist sprouts, Episcopalian sprouts, Atheist sprouts and Agnostic sprouts. They killed fat, female sprouts; thin, male sprouts; fat, male sprouts and thin, female sprouts. They killed with due regard for the legislation demanding equality for all. They were multicultural killers. They killed white sprouts, brown sprouts, black sprouts and grey sprouts. No one wearing the uniform of a sprout was spared solely because of his colour, race, creed or ethnicity. In that, if that alone, the killing abided by the laws of EUDCE.

Gentle, quiet, sensitive people who would have thought twice about killing a mouse found themselves carving notches on their skittles.

Chapter 45

The killing was surprisingly easy to organise.

The sprouts, full of conceit and self-satisfaction, were, on the whole, still unsuspicious. It wasn't too difficult to catch them unawares. And finding assassins wasn't difficult either. Tom put Dalby and Gladwys in charge of recruiting killers while he supervised the purchase of bicycles and the building of trailers for transporting terracotta. Naturally, having the bicycles and the trailers made it easy to move the bodies around.

Dalby and Gladwys stuck to recruiting people over fifty for several reasons.

First, only the older suspects seemed in the slightest bit interested in doing anything to improve their lives. It was only the older suspects who remembered life as it had been in days before the creation of the European Superstate and who realised, therefore, that it was perfectly possible to live in a world where there was more freedom and fewer rules than the world created by EUDCE.

Second, only the older suspects were strong enough, and quick witted enough, to spot an opportunity (and to take advantage of the opportunity) to down a sprout with a single blow. And only older suspects had the presence of mind to work out what to do with the body afterwards. Younger suspects, who had never faced any real challenges, who had been fast-tracked through the final days of a deteriorating and now non-existent educational system which existed to meet political targets (and therefore ensure that politicians and teachers all received their bonuses), and who had been brought up to believe everything they heard and saw on the Telescreen, were virtually incapable of original thought.

'Most of today's kids seem to think they're entitled to a life full of answers without ever having to wake themselves up long enough to wonder what the questions might be, let alone to ask them,' said Dalby. 'They all have expectations which would embarrass royal princes.'

The one big problem they had lay in moving the sprouts from the places where they'd been turned into bodies, to the place where they would be embalmed and fitted inside their terracotta suits. This was potentially the most dangerous part of the whole exercise, even though Tom's fleet of bicycles and trailers made it practicable. There was always the risk that a sprout would inspect a trailer and find a body. It would be difficult to explain.

Strangely, it was Tom's aunt who (more by accident than design, it is true) made it possible for them to move bodies around without fear of being stopped by the sprouts.

She was towing a trailer full of fresh clay to the studio when she was stopped and arrested by two sprouts who knew nothing about the project. They took her to a local police station. Several hours after her disappearance, a frantic Tom eventually found her. He spoke to Dorothy who immediately insisted on being allowed to telephone Sir Czardas.

'The whole project is abandoned,' she said. 'We're all walking out and going home.'

'Wait, wait, wait!' cried Sir Czardas, terrified and already imagining his new future checking out faded labels on grey underwear. 'What's the problem?'

'The police have arrested one of our cyclists,' said Dorothy, who didn't have to fake her fury. 'How can I possibly move clay to my studio if the police are going to interfere all the time?'

Sir Czardas was almost comically apologetic. He promised to have the two policemen transferred to sentry box duty outside the Scottish Regional Parliament. He promised to have them transported to Africa. He promised to have them handed over to the Americans so that they could be hung, shot or electrocuted or all three. 'I'm having a bad day,' he said. 'Please don't make it any worse. My seventh wife is giving me a hard time because there are three Lady Czardas Tsastskes in existence and the latest one met one of the previous ones while shopping and she wants me to do something about it. What can I do? Moreover, she's constantly worrying about who to invite to her 21st birthday party. I'm on my seventh marriage, and sometimes I wonder if the problem might be me. But in my position I can't afford self-doubts. Do you think there's any chance whatsoever that we can sort this out without you walking away from the project?'

'I just want to be able to have my clay delivered without interference,' said Dorothy, calmer now. She had almost (but most definitely not quite) laughed during Sir Czardas's pitiful revelations.

'That's no problem,' insisted Sir Czardas. He promised that he would give orders that none of Dorothy's bicyclists, or their trailers, would be disrupted by the police. The bicyclists would, he said, be given special passes entitling them to cycle through police cordons, barriers, barricades and, if appropriate, rings of fire.

Dorothy said she thought this would be OK as long as Sir Czardas got the passes sent round within the hour.

The passes were on Dorothy's desk within forty five minutes.

And after that the bicyclists were able to move bodies around just as easily as they were able to move clay around, which is to say that they were able to move it around without any interference whatsoever. Indeed, several of the bicyclists reported that they had been saluted by sprouts, much in the way, said Tom, that motorists had been saluted by RAC and AA patrols back in the 1950's.

Chapter 46

‘There is a small problem,’ said Sir Czardas. He felt nervous even bringing it up.

‘What’s that?’ demanded the Chief Commissioner. ‘We’ve sorted out our bonuses for the year haven’t we?’

‘We have,’ agreed Sir Czardas.

‘And approved them?’

‘We did that too.’

‘So what else can there be?’ she demanded. Her most recent personal assistant had just retired and the Chief Commissioner was impatient. She had a trio of possible replacements waiting outside to be interviewed. Two of them looked particularly attractive. Boyish but elfin. She wondered if she might perhaps just hire them both. It would be easier than making a decision. Then if one turned out to be more acceptable she could keep that one and get rid of the other.

‘We seem to have misplaced a number of sprouts recently,’ said Sir Czardas.

‘Oh, not that nonsense again,’ said the Chief Commissioner dismissively. ‘You’ve got a real bee in your bonnet about this,’ she added, forgetting that she had originally been the one to bring the matter up.

‘I’m sorry, ma’am,’ said Sir Czardas. ‘But I thought I ought to mention it. Another three hundred went missing last week. I’ve been told that there are rumours.’

The Chief Commissioner looked up. ‘What sort of rumours?’ she demanded. She didn’t like rumours that she hadn’t initiated or didn’t control.

‘Some of the recruiters tell me that they’re having difficulty hiring new replacement sprouts in Poland.’

The Chief Commissioner stared in disbelief.

‘I know it sounds unlikely,’ agreed Sir Czardas, who had grown to believe that anyone with half a brain would give what cerebral tissue they had left to become a sprout. ‘But that’s what I’m hearing.’ He hesitated. ‘I’m told that they seem afraid that they too might disappear,’ he added.

‘Oh what absolute rubbish!’ said the Chief Commissioner who hated inconvenient or unpleasant truths and simply could not believe that EUDCE employees could be frightened of anything. Fear was something EUDCE used as a weapon; it wasn’t something they had to deal with themselves. ‘I can’t bear this sort of nonsense. We have far more important things to worry about.’

‘Yes, Chief Commissioner,’ agreed Sir Czardas who had not survived in his present position without knowing when to say ‘yes’ and when to say ‘no’.

‘And I don’t want this sort of rumour spreading!’

‘No, Chief Commissioner.’

‘Ring up the boss of the BBC and tell him that on no account is any of this nonsense to be broadcast on the Telescreen. If sprouts hear any of this they will be dispirited and disillusioned. If suspects hear it they’ll lose all faith in our invulnerability. And if the people in Brussels hear this sort of thing they’ll be very upset,’ said the Chief Commissioner. She paused and looked at Sir Czardas as though she were looking at him over reading spectacles. ‘And quite disapproving.’

‘Yes, Chief Commissioner.’

‘Do you hear what I’m saying? Do you understand?’

‘Yes, Chief Commissioner,’ said Sir Czardas, who did on both counts.

‘We’ll just import more replacement sprouts from Turkey. There are plenty over there who’ll jump at the chance to better themselves. We’ll give them a signing on bonus. I’ll ring someone in Brussels.’

Sir Czardas nodded his understanding, acceptance and approval.

The Chief Commissioner waved a hand dismissively. ‘You can go now.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Send in the first of the three girls waiting outside.’

Chapter 47

The Chief Commissioner was playing the harp. Or, rather, she was attempting to play it. In truth, she couldn't read music and couldn't play the harp. But she had decided that her image would benefit from a little mild eccentricity. So, she had confiscated a harp from a former member of a major orchestra and then hired the harpist as her tutor. Every morning, between 11 a.m. and 11.30 a.m. she had harp lessons. The rest of the time the harp stood in the corner of her office, a constant reminder to everyone who entered that the office's occupant had character. Occasionally, the Chief Commissioner would sit at her harp and pretend that a visitor had interrupted an impromptu recital. This allowed her to pose as an artiste, and enabled her to make her visitor aware that she (or he) was interrupting something important.

'When I came in this morning there were only two guards at the front door,' said the Chief Commissioner. 'There should be four.'

'There should,' agreed Sir Czardas. 'But unfortunately, our personpower situation is a little stretched at the moment. According to the latest report I've had there are another four hundred sprouts missing this week.' He paused, looking for a way to soften the news. 'Taken unofficial leave, I expect,' he added, hoping to ingratiate himself by offering what he suspected would be the Chief Commissioner's own response.

The Chief Commissioner looked at him suspiciously. 'Are you being funny?'

'No, no, not at all,' said Sir Czardas very quickly.

'Good, good,' said the Chief Commissioner. She stared at the ceiling, plucked a couple of harp strings and looked thoughtful. 'And if there is any unhappiness, dissatisfaction, call it what you will, then our new planned celebration will dispel that, don't you think?'

'Celebration?' asked Sir Czardas, nervously wondering if he'd missed something.

'The statues!' said the Chief Commissioner. 'The statues, you nincompoop!'

'Oh yes, of course,' said Sir Czardas. 'The statues will definitely give everyone a real lift.' He paused. 'The thing is,' he said, apologetically, 'we are running rather short of low-level sprouts. And you did say...'

'Oh yes, I was going to ring Brussels about it,' remembered the Chief Commissioner. 'I'll do it now.' She got up from the harp, moved across to her desk, picked up the telephone and pressed a button. She asked to be connected to one of the permanent members of the Secretariat, a very senior figure in Brussels.

'Mr Deputy President?' said the Chief Commissioner. 'Chief Commissioner Stein, Provincial Commissioner for Administration and Protector of the People for Province 17.' She listened for a moment. 'Yes, that's the one,' she said. 'Formerly Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England.' She laughed lightly at something the Deputy President had said, and listened again. 'Stein,' she repeated. 'Phyllis.' She listened again. 'Yes, that's right my Lord,' she said. She blushed, paused, listened, blushed lightly and simpered. 'That's marvellous of you to remember.' She listened and simpered again. 'Oh may I? Thank you.' She hesitated. 'Thank you my Lord...Gordon,' she said. 'Are you well... Gordon? Splendid. That's wonderful. It's so nice to touch base with you again. I'm afraid we have a little problem here. We're running a little light on sprouts. Could you...'

She listened for a moment as Lord Gordon spoke.

'That would be marvellous,' she said. 'Turks would be perfect, Gordon. A thousand would be lovely.'

She listened again and put her hand over the mouthpiece. 'Gordon is going to action that and send us a thousand Turks,' she whispered. Sir Czardas, tried to look more delighted than he felt. 'And two hundred mixed Latvians, Croatians and Estonians,' she added, still listening and still whispering. 'He can't promise but he says that some of them may even speak a little English.' It immediately occurred to Sir Czardas that their talents in this direction would probably be limited to 'Give me money. I have a baby to support' or 'This is a hold-up. I have a gun. Give me money or I kill you.' He did not allow this politically incorrect thought to expose itself to the world.

When Lord Gordon had finished speaking the Chief Commissioner spoke again. 'Before you go, Gordon,' she said, 'there is one thing I thought I might mention in the interests of forward planning.' She paused, listened and laughed politely. 'Of course,' she said. 'The thing is, that here in my little neck of the woods we've hit upon a rather wonderful way to boost morale and to encourage the people to recognise the wonderful work done by EUDCE.' She paused and listened again. 'Thank you, Gordon,' she said. 'We're creating a permanent exhibition of statuary as a celebration of EUDCE's magnificent era of leadership, peace and prosperity.' She paused. 'I thought I'd put you on the radar for this one.'

She listened, struggling to hide her irritation and frustration, as Gordon said something.

'Statuary,' she explained, as though talking to a rather dim child with a slight hearing problem. 'Statues. You know, like that one we used to have here in Trafalgar Square. On top of that very tall plinth.'

She listened again and seemed alarmed.

'No, no, no, no, of course not. This is absolutely nothing to do with Nelson,' she said firmly. 'Good heavens no, Gordon. We don't even mention his name unless we have to. No, the whole idea for what we're doing was inspired by the Chinese and their terracotta army.'

Lord Gordon said something.

'The Chinese terracotta army,' repeated the Chief Commissioner. 'The Chinese built a huge army of terracotta statues as a permanent celebration.'

She listened.

'No, you wouldn't have heard anything about it on the news,' she said. 'It all happened a while ago. But the statues are still there. They're underground. A farmer found them.'

Lord Gordon spoke.

'No, I don't know what the farmer was doing underground. Maybe he fell down a hole. Or was digging deep trenches or something. Anyway he found all these terracotta soldiers. They were on the Telescreen.'

She listened.

'Terracotta,' she said. 'It's a sort of brown pottery. Made out of some sort of clay.'

Lord Gordon said something.

'Yes, like flower pots,' she said. She looked at Sir Czardas and raised an eyebrow in disbelief. 'Yes, like flower pots.'

She listened.

'No, no, they're much bigger than flower pots. Each statue is about two metres tall.'

Lord Gordon asked something.

'Eight thousand and one of them to start with,' said the Chief Commissioner. 'But we're going to have more. Far more. I want it to be far bigger than anything the Chinese ever imagined.' A thought occurred to her. 'Maybe we should invite some Chinese people over for the grand unveiling. We have a sculptor making the models. Very talented, very well-known sculptor. She's got a lot of assistants, of course.'

She listened.

'Oh yes, the people love it. They adore it. They think it's an absolutely marvellous idea. It's really going to bring us all together in our shared respect for EUDCE.'

She listened as Lord Gordon spoke.

'It was my idea,' she replied and then listened. 'Thank you, very much, Gordon. You're very kind.' She listened again. This time Lord Gordon spoke for several minutes.

'Yes, I think we could do that,' said the Chief Commissioner, clearly surprised but delighted. She covered the telephone mouthpiece and whispered to Sir Czardas. 'Gordon wants to know if we can send our sculptor over there to set up a similar sort of operation for the other regions. We can do that can't we?'

Sir Czardas nodded firmly.

'I'll arrange it today,' said the Chief Commissioner firmly. 'Thank you, Gordon. Thank you very much.' And, after waiting to make sure that Gordon had gone, she put down her telephone.

'Gordon is very excited about the statues project,' she announced. 'He says it's the sort of 360 degree thinking he likes. He thinks it will be just the thing EUDCE needs to make everyone realise just what a wonderful job we've all been doing. He's very, very enthusiastic and very much wants to come to the party. He's rushed off to organise a Report and a Meeting so that they can decide where to put all their statues. His first thought was that to start with they could use those European Parliament buildings. They're hardly ever used now.'

'Marvellous,' said Sir Czardas. 'Very satisfactory.' He paused. 'And he's sending us some sprouts?'

'Definitely,' said the Chief Commissioner. 'Absolutely.' She beamed. 'Would you like some afternoon tea?' she asked. 'My new girl makes absolutely marvellous little sandwiches. Much better than the ones that last one used to make. She only uses the very straightest cucumbers.'

Chapter 48

Tom, Dorothy and Tom's aunt were in their kitchen eating soup that Dorothy had made, using three potatoes, a carrot and a leek that Tom had brought home from the allotment. Despite all the work they were doing on the statues Tom hadn't given up his job. He liked the feeling of security it gave him. Who knew when the statue project might come to an end?

When there was a knock on the front door Tom looked up at Dorothy and shook his head. 'Leave it,' he said.

'It might be a chap about some clay I've ordered,' said Dorothy. 'I told him to call round and let me know as soon they'd heard when the delivery would come in.'

Reluctantly Tom opened the door.

'Difficult to find you at home,' said a sprout in a blue suit.

'Out a lot aren't you?' said the other.

'We're Residential Placement Officers,' said the first sprout. He smirked, knowing the effect this would have.

'Aren't you going to invite us in?' asked the second sprout. 'Not that we need an invitation,' said the first, brushing past Tom and moving into their narrow hallway. He looked around. 'Lots of space,' he said. He opened the door to the living room. 'Very spacious. How many of you are there living here?'

'Three,' replied Tom. 'Myself, my wife and my aunt.'

'Who is it?' called Dorothy.

'It's two Residential Placement Officers,' answered Tom. There was a pause.

'I could do with your help,' Tom called to his wife. 'To show them round.'

'I'll be right there,' answered Dorothy. 'I'll just wash the saucepan.'

'I'll get the frying pan!' cried Tom's aunt. She sounded very excited.

'The two ladies are cooking,' explained Tom. 'Would you like to see upstairs? Shall I lead the way?'

'There's no gate at the top of the stairs,' said the first sprout, looking upwards. He took out a small notebook. 'Have to report that,' he said. He made a note about the missing gate. Tom made a mental note to burn the notebook afterwards.

'Somebody could easily fall down without a gate at the top of the stairs,' said the second sprout.

'Yes,' replied Tom. He tried to sound surprised and grateful. 'I suppose they could. I hadn't thought of that.' He looked again at the two men. The fat one was actually very fat. He was going to be a bugger to get into the trailer. And they might have to put him inside one of the extra large sized statues. 'I'll follow you both up,' he said. 'My wife will be with us in a moment.'

The Beginning of the End

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SECOND CHANCE

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All characters, organisations, businesses and places in this publication are fictitious, and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. Even the existence of the author is in some doubt.

Dedicated to Donna Antoinette, with all my love.

Chapter 1

The telephone on Bernard Brimstone’s desk made what the manufacturer’s brochure described as a cheerful chirping sound designed to ‘enliven every day’ and guaranteed to turn every telephone call into a ‘fun experience’.

Bernard, known to all who knew him as ‘Biffo’, was a tall, balding, slightly overweight, rumpled-looking man in his mid forties. Although he hated wearing a suit Biffo had little option for it was a strict company rule that all executives should wear suits, white shirts, black shoes and ties at all times. This rule had only once been relaxed. The office air conditioning system had broken down and a special memo had been sent round instructing executives that they might, if they so chose, remove their jackets while within the confines of their offices. (The memo had made it clear that jackets should be replaced if executives wished to move about in any of the public areas.)

Biffo, dressed according to the rules in a medium blue suit with a wide chalk stripe, stared glumly at the chirping telephone but did not pick it up. Biffo had a rare talent for looking rumpled and the suit he wore was, as usual, badly creased. The plain red tie he wore might have been regarded as a deliberate attempt to match his plain red socks if the two colours had been a little more alike.

‘I hate that noise,’ he muttered, with quiet resignation. He sighed. ‘Why can’t we have telephones that go brrr brrr. You know where you are with a telephone which goes brrr brrr.’

Frank ‘Streaky’ Bacon, the tall, slender, balding colleague to whom Biffo had addressed this comment, slid still further down in his chair until he was very nearly horizontal and rubbed his eyes with his fingertips. Streaky, like Biffo, was a news and documentary producer.

‘Worldwide International Global Telephone Communications Inc. sold us eight hundred chirping telephones after convincing our leader that a clear majority of office workers find a telephone which chirps far more restful than one which rings,’ he drawled lazily. ‘The heady mixture of delightful, youthful impudence and sophisticated joie de vivre is supposed to fill us with zest and enthusiasm.’

Streaky had chosen to combine the company’s clothing requirements and the needs of his own rebellious personality by wearing a brown silk suit, a blue denim shirt and a pair of patent leather shoes that had never done anything more energetic than press the pedals in his Porsche 911.

‘It doesn’t fill me with zest,’ muttered Biffo, ignoring the telephone. He frowned at something else that Frank had said. ‘Who are Worldwide International. . .er. . .what was it?’

‘Global Telephone Communications Inc.,’ said Streaky helpfully.

‘Who are Worldwide International Global Telephone Communications Inc.?’ he asked. ‘I’ve never heard of them.’

According to Mavis in the personnel department it’s a small company run by Buttress’s dishonest and unemployable brother-in-law,’ explained Streaky. Ernest Buttress was the boss of Better Television, the company which employed both Biffo and Streaky. ‘He operates out of a lock up garage somewhere in North London. He sells office equipment that no one else wants to sell because absolutely no one wants to buy it. I gather he sells almost all his stock to us. Some of it is reputed to be lightly bruised as a result of having fallen off the backs of lorries. My informant tells me that Ernest’s brother-in-law has a mysteriously magnetic attraction for goods which have accidentally fallen off the backs of lorries. This may, or may not, have something to do with the fact that many of his friends seem to have broken noses and ears which look rather like bits of diseased vegetable.’

Biffo sighed. ‘I don’t care where it came from. I hate chirping telephones,’ he insisted. ‘almost as much as I hate centrally controlled air conditioning systems and piped music.’ He paused and thought for a moment. ‘I hate Buttress too,’ he added. The telephone was still chirping.

‘If you answered the damned thing it would stop chirping,’ said Streaky.

‘That would mean admitting that I’d heard it,’ said Biffo. ‘I’m ignoring it. It’s a matter of principle.’ He put his elbows on his desk and rested his head in his cupped hands.

‘You’re not following today’s company motto,’ said Streaky, waving a finger in admonition.

Biffo, moved a supporting hand, reached across his desk and pulled a small cardboard calendar towards him. The calendar contained an uninspiring photograph of the outside of the company headquarters. A row of small blue vans bearing the company logo were parked in a neat row in front of the main entrance. Underneath the photograph was stapled what remained of 365 pieces of paper. Biffo looked at the motto on the piece of paper he could see: ‘Better Television viewers are my friends and it is my task in life to make them happy’.

Biffo read the thought out aloud, paused for a moment, and frowned. ‘What’s that got to do with chirping telephones?’

‘That was our thought for the day at least two weeks ago,’ said Streaky with something of a sigh. ‘You’re not keeping up. Find the thought for today.’

Biffo tore off a series of paper rectangles one at a time. As he tore off each one he screwed it up and tossed it onto the floor next to the waste paper basket underneath his desk. ‘What’s to day’s date?’

‘The 18th.’

‘Oh, dear. I’ve just thrown it away.’ He bent down, picked up each piece of screwed up paper and straightened it out until he found the one dated the 18th. He screwed up the unwanted pieces of paper and tossed them back in the direction of the waste paper basket. Once again each one missed and landed on the floor. As he did this the telephone stopped chirping. Biffo read the message out loud.

‘It is my responsibility to rise above all petty troubles. If I am happy then the people with whom I work will be happy too.’

‘There you are,’ said Streaky. ‘You’re making me miserable by moaning about your bloody chirping phone.’ He sighed ‘I wish I had the courage to walk away from here. Some mornings – no more than nine out of ten – I wake up thinking I’d like to go off and make a complete fool of myself with a 22-year-old bimbo with huge breasts, an outgoing personality and a 1960’s attitude towards sex.’

‘Who thinks these damned things up?’ asked Biffo, waving the crumpled piece of paper in his hand.

‘The company has two full-time psychologists on the third floor. It’s what they do. I think you ought to get a bigger waste paper basket.’

‘Why should I get a bigger waste paper basket?’

‘Because that one is clearly too small. You keep missing it.’ Biffo looked down at the mess around his waste paper basket. ‘I don’t think it would make any difference how big it was. I would still miss it. I’d heard about the psychologists. Do you mean the company employs psychologists to write the mottoes for the firm’s calendar?’

‘Yes.’

‘Is that all they do?’

Streaky shrugged and added another paperclip to the chain he had started making. ‘Maybe they also do special mottoes for the Christmas crackers. Since they’re psychologists I expect they’re both stark raving bonkers. Mavis tells me that one of them used to run an exotic bird shop somewhere in Cornwall. It was called Parrots of Penzance.’

Biffo groaned. ‘I hate Mondays,’ he said. He screwed the motto into a small ball and tossed it towards the waste basket. He missed and the ball of paper landed on the carpet alongside all the others. Biffo felt he should get up and put the paper into the waste basket. But he didn’t.

‘So do I.’ said Streaky. He abandoned his paperclip chain, crossed his legs and examined a small hole in his left sock. ‘I could put up with hating Mondays if the rest of the week was any more fun. But I hate Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays too.’ He sighed. ‘The truth is that I hate this job. I don’t wish to speak ill of him but Buttress is an evil little sod. I wish he didn’t pay me so much.’

‘I’m not too keen on Saturdays and Sundays,’ muttered Biffo. ‘Is that true about one of the company psychologists running a shop called Parrots of Penzance?’

Before Streaky could reply there was a loud knock on their office door, the door opened a foot and a half and a beautifully made up face appeared in the narrow gap.

‘There was a call for you, Mr Brimstone!’ announced a pair of lips which seemed to have been decorated with several .coats of red paint with a high gloss finish. The owner of the face and lips edged into the room. The face was surrounded by a mass of carefully disarranged blonde hair and the body beneath was equipped with impressive looking bumps in all the right places and was supported by a pair of extremely long and delicate-looking legs.

There was no disputing the fact that Ms Voluptua Bradshaw had a pleasing figure, though exactly how much of this was down to genes, nature and a healthy diet and how much was a consequence of a good structural engineering, fine upholstery or the skills of an expensive cosmetic surgeon was a complete mystery to Biffo and Streaky.

Biffo looked up and wearily raised a theoretically querulous but practically disinterested eyebrow. ‘Was there?’ he asked.

‘Good morning, Ms Bradshaw,’ said Streaky. ‘I’m glad you’ve popped in,’ he added. He pointed to the telephone on Biffo’s desk. ‘Would you feed that damned thing?’

The beautifully made up face looked puzzled. ‘I beg your pardon. . ..?’ She brushed a few strands of hair out of her eyes. A split second later they fell back into position.

‘It keeps chirping,’ Streaky said. ‘I think it needs feeding.’

An understanding and condescending smile edged across Ms Bradshaw’s porcelain features. A pair of neatly-plucked eye brows approached one another tentatively. She looked at Biffo and frowned slightly. ‘Is he pulling my leg, Mr Brimstone?’

‘I wouldn’t dream of it, Ms Bradshaw,’ answered Streaky.

‘He wouldn’t dream of it,’ said Biffo, wearily.

‘Oh, that’s good,’ said Ms Bradshaw, clearly relieved. ‘I was warned that Mr Bacon had a sense of humour.’ She smiled and pouted. ‘Humour isn’t what you might call my strong point,’ she confessed. After smiling again and showing Biffo two rows of gleaming white teeth she turned round and started to disappear.

‘Did you want to tell me something, Ms Bradshaw?’ asked Biffo before their visitor had disappeared entirely.

‘Oh yes, silly me!’ said Ms Bradshaw, turning at the door and giggling nervously. ‘I almost forgot. Mr Buttress’s private and personal assistant is asking to speak to you.’

Biffo sighed. ‘On this chirpy thing?’ he asked, pointing to the telephone on his desk.

‘Yes, Mr Brimstone.’

‘Thank you, Ms Bradshaw.’ The curvaceous young secretary left; her wiggling bottom the last item to leave the room. A minute or so later the telephone on Biffo’s desk began to chirp again.

When she had first joined the company there had been some discussion about whether or not Voluptua was the name with which she had been christened. Streaky Bacon’s friend in the personnel department, Mavis, had quickly publicised the fact that Ms Bradshaw’s two official Christian names were Enid and Cynthia. Rumour had it that she wanted to be an actress.

Biffo picked up the telephone receiver. ‘Yes?’ he said.

‘Mr Brimstone?’ asked a young, extremely earnest male voice.

‘I think so,’ replied Biffo wearily. ‘Did you ring his number?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then that’s probably who I am.’

There was a silence. ‘This is Roderick, Mr Brimstone. Mr Buttress’s personal and private assistant.’

There was a long silence during which Biffo said nothing and Mr Buttress’s personal and private assistant listened attentively to the silence.

‘Mr Buttress would like to see you, Mr Brimstone,’ said Roderick at last.

‘OK.’

‘Would four minutes past eleven be convenient, Mr Brimstone?’

Biffo paused and looked at his watch. It was nine forty three. ‘I think so,’ he replied. He carefully put the telephone receiver back onto its plastic cradle.

‘Buttress?’ asked Streaky.

Biffo nodded.

‘I’ve got an appointment to see him at six minutes to eleven,’ said Streaky.

Ernest Buttress had a model railway set permanently laid out on the boardroom table. He ran trains all day long according to a complicated timetable, and always had his appointments arranged to fit in between departure and arrival.

‘Do you have any idea what Buttress wants?’

‘They’re closing down all the news, documentary and arts programmes. We’re all going to be making quiz programmes,’ said Streaky. ‘That’s what Mavis told me.’

‘Mavis told you that?’

‘Who else?’

‘They’re closing down all of us?’

‘All of us.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘You didn’t ask. Besides it’s only a rumour. And you already seemed depressed. I didn’t want to tip you over the edge.’

‘Where did Mavis hear it?’

‘A cameraman she knows heard Buttress’s assistant telling his boyfriend about it in the washroom.’

‘The private and personal assistant?’

‘That one.’

‘Ah,’ said Biffo, stretching the word out so that it filled the sort of space a sentence would normally occupy. ‘So that’s it then.’ He looked across at Streaky. ‘What are you going to do?’

Streaky stretched his neck and pushed back his shoulders. ‘I’m going to tell old Buttress exactly what he can do with his damned job,’ he said, defiantly. ‘I’m certainly not making quiz programmes for him. I had an idea this morning that could make me millions.’

Biffo looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

‘The chap who had the idea of sticking little rubbers on the ends of pencils made a fortune didn’t he?’ asked Streaky.

‘I suppose he must have done,’ agreed Biffo.

‘So what else do people who use pencils need?’

Biffo thought for a moment. ‘Paper?’

‘Don’t be stupid,’ said Streaky. ‘Pencil sharpeners. I’m going to invent the first pencil with a sharpener stuck on the end of it.’ He paused. ‘Of course, I’ve got to work out a way to make the pencil bendy so that you can get the point into the sharpener. But that’s just a minor point. It’s the idea that counts.’

Biffo threw a handful of paper clips at him.

Chapter 2

At five minutes to eleven o’clock Biffo put down his newspaper, abandoning the crossword puzzle with which he had been struggling, left his office, waved at Ms Bradshaw (who, although puzzled, waved back) and walked down what seemed like a mile and a half of narrow corridor to Mr Buttress’s suite of offices.

And at eleven o’clock precisely Biffo entered Mr Buttress’s outer office. He felt strangely tired and, in a way which he did not understand, he felt relieved. He had been an obedient servant of society all his life. He had been a cautious and ambitious student and a loyal employee, husband and father. He had learned by rote, lived by habit and common sense and never questioned authority. He had married, fathered children and bought a house he couldn’t afford with a mortgage which had for two decades hung around his neck like a millstone. What more could a man do? Why did he feel so disappointed, frustrated and quietly desperate?

Now he felt tired and strangely exhilarated. He knew something was about to change. But he didn’t know what or why.

Chapter 3

‘Please take a seat Mr Brimstone,’ said Mr Buttress’s personal and private assistant. ‘Mr Buttress won’t be a moment.’ He glanced at the large digital clock on the wall. ‘You are four minutes early.’

Biffo started to explain that he had arrived early so that he wouldn’t be late. But he decided that the explanation sounded like an apology and he didn’t want to apologise and so he didn’t say anything. He sat down.

Two minutes later the door to Mr Buttress’s office opened and Streaky Bacon came out. He looked pale and was sweating noticeably.

Biffo rose to his feet and, because he felt that his friend needed support and comfort, reached out and put a hand on his friend’s shoulder. But, to his surprise, his friend flinched and moved away slightly, as though the touch of Biffo’s fingers had in some mysterious way burnt his skin.

‘Mr Buttress won’t be a moment,’ said the private and personal assistant to Biffo. ‘I’ve just got a few papers for him to sign.’ He slipped between Biffo and Streaky, went into Mr Buttress’s office and closed the door behind him.

‘Well?’ asked Biffo. ‘How did it go?’

‘So, so,’ replied Streaky. He seemed embarrassed.

‘Was Mavis’s cameraman friend right?’

‘I’m afraid so,’ admitted Streaky. `Absolutely spot on.’ He smiled thinly. ‘You can always trust the cameramen to know what is going on.’

‘Buttress wants you to produce a quiz programme?’

‘That sort of thing,’ agreed Streaky.

Biffo frowned. ‘What do you mean — that sort of thing?’

‘Well, it’s a sort of quiz programme,’ said Streaky. ‘But not just an ordinary quiz programme,’ he added quickly and defensively. ‘To be honest I think I rather misunderstood what was planned. Buttress isn’t a bad sort you know. What he’s got in mind is more educational television than anything else. But educational television with a big audience.’ Streaky paused. ‘He wants me to produce and direct a new weekly programme in which four celebrities visit a local village hall or pub and take on the locals in an educational contest.’

‘Ah,’said Biffo, quietly. He paused. ‘You said ‘yes’ to the quiz programme then?’

‘It’s quite an opportunity,’ said Streaky, shuffling uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

‘Yes,’ said Biffo. There was a long silence. ‘I expect so,’ he added.

‘And it’s what the viewers want.’

‘It is,’ agreed Biffo. He nodded. ‘I’m sure you’re right.’ He felt embarrassed for his friend and embarrassed for himself He wanted desperately to be somewhere else.

‘Besides,’ said Streaky, ‘at my age what else am I going to do?’ He shrugged and looked at Biffo, pleading for forgiveness and understanding. ‘There is the mortgage to pay,’ he explained. ‘And the payments on the Porsche and so on. . .’

Biffo put his hand out, touching Streaky lightly on the arm. ‘I understand,’ he said. ‘Really,’ he added. ‘You did the only thing you could. When do you start?’

Streaky looked at his watch. ‘In about twenty minute’s time,’ he replied.’ He shuffled uncomfortably. ‘Do you really think I did the right thing?’ he asked, desperate for approval.

‘Yes,’ lied Biffo. It was, he knew, what his friend needed to hear.

Streaky looked at him and sighed. ‘You’re lying,’ he said. He smiled. ‘But that’s because you’re a good friend.’ He put a hand on Biffo’s shoulder. ‘Thank you.’

Biffo grinned. ‘What are friends for?’

‘You know, you’re the best chum I’ve got,’ said Streaky, suddenly very serious. ‘You’re going to tell him to stuff his job aren’t you?’

‘Yes,’ said Biffo.

There was a long pause. ‘I wish I had your courage,’ said Streaky.

‘It isn’t courage,’ said Biffo. ‘You are the one who has courage. I’m running away.’

Streaky didn’t speak for a moment. ‘If there’s ever anything I can do for you just yell,’ he said at last.

‘Thanks,’ said Biffo.

‘I mean it,’ said Streaky. ‘Anything.’

‘I know.’

The door to Mr Buttress’s office opened and the personal and private assistant emerged. ‘It’s four minutes past eleven,’ he said to Biffo. ‘Mr Buttress will see you now.’

‘Good luck, Biffo,’ said Streaky. He was bravely trying to disguise the fact that he felt beaten and utterly demoralised and it seemed unfair that he was failing in this endeavour as well.

‘Thanks,’ said Biffo. And walked in to see the boss of Better Television

Chapter 4

Ernest Buttress, a small, neat man, quite devoid of personality and charisma but skilful at reading a balance sheet, had been the Managing Director of Better Television for three months. His main qualification for the job was reputed to be the fact that his lack of weaknesses such as sympathy, empathy and compassion meant that he was ideally suited to firing people without losing sleep over it. He had no previous experience of the television industry but regarded this as an advantage since, as he frequently pointed out, it meant that he had no misconceptions or misplaced loyalties.

He wore a small, neat and almost convincing wig and had false teeth that didn't speak at quite the same rate that he did. His two large and ferocious looking Dobermans, Recto and Verso, sat at his feet slobbering and growling constantly. It was rumoured that the dogs hated their master almost as much as his employees and that although they had attacked him several times they had never attacked anyone else. Streaky had once claimed that if a mugger attacked Buttress the dogs would join forces with the mugger rather than helping their putative master.

During the period that he had been in charge at Better Television Ernest Buttress had made no secret of the fact that he had been appointed solely to make the company more profitable. A specially commissioned, and extremely expensive study of the company's accounts and working practices had shown that the largest expenditure was on programme making. Naturally, therefore, Mr Buttress had chosen to cut costs by making cheaper programmes. Since Mr Buttress seemed to enjoy, and be particularly talented at, making people unhappy he enjoyed his work immensely.

'Ah, Treadmill,' said Mr Buttress, looking up briefly to confirm that the chair he was addressing was, indeed, occupied. 'You're the producer of our arts programme 'The Arts This Week'. Is that right?' He read the title of the programme from a paper in the folder in front of him. He read it as though he'd never even seen it before.

'Brimstone,' said Biffo.

'Is it? I thought it was called 'The Arts This Week'. Are you absolutely sure?'

'I'm Brimstone.'

'Are you?'

'I think so. I usually have been in the past.'

'It says Treadmill here.'

Biffo sighed. 'Then please call me Treadmill if it's easier.'

'Right. Er, thank you. Well I've got some pretty exciting news for you Tread. . .er. . .mill. I want you to produce one of our new family quiz programmes. It'll go out every weekday morning. Huge responsibility. Tremendous opportunity. Educational television for the masses.' Buttress beamed like a genial visitor bestowing an extra half day's holiday at a school speech day.

Biffo paused for a few moments. 'A quiz programme?'

'You'll love it,' insisted Buttress. 'And so will the viewers. We are going to have two husbands and two wives in the studio. And the presenter will have copies of their cheque books. Each partner then has to guess what the cheque stubs in his or her partner's old cheque book refer to. Marvellous stuff! When they get an answer correct we give them points towards a holiday in Benidorm. If they get an answer wrong they remove an item of clothing.'

Biffo blanched and hesitated, looking for the right words. 'I've never produced a quiz programme before,' he said.

‘Oh, don’t worry about that. You’ll find this very easy. Nothing at all to it. Just make sure you get lots of close ups of everyone’s faces. And when the accusations and counter accusations and tears start coming — zoom right in close! When someone gets down to their underclothing they get drenched in green slime.’

‘Green slime?’

‘Something the special effects people make up. It doesn’t cost much. And by getting the contestants to strip down to their underwear we save on cleaning bills.’

‘I’m not sure this is something I’m really qualified to do. . .’ Biffo said. He felt detached from what was going on. It was as though he was floating several feet above himself, looking down and watching someone he knew slightly having this bizarre conversation with this small stupid-looking man.

‘Don’t sell yourself short, Treadmill! You’re going to be really good at this.’

‘Oh,’ said Biffo. Although this was clearly intended as a compliment he didn’t think it was one. He hesitated. ‘Don’t you think the station is making enough quiz programmes?’

Buttress looked at him and frowned. ‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Don’t you think the station is making. . .’

‘Yes, yes, I heard you,’ frowned Buttress, who clearly did not understand. ‘How can we possibly be making enough quiz programmes?’

‘Isn’t there a danger that the viewing public will get tired of quiz programmes?’

Buttress stared at him without understanding. ‘The public love quiz shows,’ he said. ‘They can’t get enough of them.’

‘Who is going to produce ‘The Arts This Week’?’ asked Biffo.

Buttress frowned. ‘The what?’

‘The Arts This Week’ replied Biffo. ‘That’s the name of the arts programme I produce.’

Buttress flicked .through the papers in his folder. ‘Do you? Arts? Oh no. Oh dear me no. We won’t be making that I’m afraid. The viewers don’t want that sort of stuff.’

‘You’re stopping the programme?’

‘Oh yes.’

‘It’s the only arts programme the station produces,’ said Biffo, who felt he had a responsibility to defend the programme which had taken up so much of his life for so many years. ‘If that goes Better Television won’t be producing any arts programmes at all.’

Biffo wondered why he was defending a programme which he truly no longer enjoyed making. He realised that even if Buttress told him that he could continue making the programme he would still want to walk away and say ‘No’. He felt he was standing at a crossroads in his life but although he knew which roads he didn’t want to take he didn’t know which road he did want to follow. He knew he had to make a choice. And he knew there would be few, if any, more chances to make a choice of this magnitude.

He realised, suddenly and with astounding clarity, that all the major decisions in his life had been made either by accident or on a whim.

At school he had chosen to study subjects which were taught by the teachers he liked or which his friends had chosen. He remembered that he had chosen art as his main subject because the art teacher was a young, well-developed female who invariably wore tight sweaters.

Why, he wondered had he applied for a job in broadcasting? He had never thought about any of this before and he found it alarming to realise just how rudderless his life had been.

His whole career had, it seemed, been founded on nothing more important or substantial than the well-built chest of a woman with whom he had never had anything more than a superficial, boy-teacher relationship and whose name he now couldn't even remember.

'There you are. Proves my point. Absolutely no market for arts programmes.'

'But the programme gets quite good ratings,' Biffo heard himself protesting, rather half-heartedly. 'For an arts programme,' he added.

'Too expensive,' said Buttress. 'Far too expensive. All those reporters and cameramen.' He leant forward a little. 'You creative types don't understand finance,' he smiled in a very patronising sort of way. 'Quiz shows. That's the future for television. Quiz shows. The viewers love 'em and they're cheap to make!' He smiled properly at this thought. 'We can make a quiz programme for a fraction of what your arts programme costs. And we get a higher rate from the advertisers.'

Biffo closed his eyes and put his head in his hands. He felt old and tired. He had heard the same argument put forward a hundred times before. He was tired of it. 'You are a bloody philistine, Buttress,' he wanted to say. 'You are ruining a powerful and valuable medium for the sake of quick profits. I loathe you and despise you and I don't want to have anything more to do with your miserable operation.'

But the truth was he really didn't care any more. In his heart he knew that the programme to which he had devoted so much of his life was nothing more than a vehicle for pretentious and untalented individuals with very large egos. They were simply trying to grab some fame and money. He was tired of pandering to their whims. He was tired of his job. He was tired of television. He suddenly remembered another reason why he had applied for that job in broadcasting: one of his lecturers had introduced him to a radio producer who had long hair and a maroon corduroy jacket. He had, he remembered, been impressed by the man's bohemian appearance and apparent intellectual integrity.

'Well, what do you say Treadmill? I haven't got all day.'

Biffo opened his eyes. He suddenly realised that although he invariably worried endlessly about the minor decisions in his life he had rarely, if ever, given much thought or consideration to the big decisions.

He would worry for hours when faced with a decision about which new lawnmower or washing machine to buy. He and his wife Edwina would spend days looking at brochures before buying a new carpet or a new car.

But the big decisions had been taken more by accident than design.

He wished he could remember why he had asked Edwina to marry him.

'No time for dreaming here Treadmill!' said the man behind the desk. Biffo dragged himself back to reality. The little man in the absurd toupee was pounding his tiny fist on the desk in front of him. 'People who pull together arrive at their destination together,' he said.

Biffo recognised the quote and wondered where he'd seen it before. Then he remembered: it had been one of the thoughts for the day that he had noticed a little earlier when he had been flicking through the company calendar.

With a deep sadness Biffo realised that he wasn't just tired of his job; it was far, far worse than that: he was tired of just about everything in his life. There didn't seem to be any point in anything any more. He came to work because it was an escape from home. And he went home because it was an escape from work. The two daily journeys between home had become the highlights of his life.

'My name is Brimstone not Treadmill,' Biffo heard himself saying.

Buttress stared at him and then suddenly looked at his watch and stood up. This was a clear signal that there was a train due in at one of the stations on the boardroom table.

Biffo said and did nothing.

‘Do you want the job or not?’ asked Buttress, looking at his watch again and edging nervously towards the door which led directly into the boardroom. The Better Television boss still believed that his railway set was a well-kept secret.

Biffo stared back. But he wasn’t looking at Buttress. He was thinking back over his life and wondering where he had gone wrong. Without saying another word he stood up and headed for the door.

‘Do you want this job or not?’ demanded Buttress again. He was trying to look impressive and imposing. He was such a small and insignificant man that he failed miserably.

‘No thanks,’ said Biffo. ‘I don’t want the job. I’m leaving. I resign.’

Buttress opened and closed his mouth several times but nothing apart from a few specks of saliva came out.

When Biffo was still several paces away from the door the door opened as though as by magic. Roderick, the personal and private assistant who always listened in on the intercom, was standing in the doorway.

‘No one quits this company!’ shouted Buttress. ‘You’re fired Treadmill!’

Biffo didn’t say a word. He walked out of the office, out of the building, out into the car park and out of the life he had led for most of his adult life.

Buttress ran for the boardroom but it was no good; the 11.15 was a minute late. The Better Television boss was in a foul mood for the rest of the day. He hated it when his trains didn’t run on time.

Chapter 5

‘You resigned!’ said Edwina, Biffo’s wife, for the fourth or possibly the fifth time. He wasn’t sure whether the comment was intended to be a statement or a question. ‘Why?’ she demanded. ‘What happened?’

Edwina was medium height but so slim that she looked quite tall. She was an immaculate woman who was so concerned about her appearance that if she had to get up at night to go to the loo she would automatically check her hair before she went into the bathroom. Today her hair was blonde with reddish streaks. She was wearing a beige silk trouser suit and beige highheeled shoes. She had a pearl necklace around her throat and was wearing pearl drop earrings.

‘I resigned,’ agreed Biffo, for the fourth or possibly the fifth time. He frowned and tried in vain to remember what had happened in Buttress’s office. ‘I can’t really remember what happened,’ he admitted.

He sat down on one of the expensive kitchen chairs which Edwina had bought because they had been made by a carpenter who, if the free colour magazine which came with his daily newspaper was to be believed, sold his work to television celebrities and minor aristocrats.

The chairs looked like the type of modern art that can only be created with the aid of a hefty government grant. They would not have been out of place in the sort of museum that no one ever visits unless it is raining. The chairs were not designed with the human bottom in mind and were, consequently, desperately uncomfortable to sit on.

Edwina’s hobbies were spending money and keeping ahead of the neighbours. Her most arduous activity was sitting at home waiting for men to come and repair her many laboursaving gadgets.

William Morris, the Victorian poet and wallpaper designer, once declared that every artefact should be beautiful or useful or, preferably, both. Generally speaking most people’s belongings can be divided into four categories: the practical but ugly, the beautiful but useless, the practical and pretty and the impractical and ugly. Edwina had somehow managed to furnish a whole house with artefacts which fell comfortably and unarguably into the fourth of these categories.

Biffo, struggling to stop himself sliding forwards on the uncomfortable chair, wondered if other people allowed themselves to be buffeted through life by fate. He managed to hold himself on the chair by jamming his feet against the fridge. Maybe, he thought, other people planned their lives properly; choosing career and partner with at least the same amount of thought that they would put into choosing a new pair of curtains or a sweater. Maybe other people had proper plans and did things which they had chosen to do with their lives.

‘Why?’ demanded Edwina. This time Biffo was in no doubt. This was definitely a question. Edwina had a way with words: she turned them all into weapons. Somehow the short words always seemed to make the sharpest weapons. Biffo tried to think of an answer but was waylaid into trying to remember why he had married Edwina.

He knew he must have loved her once but he couldn’t remember what it was about her that he had found loveable.

Tiger, their elderly mackerel tabby cat (so named because of her impressive looking stripes rather than her size or man-eating abilities) rubbed against Biffo’s legs. Biffo reached down and stroked the cat’s back and neck. She purred and raised her head so that he could tickle her under the chin. The cat had originally been bought for Jasmine (who had had a temper tantrum outside a local pet shop until the animal was purchased) but she had lost interest in her in less than a week. Now Tiger was the closest thing Biffo had to a friend. A few years earlier she had been run over by an unknown motorist and she still walked with a limp. Edwina, who never called the cat by her name, disliked the way she left hairs over the carpet and the furniture and had for years fought an increasingly bitter battle to have her put down.

‘Why?’ repeated a tireless Edwina. It occurred to Biffo that if she were equipped with a small white wig and a black gown she could earn a good living as a prosecuting counsel.

‘I’ve told you,’ sighed Biffo wearily. ‘Buttress wanted me to produce a quiz programme designed to encourage husbands and wives to have rows with each other over money.’

‘And you refused?’ Edwina demanded, surprised and outraged. She bent down, peered at Tiger and then recoiled and scowled. ‘The cat’s got fleas again,’ she announced, almost with delight.

‘Yes. I think so.’ Biffo closed his eyes and tried to think back through the years. What had he ever seen in this woman with whom he had pledged to spend the rest of his life. ‘Her name is Tiger,’ he added, almost absent-mindedly.

‘I know his name is Tiger,’ said Edwina. The cat looked up at Biffo who, recognising the look, uncrossed his legs to make a comfortable lap. ‘But he’s still got fleas.’

‘If you know her name why do you always refer to her as ‘the cat’ or ‘that cat’?’ asked Biffo.

Tiger jumped up onto his lap, turned round three times and sat down. ‘And why do you always call her a he when she is a she?’

‘What on earth does it matter?’ demanded Edwina, dismissively. ‘It’s only a cat. I suppose you’re too clever and important to produce quiz programmes?’

‘It’s not what I want to do with my life. I wouldn’t be happy producing quiz programmes.’

‘Happiness isn’t everything,’ snapped back Edwina sharply.

Through the mists of a memory overcrowded with experiences Biffo had dragged out a memory of Edwina as a young woman. He remembered her as being rather shy and uncertain. They had, he remembered, met in the university library. There had been an ogre of a librarian on duty that day and Edwina hadn’t had the courage to ask her for the book she wanted. Although he too had been frightened of the ogre he had done the asking on Edwina’s behalf. She had been pitifully grateful. She had smiled at him and he had asked her if she would like to go for a cup of tea in the university refectory.

He realised now why he had married her: he had felt sorry for her and protective towards her.

It seemed bizarre now to think that he could have ever felt protective towards Edwina.

‘You must go straight back and tell him you made a mistake,’ said Edwina firmly. She spoke to him as she would speak to a naughty, and slightly backward, child. Biffo realised, as this thought occurred to him, that she had never spoken to their own children in that way.

‘I don’t want to,’ said Biffo. He realised with some horror that he was talking to her as though he was a sulky child.

He idly stroked Tiger as he thought and talked.

After leaving university he had taken a job as a junior researcher at a radio station. He’d taken that job because it had meant that he didn’t have to find another flat. He and Edwina had, he remembered, been terribly short of money. Their flat was cramped and slightly damp but they’d loved it.

He remembered buying his first car: an old Ford with two gears, no bumpers and a hand brake that came off in your hand if you pulled at it too sharply. Cars didn’t have to pass Ministry of Transport road safety tests in those distant days. Edwina had been as thrilled as he had been.

‘We agreed that you would work until you were 65. We agreed that early retirement wasn’t right for you,’ said Edwina.

‘You agreed those things,’ Biffo corrected her in his mind. But he didn’t say anything. He remembered the conversation. Or, rather, the monologue. She had decreed that he should work until he reached his 65th birthday and that for the last decade of his working life they should save as much as they could so that their pension would be well supplemented with extra cash.

It was, he remembered quite distinctly, Edwina who had decided that he should stay at a job he loathed and then, when tired and weary, and when all his hopes and ambitions had faded, he should quietly retire to enjoy some minor and insignificant hobby (not yet selected) and start preparing himself for the grave.

It occurred to him that without his wife his financial needs would be considerably less and that he would be able to live a much more pleasant life. He felt frightened, and slightly ashamed, by the thought. It seemed oddly sacrilegious.

‘You have to work until you reach 65 to get a decent pension,’ said Edwina, ignoring him, as she invariably did.

Biffo realised that not only did he not love his wife but he didn’t even like her. It was a sad realisation. She had become a demanding, greedy, shrewish woman; worst of all, perhaps, she was an enormously selfish woman. Underneath a cruel, harsh, uncaring exterior there was a cruel, harsh, uncaring woman. He wondered if, deep down, she had always been that way or if she had changed over the years. He wondered if it was his fault.

He felt very alone. He wanted someone to hug him, to hold him close, to tell him that everything would be all right, but there wasn’t anyone in the world he could turn to. Streaky Bacon was his best friend and Streaky had troubles and worries of his own. Besides, they had never shared their private thoughts or fears.

He could not remember when he had last hugged or even touched his wife. He could not remember when she had last hugged or touched him. He could not remember when they had last made love.

‘And just what are we supposed to do for money?’ demanded Edwina, still on the warpath.

Biffo scratched his head. He wasn’t interested in money or worried about their lack of it. Somehow, it didn’t seem important. ‘Something will come up,’ he said, confidently. He realised, with some surprise, that he meant this; he really wasn’t worried about the future at all. He was too busy coming to terms with the fact that his life was changing.

It seemed unlikely but he seemed to remember that he and Edwina had laughed quite often in the dark and distant past. He tried to remember what Edwina looked like when she laughed properly. It had, he thought, been a long time since she’d laughed. Come to that it had been a long time since he’d laughed. Why, he wondered, didn’t they ever laugh any more?

He wanted to laugh. He wanted to have fun. He wanted to throw off the burdens of responsibility which he had carried throughout adulthood. He felt as though he were Gulliver, tied down by a thousand slender ropes. The ropes seemed fragile but they were impossible to break.

‘Something will come up!’ sneered Edwina, her sharp features distorted by an unpleasant mixture of rage and scorn. ‘How am I supposed to manage while we wait for something to come up? I’ve got a dinner party to cater for next Saturday. How am I supposed to pay my hairdresser? I’ve got a new dress being made for me by Cynthia De Little. Do you know how expensive she is? I need new shoes. My car is nearly two years old.’

‘You’ve got hundreds of pairs of shoes,’ Biffo pointed out. He realised, when he’d said it that this was probably not an exaggeration. ‘Why do you need so many pairs of shoes?’ he asked, not really expecting an answer.

‘Don’t be stupid,’ snapped Edwina, brushing aside the question as though it did not even merit consideration. ‘If you had to go why couldn’t you let them make you redundant! You’d have been given redundancy money and I wouldn’t have to walk the streets barefoot!’

‘It was a matter of pride,’ said Biffo, realising as he said it that Edwina would not understand. He wondered if there had been a time when she would have understood. ‘I wanted to resign. I wanted to leave.’

And because of your pride the rest of the family has to starve?’ said Edwina. She made the statement into a question by raising her voice at the end of the sentence but it wasn't really intended as a question at all.

'We won't starve,' said Biffo, trying to reason with her. 'We own our house. We own both cars. We don't owe anything to anyone now that we've paid off the mortgage. We have money in the building society.'

'And just how long do you think that is going to last?' demanded Edwina.

'We can make it last six or nine months if we're careful,' said Biffo.

'Hrmph!' snorted Edwina. She snorted a lot these days. 'And what are you going to be doing in the meanwhile? Watching television? Playing golf? Just getting under my feet I expect. Pansy Fletcher's husband lost his job and spent all his time around the house. He drove her quite mad.'

'I don't play golf,' said Biffo. He paused and thought for a moment. 'I'm going to write a novel.' he said suddenly. He regretted saying it the moment the words had left his mouth.

Edwina stared at him as though he had announced that he was going to climb Everest on roller skates. 'You're going to write a novel!' she snorted derisively. 'What do you know about writing a novel?'

'I've always wanted to write a novel,' said Biffo, rather defensively. He felt distinctly uncomfortable. 'I think this will be a good opportunity.'

He wondered what had inspired him to say that he was going to write a novel. He had wanted to write a novel when he had been much younger. But that had been a long time ago. It was a dream he had forgotten he had. And now he wished he hadn't shared the dream with Edwina.

'And when the money runs out? What will you do then?'

'We can always move to a smaller house if I haven't managed to sell my novel or get a decent job,' said Biffo. 'We could sell this place, buy a cottage, put the difference in the bank and live on the interest.'

'Sell the house!' said Edwina, horrified.

'I haven't really thought about it. It's just an idea,' said Biffo, defensively again. 'Just a possibility.'

'But we couldn't possibly do that,' insisted Edwina. 'What would all our friends think?'

'What does it matter what they think?' asked Biffo. 'The important thing is that we can regard this as an opportunity. An opportunity for both of us to decide what we want out of life. An opportunity for us to get to know one another again.'

Edwina remained speechless for a few moments. 'That just about sums it all up, doesn't it!' she said. 'What does it matter what they think?' she repeated. 'We are talking about our friends,' she reminded Biffo. 'We couldn't invite them to visit us in a cottage. And how could I possibly visit them knowing that we were living in some disgusting, damp little cottage? And what about the children?' she asked. 'Have you thought about them?' She snorted again. It was an unpleasant sound.

Biffo stared at her but didn't speak.

'And why do we need an opportunity to get to know one another again?' she demanded. 'I think I know you quite well enough already, thank you very much.' She paused. 'In fact, I think I probably know you rather too well.'

'The children are old enough to stand on their own feet,' Biffo reminded her. 'Toby is twenty two and Jasmine is twenty.'

'Are you suggesting that we throw Jasmine out onto the streets?' demanded Edwina. And Toby? I suppose you want him to give up his music career and get a job in a bank?'

‘He doesn’t have to get a job in a bank,’ said Biffo, who considered it extremely unlikely that a bank, or indeed any other employer, would be prepared to give Toby a job. ‘But he’s old enough to look after himself. It would do him good.’

He realised that he liked his children about as much as he liked his wife. He wondered where he had gone wrong as a father. In his heart he did not feel that he was a bad man. How could he have produced such awful children?

‘Are you talking about me?’ demanded a youth, suddenly appearing in the kitchen.

Chapter 6

Although it was late morning Toby, Biffo and Edwina’s only son and male heir, had clearly only just woken up.

He had shoulder length thick black hair and a straggly, wispy beard and was naked apart from a pair of black socks and a pair of expensive unisex underpants. ‘You woke me,’ he complained. ‘Can I have a cup of coffee, mum?’

‘Your father has given up his job,’ said Edwina, dramatically. ‘We’re all going to be in the poor house. You’re going to have to get a job in a bank and he’s going to put Jasmine and me on the streets.’ She moved past Biffo and Toby so that she could fill the electric kettle. When it was plugged into the socket beside the sink she reached into a cupboard and took out a jar of instant coffee and a mug. ‘He says he’s going to write a novel,’ she said. She made it sound absurd, as if he had said he was going to invent a new antibiotic.

‘Why can’t you wait until you retire to write a novel?’ demanded Edwina, talking to Biffo but aiming the words at her son. She slammed the mug and the jar of instant coffee down onto the counter beside the sink and then folded her arms and stared out of the window. Toby yawned, put a hand into the front of his designer underpants and lazily scratched whatever he found in there.

‘Don’t do that dear,’ said Edwina, without turning from the window. ‘Not in public,’ she said, gently reproving.

‘I don’t like my job,’ said Biffo. It was weakness, he decided, which had made him a poor husband and a poorer father. He had failed because he had allowed Edwina to make too many of the decisions that mattered. He had allowed her to take control because he didn’t like arguments.

‘Most people don’t like their jobs,’ said Edwina. ‘That’s what jobs are. You’re not supposed to like them. You’re just supposed to do them. That’s why they’re called jobs.’

‘I’ll be too tired, too weary and too exhausted to do anything when I retire,’ said Biffo. ‘I want to do something with my life now — while I’m still young enough.’

‘Young!’ sneered Edwina derisively. ‘Don’t kid yourself!’

‘I’m not all that old,’ said Biffo, defensively.

‘You’re forty seven!’ snapped Edwina.

‘Am I?’ said Biffo.

‘Forty seven!’ repeated Edwina.

Biffo thought about this for a moment. ‘I’m forty six,’ he said. ‘I’m not forty seven yet.’

‘Forty seven, forty six, forty eight, what does it matter?’ said Edwina. ‘You’re old. I’m old. We’re both old. And just what do you want to do with your life?’ Edwina demanded. ‘Apart from writing some damned silly novel?’

Biffo thought about this before answering. ‘I don’t know,’ he admitted. He felt embarrassed. He wished he hadn’t mentioned the novel. ‘I want to feel alive. I want to have some fun.’

‘Oh my God!’ said Edwina. She snorted and waved her arms in the air as though appealing to an audience. ‘He’s going through a mid-life crisis!’

‘Maybe I am,’ said Biffo, with a shrug. It didn’t seem to matter what anyone called it. Maybe it was a mid-life crisis. Or maybe he had, for the first time, seen his life for what it was.

‘I know what it is. It’s your hormones,’ said Edwina firmly. ‘Go and see the doctor. Get him to give you something for it. But before you do that ring up Ernest Buttress and tell him you’ll be thrilled to make quiz programmes for him.’

Biffo didn’t say or do anything.

‘This isn’t going to affect my skiing trip, is it?’ demanded Toby, scratching his unshaven chin.

‘Oh there won’t be any more holidays,’ said Edwina bitterly, turning back and glaring at Biffo. ‘We won’t be able to afford holidays.’ She made it sound as though Biffo had deliberately doomed them to a life of poverty.

‘But I’ve already told the guys I’ll go with them,’ whined Toby, with a pout. He slid a hand inside the back of his underpants and scratched down there too.

‘There you are,’ said Edwina to Biffo. ‘I hope you’re proud of yourself now. Your only son. And you’re telling him he can’t go on holiday.’ She put a protective arm around her son. ‘You’ve been looking forward to this for ages, haven’t you darling?’

‘He can’t have been looking forward to it for all that long,’ protested Biffo. ‘He went skiing two months ago!’

‘If you don’t go regularly you lose all the skills you’ve acquired,’ explained Toby. ‘That damned cat’s got fleas,’ he added, nodding towards Tiger, who was now fast asleep on Biffo’s lap.

‘He’s good enough to be winning medals in the Olympics, aren’t you, dear?’ said Edwina.

‘I don’t agree with competition,’ said Toby, pompously. ‘It’s damaging to the inner spirit.’

‘Exactly,’ said Edwina, who always agreed with Toby, whatever he said. The kettle boiled. She turned and put two spoonfuls of coffee granules into the mug. She then poured hot water onto the coffee granules and handed the mug to Toby.

‘What’s going on?’ The voice belonged to a young woman who appeared in the kitchen doorway. She was wearing a man’s shirt and nothing else. She had long black hair and was beautiful. ‘You woke John up,’ she complained.

‘Who’s John?’ asked Biffo, puzzled.

‘John is Jasmine’s boyfriend,’ explained Edwina. ‘If you took any interest in your children you would know that.’

‘Has he been sleeping here?’ asked Biffo.

‘He’s moved in for a while,’ said Edwina.

‘Moved in?’ said Biffo. ‘Who is he? Why haven’t I met him? Are you sleeping with him, Jasmine?’

‘Of course she’s sleeping with him, Bernard,’ said Edwina. Now that his parents were dead Edwina and the nice woman who signed letters for Reader’s Digest were the only people in the world to call him Bernard. ‘Don’t be silly and old-fashioned. He had a little bit of trouble with his landlord so he’s staying here for a while. His father is a consultant surgeon.’

‘I don’t care who his father is,’ said Biffo.

‘He operated on a member of the Royal Family last year,’ said Edwina.

‘An Arab sheik, mother,’ said Jasmine.

‘Well I expect he was a member of the Royal Family,’ said Edwina. ‘They all are aren’t they?’

‘By the way, Dad, the cat’s got fleas,’ said Jasmine.

‘Since you’re home can I borrow your car, Dad?’ asked Toby. ‘Some of the guys are going surfing. I said I’d go with them. But we’re short of a car.’

‘Where are you going surfing?’ demanded Biffo. ‘There isn’t any surf for two hundred miles!’

‘Cornwall,’ said Toby. ‘Or possibly Wales.’

‘I thought your boyfriend was called Dominic,’ said Biffo, turning and speaking to Jasmine.

‘Dominic!’ said Jasmine, screwing up her face. ‘Give me a break!’

‘That was two weeks ago!’ said Edwina. ‘It really would be nice if you showed some interest in your children’s lives.’

Biffo thought for a moment. ‘But wasn’t it Dominic who stayed here last weekend? Tall, dyed blonde hair?’ Not for the first time Biffo felt like a stranger in his own home. He looked down at Tiger, still lying on his lap. Tiger looked thoroughly relaxed. Biffo sometimes felt as though Tiger was the only member of the family with whom he had any real affinity.

‘Yes, but that was ages ago,’ said Jasmine. ‘He wanted to get married.’ She screwed up her nose and made a face.

‘Can I take the car then?’ asked Toby.

‘Is that coffee you’re making, Mum?’ asked Jasmine.

‘The kettle has just boiled,’ said Edwina.

‘John only drinks Colombian Gold with fresh cream and cane sugar and a dash of rum,’ said Jasmine.

Edwina moved towards the refrigerator. ‘Move your foot,’ she said to Biffo.

Biffo braced himself and moved his foot away from the refrigerator. Tiger lifted her head and looked at him. He stroked her back and she settled down again.

‘Oh dear,’ said Edwina, a moment or two later, looking up from the refrigerator. ‘I don’t think we’ve got any fresh cream.’

‘Oh, mother!’ said Jasmine, pouting. She turned to her father. ‘What’s all the discussion about? John and I could hear people shouting.’

‘Oh yes, here we are,’ said Edwina, relieved. She took the cream out of the fridge.

‘I’ve left Better Television,’ said Biffo.

‘Oh,’ said Jasmine, without much interest. ‘Congratulations on the new job. Where are you going to work? Have you had a pay rise?’

‘He isn’t going to work,’ said Edwina. ‘He hasn’t got a new job. Your father has decided that he’s going to write a novel.’

‘Oh, cool,’ said Jasmine. ‘Are we going to be super rich? Can I have a car?’

‘It doesn’t pay at all,’ said Edwina coldly. ‘Your father has walked out on his job and now he doesn’t have a salary. We’re going to have to move into a hovel. Probably a council house. We’ll be in the poor house.’

We will not be in the poor house!’ insisted Biffo. ‘Anyway, they don’t have poor houses any more.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Jasmine, frowning. ‘How can you not have a salary?’ she asked her father.

‘I guess I’m just like you and your brother,’ said Biffo.

Jasmine laughed nervously and brushed her hair back out of her eyes. ‘Is this a joke?’ she asked, looking rather desperately at her father and then at her mother.

‘No,’ said Edwina firmly. ‘It’s no joke.’

‘John wants us to go to Paris next week,’ said Jasmine. ‘I said I’d go.’

‘That’s fine,’ said Biffo. ‘It’ll be one less mouth for your mother to feed. Now that we’re poor it’ll be a help.’

‘John’s an unrecognised anti-establishment freestyle artist,’ said Jasmine. ‘I said you’d pay for the tickets and the hotel.’

‘I’m afraid not,’ said Biffo, shaking his head. He paused. ‘I thought freestyle was a swimming stroke.’

‘Don’t be stupid, Daddy,’ said Jasmine. ‘Aren’t you supposed to be an expert on the arts?’ A thought suddenly occurred to her. ‘I told John you’d put him into your programme,’ she said. ‘You will still be able to get him onto television, won’t you?’

‘This poverty thing isn’t going to affect my allowance is it?’ asked Toby, suddenly looking very concerned.

Jasmine stared at him and then stared at her mother.

‘Maybe you two could try and get jobs,’ suggested Biffo.

‘And just how do you suggest they do that?’ asked Edwina, rather impatiently. ‘They don’t have the time to get jobs.’

‘I thought maybe they could fit something in around their other commitments,’ suggested Biffo, with some slight irony. The irony was wasted.

‘Sorry, Dad,’ said Toby. ‘I just don’t think that will be possible. I’ve got band rehearsals twice a week.’

‘But you only rehearse in the evenings,’ Biffo pointed out.

‘But we go on until two or three in the morning and so I can’t get up until twelve the following day,’ said Toby. He picked up the mug of coffee his mother had made and sipped from it noisily. ‘This is too hot, mum,’ he complained.

‘If you sign on as unemployed you’ll get some sort of benefit,’ suggested Biffo.

‘Oh come on, Dad!’ said Toby. ‘I couldn’t do that. That would be degrading.’ He handed the mug of coffee back to his mother who poured out a little of the black liquid and replaced it with cold water. ‘Besides, you have to turn up to claim the money. It’s strictly uncool.’

‘I’m going to have to sign on,’ said Biffo.

‘I thought you were going to write a novel,’ said Edwina.

‘I want to,’ said Biffo. ‘But I think I’ll probably have to sign on at the Labour Exchange while I write the novel.’

‘I don’t think they call it that any more, Dad,’ said Jasmine. She clasped her arms around her chest.

‘What do they call it?’ asked Biffo.

There was silence. No one knew the answer to this tricky question.

‘Well, where is it?’ asked Biffo. ‘Does anyone know where we all sign on?’

There was silence again. It occurred to Biffo that Labour Exchanges and unemployment benefit were not subjects on which the Brimstones would have won prizes if they had been appearing on the sort of television quiz show that Ernest Buttress liked.

Edwina handed two mugs of coffee out to Jasmine who took her arms from around her chest and took the two mugs without thanks. ‘Well, just what am I expected to tell John about Paris?’ she demanded, sulkily. ‘It’s not fair. You might have thought of us before you started making big decisions that affect our lives.’

‘And what am I supposed to tell the guys about the skiing trip?’ demanded Toby. Suddenly, he brightened up. ‘I know,’ he said to his sister, ‘we can use our credit cards!’

‘Brilliant!’ said Jasmine, delightedly.

‘I’m afraid I’m going to have to cancel your credit cards,’ said Biffo.

‘What?’ demanded Toby.

‘You can’t do that!’ said Jasmine, incredulously.

‘Well, that’s just the end, isn’t it,’ said Edwina, as though she now knew that there was nothing worse that she could hear.

‘We can’t risk having unexpected bills coming in,’ explained Biffo. ‘We have to keep a close eye on our finances from now on.’

‘I’m going back to bed,’ said Toby, suddenly. He clutched his mug of coffee to him as though it were a good luck talisman.

‘Me too,’ said Jasmine. ‘I’ll have to go and tell John that you’ve said he can’t go to Paris,’ she said to her father.

‘I didn’t say he can’t go to Paris,’ said Biffo. ‘I just said I couldn’t pay for him to go.’

‘He’s an artist,’ said Jasmine, angrily. ‘You’re suppressing his creativity. You’ll probably ruin his artistic progress.’

‘Well I just hope you’re pleased with yourself,’ said Edwina, when the two children had disappeared.

‘It could be the best thing that’s ever happened to them,’ said Biffo. ‘Maybe this will encourage them to take some responsibility for their own lives. And maybe it will be good for us too. It’ll be a challenge. It’ll be like starting over again. It’ll bring us closer together.’

‘I don’t want a challenge,’ said Edwina. ‘I don’t want to start over again. And why do we want to be brought closer together?’

‘I just thought. . .’ began Biffo, miserably.

The telephone rang. They both looked at it for a moment without moving. And then Edwina picked it up.

‘Oh, Heather, darling!’ she said. ‘How lovely to hear from you.’ She listened carefully for several minutes, adding only a light scattering of ‘Yesses’, ‘Nos’, ‘How wonderfuls’ and ‘Of courses’ to the conversation.

‘That was Heather,’ she said unnecessarily, when she had put the telephone down. ‘She’s managed to book tickets for the opera next month. It’s Don Giovanni. The tickets are £200 each. I said I’d send her a cheque.’ She looked at her watch. ‘I can’t go to the opera without a new dress so I’m going to go into town to see what I can find.’

‘Edwina,’ said Biffo, wearily. ‘Haven’t you heard anything I’ve been saying? We can’t afford new dresses and opera tickets. I no longer have a job or a salary.’

Edwina just stared at him. ‘I’m not telling Heather Tompkins that you’ve not got a job,’ she told him. ‘I refuse to allow you to embarrass me in this way.’

Just then Toby came racing into the kitchen holding his mobile phone. ‘I’ve got Nigel on the line,’ he announced. ‘He says he’ll lend me the money for the skiing trip and you can pay him back in a month’s time. OK?’

‘No,’ said Biffo. ‘It’s not OK.’ He took the telephone from Toby.

‘Nigel? This is Biffo. Toby’s father. I’m afraid that I’ve gone bankrupt. Please don’t lend Toby any money.’ He switched the telephone off and handed it back to Toby who stared at it, and his father, in disbelief

Edwina opened and closed her mouth twice. ‘Was that Nigel Patterson?’ she asked Toby. Toby nodded. ‘Do you know who the Pattersons are?’ she asked Biffo.

‘Of course I do,’ said Biffo.

‘Helen Patterson is the chair of the Church Restoration Fund and Michael Patterson is a merchant banker,’ she said. ‘He works in the city.’

‘I know that,’ said Biffo.

‘He drives a late model BMW’

‘I know that.’

‘An expensive BMW Not one of the cheap ones.’

‘I know that.’

‘It has all the extras,’ added Edwina.

Biffo wondered when, and from whom, Edwina had acquired her materialistic attitude towards life. It was, he realised, largely because of her that he had spent much of his life doing something he didn’t really enjoy solely in order to earn money. And then spending the money on things he didn’t need or even want.

‘You have deliberately and cruelly embarrassed this family,’ said Edwina. ‘I am leaving you and going back to my mother.’

‘Your mother lives in a two bedroom terraced house on the outskirts of Bolton,’ Biffo reminded her accurately. ‘The last time you went back to her you stayed in a four star hotel in Manchester and ran up a £1,500 hotel bill.’

It seemed to Biffo that there was a direct correlation between the amount of money he had earned and the amount of misery in his life. He wondered if he and Edwina would have been happier if he had never sought promotion and they had stayed in their small rented flat. Had it been his fault that Edwina had become utterly materialistic?

‘You and I are finished,’ said Edwina coldly. ‘But I’m not leaving this house. You’re the one who should go.’

When Biffo heard this he was shocked. Although he didn’t like his wife it had never occurred to him to leave her. He had always assumed that he and Edwina would spend the rest of their lives together. But now, suddenly, he knew that what Edwina said made sense. He felt that maybe she would be happier without him. And he felt pretty sure that the only way he could rediscover his life, and rebuild his passion for living, was to be away from her.

He wondered whether it was his fault that Edwina had become obsessed with money. Maybe if he had spent more time at home their relationship would have stayed alive for longer. He would never know.

‘You’re right,’ said Biffo. ‘I’ll leave.’ He gently lifted Tiger from his lap and put the cat down on the floor. Tiger yawned and miaowed and stayed where she had been put.

When he heard himself say this Biffo realised instantly that he meant it and that he had to go now. He went out into the hall, heading for the stairs, and as he did so passed an angrylooking man in a black shirt and a cheap grey suit. The man glowered at Biffo as he opened the front door and walked out. At the top of the stairs Jasmine, now wearing a white towelling dressing gown, was sobbing and leaning on the banisters.

‘John has left me,’ Jasmine said to her father. ‘It’s all your fault!’

Biffo, looked at her, started to speak and then changed his mind. He simply couldn’t think of anything useful to say. He went upstairs into the bedroom which he had shared with Edwina for more years than he could remember. He took off his suit and replaced it with clothes in which he felt a little more comfortable. He then tossed a few things into a small suitcase before going into the tiny fourth bedroom which he used as his study and collecting a laptop computer, a few notebooks and a small folder of personal papers. When he went down the stairs he was wearing a sports jacket which had one button missing, another button hanging loose and frayed cuffs. Underneath the jacket he wore a pale green, sleeveless sweater and a light blue cotton shirt with a button down collar. Below the waist he wore a pair of faded green corduroy trousers and a pair of very wellworn, comfortable-looking brown brogues.

‘What are you doing?’ demanded Jasmine, who had followed him down the stairs.

‘I’m leaving home,’ said Biffo.

‘Good,’ said Jasmine. ‘I never want to see you again. I think you’ve betrayed us all.’

Biffo looked at her. He could feel tears forming in his eyes. ‘Do I get a cuddle?’ he asked.

‘No,’ said Jasmine. ‘Why couldn’t you let John and I go to Paris?’ She burst into tears, turned on her heel, walked back up the stairs into her bedroom and shut the door firmly behind her.

‘What have you got in that suitcase?’ demanded Edwina.

‘Just a few clothes,’ said Biffo.

‘And in the briefcase?’

Biffo opened the briefcase so that Edwina could inspect the contents: his laptop computer, the notebooks and so on. Leaving home was, he realised, like passing through customs.

‘How much is that computer worth?’ she asked, ignoring the other, far less valuable, contents of the case.

‘I don’t know,’ said Biffo. He shrugged. ‘You can have the house and everything else in it.’ He genuinely didn’t want anything from their life together. Now that it had been decided that he was leaving he wanted to go quickly.

‘I should think so,’ said Edwina. She waved her hand to indicate that Biffo could fasten up his briefcase again. ‘I shall consider our bank account and our building society account my own too.’

‘That’s fine by me,’ said Biffo.

‘I shall go and visit Damien this afternoon,’ said Edwina. Biffo was puzzled. ‘Damien? Who is Damien?’

‘Damien Washbrook. My solicitor.’

‘Oh,’ said Biffo. He hadn’t known that his wife had a solicitor.

‘You’ll have to let me have an address.’

Biffo frowned:

‘For the papers. There will be papers to sign.’

‘Ah, yes,’ said Biffo. ‘Papers.’

Toby suddenly appeared. He was still not dressed. He stared at his father. ‘Where are you going?’

‘Your father is leaving,’ said Edwina.

‘Job hunting?’ asked Toby, sounding pleased.

‘He is leaving,’ said Edwina quite firmly. ‘Permanently.’

‘You’re not coming back?’ asked Toby.

‘No,’ said Biffo. He held out his hand.

‘Oh,’ said Toby, ignoring the outstretched hand. He paused and thought for a moment. ‘You’re not taking your car with you, are you? You know I need it for taking the band to rehearsals.’

Biffo put his hand into his trouser pocket and pulled out his car keys. He threw them to Toby who failed to catch them. The keys clattered on the floor.

‘You can have the car,’ Biffo said.

‘And you can take that cat with you,’ said Edwina.

Biffo stopped and turned.

‘The cat,’ said Edwina, nodding towards Tiger, still sitting on the floor where Biffo had left her. ‘I sometimes think that cat is the only thing in this household that you have any feelings for.’

‘I can’t take her,’ protested Biffo. ‘I don’t know where I’m going. She’s too old to be travelling around. It’s not fair to her!’

‘If you don’t take him with you I shall call the vet and have him put down,’ said Edwina coldly.

‘You can’t do that!’ said Biffo, horrified. And she’s a she not a him.’

‘Why not?’ demanded Edwina. ‘You’re leaving me to take the responsibility for looking after the children. Besides, you’re not going to be here to stop me.’

‘But what am I going to do with a cat?’ asked Biffo.

‘That’s your problem,’ said Edwina. ‘You should have thought of that before you gave up your job.’

Biffo looked at Tiger, whom he loved very much. ‘It looks as though you’re coming with me,’ he said quietly.

The cat miaowed and walked over to where Biffo was standing.

‘I need a lead,’ said Biffo. ‘Otherwise if she’s startled by the traffic she may run off and get lost.’

‘You’re always telling me that cats can find their way home without any difficulty,’ said Edwina.

‘But she’ll come back here,’ Biffo pointed out.

‘I’ll find you some string,’ said Edwina immediately. She opened a drawer, rummaged around and pulled out a length of string. ‘Will this do?’

‘That’ll be fine,’ said Biffo, he bent down and attached one end of the string to Tiger’s collar. He then stood, picked up his case and his briefcase in one hand and held onto the free end of Tiger’s temporary lead with the other.

‘Goodbye!’ he said, as he struggled to open the front door. There was no answer. The sky, he noticed, was heavy with cloud and rain to come. He hesitated, wondering whether to take a coat. But his mackintosh was in the hall cupboard and he didn’t want to go back. He took a brightly-coloured golf umbrella from the stand by the door.

As he left he heard Toby speaking to his mother.

‘Can I still go skiing?’ he asked.

‘Of course you can, my dear,’ answered Edwina.

‘I’m hungry,’ said Toby. ‘Have we got any bacon?’

Chapter 7

Moments after Biffo had left, before she had even looked in the fridge to see if there was any bacon for Toby's breakfast, the deserted wife was dialling a telephone number she knew so well that she didn't have to look it up.

'Launceston, Holsworthy and Bude,' said the receptionist in a voice Edwina knew well and loathed.

'Damien Washbrook, please,' said Edwina, in her most businesslike voice.

'Is that Mrs Brimstone?'

'Yes.'

'I'm afraid Mr Washbrook is busy in conference,' said the receptionist with not inconsiderable pleasure. Edwina's voice always put her in a bad mood. To make things worse she had been busy painting her nails. She loathed Edwina as much as Edwina loathed her.

'I don't expect he's performing brain surgery on the Queen,' snapped Edwina. 'Tell him it's me and I want to speak to him now.'

Deirdre, the receptionist, was brave but not that brave: she did what she was told.

There was much crackling and button pressing and a short delay while Damien apologised to his clients so that he could take the call in the empty partners' meeting room, but eventually Edwina and Damien were connected by a lot of wires and a good deal of extremely expensive and sophisticated technology.

The receptionist, who had some of this expensive and sophisticated technology on her desk, was able to listen to their conversation in perfect privacy.

'Are you all right, my sweet?' asked an anxious Damien.

'Bernard has left me,' said Edwina. She was unable to keep the glee from her voice.

'Left you? What do you mean 'left you'?' asked Damien, sitting forward. The blood had suddenly drained from his face and if he had been standing up he would have probably fainted.

'He's gone. Walked out.' said Edwina, as though explaining something very simple to an idiot, which in a way she was.

'Why? Did you tell him about me?'

'No, of course not. Don't be so stupid. Can't you think of anyone but yourself?'

'I'm sorry, darling,' said Damien, now a little calmer. He liked to think he had a fearsome reputation as a lawyer but that didn't stop him worrying. His big fear was that someone would find out about his affair with Edwina. He really didn't want to read about his sexual misdemeanours in a Sunday newspaper.

The affair with Edwina had been going on for nearly a year and for the whole of that time Damien had lived in constant terror that Bernard would find out. Most of Damien Washbrook's work involved property but he sometimes handled divorce cases himself and he knew just how messy divorce could be.

Damien's fear was so intense that when he and Edwina did manage to arrange a rendezvous (usually at some hotel an hour or two's drive away) he was invariably impotent. Thankfully, Edwina didn't seem to mind his inability to perform the usual functions of a lover. Damien, who was unmarried, continued the relationship because he needed the excitement and the danger to fuel his masochistic need for fear. Fear was the only driving force he understood.

They were held together by his fear and her need to have a secret she could share with her limp-wristed and outrageously camp hairdresser, Charles of Monte Carlo.

(Charles, who had been born in Walsall and who had never been anywhere near Monte Carlo, was terribly discreet and only ever talked about Edwina to those other customers who had their own little secrets and could therefore be trusted to be equally discreet. By and large these were the very women Edwina wanted to impress with her continuing infidelity.)

Edwina wanted a trophy lover (Damien drove a large, late model Mercedes with power steering, twin air bags, air conditioning and an annual insurance premium that would have paid for a family hatchback) and Damien was an adrenalin junkie who needed the thrill of a mistress but who, for practical reasons, needed one whose expectations in bed did not rise too high.

In short, theirs was a perfect, if slightly unconventional, affair.

‘He said I can have the house and everything we own,’ said Edwina.

‘Everything?’ said Damien, surprised.

‘He took some clothes and a laptop computer,’ said Edwina, dismissively. ‘Everything else is mine. I want you to get the papers drawn up before he changes his mind.’

‘Did he sign anything?’ asked Damien.

‘Of course he didn’t bloody sign anything,’ said Edwina. ‘He just walked out.’

‘And you didn’t tape him when he said you could have everything?’

‘No.’

‘Pity. Never mind.’

There was a pause.

‘Are you sure about all this?’ asked Damien, who had suddenly had an awful thought. ‘Do you really want a divorce?’

‘Of course I want a divorce,’ said Edwina. She paused for a moment. ‘I think he’s going through the male menopause. He walked out on his job this morning.’ She paused again. She knew Damien well. She would have smiled if she had been the sort of person who smiled but her brain had forgotten the code to use to summon up a smile - and even if the brain had remembered her muscles had long forgotten how to create a smile.

‘Don’t get nervous,’ she said. ‘I don’t want to marry you.’

‘Oh,’ said Damien. He was relieved. He had been married before. He hadn’t liked it. ‘You don’t?’

‘No.’

‘Oh,’ said Damien, who to his intense surprise now found that he was rather disappointed by Edwina’s certainty. ‘Can you come round to the office at three this afternoon? We can start getting the paperwork all drawn up.’

‘Three is fine,’ said Edwina.

‘Do you know who he’ll use as a solicitor?’

‘No idea. I’ll cook you some bacon in just a minute, darling. I’m sure we’ve got some. It’s probably at the back behind the melon.’

‘I beg your pardon?’ said Damien, puzzled by this unexpected turn in the conversation.

‘I said I’ve no idea.’

‘No, after that. The stuff about the bacon.’

‘I was talking to Toby. He’s getting a little edgy. He wants some breakfast.’

‘Oh. Do you have any joint bank accounts?’

‘Yes.’

‘Ring the bank and freeze the accounts immediately. Does he have any credit cards?’

‘Yes.’

‘Joint credit cards?’

‘Yes.’

‘Ring and get them all cancelled.’

‘Good idea,’ said Edwina, pleased that she had thought to get professional advice straight away. She would have rubbed her hands with glee if she hadn’t been holding the telephone.

‘I’ll see you at three,’ said Damien, his voice suddenly softening. ‘We could perhaps go out somewhere for a couple of hours this evening?’

‘Not tonight, Damien,’ said Edwina. ‘But thank you.’ She suddenly sounded extremely business-like. ‘I’ve got rather a lot of telephoning to do.’

Chapter 8

When he left home, carrying his small suitcase and his brief case in one hand, and holding Tiger's lead in the other, Biffo had no idea where he was going.

But he had no regrets.

On the contrary, he was happy to be leaving the cold and graceless suburbs of Greyton, the urban sprawl where he had spent most of his married life.

In some ways Greyton was a pleasant enough place. There were plenty of open spaces, the roads were wide, well-built and smooth and there was a large, spacious and comprehensive shopping centre. There were plenty of car parks in the city centre and the rows of houses, factories and public buildings were all extremely neat and well cared for. In theory it looked a marvellous place to live and work. There was a railway station with a regular train service to London and Greyton was often described (usually by the local publicity department) as a commuter's paradise.

Greyton was a place where people worked and shopped. It was easy to get to and easy to leave.

But Biffo realised, with some sadness, that he had never thought of it as 'home'. Nor had he ever heard anyone refer to it as home. It would not have been accurate to describe Greyton as an exotic and attractive town. If Greyton were a man it would have worn cheap off the rack suits and would have had a row of cheap pens in its breast pocket.

As he walked past a public telephone kiosk Biffo thought for a moment of calling Streaky Bacon to ask if he could sleep in his spare room for a couple of nights.

But that didn't seem to be any sort of proper answer. He knew that if he spent the evening with Streaky they would talk endlessly about the horrors of working for Better Television. They would complain about Ernest Buttress and they would drink too much. That hardly seemed to offer a real and exciting way forward.

Besides he felt sure that Streaky would be embarrassed at not having had the courage to turn down Buttress's offer of a new career producing television quiz programmes.

Biffo wanted time to think. He had, it seemed, spent most of his adult life working hard and getting nowhere. He wanted a new beginning. He wanted to take back control of his life, regain some of his lost freedom and learn a little more about himself.

When he had talked to Edwina about writing a novel he had surprised himself almost as much as he had surprised his wife. He remembered now that when he had been at university he had started a novel. He had, he recalled, abandoned it after six chapters. But he still felt he could write a novel if he had the time. Maybe he would turn out to be a talented writer. And maybe he wouldn't. Maybe he wouldn't even bother trying to write another novel. It didn't really matter all that much either way. What really mattered was finding out what he wanted to do with his life—and doing it.

After half an hour or so Biffo realised that it had at some time started to rain. It was one of those light almost indiscernible English showers which begin as little more than a mist but which then gradually, ever so slowly, become heavier and heavier until they have, almost unnoticed, become a downpour. It was one of those subtle, ingratiating showers that begin so lightly that even if you are carrying an umbrella you don't bother putting it up. And then, by the time you realise that you should have put up your umbrella, it is far too late; you are soaked and there is no longer much point in trying to keep dry.

Biffo had an umbrella but he didn't have a hand with which to hold it. As the rain steadily got heavier and heavier he stopped to turn up the collar of his sports jacket. It was a rather pointless gesture. As he bent down to pick up his suitcase and briefcase again a car pulled to a sudden halt alongside him.

‘Hello, Biffo! Do you want a lift?’ called the driver, reaching across and winding down the passenger side window.

Biffo recognised his inquisitor as a neighbour; a man who had a shop, or maybe several shops, somewhere in the town. He realised, with some slight embarrassment that he could not remember the man’s name.

‘Thank you,’ he said. He opened the front door of the car and climbed in, jamming his suitcase and briefcase on his lap. Tiger, who had been walking alongside him without complaint, jumped in and settled on top of the two cases.

‘You should have thrown the cases into the back,’ said the driver. Are you OK like that?’

‘I’m fine, thank you,’ said Biffo.

‘So, you’ve got custody of the cat then?’

‘Er, yes,’ said Biffo, assuming that this was meant as a joke.

‘Where are you heading?’ asked the neighbour.

Biffo, realising that he wasn’t quite sure about the answer to this important question, thought hard and quickly. ‘The railway station,’ he replied.

‘I don’t blame you for leaving,’ said the neighbour. ‘In your shoes I’d have done just the same.’

Biffo, totally confused, said nothing.

‘If my wife had an affair I’d be off. Sometimes tempted to go anyway.’ The neighbour turned and made a grimace. ‘Come to think of it I can’t imagine anyone wanting to have an affair with my wife.’ He shuddered.

Biffo was astonished. ‘How do you know that I’m leaving?’ he asked.

‘Oh word gets around quickly,’ said the neighbour. ‘Deidre told Audrey.’

‘Audrey?’

‘The wife,’ replied the neighbour. ‘My wife. Terrible gossip, as I expect you know.’

‘And Deidre?’

‘Deidre Jenkins. She works at Launceston, Holsworthy and Bude. Answers the telephone, makes the tea, paints her nails that sort of thing.’

‘Launceston, Holsworthy and Bude?’ repeated Biffo, feeling rather stupid. ‘Who are they?’

‘The solicitors,’ explained the neighbour. ‘Where Damien Washbrook is a partner.’ He peered out through the windscreen. ‘It’s getting very dark. There must be a real thunderstorm coming. I think I’d better put my lights on.’

‘My wife must have rung as soon as I left,’ said Biffo, to himself as much as to the neighbour.

‘Well, it’s not very surprising, is it?’ said the neighbour, with a slightly hollow laugh.

‘I don’t know,’ said Biffo answering the second question first. He frowned. ‘Why isn’t it surprising?’

‘Given the fact that they’ve been having an affair for nearly a year.’

‘Affair? Who’s been having an affair?’

‘Your wife and Damien Washbrook, of course,’ answered the neighbour patiently.

Biffo thought about this carefully before speaking. ‘My wife and Damien Washbrook are having an affair?’ he said eventually.

The neighbour turned towards Biffo and stared. He suddenly seemed very embarrassed. ‘You didn’t know?’

‘No.’ said Biffo. Watch out!’ he shouted, as the neighbour nearly ran into the back of a parked car.

The neighbour swerved and missed the obstacle by an inch or so. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I thought you knew. I thought that was why you were leaving.’

‘No,’ said Biffo. ‘I didn’t know.’

He realised with some shock that his only emotion on hearing this news was surprise. He could not imagine his wife making love to anyone. She seemed too cold, too clinical and too critical.

He wondered if she was softer and more loving with Damien Washbrook. Or perhaps Damien Washbrook liked cold, clinical and critical women.

He remembered meeting Damien Washbrook several times at dull social events. He was in his late thirties but tried to look younger. Washbrook, he remembered, had dyed blond hair and was suntanned all year round. He wore Italian silk suits and drove a Mercedes convertible.

Biffo was relieved that for the rest of the journey the neighbour, clearly embarrassed, spoke at dull length about the weather, the injustices perpetrated by local government (and, in particular, local planning departments), the failings of the national football team and the difficulty of finding good staff. To all this Biffo listened with unending patience; nodding and making suitable noises at each and every appropriate interval. He still couldn’t remember the neighbour’s name and had no idea what he sold in his shop or shops. Tiger, curled up on the briefcase on top of the case on his lap slept through it all.

When they got to the railway station the neighbour drew carefully into the taxi rank so that Biffo could climb out of the car under the shelter of the overhanging roof

‘Thanks very much,’ said Biffo, politely, clutching his suitcase and briefcase in one hand, holding onto Tiger’s lead with the other and trying to close the door with his right knee.

‘Don’t mention it!’ said the neighbour, reaching across the car, grabbing the interior door handle and removing this final, small responsibility from Biffo’s remit. ‘Do you know where you’re going?’ he asked.

‘No,’ said Biffo.

‘Good luck,’ said the neighbour, regaining his jollity now that Biffo was out of his car.

They smiled their hollow and meaningless goodbyes and then the neighbour drove away leaving Biffo, thoroughly soaked and shivering slightly, at the entrance to the railway station.

‘It’s just you and me now,’ said Biffo, looking down at Tiger.

Tiger miaowed and rubbed herself between Biffo’s legs.

Chapter 9

There were two platforms, two railway lines and two choices at Greyton railway station. Travellers could choose to travel towards London or to travel away from it. The ultimate destination of trains heading away from London was the distant coastline.

For Biffo the decision was not a difficult one.

In the one direction lay a world of suits, taxis, business meetings, urgency, bustle, pollution and a thousand varieties of glum and humourless determination.

In the other direction lay half-forgotten memories of buckets and spades, surf-edged breakers, golden sandy beaches, children’s laughter, rock pools, bathing costumes and ice cream.

It had been a long time since he had been on holiday at, or even visited, the English seaside. Edwina had always insisted that they take their holidays abroad. For the last two years they had shared a large villa in Tuscany with an insufferable group of second-rate lawyers, third-rate architects and fourth-rate politicians.

‘A single,’ said Biffo, bending forwards to speak into the inconveniently-positioned grill which separated him from the sales clerk. ‘And a cat,’ he added.

‘Where to?’

‘All the way,’ said Biffo.

‘Pardon?’

‘As far as it goes.’

‘Up or down?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Up or down line.’

‘Which is which?’

‘Up is to London. Down isn’t.’

‘Oh,’ said Biffo. ‘Down.’

‘First or second?’

‘Second, please.’

The clerk consulted a large and rather tattered book.

‘Fifty five pounds,’ he said, without looking up. ‘No charge for the cat.’

Biffo paused, and thought he must have been misunderstood. ‘Just one ticket,’ he said. ‘A single.’

‘Fifty five pounds,’ repeated the clerk. ‘Do you want the ticket or not?’

‘Er, just one moment, please,’ said Biffo, embarrassed.

It had been some time since he had bought a railway ticket. He backed away from the partition and examined his wallet carefully. It contained two twenty pound notes, two ten pound notes and three five pound notes. A total of seventy five pounds. He pulled the loose change out of his pocket. He had approximately four pounds in change. If he spent fifty five pounds on a train ticket he would have just twenty four pounds left in the world.

He had also got two credit cards. But he knew that if he purchased a ticket with a credit card it would be easy for anyone to trace his movements. He wasn't entirely sure why but he didn't want anyone to know where he was going. But he did know that he wanted a clean break from his past. It was a world from which he now wanted to escape.

He hadn't brought a cheque book with him but in addition to the two credit cards he also had a cash card. He remembered that there was a branch of the bank at which he and Edwina held their joint account less than a hundred yards from the entrance to the railway station. It would make sense to take out a little extra travelling cash to last him for the next few days until he could decide what to do next.

'How long before the next train to the coast?' he asked the ticket clerk.

The clerk consulted a time table taped to the wall on his left. 'Fifteen minutes,' he replied.

Biffo, who now had Tiger's lead tied around his wrist, picked up his suitcase, his briefcase and his umbrella and left the railway station and headed for the bank. Tiger walked along beside him as though she had been walking, on a lead, along city streets all her life.

Outside the bank Biffo put his card into the appropriate slit in the wall and tapped in his personal code number.

'THIS CARD HAS BEEN REPORTED STOLEN. IT HAS BEEN RETAINED.'

Biffo stared at the small green message in disbelief At first he was puzzled. And then he realised that Edwina must have already telephoned the bank and cancelled his card. He realised instantly that if she had cancelled his bank card she would have also cancelled his credit cards. He took them out of his wallet and tossed them into a nearby rubbish bin.

Biffo walked back towards the railway station, still clutching Tiger's impromptu lead in one hand and his suitcase and briefcase in the other. The umbrella was once more stuck underneath his arm. Both his bags seemed to be obeying the unwritten law which states that the effects of gravity on objects such as suitcases and bags will be steadily increased the longer they are carried –with the result that a bag which seems easy to carry when it is first picked up will, a few hundred yards later, be insufferably heavy.

As he walked Biffo noticed a street vendor selling flowers. He must have passed the vendor when he had been walking towards the bank but he hadn't noticed him. The vendor had a small stall filled with flowers and he and they were sheltered by a small canvas awning.

'Nice cat,' said the vendor.

Biffo paused for a moment, and smiled. Tiger pricked up her ears, as though she knew she was being praised.

'Not many people take their cats for a walk,' said the vendor, shivering and rubbing his hands to try and keep warm.

'No,' agreed Biffo.

'Bunch of roses, guv?' suggested the vendor, cutting to the chase and pointing to a large bunch of red roses.

'No thanks,' said Biffo, automatically.

'Half price,' said the vendor, quickly.

Biffo automatically hesitated. Unlike many of the flowers sold by street vendors these flowers looked fresh and good for several days in a vase.

Biffo knew about flowers. He had regularly bought flowers for Edwina. She had hardly ever thanked him for them, sometimes she didn’t even seem to notice that he had brought them, but he had carried on buying them nevertheless. Perhaps he had been trying to revive the romance in their doomed marriage. Perhaps he had been searching for love and affection and approval.

‘There’s hardly anyone around,’ explained the vendor, staring up at the darkening sky, ‘I don’t want to be standing here all day. It’s going to keep raining.’

Biffo, operating on automatic, was about to reach into his trouser pocket for his wallet when he realised that he had no reason at all to buy flowers. There wasn’t a single soul in the world to whom he could give them. This sudden realisation made him feel extremely sad, and very much alone.

‘No thanks,’ said Biffo, quietly. And there must have been something in his voice that the flower vendor recognised and understood for he stepped back under the protection of his awning and said no more.

Feeling, if it was possible, even more alone in the world than he had felt a few moments earlier, Biffo walked back again to the railway station.

‘Would you give me a single to wherever this will take me,’ he said to the ticket clerk, putting twenty five pounds onto the revolving disk which enabled travellers and clerk to exchange money and tickets.

The ticket clerk stared at him for a moment without speaking.

‘You leaving home?’ he asked suddenly and with a perceptiveness which surprised Biffo.

For a moment Biffo didn’t answer. ‘How can you tell?’ he asked. He shivered involuntarily in his wet clothes.

The ticket collector just looked at him. ‘I keep meaning to leave mine,’ he said. ‘She’s a real cow. Makes my life miserable. Wish I had your guts.’ He pressed the lever which revolved the disk and picked up Biffo’s money. He then pressed some buttons on a machine on his desk before pushing a ticket and three pounds in change onto the revolving disk and pulling the lever which sent the ticket and the change back to Biffo. ‘Platform two,’ said the clerk. ‘Six minutes. I’ve given you a cheap day return.’

‘But I only want a single,’ protested Biffo, confused.

‘A cheap day return is cheaper than a single,’ explained the clerk. He shrugged and tried to produce a wink but it looked more like a twitch. ‘We’re not supposed to tell people.’ He bent forward and looked from side to side before whispering: ‘Good luck!’

Biffo thanked him, put the change into his trouser pocket and the train ticket into the breast pocket of his sodden sports jacket and walked towards the platform. On his way he stopped briefly at a kiosk to buy a bar of chocolate, an apple and a magazine. In the station buffet, where he bought himself a coffee, he persuaded a shapeless but smartly-uniformed woman with a full moustache to let him take half a dozen tiny plastic containers full of milk for Tiger.

When he saw the train pulling into the station he felt himself suddenly swamped by a mixture of emotions. There was fear mixed with sadness; excitement mixed with hope; and relief mixed with mourning.

He had no idea what the future held for him but he knew that it just had to be better than the past. For too long there had been far too much responsibility and far too little fun in his life.

Chapter 10

When Biffo climbed down from the train an hour and three quarters later the rain had stopped and the sun was shining brightly. Whether this was because the weather had changed or because his journey had taken him from bad weather into good he did not know. He had spent most of the entire journey staring into space, quite unaware of what was going on inside or outside the empty carriage in which he was sitting.

Biffo had not even opened the magazine he had bought. Tiger, having emptied three of the small containers of their milk, had spent the rest of the journey sleeping.

The station to which his twenty two pounds had taken him was considerably smaller than the one which he had left. It was a railway station which had probably been fortunate to escape conversion into a bijou holiday residence.

Beside the station there was little to be seen except green fields, trees and hedgerows. On the other side of the railway tracks there were a dozen scattered houses and a small church with a squat stone tower. But on Biffo's side of the tracks there was little sign of human civilisation other than a distant farmhouse, a couple of cottages and a disused stone barn with missing slates and crumbling walls held up by ivy and habit. There was, however, also a single-decker bus and two of Biffo's fellow railway passengers were already climbing aboard and greeting the driver cheerily.

'Hurry up!' said a man in a blazer and a peaked hat, ushering Biffo towards the vehicle. 'Or else you'll miss the bus.' Biffo had no idea where he or the bus were going but he was content to allow fate to direct his movements and so he obediently climbed aboard the brightly-painted vehicle.

'Oi!' said the driver, while Biffo pushed first his suitcase and then his briefcase into a tiny space intended for luggage. 'You can't bring that on here!'

Biffo looked around before realising that the driver was speaking to him. 'Can't bring what?' he asked, genuinely puzzled.

'That,' said the bus driver, pointing to Tiger.

'Why not?' asked Biffo.

'We don't allow no cats,' said the driver.

'Why on earth not?' asked Biffo.

The driver thought about this for a moment, pushed his hat back and scratched his head. 'I dunno,' he admitted.

'Do you have a rule which says you aren't allowed to carry cats?'

The driver scratched his chin thoughtfully. 'I dunno.'

'I would be surprised if you did,' said Biffo. 'There can't be all that many people travelling with cats.'

'Never seen one before,' said the driver. 'But we don't allow dogs. I do know that.'

'It isn't a dog,' said Biffo. 'It's a cat. Her name is Tiger.' Tiger miaowed, as if on cue.

'Well there may not be a rule about cats but what if it wants to, well, you know, obey a call of nature?' asked the driver. 'That would be an incident and the company doesn't like incidents.'

'Do you have a lavatory on board?' asked Biffo.

‘Of course not!’ replied the driver. ‘This is a bus, not one of them luxury coaches.’

‘So what happens if I want to obey a call of nature?’

‘Not the same thing at all,’ said the driver.

‘Have you ever had an incident with a cat on your bus?’ asked Biffo.

‘No,’ said the driver. ‘I told you. Nobody’s ever got on with a cat before. But I still don’t think you can come on with the cat.’

Suddenly Biffo had an idea. ‘Do you have a company rule about what people are allowed to carry in their briefcases?’

The driver thought about this for a moment. ‘No. Of course not.’

Biffo took his briefcase back out of the rack and unfastened it. He removed his laptop computer which he put down next to his suitcase and then lifted Tiger up and popped her into the briefcase.

‘There you are,’ said Biffo.

The driver scratched his head. ‘Does that make a difference?’ he asked.

‘I should think so,’ said Biffo. ‘Now you can forget all about the cat.’

The driver thought about this for a moment and then sighed. ‘OK,’ he said. ‘Where to, then?’

‘Where are you going?’ asked Biffo.

The driver recited half a dozen names which meant absolutely nothing to Biffo.

‘How far can I go for a pound?’ asked Biffo. He paused. ‘I’m on holiday,’ he explained. ‘A mystery tour.’

The bus driver grinned and winked. ‘Looking for a bit of adventure, eh?’

Biffo smiled back and nodded. ‘Quiet adventure.’ he agreed.

‘Make it one pound forty pence,’ said the driver. ‘And I’ll tell you when to get off.’

Biffo handed over the one pound and forty pence and put his destiny firmly into the bus driver’s hands.

Chapter 11

‘That’s a nice little cat,’ said the small, rather frail looking woman next to whom Biffo had chosen to sit. ‘What’s his name?’

‘He’s a she,’ said Biffo. ‘She’s called Tiger.’

‘Does she like being stroked?’ asked the woman, looking at Biffo, but reaching a hand out to stroke Tiger’s head.

‘She loves a fuss,’ said Biffo, looking down at Tiger, who had already climbed out of the briefcase and was now sprawled comfortably on his lap.

Tiger purred loudly, and pushed up her head to make the most of the fuss she was getting.

‘Where are you going, dear?’ asked the old lady.

‘This probably sounds odd but I don’t really know,’ admitted Biffo.

The woman, still stroking Tiger’s head, looked at him and raised a surprised eyebrow.

‘I’m having something of an adventure,’ explained Biffo, with half a smile. ‘The bus driver is going to tell me when I get where I’m going.’

The old woman nodded, wisely. ‘What are you running away from, dear?’ she asked.

‘Running away?’ said Biffo.

‘You’ve got your bags, you’ve got your cat and you don’t know where you’re going,’ said the old woman. ‘Since you’re not much bothered about where you’re going I think it’s quite likely that the one thing you do know is where you’re coming from. And that you want to get away from there as quickly as you can.’

‘You’re right,’ admitted Biffo, with a laugh.

‘Do you think there’ll be a reconciliation?’ asked the old woman.

Biffo, surprised, turned and looked at her and smiled. ‘No,’ he said firmly. ‘There definitely won’t be a reconciliation.’

‘Children?’

‘Two. They’re both grown up.’

‘That’s good.’

‘And you’ve left your job?’

‘Yes. How did you know that?’

‘I’m seventy six,’ said the old woman in reply. ‘You get to see things when you get to my age.’

‘Ah,’ said Biffo, nodding in understanding.

‘You don’t think me rude, do you?’ asked the old woman.

‘Rude?’ asked Biffo, genuinely puzzled. ‘Why should I think you rude?’

The old woman shrugged. ‘It’s nice to have someone to talk to,’ she said.

‘Yes,’ agreed Biffo. ‘Have you been somewhere interesting today?’ he asked her.

‘Oh, just a funeral.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Biffo.

‘No, don’t be,’ said the old lady. ‘It wasn’t anyone I know.’

Biffo was confused. ‘You went to the funeral of someone you don’t know?’

‘Yes. I do it all the time.’

`Why?’

‘It’s nice. I like funerals. They are so melancholy. So peaceful. And they always make me feel good.’

‘Why do funerals make you feel good?’

‘Because at a funeral I feel really confident and good about myself. I’m superior to the grieving relatives. They’re sad and I’m not. And I am certainly superior to the centre of the event who is, of course, dead and therefore inferior to everyone.’

‘But doesn’t anyone ever ask you what you’re doing at one of these funerals?’

‘Of course not! They just think I’m some mystery woman from the past. An old friend. An old mistress. It doesn’t matter. They don’t say anything. I go along to the house afterwards sometimes. Have a bite to eat and a glass or two of something to drink. If it’s a busy do they don’t mind me being there. If it’s quiet and there isn’t much of a turnout they’re pleased to see an extra person there.’

Biffo did not know what to say to this. So, wisely, he said nothing. He wondered if the world was full of people like this. He realised that in London, at the offices of Better Television, he had been rather isolated from the real world.

‘I used to talk to myself a lot,’ admitted the old woman, suddenly.

‘I talk to myself,’ said Biffo.

‘I don’t talk to myself anymore,’ said the old woman.

‘No?’

‘I used to argue with myself a lot,’ confided the old woman. ‘And I started to get really cross with myself. So now I ignore myself. It saves a lot of trouble.’ She smiled sweetly.

‘That makes sense,’ said Biffo.

‘Why have you got that umbrella?’ asked the old woman.

‘It was raining when I left home,’ Biffo explained. He shrugged. ‘But to be honest it’s been more trouble than it’s been worth.’

‘I like umbrellas,’ said the old woman.

‘Do you?’

She leant a little closer to him. ‘Whenever I go to the city I sell one,’ she whispered confidentially.

Biffo frowned. ‘Where do you get them from?’

‘The railway lost property office, of course,’ whispered the old woman. ‘Sometimes I go to the bus company lost property office, too.’ She winked at him and tapped the tip of her nose a couple of times with a slightly arthritic forefinger. ‘You just walk into the lost property office and tell them you’ve lost your umbrella. They ask you what it looked like and you say it was black and had a handle. Then they bring out half a dozen and you pick out the best looking and most expensive one.’

‘And then you sell it?’

‘Of course. I take them all to a second-hand shop. I can never be bothered with umbrellas. They’re such a lot of trouble. I use the money to buy extra bird seed.’

‘You feed the birds?’

‘Only in the winter,’ said the old woman. ‘I collect seeds and nuts during the summer and the autumn. But there’s never enough. I have to buy more. The squirrels eat so much you know. I did buy a squirrel-proof bird feeder but no one had told the squirrels it was squirrel-proof’

‘Ah,’ said Biffo.

‘I don’t mind feeding the squirrels,’ said the old woman.

‘No,’ said Biffo. ‘They have to eat too.’

‘I’m quite potty, you know,’ said the old woman, happily.

‘You don’t sound potty to me,’ said Biffo, who was smiling. It was, he realised, a long time since he’d felt like smiling.

‘That’s because you’re potty too,’ said the old woman. She reached across and tickled Tiger under the chin. Tiger purred loudly. ‘Do you know what you’re looking for?’ she asked him suddenly.

Biffo frowned, slightly confused. ‘I beg your pardon?’

The old woman repeated her question.

‘No,’ said Biffo, misunderstanding her, ‘the bus driver is going to tell me when I’ve got to my stop.’

‘I don’t mean that,’ said the old woman, shaking her head rather impatiently. ‘Do you know what you want out of life? Do you know what you are looking for?’

Biffo thought about this for a while. ‘No,’ he admitted. ‘I don’t think I do.’

The old woman moved a little closer to Biffo. ‘Until you know what you want you’ll never stand a chance of getting it,’ she said quietly.

‘What do you want?’ asked Biffo.

‘I want people to leave me alone,’ said the old woman without hesitation.

‘You’re talking to me,’ said Biffo.

‘I like you,’ said the old woman.

‘Why?’

‘Because you’ve got a cat with you on a bus. When I saw you I realised you must be a bit potty.’

They were now driving through a small town and the bus driver called out the name which Biffo did not catch.

‘This is my stop,’ said the old woman, starting to get up. Biffo, holding onto Tiger, moved out into the narrow gangway which ran between the seats and stood up. ‘Goodbye,’ said the old woman. She leant down so that her lips were close to Biffo’s ear. ‘Good luck!’ she said.

‘Thank you,’ said Biffo. He handed the old woman his umbrella. ‘Would you take this for me, please?’ he said. ‘And sell it to buy bird seed?’

The old woman took the umbrella from him. ‘You’ll be all right,’ she told him. She spoke with a strange confidence. ‘But, remember, you have to find out what you want.’

‘I will,’ said Biffo.

‘If you don’t know what you want you’ll never find it,’ said the old woman, sternly. ‘And you make sure you look after Tiger,’ she added sharply, looking down as she clambered carefully down from the bus.

‘I will,’ promised Biffo. As the bus driver let out the clutch and set the bus into motion again he sat down, holding onto Tiger, and waved with his free hand. The old woman, standing on the grass verge beside the road, smiled and waved back to him with his umbrella.

Chapter 12

Twenty minutes later Biffo watched the bus which had brought him to his mystery destination rumble off into the distance, leaving behind it a thick cloud of summer dust and an unpleasant smell of diesel fumes. He put his laptop computer back into his briefcase, picked up both the briefcase and his suitcase, and took hold of Tiger’s lead. He didn’t know where he was or what he was going to do next but he was ready for it.

The road along which the bus had travelled had become steadily narrower and narrower and Biffo had for a while wondered if they would ever arrive anywhere.

They had turned left at ‘Loose Chippings’, veered right at ‘Unsuitable for Caravans’ and gone straight on at ‘Blasting Daily’ but after that he had quite lost track of their route.

Fondling-Under-Water, the village which the bus driver had chosen for Biffo and Tiger, was neat and pretty and, unlike the other villages through which they had passed, it looked exactly the way Biffo had always thought a village should look. (The name Fondling-Under-Water is derived from, and is a modern bastardization of, the old English name ‘Foundling-OnThe-Water’, which refers to the fact that many years ago an unwanted child, or ‘foundling’, was, like the baby Moses, found floating on the local river Ripple in a wicker basket.)

The other villages had been mostly sprawling and rather ill-defined; electoral constituencies rather than places to call home. But Fondling-Under-Water looked and felt like a proper village. Biffo immediately felt that the bus driver had made a good decision.

Fondling-Under-Water was miles from the nearest traffic lights, pedestrian crossings, street lighting and pavements. It was defiantly remote and gloriously independent.

From the spot where the bus had dropped him Biffo could see a village green, a village store and a half circle of pretty, thatched cottages around a pond upon which swam a dozen noisy ducks.

There was also a small village hall (circa 1930) surrounded by a neatly-trimmed yew and laurel hedge and a church (circa 1100) with a tower and (although this was a much later addition, paid for by a vicar with a private income, high aspirations and a builder with a squint) a slightly twisted spire.

And, easiest to see of all since it was directly across the road from the spot where Biffo had left the bus, there was a particularly handsome-looking public house called The Gravedigger’s Rest.

It had clearly been some time since the pub had been subjected to the sort of care and attention which can normally be regarded as falling within the boundaries of regular maintenance, and Biffo could not help noticing that rather large areas of roof were absent.

However, the Gravedigger’s Rest clearly had character. It had whitewashed walls, criss-crossed with solid, black beams, and a large sign hanging over the door showed a portrait of a grizzled old man holding a foaming tankard of ale in one hand and a large shovel in the other. It was, Biffo thought, the sort of public house which people in cities always think of when they think of rural public houses.

Biffo looked around. Every roof, apart from the one gracing the church and the incomplete slate roof of the village pub, was thatched or red tiled, and gleaming, fresh whitewash on every house and garden wall shone brightly in the early spring sunshine. Back in the middle ages every dwelling in the village had been whitewashed to protect the inhabitants from the plague and no one had ever bothered to update the decorating plan.

But it was the public house, not the thatched roofs or the whitewashed walls, that attracted Biffo’s attention; not so much for its outward appearance, but for the beguiling promise of refreshment.

Biffo, still clutching Tiger's lead, picked up his suitcase and his briefcase from the grass verge, walked across the road and entered the pub. Tiger, who had never seemed in the slightest inconvenienced or surprised by the presence of the lead, trotted behind, head and tail held high.

Inside the pub's narrow hallway the walls were lined with dark oak panelling which gave the whole place a gloomy but cosy feeling. Numerous pieces of paper, most of which had clearly been there for a long time for they were browning and curling at the edges, were fastened to the oak panelling with drawing pins. The vast number of small holes in the panelling suggested either that these were by no means the only pieces of paper to have been fastened to the wall or that The Gravedigger's Rest was host to some particularly enthusiastic and hard-headed woodworm.

Biffo put down his suitcase and his briefcase and opened the door marked 'Public Bar'.

He saw the words 'Mind Your Head' chalked on a beam just in time and so narrowly missed smashing his forehead against the massive slice of timber which threatened to knock out anyone above the height of five foot six inches.

But, even as he was congratulating himself on spotting the 'Mind Your Head' sign he missed the chalked words 'Mind The Step' and so he entered the public bar with rather more pace, and at a rather more exaggerated angle, than would have been considered prudent by a more cautious guest.

'Are you OK?' asked a feminine, friendly sounding voice coming from a body Biffo could not see. Biffo, who had knocked over a small table, a chair, and two bar stools as he fell, lay among this scattering of sturdy furniture with a large chunky glass ashtray sticking into his right ribs and a small collection of beer mats scattered under and around his body.

He raised his head, shook it, blinked and looked around. The bar was welcoming and looked well-used. A vast stone fireplace dominated the wall opposite the bar. Huge piles of logs were stacked on both sides of the fireplace and a mound of grey ash in the hearth confirmed that neither the fireplace nor the logs were there for show.

'There is a sign warning about the step,' said the voice, whose owner Biffo had still not located.

'I saw the notice warning about the low beam,' said Biffo, cautiously moving his arms and then his legs. 'I missed the one about the step.'

'Most visitors only see one or the other,' admitted the voice. 'But to be honest we don't get all that many visitors.'

'Maybe you could combine the two warnings,' suggested Biffo, slowly clambering to his feet and rubbing his elbow. 'Mind Your Head And Watch Out For The Step'. He looked around but still could not see anyone. 'Or Mind Your Step And Watch Out For Your Head.' When he had finished rubbing his elbow he gave his ribs a rub. Rubbing helped, as it usually does.

'I'll suggest that to the landlord,' said the voice.

'Or you could just put a notice on the floor saying 'You Missed The Step, Didn't You?' said Biffo, standing up and bending and straightening his knees a few times to make sure that they were still in working condition.

'Have a drink on the house,' said the voice, which now had a distinct smile in it.

'Thank you,' said Biffo, who was now rubbing his right shoulder. He looked around and at last discovered the source of the voice.

She was standing behind the bar drying glasses with a plain white cotton tea towel. Biffo was not good at estimating ages – particularly where women were concerned –but she was, he thought, probably within ten or fifteen years (either way) of her mid-thirties. She had shoulder length chestnut hair and unlike most of the women he had met recently she was smiling with her eyes as well as her mouth.

She wore a close-fitting, low-necked dress that ended just below her knees and which clung to her body making it quite clear that she was neither fat nor thin but could perhaps best be described as having what would, in the days before political correctness, have been described as a voluptuous figure. It was a long time since Biffo had been the grateful recipient of a genuinely welcoming smile from a woman; to receive such a smile from such a woman was a bonus. Her fingernails, Biffo noticed, were painted dark red.

‘Bernard Brimstone,’ said Biffo, introducing himself ‘Everyone calls me Biffo though I can’t for the life of me remember why.’

‘Laetitia-Anne De Tomatso,’ replied the woman standing behind the bar counter. ‘Everyone calls me Lettice. What would you like to drink?’

‘A pint of bitter would do very nicely, thank you.’

Lettice put down the tea towel and the glass she was drying and picked up a pint glass. ‘Any preference?’ she asked, waving a hand in the direction of an impressive variety of pump handles.

Biffo shook his head. ‘No, whatever you recommend will be fine,’ he said. ‘Have you seen my cat?’ he asked, looking around. ‘When I came in here I had a cat with me.’

‘Did your cat have a long piece of string attached to its collar?’

‘Yes.’

‘He’s over there,’ said Lettice, nodding towards the window sill where Tiger sat licking herself ‘Do you want some milk for him? Is it a he?’

‘She’s a she. But yes, please, to the milk. Thank you. ‘In a glass.’

‘A glass?’

‘A wine glass would be fine.’

‘Not a saucer?’

‘Definitely not a saucer.’

Lettice put down the unfilled beer glass and picked up a wine glass. She bent down, opened a refrigerator underneath the bar and took out a pint of milk. She then filled the wine glass with milk and handed the glass to Biffo. Biffo put the glass down on the window sill next to Tiger. Tiger lapped noisily.

‘Does she want anything to eat, do you think? I can offer her cheese flavoured crisps, pork scratchings or peanuts. I’m afraid we’re right out of smoked salmon.’

‘Do you think the village shop will still be open? Tempted as I’m sure she would be by the cheese flavoured crisps I think I’d better pop and buy her some cat food.’

‘The shop stays open until eight unless you get there later. Miss Box once opened up at two in the morning to sell Cheesy Stilton a comb.’

‘Miss Box?’

‘It’s her shop.’

‘I don’t suppose I should ask why Cheesy Stilton wanted to buy a comb at two in the morning?’

‘No. She sometimes claims to be deaf, by the way. Don’t believe a word of it. She could hear a bank note flutter to the ground twenty yards behind her. Do you always travel with a cat?’

‘This is the first time.’

‘I don’t suppose you’re headed for London, are you?’

‘No,’ said Biffo, puzzled. ‘Why should I be?’

‘I thought perhaps you had hopes of becoming Lord Mayor,’ said Lettice.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Biffo, who didn’t understand. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘Dick Whittington,’ explained the woman behind the bar, taking a pint glass from a shelf behind her. ‘Didn’t he go to London with his cat? But then he had his belongings tied up in a handkerchief and you’ve got a Luis Vuitton suitcase and a briefcase with a combination lock.’

‘Sorry,’ said Biffo. ‘It’s been a busy day.’

‘That’s OK,’ said Lettice. ‘Do you want to use the phone?’

‘Er. . .no, thank you,’ said Biffo, slightly puzzled. ‘Why should you think I might want to use the telephone?’

‘I assumed your car must have broken down,’ said Lettice, filling the pint glass with beer.

‘No, no. Not at all,’ said Biffo. ‘In fact I didn’t come here by car. I came on the bus.’

Lettice, who looked surprised at this, finished filling Biffo’s glass and put it down on the bar counter.

‘Thank you,’ said Biffo.

‘Pleasure,’ said Lettice. ‘Are you sure you’re OK? You had quite a fall.’ She picked up her tea towel and continued drying glasses.

‘Bit bruised and battered,’ said Biffo. ‘But I’ll survive.’ He picked up the beer glass, took a sip, smiled his approval and took a longer drink. He looked at his watch and then looked around at the empty bar. ‘Are you always this quiet at five past six?’

Lettice laughed. ‘No,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘Everyone has gone down to the cricket field to see how Constable Hobbling’s knee is bearing up.’

‘Ah,’ said Biffo, as though he understood.

Lettice said nothing, but just carried on drying glasses.

‘Who is Constable Hobbling and why is everyone so keen to check on the condition of his knee?’ asked Biffo at last. Curiosity can only be suppressed for so long.

‘In the winter Constable Hobbling is our village bobby. In the summer he is also fifty per cent of the village cricket team’s opening bowling attack,’ explained Lettice. ‘He wrenched his knee a couple of months ago when he fell off a barn roof’

‘The village takes its cricket seriously then?’

‘The men do,’ said Lettice. ‘They never win anything but they’re all cricket mad. I sometimes think that it’s the cricket club that holds this village together.’

‘But wives, mothers and girlfriends aren’t so keen?’

‘Actually they are,’ Lettice replied. She thought for a moment and then smiled and shrugged. ‘At least they know where their husbands are and what they’re doing. And quite a few get involved making teas and so on.’

‘What about your husband?’ asked Biffo.

‘My ex-husband wouldn’t know his leg before from his caught behind,’ she replied. ‘He wasn’t interested in sport, nature, books, politics or the environment. His world revolved around him – and that was about it. He used to spend several evenings a week on a sun bed at the local country club. The week before we split up he forgot to take his watch off before getting onto the sun bed. He was furious. He ranted and raved and tried to get the club secretary to sack the girl who was in charge of the sunbeds.'

'Why?' asked Biffo, puzzled. 'Does sunlight damage watches?'

'It wasn't his watch he was worried about,' explained Lettice. 'He was upset because there would be a white patch where his watch had been.'

'That worried him?'

'It worried him a lot. He fastened his watch up tighter so that it wouldn't move and show the untanned skin.'

'Why did you marry him?'

'Why do any of us do foolish things? I was young and impressionable and he seemed exciting and romantic. Sadly, I quickly discovered that he really wasn't interested in me. Come to think of it — I don't know why he married me, except that I suppose he felt he needed a wife to make him look respectable. He's a lawyer and, apart from himself, he's only interested in one thing.'

'Which is?'

'Money. He desperately wants to be rich. When I was with him he was always setting up big deals that never quite came off'

'Oh,' said Biffo. 'I'm sorry.'

'Don't be. I haven't seen him for three years and that suits me fine.'

'He doesn't live in the village?'

Lettice laughed. 'Oh no,' she said. 'I came here when we divorced. He's strictly a town man. He thinks Islington is rural.'

Biffo sipped again at his beer.

'So, what are you doing here if your car didn't break down?' asked Lettice. 'You don't look like the sort of passenger who normally travels around the countryside on buses.'

Biffo hesitated. 'Bit of a sort of holiday, I suppose,' he answered at last. He thought for a moment. 'Do you do bed and breakfast here?' he asked.

'Puffy charges fifteen pounds a night,' said the woman. 'Or seventy pounds a week. If you're staying longer than that you can negotiate.'

'Puffy?'

'That's the landlord.'

'But why Puffy?'

'That's what everyone calls him. Puffy Harbottle,' the woman replied. 'He's my uncle. His wife, my aunt, used to be the landlady.'

'But why Puffy? It seems an odd name.'

'Yes, Biffo,' smiled Lettice. 'I suppose it is.'

'Sorry.' said Biffo. He could feel himself blushing. 'Do you think he'll mind my cat staying with me?'

‘I wouldn’t have thought so. Does she catch mice?’

‘She has been known to.’

‘Then she can earn her keep.’

‘Is Puffy down at the cricket pitch too?’ asked Biffo, taking another inch or two of beer out of his glass.

‘He certainly is,’ replied Lettice. ‘

‘And your aunt?’

‘Oh, Prudence went off with a soft drinks salesman,’ said Lettice.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Biffo.

‘Don’t be,’ said Lettice. ‘But Puffy doesn’t like talking about it. He was upset for ages but he’s gradually getting used to the idea.’

‘He loved her a lot, then?’ said Biffo.

‘No, I don’t think so,’ said Lettice, after thinking for a moment or two. ‘Not for the last few years certainly. But he was pretty miserable about her going off with a soft drinks salesman. He regarded it as a sort of betrayal. I don’t think he would have minded if she’d gone off with a malt whisky salesman. Have you got any other luggage?’

‘Just what I had with me when I came in,’ said Biffo, looking around. His suitcase and briefcase were on the floor just inside the door. He drank the rest of his beer. ‘That was very good,’ he said,, putting the empty glass back down on the bar.

Lettice lifted a flap in the bar counter. ‘Bring your bags and your cat and I’ll show you your bedroom,’ she told him.

She led the way up a tight and narrow staircase which seemed to have been built by a corkscrew designer with a twisted sense of humour.

‘I assume you don’t get many American visitors,’ panted an out of condition Biffo, dragging his luggage up the stairs, trying to stop his legs getting entangled in Tiger’s lead, and making a genuine attempt not to stare too hard at Lettice’s bottom as it swivelled a few inches in front of his eyes.

‘No, I don’t think so,’ agreed Lettice. ‘But how do you know that?’

‘The ones I’ve met have all been far too broad in the beam for this staircase —they’d get stuck,’ explained Biffo.

‘Actually we don’t get many visitors at all,’ sighed Lettice, sadly. ‘In fact you’re my first.’

Chapter 13

The room which Lettice showed Biffo was not small but there wasn’t much room to move about. Most of the floor space was taken up with furniture which looked like the sort of stuff which is usually left over at the end of a house auction. The sort of mismatched, bulky, unfashionable furniture which makes a weakkneed auctioneer with no available storage space begin to panic.

This was not particularly surprising for the furniture which filled Biffo’s room had all been bought at the end of a house auction when a weak-kneed and panicky auctioneer, faced with the prospect of finding somewhere to store massive pieces of furniture which neither dealers nor members of the public seemed to want to buy, had invited offers. He had been relieved to knock down several mismatched items to Mr Harbottle of The Gravedigger’s Rest who had offered £5 for the lot.

The bed was, as is not entirely inappropriate in a bedroom, by far the most significant and eye catching item of furniture present. It was considerably wider and much longer than most beds Biffo had ever seen before and had impressive brass railings at both its foot and its head.

‘The brass needs a bit of a polish,’ said Lettice, rubbing at the nearest piece of brass with her handkerchief The stretch of brass she had rubbed began to shine. It made the rest of the brasswork look even more as though it needed a polish.

‘And I’m afraid Puffy doesn’t believe in dusting,’ Lettice apologised. ‘His philosophy is that if you once start dusting then you have to keep doing it. On the other hand, if you don’t dust then the dust will eventually be settling on dust.’

‘I guess he’s right,’ said Biffo.

‘He says you’re home and dry when that happens,’ said Lettice. After all, who cares when it’s only the dust getting dusty?’

‘Er. . ., yes,’ said Biffo.

‘I’ll put a hot water bottle in the bed later,’ said Lettice, changing the subject a little. ‘To air it out a bit,’ she explained.

On the left of the bed there was a huge, dark oak chest of drawers on top of which stood an old-fashioned water jug and bowl. The chest contained three massive drawers and two smaller ones. Each of the smaller drawers was bigger than Biffo’s suitcase and he therefore felt safe in assuming that there wouldn’t be a problem finding enough storage space when it came to unpacking. Both the jug and the bowl contained large cracks which cast some doubt on their ability to function successfully as water containers. This possible disadvantage was made irrelevant by the presence of a sink in the corner of the room. It was the smallest sink that Biffo had ever seen, just big enough for a child to wash one hand at a time, but it was served by two incongruously huge brass taps.

On the right of the bed was a huge, old pine wardrobe which reached right up to the ceiling and was at least as wide as it was tall.

‘How on earth did you get that in here?’ asked Biffo, staring at the wardrobe. ‘I’ve seen houses smaller than that!’ He stood back admiringly and gazed at the object.

‘Puffy and Cheesy Stilton took it apart, brought it in through the roof and then stuck it back together,’ replied Lettice as if this was a normal way to furnish a room.

‘Through the roof?’

‘They removed the slates.’

‘Do you have to pay rates on it?’ asked Biffo, trying to open one of the wardrobe doors.

‘I don’t think the doors open,’ Lettice warned Biffo. ‘Cheesy lost the hinges so he nailed the doors shut. He said it would be safer that way.’ She managed to make it sound quite normal to nail shut the doors of a wardrobe.

‘I haven’t brought that many clothes with me anyway,’ said Biffo. He looked at the wardrobe again. It really was huge. ‘Actually, I don’t think I’ve ever owned that many clothes!’

‘That’s exactly what Cheesy said,’ said Lettice. ‘I’ll leave you to unpack and settle in. If there’s anything else you need just let me know.’

‘Just a box filled with earth,’ said Biffo, without hesitation.

Lettice seemed surprised by this request. Although Biffo was the first customer she had met who wanted to stay at The Gravedigger’s Rest a box of earth was not an item which she would have expected to feature high on any list of items required by guests.

‘It’s for Tiger,’ explained Biffo, nodding towards his feline companion, who, after a quick exploratory sniff had confirmed the absence of existing cat smells, was already comfortably curled up on the bed.

‘Oh, of course,’ said Lettice, understanding and smiling in one smooth movement.

When Lettice had left Biffo walked over to the large dormer window at the foot of the bed. There was a fitted window seat in the bay of the window so Biffo sat down, made himself comfortable and looked out.

The window overlooked a small garden immediately behind the pub, then several large horse chestnut trees connected by a thick hawthorn hedge and, beyond the hedge, a large flat green field upon which was situated a small, white cricket pavilion of the type originally designed and favoured by the Victorians and much loved by colonialists for generations.

The pavilion might have been small but it was equipped with all the fancy woodwork which might adorn a much larger erection. At the front of the pavilion there was a white picket fence complete with a small, white gate through which the cricketers could pass on their way to and from the arena before them. Behind the pavilion a broad river could be seen wriggling its peaceful way through the countryside.

The garden, which clearly belonged to The Gravedigger’ Rest, contained several large, wooden picnic tables (the sort that have benches attached to them, presumably so that if anyone tries to steal a table they will be grossly inconvenienced by also having to steal a couple of benches) and diners were provided with some protection from both the sun and the rain by a variety of now faded, frail and rather tattered umbrellas which had at one time probably advertised an alcoholic beverage but which now advertised nothing but the fact that they needed replacing.

The cricket field contained a single, solitary, short, round figure. He was bent over a large mowing machine. There was no sign of Constable Hobbling, his troublesome knee or The Gravedigger’s Rest regulars.

Biffo watched for a moment or two as the man performed what looked like a primitive dance around the mowing machine, hitting it from time to time with a large metal tool which he was holding in his right hand. It seemed fair to assume that he was not a particularly happy man and even Mr Sherlock Holmes’s companion, the slow-witted Dr Watson, would have probably not needed the maestro’s advice in order to come to the conclusion that the mowing machine was the major cause of that discontent.

A few minutes later Biffo climbed gingerly back down the narrow, twisting staircase (it was even more difficult going down than going up) and into the bar. He left Tiger fast asleep, and happily chasing rabbits, curled up on top of the bed.

Down below the pub was now considerably busier than it had been half an hour earlier. The absence of Constable Hobbling on the cricket field, and the absence of interested observers, was explained, for the cricket spectators had crowded into the bar in force.

‘How’s the fast bowler?’ Biffo asked, having returned to the bar, and nodding towards the large crowd at the far end of the bar, where a good deal of discussion was going on.

‘I believe he’s in pretty good condition,’ said Lettice. ‘There were a lot of smiles around when they all came back.’ She picked up a fresh beer glass. ‘Do you want another?’

‘Not just now, thank you,’ said Biffo. ‘I’m just popping to the shop to buy some cat food,’ said Biffo. ‘But I wouldn’t mind a nibble of something when I get back. Do you have a menu? Do you do food?’

‘We have a menu and we do food,’ said Lettice. ‘But the two don’t necessarily have anything to do with one another. I’ll see what we can fix up for you when you get back. But I do know we’re out of bread. Perhaps you could pick some up from the shop? Mind your head as you go out.’

The warning came a fraction of a second too late.

Chapter 14

When Biffo stepped outside The Gravedigger's Rest that April evening the sun was already beginning to set and a couple of early rising bats were searching for breakfast as they swooped and dived through the warm, early evening air. Across the road, in the gardens in front of a neat row of whitewashed thatched cottages, a woman in a pale blue gingham dress and gardening gloves was performing minor horticultural surgery with a pair of sharp secateurs. Two small children, a boy and a girl, were playing a game of 'catch' (it would, perhaps, have been more accurate if the game had been called 'drop') with a large inflatable ball.

Biffo turned to his left and began to walk around the village green towards the very traditional-looking village shop.

Above him beech and chestnut trees on the edge of the village green were bursting into leaf. At ankle level, along the bottom of the neat little hedges and walls which separated the highway from the gardens of the thatched cottages overlooking the village green, scores of bright yellow primroses added colour and reality to the springtime promise.

The double-fronted village shop was a riot of colour and looked as if it had been 'dressed' for an early Technicolor movie. The windows were packed from bottom to top with narrow shelves upon which someone had carefully balanced an enormous variety of those non-perishable products which were, presumably, to be found in slightly greater profusion within the shop itself

Two bouncy rubber balls (one red, one yellow); three coffee mugs decorated with pleasant pastoral scenes; half a dozen toy soldiers; a pack of two pale blue toilet rolls; a box of hair rollers; two small packets of paper handkerchiefs; a tin of humbugs; a pack of notepaper and envelopes; a box of aniseed balls; a doll that, according to the faded writing on a small piece of card pinned to its dress, said 'Mama' when tipped forwards; a selection of birthday, anniversary and congratulations-on-passing-your-driving-test cards; a bright yellow tin of baking powder; two bottles of tomato ketchup (one large and one very large); a small pile of boxes full of drawing pins; a plastic folder full of coloured pencils; a sketchbook; a variety of maps of the area; a collection of paperback novels and, as enthusiastic advertisers are prone to put it, much, much more.

Outside, in front of the two large windows, there were two rows of wooden benches laden with brown and white cardboard boxes full of fruit and vegetables. There were red apples and green apples, green and white cauliflowers, red tomatoes, potatoes still covered in dried brown earth, yellow bananas, orange oranges, dark green cabbages, rusty golden onions, light green lettuces, red and white radishes, huge green cucumbers, blood-red cherries, green pea pods just ready to be burst open and beautiful, ready for biting, early red strawberries which had presumably been imported from a part of the world where the strawberry ripening season was somewhat more advanced.

Lest there were any doubt at all about the nature and purpose of the establishment, there was a large black and white sign above the shop. The sign carried the legend 'The Village Shop' in neat, but nevertheless obviously hand-painted letters. Underneath the sign, in much smaller letters were the words: Est 1946 Prop: D. Box.

Biffo paused for a few seconds and gazed in admiration at this colourful and attractive display. And then he stepped from the early evening sunshine into the surprising darkness inside the shop, taking great care as he did so for the entrance to the shop had been narrowed by two large wicker baskets. The basket on the left hand side of the doorway was filled with small whitish bundles of neatly-chopped and parcelled kindling. The basket on the right hand side of the door was filled with a large mound of purple and grey beetroot. Kindling and beetroot were clearly either popular items in Fondling-Under-Water or else the proprietor of the shop was endeavouring to disencumber herself of overstockage in the kindling and beetroot departments.

'Hold this!' said a voice out of the darkness, thrusting something into Biffo's arms. Biffo unexpectedly found himself clutching something that felt like a mushroom but was far too large. It was the size of a football.

'And this!' said the same voice, thrusting something else on top of the mushroom disguised as a football. It was, Biffo quickly realised, another mushroom disguised as a football.

‘Bring them over here,’ said the voice, which Biffo discovered by leaning forwards and peering into the darkness ahead of him, belonged to a plumpish, middle-aged woman who was wearing a knee-length floral pinafore over a purple tweed skirt and a matching cardigan. She wore red rubber gloves and a blue beret and had a distinctive but uncultivated collection of black hair growing on her upper lip in a style that would have merited some commendation as a moustache had it been situated on a male visage. She had a jaw that looked as though it had been carved out of a large block of granite and, generally speaking, she seemed to be about as feminine and delicate as your average bad tempered rhinoceros. She had large ears which stuck out rather a good deal from the side of her head and wore her hair tucked behind them. This, together with her short stature, gave her a curious, rather wide-headed, almost extra-terrestrial appearance. This was, Biffo accurately assumed, either D. Box herself or some authorised representative.

After many years of marriage to a forceful and demanding woman Biffo was accustomed to doing as he was told by members of what is sometimes utterly inaccurately known as the ‘weaker sex’ and so, unquestioning, he did as he was told and carried the items which had been thrust into his arms over to the indicated site.

‘Are you Mrs Box?’ he asked, rather hesitantly.

The woman glowered at him as though he had pinched her bottom. ‘I most certainly am not. Mrs Box has been dead for twenty seven years. Do I look as though I’ve been dead for twenty seven years?’

Since the woman who was not Mrs Box had moved away into the darkness and was virtually invisible as she spoke it was difficult for Biffo to produce an entirely satisfactory answer to this question which, he accurately assumed, was, in any case, purely rhetorical.

‘Put them in here,’ said the woman, gently lowering the three football-sized mushrooms that she was carrying into a large wicket basket. Biffo, stumbling along behind her added his burden to the basket. ‘Everything is in chaos today,’ said the woman. ‘I’m Delphinium Box. Miss Box to you, young man. My father founded the shop. He was Donald Box. He ran it with my mother. She was Hermione Box.’

Biffo introduced himself It was a long time since he had been addressed as ‘young man’. He immediately warmed to the shop owner.

‘Hrmph,’ was Miss Box’s only reply. It was, Biffo was to discover, her favourite reply to almost all questions, comments and answers.

‘What on earth are these?’ asked Biffo, peering at the football-sized mushrooms overfilling the basket. He reached out a finger, as though to touch one of the mushroom-like creations, but withdrew quickly when his wrist received a firm slap.

‘Puffballs!’ said the woman. ‘Haven’t you ever seen a puffball before? I’m in a state. Did you hear that the damned fool Franklin Minton has fallen off his bicycle and broken his ankle?’

‘No,’ said Biffo, answering both questions economically.

‘What do you do with them? I am sorry to hear about Mr Minton’s accident.’

‘Eat them,’ said Miss Box, apparently accustomed to two tone conversations. ‘Don’t feel sorry for him. It was undoubtedly his own damned silly fault. Probably drunk. Or not drunk, which in his case, would have had similarly disastrous consequences. He’s probably more stable when he’s drunk. Where have you come from?’

Biffo started to tell her.

But, even in the semi-darkness, he got the distinct feeling that his words were not being received by a sympathetic audience. His instincts in this matter were unerring. ‘I haven’t got time for all that now,’ said Miss Box, impatiently. ‘You must tell me some other time. What do you want?’ She had somehow managed to squeeze in between a huge stack of pickled gherkins in large economy-sized jars and an equally impressively sized display of floral-patterned kitchen rolls and was now standing behind a well-worn wooden counter. The counter, a long one, was piled high with tins, packets and boxes. A large, old-fashioned till stood in the middle of the counter and numerous notices and posters had been pinned, glued and taped to the wooden panel on the front. One small notice in particular caught Biffo’s eye. ‘Genuine Axe,’ it read, ‘previously the property of George Washington. Offers invited.’

‘Do you really have George Washington’s old axe?’ asked Biffo. ‘The one he used to chop down the apple tree?’

‘I certainly do,’ replied Miss Box. ‘We get a few Americans coming through here in the summer. They’re usually lost but Americans are always on the look out for antiques — especially New World antiques and very especially if they think they can pick up something at a bargain price.’

‘And it’s the original axe?’ asked Biffo. ‘George Washington’s axe?’

‘Well, I expect it’s had another head put on it and the handle has been replaced,’ said Miss Box. ‘But apart from that it’s just the way it would have been when used by the great man himself.’

Biffo thought about this for a moment. ‘Do you sell many?’ he asked.

‘One or two,’ said Miss Box, cautiously.

‘Mmm,’ said Biffo. He smiled. Miss Box did not smile back. Biffo felt slightly uncomfortable.Miss Box did not display any signs of feeling uncomfortable.

‘Do you have any cat food?’ Biffo asked. And bread?’

‘Do I have any cat food?’ said the woman. ‘What sort of question is that? Of course I’ve got cat food! Of course I’ve got bread. This is a shop isn’t it?’ She peered at him. ‘Just what sort of sandwich are you going to make? Do you know what they put in cat food? I’ve got some very cheap pate. You’d be much better off with that.’

Biffo started to point out that not all shops sell cat food but Miss Box was talking again. ‘Wholemeal? Granary? Cottage loaf? Sliced? Unsliced? Or do you want bread rolls? Crusty rolls? Finger rolls? Soft rolls? Baps?’

‘Perhaps a wholemeal loaf?’ said Biffo, rather timidly.

‘Small or large?’

‘Large.’

‘Sliced or unsliced?’

‘Unsliced.’

The woman reached behind her, pulled a large, unsliced wholemeal loaf off the shelf and put it down on the counter in front of her.

‘What sort of cat food do you have?’ asked Biffo.

‘Turkey, beef, chicken, lamb, duck. Extra jelly. Crunchy dry stuff. What do you like best on your sandwiches?’

‘It’s not for me, it’s for my cat,’ explained Biffo.

‘Of course it is,’ said the shopkeeper, nodding. ‘That’s what they all say. What does your cat like?’

‘Anything expensive,’ said Biffo. ‘She won’t eat cheap cat food.’

‘Well that’s fine then,’ said the shopkeeper. ‘All my cat food is expensive. And if it wasn’t I’d just charge you more for it to keep your cat happy. The pate from Cranberry Farm is much cheaper.’ She led Biffo to the shelves upon which tins and packets of dog and cat food were displayed. ‘What would you like?’

‘Oh that should go down well,’ said Biffo, eagerly pointing to a brand which he knew Tiger liked.

‘How many?’

‘Half a dozen tins, please. And do you have a toothbrush? And toothpaste?’

‘Toothbrushes are behind you, slightly to your left, knee height, between the apricot jam and the horseradish sauce and directly above the toothpaste.’

Biffo carefully followed these instructions, reached out into the darkness and, a moment or so later, was impressed to find himself clutching a toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste.

‘And a razor? And some shaving soap?’

‘Came away in a hurry did you?’

‘Sort of,’ admitted Biffo.

‘Are the police after you?’

‘Good heavens, no!’

‘Don’t worry so much,’ said Miss Box. ‘Doesn’t matter to me. Razors are in between garlic tablets and ladies’ tights. Razor blades are directly below tinned tomatoes and in between the stuffed olives and the children’s socks. Shaving soap is to the left of the birthday cards and just above shoelaces.’

Biffo followed these instructions with satisfying success. Miss Box’s display system might not have followed any logical order but she certainly seemed to know where everything was.

‘Anything else?’

Biffo thought for a moment. ‘Er, no thank you.’

Invisible fingers played the keys of an old-fashioned till and then Miss Box announced the result as though she were a returning officer announcing the consequences of a contentious election.

‘How long are you staying in the village?’ she asked as

Biffo pulled out his wallet and handed over an appropriate note.

‘I’m not sure,’ admitted Biffo. He paused and coughed nervously. ‘I’m actually looking for work,’ he said.

‘Honest?’

‘Oh yes. I really mean it. I’m really looking for work.’

‘No, you fool. I mean are you honest? Can you be trusted?’

‘Oh, yes.’

‘You seem a bit stupid,’ said Miss Box, who was clearly not a woman who felt herself constrained by normal social niceties. She peered at him. ‘Are you?’

Biffo was thrown by this. ‘I don’t think so,’ he replied eventually.

‘Can you ride a bicycle?’

‘Er. . .yes,’ said Biffo bravely.’ At least I used to be able to. . .I haven’t ridden a bicycle for twenty years. But they do say that riding a bicycle is, er, like, er. . .well once you’ve learnt you never forget.’

‘When can you start?’

‘When would you like. . .?’

‘In the morning,’ interrupted the shopkeeper. ‘Eight o’clock sharp.’

‘Right. Fine.’ said Biffo, surprised at how quickly everything was happening. ‘I suppose I should ask about wages. . .’

‘Of course there are wages,’ said the shopkeeper, speedily dismissing this subject. ‘Do you have any trouser clips? Franklin always brought his own.’

Biffo had always been regarded as a skilful negotiator in the world of television. Artists’ agents and outside contractors had been known to blanch upon discovering that they had to negotiate with him. He felt that he was not doing particularly well with Miss Box.

‘Are those the same as bicycle clips?’ asked Biffo.

‘The same as what?’

‘Bicycle clips. The things you put round the bottom of your trousers to stop them getting caught in the chain,’ said Biffo.

‘They’re trouser clips,’ said the shopkeeper. ‘Why would anyone want to call them bicycle clips?’

Biffo swallowed. ‘I don’t, er, have any trouser clips with me,’ he admitted.

‘Directly behind you and just above your head. They’re hanging on a nail. Just above the mixed screws and below the jam pot covers. They’re 34 pence each but we only sell them in pairs.’

Biffo turned round, found the trouser clips and took a pair.

‘Now that you’re a regular customer do you want to start an account?’

‘Yes, I suppose so,’ agreed Biffo, beginning to think that a little credit might help eke out his meagre wealth.

Somewhere in the darkness the invisible fingers once again played the keyboard of the invisible till. ‘I could take it out of your wages,’ said Miss Box.

‘That sounds like a good idea,’ timidly agreed Biffo. ‘Er, while we’re on that subject, I hope you don’t mind my asking, but what, exactly, are, er, my wages?’

‘Quite satisfactory,’ said the shopkeeper firmly making it clear that this aspect of the conversation was now over. ‘You just make sure you’re here by eight in the morning. I want your bum on that saddle by one minute past eight at the latest.’

‘Of course. Thank you,’ said Biffo meekly.

Television executive to grocery delivery boy in one day seemed a fairly substantial career move. Biffo couldn’t help smiling to himself as he wondered what Edwina would have had to say about it if she had known.

The shopkeeper thrust a large, stout, brown paper bag into Biffo’s arms. ‘Don’t forget your shopping,’ she said. She scurried off into the darkness as soon as Biffo had taken the bag from her.

Outside the sun was beginning to set and the sky over the church was a glorious mixture of red and orange.

Chapter 15

When Biffo walked back in through the front door of The Gravedigger's Rest he remembered the step down into the bar just in time. Unfortunately, because all his attention was concentrated on his feet, he forgot to duck and so, inevitably, he cracked his head.

He staggered into the bar, dropping the brown paper bag, and, holding his head in his hands, leant against the wall for a moment while the galaxy of stars he could see slowly dissolved. It had been a long day and all he wanted now was a quiet, pleasant meal and a good night's sleep.

'Don't knock the place about!' called a voice Biffo did not recognise. Biffo looked hard in the direction of the voice which seemed to have come from the far end of the bar. His eyes and brain didn't seem to be functioning too well but the owner of the voice appeared to be a jovial, red-haired, red-faced fellow in a white open-necked, short-sleeved shirt and a pair of grey flannels. 'This is a listed building,' said the red faced man, whose arms and face were generously supplied with freckles. This was clearly Puffy Harbottle, the landlord of The Gravedigger's Rest.

'Listed or listing?' asked a very short, round man who was wearing a pair of oil-stained jeans and an oil-stained shirt. He was so round that he looked as if he would probably roll right over and back up onto his feet if he fell over.

'Are you all right?' Lettice asked Biffo.

'That's seven so far!' called a fourth voice, yet another that Biffo did not recognise. 'Write it down on the slate, Lettice.' Biffo's brain was recovering quickly from the unequal collision with the beam and he could see that the owner of this voice was a fellow who was leaning on the very far end of the bar and who, unlikely as it seemed, appeared to be wearing a green and pink striped jumper.

Biffo bent down, picked up his brown paper bag and tottered weakly over to the bar where Lettice, who had just finished wiping clean a small wood-edged piece of slate with a damp cloth, was busy writing something on the slate with a very small piece of white chalk. Biffo took the loaf of bread out of the bag and placed it on the bar counter. 'I hope this is OK,' he said, leaning on the counter, and looking at the slate on which Lettice had been writing. She had written the figure seven on it.

'Oh, thanks,' said Lettice, picking up the loaf. I'll get you the menu. You must tell me what we owe you.'

'Er, excuse me for asking this, and do please tell me if it's got nothing to do with me, but can you tell me why you wrote down seven when I banged my head?' asked Biffo.

'Oh that!' said Lettice, picking up the slate and pushing it under the counter. She was blushing bright red. 'Some of the locals have a bit of a bet on the number of people who will knock their heads on that beam every week,' she explained. 'The regulars don't do it very often, but visitors usually do it once or twice an evening. And since you're the only visitor we've had for a while you're naturally rather the centre of attention. Quite a bit of money rests on how many times you hit your head.'

'Are you staying here long?' the short, round man in the oily jeans asked Biffo. He spoke very quietly and winked when he had asked his question. He wore a toupee which sat on top of his head a little uncertainly. His hands were covered in oil.

'Well, I rather think I might,' replied Biffo. 'It all depend on my finances.'

'Splendid!' said the short, round fellow, rubbing his oilstained hands together with undisguised delight and scurrying off towards the far end of the bar.

'That's Roderick Hedrubb,' said Lettice, 'and the guy at the other end of the bar – the tall, blonde, curly-haired guy in the striped jumper — is Cheesy Stilton.'

'Ah' said Biffo.

'And this is Puffy Harbottle,' said Lettice, introducing the red-faced man in the white, open-necked shirt.

The two men shook hands and exchanged greetings. 'The good lady wife is away for a day or two,' said Puffy, rather apologetically. 'Little bit of family business up north,' he added unnecessarily. 'But Lettice is helping me to run a tight ship.'

'Lovely pub,' said Biffo, wondering why Lettice had told him that the landlord's wife had run off with a soft drink salesman. Lettice showed no sign of embarrassment and Biffo said nothing.

Introductions over, Lettice disappeared, clutching the wholemeal loaf to her bosom.

'I'm just going to pop upstairs to feed Tiger,' Biffo called after her. 'Do you have a can opener I can borrow? And a plate?'

'I'll get them for you,' called Lettice.

'Are you dining with us?' asked Puffy.

'Oh yes,' said Biffo.

'Splendid!' said Puffy. 'My wife usually does the cooking but I'm sure Lettice and I will be able to sort something out for you.'

'Great!' said Biffo. 'I'm starving.'

'You've come to the right place!' said the landlord, puffing out his ample chest and giving Biffo one possible explanation for the soubriquet. 'I'm sure you will agree that we've a right to be proud of our international cuisine here at The Gravedigger's Rest.'

'International cuisine!' said the short, round man managing to express considerable reservoirs of doubt and scepticism in those two words.

'Absolutely!' said Puffy, proudly. 'International cuisine!' he repeated.

'And just what's international about the food you sell?' demanded the short, round man.

Puffy thought about this for a moment. 'We have Welsh Rarebit and Yorkshire Pudding,' he pointed out. 'They're foreign.'

The small, round man snorted rather disdainfully.

'And Scotch Woodcock,' said Puffy.

The small, round man dismissed this with a sniff.

'And Scotch eggs!' added Puffy Harbottle. 'Scotland is very foreign.'

'What's Scotch Woodcock?' asked the small, round man.

Puffy opened his mouth and then shut it again before anything came out. He looked to Biffo for help.

'I think it's sort of scrambled egg with anchovies on top,' said Biffo. 'Isn't it?'

'Sounds about right to me,' said Puffy. 'Scrambled egg with anchovies on top. Scotch Woodcock.'

‘Not exactly international though is it?’ said the short, round man, making it clear that he didn’t regard Wales, Scotland or even Yorkshire as being foreign parts.

The landlord racked his brain in an attempt to provide more support for his claim.

‘Frankfurters!’ he said at last, as though playing a trump card. ‘They’re quite definitely foreign.’ He turned to Biffo. ‘They’re international aren’t they?’

‘Definitely!’ agreed Biffo, nodding.

‘Pshaw!’ snorted the short, round man. ‘Pfui!’ he added as a vocal postscript.

Puffy moved an inch or two closer to Biffo. ‘We have difficulty with some of the locals,’ he said. ‘Not many gourmet palates around here,’ he complained. ‘Most of them just want a pie and a plateful of chips.’

A moment later Lettice returned, carrying a can opener and a large white plate. Biffo went up to his room and fed a by now ravenous Tiger.

Chapter 16

‘Let me know what you fancy and I’ll tell you if we’ve got it,’ said Lettice, handing Biffo a small red plastic folder. Biffo opened the folder and found a neatly typed menu inside. The menu, which had a date just over three years old typed in the top right hand corner, was extremely impressive.

‘Oh, whoops, ignore the date,’ said Lettice, ‘I think it’s been a while since the menus were redone.’ She paused and bit her lower lip for a moment. ‘Actually, I think these menus were put together when Puffy’s wife was doing the cooking.’

‘It’s very impressive!’ said Biffo, examining the menu carefully and preparing to throw caution to the winds now that he had a job and possibly even an income as well. It is true that he might have been a little happier if he had known exactly what the income was, but he was well aware that the employment possibilities for former television executives in the village of Fondling-Under-Water were probably not dropping off trees, or even terribly thick on the ground, and so he was pleased to have landed on his feet, or, to be more accurate, on Franklin Minton’s bicycle.

While Biffo struggled to choose between Aylesbury Duckling A L’Orange, Sirloin Steak Avec Une Sauce Poivre Piquant and Coq au Chambertin the relative peace of the bar was abruptly disturbed by the ringing of a telephone.

Biffo lowered the menu he was reading for a moment and watched as Puffy walked methodically along behind the bar before lifting the chipped and discoloured, old-fashioned black plastic handset from its matching, chipped and discoloured, oldfashioned black plastic receiver. Biffo had seen more modern telephone equipment displayed in antique shop windows.

The landlord listened to the caller with rapidly growing disquiet, speaking only at irregular intervals to add obviously appropriate encouragement (‘Yes’, ‘Yes’, ‘No’, ‘Ooh’, ‘Yes’, ‘No’, ‘Ah’, ‘No’, ‘Yes’ and ‘Yes’) to what was clearly a spirited and anxious monologue.

When the conversation was over Puffy replaced the receiver with a heavy-handed clatter, and returned to the far end of the bar with a gloomy look on his face. Those to whom he hurried could see that all was not well, and that the publican was the bearer of bad tidings, and they clutched at their pint glasses as though they were children holding tightly to their comfort blankets.

Biffo could not hear what was going on at the other end of the bar but the news Puffy had received through the telephone caused such great consternation that the landlord and Lettice were kept busy pulling fresh pints for all concerned. While they were awaiting their calming pots of foaming brew the customers sat silently on their stools as though they had just been given advance notification of an early date for the end of the world.

‘Have you chosen yet?’ asked Lettice, returning to Biffo’s table.

‘I think I’ll have the Coq au Chambertin,’ said Biffo. He nodded towards the far end of the bar ‘What’s happened?’

‘Franklin Minton has broken his ankle,’ whispered Lettice back as she wrote Biffo’s order on a small notepad.

‘So I heard,’ Biffo replied quietly. ‘I gather he fell off his bicycle. I was very sorry to hear it.’

Lettice’s lower jaw dropped open and she put down her pencil. ‘Just how did you know that?’

‘Well it’s a village,’ explained Biffo, with a dismissive shrug. ‘You know how things get around in villages.’

‘Mmm,’ agreed Lettice, who did. She nevertheless still looked surprised and impressed. ‘He was probably tiddly,’ she said. She thought for a moment. ‘Though come to think of it he’s always tiddly and he doesn’t usually fall off his bicycle. Maybe he tried to ride it while he was sober.’

‘Mr Minton seems to have a lot of very good friends,’ Biffo said, nodding towards the far end of the bar. ‘Everyone seems very upset. It’s rather touching.’

Lettice looked towards the other end of the bar and then looked back at Biffo. ‘Franklin is an important member of the cricket club,’ she said. ‘And the season has just started.’

While Lettice spoke Biffo slowly became aware that just about every pair of eyes at the far end of the bar was looking in his direction, He noticed this out of the corner of his eye and tried hard not to turn his head and stare back.

‘Brace yourself,’ whispered Lettice. ‘I think you’re going to get an invitation any minute now.’ She disappeared off into the kitchen.

Biffo, who had not worked as a television executive for many years without acquiring the ability to add two and two together with a good chance of getting the right answer, knew instantly what she meant. Fact one: Franklin Minton had clearly been a member of the cricket team. Fact two: with a broken ankle he obviously wouldn’t be able to play. Conclusion: the Fondling-Under-Water village cricket team would be a player short. Solution: Biffo.

Biffo hadn’t played cricket since he’d left school and so he had no immediate or easily recallable memories to pollute his distant and romantic recollections of his playing days. He had, he rather seemed to remember, been an extremely promising batsman. He remembered crisply pulling a full length ball to the boundary and hearing his colleagues just over the boundary rope cheering in delight. And he half remembered bowling too – though the memories did not encourage him to believe that he would make his mark by taking many wickets. He seemed to remember bowling so slowly that on one occasion, when dissatisfied with the ball he had sent down, he had been able to race after it, recover it, and bowl it again. On another occasion a team member had, he remembered, commented that if a ball he had bowled had gone far enough it would have probably been a wide

Despite these slightly less than majestic memories he decided that playing for the local village cricket team could be just the jolt he needed to help him forget his past. He wondered if anyone would have any cricket trousers he could borrow. He hoped he had put a decent white shirt into his suitcase when he had packed his belongings. Slowly he turned his head and looked along the length of the bar. The cricket club members were all still staring in his direction.

‘I forgot to ask you if you would like anything to drink with your meal,’ said Lettice, who had popped back out of the kitchen.

‘Do you have any claret?’ asked Biffo, who was beginning to feel that the first day of his new life was worth celebrating.

‘I don’t know. I’ll ask Puffy,’ said Lettice. She walked up behind the bar to where Puffy was standing. A few moments later she returned.

‘Puffy says we’re right out of claret at the moment but that he’s got a very nice little wine that is so good that Orson Welles himself wouldn’t be able to tell it wasn’t claret.’

‘I don’t expect he would,’ agreed Biffo. ‘He’s been dead for quite a while. His taste buds have probably deteriorated a bit by now.’

‘Has he? What a pity. I hadn’t heard. Anyway he was a bit of an expert on wine wasn’t he?’

‘I think he used to do advertisements for sherry.’

‘I expect that is what Puffy meant.’

‘Fine. I’ll have a bottle of the Orson Welles special then.’

Lettice disappeared again.

There was still a good deal of muttering and whispering going on at the other end of the bar. Every few moments someone would stare in Biffo's direction and then quickly look away again. Biffo, who had decided to play it cool, carefully studied the message on a slightly soggy beer-mat. It seemed to be some sort of joke.

'Excuse me,' said Puffy, who had moved along behind the bar so silently that Biffo hadn't heard him coming. 'But do you by any chance know anything about cricket?' Puffy had been accompanied by Cheesy Stilton.

Biffo, who had, of course, been expecting this question, turned, smiled and thought for a moment. 'Twenty two players and a very hard ball?' he said, slipping a question mark onto the end of the sentence by raising his voice for the last word or two.

'Exactly!' said Puffy. 'That's the game. I don't suppose you play do you? How much exactly do you know about the game? Leg before wicket? Googlies? Fast medium bowled round the wicket? Chinamen? Seam up bowled over the wicket? Deep extra cover? Silly point? Au fait with the laws and that sort of thing?'

'Well, I'm probably a little rusty,' admitted Biffo. 'But in my time I have been known to twiddle with a bat.'

'I say,' said Puffy, 'that's pretty good news.' Cheesy Stilton turned and raised a thumb to the waiting crowd at the other end of the bar. This promising indication of good news to come was well received and there was much nodding and smiling and holding up of thumbs in return.

'Are you going to be here on Saturday?' asked Puffy.

'I sincerely hope so,' said Biffo.

'Wonderful!' said Puffy, clapping Biffo on the shoulder with a fist the size of a small goose. 'You see one of the villagers, a vital member of the cricket club, had a most unfortunate accident today. He fell off his bicycle and appears to have rather done himself a bit of a mischief'

'Franklin Minton,' said Biffo.

Puffy seemed surprised. 'That's right!' he said. 'How did you know?'

Biffo shrugged. 'Oh you know how it is in a village,' he said, dismissively. 'Word gets around quickly.'

'Yes,' said Puffy. 'It does, doesn't it?'

'He was seen standing on his good leg trying to kick the bicycle with his bad leg,' said Cheesy.

'Sounds like road rage!' said Puffy.

'Oh I don't think so,' said Cheesy. 'I expect he was just hopping mad.' He showed no sign of realising that he had inadvertently cracked a joke.

'Ah', nodded Biffo. He wasn't sure whether or not it would be appropriate to comment on the joke so he didn't.

'And so we rather wondered if you would be willing to take his place?' continued Puffy.

'I'd be absolutely delighted!' said Biffo, bracing himself as Puffy hit him playfully on the shoulder with the goose again.

And Biffo truly was delighted. He had been in FondlingUnder-Water for considerably less than a day and already he had a job and was a member of the local cricket team. He definitely felt that, if he had anyone to write home to, he could have quite justifiably written home to report that his arrival in the village had been greeted with something approaching rave reviews. (He realised, of course, that if he had had anyone at home to write to he probably wouldn't have been in the village in the first place.)

'Of course you'll have to join the cricket club,' said Cheesy.

‘Of course,’ said Biffo. ‘Willingly. What do I have to do? What are the rules?’

‘Rules?’ said the other villager. ‘What do you mean - rules?’

Biffo was puzzled. ‘All clubs have rules,’ he said. ‘It’s just something about clubs.’

‘Oh,’ said the other villager. He looked at Puffy. ‘Do we have rules?’

Puffy frowned for a moment. ‘I’m not sure,’ he said. ‘The only important one I can think of is that no one can be a member unless they join.’

‘OK,’ said Biffo. ‘That sounds fair enough. Do I have to do anything to join?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Cheesy quickly. ‘You have to hand over money.’

‘Of course,’ nodded Biffo. ‘That sounds like a club rule. How much?’

‘How much is it?’ Cheesy asked Puffy.

‘I think it’s probably a fiver,’ said Puffy.

‘Can you put it on the slate for me?’ asked Biffo. ‘I have something of a cash flow problem at the moment.’

‘Of course,’ said Puffy, with a sigh. ‘I think that’s probably the other rule of membership.’

Biffo looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

‘That members never pay their membership dues,’ explained Puffy.

Chapter 17

‘I’m terribly sorry about this,’ said Lettice. ‘But it seems that we’re right out of Coq au Chambertin.’

‘That’s OK,’ said Biffo accepting this bad news cheerfully and with good grace. He was busy imagining himself playing spectacular on drives through the covers. Or, he wondered, should that be off drives through the covers? Or cover drives through the off side? Or cover drives through the on side? He was getting very confused. Puffy and Cheesy had now disappeared.

‘Would you like to choose something else?’ asked Lettice handing him the menu again.

‘I’ll have the Sirloin Steak Avec Une Sauce Poivre Piquant,’ said Biffo without hesitation.

‘I’m sorry if the French isn’t quite accurate,’ said Lettice, writing down Biffo’s new order. ‘Puffy got Franklin Minton’s grand-daughter to write out the menu.’

‘It sounds fine to me,’ said Biffo, whose skills as a linguist definitely put him in the unskilled category.

‘She’s only ten.’

‘It’s absolutely charming,’ said Biffo.

‘Would you like anything while you’re waiting for your meal?’ asked Lettice.

‘Perhaps just a packet of crisps?’ suggested Biffo. ‘I’m a little peckish.’

And a pint of beer perhaps?’

‘Sounds good!’ agreed Biffo, who had suddenly become aware that a small deputation of two from the informal meeting of cricket club members had quietly moved to his end of the bar. Puffy was half of the small deputation.

‘May I introduce the cricket club captain, Cedric Stickers?’ said Puffy. He waved an introductory hand in the direction of a short, round man who was wearing what appeared to be an expensive blue suit which was, sadly, several sizes too large for him. The newcomer was shorter and rounder than Roderick Hedrubb and this surprised Biffo who had regarded Mr Hedrubb’s shortness and roundness as pretty well definitive. The trousers of Mr Stickers’ suit were slightly too long and were, consequently, rather baggy around his ankles. The sleeves of the jacket were long enough to keep Mr Stickers’ hands warm in winter. The suit looked as though it had been bought by a careful parent who expected the wearer to grow into it. In view of the captain’s age this did not seem to Biffo to be a realistic expectation. On the other hand, thought Biffo, the upside of this advance planning was that the purchase of gloves would not be a major expense in the household budget. ‘Last year Mr Stickers was elected Best Captain of the Season,’ added Puffy.

The captain, who was a decade or two past his prime, had the sort of shape modern car designers like to describe as aerodynamic in that there are no sharp corners but lots of wellrounded curves. However, no one could have ever described him as streamlined. He had a white, pasty, round face and two rather small eyes. Above the neck the general effect, Biffo thought, was rather that of a family-sized steamed pudding into which a penny-pinching chef had tossed a couple of currants.

Lettice quietly put a packet of crisp down in front of Biffo.

‘So good of you to help us out,’ said the short man, peering at Biffo. He wore a toothbrush moustache and had attempted to cover a very large bald patch with seven, or possibly eight, strands of dyed black hair. Despite the almost total absence of head hair the shoulders of his blue suit were nevertheless generously sprinkled with dandruff. Since he was very short the dandruff, like the bald patch, was easy to see.

‘Bernard Brimstone,’ said Biffo, holding out his hand. ‘Biffo. Pleased to meet you.’

‘Call me Bill,’ said Mr Stickers. ‘It isn’t my name but it’s what everyone calls me.’ He frowned for a moment and turned to Puffy Harbottle. ‘Puffy, why do they call me Bill? I’ve forgotten again.’

‘Bill Stickers,’ explained Puffy patiently. ‘It’s a sort of friendly joke. It shows that the chaps like you.’

‘Of course, ‘said Bill, still looking puzzled for a second or two but then quickly abandoning his attempt to understand the joke and simply accepting it and beaming with pride. He rather belatedly laughed. At least Biffo assumed that it was a laugh. It sounded rather like a blocked drain suddenly emptying.

‘Were there a lot of captains last season?’ asked Biffo, innocently.

Everyone looked at him but no one said anything. It was clear that no one understood what he was talking about.

‘You said that Mr Stickers had been elected Best Captain of the Season,’ explained Biffo. ‘I wondered. . .’

‘Ah,’ said Puffy, understanding at last. ‘No, Bill was captain for the whole season.’

Biffo thought about this for a while. He wasn’t at all sure that he understood. ‘But he was the only captain?’

‘Oh, absolutely,’ said Puffy.

Biffo nodded and tried to look as though he understood, though he did not.

Lettice put a pint of beer next to the packet of crisps that still lay unopened and then hurried off back into the kitchen.

‘Bill is also chairman and president of the Fondling-Under-Water Cricket Club,’ said Puffy.

‘Congratulations!’ said Biffo, suitably impressed.

This went down terribly well and it was immediately clear to Biffo that Bill Stickers was very proud of his three positions.

‘Bill saved the club,’ said Puffy. ‘Our cricket ground had been in the hands of the Hepplewhite family for generations but Lord Hepplewhite had a little bit of bad luck recently and had to sell.’

Bill, who looked extremely pleased with himself, straightened first his shoulders and then his tie and tried to make himself look as tall as possible.

‘The cricket club would have probably gone to the wall without me,’ said Bill. ‘There would be bungalows all over it or some farmer would be growing beetroot at square leg by now.’

‘Well, good for you!’ Biffo said to Bill. He opened his packet of crisps and offered the cricket club president, chairman and captain the opportunity to dip into the contents. ‘It’s good to see someone using their money wisely.’

‘Lottery money,’ said Bill, greedily taking as large a fistful of crisps as he could pull out of the bag and pushing them all into his mouth at once.

Biffo was confused. ‘You mean the lottery people gave you the money to buy the ground?’

‘Gnheu,’ said Bill proudly. ‘I crunch crunch crunch lottery crunch crunch year crunch. Crunch crunch six crunch. At the crunch it crunch crunch crunch.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Biffo. ‘I didn’t quite get that. . .’

Bill swallowed the crisps he was eating. ‘I won the lottery five years ago. Seven point four six million. At the time it was the fourth biggest win ever. I was in all the papers.’

‘Ah,’ said Biffo. ‘Congratulations.’

Suddenly, the calm of the evening was shattered as a huge bear of a man in a tattered sheepskin coat burst into the bar carrying a large plastic bag. He marched over to the bar and emptied the plastic bag out on the bar counter. Biffo stared in astonishment at a pile of trophies, silver tankards and plaques.

‘These were in with a couple of old pictures I bought yesterday,’ said the stranger. He spoke in a strange accent which Biffo couldn’t place.

Puffy, examining the silverware, nodded his head appreciatively. ‘Impressive!’

‘Should fill up the cabinet nicely,’ said the newcomer, nodding in the direction of a large wooden cabinet behind the bar. The cabinet, which had the words Fondling-Under-Water Cricket Club stencilled onto it, was half full of trophies and other silverware. Biffo had assumed that the trophies had all been won by the cricket club. He leant over and looked at the trophies which the newcomer had brought. One was inscribed ‘Eastern Counties Schools Lacrosse Champions 1953’, a second carried the inscription ‘Cardiff Region Boys Darts Champion 1946’ and a third was engraved with the name of an amateur football club in the West Midlands. There was no indication of the contest in which they had been victorious, though judging by the modest size of the trophy it was probably not the FA Cup.

Puffy opened the cupboard, and gave each of the trophies a cursory rub on his jumper before putting it onto one of the display shelves.

‘Did you get all your trophies this way?’ asked Biffo, genuinely surprised.

‘Of course we did,’ replied Puffy. ‘You don’t think our team could actually win anything, do you?’ He pulled a trophy out of the cabinet and showed it to Biffo. It was engraved West of England Formation Dancing Association Team Trophy 1951 (Tango).’

‘But aren’t you supposed to practise and win trophies through hard work,’ protested Biffo.

‘Probably,’ agreed Puffy. ‘But it’s a hell of a lot easier this way.’

The stranger who had brought the bagful of trophies picked up his now empty plastic bag, screwed it up and stuffed it into his pocket. ‘See you later!’ he promised, disappearing as rapidly as he had arrived.

Who was that?’ asked Biffo.

‘Helmut,’ replied Puffy. ‘Bill used to be a hairdresser before his big win,’ he continued, before Biffo could ask any more questions about the stranger in the tattered sheepskin coat.

Biffo, in a slight state of shock, offered Puffy a crisp. Puffy declined. Biffo breathed a quiet sigh of relief and took another crisp for himself

‘I once cut Paul McCartney’s hair,’ said Bill, reaching out and, unasked, helping himself to another handful of crisps.

‘Really?’ said Biffo.

‘Crunch crunch crunch actually crunch crunch crunch,’ said Bill. ‘It was a crunch crunch crunch playing Paul crunch in a crunch about the crunch.’ They were very noisy crisps.

‘Sorry?’ said Biffo who had no idea what Bill had said. ‘I’m afraid I didn’t quite get that. . .’

Bill finished crunching the crisps he was eating and swallowed them.

‘It wasn’t actually the real Paul McCartney,’ said Bill, after licking his lips. ‘It was an actor playing Paul McCartney in a play about the Beatles.’

‘Ah.’ nodded Biffo, putting two fingers into his crisp bag and discovering that it was empty. He screwed up the crisp bag and lay it on the bar counter.

‘But it was a very good play,’ said Bill, half closing his eyes, staring at the ceiling and giving a good imitation of a man in thought. ‘I can’t remember the title. Did you see it?’ He picked up Biffo’s pint of beer and drank half of it in one swallow.

‘I don’t think so,’ said Biffo, glumly watching his beer disappear. He was beginning to feel very hungry and wondered just how hungry he would have to be before he went upstairs to his room and started eating some of Tiger’s food. He remembered his former television colleague Streaky Bacon once saying that hairdressers are specially trained to be able to talk for hours without saying anything. He had claimed, probably without justification, that they took a diploma in ‘inconsequential chit-chat’. Biffo decided that on this occasion he would have preferred it if Bill had chatted more and eaten less.

Bill then began to give a monologue on the history of the potato crisp. The former hairdresser was clearly not only a man who read widely and indiscriminately but also someone who was always eager to share his extensive knowledge with a largely untutored world.

During a pause in the monologue (unlike professional politicians Bill had not yet perfected the art of breathing in midsentence in order to stop anyone else getting a word in edgeways) Lettice, who had emerged from the kitchen looking even more flustered, interrupted.

‘I’m terribly sorry,’ she said. She looked rather dishevelled and was holding the now familiar menu in her hand.

‘That’s OK,’ said Biffo, welcoming the interruption. Bill, who did not seem so pleased, simply glowered.

‘I’ve been right through the freezer,’ said Lettice, clearly apologetic. ‘And we don’t seem to have any sirloin steak in stock.’

Biffo smiled and took the menu from her. ‘That’s OK,’ he said. ‘Don’t worry.’ He checked the menu. ‘I’ll have the Aylesbury Duckling A L’Orange,’ he said. ‘Sounds wonderful.’

‘Right,’ said Lettice, relieved. ‘And do you want to stick with the same wine?’

‘Yes please,’ said Biffo. ‘That’ll be fine.’

Lettice went back into the kitchen in search of a spare Aylesbury Ducking and, presumably, an unemployed orange.

‘Where’s he gone?’ Biffo asked Puffy, noticing that Bill had disappeared.

‘Probably phoning Mrs Stickers to tell her to get the caviar out of the fridge for his tea,’ replied Puffy. He nodded in Bill’s direction. The lottery winner was standing by the door talking on a mobile telephone. He seemed a little more agitated than one would have expected of a man ordering up his nightly supply of overpriced fish eggs.

‘I rather get the impression Bill likes being cricket club president, chairman and captain,’ said Biffo.

‘Loves it,’ said Puffy, rather wearily. ‘He’s a real pain in the butt. To be honest I don’t really think he has much interest in cricket. But he loves the fact that everyone in the village is in his debt.’ He leant a little closer. ‘I rather think he likes being important,’ he confided.

Bill shut his telephone and left the bar hurriedly. He did not say goodbye or hit his head on the beam.

‘Odd fellow,’ said Puffy. ‘Even though he won z point x million I sometimes actually feel sorry for him.’

‘Who are the other players?’ Biffo asked Puffy, nodding towards the far end of the bar where a small cluster of drinkers, clearly regulars at The Gravedigger’s Rest, appeared to be doing their best to make the next beer delivery truck driver’s journey well worthwhile. When they had celebrated the fact that their fast bowler’s knee was in good condition they celebrated the start of the forthcoming the cricket season and then they celebrated the end of winter.

They celebrated the existence of The Gravedigger’s Rest and mostly, and most consistently, they celebrated the fact that the public house of that name was blessed with a good supply of excellent beer and a wise landlord who was always happy to give credit to his most valued customers. They liked celebrating.

‘I’ve never before been in a pub where the customers help themselves,’ Biffo said, as Cheesy Stilton displayed exceptional and unexpected dexterity by reaching over the bar and refilling his own glass with beer. When he had completed that task to his own satisfaction, and had filled the glass to the point where only the wonders of surface tension prevented spillage, he repeated the performance with a second glass. There was little doubt that if beer drinking had been a recognised Olympic sport the regulars of The Gravedigger’s Rest would have all been favourites for medals. Observers would have had little choice but to have been seriously impressed by the amount of training going on.

‘We have an honesty book,’ explained Puffy. ‘The regulars just help themselves and jot down what they owe me in the book.’ He paused. ‘Once a month I add it all up and write it off as a bad debt.’ He sighed. ‘Actually, the honesty book has gone missing. I think someone has nicked it.’ He brightened up. ‘Probably somebody’s idea of a joke. I expect it’ll turn up.’

‘Tell me about Cheesy,’ said Biffo.

‘Walter ‘Cheesy’ Stilton,’ said Puffy, as though introducing a victim for ‘This Is Your Life’. ‘Last year he was elected Best Lower Middle Order Batsman of the First Half of the Season. He is one of the team’s most capable drinkers. A great beer man. Cheesy can drink ten or twelve pints of the best and still drive a car right along the white line in the middle of the road.’

Biffo nodded appreciatively.

‘He’s a brilliant mimic too,’ added Puffy, with undisguised admiration. ‘There is no one for miles to touch Cheesy when it comes to imitating farmyard animals.’ Puffy lifted up the bar flap as he spoke. ‘His cow in labour is sensational. Quite remarkable. He brought the house down at last year’s Annual Cricket Club Dinner.’ He wandered along behind the bar and helped himself to a large gin. ‘And if you ever have any plumbing problems Cheesy is your man,’ said Puffy. ‘He may not look much out of the ordinary but that man can work miracles with a wrench.’

‘Wench?’ said Biffo, slightly puzzled.

‘Wrench,’ said Puffy. ‘But, come to think of it he can probably work miracles with wenches too.’ He turned to Biffo. ‘Can I get you anything?’

‘I wouldn’t mind another beer,’ said Biffo. Puffy poured Biffo a pint of beer.

Just then Lettice reappeared looking rather embarrassed.

‘I don’t know how to tell you this,’ she said to Biffo.

‘No Aylesbury duckling?’

‘No duckling from Aylesbury, Wednesbury or anywhere else for that matter.’

Biffo held out a hand. ‘So, what else is on the menu?’

‘There isn’t a lot of point in showing you the menu,’ said Lettice, holding tightly onto the menu. ‘I’ve checked. We don’t have anything that’s listed on it.’

‘Let me look!’ said a disbelieving Puffy, holding out a hand.

Lettice handed him the menu.

‘We don’t have anything on here,’ he announced almost immediately, closing the menu with a loud snap and handing it back to Lettice.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Lettice to Biffo.

‘Do you have any food at all?’ asked Biffo. ‘Or shall I just have another packet of crisps.’ He brightened up. ‘I do like crisps,’ he assured her.

‘We’ve got some tinned tomatoes,’ said Puffy. ‘Pru – that’s my wife – bought a few cases a couple of years ago. We can’t have eaten them all.’ He suddenly seemed depressed and looked guilty about something.

‘I found the tinned tomatoes,’ said Lettice. ‘You definitely have lots of tinned tomatoes. You could build an extension with the number of tins of tomatoes you’ve got.’

‘Why would I want to build an extension with tins of tomatoes?’ asked Puffy, puzzled. He still looked guilty.

‘And bread,’ said Biffo. ‘I know you have bread because I brought a loaf back from the shop.’

‘I could do you tomatoes on toast,’ offered Lettice, with some relief

‘Sounds great to me,’ said Biffo.

‘Do you still want the wine?’ asked Lettice.

‘Where did you say it came from?’

‘I’m not sure where it’s from,’ admitted Lettice. She turned to her uncle. ‘Where is the wine from?’

‘What wine?’

‘The wine you told me to offer Mr Brimstone when he asked for claret.’

‘Oh don’t give him that crap,’ said Puffy. ‘It’s from Australia. Or South Africa. It’s foreign anyway. But not the right sort of foreign.’ He paused and addressed Biffo. ‘You should never drink wine that comes from a country where they play cricket.’ He sighed. ‘Forget the wine.’

‘Good advice,’ agreed Biffo, with a nod. ‘I’ll have another beer, please,’ he said to Lettice.

Lettice poured him a beer and then disappeared back into the kitchen to turn bread into toast and to heat up some tomatoes.

‘Something I ought to tell you,’ said Puffy. He took a deep breath. ‘I told you a bit of a white lie about my wife Prudence.’

Biffo tried to make the sort of facial gesture which would indicate that he did not hold this against Puffy.

‘My wife isn’t up north on family business,’ confessed Puffy. ‘She ran off.’

‘Oh,’ said Biffo, feigning surprise. ‘I’m sorry to hear that.’

‘With a soft drink salesman,’ said Puffy. He shook his head and closed his eyes at the shame of it.

They drank in silence for a while.

‘Here’s your tomatoes on toast,’ said Lettice, suddenly appearing from the kitchen carrying a large plate of toast topped with a huge mound of tomatoes. ‘Where’s Cheesy going to in such a hurry?’ she asked, nodding towards the door.

Puffy and Biffo both turned and watched Cheesy disappear.

‘He’s gone to see a man about a dog,’ said Puffy.

‘Oh,’ said Lettice. She put the tomatoes on toast down in front of Biffo.

‘Funny saying that,’ said Biffo. ‘I’ve often wondered where it came from and why people say it.’

Puffy, clearly puzzled, looked at Biffo and frowned but said nothing.

Chapter 18

And the small chap with the thick spectacles?' said Biffo. 'Who's he?'

'Ah, that's Justin, our wicket keeper' said Puffy. 'You always know where you are with Justin. Of course, he'll always let you down but that's part of his charm.'

Biffo frowned. 'I'm a bit confused,' he admitted. 'If he always lets people down how on earth can you know where you are with him?'

'People expect him to let them down so they are never disappointed,' explained Puffy. 'It's a form of reliability.'

'Terrific carpenter and a very keen gardener,' said Puffy. 'He grows huge vegetables which win lots of prizes at all the local produce shows but they're so woody that they are totally inedible and so his wife buys all her vegetables from Miss Box's shop.'

'Blind as a bat but put a chisel in his hand and he's a bloomin' artist. He used to play professional football. But when his eyesight went he had to give it up. Even with his glasses on he couldn't see where the goal was. Still, he hasn't lost touch with the game,' Puffy continued. 'He's a referee now,' he said after a pause.

'Really?' said Biffo.

Puffy looked at him and raised an eyebrow a millimetre or so.

'Sorry,' said Biffo, feeling fairly stupid.

'He's so blind he doesn't even drive a car anymore,' said Puffy. 'Just as well, really, considering the bridge.'

'What happened with the bridge?' asked Biffo, on cue.

'There's a small stone bridge over the river Ripple about fifteen miles away from here,' began Puffy. 'It's been there for centuries and because it was built before cars, or even horse drawn carriages, it's very narrow. These days it's part of a bridle path which is popular with walkers. People drive here from all over the place to walk along that path though I've never understood why they don't just stay at home if they want to go for a walk. Seems daft getting into the car and driving somewhere so that you can go for a walk doesn't it?' He stopped talking long enough to transfer a third of a pint of beer from his glass to his stomach. Biffo guessed that Puffy was probably used to living in a beautiful English village and therefore didn't realise just how joyful a walk in the country can be to someone who is usually surrounded by endless acres of tarmacadam and concrete.

'So, a few years ago,' continued Puffy, 'when he was coming home one night after a boozy dinner to celebrate the fact that the team he played for had been relegated Justin suddenly got it into his head that he was going to get stopped by the bluebottles and breathalysed.'

'Hang on a minute,' said Biffo, scratching his head. 'I don't understand something here. Why were they celebrating the fact that the team had been relegated?'

'Because the players all got a bonus every time they won a match,' explained Puffy. 'They all knew that if they went down into a lower league the competition wouldn't be as stiff and they would win more matches.'

Biffo, decided that there were probably some steep learning curves to be negotiated before he could count himself as being properly assimilated into village life in Fondling-UnderWater.

'There was no real reason for him to worry about being breathalysed because there hasn't been a police vehicle in these lanes for years - unless you count Constable Hobbling's moped which most people don't since a moped is not actually the sort of vehicle that would be top of your chosen list if you had to get involved in a car chase would it?'

'I suppose not,' agreed Biffo who hadn't actually seen Constable Hobbling's moped but assumed that in speed terms it probably held no great advantage over other mopeds.

And anyway after six o'clock at night Constable Hobbling is either in here or tucked up in bed with Avril Showers, the insurance man's widow. Why would he want to be riding around the lanes on a draughty moped when he could be keeping himself occupied taking down Avril's particulars?'

Biffo decided that this question did not require an answer or even a nod. He just sipped his beer and listened.

'But Justin was convinced that the lanes were going to be crammed full of policemen waiting to leap out of hedgerows and arrest him,' continued Puffy. 'So, he turned off the main road just behind Myrtle Berry's cottage and headed off down the bridle path.'

'Unfortunately, he forgot that his car — a pale blue 1953 Morris Minor which was in such tip top condition that a car collector from the North of England was so keen to buy it that he asked Justin to name his own price – was just ever so very slightly wider than the bridge over the river.'

'So, there was Justin pootling down the bridle path in the pitch dark. There was a good moon and so to save electricity and avoid giving himself away to the non-existent police force hiding in the bushes Justin turned off his lights.'

`All went well until he reached the bridge. He didn't slow down because he knew that there was a steep hill on the other side and he wanted to give the Morris a good run at it.'

'The next thing he knew, he was stuck. His car had been travelling fast enough to get onto the bridge but once there it fit like a cork in a bottle.'

'What's more he couldn't even open the car doors, of course, and so there he stayed until Myrtle Berry took her dogs for a walk and found the bridge blocked.'

'It was four hours before we got there and another two hours before Albert Ross, who has the antique shop the other side of the church, pulled him off the bridge with his Volvo. Because no one had a camera to record the scene for posterity, we had to wait for someone to go back to the village and fetch Maude Lynn who had a box Brownie. Naturally, she didn't have any film for it so we all had to sit around and wait while Ivy Bridge pedalled over to Miss Box's shop to pick up a roll.'

'How terrible!' said Biffo. 'Especially since he loved the car so much.'

'Loved the car?' said Puffy, puzzled. 'What made you think he loved the car? His aunt left it to him when she died. He'd only had it a week.'

'You said that he turned down that car collector who asked him to name his price,' said Biffo.

'When the car collector asked him to name his price Justin asked him for £200 which was just £10 more than he'd been offered by Mel Bourne at the garage. But it turned out that the car collector was all mouth and no wallet.'

'Oh,' said Biffo. 'Still, it must have been a nasty experience for him.'

'I wouldn't say that,' said Biffo. 'Justin sold his car as scrap to a gypsy for £20, reported it stolen, put in a claim and got £250 from his insurance company.'

Chapter 19

‘And the very short, roundish sort of chap in the toupee and the oily jeans?’ asked Biffo, now back on a stool at the bar. He had thoroughly enjoyed the plate of tomatoes on toast which he had eaten alone at a small table near to the empty fireplace.‘Roderick, didn’t you say his name was?’

‘That’s Roderick Hedrubb,’ said Puffy. ‘We call him Itchy.’

‘Does he play in the team?’

‘He used to, but he won’t touch a bat or a ball these days. He retired with a career batting average of 10.01 and a career bowling average of 39.87 runs per wicket. He’s terrified that if he plays another match his batting average will go under 10 and his bowling average will go above 40. We’ve tried to persuade him to come out of retirement — he was one of the best players we’ve ever had – but he won’t consider it. He’s our groundsman now.’ He frowned. ‘How did you know he was wearing a toupee?’

‘Because it looks as if it might be on back to front,’ said Biffo.

‘I don’t think it is,’ said Puffy, peering at Itchy’s head. He gave up, leant a little closer to Biffo and spoke confidentially. ‘Don’t tell Roderick you could tell he was wearing a toupee,’ he said. ‘He’s quite proud of it. He bought it at the White Elephant stall at last year’s village fête. It used to belong to Ernie Showers.’

‘Avril’s former husband?’ asked Biffo.

‘That’s the one,’ replied Puffy. ‘You’re getting the hang of things.’

Just then Cheesy returned. He was holding a lead. On the end of the lead there was a dog.

‘He really did go and see a man about a dog!’ exclaimed Biffo, genuinely surprised.

‘Of course,’ said Puffy. ‘Where else do you think he went?’

Chapter 20

‘And Helmut – the huge chap who looks a bit like a walrus with a hangover?’ asked Biffo, nodding in the direction of a huge fellow who looked very much like a walrus might look if it had a hangover. The bear of a man who had brought in a bag full of second-hand trophies had returned. He had removed his tattered sheepskin coat and underneath it was wearing a tweed jacket, a pair of tweed plus two trousers and knee length socks.

‘Oh, Helmut,’ said Puffy. ‘Helmut Walton. He was last year’s Middle Order Batsman of the Second Half of the Season.’

Biffo thought about this for a moment. ‘Does absolutely everyone in the team get some sort of award?’ he asked.

‘Of course,’ said Puffy. ‘I was Best Upper Middle Order Batsman of the First Half of the Season.’

Biffo thought again for a while. Eventually he spoke. ‘I don’t want to appear stupid,’ he said at last. ‘But I don’t really understand.’

‘We always have an annual dinner at the end of every season,’ explained Puffy. ‘For years we used to have a player of the year. The club members would vote for the player whom they felt had contributed most to the club. But in the end we had to give that up.’

‘Why?’ asked Biffo. ‘It sounds like quite a good idea.’

Puffy seemed a little embarrassed. ‘It was difficult to find a winner,’ he admitted. ‘When we added up the votes we found that there was never a clear winner.’

‘The voting was always too close?’

‘Sort of. Everyone used to vote for themselves so no one ever got more than one vote.’

‘Oh,’ said Biffo. ‘I can see that that would make sorting out a winner a little tricky.’

‘So, we did a bit of reorganising,’ said Puffy. ‘Now everyone in the club gets an award.’

‘That sounds very fair,’ agreed Biffo.

‘It works quite well,’ said Puffy. ‘There aren’t any complaints.’

‘Why does that chap have the nickname Helmut?’

‘Actually, I think that Helmut is his real name,’ admitted Puffy. ‘But his second name is totally unpronounceable so we call him Walton. Helmut Walton.’

‘He’s German, though you wouldn’t believe it,’ continued Puffy. ‘He doesn’t have the average German’s highly developed sense of humour. He speaks English with a curious Welsh accent because at school his teacher was a Miss Jones who came from Cardiff. He’s really very foreign.’

‘Nothing wrong with being foreign,’ said Lettice, anxious that her uncle would not appear to have politically incorrect views on such matters.

‘No, I suppose not,’ agreed Puffy, rather hesitantly. ‘Although I wouldn’t like to be foreign myself’

‘We’re all foreign to someone,’ said Biffo.

‘Good heavens, I hope not!’ said Puffy. He shuddered. ‘What a terrible thought.’ He shuddered again. ‘How could you and I possibly be foreign? We’re English!’ He looked at Biffo.‘You are English?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Biffo.

Puffy seemed reassured.

‘Helmut runs a reclamation yard,’ said Lettice. ‘He sells old tiles and window frames to people trying to restore old houses. It’s a good business. If you wanted to build an 18th century house from scratch today he could sell you everything you need.’

‘He’s as strong as an ox and probably the most intimidating player I’ve ever seen on a cricket pitch,’ said Puffy. ‘He’s got enormous hands. He’s the only person I know who can bowl overarm at skittles.’

‘He never seems to remember any of the rules of cricket but he enjoys the game,’ said Lettice. ‘His only problem in life is that his wife doesn’t like letting him out of her sight for very long.’

‘Marriage and fatherhood have destroyed more good cricketers than beer, whisky, gambling and wild women put together,’ said Puffy.

Lettice looked at her watch and moved a little closer to Biffo. She smelt of scented soap. ‘He’ll be leaving in just under five minutes,’ she said softly.

Biffo, puzzled, looked at her. ‘How do you know that?’

‘Helga – that’s his wife – allows him half an hour in the pub every evening,’ explained Lettice. ‘But out of that half hour he has to walk here and walk back home. He lives about five minutes away so he really only gets about twenty minutes drinking time. And he’s already been here for a quarter of an hour.’

‘I don’t believe you!’ said Biffo, starting to laugh.

‘No, really. I’m serious,’ said Lettice. ‘It’s true, isn’t it Puffy?’

Puffy nodded his head. ‘I’m afraid so,’ he agreed. ‘He used to be quite a tearaway. But not anymore.’ He turned to Lettice. ‘Do you remember that cricket tour to Corfu he went on a few years ago?’

Lettice laughed. ‘I’d forgotten all about that! Tell Biffo!’

‘When Helmut was much younger he worked for a firm of accountants in the stockbroker belt in Surrey and played cricket for the firm’s side. The firm’s boss was a bloke called Douglas Kent and the firm was called Kent Accounting so the cricket club was called Kent Accounting Cricket Club.’

‘Helmut was single in those days and the team used to go away on a cricket tour every year. One year they would go touring in the West Country and another year they would go up into Yorkshire – that sort of thing.’

‘One summer Helmut and his pals went off to Corfu. When they got there they were welcomed at the airport and given a pretty royal reception. They were interviewed for the local TV and radio, taken into town on an open bus, given rooms at the best hotel and invited to a special dinner by the local dignitaries.’

‘The next morning they were asked if they would do a bit of coaching at a couple of local schools and then taken along to play their first match.’

‘Now, you have to remember that Helmut and his chums usually played local club third teams. And by and large third teams at local clubs are made up of social cricketers - guys who enjoy a game of cricket but hardly ever practise and don’t take the game too seriously. They go there for a bit of fun, a bit of mild exercise and an excuse to have a drink or three with some congenial chums. Most of them have kit which is falling apart and half of them don’t even have bats of their own.’

‘So Helmut and company should have been worried when they got to the club where they were playing and found that there were several hundred spectators sitting around waiting for the match to begin.’

At home Helmut and his team would have thought themselves lucky if they had attracted an audience of two old men and a mangy dog. Here they were faced with tiered seating, a proper pavilion, a working scoreboard and a real crowd.’

‘It wasn’t until the television cameras turned up that they really got worried. And the worry turned to panic when they wandered round the back of the pavilion and watched the local team practising in the nets.’

‘They finally twigged what had happened when a reporter started to interview the team captain.’

‘When the team’s visit had been booked it had all been done on the telephone and the person in Corfu who had taken the call had misheard. He’d thought it was Kent County Cricket Club that wanted to come and play a few games. Not surprisingly the locals had been thrilled to bits.’

‘What happened?’ asked Biffo, laughing.

‘Mr Kent, the accountant, and his merry team of bean counters, decided that there was only one thing for it. They went into the bar and got absolutely plastered. The locals were a bit disappointed when the visitors were all out for under twenty – I think they were probably looking forward to watching Colin Cowdrey knock up a quick hundred – but they were absolutely thrilled to win by ten wickets and the visitors had a good excuse because most of them could hardly stand up without support.’

‘Would you say that Cheesy, Itchy and Helmut are fairly typical members of the Fondling-Under-Water Cricket Club?’ Biffo asked.

‘Oh absolutely,’ said Puffy. ‘Pretty typical. Maybe a bit duller than average.’ He thought for a moment. ‘Yes, perhaps a bit duller than the average. Do you want to hear about Rupert Fitzwalter? That’s the chap in the red shirt at the far end of the bar.’ He sighed admiringly. ‘Now Rupert is really quite a colourful character.’

‘I’d love to hear about Rupert Fitzwalter,’ said Biffo honestly. ‘But if I don’t go to bed pretty soon I’ll drop off this bar stool. It’s been a long day and I’ve got to get up early in the morning.’

‘You get up whenever you feel like it,’ said Puffy.

‘I’ve got to start work at eight,’ said Biffo.

‘Start work?’ said Puffy, surprised.

‘I’m starting work in the transport business,’ said Biffo, unsuccessfully stifling a yawn. He clambered off the bar stool, said goodnight to everyone within range and tottered up the stairs to bed.

Chapter 21

People who don’t have any money, and who know that their own worries are often generated by a lack of ready funds, frequently imagine that the rich must live worry-free lives.

They are, of course, quite wrong in this for the rich worry constantly about losing the money they have and becoming poor again. Generally speaking, the rich worry just as much as the poor. Indeed, it is possible that they may worry more about money than the poor.

As Bill Stickers hurled his Rolls Royce Corniche through the gates of his elegant country seat he was as worried about money as he had ever been in his pre-lottery win days, when every penny of his mortgage, plus the grocery bills, the electricity and gas bills and the garage bills, had all had to be paid for out of the modest wage he earned through shaving, snipping and singeing.

Bill stopped the huge car far too quickly, skidding and sliding on the gravel and sending a spray of fine chippings into the rose bed outside the library windows. He leapt out of the Rolls Royce the moment it stopped, giving the heavy door a careless push so that it clunked back into place. His blood pressure had now risen to a point where the expensive Harley Street physician whom Bill routinely visited for check-ups would have been doing a lot of lip pursing and brow furrowing.

‘Pansy!’ he called out, once he was inside the house. He repeated the cry half a dozen times before Pansy, who had been keeping herself busy watering the plants in the conservatory, heard him and came rushing into the hall. She was still wearing a pair of pink rubber gloves and carrying a little green plastic watering can.

Mrs Pansy Stickers was a small, slight woman who had never really come to terms with being rich. When her husband had cut hair for a living she had worked in a video shop (her official title had been ‘Home Entertainment Consultant’ but she had never felt truly comfortable with the word ‘consultant’ and had only worn her name badge when she knew that the shop’s owner was likely to call).

When she had been married to a poor person she had worried because they didn’t have much money. Now that she was married to a rich person she worried several times as much as she had before. She worried because she didn’t really believe that they were rich. She worried that people who had known them when they were poor wouldn’t like them because they would feel jealous, while people who didn’t know them before would dislike them because their money had come from a lottery win. Pansy felt that money won in a lottery wasn’t really very solid money. She felt that it had come so easily that people would one day be able to come and take it away from them. She envied those who had inherited their money. She felt that inherited money that had come down from generation to generation was the best sort of money. It had, by definition, been in the same family for years and therefore probably had better staying power.

Pansy’s constant worry was that if they really were rich (and she still had doubts) they might lose it all one day and become poor again. If it was possible to get Olympic medals for worrying Pansy would have had antique trophy cabinets filled with gold medals.

‘What the hell has happened?’ demanded Bill.

‘Oh dearie me,’ said Pansy, putting the watering can down on a small mahogany table so that she could wring her hands. ‘Oh dearie me, it’s such a worry.’

Bill snatched up the watering can and wiped his sleeve over the top of the mahogany table so that there wouldn’t be a water stain on the wood. ‘Where is it?’ He put the watering can down on the floor.

‘Oh dear,’ said Pansy, still wringing her hands but now looking at the table too. ‘Has it left a mark?’ The rubber gloves she was still wearing squeaked.

‘Don’t worry about the table,’ said Bill, whose blood pressure was now in the opposite of freefall. ‘It doesn’t matter. Where’s the fax? On the telephone you said there had been a fax from the bank.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry. I’ve marked it haven’t I?’ Pansy bent down so that she could examine the table more closely.

‘Forget the table,’ said Bill, speaking through clenched teeth. ‘Where is it?’

‘Where’s what?’ asked Pansy.

‘The fax!’ said Bill, trying to stay calm but finding it extremely difficult. He spoke slowly and carefully so that each word in the sentence stood alone. ‘The fax you said had come from the bank.’

‘Oh, I put it somewhere safe so that I’d be able to find it when you came home,’ said Pansy, looking around her in despair. The rubber gloves squeaked a good deal more before she finally found the fax (she had folded it twice and slipped it into the patch pocket on the front of her pinafore).

The fax had come from Bill Stickers’ Personal Account Manager at the private bank in the Channel Islands to which he had entrusted the management of his lottery winnings.

Bill had chosen the offshore bank because it had a very important-sounding name and extremely expensive-looking cheque books. When his personal wealth had suddenly increased from £345.67 pence (all in a Building Society deposit account) to a considerably more impressive £7,460,345.67 he had taken great delight in closing his account with the local High Street bank (where the manager had once turned down his application for a £1,000 loan to buy a second-hand car) and moving to a bank where the staff welcomed rich customers with obsequious smiles and all the respect they wanted whether their money was inherited, earned or won.

Bill, enormously impressed by the folder (embossed in gold with the bank’s substantial-looking crest and a motto in Latin) which he had been given in which to store his portfolio statements, had happily, indeed enthusiastically, handed over his entire fortune (including the £345.67) and signed documents which gave the management of his new bank carte blanche to do with his money as they saw fit.

Although he had once berated a stony-faced counter assistant at his local Building Society for not telling him that they had another account which offered an extra 0.15% interest, Bill had been enormously, even pitifully, grateful that the new bank had accepted him as a customer and had been happy to hand over control of his new wealth.

The money had, in truth, frightened him. He didn’t know what to do with it and he had been grateful to the bank for taking it off his hands.

Every quarter he received a statement which he had carefully filed in the expensive folder they had given him. He had never really understood the statements but in the beginning he hadn’t liked to ask anyone about them because he didn’t want them to think he was as ignorant as he was (he was frightened that they would laugh at him behind his back) and as the months went by it became impossible to ask questions because to ask questions would be to admit that he had been too embarrassed to ask the same questions before and then they would be able to laugh at him for being both ignorant and frightened of them.

He read the fax carefully. Like all faxes from the bank it was on plain paper (the bank regarded confidentiality as vital) though he recognised the signature at the bottom.

Dear Mr Stickers,

Due to a recent downturn in the markets in which you are currently invested we have to inform you that after liquidating your portfolio to pay our charges your balance with us is currently £0.13. Since this is a lower sum than our minimum balance requirement we look forward to receiving further funds from you at your earliest convenience.

Yours sincerely,

‘Is it serious?’ asked Pansy.

Bill read the fax again. It still said exactly the same as it had said the first time he had read it.

‘The bastards have lost all our money,’ said Bill.

‘All of it?’ said Pansy. She was still wringing her hands.

‘All of it!’ said Bill. ‘How could they lose seven million quid?’

‘Oh dear.’ said Pansy. ‘Oh dear.’

Actually, she wasn’t shocked by the news because she had been expecting it to happen for a long time. Now that it had finally happened she actually felt very calm about it. Many of her biggest worries had now disappeared.

‘Take those bloody gloves off!’ said Bill.

‘Yes, dear,’ said Pansy. She took the gloves off ‘So we’re poor again?’

‘The bastards have stolen my money!’ said Bill. He looked at his watch. ‘And they’ll be shut now. I can’t ring them until the morning.’

‘Never mind,’ said Pansy. ‘You can always go back to hairdressing.’ She looked at him, desperately trying to think of some thing comforting to say. ‘It’s nice that you have a skill.’

Bill glared at her and opened his mouth.

‘Shall I make some tea, dear?’ asked Pansy.

Bill shut his mouth, sat down and put his head in his hands. It would be fair to say that he did not feel at his best.

Chapter 22

The bedroom which Biffo had shared with Edwina for so much of his adult life had been fitted with spacious, built-in wardrobes, and although rather more than three quarters of the available space had been filled with Edwina's fine collection of designer dresses and associated ancillaries there had, nevertheless, been a not inconsiderable amount of space available for her husband's clothes.

Biffo had, over his half a lifetime, accumulated a fairly impressive collection of suits, shirts, shoes, sweaters, socks and so on.

It was, therefore, something of a surprise and modest disappointment, to discover that he had, in his haste and confusion, brought with him two pairs of extra thick walking socks (originally bought especially to be worn exclusively with a pair of walking boots which he had not brought with him), half a dozen monogrammed handkerchiefs, a box containing a variety of collar studs, a cummerbund, (but, naturally, no dinner jacket with which to wear it), five pairs of brand new sock suspenders still in their original packaging (something he had never worn his life), two left hand gloves, a black bow tie, a brassiere (which, he assumed, must have got into one of his drawers by mistake) and two brand new dress shirts in their original and probably virtually impenetrable packaging (which he had received the previous Christmas as a gift from Edwina).

He had, in short, not brought with him any spare clothes that would be of any use at all. For an Englishman, the most alarming discovery was the fact that he had forgotten to bring any pyjamas. He liked the idea of starting his new life without too much baggage (either physical or emotional) but he would have liked a pair of pyjamas.

Standing in his shirt and socks Biffo tried to decide whether it would be more appropriate to remove his shirt (and, indeed, his socks) and go to bed naked (and thus reduce the amount of washing he would ultimately have to do) or to keep on his shirt (and, possibly, his socks as well) and therefore go to bed prepared for those awesome eventualities, such as fire, flood and middle of the night pestilence, which had always concerned Edwina so much.

As Biffo contemplated this dilemma, realising that whatever he decided to do the shirt he had on today would be the shirt he wore tomorrow, there was a timid knock on the door.

'Yes?' said Biffo, puzzled. 'Who's there?'

'May I come in for a moment?' asked a male voice.

Biffo, grateful that he had kept his shirt on, opened the door and found a tall, thin, wiry-looking fellow in a red shirt standing there. Biffo had seen him at the bar with the other cricket club members but didn't know his name.

'Hope you don't mind my troubling you so late,' said the stranger. 'My name is Rupert. May I have a word with you?' He looked up and down the corridor before adding the final two words. 'In private?'

'Rupert Fitzwalter?' asked Biffo.

'That's right!' agreed the stranger, apparently not surprised that Biffo knew his name. He walked into Biffo's room, sat down on the bed and peered into Biffo's open suitcase.

'What on earth are these?' he asked, picking up a pair of sock suspenders.

'Sock suspenders,' explained Biffo.

'Oh,' said Rupert, putting the sock suspenders back into the suitcase. He picked up another, identical pair. 'And these?'

'Sock suspenders,' explained Biffo, again.

‘Ah,’ said Rupert, putting the sock suspenders back into the suitcase. ‘I’ll come straight to the point,’ he said, leaning forwards and looking first towards the door and then towards the window, as though anxious to make sure that they were not being overheard. ‘I want to help you earn a little extra beer money.’

‘Really?’ said Biffo. ‘What can I do for you?’

‘I run a book in the pub on how many people will hit their heads on the beam over the entrance to the public bar.’

Biffo nodded. ‘I see.’

‘If you’re staying here for a while,’ said Rupert, ‘you’re likely to be the most important contributor to the numbers.’

‘You mean I’m likely to hit my head more than anyone else?’

‘You’ll probably be the only person hitting your head. But to soften the blow I’ll be happy to pay you £5 every time you bang your head on that beam between today and Saturday. Up to, say, a dozen times in all.’

‘You want to pay me to bang my head?’

‘Up to £60 worth!’ agreed Rupert.

‘Do you get a kick out of seeing people in pain?’ asked Biffo.

‘Not a bit of it,’ said Rupert. ‘You don’t have to hit it too hard. You could always pretend to have given yourself a rather bigger bang than you really have,’ he added.

‘And if I bang my head often enough you don’t have to pay out anyone?’

‘That’s about the size of it,’ agreed Rupert.

‘But isn’t that crooked?’ asked Biffo.

‘Not really,’ said Rupert. He looked at Biffo and thought carefully. ‘I call it realigning the odds a little,’ he said.

‘Sorry, no,’ said Biffo firmly.

‘Oh,’ said Rupert, disappointed. ‘I hope you’re not offended by my suggestion?’

‘Not at all,’ said Biffo. ‘It’s just that I’ve got an eggshell skull,’ he lied. ‘I could fracture my skull if I banged it against that beam too often.’ He paused. ‘I could die,’ he added.

Rupert looked concerned. ‘Gosh!’ he said. ‘I’m most terribly sorry. Will you please forget I ever spoke?’ he asked. He leant forwards and tapped Biffo on the knee. ‘Would you do that for me? Forget I ever spoke.’

‘Of course,’ said Biffo. He stared for a moment and then smiled. ‘Forget what?’

‘Thanks,’ said Rupert. `And, er, I’m sorry to hear about your skull. . .’

‘Don’t you worry about it,’ said Biffo, by now almost believing the story himself

Rupert stood up and headed for the door. Just before he left he turned back. ‘Do you mind if I ask you something?’ he asked.

‘No,’ said Biffo.

‘Why are you so frightened of your socks falling down?’

Biffo, puzzled by the question, looked at Rupert.

‘All the sock suspenders,’ explained Rupert.

‘Oh those!’ said Biffo, understanding. ‘I never wear them,’ he said quite honestly. ‘My wife’s sister always used to give me a pair for Christmas.’

‘And you are in love with your wife’s sister and you don’t like going anywhere without the presents she’s bought you?’

‘No. That’s not it at all. The truth is that I can’t stand her. I picked them up by mistake,’ admitted Biffo. He stared into the suitcase sadly. ‘In fact everything I brought was a mistake,’ he added.

‘Oh, I say, what rotten luck,’ said Rupert. ‘You must have been in a hurry. Bit of a tiff with the wife?’

‘You could say that,’ agreed Biffo.

‘Sorry to hear it,’ said Rupert. He paused and looked at the suitcase again. ‘So, what are you going to do with all the stuff in the case?’ He put a hand into the case and rummaged around a little. ‘Do you mind?’

‘Not at all,’ said Biffo.

‘I’m going to dump it all,’ Biffo heard himself say. He realised that he quite liked the idea of starting again from scratch. With just the clothes he had come away in.

‘I’ll give you £20 for the lot,’ said Rupert, holding up Edwina’s brassiere and examining it carefully. He seemed impressed. ‘Cash.’ He reached into his trouser pocket and took out a roll of notes.

‘What on earth do you want with all this junk?’

‘Dunno,’ said Rupert. ‘But it’s what I do. I have a junk shop. Few antiques. Books. Bits and pieces people don’t know what to do with.’

‘OK,’ said Biffo. ‘It’s a deal. He started to take stuff out of the suitcase.’

‘In the case,’ said Rupert.

‘It’s a Louis Vuitton,’ protested Biffo. ‘They’re very expensive.’

‘I’ll need something to carry the stuff in,’ said Rupert, handing over two ten pound notes.

‘Yes. I suppose you will,’ agreed Biffo, taking the notes. It was, he realised, the second time in a day that he had been out negotiated. He tried to put the notes into his trouser pocket but was interrupted in this endeavour by the fact that he wasn’t wearing any trousers. ‘Not those!’ he said suddenly, as Rupert picked up his jacket and trousers from where they lay on top of the bed and started to stuff them into the suitcase. ‘Those are the only clothes I’ve got left!’

Rupert examined the jacket professionally. ‘Not worth much anyway,’ he said, putting it back down on the bed. He closed the suitcase, picked it up and headed for the door.

‘Nice to have met you,’ he said. ‘Sleep well. I hope you wake up healthy, wealthy and wise.’ And then he left.

Biffo, who thought this seemed rather a lot to expect from a night’s sleep, removed his shirt and put it into a drawer. He closed that drawer and put his trousers into a second drawer. He then removed his jacket and carefully lay that down in a third drawer. Finally, he took off his socks. He put one sock in each of the smaller drawers at the top of the chest.

And thus, quite naked and unashamed, he climbed into bed for his first night at The Gravedigger’s Rest and fell asleep the moment his head touched the pillow.

Moments later Tiger, who had been curled up at the foot of the bed, sat up, got up, stretched, padded silently up the bed, climbed onto Biffo’s chest, lay down and purred contentedly.

Chapter 23

Pyjamas were not the only essential item Biffo had forgotten to pack when he had left home. He had also omitted to bring with him his alarm clock. And as a direct result of this omission when he woke the next morning and looked at his watch he was horrified to see that it was twenty past seven. He immediately felt almost overwhelmed by a powerful sense of guilt. For as long as he could remember he had woken every morning at 7.00 am sharp.

Biffo leapt out of the bed with the same sense of physical urgency he would have undoubtedly displayed if he had discovered that he was sharing the sheets with a frog. He immediately realised, with some considerable embarrassment (for although he would have described himself as a free thinking libertarian he had rather modest views about such issues) that he had slept in the nude.

Grabbing the shirt he had worn the previous day (he had to open three drawers to find it) and clutching it to those parts of his body most central to his personal sense of privacy he padded bare foot across the wooden floor to the bedroom window and looked out.

The scene he had watched the day before had not changed and for a brief moment Biffo wondered if he had perhaps accidentally stepped into some sort of time machine. The large mowing machine was still there and the groundsman, Roderick Hedrubb, was still hitting it with what appeared to be a heavy blunt instrument. As he watched Mr Hedrubb abandoned his attack on the machine and marched purposefully off the field in the direction of the Gravedigger’s Rest. Since he was still clutching the blunt instrument he looked a rather fearsome sight and even at that distance he made Biffo feel rather nervous.

Biffo turned away from the window, and, with some urgency, washed, shaved dressed himself and fed Tiger. He had two priorities. First, he needed some breakfast. And second, he had to get to Miss Box’s shop by eight o’clock.

Downstairs the pub, which smelt of stale beer and old tobacco smoke, was silent and utterly deserted.

‘Hello,’ called Biffo, rather tentatively. There was no reply.

‘Is there anyone there?’ called Biffo again, this time rather more loudly but with an equally complete lack of response. The Gravedigger’s Rest was beginning to make the Marie Celeste look overcrowded.

Biffo walked tentatively along a rather lengthy corridor, knocking on each door as he came to it. ‘Hello! Is there anyone there?’ he called out, each time he knocked, the volume of his cry rising as he grew in confidence and frustration.

Suddenly, one of the doors that Biffo had passed, and knocked on, was pulled open from the inside. ‘What’s the matter?’ demanded a rather angry sounding voice. ‘Are we on fire?’

Biffo turned and saw the landlord, Puffy Harbottle, sleepily rubbing at his eyes and yawning. The landlord of The Gravedigger’s Rest was wearing a baggy and faded pair of blue and red striped pyjama trousers and a pale yellow pyjama jacket, which was unbuttoned. A snowy white paunch hung over the top of the pyjama trousers like frozen snow hanging over a roof edge. The landlord’s feet were encased in a pair of tartan carpet slippers which had clearly done lengthy service in the foot warming department.

‘Oh! I’m sorry!’ said Biffo. ‘Did I wake you?’

‘What time is it?’ asked Puffy, leaning forward and peering through half closed eyes in an attempt to locate and identify the source of the interruption. His pyjama trousers decided to obey the call of gravity and Puffy caught them in the nick of time.

‘Nearly half past seven,’ said Biffo, brightly.

‘Morning or night?’ asked Puffy, unfastening the cord around his trousers and then tying it a little tighter.

‘Morning.’

Puffy, eyes closed, sleepily scratched his naked chest and yawned. ‘Can’t you sleep?’

‘Yes, thank you, I slept very well,’ said Biffo, mistaking the question for one which required an answer. ‘Where can I get some breakfast?’

Puffy frowned, squinted and licked his lips, though he did not perform all these tricky manoeuvres at the same time.

‘Breakfast?’ he asked.

‘Am I too early?’ asked Biffo rather tentatively. It seemed a pretty good bet that he wasn’t too late.

‘You want breakfast?’ asked a squinting Puffy.

‘I am rather peckish,’ admitted Biffo.

‘What time did you say it was?’

‘Er, just after half past seven,’ replied Biffo, taking another peek at his watch.

‘Lettice is an early riser. She should be up and about at 9.30,’ said Puffy firmly. ‘If you speak to her nicely she’ll make you a piece of toast.’

‘Thank you,’ said Biffo, but the door was already shutting.

‘Puffy, can I borrow your lawnmower?’ demanded a voice Biffo didn’t recognise but which seemed to come from someone standing immediately behind him. Since Biffo had no idea that there was anyone standing behind him he turned sharply and then jumped several inches into the air when he saw Itchy. The groundsman was still clutching the menacing blunt instrument with which he had been offering encouragement to the large piece of machinery in the middle of the cricket pitch.

Unshaven, wild eyed and with his toupee balanced precariously on the back of his head Itchy looked as though he was made up to appear in a horror movie. He was covered in oil stains and grass cuttings and his clothing would have been regarded as quite unsuitable for resale by even the most desperate of jumble sale stall holders.

‘What?’ demanded Puffy, peering through a six inch gap.

‘It’s me, Itchy,’ said Itchy. ‘Can I borrow your lawnmower, Puffy? And your extension lead?’

Puffy growled something which Itchy obviously took to be a ‘yes’ for the wild eyed groundsman muttered a quick ‘thank you’ before scurrying off back down the corridor towards the back door and, presumably, the garden shed where Puffy kept his lawnmower.

Biffo, abandoning the idea of breakfast, headed for the exit. On his way out he banged his head on the top of the door frame. After rubbing it for a moment or two he tottered delicately over to the bar and hunted around underneath the counter. When he found the slate upon which Lettice had been keeping score he rubbed out the figure seven and replaced it with a figure eight. He then headed back to the door, ducked, carefully watched his feet to make sure that he didn’t trip, and miraculously left the Gravedigger’s Rest without more incident or in jury. The front door, like the back door through which Itchy had entered and departed, was not locked.

Chapter 24

When a still hungry Biffo arrived at the village shop there was a new addition to the collection of ephemera lined up outside that emporium. Leaning against a tree was an extremely elderly black sit-up-and-beg bicycle which had obviously seen rather better days. A large metal pannier was attached to the front of the bicycle and this had been filled to the brim and way beyond with groceries, fruits, vegetables and other goods from the shop.

Biffo examined the unstable-looking delivery vehicle with some trepidation. He couldn’t help wondering whether having such a large pannier attached to the front of the bicycle would affect its handling. He rather wished he had an opportunity to test drive the vehicle in its pre-loaded state. He took his new trouser clips out of his pocket and put them into position. It was the first time he had had to wear special equipment for work and it made him feel very professional.

Abandoning his gloomy examination of the well-loaded bicycle he stepped gingerly between the two wicker baskets in the shop doorway and leant forwards slightly. ‘Hello! I’m here!’ he yelled into the darkness on the other side of the open door.

‘I can see that,’ said Miss Box, from no more than a couple of feet away. ‘I’m not blind and I’m not deaf’

A startled Biffo jumped backwards, stumbled against the wicker basket full of kindling, and fell over. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said, from his position on the ground. ‘I couldn’t see you.’ He scrambled to his feet with as much agility as could be expected of a man of his age, brushed the dust from his trousers and started to pick up miscellaneous bits of kindling and put them back into the wicker basket.

‘I’ve loaded up the bicycle,’ said the shopkeeper, stepping out from the shadows. ‘The first delivery is for Mrs Kennedy at Porterhouse Farm.’

‘Right!’ said Biffo, trying to sound more enthusiastic than he felt. He kept trying to forget that it had been a long time since he had ridden a bicycle. He wondered if the machine had gears. Looking at it he wondered if it had brakes. And he was hungry. ‘Where is Porterhouse Farm?’

‘Go down to the church, take the first left, ride for fifteen minutes or so, ignore the lane on the left and then turn right,’ said Miss Box, snapping out the instructions without hesitation. ‘If you see a whitewashed cottage with a thatched roof on your right you’ve gone too far. Go past the cottage where Cyril Player was born and about five minutes further on you’ll see a small, bumpy farm track on your left. Take it. But watch out – it’s easy to miss the turning. Porterhouse Farm is twenty minutes or so down that track. You’ll have to take care down the track because of the potholes. I don’t want those tomatoes getting bruised.’

‘Do you mind if I write all that down?’ asked Biffo, already not quite sure which turnings to take and which to avoid.

It occurred to him that in order to follow these instructions he would need to know how fast Miss Box would cycle.

The shopkeeper began impatiently to repeat what she had just said.

‘Er, excuse me,’ said Biffo, diffidently interrupting his new employer. ‘Do you have a pencil I could use to make some notes?’

‘With or without a rubber on the end?’

‘I don’t mind,’ said Biffo.

‘The ones without a rubber on the end are ten pence each. The ones with a rubber on the end are twelve pence.’

‘Oh,’ said Biffo. ‘I don’t suppose you’ve got a little stub of pencil I could borrow?’ he asked.

Miss Box looked at him sharply.

‘Of course not. I’m sorry.’ Biffo apologised. ‘I’ll have one with a rubber on the end,’ he said, recklessly.

‘I can let you have a dozen for a guinea,’ said Miss Box, already out of sight.

Biffo tried to remember what a guinea was and whether this was a good offer.

‘Do you want a notebook?’ called Miss Box, already somewhere deep inside the shop.

‘Yes, please,’ said Biffo. ‘I suppose so.’ He thought for a moment and was about to ask the shopkeeper if she had any old, unwanted, used envelopes he could use for scribbling maps and messages. But when he remembered the look he had received when he had enquired about pencil stubs he thought better about this and kept quiet. ‘Just one pencil will do, thank you,’ he said.

‘Lined or unlined? Hard or soft cover? Small, medium or large?’

‘Soft. Unlined,’ said Biffo, reasoning that these choices would minimise his expenditure. He was beginning to worry that his expenses might exceed his profits.

‘Good morning Miss Box!’ cried a now familiar voice.

Biffo turned and saw Roderick Hedrubb standing outside the shop. Itchy was holding several electrical extension cables looped over his arm.

Miss Box looked up and raised a solitary eyebrow. ‘Good morning, Itchy!’ she said. ‘What do you want?’

‘Do you have an electrical extension cable I could borrow?’ asked Itchy.

Miss Box sighed.

‘I’ll bring it back!’ promised Itchy.

Muttering to herself Miss Box turned and disappeared back into the darkness inside the shop.

‘Are you collecting them?’ asked Biffo.

Itchy frowned. ‘Collecting what?’

‘Extension leads,’ said Biffo, pointing to the leads looped over Itchy’s arm. ‘You seem to have quite a few already.’

‘Here you are,’ said Miss Box, emerging from the darkness and holding out an extension lead which Itchy took from her. ‘A shilling an hour.’

‘It’s for the cricket club,’ protested Itchy.

Miss Box snorted. ‘All right then,’ she said. ‘But mind you bring it back in good condition. I don’t want you wearing it out by putting too much electricity through it.’

‘I’ll bring it back!’ promised Itchy, trudging off down the lane.

‘Before Christmas!’ called Miss Box after him. Itchy half turned and waved his free hand.

‘Hrmph,’ said Miss Box. ‘Small, medium or large?’

Biffo was still wondering what Itchy was planning to do with so many extension leads.

‘Small, medium or large?’ repeated Miss Box.

‘I beg your pardon?’ said Biffo. ‘I’m sorry. I wasn’t concentrating. Were you talking to me?’

Miss Box looked around. ‘There isn’t anyone else here, is there?’

‘Er, no.’

‘So, do you want small, medium or large?’

Biffo had no idea what Miss Box was talking about. ‘Er, small, medium or large what?’

Miss Box sighed. ‘Notebook,’ she said, impatiently.

‘Small, please,’ said Biffo. ‘Something I can fit into my pocket.’

‘That will be 30 pence,’ said the shopkeeper. She disappeared into the shop. ‘Do you want to pay cash?’ she said when she reappeared. ‘Or shall I put the 42 pence against your wages?’ She handed a pencil and a notebook to Biffo.

‘Put it against my wages, please,’ said Biffo. ‘But could I have a receipt for the pencil, the notebook and the trouser clips?’ Miss Box looked at him and raised an enquiring eyebrow.

‘For my accountant,’ explained Biffo. ‘They’re all deductible expenses.’

The shopkeeper snorted, ignored this and looked at her watch. ‘I suggest you get on your bike,’ she said. ‘Your employment officially started two minutes ago and since I’m paying you by the hour I don’t intend to stand around here paying you to chit chat.’

Chapter 25

Biffo cycled for hours around the village of Fondling-Under-Water and its immediate environs.

He delivered a box of assorted groceries to a cheerful, bosomy farmer’s wife with bright red hair and a snorty laugh that could be heard half a mile away; a monthly magazine and a pound of butter to a doctor’s widow and a bottle of pickled gherkins and a packet of runner bean seeds to a stout, red-faced retired colonel who had gout, two large, dribbling bulldogs and a thin sister. He met Itchy, also travelling by bicycle, as he came away from the bosomy farmer’s wife and the doctor’s widow. He had, on both occasions, obviously added more extension leads to his growing collection.

He delivered two rolls of lavatory paper and a packet of prunes to the vicar and a freshly dry-cleaned winter coat to a retired schoolmistress with flirty eyes who invited him in for a glass of elderberry wine and seemed extremely disappointed when he politely declined on the grounds that the wine might affect his ability to handle the bicycle safely. He delivered a packet of pipe tobacco to a young mother-to-be who was expecting a box of disposable nappies and a box of disposable nappies to a retired bank manager who had nothing to put in his pipe and was not amused by the error.

Miss Box had an old-fashioned policy of doing anything to please her customers and so on one occasion Biffo cycled four miles to deliver a box of matches to a cottage in the middle of a forest. And after he had cycled two and a half miles to deliver a bag of flour to half of a pair of semi-detached cottages Miss Box sent him straight back to the owner of the adjoining property who had, in Biffo’ absence, telephoned with an urgent order for a bag of sugar and a ball of string.

Biffo got chased by dogs on four separate occasions and completely lost six times. He fell off the bicycle twice. One of these incidents required a large sticking plaster (anticipating future disasters of a similar nature Biffo bought an economy-sized packet of sticking plasters from Miss Box for 98 pence).

At noon an extremely weary and ravenous Biffo purchased from Miss Box a small loaf of bread (70 pence), a large slice of cheddar cheese (£1.20), an apple (32 pence) and a bottle of beer (£1.50) and with the aid of his faithful old pocket knife he turned these simple ingredients into a picnic lunch which he ate, while sitting on a hand-carved, genuine rustic garden bench (£79.99 to buy but Biffo only sat on it), with much pleasure and four pickled onions (84 pence).

After he had finished one of the cheapest but tastiest and most satisfying meals he had eaten for a long time Biffo decided to take a short walk around the village to stretch his sore legs.

Attracted by the high, persistent whine of something that sounded like a strained electric motor Biffo walked around the side of the Gravedigger’s Rest and leant over the gate. He then found out why Itchy had been so keen to corner the local market in electrical extension leads.

Itchy, who was using Puffy’s tiny garden-sized lawnmower, to cut the several acres of grass on the Fondling-Under-Water cricket field, had connected dozens of electrical extension leads together so that he could plug the mowing machine into a socket in his own kitchen.

Biffo watched Itchy and the lawnmower for a few minutes. Even from beyond the boundary’s edge Biffo could see small puffs of white smoke coming from the tiny engine. There was a distinct and pungent smell of burning in the air.

Chapter 26

At seven fifteen that evening an exhausted Biffo arrived back at the shop to discover, to his absolute relief, that the shopkeeper had already started moving her display of fruits and vegetables and other objects back into the safety of the shop for the night (not, she assured him, because of any fear of human burglars or vandals – for such monstrous behaviour was not known in the quiet village of Fondling-Under-Water - but to ensure that her goods were not drowned by a sudden burst of rain or eaten by foxes, mice, rabbits and other rural marauders).

Wearily, Biffo clambered off the bicycle and stood rubbing those delicate parts of his body which had suffered most. He watched as the shopkeeper wheeled the bicycle into an open shed at the side of the shop where, with some considerable difficulty, she eventually managed to lay it to rest for the night in a very narrow gap between an enormous pile of empty wooden apple boxes and an equally enormous pile of bags containing garden fertiliser and potting compost.

‘Well at least you won’t be wanting tomorrow afternoon off for the cricket,’ said the shopkeeper as she turned from her labour and stood, breathing rather heavily, hands on hips, in front of the shed.

‘Well actually,’ began Biffo, ‘I’m afraid I did say. . .’

‘Oh, don’t tell me they’ve roped you into their damned silly games already!’ said the shopkeeper, rolling her eyes to the heavens.

‘I’m afraid so,’ admitted Biffo.

‘Well just you make sure you’re here bright and early in the morning,’ said the shopkeeper. ‘Six thirty,’ she said, nodding to Biffo, picking up the wicker basket containing bundles of kindling, and disappearing into the dark interior of the village shop.

‘Goodnight Miss Box!’ called Biffo to the disappearing shopkeeper.

‘Hrmph!’ was all that came out of the shop.

It wasn’t far from the village shop to the pub but it took Biffo all the effort he could muster to walk that short journey. After a day of unaccustomed exercise on an elderly bicycle his muscles seemed to have gone on strike. Biffo just hoped that all this pedalling would not stop him being able to perform satisfactorily at the cricket match the following day.

Chapter 27

It was only when he had taken a bath that Biffo remembered (much to his annoyance) that he didn’t have any clean clothes to wear.

The shirt, socks and underwear which he had worn that day he had washed with him as he had lain in the bath, and these were now draped over the window-sill drying very slowly in what remained of the day’s sunshine.

Biffo began to think that perhaps his cavalier decision to start his life completely afresh might be just a tad foolish. After all he had plenty of clothes hanging in the wardrobe he had so recently agreed to hand over to his wife. He decided to swallow his pride and ring home.

Edwina answered the telephone with her usual polite formal greeting, giving the caller her name, followed by the telephone number in its entirety.

‘Hello,’ said Biffo, when Edwina had finished.

There was a moment’s silence and then Biffo heard some muffled talking at the other end of the line. It sounded as though Edwina had put her hand over the telephone and was talking to someone.

Well!’ said Edwina eventually. ‘And what do you want?’

‘Are you all OK?’ asked Biffo.

‘We’re all very well,’ said Edwina. There was the sort of pause which could most accurately be described as pregnant. ‘I was hoping you would ring,’ she said.

‘You were?’ said Biffo, rather surprised and a little nonplussed. A frisson of alarm spread through his body.

‘Damien wants to speak to you.’

‘Damien?’

‘Damien Washbrook. My lawyer.’

‘Oh yes,’ said Biffo, remembering. ‘The suntanned blond.’

‘He’s my lawyer,’ said Edwina sniffily.

There was a little fumbling and some whispering and then another voice came onto the line.

‘Mr Brimstone?’ said the new voice. It was a very plummy, public school voice.

Biffo confirmed his identity.

‘My name is Damien Washbrook,’ said the new voice. ‘I am Mrs Brimstone’s legal representative in this matter. Do you have legal representation of your own?’ the voice asked.

‘No,’ said Biffo. ‘I don’t know any lawyers and to be frank with you I’d like to keep things that way for as long as possible.’

‘I must recommend to you, entirely without prejudice of course, that you seek legal representation at the earliest available opportunity,’ said the plummy voice.

‘What do I need a lawyer for?’ asked Biffo. ‘I’ve already agreed to give my wife everything I’ve got. She can’t have any more than everything.’

‘If you were to have taken professional legal advice I am sure that your advisor would have warned you that the observation you have just made is not strictly accurate,’ said the plummy voice. ‘Mrs Brimstone is entitled to ask the court to give her a percentage of your future earnings.’

‘I told my wife she could have everything I’ve got,’ said Biffo, who was still trying to unravel the plummy voice’s previous sentence which seemed far enough removed from the English language to be of legal significance. ‘I didn’t know she was going to want more than everything.’

‘When your wife becomes your ex-wife she may be entitled to a portion of your earnings,’ said the plummy voice. ‘Am I correct in believing that your previous employment was terminated yesterday by yourself?’

‘Spot on,’ agreed Biffo.

‘And have you obtained a fresh position since the cessation of your previous employment?’

‘I have,’ said Biffo, rather proudly.

‘Aha!’ said the plummy voice. There was a silence again while the plummy voice and Edwina discussed this unexpected, and to them potentially profitable, development.

‘Er, in what capacity are you now employed?’ asked the plummy voice.

‘I’m in transport,’ said Biffo, proudly.

‘Ah. Transport?’ said the plummy voice, clearly overcome with visions of large tankers, cargo aeroplanes and fleets of lorries.

‘Deliveries, to be precise,’ said Biffo.

‘Ah. Deliveries. And that would be delivering what exactly?’

‘All sorts of things,’ said Biffo. ‘Apples, carrots, toilet rolls, string, mousetraps.’

‘A wide variety of goods are transported?’

‘Oh yes.’

There was a pause while the brain connected to the plummy voice digested this information and doubtless instructed a hand to take notes. ‘And are you employed in an executive capacity?’

‘I don’t think you could really describe it as being an executive position,’ admitted Biffo. It was his turn to pause. ‘I ride a delivery bicycle for the local village shop.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said the lawyer, pausing and laughing rather nervously. ‘I thought I heard you say you ride a delivery bicycle?’ He laughed again, though it wasn’t the sort of laugh that would have cheered a comedian.

‘That’s it. I ride a delivery bicycle.’

‘You sit on an ordinary, old-fashioned bicycle with one of those little baskets at the front?’ The lawyer was clearly still finding this concept difficult to understand.

‘Yes. It’s a very old-fashioned bicycle actually. I don’t think the manufacturers of the bicycle had quite got the hang of what brakes are supposed to do when they made this model. Maybe they got on top of things with a later edition. The front brake on the one I’m using seems to work quite well sometimes - though it is difficult to know in advance when it is going to be working well and when it is not going to be working at all - but the back brake doesn’t ever work. I was riding back from a delivery late this morning and neither brake worked as I came down Primrose Hill. I don’t suppose you know Primrose Hill, in fact I didn’t know it myself until this morning, but it’s very steep and there’s a really nasty left hander at the bottom. . .’ Biffo was enjoying teasing Damien

The solicitor didn’t seem terribly keen on hearing anymore about Biffo’s brake problem. ‘And you deliver groceries to customers?’ he interrupted.

‘That’s right!’ said Biffo.

‘And this isn’t part of, how shall I put it, a publicity stunt of some kind?’

‘Oh no. Not at all.’

This was a cue for another silence and this time the muffled mumblings and mutterings went on for much longer and seemed much more desperate.

‘I understand from Mrs Brimstone that you have agreed to an immediate separation, a divorce as soon as possible and a settlement of all chattels and effects exclusively in Mrs Brimstone’s favour?’ said the plummy voice.

‘Yes!’ said Biffo.

‘We need to see you in order to get some documents signed and witnessed,’ said the plummy voice. ‘Where are you staying at the moment?’

‘The Gravedigger’s Rest,’ replied Biffo.

‘And what exactly is The Gravedigger’s Rest?’ demanded the plummy voice. ‘Is it some sort of hotel?’ The voice was now thickly laced with undisguised contempt.

‘It’s a pub,’ said Biffo.

‘I see,’ said the plummy voice. There was a pause. ‘A pub a public house?’

‘That’s right. But I’ve always thought that calling a place a pub makes it sound much friendlier and more fun than calling it a public house. Big cities have public houses on corners and people go there to get drunk and fight. Villages have pubs and people go there to ...’

The plummy voice turned away from the telephone but this time the owner of the plummy voice forgot to put his hand over the telephone receiver. Although the voices coming through the earpiece were faint Biffo could just about hear them.

‘He’s staying in some sort of public house,’ said the plummy voice.

‘He’s clearly gone potty,’ said Edwina, sounding worried. Biffo was quite touched. ‘I just hope no one I know finds out.’ Biffo was strangely relieved to discover that Edwina hadn’t changed.

‘I really do think we should get down there as soon as we can,’ said the plummy voice. ‘We need to get him to sign these documents before he changes his mind and decides he wants a more equitable share of the community property.’

‘Ask him where he is,’ said Edwina. ‘Better still get him to come back here and sign the forms.’

There was a scrambling noise as the telephone receiver was dragged across the surface upon which it had been lain.

‘Whereabouts exactly are you?’ demanded Damien, picking up the telephone again.

Biffo told him the name of the village.

‘It would obviously be in your best interests if you signed the separation agreement fairly quickly,’ said Damien. ‘I think I can persuade Mrs Brimstone to agree to that. I could draw up the appropriate documents on behalf of you both.’

‘Gosh!’ said Biffo. ‘That’s very good of you.’

‘Let’s fix up an appointment for tomorrow. Shall we say in my office?’

‘I’m afraid that won’t be possible,’ said Biffo. ‘Not tomorrow. I’ve agreed to play in a cricket match and I’ve got a lot of deliveries to make in the morning.’

‘A cricket match?’ said the plummy voice, as though Biffo had announced that he intended to take part in a shark wrestling contest.

‘That’s right.’

There was another pause. And then Edwina came on the telephone. ‘You don’t play cricket!’ she said, rather indignantly.

‘I do tomorrow,’ said Biffo.

Edwina sucked in about forty litres of air and blew it out again very quickly. ‘We’re doing this for you,’ she said. ‘Damien is a very busy man.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Biffo. ‘But I really can’t get up there tomorrow. I have to do the deliveries in the morning and then there’s a cricket match in the afternoon. Besides I haven’t got enough money for the train fare.’

‘Well, if you’re going to be difficult then I suppose we’ll have to come down there,’ Edwina said. ‘Where on earth are you anyway?’

Biffo started to explain but Edwina, bored by the instructions, had handed the telephone to her lawyer and paramour and so Biffo once again gave the plummy voice the name of the village and agreed to meet them both at The Gravedigger’s Rest at one o’clock.

‘Will the chef do us a little luncheon there?’ asked the plummy voice.

‘I think they may be able to manage a snack,’ said Biffo, cautiously. ‘Tomatoes on toast is something of a local speciality. And you can always stay on and watch the cricket.’

There was a pause. ‘I don’t think we’ll bother with luncheon,’ said the plummy voice. ‘Or the cricket. We’ll see you tomorrow.’

‘Oh, there is one thing,’ said Biffo, before the plummy voice rang off. ‘Do you think you could bring some of my clothes with you? I came away with hardly anything and having something of a cash flow problem I don’t have the wherewithal to buy any spare stuff. That’s what I called about actually.’

‘I’ll put you onto Edwina,’ said the plummy voice. Biffo repeated his request.

‘Oh, I gave all your clothes to Oxfam,’ said Edwina. ‘Toby filled the car and took them down there yesterday afternoon.’

‘But. . .yesterday afternoon?’ said Biffo. He would have been shocked if he hadn’t known Edwina better. ‘I only left yesterday!’ It seemed a lot longer than that.

‘I didn’t want the children to be disturbed by seeing your stuff about the place,’ said Edwina. ‘Besides you took a suitcase full of clothes with you.’

‘There wasn’t anything I could wear in there,’ said Biffo. ‘I wasn’t thinking very clearly when I packed.’

‘I’ll have the suitcase back,’ said Edwina. ‘It was a Louis Vuitton.’

‘Er, I’m afraid I sold the suitcase,’ admitted Biffo. ‘Together with everything that was in it.’

‘You sold it?’

‘Yes.’

‘The suitcase?’

‘Yes.’

‘How much did you get for it?’

‘Twenty pounds.’

‘Twenty pounds! It cost more than twenty times that much!’

‘I know,’ admitted Biffo, guiltily. ‘I don’t seem to be as hot at negotiating as I thought I used to be.’

Edwina did the thing with forty litres of air again. Well, don’t forget to give me the £20 tomorrow,’ she said.

‘You want the £20?’

‘You did agree, did you not, that I would have all the property that we owned prior to your leaving me.’

Biffo sighed. ‘Yes. I did.’

‘That’s what I thought.’ said Edwina. We’ll see you tomorrow and you can give me the £20. Oh, by the way, there’s a letter for you. It looks boring so I haven’t opened it. I’ll bring it with me.’

Chapter 28

After his disturbing conversation with his wife and her plummy solicitor Biffo sat in his room and cuddled Tiger.

‘There are some people it is very easy to loathe,’ he said. Tiger purred, as was her wont on these occasions, and stretched out a leg.

After half an hour Biffo felt much better, as he always did. He had long been convinced that if more people lived with cats, depression would be a much rarer disease. He always found it difficult to stay gloomy after chatting to Tiger about his problems. Tiger always seemed to understand.

When he had fed Tiger he clambered stiffly down the stairs to the bar. Puffy Harbottle and most of the village cricket team were gathered at one end of the bar having what looked like a serious discussion about something or other. Since it was serious it was probably about cricket. Biffo started to sit down on a stool at the empty end of the bar but changed his mind and, instead, just leant on the bar. He was wearing very damp clothes which felt rather uncomfortable even when he was standing. He thought they would feel even worse if he sat down. Besides, after a day on a bicycle the attractions of sitting down seemed slight.

‘How do you like working for Miss Box?’ asked Lettice, who was leisurely washing a glass in the small sink underneath the bar counter.

‘It’s pretty hard work!’ said Biffo, rubbing his back and grimacing. ‘The countryside round here looked pretty flat when I arrived on the bus. It seems to have suddenly got a lot hillier.’ He paused. ‘And I don’t think I’ll ever find my way around.’

‘Oh you will,’ said Lettice, reassuringly. ‘When I first worked here a customer ordered a pint and a half of lager. I spent twenty minutes looking for a glass big enough to take a pint and a half’

‘You didn’t!’

‘I did. I notice you’re not sitting down.’

‘I prefer to stand,’ said Biffo, wryly. ‘Still, the job has its good points. I reckon I could win the Tour de France next year.’

Lettice laughed. ‘Not really your cup of tea, then?’

‘I’m not entirely sure that I’d choose to spend the rest of my life riding a delivery bicycle,’ admitted Biffo ruefully. ‘But for the time being it fills the bill very nicely. Fresh air, plenty of exercise, beautiful countryside and Miss Box doesn’t make me read daily mottoes.’

‘Daily mottoes?’ smiled Lettice, puzzled.

‘My last employer was a great believer in daily mottoes,’ answered Biffo, very seriously. ‘He apparently hired someone to write them.’

‘Who was that?’

‘The chap who wrote the mottoes?’

‘No. Your last employer.’ Lettice rinsed a glass under the cold tap.

‘A television company,’ replied Biffo. ‘Better Television.’

‘What did you do for them?’

‘I was a producer.’

‘Good heavens!’ said Lettice. ‘I am impressed!’ She shook the excess water from the glass and then picked up a tea towel from the radiator behind her. The radiator didn’t work, and never had, because Puffy had run out of money long before the planned central heating installation had been completed. But it made a convenient towel rail.

‘You shouldn’t be impressed,’ said Biffo. ‘It was a terrible company - well I suppose it still is, I don’t expect it has miraculously improved just because I left. And working in television really isn’t very glamorous, you know. Most of the time it’s about as exciting as accountancy. Come to think of it most of the time there isn’t a lot of difference between being a television producer and being an accountant.’

‘Were the mottoes the last straw?’ asked Lettice. ‘There’s usually a last straw, isn’t there.’ She had finished drying the glass and she paused and half turned to put it away on the shelf behind her. ‘Or shouldn’t I ask?’

Biffo thought for a moment. ‘It wasn’t the mottoes,’ he said. He thought again. ‘I didn’t like my life very much. I had become everything I hated when I was 18. I’m still not sure how it happened but I know I’m lucky to have a second chance,’ he said. ‘If there was a last straw it was when they told me they wanted me to produce a quiz programme.’

Biffo thought again about the years he had spent at Better Television. `Actually, I never really liked working in television very much,’ he confessed. ‘I only really got into it because they paid me obscenely well and my wife rather liked money. Well, still does to be accurate.’

‘Where is your wife? Is she joining you here?’

‘Good heavens, no!’ said Biffo. He shuddered at the thought. ‘Well, oddly enough, come to think of it she is,’ he corrected himself ‘She’ll be here tomorrow at lunchtime. She’s coming down with her lawyer, though to be honest I have it on good authority that they are a little closer than is usually considered appropriate for lawyer and client. But I don’t expect they’ll be here for long. I’m afraid I don’t think they like tinned tomatoes. They’d be a little more comfortable with something disgusting done with quails’ eggs, frog’s legs, Californian spinach and Peruvian sun-dried tomatoes. My wife is one of those people who doesn’t value food for its nutritional qualities or its taste but for its appearance and cost. Given the choice of eating healthy, cheap food that tasted good but looked horrible and eating expensive food that tasted horrible but looked good she would take the latter every time.’

‘And what’s wrong with my tinned tomatoes?’ asked Lettice, feigning indignation. ‘There’s a lot of skill involved in plopping heated up tomatoes onto two pieces of toast.’

‘There is absolutely nothing wrong with your tinned tomatoes,’ replied Biffo. ‘In fact, if they’re still on the menu I’d like to put in an order for them for this evening.’

‘We’ve got plenty of bread and tons of tomatoes,’ said Lettice.

Biffo looked around the bar. ‘I must say I do like it here,’ he said. ‘It seems like a good place to restart my life.’

‘Is that what you want to do?’

‘What?’

‘Restart your life?’

‘Yes,’ said Biffo, without hesitation. ‘I suppose it sounds a bit dramatic. But my last life was such a disaster that I really feel that starting again is the only option.’

‘And what exactly do you want to do with your second life?’ Lettice smiled.

Biffo looked at her quizzically. ‘You seem to be assuming that I don’t want to ride a delivery bicycle for Miss Box for the rest of my days?’

‘I’m assuming that you don’t want to ride a delivery bicycle for Miss Box for the rest of your days,’ confirmed Lettice. ‘Besides I suspect you might find that Franklin Minton will want his old job back when he recovers.’

Biffo picked up a beer-mat and played with it for a moment. ‘You won’t laugh?’

‘Not if it’s your dream I won’t. I never laugh at people’s dreams.’

Biffo carefully positioned the beer-mat on the bar counter so that a third of it was projecting out into the air. He then used his fingers to flick it up into the air so that it performed half a somersault. He caught the beer-mat and felt rather pleased with himself. He then took a deep breath. ‘I’d really like to find a cute little cottage in the middle of nowhere – thatched roof, roses and honeysuckle round the door, log fire in a stone hearth, you know the sort of thing. Somewhere cosy and comfortable where Tiger and I can settle down. The snag is I don’t have any money so the idyllic little cottage is going to remain pretty much a dream.’

‘I thought you said you worked in television because it paid well.’

‘I did. But my wife was very good at spending money. She had several diplomas in shopping.’

‘And she managed to spend everything you earned?’

‘Not all of it, no. There’s the house, of course. Furniture, cars and some money in the building society. But I agreed to give her the house and everything we owned when I left.’

‘That was very generous of you.’

Biffo shrugged. ‘I didn’t want a long drawn out argument. I just want to get on with my new life.’

‘You could always rent a cottage,’ said Lettice.

‘I hadn’t thought of renting. I was brought up to think that renting wasn’t a good financial move.’

‘If you can’t afford to buy somewhere it’s a pretty damned sensible financial move.’

‘Yes. I suppose it is. Are there any cottages to rent around here?’

‘Oh yes. In fact I can show you particulars for two or three if you’re really interested. Rents aren’t very high. Not many holiday-makers come here and it’s always the holiday-makers who push up the rental prices. Even with what Miss Box pays you should be able to afford something.’

‘You’re the first barmaid I’ve ever come across who has a sideline in cottage rentals.’

‘It’s really the other way around,’ said Lettice. ‘My proper job is as an estate agent. Or at least it was until I moved in here temporarily to help my uncle in the pub when my aunt left.’

‘You’re really an estate agent?’

‘Sort of. I do a little part-time work for one.’

‘You don’t look like an estate agent.’

‘What do estate agents look like?’

‘I suppose I mean you don’t seem like an estate agent,’ said Biffo, pedalling backwards.

‘What do estate agents seem like?’ asked Lettice, slightly raising one eyebrow.

‘I don’t know. . .’ mumbled Biffo. He felt himself blushing. ‘I suppose, because you’re, well. . .you seem honest.’ It wasn’t what he wanted to say. But it was what came out.

‘We’re very good at pretending to be honest,’ said Lettice, teasing him. ‘We take courses in it.’ She disappeared for a moment and returned clutching half a dozen brochures.

‘Have a look at these, if you like,’ she said, handing the brochures to Biffo. ‘It will give you an idea of what’s on the market.’ She turned away again.

‘Have you got to go?’ asked Biffo, spreading the brochures out on the bar counter. He enjoyed chatting with Lettice. He liked her.

‘I have to get to work in the kitchen,’ called Lettice, who had disappeared and could be heard opening cupboards and drawers. ‘I seem to remember being given an order for tomatoes on toast.’

Chapter 29

Bill Stickers had not had a good night. He had done a lot of tossing and quite a lot of turning but not a great deal of sleeping.

He had given up trying to sleep at six that morning and had got up and made himself a cup of tea. He had very much enjoyed being rich and he didn’t think he was going to like being poor.

He didn’t understand what had happened and how the bank had managed to lose all his money (his name had been on the lottery ticket and he always thought of it as ‘his’ money rather than ‘their’ money) but he also had a strong suspicion that there wasn’t going to be anything he could do about it.

He sat, in his Jermyn Street pyjamas and his Jermyn Street dressing gown, and sipped at his Earl Grey tea and, through the double-glazed kitchen window, watched the sun come up over his neatly-manicured one acre of garden, well-kept five acres of mixed woodland and four and a half acres of paddock.

The house in which he and Pansy lived had, back in the days when vicars had been important and wealthy members of all rural communities, been the Fondling-Under-Water vicarage. The ‘exquisite, beautifully proportioned Georgian building’ had, according to the estate agents, been ‘restored sympathetically and comprehensively equipped with an impressive range of modern facilities’.

Acting on his new bank’s advice Bill had purchased the house with a loan. Although he had what he thought was quite a lot of money sitting in his account the bank had successfully managed to persuade him to borrow a lot more money. These additional funds naturally came from them but they had assured him that there were lots of mysterious tax advantages to be gained by borrowing money. The smart (in all senses of the word), exceptionally well-dressed men from the bank had used words like ‘leverage’ and ‘gearing’ and although Bill hadn’t had the foggiest idea what they had been talking about he had nodded wisely because he had been far too embarrassed to admit just how ignorant he really was.

The early morning went slowly but, as early mornings usually do if you leave them alone to get on with it, it eventually went. And at one minute past nine o’clock Bill made a telephone call to his bank.

‘What’s this fax all about?’ he asked, when he finally got put through to an anonymous bank employee.

‘Which fax is that?’ asked the anonymous man in a suit. Bill read out the contents of the communication he had received.

‘Yes, that seems to be correct, Mr Stickers,’ said the bank employee.

‘You’ve lost my money?’

‘Well, the bank hasn’t lost your money, Mr Stickers,’ said the man at the bank. ‘There has, to put it quite simply, been a global down turn in the economy and your portfolio has consequently suffered a downward re-appreciation.’

‘A downward re-appreciation?’

‘Er, that means that financially speaking your portfolio is not worth as much as it was.’

‘It isn’t worth anything, is it?’

‘Strictly speaking that is accurate, Mr Stickers.’

‘You’ve lost all my money!’

‘Oh no, Mr Stickers. We haven’t lost your money. It is true that you gave the bank discretionary powers over your investments but we kept you fully informed of our plans. It is most unfortunate that the collapse in the Japanese electronics market, a deterioration in the value of the South African rand and an unforeseen alteration in the value of sterling all coincided with a rise in the value of the dollar.’

‘Is there anything left?’

‘I’m afraid not. That’s why we sent you the fax.’

‘What about my £300?’

‘Which £300 would that be?’

‘The £300 I started off with.’

‘All your monies were incorporated in your portfolio.’

‘You’ve lost that too?’

‘The economic downturn seems to have affected your entire portfolio. . .’

‘And my house? Do I still own that?’

There was a lengthy pause while the anonymous voice played with the keyboard in front of him.

‘Your house is actually owned by one of your registered companies.’

‘Oh, good!’ said Bill, feeling a little brighter. For a moment or two he had feared that he had lost everything.

‘But the company, which is registered in the Virgin Islands, is a wholly owned subsidiary of another company which you own and which is registered in Turks and Caicos.’

‘Where?’

‘Turks and Caicos. There are considerable tax advantages in having a company there, Mr Stickers.’

‘And I have a company registered there?’

‘Yes, Mr Stickers. You’ll find all the details in your portfolio.’

‘So I still own that company?’

‘Oh, I’m afraid that’s gone into liquidation, Mr Stickers. It was unable to pay back the loan your associated company in Andorra had arranged with the Lithuanian branch of this bank.’

‘So I don’t own my own home?’ The respite had been a short one. Bill wondered where he had put his hairdressing scissors.

‘Indeed that is correct, Mr Stickers.’

‘So we’ve lost our home?’ said Bill, feeling extremely tired. ‘Don’t I own anything anymore?’ He wondered if the short back and sides was still a popular cut. The shaved head seemed to be popular in some quarters and he thought he could probably manage that fairly well.

There was another pause. ‘Well there does seem to be one land transaction listed here,’ said the anonymous banker. ‘It’s a very small value deal which you made shortly after joining us and which our investment people seem to have completely overlooked and failed to incorporate into your general portfolio.’

‘Land?’ said Bill. ‘I don’t remember any land. When did I buy land?’

‘It’s a modest plot of a few acres in a place called Fondling-Under-Water,’ said the banker. ‘You seem to have made the purchase, much against the advice of our investment team I should point out, from someone called Lord Hepplewhite.’

‘The cricket ground!’ cried Bill. ‘I still own the cricket ground.’

‘It doesn’t mention cricket here,’ said the banker. He sighed. ‘Anyway, that appears to be your only asset that the bank is aware of. Perhaps you can sell it and buy yourself a small property with the proceeds? According to our records the land has planning permission for residential building use.’

‘Sell it?’ said Bill, horrified. ‘But that’s the village cricket ground!’

‘Well, it’s your choice,’ said the banker. ‘Land which has planning permission always fetches a good price. Something of that sort of size should fetch. . .oh. . .£80,000. Perhaps more. I see there’s a river nearby. Is it a pretty setting?’

‘Yes, it’s very pretty.’

‘Then you might be able to get £100,000 for it. If you would like to invest that sum with us we would be happy to manage your investments.’

‘No, thank you,’ said Bill quickly. ‘If I’ve got anything left I’ll lose it myself. I can probably do it more slowly than you did.’

‘I’ll arrange for all your accounts with us to be closed,’ said the banker. ‘It’s been a pleasure looking after you.’ The telephone went dead and Bill automatically replaced the receiver. He felt as though he was in a dream.

‘Is everything all right, dear?’ asked Pansy, who had entered the room while Bill had been on the telephone.

‘No,’ said Bill.

‘Oh dear. We’ve lost all our money haven’t we?’

‘Yes.’

Pansy felt strangely relieved by this piece of news. Now that they no longer had any money she no longer had to worry about becoming poor again.

We’ve lost the house too,’ said Bill. ‘All we have left is the cricket field.’

Well, that’s nice, dear,’ said Pansy, who knew how much Bill enjoyed being captain of the village cricket team.

‘We’ll have to sell it,’ said Bill.

‘Shall I get you some breakfast?’ asked Pansy, beginning to bustle. She was at her happiest and best when preparing food. If she had been given a free choice about how to spend her life she would have chosen to spend it making sandwiches. She obtained enormous satisfaction out of turning loaves of bread, packs of butter, blocks of cheese and jars of pickle into sandwiches and was a vital member of the Fondling-Under-Water Cricket Club’s tea making team. ‘How many slices of toast would you like?’ she asked when her husband failed to respond to her original question.

Chapter 30

Bill Stickers wasn’t the only person in the world whose day had started rather badly.

While Bill was nibbling his toast and trying (not very successfully) to persuade himself that he was hungry (and still wondering how his highly paid financial advisers had managed to lose over seven million pounds without any help from him) Damien Washbrook was convinced that he was having a heart attack.

Damien and Edwina were driving along in Damien’s late model Mercedes when his mobile telephone rang. He answered it and immediately wished he hadn’t. It was his brother George and he knew instantly that something had gone wrong.

‘What’s the matter?’ Damien demanded. ‘What’s gone wrong?’

‘How do you know something has gone wrong?’ asked George.

‘Because everything was going well. Things couldn’t get any better could they?’

‘No. I suppose not.’

‘So if they couldn’t get any better they could only get worse.’

‘I suppose so,’ said George. ‘I must say that’s pretty damned smart for a lawyer.’

‘I wish you wouldn’t do that!’

‘Do what?’

‘Keep on putting me down.’

‘Only a joke, Damien.’

‘Yes, I know. But you do it when there are other people around. It makes me feel like a fool. People laugh at me.’ He glanced at Edwina, sitting impassively in the passenger seat. She raised an eyebrow an eighth of an inch, but said nothing.

‘Well you’re a lawyer,’ said George. ‘You have a choice. You can either have people despise you or have them laugh at you. Personally I’d rather have people laugh at me.’

‘Why can’t I have people just plain like me?’ demanded Damien.

‘Because you’re a lawyer,’ said George. ‘No one will ever like you.’

Damien sighed. He could never win with his brother. ‘So, what has gone wrong?’

‘Summerton has pulled out.’

‘Pulled out?’

‘Pulled out.’

‘Just like that?’

‘Just like that.’

‘He can’t.’

‘He has.’

‘But it’s not fair!’

‘No one ever said life was going to be fair,’ said George.‘You should know that. You’re a lawyer.’

‘But it’s so desperately, desperately unfair!’ whined Damien. ‘What are we going to do?’ He sounded like a small and timid boy who has just hit a cricket ball through next door’s greenhouse and who now needs his older brother to take charge. There was no cricket ball or greenhouse involved, and no glass had been broken, but George, Damien’s older brother, was a property developer who always had deals bubbling in Europe, America and Asia. If all of his deals had been pies he would not have had enough fingers to keep one in each.

‘We have to find another site,’ said George. ‘And we have to find it by next Monday.’

‘Or what happens?’

‘Unless you can find space for 87 prefabricated buildings in your back garden we’ve got just the teeniest weeniest bit of a problem,’ said George. ‘Basically, the whole deal goes sour and we’re out a good deal of money.’

‘Can’t we get them to delay the delivery date?’

‘No.’

‘But if we explain to them what has happened. . .’

‘. . .it won’t make any difference at all.’

‘I’ve put every penny I can raise into this deal,’ said Damien, who had for years struggled with unrealistic delusions of adequacy. ‘I know it doesn’t matter much to you but to me this is a matter of life and death.’

‘Don’t exaggerate Damien.’

‘I’m not exaggerating!’

‘Yes, you are! You might lose all your money but you’re not going to die.’

‘I will probably have a heart attack!’

‘Of course you won’t. I’ll sue you if you do,’ said George. ‘We’ll be fine if we can just find another site. So look around. Talk to a few people.’

‘Don’t you know anyone who can help?’

‘No,’ said George. ‘I’ve got to fly to New York. I’ll be back on Sunday. Just make sure that you’ve found us a new site by then. Remember, the deal is that the buildings are erected on Monday.’

‘New York! You can’t!’

‘I have to,’ said George. ‘I’ll be back on Sunday. Just make sure that you’ve found another site by then and everything will be absolutely fine.’

‘George!’ cried Damien. But George had gone.

‘What was all that about Damien?’ asked Edwina. ‘What’s the matter?’

‘How do you know something is the matter?’

‘Because I heard your end of the conversation and half of your brother’s end. And because you are bright red and dripping with sweat. And because you are panicking.’

‘No I’m not.’

‘Yes you are.’

‘I don’t panic.’

‘Yes you do. You’re doing it now.’

‘I’m not! I’m not! It’s just that there’s a crisis.’

‘What’s happened?’

‘It’s. . .it’s a business thing. . .’

‘Well, are you going to tell me about it?

Damien didn’t answer for a moment.

‘Damien!’ said Edwina sharply. ‘What have you done?’

‘I got involved in a deal with my brother. . .’

‘Your brother is a crook!’

‘He’s not. He’s very successful. He makes a lot of money.’

‘So what’s the problem then?’

‘George bought some prefabs from a man he knows.’

‘Prefabricated buildings? Are they still making those?’

‘These are modern prefabs. Beautifully equipped. They make them for the army but they would make splendid holiday homes.’

‘And you and he bought some of them?’

‘Yes. Equal partners. He let me in as a favour.’

‘Oh Damien! You are stupid sometimes. From what I’ve heard of him your brother doesn’t do favours.’

‘No, no! It’s a great project.’

‘How many prefabs did you buy?’

‘Eighty seven.’

‘Eighty seven! What are you doing? Starting your own city?’

‘George got them for a very good price. The man we bought them from is going to erect them and everything.’

‘Who is this man?’

‘Some sort of middle man. I think he bought them from the government. It’s all very honest and above board.’ Damien paused to gesture at a cyclist who had dared to stray out of the gutter for a moment. ‘George then did another deal with a man called Summerton.’

‘This isn’t the man who sold you the prefabs?’

‘No.’

‘And what is Summerton going to do?’

‘He isn’t going to do anything now. He was going to sell us a piece of land on the coast.’

‘And Summerton has changed his mind.’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know.’ Damien peered at a road sign.

‘So what happens if you can’t find anywhere? Can’t you pull out of the deal to buy the prefabs? Just pay a forfeit or something?’

‘This isn’t a party game,’ snapped Damien. `We had to pay the money in advance to get the buildings at such a good price,’ he said. ‘It didn’t seem a risk at the time,’ he added lamely.

‘I see,’ said Edwina. ‘So, to sum up, on Monday you take delivery of 87 prefabricated buildings but you don’t have anywhere to put them.’

‘That’s about the size of it,’ admitted Damien.

Chapter 31

While Damien and Edwina were driving gloomily down to Fondling-Under-Water, Biffo was riding Miss Box's bicycle around the narrow, twisting lanes of their destination. The sun was shining, the sky was blue and decorated with a few small, harmless, fluffy white clouds, the birds were twittering their little hearts out as though auditioning for chorus parts in the latest West End musical, and as far as Biffo was concerned all was pretty much well with the world.

It is true that he was not looking forward to the arrival of his wife and her legally-qualified paramour but his feelings about this were more than counterbalanced by his excitement at the prospect of playing in his first cricket match for the best part of half a century.

It was shortly after delivering a new broom handle (Biffo quickly found that this was not the easiest item to carry on a bicycle), six red clay flower pots and a pair of pillow cases to a neat, thatched cottage occupied by a retired civil servant and his wife that Biffo jammed on his brakes, put both his feet on the ground and skidded, unsteadily, to a halt.

When Lettice had given him a fistful of house brochures the previous evening Biffo had flicked through the first half a dozen brochures without much interest or enthusiasm. None of them made his heart go zing. But the seventh and final brochure, for a property known as Buttercup Cottage, had captured both his interest and his enthusiasm and had set his heart zinging like a fire alarm. And suddenly, and unexpectedly, he had found it.

Buttercup Cottage had been built in the late nineteenth century by a builder who knew exactly what a country cottage should look like. Unencumbered by fancy architects or pettyminded members of the local planning department, he had built a small, solid, simple stone cottage with leaded windows and a solid oak front door and had topped the whole thing off with a stone chimney and a red-tiled roof He had painted the walls white. The front door was protected from the elements by a stone porch which contained two windows and two very solid slate seats. A crazy paving path connected the front porch to a white wooden gate positioned in the middle of a white wooden fence. A small, fast flowing stream separated the fence from the lane and a small slate bridge connected the lane to the crazy paving path. Behind the cottage there was a thirty acre wood, largely comprised of oak and chestnut trees and according to the agent's details a natural spring in the wood provided the cottage with a plentiful supply of fresh, pure, cold drinking water. The front windows of the cottage looked over fields, and since the cottage had been built on a slight rise, also looked down upon The Gravedigger's Rest, the cricket field and the rest of the village of Fondling-Under-Water.

Biffo stared at Buttercup Cottage and, despite the peeling paint, the overgrown garden and the unhappy-looking roof (the loft had been used by squirrels as a playground for some years) it was, for him, undisputed love at first sight. It was the country cottage of his dreams. He leant his bicycle against the hedge on the other side of the road and stood, with his hands before him resting on the top of the creaky gate, and drooled.

After a while Biffo let out a huge sad sigh, turned, walked back over the bridge and climbed back onto his bicycle to continue his deliveries. There was, he knew, absolutely no way in which he could convert his dream into reality.

The asking price was by no means unreasonable. The former owner's beneficiaries, and the estate agents selling the cottage, were very much aware that the dilapidated appearance put it firmly into the 'cottage with potential for renovation' category rather than the considerably higher priced 'suitable for immediate occupation' category.

The alternative monthly rental fee mentioned was not high either. But Biffo was relying on his wages from Miss Box to pay his bill at The Gravedigger's Rest and he didn't think he would get a very positive response if he asked a bank manager to lend him money to buy a cottage on the basis of his job as delivery boy.

He could just imagine the conversation.

‘And what is your annual income, Mr Brimstone?’

‘I’m not sure.’

‘You’re not sure?’

‘Miss Box hasn’t told me

‘I see. Well, the bank normally lends three times a home owner’s annual salary. So, that would mean that we would be happy to lend you three times ‘not sure’. Would that be all right?’

Biffo winced at the thought, climbed back onto his bicycle and pedalled off to deliver a brace of pheasant, a slice of Stilton cheese, a reel of pale blue cotton and a socket wrench to Major Gregory at the rather grandly named ‘Windsor House’.

Thirty five minutes later, having returned his bicycle, complete with its now empty basket, to Miss Box’s shop, Biffo strolled round to The Gravedigger’s Rest. He strolled because it was the way of the village to stroll. No one hurried. But he also strolled because he didn’t have much option. Biffo was becoming seriously concerned that he might have to spend the rest of his life sitting on a bicycle. After a morning spent delivering an enormous variety of items to an extensive variety of homes within the apparently unending Fondling-Under-Water catchment area, Biffo had discovered that he could hardly walk. The muscles which enabled him to ride a bicycle were simply tired. The muscles which should have enabled him to walk seemed to have shrivelled up and died.

For his lunch he had purchased, and consumed, two bread rolls (46 pence), a large chunk of cheese (74 pence), an apple (32 pence) and a small bottle (99 pence) of lemonade. All these sums were to be taken from his end of the week wages and Biffo had a sneaking suspicion that at the rate he was going he could well end up owing Miss Box money. He wished he could summon up the courage to ask her what she was going to pay him.

As he approached The Gravedigger’s Rest Biffo could see that a large, silver Mercedes was selfishly parked across the centre of the forecourt, blocking the whole area.

Biffo assumed, quite accurately, that Edwina and Damien had arrived.

Chapter 32

‘Ah, Bernard!’ said Edwina, climbing out of Mercedes as she saw Biffo approaching. She was wearing a navy blue suit and a white blouse and carrying blue leather gloves and a capacious blue leather handbag. She wore navy blue shoes. ‘We were rather expecting to see you arrive on your little bicycle. ‘

‘I’ve returned it to the shop,’ said Biffo. ‘Have you been here long?’

‘We’ve just arrived,’ said Edwina. ‘Is it black with one of those nice little baskets on the front?’

‘What?’

‘The bicycle?’

‘It is black,’ said Biffo. ‘But the basket is quite a big one.’

‘I have to confess that I didn’t even know you could ride a bicycle,’ said Edwina. ‘How very clever of you. And I certainly never imagined that for all those years you had been harbouring a secret desire to ride a delivery bicycle.’

‘It wasn’t an ambition,’ said Biffo. ‘It was just the only job available.’ He instantly felt cross with himself for explaining. He didn’t owe this woman any explanations.

A tall, thin, suntanned, arrogant-looking man with a sneer fixed onto that part of his face where most people smile climbed out of the driver’s side of the Mercedes. He opened the rear passenger door on his side and took a jacket from a wooden hanger. He put the jacket on and then reached into the car and removed an extremely expensive-looking brown leather briefcase. In recognition of the fact that he was coming to the country he was wearing a green and brown three piece tweed suit with a matching houndstooth cotton shirt and a green, knitted tie. His feet were shod in highly-polished brown brogues.

‘Do you know Damien?’ Edwina asked Biffo, regally waving half a set of immaculately-manicured fingernails in Damien’s general direction.

‘I think we may have met,’ Biffo replied.

‘Damien is my lawyer,’ said Edwina.

‘And slightly more than that I understand,’ Biffo thought it appropriate to remind her.

‘Perhaps,’ agreed Edwina. She tried to smile but it didn’t quite come out as a smile. Smiling wasn’t Edwina’s strong point. She hadn’t had a lot of practice. Biffo felt the muscles around his head begin to tighten. He hoped he wasn’t going to get one of his tension headaches. Not with the big match coming up.

‘I want you two to be friends,’ said Edwina. ‘Shake hands,’ she ordered them.

Damien walked around the car and walked across to where Biffo was standing. He held out a damp, limp hand which, to avoid any unpleasantness, Biffo took. He was instantly and unpleasantly reminded of the time when he had gone fishing with a friend and had held a rainbow trout while the friend disengaged the hook from the unfortunate fish’s mouth. He shuddered and hoped the involuntary movement had not been noticeable.

‘I have brought with me some documents which require your signature,’ said Edwina’s lawyer. He looked around and allowed his lip to curl a little further into a fully-fledged sneer. ‘Can we go somewhere a little more private?’

‘I’m sure we will be able to find a corner in the bar,’ said Biffo, heading towards the front door to The Gravedigger’s Rest. ‘Do you want something to eat?’ he asked over his shoulder

‘Here?’ said Damien, so horrified that he actually stopped for a moment.

‘No thank you, Bernard,’ said Edwina, with studied politeness. ‘I really don’t think so.’ She put on her gloves to protect her hands from any parts of the building with which she might be unable to avoid physical contact.

Biffo led the way into the public house. He remembered to duck and therefore avoided the beam and he remembered the step down just in time to correct his trip into the bar. Sadly, he forgot to warn the two who were following him of these twin unnatural hazards.

Edwina, was short enough to miss the beam but her lack of stature provided no protection against the step down into the bar. She tripped, half fell, almost recovered her balance and then crashed into one of the tables. Behind her there was a loud crack, followed by an equally loud curse, as Damien’s skull and the entrance door beam fought for supremacy. Biffo was surprised and quite impressed by the extent of Damien’s vocabulary but less surprised to see that the beam had come off best.

Holding his head, knees bent with the shock, Damien had no chance with the step. He fell forward and crashed into Edwina. The two of them ended up stacked horizontally on the bar floor. Edwina flat on her face and Damien stretched out on top of her. Damien’s partial denture (a souvenir of an unhappy incident involving a plumber and a disputed bill), being lighter but subjected to the same degree of force as had the mouth in which they normally resided, had accelerated faster than Damien, and lay on the floor several feet in front of them both.

‘What on earth…?’ demanded Lettice, rushing into the bar and looking alarmed.

‘One more for the beam,’ said Biffo. He pointed to the two figures on the floor. ‘The woman in the blue suit is my wife,’ he said. ‘The man lying on top of her, in what could only be described as an entirely inappropriate position, is her solicitor.’

‘Are you both all right?’ asked Lettice. As she spoke she reached under the bar for the slate and chalk.

‘We’re fine, thank you!’ said Damien, using his arms to lever himself up onto his knees. As soon as he heard himself speak he was well aware that he had been separated from his denture. Being conscious that an absence of teeth did nothing to enhance his appearance Damien immediately clasped a hand across the lower part of his face.

‘I’m not!’ snarled Edwina. Scrabbling around on the floor she pushed her bottom up into the air with such ferocity that Damien received a powerful blow in what can perhaps most appropriately be described an exceptionally delicate area. Groaning in agony he collapsed on top of her again, flattening her once more on the floor and squeezing all the air out of her lungs.

Biffo, trying hard to maintain a straight face, looked across at Lettice who was leaning forward over the bar and staring at the two people on the lounge floor in some astonishment.

‘What the hell is going on?’ demanded Puffy Harbottle, suddenly appearing as from nowhere. He looked over Lettice’s shoulder and raised both eyebrows. ‘Better throw a bucket of water over them,’ he said to Lettice, before disappearing again.

‘Get off me you stupid oaf!’ said Edwina in a voice Biffo recognised very well.

‘I was hying to het hoff you!’ protested Damien, rolling sideways off his client and mistress. He lay on his back, eyes closed, and breathing heavily. His lower face had a sort of, well, empty look.

‘Damien?’ said Lettice. ‘Is that you Damien? What the hell are you doing here?’

The lawyer opened his eyes instantly and looked across to where the sound had come from.

‘What on earth are you doing here?’ Lettice repeated.

‘Lettice!’ said Damien, scrabbling to his feet, tidying his hair and straightening his tie.

‘Damien, I want you to sue these people!’ insisted Edwina, who, now that she was liberated, was struggling to her feet. ‘My suit is ruined!’ she cried.

‘There’s no point in suing Puffy,’ said Lettice. ‘He hasn’t got any money.’

‘Who the hell are you?’ demanded Edwina, rudely.

‘Lettice,’ said Lettice. ‘I’m the landlord’s niece. And you’d be wasting your time if you sued him because he hasn’t got any money.’

‘He must have insurance,’ said Edwina.

‘I wouldn’t bank on it,’ said Lettice.

‘Not having proper insurance is probably against the law!’ said Edwina. ‘I could sue him for that!’

‘Is this your wife?’ Lettice asked Biffo.

‘Yes.’

‘Golly,’ said Lettice. ‘You poor thing.’

‘Do you hear, Damien?’ demanded Edwina. ‘I want them sued. This place is a death trap. I could have broken my neck.’

‘And what is he doing here?’ Lettice demanded, ignoring Edwina and pointing at Damien.

‘I understand that he is here in something of a joint role,’ explained Biffo. ‘On the one hand he is acting as my wife’s solicitor. On the other he is also her bit on the side.’

Lettice laughed out loud. ‘He and your wife? An item?’

‘Yes. What’s so funny?’ asked Biffo.

‘That’s my ex-husband!’ said Lettice, pointing to Damien.

‘Him?’ said Biffo.

‘Yes.’

‘Damien!’ said Edwina, looking around. ‘Who is this. . .’ she paused, as though searching for a more appropriate label, but eventually settled for the most obvious word ‘. . .woman?’

Damien opened and closed his mouth several times without anything at all coming out.

‘I gather that Lettice is Damien’s former wife,’ said Biffo, trying to be helpful.

Edwina glared at Lettice. ‘Is that really your name?

Lettice smiled. ‘Yes.’

Edwina glowered at Damien. ‘You were married to a damned salad?’

Damien opened his mouth again. Once again the energy was wasted for no words escaped.

‘I should pick those up before someone treads on them,’ Biffo said to Damien, nodding towards the lonely looking dentures on the carpet.

‘Aaarrrghh!’ said Edwina, seeing Damien’s denture for the first time and staring at it as though it had been a King

Cobra about to strike.

Damien, awakened from his panic induced inability to speak or move, leapt across the room, grabbed his denture and thrust it into his mouth in one fluid movement.

‘Damien!’ said Edwina, pulling a face. ‘Take those teeth out this minute. You didn’t wash them!’

Obediently, Damien removed his teeth. He clearly didn’t know what to do with them and so he pushed them into his jacket pocket.

‘Not in your pocket, you fool!’ said Edwina. Damien took his teeth out of his pocket again.

‘Is that woman your former wife?’ demanded Edwina.

‘Yeth.’

‘Why wasn’t I told about this woman?’

‘I hold you I hath been married!’ protested Damien.

‘But you didn’t tell me you had been married to this woman!’ said Edwina, triumphantly.

‘I hidn’t hnow she wath here!’ said Damien, desperately. He turned to Lettice. ‘Ith there somewhere I han wash my heeth?’ he asked.

‘There’s a wash-basin in the gents,’ said Lettice. ‘It’s out in the passage.’

Damien didn’t need telling twice. He made a beeline for the door, the passage, the wash-basin and safety.

‘Mind the step. . .,’ Lettice reminded him.

She was too late. Damien, hurrying, tripped.

‘. . .and mind the beam!’ added Lettice.

A moment later she reached under the counter for the slate. Outside in the corridor Damien seemed to be whimpering.

Chapter 33

Three quarters of an hour later the documents Damien had brought with him had all been initialled, signed, countersigned and duly notarised.

Keen to start his new life unencumbered by memories of his old life Biffo had happily agreed to give Edwina everything the two of them had once owned together.

He signed documents giving her sole ownership of their house, their cars, their furniture and their savings accounts. In return Edwina signed documents to confirm that she would be responsible for all the bills relating to house, cars and so on and that she would have no claim over any of Biffo's income, earnings, winnings or acquisitions from the day when he left the marital home. With considerable glee she also signed a paper giving Biffo sole custody of Tiger the cat.

At the end of all the signing Biffo shook hands with Edwina and with Damien and Damien and Edwina kissed each other on the cheeks. Lettice served them all glasses of tonic water which was, she apologised rather ruefully, the nearest thing they had got to champagne.

'Miss Box has a very good selection of champagnes,' she told them. 'I'd have asked her to send a bottle round if I'd known.' She smiled. 'Miss Box has an excellent home delivery service.'

'I'm afraid we must be getting back,' said Edwina. 'Lots to do.' She put down her almost untouched glass of tonic water and stood up.

Damien responded immediately, emptying his glass and standing up.

'Before we go,' he said to Biffo. 'I wonder if I could just ask you a question?'

'You can ask. I may not be able to find an answer.'

'While I was in your lavatory I couldn't help noticing a large flat area of land just behind the public house,' said Damien. 'Pretty little spot. Seems to be right next to the river. Do you happen to know who owns it?'

'That's easy,' said Biffo. 'That's the cricket ground and the owner is a chap called Bill. Bill Stickers.'

'Bill Stickers? Odd name.'

'Well, his real name is Cedric. But everyone calls him Bill.'

'Don't suppose you happen to know if it's for sale, do you?'

'What? The cricket ground? For sale?'

'Yes.'

'Good heavens, no!' laughed Biffo. He looked at his watch. 'I'm glad you reminded me. I must get a move on. The match is due to start in a few minutes.'

'Oh, yes, of course. Your cricket match. Right ho,' said Damien. 'Thanks anyway.' He and Edwina started to head towards the door. They both paused in front of the step. Damien ducked and stepped up cautiously. Edwina followed him. 'Oh, I've just remembered,' she said, pausing on the step and rummaging in her handbag. 'A letter came for you this morning.' She pulled out a long, thick white envelope and handed it to Biffo. 'And you owe me £20.'

Biffo took the envelope, glanced at it, and stuffed it without thinking into his trouser pocket. He took £20 out of his pocket and handed it to Edwina. He didn’t have much left but he didn’t care. ‘Are you coming to watch?’ he asked Lettice.

‘When I’ve tidied up a bit,’ she said.

Biffo, leaving the bar, turned to wave goodbye.

‘Careful!’ cried Lettice.

But it was too late. She winced and then, once again, she reached under the counter for her slate and chalk.

Chapter 34

Having spent the last day and a half cycling around and around the village Biffo could at least console himself with the thought that he now knew his way around Fondling-Under-Water almost as well as some of the less mobile locals. Despite the discomfort he felt as a result of his efforts, he had acquired a genuine and steadily growing affection for the village.

The natural beauty of the place was unquestionable. Instead of the endless acres of hedgeless prairies so favoured by huge commercial farms, the countryside in and around Fondling-Under-Water still consisted of gently rolling hills, divided by thick, tree-studded hedgerows into small, green fields. The local river, the river Ripple, which snaked through the village from East to West, had neither been sucked dry by a water company hungry for water nor polluted by farmers or chemical companies using the river as a dumping ground for their waste.

The local woodlands were comprised of oak, beech, sycamore, horse chestnut, hazel, rowan and other indigenous, deciduous species. An occasional fir tree acted as a reminder of what might well have been if the commercial foresters had taken over.

The architectural beauty of the village was unquestionable too. Fondling-Under-Water remained unspoiled by concrete and breeze block and there were no fake wooden beams because those properties which required beams had real ones. The absence of any architectural horrors, dreamt up by BMW driving whizz kids with a penchant for silk suits, French ties and copper roofs, was a tribute not to the strength of purpose and good sense of the local planning department but to the fact that its geographical position meant that Fondling-Under-Water was neither suitable for turning into a dormitory town nor convenient for siting a weekend cottage.

The cricket field in Fondling-Under-Water had originally been created by one of the present Lord Hepplewhite's ancestors, a man for whom cricket had been both an addiction and a constant joy. He had had the field rolled as flat as a billiard table and had built a pavilion, which was modelled on the pavilion at the famous cricket ground in north London named after Thomas Lord.

The closer Biffo got to the Fondling-Under-Water cricket field the greater his apprehension grew. He was terribly aware that he hadn't played cricket since he had left school and even then he hadn't played very often. He could remember standing, with the rest of his form at school, in a long line while the two best players in the class chose their sides. Biffo remembered this as an extremely humbling and humiliating experience. He, and a boy who wore spectacles and suffered badly from asthma, had remained together in the line at the very end; unwanted by either captain. At the time he had regarded this as exceedingly unjust. Because he collected stamps and read books he had acquired a reputation amongst his school fellows as being bookish, scholarly and no sportsman. The result of this prejudice was that he had never had much of an opportunity to exhibit his talent at cricket or, indeed, any other sport.

He remembered that on one occasion an epidemic of mumps within the school had removed the ability of the two captains to be quite so choosy. His delight and pride at being picked for one of the teams had been tempered by the knowledge that with only sixteen fit pupils to choose from the two captains had not had a great deal of choice. He remembered the occasion being spoilt by the pity and shame he felt when he joined the team for which had so belatedly been selected, turned and saw that the asthmatic boy in spectacles, still standing alone and now an automatic and unavoidable choice for the other team, was crying. He remembered thinking how terrible life must be if, as he had so often been told by his father, his school days were to turn out to be the happiest days of his life.

It was at this point that Biffo stopped walking and stood still for a moment or two.

Part of him wanted very much to play in the village cricket match. He had always wanted to feel someone slap him on the back and say 'Well done!' He had always wanted to hear people shout out to him 'Catch it!' 'Good shot!' or 'Well bowled!' Even a 'Hard luck!' or a 'Well tried!' would have done.

But part of him, a bigger, stronger part, was terrified and full of self-doubt. He was frightened that he would let down the side, drop a vital catch, be given out first ball (‘bowled first ball by a full toss’ seemed to be a phrase which he remembered as meriting large amounts of personal shame) or bowl an over in which every ball was hit for six.

The prize (sporting success and companionship) was great. But the prospect of failure seemed just too great.

Suddenly, Biffo heard a cheery shout from a familiar voice.

‘Hello, Biffo!’ cried Puffy Harbottle, The Gravedigger’s Rest landlord. ‘Ready for the match?’ He approached Biffo with a wave and a big smile.

Biffo, who most certainly was not ready for the match, either physically or mentally, smiled faintly and shook Puffy’s hand.

‘You look a bit off colour,’ said Puffy, concerned. ‘Are you sure you’re feeling OK?’

‘Rather exhausted, actually,’ admitted Biffo. ‘Cycling is much harder work than sitting behind a desk. And to tell you the truth I’m also feeling just a trifle nervous,’ he added. He lowered his voice. ‘To be honest with you I can’t remember when I last saw a cricket match!’

‘Don’t you worry about a thing!’ said Puffy cheerily. ‘I’ll give you ten to one you’ll be absolutely fine. Nothing to worry about at all. We all take our cricket pretty seriously but try to put that out of your mind.’

‘Thanks,’ said Biffo, making a brave attempt to smile. ‘Thank you very much.’

Chapter 35

Although the cricket pavilion in Fondling-Under-Water had been designed along the same general lines as the pavilion at Lord’s cricket ground in London it was rather noticeably smaller.

There was a small white picket fence in front of the pavilion and in the middle of this fence, reached from the pavilion by a row of slate steps, a small wooden gate through which cricketers and umpires walked on their way to the wicket.

Between the fence and the front of the pavilion, and on both sides of the slate steps, there were six rows of wooden benches, all painted white, upon which vice presidents of the cricket club, and their guests, could sit in well-wrapped attention.

The pavilion was divided into three main rooms. On the right was the dressing room used by the Fondling-Under-Water cricket team and on the left was the dressing room used by the visiting team. In between these two rooms was the largest and main room in the building - known as the Short Room in homage to the Long Room at Lord’s - where the older, more fragile members could sit on stools and high, long-legged chairs to watch the match.

Just as cricketers at Lord’s can only reach the playing area by walking through the Long Room so players at Fondling-Under-Water could only reach the front door of the pavilion, and thereby the gate, by passing through the Short Room.

When the pavilion had been built, the club’s original owner and benefactor had arranged for a large glass-fronted cupboard to be erected against the back wall of the Short Room. It had been his intention that the cupboard should be used to store the club’s trophies but, sadly, the club’s achievements had been slight or, to be more accurate, non-existent in this area. (It was not considered appropriate to store fake trophies in the pavilion. These, as we have already seen, were stored in the local pub.)

And so the cupboard was used instead to store and display such club memorabilia as the bat used by Bert Jenkins to score an undefeated 45 runs during a league match in 1953 (the highest score by any Fondling-Under-Water player) and the ball used by Nigel Tiverton to dismiss four opposition batsmen with his medium pace off-breaks (described as such because no one, least of all Nigel, was quite certain how to define his bowling style).

Behind the Short Room there was a small but wellplanned kitchen, and behind each of the two dressing rooms there were small communal bathrooms – each one being equipped with a single, large, rectangular bath in which eleven grown men could share soapy water and bathe and scrub together. For nearly a decade there had been a campaign to have the baths replaced by showers. It was argued that this would be more hygienic. This proposal, regularly put forward at the club’s Annual General Meeting, was always defeated by a hefty majority since there were many in the club who felt that the sense of camaraderie produced by communal bathing far outweighed such petty considerations as the possible spread of infection. Those who favoured the status quo were strongly supported by evidence, submitted annually, which indicated that when Gilbert Runcorn picked up an unfortunate and uncomfortable infection while on a trip to Amsterdam in 1969 not one other member of the team had acquired the same infection.

‘Most of you have already met Biffo, haven’t you?’ said Puffy, as the two of them entered the pavilion.

There were six people, already changed into their cricket whites, sitting or standing in the Short Room and five of them nodded, smiled and said ‘Hello!’ Biffo recognised them as having been in the pub on Monday evening.

‘Welcome to Fondling-Under-Water cricket club,’ said the sixth, whom Biffo had certainly not yet met, a tall, bearded fellow whose cricket trousers, shirt and jumper were so white that they almost sparkled. He carefully leant an expensive-looking, bat against a nearby stool and held out a beautifully manicured hand. ‘Paddy Fields,’ he said, introducing himself ‘I’m the vice captain. Sorry we haven’t met before. I understand that you’re staying at the pub for a few days?’

‘That’s right,’ agreed Biffo, accepting the outstretched hand, but having the presence of mind to wipe his own rather clammy palm on his trousers first. ‘I’m afraid I haven’t got any cricket gear with me,’ he apologised.

‘Don’t you worry about that, old fellow,’ said Paddy, cheerily. ‘We’ll fix you up with everything you need.’

‘And I have to confess that it’s been quite a while since I actually played a game of cricket,’ continued Biffo.

Paddy airily waved a hand to indicate that this was of absolutely no consequence. ‘You’ll soon get the hang of things,’ he said. He leant forwards a few degrees. ‘One small thing,’ he said, putting a hand on Biffo’s shoulder. ‘If there is ever any doubt, I would like you to remember that you’re on our side.’

Biffo, who was puzzled by this, stared at him for a moment or two. ‘Of course,’ he said at last.

‘Speaking for myself I’d much prefer a totally objective approach,’ he said. ‘But one has to be practical and in my experience that’s the way the opposition tend to deal with these things.’

‘Er, yes,’ said Biffo who had no idea what Paddy was talking about.

‘This is, after all, our quarter final match in the Worthiness Best Bitter Nationwide Cup competition’ explained Paddy. ‘In thirty two years of trying we’ve never reached the quarter finals before. We’ve been pretty lucky so far this year. We beat Caverdale in the first round – mind you they could only find nine fit men and two of them were over 80 – and we had a walk over in the second round when our opponents never got here. It turned out that the driver of the coach they’d hired was absolutely plastered and when he suggested that they stop off in a gateway for a rest the team agreed, thinking it was an opportunity to get a bit of shut eye themselves. They all fell fast asleep and didn’t wake up until six the following morning when a farmer banged on the coach door because he wanted to get his tractor into the field.’

‘Ah,’ said Biffo.

‘The Wanderers - our opponents today - come from near Bristol or Northampton, or somewhere like that. They’ve been coming here for seventy four years.’

‘Are they good?’ asked Biffo.

‘Not really,’ replied Paddy. He smiled. ‘They usually beat us, of course.’ He thought about this for a moment. ‘But never by very much,’ he added. ‘So we think we could be in with a chance. It’s been pretty close a few times. In 1932 they won by just six wickets and 1937 the margin was just 98 runs.

‘We even played them right through both World Wars,’ said Puffy proudly. ‘In 1940 our side consisted of three men over 60, two over 70, three women, three boys under 16 and a sheep dog. The sheep dog fielded - one of the best fielders we’ve ever had they say, he took two stunning catches in the deep - but didn’t bat, of course. Their side contained a chap with a wooden leg, a chap who was registered as blind and a woman who was eight months pregnant and who kept wicket because she didn’t think she ought to run about too much.’

There was a sudden clatter of metal on wood as the remains of the Fondling-Under-Water team left the dressing room and marched into the Short Room. It occurred to Biffo that the players he had met in the pub now all seemed to be considerably taller than they had been two days earlier. This puzzled him. He couldn’t understand whether this was because he had shrunk or because they had suddenly grown.

Biffo turned to Puffy Harbottle, who was standing next to him. ‘I know this seems a bit silly,’ he said, ‘But everyone seems, I don’t know, well, sort of, taller.’

Puffy leant a little closer to Biffo. ‘It’s the extra-long spikes.’ he explained. He turned his head and looked in the direction of the visitors’ dressing room, checked to make sure that the door was still closed, and then leant closer still. ‘We generally wear very long spikes when we play at home,’ he whispered. He paused. ‘The ground is always a little damp down near the river,’ he said. He then winked. ‘The local blacksmith makes the spikes for us. They’re twice the normal length.’

‘Ah. I see,’ nodded Biffo, who didn’t see at all. He was secretly already beginning to think that he might have been wiser to spend the afternoon cycling around Fondling-Under-Water delivering groceries for Miss Box.

‘Tell me about the vice-captain,’ Biffo said, nodding in Paddy’s direction.

‘Ah that’s Paddy Fields, the local carpenter,’ said Puffy. ‘He has his clothes specially built in Savile Row. He’s the only Russian aristocrat who’s ever played for us.’

‘He doesn’t sound very Russian,’ said Biffo. ‘And to be honest I’ve never thought of Paddy as being a Russian name.’ He thought a bit more. ‘How does he come to be working as a carpenter in Fondling-Under-Water?’

‘His great, great grandfather – I may not have the right number of greats in there – was apparently pretty bright. He insisted that everyone in the family had a trade so that when the revolution came they could all earn a living and wouldn’t starve. They all learned something different. Paddy’s grandfather was the carpenter. After the revolution he came over here and started a business. Paddy is a third generation carpenter.’

Just then the door to the visitor’s dressing room burst open and a small round fellow with a very pink face and half a dozen strands of ginger hair combed across a very pink scalp strode out as though looking for a fight. He was wearing a cream shirt and a pair of slightly off white and rather rumpled trousers. He had used a multi-coloured tie instead of a belt to hold up his trousers though the trousers looked so tight that it seemed unlikely that gravity would have been able to work its wonders even without the belt.

‘Right!’ he said, clapping his hands together and giving them a hard rub. ‘Let’s get the show on the road!’

‘Good afternoon,’ said Paddy, who had raised both eyebrows at his opponent’s choice of phrase. He introduced himself. ‘And this is our captain,’ he said, introducing Bill Stickers to the newcomer.

‘Daniel Potterton,’ said the small, round fellow. ‘Captain of the Wanderers Touring Team.’

The two captains shook hands with one another. And Paddy shook hands with Daniel.

‘Shall we go out and toss?’ asked Daniel.

‘After you!’ said Bill, opening one of the twin doors at the front of the pavilion and ushering his opponent out with a genteel wave of his hand.

‘I’m beginning to feel a little guilty about being here,’ said Biffo to Puffy, trying to prepare the ground for an early departure.

Puffy looked at him and raised an eyebrow. ‘What do you mean, ‘guilty’?’

‘I feel bad about leaving Miss Box,’ explained Biffo, wishing he was a better liar. ‘It’s only my second day on the job and she does seem to have an awful lot of deliveries to get through. Maybe I should go back and give her a hand.’

‘Oh, don’t you worry about her,’ said Puffy, reassuringly. ‘She’ll manage. If there’s anything urgent she’ll just pop it into her car and drive round when she closes this evening.’

‘She’s got a car?’ said Biffo, greatly surprised.

‘Of course!’ said Puffy, clearly surprised that Biffo was surprised.

‘Then why does she have everything delivered by bicycle?’ asked Biffo, puzzled.

‘Because that’s the way her father did things and the way she’s always done things, I suppose,’ said Puffy. ‘She’s very keen on tradition. Wonderful woman. Build and delicacy of a rhinoceros, jaw carved out of solid granite, and a moustache any youth would be proud to own. She regards being irritable and rude to the customers as an essential part of her job.’

‘Has she ever been married?’ Biffo asked.

‘Miss Box?’

‘Yes.’

‘No!’ laughed Puffy. ‘Cheesy reckons she did have a fling about thirty years ago with a touring fast bowler. His yorker broke her delivery boy’s shin bone and he felt so bad about it that he stayed on to help while the delivery boy’s leg mended. There was a rumour that the shop bicycle wasn’t the only thing he had his leg over.’

‘All the same,’ said Biffo. ‘I do feel as though I’m letting her down. . .’

‘Don’t be silly,’ said Puffy. ‘With our big match coming up it’s vital that you get your eye in today.’

‘OK,’ sighed Biffo. He paused, not entirely sure that he wanted to know the answer to the question he was about to ask. ‘What is the big match – and why is so important? I thought today’s match was important.’

‘Many, many years ago,’ began Puffy, putting an arm around Biffo’s shoulder, ‘a young lad called Cyril Player strode out onto the cricket pitch as a keen young member of the Fondling-Under-Water cricket team. He was the youngest player to get into the team, the youngest player to score 20 and the first to take 50 wickets in a season. He was, in short, a boy wonder.’

‘I rather vaguely think I may have heard of him,’ said Biffo, thinking hard. ‘Didn’t he become a professional?’

‘He did indeed,’ said Puffy. ‘He became - and still is - an extremely successful professional. He’s even played for England.’

‘I see,’ said Biffo. ‘Or at least I think I do.’ He frowned. ‘Actually,’ he admitted, ‘I don’t. Is he playing for our opponents today?’

‘Good heavens, no!’ replied Puffy. ‘Mr Player and a team of selected professionals will be here on Saturday. It’s a big match for us. The biggest most of us have ever played in. For one thing it’s the only chance most of us will ever get to play against professionals. It is also a chance for us to give Mr Player a poke in the eye. He’s not terribly popular around here. The general view is that he’s become rather too big for his size elevens in recent years.’

‘I see,’ said Biffo. ‘It’s a sort of grudge match.’

‘In a way it is,’ said Puffy. ‘But there is even more to it than that. In the sort of cricket we play each team only ever has one innings. We only ever play one day matches you see. They bat, we bat and that’s it. But this match is different.’

‘It’s going to last more than one day?’

‘Oh no! These guys are professionals. They’re only giving up a day of their time as a favour to Mr Player. It’s his benefit year and they’re all scratching his back so that in due course he’ll scratch their backs.’

‘You mean they are playing in his team - to help him raise money - so that he will play in their teams to help them raise money?’

‘You’ve got it.’ said Puffy. ‘So the match will all be over in the day. In the afternoon, actually. But - and this is the crucial factor - the Fondling-Under-Water team gets to bat twice!’

‘And the opposition doesn’t?’

‘Certainly not,’ said Puffy. ‘This was all agreed months ago. Since they’re professionals and we’re decidedly not it was thought necessary to give us some sort of advantage. To even up the odds a little.’

‘So you all bat twice and they just bat once?’

‘That’s it. For most of us it’s the first – and probably only – time we’ll get a second chance.’

Biffo looked around to check that no one was within earshot. ‘I wanted to ask you about Paddy,’ he said. ‘He sort of behaves a bit as though he’s the club captain doesn’t he?’

‘Oh well,’ said Puffy. ‘Interesting that you’ve noticed. That’s because he would be captain if it wasn’t for the fact that Bill wants to be captain and owns the cricket field. Bill is really much more interested in being called captain than in having to worry about field placings, batting orders and deciding who is going to bowl next. So it works out quite well. Bill gets to be captain and Paddy gets to boss everyone around.’

Just then the two captains, who had been attended and surrounded by several members of their respective teams while they tossed to see who would bat first, reappeared at the front of the pavilion. The visiting captain, Daniel Potterton, had a broad smile on his pink face. Puffy, followed by Biffo, stepped out through the pavilion door and stood on the step outside.

‘I take it you lost the toss again?’ said Puffy to Bill.

Bill nodded. ‘We lost,’ he agreed.

Puffy turned to Biffo. ‘When he wins the toss it’s always ‘I won’,’ he said, in a stage whisper. ‘But when he loses it’s always ‘We lost’.’

Paddy, the vice-captain, allowed the corners of his mouth to twitch a little. Biffo felt it likely that this was as much of a smile as the vice-captain could manage.

‘They’ve decided to bat,’ said Paddy.

‘Oh, good,’ said Puffy.

‘Why is that good?’ asked Biffo, in a whisper.

‘Because if they bat first then, with any luck, it will be some time before they remember about the damp patch down by the river,’ replied Puffy, after looking round to make sure that none of the opposing team were listening to him. ‘It’s much worse this year than it was last time they were here.’

‘Is that important?’ asked Biffo.

‘Crucial,’ said Puffy. ‘There isn’t any point in hitting a ball along the ground down that part of the field. It’ll just get stuck. But you can safely hit the ball in the air down there because any fielder who tries to catch it will probably get bogged down and be unable to run properly.’

‘Oh, right,’ said Biffo, nodding as though he understood the significance of all this, which to be perfectly honest he didn’t.

Around and behind them there was much clattering from the Fondling-Under-Water side, and much shuffling from the Wanderers cricketers (who were all wearing pumps or cricket shoes with studs rather than boots with long spikes) as the cricketers prepared themselves for battle.

One or two of the Fondling-Under-Water team, who were due to field, started to wander out onto the cricket field, throwing a cricket ball to one another in a desultory attempt at practice. Biffo was secretly rather relieved to notice that most of the players flinched and jumped out of the way when the ball travelled in their direction. The Fondling-Under-Water players did not take kindly to opponents who did a lot of practising before a match; it simply wasn’t regarded as cricket. Indeed, it was generally considered that there was a very narrow line between practising and cheating.

Most of the Wanderers team settled themselves down onto the benches at the front of the pavilion while their opening batsmen walked through the Short Room and into their dressing room to put on their batting pads in preparation for the first overs of the match.

‘Shouldn’t I be getting ready’ said Biffo to Puffy, as a very short, gnarled fellow walked past them wearing a rather battered straw panama hat and a white coat which reached down to his ankles. ‘Who’s that?’ Biffo asked, allowing this to supersede his previous question.

‘Who?’ asked Puffy, looking around.

‘The chap in the white coat,’ said Biffo, nodding to the gnarled fellow, who was now chatting to the visitors’ captain. ‘He looks like an ice cream salesmen.’

‘Oh him!’ said Puffy. ‘That’s Hamish Jones, the ‘Wanderers’ umpire.’

‘They brought their own umpire?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Puffy. ‘Each team supplies its own umpire.’

‘Really?’ said Biffo, genuinely surprised. ‘I never knew that.’ He looked down and pointed at his faded green corduroy trousers and his brown brogues. ‘You said you had some kit I could borrow,’ he said. ‘I can’t really go out there like this. . .’

‘Oh yes, of course,’ said Puffy. ‘I’m sorry. I’ll have a word with Paddy. He’ll know where it is.’

He disappeared down the steps to speak to the vice-captain. Moments later he returned. ‘Follow me,’ he said. ‘It’s in the dressing room.’

Puffy led and Biffo followed.

In the dressing room, which smelt of a strange mixture of oil of wintergreen, cheap aftershave, carbolic soap, disinfectant and a wide variety of less chemical and more personal odours, Puffy rummaged around among a collection of clothes hanging on a large peg on the back of the door. Within seconds there was a pile of trousers, jackets, shirts and other items, several feet thick on the floor.

‘Ah! Here it is!’ said Puffy, at last. He pulled a fairly short and grubby white coat off the peg and handed it to Biffo.

‘What’s this?’ asked Biffo, automatically accepting the coat.

‘Your coat!’ said Puffy.

‘My coat,’ said Biffo. ‘What do I want a white coat for?’

Puffy looked puzzled. ‘All umpires wear white coats,’ he said. He looked at the coat he had handed to Biffo. ‘Well some umpires wear slightly off white coats,’ he said, correcting himself ‘I could get it washed for the next match if you like.’

‘Umpires?’ exclaimed Biffo in horror. ‘You want me to umpire?’At first glance, and to the totally uninitiated, umpiring might seem to be a rather less demanding occupation than batting, bowling or fielding. But Biffo had immediately realised that umpiring a cricket match was likely to be fraught with danger and opportunities to annoy and upset all sorts of people.

‘Yes, of course,’ said Puffy. He paused, clearly a little puzzled by Biffo’s reaction. ‘What else did you think we wanted you to do?’

Biffo opened and shut his mouth several times. ‘I don’t know,’ he said at last. ‘Well, what I mean is that I thought. . .,’ he swallowed. ‘I didn’t realise you wanted me to umpire.’

Puffy stared at Biffo for a moment. ‘You didn’t think we wanted you to play, did you?’

‘Oh no, oh no, of course not!’ said Biffo.

‘Didn’t think you would,’ said Puffy, nodding sagely. ‘Why would we invite a complete stranger to play in the team, eh? Even for a relatively friendly match? Be pretty silly, wouldn’t it?’

‘Oh absolutely,’ agreed Biffo, nodding furiously. ‘Very silly.’

‘Do you want a hat?’ asked Puffy. ‘Franklin always wears a battered old panama.’ He rummaged around among the pile of clothes on the floor. ‘It must be here somewhere,’ he said.

‘Franklin?’ said Biffo.

‘Franklin is our regular umpire,’ Puffy reminded him.

‘Is this what you’re looking for?’ asked Biffo, removing an extremely tatty hat from one of the white coat pockets.

‘That’s it!’ said Puffy. ‘Put it on and let’s get out there. The rest of the blokes will be wondering where we’ve got to.’

Biffo put on Franklin Minton’s hat, which was at least two sizes too small, and followed Puffy out towards the centre of the cricket pitch. He couldn’t remember ever being so frightened in his whole life. He could not have been more nervous if there had been a scaffold awaiting him.

Chapter 36

‘It’s absolutely perfect!’ whispered Damien, even though there was no one within a hundred yards of where they were standing. ‘Nice piece of flat ground with a river running alongside. Just what we’re looking for. Plenty of space for our buildings.’ He pointed to the far corner of the field. And we can knock down that little white shed and put up a Family Leisure Centre.’

Are you sure you’ll be able to buy the land?’ asked Edwina. She moved a little closer and put her arm around him. She wasn’t normally a person who liked emotional or physical displays of affection (particularly in public) but she was, at that moment, very proud of Damien.

Damien turned and looked at her. ‘I know how to deal with these yokels!’ he sneered. His lip curled and if he had had a moustache he would have undoubtedly given it a twirl.

‘Oh, Damien!’ said Edwina, giving his arm a squeeze. ‘You are wonderful.’

In the distance a group of men clad in white trooped out of the pavilion.

‘Which one do you think is Stickers?’ asked Damien.

‘We’ll ask,’ said Edwina.

‘Good idea!’ said Damien.

Chapter 37

Biffo afterwards swore that he could not remember how he got from the pavilion to the cricket square in the middle of the Fondling-Under-Water cricket ground. To say that he felt dazed and confused at the discovery that he was to act as an umpire would be as much of an understatement as saying that Napoleon didn’t feel full of the joys of spring after his bad day at Waterloo.

Biffo’s memory of that afternoon’s events restarted when he was met in the middle by the other umpire - the small, gnarled fellow with the ankle-length white coat who had arrived with the touring team.

‘Mr Jones,’ said the small gnarled fellow. ‘Mr Hamish Jones.’ He looked up at Biffo as though expecting him to make some comment and winked.

‘Pleased to meet you,’ said Biffo, holding out his right hand. He wasn’t sure whether or not he should wink back.

The small gnarled fellow kept both his hands in his pockets and stuck out a bony chin. ‘My father was Welsh and my mother was Scottish,’ he said defiantly. He winked again.

‘I see,’ said Biffo. He wondered if winking was perhaps a sort of umpire’s secret code - like a Freemason’s handshake. And so he winked too. It was a rather half-hearted wink, it is true. But it was undeniably a wink.

‘Which end do you want?’ the gnarled fellow asked. He seemed somehow disappointed, as though he had expected Biffo to make more of a comment about his mixed ancestry. ‘I’ll take this end.’ he added without waiting for Biffo to reply. He winked again.

‘Er, well, I’ll take the other end,’ said Biffo, winking.

‘Right,’ said Mr Jones. Biffo had thought he might be pleased that they had been able to come to an amicable agreement but instead he seemed a little irritated. He winked again.

‘Right,’ said Biffo, winking goodbye and starting to walk down the pitch and smiling and waving nervously to Puffy.

‘OK?’ asked Puffy, walking towards the new FondlingUnder-Water umpire. ‘Is everything all right?’

‘Not really,’ admitted Biffo, quietly. He looked around to make sure that no one was close enough to overhear. ‘What, exactly, am I supposed to do?’

‘Simple. If any of our bowlers appeals you give the batsman out,’ explained Puffy. ‘If any of their bowlers appeals you give the batsman not out - unless the stumps are down and it’s too late to call ‘no ball’. Try to remember to call ‘no ball’ at least once an over when they’re bowling.’

Biffo frowned. ‘Is that entirely fair?’ he asked.

‘No, but it’s what their umpire will do,’ replied Puffy. ‘That’s why each side has its own umpire.’

‘Oh,’ said Biffo. ‘And why does their umpire keep winking at me? Is it some sort of secret code?’

‘Don’t worry about him!’ said Puffy. ‘It’s just a twitch. He winks at everybody. When he first came down here a few years ago Itchy winked back at him every time he winked. Itchy thought he was just being friendly but it made Mr Jones quite furious. He thought Itchy was taking the mickey.’

Biffo swallowed hard and hoped that he hadn’t annoyed Mr Jones too much. He thought a subtle change of subject might be sensible. ‘It’s a long time since I played cricket,’ he whispered, without exaggeration. ‘I’m worried that I may be a little rusty about one or two things.’

‘Like what?’ asked Puffy.

‘Well, for a start, exactly how many balls are there in an over?’ asked Biffo, teasing him.

Puffy, clearly rather startled by this confession of ignorance, looked around to make sure that no one was listening to this heresy. ‘There are six balls in an over,’ he whispered. ‘And you do this,’ he held up a finger in front of his nose, ‘when you want to give a batsman out.’

Meanwhile, the Fondling-Under-Water cricketers were arguing over the positions they had been allocated by the vice-captain.

‘Why can’t I go in the slips?’ demanded a sensitive looking fellow with collar length hair and a hooked nose.

‘Because the captain wants you at third man,’ replied Paddy, in his very best ‘I-don’t-even-want-to-talk-about-this’ voice. ‘Since you’re our most junior player you get to field in the wet patch.’

‘But it’s muddy down there,’ protested the sensitive looking fellow who, despite his apparent youth, was none other than the local vicar, the Reverend Hubert Counter. ‘My wife will complain if I go home with dirty trousers.’

‘Can’t I be in the gully today?’ asked Cheesy. ‘I’m fed up of fielding at long off’

‘But you always field at long off,’ said the vicar.

‘That’s why I want to be at gully,’ replied Cheesy, not unreasonably. ‘I never asked to field at long off.’

‘But you’re a specialist in that position,’ protested Paddy.

‘A long off specialist?’ said Cheesy. ‘Whoever heard of anyone being a specialist long off fielder?’

‘I’m going home if I have to field at third man again,’ announced the vicar firmly. He had folded his arms across his chest and was holding his head back, making it perfectly clear to all and sundry that he had no intention of moving. Since his bowling was generally considered vital to the team’s hopes of success his threat could not be ignored.

Biffo, who had now arrived at the other end of the pitch, put the panama hat he was carrying onto his head and thrust his hands into the pockets of his white coat; a creased and grubby garment which, Biffo surmised quite accurately, had not been washed or pressed for several seasons. He found a spare cricket ball and half a dozen small, round pebbles in one of the coat pockets and, puzzled, started to flick the pebbles into the air to get rid of them.

Chapter 38

‘So, you’re the new umpire!’ said a voice Biffo did not recognise. He looked round and down at a small, wizened individual wearing a massive pair of yellow pads and a huge pair of ageing, red-leather wicket-keeping gloves.

Biffo agreed that he was the new umpire. ‘You must be the Fondling-Under-Water wicket keeper!’ he said. Justin had been pointed out to him in the bar at The Gravedigger’s Rest.

‘You’re bright, I’ll give you that,’ said the wizened wicket keeper. He held out a gloved hand. ‘Justin Wilson,’ he said. Biffo shook hands with the glove. The leather was cracked in several places.

‘I’ve been keeping wicket for sixty six years,’ said the wizened wicket keeper. ‘I’ve got arthritis, diabetes and epilepsy and I’ve had two heart attacks. I’ve got cataracts in both my eyes, a spot on my lung and I’m allergic to seven different antibiotics.’

‘Ah!’ said Biffo.

‘But the doctor says I’ve got athlete’s feet,’ said the wicket keeper proudly. ‘I’ve always looked after them you see.’ He stopped and thought for a moment. ‘Though maybe I was born with them. What do you think? Do you think you’re either born with athlete’s feet or you’re not?’

‘I see you’ve met Justin,’ interrupted Puffy. ‘Quite a character isn’t he?

Biffo nodded in agreement.

‘He’s really three fielders in one,’ continued Puffy. ‘Two short legs and he keeps wicket too!’

Justin pulled a face.

‘His heart condition means that we have to appeal very quietly,’ said Puffy. ‘He can’t cope with too much excitement. When Len appeals he has to put cotton wool in his ears.’

Biffo fastened the white coat. It was difficult to persuade the buttons to connect with their respective button holes. He had to breathe in to bring the two sides of the coat together. Fastening the buttons was such a struggle that in the end he only managed to fasten three of them. It was clear to Biffo that he was considerably larger than Franklin Minton. The hat, now sitting crumpled in his pocket, had sat balanced on the top of his head like a thimble on an apple. And the white coat felt uncomfortably tight.

‘Justin was offered your job when Franklin had his accident,’ said Puffy.

‘Really?’ said Biffo. He turned to Justin. ‘Why did you turn it down?’

‘I wanted something with better promotion prospects,’ said Justin. He drew himself up to his full height. ‘I want a career not a job,’ he said indignantly.

‘Justin hasn’t actually started work yet,’ said Puffy. ‘He’s still hunting for the right position.’

There was a loud and weary-sounding sigh from a fielder somewhere nearby. ‘I’ll field at third man,’ said Len, the source of the sigh. Len, a nineteen stone tractor driver, was a big man in every direction. ‘But only if I can move up a place in the batting order. I don’t see why I should always bat at number eleven.’

‘Thanks Len,’ said Paddy, rather wearily. ‘You can bat at number ten. Vicar you field at third slip. Happy?’

‘Yes,’ said the vicar, who had brightened up considerably. ‘I suppose so.’

‘What do you mean ‘I suppose so’?’ demanded Paddy. ‘I thought you wanted to field at slip.’

‘I do,’ said the vicar. ‘But why do I have to be third slip. Why can’t I be first slip or even second slip.’

‘What difference does it make?’ asked Paddy.

‘It makes a lot of difference,’ said the vicar. ‘First slip sounds a lot more important than third slip. It’s like in an orchestra. First violin is much more important than third violin.’

‘It’s nothing like it is in an orchestra!’ insisted Paddy.

‘But my wife will want to know why I was third slip and not first slip,’ said the vicar.

Paddy sighed. ‘OK vicar,’ he said. ‘You field at first slip.’

‘Thank you, skipper,’ said the vicar, raising his right index finger and touching his forehead.

‘If you’re letting the vicar field at first slip then it’s only fair that you let me field at gully,’ said Cheesy.

‘Don’t you think you are a bit, well, sort of slow to field at gully?’ asked Paddy.

‘Who says I’m slow!’ demanded Cheesy. ‘What about that catch I took when we played Little Chigford?’

‘That was in 1956,’ Paddy pointed out, rather bluntly. He seemed to be running out of patience.

‘I had to run twenty yards round the boundary,’ said Cheesy. ‘It was a magnificent catch. Everyone said so. And it wasn’t 1956.’

‘You were a lot younger then,’ said Paddy. ‘When was it if it wasn’t 1956?’

‘It was 1954,’ said Cheesy.

‘There you are,’ said Paddy. ‘It was a long time ago. You were a lot younger and faster then.’

‘Exactly!’ said Cheesy, wagging a finger at Paddy. ‘It’s about time one of the younger blokes fielded at long off. You need someone agile and fast at long off. What you need at gully is someone with a safe pair of hands.’

Paddy, who had seemed to be coping remarkably well, put his head in his hands and groaned. After a moment or two he removed his hands and looked around. ‘Who’ll field at long off?’ he shouted.

There was no reply.

Paddy sighed. ‘OK,’ he said, wearily. ‘We won’t have a long off.’

‘But we always have a long off,’ protested Cheesy.

‘Well we won’t have a long off this time,’ said Paddy.

‘But long off is a very important position,’ said Cheesy.

‘I know it is,’ said Paddy.

‘Someone ought to field there,’ said Cheesy.

‘But no one wants to field there,’ protested Paddy.

‘You’re the captain,’ said Cheesy. ‘Why don’t you just tell someone to field there.’

Paddy said nothing but just stared at Cheesy.

Cheesy sighed. ‘If no one else will field there then I’ll field there,’ he said. ‘Someone’s got to field at long off,’ he muttered as he walked away. ‘The trouble with this team is that no one realises just how important a position long off really is.’

Chapter 39

While the members of the Fondling-Under-Water fielding side were arguing about who was going to field exactly where, a far more significant drama was taking place near to the boundary.

Edwina Brimstone and Damien Washbrook, standing in the narrow strip of land between the boundary rope and the boundary hedge, had identified the owner of the Fondling-Under-Water cricket pitch and had called him over to where they were standing. Edwina had wanted to totter onto the pitch to talk to him but had been dissuaded from this course of action by Damien who remembered enough from his cricket playing days at school to know that women wearing high heeled shoes are not, generally speaking, welcomed onto the pitch. (If he had spoken to the Fondling-Under-Water groundsman he would have discovered, possibly to his surprise, that Edwina – and indeed, any other woman – would have been welcomed onto certain parts of the outfield since her high-heeled shoes would have helped to provide much needed drainage holes.)

‘Lovely day,’ said Damien, smiling. He knew that people who lived in the country always loved talking about their weather. Just as some men like to think of themselves as racing drivers or professional golfers so Damien liked to think of himself as a wheeler dealer. He had read synopses of several American bestselling textbooks on sales techniques and knew that building a relationship with the customer was a significant first step in the selling process. Damien wasn’t actually selling anything, of course, but he felt that trying to buy a cricket field from a man who doesn’t necessarily want to sell it might require some of the skills of a salesman.

‘It will be if it doesn’t rain,’ said Bill, who had spent several years of his life talking about the weather when working as a hairdresser. It was no longer one of his favourite topics of conversation. He had learned that whatever you said about it, and whatever you wanted it to do, weather would come and go as it pleased.

‘What’s it going to do, then?’ asked Damien, looking up at the sky, quizzically.

‘Dunno,’ said Bill, who didn’t much care and wondered why these two over-dressed strangers had been so keen to call him over.

‘I’m told that you’re the owner of this piece of land,’ said Damien.

‘The cricket ground?’

‘That’s right.’

‘It’s a very nice field,’ said Edwina, conscious of the fact that her lover was having a little trouble getting the negotiations under way. ‘Close to the river.’

Damien tried out several possible opening gambits in his mind

‘Oh it is that,’ said Bill. ‘A very nice field.’ He paused. ‘Close to the river,’ he agreed.

‘Do you think the authorities would ever allow building on it?’ asked Edwina ‘It would make a lovely spot for a few houses don’t you think?’

‘It already has planning permission,’ said Bill. ‘It had planning permission when I bought it.’

Damien felt his heart beating faster. ‘I don’t suppose you’ve thought about selling it?’ he said, rather tentatively.

‘How much do you want to pay for it?’ demanded Bill.

This rather surprised Damien who was mentally still quite a long way from this crucial point in the negotiations. He had expected a good deal more tiptoeing around before they got down to the nitty gritty.

‘Er. . .,’ he said. ‘Well, er. . .,’

‘Might sell it for the right price,’ said Bill who realised that he might have found a punter to help him solve his cash flow problem.

‘Well, I might buy it at the right price,’ said Damien. He felt rather pleased with this retort which, it seemed to him, kept the negotiations moving along at quite a pace. ‘It’s a nice field,’ he added. ‘A very nice field.’ He smiled and showed a lot of teeth in the way that he’d seen politicians smile when trying to win votes. ‘I want to start a holiday theme park,’ he said. ‘It’ll be a real asset to the village.’ He warmed to his theme. ‘It’ll bring in lots of visitors.’ He paused. ‘All very classy,’ he added, reassuringly. ‘Nothing tacky, you understand.’

‘Ah!’ said Bill, nodding. He didn’t want to hear any more of this. He loved the village of Fondling-Under-Water and he couldn’t bear to think of this terrible couple spoiling it with regiments of holidaymakers. But, on the other hand, he and his dear lady wife were penniless and facing an extremely uncertain future. All in all it was, he felt, a tricky situation.

‘We’ll sell holiday rights in our accommodation so that the people who come here will have a vested interest in maintaining the quality of their environment,’ said Damien.

‘Holiday rights?’ said Bill. ‘What’s that?’

‘Er, it’s well, er a sort of timeshare arrangement,’ said Damien, rather guiltily.

‘Ah!’ said Bill. ‘Timeshare.’

‘Timeshare has had a bad press in recent years,’ said Damien defensively. ‘And it is true that there have been some unreliable operators. But we’re right at the top end of the market.’

‘Of course,’ agreed Bill.

‘So, what do you think?’ asked Damien.

‘I think it depends on what sort of money you’re offering,’ said Bill.

Damien rubbed his hands down the side of his trousers. He suddenly felt very nervous. ‘Can I think about that?’ he asked. He desperately wanted to speak to his brother.

‘Look,’ said Bill, ‘the match is about to start. Why don’t you have a think about it and then we’ll have a word during the tea interval.’

‘Fine!’ agreed Damien. ‘Splendid idea.’

‘But let’s just keep this between the three of us,’ said Bill, looking around belatedly to make sure that there was no one close enough to hear.

‘Of course!’ nodded Damien. ‘Absolutely!’

‘You be here during the tea interval,’ said Bill. ‘I’ll potter over and we’ll have a chat.’

‘Right!’ agreed Damien. ‘Er, when is the tea interval?’

‘Couple of hours or so,’ said Bill. ‘You’ll know it’s the tea interval because everyone will disappear for an hour or so.’

‘Hour or so?’ said Damien. He tried to remember back to his school days. He didn’t remember tea intervals taking up so much time.

‘We take our teas seriously round here,’ said Bill, hurrying back towards the centre of the cricket field where he was both relieved and surprised to see that play had still not begun.

Chapter 40

‘Cricket,’ thought Biffo, looking around the Fondling-Under-Water cricket ground from his unique vantage point behind the stumps at the bowler’s end of the wicket, ‘is a very peaceful game. I think I could get to like this.’

On his right Biffo could see the back of The Gravedigger’s Rest. Straight ahead, was the Fondling-Under-Water parish church, a magnificent piece of ancient English architecture.

On Biffo’s left there was nothing much to see but the fields, hedgerows and rolling hills of the local countryside, studded with occasional farms and cottages and criss-crossed with a network of tiny lanes. And behind him, temporarily out of view, somewhere beyond a pasture, a small wood and half dozen cottages lay Miss Box’s village shop.

Biffo stood drinking in the view; feeling more rested and relaxed than he could remember feeling for years. And then he felt someone tugging on his sleeve. He turned his head and saw Cheesy Stilton standing beside him. He looked like a boy waiting to ask the teacher if he can be excused to go the lavatory.

‘Can we get on with the game?’ asked Cheesy

‘Pardon?’ said Biffo, frowning.

‘I don’t like to be any trouble,’ said Cheesy apologetically. ‘But do you think I could start now?’

Biffo stared at him. ‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Can I begin bowling now?’ asked Cheesy nervously. He didn’t want to annoy an umpire; especially an umpire he didn’t know very well; particularly the umpire whom he had reason to believe might treat his more marginal appeals rather favourably.

‘Of course you can,’ said Biffo. He looked around and seemed surprised to see that half a dozen of the Fondling-Under-Water players had gathered round.

‘You’re supposed to say ‘play’,’ Cheesy explained.

‘Am I?’

‘Yes. It means the over can start.’

‘Oh,’ said Biffo. ‘OK. Play.’

Chapter 41

‘So, how much do you think we should offer?’ asked Damien.

‘I thought Biffo was supposed to be playing cricket!’ said Edwina. ‘What’s he doing standing there in that grubby white coat?

‘He seems to be one of the umpires,’ said Damien. ‘Maybe he’ll play later on.’

‘Isn’t an umpire like a referee?’ asked Edwina.

‘Sort of’

‘How can he be an umpire and a player? He could end up giving himself out offside or having to disallow a goal he’d just scored.’

‘They don’t have goals in cricket, dear.’

‘Don’t nit-pick. Whatever. You know what I mean. And don’t be patronising.’

‘I wasn’t being patronising!’

‘Yes you were. You called me ‘dear’.’

‘I was just being affectionate.’

‘Well, I don’t like it.’

‘Sorry.’

For a few minutes the two of them stood just beyond the boundary’s edge watching the cricket match. Since neither of them knew any of the players, one of them knew absolutely nothing about the game and the other had absolutely no interest in any sort of sport they didn’t have a great deal of fun. It wasn’t one of those little moments in life that captures the heart and hangs around to warm the spirit in later years.

‘There isn’t even anywhere to sit,’ complained Edwina.

‘There are some seats over there,’ said Damien.

‘Where?’

‘By the pavilion.’

‘I’m not going over there.’

‘Why not?’

‘We might have to talk to those people. Some of them look very common.’

‘Oh,’ said Damien. ‘Well, there is a gate just over there. We could sit on that.’

‘A gate? You expect me to sit on a gate?’

‘You could sort of lean against it. . .’

‘I’m not sitting or leaning on or against a gate.’

‘No,’ said Damien. ‘Of course not.’

There was another long silence during which quite a lot of exciting things happened on the pitch.

‘So, how much do you think we should offer?’

‘For the land?’

‘How many acres are there?’

Damien looked around the field. ‘Five or six I would guess.’

‘How much does land around here fetch these days?’

‘I don’t know.’ Damien looked around and thought for a moment. ‘I think farm land usually goes for around two thousand pounds an acre at the moment.’

‘So offer him ten thousand. He’ll probably fall at your feet drooling but it’ll be quick and painless.’

‘I don’t think he will,’ said Damien. ‘The land already has planning permission. And I think I might have made a bit of a mistake when we talked to him earlier on.’

Edwina looked at him sharply. ‘Why? What sort of mistake?’

‘I told him what I was planning to do with the land.’

‘So?’

‘So, he knows I’m going to take advantage of the planning permission and to build on the land. That changes the value.’

‘So you’ll have to offer him a bit more.’

‘That’s the problem. How much more.’

‘How much can you afford?’

‘I’m not sure. We’ve got a lot of money tied up in those prefabricated buildings.’

Edwina looked at Damien for a long moment. ‘Are you sure you know what you’re doing?’

‘Maybe we can fix up some sort of contract that gives us the right to pay him in instalments. That way we won’t have to find the money in advance.’

‘Can you do that? Will he agree to it?’

‘I’ll put a delayed payment clause into the contract as an option and hide it on page 17,’ said Damien with a snigger. ‘He won’t even know it’s there until he’s signed and we own the land.’

‘What sort of delay?’

‘Ten. Maybe twenty years.’

Edwina laughed and reached out and held Damien’s arm.

‘You’re a tricky devil, aren’t you?’

Damien looked down at her uplifted face and smiled, rather pleased with himself

‘If you do that then it doesn’t really matter what you offer him, does it?’

Damien thought about this for a moment. ‘No,’ he agreed. ‘It doesn’t really, does it?’ He bent his head to kiss her but she turned her head so that his lips brushed her cheek.

‘Not on the lips,’ she said, sharply. ‘You’ll mess up my lipstick.’

Chapter 42

‘We played badly,’ muttered Puffy, as he and Biffo walked side by side off the pitch.

‘But they were all out for 95 runs!’ Biffo pointed out. ‘That’s not bad, surely?’

‘They played pretty badly too,’ admitted Puffy.

When the fielding side, the last two batsmen and the two umpires reached the pavilion they found that Fondling-Under-Water’s loyal band of tea makers had been hard at work.

The sandwiches, half of which were made with white bread and half with brown bread, were filled with slices of cheddar cheese and home-made chutney, sliced tomatoes and salad, egg and cress or sliced ham. Two large pork pies had been laid out on mismatched dinner plates (each pie neatly chopped into a dozen equally sized pieces) and four dozen well-filled sausage rolls lay neatly in lines on two large baking trays.

For those with a sweet tooth there was a large chocolate cake, two sponge cakes (one filled with strawberry jam and the other filled with plum jam and cream), a couple of dozen chocolate eclairs, four dozen jam tarts and a large mound of scones, filled with jam and clotted cream. Everything on the table was home-made and packed with calories and looked quite delicious. Mrs Betty Cleavidge, a gloriously buxom woman who had been guardian of the cricket club teas for several decades, was always careful to make sure that her team’s teas were unbeatable.

‘Streuth!’ said Biffo, impressed and amazed by the mountain of food that had been prepared. ‘Is all this for us?’

‘Making the teas for a local cricket club is a big responsibility,’ said Puffy.

Chapter 43

Bill Stickers normally enjoyed a cricket tea just as much as any other player. He was particularly partial to Mrs Betty Cleavidge’s chutney and was so keen on cream horns that he had once eaten five during a single tea interval. (He had, not surprisingly, been unable to take the field after tea on that occasion.)

But, on this occasion, while the rest of the players were in the pavilion doing damage to the pile of sandwiches and cakes that had been prepared for them, Bill walked briskly across the cricket field to the spot where Edwina and Damien were standing. Not normally a man for whom ‘brisk’ could safely be used to describe anything he did, Bill was in a hurry because he wanted to get back to the pavilion before all the food disappeared.

‘Enjoying the match?’ he asked, as he approached Edwina and Damien. He couldn’t remember their names and wasn’t even sure he had ever known them. He didn’t know a great deal about business negotiations (not ever having taken part in any it would perhaps be more accurate to say that he knew absolutely nothing about business negotiations) but he seemed to remember having read somewhere that good negotiators always try to make the opposition feel comfortable and relaxed before getting down to the nitty gritty.

‘It’s wonderful!’ said Edwina, smiling sweetly.

‘Terrific stuff,’ agreed Damien. ‘Riveting.’

‘Well, do you want to make an offer?’ asked Bill. Having made the opposition feel as comfortable and as relaxed as he intended to make them feel, and having got the niceties out of the way, he wanted to get down to business as quickly as possible. He had spotted some chocolate eclairs among the food that had been prepared and he liked chocolate eclairs almost as much as he liked cream horns.

‘I think so,’ drawled Damien, slowly. ‘Without prejudice, of course. And notwithstanding any clauses which may be aforementioned or discussed hereinafter.’ He stretched each word almost to breaking point and managed to inject a considerable amount of doubt into these words. He had decided to play ‘Mr Cool’ in order to try and get the land as cheaply as possible.

‘Jolly good,’ said Bill. He stood and waited.

‘You have to understand that I would be taking a considerable risk,’ said Damien.

‘How much?’ asked Bill. ·

‘Ten thousand,’ said Damien. ‘For the whole field, of course.’

‘Bye!’ said Bill, turning round and heading back towards the pavilion. He may have been inexperienced but he wasn’t stupid. ‘He’s going!’ hissed Edwina, as Bill marched back towards the pavilion. ‘You’ll lose it.’

‘That’s just my opening offer, of course,’ Damien called after the disappearing land owner.

Bill looked behind him but didn’t stop walking. ‘What’s your best offer?’ he called.

‘Twenty five!’ called Damien.

Bill just kept walking. The cricket field was the only thing he had left. He didn’t really want to sell it. If he sold it then he would undoubtedly lose the post of club cricket captain. And he liked being captain. He knew that he wasn’t any good as a captain and he was under no illusions about his organisational skills (he had once overheard Cheesy say: ‘our captain couldn’t organise a prayer meeting in a nunnery’) but none of that mattered because he had Paddy to deal with the complicated stuff like field placings. Bill had practised coin tossing for hours and that was an aspect of the captaincy which he believed he could master. He liked being president and chairman too. If he sold the ground he wanted every penny he could get for it.

‘Fifty!’ called Damien, now walking swiftly after Bill. ‘I’ll pay fifty.’

Still Bill kept walking.

Damien broke into a jog. Although he looked fit he wasn’t a man who was accustomed to real physical exercise. ‘What do you want?’ he asked when he caught up with Bill.

‘A hundred,’ said Bill, without hesitation. ‘A hundred thousand.’

‘What!’ said Damien. ‘That’s absurd.’

‘It’s a fair price,’ said Bill, remembering what the banker had told him.

‘Ninety?’ offered Damien, unable to conceal the desperation in his voice.

‘A hundred,’ said Bill, who hadn’t stopped walking, or even slowed down.

‘OK!’ said Damien. ‘OK! I’ll pay you a hundred thousand.’

‘Great!’ said Bill, stopping walking for a moment and finding himself unable to prevent a big smile spreading across his face. He held out his hand.

Eventually Damien realised that Bill wanted to shake his hand. Assuming either that this was some strange rural ritual or that Bill wanted to find out if he was a Freemason, he put out his hand (giving the sign) and the two men shook. Bill didn’t do anything funny with his fingers and so Damien rightly assumed that he wasn’t a Freemason.

‘I’ll bring down some papers for you to sign in the next day or so,’ said Damien. ‘Where can I find you?’

Bill gave his address and telephone number and Damien wrote the information down in a small pocket diary.

‘Splendid!’ said Bill, who wanted to jump and down but felt that it was probably not the thing to do. He hurried back to the pavilion where he celebrated (very privately) with three chocolate eclairs and two glasses of orange squash.

Damien, hurried back in the opposite direction where he was quickly reunited with Biffo’s wife and his client.

‘What happened?’ demanded Edwina.

‘I got it!’ said Damien, as excited as a schoolboy with a new bicycle. ‘I did the deal!’

‘Fantastic! said Edwina, who immediately had visions of their having to move to Monaco to minimise their tax problems. ‘Congratulations!’

They embraced, but did this cautiously so that Edwina’s make-up would not be disturbed.

‘What did you get it for?’ asked Edwina.

‘I beg your pardon?’ said Damien, who as a young lawyer had been taught to pretend he hadn’t heard the question if he wanted time to think before giving an answer.

‘How much do you have to pay for the land?’

‘Oh, I got it for a hundred!’ said Damien brightly, who, being a lawyer, was devious. He wanted to give the impression that he was delighted with the price he’d agreed to pay.

‘Oh.’ said Edwina, rather disappointed. She had had higher hopes for Damien’s negotiating skills.

‘But don’t worry,’ added Damien quickly. ‘Just because I’ve said I’ll pay that much it doesn’t mean that I’ll actually have to hand over that much money.’

Edwina was greatly reassured by this.

Chapter 44

‘Ready then?’

Biffo turned round and saw the other umpire standing behind him.

‘Time to get back out there,’ said the visiting umpire. He had cake crumbs around his mouth and several stains down the front of his white coat. He lifted his left arm and made a great show of displaying his watch. ‘Tea interval’s over!’ he explained. He rubbed his hands together, though Biffo wasn’t sure whether this was because he was looking forward to the second half of the match or because his hands were cold.

‘Right!’ agreed Biffo, looking around for somewhere to put his plate. He balanced it, rather precariously, on top of a pile of crockery sitting right on the very edge of the large table which dominated the centre of the Short Room.

‘Ready?’ enquired the visiting umpire.

‘Ready!’ agreed Biffo.

The two men left the pavilion and headed for the wicket. They were half way there when there was a loud crash. The pile of crockery to which Biffo’s plate had been the ceramic equivalent of the final straw had finally decided that it had no choice but to obey the law of gravity. Several dozen cups, plates and saucers had shattered on the Short Room floor.

For a moment or two there was silence in the pavilion. Those who were standing closest to the table shuffled cautiously away from the wreckage and universally adopted looks of innocence, surprise and horror.

‘Who did that?’ demanded Mrs Betty Cleavidge, emerging from the kitchen. She took two steps forward and then stood, her hands on her hips, and a scowl on her face, staring at the wreckage around her feet.

‘It wasn’t me!’ said Len, quickly.

‘Nor me!’ said Cheesy.

These were followed by many other protestations of innocence.

‘Never mind,’ said a brave but foolish member of the visiting side. The speaker was an innocent youth who did not know Mrs Cleavidge and was not aware of the danger of antagonising such a formidable woman. ‘It’ll save you a lot of washing up.’

Upon hearing this bold attempt at what the visiting cricketer would have probably described as a ‘joke’ the FondlingUnder-Water cricketers swarmed towards the door, left the pavilion en-masse and were well on the way to the pitch before they realised that it was the visitors’ turn to field and their turn to bat.

They turned round and retreated to the pavilion just in time to see the foolish visitor disappearing into the distance with an unhappy Mrs Cleavidge, dish mop aloft, in hot pursuit.

For Bill Stickers, club captain and property dealer manque, the attraction of chocolate eclairs trumped the threat posed by Mrs Betty Cleavidge. He had not budged and welcomed his team back into the pavilion by holding out a large plate of creamfilled scones.

Mrs Cleavidge chased the visiting jester for a hundred yards and returned to the pavilion wheezing and looking pale. She immediately had one of her funny turns and had to rest in a deck chair behind the pavilion. She sat warming her hands (they were always cold because she had terrible circulation, and usually red and chapped because they spent more time in washing up water than out of it) around a nice cup of tea. This was for her a strange treat for although she made gallons of tea every weekend she rarely ever had time to drink any of the stuff.

Meanwhile, the visiting side had distributed themselves around the ground in what they felt could appropriately be described as fielding positions.

Daniel Potterton was an enthusiastic captain, whose eagerness could never be faulted but, like Bill Stickers, he would have never claimed that he was a master tactician.

He had no difficulty in working out where fielders should stand when he was watching other people play cricket. When seated high in the stands at a Test Match ground he never felt shy about offering his advice to the England captain. But somehow everything seemed different when he was standing on the mown grass of a cricket ground. He never seemed to have enough fielders to fill all the positions which he felt needed filling.

He had discovered, through bitter experience, that although his bowlers always wanted four slips, two gulleys, a leg slip, a forward short leg and a silly mid-on they were not always able to bowl in such a way as to take full advantage of such an aggressive field setting. It was, therefore, his custom, based on a good deal of experience, to allow the fielders to position themselves around the bat in a fairly large and well spread out circle.

On this occasion, however, there was such a large and noticeable gap in the field that even Daniel could see that the Fondling-Under-Water batsmen might notice and take advantage of the space.

Daniel knew, of course, that very few batsmen in village cricket are good enough to deliberately hit the ball into gaps between the fielders but his mathematical skills were well enough developed for him to realise that when a quarter of the ground is unpatrolled there is a reasonable chance that one shot in four will lead to an increase in the batting side’s total.

‘There’s a big gap down there!’ shouted Daniel, who was standing in what could perhaps best be described as a mid-wicket position. He waved and pointed to the gap.

The rest of his side pretended not to hear him. The secret of the Fondling-Under-Water damp patch was not, it appeared, quite such a secret as the Fondling-Under-Water players believed. Three of the visiting players examined the sky above as though looking for enemy aircraft, three scrutinised their fingernails as though they had never noticed them before and five aspiring botanists bent down and carefully studied the grass at their feet.

‘There’s a big gap!’ Daniel shouted again.

The wicket keeper, who since he was wearing a pair of thick wicket keeping gloves had been denied the opportunity to examine his fingernails and had chosen the looking down at the grass option rather than the looking up into the sky option because looking upwards always made him feel dizzy, raised his eyes, looked across at his captain and then looked around, as though searching for this alleged gap.

‘Where?’ he demanded, at last.

‘Over there!’ said Daniel, pointing to the gap.

‘Oh yes!’ said the wicket keeper, apparently seeing the gap for the first time.

‘Someone should fill it!’ shouted Daniel.

The other nine members of his team continued to study sky, grass or fingernails, depending upon whim and personal preference.

‘I think you’ll have to go down there yourself, skipper,’ said the wicket keeper.

‘Why won’t anyone field there?’ demanded Daniel.

Jack Hobbs, one of the Fondling-Under-Water opening batsmen, turned to Biffo. ‘It’s going to get dark soon,’ he muttered.

Jack was standing at the non-striker’s end, next to Biffo, since it was his partner’s turn to take the first ball. Jack’s real name was Cedric and he worked as a farm labourer. For twenty seven years he had opened the Fondling-Under-Water batting together with a retired blacksmith known as Herbert Sutcliffe. Herbert, whose real Christian name was Simon, and whose surname was Wrigglesworth had been given his nickname and his position in the Fondling-Under-Water side by Donald Box, founder and proprietor of the village shop and father of Delphinium Box. Mr Box, who had captained the side for twenty years, had been tickled pink by the prospect of captaining a batting side opened by Hobbs and Sutcliffe, in his view probably the best known and most successful opening partnership the England cricket team had ever had.

‘Mr Ruggles!’ called Daniel, addressing the nearest fielder.

Newton Ruggles abandoned his careful study of his fingernails and looked up.

‘Would you be kind enough to field in that gap over there, please?’

‘Which gap?’

Daniel pointed to the gap. ‘That gap!’

‘Oh that gap,’ said Mr Ruggles, as though he had not noticed the gap before. ‘That’s what we call ‘third man’ skipper.’

‘Well, whatever it’s called there isn’t anyone there.’

‘It’s too muddy.’ said Mr Ruggles, shaking his head. ‘I’m not fielding down there. My wife will only wash my cricket trousers every four games.’

Daniel looked around the rest of the field, desperately trying to catch someone’s eye. But looking round doesn’t help much when eyes don’t want to be caught.

Daniel sighed. It was a very loud and very tired sigh. ‘I suppose I’ll have to go down there myself,’ he said, standing with hands on hips and looking around and waiting for someone to contradict him. But no one contradicted him.

‘It looks like you’ll have to go down there yourself,’ said Hamish Jones, the Wanderers’ umpire.

Grunting, scowling, shaking his head and generally looking very unhappy Daniel headed off for the damp patch.

‘He looks a bit disgruntled,’ said Biffo to Jack Hobbs.

‘Funny word that,’ said Jack.

Biffo looked at him, puzzled. ‘Why? What’s funny about it?’

‘Disgruntled,’ said Jack.

‘Why?’ asked Biffo, frowning. ‘Why is it funny?’

‘Disgruntled,’ said Jack. ‘Take the dis off it and you’re left with gruntled. Normally when you take the dis off a word the word you’re left with means roughly the opposite. Take dis off disclaimed and you get claimed. Remove dis from disappointed and you get appointed.’

Biffo thought about this for a moment. ‘Yes,’ he said, not quite understanding what Jack was getting at.

‘But what does gruntled mean?’ asked Jack.

‘I don’t know,’ said Biffo. ‘I suppose it ought to mean happy.’

‘Funny that,’ said Jack, thoughtfully. He sighed, toyed with his bat for a moment and then nodded towards Daniel who was now picking his way through the damp patch and discovering why none of his team wanted to field down there. ‘He seems to have discovered the secret of the damp patch,’ he said.

‘It’s all soggy down here!’ Daniel shouted, lifting a leg and pointing to the splashes of mud which had reached almost to his knee. He had found out why none of his team wanted to field at third man.

No one took any notice of him.

‘Shall I start?’ asked Hugo Wimpole-Bassett, the Wanderers opening bowler.

‘I think so,’ said Biffo. ‘Go!’ he said, loudly.

The opening bowler looked at him. ‘What do you mean?’ he asked.

‘Go!’ said Biffo. ‘You can start.’

‘But what does ‘Go!’ mean?’ asked the bowler.

‘It means you can start bowling,’ explained Biffo. He looked across at Jack Hobbs and lowered his voice. ‘Isn’t that what I’m supposed to say?’

‘I think you’re supposed to say ‘Play!’’ said Jack. ‘But if you want to say ‘Go!’ that’s absolutely fine by me.’

‘Oh yes,’ agreed Biffo, though he really couldn’t see that there was a great deal of difference between ‘Go!’ and ‘Play!’.He cleared his throat and called out: ‘Play!’

Hugo Wimpole-Bassett had bowled the first four balls of his over when the sea mist started to roll in.

Chapter 45

Biffo's experience of sea mists was limited. Apart from spending two weeks of most of his childhood summers sheltering behind canvas wind breaks on Cornish beaches he had never spent much time at the seaside, and sea mists, being predictable creatures of habit, are most often to be found in the approximate vicinity of the sea.

Biffo was more accustomed to land mists. These tended, in his experience, to be fairly slow moving; steady and reliable diminishers of visibility. A land mist is polite and always gives a little notice of its arrival. It sort of trickles into place; and could perhaps be most accurately described as the dripping tap of mists.

A sea mist, on the other hand, is no trickier and is unconcerned with polite niceties; it is the burst pipe of mists. One minute it is somewhere else entirely, unseen and quite unsuspected, and the next minute it is there.

One minute the sun was shining on Fondling-Under-Water and the next minute the cricketers were all enveloped in a vast, wet blanket of impenetrable dampness.

'I say,' cried Daniel, the first member of the visiting side to be overwhelmed by the sea mist and to realise that he could no longer see. 'I can't see a thing!' There was a pause and then a panicky shout. 'It's either gone very foggy or else I've suddenly developed cataracts.' The voice came out of the mist clearly enough but the owner of the voice was already quite invisible.

Within minutes the mist was so thick that the cricketers in the middle could not see the pavilion, and the spectators (and more importantly the scorers) in the pavilion could not see what was happening on the pitch.

'What shall we do?' asked a voice which Biffo vaguely recognised. He peered through the mist and just managed to identify Hugo Wimpole-Bassett who was standing about three feet away from him.

'I don't know,' said Biffo. 'It seems to be a bit misty.' He turned around through what he thought was three and sixty degrees, looking for Jack or Herbert. He couldn't see anyone at all.

'Maybe we should get some torches,' said Hugo. 'Or get people to turn their car headlights on.'

'I don't think that will help much,' said Biffo. 'Jack?' he called. 'Herbert?'

'Who's that?' came back a wheezy voice.

'It's Biffo' said Biffo. 'Who's that?'

'Herbert,' said Herbert, who was clearly short of breath.

'Are you at this end?' asked Biffo.

'Yes,' said Herbert. We ran three.' He wheezed a bit more. 'It's a long time since we ran a three,' he said.

'How long is this mist likely to last?' asked Biffo.

'It could be over in a few minutes,' said Herbert. There was a long pause while he did some more wheezing. 'Or it might last for the rest of the day,' he added. He felt very miserable. He had scored a total of 48 runs in his last eight innings and until the mist had come down he had felt confident that he would be able to reach his fifty in this match. (Fondling-Under-Water players did not limit themselves to a single match when it came to reaching batting milestones. Jeremiah Titcombe's first hundred had taken him eight years and 96 innings.)

'Shall I finish the over?' asked Hugo Wimpole-Bassett.

‘What do you think, Herbert?’ Biffo asked.

‘Oh, let’s carry on,’ said Herbert. The pause was noticeably shorter this time. We don’t usually let the weather interfere with play.’ He sighed dreamily. We could do with Wally Sticklepath today.’

‘Who was Wally Sticklepath?’ asked Biffo.

We never lost a match when it was misty and we had Wally Sticklepath playing,’ said Herbert, nostalgically. ‘He was a great mimic and he could throw his voice. When it was misty he would have the opposition batsmen running all over the place. He would stand at third man, pretend he was one of the batsmen and yell out ‘Run Two’. We ran out both batsmen at once thanks to him. One had gone to square leg and the other one was last seen getting off a bus in Middlesbrough.’

Biffo cleared his throat. ‘Carry on,’ he said. ‘Play!’ he added quickly.

There was a long silence and then Biffo heard a voice. It was coming from a body he couldn’t see.

‘Er, do you know which direction the stumps are in?’ asked the bowler, rather diffidently.

Biffo, who now had no idea which way he was facing or where anything was, did not need to think before replying. ‘No,’ he said. ‘But maybe we ought to find out. Let’s find the stumps at this end first.’

He bent down and waved an arm around. ‘Use your bat,’ he said to Herbert. ‘See if you can find the stumps.’

‘I won’t be out if I hit the wicket will I?’ asked Herbert.

‘No,’ Biffo assured him. ‘We need to find the wicket so that we can work out where the other end is.’

‘I’ve got them!’ called Hugo, a moment or two later.

‘Keep talking,’ said Biffo. ‘So that we can find you.’

‘What shall I say?’ asked Hugo.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ said Biffo. ‘Just keep talking.’

‘Do you like semolina?’ asked Hugo.

‘Pardon?’ said Biffo.

‘Do you like semolina?’ asked Hugo.

‘Not particularly,’ said Biffo. ‘What on earth do you want to know that for?’

‘I don’t really want to know,’ said Hugo.

‘Then why did you ask?’

‘You said to keep talking,’ said Hugo. ‘I couldn’t think of anything else to say.’ He paused. ‘People tell me I’m not terribly bright,’ he said, rather sadly.

‘Oh I’m sure you are,’ said Biffo.

‘No, really, I’m not,’ said Hugo. ‘I’m actually most terribly thick. But it’s OK because my dad is stinking rich and I work for him so it doesn’t really matter.’

‘Oh, good,’ said Biffo.

‘I can see you!’ said Herbert.

‘Who? Me?’ said Biffo.

‘No. The bowler,’ said Herbert. ‘And the stumps.’

‘I can see you,’ said Hugo, sounding quite excited.

‘Me?’ said Herbert.

‘No, I can see the umpire,’ said Hugo. ‘Oh, I can see you too, Herbert.’

‘I can see both of you too!’ said Biffo, feeling relieved. ‘Right!’ he said, standing behind the stumps and peering into the distance. ‘Jack?’

‘Yes!’ said a voice, which seemed to come from behind him. ‘Is that you Jack?’

‘Yes.’ replied a voice which now clearly belonged to Jack but which still seemed to be coming from behind them.

Biffo and Herbert peered through the mist at one another.

‘Where did that come from?’ asked Biffo.

‘Behind us,’ said Herbert.

They walked around the stumps and faced the opposite direction. ‘Are you still there?’ called Biffo.

‘Where would I be going?’ called Jack. ‘I’m staying with the stumps.’

‘Hugo is going to bowl in a minute,’ shouted Biffo. ‘I’ll tell him to call out when he delivers the ball. Try not to hit a six because if you do we’ll never find the ball.’

‘Right!’ replied Jack, optimistically.

‘Call out when you deliver the ball,’ Biffo said to Hugo.

‘OK,’ said Hugo. He walked away from the stumps and then walked back again.

‘What shall I call out?’ he asked.

‘Anything you like,’ said Biffo. Anything. It’s just so that Jack knows the ball is coming.’

‘Right,’ said Hugo.

‘But not that question about the semolina,’ said Biffo. ‘It will confuse him. He’ll probably try and answer.’

Hugo walked away again and disappeared for a few moments. And then he came back. ‘I’m not taking a full run,’ he said.

‘Very sensible,’ said Biffo.

‘I might get lost,’ said Hugo.

‘Right,’ said Biffo. ‘Play!’ he shouted. He peered into the mist ahead of him.

‘I haven’t seen it yet!’ called Jack.

‘It hasn’t been bowled yet,’ said Biffo.

‘I heard someone call out,’ said Jack.

‘That was me,’ said Biffo. ‘I just said ‘Play!’. Hugo will call out when he bowls.’

‘OK,’ said Jack.

‘I like semolina!’ called Hugo, as he delivered the fifth ball of his over.

Jack, who was, not surprisingly, rather puzzled by this unexpected statement did not see the ball. And nor did any of the fielders.

‘Who’s got the ball?’ called Biffo. No one answered.

‘Has anyone seen the ball?’ shouted Biffo.

There was a general murmuring of ‘No’s from around the field.

‘Oh,’ said Biffo. He sighed. ‘We seem to have lost the ball.’

‘Use the spare!’ suggested Herbert. ‘Franklin always carries a spare.’

Biffo pulled the spare ball from his coat pocket and handed it to Hugo.

‘Another ball is coming!’ shouted Biffo.

‘Did you find that one then?’ called Jack.

‘No,’ said Biffo. ‘It’s another ball.’

‘Tell me when it’s coming,’ said Jack.

‘Listen out for Hugo,’ said Biffo.

‘Do you like semolina?’ called Hugo, delivering the sixth and final ball of his over.

‘I told you not to say that!’ said Biffo.

‘Ouch!’ came a fierce yell from twenty two yards away.

‘What happened?’ called Biffo.

‘It hit me!’ replied Jack, rather put out.

‘The ball?’

‘What the hell else do you think hit me?’

‘Owzat?’ cried Hugo.

‘Are you all right?’ called Herbert.

‘Am I still alive?’ asked Jack.

‘Can you see the ball?’ called Biffo.

‘No,’ said Jack. ‘It bounced away somewhere. I don’t know where it’s gone.’

‘Owzat?’ asked Hugo.

‘What do you keep shouting that for?’ asked Biffo.

‘I was appealing,’ said Hugo. ‘He might be out. The ball hit him. Maybe it hit his pads.’

‘Don’t be silly,’ said Biffo, who was running out of patience. ‘How can I give him out? I can’t even see him.’

We can’t find the ball!’ Biffo heard someone shout.

Since they had now lost the only two balls they had there was little choice but to abandon the match.

We’ll have to go off,’ said Biffo.

‘What for?’ asked Herbert.

‘I don’t know,’ said Biffo. ‘Bad light?’ he suggested.

‘The light is fine,’ said Herbert. ‘It’s just that we can’t see anything.’

‘Lost balls,’ said Biffo. ‘Play abandoned due to loss of balls.’

‘I doubt if they are really lost,’ said Herbert, pedantically.

‘They’re bound to be around somewhere. We’ll find them when the mist lifts.’

‘OK,’ sighed Biffo. ‘Play abandoned for mislaid balls.’ He raised his voice. ‘Does anyone know where the pavilion is?’

Chapter 46

By the time Daniel Potterton, Herbert Sutcliffe and Biffo arrived at The Gravedigger's Rest they were all soaked to the skin. The mist had turned to rain and the rain had turned quickly and apparently effortlessly into a fully blown storm.

'Well, look who's here!' said Len, as they trooped in through the door to the public bar. Herbert, being local, ducked and didn't bang his head on the lintel. Nor did he trip down the step into the bar. Biffo, remembered the step but forgot just how low the door was and banged his head. Daniel Potterton, never having entered The Gravedigger's Rest before banged his head and fell down the step.

Rupert smiled contentedly.

'Is it raining?' demanded Itchy, anxiously.

Shaking the water from his head, like a dog just out of a bath, Biffo confirmed that it was.

Itchy swore quietly. 'I'm going to get soaked.'

'Do you have to go out somewhere?' asked Biffo.

'I need to water the pitch later,' explained Itchy.

'Your lot have gone,' said Len, helping Daniel to his feet. Daniel, dripping water onto the carpet, held his head with one hand and rubbed his left knee with the other. He looked around. 'Gone?'

'They wanted to get to wherever it is that you're supposed to be playing tomorrow,' said Len.

'They left a message for you,' said Itchy. 'I wrote it down so that I wouldn't forget it.' He picked up a soggy beer-mat, eased himself off his bar stool, and took the beer-mat over to Daniel.

Daniel took the beer-mat in the hand he had been using to rub his knee and read out the message it contained. 'Riddles Best Bitter – For the Discerning Drinker.' He looked puzzled.

'Try the other side,' suggested Itchy.

'The biggest iceberg ever seen was larger than Belgium,' read Daniel. 'No 37 in a series of 101 Amazing True Facts Brought to You by Riddles Best Bitter'. He paused for a moment, clearly puzzled. 'Is it in code?' he asked, looking around the bar, as though asking for help.

'Maybe that was the wrong beer-mat,' said Itchy. He turned back to the bar and started to examine the other beer-mats. 'Ah!' he said, gleefully, after picking up and examining both sides of half a dozen beer-mats. He handed Daniel the newly discovered beer-mat upon which a single word had quite clearly been written in blue ink.

Daniel accepted the beer-mat gratefully and read out loud the word which had been scrawled upon it. 'Gone.'

'Well, that's a help,' he said.

'I wanted them to stay,' said Rupert.

'You wanted them all to come into the pub so that they'd all bang their heads,' said Puffy, standing behind the bar and drying glasses with a grey tea towel.

'You wanted them to come in so that they'd buy your beer,' was the retort from the bookie.

‘You lot drink all the beer I can keep in stock,’ said Puffy. ‘If I could get you to pay for it I’d be a happy man.’

‘Is that it?’ asked Daniel. ‘Is that the message?’ Having absorbed, assessed and memorised the message he had put the beer-mat back down on the bar and was now rubbing his knee again.

‘They said you’d know where they’d gone,’ said Puffy.

‘I had a copy of the itinerary,’ agreed Daniel. ‘But it was in my bag.’

‘So, where is your bag?’

‘In Mr Ruggles’ car.’

‘Ruggles?’

‘Newton Ruggles. The bank manager. I came in his car. They took my licence off me last year.’

‘Who did?’ asked Itchy, looking puzzled.

‘The police,’ replied Daniel. ‘Well, to be accurate the magistrate actually took my licence from me. But I don’t entirely absolve the police from blame.’

‘They really did that?’ said Itchy.

‘They said I had too much alcohol in my blood,’ said Daniel.

‘Crumbs!’ said Itchy, who led a sheltered life and knew surprisingly little about the ways of the world. He was genuinely shocked. ‘Can they really do that? Where do you live?’

‘Birmingham,’ said Daniel. ‘But it was a magistrate in Middlesex who took away my licence,’ he went on. ‘That’s sort of Londonish,’ he explained.

‘Middlesex has always had quite a good cricket team,’ said Itchy, genuinely surprised. ‘I’m surprised a county like that would take your licence away, just for having alcohol in your blood.’

‘So I sold my car,’ Daniel went on. ‘My wife doesn’t drive so there didn’t seem much point in keeping the damned thing in the garage.’

‘Let me get this straight,’ said Len, who was obviously having some trouble understanding what had happened. ‘The police took away your driving licence because you had blood in your alcohol?’

‘Alcohol in my blood,’ said Daniel. ‘They took away my licence because they said I had too much alcohol in my blood.’

‘How can you have too much alcohol in your blood?’ asked Len, who seemed to find this whole concept genuinely puzzling. When an inhumane barmaid in Wednesbury had once told him that he had had enough to drink Len had logically and indignantly explained to the barmaid that if he had had enough to drink he wouldn’t have wanted any more. ‘Who said you had too much?’ he demanded, without waiting for an answer to his previous question.

‘It’s the law,’ said Daniel.

‘Have you heard of them doing that?’ Len asked Constable Hobbling.

‘Heard of them doing what?’ asked Constable Hobbling, when he had finished emptying his fourth pint of best bitter.

‘Taking away a bloke’s driving licence because he had too much blood in his alcohol.’

‘Alcohol in his blood,’ said Daniel.

‘Constable Hobbling is a policeman,’ Len explained to Daniel, ‘He’s bound to know about stuff like this.’

‘Oh yes, they can,’ agreed Constable Hobbling, nodding wisely.

‘Phew!’ said Herbert Sutcliffe. ‘That’s terrible.’

‘Blood in the alcohol,’ said Len to himself

‘Alcohol in the blood,’ said Daniel.

‘Alcohol in the blood,’ said Herbert, clearly thinking hard. He looked around. ‘So, that would be a driving offence?’

‘Yes,’ said Len. ‘Daniel says he lost his driving licence because the police said he had too much blood in his alcohol.’

This time Daniel, feeling slightly confused himself, did not bother to correct Len.

‘Oh yes,’ said Constable Hobbling, nodding wisely. ‘They do it in the towns.’ He put down his empty glass, put his hands behind his back, rocked backwards and forwards on his feet and closed his eyes.

‘They do it everywhere these days,’ said Daniel.

‘They do,’ confirmed Biffo.

‘I think it’s the Road Traffic Act,’ said Constable Hobbling, opening his eyes and looking pleased with himself at this piece of legislative knowledge. He frowned and thought for a moment. ‘Either that or something else.’

‘They don’t do it here,’ said Len, pulling a face and shaking his head vigorously. ‘It doesn’t happen here,’ he said firmly and with some considerable pride.

‘We don’t have any trouble like that round here,’ added Herbert, earnestly shaking his head.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Biffo, confused. ‘Do you mean that people don’t drink and drive?’

‘Well I’ve never heard of anyone in the village losing their licence for having too much blood in their alcohol,’ said Len firmly. ‘Have you?’ he asked Puffy.

Puffy shook his head.

‘Are you the village policeman?’ Daniel asked Constable Hobbling.

‘Community constable,’ replied Constable Hobbling. ‘Lived here all my life. Community constable for twenty seven years.’

‘And you have never had to arrest anyone for drunken driving?’

‘Certainly not,’ said Constable Hobbling, indignantly. ‘It’s my job to keep the peace not to start a war.’ He took a large sip from his glass and leant forward as though to share some confidential item of gossip. ‘Besides,’ he said softly. ‘I only have a moped so I couldn’t really chase anyone.’ He thought for a moment. ‘I certainly couldn’t chase them if they went up a hill.’

Hardly had these sensible words left Constable Hobbling’s mouth when there was a loud cry of something that sounded like ‘Drip!’ from the far end of the bar.

Daniel and Biffo, both being new to Fondling-Under-Water were surprised by this shout. They both assumed it to be the result of some sort of argument between two of the drinkers at that end of the bar. Daniel, coming from a part of the world where an insult would invariably soon be followed by the throwing of glasses and punches, instinctively ducked and tried to look as small as possible while Biffo, who was surprised at the modest and non-profane nature of the insult, merely peered through the smoky gloom to try and identify the originator.

But, with these two exceptions, everyone else in the bar seemed to know exactly what the cry meant.

Behind the bar Puffy, who was busy filling a beer glass with beer, stopped what he was doing, bent down out of sight for a moment and reappeared clutching four old saucepans which he proceeded to position on the bar counter. He seemed to know exactly where the saucepans should be. Meanwhile, Lettice, a couple of yards away from him, was handing empty beer glasses out to the customers who were rushing about placing the empty glasses on the floor and on the small tables which were scattered around the public bar. Everyone seemed to know what they were doing and everyone, apart from Biffo and Daniel, seemed to know what was going on.

‘What’s going on?’ Biffo asked Len, when everyone seemed satisfied that they had placed empty vessels in all the appropriate places.

‘One by the door, please, gentlemen!’ called Puffy, holding out an empty beer glass.

Itchy took the glass from him and carefully placed it on the floor near to the door. He stood back, examined the position where he had placed the glass for a moment and then leant forward and moved it two inches to the left.

‘What’s going on?’ Biffo asked again.

‘Sssshhhhh!’ said Len, holding a finger to his lips.

‘Sorry!’ whispered Biffo, automatically. He looked across at Daniel, who shrugged. He looked equally confused. The bar was now quite silent.

And then Biffo heard it. ‘Drip. Plunk. Drip. Plunk. Drip. Drip. Drip. Plunk. Plunk. Drip.’ It was, he thought at first, rather like one of the absurdly unmusical symphonies which modern composers insist on writing and which his television programme,‘The Arts This Week’, had, for reasons which he would now readily admit he did not understand, promoted, publicised and fêted. After listening to the ‘Drip. Plunk. Drip’ for a minute or so more he came to the conclusion that he was quite wrong. The sound of all those drips landing in all those empty beer glasses and saucepans was far more musical, far more imaginative and far more appealing to the ear than the cacophony produced by the over-hyped and arrogant composers whose work had appeared on his television programme.

Biffo watched, fascinated, as Puffy, Lettice and the drinkers in the bar, carefully examined each receptacle to make sure that it was correctly positioned. One or two needed moving a fraction of an inch or so but the majority seemed to be positioned perfectly to catch the water which was now falling through the ceiling in a couple of dozen places.

‘Thank you gentlemen,’ said Puffy, loudly, a moment or two later. ‘And lady!’ he added, nodding towards Lettice who smiled at him and made as much of a curtsey as you can make when wearing a tight skirt and standing in the narrow space behind a bar.

‘What on earth is happening?’ asked Biffo.

‘Leaky roof,’ answered Len.

‘Yes, I rather thought it might be,’ admitted Biffo. ‘But how come you all know where to catch the leaks?’

‘Because when it rains hard enough and long enough the water always comes in through the same places,’ replied Len, as though explaining something very simple to someone very stupid.

‘So wouldn’t it be better just to have the roof repaired?’ asked Biffo

‘It doesn’t cost anything to catch the water in glasses and saucepans,’ replied Len.

‘I suppose not,’ agreed Biffo. ‘But the water up in the loft must be doing quite a lot of damage.’

‘I don’t expect it does the upstairs rooms much good either,’ said Len.

Biffo looked up.

‘It doesn’t usually start coming through down here until it’s been raining for an hour or two,’ explained Len.

‘So why not get the roof repaired?’ asked Biffo, redirecting the question to the landlord of The Gravedigger’s Rest.

The ‘Drip. Plunk. Drip. Drip. Plunk.’ had now started to become a much softer ‘Splish. Splash. Splosh’ as the receptacles had started to fill.

‘No money,’ said Puffy with a shrug.

‘Can’t you claim on your insurance?’

‘No insurance.’

‘I’d better go and check my bedroom,’ said Biffo, emptying the glass from which he had been drinking, standing up ready to head for the passageway which led to the stairs which led to his bedroom.

‘Do you want an umbrella?’ asked Puffy.

Biffo thought that this was a joke until Puffy produced an umbrella and offered it to him.

‘No, thanks,’ said Biffo. ‘I’ll just dodge the drips.’

Puffy looked at him and frowned. He started to say something but Biffo had gone. The drips in the passageway and on the staircase, none of which were being collected by beer glasses or saucepans, had already collected together on the floor and on the stairs and had created noticeable puddles.

It was, however, when Biffo reached the upstairs corridor which led to his bedroom that he realised why Puffy had offered to lend him an umbrella. In several places there was enough water coming through the ceiling to create a very respectable shower.

When he opened the door to his room Biffo realised why the bed had been placed in such an eccentric, diagonal position. He was very pleased that he had never found the time or the energy to move it. Although water was dripping steadily through the bedroom ceiling, the bed was positioned in such a spot that it had remained perfectly dry. Splashing around on the floor Biffo picked up his briefcase and tossed it into a drawer so that it would have some protection from the rain. As he looked around he wondered what Edwina would have to say if she saw a bedroom turned into a furnished paddling pool. He felt a migraine headache starting as he toyed with the horror of having to explain to her what had happened. And then he remembered that Edwina wouldn’t be around to see what had happened and the blossoming migraine headache disappeared as quickly as it had arrived.

It wasn’t until he was about to go back downstairs again that he realised that Tiger had disappeared.

Chapter 47

‘Tiger has gone!’ shouted Biffo, running into the bar in a considerable state of distress. When he had left the bar to check on his room his clothes and hair had already shown some signs of having started to dry out but his short trip up the stairs and back down again had left Biffo, once more, soaked to the skin. He could almost feel a sneeze coming on.

The panic which followed this simple and heartfelt announcement can, in hindsight, be both excused and explained by the simple fact that most of his listeners mistakenly assumed that the three word sentence which Biffo had uttered had been a four word sentence and that the three words which he really had spoken had been preceded by the definite article.

There is, of course, a considerable amount of difference between the simple sentence ‘Tiger has gone!’, uttered by an unhappy cat owner who is worried that he may have suddenly and tragically become a former cat owner, and the far more doom laden, and entirely different, sentence ‘The tiger has gone!’ which seems to suggest that a man-eating beast may have escaped from its place of confinement and be about to help itself to a tasty human snack or two.

Instead of offering help, sympathy and comfort (as they might reasonably have been expected to do) approximately half of Biffo’s audience climbed onto tables while the remaining number picked up chairs and brandished them in the manner normally favoured by circus lion tamers.

‘What’s the matter?’ demanded Biffo, taken aback by this unexpected response.

‘People around here tend to be a bit nervous about tigers,’ said Len, who had managed to climb onto the bar counter and was now clearly trying to pluck up the courage to leap several feet into the air and wrap his arms around an ancient and rather moth-eaten stag’s head which was hanging on the wall.

‘Tigers?’ said Biffo, puzzled. ‘Who said anything about tigers?’.

‘Where did it escape from?’, ‘How many are there?’, ‘What was it doing here?’, ‘Has anyone got a gun?’ ‘Are they man eating tigers?’ and ‘Get your foot off my neck!’ were just some of the most popular questions and exclamations that Biffo heard during the next fifteen seconds or so. No one seemed to be listening to anyone else and no one seemed in the slightest bit interested in finding or offering answers to any of these questions. ‘

‘Isn’t your cat called Tiger?’ Lettice asked Biffo. She was the one small oasis of calm in the emotional maelstrom which had now taken over the public bar of The Gravedigger’s Rest.

‘Yes,’ said Biffo, failing in his struggle to stop a sneeze. ‘She’s disappeared.’

‘Did you search your room?’

‘There isn’t a lot to search!’ said Biffo. ‘But I looked everywhere,’ he added.

‘Did you look under the bed? Maybe she crawled under there to find somewhere dry.’

Len had finally found the courage to make the leap up to the moth eaten stag’s head. Sadly, the mounting which had for so long managed to restrain the stag’s head from obeying the dictates of gravity was nowhere near sound enough or strong enough to hold Len’s weight as well. A loud, rumbling and tearing sound was quickly followed by a cloud of plaster dust and a number of expletives as Len and the stag’s head made gravity happy by falling to the ground together.

‘There’s a puddle an inch deep on my floor,’ replied Biffo, ignoring Len and the falling stag’s head and answering Lettice’s question. ‘Cats hate water. But, yes, I did look under the bed. And she’s not there.’

‘What the hell is going on?’ demanded Puffy.

‘Biffo’s cat is missing,’ explained Lettice.

‘Probably eaten by the damned tiger,’ said Puffy. ‘I’m no veterinarian but it seems to me that if you keep a cat and a tiger in one room you’re asking for trouble. Is there a lot of mess? Blood everywhere? Maybe we can follow the bloody footprints?’

‘I think I’ve done my back an injury,’ said Len.

‘There are no bloody footprints. There wasn’t a tiger,’ insisted Lettice. ‘Just a cat.’

‘So, what the hell makes him think the cat’s been eaten by a tiger?’ asked Puffy, now thoroughly confused.

‘He doesn’t think the cat has been eaten by a tiger,’ explained Lettice. ‘There never was a tiger!’

‘Then why the hell frighten the life out of everyone by saying there was?’ said Puffy, irritability replacing confusion.

‘I didn’t say that a tiger had escaped!’ insisted Biffo. ‘My cat is missing.’

‘I heard you say it!’ screamed Puffy.

‘You misheard!’ said Lettice.

‘And I suppose everyone else misheard too!’ shouted Puffy.

‘Yes!’ shouted Lettice.

‘What?’

‘Yes.’

‘Yes what?’

‘And my arm hurts,’ said Len.

‘Yes, everyone else misheard too,’ said Lettice.

‘There isn’t a tiger?’

‘No.’

‘There never was a tiger?’

‘My arm hurts worst,’ said Len.

‘No.’

‘Oh,’ said Puffy, now much quieter. ‘You should be more careful about starting scares like that,’ he added a moment or two later. ‘Crying wolf they call it,’ he muttered. ‘Someone might have had a heart attack.’

‘The beer glasses are full,’ said Itchy, who, reassured by the fact that Biffo, Lettice and Puffy hadn’t climbed up on the bar or picked up chairs with which to defend themselves, had walked over to the bar to share this item of news with the landlord.

‘You should put a small billiard table in here,’ said Cheesy.

‘Why?’ said Puffy.

‘You could call it the pool room.’

Puffy ignored him.

‘A pool room because it’s full of water,’ explained Cheesy. ‘It’s a sort of joke.’

‘I think I’ve broken something,’ said Len, who was still lying flat on the floor.

‘Er, thanks Itchy,’ said Puffy, ignoring Cheesy. ‘Would you mind asking the lads to empty them?’

‘What about the tiger?’ asked Itchy, looking around rather nervously.

‘There is no tiger,’ said Puffy, speaking very slowly and clearly, as though trying to make a deaf person, a child or a foreigner understand.

‘Oh,’ said Itchy. And then he laughed and punched Biffo on the arm. ‘You little tinker!’ he said. ‘You had us all going for a minute there.’ He turned to face the rest of the bar. ‘No tiger,’ he called. ‘Blame the practical joker here!’ He laughed and playfully punched Biffo on the arm again.

There was some muttering but by and large most people climbed down off their tables and put down their chairs with smiles of relief on their faces.

Biffo rubbed his arm which hurt quite a lot. Itchy’s idea of a playful punch was Biffo’s idea of a knockout blow.

‘Let’s empty the glasses and saucepans,’ said Itchy, setting a good example by picking up two beer glasses and carefully pouring the contents onto the floor.

‘My cat is missing,’ said Biffo very quietly. He had not realised until this moment just how much Tiger meant to him. Tiger was, Biffo realised, his only true friend.

‘We’ll help you find her,’ said Lettice, kindly. ‘She’ll be all right just you wait and see.’

‘I’m going to faint,’ said Len. ‘I’m fainting. . .I’m faint. . .I’m. . .’

‘She may have slipped out when I opened the door,’ said Biffo, fighting hard to keep his voice steady. ‘I’m going to look for her,’ he added, turning and heading back down the corridor away from the bar.

‘Wait!’ called Lettice.

Biffo stopped, turned and waited.

‘We’ll help you,’ she said. ‘You don’t know your way around. We’ll organise a search.’

‘Get up, Len!’ said Puffy, kicking one of the unconscious man’s feet.

Lettice clapped her hands to attract the attention of the customers, most of whom were now busily engaged trotting backwards and forwards to the gents’ lavatory emptying saucepans and beer glasses. (They could have saved themselves a lot of time by using the ladies’ lavatory which was far more conveniently situated but prejudices and old habits die hard and although Lettice was the only woman in the bar no one had the courage to break with years of tradition and stout taboos and push open the door with the figure of the little lady glued on it.)

‘Len?’ said Puffy. He bent down and realised for the first time that Len really was unconscious. ‘I say,’ he said, raising both his head and his voice. ‘Len seems to be unconscious!’

‘He probably thinks he’s fainted,’ said Itchy, who had returned from his trip to the gents’ lavatory. It was well known that Len was an experienced hypochondriac who constantly enjoyed imagining that he was enduring poor health.

‘No, seriously,’ said Puffy. ‘I think he may be injured!’

‘Don’t move him!’ said Cheesy. ‘More serious injuries are caused by bystanders moving accident victims than are caused by accidents.’ He had read this somewhere and learnt it by heart.

‘I wasn’t going to move him!’ said Puffy.

‘So what do we do?’ asked Jack Hobbs. ‘We clearly can’t leave him there. Puffy won’t be able to move about behind the bar with him lying where he is.’

‘Maybe you should ring for an ambulance,’ suggested Daniel Potterton.

‘The nearest ambulance station is an hour away,’ said Puffy. He sighed. ‘I suppose we’ll have to get the doctor to take a look at him.’

‘I clearly can’t do anything to help here,’ Biffo whispered to Lettice, during the silence. ‘Do you think anyone would mind if I went and started looking for Tiger.’

‘Wait just another minute,’ whispered Lettice back. ‘As soon as they’ve sorted out what to do with Len I’ll organise a search party to help you.’ She reached out, took his hand and squeezed it.

‘So, where do we find your local doctor?’ asked Daniel.

‘Oh finding him isn’t going to be any problem,’ said Puffy. He stood up. ‘Doc!’ he called.

‘You mean he’s already in here?’ said Daniel.

‘Oh yes,’ said Puffy. He peered around the bar. ‘But I can’t see him? Has anyone seen the doc?’

Biffo, who had been listening to this conversation, was as surprised as Daniel clearly was to discover that the local doctor was in the bar. He looked around trying to identify the physician. Cheesy? Unlikely, surely. Itchy? Impossible. Rupert? Surely not. Jack? Herbert? It couldn’t possibly be.

‘Here he is!’ called Herbert, as a figure emerged from the gents’ lavatory clutching two empty beer glasses.

‘Doc!’ called Puffy. ‘We’ve got a patient for you!’

Chapter 48

‘He’s got a broken humerus,’ said Dr Rupert Fitzwalter, kneeling beside the now conscious but moaning Len. He had prodded and probed with surprisingly delicate and gentle fingers. ‘Broken the neck of the bone, right up near the shoulder.’ He looked round. ‘I’ll pay ten to one if I’m wrong.’

‘Put me down for a quid, doc,’ said Herbert.

‘Fifty pence for me, doc,’ said Jack.

‘I’ll have a quid too, doc,’ whispered Len; the brave patient hedging his bets by taking a wager against his own doctor’s diagnostic skills.

‘Is he really the village doctor?’ Biffo whispered to Lettice.

Lettice looked at him, smiled and nodded.

‘He doesn’t seem very much like any doctor I’ve ever known,’ whispered Biffo.

‘He likes to gamble,’ admitted Lettice. ‘But he’s a good doctor although he does always enjoy having a bet with his patients when he makes a diagnosis.’ She shrugged. ‘The last doctor we had was always as drunk as a skunk so as far as the villagers are concerned Rupert is a great improvement. With Rupert they at least have the consolation of knowing that if he makes the wrong diagnosis they get to take some money off him.’

‘What does it mean?’ asked Len, who was considerably whiter than the sheets between which Biffo had spent the previous night. He moved slightly and winced as he did so.

Rupert, bit his lower lip and didn’t speak for a moment.

‘You can tell me, doc,’ said Len hoarsely. ‘I can take it,’ he added bravely. He was now taking great care not to move at all.

Rupert looked down, paused, and gave Len the bad news. ‘You’re going to miss the next six matches at least,’ he said.

It was then poor Len’s turn to stay silent for a moment. ‘I thought as much,’ he said. He looked quite utterly wretched. He angrily brushed away a tear which had appeared in the corner of his right eye.

Rupert looked down at Len. ‘I’m going to drive you over to the hospital,’ he said. ‘Before we go do you want something for the pain?’

‘Oh yes, please,’ said Len with pitiful eagerness.

‘Give him a double whisky, Puffy,’ said Rupert, heading for the door.

Puffy poured Len a double whisky

‘Are you sure that’s a double?’ asked Len, when handed a large tumbler two thirds full of whisky.

‘It’s at least four doubles!’ replied Puffy.

‘Maybe you should just fill it up to the top,’ suggested Len.

Meanwhile, Lettice began to recruit villagers for a search party to help Biffo look for Tiger. ‘We don’t want too many people,’ she said to Biffo. ‘Six should be plenty. If we have too many people wandering around the poor little thing will probably be terrified. Besides, we need to leave a few people behind to help Puffy look after Len. He’ll probably be unconscious in a few minutes and then he’ll need carrying out to Rupert’s car.’

‘What are we looking for?’ asked Itchy, who had been the first to volunteer.

‘A cat,’ said Lettice.

‘I realise that,’ said Itchy. ‘But what sort of cat? I don’t want to totter around in the rain pouncing on just any old cat I see and dragging it back here for inspection.’

‘It’s a sort of…’ began Lettice, rather uncertain as how to describe Biffo’s feline friend.

‘Tiger is a mackerel tabby,’ interrupted Biffo. ‘Quite small and skinny though you’d wonder why if you saw how much she eats.’

‘Tiger?’ said Herbert. ‘That’s the cat’s name?’

‘That’s the cat’s name,’ agreed Biffo.

‘Ah.’ said Herbert, who wasn’t the fastest thinker in the village, ‘Now I’m beginning to understand.’

‘And she’ll come if we call her by name?’ asked Daniel.

‘I’m not exactly sure about that,’ admitted Biffo. ‘Cats are pretty independent creatures. But she usually comes when I call her – especially if she’s hungry.’

‘Why don’t we just go and look for her?’ said Lettice. ‘If anyone spots a mackerel tabby they can call out for Biffo so that he can hurry over and investigate.’

And so the great cat hunt began. It was, as Itchy pointed out later, the first Tiger hunt Fondling-Under-Water had ever seen.

Chapter 49

Biffo, Daniel and Cheesy stood just outside the back door of The Gravedigger's Rest public house and tried to take some modest shelter from the rear of the building. These three had volunteered to begin the search for Tiger outside in the rain. Lettice, Itchy and Herbert were searching for Tiger inside the pub where they were indoors but just as likely to get wet.

The storm was increasing in ferocity and the rain, driven by the fierce wind, was travelling almost horizontally. The white metal garden furniture and the large sunshade umbrellas in the small back garden had been blown over and were now piled in an untidy and tangled heap against a tattered wooden fence. The fence was leaning at a distinct angle to the usually favoured vertical.

'This sea mist is getting a bit serious,' shouted Daniel, though the mist itself had now been blown away.

'Well, at least it's not windy,' shouted Cheesy, stepping out from the shelter of the pub's back wall, and leaning forward at an angle of forty five degrees to stop himself being blown backwards. With his eyes half closed and his hair streaming behind him he rather looked as though he was riding a motorcycle.

'This isn't windy?' shouted a disbelieving Daniel, holding onto a rusty metal downpipe with one hand and clutching his shirt collar tighter about his throat with the other.

'Oh no,' shouted Cheesy, as calmly as a man can be when he is shouting to make himself heard against what would, if it was swirling around London, probably be classified as a hurricane. 'Sometimes it's really blowy round here,' he shouted.

There was a great crash a yard or two in front of them and a sheet of rusty corrugated iron, blown by the wind, landed just a few feet away from where Cheesy was standing.

'Where the hell did that come from?' demanded Daniel, letting go of the down pipe and using his hand to shield his face as he peered up into the utterly impenetrable black sky. The down pipe, which had been loose for months, and which had been dislodged slightly more by Daniel holding onto it, responded to being deprived of Daniel's supporting hand by sliding slowly and very noisily to the ground.

'Strewth!' cried Daniel. 'The whole place is falling down!'

'Just a drain pipe,' shouted Cheesy, calmly. 'Nothing to worry about.' The piece of guttering which had been supported by the downpipe fell down next, narrowly missing Daniel's head.

Daniel looked up into the blackness in a pointless attempt to see if anything else was about to fall down. 'I need a batting helmet. And where did that piece of corrugated iron come from?' he demanded.

Cheesy peered through the blackness at the rusty and now badly bent piece of metal as though making a genuine attempt to guess at its provenance. 'Difficult to tell,' he replied, at last. But having covered himself, in that way that experts do, he proceeded to offer his opinion. 'I think it's probably come from the shed at the bottom of Herbert's garden.' He paused. 'But before that it probably came from the roof of the big barn behind Scattermouth Farm. Or it may have been from somebody's boundary fence.'

'You make it sound as though the air is thick with flying sheets of corrugated iron whenever there is a bit of wind,' shouted Daniel, peering up at the sky rather nervously.

'Oh yes,' shouted Cheesy, calmly. 'People don't bother too much about losing the odd sheet of corrugated iron. You usually get back pretty much what you've lost. Herbert will probably end up with another sheet of iron from Scattermouth Farm.'

‘And Scattermouth Farm?’ shouted Daniel. ‘Do they just supply the whole neighbourhood with sheets of corrugated iron?’

‘Oh no,’ shouted Cheesy, ‘they always get stuff blown from farms at the South Western edge of the village. They use a lot of corrugated iron down there.’

‘Why do people in the country always fill in hedges with bits of corrugated iron?’ asked Biffo.

‘Boundaries are very important to us,’ shouted Cheesy, very seriously.

‘Is that just to keep the animals in the fields?’ asked Biffo.

‘No,’ said Cheesy. ‘It’s just that boundaries are very important to us. In the country it’s much safer to mess with a bloke’s car or his wife than with his boundary. When there are gaps in hedges or fences we fill them in with whatever is handy.’ Exhibiting all the caution of a man who was once bitten on the nose by a rat he peered into a dustbin which had long since lost its lid. ‘Tiddles?’ he called.

‘It’s Tiger,’ shouted Daniel.

‘Yes, I know,’ yelled Cheesy. ‘But I feel silly shouting Tiger.’

Daniel opened the door to a small shed and peered inside.

‘Tiger?’ he called. ‘Tiger?’ Empty tins which had been piled up precariously close to the doorway fell over with a great crash. We really need torches,’ he shouted. ‘I thought I saw something move in here but it’s so damned dark I don’t have the foggiest idea what it was.’

‘Do you really think Tiger would be out in this?’ Daniel shouted to Biffo, who was now just a dimly visible figure at the far end of the garden.

Somewhere, high in the sky and far away from the storm, a sliver of moon was providing mellow background lighting, and although Daniel was reluctant to offer any criticism of the great lighting man in the sky he did feel that the light provided was woefully inadequate for a night time search for a dark coloured cat.

‘I don’t know,’ shouted Biffo back. He shrugged but no one saw the shrug. ‘But if she’s frightened - which she will be she could have run anywhere.’ Like the other two he was now soaked to the skin. The whole thing seemed hopeless. He was desolate. He could not rid himself of the awful feeling that he would never see Tiger again.

Chapter 50

Meanwhile, inside the Gravedigger's Rest, Lettice, Itchy and Herbert may not have been threatened by so much flying metal but they were no happier, or indeed much more comfortable, and they certainly weren't having any more luck in their search for Biffo's missing cat.

The Gravedigger's Rest had originally been built as a rather compact inn. But generations of landlords, builders and designers (some professional, some amateur and some not having the foggiest notion what they were doing) had added bits here, raised ceilings there, taken out walls here, put in doors there, removed panelling here, added partitions there, installed plumbing here, added electrical wiring there and generally, through a mass of miscellaneous repairs altered the structure and the internal geography of the building so much that if the original builder had been blindfolded and placed in the middle of it he would neither have recognised his own structure nor had the foggiest chance of being able to find his way around it.

There were, as there are in most buildings of a certain age, a seemingly infinite number of hiding places for a cat.

There is great hiding potential in cupboards which are not quite properly closed, spaces between the floorboards of upper floors and the ceilings of lower floors, and the readily reachable gaps which always exist between and behind walls.

To make the search even more frustrating the inn was, like all old buildings, positively awash with a vast quantity of resident fauna.

The result was that every ten or twelve seconds or so Itchy or Herbert or Lettice would hold up a hand, go 'Ssshhh!' and cup a hand around one ear in order to make it clear to the others that they were listening very carefully to something.

'Tiger! Tiger!' they would call, in that slightly obsequious way that people use when trying to persuade a cat to respond to them.

'What's in there?' asked a thoroughly soaked Itchy, wearily pointing to a door which was open just wide enough to let a cat through.

'I haven't the foggiest notion,' admitted an equally soaked, equally weary Herbert. He was so utterly lost that he wasn't even entirely sure that he could find his way back to the bar.

Itchy entered first and went through the rotten floorboards with his initial stride into the room. A split second later his feet and legs crashed through the water-weakened plaster ceiling of the bar below.

'Who the hell is that?' demanded Puffy, in the bar below. He brushed pieces of soggy plaster out of his hair and examined the wriggling feet and legs which were dangling just inches away from his head. He seemed surprisingly calm about the fact that the ceiling to his public bar now contained a large hole.

'It's Itchy,' replied Jack, looking up.

'How can you tell?' asked Puffy, curious.

'I'd recognise those soles anywhere,' replied Jack, who supplemented his modest income with a little semi-professional cobbling.

'Silly bugger,' said Puffy. 'Come down the stairs like everyone else,' he shouted up to the dangling and wriggling lower portion of the Fondling-Under-Water groundsman.

Itchy, who had heard this comment, muttered something back but his words of protest and self-defence were lost in the plasterwork.

‘Why on earth did you do that?’ demanded Herbert.

There is one school of thought that Itchy, already deeply embarrassed and annoyed by the predicament in which he now found himself (not to mention the fact that he was in some considerable physical discomfort since his two legs had managed to slide either side of a rather stout beam) may not have been thinking clearly when he asked Herbert to help pull him out. There is, however, another school of thought, which puts forward the theory that Itchy knew exactly what he was doing. Both schools of thought are united in the belief that Herbert’s rash and, indeed, reckless behaviour did not reveal anything new about his intellectual capacity.

The result was that when Biffo, Daniel and Cheesy, as sad and soggy a trio as has been seen since the three-man tea room orchestra went down with the Titanic, tottered back indoors to take a break from their fruitless outdoor search for Tiger, and to check on how the indoor search was going, they found that one third of the indoor search party, Lettice, was standing in the bar with Puffy, staring up at the combined legs of the other two thirds of the indoor search party.

‘No luck?’ Biffo asked Lettice.

‘None, I’m afraid,’ said Lettice.

A cloud of plaster dust showered the bar as Itchy, dangling above, struggled to free himself from his predicament.

‘I think we’d perhaps better give up for tonight and try again in the morning,’ said Biffo, dolefully.

‘Maybe she will have come back by then,’ suggested Lettice hopefully.

‘I doubt it,’ said Biffo, woefully.

‘You two might just as well come down this way,’ Puffy shouted up at the pair above. ‘The ceiling is a complete disaster anyway. You can’t do any more harm.’

He was wrong about that. In climbing down to the bar the two of them managed to do a good deal more damage, and to make a great deal more mess.

‘Thanks everyone,’ said Biffo, shaking hands with Daniel, Cheesy, Lettice and the plaster-covered Itchy and Herbert. ‘I think I’ll go up to bed.’

‘Have you got a spare bed I could use?’ Daniel asked Puffy.

‘Help yourself to whatever you can find,’ said Puffy. ‘There are plenty of spare rooms.’

‘Check the floor first,’ said Itchy.

‘How do I do that?’ asked Daniel.

‘Stand on it,’ said Itchy. ‘If you go through then you’ll know that the floor is rotten and you shouldn’t have gone in there.’

‘Thanks,’ said Daniel, drily.

‘Have a drink to help you sleep,’ said Puffy. ‘On the house.’

‘The usual,’ cried the regulars, in chorus.

‘I was talking to our visitor,’ said Puffy.

Daniel thought for a moment. ‘I’ll have a port, please.’

‘What sort would you like?’ asked the landlord. He looked around. ‘I’ve got Taylors, Cockburns. . .’

‘Oh, any port will do in a storm,’ interrupted Daniel.

Puffy took down a bottle, poured out a large port and handed the glass to Daniel. He then poured drinks for Biffo and the others.

‘Goodnight, Daniel,’ said Biffo, a few moments later, as Daniel tiptoed timidly into the room next to his.

‘Goodnight, Biffo,’ said Daniel. ‘Sleep well.’

‘Thanks,’ sighed Biffo. ‘I’ll try.’

Wearily and miserably Biffo, removed his sodden white coat and the rest of his soaking clothes and let them lie on the floor where they fell. More out of habit than anything else he gave his hands and face a perfunctory wash and cleaned his teeth. His towel, when he took it off the towel rail, turned out to be soaking wet. Water was still trickling through the ceiling but surprisingly, and thankfully, his bed still seemed to be dry. Biffo pulled back the covers, ready to collapse into bed.

‘Miaow!’ said a familiar and comfortable looking (dry) face, looking up at him.

‘Tiger!’ said Biffo gleefully.

And suddenly the world seemed an infinitely brighter and better place.

After giving Tiger a cuddle he rushed next door and then downstairs to tell his new chums the good news. Everyone was genuinely pleased. No one complained or said ‘You mean that we got soaked for nothing?’

It was, thought Biffo, as he climbed back up the stairs again, the first time in his life that he had real friends – people who would help him simply because they liked him and with no thought of gain for themselves - and the first time he had felt part of a real community. It felt good.

Chapter 51

When Biffo woke the next morning the rain had stopped, the sky was blue, the sun was shining brightly and the birds outside were singing gaily, puffing out their little chests and letting rip with all their favourite melodies.

But the night's heavy storm had created havoc within The Gravedigger's Rest public house. The carpets were sodden, the wallpaper was clinging to the walls with about as much enthusiasm as a politician clinging to a pre-election promise and water was still dripping through the ceilings.

Biffo said good morning to Tiger, who politely miaowed back from her temporary perch on the windowsill, squeezed and shivered into damp clothes and sensibly emptied half an inch of water from his shoes before putting them on.

Walking gingerly, in case he followed the example set by Itchy and Herbert, Biffo left his room, tiptoed along the corridor and slowly and cautiously made his way downstairs. Puffy was sitting in the public bar. He looked miserable.

'Glum, isn't it?' said Puffy. He was unshaven and bedraggled. He was sitting on a bar stool and had a glass in front of him and an almost empty bottle of whisky at his elbow. 'You should see the kitchen,' he said. 'The whole ceiling has come down. It's completely unusable.'

On the tables and floor around the bar the glasses and saucepans which had been put in position to catch the worst of the drips were all full and overflowing. Although the rain had stopped, the water which had filtered through the rooms upstairs was still leaking through the ceiling in a dozen or more places.

'You're up early,' said Biffo, doing his English best to ignore the obvious crisis and concentrate on the niceties of life. 'It's a lovely day outside.'

'Haven't been to bed,' replied Puffy, who didn't look as though he had. A loose piece of plaster fell from the ceiling and crashed onto a table behind him. The weight of the plaster tilted the table so much that it fell over. Two beer glasses full of rain water crashed to the ground. With some surprise Biffo noticed that the glasses did not break. Puffy didn't even turn round.

'What now?' asked Biffo.

'Oh, the usual!' sighed Puffy. 'The big tidy up.'

Biffo wished he could think of some way to help his new friend mend his roof. But he couldn't. He could however help in a more immediate and more practical way. 'I've got to do the deliveries for Miss Box,' he said. 'But would you like some breakfast first? I could easily pick up some bread, some marmalade and some tea and milk before I go. If you light the fire we can use one of those saucepans to boil water and make a cup of tea.'

'A cup of tea would be rather welcome,' agreed Puffy.

'And if you can find a fork or just a stick we can toast bread on the fire too,' added Biffo, heading for the door. He looked back. 'Toast and marmalade and a nice cup of tea. What more could you possibly want?'

'Sounds pretty good to me,' said Puffy. With a considerable effort he levered himself off his chair. 'I'll light a fire.'

Chapter 52

‘Did you manage to finish your cricket match before the rain started?’ asked Miss Box, who was busy carrying trays of fruit and vegetables out to the front of her shop when Biffo arrived.

‘I’m afraid not,’ admitted Biffo. ‘I’m not really sure what happened in the end. The match was more or less abandoned.’

‘Because of a little rain?’ said Miss Box, stopping what she was doing and looking up. She was clearly surprised.

‘It was very misty,’ said Biffo. ‘The bowler couldn’t see the batsman, the batsman couldn’t see the bowler and no one could see the ball.’

‘Sounds exactly like my sort of cricket match,’ said Miss Box, laying out cucumbers neatly in a row. ‘I’m glad you’re here early I’ve got a lot of deliveries for you.’

‘Er, actually, I came to pick up a few things for breakfast,’ said Biffo, feeling himself flushing slightly. ‘Quite a few ceilings collapsed in the pub during the storm last night so things are in rather a state.’ He wondered why on earth he was going red and feeling guilty.

‘Franklin never thinks of excuses as good as that,’ said Miss Box. ‘Just you remember that I start paying you when you start working.’ She picked up a brown paper bag and started filling it with plums. When the bag was nearly full she placed it on a set of old-fashioned weighing scales.

‘That’s fine,’ said Biffo.

‘That’s just as well,’ said Miss Box. She didn’t have any weights for the scales but instead used items which she had once had weighed at the butcher’s shop in Lesser Wheeping. She put a can of peaches and a small tin of sardines on the other side of the scales and then, one at a time, added half a dozen boxes of matches. For heavier items she used large tins of dog food and a salt lick. ‘So, what do you want?’ She added two more plums to the paper bag and then removed it from the scales and screwed up the top.

‘Bread, margarine, marmalade, tea and, er, sugar,’ said Biffo.

‘Sliced bread or unsliced?’ asked Miss Box.

‘We’re going to toast it, so I guess sliced would be easier,’ said Biffo.

‘No milk?’ asked Miss Box, collecting together the items Biffo had ordered.

‘Oh, yes, and a bottle of milk, please,’ said Biffo. Miss Box put a pint of milk with the other things on the counter in front of her.

‘On your account as usual?’

‘Yes please,’ said Biffo, as Miss Box popped the items he had bought into a large brown paper sack.

‘And when will I see you ready for work?’ asked Miss Box, handing him the paper sack containing the items he had ordered.

‘Less than an hour,’ shouted Biffo, already hurrying back to pub with his arms’ full of breakfast ingredients.

Chapter 53

When Biffo got back to the pub Puffy already had a magnificent looking fire going in the fireplace. He had also emptied the dirty rain water from a saucepan and refilled the pan with fresh water from the tap. And, from somewhere in the pub, he had unearthed a long-handled brass toasting fork. A teapot, a tea strainer, two mugs, two plates, two spoons and two knives were laid out on a small table.

‘Is Tiger OK?’ asked Puffy, sticking a slice of bread onto the toasting fork while Biffo struggled to balance the saucepan on the blazing fire.

‘She’s fine,’ said Biffo. ‘I feel really guilty about all that fuss last night.’

‘Don’t be,’ said Puffy. ‘The important thing is that she’s OK. Some people don’t like cats. I do.’

‘How’s Len?’

‘Oh, he’s not too bad,’ Puffy replied. ‘Rupert was right, of course. He’s got a broken arm.’ He withdrew the slice of bread he was toasting from the flames so that he could examine it. It hadn’t even started to go brown.

‘Poor old Len!’ said Biffo.

‘Oh, he’ll be OK. He’ll enjoy all the attention.’

‘I was really surprised to discover that Rupert was the local doctor,’ said Biffo. ‘He doesn’t, well, seem like a doctor. I thought he told me that he ran an antique shop.’

‘He does run an antique shop. It doubles as his waiting room.’ He examined the piece of bread again and then put it back in front of the fire.’ And what should a doctor be like?’

Biffo laughed. ‘I’m not sure,’ he admitted. ‘Maybe it would be more accurate to say that Rupert is the most unusual doctor I’ve ever met.’

Puffy looked across at him and smiled. ‘Rupert is OK,’ he said. ‘He’s a good doctor. The villagers like him.’ He examined the piece of bread yet again. This time it was beginning to go brown. The water in the saucepan began to bubble.

‘Wrap something round the handle before you try and lift that saucepan off the fire,’ warned Puffy. ‘There are some small towels behind the bar.’

Biffo did as Puffy suggested. ‘Is that piece of bread supposed to be on fire?’ he asked.

‘Damn.’ said Puffy. He shook the burnt bread off the toasting fork into the fire and then put another slice of bread onto the fork. He thought for a moment. ‘Actually,’ he said, ‘it’s a good thing to have a doctor who has another interest. He understands life a bit more than some doctors I’ve known.’

Biffo made the tea, Puffy finished making the toast and then they sat in silence for a while and ate.

‘There must be some way to get the roof repaired,’ said Biffo. He felt better with some toast and tea inside him.

‘Let me know if you think of it,’ said Puffy.

Chapter 54

‘You’re steaming!’ said Mrs Box.

‘I beg your pardon?’ said Biffo.

‘You’re steaming,’ repeated Miss Box in her very matter of fact voice. ‘Look at yourself’

Biffo looked down. It was absolutely true. Standing there in the morning sunshine he actually was steaming.

‘Are those clothes damp?’ demanded Miss Box.

‘I’m afraid so,’ admitted Biffo. ‘We lost my cat last night.’ He meant this to be an explanation but realised as he said it that as explanations go it lacked a little certain something.

‘And you were out in that storm looking for her?’ said Miss Box perceptively.

‘Yes,’ said Biffo. though to be honest it had been as wet inside the pub as it had been outside.’ He pulled at his trouser legs to separate the material from his skin. ‘The roof of The Gravedigger’s Rest isn’t terribly waterproof’

‘Did you find her?’

‘Yes. She wasn’t really lost at all.’

‘Cats never are.’

Biffo, puzzled, looked at her.

‘They may not be in the place you want them to be,’ said Miss Box. ‘But that doesn’t mean that they are lost.’ She reached across, took a corner of Biffo’s jacket in her hand and squeezed. Drops of water fell onto the ground. ‘These clothes are soaking wet. Get back to the pub and take them all off. Put on some thing dry before you get rheumatics.’

‘Er, well, there’s a bit of a problem there,’ said Biffo. ‘I’m afraid I haven’t got anything dry to change into.’ But he knew Miss Box was absolutely right and that even if he did his rounds dressed in a towel he had to get out of his wet clothes. His shirt was sticking to his back as eagerly as his trousers were sticking to his legs and he felt extremely uncomfortable. ‘I don’t suppose you have anything suitable I could buy?’

Miss Box scratched her head. ‘I don’t carry a full range of men’s clothing,’ she said, rather apologetically. ‘When my father was alive we used to carry a large range of sports jackets and flannel trousers.’ She thought for a moment, keen to help and unwilling to lose a sale. ‘But I expect I can find you something dry to put on.’

Chapter 55

The heavy-duty navy blue boiler suit Miss Box had unearthed from a large cardboard box at the back of the shop had been made for a very short man and there were four inches of bare white leg visible in between the bottom of the trousers and the top of the very short thick green woollen socks that encased Biffo's feet.

'Don't worry about the gap,' she said. 'The wellington boots will cover that.' She bent down and tugged at the material in an attempt to pull the trouser legs down a little further.

'There's a lifetime guarantee with this!' said Biffo, when he had finished wincing and had regained his balance. He was reading the label attached to the boiler suit. 'What exactly does that mean? Does it mean that it's guaranteed for my lifetime?'

'It means the suit is guaranteed until it wears out,' said Miss Box.

Biffo, who had picked up the green, rubber wellington boots which Miss Box had brought him, thought carefully about this. 'So, if it wears out tomorrow that's the end of the lifetime guarantee?'

He stood on one leg and attempted to pull on one of the wellington boots. The boots seemed a little tight.

'That's what a lifetime guarantee means,' said Miss Box, rather testily. 'You don't expect it to be guaranteed after it's worn out, do you?' Somehow what she said sounded sensible. Even if Biffo had had the courage to argue with her he wouldn't have been able to think of anything constructive to say.

Biffo, encased beneath the boiler suit in a pair of ex-officers' top quality underpants and a warm (and dry) green and brown check woollen shirt, was too grateful to question the fundamental principle of the guarantee at any length.

'Do you have a bigger size in the boots?' he asked, almost overbalancing. 'These are a little tight.'

'One size fits all,' said Miss Box. 'They don't come in different sizes.'

'One size fits all?' protested Biffo. 'But these are boots. Boots always come in different sizes.'

'Not these boots,' said Miss Box, making it quite clear that this was not a topic for further discussion.

Biffo tried again and by alternately jumping up and down and pulling as hard as he could he eventually managed to get his feet into the boots. He had to scrunch his toes together to do it.

'There you are!' said Miss Box, with her hands on her hips. 'What did I tell you?'

'One size fits all,' said Biffo, defeated.

'Exactly!' said Miss Box, gleaming.

'You're absolutely right!' said Biffo, wincing as he tried to walk. He abandoned the effort after a couple of paces and gave silent thanks for the fact that he had a bicycle to ride and would not have to travel around the village on foot.

'Let me see, now,' said Miss Box, taking a slip of paper and a stub of pencil out of her trouser pocket. 'That will be £27.50 for the boiler suit, £15.95 for the shirt, £2.50 for the officer's shorts, £3.00 for the socks and £18.45 for the boots.'

'Do you want me to charge it to your account?'

‘Yes, please,’ sighed Biffo, ‘I’m afraid so.’ He wondered how long he would have to work before he started to make a profit from his career as a delivery boy.

‘I’ll put these in the sun to dry,’ said Miss Box, hanging Biffo’s damp clothes over a low branch on a nearby tree. ‘Is there anything in the pockets that you want? Room key? Stuff like that.’ She marched off towards the shop. ‘Captain Trilby telephoned and ordered two large marrows and some mushrooms just before you came,’ she said. ‘I’ll start packing your bicycle.’

‘I don’t have a key,’ said Biffo, to the disappearing Miss Box. ‘There aren’t any keys at The Gravedigger’s Rest.’ He stopped and thought for a moment. ‘But I’d better get my notepad and pencil,’ he added, more to himself than to Miss Box.

He rummaged around in his jacket and trouser pockets until he found his notepad and pencil. The notepad was slightly damp but still useable. He also pulled out a folded and crumpled long white envelope. He stared at the envelope for a moment trying to remember where it had come from. Eventually he remembered that Edwina had given it to him the day before.

He examined it carefully. There was no return address on the back and no clue as to the sender on the front of the envelope. His name and old address were typed neatly on the front of the envelope. Eventually, with a shrug he stuck a thumb under the flap, tore open the envelope and pulled out the contents.

The envelope contained two things: a letter and a cheque. The letter was from the chief accountant at Better Television and this is what it said:

‘Dear Mr Brimstone,

The chairman of Better Television has instructed me that he has terminated your employment with this company forthwith. As per clause 15 B of your contract under which this company has to give two years notice if terminating your employment I am therefore enclosing a cheque in lieu of our salary obligations to you. The appropriate tax and national insurance contributions have been deducted from this payment. Acceptance of this cheque in full and final payment of our obligations to you will be taken as your agreement that your employment is terminated and that you have no further claim on the company.

Yours sincerely

James Tennyson

Chief Accountant

Biffo read the letter through twice before he examined the cheque. He couldn’t understand why Better Television had sent him a cheque until he remembered the chairman refusing to accept his resignation and telling him that he was fired. He felt extremely grateful for the chairman’s vanity.

He also remembered, with some relief, that the agreement he and Edwina had signed meant that every penny he now received was his to keep. Slowly, he turned the cheque over and examined it carefully

It was the largest single cheque he had ever handled. It was for £93,456.78.

He was still staring at the cheque two minutes later when Miss Box emerged from her shop clutching several of her large, stout brown paper bags (all packed right to the top) and two huge marrows.

‘Come on!’ she said, sharply. ‘I’m not paying you to stand around all day.’ She nodded to where the delivery cycle was leaning against a fence post. ‘Bring the bicycle over here so that I can pack your basket.’

Biffo stuffed the cheque into a pocket of his boiler suit and got to work.

Chapter 56

‘Oh I say! I do like the new look,’ said Lettice, when Biffo walked into the bar that evening. He remembered both the low beam and the step and felt quite proud of himself. The buckets and beer glasses had all been emptied and put away and someone had swept up most of the debris. There was very little ceiling but the bar looked tidy and almost clean.

Biffo looked at her and raised an eyebrow.

‘It’s very, er. . .’ began Lettice.

‘I think that says it all,’ agreed Biffo mournfully. ‘It’s very, er. . .’ He climbed onto a stool and ordered a pint of beer.

Biffo had had a busy day and was thirsty and hungry. He had spent the morning cycling round and round the village, constantly surprised at the appetite of the villagers for Miss Box’s stock. The bicycle delivery service which Miss Box offered made it easy for villagers to buy from her. To visit the local supermarket they had to drive or catch a bus into the nearest town. To buy from Miss Box they had only to lift up the telephone.

Twice Biffo cycled past ‘Buttercup Cottage’. And each time he paused for a few moments.

He remembered the old lady he had met on the bus which had brought him to Fondling-Under-Water. ‘If you don’t know what you want you’ll never find it,’ she had said. Biffo didn’t know whether it was luck or fate that had guided him but he now knew what he wanted. He wanted to live in Fondling-Under-Water and he wanted to live in Buttercup Cottage. He wanted to write books and become a well-established member of the cricket club and deliver groceries for Miss Box whenever Franklin Minton fell off his bicycle and injured himself

At lunchtime he took several bread rolls, a hunk of cheese and an apple with him and travelled by bus to WiddlecomeOver-The-Moor where there was a small branch of one of the big banks. He opened an account, paid in the cheque from Better Television and slept most of the way back to Fondling-Under-Water.

He spent the afternoon repeating his tour of the village, and delivering a wide range of goods to a relatively small range of villagers. After several hours of hard pedalling he returned to The Gravedigger’s Rest, fed Tiger, thought about having a bath and decided instead to go down to the bar.

‘It’s quiet tonight,’ said Biffo, looking around. This was something of an understatement since the bar was empty.

‘It’ll get busy later on,’ said Lettice. ‘The village cricket club is holding its Annual General Meeting here tonight.’

‘What time?’

‘It’s due to start at nine,’ said Lettice. ‘Can I get you anything to eat?’

‘I take it the duck is still off?’

‘I’m afraid so.’

‘Tomatoes on toast?’

‘I can do tomatoes on toast.’

Chapter 57

‘So, what sort of day did you have?’ asked Lettice, an hour or so later. The tomatoes on toast had been cooked, eaten, enjoyed and digested. The cook had been duly and appropriately complimented and had acknowledged the compliment with a glorious smile.

‘Pretty good,’ replied Biffo. ‘You know that cottage I liked?’

‘Buttercup Cottage?’

‘That’s the one. Is it still for sale?’

‘Yes, of course,’ said Lettice with a surprised laugh. ‘Property around here doesn’t sell that quickly.’

‘I pedalled past it today. Twice. I really do like it. Do you think I might be able to have a look inside?’

‘Of course! We can go round tomorrow if you like. The Trubshaws who own it have the keys. I’ll give them a ring.’

‘Thanks. That would be wonderful.’

‘It would be lovely if you could buy it,’ said Lettice. ‘I can just see you living there.’

‘I was rather thinking that I might, well, you know, make a sort of offer,’ said Biffo

‘Really!’ said Lettice, genuinely excited. ‘That’s terrific!’ She picked up the telephone and began to dial. ‘I’ll ring the Trubshaws and see if they’re in.’ She paused. ‘So you’re going to stay in the village, then?’

‘Yes,’ said Biffo.

‘I don’t mean to be rude,’ said Lettice. ‘But how, er, can you raise the money? I only ask because the other day you said you were completely broke. Did your wife agree to let you have half the house? Oh, hello Aunt Moira! It’s Lettice. I’m ringing with my estate agent’s hat on. I’ve got someone who wants to look around Buttercup Cottage. Yes, he’s a serious buyer. His name is Mr. . .er. . .’ Lettice put a hand across the telephone mouth piece and looked across at Biffo. ‘Sorry,’ she whispered, ‘I’ve forgotten your second name.’

‘Brimstone,’ said Biffo.

Lettice lifted her hand from the telephone mouthpiece.

‘Mr Brimstone,’ she said to the person at the other end of the telephone. ‘Now? I don’t see why not. I’ll have a word with him.’ She put her hand across the telephone mouthpiece again.

‘Moira Trubshaw – she and her husband own the cottage – says if you want to go round now you can pick up the keys this evening. Is that OK?’

‘That’s great!’ said Biffo. ‘Is it far?’

‘Just a few yards down the lane,’ Lettice said to Biffo. ‘I’ll tell you how to get there. I’d really love to come with you but Puffy has disappeared and I can’t leave the bar.’

‘I’ll go and get the keys and then perhaps we can go and see it tomorrow?’ suggested Biffo.

`Wonderful!’ said Lettice. She took her hand away from the mouthpiece. ‘Mr Brimstone will be right round for the keys,’ she said. She gossiped a little, mentioned the fact that she had seen her ex-husband the day before, agreed that the weather was very changeable, asked Moira to pass on her best wishes to her husband, said goodbye at least three times and eventually put the telephone down. ‘Right!’ she said. ‘You can’t miss their cottage. You turn left out of the pub, take the first right. . .’

‘. . .down towards two large wholemeal loaves, three pints of milk and a copy of the Daily Telegraph?’

Lettice laughed. ‘I beg your pardon?’

‘You probably know it as White Gables Farm,’ said Biffo.

‘That’s right.’ said Lettice. ‘What was all that other stuff about. . .?’

‘That’s their daily order from Miss Box’s shop.’

‘Oh? Really? Well, go down there for a quarter of a mile and then take the second on the left. . .’

‘The lane that goes down to one small Hovis loaf, a copy of The Times and a pint of milk?’

Lettice just looked at him.

‘Major Cranberry.’

‘Absolutely right!’ laughed Lettice. ‘I’m very impressed.’

‘I’ve been learning while I ride,’ explained Biffo. ‘Did you know that Major Cranberry sends all his clothes to the laundry? Even his socks and ties?’

‘No,’ said Lettice. ‘I confess I didn’t know that. I’ve never known anyone who sent ties to a laundry.’

‘I probably shouldn’t have told you that,’ said Biffo, leaning across the bar and lowering his voice. ‘It’s probably highly confidential. Do you think there is a confidentiality oath for bicycle delivery boys? Do you think I could be removed from the saddle for revealing trade secrets?’

‘I don’t expect so,’ giggled Lettice. ‘But if there is a confidentiality code, Major Cranberry’s little peccadillo is safe with me.’

‘So how far past Major Cranberry’s place is the Trubshaw’s cottage?’

‘Oh, about two hundred yards. On the left.’

‘Is it a pink cottage? With a tumbledown lean-to with a corrugated iron roof hanging onto one side of it?’

‘That’s the one!’

‘You’ve only been down that lane in a car, haven’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘That pink cottage is more like a quarter of a mile past Major Cranberry’s,’ said Biffo, sternly. He got up from the bar stool upon which he had been sitting and looked at his watch. ‘I’ll be back soon,’ he said. ‘If I’m not back in a week send out a search party.’

Lettice said she would.

‘Oh, by the way,’ said Biffo, heading for the door, ‘in answer to your question, my wife didn’t give me half the house - in fact, she didn’t she give me anything. I’ve got some money to buy the cottage because I found a cheque for £93,000 this morning.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Lettice, puzzled.

‘What do you mean, what do I mean?’

‘How did you just happen to find a cheque for £93,000?’

‘It was in my trouser pocket.’

‘How did it get there?’

‘I put it there.’

‘You put a cheque for £93,000 into your trouser pocket and forgot about it?’

‘I put the envelope into my pocket. I didn’t know it contained a cheque for £93,000.’

‘Oh,’ said Lettice. ‘I know what you mean. You’d be surprised at how often that happens to me. I’m always putting envelopes into my bag and finding out afterwards that they contain cheques for £93,000.’

‘It was an unexpected redundancy cheque,’ explained Biffo.

‘That was pretty decent of your former employers! But why was the cheque unexpected? Surely they didn’t just send you a cheque for £93,000 without telling you about it?’

‘I walked out and so they really didn’t have to pay me anything,’ said Biffo.

Lettice was clearly puzzled. ‘Why did they pay you if they didn’t have to?’

‘Because the boss wanted to be able to say that he sacked me,’ explained Biffo.

‘What odd people there must be working in television!’

‘There certainly are.’

Lettice blushed. ‘Oh, I say, I didn’t intend that to be rude.’

‘I know,’ laughed Biffo. ‘It’s OK’

‘Do you mind that he can say he sacked you?’

‘Not in the slightest,’ said Biffo. ‘Especially since he bought the privilege with a rather generous cheque.’ He pointed to a stock of chocolate bars and small packets of biscuits which Puffy kept behind the bar. ‘Would you give me one of those small packets of biscuits, please? I still feel a bit peckish.’ Lettice handed over the biscuits which Biffo stuffed into one of his pockets.

‘Don’t forget the cricket club Annual General Meeting,’ said Lettice as Biffo left. ‘It’s due to start at nine.’

Biffo, just about to leave the bar, turned to acknowledge Lettice’s reminder. As he did so he remembered the step but forgot the beam. He stopped, cursed quietly, rubbed his aching head, turned and watched while Lettice took out the slate from underneath the bar-counter.

‘Does that count?’ he asked. ‘You distracted me.’

‘It counts,’ said Lettice.

‘Bye, Lettice,’ Biffo said.

‘Bye, Biffo,’ Lettice replied. ‘Mind how you go.’

Chapter 58

Outside, it was a beautiful evening. The sun was deep orange and low in the sky. Biffo's legs were stiff after a full day in the saddle and he was looking forward to a walk through the village. Overhead the birds were settling down in the trees for the night. In the fields around him rabbits were racing about innocently, playing games and having fun.

The lanes of Fondling-Under-Water were deserted and Biffo strolled in peace and safety towards the Trubshaw's cottage. As he walked Biffo took out the small packet of biscuits he had stuffed in his pocket. With some considerable difficulty he eventually managed to open the cellophane packet.

He was chewing a rather tasty ginger biscuit, and reflecting on the thought that, all things considered, life really wasn't all that bad after all when he heard a noise behind him. He turned and was surprised to see a sheep trotting along the middle of the lane, just a few yards behind him.

'Get back to your field!' he said sternly to the ewe. 'You'll get run over.'

As he said it he realised that this was, in many ways, a pretty empty threat. The ewe faced a far more certain death if she went back to her field than if she continued to trot along the road. On an impulse he took a biscuit out of the packet he was holding, stopped, turned, and offered the biscuit to the ewe. She too stopped and stood a yard or two away from him, staring at him rather nervously.

'It's OK,' said Biffo. 'It's a biscuit. You can eat it.'

The ewe, curious but still nervous, edged forward a few inches. Biffo shuffled back in the ewe's direction and held his arm out a little straighter. The ewe moved forward another six inches.

They continued this peculiar food-based courtship for a couple of minutes and then, at last, the ewe managed to overcome her fear and take the biscuit from Biffo's hand.

'Now, you'd better go back,' said Biffo firmly, when the biscuit had disappeared and the ewe had eventually stopped munching.

The ewe, who had huge mournful eyes, just stared at him. Biffo turned and continued the remainder of his walk to the Trubshaw's cottage. Every few yards he turned round to see if the sheep was still there. She was.

The ewe was still there, just a few yards behind him, when he approached the Trubshaw's tiny cottage. And, despite his appeals, she was still there when, in the absence of bell or knocker, he used his knuckles on the Trubshaw's door to announce his arrival.

A rustic name plate, hand-made out of a slice of tree trunk, informed callers that the name of the cottage was 'Dunbattin'.It seemed a fair guess that Mr Trubshaw had, in his youth, played for the Fondling-Under-Water cricket team.

'Come in!' said the tiny woman who answered the door. She was dressed in a smart tweed skirt and a pale pink blouse and Biffo guessed that she was probably in her eighties (give or take a decade). Biffo was rather surprised to see that despite the fact that it was a warm evening she wore three cardigans. The outer one was beige and had large patch pockets on the front. This one was unbuttoned. The middle cardigan was brown and one of the buttons was fastened. The inner cardigan was pale blue and all the buttons were fastened. On her feet she wore huge sheepskin slippers.

'My name is Brimstone,' said Biffo. 'I've come for the key for Buttercup Cottage.'

‘You’re Mr Brimstone,’ shouted Mrs Trubshaw. ‘You’ve come for the key for Buttercup Cottage. Come in and have some cake and a cup of tea.’ She peered around Biffo at the ewe which was standing in the lane outside. ‘Come on sheepie,’ she added. ‘It’ll be cold out there.’ When she spoke to the sheep she lowered her voice to a normal talking level. Biffo decided that the sheep must belong to her and Mr Trubshaw. He knew that some people living in the country did keep sheep as pets.

Biffo walked into the cottage and into a small room that was clearly used as a living room. To his surprise the lonely sheep followed him. She seemed to know where she was going. The room was crammed with furniture and with a fire blazing in the hearth it was as hot as a sauna.

Biffo, wondered if the sheep was allowed into the living room. He tried to turn the sheep round. But the ewe was heavy and determined and behind him Mrs Trubshaw had already shut the front door.

‘You aren’t cold, dear, are you?’ shouted Mrs Trubshaw, closing the door to the living room.

‘No, no,’ said Biffo, unzipping the front of his boiler suit and wiping sweat from his brow. ‘I’m, fine thanks.’ He wanted to say something about the sheep but couldn’t think of anything appropriate. Mrs Trubshaw seemed quite unperturbed by the sheep’s presence and Biffo was relieved by this. The sheep seemed to feel at home.

‘This is Mr Trubshaw,’ shouted Mrs Trubshaw, waving an arm in the direction of a large, red-faced man of eighty something who sat or, more accurately, lay in an easy chair beside the fire. He was wearing a thick, three piece woollen suit, a shirt and a tie, highly-polished, black lace up shoes and a green flat cap with a finger-stained peak. His left knee was about a foot away from the blaze. He was watching a quiz programme on an old-fashioned television set which was equipped with a twelve inch screen. The programme appeared to be set in a community hall. The sound was switched off.

‘Mr Brimstone, dear,’ shouted Mrs Trubshaw.

The sheep was eating a hand-embroidered tablecloth which was hanging enticingly at mouth level.

‘I’m not deaf,’ shouted the old man.

‘What?’

‘I’m not deaf’ shouted the old man, so loudly that Biffo had to shake his head to get rid of the noise.

‘Of course you are!’ insisted Mrs Trubshaw, loudly. She shuffled away into a small kitchen at the back of the cottage.

The old man turned towards Biffo. ‘She’s as deaf as a post so she thinks everyone else is deaf,’ he said. He frowned. ‘Who are you?’ he demanded.

‘Brimstone,’ said Biffo. ‘I just came for the key to Buttercup Cottage.’ He couldn’t help staring at the television screen. A young woman in a very short dress was talking to the camera. She seemed rather nervous. Two groups of four people stood behind them both. One group of four consisted of celebrities whom Biffo vaguely recognised. The other four people were very clearly ordinary members of the public. The young woman bore an uncanny resemblance to someone he knew but he couldn’t quite remember who it was.

‘Ah,’ said the old man. He pointed to a chair the other side of the fireplace. ‘Sit down.’

Biffo sat down and tried to keep his knees as far away from the fire as possible. He peered at the television set again.

The old woman returned from the kitchen carrying a large, empty metal tray. She put the empty tray down on a low table directly in front of the fire.

‘The fire is going out!’ yelled Mr Trubshaw, pointing to the fire which was blazing strongly and seemed to Biffo to have several hours’ life left in it. He grabbed his wife’s arm and, thereby, her attention. ‘It needs more wood!’ he said, pointing to the fire.

‘Are you cold?’ Mrs Trubshaw asked Biffo.

‘No, no!’ cried Biffo. The sweat was now dripping off his forehead into his eyes and off his chin down onto his new boiler suit.

‘He always wants more wood on the fire,’ shouted Mrs Trubshaw, nodding towards her husband. She shuffled off towards the kitchen again. ‘He thinks it grows on trees,’ she muttered to herself She turned, just before she disappeared. ‘You think wood grows on trees!’ she shouted. Mr Trubshaw, vaguely aware that his wife had spoken, nodded and smiled at her.

The sheep, having destroyed the hand-embroidered tablecloth, had now turned its attention to an antimacassar on the arm of Biffo’s chair. Biffo tried to pull the antimacassar out of range but the sheep already had a firm hold on the material and the more Biffo pulled the more determined the sheep became. Eventually, Biffo decided that he was doing more harm than good and he let go. The sheep, still pulling, shot off backwards into a glass fronted china cabinet, causing a considerable amount of damage and embarrassing Biffo greatly.

‘Where’s the key then?’ asked Mr Trubshaw.

Biffo was puzzled. ‘Er, I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘Which key is that?’

‘The key to Buttercup Cottage,’ said Mr Trubshaw. ‘My wife said you’ve brought it back.’

‘No,’ said Biffo. ‘I’ve come to collect it.’

‘Ah,’ nodded Mr Trubshaw, sagely. ‘You’re locked out again.’

Biffo glanced at the television set. He suddenly remembered the identity of the woman on the screen. It was Voluptua Bradshaw, the secretary he had shared with his friend ‘Streaky’ Bacon. She was waving and blowing kisses at the camera.

Mrs Trubshaw emerged from the kitchen carrying one cup and a saucer. She placed the cup and the saucer on the tray.

Biffo, now standing, pointed to the shattered china cabinet. ‘I’m terribly sorry,’ he said. ‘The sheep. . .’

‘Oh dear!’ shouted Mrs Trubshaw. ‘Is the poor thing all right?’

‘Did you try a ladder?’ asked Mr Trubshaw. ‘I once climbed in through a bathroom window when I had locked myself out.’ He thought about this for a while. ‘Mind you, I was younger then,’ he confessed.

‘Yes, dear,’ shouted Mrs Trubshaw, smiling at him, and patting his arm. ‘It’s a very nice sheep,’ she said to Biffo. ‘Sit down I’ll bring you some cake.’ She disappeared.

‘And thinner I expect,’ said Mr Trubshaw.

Biffo gave up and sat down. The credits for the quiz programme were finishing. He watched the screen. The final credit was one he recognised. ‘Directed and Produced by Frank Bacon’. His friend hadn’t wasted any time in starting his new career.

‘Are you warm enough?’ Mr Trubshaw asked him.

Mrs Trubshaw reappeared from the kitchen, carrying a large plate upon which there stood half of a very large fruit cake. The cake was covered in a thick layer of what looked at first glance like blue icing but which, Biffo could see, was actually mould.

Mrs Trubshaw carefully put the cake down on the metal tray. She then returned to the kitchen.

‘I feel the cold,’ said Mr Trubshaw.

‘Yes.’ agreed Biffo, who had worked this out for himself

The sheep was now chewing one of the curtains. Biffo tried not to look.

Mrs Trubshaw reappeared from the kitchen carrying a tea pot. She poured tea from the pot into the cup and handed the cup to Biffo.

‘Thank you,’ said Biffo, taking the cup. Something seemed odd but he couldn’t quite put his finger on it. When he lifted the cup to his mouth he realised what it was. Mrs Trubshaw had forgotten to heat the water and the tea was stone cold.

Mrs Trubshaw disappeared.

‘Aren’t you having a cup of tea?’ Biffo asked Mr Trubshaw.

‘Oh no,’ said Mr Trubshaw. ‘She always forgets to boil the water.’

‘Ah,’ said Biffo, nodding.

The sheep, still chewing the curtain, paused for a moment to do what sheep do but usually in fields.

‘Having a sheep in the house must cause quite a lot of damage,’ said Biffo.

‘Yes,’ agreed Mr Trubshaw. ‘I would think so.’

Mrs Trubshaw reappeared carrying a small plate and a large knife. She cut a large slice of cake and placed it on the small plate. ‘Have some cake,’ she shouted.

‘Oh, that’s very kind of you but I don’t think I could,’ said Biffo. ‘I ate at the pub just before I came out.’

‘How’s your tea?’ asked Mrs Trubshaw, smiling at him.

‘Very nice, thank you,’ said Biffo. He took a sip and smiled back at her. ‘Lettice said you would let me have the key to Buttercup Cottage,’ he reminded her.

‘Oh, the key!’ she shouted. ‘Why didn’t you remind me, you silly thing. I nearly forgot the key.’ She looked around. ‘Now where did I put it?’ She picked up the small plate, together with its cargo of mould encrusted cake, and handed it to Biffo. ‘Eat your cake,’ she shouted, before shuffling off to the far side of the room and starting to rummage in the top drawer of an old bureau.

Biffo looked around, trying to think of a way to dispose of the cake. He looked across at Mr Trubshaw who had fallen asleep and was now snoring quietly. Without hesitating Biffo tossed the whole piece of cake onto the fire. The reaction was instantaneous. It was as though he had thrown a cup full of petrol onto the flames.

‘Here you are, dear!’ shouted Mrs Trubshaw, holding out two keys dangling on a piece of string. ‘Oh, you’ve finished your cake. Would you like some more?’

Biffo beamed broadly, stood up and took the proffered keys. ‘Oh, no thank you!’ he said. ‘I really couldn’t. But thank you.’ He paused, thought for a moment and hesitated. He didn’t like telling fibs. ‘It was delicious,’ he lied.

Mrs Trubshaw smiled.

Biffo felt instantly relieved of guilt. He headed for the door, stepping over the debris which lay in front of the shattered china cabinet.

‘Let me pay you for the damage,’ he said. ‘It was partly my fault that the sheep backed into the cabinet.’

‘Pardon?’ shouted Mrs Trubshaw.

‘I want to pay you for the damage,’ shouted Biffo.

‘What damage?’ asked Mrs Trubshaw, frowning.

‘Goodbye,’ sighed Biffo, holding out a hand. ‘Thank you.’

‘Our pleasure, dear,’ said Mrs Trubshaw. ‘It was lovely to see you. Give our love to Lettice.’ She smiled at him again. ‘Don’t forget your sheep,’ she said.

Biffo went quite cold and stared at her. ‘I beg your pardon?’ he said.

‘Your sheep,’ said Mrs Trubshaw. ‘Don’t forget your sheep.’

‘It’s not my sheep,’ said Biffo, trying not to sound as hysterical as he felt. ‘It’s your sheep.’

‘Oh we couldn’t,’ said Mrs Trubshaw. ‘It’s very nice of you, dear, but we couldn’t. You must keep it.’

Biffo stood outside in the lane while Mrs Trubshaw skilfully shooed the sheep out of the living room and out of the cottage.

‘Bye!’ she shouted, standing on the doorstep and waving to him.

‘I thought. . .,’ began Biffo. ‘The sheep. . .’ he said. ‘I’m sorry. . .’ he apologised. ‘The damage. . .he said. ‘Let me pay for everything. . .’ he pleaded. The sheep stood beside him in the lane, chewing on an antimacassar she had brought with her as she had been ejected.

‘It was lovely to meet you both!’ shouted Mrs Trubshaw. She lowered her voice, clearly now talking to herself. ‘Such a lovely couple,’ she muttered.

As Biffo walked back to the pub he had an idea for a way to help get the roof of The Gravedigger’s Rest mended.

Chapter 59

When Biffo walked back into the bar at The Gravedigger's Rest the Fondling-Under-Water cricket club Annual General Meeting was just about to start. The great Don Bradman would have been impressed by his perfect timing. Biffo had walked back briskly, pausing only to slip into the village telephone box and telephone his friend and former colleague Streaky Bacon at home.

Biffo's new friend, the antimacassar-loving ewe, had followed him all the way back to the pub but Biffo had managed to slip through the front door, leaving the ewe outside. The ewe had, for the first time since their meeting, made a few loud noises of protest. However, finding herself on a stretch of lush grass on the infrequently cut verge outside the pub she had settled down for a spot of grazing. Sheep, whatever their breed, have two strong qualities: an ability to turn long grass into short grass and endless supplies of patience.

Bill Stickers, Paddy Fields and an elderly, tall, extremely slender man who had a pince-nez balanced precariously on the end of a generously proportioned nose were sitting on three chairs at the far end of the bar.

The tall, slender man with the generously proportioned nose, who was sitting in the middle of the trio, was wearing a dark green tweed jacket together with a matching pair of plus twos, a checked shirt, a large floppy green bow tie that looked such a mess that it had obviously been hand tied, a pair of knee length green socks and (evidence that his memory was not quite as good as it had once been) a pair of red velvet slippers. He had a large, red and white spotted handkerchief tucked into the breast pocket of his jacket and from time to time he provided loud practical evidence that this handkerchief had a functional as well as a decorative value.

In honour of the importance of the occasion Bill and Paddy were both wearing a suits. Most of the rest of the village (and all of the cricket team) were sitting, standing, lounging or leaning around the rest of the bar. No one else wore a suit or a tie.

'I know Paddy and Bill,' whispered Biffo to Lettice, who was standing, arms folded, at the end of the bar furthest away from the trio. 'But who is the odd looking chap in the middle?

'He isn't odd,' whispered Lettice. 'He's a Lord so he's eccentric.' She paused to give Biffo a chance to understand this social nuance. 'That's Lord Hepplewhite,' she explained. 'He's the club patron.'

When he saw Biffo enter Paddy immediately stood up and walked across towards him. 'Just the fellow I wanted to see,' said the club vice-captain, approaching Biffo with what Biffo immediately recognised as the smile of a man who wants something but doesn't have terribly much to offer in return. Biffo instinctively recoiled, rather hoping that Paddy's remark had been aimed at someone else. It hadn't of course.

'Are you free on Saturday?' Paddy asked, when he finally had Biffo pinned up against the dartboard.

'Saturday?'

'Saturday,' agreed Paddy, widening his smile and putting a hand on Biffo's shoulder in a friendly, 'Let's be the very best of chums' sort of gesture. 'We have a match that day and the captain and I wondered if you might be free?'

'Ah,' said Biffo, hesitantly. He wasn't at all sure that he wanted to be an umpire again.

'I'm not entirely sure that I'm cut out for umpiring,' he said at last. He decided to try and take the seriousness out of the moment with a little humour. 'I'm not sure that I have the finger for it,' he added, diffidently holding up the index finger of his right hand and examining it critically. 'I think a successful umpire needs a finger with rather more bite to it, don't you?'

'Oh you misunderstand,' said Paddy quickly. 'We don't want you to umpire. We want you to play!'

This was unexpected and for the 23,458th time in his life Biffo didn’t really know what to say. It sometimes seemed to him that he spent most of his life not knowing what to say. It was a constant disappointment to him that a bon mot was invariably an afterthought. He would usually think of a sharp retort a week, or more often two weeks, too late.

‘We’re playing a charity match on Saturday and now that Len’s injured we’re short of a player,’ said Paddy.

‘And if you’re half as bad a cricketer as you are an umpire,’ said Len who had wandered over with Paddy, ‘I won’t have to worry about getting my place back when this damned bone has mended.’ Len had his arm in a plaster cast and a sling.

‘Ah,’ said Biffo, conscious of the fact that he was beginning to sound rather simple minded.

‘Would you say you’re primarily a batsman or a bowler?’ asked Paddy. ‘Wicket keeper?’ he added, hopefully.

‘I’m not really much of a batsman or a bowler,’ admitted Biffo, with rare honesty. ‘To be honest it’s been a while since I. . .’

‘All rounder then!’ said Paddy, beaming.

‘I would have thought so,’ said Biffo, cautiously. ‘Perhaps,’ he added.

‘What sort of stuff do you think you might bowl?’

‘Well, er, probably not too fast, and not spinning very much,’ said Biffo. He held an imaginary ball in his hand and brought his arm over as though about to bowl a ball. ‘Sort of like that, I guess,’ he said. He tried to smile but it didn’t feel quite right and he suspected that what he had produced was probably closer to a grimace.

‘Bat?’

‘Oh I would imagine so,’ nodded Biffo. ‘Although I have to confess that it’s been quite a time since I, er, batted,’ he warned.

‘We’ll perhaps give you a net,’ said Paddy. ‘See how you get on. Help you with a few bits of advice if necessary.’

‘I rather think he’d be better off if you gave him one of those wooden things,’ said Rupert who was standing nearby.

Everyone looked at him but no one laughed or spoke.

‘A bat,’ explained Rupert. ‘He’d be better off with a bat.’ Still no one laughed or spoke.

‘Better off with a bat than with a net,’ said Rupert.

The silence continued.

‘It was a joke,’ said Rupert.

‘Thank you, Rupert,’ said Paddy.

Rupert sighed. ‘Bloody philistines around here have got no sense of humour at all.’

‘I think I’d probably rather just get thrown in at the deep end,’ said Biffo who suspected that if lots of people gave him advice he would simply end up feeling extremely confused. ‘But who will umpire?’ he asked, suddenly feeling an entirely mistaken sense of loyalty towards his former post.

‘Oh don’t you worry about that!’ said Paddy. ‘We can get anyone to umpire.’ As soon as he had spoken he obviously realised that he had not been entirely tactful. ‘Not that it isn’t a skilled position, of course,’ he added. ‘I meant to have a word with you after the last match and congratulate you on the way you handled a very difficult set of circumstances.’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said Biffo, diffidently. He felt himself blushing like a small schoolboy being praised by a master.

‘Shall I put you down for six?’ asked Paddy. ‘Perhaps seven?’

Biffo, who wasn’t sure whether this was a time or a donation failed to hide his confusion. ‘Er, six. . .er. . .seven, er. . .?’

‘Batting order,’ explained Paddy. He thought for a moment or two. ‘Perhaps you’d be happier at seven? Give you a chance to get a good look at the opposition bowling!’

‘Good idea!’ agreed Biffo, nodding his agreement. ‘Very good idea.’

‘Splendid,’ said Paddy. ‘Splendid!’ He took a small notebook from his jacket pocket, opened it, carefully made a note in it and then closed it and put it away again. He did everything slowly and meticulously. He nodded at Biffo and then walked back to the table where he resumed his position alongside Cedric ‘Bill’ Stickers and Lord Hepplewhite.

As soon as the vice-captain had sat down Bill, who had clearly been waiting for him, stood up and cleared his throat noisily. He did not look well. He had had a drink or two to settle his nerves but he hadn’t had quite enough to drink to soothe away the guilt he felt. His face was pale and he did not look as confident as he normally did. The cough was clearly an attempt to show that the meeting was about to start. Unfortunately, no one took any notice of him. He took the teaspoon from the saucer of the cup of coffee in front of him and attempted to bang it on the table. Unfortunately, although the table was large and the spoon was small, he completely missed the former with the latter.

‘Isn’t Bill the club patron?’ whispered Biffo, resuming his conversation with Lettice.

Lord Hepplewhite raised one hand in a diffident but nevertheless imperious gesture, as though summoning a waiter in his club. The response was instantaneous. Everyone fell silent.

‘No.’ whispered Lettice. ‘Bill is everything else but he isn’t the club patron. They made Lord Hepplewhite the club patron when Bill bought the cricket field and took over as president.’

Bill cleared his throat again. ‘The first item on this evening’s agenda is the club’s intended purchase of a lawnmower,’ he announced.

Puffy, who was standing next to Lettice, spoke. ‘Where does Bill get his suits?’ he whispered. Neither he nor Lettice were busy, despite the fact that the bar was crowded. Everyone present had stocked up with drinks, crisps, pork scratchings, peanuts and all the other essentials before the meeting had started. (‘I don’t want any of those new-fangled natural foods,’ said Jack Hobbs when examining the ingredients list on a packet of crisps. `At my age I need all the preservatives I can get.’)

‘Some of you will know our present lawn mowing machine has for some time been prone to reliability problems,’ said Bill. ‘Our groundsman, Mr. . . er. . .ltchy. . .Mr. . .Hedrubb, has done magnificent work in keeping the mower in active service for as long as he has.’

This remark was greeted with a modest amount of applause and several members of the Fondling-Under-Water cricket club made pertinent observations of their own.

‘I don’t think that shade of brown poplin has ever been particularly fashionable,’ whispered Puffy.

Lettice, responding to Puffy’s remark, giggled. She was a nice giggler. Some grown women giggle like little girls, which can be slightly disturbing. Some women snort when they giggle, and that can be even more disturbing. But to Biffo Lettice’s giggle seemed natural and cute. Biffo loved it when she giggled.

‘Don’t be bitchy!’ she whispered, admonishing her uncle. ‘Bill doesn’t need to look rich because he is rich.’

‘I now call upon the Fondling-Under-Water cricket club ground committee chairman and senior groundsman, Itchy, to say a few impromptu remarks on the subject of the lawnmower,’ said Bill. He sat back down on his chair. He really did not look well. He looked as though he was burdened by a huge secret, which, of course, he was but since it was a secret no one knew this.

‘What can I get you to drink?’ Puffy whispered to Biffo.

‘I’ll have a whisky, please,’ replied Biffo, equally quietly. ‘I’ve just had a rather nerve-wracking experience. In fact,’ he added, ‘I think I’ve had several nerve-wracking experiences. A Macallan. A double, please.’

Itchy, who had been leaning against the wall next to the fireplace, pushed himself upright and coughed rather nervously. He was not a man who would describe himself as an accomplished public speaker and in his right hand he held a thick sheaf of paper which he held up. It was clear that these were his notes for his impromptu remarks. He cleared his throat several times and asked to be given a glass of water. Naturally, no one in the pub had a glass containing water. Someone called across to Puffy to fill a glass with water and send it across.

‘How did you get on with the Trubshaws?’ whispered Lettice as Puffy stopped work on Biffo’s malt whisky and busied himself with the water tap and a glass.

‘Mrs Trubshaw sent you her love,’ whispered Biffo. ‘Is she really your aunt?’

‘Oh no, not really. I just call her auntie. Aren’t they both sweet?’

‘Er. . .yes, I suppose so,’ agreed Biffo, although he wasn’t entirely sure that this was the most suitable adjective he could think of.

‘Some people think she’s a bit dotty,’ said Lettice. ‘But she’s lovely and really quite quick-witted in her own way. A couple of years ago a locum GP who visited her was so worried about her that he sent her to see a psychiatrist. I can’t imagine why but the psychiatrist asked her for the name of the Prime Minister. ‘Does it matter?’ Aunt Moira asked. ‘They’re all the same, aren’t they?’ The psychiatrist didn’t know what to say to that. He wrote and told the GP that he wasn’t sure whether Mrs Trubshaw was completely batty or the sanest person he’d ever met.’ A sudden thought occurred to Lettice. ‘You didn’t eat any of Aunt Moira’s cake, did you?’

‘No,’ said Biffo.

‘That’s good,’ said Lettice, clearly relieved. ‘Did you get the keys?’

Biffo took the keys out of his pocket and held them up.

Puffy had now filled the glass with water and it was making its way across the room to where Itchy was waiting for it.

‘What keys are those?’ asked Puffy.

Lettice explained.

‘Lovely place,’ whispered Puffy, putting Biffo’s double malt whisky down on the counter. ‘Needs a little restoration work, of course.’

‘Are you sure you want me to come with you tomorrow?’ asked Lettice. ‘I’ll be happy to show you round and answer any questions you have but if you’d rather go by yourself that’s fine.’

‘I’d love it if you showed me round!’ said Biffo. ‘Thanks!’

The glass of water had now reached Itchy who took a sip and put the glass down on a nearby window sill.

‘Thank you, Mr President,’ Itchy yelled. He spoke very loudly, as though addressing a large open air audience. He bowed slightly in the direction of Lord Hepplewhite.

‘Your Lordship.’ He stopped for a moment and took another sip from the glass of water. ‘I would like to begin by saying what an honour and. . .’, he paused and looked hard at the piece of paper he was holding. ‘I would like to begin by saying what an honour and a. . .’, he paused again and carefully studied the piece of paper he was holding.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Rupert Fitzwalter.

‘I can’t read this word,’ said Itchy. He brought his voice down from a yell to a shout and showed the doctor the piece of paper he was holding. ‘There’s an oil stain on it.’

Rupert studied the paper for a moment. ‘It’s a surprise,’ he said.

Itchy stared at him, puzzled.

‘The words are ‘a surprise’.’

Itchy looked at the piece of paper again. ‘Are they?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes.’

‘OK,’ sighed Itchy. He cleared his throat, took another sip of water and began again. ‘I would like to begin by saying what an honour and a surprise it was when the club president unexpectedly invited me to speak at this meeting,’ he yelled. ‘As chairman of the ground committee I have to report that the Fondling-Under-Water cricket club lawn mowing machine has suffered a total of 78 separate instances of total mechanical or electrical malfunction during the twelve months of the year which have passed since our last Annual General Meeting which was held, er. . .,’

At this point Itchy paused and turned over the piece of paper from which he was reading.

‘. . .a year ago.’

Itchy looked around the room to make sure that this information had been absorbed by his audience. There was a good deal of thoughtful nodding and some tutting and many lips were pursed. Itchy seemed satisfied by this response. ‘Malfunction means it broke down,’ he said, feeling confident enough to ad lib a little. This much needed translation was well received.

‘As chairman of the ground committee of the FondlingUnder-Water cricket club I authorised myself, in my position as head groundsman of the Fondling-Under-Water cricket club, to commission and authorise an outside examination and appraisal of the machine’s condition and capabilities,’ yelled Itchy. He paused, took a deep breath and lost his place in his notes. ‘As chairman of the ground committee,’ he began again, ‘I authorised myself, in my position as head groundsman, to commission and authorise. . .’ at this point Itchy realised that he was reading something he had already read. He stopped, frowned and read on silently for a few moments.

‘Give us a song and dance, Itchy!’ shouted some would be wag from a dark corner of the room. The would be wag was shushed by Itchy’s friends and many sympathisers.

Itchy ignored this inappropriate request and continued to read his notes. He concentrated so hard on doing this that when he got to the bit he hadn’t read out he forgot to stop reading in silence and start reading out loud. After two or three minutes of total silence the audience became a little restless and the would be wag who had invited Itchy to perform a song and dance gained fresh courage and repeated his request. This time the request received more support from other members of the audience. Someone standing next to Itchy nudged him and whispered something in his ear.

Itchy blushed, coughed, took another sip of water and began again to share his notes with his audience.

‘The outside experts commissioned by myself in my capacity as chairman of the ground committee of the Fondling-Under-Water cricket club duly and subsequently subjected the said machine to an exhaustive mechanical and electrical overhaul and eventually, after some considerable consideration, came to the regrettable conclusion that the machine was, and is, in an irrep. . .’ Itchy stumbled over this bit and tried again, ‘in an irrepeparepara. . .’ he tried again, ‘in an irreparabab. . .’ he stopped, licked his lips, shrugged his shoulders, paused, sighed, looked around and then carried on. ‘The fact is,’ he said, lowering his voice by fifty or sixty decibels, ‘that it’s a twenty five year old pile of crap that ain’t worth the mending of’. He looked around and shrugged. ‘In non-technical language it’s buggered.’

At this point Lord Hepplewhite, who had developed cramp in his right leg, suddenly decided to stand up to exercise his muscles and try to get rid of the cramp. There was much scraping of chairs and stools as the rest of the audience stood up out of politeness. The Fondling-Under-Water Cricket Club was no republican hot bed. The members had never been visited by the Queen but they had Lord Hepplewhite and in Her Britannic Majesty’s absence they were more than happy to treat him with the respect they would have shown to her.

Itchy, who thought he was getting the beginnings of a standing ovation, paused, blushed a little and tried not to look embarrassed.

‘You used to work in London, didn’t you?’ whispered Puffy to Biffo.

Biffo agreed that this was true.

‘Do you know how a chap would set about getting an export licence for flies?’

Lord Hepplewhite managed to get rid of his cramp. He sat down again. Everyone who had stood up out of respect for him also sat down again.

Biffo, who wasn’t entirely sure that he had heard correctly, looked at Puffy and then asked him to repeat the question. Meanwhile, Itchy, flushed with pride, was continuing his report.

‘That’s it! Give it to us straight, Itchy!’ called someone.

‘We can take it,’ added someone else, bravely.

But Itchy was unwilling to abandon his carefully prepared report. After the slight deviation from the script he continued reading from his notes.

‘Despite this report which had, I might say confirmed my own personal observations as to the value of the said piece of equipment, and, at the same time, in view of an unofficial conversation with, from and to the club president and chairman in which I had it confirmed to me personally and verbally and in speaking that there was an absence of any available monetary funds with which to purchase a replacement machine with which to cut the grass of the aforesaid club, as chairman of the ground committee of the Fondling-Under-Water cricket club I instructed myself, in my capacity as head groundsman of the Fondling Under-Water cricket club, to continue to use the aforesaid piece of equipment until such time as the previously aforesaid piece of equipment could not be used any more for that purpose for which it had been used in the past.’

Itchy, exhausted by his hard work, and leaking liberally from every pore, took a large yellow handkerchief from his trouser pocket and mopped his face several times. He still had several pages of his impromptu speech to read.

The handkerchief, like most of his clothing, was heavily oil-stained and left smears of oil across his forehead, cheeks and chin. He ended up looking like a soldier camouflaged for jungle warfare.

‘Let the man have a proper drink!’ said Puffy, filling a pint glass with best bitter and handed the glass across the bar. The glass was then passed from hand to hand until it reached the intended recipient who grasped it gratefully.

‘This speech is going to be longer than the Gettysburg address,’ murmured Puffy to Biffo. He paused and thought for a moment. `Though probably slightly less significant in historical terms,’ he added.

‘You did say flies?’ said Biffo.

‘That’s right.’

‘I’m probably going to regret asking this question,’ whispered Biffo. ‘But why would anyone want to export flies?’

‘Herbert Sutcliffe asked me to ask you,’ whispered Puffy.‘He didn’t like to ask you himself.’

‘I can understand that,’ whispered Biffo.

‘He’s got a lot of flies on his manure,’ said Puffy. ‘He thought that if he put them into milk churns he could probably sell them to the French.’

Biffo thought about this for a while but eventually had to give up and ask the obvious question. ‘Why would the French want to buy British flies?’

‘He was thinking of the frog farmers.’

‘The farmers? Why would French farmers want to buy flies?’

‘Not just any old farmers. The frog farmers.’

‘Yes, I understand that. The farmers in France. The frog farmers.’

‘No, the frog farmers in France.’

‘Frog farmers?’

‘Yes, the French farmers in France who breed frogs.’

‘Do farmers in France breed frogs?’

‘Of course they do. Where do you think they get all those frogs’ legs? They can’t go hunting them down one by one in people’s back garden ponds can they? Never get the throughput. A leg here, a leg there. There wouldn’t be any continuity in supply, would there?’

‘I hadn’t thought about it much,’ confessed Biffo. ‘But I suppose not.’

‘Well frogs eat flies,’ explained Puffy. ‘So Herbert thought that if he collected all his flies together he could sell them to the French frog farmers.’

‘I see,’ agreed Biffo, who did.

‘But the chap at the local business advice centre didn’t know anything about exporting flies.’

‘I’m not surprised,’ mumbled Biffo.

‘So you can’t help then?’

‘Afraid not.’

‘Thanks. I’ll tell him. Worth a try. Hope you didn’t mind my asking.’

‘Not at all.’

‘He thought you might know since you’re from London,’ said Puffy.

‘In my capacity as head groundsman I therefore continued to use the aforesaid piece of equipment,’ continued Itchy. ‘Unfortunately, I have to report that…’ at this point he reached the end of the piece of paper from which he was reading. He shuffled the papers in his hand and then continued reading,

‘Our young Jerry has been walking out with a dental hygienist from Warrington. They met while she was on a touring holiday with her parents. They had a little blue caravan which they parked in the field across the lane from us. She has a strong body with a good bosom and a nice smile and Jerry is very smitten. She is due to go back on Saturday but Jerry has invited her to come back down for a weekend shortly. His mother and I have told him that she can have the spare room and no hanky-panky.’

Itchy had been concentrating so hard on reading from his script that he was not, until this point, aware that something had gone wrong. The words had been going in through his eyes and out through his mouth without any noticeable contact with his brain.

His attention was brought to the fact that al1 was not well by the laughter that this last sentence brought from his audience. Blushing an even deeper red he moved the errant page (part of a letter he had been writing that afternoon to his brother in East Anglia) to his trouser pocket and shuffled through his papers to find the correct continuation sheet.

‘Unfortunately, I have to report that,’ he began again, ‘a day or two ago, as I was preparing the wicket for the club’s last match, the Fondling-Under-Water grass cutting equipment finally became what I can only describe as functioning only in an entirely non-operational state.’

This statement was received in silence while the members of the cricket club tried to work out exactly what it meant. Itchy, who hadn’t understood what he had read any more than the listeners had understood what they heard, stopped for a moment and scratched his head.

‘Don’t scratch too hard,’ yelled the wag who had wanted the song and dance routine. ‘You’ll get splinters.’

‘Would I be right in thinking that you are telling us that the lawnmower finally gave up the ghost?’ asked Paddy, the club vice-captain.

‘That’s it,’ said Itchy, nodding furiously. ‘The bloody thing she just stopped and wouldn’t go no matter how hard I hit her.’

‘Er, do you mean that when the machine wouldn’t go you, er, well, hit it?’ asked Bill, who was apparently surprised by this revelation.

Itchy nodded again. ‘I hit her with a spanner first of all and then when that didn’t do no good at all I gave her a really good thwack with a wrench. Then when even that did no good I gave her a damned good bashing and thrashing with the scaffolding pole what I keep for serious breakdowns.’ He paused, satisfied that he had given a fair and full account of what he regarded as sophisticated attempts to repair and restore the errant machinery. Bill and Biffo, neither of them having had much experience of dealing with mechanical equipment, were the only ones in the room who were surprised by the relative simplicity of Itchy’s maintenance programme. Every other citizen of Fondling-Under-Water, including the club patron Lord Hepplewhite, recognised that when mechanical equipment falters it is necessary to treat it sternly.

‘And the machine failed to respond?’ shouted Lord Hepplewhite, in what he thought was a kindly and sympathetic way. Lord Hepplewhite was deaf and did not like hearing aids which he regarded as new-fangled nonsense. He found that if people spoke up he could hear them perfectly well some of the time. In order to ensure that he could hear himself talking, and to help any other deaf people whose paths crossed his, he himself spoke extremely loudly. Those who were not particularly tactful called it shouting.

‘That’s right, your Lordness,’ agreed Itchy, flustered at being addressed directly by a peer of the realm and particularly flustered at being shouted at by a peer of the realm.

‘Machines do that,’ agreed Lord Hepplewhite, nodding wisely. ‘I remember a machine, er, doing that to me once. It. . .er. . .it was a sort of machine. . .it, er. . .it was a moment I’ll, er, never forget.’ He paused and stared in the distance. Lord Hepplewhite was a sympathetic and perceptive man but he was also sometimes rather forgetful. He sometimes lost his train of thought and forgot what was he was trying to say, he sometimes forgot what someone else had said and he sometimes forgot to whom he was talking and why.

Itchy, puzzled, and slightly worried that he had missed something significant, looked across at Lord Hepplewhite. ‘What was that, your Lordship?’ he asked.

‘What was what?’ demanded Lord Hepplewhite.

‘The, er, the. . .er, the something you said you’d never forget. . .’ said Itchy.

‘I know it was something I’ll never forget but it’s. . .er. . .escaped me for the moment,’ replied Lord Hepplewhite, without embarrassment. He beamed at Itchy. ‘It will come back in due course I expect.’

Oh,’ said Itchy, sweating profusely at having been engaged in such a lengthy conversation with a peer of the realm. He was totally confused and didn’t have the foggiest idea what Lord Hepplewhite was talking about.

‘And so what happened then?’ boomed Lord Hepplewhite, adjusting his pince-nez so that he could look over the top of them at Itchy.

Itchy stared at him.

‘When the club machine failed to respond to your encouragement,’ Lord Hepplewhite reminded him.

‘I borrowed a lawnmower from Mr Harbottle,’ said Itchy.

‘Was this arrangement satisfactory?’ Lord Hepplewhite asked

‘Not really,’ admitted Itchy. ‘Mr Harbottle’s lawnmower was an electrical model intended for domestic use. I had to borrow every electrical extension cord in the village in order to reach the far side of the field.’

‘Most inconvenient, I would imagine,’ said Lord Hepplewhite.

‘It was,’ said Itchy. ‘Besides,’ he added, with something of a shrug, ‘I can’t use Mr Harbottle’s lawnmower again.’

‘Oh,’ said Lord Hepplewhite, surprised. ‘And why is that?’ Several heads turned in Puffy’s direction. Puffy shrugged his shoulders to make it clear that he didn’t know the answer to the question.

Itchy, who suddenly seemed rather embarrassed, certainly knew the answer to the question. ‘It sort of,’ he began, diffidently. ‘It sort of, well, it sort of blew up,’ he replied. Those parts of his face which were not covered in oil blushed. (The parts which were covered with oil probably blushed too.)

‘Eh?’ said Puffy, who had not heard about this before. ‘What do you mean: ‘It sort of blew up’?’

Itchy thought about this for a while, and scratched his head. ‘I’m not sure how else to put it, Puffy,’ he said at last. He spoke sadly, and with regret. ‘There was a lot of smoke and a few flames and a big sort of phut sound and it sort of, well, sort of blew up. . .sort of thing.’

‘Thanks, Itchy!’ said Puffy, who really wasn’t feeling grateful at all. ‘You might have let me know.’

‘I cleaned it up and put it back in your shed!’ protested Itchy, in self-defence. ‘It won’t cut grass but it looks smarter than it did when I borrowed it.’ He frowned, clearly thinking hard. ‘You could sell it!’ he said brightly.

Several dozen people in the room made a mental note not to buy a lawnmower from Puffy Harbottle in the near future. Puffy, realising that Itchy’s suggestion was a sensible one, but also realising that he would never now be able to sell the mower in the village, made a mental note to take the mower into the next town in order to sell it.

Itchy looked around. ‘I had to cut the last bit of grass with a pair of shears I borrowed from Mr Harbottle’s shed.’

‘And so what is your conclusion and your recommendation to the club?’ asked Lord Hepplewhite.

Itchy opened his mouth, closed his eyes, opened his eyes, raised his head and looked at the ceiling, rubbed his chin and waved a hand around as though he had been asked to explain Einstein’s theory of relativity to a deaf and dumb Chinaman. He liked being the cricket club groundsman because he liked cutting grass. But public meetings and public speaking would always come pretty low down on his list of his favourite activities.

‘Using the shears gave me blisters,’ said Itchy. ‘It took me three hours to cut just a few square yards. It would take me months to cut the whole field with shears.’ He paused and thought hard for a few moments, although thinking was clearly not his favourite activity. ‘The grass would grow faster than I could cut it,’ he added.

This last remark, though not intended to be humorous, caused amusement and produced some giggling and a little light laughter.

‘Use your notes!’ hissed Cheesy as Itchy floundered in silence.

Itchy, who had clearly forgotten that he was holding a sheaf of carefully prepared notes (these notes were written, it has to be said, with a great deal of help from his daughter who was studying social sciences through the Open University) brightened up considerably. He rummaged around among his notes looking for the appropriate page.

‘There’s something I wanted to ask you,’ whispered Biffo to Puffy, taking advantage of this new opportunity. ‘Would you consider having a television programme broadcast from The Gravedigger’s Rest?’

Puffy frowned, clearly puzzled. ‘What sort of television programme?’

‘A quiz programme.’

‘Why would anyone want to broadcast a television programme from here?’ asked Puffy, clearly puzzled. He looked around the pub. Even though Puffy, with the help of Lettice and some of the regulars, had cleared away most of the debris, the pub still had what could perhaps most politely be described as a slightly used appearance.

‘The television company I used to work for makes a quiz programme,’ explained Biffo. ‘Every week the programme is transmitted from a different venue - a village hall, a hotel or a pub.’

‘But not this sort of place,’ said Puffy, looking around at his water stained bar and at the holes in his ceiling.

‘The producer is a friend of mine,’ said Biffo. ‘I spoke to him a few minutes ago and he’s agreed to make a programme here if you’d like him to.’

Puffy shrugged. ‘Why not?’ he said. ‘I suppose it could be fun. And I’d probably sell some beer to the television people.’

‘Ah,’ said Biffo. ‘The deal is a bit better than that.’

‘They’ll pay a fee?’ asked Puffy.

‘No, they won’t pay a fee,’ said Biffo. ‘But I think I can probably persuade them to repair the roof, put in a new ceiling and cover up the worst of the water damage.’

Puffy looked at Biffo. ‘Is this for real?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘I could kiss you!’

‘You lay one lip on me and the whole deal is off.’

‘When can they come?’

‘As soon as you like. My pal was due to travel up to a working men’s club in the North of England tomorrow. But he’ll postpone that trip and come here instead if you like.’

‘The sooner the better!’ said Puffy.

‘Can I borrow the phone?’ asked Biffo.

‘As chairman of the ground committee it is, therefore, my recommendation that the club authorise forthwith the purchase of a new grass cutting machine,’ said Itchy.

‘What does forthwith mean?’ asked Cheesy.

Itchy frowned. ‘What?’

‘What does forthwith mean?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You said it.’

‘It’s written down here,’ explained Itchy.

‘Oh,’ said Cheesy.

‘As chairman of the Ground committee it is, therefore, my recommendation that the club authorise forthwith the purchase of a new grass cutting machine,’ repeated Itchy. ‘As head groundsman of the Fondling-Under-Water cricket club I have, on the club’s’ behalf, conducted research among a number of local retailers,’ he continued. ‘I have discovered that we can expect to purchase a decent second-hand machine for between £1,800 and £1,900. It is, therefore, my recommendation, as chairman of the ground committee of the Fondling-Under-Water cricket club, that we allocate this amount of money for such a purchase, er, forthwith.’ Itchy, his ordeal over, folded up his notes and stuffed them into his trouser pocket. He then tried to make himself look as small and as inconspicuous as possible.

Around the room a lot of air was sucked in very sharply.

‘Wow!’ said Puffy quietly to Lettice. ‘That’s a hell of a lot of money!’ He thought about it. ‘Just for cutting grass.’

‘Has the club got that much money?’ asked Lettice.

Puffy looked at her. The look made it clear that there was little doubt about the answer.

‘Where’s Biffo?’ asked Lettice, suddenly realising that he was missing.

‘He’s on the phone,’ said Puffy.

Bill stood up. ‘I would like to propose a vote of thanks to the chairman of the ground committee and to the head groundsman of the Fondling-Under-Water cricket club,’ he said.

‘I’ll explain in a minute,’ Puffy whispered to Lettice. He winked.

‘Go on then!’ shouted the wag who had previously made attempts to contribute to the evening’s entertainment.

‘Er, I would like to propose a vote of thanks to the, er, chairman of the ground committee,’ said Bill.

‘I second that!’ said Paddy quickly.

Bill then asked the members to vote.

‘Motion passed anonymously,’ he announced a few seconds later, after looking around the room.

‘Unanimously,’ whispered Paddy.

‘Carried unanimously,’ added Bill.

‘I would like to propose an, er, vote of thanks to the, er, head groundsman,’ said Bill.

‘I second that!’ said Paddy, automatically.

Bill then asked the members to vote.

‘Motion passed anonymously,’ he announced.

‘Unanimously,’ whispered Paddy.

‘Unanimously,’ said Bill.

‘I propose that the club spends the appropriate sum, subject to the availability of the necessary funds, on the purchase of a new lawnmower,’ said Cheesy.

‘Seconded,’ said Itchy quickly.

‘I don’t think you can second the motion,’ said Paddy.

Itchy looked hurt.

‘Not quite cricket, old chap,’ said Paddy.

‘Seconded,’ said Constable Hobbling.

Bill then asked the members to vote. About half of those present put up a hand. The rest were too exhausted by the previous votes to raise their hands.

Bill did not allow this to worry him or to delay matters.

‘Motion passed anonymously,’ he announced, without hesitation. He looked as if he really wanted to be somewhere else, doing something else. Paddy didn’t bother to correct him this time.

‘How much do we have in the kitty?’ asked Puffy. He looked around the room. ‘Have we even got enough money for a down payment on a new lawnmower?’

These two questions seemed to throw everybody into a good deal of confusion. They had not been expected.

Meanwhile, Bill decided that he really had to get away.

Very quietly, he leant towards Paddy and whispered in his ear and asked him to take over.

‘What’s the matter with the captain?’ enquired Lord Hepplewhite, as Bill wriggled his way to the door and disappeared.

‘Says he’s not feeling well,’ replied Paddy.

‘I thought he looked a bit off colour,’ said Lord Hepplewhite. ‘Got something on his mind no doubt. These millionaire chappies have always got deals going on somewhere in the world.’ The peer chuckled loudly. ‘He’s probably selling a couple of oil wells in Texas so that he can buy a yacht and another island in the Caribbean.’

A moment later Biffo reappeared.

‘How did you get on?’ demanded Puffy, anxiously.

‘It’s all set!’ said a grinning Biffo. ‘My chum will be here tomorrow. He’s looking forward to meeting you.’

‘Who will?’ demanded a curious Lettice. ‘Will someone please tell me what is going on?’

Chapter 60

‘Does anyone have the accounts?’ asked Paddy, looking around the public bar in The Gravedigger’s Rest.

No one would admit to this. There was a good deal of muttering and many heads were shaken.

‘Who exactly is the club treasurer this year?’ demanded Lord Hepplewhite, loudly.

No one seemed anxious to acknowledge this responsibility.

‘Do we actually have a treasurer?’ asked Paddy.

‘Oh, we must have a treasurer!’ said Puffy.

‘Perhaps it’ll be in the minutes of last year’s annual general meeting,’ suggested Lord Hepplewhite.

Paddy picked up several pieces of paper from the table in front of him and looked at each of them in turn without finding the name of the club treasurer.

Lord Hepplewhite stood up and cleared his throat. The room fell silent. ‘Ladies, gentlemen, I suggest we have a short recess while we endeavour to identify the identity of the club treasurer. ‘Shall we say twenty minutes?’

There was a short polite pause and then everyone stood up, elbows out, and attempted to break the world sprint record for ten yards in a race for the bar.

Puffy and Lettice started serving drinks as though they were on the Titanic and someone had just announced: ‘We’ve hit an iceberg, there aren’t enough lifeboats and most of you are going to die!’

‘Do you want a hand?’ Biffo asked, having to shout to be heard about the clamour of: ‘Four pints of the usual, two gins and a couple of packets of pork scratchings.’

‘You could wash some of those if you like,’ said Lettice, nodding towards a long line of dirty glasses which had been deposited on the counter. Both her hands were busy pulling down pint glasses from the rack behind her, filling them and handing them over to eager drinkers the other side of the bar.

Biffo, not waiting to be told twice, slipped under the bar hatch, put a squirt of washing-up liquid into the metal sink beneath the bar and then added hot water. Bubbles developed and steam rose. The former television producer, now grocery delivery cyclist, had drifted down the social scale and become a glass washer. But if anyone had been interested enough to take time to ask him how he felt he would have had to admit that he hadn’t felt as happy for years. Washing up can be a curiously satisfying experience.

‘I’ve been invited to play in Saturday’s match,’ said Biffo to Puffy, when the rush on the bar had subsided a little.

‘Great!’ said Puffy, genuinely pleased. ‘That’s terrific!’

‘It’s the match against the professionals, isn’t it?’ said Biffo.

‘That’s the one,’ said Puffy.

‘Mr Player has played for England, hasn’t he?

‘He certainly has,’ said Puffy. ‘He was working as a coach for a local club when England went on a tour to Pakistan. Just about everyone in the touring party went down with food poisoning and he was the only player they could find still capable of wearing white trousers with any confidence. He was lucky to get an England cap. The rumour was that two television commentators and a journalist from one of the tabloid newspapers nearly got England caps on that tour.’

‘Still,’ said Biffo, with an envious sigh. ‘He played for England!’

‘He certainly did!’ agreed Puffy. ‘Twice. And he never lets anyone forget it either. It’s his benefit this year and he’s bringing a bunch of his pals down here to play a friendly match against the village team. He may well bring a couple of England players. He’s just written his autobiography. Can’t remember the title though. . .’

‘Do you mean we’re going to be playing a bunch of internationals?’ asked Biffo, going rather cold.

Puffy nodded. ‘There’s no need to worry too much,’ he said. ‘They’ll probably be gentle with us.’

‘Still,’ said Biffo. ‘It’s quite a thing to be playing against men who’ve played for England.’ He paused. ‘Do you think they’ll slow down their bowling?’ he added, rather nervously.

‘I would think so, as long as we let them win,’ said Puffy.

‘Well that shouldn’t be too difficult,’ said Biffo, smiling with relief

‘Absolutely,’ agreed Puffy. ‘Running for Cover!’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Running for Cover!’ repeated Puffy. ‘That’s the title of Player’s autobiography.’

Chapter 61

After almost exactly twenty minutes the ‘identify the treasurer’ interval was over. And a small piece of paper which had been unearthed from the pile on the table, and which contained the tell tale words ‘Treasurer: Helmut Walton’, had enabled Paddy and Lord Hepplewhite to identify the treasurer as Helmut Walton. Constable Hobbling, loyal and sober representative of the forces of law and order, had been dispatched to fetch the club accountant from his home on the other side of the village green and a few minutes later the village bobby duly returned with his mission accomplished.

‘Sorry I couldn’t be here earlier!’ apologised Helmut, when he appeared, slightly out of breath and a trifle tousled. ‘I had a bit of an emergency to deal with.’

‘Nothing serious, I hope?’ said Lord Hepplewhite, anxiously.

‘Oh no,’ said Helmut. ‘My wife had her potato peeler lost. So I had to through the compost heap go in case she had it thrown away.’

All sorted satisfactorily, I trust?’ said Lord Hepplewhite.

‘Really not, I am afraid,’ admitted Helmut. ‘I could not it find.’ He seemed downcast.

‘We’re sorry to drag you over here,’ said Paddy. ‘But the chairman of the ground committee. . .’

Helmut looked puzzled.

‘Itchy’ explained Paddy.

‘Ah,’ said Helmut, nodding wisely.

Paddy cleared his throat and began. ‘The chairman of the ground committee,’ he continued, ‘has reported that the club’s grass-cutting equipment has cut its last blade of grass. That’s the rather sad news. I’m sure we were all rather attached to the old mower. Been with us a long time. The bad news is that he has told us that we need to buy a new machine at an estimated cost of between £1,800 and £1,900.What we need you to do is to tell us that we have enough money in the bank.’

‘Ah,’ said Helmut, his voice full of regret. ‘I could tell you that if that is really what you want me to be telling you. . .’ He looked around and paused for a few seconds, then shook his head sadly ‘. . .but I fear I would be lying’. He had brought with him a thick file of bank statements, invoices and other assorted bits of paper. He rummaged around for a minute or two and then produced a slip of paper which he seemed to regard as relevant.

‘According to Snoring and Dribbling we seem to have a balance of £2,584,’ he said, his brow furrowed. He shook his head. ‘But I do not think that we can regard with confidence that figure as entirely one hundred per cent reliable.’

‘Snoring and who?’ said Lord Hepplewhite, frowning.

‘Dribbling,’ replied Helmut. ‘Snoring and Dribbling. The club’s accountants.’

‘Ah,’ said Lord Hepplewhite.

‘But that sounds a very good figure,’ protested Paddy. ‘I rather like that figure. In fact I very much like that figure. Why isn’t it reliable? Isn’t that what we’ve got in the bank?’

‘Exactly not,’ said Helmut, the man with his finger pressed firmly on the pulse of the club’s financial matters. He rummaged around amidst his papers again and this time produced a bank statement. ‘Ah, no, I thought as much,’ he said. There was now a good deal of regret in his voice.

‘What is it?’ demanded Paddy.

‘Well, we seem to be in what I am believing financiers enjoy calling a negative flow cash situation,’ said the treasurer.

‘Snoring and Dribbling?’ said Lord Hepplewhite again. He looked very confused. ‘I don’t think I know them. ‘Are they local?’

‘I call them Snoring and Dribbling,’ said Helmut, mildly apologetically. ‘But it is not their real name. It is a sort of joke.’

‘How negative?’ asked Paddy, frowning.

‘Well, I rather unhappily overlooked a cheque I wrote to cover the council rates and according to the bank’s figures we are now £117.65 in the pink,’ said the treasurer. ‘And, much as the general dislike of banks I share, I’m afraid that in this case I am with reluctance rather inclined to believe that the bank’s figures are to be pretty well adjacent to accurate likely.’ He paused. ‘Of course,’ he added brightly, ‘quite a few members have not yet their annual subscription fees paid so that might a little difference make.’

This remark was greeted in total silence, not least since it was pretty well understood that a not insignificant number of members regarded the paying of annual subscription fees as optional rather than compulsory.

One or two members had slight coughing fits. Several members found something on the floor that required their undivided attention and other club members found that their watches needed winding, their pens suddenly needed cleaning or their noses urgently needed blowing. One or two members suddenly took a serious, almost obsessive interest in their fingernails.

‘I have just come into a little money,’ whispered Biffo to Puffy. ‘Do you think it would be appropriate if I offered to pay for a new mower? I could afford it.’

Puffy looked at him and put a hand on his shoulder. ‘That’s very kind of you,’ he said quietly. ‘But, you should keep your money in your wallet. This is a community problem and we’ll all be much better off if we solve it as a community.’ He paused. ‘Look at Bill,’ he said, disregarding the fact that this was an impossibility since Bill had disappeared. ‘He thought he could buy respect by buying the cricket field for the village. It was a wonderful gesture and we’re all grateful but gratefulness gets in the way of mutual respect.’ He looked at Biffo and raised an eyebrow.

‘Thanks,’ said Biffo, quietly.

‘How much would we have in the bank if all the members paid their membership fees?’ asked Lord Hepplewhite, who as well as being patron was also the club’s only honorary life member and therefore one of the few people in the room who didn’t owe the club money.

‘Well, we would, if every member paid up what they are owing, have a credit balance of very nearly £3,145.00. But the chances. . .’

‘Thank you, Mr Treasurer,’ said Paddy. He looked at Itchy who looked as miserable and disappointed as a boy who has been told that instead of a brand new bike with gears and a bell he’ll be getting a pair of indestructible woollen socks for Christmas.

‘Don’t you worry Itchy,’ he promised. ‘We’ll get you that mower.’ He looked around. ‘I think it’s pretty clear that we need to find some way of raising the money we need to buy a new mower,’ said Paddy. He looked around the bar. ‘Does anyone have any suggestions?’

‘So what are they really called?’ Lord Hepplewhite asked Helmut.

‘Who?’

‘Snoring and Dribbling. If they’re not really Snoring and Dribbling.’

‘Oh but they are,’ said Helmut, nodding with some enthusiasm. ‘They’re snoring and dribbling. They absolutely are!’

Lord Hepplewhite frowned and thought for a moment. He had lost the plot. ‘Are what?’ he asked eventually.

‘Snoring and dribbling,’ replied Helmut. ‘That’s why I call them Snoring and Dribbling!’

The private confusion of Lord Hepplewhite had not disturbed the intense cerebral activity in the rest of the room. The members of the Fondling-Under-Water cricket club were not a mean or unusually tight-fisted lot but when they realised that they had a choice of either digging into their own pockets to pay for the new mower or thinking of other ways to raise the money they invariably came up with a host of splendid ideas. As far as money was concerned their speciality, if they could be said to have one, was finding ways to extract money from other people.

‘Let’s have a fund-raising fête and sports day!’ suggested Cheesy.

It was immediately agreed that Cheesy’s suggestion would be a painless and sure-fire way to raise the necessary funds.

It was, furthermore, agreed that since the grass was growing longer every day they should hold the fund-raising event as quickly as possible.

We could combine next Saturday’s match against Cyril’s Eleven with a fund-raising day for the club!’ suggested Puffy.

A unanimous vote was held, in the best democratic manner, and it was decided that the match against Cyril Player’s Celebrity County Eleven should be the centre piece for a day designed to raise money to buy a new lawnmower.

This decision was greeted with considerable enthusiasm and the assembled throng was about to celebrate the moment by obtaining additional sustenance of the appropriate variety when, above the hubbub, a lone voice could be heard at the back of the room.

‘Excuse me!’ said a tall, unusually elegant and well-dressed figure at the back of the room. He had collar-length hair and a hooked nose. He seemed nervous and was so flushed that he was either exceptionally warm or he was feeling extremely nervous about something. He spoke diffidently but loudly enough to attract everyone’s attention. It was the vicar, the Reverend Hubert Counter.

‘I’m sorry to bother you all,’ he said. ‘But before the meeting draws to a close I would just like to say something of a rather personal nature.’

Everyone waited. Cricket club members are as partial to gossip as anyone else and what can be described today as `information of a personal nature’ can almost certainly be described as ‘gossip’ by the time tomorrow comes.

The vicar cleared his throat and continued. ‘After a good deal of soul-searching, and a great many private discussions with God, who has, I may say, been an extremely sympathetic and supportive listener, I have decided that I wish to reassign my gender disposition.’

He then paused, clearly expecting the assembled members of the Fondling-Under-Water Cricket Club to greet this news with some sort of response. But since no one had the faintest idea what he had said no one responded.

‘I, er, think that perhaps I should be a little more blunt,’ said the Reverend Counter, accurately diagnosing the reason for the lack of response. He thought for a moment, cleared his throat, and tried again. ‘After a good deal of thought I have decided that my outward physical appearance, from a gender point of view, has for many years been inappropriate to the needs and feelings of my inner, emotional self For some time I have attempted to deal with this dilemma by living two lives: a private life in which I have expressed my gender preference to my own personal satisfaction and a public life, in which I have maintained an established gender image with which my emotional self no longer feels entirely comfortable.’

‘However, I no longer feel that this social dichotomy is appropriate. Indeed, I feel that in order to regain my feeling of self-respect, my honesty and my integrity I should and must be honest with you all. I have, therefore, decided to depose my established persona and to replace it, on a full-time basis, with the alternative persona with which I can honestly say I feel more comfortable.’

‘I have spoken to my dear lady wife at considerable length about my intentions and she has asked me to assure you that she stands right behind me. If circumstances allowed, she would, indeed, be here today to share this moment with me. However, her latest batch of elderberry wine has to be bottled and she has asked me to ask you to excuse her absence while regarding her as being here in spirit if not in body. I have no plans to undergo surgery and Primrose and I, and our children Tarquin, Fiona and Tamarisk will continue to live together as a family. I have also spoken to the Bishop. Initially he had some reservations and felt that it might be better for the church - both locally and nationally - if I were to resign my living and seek an alternative calling. However, after lengthy discussions with my legal adviser, the Bishop eventually, and I may say generously, agreed that I should be allowed to stay here in Fondling-Under-Water and to continue to be your spiritual shepherd.’

The vicar stopped. And waited.

Again, nothing happened except that most people looked at someone else and everyone looked puzzled. There was some whispering.

‘What did he say?’ Biffo whispered to Puffy.

Puffy shrugged. ‘No one ever really understands much he says,’ he admitted. ‘But this time I don’t think I understand anything.’

The vicar, who seemed aware of the yawning gap which existed between what had been delivered and what had been received, swallowed and spoke again.

‘Naturally,’ he said, ‘it would not be appropriate for me to continue to be known by the name of Hubert. In future, therefore, I would like to be known as Hermione.’

This time the assembled congregation did understand what he had said. Every lower jaw in the bar headed south as though wire operated and if there had been a dentist present he would have been able to perform dental check-ups without more ado.

‘Did he say what I thought he said?’ Puffy asked Biffo and several dozen other people asked several dozen other people.

‘If I heard what I think I heard then I think he probably did say what you thought he said,’ said Biffo. He thought about it some more. ‘But I’m not sure,’ he added a moment later.

‘What’s the big deal?’ asked Lettice, who was standing on Biffo’s left polishing glasses. ‘He’s going to wear a frock all the time and wants to be called Hermione. He’s a vicar and he’s always worn a frock.’

‘How do you know he’s going to wear a frock?’ asked Puffy.

‘Because that’s what he just said,’ said Lettice. ‘Anyway I thought everyone in the village knew he was a transvestite.’

‘He’s a transvestite?’ said Puffy.

‘Yes,’ said Lettice.

‘The vicar is a transvestite?’

‘Yes.’

‘You knew that?’

‘Yes. Of course.’

‘You never said anything.’

‘I thought you knew. I thought everyone knew. Besides what would I say?’

Well,’ said Puffy, ‘you could have told me. You could have said ‘Hey, the vicar is a transvestite’.’

‘Why?’

Puffy thought about this for a moment. ‘I don’t know,’ he admitted. ‘No reason apart from the fact that it’s damned good gossip. But you could have told me. Anyway, how did you know?’

‘The washing,’ said Lettice.

‘The washing?’

‘Like every other woman in this village the vicar’s wife hangs her washing out on Monday mornings. You can see the vicarage garden from the road. She’s a flatchested size eight with three small children. She hangs out bras and knickers and slips and dresses that fit her and she hangs out bras and knickers and slips and dresses that would fit a 38C size eighteen. Who else is there in the vicarage that would fit a 38C size eighteen?’

Puffy stared at her. ‘You look at other people’s washing?’

‘Of course I do,’ said Lettice. ‘Don’t you?’

‘Of course I don’t!’ said Puffy, indignantly. And are you saying you can tell a woman’s bust size just by looking at her empty bra?’

‘More or less. I know that some of the bras the vicar’s wife hangs on her line wouldn’t fit her.’ Lettice paused. ‘Besides,’ she added. ‘He sometimes doesn’t get all his nail varnish off properly.’

‘Under the circumstances,’ said the vicar, ‘I think it only fair to announce my resignation from the Fondling-Under-Water cricket team. However, my playing days have given me many happy memories and I would very much like to retain an interest in the club. I will be having a word with Mrs Cleavidge tomorrow to ask if I might help with the teas.’

If the vicar had announced that he intended to become a Satanist, use the knave for the celebration of black masses, and invite parishioners to strip naked, sacrifice one of the church wardens, and then drink the blood of a young virgin, the response might, just might, have been something close to the response this announcement produced.

‘You can’t do that!’ cried three quarters of the people in the room. They spoke simultaneously, as though rehearsed, which they were not. The remaining one quarter of the people in the room, all of whom had been concentrating on ordering drinks, paying for drinks or drinking drinks, looked up in alarm to find out what it was that could not be done, and who it was that was not to be allowed to do it.

‘What about Saturday’s match?’ cried Paddy, above the general despair.

‘Well I don’t think I can possibly play,’ said the vicar with unaccustomed firmness. ‘I will feel much more comfortable helping with the teas.’ He daintily used his right hand to spread a little imaginary butter in the air and smiled sweetly.

‘Can we talk about this?’ asked Paddy. `Just the two of us?’ The vice-captain had gone quite pale. He did not look well.

Reluctantly, the vicar agreed to talk privately with the club vice-captain. The other members headed for the bar and ordered much larger, much stronger drinks than they had planned to order. Puffy would have benefited greatly from this unexpected side effect of the vicar’s announcement if it had not been for the fact that most of the cricket club members asked Puffy to add the cost of their drinks to what they already owed. The cricket club members were not keen bill payers.

‘What did you say these people did?’ asked Lord Hepplewhite, joining the crowd at the bar and grabbing Helmut by the sleeve before he could disappear.

‘Which people?’

‘The Snoring and Dribbling people.’

‘They’re our accountants,’ Helmut explained again.

The good Lord’s confusion was clear. He scratched his head vigorously. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘They’re called Snoring and Dribbling?’

‘Well, not exactly,’ admitted Helmut. ‘But that’s what I call them.’

Lord Hepplewhite paused for a moment. ‘So what do other people call them then?’

‘Winchester and Merriweather,’ replied Helmut, rather agitated at being kept from the bar. ‘They have offices in the old building at the fire station end of Victoria Terrace. Their place you cannot miss - it is just next door to the bespoke truss maker - what’s his name?’

‘Clive Periwinkle,’ said Lord Hepplewhite instantly regretting the speed with which he had expressed his familiarity with the region’s premier truss maker.

‘That is the one,’ said Helmut. ‘Surgical Supplies to the Landed Gentry. There is a pet food shop on the other side and a fish and chip shop run by two Chinamen across the road directly almost. Their cod is fine but I would not the battered sausages touch if I you were.’

Helmut, who then managed to extricate himself from the good Lord’s grip, moved away and joined the queue for the bar. He looked at his watch. He had six minutes to drink his beer and get back home.

‘Oh I know Winchester and Merriweather!’ said Lord Hepplewhite, no less confused than he had been a little earlier. ‘But why do you call them Snoring and. . .’ He stopped himself in mid question and chuckled. ‘Oh, I say, that’s very appropriate,’ he admitted. ‘Very appropriate.’ He chuckled again. ‘Snoring and Dribbling,’ he said to himself ‘Very good. Very apt. Very droll.’ He nodded appreciatively. ‘Snoring and Dribbling,’ he repeated.

Among the other cricket club members the vicar’s revelation that he intended to exchange his bat for a butter knife, and his role as a key bowler for a new position with a pot of shrimp paste and a sandwich loaf, was the favourite topic of conversation.

‘Of course,’ said Cheesy, ‘if he does play we know where he’ll be fielding.’

‘Where?’ asked Jack Hobbs.

‘In the slips, of course,’ answered Cheesy.

This inevitably led to a good many jokes about maiden overs and fine legs.

Chapter 62

‘Biffo!’

‘Streaky!’

The two friends beamed at one another, shook hands and then hugged. It hadn’t been long since they had seen one another but a great deal had happened to them both.

‘You look fantastic!’ said Streaky, when the two chums finally disentangled themselves from one another.

‘I feel good,’ agreed Biffo, grinning.

Streaky looked around, held out a hand and beckoned a long-legged redhead in an extremely tight white T-shirt and very short white skirt to climb out of his Porsche. Judging by the unfettered bulges underneath the T-shirt the redhead was waging a private war against the underwear industry.

‘We’re engaged!’ Streaky said, with a sweet and rather charming mixture of modesty, pride and embarrassment.

Biffo looked at the redhead in amazement. On television she had looked completely different. And now she looked different again.

‘I didn’t have red hair the last time you saw me,’ said the girl.

‘No,’ agreed Biffo.

‘It’s dyed,’ the redhead explained.

‘It’s Voluptua!’ said Streaky.

‘I used to be blonde,’ said the redhead.

‘I know,’ said Biffo, trying hard to disguise the fact that he could have hardly been more surprised if Streaky had announced that he had become engaged to Queen Victoria.

‘Voluptua Bradshaw!’ said Streaky. ‘The future Voluptua Bacon. Our former secretary is a big star. Voluptua is the presenter for my new quiz programme.’

‘I’ve always wanted to be an actress,’ said Voluptua. She seemed very happy.

Biffo was having difficulty taking all this in. ‘And you two are engaged?’ he said.

Streaky nodded, grinned and kept on nodding.

‘Congratulations to both of you!’ said Biffo.

Streaky stopped grinning and stopped nodding. ‘I was sorry to hear about you and Edwina,’ he said, reluctant to spoil the moment but conscious that he should say something about Biffo’s little personal problem.

‘Don’t be,’ said Biffo, reassuringly. He sighed. ‘It was all a bit of a relief, to be honest. And Edwina had got another bloke anyway.’

‘Yes, I did hear something along those lines,’ said Streaky. Embarrassed, he turned slightly and pointed at the village pub. ‘So this is The Gravedigger’s Rest, eh?’

Biffo and Voluptua turned and looked at the pub.

‘Who was he?’ asked Streaky.

Biffo frowned. ‘Who?’

‘The tired gravedigger?’

‘I’m not sure,’ admitted Biffo.

‘Doesn’t matter,’ said Streaky. ‘I can get the scriptwriters to make something up.’ He looked admiringly at the pub. ‘Beautiful building,’ he said appreciatively.

‘Of course it needs a bit of loving restoration here and there,’ said Biffo.

All these old places need a lot of tender, loving care,’ agreed Streaky. He looked at Biffo. ‘What does it need?’

‘New roof, a few new ceilings and about fifty gallons of white paint,’ said Biffo, quickly.

‘That’s all?’

‘That’s more or less all.’

‘I need to make the programme on Saturday.’

‘I’m sure that will be OK,’ said Biffo.

Streaky looked at the calendar on his watch and sighed.

‘The blokes in the village will do most of the work,’ said Biffo. ‘Better Television has only got to pay for the materials.’ He shrugged as though this were such a trifling sum that it would be hardly worth putting the claim form in to the accountant.

‘Oh good,’ said Streaky, with a sideways look at Biffo. ‘As long as that’s all.’

‘That’s settled then,’ replied Biffo. ‘Let’s go inside and you can meet the landlord. I might even buy you both a beer.’

‘Best offer I’ve had since I got here,’ said Streaky.

‘Mind your heads,’ said Biffo. ‘And watch your step.’

The warning was of limited value. Streaky banged his head. Voluptua tripped and landed flat on her face, showing that her dislike of underwear was complete.

Chapter 63

‘Perfect!’ said Streaky, looking around the bar for the umpteenth time. He sipped at his beer and nodded approvingly. ‘Good beer,’ he said. He was drinking his fourth, or perhaps his fifth, pint of beer.

Voluptua, who was sitting next to him and who didn’t like beer very much was still drinking her first pint. When she was sixteen someone had bought her a beer on her first visit to a pub. She hadn’t liked it but hadn’t liked to say so because she thought drinking beer was a terribly grown up thing to do. Because she had never said she didn’t like beer people always bought her beer. And so, seven years later, she was known by everyone who was acquainted with her to be a regular beer drinker. A year or two ago she had, once or twice, tried to order something different but the die was cast. If she wanted to change her drink she would have to change her friends, her relatives and her job.

‘I’d love to make one of our new quiz programmes in your pub,’ Streaky said to Puffy. ‘Can you provide me with an audience?’

‘Oh I think we can manage that,’ said Puffy, eagerly

‘And a team to represent the pub?’

‘Er. . .what sort of team were you thinking of?’ asked Puffy, cautiously.

‘A quiz team. You know the sort of thing: ‘Which team won the Cup Final in 1952?’ ‘What year did Elvis Presley record Blue Suede Shoes?’ That sort of thing. I’ll bring down a bunch of celebrities to take on your team.’

‘I should think we can put a team together.’

Streaky looked around. ‘I have a small budget to pay for alterations which might be necessary and to cover the cost of damage and inconvenience,’ he said. ‘Of course, in theory I can’t give you money for structural repairs - roof, ceilings, stuff like that.’ He scratched his chin. ‘But I’d like the inside of the pub to look truly traditional. Could you find some really old-looking chairs and tables? I’d like them to look battered and well-used.’

Puffy looked around. It would have been difficult to find chairs and tables which looked older, better used or more battered.

‘And a fireplace,’ said Streaky, with a big wink aimed at Puffy. ‘I don’t care what the weather is like - I’d like to have a log fire roaring.’

‘We have a fireplace,’ said Puffy. ‘It works very well. . .’

Streaky held up a hand. ‘You’d better get it checked. Swept. Cleaned. Hire some small boys and have them climb up and down inside it to get rid of the birds’ nests.’

‘Fine,’ said Puffy, catching on at last. ‘I can arrange that.’

‘And see if you can lay your hands on a really old piece of carpet,’ said Streaky.

‘Would something moth-eaten and beer-stained do?’

‘That would be perfect. Just the sort of thing an old-fashioned pub should have. I’m sure you’ll be able to find something suitable.’

‘I know exactly where I can get what we need,’ said Puffy.

He exchanged glances with Biffo and then looked down at the carpet on the floor. It was, of course, extremely moth-eaten and many of the stains with which it was decorated were undoubtedly caused by beer.

‘And I need it all done by Saturday,’ said Streaky.

‘No problem,’ said Puffy confidently.

‘Fine,’ said Streaky. ‘Terrific.’ He put his hand into his jacket pocket and took out a cheque book and pen. ‘Do you think £10,000 would cover your costs?’

Puffy swallowed hard. ‘I should think so,’ he said.

‘That’s a good job,’ said Streaky, scribbling and signing. ‘Because I can’t give you any more than that.’ He handed over the cheque. `Fill in your name.’ He looked at his watch, sighed, stood up and looked down at the beautiful Voluptua. ‘I suppose we’d better get back to London,’ he said, rather glumly. He looked around and then looked at Biffo. ‘How the hell did you find this place?’ he asked.

Biffo shrugged. ‘The bus stopped here,’ he replied.

Streaky thought about this for a moment, nodded and headed for the door.

Watch the step!’ called Puffy.

‘And mind your head,’ added Biffo.

Streaky turned to thank them, tripped over the step and banged his head. Voluptua was more fortunate. She tripped over the step but her head missed the beam by an inch or so.

Puffy made the appropriate amendment on the slate.

Chapter 64

‘Thanks,’ said Biffo, as he, Streaky and Voluptua walked towards Streaky’s car. ‘That was very generous of you. I didn’t realise you’d got such a big budget.’

‘I haven’t got a big budget,’ said Streaky. He handed the car keys to Voluptua. ‘You’d better drive.’

‘But you just gave Puffy a cheque for £10,000 to repair his pub!’

‘My pleasure,’ said Streaky. ‘Nice pub. Nice bloke. And you’re my pal.’

‘Which key is it?’ asked Voluptua, examining the key ring that Streaky had given her.

‘The big one,’ said Streaky. ‘The little one is for the petrol cap. But you don’t have to use the key. If you press that little button all the doors will open as if by magic.’

‘How many weeks is the programme scheduled to run for?’ asked Biffo.

Voluptua pressed the little button.

‘Twenty.’

There was a squeal of delight as Voluptua discovered that the remote control device had opened the car doors.

‘And what’s your budget?’

‘Ten thousand.’

‘For each programme?’

Voluptua slid into the driver’s seat, adjusted the driver’s mirror and checked her hair and lipstick.

Streaky looked genuinely surprised. ‘No! For the series.’

Biffo stared at Streaky. ‘You’ve just spent your entire budget for the series?’

‘Golly,’ sighed Streaky, deliberately mistaking the question for a statement and accepting the news as though it was something he had not realised before. He tossed aside the information with a slight and careless shoulder shrug and then climbed into the passenger seat with the practised ease of someone who is accustomed to getting into a car which is much too small for him. He lowered the window. ‘I’m terrible with money,’ he said, partly as explanation, partly as apology. He waved a hand and grinned. ‘I’ll see you at the end of the week. Make sure the landlord spends the company’s money wisely.’

Chapter 65

Living in a small, closely-knit village is, in many ways, like being a member of a large family.

Between the inhabitants of the village there are, inevitably, many minor disputes and disagreements. Sometimes there are petty feuds which may last for decades - long after the cause of the original discontent has been forgotten.

It is written somewhere that where two or three are gathered together there will be misunderstandings and Fondling-Under-Water was no exception to this simple rule.

But that is the downside of village life and there is no need to dwell on such unpleasantnesses.

The upside of life in a village is that when one member of the extended village family needs help he can ask for it in the confident expectation that his need will be met without question or rancour. Indeed, the concept of privacy is such an alien one within a village community that in many cases the help that is required will be forthcoming before the person wanting that help has thought to ask for it. (There are even those who believe that on some occasions help is forthcoming some time before the person being helped is aware that he or she needs help.)

When it is the village publican who is in trouble, and he needs help to restore, repair and save the village pub the saviours are out in force.

And so it was that long before Streaky Bacon and the delectable Voluptua Bradshaw had arrived back in London the villagers of Fondling-Under-Water had begun to redistribute the manna which had fallen in such abundance from Better Television heaven.

Within an hour and fifteen minutes several thousand second-hand slates had been ordered and were on their way to Fondling-Under-Water from a demolition site in Cornwall.

Within an hour and forty minutes a complex gridwork of rusty scaffolding had been erected on the outside of The Gravedigger’s Rest and a team of eager labourers had steadily begun to remove the fractured and patchwork collection of old slates which had contributed so much to the unwanted permeability of the village pub’s aged roof.

Long before Voluptua (never a confident driver) had found somewhere to park Streaky’s Porsche, and the two lovers had dragged themselves indoors and made a refreshing pot of Darjeeling tea, a brace of plasterers and a trio of carpenters (the best in the village) had been pulled off a job in WiddlecomeOver-The-Moor and were hurrying back to The Gravedigger’s Rest in order to revise and reconstitute the weather-battered ceilings of that highly valued establishment.

Biffo, whose experience of building workers was confined to his previous life in the suburbs, had been startled when he had heard Puffy assure Streaky that he could restore The Gravedigger’s Rest in the sort of time usually needed for a building estimator to draw a few deep breaths and find a piece of paper large enough to contain an estimate full of noughts.

But as Biffo cycled to and fro past The Gravedigger’s Rest he gradually realised that living in a village has virtues and advantages which cannot be classified under such headings as ‘lovely views’, ‘melodious bird song’ or ‘clean air’.

The village was rallying round in the way that the closest of families do, and it was clear to Biffo that Better Television’s money would be spent (the vast majority of it on materials for the villagers were happily giving their time for free) and The Gravedigger’s Rest would be restored to watertight but still unspoilt beauty well in time for Streaky, Voluptua and the television crew to excite the nation with yet another quiz programme.

Chapter 66

‘I’ve got something to tell you all,’ said Bill Stickers. He had gone such an unhealthy looking shade of white that he looked like a ‘before’ picture for an advertisement promoting some ironrich health remedy. He paused, studied his hands for a while and then cleared his throat. ‘It’s not terribly good news,’ he warned his audience. He looked miserable, desolate and terribly alone.

Cheesy, who was leaning against the bar, half turned. ‘What the hell is this all about?’ he asked Puffy. Members of the cricket club had been called in to The Gravedigger’s Rest for a special meeting. They had been told that the captain, chairman and president had an important announcement to make.

Puffy shrugged. ‘I haven’t the foggiest,’ he admitted

Bill blew his nose and started again. ‘I discovered the other day that the bank which has been looking after my money had, apparently made some injudicious investments.’ He spoke in a whisper but everyone could hear him. Somehow those listening knew that what he had to say was important. There was something at once both exquisitely embarrassing and irresistible about someone they all knew discussing his financial problems in public. This, they suspected, could be even more enthralling than the vicar’s revelation.

‘To cut a long story short,’ said Bill, clearing his throat again. ‘I found that I am not the wealthy man I thought I was when I had the money I, er, no longer have.’

Bill paused to mop his brow. ‘I found that I was, er, slightly, not to put too fine a point on it, pretty well broke,’ admitted Bill. He seemed ashamed of this admission. To most of the villagers his shame seemed odd since poverty was a condition with which most of them were well acquainted.

‘In view of all this, and of subsequent occurrences,’ said Bill. ‘I would like to offer my immediate resignation from the chairmanship, presidency and captaincy of the cricket club.’ He paused and wiped his mouth. ‘To take effect immediately,’ he said.

‘Nonsense!’ cried Puffy. ‘You don’t have to resign just because you’ve lost your money.’

A strong murmur of support for this view ran swiftly around the room. It was commonly accepted that Bill Stickers had been appointed chairman, president and captain of the Fondling-Under-Water Cricket Club partly because of his wealth (and partly because he owned the ground upon which the club played its matches) but no one felt it right that Bill should be stripped of his titles simply because he had lost the wealth which had gained him the titles in the first place.

The people of Fondling-Under-Water were a kind-hearted bunch; unlike some of those working for banks and building societies they didn’t like to see a man being kicked when he was down.

‘I’m afraid you haven’t heard the half of it yet,’ admitted Bill quietly. He pushed his fingers through what was left of his hair and, at the end of the gesture, scratched the back of his neck. He rubbed his nose, tapped his front teeth with his thumb nail and pulled rather ferociously at an unfortunate ear lobe. ‘It’s taken me a long time to pluck up the courage to tell you this,’ he said. He took a deep breath and then let it out in a rush. ‘I’ve sold the cricket ground.’

These final few words (the most significant and only truly crucial part of the whole speech) were tossed out so rapidly that most of those present did not hear them properly. Those who were standing close enough to hear did not seem to register them as being of significance.

‘I thought he said he’d sold the cricket ground,’ whispered Cheesy to Puffy. He tried a small, nervous laugh but it came out sounding more like the desperate gargle of someone being strangled.

‘So did I!’ replied Puffy.

They didn’t believe what they had heard but at the same time they weren’t entirely sure that they hadn’t heard it.

‘Sorry, Bill,’ said Paddy Fields, speaking for everyone present. He paused and then spoke slowly and very clearly. ‘Could you say that again?’

There was a long, long pause.

‘I’ve sold the cricket ground,’ said Bill. This time he spoke clearly and there was no mistaking his words. He looked more miserable and more desolate than he had when he had begun.

The dreadful news was greeted with total silence.

‘And there’s something else,’ Bill went on.

No one spoke. They could not imagine what else there could possibly be. It was as though King Edward VIII had finished his abdication speech and then added. . .`oh, and by the way...’.

Biffo could feel his own heart beating. He felt sure that everyone else present must be able to hear it. But they couldn’t. They were all deafened by the cacophony their own hearts were making.

Chapter 67

‘The cricket ground was the only asset I had left,’ said Bill rather weakly.

In the end he had been the only one able to break the forbidding, solid wall of silence he had created.

‘I really didn’t mean to sell it. But then a bloke came up to me out of the blue and offered me money for it.’ He paused and then blew his nose noisily. ‘Quite a lot of money,’ he admitted.

‘What’s he going to do with the ground?’ asked Paddy. It was the obvious question. The question everyone present wanted answering. ‘That’s the something else you were going to tell us isn’t? You know what he’s got planned for the ground, don’t you?’

‘I don’t think he’s going to leave it as a cricket club,’ said Bill weakly. He looked around. Everyone was looking at him. He sighed. This was the bit he was really dreading. ‘He’s going to build some sort of holiday camp there.’

‘Oh well that’s no problem,’ said Paddy, trying hard to laugh and look unconcerned. ‘He’ll never get planning permission. My cousin is chairman of the local planning committee. He’s dead keen on cricket.’

‘The land’s already got planning permission,’ said Bill quietly.

Everyone stared at him.

‘A few years ago Lord Hepplewhite was trying to raise money from his bank,’ explained Bill. ‘His solicitor told him that if he got planning permission for the cricket pitch the land would be worth more and the bank would lend him money against it.’ Bill hesitated and shrugged. ‘Lord Hepplewhite knows a lot of people. Getting planning permission probably wasn’t difficult.’

There was a long, long silence during which those present attempted to digest this devastating news.

‘Do you know the name of this fellow – the chap who has bought the cricket ground?’

‘Washbrook,’ said Bill without hesitation. ‘Damien Washbrook. He’s a solicitor.’

Biffo went quite cold. He asked Bill to repeat the name.

Paddy turned towards Biffo. ‘Do you know him?’ he asked.

‘I think so,’ said Biffo. ‘If he’s the bloke I think he is then he’s my ex-wife’s boyfriend.’

‘Do you have any idea why he’s bought the ground?’

Biffo shook his head slowly. ‘No,’ he confessed. He shrugged. ‘Perhaps he’s also a property dealer.’

‘Do you think that his buying the land has anything to do with your being here?’ asked Cheesy. There was a certain coolness in his voice.

Biffo looked at him. ‘No!’ he said. ‘Of course not! How could it?’

‘It seems a bit of a coincidence,’ said Paddy sternly.

Biffo looked around the bar. Everyone was looking at him.

‘I can understand how you all feel but you wouldn’t have known I knew him if I hadn’t told you!’ protested Biffo.

‘That’s true,’ said Paddy immediately. He took a deep breath. ‘Sorry, Biffo.’ he apologised. ‘I think we’re probably all a bit shocked.’

‘Sorry!’ said Cheesy. He looked embarrassed.

‘That’s OK,’ said Biffo. ‘I can understand why you were suspicious. In your place I would have probably felt the same.’

‘Have you signed the contract handing over the land to this Washbrook fellow?’ Paddy asked Bill.

Bill’s lowered gaze answered the question.

‘Maybe if we can raise the money we can buy the ground off this Washbrook chap,’ suggested Itchy hopefully.

‘How much did he pay?’ Paddy asked Bill.

‘£100,000,’ Bill answered without hesitation.

Paddy whistled.

‘He tried to get me to take it in instalments,’ said Bill. ‘But I didn’t trust him so I made him pay me in cash. I didn’t trust him and I don’t trust banks. He complained a lot but agreed in the end. I’ve got the cash stashed in my greenhouse.’ He paused. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said at last. Head down he darted for the door and disappeared out into the night. No one said goodbye.

Paddy was the first to speak. ‘So,’ he said at last. ‘What are we going to do?’

‘I suppose we’ll have to find somewhere else to play,’ said the vicar with a sigh.

Everyone looked at him as though he had suggested a summer tour of Mars.

‘But we’ve always played on that ground!’ said Cheesy.

‘My dad played cricket on that ground,’ said Itchy defiantly. ‘I don’t see why we should stop now. . .’

‘Just because someone is going to build on it,’ added Paddy drily.

Chapter 68

‘You look as if you’ve just taken a wicket and found out that the umpire had called a no ball,’ said Biffo to Puffy.

The landlord of The Gravedigger’s Rest was sitting on a stool behind his bar, with his head in his hands. There was chaos all around him as carpenters and plasterers repaired the pub ceilings. No one had bothered to lift up the carpet which was now tattier and more badly stained than ever. At this rate, thought Biffo, the carpet would soon become a real collector’s item.

‘Have a drink,’ said Puffy, pouring a large whisky for Biffo and taking a sip from his own. ‘And thanks again for arranging all this.’ He waved a hand around to indicate the work that was going on. ‘I don’t think we’d have got through another winter with the roof in the state it was in.’

‘Pleasure,’ said Biffo. A small chunk of plaster fell from the ceiling and fell into the glass. Drops of whisky splashed out of the glass and onto the back of Biffo’s hand. ‘But you’re looking even more miserable than you were when I saw you last. What’s up?’ He licked the drops of whisky from his hand and carefully removed the chunk of plaster from his glass.

‘I’ve just been talking to Paddy,’ said Puffy.

Biffo looked around for somewhere to put the small piece of plaster.

‘Just toss it on the floor,’ said Puffy. ‘We’re going to have a clean-up later.’

Biffo did as he was told and tossed the small piece of plaster onto the floor.

‘Paddy rang his cousin,’ explained Puffy. ‘The one who is chairman of the local planning committee.’

‘I remember,’ said Biffo. ‘But they’ve already given permission for the cricket ground, haven’t they?’ He took a swig from his glass. ‘Cheers,’ he said. ‘And thanks.’

’Apparently it all happened some time ago,’ said Puffy. ‘Bill was absolutely right. Lord Hepplewhite explained to Paddy’s cousin and a couple of other people on the committee that he needed planning permission on the land in order to get a loan from his bank. Under normal circumstances they wouldn’t have dreamt of giving him planning permission to build on the cricket ground. But because everyone likes him, and they felt sorry for him, and he promised never really to build on the land, and no one likes these financial people and everyone likes the idea of pulling a fast one over a bank, they gave him the permission.’

Puffy sighed. ‘So the planning permission was just intended as a ploy to help him get a loan from his bank.’ He finished his drink and poured himself another. A refill?’ he asked Biffo.

Biffo, understanding why his friend felt so depressed, followed the landlord’s example and emptied his glass. Puffy immediately filled it for him.

Somewhere above them there was a yelp and a loud crash. They both ignored it.

Chapter 69

Miss Box's bicycle was sturdy but it was built for strength and reliability rather than for speed. It had but three gears (one for whizzing downhill, one for pedalling on the flat and one for struggling uphill) and all the aerodynamic qualities of a small garden shed. It had been black when it had been delivered from the factory but it had, over the years, slowly turned brown with rust. When Miss Box spotted Biffo rubbing off some of the rust she told him off. 'Leave the rust where it is,' she said. 'It protects the metal.' Biffo looked at her as if she was potty. 'Remove the rust and the metal underneath will go rusty,' she explained. 'Keep removing the rust and eventually there won't be any metal left.'

The brakes, as Biffo had discovered on several hair raising occasions, were more for show than for action and slowing down put a heavy burden on the toes and soles of the rider's shoes or boots.

There was a large metal basket at the front of the bicycle, in front of the handlebars, and another, very slightly smaller metal basket at the back. There was a bell but it had long since lost its ring.

Biffo had arranged to meet Lettice at Buttercup Cottage at 1 o'clock but an emergency delivery of pork sausages and a bag of potting compost had delayed him and it was ten past the hour when he finally skidded to a halt outside the cottage gate.

He leant the bicycle against the hedge on the opposite side of the road and rushed into the garden alternately shouting out apologies and calling Lettice's name.

'I was sitting in the summerhouse in the back garden,' said Lettice, calm and unperturbed, appearing from between an overgrown rhododendron bush and the corner of the cottage. She was wearing a light blue cotton dress with white lace-edging around the short sleeves and a scoop neckline. 'The grass needs cutting but the back garden is beautiful.'

'I gather Puffy's got a mower for sale,' said Biffo with a grin. He realised once again just how beautiful Lettice was.

'Have you got the key?'

Biffo rummaged around in his pockets. 'I'm sorry I'm late,' he said again. 'Miss Box sent me off with an emergency delivery. I didn't like to ask whether it was the sausages or the potting compost which was the emergency. One tries to please.'

'Please don't worry about it!' said Lettice. 'I could have happily sat all day in that summerhouse. It really is a beautiful spot.' She peered behind him. 'Is that yours?'

Biffo turned around. The ewe, recognising that she had become the centre of attention, baaed loudly.

'Well, in a sort of way I suppose she is,' he admitted.

The ewe had been waiting for him outside The Gravedigger's Rest and she had followed him around all morning. Whenever he had cycled too fast for her she had merely waited and nibbled at a verge until he came cycling back. She was now standing outside the gate, staring at him with huge doleful eyes. `We met yesterday evening,' he said. 'It's a long story.'

'Do you know who she belongs to?'

'Haven't the foggiest.'

Lettice walked up the path, opened the gate and examined the sheep. 'She isn't marked.'

‘What does that mean?’ asked Biffo, whose areas of expertise did not include sheep markings.

‘Farmers usually mark their sheep in case they get out and get lost. This one hasn’t been marked since she was shorn last year so the chances are that she’s probably been living wild for quite a while.’

`Ah.’

‘Shall I let her in?’

‘In where?’

‘Into the garden? She can eat some of the lawn. If we leave her out in the road she may get run over or cause an accident.’

‘I suppose you’d better,’ agreed Biffo.

The ewe did not need asking twice. The moment Lettice opened the gate she shot through the opening and into the garden. She baaed loudly at Biffo and then happily turned herself into a lawn eating machine.

Biffo pulled out the two keys which Mrs Trubshaw had given him. ‘Do you know which key fits which door?’ he asked.

Lettice took the two keys from him, selected the appropriate key for the front door and let them into the cottage. ‘It’ll be a little damp,’ she warned Biffo. ‘It’s been empty all through the winter. I think Mrs Trubshaw did come up a couple of times and light a fire but it really needed a little more attention than that. These old cottages do need quite a bit of looking after.’

‘It does smell a bit musty,’ agreed Biffo. He stepped gingerly onto the bare floorboards in the hall. ‘Is the floor safe?’ he asked, recklessly bouncing up and down a little on his toes. He looked up at the walls. There were several large damp patches showing where rain had come in during the winter. None of these worried Biffo. He had always dreamt of living in the country. Damp stains seemed a small price to pay.

‘Oh, I think so,’ said Lettice. ‘It’s the roof which really needs some work doing on it. There were a couple of storms last winter and quite a few tiles were blown off. I’m afraid I don’t think Mrs Trubshaw ever got around to having them replaced.’

‘Who was the last owner?’

‘Mr Rose. He was Mrs Trubshaw’s brother.’

And she inherited the cottage when he died?’

‘That’s right.’

Biffo wandered from the hall into a large, airy room which overlooked the back garden. Like the hallway it was quite bare.

‘It’s wonderful!’ said Biffo. Some people would have seen it as lonely and out of the way. He saw it as quiet and secluded.

Lettice smiled at him. ‘It needs quite a lot doing to it,’ she warned him. ‘But I think that is probably reflected in the asking price.’ She hesitated. ‘You could always make an offer,’ she said. ‘I think the asking price is pretty much just a sort of starting point.’ She blushed. She suddenly realised that she very much wanted Biffo to buy the cottage and stay in the village.

‘What happened to all the furniture and the carpets?’ asked Biffo.

‘There was a house auction. It’s a pity in a way because quite a lot of the furniture really went well with the cottage.

But with no one living in the cottage it was the wisest thing really.'

'I like the hearth!' said Biffo, indicating a huge, old-fashioned fireplace. It was big enough to walk into. There were two huge stone seats built into it. 'Do you know if the chimney works?'

'Of course it works!' said Lettice. 'You can burn logs cut from your own trees. There are working fireplaces in all the rooms.'

'Wonderful!' said Biffo, who meant it.

'Puffy always says that chopping up your own wood warms you up twice,' said Lettice. 'Once when you chop the wood and once when you burn the logs.'

Biffo unlocked a pair of French windows which opened out onto a small patio. The windows had swollen with the damp and were stiff and difficult to open. But with a little pushing and a little wriggling they opened eventually. A sliver of wood broke off the bottom of the door and stayed behind.

'The wood is a little rotten, I'm afraid,' said Lettice. And everything needs painting.'

'I haven't seen anything that a bit of loving care and attention couldn't put right,' said Biffo. He pulled the French windows shut and, with a little difficulty, eventually succeeded relocking them.

'What are you going to do here?' asked Lettice.

Biffo looked at her. 'What do you mean?' he asked.

'I'm sorry,' apologised Lettice. 'That was very rude of me.' She had gone red.

'I'm going to tidy things up a bit,' said Biffo. 'Well, to be honest I'll try and find some people to help me tidy things up. I'm not very handy.' He paused. 'That isn't what you meant, is it?'

'No,' said Lettice. 'I was being nosy, I'm afraid.'

'That's OK,' said Biffo. 'Go on.'

'I think I've probably been living in this village too long. No one has any secrets round here. I meant to ask what you're going to do for a living. I'm assuming that you're not hoping to keep Franklin's job when his ankle gets better. And I'm afraid there isn't much of a demand for television producers in the village.'

Biffo laughed. 'I really don't know what I'm going to do,' he confessed. He paused and thought for a while. 'That's not entirely true,' he admitted. 'When I left home I told my ex-wife - actually she's still my wife I suppose but I already think of her as my ex-wife - that I was going to write a book.'

'How exciting!' said Lettice. 'A novel?'

'Yes,' said Biffo, feeling rather embarrassed. 'Or maybe I'll write a play.' He thought for a moment before continuing. 'Maybe I'll write a novel about a man who runs away from home and moves into a cottage in the country. I could call it 'The Escape Artist'.' He smiled. 'Meanwhile,' he said, 'I've got a little time to get myself sorted out thanks to the cheque Better Television sent me, so Tiger and I can settle here, write the novel and catch mice.'

'Really?' And which are you going to do?'

'Pardon?'

'Are you going to write the novel or catch the mice?'

'I thought I might leave the mice to Tiger,' Biffo replied.

‘Sounds like a good idea!’ agreed Lettice. ‘Shall we go and see the kitchen?’ she asked, heading back across the hall.

‘Please!’ said Biffo enthusiastically, following her.

‘I’m afraid that Mr Rose never had it modernised,’ said Lettice.

The kitchen, which was much larger than Biffo had expected, was dominated by three huge items of furniture: a massive and extremely dirty Aga cooker; a huge, old-fashioned white sink with two large wooden draining boards and a single cold tap, and a Welsh dresser that stretched from floor to ceiling. The floor, which was slightly uneven, was made of flagstones.

‘The auctioneer didn’t sell everything then!’ said Biffo.

‘He would have done if he could have,’ said Lettice. ‘But the Aga was far too big and heavy to move and the dresser has obviously been built where it is. It would be impossible to get it out of the room without chopping it up.’

‘I’m glad they didn’t,’ said Biffo.

‘A London dealer wanted to,’ said Lettice. ‘He was going to have it cut into three parts, take it up to London, sell it and have it put back together in someone’s else house.’

‘Why didn’t he?’

‘Mrs Trubshaw wouldn’t let him,’ said Lettice. ‘The same dealer also wanted to dig up the flagstones.’

‘But Mrs Trubshaw wouldn’t let him?’

‘Mrs Trubshaw wouldn’t let him,’ confirmed Lettice.

‘Good old Mrs Trubshaw!’ said Biffo, with enthusiasm. ‘I like her more by the minute.’

‘She also saved the huge cast iron bath upstairs,’ said Lettice. ‘And a huge wardrobe and four poster bed that have both obviously been in the house since it was built. Mrs Trubshaw says she thinks that the Welsh dresser, the wardrobe and the four poster bed were all built by the carpenter who helped build the cottage.’

‘Let’s go upstairs and have a look!’ said Biffo, who had already decided that the cottage was exactly what he wanted.

Lettice led the way and he followed her up a narrow, extremely steep staircase which looked to Biffo as if it had been created by the same builder who had built the staircase at The Gravedigger’s Rest.

‘Mind your head at the top of the stairs,’ said Lettice. ‘And you’ll have to be careful going into the bedrooms.’

‘Oh don’t worry about me,’ said Biffo, ‘I’m an old hand at dealing with low beams.’ He had just finished the sentence when he cracked his head as he reached the top of the stairs.

‘Are you all right?’ asked Lettice, as Biffo rubbed the top of his head with his right hand.

‘My skull must be getting harder,’ replied Biffo, blinking, and stepping forwards gingerly. ‘I’m not seeing as many stars these days.’

‘You’ll have to start wearing a motorcycle helmet,’ suggested Lettice.

Biffo grunted something inaudible in reply.

‘This is what we estate agents like to describe as the master bedroom,’ said Lettice, leading the way into a spacious bedroom which had diamond-paned windows looking onto the back garden, the side garden and the front garden. The bedroom was furnished with a magnificent four poster oak bed and a matching oak wardrobe. ‘Mind your head as you come in because although the ceiling is fairly high the door is a little low.’

‘I wonder why they always used to build doorways for midgets,’ asked Biffo, ducking so low that there was a full foot between the top of his head and the bottom of the door jamb.

‘People were shorter when they built this house,’ explained Lettice. ‘If you visit a house built in the middle-ages you’ll find that their ceilings and doors were even lower then.’

‘It’s all that free school milk we used to have to drink when I was a kid,’ said Biffo. ‘It’s turned us into a race of giants.’ He walked over to one of the windows and looked out. The view was spectacular. The carpenter who had built the bed and the wardrobe had also built a window seat underneath each of the three windows. ‘I think this is probably the most beautiful bedroom I’ve ever been in,’ said Biffo.

‘Me too, Lettice replied. ‘It’s wonderful, isn’t it?’

Biffo tried to open the window overlooking the garden but the catch came away in his hand. ‘Whoops!’ he said, looking at Lettice. ‘Sorry about that.’

‘That’s OK,’ said Lettice. She wondered why it was that all the men she knew managed to look like guilty little boys whenever they had done something wrong. ‘Don’t worry about it.’

‘What shall I do with this?’ asked Biffo, holding up the broken catch.

‘Oh, just leave it on the window seat,’ said Lettice.

Biffo put the catch down on the window seat and then suddenly and utterly unexpectedly cried out in alarm as his right foot and lower leg disappeared, quite without warning, through the floorboards near to the window. He kept perfectly still (it would perhaps be more accurate to say that he froze) and for a moment or two neither he nor Lettice spoke.

‘Are you all right?’ asked Lettice. Gingerly, she walked across to where he was standing.

‘I’m fine, thanks,’ said Biffo, who had gone a little pale.

‘But part of me seems to have popped downstairs. I seem to have done an Itchy!’

‘Can you pull your foot back up?’

‘I think I’ll lie down,’ said Biffo, lowering himself to the floor. ‘If I spread my weight around I’ll perhaps be less likely to go through. I’m worried that if I push down with one foot while trying to pull the other foot up I’ll probably end up with both feet downstairs.’

He lay down, wriggled about for a bit and eventually managed to free his foot and leg. His right shoe had disappeared.

‘I’m terribly sorry,’ said Lettice, as she backed away rather gingerly.

‘Not your fault,’ said Biffo, as he crawled towards the door.

‘I suppose the rain must have got in and made the floorboards a bit rotten,’ said Lettice.

‘Let’s have a look at the rest of the bedrooms,’ said Biffo, gingerly standing upright again.

‘Are you sure?’ asked Lettice, as Biffo edged past her. ‘Do be careful!’

There were quite a few damp patches in the other rooms, and in several places it was possible to see the sky through the roof. But Biffo managed to wander around without making any more holes in the floor and the downstairs ceiling.

‘It does need a bit more work on it than I had thought,’ admitted Lettice, as they made their way back downstairs.

‘I want to buy it,’ said Biffo firmly.

Lettice looked at him. ‘Are you sure?’

Biffo looked back at her and smiled. ‘I thought estate agents were supposed to sell properties!’

‘Well, I don’t want you to get involved with something that is going to cause you too much trouble, heartache and expense. . .’

‘I love the cottage!’ said Biffo, with genuine enthusiasm. And I feel we’ve got a lot in common. We’re both a bit worn out, we both need some loving care and attention and we’re both about to start a new part of our lives.’ He stopped on the stairs. ‘What is the asking price?’

‘£75,000,’ replied Lettice. ‘But in view of the condition I think we would be happy to recommend to Mr and Mrs Trubshaw that they accept considerably less than that.’

‘Would £65,000 be fair?’

‘I think that would be very fair. Do you want me to have a word with Mrs Trubshaw later on this afternoon?’

‘Yes, please,’ said Biffo, eagerly.

‘Would you like to see the garden?’ asked Lettice, heading for the back door. The door had stuck slightly. She kicked it gently with her foot. It opened. ‘And the summerhouse?’ she added, stepping out into the garden. The ewe, who was still munching away at the grass, looked up as the back door opened, baaed twice, and then put her head back down and got back to work. She seemed very happy.

‘I certainly do,’ said Biffo, hesitating for a moment. ‘Tiger will love the garden. But before we go outside do you mind if I try to find my shoe?’

Chapter 70

Biffo heard the news that his offer for Buttercup Cottage had been accepted when he walked into the bar at The Gravedigger’s Rest that evening.

‘Congratulations!’ said Lettice, smiling broadly.

‘They accepted the offer?’

Lettice nodded. ‘So now you’ve got somewhere to keep your sheep.’ They had left the ewe happily quartered in the garden when they had left Buttercup Cottage.

‘Thanks!’ said Biffo. ‘Drinks all round!’ he added, overcome with generosity.

‘Thank you,’ said Itchy, the only person in the bar apart from Lettice. ‘I’ll have the usual!’ He had not finished the pint in front of him but firmly believed in the philosophy that a pint in the glass is worth two in the cask.

‘What’s the usual?’ Biffo asked, out of idle curiosity.

‘A pint of Old Glorious,’ replied Lettice, identifying Itchy’s tipple of choice. She had already taken down a fresh pint glass from the shelf behind her.

‘I’ll have the same,’ said Biffo. ‘What are you having?’

‘I’ll have a bitter lemon, thanks,’ said Lettice

‘And a double whisky for me,’ said Puffy, suddenly appearing as though by magic. ‘I heard that someone was buying free drinks,’ he explained to Biffo.

‘What are we celebrating?’ asked Itchy.

‘I’m buying a cottage!’ replied Biffo.

‘Congratulations!’ said Itchy. ‘You’re staying in the village, then?’ He looked genuinely pleased.

‘I certainly am!’ agreed Biffo.

‘Which cottage are you buying?’

‘Buttercup Cottage.’

‘Aha!’ said Itchy, knowingly.

‘You know it?’

‘Oh yes.’ said Itchy, nodding his head. ‘I know Buttercup Cottage.’

‘What do you think of it?’ asked Biffo.

‘Very pretty,’ said Itchy enthusiastically. He scratched his head as he watched Lettice pour his pint of Old Glorious and put it down on the bar in front of him. ‘It’ll need a bit of work doing to it,’ he warned.

‘Oh yes,’ agreed Biffo. ‘I realise that.’

Itchy beamed. ‘I’ll have a look at it for you,’ he offered. ‘Tell you what you need to have done.’

‘That’s very kind of you,’ said Biffo.

‘You have to watch out with these old properties,’ said Itchy. ‘There’s some folk who’ll take advantage of you. You’ll need someone you can trust.’

Itchy had started to tell Biffo how a firm of cowboy builders in another village had taken advantage of a couple who had bought a weekend cottage when Paddy staggered into the bar.

‘Give me a drink, Lettice,’ he said, clambering weakly onto a stool. The movement seemed to take every bit of energy he possessed.

‘What would you like?’ Lettice asked him.

‘Whatever comes out of the bottle the quickest,’ Paddy replied. ‘This is an emergency.’ He cupped his head in his hands and stared at a beer mat on the counter.

‘Tough day?’ asked Puffy, when Lettice had poured the vice-captain a large brandy and the vice-captain had put the brandy where it could do some good.

‘I’ve just been to see the vicar,’ explained Paddy, handing his empty glass back to Lettice. He held the glass in such a way that it was obvious that he wanted a refill.

Everyone moved a little closer and waited. The silence fell like snow. Even the clock behind the bar seemed to have stopped ticking.

Paddy leant across the bar and spoke directly to Lettice. ‘Have you got a white skirt?’ he asked her.

Lettice looked rather taken aback, and not a little puzzled; it was not a question she had expected. She put a fresh glass of brandy in front of the vice-captain. ‘I’m not sure,’ she replied.

‘Think hard,’ pleaded Paddy. ‘It’s important.’

Lettice thought carefully. ‘I’ve got a tennis skirt,’ she said eventually. ‘I haven’t worn it since I was at school.’

‘Do you think it would fit the vicar?’

Lettice stared at him, took a sip from the glass of brandy she had put in front of Paddy, swallowed, and thought about this for a few moments. ‘I would think so,’ she said at last. ‘It wouldn’t be difficult to let out the waist a bit if necessary.’

‘Thank heavens,’ said Paddy, clearly pleased. ‘Can the vicar borrow it?’ He drank half the brandy in a single gulp.

‘Of course,’ said Lettice. ‘He can have it. I never wear it.’

Paddy reached across the bar, took Lettice’s hand, raised it to his lips and kissed her fingers. ‘Thank you,’ he said quietly. ‘You will be blessed for this.’ He picked up his glass, finished the brandy, and put the empty glass down on the bar.

‘I’ll have another pint, please, Lettice,’ said Itchy, holding an empty glass out in front of him. He looked pale.

‘Me too,’ said Biffo, finishing his pint of Old Glorious and placing the empty glass alongside Itchy’s. He did not look quite as pale as Itchy but he had worked in television and was not such a stranger to the unusual.

Lettice refilled Paddy’s brandy glass, filled Biffo’s glass and then poured herself a large whisky. Puffy filled Itchy’s glass and poured himself a larger whisky. One of the advantages of owning a pub is that you can pour yourself big drinks.

‘The vicar has agreed to play for us tomorrow,’ Paddy explained. ‘And he says he’ll consider carrying on playing for the rest of the season.’ He took a gulp from the brandy glass. ‘But he’ll only play,’ he paused and took another gulp.

‘He’ll, er, he, er, says that he will only, er, play if he can, er, wear a skirt.’

‘And he hasn’t got a white skirt,’ said Lettice.

‘He’s got a white blouse,’ said Paddy. ‘But apparently he hasn’t got a white skirt.’

‘He has now,’ said Lettice, flatly.

‘I think I’ll ring him and let him know,’ said Paddy. ‘He’ll be pleased.’ He looked at Lettice. ‘Are you sure he can keep it?’

‘I’m sure,’ said Lettice.

‘You’d better ring him now,’ said Puffy, handing the telephone across the bar. ‘You may not be sober enough to dial if you keep downing the brandies.’

‘Just tell him that if he wears high heels he has to wear those very thin ones!’ said a worried sounding Itchy. ‘Those thin ones aerate the grass nicely but I’m not having people in thick high heels running about on my wicket.’ He finished his beer and handed the empty glass across the bar. Lettice took the glass and started to refill it for him. A moment or two later Biffo did the same; though, since Lettice was still busy, he handed his glass to Puffy.

They all sat quietly while Paddy telephoned the vicar with the good news.

‘What do you think the vicar puts in his bra?’ Itchy asked Biffo in a whisper. ‘I mean, he hasn’t got, you know, the sort of stuff that normally fills a bra, has he?’

‘I’ve no idea,’ Biffo whispered back. He thought about it for a moment or two. ‘Old cricket balls?’

‘Phew!’ said Paddy, letting the telephone receiver fall back onto the handset. ‘I could have done without that!’

Just then the door opened and Constable Hobbling came in, walked to the bar and removed his helmet. He placed his helmet on the bar and sat down on a stool. Puffy immediately reached for a glass and began to fill it with a pint of Old Favourite- known to him, and, indeed, to all the regulars, to be the constable’s preferred beverage.

Constable Hobbling’s arrival was greeted with numerous ribald remarks.

‘Are you going to be playing in a frock too?’ asked Itchy. ‘Solidarity with the vicar and all that.’

‘If you are wearing a frock, you’d better have a word with the vicar,’ advised Puffy. ‘Make sure your outfits don’t clash.’

‘It’s OK,’ Itchy pointed out. ‘They’ll both be in white.’

But Constable Hobbling wasn’t listening. No one noticed the glum look on his face until he spoke. But when he had spoken he was not the only one with a glum look.

‘I can’t play,’ the village policeman said, unhappily.

There was a long, long silence, broken only by the sound of Itchy emptying his glass in a single lift.

‘Tell me he didn’t say that,’ said Paddy at last. He spoke quietly and his request seemed a genuine one. Sadly, all those present had heard what the policeman had said and none of them was prepared to lie.

‘I’d love to play,’ said Constable Hobbling. He sounded genuinely heartbroken. Biffo thought that the policeman might burst into tears at any moment. ‘But I can’t.’

There was another long, long silence. This time the silence was broken only by the sound of Itchy placing his empty glass on the bar counter and pushing it across towards Puffy.

‘I had a telephone call today from Police Headquarters,’ explained the village policeman. ‘They’re unhappy with my arrest record.’

‘Why?’ asked Itchy, incredulously. ‘What on earth is wrong with your arrest record?’

‘I haven’t arrested anyone for seven years,’ said Constable Hobbling.

‘Shows you’re keeping law and order,’ said Puffy. ‘You haven’t needed to arrest anyone because no one has done anything wrong. Everyone respects you and is too frightened of you to break the law. Simple.’

‘It’s not that simple,’ said Constable Hobbling. ‘A new management team has taken over and they’ve set arrest targets.’

‘What does that mean?’ asked Lettice.

‘It means that if I don’t arrest someone within 24 hours they’ll move me into the city and make me work in an office,’ said Constable Hobbling. He sounded thoroughly miserable.

‘Arrest someone?’ said Puffy, horrified.

‘In the village?’ said Itchy, terrified.

‘That’s what they said!’ said Constable Hobbling.

There was another long, long silence while everyone in the bar thought about this a little and drank quite a lot.

‘How, exactly, does this prevent you from playing in the match?’ asked Paddy tentatively.

‘The Inspector says my weekend leave is cancelled,’ explained Constable Hobbling. ‘He says the Superintendent has given orders that I’m to be on duty until I make an arrest.’ He lowered his voice and looked over his shoulder as though frightened that someone might hear him. ‘He threatened to come up here and check up on me. If I’m not wearing my uniform at all times I could get into big trouble.’ He thought for a moment.

‘They could…,’ he frowned. He paused. ‘I don’t know what they could do,’ he admitted. ‘But I’d be in big trouble.’

‘Let me get this straight,’ said Paddy, addressing the village policeman directly. ‘The important thing is that you have to be on duty this weekend.’

‘Yes.’

‘And you have to wear your uniform?’

‘Yes.’

‘But virtually the whole of the village will be at the cricket ground won’t they?’

‘I suppose they will,’ agreed Constable Hobbling.

‘So it would obviously be important for you to be at the cricket ground too?’

Constable Hobbling thought about this for a moment. ‘It would,’ he agreed. He looked much brighter.

‘In your uniform.’

‘In my uniform.’

‘But is there anything in the regulations which says that while you are on duty, wearing your uniform, you cannot play a little cricket?’

Constable Hobbling thought about this for some time. He was not quite as well acquainted with police regulations as he perhaps ought to have been and so this took some little time. But at long last, having trawled his memory for whatever he could remember of police regulations, he spoke. ‘Not that I know of,’ he admitted.

‘So, there you are!’ said Paddy, delightedly.

Constable Hobbling looked confused. ‘Where am I?’ he asked.

‘At the cricket ground,’ said Paddy. ‘Playing cricket in your uniform!’

Constable Hobbling thought about this for a long time. He was not a man to whom thought came easily, and he was not a man who liked to leap recklessly to conclusions. He much preferred to take his time. He liked to allow thoughts, ideas and notions to seep deep into his brain before making any decisions. Over the years this habit had at the same time frustrated and annoyed his superiors, and endeared him to the citizens he was hired to protect.

‘Playing cricket in my uniform?’

‘Playing cricket in your uniform,’ said Paddy. ‘And if your Inspector turns up you can, if necessary, just totter over to the boundary, put your hands behind your back, do those knee bends that policemen do and say ‘Evenin’ all!’ to everyone.’

‘So I can play in the big match after all?’ asked Constable Hobbling.

‘Absolutely!’ agreed Paddy. He looked around. ‘I think we all agree on that, don’t we?’

There was a ragged chorus of ‘Oh yes.’ and ‘Absolutely!’ from around the bar.

Suddenly Constable Hobbling frowned as he remembered something. ‘There is one thing that’s bothering me,’ he said.

‘What’s that?’ asked Paddy, hardly daring to breathe lest Constable Hobbling had found some fatal flaw in his fragile logic.

‘Why did Itchy ask me if I was wearing a frock?’ asked the policeman. He turned and looked directly at Itchy.

‘Ah,’ said Paddy. Well, you know that our vicar has, er become, well a sort of vicaresse?’

‘A what?’

‘A lady vicar.’

‘Ah, yes.’ Constable Hobbling nodded wisely. There had been a circular from the Chief Constable about the hazards of racism and other -isms in the police force and he rather suspected that men who wanted to dress up in frocks might well be members of an -ism who were, therefore, entitled to extra respect.

‘Well, he has agreed to play in the big match,’ said Paddy. ‘But he will be playing in a frock.’

‘A skirt,’ said Lettice. ‘A white skirt. And a blouse. A white blouse. A white skirt and a white blouse.’

Paddy waved a hand as though to dismiss this correction as a piece of unnecessary semantics. ‘Skirt, frock, whatever,’ he said.

‘There’s quite a difference,’ said Lettice. ‘On the whole skirts tend to be cheaper than frocks,’ she added, knowing that Paddy would find this difference memorable.

‘Really?’ said Paddy, tucking this apparently useless but quite possibly money-saving piece of information away in a convenient cortical crevice. Maybe next time he needed to buy his way out of a sticky situation at home he could do so by offering to buy a new skirt instead of a new frock.

Suddenly something occurred to Lettice. ‘Will he be wearing a bra for the match?’ she asked Paddy.

‘A bra?’

‘Yes, you know. . .,’ said Lettice. She began to explain.

‘I know what a bra is,’ said Paddy. ‘I’m a married man.’

‘Yes. Well, do you know if he will be wearing one?’ asked Lettice.

‘Why?’ asked Paddy.

‘Well, he should remember to wear a white bra,’ said Lettice. ‘A black bra under a white blouse will look simply awful when he’s playing cricket.’

‘I don’t think that’s the sort of thing a captain can interfere with,’ said Paddy hastily.

Puffy, who felt that discussions regarding feminine underwear were not wholly appropriate for a public bar, and deciding consequently that the conversation needed to change direction slightly, spoke to Constable Hobbling. ‘Naturally, we will try not to say or do anything which suggests that we notice anything odd or unusual about the vicar’s appearance.’

Itchy, who thought it exceedingly unlikely that twenty one players and two umpires could fail to come up with a constant stream of comments drawing attention to the vicar’s unusual choice of apparel (regardless of the colour of his bra) spluttered and very nearly drowned in his beer.

‘Naturally,’ said the policeman, very sternly. He finished his pint of beer, put the correct amount of money down on the counter to pay for it and headed for the door. With his fingers on the door handle he turned.

‘I’ve just remembered,’ he said. ‘I’ve still got to find someone to arrest.’

‘Don’t worry about that for the moment,’ said Paddy, his voice full of gentle reassurance. ‘You’ll find someone to arrest.’

‘Do you think so?’ said Constable Hobbling. He seemed cheered by Paddy’s confidence.

‘No problem,’ Paddy promised.

‘That’s a great relief,’ said Constable Hobbling.

‘You just concentrate on your bowling,’ said Paddy.

Chapter 71

There was a long silence after Constable Hobbling’s disappearance. The silence was broken only by the sounds of drinking.

‘Who is he going to arrest?’ asked Itchy at last. Itchy, having had several brushes with the law, was clearly a little sensitive on this issue.

‘Whom,’ said Puffy. ‘I think you’ll find it’s whom.’

‘What?’ said Itchy. ‘Who’s he?’

‘Whom’ said Puffy.

‘What’s whom?’ asked Itchy.

‘Who’s whom?’ said Puffy, now thoroughly confused and bewildered, and wishing he hadn’t bothered.

This might have gone on for some time if Biffo had not interfered and explained.

‘OK,’ said Itchy. ‘Whom is he going to arrest?’ He frowned and looked at Puffy. ‘It doesn’t sound right,’ he said. ‘It sounds funny.’

‘It’s right,’ said Puffy. ‘Isn’t it?’ he asked, addressing the question to Biffo.

‘It’s right,’ said Biffo. ‘If the person doing the arresting is the subject of the sentence.’

‘Why should I believe him?’ Itchy asked Puffy.

‘I’ve got a degree in English,’ said Biffo.

‘I thought you said you worked in television,’ said Itchy.

‘I did,’ said Biffo.

‘There you are then,’ said Itchy. ‘Why should we believe you?’ He thought for a while longer. And since when has the person doing the arresting done the sentence?’

Biffo thought about this moment. ‘Pass,’ he said. He sighed. ‘I think you were probably right the first time.’

‘Thank you,’ said Itchy, feeling strengthened by what appeared to be a small victory. ‘Who is he going to arrest?’

‘Who?’ asked Paddy.

‘Don’t let’s start all that again,’ said Lettice.

‘No, I mean who is he going to arrest?’ asked Paddy. ‘It’s a good question.’

‘Thank you,’ said Itchy. And I’d like a good answer. Preferably an answer that doesn’t include my name.’ They thought about this for quite a while.

And then they all ordered another round of drinks.

Chapter 72

It was Saturday and the players and supporters of the Fondling-Under-Water cricket club were holding their hastily planned fund-raising event.

‘Don’t these things generally have to be organised a long time in advance?’ a puzzled Biffo had asked Lettice the day before.

Back in the place which he had once called home, in what now seemed a previous existence lived by someone else, his ambitious and social climbing wife Edwina had been chairman of the committee which had organised their annual local fête. He remembered that her committee (which consisted exclusively of ambitious, social climbing people) always started planning next year’s fête on the day after this year’s fête had finished. For the twelve months which followed they would meet twice a month. Everything had to be discussed in minute detail.

‘Not here,’ Lettice had replied. ‘Only villagers who live in and around Fondling-Under-Water are going to come so there isn’t much planning to do.’

‘But what about hiring tents and organising the catering and so on?’

‘We don’t waste money on hiring tents,’ Lettice had explained. ‘And the cricket club tea ladies will do the catering.’

‘Don’t you have to find someone to open it?’

‘Open what?’

‘The ‘do’, the fund-raising event or whatever you call it.’

‘Oh, you mean get someone like a vicar or a pop star to come along, make a boring speech and tell people when they can start enjoying themselves?’

‘That sort of thing,’ Biffo admitted, remembering that Edwina and her fellow committee members had once spent many hours trying to decide whether to invite their local MP or a television quiz show host to open their fête. He seemed to remember that status had won out over rank commercialism and the MP, a political nonentity who had about as much charisma as a bag of turnips, had been invited.

‘Oh no,’ said Lettice. ‘It will just sort of start when people get there.’

‘And you don’t take out insurance for bad weather?’

Lettice had looked at him as though not quite sure whether he was teasing her. She eventually decided that he was serious. ‘Do you really know people who do that?’

‘Oh yes,’ Biffo had assured her. ‘Back in my previous existence the organisers of our local fête used to spend £1,500 every year on an insurance premium. If the event got completely washed out by bad weather they could make a claim.’ He thought for a moment. ‘I think it had to rain for five hours continuously before they got any money.’

Lettice had gaped at him open mouthed. ‘We’re only hoping to raise enough money to buy a lawnmower!’ she had said. ‘We have the cricket pavilion for shelter and if it rains too heavily we’ll adjourn to the pub.’

‘I do see your point,’ Biffo had said. ‘I must say it’s rather nice to be able to organise a fund-raising event in less time than it takes the grass on a cricket pitch to grow.’

Chapter 73

When Biffo awoke that Saturday morning he gently moved the sleeping Tiger off his chest and onto the bed covers a foot or so away (Tiger miaowed, stretched, looked around and immediately went back to sleep) and tiptoed across the cold (and still slightly damp) floor to the window. He could already see some action on the cricket field. Three men were carrying a large fence post across the outfield and just in front of the pavilion a small group of women in short white skirts, white T-shirts, white pumps and white socks seemed to be holding an early morning gym class. Someone, presumably Itchy, had driven eight metal stakes into the ground around the cricket square in the middle of the field in order to protect the turf there from women wearing the wrong sort of high-heeled shoes. In the absence of a long enough piece of string or tape Itchy had used the collection of borrowed electrical power leads to mark off the exclusion zone.

After shaving, dressing and putting down food for a still sleepy Tiger, Biffo made himself some toast and a pot of coffee and enjoyed a leisurely start to the morning for the first time since his arrival in Fondling-Under-Water. Except for a few weeks before Christmas Miss Box didn’t offer her customers a Saturday morning delivery service. She would have liked to have offered a seven day a week service but Franklin Minton, her regular delivery cyclist, had always made it quite clear that if she wanted her customers serviced on a Saturday or a Sunday she could find someone else to do the servicing.

The consultant orthopaedic surgeon at the local hospital had, after another look at the X-rays, told Franklin Minton that he would not be fit to ride a bicycle for eight weeks and although (thanks to the cheque from Better Television) Biffo no longer really needed the money to pay for his board and keep at The Gravedigger’s Rest he had happily promised Miss Box that he would continue with his job as locum cyclist for as long as she wanted him.

Franklin himself had been told by Paddy that his services as umpire would be required for the forthcoming big match after all. When he had pointed out that an inability to stand up would in most circles be considered something of a handicap for an umpire Paddy had suggested that he umpire in a chair.

‘And how am I going to move a chair from one end of the pitch to the other?’ Franklin had demanded. ‘No one is going to want to start moving furniture after every over.’

‘Get a wheelchair!’ Paddy had suggested.

‘Where am I going to find a wheelchair?’ Franklin had demanded. ‘The local hospital has a nine month waiting list for wheelchair loans. By the time I get one I’ll be walking again.’

‘Miss Box is bound to have one,’ Paddy had assured him.

Technically, the vice-captain was wrong about that. Miss Box didn’t have one wheelchair. When Franklin told her what he needed she had asked him whether he wanted a metal one or a wooden one, a wheelchair which had to be pushed or a wheelchair which could be propelled by the occupier. In a wooden shed behind the shop she had, it seemed, a bigger collection of wheelchairs than most general hospitals can boast.

‘Why didn’t you tell me that you’d got all these wheelchairs?’ said Franklin, indignantly, when Miss Box showed him her store.

‘You didn’t ask!’ Miss Box replied, equally indignantly. ‘Besides I didn’t think you could afford to hire one.’

‘You’re going to charge me?’ asked Franklin, incredulously.

Miss Box said nothing but just stared at him.

‘Sorry,’ said Franklin. ‘Forget I said that.’

In the end Miss Box agreed to lend Franklin a wheelchair for the duration of the match without charge. ‘But I want it back straight afterwards!’ she had insisted.

Daniel Potterton, who had been staying with one of Mrs Cleavidge’s tea ladies, (there was, naturally, much talk about the precise nature of the relationship) called in at The Gravedigger’s Rest before catching the bus back to the nearest railway station.

‘If I don’t go now I’ll never go,’ he told Biffo. ‘I can catch up with the rest of the team by tonight and play with them for the rest of the tour.’ He looked around the now repaired but still battered-looking public house and, through the window, across at the cricket field with its absurdly over decorative cricket pavilion and shook his head. ‘I don’t know what it is about this place,’ he said with a sigh. ‘But I know one thing — if I ever run away from home this is where I’ll come.’

‘Are you busy?’ asked Puffy, wandering in just as Biffo was finishing his second cup of coffee. He had eaten, and thoroughly enjoyed three slices of buttered toast and a large quantity of Thicke Cutte Olde Englishe marmalade. The label was unbearably pretentious but the marmalade was excellent.

‘Not at all,’ said Biffo, putting down his cup.

‘Do you think Miss Box would lend you her bicycle? We’ve got a bit of an emergency.’

‘I would think so,’ replied Biffo.

‘Paddy has just been on the telephone,’ said Puffy. ‘We need dear old Percy to help with the public address system but he isn’t on the telephone and his cottage is at the end of a very narrow track. You can’t drive down there. Paddy wondered if you’d cycle over and ask him to be at the cricket field at lunch time. Tell him there will be a couple of pints of beer in it for him – and as many sandwiches as he can eat.’

Biffo said he would be delighted to help. Pausing only to get instructions on how to find Percy’s cottage he tottered around to Miss Box’s shop and asked if he might borrow the bicycle for an hour or so.

‘Of course you can,’ said Miss Box magnanimously. She disappeared into the shop for a few minutes and came out wheeling the bicycle. The front basket was full. ‘Just drop these few things off at Mrs Kendall’s for me. I wouldn’t ask but she needs them all terribly urgently.’ The urgent delivery consisted of a plastic dustpan and brush, a large courgette, two small plastic rubbish bins, an alarm clock, a large quantity of wire wool, two wooden coat hangers and a small gas cylinder.

‘Emergency coat hangers!’ said Biffo, drily.

Miss Box paused on the very threshold of prudence. She did not like talking about her customers. ‘Mrs Kendall has her in-laws coming,’ she explained, looking around to make sure that no one was listening. ‘She discovered last night that she’s only got those cheap wire coat hangers that dry cleaners use.’

Biffo realised that by sharing this confidential information with him Miss Box was paying him quite a compliment. He felt a lump in his throat. It was not a large lump but it was a lump. ‘Where does Mrs Kendall live?’ he asked, before he was overtaken by emotion.

Miss Box explained. Biffo was not surprised when he learned that Mrs Kendall lived in precisely the opposite direction to Percy’s cottage.

‘She’ll give you a bale of hay and a sack of Brussels sprouts,’ said Miss Box, as Biffo threw his leg over his bicycle saddle and prepared to pedal off. The gas cylinder, although small, weighed a lot and made it difficult to get up any speed.

Biffo paused, wobbled, stopped and looked back.

‘We occasionally do a little bit of bartering in the village,’ explained Miss Box. ‘It’s our way of helping to save the trees.’

‘The trees?’ said Biffo, puzzled. He was also slightly worried about how he was supposed to carry a bale of hay and a sack of Brussels sprouts on a bicycle. But he didn’t like to say anything about this. Miss Box clearly had no doubts about the viability of the exercise and Biffo was beginning to take a pride in his work.

‘It cuts down on the paperwork,’ said Miss Box. ‘No invoices. No bills. Nothing on paper.’

‘Ah,’ said Biffo, understanding. He was to learn in course that the economy of the village depended almost totally upon fiddling insurance companies and avoiding tax.

‘But don’t bring the hay back here,’ said Miss Box. ‘That goes to Captain Giles. It’s for his daughter’s horse.’

Biffo did not succeed in hiding his sense of confusion.

‘Captain Giles always cleans and services my Aga,’ explained Miss Box. ‘I send him an occasional bale of hay.’

And does he get the Brussels sprouts too?’

‘No, of course not!’ said Miss Box, as though surprised that anyone could possibly be quite so stupid. ‘The sprouts are for Miss Daventry. She makes jam which I sell in the shop.’

‘Sprout jam?’ said Biffo. He had long suspected that people living in the country did things with food which might not have been regarded as usual in London. They certainly grew foods which never seemed even to reach the big city. He had, for example, never knowingly seen a turnip or a swede on the menu in any smart London restaurant but large areas of the countryside seemed to be dedicated to growing these two crops. Somebody, he reasoned, must be doing something with all the swedes and turnips that were being grown. He liked to think of himself as broadminded, and if people living in the country liked to eat jam made out of sprouts then that was fine by him.

Miss Box sighed. ‘Miss Daventry gives the sprouts to Mrs Peabody,’ she explained, her patience clearly running out. ‘Mrs Peabody grows strawberries and always has a few punnets more than she and her family can eat. So she gives the leftovers to Miss Daventry to turn into jam.’

‘Why doesn’t Miss Daventry simply give Mrs Peabody a few pots of strawberry jam?’ asked Biffo.

‘Because Mrs Peabody doesn’t like strawberry jam,’ said Miss Box.

Biffo, who was beginning to realise that there was far, far more to Fondling-Under-Water than he had previously realised, decided that if he was going to get to Percy’s cottage before the match began he would have to call a temporary halt to his tutorial in bartering.

He called a cheery goodbye to Miss Box, bravely waved one hand, and wobbled off down the road to deliver the plastic dustpan and brush, the large courgette, the two small plastic rubbish bins, the alarm clock, the large quantity of wire wool, the two wooden coat hangers and the gas cylinder.

Chapter 74

It was an hour and a quarter later when an extremely leg-weary and saddle-sore Biffo finally pedalled and free-wheeled down the path to Percy's cottage.

When Biffo had arrived at Mrs Kendall's cottage he had unloaded his bicycle quickly in the hope that he could make a speedy get away. But Mrs Kendall's existing gas cylinder wasn't quite empty and she refused to let Biffo connect up the new one until the old one was empty. And so, in order to bum up the remaining gas they had turned the gas fire up as high as it would go and had sat in front of it sweltering; waiting for it to go out.

'Would you like a nice cup of tea?' Mrs Kendall had asked.

Biffo didn't really want one but knowing that Mrs Kendall cooked by gas he reckoned that if he said 'yes' it would use up a bit more gas. He had drunk three cups of tea in all. Despite this it had taken twenty minutes to use up the remaining gas. And having to deliver the hay and the bag of sprouts, and to return the empty gas cylinder to Miss Box's shop, had taken another forty minutes.

As he waited for someone to appear Biffo looked around. Percy's cottage appeared to have no more than one room downstairs and another upstairs. Heavy, wooden shutters covered all the windows. A metal windmill, twenty or thirty feet high, stood at the rear of the cottage. A pile of neatly-chopped logs were stacked up against the wall. A massive bow saw and a variety of tools hung on nails on the outside wall of the cottage. The air was thick with the smell of wood smoke.

'Who are you and what do you want?' demanded an angry voice from somewhere up above. The voice was rich, deep and vaguely familiar. Its owner spoke slowly and with quiet dignity, announcing each word with care and deliberation.

Biffo looked up and could see that one of the upstairs shutters and an upstairs window had been opened a couple of inches. He could not see the owner of the voice.

'My name is Brimstone,' explained Biffo. 'I'm a newcomer to the village. I'm staying at The Gravedigger's Rest. The local cricket club is holding a fund-raising event today and I was asked to see if you could come and help with the loudspeaker equipment.' He suddenly realised that he had neither been given, nor had he asked for, the cottage owner's surname. 'I think they want you to do the announcing. They said to tell you that they need you,' he added. 'And that there is a couple of pints of beer in it for you and as many sandwiches as you can eat.'

The cottage's invisible inhabitant blew his nose loudly. It was difficult to tell precisely what this meant. 'Wait there,' was the instruction from above.

Biffo waited for a while and looked around again. The cottage was in a beautiful position. In the distance Biffo could just make out the village cricket ground. A few yards away a fast flowing stream bubbled its way across water-smoothed pebbles. A few minutes later he heard a bolt being pulled back on the other side of the door. Then there was the sound of a second bolt being pulled back. This was followed by the sound of a key turning in a lock. Eventually, the front door swung slowly inwards.

It was very dark inside the cottage, and difficult to see in from outside, but Biffo could just make out a tall, slender figure holding open the door.

'Er. . .Percy?' asked Biffo. He felt himself blushing and wished he knew the man's full name.

Percy stepped back into the darkness for a moment. 'You had better come in,' he said. He spoke carefully and clearly and Biffo was captivated by the man's deep rich brandy and cigar voice. Percy switched on the light so that Biffo could see where he was going, pointed to a single, elderly armchair in front of an empty fireplace and squinted in what was for him clearly unaccustomed brightness. There was a large, freshly made wooden box on the floor, surrounded by tools and woodshavings. The box was over six foot long and big enough to be a coffin. The man was wearing a pair of pinstriped trousers that had seen much better days. Above the waist he was wearing an off-white vest. A pair of bright red braces hung down from his waist.

Many people become irascible, demanding, unforgiving and intolerant when they have lived on their own for a while. Percy was different. He had been irascible, demanding, unforgiving and intolerant all his life and this may, perhaps, have explained why he had always lived alone. But now he was none of those things.

‘What are you making?’ asked Biffo, stepping around the box. He thought he was making polite conversation.

‘My coffin,’ said Percy, without emotion.

Biffo sat down rather suddenly and Percy switched off the light the moment his bottom hit the seat cushion.

‘Hope you don’t mind if I turn the electricity off,’ said Percy. ‘The windmill isn’t working terribly well at the moment. I’ve got a battery and an old bicycle fixed up to provide an emergency supply but why waste electricity? You don’t need light to talk by, do you?’ He disappeared for a moment and when he reappeared he struck a match and lit a candle. ‘You don’t mind if I shave before we go, do you?’ Biffo, who said nothing, felt sure that he had heard the voice before. But he couldn’t think where.

Standing in front of the fireplace, and looking into a large, oval mirror hanging on a nail above the mantelpiece, Percy then proceeded to use the candle and a wet rag to ‘shave’ his face.

Biffo watched this shadowy tableau in astonishment. ‘I’ve never seen anyone else do that!’ he said as the room gradually filled with the smell of burning hair.

‘I learnt the trick from a fellow who used to have a cottage just over the hill,’ said Percy. The candle flickered as he spoke. ‘The flame singes the hairs. You can get as close a shave as you can with a blade.’

‘But doesn’t it hurt?’ asked Biffo. ‘Don’t you burn yourself?’

‘I did the first few times I did it,’ admitted Percy. ‘The trick lies in knowing how to hold the candle.’ He finished shaving, dabbed at his face with the wet cloth and then rubbed his fingers over his jaw and chin to check that he hadn’t missed any patches of bristle. When he was satisfied he put the candle into a holder. He then plucked a white, collarless shirt from where it was hanging on a nail that had been hammered into the wall.

‘What do you do here?’ asked Biffo, as Percy struggled into his shirt in the semi-darkness. ‘I hope you don’t mind my asking?’

‘I’m a coppice woodsman,’ said Percy. ‘Probably one of the last in the country.’

‘What’s a coppice woodsman?’ asked Biffo, feeling indecently ignorant.

‘I work with wood,’ explained Percy, buttoning up his shirt. ‘I take the bark off oak for tanning and I make oak stakes for furniture, beezum brushes and hurdles.’ He stopped for a moment to check again that his skin was smooth enough. ‘And I’m a charcoal burner too, of course. I burn oak, ash, birch and alder. I make wooden tent pegs for old-fashioned campers and I make walking sticks for the holiday-makers.’

‘How long have you been doing this?’ asked Biffo.

Percy thought for a moment. ‘Nine or ten years I should think.’ Satisfied with his chin he went back to fastening the buttons on his shirt. ‘I’m afraid I rather lose track of the time out here.’

Biffo was surprised. He had expected to hear that Percy had been a woodsman all his life. He was full of questions he wanted to ask.

‘You haven’t always lived in the country then?’

‘Oh no.’

‘What did you do before you became a. . .er. . .’

‘. . .coppice woodsman?’

‘Yes. Coppice woodsman’

‘I was a newsreader,’ said Percy.

‘Of course!’ said Biffo, suddenly remembering and feeling rather stupid. ‘Of course. Percy Kempton. I remember now. I remember your voice.’

‘That was another life,’ said Percy, rather dismissively.

‘Why did you give it up?’ asked Biffo.

‘Couldn’t stand it any longer,’ said Percy. ‘Terrible people in broadcasting. No souls. No spirit. No passion. All veneer and no wood underneath. I woke up one morning and realised that all my problems were created by other people. So I made a deliberate decision to become a recluse. If you don’t mix with other people they can’t cause you any trouble, can they?’

‘I suppose not,’ agreed Biffo. ‘I was in broadcasting,’ he said. ‘Until quite recently.’

‘You’ve given it up?’ asked Percy.

‘I ran away.’

‘To Fondling-Under-Water?’

‘Yes. I didn’t mean to come here. It just, sort of happened that way.’

‘Good for you. You won’t regret it for an instant. I don’t know anywhere in the world quite like Fondling-Under-Water. If you’re looking for peace you’ll find it here.’ Percy went to a cupboard next to the fireplace and took out a collar and a London club tie which Biffo recognised. He fastened the collar onto the shirt, wrapped the tie around his neck and tied it. He did this quickly and surprisingly skilfully for a man who did not look as if he often wore a tie. He then took his jacket out of the cupboard and put that on before slipping his feet into a pair of shoes.

‘I hope you don’t mind my asking,’ said Biffo. ‘But why are you making a coffin?’

‘It’s mine,’ said Percy.

‘Oh, I’m sorry. What’s. . .er. . .wrong?’

‘Nothing is wrong.’

‘No, I mean, are you ill?’ Biffo, stopped and hesitated for a moment. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘Perhaps you don’t want to talk about it.’ He held up a hand in the dark. ‘That’s fine.’

‘I’m not ill. At least not that I know of,’ said Percy. ‘But I’m dying nevertheless.’

Biffo frowned, puzzled.

‘We’re all dying,’ explained Percy. ‘We all have to go sometime. I’m just planning ahead a little. I’m making myself a decent sized coffin out of decent wood.’ He looked at Biffo, as though aware of what he was thinking. ‘I’m not worried about dying,’ he said. ‘I’m not even worried about being old. In fact I rather like being old. I used to be in a constant hurry when I was young. But now that I’m old and have less time left I feel as though I can wait for ever for everything. When I reached middle age I worried about falling ill and dying. Now that I’m old I know I’m not going to die young. I’ve had a good innings. So I don’t have to worry about dying young and being cheated.’ He brushed his jacket down with his hands. ‘Do I look all right?’

Biffo peered into the darkness. ‘You look very smart,’ he said honestly. The transformation had been remarkable.

‘Right!’ said Percy. ‘We’ll just have a drink and then we’ll get along to the village.’ He reached into a drawer and took out a pewter hip flask. He took the top off the flask and offered it to Biffo.

Biffo hesitated for a moment. He was about to refuse, on the grounds that it was a little early in the day for him, but then realised that this might sound rude. ‘Thank you,’ he said, accepting the flask and taking a gentle sip. He swallowed and immediately started coughing. ‘Powerful stuff.’ he said, when he had control of his voice again. He handed the flask back to Percy.

‘I’m very impressed that you agreed to come because the village needs you,’ said Biffo.

‘This village is my family,’ said Percy. He held the flask to his mouth and tipped it up. He swallowed several times before lowering the flask. ‘These people mean everything to me,’ he said. ‘They are all I’ve got. They’re a mixed bunch. Some of them are probably outright crooks.’ He offered the flask to Biffo who held up a hand, smiled and shook his head. ‘Most of them don’t take a great deal of notice of the law and not many of them have much of a conscience when it comes to insurance companies and banks and so on but they’re loyal, discreet honest people when it really matters and with people they care about.’ He held the flask to his lips again and took another long drink. ‘I don’t like people terribly much. As a rule I much prefer my own company. But if I needed their help I know they’d give it to me.’

Biffo nodded. He understood.

‘Come on then,’ said Percy, closing the flask and slipping it into his pocket.

‘I came by bicycle,’ said Biffo, as they stepped out into the sunshine. He pointed to Miss Box’s bicycle, leaning up against the wall of the cottage.

‘That looks like Miss Box’s delivery bicycle,’ said Percy, with a slight smile.

‘It is,’ agreed Biffo.

‘Ah.’ said Percy. He locked up his front door and nodded towards the path. ‘Shall we walk?’

Together, the former news reader and the former television producer walked along the rocky path to the village and the cricket ground.

Chapter 75

An ad hoc committee, consisting of Paddy, Cheesy and Puffy, had arranged a number of events, in addition to the cricket match, to help enliven the Fondling-Under-Water fund-raising day.

The trio had put up notices in both The Gravedigger's Rest and Miss Box's shop inviting villagers to take part in a threelegged race, a sack race, an egg and spoon race and a competition to see who could toss a caber the furthest.

First, there was the problem with the organisation of the tossing the caber event. Paddy and Cheesy had disagreed on the definition of a caber.

Cheesy, who had seen caber tossing first hand on a visit to Scotland, had suggested that they use a telegraph pole but Puffy had insisted that no one would be able to lift a telegraph pole, let alone toss one and that as far as he was concerned no one with functioning brain tissue would consider tossing anything heavier than a salad.

Paddy had expressed some doubts about whether, even if anyone could lift one, they would be able to find a spare telegraph pole lying around in the village. He had expressed the view that they should not steal a telegraph pole since in his view even the authorities would not have a great deal of difficulty in linking up the disappearance of a telegraph pole from one of the roads into or out of Fondling-Under-Water with the sudden appearance of an identical item at a local fund-raising event.

The trio had eventually compromised and agreed that they would use a large, wooden fence post for the caber tossing event. Puffy had reminded the other two that there was a large, unused and slightly rotten fence post buried in the nettles behind the pavilion which would serve this purpose extremely well. 'If we could get the competitors to take the post down towards the river we might be able to get them to throw the damned thing into the water and get rid of it,' said Puffy hopefully.

A number of 'surprises' had been organised to ensure that the day was a memorable success. Itchy erected a net just off the playing area so that spectators (including women and children) could bowl at some of the star batsmen taking part in the match. Spectators would pay £1 for the privilege of bowling three balls at a batsman. The cash incentive would be that they would receive £5 every time they hit the batsman's wicket.

The planned highlight of the day was, however, undoubtedly the fact that Paddy had, through his brother's dentist, arranged for a member of the nearby parachuting club to be dropped from a light plane at 1.55 pm and to float down onto the pitch just in time to shout 'Play' and start the match. In order to serenade the parachutist, and announce his arrival, the Fondling-Under-Water brass band would welcome his arrival by playing 'Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines'.

Refreshments for the day were, of course, being provided by Mrs Betty Cleavidge and the team of butter-knife-twirling ladies who normally provided teas for the cricket club.

Mrs Cleavidge and her tireless team had, in anticipation of the forthcoming match, prepared a veritable mountain of sandwiches, fairy cakes, sausage rolls and jam tarts but when Paddy told them about the fund-raising events and the expected inflow of spectators and contestants they stepped up their sandwich and cake making activities into overdrive.

These were committed tea time specialists and it never occurred to them to prepare food for a luncheon and for a tea; instead they simply made enough food for two teas. And since they were expecting an unknown number of guests they made as much food as they possibly could.

They chopped several pounds of cheddar cheese into neat, little cubes, bought all the cocktail onions and little sausages that Miss Box could find in her shop, and duly skewered the cubes of cheese, the cocktail onions and the little sausages on little wooden cocktail sticks. They made pasties and sausage rolls and prepared trifles, chocolate cakes, Victoria sponges filled with jam, cream and a dozen other fillings, apple pies, blackberry pies and mixed fruit pies. They baked tea cakes, crumpets, muffins and currant buns by the boxful and, curiously, acquired enough pickled gherkins to satisfy an army of gherkin addicts. (Mrs Betty Cleavidge had once been asked for pickled gherkins by a visiting player. A proud hostess, she had been mortified by her inability to satisfy this request and she had sworn never again to be found short of a pickled gherkin.)

Puffy Harbottle had generously donated two barrels of beer and a barrel of cider to augment the vast quantities of tea and orange squash which Mrs Cleavidge and her team planned to produce.

Mrs Cleavidge had rejected the idea of charging anyone for tea, sandwiches and cakes. The club had always supplied its players and the visiting team with free refreshments and Mrs Cleavidge was a great believer in tradition. However, in an inspired moment of anticipation Mrs Cleavidge had taken the precaution of obtaining a large supply of antacid tablets on loan from Rupert Fitzwalter the local doctor, antique dealer and bookie. Showing rare commercial acumen she intended to sell these tablets at the very reasonable price of £1.50 each to those of her customers who ate their way into gastric disharmony. Puffy, who knew of this arrangement, felt that there was a strong likelihood that this venture could well prove to be the most profitable part of the day. This was no reflection on the cooking skills of Mrs Cleavidge and her team of sandwich makers but was, rather, an acknowledgement of the fact that when people are faced with vast quantities of free food they will invariably eat more than they need or is good for them.

Chapter 76

It was ten minutes to eleven, and just ten minutes before the official start of the festivities, when Percy and Biffo (the latter wheeling his bicycle) arrived at the Fondling-Under-Water cricket ground.

‘Percy!’ cried Paddy, who was the first to spot the arrival of the former newsreader. ‘Thank you for coming!’ He shook hands with Percy and started to explain why they needed him.

‘My friend has explained it all,’ said Percy, waving his free hand in Biffo’s direction. ‘You’re trying to raise money for a new lawnmower.’ Biffo couldn’t help noticing that Percy’s enunciation wasn’t quite as clear as it had been when they had left the cottage. He seemed to have a little difficulty with the word lawnmower.

‘We’ve set up a microphone over here,’ said Puffy, pointing and leading the way to a tennis umpire’s chair which had been set up just inside the square leg boundary. A microphone was ready waiting on the umpire’s table, connected by several long leads to a series of loudspeakers around the ground.

‘Splendid!’ said Percy. He stood and looked up the steps to the chair. ‘Seems quite high up, doesn’t it!’

‘We thought it would give you a good view,’ said Puffy, who had arrived to say ‘hello’ to Percy.

‘Absolutely,’ said Percy. ‘Marvellous.’ He put a foot on the bottom rung, preparing to climb the short ladder to the chair and turned around. ‘My new friend mentioned something about a glass of beer?’

‘Of course!’ said Puffy, hurrying off towards the pavilion.

‘It’s been a long walk,’ explained Percy to Paddy and Biffo. He climbed cautiously into position on his chair

‘Quite!’ agreed Paddy. He turned and whispered to Biffo. ‘He didn’t have anything to drink before he left did he?’

Biffo shook his head. ‘Just a sip or two from a hip flask.’

‘We have to watch him,’ whispered Paddy. ‘Sober he’s fantastic but if he gets tiddly he can be a bit of a nightmare.’

Biffo, not knowing what to say to this, said nothing.

‘I say, would one of you chaps fill my flask for me?’ Biffo and Paddy looked up.

Percy was holding out his flask. The top was off and he was holding the flask upside down. It was clearly empty.

‘Puffy’s bringing you a beer,’ Paddy reminded him.

‘That’s fine for quenching the thirst,’ said Percy, with a broad smile. ‘But I need something a little stronger for quelling the nerves.’ He winked, waved the flask about and then threw it down. Biffo, much to his own surprise, caught it neatly.

‘What would you like in it?’ Biffo asked.

‘Whisky would be nice,’ answered Percy. He paused. ‘Or brandy.’ He cleared his throat. ‘Some people drink to forget,’ he said. ‘I have forgotten everything I want to forget. I drink because I like the taste.’

Biffo turned and started to walk back towards the pavilion. ‘We’ll have to watch him,’ whispered Paddy, accompanying him. He shook his head. ‘This may have been a big mistake. . .’

‘Gin will do nicely,’ Percy called after them. ‘If there isn’t any whisky or brandy.’

Chapter 77

When Biffo and Percy had arrived at the cricket ground there had been no more than a couple of dozen people about. But by the time the little hand on the pavilion clock had reached eleven and the big hand was pointing straight up virtually every house, every cottage and every farm within five miles was empty and everyone had converged on the Fondling-Under-Water cricket ground.

The team players were, of course, in white but many of the spectators - even the women - were wearing white too. Biffo had never before realised that white came in so many different shades.Even villagers who weren't particularly fond of cricket had come along to see what was happening, to have some fun and to help raise a few pounds for the cricket club. Those who owned an electrical extension cable had turned up because they all knew that their best chance of getting their property back was to help the cricket club raise enough money to buy a new lawnmower. There was also a widespread fear that if the club didn't find the money to buy a new mower Itchy would be on the prowl trying to borrow someone else's equipment. Most people in the village knew what had happened to Puffy Harbottle's lawnmower.

'What's in it?' Paddy asked Biffo, pointing to the pewter hip flask Biffo was carrying back to Percy.

Biffo confirmed that the flask was now full of twelve year old malt whisky.

Paddy looked at the flask and winced. 'Is it neat?'

Biffo looked at him.

'The whisky. Is it neat? Or did you put some water in?'

'It's neat,' replied Biffo. 'I thought he'd prefer it without water. The stuff he had in it when we were walking down here tasted like pure rocket fuel.'

Paddy sighed. 'Would you ask him to announce the egg and spoon race?' he asked. He handed Biffo a piece of paper. 'The names of the competitors and everything else he's likely to need are all on there.' He leant a little closer. 'If you have to fill his flask again I would be grateful if you would try and add some water! A mixture consisting of one third whisky and two thirds water would probably prove helpful.'

Biffo said he would try, and then took the flask and the piece of paper across to where Percy was sitting.

'I've brought your flask,' said Biffo, holding the flask up in the air so that Percy could reach down and take it from him. 'I filled it with malt whisky.'

'Jolly good!' said Percy. He handed down an empty pint glass. 'Would you hand that back to Puffy?' he said. 'Perhaps you would ask him if he would be kind enough to fill it up again when he has next got a spare moment.' He spoke clearly; carefully enunciating each word separately.

'Paddy asked if you'd announce the first heat of the egg and spoon race,' said Biffo, holding up the piece of paper he had been given so that Percy could take it.

'Egg and spoon, eh?' said Percy, slipping his flask into his pocket and accepting the piece of paper from Biffo. His eyes positively twinkled. 'Do you know, I don't think I've ever announced the start of an egg and spoon race before!'

Chapter 78

The early heats for the egg and spoon race, the sack race and the three-legged race were all conducted without much trouble. Mrs Jack Hobbs was threatened with disqualification for gluing her egg to her spoon and Mrs Herbert Sutcliffe complained that the sack she had been given still contained several pounds of fertiliser. (Her objection was based not on olfactory grounds but on the grounds that the additional weight constituted an unofficial handicap.)

Lord Hepplewhite, who had sat on the local bench for thirty years, and who was always made referee on occasions like this, took the potential sting out of these problems by ruling that Mrs Hobbs' egg should be unglued from its spoon and that Mrs Sutcliffe should be given a fresh and more acceptable sack. In the event it proved quite impossible to separate Mrs Hobbs' egg from her spoon and so she was provided with a fresh egg and a fresh spoon. The replacement of Mrs Sutcliffe's unsatisfactory sack offered no problems.

The real excitement of the morning took place in the nets where spectators (including women and children) could bowl at a succession of star batsmen from the Fondling-Under-Water team. To everyone's disappointment the visiting professionals had declined to take part in this part of the entertainment. When telephoned the previous evening, their captain for the day, Cyril Player had expressed the players' formal regret and pointed out that they felt that it would be demeaning to their professional status if they were to take part in what amounted to little more than a side show. This excuse did not go down particularly well with the villagers, several of whom remembered that three of the visiting batsmen had made television advertisements for a brand of yoghurt, two of the team were regular guests on a television panel game which was famous for dunking losing contestants in a vat of green goo, while a sixth had acted in a seaside pantomime in which he had been required to wear full cricket gear while running around the stage hitting everyone with a large rubber cricket bat and shouting out 'I'm Batty the village idiot!'.

'Bunch of stuck up snobs,' said Mrs Harborough, who was known for, and proud of, her plain speaking.

None of this mattered much, however, for the event still proved to be an enormous success. The unexpected star turned out to be none other than Lady Hepplewhite; the exquisitely proportioned wife of Fondling-Under-Water's only peer.

'Gosh, isn't it heavy!' cried her Ladyship, when she first picked up a cricket ball. 'What do I do?'

Bill Stickers who was escorting the club patron's wife and trying to keep out of sight as much as possible, explained to Lady Hepplewhite that she had to bowl the ball in the general direction of Jack Hobbs who was waiting some twenty two yards away.

Lady Hepplewhite's first attempt to bowl was so unsuccessful that she didn't want to try again but Bill encouraged her to have another go and suggested that she try bowling underarm. He explained that although unusual this was entirely legal. It was an inspired suggestion. Lady Hepplewhite's first ball whistled underneath Jack Hobbs' bat and removed his leg stump from the ground. Her second ball narrowly missed the off stump. And her third ball bounced off the batsman's foot and removed his middle stump. Jack, limping badly, retired from the nets and Herbert Sutcliffe took his place.

Feeling rather embarrassed at having won £10 when the club was trying to raise money rather than give it away, Lady Hepplewhite insisted on using her winnings to buy more attempts. But things did not go quite according to plan. Twenty five minutes and six batsmen later she walked back to her deckchair clutching £140 in notes and coins.

Chapter 79

The visiting cricket team arrived shortly after one o’clock, just in time for lunch and the judging of the fancy dress competition.

Cyril Rodney Arthur Percival Player and his ten professional playing colleagues arrived at the ground in a flurry of brand new, well-polished, sponsored cars. They unloaded their bored, immaculate, leggy, blonde girlfriends and battered bags of kit under the watchful, and slightly envious, eyes of the Fondling-Under-Water cricket team and their faithful and loyal supporters.

On the whole the professionals were taller, broader and slimmer than the village players. They were all heavily tanned and as they clambered out of their cars and stretched their backs there was an arrogance about their every movement which several members of the local team found strangely disturbing. Most of the professionals wore jeans and casual shirts. One or two wore tailored slacks and blazers. Cyril Player wore a pair of light blue slacks and a blazer with the England badge on the breast pocket. Biffo wondered how he had managed to get hold of the blazer since, according to Puffy, he had never officially been a member of an England touring party.

‘Isn’t that Michael Hunt?’ Cheesy asked Puffy, nodding towards a tall, broad-backed, blond-haired giant wearing faded blue jeans, a dazzling white T-shirt and a pair of designer sunglasses. He spoke in a whisper, partly it seemed through awe and partly through fear.

‘I think so,’ whispered Puffy.

‘Who’s Michael Hunt?’ asked Biffo.

The other two looked at him in astonishment.

‘Where have you been for the last two years?’ asked Cheesy, incredulously. ‘He’s the fastest bowler in England. Some say he’s the fastest bowler in the world. He felled a South African with a bouncer eighteen months ago and nearly killed him.’

‘I’ve never had much time to read the sports pages,’ admitted Biffo.

‘I’m not playing against him,’ whispered Cheesy. He started to rub his knee. ‘I think my patella just fell off. Or a cartilage turned to powder.’

‘Don’t be daft!’ Puffy whispered back. ‘He won’t bowl flat out at us.’

Just then the man reputed to the fastest bowler in the world glanced across in their direction. The three of them blushed and then waved at him and grinned broadly. Hunt nodded his acknowledgement, without smiling, and turned away and bent his head to listen to his blonde, busty, long-legged companion. He patted her gently on the behind and then, without looking, reached out and took a pen and an autograph book from a small boy. He signed his name and handed the pen and book back to the boy without once looking at him.

‘And that’s Tom Morton!’ said Puffy. ‘Over there, with Cyril and Paddy.’ He nodded in the direction of another giant. This one had red hair and was taller and broader than Michael Hunt. It occurred to Biffo that if Tom Morton had decided to walk across the M1 motorway cars, lorries and coaches would have screeched to a halt – not to avoid knocking down an innocent motorist but to avoid crashing their vehicles into a mountain of a man who looked solid enough to crush a mere 20 ton lorry into an unrecognisable tangle of crumpled metal.

‘Heaven preserve us!’ muttered Cheesy, sounding as nervous as though someone had just pointed out Dracula. ‘It is.’

‘Who’s Tom Morton?’ asked Biffo.

Cheesy looked at him, as though not really believing that Biffo didn’t know. ‘The other half of England’s best opening attack for decades!’ he replied, when he realised that Biffo’s ignorance was genuine. ‘He was banned last year for threatening an umpire and punching an opposition batsman. But he’s still one of the best bowlers in the country.’

The banned fast bowler had joined the rest of the visiting team of professionals at Mrs Cleavidge’s groaning trestle tables. The mound of sandwiches and cakes was already beginning to shrink noticeably. The professionals, like locusts, ate speedily and with quiet determination. Most of them didn’t seem particularly concerned about what they were eating.

‘When does his ban finish?’ asked Puffy.

‘It’s about now,’ said Cheesy. ‘He’s probably come here for a bit of practice.’

‘Oh gawd!’ said Puffy. ‘You know what that means, don’t you?’

Cheesy nodded.

‘What does it mean?’ asked Biffo.

‘It means he’ll probably want to bowl flat out,’ said Puffy.

‘He certainly will,’ whispered Cheesy, his voice now little more than a croak. ‘Look who just got out of that green Rover!’

‘The short chap with white hair, in the beige safari suit?’ said Biffo.

‘No,’ said Cheesy. ‘That’s George Tompkins. He used to play for England. He’s a television commentator now. But the one with him - the podgy guy with the beard and the sunglasses - is Bert Dobson one of the England selectors.’

‘Oh, no!’ said Puffy. ‘Tom Morton really is going to have to take this match seriously.’

‘I remember George Tompkins!’ said Biffo, pleased to recognise a name at last. ‘Which one is he?’

‘The little chap in the badly-fitting safari suit.’

‘He was the best spin bowler I ever saw!’ said Biffo.

‘He was a wicket keeper,’ said Puffy.

‘Are you sure?’

‘He was a wicket keeper,’ said Cheesy, with certainty.

‘I remember!’ said Biffo. ‘He scored 100 against the West Indies didn’t he? At Edgbaston?’

‘It was against Australia,’ said Cheesy.

‘At Headingley,’ said Puffy

‘Well, I knew he’d scored 100,’ said Biffo. He paused for a moment and stared at the man who was almost one of his sporting heroes. ‘Wow!’

‘Look who’s getting out of the Jaguar!’ said Puffy.

The other two looked to see who was getting out of the Jaguar.

‘The scruffy bloke with the long hair?’ said Cheesy.

‘Yes.’

‘Who is it?’ Cheesy asked.

‘I don’t know,’ said Puffy. ‘But look what he’s just got out of the boot.’

‘A bag?’ said Cheesy.

‘A camera bag,’ said Puffy. ‘And a telephone lens.’

‘Telephoto lens,’ said Biffo.

‘That’s what I said,’ said Puffy.

‘No, you said telephone lens,’ said Biffo.

‘Don’t be silly,’ said Puffy.

‘Is he a photographer?’ asked Cheesy.

‘It’s the press,’ whispered Puffy. ‘The press are here.’

‘I think there’s another one getting out of that sports car,’ said Biffo, pointing towards a short, fat man wearing an army flak jacket and a pair of brown corduroy trousers who was struggling to lift something out of the boot of his car.

‘Oh my gawd!’ murmured Cheesy. ‘This was supposed to be a quiet fund-raising match.’

The short fat man, who had pulled an enormous lens out of the boot of his car, was now wrestling with it and the camera to which it was attached and struggling to fasten the whole thing to an extremely sturdy looking tripod. He seemed to have equipment powerful enough to take close up pictures of moon craters.

`We’re going to be famous!’ said Puffy, full of wonder. ‘Do you think I might get my picture in the papers?’

‘Village Batsman Felled by England Star!’ said Cheesy gloomily. He wrote out the headline in the air with his finger as he spoke. ‘Do you have a helmet?’

Puffy looked at Cheesy as if he’d asked him if he had a wooden leg. ‘What do you mean?’

‘A helmet. Have you got one?’ He paused. ‘It’s one of those things batsmen wear on their heads to stop them getting killed by bad-tempered fast bowlers who are trying to impress selectors and win back their places in the England side.’

‘I know what a helmet is,’ said Puffy, rather impatiently. ‘But of course I haven’t got one. I’ve only got one pad and my bat’s got a bit chipped out of the blade.’

‘Have you got one?’ said Cheesy to Biffo.

‘No,’ answered Biffo. ‘I don’t even have a bat or a pad.’

‘I bet we haven’t got a helmet between us,’ said Cheesy, gloomily. ‘They’ll kill us all. It’ll be a massacre. It’ll be the Battle of Wounded Knee all over again.’

‘The Battle of Wounded Knee?’ said Biffo.

‘Cheesy was hit on the knee twelve years ago,’ explained Puffy. ‘He’s never forgotten it.’

‘Nine years ago,’ said Cheesy. ‘It was nine years ago. They broke a bone in my knee.’ He pulled a face. ‘It hurt a lot. Two other blokes had bones broken too.’

‘Who was bowling?’ asked Biffo.

‘Some tearaway kid playing for another village,’ said Cheesy. ‘He wasn’t half as fast as these blokes are.’ He sighed. He started to move away towards the pavilion. ‘I’m going to go and write out my will.’

‘Don’t be daft,’ Puffy called after him. He paused and then added. ‘You haven’t got anything to leave anyone.’

‘Do you really think it’s going to be dangerous?’ Biffo asked Puffy.

Puffy thought for a moment. ‘If they start bowling fast I’m going to take guard about three yards outside my leg stump,’ he said. ‘These blokes don’t bowl that wide.’ He paused, thought for a moment and grinned. ‘But I wouldn’t miss the chance of being able to say I’d batted against Tom Morton and Michael Hunt for anything.’ He stopped and pointed at Paddy who was hurrying across towards them. ‘I think the vice-captain wants a word.’

‘Biffo!’ called the vice-captain, slightly breathless and considerably less composed than usual. ‘Would you be kind enough to pop over and give Percy this slip of paper to read?’

Biffo hurried off to complete his errand. As he went he noticed that The Fondling-Under-Water Morris Dancing Team had started performing in front of the pavilion.

Eight men in white shirts, black knee-length breeches, white socks and black shoes were jumping up and down and banging sticks in the air. They wore top hats and colourful sashes and had little bells sewn onto their socks. No one was watching them but they were enjoying themselves so much that they hadn’t noticed. They probably wouldn’t have cared even if they had noticed.

‘I see Cyril has brought some heavy fire-power with him,’ said Puffy, referring to England’s two premier fast bowlers.

‘Yes,’ agreed Paddy, looking grim.

‘Do we know anyone who owns a motorbike?’ asked Puffy.

Paddy looked confused. ‘Are you thinking of trying to make a quick getaway?’ he said, with a rather hollow laugh.

‘No,’ said Puffy earnestly. ‘I wouldn’t miss this match for the world. But I don’t have a batting helmet and these guys do tend to bowl rather quickly. It just occurred to me that if I can find someone who owns a motorbike I might be able to borrow a motorcycling helmet.’

‘Ah,’ said Paddy. ‘I see what you mean.’ He started to move away. ‘I’d better wander over to the pavilion to make sure that everything is going OK with the fancy dress competition.’

‘I’ll come with you,’ said Puffy. ‘I’m feeling a trifle peckish. A little light lunch might settle the butterflies in my stomach.’.

’Ah,’ bit of a problem there,’ said Paddy, as they headed for the pavilion. ‘When I last saw her, our dear Betty Cleavidge was in grave danger of losing vital supplies of hair. She says she made enough food for a couple of thousand people but that the visitors are eating everything in sight. She’s worried that there might not be anything left for tea.’ He paused. ‘She asked me to tell our side to hold back for a while.’ Paddy scratched his head and looked rather sheepish. ‘I forgot to mention it to the others.’ He shrugged. ‘Nothing like this has ever happened before.’ He looked very miserable. Suddenly his face lit up. ‘I know someone who’s got a moped!’ he said. ‘Constable Hobbling.’

Puffy frowned. He was puzzled by what seemed to be a rather unexpected turn in the direction of the conversation. ‘A moped?’

‘You were looking for a motorbike.’

‘Of course!’ said Puffy, finally understanding. ‘And Constable Hobbling, being a law abiding citizen, always wears a helmet. Terrific! I’ll go and find him.’

And so while Paddy scurried back to check on the fancy dress competition, and to warn the rest of the team to lay off the sausage rolls and jam tarts, Puffy set off in search of Constable Hobbling.

Chapter 80

As Paddy hurried to the pavilion and Puffy searched for Constable Hobbling the loudspeakers around the ground crackled into action.

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ said Percy, his rich, deep whisky, gin and brandy-soaked tones immediately grabbing everyone’s attention. ‘The Fondling-Under-Water Cricket Club is pleased to welcome Mr Cyril Player of England, Somerset, Warwickshire, Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire and the Fondling-Under-Water Cricket Club, and his team, to the Fondling-Under-Water Cricket Club. The match will begin shortly. Meanwhile, the club captain is delighted to announce that Lady Hepplewhite has kindly agreed to judge the Fondling-Under-Water Cricket Club first ever Fancy Dress Competition. The judging will take place in front of the pavilion and will start immediately.’

Listening to the former newsreader Biffo realised that he could tell which words were supposed to begin with capital letters by the way Percy pronounced them.

In response to Percy’s announcement the area in front of the pavilion suddenly began to swarm with fairies (ranging in age from six to sixty), gorillas (ranging in size from enormous to just how many people are there in that gorilla suit?’) and representations of long dead members of the royal family.

There were three vicars, four wildly underdressed and extravagantly over made up women who looked like ladies of the night (three of them were male and one of them, it later turned out, was not), five famous and instantly recognisable cartoon characters, six movie stars and seven Elvis Presleys.

The only member of the cricket team taking part in the competition was Justin, the wicket keeper. He was dressed, surprisingly convincingly, as a lemon. The main part of the lemon was carved out of sponge rubber. Justin’s arms, legs and head, all which poked out from the lemon itself, were painted yellow. He looked so realistic that everyone who looked at him immediately felt the need for a little something sweet.

Meanwhile, the unceasing demand for fairy cakes, jam tarts, cream horns and thick slices of black forest gateau kept Mrs Cleavidge both on her toes and on tenterhooks. As the demand grew so the slices of black forest gateau grew thinner.

Though this was the first time the Fondling-Under-Water Cricket Club had organised one, fancy dress competitions were, Biffo learned from Cheesy, an integral and expected part of most village celebrations.

There was, Cheesy told him, always a fancy dress competition during the summer fête and there was another at the children’s Christmas party. Curiously, even the organisers of the autumn produce show (‘Biggest Onions’, ‘Longest Leeks’, ‘Best Blackberries’ and so on) did not feel able to present their event to the public without the additional attraction of a fancy dress competition.

‘Every kid in the village has at least one fancy dress costume,’ said Cheesy. ‘Most of the adults have two.’

He explained that during the fancy dress ‘off season’ – a period of about six weeks in January and February – there was always much tinkering with and swapping of costumes. He told Biffo that most women in Fondling-Under-Water know how to convert a fairy costume for a nine year old into a tart costume for a 45 year old man using little more (and sometimes less) than a pair of scissors, a few safety pins, a yard of net curtain and an old cushion cover or two.

Cheesy also explained that the fancy dress competition was always judged by Lady Hepplewhite. The current holder of that title, the fifth or possible sixth Lady Hepplewhite, had already done it so often, Cheesy said, that there had once been a rumour that she had put it down on her passport under the heading ‘occupation’.

‘Are you entering the fancy dress competition?’ Biffo had asked Puffy when he had first heard about this aspect of the day’s entertainment.

‘Me?’ Puffy seemed rather taken aback at this. ‘Of course not!’ he snorted. ‘I can make a complete idiot of myself without dressing up as a pirate and hopping around with a stuffed parrot sewn onto my jacket.’

Although, like Puffy, most of the cricket team member had chosen not to take part in the fancy dress competition they were, to a man (and, not forgetting the vicar, a transvestite) gathered around the judging area in order to offer support to Justin. Biffo wandered over to join them in offering Justin thoroughly biased encouragement and loud cheers if he won.

‘Damned good costume, Justin!’ said Cheesy.

Justin grinned his delight.

‘Where did you get it from?’ asked Itchy.

‘A bloke I know runs a theatrical shop,’ replied Justin. ‘He’s got piles of really good costumes in stock. I’ll give you his phone number if you like.’

‘You obviously felt a bit fruity when you chose that one,’ said Herbert Sutcliffe.

This was greeted with general groans.

‘He’s got loads of really good fruits,’ said Justin, with great enthusiasm. No one seemed to think it odd to stand and listen to a lemon enthuse in this way. ‘I could have been an orange, a strawberry, a raspberry, a slice of melon or a banana.’

‘Why not a slice of melon?’ asked Itchy.

‘I didn’t want to be part of something,’ said Justin. ‘I wanted to be a whole fruit.’

‘Why didn’t you choose a banana?’ asked Cheesy, who seemed taken with the idea of a banana suit, and who clearly found it curious that Justin had not also found the idea of dressing as a banana irresistible.

Justin stared at him. ‘I didn’t want to look stupid,’ he snapped, drawing himself up to his full (but not very spectacular) height.

Chapter 81

Puffy found Constable Hobbling sitting on the light roller. His moped was parked nearby with the helmet on the seat. Constable Hobbling was dressed in his blue police uniform. His police helmet was perched on his head. He looked very miserable.

‘Can we borrow your helmet?’ asked Puffy, coming straight to the point.

The policeman looked up, reached up and grabbed the top of his police helmet with his hands as though worried that Puffy might grab it and run off with it. He seemed alarmed.

‘My helmet?’ he said. ‘What do you want my helmet for?’ he demanded. ‘You can’t have it anyway,’ he said. ‘It’s part of my uniform,’ he explained. ‘I’ve heard that an Inspector is coming up today to see if I’ve made an arrest. If he sees me without my helmet there’ll be big trouble.’

‘Not that helmet,’ said Puffy. ‘Your motorcycle helmet.’ He pointed to the relevant item. We don’t have a batting helmet between us.’

‘Oh,’ said Constable Hobbling. He nodded.

‘We can borrow it?’

‘Yes, of course.’ said the policeman with a shrug.

‘You seem a bit down in the dumps,’ said Puffy. What’s up.’

‘I’m still worrying about finding someone to arrest,’ said Constable Hobbling.

‘Oh don’t worry about that,’ said Puffy. ‘If the worst comes to the worst you can always arrest Itchy.’

The constable looked up. For a moment there was hope in his eyes. ‘Could I?’ he asked, eagerly. Then he paused, thought for a moment, pushed back his helmet and scratched the front of his head. ‘But what for?’ he asked Puffy.

The landlord shrugged. ‘Take your pick,’ he replied, with a shrug. ‘I expect Itchy’s broken most of the laws you can think of’

Constable Hobbling nodded in agreement and thought about this for a minute or two. Then, his shoulders drooped and with obvious sadness, he shook his head. ‘I couldn’t do it,’ he said. ‘I couldn’t arrest Itchy.’

‘Well you’re going to have to arrest someone,’ said Puffy.

‘I know,’ replied the policeman. ‘That’s why I feel so miserable.’

Chapter 82

It was later agreed that the judging of the fancy dress competition went well, although it was also generally agreed that it would have been better if the proceedings had not been marred by a small and slightly embarrassing moment when Lady Hepplewhite was about to announce the winner.

Lady Hepplewhite preferred to follow an informal process when judging the winner of the Fondling-Under-Water fancy dress competitions. She would wander around amidst the entrants, select a winner, retreat to a vantage point, stand on a chair, and draw attention to her choice with the aid of a pointed finger.

On this occasion she decided to eschew fairies, animals and cartoon characters and award the winning prize of two bottles of parsnip wine and an armful of rhubarb to one of the four tarts.

‘Oh, that one has to be the winner!’ said Lady Hepplewhite, standing precariously on a folding wooden chair and pointing out a leggy blonde in fishnet stockings, a pelmet-sized black skirt, a see-through purple blouse and a huge, shoulder length blonde wig.

‘Who is the winner?’ Biffo asked Puffy who was standing beside him.

Puffy leant forward an inch or two and inspected the winner, who did not yet seem aware of Lady Hepplewhite’s choice, but who, from the direction in which Lady Hepplewhite’s aristocratic finger was pointing, was unmistakeable.

‘Haven’t the foggiest,’ said Puffy. ‘It isn’t one of our lads.’

He peered again, puzzled. ‘It must be a bloke from another village.’

‘If that’s a bloke I’m a cabbage,’ said Biffo. ‘That blouse is see through and those aren’t balloons.’

They both edged a little closer. The putative winner of the fancy dress competition was talking to Tom Morton. Suddenly she reached up, put her arms around his neck, pulled down his head and kissed him full on the lips.

‘They’re not and he isn’t,’ agreed Puffy. Suddenly his voice dropped. ‘Oh my gawd,’ he said, looking at Biffo. He lowered his voice. ‘She’s given the prize to Tom Morton’s girlfriend. And she’s not even entered in the competition.’

‘We’ll have to do something,’ said Biffo, nodding towards Lady Hepplewhite, who had explained her choice to Bill Stickers. The club captain was hurrying off to tell Tom Morton’s girlfriend the news that she had won a fancy dress competition she hadn’t entered.

‘It’s too late to stop Bill,’ said Biffo. ‘Let’s have a word with Lady Hepplewhite.’

‘What the hell are we going to tell her?’ asked Puffy. ‘If Tom finds out Lady Hepplewhite has given his girlfriend a prize because she thinks she looks like a bloke dressed up to look like a tart he’ll kill us all — one by one and legally!’

‘Come with me,’ said Biffo, ‘I’ve got an idea!’ He ran over to where Lady Hepplewhite was standing, still on her chair, waiting for Bill to return with the winner of the fancy dress competition.

‘Can I have a word, your Ladyship?’ asked Biffo.

‘Not now dear, I’m judging,’ said Lady Hepplewhite.

‘Your Ladyship this is Biffo Brimstone,’ said Puffy. ‘He’s just arrived in the village. He’s playing in the team today.'

'Oh how nice!' said Lady Hepplewhite. She held out a hand. Biffo wasn't sure whether to shake it or kiss it so he did both.

'Lady Hepplewhite,' said Biffo, speaking as fast as he could. 'I think there's been a terrible mistake. Did you just pick that girl in the purple blouse and the black skirt as winner of the fancy dress competition?'

'Now, now!' said Lady Hepplewhite, wagging a reproving finger. 'You may be new to the village but you must learn that I'm not open to bribery or persuasion! I'm sorry if you feel that someone else should have won but I really can't let you interfere with the judging process.'

'No, no,' said Biffo. 'I don't want to.' He paused. 'Well, yes, in a way I suppose I do,' he admitted. 'The problem is that I think you've given the prize to the wrong person.'

'There you go!' said Lady Hepplewhite, wagging a reproving finger.

'Hurry up!' hissed Puffy. 'They're coming!'

'The girl you think is a bloke dressed up as a tart isn't what you think she is,' said Biffo. 'She's not a bloke in drag. She is really Tom Morton's girlfriend and she and he are going to be very piss… annoyed when they find out what's happened. Tom Morton is one of the visiting cricketers. He's a fast bowler who plays for England.'

Lady Hepplewhite looked away from Biffo and back into the crowd. Bill Stickers was now threading his way through the animals, the Elvis Presleys, the cartoon characters, Justin's lemon and the assorted players, with Tom Morton and his girlfriend in tow. Tom Morton was striding. The girlfriend was tottering and discovering just how difficult it can be to try and walk quickly on grass while wearing pencil-thin five inch high heels.

'Oh dear!' said Lady Hepplewhite, suddenly going white. 'What on earth am I going to do.'

'Here she is!' said Bill, who had not yet told Tom Morton's girlfriend why she had been picked out of the crowd.

'What's going on?' demanded Tom Morton, clearly preparing himself to get very cross. Since he was normally an angry man this meant simply notching up his anger level several degrees. The press photographers, smelling trouble, had forced their way through the crowd and were grouped around the fast bowler, his girlfriend and Lady Hepplewhite.

'Lady Hepplewhite was planning to pick out a winner for the fancy dress competition,' said Biffo suddenly. Everyone looked at him and he felt himself going slightly weak at the knees. He spoke directly to Tom Morton's girlfriend. 'But when she saw you in the crowd she thought that the Fondling-Under-Water Cricket Club really should have a beauty queen to help us celebrate this occasion.' Biffo smiled. 'Lady Hepplewhite would like you to be that beauty queen.'

'Oh yes, absolutely!' said Lady Hepplewhite, almost fainting with relief 'Oh yes. It would be just wonderful if you would accept.'

Tom Morton's girlfriend squealed with delight. Tom Morton wasn't the sort of person to squeal. But when his girlfriend was happy he too knew happiness.

'Brilliant!' Puffy whispered in Biffo's ear.

'What's your name, my dear?' asked Lady Hepplewhite.

'Lotti,' said the new beauty queen. 'With an i.' She blushed and curtsied. 'Your Highness,' she added.

'Dotty?'

'Lotti, your Highness.' repeated the beauty queen. There was more blushing and more curtsying.

‘Lotti?’

‘That’s right, your Highness!’ beamed the beauty queen.

‘Lotti!’ This time there was no blushing left to do. But there was another curtsey.

‘Of course it is, my dear,’ said Lady Hepplewhite. ‘Well done! What a lovely name. And you don’t need to call me ‘your Highness’, ‘your Ladyship’ will do nicely.’

‘Thank you your Highness!’ The beauty queen curtsied again. She was going up and down more often than a Harrods lift during the Christmas season.

‘So, who’s the winner of the fancy dress competition?’ asked Bill Stickers. Intelligence and tact had never been his strong points.

‘The. . .er winner of the competition is. . .er. . .the. . .,’ stumbled Lady Hepplewhite. She looked down at Biffo for help.

Biffo looked around, desperately seeking inspiration. ‘The lemon,’ he prompted.

‘The lemon!’ said Lady Hepplewhite, with another great sigh of relief She smiled sweetly. ‘The winner of the fancy dress competition is the lemon!’ she declared solemnly, as though announcing the winner of an Oscar for best actor.

The announcement was greeted with much cheering.

It was, Biffo thought later, one of his greatest achievements. In two minutes he had snatched the day from the brink of disaster and made almost everyone happy. Such joys are not known to many.

At that moment the pavilion clock struck two and the brass band started to play ‘Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines’ to celebrate the arrival of the parachutist. Thinking that they were late in their musical welcome they played the tune very loud and very quickly.

Unfortunately, the parachutist was nowhere to be seen.

Heads were bent back in vain as several hundred eyes searched the skies but saw nothing but swallows, seagulls and clouds. None of these were equipped with parachutes.

‘Not yet!’ hissed Paddy, running over to where the band was playing and waving his arms from side to side. Wait until you can see him coming!’

Chapter 83

‘I can’t play!’ insisted a tearful Jack Hobbs. ‘I can’t stand, I can’t walk and I certainly can’t play cricket.’

The unhappy Fondling-Under-Water opening batsman was sitting in the pavilion with his foot up on a chair. His right trouser leg was rolled up to the knee and the old boot and grubby sock which had been removed from his right foot were lying on the floor nearby. The whole team was gathered around.

‘Let me take a look,’ said Rupert, the local antique dealer, bookie and doctor. He spoke in his role as village physician though, given the age of Jack’s leg, and the long odds against him playing, his interest could have been inspired by his role as an antique dealer or, indeed, his role as village bookie.

He bent down and prodded at Jack’s bared limb. ‘Does that hurt?’ he asked. Jack made the sort of sound a cat makes prior to regurgitating the half-digested remains of the previous evening’s shrew.

‘It’s not broken,’ said Rupert, confidently. ‘But it’s very swollen.’ He sucked in a couple of litres of air between his teeth and shook his head in dismay and sympathy. You’re going to have a massive bruise.’ He casually pressed his thumb into the flesh at the side of Jack’s foot. Jack winced.

‘What did you do that for?’ demanded the unhappy batsman.

‘It’s what we doctors do,’ explained Rupert. He thought for a moment. ‘I’m not entirely sure why,’ he admitted. ‘But we just do.’ He stood up and stretched his back.

‘Is that it?’ demanded Jack.

‘Is that what?’ said Rupert, puzzled.

‘Is that all you’re going to do? Aren’t you going to examine me?’

‘I have examined you!

‘Not properly.’

‘What do you mean by properly?’

‘You know,’ said Jack. He stopped for a moment, thinking hard. ‘A thorough medical examination,’ he said.

‘What do you want me to do?’ asked Rupert, rather impatiently. ‘Peer down your throat? Ask you if you were ever dropped on your head as a child? Check you for signs of German measles? A cricket ball hit you on the foot and you’ve got a bruise!’

‘Sorry, doctor,’ said Jack, meekly.

‘I should think so too,’ said Rupert.

‘Can you play with a runner?’ asked Paddy.

Rupert relented, possibly feeling rather sorry for his tirade. ‘But it’ll be a big bruise,’ he said. ‘I dare say that’s going to be the biggest bruise I’ve seen for years.’

Jack looked suitably flattered. Clearly proud, he smiled and quietly thanked Rupert.

Paddy tried again. ‘Can you play with a runner?’

Jack didn't even stop to think about the question. He simply shook his head. 'I can't even stand,' he said miserably. 'It's all that bloody woman's fault.'

The silence which followed the realisation that the Fondling-Under-Water cricket team had lost one of its opening batsmen did not last for long, although it was broken in a thoroughly unexpected way when Justin, still convincingly dressed as a lemon burst into the pavilion.

'Can someone unzip me, please?' wheezed the aged wicket keeper, who was, he would have been perfectly happy to admit, far too old to be bursting into anywhere. Until that moment he would have insisted that his bursting into rooms days were long since over.

Since Biffo was standing nearest to the door it was to the village newcomer that the winner of the fancy dress competition offered his back.

Biffo rummaged around at the back of the lemon, found the zip toggle and pulled. Nothing happened. Biffo pulled again, a little harder this time.

'Careful!' cried Justin. His face, legs and arms were still painted yellow to match the lemon costume he was wearing but a red flush was beginning to show through the yellow giving him a rather curious orange appearance. 'Don't rip it whatever you do. The bloke who lent me this costume will kill me if I take it back ripped.'

'It's stuck,' said Biffo.

'It can't be stuck,' said Justin, more in hope than knowledge. He moved away from Biffo and promiscuously offered his back elsewhere. 'Unzip me!' he appealed.

The vicar, who fitted Lettice's tennis skirt remarkably well and who, Lettice had been pleased to see when she spotted him a little earlier, was wearing a white bra underneath his white blouse, was the next to try. He pulled at the zip toggle for a few moments without any result. 'I'm sorry Justin,' he said at last. 'It seems to be stuck.' The vicar spoke in a high-pitched voice in a brave attempt to sound in tune with his appearance.

'It can't be stuck!' said Justin, as though addressing a simpleton. 'How can it be stuck?'

'Zips are always getting stuck,' squeaked the vicar. He thought he was being sultry. Those around merely thought he sounded odd.

'I'll go and find a real woman,' said Justin cruelly. 'They're good with zips.' He waddled off, out of the pavilion and down the steps towards the trestle tables where Mrs Betty Cleavidge and her helpers were distributing late luncheons and early teas. Justin was not generally quite so insensitive to the feelings of others but when you are dressed as a lemon and you no longer want to be dressed as a lemon it is sometimes difficult to be tactful. The vicar, hurt by Justin's remark, looked as if he was about to burst into tears. Biffo, feeling sorry for the unhappy clergyman, put his arm around him and patted the distressed cleric on the shoulder. The vicar, encouraged by this display of sympathy, took a small, embroidered handkerchief from his sleeve, forgot himself and blew his nose loudly. It was a very earthy, masculine blow, rather than the delicate feminine sniff which he might have attempted had he been properly in control of himself and been able to think about things a little more clearly.

'I still don't understand what happened,' said Paddy, standing beside his injured opening batsman and rubbing his ear. He had been standing rather too close to the vicar when he, or possibly she, had blown his, or quite possibly her, nose. 'How come you were hit at all?'

'She bowled underarm,' complained Jack. 'The ball never left the ground. It was impossible to do anything about it.'

'That's daft,' retorted Len, who, arm in a sling, had come to watch and cheer and, whenever appropriate, to do some appealing from the boundary. 'If it was rolling along the ground all you had to do was leave your bat on the ground.'

'But you couldn't do that!' said Jack, his voice replete with indignation. 'When a ball rolls along the ground it doesn't just roll along the ground; it bounces and jumps all over the place.' He attempted to show what he meant with an illustrative hand movement but he did this rather too energetically and his foot very nearly fell off the chair upon which it was resting. He paled, swallowed hard and paused while he readjusted his leg. ‘Of course, it might not bounce around on a really flat wicket but. . .’

‘Sssshhhhh!’ said Paddy, shushing furiously while at the same time looking around nervously in case Itchy was within earshot. Itchy was very sensitive about the quality of the pitches he prepared - even in the nets.

‘Besides,’ continued Jack. ‘You couldn’t be sure she was always going to roll ‘em along the ground. Sometimes, without any warning she’d whirl her arm round and the ball would land half way down the wicket and go whizzing past at ear height. She bowled two damned fine bouncers at me, I can tell you.’ He paused. ‘Anyway,’ he added defensively. ‘It wasn’t just me who got out to her. She kept getting everyone out.’

Paddy could not deny this. ‘That’s true,’ he agreed ruefully. ‘Thanks to her bowling we lost a lot of money on that stall.’ He paused, stared at Jack’s foot and sighed loudly. ‘I hate to think what’s going to happen to us when we’re up against Tom Morton and Michael Hunt.’

‘I’d rather face them than her any day,’ muttered Jack, safe now in the knowledge that this was not something he was going to have to do.

‘Who’s going to open the batting with Herbert?’ asked Puffy.

‘I will,’ said Paddy. ‘But we’re going to be a player short. ‘Who else can we find to play?’

Outside the Fondling-Under-Water brass band started to play another enthusiastic rendition of ‘Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines’.

Everyone rushed to the pavilion windows and door in order to watch the parachutist descend. Unfortunately, there was no parachutist in sight. The band, misled by a circling buzzard high in the sky, gradually abandoned the tune.

‘You’d think the damned fools would realise that there won’t be a parachutist until there is a plane,’ muttered Paddy. A lone trombonist, eyes closed and lost in the pleasure of the moment, continued with a solo rendition of the welcoming music.

‘What about Lord Hepplewhite?’ asked Cheesy. ‘He used to play.’

Paddy, turning away from the pavilion window, shook his head. ‘He gave up playing years ago,’ he said. ‘Apart from the gout, the arthritis, the poor hearing, the bad eyes and the heart trouble he’s not in bad condition for a man his age. But despite the operation he’s still got that prostate problem, of course, and so he’d have to field close to the pavilion. Added to which there is the fact that his Lordship has a little difficulty in bending.’

The trombonist, realising that his fellow musicians had stopped playing, gradually abandoned his solitary musical welcome.

‘Do you play, doctor?’ Biffo asked Rupert Fitzwalter.

‘Certainly not!’ said the doctor, quite firmly. ‘I have my hands full attending to you lot. First there was Constable Hobbling’s knee. Then it was Franklin’s ankle. And then Len’s arm. And Jack’s foot. You lot don’t just need a team doctor - you need your own MASH unit. You haven’t got a healthy body between you.’

‘What about Arthur Sturgeon?’ suggested Itchy.

This suggestion was greeted with the sort of enthusiasm with which Hannibal might have responded if an aide had suggested using three-legged giraffes as an alternative to elephants. Cheesy made a noise like a chicken.

‘Who’s Arthur Sturgeon?’ Biffo whispered to Puffy.

‘He’s the club scorer,’ explained Puffy.

‘I didn’t know the club had a scorer!’ said Biffo, strangely impressed by this minor revelation.

‘He’s been our scorer since he was a lad,’ said Puffy.

‘Has he never played cricket?’ asked Biffo.

‘Just once,’ said Puffy. We were short of a player for a league match when Justin sprained his wrist opening a jar of marmalade. It was ten or twelve years ago. Arthur scored nought, bowled one over for thirty four runs and dropped two easy catches. He proved himself to be probably the most uncoordinated human being alive. At the end of the match he went round all the other players asking them how we thought he’d done.’

Cheesy, apparently bored with the chicken impersonation started to work his way through the rest of his repertoire of farmyard animal impersonations.

‘What did you tell him?’

‘We told him that he had done very well and showed enormous promise but that he was far too valuable as a scorer to play in the team on a regular basis.’

‘And he was happy with that?’

‘I think so,’ said Puffy. ‘But for years afterwards he always drove around with his cricket bag in the boot of his car - just in case. We went to the Oval for a day at the Test Match a couple of years ago and Arthur insisted on carrying his cricket bag with him. He said that if one of the England players injured himself they might need someone to stand in for him.’

‘Arthur always likes to be prepared,’ said Cheesy. ‘He was a boy scout.’ He looked at Puffy. Wasn’t that the day when there wasn’t any play?’

‘There’s never any play when we go up to London for the Test Match,’ said Puffy. ‘I’m not sure that they ever actually play the matches.’ He thought for a moment. When you’re watching the match on television and it rains they always play scenes from old Tests. But when you’ve paid money and you’re sitting there in the rain there’s nothing at all to watch.’

‘I lost £50 that day,’ said Cheesy. ‘It’s coming back to me now.’

‘One thing has always worried me about those old matches they show in black and white on the TV,’ said Itchy. ‘At the end, when Bradman had reached his hundred or his two hundred, or the match was over, all the blokes in the crowd would throw their hats into the air.’

Everyone agreed that they had noticed this. Cheesy began to perform his impersonation of a pig.

‘So how did they all find their hats afterwards?’ asked Itchy.

‘How did you lose £50?’ Biffo asked Cheesy.

‘The ground staff spent the entire day taking the covers off and putting them back on again,’ explained Puffy on Cheesy’s behalf ‘We didn’t have anything else to do, and we’d paid for our tickets, so we stayed there and watched them.’

‘Since there wasn’t any cricket to bet on we had a few bets on how long it would take the ground staff to get the covers on and off,’ explained Cheesy, temporarily abandoning the pig noises. He shrugged and thought about it for a moment or two. ‘They were quicker than I thought they’d be.’

‘Consistently,’ added Puffy.

Cheesy nodded but said nothing. The memory of his loss seemed to have depressed him.

‘Well, if you don’t want Arthur Sturgeon we’ll have to think of someone else,’ said Itchy, rather grumpily. ‘I was just trying to be helpful.’ He stopped and thought for a moment. ‘And I’m serious about all those hats. How did all those blokes find their own hats afterwards?'

Various other suggestions were made as everyone struggled to think of a replacement batsman. All were dismissed quite quickly. The village of Fondling-Under-Water seemed to be extremely light on able bodied cricket players.

'Hats are expensive,' said Itchy, when the suggestions had dried up. 'And, besides, a man acquires an affection for a hat.' He reached up, as though to reassure himself that his own head covering was still in place. Comforted, he pulled his floppy white hat down a little more firmly.

There was a long silence.

'Perhaps we should ask Lady Hepplewhite,' suggested Biffo, tentatively.

Everyone looked at him and stared. Biffo felt himself blushing. He didn't know quite why but he felt embarrassed.

'Lady Hepplewhite?' said Cheesy, as though Biffo had suggested inviting the Man in the Moon to pop down for a match.

'She's a woman,' Itchy pointed out. He seemed genuinely surprised that Biffo had not noticed this.

'But Jack himself admitted that her bowling is pretty well unplayable,' said Biffo, dragging courage from some previously unknown source and bravely defending his suggestion. 'Maybe she could add a little something to our bowling attack.' His voice tailed off and he wished he hadn't spoken.

'It's an idea,' admitted Puffy, much to Biffo's surprise.

'We can't have a woman in the team!' said Itchy indignantly.

There was a lengthy silence. It seemed a quieter, heavier, more potent silence than the usual sort of everyday silence that simply doesn't contain any noise.

'Can you think of anyone else we can ask?' Paddy asked Itchy. 'It's a little off the wall but it could be a brilliant suggestion.' He looked at his watch. 'Besides, we haven't got all day to find another player. And I don't want to play this match with ten men.'

'You will be playing with ten men if you invite Lady Hepplewhite,' pointed out Len rather pedantically.

Suddenly, a shadow fell across the pavilion.

'Are you chaps ready to start this match?'

Everyone turned.

Cyril Player, dressed in his freshly-laundered cricket whites and ready for action, was standing in the doorway. He was surrounded by a halo of sunshine which gave him a strange, almost mystical look. He flipped a coin with his right thumb, watched while it span high up into the air, and then caught it neatly in his left hand. 'So, do you want to take your two innings one after the other? Or do you want to bat first and last, with us batting in the middle?'

'I think it would be sensible for us to bat first and last, Cyril,' said Paddy. 'It'll mean that your chaps can have a bit of fun with us and score as many as you like. If we take both our innings first you might end up needing to score just half a dozen runs. I'm sure that would disappoint many of the spectators.'

'No point in bothering with the toss then,' said the visitor's captain. He examined the coin carefully and pocketed it. 'That's the coin I used when I captained Surrey in the Bunsen & Hodges Cup,' he remarked casually, as though he had only remembered this upon examining the coin. 'What's happening about my benefit collection?' he asked, looking around the pavilion.

'I suggest you get a couple of your chaps to take buckets round while we're batting,' said Paddy. 'We'll get our announcer to ask everyone to give generously.’

‘Jolly good,’ said Cyril.

‘And, of course, I expect you’ll have brought copies of your autobiography to sign. What was it called?’

‘Running for Cover’,’ said Cyril. ‘I’ve got a couple of hundred copies in the car. I’ll sign them during the tea interval.’

‘Splendid.’ said Paddy. ‘I’m sure they’ll be very popular. Meanwhile, we do have one slight problem,’ he said. ‘One of our opening batsmen has been injured so we’re short a player.’ He hesitated. ‘We’re having a little difficulty finding a replacement at such short notice.’ He paused and swallowed hard. ‘Do you have any objection if we replace him with a woman?’

‘No objection whatsoever,’ said Cyril. ‘You can play eleven women if you like.’ He looked at the vicar, dressed in his white blouse and short skirt. ‘Is that her?’

‘Er, no,’ said Paddy. ‘That’s the vicar.’

Cyril stared hard at the vicar and then back at Paddy and shrugged. ‘I’m agnostic, myself,’ he said, before heading for the door. He paused at the top of the steps. ‘I can let you and members of your team have 10% discount on the price of my book,’ he said generously. His studded boots clattered noisily on the pavilion steps as he trotted back out onto the field.

‘He called me ‘her’!’ said the vicar. ‘He thought I was a woman!’ He was clearly thrilled by this. The melancholy aroused by Justin’s caustic comment, had been lifted.

‘Who’s going to ask Lady Hepplewhite if she’ll play?’ Paddy asked.

‘You ask her,’ said Puffy. ‘You’re the vice-captain.’

‘Bill ought to ask her,’ said Paddy. ‘He’s the captain.’

‘I’m not asking her,’ said Bill quickly. ‘She’s a woman. I don’t want to go down in history as the man who brought a woman into the Fondling-Under-Water cricket team.’ No one was tactless enough to mention that Bill was about to go down in history as the man who sold the cricket club ground.

‘Biffo should ask her,’ said Puffy. ‘He rescued her from that fancy dress fiasco.’

‘She hardly knows me!’ protested Biffo.

‘That’s no problem,’ said Puffy.

Lady Hepplewhite was sitting waiting for the match to begin. She was blissfully unaware of the fact that her status was about to change from spectator to player.

Chapter 84

While Rupert had been examining Jack’s swollen foot, and assorted members of the team had been struggling to help Justin escape from his disguise as a lemon, Percy had been working hard to keep the spectators amused in what appeared to be an unexpected hiatus in the proceedings.

The fancy dress competition, the egg and spoon race and the three-legged race were all over. And the caber had gone missing. The commentator’s task had not been an easy one.

Percy, however, was feeling extremely comfortable in front of the microphone and he was doing his best to keep the crowd entertained. He was treating them to a philosophical monologue.

‘Chopping your own wood, fetching your own reeds, thatching your own roof, these are proper occupations for a man,’ he said. His rich, oak tones reverberating around the ground. We speak of the industrial revolution as though it was something of which we should be proud. But was it? Men were put into factories and terraced houses were built so that the occupants could be chained, day and night, to their grimy work benches. Machinery destroyed craftsmanship and with it went pride and joy and independence and enthusiasm. All these were replaced with dullness and boredom and dependence and insecurity and fear. Men were turned into servants and as the industrial revolution still goes on it becomes increasingly clear that it is not a revolution of the people for the people but a revolution for the rich. The people should have listened to Ned Ludd and the Tolpuddle Martyrs.’

Percy paused. It had occurred to him that Ned Ludd and the Tolpuddle Martyrs sounded like a rock group and its lead singer. ‘Let’s hear it for Ned Ludd and the Tolpuddle Martyrs!’ he cried out, to cheers from the crowd around the ground, most of whom did think that Ned Ludd and the Tolpuddle Martyrs must be rock stars.

‘What the hell is Percy talking about?’ hissed Paddy. The Fondling-Under-Water vice-captain was proud of his ability to remain calm when circumstances justified panic but his taut neck muscles and staring eyes indicated that panic was not far away.

Percy paused again. He needed another drink.

Chapter 85

‘Psst!’ hissed Lord Hepplewhite. He curled a finger in Paddy’s direction, making it clear that he wanted to talk to him. Paddy excused himself, and stepped over to where the Lord was sitting.

‘Have you invited my lady wife to play in the match?’

‘Yes, my Lord,’ admitted Paddy. ‘Jack Hobbs has a bruised food and we’re a player short. Lady Hepplewhite did bowl very effectively in the nets.’

‘She’s a woman!’ shouted Lord Hepplewhite.

‘Er. . .yes,’ said Paddy. He looked over in Lady Hepplewhite’s direction. Lord Hepplewhite’s observation was indisputable. His wife was built like a ship but she had an impressive prow. Lady Hepplewhite saw the vice-captain looking in her direction and waved to him. Paddy blushed, smiled and shyly waved back.

We had noticed that, my Lord,’ he said.

‘Had you noticed?’

‘We had, my Lord.’

‘That’s all right, then,’ said Lord Hepplewhite, a little calmer now. ‘As long as you had noticed.’

‘She’s a remarkably good bowler,’ said Paddy enthusiastically. ‘I gather she specialises in underarm deliveries but Jack also says she’s got a very good bouncer.’

‘Good bouncers, did you say?’ said Lord Hepplewhite, cupping a hand to his ear. Without waiting for a reply he nodded his agreement and winked at Paddy. ‘You’ve got a good eye my boy. Exactly why I married her.’ He winked again.

Paddy wasn’t sure what the protocol was. Would he be considered rude if he didn’t agree with Lord Hepplewhite? Or would it be more impertinent for him to agree? He decided to stick with the undeniable and risk impertinence. ‘Yes, my Lord,’ he said. ‘Lovely bouncers.’

Chapter 86

Mrs Betty Cleavidge was distraught. She needed every ounce of courage she could muster not to bury her head in her pinafore and burst into tears.

Never before in her decades of making teas for the Fondling-Under-Water cricket team had there ever been any danger of the food running out. She felt deeply ashamed and embarrassed. She had long cherished her ability to feed the 5,000, however hungry they might be, but the first tea interval hadn't yet arrived and bald patches were already appearing on trestle tables upon which stores of pasties, pies, tarts, sandwiches and cakes should have been piled high.

Not for one moment did she think of blaming those who had demolished her carefully prepared mountains of food.

It was her job to make sure that there was plenty of food available. And if the food ran out it was her fault. She was not a woman who shied away from responsibility. She had authority over the preparation of food for the Fondling-Under-Water cricket team. And with that authority went responsibility. She was not interested in excuses or explanations.

'Life is simple enough,' she said to the vicar's wife. 'My responsibility is to make sure that there is plenty of food to go round. If there isn't enough food to go round then I have failed those who put their trust in me.'

How could she possibly blame those who had eaten the food she had made? Was not food made to be eaten?

But Mrs Cleavidge was not a weak woman. In a crisis she had unplumbed depths. And from deep within her tortured soul she garnered every ounce of strength she could find. She was not going to succumb. She was going to make sure that everyone had plenty to eat. And there was only one way to do this.

'Can you manage by yourself for a while?' she asked her most senior assistant, Mrs Stilton; partner, cook, laundress, masseuse and darner to the Fondling-Under-Water star whose name she shared.

Cheesy's wife, whose bust and hip measurements had grown with, and matched, her age every year since her early 30s (her age, bust and hips had now all reached the commendable figure of 46), was a dependable and hard-working sort. Mrs Cleavidge had no hesitation in putting the immediate moment to moment management of the trestle tables, and the tea making, into her capable and experienced hands. Mrs Cleavidge did not delegate easily and she would not have handed over the custody of the urn to anyone else.

Mrs Cleavidge's big problem was that her own cottage, complete with the kitchen which had spawned galaxies of cream horns, jam tarts, Black Forest gateaux, Victoria sponges, mince pies and endless pots of chutney, was three miles away as the crow flies and nearly half as far again for those who do not have wings.

Mrs Cleavidge looked around. The obvious solution was standing no more than a few yards away from her.

'Mrs Counter!' called Mrs Cleavidge. 'May I have a word?' The vicar's wife bustled over from her post. She had been dispensing plastic beakers full of orange squash to a line of small boys which seemed to her to be endless. (This was because the line of small boys was, indeed, endless. As each boy left the front of the queue clutching his beaker of orange squash he would walk around and join the back of the queue again. This was not because the boys were thirsty but because they were having a competition to see who could collect the most beakers.)

'Do you mind if I use your kitchen?' Mrs Cleavidge asked the vicar's wife. 'I need to rustle up some quick pasties for teatime.'

'Help yourself, dear,' replied Mrs Counter. 'The back door's open. Just let yourself in. But I'm not sure how much food there is in the larder.' 'Don't you worry about food,' said Mrs Cleavidge, unfastening her pinafore. 'I'll pop into Miss Box’s shop on the way round.’

And with that she was off.

Chapter 87

There you are, Franklin!' said Paddy, when he saw the Fondling-Under-Water umpire being wheeled towards the stumps.

'What are you doing!' yelled, Itchy running across to protest. 'You can't wheel that thing all over the pitch.'

'We'll make sure it doesn't go on the wicket,' said Paddy, with a comforting wave of his hand. Itchy did not seem convinced. 'It's the only way Franklin can umpire,' added the vice-captain. He looked down at Franklin and beamed with genuine delight. 'I must say, Franklin,' he said, 'that you are looking very fit and healthy after your accident.'

'How's he going to signal leg byes?' asked Itchy, uncharacteristically putting an oil-stained finger on a problem no one else had foreseen.

'The umpire stands on one leg to signal a leg bye, doesn't he?' asked Franklin, though it wasn't so much a question as a snarl.

Itchy thought for a few moments. 'Yes,' he agreed. 'I suppose so.'

'Well standing on one leg is the one thing I'm really good at,' snapped Franklin.

'I'd like you to meet the visiting team's umpire,' said Paddy, turning slightly. For the first time Franklin saw that behind Paddy there stood a leggy blonde, wearing fishnet stockings, a pelmet-length black skirt and a see-through purple blouse.

'This is Lotti,' said Paddy. 'Lotti, this is Franklin Minton, our umpire. He's been in an accident - hence the wheelchair.'

'Pleased to meet you,' said Lotti, holding out a hand. Her nails, which were painted purple to match her blouse, were as long as penknife blades. Franklin took her hand gingerly. He tried not to look at what was on display under the purple blouse. Since he was sitting in a wheelchair and Lotti was bending down towards him this was not easy. There wasn't much else to look at.

'Lotti, who is Tom Morton's girlfriend, has an advanced diploma in physical education,' said Paddy. 'She tells me that she doesn't know terribly much about cricket but she has nevertheless kindly agreed to take an end for this match.'

'I've done theoretical hockey,' said Lotti.

Paddy frowned and looked at her. 'What exactly is theoretical hockey?' he asked.

'Well the college I attended didn't actually have any sports fields and so we couldn't actually play any of the games we learned about,' explained Lotti. 'So we studied them from a theoretical point of view.'

'Ah.' said Paddy, as though he understood. He didn't understand and didn't really think he wanted to.

'And there can't be a lot of difference between cricket and hockey can there?' said Lotti. 'They're both played with a ball and a stick after all!' She didn't look like the sort of girl who played a lot of outdoor ball games.

'Er, I think you'll find that there are one or two slight differences,' said Paddy, cautiously.

'But I'm sure everything will be OK,' said Lotti. 'Tom showed me how to do this,' she continued, holding a finger up in front of her. 'I'm supposed to do it when he yells 'Howzat?' She looked around, clearly pleased that she had remembered this complicated manoeuvre. 'Besides,' went on Lotti, proudly and confidently sharing the details of her secret weapon. ‘I’ve brought my camera with me for any difficult decisions.’

Franklin and Paddy looked at her and then at one another but no one spoke.

Lotti took a thin strapped white plastic handbag off her shoulder, reached into it and pulled out an instant camera.

‘Here you are!’ she said proudly. ‘It takes photographs and then prints them out instant. . .instantan. . .all at once. Fashion photographers use them all the time.’

Franklin looked at her carefully. ‘You’re planning to use that,’ he nodded at the camera, ‘to help you make decisions?’

‘Oh yes!’ said Lotti. She looked very pleased with herself

‘If there’s anything controversial I’ll take a photograph and then we’ll all look at the print together and you can help me make a decision.’ The way she explained things it almost sounded sensible.

No one spoke. No one wanted to contradict Tom Morton’s girlfriend.

Chapter 88

At long last the big match was about to start. The atmosphere was heavy with expectation and excitement. This was a moment for which the villagers had waited for some considerable time. They were keen to see the famous cricketing legends of the visiting side. But they were keener still to see their own local heroes do battle. No one really expected the Fondling-Under-Water players to win. The spectators simply hoped that they would acquit themselves with dignity. After all, every run scored and wicket taken would be a victory against opposition of such imposing calibre.

The visiting captain had arranged his fielders with the skill and precision for which he liked to think he would one day be remembered by generations not yet born.

In his heart he knew that as a batsman his career had been just slightly better than mediocre. As a bowler, he knew that the best that could be said was that he had always bowled a good line and a reliable length. Arthritis in his shoulder meant that his bowling days had been over for some time. He had been lucky to play for England and he knew it. His hope now was that he would be remembered for his captaincy skills.

Four slips, two gullies, a forward short leg and an unusually silly mid-on made it clear that the visiting captain was in an aggressive mood. Cyril Player was back where it had all started so many seasons, and so many overs ago. He was determined to show the villagers the titan he had become.

Tom Morton, a gleam in his eye, fire in his belly (he had eaten a particularly hot curry the night before) and a brand new cricket ball in his right hand was pacing out his run up.

Michael Hunt, currently fielding at long leg, was doing vigorous shoulder-loosening exercises to let the spectators and the captain know that he would be opening the bowling at the other end.

Around the boundary edge press photographers were loading their cameras, feeding their motor drives with fresh batteries and sharpening up the focus on their telephoto lenses.

At the end from which Tom Morton was due to bowl Franklin Minton was sitting in his wheelchair with Mr Morton’s long-sleeved England sweater draped around his shoulders. Looking around at the array of cricketing talent displayed before him Franklin could, at least until the Fondling-Under-Water opening batsmen arrived at the crease, believe that he was umpiring in a Test Match. Just as some cricketers dream of playing cricket for their country so Franklin dreamt of raising his finger at international level.

At square leg the luscious Lotti, far less impressed than Franklin Minton, was touching up her nail polish just in case she needed to give anyone out. She did not want to embarrass herself, or Tom, by holding up a finger upon which the nail varnish was chipped.

‘We have two umpires today,’ announced Percy Kempton, helpfully. ‘To help you differentiate between the two I can tell you that at one end we have Mr Franklin Minton. He is wearing the white coat. Our second umpire, at the other end, is the lovely Lotti...’ There was a pause while Percy flicked, unsuccessfully, through his notes looking in vain for Lotti’s second name. ‘Our second umpire is the lovely Lotti,’ he said again. ‘You can identify her by the fact that she is not wearing a white coat.’

Around the boundary edge several members of Betty Cleavidge’s sandwich making squad were taking a few moments off from wielding their butter knives to collect donations from the spectators. The buckets they carried were all labelled with small notices stating that money collected would go towards the purchase of a new lawnmower.

And striding out to the wicket were the two opening batsmen for the Fondling-Under-Water cricket club: Herbert Sutcliffe and Paddy Fields. Both wore pads and both carried bats which had lots of red marks down the edges but no marks at all in the middle. But only Herbert, due to face the first ball, was wearing a helmet. Constable Hobbling's motorcycle helmet would be worn by whichever batsman was due to stand in the firing line.

Back in the pavilion, the waiting batsmen fidgeted nervously. There was tension there, and all around the ground.

When Paddy and Herbert reached the wicket they stopped for a moment. Paddy took off one of his batting gloves and held out his hand to Herbert. 'Good luck!' he whispered.

'Thanks Paddy,' said Herbert, removing one of his own gloves and shaking hands with the club vice-captain. 'I'll do my best.'

'I know you will,' said Paddy. 'And no man can ask more than that, from you or from anyone.' He had to fight hard to swallow a lump in his throat.

Herbert nodded and walked down the pitch to take up his position in front of his stumps.

'Herbert looks imposing doesn't he!' Biffo said to Puffy in the pavilion. 'Just look at him. Head held high. Eyes looking straight ahead. No man went in front of a firing squad with more courage.'

(Not until it was his turn to bat, and wear Constable Hobbling's motorcycle helmet, did Biffo discover that the design of the helmet was such that it was quite impossible to see anything at all unless one held one's head high and looked straight ahead.)

'Middle and leg, please umpire,' said Herbert, grounding his bat in front of his stumps. In response to Franklin's direction he moved his bat a quarter of an inch one way and then half an inch the other way. When he was thoroughly satisfied he made himself a mark on Itchy's virgin turf

Franklin turned his head and peered over his shoulder. It was, he discovered, difficult to look behind you when you were sitting in a wheelchair. It hurt his neck and he decided not to do it again. In the distance, far, far behind him he could just see Tom Morton standing motionless on the outfield.

For Franklin, as well as the Fondling-Under-Water batsmen, this was the moment of truth. He hoped he would have the courage to be fair. More significant, perhaps, he hoped he would have the eyesight to see the ball when Tom bowled.

'Play!' he called.

His voice sounded much hoarser and drier than he remembered it.

Franklin had for years warmed the cockles and muscles of his heart by planning his autobiography. (He already had a title. His book was going to be called 'The Umpire Strikes Back'.) He might not have umpired at international level but now he could at least tell his readers that he had told international players what to do and when to do it.

The single four letter word starting the match had hardly escaped his lips when high overhead a small aeroplane flew into sight. It could be heard buzzing away like some gargantuan fly. On the boundary's edge the members of the brass band tilted back their heads as though they were connected together by steel rods. They all wanted to check that there was indeed an aeroplane overhead.

And within the briefest of brief moments a tiny figure, seemingly no bigger than a child's doll, emerged from the aeroplane and started to plummet down towards the little piece of the planet known as Fondling-Under-Water.

This time there was no doubt. This was no buzzard, no seagull, no high-flying swallow or swift. The long-awaited parachutist was on his way. And with enthusiasm more than making up for any lack of ability, talent, training or skill the brass band burst, as they had been instructed so to do, into their much awaited and spirited rendition of 'Those Magnificent Men In Their Flying Machines'.

On dark winter evenings, when there is frost and mist outside and cricket consists of nothing but past memories and future hopes, there is still discussion in The Gravedigger's Rest about whether or not Herbert Sutcliffe was distracted by this sudden and spirited musical interruption.

But the fact is that neither he nor Franklin Minton, nor indeed Paddy Fields, saw Tom Morton's first ball. Travelling at somewhere between 80 and 90 miles per hour it pitched on a perfect length, deviated off the pitch just a fraction and neatly removed Herbert's off stump completely, sending it and both bails flying back towards the wicket keeper.

The parachutist, gliding slowly and silently down to earth, waved at the people he saw below. No one waved back. He thought this very odd. People usually waved and cheered and jumped up and down a lot when he arrived. They were all staring at something that was happening in the field below him.

Franklin Minton, the umpire, had nothing to do. There was no need for appeal or consultation. Herbert Sutcliffe was as out as any batsman can be.

Naturally, Herbert was unhappy about his dismissal, as indeed were his colleagues back in the pavilion. And the scorebook in which Arthur Sturgeon had neatly pencilled in the details of Herbert's innings showed quite clearly that the Fondling-Under-Water opening batsman had been dismissed for nought, bowled first ball by Tom Morton, and that the Fondling-Under-Water team had lost their first wicket without scoring a run.

'And that's the first wicket to fall,' announced Percy Kempton. He peered at the batsman trudging back towards the pavilion but couldn't identify him. He certainly didn't know the name of the bowler. He suddenly realised that he didn't have the foggiest idea which side was batting and which side was fielding. 'For those of you keeping score I can tell you that one of the batsmen is out,' said Percy. He paused. 'And it seems that one of the opposing bowlers has taken a wicket.' He took a nip from his flask and congratulated himself on handling the situation so well. Knowing virtually nothing about cricket, and knowing so few of the players by sight, he had harboured some slight fears about his suitability for the job of cricket commentator. A few sips of sustaining fluid had helped make these fears disappear.

Franklin was suddenly aware that a large figure was blotting out much of the daylight. 'Can I have my sweater?' asked the successful bowler. 'I don't want to get cold while the next batsmen comes out.'

'It's all tied up neatly now,' said Franklin, who liked having Tom Morton's thick, cosy, white sweater wrapped around his shoulders. He didn't want to give it back. He liked being wrapped up in an England sweater.

'I want my sweater!' insisted the fast bowler. He had never been accused of being a polite person. Stubborn, rude, arrogant, bad tempered, vicious - all these things he had been called. But never polite.

Well you can't have it!' said Franklin. He clutched at the jumper and looked up at Tom Morton defiantly. Tom seethed.

Moments later the parachutist landed gracefully at midwicket. His arrival was greeted with total silence. He looked around, puzzled. Feeling distinctly embarrassed, like a guest who realises he is at the wrong party, and suspecting that he must have been dropped on the wrong field, he quietly cursed the pilot of the aeroplane, collected together his parachute, rolled it into an untidy bundle and trudged off red-faced towards the pavilion hoping that he might find a telephone so that he could ring and ask his mother to come and fetch him.

Tom Morton, now furious, raised an arm to hit the umpire but out of the corner of his eye he saw the row of telephoto lenses at the boundary edge. He wasn't blessed with great intelligence, or sympathy towards the feelings of others, but he knew that even in professional cricket circles it would not do his reputation any good to be photographed knocking over an umpire.

At the back of his mind he even had an idea that knocking over an umpire who was confined to a wheelchair might be even worse than knocking over an umpire who was standing up. And so he didn't hit Franklin. But as he walked away Tom was still seething. Someone called his name and without even bothering to look he automatically put out a hand and caught the ball that had been thrown to him.

He was not a happy bunny.

Chapter 89

Percy, like most males who are loosely involved with the world of show business, had always liked cricket, even though he had never really understood what was happening on the other side of the little white fence which invariably, and quite properly, separated the professional players from the amateur spectators.

During his years at the BBC it had been common practice for him, usually together with several colleagues, to totter out of the BBC headquarters in Portland Place and head north across the Marylebone Road, around the edge of Regent's Park and into St John's Wood and Lord's Cricket Ground.

The main attractions were the all-day bar and the chance of a little fresh air and sunshine but Percy had never objected to the cricket matches which invariably also seemed to be going on there when he visited.

'I have nothing against cricket,' he once said. 'But the best bit about it is that they let you drink all day long.'

Sipping at his beer, Percy watched Puffy Harbottle take Herbert Sutcliffe's place at the crease

Two minutes later Puffy was back in the pavilion insisting that the ball with which he had been bowled must have been a 'no ball'.

'No one could bowl that fast without overstepping the crease by at least ten yards,' he insisted. 'Franklin must be blind. Sitting in that wheelchair is probably restricting his field of vision.'

By the end of Tom Morton's first over the Fondling-Under-Water cricket club had lost three wickets for no runs.

'If we're not careful this match is going to be all over in twenty minutes' time,' said Justin, watching from the pavilion. The wicket keeper, still dressed as a lemon, turned to Cheesy Stilton, who was buckling on the pads which just a moment or two earlier had been fastened around the previous batsman's legs. 'You'll have to try and stretch things out a bit,' he said.

Cheesy stopped buckling for a moment and looked Justin in the eye. 'Have you any suggestions as to how I might do that?'

'I don't know!' retorted Justin. 'Do I have to think of everything?' He thought for a moment. 'Appeal against the light. Tell the umpire you think that Tom Morton's action is suspect. I'm pretty sure an umpire in the West Indies once called him for throwing. Find a dandelion in the middle of the pitch that needs digging out.'

'There are no dandelions in the middle of my pitch!' said Itchy indignantly.

Wishing to avoid further uninvited conflict Cheesy picked up Herbert's bat and marched out of the pavilion.

At the far end of the ground Michael Hunt was polishing the ball on his trousers and keenly awaiting the arrival of the new batsman. He had already managed to produce a nice red streak down his right thigh. He had been thinking of bowling at half or three quarter pace - just to give the villager players a chance - but Tom Morton's success at the pavilion end had made that an impossibility. If Tom was going to bowl flat out then he had to bowl flat out too. He didn't want to drive home at the end of the day without having taken a wicket. He looked down at the red streak he had produced and rubbed the ball against his thigh a little harder; while he did so he took the opportunity to pick at the seam with his thumb nail.

Fired up by the exchange with the wicket keeper Cheesy was keen to do battle with the opposition. He marched straight to the vacant crease and started to dig a small hole in front of his stumps. He wasn't sure why he was doing this, and he knew it offended Itchy, but every batsman he had ever seen had done it so he always did it.

'How are you feeling?' asked a familiar voice.

Cheesy looked up to see a pale looking Paddy trying to grin at him. Paddy had not yet faced a ball but had had to stand and watch while three of his best batsman had been dismissed. The grin was not convincing.

‘Maybe it will rain,’ said Cheesy hopefully.

Paddy looked up at the sky. It didn’t look as though it was going to rain. There were even rays of sunshine poking through.

‘Perhaps we could get that aeroplane which dropped the parachutist to come back,’ said Cheesy. We could give him a watering can and tell him to fly round and round in circles.’

‘Let’s keep that as a back-up plan!’ said Paddy, smiling at last.

‘Are you two playing cricket or would you like someone to bring out a couple of deck chairs, a pot of tea and a plate of cakes?’ shouted Cyril Player. He nodded towards the end from which Michael Hunt was waiting to bowl. ‘The umpire is waiting,’ he said. ‘And it’s not polite to keep a lady waiting.’

Paddy and Cheesy looked first at him and then at the stumps at the non-striker’s end. Tom Morton’s girlfriend, Lotti, saw them looking. She smiled at them and waved with her right hand. She was holding her camera in her left hand. Her white plastic handbag was on the ground, leaning against the stumps at her feet.

‘Good luck!’ said Cheesy.

‘Thanks,’ said Paddy, walking back to his crease. ‘I think I may need it.’

‘Are you ready?’ called Lotti.

‘As ready as I’ll ever be,’ replied Paddy. He twirled his bat, looked around the field and muttered a short prayer to whichever saint looks after batsmen and lost causes.

Thirty seconds later, on his way back to the pavilion, he handed Constable Hobbling’s motor cycle helmet to Helmut Walton.

‘Was it the inswinger?’ asked Helmut.

‘Was what the inswinger?’ asked Paddy.

‘The ball that bowled you. Michael Hunt has a vicious inswinger.’

‘I don’t have the foggiest idea whether it was an inswinger, an outswinger or an unidentified flying object,’ confessed Paddy. ‘I didn’t see it at all. One moment I was standing there waiting for him to bowl and the next he was dancing down the pitch with a bloody great grin across his face. When I turned round I could see the wicket keeper wandering around picking up stumps and bails and so I had a pretty good idea I was probably out.’

‘Ah,’ nodded Helmut wisely. ‘I have a theory,’ he said. ‘I am going down the wicket to rush just before he bowls.’

Paddy stared at him. ‘You’re going to what?’

‘I am going down the wicket to rush just before he bowls,’ repeated Helmut.

‘You’re mad,’ said Paddy.

‘Yes, that is probably true,’ admitted Helmut. ‘But this is my theory: the further down the wicket I run the less of my stumps the bowler can see and the more difficult it will be for the umpire to out give me if the ball hits my person!’

Paddy thought about this for a moment. ‘I suppose you’re right,’ he admitted at last. ‘But aren’t you worried that you’ll be hit?’

‘Oh no,’ said Helmut. He bent a little closer to Paddy. ‘I have protection,’ he confided. ‘I have tucked newspaper under my shirt and another down inside of my trousers.’

‘Oh,’ said Paddy. He thought about this. ‘Oh,’ he said again. ‘Well good luck then,’ he added, before continuing his slow, long walk back to the pavilion. He decided that there might be some sense in Helmut’s theory but that he would be unwilling to try it even if he had a full set of the Encyclopedia Britannica tucked under his shirt and a set of London telephone directories stuffed down the front of his trousers.

Chapter 90

When Paddy Fields was dismissed and Helmut Walton went out to bat, Fondling-Under-Water had lost their first four wickets without scoring a run.

By the end of Michael Hunt's first over Helmut had shown that, with the notable exception of his wife (whom, it must be said, he loved dearly) he was afraid of nothing and no one.

When, still five or six yards away from the wicket, Michael Hunt looked up to make sure that he was still heading in the correct direction, he was flabbergasted to see that instead of standing cowering in his crease the batsman, a huge, bear-like figure with a massive moustache, was racing up the wicket towards him.

'He's not supposed to do that!' Hunt just had time to think. But it was too late for him to stop running in and too late for him to hold onto the ball. He was on automatic pilot and nothing, with the possible exception of the sudden erection of a brick wall, could stop him.

Helmut was half way down the pitch, furiously swinging his bat, when the second ball hit him. It bounced off his shoulder, soared over mid-wicket's head and raced away towards the boundary.

'Run!' screamed Helmut, who was still whirling his bat around his head.

Cheesy; who had been trying hard to think of something sympathetic to say to the next incoming batsman had, when he had seen his team-mate racing towards him, assumed that Helmut was merely saving time by running back to the pavilion before he was actually out. The suggestion that they might actually get some runs completely threw him.

As it happened, Cheesy's hesitation did not matter a great deal. The visiting captain's aggressive field placing meant that none of the visiting team was able to prevent the ball racing away to the boundary.

Helmut's unorthodox approach to batting did not go unnoticed.

In some quarters it caused confusion - even consternation. Franklin Minton, standing, or rather sitting, at square leg, was trying to decide whether there was a limit to the extent to which a batsman was allowed to charge down the wicket and, if not, whether it was permissible for a batsman to shoulder charge the bowler before he let go of the ball. And would the batsman then be allowed to hit the ball if the bowler dropped it?

His umpiring colleague, Lotti, had retreated in dismay when she saw Helmut charging towards her. She had been convinced that he had gone mad and was about to attack her with the big wooden thing he was carrying.

Tom Morton, who was still seething was now fuming as well since it seemed to him that once you let batsmen stop being frightened of you they will start taking all sorts of liberties. (He had forgotten why he was seething, but he had not forgotten to seethe.)

But by no means all those who observed Helmut's gallant attempt to prove that attack is the best form of defence were dismayed.

In the pavilion the nine elevenths of the Fondling-Under-Water team who were not actively involved in the game were as close to ecstasy as cricketers can be when their eleven minute old innings has resulted in the loss of four wickets for just four runs.

And Percy Kempton, sitting in front of the microphone, decided that this was the moment to abandon all pretence at impartiality and firmly to nail his colours to the mast.

When he had worked for the BBC he had been taught that commentators must at all times endeavour to disguise any feelings of favouritism to which they might be prey.

‘The reporter is an invisible fly forever hovering above the manure of human existence,’ an esteemed but long dead producer had once written in a BBC training manual.

But Percy was no longer working for the BBC, and Helmut Walton’s valiant refusal to lie down and accept defeat had aroused within him strong feelings which he was not prepared to ignore.

‘Go get ‘em, Helmut!’ he roared, all caution thrown to the winds.

On the pitch the contestants were preparing themselves for the next round of a contest which now no longer seemed to be following the expected route.

Michael Hunt, a cricketer who would, in a competitive intelligence test, have found it something of a strain to give a block of wood a hard time, had decided that the best way to combat Helmut Walton’s aggressive approach to batting was to take an even longer run and bowl even faster. He had, therefore, retreated to the boundary’s edge in preparation for his second delivery.

Helmut, on the other hand, had decided to vary his approach. Rightly concluding that his down the wicket charge might have slightly annoyed the England bowler (evidence supporting this conclusion was not difficult to come by - fish or vegetables held a few inches away from Michael Hunt’s ears would have been nicely steamed within five minutes or so) he decided, instead, to stay in his crease and simply try to keep out of the firing line.

Meanwhile, Percy was desperately trying to think of something to say.

Football fans are known to turn the names of their favourite teams into slogans at the peep of a referee’s whistle or the raising of a linesman’s flag. ‘Liverpool’ or ‘Arsenal’ they will sing, stretching the appropriate syllables out into a chorus without making the result sound in the slightest bit contrived.

It is not easy to turn the name ‘Fondling-Under-Water’ into a crowd pleasing hymn but Percy was not about to allow himself to be worried by such a minor consideration.

‘Give me an F,’ he began, vaguely remembering one of the chants he had heard during a visit to Stamford Bridge and attempting to adapt it to fit the circumstances. ‘Give me an O, give me an N, give me a D, give me a. . .’

At this point Percy rather lost his way and had to stop and think for a moment. Eventually he found a roughly printed score card which he had been given. This made things considerably easier. ‘Give me an L, give me an I, give me an N, give me a G,’ he continued, using his finger to help him keep track of where he was. The crowd, catching on to what he wanted, started shouting out letters of the alphabet, though since their efforts were not synchronised the result was rather confusing.

After the ‘G’ Percy paused, unsure about what to do next.

Michael Hunt was also in uncharted waters. He had never actually run as far as he was now attempting to run - not at least, at full pace - and he was beginning to feel a little short of breath. Fifteen yards from the stumps he felt as though his chest was about to burst and he had to slow down a little. Five yards from the stumps he had to slow down a lot. By the time he reached the stumps at the bowler’s end, and was ready to deliver the ball, he had virtually stopped moving. The result was a fairly gentle full toss which Helmut, now standing well back in his crease, had plenty of time to see and to play.

‘Give me a little space,’ said Percy, regaining his enthusiasm and continuing with exhortations to the crowd. ‘A little gap,’ he explained.

The spectators who had been following his instructions as faithfully as they had been able were thrown by this exhortation. One man shouted ‘little space’ and a boy shouted ‘little gap’, several women simply ‘space’.

Beyond the boundary’s edge Helmut’s wife, watching her husband bat for the first time in her life, and feeling so proud of him that she uncharacteristically vowed to herself that one evening she would, as a treat, let him stay in The Gravedigger’s Rest for twice his normal allowance, shouted out ‘space’. She followed this by shouting out ‘gap’ just to be on the safe side.

At the time some critics claimed (and, indeed, there are those who still do) that Helmut’s second consecutive boundary shot off Michael Hunt’s bowling was even luckier than the first.

But this is akin to hair splitting; an activity to be contemplated only by the slight in spirit and the small in heart. The important thing is that Helmut swung his bat, his bat collided in mid-air with the ball and the end result was an immediate doubling of the Fondling-Under-Water Cricket Club score.

The fact that Michael Hunt’s third delivery removed Helmut’s middle stump could not detract from the magnificence of a breathtaking innings from the winner of a previous season’s award for the ‘Best Middle Order Batsman of the Second Half of the Season’.

It would have been difficult that day to find anyone in Fondling-Under-Water who did not feel that Helmut well deserved the standing ovation he received from the crowd and his team mates. His innings had lasted for three balls and he had scored eight runs. He was a hero.

Chapter 91

The end of Helmut Walton’s innings marked the high point and the beginning of a sad down turn in the fortunes of the Fondling-Under-Water cricket club.

Biffo managed to get his (borrowed) bat onto the ball but sadly only succeeded in deflecting the latter onto his stumps. Cheesy, determined to go down fighting, skied a ball that stayed in the air long enough for the wicket keeper, by far the youngest and fittest member of the visiting side, to run to deep midwicket to take the catch.

The arrival at the crease of the Reverend Counter in his blouse and borrowed tennis skirt caused some consternation among members of the visiting side but it was, perhaps, when he was joined at the crease by Justin, still stuck in his costume and dressed as a lemon, that they began to lose their concentration a little.

Sadly, despite their not insignificant psychological advantage the lemon and the vicar in a skirt failed to add noticeably to the village team’s score. (It would be more precise to say that they didn’t actually manage to add anything at all.) The lemon, who had been unable to fit Constable Hobbling’s motor cycle helmet onto his head and whose vision and ability to hold the bat were both impaired by his costume, was bowled around his lemon coloured legs for a duck while the vicar, who claimed later to have been attempting to play a terribly fine leg glance, was caught behind by the wicket keeper.

Constable Hobbling, who had rather surprised those members of the fielding side who had guilty consciences by toddling out to bat dressed not in cricket whites but police blues, and who had the unique advantage of being able to bat in a helmet which actually fitted his head, played two doughty forward defensive strokes before being controversially given out leg before wicket to a ball from Tom Morton. The finger which gave him out was raised by the delectable Lotti. (Constable Hobbling obtained remarkably little comfort from the subsequent revelation that Lotti had merely been examining the condition of her nail varnish at the time.)

Lady Hepplewhite, took the home side score into double figures when Michael Hunt, overcome by an entirely unprecedented and unexpected attack of gallantry, bowled her a gentle full toss. Mr Hunt was forced to watch in dismay (he also felt deeply betrayed) as Lady Hepplewhite drove the ball firmly through the covers for four. When Constable Hobbling was dismissed Lady Hepplewhite was left undefeated.

When the Fondling-Under-Water first innings finally closed, just thirty seven minutes after it had started, the village team had scored a not terribly grand total of twelve runs. There had been but three scoring strokes.

The fielding side, the arrogance with which they had arrived now strengthened by the success their skills had wrought, strode towards the pavilion like giants. Not one of them seemed an inch under ten feet tall.

Overcome with a feeling of generosity which he would later greatly regret Cyril Player took out his wallet and casually tossed a crisp ten pound note into one of the buckets which were being used to collect money for the new lawnmower fund. He managed to turn this simple act into a dramatic gesture. The whole event, from the withdrawing of his wallet from his back pocket to the final flutter of the ten pound note into the bottom of the bucket, lasted quite long enough to be seen by everyone within fifty yards of the pavilion steps.

‘I think you’ll find that this is the first of today’s two tea intervals,’ announced Percy Kempton, reading from the hand written time table of events with which he had been supplied. ‘What an exciting match this is turning out to be,’ he continued. ‘It’s clear that there is going to be a tense finish - so don’t go away!’

There was a pause and a slight rustle as he moved one piece of paper out of the way and brought another into vision. ‘The Fondling-Under-Water Cricket Club is pleased to announce that during this interval international cricketing star Cyril Player will be signing copies of his new book at a table just in front of the pavilion,’ announced Percy.

Chapter 92

Percy’s voice had hardly faded when another, almost equally loud voice, could be heard just outside the pavilion.

‘P.C.Hobbling!’

The voice was so loud and so commanding that everyone in or near to the pavilion stopped talking or eating and turned to stare at the source of the sound. This turned out to be a tall, extremely thin, gaunt-faced police inspector who wore a blue uniform and, to show the world that he was above the rank of constable, a prettily-decorated flat hat. The policeman had an unusually small head (it was, nevertheless, perfectly adequately proportioned for the brain it contained) and the hat, the smallest which the police stores were able to supply, sat a little low and rested on the tops of his ears, pushing them down slightly. This gave him a strange, almost extra-terrestrial look

Constable Hobbling, who had been sitting at the back of the pavilion attempting to soothe his troubled spirit with a cup of tea and a plate of egg and cress sandwiches, rushed forward in obedient response to the call from his superior officer.

As soon as he saw the cadaverous figure who had called his name he slammed his heels together, sprang to attention and saluted.

The impressive effect of this combination of slickly executed movements was slightly diminished by the fact that he had forgotten to remove the egg and cress sandwich from the hand with which he saluted. The resulting impact of sandwich on helmet did not add a great deal to the impression he gave. It didn’t do much for his confidence, either. When Betty Cleavidge made an egg and cress sandwich she used plenty of egg, plenty of cress and plenty of butter.

‘I’d like a word,’ said the cadaverous police inspector. He then performed a neat, one hundred and eighty degree turn and marched away from the pavilion.

Pausing only to wipe the egg and the cress from his ear, his helmet and his uniform collar Constable Hobbling hurried down the steps and followed close behind.

Chapter 93

Meanwhile, back in the pavilion, Paddy put away his mobile phone and grinned.

‘I have some good news’, he said. ‘Bill, you’ll be particularly interested in this.’

The other players looked at their vice-captain. The more energetic among them raised querulous eyebrows.

‘That was my cousin,’ said Paddy. ‘He’s been looking through some old planning files in his office. . .’

Chapter 94

According to the history books the return of Napoleon to Paris, after his exile on the island of Elba, was a time of unprecedented, and subsequently unequalled personal glory.

But when today’s historians write the story of our century they will have a new example of personal victory to share top spot with Monsieur Bonaparte’s days of triumph.

Mrs Betty Cleavidge arrived back at the Fondling-Under-Water cricket ground less than five minutes after the start of the first tea interval.

It had been decided that since the two teams were between them playing three innings there should be two tea intervals; one after the first Fondling-Under-Water innings and before the only innings the professionals would have, and one after the professionals had batted and before the Fondling-Under-Water players had their second innings.

This simple plan suited Cyril Player very well for it gave him two opportunities to sign copies of his book and, hopefully, to increase the size of his benefit fund.

Mrs Cleavidge, pushing the vicar’s wheelbarrow with zeal, determination and a pair of arms which would not have looked out of place on by a heavyweight boxing champion, arrived back on the ground eager and ready to fill hungry stomachs during the first of these two intervals. As she arrived she was surprised to see Bill, the Fondling-Under-Water Cricket Club captain, go running off down the lane. She was curious but she had other things on her mind.

‘What on earth have you got there, Mrs Cleavidge?’ asked the doughty Mrs Stilton, peering at the wheelbarrow.

‘Pasties, Mrs Stilton!’ replied Mrs Cleavidge glowing with pride and the physical consequences of her exertions.

The distance from the vicarage to the cricket ground is not a great one for a pedestrian carrying, say, a shopping bag filled with a loaf of bread, a bottle of milk and a pound of tomatoes. But Mrs Cleavidge had made far too many pasties to carry in shopping bags. And a wheelbarrow which is piled high with pasties requires a considerable amount of pushing.

Mrs Cleavidge lowered the handles of the wheelbarrow, pulled back the two tea towels with which she had protected her handiwork for the duration of the journey, and rubbed at her lower back. Quite justifiably she felt very pleased with herself

‘My, oh my,’ said Mrs Stilton who had probably avoided considerable disappointment in her life by never having exhibited any inclination to appear on Mastermind or take part in the Brain of Britain competition.

‘Good heavens!’ said Mrs Counter, the vicar’s wife. ‘Do you think they’ll eat that many pasties?’

‘I hope not!’ replied Mrs Cleavidge. ‘If there aren’t some leftover I won’t know for sure that I’ve made enough, will I?’

‘Quite right, quite right, Mrs Cleavidge,’ answered Mrs Counter. ‘I hadn’t thought of that.’

‘Let’s get these pasties out of the wheelbarrow and onto a trestle table,’ said Mrs Cleavidge, bending down to pick up the wheelbarrow handles again, prior to pushing her pasties across to the nearest table. She paused, with her hands on the wheelbarrow handles and spoke to the vicar’s wife. ‘I bought all the ingredients from Miss Box but I forgot to pick up any mixed herbs so I rummaged around in your kitchen and found yours. I used the lot I’m afraid but I’ll get a replacement jar for you from Miss Box on Monday.’

‘Mixed herbs?’ said the vicar’s wife, looking terribly confused. She thought for a moment. ‘I didn’t have any mixed herbs,’ she said at last.

‘Oh yes you did!’ said Mrs Cleavidge firmly. ‘In that big glass jar tucked away behind the tea caddy.’ She bent her arms, lifted the back end of the wheelbarrow off the ground and trundled her pasties across to where Mrs Stilton, having made a nice large space on a trestle table, was waiting for her arrival.

‘A big jar behind the tea caddy?’ repeated the vicar’s wife. She spoke so quietly that Mrs Cleavidge could hardly hear her. She then opened her mouth as though about to speak but closed it again without saying a word. She had gone a very strange colour.

Chapter 95

When Constable Hobbling returned to the pavilion his team mates gathered around him, oozing sympathy and understanding.

‘The Inspector says that if I don’t make an arrest this afternoon I’m going to be transferred to clerical duties at police headquarters,’ the village policeman reported, glumly.

He sat down on a wooden chair, put his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands.

The general consensus was that this was utterly unfair, quite unreasonable and generally pretty worrying.

‘What will happen to us?’ demanded Itchy, rather tactlessly expressing the fear that everyone felt but that no one else had felt able to express.

Constable Hobbling reached out and took a raspberry jam tart from a plate in front of him. He put the whole of the tart into his mouth without even looking at it.

‘Will they send us another policeman?’ asked Itchy, whose tactlessness knew no bounds.

Constable Hobbling, who was unable to speak, nodded. As a result many worried glances were exchanged. Puffy, as landlord of The Gravedigger’s Rest, was particularly concerned. He exchanged worried glances with Biffo, Paddy and Cheesy. He had little doubt that a new policeman would be unlikely to take the sort of sensible, mature and well-balanced attitude towards such delicate and crucial things as licensing laws, as had been displayed so consistently by Constable Hobbling.

The much-loved policeman swallowed and licked his lips.

‘I keep telling him that no one here breaks the law,’ he said, morosely. ‘But he doesn’t believe me.’

The members of the cricket club looked at one another. It was becoming dangerously clear to them all that in the inspector they might well be dealing with a more perceptive and intelligent man than they had at first suspected.

Constable Hobbling reached out and took another jam tart. The trouble with comfort eating is, as many would-be-slimmers have found to their cost, that the comfort only comes when you are actually eating. Eating a jam tart (or a cream cake or a packet of biscuits) may help provide comfort and solace but the minute the tart (or the cream cake or the packet of biscuits) has been consumed the comfort and solace will cease. The only answer is to keep eating.

After a cursory glance, Constable Hobbling popped the tart into his mouth. Once again he felt a little better for a few moments. But, sadly, he knew that the relief would not last.

Chapter 96

Constable Hobbling was by no means the only person in Fondling-Under-Water to be having a day he would happily forget. Former England cricketer Cyril Player was also having one of those frustrating and disappointing days that deserve to be put out with the rubbish.

Mr Player had begun the tea interval sitting behind several huge piles of his books. He had his pen poised and fingers held ready to scrawl his signature. A notice pinned to the front of the trestle table he had borrowed warned potential purchasers not to ask for personal inscriptions.

Mr Player had brought with him two hundred copies of the autobiography entitled ‘Running for Cover’ which a skilful ghost writer had written for him. He had also brought three pens. With extraordinary optimism he had even brought with him a notebook so that he could, if he ran out of books, write down the names and addresses of additional purchasers and then fulfil their orders when he had obtained additional supplies from his publisher.

Several people who had read the book had told him how much they had enjoyed it and one day, when things were a little quieter and he had the time to spare, he thoroughly intended to read his autobiography himself.

Things had not, however, worked out quite according to plan and at the end of the tea interval there had been no discernible change in the height of the piles of books before him. He still had one hundred and ninety nine copies of his autobiography left on the table. And there was plenty of ink left in his pens.

The sole copy which had been sold had been bought by Paddy Field, the Fondling-Under-Water vice-captain, who had bought a copy of Mr Player’s book as a gesture of goodwill.

There could be little doubt that so far the visiting professional was considerably out of pocket on the day. Mr Player’s hopes for turning the event into a financial success now rested largely upon the collection which it had been agreed he would be entitled to hold immediately after the conclusion of the first tea interval and during the visiting team’s innings.

No one thought it necessary to tell him that his prospects of enjoying a good collection had not been enhanced by the fact that Mrs Cleavidge’s team of sandwich makers had already been round the crowd once and had, through a potent mixture of charm, cleavage and physical intimidation (wielding a butter knife can build up pretty impressive biceps), collected every available piece of loose change on the ground.

Chapter 97

‘This isn’t just about getting lots and lots of arrests just to show the ratepayers that we’re giving them value for money,’ said the Inspector to Constable Hobbling.

Towards the end of the first tea interval the Inspector had called the unhappy Constable Hobbling out onto the grass for yet another meeting. The Inspector liked meetings. If he didn’t have regular meetings he got withdrawal symptoms.

Constable Hobbling made an appreciative noise and waited for the Inspector to continue. He was looking forward to hearing the Inspector’s other reasons why he needed to arrest his friends.

But the Inspector had finished talking and was now busy taking large bites out of one of Betty Cleavidge’s special pasties.

If there was another reason for Constable Hobbling to make more arrests (or, to be more accurate, to make one arrest) the Inspector wasn’t going to share that reason with Constable Hobbling.

Suddenly Cheesy appeared. He had a plastic beaker filled with orange squash in one hand and a slice of fruit cake in the other.

‘I’m sorry to bother you, Constable,’ said Cheesy, spraying a fine mist of fruit cake over the village policeman’s uniform. ‘But I just wanted to thank you for your wonderful work in stopping that burglary the other day. Your quick thinking undoubtedly saved our family silver.’ And with that Cheesy wandered off.

Constable Hobbling, who didn’t have the faintest idea what Cheesy was talking about just stared in silent horror at his fast-bowling colleague. He was utterly confused by the idea of Cheesy having any family silver to be stolen. As far as he knew Cheesy and his family still ate their meals using plastic cutlery which they had acquired during a Spanish holiday in the 1960s.

‘That’s the sort of thing I like to hear!’ whispered the Inspector, clearly impressed.

Seconds later Itchy Hedrubb wandered over and held out a stained hand. ‘Excuse me,’ he said, speaking to the Inspector. ‘Am I interrupting?’

‘Not at all,’ said the Inspector, transferring his pasty to his left hand so that he could take Itchy’s proffered palm.

‘I just want to thank our policeman,’ said Itchy. ‘I haven’t had the chance before, but his swift action saved my little girl from drowning the other day.’

‘Really?’ said the Inspector.

‘He was too modest to stay around to be congratulated,’ said Itchy, speaking to the Inspector.

Constable Hobbling stared at him. Itchy’s daughter was 22, married and heavily pregnant.

‘Thank you, Constable Hobbling,’ said Itchy. ‘I think I speak for the whole village when I say that we all feel much happier knowing that you’re looking after us all.’ He then wandered off and disappeared back into the pavilion.

‘This is what community policing is all about,’ said the Inspector, clearly delighted. He took another huge bite out of his pasty. ‘Congratulations!’ he said. He waved his pasty about. ‘Very good pasty!’ he added.

‘Thank you, sir,’ said Constable Hobbling, brushing pasty crumbs off his uniform.

‘Excuse me!’

The two policemen turned.

‘Do you mind if I have a word?’ asked Puffy who had appeared as if by magic.

‘This is Mr Harbottle,’ Constable Hobbling explained to his superior. ‘He’s the landlord of our local hostelry.’

‘I’m sorry I haven’t had chance to thank you for sorting out that little problem the other day,’ Puffy said to Constable Hobbling.

‘What little problem was that?’ the Inspector asked Puffy. Constable Hobbling was glad the inspector had asked the question. He too wanted to know the answer.

‘A coach full of football fans stopped at The Gravedigger’s Rest,’ explained Puffy. ‘They had been drinking on the coach and they were a bit the worse for wear. For a moment I thought we were going to have some trouble. But Constable Hobbling had seen the coach pull up and he came in and sorted things out.’

‘You didn’t have any trouble?’ asked the Inspector. He put the remains of his pasty into his mouth.

‘None whatsoever,’ said Puffy. ‘Some men have that special quality that enables them to win the respect of others,’ he went on. ‘And Constable Hobbling has that special quality in spades.’

‘I’m glad to hear it,’ said the Inspector.

‘Thank you again,’ said Puffy to Constable Hobbling.‘We’re all grateful to you.’ Like Cheesy and Itchy before him he then wandered off back in the direction of the pavilion.

‘Would you like another one, sir?’ asked Constable Hobbling, who couldn’t remember ever feeling quite so embarrassed.

‘Another one?’ said the Inspector. ‘You mean there are more people in this village who think you’re a combination of Robin Hood, the Lone Ranger and Albert Schweizer?’

‘No, no,’ said Constable Hobbling quickly. ‘I meant another pasty.’

The Inspector looked around. ‘Do you think that would be possible?’ he asked. ‘I wouldn’t want to have to, you know, exert any undue professional pressure on anyone.’

‘Oh no, sir, nothing like that will be necessary,’ said Constable Hobbling, heading off confidently towards the refreshment area. ‘I’m sure I’ll be able to get you another pasty.’

It was a close run thing. Only by prising three quarters of the last pasty out of the eager fingers of ltchy Hedrubb was Constable Hobbling able to make good his promise.

‘What happened to the rest of it?’ asked the Inspector, examining the damaged pasty suspiciously.

‘I’m afraid a small piece broke off when the catering assistant was handing it to me,’ apologised Constable Hobbling, who rightly felt that the Inspector would probably enjoy his pasty more if he did not know that the missing segment had already begun its journey through Itchy Hedrubb’s intestinal tract.

Chapter 98

Unlike Constable Hobbling, Mr Player had not attempted to ease his disappointment with food. He wanted to keep his fingers clean lest any stickiness mark the books before him.

However, Tom Morton and Michael Hunt had, between them, consumed no fewer than five of Betty Cleavidge’s freshly baked pasties and had enthusiastically recommended them to the rest of his team. They were, they had both declared, the tastiest pasties they had ever eaten.

By the time the first tea interval had ended the wheelbarrow was empty. Every single one of Mrs Cleavidge’s pasties had been devoured with relish (and, in many cases, a large dollop of Mrs Cleavidge’s home-made chutney).

All the members of both teams except Cyril Player had eaten at least one, as had the two umpires.

Mrs Cleavidge was very pleased with her emergency endeavours to feed the flannelled multitudes (though, naturally, disappointed that she had not made too many).

There had been a few pasties left over for spectators to enjoy and one of Mrs Cleavidge’s eager helpers had taken a couple over to Percy Kempton who fell asleep shortly after consuming them. And, of course, even the visiting police inspector, who had come to Fondling-Under-Water to have firm words with Constable Hobbling, had consumed and enjoyed a pair of pasties (or, more accurately, one and seven eighths pasties).

There was just one person on the field who was not delighted with the success of Mrs Cleavidge’s pasties. There was one person who was not looking forward to the forthcoming proceedings.

As the Fondling-Under-Water team strolled out onto the field, and the two batsmen who were destined to open the batting for the visiting team strode out to join them, Mrs Counter, the vicar’s wife, sat in a dark corner of the pavilion nervously chewing her handkerchief

Chapter 99

Although in every other respect the Reverend and Mrs Counter were thoroughly law-abiding citizens they had, ever since they had studied together at University, shared a liking for an occasional puff at a home-made cigarette.

They both found that an occasional evening spent sharing a roll-your-own or two helped them to escape from those aspects of twentieth century life which managed to break through and touch (contaminate might be a more appropriate word) the lives of the residents of Fondling-Under-Water.

Being well aware of the known links between the smoking of tobacco and the development of cancer, heart disease and other serious disorders they preferred to relax by smoking marijuana - a substance which they regarded as infinitely less toxic than the other stuff. They found that it helped them to relax very effectively.

This was not an activity which they regarded as risky for, generally speaking, the residents of Fondling-Under-Water did not feel oppressed by the law in the same way that residents of some parts of London, Birmingham or Manchester might feel oppressed by the forces of law and order.

Nevertheless, since marijuana is an illegal substance, illogically and unscientifically classified (through a bizarre historical quirk) in the same general category as heroin and cocaine, the vicar and his wife kept their supplies in a plain glass jar which was half hidden away behind the tea caddy.

It is generally agreed that marijuana helps those who smoke it (or otherwise consume it) to relax and forget some of their most pressing anxieties.

What is less well known is that, as with most drugs, the precise effect that marijuana has - and the end result - depends very much upon the state of mind of the person using it.

At the tea interval which followed their disastrous first innings the Fondling-Under-Water batsmen were feeling depressed and miserable. They had not, in truth, expected to win their match against the professionals - but nor had they expected to be dismissed for a total that looked more like a shoe size than a cricket score.

Consequently, Mrs Cleavidge’s marijuana-packed pasties were just what the doctor would have ordered for the FondlingUnder-Water players if he could have done so without being arrested, disbarred, discredited and generally sent to bed without any supper. In order to play at their best the Fondling-Under-Water team needed to relax a little and lose their inhibitions. Some of Reverend and Mrs Counter’s special herb was just what they needed.

The visiting professionals, on the other hand, were feeling worked up and ready to decimate the local amateurs.

For them tension was as much a part of their necessary stock-in-trade as a set of stumps, a ball and a pair of bats. They thrived on tension and pressure. They fed on stress in the same way that small boys thrive on crisps.

Despite the fact that they were playing a village team of amateurs all of them wanted - indeed needed would perhaps be a better word - to win. And so they definitely didn’t want - or need to be relaxed.

Next to a potent laxative, a healthy dose of marijuana was the last thing the visiting professionals needed in their tea time pasties.

Chapter 100

Even the least discerning spectator would have found it impossible not to notice a considerable difference in the demeanour of the players who took the field after the first of the afternoon's two tea intervals.

Before the first tea interval the home side batsmen had walked out to take their chances with Tom Morton and Michael Hunt with the same sort of level of enthusiasm which Anne Boleyn probably showed when lumbering off to keep her final appointment with the state authorised axe man.

But, after the tea interval, Paddy Fields and the FondlingUnder-Water Cricket Club team walked out onto the field as though they did not have a care in the world.

They appeared, indeed, to be looking forward to their forthcoming adventures on the cricket field. They were full of utterly unexpected enthusiasm. They laughed, they joked and they gaily threw the ball to one another. (Even the fact that the person to whom the ball had been thrown invariably missed the catch didn't seem to worry them in the slightest.)

At the boundary's edge this change of heart was, by some cynics, put down to the fact that the Fondling-Under-Water players would no longer have to face the bowling of Tom Morton or Michael Hunt.

But not all of those present that day subscribed to this point of view.

Sitting in the pavilion, and taking a few moments well-earned rest, Mrs Cleavidge and her team of butter knife twirlers felt, with not a little pride and with more justification than most of them (the exception being the vicar's wife) could possibly know, that it was the magnificent tea they had provided which had given their team such an unexpected and potent mixture of joie de vivre and fighting spirit.

'It was your jam tarts which perked them up,' Mrs Stilton said to Mrs Hedrubb.

'Oh no,' said Mrs Hedrubb modestly to Mrs Stilton, 'I'm sure we can give the credit to your sponge cake. No one makes a sponge cake like you do.'

'I think we both know the real reason why the team looks so happy,' whispered Mrs Stilton, sycophantically. She nodded in the direction of Mrs Cleavidge. 'It was Betty's pasties that made the difference.'

'Oh yes, of course,' agreed Mrs Hedrubb, nodding enthusiastically. Her several chins nodded with her.

'Oh yes, yes,' said Avril Showers, the policeman's paramour.

'Absolutely,' agreed Mrs Stickers. 'The pasties were very, very popular.' She blushed, as she always did when she spoke in public. Some people thought she blushed because of her hormones but she knew that wasn't true. She had always blushed. Even when she hadn't had hormones she had blushed.

'Yes, I think you're right,' said the wicket keeper's mother. 'It must have been the pasties.' The wicket keeper's mother was so old that she still thought of America as a colony but she knew which way was up and which side to butter a piece of bread.

Mrs Cleavidge beamed with pride and nodded her thanks to her acolytes but, within seconds, the glorious moment was rather spoilt by the vicar's wife.

'Oh no, I don't think so,' said Mrs Counter rather too quickly and much too loudly.

They all turned round and stared at her.

‘Oh?’ said Mrs Cleavidge. ‘Do you not? Well I’m sure you have a point. Your cheese and tomato sandwiches always go down well and I know your husband appreciates those tiny little onions you bring.’

The vicar’s wife opened her mouth to speak but all she could manage was a passable imitation of a goldfish.

‘By the way do tell your husband how nice I think he looked today,’ said Mrs Cleavidge sweetly. ‘That little white skirt fit him very well.’

‘What I meant to say,’ said the vicar’s wife, blushing as red as a tomato, ‘was that I don’t think it was any one particular food that made the difference.’ She swallowed hard and looked around but encountered nothing but blank faces and slightly raised eyebrows. Mrs Cleavidge ruled the cricket teas with an iron will and had a tongue that could cut flesh at twenty paces.

‘I’m sure that Mrs Cleavidge’s pasties were an absolute favourite,’ Mrs Counter blundered on, ‘but I just, er, didn’t, er. . .think that it was perhaps only the pasties which have er. . .although I could, of course, be wrong about this because they were very popular, very, very popular. . .’. Slowly the unhappy Mrs Counter lost heart and gave up. She put her handkerchief back into her mouth, from whence she wished she had never taken it, and carried on chewing. It was a paper handkerchief and it did not take well to this sort of rough physical treatment.

‘Excuse me,’ said the police Inspector suddenly appearing in the pavilion doorway. ‘I’m sorry to bother you, but do you have any of those pasties left?’

Chapter 101

‘Where would you like me to field today, skipper?’ Herbert asked Paddy Fields with unusual politeness.

‘Oh anywhere you like, Herbert,’ replied Paddy with a broad smile. He waved his arms around in a series of magnanimous gestures and spoke to the rest of the team. ‘Just spread yourselves about a bit,’ he said with a chuckle.

He felt far too comfortable and confident to worry about field placings.

Naturally, everyone stayed as close to the wicket as they could so that they would not have to walk too far at the end of each over.

Norman Soames and Cecil Kipling, the opening batsmen for the visiting side, wandered out towards the business area of the cricket ground and looked around them.

‘Aggressive field placings,’ commented Norman.

Cecil, who felt a little strange and had had to concentrate hard to make sure that his right and left legs moved alternately, paused for a moment and looked around. In addition to the wicket keeper, and the opening bowler pacing out his run up, there appeared to be four slips, two gullies, two leg slips and a silly mid- on. ‘Very aggressive,’ he agreed. The wicket keeper appeared to be a lemon. Cecil wondered if something he had eaten could possibly have disagreed with him. He looked away from the lemon. ‘There are two women fielding,’ he said, referring to Lady Hepplewhite, who was fielding at fourth slip, and the vicar, who was just a yard or so away from her in the gully.

‘No, I don’t think so,’ said Norman. ‘The one with the sticking plasters on his legs is a bloke in a skirt.’ He paused and thought for a moment. ‘I think someone said he’s the local vicar.’

‘Oh,’ said Cecil. ‘That’s all right then.’ Something didn’t seem quite right but he couldn’t quite think what it was.

Constable Hobbling, who had finished measuring out his run up, marked Itchy’s precious turf with the heel of his size twelve boot. He checked the strap of his helmet to make sure that it was tight enough. He had thought about taking the helmet off while he was bowling but had decided that the visiting inspector would almost certainly not approve of this. He didn’t want to upset the visiting inspector. He felt a warm and utterly unexpected rush of affection for his senior colleague.

‘What did you say that bloke in the skirt has got stuck on his legs?’ asked Cecil, who was rather short sighted.

Norman squinted at the vicar’s legs. ‘Looks like sticking plasters to me,’ he replied.

‘Oh!’ said Cecil.

‘Shall we start soon?’ called Franklin Minton,

‘I’m ready,’ replied Constable Hobbling.

We’re all ready,’ said Paddy, looking around. The other fielders all nodded. Several of them held their hands out in catching positions to indicate their readiness.

‘Why has he got sticking plasters stuck all over his legs?’ Cecil called down the wicket.

‘Dunno,’ replied Norman. ‘Maybe he cut himself shaving.’

‘Ah,’ said Cecil, nodding wisely. ‘Probably.’

‘Are you two ready?’ Franklin asked the two batsmen.

‘Definitely,’ replied Norman Soames, walking down to the lemon’s end of the pitch, to receive the first ball of the innings.

‘Haven’t you forgotten something?’ asked Franklin, rather drily.

‘What’s that?’ asked Norman, stopping in the middle of the pitch and looking back up the wicket towards the umpire.

He thought hard but could not think of anything he should have said or done that he hadn’t done or said.

‘Your bat,’ said Franklin, pointing to the space the missing bat would have occupied if it hadn’t been forgotten. ‘You haven’t got a bat,’ he explained.

Norman looked down. Franklin was absolutely right. His newly-whitened pads were neatly buckled around his legs and he was wearing expensive batting gloves which he had designed himself and which bore a facsimile of his signature, but his hands were empty. He had indeed forgotten to bring his bat with him.

‘You daft beggar!’ said Cecil Kipling, pointing a finger at his colleague and laughing out aloud.

Norman looked at Cecil and frowned. There was, he felt sure, something about his batting colleague that wasn’t quite right. He thought hard and long. ‘You haven’t got one either,’ he said, at last. The accusation was perfectly accurate and this time it was his turn to laugh.

Cecil examined his own hands. It was true that they too were batless.

‘What the hell is going on out there?’ demanded Cyril Player, standing beside the rest of his team outside the pavilion.

‘It looks like Norman and Cecil have forgotten their bats,’ said Peter Wodehouse, of Northamptonshire, Glamorgan and Surrey.

Everyone, except the captain, felt that the fact that the two opening batsmen had gone out to bat without their bats was the funniest thing they had seen for a long time. There was much chuckling and giggling among the visiting team members.

On the third man boundary Tom Morton and Michael Hunt, who had been given buckets so that they could collect money for their captain’s benefit fund, were giggling like teenage schoolgirls. Apart from two buttons, three pebbles, a badge and a five penny piece their buckets were empty but they didn’t care. They didn’t have a care in the world.

Their captain had selected them for this task for two reasons. First, since they were the number ten and eleven batsmen he felt it unlikely that their presence at the crease would be required. And second they were, with the exception of himself, of course, the two best known players in the visiting side. But his two representatives were not doing much to improve his bank balance.

The visiting captain didn’t think that the batsmen’s failure to take their bats with them was funny at all. He thought it was distinctly unprofessional. He tried to point this out to the rest of his team. ‘Would anyone giggle if a doctor went out without his stethoscope or a policeman without his truncheon?’ he asked. The response was simply more chuckling and more giggling.

Incensed, Cyril glowered at the gigglers and glared at the chucklers before grabbing two bats and marching straight out to the middle with them. He knew that he was not a humourless man - he had been known to tell jokes himself when speaking at dinner engagements - but going out to bat without a bat seemed to him to be distinctly lacking in any comedic quality.

While the two batsmen waited for their captain to arrive with their bats, Helmut Walton and Lady Hepplewhite helped Justin Wilson, the wicket keeper who was still zipped firmly inside his lemon costume, to get back onto his feet. The hapless wicket keeper had laughed so much he had fallen over and his attempts to stand up had simply sent him rolling around the field in large circles.

Chapter 102

Once the two batsmen were properly equipped, and the fielding side had managed to settle down a little, Franklin looked around the field to check that everyone was ready. He then called ‘play’ and thus began the visiting team’s first and only innings.

To say that things started badly for the professionals would not for one moment convey the full scale of the disastrous first half an hour.

Constable Hobbling’s first ball was a very slow full toss which even a mediocre village player would, under normal circumstances, have fully expected to send whizzing off towards the boundary.

But when Norman saw the ball coming towards him he suddenly started to giggle uncontrollably. He walked down the wicket, took his left hand off his bat and used it to point at the ball before falling to his knees with tears streaming down his face. By this time the ball had passed him by, had missed the stumps by about a yard and had, much to everyone’s surprise, been caught by Justin the wicket keeper.

Responding to loud cries of ‘Stump him!’ from his team mates Justin panicked (panicking was one of the things he did best) and hurled the ball away from him as though it was a hot potato.

Puffy, who was fielding in the gully, caught the ball and threw it to his vice- captain Paddy Fields. Alone among the trio Paddy had the presence of mind to walk to the stumps and use the ball to knock off the bails.

‘Howzzaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?’ cried Constable Hobbling, dancing a little jig in front of Franklin Minton.

The umpire raised a finger and the visitors had lost their first wicket.

The next batsman, S.J. Honeypot (of Warwickshire and Somerset) retained his composure long enough to edge Constable Hobbling’s second ball to the wicket keeper. Much to everyone’s surprise Justin held onto the catch. Justin was probably more surprised by this than anyone else. Catching and holding onto the ball were skills he was still working on.

‘What happened?’ asked his replacement, Thomas Winston, as they crossed in the middle of the field.

‘I was bowled by the policeman, caught by the lemon and given out by a man in a wheelchair,’ said S.J. Honeypot accurately but glumly. ‘But I was distracted by the woman fielding at fourth slip and the vicar in the skirt fielding in the gully.’ He shook his head sadly. ‘She’s got nice legs but his are covered in bits of sticking plaster.’

‘Never mind,’ said Thomas. ‘Look on the bright side.’

‘What bright side?’ asked S.J. Honeypot.

Thomas, who hadn’t anticipated the question, thought about this for a moment or two. ‘You can go and have a sit down,’ he said at last. `There are some jam tarts left,’ he added, knowing S.J.’s weakness.

‘Oh whizzo!’ said S.J. Honeypot, brightening up considerably. He wished his fellow professional good luck and walked back to the pavilion with a broad smile on his face.

Thomas Winston, the incoming batsman, hit the first two balls he received from Constable Hobbling for four each and at the end of the first over the visiting professionals had scored eight runs for the loss of just two wickets.

And that was probably the high point of the visitors’ innings.

Chapter 103

Cheesy Stilton had Thomas Winston caught by the vicar before he had added any more runs to his score. And, in his second over Constable Hobbling dismissed Cecil Kipling, who had managed to remain at the non-striker’s end for so long that he forgot that he was standing at the business end of the wicket. He was bowled while leaning nonchalantly on his bat, standing two feet to the left of his stumps and watching with utter fascination as a little fluffy white cloud wandered slowly across the sky. When Franklin Minton explained to him what had happened he burst out laughing.

It was at this point that the professionals’ captain strode purposefully out to the wicket to join Kenny Lillywhite, a visitor who was yet to inconvenience Arthur Sturgeon, the scorer.

It is fair to say that Cyril Player was not a happy man. The day was not turning out as he had hoped or expected.

He had hoped that he would, on his return to FondlingUnder-Water, be treated as some sort of prodigal son. He had expected his hand-picked team of skilled professionals to show the amateur players of Fondling-Under-Water the size of the gap between village cricket and professional cricket.

And he had hoped and expected to add a sizeable sum of money to his tax free benefit fund.

In contrast to these hopes and expectations the day had so far been packed to the brim with disappointments. Only one villager (and that was Paddy Fields who had clearly made the purchase as a gesture of goodwill) had taken the trouble to buy a copy of his autobiography.

Moreover, he was pessimistic about the chances of Tom Morton and Michael Hunt managing to part the villagers from any of their loose change. On reflection it seemed to him that he might have chosen the wrong players for this vital task.

Worst of all his team now seemed to be treating the whole afternoon as a bit of fun. Since the tea interval they seemed to their captain to have lost their edge. They were all clearly having a jolly time and they were doing far more laughing than was good for any team of professionals. Mr Player did not regard cricket as a game, or even a sport. It was a job and Mr Player regarded jobs as serious things.

And so, like any good general, Cyril Player had decided to lead his men from the front.

Despite comments which he knew had, in the past, been made about him in one or two of the cricketing magazines he felt that he was not an unintelligent man and while walking out to the crease he had formulated a plan. It was a simple plan but he had always believed in simplicity. He would, he had decided, thrash the impudent locals, score 200 in no time at all, declare and then dismiss them for another derisory score. In this simple way he would win the match convincingly and be able to leave Fondling-Under-Water with his head held high, even if his pockets were emptier than they had been when he had arrived.

Alas, as the hapless Mr Player would have known if he had been a more sensitive and observant individual, fate has a regrettable tendency not to take too kindly to plans. However noble the intention may be it is, all too often, the appointed function of fate to stuff a thick-pointed stick into life’s delicate machinery.

The Fondling-Under-Water opening bowler, Constable Hobbling, had, after his stirring opening spell, been rested and when Cyril Player reached the crease he found that the vicar had taken the ball and was polishing the ball on his skirt and preparing to bowl his first over.

Despite his immense experience, and the many years he had spent as a professional cricketer, this was the first time that Cyril had found himself being bowled to by a hook-nosed, transvestite leg break bowler with eight bits of sticking plaster decorating his pink and hairless legs.

It was also the first time he could remember playing in a match in which the wicket keeper was dressed as a lemon.

Despite all this Cyril had little difficulty in concentrating on the task ahead. He was a professional doing a difficult job and he was also far too unimaginative to be disturbed by any of these relatively unusual features. He took guard, made a firm mark on Itchy’s pitch and prepared for the vicar’s first ball.

The vicar’s first ball, which was a trifle shorter than he would have liked, landed a foot or so outside the leg stump and failed to turn. Mr Player had plenty of time to plan and execute his first scoring shot and he watched with some pride as the ball, sweetly struck in the centre of the bat, raced away towards the boundary. There was clearly no need to run. Four runs were in the bank.

The vicar’s second ball was a better length and was much better directed. It even had a small amount of top spin added to it and when it bounced it kept low. None of this threatened Mr Player who had always regarded himself as one of the best players of spin bowling in the country. He drove the ball back down the wicket and watched with satisfaction as it shot past the vicar’s outstretched fingers.

‘Run!’ yelled Cyril, scampering down the pitch as though his life depended upon his reaching the other end as quickly as possible. He ran, head down, without even looking up to see if the batsman at the other end had heard him and was responding. He knew that Kenny Lillywhite was a reliable professional.

Not looking up to check that Kenny was running in his direction was a mistake.

‘What?’ demanded Kenny Lillywhite, normally such a reliable professional.

When the captain’s call awakened him from his reverie he had been looking at the grain of the wood in his bat and thinking how beautiful it was. He looked up and saw his captain, a fierce look on his face, racing towards him as though he was being chased by a pack of man-eating wolves. Or, since Justin was leaping up and down in excitement at the far end of the pitch, a single man-eating lemon.

‘Run!’ screamed his captain. ‘Run!’

At this point Kenny lost his self-control and panicked. It wasn’t his fault. The pasties Mrs Cleavidge had baked contained a large portion of marijuana and the drug affects different people in different ways.

He threw down his bat, the very bat which, just a moment earlier, he had been admiring so keenly, and started to run.

Unhappily, he did not run towards Mr Player, a direction which would, under the circumstances, have been far more appropriate, and which would have taken him to the safety of the crease at the other end of the pitch. Instead he ran in the same direction that his captain was running.

Since he was already starting from the end towards which the captain was running this meant that he ended up running towards the pavilion. Since he was a fit and well-trained professional he ran quickly and within ten yards he had overtaken the vicar who was chasing after the ball.

Within moments Kenny had overtaken the ball too.

When the captain arrived at his destination he realised with horror that he hadn’t seen Kenny Lillywhite running past him in the other direction, as is the normal procedure in these circumstances. He looked around and to his astonishment saw his batting partner running off towards the pavilion.

‘Kenny!’ he yelled. ‘Where the hell are you going?’

Kenny stopped dead in his tracks, allowing the ball and then the vicar to overtake him again. He turned round and it occurred to him that his captain looked rather cross. Indeed, he felt that the word ‘angry’ might be more appropriate.

Kenny tried to explain but found it difficult to put his feelings into words.

‘Hurry up! yelled Paddy Fields to the vicar.

The vicar slowed down for a moment and looked behind to see what was happening. When he stopped one of his false breasts popped out of his bra and slipped out between the buttons of his blouse. The vicar caught the errant prosthesis just in time as it headed earthwards.

‘Get the ball and throw it!’ shouted Paddy.

‘What?’ called the vicar.

Paddy repeated his instructions.

‘Get back here!’ shouted Cyril to Kenny.

Kenny was not entirely convinced of the wisdom of this but he was now far more frightened of the captain than he was of the invisible pack of wolves or the highly visible lemon. And so he started to run back towards the stumps which he had so recently abandoned.

Cyril Player now had a difficult decision to make. Should he stay where he was and hope that Kenny Lillywhite would be able to make it all the way to the wicket keeper’s end before the vicar could throw the ball back to the lemon? Or should he run back towards the set of stumps he had just left to ensure that no one was run out?

He was trying to make a decision about this when the vicar stopped, swooped, picked up the ball, turned and threw in towards the wicket keeper. Unfortunately, instead of throwing the ball, which he had picked up with his left hand, he threw the false breast which he was holding in his right hand.

‘I was flustered,’ he explained for several years afterwards. ‘It was a mistake anyone could make.’

When the silicone breast hit him on the back of the neck Kenny finally lost all self-control. He had no idea what it was that had hit him but he didn’t like the feel of it. There was an unpleasant squelchy sort of feel to it - as though it was perhaps an alien of some kind. A small alien but an alien. He didn’t like the idea of being used as target practice by anyone but he was especially averse to be being attacked by aliens, however big they were or were not. He threw himself on the ground and tried to make himself into as small a target as possible.

If Cyril Player had been a weaker man he would have probably sat down on the grass himself He may even have burst into tears. But he was not a weak man and he did neither of those things. Instead he tried to work out who would be run out if he stayed where he was.

While Cyril Player was thinking, the Reverend Counter, who had realised what he had done, was screaming in horror.

He raced up to the spot where Kenny Lillywhite was crouching on the ground waiting to be captured by aliens, dropped the ball he was holding, picked up his missing bosom and thrust it back inside his blouse without even bothering to dust it off. Only when this was done did he feel whole again.

It was then that he became aware of the instructions being shouted at him. The general consensus of opinion seemed to be that he should throw the ball to the wicket keeper as quickly as he could. Eager not to disappoint his colleagues he responded to this widespread appeal by doing exactly what everyone wanted him to do.

The throw was a good one. It hit the middle stump, just below the bails, about a second before the desperately diving Cyril Player threw himself at the crease.

And about a second after that Franklin Minton gave the visiting captain out.

After Cyril’s dismissal the professionals struggled slightly more than a little.

A trembling Kenny Lillywhite retired hurt for a while but returned to the crease after being subjected to what could most appropriately be described as a ‘firm talking to’ by the captain. He later told his chum Cecil Kipling that he didn’t really want to resume his innings but that going out to bat again was the only way he could escape from the captain’s vitriolic tongue. He was dismissed when he mistimed a square cut and was caught by Constable Hobbling off Cheesy Stilton’s bowling.

Peter Wodehouse, once described by Wisden as the greatest off spin bowler to have come out of Walsall for many seasons, was given out l.b.w. by a surprisingly confident Lotti. A quicker ball from Cheesy Stilton had caught Mr Wodehouse on the knee and loud appeals from the two gully fielders had weighed far more heavily with Tom Morton’s girlfriend than Mr Wodehouse’s protestations that the ball had been too wide and too high.

‘Those two gentlemen had no direct interest in the dismissal,’ Lotti told the unhappy batsman as he paused before starting the long trudge back to the pavilion. ‘If the bowler had appealed I would have ignored him but when two objective observers came to the same conclusion I had to take their views seriously.’

Mr Wodehouse had surprised some spectators, and delighted all members of the press contingent, by bursting into tears and having what could only be described as a tantrum when he reached the pavilion steps.

Chapter 104

David Porter and Clive Woodwright had constructed the foundations for a promising looking partnership, and had contributed 29 runs to the visitors' surprisingly meagre total, when Paddy Fields decided that the time had come to unleash his secret weapon: Lady Hepplewhite.

It had been a long time since either David Porter or Clive Woodwright had faced a bowler with two X chromosomes and they were neither of them happy about it. They held a short meeting in the middle of the pitch to discuss the problem.

'We're going to look right pillocks if we're bowled out by a woman,' muttered Porter with a thoroughly uncharacteristic giggle. He was an experienced and canny Yorkshireman with a pair of exceedingly hairy eyebrows and a permanent scowl. His ability to intimidate his opponents was legendary but this afternoon he was extremely relaxed and nowhere near as combative as usual.

'What do you suggest?' asked Clive Woodwright, a solid but slightly-built journeyman cricketer who was in his twilight years with Lancashire County Cricket Club. Woodwright was a competent batsman and a competent medium pace bowler but no one had ever accused him of being an intellectual. He had once spent four summers working on a crossword puzzle torn from a copy of the Daily Mirror.

Mrs Cleavidge's pasty had done nothing to sharpen the quality of his intellect.

'You stay down that end and just try to block,' said Porter. 'I'll stay at the other end and try to get myself out when either the policeman or the tall bloke in a skirt is bowling. That way I won't be dismissed by the woman.'

'Right ho!' agreed Woodwright, automatically prodding at the wicket with his bat before returning to his crease. He felt calmer and more relaxed than he had felt for years and decided to try to remember to play more village cricket in the future.

However, Woodwright found that he had difficulty in concentrating. When the bathukolpian Lady Hepplewhite came bouncing in to bowl her first ball he simply didn't know where to look. He was hypnotised by the jiggling evidence of her bountiful XX chromosome status. In the end he turned his head away completely, lost sight of the ball and was clean bowled by a slow delivery which never left the ground and skidded underneath the bottom of his bat.

With the remaining balls of her over Lady Hepplewhite succeeded in dismissing both Tom Morton and Michael Hunt in the space of just four deliveries. They were both clean bowled by balls which hardly left the ground between leaving Lady Hepplewhite's delicate hand and arriving at the stumps.

Much to the astonishment of the spectators neither player seemed to mind at all. Tom Morton congratulated her Ladyship on her good form and Michael Hunt, who had eaten no less than three of Mrs Cleavidge's pasties, seemed to be inexplicably amused by the fact that when he was dismissed both bails had fallen off the stumps and onto the ground.

'How did you get out to that?' demanded the furious captain when Tom Morton returned to the pavilion. 'The ball never even bounced!'

'How could you see from where you were?' demanded Tom. 'I tell you it bounced. It bounced at least eight times!'

At the end of the innings David Porter remained undefeated.

To everyone's surprise the professionals had been dismissed for a mere 64 runs. The Fondling-Under-Water Cricket Club, the home side, required a relatively modest 53 runs to win.

‘You played like complete buffoons!’ complained the visiting captain in the dressing room a few minutes after the end of the innings. His eyes were nearly popping out of his head with rage. He glared at them all, one by one. ‘Do you want to let a bunch of village yokels make you look like idiots?’ he demanded.

‘If it makes them feel happy and good about themselves then that’s fine by me,’ said Tom Morton, who was leaning against the wall with one arm around Lotti, his girlfriend. He had a strangely calm and satisfied smile on his face. It was a side of him that neither she nor anyone else had ever seen before.

‘Cricket isn’t about winning or losing,’ said Michael Hunt quietly. ‘We should be using the sport - and whatever skills we may have - to help to strengthen our relationships with our fellow men.’

‘And women,’ said Cecil Kipling, who suddenly realised that he secretly felt disappointed that he hadn’t been bowled by Lady Hepplewhite.

‘Yes, and women,’ agreed Michael Hunt.

‘I’m disappointed that I didn’t get bowled by Lady Hepplewhite,’ said Cecil Kipling, who suddenly realised that secrets were a burden he didn’t want to carry. It would, he thought, have been a wonderful thing to have been bowled by a woman.

‘I don’t know what’s got into you lot today,’ muttered their captain. ‘I think you’ve all lost your minds.’

‘It would have been a wonderful thing to have been bowled by a woman,’ said Cecil Kipling wistfully.

‘Where are those collecting buckets?’ the captain asked, ignoring Mr Kipling.

Michael Hunt pointed to the far corner of the dressing room.

‘There isn’t much in them, I’m afraid,’ said the fast bowler. ‘The people around here don’t seem to have much money.’

Cyril walked over to the buckets and looked in. The two buckets still contained two buttons, five pebbles, a badge and a five penny piece. It was not what he had hoped for.

Fired by a potent mixture of frustration, anger and the knowledge that his all efforts had resulted in a net financial loss for the day, Cyril kicked the two buckets over so that the buttons, the pebbles, the badge and the five penny piece were scattered across the floor.

The five penny piece rolled to a halt a few inches away from Kenny Lillywhite’s left foot. Kenny looked around, and then, confident that no one was watching, bent down, picked up the coin and slipped it into his pocket. It wasn’t a very big fee for a day’s work but his mother had always taught him that if you look after the pennies the pounds will look after themselves. Besides, his father had been born in Glasgow.

Cyril set his jaw and pulled himself back together. The day was not yet over. He would show these damned amateurs. They were going to get the biggest hiding any cricket team had ever received.

Chapter 105

‘So, how’s it going, Constable?’ asked the Inspector.

‘Pretty well, on a personal level,’ said Constable Hobbling proudly. ‘I think I can be safely said to have done a little towards cementing relationships between the force and the village. My moped helmet has been of great comfort to the other players in the team.’

He vaguely remembered having read somewhere that the Chief Constable regarded relations with the public to be one of his priorities. ‘The team seems to be doing better than expected,’ he added.

‘Team?’ said the inspector, puzzled. He had been under the impression that Constable Hobbling was Fondling-Under-Water’s lone warrior in the ongoing battle against crime.

‘The Fondling-Under-Water Cricket team.’

‘Ah yes! That team,’ said the inspector. ‘I was enquiring about your search for someone to arrest.’

‘Not quite what you would call a complete success just yet, sir,’ admitted Constable Hobbling rather miserably. ‘But I have hopes. High hopes. Maybe someone might get a little rowdy later on.’ He cleared his throat. ‘Would a drunk and disorderly do, inspector?’ he asked diffidently.

‘A drunk and disorderly would do very well,’ agreed the inspector. He looked around and bent closer to Constable Hobbling. ‘Meanwhile, as what I think you might call a backstop, have you looked around the vehicles?’ he asked conspiratorially. The inspector was not normally inclined to help his underlings but the pasties he had consumed had given him a surprisingly satisfied feeling. `And the arrest doesn’t have to be today,’ he said. `Any time this week will do fine.’ He felt curiously at peace with the world. It was, for him, a strange feeling.

Constable Hobbling admitted, with some reluctance, that looking at motor cars was not something he had tried.

‘There’s bound to be one with a lapsed tax disc,’ advised the police inspector. ‘Or maybe even a bald tyre or two,’ he added brightly. The inspector winked and touched the side of his nose with his right forefinger. It was not a gesture he had ever made before. It was something he had once seen in a film and it seemed vaguely appropriate. Then he did something that (on or off duty) he hadn’t done for over a decade: he smiled.

Constable Hobbling recoiled automatically and backed away. He didn’t like being smiled at by the inspector. It gave him an uneasy feeling. He looked around nervously, he had heard about the ‘good cop/bad cop’ routines favoured by the city slickers. But the inspector was by himself. Constable Hobbling wondered if there was any such thing as a one-man ‘good cop/ bad cop’ routine.

Chapter 106

It was generally agreed among the members of the press who were present at the ground that day that Tom Morton’s first over of the Fondling-Under-Water second innings was the slowest he had ever been seen to bowl. There were those among the experts who claimed that he was bowling slower than Constable Hobbling or Cheesy Stilton – neither of whom would have had the temerity to describe themselves in public, in daylight and without having consumed a relatively large quantity of alcohol, as genuinely ‘fast’ bowlers.

Herbert snicked Tom’s first ball through the slips for two and edged his second past the wicket keeper for a daring single.

After the third ball, which Paddy had blocked with a straight bat and a surprising amount of confidence, Cyril marched over to his premier fast bowler, stood in front of him with his hands on his hips and glowered. ‘What the hell are you doing?’ he hissed. He had froth on his lips and looked as if he was about to have a nervous breakdown.

Tom looked at him, and frowned. ‘Don’t let yourself get so upset,’ he said. He raised both hands, palm up, in a calming gesture. ‘Stay cool,’ he urged.

‘Why are you bowling so slowly?’ demanded his captain. ‘My granny could bowl faster.’

Hearing his colleague being insulted Michael Hunt walked over and stood next to Tom.

‘I don’t want to hurt any of these blokes,’ protested Tom, lowering his voice so that he would not hurt their feelings. ‘They seem a nice bunch and they’re only amateurs.’

‘Do you want them to beat us?’ demanded their captain. There was clearly no doubt in his mind that this question was intended to be rhetorical but to his astonishment Tom simply shrugged. ‘What if they do?’ he said. ‘It doesn’t matter.’ He smiled.

Cyril stared at him for the best part of a minute without speaking. ‘It doesn’t matter!’ he said, at last. ‘It doesn’t matter? Do you really mean that?’

Tom thought about this for a while and then nodded to indicate that he did, indeed, mean what he had said.

‘Well, I think it does matter!’ snapped the captain. ‘Finish this over and then take your sweater. You won’t be bowling again in this match.’

Tom, who felt more relaxed than he could ever remember feeling before simply smiled. ‘OK skipper!’ he said.

‘If he’s not bowling then neither am I,’ said Michael Hunt firmly.

Chapter 107

And so, instead of facing two of the finest fast bowlers in the world, the relieved Fondling-Under-Water batsmen found themselves having to deal with an attack which could perhaps most accurately be described as half-hearted.

‘We can win this match,’ muttered Paddy to Herbert when they met in the middle of the pitch to calm their nerves by prodding at a few imaginary bumps.

Herbert was rather alarmed by Paddy’s confidence. ‘Do you think so?’ he said, rather weakly. He had never been an optimistic man, nor a man to whom confidence came naturally. The idea of defeating a team of professionals was not one he could readily come to terms with. Breaking the bank at Monte Carlo would have seemed a more realistic - and realisable - proposition. Moreover, it didn’t seem right. Amateur cricketers simply weren’t supposed to beat professionals.

‘We’ve got 22 runs on the board and we haven’t lost a wicket!’ Paddy pointed out, with thinly-disguised delight.

Herbert felt beads of sweat breaking out on his brow and was bowled next ball by a slow full toss from David Porter.

‘Oh, I say,’ the bowler said as Herbert walked past him on his way back to the pavilion. ‘I’m sorry about that. The ball slipped.’ He seemed genuinely apologetic.

For a while the visitors, led by their determined captain, succeeded in holding back the Fondling-Under-Water amateurs.

But the end came in an unexpected way after Helmut had walked down the pitch and hit the first ball he received as hard and as high as he could over mid- off’s head.

Thomas Winston, who was fielding at mid-off at the time, ran backwards to position himself underneath the ball but suddenly realised that the ball wasn’t going to travel as far as he had thought it would. He was leaning forwards with arms outstretched, when the ball crashed through his fingertips and landed on the grass.

Under normal circumstances few cricketers would have found this incident amusing. But how many cricketers take the field after consuming Mrs Cleavidge’s special pasties?

When the ball landed at his feet and he realised that he had missed it Thomas suddenly started laughing.

‘You missed it!’ cried Cecil. And then he started to giggle.

‘He missed it!’ said S.J. Honeypot to Tom Morton. And they both burst out laughing too.

Soon ten elevenths of the visiting side were helpless with laughter. The sole exception was, of course, Cyril Player who did not see anything at all funny in a fielder failing to take a straightforward catch.

‘Throw the ball!’ yelled Cyril.

Thomas Winston looked at his captain, picked up the ball and threw it to Kenny Lillywhite who threw it to David Porter who threw it to Clive Woodwright.

Meanwhile, Helmut and Paddy carried on running.

‘How many...puff...puff…how many’s that?’ a breathless Paddy eventually asked Franklin Minton.

‘Seven,’ replied the umpire.

‘How long. . .puff. . .puff..can we keep doing this?’ asked Helmut, one run later. He was sweating profusely and beginning to look rather flushed.

‘As long as you like,’ replied Franklin.

‘Can I...puff..puff..have a runner?’ asked Paddy when the shot had gained them eleven runs.

‘No, I don’t think so,’ said Franklin.

‘Throw the ball to me!’ screamed Cyril, jumping up and down in frustration. Michael Hunt threw the ball to David Porter who threw it over the captain’s head to Kenny Lillywhite.

‘They’re still running!’ said Tom Morton, who had finally gained control of himself and stopped laughing. As soon as he’d said it he started laughing again. He caught the ball and threw it to Michael Hunt who threw it to Thomas Winston.

‘They’re still running!’ said Clive Woodwright.

‘How many is it now?’ shouted Kenny Lillywhite.

‘Twelve!’ replied Franklin Minton.

‘Twelve!’ said Kenny, with tears streaming down his face.

‘They’re still running!’ cried Michael Hunt, pointing to the two batsmen and collapsing to his knees, with tears of laughter dripping off his chin.

Moments after the home side had completed a historic victory a furious and red-faced Cyril Player brushed aside reporters and photographers, climbed into his sparkling, sponsored motor vehicle and, with wheels spinning wildly, left without bothering to wait for the three team members he had brought with him.

Two days later, after unconfirmed reports that he had, suddenly and apparently without provocation, attacked a small boy with a bat, an announcement was made that Mr Player was receiving treatment at a private clinic and, after taking professional advice from his club’s resident psychoanalyst, had decided to retire from professional cricket.

Several newspapers subsequently reported that the small boy, an autograph hunter, had innocently asked Mr Player if the batsmen had stopped running yet.

Chapter 108

Immediately after the match, the Fondling-Under-Water cricket team and their supporters were still celebrating when Damien Washbrook’s Mercedes purred into the car park at the Fondling-Under-Water cricket ground.

A huge lorry pulled up behind the saloon. On the back of the lorry there sat a prefabricated building.

‘My first instant house has already arrived!’ said Damien, climbing out of the Mercedes.

‘I suggest you send it back where it came from and find somewhere else to erect it,’ said Paddy, walking across to him. ‘You can’t put it here.’

The rest of the cricket team followed Paddy.

‘What do you mean I can’t build here!’ sneered Damien. He waved a bunch of papers. ‘I own this piece of land. And I’ve got planning permission. I’m going to put 87 residential dwellings here.’

‘You can’t,’ said Paddy.

‘I can!’ insisted Damien defiantly.

‘I’m afraid not!’ said Paddy.

‘Oh yes I can,’ said Damien, beginning to look worried.

‘Oh no you can’t!’ said Puffy, Biffo, Cheesy and Itchy in unison.

‘It’s no good at all you lot trying to get clever with me. I can build on this land and by jove that’s what I’m going to do!’

Edwina, who was wearing a bottle green suit with matching green shoes, moved closer to her man.

‘I suggest that you take a good close look at the document that gives you planning permission,’ said Paddy.

Paddy had a certainty about him which disconcerted the lawyer. He went a little pale, flicked through the papers he was holding, picked one out and gave the remainder to Edwina to hold. ‘There isn’t a problem is there?’ she asked, looking anxious.

‘No, of course not!’ said Damien. ‘They’re just trying to get us worried.’ As he spoke his eye was flicking through the document he had pulled out. ‘It’s all absolutely fine!’ said Damien to Paddy. ‘I’m a lawyer. I know all about this sort of thing.’

‘Have you looked at the date when the document was signed and stamped?’ asked Paddy.

‘What of it?’ asked Damien.

‘It’s very important,’ said Paddy. ‘Especially when you read it along with clause 26.’

Damien went back to reading the document which gave him permission to build on the land he had bought. Suddenly all the colour drained from his face and he went a sickly, deathly grey.

‘What is it?’ demanded Edwina, realising immediately that something was wrong.

‘When the local planning committee gave the previous owner permission to build on this land there were special circumstances,' explained Paddy. 'The permission was given on the understanding that if no buildings were erected within two years then the planning permission would be revoked.'

Edwina licked her lips. Despite her make-up she too had now gone a very unhealthy colour. 'Is that true?' she asked. Damien staring in disbelief at the piece of paper he was holding, nodded. 'It seems to be true,' he whispered. Only those standing immediately next to him could hear him.

'You fool!' cried Edwina, lifting her fists and attacking the lawyer. 'You bloody stupid fool!'

'The only thing you can use this land for is cricket,' said Paddy. 'Do you want to start your own team?'

'You idiot!' screeched Edwina. 'The land is worthless!'

'It's not exactly worthless,' interrupted Bill Stickers. Everyone turned and looked at him. 'You could probably get eight or ten thousand pounds for it at auction,' said Bill.

Damien put his head in his hands.

'But I'll give you a chance to double that,' said Bill. 'If you sell the land back to me now – today - I'll give you twenty thousand pounds for it.'

Damien lifted his head out of his hands and looked at Bill suspiciously.

'I want to be generous,' said Bill. 'But the offer only stands if you sell the land back to me now. Today. If you wait until tomorrow I'll pay you ten thousand at the most.'

Damien sighed and seemed to shrink. He was thinking about how he was going to explain all this to his brother.

'Don't listen to him!' said Edwina.

'Twenty thousand today or ten thousand tomorrow,' said Bill.

'Will you make it thirty?' asked Damien.

'Twenty,' insisted Bill. 'It's a generous offer for a piece of land with a large damp patch and no planning permission.'

Damien sighed. 'OK,' he said, weakly.

'Sensible chap,' said Bill. He pulled a rumpled bundle of papers out of his left hand trouser pocket. 'It just so happens that I've got a contract here.' He delved into his right hand trouser pocket. 'And I've got the cash here.'

Moments later Bill Stickers was £20,000 poorer. But he didn't give a fig about that. He had rescued The Fondling-Under-Water Cricket Club ground. He was prouder and more excited than he had been on the day when he'd won the Lottery.

Chapter 109

‘I just can’t believe it,’ said Damien miserably. He stood for a moment by the side of his Mercedes and stared at the cricket ground. Edwina, white-faced, climbed into the passenger seat and fastened her seat belt. ‘All that money lost so that a bunch of village idiots can play cricket!’ said Damien. He opened the driver’s door but still didn’t get into the car. ‘Bloody stupid game anyway.’ he said sourly.

‘What did you say?’ demanded Cheesy.

‘I said that cricket is a bloody stupid game,’ said Damien, gaining courage from his misfortune.

Cheesy and one or two of the other players moved forwards belligerently but Constable Hobbling was way ahead of them. In three quick strides he was standing beside the solicitor and had his hand on his collar. ‘I arrest you!’ he said. He suddenly realised that he didn’t know what to say. He seemed to remember that he was supposed to give some sort of warning.

‘Anything you say will. . .’

‘. . .I know, I know,’ interrupted Damien irritably. ‘Just what do you think you’re arresting me for?’

‘You said cricket is a bloody stupid game,’ said Constable Hobbling.

‘Don’t be daft!’ said Damien. ‘You can’t arrest me for that.’

‘Look around,’ said Constable Hobbling.

Damien looked around.

‘What do you see?’ asked the policeman.

‘A lot of very bad tempered and slightly stupid villagers.’

‘You upset a lot of people,’ said Constable Hobbling. ‘That’s behaviour likely to cause a breach of the peace. You’re nicked.’

It took a moment for this to sink in but a moment later there was a huge cheer.

The loudest cheer came from the Inspector. Well done, lad!’ said the senior policeman, walking forwards and shaking hands with Constable Hobbling.

Chapter 110

For a while there was a little confusion after Constable Hobbling had arrested Damien Washbrook. A large proportion of the confusion was caused by the fact that the village constable had never arrested anyone before and wasn’t absolutely, entirely sure what to do. When someone is arrested it is usually the arrestee who is nervous and slightly agitated. On this occasion things were reversed.

‘What do I do now?’ Constable Hobbling whispered to the Inspector. He took a large handkerchief out of his trouser pocket and mopped his face. It had been a long, hot, hard day.

‘Take him to the station,’ explained the Inspector.

‘But how do I get him there?’ asked Constable Hobbling. ‘My moped hasn’t got a passenger seat.’ The unhappy policeman looked at his watch. ‘And there isn’t another bus until Monday morning.’ Tactical and strategic problems were already beginning to take away the pleasure of his first arrest.

‘You could borrow a car,’ suggested the Inspector.

‘That’s a bit difficult,’ said Constable Hobbling, apologetically. He shuffled about a bit and mopped his forehead again. ‘I don’t have a driving licence,’ he admitted at last.

The Inspector thought about this for a while. ‘Ah!’ he said. And then because it was the best thing he could think of to say he repeated it. ‘Ah.’ he said again.

In the end they decided that Constable Hobbling, phutphutting along on his tiny-engined moped, would lead the way to the nearest police station. Damien Washbrook, driving his purring Mercedes saloon, would follow. And the Inspector, driving his official police car, would bring up the rear and make sure that Mr Washbrook didn’t make a break for it and choose the life of a fugitive instead of facing his punishment at the hands of the law.

The journey to the police station was a slow one, made slower by the fact that in order to get up the hills Constable Hobbling had to climb off his little moped and walk. Behind him, on each occasion, the Mercedes would purr patiently and the police car would whine its protests.

‘Excuse me!’ said a voice no one recognised, as the procession left the cricket ground. A large percentage of The Fondling-Under-Water Cricket Club turned round. A small, rather rotund man in a plaid shirt and faded blue jeans was standing behind them with a plastic clipboard in his hand. ‘Where do you want this prefab putting?’ he asked.

Cheesy looked at Itchy and Itchy looked at Puffy and Puffy looked at Biffo. None of them spoke.

‘I’ve got one on the lorry. There’s another 86 coming,’ said the driver. ‘Where do you want the damned things putting?’

‘Are these the buildings which were ordered by Mr Damien Washbrook?’ asked Biffo, as though they were expecting several deliveries of prefabricated buildings and he didn’t want to get them mixed up.

The man in the plaid shirt looked at his clipboard. ‘That’s him. Are you him?’ There was now a long queue of lorries building up behind the leader of the pack.

‘No,’ said Biffo, managing to suppress a little smile. ‘I’m not Mr Washbrook. I’m afraid that Mr Washbrook has just been arrested and is currently being escorted to the local police station.’

The lorry driver in the plaid shirt scratched his head. ‘So what the hell am I supposed to do with all these buildings?’

‘Have you got Mr Washbrook’s home address?’

Once again the lorry driver consulted his clipboard. This time he turned the board round to show Biffo the address that was written down as Damien’s home address. Biffo recognised it immediately. It was the address he had shared when living with Edwina.

‘In the absence of any alternative instructions I suggest that you deliver them to Mr Washbrook’s home,’ said Biffo. ‘There’s quite a long driveway and a large garden. The ones you can’t get into the driveway or the garden you’ll just have to leave in the road, on the verge or on the village green.’

The lorry driver smiled his thanks at Biffo and left.

Chapter 111

‘That was brilliantly done!’ said Puffy to Bill Stickers as they stood and watched the small procession, led by Constable Hobbling, begin its journey to the local police station.

‘It was Paddy’s idea,’ said Bill, suddenly overtaken by an exceptional burst of modesty.

‘But why did you offer him twice as much as the land is worth?’

‘Because I didn’t want the cricket club land to be in a stranger’s hands for a moment longer than necessary,’ said Bill. ‘And because I didn’t want him to have time to think up some fresh scheme,’ he added. ‘Paddy thought he’d be unable to refuse the chance to cut his losses.’

‘So you’ve got the land back - and you’re £80,000 ahead!’ said Puffy. ‘Not a bad day’s work.’

‘The cash will come in very handy,’ said Bill. ‘The wife and I can buy a little cottage and stay in the village. I’m going to open a barber’s shop. To be perfectly honest I’ve missed it. I’m looking forward to getting the scissors in my hand again.’ He made a snip snip snip movement with the first two fingers of his right hand. ‘But the cricket pitch doesn’t belong to me,’ said Bill. He handed the papers he and Damien had signed over to Paddy. ‘I bought the land back on behalf of the cricket club.’

Paddy looked through the papers he had been given and clapped Bill on the shoulder. ‘Thank you Bill!’ he said. ‘That’s a very generous gesture.’

‘I didn’t want to be tempted again,’ said Bill honestly.

‘As vice-captain,’ said Paddy, ‘I think I can speak for the rest of the team and the club when I say that I hope you will continue to be our captain, chairman and president.’

There was a murmur of approval for this.

A tear appeared in a corner of Bill’s left eye. He raised a hand and quickly wiped it away. ‘I’m very touched,’ he said, his voice breaking. ‘It’s been a long day. I feel very tired,’ he added. ‘And emotional.’

‘You need a drink,’ said Puffy.

‘So do I!’ said Cheesy, Paddy, Herbert, Helmut, Justin and the vicar in unison.

It was this that reminded Biffo that his friend Streaky Bacon would be at the pub that evening to record his quiz programme.

Chapter 112

When the victorious Fondling-Under-Water cricket team, closely followed by Lord Hepplewhite, Mrs Cleavidge and her tea ladies, the brass band, the Morris dancers, the parachutist (who was still waiting for his mum to fetch him), the inimitable Percy Kempton, Franklin Minton and Laetitia Anne de Tomatso, walked round the corner and arrived at The Gravedigger's Rest they found Streaky Bacon standing on the front doorstep doing what looked like the sort of jig a man might dance if, perchance, he suddenly found himself forced to stand on top of a hot stove while not wearing any shoes.

Two huge television vans were parked outside the pub, and alongside the vans were two Volvo estate cars, three BMWs, Streaky's Porsche and several other large and expensive-looking vehicles. The excitement on the cricket pitch had been so great that none of the villagers had heard any of these vehicles arrive.

'Where on earth have you all been?' Streaky demanded, pointing to his watch and giving an excellent impersonation of a man on the very brink of a nervous breakdown. 'You should have been here three hours ago for rehearsals!'

We've been playing cricket!' said Itchy, surprised that anyone, even someone from London, should ask such a stupid question. We won!' he added with a big, self-satisfied grin.

'Where?' demanded Streaky. `Where were you playing cricket?'

'On the cricket pitch,' said Itchy patiently, but clearly surprised at the extent of the ignorance exhibited by visitors from the capital city.

'Yes, but where was the cricket pitch?' asked Streaky trying not to become violent. Why, he wondered, were people who lived in the country so irredeemably stupid.

'Just over there,' said Itchy, nodding in the direction of the cricket pitch. He moved to a small window in the hallway.

'You can see it from here,' he said, pointing to the now deserted cricket pitch.

'You were there?'

'Up until about five minutes ago.'

'Why didn't someone tell me?' demanded Streaky. 'You're due on air in seven minutes!' he said, interrupting himself and pointing to his watch again. 'Never mind about all that, let's get you all into the pub!'

Biffo looked at his friend, clearly puzzled. 'Is the programme live?' he asked him.

'Of course it's live!' said Streaky, now almost crying. 'Do you think I'd be in a state like this if it was recorded?' Biffo had never seen him so upset. Suddenly full of remorse for snapping at his friend Streaky started to apologise. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I don't know what's come over me.' He took a deep breath and tried to settle himself 'They wanted it live because they say it makes the whole thing more exciting. Plus it's cheaper. No tape. No editing.'

'Don't worry about it!' said Biffo. 'I'm sorry we're late.'

Streaky started to pull people into the pub by their arms and then paused to look at his watch again. 'Six minutes to show time!' he yelled. This did not make people move any faster but it did make them panic a little.

'I really thought it was going to be a recorded programme,' said Biffo, genuinely apologetic. With similarly unimpressive results he too then started to try and hurry people into the pub.

Puffy and Lettice, who had managed to make their way to the front of the crowd on the walk round to the pub, picked their way gingerly in between several cameras and microphones and a vast array of lights, and their various human attendants, and stepped carefully over and between a tangle of cables connecting the cameras and microphones to the vans outside the pub. Eventually they reached the bar. Once in position they started pulling and pouring as though they were entered in some sort of Olympic competition for bar attendants.

Two tables had been set up at the far end of the room, with four chairs behind each one. Four people were sitting on one set of chairs. They had notepads and pencils, a water carafe and four glasses in front of them. A girl in blue jeans and a pink shirt rushed constantly from one to the other. She had a comb in one hand and a box of make-up and tissues in the other. First, she dabbed a bead of sweat from a nose, then she coaxed an errant hair back into a position, then she repaired a make-up crack caused by too broad a smile, then she dabbed a bead of sweat from a forehead. The other table was similarly equipped but the chairs behind it were empty.

Someone, presumably one of Streaky's production assistants, had lit a log fire in the hearth and the blazing fire had boosted the temperature in the bar to an uncomfortable level.

Voluptua Bradshaw, Streaky's girlfriend, former secretary, and the presenter of the programme, was holding a large, old-fashioned microphone in one hand and sitting on a stool with a thick clipboard on her knee. She was wearing a shimmering, strapless blue dress that looked curiously out of place in a well-used English public house. She looked terrified and appeared to be talking to herself as she tried to remember what it was that she had to say.

'Who are your team members?' asked Streaky as thirsty and weary sunbaked villagers tottered weakly into the pub. Being regulars most of them negotiated the step and the beam without difficulty.

'Me, Paddy, Puffy, the vicar, Biffo, Herbert, Constable Hobbling, Bill. . .,' began Cheesy, responding to Streaky's question.

'No, no, no, no, no! You can only have four members in your team!' cried Streaky. He looked up towards the newly decorated ceiling as though searching for divine guidance, or, at the very least, a little inspiration. There was still a smell of paint in the air. 'I knew this was going to be a disaster.' he muttered to himself, wringing his hands. He looked at his watch again. 'Five minutes!' he yelled above the noise in the bar. Puffy and Lettice were serving beer and gin as rapidly as they could to the cricket team, the tea ladies, the brass band, the Morris dancers, Franklin Minton, Percy Kempton (who had sobered up surprisingly quickly and was now keen to find a bottle he could empty into his hip flask), the parachutist ('Can I just have a small glass of diet lemonade please?') and the rest of the village. All were trying to order their refreshments at once.

'I want four team members representing The Gravedigger's Arms!' said Streaky loudly.

'Rest,' said Biffo.

'I can't!' said Streaky. 'How can I possibly rest? I don't have time to rest. I've got to panic. If I don't panic who will?'

'No, it's The Gravedigger's Rest,' explained Biffo calmly. 'I thought you'd want to get the name of the pub right.'

'Oh I'm sorry,' said Streaky, swallowing hard and trying to regain control. He rolled his hand into a fist and hit himself firmly between the eyes. 'Don't worry about me,' he said. 'I think I'm losing my mind,' he added.

Suddenly the crowd which was in the pub parted and Voluptua came struggling through. 'I can't go on!' she cried, tears trickling down her cheeks. 'I can't do it!'

'Can't do what?' demanded Streaky.

'I can't do it!' said Voluptua. She threw her arms around Streaky's neck and collapsed sobbing into his arms.

'I'll go and find four people for the pub team,' offered Biffo. He hurried over to the bar and used the brass foot rail to lift himself a few inches higher than the crowd around him. 'Mr Bacon, the producer, represents Better Television – the company which has so generously helped restore the pub to its former waterproof state - and he would like four volunteers to represent The Gravedigger’s Rest.’

‘At what?’ whispered Puffy, leaning across the bar and nudging Biffo’s elbow. ‘Tell them what it’s all about.’

‘Oh, yes, thanks,’ whispered Biffo to Puffy. He raised his voice again. ‘It’s a sort of trivia quiz thing,’ he explained. ‘There are, as you can see, four visiting celebrities and there are supposed to be four people representing the pub.’

‘What sort of questions are they going to ask?’ asked Cheesy.

‘I don’t know,’ replied Biffo, stumped. ‘Sort of, well, trivial ones I suppose.’

‘Are there any prizes?’ asked Itchy.

‘I don’t know,’ said Biffo. ‘Probably.’ He looked around for someone to ask. ‘Are there any prizes?’ he asked a short girl with curly blonde hair who was standing next to one of the cameras.

‘I think so,’ said the girl. ‘There usually are with this sort of thing.’

‘Four minutes!’ cried a tall, red-haired girl in black jeans and a black T-shirt. She was wearing headphones with a small microphone attached and seemed to have temporarily taken over the job of panicking. She did it very well. Streaky was still trying to comfort Voluptua who appeared to be having the nervous breakdown Streaky had seemed about to have.

‘Yes,’ said Biffo, answering Itchy.

‘Then in that case I’ll volunteer,’ replied Itchy instantly.

‘Can we have more light on the celebrities?’ asked one of the cameramen, pointing to the corner of the pub were the celebrities were sitting. An electrician moved some lights, knocked over a table and some drinks and bumped into Mrs Cleavidge who spilt half a glass of port down the front of Mrs Counter’s best frock.

‘I’ll have a go,’ said Justin.

‘You can’t be on television,’ said Puffy, from behind the bar.

‘Why not?’

‘Because you’re still dressed as a lemon,’ said Puffy. ‘I’m not having this pub represented by a lemon.’

‘That’s not fair,’ moaned Justin, who seemed terribly dis appointed. He sat down on a vacant bar stool and put his yellow head in a yellow hand.

‘You can have a drink on the house,’ said Puffy, in compensation. ‘Any drink you like as long it’s half a pint of bitter.’

‘Oh thanks!’ said Justin, cheered by Puffy’s generosity. ‘I’ll have half a pint of bitter. If that’s all right with you.’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ smiled the vicar’s wife to Mrs Cleavidge. Now, more than ever, she wished she’d gone home at the end of the match.

We don’t mind having a go,’ said Lady Hepplewhite, raising one hand and clutching her husband to her with the other.

‘Great!’ said Biffo. ‘Thanks. Would you go and sit down at that empty table, please? There doesn’t seem to be all that long to kick off. We need one more.’

Puffy handed Justin his half pint of beer.

‘I’ll have a go,’ said the vicar gamely. The Reverend Hubert Counter was having a wonderful day. And now he was going to get a chance to appear on television.’ On the spur of the moment he decided to begin his television career with a new voice. He started to experiment with something which seemed a little sexier. ‘It’ll be so exciting!’ he said rather breathlessly.

Biffo looked at him. ‘Fine!’ he said. ‘Thanks.’

‘Hey!’ protested Puffy.

‘Do you want to volunteer?’ asked Biffo.

‘No!’ said Puffy, holding up a hand as a sign of defeat. ‘But the vicar’s in a skirt. What about the pub’s image?’ He hesitated. ‘Does anyone watch this damned programme anyway?’

‘Look at this way,’ said Biffo, reassuringly. ‘You’ve got a new roof and new ceilings. Your customers are all locals and most of them are in here. What have you possibly got to lose?’

Puffy thought about this and then smiled. ‘When you put it like that,’ he said. ‘Not a lot.’

A peer, a peeress, a transvestite vicar and a barely literate groundsman might not have been everyone’s ideal choice to represent the village pub in a televised quiz programme but with less than four minutes to go before the programme was due to start Biffo did not feel that setting up a selection panel was entirely appropriate.

‘It’s not fair I can’t be on the team,’ complained Justin.

‘You can be first reserve,’ said Biffo. ‘In case anyone drops out.’

‘Oh,’ said Justin. ‘Thanks.’ He grinned proudly.

The four contestants hurried over to their table and sat down. The make-up girl, who was still fussing around with the four celebrities, rushed over to see what she could do to help.

‘Who are the celebrities?’ asked Lettice in a whisper.

‘I don’t have the faintest idea,’ Puffy whispered back.

‘Three minutes!’ cried the tall red-haired girl. She had stopped panicking and now sounded and looked very calm. A moment later Voluptua, who neither sounded nor looked calm, was escorted by Streaky back through the bar to the stool which she had so recently vacated. Her hair was a mess, one of the shoulder straps holding up her dress had slipped down over one shoulder, mascara had run down her cheeks and she was sobbing. Streaky stayed with her for a moment and then left her to the attention of the make-up girl who had abandoned Lord and Lady Hepplewhite, Itchy and the Reverend Counter without so much as laying a powder puff on any of them.

‘Is she OK?’ Biffo asked his former television colleague.

‘Oh, she’ll be fine,’ lied Streaky. He rushed off to berate a cameraman who was eating what looked and smelt like a bacon sandwich though it was not easy to understand how he had managed to obtain such an item.

‘Who are the celebrities?’ Biffo asked the redhead.

‘The tall, bald one on the far left in the orange corduroy jacket, the silk shirt and the pink floppy bow tie is Sir Ramick Hobbs,’ she replied. `He’s terribly important at some University or other and he’s our token intellectual.’ The redhead examined him closely. ‘Didn’t you used to work at Better Television?’

‘In another life,’ replied Biffo.

‘And you don’t know who any of these celebrities are?’

‘I produced the arts programme,’ explained Biffo. ‘I’ve vaguely heard of Sir Ramick Hobbs but he never appeared on any of my programmes. Who are the others?’

‘The vast cleavage next to him belongs to Bobby Sox. She had two hit records a couple of million years ago and is married to a 19 year old footballer who earns £2 million a year. She says she’s only 29 but if she is then she was minus three when she had her first record in the charts. She’s been married five or six times and always writes a kiss and tell book afterwards but she describes herself as a born again feminist.’

Biffo nodded. He hadn’t heard of her.

‘The stupid-looking bloke on her right is called Deadly Dave - sometimes billed as The Darlington Destroyer. He claims to be a boxer. He’s wearing dark glasses because he had a big fight last Saturday and lost for the sixth or seventh time in a row. I’ve lost count. He doesn’t seem to be a terribly good boxer and by all accounts he’s not a very nice person but everyone loves him because he has a very clever manager who has successfully positioned him as a permanent underdog. As you know the British hate winners and love underdogs.’

‘And the girl on the far right? The plump one who looks about 18.’

‘You really, really don’t know?’

‘Haven’t the foggiest.’

‘Honest?’

‘Honest.’

‘You are out of touch aren’t you. That’s Amanda. She isn’t plump she’s grotesquely fat and she isn’t 18 she’s only 17. She’s the obligatory TV chef Every celebrity panel has to include at least one chef these days. The government’s probably passed a law about it. She’s sponsored by two big meat packers and her ratings are incredibly high. Streaky only managed to get her for this programme because her agent was tickled pink by his name.’ The redhead checked the stop watch which was fastened to her clip board. ‘Two minutes!’ she called, raising her voice to make this announcement.

‘Do you think she’ll make it?’ asked Streaky anxiously, now back at Biffo’s elbow. He nodded in Voluptua’s direction.

Biffo looked at him, looked at Voluptua and then looked back at Streaky. ‘No.’

‘What am I going to do?’ begged Streaky. ‘Where the hell can I find another presenter?’ He put his thumb into his mouth and bit it. ‘I should have brought a spare, shouldn’t I? In case she falls apart.’

‘What about Percy Kempton?’ asked Biffo.

Streaky took his thumb out of his mouth and looked at his friend. ‘Percy Kempton? Is he here?’

‘Sitting over there,’ said Biffo, nodding towards Percy.

‘There is a god!’ cried Streaky. ‘Is he drunk?’ he asked. ‘Oh, what does it matter. Thank you, Biffo!’ he said, hurrying across to Percy’s table.

Miraculously, the make-up girl had restored Voluptua’s hair, dress and make-up to its pre-sob state. When she was satisfied with Voluptua she rushed over to the pub’s panel and headed straight for the vicar. Her yelp of despair could be heard across the room. ‘We can either take this stuff off or just put a lot more on and hope everyone thinks you’ve been in a car accident and you’re still waiting for cosmetic surgery!’ she said, looking at the vicar’s make-up.

The vicar, slightly startled and not a little hurt, looked up at her and fluttered his eyelashes without saying anything. With a deep, weary, sigh the make-up girl reached into her pocket and produced a large tube of foundation cream. With one slick, practised movement she twisted the top off the tube and, in an attempt to cover up the vicar’s childish work with his wife’s make-up, proceeded to spread a thick layer of cream over the vicar’s face.

Suddenly, the red-haired girl was waving her arms to attract Voluptua’s attention.

‘Break a leg, darling!’ cried Streaky from where he sat at Percy’s table.

‘Quiet please!’ called a stocky, middle aged man in a pair of baggy blue jeans and a much darned sweater. Like the redhead he was wearing headphones fitted with a microphone and carrying a clipboard. He held the clipboard high to make it clear to everyone that as the owner of a clipboard he was an important person who needed to be obeyed. The talking and laughing died to a dull whisper, enlivened by the occasional chink of glass on glass or glass on table.

The redhead used her fingers to count down from ten to one and then, when just one finger was left, she pointed at Voluptua in a single, generous, emphatic movement that seemed to galvanise the neophyte presenter into action.

Chapter 113

The format of the programme was devastatingly simple and the plan was that Voluptua would begin the proceedings by introducing the two teams.

It is difficult to imagine a simpler and less adventurous beginning but things did not go quite as smoothly as Streaky had hoped. The first problem was that Voluptua didn't know the names of the pub team and had to ask them to introduce themselves.

The second problem was that Voluptua came from a family of enthusiastic royalists. Her father and mother lived in a two bedroom terraced house in an unpronounceable and rarely visited Welsh seaside resort and the only pictures their home contained were of members of the Royal Family. At the age of four Voluptua had been taught to curtsey every time she passed the portrait of King George VI which hung in the hallway.

It is, in consequence, perhaps not surprising that she became extremely flustered when she found out that she had a peer and a peeress on the panel. Her confusion was compounded when the vicar lost his head and, despite using the peculiarly high pitched voice he had prepared, introduced himself as the Reverend Hubert Counter. Although he quickly corrected this error, and reintroduced himself as Hermione Counter, Voluptua's fragile confidence was damaged beyond repair. She threw the microphone she was holding onto the bar in front of Puffy and fled, tears flowing, towards the open arms of her lover and mentor, Streaky Bacon.

Percy Kempton did not hesitate for a moment. Unburdened by the attentions of the make-up girl (who, brave creature, tried to dab at him with her powder puff as he strode past) Percy picked up the abandoned microphone and continued where Voluptua would have left off if she had ever started.

Ignoring Voluptua's bizarre disappearance in the knowledge that if he ignored it the viewers would soon forget it had ever happened ('never explain, never apologise and never pass wind-from any orifice - within range of a live microphone' had been the vivid and unforgettable instructions he had received when he had first entered the then romantic and mystical world of broadcasting) Percy perused the questions on the clipboard as he talked and walked and smiled his way to the corner where the two teams sat waiting for the action to begin.

At the start of the programme the four celebrities had been rather smug and cocky. In contrast Lord and Lady Hepplewhite, Itchy and the vicar had begun to wonder about their wisdom in exposing themselves to what suddenly appeared to be the prospect of national humiliation. The celebrities had done their best to make the amateurs feel uncomfortable.

But now the situation was reversed. The celebrities were now more nervous and uncertain than the four representatives of The Gravedigger's Rest. The celebrities had begun the festivities comforted by the belief that they knew what to expect but the sandy foundations upon which their confidence had been built had been washed away by Voluptua's flood of salty tears.

'What's your name?' demanded Percy, bending down and breathing beer and gin fumes into Amanda's face.

The chubby chefette tried to back away but her chair was up against the wall and there wasn't anywhere to go. She opened her mouth but nothing came out.

'Nil points for the so-called celebrities,' cried Percy. There was a roar of approval from Len who, since he had been unable to play cricket because of his broken arm, had kept his other arm active by drinking a good deal.

A squeal of protest came from the celebrity panel.

'You can't do that!' protested Bobby Sox. 'That's. . .' she struggled to find the words she was looking for, '… unfair.' Len laughed a lot. Very loudly. There was much cheering from the audience.

‘Rubbish!’ said Percy. He peered at her. ‘Who are you?’

‘I’m Bobby Sox!’ said Bobby Sox, sharing her teeth and cleavage with the camera and the viewers.

‘Where on earth did you get such a silly name?’ asked Percy.

Bobby Sox glared at him. Her mouth was smiling but her eyes were not.

‘I don’t see. . .’

‘No points!’ cried Percy. ‘No points for the daft biddy with the vast cleavage. What’s the score?’

‘The celebrities have nil and The Gravedigger’s Rest team has one point,’ said the girl keeping score. ‘But you’ve asked the celebrities two. . .er. . . questions and you haven’t asked The Gravedigger’s Rest team any questions at all.’

‘Right!’ said Percy. He turned back to his clipboard, studied the questions for a moment or two then shook his head and sighed in disgust. ‘These are really boring questions,’ he said, tossing the clipboard aside. The board landed on the floor, the clip sprang open and the papers it had been holding scattered far and wide.

This made Len laugh again. He laughed very loudly and when he laughed everyone else laughed with him.

‘Who is that?’ Streaky Bacon whispered to an aide. ‘Get his name. Sign him up. I want him in every show I ever make.’

‘Tell me,’ said Percy, addressing Itchy. ‘Have you ever heard of any of these silly beggars on the celebrity panel?’

Itchy did not own a television set, didn’t like to admit to his ignorance, and feared that the celebrities might be disappointed by the truth. But he was, if nothing else, an intrinsically honest man, unless the circumstances suggested otherwise, and so he hesitated and then shook his head. ‘I’m afraid not,’ he confessed.

‘One point to the home team!’ said Percy, without a moment’s hesitation.

‘Hey!’ protested Sir Ramick Hobbs indignantly. ‘Why did they get a point for that?’

‘Are you suggesting that the gentleman was lying?’ demanded Percy, swivelling round towards him, slightly unsteadily.

Well no, not at all,’ laughed Sir Ramick, fingering his bow tie rather nervously.

‘Then he must have given the right answer,’ said Percy triumphantly.

‘But it seemed a funny sort of question,’ protested Sir Ramick weakly.

Percy scratched his head. ‘You didn’t think the question trivial?’

‘Well yes, absolutely. Of course it was trivial. That’s exactly my point.’

‘You’re a buffoon,’ said Percy. ‘When the delectable Voluptua introduced this programme I distinctly remember her describing the show as dedicated to trivia.’

‘Yes, but there’s trivia and there’s trivia,’ complained Sir Ramick weakly.

‘Balderdash!’ said Percy. He paused, staring at Sir Ramick’s jacket, shirt and bow tie. ‘Who chooses your clothes?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Who chooses your clothes?’

Sir Ramick hesitated. ‘I do.’ He looked down.

‘Do you think you look good?’

Sir Ramick thought about this for a moment. ‘Well, yes, I think I do,’ he said.

Percy turned to the audience. ‘Do you think he looks good?’

There was a chorus of ‘No’. Len shouted loudest. And then he laughed a lot too.

‘You’re wrong,’ said Percy bluntly. ‘You look a complete idiot. And you don’t get any points. Would someone get me a drink, please?’

‘What do you want, Percy?’ responded Puffy from behind the bar.

‘Whatever you’ve got, Puffy,’ replied Percy, ‘But a lot of it. I can feel flashes of sanity breaking through and with that comes a desperate fear that I’m in danger of sobering up.’

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At the end of the programme the celebrities had gained just two points. In contrast to this pitiful showing the local team, representing The Gravedigger's Rest, had accumulated an impressive twelve points.

Lord Hepplewhite had correctly identified his wife's bra size. Itchy Hedrubb had gained three points by naming the groundsmen at three leading Test Match grounds. (No one had known whether or not he was correct but Percy had ruled that he was and since Percy had appointed himself sole arbiter of right and wrong that was that.) Lady Hepplewhite had accurately explained how to make a Bloody Mary and had identified Deadly Dave's left humerus. The Reverend Hubert Counter (a.k.a. Hermione) had named all twelve disciples, hummed the opening bars of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and explained the difference between a camisole and a chemisette.

It had, in sporting terms, been what is customarily known as a rout.

With ninety seconds of the programme left Voluptua Bradshaw bravely returned to the fray, holding a piece of paper upon which Streaky had carefully written down a short ad lib.

'The producer has asked me to remind you all that at the beginning of this series it was announced by Better Television that any team which managed to defeat our celebrities in a round of 'Celebrity Trivia!' would receive a genuine replica plastic statuette of myself,' here, to great cheers, Voluptua held up a genuine replica plastic statuette of herself, 'and £1,500 worth of bedding plants from Digwell Garden Supplies.' She smiled, winningly, at the four members of the winning team.

'Excuse me,' said Itchy, instantly. 'But could we change our prize?'

A look of panic spread across Voluptua's face. She looked down at the sheet of paper Streaky had given her. It made no mention of how to deal with interruptions and no mention of changes to the prizes.

'Of course you can!' said Percy, magnanimously, stepping into the breach.

'It's just that I happen to know that Digwell Garden Supplies also sell a very good ride on mower,' said Itchy speaking very quickly. 'And if the rest of the team don't mind,' he looked at the other team members who instantly made it clear that they had no objection at all to switching their bedding plants for a lawnmower, 'and if it's all the same to you and Better Television I think we could really do with the ride on mower because. . .'

Percy looked across towards Streaky who was nodding enthusiastically. The producer had just received a telephone call from Mr Buttress telling him that the preliminary reports showed that the programme had achieved record viewing figures.

'No problem at all!' said Percy, happily. 'The lawnmower is yours!'

The red-haired girl made a winding up movement with her right arm. Percy put an arm around Voluptua, turned her towards the camera and hissed 'Smile and wave!' into her ear.

They both smiled and waved. Everyone else in the pub smiled and waved back at them. The contestants grinned like idiots.

Behind the bar Biffo found himself putting his arm around Lettice. He felt her snuggle against him. And then he felt her arm around his waist. He looked down. She looked up. They kissed.

Biffo's second innings was going well.

Vernon Coleman is the bestselling author of over 100 books. His books include Mrs Caldicot’s Cabbage War, Mrs Caldicot’s Knickerbocker Glory, Mr Henry Mulligan, It’s Never Too Late, Paris in My Springtime, the Bilbury series and many others. For a list of available books please see the author’s page on Amazon and for more information visit http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

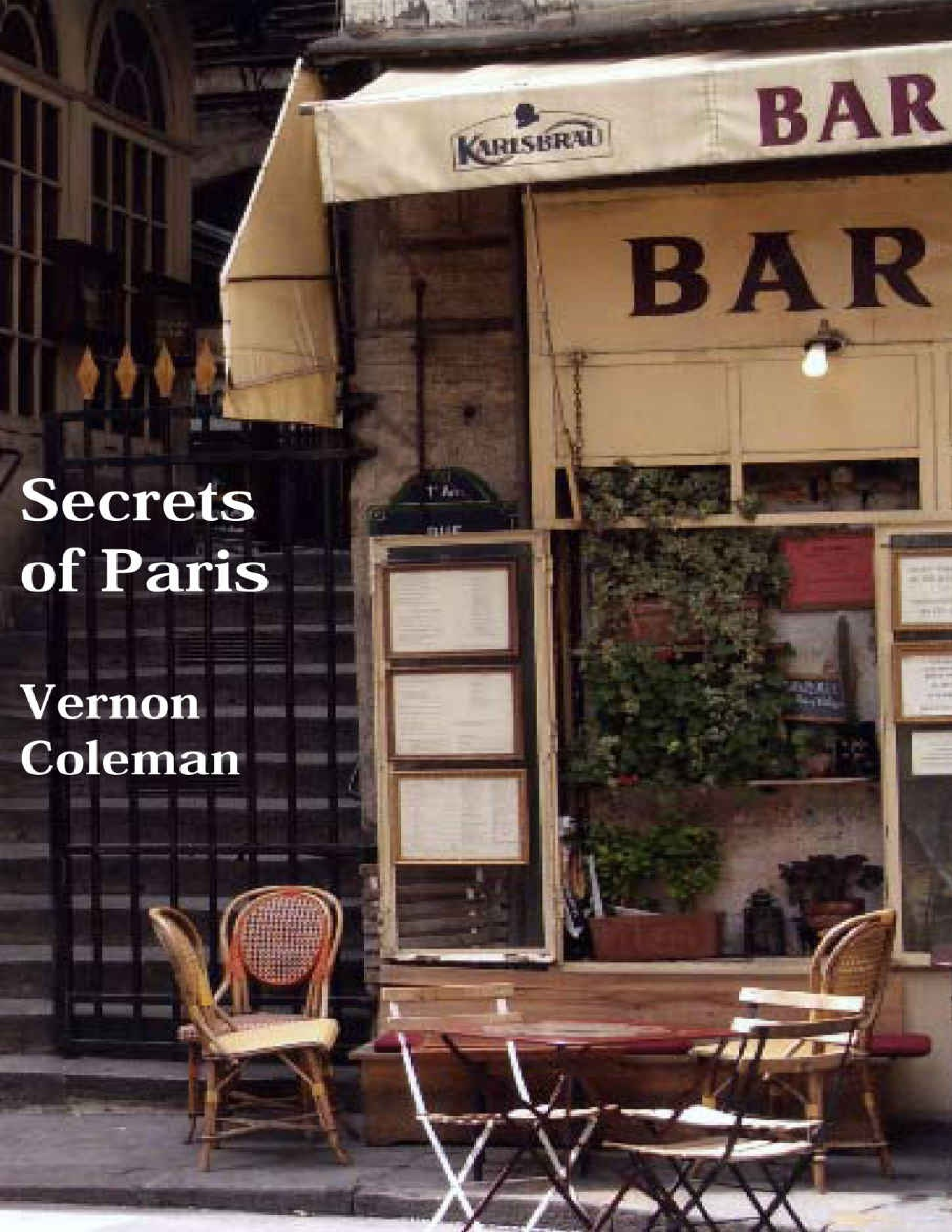
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Secrets of Paris

Vernon Coleman

Secret of Paris

Paris for Beginners: An Insider's Guide

The perfect book for your trip to Paris.

Vernon Coleman

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Dedication

There's a good reason for this book being written in the first person plural rather than the first person singular. The reason is Donna Antoinette Coleman. She has worn out many pairs of shoes, and gained countless blisters, tramping the streets of Paris and helping me research this book. With Donna Antoinette by my side Paris always looks at its beautiful best. *Secrets of Paris* is dedicated to her with my thanks as well as all my love. It is her book just as much as it is mine. (Though, naturally, errors and omissions are my responsibility.)

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Preface

There are some places in Paris which every tourist visits. The Eiffel Tower, Sacre Coeur, the place du Tetre, the Louvre and the Champs-Elysées are on everyone's list of `must-see'. You can't go to Paris without standing on a traffic island at the bottom of the Champs-Elysées and taking a photograph of the traffic racing up towards the Arc de Triomphe. It's what everyone does. You have to stand at the bottom at Rond Point at night and look up. Then walk up and down. Everybody does. No reason. They just do.

Nor can you visit Paris for the first time without joining the throngs queuing to shuffle into Notre Dame. (Well, you can. But it would be a pity. And, remember, if you end your trip to Paris with heaps of things left to do, then you will always have something to look forward to for your next visit.)

But, wonderful as these iconic places are (and they all are wonderful and well worth a visit, there are many other places in Paris which are a real delight to visit but which the usual tourist buses and official tours don't and won't take you to. Nor will the usual guide books recommend them.

We've spent years putting together this list of our favourite Parisian secrets (and worn out many pairs of shoes and acquired countless blisters in the process). We're confident that if you spend a little time following our suggestion to wander off the beaten track, and look at Paris from a slightly different angle occasionally, you won't regret it.

Most guidebooks are filled with dull and immediately forgettable information about the dates buildings were commissioned and the dates their architects were born and died. You might, for example, discover that Paris used to be called Parisea and before that was known as Lutetia. But, quite frankly, who cares? Unashamedly and unapologetically we haven't included any so-called `useful' information in this book. *Secrets of Paris* is designed to give you the sort of gossipy, genuinely helpful information a friend who knows Paris would give you. Paris is one of the easiest cities in the world to understand and to find your way around - once you know the secrets. We've also included some paragraphs designed to introduce to you the Parisians; to help you learn how to enjoy Paris and understand the French.

You will see, incidentally, that this book contains none of the advertisements or overt recommendations which so often seem to be scattered in modern guide books. This means that as authors our only allegiance is to you, the reader. And we would also like to assure you that we have received no sponsorships or freebies or cut price anythings (or have we ever tried to obtain any). Where we recommend particular services or shops it is purely because we have found them to be worth recommending.

Finally, we've tried to make this a book you'll find fun to read as well as to use as a reference guide.

Enjoy Paris. It's difficult not to.

Vernon Coleman, Paris

Part 1: The Planning

1. Don't go to Paris in August

However tempted you may be by the special offer prices available from your travel agent, don't, please don't go to Paris in August. Almost any month of the year will be fine (we prefer September and early October to April) but going to Paris in August is not a good idea.

Unless you have lived in Paris, or explored away from the main tourist haunts you will probably have no idea of the extent of the August shutdown. Even in the tourist areas many shops and attractions are shut. Tourism lasts all around the year in Paris. To the French August is a month for holidays away from the city.

We too had no idea just how complete the shutdown is until we discovered that we had a leak in our Parisian apartment. We have a 24 hour a day, 7 days a week service contract with a plumbing company and the idea is, of course, quite simple. If we have a plumbing problem we ring them and they send someone round to deal with it. For this service we give them money.

We should have known that something was wrong from the fact that we had to ring five times before anyone answered the telephone.

`We have water leaking from a pipe,' we told the rather bored sounding man who eventually picked up the receiver.

`What is your address?' he asked.

We told him.

`Someone will come in September,' he said.

`September!' we cried, aghast. `We have water pouring from a leaky pipe.'

`It is August,' he explained. We could hear the shrug of indifference. `Everyone is on holiday.'

What was so surprising was his astonishment that we should expect a plumber to be available in August.

In the end we decided, in the best French fashion, that the leaky pipe was not our problem. It was the problem of the people in the apartment below. And they, of course, were away for August. In Paris, that’s the way things are done. C’est la vie.

You are, of course, unlikely to need a plumber if you're going to Paris on holiday. But August is still not a good time to visit. Not only are many cafés, bars and shops closed for the month but you will also find that the streets and parks are empty of Parisians and full of sweaty tourists – most of them wearing heavy backpacks. If you visit Paris in August you will come away with a very low view of the place.

The other reason for not going to Paris in August is the weather. August has always been a hot month in Paris but since global warming took a hold on the world the temperatures in the capital have become unbearable (July has now become too hot, too). A candle in our apartment actually drooped and melted into a shapeless lump of wax during one particularly nasty heat wave. Even the pigeons were feeling too knackered to fly. They just sat on ledges and did nothing. The heat is, of course, why the Parisians spend August somewhere else. And it's why you, too, should keep away. Ignore the fact that hotels offer good prices in August. The prices are low then for a very good reason. If you do not follow this advice you will regret it. `We should have done what the book said,' one of you will say, as you both lie exhausted and soaked on your hotel beds. `But it was 10% cheaper,' the other will reply. And then the row will start and you will end up paying a fortune to abandon your holiday and go back home.

2. Make sure you wear comfortable clothes and shoes

Wear comfortable shoes and comfortable clothes - preferably with loads of zip pockets. But if you don't want the Parisians to depress you with their sneers we suggest that you wear something that is reasonably chic. Don't wear shorts or anything that would look well suited to a Spanish beach. The Parisians are offended by anything made out of shiny nylon or material which contains pictures of palm trees. We don't wish to offend you by mentioning these things, simply to help you avoid finding yourself the object of scorn and pity.

If you can't stuff everything you need into your pockets, and you need to take a bag with you when you are out and about, make sure that it is light and has zip pockets. Zips on pockets and bags will provide you with some protection against pick pockets (especially if the zips stick a bit and are difficult to open) but we suggest that you carry valuables (passport and money) in a hidden money belt. Just keep enough money for each day's needs in the wallet you carry in your pocket or handbag. This, incidentally, will be the wallet you hand over if you are robbed - it is what we call a `mugger's wallet'. To make your `mugger's wallet' look authentic add a couple of old, expired membership cards, which will be no loss to you and of no value to anyone else. Our mugger's wallets contain: a membership card for a video library which was converted into a Chinese take away in 1996, an impressive looking discount card for a fish and chip shop which has been a mobile phone shop since 1994 and an expired entrance pass for the Casino in Monte Carlo.

Be careful when choosing a hotel

You can, of course, spend a fortune on a hotel if the Government or your company is paying the bill, and you desperately need a third of an acre of lushly carpeted real estate, but it is the position of your hotel that is crucial. You must stay somewhere in central Paris. Ignore all those smart new hotels which promise you modern glass and steel, an Olympic swimming pool and easy access to the city centre via the French railway system. Stay in one of these and you will spend more time underground than you will spend admiring Paris. You need to be in central Paris. The best arrondissements for you to stay in are the 1st, 2nd, 6th, 7th or 8th. Alternatively, lay out a map of Paris in front of you. Find three points: the place de l'Opera, the Jardins du Trocadero (close to the Eiffel Tower) and Notre Dame. Now draw a vertical line through the Jardins du Trocadero, a horizontal line through the place de l'Opera and vertical and horizontal lines through Notre Dame. You will have created a box on your map. Unless you have a particular reason to stay elsewhere we suggest that you look for a hotel that is situated within the box. You'll find plenty of choice.

With your base in one of our recommended arrondissements, or within the square you've drawn, you should be able to walk anywhere you want to visit.

If you're booking your own hotel (rather than using a tour operator) it might be worth asking if there are any discounts. If there has been any sort of international incident in recent months the prices are likely to be down because of the absence of tourists. Tourists from some parts of the world often tend to be nervous and don't like to travel if they have just read about some sort of incident in a foreign place. Their knowledge of geography is sketchy at best and they think that everywhere not actually part of their homeland is all in one place called `Foreign'. This means that if a bomb has gone off in Istanbul they will all cancel their trips to Brazil, Australia and France and stay at home and cower in the nearest shopping mall. The advantage of this to you is twofold. First, you will probably be able to persuade your hotel to offer you a room at a cut price rate. Second the city of Paris won't be full of swaggering, overweight wanderers taking up the pavement and spoiling the view with their polyester wrapped behinds.

4. Cash or travellers' cheques?

We never bother with travellers' cheques; considering them to be an expensive waste of time and money. And we don't use credit cards in France except in emergencies. We take nice crisp Euro notes.

Technically, it is rumoured that shops are only allowed to accept payment in cash for items which cost 100 euros or less. But we have not yet heard of anyone in France prepared to turn down a cash payment.

If you do decide to take cash we suggest that you carry your cash in several places upon your person. Don't leave money in your hotel or keep it all in your bag. Money belts are cheap to buy and effective to use. (Do not, however, put anything metal in them. If you do then you will ping when you go through customs and you will end up having to strip to your underwear to satisfy the curiosity of a rude Nazi with halitosis.)

Part 2: Getting to Know Paris

1. Getting orientated

Paris is like big sweet shop. Before you gorge yourself on the sherbet dip and find that you don't have any room left for a liquorice Catherine Wheel, you need to look around and get your bearings. The best way to orientate yourself - and to, almost literally, obtain an overview of Paris - is to buy tickets for one of the open topped tourist buses such a Les Cars Rouge. Sit on the top of the bus with a map on your lap and follow your route all the way round. If you stay on the bus for a full circuit the round trip will take between two hours and two and a half hours.

(Incidentally, hotels give away quite decent maps sponsored by large stores but newsagents sell excellent red pocket sized maps of Paris which are much better. They're about as thick as a small paperback but smaller. Even the Parisians use them. They are more comprehensive, more durable and more portable than most tourist maps.)

When you climb aboard the tourist bus the conductor will hand you a set of personal headphones which you can plug into the side of the bus. You can choose the language delivered to you and so listen to a running commentary describing the sights you are passing.

This is the quick and easy way to orientate yourself and to decide which bits of the tour you really want to explore more thoroughly. When you've gone all the way round get off and have a coffee and then just get back on the bus (your ticket allows you to get on and off wherever and whenever you like for two days) and use the bus like an unusually convenient and inexpensive taxi. Despite having spent much of our lives in Paris we still do this quite regularly and find that the tourist bus makes quite a good taxi service.

Finally, there is an excellent, regular boat service on the river Seine called The Batobus. The boat runs up and down the river, stopping at a variety of convenient locations. It really is an excellent way to travel and we use it regularly if we want to spend a day in another part of central Paris. The bus is, of course, immune to traffic jams though there can be a problem if the river is unusually high.

2. Remember that Paris is a lived-in city

Unlike London, which is a city for businessmen, holiday-makers and shoppers, Paris is a city that millions of people really live in. They don't live in the suburbs, an hour's train ride out of town, they live in the city centre - often within walking distance of where they work, where they go to school, where they shop and where they meet friends. You'll see children going to school or the park, mothers and babies doing the grocery shopping and business people walking to work. Even those Parisians who have a cottage or a chateau in the country still consider themselves to be Parisian above all else.

Naturally, in order to cater for this large live-in population there are lots of `proper' shops in the city centre: shops selling onions and vacuum cleaners rather than just providing tourists with hamburgers and silly T-shirts. Generally speaking (and excluding, for example, the shops selling the vacuum cleaners) the stores which cater for the Parisians are much more fun, and provide better value, than the shops which cater for tourists.

3. Enjoy café society

Paris is as famous for its cafés as it is for the Eiffel Tower. And because of its cafés, Paris is the most rewarding city in the world for people watchers. Sitting in a café, at a table facing outwards, is probably the best way to enjoy this pastime.

If you're looking for a café with history, and you want to be able to say that you've probably sat at a table where famous American novelists or French existentialists have spilt their wine, then the six best cafés still in existence are probably: Deux Magots, Lipps, Café Flore, La Dome, Café de La Paix and La Rhumerie. Inside Deux Magots there is a plaque on a bench commemorating the fact that Jean-Paul Sartre and Simon de Beauvoir `sat there'. Aficionados of the Café Flore will tell you that they spent a good deal of time there too. Sartre was a tourist sight in Paris in the 1960's and 1970's. He was arrested three times for distributing banned literature but never charged. As Charles de Gaulle remarked `One does not imprison Voltaire'. We once saw a French magazine article about Sartre which described him as Che Guevara with a pipe. Albert Camus also spent a lot of time in Deux Magots and the Café de Flore but we can't tell which seat he favoured. Maybe he just took pot luck. (If you return to Café de Flore try upstairs. It is supposed to be less fashionable but it has a special atmosphere of its own.)

These are among the most exciting and famous cafés in the world and have been for the best part of a century. London invented coffee houses but abandoned them. Today, only Vienna has cafés which match those of Paris.

Some tourists complain that the price for a coffee or a cup of tea in a famous Parisian café is high. Prices are quite high (though often no worse than the price of a much less drinkable beverage in a motorway service station in Britain).

But when people complain it is usually because they have made the mistake of assuming that they are just paying for the drink. They aren't. When you order a drink in a Parisian café (particularly a pavement café) you are renting a seat so that you can watch the passing show. And there you sit, in comfort, while pedestrians hurry past. And you can sit in judgement, too. Commenting on their clothes, their walk and their purchases. And, if perchance, it starts to rain you can sit smugly in the warm and dry while they struggle to put up their umbrellas and battle with the wind.

The famous cafés are good to visit but if you just want to have a drink, use the loo, eat or just watch the world totter by then almost any café you come across will do very nicely. There are more cafés in Paris than there are estate agents in the average British High Street. It's difficult to walk more than a hundred yards in central Paris without passing a café and in some parts of the city the cafés seem to be breeding and out of control. It's sometimes difficult to see how they all manage to stay in business. But they do and it isn't just the tourists who keep the cafés alive. The Parisians regard cafés as an utterly essential part of their daily lives.

Look into a café in the early morning and you will see workmen in overalls standing side by side with businessmen in smart suits at the bar starting the day with a brandy or a glass of wine. They're fortifying themselves for the day ahead. They'll be there again in the evening, having a drink to fortify themselves for the journey home.

Incidentally, only gauche tourists call out `Garcon!' when they want a waiter. (And some of them really do.) This is rude and stupid because a waiter working in a café, bistro or restaurant in Paris is a skilled professional who expects to be called `sir' (`Monsieur') and regards himself to be about on a social par with dentists, lawyers or senior civil servant. (The word `bistro', by the way, comes with and without a `t' at the end.) Do not patronise a Parisian waiter, or treat him condescendingly, or you will wait a long time for your order to arrive. Even in the most modest establishment you should call the waiter `Monsieur' and treat him deferentially. (The vast majority of waiters are male.) And, of course, only a fool complains about anything in a restaurant before they have eaten.

In cold weather the best drink to order is a vin chaud. (Pronounced van show.) This is hot red wine. It should be served with a slice or lemon or orange, cinnamon and heaps of sugar. Vin chaud isn't always on the menu (especially in the posher places) but they always serve it because it's what the locals love to drink when the weather is cold. We have introduced the delights of a vin chaud to numerous friends. All now declare it to be their favourite way to consume alcohol.

While sitting in cafés we love watching Parisians park their cars. It's great fun. In most countries, if a driver comes along in a fifteen foot long car and finds a fourteen foot long space he will probably look at the space for a moment, curse loudly and then drive on. The British motorist looks for a space into which his car will fit. This isn't the French way. In Paris the driver makes the space fit his car, rather than the other way round. He will simply reverse into the space as hard as he can and bump the car behind back as far as it will go. This will usually mean that the car he has backed into will be shunted into the car behind it. And so on and so on. The driver will then nudge the car at the front of the space he wants to get into. And eventually he will get a fifteen foot long car into a fourteen foot space which he has turned into a fifteen and a half foot long space. The fun is repeated when a driver of one of the cars which has been shunted comes along and wants to move his car.

Usually, if a driver finds that he is sandwiched in by two cars whose bumpers touch his then he will probably jump up and down and start tearing out hair. In Paris the driver simply jumps into his car and reverses into the car behind and then shunts into the car in front until he has created enough space to enable him to drive out into the traffic. He will, of course, do this without signalling because signalling is cissy and not something the French do unless they intend to drive in a dead straight line and want to confuse the motorist travelling behind them.

We once saw a car on which the owner had tied the sort of floats boat owners use to protect their craft when moored. The floats were obviously there to provide some protection while the car was parked and they seemed to do the job well.

Sadly, you will notice that some clever Parisians have bought themselves extremely tiny Smart cars which are so short that they can be reversed up to the pavement and parked with the front of the car pointing directly outwards and towards the traffic. This is cheating, it deprives café-sitters of delightful entertainment, and we don't think it ought to be allowed.

If you want to enjoy the spectacle of watching the Parisians park (and unpark) their cars, make sure that you take a table which will give you a good view of a decent stretch of kerb. Cafés in streets linking into the Champs-Elysées are particularly good for this type of entertainment.

Finally, it is worth remembering that in addition to an apparently endless number of cafés, bistros and winebars Paris also contains a number of excellent tea salons. Almost every arrondissement has one. Some entertain their customers with puppet shows or piano music while others merely concentrate on providing their customers with a vast variety of different teas from which to choose.

4. Know where to shop

Most visitors to Paris assume that the best shops are to be found on the Champs-Elysées. This is not true. The Champs-Elysées is a splendid thoroughfare which contains a number of excellent and traditional Parisian cafés (the best known among them being Fouquets - which can be found about half way up on the left hand side looking up the hill) but contains more airline offices and car showrooms than decent shops. There are several arcades (The Lido arcade being the most interesting by far) and one or two spectacular megastores but you will find much better shops elsewhere in Paris.

The best big stores in Paris are Galeries Lafayette and Printemps, which are conveniently placed next to one another on the Boulevard Haussemann, just behind the place de l'Opera. If you can't find what you want then you probably won't find it in central Paris. Outside these stores there are some excellent pavement stalls selling cheaper products - ties, scarves, watches and those peculiar kitchen implements which look so good when being demonstrated by an expert but which invariably prove unusable when you get them home.

Even if you don't want to purchase anything you really should visit Galeries Lafayette. There is nowhere in the world quite like it. The food and toy departments are particularly amazing. And for a breath taking moment, go into the main store, pass the counters selling perfumes and watches and look up. The inside of the store is a huge atrium which is, at Christmas time, filled with an enormous Christmas tree. Just how they get such a huge tree into the store is a mystery akin to the old ship in the bottle puzzle. If you're in Paris in the weeks before Christmas it is also well worthwhile taking a long look at the shop windows of Galeries Lafayette and Printemps. Both stores usually fill at least some of their windows with special displays for children. The stores even erect raised platforms so that small children don't have to be held up by their parents but can stand and watch the moving puppets and other toys. Galeries Lafayette usually has the best Christmas lights in the city.

The best fashion stores are to be found in the Avenue Montaigne where you can find Christian Dior and Chanel for example, and the City's best boutiques are found along the rue St Honore. Whether you are looking for luggage, jewellery, stationery or a sandwich you'll find it along here.

Finally, we're delighted to report that small shops survive and thrive in Paris. The short street where we live, which is by no means unusual, contains a mattress maker, a laundry, a plumbing supplies store, an architect, two picture framers, a furniture restorer, four traditional cafés, an estate agent, a dress shop, a furniture store and a shoe cleaning shop where the owner will polish your shoes until they look better than they did when you took them out of the box.

5. The best way to see Paris

Without a doubt, the best way to see Paris is to walk. Unlike many other capitals Paris is remarkably compact. Technically, the distance from the Eiffel Tower in the West to Sacre Coeur in the north is less than four miles (though in practice you should at least double that to allow for sidestepping other pedestrians and getting lost a few times en route). The `official' distance from the Arc de Triomphe in the far west to the Bastille in the extreme East is the same. It is, remarkably, just over three miles from the Palais du Luxembourg in the south of the city to Sacre Coeur in the north. You can walk right across Paris in a day (though you might want to take a taxi back to your hotel if you do) and since those who control the city decided long ago to limit the number of skyscrapers to one (the Montparnasse tower) you can spot major landmarks such as the Eiffel Tower and Sacre Coeur from just about anywhere in the city. If we lose our bearings we use these iconic landmarks to help us find out where we are and how to get where we want to be if that isn't where we are. If you see what we mean. The general lack of tall buildings casting unwanted, ugly shadows over the city also means that the famous Parisian light is still one of the city's best features.

For years one of our favourite pastimes in Paris has been to walk aimlessly, following only our inclinations and the sight of an interesting piece of architecture, a curious courtyard, an enticing park or a fascinating view. We walk until we manage to lose ourselves, strolling along boulevards and alleyways and through parks galore and then find our way back home without using the metro, a taxi or a map.

There are, incidentally, plenty of old-fashioned shoe repairers in Paris. Just keep an eye open as you walk around near your hotel and you'll probably soon find one. Alternatively, just ask at the hotel reception.

If you walk around Paris you will discover and see all sorts of things that are lost to those who travel everywhere by bus or taxi. The French even have a word for a person who wanders through Paris. They call him a flaneur - someone who strolls, saunters, or wanders the streets at random - looking for experiences rather than knowledge. The true flaneur will `s'arretant souvent pour regarder' (stop often to look).

6. Staying alive (coping with the traffic)

The one snag about getting around Paris on foot is the traffic. French motorists regard pedestrians as fair game and if you want to stay upright and avoid becoming a hood ornament on some battered Renault you must take great care when crossing even the smallest road. Some of the wider avenues require courage, timing and athleticism if you are to get from one side to the other in good condition. Timing is everything and you must, of course, always try to keep one hand free so that you can make rude gestures at motorists who whizz past you.

The most impossible roads to cross are the Champs-Elysées and the place de la Concorde. We firmly believe that there are nervous tourists on the island in the middle of the place de la Concorde who have been living there for decades; paralysed into immobility by the constant sea of speeding traffic whirling around them. Swimming through a shark infested sea would be less of a challenge than crossing the place de la Concorde on foot. Motorists don't always take much notice of the traffic lights around the rest of Paris but on the Champs-Elysées and the place de la Concorde, they do, fortunately, regard them with a little respect. And so wait for the moment and take it briskly. Don't ever be tempted to try to cross the ten lines of traffic which scream up and down the Champs-Elysées when the lights are against you. It will be the last mistake you make.

7. Ignore zebra crossings (motorists do)

Generally speaking, you should not be misled into thinking that the white strips of paint with which the city has decorated the roads at various points bear any resemblance to zebra crossings, or are of any value to pedestrians.

The curious idea of allowing pedestrians to cross roads in safety at certain points was introduced by the Germans when they invaded France during the Second World War. The Germans were appalled at the messy way the French just wandered across roads whenever the fancy took them. Sadly, of course, the French never like being told what to do and they particularly dislike being told what to do by Germans whom they generally regard as bullet headed bullies with no sense of style, no sense of taste and an appallingly childish sense of humour. Consequently, motorists treat these crossings with utter disdain; often making them utterly unusable by parking right across them.

French zebra crossings look much the same as zebra crossings in other countries but you must not allow this to confuse you. The white strips of paint across the road have absolutely no relevance and should be regarded as artistic interventions rather than as invitations to cross the road safely.

8. Watch out for motorbikes

It is vital to watch out for the mad motorcyclists who race through Paris on unusually noisy machines. They usually do this in the middle of the night so that they can wake up as many people as possible but occasionally they race around during the daytime to knock off a few pedestrians.

9. Buy a ladder

There is one way for a pedestrian to cross Parisian roads without difficulty. We found it by accident when we were decorating our apartment and had to buy a ladder.

We found that walking through Paris with a full length aluminium ladder enabled us to get through the traffic without any trouble. Whenever we wanted to cross the road the traffic stopped for us straight away.

Of course, you may find that there is a limited amount of space available in your hotel room for storing the ladders you purchase each day.

10. When frogs become toads

When they get behind the wheel of a car the French all behave like Mr Toad. Female French motorists behave like Mrs Toad. (For the record, female drivers in France are even worse than the men. Some say that French, female drivers are even more stupid and more arrogant than Belgian motorists.)

When French drivers get into a car they are only interested in three things: the accelerator pedal, the ashtray and the horn. The first and third of these they press all the time. The second, they fill as quickly as possible.

A French friend of ours, who has lived in Paris all her life, claims that French drivers need three hands; one for their cigarette, one to fondle the knee of any accompanying passenger, and one to make rude gestures to other drivers and pedestrians and to make the sign of the cross after close calls.

How do they steer? With their knees, of course.

Regardless of the size or age of their car, drivers in Paris take it for granted that they are more important than all other motorists and are always entitled to assume that they have the right of way. So, for example, if there is a crossing ahead they will assume that approaching traffic will give way to them. This wouldn't be a problem if the drivers in the approaching traffic hadn't made exactly the same assumption.

Parisian motorists regard traffic congestion as a personal affront because it stops them driving fast and showing how well they can handle a car when it only has two wheels on the ground.

Traffic rules are seen as interesting suggestions which drivers will consider if they aren't too busy. Traffic lights are theoretically regarded as negotiating points but in practice no one stops long enough to do any negotiating. Road signs which demand some sort of action are regarded as a clear threat to the motorist's intellectual freedom and personal liberty to do what he wants to do when he wants to do it.

If French drivers want to park on a pedestrian crossing or on the pavement then they regard it as the job of any nearby pedestrian to get out of the way fast.

It is our considered view that the primary aim of all Parisian motorists is not to arrive at a destination but to kill, maim or simply terrify as many pedestrians as possible. And to a French motorist a destination is simply somewhere that they reach before they turn around and do it all again.

All this means that the safest way to cross the road in Paris is to assume that every motorist you see is deliberately trying to kill you. It is just possible that one or two of them may not be, but this is the safest way to deal with things.

N.B. Readers who have seen films such as Ronin and The Bourne Identity will have some idea of the way the French drive. It is generally assumed by people who don't know Paris very well that these films were shot using stunt drivers. We believe that this is a myth and that the films were made in ordinary rush hour traffic.

11. Traffic jams

Traffic jams aren't usually as bad in Paris as they are in London or other British cities. This is because French drivers tend to nudge each other out of the way, rather as dodgem drivers push aside inconveniently parked dodgem cars. No French driver can sit in a stationary car for ten minutes (let alone for a period of several hours) without honking his horn, shouting abuse and driving into the car in front.

Nevertheless, there are some jams, particularly at peak times and the French moan that traffic delays have interfered badly with the time they have available to conduct affairs of the heart.

Having an affair used to be known as having a `cinq a sept' (five pm to seven pm) because that was when a husband saw his mistress or a wife saw her lover.

However, the traffic in Paris at that time of the day is now bad. Take thirty minutes travelling time out of a `cinq a sept' and you are left with the sort of romantic sprint no Frenchman would willingly accept.

12. Pollution control

The Parisians have found a simple but effective way to deal with pollution caused by cars. They monitor pollution levels and if these reach unacceptable levels then half the cars which normally enter Paris are banned for a day. The authorities do this by banning cars according to whether their number plate ends with an even or an odd number.

The very rich get round this by having one car with an even number and one car with an odd number.

13. Motorcades with police escorts

In most cities around the world you can be pretty sure that if you see a motorcade coming there will be at least one famous and very important person sitting in one of the cars.

This is not the case in France.

A few years ago, when France was in what French economists now like to dismiss as `a bit of a temporary cash flow crisis', the nation applied to the World Bank for a loan. In order to decide whether or not to make the loan, the World Bank sent some economists over to Paris to take a look at the books and see what security the French could offer. Not wanting to attract attention to their financial predicament the French sent a mini bus to the airport to pick up the economists but deliberately didn't send a police escort. Inevitably, and perhaps predictably, the mini bus full of economists got stuck in heavy traffic. This did not go down well with the economists who were peeved at being forced to spend several hours in a queue with ordinary people. The result was that the French Government's application for a loan was refused.

As a result of that unfortunate incident the French Government now gives a full police escort to anyone who might be in a position to cause even the slightest embarrassment to France. Red lights and pedestrians are all ignored.

If you see a limousine being escorted through London by a squad of outriders and a line of police cars you can be pretty sure that the limousine contains either a member of the Royal Family or the Prime Minister's wife. But if you see a limousine being escorted through Paris the chances are that the vehicle contains a team of Polish mining engineers, a platoon of Venezuelan oil drillers or a group of representatives from the International Olympic Committee investigating the possibility of allowing Paris to host the Olympics in 2064.

The Parisians are, of course, less respectful towards these visitors than is their Government. We once watched in astonishment as a cavalcade of cars, which was screaming through Paris and accompanied by the usual motorcyclists with flashing blue lights, was booed and jeered by just about every pedestrian wandering along. The boos and jeers raced along the pavement at the same speed as the cars and the passengers inside must have realised that, despite their escort, they were not welcome in the city. We bought a local paper and discovered that the cars contained representatives of a Chinese trade mission. The Parisians, knowing who was in the cars, were taking advantage of the opportunity to show their feelings about the Chinese political system.

14. Nevertheless, walking is best

Despite all this, we would remind you that there is no doubt that the best way to see Paris is to walk. Pedestrians see so many things that others do not notice: enticing alleyways, exquisite courtyards, beautiful doors (perhaps the most attractive doorway in Paris adorns an exquisitely ornate apartment building in the Avenue Rapp) and beautifully dressed shop windows.

15. French notaires

As you wander keep an eye open for any door which has two large gold disks attached to the wall above it in such a way that the disks can be seen by pedestrians approaching from either direction. When you see these gold disks (which contain the figure of Justice, sitting above the words Republique Francaise) you will know that a notaire works in the building. Notaires are French lawyers who deal with all the nation's official paperwork. Much of their work involves the buying and selling of property. A single notaire often acts for both the buyer and the seller because he is paid not to represent one party's interests but to make sure that the whole thing is done according to the law. Many notaires act as estate agents too. Fortunately, the French trust their notaires in a way that we don't trust our lawyers or our estate agents. The notaire who strays from the path of righteousness faces severe penalties.

16. Pedalling through Paris

The French cycle around Paris a good deal and there are cycle lanes criss crossing the city. You can now get almost anywhere in the city of Paris in the safety of a specially designated cycle lane. Bicycles can be hired by the day or the week. (Bicycle rental agencies seem to come and go but your hotel should be able to help you find the current favourite. And, of course, bicycles can be rented from one of the City’s many bicycle rental racks.)

Cycle lanes sometimes run quite close to the traffic and reckless and irresponsible French cyclists who find the idea of entrusting their lives to the sobriety and good manners of French motorists often cycle on the pavement. You, being an honest and responsible citizen would not naturally dream of doing such a thing.

A popular modern alternative to the bicycle is the small, folding, aluminium scooter. In most of the rest of the world the enthusiasm for these gadgets lasted about as long as a piece of Gerald Ratner's cheap jewellery might have been expected to survive but scooters live on in Paris. We have even seen sophisticated looking businessmen using them to whizz from one business appointment to another. It's quite startling to see a perfectly groomed Parisian businessman scooting along the pavement with his briefcase under his arm, his pink lambswool scarf flung, with inborn Gallic casual skill, over his left shoulder and his 100 euro haircut moving lightly in the self-generated breeze. (No other nation has so many words for scarf and no other country has an entire culture built around different ways to tie a scarf.)

Small, mini wheeled motorised scooters (fitted with quite powerful engines) are also popular from time to time. These produce as much noise as a Formula One racing car and reach terrifying speeds. The riders usually appear to be students, though they whizz past so quickly that it is difficult to tell.

17. Le Metro: The French underground

Do not confuse the Paris Metro with the London Underground. The former is useful, fast, efficient and relatively clean.

Finding your way around Paris with the aid of the Metro isn't difficult once you understand that the Parisians refer to the Metro lines according to the name of the station at the end of the line. This makes picking out a route a bit like doing one of those maze puzzles which are published in children's comics.

Most Metro stations are equipped with large, electrically lit maps so that you can press two buttons and check out your route. Unfortunately, although theoretically very useful, these maps are usually commandeered by English schoolchildren who, being accustomed to getting their entertainment by pressing buttons, are unwilling to allow themselves to be torn away from the entertainment. It is, therefore, usually best to obtain a small map and to plan your route before you go down underground.

Once you know where you want to go buy a carnet of ten tickets (unless you know that you won't ever use that many). This is cheaper and saves time. You must keep your ticket once you are on the train because occasionally inspectors come round. They are empowered to shoot people who are travelling without having paid the proper fare. We find that used Metro tickets make quite good book marks.

The white tiled corridors which connect Metro stations are usually neat and clean and some of the best musicians in Paris work in them. The stations themselves are often lavishly and imaginatively decorated. They are also imaginatively named and provide a remarkable history lesson of French statesmen, artists, battles, financiers, writers, and artists. Well-known individuals commemorated as Metro stations include Charles de Gaulle, Franklin D Roosevelt, George V, Garibaldi, Bolivar, Victor Hugo, Emile Zola, Lamarck, Anatole France and Robespierre. Less well known today, but still remembered as Metro stations, are Felix Faure (a French politician who died at his desk with his mistress on his lap - chunks of her hair had to be cut off to release his fingers), Guy Moquet (a student shot by the Germans in 1941), Père Lachaise (who founded a convent where the cemetery bearing his name now stands), Hoche (a general in the Republican army who began life as a stable boy) and Motte Picquet (a naval general of the American War of Independence). The Metro station Abbesses is named after the 16 abbesses of an order created in 1133 by Louis VI. The stations Stalingrad, Austerlitz and Wagram were named after Napoleonic battles. (Don't look for Waterloo. That's in London.) Look around inside the Metro stations and you'll find all sorts of curiosities.

When you reach your destination and want to get off the train you must open the door yourself. If you fail to do this and no one else is getting off at your stop you will be stuck on the train.

Seats near to the doors are reserved for the war wounded and for pregnant women. Anyone who is both war wounded and pregnant is, presumably, entitled to two seats.

(Pregnant women are also entitled to go to the front of queues just about everywhere, though this is not a privilege that it is wise to exploit if you do not have a discernible bump. Some pregnant women also claim that they are entitled to cross roads wherever they like. A pregnant friend of ours tried this out. Once.)

Sadly and embarrassingly, the only really bad behaviour we have seen on the Metro came from British schoolchildren on a trip to Paris. The accompanying schoolteachers seemed utterly unconcerned about the chaos and disorder their pupils were causing. We could only conclude that the pupils were attending a school for putative football hooligans. We obtained little comfort from the knowledge that Britain's reputation as the world's leading source of hooligans is in safe hands.

18. L'Autobus

There are loads of buses in Paris and you can get on a bus using the same tickets that you've bought for use on the Metro. We are reliably informed that all these buses go somewhere though it isn't always easy to work out just where they are going or when they are likely to get there. We use buses occasionally. We get on one if it seems to be going in the right direction and we then get off if it appears to have veered from its course or if it becomes too crowded. This pragmatic approach works well for us.

Occasionally, passengers on a bus will start lengthy arguments with the driver. When this happens it is wise to leave the bus immediately. We once stood on a stationary bus for forty five minutes while a group of passengers and the driver argued heatedly and with great vigour. We had some difficulty following the argument but we gathered that the dispute had started because the bus had arrived at its stop three minutes late. It did not seem to occur to anyone that the bus would have arrived at its destination forty five minutes earlier if the dispute about tardiness had been postponed. There is no point in trying to point out things like this to the French. Their love of a loud argument is far greater than their love of logic or, indeed, their love of getting to their destination on time.

19. Travelling by taxi

French taxis look like private cars though they do have lights of varying sizes fitted to their roofs. Even Parisians find it difficult to decide whether a taxi is available or not and stopping one in the street is nowhere near as easy as it is London. Sitting in the comfort of a pavement café we have often been entertained by the sight of fur-coated women with large packages from Christian Dior and Louis Vuitton jumping up and down on and off the pavement as they struggle, vainly, to attract the attention of a taxi driver.

Queuing at a taxi rank is a relatively sure way to find a taxi but unfortunately the concept of queuing (particularly when it involves standing outside in the cold) is not something with which the Parisians feel entirely comfortable. If you're in a queue anywhere other than at a mainline railway station (where there are steel barriers to keep the queues neatly defined and special taxi captains to decide which queue member gets into which taxi) you will have to keep a close eye on the people behind you and, indeed, on the other side of the street. Once a taxi arrives, get into it quickly. Don't stand around on the pavement saying `After you' and `No, after you' or telling the driver where you want to go. On more than one occasion we have lost our taxi to a woman who has rushed across the street and dived in through the door on the other side of the vehicle. It hasn't always been the same woman who has done this but it has always been a woman.

The best and most efficient way to get a taxi is to go back to your hotel and telephone for one. If you are several miles away at the time you will, of course, have to get to your hotel by Metro, by bus or on foot. The hotel receptionist or concierge will have suitable telephone numbers and should, if you ask nicely, make the call for you. There are, as you will have doubtless already noticed, two snags with this. The first is that you have to pay for the taxi to get to where you are. The second is that you can only do this when you are already in your hotel and going out and not when you are out and trying to get back to your hotel.

If you have a mobile telephone with you, and you have the telephone number of a taxi firm and the courage to ring them up all by yourself, then you can telephone for a taxi wherever you are in the city. The taxi firm employees who answer the telephone usually speak English though they may not admit this to you, particularly if they think that English is the only language you speak. The French get great pleasure out of treating all foreigners as deaf lunatics and this is easier to do when they have the language advantage. If you don't have a mobile telephone you can try using a call box and we wish you luck in your endeavours.

Theoretically, passengers are not allowed in the front seat of an ordinary taxi (mainly, we suspect, because that is where the driver keeps his maps, his cigarettes, his cigarette butts, his baguette sandwich and his copy of *Le Soir*) and so if more than three of you wish to ride together you will have to order a limousine or one of those ugly monstrosities known as People Carriers. Alternatively, and at far less expense, you can simply bribe the taxi driver by giving him a 20 euro note before you all get in. You could try something smaller but be prepared to make a run for it if the driver decides to be offended by such a small bribe.

French taxi drivers are not terribly well informed about their city. Most are probably better able to find their way around the back streets of Istanbul or Algiers. Unlike their London counterparts, who have to learn `the knowledge' before they can drive cabs in the city centre, we suspect that anyone with a driving licence and access to a motor vehicle of some kind can become a taxi driver in Paris. In addition most Parisian taxi drivers have an unusually poorly developed sense of direction and rely on a satellite navigation system, a map spread out on the front passenger seat beside them or the fact that Paris is a small city and that if they keep riding round and round they will eventually arrive somewhere close to where you want to be.

Parisian taxi drivers are, in addition, utterly useless at avoiding traffic jams or demonstrations - even when they know in advance where the problem areas are likely to be. Indeed, we suspect that the love of demonstrations among the French in general is so well developed in this city that taxi drivers deliberately make their way towards the nearest blockage, just as a lemming might head for the nearest cliff. If taxi drivers think you are foreign they are quite likely to take you twice round the city even if your proposed journey is quite a short one. As a general rule we always make quite a fuss if we find ourselves passing the Eiffel Tower more than twice in a single journey.

We have yet to meet a Parisian taxi driver who has the sort of pride in his work commonly found among London cabbies. The only upside is that Parisian taxi drivers are, generally speaking, taciturn and rather gloomy individuals who, unlike their opinionated British counterparts, are not greatly interested in discussing the shortcomings of their Government.

20. Finding specific buildings

When streets in Paris run parallel to the river Seine the numbers of the buildings generally follow the direction in which the river is flowing. When streets run perpendicular to the river, building numbers begin at the end nearest the river. Even numbered buildings are on the right hand side of the street or avenue, and odd numbered buildings are on the left.

21. A shocking note about electrical appliances

The French use a different type of electricity. This may be because they get most of their electricity from nuclear power plants or, more probably, because French electricity contains more fat, alcohol and nicotine.

Whatever the cause of the difference the fact is that in our experience you may have some slight difficulty making your appliances function effectively in France. Sockets and plugs for telephones, computers and other electrical appliances are, of course, utterly different to the ones used in the rest of the world. Some electrical appliances and chargers simply won't adapt and work in France. Or, rather, they may well work for a while before catching fire and blowing up. (All of this should provide great comfort to eurosceptics. The EU's aim for a United States of Europe will never reach fruition until all the EU’s member countries start using the same sort of electricity.)

We have no practical advice for you concerning any of this. But we thought you should know.

22. Beggars: a major growth industry

Like most major European cities Paris has, in recent years, become heavily infested with beggars. Most come from Eastern Europe and are en route to Britain where the State generously supplies beggars with five bedroomed houses, new cars and dishwashers paid for by taxpayers. In France the State is less generous, unless you happen to be a State employee, and so beggars tend to congregate around well-known tourist areas which are, as a result, now just about as hazardous as the entrance to the Bazaar in Istanbul. The most all pervasive beggars are the teams of young girls who target the main railway stations, the parks and the Grand Boulevards near to the big cafés and the main shops. The police do their best to move them on and stop them becoming too much of a nuisance but, sadly, their success in this endeavour is, at best, mixed. The beggars know that while they won't get much from the French the English speaking tourists are the softest touch in the world. The beggar's first words will usually be `Do you speak English?' If you admit that you do the beggar will thrust a small scruffy piece of paper into your hand explaining why you should immediately hand over a decent chunk of your holiday money. If the girl doing the begging doesn't have a baby in her arms the note will tell you that there is a baby nearby starving and desperately needing sustenance. (The note won't mention the thug sitting in the café round the corner, sipping wine and smoking cigarettes and reading the paper. It is, of course, to him that your money will go.) You may feel (as we used to) that a small donation is a small price to pay for a guilt free conscience. Try hard not to succumb to temptation. You will, in the end, find the guilt much easier to live with. The modern East European beggar doesn't accept a single euro coin with a smile and a nod. She will regard a donation not as a sign of generosity but as a sign of weakness to be exploited. Once you've handed over one coin you will be followed wherever you go by the recipient of your largesse demanding more extensive funding. Worse still, she will probably call over her confederates and so you will soon be surrounded by impatient and remarkably persistent supplicants - all wanting food for their starving babies. Eager fingers will pull at your luggage and your clothes and (if within reach) your wallet.

We once sat on a bench in a park and watched an English couple give money to one of these beggars. Once they had done this the beggar became quite belligerent and demanded more coins. When the couple shook their heads the beggar simply snatched the ice cream the man had just started eating and ran off with it laughing. She and her friends then shared it.

Incidentally, beggars should not be confused with tramps. Paris has always had its clochards (tramps). Most live on the river bank (traditionally under the bridges). They don't usually ask for money and they are not a nuisance to visitors to the city.

23. Parisian street entertainers

For a while at the end of the 20th century and the start of the 21st the most popular occupation in Paris seemed to be dressing up standing still and pretending to be someone (or something else). There were several editions of Charlie Chaplin, countless versions of the Statue of Liberty (complete with flaming torch), at least one Tutankhamen and numerous mummies (the sort wrapped in bandages rather than pushing prams).

The human statues seem to have more or less disappeared (though, given the vagaries of popular fashions in the world of entertainment, they will undoubtedly make a comeback eventually).

The disappearance of the statues does not mean, however, that Paris is devoid of street entertainers. Far from it. The pavements of the city of light sometimes seem to be positively awash with men and women earning a living through their talents in the wide ranging world of show business.

Still quite popular, for example, are the street entertainers who make their living on the pavements outside the big cafés and who earn their living by following tourists and mimicking their walk. They do this to amuse the café patrons and can be quite cruel. We've sat in cafés for hours, not brave enough to move lest we find ourselves mimicked as we leave.

And there are masses of street musicians in Paris too. In addition to solo guitarists it is not at all unusual to see groups, bands and even orchestras performing in streets, squares and parks. We have, on several occasions, seen entire orchestras busking in the open air.

24. Confidence tricksters

Like all big cities Paris is full of confidence tricksters though in France they do tend to do things with a certain amount of style. The most famous conman who worked in Paris was the fellow who made a good living out of selling the Eiffel Tower to rich travellers. He told them it was being demolished and that the French Government wanted to sell it for scrap. A conspirator who worked in a French Government office helped by providing an office where the banker's drafts could be handed over.

Sadly, you're more likely to come across grifters working simple short cons.

Here is one or two of the ones we've come across (either because they've happened to us or because we've seen them happen to other people).

1. A nice young couple gave their camera to a stranger who kindly offered to take a picture of them in front of the Eiffel Tower. He backed away to get them into shot and then turned and ran off with their camera. (Such crooks rely on being able to run off very quickly. Unless you’re an Olympic class middle distance runner we wouldn’t recommend that you give chase. Even then, we suggest you stay where you are and abandon the camera. Crooks often carry knives.)

2. There is a man in Paris who wanders around the public parks with a fake identity card slung around his neck and a pocket full of tickets. He approaches people sitting on benches or chairs and sells them tickets. We've seen him in several different parks. He is careful to hit only on tourists since the Parisians and locals know that there is no charge to

sit on benches and ordinary chairs in local parks. (There may, however, be a charge to sit on deckchairs.)

3. We were walking along a street near our apartment when we saw an expensive looking ring glittering on the pavement in front of us. Just before we got to it a smartly dressed man appeared from behind a car and picked it up. He then looked up, and seemed surprise to see us there. He held up the ring to show it to us. We looked at it and nodded. He tried it on. It did not fit any of his fingers. `It ees losted,' he told us. We nodded our understanding and agreement. He tried to hand the ring to us. `You take,' he said. `It ees gold.' `Oh no, we couldn't,' we said. `We must take it to the police station.' `No, no, no,' he said, shaking his head. `You take.' He thrust the ring at us. Reluctantly, we took it, wondering how long it would take us to walk to the nearest police station and make a report. He smiled and nodded and started to walk away. Then, as though remembering something, he turned back. `You give me money for food,' he said. `Twenty euros. You have the ring.' We gave him the ring. At first he didn't want to take it. `You keep the ring and give me money.' We said we would rather he kept the ring. He seemed disappointed but when he realised that we were serious about not giving him money he took the ring and walked away. We followed discreetly, at a distance. In the next street we watched him drop the ring on the pavement and hide behind a car. The ring was brass, of course and the conman probably had a pocket full of them.

25. Eating out

If you want to eat out in Paris please ignore the hamburger chains (of which there are now, sadly, quite a few in Paris) and choose instead the local speciality a `croque monsieur' (ham and cheese on toast), croque madame (a croque monsieur with fried egg on top) or a croque vegetarienne (toast with just the melted cheese). The hamburger bars are largely kept in business by travelling Britons and Americans and whatever we think of the French we owe them a chance to rid their country of these beastly places.

The words Le Menu mean the set meal of the day (usually two or three courses and a drink at a fixed price). The words Table d'hote officially mean that the table is presided over personally by the host and hostess and is derived from the word d'hotel. (In French the word `hotel' means a house not somewhere for travellers to stay.)

If you're looking down the printed menu for something to select we suggest that you look for `crudites' (a plateful of beautifully prepared and tasty raw vegetables - usually including tomato, beetroot, carrots and so on) and `frites' (a vast plate full of chips). Together the two make a splendid meal and will nearly always be served with slices from a baguette (a long thin loaf which tastes absolutely nothing like the rubbish sold in British supermarkets). If you want to drink wine and don't know what to choose you could try `vin de table du patron' (an ordinary wine recommended by the owner) or `un ballon de rouge' (a glass of red wine).

26. Public lavatories

All travellers know the pain of needing a lavatory in a strange city. Once the need makes itself felt, your every move and every gaze is governed by the search for relief. It is a quest that becomes as dedicated as a pilgrimage and as vital as a hunt for a matching blood donor. Each small building you spy becomes a target for your attention and you constantly rush from one side of the street to the other, each time thinking that you've found what you are looking for.

When you don't find anywhere you take advantage of the fact that in Paris every other building is a restaurant or a hotel or a café and you pop inside to take advantage of their lavatory. Being a hesitant and shy tourist you don't like to use the loo without buying something so you order a cup of coffee on your way down the stairs. When you go down the stairs, with your bladder full, you are determined that you'll leave the coffee untouched. But when you come back up the stairs, with your bladder empty, your resolve has weakened and it seems a pity to waste it so you don't.

Ten or fifteen minutes later the whole business starts again. By the end of the day you've done nothing but search for lavatories and seen nothing but the insides of a hundred small cafés. That evening when you return to your hotel you take a solemn oath that tomorrow will be different but when you start your day with rolls and coffee you doom yourself to another identical day of torment. When you finally leave and get back home and people ask you if you enjoyed the catacombs or the Champs-Elysées you lie and say, of course you did. They lie too and say how wonderful it all is. And so the secret life of the typical tourist remains a secret life.

The cafés in Paris are a godsend because they all have loos. (Usually downstairs or upstairs). If you need to use the loo but don't want to buy more fluids just walk in and head for the first set of stairs you can find. Look for the word `toilettes'. Men and woman sometimes have to share facilities. In rough parts of the city you may still come across one of the old hole in the ground loos (called Turkish so as to blame some other country for the design). If you come across one of these make sure that you are ready to leave before you press the flush button. And then move quickly if you want to avoid getting wet feet.

Some of the smarter Parisian cafés still have a woman sitting down in the lavatory section. She will have a little table beside her on which there will be a small bowl. You are supposed to put coins into the bowl if you use the loo. If you don't do this she will chase you for several miles through Paris, hurling obscenities at your back. Never have we felt quite so ashamed of our country as when we once saw a teacher tell a crowd of English schoolchildren to go into a bar to use the loo, and to run in and out as quickly as they could to avoid paying the 30 centime fee.

There are lady attendants looking after the `official' loos too. For a small fee you get a clean lavatory, a towel, and soap. These women are professionals and they run their lavatories as a business. They deserve to make a fine living.

Finally, there are now in some areas of Paris the very latest high tech lavatories. These are sterilised at a million degrees centigrade after each use. Read the instructions, put your coin in and get in and out as quickly as you can. Those who have been caught in one of these loos during the cleansing process have been in no state to describe how bad it is afterwards.

27. Tipping

When artist Andy Warhol was shot, and thought to be dying, he was put into an ambulance with a friend who had also been shot. As they were about to drive off to the hospital the ambulance driver turned to Warhol's friend and said: `If we sound the siren, it'll cost five dollars extra'.

That happened in New York, of course but the French also like a good tip and few people in the service industry in France do anything much without expecting a bonus; a little something on top of their salary, wage, fee or bill.

Working out just what to give isn't easy. If you give too little the recipient will regard you with utter contempt. If, on the other hand, you give too much the recipient will regard you with utter contempt. The right amount to tip is something between 10% and 20%, depending upon the quality of the service you have been given. Do not, however, make the mistake made by a rather particular friend of ours from Switzerland who spent two weeks in Paris carefully working out every tip with a calculator to make sure that he gave exactly 15% and not a centime more or less to everyone he met. His tipping was exemplary but he would have had more fun working for a fortnight in an accountant's office.

If the tip is automatically added to the bill (as it usually will be) it is customary to leave any small coins that you receive for the waiter to collect.

Part 3: Understanding France and the French

1. Introduction

There are people of many nationalities in Paris, but most of the people you'll bump into will probably be French. It is, therefore, necessary to know a little about them.

The French are not like the rest of us.

Generally speaking the French are greedy, vain, mean and selfish. `Fais ce que tu veux' (do what you want) is a French family motto. The French are so full of self-regard that they don't give a fig about how others see them. `I want to come back in another life as a Parisian; shallow, superficial, vain, self-obsessed, beautifully dressed, shopping, eating, talking rubbish for hours in smoky cafés,' wrote a journalist recently.

These are not, however, attributes which the average Frenchman (were there such a creature) would regard as a sign of a character deficiency.

To understand the French you must realise that in their eyes, members of every other nationality in the world are, by the very fact of not being French, labouring under a huge and unassailable disadvantage in the daily stroll through life. The French are the most politically incorrect, selfish people in the world. They are racist, xenophobic and chauvinistic and proud of it. They would not vote for anyone who was not at least some and preferably all of these things.

In recent years the British have been taught to disapprove of eccentricity and try to eradicate it. The French, on the other hand, still respect eccentricity as exhibiting the very essence of individuality.

As a result of all this Paris is the least restricting city on the planet. It is a city where liberté, égalité and fraternité (freedom, equality and brotherhood) still mean something. It is city where the will of the people is respected as in no other city on earth. So, for example, when a group of keen rollerbladers started rolling through the streets of Paris on Friday evenings the Mayor responded quickly not by banning the event (as the Mayor surely would have done in London) but by providing a police escort to make sure that rollerbladers weren't injured and motorists weren't too inconvenienced. In Paris the aim of the city politicians is to give the people what they want whenever and however this is possible - however eccentric the demands might be. This is a pleasant contrast to the UK where the attitude is to spend public money stopping people doing things they want to do.

This section of *Secrets of Paris* is designed to introduce you to the French. There are, after all, so many of them living in Paris that it is difficult to avoid them completely. A modest understanding of what makes them tick, and what makes them tock, will help make your stay in their city more enjoyable.

2. The Parisians love Paris

The Parisians love their city. Many prefer to live there in cramped apartments rather than move out and live in relative luxury in the suburbs or in the countryside. You can buy a chateau with its own lake and parkland for the price of a small apartment in the centre of Paris but, although the French think of themselves as countrymen not many of them actually want to live too far away from their favourite cafés and restaurants.

Because of the high price of real estate in Paris many Parisians live in tiny, dark one or two room apartments which have no view and very little light. One bright and sunny afternoon we saw a respectably dressed old woman looking at her reflection in a shop window and using tweezers to pull hairs out of her chin. This puzzled us for a while until we realised that she was probably performing this rather private chore outside in the sunshine because her apartment was too dark for such a delicate operation.

Despite their love for Paris the Parisians are unbelievably blasé about their city. If you're lost or bewildered don't bother asking Parisians for help. An amazingly high percentage of Parisians have never visited the Louvre, been up the Eiffel tower or wandered around Notre Dame Cathedral. Because these things are always there they never bother with them. We have met visitors who have, after three days in Paris, seen more of the city's landmarks than Parisians who have lived there for a lifetime.

3. The male French attitude towards women

Women in France are idolised. French men love women and love French women most of all. And French women love themselves. But none of this alters the fact that France is very much a society dominated by men and run for men. Those who doubt this might like to remember that French women only got the vote in 1945 and up until 1965 a man could forbid his wife to go to work if he wanted her to stay at home polishing his shirts and ironing his shoes.

4. The French love flowers

Paris is full of florists. Having flowers in abundance in the parks isn't enough for the Parisians. They want them in their homes too. There are more shops and markets selling flowers than in any other city we know. There are, for example, more than half a dozen excellent florists within hailing distance of our apartment. Naturally, the competition helps keep down the prices. You can buy anything common and most things rare. The best flower markets are the huge Marche aux Fleurs (which is close to Notre Dame) and the stalls next to La Madelaine where, the last time we looked, one of the market stall holders had put up a sign saying `priere de toucher avec les yeux' (please touch with your eyes).

The florists are always busy because the French buy flowers for one another (as a cadeau) and for themselves (pour la maison). If you buy flowers for yourself the florist will cut and trim and wrap them nicely and give you advice about how much water you should give them and how often. (One florist once told us that tulips are gourmands, a thought which we rather liked.) If you tell the florist that the flowers are a present he or she will turn into an artist and cut and trim and wrap your selection in swathes of paper, clear cellophane and colourful ribbon and create an instant bouquet at no extra charge.

To the French (and, in particular, to the Parisians) luxuries are not things you don't need, don't want and can't afford. Luxury is an attitude and luxuries, such as flowers, are essentials which must be purchased first.

5. The French don't like Foreigners

The French don't like anyone very much (not even other French people. But it is foreigners the French loathe most of all. Their disapproval of other nationalities is often tinged with some affection (their hatred of the English is softened with respect and regard for the old enemy) but the brand of hatred and contempt they feel for most foreigners is undiluted. When there is talk of yet another `American offensive' somewhere in the world the French think that the journalist has simply missed out the word `are'.

There are many things that the French don't like about foreigners. For one thing they do not understand why so many foreigners dress like golfers even when they are not playing golf. And for another they do not understand why tourists think they have the right to be rude to everyone they meet.

The French are rude, of course, but their defence is that they have given the world great literature, great art, great architecture, great food, great wine and Napoleon, the world's greatest man. The French are obsessed with the arts and with literature. In a café a little while ago we found sugar cubes which had quotes from famous poets printed on the paper wrapping. What, demand the French, has America ever produced? Le Coca Cola, le hamburger and an endless series of films ripping off the French cinema. The French say that French rudeness comes from a difficult to define sense of status which is based on the fact that there are no humble people and no humble jobs in France.

We once stood on a bus in Paris and watched in amazement as a quartet of tourists demanded that the bus driver take them to their hotel in Montmartre, which is, of course, where they wanted to go, rather than to the place de la Bastille, which is where the bus was supposed to go.

Here are three true stories which best illustrate the way the French regard foreigners.

First, in the 1991 Gulf War the French were pressured to show solidarity with the American invasion of Iraq. So they sent an aircraft carrier. The French politicians did not, however, want to upset their own internal Muslim population so they did not put any aircraft on the ship. That's diplomacy French style.

Second, we once overheard this exchange between a tourist and a custodian in the military museum at Les Invalides. The tourist saw two skulls in a glass case but could not read the information card which was only in French.

`Whose are those skulls?' the tourist demanded, rather rudely.

`They belonged to Napoleon,' replied the custodian.

`Both of them?' demanded the tourist.

`Yes,' replied the custodian. `The small one was when he was a boy and the big one when he was a man.'

`Oh,' said the tourist, nodding wisely and taking photographs of both skulls.

Third, a young French friend of ours (a television executive, married to a high flying civil servant) told us that she once played hostess to a foreign couple who were visiting the city on business. It is a big deal for the French to invite a foreigner into their home. The French woman, Jeanette, told the foreigners that the wine they were drinking was 20-years-old. Afterwards she noticed that neither of the foreigners had touched the wine; their glasses were still full when they left the table.

`Did you not like the wine?' Jeanette asked, upset.

`We're very particular about sell-by-dates back home,' said the woman tourist. `If it's 20-years-old I'm afraid it must be well past its sell-by-date.'

6. The French don't have much of a sense of time

There are very few public clocks in Paris or, indeed, anywhere in France. Spend a few minutes in Paris and you'll soon see why.

The French seem perfectly capable of going off to lunch at the right time. It's getting back that they find difficult.

7. In France the shop assistant is always right

In many countries shop staff and service employees are taught that the customer is always right. This is not, and never has been, the case in France. In France the employee is always more important than the customer and the customer is always wrong, whatever they might say or do. (The only exceptions are the French themselves. French shoppers dominate a shop in the way that an armoured tank can dominate a village square.)

We do, however, know people who found a way round this. Emigrating friends of ours from East Anglia who had trouble with builders in France hired a friend with a camcorder to follow them around. They told the builder and his team that they were taking part in a British television programme about Britons moving to France. They made sure that word got back to the local mayor too. After that they were very well looked after. `People couldn't do enough for us,' the former East Anglians told us. `And the builders finished on time. The best bit was that since the programme was supposedly being made for British television none of the locals complained that they hadn't seen it promoted in the TV schedules.'

8. The French love dogs

The French are a confusing bundle of contradictions. Nothing illustrates this better than their attitude towards animals. On the one hand the French are the cruellest people on the planet. They hunt and shoot anything that moves and they force feed geese until they nearly burst so that they can make pâté from their livers.

But on the other hand they also love animals and adore them as pets. No one, not even the British, make as much fuss of their pet animals as the French do.

Although most of them live in apartments the Parisians still insist on keeping animals. Because they are French they naturally choose dogs which are in inverse size to the size of their apartments. So, for example, Parisians who live in tiny one roomed studio apartments usually keep Alsatians, Dobermans or Rottweilers. (The reasoning behind this is typically French. If you are seen out in the park with a huge dog everyone who sees you will assume that you must have an equally huge apartment. It doesn't work, of course, because everyone knows that people with small apartments deliberately choose big dogs for this reason. But French logic doesn't stretch this far.)

Those who can afford larger apartments (such as elderly actresses and call-girls) still favour small dogs which they can carry under their arms and decorate with ribbons and bows to match the day's outfit. One Parisian friend of ours (a woman of indeterminate years but firm opinions who shares her apartment with three cats) insists that any attractive woman who is by herself but accompanied by a small dog must either now be, or must once have been, a prostitute, but we think this may be a potentially dangerous generalisation.

There is a delightful and rather elderly lady who lives in our street. She had a modest career as an actress but a far more successful career as a fiancée. In her twenties she was engaged more often than a public lavatory in central Paris and as a result of these unsuccessful alliances put together an impressive collection of jewellery (by no means just rings) which, in her thirties, she sold and converted into property. Today, she is wealthy enough to live in some comfort. She has one of those tiny, hairless dogs which always look as though they are dying from some terrible disease or have been taking a long course of chemotherapy. Whenever she takes it for a walk she dresses it in something that matches her chosen outfit of the day. For example, yesterday we saw her queuing outside the bread shop. She was dressed in a smart purple jacket while the dog had a matching purple scarf around its neck. She has scarves for the dog which match all her outfits. The inevitable result of all these dogs is that the pavements of Paris are festooned with the inevitable unpleasant consequences. As a result Parisians develop the `avoidance sidestep' which involves walking around with their eyes fixed firmly on the pavement a yard or two ahead and shuffling and jiggling around the hazards. Visitors who want to avoid taking souvenirs back into their hotel rooms are wise to adopt this method of walking, though it does rather spoil one's chances of enjoying the views. A high percentage of elderly Parisians seem to be afflicted with dowager's humps and we suspect that this may be a result of years spent shuffling along the pavements of Paris, ever watchful for the next steaming pile of steaming excrement.

Incidentally, the French don't put up signs saying `Beware of the dog'. Instead they put up signs saying simply `Chien mechant'. The words `chien mechant' do not, of course, mean that there is just a guard dog on the premises. A chien mechant is a wicked dog. We have even seen signs illustrated with slavering dogs which are clearly intended to be rabid.

9. The French love cats too

The French also love cats. It has been reported that one in two Parisians sleeps with a cat every night.

Although Paris is full of cats you won't see many of these cats out and about. The French love their cats so much that they don't usually let them outside where they might get run over. We have, however, seen cats riding both on pedal cycles and motorcycles. The one on a bicycle was sitting in a wickerwork basket attached to the bicycle handlebars. The one riding on a motorbike was sitting in one of the panniers. His head was sticking out of the pannier and he was taking a great interest in the world passing by. Neither cat was alone. Both were accompanied by Frenchmen.

In addition to loving cats for all the usual reasons the French have a great deal of respect for cats as hunters. Last year a Scottish friend of ours who was visiting Paris on business spotted a mouse in his hotel room. He rang down and reported this to the reception desk. `It will be dealt with at once,' he was told. Our Scottish friend repacked his case and waited to be taken to a mouse free room. He was rather surprised when, a few minutes later, a porter arrived and thrust a cat into his arms. `The cat will get rid of the mouse for you,' our friend was told.

10. The French love demonstrations

Even if your stay in Paris lasts only for a few days you are quite likely to see at least one demonstration while you are there. The French absolutely adore demonstrations. If there isn't at least one major demonstration (une manifestation) in Paris each week the papers start asking questions about the future of democracy.

The demonstrations can be about anything or nothing. Farmers protest about the meanness of the Common Agricultural Policy (yes, we know). Hunters protest to confirm their right to shoot anything that moves (including each other) whenever the shooting takes their fancy. And, of course, students protest just for the hell of it. We once saw a demonstration involving lawyers. It was quite surreal to see hordes of black gowned lawyers marching through the streets with placards and banners. We can't for the life of us remember what they were protesting about but it almost certainly doesn't matter now and it probably didn't matter much then either. Our favourite demonstration occurred a year or two ago when unemployed French workers went on strike and blockaded government offices. They were demanding higher benefit payments and threatening to refuse to do nothing if they didn't get what they wanted.

Ask a demonstrator what he is demonstrating about and he'll probably just shrug his shoulders and carry on shouting general abuse about the Government. Just as there are people in some countries who routinely attend funerals for fun so, in France, there are people who routinely attend demonstrations. To the keen funeral goer the identity of the person in the coffin is of no consequence. To the demonstration aficionado the subject of the demonstration is irrelevant.

The right to demonstrate or take direct action in France is highly valued and comes partly from the revolutionary traditions established in 1789 and partly from the French lack of faith in parliamentary representation. The French regard their parliament as weak and, indeed, it is pretty much ignored by the executive and by the French civil service.

France may be the most bureaucratic country in the world but it is also a natural home-land for revolutionaries and so politicians take demonstrations seriously. Street protests have, in the past, toppled governments and they will doubtless do so in the future.

French demonstrations sometimes look a bit scary but they are usually pretty peaceful and unthreatening affairs and we don't worry too much if we turn a corner and get caught up in one. The lack of aggression is probably a result of the fact that the demonstrators know that they can do pretty much whatever they like (including disrupting the traffic) as long as they finish on time and don't involve the police in any overtime.

The main difference between demonstrations in most countries and France is that while in other countries the police regard street protestors as potential terrorists, who deserve to have their heads broken and their limbs torn from their bodies, in France the police recognise that demonstrating is a highly responsible, respectable part of everyday social life.

We once watched in amazement as demonstrators lit a huge bonfire in the middle of what was normally a busy Paris street. The demonstrators scavenged bits of wood from building skips and paper from dustbins and lit an impromptu fire that blazed forty or fifty feet into the sky. There wasn't a policeman in sight. Then, as we passed by and approached a nearby corner, we noticed a policeman's head poking around the brickwork. Round the corner, completely out of sight, there were twenty busloads of policemen and a couple of fire engines. Most of the policemen were sitting playing cards in their buses. They were wearing full body armour but had their helmet visors pushed back so that they could see the cards. (The Parisian police have little tables set up in the buses so that they can all set up little foursomes for cards). The policeman peering round the corner was a look out keeping an eye on things. Presumably, if the flames had got to some unacceptable height, the watching policeman would have blown his whistle and the card-playing coppers would have dropped their cards and streamed out of their buses to do the necessary.

11. The French don't give a fig about their cars

Millions of British motorists spend their Sunday mornings cleaning and polishing their cars but you would never catch a Frenchman so much as flicking a duster over a motor car. We would hazard a guess that the French market for car polish must be the smallest in the world. The French regard the motor car as a thoroughly overrated piece of equipment. It is neither a status symbol nor a sign of virility.

The British also tend to worry more about minor bumps and scratches than French drivers do. Walk around a major

British city and you'll find bumps and dents the exception rather than the rule. Walk around Paris, however, and you'll be hard put to it to find any motor car that hasn't got a few curves that weren't in the original specifications. Most Parisian cars look as if they have spent some time fitted on a pole and being driven round and round a dodgem car enclosure.

On quiet walks along dull avenues you can amuse yourself by counting the number of cars you pass which do have dents or scratches. Our record is 23 damaged cars in a row. You will find that it is difficult to spot more than a tiny proportion of cars which are undamaged. Dents and bumps are so common in French cars that we have a sneaking suspicion that the dealers put them in before they allow their cars onto the road. To be honest we strongly suspect that a good, honest Frenchman (assuming one could be found) would be embarrassed to be seen driving a motor car that didn't have a dent or two in the body work. French motorists certainly don't waste time claiming on their insurance or having their bumps hammered out.

You will probably be spending more of your time in Paris as a pedestrian than as a motorist and so you should be aware that French drivers don't have much of a sense of responsibility as far as pedestrians are concerned.

French drivers tend to park their cars where they happen to stop. Since there are rarely any suitable parking spaces in the city centre this means that they simply park on the first pedestrian crossing they come to, leaving pedestrians with the choice of either squeezing between two sets of bumpers or climbing over the car bonnet.

While on the subject of road safety it is also well worth remembering that traffic lights in Paris are there merely to add a little colour to the motorist's day. Green lights on the roads are a negotiating point. Car, lorry and bus drivers know that they are in an advantaged negotiating position when they are dealing with pedestrians. What sort of damage can even a plump visitor do to a speeding Citroen?

There are speed limits in Paris but it is quite clear that most people don't know what they are and the few who do, don't care much about them. If asked to make an informed guess we would say that the usual speed limit within the city is 70 mph. Around the place de la Concorde and the Etoile (at the top of the Champs-Elysées) the speed limit must be somewhere in between 80 mph and 100 mph.

Finally, you should be aware that motorcyclists often ride on the pavement - usually travelling at the sort of speeds you'd expect them to travel on the roads. They, like Sartre and Picasso sitting in a café pretending the Germans aren't even there, are simply doing what the French do best: either ignoring reality, or driving round it.

12. The French are very vain

The French may not care two hoots about what their cars look like but they are very fussy about their personal appearance. The city is crammed with beauty salons and hairdressers. And, in Paris, everyone it seems is an expert on such matters. Even the novelist Colette once opened a chain of beauty salons. (Though, by all accounts, she wasn't terribly good at it. Even her dearest friends said that her clients emerged looking 15 years older.)

A neighbour once told us about a former actress (she was, apparently, something of a star in her now long-forgotten day) who insists on having her hair and make-up done even if she is only having visitors to lunch in her own apartment.

When French singer, songwriter and general superstar Serge Gainsbourg had a heart attack he refused to go to hospital because he didn't like the colour of the blanket the ambulance crew tried to drape over him. The ailing Gainsbourg clambered off the stretcher, crawled into his flat and dragged himself upstairs to find a better coloured blanket.

13. Elegance and style

The French don't much care what you or they do as long as it is done with style and elegance. When they go camping they take chairs, table, tablecloth, napkins, silverware and a wine cooler. When you buy a single cake in a pâtisserie in Paris the assistant will carefully place your selection on a white cardboard tray, wrap it in pretty paper and then tie the whole thing up with a ribbon so that you can walk out of the shop dangling your purchase from a single finger.

The posh French always set the table with the tines of the fork pointing down against the table cloth rather than up in the air (as most other people usually do). They do this in order to display the family crest on the back of the fork.

Look around in the shops (including the supermarkets) and you will see that Parisian housewives of all ages invariably put on their best frocks to go shopping. They never go out in public without having their hair done and without full make-up.

The French continue to care about their appearance however old they get. A 20-year-old English girl probably doesn't give two hoots about what she will look like in fifty years. A 20-year-old French girl does. By the middle of the 21st century British nursing homes are going to be full of elderly women with roses tattooed on their breasts and buttocks. This will not happen in France. French women don't have tattoos; they long ago realised that what might look quite fetching on a 20-year-old girl would look downright silly on a 70-year-old dowager.

Even women in their 80s and 90s totter out with nails, hair and make-up all looking immaculate. In Britain women of this age would be sitting in red plastic chairs in nursing homes. In Paris, women of that same age have a little apartment (with a budgie or a cat for company) and they do their own shopping and cooking. They never, ever pop out in their curlers and slippers. No one hurries them.

We were in a French department store recently, passing through the bra department, where several acres of expensive lingerie were offered for sale. We saw two women in their 70s who were looking at bras. `No, this is no good,' said one, discarding a bra she had been looking at. `This is far too plain. There is not enough lace.'

`Might I be so bold as to ask just who is going to see?' asked the second woman.

`Just me,' replied the first woman rather indignantly. `That is enough.'

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The disappearance of the once famous French pissoirs is a consequence of the French obsession with style and manners over substance. Pissoirs were small, green painted metal facilities which were introduced so that men would no longer have an excuse for urinating in shop doorways. They were extremely popular with cab drivers and bus drivers but they were remarkably simple.

The business part of the erection (the porcelain) was protected from the world by a green metal screen which started about two feet off the ground and finished a few feet higher. There was no roof (so the pissoir was cleaned every time it rained). Pedestrians passing by could see the feet and heads of those using the pissoir, but they couldn't see the business end of the operation being conducted. One of the last pissoirs to go was the one outside the Ministry of Defence in the rue Saint Dominique.

Pissoirs disappeared after the French Parliament spent days debating whether a gentleman in a pissoir should raise his hat if he recognised a woman passing by. They simply couldn't make up their minds and, in the end, decided that the easiest solution was to get rid of all the pissoirs.

The Government replaced pissoirs with high tech self-cleaning unisex vacuum modules which are, no doubt, very sanitary and high tech (every few minutes they are hosed down with force and so if you use one make sure you get out fast afterwards) but rather ugly. Photographers used to take wonderfully evocative shots of pissoirs but we can't see anyone bothering to waste pixels on Paris's new modular conveniences.

The French love codes, formalities and style. They love to do things the right way. La règle rules. Everything should be done at the right time and speed, at the right place and in the right way. And while you are doing what you are doing, you must be wearing the right clothes. We suspect that the French would forgive murder if it was done by someone wearing a well-chosen outfit.

Occasionally, the French obsession with doing things `comme il faut' (properly) creates problems.

A young French friend of ours called Henri is desperate to look like an Englishman (surprisingly this is a common yearning among French men). He goes about wearing a sports coat, grey flannels and brogues but he doesn't look in the slightest bit like an Englishman.

`Do I look like an Englishman?' Henri asked us. `You must be honest with me.'

He could tell from our faces that he didn't.

`What is wrong?' he asked.

`None of your jacket buttons is hanging loose from a single thread, your trousers are creased in the right places and the leather patches on your elbows are polished rather than scuffed,' we told him. `You're trying too hard.'

14. No shame

The French do not understand the meaning of the word embarrassment.

When Helene, the wife of a friend of ours who lives in the 4th arrondissement, told her husband, Jean-Jacques, that she had nothing to wear for an important dinner with a client of his he didn't believe her and wouldn't allow her to buy anything new. This turned out to be a mistake. The two of them have separate dressing rooms in their apartment and met in the hallway of their apartment only when they were ready to leave.

We would love to have been there when Helene took off her coat at the client's home. Underneath it she was wearing nothing but a tasteful selection of expensive Parisian lingerie which, being French, revealed far more than it hid. `But I told you I had nothing to wear,' she told her husband when he protested.

Jean-Jaques took her to Ungaro's in the Avenue Montaigne the very next day and bought her two expensive new gowns.

Jean-Jaques is, incidentally, an extremely successful French novelist. Under several feminine pen names he writes romantic fiction which appeals to women of all ages. Ten years ago he realised that his audience would be more enthusiastic about his books if he could promote them on television. He realised, however, that he couldn't do this because all his pen names were female. (When French women buy romantic fiction they expect it to be written by a woman.) And so he hired a young actress to pretend to be him. Or, rather, to pretend to be the author he was pretending to be. The young actress signed a secrecy agreement and agreed to do promotional appearances on radio and television.

She read all his books and rehearsed a series of bright anecdotes with which to entertain listeners and viewers. After six months (and dramatically increased sales figures) the author and the actress fell in love. Despite the incident with the missing dress they are now very happily married. Jean-Jaques and Helene, the two halves of the romantic authoress have been joined together.

15. The elderly in Paris

The elderly in Paris are universally dignified. They go for walks, they play boules, they exercise their dogs, they sit in cafés, they have a drink in a bar. They do not wear hideous elastic-waisted trousers, live in ghettos and travel around on coaches.

Traditionally, the French look after their old people. The elderly make good babysitters who are cheap and can, usually, be relied upon not to sleep with monsieur.

Sadly, however, the reputation of the French for looking after their elderly took something of a hit in 2003 when, during a heat wave, tens of thousands of elderly Parisians died alone and unnoticed in their boiling hot apartments while their families were away at the beach.

16. The French royal family

Although it is entirely their own fault, the French regret no longer having a royal family.

They do, of course, borrow the British Royal Family when they feel the need. Some French popular magazines still carry stories about Princess Diana almost as often as the *Daily Express* does.

To replace a hereditary royal family the French have Johnny Halliday.

Monsieur Halliday is a singer, actor and personality who became a star in France at about the same time as Elvis Presley became a star in America. He is a big a star in France as Elvis was almost everywhere else. You can get some idea of Johnny's popularity when we tell you that his last double album sold over two million copies on its first day of sale. Go into a record store and you will see almost all his old albums on sale.

It is rare to visit Paris and not see posters advertising a new Johnny Hallyday album, film, television special, concert, autobiography or magazine feature. The guy seems to have done everything and to be everywhere. Astonishingly, he has even made a cowboy film.

Occasionally, Monsieur Halliday will perform a free concert to a million or so of his closest admirers. One, which was held underneath the Eiffel Tower, attracted a crowd which stretched all the way back to the École Militaire. Stand underneath the Tower and look away from the river. The adoring crowd lasted as far as you can see and included young couples with babies as well as grandparents.

Monsieur Hallyday is a phenomenon. If he ever puts himself up for election he will doubtless become President.

17. The French police

In most countries people have grown accustomed to the fact that policemen spend most of their time sitting in comfortable cars or vans waiting for motorists to whizz past so that they can fine them.

In Paris, you will actually see policemen wandering around. Spend a day in Paris and you will have probably seen policemen patrolling in cars, on motorbikes, on mountain bikes, in vans, on rollerblades, on foot and on horseback. Some will be in twos, some will be in threes and some will be in little clusters. Quite a few will be smiling. The policemen in Paris will actually give advice to tourists who are lost without demanding to see identification or shooting them seven times in the head.

If you get a chance, by the way, do lose something and totter into the local police station to make a report. You will probably find yourself reporting to a detective who has a cigarette hanging from one corner of his mouth. He will wear a trenchcoat with the collar turned up and squint a good deal (possibly as a result of the rising plume of cigarette smoke). A third of French policemen look like Jean Gabin, a third look like Jean-Paul Belmondo and the rest look like Alain Delon. The French police pick out their reports on old-fashioned sit up and beg typewriters left over from the black and white movies.

18. The French are quick to learn

You must not give the French Ideas

An English banker friend of ours was sitting in the notaire's office, buying an apartment to use as a pied à terre.

`Will you be leaving the fixtures and fittings?' he asked.

The people selling the apartment looked at him with raised eyebrows.

`The light fittings, bathroom cupboards, things like that.'

`Do English people take these?' they asked, unable to disguise their astonishment.

`I'm afraid some do,' he confessed, feeling ashamed of his countrymen; ashamed that they would do such things.

`Really?' said the French couple. `They take the bathroom cupboard?' They looked at the notaire. He shrugged.

`A couple I know bought a house,' continued our friend, `and when they got there even the doors and the skirting boards had gone.'

`No! This cannot be!' said the shocked couple. `Surely no one would do such a terrible thing.'

`I'm afraid so,' said our friend, now feeling much more comfortable about the flat he was buying. `Whenever I have bought a house the previous owners have removed everything they could,' he explained. `They all told the lawyers that they would leave stuff. And then took it. The bathroom cupboard, the light fittings, the curtains, the carpets, the television aerial - all that stuff. Someone I know got to their new home and found that the lawn had been rolled up and taken away.'

`Good heavens,' said the French couple. `How terrible.' They tutted and shook their heads. `It is unbelievable,' they said.

`This terrible thing does not happen here,' said the notaire firmly. The French couple both nodded.

When our friend got the key to his new apartment he rushed round, full of excitement at owning a piece of Paris.

Everything that could be moved, unscrewed or prised away from the walls had gone.

19. Non!

An Italian publisher friend of ours (a man who loves Paris but is not quite so sure about the Parisians) insists that the first word of French that a baby learns is `Non' and the first complete sentence is `It is not possible.' He claims, however, that he has found the answer to this negativity. When asking for something to be done he begins with: `I am sure this is not possible. Am I right?' He then explains what he wants. Being contrary the French will usually insist that they can do the impossible. So, for example, when speaking to a workman our friend might say: `I know, of course it would not be possible to do (whatever it is) because there are no workmen around these days who can do those things.' He says that the workmen always become very indignant and say that although for others it may be impossible, they can do it.

20. The French are very formal

If you speak French do not ever make the mistake of referring to a stranger as `tu'. The French reserve `tu' for very close family and extremely close friends. They do not `tutu' strangers.

One of the many men who have repaired our heating system once told us that he knew a married couple in their 70s who, despite having been married for over forty years and having had four children, had still not got to the point where they called one another `tu'.

Even he thought this rather unusual.

But it happens.

21. The French love music

In our apartment building in Paris there is one saxophonist, one violinist, one pianist and one accordionist. Plus one baby. Sometimes all these musicians choose to play together. They open their windows so that they can share their music with their neighbours. Naturally this wakes up the baby who adds his own particular brand of music to the ensemble. But it’s real, it’s human and it’s lovely.

22. Civic efficiency

Apart from their affection for dogs (and their willingness to allow them to defecate everywhere) the Parisians are very proud of their city's cleanliness. And, to be fair, it is probably the cleanest capital city in the world. The streets are swept constantly, water is flushed along the gutters every day (via a magnificent system which relies on bits of old sacking tied together with string to direct the water in the approved direction) and rubbish is collected daily. We heard banging at 9 p.m. one Saturday evening. We looked out of the window and saw the dustmen emptying the bins (they were a bit late that night but they still came).

23. The arty farty French

The French are very arty and the Parisians are more arty than anyone anywhere else in France.

If your French is good enough you could try going to the theatre. There are many theatres in Paris and at least one will always be doing something by Moliere (who is to the French what Shakespeare is to everyone else but who is, we hate to have to admit it, sometimes wittier and sharper). Molière was the world's first real social satirist.

Other than works by Molière there are two plays performed at French theatres. In the first play two men dress up as women. There is always a good reason for this of course. In the second play a middle aged man has a young mistress. They are getting to know each other in the family bed when the man's wife comes home and catches them. There is then much rushing about and a great deal of opening and shutting of doors.

If you prefer cinema to theatre you will be thoroughly spoilt for choice, though be warned: French cinema goers like to make cinema more exciting by missing the first five minutes, making a noticeable entrance and then having to spend the next 90 minutes (or whatever) trying to work out what is happening by whispering loudly to one another.

If you want to see a film in the original language (e.g. English) simply look out for a film being shown in the ‘version originale’ (you will see the letters V.O. somewhere on the poster or above the ticket queue).

Working out the titles isn't always easy, however. You might imagine that film titles would be translated in a fairly straightforward manner with the result that well-known films might become: Les Freres Bleux, Le Son de Musique, Disparu avec le Vente, Quel q'un l'Aime Chaud and Pour Quelques Dollars Encore.

But this is France and things aren't done in such an obvious way. In an attempt to put their own stamp onto a film the French will usually give it a title which bears no resemblance to a translation of the original. So, for example, Les Freres Bleux would probably be advertised as Les Soeurs du Nuit. Go figure if you have the time. Alternatively, you can probably guess what is showing by looking at the posters and reading the small print.

24. Essential advice if you need to abuse a Frenchman

If you spend time in Paris then, sooner or later, you will need to abuse a Frenchman (or woman). This is just the way things are and it is no shame on you or the French person you will be abusing.

When this happens there is one very important thing to remember: however well you speak French you should revert to English.

English friends of ours who are quite fluent in French admit that they always revert to English when they need to berate a workman, traffic warden or difficult concierge.

`I always freeze and forget what I want to say if I try to shout in French,' admits the husband, who, to our ear, speaks French like a native. `You are at a huge disadvantage if you try to have row in their language,' he says. `Their invective will always be better than yours. Your only chance of getting the upper hand is to shout in English. You will know better words and whereas you might recognise something of what they are saying there is a chance that, if you show sufficient imagination, they won't have the faintest idea what you are saying. If you should lose your temper and say something quite unforgivable you will get away with it because they won't know what you've said.'

25. Speaking French (or not)

Apart from the English and the Americans, the French are the only people in the world who expect strangers to speak their language.

What will de Gaulle find to talk about to God, Noel Coward was once asked. `It depends,' murmured Coward, `on how good God's French is.'

But whereas the British and the Americans always try to help foreigners who don't speak English by raising their voices and shouting a good deal the French tend to just tut and smile and to shake their heads in that infuriating Gallic way that tells you that although they aren't saying anything downright rude they think that you're really, really stupid and inferior to them and that this is entirely due to the fact that you had the misfortune to be born foreign and not French. It's not your fault, of course, so they don't blame you. They just feel sorry for you.

The French like foreigners (that's us) to try to speak their language because it enables them to correct our grammar or our pronunciation or, preferably, both. This makes them feel superior and, therefore, very pleased with themselves. The French, more than any other nation on earth, like feeling pleased with themselves. If there is one word which sums up the French it is `smug'. They are often quite jolly people. But they are always smug.

It is crucial to remember that if you try to speak French then however you choose to say it, and whatever you choose to say, something you say will be wrong. You must not take offence at this. It is just the way the French like to put you down and show that they are superior to you.

When a friend of ours called Kenneth first visited Paris he ordered a Pernod in a famous pavement café which we won't mention because it's the Café de la Paix in the place de l'Opera and we want to be able to go back there. The waiter stared at him, clearly puzzled. `Purnow?' he said, wrinkling up his nose and shaking his head. Kenneth pointed to the menu to explain what he wanted. `Ah!' said the waiter, understanding. `Pairnew.' Our friend nodded, grateful for the correction.

The next time Kenneth went into the same café (which we still won't name because it's still the Café de la Paix) he ordered a `Pairnew.' The waiter stared at him as if he'd asked for a plate of fish and chips with lots of salt and vinegar and extra batter. Once again Kenneth had to go through the ritual of pointing to the relevant line in the menu. `Ah!' said the waiter. `Purnow!'

Kenneth left Paris convinced that café waiters go to special classes where they practise tricks designed to make their customers look like idiots. He was mistaken. There are no special classes. French waiters do this quite instinctively.

There's an old joke about an Englishman in Paris who called over the waiter.

`Waiter, there is a fly in my soup,' said the Englishman. The waiter stared at him, uncomprehendingly.

`Un mouche,' said the Englishman, pointing to the soup and the offending insect.

The waiter peered at the fly. `Ah, non, monsieur c'est une mouche,' said the waiter. `The fly is feminine.'

The Englishman looked down. `How the hell can you see that?' he demanded.

Of course, you don't really need to speak French at all in Paris.

Most French people (and all French people in Paris) speak English when they want you to do something for them (such as give them money) although they don't speak a word of it when you want them to do something for you.

Most French people (and nearly all the ones you are likely to meet as a traveller in Paris) speak perfectly passable English (though their grammar and punctuation sometimes need correcting and, generally speaking, we hope you will do this for them).

Remember this at all times: however much they pretend they don't understand or speak English they do.

English is very much the language of Europe these days. It is the language of the Internet, the language of medicine and science and the language of money. The French don't like this, of course, but that's just their hard luck. Club de golf is the official Academie Francaise French for golf club. That says it all, really, doesn't it?

If you have something difficult to do simply insist that the conversation is conducted in English. This will put the French in a position of inferiority and it will put you in charge of the conversation.

These days, we don't much care so much about the French being so snooty about their language because when they speak English they invariably make an enormous mess of things. They all think that they speak perfect English and are far too arrogant to realise what enormous clangers they have made.

Sometimes, just for fun, we don't tell them what fools they are making of themselves and, on occasion, nor should you.

One French acquaintance of ours, who is proud of his wife's cooking, tells everyone he meets who speaks English: `My wife has made herself into a wonderful tart and everyone who has ever had a taste agrees with me.' We always nod wisely and let him carry on sharing this delightful piece of news with others whom he wishes to impress.

`Slimmers are just fat losers,' the same acquaintance once said when translating and explaining the word `slimmer' for his wife. She went to a dinner with some Germans in Neuilly and had to run for her life when she repeated his definition. We felt guilty for several microseconds when we heard this. But it's difficult to feel truly guilty when you are convulsed with laughter.

26. The well-mannered French

The French are gloriously unpredictable and inconsistent; sometimes they are extremely polite, sometimes they are very rude and sometimes they are both at once. On occasion, the French can be the rudest people in the world. (They've had a lot of practice at it.) Paradoxically, they are sometimes the most well-mannered.

When we finish a letter in English we sign off with `Yours sincerely'. When the French finish a letter they sign off with: `Nous vous prions d'agréer monsieur, l'assurance de nos sentiments respecteux' (which roughly translates as we beg you to believe, sir, in the assurance of our respectful sentiments).

If you buy something in a Parisian shop and say `thank you' to the assistant, he or she will automatically snap back insistently with: `Non, c'est moi qui vous remercie'. (No, it's me who thanks you).

Even the children are relatively well behaved in France. Walk around Paris and you will see school children going to or from the park in neat rows of two. Each pair of children will be well dressed and holding hands. This is something we don't see in other countries these days; largely because even six-year-olds have a syringe in one hand and a knife in the other and so cannot possibly hold hands with one another.

27. The French don't `get' irony

Near to the Eiffel Tower we saw a poster attached to the glass door of a small shop. The words on the poster were `Vivre ensemble, pas sans vous' and there was a picture of a man in a wheelchair facing a row of steps. The message was simple: we must all live together. The disabled must not be excluded.

The irony, apparently unnoticed by the shopkeeper who had put the poster in his window, was that in order to enter that particular shop customers had to climb up a massive step. No wheelchair could have ever possibly been manoeuvred into that emporium.

Wonderful.

28. The French and their health

The French drink and smoke to excess but they care passionately about the food they choose to eat. Mortality rates show that although the French have the highest incidence of liver disease in the known world they have a relatively low incidence of heart disease.

Watch Parisian workmen buying their luncheon and you'll see what we mean. Local workmen often buy their lunch in one or other of the supermarkets near where we live. They will buy themselves a freshly baked baguette, a piece of brie or camembert or a slice of ham. They will pick out a fresh apple for desert. They will wash this down with a bottle of water or a bottle of wine. In nutritional terms that's a far cry from the British workman's lunch of a burger or a pie and chips and a pint of beer.

It's not surprising that the French have less heart trouble.

(It would, incidentally, be a mistake to assume that the French prefer simple foods because they cannot be bothered with more complicated arrangements. When workmen were painting our building they drank filtered coffee at break time. We know this because we saw the used filters and coffee grounds in the rubbish they had discarded.)

The French, a nation of hypochondriacs if ever there was one, are obsessed with their health and have four main eccentricities relating to their health.

First, they believe that all health problems are caused by liver troubles. And, considering the amount of wine they drink they are probably right. They believe that everything that goes wrong with them is caused by a faulty liver. It is because of this that they consume so much mineral water. Go into a supermarket and you'll see dozens of different varieties on the shelves. They supplement the mineral water with all sorts of weird and wonderful potions. There are as many pharmacies as bakeries in our arrondissement. That's a lot of pharmacies.

Second, they do a great deal of self-diagnosing. They don't use general practitioners in the way that the British do. If they feel ill they decide what is wrong with them and take themselves off to a specialist. It's the French patient, not a general practitioner, who decides what sort of -ologist is required.

Third, the French prefer suppositories to tablets. This is actually quite wise since suppositories are usually less likely to produce unpleasant or dangerous side effects.

Fourth, the French always do what their doctors tell them to do. (French doctors who want to keep their patients never tell them to stop drinking alcohol.) One of our neighbours told us a story about her sister which illustrates this blind obedience very well. The woman was diagnosed as suffering from a fatal disease and was told by the doctor to put her affairs in order. Puzzled but compliant the woman went home and made a list (date, places and names) of all the affairs she had had. (She presumably thought it was some sort of catharsis, designed to make her passing easier.) She then put the fatal list in a drawer in the family bureau and forgot all about it. Three weeks later the woman's doctor told her that a terrible (but at the same time wonderful) mistake had been made by the laboratory. She didn't have a fatal disease and wasn't going to die after all. The woman was overwhelmed with joy. She and her husband celebrated for a week. They had dinner at expensive restaurants. They went to the theatre. And they decided to give up work and to move to the country. It was during the preparations for the move that the husband found the list the woman had made of all her lovers.

The story does, however, have a happy ending. Far from being angry, the husband was very understanding. He said he hadn't realised that his wife had so many `friends' in Paris and would she really prefer to stay in the city? The woman thought about it for a day or two and finally admitted that, given the choice, she thought she'd settle for retiring and staying in Paris.

So, that's what they did.

We suspect that if the husband ever put his affairs in order his list would be even longer than his wife's.

29. The French are only interested in the best

If you walk around Paris for a while you will notice that while one bread shop in a neighbourhood has an enormous queue outside it the bread shop just a hundred yards down the road will be deserted. In most places the people in the long queue would simply go to the other shop. In France they don't.

The reason for this is simple.

The bread shop with the queue is the one where the baker is constantly making fresh bread. And he is making good bread. Everyone walks out with something warm in their hand. None of them is carrying a pre-wrapped sliced loaf.

There are, of course, dozens of different types of bread available in his shop (and many different types and sizes of baguette). He uses the best ingredients and makes the best bread in the arrondissement.

The shop down the road has no customers because the baker only bakes two or three times a day, or maybe just every four hours or so. He cannot afford to keep baking bread because he has no customers. It is the baker's Catch 22. How can he possibly obtain a queue of his own without making lorry loads of unsold bread?

(A baker which sold bread baked the day before would last about as long in France as a pub which sold only lemonade would last elsewhere.)

30. French slimmers

A man who helped paint our apartment told us that his wife, whom he described as `plump', is a member of a slimming club in the 18th Arrondissement, where they live. She and her fellow slimmers have weekly meetings in a local café which has a tremendous reputation for serving excellent but inexpensive meals. They drink a glass of mineral water each and they weigh themselves on a pair of scales which belong to the café owner. At the end of each weekly meeting the women have a seven course meal. (The attendees are all women. No Frenchman would ever attend a slimming club.) The painter told us that his wife and her friends never lose any weight but have a great time together on their night out. He said he suspected that none of them really wants to lose weight because, if they do, they'll have to give up their weekly meetings. The painter told us that his wife has been a member of the club for nearly a year and that during that time she has gone up two dress sizes but claims to have lost 5kg in weight.

He told us that he thought the café owner was manipulating the scales so that although the women are, in reality, getting heavier they constantly think that they are getting lighter.

It's the sort of thing the French would do. It enables them to feel good about themselves without ever having to face the unpleasantness of reality.

31. Kissing and shaking

The French do a lot of kissing. An English friend of ours called Richard works as an editor in a publishing office with nine other people - all French. Each morning all the employees have to kiss one another. `It is nearly time to go for lunch by the time we all get through this complicated but essential ritual,' says Richard. `After the kissing is done all the women have to go off to repair their lipstick. There is no air kissing in France. These are proper kisses.'

Kissing is now a global phenomenon. In America, women greeting one another confine themselves to one kiss (kisses are usually on the lips rather than on the cheek or in the air). Everywhere else is mwah mwah kissing that is fashionable. In Austria, Hungary, Spain and Sweden two kisses are considered de rigeur. In the USA and Britain, the two kiss greeting has become popular. Egypt, Russia, Belgium, Holland and Switzerland are all three kiss countries.

But the whole kissy kissy thing started in France.

Standard French kissing (as practised in the French provinces and now one of France's most popular exports) has for years involved three moves: a kiss on the left cheek, a kiss on the right cheek and finally a kiss on the left cheek again. The de luxe French kiss, as practised in Paris, adds a final right cheek kiss to this barrage of osculatory activity.

In addition to kissing one another a great deal, the French love shaking hands. Another friend of ours, a young Dutchman who works in a rather formal Parisian bank, tells us that shaking hands takes up an hour every morning. As they arrive at the bank each person must shake hands with everyone else. Since there are 17 people in the office where he works this means that each person must shake hands with 16 other people. `One or two also kiss each other,' says our Dutch friend. `They usually do the kissing after the formal shaking.'

When we visit our usual supermarket in Paris the manager comes over to greet us and shake hands. (We confess that we quite like this. It makes us feel wanted.)

The French even shake hands when they are in informal situations. We once sat on a beach in the South of France and watched in amazement as two groups of semi-naked people spent ten minutes shaking hands with one another.

32. The best French law

In France it is against the law to ignore someone needing help. Failure to offer assistance to a person in distress is a criminal offence under paragraph 2 of article 63 of the French penal code. This applies to everyone and is, in our view, the best piece of French legislation in existence.

33. Staying cool

There is a card headed `what-to-do-in-an-emergency' in the hallway of an apartment building near to ours. Printed on the card, in large letters, are the words: `Gardez Votre Sang-Froid'. `Keep Your Self Control'. Just that. Nothing else. The French don't like to be seen to panic. It simply isn't cool.

34. Waving not drowning

The French wave their hands and arms around a good deal when they are talking. Naturally, they still do this when they are using their hands-free mobile telephones. When we first saw this happening we were rather startled. We were walking along the Avenue Montaigne when we spotted a guard in a uniform standing outside an upmarket jewellery store. He was waving both arms in the air as though fighting off a swarm of bees. When we got closer we could hear him talking. But there was no one within yards of him. Only on fairly close examination did we spot the tiny ear piece and the microphone pinned on his tie. What made the incident particularly unnerving was that before we saw the ear piece and the microphone we noticed that he was wearing a gun in a holster around his waist.

On another occasion we watched in astonishment as two Frenchmen sat opposite one another at a table in La Rhumerie café in St Germain des Prés. (It's one of our favourite cafés. They serve the best grog in Paris.) The two men were both shouting and waving their arms about. It was only when one of the men got up and left, and the other continued to rave and wave, that we realised that the two men didn't know each other. They were both talking on their mobile telephones and were sharing a table simply because the café was crowded.

35. Open spaces

The French live in a country with a lot of open spaces and are not accustomed to being too crowded. They enjoy the feeling of having some space around them. The French are accustomed to large open spaces and empty roads rather than huge urban sprawls and over-crowded motorways. It is because of this affection with the countryside that modern France is run for the farmers. Most French farmers (and there are millions of them) tend to have one small field each. In their field they either grow turnips or keep a sheep. They live on huge grants from the EU. The Common Agricultural Policy (which ensures the survival of these tiny farms) is not a consequence of the EU it is the reason for its existence.

(The French love the bureaucracy created by the EU - most of it of French origin - because they ignore the rules they don't like. They know that the British and the Germans will stick to the letter of every law and thereby slowly ruin themselves.)

The Parisians would never dream of spending more than two weeks among green pastures but they like to think of themselves as country folk.

36. Boules

The French love playing their version of bowls (which they call boules). Walk through a park of any size and you will probably see a group of people playing boules. Summer or winter, wet or dry they will be there. Most players are males aged between 30 and 100. Each man has two boules and, as in the English game, the aim is to get your balls closest to the jack. But since they play on fairly rough ground they throw, rather than bowl, their balls.

It's a truly relaxing game to play or watch. It involves virtually no physical exercise at all (players even use magnets on lengths of string so that they can pick up their boules without having to bend down) and absolutely no stress. We have watched hundreds of boules matches and never once seen a player become agitated or distressed. Equipment is painfully simple and cheap to purchase. Games are, for the most part played in silence. At the end of a game everyone shakes hands with everyone else then goes home. Matches are usually informal and of no consequence to anyone, least of all the players.

Although most of the players are men, we do know of one woman who plays regularly. When her husband died, the bunch of men he played with asked her if she would like to take his place. So she took over his boules, his boules bag, his magnet and his piece of string. Now she plays boules every afternoon between 2 p.m. and 4 p.m. except when the Tour de France is in progress.

Incidentally, there are two versions of boules. The original variety of the game allows players to take a run up of one or two paces before letting go of the boule. This is known as the `jeu provencale' version. The rules were changed in Marseilles to accommodate a player called Jules Le Noir who was confined to a wheelchair as a result of an accident. So that he could carry on playing boules, the other players voted to change the rules so that players had to stand (or sit) in a rough circle scratched in the dirt. Run ups were banned. The locals described it as playing `pieds tanques' (feet together) and so petanque was born. Today there are over 50 countries in the International Federation of Petanque.

37. French chefs

Chefs in America or Britain tend to become famous as a result of their (usually bad) behaviour or their eccentricities. In France, chefs acquire reputations because of the food they produce.

We heard recently about a Parisian chef who had succeeded in turning a single egg white into a cubic metre of meringue. To us this seemed a nonsense; a sort of reverse of the biblical feeding of the five thousand. The chef had taken a perfectly good piece of food and turned it into a confection which would feed no one. But to the French this was food as art.

In another fashionable restaurant a Parisian chef made a name for himself by serving a whole meal on five spoons, carefully arranged on the plate. The waitress told diners in which order they should drain their spoons. That was it. Diners didn't even get a slice from a baguette.

A chef who specialises in making hand-made ice cream (he calls himself a glacier) refuses to sell his fine produce when the weather is hot because he fears that people will buy it and eat it to keep cool rather than for the taste.

Only in Paris could this happen.

38. Long lunches

The French believe in lengthy lunches. They like to give themselves time to enjoy their food and they like to give their stomachs time to digest what they have eaten. Even our local supermarket shuts for two hours at lunchtime every day. No one in Paris raises an eyebrow. Meals - and meal times - are taken very, very seriously. The French take two hours for lunch because that is the length of time it takes a horse to have a proper feed.

In most parts of the world people eat because they will die if they don't. The French, in contrast, live to eat. Many people take little or no pleasure from the food they consume. The French extract every possible pleasure from eating.

One Englishman we know, waiting for a village shop to open, noticed old man sitting on a bench lunching off a baguette and a bottle of wine. He wandered over and asked the old man if he knew when the shop opened.

`Half past two,' replied the old man.

The Englishman sat down beside him.

The old man ate his lunch, slowly, and then sat and basked in the sun for another half an hour.

The Englishman, growing impatient, stood up and walked over to the shop. He peered in through the door and then walked up and down.

At two thirty precisely the old man stood up, packed up the remains of his picnic and then wandered over to the shop. And opened it.

Quite right too.

Doubtless such a man is forever a stranger to indigestion.

39. The French as bureaucrats

The French are the most enthusiastically bureaucratic nation on earth. They regard bureaucracy as just as essential to life as wine or good bread. However unlike the Germans (who take their bureaucracy very seriously and regard it as the framework upon which society is built) the French only like bureaucracy because without it they would have nothing to ignore or to rebel against. The English grumble about bureaucrats but do as they are told. The Germans adore bureaucracy. They do as they are told the minute they are told to do it. The French do what they are told to do. But they do it when they want to do it.

If they are troubled by bureaucrats the French send back long, complicated letters which require a good deal of consideration before they can be answered. Relatively simple disputes between citizens and bureaucrats can go on for generations.

Nevertheless, the joke is really on the French because the cost of all the bureaucracy in France is destroying the country. The French economy is burdened by the cost of state-owned industries, by too much bureaucracy (with excessively generous pension schemes for State employees) and by a welfare and benefit system which, like Britain's, is far too expensive.

An even higher proportion of French employees work for the State than is the case in Britain. In France something like one in three people who receives a pay packet receives their monthly cheque from the Government. It isn't difficult to find examples of over-manning. The railways, for example, are notoriously overstaffed. Everyone in France wants to work for the French railways (cynics say that most people do) because railway workers, known as cheminots, have for years been able to retire at the age of 50 on full pay. The massive pension fund which pays for this wonderfully over-generous gesture is, of course, largely provided by taxpayers.

On a train from Paris to Vernon (a small town just a few miles outside the capital) our tickets were examined by no less than eleven inspectors.

Overmanning isn't confined to the railways, of course. We once sat in a café in Paris and watched five men change the printed timetable in a small display box at a bus stop. The five men were accompanied by a supervisor in a grey suit who made sure that each man carried out his proscribed activity. It was funnier than watching a BBC television crew in the 1980's.

Bureaucracy has now entered all aspects of French life. The last time we bought furniture in the huge, old store called La Samaritaine (at the northern end of the Pont Neuf) it took us three minutes to choose a desk and three hours to complete the paperwork.

But although the French love making rules they are very, very good at finding ways round them when they want to. Most of the red tape which is now destroying the British Economy comes from Brussels and was inspired by the French. But the worst of the red tape is ignored in France. If the French find something inconvenient they will quickly find a way of avoiding it.

For example, an English acquaintance of ours who wanted to retire to France bought a plot of land in a small village, and obtained planning permission to build a small house on it. She then had to go back to England (where she worked as a supply teacher) so that she could save up enough money to buy the necessary materials and to pay the builders. When she returned to France she realised to her horror that her planning permission had expired before she had started to build her dream house. In desperation she went to the local Town Hall and spoke to someone in the mayor's office. The bureaucrat listened patiently and sympathetically but the news he gave her was bad. `If your builders have not started the work then you will have lost your permission,' said the bureaucrat. `You must reapply.' He paused and shrugged and sighed. `Sadly, there are now new rules to take into consideration and it is likely that you will not receive your permission this time.' Our acquaintance burst into tears when she heard this. She had invested everything she had in this project. It was her dream. `Have you bought any tools?' asked the bureaucrat, softening. `Just a spade,' replied the teacher, who had purchased the spade so that she could plant a small bush she had been given by a friendly neighbour. `Ah, then all is well,' said the bureaucrat smiling. `You have bought a spade and so you have started your building. Your planning permission is intact.'

Part 4: The Twenty Villages of Paris

Introduction

Although the city has a mayor, a town hall (mairie) and all the associated trimmings, Paris is sub-divided into twenty arrondissements. There are no physical barriers, or even any signs telling you when you are leaving one arrondissement and entering another, but the boundaries are there nevertheless - and are extremely important to the Parisians themselves. Each arrondissement has its own mayor and town hall and all the associated trimmings. The arrondissements are self-contained villages, each with its own character, each with its own proud and faithful residents (believing that their arrondissement has unique qualities which make it the very best in the city), its own shops and its own artisans. The people of Paris tend to be as proud of the arrondissement in which they live as they are of the city itself and local politicians fight hard to protect the history, dignity, efficiency and quality of life in their own small part of Paris. When the end of year report is published each local mayor takes great pride in having provided the residents of his or her arrondissement with better kept parks, more effective traffic control, better street cleaning, better rubbish collecting and more cultural amenities than their neighbours.

The way the city is broken up and organised works well and all the arrondissements really do have their own character and special qualities. All, too, have local shops and services ensuring that, in theory at least, it is perfectly possible for residents to live comfortably within their arrondissement, without having to venture into neighbouring territory.

So seriously is all this regarded that individuals, shops and offices in the big telephone directory for Paris are listed according to the arrondissement in which they can be found.

(Incidentally, just to confuse visitors the French will sometimes talk about the quartier or the neighbourhood in which they live. Depending upon the speaker they may be referring to their arrondissement, a part of an arrondissement or a piece of the city which crosses over two different arrondissements. Ignore all such talk and concentrate on arrondissements.)

The arrondissements are arranged in a spiral starting from the centre of Paris, an arrangement sometimes described as being designed rather like a snail's shell (comme un escargot) which, given the unique French affection for dealing with their garden pests by the simple expedient of eating them, seems appropriate.

The first eight arrondissements are in the very centre of Paris (with the first arrondissement being right in the middle and just north of the River Seine) and the other twelve, which tend to be larger, run around the outside. The first arrondissement is right in the middle of the city and just north of the River Seine. The other 19 arrondissements are numbered clockwise from the first.

We have prepared a thumbnail sketch for each of the 20 arrondissements of Paris - drawing attention to what we think are the very best bits of each.

1st Arrondissement

Of all the arrondissements the 1st is the one most dedicated to tourism. The arrondissement covers a small area of the city but includes the Palais du Louvre (the former royal palace which has been home to France's most famous museum since 1791), the Jardin des Tuileries, the Musée de l'Orangerie (wherein you will find a magnificent collection of impressionist paintings - including Claude Monet's finest water lilies), the Jardins du Palais Royale, the place Vendome, a big chunk of the rue de Rivoli, the most important part of the rue Saint Honoré and a lot of very high class (and rather dull) hotels where most of the guests in residence are people who aren't paying their own bills.

If you go anywhere near the Louvre museum, do go and see the glass pyramid in the courtyard. The pyramid, designed by I. M. Pei and approved by President Mitterand, is the entrance to the museum and it is very beautiful (particularly at night). The Mona Lisa and the Venus de Milo are both in the Denon wing of the Louvre. You can find them either by following the signposts or by following the crowds. The Venus de Milo was almost destroyed by fire in the 19th century. She was saved when a radiator burst and put her out.

You won't find many signs of `normal' Paris in the 1st. The shops (and there are a lot of them in the 1st) tend to cater to tourists rather than to locals. You're more likely to find shops selling postcards and little models of the Eiffel Tower, rather than shops selling cauliflowers or boxes of camembert. Upmarket stores devote themselves to finding ways to convince overweight Spanish matrons that a crocodile handbag is a snip at 10,000 euros.

There is a wonderful boating pond in the Jardin des Tuileries. You can rent a toy sailboat, and a stick to catch it with, or just sit (no charge) and watch others play with the boat and stick they've rented. A fountain in the middle of the pool keeps the water (and the boats) moving. It's almost too romantic to be true.

For much of the summer you will also find an excellent and colourful traditional fair in the Jardin des Tuileries. There are no hooligans but lots of fun, traditional rides (including some classic beauties) and the inevitable candyfloss stalls. There's also a climbing wall. (Rock climbing is enormously popular in France - probably because the country has more than its fair share of mountains.)

The 1st arrondissement also contains the Jardins du Palais Royale. Nowhere in Paris is quite like the Palais Royale and yet most tourists miss it completely. A few yards off the beaten track and reeking of history the Palais Royale is beautiful, hidden away and very popular as a picnic spot among the Parisians who work in the nearby financial district. Colette lived here and the playwright Molière died in the `Petit Cardinal' theatre while playing Argan in his own play `Malade Imaginaire'. An irony I like to think he would have enjoyed if he hadn't been dead. The Palais Royale now contains some rather curious modern art but the whole place is steeped in history and there are still some fascinating shops to be found there underneath the arches. It was here that Paris acquired its first modern café back in the 17th century. Customers at Francesco Procopio dei Costelli's establishment could purchase coffee, hot chocolate, cream of orange flower, oil of Venus (a blend of cinnamon, water, carnation, vanilla and sugar), orange peel liqueur and hippocras (sweet wine spiced with cinnamon, ginger, cloves and mace - a precursor of today's vin chaud).

Paris, incidentally, is packed with parks. Every arrondissement has its fair share of green spaces. Most contain a patch of grass, a few elderly statues (well decorated by Parisian pigeons), a sculpture or two, colourful flowerbeds, shade-giving plane or horse chestnut trees, a special children's park (admission only to children and adults accompanying them) and plenty of benches.

Parisian parks tend to be formal and well-kept but nonetheless enormously friendly. The French love picnicking and on decent days the best benches in most parks are snapped up early by Parisians unpacking their sandwiches.

We've had some strange experiences having picnics. Sitting in one park in the 1st (not the Palais Royale) a complete stranger came up to us and said: `You are literary people. You write books.' He then quoted Nietzsche a good deal and took great delight in telling us: `si vous coupez les tulipes toujours vous avez le potage'. (If you cut the tulips you will always have soup.) We obviously nodded and agreed with him and we trust that if you meet him that you will do the same.

Having le picnic really is one of the best ways to eat in Paris. Wherever you are you won't be far away from a suitable park or square and you will find plenty of comfortable benches to sit on. (Avoid the two sided benches. They're too upright for comfort.) There are so many small shops around that it is never difficult to find the makings for an enjoyable outdoor meal.

Technically, by the way, feeding the birds in Paris is not allowed (though at least they don't seem as keen to lock you up for it as they do in London). However, no one has yet told the birds about the ban on snacking and so they tend to gather if you're having a picnic. If anyone says anything to you about feeding the birds (and occasionally they may, for the French are not slow to remonstrate with strangers) we just apologise and say that we are messy eaters and that the birds are tidying up for us. We once tried this explanation with a policeman. He clearly didn't believe a word of our excuse but he was so pleased with the ingenuity of the explanation that he smiled, peered closely at the variety of cheese we had chosen, nodded approvingly, touched his cap and left us alone.

Apart from the Palais Royale, one of the best picnic spots in the 1st (and, indeed, in the whole of Paris) is the tiny island at the western, pointed end of the Ile de la Cite. About half way across the Pont Neuf you'll find some steps and a notice advertising the boats (Bateau Mouches) which fly up and down the river.

Go down the steps and you'll find yourself in a private world known to remarkably few. It's shaped like a triangle so, this being France, it's called the Square du Vert Galant. The flowerbeds are beautiful and in the early autumn the ground is carpeted with conkers from the horse chestnut trees. To the south of the island, the river fire brigade (the Bateaux Pompes) have their base, just below the Quai de Conti on the left bank. If you're lucky they will entertain you while you have your picnic.

We once sat in this small park and watched as an elderly woman and her middle aged son sat down together. They had an old-fashioned leather shopping bag with them. When they were settled and comfortable they opened the bag and took out a pigeon. A live pigeon. The pigeon had a long piece of string tied to its leg. The son tied the other end of the string to the bench and let the pigeon walk about and even fly a little. After an hour or so the couple hauled the pigeon back, untied the string from the bench and returned the bird to the bag. They fastened the top of the bag with two safety pins, then got up and left. We were so intrigued that we went back to the same park the next day. The couple turned up at exactly the same time and did exactly the same thing. No one else seemed to notice. No one ever notices anything in Paris. Everyone is far too polite and worldly to be surprised or shocked or startled by truly curious behaviour. At the time we contemplated rushing over, cutting the string from the pigeon's foot and letting it go. But (and we're still not quite sure why) we didn't. The strange thing was that the pigeon seemed almost as devoted to the couple as they clearly were to the pigeon. Love and devotion take many different forms.

The Isle de la Cité is where Paris began. Part of the original fortress, built by French mediaeval kings, still remains as St Chapelle, a remarkable building which has been standing for 800 years but has still to show its first crack. (Modern builders might like to take a look and check out how it was done.)

Most tourists never walk along the banks of the river Seine, though it's a popular pastime with the Parisians, particularly on a Sunday. The north bank of the river is by far the best, with the stretch between the Pont des Arts and the Pont de la Concorde (in the 1st) being the best stretch. Go down the steps and walk along the bank. Take a book with you and sit on a bench and watch the river and the ducks go by. As you wander you will see barges chugging slowly up the river. The bargemen live on board with their families. They may have their washing hung out to dry and the family car parked bizarrely on the stern. It's difficult not to envy them their small, safe, private worlds; of the world and yet not quite in it, in it and yet not quite of it.

At road level, fixed to the walls which separate the Quays from the river, you'll see les bouquinistes - the booksellers whose tiny green boxes or stalls are opened when they feel like it and padlocked when they don't. There you can find books, magazines, posters, and postcards. Most of the items on sale are old, though some are fake. How the stall holders make a living we cannot imagine (though we have a secret theory, previously shared with no one else, that the stalls are mostly run by senior members of the French Government, celebrated authors and Chairmen of large companies, who relax by playing at booksellers in the same way that Marie Antoinette relaxed by playing at being a milkmaid). Walk along one of the Quays above the river in September and you will find yourself shuffling through the fruits of the horse chestnut trees. Small French boys don't play conkers and so the fruits of the horse chestnut tree lie unwanted and ungathered in the dust. If you have a young relative or friend at home you can quickly fill a bag with conkers while walking along here. (Though transporting conkers across the Channel is doubtless illegal so we know you won't do it.) You'll also find plenty of conker trees while walking up the lower reaches of the Champs-Elysées, from the place de la Concorde to le Rond Point. If you have a penknife with you (and you will need one for picnics - for cutting up baguettes and slicing cheese) make holes in a couple of horse chestnuts, remove your shoe laces and astonish the locals by playing conkers in the street. They will think you quite eccentric and admire you enormously for it. The French, more than any other nation on earth (more even than the English who more or less invented it) love eccentricity.

The river is, of course, crossed by many bridges. Bridges provide shelter. Tramps need shelter. And so Paris has (and always has had) many tramps living underneath its bridges. The tramps (clochards) are as much a part of the city as are the chestnut trees and the pigeons and although there are occasional protests about them from nouveau riche newcomers, who feel they are an eyesore and should be hidden away somewhere out of sight, the Parisian tramps are largely left alone by the city.

Just how the tramps got where they are is, of course, a mystery which tasks the imaginations of the thoughtful. Some of George Simenon's best (and saddest) novels are about the tramps of Paris; their lives under the bridges over the River Seine; their fears, conflicts and histories.

These days the tramps are becoming more sophisticated. Several have built small temporary homes out of packing cases and bits and pieces of scrap wood and metal. We saw one with a sofa, a barbecue and a rack for saucepans and crocks neatly stored in a homemade cabinet. We know of at least two tramps who have battery operated portable televisions and we have seen one with a television set, a CD player and a mobile telephone. It was strange to see a tramp texting on a mobile phone while watching his television. (Just how he managed to charge them all is just one of the many Parisian mysteries.) Apart from the tramps with packing cases and small homes, the usual clochard's tiny world is defined by the territory he can dominate with a few old flattened out cardboard boxes and a sleeping bag.

If you are (or can arrange to be) in Paris on a Sunday at the end of July then you're in luck. The Tour de France hits Paris at that time of the month and it is, without a shadow of a doubt, the biggest and most spectacular free sporting event in the whole world.

One third of the entire French population stand by the roadside at some point during the three week tour and the man in charge of the tour is reputed to have more power during that three week period than the President of France himself.

Unless you have tickets for the organised seating (which you probably won't have and certainly don't need) the best place to watch Le Tour is either the pavement around the Jardin des Tuilieres Gardens or the pavement on the north side of the river (the quai des Tuileries) - both these areas are in the 1st.

The cyclists race round the city centre eight or so times and so you get plenty of chances to see them in action. (The snag with watching from the Jardin des Tuilieries is that you can't get off what is effectively an island during the race. You have to stay until it's all over, whether you want to or not.)

If you want a place on the Champs-Elysées you'll have to grab yourself a stretch of barrier at about nine o'clock in the morning and stand there, unmoving, for seven or so hours before the cyclists arrive. We don't have the bladders or the patience for that.

The Tour is an extraordinary spectacle. It begins with police cars and motorcycles making sure that the way is clear, then there are the promotional vehicles - cars and lorries from which pneumatic, scantily dressed women toss sweets, maps and coloured caps to the waiting crowds. Some of the promotional vehicles are made in the shape of cakes or cheeses or whatever else seems appropriate to the sponsor.

Then come some of the cars carrying the spare bicycles, together with some press vehicles, more official vehicles, and the breakdown trucks which travel through France with the Tour to pick up any vehicles which might break down. Then there are more cars carrying bicycles. Then more official red cars. (None of the people in these vehicles sees any of the race, of course.)

Then comes a gap during which everyone fidgets.

After a few moments police motorcycles come screaming by, far faster than you expect. And then, eventually, the cyclists. You can tell they are coming because the TV company's helicopters, which are relaying the pictures sent from the camera toting motorcycles below, appear overhead.

The cyclists come either in batches or in a long peleton, stretched out and pedalling at nearly 30 mph, just as they have been doing for three weeks. The cyclists are skinny, suntanned and have (literally) not an ounce of fat between them. (They do so much damage to their bodies and immune systems that professional cyclists live, on average, fifteen years less than everyone else.)

The racing cyclists are accompanied by television cameramen on motorcycles (the cameraman riding pillion and turned backwards), press photographers on motorcycles, former tour winners in red cars, travelling with more officials regulating the race, and team cars with spare wheels on the roofs. There is a motorcycle carrying a blackboard to tell the riders what is happening ahead or behind them and a motorcyclist carrying drink bottles so that the domestiques (lesser riders) can carry drinks to their team leaders.

Le Tour is a mobile town of around 3,000 people and it has, for more than a century, been a part of French life. The cyclists keep up a breathtaking pace. They are, by wide acclaim, the fittest sportsmen in the world.

There are thousands of wonderful stories about the Tour.

In the very first Tour de France, held in 1903, the race director took a train to get from Paris to Lyon where the cyclists were headed on the first stage. It was, at the time, the only way for him to get there. Even then, riding boneshaker bicycles, the cyclists got to the destination faster than the train. A cyclist called Maurice Garin (the eventual winner) and some of the others had already started on the next stage by the time the race director got there.

The cyclists today are superhuman but in the old days they were seemingly fearless and beyond pain. In one of the early races a cyclist fell off his bike on rough mountain roads and a piece of flint went into one eye and destroyed it. He wouldn't give up and rode half blind for another two weeks, covering 400 miles a day in what must have been excruciating pain. When he got to Paris doctors removed his damaged eye and found that he also had a broken shoulder and a broken wrist. He rode the following year and on the dusty roads his glass eye became dusty and irritated. He took it out and put cotton wool into the socket. `I like to pamper myself,' he said, apparently without irony.

The Tour is still tough these days but a century ago it was unbelievable and the rules were sometimes downright cruel. One early cyclist called Eugene Christophe had the misfortune to break a fork on his bicycle. He carried his bicycle on his back for 15 kilometres and eventually found a village forge. He knew he wasn't allowed to have help repairing his bike so he mended it himself. But he was thrown out of the race nevertheless. The race referee ruled that Christophe had broken the rules because the blacksmith had operated the bellows. Christophe was deemed to have accepted outside assistance.

You can purchase English newspapers at most of the kiosks in Paris but if you're a magazine junkie and can't manage without your weekly fix then you should visit the Paris branch of W.H.Smith in the rue de Rivoli; a covered cloister-style walkway just a few yards from the place de la Concorde (also in the 1st). W.H.Smith in Paris also sells a marvellous selection of American magazines. For bibliophiles the store stocks a huge variety of English and American paperbacks, often available before they are on the shelves in the UK. They also have a good selection of audio CDs and DVDs though, naturally these, like the books, cost a good deal more than they do in the UK. This branch of Smiths is the only one we know of which doesn't sell vast quantities of stationery and greeting cards and it is, in our opinion, much the better for it. It's a proper bookshop though they don't have sales and you're not likely to find any bargains there.

The second best English bookshop in Paris is Brentano's in the Avenue de l'Opera (also in the 1st). Brentanos specialises in American rather than British titles and always has a good selection of books on and about Paris.

There are numerous other English bookshops in Paris (the best known and most celebrated being, of course, Shakespeare and Co which is in the 5th). Many sell second hand English books as well as new volumes. Gallianos, further along the rue de Rivoli from W.H.Smith, also sells a good range of English books. And the little bookstalls on the quays beside the river often have second hand English books for sale.

2nd Arrondissement

There are a few small shops and one or two fashion houses here, and the arrondissement includes La Bourse and the Bibliotèque National but for us the best part of the 2nd arrondissement are the Passage Jouffroy and the Passage de Panoramas - two beautiful arcades or passageways.

There is no doubt in our mind that the passageways or arcades of Paris are one of the city's best kept and most amazing secrets. We know Parisians who have lived in the city all their lives but who still haven't ever visited them. And we know many regular visitors to Paris who haven't found them either. Inexplicably, many guidebooks ignore them completely. There are numerous glass roofed arcades or Passages all over the city, most of them dating back to the 19th century or beyond, but the longest, brightest, best and most fun are probably the ones which head north and south from the Boulevard Montmartre in the 2nd Arrondissement. The Passage Jouffroy heads north and the Passage de Panoramas goes south. They contain numerous tiny boutiques and cafés and are splendid for browsing on a rainy day. The Jouffroy actually contains its own hotel - the Hôtel Chopin, which has been there since the passage was founded in 1882.

As with most of the other Passageways of Paris these two give an exquisite sense of the glory that once was. As you wander about the city you will find numerous other small passageways (especially if you have purchased a proper map to replace the free one provided by your hotel). Some are quite short, but most are packed with pleasant surprises. The Passage Verdeau (which carries on across the street from the Jouffroy) is packed with fascinating, treasure trove shops. Other covered arcades we recommend include the Galerie Vero-Dodat, the Galerie Colbert, the Galerie Vivienne and the Passage de Choiseul.

The 2nd Arrondissement also contains the rue St Denis; a famous (or infamous) haunt for prostitutes. If you wander up and down rue St Denis (even in daylight) you will see streetwalkers advertising their wares on every street corner and in doorways and alleyways. This isn't a street to walk up and down with children, who are likely to want to know why the lady across the road has come out to have a cigarette dressed only in her underwear. The street is also full of bars, peepshows and sex shops.

An old French man who regularly drinks in a café in our street, and who has a bad limp, tells English and American tourists that his infirmity is a result of what he describes as `an old war wound'. He gets two or three drinks a day on the basis of this, bought for him by sympathetic listeners who wrongly assume that he was injured in the Second World War. But it was a whore wound not a war wound. What his benefactors don't know, and he doesn't mention, is that he got his injury when a whore threw him down the stairs in an establishment just off the rue St Denis. After failing to get his money's worth he had demanded, and been refused, a refund. It was his fault and his responsibility, said the girl.

A word of quiet warning.

Women tourists visiting the rue St Denis (or other such areas) should dress with care. A female friend of ours called Roberts once complained that she had been constantly harassed by middle aged men. We rushed round to her hotel and found that she was wearing a tight T-shirt with the words `Roberts Roses Are Bloomin' Marvellous' printed on it in large letters. Her husband and father-in-law were partners in an eponymous garden centre specialising in roses. What she didn't know was that the words `Roberts Roses' is, for some reason long ago forgotten, old French slang for breasts. It's perhaps hardly surprising that so many Parisian men in search of comfort mistook the meaning of her advertisement. You don't have to dress in a whimple and habit but short skirts, tight tops and lots of flesh might well lead to embarrassing confusion.

3rd Arrondissement

Here you'll find the Musée Picasso (well worth a visit) and a few other, lesser known museums, some of which have excellent exhibitions from time to time (one once held a remarkably uplifting exhibition of bras). The 3rd also contains the Archives Nationales (which we doubt will set your heart aflutter) and some quite smart and fashionable cafés and restaurants which might. (As elsewhere in Paris, restaurants come into and go out of fashion for no discernible reason. Life must be a constant nightmare for restaurateurs. You close the doors early one morning, the King or Queen of Paris, waving goodbye to the great and the good, and the following night you spend an entire evening serving two bowls of soup to a couple from Denmark.) The bottom end of the arrondissement (looking on the map) contains the Marais. The Marais is the old Jewish quarter of Paris. Although it has in recent years been discovered by property developers and Parisians seeking good value apartments, the Marais still contains a large Jewish population and, as a result, lots of kosher butchers, delicatessens and Jewish restaurants. The area is now mostly restored and is one of the more expensive parts of Paris. If you find yourself on the appropriate corner of the rue de Sevigne peep into the entrance of the Musée Carnavalet and admire the wonderful cobbled courtyard. The Marais is a popular place to wander on a Sunday morning. Most of those wandering are making their way east towards the place des Vosges.

4th Arrondissement

The Centre Pompidou Musée (known to French administrators as the Musée National d'Art Moderne, to locals as the Beaubourg and to tourists as the funny inside-out building that looks as if the builders forgot to take down the scaffolding) and the place des Vosges are in the 4th, as is some of the Marais. The 4th is a busy arrondissement and its two big attractions mean that it attracts huge numbers of tourists.

The Beaubourg, which is the famous or infamous building which has all its piping on the outside, contains one of the world's largest collections of modern and contemporary art. There's some good stuff inside and the special exhibitions are often spectacular. The café on the top floor is pretty good and has wonderful views. The escalators, in their see through bubblewrap, are fun to ride. When freshly painted the Beaubourg itself looks either quite jolly or utterly spectacular, depending upon how much you like looking at lots of piping, but when it needs painting (as, sadly, it often seems to do) it looks absolutely gross, more like a scrap dealer's dump than an expensive museum. The colours of the pipes tell anyone who's really interested what they do.

The area around the Beaubourg contains many large cafés which are designed to cater for tourists rather than Parisians and which are, therefore, largely to be avoided unless you feel particularly hungry and really can't manage another step without sustenance. The patch of sloping ground in front of the Beaubourg used to be packed with street entertainers. We've seen fire eaters, jugglers, conjurers, bands and artistes of all kinds appearing there. Sadly, the number of entertainers there has fallen off recently (perhaps because of the French equivalent of health and safety) and the once joyful area is now largely occupied by gangs of motorcyclists who have traded in their motor cycles for large, ferocious looking dogs.

The place des Vosges, a far more classical piece of Paris, contains 36 classic and beautiful 17th century houses with arcades made of stone and brick. The square was inspired by the piazzas of Florence and the central area and the cloisters around it were once a popular place for sporting noblemen to show off their skills with swords of various kinds. The square was originally called place Royale but Napoleon renamed it the place des Vosges in honour of the region of France of that name because it was the first to send him its taxes.

We think the park in the centre of the square is one of the most beautiful small parks in Paris and the cloisters around the square are exquisite. Musicians often play there, particularly at weekends. Sometimes, if you're lucky, you'll find a jazz band playing on one side of the square and a small classical orchestra busking on the other side. It sounds over the top to say it but we'll say it nevertheless: you have never heard music played until you've heard it played in the cloisters of the place des Vosges. Victor Hugo's house, no 6, is dark and rather dull (you'd have to be a real Victor Hugo fan to find it worth a visit and the furniture it contains is pretty dire, though it was here that he wrote Les Miserables - the novel not the musical) but if you go through the nearby alleyway you will find yourself in a secret quadrangle. If you're lucky there will be a solitary violinist playing there. The acoustics are incredible and this is the nearest you'll get to heaven on this earth. Throw a few coins in the violin case.

5th Arrondissement

The 5th contains Notre Dame, at the north edge of the arrondissement. Thanks to Victor Hugo and the eternally famous French full back Quasimodo, Notre Dame has become one of the most famous churches in the world. (Notre Dame really was in decline until Hugo's best-selling novel *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* was published. The church had been badly damaged during the French Revolution when statues which were thought to represent French kings were destroyed. It was Hugo himself who organised a petition which led to the restoration of the Gothic masterpiece in the 1820's.) Situated on an island in the middle of the River Seine there is no doubt that it is the most romantically positioned ecclesiastical building in any city (with the possible exception of St Marks in Venice) and the gothic design means that Notre Dame looks as attractive in the dull half-light of winter as it does in the bright sunshine of summer.

But inside, Notre Dame is a real disappointment. The stained glass is good but the main problem is that the church gets so crowded that any atmosphere which might be there is lost. And those in charge of presenting Notre Dame to the public don't do their legacy any favours by having a gift shop inside the church. We couldn't find the money lenders but they are probably in there, too, somewhere. Tragically, we feel that Notre Dame is a spiritually empty building, full of tourists but empty of atmosphere. The last time we went in, there was a service going on but tourists were still flashing away with their cameras. The bottom line is that Notre Dame has about as much spiritual integrity as a chip shop in Birmingham at 11 p.m. on a Saturday night. Bottom line: the outside is well worth a look but the inside is just too disappointing. We think you should give it a miss to avoid a lasting and memorable disappointment.

In addition to Notre Dame, the 5th (also known as the Quartier Latin) contains the Panthéon (a neoclassical necropololis), the Sorbonne (the university founded in 1258), some English language cinemas and a vast number of cafés and stationery shops catering to students. It also contains a great many students.

The area immediately south west of Notre Dame is colourful, charming and great fun and contains some of the biggest student bookshops. The place Saint-Michel is the centre of the area and contains the best cafés. The small alleyways nearby, which lead back up towards the Boulevard Saint Germain, contain wonderful and colourful and constantly surprising shops. Because the area caters for students as well as tourists the prices (at least in the shops catering to students) tend to be reasonable. This is probably the best place in Paris to buy presents for yourself or for friends. It was these streets which were a source of cobble stones in the 1968 riots. The cobbles were thrown at the police by students. Afterwards the authorities replaced the cobbles with asphalt. It's far more difficult to tear up a chunk of asphalt.

On the Left Bank, almost opposite the Prefecture de Police on the Ile de la Cité (where France's most famous detective, Maigret, sits and puffs at his pipe), you will find the rue du Chat Qui Pêche (named after a cat who used to fish in the cellars when the Seine was high). This is said to be (and we believe it is) the narrowest and shortest thoroughfare in the world. There is only one tiny window looking into the whole street.

While you're in the area around St Michel you must visit the bookshop Shakespeare and Co. It's set back from the river bank a little way but if you look to your right when you cross the Seine from the Notre Dame you'll see it. Named after (but nothing to do with) the wonderful bookshop run by the legendary Sylvia Beech (the bookseller who first published Ulysses by James Joyce, after it was banned in Britain in 1921) Shakespeare and Co is a fascinating treasure trove of new and second hand books. It was founded in 1951 by George Whitman, a relative of the American poet Walt Whitman. (Like all great men the elder Whitman wanted to be remembered for saying something profound and witty on his death bed. He had allegedly prepared a series of bon mots for his final moment. Whenever he thought he was dying he would utter something deeply moving and yet suitably succinct and memorable. But things didn't go quite according to plan. The last words of Walt Whitman were spoken to his valet Horace Traubel and they were: `Lift me up, Horace; I want to shit.' Poor fellow. Walt's big mistake was not giving his valet a big tip to lie about the final words.)

George Whitman's inimitable version of Shakespeare and Co has, over the years, been frequented by Henry Miller, Anais Nin, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs and it was in his shop that the literary magazine *Merlin* was founded, later publishing Jean-Paul Sartre, Jean Genet and Samuel Beckett.

We're told that St Julien le Pauvre, the church near to Shakespeare and Co took 300 years to build and that generation after generation of carpenters and stone masons worked on the building, keeping the work in the family throughout. The church is set in a pleasant little park which is a good place for a picnic.

On the other side of Shakespeare and Co is the rue de la Huchette - a 13th century street which used to be lined with meat roasters and which is now, appropriately, lined with kebab stalls.

Finally, the 5th also contains the Hotel Dieu.

The Hôtel Dieu, which was founded by Bishop Landry in AD 561, is the oldest hospital in the world. The Parisian women who looked after patients there probably became the first group of nursing nuns. Today, the Hôtel Dieu is as beautiful as a hospital can be. You can find it in the square outside Notre Dame cathedral. Technically, you aren't supposed to go in. (It's not officially open to visitors and, quite naturally, the hospital staff don't want streams of tourists wandering through). But we have tottered in there once or twice. We walked in through the main doors at the front and looked as if we knew what we were doing and should be there (and, most important of all, we didn't look like tourists) and no one stopped us. Inside, the hospital has the most beautiful courtyard surrounded by exquisite cloisters. Doctors may not have been blessed with scanners and several layers of administration when the hospital was built but they knew that fresh air, gentle exercise, bird song and the perfume of flowers made a potent therapeutic mixture and so they built their hospital around a courtyard and provided cloisters where convalescent patients could promenade daily whatever the weather.

There are huge pictures on the walls of the cloisters explaining the history of the place. We stress that the Hôtel Dieu isn't a tourist attraction. It's a working hospital. But we don't think that anyone will object if you go inside to peep at the magnificent cloisters.

The Hôtel Dieu hasn't always been as wonderful as it appears to be today. A report published in 1788, when the Hôtel Dieu had 1,220 beds and was probably the most important hospital in the city, described how patients were crammed between four and six to a bed. Linen and bandages were washed in the Seine which must have been fun for those downstream taking their drinking water from the river.

6th Arrondissement

The 6th arrondissement includes a big chunk of the Quartier Latin and a large part of the area known as St Germain des Prés. It contains the beautiful 12th century St Germain des Prés church and, within hailing distance of it, three of the best known cafés in Paris (Deux Magots, Café Flore and the Brasserie Lipp). The first two are excellent and highly recommended. Brasserie Lipp, though enormously fashionable with politicians, always seems to us to be less friendly, less inviting and the one of the three worth missing. The whole area is thick with excellent cafés and coffee houses. Voltaire, Robespierre, Rousseau and Ben Franklin have all sipped and argued here. Oscar Wilde died beyond his means at No 13 rue des Beaux Arts. His final words (much wittier and more often quoted than Mr Whitman's) were: `Either this wallpaper goes, or I do.'

It was in St Germain that Dr Joseph Ignace Guillotine perfected his machine for removing the heads from people while causing them the least amount of pain. (Guillotine was a compassionate man who wanted a painless form of capital punishment as a step towards banning the death penalty, but is, sadly, remembered in a rather different way.) It was also here that the revolutionary politician Marat had his printing press. And just a little way westwards, along the

Boulevard Saint Germain, you will find, in a small park, a bust on a plinth commemorating Doctor René Théophile Hyacinthe Laennec, the inventor of the stethoscope. Laennec was walking through Paris one day when he noticed a group of children crouched at one end of a wooden beam, listening to the sound of a pin being scratched at the other end. Inspired by this simple observation Laennec went home and made a paper tube with which he could listen to his patients' chests without having to lay his head on their bosoms. Thus was the stethoscope born.

The French have a wonderful sense of the absurd and nowhere in Paris is this displayed to more effect than in the pavement just across the square from the St Germain des Prés church. The sculpture there consists of a fountain designed to appear like a burst water main. The paving slabs are fixed as though they have been pushed upwards by the force of water. It's our favourite sculpture in the whole of Paris. Don't miss it.

The 6th also contains the Palais du Luxembourg (now the French Senate) and the Jardin du Luxembourg (the Luxembourg Gardens). The Luxembourg Gardens are exactly what a public garden should be. Mothers and nannies with small children and babies. Old-fashioned green kiosks selling sweets, balloons, coloured windmills and toys. Tennis courts where you can often watch professional quality tennis being played. Boule matches. Men playing chess (whatever the weather). An outdoor table tennis table free for anyone who wants to use it. Flower beds galore. Fountains. Plenty of comfortable chairs and benches. Probably the most colourful and imaginative children's playground in the world. Plenty of places to sit if you want to sunbathe and plenty of places to sit if you prefer the shade. All in all the Luxembourg Gardens consist of 62 beautiful acres, originally created for Marie de Medicis. In May, orange trees and 200-year-old palms are brought out into the garden for the summer.

7th Arrondissement

Although it looks as though it ought to be a tourist mecca (it contains the Eiffel Tower, the Musée d'Orsay and the Hôtel des Invalides) the 7th is the arrondissement where most of the rich Parisians live. It's home for leading politicians, judges and film stars and also contains more than its fair share of embassies. When you read that such and such a film star lives in Paris, this is probably where they live. The 7th contains some of the best small, specialist food shops, a good many official Government buildings and (because of the embassies, Government buildings and important people who live there) probably more policemen per square yard than any other arrondissement.

The Musée d'Orsay, the arrondissement's biggest and most important museum, was a railway station in the 19th century but has been beautifully converted into a museum dedicated to 19th century and early 20th century art. It may not contain the Mona Lisa or the Venus de Milo but it is, in our view, the best museum in Paris. It is also home to one of the very best museum cafés in the world. There is a wonderful view of Paris through the glass clock-face. The 7th also contains the Palais-Bourbon (the Assemblée Nationale) which is where the French legislature now sits or stands or sometimes just lolls around; the École Militaire and, in the rue de Babylone, a Japanese style cinema called La Pagode which is possibly quite unlike any cinema ever built in Japan.

But it's the Eiffel Tower which makes the 7th the exciting and attractive arrondissement it is.

The Eiffel Tower, France's 320 metre high national landmark and undoubtedly the most recognised (and reproduced) public erection in the world, was erected for the 1889 Paris Exhibition (it took two years to build) and named after Gustav Eiffel who designed it (though he had a lot of skilled engineers helping him). Originally M. Eiffel had a small flat right at the very top of the tower. Until 1930 the Eiffel Tower was the tallest man-made structure in the world.

The Eiffel tower, ultimately graceful and intrinsically feminine in shape and style, was originally built as a sample of the engineers’ art and the plan was to demolish it when the lease for the land ran out in 1909. The tower was designed to sway in gales and expand and contract with the temperature. Fortunately for Paris, France and the world the tower wasn't dismantled because it turned out to be useful for sending radio communications around Europe.

Snooty Parisians and snooty tourists turn their noses up at the Eiffel Tower. But we think it is absolutely brilliant. You don't have to buy an Eiffel Tower key ring, ashtray or T-shirt but going up the Tower is one of life's essential experiences and gives a good view of surrounding Paris. (Nearly 200 million people have been up the tower so far.) The big snag is that you have to queue twice. You must queue, at ground floor, to get up to the first or second tier. On the second tier you have to join another queue to get to the top. The last time we went the queue for the lift for the final ride to the top of the tower was (as it often seems to be) about six miles long and we gave up. But a trip to the second stage floor will do just fine. If you're feeling fit and frisky you can walk to the second level. There are 600 steps and in 1905 a man ran up them in three minutes and 12 seconds. If you are hardy enough (and barmy enough) to climb to the top there are 1,665 steps.

From ground level, if you look around the tower you will see the names of all the engineers who helped build it embossed in the ironwork. Occasionally, you'll also see steeple jacks wandering around painting and doing bits and pieces of essential maintenance. Since 1889 the Tower has been repainted 17 times. Each painting uses 50 tonnes of paint and the colour has always varied slightly. Today it has an old bronze polish hue. The tower is made up of 18,038 pieces of iron and 2,500,000 rivets. (If you don't believe us you're welcome to count them.) They say it weighs 10,100 tonnes, though how they know this we aren't sure since we don't know of any weighing scales that big.

As we've already mentioned one skilful confidence trickster actually managed to sell the tower several times to gullible tourists who thought they could take it back to liven up their back gardens.

Over the years the Eiffel Tower has been used in many imaginative ways. During the First World War, for example, the French put trained parrots onto the Tower in the hope that the birds would give advance warning of incoming aircraft and enable anti-aircraft gunners to shoot them down. (The planes, not the birds). The plan was abandoned when the French realised that the parrots couldn't discriminate between Allied aircraft and German aircraft and that although they were very good at announcing the imminent arrival of the 11.43 from Berlin they were unable to differentiate between that and the 11.43 from Lyon.

At night the Eiffel Tower is floodlit. The lighting is exquisite. We think the Tower looks at its best after dark. Concerts are often held around the base of the Tower and these attract large audiences (and absolutely huge audiences if they involve Johnny Hallyday). The Tower is often used as a backcloth for spectacular firework displays.

The Hôtel des Invalides, another attraction in the 7th, is also well floodlit (the French do floodlighting and fireworks better than anyone in the world) though the golden dome means that it looks even more dramatic in the daylight - particularly if the sun is shining. It gleams and sparkles in the slightest bit of sunshine.

You should make sure that you allow plenty of time for visiting Hôtel des Invalides. Built in the 17th century by Louis XIV as a convalescent home and hospice for injured soldiers, the Hôtel des Invalides is now best known as the final resting place of Napoleon Bonaparte. (He was moved there, from St Helena, in 1861 and the gravestone from his St Helena resting place now lies in one of the smaller courtyards).

Apart from taking a peek at Napoleon's extraordinary tomb underneath the gold domed majesty (the cupola is covered in gold leaf and worth a fortune if you could scrape it all off) there are two museums. The Musée de l'Armee and Le Musee des Plans-Reliefs. The former is well worth a visit and the latter is well worth a miss unless you're dedicated to studying Plans-Reliefs. In the army museum it's mind boggling to see the length of some of the early rifles which were used. The guns were so long that some poor devil had to stand at the business end and hold it up while the chap several yards away pulled the trigger. The poor soldier holding up the business end invariably went deaf. At the very least.

And do take a slow wander around the first floor cloisters which surround the main cobbled courtyard of Les Invalides. (Les Invalides contains over a dozen courtyards). You get there by ascending the staircases at either Gate J or Gate G at the southern end of the courtyard (the Cour d'Honneur). There is a Renault tank from 1915 at the foot of the staircase at Gate J.

The small doors on the cloistered landing originally led to the small rooms in which the wounded soldiers lived out their final days. Today, sadly, the doors are all sealed up and the rooms have become part of the museum. Imagine, as you walk, Napoleon's old guard, hobbling round, chatting about the snows in Moscow and their leader's extraordinary return from Elba. Stand and look out over the cobbled courtyard, lean on the stone wall where a thousand arms have leant before, and, with a little imagination, you will be able to hear the clatter of horses' hooves. At the southern end, above the soldiers' church, you can see a statue of Napoleon, gazing out on his imaginary troops. At the northern end there is one of the most wonderfully complex sundials we've ever seen.

The Hôtel des Invalides was, as the name suggests, originally a convalescent home for wounded soldiers and whatever the weather they would take their daily constitution in the cloisters. The stone steps up to the cloisters are shallow and wide to make it easier for wounded one legged soldiers to get up and down them. The old soldiers used to totter here around so much that the steps are noticeably worn down. If you look carefully at the pillars around the cloisters you can still see bits of very early graffiti of the `Kilroy was here' type carved into the stone. We've seen inscriptions marked 1719, 1746, 1760, 1776 and 1789. Several old soldiers marked out the months and years they spent in Les Invalides, for all the world as though they were prisoners.

To the French, Napoleon Bonaparte is not just the greatest French hero, he is the greatest man the world has ever known. When you realise that, so far, there have been over 45,000 books about him published, it's difficult to argue with them. Napoleon was responsible for just about everything that is good about modern France. After establishing a military dictatorship in 1799 (he was just 30-years-old at the time, which must make the rest of us chronic under-achievers) he introduced the Napoleonic Code (still in place and the basis of the legal system which the French use and which is now being used throughout the European Union), reconstructed the French education system, built many of the most useful and most famous roads (not personally you understand, he was too slight a figure to be of much use with a shovel, but he planned their routes and gave the orders for their building), planned most of the modern city of Paris and eventually found time to crown himself emperor in 1804.

After a short enforced holiday on the island of Elba, Napoleon escaped, regathered his army and made himself Emperor again. (The story of how he did this - turning the army sent to arrest him into his own bodyguard - is one of the most amazing in history.) He looked after his family (he put members of his family on thrones all over Europe) but he also looked after his soldiers. French roads are lined with tall trees because Napoleon wanted the trees there to provide future generations of soldiers with some shade (he was accustomed to ordering his soldiers to march constantly from one battle to another).

The irony is - and we recommend that you don't mention this to a French citizen unless you deliberately want to upset him or her because they tend to be a bit touchy about it - but Napoleon nearly wasn't French at all. He was born in 1769 on the island of Corsica and his parents were Italian. Corsica only became a province of France in 1768. Close call.

(Three of the most famous `Frenchmen' of all time were Napoleon, Simenon and Picasso. Napoleon was born on Corsica, Simenon (the creator of Maigret) was born in Belgium and Picasso was born in Spain. Only one of the three was actually French and he only just made it.)

Napoleon died on St Helena (French nationalists, of whom there are a growing number, have never forgiven the British for killing Joan of Arc or for sending Napoleon so far away from home) and it wasn't until years later that it was considered safe to move him to Hôtel des Invalides. (His miraculous escape from Elba had left everyone feeling rather nervous. The French and British Governments presumably wanted to be sure that if they brought him back to Paris he wasn't going to jump out of his coffin and back onto his white horse. Even when they got him back they still weren't entirely comfortable with having him so close to the seat of power. Napoleon's corpse is wrapped in a nest of six beautifully crafted wood and metal coffins, intended, we suspect, more to prevent him getting out and starting any more wars than to stop anyone stealing the body. There are iron bars across the windows too.)

Everyone who visits Hôtel des Invalides gets to learn much the same about the great French Emperor. Everyone knows he was a Brigadier General at 24 and that he was beaten by Nelson in the Battle of the Nile and at Trafalgar. Everyone knows he was beaten by Wellington at Waterloo.

So here's a fact that not many people know and that doesn't appear in the usual guidebooks.

Napoleon's penis was cut off by the physician who performed the autopsy. It is now said to look a bit like a grape. It was put up for sale at a famous London auction house in 1972 where it failed to reach the reserve price. We are afraid that we have no idea where it is now but if you see Napoleon's penis on offer on a market stall (and it comes with a decent and convincing history) we suggest you snap it up; it could be worth a fortune to a collector.

If you want to see how a thriving city has managed to overcome all the problems put in its way by supermarkets and European bureaucrats then, while you are in Paris, you should visit the sort of area where real Parisians do their daily shopping. One of the best and most accessible is the rue Cler in the 7th arrondissement, midway between the Hôtel des Invalides and the Eiffel Tower.

We recommend the rue Cler because it is a typical, traditional French shopping street. It's a shopping precinct with a difference, which contains bakers, florists, greengrocers, an ironmonger, a Post Office, a bookshop, cheese shops, restaurants and so on. Traffic is officially barred but the French don't take much notice of inconvenient rules like this and so you do need to watch out for cars, vans and motorcycles. Politicians and show business stars who live in the area do their shopping here. There are four or five supermarkets in rue Cler or on the streets nearby but the small, specialist shops aren't just surviving, they are thriving. So, for example, you will find one shop selling nothing but different types of olive oil and another selling nothing but vacuum cleaners.

(Specialist shops do well in Paris. In the Marais we found a shop selling absolutely nothing but white blouses and another selling nothing but jewellery made from amber. There are of course plenty of shops selling nothing but cheeses (General de Gaulle once asked how anyone could be expected to govern a country with 325 different cheeses but things have moved on since the General's day and the French now have over 500 different types of home grown cheese) and others selling only red meat, pig meat or poultry. A Parisian housewife who eschews supermarkets and wants to get the ingredients for a stew or a steak and kidney pie could take a day doing her shopping.

Singer/songwriter Serge Gainsbourg was one of the many stars who lived in the 7th and if you want to visit his former home the address is 5 rue de Verneuil in the 7th. Gainsbourg was famous for four things. First, his record Je t'aime, made with Jane Birkin, was banned but famously got to number 1 in the British pop charts. Second, Gainsbourg was famous for burning a 500 franc note on television to prove that he was rich. Finally, Gainsbourg produced a successful but rather controversial reggae version of la Marseillaise. Most shops still sell postcards of the singer/songwriter unshaven, with a glass of Pernod in front of him and a cigarette in one hand. A puff of white smoke indicates that he has just elected a new Pope. Serge Gainsbourg was one of the French show business celebrities treated as royalty. His daughter is now a star. (As is Johnny Hallyday's son.)

As you wander around here, as elsewhere, keep a look out for shops described as ‘Depot Vente’. These are second hand stores where Parisians take their unwanted furniture and paraphernalia and leave it for sale, paying a commission to the owner of the store. The prices of unsold items fall over time, and if you fancy something and are staying in Paris long enough you can wait around until the price falls to what you are prepared to pay.

Finally, in the 7th, we recommend that you visit St Clothilde.

The French are not great church goers; on the whole they prefer to sit and eat rather than kneel and pray and since they eat out a lot they don't need to go to church to find an excuse to buy (or show off) a new hat. But, as a hangover from holier times, Paris is full of churches. The only one in Paris which we suggest you actually go inside is the neo-Gothic St Clothilde (to be found in the 7th, in between the rue St Dominique and the rue de Grenelle, and surrounded by French Ministries.) The church organ is much admired by those who admire church organs. The real beauty of St Clothilde is that it is the most spiritual church we've ever been into. To put it in perspective, St Clothilde is the only church where either of us has ever lit a candle. And every time we visit (which is often) we light candles in memory of lost friends, relatives or animals. You can't buy souvenirs, crucifixes and so on in St Clothilde but there is more peace and spiritual contentment to be found there than in any other church we have ever visited. It is the holiest of holy places.

8th Arrondissement

The spectacular but (from a shopping point of view rather over-rated) Champs-Elysées runs right down the middle of the 8th arrondissement. The newspaper kiosks on the pavement on both sides of the Champs-Elysées sell English magazines as well as newspapers. Other points of interest include the Gare St Lazare (in front of which there stands a magnificent clock sculpture which is well worth seeing if you're in the area), the Parc de Monceau (one of the poshest and in our view least friendly parks in Paris), the place de la Concorde and l'Eglise de la Madeleine. There are some very expensive art galleries and some hugely overpriced cafés and restaurants in the 8th arrondissement and Fauchon, Paris's most upmarket grocery (even the potatoes look as if they've been to the beauticians) is on the place de la Madelaine behind the church. (When Parisian students rioted in 1968 and wanted windows to break they headed straight for Fauchon proving that even revolutionaries have a taste for the best.) The 8th also contains the Grand Palais and the Petit Palais which were built for the 1900 World Exhibition (and which are now used to house exhibitions) and the Palais de l'Elysées which is the residence of the French President.

Around the place de la Concorde, as elsewhere in the city, you will, if you walk through the city, also notice many plaques commemorating the resistance fighters who died defending their city during the German occupation of the Second World War. Pale beige plaques, some carrying the words ‘Ici est tombé’ (Here fell) are dotted everywhere. We counted ten around this, the world's biggest roundabout. With additionally poignant tragedy, these ten died during the last minutes of the occupation. The leader of the German command, Dietrich von Choltitz, defied Hitler's orders to destroy Paris. He refused to give the order telling his men to ignite the explosives that had been planted under all of the city's landmarks, including Notre Dame and the Eiffel Tower. But he did tell his men to fight until the last cartridge. And they did just that. One French tank commander, Pierre Laigle, having just made his way into Paris, stopped to find a telephone from which to ring the fiancée he hadn't seen or heard from in four years. She set off to find him but before she could get to him a German sniper, hiding in the Ministère de la Marine, shot and killed him. Two Red Cross workers, both wearing distinctive arm bands, were shot dead while carrying the wounded to safety in those last hectic minutes.

Also in the 8th there is the Paris Stamp Market.

Even if you don't collect stamps (or know anyone who does) the Paris stamp market (held in the Avenue Gabriel close to the Rond Point des Champs-Elysées, at the bottom of the Champs-Elysées) is well worth visiting. The best day to go is Thursday, and the market is open all day whatever the weather. Even today the market is indistinguishable from the one which starred, together with Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn and Walter Matthau in *Charade* (the 1963 film, directed not by Alfred Hitchcock but by Stanley Donen, where Cary and Audrey are looking for something valuable and then realise that the `something' they are looking for is a mouldy old stamp stuck on an envelope and that the stamp is worth about fifty zillion pounds).

In addition to stamps, many of the market stalls specialise in selling old post cards and letters. The French are very keen on collecting postcards and you can buy all sorts of fascinating old cards from the early 20th and late 19th centuries. The prices here are extremely reasonable and you can pick up a mid 19th century letter (complete with stamp) for hardly anything. The last time we were there we bought a fistful of letters and old bills from the middle part of the 19th century and paid just a few euros for them. They're fun to have and to read. We have even managed to buy (again, very cheaply) letters sent out before the French cottoned on to the idea of using postage stamps.

If you want postcards that are a bit out of the ordinary to send to friends you can find unused old cards here too. And one or two of the stalls will even sell you cut price, useable stamps to put on your cards. (The dealers buy them from collectors who bought sheets of stamps hoping that they would go up in value but then, after a decade of disappointment, sold them at a discount to their face value.)

A man who runs one of the stalls on the stamp market told us a truly sad story.

In 1980, West Germany printed stamps to commemorate the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow. However, after the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan, West Germany withdrew from the games in protest and destroyed the stamps they had printed before issuing them. However, the German Minister of Posts, a Herr Gscheidle, kept a sheet of the stamps in a drawer, suspecting, perhaps, that the stamps would one day be valuable and might make a useful pension fund. If that was his intention, he was right for one of the stamps was subsequently sold for 74,000 Deutschmarks. Sadly, however, it wasn't sold by Herr Gscheidle. His wife, keen on entering postal competitions, had found the sheet of stamps in a drawer and had used them on her letters.

The 8th arrondissement is also where you will find the Avenue Montaigne.

If you want to see what the fashion houses of Paris are currently offering the Avenue Montaigne is, without a doubt, the best street in Paris to visit. Actually, it is the most complete fashion street on the planet since it is reputed to contain more de luxe labels and couturiers than Madison Avenue in New York, Bond Street in London or the Via Montenapoleone in Milan. To the rich and fashion conscious the Avenue Montaigne, the Avenue George V and rue François 1er form Paris's `triangle d'or' (golden triangle).

Even if you find the whole fashion business nauseatingly self indulgent, and painfully superficial, it's well worth going there just for a good laugh. Here you will find Dior, Chanel, Prada, Jimmy Choo, Ungaro, Valentino, Chloé, Nina Ricci, Celine, Bottega Veneta, Armani, Louis Vuitton, Uncle Tom Cobbley and many, many more familiar names. (As an aside, it is worth remembering that haute couture in Paris was founded by an Englishman called Charles Frederick Worth. Mr Worth was invited to design clothes for the wife of Napoleon III, Empress Eugenie, and to protect his designs he founded the Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture. The world of fashion, like football, tennis, cricket and rugby is an English invention.)

Designing frocks is not an art, it is a craft with airs and graces but in Paris, as everywhere else, the people who work in the fashion industry like to think of themselves as heroes battling in the war against yesterday's clothes. They have succeeded in convincing themselves that they are artists. (In reality, of course, they are no more artists than are the people who design bathtubs, for people to bathe in, or cars for them to drive in.)

Nowhere in the world do fashion designers and models have a greater opinion of themselves than in Paris. You would think they were all finding cures for cancer or working for global peace. Models (men and women who have acquired the enormous skill of being able to walk in a straight line while wearing clothes) are feted as though they are astronauts or sports stars. We love these people. They are so false and full of airs that it is a bizarre joy to watch them at work.

Our favourite pastime here is to wander along the avenues, looking in the shop windows, spotting celebrities with the paparazzi and trying to find the most absurdly overpriced item on sale. Shoes and pitifully tiny handbags at $2,000 each are commonplace. Last time we visited we discovered an utterly absurd looking jacket for just under $30,000. It was made out of various bits of dead animal and no ordinary mortal would have given it a second look if it had been on the £1 rack in a local thrift shop.

Our second favourite pastime is watching tourists hobbling out of one of the exclusive stores clutching a large, expensive, heavily branded carrier bag containing an example of the couturier's latest nightmare in silk. Just how often these flimsy and often revealing creations get worn back home is something of a mystery. The stores claim that their target customers are young, rich, royals. In their dreams. In reality (admittedly, an alien concept in the world of fashion), their customers are overweight commodities traders from Hong Kong, the haughty mistresses of Russian mafia hoods and the rotund, waddling wives of businessmen from Auchtermuchty.

Hang around this district long enough and eventually you will probably be approached by a Japanese tourist wanting you to wander into Louis Vuitton and buy bags and things for them. The scam, a sort of luggage arbitrage, is something to do with the fact that Louis Vuitton bags sold in Tokyo cost more than they do in Paris. To take advantage of this discrepancy, gangs of buyers totter into the store with armfuls of euros and stagger out with armfuls of bags. Or at least they would if they were allowed to. And that's where you come in. Because the store is now wise to this perfect example of capitalism in action, and has apparently put a limit on the number of items Japanese tourists can buy, the buyers try to find tourists to go in and do their shopping for them. They give you a fistful of euros and a shopping list. You come out, after having enjoyed a shopping blitz at someone else's expense, and hand over the goodies. Bit like a Chinese meal, we suppose. Satisfying at the time but not really rewarding in the long run. We should warn you that since buying handbags on someone's behalf is now undoubtedly illegal this is probably a scam you should avoid. We can't see the French police throwing you into prison for taking part. But why risk it?

Two famous night clubs, The Lido and the Crazy Horse Saloon, are both to be found in the 8th. There are many others too.

When Elvis Presley was posted to Germany he came to Paris every weekend and was a keen aficionado of traditional Paris night life. It is said that he deflowered all the famous Bluebell girls. Miss Bluebell was apparently very proud that all the girls she employed were virgins. But Elvis got to them. You might expect the French to have been slightly peeved by this - particularly in view of their low opinion of foreigners. But, on the contrary, the French tell this story with great pride. First, because it shows that there were once lots of virgins in Paris. And second because it was Elvis

Presley who deflowered them.

9th Arrondissement

The 9th arrondissement contains many of the city's biggest and best shops. It also contains the beautiful Opera Garnier (the original Paris Opera House) which was commissioned by Napoleon III, designed by Garnier and opened in 1875.

From the outside, the old Paris Opera House is breathtaking. It dominates La place de l'Opera (as it was no doubt intended to do) and the steps up to the front entrance are a regular meeting place for students, tourists and people who are lost, want a sit down and can't afford the prices in the excellent Café de la Paix across the road. (The Café de la Paix is one of the great Parisian cafés. It's where the Parisians go to meet friends or to rest their feet after a few hours hard work in the Galeries Lafayette. Food and drink is expensive but you're not buying sustenance; you're renting a seat from which you can watch the world go by.)

On the outside, the Opera House has a magnificent gold dome which glitters in the sunshine. Inside it has a spectacularly colourful ceiling. Long before anyone had the idea of building an inside out museum in the Marais, or putting a huge glass pyramid in the Louvre courtyard some brave soul had the idea of inviting Marc Chagall to paint the ceiling of the Paris Opera House. Chagall's fantastic imagination and use of colour made him the perfect choice for the job but it is difficult to think of any city in the world where such an artist would have been given his head in such an important and historic building. The result is breathtaking and well worth a look.

The 9th is also the home of the Drouot, the biggest auction house in the world. The Drouot fills a block between the rue Drouot and the rue Chauchat and has been doing business since June 1st 1852. There are 17 auction rooms and sooner or later everything in France passes through its doors and under the ivory hammers of the Drouot auctioneers. In 1990 they sold a piece of the Eiffel Tower's staircase. In 1991 they sold Rimbaud's passport. In 1914 they sold a collection of paintings which included ten Matisses, 12 Picassos and works by van Gogh, Dufy and Gauguin. The whole lot went for just 100,000 francs. They sell two million items a year and hold 2,000 auctions.

10th Arrondissement

The 10th is the home of two large railway stations: the Gare du Nord and the Gare de l'Est. These two stations sit right next to one another and their names denote the areas of France which they serve rather than their position in the city. Apart from these two large stations (and an enormous number of cafés, restaurants and bistros catering to travellers) this is not an arrondissement of great interest. It is, to be honest, a rather cheap and scruffy area and is not a fair introduction to the wonderful city of Paris. The 10th does also contain the Canal Saint Martin which has a certain traditional, rustic charm and is a magnet for people who love canals.

11th Arrondissement

The best thing we can think to say about the 11th is that Simenon's fictional detective Inspector Maigret is supposed to live in the Boulevard Richard Lenoir. Since Maigret doesn't actually exist and, therefore, doesn't actually live there, that probably tells you all you need to know about the 11th. The 11th arrondissement does contain the Bastille, which sounds like a very impressive building but is now the place de la Bastille or, more accurately, a large traffic island. The Bastille was originally part of Paris's defenses but was turned into a jail and it is now famous (and an integral part of French history) because the people of Paris stormed the building on 14th July 1789 (a day now known as Bastille Day) and started the French Revolution.

On the day the Bastille was stormed, the entry in Louis XVI's diary entry was confined to one word: `Rien'. That, of course, probably helps explain why they stormed the Bastille in the first place.

12th Arrondissement

The place de la Bastille is at the north west corner of the 12th arrondissement, which contains the Gare du Lyon and the new Paris opera house (the Opera Bastille). Of the two the Gare du Lyon is by far the most attractive and most functional. The now not so new Opera house looks to us as though it were approved by committees who regard beauty as a betrayal and minimalism as a doctrine. A plague on all their opera houses, say we.

There is a marble wall plaque screwed to a wall of an elegant building on the rue Sidi-Brahim in the 12th Arrondissement which reads: `Le 17 Avril 1967 ici il ne c'est rien passe'. (Nothing much happened here on 17th April 1967).

How can anyone fail to love such a city?

The 12th also contains many parks and a 2,300 acre wood known as the Bois de Vincennes. This may sound cruel but we can't imagine why you would want to go to the 12th unless you want to catch a train from the Gare du Lyon.

13th Arrondissement

The 13th arrondissement sits neatly between the 12th and the 14th. It contains the Gare d'Austerlitz and a lot of buildings. Keep away. You would have more fun in the 12th and you know what we think of that. Actually, you would probably have more fun in Wolverhampton.

14th Arrondissement

By far the biggest attraction in the 14th is the Cimetière du Montparnasse and that probably tells you everything you want to know about the 14th. Maupassant, Samuel Beckett, Serge Gainsbourg, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simon de Beauvoir are buried here, as, indeed, are a lot of other people. It's the second biggest and second most interesting cemetery in Paris. The 14th also contains the Catacombes, wherein you will find the bones of several million skeletons. This is underground and, is therefore, a good place to go if it's raining and you want to look at old bones.

15th Arrondissement

The Montparnasse Tower (Paris's only skyscraper building) stands right in the northernmost corner of the 14th, where it meets the 6th (just above it in the spiral) and the 15th (just to the left). Technically, the Tower is in the 15th. It glitters like a huge gold ingot when the sun is shining and was built so that the French could show the world that they could make a high rise building if they wanted to. We think it's far more attractive from a distance than it is close up. Inside is boring.

The 15th is on the wrong side of the Eiffel Tower and is a fashionable area for living in. It is popular with those who can't afford a place in the 7th. It's more fun than it looks. There are no great attractions here but the area just south of the Champ de Mars (the gardens which stretch down below the Eiffel Tower) is worth a wander.

There are many hotels here (most of them of the cheaper variety) but unless you are prepared to do a lot of travelling the arrondissement is simply too far out of very central Paris. A hotel closer to the centre may be a little more expensive but in the long run you'll save money and time by choosing more central accommodation.

16th Arrondissement

The 16th arrondissement includes the Bois de Boulogne (2,137 acres of woods, laws, lakes, parks, racecourses and quite a few prostitutes of various types touting for business) and the enormously and curiously impressive Jardin du Trocadero and the Palais de Chaillot. The Palais de Chaillot includes a theatre, a film library and the Museum of French Monuments, which we heartily recommend to anyone who finds Paris too exciting and needs to doze for a while.

Right across the river from the Eiffel Tower and stretching up to the Arc de Triomphe the 16th is a pleasant enough place to live for people who need lots of space, but is too full of offices and dull buildings to be much fun for the flaneur.

17th Arrondissement

Many fashionable guide books recommend the numerous flea markets (Marches aux Puces) which exist in Paris. Many are found in the Parisian outskirts. One of the biggest is on the far edge of the 17th. `You must go,' gush the guidebook writers with unstoppable enthusiasm. `Wander past quaint market stalls in hidden parts of Paris and discover bargains galore in the way the Parisians do.' They give complicated instructions on how to find your way to these markets, which are invariably held in some dreary and unloved suburb of the city.

When you get there you will almost certainly be disappointed.

There may well have been some bargains available a few decades ago but these days a trip to a Parisian flea market will prove to be about as rewarding (in every sense of the word) as an extended tour of the Roissy airport. You will occasionally find stalls flogging bits and pieces of tatty second hand furniture (though you would be wise to consider how you're going to get your double wardrobe back to whence you came before you hand over your money) but these days most of the stalls in the flea markets sell leather jackets (not much more expensive than you can buy them in a store), CDs, DVDs (which may well not work on your machine when you get them home) and hot dogs (which, if you eat one, will probably result in you spending the rest of your trip firmly fixed to your hotel lavatory). The stall holders and barkers are French but a hefty proportion of the customers are American, German, Japanese, Chinese, Dutch, Russian and British - all of whom will be carrying their own copies of the same damned guide books which put them onto the place. Go to a flea market early in the morning at a weekend (as is usually recommended) and you will find yourself one of a crowd of tourists. The Parisians are not so stupid as to bother going. They are tucked up at home; in bed with a bag of croissants, a pot of coffee and the newspapers.

Apart from flea markets there are some railway lines in the 17th. And some shops, houses and offices. We cannot think of any reason why you would want to go to the 17th unless you had been tricked into staying in a hotel there. We did see a claim in one guide book that the view from the Conference Centre is quite good but we happily confess that we haven't checked this out. If you are reduced to trying out this view then you have probably been in Paris too long and should try Venice or Amsterdam for a while.

18th Arrondissement

The 18th contains the ghosts of artists such as Renoir, Picasso, Matisse and Utrillo. It also contains the Sacre Coeur and the place du Tetre, the Cimetière de Montmartre (the third biggest and third most impressive and third most interesting cemetery in Paris - which contains. among others, what's left of Degas, Stendhal, Berlioz and Francois Truffaut) and miles and miles of fascinating little alleyways and passageways. This the part of Paris for which the word `picturesque' was invented. Steep winding streets. Stone steps. Metal handrails. Wonderful small restaurants. Smoky bars. Tiny hotels with rice paper partitions. It is the part of Paris that contains all those long stone staircases so loved by photographers using black and white film (mainly because, at the time, there wasn't any colour film available and weren't they lucky).

In the daytime, the 18th is a busy, working class area which also caters for tourists who want to visit and photograph the extraordinary and timeless beauties of Montmartre; the home territory of Toulouse-Lautrec and Renoir, the Moulin Rouge, the can-can and mind-rotting absinthe.

The pavement in front of Sacre Coeur provides the very best panoramic view of Paris.

Sacre Coeur is dismissed by the sort of people who think pickled sheep are art as looking too much like a wedding cake. Ignore these deadheads. Sacre Coeur, in the heart of Montmartre, and on the northern edge of Paris, dominates the northern skyline of Paris and it's staggeringly beautiful.

In addition to being one of the best known, Sacre Coeur is truly one of the most stunning churches in Europe. Yes, it looks like a wedding cake. (Or, rather, wedding cakes look like Sacre Coeur.) But, what's so wrong with that?

Sacre Coeur was built in celebration of the bloody repression of the Paris commune and it was built on a part of Paris called La Butte Montmartre which bears an uncanny resemblance to a block of one of those varieties of cheese which are full of holes. The biggest and most famous hill in Paris is honeycombed with caves, tunnels and disused galleries left over after centuries of quarrying for the stone and gypsum (the original Plaster of Paris) with which much of the city was built. (There is a saying known throughout France that `there is more of Montmartre in Paris than there is of Paris in Montmartre'. For over twenty years deep cracks have been appearing in the walls of houses in Montmartre and buildings have slipped. At least one area has had to be evacuated. Tourist buses rolling through the narrow, twisting streets have created thousands of tiny earthquakes and have constantly widened existing fissures. There are houses where drawers slide open if they aren't jammed shut. Architects and engineers agree that is only the crust of buildings on the surface which holds the area together - and above ground. Every now and again there are rumours that the whole area will fall down and disappear into a big hole in the ground, with just the dome of Sacre Coeur sticking out. (There are also rumours that other parts of Paris are riddled with termites. It is said that when the termites all stop holding hands vast amounts of valuable real estate will disappear.)

Inside, Sacre Coeur isn't anything special and even the most enthusiastic students of church interiors can safely give it a miss. But the outside is spectacular and, unlike many sightseeing specialities, looks just as good close up as it does on postcards. The views from the steps and gardens in front of and below Sacre Coeur are sensational. The word majestic is no exaggeration here.

There always seem to be Algerian tinkers flogging native masks and bits of leather work on the steps. Their goods are all laid out on rugs and if a policeman is seen approaching you'll see why. They simply pull together the four corners of their rug and scarper. Most of these guys could win Olympic middle distance medals for sprinting while carrying a large heavy rug full of tat.

Occasionally, there will be a busker in the vicinity. On different occasions we've seen a violinist, a cellist, a string quartet and a saxophonist. The acoustics up there are brilliant and everything sounds dreamy. A tone deaf man playing the tambourine would probably sound good.

Behind Sacre Coeur lies the place du Tetre.

In the old days this was an artists' hang out. These days it's a tourist hang out. But it's colourful and enormous fun and quite pretty and although art snobs will turn up their noses at the paintings on sale you aren't going there as an art critic; you're going there because it’s fun and unforgettable. It's fairground fun.

There are restaurant tables in the centre of the square and artists working at easels all the way around them. Some of the artists are excellent, some are very good and some are neither. Their plan, obviously, is to sell their paintings to the tourists and they seem to do quite well. You won't be surprised to see that most of the pictures seem to be of Paris, though there are the usual bowls of fruit and a few pictures of clowns. If you walk right round the square you will be approached at least a dozen times by young sketch artists wanting to do your portrait in charcoal, chalk or crayons. Just smile and shake your head if you're not interested. There are plenty of other potential customers so they won't hassle you. Some of the artists do straightforward portraits and some do cartoons. Just make sure you know what you're getting before you sit down on the little canvas stool.

There are tourists who visit Sacre Coeur by taxi. This is a huge mistake. Get there on foot. Take the metro to the Abbesses tube station and walk up the steps to Sacre Coeur on the top of the hill. Or, better still, walk up from the place de l'Opera. It's a long climb but well worth it. (There is a funicular railway alongside the steps up to Sacre Coeur for those who really can't face the final climb.) If you don't walk you will miss the feel of the place. And, anyway, you haven't been to Montmartre unless you've climbed up or down one of the many sets of steep stone steps which lead up to the top of the hill.

At night the whole area changes dramatically. This is the home of many of Paris's most famous nightclubs, strip clubs and sex shops.

Glamour, excitement, bright lights - Montmartre has it all.

Every building seems to contain either a restaurant, a café, a theatre or a nightclub. After dark the pavements lower down in Montmartre are packed with pimps and prostitutes and every street corner and every doorway is a neatly defined (and jealously guarded) sales territory for someone selling something you wouldn't ever see advertised on TV or on a street side hoarding but which is, nevertheless, a version of the most popular commodity in the world: sex.

Walk slowly along the Boulevard de Clichy, or one of the streets running into it, and every few steps your journey will be interrupted by slender young men in suits and open necked shirts who will ooze out of the darkness with big white smiles and casual, throw away invitations which probably break most known laws. They wear their hair dark and oily and chain-smoke French untipped cigarettes.

The doorways which aren't occupied by slender young men in suits are occupied by young women dressed, whatever the weather, in nothing very much at all. Thigh high boots, fishnet stockings, suspender belts, spike heels, micro skirts, hot pants, plunge tops revealing seemingly bottomless cleavage canyons, skin tight leather cat suits, shoulder length wigs in the most startling colours, unbuttoned blouses and skirts with slits up to the waist.

By daybreak the young men in suits are at home in bed, or in their favourite café playing cards, boasting, gambling and spending their illegal earnings. (Theoretically, gambling is illegal in France. Napoleon Bonaparte outlawed gambling and it has been against the law ever since. The only exceptions are state run gambling activities - such as the lottery and the state run casinos - which are, of course, entirely legal.) The lights are off and the clubs seem to have mysteriously disappeared. The streets from which they operated are now cluttered with empty bottles, litter and other debris. The area seems full of Arab cake shops and shoe shops. Grey walls are decorated with peeling posters and spattered with colourful, indecipherable graffiti. The only reminder that this is the sex quarter of the romantic capital of the world comes from the fact that a few of the street corners and some of the doorways are still occupied by prostitutes. The girls who are working the day shift are bolder and more obvious than their night shift sisters. They lean openly against lamp posts or they patrol their stretch of pavement, swinging their hips and parading their wares aggressively and unselfconsciously. The street walkers of the day tend to be a different breed to their sisters of the night. They are usually older, considerably plumper and rounder, and probably a good deal cheaper too. They are more brazen; bare breasts and skirts slit right to the waist, revealing stocking tops and suspenders, show that these women are catering to a different market.

The night girls, more flamboyant, more exotic, better made up, and more expensive cater to the tourists. They cater to the imagination; to those seeking something special.

The women who work the day shift cater largely to the locals who know exactly what they want and don't want to pay a fortune for presentation. The day shift workers cater to men who want to satisfy a simple, unromantic, unexciting physical need. The night girls are titillating. The day girls are simply provocative; the fast food providers of the Parisian sex industry.

The French have always been known for their open attitude towards sex. It is sometimes said that in the distant, bygone days, when courting French couples had to be accompanied by a chaperon, the chaperon was there not to stop the couple having sex but to give instructions, advice, encouragement and applause (and to be able to give a full report to everyone later).

Prostitution, in its various forms of professionalism, has a long history in France. Innkeepers in France used to routinely ask visiting males whom they knew to be strangers if they wanted a room `sans ou avec'; meaning with or without a woman. In central France, for example, it was assumed that any man from the north of the country would have travelled a long way and would, consequently, be lonely, cold and in need of comfort.

A century or so ago it was not unknown for women with husbands in the army to send their spouses money so that they could regularly buy a clean woman whenever one was available.

A few decades ago the brothels in Paris were shut down by authorities who hoped that by doing this they would be able to bring an end to prostitution. All that happened, of course, was that the girls went onto the streets. In the brothels the girls had regular medical examinations and carried certificates showing that they were healthy. On the streets there were no medical examinations and no certificates and the incidence of venereal disease rocketed. That was the sole consequence of the authorities' decision to close the brothels: an increase in the incidence of disease.

Today, the prostitutes spread down from Montmartre and into the 2nd arrondissement; towards the centre of the city along the rue St Denis.

The police, exhibiting Parisian pragmatism, look the other way. Prostitution is sort of illegal in France but, as in most other countries, the authorities turn a fairly blind eye to what goes on just as long as no one frightens the horses.

19th Arrondissement

The most interesting place in the 19th is the bizarrely gothic Parc des Buttes Chaumont. But it's not all that interesting.

20th Arrondissement

The 20th has one 'pièce de résistance' - and what a pièce de résistance it is. The Cimetière du Père Lachaise, which borders on the 11th arrondissement, and which can be reached by taking the Metro to the Père Lachaise stop, is the most extraordinary cemetery in Paris and, quite probably, the entire world. It is absolutely worth a visit. You must go there if you possibly can.

Père Lachaise is famous for its celebrities. It is, for example, where Oscar Wilde and Jim Morrison are buried. (Jim Morrison, by the way, died at no 17 rue Beautreillis, in the 4th arrondissement though when we last looked there was no sign to commemorate this fact.) It also contains the by now well rotted corpses of Balzac, Beaumarchais, Chopin, Colette, Delacroix, Eluard, Modigliani, Molière, Edith Piaf and Proust. Ironically, Père Lachaise also contains the body of Sir Sidney Smith who was one of Nelson's admirals.

Of all these the one who brings in most visitors is Morrison. The French get very annoyed that Jim Morrison's grave attracts more visitors than all the rest put together.

It's very easy to get lost in Père Lachaise but we usually manage to find the ex Doors' vocalist's grave by sniff alone. The aroma of marijuana and cheap red wine is unmistakeable.

The non-celebrity graves are, however, our favourites. (If `favourite' is the right word.) Some of the inscriptions are heartbreaking. An inconsolable man whose wife had died had engraved upon his wife's tomb the words: `I am waiting to join her. Until I can join her I will simply keep myself occupied. She was loved by everyone whose lives she touched and she will live for ever in the hearts of those who knew her.' Beautiful. True poetry. A tribute worthy of Paris herself.

Appendix 1

Outside Paris

The great Dr Samuel Johnson was once asked by his biographer, the intrepid and faithful Boswell, if he had ever seen the Niagara Falls.

`It is,' said Boswell, `worth seeing.'

`Worth seeing,' agreed Johnson. `But not worth going to see.'

The distinction the great man was making is, of course, a valid one. Lots of places and things which are worth seeing and worth visiting are simply not worth going to. The effort of getting there is too great for the reward you receive. An hour spent at Royal Ascot might be fun. But to get there you have to put up with enormous crowds, long queues and the vagaries of a public transport system which passed its best back in the 1950's. It would be nice to visit India or Australia. But the pain of boarding an aircraft and spending 24 hours entombed in a metal cigar where even the air is polluted rather detracts from the pleasure likely to be obtained from actually going there.

There are, of course, heaps of fascinating places outside Paris which are worth seeing. Fontainebleau, Giverny (where Monet lived and painted lilies), Chartres and Chantilly to name but four. But the one place you really should visit (and which is well worth the effort of getting there) is Versailles.

It is reported that 35,000 artisans and skilled craftsmen worked for 40 years to build the Chateau of Versailles. When you see it you will wonder how they did it so quickly.

Go by train. There's a regular train service from Gare St Lazare in Paris and it’s quick and cheap. The train station in Versailles is within walking distance of the Chateau. Don't waste time exploring the town, because with occasional exceptions it's a dull, rather battered looking sort of place that gives the impression of being far too much in awe of its main attraction to dare put its best clothes on for visitors.

Appendix 2

Twenty Things You Must Do In Paris

1. Visit Père Lachaise. Just walk around aimlessly. The Père Lachaise cemetery gives real meaning to the word `gothic'.

2. Walk around the place des Vosges. Visit on a Sunday when there are most likely to be musicians playing in the cloisters.

3. Admire the Eiffel Tower. Take the lift to the second floor. Afterwards walk in the Champs de Mars and take photographs of the tower. However naff you may think it is you cannot possibly visit Paris without visiting the Eiffel Tower.

4. Have a picnic in the Palais Royale. Buy a baguette, a bottle of wine and other bits and pieces from a local shop and have a picnic there.

5. Walk up through Montmartre to Sacre Coeur. Visit the place du Tetre. Yes, it’s brash and garish and touristy. But Paris can be. Then walk back down again.

6. Walk along the banks of the Seine and browse among the bookstalls for old books, old prints and old postcards. Go down to the water's edge and stroll along right by the river.

7. Visit as many famous cafés as you can and have a hot chocolate or a ‘vin chaud’ in them all. In particular, you must order a ‘vin chaud’ or a cup of hot chocolate in Deux Magots or Café de Flore and watch the world go by for an hour.

8. Go to the Luxembourg Gardens to see the Parisians at play.

9. Go to rue Cler to see typically Parisian small shops.

10. Go to Versailles. Take the train from Gare St Lazare and walk to the Chateau from the station in Versailles.

11. Admire the glass Pyramid at the entrance to the Louvre.

12. Go on a bus tour. Sit on the top of one of the open topped buses. It sounds touristy and it is. But it's a brilliant way to see the city. Don't bother going downstairs or in a coach. You won't see half as much. (But if you're sitting on top do watch out for flailing tree branches.)

13. Go into the old Paris Opera building and look at the Marc Chagall ceiling. It's one of the modern wonders of Paris.

14. Visit the Beaubourg in the 4th Arrondisement. It’s one of the most remarkable modern buildings in the world and the area around it is certainly lively – if rather touristy.

15. Walk down the Passage Jouffroy and the Passage des Panoramas.

16. Walk from Notre Dame to St Germain des Prés, via the church of St Michel. Visit the Shakespeare and Co bookshop.

17. Go into Galeries Lafayette and admire the atrium.

18. Stroll along the rue de Rivoli.

19. Walk up and down the Champs-Elysées.

20. Visit the Hôtel de Invalides. See Napoleon’s tomb and walk around the upper level cloisters surrounding the main courtyard.

Appendix 3
Ten Things Not Worth Doing In Paris

1. Going inside Notre Dame

2. Visiting a flea market. It's a waste of effort. You'll rub shoulders with Japanese, Chinese and American tourists and pickpockets from most of Europe. And see nothing worth buying.

3. Bother queuing to go inside the Louvre unless you're studying art history. It's simply too crowded and the queues are too long.

4. Going inside Sacre Coeur. The outside is much better.

5. Spending a fortune having dinner at Fouquet's, Maxim's or La Tour d'Argent. These aren't anything to do with `real' Paris. (If you want a treat buy a cake to accompany your cup of hot chocolate in Deux Magots or Café Flore.)

6. Visit Harry's Bar (in rue Daunou). It's vastly overrated and far more famous than it deserves. Besides, it's the best known meeting place for Americans in Paris.

7. Don't bother going to see the Opera National de Paris-Bastille. Paris's new opera house, opened in 1989 to celebrate the bicentenary of the storming of the Bastille is one of the most modern theatres in Europe and is, in our view, something of a joke.

8. Don't bother visiting the Arc de Triomphe de l'Etoile. It's best viewed from the bottom of the Champs-Elysées. And you'll get a wonderful aerial view of Paris when you go up the Eiffel Tower.

9. Don't bother visiting the Bois de Boulogne. It has become rather seedy and, to be honest, not particularly safe. It simply isn't worth the effort it takes to get there.

10. Don't bother taking a trip in a boat on the river. You can see Paris much more freely by walking along the banks. Just make sure you have a map with you so that you can identify the various buildings along the edges of the Seine. (And, remember, the best way to get an overview of Paris is to take a ride on the top deck of one of the sightseeing buses.)

Enjoy Paris. And remember: once will not be enough! It's the easiest city in the world with which to fall in love.

For details of other books by Vernon Coleman please visit either Amazon Author Central or www.vernoncoleman.com

Vernon Coleman's novels about Paris include *Paris in my Springtime* and *It's Never Too Late*.

SPIRITPOWER

Vernon Coleman

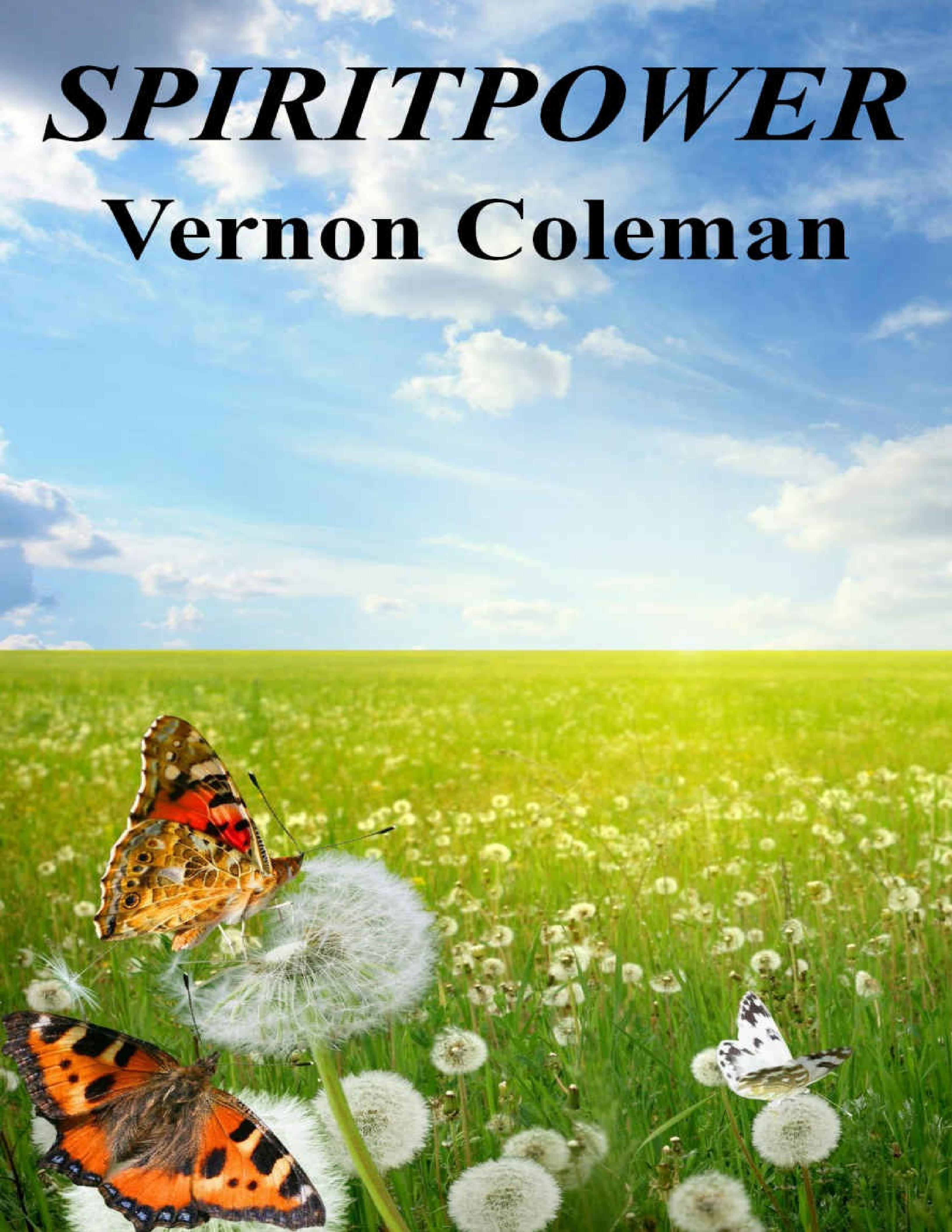

SPIRITPOWER

How To Find Freedom And Give Meaning To Your Life

Vernon Coleman

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Preface

What Do You Want Out Of Life?
(You Can Have It If You Really Want It)

'Believe nothing, no matter where you read it, or who said it! No matter if I have said it. Unless it agrees with your own reason and with your own common sense.'

– Buddha

We are all composed of three parts: body, mind and spirit. In my book *Bodypower* I described your body's astonishing self healing powers – and explained how you can take advantage of those powers to stay healthy and to defeat nine out of ten physical illnesses. In the sequel, *Mindpower,* I explored the powers of the mind, described how you can harness positive emotions and conquer and control weaknesses and destructive emotions and explained how you can use your mind to heal your body and teach yourself mental self defence. This book, *Spiritpower,* deals, as the title makes it clear, with the third and most abstract of the 'body, mind, spirit' trilogy. I have deliberately taken a practical and pragmatic attitude to this topic for I believe that the freedom of the spirit is constrained by very real, practical barriers. I believe that individual liberty and intellectual freedom are essential foundations for a healthy spirit, and that self awareness, self sufficiency and personal privacy are vital ingredients in the development of a healthy spirit. In the first part of this book I explore and explain the history and background to our current rather stagnant spiritual environment. In the second part of the book I go into the specific reasons for our loss of freedom and personal dignity. And in the third, and most important, part of the book I describe precisely how you can regain your physical, mental and spiritual freedom.

Vernon Coleman 1997

Foreword

Today’s Handbook For Tomorrow’s Revolutionaries

‘When a wise scholar hears the Tao
He practises it diligently.
When a mediocre scholar hears the Tao
He wavers between belief and disbelief.
When a worthless scholar hears the Tao
He laughs boisterously (and foolishly) at its wisdom.’

– Tao Te Jing by Lao Tsu

‘To constitute the millionth part of a legislature, by voting for one or two men once in three or five years, however conscientiously this duty may be performed, can exercise but little active influence upon any man’s life and character.’

– Samuel Smiles

We live in a demanding, harsh, high pressure world where today’s valued qualities are very different to those of a generation or two ago; where no one has any time; where loyalty, friendship and compassion are archaic qualities, emotional history rather than practical values.

Today, everything moves at a faster pace than ever before. Expectations are higher and more materialistic; success is judged not by personal achievement but in crude material terms.

In today’s world you are more likely to win society’s respect not because of your capacity for goodness or kindness or for your capacity for friendship; not through your sensitivity or through wisdom or love, but through the size and age of your motor car, the size of your home, the number of fashion items in your wardrobe and the source of your most recent top up suntan.

These are cold, rough standards by which to measure yourself – and in our competitive society your accomplishments and achievements will never be enough. There will always be someone who is richer, or who has better hair or a more perfect body.

The most potent source of pain, distress and dissatisfaction in our modern world is toxic stress – the sort of stress over which we have no personal control (and which I described in some detail in my book *How To Overcome Toxic Stress).* Toxic stress creates guilts and enormous feelings of failure. It is often toxic stress which turns ordinary men and women into workaholics, overachievers, depressives and inadequates. It is toxic stress which is largely responsible for the epidemic of mental disease in our society and the unending variety of stress related physical disorders – asthma, high blood pressure, heart disease, peptic ulceration, irritable bowel syndrome and so on. It is toxic stress which creates the anger, violence and mindless, self destructive rage which are such a part of our society.

In *How To Overcome Toxic Stress* I explained how we have created a world in which society is more important than the individual, and I described the simple ways in which toxic stress can be overcome. But even when toxic stress is overcome most of us are still slaves of, and tied into, the depersonalizing system which measures personal success only in material terms and puts the abnormal needs and expectations of the state above all else.

* * *

There are, it cannot be denied, more things to worry about today than there have ever been before. When our descendants look back on this period in human history there will be little for them to be proud of.

Superficially, the last few years have been a period of growth for a civilised, developed society. Millions of people own their own microwave ovens, video recorders and television sets. But the second half of the twentieth century will be remembered with shame and embarrassment. Our time in history will be remembered as the decade when people stopped caring, stopped trusting one another and started thinking only of themselves. The second half of the twentieth century will be remembered for poverty and extravagance; for hatred and jealousy.

The incidence of violence in our society is increasing faster than at any previous time. The incidence of child abuse is on the increase. Every winter thousands of old people die because they cannot afford to feed themselves or keep themselves warm. The number of people committing suicide is rising faster than ever. The number of people who have no jobs, and no hope of employment, has never been higher. The incidence of baby battering is on the increase. The number of sexual crimes rises constantly.

A baby born today is, when grown to adulthood, more likely to be admitted to a mental hospital than win a place at university. Thousands of people are homeless and have no hope of finding homes. There are now more alcoholics around than ever before – and the incidence is increasing every year.

We have polluted our environment, fouled our seas and filled our world with indestructible rubbish. We have more laws than ever before, and civil liberty is now merely a phrase from the past, but crime rises constantly. The greatest threat to personal liberty now comes not from crooks or bandits but from the courts and the police. Although we now have more social workers than ever before in our history, social problems are endemic. We spend more on healthcare than ever before but people are sicker than ever, and thousands die because they cannot get the treatment they need.

Most citizens have forgotten how to care and have become zombies; more concerned about their chances of winning the lottery than their responsibilities for the world.

Big companies that sell food, lend money or manufacture goods care nothing about their customers. They sell them food that will kill them. They lend them money they can't afford to pay back. And they sell them goods that are shoddy and poorly made. They lie and they cheat to maintain their profits.

The second half of the twentieth century will be best remembered for a meanness of spirit, a lack of generosity and an absence of honesty. But most of all our time will be remembered as the years when hardly anyone really cared.

We have lost our way. The maps have been altered. And the rules have been changed.

* * *

For years I made the mistake of assuming that most people were sensitive, compassionate and understanding. This was a grave error and one which has caused me much heartache. I care and you care, but most people do not. Most people are stupid, selfish and insensitive.

You do not have to go far to find the evidence to substantiate this assertion.

A recent survey showed that 88% of the population believe that schools should teach children to obey authority. The same survey showed that 65% of the population support the censorship of films and magazines and exactly the same percentage approve of capital punishment. Most people approve of giving more powers to the police – even when those powers bite deeply into their own rights to freedom and privacy. The people who 'think' this way also support and approve of a generally insensitive attitude towards poverty, suffering and sickness. In the new, late twentieth century canon these are signs, not of misfortune, but of weakness. The modern solution is more jackboot than kindness, more gas chamber than caring.

We may live in rich, allegedly developed countries but our governments treat the ill, the poor and the unfortunate with derision and contempt.

The medical profession, parts of which used to treat the Hippocratic Oath seriously, has sold out and become a marketing arm of the pharmaceutical industry. Doctors, nurses and other health care professionals have become a part of the selfish, uncaring society. Social workers are a sick joke; so obsessed with incest, daily meetings and their own sense of importance that they have completely lost touch with the real world and forgotten what compassion means. Lawyers, school teachers and others who might have been expected to fight for freedom are now interested only in preserving their own professional status. Religious leaders now abstain from moral authority – they have presumably been told that morality is no longer a marketable commodity.

Revolutionaries who dreamt of freedom, peace and compassion when they were twenty dream today of new triple-tufted carpets, double glazing and ABS brakes. (Today's twenty-year-olds have missed out the dreams of freedom, peace and compassion and gone straight to the dreams of triple-tufted carpets, double glazing and ABS brakes.)

Nero was accused of fiddling while Rome burned. At least he did something creative. Today's free citizen spends several hours a day watching television and no longer believes that he can make a difference.

Over my shoulder I see the forces of darkness arraigned in suits of every shade of grey. And yet while these evil forces crowd daily closer, the over-promoted talents of the television age dedicate their lives to endorsing violence and sucking people dry for cheap programming. The magic box is dominated by self important, intellectually deprived presenters with expensive haircuts and cheap brains. Salacious and hypocritical but rarely courageous or original, they have turned a potentially powerful medium into a tool of the state. The government is safe as long as the voters are more concerned with soapland than with reality. The electors sit slumped in front of their nightly five hours of watered down, two dimensional entertainment because they are too frightened to speak up; they are convinced that they cannot make a difference. They may occasionally still feel anger, frustration, alienation and bewilderment. But they dare not speak out for they fear for their own safety. They know that unemployment – and worse – beckons for those who stand up and speak.

* * *

It is a mistake to assume that most people are automatically and inherently good. They aren't. The world is inherently evil. Power and money corrupt and we live in a corrupt world.

The trouble is that most 'bad' people do not regard themselves as 'bad'. Indeed, they often think that they are doing a worthwhile job. People who work for arms companies or tobacco companies don't think of themselves as 'evil' even though what their company is doing may be evil. They find all sorts of excuses for what they do and they slowly lose sight of truth and decency. The most evil people in our society don't think they are evil. They think they are just doing their jobs. They think that someone else is doing all the evil things which are ruining the world. They do not realise that the evil emanates from them all along.

The fact is that evil is not just about being evil; it is also about allowing other people to behave in an evil fashion. Evil is not caring and not saying anything. For so many people in our society 'just doing my job' means cheating the poor and making life difficult for other people.

Lawyers who represent dishonest corporations are evil. Civil servants who abuse and do not serve the people who pay their salaries are evil rather than civil.

Apathy and silence are just as much a sin as torture and murder. Standing by silently is a sin.

* * *

I received a letter the other day from a reader who wanted to know why I am so outspoken.

'I agree with much of what you say,' he wrote. 'But you would make far fewer enemies if you were more tactful. You make people feel uncomfortable.'

I am sure that reader is right.

I've been a newspaper and magazine columnist for thirty years and in that time I've been fired well over forty times. (I've also resigned quite a few times too). One editor once told me that he was getting rid of my column because I made people think.

I am old enough to know that I have two main problems.

The first is that I am honest. I say what I believe. And I don't care whether it is politically incorrect or culturally insensitive.

And my second big problem is that I care passionately.

Neither of these is, I realise, fashionable virtues.

Indeed, I am sure that some people would regard honesty and passion as vices.

We live in strange and rather awful times.

Most people don't seem to give a stuff about anything any more.

The world is full of people who don't care, won't take responsibility and are frightened to say what they think.

Unlike their predecessors modern politicians no longer resign.

And they get away with it because not enough people care.

Our streets are full of people who are homeless and impoverished.

No one gives a damn.

Our hospitals are decaying. Patients are treated without compassion or respect.

The educational system is a sick joke. Illiteracy is commonplace. Huge swathes of our population are unemployable because they can neither write a letter nor add up a column of figures.

Go into a shop to buy something and the chances are that you will be served by a surly, ignorant assistant who doesn't care a jot whether you buy something or not. If you do buy and the product goes wrong they won't care about that either.

We live in a world controlled by bureaucrats and faceless morons who neither think nor care about what they do. Have you tried telephoning a government organisation or a large company to complain recently? It's like talking to cotton wool.

Bored complacency is endemic.

A friend of mine has just received a cheque from his insurance company. The accident which resulted in this modest payment occurred years ago. Over the months he has spoken and written to an endless series of grey faced bureaucrats. None of them seemed to care a jot about the delay.

Another friend is waiting to go into hospital for an operation on her hip. She has been on the waiting list for over a year. No one gives a damn. When she rings up to try to find out what is going on the hospital staff are rude and offhand. They clearly regard all patients as a bloody nuisance.

We live in a world which is run by the incompetent and the uncaring, the unthinking and the unfeeling. No one seems to care any more.

Well I refuse to apologise for the fact that I care. And you should not apologise for the fact that you care either.

* * *

I have nothing but contempt for people who sit on the fence and won't say what they think. As I write fur is back in fashion. Affluent women everywhere are pulling their fur coats from the back of their wardrobes and swaggering along the streets wearing the skins of thirty or forty dead animals with pride.

A few years ago the dirty looks, the catcalls and the occasional can of red paint forced fur owning women to put their dead animal skins back into the closet.

Not any more.

The rich bitches are getting away with it because fur is now yesterday's cause; yesterday's shame and horror. The wholesale slaughtering of living, breathing, sentient creatures so that rich bitches can swagger around looking like rich bitches is no longer a big story. It is dead news. And nobody cares. A recent survey showed that nearly half the population admit that they would not be prepared to take any sort of action – even for a cause they believe in.

But, that isn't too surprising. No one seems to really care about anything very much any more.

There is much tut tutting in the smart suburbs when news comes in of another atrocity in Africa. 'Golly,' they murmur, as they tuck into the highly processed but tasty chemical, faeces and cardboard pie they think of as food. 'Isn't that terrible.'

And then the atrocity in Africa merges into last week's atrocity in Asia and the previous week's atrocity in South America. There is much frowning and shaking of heads when the evening television news is full of reports of ethnic cleansing in distant parts of Europe, the names of which only newsreaders can pronounce.

'Well, I never,' they mutter, as they down another can of beer and wonder whether they've won the lottery this week.

And there is much disgust and disapproval when another senseless piece of violence is reported: when another mad gunman mows down a dozen or two innocent victims or when a passerby is knifed to death for daring to whistle a happy tune.

'Terrible, isn't it,' they say to one another, quickly blaming the government, the church or the killer's relatives or neighbours, and then forgetting about the horror when their favourite TV theme tune starts.

When it really comes down to it no one really gives a damn. No one cares enough to do anything.

And as each new horror story gets publicity so the old horrors are forgotten. Yesterday's carnage, cruelty and destruction become simply yesterday's news.

To some extent all this is understandable. Because every day brings new examples of wickedness we can no longer cope. There is just too much horror and awfulness to bear.

Today my mail brought me a photograph of a bear in Turkey who has had its legs broken so that it can be forced to walk about on crutches to entertain the tourists. I received a photograph of a tiger in China tied up in a cage prior to being beaten to death so that shopkeepers can turn its bones and organs into highly priced quack remedies.

And no one cares.

No one allows these horrors to affect them too deeply. They quickly forget and push aside these terrors.

But the wars, the localised, personalised violence and the sheer cruelty are just a part of it.

The entire insane world is corrupt. Politicians around the world are found guilty of taking bribes. The food industry now sells garbage which causes cancer, heart disease and other deadly diseases – and kills more people than Hitler ever did. Why are so many people silent? Children are getting leukaemia and other cancers which could have been prevented. Most cases of cancer are avoidable. Doctors now do more harm than good.

People hear the messages and read the words but they don't do anything partly because they can't cope with all the information, partly because the truth is inconvenient (if you believe that cancer is caused by specific foods then you will have to make big changes to your life) and partly because they don't think that what they hear is really going to affect them.

Cigarettes are still sold freely in corner shops, supermarkets and pubs even though they kill millions. Drunk driving continues unabated – despite the slaughter on the roads.

And people ignore it all. After all, what can they do?

They blame the politicians. They blame industry. They blame fate. But people never want to take any of the blame themselves. They have handed over responsibility, washed their hands of the world, and let the politicians take charge.

If *they* don't make the world a better place then it is *their* fault.

But nothing does get done of course because the politicians don't care. Modern politicians are, almost by definition, ruthless, dispassionate and uncaring people. The only word they really understand is 'compromise'.

Politicians don't go into politics because they want to make the world a better place; they go into politics because it is a good career. Politicians get paid extremely well. And they know they don't have to do anything.

Politicians don't have to deal with the horrors of the world because they know that people don't care enough.

* * *

In this book I intend to explain how you can regain your individuality and some, at least, of your freedom from a cruel world, and how you can begin to take back (at least some) control over your own life. I will explain how you can preserve your privacy, your dignity and your liberty until the revolution comes.

Freedom means different things to different people. But it is an essential prerequisite for happiness and a vital antidote if you hope to minimise the effects of toxic stress. Furthermore, it is only through acquiring and maintaining *personal* freedom that you will have the spiritual strength to combat and overcome the powerful establishment forces which want to limit individual rights and liberties and which are leading to a gradual increase in the powers of society.

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During the last quarter of a century I have written over 75 books. It may not be obvious from a quick glance at the titles but the common theme, running through a majority of both my fiction and my nonfiction books, has been 'freedom'.

Some of my medical books (from *The Medicine Men* and *Paper Doctors*, through *The Health Scandal* and *Betrayal of Trust* to *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You*) were written to help readers understand how their freedom and their rights have been taken from them by an oppressive, dishonest and overbearing medical establishment. Books such as *Bodypower* and *Mindpower* were written to help readers take back their freedom through a greater understanding of their own innate powers. In novels such as *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War* the theme is clear: the heroine is fighting for her personal dignity and freedom. In my *Bilbury* novels the inhabitants of Bilbury are constantly battling against the forces of evil to preserve their idyllic rural lifestyle. Now, I hope that *Spiritpower* will be the ultimate 'freedom fighter's handbook'.

For decades I have been conscious of the fact that our freedom as individuals has been steadily disappearing; consistently eroded by a variety of potent forces. Politicians, the courts, large international companies and the professions have all taken away some of our freedom. Most alarming of all, however, has been the steady and unnoticed way in which the amorphous and almost indefinable beast known as 'society' has taken our freedom.

Little by little the established forces have taken more and more control over our lives. Today, we have far less power than at any other time in history.

We like to think of ourselves as 'free' but we are not. We congratulate ourselves on not having succumbed to the awfulness of Orwell's 1984. But the truth is that we *have* succumbed. The only difference between our modern world and the world which Orwell predicted is that those who control our lives have been rather more subtle than the power barons Orwell envisaged; they have disguised their takeover of our lives with hollow excuses, false explanations and unconvincing assurances that we are still in charge of our own lives.

The modern enemies of freedom do not arrive on our shores from landing craft; they do not fall from the skies with parachutes attached; and they do not arrive on earth in spacecraft. The modern enemies of freedom are here already; scattered widely in amongst us; they wear uniforms and white coats; they wear suits, clutch briefcases and carry coloured pens in their breast pockets. The modern enemies of freedom are the representatives of a society which no longer has any respect for the rights of the individual; the commercial and state bureaucrats, the car park attendants, the planning officers, the traffic wardens, the policemen, the politicians and the millions of others whose daily work on behalf of society gives them just a little bit of authority taken from the individuals who are society but who, as individuals, have no rights.

Independence and privacy are no longer yours by right; you must work hard to obtain and enjoy them. It used to be argued (not so many years ago) that an innocent man would have nothing to hide and would, therefore, be perfectly happy to allow the civil servants, the bureaucrats, the police and every other government or private agency to know whatever it wanted to know about him.

In an ideal world, where bureaucrats and others held to old fashioned values, that sort of attitude would have undoubtedly been healthy. In our modern world, where government officials, and, indeed, whole government departments, resolutely ignore the law, deceive and pressurise the innocent and exceed their authority for the sake of the mysterious force known as society (and, of course, of themselves and their careers) such an attitude shows an unhealthy level of innocence and naivety.

* * *

Don't let your life drift by.

You really can make a difference. Dust off your principles, drag your dreams back out of the attic and scream and shout and let the faceless men and women in grey suits know that you care, and that you will not let them win.

Every night, when you go to bed, ask yourself this simple question: 'What have I done today to make the world a better place?'

To survive and succeed in our modern world, to retain your independence, your freedom and your privacy and to allow your spirit, as well as your body and your mind, to flourish, you must know exactly what you want; you must be confident that you can succeed in getting it and you must set aside your fears. You must then plan and work towards your goals.

Spiritpower has been written to help you succeed in your journey's aim.

PART ONE: *We Have Lost Our Freedom*

‘The mass of man serve the state not as men but as machines, with their bodies. They are the standing army and the jailers and the constables. In most cases there is no free exercise whatever of the judgement or of the moral sense; but they put themselves on a level with wood and earth and stones; and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well. Such command no more respect than men of straw or a lump of dirt.’

– Henry David Thoreau

CHAPTER ONE: Luddites, Factories And ‘Society’

‘We have not abolished slavery, we have nationalised it.’

– Herbert Spencer

We have fought two World Wars in the twentieth century to protect our freedom. What went wrong? In today’s society the ordinary citizen is in bondage.

From the days of the Renaissance we built up a civilisation that was, until the days of the Industrial Revolution, largely based upon the strengths and qualities of the individual. When originality and creativity and thought and progress and knowledge were stifled it was usually the Church which was at fault. And then came the Industrial Revolution – and the final end of the Church’s great powers.

During the Industrial Revolution the English Luddites, who were protesting about the introduction of new machinery which they regarded as a threat to their livelihoods, forced machine owners to take the despised new equipment out of cottages and farm houses and put it into large warehouses where it could be protected.

Ned Ludd and his followers broke up stocking and lace making machines because they feared that the new machinery would put them out of work. Inventors, like all creative thinkers, are invariably regarded as a threat – as some sort of enemy. But the looms promised to create work instead of reducing it and, although they never knew the extent of their error, Ludd and his followers had made a huge mistake. The violence with which they opposed the new machinery had effectively created the factory system.

Up until this time people had worked in their own homes but the Luddites forced employers into building factories. And once factories had been built the erection of purpose built terraced housing (to house the workers) was an inevitable consequence. (In the section dealing with education I have explained how and why all this resulted in the building of schools.)

It is one of the great ironies of all time that the Luddites – who regarded themselves as revolutionaries, fighting for the survival of the individual – were the driving force behind the development of the factory and our modern, heavily structured and repressive ‘society’. It was the Luddites who ensured that the industrial state would gradually become first the political state and then, finally, the police state.

By the start of the twentieth century post-Luddite man had, in general, reached a state of security and comfort which a century or two earlier would not have seemed possible.

It was at that point in the development of what he liked (and still likes) to call his ‘civilisation’ that western man started to turn towards regulating his life, with the development of something called ‘society’.

In the end the very success of political liberalism, which grew out of public concern and some revolt against the uneven world which the Luddites had bequeathed to their successors, created its own decline as many citizens become increasingly unwilling to tolerate the social evils which they saw around them.

The liberal minded succumbed to the idea of a regimented life (and the loss of ordinary basic freedoms) because socialism promised freedom from want and need. It was, however, an impossible, idealistic dream.

The proposed new rights and freedoms, promised through socialism, were to include a brand new concept, a brand new type of freedom: the freedom from necessity.

The new socialist state promised to protect the individual and take on all his or her most onerous responsibilities. The theory was that by destroying the economic system which had evolved during the industrial revolution (and which had been created and built by individuals) the rights of the ordinary working citizen could be enhanced. The state would take power and responsibility from the employers and would use those powers and responsibilities to look after the people.

The big plan was to get rid of all physical needs, wants and privations; to redistribute wealth, eradicate the differences which were an integral part of a class system, and bring everyone down to the same level. The state took on the enormous task of giving the voters a new freedom: the freedom from want. Although it was not (and is still not) recognised as such this was a form of totalitarianism; something completely different to the gentle liberalism which had previously been concerned with protecting the rights of the poor. ‘In a free society,’ wrote Walter Lippman, ‘the state does not administer the affairs of men. It administers justice among men who conduct their own affairs.’

Both at the time and afterwards there seemed to be little understanding of the fact that when a government takes total control of all economic life it must inevitably take away each individual’s personal freedoms – and that the removal of those freedoms must lead to oppression and discrimination.

Because totalitarian leaders need an identifiable ‘enemy’ to motivate the people, to excuse the laws they make and to justify their style of government they frequently create friction and discord and build up an ‘enemy’.

(The Conservative government in Britain benefited enormously from the Falkland conflict – a small war which gave the voters a cause to ‘believe in’ and provided an excuse for many of the things the government was doing. It is far easier for a government to get its citizens’ support through hatred or envy or some other negative emotion than it is through some positive emotion. In Germany, prior to and during the Second World War, the Jews were targeted because the Nazis needed to attack success, freedom and independence if they were to ensure that their ideas were widely accepted. The Jews represented capitalism in the popular mind and so targeting the Jewish people gave the German leaders – who presented a potent but strange mixture of socialism and fascism – both a way of overcoming the principles of commercial freedom and a target which they knew could be used to inspire the envy and hatred which would bind the voters together.)

CHAPTER TWO: The Regimentation Of Economic Life

‘The whole of society will have become a single office and a single factory with equality of work and equality of pay.’

– V.I Lenin

As Adam Smith pointed out, governments which regiment economic life are put into a position where to support themselves they are obliged to be oppressive and tyrannical.

If you take control and direction of economic activity then you must suppress the freedom of individuals and true democracy becomes a genuine inconvenience. Modern governments do not like competition or freedom because where and when either exist it must inevitably mean that things are out of their control. Governments naturally prefer a directed economy.

Socialism meant – and means – the creation of a planned economy and the abolition of private ownership and private enterprise. It means the abolition of the entrepreneur and the development of a central planning body to oversee everything and everyone.

In principle this may sound vaguely attractive to those whose main driving forces are equality and egalitarianism rather than freedom and liberty, but in practice there are, inevitably, too many conflicting forces and pressure groups for any comfortable compromise agreement ever to be reached.

There will always be irresolvable conflicts in any community. Some people will want the countryside preserved at all costs. Others will want new factories, new housing estates and new roads. Every small group wants its own aims achieved, and believes that it is in the right. The end result is conflict.

The people want their government to run their lives (and to take on the responsibility for making all the decisions) but neither the people nor their political representatives can agree on a plan. The huge weakness in a democracy is that it produces indecisiveness and ineffectiveness which leave a power vacuum; everyone gets what no one wants.

The government cannot deal with the nitty gritty of life and certainly cannot satisfy the demands of all and so unless there is one group which is infinitely more powerful than all the others the end result is that power is handed over to the unelected ‘authorities’ (the bureaucrats) who then (anonymously) either simply bow down to the most powerful lobbyists or decide what they think will be best for everyone.

Under these circumstances the individual’s freedom has been transmitted to the government and the government has passed it on to the unelected authorities, producing a dictatorship with a thousand small, invisible dictators.

Politicians are good at airing grievances and theory, but the nuts and bolts of daily administration usually end up in the hands of unnamed, unelected bureaucrats who are not bound by any rules nor subject to any appeals or controls, but have virtually unlimited discretion in regulating the activities of the electorate. And when a government delegates authority to the civil servants or bureaucrats it gives those bureaucrats authority with the force of law behind it. When the law says that a bureaucrat, or a group of bureaucrats, (worse still, a committee of bureaucrats – invariably a collection of pompous and unwise dictators pontificating about a business of which they know nothing) are backed by the authority of the law then anything that bureaucrat, or group of bureaucrats, chooses to do is legal and is sanctioned with the full authority of the law.

Today, the legal system is designed to protect the state and society rather than the individual. The end result is that the bureaucrats rule the world and the freedom and liberty of individuals are threatened more by the tyranny of the law than the actions of the lawless.

Virtually every day of every week there is news of yet another group of concerned citizens protesting because some government department or officially supported commercial enterprise wants to build a nuclear reactor, a toxic waste dump or some other nightmare in their neighbourhood.

Whenever this happens the authorities sneer at the protestors – describing them as part of the N.I.M.B.Y. syndrome (the acronym stands for Not In My Back Yard). The implication is that the protestors are in some way being unreasonably selfish in refusing to allow their local environment to be polluted.

And yet the evidence suggests that in many instances no one wants the nuclear reactor, the toxic waste dump or whatever it is that is being planned, to be built in *their* neighbourhood. And yet the authorities who want to build, or who authorise the building of, the unwanted whatever it is never ever withdraw, hold up their hands and say: ‘Oh well, if no one wants it then we won’t build it’.

CHAPTER THREE: A Structured Society

‘Democracy and socialism have nothing in common but one word: equality. But notice the difference: while democracy seeks equality in liberty, socialism seeks equality in restraint and servitude.’

– Alexis de Tocqueville

In a competitive, free society everyone has an opportunity to do whatever they want. Even if you do not get the job you really want you have the knowledge that you have a chance. In a free society anything is possible if we make the effort. However unsuited you may be to a particular type of work you can get there if you really want it enough.

But in a society where the selections are made according to fixed rules decided by bureaucrats then strength of will and determination and individual qualities do not count. State control doesn’t lead to equality or universal fairness for all but to inequality and universal unfairness for all.

In a competitive, free society anything can be bought – at a price. You might feel that the price is too high. You might not be able to afford all the things you would like to buy. But, in a free society, you have the choice. You can earn the money you need. And you can spend it any way you wish. In a society run by bureaucrats there is no freedom of choice – only orders, rules, restrictions and prohibitions.

When a government controls 40% or more of national expenditure (as is common these days throughout the ‘developed’ world) it effectively controls everything. Individuals and companies get caught up in, and irretrievably tangled in, the government’s own all invasive bureaucracy.

During the last century or so people have learned to accept and even welcome an organised society. Society expects you to go to school, learn a great many things by rote (it doesn’t really matter whether you are interested in them or understand them – society prefers you to be unquestioning and not to think too much), to marry and have a small family, to spend all that you earn (and preferably a little bit more – so that you can remain in debt and help the banks make a profit), to obtain and do a responsible, regular job (whether or not you find it of any interest), to pay your taxes regularly, to work until you are 65, carefully saving for your retirement, and then, when you retire and you are tired and weary, and all your ambitions and hopes and opportunities have gone, you can enjoy whatever minor hobbies or interests you have acquired and quietly prepare yourself for the grave.

Individualism today is associated with egotism and selfishness, and people who are prepared to have ideas and back them with their own mental, physical and financial resources are something of an anachronism; to be regarded with suspicion, resentment and disapproval.

The political development of our organised society has risen alongside a physically structured society in which we have all become increasingly dependent upon one another for lighting, food, heating, transport, communications and everything else. We are very vulnerable to society’s whims. We live in homes and use equipment which makes us far more dependent than our ancestors ever were. They could light a paraffin lamp for light, put wood on the stove for heat or for cooking and walk or ride to the nearby market for any supplies which they could not grow or make themselves. We have created an infinitely more complex society in which true independence is difficult to achieve.

The mass of people welcome a structured society because it offers them several specific types of security.

First, through the provision of a police force, ostensibly hired to protect and represent citizens, it offers them security against crime and violence. Second, it offers security against physical privation. And third, it offers the security of a known and accepted standard of living. These are all reasonable and humane objectives.

But the original proposals have been dramatically enhanced. The security against physical privation and the security of a given standard of life have both been extended. The provision of security against physical privation (ensuring that every member of society has enough food, shelter against the elements and clothing to keep him warm, and is therefore able to preserve his health and his ability and capacity to work) can, as long as one assumes that this level of security is only offered to those who are genuinely in need, easily be provided through an ordinary ‘free’ society without in any way endangering the freedom of other individuals. But, in most modern societies, this original level of security has been superseded by a far broader level of social support. The result, today, is that the provision of a widespread, all encompassing social security service, designed to provide those who are not working, or who are for some other reason unable to look after themselves, with a standard of living which approximates to that enjoyed by those who are the lower end of the working population, has produced a considerable amount of dishonesty among those who want to take advantage of these ‘free’ benefits and an equal amount of resentment among those who are working and who are therefore supporting these individuals as well as themselves.

Protecting anyone’s standard of living (or the standard of living they think they are entitled to) through artificial means results, inevitably, in the erosion of freedom and the disappearance of security for others.

The provision of a minimum income and a guaranteed standard of life for those who have no intention of working, or taking on the responsibility for themselves and their families, can only be provided by controlling a huge proportion of the wealth of those who are in work, and by establishing a socialist or communist system of government which takes control of much if not all of the ordinary person's life. And yet the freedom to make and control your own money (and your own life) is fundamental for human happiness and for true liberty.

* * *

Something else has happened to weaken the very structure of our society.

Traditionally, in any community, individuals have to choose between a safe, secure environment or a free and risky environment.

Those who choose to join the police force, the army or the civil service work within a safe, secure environment. In the army there is plenty of security but relatively little freedom. In nationalised industries (a safe, secure environment) the pressure is so small and the work so slow that anything and everything takes twice as long (and costs twice as much) as it would in the private sector. Around the world virtually every nationalised industry which has been privatised has become considerably more cost effective than it was before. This is simply because those who work within a nationalised industry are protected from the requirements of the real world.

In economic terms the relationship between freedom, security and reward has always been a relatively simple one. The soldier and the civil servant have sacrificed freedom for security and have always earned more than the unsuccessful businessman but less than the successful businessman. But in our modern society those who join the police force, the army or the civil service have succeeded in demanding and obtaining the same sort of economic reward as is obtained by the most successful businessmen. Civil servants, whose income and status are assigned and guaranteed by some unseen and unaccountable authority, want (and demand) total job security and index linked pensions (benefits which are denied those who are employed in ordinary businesses or who are self employed) but they obtain these securities at the expense of the ordinary non civil servant employee. After all, someone (the taxpayer) has to pay for those benefits. The result is that businesses and the self employed have less money and less freedom. The working community is guaranteeing to those who have the greatest amount of security a fixed part of a variable cake (the national Gross Domestic Product) and so the share left for the rest must fluctuate. Those who have willingly surrendered their freedom for security have taken freedom from those who do not have the security. This is, of course, an insidious, well disguised form of communism and yet it is a system which has grown and been sustained under allegedly 'right wing' governments.

Right wing politicians may have privatised former state industries but they have replaced state monopolies with private monopolies which are, generally speaking, pretty much as bad; they are more efficient and more profitable but they are still as large and impersonal and still in the hands of the new aristocracy: the bureaucrats.

Today's governments – whether left wing or right wing – are preoccupied and obsessed with the idea of managing the voters and regulating their every activity. In some countries you can now even be fined for not registering to vote! (Why? After all, you don't usually have to vote. The answer is that 'they' use the voting register as a way of checking up on the identities and whereabouts of all the citizens.)

Nothing, it seems, is now outside the remit of the government. Socialist Sidney Webb claimed that the future belonged to the great administrative nations, where the officials governed and the police kept order. His prediction has been proved accurate.

The great irony here is that modern socialism has been nurtured, to a large extent unknowingly and unthinkingly, by the very people who were originally the targets of socialism. Back in the 19th century Alexis de Tocqueville and Lord Acton both warned that socialism meant slavery. And they were right; modern socialism has meant that freedom, liberty and tolerance have all now pretty much lost their meanings.

It is easy to forget that the original founders of socialism wanted to create a dictatorial government, controlling the people, putting a stop to revolution and reorganising society on distinctly hierarchical lines. There was never any real difference between socialism, fascism and communism: these were all anti-democratic, anti-freedom concepts.

What, after all, is the difference between fascism and communism? To all those who follow these two beliefs it is the state and the machinery of the state which matters – rather than the individual. The concepts may sound different but the end results are the same. The freedom of the individual and freedom of thought have never played any part in socialism. It was the socialists, not the fascists, who first thought of encouraging children to join political organisations and organising sports, uniforms and special forms of address for the members of those organisations.

(As a side bar it is interesting to note that communism has always been just as elitist as any capitalist society ever devised. In the Soviet Union, under communist rule, the difference between the highest and the lowest salaries paid was about 50 to 1 – the same sort of magnitude that existed in countries such as the United States of America. In 1939 Leon Trotsky estimated that: 'the upper 11 or 12% of the Soviet population now receives approximately 50% of the national income. This differentiation is sharper than in the United States, where the upper 10% of the population receives approximately 35% of the national income.')

Socialists often complain that socialist parties have drifted noticeably to the right. In fact this isn't the case at all.

It is the other way around. Steadily, and without anyone noticing, Conservative parties have drifted so far to the left that they have taken over the ground previously held by the socialists. They have initiated and approved a continuing growth in government control and state expenditure and they have steadfastly supported the continuing state interference in the lives of their citizens.

It was Lenin who introduced to Russia the twin question: ‘Who, Whom?’ when asking who dominated whom and who takes the decisions that affect whom. In a modern ‘developed’ and allegedly ‘free’ nation –even one allegedly run by ‘right wing’ politicians – it is the state and its servants who have become the ‘Who?’ and the citizens who have become the ‘Whom?’.

CHAPTER FOUR: Great, And Even Greater, Expectations

‘We put too much faith in systems and look too little to men.’

– Benjamin Disraeli

The big question raised by all this is a crucial one: why should young people take risks with their earning potential when they can get well paid pensioned jobs working for the state?

In recent years the privileges associated with state employment have multiplied along with the levels of security promised. Today’s bureaucrats have taken the freedom of others and used it to enhance their own status and wealth. Today, a salaried and pensioned position gives security and power.

The likelihood of anyone choosing a ‘high risk’ career as an entrepreneur has been reduced still further by the fact that businessmen are constantly reviled as being rather nasty and in some ways unpalatable individuals by hypocrites whose own status and success is dependent upon the business success of others but who, nevertheless, sniff at profits as somehow immoral and disreputable, and who make it clear that they regard the very employment of others as synonymous with exploitation.

The successful businessman is sneered at and reviled by legions of talentless and unsuccessful pseudo-intellectuals and half witted academics (and, in particular, by second rate journalists on the broadsheet newspapers) for being successful, and the unsuccessful businessman is reviled for being unsuccessful.

The pseudo-intellectuals are too stupid to see that the very elements of society which they pretend to admire most wholeheartedly are at risk not because of businessmen but because of bureaucrats. The pseudo-intellectuals who think of money making as a low thing, and who believe that geniuses never go in for business are, in truth, so badly educated that they do not realise that Plato defrayed his travelling expenses by selling oil during his journeys, that Spinoza polished glasses to earn money, that Linnaeus the botanist earned his living making shoes and that Shakespeare took more pride from the fact that he was a successful theatre manager than from the plays he wrote. His main aim in working was not literary success but to acquire an honest independence.

The pseudo-intellectuals use the word ‘popular’ in a derogatory sense. (‘He is just a ‘popular’ writer’) because they are too poorly read to realise that Shakespeare was a popular playwright. Today, in pseudo-intellectual circles, the two prerequisites for ‘literary’ success are to be ‘unpopular’ and ‘unreadable’.

* * *

Despite the short-sightedness of the pseudo-intellectual supporters of our bizarre and bureaucrat run society the power of a millionaire employer today may be less than that of a small, pen pushing clerk who has the discretion to make (or not make) petty decisions and who has the authority of the state behind him.

It is true that wealthy individuals do have some power. But the antithesis of a world in which the wealthy have power is a world in which only the powerful can attain wealth – and it is this sort of world which we are rapidly creating.

Minority groups are far freer in a capitalist system than in a state system for there is a much greater chance of a member of a minority gaining money and offering employment to his friends and associates in a capitalist system than there is of a state functionary offering work to members of an officially frowned upon or even forbidden minority.

If, instead of money we only had public honours and distinctions, special privileges, more servants (though not called ‘servants’ of course), a better class of travel, more luxurious accommodation and smarter cars (as was the case in many communist countries) then the person awarding these privileges would have the power normally associated with money – the only difference would be that he would be able to decide the format and extent of any reward. The recipient of this community largesse would have no choice in the matter. He would have no freedom to decide how to spend his ‘value’ to society.

Karl Marx himself noted that the evolution of private capitalism, with its free market, was an essential precondition for the formation and development and sustenance of all the freedoms we associate with democracy. Money may have its evils but there is no alternative. It is surprising, therefore, that Marx and his followers did not foresee that the freedoms we enjoy might disappear if the free market also disappeared. But then those with far left wing beliefs are often as blind to the truth as those who have far right wing beliefs.

* * *

People now expect society to protect them from hunger, poverty and every other possible threat to their wealth, health and general well-being. Investors expect society to reimburse them if they lose money through their own stupidity or greed. Patients expect society to get them better even if they have become ill through their own fault (by eating fatty food or smoking cigarettes and so on).

Those with jobs expect society to provide them with unemployment benefit even if the company which was employing them goes bankrupt as a result of their own demands for excessively high wages. This interference with the natural course of events has led to a population which demands more and more and expects more and more and to a society in which freedom is continually eroded.

Householders expect society to pay the bill if they lose their homes through some natural disaster. There may be no moral justification for their misfortune but once society starts to take on such a massive role it must inevitably make demands upon those who have not been so unfortunate. Every penny given to the unfortunate must be taken from those who have not been so unfortunate.

Farmers expect society to reimburse them if their crops fail to prove as profitable as expected, or if their own greed and stupidity has led to a crisis within their industry.

The culture of subsidy has become international, rather than just national or individual. Every country, every large company and every large group demands official government funding and support. Protection against failure of almost any kind is now demanded and expected even though this type of protection (and security) is irreconcilable with a free society.

In a free society it is inevitable that some skills will disappear as new inventions are developed. The invention of the motor car led to the demise of the coach building industry and the need for a constant supply of horses to pull the coaches. The people employed in those industries became unemployed. In today's society such developments are not allowed to take place unless those who have lost their livelihood (and those who have invested in the industries which have been put out of business) are compensated by society or promised alternative employment.

It is always sad when a skill or an industry is superseded and those involved may not be at fault (though in many cases a little foresight would have helped minimise the extent of the damage) but when society tries to take on such huge and endless responsibilities it must inevitably remove many freedoms from the ordinary citizen. Government handouts never made a man great.

* * *

People expect someone else to take the responsibility for everything. They prefer to take vitamin and mineral tablets recommended by others rather than make the effort to eat wisely, and they prefer to put their hopes on the lottery rather than put any effort into making their own fortunes.

And (and this has been one, if not the, major force in the development of inflation and the ensuing and continuing global economic chaos which has been such a feature of the twentieth century) everyone seems to consider it their right to have their standard of living raised annually. A sufficiency is no longer enough and the greed for more is seemingly inexhaustible. To make matters even worse some trade unions have exacerbated the situation by introducing restrictive practices designed to keep jobs for their own members. This, inevitably, has limited the opportunities available to those individuals whose own jobs have disappeared through the consequences of progress. And so, in yet another way, freedom has been eroded.

* * *

The masses even allow society to help them deal with their boredom by providing them with nonstop television programmes. Taking over leisure is not a new function of the state. The official organisation of leisure activities has been done in both Italy and the Soviet Union and the Nazis even invented a word – 'frezeitgestaltung' – to describe the act of shaping the use of people's free time (rather a contradiction if you stop to think about it since the time can hardly be 'free' if it is spent doing things that the authorities want you to do).

What most citizens do not realise (largely, I suspect, because they never stop to think about it) is that they have paid a high price for the development of a structured, organised society. They have lost their freedom.

When the state takes new powers it is creating those new powers out of nothing – since such powers do not exist in a healthy, free, competitive society. And the state cannot take more power without the citizens giving up some of their own power over their own lives – in other words their freedom.

When support and security is provided for some it is a privilege paid for at the expense of others; and since our communal wealth is in the end finite the end result is that the security of those who have contributed to the protection of others will be diminished. When governments shelter the unfortunate and provide them with full compensation they are able to do so only because they have, at the same time, taken away the freedoms and the rights of others.

In order to pay those who have been unlucky society has to take more and more from those who have worked hard and not been unfortunate. The worker, the inventor and the investor must all pay a growing portion of their earnings to society in order to help fulfil society's responsibilities.

And yet how can these active parts of society function without reward? If the reward for working, inventing or investing becomes too small then everyone will simply sit back and let society look after them. There will be no incentive to work or to succeed. If you remove all potential risk from life then you also remove all possible reward. Unless there is a relationship between risk, usefulness and remuneration society cannot survive. Without incentives, and the economic discipline associated with success and failure, society is doomed.

It is possible to see what happens when the relationship between risk and reward disappears by looking at state run industries. The managers of state run enterprises should be as vulnerable as the managers of commercial businesses. They should be accountable. But although they demand equal pay they do not accept equal levels of responsibility. Managers of state run enterprises are well rewarded without taking risks and so there is no innovation and no development. Mistakes go unpunished, particularly when they are errors of omission rather than errors of commission – it is far harder to punish a manager for not taking a decision than it is to punish a manger who takes a decision which can be shown to have been the wrong one – and managers inevitably stick to the safe route and avoid anything innovative and therefore risky.

CHAPTER FIVE: Bureaucratic Totalitarianism

'The worth of a State, in the long run, is the worth of the individuals composing it.'

– John Stuart Mill

The sweetener which has been used to make the loss of freedom palatable (or, rather, unnoticeable) has been the promise of a far greater degree of security than has ever been available before. In most developed societies citizens expect to be protected not only against crime but also against poverty, hunger, cold and all the privations which used to be regarded as personal responsibilities. Most citizens have remained blissfully unaware that by accepting organisation and security they have also accepted a bureaucratic totalitarianism.

The authorities have freed us from the responsibility and necessity of solving our own problems. In doing this they have taken away our individual freedom. The 'new' freedom, offered by our ostensibly kindly state organisations, is no freedom at all. In today's world it is society itself which has all the rights and individuals who have all the responsibilities. The individual today is simply used by society in the service of the community. The will of the invisible masses, represented undemocratically by society, has been imposed on us all.

And in our society the masses are the least original and most dependent force. However much people may talk about 'cock-up' and 'conspiracy' theories the major driving force in our Society is apathy.

* * *

Some people believe that this steady but determined removal of all our freedoms is part of some global plan; part of a conspiracy designed to lead to world government, putting all the power into the hands of a tiny elite.

A more likely explanation is that the erosion of our freedoms, and the rise in the power of the bureaucracy is simply the result of a process which is no longer within anyone's control.

As I explained in my book *How To Overcome Toxic Stress,* we have created a monster ('society') over which we now have little or no control.

We tend to think of the word 'society' as referring in some vague sort of way to all of us. I think we would be wiser to regard 'society' as a malignant being with an identity and a force of its own.

To a large extent it no longer really matters very much whether the disappearance of personal freedom and the rise in state freedom is a result of a conspiracy or has simply happened. The only way in which the present system could be changed would be through a revolution; a popular and general uprising. It is a nice thought. And although it may seem unthinkable at the moment it will happen – just as there have been people's revolutions in the U.S.S.R., East Germany, Yugoslavia, South Africa and elsewhere in recent years, so there will be a worldwide people's revolution throughout the 'civilised, developed' west. But it is unlikely to happen for a while for the very simple reason that most people have no idea what has happened.

Voters may protest if taxes rise too high or if a particular freedom is removed but such protests are usually fairly short lived.

Occasional, very specific, protests against new roads or infringements of freedom may succeed. And, by succeeding, such small and very specific protests help to persuade us that we live in a democracy where the voices of the people can be heard. But all this is superficial and largely irrelevant. Most people are too comfortable, too cowed and too frightened to protest yet about the erosions in their freedom which really matter. For example, Britain (which currently has more electronic eyes per capita than any other nation on Earth, with the result that tens of thousands of powerful cameras connected directly to computer bases constantly spy on people and cars) has, in recent years, gradually become a police state without anyone noticing.

Apologists for our society frequently reassure us smugly with the thought that George Orwell's predictions for the future (as outlined in his novel '1984') have not come to pass. But the fact is that they *have.* The only difference between fiction and reality, the only thing that Orwell got wrong, is that the takeover has been much more subtle than expected – and most people haven't even noticed what has happened.

Most of today's citizens have become gullible and docile; they are far more interested in watching their television sets than they are in taking part in a revolution. The masses have no real convictions and are easily swayed by cheap promises. They can no longer tell the difference between political truths and political lies. And they aren't much interested. They feel that, generally speaking, things aren't too bad.

If they ever stop to think about it they accept that if there is a choice between liberty and a society which promises economic security they will choose the economic security (the fact that the security offered is a myth is irrelevant).

Those individuals who want to remain free, and in control of their own lives, have little choice. If the majority chooses economic security then everyone's liberty will be eroded and eventually imperilled.

Today, too many of the rich get rich through speculative gains on the financial markets and through simple greed – such as is often displayed when industrial executives whose work involves little more than administration pay themselves huge unearned salaries and fat bonuses. The lucky become rich through winning the lottery and those who are unwilling to work or make any effort on their own behalf survive and thrive through state benefits. Economic security, provided by an all encompassing, all knowing, all seeing, ‘nanny’ society can only be obtained at a price: and the price is a general loss of freedom and liberty. (The corollary is also true, of course. The price of personal freedom and liberty is the risk of personal failure and personal poverty. Freedom carries risks and responsibilities.)

* * *

Whether the erosion of our freedom and our privacy is the result of a global conspiracy, or a malignant and out of control bureaucracy, constantly expanding and acquiring new powers, is now to a large extent irrelevant.

The fact is that it is now up to every individual who wants to regain and retain some of his or her freedom and privacy to take charge of their own life.

This isn’t easy – and it is getting harder every day – but it is the only way to retain freedom of choice, freedom from the arbitrary power of other men and freedom from coercion. The modern, developed, ‘civilised’ society is so organised that until there is a global revolution and a degree of anarchy previously unimagined nothing will happen to change things.

Is a global revolution ever possible?

I believe it is. Eventually, the citizens will wake up and shout ‘enough’. The widespread availability of computer technology and fax machines will mean that the revolution will be global.

But, as I write this towards the end of the 20th century I cannot see a global revolution developing for at least another two or three decades.

Until then the ordinary citizen will remain relatively content. He will be slightly embittered about the level of taxes he has to pay, and when he turns away from his television set he will notice that the state seems to be taking more and more control over his life, but he will not respond to a call to revolution until the point is reached where the number of people working and contributing to society is smaller than the number of people who are dependent upon society for their income.

PART TWO: *Where Did Our Freedom Go?*

(To Find Out You Must Understand The Society In Which You Live)

‘Men labour under a mistake. The better part of the man is soon ploughed into the soil for compost. By a seeming fate, commonly called necessity, they are employed laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal. It is a fool’s life.’

– Henry David Thoreau

‘Even despotism does not produce its worst effects as long as individuality exists under it; and whatever crushes individuality’ is despotism, by whatever name it be called.’

– John Stuart Mill

CHAPTER ONE: The Separation Of Authority From Responsibility

‘Innumerable are these small and pitiable men; but raindrops and weeds have already brought about the destruction of many a proud building.’

– Frederic Nietzsche

‘Excuse me,’ said the pregnant woman, climbing out of her car with considerable difficulty. She was holding a small child in her arms. ‘Would it be all right if I left my car here for a moment while I popped into the pharmacy? I’ve got to pick up a prescription for my husband. He’s at home, ill in bed.’

The traffic warden, to whom she had addressed this entirely reasonable request, stroked his moustache and glared at her. ‘More than my job’s worth,’ he said gruffly. He pointed to a nearby post upon which were fastened several lines of instructions. ‘You can park here after six o’clock, but not before.’

The woman looked at her watch. ‘But it’s five to six now,’ she said. She looked around. ‘And there’s hardly any traffic. I’m not going to cause an obstruction.’

‘I don’t make the rules,’ said the traffic warden, drawing himself up to his full height. He looked very smart in his expensive uniform. He would have made a good Gestapo officer.

‘And the pharmacy shuts at six!’ the woman pointed out. ‘If I drive to the car park I won’t be able to get the prescription made out.’

‘Not my responsibility,’ sniffed the traffic warden. ‘You should have come earlier and given yourself time to park.’

‘I couldn’t come earlier. The doctor has only just called.’ said the woman. ‘We’ve been waiting all day for him to arrive.’

The traffic warden shrugged his shoulders.

‘Give me the prescription,’ I said to the woman. ‘You drive round the block once and I’ll pop into the pharmacy and get your husband’s pills.’

And so her husband got his prescription and the traffic warden was denied another victim.

(I repeatedly attack traffic wardens in my newspaper column. The traffic wardens sometimes complain and say that the attacks are unfair because they are simply ‘doing their jobs’. However, I think that we need to attack them and to marginalise them. They are the visible tip of the cruel, uncaring, authoritarian iceberg which is threatening civilisation.)

* * *

If there is anything more frustrating than having responsibility without the necessary authority it must be coming face to face with people who have authority but no personal responsibility.

Responsibility is a burden, authority a weapon and it is just and right that a man prepared to accept the strains of one should enjoy the complementary power of the other.

However, it sometimes seems that no one wants to take responsibility for their own actions. And society no longer expects people to take responsibility for their own actions.

Traditionally, responsibility and authority have always been close. The man (or woman) who has responsibility has traditionally had the authority to back up that responsibility.

But, power, responsibility and authority have been split from one another in our society.

I believe that it is the artificial separation of responsibility and authority by those unwilling to accept the former but eager to enjoy the latter which causes much of the anger, dissatisfaction and jealousy in our society and which, therefore, indirectly causes more stress induced illness than anything else.

A factory foreman or junior manager may have the responsibility for ensuring that the output in his department remains high, but it is unlikely that he will have the authority to enable him to order the equipment or materials he needs. Nor will he have the necessary authority over the workers for whom he is theoretically responsible.

A hospital doctor who is morally and legally responsible for the health of the patients in his care does not have the authority to insist that the hospital is kept supplied with the staff or drugs he believes to be necessary. He cannot even insist that the heating is turned on when he thinks it is necessary. His responsibility extends far beyond the boundaries of his authority.

But the bureaucrat or administrator who does have authority will have no responsibility for the output of goods or for the health of patients. His responsibilities are defined and limited but his authority will be great.

Administrators, clerks and officials all have the authority of the rule book and of the people who drew up the rules, but they have no personal responsibility.

Try arguing with a ticket collector or with a traffic warden and you will see what I mean. There is plenty of authority there, but no willingness to accept personal responsibility.

And, of course, while the man with authority cannot lose, the man with responsibility cannot win. The man with authority has only to insist that the rules be obeyed but if anything goes wrong the man with responsibility carries the can.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that it is the people with the responsibility who most frequently suffer from stress diseases; who commit suicide, who die young and who break down unable to cope.

But when the people with the responsibilities have all gone – defeated dispirited or simply dead – what will we have left? What is a society with rules and regulations if there is no one to lead and direct, to take decisions and to accept personal responsibilities?

In any society it is those who are prepared to accept responsibility who make up the foundations upon which all else stands.

We must ensure that those who have authority accept personal responsibility for their work. No longer should the petty official be allowed to escape from responsibility simply by sticking to the rules. He should be responsible for his interpretation of the rules. When he interprets the rules in a cruel, inhumane or clearly stupid way he should be disciplined or even fired. He will then learn that authority and responsibility go together.

And we must ensure that those who have responsibility are entitled to the authority they need. Only when he himself takes the decisions which influence his own success or failure can a man be expected to assume full responsibility.

Until we have reunited responsibility and authority we will all be living in totalitarian states.

* * *

Those who play a practical role in the management of a totalitarian state must be prepared to ignore or break all moral rules in order to achieve the ends they consider appropriate and they must also accept specious justifications for whatever vile acts they may be called upon to perpetrate.

The administrators of the totalitarian machine must have no ideals of their own and no personal views on ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. They must simply get on with their distasteful tasks in the daily search for power and in their daily obeisance to the party machine. Their pleasure is that of being obeyed by the ‘peasants’; of being the servants of a large and powerful state machine and of knowing that everything that is not specifically permitted is prohibited. In any state organisation power drifts towards those who are unprincipled and unscrupulous; those who are honest and honourable have too many morals and scruples to survive in a harsh, unbending, unsympathetic bureaucratic world.

In any totalitarian society there is an almost endless demand for individuals who are prepared to be unthinking and who are willing to put the machine before their own individual feelings. (‘It’s more than my job’s worth, mate.’ ‘I can’t let you do that – it’s against the rules.’) At some levels the requirement is merely for functionaries who do not question the rules but who obey them – and see that everyone else obeys them too. In return for this obedience they receive a regular wage, a smart uniform and far more power than they could have ever acquired through their own actions. At higher levels the need is for people who are prepared to be cruel, intimidating and deceptive on behalf of the state. The Nazi’s SS Ministry of Propaganda has its counterparts in all modern societies.

The biggest mistake made by the well meaning and kind hearted is to underestimate the number of psychopathic individuals in our society who are prepared to do anything for a little regular money and a small degree of power. People in power – whether it is a small amount of power or a large amount of power –enjoy power. The possibility of a man in a position of power being there by mistake is slight indeed.

(It is also a mistake to underestimate the number of individuals in positions of power who obtain pleasure through causing pain, distress and unhappiness. It is surprising that we consistently underestimate the number of people who are prepared to act in a cruel way. And yet we should not really be surprised. After all, our newspapers and our radio and television stations frequently publish material which vilifies and subsequently destroys named individuals who have done little or nothing to deserve such opprobrium and public contempt. They publish this material because they know it is what a large number of their readers want. It is a worrying fact that many people obtain real pleasure from the discomfort of others. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that there are plenty of people around who are prepared to work as local government officers, prison officers, abattoir workers, traffic wardens and so on. People who work in positions of petty power – where there can be no self justification on the grounds that they have or even understand a feeling for the greater good of society – are inherently unprincipled people. None of these people take these jobs by accident or against their will.)

* * *

I loathe and despise the bureaucrats because of the harm they are doing to our world.

A friend of mine had a breakdown because he could not cope with the bureaucrats. He was brilliant at what he did. But he couldn’t cope with the endless silly rules. He was for ever in trouble with the bureaucrats. He tried to argue with them. It was futile. In the end they broke his spirit. He is now dead.

Another talented friend set up a small business. She saved hard, studied hard and worked hard. She put everything she had into her business. But in the end the bureaucrats broke her. The bureaucrats drowned her in paperwork. They wouldn't listen when she asked for sense. They took months to make simple decisions which affected her life. In the end she gave up the struggle. A decade or two ago she would have been a huge success. But in today's society it is the bureaucrat who has the power and the authority. The entrepreneur has only the responsibility.

I sympathise with anyone whose life is made miserable by these petty horrors. They steadfastly refuse to take responsibility for their own actions. The bureaucrats are dedicated to obstruction, they are inescapable. They are everywhere.

And we must fight them!

There is, however, no point in trying to fight them by their rules. The bureaucrats have endless supplies of paper, time and money. They have your money and my money.

If you try to argue with the bureaucrats by using their rules you will lose. They know their rules well. They will suffocate you with paperwork.

If you try to plead with them to be sensible they will sneer at you. They have no hearts. Point out that their silly rules are threatening your job, your business, your family and your health and they will shrug their shoulders and wander off to sharpen another pencil.

The only way to challenge them is to complain about them to their superiors (for the one beauty in all this is that every bureaucrat has a superior, every bureaucrat must obey the rules and every bureaucrat is scared because he knows that if he loses his job, his place within the system, then he will be left as naked as you or I in a world for which he is quite unprepared).

And for those of us in the real world there is one final consolation.

If, in the end, we lose, if the bureaucrats win complete control of our lives, then there will still (for the rest of us at least) be a 'happy' ending.

For without the entrepreneurs, the businessmen and women, the people who are prepared to take risks, take chances, take responsibility, and risk their lives, their money and their health in the pursuit of a personal dream, the bureaucrats will have nothing. There will be no one earning any real money. There will be no one to pay for the offices, the fat salaries, the inflation linked pensions, the endless courses in expensive hotels, the comfortable offices, the long holidays and the empty weekends. The bureaucrats will be in charge of a society which will die and their final victory will be their own defeat.

CHAPTER TWO: Growing Dependency Upon The State

'The effect of Socialist doctrine on Capitalist society is to produce a third thing, different from either of its two begetters – to wit, the Servile State.'

– Hilaire Belloc

There is an old Chinese proverb which says: 'If you give a man food you feed him for a day. If you teach him to grow his own food you feed him for a lifetime.' This is the 'hand up' rather than the 'hand out' philosophy.

Charity workers trying to combat starvation in Africa have for some years now followed this principle with some enthusiasm; recognising that it makes far more sense to build roads and provide agricultural implements than merely to fly in bags of food. Encouraging people to think and act and improve themselves, and to be free and to act independently, is true philanthropy.

However, there is no little irony in the fact that while charity workers in the developing world are encouraging people to be more independent and to think for themselves exactly the opposite is happening the 'developed' world.

Today, in the western world, the new standard state philosophy is based upon the 'hand out' principle rather than the 'hand up' principle. An increasing number of people are now dependent upon society for all their needs. And many more are learning to turn to society when life gets tough. People are widely encouraged to expect and accept money from society rather than to do more to look after themselves. There is now little sense of personal or public responsibility, little compassion and little feeling that it is each man's (and woman's) duty to take his (or her) life into their own hands. People expect doctors, teachers, civil servants, bureaucrats and the courts to take responsibility for *their* lives (and then those same people complain (quietly) when they think the system is being 'bossy', taking too much power and pushing them around).

Everyone, it seems, wants more and more public money – with no thought about where the public money will come from. Scientists want public funding for their experiments. Investors want to be given public money if their investments turn sour. The unemployed expect to be given public money in lieu of employment – with absolutely no regard for whether or not they actually need public money in order to provide themselves with food, clothing and shelter. There are now small armies of people who have grown up accustomed to the idea that society will look after them. They regard the funding provided by society as 'soft' or 'easy' money. Their constant demands for money are now leading to a great division not between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' but between the 'givers' and the 'receivers'. The receivers want more. The givers want to give less. The resulting tension provides the authorities with a constant excuse for more policing and less freedom and less independence.

Society worries endlessly about the 'have-nots' but the so called 'haves' are also under pressure. They have to fight to preserve the things they have worked hard to achieve, and because all around them they see people who are receiving but not giving their motivation is constantly being weakened. They have to struggle daily against personal and family anxieties and yet they receive no support or encouragement from society.

* * *

There is much talk about drug addiction in our society and yet all the evidence shows that drug addiction is, in statistical terms, a relatively small problem.

(The quantity and quality of health damage done by illegal drugs is minute compared to the type and extent of damage done by prescribed drugs and by freely and legally available substances such as alcohol and tobacco.)

The greatest dependency in the western world (and the most damaging and the most destructive) is dependency on state welfare support; dependency on society and an expectation that someone else will always take the responsibility.

The 'developed' world has created an almost universal 'dependency sickness'. 'I am broke - give me money.' 'I am unemployed. Find me a job or give me money.' 'I am sick. Make me better.' 'I'm old. Look after me.' 'I'm pregnant. Take care of me and my child.' State welfare has undermined the principles of self support and mutual aid. This sort of dependency stifles the imagination and destroys the urge to work and it will surely destroy our society.

There is a bizarre assumption among many who have made state support a way of life that the money comes from some surreal, inexhaustible source. We have created entirely false expectations about what governments can and should do. The expectations have grown to totally unsustainable levels and have weakened our ability to fend for ourselves.

The provision of all these funds is a constant and exhausting drain on those who work. We will now never be able to provide all the money that is needed – any more than health care systems will ever be able to find all the money that is needed to support and pay for complete health care for every citizen.

National progress has been, at least in part, defined as the sum of individual industry and energy, while national decay has been defined as including the sum of individual idleness and selfishness. A state which endorses dependence upon itself encourages the latter and discourages the former.

* * *

The dependency upon other people has, in some areas of life, reached bizarre depths. For example, for twenty years or so now it has been an increasingly common practice in some countries for surgeons to remove women's breasts so that they don't get breast cancer. We know that women can dramatically reduce their chances of developing breast cancer by changing their diet (briefly, by avoiding fatty food and meat – there is more detail in my book *Power over Cancer)* but many women prefer to have their breasts removed, rather than make the effort required to alter their diet.

Similarly, many people prefer to have heart surgery rather than deal with their heart disease by changing their diet and lifestyle (once again there is now evidence to show that it is possible to cure as well as prevent heart disease by making lifestyle changes of this type – this evidence is summarised in my book *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You).*

I find these choices quite astonishing but largely symptomatic of a society in which it is now commonplace for people deliberately to choose to hand over responsibility for their health to the medical professionals.

It is this same principle which results in the widespread expectation that there will be a pill for every illness; that every health problem, be it sleeplessness, unhappiness, overweight or a double chin, can be dealt with in some way by someone else. Patients prefer pills and surgery (the easy solutions) to making lifestyle changes (the hard solutions). And doctors, not knowing what else to do, usually oblige.

Too many people want slick, quick solutions to all their problems – whether those problems are financial, health related or anything else. The need for support – and for a constant stream of 'hand outs' rather than an occasional 'hand up' – has been rising for decades and will continue to rise indefinitely. We will never be able to provide enough money or resources to satisfy all the demands.

CHAPTER THREE Everyone Wants To Win The Lottery

‘Anything acquired without effort and without cost is generally unappreciated.’

– Napoleon Hill

Gambling is one of the most basic instincts of all. Like the sexual urge it is there within us all – constantly waiting to be released. Gambling may have now equalled television as the most popular – and most dangerous – addiction in the world. The reason for this is simple: gambling – particularly through that now almost universal institution ‘The Lottery’ – offers something that not even television can match: the lottery offers wealth without work. The fact that gambling has become one of the most popular ‘hobbies’ in the ‘developed’ world is a symbol of the fact that everyone now wants a quick and easy solution to their financial problems.

The lottery is a perfect example of the ‘something for nothing’ philosophy which pervades our society; a perfect accompaniment to the welfare state. It is, indeed, more than an example: it is a beacon, leading millions astray with the faint and false hope of riches, and a symbol of the constant demand for a quick and slick solution to all of life’s problems, an easy and quick escape from a humdrum life. The lottery offers a solution that does not involve any acceptance of responsibility or even, heaven forbid, anything as horrifying as work.

The people who buy lottery tickets are, by and large, the very people who can least afford them. Lotteries, by definition, take money from today’s poor and give it to tomorrow’s rich. A very small number of the poor become rich. But most of the poor are simply made poorer. The surprising fact is that if the poor or relatively poor people who gamble saved the money they spend on the lottery they could, within a remarkably short time, improve their own lives themselves.

Lotteries undermine the principles of working and saving to achieve success but they have other serious faults too. Even in those countries where lotteries are run with the aim of raising money for the community the charitable contributions made hardly seem designed to improve the lives of the poor. Much of the money goes to subsidise branches of the arts, such as opera. Lottery money is, indeed, widely used to support predominantly upper and middle class culture and activities.

I have little doubt that as years go by the damage done by lotteries will rise steadily. A recent survey of children between the ages of 11 and 15 showed that two out of three had bought lottery tickets. In a strange, perverse sort of way buying a lottery ticket is now almost seen as being a ‘good citizen’.

CHAPTER FOUR: When Black Isn't Black And White Isn't White

'The socialists believe in two things which are absolutely different and perhaps even contradictory: freedom and organisation.'

– Elie Halevy

'Failure in any good cause is...honourable, whilst success in any bad cause is merely infamous.'

– Samuel Smiles

'Obscene is not the picture of a naked woman but that of a fully clad general who exposes his medals won in a war of aggression.'

– Herbert Marcuse

We live in a world where superficiality rules over substance. Our standards are reducing daily. Moral ideals are absent from our society. Our world is confused, and confusing, because people have thrown over the old standards without acquiring any new ones.

From our very earliest days we are brought up to think of all sorts of things as sinful. And yet, too often, it is difficult to see the logic in the arguments we are encouraged to follow. For example, we are taught by teachers and parents that bad language is sinful. It is difficult to see just why this should be. Why should one collection of letters be considered worse than another? Why should we forfeit the love of our God and those close to us by using words which are regarded for some arbitrary reason as offensive? We are taught that sex is sinful. And yet sex is nothing more than physical loving and conception (though not necessarily together). What is wrong with physical love? What is wrong with conception? Why should talking about, thinking about or doing these things be an offence against our parents, our teachers and God? The truth is that these are nothing more than superstitions.

We are told, when we are young, that lying is never justified. But is that true? Bertrand Russell, the eminent philosopher, mathematician and peace campaigner, told this story in his book *The Conquest of Happiness:* 'I once in the course of a country walk saw a tired fox at the last stages of exhaustion still forcing himself to run. A few minutes afterwards I saw the hunt. They asked me if I had seen the fox, and I said I had. They asked me which way he had gone, and I lied to them. I do not think I should have been a better man if I had told the truth.'

Russell is absolutely right, of course. He would most surely have been committing a far greater sin in those circumstances if he had told the truth.

What is black and what is white? What is sin? When is a sin really sinful? And, just as confusing, what about the apparently sinful things which are not officially regarded as sinful at all.

Violence, for example, is rarely regarded as quite as sinful as sex or even nudity. And yet surely the glorification of violence is more obscene than anything requiring nothing more than one or more healthy, naked human bodies.

* * *

Back in 1995 the whole of Britain seemed to be joining in public events designed to celebrate the 40th anniversary of victory over the Germans in the Second World War.

I found the whole idea of celebrating a victory obscene. It seemed to me that banners in the streets, balloons, street parties, cucumber sandwiches and crates of beer on trestle tables in the local church hall were not really the way to remember a war which killed so many millions.

I wasn't even sure what people were celebrating. Were all the parties being held to celebrate the fact the Allied bombs were bigger and better than German bombs and that the megalomaniacal leaders representing the forces of 'light' and 'good' were better, brighter and tougher than the megalomaniacal leaders representing the forces of 'darkness' and 'evil'?

Was the dancing in the streets somehow supposed to help us remember the men and women who died in this global bloodbath?

'Have a glass of sherry and a mince pie, Miss Blenkinsop. Let me just have one more look at the tear and blood stained letter your fiancé wrote just two hours before he was blown up by a German landmine and then we'll dance down the street together popping balloons and singing Vera Lynn songs.'

Or were people just putting on their finery and decorating the streets to remind themselves of more glorious days?

'Have another cup of tea and a ham sandwich vicar, and look at these pictures of Dresden burning. If you look very carefully you can see German people in agony with their clothes on fire.'

On the one hand the British people were being told that they would soon all be part of a single European state. They would all sing the same anthem, offer their loyalty to the same flag and carry the same currency in their pockets.

And yet people were playing hopscotch in the streets to remember the last great European war.

Was the dancing in the streets supposed to help people remember the horrors of war? Were people supposed to collapse, exhausted and slightly drunk, at the end of the celebration parties and say: 'We must never, ever have another war again.’

Some of those organising and enjoying the street parties said they were celebrating because the Second World War stopped all wars.

Really?

While Britain’s V.E. celebrations were going on there were no less than forty eight civil wars and revolutions going on in various parts of the world. Forty eight separate wars, all being fought by two lots of people who thought that they were in the right and who believed that their cause justified the death, the pain and the suffering that war entails.

As I write this today there are four million unexploded land mines in Bosnia and fifteen million unexploded land mines in Angola. Heaven knows how many unexploded land mines there are around the rest of the world. Land mine design and manufacture has become extremely sophisticated in recent years. Modern mines are designed to maim rather than to kill because the armaments manufacturers have realised that maiming an individual ties up hospital and medical services, causes social disruption, creates fear and distress and costs the enemy more than just killing people. Children seem to be the most common victims of many of these modern mine laying exercises. This is no accident.

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The problem is that most of our feelings about sin are nonsensical Sunday school beliefs, infantile babblings taught to us as part of society’s rules and regulations; based on a little religion and a little community spirit. A sense of traditional sin, and a respect for the definitions of sin which have been accepted for centuries, does not make a man good or happy. Indeed, such a distorted sense of sin will make him unhappy, permanently damage his self confidence and fill him with grudges and discontent.

We grow up in a world where the woman most men are taught to love most is a woman with whom any sort of sexual contact or talk is forbidden. The result is that many men feel that contact with women is wrong and that women should disapprove of sex because a woman who does not disapprove of sex cannot be respected. Society then rightly and understandably expresses surprise when the man whose wife is not interested in sex (or, at least, purports not to be interested in sex, or believes she is not interested in sex) finds satisfaction for his natural urges elsewhere. Society then expresses further surprise when the man feels guilty and hates the woman with whom he has had sex. Society then rightly and understandably expresses indignation, anger and astonishment when a man starts killing prostitutes. In the mysterious way in which our society works we are then told that the man has become a ‘sex maniac’ because he has read too many magazines showing pictures of naked women. No one thinks to blame the morally absurd teachings of a powerful and dominant religious force.

When contemplating sin we should replace our infantile, gloom and doom laden beliefs with real, substantial, and substantiated beliefs.

Too often, in our society, truly horrendous acts, showing a complete absence of compassion, kindness or thoughtfulness, go unpunished and uncriticised. Apparently respectable citizens say cruel things about their fellow citizens without a moment’s thought or regret or guilt. Employers exploit their employees who, in turn, cheat their customers. There is widespread and apparently approved cruelty to people and to animals. The sick, the frail, the elderly and infirm and the young are all abused and pushed around, not just by cosh waving louts and thugs but also by pen toting bureaucrats working for and on behalf of society. Animals are tortured and killed for no good reason (other than financial ones) in the laboratories of vivisectors who are paid on our behalf.

Dishonesty and unkindness are, it seems, the norm rather than the exception. And yet none of these actions seem to attract retribution of any kind; none seem to be classified as sins; none seem to be regarded as in any way worthy of criticism. Our civilisation has been slowly and steadily destroyed by these cruel actions but the misery which has been created by the perpetrators seems to attract no ignominy at all.

Children are taught about sin without ever being taught the true meaning of the concept. Children are taught moral values which are based upon superstition and nonsense and quite irrational taboos. Children are taught little or nothing about the true meaning of any sort of honest or honourable relationship. Our modern values of sin were created centuries ago by priests who lived in a different world. Sin today is divorced from any real understanding of moral rights or wrongs. Respect and kindness mean nothing, but disrespect and unkindness are not regarded as sins in our world. We are surviving with concepts of sin which were learned by rote and created for society built upon different values and with a different work ethic.

We live in a prejudiced, cruel, wicked and dominantly immoral world.

CHAPTER FIVE: Women's Liberation – The Biggest Social Blunder Of The Twentieth Century

'When a woman behaves like a man, why doesn't she behave like a nice man?'

– Dame Edith Evans

'He who would be a man must be a non conformist.'

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

The women's liberation movement has probably caused more fundamental stress and anxiety than any other social phenomenon for centuries.

Men have been put under stress because they no longer know how to act towards women. Men have been overtaken and overwhelmed by sexual politics. If they are strong and protective (as they were taught they should be) they are likely to be derided and dismissed as sexist. If they aren't strong or protective they are likely to be scorned as weak and wimpy. Most men are still not sure whether women expect them to be macho and chauvinistic (at the risk of being considered unacceptably aggressive) or soft, sensitive and understanding (at the risk of being considered wimpy and rather out of date). Some men are even worried that they should be bonding with their fellow men, though they probably aren't sure what all the sitting around the fire banging drums is really about. All this creates inadequacy and guilt. Most men are tortured by their relationships with the opposite sex.

Male uncertainty is summed up by the dilemma of a man sitting on a bus when a woman gets on. Whatever he does there is a good chance that he will be wrong. If he stands up and offers her his seat he may be attacked for being sexist. If he stays sitting down he is likely to be attacked for being rude and bad mannered. The man who puts his arm around a girl on a date may find himself in court on a charge of attempted assault. If he fails to put his arm around the girl he is likely to be dismissed as a cold hearted queer.

Women have been put under stress by the women's liberation movement too. They feel guilty if they do not fulfil their potential and carve out a successful career. But they also feel guilty if they do not care properly for their families. No one wins. The liberation of women has added to male stresses but, paradoxically, it has harmed women too.

There are, I believe, likely to be other, possibly even more damaging, long term consequences of the women's liberation movement. The aim of the original bra-burning proponents of the women's liberation movement was to close the gaps between the sexes: to remove inequalities by encouraging women to become stronger and more aggressive.

This was a mistake.

Instead of encouraging women to adopt damaging and destructive male qualities the bra-burners should have encouraged men to adopt more of the softer qualities normally associated with women. During the next few decades we will, I believe, see some of the disastrous consequences of this error.

For many years now women have, on average, lived around a decade longer than men. The life expectancy of the average white woman is currently nearly 80 years. The life expectancy of the average white man is just above 70 years. The life expectancy of the average black man is probably nearer to 65. Today men die earlier from all fifteen leading causes of death: including heart disease, cancer, accidents, violence and suicide. During this century, the incidence of stress related illness among men has risen dramatically when compared to the incidence of the same illnesses among women. Every significant stress related disease which is not physiologically unique to women is commoner among men. Nursing homes all over the 'developed' and 'civilised' world are now full of lonely old women who have outlived their male partners. There is no biological explanation for this. Women are not intrinsically healthier than men. Women do not naturally live longer than men. At the turn of the century women and men had an identical life expectancy.

I believe the explanation for the difference in life expectation is that while women have enlarged their role in society men have been pushed further and further into their destructive and damaging masculinity.

There are a few specific, simple explanations for what has happened.

One explanation for the difference in life expectation is that men, as a group, tend to work harder than women. If you include time spent gardening and dealing with chores around the house the average man works a 61 hour week whereas the average woman works a 56 hour week. And women get more health giving exercise than men – partly because their daily responsibilities include quite a lot of walking and partly because they have more free time for swimming, tennis, golf and other sports.

But these are trivial factors. It is social changes which are killing men and filling our hospitals and old people's homes with octogenarian widows. Women are in control in our society. From mothers to wives to daughters it is a woman's world. It is true that men, as a sex, often earn more than women. But although they earn more, men don't get to spend the money they make. And real power comes with the spending not the earning. Women control consumer spending in just about all areas. Stores devote seven times as much space to women's personal items as they do to men's personal items. Both sexes spend more on women than on men. Only in restaurants do men pay the bills and control the spending. It is because women do the spending that most advertising is aimed at women. And it is because most advertising is aimed at women that there are far more magazines and TV programmes aimed to please women than are aimed at men.

We live in a woman's world – and we have done for decades. Many women with two small children will admit that they think of themselves as having three children. They regard their husband as another child. It is not by accident that many men call their wife 'mother'. Men are still subordinated by their mothers and their wives. Men look for maternal comfort, love and solace from their partners and this weakens them and hands power over to the women in their lives.

The main reason that women now live so much longer than men is because their softer, gentler natures mean that they were better at coping with modern twentieth century stresses than men; they are less susceptible to feelings of frustration and less likely to be overcome with anger. It is their soft, natural feminine qualities which protects women from killers such as heart disease.

Although men are, fundamentally, just as emotional as women most men spend a great deal of effort on hiding their emotions. They don't show their sadness or their happiness or their anger. They suppress their tears. They hide everything inside them. They respond emotionally but they do not show those emotions. The damage done by this suppression is phenomenal: it is this suppression of emotional responses which is largely responsible for the pandemic of stress related diseases in our society. Thousands of men are dying of heart disease in their fifties, forties and even thirties because they do not feel able to express what they are feeling. Those locked away fears and anxieties do a massive amount of damage

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The whole women's liberation movement was a – massive social blunder – probably one of the most important mistakes of the twentieth century. If the proponents of female equality had thought things through a little better, and decided to encourage men to be more like women instead of encouraging women to be more like men, male life expectancy would have increased and female life expectancy would have stayed high.

However, if society continues as it is at the moment male life expectation will continue to fall as the pressure and stress on men continues to grow. But female life expectation will start to fall as more and more women allow and encourage the aggressive, masculine aspects of their own personalities to emerge.

In the future, life expectation for women is going to fall because today's women are being widely encouraged to think and behave like men. They are encouraged to think of 'performance' and 'achievement' rather than 'love' and' concern'.

The true tragedy of the liberation of women is the fact that instead of merely adding aspects of masculinity to their lives many women have allowed their new found masculinity to take over completely. Instead of adding aggression, power, ambition, exploitation, domination, prestige, control and other masculine manifestations of life to tenderness, playfulness, peacefulness, sensitivity, gentleness, understanding, love, concern and compassion many women seem to have replaced the latter group of qualities almost entirely with the former.

The result is that we are going to see more international confrontations and more wars. When women were allowed to think and behave like women they were a restraining influence on men. But too many of today's women are just as belligerent as men: often welcoming confrontation and war.

CHAPTER SIX: Don’t Believe Everything You Read, See Or Hear

‘Of all writings I love only that which is written with blood. Write with blood: and you will discover that blood is spirit.’

– Frederick Nietzsche

‘Just look at these superfluous people. They vomit their bile and call it a newspaper.’

– Frederick Nietzsche

History is not necessarily what happened. History is, to a very large extent, simply what has been reported as having happened. History – and the ‘truth’ – is what people believe and remember. History – whether it be personal, national or international – is made up memories, interpretations, feelings and prejudices rather than the original facts. We do not remember what happened so much as what we think happened and how we responded to what we think happened.

All this is important because it means that our knowledge and understanding of our personal, national and global history depends very much upon the way we appreciate and respond to the facts of our personal, national and global experiences.

Since the way we ‘see’ and ‘hear’ the news depends very much upon our knowledge and our past experiences it is clear that if we are to form a clear view of the world (in all its aspects) we need to be presented with reliable, trustworthy information.

This does not happen. It is now almost impossible to get hold of trustworthy news about significant events through the normal media. Most people think they get the truth by reading, listening to and watching newspapers and radio and television news programmes. They don’t get the truth: they get what the editors want them to read. If you buy all the newspapers and news magazines available on any one day you will see different stories, different emphasis, different facts and different interpretations – within the stories which are supposed to be ‘news’ stories. A story which hits the headlines in one paper might not appear in any other papers at all.

The problem is that the truth is far too complex. We are, in practice, fed a rich diet of lies, half truths and propaganda. Newspapers, radio stations and television stations are all commercial businesses; they are usually either government controlled or dependent upon advertisers. Many are little more than parts of show business. In order to stay in business they have to sell their product. If they don’t attract readers, listeners and viewers by making sure that their presentation of the news is exciting and ‘sexy’ they will lose money and go out of business.

Crowds either destroy or worship the object of their attention. And they can turn on a whim. The individual who is, at one moment, a hero can easily become a villain. Newspapers are much like crowds. They can turn a villain into a hero or a hero in to a villain in the printing of a page. A friend, a journalist, once told me a story which illustrated this fact well. Late one day the newspaper for which he worked received a story about an ordinary man who had done something to attract public attention. The details of the story are irrelevant. The newspaper’s first inclination was to turn the man into a hero. They planned to publish a photograph and a story drawing the attention of the readers to the wonderful thing this man had done. But as they planned their story another story came into the newsroom. And the individual who was at the centre of this story was even more of a hero than the first person. And so, because the newspaper did not want to have two heroes on its pages, the editors turned the first man into a villain. A man who had, a moment or two earlier, been a hero in waiting now became a villain in waiting. He was attacked and vilified for doing the very same things for which, a moment or two earlier, they had been planning to praise him. And a man’s life was ruined simply so that the newspaper editors could ‘balance’ the stories on their pages. Remember this next time you read any newspaper story. Depending upon the way in which it is written virtually any individual can be described as both a hero and a villain. Today’s newspapers are merely comics for grown-ups.

All around the world those who read broadsheet (as opposed to tabloid) newspapers are generally rather naively convinced that they are getting the real facts. Sadly, this simply isn’t true. The broadsheets publish exactly the same gossip and pre-packaged public relations fodder as everyone else. Indeed, the tabloids usually offer a more honest approach to most issues. There are two reasons for this. First, the journalists working for tabloid newspapers are of an infinitely higher quality. It is quite common for broadsheet journalists, columnists and contributors to ‘graduate’ to writing for a tabloid – where the pay is invariably much better – but almost unheard of for a tabloid journalist, columnist or contributor to take the step down to a broadsheet. Second, because tabloid newspapers tend to sell far more copies than broadsheets – and earn a considerable part of their income from the cover price – the publishers are usually less susceptible to pressure from advertisers than are the proprietors of broadsheet newspapers. Broadsheet publishers are less likely than tabloid editors to be prepared to annoy any large, powerful, rich companies. Finally, because they have acres of space to fill and are therefore more likely to end up reprinting news releases and information handouts, broadsheets are, like television news programmes, a lobbyists dream.

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Most mass market news reporting, whether published in tabloid newspapers, broadsheet newspapers or magazines or broadcast on the wireless or on television is now biased and prejudiced. That wouldn't matter so much if the bias was open and the prejudice was visible. But the bias is frequently covert and the prejudice is rarely open. Those with vested interests to support (for example, the food industry and the drug industry) construct theories to support what they do and systematically and deliberately stimulate and encourage existing fears and prejudices which are to their advantage. Journalists then obediently and politely regurgitate these prejudices as though they were fact.

The almost universal support of vivisection among broadsheet newspapers (and the deliberate 'rubbishing' of any opposition, however well founded) is a perfect example of global broadsheet support for the established forces

Today, all mechanisms for spreading information are used almost exclusively to spread views which, true or false, will strengthen a belief in the rightness of decisions taken by those in authority. Information that could cause doubt is withheld or suppressed. Every time you read a story in a newspaper or see a news programme on television you should ask yourself 'Who did that story benefit?' 'Why did they tell me that?' Acquire and nurture a healthy respect for the news media.

Those who write and speak on behalf of the totalitarians ensure that language is perverted. Words are changed so that meanings are hidden.

For example, consider the ways in which vivisectors (and their apologists in the media) distort the language in order to disguise what is done in laboratories.

Those who perform and support animal experiment are so embarrassed and ashamed of what they do that they frequently use euphemisms to disguise their activities. It is quite common, for example, for experimenters to talk of animals 'taking part' in experiments and 'helping us with our research'. The word 'experiment' has been replaced by the word 'procedure', which is less evocative. Experimenters (and the journalists who write sympathetically about what they do) have their own language. Here are just a few choice phrases they use (and their meanings):

vocal response = crying
major airway embarrassment = choking
reacting to adverse stimulation with vigorous motor responses = trying to escape
binocular deprivation = sewing the eyes up
decapitation = head removal
exhibiting lethal behaviour = dying
startle reflex = flinching
aversive electrical stimulation = electric shocks
thermal injury = burn or scald

The startling and rather frightening fact is not that vivisectors use these words and phrases (that is understandable) but that journalists use these words and phrases too. The vivisectors and their supporters regard facts as flexible resources for propaganda and they have persuaded politicians and journalists to accept their view.

Totalitarian propaganda destroys the morals of the people because it undermines the basic foundation of all moral values – the truth. And the sad end result is that people in totalitarian countries often do not feel oppressed because they are thinking as they were taught to think – they do not see anything wrong in the world around them. They do not think for themselves because they have not been taught to think for themselves and it is does not occur to them that they are entitled to think for themselves.

* * *

There are many influences which determine the extent, depth and direction of bias and prejudice in the media.

Some, such as the influence from advertisers ('If you publish/broadcast that story we will pull our advertising') is often direct, simple in operation and easy to understand.

Some, such as the influence from proprietors, shareholders and owners is rather more subtle but just as dangerous and certainly just as (if not more) effective. The proprietor or company chairman who has a global operation and who is hoping to do a deal with a government in one part of the world is unlikely to be pleased if one of his newspapers or television stations elsewhere in the world publishes an attack on that same government. Wise editors and producers make it their business to know the deals their proprietors and company bosses are involved in – the hidden agendas which they must take care to respect – for they know that if they are too 'independent' they will simply find themselves being replaced. (In order to avoid a public outcry this is usually done by promoting the individual who has transgressed to some superior position which sounds impressive and carries a large salary but has no editorial power. Within a few months the individual concerned can be eased out into the cold.)

* * *

Television is almost certainly the weakest and most unreliable source of information – and yet it is to television that most people turn when they want the facts. People feel comfortable with the television. They trust it because they can look at the pictures and think that they are seeing what is happening. And yet television is, generally speaking, pretentious, precious, self congratulatory and superficial. An ability to smile and banter, bouffant hair, capped teeth and a certain sexual chemistry with a colleague are infinitely more important than irrelevant old-fashioned nonsenses such as truth, justice and passion. Like radio, television is constrained by the fact that every story must be read out aloud. This means that a fifteen minute bulletin is unlikely to contain more than around 1,000 words of text. And that means compacting and summarising world events in a way which inevitably distorts. A television or radio news programme will contain far fewer words than a page or two in a tabloid newspaper.

But it is its very dependence upon pictures which is television’s main weakness. Because there are often no pictures of major news items (there clearly cannot possibly be a camera crew on hand whenever an embassy is stormed, a riot starts, an aeroplane crashes or a road accident occurs) the television team in the studio usually have two alternatives: either to use film and pictures taken from their library (often without saying that the film is stock footage taken some time earlier) or to adapt the news priorities to fit the available pictures – demoting in the running order the story of the demonstration in China or the earthquake in India and leading the news bulletin with the prearranged event of which they have got fresh, new film.

Most of the film television stations show will, of course, have been arranged in advance. If the TV crew is there and filming it is almost certainly because their editor sent them there. And he or she sent them there because the news team received an invitation. Television is the public relations officer’s dream, the lobbyist's perfect medium. A television news programme can be played like a piano. The lobbyist or public relations officer thinks up a good film opportunity, invites the TV crews and sits back and waits for the little bit of luck which is needed to ensure that his item gets a good showing on the programme.

People who work in television do their very best to hide all the truth about their own shortcomings from the public. They will frequently run stories complaining about the way in which newspapers (particularly the tabloid newspapers) have dealt with a story when in practice their own method of dealing with the story has been every bit as intrusive, one sided and unfair as the tabloid treatment. I have seen television programmes complaining about press intrusion which have shown a crowd of press photographers and described them as ghouls. Neither the television news teams nor the viewers seem to have identified the television cameraman, sound man and the rest of the film crew as being part of the rabble.

It is much easier to distort the truth on television than in just about any other medium. By holding the camera on an interviewee for a long period of time or by switching the camera to the interviewee in an unguarded moment it is possible to give a totally misleading impression of the interviewee. And if all else fails it is easy enough to edit out the interviewee’s wise, sound, sensible or witty retorts and keep in only the dull, inarticulate or stumbling remarks. If that still doesn’t satisfy the requirements of the editor or producer or the vanity of the presenter it is quite easy to cut in some sharp, cutting or incisive remarks from the interviewer at a later stage. Anyone who appears on a recorded television programme must inevitably trust the integrity of the television team.

Viewers tend to forget that television is primarily an entertainment medium

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In order to influence journalists and editors a public relations agency will often set up an allegedly non profit, non partisan research organisation which can then ‘study’ a particular subject and issue regular ‘independent’ research bulletins to the press. Surprisingly, the only research which ever gets promoted aids the financial aspirations of the companies which are funding the research group. Newspaper and television journalists swallow up all this ‘independent’ research with enthusiasm and rarely bother to try to find out who is funding the high sounding research groups whose press releases land regularly on their desks.

When news items break and the studio-based news editors are looking for guests they usually turn first to the experts they know can be trusted to turn up at short notice, talk coherently and not expect a fee. They frequently obtain those guests from public relationships companies or representatives. In order to disguise the true origin of some speakers there are now hundreds of Foundations, Bureaus, Research Institutes and Information Offices in existence. These organisations, which appear on the surface to be simply public spirited, independent offices, gathering information or even conducting what sounds on the surface like genuine research, are frequently simply ‘fronts’ for the industries or political parties which fund them.

The highly paid employees of these organisations are extraordinarily adept at manipulating the news in a way which will benefit their paymasters. For example, around the world drug companies enthusiastically encourage health and medical writers working for newspapers or magazines to publish information extolling the virtues and advantages of particular, named prescription drugs. This public campaigning to promote particular drugs is designed to encourage patients to buy and take the drug (if it is available without a prescription) or to ask their doctor to prescribe the drug for them (if it is only available with a prescription). And it works so well that expenditure on this sort of promotion is growing rapidly.

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Sometimes, drug companies can be very subtle. For example, some have used a rather clever approach to try to influence writers of columns which are based on the Question and Answer format. I noticed that a few years ago. I would receive a press handout for a new treatment for a common complaint and a day or so before or after the handout I would receive a 'letter' from a 'reader' asking me a question which would lead directly to the product being promoted. So, for example, I might receive a press pack on Tuesday telling me about a wonderful new treatment for left handed, 46-year-old women suffering from headaches. And, lo and behold, on Wednesday I would receive a letter from a left handed, 46-year-old woman telling me that she was suffering from headaches and asking if I could recommend a remedy.

* * *

The public relations experts and spin doctors have also used their skills to throw doubt on real risks and to protect existing commercial interests. For example, while writing this book I saw American newspaper reports announcing the 'good news' that there is 'no hard evidence linking power lines and cancer'. The key here lies in those words 'hard evidence'. Just what does that impressive sounding phrase really mean?

Well, 'hard evidence' usually means laboratory tests – commonly animal experiments. (Scientists are still in denial over animal experimentation. Despite the fact that it is now crystal clear to anyone with two neurones to rub together that animal experiments are of absolutely no relevance to human beings, scientists still persist in doing animal lab tests in preference to studying relevant and significant epidemiological results involving human patients.)

If pushed to define 'hard evidence' without using animal experiments the white coated scientists would in these circumstances probably claim that 'hard evidence' proving a definite link between electricity and cancer could only be obtained by performing a double blind clinical trial. This would mean that one group of volunteer patients would have to stand directly under a power line for ten, twenty or thirty years while a second group of matched volunteer patients would have to stand directly under what looked like a power line (but wasn't) for exactly the same length of time. For the trial to be 'double blind' none of the volunteers or the scientists conducting the experiment would know which of the two possible power lines was really 'live'.

At the end of the trial the researchers would simply count up the number of volunteers in each group who had developed cancer. And if a statistically significantly greater number of volunteers in the first group had developed cancer then that would be regarded as pretty 'hard evidence' that power lines cause cancer. (Although even then I have no doubt that companies around the world involved in the electricity industry would think of all sorts of reasons why the research results should be ignored).

You will not be surprised to hear that no such trial has been performed. And so there is no 'hard evidence' proving a link between electricity and cancer.

A similar defence (no 'hard evidence') was used when I first pointed out that eating meat causes cancer. Various defenders of farmers, butchers and the huge international meat industry quickly pointed out that there is no 'hard evidence' proving such a link. I assume that they meant by this that no double blind trial had been conducted to show that volunteers who eat nothing but meat for thirty years are more likely to get cancer than volunteers who eat something that looks, tastes and smells like meat but isn't. (The volunteers would not be allowed to eat vegetables – or indeed any other foods – with their meat since these might interfere with the trial.)

For reasons which I can understand, but not accept or condone, the meat industry doesn't seem keen to accept the overwhelming epidemiological evidence linking meat eating to cancer. (My book *Power over Cancer* gives details of the research providing this evidence.)

The same eternally useful phrase ('hard evidence') is sometimes used by those who struggle to defend the tobacco industry.

'There is no hard evidence linking tobacco to cancer,' some will claim. And they are right. To get hard evidence linking the smoking of tobacco to cancer scientists would have to persuade one group of volunteers to smoke cigarettes containing tobacco for a lengthy period of time (say thirty years) and another, matching group of volunteers to smoke cigarettes containing no tobacco for an equal length of time. At the end of the thirty years the two groups would be compared. If there was evidence that there were more cases of cancer in one group than in the other then that would be 'hard evidence'.

Finally, it is also sometimes argued that there is no 'hard evidence' linking drunken driving to road traffic accidents. Once again, to obtain 'hard evidence' of such an association scientists would have to... well, I'm sure you can guess the rest.

The fact is, of course, that there is overwhelming epidemiological evidence to support all these links. I firmly believe that there is plenty of available evidence to show that drunken driving leads to more accidents, smoking tobacco increases your chances of developing lung cancer and eating meat causes cancer. And I also believe that living under – or working close to – a power line, increases your chances of developing cancer too. However, generations of spin doctors have, over the years, persuaded doctors and journalists not to regard epidemiological research as ‘hard evidence’.

The one thing that all these health threats have in common is that they are strongly protected by large, powerful and profitable industries with plenty of money to spend on public relations companies and journalists. There is a good deal of money at stake. The electricity industry, the meat industry, the tobacco industry and the alcohol industry are each understandably keen to delay the day when a link can be shown between their highly profitable product and cancer (or, indeed, any illness).

* * *

The growing number of genuinely independent newsletters which are now published and distributed throughout the world are by far the best source of independent and reliable information about world, business and commercial affairs. The editors (often also the publishers and owners) of these newsletters usually have no paymasters other than their subscribers. They have no advertisers and no corporate responsibilities. They are frequently passionate and prejudiced but their passions and prejudices show and are not hidden. By subscribing to more than one of these newsletters it is possible to obtain a much greater insight into what is going on in the world than by reading daily newspapers or watching the television news.

CHAPTER SEVEN: When Progress Isn’t Really Progress At All

‘We were the first to assert that the more complicated the forms of civilisation, the more restricted the freedom of the individual must become.’

– Benito Mussolini

My computer printer broke down. I wanted it repaired. But the dealer told me that it was two years old and out of date. Is that progress?

My portable telephone needed new batteries. The company from which I bought the telephone just over a year ago told me that the telephone is no longer being manufactured. And they have also stopped manufacturing the batteries. This means that the telephone is useless and will have to be thrown away. Is that progress?

I wanted to listen to some old fashioned vinyl records. I tried to buy a record player. The assistants in local shops laughed at me when I told them what I wanted. Is that progress?

The glass in the wing mirror on my car cracked. A few years ago the garage would have simply replaced the glass. It would have taken a few minutes and cost very little. But the garage couldn’t obtain a replacement glass. They had to send away for a sealed unit. The whole operation took weeks and cost a small fortune. Is that progress?

When I dare to ask what the hell is so terrific about progress, and why we have to bow down before it as though it were the God of our times, folk ‘tut tut’ and look at me as though I’m an alien from another planet.

‘You can’t stand in the way of progress!’ they say, implying that it would be improper, unpatriotic, immoral and probably illegal even to try.

Well, I’ve had enough of progress. Without progress everyone would still be in work. Without progress the workshops of the world would still be alive, men would still be making things they were proud of and it would be possible to buy things on a Wednesday and expect them still to be capable of doing whatever it was they were bought to do on Saturday.

There is a myth that progress means automatically ‘better’. It doesn’t. In reality, progress means that more and more people have to exchange a rich varied, wholesome, healthy lifestyle for one which is hollow and filled with despair and loneliness. Progress means deprivation for people but strength for our social structures. Progress means that the jobs people do become more boring and less satisfying. Progress means more power to machines. Progress means that things are more likely to go wrong. Progress means more destruction, more misery and more tedium. Progress means more damage to our planet.

Those who worship at the altar of progress make two simple but vital errors. They assume that man must take full advantage of every new development and invention. And they assume that he must always search for a better way of tackling everything he does.

Neither of these two assumptions is soundly based.

Just because man invents computers, supersonic jets and atomic bombs he doesn’t have to use these things. Those who believe implicitly in progress believe that we must always endeavour to use every new nugget of information we obtain. They believe that if man invents a quicker and more effective way to kill people then we must use this quicker and more effective weapon of destruction.

Progress lovers believe that if it is possible to make a machine which manufactures identical galumps at the rate of 6,000 an hour then we must have that machine. And that those galumps will be better than galumps which have been hand carved by craftsmen.

The lovers of progress are so keen to embrace the future and eradicate the past that they will introduce new laws ensuring that only the new computer made identical galumps can be sold. The market for the old fashioned galumps will disappear.

The progress lovers don’t care about the fact that their galump making machine will put thousands of craftsmen out of work.

Progress for the sake of progress often simply means change for the sake of change. But (and this is probably heresy and will undoubtedly get me into trouble with whichever masturbatory authority is in business to protect progress) change is not always for the better.

The problem lies largely with the definition of the word ‘better’

What, exactly, does it mean?

Is a television set better than a radio or a good book?

Is a motor car better than a bicycle?

Is an aeroplane better than a yacht?

Are modern motor cars, equipped with electric windows and air conditioning, better than ancient Rolls Royce motor cars equipped with neither of these facilities?

Is artificial turf better than real grass?

Is a poorly written, badly acted television situation comedy which is in colour better than movies such as Citizen Kane and Duck Soup which were made in black and white?

Are artificial flowers better than the real thing?

Too often progress simply means more frustration and more unhappiness. It means that we become more dependent on one another and less capable of coping with the crises in our lives.

Progress means that when something goes wrong with the electricity supply your central heating boiler won't work. Progress means that it has become nigh on impossible to mend anything around the home without calling in an expert with a van full of tools. Even then he will probably tell you that he's got to send away for another part.

Progress means that when your windscreen wiper blade needs replacing you have to buy a new windscreen wiper system.

Progress means that when you want to buy a niplet you have to buy a blister pack of five which can only be opened with a kitchen knife, a screwdriver and a blowlamp.

What the hell is going on? What are we doing to our world? Will people be wiser, happier and more contented when nuclear powered, seven speed nose hair clippers are finally available?

It would be stupid to claim that all progress is bad. Progress is neither good nor bad unless we make it so. Progress is good when we use it rather than when we allow it to rule our lives. But no longer are we allowed to choose between those aspects of progress which we think can be to our benefit and those which we suspect may be harmful. Our society wants constant progress and that is what it gets.

CHAPTER EIGHT: Let Down By Science

‘When trouble is sensed well in advance it can easily be remedied; if you wait for it to show itself any medicine will be too late because the disease will have become incurable. As the doctors say of a wasting disease, to start with it is easy to cure but difficult to diagnose; after a time, unless it has been diagnosed and treated at the outset, it becomes easy to diagnose but difficult to cure.’

– Niccolo Machiavelli

If you fall ill and visit your doctor you probably imagine that you will be given a treatment which has been tested, examined and proven by reliable, responsible, honest scientists.

Wrong.

Only about 15% of medical interventions are supported by solid scientific evidence and only 1% of the articles in medical journals are scientifically sound.

What sort of science is that?

The modern clinician does not put his treatments to the test and does not want to put his treatments to the test. He will argue that his treatments do not need to be tested because he knows that they work.

That is science?

Today’s medical training is based upon pronouncement and opinion rather than on investigation and scientific experience. In medical schools students are bombarded with information but denied the time or the opportunity to question the ex cathedra statements which are made from an archaic medical culture.

If medicine was a science then when a patient visited a doctor complaining of a symptom he would be given the best, proven treatment, a treatment that was quite specific for the disease. Treatments for specific symptoms would be predictable and diagnostic skills would, because they would be based on scientific techniques, be reliable within certain acknowledged limits.

But that is not what happens. Doctors still make decisions about treatments according to their personal beliefs, instincts and hunches rather than according to any scientific principles.

Time and time again new treatments and new techniques are introduced on a massive scale without any scientific support and without doctors knowing what the long term consequences are likely to be. Medicine doesn’t anticipate disasters – it simply reacts to them. Men in white coats never seem to blush when they utter phrases such as: ‘Nothing can go wrong’; ‘It’s perfectly safe’ and ‘We never thought that would happen’. And yet, despite the constantly lengthening sequence of disasters which have marked twentieth century medicine most people will still argue that *their* doctor knows what he is doing, is trustworthy and reliable. They say this because they *want* and *need* their doctor to be trustworthy and reliable. People are quite prepared to believe that most doctors are incompetent and dangerous buffoons, educated by the pharmaceutical industry and free of moral or ethical standards. But they are not prepared to believe that about the physician into whose hands they have chosen to put their own life.

In the preface to *The Doctor’s Dilemma* playwright George Bernard Shaw points out that during the first great epidemic of influenza which developed towards the end of the 19th century, a London evening newspaper sent a journalist posing as a patient to all the great consultants of the day. The newspaper then published details of the advice and prescriptions offered by the consultants.

The whole proceeding was, almost inevitably, passionately denounced as an unforgivable breach of confidence, but the result was nevertheless fascinating. Despite the fact that the journalist had complained of exactly the same symptoms to the many different physicians, the advice and the prescriptions that were offered were all different.

Nothing has changed.

Even in these days of apparently high technology medicine there are almost endless variations in the treatments preferred by different doctors.

Doctors offer different prescriptions for exactly the same symptoms; they keep patients in hospital for vastly different lengths of time, and they perform different operations on patients with apparently identical problems.

Going to a doctor is something of a lottery, and treatments vary not because patients are different, but because doctors are different!

Despite all these variations in the types of treatment offered, most doctors seem to be convinced that their treatment methods are beyond question. Many doctors announce their decisions as though they are carved in stone.

But most decisions about how patients should be treated are based on nothing more scientific than guesswork, personal experience, intuition and prejudice.

Tragically, worthless and dangerous treatments are often administered for many, many years. When pressed for an explanation or for supporting evidence doctors will usually defend their activities by claiming that they are using ‘clinical judgement’. This sounds as if it is a professional decision but what it really means is that the doctor has strong opinions and is not prepared to listen to anyone else.

Even when techniques are assessed doctors will frequently ignore the results if the scientific evidence does not fit in with their own personal prejudiced beliefs. New treatments are tried until they kill too many people and have to be abandoned, or until something more exciting comes along.

Research has shown that the wrong diagnosis is made in more than half of all patients. This presumably also means that in more than half the patients the wrong treatment is given. And since modern treatments are undeniably powerful it also presumably means that many patients die not because of their disease but because of their treatment.

Doctors go to great lengths to disguise the fact that they are practising a black art rather than a science. The medical profession has created a ‘pseudoscience’ of mammoth proportions and today’s doctors rely on a vast variety of instruments and tests and pieces of equipment with which to explain and dignify their interventions. This, of course, is nothing new. The alchemists of the middle ages and the witch doctors of Africa recognised the need to impress their patients with their knowledge and so they created a secret and impenetrable structure of herbs, songs, dances, rattling of special bones, chants and ceremonial incantations. Today’s clinicians have much more sophisticated mumbo jumbo to offer. But it is still mumbo jumbo.

* * *

A doctor recently rang me up and asked me to go and visit him in his wonderful new health centre.

‘You’re a pretty forceful critic of modern medicine,’ he said, and I knew immediately that he felt that he was not one of the doctors who should be included in my criticisms. ‘You should come along and take a look around the new ‘state of the art’ place we’ve had built.’

Always anxious to keep up with what is going on in the world of medicine I readily accepted his invitation. And so a few days later I found myself tottering through huge plate glass doors and into a magnificently built medical centre. White walls, white floor, white ceiling. A team of immaculately coiffed smart young receptionists in spotless white coats stood waiting behind glass partitions. I had to pinch myself to make sure that I hadn’t died and gone to heaven.

It all seemed such a very long way from the simple and rather homely surgeries in which medicine used to be practised in the primitive, bad old days. I remembered one very dear, former friend who practised in a tiny and rather cold conservatory built onto the side of his house. Patients sat waiting in his dining room where tattered, well thumbed magazines laid out on the dining table provided the entertainment. The entertainment was needed for patients might have to wait anything up to four hours to be seen.

From time to time the doctor’s stern and stout wife would potter into the room to check that no one was smoking, spitting or talking and to tidy the magazines up into neat piles.

When my dear old chum was ready for his next patient he would shout ‘Next!’ It was a simple technique but it worked and there was no reliance on wiring, electricity or other fallible consequences of the twentieth century.

When a consultation was over the patient, probably still buttoning up her dress or his trousers, would leave through the conservatory door, along the garden path and out through the side gate. This rather efficient system meant that there was never any congestion at the key point: the door between the dining room and the conservatory.

Those days are, I suspect, gone for ever.

The doctor who had invited me to visit him proudly escorted me around the new building. There were, he explained, surgeries and examination rooms for all the doctors, consulting rooms for two nurses and a small but well equipped operating theatre for minor surgery.

But he seemed proudest of the pharmacy – an extremely impressive and extraordinarily well stocked drug shop. It was the centre point of the whole building; a sort of pharmaceutical shrine at which all were expected to worship.

‘Patients are processed in three simple stages,’ he explained, rather like a tour guide at a stately home. ‘First they are seen by the one of receptionists, who gives them a consultation number. Second, one of the doctors sees them. And then, finally, they visit the pharmacy to collect their prescription which will have been automatically ordered when the doctor completed his computerised record of the consultation. When collecting the prescription the patient is automatically given the date and time of their next appointment.’

‘What about patients who don’t need a prescription?’ I asked.

The doctor stared at me. ‘What do you mean?’ he asked.

I tried to redesign the question. ‘What happens to patients who need another appointment but don’t need treatment with drugs?’

The doctor continued to stare at me. ‘All patients need treatment,’ he said. ‘Why else would someone visit us if they didn’t need treatment?’

‘Well, I think the idea that all patients need treatment is arguable,’ I said, feeling rather like the small boy declaring that the Emperor was wearing no clothes. ‘But what about those patients who need treatment but don’t need drugs?’

‘How else would we treat them?’ asked the doctor.

‘I don’t know,’ I shrugged. ‘It rather depends on what is wrong with them. Osteopathy, acupuncture, dietary advice, relaxation exercises, meditation training...’

I stopped talking because I was aware that the doctor was looking rather alarmed.

‘I hadn’t realised that you were one of those nutters,’ he said, pulling his white coat around him, as though it were a suit of armour which would protect him from contamination. He instinctively backed away a few inches.

‘Surely some patients might just need someone to talk to?’ I suggested, rather lamely.

‘It’s obviously been a little while since you practised,’ said the doctor, rather coldly.

I left there feeling rather sad and even depressed; convinced, more than ever, that medicine has been taken over by the hugely powerful and immensely profitable pharmaceutical industries.

Doctors are no longer in the business of caring for patients. They are in the much simpler business of dishing out pills.

* * *

Annette (not her real name) woke up one morning a few months ago, looked out of her flat window and saw that the front passenger window of her car had been smashed. She went downstairs and found that vandals had broken into her car and stolen the cassette player. It was the third time in a month that her car had been vandalised.

She was so upset about the incident that while preparing her breakfast she cut her hand badly with the breadknife. She couldn’t see what she was doing because she was crying. Her boyfriend washed the wound and took her to the local surgery.

The doctor who put a stitch into the wound noticed that she had been crying and asked her why. Annette told him about the damage that had been done to her car. She said she felt really depressed about the amount of crime where she lived. When the doctor had finished attending to her wound he wrote out a prescription for some pills.

A few days later Annette started to complain of a ringing in her ears. She told her boyfriend about the ringing noise. He suggested that she visit the doctor again. He told her to ask if the new symptom could be a side effect of the drug she was taking.

The doctor dismissed Annette’s question about side effects with a laugh. He told her that she had a condition called tinnitus and he prescribed some pills which he said would help. He told her that the pills might not make the condition disappear completely and he warned her that tinnitus sometimes lasts for years.

After another week the tinnitus was still present and Annette had also begun to feel edgy, anxious and rather irritable. She went back to see the doctor and told him how she felt. She said that she was also having difficulty in sleeping. The doctor increased the dose of the original drug and also prescribed a sleeping pill.

When Annette asked the doctor what the original drug was for the doctor told her that it was an antidepressant. She asked him if he really thought she needed the drug. He said he had given it to her because she had told him that she was depressed. He said that it was important that she continue with the drug since there can sometimes be unpleasant withdrawal effects if drug therapy is stopped suddenly.

A week later Annette was feeling so ill that she did not want to get out of bed. She felt dizzy, nauseous and edgy and the tinnitus was worse. She could not concentrate to read, listen to the radio or watch television. She had lost all interest in sex. Her boyfriend telephoned her doctor’s surgery and insisted that a doctor visit her at home.

The doctor who had seen Annette in the surgery was not available and another doctor called at the flat. He looked at the pills that Annette was taking and announced that he was going to increase the dose and add another drug. He said that Annette should get out of bed and try to go out for long walks.

Annette tried to get up and go out but she was so dizzy that she had to keep on sitting down. The tinnitus was now so bad that she cried almost continuously. She was also complaining of indigestion and a skin rash. The persistent nausea meant that she wasn’t interested in food and that she was losing weight. Worst of all she started having difficulty in speaking. Her boyfriend called the doctor again.

Another different doctor arrived. He said he didn’t know what was wrong but he prescribed yet another drug and increased the dosage of the original antidepressant. Because Annette’s skin rash had become infected he prescribed an antibiotic. He said he thought that Annette needed plenty of rest. Annette cried throughout his visit and when he was about to leave she grabbed at his coat lapel and shouted at him. No one could understand what she said. The doctor, who seemed shaken, said that he thought that perhaps Annette needed to be in hospital. He said he would talk to his colleagues about this.

Three days later the first doctor, the one who had treated Annette when she had cut her hand, visited the flat. Annette was in the lavatory when he arrived. She had bad diarrhoea and was also suffering from stomach cramps. She couldn’t stop crying.

The doctor was clearly shocked at Annette’s appearance. He admitted to Annette’s boyfriend that he didn’t know what was wrong. He said he thought that the main problem was depression and that Annette had obviously had what used to be called a nervous breakdown but added that there might be some hormonal problem or perhaps an immune system disorder as well. He said he wondered whether Annette might have had a small stroke. He took her blood pressure and said that it was raised.

The doctor said he would arrange for Annette to go into hospital. Annette's boyfriend said he thought that this was a good idea since he was having great difficulty in coping.

Two days later, when they had heard nothing from the doctor about a hospital bed, the boyfriend rang the surgery. A receptionist told him that since Annette's problem was non-urgent they were having to wait for a bed to become vacant. The receptionist promised that someone would ring when they had any news.

That evening, while her boyfriend was at work, Annette took an overdose. She swallowed just about every drug in the flat. When her boyfriend arrived back home he telephoned for an ambulance and Annette was taken to a nearby casualty department. The hospital was crowded and Annette, who was unconscious, was left lying on a stretcher in a corridor. She vomited, inhaled her own vomit and choked to death.

All the symptoms from which Annette suffered were side effects of the drugs which had been prescribed for her.

I leave it to you to decide the moral of this tragic story.

* * *

Doctors aren't the only scientists to have let us down; to have lost touch with the real needs of the community. For example, consider the world of research – now almost devoid of morals. Tobacco companies, drug companies and other industrial giants sponsor research to show that their products are safe and that other people's alternative products are not as safe. The research is designed to look for whatever the sponsor hopes to find and if negative results are obtained the chances are that they will be ignored or certainly not given the same sort of promotional exposure that they will be given if some way can be found to make them commercially valuable to the sponsor.

One of the biggest fears I have for the future concerns the whole area of genetic research.

It is twenty years since researchers first started splicing together genes from different organisms and for several years now the food industry has been excited by the possibilities offered by genetic engineering.

Scientists working for or on behalf of the food industry have been busy messing around with foods in an attempt to make them look or taste 'better' or make them last longer. Researchers have created tobacco plants designed to be more resistant to disease, a hybrid animal that is half sheep and half goat and a cuboid tomato that will be easier to use when making sandwiches. There have even been reports that scientists have put human genes into plants in order to produce more acceptable food products. (How many human genes do there have to be in a tomato before the tomato can complain if you dare to threaten it with a knife?)

In an attempt to keep up with the world's distorted requirements for food, scientists and farmers are busy messing around with genes in an attempt to grow bigger crops. Modern, laboratory bred crops help boost yields and profits.

But there is a risk because new crop varieties are identical: each ear of wheat, each potato, each tomato is the same as the one next to it. And each farmer grows the same crop variety in order to maximise his profits. This is all very well when everything goes fine. But when a bug comes along which affects one plant every plant will be affected. And the result will be a wipeout.

About 150 years ago a fungus caused the Irish potato famine. Today, we are far more vulnerable than the Irish were. One new fungus or other infection which affects the latest laboratory engineered crop could cause a worldwide shortage of wheat or potatoes and a worldwide famine.

I have no doubt that it will happen soon. And when it does the farmers whose crops have been destroyed will demand cash so that they don't suffer financially. No one in the food industry will give a damn about the fact that deaths from starvation will rocket – as a direct result of their greedy, selfish, short sighted policies. Thanks to the farmers and the food industry the long term future for the world is hunger, growing food shortages and wars as the starving fight for food.

The clock is ticking. Before long it will be too late to stop scientists doing irreversible damage to our food. I am convinced that genetic engineering is one of the biggest threats any of us face. But no one seems to care. Journalists seem besotted with the idea of genetics and the politicians certainly won't stop the scientists because the lobbyists who represent the world's food companies are working hard to suppress fears and allay any suspicions.

CHAPTER NINE: What Do They Do With Your Money?

‘It is every day becoming more clearly understood that the function of Government is negative and restrictive, rather than positive and active.’

– Samuel Smiles

I don’t know about you but when I hand over a chunk of my hard earned cash I like to think I’m buying value for money. Whatever it is I’m buying – car insurance or a bottle of something smooth and pleasantly toxic – I want to know that the person who is getting my money is doing something for me in return. If I feel that I’m being consistently short-changed then I take my business (and my wallet) elsewhere.

By far the biggest bills I pay are to the government. Taxes everywhere are rising inexorably. Most taxpayers assume that the hard earned money they hand over to their government will be used to improve the world in which they live. But in practice most of the money raised by governments is used to subsidise an ever-expanding bureaucratic machinery.

If you pay 25% of your income in tax then you are working for other people for 15 minutes out of every hour. You are, quite literally, a slave for a quarter of your working life. If you pay 40% income tax and work 40 hours a week then you are a slave in chains for 16 hours every week.

Taxes are a relatively new invention and have risen dramatically for the last few decades as politicians and civil servants have discovered the power that comes with having lots of other people’s money to spend.

The theory is that the government will use your money to look after you when you are sick, to feed you and your family if you are unable to find work, to give you a pension when you are old and to provide you with a complete range of personal and social services. But if you take a hard look at what you get for your money you will find that the practice falls rather short of the theory.

The following details relate to life in just about any civilised, developed country in the world.

* Health care: even if ‘free’ health care is available you probably either pay cash for decent care when you need it or pay premiums to a private insurer so that you can get medical and dental care from the doctor or dentist of your choice. If you need an operation or any other type of treatment you will have to pay – unless you are prepared to risk dying on the waiting list. If your general practitioner gives you a prescription you may have to pay a prescription charge which is higher than the value of the drug.

* Insurance: if you want to carry on eating and doing all the other things to which you have grown accustomed then you probably pay insurance premiums so that you receive cash if you are injured, fall sick or unable to work. The government may claim to offer support to individuals who fall into these categories but you probably realise that you would be wise not to rely upon the government’s generosity. When you pay insurance premiums you will probably pay an additional tax.

* Pension: You may have been paying money to the government in the hope that they will eventually give you a pension. But if you are wise you will not expect to be able to survive on any pension the government may pay you. If you don’t wish to spend your declining years living in a cardboard box you probably pay regular sums into a private pension scheme.

* Transport: The government builds roads so that you can drive around in your car. But as a motorist you pay additional sums of money to cover the building of roads. You probably pay money to get a licence to put your car on the road. And you give the government even more money when you buy petrol. You will also give the government extra money if you buy a new car or have an old car repaired or serviced.

* Services/utilities: You probably pay a full commercial rate for your gas, electricity and water. And you probably pay the local authority additional money for local facilities such as street lighting. If you have your rubbish collected then there will be a service charge for that. And if you want to have your children educated you probably have to pay for the teacher and the school. You will pay more money into the central kitty if you want to park your car, if you are caught parking on a yellow line or caught speeding.

You hand over more money when you buy a house, a share or a bottle of whisky. You give the government money every time you buy clothes or make a telephone call. So what the hell is the government doing with the money you give it? What other useful services are you getting for your money?

Well, your government will be hiring armies of bureaucrats to smother small businesses with paperwork and to remove as much of your freedom as it possibly can. And it will be using your money to subsidise a massive, international arms industry which you may not want to subsidise.

You may be tempted to suspect that the government is not giving you value for money. But don’t be tempted to stop handing over money to the government as a protest because if you do that they’ll send you to prison.

And maybe that is the explanation. Maybe that is where your money goes. Maybe you are giving nearly half of your working life to pay for the prison service.

CHAPTER TEN: The Twentieth Century Addiction

‘Literary coteries have no vital contact with the life of the community, and such contact is necessary if men’s feelings are to have the seriousness and depth within which both tragedy and true happiness proceed.’

– Bertrand Russell

I see dozens of surveys every week. Public relations companies send them to me in smart folders. Most of them are about as stimulating and as exciting as a compromising photograph of a politician.

I just can’t get moved about the fact that 33% of housewives believe that carrots are an essential ingredient when preparing a Sunday lunch.

But although I saw it some time ago I can’t get the results of one survey out of my head. It keeps popping into my consciousness– rather like a tune that won’t go away.

The survey that won’t go away showed that when small children aged between four and six years old were asked to say which they liked best – television or daddy – around half voted for television. And if that doesn’t frighten you then it damned well should.

Exciting, quick, instant pleasures requiring no real effort are now essential and commonplace – and television is both the best example and the source of this new attitude to life. Children’s thoughts are always directed to the next instant fix rather than any long term sense of achievement or true fulfilment. Ask a child today what he or she wants to do with his or her life and he or she will probably answer: ‘Win the lottery!’. That is hope not ambition. Today’s generation is constantly on the run, rushing from one instant pleasure to the next. Thanks to television there is no time for taking pleasure from a beautiful scene, a walk enjoyed, a book read or a piece of music.

We are, it seems, creating a new generation with an even lower tolerance to boredom and low capability for sticking at things. Modern food is junk food. Instant food. There is no effort involved in preparing or eating food. You just stuff it into your mouth, chew and swallow and then get on to the next momentary thrill. We can thank television for that. Children are not encouraged to extract any pleasure from life in their own way. They are not taught to use their imaginations or their hands. We can thank television for that. Tomorrow’s creators will, I suspect, all come from the third world or from deprived homes. The future of the world is Muslim.

Of course, it isn’t just kids who are hooked on television. The average adult in most so called developed countries watches five hours of television a day. (In America the average adult watches television for a literarily mind numbing seven hours a day.) Five hours a day is 35 hours a week and nearly 2,000 hours a year. (Seven hours a day is 49 hours a week and over 2,500 hours a year.)

What a terrible way to waste your life! Watching TV for five hours a day is like giving away a third of your waking life to someone else.

I wouldn’t mind if the stuff on television was good. But the vast majority of the programmes now being made for television are superficial, trivialising nonsense put together by untalented nonentities with an average IQ lower than the daily temperature in Reykjavik. You can’t even wrap chips in old television programmes.

When I was young and innocent I used to do a lot of television. But no more.

I banned myself from one channel when a producer told me that he wasn’t going to broadcast an interview in which I had revealed the truth about a laboratory experiment for which a number of dogs had died because he had been reliably informed by the researchers that they hadn’t used any animals at all.

‘But I’ve got the evidence!’ I protested. ‘They published a research paper describing what they’d done.’

‘But they didn’t use any animals,’ argued the producer. ‘They only used animal tissue.’

What could I say to that? I’m proud of the fact that I managed to put the telephone receiver down without breaking it.

I was banned by the other side after I swore at someone on a late night chat show. Genuinely angered by the other guests I used a word rhyming with ‘duck’ but beginning with a letter coming a little later in the alphabet.

The word is heard constantly in films shown much earlier in the evening and it first appeared in The Times over a century ago, but the television company concerned was dismayed because I’d used it in anger.

I received a great deal of mail in support of my choice of language and as far as I know the TV company didn’t receive any complaints, but the producer demanded a public apology which I refused to give. I rather think that what upset them was not the use of the word itself (it is, as I’ve explained used regularly in movies), but that I’d used it in anger. I’d meant it. I’d spoken with passion and feeling. After years of appearing on TV programmes I honestly feel that television producers don’t feel entirely comfortable with passion. They don’t really know how to deal with it. And it frightens them.

* * *

I turned on my television set the other morning to check the results of a sporting event in which I had been interested. Instead, by accident, I found myself watching a programme which appeared to be set in a supermarket. A woman was frantically running up and down the aisles looking at the available products. Judging from the picture on my screen it appeared that a man with a camera was running around with her, filming her as she darted hither and thither.

I discovered, by listening to a subsequent conversation between her and an amiable sort of fellow in a suit, that she had been trying to find out where the poppadoms had been stored. She had failed in this onerous task and seemed disproportionately disappointed. I turned off the set and so did not find out whether she was to be given a second chance to demonstrate her poppadom searching skills. Nor did I discover whether or not the programme was intended to be educational ('how to find poppadoms when visiting your local supermarket'); entertainment ('watch a woman running around a supermarket'); sport ('let's see how quickly this woman can run around a supermarket and find the poppadoms'); suspense drama ('let's see if this woman can find out where the poppadoms are hidden in this supermarket'); or just plain news of the local TV variety ('woman searches for poppadoms in supermarket').

In many ways the poppadom hunt seem typical of the sort of stuff that television companies seem to like these days; undemanding mass market viewing, cheap to produce and unlikely to offend any viewers or upset the advertisers.

It has for years been easy to dismiss television as a medium which has never truly found its way, an opportunity which has been lost – given over for commercial reasons to froth and undemanding trivia. In a way this is true. Television is a medium that has lost its way; it's half show business, half advertising billboard and half propaganda vehicle for politicians. Television promised much but has failed to deliver.

But for some time I have thought it rather dangerous to regard television in such a simple way. Television is far a more sinister medium than the poppadom hunt might suggest. It is a propaganda tool for the establishment, designed constantly to reinforce the message that authority is never wrong.

For years television has exerted a powerful and disturbing influence on society – through the drip drip drip influence of the weekly soap operas, the popular drama series, the quiz shows, the advertisements and even the news.

The essential message television has given out has inevitably been in support of the status quo: the materialistic, conservative (with a small c) society. Programmes about video cameras in our streets and buildings tell us how useful these devices are at helping to prevent crime. They never bother to question whether or not having video cameras everywhere could be an infringement of our privacy. Programmes about the police have taught us to respect the forces of law and order and programmes about hospitals and doctors have taught us to respect the wisdom and integrity of the medical profession.

It has been the way that television has sanctified violence which has worried me most of all. The sanctification of violence began in the cowboy movies – where the cowboys in white hats (the good guys) were allowed to beat up and kill the cowboys in black hats (the bad guys) or the Indians (also the bad guys). It continued in spy thrillers – where the hero working for our side was allowed to beat up and kill his opposite numbers working for their side. And, most alarming of all in my view, it carried on in police programmes. The rules on television have always been simple: the police are the good guys and anyone they don't approve of is a bad guy. It is, say the unwritten television rules, perfectly all right for the police to be violent. After all they are only beating up bad guys who deserve to be beaten. Television does not show us the reality: that ordinary, law abiding citizens are frequently beaten up by the police, either because the police have made a mistake and burst into the wrong house, or because they have arrested the wrong pedestrian or motorist, or simply for the hell of it. We never see the way power is abused.

For years television has taught us that violence is acceptable as long as it is perpetrated by the established and accepted forces of light and aimed at those who represent evil.

Not that the glorification and justification of violence is the only important legacy television has given us. At the same time television has constantly shown us – and held up for our admiration – the many material goods we can acquire if we are prepared to work hard and play the rules according to the requirements of society. Every evening, when the viewer returns home tired and bored, the advertisers and the quiz show hosts tantalise him by showing him the things and the experiences which can be his if he continues to work hard and pay homage to the social structure.

The end result of all this insidious propaganda has been the creation of generation after generation of television viewers who are quietly prepared to support the status quo. Viewers have been taught to respect the police and the medical profession and to endorse violence when it is used by any representative of the establishment in the defence of the status quo; and they have been taught to worship the pursuit of money and material goods.

The average viewer's life, thoughts, ambitions, fears and respects have all been defined by television.

* * *

Every year or two there are serious discussions among politicians about whether or not violence on television could be a cause of the rising amount of violence in our society. These 'new' discussions always give me an uncomfortable feeling of 'déjà vu'.

It was way back in 1983 that I forecast that by the mid 1990s our society would be overrun by violent young adults. I pointed out that according to knowledge available at that time 40% of all children over the age of six years had seen one or more video nasties. And I warned that: ‘If their viewing habits remain unchanged, thousands upon thousands of them will have become violent, aggressive and virtually uncontrollable. We will have successfully bred a race of super thugs.’

Sadly, tragically, it looks as though I was right. We have bred a scarred generation. We live in a violent world where crazed men and women obtain pleasure from causing pain, from killing and maiming complete strangers.

The numbing effect violent videos can have on children is terrifying.

Just read these three quotes which I reported back in 1983:

Child No 1 (female): ‘I like scaring myself and I like looking at blood.’

Child No 2 (male): ‘I like all the blood coming out.’

Child No 3 (male): ‘I like the bit in Driller Killer where he puts a man up on sticks and then he gets the drill and puts it through his stomach and he screams for ages. Then he dies.’

Those three children were nine years old when I quoted them. And there are thousands more just like them.

The link between television or film violence and real in-the-streets violence is no mystery. Psychologists first noticed the link over thirty years ago. It has long been known that children (and some adults) find it difficult to differentiate between the violence in movies and television programmes and the violence they see in news footage. It all merges together in one great blood bath.

In 1964 it was reported that by the time the average American child had celebrated his 14th birthday he would have witnessed on television the deaths of 13,000 people. By 1971, the figure had risen to 18,000 and observers were getting very worried. The American Government was so concerned that it set up a commission to study the problem. After careful deliberation the commission concluded that: ‘Violence on television encourages violent forms of behaviour and fosters moral and social values about violence in family life which are unacceptable in a civilised society.’

Read that again.

Read it out loud.

Read it to your friends, your neighbours, your partner and your children.

It isn’t pornography which turns children into dangerous citizens. It is violence.

Showing naked bodies doesn’t do any harm. Breasts don’t kill people. You can’t bludgeon someone to death with a penis – erect or limp. Showing naked individuals having sex doesn’t do any harm either. But showing films of wild, unlimited violence causes a great deal of harm.

Every time someone is murdered ‘Concerned’ parents and ‘Anxious’ politicians join together to try to put pressure on the authorities to take some action – though no one ever seems sure what sort of action they think will be most appropriate. The usual cry is for censorship, although all the evidence suggests that censorship has never solved any problem. If violence is banned from television then, as long as there is a demand, the people who make and sell portrayals of violence will find a way to reach their markets. Creating a new law will simply result in the creation of yet another breed of law-breakers.

Back in 1983, when I first pointed out that the problem created by violence on television was coming, I argued that the responsibility lay fair and square on the shoulders of parents. I felt then, and I feel now that it is, after all, the responsibility of parents to make sure that their children do not watch material which might have a damaging effect on the way they develop. ‘Our apathy could be breeding a scarred generation,’ I warned.

But parents prefer to blame everyone else. They do not want to take any responsibility. They put some of the blame on the people who make these violent programmes. And the rest they reserve for ‘society’. They blame the politicians and the amorphous ‘them’.

It is parents who could and should have stopped their young children watching programmes which were destined to turn them into thugs and killers. But yesterday’s generation of parents has clearly failed and it does not seem likely that today’s generation of parents will do any better.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: The Tyranny Of The Law And The Disappearance Of Justice

‘The value of legislation as an agent in human advancement has usually been much over-estimated.’

– Samuel Smiles

‘Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterwards. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have the right to assume, is to do at any time what I think right. Law never made men a whit more just; and by means of their respect for it, even the well disposed are daily made the agents of injustice.’

– Henry David Thoreau

‘No laws, however stringent, can make the idle industrious, the thriftless provident or the drunken sober.’

– Samuel Smiles

It is important to understand that the law is not on your side.

During the last few generations, as a direct result of the fact that it has changed its priority from the protection of the individual to the protection of society, justice has turned from the protection of the individual to the oppression of the individual.

We like to think that the Germans who worked in the concentration camps were exceptionally evil individuals. But every nation contains thousands of people who will obey orders as long as they’re paid well, given lots of authority and provided with smart uniforms. If your government decided to exterminate beggars or Jews they would, I have no doubt, find it easy to recruit the necessary staff.

Most of those who satisfy the requirements for gas chamber attendants are currently working as lawyers, policemen and traffic wardens. And in their hands each nation is rapidly becoming a police state.

For years politicians and lawyers (two words which, I feel, go together like ‘vomit’ and ‘floor-cloth’) have been doing their efficient best to take away all your rights. Now the greatest threat to your liberty comes not from criminals but from the legal system. Recent governments have passed endless oppressive and unjust laws and all around the ‘civilised’ world new laws mean that you’re guilty if the police say you’re guilty. Human rights have been replaced by police rights.

Those paid to run the legal system have forgotten that the law was invented to protect the ordinary citizen. Consequently, the prison population is rising so fast that it won’t be long before prisoners will have to come outside and law abiding citizens will have to go inside.

No society has ever had as many laws as we have. And few societies can ever have had less justice. Ring up and complain that you’ve been robbed, mugged or raped and a snotty, supercilious, patronising, overpaid employee with an ‘I’m-far-too-busy-and-important-to-be-dealing-with-your-piddling-little-problem’ voice will reluctantly take down your details before explaining that they’re far too busy to do anything. But leave your car outside the police station to complain that you’ve been assaulted and when you get back to it you’ll find that someone has found the time to give you a ticket.

Motorists are easy targets. Most have an in-built fear of authority and a long established respect for the law. And it is far easier to make the crime statistics look good by catching a few, generally law abiding, middle class motorists than it is to try to catch potentially troublesome criminals. The modern police patrol the streets as though they own them. They interrogate citizens as though they are unwelcome intruders. Once, when lost, I remember stopping my car to ask a policeman the way. I was told rudely that I couldn’t stop where I was. I repeated my question, politely explaining that I simply wanted to know whether to turn left or right at the next junction. There was no traffic behind me and my car was not causing an obstruction. The policeman, turning very aggressive, demanded my driving licence and insurance and threatened to arrest me – though I know not what for. On another occasion, when I stopped at the scene of an accident on a motorway I was rudely told to move off. I explained that I was a doctor and asked if there was anything I could do to help. The traffic policeman angrily repeated his command that I drive on.

There is an overriding tendency among those employed to defend the law to treat ordinary citizens without respect. The individual is of no significance. The policeman regards his duty and responsibility as being towards society.

(Although, there is, of course, an exception to the rule that policemen and others involved with maintaining the law tend to treat ordinary citizens without respect. Policemen and traffic wardens are quick to grovel if they think they’re dealing with someone whom they regard as important. A year or two ago I acquired a large and impressive looking Buckingham Palace car park pass for the windscreen of my car. I quickly discovered that once they saw the sticker traffic wardens treated me very reverentially. When I parked *inside* a shopping arcade I found a traffic warden waiting for me. But he didn’t give me a ticket. Instead he stopped the traffic while I reversed out of the arcade. He then saluted while I drove away, leaving him enveloped in blue exhaust smoke.)

* * *

Sadly, it is now a mistake to confuse the law with justice, liberty, freedom and equality. Today’s law has very little to do with these fundamental moral principles. The law (man’s inadequate attempt to turn justice into practical reality) is inspired more by the self interest of the lawmakers than by respect or concern for human rights.

This is why protest with a purpose attracts far more attention than mindless vandalism. If animal rights activists do a relatively small amount of damage to a building where evil scientists are doing indefensible and unspeakable things to animals the whole area will turn blue with policemen looking for clues. The damage is considered to be a threat to society. But if an individual complains that he or she has been the victim of a similar crime the police will show very little interest in it.

The law was originally introduced to protect individuals but the law has itself become one of modern society’s greatest tyrants. The law now oppresses the weak, the poor and the powerless and sustains itself and the powers which preserve it. The cost of litigation means that there is one law for the rich and no law for the poor. The law threatens and reduces the rights of the weak and strengthens and augments the rights of the powerful.

As political parties come and go so we accumulate layer after layer of new laws. And as the oppression of individuals continues, lawlessness grows among officials and those in power. Brutality, arrogance, corruption and hypocrisy have all damaged public faith in the law but the only response from the establishment has been to create new laws to outlaw disapproval. The primary interest of the legal establishment is to protect itself. The establishment is not concerned with justice, freedom or equality since those are values which give strength to you and me.

* * *

Traditional laws are fairly simple to understand. Murder is not allowed and we must all drive on one, specified, side of the road.

But in recent years a new type of law has developed under which the authorities (namely the unelected bureaucrats) have the power to do whatever they like – without any controls. Decisions (which effectively have the power of law) are taken according to the whims and fancies of the adjudicators.

Today, we have far too many laws which fit into the second category; vague, general, oppressive laws which take away our freedom but give us no rights. Anyone who has ever run a business will know that the bureaucrats seem to delight in creating pointless and confusing new rules and regulations. The result is that it is extremely hard for a small business to stay solvent in the current regulatory environment.

In an honest country the laws are designed to restrain (and constrain) the government as well as the citizens. The citizens know how the government will use its powers because the laws are all written down. Under those circumstances it is possible to plan your life according to the law.

But we have created a society in which the laws are so complex that no one really understands them any more. The law has become devalued because there is so much law that no one can recognise it any more and no one knows whether a law is a good law or a bad law. Governments have become arbitrary, decision makers have endless discretion and basic freedoms (such as the freedom to remain silent) have gone. Only the bureaucrats (when operating as bureaucrats) are above and beyond the law.

As a result, trust and faith in justice have been steadily disappearing for decades. A recent survey showed that in ‘developed’ countries two thirds of the population feel that they will get no justice from their courts.

In a free society the laws have to be applied evenly and fairly – otherwise people simply lose all faith in the law. In modern societies, however, the laws are not applied evenly or fairly. There is ample evidence to confirm that punishments vary according to the whims and caprices of those responsible for handing them out – and according to the skills of those who represent the defendants.

Governments never pass laws designed to give people more freedom, and they never repeal laws which take away freedom, and so, every year, numerous new layers of law are laid down on top of the old ones. The result is that no one – not the politicians or the judges or the lawyers – knows what all the laws are.

The absurdity here is, of course, that according to the law, ignorance of the law is no excuse for breaking the law. And yet the law is now so complex that no lawyer or judge in the world would claim to know precisely what is and is not legal. Indeed, in many cases those laws which are not created by unelected bureaucrats, operating under the authority given to them by politicians, are often created in the courtroom when a judge, aided by counsel and shelves of legal textbooks containing precedents, hands down a new ruling.

Does this not sound like something out of a novel by Kafka?

There can be no liberty without law but the wrong kind of law – or law that is administered unfairly – can take away liberty from those whom the law is supposed to protect.

CHAPTER TWELVE: Affirmative Action

‘The finest opportunity ever given to the world was thrown away because the passion for equality made vain the hope for freedom.’

– Lord Acton

‘All the complaints which are made of the world are unjust; I never knew a man of merit neglected; it was generally by his own fault that he failed of success.’

– Dr Samuel Johnson

‘I recently applied for a job I really wanted,’ wrote a reader of mine. ‘I had all the necessary qualifications and exactly the sort of experience the advertisers said they were looking for. I was short-listed for the job. But I didn’t get it. The advertisers gave the post to a black woman. She had only basic qualifications and didn’t have my experience. One of the people on the interviewing panel told me afterwards that they hadn’t been able to give me the job because I am male and white. What is going on? I thought that discrimination was illegal.’

This reader is half right in his assumption that discrimination is illegal. Some types of discrimination are illegal. For example, discrimination against black people is illegal. Anyone who refuses to give someone a job because they are black could end up in big trouble. And I think that’s quite right. Colour prejudice is wrong. And discrimination against women is, quite rightly, illegal too. I support that as well. Discrimination on the grounds of sex is totally unfair and indefensible.

But discrimination against white men is, it seems, never illegal. It is called ‘positive discrimination’ or ‘affirmative action’ and many people (black and white) regard it as a ‘good thing’. This new form of apartheid was created by, and is sustained by, those who believe that the rights of the individual have to be subjugated to the needs of society.

My reader’s experience is by no means unusual.

Discrimination against white men is now commonplace, and middle class, white men have, strangely and unpredictably, become today’s new oppressed minority. The theory behind this bizarre activity is that because black people and women have been discriminated against in the past, discriminating against white men will somehow put things right.

Those organisations which deliberately choose to give jobs, houses or whatever else to people of a particular colour or sex are practising racism or sexism just as clearly as they would be if they were deliberately giving jobs to white males. I can see absolutely no difference between ‘affirmative action’ and ‘apartheid’. Attempting to satisfy preordained quotas of black people or women is both absurd and unfair.

It seems clear to me that there are only two possible long term consequences of ‘affirmative action’. The first is that organisations will become less efficient and less capable of doing whatever it is they are supposed to do. If ‘affirmative action’ is allowed to spread it won’t be long before every organisation in the world will have poorly trained or inadequately qualified individuals in key jobs. And the second long term consequence is that a huge amount of anger and resentment will build up.

In South Africa, where ‘affirmative action’ seems to have its deepest roots, it has been suggested that at least half the employees in management posts within public sector departments should be black. That’s a fine theory. If all the good candidates were black I would suggest that all the employees in management posts within public sector departments ought to be black. But surely the important word should be ‘good’ not ‘black’? Surely, in a fair society the best candidate should get the job.

But in practice what happens if there aren’t enough good black candidates to fill all the allocated posts? The simple answer is that incompetent and not very good black candidates will still get the jobs.

What a patronising, disempowering, insulting way this is to try to right the wrongs of past generations. The real danger is that if ‘affirmative action’ is allowed to continue everyone will suffer. Some black people and some women might feel that they are getting a good deal. And there is no doubt that some blacks and some women will get jobs that they wouldn’t have got in a fair, just world. But the blacks and the women who have jobs they can’t do properly will end up feeling miserable, unhappy and incompetent. The organisations they are working for will become inefficient and they will crumble. If they are commercial organisations they will go bankrupt. And the white males who were qualified to do those jobs will eventually rise up, rebel and fight for their forgotten rights. Within decades, embittered white men will be campaigning for this new variety of discrimination to be abolished. History will simply repeat itself.

The only real answer to the problems, injustices and unfairnesses created by past discriminatory policies is through education. We must make sure that black children get exactly the same opportunities as white children. We must make sure that girls get the same opportunities as boys. Introducing a new, late twentieth century version of apartheid into society is no way to deal with the problem; it is, rather, a patronising way of simply ensuring that freedom and liberty are further eroded. 'Affirmative action' is typical of the sort of slick, short term solution favoured by those who put the rights and needs of society above the rights and needs of individuals.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: The Demographic Threat

‘Life is a checkerboard and the player opposite you is time...you are playing against a partner who will not tolerate indecision.’

– Napoleon Hill

The average age of citizens in the ‘developed’ and so called ‘civilised’ world has been rising steadily for years. This is not because people are living longer (they aren’t) but because birth rates and infant mortality rates have both fallen dramatically during the last century or so. As a result of poor eating habits, chemically polluted foods and environmental pollution today’s elderly population is also more prone to sickness than previous generations. The result of all this is that governments constantly need to increase taxes in order to support this large, dependant population.

* * *

One of the principle themes of my book *The Health Scandal* (published in 1988) was the argument that by the year 2020 western civilisation would have reached crisis point, with more than half the population being financially dependent on the remainder of the population. By the year 2020 one third of the population in the developed world will be over the age of 65, and for every home where there are two healthy parents and two healthy children there will be four disabled or dependent individuals needing constant care.

Diseases such as schizophrenia and diabetes (which are genetically transmitted) and blindness (which is ten times as common among the over-65s and thirty times as common among the over-75s) will be as common as indigestion and hay fever are today, unemployment and stress related diseases will be endemic and developed countries around the world will face bankruptcy as they struggle to find the cash to pay pensions, sick pay and unemployment benefits.

Tragically and unfairly, resentment, bitterness and anger will divide the young and the old, the able bodied and the dependent, the employed and the unemployed; there will be, within 20 years of the start of the 21st century, anarchy, despair and civil war with ghettoes of elderly and disabled citizens abandoned to care for themselves.

For years those who have forecast the end of the human race have talked of nuclear war, starvation in the third world and pollution as being the major threats to our survival. But the decline of the developed world will be triggered not by any of these forces but by much simpler and entirely predictable developments. We are heading for a medical and social catastrophe. And every day that goes by makes that catastrophe increasingly inevitable. Everyone will suffer: today's elderly, tomorrow's elderly and tomorrow's young too.

When I first published this forecast in the 1980s the medical and political establishments refused to take my warning seriously. I was dismissed as a scaremonger. No one would broadcast the TV series I wanted to make and the book I wrote about the whole issue was studiously ignored.

It now looks as if my calculations were accurate. If anything they were rather conservative. There seems to me to be little doubt that in the next thirty years age will have a far more divisive effect on our society than race, sex or class have ever had. Recent figures from Italy show that country now has 20 million workers and 21 million pensioners. It seems that in Italy, at least, the horrific scenario I outlined has already arrived. The number of individuals who are dependent on the state for their income now exceeds the number of individuals who are creating wealth. The consequences are terrifying. And with the ratio of births to deaths now down to one to one in Italy (to give you an idea of the enormity of the demographic change which has taken place, as recently as 1968 there were two births to every death in Italy) to say that the future seems bleak is an understatement of heroic proportions.

In developed countries total populations are increasing very slowly but the size of the ageing populations are increasing at a dramatic rate. For example, during one recent decade the total population of Britain increased by less than one per cent. But in the same period the pensionable population rose by ten per cent. In many westernised nations one person in five is already a pensioner. By the year 2020 a third of the population in most developed countries will be pensioners.

Several things make this explosion in the size of the elderly population particularly significant.

First, there is the fact that among older populations there is inevitably a higher proportion of disabled and dependent individuals. The incidence of chronic disease rises rapidly among older age groups.

* Among 16 to 44-year-olds 20% of the population suffer from chronic illness.
* Among 45 to 64-year-olds 40% of the population suffer from chronic illness.
* Among 65 to 74-year-olds 50% of the population suffer from chronic illness.
* And among people aged 75 or over 65% of the population suffer from chronic, long term illness.

In many developed countries it is common to find that half the beds in hospitals are occupied by patients suffering from some sort of stroke. Stroke patients generally need to stay in hospital for long periods of time and they need intensive nursing care.

The incidence of diabetes is doubling every decade. In 1984 just 2% of the population in the average sort of developed, westernised country was diabetic. If the increase continues at the same rate then by the year 2020 (less than half a lifetime away) one in four people will be diabetic.

There is also ample evidence to show that mental disease is on the increase. The number of patients with mental illness needing to be admitted to hospital is rising by 10% every decade. Today, between 10% and 15% of the population will, at some stage in their lives, suffer from mental illness severe enough to warrant their admission to a mental hospital. Once again it is the increase in the size of our elderly population which is at least partly responsible.

One side effect of all this will be that more and more of our hospital beds will be blocked and unavailable for emergencies. All this will inevitably mean that waiting lists for non urgent surgery will get longer and longer, and the number of people in our community suffering from disabling and untreated problems such as arthritic hips will grow even faster. The steady increase in our elderly population will mean that the quality of health care for everyone will steadily deteriorate.

The second reason that the explosion in the size of the elderly population is dangerous is that the number of young people is falling. And the result will be that in the future a smaller and smaller working population will have to support a larger and larger dependent population.

That takes us neatly into the third reason that the explosion in the size of our over-60 population is likely to produce real problems: money.

Most workers who are currently paying pension contributions assume that the money they are paying will be invested and repaid to them when they reach pensionable age. But that is not the case. The pension contributions paid by today's workers are used to pay the pensions of yesterday's workers – today's pensioners. If pension programmes were being organised by private individuals they would be described as pyramid or Ponzi schemes and the organisers would be in prison.

The pensions that today’s workers will receive when they retire will be paid by the regular contributions made by tomorrow’s workers. But the working population is getting smaller and smaller. And the retired population is getting bigger and bigger. Thousands of people are now demanding to be allowed to retire earlier and earlier. A decade or two ago anyone who retired under the age of 60 or 65 was considered rather odd. Today it is not at all unusual for men and women to retire at the age of 50 or 55.

(What do all these retirees do with the rest of their lives? Many of them die early for they have no purpose in their lives. Their work may have been dull but it at least gave them a sense of importance and purpose, and a sense of camaraderie. Most of them will just sit at home, their minds and bodies decaying, as they eat, smoke and drink themselves into an early grave – watching television and clutching their lottery tickets in the hope that tomorrow might bring something better. What a miserable, pointless way to live and die.)

You don’t have to be a genius to see the disaster we are heading for. By the end of the century the size of our elderly population will have begun to concern politicians. By then it will be too late.

This is a problem that we should be worrying about *now.* It is, without a doubt, one of the biggest problems our society must face. It is something I’ve been writing about – and warning about – for over a decade but our politicians still don’t seem to have noticed it and very few members of the public seem to understand it.

* * *

The easy and often voiced explanation for both the increase in the size of the developed world’s elderly population, and the increase in the number of disabled and financially dependent individuals, is that modern medical miracles, produced by the medical profession and the pharmaceutical industry, have produced the change by enabling people to live longer.

Doctors and drug companies have for some time excused their errors and successfully distracted attention away from their incompetence by arguing that their efforts have resulted in a consistent and impressive improvement in life expectancy during the last century or so. The increasing size of our elderly (and disabled) population is, say the industry’s supporters, a direct consequence of medical progress.

The truth, however, is rather different and the medical profession and the drug companies are guilty of a confidence trick of gargantuan proportions.

The fact is that during the last century doctors and drug companies have become louder, more aggressive, a good deal richer and far more powerful but life expectancy has not gone up.

Improved sanitation facilities have meant that the number of babies dying – and the number of women dying in childbirth – have fallen dramatically, but for adults life expectation has not been rising.

To prove my point I prepared a list of 111 famous individuals – all of whom lived and died before the start of this century. I then checked to see how old these individuals were when they died.

I found that the average age at death was 72.39 years.

The conclusion is simple: despite all the expensive razzmatazz of modern medicine life expectation has simply not increased in the last century or so. The biblical promise of three score years and ten has been fairly steady for centuries.

There are two reasons for what has happened. First there has for many decades been a steady reduction in the number of children being born in the developed world. Terrified by what was originally described as the ‘birth explosion time bomb’ millions of couples decided to limit the size of their families – or not to have children at all. The development and introduction of the contraceptive pill and of sterilisation techniques for both men and women made this easy.

(In contrast this has definitely not been the case in the developing world and the global political consequences are far reaching. In Muslim countries birth rates are extremely high and the average age in those populations is inevitably much younger. A society which is predominantly composed of young, healthy individuals obviously has a very different outlook to a society which is dominated by older, often unhealthy individuals. The future is Muslim. Our ageing, western, largely Christian society has very little future.)

As the number of elderly people as a percentage of the overall population has been steadily increasing so also the incidence of disability among the elderly has been increasing steadily too. Today’s elderly are nowhere near as fit as their ancestors were. Our fat and toxin rich diet is just one factor which has led to a steady increase in the incidence of cancer, obesity, heart disease, arthritis and many other causes of long term disability. Mental illness such as chronic anxiety and depression, caused by the unavoidable ‘toxic stresses’ created by the structured society in which we live (and which I described in detail in my book *‘How to Overcome Toxic Stress’*) are now endemic – as are the myriad illnesses caused by the powerful drugs frequently prescribed by doctors with such carelessness.

* * *

Nothing has happened about any of this because politicians don’t like to act quickly if at all. Politicians everywhere tend to think in four or five year terms at the most. They are concerned only with the now – rather than with the future – because what happens now decides whether or not they get re-elected. And professional politicians care about nothing as much as they care about political power.

Nevertheless, it is now to a large extent too late. Whether the politicians ever act or not this problem exists and it is going to affect all our lives in a very real and dramatic way. The incidence of illness and disability is going to rise and rise and the availability of public resources is going to fall and fall.

If you are currently over the age of 35 then the chances are that by the time you reach the sort of age at which you might hope to retire you will discover that any publicly funded pension you might receive will either be very small or non-existent and the availability of sheltered or nursing home accommodation will be extremely limited.

If you are currently under the age of 35 then you are going to have to pay a steadily increasing percentage of your earnings in income tax and national insurance deductions. You can safely ignore anything politicians say about cutting taxes. The fact is that taxes are probably never going to be lower than they are at the moment.

The young are, I suppose, in the very worst position of all. Throughout their working lives they are going to have to struggle to pay towards the care of a larger and larger elderly population. When they themselves reach retirement age they will be in even bigger trouble for they will probably not have been able to save anything to look after themselves.

The whole concept of retirement is a bizarre one – and a relatively recent innovation, introduced simply to satisfy political needs and create higher employment levels. It was also introduced to provide a carrot for people who do jobs they hate doing. The carrot is simple: work hard for 40 or 50 years and at the end of that time – assuming that the stress of doing a job you dislike has not killed you, which in all honesty we won’t mind terribly much because when you have finished working you won’t have any further value to society – we will allow you to do what you want to do. We will even give you some money so that you can eat and keep yourself warm and sheltered.

Why should a perfectly healthy man who reaches the age of 65 be forced to suddenly stop working? Politicians, who introduce all the laws relating to retirement frequently carry on working well into their 70s and 80s. When I was a general practitioner I had a patient who was still working even though he was in his 90s. His son and his grandson – both eminent local businessman – wanted him to retire. They said it was because they were worried about him injuring himself but I rather suspected that they didn’t like the idea of their father and grandfather mowing lawns and weeding vegetable patches. Eventually, they forced him to retire and even though he was mentally and physically fit they put him into a retirement home. He was dead within two months. They had taken away his very purpose for living and killed him just as surely as if they had put a bullet in his brain.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: The Suppression Of Creativity And Innovation

'In a country where the sole employer is the State, opposition means death by slow starvation. The old principle: who does not work shall not eat, has been replaced by a new one: who does not obey shall not eat.'

– Leon Trotsky

A symptom of any society which is crumbling and relatively close to the end of an era (as I believe ours is) is a reluctance, or even a total inability, to accept anyone who is unconventional.

Our society has numerous prejudices against individuals who behave in any way which is perceived to be outside the 'norm', and against activities which are either not accepted or not understood, however harmless they may be. These prejudices are so powerful that individuals who have jobs which require the authorised respect and approval of their employers or their neighbours may have to keep any idiosyncrasies secret if they wish to succeed or even survive. Intolerance and standardisation are key words in our modern society; the mediocre are now dominant and keen to destroy anything which could be described as different or 'better than average'.

And yet most of the great developments which have changed human life (and the world) for the better have come from outside the official channels (political, business, educational or scientific) and have, in their time, been opposed and sneered at by those within the establishment.

Ordinary, conventional people, for whom there is little more to life than regular bowel movements, a slowly growing pension entitlement and an intimate knowledge of the characters in their favourite television soap opera, loathe those who depart from convention. I suspect that this may, at least in part, be because they do not feel it fair that they should have to be conventional in order to survive while someone else should get away with living his or her life freely and without restraint.

(It is the same sort of jealousy which drives literary and dramatic critics to bitterness. Most of them hate authors or playwrights who are successful. They hate them because they know that they are making money doing something which they would love to do if only they had the courage and the talent.)

And, in a way, the ordinary citizen hates unconventional behaviour because he regards it as a criticism of the society to which he has paid his dues by behaving in the 'proper' fashion.

* * *

When I wrote an article about crossdressing (also known as transvestism) in my newspaper column I received a vast number of letters from male readers who had never before dared admit to anyone that they liked dressing in the sort of clothes normally worn by women. They had kept an important part of their lives entirely secret because they were frightened of what would happen to them, their families and their lives if they dared allow their secrets out into the harsh light of our unsympathetic and cruel world.

One man wrote to tell me that he had been crossdressing for many years. He apologised for not signing his letter but said that he was terrified of anyone discovering his identity. Indeed, he was so frightened of being found out that although his communication to me was anonymous he had driven to another town some distance away in order to post his letter.

What sort of world do we live in where dressing in clothes considered socially inappropriate carries such opprobrium that a man has to take such precautions against discovery?

* * *

One of the fundamental problems with our society is the fact that too many people are paid to suppress innovation, to avoid taking positive decisions and to stop other people taking positive decisions. It is frequently far safer to say 'No' if you are an employee or a bureaucrat. In large organisations hardly anyone ever gets into trouble for not authorising something and so more and more things are, if not actually forbidden, suppressed through not actually being authorised.

Society wants you to go to school and learn a great deal of dull and probably inconsequential information by rote in order to train your mind to soak up information and not ask questions. (The aim of a modern education is to train the individual for work and to produce unquestioning and unthinking graduates). After leaving school the perfect citizen will marry and start a family (thereby taking on responsibilities which will stop him from wasting time dreaming and also stop him rebelling), buy a house which he can only just afford (thereby increasing the wealth of the 'system' and tying himself up with a large mortgage), train for, find and keep a responsible, regular job (whether or not he finds it of interest), work until he is 65 and carefully save for his retirement from the employment he has loathed for so long. Finally, when he is tired and weary and all his ambitions and hopes and opportunities have gone he can retire quietly, enjoy his insignificant hobbies and quietly prepare himself for the grave.

* * *

You should not be afraid to be different and to make enemies. You will be far more likely to succeed if you dare to make enemies. Lewis Carroll once said: 'If you limit your actions in life to the things that no one can possibly find fault with you will not do much.' Ben Graham, American writer and investment guru, once said that he hoped every day to do: 'something foolish, something creative and something generous.' It isn't a bad aim.

Imaginative, thoughtful and creative individuals have always had a hard time. The 'system' has to be defended. The questioning individual is a threat and must be ridiculed, isolated and silenced. Look back in history and you will find countless examples of citizens who were harassed or persecuted simply because they dared to think for themselves – and tried to share their thoughts with others.

Our world has never welcomed the original, the challenging, the inspirational or the passionate and has always preferred the characterless to the thought provoking.

The unconventional are the creators of our society. They may seem odd (that is, after all, why they are unconventional) and their choice of clothes, cars, homes and so on may not fit comfortably with what society expects, but their originality drives society and is the basis for all that we create.

And yet the immediate future will lie firmly in the hands of the mediocre and the incompetent for today far too much power has been put into the hands of the unelected, who are therefore above and beyond public control and criticism. The democratic process may allocate power (in theory) but it does not guarantee that the distribution of power will remain equitable. It is only the limitation of power which stops it from becoming cruel and arbitrary and in our society there are no limits on the amount of power to which the bureaucrats can help themselves.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: Society Takes The Responsibility For People Who Make Themselves Ill

‘Half the useful work in the world consists of combating the harmful work.’

– Bertrand Russell

The heavy drinking, heavy smoking, heroin-using, overweight, promiscuous homosexual man who never uses condoms and who has a penchant for motor car racing and hang gliding will probably have to pay over the odds for his life insurance. The underwriters know that his chances of living long enough to enable them to make a profit out of an ordinary premium are pretty slim.

Similarly, the driver who is involved in a road accident and who is shown afterwards to have had far too much to drink, to have driven on bald tyres and to have left his seat belt dangling on its hook could find that his chances of getting massive damages are low.

Those are just two of the ways in which people who ignore expert advice are penalised. And rightly so. They have been given the opportunity to accept the same advice that everyone else has been given and they have rejected it. Indeed, there are many other specific ways in which the foolish may be penalised for ignoring good advice. There are, for example, now many companies which prefer not to employ smokers on the very good grounds that a smoker is more likely to need time off work during the winter months than a non smoker. His mild chest infections are more likely to become serious. This seems to me to be an excellent philosophy. The individual has a choice. If he wants to smoke, hang-glide, ski off piste down steep mountains, race motor cars or do any one of a thousand dangerous things that’s fine. It’s his choice. But he should be prepared to take responsibility, and pay the price, for his decision. Society should not prevent people from doing what they want to do but nor should it (or can it) subsidise those who deliberately choose to risk their health and their lives.

After all, because there is always going to be a shortage of medical equipment and medical personnel those who are ill through no fault of their own will, when resources are spent on those who have deliberately chosen to take a chance with their health, frequently end up suffering and paying a high price for the selfish stupidity of others. People who recklessly play ‘catch me if you can’ with cancer by eating meat or smoking cigarettes are creating longer waiting lists for everyone. Hospitals everywhere are so desperately short of funds, equipment and staff that every year thousands of people who need treatment and who could be saved are left to die. Many thousands more die before they can be properly investigated. Is this fair when hospital departments and hospital beds are frequently filled with patients who have only themselves to blame for their ill health?

In our modern society the individual is no longer expected to take responsibility for his own health – or to pay the physical or economic consequences. Those who pay tax or health insurance premiums are subsidising the recklessness of those who drink too much, smoke too much, allow themselves to remain overweight or eat meat.

Why should the man who regularly smokes 30 cigarettes a day expect the nation to pay for treatment for his bronchitis, his lung cancer, his heart disease and his gastritis? Why should the woman who refuses to diet expect others to help pay when her obesity causes medical problems? Why should the man who persists in drinking too much get free treatment when his liver finally fails to cope? Why should the meat eater expect to receive free medical care when he or she develops colon cancer, breast cancer, prostate cancer, endometrial cancer, rectal cancer, pancreatic cancer or kidney cancer? There is, after all, plenty of research available proving that those cancers are linked to eating meat. Indeed, we now know what causes 80% of all cancers and so cancer is, to a large extent, optional.

Why should society insist that individuals who have deliberately exposed themselves to disease receive free care while others, less selfish and more sensible, are left untreated?

Why should the drunken driver have his injuries treated free of charge? Why should the climber who sets off in bad weather expect the nation to pay the cost of his rescue and subsequent treatment?

These people have chosen to take the risk of damaging their health and they should pay for the treatment they need. They should take responsibility for their own actions instead of expecting society to take on that responsibility. Without this proper allocation of responsibility all our freedoms will continue to be diminished.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: The Drugs War

'Those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety.'

– Benjamin Franklin

The extent to which we have lost our freedom cannot be overestimated. Everything has to be planned these days. Like it or not, we are living in a police state and there are forms to be filled in for just about everything you want to do. Anything spontaneous is disliked and disapproved of in our highly structured and regimented society, particularly if the results cannot be foreseen in advance.

If you want to open a bank account or move money from one account to another you must be prepared to produce your passport and a series of solid explanations as to why you want a new bank account and why you want to move your own money around. When governments introduce new banking rules which take away your privacy and decimate confidentiality they persuade ordinary people to support them by claiming that the new rules are designed to stop drug barons laundering money. Really? How many drug barons do you think have bank accounts at your local bank? The drug barons use sophisticated banking techniques to move money around. They don't toddle into your local bank clutching a small bag of mixed notes and coins. Our streets and shopping malls are watched by video cameras. We are constantly encouraged to believe that this is a Good Thing since it will help to reduce crime. Governments claim that they are trying to spot drug smugglers. Does anyone really believe that? The video cameras are there because politicians and administrators like to keep an eye on us at all times. They want to know where we all are and what we are doing. When governments get tough and make it harder for ordinary people to move between countries they say that they are doing it in order to stop drug trafficking. What nonsense. Do you really think that the drug barons are going to worry about a few new restrictive laws? The drug barons buy planes and ships and move their drugs in bulk and in secret. They take no notice of national boundaries.

When governments talk about introducing identity cards they claim that they are doing so to counteract drug smugglers. The same, constant excuse is used to explain and excuse giving the forces of law and order greater resources.

Governments and law enforcement agencies explain away all this loss of privacy by claiming that it is all being done so that they can stop the drugs war. This is, of course, absolute nonsense. The drug smugglers don't worry about law restricting freedom or the movement of money around the world any more than bank robbers and getaway drivers worry about speed restrictions on the roads. Governments want to take away our privacy because by doing so they give themselves more power over us. Privacy, liberty and freedom are all interlinked.

The drugs war, though ineffective and pointless, has become a great excuse for totalitarianism: a twentieth-century tyranny masquerading as a moral crusade; an excuse for the plan to deprive ordinary people of as much freedom as possible.

The drugs war has given the establishment a wonderful excuse to end banking and personal secrecy with blanket legislation originating with the excuse that it will help further the aims of the drugs war but inspired in practice by much more sinister motives. The drugs war is, to be blunt, designed to reduce civil liberties. The authorities know that they will never stop drug use (any more than they will ever stop prostitution).

As I explained at some length in my book *The Drugs Myth* legalisation or decriminalisation would make far more sense. But legalising or decriminalising drug abuse would not enable the politicians to erode our liberties with quite so much freedom. It does not surprise me that politicians in the rest of Europe constantly attack Holland for its decriminalisation policy – even though Holland has fewer drug addicts than other countries, and its policy has clearly worked. Politicians outside Holland are terrified that if the public find out about this the drugs war will have to be abandoned and the best and most enduring twentieth century excuse for totalitarianism will have disappeared.

No leading politician today seems prepared to suggest that drugs such as cannabis should be decriminalised. Even newspapers seem frightened to air the debate without making it clear that they are firmly opposed to decriminalisation.

* * *

Despite the almost hysterical support for the drugs war, the facts show that legalising – or at least decriminalising – drugs makes total sense. Those who oppose the legalisation or decriminalisation are, in practice, supporting the status quo; they are supporting drug use and supporting the state's continuing and expanding interference in our lives.

The global drugs war has been a total failure. Despite the expenditure of untold billions of dollars it has changed absolutely nothing. The drugs war has not stopped people selling drugs such as cannabis, cocaine and heroin. Occasional arrests of a few people here and a few folk there make no real difference to the major drug barons. They remain safe, secure and aloof from the day-to-day hazards of arrest and their businesses remain untouched by the phoney war.

And the drugs war has not stopped people taking these drugs. Putting people into prison for taking a drug does no good at all. Turning drug users into criminals merely makes them more vulnerable and alienated – and increases the likelihood that they will continue to take drugs.

The evidence shows clearly that if the drugs war were stopped there would be less drug taking and far fewer drug related deaths. The real irony is that those who support the drugs war – and who claim that drug pushers and users must be arrested and imprisoned at all cost – are directly responsible for many deaths.

There is a hidden agenda here. The drugs war is not about drugs at all. It is about power. The politicians love the drugs war because it gives them an excuse to exercise power over the rest of the community. The drugs war is used as an excuse for just about every new piece of legislation which takes away our freedom.

* * *

New rules which remove your civil rights are introduced because the politicians don’t want you to have any civil rights. New rules which remove your freedom are introduced because politicians (among whom dishonesty is now the norm rather than the exception) don’t want you to have any freedom.

The drugs war is a convenient excuse for these constant infringements of your liberty.

Every new restriction and infringement of your liberty is blamed on the drugs war. That is absolute nonsense and the politicians know it.

The well-meaning do-gooders who believe that by supporting the drugs war they are helping to stamp out drug use and drug addiction are doing nothing of the kind: they are in fact merely supporting governments around the world in their determination to take total control of the lives of their citizens.

If you want the state to control your life then you should support the drugs war. If you do not want your freedom then support the drugs war. But you should not support the drugs war if you want to help stamp out drug addiction. That is just about the last thing it will do.

Since the drugs war started the number of drug addicts has risen steadily and governments have made no realistic move to stop this; the fact is that governments do not want the number of drug addicts to go down because if that happens then the excuse for the drugs war will disappear.

For as long as the drugs war lasts it will enable our politicians to pass more and more new laws, which add more and more restrictions to our lives. The threat of increasing drug abuse provides a permanent good excuse for the erosion of our remaining freedoms. The drugs war is nothing other than an excuse for a steady and constant erosion of our freedoms and our privacy.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: The Dangers Of Envy

'What people fear when they engage in the struggle is not that they will fail to get their breakfast next morning, but that they will fail to outshine their neighbours.'

– Bertrand Russell

'Talk about modest merit being neglected, is too often a cant by which indolent and irresolute men seek to lay their want of success at the door of the public.'

– Washington Irving

Bertrand Russell, the philosopher, once wrote that 'Envy is the basis of democracy'. There was much truth in that apparently pessimistic thought. The two are inextricably linked. The oppressive moralists who believe in democracy above all else have created a sad, sad world.

In a true democracy no one is allowed to achieve or own more than anyone else. In a true democracy the rules and the laws are devised by the incompetent to satisfy the incompetent, greedy, unsuccessful and envious.

Envy in our society creates much hatred and fear. Attempts to create a uni-dimensional, totally democratic society, based on a single level of achievement and possession, have led to absurd social legislation.

Envy and malevolence are closely linked. The envious, themselves often living miserable lives, seem to obtain their greatest pleasure from seeing or inflicting pain or misfortune on others. Envy and malevolence are twin emotions; both driven by a love of scandal and shame and sustained by hypocrisy. The result is that any story told against another individual has a better than average chance of being believed if it says something against that individual.

Nasty, unpleasant gossip is instantly accepted as the truth by many simply because they want to hear evil of others. The propaganda which is most successful and most likely to be believed is the propaganda which stirs up contempt and hatred.

People who have done little or nothing with their lives love putting someone down and 'in their place'. And they particularly enjoy seeing someone suffer if the person doing the suffering seems previously to have achieved something out of the ordinary. It is this love of unpleasant gossip which explains the unique success of many newspapers these days. The broadsheet (or so called 'quality') newspapers are just as bad at this as the much maligned tabloid newspapers. In fact the hypocrisy of the broadsheets (which generally pretend to be above gossip but then print just as much of it as the tabloids) makes them particularly unpalatable.

In a fair world you might imagine that if someone saw another individual driving a Rolls Royce motor car he would be likely to say: 'That's a lovely car. I'd like a car like that one day'. But many people, when they see someone driving a Rolls Royce, are likely to sneer and, when they are sure that no one is looking, put a deep scratch into the paintwork.

(I have personal experience of this peculiarity of human nature. Envious, spiteful vandals once used a penknife or a key to carve a deep scratch around a classic Bentley which I owned. Because it was old the car wasn't particularly valuable and at the time I considered that it was far better for the environment to keep an old car on the road rather than to buy a new car but the damage to the paintwork cost a small fortune to repair.)

Our capacity for envy sometimes seems to be infinite. There are some in our society who even envy those who have the courage to do as they will. And envy is exhibited against those who dare to sin against our false morality values. The price we demand for forgiveness is punishment, debasement and chastisement.

The child who feels that he or she didn't get a fair crack of the whip when young will often go through life carrying imagined injustices. He or she will often seem to wallow in unhappiness. Friends (often few) frequently get fed up of trying to avoid saying anything which could possibly be falsely construed as a slight. The child who feels that he or she didn't receive enough love when small will sometimes go through life feeling hated and feeling like an outsider. Many of those who express constant bitterness and resentment and who seem constantly twisted into a position of anger are driven by envy at the love and happiness enjoyed by others.

Most bizarrely of all perhaps, some are envious even when they are doing well and seem to have everything to be grateful for. They see someone doing better than them but instead of saying 'I am doing well' they say 'He is doing better' and feel aggrieved.

Curiously, many people envy most those whom they regard as closest to them in social status. So, the corner shop owner will reserve his greatest envy for the man who has two corner shops rather than for the man who has a whole chain of shops and the man with a small house will feel the greatest envy for the man with a slightly larger small house rather than for the man with the huge mansion.

There is, of course, always someone in history or legend who is more successful than you can ever be and so it is always possible to make a comparison. 'If you desire glory you may envy Napoleon,' wrote Bertrand Russell. 'But Napoleon envied Caesar, Caesar envied Alexander, and Alexander, I dare say, envied Hercules who never existed.'

Envy means seeing things not for themselves but only in relation to others. How sad it is that the gambler who wins a small sum of money on the lottery is likely to feel envious towards the individual who has a bigger win.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: Learning Shouldn’t Stop When Education Ends

‘The best part of every man’s education, is that which he gives to himself.’

– Sir Walter Scott

‘One needs only to know the letters of the alphabet in order to learn everything that one wishes.’

– Edmund Stone

‘I learned grammar when I was a private soldier on the pay of sixpence a day. The edge of my berth, or that of my guard bed was my seat to study in; my knapsack was my bookcase; a bit of board lying on my lap was my writing table; and the task did not demand anything like a year of my life. I had no money to purchase candle or oil; in winter time it was rarely that I could get any evening light but that of the fire, and only my turn even of that. And if I, under such circumstances, and without parent or friend to advise or encourage me, accomplished this undertaking, what excuse can there be for any youth, however poor, however pressed with business, or however circumstanced as to room or other conveniences?’

– William Cobbett

Regular, mass market schooling for everyone was originally a byproduct of the industrial revolution. Prior to the industrial revolution most people lived in villages and hamlets and only a relatively small percentage of the population lived in towns and cities.

The first factories and industrial towns developed in England when industrial machinery such as spinning wheels which had been installed in cottages, barns and village halls were smashed by the Luddites; rebellious workers who believed that the introduction of machinery threatened their livelihoods.

As a direct result of the Luddite activities the machine owners put their replacement equipment into specially built ‘factories’ so that they could be protected against vandalism.

Since public transport did not exist this, inevitably, meant that the people who were going to work in those factories had to be housed nearby. In this way the first new, purpose built industrial towns developed.

The first schools were built not to educate or to inform but because unless some provision was made for looking after children factory owners could not employ women as well as men. The development of the first towns had meant that family units had been splintered and it was no longer possible for young parents to turn to their own parents for help and support.

Either by purpose, design or simple good fortune it was quickly discovered that the development of formal schooling had an additional benefit. Employers found that children who got into the habit of attending a school for regular hours during the day adapted more readily to work in a factory. Many of their parents, who had been brought up working as farm labourers, found factory work, hours and discipline difficult to get used to. Children who were accustomed to school work, hours and discipline had no such problems.

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Today, a formal education is still primarily designed to occupy pupils, to keep them busy and out of mischief and to prepare them for an ordinary working life. Very little of the tedious by rote learning which goes on in schools has any practical purpose. Children are taught algebra, trigonometry and Latin – and then subjected to examinations designed to find out how well they have absorbed the entirely useless material they have been taught. The aim is to not to teach or impart learning but to produce school leavers who will feel comfortable with the standard working ritual of modern life.

Schooling is a disciplinary activity rather than an educational one (although the latest and most fashionable educational methods – those which are designed to educate without work, study, labour or pain – fail even to instil discipline into pupils). Students are certainly not being given information which would enable them to live independent lives. They are being taught to fit into society’s demands for them, rather than taught how to think.

Why, after all, would society want to teach young people how to think for themselves? People who can think for themselves are likely to be a nuisance rather than an asset to a closely structured society which depends more on discipline and routine than on innovation or imagination.

Students, at schools, colleges and universities, are trained to do as they are told. Is it is for this reason that rules play such a crucial part in all educational establishments. Learning to obey the rules and do as you are told is a more important part of any educational establishment than learning to create or to question. Most education and training is designed to make sure that people do not maximise or optimise their own skills but that they accept whatever life or fate offers.

The society which we have created, which now has a purpose and an agenda of its own, does not want thinking citizens. People who think are likely to threaten the status quo.

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And yet there are many citizens in our society who believe (with apparent sincerity) that once their formal education is over they can stop learning. They assume that when they leave school, college or university they do so as educationally complete individuals, and that they can, from that point in their lives onwards, stop expanding, exploring and discovering.

This is no accident.

It is exactly what society wants.

When graduating students believe that they no longer need to learn they inevitably become content and stable cogs in society’s complex machinery.

The truth, of course, is very different.

The truth is that even a genuine education, one which encouraged original and creative thinking, would be merely a beginning.

* * *

The word ‘educate’ is derived from the word ‘educo’ which means to draw out and develop. Education should not be about learning and remembering dates and mathematical formulae. An educated man is one who has developed his mind to take advantage of his skills and talents and to get where he wants to be without hurting the innocent. It is perfectly possible to be both ignorant and yet well educated.

An ignorant man who has been taught to think can get hold of all the knowledge he needs in order to deal with his ignorance – either from a library or from people who have the knowledge.

But a man who is merely educated, and who may wrongly think he is knowledgeable, will remain in an intellectual rut.

The truth is that a modern, formal education is irrelevant to life. How many of the great thinkers of the past do you think were school or college graduates?

All of which explains why so many people do so well without any formal education and why so many modern employers prefer to hire intelligent and enthusiastic staff who do not have any formal (and often stifling) education.

* * *

You probably have far more knowledge than you think you have. And knowledge is only valuable when it is used. The knowledge you have stored – but which you do not use – is of no value to you or anyone else. Knowledge does not have a use or a value unless you do something with it. Knowledge is potential power and potential wealth. But knowledge and wisdom, unlike money, only really show their value when you put them to use. And knowledge and wisdom can, unlike money, be spent more than once. A good formal education should (in theory) show you how to acquire knowledge and how to use knowledge when you have acquired it. Sadly, however, very little modern formal education teaches people where or how to acquire more knowledge for themselves and hardly any formal education is designed to show people how to use what they have learned.

CHAPTER NINETEEN: Too Little Love And Not Enough Kindness

‘Not only is love a source of delight, but its absence is a source of pain. Love is to be valued because it enhances all the best pleasures, such as music, and sunrise in mountains, and the sea under the full moon. A man who has never enjoyed beautiful things in the company of a woman whom he loved has not experienced to the full the magic power of which such things are capable.’

– Bertrand Russell

I was standing behind a young woman in a bookshop. At her behest the assistant was searching through several huge reference books looking for details of a book in which she said she was interested. I had a single paperback in my hand, together with the exact amount of money needed to pay for the book, and was standing behind the customer waiting with what I thought was pretty commendable patience.

After waiting for a minute or two (it seemed like an hour but probably wasn’t more than a few minutes) my attention was caught by an advertisement for a concert in the woman’s folded newspaper which lay on the counter in front of her. I was interested in the concert and started to read the advertisement in that rather cautious way one uses when reading someone else’s newspaper.

I must have leant forward slightly in order to read the smaller print towards the bottom of the advertisement for suddenly the woman turned round, realised that I was reading her newspaper and in one swift and rather aggressive movement turned the paper over. Her sole and clear intention was to stop me reading her newspaper. She then glowered at me as though she had caught me trying to steal her purse out of her handbag and carried on with her interminable (and it has to be said rather boring) conversation with the assistant. A simple, everyday, deliberate act of unkindness.

Friends of mine had a much worse experience when they moved house. On moving in day they found that the vendors had removed the lawn (they had rolled it up and taken it away to put down in their own new garden), all the doors and the skirting boards.

Simple, everyday, deliberate, random acts of unkindness.

CHAPTER TWENTY: An Epidemic Of Depression

'The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.'

– Henry David Thoreau

Look around at the people you know. Many of them will be constantly consumed by anxiety, living well beyond their emotional means. They will have little personal time or creative energy for anything but the struggle to survive. One of the most awful unique human burdens is the one which forces us to worry so much about the past and the future that we do not have time for the present.

* * *

People suffer from stress in many different ways.

Some are simply besieged by anxiety. For them life is filled with threats around every corner. They are filled with dread and a sense of doom and danger. They give up, cannot cope and become depressed.

Some become too competitive, too hostile, too impatient and too pressured by time. They are determined to achieve and they push themselves constantly and without quarter. The pressure they put on themselves means that they become angry with co-workers who make mistakes. As a result they have difficulty working with people.

Some feel that they must constantly be on the move; changing their jobs, their homes, their lifestyle, their friends and even their nationality.

Many people believe that simply by working harder they can regulate every outcome. To a certain extent this is true. Hard work is, theoretically at least, one of the integral secrets of some kinds of success. If effort were always justly rewarded this theory would work well. But our society functions with numerous layers and levels of prejudice and many people will find that their opportunities are limited by prejudice. They can, consequently, be at a great disadvantage and suffer enormously.

Some people like to conform, like everyone around them to conform and like their lives to be neatly planned. They like absolutes and certainties. They are either angry or sad but never a little bit of both. They like to know what they will be wearing and eating and doing (and even thinking) in a fortnight's time. They do not like surprises. They live structured lives, they feel comfortable with rules. This type of individual tends to set up a black and white world. They like to go to the same place on holiday. They belong to clubs and sit on rule making committees. They know clearly what sort of behaviour is acceptable and what is unacceptable. They are stoic, hardworking, solid people. They will never achieve any level of greatness (and their very solidity may mean that in some circles they stand out as rather 'odd'). They hold everything deep inside them; determinedly suppressing their own true feelings. These people tend to suffer greatly when they discover that life is not quite as neat or as reliable as they have always hoped.

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Most people do not have the time to relax or to fully enjoy their lives. And most suffer one or more stress related illnesses: irritable bowel syndrome, eczema, high blood pressure, indigestion, asthma and a thousand and one other physical and mental problems. Long term stress can cause heart disease, adult onset diabetes and insomnia, and can even damage the nerve cells in the hippocampus – the part of the brain which is a key to learning and memory.

There is an epidemic of depression and unhappiness in our rich and gadget ridden society. Mental illness of all kinds is becoming commoner and commoner. So widespread is the despair that many people actually feel bad if they feel good. There are many who need to get drunk in order to excuse themselves for having a good time. Millions regularly rely upon psychoactive prescription drugs and although there is less guilt and considerably less social opposition with prescription drugs the damage to the body and the mind can be greater than the damage done by illegal drugs.

Much of this unhappiness is due to frustration and pressure which is not within our control – the sort of stress which I describe as 'toxic' (and which is commonly produced by the psychopathic antics of bureaucrats and administrators).

In my book *How To Overcome Toxic Stress* (originally titled *Toxic Stress And The Twentieth Century Blues*) I argued that many of the most potent, destructive and stressful forces in our society are outside our personal control; they are a result of our living in a sophisticated and so called civilised community.

These external stresses, which cannot be alleviated by learning how to deal with stress or by making an effort to live a less stressful life, are most damaging because the frustration, anger and sense of impotence they produce cannot be countered by any logical means.

* * *

Finally, one of the great injustices of this life is that those who are compassionate and who care, suffer for the crimes of those who are neither compassionate nor who care. The hunter and the vivisector do not suffer any pangs of conscience. The caring, compassionate human being suffers on their behalf.

* * *

Anger and distress that isn’t expressed turns into frustration, then into stress and finally into depression. Our natural zest for life and our natural ability to enjoy living has been destroyed by the abstract concept which we call society. In our modern world physical fatigue (a healthy type of fatigue which can be ‘cured’ by nothing more complicated than rest) has to a large extent been replaced by nervous fatigue – often to the point of nervous exhaustion. Escaping from stress and pressure becomes ever more difficult. Life isn’t getting physically harder but it is getting psychologically harder – and we are still trying to deal with our new stresses in old fashioned ways. The truth is that thinking – like water or electricity – can be good or bad for you.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE: The Coming Revolution

'The longest journey starts with the first step.'

– Confucius

The best thing a government or an institution can do for a man is to leave him alone, free to develop his mind and his skills and to improve his individual condition and the conditions of those around him.

In order to achieve this sort of world we need a society in which there is freedom for revolutionaries and reformers to think and constantly to improve and adapt society.

But our present society does not approve of the idea of either revolution or reform and there is a widespread fatalistic acceptance of the inevitability and unavoidability of our powerlessness.

Probably the most fundamental mistake we have made has been to assume that society's needs are the same as any individual's needs. This is, of course, an absolute nonsense. Every individual has different aims and needs and the community tends to reflect the needs not of the majority, nor even of the most vocal minority, but of the anonymous and unelected bureaucracy which 'runs' the community and which is, effectively, the voice of society.

The fact is that the community as an entity cannot and does not care about individuals. The needs of the two are diametrically opposed. The community can do whatever it wants to protect its interests. But what are the interests of the community? Who decides what the punishments should be when the community is offended in some way?

George Orwell's predictions in his novel 1984 have come true – but hardly anyone has noticed. We no longer rule our own lives but live in a world where discipline is imposed upon as though we were all monks, nuns or soldiers.

Society has taken over and the pseudo-intellectual chattering classes and the shirkers are its only supporters.

In modern society the individual has no rights – just duties. Traditionally, people have always loved a winner. No more. This is the era for losers. The modern and universal weakness is a lack of ambition – fuelled and lit by the fact that the state will provide the necessities of life and do its best to take away any extra you might make.

Self help is now despised. And yet it is through self help that every man and woman can grow to their full potential. Help from outside is often enfeebling and disempowering. Helping a child or an infirm person to do something that they can perfectly well do themselves is not helping them – it is taking away their freedom, their rights and their power over their own lives. Whatever is done *for* people takes away some of the stimulus and necessity for doing things for themselves. Too much guidance and too much government create helplessness.

The sneerers also forget that the man who helps himself will invariably also end up by helping others. The man who drags himself up by his bootstraps will create work and wealth for many others.

* * *

If *you* hit hard times the community won't lend you a helping hand; the government is not going to smile and say: 'That's OK – just pay us when you've got the money' if you admit that you don't have enough cash to pay your income tax. It is sometimes said that a true democracy cannot possibly tolerate capitalism but it is only with a truly capitalist system (where there is freedom of ownership and freedom of choice) that a true democracy is possible.

There is a subtle but important difference between 'opportunities' and 'chances'. In our society there are plenty of chances (hand over your money and you may win the lottery) but the opportunities are becoming rare. A gloomy sense of powerlessness has made most people feel that much of life is pointless. Material comfort simply makes the pointlessness endurable and creates an even greater feeling of cynicism.

Citizens must be encouraged to reinfranchise themselves through campaigning; they must come to understand that freedom of thought and freedom of action create the circumstances for individual success. And, collectively, individual success means that society as a whole creates the wealth which enables it to care for the genuinely needy.

The creation of a formal structure designed to care has taken away freedom. We have created a philosophy of interference and control which is excused by the fact that the state constantly needs to raise more money (in taxes of various kinds) to pay for and manage the distribution of benefits. And we have created a society in which more and more people do not take any responsibility for their own health or wealth but have an attitude of 'Why should I work? Let *them* worry about me.'

The revolution which will help revive the western, 'developed' world will be led (probably in the second or third decade of the twenty first century) by those few individuals who have managed to retain their physical, mental and spiritual freedom; who have realised that the sum of small rights offered by the state do not go anywhere near to balancing the loss of big rights taken away from them by the state, and who are prepared to make an effort and take action whatever the cost may be to themselves – even though what they do may not be of direct benefit to themselves.

There will always be injustices and inequalities in any society. When those injustices and inequalities arise through fate it is bad enough. But when those injustices and inequalities arise deliberately, in an organised society, then even the apathetic, television and lottery addicted masses will sit up, take notice, become suspicious, become angry and eventually become rebellious.

Tomorrow’s revolution will need leaders who realise that political and economic freedom go together and are inter-dependant and that true freedom means that individuals can decide whether or not the risks and benefits of a particular occupation or activity are worthwhile.

The leaders of tomorrow’s revolution will come exclusively from those who have retained their freedom, liberty and independence.

Tomorrow’s leaders will not be able to act unless and until the apathetic masses realise that liberty is not a means to an end, a price worth paying for state protection, but is ultimately, the purpose and the goal of life itself and that they have to rise up and demand back the freedom which has been stolen from them.

The next revolution will come when enough men and women believe that their happiness and well-being will not be secured through the pursuit of whatever values happen to be convenient to existing institutions and a ubiquitous bureaucracy but through individual responsibilities and individual freedoms.

Tomorrow’s revolution will come when ordinary citizens realise that we need a revolution because our society does not approve of the idea of revolution.

PART THREE: How To Recover Your Freedom

(And Get What You Want Out Of Life)

A New Paradigm For Living: How to Regain Your Freedom And Survive And Prosper In An Increasingly Bureaucratic And Unfriendly World

‘We make walls, floor, roof, doors and windows for a room;
But it is the empty space within that makes the room liveable.
Thus, while the tangible have advantages,
It is the intangible that makes it useful.’

– Tao Te Jing by Lao Tsu

‘I have made as much out of myself as could be made of the stuff, and no man should require more.’

– Jean Paul Richter

CHAPTER ONE: Who Are You? (And What Do You Want?)

'Between him who in battle has conquered thousands upon thousands of men, and him who has conquered himself, it is the latter who is the greater conqueror.'

– Buddha

'Opportunity has hair in front, behind she is bald; if you seize her by the forelock you may hold her, but, if suffered to escape, not Jupiter himself can catch her again.'

– Latin proverb

If you are going to liberate yourself you must first of all find out a number of basic truths about yourself.

You must, for example, know what you want to be free of. What are the great tyrannies in your life? Fear? Boredom? What else?

Where are you now and where do you want to be? What do you want out of life? What steps forward do you want to take? (Remember: there are no limits, other than those which you yourself set. But if you are going to get there you must know where you want to be in a month, a year and a decade. You must set yourself goals which mean something to you.)

Who do you consider to be the most successful: the individual who acquires the most money, honours, fame or power? What do *you* really want out of life: money, love, power, friendship or immortality?

Which do you value more: loyalty or honesty? If you had to choose between betraying a friend or betraying your country which would you choose?

What drives you? The desire for money, power, fame, sex, love or companionship?

What are your prejudices?

You must know what you want – otherwise you'll never get it. The more you know about yourself the greater use you will be able to make of your talents and skills and virtues. If you are going to develop your strength as an individual and carve out your own freedom then you must know yourself. And you must know your weaknesses as well as your strengths. Before you begin to reach your potential, free yourself from the constraints of our society and achieve a real sense of freedom, you must know what you are good at and, just as important, you must know what you are not good at.

You must know who you are. Many people spend their entire lives trying to be someone they are not. This causes great unhappiness. You must know what you want and what you are capable of (probably far more than you normally think you are capable of).

What are your most personal, most private, most precious dreams? Do you want to change the world? Do you simply want fun? Do you want a hedonistic life – full of sex, sunshine and toys or do you have artistic ambitions?

How far have you come in the last five years – financially, physically, mentally, spiritually? How far have you come in the last ten years – financially, physically, mentally, spiritually? How far do you want to travel – financially, physically, mentally and spiritually – in the next five and ten years?

Does your daily work provide you with all the hope and inspiration that you need in life?

Do you spend too much of your life helping other people and taking on their worries and anxieties?

Do you feel that your spirit is sufficiently strong and self contained?

Do you have enough determination to finish the things you start – assuming that you remain convinced that they are worth doing?

Do you learn from the people you respect?

Do you ever find yourself catering to the whims of people who are richer or of a higher social standing than yourself – and if you do, do you feel happy about it?

Do you worry so much about what other people say about you that your worries about what they might or might not say influence the way you act?

How much of your life do you spend trying to get what you really want?

Do any of your friends depress you? Are you conscious that any of the people who are close to you are holding you back through their negativity?

Do you have enough friends?

Do you deal with problems which make you unhappy – or do you allow them to drag on and on?

Do you allow your views and opinions about life and other people to be too easily influenced by strangers?

Do you always believe what people tell you?

Do you help people if they come to you for support and encouragement?

Do you use your body's natural healing skills?

Do you use all your mind's protective powers?

Do you allow your life to be influenced by worry about material possessions?

Do you spend too much time thinking about failure?

Which is most important to you: personal freedom or material success?

Do you learn something about yourself every day?

Does your life have a real purpose? Do you have a plan for your life?

Do you get nagged by people who are close to you? (If so, why do you let them?)

Do you learn something useful every day?

Do you get more or less self confident as you age?

Whom do you envy – and why?

Does your life seem full or empty of hope?

Is your daily life too full of stress and do you suffer from a lot of stress related disorders?

Do you often suffer from boredom?

Do you have to use drugs, tobacco or alcohol to get through the day?

Do you allow other people to make important decisions for you?

* * *

Only when you have discovered what you really want out of life will you be able to make sure that you acquire what you really want; and that you turn your hopes and dreams into reality.

Only when you know what you want will you be able to focus your attention and energies in the right direction – and stop wasting time, energy, effort and money.

The sad truth is that most people meander through life with no real sense of purpose or direction.

As children they have dreams, hopes and ambitions. Those dreams, hopes and ambitions may survive, and even grow, in their teenage years. But gradually the dreams and the hopes and the ambitions are smothered by society's expectations. Long term hopes are overwhelmed by what are seen as short term needs. Too often things happen by accident. Life progresses in a series of unplanned steps – often resulting in an unplanned, unwanted journey.

Life is there to be grasped and lived but most people live a life of frustration, desperation and mediocrity.

We may not think it but we are, in the end, in control of our lives.

No one does what they don't want to do.

Remember that your own motives aren't always as altruistic as you think them to be.

Don't overestimate your own merits and don't forget that you have faults (you should know your own faults as well as you know your merits).

Never expect other people to take as much interest in you – and your life – as you do.

Try not to worry too much about being persecuted. The more successful you become the more you will be subject to malignant gossip, but most effective people are far too busy with their own lives to spend too much effort persecuting other people. Any serious persecution you face will come from corporations and pressure groups – and will only arise if you become a threat to some status quo – rather than to individuals.

Remember that most of us make our own limitations. We refuse to take chances, we pass up opportunities, we take the safe route and we accept the small 'profits' that are there to be taken out of life instead of taking chances and going for the big 'profits'.

* * *

It is never too late to recapture those lost dreams, or to develop new ones.

But most people's lives are too full of petty responsibilities for dreams to survive.

Once the hopes and dreams have gone there is no chance at all of them ever being turned into reality.

* * *

You cannot possibly begin to use your natural talents and skills, or to take full advantage of them, until you know the precise nature of the talents and skills you have got at your disposal. Only when you know your true value, appreciate it and use it to its full extent, will you be able to take out of life what you are truly worth. We all have different assets. But we also all have enormous opportunities.

* * *

You must be able to promote your good qualities and defend yourself against those who will surely try to take advantage of you in those areas where you are weakest.

You must constantly be prepared to change your perception of yourself and your skills. Try to see yourself in others' eyes. What is your reputation? How do others see you? How do you think your friends would describe you? And how do you think your enemies would describe you? What are the nicest things people say about you? And what are the nastiest things people say about you? What sort of reputation do you have within your chosen sphere of work? How would your former school teachers describe you? If you could see the 'official' files on you what do you think they would say? If your obituary appeared in your local newspaper what would it say?

How would you like to be remembered and how do you think you will be remembered? What do like about your publicly perceived identity? What do you dislike? Is there something you could or should change? (It doesn't really matter how you are remembered – you will, after all, be dead then – but how you are remembered does, to a certain extent, reflect upon how you have lived your life.) Is there anything about your reputation which you would like to change? Is there anything you can or should change?

Don't assume that you have nothing extraordinary to offer. Everything about you is extraordinary, powerful and unique. Do not minimise or ignore the value of what you know, who you know and what you have already accomplished. Never, ever sell yourself short. Remember that if you expect yourself to fail then others will also expect you to fail and consequently failure will be almost inevitable. Success breeds success and failure breeds failure.

You must learn not to be frustrated by any absence of specific skills or specific chunks of knowledge. Learned skills and knowledge are important but these are assets which you can find through other people.

* * *

You must be careful not to let yourself be too easily influenced by other people's opinions. Nearly everyone in the world has a whole raft of opinions. Most of them pretty useless and poorly based. And most people with opinions are eager to share them with anyone who will listen.

Whenever you try to achieve something new or worthwhile you will find that there are many people around who will happily and enthusiastically tell you that your plans are futile, that your project is doomed and that you will fail. Those around you who have never dared break free themselves will be eager to warn you that you will fail because they want you to fail.

Be brave and determined: use your own mind and trust your own opinions, hopes and instincts.

* * *

You must use your various (and previously uncatalogued) assets to free yourself from the tyranny of slavery. Your assets – in the broadest sense of the word – will determine your best options and the ways in which you can most readily go about recovering your lost freedom. Never take your assets for granted. Don't undervalue them. Make an inventory of them and value them fully.

Be aware that your intangible assets – assets which you may not have been taught to appreciate – may have tremendous value to other people. You already know many things and have many skills which will be of value to other people.

Before you can successfully and thoroughly harvest your own assets you need to identify them. By this I mean anything (not necessarily material) that has value. Your greatest assets are probably not tangible. Material assets can rot, deteriorate or be stolen. They are vulnerable and, as I will show in another section of this book, can be a burden. But intangible assets are of lasting value.

Your assets are the stepping stones you will use to get you where you want to go in life and to help you achieve what you want to achieve. You can't achieve freedom without the proper use of your assets. Your skills are valuable to you because they are valuable to other people. The more other people want – or need – what you have got to offer the more valuable you become.

Most people in this world who are stuck in dull, repetitive, boring, unsatisfying jobs are stuck because they don't use their assets properly. And most people don't use their assets properly because they don't even know what their assets are.

And yet your assets are your raw materials. It is with the aid of your assets that you can build your life into whatever you want – and acquire and retain your freedom. Remember too that your asset base can grow steadily and you can turn your intangible assets (your skills) into tangible assets (lovely homes, fine motor cars and whatever else helps to make your life comfortable).

Once you know exactly what your assets are then you can start looking for ways to take the greatest advantage of them. How can you possibly utilise skills or knowledge unless you are aware of them and think of them as usable, valuable assets?

Begin, simply because it is probably easiest, by making a list of your tangible assets: your belongings. Your home, car and all your physical possessions. You may be surprised to discover that you have more tangible assets than you thought you had. And the more you think about this the more you may come to realise that you do have physical belongings for which you no longer have any real purpose or need. Maybe you could turn those unwanted physical assets into cash. Selling the bits and pieces from your attic, spare room and garage will liberate space as well as cash. Within days you could find yourself considerably richer (in cash terms) than you thought you were. And since this is 'extra' money, an unexpected cash bonus, you may feel better able to take a chance with it: to use it to fund an imaginative and possibly risky venture.

Next, make a list of your talents and abilities. Here is a brief list of possible talents to get you started:

* Meeting and befriending people (are you a good listener? do people like you?).

* Writing (you may not have written anything for money in the past but if people always congratulate you on your letter writing skills maybe you could).
* Public speaking (either to small or large groups of people or both).
* Leadership (are you good at persuading other people to do what you want them to do).
* Management (are you good at persuading other people to do what you think they ought to do).
* Selling (if you can sell raffle tickets better than anyone else you know you can probably sell almost anything better than most people).
* Organisation, administration and planning (do you always plan the family holiday?).
* Negotiating (are you the best person you know at getting a good price when you go shopping?).
* Languages (do you pick up foreign languages quickly and comparatively easily?).
* Problem solving (do other people turn to you to help them solve their problems?).
* Decision making (are you able to make a quick decision while others are trying to make up their minds).

Third, try making a list of the things you know. And don't limit yourself to only those forms of knowledge which you have used professionally in the past. You may have information acquired in the pursuit of a hobby which could well be of value to other people.

You should list:

* Academic qualifications.
* Academic skills.
* Practical qualifications.
* Practical skills (if you enjoy and are good at performing simple household repairs you almost certainly have skills which other people would value highly).
* Knowledge of languages (what foreign languages can you speak – even if you only know enough words to order a cup of coffee that is a start – it's an asset).
* Knowledge about computers and computing.
* Understanding of people and psychology.
* Knowledge about collectibles (do you have knowledge about stamps, classic cars, books, coins or other objects which people collect – and pay money for).
* Knowledge about sports, literature, painting and music.

* * *

Your next task in understanding yourself is to decide on the priorities in your life. What are the values by which you will live the rest of your life?

(Remember that money is not a value. Money is not even a purpose for living. And the acquisition of wealth is not an adequate ambition. The only reason for acquiring and accumulating money is to use it to buy something. Money is a means to an end. Money can buy you fine possessions. It can buy you comfortable travel. And it can buy you power. Most important of all, however, is the fact that money can buy you freedom.)

Look at this general list and put all the items on it in order of importance (if you think of something which isn't on the list then add it):

* Health
* Love
* Security
* Freedom
* Fame
* Adventure
* Fun
* Success
* Knowledge
* Comfort
* Passion
* Power
* Wealth
* Respect
* Eradicating cruelty to humans
* Eradicating cruelty to animals
* Protecting the environment

When you have written out the list in the order which is most important to you (you can leave off your list any of the items which you do not consider important) you can work your way down the list adding detail and deciding how you can best ensure that you achieve your ambitions.

For example, do you want to be a success at a particular sport, at one of the creative arts or simply in the eyes of the people you know.

You can also decide which, if any of these items you feel passionate enough about to die for. You will notice that some of these passions are selfless – in that they concern other people, animals or the environment.

Do not limit yourself when working on this list. Do not curtail your ambitions or hold back in any way. When you are dreaming you should reach for the stars. If you reach only for the rooftops you are putting unnecessarily stringent limits on your own ambition.

Try to decide with some degree of precision what you want out of life – and in what order. Remember that you have absolutely no chance of getting what you want out of life until you know exactly *what* it is that you want.

* * *

When you know what you want out of life you should be able to work out what additional assets you need to acquire in order to achieve what you want.

Your ambitions need to be specific. There is little point in simply saying ‘I want to be successful’. That is far too vague. You must decide precisely what you want to achieve. And then you must decide precisely how you are going to get there.

And you must then ask yourself what you have to do in order to turn your ambitions, your hopes and your dreams into reality.

And remember never to ask yourself negative questions. If you ask yourself ‘Why am I so ugly? Why did God do this to me? Why can I never achieve what I want? Why I am doomed to be poor? Why do I feel so bad about everything?’ the chances are that the only answers you will receive will substantiate and strengthen those negative views of yourself. You should ask yourself positive questions such as: ‘How can I improve? How can I do this better?’

In order to achieve your dreams you must be positive, (to get respect you must respect yourself and treat yourself with respect) you must be focused, and you must be aware.

You must keep asking yourself: ‘What do I want out of life?’ And keep questioning yourself so that you can find the real truths. For example, if you want a bigger house or a smarter, newer car then ask yourself: Why?

That single word: ‘Why?’ will tell you a great deal about yourself. Ask it yourself often. (‘Why am I doing this?’ ‘Why did I say that?’ ‘Why do I want to buy this?’ ‘Why did I agree to do that?’)

Are you buying a holiday villa in a sunny Mediterranean resort because you will spend a great deal of your life there or because it will impress the neighbours. Would a hotel or rented villa be cheaper, less stressful and more suitable?

Once you understand yourself, and you know what you really want, you will have enormous power over your life. You will find this a liberating and exhilarating feeling. It is such a powerful feeling that you may also find it frightening.

To gain the full power of your spirit you must know your aims, your objectives, your goals, your proposed strategies and tactics and your role in the world.

Once you understand, and know yourself then you can concentrate your mind on where you want to go, what you want to do and what you can do to change the world.

Most people have no idea what they want out of life. They have no big plans. They have long since forgotten any of the dreams they may have had in childhood. They have vague aspirations and they somehow feel that it might be nice to have money, fame and power. They would like to be happy. But they don’t know what they *really* want.

And until you know what you *really* want you don’t stand a chance of ever getting it. Ask yourself what you want to do – today, tomorrow and for the rest of your life.

Then, when you have decided what you want to do ask yourself what you want to do it for.

And, finally, ask yourself what sacrifices you are prepared to make.

CHAPTER TWO: What Do Other People Really Want?

‘Certain things are indispensable to the happiness of most men, but these are simple things: food and shelter, health, love, successful work and the respect of one’s own herd.’

– Bertrand Russell

In addition to understanding yourself – and your own fears, ambitions, hopes, wants and needs – you must also know and understand what other people really want out of life. And you must find out what they want from their relationship with you.

Not surprisingly, most people’s fears and needs are much the same as yours. Most people want health, wealth, respect, independence and peace.

If you try to present people with what they really want out of life then they will be far more likely to love, respect and honour you. If someone you know suffers because they don’t feel loved, then provide them with what they want and your relationship with them will boom. If you provide a lonely person with companionship then you will make them happy. Only when you know what other people really want will you be able to satisfy their needs.

CHAPTER THREE: Three Words That Can Change Your Life

'It is not enough to be busy. The question is: what are you busy about?'

– Henry David Thoreau

Why do you work so hard? Why are you trying to make money? Why do you buy the things you buy? Why do you do what you do? Why does any of it matter? Why do you seek power? Why do you want this or that experience?

Most people ask themselves 'Why?' far too infrequently.

We live in a workaholic culture where most of us take on far too many commitments – many of which have no real value – simply because we feel we should.

For example, many car owners wash their motor vehicles once a week. They devote several hours of a weekend morning to this task. I wonder how many of them ever ask themselves why they are doing this – and whether the price they are paying (in terms of time) is worth the dividend.

I can think of several possible reasons (other than the fact that it is merely a long-established habit).

(a) Because if a car is washed regularly it will fetch a better price when it is sold.
(b)Because a clean and shiny car is more likely to impress people.
(c)Because it is fun

Now, if a man gets pleasure from washing his car then that is fine. It is rather sad but I wouldn't dream of discouraging him. In fact, I would be happy for him to pop round on Sunday morning and wash my car too if it would give him pleasure.

But, if he chooses either of the other two reasons then I would encourage him to think hard about the way he is spending his time.

Let's concentrate on answer a) to begin with: the hope that by washing his car regularly he will be able to get a better price for it when he comes to sell it.

If he washes the car once a week and spends three hours on the task that is approximately 150 hours a year. In three years (the average time for which a car is likely to be kept) that is 450 hours.

Now, work out much more you think a regularly washed car is likely to fetch when it is sold and subtract the cost of washing and polishing materials. This is figure A.

Then add up the total number of hours spent on cleaning the car in between purchasing it and selling it. This is figure B.

Finally, divide figure A by figure B to obtain the hourly rate you are effectively paying yourself for car cleaning.

You will, I suspect, be horrified to discover just how little it is.

Now, let's turn to answer b).

What is the point of spending hours every week washing a car simply so that people you don't know and will probably never meet will be impressed.

Is this really the best use of your time?

* * *

It is possible to apply this simple questioning to just about everything you do.

It is even possible to apply it to work itself.

Many men (and a growing number of women) do not seem to realise that they are caught on a treadmill which is taking them absolutely nowhere.

They could completely or partly retire and live very comfortably on what they have already made. But they don't.

If they were working because they enjoyed their work that would be understandable.

But how many men or women can honestly say that they thoroughly enjoy their work?

Many working men and women are pushing themselves for no reason; they are engaged in a race where the grave is the only goal and a headstone the only prize. They sacrifice their personal lives for work from which they obtain little or no satisfaction. The only goal is making money. The money is the prize, the glory, the passion and the purpose.

And the money making ritual continues because people don't ask themselves: 'Why?' and 'So what?'

Ask yourself 'Why?' you do everything you do.

Is it for applause and public approbation? Is it because you have an urgent need to say something? Is it because you want to make money for some specific purpose? Is it because you believe that you know what is right and what is wrong? Is it because you want to right a wrong? Is it because the incompetence and dishonesty of others has inspired you to action?

Not until you know *why* you do something will you be able to do it effectively. Why settle for less life and less control over your time than you could have? (And remember to ask yourself what happened to the dreams you had when you were sixteen years old.)

Remember that you are now enjoying tomorrow’s good old days. You should do whatever you can to make each day the best day of your life. When you get to the end of your life will you be able to look back and say: ‘I gave it my best shot!’

Make sure you are doing everything you can with your life. Ask yourself why you are doing something and you may find yourself surprised by the answer. Ask yourself ‘Why?’ and ‘So what?’ whenever you plan to do something.

The answers you get may change your life.

CHAPTER FOUR: Know What You Are Afraid Of – And Why – And Then Banish Your Fears

‘Do not fear death so much, but rather the inadequate life.’

– Bertolt Brecht

A little fear is a good thing. Fear helps us stay alive.

I remember a skiing holiday I took a few years ago. I had only been skiing once before and was with a group of beginners but within minutes of arriving on the slopes for the first time I found myself standing at the top of an extremely steep and nasty looking slope.

Everyone in my group of novice skiers expressed alarm and fear. Our very young ski instructor laughed at us and told us that he knew no fear and that we should also have no fear. I (and the other members of my group) quickly abandoned him. I have a rule never to do anything potentially hazardous in the company of someone who does not know fear.

* * *

But not all fear is good, useful or welcome.

Fear is one of the most potent, all-pervasive and destructive forces in our society. Fear will stop you thinking and may interfere with the way you behave. Animals, who can smell fear, know that it is a sign of weakness.

Fear, worry and anxiety lead to fatigue and exhaustion and to mental, physical and spiritual illness. (The real paradox here is that a fear of illness can create illness.)

It is because they fear what others will or might say that so many people make themselves ill with work in order to buy new and fashionable motor cars, clothes and gadgets they do not really need. Fear, together with indecision and doubt, is a major enemy of success.

Many people say, boldly and almost defiantly, that they fear nothing. They are either lying or deluding themselves. Everyone fears something. The variety of fears human beings have vary almost indefinitely. We fear anything which controls or handicaps us physically, spiritually or mentally.

Prison is not a happy place and yet most people shut themselves into their own personal prisons through fear, envy, self pity and an over developed sense of sin.

* * *

Conquering your fears is a vital step on the road to liberating your spirit and reaching personal freedom. But before you can conquer your fears you must first know exactly what those fears are. You must examine yourself and analyse your fears. Fears which are not confronted will grow and grow and eventually destroy you.

* * *

Animals’ fears are largely pure and simple. Their needs are much simpler than ours (but don’t make the mistake of assuming that they are purely physical – they aren’t).

Animals need food, shelter and good health and kindness and love. They also need companionship and stability and they respond to love in a positive way.

Their fears are largely in the here and the now rather than in the future – created by the mind (as are most of ours).

We claim to be superior to the rest of the animal kingdom but we cannot find happiness quite as easily as other animals. We are much better at finding things to worry about and far, far superior at finding ways to be miserable.

* * *

When we think of ‘fears’ we tend to think of superficial fears, most widely known as ‘phobias’, (for example, a fear of dentists, a fear of spiders or a fear of flying or a fear of enclosed spaces).

These are very specific fears and there are fairly simple and straightforward ways in which they can be confronted and overcome. But these are not the fears which paralyse most people. And make no mistake about it: fears do paralyse. Most modern human fears are created by the culture in which we live. Naturally, we are susceptible to the basic, commonplace fears which affect other members of the animal kingdom. We fear hunger and pain, for example. But we also fear sickness, poverty, imprisonment, lack of freedom, loneliness and unemployment. We fear cancer, financial ruin, secret exposure and jealousy. We fear losing love and we fear failure.

We even fear getting old.

Many who fear old age spend much of their time and money on trying to look younger than they are. Others simply apologise for their age and use it as an excuse for everything that others criticise. Those who are most conscious of the effects of age, and most worried about ageing, are, inevitably, the ones who are most likely to suffer the adverse effects of old age. The fear of old age inevitably also includes the fears of poverty, death, ill health and pain and a loss of financial and physical freedom and independence.

And yet the fear of old age can to a large extent be eliminated by accepting it as a blessing, by realising that you have understanding and wisdom that you didn’t have when you were young, and by giving thanks that at least you didn’t die young.

* * *

We fear criticism, rejection and ridicule too. This type of fear is the basis of all kinds of modern fashions. When we buy our clothes, motor cars, jewellery and household furnishings we are conscious of the fact that if we choose the wrong items we may arouse the contempt of those around us. We are afraid that they will laugh at us if we buy the wrong things.

Millions of people have their hair cut to satisfy people they do not know and will never know.

A fear of criticism robs a man of imagination, self reliance and initiative. A fear of criticism is one of the main reasons why most people never move from their rut. Discouragement from those around (‘Why should anyone care what you have to say?) is a common cause of a failure even to try.

In our modern world everyone (particularly parents and relatives) seems to have plenty of criticism to hand out – and so everyone receives plenty of it.

Most criticism (and certainly the most damaging criticism) comes from close friends, relatives and people who claim to want to help. Anyone who sticks their head up above the parapet can expect to receive a hail of criticism and so it is not surprising that most people keep their heads well below the parapet.

My office has a simple rule when dealing with my mail: letters which offer nothing but blind, crude, unhelpful criticism are thrown away, unacknowledged, before I even see them. Before I instigated this rule I once opened a newspaper cutting in which a writer began a lengthy attack on me with the words: ‘I have not, of course, read any of this sorry creature’s scribblings’.

Too much criticism creates resentment as well as a lack of self respect and self worth. The symptoms of a fear of criticism include nervousness, self consciousness, a weak personality, an inferiority complex, a lack of initiative and a lack of ambition (‘If I try to I fail I will be criticised therefore I can avoid criticism by not trying’). Many people are so frightened of failure, of ridicule and of looking foolish that they never dare take any risks. A fear of what others will think is stifling.

Some people have a fear of death. They think about death so much that they become depressed. They worry that there may be no after life (or that there will be one and they will for some reason miss it).

They forget that God is merciful and that eternal pain will only afflict the evil and those who have remained silent in the face of evil.

And they forget that if there is no afterlife then death is merely sleep and, therefore, nothing to be feared.

* * *

One of the commonest of all fears is that of poverty.

Fear of poverty is a powerful and destructive state of mind which can destroy reason, self reliance, imagination, enthusiasm, ambition and determination.

We fear poverty because we know that few things bring as much suffering and humiliation. We fear poverty because we know that there are many cruel and rapacious individuals (and corporations) in the world who will take our money away from us without compunction – and others who will then take advantage of us and persecute us because of our poverty.

We worry about poverty because there are so many ways to become poor. You can become poor through your own fault or through no fault at all of your own. You can become poor through the dishonesty of others and through the failure of the law to provide protection.

Those for whom a fear of poverty is a significant fear tend to worry constantly about money and money related matters, are for ever expecting to be poorer than they are and frequently delay new ventures in case they fail – and lose all their money. People who are frightened of poverty are usually extremely cautious about spending money (although paradoxically some people who are poor and frightened about becoming even poorer spend their money as if they had an inexhaustible supply).

A fear of poverty often makes decision making difficult and deadens ambition; it creates pessimism and breeds doubts and excuses. Many people who worry about becoming poor spend a lot of their time planning what to do if a venture fails. They tend to procrastinate and be over cautious. And, not surprisingly, they are often also cautious about committing themselves to anything that might prove hazardous.

Our fear of poverty is enhanced by the fact that we are taught by our society that money is the key to all happiness.

(Although it is undoubtedly true that money can buy some of the freedoms which lead to happiness most people do not use money properly and certainly do not use it to buy freedom. On the contrary, most people do exactly the opposite – they give up their freedom to buy money.)

Most people do very little to confront their fear of poverty. They allow themselves to remain enslaved to an employer who, because he is the one who signs the cheques, retains control over their lives.

And even the rich – who, on the face of it, may not seem to have any need to be afraid of poverty – often fail to come to face with this very fundamental and basic fear.

The least secure individuals in our society are often those who have the biggest fiefdoms. They may have enormous amounts of money but their original and unfaced fears of poverty are enhanced because they now have the added fear of losing all that they have acquired. Those who have something to lose are far more susceptible to fear than those who have nothing to lose. The rich fear the loss of their money, the material goods and comfort it has bought, the freedom, the respect, the authority and the responsibility.

The man who already has absolutely nothing is to a very large extent unafraid of poverty. You can only be afraid of something if you think it might happen to you. And so the poor man will almost always be less afraid of poverty than the rich man. The man who has nothing has nothing to lose and so is not susceptible to fear. The man who is rich is frightened of losing his money.

This is true of all fears.

People who are comfortable are frightened of discomfort. People who are already uncomfortable have nothing to fear. People who are sick or dying do not fear sickness or death. People who are healthy are afraid of losing their health and becoming ill. The more you have, the greater your potential for fear. No human being can ever be truly secure from fear until he or she is dead. Only when you are dead are you totally secure from imprisonment, poverty, ill health or death itself.

* * *

When I was a medical student in Birmingham, England I ran a free discotheque in the city centre. Many of the kids who patronised the discotheque were young, homeless, jobless, penniless and without hope. They had no future. Quite often there were fights in the discotheque as other city gangs would invade the club looking for trouble – anxious to destroy as much as they could.

On the evening of the first fight I watched helpless and amazed as the teenagers around me fought with a ferocity I had never seen before. They carried knives and were not afraid to use them. Several were badly wounded. Others had to go into hiding to avoid the police.

Afterwards I asked a group of the battered survivors why they had fought so hard to protect something that did not seem to me to be worth dying for.

‘We haven’t got anything to lose,’ said one. ‘Except this.’ They weren’t frightened of the police because imprisonment was no great threat to them. (They were squatting in a derelict building in awful conditions.) They weren’t afraid of being injured because that would just mean hospital – clean sheets and regular food. And they weren’t even afraid of dying because their lives were so dull, dismal and hopeless that they did not feel that they had much to lose.

They had virtually nothing to fear because they had virtually nothing to lose. The only thing they had was the discotheque. And so they fought to protect it.

* * *

A fear of illness is probably as common as the fear of poverty. Those who are afraid of ill health often become obsessed with health – both their own and health in general. They constantly search for information about health care and about staying healthy. They constantly take pills which aren’t needed to treat a specific illness or specific symptoms (for example, vitamin or mineral supplements) and they take greater than ordinary care to protect themselves from any possible source of illness (such as infection). They are frequently unable to work because of ill defined illnesses and they are constantly searching for symptoms and signs of illness. Those who fear illness sometimes seem to enjoy ill health. Instead of trying to forget their symptoms and doing what they can to stay healthy those who suffer most from this fear spend much of their time making themselves sicker by worrying about their symptoms.

* * *

Much fear is fundamentally connected to a destructive and deeply damaging lack of self worth and self respect. Most people in our society live in constant fear. Their fears are legion. And they are frightened because they have little or no self confidence.

Because we have so little confidence in our knowledge, our wisdom, our judgement and ourselves in general we constantly look to others for approval. We want – and need – others to confirm that what we are doing is good because we do not have faith in ourselves.

Why, for example, are so many people frightened of public speaking? What horrors can possibly befall the public speaker?

The simple and singular truth is that the individual who is terrified of public speaking is frightened of nothing more substantial than looking a fool. He or she is frightened not of death or pain or bankruptcy or loss of freedom but of being considered inadequate or incompetent by the audience.

Most people are so lacking in self confidence and self respect that they need others to confirm that what they are doing is acceptable. They need the approval of strangers because they do not approve of themselves. They constantly fear disapproval and rejection.

And yet public opinion is very fickle and quite meaningless. An individual who would be considered normal in one situation may be an outcast in another situation and a hero in a third situation. The object of public adoration today is quite likely to be the object of public ridicule tomorrow. The individual who, through lack of self confidence, puts himself in the hands of public opinion, is taking on a fickle mistress indeed.

(Incidentally, false modesty is an entirely fake and spurious emotion which is inspired by a constant need for support, praise or even adoration. False modesty is designed to attract praise. As in: 'I'm no good at this.' The expected response is then: 'Oh, yes, you are!' To which the falsely modest individual will quickly reply: 'Oh, do you really think so?')

It is this deep seated lack of self confidence and desperate need for approval and support which explains why so many men are cowed by their wives (and, at the same time, why so many women stick with their husbands even when they are physically abused by them).

We are constantly frightened of being rejected, not loved or laughed at. It is these fears which stop most people daring to do anything much with their lives. It is these fears which result in our accepting mediocrity, poverty and constant, chronic and unrelieved disappointment in our lives.

The bottom line is: what does it really matter what other people think?

Everyone has the right to their own opinions and views. But you have exactly the same right. If you can persuade people to agree with you then that is fine and good. But if you fail then what have you lost? The world is much the same as it was. You have lost nothing. Is your dignity really so vulnerable that it can be damaged by the views of complete strangers?

The only person you really have to believe in, and the only person you really have to convince about your worth, is you. Have faith in yourself and many of your most fundamental and most destructive fears will melt like snow in a sudden heatwave.

* * *

Facing your fears is a crucial and vital part of controlling them. The best way to de-demonise a fear is to think about it a great deal. Eventually, you will take the edge off the fear by thinking about the possibilities and the ramifications. When a fear becomes boring and tedious then you have won.

This all sounds easy but I do recognise that facing and overcoming a fear can take a tremendous amount of courage. Bravery is a synonym for having absolutely no imagination, and the one quality people with fears are short of is not imagination. Physical courage is frequently regarded as the only type of courage worth praising but when physical courage is not a result of a lack of imagination it is frequently a result of stupidity. On the other hand it takes great courage to ignore public opinion, and to stand by yourself. The public does not much approve of any individual who shows indifference to its own collective opinion and conquering fear can take great tremendous courage.

* * *

In the end, you have to acknowledge that however much you worry there are many things in life which cannot be solved or avoided by worry or by free floating fear.

Most of the bad things that will happen to you will be unexpected. The things you worry about most will probably not happen – in part, admittedly, because your worrying and your planning will mean that you will lessen the odds against you.

If you are so frightened of the dangers of flying that you never fly then you are extremely unlikely to die in an aeroplane crash. But your chances of being killed in some other form of transport crash are inevitably and proportionately higher.

You should, of course, plan to deal with potential problems wherever and whenever you can but you should always remember that Aesculapius, the Greek god of medicine, was killed when a tortoise being carried by an eagle fell and landed on his head. What are the odds of that happening? How can you possibly plan for that sort of eventuality?

Most people never do anything with their lives because they spend every day worrying and thinking and scheming about what has already happened (and about which they can do nothing) and what might happen (about which they can also do nothing).

They spend days and weeks and months and years rewriting history in their minds – or (and just as futile) trying to write a script for the future or to predict what will happen to them in one, five or ten years time. Far too much energy and effort is wasted worrying about what might go wrong and what other people will think if something does go wrong, and what the authorities might or might not do.

When you are worried about something ask yourself how much it really matters.

Does it really matter very much if your car has a scratch down the side or if you are seen in clothes which are not at the height of fashion? Does it really matter very much if you have to go out with a hole in your stocking? Is the world going to stop revolving if you make a bad speech? Will your business collapse if you go away for a few days?

In order to defeat your secret inner fears you must analyse them, find out what is behind them, bring them out into the open, confront them, look at them from every possible angle, examine them in detail, make them look silly and humiliate them.

You must always look at the bottom line to find out how much harm these hidden, secret fears can really do to you. What is the worst that can happen to you if such and such a fear comes to fruition? Facing and confronting the bottom line can be a powerful way to disembowel a fear, an anxiety or a worry.

What is the worst that can happen? Would the worst really be so bad?

Finally, find yourself a passion and a purpose that transcends ordinary life and you will find it much easier to forget the day to day problems which are otherwise likely to cause you so much distress.

You will only achieve true freedom of your spirit when your life is full and you aren’t frightened of anything or anyone.

CHAPTER FIVE: The Most Valuable Commodity In The World Is Not Money

(Look after the minutes and the days will look after themselves)

‘In the dissipation of worldly treasure the frugality of the future may balance the extravagance of the past; but who can say: I will take minutes from tomorrow to compensate for those I have lost today.’

– Jackson of Exeter

‘Time is the only little fragment of Eternity that belongs to man; and, like life, it can never be recalled.’

– Samuel Smiles

‘Every moment lost gives an opportunity for misfortune.’

– Napoleon Bonaparte

‘Lost wealth may be replaced by industry, lost knowledge by study, lost health by temperance or medicine, but lost time is gone forever.’

– Samuel Smiles

I had a telephone call from my friend G today. He is a Zulu. He was on his way to Australia and called me from Bangkok. He told me that his plane had been delayed for nine hours.

‘Oh, how awful!’ I said, sympathetically. I always hate delays.

‘What do you mean?’ asked G. He sounded puzzled.

‘The delay,’ I explained. ‘It must be awfully frustrating for you.’

‘Not particularly,’ replied G, sounding as ever calm, relaxed and unflustered. ‘The delay is all part of the travelling. It is part of the experience. It means I have more time at the airport. I can read and talk and ring you.’

‘But it’s annoying to be so late,’ I said.

‘A few decades ago this journey would have taken me weeks,’ replied G. ‘What is nine hours?’

‘Aren’t you worried that you will be late for your meeting?’ I asked him.

‘The meeting cannot take place until I get there,’ said G. ‘How can I be late for it?’

* * *

Most people abhor waste. They squeeze the last few bits of toothpaste from the toothpaste tube, they use up scraps of soap and they scribble down thoughts and notes on the backs of old envelopes.

And yet most of us regularly waste something which is much more valuable than money: time.

Einstein may have proved that time is an illusion, malleable and fragile. But on a day to day basis, time is important.

We waste it in a thousand different ways. We waste it gossiping. We waste it performing pointless and repetitive chores, many of which could be ignored completely. How many people in your life do you waste time with? How many of these relationships add value to your life? What do you offer to them that makes their lives better and what do they offer to you that makes your life better?

We waste time trying to save money.

How many people do you know who regularly spend hours (or even days) trying to save money by making a gadget for use in the house or garden – a gadget which they could easily buy for next to nothing in a local store. They use scraps of waste which they find lying around and they end up with something which doesn’t work very well and looks terrible. If they had spent the time on doing something genuinely useful they could have added much more value to their lives.

* * *

Wandering around in Paris recently I stopped in front of a complex window display involving mannequins, streamers and a hundred or so brightly coloured balloons. I haven’t the faintest idea what the shop was selling. But the window display was terribly impressive. It must have taken days to design and put together.

A smartly dressed woman in her thirties was on her knees carefully dusting the balloons; meticulously wiping each tautly stretched rubber sphere with a damp cloth. The balloons weren’t overtly ‘dirty’. I’d walked past the shop a day or two earlier and the display hadn’t been there then. But someone in authority had obviously been alarmed by the possibility that one or two of the balloons might have been defiled by a few specks of dust.

I felt deeply sorry for that woman in the shop window. It was, I felt, one of the most futile things I had ever seen anyone doing.

I found myself imagining the conversation she might have with her husband when she got home that evening.

‘What have you done today, love?’ I imagined I heard her husband ask. (Although, naturally, being in France, he would have probably asked the question in French.) ‘How did your day go?’

‘I am exhausted,’ I heard her reply wearily, in a husky, sexy, French tobacco stained voice. ‘I have been dusting balloons all day.’

How terribly sad. What an entirely pointless activity.

It may sound rather comical but, the truth is that we all do some balloon dusting. We waste valuable energy, hard earned money and irreplaceable time on activities which do nothing whatsoever to improve our lives or anyone else's life.

Take a good hard look at the way you've spent your time, money and energy during the last week.

Which activities are you proud of?

And which were simply a waste of time?

How much of your life do you spend 'dusting balloons'?

* * *

Time is worth much more than money so don't waste it – your own or anyone else's.

For your own sake fill your life with passion and determination. – and leave the balloons undusted.

It is extraordinary to see just what you can do with those ignored and forgotten moments. (To paraphrase a well known saying I cannot resist the temptation to point out that in order to look after the hours it is only necessary to look after the minutes.)

Many men have learnt a language while travelling to work and numerous books have been written in the period while waiting for dinner to be served. One well known authoress wrote her first book while working as a governess. She wrote only in the time she spent waiting for her charge to turn up for lessons. Stephenson (of rocket fame) taught himself mathematics while working as an engineman during nightshifts. In his meal breaks he would work out sums. He used a piece of chalk for a pen and the side of a colliery wagon for a blackboard. Dr Darwin wrote down the thoughts which immortalised him while travelling from house to house in the country and Dr Mason Good translated Lucretius while riding in his carriage and visiting his patients around the streets of London.

I don't know whether it is still there but there used to be a message on the clock dial at a college in Oxford, England which read: 'The hours perish and are laid to our charge'.

Just think for a moment what you could do if you had an extra hour every day of your life.

The chances are that you could easily find another hour a day – simply by cutting out waste. Do a little time and motion study on your life and see just where the minutes and the hours get frittered away.

And, just as important, take a cool, hard look at the way you waste your time doing things that really don't matter very much at all.

The time spent (or rather wasted) on daily chores and rituals can quickly add up.

Assuming that you start at 20 and live to be 75 you will:

* Waste a total of 17 weeks if you spend I hour a week cleaning the car. (Why not let it stay dirty?)

* Waste a total of 40 days and nights if you spend 20 minutes a week ironing socks. (Why bother to iron socks?)

* Waste a total of well over 3 years if you spend 10 hours a week sitting in traffic jams. (Is your job really worth sacrificing so much of your life? Can't you find work nearer to home?)

* Waste a total of 836 days and nights of your life if you spend one hour a day Hoovering and dusting. (Hoover and dust for one hour a week instead of one hour a day and you will, effectively gain 716 days – that's equivalent to living an extra two years.)

* Waste a total of 3,345 days and nights of your life if you spend four hours a day watching TV. (Cut your TV watching in half and you'll have an extra 239 weeks in which to do other things. That's like living for more than another four years. Although 'self improvement' is today widely despised by the pseudo-intellectuals, you could learn a foreign language, write a book and become skilled at a favourite sport in that time.)

CHAPTER SIX: It Isn’t *What* You Know (Or *Who* You Know) But Knowing *How* To Use What You Know (Or Who You Know)

‘Every person has two educations, one which he receives from others, and one, more important, which he gives to himself.’

– Gibbon

Many graduate students mistakenly assume that just because they have completed a university or college course they are entitled to a good job, a secure position and a sound entrepreneurial or corporate future. They assume that because they have a certain amount of knowledge they are entitled to succeed.

This is not how life works.

Knowing things just isn’t enough. What *is* important is knowing what to do with what you have learned. With the possible exception of ‘memory men’ in night clubs and circuses no one gets paid just for knowing things or for having a good memory.

CHAPTER SEVEN: Why You Should Ignore (At Least Some Of) The Rules

‘Any fool can make a rule — and every fool will mind it.’

– Henry David Thoreau

In any society there will always be people who like creating their own mini laws – called rules. And as our society becomes increasingly complex (in many different ways) so there are more and more excuses for rules.

Some rules are self imposed. People create their own rules out of routine and tradition. When you ask people why they are doing something a particular way, you will often hear the answers: ‘That’s the way I was taught’ or ‘Because that’s the way we do it. ‘Those are little more than excuses for avoiding thought. Most people are shackled and constrained by many invisible, nonexistent, self imposed beliefs and rules which they have created for themselves, or which they have allowed others to create for them.

Most rules come from bureaucrats. Bureaucrats love rules. In particular they love rules which enable them to say ‘no’. Most local and central government departments now follow the Russian way of doing things: ‘If we don’t say you can do it then you can’t do it.’

You should not be afraid of ignoring, breaking or sidestepping the bureaucrat’s rules (as long as you can do so without breaking the law, of course). If you can think of a new, different and possibly better way to do something then don’t be afraid to try it. You may astound yourself and the rest of the world. Your own conscience should be the only rule maker you always obey. The only person you really have to be responsible to is yourself.

* * *

You might find it a revealing, enlightening and ultimately liberating exercise to make a list of all the rules which run your life. Include the rules which govern your personal life as well as those which run your business life.

When you have compiled your list write the question ‘Why?’ by each rule. And try to decide where all those rules originated. Many of the rules which still run your personal life will have doubtless originated with your parents and schoolteachers. Some will have originated with a previous employer. Some you will have absorbed, as though by osmosis, from friends. And many you will have acquired from ‘society’.

Every time you think of or come across another rule ask yourself whether the rule is essential or avoidable. Ask yourself whether the rule adds quality to your life. And ask yourself whether or not there are alternatives.

Many rules are designed to stop us doing things. Others simply convince us that we cannot do things, that we aren’t good enough and that we are doomed to be poor and to fail if we do not satisfy certain preconceived conditions. What nonsense rules are.

Remember that there is no such thing as impossible. The impossible is merely the limit of your imagination. Modern scientists, invariably working for corporations and government sponsored research organisations, say that something is impossible when what they really mean is that they don’t understand it and cannot explain it according to the existing rules – and that they are, therefore, more than a little frightened by it.

Don’t allow yourself to be constrained by the rules – or by other people’s views of what is or is not possible. You do not have to do things the way others do them. You can play the game of life by any rules you like. If you are going to get anywhere in life then ignoring at least some of the rules is almost a prerequisite.

CHAPTER EIGHT: Put Your Heart And Soul Into Everything You Do (But Only Do The Things Which Are Worth Doing)

‘If I were confined to a corner of a garret all my days, like a spider, the world would be just as large to me while I had my thoughts about me.’

– Henry David Thoreau

‘I put my sole trust in my own strength of body and soul.’

– old Norse saying

‘However men choose to regard me, they cannot change my essential being, and for all their power and all their secret plots I shall continue, whatever they do, to be what I am in spite of them.’

– Jean-Jacques Rousseau

‘My rule is, deliberately to consider, before I commence, whether the thing be practicable. If it be not practicable, I do not attempt it. If it be practicable, I can accomplish it if I give sufficient pains to it; and having begun, I never stop till the thing is done. To this rule I owe all my success.’

– John Hunter

People who know little about books, but who think that they might one day like to write one themselves, often ask me how long a book should be. This is an impossible question because the length of a manuscript is of absolutely no significance when trying to decide whether or not the manuscript is a book. I have seen collections of pages which were several hundred pages long but which were not books. You could pile up loose pages of neat typing until the whole mountain of paper reached a mile into the sky and still not have a book.

I have been a professional writer for many years and a long time ago I realised that a pile of pages (or a file in a computer memory) do not become a book simply when they reach a certain length. In order to become a book, a typescript, a manuscript or a chunk of computer memory must have a heart.

And that heart can only come from the writer.

Every book I write (whether it is fiction or nonfiction) has something of myself in it. My blood is there on the pages. The pages only become a book because I put something of myself into what I am writing. Pick up a book, open the pages and start reading, and you should be able to feel a beating heart.

I believe that this is true of everything we do. A good builder, for example, will put his heart and his soul into every stone he lays.

If something is genuinely worth doing then put your heart and soul into it. Until you respect your own value and your own potential contribution to other people’s lives you will achieve nothing.

Assess yourself annually. Ask yourself if you have given the best service to those who pay your wages (either directly or indirectly). If you have failed, then ask yourself what else you could or should have done. Have you wasted energy or money? If you have how can you re-budget and change your habits. If *you* had bought *your* services would *you* be happy?

The corollary here is that if you do not think that a task merits your heart and soul then there is a very good chance that the task doesn’t merit any attention at all.

When I was a child I remember school teachers always telling me to remember that: ‘If a thing is worth doing it is worth doing well.’

What no one ever told me to ask myself was: ‘Is it worth doing at all? Or am I frittering away my life on something that really doesn’t matter a damn?’

CHAPTER NINE: Aim To Be Loved Or Hated – But Never Ignored

‘One should as a rule respect public opinion in so far as is necessary to avoid starvation and to keep out of prison, but anything that goes beyond this is voluntary submission to an unnecessary tyranny, and is likely to interfere with happiness in all kinds of ways.’

– Bertrand Russell

Whatever you do you should consider it a success only if it arouses some emotion in other people.

A newspaper column is only successful if everyone who reads it feels something. It doesn’t really matter whether or not all the readers agree with what they’ve read. (Although from the writer’s point of view that may be a rather pleasing outcome, of course.) I would be happy to have “He made people think” as my epitaph.

But if a reader can put down a newspaper or magazine after reading a column and *not* feel aroused, delighted, amused, enraged or in some other way moved then in my view the column has been a failure.

What is true of a newspaper column is surely also true of everything else any of us do.

If you’re making shirts, cars or apple pies you should aim to produce a reaction. The customer who buys your shirt, car or apple pie should be moved in some way. If they are moved then you will be successful because they will buy again and they will tell their friends to buy from you.

The downside to all this is, of course, that if what you do pleases some people it will annoy and upset others. You cannot possibly do anything which will please everyone. Compare a list of the ten most popular television personalities, singers, film stars, sports stars or whatever with lists of the ten most unpopular television personalities, singers, film stars, sports stars or whatever and you will see that there are many names on both lists.

Many people worry intensely if they feel that there is a chance that anything they do could arouse criticism. For example, fear of ridicule or disdain is one of the main reasons why many people are apprehensive about doing anything which could attract attention. It is a fear of criticism which stops many people attempting to explore their own artistic skills.

This is a fear which needs to be put into perspective.

Approximately half of the so called civilised world dislikes the works of Picasso and Beethoven. “One half of the world cannot understand the pleasures of the other,” wrote Jane Austen.

So, why should you bother to be offended if some people don’t like what you do?

CHAPTER TEN: You Have To Have A Purpose For Living

'Have we not all eternity to rest in.'

– Arnauld

'The longer I live the more I am certain that the great difference between men, between the feeble and the powerful, the great and the insignificant, is energy — invincible determination — a purpose once fixed, and then death or victory. That quality will do anything that can be done in this world; and no talents, no circumstances, no opportunities will make a two legged creature a Man without it.'

– Fowell Buxton

'Purpose is the touchstone of any accomplishment, large or small. A strong man can be defeated by a child who has a purpose.'

– Napoleon Hill

'The truest wisdom is a resolute determination.'

– Napoleon Bonaparte

'What a different story men would have to tell if only they would adopt a definite purpose, and stand by that purpose until it had time to become an all-consuming obsession.'

– Napoleon Hill

Providing your family with a constant supply of clean underwear is not a purpose for living. Making sure that your children's shirts are as white as (or whiter than) your neighbour's children's shirts is no reason for living.

The woman who dedicates her life to caring for her children may become trivialised and bitter. There is a risk that she will eventually lose their respect and their love.

Ironically, if she had retained her independence and her sense of fun she would have probably retained their respect and their love.

No one said that life was fair.

Having a lawn which is better cared for than anyone else's in your neighbourhood is not a purpose for living.

God (or evolution) did not go to all the trouble of making you simply so that you could spend your days ordering fresh supplies of paper clips, or making sure that your car is cleaner and shinier than anyone else's.

People who have no purpose quickly become bored.

The rich who choose not to work often become desperately unhappy. Some simply drink too much. Others try to convince themselves (and others) that their dilettante good and charitable works are giving their lives meaning.

Lottery winners who are unable to adjust their minds to the new possibilities their wealth offers them often end up going back to their humdrum prewealth jobs in order to escape the boredom they feel.

Passion and purpose are vital. Without them life is meaningless. Moderation is not a virtue. Remember that it matters not how you live and die, but *why* you live and die.

Most people go through their lives without ever finding a purpose or without ever defining a plan. They get what they settle for. They never know what they want to do – or why. Their lives are governed by a series of accidents. They choose courses at school simply because their friends are doing those courses – or because they like the teachers. They choose jobs because they are convenient. They go through their lives with no sense of direction, no realistic hopes or expectations and no sense of purpose. It is hardly surprising that they constantly feel disappointed and frustrated.

Find what you want to do – and then do it the way you want to do it. Find, know and then be constant to your purpose in life. Set your own goals and define your aims and objectives. Decide what you want out of life and then make sure that you're going in the right direction.

Look around and you will see the passionless many, chilled of hope and overflowing with responsibilities.

You can do better with your life.

* * *

You must decide what you want out of life because without purpose there can be no passion or drive. And remember that only when you have found a cause (or several causes) worth dying for will you really know the joy of living.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: Would You Like To Be Happier?

‘Any pleasure that does no harm to other people is to be valued.’

– Bertrand Russell

‘To be without some of the things you want is an indispensable part of happiness.’

– Bertrand Russell

‘I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self contained,
I stand and look at them long and long.
They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to god,
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things,
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago,
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.’

– Walt Whitman

Few of us are blessed with Mark Tapley’s attitude to life. Tapley, a character in Charles Dickens’ book *Martin Chuzzlewit*, believed that it was his purpose in life to find happiness in the bleakest and most depressing circumstances. When faced with the prospect of marrying a good looking, plump widow who ran a public house and cooked sumptuous meals he ran away, claiming that there was no virtue to be found in reaching happiness under such circumstances.

In reality few of us would have the strength of mind to turn our backs on happiness if it was offered to us.

Most of us know that we have the potential for great unhappiness. Sadness besieges us daily and unhappiness, not happiness, is the natural human state for most of us.

There are two main reasons for this.

The first is that as human beings we are cursed with the ability to worry about things over which we have no power. We worry about the past (which has been and gone) and we worry about what other people may or may not do in the future (which, by and large, we cannot influence).

The second is that we do not achieve happiness by right or by luck. The abilities to achieve and enjoy happiness (not necessarily the same thing) are, like the ability to speak a foreign language, dance the Tango or play a good game of tennis, achievements; skills, which have to be fought for.

Happiness means the overcoming of endless, daily obstacles which never disappear.

The heroes of Valhalla spent every day hunting a miraculous wild boar which they killed in the evenings but which came to life again for the next day so that they had to hunt it down once more. Their daily work never ended because their work began again with each new day. (As someone who despises hunters and hunting I do not particularly like the analogy but it’s an extremely apt one.)

The gardener faces the constant battle posed by weeds growing among his vegetables and flowers. The salesmen has to go out every day and find fresh orders or else the business which supports him will die. The newspaper editor has to start work every day faced with several tons of blank newsprint. No one will be interested in buying yesterday’s newspapers. The chef begins each day with nothing but fresh ingredients and his recipe book. The postman starts each morning with a new sack full of mail to deliver.

Under these circumstances happiness can only truly come from within, from an attitude of mind, and, most important perhaps, from a sense of satisfaction derived from the work which is being done. The individual who enjoys his daily work, who looks forward to each day’s fresh labours, will find happiness far more easily than the individual for whom daily work is a constantly repeated drudgery. The individual for whom work is the same thing as pleasure has a direct route to happiness.

Most people never achieve any sense of lasting happiness because they spend their lives doing things which they either dislike or hate doing.

Ask yourself what three things you most enjoy doing in your life. Then ask yourself whether you spend as much time as you would like doing those things. If the answer is ‘No’ ask yourself ‘Why?’

Make a list of the ways in which you spend an average week. Then look down the list and put a tick by each of the things you do which you enjoy. How much of your life do you spend doing dull and boring things with or for dull and boring people, and how much of your life do you spend doing things you enjoy with people whose company you enjoy?

* * *

People who are happy usually:

* Either enjoy good health or have come to terms with whatever illnesses they may have.

* Have a good deal of personal freedom – to think and act however they like (with the proviso, of course, that their own sense of personal freedom does not have an adverse effect on the lives or wellbeing of any other living creature).

* Have work which they enjoy and in which they can take pride and pleasure.

* Have a sense of belonging in some community (it does not need to be a geographically based community – it can be a community held together by a common belief or a communal cause and passion).

* Have a considerable degree of control over their own lives.

* Spend as little time as possible with over-critical, negative people who make them feel downhearted or miserable.

* Have a positive view about themselves – they have identified, faced and conquered their personal fears (or have at least begun that process) and have achieved (or are achieving) a sense of personal happiness. (In order to achieve outside yourself you must first achieve inside yourself).

* Try to maintain a sense of humour, a sense of the ridiculous and an upbeat, positive attitude about as many things as possible.

* Have the ability to walk away from, and forget, minor inconveniences and trivial worries.

* Share their lives with someone they care for and who cares for them (married people are usually happier than single, divorced or separated individuals but today 25% of Americans live alone – compared with just 8% a decade ago). In the absence of a loving, sharing partner regular contact with intimate friends with whom mental and physical problems can be shared is important.

* Have the ability to maintain a sense of balance in a cruel world.

* Have a passion or a belief for which they would give up their lives.

* Have the ability to find some good in situations which may seem exclusively bad. For example, a woman who is suddenly faced with the fact that her children are leaving home may be overcome with a sense of sadness, but she should realise that she is being given a chance to regain her life.

* Have a sense of humour and the ability to laugh. The gift of creating and enjoying laughter is underestimated; it is one of the greatest gifts of all, for those who laugh together forge a bond. Watch people coming out of a theatre where they have laughed together. They are full of love and companionship. (As a contrast watch people coming out of a movie about violence.) It is also important to be able to laugh at yourself and not to take yourself too seriously.

* Have a tendency to smile frequently. (Remember that people can tell if you are smiling even if they can't see your face; if you smile while you are talking on the telephone your voice will sound friendlier and warmer – try it!)

* Have an understanding of what other people need and want. If you know what other people like – and you make some effort to please them – then they, in turn, will like you. If you know what your prospective customers want and need – and you make some effort to provide them with what they want and need – your business will prosper.

* Appreciate that once the basic needs of food, clothing and shelter have been met, the only difference money makes to happiness is to make it possible to buy time and freedom. An absence of wealth may make a person miserable but the presence of wealth does not guarantee happiness.

* * *

Remember that you are responsible for your own personal world: you chose your job, your hobbies, your friends and the way you live.

If you didn't choose these things then who did? If you didn't choose to marry the person you are living with then who did? If you didn't choose to have three children who did? If you didn't choose to work in the glue factory then who did?

You might not have had the good fortune to have been born beautiful and rich, or blessed with special physical or mental skills which enable you to earn fame and money with relative ease, but you do have the ability to take control over your life.

Most people hand over control of their lives to anyone who wants to take that control. Do not avoid your responsibilities by taking the easy way out and blaming fate or luck. You have all that is necessary for success, riches or happiness. We all have potential within us, it is merely a question of recognising and using it.

CHAPTER TWELVE: Stick Up For Yourself (And Don't Make Excuses)

'Is there one whom difficulties dishearten — who bends to the storm? He will do little. Is there one who will conquer? That kind of man never fails.'

– John Hunter

Do you often end up doing things that you don't want to do – simply because you didn't like to say 'No' when you were asked?

Have you ever agreed to give a speech, attend a dinner or luncheon, chair a meeting or act as a secretary for a volunteer group? And have you ever subsequently regretted saying 'Yes'?

Life is too short to waste time in such a way.

If you spend too much of your life doing things you don't want to do then you will be losing time and the freedom to spend your life in the way *you* want to spend it.

We all like to be liked and saying 'Yes' is much more likely to attract approval and a smile from the person doing the asking than is saying 'No'.

We say 'Yes' because we know that the other person will probably feel disappointed or let down if we say 'No'. And we say 'Yes' (when we would really much rather say 'No') when we are not clear enough about our priorities and are, consequently, prepared to let other people decide what we do with our time. It is often easy to forget that saying 'Yes' to a simple sounding request may commit you to a time and energy sapping exercise.

Saying 'No' doesn't have to mean that you annoy people or upset them. Practise saying 'No' nicely and you will find that you can avoid wasting your life doing things you really don't want to do.

Here are some practical tips:

(1) Don't be defensive. You have no reason to feel guilty for saying 'No'. Don't begin by apologising.

(2) Don't give excuses. If you give excuses you are likely to end up saying 'Yes' when you really mean to say 'No'. For example, if you are invited to speak at a meeting which is being held next Tuesday evening and you say you can't manage that evening because you already have another commitment there is a danger that the person inviting you will suggest another date 'which will be more convenient to you'. At this point you are backed into a corner. And it will be difficult to get out of giving the speech without being rude.

(3) Begin your reply by flattering the person who is inviting you to do something. Tell them that you are honoured and flattered by the invitation.

(4) Look the person who is inviting you straight in the eye when you reply. This will help you dominate the conversation and ensure that it goes in the way you want it to go. If you look down and avoid eye contact (a natural reaction when you feel guilty or embarrassed) you will be behaving in a 'passive' way. When you behave in a 'passive' way the other person will automatically become more 'aggressive' and 'dominant'.

(5) Give a solid reason for not saying 'Yes' – a reason which it will be difficult to oppose or discount. It is even better if you say something which it will be impossible for the person inviting you to try to push aside without seeming to be rude or thoughtless. Here are some possibilities:

> * 'From experience I know that this is not something I am good at and so I always say 'No'. But I am flattered that you asked me.'
>
> * 'I am so busy for the foreseeable future that I cannot accept any more invitations. I would be spreading myself far too thinly. If I said 'yes' I simply wouldn't be able to do the job justice.'* 'I have to say 'No' because I have been pushing myself so hard that I've been endangering my health'
>
> * 'I recently made a firm commitment to spend more time with my family and so I have to say 'No.'

(6) If the person inviting you presses you further you can acknowledge their difficulties and needs and try to help them solve their problem without you. For example, if you are turning down a speaking engagement you can suggest another speaker.

* * *

Every time you say 'Yes' it should be because you are doing something you want to do – and not because you are frightened to say 'No'.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: How To Bamboozle Bureaucrats

‘Bureaucracy is a great machine operated by pigmies.’

– Honoré de Balzac

Bureaucrats are the true plague of the twentieth century. Knowing how to deal with them effectively is vital. Here are two examples of simple ways in which you can deal with bureaucrats.

1. Use Their Own Rules Against Them

When I was a general practitioner, a bureaucrat called to say that he would be collecting, and taking away, all the medical records in my possession. He said that he had to take them away to check for some inexplicable, incomprehensible but documented bureaucratic reason. (Bureaucrats always have inexplicable, incomprehensible but documented reasons for what they do.) I told him that he couldn’t take them away. I said I needed the medical records in order to treat my patients and that even if I didn’t need the medical records I regarded them as confidential. The bureaucrat said if I looked at the bottom of each medical records envelope I would see that the medical records belonged to the Minister of Health and that he, as the Minister’s representative, was therefore entitled to take the records with him. With a flash of inspiration I told him that he could take the medical records – but that he would have to leave the ink behind. ‘The medical records may belong to the Minister,’ I explained. ‘But the ink is mine.’ The bureaucrat thought about this for a while, consulted some colleagues and then went away and did not come back.

2. Remember – and use the fact that – bureaucrats are terrified of responsibility

When patients move from one part of the country to another, and therefore from one practice to another, their medical records follow them at a far more leisurely pace. It is not unknown for medical records to take several months to make a journey of just a few miles. If you allowed the medical records to make their own way they would probably get to their destination more speedily. On one occasion a new patient, a diabetic, needed treatment. I did not have her medical records.

I telephoned her previous doctor. He could not remember anything useful about the patient’s condition or treatment. But, he said, all the information I needed was on her medical records which he had dispatched to his layer of bureaucrats some days earlier.

I telephoned his bureaucrats. They told me that the medical records had been sent to my local bureaucrats.

I telephoned my local bureaucrats. They confirmed that they had the medical records in question. A bureaucrat confirmed that they were, as we spoke, sitting on her desk. I pointed out, politely, that I needed them urgently. The bureaucrat said that it would be another week or so before I could have them. I explained that the situation was rather more urgent than that. I said I would drive over to the bureaucrat’s office to retrieve the medical records. The bureaucrat said I could not do that. I asked if I could drive over to examine the records without taking them away. The bureaucrat said I could not do that either. I then told the bureaucrat that if the medical records were not on my desk within thirty minutes, and the patient concerned died, I would put the bureaucrat down on the death certificate as a contributory cause of death. The medical records were on my desk within thirty minutes. I had discovered the single most important truth about bureaucrats: they do not like responsibility. A vampire will recoil at the sign of the cross. A bureaucrat will recoil at the threat of responsibility.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: Adapt And Be Ready For Change

‘I don’t deserve this award, but I have arthritis and I don’t deserve that, either. So I’ll take it.’

– Jack Benny

Many people spend much of their energy trying to be in total control of their lives; trying to clear their desks and to get everything (relationships, belongings, work) just right.

This is a recipe for constant unhappiness and frustration because every time you think you have got your world sorted out some outside influence will come bursting in to disrupt things and you will lose control again.

The only constant upon which we can all rely is that tomorrow will be different to today and when tomorrow becomes today then tomorrow will, once again, be different.

Make yourself constantly adaptable to change and you will be in a far better position to survive. The moment you think you know the future and are in control, the moment you feel secure, that is the moment when the clock starts ticking on the unseen, unidentified, unexpected time bomb that will shatter your peace of mind. The moment you start to feel content, fate will start to smile. Don’t pigeon hole yourself. And don’t let other people pigeon hole you either.

You will only ever be in control of your life when you accept that you cannot have control and that change is a normal and acceptable part of life.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: Don’t Let People Push You Around

‘When I started writing seriously, I made the major discovery of my life – that I am right and everybody else is wrong if they disagree with me. What a great thing to learn. Don’t listen to anyone else, and always go your own way.’

– Ray Bradbury

Is there someone in your life who makes you feel inadequate? Your mother? Your boss? A sarcastic or manipulative friend? Do you know someone who always puts you down and makes you feel a loser? Such people can cause immense physical and mental distress – and even create illness.

Do you get pushed around a lot? Do you spend most of your time doing things that other people want you to do?

Are you spending your life the way you want to spend it?

Are you spending your life with the people you want to be with – doing what you want to do?

To get the most out of your life you must be able to answer ‘No’ to the first two questions and ‘Yes’ to the second two questions.

Are you going in the right direction?

There are only three reasons to do anything: because it may improve the world for other people or animals; because it is fun; because it makes money.

Rate all the activities in your life for: fun, money, improving the world.

How will you spend next weekend? How much time will you spend doing things that you really want to do? And how much time will you spend doing things that you aren’t looking forward to – but that other people want you to do?

Make two lists of how you’re likely to spend your time.

On the first list put the things you’re looking forward to – the things you’ll enjoy.

On the second list put the things that you feel you ought to do, the things you think other people expect you to do and the things you’re not looking forward to at all.

Put down everything: meals, TV programmes, visitors, parties, trips out, sports, chores.

Now see which list is longest.

If your second list is the longest then you need to stand up for yourself more and the chances are that you get pushed around a lot by just about everyone you know; friends, relatives and employers especially.

You probably do errands for people who could perfectly well do their own errands. You’re probably the sort of person who gets lumbered with looking after the children while everyone else goes off to a party. You probably work overtime at a job you hate – without getting paid for it. You get the boring jobs when you’re on a committee.

And you never dream of complaining when you get rotten service in shops and restaurants.

The chances are that you’re too shy, too soft hearted and too nice to complain or say ‘No’. You don’t stick up for yourself. And the chances are that your health is suffering.

I’m not suggesting that you try to turn yourself into a selfish bully.

But if you continue to allow other people to push you around then the chances are that you’ll not only end up physically and mentally worn out but you’ll also become so frustrated and acquire so much hidden anger and resentment that you’ll become physically ill.

Headaches, backache, eczema and indigestion are just four of the disorders you’re most likely to suffer from.

Moreover, if you become ill then your tolerance for pain will be low and you’ll take longer than you should to recover.

Learning how to assert yourself – and stick up for yourself – isn’t difficult.

Here’s my advice:

1. Remember that you‘re an individual and you have rights

Of course you should try to help people who are less fortunate than you are. But don’t let yourself be suckered into looking after people who can look after themselves. Thousands of mums spend their days acting as slaves for teenagers who could (and should) do more for themselves. You have a right to some fun in your life.

2. Stop apologising unnecessarily

If you’re always saying sorry and feeling guilty then people will for ever be taking advantage of you. Only say “sorry’ when you really mean it. And remember: you’re not responsible for what people think or believe. Your only responsibility is to be honest and true to yourself. You can do no more than that.

3. Build up your self confidence

Make a list of your assets. I don’t mean cash but the really important things like knowledge, accomplishments, memories and skills.

4. Disarm your critic by agreeing with him

When someone says: ‘Your hair is a mess’ just reply: ‘Yes, I know.’ Don’t apologise. Don’t try to find excuses. Just take the wind out of their sails by agreeing with them.

5. Don’t let people label you

If someone tells you that you are always unreliable or disorganised give some examples which show that you are just the opposite. If a critic tries to stick a label on you just refuse to accept it. If you are told that: ‘You’re always late’ point out that you are late sometimes – but who isn’t – but that most or much of the time you aren’t late. If someone says you’re clumsy, simply deny it but refuse to get into an argument.

6. Force your critic to expand and clarify their criticism

Ask the critic to tell you exactly what they want you to do. People who moan and criticise are often not very good at offering practical advice. Chances are that you will put them on the defensive – you will certainly take the sting out of their attack. If someone says that you are inefficient ask them to tell you what their problem is so that you can deal with it. Invite them to give you more examples and keep inviting them to give you more examples.

7. Stay calm

However angry or irate your critic gets you should stay cool. Eventually, there is a good chance that your critic will lose his or her temper. You can then (if you wish) retaliate by asking him or her why he or she is so touchy.

8. Remember that most bullies are physical cowards

Be physically assertive. I don’t mean that you should hit your critics. But stand up to them. Look them in the eye. Invade their personal space. Most bullies (and this is particularly true of emotional bullies) are cowards. Move closer to them and they’ll probably feel uncomfortable, back away – and back down. Don’t raise your voice but keep it firm.

9. Walk away or put the telephone down

Refuse to get involved in a distressing argument. You don’t have to put up with abuse from anyone.

10. Don’t spend time with people who annoy you, constantly put you down or make you feel guilty

Why waste your life on people who make your life miserable? I don’t care who it is – colleague, friend or close relative – if they make you unhappy cut them out of your life.

11. Ignore gratuitous advice

Just because someone tells you to do this, or suggests that you do that, you don’t have to react. Say ‘Thank you’ and then ignore them and do exactly what you want to do. If people offer minor criticisms, insults or sarcastic comments just ignore them.

* * *

Stand up for yourself – you’ll be healthier. Learn how to deal with toxic people – and how to handle people who make your life miserable or who make you feel inadequate. People can only push you around if you let them.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: Use Your Imagination And Your Subconscious Mind

‘It doesn‘t matter where you live – where you live is really in your head.’

– Henry David Thoreau

‘The subconscious mind will translate into its physical equivalent a thought impulse of a negative or destructive nature just as readily as it will act upon thought impulses of a positive or constructive nature. This accounts for the strange phenomenon which so marry millions of people experience, referred to as ‘misfortune’ or ‘bad luck.’

– Napoleon Hill

‘There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.’

– William Shakespeare

‘I believe in the power of desire backed by faith because I have seen this power lift men from lowly beginnings to places of power and wealth; I have seen it rob the grave of its victims; I have seen it serve as the medium by which men staged a comeback after having been defeated in a hundred different ways...’

– Napoleon Hill

You must develop and use your imaginative skills.

Most people are unimaginative. This is not because they do not have any imaginative skills but because they do not how to use them. Many are probably frightened of displaying any imagination. The average person’s idea of variety is to own sweaters in three shades of beige; their idea of daring is to plant their runner beans a week before their neighbours.

When in prime condition you can use your imagination to rework and rearrange old ideas, to see potential where there is no apparent hope and to discover ways through when there seems to be an impasse. You can also use your imagination to create new ideas out of thin air. Newton, when he was asked how he had produced his great discoveries replied: ‘I keep the subject continually before me and wait till the first dawnings open slowly little by little into a full and clear light.’

If you allow your imagination to develop you will soon realise that most of the things which most people regard as ‘impossible’ are not impossible at all. Eventually, you will come to regard the word ‘impossible’ as a challenge.

This will give you a tremendous advantage over all those people who think that the things you are planning to do are ‘impossible’. Most people are far too aware of all the things which are impossible – and which they are convinced will not work. I suggest that you do not even allow the word ‘impossible’ to enter your mind. When deciding whether or not to do something ask yourself not: ‘Is this impossible?’ but ‘Do I want to do this?’ (And if you answer ‘yes’ to the second question use your imagination to help you decide how).

* * *

Your imagination has a far greater control over your life than you might realise. Put a piece of wood on the ground and try walking along it. Easy? Now, imagine that the piece of wood is suspended 1,000 feet above a swamp filled with alligators and try walking across it again. The more you can convince yourself that the piece of wood really is suspended above a swamp the more difficult you will find it to walk across.

Your imagination can work against you. But it can also work for you. You can use your imagination to help you achieve whatever you want. Create in your mind the idea of what you want. Hold the idea in your mind. Sum up what you want in a few words. Close your eyes and imagine yourself writing those words down on an imaginary blackboard.

Now think of all the facts and information you have. Hold those facts in your mind. With your eyes still closed write down the facts and information on an imaginary blackboard. Then get on with something else.

When you think about your problem next you will find that your subconscious mind will have produced several possible answers.

* * *

If you have difficulty in getting your imagination to work then you should buy yourself a bundle of notebooks and a pile of pens and pencils. Use the pencils and notebooks to write down everything you think of – practical plans, thoughts, fears, hopes, ideas even bits of gossip. Get into the habit of writing down everything which comes into your head. If you do this then you will free your mind to wander free and you will stimulate your imagination to work harder and more effectively.

Once you start carrying a notebook with you – and using it – you will have far more ideas than you can cope with! Your imagination is the key to success. Your imagination is your mind’s workshop. And your imagination can grow and develop the more you use it.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: Control Your Own Health

‘A great healer heals with ‘only a minimum of medicines. The superior healer knows how to heal the mind first. Even without any medicine.’

– Tao Te Jing by Lao Tsu

‘Holistic’ medicine (sometimes also spelt ‘wholistic’) has, for several decades, been growing in theoretical popularity.

Many alternative and some orthodox health care professionals describe themselves as ‘holistic’ practitioners.

But they aren’t.

Most journalists inaccurately assume that the word is a synonym for ‘alternative’ or ‘complementary’ medicine.

But it isn’t.

The word ‘holistic’ was first introduced in 1926 by the South African philosopher and statesman Jan Christian Smuts. He suggested that the whole human being is much more than (and quite different to) a collection of physical or emotional parts. Even in those days, it seems, there must have been doctors parading up and down hospital wards referring to the ‘liver’ in the end bed and the ‘case of pancreatitis’ in the third bed on the left.

The word and the concept lay more or less forgotten until the 1970s when the growth of high technology medicine led to a revolution among patients who felt that aggressive, interventionist medicine wasn’t entirely satisfactory.

In practical terms the use of the word ‘holistic’ meant, in theory at least, that instead of regarding patients as sick kidneys or hearts, health care professionals would try to meet the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual needs of their patients by using natural healing methods as well as modem, pharmacological or surgical techniques.

In short, the word ‘holistic’ was intended to describe an attitude. An attitude which can be just as well followed by an orthodox trained doctor as by an alternative practitioner. A general practitioner in a busy city health centre can be ‘holistic’ in his approach just as easily as can a herbalist or acupuncturist working from a back bedroom.

There is no doubt that a ‘holistic’ approach to medical care is extremely good news for patients. When followed properly it means that every illness can be treated with a ‘pick’n’mix’ approach – choosing whichever aspects of orthodox and alternative medicine are most likely to be effective, and least likely to produce side effects, and treating and taking full notice of all aspects of the individual’s being.

In many illnesses there is no point in treating what is wrong with the body unless you also treat what is wrong with the mind.

It seems to me remarkable that a modern doctor will treat the body of a patient who is suffering from high blood pressure, irritable bowel syndrome or asthma but ignore the mind, when it is now established beyond doubt that in so many illnesses the physical symptoms are produced by mental turmoil of one sort or another.

It is equally bizarre and, in truth, unscientific, for an osteopath to treat a patient’s back and ignore his mind.

The advantages of a truly ‘holistic’ approach are colossal, not only because ‘holistic’ medicine offers a chance to use the best and avoid the worst but also because different types of treatment can, when used together, have a synergistic effect. A genuinely ‘holistic’ approach may use a modern drug, a relaxation technique and a type of massage to tackle a single collection of symptoms.

But although in theory the word ‘holistic’ implies an admirable change in attitude there is, sadly, little evidence that practitioners really understand what the word means or how it should be applied in practice.

It would be nice to think that everyone could find a ‘holistic’ practitioner to look after them. But don’t hold your breath. You’ve about as much chance of striking oil when digging up your winter vegetables.

Today, in some so called developed parts of the Western world, more people visit alternative health care practitioners than visit orthodox medical practitioners. Judged in terms of numbers orthodox medicine is now the true alternative.

But the steady rise in popularity of alternative medicine has, regrettably, made remarkably little impact on the way that orthodox medicine is practised. There are, it is true, a few orthodox practitioners who offer alternative forms of treatment (though, sadly, many of these are best described as dabblers rather than practitioners – there are doctors around practising acupuncture, osteopathy, homoeopathy and hypnotherapy on the basis of one or two weekend courses but the establishment view, proposed and seconded by the pharmaceutical industry and supported by a medical profession which is, as I have pointed out elsewhere, now more of a marketing arm to the drug barons than an independent profession, remains unchanged: alternative medicine is a dangerous waste of time and money which should be patronised when it cannot be ignored and suppressed whenever possible.

The myth that drug therapy offers the only true solution is now repeated unquestioningly and without hesitation or embarrassment.

The importance of drug therapy, and the reverence with which drugs are regarded by doctors and nurses, is perhaps best seen in modern health centres where doctors dispense as well as prescribe and where the dispensing counter where patients exchange their prescription slips for drugs is rather akin to a high altar. The modern consultation is, too often, a simple, uncomplicated, thoughtless three part process.

First, the patient visits the doctor and reports his or her symptoms. Second, the doctor decides which drug (or, more likely, which drugs) will be most appropriate and writes out what he considers to be an appropriate prescription. And, third, the patient takes the prescription to the high priest and has it turned into a bottle of pills, a tube of ointment, an inhaler or whichever form has been deemed appropriate. An orthodox, modern medical school training means (literally) that a doctor is trained and kept up to date by and for the pharmaceutical industry. This may sound like hyperbole. It isn't. Drug companies pay for a very large part of the education that a doctor receives.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the drug company owned and controlled medical establishment still looks with horror at alternative medicine. Attempts to organise research programmes are invariably treated with a sneer or a patronising dismissal.

It is one of the great scandals of the twentieth century that the billion dollar worldwide 'charity' cancer industry, the international drug industry and the medical 'profession' (now, more of a trade than a 'profession') would all much rather suppress an alternative cancer treatment rather than have to admit that orthodox remedies might be bettered.

The truth is that the medical establishment – and the drug industry – are terrified of alternative medicine for they regard it as a major commercial threat.

So, the bottom line is that you are unlikely to find a 'holistic' orthodox practitioner after all.

You might expect to do better among alternative practitioners.

But I fear that you would probably be disappointed.

Tragically, too many alternative care practitioners are, in their complementary way, just as arrogant and intellectually isolated as medical men and women who have been trained to hand out pills.

Many acupuncturists, homoeopaths, herbalists and others describe themselves as offering their patients 'holistic' medicine when in reality they offer nothing of the sort.

However well trained she may be the alternative therapist who confines herself to a single speciality is not a 'holistic' practitioner. How many acupuncturists, herbalists and naturopaths will admit that orthodox doctors and hospitals can sometimes provide the best service?

To be honest I don't think that many patients are ever going to receive truly 'holistic' treatment from their practitioners – whether they are orthodox or alternative. Most training programmes are, by their very nature, designed to produce specialists. Medical schools turn out drug dispensers and acupuncture schools turn out acupuncturists. And there aren't many health care professionals with the time or inclination to study other available specialities.

We must also recognise that there is, of course, a huge financial disincentive involved here. How many practitioners are going to suggest to a paying patient that he would obtain better treatment by visiting another professional? I know of very few truly 'holistic' centres where a patient can obtain treatment from a comprehensive variety of orthodox and alternative practitioners.

All this is sad.

But it doesn't mean that 'holistic' medicine is out of reach.

What it does mean is that if you really want 'holistic' treatment (and in my opinion you should) you're going to have to take control yourself if you or anyone in your family needs treatment.

Anyone who is ill needs attention to their mind and spirit as well as their body. Selecting a properly balanced diet may be as important as choosing the right drug. Sometimes a successful outcome to an illness may be 80% dependent on choosing the right drug. On another occasion a successful outcome may be 80% dependent on diet.

There are very few truly 'holistic' medical practitioners. But everyone can – and should – be a 'holistic' patient.

Don't trust medical advisers. Compare and contrast all the possible treatments and analyse all the available advice. Try to learn as much about health care as you can while you are still healthy. Collect books and newsletters so that you have the information you may need on hand – when you need it.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: Learn How To Deal With Stress

'I was rich, if not in money, in sunny hours and summer days, and spent them lavishly.'

– Henry David Thoreau

'This spending of the best part of one's life earning money in order to enjoy a questionable liberty during the least valuable part of it, reminds me of the Englishman who went to India to make a fortune first, in order that he might return to England and live the life of a poet.'

– Henry David Thoreau

Nine out of ten illnesses are caused or made worse by stress. Knowing how to deal with stress will improve the health of your body, mind and spirit. Here are some tips for dealing with stress:

(1) If you are constantly busy do a little 'time and motion' study on your life. Make sure that you don't waste valuable time. For example, is it really worthwhile spending an hour of your time to race across town in the hope of saving a few pence on soap powder? Are you making best use of your resources by using a cheap car park and having to carry your shopping a mile or two in the rain?

(2) Create 'hassle free geographical zones' in your life where you can rest and recharge your batteries without fear of being disturbed. There should be places in your world where you know that you can escape from stress. You should have a quiet room in your home where there is no telephone and where you know you can relax comfortably – certain that you are not going to be disturbed.

There should be places in your locality where you can go to 'escape' from pressure. And, ideally, there should be cities and resorts which your mind associates only with relaxation. If you visit a place often enough – and have enough good memories of that place – you will eventually feel your body and mind relaxing the minute you arrive there.

(3) Learn to turn 'dead' time into useful time. Make sure that you always have a book or some paperwork with you so that you can make the best possible use of time spent at airports or railway stations. This will help you combat boredom (a major source of stress) and will also help you make time available for 'fun' things when you get back home.

(4) If you feel under too much pressure do not be afraid to retreat to your bed and tell the world that you are 'ill'. Lots of famous people – for example, Florence Nightingale – have done this to escape from pressure and recharge their batteries.

(5) Choose the seven days of your life that are the most important and most memorable. Write down as much as you can remember about those days to create a 'magic week'. When you feel 'down' simply relive your 'magic week' to put a smile back onto your face and into your heart.

(6) Do not wait until tomorrow for the future you want. Twenty years ago a friend of mine took a job with a large company. It wasn't a job he wanted but the pay was good. He really wanted to be an artist. 'I'll do this for ten years, put aside as much money as I can and then retire,' he told me and himself. 'Then I'll be free to paint.' I think he believed himself. Today, eighteen years later, he still works for the same company. He has been promoted several times. He has a company car, a pension, sickness benefits and generous paid holidays. He is very well paid and has a beautiful house in a pleasant, well kept suburb. He will stop work when he reaches the official retirement age although he now does a job he hates and he despises himself. It is not surprising that he is constantly under a great deal of stress.

(7) Never delay action which needs to be taken. Consider the case of a friend of mine who ran a small business which had expanded too quickly and who had consequently been under a great deal of pressure at work. He also had a lot of pressures at home – he had bought a new house and he could ill afford the loan payments and as a result his marriage was under a considerable strain. As a result of the accumulated pressures produced by the problems at home and at work he had a nervous breakdown. When I talked to him he agreed that the problems at home and work had caused his illness; and he agreed that he needed to change his life. 'I'll change my lifestyle when I'm better,' he said, announcing that he had to keep on working in order to keep earning a living. That was a bit like saying: 'I'm sitting on a hot stove and it hurts but I can't think about doing anything to deal with the problem until the pain has gone.'

(8) Make sure that you find time in your life for yourself and do not be afraid to give in to temptation occasionally.

A few weeks ago I had been working exceptionally hard and had just finished a book. It had been raining for a week or more but when I looked out of the window I saw, to my surprise, that the sun was shining, the sky was blue and the birds were singing. Temptation opened the door and poked her head into the room where I was working. 'Fancy a walk in the park?' she asked.

I sighed. 'I can't,' I answered sadly, waving a hand in the direction of the computer screen in front of me. 'I've got to write a newspaper column.’

Temptation raised an eyebrow but said nothing. I sighed, smiled and stood up.

Outside it was warm and peaceful and it was good to feel the sunshine on my back.

As Temptation and I walked through the gates I heard someone shouting. I looked around. The source of the shouting wasn’t difficult to spot. He was middle aged and had staring, angry eyes, wild hair and several days worth of stubble on his chin. I couldn’t tell what he was shouting about but there was spittle on his chin and he was hoarse and there was much pain in his eyes.

We walked on. Behind me, walking more slowly but still shouting, walked the man with the wild hair and the angry eyes.

We walked past the lake where young mothers and children were feeding bread to fat ducks and past military neat flower beds ablaze with red and yellow flowers. I confess with shame that I didn’t know any of their man-given names but you don’t have to identity beauty to appreciate it.

We walked up a long, steep path through a small, cool area of woodland. At the top of the hill there was a clearing from which it was possible to stand and view the majesty of the surrounding countryside; in the foreground two churches, neat rows of houses and a railway station, in the middle distance small white cottages and on the horizon, the sea.

But it was not the view which captivated my soul but the deliciously haunting sound made by a man in a green corduroy suit playing a double bass.

I didn’t recognise the tune but it was the melody to something the diminutive French singer Edith Piaf had made famous. A small crowd of twenty or thirty people were standing there listening and enjoying and, for an all too brief moment, at peace for a while with themselves, one another and the world.

As the bass player finished playing the tune which had greeted my arrival he shifted his instrument an inch or two and then started to play something else.

I looked around and noticed that the man with the wild hair, angry eyes and spittle on his chin was standing beside me. He was listening to the music and the pain in his face was softened. The anger in his eyes had gone and he seemed comforted and temporarily at peace with the world.

A few moments later a thick necked, red faced policeman came along and loudly and officiously ordered the bass player to stop. For a moment nothing happened. The musician was as lost in the beauty of what he was playing as we were.

Angrily, the officious policeman leaned forward and roughly pulled at the bass player’s jacket.

The musician stopped playing and the spell was broken and we were all yanked cruelly back into a mouldy, dishonest, cruel society where the Rules are all that matter and people, love, beauty and kindness are nothing.

For a moment no one moved. And no one spoke. The silence hung around us like a thick curtain. The musician stood up and started to pack his double bass back into its case. I looked around. There were tears now in the eyes of the man with the wild hair.

I felt myself propelled forwards by some unseen force. It was not of my will. I touched the fat policeman lightly on the arm.

‘Please let the music continue.’ The voice came from my mouth but was not of my making.

The policeman glowered at me, uncomprehendingly; a brutish weapon of a cruel state. He recited some laws which were being broken.

‘The law is ours not yours,’ I heard myself tell him. ‘If you don’t let the music continue I will arrest you for causing a breach of the peace. There is a danger that there will be a riot unless you allow this man to continue playing.’

The policeman stared at me unbelievingly.

I turned slightly. ‘I need witnesses that this officer’s behaviour will cause a breach of the peace.’

For a moment no one moved. Then one hand went up. And slowly a dozen more hands were raised in support.

The policeman stared around him and blinked; sweating slightly and confused. He mumbled something about riots and reinforcements and conspiracy. But he moved away from the musician.

The bass player took his instrument out of its case and started to play again.

Defeated, the policeman moved away and scurried back down the hill.

This time the music sounded even sweeter than it had before. The man with the wild hair, standing beside me, turned to me and smiled. I smiled back.

In our cruel, humourless, grey, passionless world each small victory against the harsh and senseless hand of authority is like a battle won. I was glad I’d gone for a walk in the park.

Temptation may occasionally lead you astray but she will sometimes lead you to moments of greater joy than you will ever find by steadfastly following the straight and narrow paths of righteousness.

(9) Even if you work for someone else you should be your own boss. Don’t let yourself be abused or used. Remember that people who work for themselves work harder but are more likely to get business satisfaction. If you are self employed you are also far more likely to enjoy freedom in the way you live.

If you work for a company remember that the company does not love you. The company has no feelings towards you whatsoever. What is a company? It is a business owned by shareholders. Do you really think that all the shareholders love you?

Stress is created by frustration and fear and comes when there is responsibility without authority. People who are truly in charge of their own lives have to endure relatively modest amounts of all these negative forces.

You might imagine that when I talk about ‘people who are truly in charge of their own lives’ I am talking about ‘bosses’ but there are very few people who work for large companies who are genuinely in charge of their own lives. Most people who are thought of as bosses are employees who still have to report to an individual, a committee or a board.

The surprising truth is that the self employed are most likely to be in charge of their own lives. You can become the boss of your own life by differentiating between the important and the unimportant, by knowing the bottom line and making your own decisions and by taking responsibility for what you do or do not do.

(10) Pleasure is an antidote to stress – and will, therefore, protect you against the illnesses associated with stress. If you do something enjoyable every day you are less likely to fall ill.

(11) Some people can cope with a small amount of stress. Others can cope with a great deal. The trick is to reduce your exposure and increase your resistance until you feel comfortable.

(12) In order to deal effectively with stress you need to know how to use your own ‘bodypower’ and ‘mindpower’. (These are described in detail in my books *Bodypower* and *Mindpower.)*

(13) You will be better able to withstand stress and pressure if you have a wide range of interests to keep your mind busy. If work is the only thing in your life then you will suffer more when you have problems at work.

(14) To avoid burnout and minimise your exposure to stress you should take regular breaks and holidays.

(15) When you are under stress you should ask yourself: ‘Is this worth the stress it causes?’ And you should ask yourself: ‘What will doing this accomplish?’

(16) Break your targets down into realistic goals. Would be slimmers are usually advised to think in terms of small losses of weight and weeks rather than large losses of weight and years. You should use the same technique when starting a huge project. If you are renovating a house, writing a book, building up an international supermarket chain from scratch or planning to cycle round the world you should plan your project in easy stages.

(17) Be yourself. Don’t try to be someone you’re not. Don’t be frightened to appear cranky or eccentric. Don’t be afraid to retain your individuality in a conformist world. Don’t worry about what other people think about you. Our society criticises and disapproves far too much. Don’t be afraid if people laugh at you. (Their lives are probably dull and pointless in comparison.) There is a strong correlation between the word ‘brilliant’ and the phrase ‘a lot of trouble’. It is no coincidence that the greatest sports players, artists and others invariably get into trouble with the authorities.

(18) Protect and cherish your privacy. In an increasingly intrusive world you should make sure that you do everything you can to retain your privacy. Don’t tell the authorities anything you don’t have to tell them. Ignore requests for information which are not backed up by the law. Don’t give information about yourself that you don’t want the world to know. Remember that the paranoid may get laughed at but they tend to live longer.

(19) Go for it! If you go for it you may have regrets – but the regrets you have for things you didn’t do will always hurt more than the regrets you have for the things you did (and got wrong). Straightforward regrets are far worse than disappointments. When your best isn’t good enough look for a fresh angle. When things are going badly remind yourself of your goals. Regularly ask yourself if you are being taken away from your goals.

(20) Aim to achieve self reliance. Always keep the phone numbers and addresses of people with skills you might need (with back ups). And always try to have a back up system for anything upon which you rely. If you rely on a computer for your work then you should have a back up computer – or know where you can rent, borrow or obtain one in an emergency. If your home works entirely on electricity then either have a generator which you can use in emergencies or else make sure that you keep good stocks of candles, portable stoves and so on.

(21) Know your destiny. If you died tomorrow would you look down from heaven and be proud of what you had achieved? Are you getting the best out of yourself? Will others look back at your life with respect, love and affection? Are you spending your life the way you want to spend it? Remember that money won’t buy you immortality. (It isn’t what you own but what you do that matters.)

(22) Don’t worry about annoying the establishment. Everyone who achieves anything worthwhile annoys someone. And the people who annoy the most really important people usually achieve the most.

(23) Learn to deal with envy. If something good happens to you then try to feel happy and to enjoy what is

happening without thinking that what is happening to you is not as good as something that is happening to someone else.

(24) Don't be afraid of the dull moments. The good sea captain knew that sailors were always more likely to mutiny when they were bored and underemployed.

The Marquis de Spinola: *'What did your brother die of?'*

Sir Horace Vere: *'He died, Sir, of having nothing to do.'*

The Marquis de Spinola: *'Alas! That is enough to kill any of us.'*

Today, many people are driven 'out of their minds' by the tedium of machine minding or repetitive office work. Boredom is a greatly underestimated pressure in our modern lives. And it is because the opposite of boredom is excitement that so many young people with dull, boring lives drink themselves silly and take to violence. (This isn't the only reason, of course, but it is an important factor.) Our expectations have risen and our tolerance for boredom has shrunk. In the middle ages, when people couldn't read or write (even if there had been anything for them to read or write) and when there was no television, no radio and no cinema, people used to have to sit around in the dark evenings in a smoke filled room, shivering and trying to see one another with the aid of a candle or two. Travel was more or less impossible (particularly when the weather was bad and the roads were impassable) and so visitors were rare. Most people hardly ever travelled more than a few miles away from their homes. It is hardly surprising that such a boring lifestyle led to witch-hunts and the regular use of the stocks on the village green. (It is perhaps fortunate that a high infant mortality rate kept down the population. Without contraceptives there would surely otherwise have been an incredible increase in the size of the population. After all, what else was there to do?)

Today we are better able to combat boredom but we are more afraid of it. We are always searching for something new. And we take advantage of every new piece of technology to put ourselves under constantly increasing pressure. Television and radio shows try to broadcast information in short convenient sized bites because producers and editors know that most viewers and listeners cannot cope with great chunks of information. Magazine editors know the same thing: that is why their pages are so frequently broken up a great deal. If the book is ever killed it will not be television which does the killing – but the inability of prospective readers to cope with so much text.

What we have perhaps forgotten is that some boredom is essential for a healthy, balanced lifestyle. A little boredom can add relief and even spice to a life that is full of pressure. All the best novels and films break up the action occasionally with apparently boring bits of description or shots of scenery, designed to help build up the tension and add to the timing. Jerome K Jerome's book '*Three Men in a Boat*' (the funniest book ever written) shows precisely how the dull boring bits in a book can, in a strange way, be just as important to the success of the whole enterprise as the funny bits.

Learn to enjoy and take advantage of the quiet moments in your life.

CHAPTER NINETEEN: Don’t Give Up!

‘There is no greater calamity than to under estimate the strength of your enemy. For to under estimate the strength of your enemy is to lose the war. Therefore, when opposing troops meet in battle, victory belongs to the strategic planner.’

– Tao Te Jing by Lao Tsu

We live in a world in which resolve, diligence, perseverance and persistence are no longer respected values.

‘If at first you don’t succeed – give up’ seems to be a watchword for modern life.

And yet patience and perseverance can overcome just about any obstacle. The individual who is determined and prepared to work hard will almost always surpass the talented individual who is not determined nor prepared to work hard. I know two tennis players. One is brilliant. But erratic. He has little drive and cannot concentrate. He plays the best tennis I’ve ever seen – for a few games. The other player is very good but not brilliant. He has a limited range of shots and a weak serve. But he is consistent and he knows his weaknesses. He plays steadily. When these two players meet the very good player nearly always beats the brilliant player.

What on earth do you think happens to all those ‘bright’ boys and girls who take all the prizes at school? Precocity is no guide to future success because there are no school rewards for endeavour or for struggle. Churchill, Newton, Sheridan, Burns, Napoleon and Wellington were all ‘failures’ at school. Ulysses Grant, US Commander in Chief, was called Useless Grant by his mother. Dean Swift was a failure. Robert Clive was such an embarrassment to his family that he was packed off to Madras, India so that he would be out of sight. Abraham Lincoln and Handel were both over 40 before they achieved any success at all.

The often forgotten truth is that the man or woman who fails but tries, tries, tries and tries again will have a much greater chance of succeeding in life. Repeated failure can either instil a feeling of hopelessness or else a feeling of quiet but rugged and steely determination. If you persist with your desires then you will sweep aside all the opposition and get all the opportunities you seek.

If you intend to succeed – to achieve anything at all in almost any area of life – then in addition to overcoming all the natural obstacles you will encounter, and the obstacles which your enemies will deliberately put in your way, you will probably also have to ignore and overcome endless types of discouragement and negativity from those whom you might sensibly expect to be on your side.

Friends and relatives who are close to you will think of all sorts of reasons why you should not expect to succeed and why you are wasting your time and energy in even trying.

‘Don’t bother, it isn’t worth the effort,’ a friend will say. ‘You don’t stand a chance, so why waste your time,’ a relative will warn you smugly.

You must learn to be self reliant and you must acquire self confidence because anyone who has a purpose in life will attract jeering and sneering from those who prefer to stay in their ruts. You must be prepared for the fact that the jeering and sneering will often come loudest from close relatives or some of those whom you regard as your friends. ‘You can’t do that!’ they will say. ‘What makes you think you can do that?’

It seems that to many envy comes much easier than admiration and it is hardly surprising that however crowded about they may be with friends many people suffer agonies of loneliness throughout their lives.

If you make an effort to fulfil your ambitions, some friends will probably predict calamity and disaster and if and when things go wrong they will smugly point out that they ‘told you so’.

These dismal discouragements are to a certain extent inspired by an inbuilt prejudice against success but there is, sadly, also a good deal of resentment and jealousy involved.

People who have done little or nothing with their own lives, and who have accepted their place in society with little in the way of protest, do not find it easy to watch as someone else proves that ambition, fire, determination and energy can defeat all manner of obstacles.

And when you finally succeed in your endeavour they will not cheer you or offer congratulations; rather they will stand around waiting for some new disaster to befall you so that they can cheer your downfall and remind you that they warned you that no good would come of it all.

Success does not often come easily. The vast majority of those who seem to have an easy talent have acquired their skill through self belief, patience, commitment, perseverance and determination and through years of practice and hard work.

The writer who produces page after page of easy to read prose has learnt his trade by writing, writing, writing and writing. And still he probably polishes and hones and worries over each new sentence. The artist, dancer, orator, singer, sculptor or sports star who attracts plaudits and praise will have learned his or her skills through repetition, constant failure, hard work, labour, sweat, tears and possibly even blood. Turner, the painter, used to get paid half a crown a night to wash in the skies on other people’s drawings. He would illustrate guidebooks and do anything asked of him – not just because he needed the money but because he needed the practice. The trick that looks easy to perform is hard to learn. And luck has nothing to do with it. ‘It’s a funny thing,’ said a great golfing star, ‘but the more I practise, the luckier I get.’

* * *

When Mohammed the prophet had been preaching for ten years he was banished, impoverished and ridiculed. Yet before another decade was over he was dictator of all Arabia, ruler of Mecca and head of a new world religion. When the armies of Mohammed entered Jerusalem not one person was killed because of his faith (though when the crusaders entered the same city, centuries later, they did not spare a single Moslem man, woman or child).

When he was trying to produce a machine which could record and then reproduce the human voice Edison was told by those close to him that what he was trying to do was impossible. It was, they insisted, impossible because no one had ever done it before. He didn’t believe them. When he was trying to create light he tried out more than 10,000 different ideas before he (literally) saw the light.

People laughed at Henry Ford’s first motor car and told F. W. Woolworth that he would go broke if he tried to run a store selling items at five and ten cents. Pope Adrian IV was so poor when he was a boy that he studied by the lights of the lamps in the street and church porches.

When Benvenuto Cellini, Italian sculptor, painter, author and heaven knows what else, was told by the Grand Duke Cosmo of Florence that his model of Perseus could not possibly be cast in bronze he was determined to do the impossible.

When he had prepared the mould for the statue he purchased several loads of pine wood, filled his furnace with pieces of brass and bronze and lit his fire. The pine wood blazed so furiously that Cellini’s workshop caught fire. When the roof burnt away the rain came in and started to dowse the furnace and reduce the temperature. For hour after hour Cellini threw more wood onto the fire in order to raise the temperature high enough to melt the brass and the bronze. Eventually he became so exhausted that he collapsed and had to retire to his bed, leaving his assistants to continue feeding the fire. When a workman rushed into his bedroom to tell him that the whole project was proving a disaster because the fire had gone out and the metal had gone hard Cellini obtained more wood from a neighbour and got his fire going again. Eventually the metal started to flow. But it wasn’t flowing fast enough and so Cellini rushed into the kitchen and grabbed every piece of copper and pewter that he could find – around two hundred different dishes, kettles and so on – and threw them all into the furnace. Eventually the metal started to flow freely and easily and the statue of Perseus was cast.

Frenchman Bernard Pallissy spent sixteen years searching for a way to make enamel. He gave away all the furniture in his house in order to pay for his experiments and when he ran out of furniture he gave away most of his clothes to help pay his assistant’s wages. His family and his neighbours constantly reproached him for his recklessness. After he had eventually mastered the art of enamel making he was arrested for being a protestant in a strongly catholic country. He was condemned to be burnt to death but his life was saved by a nobleman because he was the only craftsman able to make the enamel needed for the château the nobleman was having built. After many more great achievements and numerous battles Pallissy died in the Bastille at the age of 79 – a rebel, a revolutionary and a free thinker to the very end of his life.

Benjamin Disraeli’s first books were laughed at. Later he became a highly successful novelist. When Disraeli made his maiden speech in the House of Commons in London he was a disaster. Other parliamentarians laughed at him. He didn’t give up but worked to overcome his faults, studied the audience, practised and worked slowly and patiently for success. He became British Prime Minister.

Sir Isaac Newton had many years of elaborate calculations destroyed when his dog upset a lit candle on his desk. T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) lost the manuscript of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* when his case disappeared on a railway station. Sir Thomas Carlyle had to rewrite the first volume of his book on the French Revolution after the manuscript was accidentally used by a maid to light a kitchen fire. He lent the only copy of the manuscript to a neighbour. But the man left the book lying on the parlour floor and forgot about it. When Carlyle asked for its return it turned out that the maid had been using the pile of papers to light the fires in the parlour and the kitchen. Carlyle had no draft and had to rewrite the whole massive book.

Audubon, the eminent American ornithologist, famous for his marvellous drawings of birds, put 200 original drawings in a wooden box and gave the box to a relative to look after. He then went away for several months. On his return he asked the relative for his box. The box, which had been placed in a safe place, was produced and Audubon discovered that a pair of Norwegian rats had moved in. A young family had been reared amongst and upon the gnawed pieces of paper. The drawings were destroyed. Audubon was numb for a few days but then he picked up his notebook and his pencils and went back into the woods, determined that he would make the new drawings even better than the old ones. It took him three years of work to replace the lost drawings.

Philosopher and writer Henry David Thoreau was sent to prison for fighting for what he believed in. John Bunyan wrote ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’ after he had been sent to prison because of his views on religion.

* * *

It has been said that knowing how to wait is the main secret of success. (There is an Eastern proverb which says: ‘Time and patience change the mulberry leaf to satin.’ and an Italian proverb which goes: ‘Che va piano, va longano, e va lontano’, meaning: ‘Who goes slowly, goes long and goes far.’) And patience and persistence are frequently two of the most important factors in any success. George Stephenson worked on his famous rocket for 15 years. James Watt spent 30 years working on his condensing engine.

Success may be due to industry and application, and to achieving a mastery of a chosen subject. And men who have changed the world have often been men of mediocre talents who were blessed with passion and intensity. But rarely does success come without an untiring sense of perseverance and determination. No one can succeed without planning but persistence – which itself is usually derived from a driving sense of purpose – is a vital and frequently underestimated ingredient.

* * *

It is a mistake to assume that obstinacy alone denotes strength. A weak man can be stubborn. A stupid man can be stubborn. And a man who is both very weak and very stupid can be very stubborn indeed. But obstinacy – in a way just another word for gritty determination – is an essential ingredient for anyone who genuinely wishes to succeed in some aspect of life and who is prepared to overcome whatever obstacles may be placed in the way. Ludwig van Beethoven the composer was deaf. John Milton the poet was blind. Charles Dickens, the novelist, started work pasting labels on blacking pots.

Just wanting something is not enough. You must *want* it and *need* it. In order to achieve you must believe that you can reach your ambitions. Hoping and wishing isn’t enough. You must believe that you can achieve.

* * *

At the age of ten Dr Livingstone was sent to work in a cotton factory near Glasgow. With some of his first week’s wages he bought himself a Latin grammar so that he could begin to educate himself. He had to be at work at six every morning but he would sit up working until twelve or even later. Many nights he simply stayed up studying until he was sent to bed by his mother. He read everything he could. He even propped books up against the machinery on which he was working so that he could keep on reading. He put a book on a spinning jenny so that he could read a sentence at a time as he passed the book. Eventually Livingstone became a doctor and a missionary (he continued his factory work throughout his education to pay for his food and lodgings and books). His whole career is one huge story of determination and perseverance.

If you are going to persevere with your aims then you must ensure that you are ‘driven’. You must give your life a purpose and specific aims. You must know what you want out of life and you must turn those wants into needs.

Your drive will give you the willpower to force yourself on but you will also need to enlist the support of those around you and you will need to accumulate the knowledge that is necessary for you to achieve your aims.

CHAPTER TWENTY: Aim To Become Financially Independent

(You Can Be As Rich As You Want To Be If You Harness Your Inner Strength)

'He who knows when he has got enough is rich.'

– Tao Te Jing by Lao Tsu

'It is necessary to plan and to organise in order to get rich. Staying poor is very easy; poverty needs no plan.'

– Napoleon Hill

'The control of the production of wealth is the control of human life itself.'

– Hilaire Belloc

'Poverty takes away so many means of doing good, and produces so much inability to resist evil, both natural and moral, that it is by all virtuous means to be avoided...Let it be your first care, then, not to be in any man's debt. Resolve not to be poor, whatever you have spend less. Poverty is a great enemy to human happiness; it certainly destroys liberty, and it makes some virtues impracticable and others extremely difficult.'

– Dr Samuel Johnson

'Not for to hide it in a hedge,
Nor for a train attendant,
But for the glorious privilege
Of being independent. '

– Robert Burns

Most poor people imagine that most – if not all – of their worries would disappear if they could become rich. It is a simple belief which partly explains the success of gambling all over the world. Instant wealth seems to offer instant solutions to all of life's problems.

Money certainly helps: there is no doubt that having money enables you to do many things. Whoever controls the money controls almost everything else. No one (except a pathological hoarder) wants money for its own sake: people want money because of the power it offers and the choices it gives.

Of course, theoretically, you don't need money to be a great man or woman. You don't need money in order to think or create. You don't need money in order to become a great artist or a successful inventor. You don't need money to become a leader of men, a great orator or a powerful writer.

But in practice you need money in order to do all those things. Not just to buy food, clothes and the equipment you need to do your job – but also to buy the time and independence you need. Money is valueless by itself, but used properly it can buy you a lot more than mere stuff. It can buy you freedom.

The man or woman who works as a 'slave' for eight, ten or twelve hours a day, earning a living to pay the mortgage, the grocer and other tradesmen will have little time or energy left for his own work. You need money saved so that you can continue to keep a roof over your head, food in your stomach and clothes on your back even when the work doesn't come or when you are sick.

Remove the need for worry about the three basic needs (food, shelter and clothing) and you can allow your mind to roam free – and without limits. You can afford to take risks and try out new projects – which may have a lengthy gestation period with no immediate prospect of profit – without worrying about staying warm and fed. The man or woman who lives from hand to mouth will remain impotent and helpless throughout his or her life.

The big mistake most people make is not to realise that money also means self respect, freedom and independence. Savings provide protection against 'want' and against being 'used' by an unfair, unscrupulous or exploitative employer.

If you have money you can be as eccentric as you like: poor people who behave differently are described as mad and get locked away and sedated; rich people who behave differently are described as eccentric and people pander to their every whim.

We make our own independence and freedom and we make those glorious and invaluable intangibles possible through the money we make. Savings give hope, security and the ability to wait and negotiate from a position of strength. Money gives a freedom of action and can help produce a richness of the spirit.

There is a widespread feeling in some parts of society that money is in some way unclean and that the possession of money is a reason for guilt. This is no accident. The bureaucrats who run our society know that a man who remains on the edge of poverty is close to slavery. He has to take whatever work is available at whatever rate is offered. He is in no position to negotiate from strength.

With a little money in the bank you can say 'stuff you' to anyone who tries to make you do something you don't want to do.

Money can help you find happiness, long life, enjoyment, freedom and peace of mind. Anyone who tells you otherwise is either a bureaucrat (who knows that a person who has money – and is therefore independent – is a danger to the orderly world bureaucrats like to create), or rich (and protecting what they see as their own position) or poor (and looking for excuses and alibis for being poor).

* * *

You don’t need a plan to fail or to be poor. Being poor is easy. Anyone can do it. But if you want to succeed, or you want to be rich (or both), then you need a plan.

Like a potential lover money must be wooed. You must want to be rich. And you must be prepared to be rich. Any man who wants to get rich and who is prepared to put a little effort into it can become rich by the simple expedient of spending less than he earns; putting a little money aside on a regular basis and investing wisely.

A long time ago a Parisian called Osterwald used to visit a local public house to drink one pint of beer every evening for his supper. Every time he visited the pub he collected all the corks he could find. After eight years he sold all the corks he had collected for 8 Louis d’ors – a considerable sum – which he then invested on the stock market. He became a very rich man and when he died he left a fortune worth three million francs.

The first thing to understand – and to remember – is that rich people are not normally any cleverer than other people. Rich people do not work harder than other people, they are not better educated, they don’t have a better background, they do not have better chances in life, they do not have exceptional talents, they do not have better training and they don’t even have more luck. (Analyse how people make money and you will see that luck plays a very small part in things.)

People who are successful and/or who make a great deal of money invariably do so because they take full advantage of the skills they have and of the opportunities which come their way.

And they have a plan. They know exactly what they want and where they want to be in five or ten years time – and how they are going to get what they want and how they are going to get where they want to be. They also ignore the rules and they take no notice of the people who say ‘you can’t do that’ or ‘it isn’t done that way.’

They also know that big money isn’t dug out in bits. It flows.

* * *

The man or woman who intends to become independently wealthy (independent in that he can choose the work he does) will be sensible with his money. He will know how to economise so that he can always save. He will save what he can not so that he can point to a growing bank balance but so that he can regain his freedom and do what he wishes with his time.

It might be expected that most people who work hard for every penny they earn, and who have great ambitions, hopes and dreams, would be sensible with their money. But they aren’t. Most people waste the money they earn on alcohol, tobacco, gambling and impressing the neighbours. They try to live up to the limit of their incomes. Many men fear the appearance of poverty more even than they fear poverty. They would rather be dishonest than poor. And so they spend every penny they earn impressing strangers. The result is that they spend their lives as wage slaves – entirely dependent on others. Those who have wasted their resources will always be slaves.

* * *

Money needs to be told who is the boss.

Acquiring and saving money is important but you should know when to stop.

There is a tendency among many men and women who are successful to forget what their original aims were. There is a grave danger that earning and saving for a good, sound purpose – protecting oneself and one’s family and acquiring a certain independence from the world – may become saving for savings sake. Too great a regard for money may lead to miserliness, greed, selfishness and a dangerous and unhealthy love of wealth for its own sake (rather than for what it can do).

Many people continue to push themselves hard long after they have achieved their original ambitions and made all the money they are likely to need. They carry on working because they never stop to ask themselves why they are working or what they are working for. There are many men and women who are driving themselves to an early grave earning money which they will never be able to spend, or striving to satisfy an employer who will never appreciate their endeavours.

There are many individuals whose sole aim seems to be to be able to leave a lot of money so that everyone will see what their score was when the game ended for them. As if anyone cares.

The trick is always to be prepared to ask yourself ‘Why?’ when you are earning and, when you have earned it, ‘So What?’

* * *

You also need to know what you mean by ‘rich’ and, more particularly, what you consider to be ‘rich enough’. My definition is that ‘rich enough’ means having the money to be able to afford to live the lifestyle you enjoy, to do the things you want to do, to buy the necessities you need and (perhaps most important of all) to refuse to do the things you don’t want to do without worrying about the financial consequences. That is rich. Once you are rich by your own standards and definition then the accumulation of additional wealth will be of little significance. Many people who regard themselves as poor could comfortably regard themselves as rich if they would reduce wastage and unnecessary expectations.

Those who become most truly independent through the accumulation of money, and who acquire the greatest satisfaction and contentment through their money, are those who have raised their wealth above their wants. That, after all, is the only definition of ‘rich’ which really counts. The man who has enough or more than he needs in order to be independent is rich enough.

* * *

It is a mistake to think of success (and, in particular, financial success) as a satisfactory aim for life. It isn’t enough. Making money by itself is not enough of a challenge and if you get there it will become boring and pointless unless you have some deeper purpose.

Remember that people who have worked hard for many years often find it difficult to know what to do with their leisure hours. A large proportion of successful men and women rarely – if ever – take proper holidays. They could afford the best holidays in the world. They could earn all the money they need by simply working for twenty or fewer hours a week. But they don’t know how to enjoy themselves when they aren’t working.

If money and success cost too much in terms of life itself then the money and the success are too dearly bought. Making money can, if you are not careful, eventually become the goal instead of the means to a goal. Why else would so many men and women with big salaries and comfortable bank balances fret about making even more?

* * *

Rich people may not have the same problems as poor people – but most of them certainly do have problems, fears and anxieties. Money can make life smoother (it means you can take a taxi instead of the bus) but it does not eradicate problems.

The commonest, biggest and most important fear rich people have is that they will one day lose all their money. Once a rich person acquires this fear it tends to increase in intensity with wealth. After all, the more money you’ve got the more you have got to lose.

This fear is particularly likely to strike those who have acquired their wealth through luck or good fortune rather than through skill, ambition, talent and hard work. The individual who has earned his money will know that he can probably do it all again if necessary. And, if he looks back, he will know that earning the money was probably just as much fun as having it. He will not be quite so frightened of poverty as the individual who has acquired his wealth through a legacy or a lucky gambling win.

When you acquire money you should remember that the best things money can buy you are not luxury homes, yachts, private aeroplanes or chauffeur driven limousines but security, leisure, freedom and time. And you really do not need as much money for those ‘luxuries’ as you do if you start acquiring millionaire toys and enjoying the sort of physical lifestyle that a millionaire should enjoy. (In the section headed ‘Do You Really Need All That Stuff? I have explained how the physical trappings of wealth – i.e. the possessions with which rich people tend to surround themselves – can be a burden.)

* * *

You must make sure that you manage your money. Don’t let it manage you.

One big mistake people often make when they acquire more money than they need to buy daily essentials is to decide to try to increase their wealth dramatically.

This can be a fatal mistake.

The businessmen who has made his money through selling a product he knows well, or the talented individual who has made a fortune through his talents, or the lucky individual who has acquired money through good fortune, may all decide that they are going to double their wealth in a matter of months through aggressive investing.

This is commonly a quick route back to poverty for being greedy will often result in disaster.

People often forget that whenever they buy something as an investment someone else must be selling. The investment that you are certain is a good buy is, to someone else, a good sell. Whenever you decide that ‘now’ is a good time to buy someone else must have decided that ‘now’ is a good time to sell.

It is wiser, by far, to find a spread of safe investments which will enable you to make a good, sound, steady return without worry. You can then get on with the work you know or, if you wish, with having a good time, free of the anxieties which will inevitably ensue if you start dabbling in a world about which you know nothing. If you can get an investment return on your money of 1% above inflation then your money is making money for you.

As far as money is concerned you must remember not to trust anyone who offers advice. Don’t trust banks. Don’t trust investment advisers. Don’t trust stockbrokers. Don’t trust insurance companies. They all want you for your money. They pretend to like you. But they want your money.

The only person in the world you can trust to look after your money properly is – *you.* Always remember that your investments do not love you and will not show you any loyalty. Just because you keep a share through good times and bad times you cannot expect the share to give you a good return.

Remember that all investment is gambling. The odds differ but whenever you invest your money you are taking a gamble.

Remember too that whatever else they may say governments and society want you to spend all your money – and to keep on spending way past your cash limits.

The more you spend the richer society will become – and the more of a slave you will become. And the individual who *owes* money is a real slave to society.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE: Take Risks – But Calculate The Odds First

‘The battle of life is, in most cases, fought up hill... if there were no difficulties there would be no success; if there were nothing to struggle for, there would be nothing to be achieved... All experience of life, indeed, serves to prove that the impediments thrown in the way of human advancement may for the most part be overcome by steady good conduct, honest zeal, activity, perseverance, and above all by a determined resolution to surmount difficulties, and stand up manfully against misfortune.’

– Samuel Smiles

The saddest words in any language are: ‘If only...’, ‘It might have been...’ and ‘I wonder what would have happened if...’.

Make two lists. On the first list write down all the errors you have committed and which you now regret; the mistakes you know that you have made and which you now wish you could have avoided. On the second list write down all the errors of omission you have made; the things you haven’t done but which you now wish you had done.

Whichever list is the longer will tell you a great deal about yourself – and will, perhaps, give you a hint about how you should conduct your life in the future.

If your first list is the longest then maybe you are being a little reckless – and taking too many risks. But if the second list is the longest (and many people are surprised to find that this is the case) then you should perhaps be taking more risks

* * *

If you are going to take risks successfully you need to be able to assess the bottom line with some degree of accuracy. Only when you know the bottom line will you be able comfortably to take chances that you might otherwise avoid. Constantly ask yourself: ‘What is the worst that can happen?’ ‘What will/could happen if I do/don’t do this?’

Whenever you are taking a risk find out the bottom line: what is the worst that can possibly happen? You may be surprised to hear that there are not many risks which can make the sky fall in or stop the world going round.

* * *

Most of us regard risk taking as both hazardous and unnecessary. And many people would say that they try to avoid risks whenever they can. Some people probably seriously believe that they are wise in constantly doing all they can to eradicate risk from their lives.

But taking risks is a necessary and unavoidable part of life. Every decision worth making is potentially dangerous. There is a risk in every venture you undertake – personal, professional or commercial.

Every time you get out of bed or walk out of your home you are taking a risk. Every time you make an investment you are taking a risk. (Despite words such as ‘guaranteed’ there is no such thing as a safe investment. Even a government bond can be risky if the government falls.) Every time you begin a new relationship or a new business project you are taking a risk. It is impossible to live without taking risks.

But what you can do is to make an attempt to quantify the risks before beginning any new venture. Only when you have quantified the risks can you make a sound judgement about whether or not an individual risk is worth taking. You must put risks into perspective.

I know of a man who takes vitamin supplements because he believes that the vitamin will help reduce his risk of developing cancer. But he smokes heavily. If he really wants to reduce his cancer risk he would be much better advised to stop smoking.

* * *

One of the great tragedies of life is that we tend to take fewer risks as we get older. We become more wary of danger and more aware of the things that can go wrong. The danger is that a preoccupation with safety may reduce the possibility of success.

We should take more – not less – risks as we get older. After all, as we age we have less to lose. Regularity, habit and commonsense tend to paralyse. Not taking risks is sometimes the riskiest and most dangerous option.

The security and comfort which ordinary people enjoy has always been achieved because exceptional individuals have been prepared to take risks.

You should learn to take risks which have the highest possible upside and the lowest possible downside. In order to succeed you have to be able to assess risks accurately. You should learn from your own mistakes but (and this is just as important) you should also learn from other peoples mistakes. Knowing the bottom line leads to confidence which leads to success.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO: You Have More Power Than You Think You Have

‘Power may be defined as organised and intelligently directed knowledge.’

– Napoleon Hill

You need power to make money and to keep it. You need power to remain independent and to retain your freedom.

But where does power come from? How can ordinary people obtain power?

The answer is disarmingly simple.

If you add knowledge, ambition, faith, desire, plans and persistence together you usually end up with power.

Mahatma Gandhi obtained power by persuading over 200 million people to coordinate their minds, bodies and spirits for a single purpose.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE: Do You Really Need All That Stuff?

‘No man ever stood the lower in my estimation for having a patch in his clothes; yet I am sure that there is greater anxiety, commonly, to have fashionable, or at least clean and un-patched clothes, than to have a sound conscience.’

– Henry David Thoreau

‘Happiness is found in doing, not merely in possessing.’

– Napoleon Hill

‘Fill your house with gold and jade,
And it can no longer be fully guarded.
If you set store by your riches and honour,
You will only reap a crop of calamities.’
– Tao Te Jing by Lao Tsu

I know a handyman who earns his living painting, bricklaying and doing bits of carpentry. He’s a real jack-of-all-trades and he’s very good at what he does. But it’s difficult to get him to come and do anything because he only works two or three days a week. The rest of the time he messes around on his boat or in his garden.

A few months ago I asked him why he didn’t work harder.

He explained that he didn’t see any point in earning more money than he needed to satisfy his fairly simple needs. He told me that he has paid off his mortgage, that although old and rather battered his car is his own and that he has all the furniture he wants. He has, he told me, managed to put aside a few hundred pounds in the building society for emergencies.

I asked him if his wife was happy with this philosophical approach to employment. He said that she was very happy and that they spent much of the week gardening together, walking along the cliffs or, on sunny days, bobbing around in their little boat. He also told me that he and his wife don’t have holidays away from home because for them home is a pretty constant holiday but that they do spend a day every month travelling to demonstrations against hunting, vivisection and other examples of cruelty to animals.

He also told me that because his earnings are low he pays hardly any income tax.

I found his attitude enormously refreshing. This local handyman is leading the life of a true revolutionary. I suspect that Henry David Thoreau, the philosopher of Walden Pond, would have been proud of him.

Before you dismiss the handyman’s lifestyle as impractical ask yourself how much of your life you spend earning money to buy things you don’t really need and are only buying to impress people you don’t really care about.

Here’s a simple little exercise you can try.

Make a list of everything other than food that you’ve bought in the last six months. By the side of each item on your list make a note of the price you paid.

Then divide your after-tax annual income by the number of hours you work to find out how much you earn an hour. Don’t forget to deduct any essential business expenses from your income before you do this calculation.

Now you can easily use this figure to find out how long you had to work to buy each of the items on your first list.

This can be a frightening exercise for you’ll quickly realise that you’ve given a great deal of your life in order to buy junk that you don’t really need.

Add up the cost of all the unnecessary stuff you bought last year and work out how much of your life you wasted earning money to buy stuff that hasn’t improved or changed your life.

The whole point of modern advertising is to persuade people to buy things they don’t need; to turn shallow wants into desperate ‘must haves’.

It is skilful advertising which encourages otherwise sane people to spend a fortune on double glazing which will never pay for itself and to spend thousands of pounds ripping out a perfectly serviceable kitchen and replacing it with another, slightly different kitchen.

And, of course, the more money you have to earn to buy all this stuff that you don’t really need the more income tax you will have had to pay.

If you are happy with the things the government buys with your money then you won’t mind giving them great chunks of it. But are you really happy with what they do with it?

I’m not suggesting that the handyman’s life style is right for everyone.

But you might like to think about all this a little for the next day or two.

* * *

We live in a society which encourages the accumulation of goods: a smart, shiny motor car; a beautiful home; a wardrobe full of expensive, beautiful designed clothes – these are what we are encouraged to work towards.

If you are not careful the stuff you think you own could end up owning you. Our world has been taken over by a lot of materialistic, acquisitive nonsense. We buy telephones shaped like the sports cars we cannot afford, garden gnomes, coffee table books that no one ever reads, fancy toilet roll holders, lotions to make fat thighs thin, special pens to help us pick our lottery numbers (described as ‘great conversation pieces’ though it is surely a sorry sort of conversation which needs that sort of boost), creams to make small breasts melon sized and to make melon sized breasts positively breathtaking and all sorts of other nonsenses. We buy things for the sake of buying. We buy presents that are neither beautiful nor useful.

Some years ago I bought myself a Rolls Royce.

I tell you this not out of pride or vanity but because I learned valuable lessons through this, and the subsequent, experiences. And maybe you can learn something too from my mistakes.

A socialist in Britain once suggested that there should be an extra tax on large and extremely expensive cars. He was wrong. Large and extremely expensive cars should not be taxed at all: they are a curse on those who own them.

My Rolls Royce wasn’t a new one but a gracious, elderly classic, roughly the size of Belgium. It was so large that I needed planning permission to park it and so thirsty that I could leave the fuel pump pouring gas into the tank while I went and had my lunch.

For the first day or two owning the car was fun. But it quickly became something of a nightmare. Every time there were problems with the car – or it needed a service – I had to send it on a several hundred mile journey back to the garage from which I had bought it. Because the car was valuable it usually made the journey on a low loader. At the time I was living in a house in the country and the low loader used to have great difficulty making it through the lanes.

Eventually, there were serious problems with the paintwork on the car and I sent the car back.

But I hadn’t got the idea of owning a large, luxurious motor car entirely out of my system. I had always promised myself that if I ever had enough money I would buy a Bentley. So within days of sending the Rolls Royce back I bought my first Bentley. This, like the Rolls Royce, was rather elderly, extremely large, and quite beautiful.

The snag with the car was that it was so beautiful and so well preserved that I was rather frightened of damaging it. So, believe it or not, (and I confess I now find this rather difficult to believe myself) I bought a second, more modern, Bentley for day-to-day use.

Those two Bentleys more or less ran my life for the next couple of years.

One evening I left one of the cars parked outside a Town Hall (just a few yards away from a police station) while I attended a birthday party. When I got back to the car it had been deliberately scratched. A vandal had dragged a key, a penknife or some other sharp metal object along the boot, the car doors and the bonnet.

The first respray wasn’t successful because it was difficult to match the colour of the paint and in the end the car had to be completely resprayed at a cost of around £10,000. Naturally, the insurance company declined to pay the whole of this sum.

After that I didn’t dare leave either of the Bentleys parked without someone to watch them and make sure that they were not damaged.

The costs of maintenance were phenomenal too (I remember paying around £1,500 for an exhaust pipe for one of the cars – and being told that I was really rather lucky to get it at such a bargain price).

Since the insurance company stipulated that both cars had to be kept in a locked garage I had to get special permission if I wanted to go away for the night and park either car at a hotel.

The final straw came when, following advice from a specialist garage, I found myself buying a high pressure hose to make sure that the cars were kept properly cleaned – there was a lot of mud in the area where I lived.

When I discovered that I had to find someone to operate the hose I suddenly realised how absurd the whole exercise had become. My two Bentleys had become a drain. I was over-Bentleyed by a factor of two.

The ownership of these vehicles, designed to give me fun, was causing me aggravation and trouble, anxiety and worry. Within a day or two of realising this, I sold both cars to a dealer for a fraction of their value. I just wanted to get rid of them.

As the cars disappeared from my driveway I felt a tinge of sadness but mostly I felt free. And I realised that I had learned a very costly but extremely valuable lesson.

Today, when I see someone driving a Rolls Royce, a Bentley or some other expensive motor car I feel nothing but pity. I had bought those motor cars to add something to my life. But although they had each given me some pleasure they had all taken far more from me than they had given back. I hadn’t owned the cars – they had owned me.

* * *

There are several valuable and important lessons to be learned here.

First, do not allow material possessions, belongings of any kind, to take over your life. Next time you are buying something other than an everyday item ask yourself if you are making the purchase because you want it or need it or because you have been persuaded to buy it by someone else – or, worse still, by society. And then remember how many hours you have to work to earn that item.

And regularly take time to go through all your possessions and sort out those which you want to keep and those that you neither want nor need to keep. Sorting through (‘spring-cleaning’) your possessions has several advantages. It will enable you to see exactly what you have got (you may be surprised to discover things you had forgotten you owned) and it will also enable you to convert unwanted items into cash. You will have more space available and you will be able to find and use the belongings which are left more easily and more effectively. Clear out the stuff you own at regular intervals and throw away everything which doesn’t add value to your life. If you haven’t used something or worn something for six or twelve months sell it or give it to a charity shop.

And always remember William Morris’s saying: ‘Have nothing in your home that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful.’

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR: Use Technology – Don’t Let It Use You

(You Don’t Have To Use It Just Because It’s Been Invented)

‘Year by year we are becoming better equipped to accomplish the things we are striving for. But what are we striving for?’

– Dr Lawrence Peter

Writing in his HSL newsletter not long ago my dear friend Chevalier Harry D. Schultz said: ‘Ironically, the technology of fax and answering machines, e-mail, cellular phones, and networked computers that promised to save us time and make our lives less stressful, only increased the urgency we feel to respond and ‘be switched on’ at all times. One would think with all these high tech ‘conveniences’ we would be putting in shorter work days and enjoying more leisure time. Sadly, just the opposite is true. With the pace of society spiralling frenetically, joy will become increasingly elusive unless you seek it out by taking conscious control of your life, your time, and your priorities.’

Harry Schultz is absolutely right. Instead of giving us more freedom and greater opportunities new equipment often provides more stress and greater pressure.

For example, the fax machine has made it possible for us to communicate with one another far more speedily. Before the introduction of the fax machine it would take several days to move a letter or a document from one desk to another. Today the same letter or document can be moved from one desk to another within seconds.

The result is that the recipient is under great pressure to respond speedily.

And so, in the end, everyone communicates far more frequently than they did before.

But the increase in the amount of communicating does not automatically result in an increase in the amount of profitable (in all senses of the word) endeavour.

Technology doesn’t make life easier, it just makes life faster. Technology enables us to do more things and it enables us to do them more speedily but it is doesn’t enable us to do them better, easier or with more style.

Think about it and I suspect you’ll agree with me that Harry Schultz is absolutely right.

Most of us are surrounded by labour saving gadgets which add to our daily stress rather than reducing it. Worse still, we often allow those gadgets to dominate our lives and our thinking. Telephones, fax machines and computers bring messages to us so quickly that we feel we must attend to them immediately.

But why should you always rush to answer the telephone or fax when it is inconvenient to do so, or when you really want to rest and relax?

How many times in your life is it truly essential to produce an immediate response?

Many gadgets are expensive, complicated and unreliable. We fall for them because we believe they will make our lives easier. But often they do just the opposite.

Take a close look at every facet of your life. Throw out the gadgets which are more trouble than they are worth. Try not to bring equipment from work into your home area. And don’t allow any sort of equipment (particularly communications equipment) to rule your life.

Don’t be afraid to turn off telephones, television sets and computers. Make a real effort to use gadgets to *improve* your life – and reduce your workload.

And when you can feel yourself being pressurised into dealing with numerous apparently urgent and vital problems stop and ask yourself just how significant those problems will be in six months or six years time. That should help put the apparent urgency of those problems into perspective.

Just because the technology is available it doesn’t necessarily follow that it is essential to use it – or, indeed, that it is or would be wise to use it.

Sometimes the simpler technologies are much better.

As I was writing this chapter I telephoned a friend who works in a very large organisation. She was out. The colleague who answered the telephone told me that he would leave a message on her computer. My heart sank. I realised that if he put a message into her e-mail it would probably lie there unnoticed for days.

‘Exactly what do you mean by ‘put a message on her computer’?’ I asked him.

‘I’ll scribble a note on a yellow sticky pad and put the note on her computer screen,’ said the wise man.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE: Never Do Another Day’s Work In Your Life *(And Still Get Rich)*

‘Work is my chief pleasure.’

– Mozart

Work takes up a large part of most peoples’ lives. And it is work which usually defines you and your life.

One of the first questions strangers invariably ask is: ‘What do you do for a living?’

When describing someone to a third person their occupation is usually something we include within the first few sentences. (‘He’s a teacher. Tall, middle aged, slightly scruffy but has a great sense of humour.’ ‘She’s in her mid twenties, blonde, bubbly and very bright. She works as a hairdresser at a salon in town.’)

And yet, tragically, work is, to most people, a tiresome and largely unpleasant experience. If they get pleasure out of their work it is often despite the work they do – rather than because of it. Their enjoyment may, for example, come from the relationships they have with the people with whom they work. In many cases the only pleasure comes from the weekly or monthly pay check.

What a tragedy this all is. How much better it is to find work that you enjoy and look forward to. If you enjoy and look forward to your work then you will do it far better, far more effectively, far more productively, and consequently far more profitably, than if it is something which you suffer purely for the financial reward.

You should not regard work as a burden. If you do then you are doing the wrong job. You should rethink your attitude to work completely.

Almost without exception the people who make a real success of their lives – and who make a great deal of money – are the people who enjoy what they do for a living. They look forward to work because it provides many satisfactions in addition to the financial one.

As far as work is concerned the most fortunate people in the world are those who say: ‘I love my job. Don’t tell anyone but I’d do it even if they didn’t pay me to do it.’ These are people who get rich without ever doing a day’s real ‘work’.

Work is anything you don’t want to do. If you make sure that your work is its own reward then the chances are that you will do well at it. The more you don’t want to do it the more it becomes work.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX: Don’t Be Afraid To Be A Rebel

‘The barriers are not erected which can say to aspiring talents and industry: ‘Thus far and no farther.’

– Ludwig van Beethoven

We should all be disrespectful to our leaders. Their duty is to lead, our duty is to remind them that we put them there. Without criticism leaders become dictators.

What is authority there for but to be rebelled against? Unless people rebelled there would be no need for authority.

It is not unreasonable to argue that rebellion is essential for the survival of authority. Anyone who rebels could reasonably argue that he was helping to sustain authority. The sole real function of grey, politically correct authority is to provide a sounding board for the rebels whose ancestors created our present society and whose descendants will create tomorrow’s society. Authoritarians should be deeply grateful to rebels and anarchists for without rebellions and threats of anarchy they would not know they had authority and would never know the joy they doubtless obtain from abusing it and finding new ways to circumvent justice.

You should not be afraid to be unconventional. The boys and girls who seemed to be the high ‘achievers’ at school often turn out to be life’s drones. Those who are popular with their teachers and who do particularly well at school usually end up doing something dreary like managing the local sewage works.

But you must use humour in order to take the sting out of the hatred and the fury of the conventional. If you attack a conventional man for being ordinary he will hate you because, in his heart, he knows that you are right. But if you laughingly apologise for your eccentricity then he will accept you.

Throughout my career I have frequently been warned that the things I have done will ruin my career, will prevent me earning a living and will stop people publishing my work or buying my books.

I confess that I now feel uncomfortable if something I plan to do is praised or supported by those whom I regard as conventional.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN: Be Positive!

'Impossible is a word only to be found in the dictionary of fools.'

– Napoleon Bonaparte

Decide today that you will have no more destructive, negative or unproductive thoughts. Banish fear, jealousy, hatred, revenge, resentment, greed, superstition and anger. Fill your mind, instead, with love, faith, desire, enthusiasm and hope.

Every time you find yourself face to face with a problem try to see how you can deal with it, how you can get round it, what you can learn from it and how the experience can strengthen you. Try to discover what good you can derive from something that seems wholly bad.

If you ask yourself 'Why do I feel so bad?' or 'Why is life treating me so unfairly?' then the only answers you can possibly receive will substantiate and strengthen your feelings of failure.

You must start asking yourself questions which will lead to an improvement in your life. Try asking yourself things like: 'How can I improve my life?', 'How can I find myself a better job?', 'How can I make this job more enjoyable?'

If you constantly think in a negative way (for example: 'I feel frustrated', 'Nothing is going my way') then you will simply create further discontent and unhappiness.

On the other hand, if you say to yourself: 'What can I learn from this?', 'What can I do about that?' 'How can I change this to my advantage?' then you will move forwards, rather than backwards.

Ask yourself questions which take you further on in your life. Wallowing in the past is easy. It takes courage to move forward and to face each problem with determination.

By taking a positive attitude you will enrich and strengthen your mind.

(And remember that your mind is your spiritual estate and your body is its home. You should look after your mind and your body better than you look after all your physical possessions. Your mind and your body are the only two possessions which cannot be replaced.)

* * *

You should take care not to spend too much time with people who depress you with their negative attitudes. Those who are filled with negativity often spend their time mentally besieged by their own negative aura; spreading gloom, doom and a sense of failure to all those around them.

If other people tell you often enough that you are no good at something you will eventually come to believe them. And then, in due course, your belief will become reality.

The truth is that you can do anything you want to do if only you believe you can. Don't worry about aiming to win; just aim to do your best.

And learn to differentiate between positive, constructive criticism (which can be useful) and negative, carping criticism which is unlikely to add any value to your life.

A few years ago I used to worry enormously about what critics had to say. When they wrote things which were blatantly unfair or simply untrue I felt a burning need to respond. I have learnt to ignore much (if not all) inaccurately based criticism.

Most negative criticism which is published is written by individuals who have achieved nothing of value in their own lives or who are biased or prejudiced because their views have been 'bought' with a small cheque.

You should even learn to take a positive attitude towards your mistakes. Be careful not to let your mistakes depress you too much. Instead of allowing your mistakes to knock you backwards make sure that you gain something from them.

Everyone makes mistakes. If you spend your time merely regretting then you will gain nothing from your errors. But if you make sure that you learn from your errors then you will eventually realise that mistakes are an essential, vital part of progress.

Ask yourself these two simple questions. First, if you had a chance to relive your life up until today would you avoid the mistakes you made before? Second, and more importantly, would you see the warning signs – the small signs that signal the start of major problems ahead?

Remember that you do not have to explain, excuse or justify the things you do. And nor should you change what you do every time a stranger criticises you or offers some negative comment. You can be anything you want to be and whoever you want to be. All you have to do is go out and do it.

Fill your mind with positive emotions and there will be no room for the negative ones. Concentrate on looking for solutions and answers rather than worrying about questions and problems. Learn from your mistakes – and don't be afraid to keep on making them!

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT: Learn The Secrets Of Negotiation – And Remember That Everything Is Negotiable

'The family of emotions 'gratitude, friendship, respect etc' on which a stable society is based lose their meaning when it comes to the nomads, whose social conditions have created a different spirit. It is absurd to expect gratitude from the Moors, as it would be absurd to condemn them for being ungrateful. The sentiment of gratitude in its European sense follows from a set of social conditions in which contacts and needs are permanent; a given nomadic tribe will have a very different need tomorrow from the one it has today.'

– Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Everyone negotiates. The local car dealer and the real estate agent expect you to negotiate when they give you a price. Whether you are buying a product or a service you have to be capable of negotiating.

There are several simple guidelines to follow when negotiating.

First, you must know what your opponent needs and what his deadline is.

Second, don't bluff unless you are extremely adept at it.

Third, don't be afraid to change your mind. Indeed, if you acquire a reputation for changing your mind a great deal it can make it tricky for other people to negotiate with you for they will find it difficult to predict exactly what you are going to do or how you are going to react to given circumstances.

Fourth, you must be prepared to walk away from the deal. You must be always be prepared for the deal to break down. If you are negotiating for a higher salary you must always be prepared to resign. You must do everything you can to ensure that you are always in a position where you can resign. And you must be sure that the person with whom you are negotiating knows that you can and will (if necessary) resign.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE: Beware Of Compromise

‘I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul.’

– William Henley

Most people accept compromises in their lives. Every day they make another small compromise. Each compromise may be very small and may seem unimportant in itself. But although each compromise may appear to be no more than an unavoidable, incidental and momentary concession to the requirements of the real world, each compromise takes them further and further from the path which will lead them to their destination in life.

You owe it to yourself to get the most out of your life and your talents – and everything you do.

* * *

Jack wanted to be an artist but he had difficulty selling his work when he left college. And he desperately wanted to be able to buy a car. So he got a temporary job designing chocolate box covers for a local company. And while he was working there, earning enough money to buy his car, someone offered him a job on the company magazine. The money seemed attractive and the job didn’t sound too bad. And it was nice to be able to afford decent clothes and records and books and pay for a meal in a restaurant once in a while. And then he met a girl and they decided to set up home together so they found a slightly larger flat with a bigger monthly rental. And then he had commitments. And then the girl got pregnant and a full time job came up and it was important that he took the job.

And suddenly, before he knew what had happened, it was ten years later. And he was too tired to do any of the work he dreamt of doing.

One day he met a former classmate who had carved out a career as an artist, painting exactly what he wanted to paint in exactly the way he wanted to paint, who was having his first gallery showing. And Jack thought to himself what a lucky fellow the chap was.

But the fellow wasn’t just lucky.

He had spent ten years in penury, with no car and no flat. He wasn’t lucky. He was just determined. He knew what he wanted out of life and he went for it.

Life is all about choices.

No one does what he doesn’t want to do.

Jack made his choice and he built his life on compromise.

But it is still not too late for him to change.

If he has the courage.

CHAPTER THIRTY: If Your Ship Doesn’t Come In, Swim Out To Meet It

‘Half the failures in life arise from pulling in one’s horse while he is leaping.’

– Samuel Smiles

‘Either I will find a way or make one.’

– Family crest with a pick-axe on it

Imaginative, thoughtful and creative individuals have always had a hard time.

Look back in history and you will find countless examples of citizens who were harassed or persecuted simply because they dared to think for themselves – and tried to share their thoughts with others. The history books are crammed with examples of men who fought for years against ill fortune, poverty, jealous enemies, vested interests and a thousand other hazards.

Our world has never welcomed the original, the challenging, the inspirational or the passionate and has always preferred the characterless to the thought provoking.

Today, more than ever, the individual who dares to speak out against the establishment will face ridicule and contempt. Even success itself is often derided by those who themselves have no talent and no determination. The ‘posh’ newspapers are full of patronising articles by self appointed icons of the world of culture who are quite free of talent or skills.

Those who dare to speak out against the establishment have always been regarded as dangerous heretics. The iconoclast has never been a welcome figure in any age.

* Confucius, the Chinese philosopher, was dismissed by his political masters and his books were burned. Those who didn’t burn his books within 30 days were branded and condemned to forced labour. Two and a half thousand years later Confucius’s influence was still considered so dangerous that Chairman Mao banned his works.

* Described by the Delphic Oracle as the wisest man in the world, Greek teacher Socrates was accused of corrupting the youth of Athens, arrested for being an evildoer and ‘a person showing curiosity, searching into things under the earth and above the heaven and teaching all this to others’. Socrates was condemned to death.

* Dante, the Italian poet, was banished from Florence and condemned to be burnt at the stake if ever captured.

* After they had failed to silence him with threats and bribes the Jewish authorities excommunicated Spinoza in Amsterdam because he refused to toe the party line, refused to think what other people told him he must think and insisted on maintaining his intellectual independence. He and his work were denounced as ‘forged in Hell by a renegade Jew and the devil’.

* Galileo, the seventeenth century Italian mathematician, astrologer and scientist got into terrible trouble with the all powerful Church for daring to support Copernicus, who had had the temerity to claim that the planets revolved around the sun but who did not dare to publish his discoveries. Galileo lived in exile, wandering from city to city. He ended up in prison.

* Jesus Christ was crucified by an establishment which regarded him as a danger.

* Henry David Thoreau, surely the kindest, wisest philosopher who has ever lived, was imprisoned for sticking to his ideals.

I could go on with this list but I suspect that you’ve begun to get the idea. Original thinkers do not go down well.

But although all these individuals were persecuted for their beliefs – and many of them died for their ideals – they did at least have a chance to develop, to learn, to speak out, to teach, to write, to publish and to attempt to change things.

Today, things are worse than they have ever been for the iconoclast.

Incompetence and mediocrity thrive and are now subsidised, supported and encouraged by our increasingly bureaucratic and intrusive society. Schoolteachers and social workers encourage mediocrity because they themselves are mediocre. Talent frightens them witless.

Among bureaucrats and administrators incompetence and mediocrity are esteemed virtues; the besuited morons revere the banal and worship the bland. They support the establishment in all that it does and everything it stands for and they sneer at and scorn the unusual or the eccentric.

Politicians are frightened of anything new or challenging. They reject the innovative, the creative and the imaginative in favour of the accustomed, the comfortable and the ordinary.

It will not, I fear, be long before mediocrity and incompetence are regarded as essential virtues; the necessary building blocks for personal and professional success. In schools mediocrity will be taught as a social necessity; compulsory for commercial or personal success. Creativity will be regarded as politically incorrect and therefore unacceptable. Originality will be suffocated.

The danger now is that the great thinkers of tomorrow will never even develop – let alone survive or thrive to find themselves struggling against the eternally powerful barriers erected by the establishment of the day.

This is a tragedy of monumental proportions for the lone eccentric voice, speaking out against perceived wisdom, is often right and the experts and the officials are often wrong.

If the politically correct have their way and the social workers and bureaucrats take over the world there will be no place in the 21st century for great thinkers and leaders like Christ, Paracelsus, Galileo, Confucius or Socrates.

* * *

Men do not achieve distinction through luck or by accident but through industry and hard work. As Samuel Smiles once put it: ‘Nothing creditable can be accomplished without application and diligence.’ Perseverance often leads to success but the road to success is not always a smooth one and many of those who have made the greatest contributions to our knowledge have had to fight hard against ridicule.

Andreas Vesalius, born in 1514, achieved eternal fame but contemporary notoriety as the author of the first textbook of human anatomy: ‘De Humanis Corporis Fabrica’. Vesalius rejected many of the traditional (and grossly erroneous) beliefs about anatomy but this earned him official disapproval since the medical establishment firmly believed that the traditional texts could not possibly be wrong.

Poor Vesalius was unable to cope with the outcry his anatomical researches produced. He burnt his remaining manuscripts, abandoned any further study of anatomy and lived as a vagabond. He was accused of heresy, body snatching and was nearly executed. Eventually, forced to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, he died in a shipwreck.

When Ambrose Paré, the great French surgeon, first started work as an army surgeon it was accepted practice to stop a haemorrhage by sealing a wound with a red hot iron. Amputations were performed with a red hot knife and the wounds which were left were sealed with boiling oil. One day Paré ran out of boiling oil and used a mild emollient to dress the wounds of the men he was treating. It wasn’t an experiment. He simply had no alternative.

Paré worried a great deal about what he had done but the next day he found that his patients were not only healthy but that they were also in less pain than the men whose wounds had been sealed with boiling oil. Paré was a wise enough and observant enough man to learn from this. And from that day onwards he started dressing wounds with an emollient rather than boiling oil. He also introduced ligatures, artificial limbs and surgical instruments such as artery forceps.

Inevitably, Paré met the usual fate of innovators and reformers. He was denounced by other surgeons as dangerous and unprofessional. Older surgeons banded together to oppose him and in their attempts to discredit him they attacked him for all sorts of other things – for example, his ignorance of Latin and Greek.

Paré succeeded, however, because all the soldiers asked for him by name. They wanted to be treated by him because they knew that they would suffer less pain. They weren’t interested in whether or not he could speak Greek or Latin.

British doctor William Harvey spent eight years in the 17th century researching the circulation of the blood before he published his findings. His patience was rewarded with ridicule. He won over no converts from among other doctors but he received a great deal of abuse. He lost many friends and his practice shrank in size.

The American anatomist, lecturer, poet and novelist Oliver Wendell Holmes was similarly unsuccessful when, in 1843, he read to the Boston Society for Medical Improvement a paper ‘On the Contagiousness of Puerperal Fever’ in which he explained his theory that the disease could be carried from patient to patient by doctors themselves. Holmes recommended that pregnant women in labour should not be attended by doctors who had been in contact with possible sources of infection. He also suggested that surgeons should consider changing their clothes and washing their hands in calcium chloride after leaving a patient with puerperal fever. His controversial recommendations annoyed a large part of the medical establishment and his advice was ignored completely.

An even worse fate befell Ignaz Philipp Semmelweiss who, three years later in 1846, at the age of 28, became an assistant in one of the obstetric wards at the Allgemeines Krankenhaus in Vienna, Austria. Semmelweiss noticed that the number of women dying in his ward was considerably higher than that in another obstetric ward at the hospital. The difference was so noticeable that women frequently begged, in tears, not to be taken to Semmelweiss’s ward.

Deciding that the difference in the number of deaths had to be due to something other than the quality (or lack of quality) of his own clinical skills Semmelweiss looked for an explanation. He found one in the fact that the ward with the better survival rate was looked after by the hospital’s midwives, while in his own ward medical students assisted the obstetricians with the deliveries. Semmelweiss discovered that students came into the ward straight from the dissecting room and often performed intimate examinations with hands which only minutes before had been delving into corpses. The midwives, on the other hands, never went near to the dissecting room and, on the contrary, had been taught that cleanliness was an essential part of obstetric care.

Semmelweiss’s theory that the women were contracting puerperal fever from the students was strengthened when he attended the post mortem on another doctor in the hospital. This unfortunate man, a Dr Kolletschka, had died from a wound he had received in the dissecting room, and when his body was opened, Semmelweiss noticed that the internal pathological signs were similar to those seen in women with puerperal fever.

Convinced that his theory about the spread of infection was correct, Semmelweiss insisted that students and doctors coming from the dissecting room should wash their hands in a solution of calcium chloride before examining female patients. The precautions he introduced produced a dramatic drop in the number of deaths on his ward – from one in ten to approximately one in a hundred within two years.

Like Oliver Wendell Holmes, Semmelweiss came under a tremendous amount of pressure from those colleagues at the hospital and many eminent obstetricians elsewhere who disagreed with his theory, despite the evidence. Unable to cope with the opposition Semmelweiss left Vienna for Budapest, where he eventually became Professor of Obstetrics. Unfortunately, however, the pressure brought about by the controversy proved too much for this mild and thoughtful man and he died in a mental hospital a few years later. Semmelweiss had been ostracised and punished by the medical profession for daring to criticise practical procedures and for having the temerity to put patients before the establishment.

The history of medicine is full of men whose original work has been ignored or condemned by the establishment of the day. But no martyr in medicine suffered more or contributed more than Ignaz Semmelweiss, whose courage and persistence led directly to changes in medical practice which resulted in massive improvements in the quality of obstetric care throughout the world.

One of the most controversial characters in medical history, who may well have contributed as much as any other individual in the history of medical science, was Aureolus Philippus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim (known to his chums and his enemies as Paracelsus). Paracelsus made himself enemies all over Europe because he tried to revolutionise medicine and medical thinking in the sixteenth century. Paracelsus was the greatest influence on medical thinking since Hippocrates but the establishment regarded him as a troublemaker.

Paracelsus was born in 1493 in Switzerland. He died just 48 years later but in that relatively short space of time he tore into the precepts and paradigms of established medical thinking with all the zeal of an inspired missionary. Genius has been defined as common sense intensified and Paracelsus confirms that definition. He was a genius who was blessed with the two essentials: ideas and determination.

Paracelsus believed that it was possible to learn only by experience and personal study and he travelled widely in his search for useful information. He visited Spain, Portugal, France, Italy, Germany, Scandinavia, Egypt, Arabia, Palestine, Russia, Poland, Turkey, Holland and England. He wrote books, lectured, practised medicine and argued in Montpelier, Padua, Bologna, Basle, Vienna, Leipzig, Heidelberg, Cologne and just about all the major medical centres of Europe. He studied alchemy, astrology and herbal medicine and spoke to witches and midwives in his search for information.

It was Paracelsus's revolutionary belief that a doctor's job was to understand the causes and symptoms of different diseases and to prescribe specific solutions where appropriate. He also believed in the importance of preventing disease and was one of the first members of the medical profession to recognise that there is often an association between a man's employment and his physical condition. He was the first man to associate mining with certain chest diseases, to link cretinism and goitres with certain alpine areas, to use mercury in the treatment of syphilis, to advocate allowing wounds to drain instead of smothering them with layers of dried dung, and to argue that some foods contained poisons which had a bad effect on the human body. Paracelsus was the first peoples' doctor and he proudly claimed that he pleased only the sick and not the profession. He bombarded medical students and doctors with a seemingly endless collection of writings and lectures which were designed to encourage them to think for themselves and to reject the previously unquestioned preachings of the established medical authorities.

And yet this extraordinary man, who was the father of modern medicine, was persecuted and disowned by his own profession. His travels throughout Europe were not simply done in search of information; he was also constantly on the run from his formidable and vengeful opponents.

* * *

It is almost impossible to find anyone who has ever had a creative and worthwhile idea who has not been marginalised, ridiculed and persecuted by the relevant establishments. Individuals today have a harder job than ever to put forward new ideas – especially if those new ideas oppose the established view or conflict with the attitudes of powerful, rich vested interests. Industry, money, power and corruption are almost synonyms today.

The lesson here is clear: ignore attacks and ridicule from the establishment if you think you are right. Indeed, if you are an original thinker you should be alarmed rather than flattered if any member of the establishment, or any orthodox publication, supports what you are doing. (I decided many years ago that as long as the medical establishment continues to attack me I will be content. I would be extremely alarmed if any orthodox medical journal gave a favourable review – or even gave any review at all – to one of my books.)

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE: Remember That Your Friends Need Friends Too

‘Have few friends but those thou hast, grapple them to thy heart with hoops of steel.’

– William Shakespeare

For several years I have been writing a weekly ‘agony’ column. Every week I receive many calls and letters from readers of the column who want my advice.

There are several topics which crop up quite regularly but one of the questions which I get asked most commonly is: ‘How can I make friends?’

Sometimes the writer just wants to meet friends. Frequently, he or she wants to meet a partner with a view to developing a stable and committed relationship.

From their letters it seems to me that most of the lonely people who write to me, and who are desperate to make new friends, make two fundamental mistakes. First, they are far too serious. They approach the search for a new friend or companion with all the earnestness they might be expected to show if searching for a new species of fern. And, second, they mistakenly assume that in order to initiate a new friendship they have to show how terribly interesting *they* are when what they should be doing is expressing an interest in every new person they meet.

To captivate people you don’t need to be interesting, you only need to be interested.

Most of the lonely people who write to me believe that their loneliness is the result of some personal fault. ‘People aren’t interested in me because I’m too poor/because I’ve got a big nose/because I don’t have an exciting job/because I don’t have a job at all/because of my accent/because my hair doesn’t look right/because I always say the wrong thing.’

All this is nonsense, of course.

Romances and friendships are not usually built upon such things. Most people are captivated not by wealth, perfect good looks or beautiful hair but by vulnerability, honesty, passion and a sense of humour and – most important of all – by someone who is interested in them. Most people aren’t as interested in other people as they are interested in themselves. And so, if you are vulnerable, self effacing, honest and interested you can get away with just about anything else.

Most of the strangers you meet don’t care a stuff about your needs. But if you understand *their* needs (what they want and need out of life) they will respect you and like you.

Everyone – without exception – considers themselves to be special and different. Treat the people you meet as special and different and they will respond to you in a positive way. Remember that we all want other people to love us and trust us. In order to make new friends (and to influence people) ask not what they can do for you but what you can do for them. Try to satisfy their needs and solve their problems and in the end you will benefit too.

And try to smile. Try to look cheerful. Next time you are on a train or walking around the shops look around you. Look at peoples’ mouths. So many of the people you see will have mouths which turn down at the ends in a permanent grimace of disapproval and distaste. Such people look as though they are about to say ‘No’ before they even speak. A grimace makes everyone feel miserable. A smile, in contrast, is warming and attractive. (Smiling can produce a change in your voice and your attitude to others. Try smiling whenever you make telephone calls – and you’ll notice the difference immediately.)

* * *

When you are trying to build up one or more new relationships you are selling a product – yourself. Your customers are the people with whom you want to build up relationships. A man who wants a girl to like him will stand a far greater chance of succeeding if he takes the girl flowers or chocolates when he meets her for their first date than if he turns up on her doorstep clutching a bag full of his dirty laundry.

Relationships are like business – they involve selling yourself to other people. Some people are good at beginning, developing and maintaining relationships because they understand what their ‘customers’ want and need. In order to make new friends you have to provide a better service at a lower cost (in terms of effort as well as money).

If you meet someone who needs to be entertained and amused then you will win their friendship by making them laugh. If you meet someone who needs to talk about themselves then you will win their friendship simply by listening.

* * *

‘I’ve had 120 Christmas cards this year! she said, proudly. ‘Isn’t it wonderful to have so many friends?’

I looked around. The bookcase, the top of the TV set, the sideboard and the windowsills were packed with colourful greetings cards.

It was an impressive sight.

But what she said made me think about the way we devalue one of the most important assets in our lives:

friendship.

She didn’t have 120 friends. Most of those cards were from casual acquaintances. And I wondered if she had ever really thought about the true nature – and importance – of friendship.

* * *

Remember there is a world of difference between friends and acquaintances. The former you can ring in the middle of the night for advice and help and support. The latter will simply add to your annual Christmas card collection.

Remember too that to win a new friend you must first *be* a friend. And you must work at that friendship. You must invest time and energy and caring. And if, in the end, you finish up with half a dozen true friends then you will be truly blessed. True friendship is an asset which will never tarnish and never devalue. And no one will ever be able to take it away from you.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO: Watch And Learn!

‘A non observant man goes through the forest and sees no firewood.’

– Russian proverb

Most of the world’s scientists are, these days, funded either by governments, large international companies or massive multi million dollar a year charities. Their work is planned and structured by committees and so it is, perhaps, hardly surprising that they produce so little of value or note.

The ironical, paradoxical and embarrassing truth is that the vast majority of the world’s most useful discoveries were made more by chance than by design; often by scientists who were doing work for which they had no formal training and frequently by scientists who had little money for equipment or laboratories.

Benjamin Franklin first captured lightning with the aid of a kite made with two sticks and a silk handkerchief. James Watt made his first model of a condensing steam engine with a discarded anatomist’s syringe. Denis Burkitt, who made one of the most important cancer breakthroughs of the twentieth century by linking a cancer to a virus, did so with the aid of two grants; the first for £15 and the second for £150 with which he purchased a second hand Land Rover.

Serendipity has played a major part in a vast number of scientific breakthroughs. But serendipity only produces results when someone is prepared to look in what might, to other onlookers, appear to be the wrong direction.

Here are a few examples of how chance observation has led to major discoveries:

* Dr Priestley, to many the father of modern science and the discoverer of many gases, was first drawn to chemistry because he lived near to a brewery.

He was forty years of age and knew nothing of chemistry at the time but be became curious after noticing the peculiar properties of gas floating over the fermented liquor at the brewery.

* The Marquis of Worcester had the idea of steam power after watching the cover of a vessel containing hot water blow off. At the time he was a prisoner in the Tower of London. The Marquis later wrote a book describing his idea and Thomas Newcomen, who read the book, turned the observation into an application. James Watt, credited with the invention of the steam engine, turned the Marquis’s observation and Newcomen’s application into practice.

* Marc Isambard Brunel got the idea for building his tunnel under the River Thames from watching a shipworm. He watched how the worm used its well armed head to drill into wood first in one direction and then in another direction and to then strengthen the tunnel it had made by daubing a kind of varnish over the roof and the sides. Brunel simply copied this technique on a rather larger scale.

* Sir Samuel Brown got the idea of the suspension bridge when, while thinking about a proposed bridge design, he walked in his garden and saw a spider’s web suspended across his path. Brown used this observation to build a suspension bridge across the River Tweed.

* Professor Wilhelm Konrad von Röntgen was an experimental physicist. In 1895 he was investigating the effects of cathode rays. He noticed that although the cathode ray tube on which he was working was covered with black cardboard a greenish glow seemed to come from a piece of paper coated with a substance called barium platinocyanide which happened to be lying on a nearby bench. A lesser scientist would have simply moved the paper and thought no more about it. But Röntgen realised that the paper must have been made luminous by some unknown rays – something other than the cathode rays he had intended to investigate. Fortunately for untold millions of patients throughout the world Röntgen decided to investigate further. He put his own hand between the cathode ray tube and the piece of paper and discovered X-rays.

* Alexander Fleming was working in his laboratory at St Mary’s Hospital in London on a study of the staphylococcus bacteria when he noticed that a culture dish containing the bacteria appeared to have been contaminated. The contaminant had in some way stopped the growth of the bacteria. In retrospect it seems likely that spores of a common fungus had blown in through an open laboratory window. Contamination is a fairly common problem in laboratories and normally such cultures are simply thrown away. However, Fleming was too good a scientist just to toss away the contents of the dish, regard the incident as nothing more than a spoilt experiment and forget about it. He made careful notes on the culture and the following year published a paper in which he described the way in which the growing spores (which he had identified as being those of penicillium notarum) had contaminated the culture dish and prevented the growth of the bacteria. Fleming realised that one day the penicillin would prove useful as a drug. It wasn’t until a decade later that Fleming’s observation was turned into a practical reality but it was Fleming’s vital observation which gave mankind one of the most important therapeutic breakthroughs of the twentieth century.

* * *

It is not, of course, only scientists who need to be observant – and need to be able to seize the moment.

If he was away from home without a sketch pad and he saw something he wanted to draw later the artist William Hogarth would make a sketch (literally) upon his thumb nail. (Hence the phrase ‘a thumbnail sketch’.)

It is surprising how many people go through life apparently quite blind to what is going on around them. Numerous opportunities are missed simply because people do not really ‘see’ the things around them – and do not apply what they have seen to their own lives.

Make sure that you remain alert and observant and you will benefit greatly in many different ways.

Everyone you meet can teach you something. They may be able to teach you something big and important. Or they may be able to teach you something small and apparently unimportant. But if you remain observant, keep watching and keep listening and keep learning then in the end you will benefit enormously. You may forget much of what you have learned. New information may not seem important at the time. But there is a good chance that at some time in the future it will be important and useful.

You can learn something from everyone you meet and every situation in which you find yourself.

One of the main secrets of success is the ability to seize opportunities and to turn accidents to good purpose. Observation is, perhaps, the most important secret for gaining knowledge and success.

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE: Protest To Survive (But First Learn When To Complain And When Not To)

‘The world is disgracefully managed, one hardly knows to whom to complain.’

– Ronald Firbank

‘The lady doth protest too much, methinks.’

– William Shakespeare

I watched a documentary film about Anne Frank not long ago and I cried as I watched how the Germans treated their concentration camp victims during the Second World War. I cried not just because of the way the Jews were treated by the vile barbarians of Nazi Germany but because the pain, the sorrow, the indignity and the cruelty suffered by Anne Frank and millions of others has changed nothing.

The real tragedy is that there are now just as many – if not more – people in the world who would happily operate concentration camps and gas chambers if their governments told them to. We live in a world where cruelty is honoured, where dishonesty is rewarded and where power is taken by the vicious and the brutal and the uncaring. We live in a world where integrity is sneered at, where honesty is described as controversy, where passion is regarded as an embarrassment and where the truth is a dangerous commodity. We are ruled by pompous authoritarians who cloak their petty ambitions and personal greed in stolen power and glory but accept no responsibility for justice.

Morals and ethics have become abstract subjects for university debate, rather than guidelines for our behaviour. No one cares any more about what is right.

The politicians and their servants the bureaucrats have dirtied our land and polluted our air and our water. As a result we live in a filth that gets worse each day and which contaminates our very lives.

We are encouraged to applaud and reward the fat businessmen who cheat the world’s poor. We are taught to kneel before the representatives of evil and daily pledge our allegiance to witless, passionless mediocrity.

We live in a world where the truth is a victim and propaganda rules. We live in a world where politicians and international businessmen rule our lives.

And yet we claim to be innocents in all this corruption of the spirit. We blame an unseen ‘them’ for the horrors of our world. We blame ‘them’ for the cruelty, the viciousness and the misery. We live in comfort and contentment; slumped in front of the TV screen; deaf to the injustices which mark our world.

But we have built this society. It is our responsibility. We cannot escape from blame by keeping silent. The evil that is done is done on our account and if we stay silent then the evil is done with our blessing. It is up to us to shout ‘stop’ when we have had enough of the wickedness around us.

* * *

It sometimes seems to me that one of the single biggest differences which separates people on this planet is that while some people are aggressive and constantly ready to argue, defending their ‘corner’ whenever they feel threatened and standing up for themselves and their rights, (sometimes making themselves ill through their complaining since because there are so many things in life to complain about they wear themselves out and make themselves miserable), others never do battle but simply ‘roll over’ and allow themselves to be walked on, never complaining but simply accepting everything nasty that life throws at them and turning themselves into human doormats. There are those who do and those who are done unto.

There are, of course, many times when it is necessary to protest and complain and stand up for yourself. It has been shown that in hospitals it is the patients who want to know what is going on, what is happening to them and what treatment they are being given who are most likely to survive. The patients who are, to put it bluntly, bloody minded may not win any popularity prizes with the staff but they will probably stand the greatest chance of surviving.

You should protest about things which are important to you. But – and it is a big ‘but’ – you should pick the battles you fight and you should make sure they are worth fighting.

There are many times when battling and fighting simply uses up valuable energy. The woman who feels that she has been charged twice in a shop for a small can of beans and who then spends several hours complaining about the overcharge has lost far more than she has gained.

A few years ago a friend and I both decided that for six months we were going to fight every single injustice to which we felt we had been exposed. Every time we felt that we had been cheated in a shop, or sold a faulty item by a manufacturer, we complained. If a restaurant or a hotel gave bad service we complained. If an airline or a railway didn’t provide the promised quality of service we complained. If a government department failed to do what we felt it should have done we protested through the official channels. It was an exhausting and debilitating six months. We were both totally worn out by the experience. We had had little time for work and no time for fun. Our lives had been taken over by the constant need to stick up for what we believed to be right.

And, in the end, we were the losers.

You must choose your battles. You should avoid the petty squabbles. If you are careful not to waste your energy on disputes which don’t really matter you will have the energy you need when you come to fight a battle which really does matter. If you complain about every trivial injustice you will go mad and waste your life on meaningless trivia.

You should give in to petty annoyances not out of a sense of despair but out of a knowledge that these incidents are trivial and beneath you, and out of a knowledge that you have more important things to do with your life.

If you let minor injustices and bureaucratic trifles upset you it will not take long for your spirit to be drained. Your body and your mind will be exhausted.

Deal with the small problems in your life without emotion and remember that it is far too easy to waste your life fretting over petty nonsenses.

Escape from the sea of trivia which washes over us all – and which causes so much frustration, stress and depression, by concentrating on your hopes, ambitions and dreams. Keep your mind and heart on the big issues.

* * *

You should know how to complain so that you waste the least amount of energy. If a complaint is worth making it is worth making properly – go straight to the top. If you have a complaint about a product or an organisation complain to the Chairman or the Managing Director. There is little point in complaining to a special consumer department. Complain to the top and the worst that can happen will be that your complaint will filter downwards.

Do not be apologetic (it isn’t your fault). Do not say: ‘Would it be possible...’ but ask for what you want. Always remember that there is no point in saying ‘Don’t you know who I am?’ (The chances are that they don’t and if they did they wouldn’t care.) You should try to stay cool and be firm. If you are in the right then they will probably know this and give in. If they stand firm then you have to decide whether the battle is worth fighting. If it is – then fight on. If it isn’t – walk away and don’t give that person or business your custom again. Don’t worry about ‘losing face’. You should always be prepared to walk away from unnecessary conflict. Why should you care what they think about you? They may think that you have been defeated. But you know better. Let the inconsequential bureaucrat who wins a small victory over you crow and beat his chest; at the end of the day – and at the end of his life – he will still be an inconsequential bureaucrat.

When trying to decide which battles to fight it sometimes helps (when the battle involves money) if you know what your time is worth. Work out how much you can earn in an hour. And then, if you feel that you have been cheated out of a sum of money, try to decide in advance how much time you are prepared to allocate towards recovering that money. You may, for example, decide that you will write one letter or make one telephone call but that you will then abandon the complaint.

* * *

If someone complains to you about something you have done wrong try to defuse the situation by asking these two simple questions: ‘What did I do wrong?’ and ‘What can I do to make things better?’

Remember, too, that saying ‘sorry’ doesn’t hurt and doesn’t cost anything but will often save you a great deal of time, energy, money and heartache. What’s wrong with saying ‘sorry’? It’s only a word. Most people need to be quicker to apologise – but to apologise less. The word ‘sorry’ is one of the most misused in any language. We say it easily and without thought when it isn’t necessary. But for some strange reason we hate saying it when it is appropriate. You should stop apologising unless you genuinely feel that you should – in which case you should apologise quickly and with genuine contriteness.

When you have done, said or written something which was wrong you do not need to explain or justify. Simply say: ‘I’m sorry. I was wrong. What can I do to put things right? What would you like me to do?’

Is that really all that hard to say?

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR: You Can Be A Leader (If You Want To Be)

'The ruler must not display his weapons if he is to survive long.'

– Tao Te Jing by Lao Tsu

People can be divided into two groups: followers and leaders. Most people want someone to follow and there are never enough leaders around.

It is often assumed that all leaders are born. This is not true. Some individuals are born with leadership skills. But most people who are leaders acquire the skills they need.

If you don't already have leadership skills then you can learn to become a leader. Here is how:

1. You must understand yourself, your own needs and your own priorities. You must also understand your strengths and your weaknesses. Knowing your weaknesses is just as important as knowing your strengths.
2. You must know what you want. You must have short, medium and long term plans. How can you possibly get what you want unless you know what you want? And how can you lead others towards a goal unless you have a goal?
3. You must have plans. Just knowing what you want is not enough. You must know how you intend to get there.
4. You must develop a keen imagination.
5. You must understand how other people think. You must know the strengths and weaknesses of (some, at least, of) the people you intend to lead.
6. You must plan ahead.
7. You must be able to anticipate problems. Your plans will be of little use if they depend upon outside factors over which you have little control – and if the actions of someone else can disrupt your schedule. You must have alternative plans ready – so that if things go wrong with Plan A you can substitute Plan B.
8. You must master details. Both the Duke of Wellington and Napoleon Bonaparte (two of the greatest leaders of men ever known) paid enormous attention to small details. Both spent a good deal of their valuable time making sure that their soldiers had plenty of food and ammunition, suitable clothing and comfortable boots.

One of the Duke of Wellington's great skills was his ability to concentrate his mind on whatever he was dealing with – whatever other pressing matters may be waiting for his attention. He could not be intimidated or embarrassed into forgetting the issue at hand. In Spain, when he found that he could not bring food for his troops over from England he set himself up in business as a corn merchant so that he could feed his men. He brought grain over from South America and from Mediterranean ports. He then sold the surplus to the Portuguese.

Napoleon was a similar master of detail. He too left nothing to chance. He constantly paid attention to such details as ensuring that his men would have level roads upon which to march, and that canals were open so that stores could be brought to where his troops were camped. He took great pains to ensure that even when he was in hostile country he had a well established line of communication with Paris and with his other generals. There are records which show that even when he was busy fighting battles Napoleon took charge of things which some generals might have regarded as 'beneath them'.

During one long but major battle he personally directed where horses were to be obtained, made arrangements for the purchase of all the saddles his men would need, ordered shoes for his soldiers, bought bugles for all his men so that they could make a great deal of noise and frighten the enemy soldiers and made sure that sufficient rations of bread, biscuit and spirits were bought and stored. At the same time he was constantly sending dispatches to Paris giving instructions on public education, dealing with administrative matters and revising budget details.

He took time out in one campaign to give instructions to architects regarding the alterations he wanted making both to the Église de la Madeleine and the Jardins des Tuileries, intervened in a squabble at the Grand Opera, wrote articles for the newspapers and carried on correspondences with the Shah of Persia and the Sultan of Turkey. His letters show that he gave instructions about where helmets were to be made and where shirts, corn, shoes, guns and greatcoats were to be purchased. While he was doing this he never forgot to review his troops regularly – even though this meant riding huge distances. And, of course, he attended receptions with local dignitaries and planned his battles.

Both Napoleon and Richelieu wanted the word 'impossible' completely banished from the dictionary. They also wanted the phrase 'I can't' banned.

9. You must be willing to take on responsibility.
10. You must be unselfish. When things go well and according to plan, you should be happy to give praise to those working with you. When things go wrong you should take endeavour to learn from the errors – making sure that the same things do not go wrong again – but you must take the responsibility for the errors yourself.
11. You must be able to cooperate with others. Every leader needs advice, support and information from others. A loner does not make a good leader.

12. You must have real courage. Any unimaginative fool can show a sort of courage. A fool who does not understand the consequences of his actions may appear to be a brave man. But because you will have developed your imagination, and will therefore be able to envisage the consequences of errors and mishaps, and the potential pain of disaster, you will need to show real courage in order to be brave. Muley Moluc, the Moorish leader, lay dying, worn out by incurable disease, while his troops were fighting the Portugese. He got up from his sick bed in the middle of the battle and rallied his army. He led them to victory and then sank back exhausted and died.

13. You must have a keen sense of justice. You should not administer justice according to the rule book but according to a sense of natural, honest justice.

14. You must be able to show real determination. You must be able to stick to your plans even though others may begin to show a lack of confidence. The corollary to this is that you must be prepared to change your plans if you believe that the circumstances have changed.

15. You must work harder than everyone else. A real leader always does more than he is paid to do or expected to do. During a cholera epidemic in Vienna, Emperor Francis of Austria was walking with an aide de camp in the streets. As he walked a corpse was dragged past on a litter. There were no mourners. The Emperor found out that the man had died of cholera and that his relatives would not accompany his body to the grave. The Emperor did not hesitate. ‘Then,’ he said, ‘we will supply their place, for none of my poor people should go to the grave without that last mark of respect.’ And he did just that, and stood bareheaded throughout the burial ceremony to make sure that all the proper rites were respectfully performed. That is leadership.

16. You must understand and sympathise with the needs, wants and anxieties of those whom you are leading. The good leader will lead through encouragement rather than through punishment. The carrot is a better and more powerful aid than the stick.

17. You must be able – and willing – to do everything you expect others to do, however simple or basic that task may be.

18. You must not fear competition from those around you. The leader who is always looking over his shoulder, waiting for a challenge to his leadership, will be a weak leader. The true leader makes it constantly clear that there is no possible alternative.

19. You should lead because those who follow believe that you are worthy of the role of leader – rather than because you are officially the ‘leader’. The leader who relies solely upon his rank or title will be a weak leader. The real leader doesn’t get puffed up by success or unduly depressed by failure. He speaks his mind freely when the time is right but he doesn’t push his views onto others. When bestowing a favour he does so with a quiet dignity rather than with a great deal of noise.

20 You are entitled to expect those who follow you to be loyal. But they, in turn, are entitled to loyalty from you.

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE: Why Building Cathedrals Is Good For Your Soul

'Patience is the finest and worthiest part of fortitude, and the rarest too... Patience lies at the root of all pleasures, as well as of all power. Hope herself ceases to be happiness when Impatience companions her.'

– John Ruskin.

Our views of life are very short term. Television has taught us to have shorter and shorter attention spans – during the last decade or so the length of the average political sound bite on television has shrunk from a minute or two to around seven seconds.

We used to think of the short term as meaning less than a year, the medium term as meaning between one and five years and of the long term as referring to anything more than five years into the future.

Today, most people think of the short term as being within the next five or ten minutes, the medium term as being within the next week or so and the long term as being, at most, within the next six months.

Everything is done in a hurry. People want instant results. We want to see the results of our labours immediately so that we can get on to the next project.

I think that all this is a terrible mistake. It means that our views of life are gravely limited.

Back in the Middle Ages, when some of the world's most beautiful cathedrals were being built, people genuinely thought of the long term as referring to a span of several generations.

Work started on Notre Dame cathedral in Paris, France, in 1163 and didn't finish until around 1340 – over 175 years later. In Italy, St Peter's in Rome was begun in 1506 and not completed until 1615. In Exeter in England the Cathedral Church of St Peter was begun in 1275 and not completed until nearly a century later. Those are by no means exceptional examples.

In those days a craftsman would happily work on a cathedral (or some other grand building) knowing that he would not live to see the building finished. But he would know that his son would carry on his work. And when the son, in turn, grew into his own prime, he knew that *his* son would continue working on the cathedral.

Three or more generations would contentedly work on a single project. There would be a sense of continuity, of permanence, of being part of something bigger and more important than oneself, and of belonging to something meaningful. That feeling of belonging passed on from father to son and from father to son as the years and decades and centuries went by. A man's life did not end with his death because he lived on as part of something that he had begun to help create.

This feeling of oneness with future generations was not confined to builders and craftsmen working on large, public buildings.

A century or so ago men routinely planted trees for other men to sit under. Estate owners and gardeners would plant seeds knowing that future generations would enjoy the results. A rich man might arrange for an avenue of trees to be planted alongside the driveway to his newly built house (a house that might have already been two or more generations in the making) in the knowledge that the trees would not reach maturity until long after his own death.

Similarly, a farmer or small landowner might plant trees on his land so that his heirs would have wood to cut.

Today most of us tend to think far too short term. We need to change that. We need to be less preoccupied with ourselves and more concerned with the world in which we and our descendants will live.

* * *

Give yourself an aim, a target or a purpose that makes you part of a cause and you will be able to remain happy whatever happens to you. Even death will be just a comma in the sentence of the cause for which you are fighting.

Only when you have a cause for which you are prepared to die will you really know what living is all about. If your personal aims are tied up with a great cause in which you believe then you truly cannot lose the war. You may lose a battle or two. You may feel exhausted. You may go bankrupt. You may die. But the war in which you are engaged will go on and in so far as you are still part of that war you will not be defeated.

The best way to conquer a fear of death and dying is to achieve a feeling of oneness with those who will come after you. Your cathedral does not have to be made of stone. Make sure now that what you are doing with your life will live on after you.

CHAPTER THIRTY SIX: Focus And Take Aim

‘Nothing in the world is softer and weaker than water. But, for attacking the hard and strong, there is nothing like water.’

– Tao Te Jing by Lao Tsu

‘There are no limitations to the mind except those we acknowledge.’

– Napoleon Hill

Focusing your strength can make a big difference to your ability to do things. For example, if you ever have difficulty in opening a new jar of jam or sauce simply try imagining that all your body’s strength is pouring into your hands. Concentrate all your physical power on that one task. This Zen technique will work for you if you believe in it.

Similarly, you can benefit enormously if you learn to focus or concentrate your mental strength on some particular task. Focusing gives you better definition and enables you to see much more clearly.

Whatever you are doing you should decide in advance what you want out of it. (Opening the jar of jam or sauce is easy. You want the jam or sauce. But what about when you go on holiday? What do you want out of your holiday? Most people go on holiday because they expect to go on holiday. They flick through some brochures, they pack a suitcase and they’re off. But why? Are they going to rest? To relax? To learn? To get some exercise and fresh air? To meet people? To find a sexual partner? To practise a skill? Only when you know why you are doing something will you get what you want out of it.)

In 1996 I read an interview with the 75 year old Peter Ustinov in which the actor explained that although aware of his age he had no difficulty at all in moving about when working on the stage. After working in a theatrical production of his own play ‘Beethoven’s Tenth’ he told the Financial Times: ‘I can act for two and a half hours at a stretch. But after five minutes at a cocktail party I have to sit down. It’s a question of focus.’ To succeed you must focus on the real problems you face.

And while you are learning to focus on the things that matter to you it is also important to learn to remove from your mind those people, things and events which are of no significance to you. Just remove them completely from your life and thoughts. Focusing accurately will enable you to do things which you previously only dreamt of doing.

CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN: Be Loyal To Those Whom You Expect To Be Loyal To You

'If you want a friend, you must also be willing to wage war for him: and to wage war, you must be capable of being an enemy.'

– Frederick Nietzsche

'Do not forget those who fought the battles for you and bought your freedom with their blood.'

– Emile Zola

You should be loyal to your family, your friends, the people you work with and your customers. If you work for an individual and you believe that he is loyal to you then you should be loyal to him.

But you should never expect an organisation to be loyal to you – whether you are an employee, a supplier or a customer.

Organisations regard your loyalty as something to be bought with coupons, bonuses or a cheap mortgage rate. But they don't feel any loyalty towards you. An organisation isn't a live, sentient being (unless it is a very small company which is run by one or two people in which case you can, for all practical purposes, forget that it is an organisation).

Organisations have no soul. They are run by bureaucrats, administrators, accountants and lawyers.

CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT: Are You Making Too Many Excuses?

‘A difficulty is a thing to be overcome.’

– Lord Lyndhurst

‘Misfortune is next door to stupidity.’

– Russian proverb

Most of us make excuses when things go wrong, when our hopes remain unfulfilled or when we do not realise our achievements. We think up all sorts of extremely convincing alibis to explain why we have failed – and to ensure that someone else takes the blame. Occasionally the excuses are designed to satisfy others. More often the excuses are intended to appease our own consciences. Ironically, the creation of excuses often requires a great deal of mental thought – sometimes more than would have been needed to achieve success in the first place.

I have compiled below a list of just a few of the commonest excuses for failure. Look through this list and see how many you can find which you have used to explain away a failure. As you look through the list remember that none of these ‘excuses’ are a genuine explanation for failure.

Elsewhere in this book you will find all the evidence and explanations you need to show that these problems can all be overcome.

I failed because...

*...I don’t have the necessary education.
*...I come from the wrong social background.
*...No one understands me.
*...I didn’t get enough support from the people around me.
*...I didn’t have enough time.
*...I’ve not been well.
*...I have too many other responsibilities.
*...I’ve been unlucky.
*...I haven’t had any breaks.
*...My family is holding me back.
*...I made one mistake and that was that.
*...Someone else stole my idea.
*...I just don’t know the right people.
*...I don’t have enough savings.
*...There’s a recession.
*...I’m too old.
*...I’m too young.
*...I’m the wrong sex.
*...I’m not good looking enough.
*...I don’t have enough influence.
*...People have it in for me.
*...They won’t give me a break.
*...My background is holding me back.
*...I have too many other worries.
*...I have to worry about paying the bills and daren’t take any chances.
*...No one will listen to me.
*...I wasn’t allowed to do what I wanted to do.
*...Times are hard.
*...There’s too much bureaucracy.
*...I don’t get any support.
*...People hold my past against me.

You can learn a great deal about yourself from the type of excuses you use.

The truth is that (at the beginning, at least) the world isn’t out to get you – even if it seems like that. When you have already achieved a measure of success then you may well find that you will be opposed by people who have a personal or commercial interest in putting a halt to your successes – but at the beginning ‘they’ are unlikely to pay much attention to you.

In order to succeed you should find the real reason for your failure and then deal with that. Analyse your real weaknesses and find out exactly where things have gone wrong – instead of creating excuses which blame others – and you will benefit enormously.

CHAPTER THIRTY NINE: What Have You Been Doing Wrong?

'I am still waiting for something really wonderful to happen.'

– woman celebrating her 100th birthday

If you think you have been working hard all your life but you still haven't fulfilled any of your ambitions then there is a good chance that you have been doing something wrong.

Your life does not have to be dull, mundane, frustrating, boring, tiring, exhausting or unfulfilling. You are your reality. You can choose your own life if you want to do so. You, not the government, can rule your life. You can be immune to the vagaries of the economy. You do not need to be dependent upon the extent of your education or bank balance. You do not have to be restricted by a lack of good looks or contacts. Decide what you want and go for it. Remember that the only important battle is the last one.

1. Do you know what you want?

You must have a specific purpose. It is no good simply hoping to be 'successful', 'rich' or 'famous'. Those ambitions are far too vague. A vague desire for success alone is not enough. You need a plan and you need a purpose. Hopes and wants are not enough. Only needs succeed. Only when you have found something or someone worth dying for will your life be really worth living.

2. Do you work well with other people?

You must work with people who have the same hopes and aspirations as you do. It is impossible to do anything entirely by yourself. Whatever it is you want to do with your life you are going to have to do it with the help of other people. Acquire and show an interest in people. Learn to understand how other people think and work. Take an interest in people – talk to them and learn from them.

My book *People Watching* is packed with practical tips and hints on how to 'read' people simply by watching them. Be curious and interested in other people and you will benefit twice. First, you will learn a great deal which will be of use to you in your life and work. Second, the people in whom you show a genuine interest will like you because you have shown an interest in them. If you have a conversation which seems to be flagging simply keep on asking questions: delve deeper and deeper and people will eventually talk to you and tell you more and more about themselves. Ask yourself how other people do things – what are their strategies and tactics for life and for work.

3. Do you have all the information you need?

If you try to build up your life or your business with the aid of guesses and hunches then you will be doing very little to influence fate to be kind to you. You need information. But do not allow yourself to be overloaded with information. We live in an age where information is readily and freely available in huge quantities. There is, indeed, so much information around that it is often possible to forget what the information is for. You must learn to know when you have acquired enough information to make a decision.

4. Do you really want to succeed?

In order to succeed you must be driven by a desire to do something positive with your life. You must be determined and enthusiastic. Desire and willpower will help to produce success. You must have a passion as well as a purpose. A passion, a purpose and a plan will produce action – and action will produce results. Remember: hard work alone is not enough. Never forget: if hard work alone produced wealth and success then factory workers and farm workers would all be taken home in chauffeur driven Rolls Royce motor cars.

5. Are you good at judging risks?

If you try to take too many short cuts – and achieve your aims overnight through gambling – the chances are that you will fail. You must learn when – and when not – to take risks. You must be aware of the hazard of procrastination (if you are for ever waiting for the perfect moment then you will probably be for ever waiting) but you must also be aware of the hazard of jumping in with both feet when you can't see your hand in front of your face!

6. Have you been spreading yourself too thin?

Having several irons in the fire or balls in the air is a good basic principle. By the very nature of things there will be times when one project doesn't seem to be getting anywhere. Having several projects will help you through the dull – and possibly depressing – patches. But if you involve yourself in too many projects then your energy and your resources will probably be spread too thinly and your chances of success will diminish.

7. Are you too undisciplined?

In order to succeed you must be disciplined. Disciplined diligence can make up for an absence of great intellect or wealth. You must (at least, to begin with) be prepared to put in long hours (though if you enjoy what you do this will not seem like too much of a hardship). And you also need to be disciplined about money. If you are setting up a new business and you spend too much money on things which aren't strictly necessary then you will be short of capital to help you deal with the inevitable mistakes and problems. Not long ago I spoke to someone who had recently obtained a bank loan to set up a new business. He had spent more than half the money he had borrowed on vast quantities of expensive stationery and an impressive looking chair and desk for his office. Since his business was designed to be built around visiting clients in *their* offices this initial expenditure was clearly pointlessly extravagant.

8. Do you need to be more persistent?

Do you give up or feel disheartened every time you come across an obstacle? If so then you need to be more persistent. You don't need any great talents to become successful if you are persistent and determined. Any top sportsman or woman will confirm that hard work often beats talent. The steady sports professional who works hard and practises consistently will, over a period of time, usually beat the enormously talented professional who does not practice. 'It has ... often happened that genius has planted the tree, of which patient dullness has gathered the fruit,' wrote Samuel Smiles. Remember that one energetic attempt is worth a great deal more than all the hopes, dreams and aspirations in the world. Hopes, dreams and aspirations are an essential fundamental part of success; but alone they are not enough. Persistence (for which the basic quality is willpower) is an essential quality for success. Those who do not have your determination may describe you as cold blooded or ruthless. Remember that the four key principles for success are: desire, faith, planning and persistence.

9. Are you going in the wrong direction?

If you are going to do well at what you do then you must enjoy it. The people who do best in life are those who never do a day's work. They enjoy what they do so much that they don't think of it as work. Such individuals often end up winning twice: they have fun and (because they apply themselves to what they do with great dedication) they also make a great deal of money.

10. Is your private life unsatisfactory?

If you are unhappy because of problems in your private life then your chances of getting where you want to be will be dramatically reduced. You must deal with your personal problems clearly and quickly and decisively.

11. Do you have fears which you have not recognised or dealt with satisfactorily?

If you are frightened of failure, or the consequences of failure, then you will be constantly handicapped in your search for success. If you worry about what other people might think then your chances of getting where you want to be will be low. If you allow your subconscious mind to be flooded with negative thoughts then you will fail. Instead of allowing your subconscious to damage your life learn to use it in a positive way. Give your subconscious mind a difficult topic to think about – and then go back to it after a while. You will probably find that much of the hard thinking work has been done for you (while you were busy doing something else).

12. Do you lack confidence?

If you think that you will fail then you will probably fail. If you think you will win then you will probably win. If you have faith then you can rise to almost limitless heights. You must have a vision of where you want to be in one year, two years, five years time. When visualising where you want to be you must also visualise yourself working towards that end. Repeat your dreams to yourself until you come to believe them. Remember that perception can become reality if you believe in it enough. Bad thoughts can have a negative effect upon you. And good thoughts can have a positive effect upon you. Belief in a cause can be a cause of great happiness. And when you go for it – go for it in a big way. Try to change your focus from the small and the immediate to the large and the long term. Do not hold yourself back by worrying too much about failure. You must do what you can to minimise the risk of failure. But do not allow yourself to be so obsessed by failure that you spend too much time preparing for it. The more time you spend on a backup plan the more you are accepting the possibility of defeat. Remember that success often comes just one step after defeat has stared you in the face. You can get whatever you want if you are prepared to make the necessary demands upon yourself – and never to give up hope. When you believe in yourself others will believe in you too. Self confidence is contagious: those around you will also have confidence in you. Do not be afraid to burn your bridges behind you.

13. Do you use all your skills?

You must take full advantage of all your senses – including your sixth sense. When inspiration flashes into your mind, welcome it, treat it with great respect and act upon it. Inspiration is never to be ignored. If you ignore inspiration too often it will not call again. If you want to succeed you must be prepared – and able – to light your own fire. If you want to change things then you will need every skill you can find. Changing things is much harder than maintaining or working for the status quo. Change means action and taking chances. It also often means enduring pain.

14. Are you in a rut?

Do not accept fate simply because everyone else does. Do not allow yourself to fall into a habit of daily routine from which escape seems impossible. Escape is possible but most people – even when they have been told the secrets of success – simply carry on as before. The man who is ruled by his own lack of determination and energy is just as much a slave as the man who is 'owned' by another or who is ruled by a wicked dictator.

15. Are you being adversely affected by negative emotions?

Positive emotions will take you to success but negative emotions will, just as surely, take you to failure. Hatred does far more harm to the person doing the hating than the person who is hated. Envy, jealousy and selfishness are all entirely useless and destructive emotions.

16. Are you capable of making decisions quickly?

You have to be able to make decisions quickly and you have to be firm – even if you may be wrong. Making mistakes is an integral part of succeeding. If you are afraid of making mistakes then you will never make any decisions and you will never achieve anything. But you must be prepared and able to learn from your mistakes. Not making decisions (through fear), or changing your mind frequently (again through fear of having made a mistake) are common causes of failure (though changing your mind because circumstances have changed is a sign of strength not weakness). Surgeon John Hunter used to say that the art of surgery would never advance until doctors and surgeons had the courage to publish details of their failures as well as of their successes. It is, of course, particularly important to be able to make quick decisions and act decisively in an emergency. To help yourself make quick decisions you can do two things: first, you should sharpen your intuitive skills so that you are better able to make a fast, but well based, intuitive decision; second, you should train yourself to assess risks quickly and effectively, weighing up the pros and cons before making a decision.

17. Do you deal with problems decisively — or do you panic?

There is no point in panicking when you are suddenly faced with a problem. There is rarely little point in begging, pleading, cajoling or threatening when things go wrong. Try not to allow yourself to be bogged down in detail when you come face to face with those whose main purpose in life seems to be to stop you doing things that you believe you should be allowed to do. Our society is full of them. These are the men and women who hide behind their uniforms. Remember that winning is not a question of being the better side, or even being right. Winning is about winning. It is the problems in our lives which give us wisdom and happiness for it is through solving the problems we have to face we discover knowledge, contentment and joy.

18. Are you spending too much time with people who depress you and hold you back?

One famous artist always refuses to look at bad pictures. He believes that if he does this his pencil may become tainted. It has always struck me as absurd that depressed patients are placed in a ward full of depressed patients and expected to get better. You should avoid people who make you feel downhearted, depressed and dispirited. Do not allow your mind to be contaminated by the minds of those who have entirely negative thoughts.

19. Are you spending too much time on trivia?

Bickering over trivialities is destructive. Concentrate on the big picture. Far too many people are obsessed and overwhelmed by trivia. Pointless trivia is the bondage of the soul. Gulliver in the land of the little people was tied down by trivia. Most of us are, at one time or another, tied down by the bureaucrats and by trivial responsibilities. (But trivia need not always be pointless. While Michelangelo was working on a statue a visitor asked him what he had done since his last visit. Michelangelo explained that he had softened this feature and that and given more expression to the statue's lips. 'But these are trifles!' protested the visitor. 'It may be so,' said Michelangelo. 'But recollect that trifles make perfection, and perfection is no trifle.')

20. Don't have regrets and do not try to justify what you do.

The more successful you become the more you will realise that there are many people around who will want to question what you do and what you have done with your life. They will demand that you justify every move you have made. You will find that some of the severest criticism you will face will come from those whom you might have imagined would have been on your side. (They may, indeed, actually describe themselves as being on your side.) Ignore them. Constantly defending yourself and having regrets will turn you into a loser.

21. Have you been distracted from your aims?

I know a woman who always knew exactly what she wanted to be: a nurse. She spent her teenage years training to be a nurse. In her twenties she worked hard at her job. She was good at it. She enjoyed what she did. The patients liked her. The other nurses liked working with her. The administrators were so impressed that they promoted her to an administrative post. Too flattered to say: ‘No, this isn’t what I want to do’ she accepted the administrative post. She then spent the next fifteen years of her life doing a job which she hated. Instead of spending her days with patients she spent her days with files and piles of paperwork. Eventually, she had the good sense and mental strength to insist that she was downgraded and put back onto the wards. She had to take a massive pay cut. But now she enjoys her work and her life again. Do not allow yourself to be distracted from your real goals and purposes – whatever they may be.

22. Do you talk too much?

Do not talk too much about yourself or your plans. If you tell others what you intend to do there is a risk that you will attract envy and therefore danger. And there is also a risk that others may steal your ideas and use your plans to satisfy their own ambitions.

23. Are you capable of dealing with disappointment?

If you want to succeed then you must be prepared for disappointments and disillusionment. You must also be prepared for dishonesty from on high.

24. Decide who your heroes are.

When you are in difficulty ask yourself: ‘What would *they* have done in these circumstances?’ Most great men and women exhibit many of the qualities on this list: an ability to inspire; courage; an ability to think clearly and make decisions quickly; a lack of unreasonable prejudice; an ability to organise; persistence; determination; charisma and poise; self confidence; faith in themselves and in what they do; an understanding of nature and people and patience. How many of those virtues do you have? How many of those virtues can you create within and for yourself?

25. Do you make enough notes?

You should practise writing down all your thoughts and hopes. Write down everything you have to do. Make lists. Writing things down helps to clear your head – and helps to keep the ideas flowing. The practise of writing everything down is commonplace among great men and women.

26. Do you deal well with adversity?

When things go wrong you should escape – in your mind. Write about your adversities, use them as experiences. Use anything and everything that happens to you. Any adventure can be – and should be – a valuable learning experience.

27. Do you have a sense of humour?

When Henry David Thoreau was dying a friend asked him if he had made his peace with God. ‘I didn’t know we’d fallen out,’ was Thoreau’s splendidly laconic reply. A sense of humour can help you make friends and deal with problems.

28. Do you have enough interests?

You should let your interests range as widely as possible. The more potential sources of pleasure you have the more likely you are to be able to survive a crisis in some important part of your life. If you keep your life too narrow you will be prone to disappointment. Alexander the Great is said to have wept when he realised he had no more worlds to conquer. He should have thought of space travel.

29. Are you too hostile?

Keep your hostility for when you need it. Try to approach every stranger as a potential friend and most of the time you will not be disappointed. If you approach every stranger as a potential enemy then you will soon acquire a great many enemies.

30. Do you overestimate your powers?

If you *slightly* overestimate your powers you will be constantly surprised by failure and disappointment. And your life will be miserable and unhappy. If you *slightly* underestimate your powers you will be constantly surprised by success. And your life will be happy. – John Ruskin.

31. Do you think big enough?

Remember that large bounds are often easier than little steps. If you take large bounds you only have to move two or three times to get somewhere. If you take little, tiny steps you may have to move a dozen times to travel the same distance. And don’t be afraid to miss out steps that other people may think are essential – if you can see a profitable, safe and effective short cut. Most people live in an entirely linear way. They deal with problem A, then with problem B and then with problem C. But you may discover that if you deal with problem C you automatically get rid of problems A and B.

32. Do you know how to turn obstacles into opportunities?

Problems are opportunities. Grasp them. If someone has a problem and you can find the solution for them then you will gain their everlasting gratitude. But if you find a solution to a problem someone doesn't know he has, make sure that you tell him about the problem before you tell him about the solution. If there is a barrier between you and potential customers use your mind to find ways to avoid or work your way through the barrier – and ways to increase your customer's perception of the benefit you are offering them. If you run a mail order business and your business is threatened by a postal strike do not regard the proposed threat as an obstacle so much as an opportunity.

33. Are you aiming high enough?

You should aim to get the greatest possible result from every effort you make.

34. Are you over-complicating your life?

Do you remember the story I told you about my two Bentley motor cars? They were beautiful vehicles. One was old. One was relatively new. But they required a good deal of care and attention. Every few months I had to take them both to a specialist garage where the cars could be serviced. An ordinary service for one of these cars cost about the same as a small car would cost to buy. On one occasion, when I was collecting one of the cars, one of the specialist mechanics told me that in order to preserve the vehicles and protect them from the elements I should buy a high pressure hose and clean them down after taking them around the muddy lanes near where I lived. I dutifully went out and bought a high pressure hose. And then I realised how absurd my life had become. I was being ruled by two motor cars. I sold both cars immediately and bought a sturdy, four wheeled drive vehicle which I have owned for three years without ever washing.

35. Are you sure you know exactly what you want?

Unless you know what you really want there is very little chance that you will ever get it.

36. What do you think is stopping you getting what you want?

Could it be, do you think, that getting where you want to be is going to be painful, difficult, inconvenient or just plain hard work? Is there going to be more pain in getting where you want to be than there is in staying where you are now? Even if you have a job – and do not ever intend to work for yourself – you should nevertheless think of yourself as self employed. Being self employed used to be regarded as a precarious way to earn a living. In fact, it is just the opposite. But being self employed doesn't just mean earning a living without having a 9 to 5 job to go to. Being self employed requires an attitude of mind as much as anything else. Many people who lose their jobs and who decide to earn a living for themselves describe themselves as 'freelance' or 'self employed' but in their hearts they are still operating like small cogs helping a large wheel to go round. The self employed work for many people but are beholden to none – as anyone who has ever employed a self employed plumber or builder will confirm. If you have a job you should think of yourself as operating as a self employed individual within that organisation. Constantly be on the look out to try to find ways in which you can help your boss or company be more successful. Be creative. Look for ways to save money or make money or to introduce new products. And when you have proved that you can contribute wealth to the company you can be creative on your account – and ask for a percentage of the profits.

37. Do you know how to motivate yourself?

There is no point at all in waiting for others to motivate you. If you want to succeed then you must motivate yourself. You must make *not* achieving more painful than achieving. Commit yourself to your plan. Open your eyes to the world and do not be afraid to travel outside your normal boundaries – be those boundaries national, mental or spiritual. Learn from others who have been in similar situations to you.

38. Are you honest?

You must be honest in everything you do with those who work for you, your customers and those with whom you do business. Integrity in adversity is vitally important. Nothing is easier to acquire than a bad reputation. Nothing is harder to get than a good reputation. Nothing is easier to lose than a good reputation. Nothing is harder to lose than a bad reputation. But most of all you must be honest with yourself. To know when and what you do not know is vitally important. It is always dangerous to pretend to know something you do not know.

39. Are you driven by vanity?

You must not be inspired or driven exclusively by vanity – a dangerous and destructive force. A little vanity is fine. But too much can be deadly.

40. Are you constantly improving what you have to offer?

However successful you become you must always try to improve the quality of the products or the service you sell. (You are ‘selling’ something whatever you do for a living. A heart surgeon is selling his knowledge, skill and time. A lawyer is selling his knowledge, skill and time. A freelance gardener is selling his knowledge, skill and time.)

41. Do you find it difficult to concentrate?

You can’t succeed at anything without concentrating on what you are doing. In order to concentrate you may need to cut yourself off from outside stimuli. If you are working on something which requires a great deal of continued thought then you may need to close the door and turn off the telephone. You may find that playing music will help by cutting out any small, extraneous noises which might distract you. (Once you are concentrating hard you will probably be quite unaware that the music is playing. A few moments ago I stopped work for a second and decided to put on some music. I then realised that a tape was already playing. I had been concentrating so hard on what I was doing that I was completely unaware of the music.)

42. Do you blame other people for everything that goes wrong?

Some people spend their entire lives utterly convinced that they are the victims of ingratitude and treachery and that they are persecuted by named and known or unnamed and unknown enemies. Every time they fail at something they find someone else to blame. Taken individually all their complaints and protests may sound plausible but such individuals eventually fail to rise above their constant moaning.

43. Do you get depressed by other people’s failures to do what they promise to do?

You and I would like to live on a planet inhabited by wise, compassionate, sensitive, intelligent beings. But, sadly, space travel is not yet available and so we are stuck with a planet which is dominated by the cruel, the rude, the selfish, the greedy, the unthinking and the prejudiced. You must not allow yourself to be too frustrated by people who do not do what they say they will do. Such frustration turns to stress which will make you ill. Be true and noble to yourself and to those who are true and noble to you; there is nothing else to be done.

44. Do you worry about not being up to date with technology?

We live in a world of constant change. On any given day anyone older than about twelve years of age will be living in a world where the technology is developing faster than they can keep up. But don’t worry. It doesn’t matter. You can always hire someone to handle the technology. And if the technology isn’t accessible enough for you to use without understanding it then it hasn’t developed properly. How many people who use a motor car, a television set or a camera understand how these pieces of technology work? Why should you feel guilty because you don’t know how a computer works? The computer manufacturers will be doing their jobs properly when they sell products which anyone can understand. I believe that Marshall McLuhan was wrong. It is the message not the medium which is important. The medium is merely the route you use to spread the message. If, as I hope, this books adds in some way to the quality of your life it will be because of the ideas it contains and not because of the paper and ink with which it has been manufactured.

If you enjoyed reading *Spiritpower* we would be grateful if you would post a favourable review.

Dr Vernon Coleman is a qualified medical doctor and the author of over 100 books. His books have sold over two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK alone and have been translated into 25 languages. For a list of books please see Vernon Coleman’s author page on Amazon or visit http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

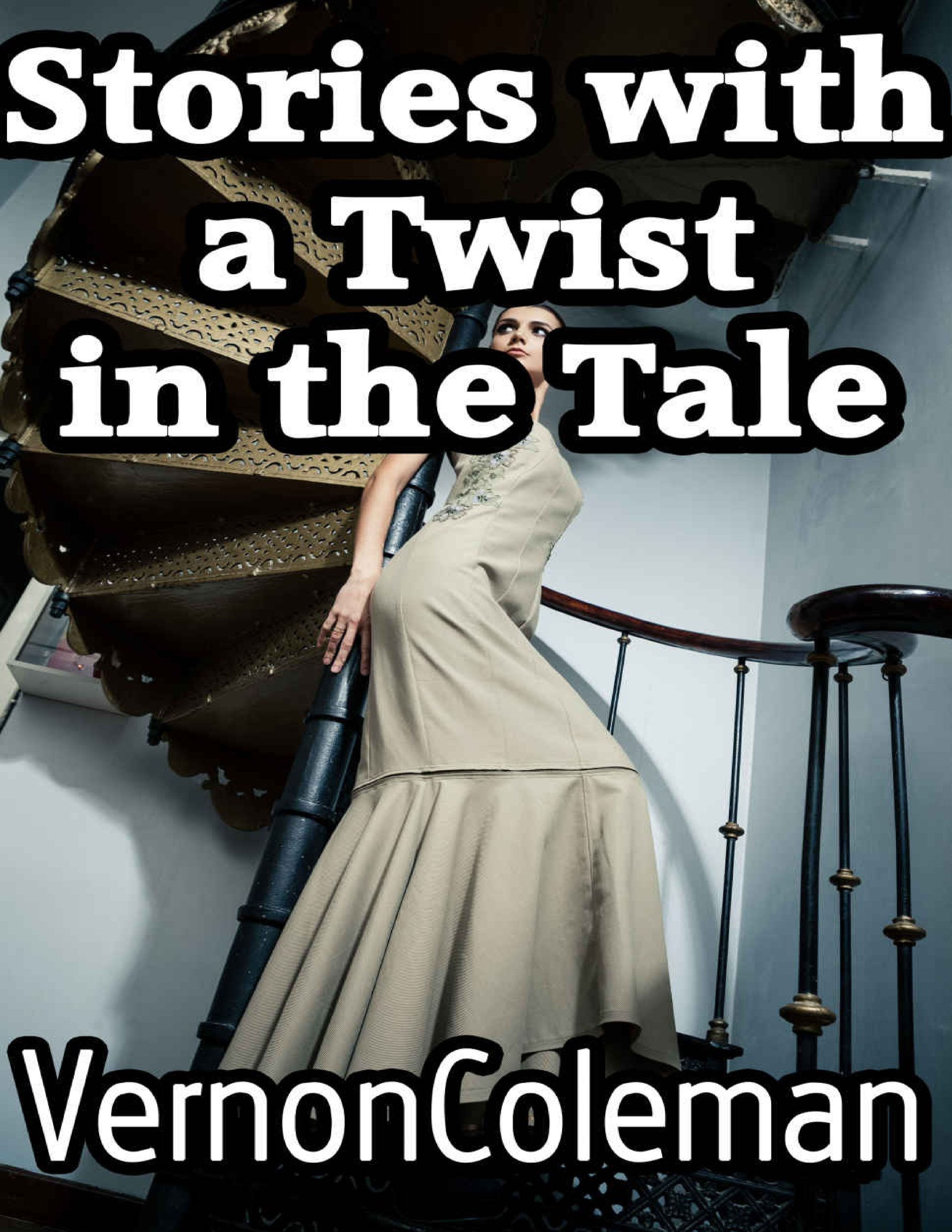

Stories with a Twist in the Tale

VernonColeman

Stories with a Twist in the Tale

Vernon Coleman

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Dr Vernon Coleman is a qualified doctor who has been a professional author for 40 years. He has written over 100 books which have sold more than two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK alone. His books have been translated into 25 languages and sold around the world. Many of his books are available as Kindle books on Amazon. For more details about available books please see his author page on Amazon. For free articles please visit www.vernoncoleman.com

Dedication

To my darling Antoinette with all my love.
You are everyone and everything to me. I am at home when I am with you; wherever we may be.

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Introduction

During the 1970s I wrote several thousand stories, articles and columns for national newspapers and magazines. Many of the pieces were topical and no longer relevant. A good many have been lost. But a few dozen stories which I have unearthed do seem to me to be worth saving. Most (though not all) of these are stories with a twist in the tale. Some have a medical flavour. Some are pure fiction. Some are autobiographical. Some are a mixture of all of these. None of these stories and reminiscences has been previously published in book form. I hope you enjoy them.

Vernon Coleman, February 2015

Chain Reaction

A handful of tightly curled blonde hairs floated in soapy water in a white enamelled dish. The nurse preparing Gillian Breakwell for her operation conceded privately that her patient was certainly a natural blonde.

A few minutes prior to this depilation, a doctor in a pair of shapeless green trousers and a heavily starched white coat which creaked rather than rustled had given her an injection which he had promised would relax her.

And a few minutes prior to that, the ward sister, a permanently breathless woman whose dark blue uniform seemed in danger of losing the struggle with a body which defied containment, had brought Gillian a message from her husband. He had telephoned to send his love.

Some distance away, and seemingly quite unconnected, a man called David Jepherson was waiting in the reception room outside the manager's office at his bank. He had read, from cover to printer's name and address, a leaflet about the importance of making a Will and a leaflet describing the extensive, not to say expensive, services offered by the bank to would-be travellers.

He had also read a specially produced glossy quarterly magazine which the bank produced for customers and which contained descriptions of the leisure time activities of some of the bank's employees. Despite being glossy, the magazine was exceedingly dull.

His reading had been punctuated by numerous visits from the bank manager's secretary to explain that the manager had been called away to a very important meeting, had been unavoidably detained and would not be back for some time.

She had offered Mr Jepherson an alternative appointment but Mr Jepherson, who had been preparing himself mentally for this meeting for several days, had explained that he would prefer to wait. He hadn't slept properly for three nights, and he wasn't sure that he could cope with more sleepless nights.

For slightly more than two years he had owned and driven his own taxi. Now he hoped to buy two extra, second-hand cabs, hire extra drivers and start his own small fleet. He had saved enough money to pay for one of the extra cabs but he needed a loan from the bank to pay for the other and for the initial running costs of his new venture.

He straightened his perfectly aligned tie for the twentieth time and once more picked up and tried to concentrate on the leaflet on making a Will. It was something he'd thought about doing many times but somehow he'd never quite got round to it. Perhaps he would do it when he'd fixed up the loan he needed.

The bank manager, for whom he was waiting, was not, as his secretary had implied, at a meeting of important local businessmen.

Gerald Hill was, in fact, at home impatiently waiting for a heating engineer to call and attend to a still and silent central heating boiler.

The engineer, who had telephoned the day before, had promised to call before nine in the morning. Mrs Hill, who had an appointment booked for ten with her hairdresser, had telephoned the bank at twenty minutes to ten when the man still had not called and had instructed her husband to return home.

The appointment with her hairdresser, she took pleasure in reminding her husband, had been arranged so that she could look her best when they attended the golf club dinner that evening.

She explained that she would be unable to obtain another appointment at such short notice, especially not with Mr Luigi who was terribly, terribly busy, and that under no circumstances would she be prepared to attend the dinner with her hair in its current state.

With no one in the house, she reminded her husband, the heating engineer would undoubtedly carry on his way to his next customer, leaving their house and boiler as cold as ice. Mr Hill had accordingly abandoned the pleasures of banking to return home and boiler sit.

So, meanwhile, taxi driver David Jepherson sat waiting at the bank.

Also waiting – in fact waiting for David Jepherson and his taxi – was surgeon Mr Paul Laker-Clarke. He was waiting in his own drawing room.

Having read the morning newspaper and completed the crossword, he was studying a seed catalogue that had arrived in the morning post, and had selected suitable varieties of flowers and vegetables for the coming year.

Although from time to time he looked at his watch, there were no visible signs that he was unduly worried by the non-arrival of the taxi which should have taken him to the hospital.

The taxi was necessary because, nine months previously, driving home after an unexpected midnight visit to the hospital to deal with an emergency, Mr Laker-Clarke had been stopped by a pair of traffic policemen.

The two glasses of sherry that had preceded his evening meal and the two rather large malt whiskies that had followed it, had apparently left enough alcohol on his breath, and it later turned out in his blood, to deprive Mr Laker-Clarke of his licence to drive a motor car.

The magistrates had been completely unimpressed by the surgeon's production of the patient, now healthy, as evidence of his sobriety. They did not agree that a man capable of wielding a surgical knife with success could be relied upon to steer a motor car with care. They preferred to act upon the more objective evidence provided by a study of Mr Laker-Clarke's blood sample.

Deprived of his licence, Mr Laker-Clarke had arranged for a local taxi driver to take him into the hospital each morning in time for surgery, and to take him home again at the conclusion of the daily operating session.

The driver, David Jepherson, had been due to pick up the surgeon at half past ten but, with the bank manager absent, Mrs Jepherson's plaintive reminders to her husband over the cab radio had been announced to an empty taxi.

And in the hospital, the unfortunate Mrs Breakwell, shaved and sleepy, had been prepared for an operation that had to be cancelled.

The ward sister herself had given Mrs Breakwell the news. She, too, it was who gave Mrs Breakwell's husband the news when he rang a little later to enquire about his wife.

Mr Breakwell was angry about the cancelled operation. He'd been so worried about his wife that he had waited at home all morning.

He knew for a fact that Mrs Hill, the bank manager's wife, was going to be in a very bad mood when he finally got there. He'd promised to be there to deal with their boiler before nine o'clock.

First published in the London Evening News 24.9.1979

Mercy Dash

Constable Williams liked driving motor cars. He'd joined the police force because they had lots of expensive fast cars for patrolmen to drive.

Of course, he'd had to potter around in a tiny Austin for a couple of years before they'd let him loose with one of the bigger saloon models.

Some forces even had really fast sports cars: Jaguars, MGBs and Aston Martins. He really fancied himself behind the wheel of one of those.

He put the big Triumph into a lower gear and accelerated around a couple of slow lorries; the road in front of him curved rapidly round to the left and he had to cut sharply in front of the leading lorry.

The Triumph didn't have any police markings and the lorry driver hooted fiercely and flashed his headlights a couple of times. Williams swore silently at him.

He leant back so that his arms were extended at full stretch. At night he liked to imagine that he was driving in some important rally, racing through the French Alps to reach some distant checkpoint and clock in for a few hours rest. It always made his journeys seem shorter.

The canister on the seat beside him seemed to urge him on. The address of the hospital that it had come from was painted on the side in large white letters. A large label tied to the canister carried the name of the hospital due to receive the frozen kidney within.

A small black car, a Mini, appeared suddenly in the blaze of the big car's headlights. Williams slowed down a little as he approached it, dropping down from ninety to just under seventy miles an hour. The driver of the Mini stayed obstinately in the middle of the road.

Williams tooted and flashed his lights; the Mini stayed exactly where it was. Williams tooted again; by now he'd had to brake again and slow down to the Mini's speed, about fifty or fifty five miles per hour.

The Mini still wouldn't budge. Williams accelerated a little and closed in. The driver of the Mini accelerated a little to increase the space between the two cars; Williams accelerated with him.

When they were both doing about seventy, the Mini driver levelled off. The road was narrow and winding; every time they reached a corner they slid round with squeals and screeches. Several times the big Triumph nearly slid off the road.

Williams moved his fingers gingerly to relax them a little; he gritted his teeth and smiled, he was enjoying himself. Williams could have gone another five or ten miles an hour faster on the straight stretches but the Mini driver seemed to be driving flat out. They sped on together.

Several times Williams felt his car shudder as it went over a small animal, a rabbit or a hedgehog. Once he nearly hit a cyclist who'd wobbled in front of the two cars. The Mini had swerved out but Williams had been unable to see the cyclist until it was almost too late. The cyclist had fallen but Williams was certain that he hadn't actually hit him.

It wouldn't look good in the papers if the cyclist had been injured and had managed to take his number. Williams quickly dismissed the thought from his mind and concentrated on his driving.

The road was narrower still now and the Mini was occasionally managing to pull away from the bigger, clumsier car. But each time Williams managed to pull back and close the gap. The contest with the driver of the Mini had become something rather personal.

Occasionally, when the road straightened out a little, Williams would pull out and try to overtake. But there was never quite enough room. The Mini always managed to pull away at the last moment, leaving Williams stranded and with a difficult corner to negotiate.

They sped on together, covering over fifty miles in the first hour. It didn't seem an exceptionally fast average but the roads were bad, there was quite a lot of traffic and they frequently had to cruise slowly behind a line of lorries while they waited for a stretch of clear road.

Several times the lorries they overtook had to pull off the road, onto the verge, to get out of the way of the two cars. One lorry slid down into a ditch, and in his rear view mirror Williams could see its headlights dancing crazily around the sky.

Williams began to study his petrol gauge. He was supposed to have handed the canister over to another police driver, from another force, several miles previously. He had kept an eye open for the change-over car but, perhaps not surprisingly, had not seen anything.

Now he was beginning to run out of petrol. He judged from the gauge that he had less than a gallon left; at the speed he was travelling that would take him no more than twenty miles – and heaven knows where he would be in twenty miles' time. He certainly wouldn't be at the hospital where they were waiting for the kidney.

The canister, held securely underneath the seat belt, gave Williams extra confidence. He thought of the man or woman waiting for the kidney inside it. He thought of the team of surgeons, nurses and relatives waiting for him to arrive; waiting for his precious cargo.

At last they came to a stretch of good, straight road. There was a break in the incoming traffic and Williams pulled out to overtake. The driver of the Mini pulled in slightly to allow the Triumph to pass. The nearside wheels must have gone onto the grass verge for, in his rear view mirror, Williams saw the Mini slide and somersault; suddenly it seemed to be broadside on, then it was lost altogether as a huge lorry, travelling in the other direction, swept it sideways. There was an explosion, flames lit the sky and Williams saw the Mini somersaulting crazily out of his field of vision. The driver had no chance.

Williams instinctively braked, then thought of the canister at his side and, realising that he could do nothing for the driver of the Mini, grimly put his foot heavily on the accelerator; a life gone, a life to be saved. A mile ahead he found a garage, bought petrol and told the attendant to raise the alarm.

He reached the hospital in another hour. A porter who was waiting for him leapt to the car and snatched the canister from him, then ran with it to the operating theatre.

‘That was a magnificent drive!’ said the surgeon, three hours later. ‘I think she will be all right.’ He paused. ‘By the way,’ he said, ‘her husband was driving down from your area but he hasn’t arrived yet. They are a devoted couple but he works away from home. I don’t suppose you passed any cars in trouble? I think he was driving a Mini.’

First published Evening News 17.10.1970

Dead or Alive

It was hot, very hot.

There was some shade behind the rock where Rizzi was hiding but even in the shade it was hot.

A lizard abandoned the cool darkness of a rock crevice for a moment or two; ran across a patch of rocky ground and slid quickly into another crevice. The heat was too much even for him. The air shimmered and the rocks seemed to sparkle in the bright sunlight.

Above Rizzi the cliff rose for over a hundred feet. The hard white rock, unbroken by tree or shrub, stretched upwards almost vertically. On the other side of the mountain there was a drop of about one hundred and fifty feet. At the bottom of the drop a shallow blue lake shimmered.

Rizzi was hidden behind a rock at the side of the road. And coming up the road was Giovanni. Rizzi was going to kill Giovanni.

Giovanni was, as usual, travelling by jeep. The dust thrown up billowed behind him like a parachute, drowning the second jeep which followed in thick, choking white dust. Giovanni never travelled alone.

As head of the local Organisation he needed a bodyguard and he never travelled without two or three of his most faithful men – men who were tough, ruthless, cruel and loyal.

Rizzi was going to kill Giovanni because the Organisation had destroyed his father. His white knuckles almost gleamed as he clutched his rifle and crouched down low behind the rock.

Rizzi and his brother had been sitting outside their little farmhouse when the assassins had come for their father.

Rizzi's father hadn't had a gun. Even if he had one, he probably would not have used it. He was a kind, gentle man; too kind perhaps to survive in a country where a man like Giovanni could operate so successfully.

The Giovanni's Organisation had demanded protection money and when the old man refused, they killed him.

Then they'd stolen his goods, the few pieces of silverware he had collected, the small hoard of money he'd accumulated and the best of his clothes. They'd burnt his house and killed one of his sons.

Sitting in the front of Giovanni's jeep one of the bodyguards was searching the road ahead for any sign of ambush. Occasionally he took a pair of binoculars from the dashboard and tried to focus them on the rocks and ledges ahead as the jeep bounced along the mountain road.

Behind his rock, Rizzi was motionless. It was getting even hotter. The lizard scuttled across the road and darted behind another rock. The heat really was too much even for a lizard. But it didn't bother Rizzi.

Down below, on the lake, a boatful of tourists sang cheerful songs and the sound floated up the mountain, a strange envoy from another world.

The jeep was less than a mile away. The second jeep had dropped back a little to try to escape some of the dust. The driver wore goggles but it was almost impossible to keep them clear. The other men sat facing the back of the jeep to try to keep their eyes clear of dust and grit.

Rizzi shifted slightly and his rifle slid an inch or so along the top of the rock.

The man at the front of the jeep, the man with the binoculars, was still peering anxiously ahead.

Suddenly, he grabbed the binoculars and struggled to steady himself in the rolling jeep. He shouted something and banged the driver on the shoulder. The driver braked urgently, the jeep skidding to a halt. The second jeep braked sharply and pulled up with no more than a couple of feet to spare.

'Up there,' said the man beckoning with the binoculars. 'I saw the sunlight glint on something. It looked like metal.'

'You're too jumpy,' said Giovanni with a laugh.

He held the binoculars for a minute before lowering them. Then he nodded. He called quietly to two of the men in the second jeep.

The two men jumped on to the road, one man carrying a rifle, both of them carrying knives.

While the two ran ahead, the jeeps edged forwards. The glinting metal was about a third of a mile ahead.

Giovanni suspected there might be someone waiting for him. Someone with a gun. He was right. Rizzi was.

Rizzi never moved. He crouched, still as the rock he was hiding behind, his hands still gripping his rifle.

The two men were now only ten yards away. The one with the rifle lay still and aimed at the spot where he expected a head to appear. The other man continued to crawl forwards. When he reached the rock he peered anxiously round the edge of it. Rizzi was there all right. Crouching low behind the rock he seemed almost asleep. He might have fainted from exhaustion in the heat.

Giovanni's man was an experienced killer. He took out his knife and leapt furiously forwards. His knife jarred as it struck deep into Rizzi's back.

The killer stood up and beckoned to his companion. The two carefully scoured the road nearby. It was clear. They returned to Rizzi. The killer took him roughly by the shoulder and turned him round, starting to search for a wallet or purse. The second man, having called to Giovanni, turned round to help. Suddenly he put a hand on the killer's arm and pointed to Rizzi's chest – torn open by a bullet hole. Rizzi had clearly been dead for hours.

The killer saw the grenade first. It was lying alone on the ground, tucked almost underneath the rock. The pin was still fixed to Rizzi's belt. When the killer had turned Rizzio over, the pin had come out of the grenade.

The grenade exploded almost immediately. The blast shook the cliff, and another half a dozen grenades and a stick of dynamite exploded seconds afterwards.

When the wall of the cliff started to crack, the road began to disappear. The two jeeps were swept down into the lake like toys, their occupants, including Giovanni, crushed beneath a mass of stone.

A mile up the road Rizzi's brother, the son that Giovanni hadn't killed, wiped a tear from his eye and poured another shot of wine down his parched throat.

First published in the London Evening News 10.7.73

Customs Change

'Sorry sir,' said the customs officer, 'but I'll have to ask you to open the back. I need to take a look inside.'

'What's up?' demanded the surprised driver of the lorry. 'You've got my papers?'

'Yes. I'm sorry, sir, but we'd be grateful if you would open the back of the lorry so that we can have a look inside.'

'Sure,' said the lorry driver, quickly leaping down from his cab and clearly anxious to oblige. 'Hope you won't be long, I'm a bit behind time.'

'Won't keep you long at all, sir,' said the customs officer. 'Just routine.'

The driver walked around to the back of the lorry, jingling a big bunch of keys. 'Wedding anniversary tonight,' he said, winking at the customs man. 'Can't afford to be late for that.'

The officer half smiled. He was young enough to be aware of his position and old enough to be tempted to smile and talk a little.

The lorry driver, having worked on continental trips for nearly six years, saw and recognised all this quickly. 'Eleven years married,' he said. 'That's why I got this job.' He laughed and the customs man smiled broadly.

'Girl in every port?' the customs man asked.

'It's a thought,' confessed the driver with a shrug. He didn't give anything away. He unfastened a padlock and chain at the back of the lorry and then unlocked the rear doors. From inside the lorry he pulled down a short pair of steps.

'Help yourself,' he said to the officer.

'What have you got in there?' asked the man in blue.

'It's all on the forms,' said the driver.

The customs man paused on the bottom step. 'I left the forms in the office,' he said, 'remind me, will you?'

'Chocolates and sweets,' said the driver. 'Swiss stuff mainly. My boss buys it in bulk out there and then wholesales it in this country. There's quite a market in the specialist shops. There's something rather special about Swiss chocolate according to the people who can afford to pay for it. Personally, I can't stand the stuff. It's too smooth for me.'

The officer shivered as the cold inside the lorry seemed to wrap around him.

'I'll come in with you,' said the driver. 'We have to keep the doors shut.'

'Didn't realise you had refrigeration apparatus,' said the officer.

'It isn't really refrigerated,' said the driver. 'Just chilled.'

'Now,' said the official. 'What precisely have you got?'

'Chocolate motor cars, chocolate cows, chocolate dolls, chocolate mice, Easter eggs, rum filled chocolate bars, raisin and nut filled chocolate bars, chocolate crunchy bars, chocolate snacks, chocolate gift packs,' recited the driver, counting off items from memory. 'All sorts of things. I don't know how they think them up. They'd make the Eiffel Tower in chocolate if they could.' He grinned. 'What's up? Someone smuggling chocolate into the country?'

The official grinned back at him. 'Gold,' he said. 'We got a tip off that some gold was coming through today and we've got to check all the lorries coming through.'

'Gold? Really!' said the driver. 'Crumbs. I should be so lucky. All I get is chocolate.'

'Keep it quiet,' said the customs man, with a finger on his lips. 'Shouldn't have told you that.'

'OK,' said the driver. 'I didn't realise people still smuggled gold.'

'Currency fiddles, tax scams, arbitrage this and that,' said the man in blue. 'They make millions just moving gold around the world. Buy it here, sell it there; make a fortune.'

Suddenly the lorry driver began to grin broadly. 'Hey,' he said, 'Just thought, we've got some gold on board.'

The official turned quickly and stared at him.

'Over here somewhere,' said the lorry driver, opening a case at the far end of the lorry. He took out a small cardboard box, broke it open and then took from it a small gold coin. 'Gold sovereigns,' he said, 'thousands of them.'

The customs officer stared at the gold coin in astonishment.

'Very tasty too,' said the lorry driver, with a grin. 'For those who like Swiss chocolate.'

The officer reached for the coin but the lorry driver held it just out of reach. Then slowly he picked at the edge of the coin and removed of sheath of gold paper. Underneath he revealed a chocolate coin. He handed it to the customs officer who looked at it and grinned back at him.

'You had me worried then,' he sighed, taking a bite and turning away. He made his way back to the lorry doors. Together the two men jumped out into the customs shed. The driver refastened the doors and the padlock.

The official disappeared and returned minutes later with the lorry driver’s forms and papers. ‘All OK,’ he said. ‘You can get home to the wife,’ he smiled. ‘What are a few dozen cases of gold sovereigns between friends?’

‘What indeed?’ said the lorry driver accepting his papers and climbing back into his cab.

He started up the engine, slipped it into first gear and then slowly pulled away from the customs shed. As he left he waved goodbye to the young officer and wondered what the poor man would have said if he had known that underneath the layer of boxes containing genuine chocolate coins there were 20,000 gold sovereigns. Each solid gold piece wrapped in gold foil and disguised as a piece of chocolate.

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The Message

Allman stared at the drawing in its elegant gilt frame.

There was half a horse, a pair of human legs and little more except a signature scrawled across the middle of the lithograph.

And for that the asking price was the same as for a small car. It was right, thought Allman, that the signature should be the most easily identifiable thing in the drawing. That, after all, was what this Paris gallery was selling.

Reflected in the thick bullet-proof glass of the gallery window through which Allman was looking, was a man in a thick suede coat with a black fur lining.

Allman was certain that the man was following him. He had stopped three times to look in shop windows and each time the man in the suede coat had also stopped.

When he had continued, the man in the suede coat had also moved on – apparently without any wish to hide the fact that he was shadowing Allman.

Allman was not surprised. In his pocket there was a message which had already caused the death of one agent in Juan les Pins. A message which he had to get to his contact in Paris.

He walked past a yellow post box fastened to the wall between the gallery and a milliner's shop. It was a pity that the information he had could not simply be dropped into a post box. But it was far too valuable to entrust to the mail.

It was a bitterly cold evening but even so there were quite a few people about; most of them window shopping. The Rue du Fauborg Saint Honoré is one of the most expensive streets in the world, ever popular with both Parisians and tourists.

Outside the British Embassy, a man in a thick blue overcoat was getting into the back of a huge, green Rolls Royce. As he walked past, Allman peeped into the car. The inside of the car looked very warm and comfortable. A newspaper lay neatly folded on the back seat; a cocktail cabinet was open. The chauffeur closed the car door and slid behind the wheel. The car moved away.

Allman walked on. He looked at his watch. He had two hours in which to make the hand over. Two hours in which to reach his contact.

Before him the Place Vendôme suddenly appeared with its pillar rising high up into the blackness. The pillar, thought Allman, always looks just like a large version of the popular candles which are modelled on it.

Outside the Ritz hotel, a doorman clapped his gloved hands together to warm them. Inside, the chandeliers shone brightly. Allman nodded to the doorman but kept walking. The doorman neither nodded nor smiled. Allman didn't look like a guest.

The man behind, the man in the sheepskin coat, kept following, not trying at all to hide the fact that he was following Allman.

Both men knew that Allman could have been picked up over an hour ago. But the opposition desperately wanted to know the identity of Allman's contact. They wanted to know who had been getting messages out of Paris for so long.

Allman knew that it was important that they should not trace the man. He also knew that he had to try to get the message to him. And he knew that whether or not he succeeded he was finished.

He walked past the bank on the corner of the square and stared for a moment at the huge board which listed the rates of exchange. He looked also at the night safe. Then he turned left up the Rue de la Paix.

He stopped at Cartier's to look in the window. You needed to have a wallet heavy enough to ruin your suit to buy anything in there. A huge, uniformed guard stood outside the door and moved a little closer as Allman stared into the window. The shop was closing and the guard was being very careful.

Allman moved on, past a shop where a mink-edged denim suit was on sale for several thousand pounds sterling, past the Citroen showrooms where cars sparkled like gems and past a man selling hot chestnuts.

The smell was delicious, and Allman walked close to the stall to bathe in the aroma and the warmth. The man held out a bag to him but Allman shook his head. If he bought chestnuts the seller would become a target.

The man in the suede coat was only a few yards behind now.

They crossed the road almost together and entered the famous Café de la Paix. Allman sat down in a window seat. His follower sat down in a chair directly behind him. Only a yard or two away.

The waiter hurried up and Allman ordered coffee. The man in the suede coat did likewise. There was no chance for Allman to speak to the waiter or to give him anything. The man behind was too close. Allman bent forward over the table and blew on his hands.

They stayed there for nearly half an hour then Allman looked at his watch. He was running out of time.

He left money on the table and stood up suddenly. The man following him had already paid his bill and he stood up at the same time, taking a careful look at Allman's table. There was nothing on it but the coins Allman had left.

They left the café, crossed the road and went down into the Metro. It was much warmer down there and, compared to the cold of the evening, the typical sweet smell of the Metro was curiously refreshing.

Allman, like most people who use the Metro regularly, already had his ticket. He bought a small booklet of tickets every week or so when he was in the city. He gave his ticket to the woman on duty who clipped it and handed it back to him.

The man in the suede coat following a few yards behind. Allman took the train going east and got off at Pont Neuf.

Inevitably, the man following him did the same. They walked off the platform no more than five yards apart. Then they walked up the stairs and along the network of underground corridors in their small procession.

As they left the station, Allman handed his ticket to the collector. The man in the suede coat did the same. Then they walked out, back into the coolness of the night. They were by the river.

Allman looked down at the water and casually glanced at his watch. He smiled to himself, turned back and saw the man in the suede coat standing about six yards away, pretending to look down into the river.

The man looked away as Allman looked at him. He did not want to look into the eyes of a man he was going to kill.

Allman walked along the bridge with a carefree swing of his arms. It was somehow good to know that it was all over.

By now the ticket collector at the Pont Neuf would have read the coded message which Allman had handed him; the message which, like so many others, had been written on the back of a Metro ticket.

Allman knew that whatever happened he had won.

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Past is Past

The three men at the bar turned round as Paulo shuffled into the dark, dusty little wine shop.

One of them spat noisily onto the dusty bare wooden boards.

The spittle spread and formed a damp round stain. Paulo blinked and stood still for a moment, staring into the blackness.

'Lost?' called one of the men. The others laughed.

'Have you seen Luzio?' Paulo asked softly.

'Luzio?' said the man who'd spat. 'You want Luzio?'

Paulo nodded.

'Luzio got out of town fast when he knew you were looking for him,' said the first man with a sneer.

'I want to give him something,' said Paulo flatly.

'A knife, perhaps?' said the man who'd spat. 'In the back?'

'A present,' said Paulo. 'I am tired of this feud. My father has been dead for five years. I want to give Luzio a present. A token of friendship.'

'That is very kind of you,' laughed Luzio, appearing suddenly, as if by magic, from a table in the corner of the little shop.

'I brought you this,' said Paulo, holding out a loosely wrapped parcel.

'Take care, Luzio,' shouted the first man, 'it may explode when you touch it.'

Luzio ignored him and snatched at the string around the parcel. Inside there was a new brown leather coat. Luzio held it up and nodded appreciatively.

'Very fine,' he said. 'Why have you brought me this?'

`I thought it was time to forget,' said Paulo. 'As long as I seek revenge for my father I am not alive. The past is past.'

Luzio put on the coat.

'It's a fine coat,' he said. In truth it was a very expensive coat; more elegant and expensive than anything he had ever bought himself.

'Good,' said Paulo. 'I'm glad you like it.' He turned and left the shop. Behind him he heard the laughter of the four men.

Paulo walked slowly. It was nearly twelve and the sun was high. His feet shuffled in the thick Sardinian dust which rose in small clouds about his feet.

He turned off the main street and walked nervously along a narrow passageway. After walking the passageway for twenty or perhaps twenty five yards he stopped and knocked at a green wooden door. Most of the paint had long since peeled away. Even there, deep in the passageway, the heat was intense.

There was no reply. Paulo knocked again.

'Yes?' called a woman from somewhere inside the house.

'Grucci,' called Paulo. 'Is Grucci in?'

The woman mumbled something. A minute or two later the door opened slowly.

'Hello Grucci,' said Paulo.

'What do you want?' snarled Grucci.

'Can I come in?' asked Paulo.

'Why?' demanded Grucci.

'I want your help,' said Paulo.

'You want my help!' laughed Grucci. 'Why do you want my help?'

'Can I come in?' asked Paul again.

Grucci opened the door and stood aside to let Paul into the tiny room.

'I have no money,' said Paulo.

'What?' screamed Grucci. 'Have you come to me for money?'

Paulo shook his head. 'I need your help to get money,' he explained. 'But there will be money for you too.'

'Why have you come to me?' demanded Grucci.

Paulo shrugged his shoulders. 'There is a man who is in the town, a man with money,' he said. 'He came to me, he wanted to buy my business. He has a lot of money with him. I did not want to sell my business. But if we kill him we can take the money. We can share it.'

'So, why did you come to me?' asked Grucci suspiciously.

'You can kill,' said Paulo. 'I have never killed.'

‘Grucci swallowed noisily. ‘I have only killed once,’ he said. ‘And then it was only half a killing – with my brother.’

‘It is easier the second time,’ said Paulo. ‘There was no one else I could go to. And I need the money.’

‘Grucci nodded. ‘Where is this man now?’ he asked.

‘Somewhere in the town,’ said Paulo.

‘This is a trick,’ said Grucci. ‘You want your revenge. You want to kill me.’

‘I am tired of revenge,’ said Paulo, lifting his shoulders slightly and then relaxing them again. `I am only hungry now.’

‘How much money is there?’ asked Grucci.

‘Who knows?’ asked Paulo, shrugging his shoulders again. ‘Maybe half a million, maybe a million lire. Maybe more.’

‘Maybe, maybe,’ said Grucci angrily.

‘Have you got a gun?’ asked Paulo. ‘A rifle?’

‘Grucci nodded.

‘If we go up on your roof you will be able to shoot him easily,’ said Paulo. There will be no danger then.’

‘Where is his money?’ asked Grucci.

‘In his bag,’ said Paulo. ‘In his bag at my house. He trusts me. He left it there. We can get it easily. But we will have to kill him first.’

‘O.K.,’ nodded Grucci. He moved to a cupboard, took out a rifle and box of cartridges and waved Paulo to the door.

They climbed up onto the roof in silence. Together they edged their way to the side of the roof from where they had a view over the village square.

They could see into each street. It was midday. The village was deserted.

‘He will come,’ said Paulo, confidently. ‘Each day he does the same thing.’

Down in the square a small boy ran round in circles, chasing half a dozen birds who were fighting over a dried up crust of bread. The two men on the roof lay in silence, waiting.

‘He had better come,’ said Grucci. ‘If this is a trick you will pay for it.’

‘There will be money for you,’ nodded Paulo. Suddenly he stiffened; he pointed down into the square where a man had suddenly appeared. ‘There he is,’ he said quietly. ‘That is the man.’

‘Good,’ said Grucci, squinting along his rifle barrel. He turned to Paulo for a moment. ‘I did wonder if you were trying to trick me into shooting my brother,’ he said. ‘You would like that,’ he smiled. ‘But that is not Luzio. Luzio does not have such a smart, leather jacket as that man is wearing.’

Then he aimed carefully, squeezed the trigger and fired.

Down in the square the man in the brown leather jacket dropped without a moan.

Paulo leant close to him. ‘You just killed your brother,’ he murmured. And then, with a swift, clean movement he cut Grucci’s throat. With the two brothers dead the future looked good.

First published in the London Evening News 8.9.71

Castles in the Sand

Once upon a time there was a rich prince called Arabdulla. Though he ruled a huge stretch of desert it was not the thousands of acres of sand which made him rich but the oil which had been discovered on the land which he owned.

Being a rich and handsome prince, Arabdulla had many wives and he also had hundreds of children. He lived together with his enormous family in a vast marble palace built in the middle of the desert.

The walls of the palace were fifty feet high so that they protected the buildings from wind and sand and at the same time provided some shade.

One day, when a sly businessman was travelling through the desert, a sandstorm blew up. The businessman was feeling very pleased with himself for he had just completed a lucrative business deal in a neighbouring country.

The businessman who was accompanied by two guides, was frightened and he urged his companions to find shelter. The only place that could be found was the marble palace of Prince Arabdulla.

The businessman dined with the prince and afterwards was shown to one of the guest bedrooms in the palace tower. Even though his room was at the very top of the tower he could not see anything of the wicked desert storm which had sent him scurrying for shelter. The high walls of the palace were all that could be seen from anywhere in the royal quarters.

In the morning the storm was still raging, and Prince Arabdulla would not hear of letting his guest step outside the palace. The businessman spent the morning watching the royal children playing in the courtyard, though most of the children seemed to spend their time sitting quietly in the shade.

'Don't your children like playing games?' the businessman asked Arabdulla, when the prince came out to drink iced tea with his visitor.

'It's very difficult finding games for them to play,' said Arabdulla. 'The shops are so very far away.'

'But surely you could build a sand pit for them?' said the businessman.

The prince looked puzzled. 'What is a sand pit?' he asked.

'Well,' said the businessman, who was rather surprised at the prince's ignorance. 'It's a sort of restricted playing area full of sand which children can play in. They can make castles and dig holes.'

The businessman started to say that with so much sand around he would have thought that the children would have already got tired of playing with it but then, being a successful entrepreneur, he had a brilliant idea.

Perhaps, he thought, the prince doesn't know how much sand there is around this palace. With so many wives he probably doesn't have very much time for sightseeing.

'Where could I get some of this sand from?' asked the prince.

The businessman hadn't felt so happy since the time he met a millionaire in a casino who wanted to get rid of all his money to avoid paying tax.

'Well it just so happens,' he smiled generously, 'that I'm the very man for you. I have a little sand to spare back home,' he explained. 'And I'd be delighted to help you out. It's the least I can do after your hospitality.'

'Oh dear me no!' cried the prince in horror. 'I couldn't dream of accepting your sand without payment.'

The businessman sighed a quiet breath of relief. 'I tell you what,' he offered, 'you give me some of your oil and I'll give you some of my sand.'

'What a generous man you are!' said the prince. 'I have plenty of oil and I feel that the exchange is hardly fair but dare not object lest you withdraw your kind offer.'

'It's a deal then?' asked the businessman, drawing a blank contract form from his inside jacket pocket.

The sandstorm passed by them sometime during the night and next morning the sentries reported that the desert was clear again. The businessman and his two guides set off early after breakfast.

Once they were outside the palace walls, and out of sight of the palace guards, the businessman signalled to his two guides to stop their camels.

'How much of this desert does Prince Arabdulla own?' he asked them.

The eldest guide shrugged his shoulders and flung his arms wide. 'His highness owns all of the desert.'

The businessman frowned. He didn't like the idea of selling the prince his own sand but he didn't seem to have any choice.

'Where does the prince drill for oil?' the businessman asked the guide.

The guide pointed to the West and to the South.

'There is no drilling to the North?'

The second guide shook his head.

The businessman, who didn't want to find himself too close to the prince's oil fields, smiled. 'Are there any men in the North?' he asked.

The first guide nodded. ‘But they don’t work very hard,’ he said.

‘What about the East?’ asked the businessman.

Both guides shook their heads. ‘Nothing,’ they said together.

‘Then,’ sighed the businessman. ‘It’s the North.’

It took them three days’ hard riding to reach the oasis where the younger guide said that the Northern men had their camp.

To persuade them to work for him, the businessmen had to offer ridiculous wages and working hours that would have satisfied a lazy lord.

When he told them that all he wanted was sand they obviously thought that he was quite mad. Some complained that he must be some sort of devil if he would pay money for digging up sand. The rest, deciding that there must be some mysterious and lucrative reason behind the stranger’s strange whim, immediately demanded that their wages be doubled.

The first load of sand was delivered to the palace after a month of swearing, sweating and bullying. The men were lazy but they were not stupid, and the businessman had to offer them more and more money as it became obvious that he was desperate to load his camels to the humps with bags of sand.

The prince seemed delighted with the sand when it was finally delivered to him and he signed an agreement instructing his agent to supply the businessman with a good deal of crude oil.

‘By the way,’ said the prince, as the businessman was leaving, ‘my wives have had several more children since you were last here. We shall soon need even more sand.’

The businessman offered to help again and they signed another contract promising to exchange bags of sand for barrels of oil.

This went on for several months. The men at oasis dug dozens of holes as they filled hundreds of sacks with sand. They rebelled regularly and the businessman had to stay with them to make sure that they kept working. He lost pounds and become short-tempered and tired.

Then, one day while the men were digging, there was a sudden gush and they were soaked to the skin in thick, black oil. For a moment they all stood motionless, drenched in the stuff. Then the businessman leapt yards into the air. A fortune in oil was hidden under his feet. He rushed across to his old guide who had stayed with him as an interpreter.

‘I’m rich!’ he shouted.

‘Pardon me, sir!’ said the guide quietly. ‘But all the oil in the desert belongs to the prince.’

‘But I did all the work!’ cried the businessman in dismay.

‘It’s his sand but you didn’t object when I started to dig it up and take it to him!’

‘Sand is one thing,’ said the guide, ‘oil is another.’

The businessman wanted to cry.

‘Well anyway,’ he said, ‘the least the fellow can do is give me a share of it.’

‘I thought you told the prince that you were bringing the sand from your home,’ said the guide, ducking to avoid the water can which the businessman threw at him.

So, when the businessman arrived at the palace with his next load of sand he had to remain cool and detached when the prince boasted about his accidental new oil find in North of the desert.

Then, since the prince’s many wives had continued to bear him children, they agreed to exchange another load of sand for more oil, though, to be honest, the businessman wasn’t terribly keen.

Most of his men would be working at the new well and he would have to start digging in the East to avoid the prince’s drilling rigs.

He would probably have been even less happy if he had seen the palace guards carelessly tipping his last consignment of sand over the palace walls.

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Crisis Case

The air conditioning system had broken down again and John Stewart, who had been sitting in the surgeon's changing room for nearly three hours, was saturated in sweat.

He had been woken at six by one of the male nurses from the camp hospital who told him there was an emergency case.

Mrumba, the Prime Minister of the small island of Parangi, where Stewart was stationed with a small peace-keeping force, had been taken ill in the night.

It had been decided that it would be safer to treat him in the military hospital – away from the rebel forces on the island.

But Stewart had been ordered not to operate until Dr Bjunku, superintendent of the local hospital, arrived to take charge.

It seemed a dangerous order, but the Parangi were touchy. They were proud of their new-found independence.

As Stewart wiped the sweat off his face and the back of his neck, the telephone rang. He picked up the receiver to hear Bjunku's secretary say he was on his way and asking Stewart to prepare Mrumba for the theatre.

Stewart opened the door from the changing-room and called for a nurse. He issued a few brisk commands, telling the nurse to bring the patient from the small side ward where he had been lying heavily doped for the last couple of hours.

While the nurse hurried off to fetch the patient, Stewart slipped out of his lightweight uniform and into the thin, white, semi-sterile trousers and vest which he wore under his theatre gown. He then tied on his cap and mask. The theatre was bustling. The anaesthetist was checking the cylinders of gas. Stewart started to scrub his hands and arms. He scrubbed for nearly 10 minutes.

Mrumba was on the table, half anaesthetised by the time Stewart finished scrubbing. In a real emergency Stewart could have been ready to operate within minutes of entering the theatre, but he still had to wait for Bjunku.

Stewart had never met Bjunku. They had little contact with the local hospital except when they were asked to look after patients who were beyond the simple care available there.

As Stewart stood waiting, he couldn't help wondering what sort of doctor Bjunku was to take so long to travel 20 minutes to operate on his Prime Minister.

When the colonel had told Stewart that Bjunku would be in charge, he had assured him that Bjunku had qualified in Britain and was a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons.

Stewart had already got his gloves on when Bjunku arrived in the theatre. The African, who was wearing a mask and cap, nodded to Stewart and indicated that he should start the operation.

Bjunku scrubbed quickly. He was gowned and gloved in less than five minutes and joined Stewart at the operating table. He took a position on the other side of the operating table so that they could work together more easily.

The two of them worked quickly. Bjunku seemed willing to let Stewart do most of the work. The Prime Minister's abdomen was quickly laid open and they soon found the source of the problem. The Prime Minister had a large ulcer which was bleeding.

Stewart grunted in satisfaction as he pointed to the ulcer. Bjunku nodded sharply and slipped his hand inside the open abdomen. The two of them worked quickly and silently to sew up the ulcer to prevent the bleeding.

As Stewart was putting the last stitch in place, Bjunku jerked the scissors forward to snip through the final thread. He seemed to lose his balance and the point of the scissors slid smoothly through the Prime Minister's aorta. Blood gushed out. The anaesthetist leaped to his feet in horror as the patient's blood pressure sank to an almost unmeasurable level.

Stewart thrust his hand on the aorta in an attempt to stem the flow of blood but the cut was too long. Blood poured out into the opened abdomen. The Prime Minister was dead within two minutes.

Stewart stared at Bjunku. The African stood still for a moment, then turned silently away from the operating table and went through into the changing room. When Stewart followed him half a minute later Bjunku was gone.

The anaesthetist came in, his face ashen. They both knew what the Prime Minister' death could mean. Mrumba *was* Parangi.

Then the telephone rang. Stewart picked it up immediately.

'Bjunku here,' said a voice at the other end. 'I've had a crash. I think someone may have messed with the brakes of my car. Would you please start the operation without me?'

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Seasonal Casualty

Working in hospital over Christmas is rather like being involved in a three day house party.

There's always a lot of goodwill flying around and every ward is well stocked with liquid guaranteed to dilate the most sclerotic vessels. There are lots of bright decorations, a good deal of mistletoe and lots of unusually happy faces.

There's a feeling among the staff that if one has to work one may as well make the best of it.

At Inkpen Cottage Hospital we'd managed to empty most of the wards, keeping only the homeless and the genuinely infirm. There were no routine admissions due and no operations on the lists. We were all looking forward to a quiet few days.

Of course, I got lumbered with looking after casualty on Christmas Eve but even that chore has its blessings. The two casualty nurses who had also found themselves on duty were hardly the type to spoil the party. And as long as I didn't let my blood alcohol level get above 80 I felt confident that I could manage quite happily. I'd worked it out that I could take a drink every hour and a half.

We had one man in with a slight sprain and that was all. He'd managed to fall off a stepladder while decorating the Christmas tree and had hurt himself when he fell.

As dawn broke I began to feel that we'd got away with a quiet night. I was just nibbling at a mince pie that I'd pinched from one of the wards when the plastic doors at the front of the department were pushed open and I heard someone calling.

I tottered out to have a look at the intruder. I thought it might be one of my mates from surgery or possibly even one of the nurses bringing supplies of food.

It was neither. It was a big fellow in his late sixties and he really looked the worse for wear. He was absolutely filthy, covered in dirt from head to toe. He looked as if he'd just fought his way out from under a lorry load of coal.

'Hello there,' I said. 'I'm Doctor Rogers. What can I do for you?'

The old fellow grimaced and tried to smile.

'Just sit down a bit,' I said. 'Take your time. There's no hurry.'

'I feel a bit run down,' said the old fellow weakly. 'I'm absolutely whacked.'

'You look it,' I agreed. 'Hang on and I'll get one of the nurses to get a cubicle ready and then I'll have a look at you.'

'Thanks,' groaned the old man.

I found the two nurses playing pontoon in the emergency theatre and persuaded them to come and help me. Then I helped one of the nurses get the old fellow out of his dirty clothes and on to the couch.

'How did you get in this state?' I asked him. 'You're covered in bruises and scratched to pieces.'

The old man shrugged his shoulders. 'You'd never believe me,' he said, with half a smile.

'What's your job?' I asked him.

He looked at the clock on the opposite wall. 'I'm unemployed again,' he said flatly.

'Address?' I asked, filling in one of the forms that they always like us to complete.

'It's a bit difficult, really,' confessed the old man. 'I'm not from round here.'

'That's all right,' I said. 'You can spend Christmas with us. We've got a spare bed.'

'That's very kind of you,' said the stranger.

'Not at all,' I said, with a smile. 'Christmas is the time of goodwill to all men and all that stuff.' I felt sorry for the old tramp. The poor old devil must have been half frozen with nowhere to sleep.

'I've got a bad back too,' said the old man. 'It aches something terrible and I've got a dreadful pain down the back of my right leg.'

I had a look at his back and decided he had all the symptoms of a disk lesion. 'You've been straining a bit too much,' I said. 'Too much heavy lifting, perhaps?'

The old man nodded. 'Probably,' he agreed. 'I'm getting on a bit but the work doesn't get any lighter.'

I didn't like to remind him that he'd already told me that he was unemployed so I didn't say anything.

'There's this too,' he said, and turned up his forearm. 'There was a two inch, fairly deep gash, the sides of which wouldn't quite meet when I pressed them together.'

'Needs a few stitches,' I said. 'You'll be OK. And I'll give you a tetanus jab. How did you come to get a cut like that?'

He looked up at me as though considering what to say. After a moment he made his mind up.

'It's not a cut, doctor,' he said. 'One of the damn reindeer bit me.'

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Aim for Revenge

From where he was hiding, behind the hedge, Watkins could see almost right into the living room of Dick Barlow's house.

He could see the brand new colour television set, the radiogram, the cocktail cabinet, the shelves full of brightly jacketed books and Dorothy Barlow who was sitting in an easy chair with a pre-luncheon cordial in her hand.

Watkins could see the driveway, leading down to the lane. He could see the sun glinting on a mirror on a dressing table in a bedroom upstairs. And he could right into the empty garage where Barlow kept his Lotus.

Lovingly he ran his fingers along the barrel of the gun he'd brought with him. And checked, for the tenth time in a minute, to see that he'd got the range right and that he had the gun, which was resting on a narrow grassy bank and peeping out between the roots of the hedge, aimed straight at the Barlows' front door.

The range was right and Watkins could have shot holes in the letterbox.

He smiled to himself and licked his drying lips like a cat with a treat in store. Watkins was waiting for the fatted mouse to come home. He was waiting for Dick Barlow to come home for his lunch.

And before Dick could get his teeth stuck into the lamb chops, boiled potatoes and carrots which his wife had so lovingly prepared he would have had to pass across Watkins' line of fire.

If you asked Watkins why he hated Barlow he would have found it easy to answer.

'I would have had a lovely house, a fast car and a pretty wife,' Watkins would say to himself. 'If it hadn't been for him.'

He blamed Barlow for everything. It was Barlow who'd taken his job. Barlow, a young man of thirty five with no experience at all; Barlow who'd never done anything worth telling anyone about except marry the Marketing Director's daughter; Barlow who'd never be able to do the job the way Watkins had done it.

If it hadn't been for Barlow, Watkins would have been living still in his six bedroom town house, still driving his big Ford and still making love to Enid, his plump but agreeable wife, and Helen his plump and even more agreeable mistress.

It wasn't surprising that Watkins hated Barlow when you remembered that Barlow had taken Watkins' job, fat salary, large expense account and a new car every eighteen months.

And what, thought Watkins, did Barlow know about engineering? He'd spent three years at a college where he'd learned how to parade through the streets on demonstrations without looking self-conscious. Then he'd spent two years with one of the big companies as an apprentice.

Watkins had spent eleven years as an apprentice. And four years as a trainee designer. And fourteen years as a designer. And six years as a senior designer. And now where was he? Back where he'd started. And Barlow was doing his job.

Watkins fondled the gun lovingly.

His mistress had been the first to go, then the house. And finally Enid had left him to go back to her aged parents.

They'd all abandoned him. Oh, they had loved him and cherished him while he was on top; but they all turned their backs on him quickly enough when he'd slipped a little way down the slope.

Slipped a little, that was a laugh. From a fat salary to unemployment benefits is more than a little.

He hated the way they looked at him in the unemployment office – young girls who didn't look old enough to sit up and watch the nine o'clock news. Certainly they didn't look old enough to know the facts of life.

They sat smugly behind their little desks and he had to be polite to them. They gave him money as though it were their own. In the old days what they gave him wouldn't have paid for his petrol.

No wonder he hated Barlow. It was all Barlow's fault. It was only right and proper that he should be punished.

It was obvious to Watkins, perfectly clear, that Barlow had planned it all. He'd known that Watkins was vulnerable, had marked down his job, and then gradually worked his way into it. He'd been bright enough to marry Dorothy Roberts and smart enough to be around at just the right time. The directors had told Watkins that he'd lost his edge. That he prevaricated too much. That he didn't follow through on decisions. They said he was all talk and no action. It was all rubbish. They just wanted to help Barlow walk into his job.

But Barlow wasn't bright enough, not bright enough to realise that you couldn't play with Jim Watkins and get away with it.

No. Jim Watkins never lost out to anyone. He was still going to make it back. Indeed, he'd be back on top before anyone knew what was happening. He'd have two mistresses instead of one and send Enid a penny a week. If she didn't want him when he was down, he didn't want her when he was back on top.

Hearing the sound of the Lotus roaring up the lane, Watkins tightened his hold on the rifle, pushed his face down low and squinted along the barrel.

He could see the drive, see the front door and see just the spot where Barlow would get out of his car.

He waited patiently, feeling the tension of the trigger as he pulled on it. He felt warm and contented again. Happy in the knowledge that everything was going to turn out fine.

He'd soon be back at work, back in the big office, with his secretary and his big car. Everything normal once more. He might even take Enid back. If she did some begging.

Dick got out of his car and slammed the door. Jim squeezed the trigger, waited, checked the aim and pulled the trigger that last fraction of an inch.

There was a click as the hammer crashed down. But that was all. Dick Barlow, hearing, seeing, feeling nothing, went on to his lunch. And across the road, behind the hedge, Jim Watkins was alive with excitement. He put down his son's toy air rifle and wiped his forehead.

'Got him,' he said for the hundredth time that year. 'I could have got him then.' He rubbed his hands happily, picked up the rifle and went contentedly on his way. He even hummed a little tune on his way back to his bedsit.

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The Jackdaw

Eddy carefully unrolled the painting.

He kept it flat on his bed with the forefinger and thumb of one hand at the top and the forefinger and thumb of the other hand at the bottom.

He stared at it lovingly. It was one of Vermeer's greatest masterpieces. A small, rectangular miracle; approximately 240 square inches of heaven.

Each square inch of the painting was worth thousands of pounds. That meant that even a piece of canvas the size of his thumbnail was worth a good deal of money.

The painting was simple enough. The artist had persuaded a young servant girl to sit for him and it was this girl whom Eddy could not stop admiring.

She was sitting on a simple kitchen stool staring at a letter which she held in her right hand. It was impossible to tell whether the letter carried good news or bad news.

It was, perhaps, one of those letters which captures all the reader's interest but which gives nothing away until the end is in sight. A letter like an O.Henry story.

Eddy had not owned the painting for long. He had in fact owned it for less than a day (if 'owned' is the appropriate word) for it was during the previous night that he had stolen it from the Art Museum.

They were not really used to looking after valuable paintings in the Museum. The paintings they normally had on show would not have been stolen if they'd been left overnight in a public park. They Museum had been allowed to borrow this picture for a special display.

All Eddy had to do was sit in one of the toilets without putting the catch to 'engaged'. The guard had simply looked into the lavatory, seen that all the doors were on 'vacant' and moved on.

Then Eddy had slipped out and into one of the broom cupboards at the back of the attendant's tiny office. Just to be safe.

When he had left the broom cupboard, only a dim light from a room at the far end of the main corridor suggested that there was anyone in the museum at all.

Not that that worried Eddy too much. He was heading in the opposite direction; towards the tiny gallery on the first floor where the Vermeer was displayed; where Eddy had stood that afternoon, together with a couple of hundred tourists gazing at the masterpiece.

After he had taken the painting down, Eddy stared at it affectionately for a moment.

It was not a big picture but the frame was heavy. He moved quickly and as quietly as he could, his rubber soled pumps hardly making a sound.

Back down in the lavatory, Eddy realised that the picture was far too big to go through the window while still in its frame.

It took only half a dozen slashes with a big, sharp knife to cut through the edges of the canvas and then the painting was easy to roll up. It slid easily underneath Eddy's shirt and made the most expensive vest ever worn by a man.

Within five minutes, Eddy had been out of the window and on his way back to his sitting room-cum-bedroom. It had all been very easy.

Eddy fondled the edges of the canvas lovingly. He felt a little guilty about having cut the canvas from its stretcher but there had not been any alternative. It was the architect's fault for putting such a small window in the lavatory.

The picture did not seem to have been damaged. Eddy examined it carefully from side to side. As he looked at the painting, policemen on the other side of the city were trying to come to some conclusion about how the painting had been stolen.

'The thieves must be working on commission for someone,' said one Inspector, 'otherwise why do they always steal just one painting?'

'There wasn't much else of value in that museum last night,' pointed out another policeman.

'No,' agreed the first. 'But there was at the Simpson gallery last month when the Rembrandt was stolen. There were five more valuable paintings and none of them was even touched.'

'What about the pictures themselves?' asked the Chief Inspector, who had been sitting quietly with the two junior men. 'Any clue there?'

The Inspector looked at a piece of paper on his lap. 'Two by Rembrandt, one Picasso, one Monet, three Rubens, a Gainsborough and now a Vermeer,' he said.

'No pattern there,' said the Chief Inspector.

'They're all valuable and they've all been stolen,' said the man who had read out the list. 'That's all they have in common.’

Across the city, the thief was still carefully examining the Vermeer.

When he’d finished admiring it, Eddy bent down and dragged a huge tin trunk out from underneath his bed. The trunk was locked and Eddy unfastened it with a key he took from his trouser pocket. He lifted the lid and removed three sheets of tissue paper before carefully unpacking a Gainsborough, a Monet, three Rubens, a Picasso and two Rembrandts. He began to arrange them along the wall behind his bed.

To arrange them, Eddy had to clear away a scatter of pin-up magazines – all showing ladies in provocative poses.

Eddy lifted one of the magazines and flicked through it. A half smile on his lips became a smile of contempt and then a sneer. Eddy gathered the whole pile of magazines and slipped them into a waste basket.

Then he sat down to look at his paintings.

He reckoned he was the only man on earth with a collection of pin-ups worth millions.

First published in the London Evening News, 4.2.74

The Sweepstake

I think it was Perkins who first had the idea, but we were unanimous in our support. It seemed an excellent way to take a little bit of the tedium out of our work.

The trouble was that although Dr Hopkinson knew his stuff, he didn't know how to put it across.

He'd written several monographs on coeliac disease and a couple of out-of-print textbooks. There was no doubt that he knew his stuff but going round the wards with him in the hope of learning something was about as rewarding as looking for a rash on a wooden leg.

Unfortunately, however, Dr Hopkinson's ward rounds were as much a part of the curriculum as the anatomy lectures. So when Perkins had this idea for livening up the rounds, we all jumped at it.

The plan was that as no one could ever tell how long a round with Hopkinson would last, we'd have a sweepstake on it.

Perkins, who said he could borrow a stopwatch off a fellow he knew, was appointed official timekeeper.

Then, the rules having been agreed upon, we all settled down, wrote our names and the time we thought the round would take on a piece of paper and tossed a shilling into a borrowed (and recently sterilised) bedpan.

We decided to run the sweepstake on the following Tuesday.

There were 35 patients in the ward to be examined – and used as possible teaching material – and within the first three minutes, Hopkinson had seen four.

Perkins had hardly even had time to start his stopwatch and the rest of us were struggling behind like out-of-condition runners at the start of a cross-country race.

At the rate he was going, Hopkinson would easily finish in three quarters of an hour, which would make an absolute mockery of the whole sweepstake. He never took less than an hour and three quarters to go round a ward and usually his rounds lasted a good two hours.

As he left the seventh patient, Will Simmonds stepped forward a pace.

'That was an interesting case, sir,' he said, showing interest for the first time in his career. 'Could you tell us a little more about the patient's previous medical history?'

Hopkinson stopped and half turned, he lowered his spectacles as if Will had invited him out for a pint, and then nodded absent-mindedly.

'Delighted,' he murmured. 'Delighted to see you taking an interest, Simmonds. Come along to my office this evening.'

'Thank you, sir,' gulped Will unhappily.

Hopkinson saw the next six patients in little over ten minutes. The round seemed to have turned into a gallop. Most of us were going to be non-runners in this particular event. I wondered who had written down the shortest estimate.

The next bed was occupied by a new patient, an Indian who spoke about as much English as any of us spoke Hindu. Half-heartedly Hopkinson read through his thin case-notes.

'This man,' he told us without excitement, 'is complaining of a weakness in his right arm.' He turned to the man. 'Tell me,' he shouted. 'Which hand do you write with?'

The Indian shook his head.

Hopkinson repeated the question but a little louder. He belonged to the almost extinct breed of Englishmen who believed that foreigners would understand what you said as long as you shouted at them.

'No write,' said the Indian briefly.

'Ah,' said Hopkinson wisely. 'Well,' he went on, 'which hand do you work with?'

'No work,' said the Indian with a grin. He was catching on fast.

Hopkinson looked a little upset. He sat down on the man's bed for a moment. 'If you use a hammer,' he said, furiously knocking imaginary nails into the bedclothes with an imaginary hammer, 'which hand do you hold the hammer with?'

The Indian shook his head slowly and looked at Hopkinson. He seemed to decide against replying at all and contented himself with brushing Hopkinson' imaginary nails off the bedspread.

'Which hand do you drink with?' demanded Hopkinson angrily, lifting an imaginary pint and raising it to his lips.

The Indian grinned and nodded and with his left hand picked up another imaginary glass from the bed. 'Yes, please!' he said brightly.

Hopkinson stood up and walked on to the next patient. He saw the next eleven in twenty minutes and didn't show any signs of slowing down at all.

'We've got to slow him down a bit,' muttered Will.

‘What do you think of that paper for the new drug for treating Parkinson’s disease?’ asked Timothy Glanville, as Hopkinson moved on.

Will and I smiled at each other. The man who’d written the paper he was talking about was an arch enemy of Hopkinson.

‘Rubbish,’ muttered the consultant, shaking his head angrily. ‘The man is mad. Getting sense out of him is about as likely as getting orange juice out of a lemon.’ He ranted and raged for another ten minutes, giving us a list of the articles he himself had written on similar subjects and instructing us to write an essay on the topic. For once none of us minded his long-winded rant.

Then, muttering something under his breath he moved on. We followed silently.

He left the ward a few minutes later, crossing the line level with the sister’s office one hour, seven minutes and forty seconds after he’d crossed it on his way into the ward.

We all hurried off into the sluice room to examine the sweepstake tickets and to see who’d won.

First of all we sorted out the tickets that had a time under two hours. There weren’t many of those. Suddenly Will Simmonds went rather pale as he picked up one of the tickets.

‘Hello, hello,’ he said quietly. ‘This one is close. One hour, seven minutes and thirty five seconds.’

‘Ye Gods!’ said Perkins. ‘Who the devil was that?’

‘You must have been a bit fast with the stopwatch,’ said Will, throwing the ticket down so that we could all see it.

The name of the winner, written faintly but nevertheless quite clearly, was Hopkinson.

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The Search

‘Go away’, mumbled Eddy, pulling the bedclothes up over his head and hiding, ostrich style, from the insistent buzzing of his front doorbell.

But the buzzing didn’t go away.

Cursing, Eddy put on his dressing gown and staggered to the front door.

‘Inspector Harris,’ said a huge man, pushing past. He took a card out of his pocket and flashed it briefly. Then he took a neatly folded piece of paper out of his raincoat pocket and handed it to Eddy who stared open-mouthed as half a dozen uniformed policemen marched into his flat.

Eddy scratched his head and tied his dressing gown a little tighter. ‘Warrant?’ he said. ‘What do you want to search my place for?’

‘Come on now, Eddy,’ said the inspector. ‘There’s no need to play the innocent with me. Henderson’s the jewellers was done last night,’ he went on. ‘It was a beautiful job. A nice, neat entry; the burglar alarms were tied up very prettily and the safe was opened by a man who knew what he was doing.’

‘There are only about a dozen men in London who could have opened that safe,’ continued the inspector. ‘And most of them would have just emptied it. There were all sorts of goodies in it. Watches, paste pearls and so on. But the only thing missing when the manager got there this morning was the only thing really worth taking: £150,000 worth of diamonds. Six beautiful stones.’

Eddy whistled. ‘Nice haul,’ he said, appreciatively.

‘So you don’t mind if we have a look round do you?’ smiled the inspector.

‘Help yourself,’ said Eddy. He started off towards the kitchen. ‘Want a coffee?’ he called over his shoulder.

‘Thanks,’ replied the inspector. ‘Don’t mind if I do.’ He followed Eddy into the kitchen where two policemen had already emptied every cupboard and were busy working their way through pots and pans.

‘I hope your animals are going to put all my stuff back where they found it,’ said Eddy, gazing with disgust at the mess.

‘They’ll put it all back,’ said the inspector. ‘If we don’t find anything.’

Eddy poured water into the kettle and switched it on.

‘Half a minute,’ said the inspector. He leant across and took the plug out of the socket, then he took the lid off the kettle and looked inside. He smiled, put the lid back and put the plug back into the socket.

Eddy made the coffee, handed a cup to the inspector and sipped at a cup himself.

‘We’ve been through the bathroom,’ said a young policeman, coming into the kitchen a few minutes later. ‘Nothing there.’

‘Have you got a loft?’ the inspector asked Eddy.

Eddy nodded. ‘The hatch is in the bedroom,’ he said.

‘Have a look,’ the inspector said. ‘And don’t forget the water tank.’

Eddy grinned. ‘It’s none too clean up there,’ he said.

‘Let’s go into the sitting room,’ said the inspector. ‘I want somewhere comfortable to sit down.’

The two men who had been going through the kitchen had already moved into the sitting room and they were busy emptying Eddy’s desk.

‘Be careful with those pictures,’ said Eddy, as one of them emptied a packet of photographs out onto the desk.

The policeman flicked through the pictures, examined one or two, and slipped them back into the envelope.

‘My hobby, photography,’ said Eddy.

The policeman turned away. His colleague had started emptying books out of a large mahogany bookcase.

‘Do you think you could keep those books in order?’ asked Eddy.

The policeman looked at the inspector. The inspector nodded. The policeman stopped throwing the books onto the floor. Instead he carefully piled them up into little heaps.

‘I’m in a generous mood,’ said the inspector. ‘If I wanted to I could take them all apart page by page.’

It was midday before they gave up. The inspector went through the flat making sure that they’d searched everywhere. Eddy went through with him, checking to see that everything had been put back more or less in the right place.

Eventually they left. Eddy stood by the window in his sitting room and watched them drive away. He waited five minutes to see if they’d come back but they didn’t.

Smiling to himself he went into the kitchen and opened the fridge. He took out a bottle of beer and used an opener to snap the top off the bottle. Then he took the ice tray out of the fridge and put it on the kitchen table.

Gradually the ice in the tray began to melt and as it did so and the tray filled up with water, half a dozen small pieces of ice seemed obstinately reluctant to melt.

Eddy waited until the rest of the tray was full of nothing but water then he picked the six small pieces of ‘ice’ out of the tray and put them on the table. One by one he picked them up and examined them. They sparkled and shone. A hundred and fifty thousand pounds worth of sparkle and shine.

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The Office

When George Parkinson was promoted to Group Divisional Managing Director, he threw an enormous party to celebrate his new appointment. He was happy, proud and almost content. For once even his ulcers seemed satisfied.

He had an income that was well into six figures. He had status and authority, responsibility and power. And he loved it. And he had a virtually unlimited amount of money to spend on his own office suite.

Previously George had a small, rather scruffy little office on the third floor. But as Group Divisional Managing Director, he was entitled to have a whole floor to himself. A whole floor which he would share with no one. It was an exciting thought and one which gave George a great deal of pleasure. Planning his new office was the most interesting thing George had done for years. Like a new bride he was determined to create an environment that would be as near to perfect as possible. An environment in which work would be a pleasure.

There were six rooms on the floor that George was able to use, and of these he allocated two to assistants and secretaries, telephonists and tea makers. That left him four rooms. One, of course, had to be furnished for use as a conference room and another needed to be set aside as a library where books, magazines, papers and microfilm recordings could be stored. That left George with two rooms to himself.

The previous occupant had left a depressing collection of equipment in the rooms. There were filing cabinets and desks, cupboards and boring club chairs. It wasn't the sort of furniture that George wanted.

He got rid of the filing cabinet and replaced it with a cocktail cabinet. He exchanged the club chairs for a studio couch in white leather and put a widescreen television set where the telex machine had stood.

He had the bookshelves ripped out and replaced by stereo speakers and he had the larger of the two desks replaced by computer gaming equipment. The micro filming equipment was replaced by a magazine rack and an expensive coffee machine.

Having thus managed to give the rooms some character, and having had them repainted in delicate shades of pink and blue, George set about adding the little things that make all the difference.

First of all he sacked his old personal assistant, 33-year-old Miss Cavendish, an accomplished typist, telephonist and office administrator, and replaced her with 23-year-old Miss Holmes, an accomplished scrabble player, coffee maker and once, unofficially, voted York's 'Miss Office Bicycle'.

With the aid of a protractor and a pneumatic drill, he planned, designed and executed a 9-hole putting course around his thickly carpeted office floor. Then he added a sauna bath, Olympic size swimming pool (on the roof, reached via a private lift which was itself equipped with a telephone, television and stereo equipment), and squash court (in the basement, reached via another private lift, also equipped with a telephone, television and stereo equipment).

The right distance away he had a clay pigeon launching site built so that he could sit in his office and practise his marksmanship.

When it was all finished, George was quite convinced that he had the most wonderful office in the whole world. An office fit for a Group Divisional Managing Director.

When he had been a lowly Managerial Executive, George had been accustomed to spending Wednesday afternoon on the local golf course. Now that he was a Group Divisional Managing Director, with a luxurious office, he was happy to stay indoors. After all, he had a nine-hole putting green in his office. And lots of other toys.

The snag with this, of course, was that while out on the golf course no one could contact him. There, he was safe from interruption. People couldn't phone him or call in to ask silly questions.

In his office, however, he was at their mercy. And soon George realised that if he were to get in any good golf practice he would have to switch his phones off on a Wednesday afternoon. After all, it wasn't unreasonable. If he had been out on the golf course no one would have been able to get hold of him. And he was at least saving the time that he would have spent in travelling to and from the golf course.

George enjoyed the privacy of his office so much that he began to play golf on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays as well as on Wednesdays. His indoor games of golf were as sacrosanct as the games on the outdoor course, but they were sacrosanct for five days a week and not just one day.

Having discovered just how easy it was to cut himself off from the world, George began to take far greater advantage of the facilities he had provided for himself. He began to enjoy watching cricket and tennis on the television, he enjoyed his stereo, his magazines, his clay pigeon shooting and his comely secretary.

He began to have his lunch in his office, partly because it saved time and partly because it was more comfortable than going out to a busy restaurant. He began to have his breakfast there, too. After all, back at his bachelor flat there was no one to cook his bacon. In his office, pretty Miss Holmes was willing. And she cooked a mean streak of bacon.

Within a month of moving into it, George was bathing, eating, showering and sleeping in his office. He even began to entertain there. He had a well-stocked bar and wide variety of records. It was quiet and central, well decorated and exciting.

There was only one problem. George was so content in his office that he never switched his telephones on. He was never available to give advice or make decisions and the company he was supposed to be running began to drift a little out of control.

‘We never seem to be able to get hold of you, sir.’ said one of George’s senior executives at a cocktail party one weekend. ‘Could you give us another number, perhaps, where we might reach you when something urgent crops up?’

George, who was a tolerant man, was not upset by this suggestion. On the contrary, it gave him an idea.

And after that, every weekday, at about nine o’clock in the morning, George would get into his car and have his chauffeur drive him across town to his flat in which he had installed Miss Cavendish together with a typewriter, a filing cabinet, a telex machine, a couple of old club chairs, a microfilm device and a large desk. And, of course, three old-fashioned telephones.

Then, until mid-day or early afternoon on Wednesdays and until five o’clock on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays, George would stay in his flat, which he had virtually deserted and which would otherwise have been left cold and unoccupied, and work until it was time to rest and play. Then he would get back into his car and have his chauffeur drive him across town to his office for an evening’s fun and games.

First published in Argosy Magazine, October 1972

Garden Ornaments

It all started late last summer when local insurance agent, stout-drinker and bowls champion Terry Stefani, who lives at number 14, bought an old disused 142-foot tall electricity pylon and had it installed in his back garden.

'I'm fed up with looking at plastic gnomes and stone ducks,' said Terry, 'and though I really wanted a garden swing for the children I think this pylon was a really good buy. A lot of people like pylons and I'm sure they will all want to climb it – especially now that there is no risk of being electrocuted.'

By the following Tuesday, Terry had sold the weekend climbing rights to the Kintbury Pylon Climbing Club, signed a 42 page contract with the BBC, who wanted a team of celebrities to clamber up the pylon on Easter Friday with television cameras strapped to their backs, successfully fought a protest from the local planning committee who wanted the top 140 feet of the 142-foot pylon lopped off and had his broken right leg set in plaster at the Inkpen General Infirmary.

On the Wednesday, shortly after Terry had announced that the National Association of Retired Pylon Climbers had asked permission to hold their weekly annual general meetings at the top of his pylon, two large, articulated lorries drew up outside number 16 and started to unload what looked amazingly like a dismantled railway signal box.

Later that same day, after a good deal of hard work by Mr Henry McTavish, the sole occupant of number 16, a fully assembled railway signal box appeared in the front garden.

After arranging to have the signal box fitted with running water, electricity and colour television, Mr McTavish advertised his intention of taking bookings from retired railway signalmen. 'This is the sort of holiday that retired signalmen dream of,' said Mr McTavish. 'If things go well enough I hope to be able to buy twenty feet of track and a set of points.'

By the end of November, Mr Marriot at number 23 had bought and installed an illuminated motorway sign, Mrs West at number 34 had filled her garden with telephone kiosks and at number 38, a lighthouse had been erected in the back garden. On the first night that it was switched on, neighbouring residents who thought it was snowing woke up to find that their gardens were covered with a six inch thick layer of dead moths.

By the end of December, everyone in the street had something unusual in their garden. At number 17 there was a disused GPO tower, at number 8, the corner house with the larger than usual plot of land, they had an oil rig with a helicopter landing pad. At number 32 they had a stretch of unused motorway barrier and seven street lamps and at number 28 the garden was packed tightly with pillar-boxes and telegraph poles.

Many visitors came to spend the whole day in the street. They would climb the pylon in the morning, have coffee in the signal box, make a phone call from a call box, eat a salad in the lighthouse, spend the afternoon on the oil rig, have tea with some plastic gnomes which had survived the changes and end the day with dinner at the top of the disused GPO tower.

Before January was over, however, the boom time began to fade. Every garden in the country had its speciality attraction. The number of visitors pouring into the street began to diminish and it was clear that the locals needed something extra if they were to continue to attract tourists.

In early February, Mr Jenkins of number 9 had a brilliant idea. He dismantled and sold his 80-foot parabolic radio telescope and replaced it with a cabbage patch. Before the week was out there were carrot beds at number 17, sprouts in waiting at number 21 and prospective turnips at number 19.

Gardeners from all over the world poured into the street again; this time to view what was described as 'Britain's only small vegetable gardens'.

There was even a rumour that Terry Stefani had ordered some grass seed and was planning to grow a lawn in his back garden.

First published in Garden News 28.9.1973

Consult a Specialist

I don't know about you, but whenever I see someone I don't instantly recognise waving in my direction I automatically turn around to see if they are waving at anyone behind me.

So when the woman by the sweet counter smiled and waved in my direction I tried to turn round naturally and take an interest in the counter behind me.

As luck would have it, of course, I found myself peering carefully at a display of women's underwear – the sort of stuff that goes above the waist, rather than below it.

I had been half way home after morning surgery when I remembered promising to buy my young nephew a new set of studs for his football boots.

That meant popping into the local department store. I was half way to the back of the shop, where the sports gear was kept, when the woman by the sweet counter, smartly dressed, well made up and fortyish, waved in my direction.

This time the wave had definitely been intended for me.

'I've been meaning to ring you all week,' she cried with an enormous smile. 'I'm so glad I bumped into you.'

Like all general practitioners I just cannot remember the names, identities or ailments of all my patients. The really regular visitors I eventually get to know, but patients who call in no more than two or three times a year are, I'm afraid, rarely remembered. I may remember their faces, their knees or their piles but I can never remember their names.

And since I'm not infrequently stopped when shopping by patients who want advice, prescriptions or sick notes I have more than my fair share of odd conversations.

The patient, knowing who I am, and knowing what he or she wants, is quite in control of his or her half of the conversation. But I, not knowing who he or she is, nor what he or she wants, have to blunder along as best I can.

So, as usual, I began by nodding and smiling back.

'I'm still having trouble,' she went on, 'and it doesn't seem to be getting any better.'

'I'm sorry to hear that,' I said, replacing the smile with a suitably sympathetic look.

'I get a lot of gurgling in the day time and sometimes it doesn't stop at night either,' said the woman. 'The noise keeps me awake for hours and my husband can't sleep either.'

'Mmm,' I nodded, thoughtfully.

'My husband has been very worried,' the woman told me. 'He wanted to ring up a consultant in Birmingham that a colleague of his at the office had recommended, but I told him I'd get in touch with you.' She smiled at me again. 'I've always had faith in you,' she confided, 'and you've never let us down, have you?'

I shook my head and smiled once more. I still didn't know who she was or what was wrong with her.

'So, what do you think?' asked the woman.

'Well we'll obviously have to do something about it,' I told her, clutching at straws, 'you obviously can't go on like this.'

'It'll be a great relief,' nodded the woman.

'Can you come along sometime so that we can talk about it?' I asked her. If I had her medical records in front of me I would at least know her name.

'Well I could,' said the woman doubtfully, 'but wouldn't it be better if you could call in sometime.'

Now, like all family doctors I prefer to see patients at the surgery. A home visit takes up far more time than a surgery consultation. And in my surgery I've got a couch and all the equipment I'm likely to need. I looked at her rather resignedly and agreed.

'If anything does need to be done,' she said, 'how long will the wait be? We want to get it over with as soon as possible. We've got a holiday booked in a months' time.'

'Well, let's see exactly what the problem is first of all,' I said, avoiding the question as skilfully as I could. I promised to call round that afternoon.

I was just writing down her address, which I'd confessed to having forgotten, when a tall rather slender woman in her early thirties tapped me lightly on the arm.

'Sorry to bother you, doctor,' she said, 'but if I bring Jason along to the surgery tonight can you have a look at his foot? His teacher said she thought he'd got a verruca and they won't let him go swimming until you've seen him.'

'Did she say 'doctor'?' asked the woman with the gurgling, when Jason's mother had gone.

I nodded, puzzled.

'Aren't you Mr Kitchen?'

I shook my head, even more puzzled.

'Mr Kitchen of Griffiths and Son?'

‘No.’

‘The plumbers?’

‘They may be but I’m not,’ I told her. ‘I’m a doctor.’

‘Well,’ sniffed the woman, ‘you might have said earlier. I’ve never known anything so stupid.’ And she stalked off angrily.

I stood there for a moment scratching my head. Then I turned and hurried out of the store, anxious to get back safely home as soon as possible. It wasn’t until I got there that I realised that I’d quite forgotten to get the studs for my nephew’s football boots.

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The Stroke Victim

The hospital was just outside London; it served one of the many new town areas which have sprung up since the War. The building itself had originally been a workhouse and the hospital secretary, with the slightest bit of encouragement, would happily describe which bit of the building was which bit of the workhouse.

Since those sad old days a number of prefabricated buildings had been added, one served as a laboratory, another as a pharmacy and a third as an emergency ward.

I was working there as a house officer, the most junior medical grade in the hospital service, and I had a room in a fairly recently erected building which was described on the hospital map as the Residents' Mess.

It would have been fairer to describe it as the Architects' Mess.

Still, it was no more than a few hundred yards from the nurses' home, and the tennis courts were only about half that distance away.

Working as a house officer is one of the hardest jobs I know. You're on call for over 80 hours a week, the sort of duties that no airline pilot or lorry driver would be allowed to work. Indeed, it's by no means unknown for a junior doctor to be on duty for a full 168 hours in a week. For a good deal of that time the young doctor has a good deal of responsibility.

Theoretically, of course, the consultant physician or surgeon has the ultimate responsibility for his patients. In practice, however, the consultant is rarely in the hospital at night or at the weekend and then the house officer has to make many important decisions.

There are, however, a number of consolations. For one thing it is rewarding work. There is nothing more satisfying than going to bed at dawn and knowing that on the ward you've just left, there is at least one person alive who wouldn't be if you hadn't been there. And, for another thing, you never know what is going to happen next. Some extremely strange things do happen in hospital.

Take Michael M, for example.

He was admitted to the hospital in the middle of the night one dark, wet week in February.

I remember his arrival at the hospital very well because, one of my colleagues had just been on holiday for a fortnight and I'd been looking after his wards as well as my own. I was looking forward to a good night's sleep.

The bleep went, as bleeps will, just as I was drifting off into dreamland. I was tempted to ignore it or to stamp on it but being, like one of Pavlov's dogs, well-conditioned to respond to its high-pitched whine, I picked up the telephone and called the ward.

They told me that they had a new admission for me so I had to struggle out of bed and across the grounds, plunging through puddles, pouring rain and biting wind and dressed in little more than a white coat and a pair of slip on shoes (preferred because they are much quicker than shoes with laces for dressing in an emergency).

Hospital architects and administrators never actually live in the hospitals they build and administer so they don't really care whether or not they are truly practical places. Even new buildings are often designed in such a way that at night the doctor on call has to make his way across a pitch-black courtyard or car park area.

By the time I finally arrived on the ward I was frozen. I was soaked through and shivering. I felt quite certain that I was three quarters of the way towards catching pneumonia and ending up on my own ward.

So while I looked at the patient, one of the night nurses made me a large mug of black coffee. That's another of the consolations of being a house officer. Coffee is never far away.

The new admission, Michael, was in a bad way. He'd had a stroke and he couldn't move his arms or his legs. He was half-conscious and his breathing was strained and difficult. I examined him carefully, gave the nurses some instructions and then drank my coffee before borrowing an umbrella and plunging back outside into the rain, the wind and the still-spreading puddles.

By the time I got back to the Mess, I was soaked again - despite the umbrella.

The next morning the patient was a little better. He could move his right arm and his right leg and his breathing was easier. It seemed, after all as if my soaking hadn't been in vain. It looked as if he had a good chance of pulling through.

Bit by bit Michael began to improve even more. By the end of the third day of his stay in hospital he could move all his limbs. He could even feed himself. It was a pleasing and remarkable recovery.

As many doctors and nurses will tell you it is only because some patients recover that they can cope with the problems of dealing with chronically sick patients. It is warming and encouraging to see a patient walk out of a hospital ward into which he had been brought on a stretcher.

There was only one problem: Michael's speech was still badly slurred. Just like a lot of people who've had a stroke, Michael found it difficult to talk. He tried with all the energy he could muster but he just could not make himself understood. It was frustrating for all of us. He wanted to be able to talk to us and we wanted to be able to listen to him.

But when he talked it sounded as if he were speaking in code. It was totally incomprehensible.

One of the nurses worked very hard with him, spending several hours a day struggling to help him. But it was no good. Michael could walk and he could feed himself but he couldn't talk. And that, we began to think, was probably that.

It was about a fortnight after he had been admitted to the ward that Michael had a visitor.

It was his first visitor and she came accompanied by a woman whom we discovered had been Michael's landlady. I talked to the landlady and she told me that Michael had been brought up in Sutherland, right in the north of Scotland, in a tiny village miles from anywhere. He had been to school and started work in that tiny village and had only recently come down to London to seek his fortune (or, rather more prosaically, to find some sort of job).

His sister, the visitor, had flown down as soon as she'd heard of Michael's illness. News travels slowly in those far northern parts.

The staff nurse on duty and I walked down the ward to have a word with Michael's sister and to explain that her brother would not be able to talk but that he could converse with the aid of a pencil and a piece of paper.

When we got to Michael's bed, however, the two of them were chatting together quite happily. They were laughing and seemed to be exchanging gossip.

As we turned away and crept back up the ward we both realised that Michael and his sister were talking happily in the broadest and most incomprehensible Scottish accent either of us had ever heard.

I felt about two feet tall.

First published in Hospital Life in April 1975

Recorded Talk

'Right,' said the producer, handing me a duplicated copy of my script. 'Wonderful stuff of yours. Absolutely wonderful, of course. But before we get down to recording there are just one or two changes that I think we should make. If you don't mind, of course?' He looked at me expectantly. I wondered what he would have done if I'd said that I did mind. Probably shown me the way to the lift.

'Firstly, I think we ought to chop this introductory paragraph,' he said, putting a pencil line through the first paragraph, my favourite. 'It is just a little bit too controversial for this programme. Just a teeny weeny bit on the raw side.'

'Surely,' I nodded. 'We'll cut it.'

'And now this bit about the fellow who, well, do we really need that in? It's a bit horrific, isn't it? I always faint at the sight or sound of the word 'blood' and I'm sure that a lot of our listeners feel the same way.'

'Right,' I said, drawing a line through the offending sentence.

'Now, there is this bit about the new drug.' The producer turned up his nose. 'I rather think that could be construed as advertising,' he said. 'Don't you?'

'I suppose so,' I agreed. 'Shall we cut it out?'

'Probably best. I'm glad you suggested that,' said the producer. 'I agree wholeheartedly. Now here we have a little of history…' He paused, pointing to the third paragraph. 'Got nothing against history, of course…in the right place it's marvellous stuff.' He sighed. 'But we don't like to put over too much history. It tends to bore the listeners.'

'No,' I said. 'We'll cut that out, shall we?'

'Fine. And this little paragraph here. I rather think the listeners will feel that you are insulting them. After all, we have some quite intelligent listeners. Perhaps we could just do away with that bit altogether?'

'OK.'

'And this bit here, is it really accurate?'

'I think so,' I said. 'There really isn't any evidence either way.'

'Not sure?'

'Not sure.'

'Cut it out then,' said the producer. 'We must be perfectly sure or else we'll get hundreds of angry phone calls, not to mention dozens of writs. The suits on the eighth floor hate writs.'

'Right,' I said. 'Have you got another pencil?'

Handing me a spare pencil, he said: 'I think this clause is too complex. You've written some fine prose but it's just too clever for radio.'

We cut it.

'And here I rather think that you have been a little bit too specific. We have to remember the size of the audience. We must be general. And though it's nice to have a few specific examples, these are just a teeny bit libellous, don't you think?'

'Yes, I see,' I said. 'Shall we cut that?'

'It would perhaps be best,' he agreed.

We cut.

'Now,' said the producer. 'I think we're ready for a run through.' He left me alone, and went back into the control box. The green light came on.'

'This disease, once common, is now rare in some parts of the world,' I said, reading what remained of my script.

'Go on,' mouthed the producer, from the other side of the glass partition.

'That's it,' I said. 'That's all that's left.'

He came back into the studio. 'It's a bit short, isn't it?'

I nodded in mute agreement.

'Look here…,' he said, 'can you pad it out a bit?'

First published in Homes and Gardens in June 1973

La Flush d’Or

Of course the French have always been that teeny weeny bit more sophisticated than everyone else and when it comes to combining style and imagination, they’re absolutely on their own. Still, even we were astonished at the latest Parisian innovation. We’d been to dinner at that marvellous new place in St Germain, you know, the one just round the corner from Deux Magots. The one where they have that absolutely enchanting girl singing and that fellow at the piano, the one with the beard who’s always rushing off to the telephone.

Well, we had a bottle and a half of that simply marvellous claret they keep there just for us and when we’d finished the coffee we both needed to powder our noses if you know what I mean. Well, I didn’t want to powder my nose you understand but that’s what polite people always say and most of the other euphemisms people use are so ghastly aren’t they? Anyway, the girl who looks after the coats seemed quite surprised when I asked her to point me in the direction of the toilette. I haven’t felt quite so totally devoid of chic since I entertained George Entwhistle, and he struggled through a whole artichoke with a knife and fork at Maxims.

Well, when she’d got over her surprise she told us that they didn’t have a toilette at all anymore and that we’d have to go to Twyford’s just round the corner in the Rue du Bac. We still didn’t quite catch on and I wondered if perhaps Twyford’s was another little restaurant with an accommodating proprietor. After all, it had been three months since I’d been in Paris and you know how quickly fashions change there.

But what a surprise! Twyford’s turned out to be this absolutely ravishing little place where they specialise in what they call Latrine Gourmande. It seems that the place was founded by this charming fellow Pierre Soir (known to all and sundry as P.Soir, of course) who felt that it was quite wrong that the consumption of food should be surrounded with ritual and sophisticated surroundings while the other basic human activity is almost totally neglected. Absolutely marvellous man and what a brilliant idea! I just can’t imagine why no one has thought of it before.

He’s got this delicious little place that’s been decorated by an absolutely marvellous genius, half Irish, half Pakistani, called Kilroy Wasir. My word what a genius the man is! They’ve got nine luxury toilettes now, of course, but that place in the Rue du Bac was the first. And it’s a real experience going there. We’ve been all over the place but we both agreed we’d never seen anything like it.

There are fountains in the vestibule set in pastel tinted porcelain and a group of musicians from one of France’s leading orchestras, which I absolutely promised not to name because they’re moonlighting, play music from some of Handel’s most popular works. You can guess which is the favourite, I do dare say. There’s a barbier and a cireur and twelve cabinets and Monsieur P.Soir himself is the Maître du toilette at the Rue du Bac since that was his first establishment and he still feels so fond of it. Mme Lulu Junot handles the hot towels and air fresheners and although I blush to mention it there is one cabinet furnished in exactly the style of the throne favoured by the slothful French king whose name and number I simply always forget but who always attended to affairs of the bowel while dealing with affairs of the state.

It costs a little more than the bog standard toilette, of course, but then in Paris one expects to pay for the best and it’s worth it just to look at the furnishings. They’ve even got perforated paper decorated by Andrex Izal, that absolutely riveting French artist who does such extraordinary things with pastel tints. We sneaked half a dozen sheets of it and we’ll keep them with all our menus in the study. I’m absolutely convinced they’ll be worth a small fortune one day.

Pierre told us that he gets whole families spending the evening first at a restaurant and then at one of his luxury toilettes and he’s clearly making himself a very nice fortune thank you very much but don’t for a moment imagine that I don’t think that he deserves it.

Still, in Paris, the trouble these days is that if anyone has a really good and tasteful idea someone else will jump onto the wagon and commercialise it. Colonel McDonald, a self-styled American comfort station executive, has opened a station in the Champs called the Straight Flush, decorated in artificial red plastic and staffed by those totally sexless creatures the Colonel McDonald girls. And just before we left we heard an unsubstantiated rumour that a Chinese firm is opening a Bring in Lu at a camping site in the Bois de Boulogne. Horror of horrors! Sometimes it seems that nothing is sacred.

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The Bargain

‘They’re marvellous value,’ she said, excitedly. ‘They’ve got high collars and bouffant sleeves. They’re normally £9 and the shop, the little boutique on the corner next to the building society, is selling them at £4.’

‘Mmm,’ I murmured.

‘That’s five pounds I’d be saving.’

‘I nodded but said nothing.

‘I could buy two for the price of one,’ she pointed out, ‘and still have a pound left over.’

I looked at her.

‘So you’d be saving a pound!’ she explained, triumphantly. ‘If I bought four it would only cost £16 and they’d be worth £36 so you’d be saving £20 so I could buy another five and save another £25.’

‘That would be £45 I’d be saving,’ I pointed out.

‘I’m so glad you see it that way,’ she smiled. ‘Some men wouldn’t understand.’

‘£45 is a lot of money,’ I agreed.

‘I could save you even more,’ she promised me. ‘If I bought ten of them you’d save £50.’

‘Then you could buy another twelve.’

‘And save another £60.’

She seemed very excited now. ‘If you wanted to save £100 I could buy twenty of them.’

‘Or if you bought two hundred I’d save £1000. Then we’d be really rich.’

‘It’s silly to be so small minded about it,’ she said. ‘Let’s go for the big money.’

‘What do you mean,’ I asked, ‘the big money?’

‘Well, if I bought 1,000 of them you’d save £5,000 and if I bought 10,000 of them you’d save £50,000. If I bought 100,000 it would be half a million pounds! Half a million pounds!’ She closed her eyes dreamily.

‘We might as well go for the million.’

‘That would be 200,000 of them,’ she said, after a moment’s hesitation. ‘And a million pounds you’d have saved.’

‘Just think what we could do with a million pounds,’ I agreed.

‘Wouldn’t it be marvellous!’ she sighed, snuggling up to me. ‘We could afford whatever we wanted then.’

‘Money may not be everything but it’s something,’ I nodded.

‘Of course, I don’t want that many. Just the one would be nice. They’ve got lovely high collars and bouffant sleeves.’

‘One blouse?’

‘Of course. From that corner boutique next to the building society. They’re reduced to £4 from £9.’

‘Of course you must get one,’ I told her, still dizzy.

‘Thank you, darling!’ she said. She reached for the car keys. ‘I’ll pop out and get one before they’ve all gone.’

First published in Punch 6.12.78

Horror Scopes

Aquarius Jan 20 to Feb 18
You are likely to become unemployed and contract a painful, infectious disease. Your dearest friend will betray you and financial problems will get worse. Someone you will never meet will cause severe damage to a possession you value. Bad weather will make gardening a pointless exercise. You have forgotten to pay insurance premiums.

Pisces Feb 19 to Mar 20
Personal relationships will be at a low ebb, mainly due to your own attitudes. This is not a good time to enter into any business relationship. Domestic problems will develop. Relatives will be something of a nuisance and someone you cherish will suffer unsuspected heart damage. It is not wise to be alone since you will be so depressed that your life may be in danger.

Aries Mar 21 to April 20
Do not listen to the advice of others. Once more you will realise that your life is futile. Food hygiene is a real problem and those close to you will turn away in your time of need. This is not a good time to spend money since your financial future is very bleak. Do not scorn the help of those whose advice you need.

Taurus April 21 to May 20
The garden fence needs attention and this is not a good time to spend money on yourself. Halitosis will be a real problem and those whose financial advice you have taken in the past will be spending much of their time in the bankruptcy courts. The garage doors may as well be repaired while the garden fence is receiving attention. You will not have time to attend to such matters in the future.

Gemini May 21 to June 20
This is not a good time to leave the house. Do not answer the door without peeping through the curtains and keep bail money in a safe place. Ears will need syringing.

Cancer June 21 to July 20
It may be wise to take a long holiday abroad this year. South America may be most suitable. Beware of friends who may be more than they seem to be, and make urgent repairs to your guttering. Family relationships will prove a burden and varicose veins will figure prominently. Make sure vaccinations are kept up-to-date.

Leo July 21 Aug 21
A hospital stay may prove longer than anticipated and financial matters will need attention. Changes in your career will inevitably follow absences and the size of your family will be reduced after a friend becomes closely attached to one of those nearest to you.

Virgo Aug 22 to Sept 22
There will be a dramatic change in your personal status and a memorable evening will result in worries for a month. Drinking habits will cause problems and you are likely to get a good deal of exercise during the coming year. Failure of certain ambitious projects is almost certain and new electrical equipment will probably prove faulty.

Libra Sept 23 to Oct 22
You will be changing your environment in the near future and you will be unlikely to have financial problems for some time. Someone else will do the cooking but toilet arrangements will be primitive and there will be few opportunities for mixing with the opposite sex, although you are likely to have cause to regret an impromptu intimacy which preceded these changes. Special clinics can be attended without an appointment.

Scorpio Oct 23 to Nov 22
The future looks very bleak and industrial disputes will do nothing to brighten your prospects. You will be very unhappy in the coming weeks and redundancy money, although apparently generous, will soon prove inadequate. Your doctor will prescribe tranquillisers but these will prove, sadly, ineffective.

Sagittarius Nov 23 to Dec 20

There will be opportunities to attend parties but you would be wise to refuse invitations. You are unlikely to do this, however, and you will regret rejecting this advice. Emotional difficulties will result in a heavy consumption of paper tissues. Health problems make it unwise for you to plan far ahead so your financial problems will prove to be of little importance. Bunions will still be a problem.

Capricorn Dec 21 to Jan 19

Do not be too gloomy but remember that it is not true that things can only get better. You will be surprised just how much worse they can get. Make positive attempts to solve personal problems and you will find some solace in having tried. Friends will be of little help and difficulties involving income tax will result in the dissolution of a business partnership. Expect to travel to a foreign country which is connected with the exporting of coffee and keep a suitcase packed. Sinus troubles will persist.

First published in Punch 2.1.1980

How to Find a Good Bookshop

Go straight along the High Street and turn left after the Post Office. Take the first turn after the laundry and go straight on past the little alley which leads down to the old warehouse that was converted into a nightclub two years ago. There was a murder there last year. Two blokes got into a fight over a woman. She used to live down past the old cinema; the one that used to be a bingo hall before they made it into a radio station. She lived near to the chap who used to deliver our milk. No, I tell a lie, it was the bread. He had lovely auburn hair. Always used to have a smile and a joke.

Anyway, go past the alley and keep on going past the road that goes by it. I can't remember the name but there is a zebra crossing there. Or is it a pelican. After the second set of traffic lights there's a baker's on the corner. It's either a baker's or a shoe shop. Turn left at the Chinese take away, though I think they've moved now. It's one of those video shops. Where they sell all those nasty films that children love. Turn left there and go down the hill as far as you can. You can't miss the next turning. It's just after an old grit bin that some vandals turned upside down last year.

When you get to the end you'll see the canal straight in front of you. It might not be a canal come to think of it. It might be a railway cutting. One or the other. Go along the bank there and keep a sharp eye out for a left turning that has a pub called the Green Dragon on one corner and a sweet shop on the other corner. It might be the Nag's Head come to think of it. The chap who runs it used to be a jockey. Or a boxer. The sweet shop has a sign in the window advertising 'special offer sprouts'. The prices are ridiculously low and I think the owner's brother-in-law nicks them from the allotments. Then take the third turning on the left. Third or fourth.

Go about a hundred yards along there and look for a tiny road that needs repairing. There was a boy run over there nine years ago. He was going to see his Gran who used to be a neighbour of a friend of mine. But I knew her through the Christmas Club last year. Really good value it seemed to be until the man running it was arrested. That was before the butcher ran off with that woman from the sweet shop, of course. There's a cobbler's down there about two doors down. Go about 150 yards up that little road and there are three shops in a little cul-de-sac. I think one of those is a good bookshop. Or you could always ask at the Post Office.

First published in The Bookseller 28.5.1983

What’s in a Name?

Based on an original idea by Vernon Coleman
Story by Vernon Coleman
Additional material by Vernon Coleman
Research by Vernon Coleman
Punctuation by Vernon Coleman
A Vernon Coleman column
Typed by Vernon Coleman

Have you noticed how the lists of credits that follow television programmes seem to be getting longer and longer?

I watched a programme the other night that consisted of very little but the credits.

Right at the start we had five minutes of credits. They were plastered all over the opening shots. Then there was a titchy bit of film without any credits. At the end of the programme I couldn’t remember anything about the subject. But I could tell you who bought the sugar for the assistant director’s assistant’s cup of tea.

In the movies it was OK. The credits at the front end of the film gave you time to unwrap your popcorn, find the straw for your orange drink and see whether the girl you’d taken was going to be game for a bit of mild hanky panky during the dull bits.

Besides, I really rather enjoyed the credits that accompanied the movies.

The people they listed always seemed to have such wonderfully silly jobs. What, for example, do you think a gaffer is? I used to have all sorts of theories about gaffers. To begin with I used to think it was probably a posh way of writing ‘gofer’ (as in ‘gofer a cuppa coffee George’). But eventually I decided that the gaffer was probably the bloke who had the job of making sure that everyone on the set behaved themselves. I had this vision of him being rather elderly, well-dressed and extremely earnest.

I could just see Mr Winner telling Mr Bronson that if he didn’t behave himself he’d have a word with the gaffer and that would be that.

And what does a best boy do?

It sounds the sort of post you’d only need to fill if you were making a film in Arabia and wanted to get on the right side of the locals.

But maybe a best boy is what you have if you’re getting married very young. Instead of a best man.

And a grip.

What is a grip.

I’ve always thought of the ‘grip’ as having a terribly vital sort of job.

Indeed, there is probably a University in California which offers courses in gripping.

Maybe they only have a grip if the film is really exciting and people need their hands held.

Or maybe he assists the hairdresser?

Or carries the bags?

Or holds onto the director’s canvas chair if it’s windy?

Whatever it is it’s certainly got to be a good deal more exciting than anything the people on television do. They all have such really boring jobs.

At the end of every thirty minute featurette there they are. Listed in all their transient glory for a hundred mums and aunties to swoon over.

The assistant producer’s assistant gets a name check. And the secretary to the assistant producer’s assistant gets her name on the telly too.

The second assistant sound recordist is there alongside the sound mixers, the video editors, the executive editor, the executive producer, the assistant to the executive producer’s assistant sound mixer, the cameraman, the man who holds the camera, the man who holds the cameraman, the man who switches on the lights and the man who switches them all off again when it’s all over.

Why do they do it?

Who the hell really cares whether the man who wrote the memo that approved the budget is called Nigel or Stanley?

Who wants to know that the vision mixer is called Mike and that eleven out of the twelve researchers were called Debbie (the other one is always called Fiona).

It’s just as well that the rest of society isn’t composed of people who are so vain.

Just imagine buying a suit and finding that inside, instead of a nice neat label about two inches by three inches telling you who'd made the suit, the entire lining was decorated with the names of the people who'd been responsible for turning half a dozen woolly fleeces into a pair of trousers and a jacket.

Or imagine going into a restaurant and finding the menu adorned with the names of the men who'd grown the potatoes, picked them, thrown them into the truck, driven them to market, sold them, bought them, washed them, peeled them, turned them into chips, fried them and thrown them onto a plate.

Plus the names of the men and women who'd done the same for the peas, the carrots, the broccoli and the mushrooms.

Plus the names of the chef, the assistant chef, the assistant chef's vet, the pastry cook, the pastry cook's boyfriend, the candlestick maker and the man who's printed the menu.

Or imagine buying a car and finding the names of the men who'd played cards while it was being built by robots emblazoned in chrome on the bonnet lid. Or buying a newspaper and finding it filled with the names of the printers, the paper makers, the delivery boys and girls, the bankers, the researchers, the libel lawyers, the ink mixers, the photographer's assistant, the editor's analyst, some more libel lawyers, the lift operator, even more libel lawyers and the man who has the job of covering up the nipples when actresses slip out of something comfortable on cold first nights.

I can see where it's all going, of course. Eventually someone will make a television programme that consists of nothing but a list of credits.

Then we'll get the ultimate programme.

A sequel.

Listing the names of the people who put together the credit list for the first programme.

Article edited by Vernon Coleman
Assistant: Vernon Coleman
Supervising editing: Vernon Coleman
Word mixing: Vernon Coleman
Word control: Vernon Coleman
Gaffer: Vernon Coleman
Sentence manipulation: Vernon Coleman
Best boy: Vernon Coleman
A Vernon Coleman column
Produced by Vernon Coleman

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What’s in a Body?

Tom Whitehouse gazed admiringly at his new body. The grey skin stretched taut over the tiny frame, the dull glass eyes, the shaven head: it was all so familiar. For over forty years Tom had been in charge of the cadaver or subject store at St Christopher’s Hospital Medical School; during that time he must have prepared several thousand bodies for dissection. It was his job not only to clean, shave and label his ‘customers’ but also to inject them with preservative.

It was funny really. He had started work at the Medical School as a laboratory assistant straight after leaving school. The old man who had been in charge of the subject store had asked for an assistant and Tom had applied because the pay was better. It was difficult to find people prepared to work anywhere in the mortuary but Tom was hoping to get married. The extra weekly money had enabled him to get married that much earlier than he had dared hope. Looking back now he couldn’t understand what all the rush had been about.

The little old lady stretched out naked and still on the stone table was thin and bony. Still, once they get this far, thought Tom, that was all to the good. The students liked a thin subject to dissect, it made their work so much easier. In fact, thought Tom, Professor Simkins himself might well like to use the new body.

Professor Simkins, of the Department of Anatomy, was writing a new Dissecting Manual for medical students and had spent a good deal of time in recent months dissecting bodies and then having photographs taken to illustrate his new book.

Tom gazed at the little old lady. It seemed a shame really. Although he had worked so long among the dead Tom had never quite managed to adopt the nonchalant attitude towards death which so many people in similar positions displayed. Tom could never forget that his ‘customers’ were someone’s children; they had probably married and may have had children of their own. They had certainly loved and laughed. But once they entered the medical school as subjects they lost all dignity and respect. They were not so much subjects as objects.

Tom’s assistant, a red-cheeked youth with a sullen scowl, never seemed to have even passed through this stage. To him the people who entered the preparation room were no more human than the cold stone slabs on which they lay. Tom had not wanted him as an assistant in the first place but he had no say in the matter. Not that Professor Simkins would normally have omitted to consult Tom but the new assistant was a vague relation of the Professor’s, and Tom rather gathered that he had little choice in the matter either.

Normally Tom and the Professor got on well together. Tom was the complete physical opposite of the Professor. The subject store man was short, round and sometimes blustery, bright tiny twinkling eyes sunk deep in a spherical little head, the whole crowned with a few wisps of silver grey hair. Professor Simkins was tall and thin, basically ungainly but sometimes surprisingly regal. Temperamentally, too, they were precisely complementary. Tom sometimes bluff but a cheery fellow at heart. Professor Simkins seemingly impersonal and unfeeling; rather cold in manner, even to those he knew well. Tom admired and respected the Professor who in turn respected Tom and refused to interfere with the daily running of the subject store.

It was twenty minutes to six; Tom pulled a sheet over the little old lady and sighed. It was time to go home for the weekend. As he left, Tom gazed for a moment at the bodies on their cold stone slabs, he nodded to them, called good night and quietly shut the door as if afraid of waking them.

As he hurried homewards, the sickly smell of death and preservatives billowing around him like a swarm of bees, Tom’s face lost its cheerful look and acquired a dreary, contemplative stare; his eyes lost their sparkle and gained a dull, hopeless gaze. He did not look forward to going home. It was ironic, he thought, that marriage, the thing that had induced him to take the job in the subject store all those years ago, should have turned out to be such a miserable anti-climax.

His marriage had never turned out the way he had hoped. It was a hopeless failure. The pretty young thing he had chosen to spend his life with had quickly turned into a crotchety, shapeless matron with a razor sharp tongue. She seemed to derive an infinite amount of pleasure from playing with her husband; like a cat with a mouse she would tease and torture him, taking his every move as a signal to pounce. Tom hated her as much as he had ever hated anyone, or could ever hate anyone. Not a stinging, burning hate but a dull, constant throb of loathing.

As it was fine, Tom decided to walk home that night and it was a few minutes after six when he arrived at his grubby little detached house in a nice enough suburb of the town. His wife was waiting for him, arms akimbo, at the back door. Tom forced a cheerful smile. ‘Hello, dear, how are you? Have you had a good day?’

He tried to start a conversation but he may just as well have spoken to one of the bodies in the subject store. His wife glared down contemptuously at the chubby little man. ‘And where have you been tonight? Gallivanting off with one of those lady friends of yours I dare say. Not a care for your poor wife slaving over a hot stove all day. Oh no! You enjoy yourself Tom Whitehouse. Your meal is on the table and don’t blame me if it’s spoilt.’

Tom squeezed thankfully past his wife as soon as she had subsided a little. He had managed to get home early enough to allay her completely unfounded suspicions, though he knew that that never helped. He stared sickly at the anaemic cabbage and dried up meat, coated in brown, gelatinous gravy. With a sigh he sat down and ate his meal; his wife sat opposite, noisily sipped a cup of tea and watched him. She always ate her evening meal before he got home.

The atmosphere was almost as thick as the gravy which coated his meal and by the time he had come to the last potato Tom could stand the silence no longer. He glanced across the table at his wife, she was still staring steadily at him. If looks could wither, Tom would long ago have become a prize possession for an Indian headhunter.

'What are we doing this weekend, my dear?' asked Tom.

There was a moment's silence. Then Tom's wife boiled over with rage, her fat jowls shook with fury, her dark brows zoomed inwards like halfbacks pouring in on an invading centre forward and the veins stood out on her vast white forehead.

'How do you expect me to know what we are going to do? Since when have I had a say in anything? Have you planned anything?'

'Well, er, nothing in particular my dear, nothing,' stammered Tom. 'I have nothing in mind.' He noticed his wife's mouth curling up at the edges, like stale bread, and added hastily, 'unless you would like to come to St Christopher's. On Sunday perhaps.'

He waited for a moment and having assured himself that his wife was not preparing any formidable verbal attack continued. 'You've never come, there isn't much to see but perhaps you would like to see where I work. You can have a look around the Pathological Museum; it's a sort of super gruesome Madame Tussauds.' Tom chuckled, quite taken with his own suggestion.

'And what on earth would I want to spend my Sunday afternoon there for? Though I can't expect you to think of anything better than that, I don't suppose; and if we don't do that we shan't do anything.'

It was raining on Sunday, and by the time they arrived at the Medical School they were both thoroughly soaked. Almost immediately Tom regretted having invited his wife to St Christopher's at all. She was not the slightest bit interested in the museum, the place where the young gentlemen often took their young ladies, whether to frighten them or impress them Tom had never been quite sure.

She stalked around the corridors noisily, paying not the slightest attention to Tom's entreaties for her to be quiet. She wandered gaily in and out of those laboratories which had been left open. She tutted and squawked at the experimental animals, cooped up in their tiny cages and in one of the narrow corridors rudely forced her way past the Assistant Dean who, as luck would have it, had slipped in to catch up on some paper work.

Finally, the grand tour was over and Tom heaved a thankful sigh of relief. Only the subject store remained and then they could go home. Tom noticed the fading of his wife's usually pale complexion before they got to the store door; but he was not ready for what happened as he opened the door.

He had not intended her to enter the room and merely held the door open for her; she leant forwards on tiptoe, gazing open-mouthed at the room of enshrouded bodies.

Suddenly she fainted.

It was a few seconds before Tom realised what had happened but it was not much longer before he had scooped her up in his powerful arms and placed her on one of the stone slabs. He darted across the room to fetch a beaker of water to sprinkle on her face. He heard her shouting, 'I can't expect you to think of anything better.' But when he turned, she was still lying, silent, on the stone slab where he had laid her.

He continued across the room but instead of fetching water he picked up the syringe with which he injected his subjects with preservative. He filled it carefully and returned to his wife. As he placed the syringe in position, pushed it into a vein and began to squeeze the piston his wife began to stir. She half awoke, looked to see what he was doing and frowned, puzzled. Four times he filled the syringe and emptied its contents into his wife's bloodstream until she moved no more.

It was only then that he realised what he had done.

In a flash he darted across the room and shut and locked the door, which up till then had remained wide open. Next he stripped his wife and bundled her clothes into a black plastic bag. He could take them to the furnace afterwards and destroy them.

An hour later his wife's body was lined up on the slab; shaved, naked and preserved; stripped of all dignity and identity. He covered it with a white sheet, turned and left the room.

No one, he thought, as he trudged homewards alone, need suspect. His wife was little known and little liked; there was no one to miss her. She never spoke to the neighbours and had no friends or relatives.

As for the body, Tom was in an ideal position to dispose of it, his lists were never checked. If a body had a particularly unusual deformity, or an organ showing distinct signs of some disease then Tom would sometimes be required to prepare a report on the subject to accompany the specimen when it was introduced into the pathology museum. But that was a rare enough occurrence.

For three months the body lay in the subject store waiting for the next intake of medical students when it would accompany the other cadavers into the dissecting room. Meanwhile, the half-hearted gossip which had worried Tom a little after he had spread the word about his wife's unfortunate illness and untimely death did not last for long. And Tom was much happier.

Month by month he watched his wife disappear under the eager scalpels of the preclinical students. First the arms, then the legs were removed and dissected. Within four months of appearing in the dissecting room his wife's body had become a grotesque and lonely torso. Tom could no longer recognise the woman to whom he had been married for so many miserable years, only the number of the table told him which body belonged to which name.

Tom was busy scrubbing up a new 'customer' in readiness for the following year's intake of students when Professor Simkins walked in. The Professor looked delighted. 'One of the groups has discovered a most astonishingly distended spleen, can you let me know details of the patient's disease, treatment, doctor and so on?'

'Can you tell me what table that is, Professor?' asked Tom.

The Professor thought for a moment and frowned. 'No, I'm afraid not,' he confessed.

It was a long walk from the subject store to the dissecting room. Before they had got half-way there, a terrible thought struck Tom. What if the body should turn out to be his wife's, the body without a death certificate or a record? His wife had always been awkward.

It was a shock to everyone when old Tom Whitehouse collapsed to the floor on being shown a distended spleen. But it wasn't for several days that the gossip finally got itself sorted out. It seemed that Tom had collapsed and died after a heart attack.

There was quite a considerable amount of confusion about the subject store records. The file on one body could not be found anywhere. But fortunately it had no exciting peculiarities and the remains were simply destroyed in the furnace.

First published in London Mystery Magazine in April 1966

The Trial

You could almost feel the tension in the courtroom. In the dock the six defendants, confused and bewildered still, exchanged nervous whispers and rubbed their hands down the sides of their trousers. On the opposite side of the courtroom the jury, still settling themselves into their seats, busied their hands with coat buttons and handbag catches. Between them, the prosecuting counsel and defence counsel chatted happily together, awaiting the verdict as colleagues not enemies.

The trial had lasted for four days and had attracted a considerable amount of publicity. Representatives from all the national newspapers, all the television and radio networks, and over a dozen foreign agencies and magazines had crowded on to the benches reserved for the press and overflowed on to those officially intended for members of the public.

The six men had been charged with obstructing the police and resisting arrest. Other charges of causing a breach of the peace and incitement to riot had been dropped at an early stage in the proceedings. The conflict from which the charges and the trial had been born had been a direct result of the farm labourers' strike which had lasted for most of the previous winter.

The strike had attracted considerable opposition from the numerous organisations which make it their business to protect the interests of dumb animals. The union representing the farm labourers in the dispute had quickly pointed out that if the employers would capitulate quickly, the animals would suffer no more. The farmers, however, insisted that capitulation would ruin them. While the arguments continued, there were many stories of animals trapped in porcelain and steel pens and dying of neglect and starvation.

George and James Lovelace and four of their colleagues on a farm in the south west of England had originally joined in the strike. Like thousands of their fellow workers, they felt incensed at the lack of response shown by their employers during an attempt to negotiate better working conditions. Their anger about their own misfortune had, within less than a fortnight, been replaced by concern for the animals formerly under their care. A quarter of a prize dairy herd had died of malnutrition because of their dispute when the six men decided that they could hold out no longer. They knew that their ageing employer, who could not cope with the animals himself, would be ruined if any more cattle died and that their jobs would disappear. Continuing the strike seemed pointless. Quietly and without any fuss or publicity, they returned to work.

They had been at work for three days when a reporter for a local television station, visiting farms in Dorset while preparing a report on the strike, found the men at work. When interviewed they announced that they could no longer stand by and see animals die of neglect.

The television programme caused a furore.

Suddenly, interest in the strike was focused on this one farm and reporters rushed to see the brave six men who had defied the instructions from their union. The leader of the men's union announced at a press conference that the men would be dismissed from their union unless they returned to the picket lines immediately and that at the conclusion of the dispute the men would find themselves unemployable.

Pickets were brought from other parts of the country to try to stop the farm operating. Coachloads of miners, car workers and dockers, many of whom had never actually seen a cow, stood ankle deep in mud and halted deliveries of animal foodstuffs.

Several hundred policemen were sent from major centres in the area, given the task of ensuring that the six farm labourers and their supporters from the animal protection societies did not come into direct contact with the union pickets.

On the sixth day after the men had returned to work, incensed by the fact that their picketing was having little effect, a group of miners from Yorkshire broke through the police cordon and a thick hawthorn hedge, and threw abuse and clods of earth at the six men. The two Lovelace brothers, who happened to be nearest to the invading pickets, picked up pitchforks and threatened the nearest of the miners.

The senior police officer present, struggling through the angry crowd, decided that the easiest solution was to arrest the six farm labourers. It was either that or attempt to arrest a hundred coal miners and the policeman was a pragmatist. So the six farm labourers were pushed into police vans and hurried off to the nearest police station. As they were arrested they protested and two policemen received minor cuts and bruises.

The farm labourers' dispute lasted for another month.

The six men from Dorset were denied bail, and when the strike was over they returned to their farm to find that the surviving cattle had to be destroyed. Their union dismissed them and they were 'unemployable'. All they had to look forward to was a trial.

Now, as they stood in the dock and waited for the jury to declare their verdict the six men looked lonely and frightened.

The foreman of the jury, who like eight of his eleven colleagues was a member of a trade union, announced the verdict of 'Guilty' in a quiet voice without looking in the direction of the dock.

When he had sat down the judge delivered his verdict, sentencing each of the six farm labourers to seven years' imprisonment. It was, he agreed, a harsh sentence but one that he insisted should be considered to be a deterrent to others intent on disturbing industrial relationships, rather than a punishment for the crimes committed.

Appeals were lodged by the six defendants, but it seemed that for the second time in the space of 150 years the people of Tolpuddle had made history.

Note: In 1834 six farm labourers who had organised trade union activities in the village of Tolpuddle in Dorset were sentenced by a hostile judge and jury to spend seven years in a penal colony in Australia. Their crime was combining to fight for a living wage.

First published in the Telegraph Sunday Magazine 4.3.1979

Strictly not Allowed

I was a patient in one of our biggest and most impressive hospitals. On every floor there was a whole body potassium counter, an electron microscope and a serum analyser. I was in hospital because I had broken my leg while attempting to negotiate a particularly tricky turn in the Swiss Alps. At least that was what I'd told the nurses. In fact, I'd broken my leg when I got knocked off my bicycle by a pedestrian who'd run out into the road. But you couldn't tell people that and keep any dignity, could you?

Although I was lying comfortably in a quiet ward, I had a headache. It wasn't a particularly vicious headache. But it was a headache. A common or garden headache. And I thought that an aspirin tablet might just take the edge off the pain.

So I caught one of the junior nurses as she hurried past and asked her if I could have an aspirin. 'I have a headache,' I explained.

Unfortunately, the nurse didn't have a key to the drug cupboard so she had to wait until the ward sister came back on duty half an hour later.

'An aspirin?' the sister said to the nurse, after she'd looked at my notes. 'Oh no! She can't have aspirin. She isn't written up for any aspirin.'

'I'm sorry,' said the nurse, when she next came past. 'But the doctors haven't prescribed any aspirin for you.'

'Couldn't you get some prescribed for me?' I asked.

'We'll have to ask the doctor,' said the nurse.

'Well, let's ask the doctor then, shall we?' I said.

My head was still aching. If anything it was worse.

The nurse went back into the office and had a word with the sister who rang the switchboard who bleeped the house physician.

Three or four minutes later the house surgeon came to the telephone.

'Dr Williams had to go out for a few minutes,' he said. 'I'm holding his bleep for him. What can I do for you?'

'We've got a patient who wants an aspirin,' said the sister. 'But she's not written up for it.'

'I was in the bath,' complained the house surgeon. 'Did you ring me up for that?'

'We've been told not to give any drugs unless they're written in the Kardex or in the patient's notes,' said the sister haughtily.

'You say there is no analgesia marked on the Kardex?' said the house surgeon.

'No,' said the sister.

'But the patient wants aspirin?'

'Yes.'

'What did she come in with?'

'A broken leg.'

'A broken leg? On a medical ward?'

'We've got some orthopaedic patients in some of our beds. The orthopaedic ward is full.'

'Is the leg giving her trouble?'

'Not that I know of. I think the leg is fine. But she's got a headache.'

'Ah,' said the house surgeon. 'Any other symptoms?'

'Not that I know of.'

'To be honest I'm not sure about this,' said the house surgeon. 'There's no history of gastric upset is there? No anticoagulants? No steroids?'

'I don't think so.'

'You don't think so?'

'I can't read Dr Williams' writing.'

'I think we ought to leave this unless you want to get in touch with the medical registrar.'

'Who's the medical registrar on call?' asked the sister wearily.

'Dr Mahoo. But he's gone out with Dr Williams and I'm holding his bleep as well. Just for the moment.'

'Ah.'

Meanwhile, I was getting more and more agitated as I lay waiting for my aspirin. I managed to catch the junior nurse as she went past with a bedpan.

'Haven't you found my aspirin yet?' I asked her.

'No, sorry.'

'My headache is getting worse. I really do think an aspirin would sort it out.'

‘I’m sorry. But you aren’t written up for aspirin you know. And it can be dangerous.’

The nurse went back to the office where the sister was sitting staring at the telephone in suppressed anger. The nurse crept out without saying anything.

‘Could you bring me the telephone?’ I called to the ward orderly.

She wheeled the telephone across to me and plugged it in. I rang home.

‘Hello, Dick?’

‘Yes. What’s up love? Are you OK?’

‘I’m OK but I’ve got a stinking headache – could you bring some aspirin in with you when you come this afternoon? And come as early as you can please.’

‘Sure. I was just on my way over there now.’

‘Thank heavens for that.’

‘Hey, you’re in the hospital,’ said Dick. ‘Don’t they have aspirin there?’

‘It’s a long story,’ I said.

Just then the sister came out of her office. She was holding her head and looked very cross.

‘I think you’d better bring the bottle with you,’ I said to Dick.

First published in Interface magazine, April 1973

Old Henry

Henry was 76 last June. His wife died 18 months ago and since then Henry had been living by himself, struggling to keep his tiny terraced house going, cooking for himself twice a week, taking help from no one except his daughter who cooked him a meal every Sunday lunchtime.

With the onset of winter, Henry's bronchitis flared up and when the police were called by a suspicious neighbour, Henry was found sitting almost helpless in a chair in his living room. Apart from dragging himself to the downstairs toilet, he hadn't been out of the living room for nearly a week and the room, which was littered with refuse and bits of stale food, was cold and damp.

Henry was taken along to the nearest general hospital where he was admitted into a men's medical ward. After a bath and a good meal, some antibiotics and chest physiotherapy, he was almost back to normal. His breathing improved tremendously and after being in the ward for three days he was able to walk around the hospital grounds.

Unfortunately, as soon as he had been taken into hospital, the landlord of the terraced house in which he had lived for 17 years changed the lock on the front door and sent Henry notice to quit. The social worker from the hospital visited the property and announced that even if the landlord could be persuaded to change his mind she couldn't in all honesty agree to Henry going back there.

The daughter was contacted. She said she was very sorry but she had three small children and a small council house. She said that she couldn't possibly look after the old man who was in any case only her stepfather. The only other relative, a cousin, was traced to Canada, though no one managed to find his exact address.

Henry stayed in the hospital ward for three weeks until it was clear that he wasn't going to be able to go anywhere without the hospital's help.

The medical social worker in the hospital tried to find a place for Henry in one of the nursing homes or old people's homes in the district. Unfortunately, it was impossible to find him a place for nine months or more and the hospital said that they couldn't in all fairness to other prospective patients allow Henry to take up a bed for that long.

So they arranged to transfer him to a geriatric ward.

The geriatric hospital was also a mental hospital. Most of the patients being nursed there were elderly psychotics. There were nowhere near enough nurses to look after the patients. There was no one to give physiotherapy, the doctor called only once a week and there was no attendant social worker. Visiting was impossible for Henry's daughter as the geriatric hospital was 11 miles away from her home and she had no independent means of transport.

In the geriatric hospital Henry started to regress. There was no reason for him to get up out of bed. If he did get up there was nowhere for him to go. He wasn't allowed out of the ward into the grounds because there weren't enough nurses to keep an eye on patients both inside the hospital and outside in the grounds. So he mostly stayed in bed. There was no one to talk to because all the other patients were demented, drugged or asleep. There were no books to read and no newspapers were delivered. There was no television and no radio. All his own belongings were still locked up in the terraced house where he had lived for 17 years.

Henry began to lose his temper more and more frequently and to help control him the medical staff prescribed sedatives. Then Henry didn't get out of bed at all. He developed bedsores on his buttocks and on both ankles and when he contracted pneumonia no one thought it was worth treating him.

Henry's step-daughter and two former neighbours attended the funeral and a solicitor announced that Henry had left his estate (worth £746) to his step-daughter. It was just enough to pay for the costs of the funeral.

First published in The Sunday Times 14.5.72

Let me through…

It was two or three minutes before I realised that anything had happened. From my end of the cinema foyer, all I could see was a small crowd of people bending over something. It could have been a midget, a hole in the floor, a couple making love or someone not feeling very well. With my qualifications dangling, bright, new and very unused, I edged forwards tentatively.

I peered over the top of the nearest shoulders. A man, middle aged, balding and very blue in the face, was lying flat on his back. By his side were kneeling two men, one clearly the cinema manager and the other obviously someone who knew something about first aid. Having turned the patient on his side, he was feverishly searching for a pulse.

Forcing courage into both feet, I stepped forward and bent down. 'Are you a doctor?' I whispered.

The man shook his head, jumped to his feet and leapt back. 'Are you?'

I nodded. He edged back even farther. I was committed. I picked up the man's wrist. Nothing. He really was quite blue.

'Can you do mouth to mouth?' I asked the original first-aider, before he edged back into the crowd.

He edged forward. 'Yes.'

'Have you called an ambulance?' I asked the cinema manager. He nodded and looked at his watch. 'Nearly five minutes ago.'

I ripped the sick man's coat open, unbuttoned his jacket and shirt and bared his chest. The crowd, which I had forgotten, surged forward expectantly.

I pushed the man's case under his neck, started thumping his chest and tried to think of encouraging advice to give the poor first aider who had the miserable job of blowing air into those limp lungs through blue, saliva-sticky lips. I tried to put the case into such a position that the man's head hung at what I thought was the right angle. A little voice inside me kept demanding to be told where the registrar was, where the anaesthetist was and why there wasn't any oxygen. The crowd was buzzing with excitement. No one wanted to go in to watch the film. This was real drama.

'You're doing fine. Keep at it. Don't worry, I'm a doctor,' said a voice at my elbow. I stopped for a moment and turned round. A young fellow, who looked as if his qualifications were even newer than mine, was crouching beside me and smiling encouragingly. 'You're doing all you can,' he added. I carried on thumping. Beads of sweat were forming on my forehead.

Another five minutes passed. Then another pair of hands appeared on the man's chest. I looked up. On the other side of the patient another fellow had appeared. This one, also young, wore a smart bow tie, a neatly checked coat and a look of confidence that he must have hired for the night.

'I'm a doctor,' he explained, taking over the cardiac massage after gently pushing my hands away. He tapped daintily in the region of the man's sternal angle, searched for a raised jugular venous pressure, gave a few more taps and then smiled.

'All right,' he said. 'Carry on.'

'Thank you,' I said.

'Just keep on with it,' said the fellow in the bow tie. I nodded.

I had hardly pumped more than another pint round when a third Samaritan arrived. 'I'm a medical student,' he said. 'Can I help?'

'Well there are already three doctors here,' I said, 'but if you can think of anything else to do, please do.' The student disappeared.

'Er…are you a doctor?' asked the man with the bow tie. I nodded. 'Oh,' he said, rather disappointed.

The cinema manager announced that the ambulance had arrived.

'Right, we'll put him in this then,' said one of the ambulance men, unfolding a portable chair.

'I think we need a stretcher,' I said.

'This is easier,' said the ambulance man.

'A stretcher,' I repeated.

The ambulance man snorted and disappeared. He came back about 60 thumps later. We put the man on the stretcher, gave him a few more thumps and a few more puffs and then carried him out to the ambulance.

'Can you come with us?' asked the ambulance man. There didn't seem to be much choice, so I climbed in and pulled the door to behind me.

'Let me in!' shouted a young girl on the pavement. I opened the door. 'I'm a nurse!' she said, pulling me by the sleeve. 'Move over!'

Obediently, I got out of the ambulance and she clambered in. 'He needs cardiac massage,' said the nurse, beginning to thump the patient’s chest. The first aider just carried on with his mouth to mouth.

First published in The Sunday Times, 17.1.71

Going the Rounds…

‘Good morning, sir.’

‘Morning, Coleman. Ready for the round?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Any new patients?’

‘Just a couple, sir. This is the first. Mr Jenkins. He came in over the weekend.’

‘Mmm? And what’s wrong with Mr Jenkins?’

‘First started complaining of a cough about two days ago…’

‘Cough, eh? I remember seeing a man about 11 years ago. He’d been complaining of a cough for about three weeks when we brought him in here. Nothing else, just a cough. He died within 24 hours. Nasty great carcinoma of the bronchus.’

‘And on examination I found some clubbing…’

‘Ah yes, clubbing. Good old clubbing. I’ve seen some clubbing, I can tell you. I remember one case I saw two or three years ago in this very hospital. Oddly enough he’d been spotted by a nurse, young student nurse from here. Went into a jewellery shop in town with her fiancé to buy an engagement ring and noticed that the jeweller was clubbed. Sent him up here to see me in my out-patients. We did the X-rays, all the tests, he’d got a nasty abscess in one lung. Enormous thing. Sent him off up to London. They had to do a lobectomy. Saved his life that clubbing.’

‘…and a large right-sided pleural effusion.’

`Never means much that you know. We’ve got a cleaner here who came to see me feeling a bit under the weather, not in the slightest bit short of breath. We X-rayed her and found big effusions on both sides. Got sarcoid. Still got the effusions as far as I know. Not doing her any harm. Wonderful woman…’

‘…probably pneumonia…’

‘You probably wouldn’t credit it but I once saw a young man, 21 or 22, who had the worst lot of pneumonia I’ve ever seen. He played rugger for the Old Nihilians, scored three tries and a conversion with a temperature of 104. Said he felt a bit off colour but otherwise felt fine. I saw him because his GP noticed he wasn’t getting over what they thought was a cold. Or something like that. Had to put him on ampicillin and cloxacillin for a month to clobber the bugs he’d got. And do you think I could keep him off the rugby field?’

‘…put him on penicillin…’

‘Do you know I once saw the most tremendous reaction to a penicillin injection in a young man about this fellow’s age. Almost killed him. Came out in a deep red rash, bloated skin, couldn’t breathe. Really ill for several days. Eventually got him through and he had a tattoo done on his forearm. ‘Allergic to penicillin’. Very sensible that. Good mind to suggest it in one of the journals.’

‘…home at the weekend…’

‘I think we ought to get people home sooner, you know. We tend to keep them in hospital far longer than they need to stay. And sometimes we bring people in who really don’t need to come in. What really gets me mad are the sanctimonious beggars who insist on sending old people into hospital whether they want to go or not. I had a case not long ago. Old woman of about 96. Might have been 97. She didn’t want to go into hospital. Quite happy at home. Bit weak and unsteady but she had all her things around her. Memories, you know. Quite happy to last on there till the next winter took her off. But no, some local do-gooder insisted on sending her into hospital. Got an order, too. Unfit to look after herself, they said. Poor old soul. She died in a week.’

‘…and…’

‘Good. And what was the other patient you had in?’

First published in The Sunday Times 21.5.72

Like I need a hole in the head…

The patient had come in to have a cyst removed from the top of his head and he'd been lying on a hospital bed for three hours. Three hours is plenty of time for a patient to start imagining the worst.

The senior surgeon had left the theatre and gone for his morning coffee. He'd just finished one long case and had another one due to start as soon as I'd finished. Apart from the nurse designated to help me, the theatre staff were busy clearing up the debris from the last operation and preparing trolleys for the next one. Instead of being a silent, tidy place the operating theatre looked more like a busy railway station buffet.

The porter brought the patient in on a trolley and helped him climb off and on to the operating table. As the cyst was on the back of his head, we had to get him to lie on his face, resting his chin on his hands. It looked very uncomfortable.

I carefully picked up one of those green towels with a neat hole in the middle and draped it over the man's head. A tuft of greasy black hair sprang up through the hole. I pulled the towel off and sat down for a minute or two while the theatre porter found a razor and shaved a convenient area around the cyst.

He must have been an unusually enthusiastic porter for when I looked again a few seconds later, he'd shaved a huge circle in the middle of the man's head. The poor fellow would have only needed an old dressing gown and he'd have been able to go to a fancy dress party as a monk.

I put the towel back and accepted the scalpel which the nurse offered me. I was just about to start cutting when the man reached up and scratched at his scalp, pulling the sterile towel off. I pointed out that it would be easier for both of us if he kept still.

The blade was only about a quarter of an inch away from the man's head when I realised that I still hadn't put in any local anaesthetic. Wearily, I handed the knife back to the nurse and drew up some local in a syringe.

'Can you feel anything?' I asked, prodding the area around the cyst with a needle after I'd injected some anaesthetic.

The man shook his head, dislodging the towel again.

The nurse put on a fresh towel. I picked up the knife once more, and began to cut through the skin. It was hot in the theatre, the air conditioning had broken down for the third time in a week and I think I would have been sweating if I'd been working in a fridge. It was a big cyst which seemed to be getting bigger every minute. I couldn't help thinking that if I removed it I'd have a huge flap of spare skin and the man would have a hollow skull. My mask was sticking to my mouth, my boots were flooded with sweat and I had an itch at the back of my neck.

Eventually, I got the cyst out. For the first few minutes of the operation the patient kept up a steady stream of chatter, and then slowly he quietened down, perhaps silenced by the nurse's gasps of surprise as the cyst slipped out, perhaps worried by the rivulets of blood trickling down his scalp.

Where the cyst had been there was now a hole about an inch deep and an inch across. I was looking at it, wondering how best to close it, when one of the anaesthetists came in.

'Gawd,' he said. 'What a big hole!' He called to one of the porters. 'Come and have a look at the enormous hole Coleman's made in this guy's head.'

Frantically, I tried to catch his eye, to let him know that the patient wasn't unconscious. But he'd already turned away and was trying to persuade a couple of very junior nurses to come and look at the enormous hole I'd made.

Desperately I tried to sew up the hole as quickly as possible.

'Are you all right?' I asked tentatively, as I put in the last stitches. There was no answer. I repeated the question. There was still no reply. I bent down so that I was only a foot away. 'Are you still there?' I called. I took the green towel off and swabbed away some of the thicker rivulets of blood. The patient didn't move. 'It's OK,' I said. 'I've finished, you can move now.' Still he didn't move.

I was getting rather frightened. Perhaps I had dug down too deep. Perhaps that stuff I'd thought was part of the cyst…perhaps the patient had taken umbrage at the anaesthetist's remarks…

'It's all over,' I shouted. The theatre staff preparing for the next big case came into theatre to see what was the matter.

With a yawn the patient pushed himself up onto one elbow and then rubbed his eyes.

'Are you all right?' I asked.

Blearily the patient nodded and blinked. 'Sorry,' he said. 'I must have dropped off. Haven't you started yet?'

First published in The Sunday Times 12.12.71

Hospital on Wheels

The old lady was in heart block with a pulse rate so slow that it seemed as if the muscles and cockles of her heart were working to rule.

We'd tried treating her with drugs but they'd made very little difference and it was clear that she needed specialist care. She'd need a pacemaker and all the attention the staff of a fully equipped coronary care unit could give her.

So we telephoned the nearest unit and they agreed to take her. Our problem then was to get her there. Admittedly, the other hospital was only seven or eight miles away. But seven or eight miles, even in a fast moving ambulance, can take three lifetimes.

Our problem was solved when the registrar in the coronary care unit mentioned that they had specially equipped ambulances and that they would send one for her.

The ambulance arrived about ten minutes later.

It took them nearly a quarter of an hour to park it, so huge was the vehicle. Eventually, they had to park it a quarter of a mile from the ward and a nurse and I had the job of escorting the patient from the ward to the ambulance.

'It's a good motor,' said the elder of the two ambulance men. 'Have you seen it before?'

The nurse and I had to admit that we hadn't seen it before.

'Come inside and we'll show you around,' offered the second ambulance man.

We climbed up the steps at the back and waited inside while the ambulance men loaded the stretcher into the vehicle. The old lady was very fed up about the whole thing. She didn't want to move.

'You've got some impressive looking equipment in here,' said the nurse.

The two ambulance men beamed. Like housewives displaying their new kitchen equipment they glittered with excitement and pride.

'What's this?' asked the nurse, bending over a large machine which sat in a corner of the ambulance.

'That's our portable electrocardiogram,' said the elder ambulance man. 'It's one of the best. Cost a fortune.' He picked up a couple of leads and attached them to the old lady's ankles. 'We've got a screen on which we can keep a visual record, and a recorder on which we can keep details of everything that goes on.'

The nurse looked impressed. She looked at me. I knew how she felt. In our hospital we were still struggling with an old machine which had probably been donated to the hospital by a second-hand shop whose owner didn't know what to do with it.

The second ambulance man leaned forward and played with a few switches. Then he picked up the old lady's drip bottles and fastened them to a special attachment on the ceiling of the ambulance.

'We've got a very good defibrillator,' said the first ambulance man. 'And a full set of intubation equipment.' He finished connecting leads to the old lady.

He opened a cupboard on the other side of the ambulance and displayed a shelf full of laryngoscopes, tubes and anaesthetic equipment.

'Of course we carry a wide variety of drugs,' added the second ambulance man, opening another cupboard. 'And several spare oxygen cylinders.'

'Well, I suppose we'd better be moving on,' said the first ambulance man, pulling back a sliding door which opened into the driver's cab.

'Right,' said the nurse. 'Certainly. Thank you very much.'

'Of course, we all go on a six month course,' said the second ambulance man. He looked at the electrocardiograph machine. 'I see she's got a very elevated ST segment and a Q wave in V4.'

The nurse and I looked impressed, as well we should have done.

'We go along for six months and then we have a special course in anaesthetics, a course in pharmacology and a course in cardiology,' he smiled at us. 'All right then?'

The nurse raised an eyebrow.

'You're happy to leave your patient with us?'

'Oh yes,' said the nurse. 'Yes.'

'Thank you very much,' I said.

'Good,' said the second ambulance man. 'We'll be off then.' He climbed into the cab with his colleague. We clambered out, jumped down onto the ground and slammed the back doors. The ambulance man who was driving turned the starter key. We heard the engine whining for a moment and then dying away. He tried again. The same thing happened. He tried again. Once more nothing happened.

'We seem to be having a little trouble,' said the ambulance man who wasn't driving, poking his head out of his window. ‘Just a bit of trouble with the battery.’

‘Lift the bonnet,’ I suggested. ‘We could have a look for you. See if there are any loose leads.’ I don’t know why I said this. I wouldn’t know a loose lead if one tried to strangle me.

‘I’ll give it a moment and then try again,’ said the driver. ‘But don’t go away. We might need a push.’

First published in Hospital Life in September 1974

The Patient Who Wanted to Know

One of the problems with hospitals is that there often seems to be some sort of invisible barrier which prevents the spread of information from the medical and nursing staff to the patients.

The result is that patients are quite often totally unaware of what is going on until their stomachs have been opened or their sinuses scraped.

Even then, the doctors' activities, conducted under protection of an anaesthetic, are well guarded.

Some patients welcome this secrecy. They have no desire to find out what goes on inside them, and even less interest in what comes out.

But for others, the whole business is frustrating and annoying. They sometimes exercise considerable ingenuity in attempting to prise information from the staff.

At the last hospital I worked in we had one patient, a man in his mid-forties, who had been admitted as an emergency with a history of severe abdominal pain.

If he'd been taken into a medical ward he would have been given a gallon and a half of white medicine and told to go home and rest. But as he was brought into a surgical ward he had to have an operation. That's the way medicine goes. If you go into a Ford garage they sell you a Ford. If you go into a BMW garage they sell you a BMW.

The surgical registrar chopped a little bit here, snipped a few bits there, made some general alterations to the man's gastric architecture, and then sewed him up again.

After the operation the man recovered well, and within a couple of days he was fit enough to sit up in bed and be ignored by the nurses.

He was, however, continually anxious about his own condition, demanding information and reassurance from everyone who came into the ward in a uniform or a white coat. I told him everything I knew but he wasn't satisfied. I think he thought we were keeping something from him. We weren't.

On the day before we finally discharged him into the gentle, sympathetic care of his wife and golfing companions, he made a brave and imaginative attempt to supplement the supply of information he'd managed to accumulate.

I was sitting in the sister's tiny office, writing up notes.

I watched, with the cool interest of a man avoiding work he knows must be done, as Mr J clambered out of bed, wrapped his faded dressing gown around his stitched and healing body, and began to make his way towards the far end of the ward.

I watched until he'd disappeared from sight through the doorway at the far end of the ward, and then I settled down once more to add my few straws to the load that daily threatens to break the back of the medical records department.

I wasn't worried about Mr J., convalescing patients often wander about the hospital. The men usually congregated outside the pharmacy. The women usually wandered into the hospital shop. I don't know why this should be. It's just what happened.

I'd added no more than a sentence to the first set of notes in front of me when the telephone on the sister's desk began to ring.

Ever anxious to take an excuse for abandoning my clerical duties, I answered it.

'Excuse me,' whispered a faint voice, 'could you tell me how Mr J is please?'

'Fine,' I said, merrily. 'Very well.'

'Could you tell me what was wrong with him?' the caller went on.

'Ah,' I said. 'Who is that please?'

There was a short silence. 'It's his father,' came the reply, a few seconds later.

'His father?' I repeated.

'That's right.'

'Well,' I replied, 'it was nothing very serious. He had a sex change operation.' I paused. 'He'll be able to get pregnant now.'

There was a long pause and then a click as the telephone was put down on the receiver.

When Mr J returned to the ward he looked pale and rather sheepish and he left us the next day without a murmur.

I suppose there was no way that he could have known that the medical notes I happened to have open in front of me on the sister's desk were his own notes. And that under 'Family History' I could quite clearly see recorded the fact that his father had died 15 years previously.

Doctors may sometimes be classified above mere mortals but we don't get many telephone calls from the hereafter.

First published in Weekly News, 17.2.73

My Most Embarrassing Moment

I don’t know when or where it started but there is a custom in British hospitals that once or twice a year the consultants invite their junior colleagues home to dinner.

I suppose it might have started in the days, not so very long ago, when junior doctors were paid hardly enough to live on.

The idea then was probably that two meals a year would help to keep the young doctor fit and healthy.

Or it could, I suppose, have started because consultants like to show off, like to keep housemen and registrars eager for promotion and like to consider themselves benevolent and patriarchal.

Anyway, while I was doing my first job in hospital, the consultant for whom I was working, a middle-aged man who’d gone prematurely bald and who had a reputation for meanness and arrogance, invited me back to his house for dinner one Saturday evening. He’d checked and knew I wasn’t on call that night.

I didn’t have the courage to say no and I couldn’t think of a good excuse to refuse so I accepted.

My colleagues, wiser or cleverer than I, all refused the invitation. One had to be on call, another had a wife who was expecting a baby at any moment and the third was tied up working for an important higher examination.

I was left to go to dinner alone and, not being in actual physical need of the food, I was really dreading the experience.

I spent the best part of Saturday afternoon getting ready for the big occasion. I got out my best (actually, my only) three-piece suit, pressed the trousers and got most of the stains out of the jacket. And I even went into town and bought a bottle of wine from a supermarket. It wasn’t a very good bottle of wine but who can tell the difference, anyway? And I didn’t have the money to throw away on wine, even though I thought it might be a nice gesture.

I arrived on the dot at half past seven, having parked my moped behind a nearby telephone kiosk.

The consultant’s wife opened the door. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said, ‘but my husband is out at the moment. He had to go and see a patient.’

I went in.

‘It’s one of his private patients,’ she said, ‘always calling him out at the most inopportune times.’

I gave her the bottle of wine I’d been clutching. ‘I’ve bought you some wine,’ I said totally unnecessarily.

‘Thank you,’ she said, taking the bottle from me. ‘How nice.’

She led the way into the dining room, put the bottle on the table and then showed me into the lounge.

We talked of this and that for half an hour or so. We discussed the state of the health service, the financial problems of junior hospital doctors, the tax problems of rich consultants and the vagaries of the local golf course where she was, apparently, a keen member.

Conversation was not sizzling, though the consultant’s wife worked hard to ensure that it did not flag.

At half past eight her husband appeared.

‘Sorry I’m late,’ he said. ‘Shall we go straight in to dinner?’

His wife disappeared into the kitchen to finish her preparations and my host and I went into the dining room.

‘Take a seat,’ he said.

I sat down.

He sat down at the far end of the table and then noticed my bottle of wine. He leaned forward and picked it up. I smiled at him. He scowled.

‘I hope you like melon,’ said my hostess, coming into the room.

‘Oh yes,’ I said.

‘What the devil are we doing with this muck?’ The consultant demanded, angrily holding up the bottle of wine and glaring at his wife. ‘It’s an insult to offer this to anyone.’

And that, I think, was probably my most embarrassing moment.

First published in The Weekly News 9.12.72

My First Operation

We were all waiting. The patient, already anaesthetised, was lying on the operating table. The anaesthetist, sitting at the head of the table, presiding like father at Sunday lunch, kept one eye on the machine by his side and the other on the patient. Two junior nurses were standing quietly behind the theatre sister. They'd tidied up the corner of the theatre where the sister and I had scrubbed and gowned.

The sister stood on one side of the operating table and I, the junior house surgeon, stood on the other side. We were waiting for the surgeon who was going to perform the operation.

The patient had already been swabbed with antiseptic and, except for a small square of naked flesh, his whole body was covered with green, sterile towels.

Suddenly, the door to the theatre opened and the surgeon poked his head round it. 'Sorry I'm late,' he called. 'I've got to see a patient in casualty.' He nodded to me. 'Would you mind starting without me? I'll be along when I can.'

The noise I made as I gulped must have sounded deafening. I'm sure it must nearly have woken the patient despite the fact that he was deeply anaesthetised.

'OK,' I whispered. I turned back to the patient.

The small square of naked flesh had grown, stretched suddenly into a daunting field-sized area of pink skin.

'It's easy,' said the anaesthetist. `An appendectomy is just like taking a tooth out.' He knew I'd never done an operation by myself. He perhaps didn't know I'd never even taken a tooth out.

The theatre sister offered me a scalpel.

'Thank you,' I managed to murmur. I gazed down again at that field of pink skin. It looked big enough to land an aeroplane on.

Suddenly I didn't have the faintest idea where to start cutting. Yes, I'd seen nearly a dozen similar operations performed when I'd assisted the surgeon. And it seemed so very, very easy then.

'I'm sorry,' said the sister, suddenly, unexpectedly. She moved two of the green towels back a little, so that an even larger area of skin was exposed. She held one of the towels still for a moment, an inch or so to one side of the umbilicus. Hinting.

It came back to me then. I had to make the incision at a point a third of the way along an imaginary line drawn between the superior iliac spine and the umbilicus.

The incision needed to be perpendicular to that line, and, if I made it in the right spot, I should be able to make do with an incision about two and a half inches long. Not quite keyhole surgery, perhaps, but pretty good. And likely to leave my patient with a small, neat scar.

I'd seen the surgeon I was working for take an appendix out through a hole which didn't seem to be more than an inch long.

But I wasn't feeling that ambitious.

I lifted the scalpel and dug it deep into the patient's skin. Terrified that I might have cut too far I lifted the scalpel out again quickly.

A small drop of blood oozed out of the tiny hole I had made. I wiped it away and put the scalpel back in position. This time I pressed down as hard as I dared and drew the scalpel along the skin for a couple of inches.

For a moment I could see no sign that I had even punctured the skin, and then blood slowly began to ooze out of the thin wound I had made.

The sister offered me a sterile swab. I dabbed half-heartedly at the wound. Blood continued to flow out, forming a small puddle on the skin. I gazed at it horrified.

The sister gently took the swab from my hand and pressed it down firmly on the wound. When she lifted it up a few seconds later, the bleeding had temporarily stopped.

Slowly blood began to ooze again from two small, cut vessels. The sister put the diathermy coagulating forceps in front of me. I picked up the diathermy, which burns and seals broken blood vessels, pressed the pedal to switch on the electricity and touched one of the bleeding vessels with the tip of the forceps. There was a small puff of smoke, a sizzling noise and the bleeding stopped. I then burnt the second vessel and closed that off too.

The sister took the diathermy forceps from me and handed me the knife again.

I looked down into the wound. It was less than a quarter of an inch deep, but the thin layer of fat which I had cut was beginning to fall outwards. I made another cut along the bottom of the wound I'd made. And so we went on. Each time I hesitated the sister would hand me whatever I needed, before I knew I needed it. I never questioned her.

By the time the surgeon came into the theatre, apologising profusely for being so late, I'd divided the tissues right down to the peritoneum, the thin layer of tissue which lines the abdominal cavity.

While the surgeon scrubbed and gowned, I tidied up the wound, made sure I'd missed no bleeding points, and, finally, cut through the peritoneum.

I moved back from the table as the surgeon approached, making room for him. He shook his head and waved a hand at me.

‘Get back where you were,’ he said. ‘What are you stopping for?’ He moved into the position usually occupied by the surgeon’s assistant.

I stared back at the wound. All the confidence I’d built up drained away. How could I operate knowing that the surgeon who’d taught me all I knew was assisting me?

The surgeon looked up across the table and called to the two junior nurses, standing ready to fetch things for the theatre sister.

‘Come here,’ he said.

They edged closer to the table, terrified of touching and desterilising any of the towels and drapes covering the patient and the instrument trolley.

‘What do you know about this operation?’ the surgeon asked one of the nurses.

The nurse paused for a moment. ‘It’s an appendectomy,’ she said in a whisper.

The surgeon nodded. ‘And what’s this?’ he asked her, pointing to the peritoneum I’d just cut.

‘The peritoneum,’ stuttered the nurse, after a moment or two.

Again he nodded. ‘Now that the surgeon has got through the peritoneum,’ the surgeon waved a pair of forceps in my direction, making it clear that I was the surgeon to whom he was referring, ‘he picks up a pair of bowel forceps and brings some bowel out of the abdomen. He’s looking for the large bowel and, in particular, he’s looking for the caecum.’

And so he went on.

As he talked, I did precisely what he said I was doing. As far as everyone else in the theatre was concerned, he was just taking the opportunity to teach a couple of junior nurses about an appendectomy. As far as I was concerned, however, he was providing me with precise and thorough directions.

I found the appendix, removed it, tied off its blood supply, closed the peritoneum and then proceeded to close all the layers I’d opened.

The surgeon never interfered.

When I’d put the last stitch in and taken the skin towels off the patient, I walked proudly out of the theatre and into the surgeon’s changing room.

There I usually completed my task as assistant to the surgeon by writing up the operation notes, details of what had been done in the course of the operation. But this time the surgeon was already sitting down writing the notes for me.

‘Do you want me to do those?’ I asked.

The surgeon shook his head. ‘This is the assistant’s job,’ he said. He wrote a few more sentences and then tossed the notes onto the table in the middle of the room and walked out. ‘Thank you,’ he said as he left.

Automatically I picked the notes up to see what he’d written. At the bottom of the page there was a space for the surgeon’s name.

In this space he’d written my name and underneath it, in precisely the same way that I usually wrote my initials under his name when I’d assisted and written up the notes, he’d put his initials. I felt curiously proud. I’d performed my first operation as the senior surgeon.

There was a knock on the door and the theatre porter appeared. ‘Excuse me, doctor,’ he said, ‘but the next patient’s on the table and the surgeon wonders if you’d be kind enough to come and assist him.

There isn’t much time for reflection in surgery.

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The Night we lost the Gastroscope

The telephone rang just as I was getting into bed. I was tempted not to answer it. It was my night off and I was looking forward to a good night's sleep. Eight uninterrupted horizontal hours. But in the end, of course, I did answer it. It might have been something important. It's very difficult to allow a telephone to ring, ring and ring until it stops.

The caller at the other end was the consultant for whom I was working at the time. I was a lowly house officer; the most junior of doctors on the hospital stepladder. He was on call for another hospital in the group and he'd been called out by a junior registrar who needed help. A patient had been admitted as an emergency with blood pouring from both ends of his gastrointestinal tract.

Having seen the patient, the consultant had decided that before operating he wanted to look into the man's stomach. Unfortunately, the other hospital didn't have any suitable equipment; the only gastroscope in the area was in the operating theatre at the hospital where I was working. Hence the telephone call. The consultant wanted me to find the gastroscope, put it into a taxi and send it over to him.

Hurriedly I put on the clothes I had just taken off and ran across the road which separated the residents' mess from the hospital. As I passed the telephone operator's office I called to him to telephone for a taxi, ready to take the gastroscope as soon as I'd got it.

It wasn't that easy.

The operating theatre was locked. The night sister who'd got the key had to go over to the maternity wing. By the time I found her, explained what had happened, got the key off her, got back to the operating theatre and opened the theatre doors, the telephone operator had a taxi driver waiting on the hospital forecourt.

Even though I wasn't sure precisely where the gastroscope was stored I felt that it wouldn't take more than a minute or two find it. After all, it's quite a big instrument and the operating theatre wasn't very large.

After searching for it for five minutes I still hadn't found it. I'd looked in the cupboard where most of the other endoscopic equipment was kept, I'd searched the drawers and shelves where the surgical instruments were stored, and I'd had a look in the steriliser to make sure it hadn't been left there. I'd even emptied the cupboards where the anaesthetists keep their equipment, and I'd had a look in the linen cupboard just in case it had been put there by mistake. Well, you never know.

I rang the switchboard and asked them to send the night sister along. I felt sure that she must have some idea where the gastroscope was kept.

She didn't even know we'd got a gastroscope, let alone what it looked like. However, she suggested that we fetch the night porter. Like all porters he had a well-deserved reputation for knowing everything about the hospital (and its staff). I was confident he'd be able to put his finger on it right away. No problem.

He emptied the cupboard where the oxygen and nitrous oxide cylinders were kept, found two half bottles of curdled milk in a cupboard in the sister's office, and went through the lockers in the surgeons' changing room with police-like thoroughness. It's really quite amazing what some surgeons keep in their lockers. In one we found a half set of golf clubs, three dirty socks and two dead cactus plants in their pots.

I was getting desperate. The consultant had rung through twice and the junior registrar had rung once to see what was going on. They were sitting waiting, they said, and would be obliged if I would hurry up. The gastroscope, they pointed out with exaggerated politeness, had cost about £1,500 and it seemed a pity not to use it so would I please send it along unless I was using it myself.

Suddenly there was a whoop of delight from the night porter. He had been burrowing through a cupboard full of old, half-perished rubber tubing and was up to his elbows in the most amazing bits and pieces of equipment which would, I felt sure, have puzzled the most knowledgeable medical museum keeper. The box he was holding as he whooped had the word 'gastroscope' written on it.

I opened the box. The gastroscope was there all right but it didn't look very much like the gastroscope I'd seen being used. It was something that had probably last seen active service back in the days when surgeons sharpened their scalpels on the soles of their boots. I told him to wait a minute as I thought it might be a good idea if I rang the theatre superintendent. I said I didn't think she'd mind.

I don't know whether she would have minded because apparently she wasn't on the telephone. If I wanted her I'd have to send a taxi and bring her into the hospital personally.

I gave up, accepted the gastroscope the night porter had found, gave it to the taxi driver still waiting patient on the hospital forecourt and told him to drive to the other hospital as fast as he could.

Less than a minute after he'd left I had a telephone call from the other hospital to say that they couldn't wait any longer and that they'd already started operating.

Apparently when the poor taxi driver arrived with the old gastrosope he had been turned away. The night porter there said he didn’t know anything about it.

The next morning, bleary eyed after my night off duty, I asked the theatre superintendent where the new gastroscope was kept. I thought it might be useful to know.

‘It’s in the shower,’ said the superintendent.

‘In the shower!’ I repeated, astonished.

‘In the shower,’ said the superintendent rather haughtily. ‘It’s safe there. It’s a very expensive piece of equipment you know.’ And she walked away.

I still haven’t dared to look in the lavatory to see what she keeps tucked away behind the loo brush and the bottle of bleach.

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Young specialists

Andrew, aged 10, was self-appointed leader of the children's ward and had an amazing knowledge of medicine. He'd been in hospital for the best part of a year with some strange hormonal disorder that was being continually investigated. His seniority in the ward meant that he knew, better than most of the nurses, where various bits of equipment were kept and what they were used for.

During his stay he had developed an interest in surgery, and particularly in surgical instruments. Whether they were intended for minor casualty work or for heart-lung operations he fondled them lovingly and, like a squirrel hoarding nuts, stored them away in odd corners where only he could find them.

Apart from his illegally acquired collection of hospital instruments, he had built up a commendable collection of his own: forceps thrown out by the theatre sister because they'd been damaged or outdated, retractors honourably retired, bent and blunted scissors and so on. To be honest his collection of discarded bits and pieces was much better than that available in the casualty theatre.

The week I stood in as a locum paediatric houseman, Andrew developed a new interest. I found him in the sister's office studying a small pile of laboratory reports. He'd never seen them before and was fascinated. He asked me what a haemoglobin was and we talked about the forms for a few minutes before he dutifully put them back on the sister's desk and left. It was good to see him quiet and attentive.

I should have been content to leave him with his instruments.

Four days later I met him in the middle of the ward.

'Hey, doc,' he said. 'What's my haemoglobin?'

'Er…' I stuttered. 'I'm afraid I'm not quite sure.'

'I think you ought to know,' said Andrew.

I was a little taken aback. I checked in the notes and found that we hadn't checked his haemoglobin for nearly three months. I arranged for it to be done.

For the next week or so, every day I entered the ward Andrew would ask me about one of his blood constituents, and as he'd been in the hospital for some time and we'd stopped doing the more routine investigations on him, I found his suggestions were often helpful.

The trouble started when the consultant paediatrician decided to abandon his private patients, pop into the hospital and do a ward round.

'Now then, we come to this little chappie,' said the consultant in his most patronising matter, bravely patting Andrew on the head. 'He's been with us for quite a while. What have we been doing to him recently?'

I mentioned a few sophisticated tests which were in progress. The consultant nodded wisely.

'Any serum electrolytes done recently?'

'Yes,' I said, grateful to Andrew. I wasn't sure quite of the precise figures but I thought I could make a reasonable guess.

'Sodium 134,' I started.

'138,' said Andrew immediately.

The paediatrician looked at him.

'Potassium 4.3,' I said.

'It was 4.4 yesterday,' said Andrew.

'Anyway, everything's normal,' I said.

'My potassium is going up,' said Andrew.

The consultant looked at me and I looked at Andrew.

'He seems quite well,' I said.

'I think you ought to do something about my potassium,' said Andrew.

The consultant coughed nervously and edged away.

'I'll tell my mum,' warned Andrew.

The consultant, who'd met Andrew's mum and still bore the psychological scars, stepped back. He bent down. 'Do you still collect retractors?'

Andrew hesitated and then nodded.

'I've got a wonderful retractor which I don't use now,' said the consultant. This was not too surprising since he was a paediatrician and hadn't done any surgery for at least 30 years.

Andrew looked interested.

'It's shiny,' said the consultant.

Andrew's eyes opened wide.

The consultant shook his head sadly.

'Pity,' he said.

'Can't I have it?' asked Andrew. 'Please!' he added, unexpectedly.

The consultant frowned . 'I don't know,' he said. 'After all, you're not an instrument specialist now, are you?'

Andrew nodded. 'I am,' he said, breathlessly.

'But what's all this about potassium?' demanded the consultant. 'You've got to specialise. You can't collect instruments and study biochemistry results.'

Andrew paused for a moment. Then he brightened up. 'I'm still an instrument specialist,' he declared.

'Then you'll forget all this potassium stuff?'

Andrew nodded.

'Good,' said the consultant. He winked. 'I'll send you the retractor then.'

'Find him something old from the theatre,' he muttered as we left the ward. 'And for heaven's sake don't get him interested in anything else.'

On my way to the ward next day, I slipped into sister's office to pick up a few notes. Sitting at the desk was a small freckled child with a bandage on his left arm and a pile of forms in his right hand.

'Hello!' I said. 'What are you doing here?'

'I'm the blood test specialist,' he said. 'Andrew taught me all about it.'

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Hunting Season

Sister Meddlecot, the sister in charge of the operating theatres at the Bucklebury General Hospital, was having a tidy up. If we hadn't still been struggling through the severest winter we'd had for a year you'd have called it a spring clean.

She'd emptied the surgeons' lockers of old half-eaten sandwiches, thrown all the slightly dodgy magazines out of the anaesthetic room and ejected six and a half pints of sour milk from the theatre fridge. Spurred on by the success of these early efforts, she'd begun to sort through the stock of operating instruments that we had accumulated over the years. 'We never use this,' she said repeatedly, 'and that is out-of-date. We couldn't possibly ever want this again and it would be positively dangerous to use that.' And she made one of the theatre technicians fetch a couple of huge cardboard boxes which she proceeded to fill with instruments that she assured the rest of us would be welcomed by Oxfam.

'They'll be glad of them in some out of the way place,' she said, ignoring the fact that there was a widespread rumour in the hospital that Oxfam had originally supplied the Bucklebury General with most of its equipment.

In the main operating theatre, Mr Lavage was busy struggling to remove a kidney stone from a private patient. The operation wasn't going too well and from time to time the theatre rang out with curses and incantations. Within the theatre, enclosed in their private world, the theatre team worked on oblivious of the activity outside.

The professional, almost ecclesiastical silence which reigned most of the time in the theatre was finally broken for good when Mr Lavage suddenly decided that he wanted to use a Higginbotham's Clamp. Neither he nor anyone else had used a Higginbotham's Clamp for a decade or more but surgeons of a certain age have long memories and stubborn natures so, once the thought had entered his mind, Mr Lavage would be satisfied with nothing else.

A theatre porter, the anaesthetics registrar and two junior nurses hunted frantically through a great pile of instruments in a cupboard in a far corner of the unit while the scrubbed nurse checked to make sure that the Higginbotham's Clamp hadn't, by some pleasant accident, been put on the trolley. This task wasn't made easier by the fact that she didn't have the faintest idea what the damned thing looked like.

However, the clamp was not to be found anywhere and eventually Sister Meddlecot was called for. She blushed richly when Mr Lavage announced his demand and she scurried from the theatre in great haste, heading for her office where two large cardboard boxes were by now quite full of old and half-forgotten instruments. The Higginbotham's Clamp was, naturally enough, at the bottom of the second box, and by the time it had been found and sterilised, Mr Lavage had been waiting for nearly an hour. He'd refused to continue with the operation without the clamp. Surgeons are like that sometimes.

When Sister Meddlecot finally produced the missing clamp, now all clean and ready to use, Mr Lavage looked at her coolly and then turned to the anaesthetist. 'I think Sister Meddlecot is getting a bit past it,' he accounted. 'Perhaps we should wrap her up and send her off to Oxfam.'

Sister Meddlecot turned a rather frightening shade of red and stalked off busily.

At last the operation was completed. The patient was sewn up, brought round and wheeled out of the theatre. Mr Lavage, weary but content, ceremoniously took off his gown and settled himself down with a cup of black coffee and a currant bun.

When the coffee and the bun had been well digested he put his gown back on and went to visit the patient in his private room. Most patients like to wake up to find the surgeon bending over them in a green operating gown. It looks a little more impressive than a baggy theatre vest and a pair of baggy white trousers, which was the uniform Mr Lavage wore underneath his gown.

'It was quite a stone,' said Mr Lavage, explaining why the operation had taken so long. He didn't bother to explain that he had spent an hour waiting for a clamp he really didn't need. He rightly didn't think the poor patient would quite understand.

'Was it really,' said the patient. 'I say, I'd rather like to see it if I may.'

'Certainly,' said Mr Lavage. 'I'll fetch it for you.' With that he left the patient to the tender care of a young nurse and strolled back to the theatre.

'Oh dear,' said Sister Meddlecot, when Mr Lavage asked for the stone he'd taken from the patient's kidney. 'I'm afraid it was thrown away.'

Mr Lavage scowled. He turned away and stared out of the window for a moment, counting to ten and waiting for his wrath to subside. Then, for the first time, he noticed that there was a narrow gravel path outside the theatre window. He called for one of the theatre porters.

'Fetch me a handful of that gravel,' he said to the porter. And the porter, being used to obeying strange commands, did as he was told.

From the handful of gravel that the porter brought in Mr Lavage chose a medium sized pebble of approximately the right size and this he took in to the patient, who was waiting to see the stone that the surgeon had removed from his kidney.

‘Good heavens,’ said the patient with awe. ‘May I keep it?’

‘Certainly,’ said Mr Lavage, with a generous wave of his arms. ‘It always was yours.’ And with that he again left the patient to the tender care of the young nurse.

I heard afterwards that the patient, an industrial chemist, spent three weeks trying to analyse the stone that had caused him so much pain, and which had been removed from his kidney with such inconvenience and expense, and had been amazed to find that it was impossible to dissolve or analyse.

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Arthur

Arthur was a well-known local figure. He and his scruffy mongrel dog, Dick, lived in and around the park opposite the hospital. They had lived there for as long as I could remember and, in fact, for as long as most people could remember. They were quite inseparable. Man and dog, two friends, two colleagues.

There were, of course, quite a number of rumours about old Arthur. Some folk said he had been a well-to-do businessman and had gone to seed when his wife had died. They said that without her he had been sad and lonely and unable to cope with the complexities of business life.

Others said he had been a tramp all his life, walking all over the country with a whole sequence of dog companions.

Whatever the truth, Arthur certainly had many friends. He wasn't a loner, in the way that tramps usually are, but was pretty universally liked and loved. He didn't do anything for his living, though occasionally he would sketch a few pictures and hang them on the railings around the outside of the park, collecting coppers from passers-by.

But on the whole, he just lived on what people gave him. And people who gave him money or sandwiches would usually give Dick something too. If Dick was well fed, then his master shared his meal. If Arthur was well fed and Dick hungry, then Arthur shared his food with the dog.

I can remember Arthur being brought into the hospital. It was a Sunday afternoon and as usual the wards were packed full with visitors.

Poor Arthur. They stared at him as he was wheeled into the ward and on many of their faces one could all too easily read their thoughts. 'What a scruffy, dirty old man! What is he doing in a smart hospital like this?'

Poor Arthur had pneumonia. It wasn't surprising. In fact, it was surprising he hadn't had it before.

He was semi-conscious when he was wheeled in and it wasn't until the Monday morning that he awoke.

'Where is Dick?' he croaked. 'What have you done with Dick?'

And, of course, none of us had given a thought to Dick. It wasn't really the sort of thing one usually has to worry about when a patient is brought into hospital as an emergency.

We had to confess that we didn't know where Dick was. And we had to agree to look for him. Arthur was desperate with worry.

Not that we had to look far. We found Dick out in the hospital car park, waiting by the entrance used by the ambulances, the entrance through which Arthur had disappeared.

We bought a few scraps of meat from the butchers and fed them to the dog. We told Arthur not to worry and promised we'd feed his canine friend until he was fit enough to leave and go back to his park.

If we'd thought about it I suppose we should have realised earlier that Arthur was never likely to be fit enough to go back to his park. How could we discharge a man who had nowhere else to go? Arthur would have to go into a home of some kind.

He'd been in for about a fortnight when Arthur first asked if we could let him see Dick. 'Can't you bring him into the ward?' he asked. 'During visiting time,' he added, anxious to oblige.

We agreed in the end and fetched the dog along to the ward. It was against all the rules we could think of but we didn't think anyone would mind.

But, of course, they did. One of the administrative sisters saw us taking the dog along a corridor and she went ballistic.

'What on earth do you think this is?' she demanded. 'It's a hospital,' she answered, in case we weren't sure. 'It's supposed to be hygienic. Dogs aren't hygienic!'

She was right, of course. It was unreasonable to take a dog into a hospital ward. There was little we could offer in the way of logical argument. So the dog went straight back to the car park.

Arthur, however, wasn't so content to abandon his attempts to see his friend. He begged and pleaded with everyone who went near him.

'Wait until you're a bit fitter,' we told him, 'and then you can go out and see how he is.'

But that wasn't enough for dear old Arthur.

One night the nurse in charge of the ward suddenly felt a draught. She investigated and found one of the ward windows was open. Arthur was missing; his bed was empty. We looked everywhere for him, but he'd disappeared.

One of the porters found him the next day. Behind the dustbins at the back of the hospital, virtually frozen to death, with Dick lying on top of him in a vain attempt to keep his master warm and alive.

Arthur never regained consciousness and poor Dick was taken away by the RSPCA.

It was that experience, as much as anything, which convinced me that I didn't want to work in a hospital, where the world must inevitably be run according to other people's rules. I wanted to be a general practitioner and to have a little more freedom.

First published 8.2.1973

Michael

When Michael was brought into hospital, it was so difficult to tell whether he was alive or dead that the nurse who accompanied him to the ward put out a cardiac arrest call. By the time the two ambulance men had got him to the ward entrance, two doctors and a porter with a trolley loaded high with anaesthetic and resuscitation equipment were waiting for him. It was an impressive entrance.

The two doctors fought bravely to save Michael's life. They pushed a tube down his throat and another into one of his veins. They filled him full of oxygen and stimulating drugs and he woke up. He began to breathe a little more easily and to look a rather healthier colour. He looked more like a patient and less like a cadaver, better fitted for an acute medical ward than the morgue.

He made a partial recovery, but that same night he collapsed again and this time his wife and his sister-in-law were with him. By the time the cardiac arrest team had arrived on the scene, most of their work had been done for them. His wife was a night sister in a nearby accident hospital and his sister-in-law an administrative sister in a geriatric hospital.

When Michael was once more breathing by himself these two good ladies introduced themselves. 'You don't mind if we stay, do you?' they said. The ward sister arranged to find them beds on the private block. Between them they turned the day and the night into a vigil, one watch on and one watch off.

By the third day, despite intensive treatment, Michael was still not able to take very much of an interest in his surroundings. He was conscious, but little more. He looked tired; not just tired and in need of a rest, but tired of life itself. He looked as if he had been halfway through the gates and then been recalled at the last moment. He looked as though he'd had Cerberus snapping at his ankles. And, of course, he had.

On the fourth day he collapsed again, disappearing from the land of the living with all the subtle stealth of a practised conjuror. And with pomp and electrical aids he was dragged back to life. His wife, who was on duty at the time, taking her turn at his bedside, called the cardiac arrest team herself.

'You mustn't let him die,' she pleaded with the registrar in charge. 'You mustn't let him go.'

And who, with those pleas, could do other than their best? They dragged him back, feet first, from the dark beyond. Now Michael hardly bothered to open his eyes. He breathed rarely, taking deep gulps of air as if desperate for it. He seemed to resist the effort to live for as long as possible.

By the end of the week he was still desperately ill. His cheeks were hollow, his eyes dark and bottomless.

I stood with him one day, while his wife and his sister-in-law took their lunch together. He opened his eyes for a moment, saw me standing there and with a feeble effort shook his head very slightly from side to side. His eyes caught mine, and they were the eyes of a man who knows what hope there is, knows that he must go and wants to go peacefully and quietly.

Guiltily, I crept away when his eyes closed.

That night he 'died' again. And again he was unceremoniously brought back into the land of the living, a reluctant member of the human race marking time in no-man's-land.

His wife and his sister-in-law had virtually moved into the hospital. They wouldn't dream of taking him home. They didn't want him to be anywhere but in the hospital which had saved his life so often. They continued with their vigil; they continued to watch his every breath, to keep one eye on the Cardiorater, to watch the tiny blip that meant life was still there. Occasionally, one of them would try to talk to him, but he would never speak. From time to time he would open his eyes and look around as if to say, 'Am I still here?'

The rest of the ward might not have been there. The curtains were kept drawn around poor Michael. All the emergency equipment was kept permanently by his bedside. The other patients were quiet and unusually depressed. It was as if they had in their midst a permanent reminder of their potential fate. Every time Michael disappeared from the land of the living they disappeared with him. They saw themselves following him; they began to suffer physically as well as mentally.

'He will get better,' said Michael's wife to the registrar one day. 'He will get better, won't he? I know he will.'

The registrar said nothing. It was difficult to know what to say.

'We must keep trying,' the wife insisted. 'He might wake up tomorrow. Tomorrow he might be better.'

But tomorrow is many, many days away; at least another lifetime.

Michael died at the eighth attempt; died at four o'clock in the morning with a tube down his throat, a needle in each arm, and a long cardiac needle in his heart, a pair of defibrillating paddles by his side and a smear of grease on his chest. He died lying on the floor, surrounded by broken ampoules of this and that. He died after over a week of trying.

'Well, we did our best for him,' said his wife, sipping tea in the sister's office.

But I wondered if we did.

First published in Nursing Times 15.2.1973

Peter and Annette

She was 17 and he, much older and more experienced, was nearly 18. They were in many ways still children, playmates held together by the bonds of marriage. Children growing up together, exploring the world in each other's company.

And yet they were parents. They had a young son, a three-month-old baby called Jason.

If the baby had been born 10 years earlier they would have called it John, Paul, George or Ringo. Fifteen years ago they would have called it Elvis. The poor child had been doomed to carry the name of some spectacular hero whenever he had been born. His parents were still young enough to hope that by giving him a seemingly exciting name he would himself have an exciting life and give them the glamour they wanted so badly but seemed to know would not be theirs.

She was in hospital because her second child – they had already decided to call him Marc – was growing at an unusual rate. He was no older than a month yet already he was visible. A huge mound of Annette's tummy betrayed his presence, or so Peter and Annette thought. The magic of it all delighted them. They were too young to be frightened by the added responsibility, the other mouth to feed, the hopelessness of it all.

Tests quickly showed that she had a tumour, of course. It was a bone tumour of some kind, growing forwards from her spine, and already it had blocked off one kidney. Occasionally poor Annette was in pain that even she in her youthful optimism could not bear. It was unreasonable of young Marc to treat her that way.

She needed regular doses of strong analgesics. Twice a day the pain broke through the barriers of analgesia that we built around her. Twice a day she drifted off into another world where sleep is accompanied by comfort. And twice a day she woke up to demand to be allowed to go home. Twice a day she would insist that we let her go home to her beloved husband. And, just as regularly, twice a day, she would need more analgesia. At first we'd tried to tell her the truth. But she did not want to listen. It seemed cruel to keep telling her.

We spoke to Peter at length and tried to warn him, to explain to him what was happening. But it didn't seem to mean anything to him.

'Your wife is not pregnant,' I told him. 'She is not expecting a baby.'

He smiled at me as if I'd made a slightly ludicrous mistake, and walked away as if with some private secret, back into the ward to hold his poor wife's hand.

'She is very sick,' I told him.

He just nodded, talked happily about the playmate for young Jason, worried with the nurses about how well he was coping with Jason by himself, pleaded with his boss for more time off to come and visit his wife and pleaded with us to let her go home to him.

'I will look after her,' he insisted. 'She'll get better if she comes home.'

But she needed more and more injections. She was in pain for several hours of the day, taking huge doses of analgesic and anti-mitotic drugs.

She had radiotherapy and showed Peter the crayon marks the radiotherapist made on her tummy.

Then a surgeon was asked to see her. The tumour that had blocked off one kidney was now beginning to take the other with it too. Things were getting desperate. He agreed to operate, to make some desperate smash and grab attempt to remove the tumour; or at least as much of it as he could. It was a hopeless task but it had to be done. We had to try.

'Your wife will never have another baby,' I told Peter. Her womb had been removed with a mass of tumour that had made even hardened theatre staff members cringe with horror.

Peter started to cry. He had seen her tummy; the baby Marc was no longer there. The tummy was flattened back to virginal shape.

Still he didn't understand. He didn't want to understand. What I was telling him wasn't possible. It was something that happened to old people, not to people like Annette.

He came and sat with her each afternoon and each evening. Each evening one or other of us would take him to one side and explain to him that she was dying, that the end was near, that he would have to live without her, that he and Jason would have to make a life together without the woman whose love they shared.

It made no difference. He would not believe. The nurses in the ward came to share his own belief; his denial. They insisted that she was going to live, that a miracle would happen. They didn't want the truth to be the truth. 'Please God,' they would pray silently, 'take Mrs Stevens who is 89 and who has had a good life. Leave Annette who is 17 and has much to live for.'

But God had more need for Annette than for Mrs Stevens. Annette went to sleep one night and never woke up again. Peter sat by her side and watched her in her last sleep. I took him aside to tell him that it had happened, that his wife had died. He stared at me, listened without hearing, watched without seeing. He turned away, tearless and started to move off.

‘She’ll be all right, just you see,’ he said quietly to no one in particular. ‘I’ll come back and see her tomorrow afternoon,’ he called over his shoulder. ‘Look after her.’

First published in Nursing Times 22.2.1973

George

George had been on the men's medical ward for nearly two months when Dr Armstrong arrived, appointed as the new house physician. As usually happens with patients who remain on a short-stay ward for a long time, and don't need intensive care on a daily basis, most of the nurses didn't even know George's surname or why he had come into the hospital in the first place.

George was just plain George; a large and rather amiable man in his middle fifties who lay in bed all the time and needed thorough nursing care. He lay in bed all the time because he could hardly move. He stayed in the hospital because there was nowhere else for him to go. His wife was arthritic and alone and the geriatric hospital was already overflowing into its corridors.

As most people do, Dr Armstrong brought with him to the ward a mixture of virtues and vices. He was young, innocent and enthusiastic. He was determined to right all the wrongs in the world and to ignore the squeals of pain from people upon whose toes he trod. As a young and newly qualified doctor he had never heard the sound of axes being sharpened.

To Dr Armstrong, George was a challenge and to George, Dr Armstrong was hope. Their relationship was built on this simple understanding. On his second morning on the ward, Dr Armstrong spent three quarters of an hour reading through the two inch thick file of notes which detailed George's illness.

And then, with patella hammer and opthalmoscope, stethoscope and notepad, Dr Armstrong prepared to examine the subject of those notes.

He discovered to his surprise that George was not as weak as one might have supposed. A few weeks previously, George had experienced a cerebrovascular accident, the precise nature of which had never been determined. It seemed now that the results of that CVA were not so severe, the condition not so serious; George was beginning to make progress.

As far as George was concerned his major problem was diplopia. He saw double everywhere he looked. There were two ward sisters, four feet sticking up at the end of his bed and two cups of tea on his bedside locker and it was all rather too much for him.

Dr Armstrong, making a note of this, reassured George and promised to arrange for a physiotherapist to help him. And, realising that if he was to become mobile again, George would need to be able to see with some accuracy he decided to find him a patch to wear over one eye.

Arranging for a physiotherapist was the easier of these two tasks. But amazingly, the hospital did not have a single eye patch. There were, it is true, a couple of rather seedy-looking cardboard things that were said to be eye patches. But Dr Armstrong was determined to find George a black leather eye patch. Something he would wear with pride rather than diffidence.

And in the end he found one; a friend working in an eye hospital produced just the thing he was looking for, an eye patch that a pirate would have been proud to wear. And George wore it with a grin that few of the nurses on the ward had ever seen on his face before. He began to laugh and to joke. He could see things as they were and he felt that someone cared for him. He began to clamber out of bed with the physiotherapists' help and to stagger about the ward. He began to recover. And he wore his eye patch for just about 24 hours a day.

Occasionally, while he was asleep one of the night nurses would creep up and remove the patch, leaving behind a red mark where the elastic had cut slightly into his skin. But if he woke during the night George would reach out for his patch and put it back on before he went back to sleep.

All went well until the day Miss Waterford did her round.

Miss Waterford was the hospital matron. A Very Important Person. She was responsible for two hospitals and occasionally she deigned to visit the wards, speaking to the patients and laying her delicate hands on fevered brows, as long as the brows concerned weren't too hot and sweaty. It was a sort of royal visit without the royalty.

She stared at George with astonishment as he grinned at her from his bedside chair.

'What on earth is that ridiculous eye patch for?' she demanded haughtily. 'You look like a pirate.' She bent down and peeped underneath it. 'There's nothing wrong with your eye,' she said. 'Take it off or your eye will stop working properly.'

George looked first at Miss Waterford and then at the ward sister. The ward sister, out of Miss Waterford's field of vision, shrugged her shoulders. Reluctantly, George took off the patch. Miss Waterford picked it up and pocketed it. 'That's better,' she said. 'Much better.'

As she moved on down the ward a single tear began to trickle down George's left cheek. And when she left the ward that single tear had become a trickle.

With the eye patch George had been happy. It had marked, in some strange way, a new era in his life. More than protecting him from his diplopia, it had given him a disguise behind which he could hide. It gave him a debonair look; it was a talking point, something to make him different.

And without the patch George was miserable. He lost interest in the physiotherapy, and not even Dr Armstrong, who was now much busier with other patients, could revive his enthusiasm for recovery. He took to lying in bed all day again. And a month later, with a massive pulmonary embolism in his lungs, he was dead.

First published in Nursing Times February 1st 1973

The Strange Case of the Paralysed Boy

The patient had been on holiday in England for about a month, having come over here with a group of other young Belgians. He was 17 and his home was in Brussels.

A local general practitioner had been called to see him after he had been found lying immobile on the floor of his room. The GP had sent him up to the hospital casualty department.

As the patient spoke very little English, it was not possible to get a history from him, and at the time no interpreter was available. His only complaint seemed to be a generalised muscle weakness of sudden onset. He was conscious, alert and seemed quite remarkably unperturbed by his inability to move any of his limbs.

On examination, apart from the generalised muscle weakness, we found that his muscle tone was reduced and that all his reflexes were diminished. His blood pressure was 130/80, his pulse was 60 and there were no other positive findings at all. An ECG showed gross flattening of the T waves.

At this stage we were rather bewildered. It was decided that a study of the patient’s electrolytes might prove revealing and so blood was taken. As it was then 7 p.m., a laboratory technician had to be called.

When the serum potassium was found to be only 2.1 we decided that the generalised weakness must be due to the hypokalaemia and though we still had no clue as to the cause of the low potassium it was decided to treat the body with intravenous potassium.

In the first instance, fearful of the consequences of induced fatal hyperkalaemia, we were cautious, giving him 1 gram of KCL in a litre of 4.3 per cent dextrose, run in over two hours. As this was approximately twice the standard rate we thought it would be sufficient.

Two hours later when the drip bottle was nearly empty we repeated the serum potassium. It was still 2.1 and the patient had made no improvement at all. Indeed, he was, if anything, rather worse. He was suffering occasional bouts of hypotension and extreme bradycardia and was becoming rather agitated.

At this stage our consultant pathologist offered welcome advice. He suggested that we should begin with 4 grams of potassium, given in 500 cc of 4.3 per cent dextrose over two hours. This was to be followed with further serum potassium assessments and additional doses of potassium as necessary.

When the 4 grams had been infused, the potassium rose to 2.4 and the patient was still completely unable to move any limb. We therefore bravely arranged for him to be given another 4 grams in the next four hours and an additional 4 grams in the six hours after that. This was a massive, and potentially lethal, dose for an ordinary individual.

With half of the third dose of 4 grams infused, we repeated the potassium. This time it had risen to the eminently respectable level of 4.6 and, far more important, the patient had regained full use of all of his limbs. His reflexes were back to normal and his muscles were no longer loose and floppy.

It was only after this more extreme system of treatment had been started that we managed to get hold of an interpreter. One of the night nurses spoke fluent French and through her we managed to take a decent medical history.

We discovered that the boy had been suffering from some form of potassium deficiency for some time, that he usually took potassium mixtures and that he had to go into hospital in Brussels for exactly the same condition. Hence his relatively unworried appearance when he had been brought into the hospital paralysed.

Unfortunately, he had come abroad without any of his usual mixture and so he had suffered a particularly bad attack of hypokalaemia.

The actual diagnosis was never made, as the boy was flown back home as soon as he was well enough to be moved, but it seems likely that he must have had some form of chronic disease; possibly an intermittent spontaneous familial hypokalaemic disease. It seems staggering that his family let him go abroad without any of his regular medicine and without a letter explaining his condition. Everyone (including the patient himself) would have been saved a good deal of trouble and anxiety if he had brought details of his medical condition with him.

First Published in GP magazine 10.12.1971

Mrs Norris

'Well,' said Mrs Norris, 'I hadn't been feeling myself for months. So I decided I'd pop along and see what the doctor could do for me. I hadn't been to see him for a while and I know he likes to see me from time to time. Just to see how I'm getting along. He loves to hear how my bowels are behaving. Doctors are a bit funny like that, aren't they? Not like normal people.

'I told him I'd been a bit under the weather. Nothing spectacular you understand. Just a bit under the weather. I'd been having a bit of difficulty getting off to sleep at night and I think the sleeplessness had been a bit too much for me. Worn me out a bit.

Of course the dear doctor said straight away that he could tell that I wasn't quite right. Dr Blackburn is like that. Sorts things out straight away, does Dr Blackburn. He said I looked as if I was feeling a bit under the weather. So I told him I was. Well there's no point in trying to fool the doctor is there?'

'He said I ought to have a tonic so he gave me a tonic. A big bottle of the stuff.

'I always tell him to give me a big bottle of it. If he doesn't I only have to go back and get some more from him and I know how busy doctors are these days.

'It was a big bottle of brown stuff and it tasted really strange. If I hadn't had it from the doctors I'd have thought that someone was trying to poison me. Anyway, I did as I was told and took it four times a day. But it made feel all sick.

'In fact I don't mind telling you I was actually sick twice. Brought back the best part of half a pound of nice mince I did. Well that couldn't be right I thought. Not to bring back half a pound of nice mince like that. So I went back to Dr Blackburn and told him about it. Well, I thought he'd want to know.

'He actually gave me some little white tablets for the sickness. Tiny little things they were and they stopped the sickness all right. Stopped it right away they did but they gave me the most terrible headaches. It felt as if my head was coming off. I had to keep on taking them because of the tonic stuff. If I didn't take the little white tablets the brown mixture made me feel sick. And Dr Blackburn hadn't said to stop the brown mixture.

'Anyway, in the end I had to go back to the doctor again. He said he was very sorry about it and he said that it was something that did sometimes happen with people with particularly sensitive dispositions. Ever since I was a little girl I've been that way. I had rheumatic fever. Mind you I expect the doctor knows I've got a particularly sensitive disposition. Well doctors do know, don't they?

'So he gave me some large white pills for the headaches. Good heavens they were big. I didn't know whether to swallow them or to climb on top of them. They were so big you nearly needed to eat them with a knife and fork. They were a meal in themselves. I said to him, I said, I hope these pills of yours have got less fattening centres. He laughed did Dr Blackburn. He likes a good joke you know.

'They were good pills too. Fair enough, they stopped the headaches right away. The only snag was that they gave me a bit of diarrhoea. I've always been a bit susceptible to a bit of bowel trouble from time to time. I have rather edgy bowels. And a consultant surgeon once told me to take great care of my bowels. Them being edgy and all.'

'Dr Blackburn gave me a bottle of medicine for the diarrhoea and that stopped it really quickly. It wouldn't have been quicker if he'd given me a bag full of corks. Really good stuff it was. Very strong and white. I like white medicines. They always seem to be strong. But the diarrhoea had left me a bit weak and he had to give me a few iron injections as well. And with being so weak and so on I got a bit of a throat infection as well. What a throat that was. I couldn't hardly swallow the capsules he gave me. Antibiotics they were. And I had to whisper – it was so bad.

'Penicillin type things they were, he told me. And he gave me some tablets to take off the pains in my arms and legs as well. Funny pains all over me I had for a while. Really funny pains. Like I had a sort of flu. I told him I hoped it wasn't one of those foreign flus. Well, it's bad enough having our own without having them foreign ones as well. Asian and Chinese and what have you. Well he said it was all right and that it was one of ours he didn't doubt. So I didn't worry too much about it.

'Trouble was the penicillin things brought me out in a rash. Proper poorly I was for a while. What a rash it was. You could hardly see my arms and legs and my face was all red and blotchy. You'd have thought I was advertising for those tyres. You know, those foreign French things.

'He had to give me some cream or ointment or something to help get rid of the rash. And get rid of it, it did too. Of course I stopped taking the antibiotic capsules. I know to do that from past experience. The sore throat seemed to get better just as the rash on my body was building up. It's like they say there's only so much misery in the world at any one time. You know, one person starts to cry and another one stops. Well, that's how it is with my body. One thing goes wrong and another thing gets better. There's only so much room in one body for illness.

'And the itching. You should have seen the scratching I was doing. He had to give me some tablets to stop the scratching. I think I should have scratched myself away otherwise.

'Funny thing about those tablets was that made me feel all drowsy. Made me feel quite sleepy. Mind you that was handy because it saved me asking for some sleeping tablets. And I slept like a log. I really did.

'Of course now that I'm sleeping better I'm not feeling so tired and I feel much brighter. Not under the weather at all, though I'm still taking the brown medicine and the little white tablets and the big white ones for the headaches. I think it always pays to go to the doctors and get help when you're poorly. It's what they're there for isn't it? Marvellous what they can do, isn't it?'

First published in Nursing Times March 22 1973

The Medical Olympics

As is now traditional, the first annual Medical Olympics was opened last weekend at the Inkpen Cottage Hospital by Mr Ernest Algernon McWheedle, a 47-year-old brewers' assistant whose uncle once knew a man who had a request played on a radio programme. I'd have opened the event myself if I'd been asked but I've no doubt that the organisers felt that I would be too busy.

Those of you who keep a close eye on the gardening page in Chess Weekly will have probably already noticed that the choice of venue for the games has brought a lot of criticism down on the heads of the organisers. It has been said that the Inkpen Cottage Hospital is too small and insignificant a place to merit hosting such an important function.

However, those of us who attended the games felt that the venue was a perfect choice and that the size and status of the hospital adequately reflected the size and status of the games.

Perhaps rather surprisingly the most exciting events were the field events. There was some rewarding sport to be seen.

We were all amazed to see Dr Austin Morris throw an aspirin tablet 35 yards to win the 'Tossing the Tablet' gold medal by a clear four yards. This was a tremendous throw by a man who only two years ago was told by his publican that his account at the public bar of the Cow and Pail was about to be closed. Not even the most earnest critics of the event could fault Dr Morris's throwing style. It was universally agreed that he had a way with an aspirin tablet.

And then, who among us will be able to forget the thrill of watching Dr Michael Ford and Dr Rick Lantern fight it out for first place in the 'Squirting a syringe' competition. First, Ford seemed to have won with a stupendous twelve and a half yard squirt. But then Lantern forged ahead using a new disposable plastic syringe and sending a jet of distilled water twelve and three quarter yards. Ford immediately fought back with a jet that was measured at just under thirteen yards. Finally, Lantern won with an amazing fifteen yard squirt. Using an old-fashioned glass syringe, with a specially filed nozzle, he sent a jet of opaque dye into uncharted territory for syringe squirters.

There was some controversy surrounding the disqualification of Dr Arnold Tweedie, an anaesthetist. It was decided that, as Dr Tweedie was a professional squirter he could not be allowed to represent his hospital and a result the whole of the North South East Warwickshire team walked out on their hands and knees.

How tremendous it was to see Dr Willy Notcutt (who is famous for having lined 12 patients up in an out-patient department, got them all to bare their knees and then played a chorus of 'Abide with Me' with his patella hammer) throw the kidney biopsy needle 87 yards. That was one of the highlights of the whole games. Who could have guessed that Sister Motherwell wouldn't turn round in time?

Then there was the exhausting and thrilling marathon. What an event that was. The competitors had to race from Stephen Ward to the intensive care unit pushing a cardiac arrest trolley and carrying an ECG machine.

The winning team, entered by the Southlands and District Amateur Nursing Operatic Society, won with a time of four minutes and seven-and-a-half bonus points (one bonus point for hitting a pupil nurse with the arrest trolley, half a bonus point for knocking over an unidentified visitor and six bonus points for hitting an assistant matron and putting her in the fracture ward for three weeks.)

It was stimulating to see young Nurse Watkins win the 78-yard dash from sister's office to the sluice, closely followed by three eager registrars and a theatre assistant.

We were all amused to see Avon Ward win the 'Thermometer hurling' gold medal. It was wonderful to see Nurse Smith-Jones throw a thermometer 97 yards from a standing start, and it was even more rewarding to watch her run forward and catch the thermometer before it landed. That was a chase that will be remembered by all who managed to get into a good viewing position.

It was nice to see young Dr Holliday win the 'Prescription Signing' event, with a staggering 879 prescriptions signed in 11 minutes. And we were all glad to hear that afterwards the judges had given him a bonus of 78 prescriptions because it was agreed that no one could read anything he'd written.

What an event the 'Leaping the hospital bed' turned out to be! Who would have expected 11 to 1 outsider Sister Mildew to win? Who would have thought the old lady had so much leap in her?

On the third day of the games, those of us who had stayed the course were delighted with the opportunity to watch Nurse Harrow dive into a vat of cough linctus from the 30 metre board and do seven double somersaults in mid-air while removing her uniform. What a relief to see that she was wearing a swimming costume underneath the uniform. And we were lucky enough to see Sister Hadley win the 11 yard breast stroke through a tank of mist.mag.tricyl.

We gasped as we watched Dr James Grabble win the 'Swallowing a tablet' contest, after successfully ingesting

427 assorted drapsules, 235 assorted capsules, 875 assorted pulvules and a variety of spansules, tablets, sachets and suppositories. When he comes out of the intensive care unit, Dr Grabble will be given his prize – a large bowl and a wooden spoon. If fate intervenes and he is unable to receive his prize, the cup will be presented to the runner up.

There were also bed-making contests, bedpan carrying competitions, floor polishing events and the venepuncture trials. It was, all in all, a thrilling Medicated Olympics and we are all looking forward to next year's meeting, due to be held in a disused locker at Victoria station.

First published in Nursing Times 24.8.1972

This story was published in Nursing Times as the 1972 Olympics were under way. I've included it in this collection because although it is an obviously spoof report I was approached after it was published by a number of people (including representatives of a large and very serious American nursing organisation) who wanted my help in organising Medical Olympic events in the USA. I still rather regret having confessed to them that the piece was a joke and that no such event had ever taken place in England.

Smoke Your Way to a State Funeral

In a press statement released yesterday the chairman of the Alveolus Baccy Company Limited, Dr Arthur Fagg, announced that in an attempt to correlate the company's advertising programme with the Government's national anti-smoking campaign, they were producing a new catalogue describing what they considered to be more suitable free gifts available to collectors of coupons given away with their products.

The simplest gift available, exchanged for just 5,000 coupons, will be a delightfully designed, extremely functional garden incinerator.

The incinerator, made from best quality pig iron, has 16 neatly drilled holes around its base to ensure thorough ventilation and it comes in a special gift pack presentation set together with four garden bricks which, when properly arranged, make up the stand for the incinerator; a box of matches; a weather-proof hymn book and a copy of the Clean Air Act,

Coupon collectors who manage to smoke enough cigarettes to gather 10,000 coupons will be able to exchange their coupons for a plywood coffin specially designed for the ABC Ltd.

This simple but elegant coffin, decorated with plastic flowers and the special ABC crest, comes complete with a discount card to be used at one of five undertakers, an introduction to a men's hire store and a copy of a new booklet entitled 'Recipes for a Wake' written by the late Thelma Stout.

For 30,000 cigarette coupons, smokers can obtain a luxurious coffin; a magnificent nine foot long piece of furniture designed by one of the country's best known coffin designers, Ernest D'Eath. This luxury coffin is satin lined, has genuine artificial brass handles and is fitted with an internal stereo speaker so that the deceased can listen to his or her own funeral service.

Customers who live long enough to smoke enough cigarettes to collect 50,000 coupons can, in addition to the luxury coffin, claim a plot in a cemetery of their choice.

The new ABC catalogue contains details of 500 fully equipped cemeteries which are taking part in the scheme. A customer has only to name the cemetery in which he or she wishes to be buried; and back by return of post will come a plan of the cemetery on which he can make his choice of site.

For only another 50,000 coupons, the heavy smoker and hardy bronchitic can obtain a portable Cotswold stone vault for his garden or cemetery plot.

The ABC vault sleeps four in comfort, has fitted carpets throughout and enjoys central heating installed by one of the country's leading vault heating experts. The vault contains a colour television set, a fully loaded cocktail cabinet, a telephone link to the nearest hospital (just in case), an excellent library of English classics, a safe in which valuables can be kept and a seventy eight foot retractable television aerial.

'These vaults,' says Dr Fagg in the gift catalogue, 'mark a new departure for the company. The vaults were designed without any attention to cost. They are undoubtedly as good as the portable vaults available from any of the nation's major stores. We are proud to have these vaults in our catalogue and we hope that more and more people will take advantage of this wonderful offer.'

Finally, in the back of the catalogue there is, of course, that something special. The gift that is out of this world, and which, for most smokers, will be just a dream.

For one million coupons a smoker can have a State Funeral.

Not a mock-up of a State Funeral but the real thing.

The Alveolus Baccy Company has arranged with the Government for hardy coupon collectors who reach this marvellous target to be given a real live genuine State Funeral, with a twenty one gun salute, a two page obituary in the newspaper of their choice, a procession of boy scouts carrying bundles of plastic non-inflammable flowers, a plaque in Westminster Abbey, a two minute spot on the BBC television news , a crowd of 600 paid mourners and a funeral oration by the chairman of the Alveolus Baccy Company.

Finally, in a special announcement which came yesterday from the ABC media headquarters in Croydon, Dr Fagg announced that he is currently negotiating with St Peter for special terms for smokers who collect five million coupons.

'I'm not in a position to announce precise terms,' he said, 'but I think I can say that if negotiations conclude successfully any smoker who collects five million of our coupons will be virtually guaranteed a place in heaven.'

First published in Medical News-Tribune, 13.11.1972

Note: I am embarrassed to admit it but this silly spoof ended up in the national press and on national and local radio news programmes – as a genuine news story. Bizarre though it may now seem, a number of reporters and editors believed that the story was genuine. None of them bothered to contact me to see if the story was true – and none bothered to see if the Alveolus Baccy Company actually existed.

We hope you enjoyed this book. If you did then we would be grateful if you would post a favourable review on Amazon.

Dr Vernon Coleman is a qualified doctor who has been a professional author for 40 years. He has written over 100 books which have sold more than two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK alone. His books have been translated into 25 languages and sold around the world. Many of his books are available as Kindle books on Amazon. For more details about available books please see his author page on Amazon. For free articles please visit www.vernoncoleman.com

The Story of Medicine

An account of the social, political, economic and military influences on the health of the people and the practice of medicine from the beginning of time to the modern period

- The Power of the Gods
- Our Debt to the Orient
- The Great Men of Greece
- The Roman Legacy
- The Arabian Inheritance
- The First Medical Schools
- The Black Death
- Drugs and the Drug Industry
- Quackery and Genius
- Nursing Becomes a Profession
- Women in Medicine
- The Rise of the Specialist

Vernon Coleman

EUROPEAN
MEDICAL
JOURNAL

The Story of Medicine

Vernon Coleman

European Medical Journal

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The author Vernon Coleman MB ChB DSc is a registered medical practitioner. He is the author of over 100 other books, many of which are available as Kindle books on Amazon. For a list of books please see Vernon Coleman’s author page on Amazon or visit http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

TURNING POINTS

FURTHER READING

Chapter 1: Medicine in Perspective

The influences and effects of historical events — Myths and prejudices as they affect the historian — The effects of medicine on such disciplines as agriculture and politics — To understand the present we need to know the past

In the past, medical history has usually been studied by medical historians and written about for the benefit of other academics with the same specific interest. This book is different in that I am not a medical historian and I have not tried to write a book for specialists.

My interest is much more in the present than in the past and in studying and describing the cause and effect of discoveries and events rather than in recording the minutiae surrounding them. I believe that, although lists of dates and details may provide a superficial impression of history, real medical history must consist of an account of the influences which have led to major discoveries and of the effects which those discoveries have had upon society. It seems to me that such an approach should interest a much wider readership.

My interest in cause and effect does not, of course, mean that I have been prepared to abandon factual accuracy. Indeed, on the contrary, it is particularly important to ensure that all names, dates, places and specific discoveries are detailed as accurately as possible when conclusions and analyses are to be based on those facts.

My aims have meant that I have had to look for the truth rather than the myths, legends, fantasies and misconceptions with which many history books are so richly decorated. Many characters who play an important part in Roman and Greek history, to mention just two specific eras when myths were part of daily life, probably never existed. Voltaire wrote that history is but a fable that has been agreed upon, and you do not have to read many history books to see what he meant. To illustrate and support their own theories and contentions, many authors introduce and use suppositions and poorly documented hearsay evidence. I have tried to eliminate these myths and misconceptions except where they themselves had an influence on medical care or social progress.

I have also had to be on the lookout for prejudice and bias, and one of my most difficult tasks was to try to recognise and limit as far as possible my own prejudices and those of the authors from whose works I sought information. The importance of bias is easy to underestimate but an experienced historian can make any event appear both inevitable and foreseeable. It is dangerously easy to look for and discover links between otherwise isolated facts if you are struggling to support a theory in which you have more than a passing interest

Myths and bias are just two potential sources of inaccuracy. There are others. For example, much information reported as historical fact has to be regarded with suspicion when one realises that attitudes, knowledge and even language have changed over the centuries. These changes mean that reported material published ten centuries ago does not necessarily mean what it seems to mean today. The word ‘plague’ is used today to describe a specific disorder with well-recognised symptoms, but over the centuries the word has been applied to almost all of the diseases which have puzzled sufferers and observers — just as the word ‘flu’ is today used to describe a wide variety of viral diseases which have certain vague, poorly defined symptoms. Similarly, the word ‘leprosy’ has been frequently misused and an individual said to have had leprosy might have had any one of several diseases including syphilis, bubonic plague or smallpox or he might simply have been dirty, verminous or infirm.

Cynicism and suspicion are, I discovered, necessary qualifications for anyone writing a history book. I found, for example, that things do not happen quite as neatly and as suddenly as they might appear to do. There is not, of course, any sudden discovery which enables men to understand the working of the heart. What happens is that a number of isolated and, at the time, unrelated events result in a gradual increase in knowledge and understanding. Discoveries and inventions have very rarely had any immediate effect on ordinary life; rather they have been turning points or landmarks which have signalled a slow change in the direction in which thinking men have moved.

Another widely held misconception is that progress in medical care has been made by medical professions. The truth is that much progress in medicine has been made by people outside the mainstream of medical thought and practice. The contributions made by laymen include such specific innovations as the introduction of X-rays and such general contributions as the improvement of water supplies and sewerage facilities. Traditionally, medical history books have linked medical history to the medical profession and the acquisition and accumulation of medical knowledge, but improvements in health and reductions in mortality rates are related to far more than the origins of the Royal College of Physicians and the discovery of cellular pathology.

The truth is that the medical establishment has not always been right and the quacks have not always been wrong. Thinkers reviled and rejected by those influenced too much by greed, stubbornness, stupidity, jealousy and religious or philosophical commitments have often been proved right by later events. For many centuries, members of the orthodox medical establishment provided care for only a small proportion of the total population. The majority of patients were looked after by informally trained midwives, medicine men, alchemists and apothecaries who together made formidable contributions to medical theory as well as medical practice.

Then there is the point that the role and influence of different treatments have been confused by the fact that the importance of the placebo effect has been easy to underestimate. For more than seven hundred years the kings of England and France were regarded by their subjects as able to cure physical illness simply by touch, and evidence of this faith survived in France until the reign of Louis XVI and in England until Queen Anne. Many other healers, who relied on pure belief and effectively acted as mediums for real or imaginary supernatural forces, have been able to influence the progress of disease significantly. The interlinking relationship between mental state and physical illness is now known to be a strong and important one but at the time when traditional treatments were in common use this relationship was not widely recognised and was often attributed to unworthy influences. Nevertheless, although today we can relate modern knowledge and thinking to conditions and influences at all times in history, it is important to remember that, placebo response or not, the result was genuine. The King’s Touch may have relied upon the placebo effect but it undoubtedly had real influence.

Another possible cause of confusion and error is the fact that history is a continuous, fluid process which cannot be divided into neat sections on either temporal or geographic grounds. Picking one area of medical care in the sixteenth century and describing it as typical of medicine at that time is as misleading as choosing an area of medical care today and claiming that general standards can be judged from that one example. The quality of care provided in a teaching hospital in London today is very different to the quality of care provided in an ordinary district hospital no more than a mile or two away.

Just as the quality of technical care has always varied from place to place, so disease patterns have varied, appearing and disappearing often inexplicably, being in turn epidemic and endemic, insidious and dramatic.

National boundaries have always been irrelevant as far as medical progress has been concerned. Diseases have never recognised customs barriers, and no country has had a monopoly on scientific advances for long. While making this point I should perhaps confess that in assessing the varied contributions made in different parts of the world I have been influenced by the availability of written information, a criterion which may have led to an apparent distortion in the advances made in individual countries. I hope that my awareness of this potential imbalance has enabled me to minimise its effect as a bias.

And so, aware of all these potential literary hazards, I began with the simple intention of studying the effects of medical progress on human history and the effects of general history on medicine. I discovered, however, that it is exceedingly difficult to separate medical history from any other type of history and that attempting to do so is rather like trying to complete a hundred jigsaw puzzles, all illustrating similar scenes, whose pieces have been mixed together; like trying to unravel a hundred balls of white string tangled by a nuisance of incorrigible kittens.

Close study of the history of all diseases, and in particular the communicable diseases, illustrates the intricate relationship between health and socio-economic status and the links between infection and malnutrition, uncontrolled fertility, an unhealthy environment and inadequate health services. General living standards, trading successes and advances in agricultural techniques have all contributed to health care, while disease and disorder have affected social progress. Malaria may have helped lead to the downfall of the Roman Empire, while haemophilia in the Russian imperial family in the nineteenth century may have contributed to the success of the Russian Revolution.

Agriculture may not seem to have any immediate relationship to medicine but, since the introduction of systematic digging and ploughing five thousand years ago, agricultural affairs have strongly influenced the lives of ordinary people. Famines have not only caused death directly but also led indirectly to disasters as varied as epidemics and wars. The underfed are not only easy prey for infections but also easily aroused to invade neighbouring countries in the search for food.

The need to improve the import and export of food supplies probably led the early settlers to begin developments by riversides and on estuaries. Major cities were built on rivers such as the Nile, Tigris, Euphrates, Indus, Ganges, Yangtze Kiang, Thames, Hudson, Seine, Rhine and Tiber, and those early town-makers could not have realised that there was to be a link between international travel and the spread of disease.

Industrial developments have had their impact too. The development of machinery during the Industrial Revolution led to improved agricultural techniques, which in turn led to the greater availability of food-stuffs. This produced: an improvement in general health standards which meant that people were better able to fight infection. On the other hand, developments in industry changed the nature of other aspects of life, and the birth of large towns to act as dormitories for the growing factories put excessive pressure on facilities for the provision of clean water supplies. The squalor and unhappiness of town life that followed the Industrial Revolution undoubtedly contributed to alcoholism, tuberculosis and many other disorders.

The influence of religion on health and life in general has also been mixed. The Jewish leaders prohibited the consumption of pork in order to protect their followers from the dirty habits wrongly believed to be associated with pigs, but at the same time they encouraged communal bathing which did spread disease. The Moslems encouraged religious pilgrimages which took germs from one continent to another. In more recent times the Catholic opposition to contraception has undoubtedly exacerbated hunger, starvation and disease in many countries.

The conclusion has to be that a true social history of medicine cannot be divorced from a history of education, politics, religion, industry, economics, social class, military might or indeed any other aspect of human life. Medicine and disease have been affected by all these disciplines, which have, in turn, been affected by medical progress. Disease has influenced the general welfare and progress of man and the development of civilisation, and there is no reason to suspect that it will not continue to do so. The impact of scientific discoveries on health has invariably been far less immediate and dramatic than the impact of changes in general living conditions.

Goethe wrote that it is impossible to understand the present without a knowledge of the past, and I hope that the facts I have unravelled and the individual pictures I have managed to complete will provide some account of the lessons we can learn from what has gone before. Study of the social history of medicine reveals much about our contemporary problems because a true history of medicine is a history of people, deriving from and adding to our own attitudes and experiences as we see the same problems recurring time and again. History enables us to see the present in perspective, as a continuation of the past, and should, therefore, give us a chance to acquire some idea of the possible consequences of the present on the future.

Chapter 2: The Power of the Gods

The animal's natural instinct for survival — Man turns to the supernatural — The association between religion and medicine begins — The value of medical care provided by the priests

All living creatures have a natural instinct for survival which includes an ability to search for and use simple self-healing remedies. Injured animals lick their wounds, cats eat grass to make themselves sick if they have swallowed too much fur, black bears coming out of hibernation will deliberately search for berries which have a laxative effect, and many wild creatures know how to use spiders' webs to help stop bleeding. Birds will bathe in dust to get rid of lice, and there have even been reports from skilled naturalists of birds applying splints made of clay and stiff grass to injured legs.

It is not surprising, therefore, that human beings have a natural ability to use effective, simple remedies when they fall ill. Man has never been too primitive to treat himself, and there is good evidence to suggest that, even though *average* life expectancy during the Stone Age is thought to have been no more than fifteen years, many of the old-established, traditional remedies favoured were both effective and safe.

Nevertheless, however effective these remedies may have been, it was not long before primitive man began to wonder about the cause of diseases. Thinking men would undoubtedly have realised that prevention is better than any cure and they would, therefore, have sought some explanation for the occurrence of disease.

However, with no knowledge of human anatomy or physiology and no understanding of bacteriology, pathology and the other mechanisms responsible for the production of disease, it is not surprising that primitive man should turn· to the supernatural for explanations and that consequently he would supplement his natural use of ointments, applications and herbal draughts with supplications to those gods who were recognised as the responsible forces behind all things good and evil.

These links between medicine and the supernatural developed in many different ways. Some observers simply associated bad spirits and devils with disease and good spirits and gods with good health and sought to release evil spirits from the bodies of those afflicted by disease. It was this idea which led to such forms of treatment as trepanning, where a hole is bored in the patient's skull so that the evil spirits can escape. Others regarded illness as punishments from the gods and tried to placate the offended deities by making sacrifices or supplications. The link between these different types of religious philosophy was the need for an intermediary, a man who could keep track of the needs, expectations and requirements of the spirits and who could, therefore, provide the community with advice about how best to avoid ill health and recover good health.

In this way the close link between the priests and the practice of medicine was born and was to remain strong and powerful for many thousands of years. The links were strengthened by the fact that priests often adopted folk remedies and used them as adjuncts to their spiritual solutions.

This association between medicine and religion had obvious shortcomings. For one thing there was unlikely to be any progress in medical understanding as long as supernatural explanations for physical disorders were accepted. If your headache is caused by the fact that a god is displeased with something you have done, the only solution is to look for ways to appease the offended god; searching for practical reasons and solutions for the headache will not help. Consequently, the links forged by primitive man ensured that medical progress would be delayed for centuries.

Despite these enormously important restrictions, medicine, as practised by the priests, often produced results. If it had not, it would not have survived for so long. The results were due to two things.

First, there is no doubt that many of the traditional folk and herbal remedies favoured by priestly physicians actually did work. Primitive people knew about the effectiveness of many drugs and the Peruvian Incas, for example, used curare to relax muscles and cocaine as a local anaesthetic many centuries before either drug was introduced into orthodox medical practice. One of the most extraordinary surgical techniques used by primitive man was the employment of black ants to suture wounds. This was done in South American, and the ants were first encouraged to bite the two sides of a wound; their bodies would then be twisted off, leaving the jaws in place as fixing clips.

Second, it is well known that symptoms can be alleviated by faith in either the treatment offered or the source or implement of that treatment. The placebo effect, whereby a patient may recover when given a pill consisting of nothing but sugar, is thought to depend upon the patient having trust in the remedy and in the person providing the pill, and it would undoubtedly work just as well for a cave man as for a twentieth-century patient.

Chapter 3: Medicine in Mesopotamia

The link between medicine and religion is weakened — A search for medical solutions to medical problems — The availability of medical care — Hammurabi's Code

The first slow, tentative steps towards the development of a scientific approach to medical care were taken in the part of the world now known as Iraq. At the time when those steps were being taken, some six thousand years ago, the land between the rivers Euphrates and Tigris was known as Mesopotamia, although during the ensuing centuries, the political maps of the area changed many times.

History books are full of contradictions about dates, rules and names relating to the Middle Eastern areas, and the inevitable absence of records has meant that there is much confusion about the precise dates of specific developments. It is clear, however, that early civilisations in that part of the world linked medicine, magic and religion just as closely as did other primitive peoples. It was widely believed that the air was full of demons which invaded humans as soon as the gods withdrew their protection and, consequently, treatments in early Mesopotamia involved either placating the gods or providing the patient with a remedy designed to drive the demons out. For many centuries no one really knew whether treatments worked because of any intrinsic value or because of effects they had on offensive demons or disgruntled deities.

What makes these powerful Middle Eastern countries so memorable is that it was there that these mystical links were first set aside as causes of accidents and injuries, and sources of infection and disease were first recognised. It is difficult for us to understand how difficult it must have been to separate medicine from religion and magic, but it was here that the first steps were taken towards the development of medical science as an individual discipline.

Progress in the world of medicine did not, of course, begin or continue without progress occurring in all other areas of society, and it is important to remember that the people taking these early steps towards the development of medicine were also building cities, trading with or conquering their neighbours, producing the first works of literature and of art and creating new mathematical theories. None of these disciplines developed without influencing or being influenced by other disciplines. For example, the custom of embalming and mummifying bodies must have provided the embalmers with a more extensive knowledge of human anatomy than had been acquired by any preceding civilisation. All the evidence we have does indeed suggest that, at the time, the store of knowledge available and the general standard of living in the cities was greater than it was to be for over fifteen hundred years after the coming of Christ.

Many centuries before the Greeks rediscovered the same thing, it was recognised that fresh air, sunshine and a good diet are necessary for good health. It was known that the human heart had an important role to play in the survival of the human organism, and it was accepted that a pump of some sort sent blood through vessels around the body. Physical examinations which would not have been out of place in a nineteenth-century hospital were performed, with pulses and temperatures recorded; and opiates were used for anaesthesia and alcohol as an antiseptic long before these essentials became accepted in northern Europe.

Once the links between medicine and religion had been weakened and it had been recognised that disease and disorder could have specific causes, the search for medical solutions increased its pace. In ancient Babylon, for example, the sick were taken into the market-places and left there. Anyone passing by was expected to stop, enquire about the patient's symptoms and offer any advice he thought suitable. Passers-by who had experienced the same symptoms and survived would be expected to offer a precise prognosis as well as an account of the remedies they themselves had found efficacious. This may ·sound laughable to us but it was undoubtedly not only an effective way of increasing the quality and quantity of medical knowledge but also of great help to the patients themselves.

As the centuries went by, more and more information was collected together. Fractured bones were set with splints or gluesoaked linen bandages, and gaping wounds were closed with strips of linen anchored to the healthy skin on either side with an adhesive. Sophisticated weighing machines were used to prepare drugs such as bicarbonate and calamine, and physicians learned to specialise and to limit themselves to looking after patients with particular types of disorder. Indeed, a physician who strayed outside his acknowledged sphere of experience and whose patient did not do well would find himself in serious trouble. There is even evidence that the first psychiatrists were at work, and it seems that several thousand years before Freud was a twinkle in his mother's subconscious it was recognised that guilt, fear and resentment could all have an adverse influence on human health.

The availability of medical treatment varied considerably from patient to patient. On military expeditions soldiers received free treatment from doctors paid by the state but, by and large, the better doctors were available only to the rich who could afford their fees. Slaves had the advantage that they might be treated by their master's own physician, but they also ran the risk of being used as guinea pigs if any particularly risky piece of medical work seemed necessary.

The greatest step towards the development of real medical profession was made not by a doctor or priest but by King Hammurabi, who ruled Babylonia about 2000 BC and who prepared a series of rules and regulations designed to protect both doctors and their patents. The Code of King Hammurabi included details of the fees which might be charged for the performance of specific services and included rather terrifying, but undoubtedly encouraging, rules about the penalties for professional misconduct or even for simple incompetence. Hammurabi ruled that a physician who caused a patient's death would have his fingers cut off. The penalties for not taking proper care of slaves were rather lighter but were nevertheless designed to encourage a high standard or practice.

As information was gathered together, so official texts dealing with such subjects as anatomy, surgery, gynaecology, pathology and ophthalmology were prepared. Doctors were expected to follow officially recommended treatments for at least three days before trying anything new, and an over-imaginative doctor who disobeyed this ruling would pay with his life if his patient died.

Once it was recognised that a fall can cause a fracture without any intervention from the gods, other cause-and-effect relationships were accepted and, for example, it quickly became acknowledged that eating infected food or drinking infected water could produce internal disorders. Consequently, health measures designed to protect the public were introduced in Babylon. Recognising that dirty habits could cause disease, legislators introduced punishments for those convicted of dropping bones or refuse on the ground. There were rules about how close to houses cattle could be kept, and clothes worn by people with infectious diseases had to be burnt. The dead had to be carried far away from populated towns, and strictly upheld regulations were designed to protect the water supplies from contamination.

While Europeans were still living in mud huts, the Babylonians were living in cities with access to lavatories, drains and clean water supplies.

Chapter 4: Our Debt to the Orient

Meanwhile in the Orient — Surgery in India — Medical practices in the East — Our debt to those early men of medicine

At the time when the people of Mesopotamia were formulating their first theories about causes and cures of disease, similar fundamental theorising was going on in India, China and other parts of the distant East. However, it might as well have been happening on a different planet: several thousand miles of rough country separated these various centres of the civilised world, and contact between different cultures must have been at best rare and of little influence.

And yet, at roughly the same time, the fundamental break with religion and mysticism was being contemplated. Our knowledge about exactly what went on in China and India four and five thousand years ago is inevitably sketchy and much of it is based on legend rather than fact, but there is evidence to suggest that even then amateur and professional physicians were recording the effects of treatment on human ailments. Good health was recognised as a sign that the elements which made up the body were in balance, while disease was a sign that the constituent elements had gone out of balance.

The type of care available in each country and the direction in which research and progress went were obviously dependent, to a large extent, upon the cultural and religious strengths and weaknesses of the countries concerned. In China, for example, where religious convictions prevented the drawing of blood or the mutilation of the human body, there was obviously no progress in the world of surgery. There were, however, important developments in other areas. It was in China that massage first became a respected and well-used form of treatment, and acupuncture, a treatment form rapidly gaining followers today in many Western countries, was first introduced in China many centuries ago. Many herbal drugs were known and there is even evidence to suggest that fingerprints were first used to identify individuals in ancient China Great attention was paid to diagnostic skills; the Chinese listed ten thousand types of fever and when taking the patient’s pulse would touch the radial artery in many different places in order to obtain the greatest amount of information.

Surgical skills in India, two thousand years before the birth of Christ, were remarkably well developed, and the ancient Hindus had scalpels, scissors, hooks, probes, forceps, catheters and syringes to help them. In all they had over a hundred different surgical instruments and used them for complex operations. In fact, today’s plastic surgeons use a technique for operating on the nose that was first developed by those surgeons in India four thousand years ago. The operation was developed to deal with the disfigurement suffered by adulterous women who had had their noses cut off as a punishment.

The Indians’ apparent understanding of infection and disease was an important factor in the success of their surgical endeavours. Operating theatres in India four thousand years ago were kept scrupulously clean, and surgeons had to keep their hands scrubbed, their nails short, and had to wear clean white clothing when operating. Sheets were steam-cleaned, instruments boiled, and operating rooms, though well lit and ventilated, were protected from dust and smells with the use of fragrant smokes and perfumes. The surgeons, who used anaesthetics and antiseptics some thousands of years before they were introduced into European hospitals, were even forbidden to speak during operations in case their breath contaminated the wounds. When convalescing from surgery, patients were encouraged to rest, to eat well and wisely and to enjoy plenty of sunshine and fresh air. Flowers, perfumes, and music therapy were used to make convalescence more enjoyable and successful. To prevent further infections, impure water supplies could be purified by boiling, heating in the sun or filtering through sand, coarse gravel and charcoal.

In addition to their surgical skills, the Indians had acquired other sophisticated medical skills. Before reaching a diagnosis, the Hindu physician would examine a patient and listen to his heart and lungs, and there are suggestions that the Indians knew how to protect against smallpox with inoculation and against malaria by using mosquito netting. These observations are all the more remarkable when it is remembered that it was not until the end of the nineteenth century that the association between malaria and the mosquito was first recognised officially by Western doctors. It even seems possible that the Hindus recognised an association between plague and rats. Like the Chinese and the Babylonians, the Indians used a wide variety of drugs, and one Hindu book alone describes the qualities of seven hundred plants, many of which are now known to have genuine effects.

Sadly we do not know precisely how these services and this knowledge was made available to the peoples of the Orient, whether the surgical skills and operating theatres were available to all or only to a select few. Nevertheless, it seems likely that the extent of medical knowledge in any country must have had some influence on the quality of medical care made generally available.

Of course, as far as we are concerned, the original thinking and the accumulation of information are of considerable historical importance. It was the ideas and information drawn from the Middle and Far East that contributed most to Greek and Roman medicine around the time of Christ. Although much of that knowledge was undoubtedly lost until the Renaissance several hundred years later, ancient medical discoveries and practices have undoubtedly exerted a powerful influence on modern medical practices. When we look back at what we used to know, we ought perhaps to be more conscious of the debt we owe to our scientific ancestors and of the ease with which learning can be lost if it is not used and looked after with care.

Chapter 5: The Great Men of Greece

The Greeks acquire information — Mixing fact and fiction — The role of Hippocrates — The early medical profession

Like all successful powers the early Greeks were extremely good at collecting, collating and assessing information and ideas from the nations with whom they fought or traded. They acquired knowledge from other Mediterranean countries, from all around the Middle East and from the Asian continent, and they built their society and culture with the aid of the experiences, beliefs and practical skills of their neighbours.

When studying the history of the Greeks it is sometimes impossible to differentiate between fact and fiction, since they had a delightful habit of creating myths and legends to dignify most aspects of their society. In spite of this, it seems clear that the foundations of scientific medicine were laid in Greece. The blueprints may have come from Egypt and the bricks from Babylon, India and Crete, but it was the Greeks who brought these different elements together and created a scientific discipline based on proven facts and logical thought It was the Greek philosopher physicians who first tried to analyse disease processes and to create treatment plans accordingly.

The man given credit for founding the principles of scientific medicine is Hippocrates, and he is said to have been born on the island of Cos in 460 BC. Inevitably, perhaps, there is much confusion about the identity of Hippocrates. Some of his work has been attributed to other contemporary physicians, and it is even argued that Hippocrates was not one man but several. To argue about the minutiae of a man’s life is to risk missing the fact that the Hippocratic philosophies changed the course of life throughout the world.

At the time of Hippocrates’ birth Greek medicine was still closely linked to religion, and it was in temples dedicated to Aesculapius, son of Apollo and the senior god of medicine, that most healing took place. These temples were usually built in peaceful spots, and patients were encouraged not only to pray and to make sacrifices to the gods but also to sleep, wash regularly, relax, exercise and eat healthily. Massage was usually available and mud baths were popular. These establishments were ecclesiastical health farms, and those attending them would undoubtedly have benefited from the psychotherapeutic effects.

The Greeks were really hedging their bets by continuing to pay homage to the gods because, even before Hippocrates, they had recognised that many disorders have psychological causes and that effective treatments often involve simple practical remedies. Many of the so-called priests seem to have had considerable faith in the innate healing power of the human body and were prepared to help things along with a judicious nudge from time to time. Recognising that cleanliness is next to godliness, the priests who attended the patients in the temples took care to keep their hands scrubbed and their nails short, while they used wine-soaked linen for bandaging and boiled water for washing wounds. Where prayer, exercise and diet were insufficient as a cure, they resorted to emetics, purges and blood-letting. They kept records of the treatments used, and over each patient’s bed hung a marble tablet detailing his symptoms. It is fair to say that patients in these establishments were better cared for than those in London hospitals two thousand years later.

All this was taking place at a time when some of the greatest and most innovative thinkers the world has ever known were alive. In the fifth century BC Pericles, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Socrates, Plato, Herodotus and Thucydides were all making their mark. It was a time of thought, ideas and innovation, and the arrival of Hippocrates and the approach associated with his memory revolutionised medical thinking and practice.

The most important single thing Hippocrates did was completely to dissociate medical care from both religion and abstract philosophy and to establish it as a genuine scientific discipline. This may seem to us a simple and logical step but, at that time it must have taken enormous courage and intellect. Some of his observations were undoubtedly wrong and some of his conclusions certainly contradictory, but these small errors are of little significance when compared to his triumph in divorcing disease from religion. Hippocrates did for medicine what Galileo did for astronomy. We tend to remember Hippocrates for the Oath which bears his name but he (or they) played a crucial role in the development of medicine as a profession.

Hippocrates believed that the physician should look for a natural rather than a supernatural explanation for disease processes, and he encouraged other physicians to search for physical causes when studying illnesses. He made copious notes about the natural history of individual patients and collected many facts about specific diseases. He wrote accurate descriptions of puerperal septicaemia (the blood-poisoning that can occur around childbirth), malaria and dysentery, and he was the first to argue that the disorders of the brain, such as epilepsy, were caused not by divine wrath but by some disorder of the central nervous system. He recognised insanity as a disease rather than a sign of disapproval from the gods. He encouraged physicians to study individual patients so that they would have a better idea of the prognosis to offer others with similar symptoms. He classified diseases as acute, chronic, endemic or epidemic and believed implicitly in the importance of the individual patient.

From what he learnt from his observation of patients, Hippocrates concluded that the best way to help an individual recover good health was to support the body’s own self-healing mechanisms in their battle against the specific factors responsible for disease. To this end he advocated a regime of fresh air, exercise, good food, hydrotherapy and massage which would find favour with most modern gurus of medicine. He applied the first logical approach to clinical problems and when, for example, the priests argued that epilepsy was caused by eating goat flesh or lying on goat skins, he wanted to know why the Lydians, who relied on goats for food and clothing, were no more likely to suffer from epilepsy than anyone else. He was enthusiastic about relating food intake to physical work, observing that those who are fat often die earlier than those who are thin, and took advantage of every opportunity to carry out clinical experiments. Although he used purgatives and diuretics, he reserved all drugs for use only when simpler remedies had proved ineffective. His knowledge of anatomy was poor since facilities for dissection were scarcely adequate, but he observed gymnasts and sportsmen and learnt what he could from the injuries and wounds he examined.

Medicine was not to return to such basic principles for nearly 2,500 years, and more than two thousand years later patients in Europe’s capitals were lying on dirty mattresses in foul air and provided with poor food. Those with mental diseases were locked up, flogged and even murdered by those responsible for their treatment.

Hippocrates is also remembered for his role in the development of the medical profession. Although he published notes describing how a physician should dress and behave, he is best remembered today for the oath or code of conduct which bears his name. The oath may have been intended originally to help strengthen the emerging medical profession, since those who take it promise to support fellow physicians and to confine their teaching to those who are already familial members of the exclusive circle, but it also undoubtedly improved the lot of the individual patient. Incidentally, it was in the Hippocratic Oath that the first clear division between medicine and surgery appears. Those who took the oath promised not to use the knife on their patients; the physician in ancient Greece considered himself above such crude forms of intervention and, with effective anaesthesia and aseptic techniques many centuries away in Europe, the distinction was probably a wise one.

After Hippocrates died, it was not long before the world of medicine subsided again. Aristotle, the great scientist who had studied under Plato and was tutor for a time to the young Alexander the Great, founded comparative anatomy and embryology, while Herophilus and Erasistratus dissected the bodies of executed criminals and together made the first recorded observations about human anatomy, but the Greek Empire was beginning to fall apart, and the plague which struck Athens during the Peloponnesian War undoubtedly led to the collapse of the Greeks as a world force.

Ironically, as the Greeks lost power and status, Hippocrates, who had made such a contribution to medical science by separating medicine from religion, was deified. It was as though this great step forward had never been made. Not for more than two thousand years would medicine attain such heights again.

Chapter 6: The Roman Legacy

The fall of Greece — The rise of the Roman Empire — Galen's importance — The theory of the four humours — The military and engineering skills of the Romans — The fall of the Roman Empire

As the Greek Empire declined, so the Roman Empire grew in size and strength. The two cultures were quite different, and while the Greeks had placed great emphasis on philosophy, art and science, the Romans had always been a practical people, more concerned with engineering and military problems.

Before the fall of Greece most Roman families did not bother with doctors but looked after themselves. The head of each household kept a large home pharmacy of herbs and if a member of the family fell ill would hand out an appropriate remedy and call upon a suitable god considered to have jurisdiction over the particular disease, symptom or bodily function.

After the destruction of Corinth a number of Greek physicians fled to Rome, where, although they were treated as slaves and would be killed if they failed, they could earn good rewards if they proved popular and successful. Although trained in Greece, most of these physicians rejected the Hippocratic theories of natural healing and resorted to traditional treatments more in line with the Roman use of herbs and gods. As a result, many of the scientific advances made by Hippocrates and his successors were temporarily lost.

Slowly the physicians from Greece earned respect from the citizens of Rome; in 46 BC Julius Caesar granted citizenship to all practising doctors of medicine, and fifty years later Caesar Augustus issued a decree exempting all doctors from taxation. Augustus also introduced free clinics and free medical services. Unfortunately, the financial advantages associated with the medical profession meant that there were soon a great many second rate doctors practising in Rome and, indeed, by AD 200 legislation had to be introduced to control the licensing of, and to provide some control over, physicians. It is perhaps important to remember that, although the medical profession was growing in size and stature, there were no other medical services. For example, civilian hospitals did not exist, and although some doctors in big cities would take rich patients into their homes for suitable fees, most patients were looked after in their own homes. The absence of hospitals was matched by an absence of nurses since proper training for women intending to care for the sick was not introduced until AD 400.

During the rise of the medical profession in Rome in the first century AD three influential figures appeared. First, there was Celsus, who wrote *De Re Medica,* in which he detailed information about both medical and surgical practices. Then there was Dioscorides, a pharmacologist and botanist who described over six hundred medicinal plants and whose book was the basis of herbal therapy for the next fifteen hundred years. Drug therapy was considered an important aid to restoring health, and mixtures of a hundred different herbs in one remedy were not unknown. Unfortunately, dispensing was not always skilful: it has been recorded that some dispensing was done by prostitutes looking for an additional source of income. Finally, there was Galen, a physician whose thinking was destined to dominate medicine until the Renaissance.

Galen, like so many Roman physicians, was a Greek. Soon after qualifying he was appointed surgeon to a school of gladiators, a post which undoubtedly enabled him to learn something about human anatomy. Galen accepted the theory put forward by Aristotle that nature makes nothing without a purpose and tried to explain the function of all parts of the human body. He reached several remarkably accurate conclusions and taught, for the first time, that arteries are filled with blood which moves within the body as a result of the heart's pumping action. Like so many great men in medicine, Galen was a controversial figure for many years but gradually his research and his original ideas began to attract growing interest and support.

Sadly, as interest in his theories increased and as his stature as a medical teacher grew, so the number of people prepared to argue with him fell, and although many of his theories had little basis in fact and had never been proved, students of medicine tended to regarding everything he had written as inevitably correct. Research and original thinking in Rome seemed to stop after Galen's death.

Because of his historically important role, some of the background to Galen's theories about medicine is worth mentioning. While Galen's understanding of human anatomy was based on his experiences as a surgeon, his knowledge of physiology and pathology was based on the theory of the 'four humours'. It is difficult to decide exactly where and when this theory was first put forward. There is evidence that the Chinese, the Hindus and the ancient Egyptians all believed that the world was made up of a small number of basic elements and that human health depended upon maintaining a balance between them. The Indians believed that the human body, like the world around it, consisted of five elements: space, wind, fire, water and earth. The Chinese regarded the five basic elements as: wood, fire, earth, water and metal. The early Greek philosophers argued that the four basic elements were fire, air, water and earth and that each element had two qualities. Fire was hot and dry, air hot and moist, water cold and moist, and earth cold and dry. They translated these four qualities (dry, cold, hot and moist) into the four humours, claiming that the human organism consisted of blood (hot and moist), phlegm (cold and moist), yellow bile (hot and dry) and black bile (cold and dry).

Wherever the theory of the four humours originated and whatever its pedigree, it was certainly Galen who restored and dignified it. He, like many medical predecessors, believed that any illness was caused by an imbalance of these four humours and that consequently treatment should involve an attempt to restore the balance.

The Romans may not have been very advanced when it came to personal medical care but their military and engineering skills enabled them to advance public health facilities enormously. For several hundred years before the Roman Empire began to expand, the Romans had been enthusiastically building aqueducts, sewers and roads. The importance of providing these basic facilities cannot be overemphasised. Today, when World Health Organisation teams go into undeveloped countries, their first priorities are to provide clean water, efficient drains and passable roads. While Galen was struggling with the theory of the four humours, fourteen great aqueducts supplied Rome with 300 million gallons of drinking water a day. Houses had their own private cisterns and taps, and settling tanks were used to keep the water clean. Some of these aqueducts are still in use today, and there are few modern cities which can boast better water supplies than the Romans enjoyed two thousand years ago. Sewerage facilities were equally well advanced and the Romans had public lavatories and flushing water closets. Regulations ensured that public roads were kept clean, that only fresh food was available, that corn stocks were kept up as an insurance against famine and that dead bodies were cremated. Many Romans even enjoyed underfloor central heating.

The Roman army took their engineering skills with them when they travelled, and those countries and cities which came under Roman domination soon acquired similar facilities. When the Romans occupied London and other major cities in Britain, the Britons had bath houses and water-flushed latrines, while those who remained unbowed and unconquered still lived crudely and simply.

For several centuries the Roman Empire spread at a tremendous rate. It reached the Sahara in the south, Scotland in the north, the Spanish coast in the west and the Persian Gulf in the east. It grew so large that the corrupt and wealthy central society in Rome lost any real contact with the many peripheral societies and distant forces which made up the army. Distances were huge, travel was slow and there was little real opportunity for close relationships to develop between different parts of the Empire. In particular, there was one enormous problem associated with the growth of the Roman Empire which no one foresaw.

Rome was the hub around which the rest of the Empire revolved, and as a result there was constant traffic between the periphery and the centre. This meant that returning soldiers, merchants, politicians and diplomats brought with them diseases from foreign parts. They brought new diseases back to people who had no immunity to them and who were, therefore, extraordinarily susceptible. One of the diseases which helped to destroy Rome and its Empire was malaria, a disease which the Indians, several hundred years before, had attributed to the bite of a mosquito. In South America the Peruvian Indians were already treating malaria successfully with powder from cinchona bark but the Romans knew nothing of that. Their military might alone was not enough to protect them from this unseen enemy. Malaria, and other diseases such as smallpox and measles, weakened the people and undoubtedly helped to destroy the Empire.

The impact of the various plagues meant that the power of the traditional gods and herbal remedies were no longer regarded with such awe. As the Empire fell apart, the people who had been under its domination became desperate for new hope, a new medical discipline, a new religion. The answer they found was Christianity.

Chapter 7: The Influence of the Christian Church

The birth of Christianity — The decline of the medical profession — Cities in chaos — Plagues become endemic — Anatomy studies are halted by the Church — Monasteries open their own hospitals — Priests practise medicine — The emphasis on caring not curing — The King's touch — The local wise woman

The collapse of the Roman Empire left much of Europe in political, military and social turmoil. When the legislation and order imposed by the Romans on huge areas was withdrawn, regional control was available to those who were able to take it. The only organisation capable of providing anything like a central government, and of replacing the control of Rome, was the Christian Church, which had quickly developed a strong organisation and was capable of exerting authority and discipline upon its members.

The Christian religion offered new converts one tremendously important advantage over other forms of worship: an afterlife to be enjoyed by the faithful. At a time when plagues, disease and infections of many kinds were racing around the known world, a promise of life after death had considerable appeal. If death was unavoidable, at least you could take advantage of the offer of another life.

However welcome this discipline may have been to those yearning for strong leadership and some protection against local tyrants anxious for power at any cost, the Christian Church did little or nothing to improve the health or living standards of the ordinary people. Indeed, by abandoning many of the improvements in public health made by the Romans and by replacing technological improvements with prayers and superstition, the Church may well have contributed to the increase in mortality and decline in good health which characterised the early centuries of Christ's spiritual leadership of the Western world.

Details of the advances made by the Greek physicians, the Indian surgeons and the Roman public health experts were stored away in monastery libraries, and those Greek and Jewish physicians who still followed the teachings of the ancients were banned by the Church, which taught that all illness was produced by God and could only be alleviated by worship. The Church was hostile to all those anxious to study anatomy, physiology or pathology and so medical research came to a halt. The surgical art, which had reached such heights in India so many centuries before, fell into the hands of barbers, bath-house attendants, executioners and other half trained illiterates.

Towns and cities continued to grow in size but there were no longer drainage systems, fresh water supplies or laws about the keeping of food and disposal of refuse. Church leaders had no interest in providing such services, and without a concerned central government such facilities as already existed were allowed to fall into disuse and ruin. The official policy was to put all trust in God.

With growing, disorganised cities, plagues of one sort or another were endemic. Famine, too, was a major problem. The Romans had organised corn stocks to guard against starvation during lean years, but the Church did not make adequate provisions for such times, and many thousands starved to death when harvests were poor. The weakened people were then even more susceptible to infections.

The early Church undoubtedly did much to hold up medical progress. Anatomy, for example, remained a mystery, and scholars relied on Galen's notes about the anatomy of the pig and the ape since the Church, firmly believing in physical resurrection, totally disapproved of the dissection of human corpses. But although it is tempting to regard the Church's influence on medieval medicine as entirely destructive, it would be unfair to do so. There is little doubt that the Church provided most of the institutional care for the sick, disabled and the elderly. Those hospitals that existed were intended to provide succour for the soul rather than the body and offered spiritual comfort rather than physical care, but they provided shelter for the people who had nowhere else to go. Incidentally, lepers were excluded from some of those early hospitals, not because they were thought to have an infectious disorder but because they were thought to have sinned dreadfully for God to have punished them so severely. It was the risk of moral contagion rather than physical infection which led to their exclusion from society and to the building of special leper colonies and hospitals.

Many monasteries and abbeys had their own hospitals and infirmaries, intended either exclusively for the use of the inmates or for public use. These establishments were sometimes staffed by paid male attendants, although often the fitter convalescent patients also helped.

Local priests undoubtedly tried to play their part as well, and during plagues many churches were temporarily converted into hospitals. Some hospitals, which still exist today, were founded at that time through the auspices of the Church; for example, the Hotel Dieu in Paris was founded by Bishop Landry in AD 561. Patients there were originally looked after by a small group of Parisian ladies who were connected with the Church, and when eventually those women were organised into a sisterhood by Pope Innocent IV, they probably became the first group of nursing nuns. Other hospitals were founded by trade and professional guilds who ran them for sick or aged members. Those who had no connections with any such organisation had to rely on finding space in a hospital founded by a generous patron.

However, it is important to remember that the emphasis in all these establishments was very much on care rather than cure and that their staff included few people with any real medical training. Even as late as the thirteenth century, when the Hotel Dieu had been moved to a new site near Notre Dame, there were said to have been no more than six doctors in the whole of Paris. The absence of any real medical science or medical profession at this time meant that much healing was enacted on the basis of good faith, with great reverence accorded to the miraculous healing powers of the saints and of holy relics. The close relationship between medicine and religion that had been thrown on one side by Hippocrates was now back with a vengeance. Saints had replaced the Roman gods as the agents responsible for specific illnesses and organs. (For example, St. Blaise was in charge of the throat, St. Apollonia the teeth, St. Bernadine the lungs, and St. Erasmus the abdomen.) Prayers were offered to the saints considered most likely to be able to intervene, and holy relics were often worshipped like idols.

The widespread belief in the royal ability to heal by the laying on of hands also grew in popularity. Since kings were considered to be close to God, and since God was considered to be responsible for all illness, it is hardly surprising that this apparently sacrilegious belief should have proved so popular in both England and France. The King’s Evil (scrofula or tuberculosis as it is now known) was the disease most commonly considered suitable for healing in this way. It was, after all, a disease which provided clearly defined physical changes, which did not weaken the patient so much that the journey to court would prove impossible and which sometimes disappeared spontaneously: three factors which made it eminently suitable for cure with the King’s Touch. In England this apparently pagan practice is said to have started with Edward the Confessor. In France it was said to have been first tried by Clovis the Frank in AD 496.

With cities dirty, people almost permanently sick and no proper medical profession, it is hardly surprising that increasing numbers of untrained people began to offer medical advice and help to those suffering and to those, such as women in childbirth, who simply needed some attention from a neighbour with experienced hands. The ordinary people sought support, advice and information from anyone with a little knowledge and experience. In each community, in each small village, there would be a woman whose knowledge and practical abilities were recognised and accepted locally. She would use such wild herbs as were available in the countryside and would help the labouring woman deliver her infant. The quality of care provided was undoubtedly poor, probably little better than that available to primitive men thousands of years before, but it was all there was.

The Christian religion, which dominated medical thinking, halted progress in Europe for the best part of a millennium.

Chapter 8: The Arabian Inheritance

Medicine is preserved as a science in Arabia — Rhazes and his influence — The Arabs learn from the Greeks but make their own contributions — The Crusaders

In AD 431 the Patriarch of Constantinople, Nestorius, decided that the Virgin Mary should be called the Mother of Christ and not the Mother of God. When this apparently inoffensive piece of pedantry resulted in his being banished for heresy, Nestorius and his followers went to Mesopotamia, where they spent many years translating the old Greek texts into Arabic. As a result, during the Dark Ages of Europe the science and the art of medicine were better preserved in Arabia than anywhere else.

The business of assimilating Greek culture into the Arabic world was continued by Chosroes, who not only kept a Greek physician at his court but also sent another physician off to India in search of more knowledge. The process of deliberately weaving bits and pieces of information together from around the world had begun, and by the middle of the sixth century a medical school had been founded in the city of Jundishapur in south-west Persia, where physicians of all nationalities and religions worked together.

As the Moslem empire engulfed Persia in the seventh century, the existing medical societies were absorbed and the information was put to good use. Many great local physicians trained with the help of the classical texts, and the standard of medical care was undoubtedly higher in Arabia at this time than any where else in the known world. Rhazes were perhaps one of the most memorable individuals of the ninth century. He taught his students in wards and outpatient clinics and encouraged them to talk to and examine the patients. He believed that a fever was not a disease in itself but simply a sign that the body was working towards the destruction of some unseen disorder. He wrote accurate descriptions of smallpox, measles and scarlet fever and is perhaps best remembered for his advice when consulted about the site for a new hospital to be built in Baghdad. With remark able astuteness Rhazes suggested that large pieces of dead animals be hung in potentially suitable spots around the city and that the hospital be built on the site where the dead animals decayed more slowly. This apparently simple but clever device suggests that he understood a good deal about the pathology of disease. However, his knowledge of medicines was perhaps not so sophisticated, and it seems that among the animal products he recommended as having medicinal properties were stag’s teeth, elephant’s teeth and lion grease; animal excrements were also considered to have their uses.

Not only were there proper hospitals throughout the Moslem Empire at this time but touring clinics were often sent round to country areas. There is even evidence that when large crowds gathered near mosques, first-aid stations would be set up to deal with those needing medical care. By the middle of the tenth century the Caliph of Baghdad had ordered that would-be doctors should take examinations and acquire licences. There was stiff competition in the hospitals for medical posts.

The Arabs may have acquired most of their knowledge from the Greek classics but they also contributed much that was new. It was in Arabia that the first alchemists began to look for the ‘elixir of life’ and found many useful chemicals as they did so. Arab scientists also expanded the science of astrology and developed the theory of the four temperaments (describing people as sanguine, choleric, phlegmatic or melancholic), which fitted well with the theory of the four humours.

By the end of the tenth century some European centres were beginning to follow the Arabian example. The Crusaders brought many medical practices and theories home from North Africa, and the medical school at Salerno, the first in Europe, was probably developed by Crusaders travelling homeward. Ironically, the old Greek texts had to be translated from Arabic into Latin before they could be used by European students.

It was perhaps fortunate for Europe that the Crusaders rescued much of this knowledge. They did so just in time: in 1256 the Mongols destroyed Baghdad and the Moslem culture, dismantling the library at Baghdad and using the stones to build a bridge over the River Tigris.

Chapter 9: The First Medical Schools

The medical school at Salerno — Roger of Sicily introduces rules about the practice of medicine — The Church leaders do not approve of priests practising medicine — Roger Bacon, a great original thinker — Bologna, Padua and Montpellier – The provision of medical care still largely in the hands of the illiterate and the unskilled

The Italian sea port of Salerno, just south of Naples, was both international and interdenominational. It was home for Christians, Jews, Greeks, Arabs, returning Crusaders and other travellers intent on moving around Europe. During Roman rule Salerno had been a health resort, and in the centuries that followed it continued to attract men and women from all walks of life.

It was in Salerno that Western Europe began to regain some of its lost medical traditions and to revive the study of scientific medicine which had been retained almost exclusively by the Arabs for the best part of a thousand years. With the Church still the most powerful institution in Western Europe, and controlling almost all aspects of government, law, education and health care, it is perhaps not surprising that the first signs of a revival of scientific medicine should take place in a city with such a cosmopolitan population.

The revival of a truly scientific approach to medicine began in the ninth century. At first there was no formal establishment at Salerno and no formal training schedule, just a group of medical practitioners who began by passing on practical tips to any interested student. These humble beginnings were the spark which eventually led to the development of medical schools all over Europe, and those early practitioners in Salerno played a vital part in the redevelopment of medicine as a profession.·

Gradually, the reputation of that informal teaching group spread and more and more students came to Salerno to learn their profession. Inevitably the students had differing opinions, which led to discussion and arguments, and what had begun as a series of simple, practical classes slowly came to deal with the problems on a much wider scale. In many ways it was not what was taught that was important so much as the fact that for the first time since Hippocrates diseases were being studied, patients observed and treatments devised in a rational attempt to deal with observed symptoms. Surgical practices were revived and, under the influence of the Jews, Arabs, Latins and Greeks, the scholars at Salerno once again severed the links which had for so many centuries tied medicine and religion so closely together. The teachers at Salerno may not have known much about anatomy or physiology but they were paving the way for a medical renaissance.

At Salerno students did not just learn the rudiments of good medicine, they also learned some of the tricks of the trade. One writer, for example, pointed out that when taking a patient’s pulse the doctor should be aware that his very arrival might have produced a speeding up of the heart rate. Another Salerno author suggested that, if a patient did not pay his bill, the doctor should make some adjustment to his prescription to make the patient come out in spots. The additional, unexpected symptom was intended to result in prompt payment!

As the clergy still made up the majority of educated men in Europe, it is not surprising that many clerics and monks began to practise medicine in the Salerno style. By the eleventh century the principle of formal medical education had become widely accepted, and the School of Salerno, in particular, was widely respected throughout Europe. In 1140 Roger of Sicily ruled that anyone practising medicine had to be properly qualified, and other rulers made similar edicts. However, since Church policy was still that the endurance of suffering was saintly and that faith and prayers were far better aids to health than any pagan forms of intervention, Church leaders were not going to remain silent when it came to laying down the law. They resented the idea of the clergy’s involvement in the business of health care for several reasons. They thought the practice of medicine potentially immodest and were worried about the implications for the Church should a clergyman be associated with the death of a patient. They were also worried that, with fat fees to be earned, many holy men were spending too much time on healing the body and not enough on healing the soul.

In the twelfth century several edicts were published which were intended to prevent monks and priests from practising medicine. Since the Church was still extremely powerful and since members of the Church were often the only people able to read, this ruling had a damaging effect on the development of a proper medical profession. The practice of surgery was considered particularly unsuitable for those who had taken holy orders, and the venom with which surgical practice was condemned by the Church can be judged from the fact that it was several centuries before surgery became an acceptable art rather than a disreputable trade. The subsequent battles between physicians and surgeons can be traced back to this ecclesiastical disapproval.

Despite this official disapproval, some clerical practitioners still made major contributions not only to the quality of medical care available within each small community but also the quantity of medical knowledge more widely available. Roger Bacon, who lived from 1214 to 1298, was one of the most influential of these practitioners.

Bacon was an original thinker at a time when original thinking was rare and dangerous. Even at Salerno, Bologna, Padua, Montpellier and the other centres of academic excellence, most work was confined to the study and intellectual dissection of the ancient Greek texts. Bacon was a Franciscan monk who had been well educated both as a philosopher and as a natural scientist, and it was his work that made the Paris medical school famous.

One of the first to insist that chemicals could be used medicinally and that alchemy had a role to play in human pharmacology, Bacon found himself battling against the entire establishment. Galen had favoured herbal medicines, and the medical established revered the works of Galen. The Church strongly objected to Bacon’s theories because it seemed dangerously sacrilegious for a monk to suggest that the will of God could be influenced with the aid of a handful of chemicals.

Not that Bacon confined himself to the study of drugs. He is said to have invented a telescope, a microscope and the first spectacles, and prophesied powered flight and underwater exploration. He performed a great many original scientific experiments. All this made him desperately unpopular with almost all sectors of established thought, and Bacon became the first of the scientific martyrs who were to litter the history of the Renaissance.

Outside the Church the medical profession continued to develop, and in 1224 King Roger II’s grandson, the Emperor Frederick II, produced the first proper curriculum for the Salerno medical school. Students had to be aged over twenty-one and to have studied logic for three years. The course they were expected to follow was designed to last for five years, and graduates had to spend an additional year of practice under the supervision of a senior and experienced medical man. After graduation students took an oath similar to the one written by Hippocrates and agreed not to dispense or sell medicines but to limit themselves to the formal practice of medicine. It was the graduates from Salerno who first had the title of doctor. These regulations are remarkably similar to those in use at most modern medical schools today.

Sadly, Salerno did not survive as a major centre of educational excellence. Other schools were founded in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the earliest and most important at Bologna and Padua in Italy and at Montpellier in France. The latter, founded by Guy de Montpellier in the twelfth century, succeeded Salerno as the foremost medical school in the thirteenth century. Visited by returning Crusaders, as Salerno had been, word of the excellence of the medical attention available there gradually spread, and by the thirteenth century Montpellier was providing doctors for the households of popes and kings throughout Europe. Students from France, Spain, Italy and even Britain studied there, and John of Gaddesden, said to have been the model for Chaucer’s doctor in the *Canterbury Tales*, is believed to have trained at Montpellier in the early fourteenth century.

These developments in medical education prepared the way for future progress, but it is important for us to remember that, even after the founding of academic establishments such as Montpellier, the practice of medicine was still largely in the hands of the untrained and the illiterate. The Church may have abandoned its tight hold on medicine but many Church leaders still retained the right to appoint medical practitioners, which they did with little regard for academic achievements. Many of the practitioners licensed by the Church were illiterate, and almost all surgery was performed by the technically, academically and culturally unskilled barber-surgeons. Even more important perhaps were the midwives, wise women and grocer apothecaries who provided what was effectively a general practitioner service for the community. For most people, real medicine still meant witches and midwives who had no formal medical training. The local women understood bones and herbs, while many scholarly physicians were dabbling in astrology, alchemy and an assortment of metaphysical therapies. Paracelsus, the sixteenth-century physician and alchemist, was later to claim that he learnt all he knew from sorceresses, and it seems that, although the academic world was making the break with religion, it had not yet learned to harness the knowledge gleaned over centuries by those ‘general practitioners’ with no formal training.

Mortality at this time is well illustrated by details of events in the first Crusade, which took place in the late eleventh century. It was estimated that half a million soldiers set out on the Crusade but that only 300,000 landed at Aleppo. After the long siege of Antioch only sixty thousand soldiers remained, and when Jerusalem was finally taken, it was an army of some twenty thousand men who half marched and half limped into the Holy City. Hunger, privation and disease had taken a far greater toll than the enemy could ever have done.

Chapter 10: The Black Death

The decline in the Church's power — The start of the Black Death — Mass flagellation — The inability of the Church to control the plague results in a loss of confidence — The economic effects of the plague — The first quarantine regulations

At the beginning of the fourteenth century there were medical schools scattered throughout Europe, and many scholars had revived interest in the teachings of the great Greek physicians. The Church's stranglehold on medical practices had been broken, and many thinking men were questioning the value of accepted medical therapies and beginning to experiment with new theories, diagnostic aids and chemicals. The revolt against the power of the Church had begun to take shape, and the artistic and scientific revolution which was to shake the world was beginning to develop.

Yet despite these theoretical rumblings the quality of care available in most areas of the world was still appalling. Public health facilities were worse than they had been during the Roman Empire; cities stank of refuse, excrement and death, water supplies were polluted and food supplies intermittent. Church and military leaders may have had access to clean hospitals and the medical skills of men who were, at least, literate, but for ordinary citizens health care meant the attentions of local woman with an armful of herbs or, if things went badly, a chance of a share of a dirty, stinking bed in a local hospice.

The absence of proper medical care and public health facilities meant that most of Europe was ripe for an epidemic, and in the fourteenth century it was to succumb to a major one. Epidemics have often changed the course of society, and the Black Death did just that.

For centuries plagues had undoubtedly played an important part in history. For example, it was a plague of some sort which led to the destruction of Greece in the Peloponnesian war. Although today the word 'plague' usually refers to a specific type of infection transmitted by fleas and rats, we have no means of determining exactly what caused those plagues that did so much damage in the past. Diagnostic skills were not well developed, and many of those reporting the spread of any particular plague were quite unskilled. Such plagues could have been bubonic plague, typhus, measles, smallpox or other infections.

The important point is that in small, isolated communities people tended gradually to acquire an immunity to most of the infective organisms which were encountered locally. Those who did not acquire immunity usually died. However, when contact is established between otherwise isolated communities, there is an exchange of infections and diseases. War, trade and other voyages of discovery have often led to the decimation of otherwise healthy nations. (Even in our century there is good evidence for this theory, one of the most dramatic being the islanders of Tristan da Cunha, who had no acquired immunity to the common childhood diseases regarded as trivial by most in the West. The islanders were decimated by simple measles because they had never met it before. This point is of recurring significance in medical history.)

It is now believed that the Black Death started at the trading station of Caffa on the Russian shore of the Black Sea. Merchants from Genoa had taken refuge there from attacking Tartars, who had brought the infection with them from the east, and the Genoese remained besieged in the Caffa for two years. According to legend, the plague entered the city of Caffa when the Tartars began to throw corpses over the walls, using huge catapults to aid them in this, the first recorded episode of biological warfare. When the Tartars gave up their siege and left, they took the plague with them to Russia, India and China, while the Italian merchants returned home, taking the plague to northern Europe.

From Genoa the Black Death spread quickly through Italy between 1345 and 1350. Florence lost between a third and a half of its inhabitants to the disease. From Italy the plague spread through France and Germany. It first arrived in England at Weymouth in Dorset in June 1348, and then quickly spread to London, where, because of the poor social conditions, it devastated the city.

The Black Death produced a state of panic in Europe. In Spain the clergy declared that the plague was caused by the opera; in England bishops claimed that it was a punishment handed down by God to a nation too enthusiastic about the theatre. Some clerics insisted that it was caused by witches, others that long-pointed shoes were responsible! One popular theory was that Jews were poisoning the wells and, as a result, in Burgundy alone fifty thousand Jews were forced to confess and then burnt to death. At Basle and Freiburg all known Jews were herded into a large wooden building which was set on fire, and at Strasbourg thousands were hanged. Many fled to Germany and Poland to reach safety.

One bizarre result of the plague was the spread of mass flagellation throughout Europe. Thinking that the plague was a divine chastisement and that by flagellation the penance might be diverted, many thousands roamed Europe whipping them selves. Even Pope Clement ordered public flagellations at Avignon in an attempt to stop the plague.

Another sign of the unbalancing effect of the disease was the spread of other types of mass hysteria involving repentant sinners. The wild dance of St. Vitus, for example, spread rapidly across Europe in the wake of the plague, and the dancing mania caught up thousands.

In 1349 the war that England had been waging with France was temporarily halted while both sides got their breath. It was not resumed until 1355.

In southern France the Pope consecrated the River Rhone at Avignon so that corpses could be thrown into the river and considered buried. At sea, ships' crews were completely wiped out. In Britain the plague is believed to have reduced the total population from around four million to two million. Similar reductions in population are believed to have affected other countries, and at a rough estimate it seems likely that over twenty million people died from the plague within a period of a few years.

Whatever the cause of the plague, it soon became only too apparent that neither the medical establishment, the Church nor the local healers had any answer to it. Plenty of remedies were tried: dishes of fresh milk were left on the lips of the dying to absorb the plague poison; herds of oxen and cows were driven through the streets so that their good, clean breath might neutralise the action of the bad city air; goats were kept in bedrooms in the belief that the bad air in a house could be eradicated by a powerful smell; cold, moist, watery foods were blamed, as was excess excitement. Drunkenness was thought responsible by one set of experts, while others said that abstinence caused a greater susceptibility to the plague. Doctors wore cloth helmets and respirators stuffed with herbs in attempts to protect themselves, crosses were chalked on doors and bonfires built in the streets.

The obvious inability of the medical establishment to control the epidemic meant that faith was shattered, and, as the medical establishment and the Church were still closely linked, this also meant that the Church's powerful position in Europe was severely damaged. Loss of confidence in the Church continued and increased during the years which followed.

In Britain at the start of the fourteenth century the feudal system was strong, with the social scale consisting of king, lord, knight, landowner and peasant. The neat regime was brought down by the Black Death which increased the importance of the peasant, redistributed wealth and more or less ended the recurrent outbreaks of famine that had helped to keep peasant classes under control. The Church's influence decreased dramatically, and whereas the killing of Thomas à Becket was received with horror in 1170, the execution of the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1381 was received with cheers. During the next two centuries deviation from established Church thinking led eventually to the Reformation.

The Black Death put ordinary working men, for the first time, in a position of some power. In areas where the death rate had been high, there were gluts of food and shortages of labour. As a result, peasants could move from one area to another and demand better wages and conditions. To keep their land worked, landlords had to offer labourers attractive conditions, and the feudal system by which Europe had been ruled for hundreds of years was broken. Those who survived the plague benefited enormously. Its effects on the world were to last for centuries and to influence the whole history of Europe.

By 1374 the plague had become endemic, returning at irregular intervals to decimate populations just recovering from the previous round of death and destruction. Doctors, clergy and midwives had all proved helpless, and none of the preventive methods or curative techniques had been of any value. But in 1374 the first effective steps designed to control the spread of the plague were introduced. They were brought in not by doctors or others connected with the medical profession but by city administrators in the Venetian republic, which like all major ports was particularly vulnerable to plague attacks.

Regulations, drawn up by Visconti Bernabo stated that those who had contracted the plague should be taken from the built-up areas into fields and left there either to die or to recover; people who had nursed plague patients had to remain in isolation for ten days. The clergy were instructed to examine the sick and to report any cases of the plague to the authorities; anyone who failed to report a case of the plague was liable to be burnt at the stake. Powerful laws were introduced to prevent travellers bringing the plague into the town, and anyone who did so was liable to forfeit all his goods to the state. Ships approaching Venice had to be inspected, and any carrying the infection were refused entry.

These regulations proved so successful in Venice that other towns, cities and republics followed the lead and introduced similar laws. At Ragusa, on the eastern shores of the Adriatic, the local authorities went a little further and built a landing stage some way out of the city and ordered all immigrants and traders to land and remain there for forty days. This isolation period of forty days ('quaranta giomi' in Italian, from which our word 'quarantine' was derived) was soon copied by other port authorities in the Mediterranean area.

Chapter 11: Expanding Horizons

The first printing presses in the fifteenth century — The first international travellers — Magellan, da Gama and Columbus — The spread of information

Two developments in the second half of the fifteenth century had an enormous influence both on the quality and quantity of medical care and on the incidence and spread of disease. Both developments were concerned with communication: the first, printing, greatly influenced the availability of medical information, while the second, international sea travel, led to a devastating exchange of infections between Europe and America.

It is almost impossible to overemphasise the importance of the rapid progress made in the world of printing during the fifteenth century. Today we take it for granted that a major discovery made in one part of the world will be reported in all other parts of the world within hours. Printing processes are now so sophisticated that reports and photographs describing events in Australia can appear on the same day in newspapers in North America. On special occasions books can be on public sale within days of the event they report, and a steady torrent of information rushes around the world at such a rate that our problem today is not in obtaining information but in sifting the useful from the useless.

Before the printing presses began to make knowledge more easily available, the rate at which information could be shared depended on the speed and ease with which educated men could travel. These limitations meant that for centuries developments in Asia, Europe and America continued in isolation. Artistic and scientific advances remained regional or national resources rather than becoming available internationally.

By the fifteenth century students and scholars all around Europe were hungry for books and for the information they contained. One bookseller in Florence was said to have employed up to fifty scribes, and in monasteries throughout Europe monks were busy copying out volumes of all kinds. Printing techniques were not improved by accident; they were an inevitable result of a steadily increasing demand for knowledge and reading matter of all kinds.

It is sometimes said that printing was invented by Johann Gutenberg, but this rather raw assertion suggests that before Gutenberg’s time printing was unknown. In fact, material had already been printed and published for many centuries; the Chinese, for example, are thought to have invented paper about a thousand years before, using wooden blocks to enable them to print books. Gutenberg’s great contribution was to make printing commercial and turn it from a country craft into a widely available industry. He did this by making up pages of type composed of individual letters instead of a single carved block. He used metal to make his individual letter punches, in much the same way as silversmiths and goldsmiths had made metal punches with which they could mark their products, and prepared moulds which enabled him to make an unlimited number of those individual letters with great ease. To print effectively, he had also to prepare a special ink that would work with metal.

These technical advances revolutionised printing and made it possible for those who followed to complete the task of turning a previously little known and little used art form into a basic means of communication for thousands of people. No longer was it necessary for a skilled craftsmen to carve every printing block by hand; Gutenberg’s inventions had made it possible for printers to produce an enormous variety of printed material, easily, accurately and relatively inexpensively.

Gutenberg’s inventions made a tremendous impact: within years printing presses had been set up in most European countries, and books on all subjects were readily available. As a result scholars could share their theories and discoveries without having to spend months travelling, while students could acquire in hours information that it had taken an author years to accumulate. Printed literature spread across Europe, and students of medicine found themselves able to study and question in detail the claims and assertions of all the established masters of their art. The development of those early printing presses had an enormous influence on both the quality and quantity of medical care available.

While Gutenberg and his successors were breaking down one barrier to international communications, such men as Magellan, da Gamma and Columbus were conquering physical constraint by making pioneering voyages of discovery to satisfy commercial need for new trading partners. Until the fifteenth century Europe’s only contact with the rest of the world had been confined to those parts of the East that could be reached by caravan. When, in the middle of the fifteenth century, the Turks sacked Constantinople and blocked the land route, ocean travel became the only alternative. Christopher Columbus sailed across the Atlantic and made his historic landing on American soil in 1492; Vasco da Gama opened a sea route to Asia in 1497, a little more than two centuries after Marco Polo had made his historic overland trip eastward in 1271; and in 1520 Ferdinand Magellan crossed the Pacific Ocean after sailing through the channel linking it with the Atlantic.

These journeys not only made the spread of information and theories international but also effectively destroyed the huge geographical barriers that had isolated different populations on their native continents. In terms of human health, such breaking down of barriers had one major disadvantage: infectious diseases which had become endemic and therefore relatively harmless on one continent could now spread to a new continent where they would meet a population composed entirely of previously unexposed and therefore vulnerable potential victims.

When Christopher Columbus landed in the New World, he could scarcely have imagined the effect that his voyage would have on the economic, physical and spiritual health of future generations. He had no way of knowing that by crossing the Atlantic Ocean he was destroying a massive barrier which had for centuries prevented the exchange of infective organisms between the eastern and western continents.

It is now known that the susceptibility of population to any particular organism or disease depends on a number of variable factors. Hereditary resistance and racial susceptibilities are obviously relevant but perhaps the most important single factor is the amount of exposure that a particular population has had to each disease-including organism. As I explained in a previous chapter continuing exposure to a disease can lead to the development of a valuable level of immunity. Modern epidemiologists have observed that diseases thought to be only mildly dangerous when caught by individuals living in a community where that disease is recognised as endemic, may be fatal when contracted by individuals from a community which has remained previously untouched by the disorder. For example, when Eskimos in the Canadian Arctic caught measles for the first time in 1952, seven in every hundred died. This is a phenomenally high mortality rate for a disease considered rather trivial by most of the populations in the so-called developed Western world. Similarly it has been shown that Indians living in North America suffer far less acutely from tuberculosis than their grandparents suffered a few decades ago. They have acquired a certain amount of resistance to the disease. Medical literature is full of other examples of islanders and isolated tribes who have suffered terribly when exposed to disorders which we think of as trivial.

Chapter 12: The Outcome of Travel

Columbus's voyage has some unexpected results — Syphilis and the trade in infectious diseases — Cortez, smallpox and the conquest of the Aztecs — Maize and potatoes change life in Europe — The international exchange of medical information begins with the introduction of quinine into Europe

By crossing the barrier that had previously separated the American continents from the European continent, Christopher Columbus and those who followed him opened the way for a huge exchange of infections. This 'trade' in bacteria and viruses was to become the most politically, socially and economically important result of the discovery of America.

The disease classically associated with Columbus's maiden voyage is syphilis. Before Columbus returned to Spain, syphilis was either unknown or, at least, mild and unimportant; after his return it became widespread and devastating. Its spread across Europe was helped by the fact that, within a matter of months of Columbus' setting foot on the European mainland, the young French King, Charles VIII, led a campaign in Italy with an army of thirty thousand mercenaries from France, Germany, Switzerland, England, Hungary, Poland, Italy and Spain. Syphilis spread rapidly through the army and its entourage, causing so much damage that Charles had to abandon a siege of Naples and allow his soldiers to return home. Inevitably, they went back to their native countries and took their new infection with them. In the following few years other travellers took the disease to the equally unprepared populations of Africa and the Far East.

For a few decades the association between syphilis and sexual intercourse was not recognised. In Paris, for example, infected people were forbidden even to meet other citizens. The link between sex and syphilis was first recognised in Aberdeen, where the town council had strong things to say about the ways of loose women. Whether they recognised that the disease was infectious or simply considered that immorality inspired punishment from God, it is impossible to say. Whatever the view of the Aberdeen elders, however, the majority of the European aristocracy seemed to find a life of continence too high a price to pay for safety from infection. Members of the French, Spanish and English courts considered syphilis a sign of manhood and, although in an attempt to stem the spread of the disease some public bath houses were closed down (causing standards of personal hygiene to fall even lower), there seems to have been little attempt to stop the spread of the infection. One observer, Erasmus, is even quoted as commenting that any nobleman who did not get syphilis was either not very noble or not much of a gentleman.

Whatever the military and economic results of such widespread infection, the political effects were sometimes dramatic. Ivan the Terrible, the first Tsar of all the Russias is believed to have been suffering from tertiary syphilis when he rampaged through his homeland slaughtering peasants by the thousand.

England's Henry VIII is commonly thought to have had syphilis, and it may be that his difficulty in siring an heir was a result of the infection. It is possible that the resultant constitutional troubles might have been avoided had Columbus and his men chosen to sail in some other direction.

The trade in infectious diseases which followed the first crossings of the Atlantic was not, of course, undirectional. The people of Europe may have suffered from the introduction of syphilis but the inhabitants of the Americas certainly suffered from the introduction of European diseases.

The travellers intent on colonising, conquering or emptying the rich lands of America took a whole range of disorders into a country which was relatively untroubled by infectious diseases and where, therefore, the population had had no opportunity to build up any resistance to infection.

Although measles and diphtheria were among the disease which crossed the Atlantic from east to west, the most important was probably smallpox, which is believed to have been taken across by Cortez. Smallpox was as important a factor in the conquest of Mexico as the fighting skill and bravery of the conquistadores, and the deadly nature of the disease spreading its way through a population with no natural immunity gave Cortez an enormous advantage. With an army of no more than six hundred men he conquered the Aztec Empire and saw his own culture and religion adopted by the natives. It is not surprising that the unhappy Indians should consider the God of the conquerors more powerful than their own when they saw the Spaniards immune to a disease which was causing death and destruction to their own race.

The effect of smallpox on the American population can best be judged from the fact that, before contact with the east was established, the total population of Mexico was probably between twenty five and thirty million. Fifty years later it was a tenth of that, and it halved again in the next fifty years. It is remarkably easy in such circumstances for a conquering army to impose a totally effective rule on a defeated nation.

Once it had been introduced from the continent, smallpox spread from population to population. From Mexico it travelled to Guatemala, and from there it attacked the Incas, making them easy prey for the conquering Pizarro. Travelling armies from Europe soon realised that, while they themselves had considerable immunity to smallpox, the local inhabitants were extraordinarily vulnerable. Less scrupulous invaders would help spread the disease by handing infected blankets to local people.

Contact between Europe and the Americas did not just lead to changes in the socio-economic status of the American peoples; it also led to changes in European life. Two widely available products used as foodstuffs in American, maize and potatoes, were unknown in Europe and when they were imported they helped to change the dietary habits of millions. Both products enabled farmers to produce large quantities of high calorie foods from relatively small amounts of land. This inevitably had an effect on the health of the population and on the political composition of Europe. Changes in the types of food available also led to changes in the type of diseases seen. For example, it is clear that the incidence of dental decay in Europe increased rapidly following the import of plentiful sugar supplies from America.

Those fifteenth and sixteenth century expeditions also had one more important consequence: they led to the first international exchange of medical information. Quinine, extracted from the cinchona bark, was imported to Europe by explorers returning from Peru, where for years the natives had been using it to treat malaria. Quinine quickly became established as a vital element in the pharmacological armamentarium of any self respecting physician but it also had a far more important effect on European medical practices. Until quinine was introduced, the practice of pharmacology had been an untidy mixture of folklore and witchcraft. The acknowledgement that quinine provided a specific solution to a particular problem was the key which opened the flood gates to the introduction of many other pharmacologically active compounds. Quinine was one of the first drugs to have a recognised beneficial effect and to be clearly associated with a specific set of symptoms. In the years that followed, many other drugs were suggested, tested, tried and accepted, and the practice of medicine slowly became a genuine science.

Chapter 13: The Rejection of Old Ideas

Controversial characters in the history of medicine — Paracelsus perhaps the most colourful of them all — Vesalius and the first textbook of human anatomy — It is recognised that Galen might be wrong — Paré's contribution to surgery — Treating the patient as a whole man — The rebirth of medicine

The history of medicine is richly peppered with fascinating, colourful and often controversial characters. The Renaissance was an excellent time for men who were more interested in scientific truth than in acknowledged prejudices, and the first half of the sixteenth century was a time of much controversy and original thinking.

The advances made during that period can be illustrated by describing the lives of three men, Paracelsus, Vesalius and Paré.

One of the most controversial and undoubtedly one of the most colourful characters in medical history, who may well have contributed as much as any other individual in the history of medical science, Paracelsus, was christened Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim when he was born in 1493. Better known as Paracelsus, this Swiss born citizen, who died in 1541, tore into the precepts of established medical thinking with all the zeal of an inspired missionary. He revolutionised medical thinking throughout Europe.

The most revealing of the many stories about Paracelsus reports him as having claimed to have learned more from his contact with witches and midwives than from a study of the ancient and previously well respected texts of such classical authors as Galen. Paracelsus believed that it was possible to learn only by experience and personal study, and he travelled widely in the search for useful medical information. He went to Spain, Portugal, France, Italy, Germany, Scandinavia, Egypt, Arabia, Palestine, Russia, Poland, Turkey, Holland and England to study, work drink and make friends. He wrote books, lectured, practised medicine and argued in Montpellier, Padua, Bologna, Basle, Vienna, Tubingen, Wittenberg, Leipzig, Heidelberg and Cologne — almost all the major medical centres of Europe. No idea or theory was too bizarre for his attention and no concept or belief too sacred to be rejected. He studied alchemy, astrology and herbal medicine in his search for information.

Unlike the established medical authors of the time, Paracelsus believed that a doctor's job was to understand the causes and symptoms of different diseases and to prescribe specific solutions where appropriate. He also believed in the importance of preventing disease and was one of the first members of the medical profession to recognise that there is often an association between a man's employment and his physical condition.

Paracelsus's writings make formidable reading, but it was not only his specific discoveries which made him such an important figure in Renaissance medicine: he was the first man to associate mining with certain chest diseases, to link cretinism and goitres with certain alpine areas, to use mercury in the treatment of syphilis, to advocate allowing wounds to drain instead of smothering them with layers of dried dung, and to argue that some foods contained poisons which had a deleterious effect on the human body. But all these important advances seem almost irrelevant when put alongside his philosophical contributions and his effect on the attitude of the men studying medicine in the sixteenth century.

Paracelsus was really the first 'people's doctor', and he proudly claimed that he pleased only the sick and not the profession. He bombarded medical students and scholars with a seemingly endless selection of almost blasphemous assertions, which encouraged them to think for themselves and to reject the previously unquestioned preachings of such authorities as Galen. He seems at times to have enjoyed humiliating the establishment, as for example when he welcomed barber-surgeons as well as official medical students to his lectures at Basle, but there is little doubt that this extraordinary man was the father of modern medicine and the sixteenth century equivalent of Hippocrates.

Andreas Vesalius, the second of this trio of Renaissance pioneers, was born in 1514 at about the time that Paracelsus embarked on his travels. Vesalius achieved contemporary notoriety and eternal fame as the author of the first textbook of human anatomy, *De Humanis Corporis Fabrica.* The end of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth century in Europe had seen a tremendous upsurge in interest in human anatomy, and with increasing numbers of students and scholars able to study copies of the ancient texts produced by such men as Galen it was inevitable that the infallibility of these ideas was questioned. Once it was recognised that Galen could be wrong, many students began to offer original observations and theories. The inaccuracy of Galen's anatomical notes was made more obvious by the fact that, for the first time in centuries, human anatomy could be studied by practical dissection, now that the influence of the Church had declined. As a result artists and students of medicine were all anxious to dissect, study and draw human cadavers. Leonardo da Vinci was one of the many multitalented Renaissance men whose interests included anatomy. Contemporaries such as Michelangelo, Raphael and Durer all performed their own dissections and made drawings as they struggled to improve their knowledge of human anatomy.

Da Vinci had planned to publish a textbook of anatomical drawings, but Vesalius was the first to do so. His frank rejection of many of Galen’s anatomical claims earned him considerable disapproval, since leaders of the medical establishment still firmly believed that Galen could not be wrong, even if the evidence proved otherwise. For more than a thousand years Galen had been considered beyond criticism, and his reputation was not to be easily overthrown.

Poor Vesalius was unable to cope with the outcry his researches in anatomy produced. He burnt his remaining manuscripts, abandoned the study of anatomy and took a job as court physician to Charles V in Madrid. But those who attacked him could not change the fact that Vesalius’s book had revealed the fallibility of the ancient texts, and the study of anatomy continued in art centres and medical schools all over Europe.

The increasing amount of information about the anatomy of the human body led, quite naturally, to a tremendous improvement in the quality of surgical care. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, surgery was almost completely in the hands of uneducated wanderers who could be just as happy gelding a man’s pig or cutting his hair as amputating his leg. The barbersurgeons were indeed barbers, who supplemented their income from work with the scissors by working with the knife.

However, once it became clear that anatomical understanding could make the preparation and execution of surgical operations more of a scientific endeavour than an exercise in butchery, more educated men began to take up the profession. In the early part of the sixteenth century in France and England, physicians at last acknowledged surgeons as professional colleagues.

Ambrose Paré was one of the best known and most successful of those early surgeons. He made several significant, practical contributions to surgical science, discarding the ancient but well established view that wounds should be treated with boiling oil and introducing such refinements as ligatures, artificial limbs and artery forceps.

Wise, ingenious and humane, Paré came from a medical family. His father, uncle and brother were all barber-surgeons. Because he had received little formal education Paré could not obtain a place at the Paris University to study the medical classics. Instead he worked and studied surgery at the Hotel Dieu, the hospital which had served Paris for several centuries. Saved in this way from indoctrination, Paré acquired a sound basic surgical education which enabled him to obtain a post as an army surgeon. Fortunately for him, France was always at war for the next two decades and he was able to get plenty of practical experience. It was while working with the army that Paré made his greatest contributions to the available reservoir of information and achieved a reputation such that, when he retired from army work and set up in private practice, he became a royal surgeon.

Paré was one of the first surgeons to approach his work with sufficient skill and professional diligence to help demolish the dreadful reputation endured by previous members of his profession. He recognised that surgery could not be divorced from nursing care, nor from medical care in general, and by his own practical example Paré helped to establish the practice of surgery as a respectable medical speciality.

Chapter 14: New Ideas but Old Practices

In practical terms the medical revolution has had little effect — Astrology and medical practice — The importance of Nostradamus and Copernicus — The local midwife is the general practitioner for most families — The standard of obstetric care — The infant mortality rate

The theoretical advances and practical improvements introduced by such men as Paracelsus and Paré played an important part in the subsequent development of medical practice, but it was many years before the ordinary citizen noticed any real improvement in the quality of medical care available to him.

Despite the advances in printing techniques and the increasing numbers of Europeans travelling, talking and studying in foreign towns and countries, the old medical practices were slow to disappear. The dramatic new ideas introduced by men like Paracelsus were largely rejected by members of the medical establishment and totally ignored by the midwives and witches who between them provided advice and care for the great majority of the European population.

Surgery was practised by men who often doubled as barbers, pedlars, tinkers, conjurers and rat-catchers, and apart from the small number of practitioners of the quality of Ambrose Paré, most surgeons, whether they catered for the working people or for royalty, were both uneducated and incompetent.

Although a few physicians in practice had studied medicine at one of the great universities, in such centres as Montpellier, Padua and Paris, and would therefore have acquired a certain amount of traditional theoretical knowledge, most professional medical workers had practical skills which were based more on superstition and folklore than on a background of scientific information.

The orthodox physician relied heavily on such skills as astrology, palmistry and the study of urine as diagnostic aids, although the accuracy of such techniques was probably no more reliable then than it is today. Astrology, in particular, was widely used by leading members of the medical profession. Brought to Europe from Arabia, astrology had by the sixteenth century become a subject which fascinated all men who claimed to have any interest in learning. Medical men believed that different signs of the zodiac ruled over different parts of the body and that, consequently, a study of the states of the planets at one particular time would help them to reach a conclusion about the health of a particular patient. Sagittarius, for example, was thought to have power over the human thighs. The study of astrology closely accompanied the study of medicine in the sixteenth century, and since a knowledge of astrology depended upon an understanding of astronomy, the three specialities were closely linked.

Nicholas Copernicus, the astronomer who demonstrated that planets rotate around their own axes and also around the sun, studied medicine at Padua in 1501 and spent the latter part of his life studying astronomy and practising medicine. Copernicus founded his diagnostic skills on the science of astrology and based his prescribing habits on the teachings of Galen. One of his prescriptions contained powdered gold, silver, emerald, sapphire, coral and a score of other substances.

Astrology reached its zenith in the middle of the sixteenth century when Michael de Notredame, better known as Nostradamus, was alive and prophesying. Nostradamus was the best known and most widely read seer of the Renaissance years and he, like Copernicus, also practised medicine. Nostradamus began making prophecies in 1547 and quickly proved himself so successful that he was appointed to cast horoscopes at the court of Henry II of France. He was also appointed as physician to Charles IX when he became King in 1560.

Even the preparing of prescriptions was considered by some doctors to need the astrology chart, and as late as 1660 John Locke, the philosopher and doctor, argued that medicinal herbs should be picked only at astrologically propitious times.

The power of the astrologer remained an important force throughout the sixteenth century, partly because the astrologers carefully protected themselves by arguing that if a prediction (and therefore a diagnosis) was wrong it was the fault of the patient, either for demanding too hasty an analysis or for feeding the astrologer with inaccurate information. It is difficult not to compare the fashion for consulting astrologers in the sixteenth century with the fashion for consulting psychoanalysts in the twentieth.

However, all this was of practical interest to relatively few people. Astrology and astronomy could be studied only by physicians who could afford the time and equipment. Most of the physicians who had studied at one of the great universities had to be content with bleeding or purging their patients or administering concoctions prepared with more imagination than scientific skill. Paracelsus might have been burning Galen’s books, but the majority of physicians still followed the Roman’s advice and prepared medicines containing a plethora of ingredients.

Indeed the total number of practising physicians in the sixteenth century was so small that the greater part of the population never saw a qualified or educated doctor. This fact is often forgotten by medical historians who describe in great detail the exploits of such men as Paracelsus and Paré and leave the reader with the impression that the ordinary citizen could expect a home visit or a surgery consultation with one or the other.

In reality most citizens relied on local women to provide them with medical help, as they had and would do for many centuries; the midwife was effectively the local general practitioner, treating all illnesses, major and minor, with her own selection of herbal remedies. Ironically, the quality of care which she provided may well have been better than that provided by the officially recognised physicians. Paracelsus recognised this fact and made a point of seeking out the local midwives on his travels to ask for details of their remedies, recommendations and recipes. Unfortunately, many well tried and effective herbal remedies were ignored for centuries, simply because the formally educated practitioners would not deign to interest themselves in the type of care provided by midwives for the ordinary people.

Midwives crossed social barriers only when it came to obstetrics, a speciality which was practised at all levels with an appalling lack of success. Difficult labours almost always led to the death of both mother and child, and even entirely normal labours were so dangerous that a pregnant woman probably had only a fifty per cent chance of surviving the experience. Babies and pregnant women are, of course, most vulnerable to unhygienic conditions, and it was the midwives’ failure to understand the importance of cleanliness that contributed most to the appalling death toll of mothers and their infants.

The high infant mortality rate, which lasted for many more years, helped to keep the population of Europe relatively stable for a considerable time, and it still distorts the mortality statistics for that era. It is commonly believed that life expectancy at that time was no more than a few decades, but if we look at the ages at which memorable figures of the sixteenth century are reported to have died, we can easily see that this was by no means always the case. Paracelsus, who was killed in a brawl, was forty eight when he died, Vesalius reached fifty, da Vinci was sixty seven, Michelangelo eighty nine, Nostradamus sixty three, Copernicus seventy and Paré eighty.

For everyone, rich and poor, royal and common, the quality of general medical care in the sixteenth century was scarcely different from that in the Middle Ages. Philosophers and scientists had made the first steps towards improving the quality of life and the quality of available medicine, but their efforts were, as yet, unnoticed.

Chapter 15: The Decline of the Church

The power of the Church continues to decline — Henry VIII and Thomas Linacre — The seeds of a medical profession are sown — Hospitals are so dirty that it is safer to stay at home

For centuries the Church had maintained a stranglehold on medical care. The clergy often provided general medical services, the ecclesiastical authorities made medical appointments, and many hospitals were owned and run by monks, nuns and priests.

Then, in the space of a relatively short period, the power of the Church in Europe declined rapidly. This breakdown of ecclesiastical prestige to a large extent removed the care of the sick from the control of the Church.

It was in England that some of the most dramatic events occurred. Thomas Linacre, one of the physicians appointed to care for Henry VIII, managed to persuade the King to provide a charter for a body of physicians who would be entitled to examine and license would-be medical practitioners. Not to be outdone by a mere physician, one of Henry's surgeons, Thomas Vicary, obtained the King's assent a few years later to form a united company of barber-surgeons. The ambitious and rather unsuccessful aim of this new union was to keep surgery for the surgeons and to keep barbers in their place.

Henry VIII's attempts to regulate medical services in England may have looked good in theory but in practice they were something of a disaster. Neither of the newly formed colleges (both of which later became known as royal colleges and which are today official examining bodies for physicians and surgeons) could produce enough qualified practitioners to provide medical care for the whole population. By the end of the sixteenth century the College of Physicians had thirty-one 'fellows'. Unhappily, the legislation which had been passed made it illegal for anyone not qualified to offer advice or help.

The next, almost inevitable, step was the 1542 Quacks' Charter which allowed unqualified practitioners, usually known as apothecaries, to sell herbs to patients on the understanding that they would not charge fees for advice or information about their use. The brighter, literate and more ambitious apothecaries undoubtedly read some of the medical books that appeared on the market in the middle of the sixteenth century. These books, most of which dealt with the use of herbal remedies, were also popular among ordinary people who simply wanted to know a little about home medical care.

Change was not confined to the medical profession. In 1536 the City of London authorities pointed out to the King that hospitals which once provided beds for the poor and the sick now often housed priests and monks who wanted somewhere comfortable to live in the capital. Subsequently, many Church-run hospitals were dissolved, further reducing the power and wealth of the ecclesiastical authorities.

Not that the disappearance of hospitals was likely to have made much difference to the quality of care available for the sick. The lack of any effective, reliable ways to make diagnoses or to treat patients meant that for centuries hospitals had offered nothing more than a place where cripples, beggars, the sick and the weak could rest and die in some peace. Even one of the best European hospitals, the Hotel Dieu in Paris, which had survived wars, plagues and political struggles, was dirty and overcrowded. The Augustinian sisters who tried to look after patients bundled together on piles of dirty straw had to contend with insufficient food and too many patients. They almost certainly found it impossible to keep the patients or the wards clean, although they are reported to have tried valiantly to keep their linen and bandages clean by washing them in the Seine. It is quite likely that an otherwise healthy individual with a single disease was better off being ill at home than in a hospital where infections could spread almost unimpeded.

Chapter 16: Scientific Advances

Progress in medicine influenced from without – The first medical equipment — Galileo, Sanctorius and Kircher — Microscopy adds a new dimension — Harvey and the circulation of the blood — The irrelevance of these theoretical advances to practical care

Progress in medicine has always been influenced by many factors outside the formal medical establishment. Many of the most important medical discoveries and innovations introduced and accepted within the last two centuries were proposed not by physicians or surgeons but by politicians, engineers, physicists and chemists.

This apparent anomaly was as true in the sixteenth century as it is today. In some respects it was undoubtedly easier then for scientists who were not practising doctors to introduce theories designed to influence medical knowledge or practice. After all, there were no strict boundaries between different disciplines in those days, and it was common for one man to maintain an interest in a great many subjects. The lack of scientific journals and the paucity of solid factual material with which to fill textbooks made it comparatively easy for a man to become an expert in several apparently unconnected fields. It is probably also true to say that the general shortage of factual information produced a favourable climate for creative thinkers. An absence of acquired prejudices often makes it easier for someone with a superficial knowledge of a subject to see fundamental truths more speedily than would be the case for a devoted student who has listened to the ideas of all other existing experts.

Many people made notable contributions to medical science in the sixteenth century without apparently having anything more than a passing, natural interest in human health. For example, there were the scientists who helped to provide doctors with a system of measurements with which they could accurately assess and compare various anatomical and physiological qualities. Today we take it for granted that doctors routinely carry out a wide range of tests when performing a physical examination: many of those tests are designed to enable the physician to compare the patient's physiological performance with an accepted standard. So, for example, the humblest physician will usually be able to weigh his patient and to calculate his pulse rate. Taking note to these measurements enables the physician to assess the patient's condition in comparison with other patients and to compare his condition at that particular time with his condition at other times. Most of the diagnostic and therapeutic skills available to the modern doctor depend heavily upon the availability of simple measuring devices.

Galileo was one of the sixteenth century Italians who played a vital part in the design and building of the basic pieces of equipment with which these assessments are made. While attending a cathedral service he is said to have watched a lamp swinging on a long chain from the roof and to have used it to measure the beat of his pulse. One of his contemporaries, Sanctorius, designed and built the first weighing machine and the first clinical thermometer.

The microscope was, perhaps, the one instrument which made the most impact on the way in which medical science progressed during the seventeenth century. No single scientist can be given the exclusive credit for having invented the microscope, and it seems likely that early attempts to magnify with the aid of ground glass took place in different parts of Europe more or less simultaneously. Several investigators quickly realised its value as a scientific instrument. Athanasius Kircher, a Jesuit priest, was probably the first man to use the microscope to investigate the causes of disease; Robert Hooke, who worked in London, was the first to describe individual cells; Jan Swammerdam of Amsterdam used the microscope to help him dissect small organisms, while another Dutchman, Antonie van Leeuwenhoek, was the first person to describe red blood cells, spermatozoa and bacteria.

The equipment designed by these early scientists provided the basis for a new type of medical philosophy which was expounded by men like René Descartes, the seventeenth century philosopher, who regarded the human body as nothing more nor less than a complex piece of machinery. This crude (and inaccurate) approach may well have appalled the clerics but it undoubtedly took medical science forward in rapid strides. Once scientists had begun to regard the human body as a mechanical device, they could start to prepare accurate physiology texts. For example, three seventeenth century Italians, Giovanni Alfonso Borelli, Marcello Malpighi and Giorgio Baglivi studied, experimented on and wrote about muscles, lungs, stomach and kidneys. These discoveries about human tissues and physiology had little effect on practical medical care, but they provided the background information upon which future clinicians could work to develop diagnostic skills and therapeutic aids.

Both Galileo and Sanctorius worked at Padua, as did William Harvey, the English physician regarded by many historians as the most eminent and influential figure of that time. Like Malpighi and the others who based their approach on the understanding that the human body operates like a machine, Harvey first made a study of the existing theories and hypotheses and then examined them one by one by experimentation, using mechanical aids and mechanical arguments to help them.

Theories about the circulation of the blood had been proposed, argued and refuted by scientists and physicians of almost every era. Speculation had for many years been based on Galen's belief that the blood circulating in the arteries was different from the blood circulating in the veins, that both kinds of blood ebbed and flowed rather than circulated around the body and that blood permeated within the heart from the right side to the left. Galen's claims misled medical scientists for many generations. For some years before Harvey published his monograph *De Motu Cordis* in 1628, scientists had made educated guesses about the functions and actions of human blood. Theories were advanced in Italy by Colombo and Cesalpino, and in Spain by Michael Servetus, who was burnt alive in 1553 by the Protestant leader John Calvin for publishing a book which included the suggestion that a separate pulmonary circulation existed within the lungs, but Harvey was the first person to produce experimental proof for his theory. He realised that, since the heart was pumping blood along with every beat, it must be moving the blood somewhere. It seems obvious to us now that the blood had to be moving around the body in a closed circulatory system, but that single, simple conclusion earned William Harvey immortality.

Harvey's original thinking and his ability to prove his ideas led to many changes in medical research and practical care. His theory that blood is pumped around the body in a continuous cycle led directly to the discovery of many other basic physiological facts. It also slowly led to the realisation that blood loss during operations could be fatal and that blood-letting, by leeching or cupping, was not always an entirely logical procedure. It also refuted the theory that weakness and blood loss could be remedied by drinking human blood — a belief which had survived until the fifteenth century, when Pope Innocent VIII had been given fresh blood from three healthy young boys to drink.

All these men made enormously important contributions to medical science and provided small but essential pieces of information, which helped later researchers to acquire an overall understanding of human physiology, and equipment with which to test their theories. The watch and clock, the thermometer, the weighing machine and the microscope all enabled the inquisitive scientist to access and study the workings of the human body with some precision. In the centuries which followed research workers would be able to build on their theories and use the facts obtained to help improve both the quality and quantity of medical care available to the ordinary citizen.

Chapter 17: The Dawn of a New Era

Practical medical care in the hands of midwives, the apothecaries, the surgeons and the physicians — The roles and values of each group — Louis XIII and Molière — Thomas Sydenham revives the Hippocratic style.

While scientists such as Galileo, Malpighi and Harvey were performing experiments and providing theories to benefit future generations, medical care for sixteenth and seventeenth century Europeans was in the hands of four groups of often unskilled and ineffective ‘professionals’.

For the great majority, medical care still meant a consultation with the local midwife, an often illiterate woman whose limited skills depended largely upon her knowledge of well tried herbal remedies. Many midwives had served apprenticeships with their mothers, from whom they had acquired their knowledge and practical skills, but occasionally, in an area where there was no recognised midwife, a woman thought to have the necessary practical experience would be appointed or elected to the post.

In spite of their lack of formal training, many midwives were popular, effective and well paid. In the seventeenth century 10 shillings would have been a good fee for a consultation with a physician, but it was not unknown for midwives to be paid more than this. In 1613 Margaret Mercer was reputedly paid 80 guineas for a single confinement in Germany, while in 1605 Alice Dennis received slightly more for attending the Queen. Two midwives who attended the court of James II were each paid 500 guineas. These enormous sums of money suggest that the ordinary midwife was by no means always regarded as an inferior member of the health care team.

The standards of care and hygiene practised by midwives are often considered to have been abysmally low but, although characters such as Charles Dickens’s fictional Mrs Gamp *(Martin Chuzzlewit)* undoubtedly existed, in reality their conduct was governed by a number of regulations. The first were probably drawn up in Germany in 1452 but subsequently municipal and ecclesiastical authorities throughout Europe did what they could to ensure that midwives were honourable, honest and professional in their approach. From the sixteenth century midwives took oaths to be ready and faithful to their patients, and in England in 1646 midwives submitted a written complaint to Parliament stating that they were unable to maintain the necessary standards because of a lack of official recognition.

While the more literate and intelligent midwives were struggling for professional status and recognition, those members of the profession with the least knowledge and the most limited skills were often tempted to dabble in witchcraft. This was a risky but potentially very profitable exercise in the superstitious years of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. If a woman was accused of witchcraft and found guilty, she was likely to die; if she could manage to obtain a reputation for being a witch without attracting the attention of the authorities, she could enhance her prestige, reputation and income considerably. The damage done to the role of women in medicine by such activities was, however, enormous. Those midwives who did practise witchcraft effectively destroyed the cause of their colleagues by providing the authorities with much needed evidence to justify a war against women health professionals.

Witch-hunting was first organised in the fourteenth century by those members of the medieval church who controlled medical education and practice. It was, perhaps, the first illustration of the lengths to which the professional establishment will go in order to protect its own interests. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries thousands were executed all over Europe; women were burned alive at the stake in Germany, France, Italy and England. The official argument was a simple one: a woman was not allowed to study medicine, and if she claimed to be able to cure the sick in any way, clearly she had to be a witch, working with the aid of the devil.

Those midwives who practised witchcraft gave such men as Matthew Hopkins, the English Witchfinder General, sufficient reason to continue their cruel campaign into the seventeenth century, although by this time the importance of midwives was beginning to be officially recognised.

The second important category of medical professionals was the apothecaries, who were legally allowed to sell prescriptions for herbal remedies but were not permitted to charge for advice. In practice, of course, the ambitious apothecary would charge a high price for the substances he sold and hide the price of his personal, professional services in the price of the drug.

In England in 1617, King James I granted a charter which gave apothecaries the exclusive privilege of selling and preparing medicines. A seven year apprenticeship was ordered and would-be members of the new profession had to find a position with an existing apothecary. Through their practical training they acquired a sound understanding not only of the drugs available but of the indications and hazards of drug therapies. By allowing the apothecaries an exclusive right to prepare and sell medicines, the established physicians had unwittingly lost the chance to retain exclusive control of the direction of the medical profession. The seventeenth century apothecaries were the predecessors of today’s general practitioners, but in practice there were too few apothecaries to provide a service for more than a small percentage of the population. At the beginning of the century there were only just over a hundred apothecaries in England. The midwives, numerically far superior, still played a more important part in medical care as far as most people were concerned.

The third group of health care professionals were the surgeons. They were still considered far inferior to physicians and often operated under the strict instructions of the more formally educated members of the medical profession. A would-be surgeon had to serve an apprenticeship but, despite the advances which had been made in anatomy, physiology and all the experimental sciences, the ordinary surgeon was still relatively ignorant The sixteenth and seventeenth century physicians considered themselves superior to all other medical practitioners. In practical terms, however, the early members of the Royal College of Physicians, probably provided care inferior to that given by an efficient and caring local midwife. Because few physicians were officially trained, they were usually found only in large cities.

The French playwright and satirist Molière described the leading members of the medical profession as arrogant buffoons, and the evidence seems to support him. Doctors in seventeenth century France were still prescribing remedies which were more likely to do harm than good. Louis XIII, for example, was regularly purged with suppositories from the age of ten days, and in a single year it is said that he had 212 enemas, 215 purges and, just for good measure, forty seven bleedings. The young Marquis de Fors, who, in 1640, at the age of twenty, was wounded in combat at Arras, was bled twelve times by Cardinal Richelieu’s personal physician. This was twelve years after Harvey had published his account of the circulation of the blood.

Medical care in other parts of Europe was little better, and old fashioned theories were slow to disappear. When Charles II of England had a fit in 1685 while being shaved, he was at tended by fourteen leading physicians who treated him by taking blood and providing an emetic and a purgative. They also shaved his head and applied blistering agents to his scalp, put special plasters containing pigeon droppings onto the soles of his feet and gave him a medicine made from a human skull.

The one seventeenth century physician who is widely remembered for his good sense and the high quality of his care was Thomas Sydenham (1624-89). Sydenham was no researcher and he made no great contributions to medical science but he was a conscientious man who helped to raise the standard of general medical care available from the official establishment in Britain. Sydenham based his medical philosophy on that of Hippocrates, watching his patients carefully in order to take note of all those signs and symptoms which might provide a clue to the diagnosis. Preferring simple remedies to complex mixtures and sometimes bravely admitting that there was no suitable remedy worthy trying. Sydenham helped to take the medical profession into a new era. He prescribed iron for anaemia, quinine for malaria, and used opium to help treat pain.

His classical commonsense approach helped to prepare the medical profession for the flood of new information, ideas and treatments which would be produced by the medical scientists who had benefited from the breakthroughs inspired by such men as Galileo and Harvey. Thomas Sydenham established a new tradition of clinical observation and professional scepticism which was, in its own way, as revolutionary as the ‘discoveries’ of the experimentalists.

Chapter 18: The Nature of Infection

The nature of infectious disorders — The plague in Europe — Other infectious disorders cause havoc

During the Renaissance many attempts were made to explain the precise nature of infectious diseases. The most astonishing attempt was the work of Hieronymus Fracastorius, a Veronese nobleman who, in 1541, published a book entitled *De Contagione. Fracastorius*, whose foresight stands out even among the extraordinary intellectual explosions of the sixteenth century, suggested that contagious diseases were disseminated by small particles of matter which were able to multiply rapidly and which could be spread through the air, by simple, direct contact or from one individual to another through infected clothing. This valuable book was virtually ignored at the time because there was no real evidence to support the theory. It was almost another 150 years before the remarkable microscopist Antonie van Leeuwenhoek, who worked as a draper and city hall janitor in Delft and who had ground more than four hundred lenses and built more than two hundred microscopes in his spare hours, described bacteria for the first time.

Meanwhile, epidemics continued to affect Europe, and the mortality rate from infectious diseases was still as great in the seventeenth century as it had been in the less enlightened Middle Ages. The plague hit Italy in 1630 and killed 80,000 in Milan alone. In the Venetian Republic over half a million are said to have died. In Moscow in 1603 more than 120,000 succumbed, in 1679 Vienna lost 70,000, and in Prague in 1681 83,000 died.

Throughout the century the plague came and went, affecting France, Italy, Denmark, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, Spain, the Netherlands and England. Individual attacks of plague were often followed by economic disaster and famine. London was affected in 1624 when 41,000 were killed, in 1635 when another 10,000 died and finally in 1664 when the total number of dead was nearly 70,000. Europe is still littered with statues and local customs originally created by citizens anxious to give thanks for having avoided the plague. In the English county of Derbyshire, for example, where the villagers of Eyam contracted plague through a parcel of clothes sent from London, many modern villagers still dress and deck their wells with flowers each year. The wells enabled the individual villages to remain tightly knit, closed communities and therefore helped to prevent the spread of the plague.

Attempts to prevent the plague spreading and to deal with those suffering from the disease varied from town to town and from country to country. Since no one knew exactly what caused the plague or helped it to spread, attempts to control it were not always devoid of hysteria and superstition. Terrified by this horrible disease angry mobs would kill any individual thought to have helped spread it.

Colbert, Minister to Louis XIV, issued regulations for the whole of France in 1683 which gave a considerable amount of power to the Board of Health and quarantine station in Marseilles. Houses where individuals had contracted the plague were burned to the ground. In Milan a writer who wiped his ink stained fingers on the walls of houses he passed was stripped, shaved, purged and then tortured. His right hand was cut off, he was stretched on the wheel, his bones were broken and his body was burned. Finally his ashes were thrown into the river and his belongings were all burnt. A servant girl in Germany who infected herself and her master with the plague by bringing infected property into their home in Königsberg died, but angry, frightened townsfolk ensured that she was exhumed, hanged and then burned at the foot of the gallows.

However, several local authorities introduced useful regulations. In the English village of Faversham the local council appointed three wardens to examine people trying to enter the town and to exclude those who had come from well known plague areas. A woman was paid to search for dead bodies, which were then buried in lime filled pits. Infected clothing was burnt in huge fires which were never allowed to go out. In 1667 Sir William Petty introduced a plan to reduce plagues in London which was based on the far sighted economic argument for a medical service provided by the State. Petty suggested that the value to society of a healthy individual far exceeded the cost of providing a basic health service to the State and of organising a form of preventive medicine.

In the end, however, the plague died away not as a result of any human intervention but for reasons of its own. Epidemiologists are still puzzled by the way the disease seemed to disappear from Europe, making one last attack on Marseilles in 1720, when fifty thousand people were killed, and then disappearing until the end of the nineteenth century. Some historians argue that the plague was transmitted by fleas which lived on the black rat and that it disappeared when the black rat was driven out of Europe by the brown rat, which has a different flea and does not live so close to human beings. Others claim that the black rat was still common in London after the end of the plague. They suggest that the plague was spread directly from man to man and that its demise was due to an acquired immunity which helped to protect the population.

We shall probably never know why the plague finally died away. But whatever the reason it is unlikely to have had anything to do with medicine or the medical profession. (Nor, incidentally, is there much real support for the popular theory that the Great Fire of London cleansed that city.)

The disappearance of the plague was accompanied by other changes in the incidence of disorders that had previously been endemic in Europe. Leprosy (or the disease known as leprosy), which had at one time affected thousands throughout Europe, had more or less disappeared by the end of the sixteenth century, and syphilis, which had at first decimated the population in some parts of Europe, slowly began to fade in significance.

Other infectious disorders remained rife. Influenza was common on both sides of the Atlantic, smallpox was seen everywhere, while dysentery and typhoid killed millions. The death rate among mothers and infants remained high and half the new born babies in seventeenth century England failed to survive.

Chapter 19: Conflict in the Profession

Jealousy between the apothecaries and the physicians — A struggle between the midwives and the surgeons — Obstetrics attracts interest — Forceps are introduced — The rise of the male midwife and the decline of the female

The conflict and professional jealousy between the apothecaries and the physicians in London continued to develop throughout the seventeenth century. The physicians were themselves very much to blame for the fact that the apothecaries had acquired so much power in such a comparatively short time. Membership of the Royal College of Physicians was limited to so few that any association prepared to license and regulate a body of professionals able to offer medical care and advice was bound to flourish. By the end of the seventeenth century still only a handful of qualified physicians were available for public consultation, whereas there were a thousand licensed apothecaries.

Undoubtedly worried by the fact that the apothecaries seemed to be encroaching upon their professional territory, the physicians made several attempts to regain professional superiority. In 1687 they offered to start treating the poor free of charge and in 1696 founded dispensaries to give free medicine in addition to advice. But still the apothecaries grew in power and popularity.

The conflict came to a head in 1703 when the physicians accused an apothecary called Rose of prescribing medicines without first referring to a physician — a breach of the Act of 1542 which allowed apothecaries only to dispense.

Although the physicians won their case against Rose, the House of Lords reversed the decision after an appeal and ruled that apothecaries could see, examine and prescribe for patients without consulting physicians. The House still maintained, however, that apothecaries could not charge for an examination, but only for the medicine that was dispensed. It is hardly surprising that subsequently most of the consultations between patient and apothecary ended in the handing over of a medicine. It may well be that the modern doctor’s tendency to hand every patient a prescription dates back to that absurd ruling.

The Rose case was a major breakthrough for the apothecaries and a relative disaster for the physicians.

The seventeenth century also saw a struggle for power between the midwives and the surgeons.

Traditionally, obstetrics had been a speciality followed only by women. Midwives had had to compete with male dominance in all other areas of medicine but had ruled over the care of pregnant women and their newborn children without any real interference. All women, from the poorest peasant to members of the Royal families of Europe, relied on midwives when they were expecting babies. Since, in the absence of any form of effective contraception some women spent their adult lives pregnant, midwives had plenty of work.

In the seventeenth century, however, several men began to show an interest in the subject. In 1668 a Frenchman, François Mauriceau, wrote a textbook on the diseases of pregnant women, which included details of how to manage a normal labour, how to turn an unborn child within the womb and how to manage such problems as tubal pregnancy. A Dutchman, Henrik van Deventer, wrote a book in which he described the female pelvis and discussed how abnormalities of the pelvic bones can affect the course of pregnancy. Another Dutchman, Hendrik van Roonhuyze, was an expert at delivering babies by Caesarian section. Perhaps the most extraordinary male midwives were the members of the Chamberlen family. Peter Chamberlen, who attended Queen Henrietta Maria during a miscarriage in1628, invented the first obstetric forceps. The invention, which revolutionised the way in which midwives and surgeons could help the pregnant woman with a difficult delivery, was kept a family secret for two centuries.

Traditionalists of all sorts joined with the established midwives to oppose the men who were beginning to take such an active part in the speciality and who argued that their technical superiority enabled them to provide women with a safer service. The midwives argued that most of the women who were delivered with the aid of instruments could be delivered more safely by hand. Laurence Stem joined in the argument in his book *Tristram Shandy*, in which he seemed to have little faith in the male midwife.

The midwives were not well organised to fight this new aggressive breed of obstetricians and surgeons. Moreover, they were reluctant even to try to use instruments. Slowly their authority diminished. The male midwives began to take over the responsibility for the care of the pregnant woman and left the traditional midwife to cope with the simple nursing.

Chapter 20: A Revolution in Medical Education

The scientific revolution begun by Paracelsus continues — The University of Leyden — Modern medical education is founded

By the end of the seventeenth century, the revolution started by Paracelsus and other early Renaissance scientists had inspired progress all over Europe. Many societies had been formed by academics who wanted to share their ideas with others, notably the Royal Society in London and the Academy of Science in Paris, both founded in the 1660s.

These scientific bodies took advantage of improved printing techniques to publish their own journals. The Royal Society of London, for example, published a great many important papers on scientific advances during the seventeenth century. Entitled *Philosophical Transactions,* the Society's journal published work by Isaac Newton when he developed his theory of gravity and his laws of motion, by Robert Boyle (whose work on gases is remembered by the laws which bear his name), by John Locke (whose *Essay on the Human Understanding* is considered to be a classical piece of philosophical writing), by van Leeuwenhoek (who sent his papers over from Holland) and by Robert Hooke who, working with Boyle, expanded the significance of Harvey's work on the circulation of the blood with a complementary piece of research which showed that the movement of the lungs draws air into the body.

More important, in practical terms, than the publication of these major papers was the effect of the scientific revolution on medication education and subsequently on the quantity and quality of medical graduates.

The impact of the new scientific era on the training of doctors seems to have been greatest at the University of Leyden, which, by the end of the seventeenth century, had begun to rival Padua as the most important centre in Europe for scientists of all kinds.

Two men in particular helped not only to make Leyden an important centre of education but also to revolutionise medical education. Their major step forward involved no particular scientific discovery; they simply insisted that students should not confine themselves to a theoretical study of physiology and anatomy, as they had in the past, but should spend some time studying live human beings.

The first professor to introduce students to the idea of walking the wards was Franciscus Sylvius, who was also known as Franciscus de la Boe. Fielding H. Garrison, the eminent medical historian, points out that Sylvius did some original work of his own, but it was for allowing his students to accompany him on his rounds of his twelve bed ward in Leyden that he is probably best remembered. Following the logical pattern of scientific thinking that had been first produced in Padua, Sylvius encouraged his students to study symptoms, to listen to patients' complaints and then to try to produce reasoned explanations and rational treatments for probable diagnoses. It was not an original approach, since Hippocrates had taught much the same thing two thousand years previously, but it was, in the seventeenth century, as revolutionary an idea as any.

The other major figure at Leyden was Herman Boerhaave, who was appointed a lecturer there in 1701. Boerhaave encouraged his students to study primary sciences, such as physics, chemistry, botany, anatomy and physiology, and to try to correlate changes in the human body found at postmortem with symptoms recognised in life. Like Sylvius, he insisted that his students walk the wards and meet and talk to living patients. Through his students, Boerhaave's influence spread around the world; the medical schools in Vienna and Edinburgh were particularly influenced by his pupils. Since pupils from those two schools themselves later taught in other establishments on both sides of the Atlantic, it is no exaggeration to say that Boerhaave was the father of modern medical education.

Chapter 21: Medicine in Eighteenth Century America

America begins to feel its feet — Benjamin Franklin's rise — The first hospital in America — Medical education in America begins

In the years since Columbus had first crossed the Atlantic, the American continent had been under the economic and political control of the major European powers. No records exist of any significant original scientific work in America at that time, although the quality of medical care provided by the often untrained and illiterate medicine men was probably no better and no worse than the standard of general medical care available in Europe.

Contact between the two continents had undoubtedly led to permanent changes in the economic and political life of both New and Old Worlds, but it was not until the early part of the eighteenth century that the American people began to acquire their own medical establishment, hospitals and scientists.

The man most intimately associated with the early history of American medicine was Benjamin Franklin, a man of extraordinary talent who made a name as a printer and publisher, author, politician and diplomat, scientist and inventor. Born in 1706, Franklin was one of the men who helped to write the Declaration of Independence and the American Constitution. His accomplishments rival those of the Europeans who contributed to the scientific and artistic developments of the Renaissance.

The son of a soap and candle maker, Benjamin Franklin had no fewer than sixteen brothers and sisters — in itself a tribute to his mother's health and capacity for survival. Apprenticed as a printer, he quickly became a publisher, and his various business venues earned him enough money to spend the latter part of his life as a politician, diplomat and scientist. He is credited with the invention of bifocal lenses and the first flexible catheter; he wrote papers on such varied subjects as sleep, gout, deafness, infections and infant mortality, but perhaps his greatest contribution to the medical and social history of America was the part he played in the foundation of the first medical institutions on the west side of the Atlantic.

Franklin's contributions to American life really began in 1743 with the foundation of the American Philosophical Society, now America's oldest learned society. In his founding prospectus Franklin wrote that he intended to 'promote useful knowledge among the British plantations in America' and he stressed that the society should always include seven members: a physician, a botanist, a mathematician, a chemist, a mechanician, a geographer and a general natural philosopher. The society was modelled on the Royal Society in London where, for a while, Franklin had practised his trade as a printer.

A few years later, in 1751, Franklin helped to found the first real hospital in America.

The role of the Pennsylvania Hospital and other Philadelphia institutions in American history was vital. Until the 1750s any American doctor who wanted proper training had to go to Europe. Most went to Leyden or to Edinburgh, where the two most influential medical schools were situated, although many naturally also visited and studied in London for a while. The first American medical school was founded in Pennsylvania in 1765 by John Morgan, an Edinburgh graduate, and the links with the Scottish capital were strengthened by the appointment of other Edinburgh graduates to the teaching staff. One of the first professors to be appointed, Doctor Benjamin Rush, was one of the five physicians to sign the American Declaration of Independence in 1776. Both Rush and William Shippen, the Professor of Anatomy and Surgery at the new medical school, were Edinburgh graduates.

If Benjamin Franklin was America's first true intellectual and Renaissance man, Benjamin Rush was America's first physician to have a truly international reputation. Like the seventeenth century English physician Thomas Sydenham, Rush followed the Hippocratic school of learning and believed firmly in observing his patients carefully before coming to conclusions. He claimed that inflammation was an effect rather than a cause of disease, and he was ahead of many of his contemporaries in arguing that insanity was a disease rather than a divine visitation.

In the early 1700s medicine to most intelligent Americans was just another subject worthy of a little attention. Few educated men took more than a passing interest. Medical care was largely in the hands of midwives, salesmen promoting patent medicines, and quacks. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, medicine had become an acknowledged and respected profession. Numerous medical societies had been founded, and five medical schools had been established, in Pennsylvania, New York, Harvard, Philadelphia and Dartmouth College, the first diploma to a graduate completing a course of education in America being awarded in 1768 to John Archer at the University of Pennsylvania. A healthy medical establishment was booming and, although the quality of care available was still of doubtful value, America had caught up with Europe and was no longer dependent on the schools in Leyden and Edinburgh.

Chapter 22: Drugs and the Drug Industry

Pharmacology in the seventeenth century — The patent medicine manufacturers — Laudanum is introduced — The theriac — Heberden’s disapproval — The therapeutic vacuum filled

The medical men who had led the advances in scientific thinking since the Renaissance had spent considerable time and effort on the study of human anatomy and human physiology; they had performed experiments with equipment such as the microscope and they had developed a number of useful surgical instruments.

One branch of medicine, however, had remained almost at a standstill throughout this period: pharmacology in the seventeenth century was still a confusing mixture of superstition and tradition.

When the first edition of the *London Pharmacopoeia* was published in 1618, it contained details of mixtures which included worms, dried vipers, foxes’ lungs, powders of precious stones, oil of ants, oil of wolves, and butter made in the month of May. The 1650 edition suggested recipes for compounds containing moss from the skull of a victim of violent death. Later in the century practitioners were advised to use compounds containing human perspiration, the saliva of a fasting man, the sexual organs of animals, human urine, feathers, fur, raw silk, excreta of all kinds, spiders’ webs, cast-off snakes’ skins, swallows’ nests and jaw bones from the skulls of executed criminals.

These ingredients were used by apothecaries and physicians as well as by lay people anxious to treat themselves. Indeed the seventeenth century official pharmacopoeia used by the College of Physicians included details of how to prepare compounds with crabs’ eyes, live spiders rolled in butter and powdered Egyptian mummy.

The apparent inability of the leading members of the medical profession to distinguish between those remedies which had a useful effect and those which, in the light of modern experience, had little more than a placebo effect, does perhaps help to explain the popularity of the patent medicine manufacturers. After all, if leading medical scientists and practitioners were unable to differentiate between the pharmacologically active products and the compounds which relied for their effect upon fear, superstition and imagination, it is not surprising that the public fell for the claims and advertisements of the new breed of pill-pushers. Anderson’s Pills, Dr Bateman’s Pectoral Drops and Duffy’s Elixir sold extremely well and made large sums of money for their manufacturers.

The first drug to be recognised in Europe as an effective and specific remedy was quinine. Bernardino Ramazzini, the Paduan professor who founded the science of industrial medicine, claimed that cinchona bark (from which quinine is derived) did for medicine what gunpowder had done for war. He was almost certainly right, because the acceptance of quinine as an effective and powerful drug in its own right resulted in the dismissal of the centuries old Galenic teaching that the only useful medicinal preparations were those which contained dozens of different ingredients.

Very slowly the science of pharmacology began to take shape, and educated doctors began to put together a small accepted armoury of drugs recognised to have specific functions. In 1660 Thomas Sydenham had extracted laudanum from the opium poppy, which, like quinine, soon became accepted as a medicinal product. The real advances in pharmacology did not, however, take place until well into the eighteenth century, when such men as William Heberden began actively to promote the idea of a logical system of dispensing and prescribing.

The traditional medicine which particularly annoyed Heberden was known as the theriac, a sort of medicinal stew which contained just about anything that the man preparing it felt like dropping in. The theriac had been used as an essential medicine com pound for the treatment of all kinds of illnesses and symptoms of just about every type for centuries. One of the first men to promote its use was a king of Pontus in Asia Minor, Mithridates VI, but Galen had a favoured mixture of his own, and his approval had more of less ensured the popularity of the idea. In cities such as Cairo, Constantinople, Genoa and Venice, which were important drug making centres, the theriac was prepared with great ceremony once a year and then used for the following twelve months. I rather suspect that any loose drugs found lying around the quay might have found themselves in the pot.

The theriac sounds something of a joke today but in practice it was considered to be the most valuable tool of any physician or apothecary, since it contained just about every product thought to have any medicinal value at all. And before we laugh at the concept as hopelessly medieval, we should perhaps remember that Claude Bernard, a renowned physiologist of the nineteenth century, once recalled that, when he was apprenticed to a pharmacist, he was warned never to throw anything away but to keep it to pop into the theriac. Indeed, some modern medicinal compounds sold over the counter today contain almost as many ingredients as the ancient theriac, and there is about as much scientific logic behind their inclusion as there was behind the preparation of the theriac.

Heberden found the whole ideal of the theriac rather offensive and in his *Essay on Mithridatium and Theriacs,* which was published in 1745, he did a great deal to damage the professional popularity of this extraordinary mixture.

Fortunately, the therapeutic vacuum which could have resulted from Heberden’s essay was quickly filled by the discovery of some new facts about some old medicinal plants. In 1763, for example, in a paper entitled *An account of the success of the bark of the willow in the cure of the agues,* a man mentioned at the top of the paper as Edmund Stone and at the bottom as Edward Stone informed the British Royal Society of the effectiveness of a compound prepared from willow bark. This compound was the forerunner of the modern aspirin tablet.

In 1776 William Withering, an English physician, described how he had learned about the effectiveness of the foxglove plant in the treatment of dropsy or ankle oedema, now known to be a major symptom of heart failure. Withering had learned about the usefulness of foxglove leaves from an old lady he had met on the way to Shropshire. The drug he described, known today as digitalis, is still one of the most important weapons in the treatment of heart disease.

It seems that the foxglove had been known to be effective in the treatment of dropsy for several centuries. Withering's contribution was to evaluate the product and to describe in some detail the potential hazards that might be associated with the drug's misuse. He had no way of studying the drug's full effect or of determining the precise way in which it worked, but his papers were among the first to include as precise an assessment as possible of a drug's potential pharmacological power.

Chapter 23: Power and Illness

The illnesses of individual leaders illustrated by an account of George III, whose condition lasted for many years of his reign

A history of the influence of medicine upon society would not be complete without some mention of the fact that many leaders, who had considerable authority over millions of people, may have been influenced not by logic or necessity but by disease. The difficulty in assessing the effect which specific disorders may have had on their particular victims is intensified by the fact that until fairly recently diagnostic skills were poor and medical records almost non-existent.

Henry VIII, for example, has been said to have suffered from syphilis, and some historians argue that it was this infection which made it difficult for him to produce an heir. Other medical experts disagree with this contention and claim that rhesus incompatibility was the cause of Henry's marital disharmony.

Napoleon is said to have suffered from piles and constipation, and it is sometimes claimed that at the Battle of Waterloo he was unable to sit on his horse because of the pain of his condition. With a little imagination it is possible to argue that Napoleon's piles led to his defeat and to subsequent changes of the map of Europe.

More recently it has been discovered that Queen Victoria was a carrier of haemophilia, the bleeding disease which affects only men but which can be carried by women.

It seems that Queen Victoria's third child, Alice, also carried haemophilia, as did Alexandra, daughter of Alice and Louis IV of Hesse-Darmstadt. Alexandra married Nicholas II, Tsar of all the Russias, and had a son, Alexis, who suffered badly from the disease. It can be argued that it was entirely because of her son's condition that Alexandra became dependent on Rasputin, the mad monk about whom so much has been written, and partly because of it that the Russian imperial family failed to provide the Russian people with the compassionate leadership they needed. On the basis of this conjecture it has been suggested, only partly in jest, that Lenin owed his success to Queen Victoria.

Speculation of this kind can hardly be classified as historical fact since it is based to some extent on rumour and imagination, but it is undoubtedly true that at many times the health of individual leaders has had an important effect on the health of millions of their followers.

One of the best documented accounts of the effect that one man's health may have on history concerns George III, who ruled Britain for sixty years, from 1760 to 1820, during one of the most important periods in the country's history. During his reign, Britain was fighting France, Spain and America abroad, while at home there was considerable political upheaval.

And yet, according to many contemporary accounts, during much of this time of turmoil and conflict George, who had considerable authority and influence over Parliament, was quite mad.

It now seems likely that George III had inherited the rare disease porphyria, which did not immediately threaten his health but undoubtedly had a powerful effect on his mental state. Although it is impossible to say precisely what effect George's condition had on his attitude to people and to world affairs, it is certainly possible that his personality played an important part in influencing the Americans to declare war on Britain and that his objection to Pitt's proposals for Catholic emancipation may have been coloured by his illness.

Historical events rarely follow a logical pattern, but it is interesting to ponder the possibility that the health of rulers, politicians and military leaders may have influenced events which not only had a powerful effect on people at the time but may subsequently have altered the political, social or economic status of their countries.

Chapter 24: The Industrial Revolution

The Industrial Revolution — The economic advantages and social changes — Industrial diseases become more important — The effects of industrial progress on the health of children — Alcoholism and tuberculosis: two major problems — The effect of the Engineering Revolution on health

Harvey had provided practical proof of the circulation of the blood, and Vesalius had sparked an international revival of interest in human anatomy; Leeuwenhoek had described blood corpuscles and bacteria, and Boerhaave had introduced bedside teaching into medical education. But by the beginning of the eighteenth century living standards in all parts of the world were still primitive. The theoretical advances made by some of the greatest anatomists and physiologists had not yet led to any practical results. Ill health and early death at the end of the seventeenth century were hardly any better than they had been before the Renaissance had begun. Practical progress seemed to be at a standstill.

Then suddenly, in the eighteenth century, the world was changed by the most dramatic and far reaching revolution in the history of mankind. It was a revolution inspired not by medical scientists, soldiers or politicians but by engineers and businessmen.

The Industrial Revolution, which started in Britain and quickly spread around the western world, changed living standards, disease patterns and all other facets of society within a few dramatic decades. Countries which had depended upon agriculture, local crafts and livestock were suddenly dominated by machines and the work they could do.

The population of Britain in the early eighteenth century was a mere six million — a third the size of the French population at that time — and yet it was no chance occurrence that Britain became the original home of the machine age. As a small island Britain had few of the transport problems which faced the large European landmass, since no inland town was more than a hundred miles or so away from the coast. Land travel at that time was slow and difficult but it was relatively simple to transport goods by sea. A good natural supply of such basic resources as coal, china clay, iron and fresh water gave Britain an important additional advantage.

Even before the Industrial Revolution these fundamental advantages had helped to give the British a relatively high standard of living. In contrast to other European countries, the good things in life were spread fairly evenly across the land. There was a wealthy upper class, of course, but there was also a huge affluent middle class group of people. This widespread affluence produced an enormous and apparently insatiable need for manufactured goods. Consequently, many businessmen found that the demands for their products often exceeded the supply. The only answer was to improve the rate of production, which they accomplished by introducing machines to do work previously done by men or animals. As a result, the beginning of the eighteenth century saw the first steam engines, which, with the fuel saving improvements made by James Watt later in the century, soon became indispensable to almost all branches of industry. Other innovations, including, for example, a technique that improved the rate at which iron could be produced, enabled the Revolution to pick up speed.

These developments affected the wealth and health of the ordinary citizen in several ways. To begin with, there were the inevitable economic advantages of living in an era of unprecedented growth in trade. As machines helped to make manufacturing processes cheaper, Britain could compete very much more effectively in world markets. Greater export sales gave industrialists more money to spend on wages, and for a while this undoubtedly led to a period of comparative prosperity for the ordinary working man and woman.

However, not all the changes produced by the Industrial Revolution were to the advantage of the population in general.

Craftsmen, instead of working at their own pace on tasks that required skill and provided considerable satisfaction, found themselves working with machines which were dirty, boring and often dangerous. When improved farm machinery became available, labourers discovered that they were no longer needed. The inevitable protests were regarded as reactionary by the progressive enthusiasts who stood to gain most from the Revolution, while the protesters, who at best could expect to find work in poorly lit, badly ventilated factories, had little reason to share the enthusiasm of their employers.

Social changes were as dramatic as the ones affecting employment possibilities. The building of huge new factories inevitably meant that entirely new communities had to be developed, and so new towns grew up at an unprecedented rate. People moved in huge numbers from the south of England to the north, where many of the big factories were being built. Villagers moved into towns, and women and children were, for the first time, dragged into heavy employment.

Thousands of people who had lived in small cottages in rural surroundings where they could tend their own small gardens and enjoy the relatively clean fresh air of the country, had to move to rows of terraced houses, where they were denied the chance to grow their own vegetables and were condemned to breathing polluted air. The overcrowding that resulted from the Industrial Revolution led directly to a rapid and savage deterioration in the quality of life and health. The new housing estates springing up all over Britain had no clean water supplies, no sewerage facilities and inadequate space or arrangements for play and recreation. In these conditions infectious diseases spread rapidly. As the Industrial Revolution spread throughout the world, so too did its harmful effects on health, although the full impact of the Revolution on the health of the British people did not become apparent for more than a century.

One direct and immediate result of the Industrial Revolution was the increase in the incidence of disease related to various manufacturing processes.

The first firm and formally recognised association between occupation and disease had been made back in the sixteenth century by the ubiquitous Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, who had written abut the relationship between mining and certain disease processes. At about the same time George Bauer, who was also known as Georgius Agricola, published a volume called *De Re Metallica,* a set of twelve books which included details of the diseases and accidents which most commonly affected miners. He included in his books advice on how these disorders could be best avoided, suggesting and describing in detail ventilating machines which he said could be used to replace stagnant air underground. He also suggested that miners should wear masks to protect their lungs. Inevitably, perhaps, these imaginative and far reaching solutions were ignored by the medical establishment, which was more concerned with treating people when they had become sick than with keeping people healthy, and by the mine owners, who were able to find an inexhaustible supply of fresh miners for considerably less than the cost of installing expensive machinery.

The official father of industrial medicine, however, was Bernardino Ramazzini, who was a Professor of Medicine at the University of Modena and then at Padua in the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century. It was while living in Modena, which at the time contained a large number of tall, overcrowded houses, that Ramazzini watched a man clear out a cesspit. The man was, perhaps not surprisingly, working as fast as he could in order to get out of the pit and breathe some diluted polluted air instead of having to make do with the concentrated stuff. Ramazzini realised as he watched the man that some occupations are associated with their own specific hazards.

Inspired by this thought, Ramazzini visited local mines, shops and factories and studied the type of work being done by miners, bakers, grooms, printers, blacksmiths and other labourers and craftsmen. As a direct result of his observations, he suggested that workshops should be ventilated, that working temperatures should be controlled as much as possible and that men doing repetitive tasks should be allowed to rest at intervals and change their posture to avoid future trouble with their health. He gave credence and authority to the philosophy that men should be able to earn their living without sacrificing their health.

Unfortunately Ramazzini’s observations and theories were not put into practice and, by the time of the Industrial Revolution, it was common for workmen in all branches of industry to suffer from diseases which were often unique to their occupation. Hargreaves’ spinning jenny, Arkwright’s frame, Crompton’s mule for cotton spinning and James Watt’s steam engine all revolutionised major industries but all produced specific hazards. It was not until the second half of the eighteenth century that industrial medicine was revived as a speciality, with Percival Pott describing the association between chimney sweeps and scrotal cancer in 1775, and Thomas Beddoes’ reporting in 1799 that brassworkers and stone cutters were particularly susceptible to consumption.

Even then progress was still remarkably slow. New industrial processes continued to produce additional hazards. New paints, dyes and alloys became associated with new diseases, and each fresh machine seemed to bring with it an extra hazard for the man who would operate it. To us, disorders such as miner’s elbow, wool-sorter’s disease, knife-grinder’s phthisis, painter’s colic, weaver’s bottom, hod-carrier’s shoulder, brass-founder’s ague, grocer’s itch, glass-blower’s cataract, hatter’s shakes, Billingsgate jump, tailor’s ankle and so on sound faintly comical. To the men who suffered, and sometimes died, from occupational disorders, they were far from amusing.

Legislative help and practical support from the medical profession was not forthcoming until the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The direct effects of industrial progress on the health of workmen, women and children were severe enough. There were other less obvious influences too.

Moving great numbers of country folk into heavily populated urban areas changed living conditions enormously in a relatively short time. The increase in the incidence of infectious disorders associated with poor community services became an obvious problem a little later, as the primitive facilities available within these communities began to break down under the excessive load. But the change in lifestyle produced several obvious effects very quickly. One of the most dramatic of these was the increase in the incidence of alcoholism and the cruelty, violence and privation associated with it.

Alcohol had, of course, been around for many centuries. In Britain, before the Romans, fermented brews made from barley, honey or apples had caused a considerable amount of fighting. In the sixth century things were so bad that the church decreed that drunken monks would not be given any supper. But widespread regular drunkenness did not become a big problem until the eighteenth century, when living conditions changed rapidly and many people found that they had little to do with their little free time but try to forget the miserable conditions in which they were working and living. Inevitably, perhaps, children were beaten, badly fed and often neglected by drinking parents. In his *Gin Lane*, published in 1751, Hogarth described vividly the effects that drink could have on an ordinary, respectable family.

As the incidence of alcoholism increased, so did the number of people suffering from tuberculosis (consumption). The damp, cold English climate suited this disease perfectly, and the overcrowding produced by the Industrial Revolution helped to spread the disorder rapidly. The incidence of tuberculosis was no doubt enhanced by the window tax, introduced in 1696, which encouraged landlords to brick up windows in order to reduce their liability for tax. This effectively resulted in thousands of people being deprived of air and light. A similar situation existed in France, where a window tax was also in force during the eighteenth century.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the revolutionary ideas of the Renaissance scientists had begun to give life back to medicine and the medical profession. Nevertheless, although the Industrial Revolution may have had little or nothing to do with health care specifically, James Watt, Jethro Tull and the other men who led the Industrial Revolution from the front had a far greater effect on mortality and morbidity rates in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries than any of the medical scientists who had been at the heart of the Renaissance. The trouble was — they were not improving health standards; they were making them worse.

Chapter 25: An End to Scurvy

The damage done by scurvy — James Lind experiments, but no one takes any notice — Lemon juice is introduced just in time to save Nelson

In 1535 Jacques Cattier had sailed from St. Malo in France with a total crew of 110 men, intending to explore the coast of Newfoundland, but within six weeks one hundred of his men had developed scurvy, a disease caused by the absence of Vitamin C from the diet. In the early stages the symptoms are simple enough — the patient usually notices that his gums bleed rather easily. Later on, however, the disorder begins to affect the whole body, resulting in considerable pain before death intervenes.

Luckily for his men and his expedition, Cartier discovered from a native that the complaint could be cured by drinking the juice from the fruit of local trees. His crew recovered within days.

Wise sea captains quickly followed Cattier's example and, to maintain a healthy crew, ensured that each man was provided with a regular supply of either orange or lemon juice. In a book called *The Surgeon's Mate,* published in 1636, John Woodall actually recommended that these juices be used to prevent the development of scurvy. Few captains who read his book needed to suffer the agonies of Vasco de Gama, who lost a hundred of 160 men on his voyage to India, although no one knew why these juices prevented scurvy.

Then, remarkably and inexplicably, captains stopped providing men with citrus fruits, and the scurvy began once again to decimate crews on long voyages. When Anson's fleet circumnavigated the globe between 1740 and 1744, he lost three quarters of his men to scurvy.

It was not until 1747 that the idea of preventing scurvy by giving sailors lemon or orange juice to drink was reintroduced. The man who suggested it was James Lind, an Edinburgh graduate, who performed the· first proper clinic trial in his successful attempt to prove that, by using one or other of these fruits, scurvy could be prevented. He published the results from his study in 1753 and described how he had given some sailors vinegar, some cider, some oranges and some lemons. Only those sailors who had been given fruit avoided scurvy. It was Lind's work which enabled Lieutenant Cook (later to be promoted) to sail around the world between 1769 and 1771 without a single case of scurvy.

Surprisingly, the Admiralty took no notice of Lind's research. In 1779 the Channel Fleet had 2,400 cases of scurvy after a ten week cruise. Sir Gilbert Blane, however, cured an outbreak on twenty eight ships in 1782 by using fruit and eventually succeeded in convincing the Admiralty chiefs that the proposal was worth following. In 1795, a year after Lind's death, lemon juice became a compulsory part of every sailor's diet. To make sure that the sailors took their lemon, it was added to their grog ration. When, in later years, limes were used instead of lemons, the Americans gave British sailors the nickname 'limey' to commemorate the fact.

Since, in the Seven Years' War, from 1756 to 1763, approximately half of the 185,000 sailors involved had died of scurvy, it was perhaps just as well that the Admiralty acted when it did. It is unlikely that even Nelson's tactical skills could have made up for a navy decimated by scurvy, and the wars with Napoleon which were to follow might have had a rather different outcome.

Chapter 26: A New Weapon Against Disease

Smallpox has killed millions — By the early eighteenth century it is still spreading — Inoculation becomes fashionable — Dimsdale makes his fortune — Jenner publishes his famous paper — The prophet is ignored in his own country, but the news spreads around the word — The American President is pleased

Over the centuries, smallpox has been responsible for many millions of deaths. Modern historians have traced the disease back to ancient Egypt, where Pharaoh Ramses V seems to have died of smallpox in 1160 BC. Since then smallpox has been the most widely distributed of all the serious infectious diseases. Plague, cholera, yellow fever and malaria have all killed many millions but none of these diseases lasted for so long or affected such a large part of the world as smallpox.

During the Elephant War of AD 569 in Arabia, a smallpox epidemic among the Abyssinian troops besieging Mecca saved the city, and in the following centuries the disease spread over the whole of Europe and Africa. Whenever smallpox was introduced into a new area, it proved devastating. In the sixteenth century the Aztec Empire collapsed when three and a half million Mexicans died of smallpox, brought by Cortez's small army, and later smallpox was used to help defeat native American armies; Amherst and Colonel Bouquet, for example, used infected blankets to spread the disease among the Indians. By the beginning of the seventeenth century smallpox was endemic in America; nine tenths of the population on the Massachusetts coast were killed by the infection, and small towns were sometimes almost completely wiped out.

During the early eighteenth century smallpox was still common and spreading; in 1707, when smallpox reached Iceland, 18,000 died from a population of 57,000. In Europe at that time it was estimated that one in every five children would die of smallpox, which was also said to be the leading cause of blindness. About sixty million Europeans died of smallpox in the eighteenth century. Advertisements for servants would often include a note warning that applicants would have to produce evidence of having had the disease before they would be allowed into a household. It was known that people who had had smallpox could not catch it again and therefore spread it further.

The disease had a devastating effect on almost all aspects of life. It attacked and killed members of most royal families.

During the Franco-Prussian war 200,000 soldiers contracted the disease, of whom more than 25,000 died, while, at the same time, the disease killed 18,000 French citizens in Paris.

Naturally, many attempts were made to control the disease. No effective form of treatment had been discovered (and none ever has) but there was one way of preventing smallpox which had first been tried in China and India twenty-five centuries before. It had been discovered that, by putting material from smallpox scabs or pustules into the nose or skin of a healthy individual, a less severe attack of the disease could be produced, which would subsequently provide the patient with protection against the more serious and potentially fatal form. In China, for example, where a proverb cautioned that you should not count your children until they had all contracted smallpox, physicians collected the scales from drying smallpox pustules, ground them to a power and blew them into the nostrils of people who wanted protection. They also tried placing healthy individuals in contact with patients suffering from mild forms of smallpox in the expectation that the healthy people would contract the mild form of the disease and then remain protected.

However, it was not until the beginning of the eighteenth century that this effective form of preventive medicine first became popular in Europe. An Italian, physician, Dr Emanuel Timoni, working in Constantinople in 1714, discovered that the Turks used inoculation to protect their citizens from smallpox, and sent a paper on the subject to the Royal Society in London. Meanwhile Giacomo Pylarini, a Greek doctor working in Smyrna at about the same time, took some thick material from a smallpox pustule and rubbed it into a scratch made with a clean needle on the·arm of a healthy volunteer. An account of this experiment was sent to Doctor John Woodward in London, who published the details in the *Philosophical Transactions* of the Royal Society. It is possible that Pylarini based his theory on the knowledge that mothers often encouraged their offspring to mix with other children who had smallpox, as long as the infection seemed to be in a mild form. It seems very possible that, for many years before Tunoni and Pylarini published their papers, local wise women were effectively practising this type of preventive medicine.

Inoculation became fashionable in Britain and in Europe when Lady Mary Montagu, the wife of the British Ambassador to Turkey, had her daughter publicly inoculated against smallpox. Experiments with prisoners from Newgate Prison seemed to prove the relative safety of the technique.

Unfortunately, this type of inoculation carried some risk, and after a few deaths had resulted from the practice, it soon lost popularity in Europe. In American, however, inoculation continued apace. Both Benjamin Franklin and

George Washington advocated the method, and as smallpox spread across the American continent, so did the use of this often effective form of protection. In the 1740s Dr Kilpatrick in Charleston, who inoculated by making a very shallow, superficial scratch, showed that the practice could be comparatively effective and safe. He inoculated between eight hundred and a thousand people in 1743, only eight of whom died.

One man who made a fortune from inoculation was Thomas Dimsdale, a leading British practitioner of the technique, who, in 1786, was invited to go to Russia to inoculate the family of Catherine II. In return for this comparatively simple contribution, Dimsdale was made a baron, a councillor of state and a major general. He was also given his expenses, a fee of £10,000 and an annuity of £500. Dimsdale may have done well out of this particular family but he did understand the shortcomings of inoculation. When a Society for the Inoculation of the Poor was formed in London, Dimsdale objected on the grounds that, in the overcrowded conditions in which the poor of London lived, inoculation would simply spread smallpox and produce artificial epidemics of the disease. This was a valid argument, because inoculation did not protect the patient against smallpox but rather gave him a minor attack of the infection so that his body could prepare its own defences and so that he would remain immune if exposed to more serious attacks of the same disease. In Dimsdale's opinion there was no guarantee that individuals who caught the infection from an inoculated patient would not allow the spread of a more dangerous version of the disorder. One doctor reported, for example, that a single inoculated child had infected a total of seventeen people, eight of whom had subsequently died. Inoculation, it seemed, might be very good for the rich but for the majority of the population, who lived in close contact with one another and who could not all be inoculated at the same time, the method was fraught with danger.

Throughout the eighteenth century, smallpox continued to recur and to kill many hundreds of thousands. Indeed, one of the greatest epidemics of smallpox to affect London occurred in 1772, half a century after inoculation had first been introduced; in that one year nearly four thousand people died. The disease was still spreading across Europe in that decade, and in 1774 it claimed the life of King Louis XV of France.

1774 also saw a vital breakthrough in the fight against smallpox made by a Dorset farmer called Benjamin Jesty. Frightened by the latest news of a local outbreak of smallpox, Jesty vaccinated his wife and two sons with cowpox (a similar but mild disease contracted by cows) to protect them against the more dangerous disease. The difference between inoculation and vaccination is an important one. Vaccination involves giving the person a harmless disease in the expectation that, in preparing its defences against the mild disease, the body will also prepare defences against a similar but potentially lethal disease. The theory, of course, depends very heavily on the similarity of the two infections concerned. Jesty had undoubtedly noticed that girls working on his farm who had contracted cowpox did not seem to get smallpox. Jesty's experiment was, however, ignored by the medical profession for two decades.

The idea was revived by a general practitioner called Edward Jenner, who is usually given the credit for inventing vaccination, although as we have seen this is not true. The son of a clergyman, Jenner worked in Gloucestershire, England where it had long been known that dairymaids who developed cowpox did not get smallpox. Jenner slowly collected evidence from his patients and the local people until, in 1796, he was certain enough of his theory to repeat the experiment first tried by Jesty in 1774. With enormous professional courage Jenner inoculated material from a cowpox pustule on the hand of a dairymaid, Sarah Nelmes, into the arm of an eight year old, James Phipps. The real test of Jenner's nerve came seven weeks later, when the time had come to inject the boy with material from a genuine smallpox pustule. To Jenner's undoubted relief, the boy remained healthy.

With the remarkable pig-headedness that has characterised the scientific medical establishment through the ages, the Royal Society did not think Jenner's account of his experiment worthy of publishing (although they had been happy to publish one of his earlier papers describing the natural history of the cuckoo).

Undeterred by the lack of interest shown by the profession's leaders, Jenner continued with his experiments and within two years had performed twenty-two similar vaccinations. He described his work in a booklet which he published himself in 1798. Like Harvey, Jenner had based his research upon a solid foundation, beginning with a thesis (admittedly based on what might have been dismissed as an old wives' tale) and turning it into a proven scientific fact.

Within a remarkably short time, news of Jenner's work had spread around the world. In some areas an infected cow would be led from door to door so that material could be scraped off and used to vaccinate the waiting citizens. In France, the Emperor Napoleon ruled in 1805 that all his troops who had not had smallpox should be vaccinated at once. Jenner was not quite so popular in his own country, however. The theory of vaccination met considerable opposition from jealous members of the medical profession who argued that there was a risk of transmitting syphilis and by others who claimed that preventing smallpox was interfering with the will of God. It was even suggested that, by limiting deaths from smallpox, vaccinators would put a burden on family men who might otherwise have expected their liabilities to be limited! However, Jenner's supporters slowly outweighed his opponents, and eventually the British Parliament awarded him a grant to continue his experiments. By the time they did, however, the technique had already been accepted in most parts of the world.

Getting the material for vaccination to America and other distant parts was not quite as easy as spreading it around Europe. The technique was first introduced in America by Dr Benjamin Waterhouse of Boston, who was Harvard's first Professor of the Theory and Practice of Physics. Waterhouse had been sent a copy of Jenner's booklet by a friend, John Coakley Lettson, who was a leading figure in the Society for Inoculation of the Poor in London and who had quickly recognised the superiority of Jenner'*s* method of vaccination over the established form of inoculation. In 1800 Lettson sent Waterhouse some cotton threads that had been soaked in cowpox, with which Waterhouse vaccinated seven of his own children.

Waterhouse proved Jenner's theory to his own satisfaction by arranging for one of his vaccinated children to be left in a room with a patient suffering from a naturally acquired dose of smallpox. When the boy remained healthy, Waterhouse proceeded to protect the American people and to make his own fortune by vaccinating as many as he could. Later, Thomas Jefferson, the American President, persuaded a deputation of North American Indian chiefs to take supplies of the vaccine back to their people. Mass vaccination programmes were therefore in operation on both sides of the Atlantic within a few years of the publication of Jenner's experiment

Transmission of the cowpox vaccine to Central and South America was organised by King Charles IV of Spain, who, in 1803, put twenty-two unvaccinated children on a frigate and two more who were vaccinated immediately before departure. When the vaccinated pustule developed on the original two children, two more were vaccinated with the material obtained from them. This process continued until the frigate arrived in Venezuela, where more children were picked up. In this way the cowpox vaccine was taken to Central and South America, the Philippines, Macao and eventually to China, where the original form of inoculation had first been used so many hundreds of years before.

Meanwhile, Russian doctors were vaccinating people on their border with China. It had taken only a few years for Jenner's discovery to affect the whole world. During the following two centuries vaccination, first against smallpox and then against other diseases, would prove to be a most effective weapon for controlling dangerous infectious diseases (although the weapon was subsequently overused).

Chapter 27: Quackery and Genius

The shortcomings of the medical profession — The quacks do well — The piss prophets — Mesmer: charlatan or genius? – Mesmer's influence on medicine and medical thinking

The lack of any solid scientific foundation upon which diagnostic skills could be based and the absence of reliable, safe, effective forms of treatment for anything more than a handful of assorted symptoms meant that orthodox eighteenth century medical practitioners, whether physicians or apothecaries, were just as vulnerable to critical comment as their predecessors had been. Medical schools had been built and students were being given a rudimentary introduction to subjects such as anatomy and physiology, but the educational programmes in these establishments were more suited to the training of theoretical scientists than to the preparation of practising doctors. Learned societies and august journals provided philosophers and experimental scientists with a good variety of opportunities to discuss and explain their work, but the theories and philosophies they shared were largely irrelevant to the ordinary citizen.

With all these shortcomings it is not surprising that orthodox medicine did not have a monopoly on the care of the sick. Indeed there were a great many charlatans and confidence tricksters in practice. One of the most successful of the many relatively sophisticated quacks to make their fortunes in the eighteenth century was Sir William Read, a tailor, who set up in the Strand in London as an eye specialist in 1694 and who even managed to number Queen Anne among his patients. Read was knighted by Queen Anne and later became oculist to George I. Another well known and successful quack, Joshua Ward, had tried politics earlier in his career but eventually found medicine more to his taste, making his fortune by selling pills, drops, powders and such wonders as 'liquid sweat'. Having succeeded in correcting the dislocated thumb of George II, Joshua Ward found himself a successful society practitioner and was consulted by Chesterfield, Walpole and Gibbon. Ward's success was so great and his influence so strong that he was not only given a coach and six horses and the right to drive through St. James's Park but also specifically excluded from the restrictions of the Act of 1748 which was designed to stop unqualified people preparing pills. Dr Samuel Johnson, incidentally, described Ward as the dullest man he ever knew, while Alexander Pope noted that he had become a 'famed physician' without 'the least pretence to skill'.

Quacks did not operate only in London, nor did they confine their attention to the rich and powerful. Many worked in country districts, selling their remedies as they travelled around. The more successful had horses and carriages while the less successful had to travel on foot. Often these quacks joined up with travelling fairs and shows and sold elixirs and magic potions with the semi-hysterical rhetoric of traditional fairground hawkers.

Some of the most successful practitioners were women. Mrs Sally Mapp, a bonesetter who lived in Epsom, is said to have had liveried servants and to have treated many members of fashionable society. Mrs Joanna Stevens earned herself a fortune by preparing and selling a special remedy which she claimed would get rid of bladder stones. Her cure was apparently so successful — though no evidence exists to prove its value — that, when she offered to sell the secret recipe to the nation for £5,000, Parliament actually voted to give her this enormous sum of money. When she duly handed over her secret, her recipe was found to be a mixture of snails, soap, egg shells and various vegetables.

For centuries fully qualified and highly respectable physicians had often claimed to be able to diagnose illness by studying, and tasting, the urine of their patients. Chaucer, Shakespeare and Molière had all written rather derisory comments about such doctors but their opinions had done little to damage public faith in this apparent mystical skill. Since even the most eminent member of the medical establishment had no real way of knowing what a patient's urine did or did not show, there was obviously no reason why quacks should not take advantage of this touching faith and offer to provide prognoses based on a study of urine samples.

Often known as 'piss prophets', these specialist quacks would plant a colleague in with patients as they sat in the waiting room and then wait for the bogus patient to elicit information about each individual in turn. Later, the piss prophet would study phials of urine and announce to each startled patient the truth about his family, relatives and friends. With faith established in this simple way, the doctor would be able to sell a bottle of his expensive mixture without too much trouble. By the time the patient discovered that the medicine had no useful effect, the doctor would be miles away in another town or village.

One of the most colourful eighteenth century quacks was Dr James Graham, who took advantage of the early electrical experiments of Franklin, Galvani and Volta to offer his patients the first electrical treatments. Graham made his fortune with the aid of his 'celestial bed', which he hired out to anxious couples for massive fees. The bed, which was designed to guarantee conception to the childless, used magnetic and electrical power in a way unequalled before or since. The magnificent celestial bed in the temple of health just off the Strand is said to have cost Graham £10,000 to build, while hiring it for the night cost a minimum of £50. Incidentally, one of the young girls who was said to have helped Graham illustrate his lectures on sex was later to acquire fame and fortune as Lady Hamilton, the mistress of Lord Nelson.

When the celestial bed's popularity faded, Graham turned to mud baths and gave lectures while buried up to his chin in earth but unfortunately this gimmick did not prove quite so popular.

The craze for electrical devices did not disappear when the bed was dismantled. Later, quacks introduced and successfully marketed many medical cures which depended upon electricity for their effect. An electrical eye bath was said to cure weak vision, and electrical towels and hairbrushes were sold to anyone prepare to hand over the right amount of money. A Yale graduate called Perkins made a considerable amount of money on both sides of the Atlantic by selling 'electric tractors'. These were metal rods which were said to remove pain when rubbed on the body, but their effect undoubtedly depended upon faith rather than electrical power.

A great many of these quacks were, like Perkins, nothing more than confidence tricksters relying upon the fact that people who are ill want to get better and will be particularly ready to believe in a potential cure if they are in pain. In addition, the quacks knew that the person who has paid out hard earned money for a cure will be more than ready to believe that he has bought something worthwhile. The placebo response works well when the patient has to put up with a little discomfort — and it did not matter particularly whether the discomfort involved an evil tasting medicine or a little damage to the wallet

It would be a great mistake to dismiss all these unqualified practitioners merely as grasping charlatans, for they could only get away with selling their unproven cures because the qualified practitioners had nothing better to offer. If the physicians, surgeons and apothecaries had been able to provide effective and safe forms of treatment, the quacks would not have flourished. As it was, there is little doubt that many of the men and women described as quacks undoubtedly contributed a great deal to the health of the people they treated. As far as the individual patient is concerned, of course, it does not really matter whether relief is obtained from a consultation with a highly qualified practitioner, who has a thorough knowledge of human anatomy and physiology, or from an illiterate scoundrel.

In addition, many of the so-called quacks who practised in the eighteenth century contributed a great deal to medicine in general. The medical establishment has always been loath to give credit to those who have not acquired the regularly accepted qualifications; even today there are many orthodox practitioners who refuse to admit that such people as osteopaths can be of any use to patients.

Of the many quacks who made major contributions to medical science, the one who probably stands above the rest was Franz Mesmer. He graduated in Vienna in 1766 and aroused the sort of controversy that had first surrounded Paracelsus two centuries earlier. Mesmer began his academic career by studying the power and influence of the universe on human beings. His first theory was that some unseen power from the planets influenced human behaviour in just the same way as the moon influences the sea. At first Mesmer believed that the power was transmitted through ordinary magnets, since his experiments suggested that by moving a magnet he could control the flow of fluid from a patient being bled, but gradually he began to realise that the magnet was not really necessary and that the same effect could be obtained with nothing more mysterious than his own hands. 'Hypnosis', in its various forms (the word 'hypnosis' had not then been invented), had been the subject of study and experimentation since the days of ancient Egypt; Athanasius Kircher, a seventeenth century microscopist, had done some significant work on the subject, but Mesmer was the first man to seek to use the influence of mind over body

Mesmer claimed that the explanation for this new power source was something called 'animal magnetism', a powerful basic force derived from the planets or from some other unknown body in space, which could be utilised by human hands and controlled in such a way as to have an effect on individual patients.

Mesmer was enormously successful and the Austrian medical establishment quickly started a campaign to discredit him. When he cured a young blind girl, they accused him of being a cheat and a charlatan. Thrown out of Vienna, he moved to Paris, where he soon established an even more lucrative private practice. Undoubtedly quite a showman, Mesmer would dress up for his séances and influence his patients with music, staring eyes and a wand. For a while he continued to use magnets as part of his consulting room technique, although he realised and openly admitted at an early state that they were not entirely necessary. His success with patients suffering from disorders which we would now describe as 'psychosomatic' or 'stress induced' was tremendous.

Inevitably, Mesmer's success in Paris once again aroused considerable controversy, and many members of the medical establishment, inspired no doubt more by jealousy than other motives, set up a special commission to investigate his claims. The commissioners, who included Benjamin Franklin, the chemist Lavoisier and a Dr Guillotin, who invented the instrument which bears his name, decided that there was no justification for any such force as animal magnetism and instead claimed that Mesmer's effects were produced by imagination.

Whether or not the commission's findings would have affected his practice we have no way of knowing, for Mesmer was not to practise in Paris for much longer. The King, Louis XVI, and his court had been enthusiastic supporters of Mesmerism, and when the French Revolution became a reality, Mesmer left France.

Although he died in obscurity in Switzerland in 1815, Mesmer’s influence on medical care and, in particular, on the treatment of the mentally ill remained important. His ability to control, influence and cure the mentally ill helped to lead to reforms in practical psychiatry, and such men as Sigmund Freud owed a great deal to his work. Mesmer’s influence was not, however, confined to the care of the mentally ill. Many surgeons used mesmerism as a form of anaesthetic.

Although the medical establishment may have considered him to be a quack and a showman, Franz Mesmer was probably one of the most influential and important figures in the history of eighteenth century medicine. His influence as a practitioner matches his influence as a philosopher, which, at that time, was rare indeed.

Chapter 28: The Evils of Institutional Care

Institutional care in the eighteenth century — Tenon’s report — The care of the mentally ill — Practical improvements led by Pinel in France

The quality of institutional care in the eighteenth century was no better than the quality of general medical care. The general standards in most hospitals were low, and death rates were high. The Foundling Hospital in Dublin, for example, admitted 10,272 infants in the years from 1775 to 1796, and of these only forty-five survived.

In 1788 Jacobus-René Tenon published a report describing the hospitals of Paris which must have shocked even the most complacent city officials. He described how the Hotel Dieu contained 1,220 beds, in each of which between four and six patients were crammed. Patients in many parts of the hospital lay about on dirty straw, and no attempt was made to keep infectious patients away from those suffering from non-infectious diseases. The stench in the hospital was said to be so foul that people entering it would often do so only when holding a vinegar-soaked sponge to their noses. Patients who had surgical operations invariably died, and relatively few patients ever walked out of the hospital. Most healthy pregnant women confined in the Hotel Dieu died in childbirth.

The same things were true of almost all other hospitals throughout Europe. When Tsar Paul came to power in Russia in 1796, he was so horrified at the state of the hospital in Moscow that he ordered it to be rebuilt. In Frankfurt physicians considered working in hospital equivalent to a sentence of death. Another reforming writer of the eighteenth century, John Howard, toured European hospitals and prisons at about the same time as Tenon made his report, and his studies were equally startling. It was the same story almost everywhere: dirty straw as bedding, no fresh air, no sunlight, no bandages and a milk and water diet supplemented with weak soup.

If the standard of care in ordinary hospitals was low, that in mental hospitals and psychiatric institutions was almost beyond description or comprehension. At the Blockley Hospital in Philadelphia, for example, a report published in 1793 showed that, since it was almost impossible to hire nurses, insane women patients were looked after by just three male keepers, who exhibited their patients as a sort of side-show, opening the wards to the public and allowing visitors to poke fun at the more obviously insane patients. There was no heating in the hospital because the authorities had decided that insane patients were unlikely to suffer from extremes of temperature. Dr Benjamin Rush, thought to have been one of the most enlightened medical practitioners in America, is reported to have kept disturbed patients awake and standing for twenty-four hours at a time.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century Daniel Defoe, best remembered for his account of the exploits of Robinson Crusoe, had written a bitter complaint about the number of private mad-houses where for a decent fee patients could be hidden away from the world. ‘Is it not enough to make anyone mad,’ he asked ‘to be suddenly clap’d up, stripp’d, whipp’d, ill fed and worse us’d? To have no reason assigned for such treatment, no crime alleged or accusers to confront? And what is worse, no soul to appeal to but merciless creatures who answer but in laughter, surliness, contradiction and too often stripes?’

But no one in Europe took much notice of Defoe, and medical practitioners continued to treat mentally ill patients in the belief that physical punishments would cure their troubles. At the Bethlem Royal Hospital, known better as Bedlam, half naked patients were kept chained in irons, were allowed only straw bedding and were cruelly mistreated. Physicians bled their patients at the end of May or the beginning of June each year, and after being bled each patient would be made to vomit once a week before being purged. For the more troublesome patients there was a tranquillising wheel on which individuals could be strapped and spun round until they lost consciousness. Until 1770 visitors could pay a penny to see the ‘fun’ at Bedlam.

John Wesley, the founder of the Wesleyan Church, suggested that a useful treatment for lunacy might include rubbing the patient’s head several times a day with vinegar in which ground ivy leaves had been infused. More seriously ill patients, described by him as suffering from raving madness, would receive more dramatic remedies, and he pointed out that, since all madmen were cowards, binding them sometimes did as much good as beating. Wesley, who seems to have considered himself a benefactor of the mentally ill, also suggested pouring water onto their heads and giving them a diet of nothing but apples for a month. Between these treatments mental patients would usually be confined to over-crowded quarters where urine-soaked and excrement-laden straw would serve as bedding. Wesley, incidentally, was one of the first men to use electricity in the attempted treatment of mental illness.

While Tenon, Howard and others were writing about the inhumane and degrading conditions in ordinary hospitals, other observers were making similar protests about the conditions in lunatic asylums. One of the most powerful indictments of the ways in which the mentally ill were cared for was made by Dr Philippe Pinel, a physician to Bicêtre and Salpêtrière prisons in Paris where many lunatics were housed. Pinel decided to offer to free a number of prisoners from their chains if they promised to behave like gentlemen. To the surprise of the less imaginative officials, the prisoners were not violent or disorderly when their chains were removed.

Like Hippocrates so many years before, Pinel argued that the mentally ill are sick and not responsible for their own condition. Pinel amplified this simple theory in a textbook written in 1801, which was effectively the first treatise on psychiatry and in which he described how mental illnesses can be temporary or permanent and either relapsing or persistent He also argued that domestic crises, unhappy love affairs and similar stresses can all produce types of mental illness.

Unfortunately, not everyone agreed with Pinel, and the humane theories he had expressed were not widely accepted for many years. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, mental hospitals, like many general hospitals, were still quite unsuitable for the care of people needing medical attention.

Chapter 29: The Birth of the Pharmaceutical Industry

Pill-making by hand has its problems — William Brockeden's pill-making machine — The pharmaceutical industry is born.

The observations and experiments conducted by men like William Withering had extended the range of useful pharmacological compounds available, but the business of preparing and dispensing medicines had hardly changed since the days of Galen. Weighing scales had made the process of preparing medicines slightly more scientific, but the apothecary in practice at the start of the nineteenth century still used a pestle and mortar to mix his compounds. Finished medicaments were sold as mixtures, powders or pills, and the rate at which an apothecary could stock his shelves depended entirely upon his own dexterity and that of any assistants he might have. Even pills were made by hand: the active ingredients were first ground together with a pestle and mortar, then rolled like a piece of pastry before being divided into short sections and rolled into spheres. If a pill was bitter-tasting and likely to be difficult to swallow, it might be given an outer coating; if the pills were intended for an upper-class clientele, they might be coated with silver or gold.

Without machinery to standardise the preparation of pharmaceuticals, it was difficult to ensure that each dose of each medicine was identical to all others. Pill-rolling by hand inevitably meant that some pills contained more active constituents than others. It was also difficult for any one manufacturer to gain an advantage by increasing his output. An apothecary who wanted to double his output of hand-rolled pills would have to hire twice as many apprentices, so any extra potential profit would inevitably be reduced.

These two problems were overcome in the early nineteenth century by a man who was destined to become the most important single influence in the foundation of the enormously powerful pharmaceutical industry. Born in Devon, England in 1787, William Brockeden trained as a watchmaker but also earned money as an author and artist. It was in his capacity as an artist that he made the discovery that was to revolutionise the preparation of medicines and enable apothecaries to replace pill-rolling apprentices with efficient, reliable tablet-making machines.

Infuriated by the fact that he could not obtain drawing pencils which were free from grit, Brockeden had the idea of compressing pure powdered graphite in a die between two punches. Realising that his invention could have other uses, he then took out a patent for a device for 'Shaping of pills, lozenges and black lead by pressure in a die'.

In 1844, a few months after Brockeden's patent was granted, the *Pharmaceutical Journal* announced: 'We have received a specimen of bicarbonate of potash compressed into the form of a pill by a process invented by Mr Brockeden and for which he has taken out a patent. We understand the process is applicable to the compression of a variety of other substances into a solid mass, without the intervention of gum or other adhesive material.'

The invention was immediately successful on both sides of the Atlantic, and in America Jacob Durnton experimented further with Brockeden's idea. He discovered that the die and punch faces could be kept clean by adding small amounts of cocoa butter or mineral oil to the basic tablet ingredients, to act as lubricants.

Inevitably, there were experts who dismissed machine made tablets as nothing more than a passing fancy, and one disgruntled apprentice wrote to the *Pharmaceutical Journal* asking whether he had trained for three years only to spend his future writing out labels and wrapping up bottles of factory made tablets. Even at the end of the nineteenth century the *Pharmaceutical Journal* published an editorial stating that, 'Tablets...have had their day ... and like every other form of drug preparation that has preceded them, will pass away to make room for something else.'

However, the profession and the public found tablets attractive and too simple to resist. They were easier to take and to carry around than powders or mixtures, and customers soon realised that the efficacy of individual tablets did not vary much. When machines began to turn out tablets by the thousand, the popularity of the tablet was confirmed. Within a few years of the registration of Brockeden's patent, small companies making compressed tablets had sprung up all over the world, and apothecaries had discovered that it was easier and cheaper to buy their finished tablets from a specialist supplier. Thus, the Industrial Revolution had its first direct effect on the medical profession and upon the medicines its members prescribed.

Chapter 30: Surgery Gains Status in France

Surgery progresses in France — The physicians object — The military influences on surgical developments — Larrey's contributions.

In most European countries, surgery was still in the hands of semi-literate incompetents but in France some progress had been made. The event which had enabled French surgeons to rise above their contemporaries in other parts of the world had been the effective treatment in 1686 of King Louis XIV's painful fistula by the surgeon Charles François Felix. Felix obviously dealt with the King's unfortunate condition to everyone's satisfaction, because his work earned him a farm, a title and a fee three times as great as the honorarium paid to the royal physician. Since physicians had always considered themselves to be superior to surgeons in social status and learning, this small operation was clearly of enormous significance both to Felix and to French surgeons in general.

Needless to say, the popularity of surgery as a speciality at the royal court did not meet with the French physicians' approval, and when another royal surgeon persuaded Louis XV to create five chairs of surgery at St Côme, the Paris faculty of physicians protested publicly and marched to St Côme through snow and sleet. The citizens who watched the extraordinary protest were not impressed by the physicians, and the march apparently ended in disarray. It had no effect on the King's decision.

The status of French surgeons was strengthened in 1731 with the founding of the first Academy of Surgery, and it was confirmed in 1743 when Louis XV ruled that barbers and wigmakers could no longer practice surgery and that all surgeons had to study and pass the requisite examinations. An illustrious surgeon from Montpelier, François de la Peyronie, who together with Felix's successor as royal surgeon, Georges Mareschal, had helped to found the Academy of Surgery, was one of the main forces behind this restrictive ordinance, which lasted until the French Revolution some fifty years later.

While the French were establishing the basis of a powerful surgical profession, physicians in other countries were still helping to ensure that surgery remained a subordinate craft. In Germany, in the eighteenth century, surgery was largely in the hands of the strolling bonesetters and barbers. In Britain, the surgeons had managed to separate themselves from the barbers in 1745, but the restrictions on unqualified surgeons applied only within a seven-mile radius of London. In the greater part of Britain surgery was still open to anyone who felt fit or able to practice it.

The French King's fistula had given surgery in France a head start over the profession in all other European countries. The French Revolution, and the wars that followed, helped to ensure that those studying and practising the art of surgery were able to obtain a good deal of experience. The same type of experience was, of course, available to the surgeons of other armies, but only the French seem to have had the basic training and education to benefit fully from it.

One man in particular, Dominique-Jean Larrey, is remembered for his reputation as a surgeon who succeeded in matching practical skills with a genuine affection both for his work and for the soldiers he was paid to look after. In general, military surgeons were not well loved, but Napoleon described Larrey as the 'most honest man and the best friend to the soldier that I ever knew' and explained that Larrey 'tormented the generals, and disturbed them out of their beds at night whenever he wanted accommodations or assistance for the wounded or sick'. 'If the army were to raise a monument to the memory of one man,' Napoleon concluded, 'it should be to that of Larrey.'

To Larrey we owe the development of flying ambulances, clearing stations, base hospitals and efficient systems for dealing with battle casualties, but perhaps his most important contribution was his ability to make his soldier patients aware that he cared for them. He treated casualties according to their surgical need rather than their rank or nationality and made many friends throughout the army.

Larrey's popularity with the ordinary soldier can be judged from the fact that members of the Imperial Guard saved his life on several occasions, sharing their rations with him, wrapping him in their own clothes when he was cold and rescuing him when he was surrounded by Cossacks. Even when captured by the Prussians, Larrey's reputation as a generous and gentle surgeon led Field Marshal Blücher to provide him with an escort back to the French lines.

The history of surgery belongs almost exclusively to the French. The profession was founded during the Renaissance by Paré, it was given status and respectability in the seventeenth century by Felix, and its popular acceptance as a medical speciality was ensured by such men as Larrey at the end of the eighteenth century.

Chapter 31: The Apothecaries Gain Control

Changes in France following the Revolution — Laennec and the first stethoscope — Progress in all fields of medicine, but blood-letting continues — Robert Knox obtains anatomy specimens from dubious sources — Political changes within the medical profession — The Apothecaries Act in Britain

Many social, military, economic and cultural changes took place in the early decades of the nineteenth century. The establishment in Europe and America had been severely shaken by the events of the previous few years, and the long series of wars had produced great changes in living conditions.

As a direct result of all these changes the quality and availability of medical care changed dramatically in both the New and Old Worlds. Critical observers, such as Tenon, Pinel and Howard, helped to encourage the ordinary people to demand better health-care facilities, and for the first time angry citizens questioned those administrators whose regulations had in the past caused so much discomfort.

Things improved faster in France than anywhere else, probably because there the changes in the relationship between the official, political establishment and the general public had been greater than anywhere else in the world. Just before the French Revolution conditions in France were roughly as bad as they were anywhere else in Europe. Directly after the Revolution they were probably better in France than in most other European countries. However, improvements in the quality of medical care and the standard reached by medical practitioners changed quite dramatically all over Europe during this short period.

One reason for the dramatic improvements in France was that many of the men who had served in Napoleon’s armies as surgeons later became important and effective members of the medical establishment. The fact that so many military surgeons made important contributions to the development of medicine as a useful, caring profession is a tribute not only to the democratic nature of the new post-Revolution French society but also to the quality of Larrey’s fellow surgeons.

Marie-François-Xavier Bichat, for example, who died at the age of thirty-one in 1802, began his career as an army surgeon and yet produced some of the most notable early books on the importance of human anatomy to clinical surgeons and physicians. His influence spread around the world. Another former surgeon, René Theophile Hyacinthe Laennec, not only became a successful, well-respected hospital physician but also earned himself immortality by inventing the stethoscope, the first purely clinical instrument to have been designed solely to aid the diagnosis of disease.

Like other physicians of the time, Laennec had learned to listen to his patients’ hearts and lungs by placing his ear directly on their chests – a technique that was not only invariably ineffective, occasionally impractical and sometimes embarrassing but also often quite unhygienic. While struggling to listen to the heart of an extremely fat patient, Laennec is said to have remembered watching two young children playing among a pile of logs in the Bois de Boulogne. The children had been tapping out signals to each other, one child tapping the log and the other listening by placing his ear against the other end. Attempting to copy this trick with a tube of rolled-up stiff paper, Laennec placed one end of the tube on the patient’s chest, directly over the heart, and the other to his own ear. When he found that this simple instrument enabled him to listen to the human heart more effectively and more comfortably than before, he had a slim wooden cylinder made. This cylinder, the first stethoscope, was an instant success and was adopted by physicians all over Paris.

Men such as Bichat and Laennec, who had learned their profession through close contact with the ordinary people and who had considerable practical experience, were among the first of a new breed of caring, imaginative clinicians who helped to give the medical profession a much better reputation.

Like other clinicians in practice in those early years of the nineteenth century, they were, for the first time, putting the theoretical studies of the great medical scientists to practical use. Physicians throughout Europe and America were beginning to realise that they could use such instruments as the microscope to help them understand the pathology of specific disease processes. Two eighteenth-century scientists, Leopold Auenbrugger and Giovanni Battista Morgagni, had produced original work which had at the time had little effect on medical practice. Auenbrugger, a physician in Vienna, had discovered in 1751 that by tapping the chest it is possible to discover the presence of any fluid. He got the idea for his experiments in human percussion after watching wine merchants tapping barrels to see how much wine remained in each one.

Morgagni was the first real pathologist. In his book *De Sedibus et Causis Morborum* he showed that the study of dead bodies could provide real help for those concerned with the care of the living. In the early nineteenth century the work of these two men bore fruit and became generally accepted. Auenbrugger’s percussion method was used alongside Laennec’s stethoscope to aid in diagnosis, and Morgagni’s teachings helped clinicians to judge the importance of postmortem findings.

The success of those early nineteenth-century clinicians can be judged from the fact that so many of them gave their names to diseases which had until that time remained a mystery. Richard Bright, Thomas Addison, Thomas Hodgkin and James Parkinson were just four members of the British medical profession to give their names to specific diseases. Many members of the profession made important contributions to medicine which are still of value today. One of the most extraordinary pieces of clinical research was done by William Beaumont, an American army surgeon who, in 1833, published a description of studies on the human stomach. The victim of his research was a French Canadian called Alexis St. Martin, who had received a gunshot wound which, on healing, had left part of his stomach on view to the outside world. Beaumont was able not only to watch St. Martin's stomach dealing with food but also to measure the quantity and quality of gastric juice produced. Beaumont began his studies in 1825 at an isolated military post in the forests of Michigan and studied Alexis St. Martin for several years. He showed that different foods have different effects on the stomach lining and that the production of stomach acid can be influenced by things other than food.

Despite these advances, the sagacity and acumen of the men who led the nineteenth-century revolution in clinical medicine must not be allowed to disguise the fact that the medical profession which provided general care for the public was not made up of an endless series of Laennecs and Beaumonts. There were many hundreds of doctors still practising medicine in the same dull, ineffective and dangerous way that it had been practised for centuries.

For example, blood-letting was still a principal therapeutic tool favoured by the majority of practising doctors. The fact that when blood was removed a patient would be quieter and have a lower temperature was considered a point in its favour by many practitioners. As far as the doctor was concerned, the main advantage of blood-letting was that it enabled him to do something which had an obvious effect on the patient and which did not cause any immediate and obvious harm. It was also easy to perform. Some practitioners would cut into a vein, some would deliberately cut into an artery, while others favoured cupping, a procedure which involved making a cut into the skin and then placing a cup-like instrument over the opening. A vacuum created within the cup by sucking out the air caused the blood to flow from the wound. Finally, there were the men who used leeches. The popularity of these creatures as a means of blood letting increased rapidly during the nineteenth century: in 1824 two million were imported into France; by 1832 this figure had risen to fifty-seven million.

Medical education at this time was not always pursued without opposition, conflict or controversy. For example, the dissection of human cadavers had become an essential part of medical training, not only for the student anatomist but also for the clinician anxious to learn more about the pathology of human disorders, but while, in many parts of Europe, there was a plentiful supply of corpses for doctors to dissect, the ready availability of human material was not universal.

Until 1751, in Britain the only legally available corpses were the four criminals annually allocated to the Barber Surgeons' Company in London. After 1751 the law was changed to make the corpses of all executed criminals available to the dissectionists, but the old-fashioned habit of gibbeting corpses meant that there was still a shortage. This led to the growth of a night-time industry dedicated to supplying the medical profession with corpses.

One of the first men to follow Bichat's example and link anatomy with clinical science was the Edinburgh physician Robert Knox, who had also worked with Baron Larrey in Paris and whose attractive lecturing style kept the lecture theatre full — he is said to have had a regular class of over five hundred students. Unfortunately there was a shortage of cadavers at that time in Edinburgh, and the unhappy Knox became involved in one of the great medical scandals of the century.

Bodies were obtained by people like Knox in a number of ways from a variety of sources. Poor people sometimes sold the bodies of their dying relatives, and corpses were sometimes removed from coffins by unscrupulous undertakers, who buried an earth-filled coffin and sold the corpse. A more dramatic method of obtaining fresh corpses was simply to dig them up. It is said that in Britain in the 1820s, a total of some two hundred men were busy digging up bodies and removing them from churchyards. Some of these early 'resurrectionists' were undoubtedly medical students or anatomy lecturers looking for material for themselves, but many were common criminals who would steal anything for a good price. Corpse-stealing had been an offence since 1788 but relatively few people were caught and, when they were, sentences were usually light.

There was, of course, one way to obtain corpses for dissection which did not involve skulking around in churchyards at the dead of night. Murder was the technique favoured by two Irishmen, Burke and Hare, in 1827. They began their careers on the fringe of medicine by selling the body of a dead lodger which was about the carted away for a pauper's funeral. Encouraged by the ease with which they made this sale, the two unemployed men then suffocated two more lodgers who seemed ill and apparently likely to die. Business continued to be profitable, and eventually Burke and Hare took their total number of victims to sixteen. All these bodies were happily bought by Dr Knox and his assistants.

When the two men were eventually caught, Hare turned King’s evidence and as a result was allowed to leave Edinburgh, while Burke was hanged and later dissected by Professor Alexander Monro, who held the chair of anatomy at Edinburgh University. The unhappy K.nox was virtually ruined by the scandal, since the body of one of the victims was found in his private dissecting room. The medical profession, which contained many men as guilty as Knox, managed to keep clear of the scandal. The Burke and Hare murders resulted in the passing of an Anatomy Act in 1832 which ruled that all unclaimed dead bodies should go to the medical schools for dissection.

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At the beginning of the nineteenth century, practising clinicians in Britain fell into one of four categories. First there were the university-trained physicians who had usually studied at either Oxford or Cambridge and were Fellows of the College of Physicians. These practitioners had usually acquired Fellowship of the College on the basis of their academic studies. They dressed immaculately and fashionably and wrote and spoke in ‘dog Latin’, but they were ignorant of the more practical side of clinical medicine. The physicians, who were few in number, provided most of the medical care for the London establishment but were not, at that time, considered to be specialists or in any way professionally superior to the apothecaries, who provided a similar service for the great majority of the population. Socially, however, qualified physicians were far superior to surgeons and apothecaries, and they were the only members of the medical profession who could expect to enter a large house through the front door — apothecaries and surgeons had to enter through the servants’ or tradesmen’s entrance.

The second group of medical professionals included the surgeons, who, since 1801, were also able to describe themselves as belonging to a Royal College. A licence from the College entitled a graduate surgeon to operate anywhere in Britain but did not allow him to prescribe remedies designed to deal with internal ailments.

In the third, and most important, group of medical professionals were the apothecaries, who provided medical care for the majority of people able to afford professional care. Although traditionally they had been trained to dispense medicines and although, by law, they were still not permitted to offer advice, in practice the apothecaries became Britain’s general practitioners. In Italy, France and Germany the apothecaries were the fore-runners of the pharmacists; in Britain they were the predecessors of today’s family doctors and provided the main driving force behind the development of the modern medical profession.

Not all the people professionally involved with the care of the sick were qualified, of course, and even as the three established branches of the British medical profession grew in strength, so too did the stature and popularity of the fourth group: the quacks. Harley Street, for example, began its long association with the medical profession when an outrageous quack called St. John Long began to practise there. The demand for quacks was inevitable, since there were still relatively few qualified people available. In Lincolnshire, at the turn of the century, for example, it was reported that there were in practice five qualified physicians, eleven surgeons and apothecaries who had served their apprenticeships, twenty-five druggists who had received no training at all but who were engaged in the dispensing of medicines, sixty-three unqualified and untrained midwives, and forty quacks who had received no education at all. It is probably fair to estimate that less than a quarter of the medical practitioners in the north of England had any medical training.

However, the Industrial Revolution had increased the number of people who could afford to buy professional medical care, and many of these people were not satisfied with the attentions of an unqualified, uneducated quack. They wanted to be seen by someone who had been officially recognised and who had acknowledged qualifications.

Health professionals in all three branches of medicine were themselves eager to belong to a universally recognised association. They, like some of their patients, did not approve of quacks being allowed to practise unimpeded. Consequently, several new laws were proposed, designed to regulate the status and legal rights of those within the medical profession.

In 1806, for example, the Royal College of Physicians published a piece of proposed legislation in which it was suggested that Britain be divided into sixteen districts, each of which would be under the control of a resident physician who would award qualifications to people wishing to practise in his area and then charge each practitioner an annual fee. The Royal College of Physicians clearly wanted to take control of the entire British medical profession.

A second scheme, proposed by Dr Edward Harrison and supported by the Presidents of the Royal Society and the Royal College of Physicians and the Master of the Royal College of Surgeons, suggested that there should be a medical register for all physicians, surgeons, midwives, apothecaries, chemists and druggists. The scheme was abandoned, however, when the College of Physicians opposed it on the rather dubious ground that the new register would damage the supremacy of its members.

Finally, in 1815, the Apothecaries Act was passed. This most important piece of legislation made it compulsory for all new apothecaries to serve a five-year apprenticeship, study anatomy and physiology, walk the wards in a recognised hospital for at least six months, and pass an examination and obtain a licence before practising their profession. These regulations governed the whole country, and the apothecaries succeeded in outmanoeuvring the College of Physicians, whose members could now be prosecuted if they practised as apothecaries without an apothecary’s licence. Qualified surgeons, who were members of the newly formed Royal College of Surgeons, formed an agreement with the apothecaries, and many of the more ambitious young practitioners sought qualifications from both the Society of Apothecaries and the Royal College of Surgeons.

Within fifteen years of the Act being passed, the Society of Apothecaries had won for its members the right to charge a fee both for providing advice and for dispensing medicines, and had therefore broken the dominance of the College of Physicians. Many of the newly registered apothecaries grouped together in the areas in which they practised to share scientific and medical experiences and to provide each other with professional and political support. One of the first of these societies was the Worcester Medical and Surgical Society, founded in 1816 by Charles Hastings. Hastings later founded the Provincial Medical and Surgical Association, a professional organisation which was to become better known as the British Medical Association.

The Society of Apothecaries soon began to take over the general control of medical care in Britain. The College of Physicians was reluctant to allow too many new fellows to be registered but the apothecaries were happy to meet the public demand for more doctors. By the 1840s, when the College of Physicians was still granting licences to only a handful of doctors at a time, the apothecaries were granting licences to hundreds of young men and carving for themselves a major slice of the medical profession’s responsibilities in Britain.

Chapter 32: Killer Diseases Force Social Change

Smallpox, tuberculosis and cholera continue to threaten — The cholera epidemic in Europe produces improvements in public health — Chadwick's proposals — Dr John Snow and the Broad Street Pump — Potato blight in Ireland

At the beginning of the nineteenth century infectious diseases were still rife. Three of the most prevalent were smallpox, tuberculosis and cholera.

In the years since Jenner had published his inquiry into the Causes and Effects of the Variolae Vaccine, the number of people dying of smallpox around the world had fallen. But, although there was already powerful evidence to support the theory that vaccination saved lives, there were still many groups of people unprotected.

As the century began, there was a growing body of opinion opposed to vaccination in principle. Some opponents honestly felt that vaccination was a dangerous practice and pointed to occasional deaths as evidence. Other opponents of Jenner's scheme felt that compulsory vaccination programmes were an infringement of human rights, although they could not disagree with the thesis that one member of a community who refuses to have a vaccination may provide a harbour for a virus which would otherwise be unable to survive.

In America, President Thomas Jefferson had suggested with considerable imagination that smallpox vaccine would not only provide those using it with protection but help to eradicate smallpox from the earth. But in Jenner's home country the argument raged for many years before mass vaccination programmes were introduced. It was a three-year epidemic which killed 41,000 people that finally produced the 1840 Vaccination Act — legislation which sounded the first peals of the death knell for the disease in Britain. Progress in the fight against smallpox elsewhere in Europe was intermittent. Napoleon had insisted that his soldiers be protected against smallpox, but later French leaders were not so enthusiastic, and in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71 more than 23,000 French soldiers died from the disease. The German generals who had insisted that their men be vaccinated lost only 278 men to smallpox.

As smallpox came under control, however, tuberculosis continued to kill or disable thousands. Caused by a bacterium which some believe to be the oldest living creature on earth, tuberculosis exists in two main forms – bovine and human. The bovine type is contracted by drinking milk from tuberculous cows, and since children drink more milk than most other members of society, bovine tuberculosis mainly affects children. The human type of tuberculosis, which spreads from person to person and affects the lungs, is also known as phthisis or consumption, and it was consumption which was largely responsible for the large number of deaths involving young adults in the nineteenth century.

In the rural areas of Europe during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, bovine tuberculosis (also known as scrofula or the King's Evil) was the commoner of the two types and affected many hundreds of thousands of youngsters. By the late seventeenth century, however, consumption was becoming more important as towns grew in size and the poor living and working conditions facilitated the spread of the disease. John Locke wrote in 1685 that a fifth of all the deaths in London that year were due to consumption. The Industrial Revolution made Western Europe and America a perfect breeding ground for the tubercle bacillus, and by the nineteenth century the disease was endemic. Consumption is said to have killed more people in nineteenth-century Britain than smallpox, scarlet fever, measles, whooping cough and typhus fever put together.

Even though men such as John Coakley Lettsom, who practised in Margate, England at the end of the eighteenth century, claimed that consumption could be prevented or cured by good food, sunlight, fresh air and rest, the social changes which accompanied the Industrial Revolution meant that the disease was allowed to continue to spread unchecked, and although there is some evidence to support the theory that, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, the disease had been around for so long that many families had acquired genetic resistance to it, consumption was still a major killer in all developing countries.

The third of this important trio of diseases, cholera, became important in Europe only during the nineteenth century. As trade with the East continued to expand, the cholera bacteria were transmitted from central India to China, Japan and Asiatic Russia, reaching Poland, Austria, Germany and Scandinavia by about 1829. During the next few years, cholera travelled slowly but persistently across the whole of Europe. The natural history of the disease in Britain was typical of its progress in most European countries.

When cholera first arrived in Britain in 1831, it found an ideal environment: no large town had water safe to drink, and most of the rivers were polluted. The growing population in most towns crowded into the tiny back-to-back houses, and the average two-roomed house often had twenty people crammed into it, all using unhygienic privies which frequently overflowed into the yards and streets. The better-off families might have had fewer problems with their sewage disposal, but they had to take their fresh water supplies from the same polluted sources as everyone else. The lessons which had been learned had been long since forgotten, and the modern, growing towns were all run on exactly the same lines as medieval villages.

The cholera epidemic of 1831 obliged the authorities to consider what could be done to improve the general state of public health. Although the poor, who suffered more from cholera than the rich, sometimes claimed that the disease was due to deliberate poisoning, and the religious insisted that cholera was a punishment for immoral behaviour, most observers seemed to recognise that the epidemic was related in some way to the poor water supplies and sewerage facilities.

Of the many men who struggled to do something to improve the quality of public health care in Britain, one of the first and most far-sighted was the civil servant, lawyer and journalist Edwin Chadwick, whose ideas and innovations influenced events in America as well as Europe. Dismayed by the number of people killed by the cholera epidemic, Chadwick, who had been invited by the Government to help with Poor Law Reform, argued that proper sanitation facilities would not only improve the quality of life but also be of value in economic terms. This deliberate equation of good health and economic strength was not a new philosophy, as it had already been put forward in the seventeenth century by Sir William Petty. But, whereas Petty's arguments had gone more or less unnoticed, Chadwick's did not. The changing political climate in Britain in the early part of the nineteenth century, which had accompanied the drive for equality initiated by the working people as they became better off and better educated, meant that there was a genuine need for change. Since more working-class people now had political power, politicians were under more pressure to do something about the foul conditions in which the town dwellers usually lived.

Chadwick prepared and studied maps which showed where the worst death rates due to disease occurred. His figures showed that the average age at death was forty-three for gentlemen, thirty for tradesmen and twenty-two for labourers crowded together in the cities, and on the basis of these statistics concluded that disease was spread by atmospheric pollution caused by over crowding, poor water supplies, bad drainage and dirty towns. In his report entitled *A Report of an inquiry into the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population of Great Britain*, which was published in 1842, Chadwick suggested that a circulatory system be used in towns and cities to supply water and remove waste products, showing that the authorities would actually save money by building proper facilities. A water board expert for the Trent River Water Works showed that, whereas when water supplied at high pressure tended to burst the traditional bored elm trunks, it did no damage at all to iron pipes, while a surveyor to the Holborn Sewers Commission produced evidence showing that narrow-bore drains which had smooth inside walls, cleaned themselves when water closets were used. Agreeing that it would cost money to build pumps to supply fresh water to town dwellers and to provide sewer pipes of the type he recommended, Chadwick suggested that sewage could be processed and sold to farms as valuable fertiliser.

Chadwick's recommendations were incorporated into a Public Health Act in 1848 and, although not all his ideas were accepted (it was cheaper to import Chilean guano *as* a fertiliser than to treat human sewage for the purpose), he made a great contribution to the quality of life in Britain. Almost alone, Chadwick provided the initial impetus which eventually gave us clean streets, clean water supplies and sewage disposal facilities.

The proposals put forward in the 1848 Act were given additional impetus by the second major epidemic of cholera, which began that year and proved to be the most widespread of the four outbreaks of cholera to affect Britain. In London alone the 1848-9 outbreak was responsible for the deaths of nearly fifteen thousand people; slightly more than six out of every thousand people died from the disease.

It was in London during that epidemic that the relationship between cholera and water supplies was first proved, by a doctor called John Snow. Deciding that the only explanation for the way the disease seemed to spread was that it was carried in water supplies, Snow argued that the solution was to keep sewage away from drinking-water supplies. He considered that, because the commonest symptoms, diarrhoea and vomiting, both involved the alimentary tract, the disease must be transmitted by something ingested rather than something carried in the air. He argued that an airborne contaminant would enter the lungs rather than the alimentary tract

In 1849, when the second cholera outbreak hit London, Snow gave up his general practice in order to investigate his theory. His first conclusive proof came from a survey of the district around Golden Square in the centre of London. At that time piped water was not supplied to all houses in the area, and the people took their water from pumps and wells. A pump in Broad Street supplied the majority of local inhabitants, and Snow's enquiries revealed that a cholera epidemic in the area was linked directly to the use of the Broad Street pump. A later investigation showed that the brick lining of a cesspool about three feet away from the well was cracked and decayed, and it seems likely that this was responsible for contaminating the previously drinkable water from the Broad Street pump. To prevent the further spread of cholera, Snow recommended that the pump's handle be removed so that water could no longer be drawn.

The evidence was complete when Snow began to compare the incidence of cholera in areas of London supplied by different water companies. He found, for example, that customers of the Southwark and Vauxhall Water Company, which supplied water from the polluted lower reaches of the River Thames, were far more likely to get cholera than customers of the Lambeth Water Company, which took its water from a pure source.

As a result of social pressures and the work of men like Chadwick and Snow, by the middle of the nineteenth century the taming had begun of these three major killers: smallpox, cholera and tuberculosis. Many more people would die before the diseases could be described as under control, but there is no doubt that the devastation they had wrought during the latter part of the eighteenth century was being neutralised. Jenner's vaccination was conquering smallpox, while tuberculosis and cholera were soon to be brought under control by improvements in living conditions and standards of public hygiene.

Finally, there is one other 'disease' not usually included in books devoted to the history of medicine which should be mentioned here. When the Irish potato crop was destroyed by the blight in 1845 the resulting famine produced far-reaching international social, political and economic effects which equalled those produced by the infectious diseases directly affecting man.

Since it had been introduced into the European diet by Sir Walter Raleigh at the end of the sixteenth century, the potato had become a staple part of the daily diet in many countries. In Ireland in particular, where crops were not good and animal farming was not as widespread as elsewhere, the importance of the potato is difficult to overemphasise. The whole Irish economy depended on potatoes, which were eaten, used as pig food or sold, and the blight of 1845 was nothing less than a national disaster. Two or three million Irish people died from starvation as a result of the disease, and the final effects of that historic crop failure were still noticeable decades later, not just in Ireland but in other countries too.

The most obvious and immediate result of the Irish potato blight in England, for example, was the repeal of the Corn Laws. Passed in 1815 in an attempt to restore agricultural prosperity to a farming community threatened with ruin by the fall in prices at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, the Corn Laws had never been popular with town dwellers or the British poor in general. When the Irish potato crop failed, corn was in tremendous demand, and prices rose naturally, with the result that it was no longer necessary, or even practical, to maintain prices at an artificially high level. Other political and economic factors were involved in the decision to repeal the Corn Laws but the situation in Ireland was certainly of significance.

The extent of the famine in Ireland also resulted in the mass emigration of many Irish nationals. Some left to live in England, while others travelled in the opposite direction to look for their fortunes in America. Many twentieth-century Irish-Americans are the descendants of those migrants who left Ireland to escape the famine and look for food, work and new homes.

As an influence on international social history, potato blight must take its place alongside smallpox, plague and cholera.

Chapter 33: The Hazards of Industry

Britain's industrial dominance built on the backs of little girls — The first investigation of health hazards resulting from the Industrial Revolution — The Factory Act

As the Industrial Revolution continued to change working conditions throughout the world, it became clear that employers would not be prepared to make improvements designed to protect their employees until forced to do so by government legislation.

By the end of the eighteenth century British factories were employing women on heavy, dirty work and using the services of young children. Children between the ages of five and twelve had been taken away from rural villages to work under foul conditions in the growing towns. William Cobbett, the social historian and author, claimed that England was building her industrial dominance on the backs of thirty thousand little girls.

Protesting loudly at these accusations, factory owners claimed that the nation's status depended on a large workforce, and profitability depended upon machinery being in use for as many hours as possible. The tools and equipment originally introduced to help men work more efficiently and effectively were rapidly becoming far more important than the human beings who operated them.

In Britain two Acts of Parliament (the Health and Morals of Apprentices Act of 1802 and the Factory Act of 1819) introduced some controls, ruling that children had to be at least nine years old before they could be employed, and later legislation reduced their maximum working day to ten hours, but the great advances in legislative control did not take place until after a British clinician had published his studies of some of the real problems then existing.

The first member of the medical profession to investigate the health hazards associated with industrial employment, Charles Turner Thackrah, worked in Leeds, a city where it was said there were more than 120 known trades and occupations.

Thackrah's book, entitled *The effects of the Principal Arts, Trades and Professions, and of Civic States and habits of Living, on Health and Longevity, with Suggestions for the Removal of many of the Agents which produce Disease and shorten the Duration of Life* and published in 1831, helped to encourage other members of the medical profession to take an interest in the enormous range of occupational diseases affecting the working population. In the book Thackrah describes how, despite the existing legislation, children aged seven had to start work at half past five in the morning and work through until seven in the evening with only a forty-minute break. It is not difficult to imagine the damage that such working conditions could do to growing children. In addition to the bald facts, however, Thackrah made numerous practical suggestions about ways in which workers could be protected from the disorders normally associated with their working conditions. He suggested, for example, that men whose work involved mining and grinding should be provided with masks in addition to proper ventilation, and pointed out that research had already been published showing that fork grinders in Sheffield, who used a dry grindstone, usually died at the age of thirty, while knife-grinders, who worked on wet stones, usually lived to between forty and fifty years of age.

Thackrah died of tuberculosis at the age of thirty-seven, two years after his book was published, but in the same year as his death the Factory Act of 1833 was passed. This effective piece of legislation ruled that no one under eighteen years of age should work at night, nor for more than twelve hours a day or sixty-nine hours a week. The minimum age for young workers was set at nine years, and employers were required to see a certificate proving a child's age signed by a medical man, before they could employ children. To make sure that the Act was being properly applied, a system of factory inspections by government-employed officials was set up.

During the rest of the nineteenth century industrial medicine increased in importance, and new laws were passed in other countries to control conditions of employment. But that Act of 1833 was the first and most important breakthrough to be made in the fight to protect the health of industrial workers, and Charles Thackrah was the man who first succeeded in putting Ramazzini's theories into practice.

Chapter 34: Nursing Becomes a Profession

Hospital care before the nineteenth century — Fliedner's establishment leads the way — Elizabeth Fry and Theodor Fliedner — A birth in Florence

Advances in hospital organisation and nursing had been few and largely insignificant during the otherwise tempestuous first half of the nineteenth century. From the Renaissance until the end of the eighteenth century nursing had remained largely in the hands of the members of those religious orders who had dedicated themselves to the care of the sick. Although the ability of these nursing nuns to alleviate physical pain and suffering was unremarkable, they were undoubtedly able to contribute a great deal to the mental and spiritual welfare of their patients.

At the end of the eighteenth century the Church's role in caring for the sick had diminished dramatically. In France, for example, the Church-run hospitals had been taken over by the state in 1789, while reports on the horrors of institutional care produced by such men as Tenon and Howard had resulted in the rebuilding and reorganisation of some hospitals. Together these changes meant that nursing care was no longer the prerogative of the nuns, and there was now a growing demand for nursing assistants without ecclesiastical connections.

Yet, despite the political changes which had taken place at the end of the eighteenth century and the many scientific advances in medicine, hospitals were still stuffy, smelly and overcrowded and their nursing staff poorly paid and treated as domestic servants. A nurse might expect £5 a year for being in sole charge of seventeen beds for thirteen hours a day. There was no equipment, nor were many drugs widely available. Newly recruited nurses received no medical training and were expected merely to carry out fundamental household chores. There was no working relationship between nurses and midwives, nor between nurses and doctors.

Genuinely overworked and certainly underpaid, the professional nurse undoubtedly had a hard life. One woman in charge of a ward full of sick and dying patients would have found herself fully occupied in looking after the basic needs of those patients, with very little time left for more than cleaning and feeding them. Under these circumstances it is hardly surprising that the early nineteenth-century professional nurses acquired some thing of a reputation as heavy drinking whores. With alcohol and opium the only readily available drugs to have any definite sedative effect, there was probably no shortage of either in hospitals, and the overworked, unhappy nurses can hardly be blamed if from time to time they succumbed to the temptation to drown their miseries. Nor is it very surprising that some nurses took advantage of the ready availability of raunchy, lecherous medical students to earn a little extra money.

This enormous social, intellectual and economic chasm dividing nurses and doctors would undoubtedly have continued to exist but for the fact that during the nineteenth century several educated, intelligent and wealthy young ladies began to take an interest in the care of the sick and dying. Inspired by a desire to help others and fired by a mixture of religious zeal and subconscious guilt, these young ladies were not impressed with the idea of removing bundles of dirty straw or sweeping out fouled wards. They wanted more personal contact with their patients and obtained more satisfaction from sitting with, talking to and soothing the sick and troubled than from working alongside the professional nurses who were expected to work with broom and pail. It was from this class of amateur nurse that the revolutionaries in nursing care were to come.

The first major step towards the development of an organised, trained, properly administered nursing profession was taken in Germany, in a village called Kaiserwerth by Pastor Theodor Fliedner and his wife Friederike who, in 1833, opened a training school where, together, they intended to help discharged female prisoners become nurses. Fliedner and his wife recognised that nursing involves more than a series of basic domestic chores, acknowledged the need to provide potential nurses with some form of specific training and managed to organise a practical training programme.

Fliedner's establishment was the prototype for similar training schools later to be built in places as far apart as Scandinavia and the United States, but it was the visits made to his village by two British women which were to lead directly to the massive changes which produced the highly organised and well-established nursing profession we have today.

The first of these visitors was Elizabeth Fry, the daughter of a wealthy Quaker banker, who went to Germany in 1840 and was immensely impressed by what she saw. In fact, she had been instrumental in Fliedner's decision to start training nurses, since, when he had visited London in 1822, it was her work on prison reform which had most impressed him. Her recommendations on Newgate Prison had involved suggestions that prisoners be separated according to their sex and that they be given job training, so that on leaving prison they would be able to find some useful employment in accordance with this suggestion, Fliedner's original plan had been to provide training for discharged female prisoners in the hope that they would be able to stay out of trouble.

The fact that he had chosen to train them as nurses was an additional bonus which so impressed Mrs Fry that, on her return to London, she opened Britain’s first nursing school.

Like Fliedner, Elizabeth Fry based her training programme on religion, believing that nursing was and should be a Christian vocation. Her aim was to attract women willing to devote themselves ‘to the glory of God and the mitigation of human suffering’, and she never disguised the fact that, although the sick would undoubtedly benefit, the work would also be a type of religious martyrdom.

The efforts of both Fliedner and Mrs Fry were genuine and well intentioned but they lacked the fierce determination that was necessary to turn a vocation into a respected profession. They did not know that, at about the time of their first meeting in London, a Mr and Mrs Nightingale were staying at a villa in Florence where Mrs Nightingale was expecting her second child.

A few decades later, christened with the name of her birth-place, Miss Nightingale was to stamp her personality indelibly on the developing nursing profession.

Chapter 35: Florence Nightingale’s Contribution

Florence Nightingales decision — Florence studies hospital reports and meets Pastor Fliedner — The Crimean War – Florence is a heroine – New hospital designs

To judge from her own notes and private diaries, Florence Nightingale was a sensitive, imaginative, emotional and excitable child. Born in Italy and brought up by parents who considered European travel a normal part of everyday living, she had plenty of opportunity to see all aspects of human life. It was not long before she began to feel a desire to help the sick and the poor and to do something to relieve their pains and anxieties and as the years went by the more determined she became to ease the suffering of those less fortunate than herself.

In 1844 she decided to dedicate her whole life to the care of the sick. For a young woman from a prosperous background this was, to say the least, an unusual decision. Young women of good birth had spent time with the sick before, it is true, but their efforts had been strictly confined. Most had spent odd hours sitting with and talking to the sick, visiting them in their own homes and providing food and clothing. Professional nurses, however, had always been either dedicated members of a religious order or domestic servants who worked in hospitals because they could not obtain posts in private houses.

When Florence finally plucked up the courage to tell her parents her plans, they were horrified. Despite the work of Pastor Fliedner in Germany and Elizabeth Fry in Britain, hospitals were still invariably dirty, insanitary places largely staffed by dirty, insanitary women. The windows of most wards were boarded or bricked up to retain heat, and beds were crowded together. Patients came mostly from tenements or terraced houses, or from the streets. Bed linen was not usually changed between patients, and the nurses did not have the time to wash patients properly.

Despite her parents’ reluctance, Florence remained determined and began to prepare herself by reading every hospital report she could lay her hands on and studying the public health reports that were beginning to appear in the late 1830s and early 1840s. Not satisfied with British reports, she succeeded in obtaining information about hospitals in Paris and Berlin. When she travelled abroad with her parents, she took every opportunity to visit hospitals of all kinds to study the facilities available. She was training herself to be the first practical hospital administrator.

In 1850, while in Germany, she managed to fit in a visit to Pastor Fliedner in Kaiserwerth. It was that visit which finally convinced Florence Nightingale that she had chosen the right profession and that, whatever her friends and family might say about it, her life was destined to be spent in caring for the sick. Full of enthusiasm, fired by the Kaiserwerth experiment and determined to ensure that some of what she had seen in Germany should be put into practice in Britain, she immediately wrote a pamphlet entitled *The Institution of Kaiserwerth on the Rhine for the Practical Training of Deaconesses, under the direction of the Rev. Pastor Fliedner, embracing the support and care of a Hospital, Infant & Industrial Schools, and a Female Penitentiary*. It was the first of a number of important publications devoted to the organisation and administration of hospitals to come from Florence Nightingale.

Three years later Miss Nightingale got her first chance to put into practice the information she had been so carefully collecting for the previous decade. The Institution for the Care of Sick Gentlewomen in Distressed Circumstances was about to undergo a reorganisation. Florence managed to obtain the post of Superintendent to organise the changes and to be in charge of the management of the Institution’s new residential buildings.

The committee which governed the charity had taken on rather more than they had imagined. Miss Nightingale soon made it clear that she knew what was right and that everyone else should agree with her.

She arranged for call bells to be installed so that nurses could see instantly which patients required help. She insisted that the Institution should accept patients of all denominations. She made it clear that she considered clean beds and fresh linen essential. She signed tough contracts with wholesalers for supplies and refused to accept delivery if the goods were not up to standard. She was, in short, the very epitome of the classic senior hospital sister: brusque, determined and fearsome. Yet at the same time she cared deeply for the women in the Institution and they, recognising that her aggressive attitude was fired on their behalf, were more than fond of her.

To those who knew her, it must have been obvious that Florence Nightingale was not going to be satisfied running a small hospital in London for ever. She had greater things in mind.

While Miss Nightingale was running her small hospital in Harley Street, an enormous row was building up in Britain over the conditions said to be facing the British soldiers fighting the Crimean war. The controversy raged over the barracks at Scutari, which were said by *The Times* correspondent to be totally unsuitably prepared for the care of the sick and wounded, with too few surgeons, no nurses and no dressings.

Disturbed by the story, the Secretary of War, Sidney Herbert, wrote officially to Florence Nightingale asking her to go to Scutari and organise a proper hospital there. ‘There is but one person in England that I know of’, he wrote, ‘who would be capable of organising and superintending such a scheme.’ Mr Herbert need not have bothered. Florence Nightingale had the same idea and, as his letter to her was in the post, one from her to him was also on its way. Miss Nightingale told him that she had already organised a small group of nurses to travel to Scutari.

With government backing Miss Nightingale’s small group grew to thirty-eight: some were professional nurses who had volunteered because the wages were good; others were nuns. Their nursing experience was as mixed as their religious backgrounds, but that small party changed many people’s attitudes towards nursing and indeed proved to be a turning point in the history of hospital management as well as of general nursing care.

In the chaos that preceded her journey the death rate among the wounded at Scutari had been forty-two per cent. In the order that followed her arrival it fell to two per cent. There could have been no better proof of the efficacy of her methods.

When she returned from the Crimea, Florence Nightingale was a national heroine. Her uncompromising attitude towards the reactionary military authorities on behalf of the sick and wounded British soldiers had proved so popular that the staggering sum of £50,000 was raised on her behalf to found a school for nurses at St. Thomas’s Hospital in London. The nurses who qualified there spread ‘the Gospel according to Florence’ to other major British hospitals, and within a few years every major hospital had its own training school. In a comparatively short time the nursing profession was established as a respectable, worthwhile part of the medical profession.

Florence Nightingale’s influence was not confined solely to the organisation of nurses. In the years after the Crimean War she became known as an authority on the design and equipping of hospitals. She understood that fresh air, clean water and plenty of sunlight are essential to good health, and she always insisted that hospitals should be designed in such a way that the task of keeping them clean would not be too difficult. She recommended that hospitals be built in a ‘pavilion’ style with large wards and plenty of light and space, so that her nurses could move about easily and have a good view of their patients. She also believed in building hospitals with plenty of garden space so that patients could convalesce by walking among the lawns and flowers.

Nor was Florence Nightingale’s influence limited to her home country. All over Europe and in America nursing schools were set up according to her design, and her publication *Notes on Nursing* was considered essential reading for all who intended to enter the nursing profession. Her impact also had a powerful effect on Jean Henri Dunant, the Swiss banker who founded the International Committee of the Red Cross and who was responsible for the Geneva Convention.

In 1872, when visiting London, Dunant read a paper in which he admitted that, ‘Though I am known as the founder of the Red Cross and the originator of the Convention of Geneva, it is to an Englishwoman that all the honour of that Convention is due. What inspired me...was the work of Miss Florence Nightingale in the Crimea.’

Chapter 36: Proponents of Hygiene

The cause of infection is still a puzzle — Oliver Wendell Holmes has an idea — Dr Semmelweiss and puerperal fever

In the early sixteenth century Girolamo Fracastoro had suggested that infection might be caused by micro-organisms, and in the seventeenth century Leeuwenhoek had seen these minute organisms under one of his microscopes, but the fact that unhygienic habits might be related to the spread of micro-organisms and the consequent spread of disease seems to have escaped observers until well into the nineteenth century.

One disease that had always been closely associated with hospitals was puerperal fever, a disorder which affects women after childbirth and which Hippocrates had recognised as being both fatal and contagious. The first doctor to recognise that puerperal fever might be prevented by keeping the maternity ward as clean as possible was a Manchester surgeon called Charles White who practised in the late eighteenth century. Unfortunately for several million women, White's observations and recommendations attracted little attention, and lying-in wards remained dirty, dangerous places until well into the nineteenth century.

In 1843 the American poet, novelist, anatomist and lecturer Oliver Wendell Holmes read to the Boston Society for Medical Improvement a paper *On the Contagiousness of Puerperal Fever,* in which he explained his theory that the disease can be carried from patient to patient by doctors themselves. He recommended that pregnant women in labour should not be attended by doctors who had been in contact with possible sources of infection.

Holmes also suggested that surgeons should consider changing their clothes and washing their hands in calcium chloride after leaving a patient with puerperal fever. His controversial lecture, however, annoyed a large part of the medical establishment, and his advice was ignored completely.

A similar fate befell Ignaz Philipp Semmelweiss who, in 1846, at the age of twenty-eight, became an assistant in one of the obstetric wards at the Allgemeines Krankenhaus in Vienna. Semmelweiss noticed that the number of women dying in his ward was considerably higher than that in another obstetric ward at the hospital. Indeed, the difference was so noticeable that women frequently begged in tears not to be taken into Semmelweiss's ward.

Deciding that the difference in the number of deaths had to be due to something other than the quality of his own clinical skills, Semmelweiss looked for an explanation. It lay in the fact that the ward with the better survival rate was looked after by the hospital's midwives, while in his own ward medical students assisted the obstetricians with deliveries. Semmelweiss discovered that students came into the ward straight from the dissecting room and often performed intimate examinations with hands which only minutes before had been delving into corpses. The midwives, on the other hand, never went near the dissecting room and. on the contrary, had been taught that cleanliness is an important part of obstetric care.

Semmelweiss's theory that the women were contracting puerperal fever from the students was strengthened when he attended the post mortem on another doctor in the hospital. This unfortunate man, a Dr Kolletschka, had died from a wound he had received in the dissecting room, and when his body was opened, Semmelweiss noticed that the internal pathological sighs were similar to those seen in women with puerperal fever.

Convinced that his theory about the spread of infection was correct, Semmelweiss insisted that students and doctors coming from the dissecting room should wash their hands in a solution of calcium chloride before examining female patients. The precautions he introduced produced a dramatic drop in the number of deaths on his ward, from one in ten to approximately one in a hundred within two years.

Like Oliver Wendell Holmes, Semmelweiss came under a tremendous amount of pressure from those colleagues at the hospital, and many other eminent obstetricians, who disagreed with his theory, despite its dramatic proof. Unable to cope with the opposition Semmelweiss left Vienna for Budapest, where he eventually became Professor of Obstetrics. Unfortunately, the pressure brought about by the controversy proved too much for this mild and thoughtful man and he died in a mental hospital a few years later. The history of medicine is full of men whose original work has been ignored or condemned by the establishment of the day. But no martyr in medicine suffered more, or contributed more, than Ignaz Semmelweiss, whose courage and persistence eventually led directly to changes in medical practice which resulted in massive improvements in the quality of obstetric care throughout the world.

Chapter 37: Women in Medicine

Charles Darwin and the concept of evolution — Medical education under discussion – The first woman doctor qualifies

While doctors, such as John Snow, continued to fight for the improvement of public health facilities and as the newly born pharmaceutical industry began to blossom into the beginnings of the massive international industry which exists today, scientists and clinicians in many parts of the world continued to add to the rapidly expanding library of information on human anatomy, physiology and pathology.

The nineteenth century witnessed the great contributions to science of such men as Charles Darwin who gathered information on the similarities and differences between hundreds of plants and animals, a meticulous and detailed study which finally provided him with the first solid evidence in support of the theory of evolution.

While scientific research and discovery advanced, members of the medical profession in many parts of the world were still looking for ways to organise and rationalise programmes of medical education and registration.

In the United Kingdom, for example, apothecaries, physicians and surgeons were still arguing and negotiating in the search for a satisfactory legislative compromise which would ensure that only qualified individuals were entitled to practise medicine. Although the Society of Apothecaries had control over apothecaries practising in England and Wales, there were still more than a score of different bodies with the right to permit students to practise medicine. Many of these were entitled only to allow their graduates to practise within strictly defined geographical areas. For example, while the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh could allow its graduates to practise in the three Lothians, Fife, Roxburgh, Berwick, Selkirk and Peebles, the Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow was the exclusive licensing authority for Lanark, Renfrew, Ayre, Burgh and Dumbarton.

Several attempts were made to rationalise and reorganise these different licensing bodies and although, in 1844, the Home Secretary, James Graham, drafted a Bill designed to regulate the medical profession throughout the United Kingdom, it was not until 1858 that the Medical Act, which did succeed in regulating the medical profession as a whole, was eventually passed.

The aim of the Medical Act was to ensure that all medical graduates had the same basic qualification, so that citizens and local authorities throughout the United Kingdom would be able to recognise at once a fully qualified medical practitioner who had been deemed competent by the officially recognised authorities. Qualified practitioners were listed in a register set up by the newly formed General Medical Council (GMC). Anyone not registered with the GMC could still practise but could not claim to be qualified.

At first, any doctor with either a surgical or a medical qualification was entitled to be registered, and it was not until nearly thirty years later that all graduates had to be qualified in both medicine and surgery, as they do today.

An account of the scientific and political changes affecting the medical profession in these middle years of the nineteenth century would not be complete without a description of the impact made by a young American woman, Elizabeth Blackwell.

It is sometimes said that Dr Blackwell was the first woman doctor, but it is more accurate to say that she was the first female member of the newly organised profession. Although there had been women surgeons and physicians in ancient Greece and Egypt, in post-Renaissance Britain women had been banished from the official medical establishment. They were, of course, allowed to continue to practise unofficially as midwives and as advisers in country areas, but they were denied the opportunity to acquire official status.

The changes which took place in medical education in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries meant that, in many parts of the world, traditional women practitioners were being effectively forced out of business. The new laws introduced rules which meant that only the qualified could claim to practise medicine under official approval, and at the same time the new rules maintained the tradition that only men could qualify to practise medicine. Women, for so long the mainstays of the medical profession for the ordinary people, were being forced into a subordinate role and denied the opportunity to practise medicine at all.

Refused admission by the larger and better-established American medical schools, Elizabeth Blackwell managed to find a smaller medical school, Geneva Medical College, to allow her to enrol as a student. After completing her academic studies, Dr Blackwell travelled to Europe and worked in both Paris and London before finally settling down to practise in New York, where she and her newly qualified sister set up both an infirmary and a women's medical college.

In Britain the first woman to qualify was Elizabeth Garrett, who had met Dr Blackwell in London and subsequently decided on a career in medicine. For four years, from 1861 to 1865, the determined Miss Garrett seems to have applied to every college and hospital offering courses in medical education. Eventually, the Society of Apothecaries agreed to admit her as a medical practitioner if she could produce the necessary certificates showing that she had reached the required state of proficiency. It seems likely that the Society had considered it almost impossible for Miss Garrett to qualify under these restrictions.

To everyone’s surprise, however Miss Garrett did obtain the certificates and passed the entrance examination. Within a few years Miss Garrett, and those who followed her, had succeeded in influencing public opinion so that more and more medical schools began to accept women as students. Similar changes occurred in other parts of Europe, and within a few years women were admitted to the medical registers in Switzerland, Germany and the Netherlands. By the end of the century women in medical schools around the world were qualifying as doctors.

Chapter 38: Solving Problems in Surgery

Surgery is still a primitive science – Two major problems remain: pain and infection — The first anaesthetics — Queen Victoria makes a point — Infection still kills in the operating theatres — Joseph Lister and his theory — The influence of Pasteur — Surgery catches up

By the middle of the nineteenth century, there had been developments in public health and community hygiene, improvements in working conditions and the organisation and administration of the medical profession. Pastor Fliedner, Elizabeth Fry and Florence Nightingale had taken the first steps towards establishing nursing as a respectable profession and physicians, such as René Laennec, had made positive contributions to the quality of practical clinical care. The American Oliver Wendell Holmes and the Austrian Semmelweiss had described the hazards associated with dirty hospital wards, and the Englishman Charles Darwin had made an enormous contribution to the understanding of the development of the human body.

But surgery was still a very primitive science, and few noticeable changes had taken place, either in the practice of the speciality or in the number of patients surviving. Surgeons had their own college and were accepted as academic and social equals by most other members of the medical profession, but their effectiveness was still very much in question.

When Paré and the other Renaissance surgeons had been in practice, four major problems made life difficult for the surgeon and dangerous for the patient — ignorance of human anatomy, a need to arrest the inevitable bleeding that occurs at operation, and an inability to control pain and infection.

By the middle of the nineteenth century most surgeons had a good grasp of human anatomy, thanks to the work of such men as Vesalius, and the fact that all students had the opportunity not only to watch their lecturers opening and carefully dissecting cadavers but also to dissect at least one dead human body for themselves. Improvements in surgical technique, introduced by Paré and others, meant that bleeding was no longer an insuperable problem for the skilled surgeon. However, the last two difficulties associated with surgery — pain and infection — unhappily remained unsolved, and both made surgery hazardous for the patient and unsatisfying for the surgeon.

Although adequate supplies of opium were available for the treatment of post-operative pain, even this powerful drug had its limitations, and patients frequently had to be held down by strong assistants while the surgeon operated.

Infection was still a major cause of operative failure. In 1850 nearly half of the amputations performed proved fatal because of gangrene, and one of the best surgeons in Berlin is reputed to have thrown down his scalpel and refused ever to operate again after ninety per cent of his patients had died from infection.

In an attempt to deal with these two remaining hazards, most nineteenth-century surgeons had developed the habit of working as fast they could. One surgeon is said to have taken off a patient's arm while a colleague turned round to take a pinch of snuff, while a gruesome entry in the *Guinness Book of Records* shows that a Scottish surgeon, Robert Liston, is said to hold the world record for the fastest amputation of a limb. He was timed at thirty-three seconds for an operation to remove a patient's leg at the thigh, but, unfortunately, he was so fast that his assistant could not get his fingers out of the way in time. In addition to the patient's leg, three of the assistant's fingers succumbed to the saw and found their way into the waste bucket.

It was clear to anyone interested in medicine that the practice of surgery could not progress until these two major problems had been overcome. Someone, somewhere, would have to come up with an effective way of numbing the patient, so that operations could be carried out without the pain proving intolerable to both patient and surgeon. And it would also be necessary to find some way to prevent infection setting in during or after an operation.

The first of these two problems, that of finding some way to numb the patient during an operation so that he neither suffered nor made the surgeon's work impossible, was the first to be solved.

Over the centuries many attempts had been made by surgeons and scientists to develop an effective form of anaesthesia, and dozens of different techniques had been tried. Herodotus described how hashish was used as an anaesthetic; Dioscorides had described how a patient could be made drunk and insensible by giving him an alcoholic extract of Mandragora; the Chinese introduced opium; Paré had experimented with compression, pressing firmly on a carotid artery in the neck to make the patient unconscious; John Hunter had used tourniquets and had tried freezing the patient; and more modern surgeons had experimented with Mesmerism.

But all these methods had their drawbacks, the main one being that, if the patient was anaesthetised sufficiently to avoid pain, he could not always be aroused again afterwards.

The first genuinely effective and safe anaesthetic to be developed was nitrous oxide. It was first used in 1799 by Sir Humphry Davy, the inventor of the miner's lamp which bears his name. Sir Humphry, in pain because of an erupting wisdom tooth, experimented upon himself with the gas and found that it provided considerable relief. He realised that nitrous oxide might have a use in surgery, but his discovery seems to have gone more or less unnoticed by the medical profession, who regarded ‘laughing gas’ as suitable for drawing-room games but not for the operating theatre. Michael Faraday, then a pupil of Sir Humphry’s, described the anaesthetic qualities of ether, but his observations were also ignored by the medical establishment.

It was in America that these anaesthetic gases were first used in earnest, and it seems that a dentist called William Thomas Green Morton was the first man to anaesthetise a patient publicly in a hospital operating theatre. This operation, which took place at the Massachusetts General Hospital in 1846 and involved the removal of a tumour from the neck of a patient under an ether anaesthetic, alerted the surgical world to the possibilities and advantages offered by proper anaesthetics. Before the end of the year the technique was being used in Europe.

Interestingly, Robert Liston was the first European surgeon to operate on a patient who had been anaesthetised, but he does not seem to have been able to forget his habit of operating at speed. His first operation is said to have involved the amputation of a leg and to have been done in a time rivalling his own world record.

Technical advances in anaesthesia followed quickly but the major problem facing surgeons now was not a technical one but a social one. The difficulty was produced by the fact that several surgeons had begun using the anaesthetic gas chloroform on women for relief of pain in childbirth.

This horrified many male religious leaders who argued that it was unnatural for a woman to suffer no pain while giving birth. The anguished spokesmen quoted the Bible, and in particular the passage in which God says to Eve, ‘In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children’, as support for their opposition to anaesthesia. Dr James Simpson, who had introduced chloroform anaesthesia in midwifery, was not about to be out-manoeuvred, however, and he quickly quoted another passage from the Bible which states, ‘And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam and he slept; and He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh instead thereof.’

Heaven only knows how long this theological gamesmanship would have continued if the anaesthetists had not been allowed to play a trump card and effectively put an end to all opposition. Their trump was no other than Queen Victoria, who, in 1853, gave birth to Prince Leopold while under the influence of chloroform administered by Dr John Snow; the same Dr Snow, incidentally, whose work on cholera and the Broad Street pump helped lead to the provision of cleaner water supplies in London.

With anaesthesia fashionable and given the royal approval, the religious arguments against it were quickly forgotten, and the opposition that had threatened to make any form of anaesthesia unacceptable, under any conditions whatsoever, melted away overnight. Over the next few years it became accepted that all operations would be conducted using anaesthesia.

The effect on surgeons and the practice of surgery was most remarkable. Whereas before they had had to concentrate on finishing an operation as quickly as possible, surgeons could now take their time and carefully plan their operations.

The conquest of pain by the introduction of anaesthesia marked the beginning of the modern era in surgery. However, post-operative infections were still killing many patients, and the full effects of the introduction of anaesthesia could not be appreciated until some means had been found to minimise the risk of a patient on the operating table contracting a fatal infection.

Dealing with the problem of infection as it affected surgical problems was still something of a nightmare for thinking surgeons. Earlier in the nineteenth century the American Wendell Holmes and the Austrian Semmelweiss had both realised that puerperal fever could be prevented by keeping doctors, patients and wards as clean as possible. But still no surgeon practised any sort of caution when operating. Indeed, on the contrary, many surgeons seemed to practise in such a way as to invite infection, wiping their instruments on their blood and pus-stained coat tails, while their assistants carried needles threaded with silk for sutures in their coat lapels. One eminent New York surgeon is said to have whetted his scalpel on the sole of his shoe.

Dirty hands, clothes and instruments, and unwashed patients, must have made conditions perfect for bacteria. After the introduction of anaesthesia, operations were often successful, but patients still invariably died of infection. In Pads, a mortality rate of sixty per cent was recorded. In Edinburgh, a rate of forty-three per cent was noted. In America, one proud surgeon announced that he had cut his mortality rate to just under a quarter.

When, eventually, the first practical steps were taken to cut down the incidence of infection in the operating theatre and the recovery room, they were taken by a surgeon, Joseph Lister, who had read and studied the early work of a French chemist called Louis Pasteur.

Pasteur’s early scientific work had included a study of the process of fermentation which had led him to the conclusion that under natural conditions fermentation is produced by small, unseen organisms which could themselves be disturbed or destroyed by rapid heating. (This, incidentally, is the process which now bears his name.)

Lister learned about Pasteur’s work while working as a Professor of Surgery at the University of Glasgow in 1860. Dismayed and worried by the fearful mortality rate among surgical patients, he had been studying the problem for some time and accepted the idea, then prevalent among surgeons, that the majority of deaths were caused by some poison in the hospital atmosphere. Discussing this enormous problem with the Professor of Chemistry at the University, Lister was told about Pasteur's work and managed to get hold of some reports detailing the Frenchman's work. From the papers he studied, Lister then came to the conclusion that it was not the air that was the problem so much as the small organisms in the air. The solution, he decided, would be to find some way to keep the hospital atmosphere free of these small organisms. Pasteur had suggested that, in addition to using heat to destroy the organisms, fermentation could be controlled either by the use of antiseptics or by a process known as filtration.

It clearly was not practical to keep patients at a high enough temperature to destroy these small organisms, and nor was filtration practicable, and so Lister started experimenting with other ways to prevent the development of infection. After unsuccessfully trying out various chemicals, he hit upon carbolic acid, a substance which had already been used in the disinfection of sewage in Carlisle and which had, by coincidence, also been tried out by a French chemist called François Jules Lemaire a few years earlier. Lister's method was to use a piece of lint impregnated with carbolic acid to make an artificial scab. The first patient, who had suffered a compound fracture, did well, and after some more research and some experimentation, Lister published in the *Lancet* in 1867 a paper entitled *On the Antiseptic Principle in the Practice of Surgery.*

This paper was to provide the answer to the problem that had for centuries faced all surgeons, but it was not to be accepted by the medical establishment without some difficulty. The critics of Lister's theory ignored his evidence and attacked his recommendations with the tragic result that it was several decades before all surgeons were practising the sort of technique that had been advocated.

Convinced that he had hit upon the answer to the age-old problem of post-operative infection, Lister continued to experiment despite the criticism. Still believing that all pathological organisms were carried in the air, he next developed a steampowered carbolic spray which would enable him to fill the operating theatre with a fine mist of carbolic acid. Since he operated in the centre of this mist and since the carbolic acid inevitably covered his hands, his instruments and the patient, Lister's new invention proved extremely successful, and the number of patients dying after operations was immediately reduced.

Lister's theory was, of course, that infection could be prevented by the use of antiseptic substances designed to kill organisms likely to cause trouble. In the years which followed his early experiments, other investigators showed that it was not necessary to smother the patient or the surgeon with antiseptics but that an equally good result could be obtained by thoroughly cleaning all instruments and by dressing surgeons and their assistants in clean gowns, caps and gloves.

But it was Lister's imagination and courage which first led to the conquering of that fourth major difficulty facing surgeons, and it was his pioneering work which led directly to the fact that, in the next few decades, surgeons around the world could begin to perform operations never dreamt of before. Within Lister's lifetime surgeons would be operating within the human chest and skull without fear of failure.

Surgery had, at long last, caught up with the other branches of medical science.

Chapter 39: Improvements in Public Health

Progress in public health and working conditions — A number of Acts are passed — Fall in death rates from infections

In the years since the passing of the first Public Health Act in 1848, the number of people dying from infectious diseases had continued to fall. Tuberculosis, for example, had become a far less significant cause of death. But even the most enthusiastic supporter of Chadwick's principles would have had to agree that the changes had not been brought about entirely by improvements in sanitary conditions.

The response to the proposals in that first Act had been mixed and, although Chadwick's recommendations were eventually to be accepted as vital to the health of every community, progress had been delayed by many who seemed to prefer the risk of disease to the restrictions and expenses proposed by Chadwick. In a leader approving of Chadwick's dismissal from the Board of Health in 1854, *The Times* said: 'We prefer to take our chance of cholera and the rest than to be bullied into health.' The fall in the number of people suffering and dying from infections had been produced instead by improvements in general living standards which had resulted from the industrial, political and economic upheavals of the previous century. Better transport facilities which followed the growth of the network of railway lines throughout Britain in the first half of the century meant that food supplies could be carried at lower cost and with less wastage than before. As a result, food surpluses in one part of the country could be used to satisfy demands in other parts, while at the same time providing farmers and suppliers with additional profits. In addition, several improvements had been made to the ways in which food was produced. Although the Romans had recognised the importance of keeping soil fertile by rotating crops and using manures, little more had been done to improve the quality of crop production until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when improvements in agricultural policies resulted in a greater output of food and consequently a higher nutritional standard for the general population. Well-fed people are better able to cope with and survive disease and infection.

Improvements in working conditions were also made during the nineteenth century. Factories were better ventilated and better lit, and working hours were restricted by law after the Factory Act of 1833. As a result men, women and children who had previously spent all their waking hours inside dark gloomy buildings could now begin to spend more time in the open air.

Better wages, which resulted from pressure produced by liberals in politics and exerted by the labour force themselves, also helped. All these improvements in living conditions helped to reduce dramatically the incidence and statistical importance of tuberculosis, an illness which, at the beginning of the century, had been a devastating endemic disease.

Although the sequence of change and improvement occurred first in Britain, where the Industrial Revolution had begun, a similar sequence occurred in other countries as they began to adapt to industrialisation.

Recognising that the effects of the 1848 Public Health Act had been far too haphazard, in 1860 the British Government instructed the Privy Council to review the state of public health in Britain. The team of experts brought together to pursue these studies found that, despite the improvements which had taken place, infant mortality still reached 250 per thousand births in some parts of the country, with an average for the whole country being something like 150 per thousand births. The number of adults falling ill and dying at an early age may have fallen but the number of infants surviving beyond the first year of life had still hardly changed. Today we use infant mortality rates to help us assess the health-care facilities, public health standards and general living standards in developing countries. The figures for Britain and most of Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century were as bad as any today in the most primitive developing countries.

The reports from the Privy Council led to a spate of Parliamentary Acts designed to interfere with community life in order to preserve public health. In 1866 the Sanitary Act was passed, followed in quick succession by the Factory Act and Workshop Act, the Artisans' and Labourers' Dwellings Act and a Vaccination Act. The culmination of the Privy Council's work was the Great Public Health Act of 1875 which at last put into action the majority of the suggestions made so much earlier by Chadwick and his colleagues. Hospitals were to be founded and inspected, food was to be sold without adulteration, sewage facilities were to be provided throughout the country, and much of British life was to be regulated by officials armed with legislative power.

These new controls were extraordinarily effective. For example, in 1869 there were 4,281 typhus deaths in England, with 716 people dying in London alone of this one disease. By 1885 there were 318 deaths from typhus in England and only twenty-eight in London. By the beginning of the twentieth century, before Charles Nicolle had discovered that typhus is spread by the body louse, there were no deaths at all from typhus in London. The disease had been more or less eliminated by simple environmental changes and improvements.

Other diseases were affected similarly, with smallpox, tuberculosis and cholera becoming relatively rare rather than endemic. The diseases still existed, of course, but they no longer caused the widespread slaughter that had epitomised the early part of the nineteenth century.

The changes and improvements which had taken place in Britain also occurred in other countries. In America, for example, New York appointed a Metropolitan Board of Health in 1866, and within the following half-century the infant mortality rate was cut by two-thirds. Sometimes the improvements which took place produced bizarre contrasts. In Germany, Hamburg had postponed improvements to its water supply whereas its neighbouring town, Altona, had installed a water-purification plant. During the epidemic which struck Hamburg in 1892, one street on the border between the two towns included houses on one side which were in Hamburg and houses on the other side of the road which were in Altona. The people living in houses supplied by the Hamburg water authority died of cholera. Their neighbours across the road survived.

The improvements in public health-care facilities and in general living conditions, themselves produced by political, social and economic pressures, in turn produced changes of their own.

In large towns and cities, for example, the number of people dying of infectious diseases had fallen dramatically by the end of the nineteenth century, with the result that the population in cities had begun to grow rapidly. The resultant overcrowding which put additional pressure on the improved facilities was exacerbated by the fall in the infant mortality rate. The improvements envisaged by Chadwick had, paradoxically, proved almost too effective.

Chapter 40: Unravelling the Microbe Mystery

Pasteur continues his work in France — Robert Koch in Germany — Anthrax and rabies — Public health gets a boost

While Lister was developing his antiseptic technique in Britain, Louis Pasteur was continuing his career as a chemist in France. Pasteur had made his name by helping the wine industry deal with a particularly troublesome fermentation problem. The advice he had given about destroying the troublesome microbes by heating had proved so successful that, when the silkworm breeders of France found themselves facing ruin because of an infection which was killing their worms, they asked Pasteur for help.

It took five years, but eventually in 1870 Pasteur not only identified the diseases responsible for the destruction of a large part of the silkworm industry but also managed to make positive recommendations designed to enable the breeders to protect their worms and their livelihoods.

With that problem solved, Pasteur turned to help a third French industry — the beer producers — and again managed to give advice which proved to be of immense commercial value.

It was at this point that Pasteur became involved in the study of those organisms affecting human beings more directly; a study which was to involve him for the rest of his life.

Pasteur's interest in the diseases affecting human beings was aroused partly by the fact that Joseph Lister had written to tell him of the success that he had had with his carbolic spray and his general principle of antisepsis. Pasteur agreed with Lister that human diseases were caused by tiny organisms but disagreed with his theory that the organisms existed only in the air, claiming that heat treatment of the water, bandages and surgical equipment used in an operation would prove more effective than spraying everything with antiseptic.

Inspired, perhaps, by Lister and determined to produce more specific evidence linking micro-organisms with specific diseases, Pasteur began work on a disease called anthrax which at the time was killing large numbers of sheep and cattle.

Anthrax had already been the subject of work done by a German called Robert Koch who had qualified as a doctor in 1866 at Gottingen and who, while working as a country physician, had spent some time peering through a microscope.

Koch had discovered and described the entire life cycle of the organism responsible for anthrax and had written to a botanist called Ferdinand Cohn with details of his studies. Cohn was extremely enthusiastic and immediately published Koch's studies, which not only conclusively proved that the anthrax bacillus caused the disease but also showed that a culture of the organism grown in the laboratory could cause anthrax when injected into animals.

Pasteur continued to look for ways in which to provide animals with protection against anthrax. It obviously was not practicable to treat humans or animals with heat or to smother them with copious quantities of antiseptic. There had to be a better way. To Pasteur, that better way seemed to be vaccination. After all Jenner had succeeded in preparing a vaccine which would protect people against smallpox, so why shouldn't it be possible to prepare vaccines which would protect human beings and animals against other infectious diseases?

While Pasteur was working on his anthrax vaccine, Koch was continuing with his microscope studies and experimenting with ways of preparing bacteria for close examination. These purely technical advances had no specific bearing on health care, but they enabled Koch and his many successors to advance the science of bacteriology with greater ease and success. Of more immediate importance to the world of medicine was Koch's discovery in 1882 of the tubercle bacillus and his discovery in 1883 of the organism responsible for the killer disease cholera.

Then it was Pasteur's turn again. In the latter part of the 1880s, the Frenchman succeeded in developing a vaccine which could be used to protect the victims of rabies. As a boy, Pasteur had seen a mad wolf charging through his home town and had seen the agonies suffered by those unfortunate enough to be bitten by the creature. It was that memory which seems to have decided him to look for a vaccine against rabies.

Eventually he prepared a vaccine and with great trepidation tried it out on a young boy brought to him dying after a bite from a mad dog. The boy survived, and Pasteur had made a second vaccine with which human beings could be protected. It was almost a century since Jenner had first produced his smallpox vaccine.

In 1886 a fund was started to set up a special laboratory where Pasteur and his assistants could continue their work. Within a few months the sum of two and a half million francs had been collected, and in just over two years the Pasteur Institute had been built in Paris. Later on that small boy who had been the first to be saved by the anti-rabies vaccine became a gatekeeper at the Institute.

The work of Koch and Pasteur undoubtedly opened up a new world to scientists and doctors. Pasteur's research had inspired Lister and other doctors to study with scientific detachment the problems facing surgeons, and eventually to make surgery a relatively safe and effective procedure. Reducing the risk of post-operative infection meant that surgeons could begin to experiment with more daring surgery, without exposing their patients to unnecessary and unacceptable risks. The work of both men on the isolation of organisms that caused disease and the preparation of suitable vaccines eventually led to the development of campaigns which helped to eradicate such infections as tuberculosis and cholera from many parts of the world.

But perhaps the most important effect of their work was that it gave added strength to the campaign first started in London by Chadwick. The fact that it was now proven that infectious diseases could be spread by dirt and controlled by cleanliness, meant that those campaigning for clean water, better sanitation, better housing and cleaner streets had science on their side. Pasteur and Koch had between them founded the science of bacteriology, had provided medical men with solid evidence explaining the existence and spread of infectious diseases of all kinds and had proved not only that specific infections were caused by specific organisms but that those organisms could be controlled.

Chapter 41: Sigmund Freud's Obsession

Sigmund Freud and Charcot in Paris — Freud's theory about sex — The impact of Freud on medicine — The impact of Freud on life

Sigmund Freud was born in 1856 in Freiburg (part of what was, until1993, known as Czechoslovakia) and qualified as a doctor in 1881. He specialised in neurology, the practical branch of medicine which deals with physical disorders of the nervous system, and after working for a time in Vienna he obtained a post at the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris where Jean Martin Charcot worked as a physician. Charcot had acquired a tremendous reputation not only as a general physician but also as a specialist in nervous disorders, and his work involved a study of the value of hypnosis. While working with Charcot the young Freud soon forgot his enthusiasm for pure neurological research, which he recognised as being unlikely to provide him with much of a living, and instead developed an interest in a range of disorders usually grouped together as neuroses. From being a student of anatomy and neurology, Freud had become a student of psychiatry.

At the age of thirty Freud set up as a private specialist in Vienna, the city where he was to work for most of his life and where during the next few decades he was to found a medical philosophy which, within his lifetime, would have a worldwide effect on the attitudes of doctors and patients towards mental illnesses of all kinds.

He began by experimenting with hypnosis, putting patients into a trance and then suggesting to them that their symptoms would disappear as soon as they came out of the trance state.

He soon discovered, however, that to achieve results hypnosis was unnecessary; instead, by persuading his patients to relax and learn to trust him, he could successfully tap their unconscious memories in an attempt to search for clues which might explain their subsequent fears and behaviour patterns. Freud was learning how to take his patients back down memory lane.

From his research on patients relaxed in his consulting room, Freud formed his theory about the importance of sexual influences on the subconscious mind. He claimed that many repressions were sexually based and that secret, unrecognised sexual impulses explained all deeds and thoughts whether good or bad. Dreams, he argued, provided additional clues to the activities within the unconscious mind and again indicated the basic sexual needs and desires of the individual patient. Freud was obsessed with sex: when he noticed that the physical symptoms which accompany an anxiety state were similar to those experienced by someone who has just practised coitus interruptus, he came to the conclusion that all anxiety and neurotic behaviour must be produced by some sort of sexual pressure. On another occasion, when a young girl opened the door to his consulting room by accident, Freud is said to have pardoned her by explaining that her action simply denoted her curiosity about the sexual behaviour of her parents.

His theories about the importance of unrecognised sexual desires inevitably caused considerable controversy and a great deal of publicity. Freud dealt with the controversy by claiming that those who disbelieved his theories or opposed his arguments were themselves repressed and fired by hidden desires which they were not prepared to accept; he dealt with the publicity by putting up his consulting fees.

Although Freud influenced many contemporary neurologists and psychologists, founded the school of psychoanalysis and provided students of medicine with a wider understanding of mental illness, it gradually became clear that the value of psychoanalysis was severely limited. The speciality could only be practised effectively if doctor and patient could spend long periods of time together and, even then, relatively few patients benefited from this expensive treatment.

Consequently, the effect that Freud had on clinical medical practice and the health of people in general was limited by the fact that, while a very large number of qualified medical practitioners devoted their working lives to the practice of this specialised and relatively unproductive aspect of psychiatric care, only a small number of patients could be treated. Psychoanalysts tended to congregate in areas where the general standard of living was high and the quality of medical care good, and their fashionable status in society eventually matched in many ways the status and position of astronomers such as Nostradamus.

More important than his specific clinical role was the effect that Freud had on general attitudes both within the medical profession and in society in general. His influence within the establishments providing medical education resulted in the fact that many graduates had a wider understanding of the basis of mental illness, although a number were probably limited by his obsession with the importance of repressed human sexual urges. His effect on social attitudes was probably more important, since it seems likely that the increased readiness of people to discuss sexual problems resulted in part from his work, and it may also be true that the wider availability of contraceptive advice, which was to have such an important effect on all aspects of human life in the twentieth century, was in part a consequence of his making more people aware of their sexual feelings and needs.

Chapter 42: Surgery Knows No Bounds

Surgery progresses by leaps and bounds – The first heart surgery — Putting surgery in its place

In the few years following the introduction of anaesthetics and the practice of asepsis, surgeons made quite phenomenal progress. Whereas a few years earlier they had been limited to working as quickly as possible to remove damaged, gangrenous or otherwise functionless limbs, they could now develop proper surgical techniques, designed not just to destroy or remove unwanted tissues but to repair and restore function to almost any organ. The progress a surgeon could make was limited only by his own imagination and his dexterity, and while older, more established surgeons sometimes mocked and jeered, braver and wiser surgeons explored previously uncharted territory with astonishing success.

Before the introduction of aseptic techniques, for example, abdominal surgery was dangerous and almost unthinkable. In the 1880s, however, a number of surgeons performed operations that are now still considered standard and classical procedures. An Italian, Pietro Loreta, performed the first pyloroplasty in 1882 and an Austrian, Christian Albert Theodor Billroth, performed the operation which bears his name, in the previous year. Both these operative procedures are still used by surgeons operating on patients with peptic ulceration. The first colostomy was performed in 1888 by a German called Karl Maydl, and the first gall bladder was removed by another German, Carl Langenbuch, in 1882, although an American called John Stough Hobbs had actually opened the gall bladder and removed stones in 1868.

The prospect of opening a patient’s chest and performing intra-thoracic surgery of any kind would have certainly appalled any surgeon who could not rely on anaesthesia to keep his patient quiet and an aseptic technique to give him a reasonable chance of keeping the patient alive. In the 1890s, however, a number of surgeons took the plunge and performed surgery within the chest cavity. One of the most remarkable pioneering operations was performed by Professor Dr Ludwig Rehn of Frankfurt who, in 1896, successfully repaired a right ventricular stab wound despite the fact that Billroth, an internationally respected abdominal surgeon, had announced that, ‘A surgeon who would attempt such an operation should lose the respect of his colleagues.’

In the paper announcing the success of his operative procedure, Rehn explains that he was forced to operate by the fact that his patient was bleeding to death. Stabbed with a kitchen knife through the fourth intercostal space, the unnamed, and now forgotten, patient enabled Rehn to begin a surgical fashion that was to escalate rapidly within the next few years. A mere two years later surgeons were proposing to operate on the mitral valve in order to restore cardiac function.

Brain surgery was developed too in those remarkable early years of the surgical renaissance, and it seems now that the braver, more imaginative surgeons considered no operation impossible and nothing impractical.

The main difference between the type of surgery being practised at the end of the nineteenth century and the type of surgery practised in the middle of the nineteenth century was that anaesthesia and asepsis had made elective surgery a real practical possibility. When mortality rates for surgical patients were as high as fifty per cent, few surgeons and fewer patients were prepared to risk any surgical procedure unless the alternative was certain death. So the mid-century surgeons had had to confine themselves to amputating dangerously infected limbs or clearly defined tumours.

Once surgery had become a comparatively safe and painless alternative, the number of operations available obviously increased dramatically, as did the number of patients prepared to offer themselves for surgery.

Although these changes obviously led to longer and better lives for many people, the truth is that the emphasis on curative surgery as a solution to people’s individual problems attracted far too much enthusiastic support from both the public and the medical profession. The new type of surgery being practised at the end of the nineteenth century was a glamorous and attractive speciality. Its practitioners could, and often did, perform what seemed, to the ordinary individual, to be miracles.

But surgical operations employed large numbers of skilled doctors and nurses and required a great deal of money if they were to be done successfully.

In the shadow of these surgical advances the importance of preventive medical techniques and their effectiveness in saving and improving lives was often forgotten.

Chapter 43: The Control of Exotic Disease

The effect of malaria – Ronald Ross makes some inquiries Yellow fever is a threat – Cuba plays a part — Walter Reed and his colleagues – Yellow fever defeated — The Panama Canal is cut.

While the incidence of tuberculosis, smallpox and cholera was on the decline in Europe, there were two diseases which were still endemic in many parts of the world and which were, together, responsible for much illness and many deaths. Neither of these diseases, malaria and yellow fever, had attracted much interest from theoretical research workers or clinical investigators, perhaps because neither disorder was still common in the European countries where most medical research work was being done

Malaria had not always been confined to those parts of the world commonly described as the tropics. It had, for many centuries, been the scourge of Europe, and there is good evidence that malaria was one of the major reasons for the collapse of the Roman Empire. Known as the ague, it affected soldiers in all parts of the widespread Roman Empire and caused many deaths as well as a considerable amount of incapacitating illness.

In the years following the collapse of Roman authority, malaria had continued to have a powerful influence on European life. At a seventeenth-century papal conference in Rome, for example, eight cardinals and thirty secretaries are reported to have died of malaria. Oliver Cromwell, the English Parliamentarian of the seventeenth century, is believed to have suffered from malaria for most of his life, while there is evidence that malaria existed in America well before Columbus crossed the Atlantic for the first time.

From the days when it was first recognised as a specific disease, malaria had been the subject of a number of investigations. The Indian physician Susruta, who lived about 500 BC, suspected that malaria was transmitted by insects and specifically attributed it to the bite of the mosquito. The Romans also suspected the involvement of mosquitoes and there is written evidence that they believed that marshlands were breeding grounds which made the spread of the infection more likely.

Although these suspicions were not proven and the full life history of the malaria parasite was not investigated until much later, an effective treatment for malaria was discovered and widely used as far back as the seventeenth century. According to legend, the idea of using Peruvian bark in the treatment of the infection happened by accident when a Peruvian Indian suffering from malaria and its accompanying fever drank copiously from a pool near to some trees. The water was bitter but, to his surprise, it seemed to cure his fever. When he told his friends they went and drank from the pool and discovered that their symptoms disappeared. After some study the Peruvians found that the water was given its unusual taste and ‘magic’ qualities by the fact that it was full of small pieces of bark from one of the nearby trees. The bark had fallen into the water and produced what was effectively an infusion. The tree was the cinchona, and the drug was the one known to us now as quinine.

Eventually, the value of cinchona bark became known in Europe and when used by the English physician Sydenham in the seventeenth century quinine was the first and, at the time, only drug available which had a specific, recognised purpose.

It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that the relationship between malaria and the mosquito was properly established. The first step was taken by a French army surgeon working in Algeria, Alphonse Laveran, who, in 1880, published a paper in which he announced that he had found minute amoebalike organisms in the blood of patients suffering from malaria.

The discovery of these organisms made it possible for physicians to diagnose malaria accurately, but it did not help in either the treatment of the infection or its prevention. Laveran had shown that patients suffering from malaria had tiny parasites in their blood which grew and changed shape as the days went by and that the breeding of the parasites was associated with bouts of ague fever. But he had not found out how the parasites got into the blood in the first place.

It was left to a British officer in the Indian Medical Service, Ronald Ross, to find and publish the evidence which eventually led to a direct understanding of the mechanism of malaria and, consequently, to an all-out international campaign to eradicate the disease. Ross first became interested in mosquitoes when he found himself living in a bungalow where there was a tub of water outside the bedroom window. He found that he could rid himself of mosquitoes simply by emptying the tub of water, and he suggested that the whole army mess could be freed of the insects by emptying all other water containers. To his astonishment, the local adjutant rejected his suggestion, arguing that to do so would be to upset the order of nature. That bizarre objection seems to have fired Ross to take an even greater interest in the subject, and whereas previously he had spent his leisure time studying literature and mathematics, he subsequently began a study of malaria, a disease which he recognised as being the cause of millions of deaths and which he knew was little understood.

Ross obtained some of the papers and books written by Alphonse Laveran and began to study both the parasites and the mosquitoes which he felt certain were implicated. His first research work was done with a microscope which had a cracked eye-piece and screws rusted with his own sweat. Slowly he made progress, and when he returned to London in 1894, Ross met Dr Patrick Manson, a graduate of Aberdeen University, who had worked with the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs Service and who had studied in fine detail a great many tropical diseases, including malaria. The two men discussed the possible relationship between the malaria parasites described by Laveran and the mosquitoes, and when Ross returned to India in 1895, he restarted his personal investigations, writing each week to Manson to describe his progress and ask for advice.

In his book *Studies in Malaria,* Ross describes how his colleagues in India laughed at him while he was doing his work; none of them seems to have understood the potential importance of his work. Even those senior officers responsible for him failed to comprehend the value of his researches, and on at least one occasion he was posted to another part of India just as his work was nearing a conclusion. Ross plaintively points out that, although one third of all the hospital admissions in India at the time were caused by malaria, hardly any of the one thousand British Government doctors working in the country had investigated the problem.

Finally, after working on malaria for nearly a decade, Ross found the evidence he had been looking for, and he published papers describing the close association between the malaria parasite and the anopheles mosquito just before the end of the nineteenth century. He showed that it is through the bite of this mosquito that malaria is transmitted from an infected individual to a healthy person and that the malaria parasite matures and reproduces inside the mosquito.

The other disease, endemic in many tropical countries, which had resisted all attempts at control, was yellow fever, an often fatal infection which had been recognised for several centuries as posing a tremendous threat to all travellers, adventurers and armies. Local inhabitants in countries where yellow fever was common invariably inherited some slight resistance to the disease, a single attack of which will produce complete immunity for life. For those people, living in a country where yellow fever was present, the infection was, therefore, not too dangerous. They suffered a fairly mild attack, got better and suffered no more. For travellers and visitors, however, the disease was far more serious, since that one attack often proved fatal to the individual with no inherited resistance at all. In 1800, for example, Napoleon Bonaparte sent an army of 30,000 to Haiti, but yellow fever killed 23,000, enabling the local army to resist the colonists.

It seems likely that yellow fever began its devastating career in Africa and was spread to America and southern Europe by explorers and slave traders in much the same way as syphilis travelled in the other direction. Known as ‘yellow jack’ to sailors, the infection is thought to explain the fate of the legendary Flying Dutchman, a sailing ship which was condemned to sail for ever around the seas off the Cape of Good Hope because no port would admit the ship, on board which yellow fever raged. If each infected man had been thrown overboard by his remaining shipmates, the only real mystery is what happened to the last man on board.

The idea that the mosquito might carry yellow fever from one individual to another had been put forward several times in the nineteenth century by doctors who had been puzzled by the fact that the infection can disappear for weeks at a time and can be carried across whole oceans without any of the sailors on board ship seeming to be infected. In 1881, for example, a Dr Carlos Finlay of Havana had suggested that the mosquito carried the fever, and according to his argument the infection could be carried on board ship if a water barrel contained a fever carrying insect.

Two things finally led to the conclusive discovery that yellow fever really is carried by a mosquito. One fact was Ronald Ross’s research, which had shown that malaria is carried in this way. Once the path had been established by one brave researcher, it was far easier for others to travel in the same direction without drowning in the scorn poured on their heads by professional sceptics. The other factor was the more practical need discovered by the Americans to find some way to deal with yellow fever, which was killing large numbers of the American marines stationed in Cuba, which was at the beginning of this century occupied by the United States.

Major Walter Reed was put in charge of a special commission given instructions to investigate the causes of the infection and to find some way to control its spread. In 1900, with three other investigators, Reed travelled to Cuba. One of the men with him, Aristide Agramonte, was a pathologist, one James Carron, a bacteriologist, and the other, Jesse Lazear, an expert on insects. They began their studies at Pinar del Rio where there were thirty-five cases of yellow fever in the barracks. The first thing they discovered was that none of the doctors or nurses involved with these patients had contracted yellow fever. This simple fact alone seemed to rule out any possibility that the infection could be transmitted directly from one victim to another.

While pondering on this fact, Reed and his colleagues met the previously disregarded Dr Finlay, who had for many years been arguing that mosquitoes carried yellow fever. The team decided that the only way to investigate the truth of Finlay’s theory was to try to produce yellow fever in volunteers from mosquito bites. Since each member of the team knew that yellow fever could kill, this was an extraordinarily brave thing even to contemplate.

Because of the risks, the commission decided that they could not call for volunteers without being prepared to experiment on themselves. The first man to face the risk was Lazear, the insect specialist, who began by allowing a mosquito to bite the arm of a yellow fever sufferer and then to bite his own arm. Nothing happened as a result of that experiment, since, although Lazear and the others did not realise it, yellow fever takes a while to develop inside the body of the mosquito, and the insect which had bitten the known victim would not be carrying the infection when it was put onto Lazear's arm.

The experiments continued and eventually both Carron and Lazear contracted yellow fever. With extraordinary professional determination, Lazear wrote notes about his own condition and the course of the disease, and when he died, the other three members of the commission were well on the way to establishing the natural history of yellow fever. Carron, the first of the two to succumb, survived.

The work of Ross and Manson on malaria and Reed and his colleagues on yellow fever established that mosquitoes were responsible for the spread of both diseases and made it practicable for public health officials around the world to begin the slow fight to eradicate both diseases. It quickly became clear that, by draining the swamps, marshes and expanses of free-standing water which were used by mosquitoes as breeding grounds, the life cycle of the infections could be broken. Without the mosquito, the two diseases would be paralysed, unable to move from victim to victim.

One project which benefited almost immediately from the work on malaria and yellow fever was the cutting of the Panama Canal, which was designed to connect the Atlantic and Pacific oceans by providing a waterway through the Panama isthmus.

Back in the sixteenth century, the Spanish had had the idea of digging a canal across this narrow stretch of land but the size of the project had proved too daunting. Then, in 1846, the Americans had signed a treaty with the country, then known as New Granada and now known as Colombia, which had control over Panama. The Americans, having thereby obtained effective control over this valuable stretch of land, built a railway which stretched from one ocean to the other. The idea of building a canal had not been forgotten, however and in 1880 the French Panama Canal Company, under the leadership of the engineer who had built the Suez Canal, Ferdinand de Lesseps, began work.

The project begun by de Lesseps inevitably faced delays and financial difficulties, but the major problem was that the workers were dying off rapidly of yellow fever and malaria. By the time the attempt was abandoned in 1889, the death rate had reached frightening proportions.

The discoveries made by Reed and Ross encouraged the Americans to try again, and in the first decade of the twentieth century the project was reopened.

This time the man in charge, Colonel Gorgas, took great precautions to preserve the lives of his engineers and labourers. He drained pools that could be drained and used netting to protect the men in their rooms and built what were effectively mosquito-proof rooms for sleeping and eating.

The precautions had a dramatic effect on the success of the project, and by 1914, when the canal was finished, the mortality rate was about three per cent of what it had been when de Lesseps had tried.

It seems unlikely that the Panama Canal could ever have been built without the work of men like Reed and Ross. During the rest of the twentieth century the preventive techniques employed by Colonel Gorgas in Panama were introduced in many countries around the world.

But the story of these two diseases is not one of total success. For one thing: the cost of introducing campaigns designed to eradicate malaria from a country can be considerable and, even by the early 1980s, only a quarter of the countries which had originally been classified as malaria-infested had been freed of the infection. In another quarter of the 146 countries involved, no organised action at all had been started. The unwillingness of some governments to introduce anti-malaria campaigns inevitably means that those countries which do eradicate the disease cannot afford to relax, since neither the mosquitoes nor the parasites involved recognise international boundaries. In Turkey, for example, there were only 1,263 cases of malaria in 1970 but in 1975 the number of people suffering from the disease had risen to 9,829. The country's guard stayed down, and in 1976 there were 37,320 cases, while in 1977 the number infected had risen to 115,350.

Chapter 44: Röntgen’s Discovery

The importance of good luck – The role of the non-professional — Professor Röntgen’s contribution — The speed of communication makes his discovery known within weeks

During the centuries many of the most important inventions and discoveries within the world of medicine and healing have been made by a mixture of good fortune and good luck. If Laennec had not seen those two boys playing in the Bois de Boulogne, would he have invented the stethoscope? If Auenbrugger had not been brought up among barrels of wine and seen his father tapping the wine casks, would percussion have occurred to him as a useful means of judging the fluid content within a chest cavity? If Florence Nightingale had not visited Pastor Fliedner, would she have had the fire and courage to make such a mark on the medical world? If William Brockeden had not been fed up with pencils full of grit, would he have built that first tablet-making machine?

The list of discoveries made as a result of a single lucky incident is enormously long. It is quite true, of course, that luck alone does not produce anything tangible and that, in every one of the cases I have mentioned, the individual responsible for each discovery or innovation was alert enough to take advantage of the circumstances, but the point is an important one, for today many researchers seem to believe that money and logic must inevitably produce solutions to any questions posed. The truth is that the good researcher needs to be alert and observant at all times, since there is never any way of knowing which piece of information will prove to be the most important one.

Another important point about the major innovations and discoveries which have had an effect on healing and the healers is that a great many of them have been made by individuals who had neither any medical training nor any particular interest in medicine. Louis Pasteur, for example, was a chemist. Edwin Chadwick was a solicitor and a journalist, Benjamin Franklin was a trained printer, Charles Darwin was a natural historian, Leonardo da Vinci was an artist. Medicine has always been a subject which has attracted the interest of intelligent men and women from all professions.

I make these two points here because they serve as an admirable introduction to the fact that in 1895 a fifty-year-old Professor of Physics at Würzburg in Germany made an accidental discovery which was to have as great an effect on the practice of clinical medicine and practical surgery as any other single technological step forward in the history of healing.

Professor Wilhelm Konrad von Röntgen was an experimental physicist, and in 1895 he was investigating the effects of cathode rays (which consist of nothing more mysterious than electrons freed from the negative electrode, or cathode, of a gas-filled tube through which an electrical discharge has passed). Cathode rays had been studied many times before, but what caught Röntgen’s attention was the fact that, although the tube he was working with was covered with black cardboard, a greenish glow seemed to come from a piece of paper coated with a substance called barium platinocyanide which happened to be lying on a nearby bench. Many researchers would just have moved the piece of paper, but Röntgen realised that the paper must have been made luminous by some unknown rays — something other than the cathode rays he had started off intending to investigate.

Fortunately for the medical profession and millions of patients throughout the world, Röntgen decided to investigate further. He put a thousand-page textbook between the tube and his piece of coated paper and found that the paper still became luminous. Next he placed his own hand between the tube and the piece of paper, and discovered X-rays.

The bones of his hand appeared on the luminous paper as dark shadows since they were obviously dense enough to prevent the flow of these unseen rays.

Röntgen then did two more things. First he experimented with photographic plates and showed that the invisible rays he had discovered could produce a permanent effect on the plates. And then he published a report describing the effect that he had noticed.

In an earlier, or later, decade his work might have taken months or even years to travel around the world, but in the 1890s the efficiency of the printing industry and the postal services of the world were at their peak. Röntgen himself published his paper describing his research work in the *Würzburgh PhysicoMedical Society Proceedings* on 28 December 1895, and a month later the *Lancet* in London published an X-ray photograph of a human hand taken by Campbell Swinton in a laboratory in London. At the end of February 1896, just under two months after Röntgen’s original experiment, the *Lancet* published a report from Liverpool which described how a surgeon had used Xrays to help him localise an air-gun pellet before arranging for its removal. Similar reports quickly appeared in other medical journals around the world.

Within a remarkably short time, specialist radiologists had appeared in hospitals in many parts of the world and, since the risks subsequently associated with radiation therapy were not recognised until much later, many of these early specialists suffered and died as a result of their endeavours. With the help of these specialists, however, surgeons found that they could use the new X-rays to help them diagnose and locate fractures, dislocations and foreign bodies such as bullets. In 1898 W.B. Cannon, later to become an eminent American physiologist, found the movements of the stomach and the intestines could be studied by watching the progress of bismuth paste within the body, and in 1906 this procedure was used by surgeons to help them plan operative work.

Meanwhile other research workers had discovered that radioactive materials could be used to burn and destroy pieces of unwanted tissue, such as those involving cancerous growths. Pierre and Marie Curie were just two of the researches who investigated the possibility of using radium as a therapeutic material in the early years of the twentieth century.

But it was as a diagnostic aid that X-rays proved most useful. By enabling surgeons and physicians to see inside the living human body, they made it possible for far more accurate diagnoses to be made, often at a much earlier stage than ever before. Many of the therapeutic advances made in the twentieth century would have been impossible to prepare or use had Röntgen not taken note of that bizarre incident in his laboratory at Würzburg. There have been a number of minor technical developments in the field of radiology in the years since then, but none of these have had the impact or value of Röntgen’s original discovery.

Chapter 45: The Shrinking World

Transport progress — motor cars and aeroplanes — The social and economic effects — The effects on health are widespread and important — The world gets smaller

Throughout the nineteenth century, inventors in Europe had been experimenting with transport machines which would run along roads rather than on rails. The first vehicles were steam-powered, and at the beginning of the century steam buses ran in Paris and steam-driven vehicles were seen on the streets of Philadelphia. In 1831 a regular steam coach service carrying paying passengers ran between Gloucester and Cheltenham, some time before the railways were built.

However, steam-driven vehicles were never popular on the roads, and towards the end of the nineteenth century several inventors began work on automobiles powered by gasoline. A French engineer, Alphonse Beau de Rochas, and an Austrian, Siegfried Marcus, both built engines which ran on gasoline but it was two Germans, Carl Benz and Gottlieb Daimler, who first turned amusing inventions into effective forms of popular transport by manufacturing automobiles for public sale.

Before the end of the nineteenth century motor cars were being built in factories all over Europe and America. Peugeot, Renault and Fiat were all in business before 1900, and in America, just after the turn of the century, the young Henry Ford started a motor car manufacturing company which was to produce seventeen hundred cars in its first full year of business. While a group of engineers and inventors had been designing automobiles, another group of inventors and would-be aviators had been toying with the possibility of building flying machines. Gliders and hot-air balloons had enabled men to drift in the sky but, without some means of controlling their activities, these inventions had remained toys rather than commercial propositions.

In 1900 Ferdinand Graf von Zeppelin became the first man to build a rigid dirigible balloon. Then, in 1903, Wilbur and Orville Wright succeeded in producing a flying machine capable of making a sustained, controlled and powered flight. Zeppelin and the Wright brothers had produced machines which were to revolutionise life in the twentieth century. International travel, which had previously taken weeks or days, could now be completed in hours.

Within the space of a very few years, travel had become simple, quick and relatively cheap. At the beginning of the twentieth century few citizens would have travelled more than a thousand miles in a year; within a few decades many people would be travelling ten times that distance and thinking nothing of it.

The social, economic, cultural and medical effects of such easier travel were enormous. The railway engine had enabled people to journey between large cities at little cost and in some comfort, and it had allowed businessmen to sell their goods in markets which they would otherwise never have explored. The changes produced by road and air travel were even more extensive. The internal combustion engine enabled families to travel the countryside unhindered by any lack of public transport facilities. The flying machine made deserts, mountains and even oceans as insignificant as ruts in the road and allowed travellers to cross international boundaries with speed and without inconvenience.

Communities which had been isolated and introspective for years became cosmopolitan within a very short space of time. People could travel around the country, and even around the world, and see how others lived and coped with their problems. Military authorities saw enormous possibilities for the transportation of weapons and men, and quickly realised that air travel had added a new dimension to espionage.

These changes inevitably had a number of effects on the mental and physical health of the individuals concerned. The social and economic advantages offered by these two new forms of transport were undoubtedly vast, but the effects on the general good health of the public are more difficult to assess. It is certainly true that the general living standard rose quickly in those countries where air and road transport were developed most speedily. The advantages to industry were so enormous that the wealthy industrial nations began to grow richer and more prosperous at an almost indecent rate. Wholesale prices of all kinds of goods fell quite dramatically in America, Britain and Germany at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century.

But it is also true that the incidence of many physical and mental disorders also increased during this period and in the years that followed. Dietary changes, which accompanied the improvement in living standards, did not always add to physical health. For example, the greater consumption of meat and animal fats is likely to have been an important factor in the development of heart disease and cancer later in the century, while the increased consumption of refined foods is now thought to have led to an increase in the incidence of serious bowel disorders.

And in addition to these effects, people also faced more immediate hazards. The motor car was soon capable of travelling at much greater speeds than a horse-drawn vehicle, and as a result accidents, when they occurred, tended to be more serious. The pollutants added to the atmosphere by motor-car engines in large cities did nothing but harm to the lungs of pedestrians exposed to them each day. Finally, because more people could now travel long distances, there was a much greater mixing of infectious diseases. Air travel, in particular, meant that individuals from one part of the world could within hours be exposed to bacteria and viruses normally endemic in another part of the world.

When the only way to travel around the globe had been by ship, foot or horse, international travel had been so slow that someone leaving one part of the world with an infection would have either acquired obvious symptoms, died or recovered completely by the time he reached his destination. With the introduction of air travel, however, it became possible for a traveller to contract a disease on one side of the world and to be walking about on the other side before he became aware of being ill. This made quarantine regulations impractical and was to make the work of public health workers in later years far more difficult than it had ever been.

Chapter 46: The Rise of the Specialist

Specialisation becomes a necessity — Harley Street becomes popular — Sigmund Freud's effect

Medical science had developed so rapidly during the nineteenth century that by 1900 it was no longer possible for one man to be familiar with all the theoretical information and practical skills available to the practising clinician. In a way this was ironic because, after centuries of wrangling, the profession had just begun to act as a united force.

During the years which followed the Renaissance, medicine and surgery had developed along separate lines largely be cause the physicians, whose training included academic study at one of the major universities, considered the surgeons, whose training consisted largely of the acquisition of simple practical skills picked up during a rather haphazard apprenticeship, to be socially and professionally beneath them. The midwives and apothecaries, whose education also consisted of an informal type of apprenticeship, were also considered rather inferior by the haughty physicians, and so they too continued to work within their own rather specialised fields.

Then, in Britain, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Acts of Parliament were passed which brought the apothecaries, surgeons and physicians together for the first time. (In other countries, the apothecaries remained outside the strict confines of the medical profession, but the surgeons and physicians recognised each others' qualifications and complementary values.) Long-established jealousies and professional suspicions seemed to have been buried for the first time, and the profession developed a united front with which to overpower the evergrowing threat posed by the mass of unqualified practitioners.

Then the information explosion, which began to produce shock waves in every institution in the Western World during the nineteenth century, forced practitioners to specialise not just in medicine or surgery but in the diagnosis and treatment of disorders confined to one particular system or organ of the body. Although many doctors before this time had chosen to specialise in one type of operation or form of treatment, they had chosen to work within a specific medical area, either because they found that area of particular interest or because they found it exceptionally profitable; until the nineteenth century it was not vital for a physician or surgeon to specialise just because the amount of available information made any other course impractical.

The increased specialisation meant that, for the first time in history, doctors began to call in colleagues for consultations. The very fact that it was now acceptable for a man to specialise also made it possible for any physician or surgeon to admit openly, without losing face, that a particular problem was outside his range of knowledge. At the same time, a growing number of practitioners, instead of taking full and exclusive responsibility for their own group of patients, began to rely on the 'referral system', whereby a general practitioner or doctor with a wide range of patients to look after would call on a specialist for advice. This produced changes in the way in which doctors organised their practices. Instead of each doctor having a house in the area where he worked and seeing his patients in a few rooms specially set aside for the purpose, consultant specialists began to take rooms in central positions where they would be convenient for both patients and general physicians visiting for advice.

London was an obvious centre for specialists in Britain, since it not only had a large population of its own but was also within fairly easy reach of most outlying country districts. Road and rail travel was becoming much more comfortable and less expensive, and specialists who set up consulting rooms in London could not only expect a steady trickle of patients from villages, towns and even cities where there was no resident specialist but, for an appropriate fee, also be persuaded to venture out of town themselves to visit patients in their own homes.

Many of the London specialists chose to open their consulting rooms in Harley Street, an area in the north of London which had been previously known as a rather smart residential area. It had the twin advantages of being extremely close to two main-line railway stations — Euston and Paddington — and of being in the centre of one of London's most fashionable and exclusive developments.

In 1873 there were thirty-six qualified medical men in Harley Street, and by the end of the century 157 specialists were practising there. Since almost the whole street had been taken over by members of the medical profession it acquired the nickname 'The Valley of the Shadow of Death'. This area was so popular with doctors that the houses in the surrounding streets of Wimpole Street, Welbeck Street, Devonshire Place and Portland Place began to shine with brass plates on display. One of the first doctors to put up a plate in Wimpole Street was Dr Conan Doyle (the creator of Sherlock Holmes) who had been a general practitioner in Southsea and had studied eyes in Paris and Vienna. He intended to become an eye specialist but within three months had abandoned medical practice to become a fulltime author. Even in those early years, when most doctors owned their own houses and only a few shared premises, some specialists were more popular than others. It is reported, for example, that dermatologists were unpopular because their patients tended to frighten away other patients, while paediatricians were unpopular because their young patients had a habit of being sick on the waiting-room carpet.

In other European countries the rise in the number of specialists grew at very much the same rate, but in

America the process assumed extraordinary proportions. It seemed that every young qualifying doctor wanted to specialise, and by the 1890s in large cities there were relatively few doctors in general practice. As a result, when an individual fell ill, he had to decide for himself which specialist to call on. This arrangement was far from satisfactory, since not only was it often difficult for an unqualified person to decide which type of specialist he required but also many specialists were available for consultation only during office hours. If someone fell ill at night, he often had considerable difficulty finding and persuading a doctor of any kind to call on him at home.

This situation was also open to corruption, because there was little control over the number of times that a patient could be referred between specialists. Specialists frequently referred patients to other specialists, and rumours were rife of groups of practitioners referring patients for unnecessary consultations and then splitting the fees between them.

Anaesthetics had been one of the first branches of medical practice to acquire its own group of specialists, and after Dr John Snow successfully administered chloroform to Queen Victoria, many other physicians chose to specialise in the administration of anaesthetics. Other specialities developed as technical skills and knowledge became too complex for the general practitioner to master, and before the end of the nineteenth century there were specialists dealing with the skin, the throat, the bladder, the nervous system, infectious diseases, rheumatism, gout, cancer, the heart, the lungs, the mouth, the eye, the liver and just about every other part of the body. There were specialists dealing with single diseases, groups of diseases, single organs, groups of organs, patients requiring specific types of investigation and patients requiring specific forms of treatment. When the principle of asepsis was accepted by surgeons and the number of operations which could possibly be performed successfully expanded, surgical specialists began to develop too. Then the discovery of X-rays not only led to the introduction of a new speciality, radiology, but, by opening up whole areas of the body which had hitherto remained mysterious and impregnable, led directly to even more specialities developing.

There was one other important area which was by now acquiring specialists of its own. Mental illnesses had for several centuries been considered something clearly distinct from other forms of illness, but it was only now, at the end of the nineteenth century, that psychiatric problems really began to merit the development of an independent speciality. This upsurge in interest in mental problems had been brought about largely through the efforts of Sigmund Freud.

Chapter 47: Blood Transfusion Becomes a Reality

Karl Landsteiner's discovery — Man's experiments with blood transfusion — Surgeons able to do much more intricate operations — The rise of the casualty surgeon

For many centuries doctors had unsuccessfully tried to transfuse dying men with fresh supplies of blood. Even before Harvey described how blood circulates around the human body, physicians had played with the idea of supplementing a sick person's blood with blood from a healthy individual or even a healthy animal.

The first successful transfusion was probably made by the French doctor Jean Baptiste Denys, who was Professor of Philosophy at Montpellier and court physician to Louis XIV. Denys is said to have given a young boy eight ounces of blood from a lamb in 1667. His success with that patient encouraged him to try with another the following year, but the unfortunate death of the recipient of that transfusion resulted in a lawsuit against Denys and, after his arrest, the procedure of transfusing blood from animals into man was prohibited by an Act of the Chamber of Deputies in 1668.

In Italy a physician in Florence called Francesco Folli published a book in 1680 in which he described similar experiments that he had conducted, while in England both Christopher Wren, the architect, and Robert Boyle, the scientist, wrote papers on the subject. The diarist Samuel Pepys included an account of a transfusion done by Richard Lower, who, like Denys, put lamb's blood into a man, and reports that the subject had aroused much interest including the comment that it might be entertaining to let the blood of a Quaker into an archbishop.

An early example of medical litigation, occurring when a suit was brought against Dr Denys by the widow of the man who had died after an attempted transfusion, effectively put a stop to all further transfusions for some time, and it was not until 1818 that a London doctor, Dr Blundell, and a surgeon, Mr Cline, performed the next transfusion a dying man, obtaining blood from several volunteers and transferring it to the recipient with the aid of syringes. Subsequently, in the *Lancet* in 1829, Dr Blundell reported how a female patient who had bled heavily after childbirth had received blood from his own assistant and had subsequently done well.

Many of the early transfusion attempts were foiled, however, when the blood intended for the transfusion clotted in the syringe and could not be used. In view of what we now know about blood groups and the dangers of transfusing mismatched blood, this problem may have saved many lives.

The major breakthrough came when the biologist Landsteiner discovered that different human beings have different types of blood. By a series of tests he showed that, whereas there are some individuals whose blood can be given to any recipient, there are also individuals whose blood will not mix safely. Once this technique of identifying individual blood groups had been perfected, it became feasible for doctors and surgeons to transfer blood from one individual to another compatible individual. When, a little later, it was discovered that a substance called sodium citrate can be used safely to prevent the clotting of blood intended for transfusion, the final major problem had been removed.

This newly developed ability to transfuse blood from one person to another had two important practical effects.

First, it meant that surgeons were now able to perform even longer and more intricate operations without having to worry unduly about their patients losing too much blood on the operating table. The ability to transfuse blood, the availability of X-rays, the introduction of the principle of asepsis and the development of effective forms of anaesthesia all revolutionised surgical techniques, and no single later development matched these for Importance.

Second, it also meant that surgeons working in casualty stations and accident departments could, for the first time in history, hope to save those individuals who had been badly wounded and whose injuries had been accompanied by a severe loss of blood. Advances in radiology, anaesthesia and asepsis had meant that surgeons could hope to save the lives of badly injured patients, and the fact that blood could be safely transfused into those patients meant that life could be prolonged and maintained while these surgical repairs continued.

Ironically, of course, the advance in surgical techniques which inevitably resulted from the work of Landsteiner did not lead to a dramatic decrease in the number of people dying from accidental injuries. The reason for this paradox was simple: the wider availability of the motor car, the aeroplane and other pieces of machinery meant that the total number of accident victims was increasing annually.

Chapter 48: Disease and War

The Russo-Japanese War — The importance of infection to generals — The Boer War and typhoid — The example is followed around the world.

The Russo-Japanese war of 1904-6 was a landmark in military and civil health care. It was the first major military encounter in which the number of casualties produced by infection and disease did not exceed the number of men wounded.

Before the Russo-Japanese War military campaigns were always bedevilled by infectious diseases, and generals had become accustomed to losing large numbers of men to unseen opponents. The conditions under which battles were fought were ideal for the development of infections: the soldiers were invariably tired and weak after marching hundreds of miles, their food supplies were rarely adequate or properly balanced, their drinking water was often polluted and the sewage facilities in their camps were crude. Additionally, soldiers in a new country were often exposed to types of infection against which they had no acquired immunity. As a result, many campaigns were won or lost because of the presence or absence of small organisms rather than through the skills and experience of their military leaders.

In the spring of 1812, for example, Napoleon had reached the peak of his power. His new French Empire spread from Russian and Austrian frontiers in the east to the sea on the north, south and west. His two brothers and his son sat on thrones, and everyone except the British had succumbed to his power.

But not even Napoleon had been able to defeat typhus, a disease which thrives in dirty conditions and which was endemic in hospitals, prisons and all the other places where overcrowding was common during the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Army camps were perfect breeding grounds for the louse which carries the disease, since it was almost impossible for the soldiers to wash or change their clothing. Napoleon’s army had been fighting and travelling for so long that most had probably not seen themselves naked for years. To Napoleon typhus was probably a greater threat than Wellington.

The disease was still a major problem for the British in the Crimean War nearly half a century later. Together with cholera and smallpox, typhus killed ten times as many British soldiers as were killed in action by the enemy. Typhus alone was responsible for the deaths of nearly a million soldiers.

Even during the Boer War at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, five times as many British soldiers died of disease as of bullets.

By that time it had been recognised that dirty conditions encourage disease, and the town and city dwellers in most European countries had been effectively protected by public health regulations. Inexplicably, however, military authorities still seemed to consider soldiers expendable and did nothing to protect them against infection. Anti-typhoid injections were available before the Boer War but they were not used; if they had been, many of the eleven thousand men who died from the disease could have been saved.

It was not until the Russo-Japanese War that the generals first began to consider infection and disease a serious threat to be combated. Both Japanese and Russians took two important steps towards protecting their soldiers. First, they made a positive effort to improve the living conditions of their armies and to ensure that clean water supplies were made available; second, they introduced vaccination on a wide scale. The effect of their policy was dramatic. The Japanese lost nearly sixty thousand men to the enemy, but only a third of that number to disease, while the Russians claim that only one in a hundred of their soldiers died from infections.

Following this example, military authorities around the world slowly began to introduce similar forms of protection for their men.

Chapter 49: The First Organised Health Services

Improvements in medical education begin in America — The library with no books — Hospitals poorly staffed despite Florence Nightingale’s example — The general availability of medical care — The early health services

More changes had taken place in the quality and availability of medical care during the nineteenth century than in any other single century. And yet, despite the advances which had taken place in medical science and which had resulted in theoretical improvements in the quality of surgical care and the quality of nursing care and in practical improvements in the standard of living conditions in most major towns and cities, there were still many problems to be overcome.

For example, although the medical profession had succeeded in establishing the principle that only those surgeons and physicians who were officially registered and recognised as such could practice medicine freely, there had been relatively few improvements in the quality of medical education available.

In America in 1910, when Abraham Flexner published a comprehensive study of the quantity and quality of medical education available in his country, he found that there were an extraordinary number of independent schools offering many standards of education. He found, for example, thirty-nine medical schools in Illinois, fourteen in Chicago, forty-two in Missouri, forty-three in Pennsylvania, eighteen in Tennessee, twenty in Cincinnati and eleven in Louisville. Inevitably there were many medical graduates, and whereas at the time there was one doctor for every two or three thousand people in Germany, France and Austria, there was one doctor for every seven hundred people in America, with the ratio reaching one for every four hundred and sixty people in New York.

Visiting medical schools all over America quite unannounced, Flexner found an enormous variety in the quality of medical teaching. In Los Angeles he opened the door to the library at the College of Physicians and Surgeons and found that it contained no books. In Kansas he opened the dissecting room door at a local medical school and peeped inside to find a chicken yard covered with straw. The laboratory at the Maryland Medical College was said to consist of a few dirty test tubes kept in cigar boxes.

Of the one hundred and fifty medical schools which he managed to visit, Flexner found that eighty had no educational requirements at all, while many more were far more interested in the student’s ability to pay his fees than in his academic prowess. Very few of the medical schools had any arrangements with local hospitals for practical tuition, and it seemed that, in many cases, all a student had to do to qualify was to pay his fees regularly.

Flexner ‘s conclusion was that quantity was not everything, and in his report to the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching he recommended that the schools which should be supported were the ones which were using modern teaching methods and approaches. As a result of his report many medical schools failed to survive, while those that did live on often received donations from charitable organisations in order to make them independent of their students.

Another problem which had to be faced at the beginning of the twentieth century was the fact that many hospitals were still poorly staffed, poorly equipped and not administered properly. Florence Nightingale’s enthusiasm for hospitals built in the pavilion style had resulted in the development of a number of admirable buildings, such as the John Hopkins Hospital in America and the Rudolf Virchow Hospital in Berlin, Germany, but lack of money meant that in many areas the only hospital buildings existing were old fashioned, poorly ventilated, badly lit and cramped. These inadequate working conditions inevitably made administration difficult, and whereas ‘show’ hospitals built in the largest cities and attached to the leading medical schools may have had excellent facilities, people living in small towns and cities had too often to put up with hospitals which were far inferior in almost every respect.

The vast variety in the quality of hospital buildings around the world resulted from the fact that the buildings in use had been erected by many different organisation’s, some voluntary, some statutory, some public, some private, and their original designers had been commissioned to satisfy the specific requirements of the potential owners.

In Britain, for example, there were hospital buildings which had been built for religious organisations and others which had been built by local authorities having to comply with the Poor Law Act of 1835, which had required the building of institutions and asylums for the poor and sick, the mentally ill and those patients suffering from contagious diseases. Many of these hospitals had been over-crowded since the days of their opening, and as voluntary hospitals found it harder and harder to collect funds from citizens who knew well that there were public facilities and public funds available, the overcrowding problem became more acute.

The type of staff and facilities available in the better hospitals differed a great deal from the staff and facilities available in the older buildings. In the more well-equipped and well-endowed hospitals, for example, doctors and nurses found that not only did they have better equipment but that they were assisted by other specialists. Röntgen’s X-ray equipment, for example, made the employment of special technicians inevitable, while, at the Massachusetts

General Hospital in America, Dr Richard Cabot hired the first medical social worker to work with him in his out-patient department in 1905.But, at the same time, in the Poor Law hospitals and in other similar institutions around the world, nursing care was often as bad as it had been before Florence Nightingale's days.

There was one other factor which was just as important as the quality of medical education and the quality of hospital services, and that was the general availability of medical care.

During the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century laws had been passed in most parts of the world which made it difficult for anyone not possessing an officially recognised qualification to practise medicine. Theoretically, these laws were designed to protect patients from quacks and charlatans, but in practice there was a problem in that a very large number of people had traditionally relied upon these very people, now outlawed, for their medical care.

In part, the problem had been solved by the increase in the number of medical graduates, which made it possible for most people to find and afford a registered practitioner. In America, the number of graduates had grown to extraordinary proportions as a result of the fact that medical schools could be turned into profitable institutions by charging healthy fees. In Britain, the Society of Apothecaries had deliberately increased the number of qualified doctors in order to provide a practical answer to those who argued that the quacks were providing a necessary and worthwhile service. (Many of those qualified and registered were probably less able than some of the unqualified and unregistered practitioners, but as educational standards improved, so this problem subsided in importance.)

In addition, however, there was one other important development which improved the availability of medical care and helped to accustom those individuals used to obtaining help from midwives, quacks and other unqualified advisers to the idea of seeking help from properly qualified and registered practitioners. The development which enabled people to make this transition involved the introduction of the first types of organised health service.

The idea of individuals being able to take advantage of some form of organised health care programme, which provided care free of charge or which required small regular payments rather than large irregular sums, was not a new one. At the end of the eighteenth century there had been a number of clubs and societies in existence around Europe which collected small payments from their members and in return provided medical services and sick pay. Many of these organisations had been run by trades and guilds and had existed for the protection of their own members.

In addition, in England, the local Boards of Guardians, appointed under the Poor Law Act of 1835, had been required to appoint district medical officers who were obliged to provide medical care for anyone needing it.

Then, in 1862, the Russians had introduced what they had hoped would be a comprehensive health service. However, although the service was free, it was also rather inadequate since, to begin with at least, there were not enough trained workers to cover the whole country. More effective than this was the scheme organised by the German government in 1880, which was based partly on a form of health insurance. The Swedish government introduced a similar scheme at the beginning of the twentieth century, and its National Board of Health appointed doctors to act as both public health officers and general practitioners. It was the German scheme which inspired the British Prime Minister, Lloyd George, to organise a National Health Insurance Act in 1911. Under this legislation wage-earners were entitled to sickness benefit and a free general practitioner service as long as they made the necessary contributions.

By 1914 health care schemes were in action in several European countries, while in many parts of the world the first steps had been taken to base the education of medical practitioners on a sounder footing and to make their skills and services available to as large a number of people as possible.

The cost of building properly designed, well-equipped hospitals was still prohibitive, however, and few of the establishments in use would have satisfied the strict requirements of Florence Nightingale.

Chapter 50: The Birth-control Protagonists

The population explosion — The history of contraceptives — A practical necessity — The Malthusian League — Margaret Sanger leads the way — The importance of contraception – Religious opposition

Since man first walked upon the earth, the human population had grown slowly and steadily, suffering intermittent and local setbacks due to plagues and epidemics and taking thousands of years to edge towards a total of 1,000 million people. Then, during the nineteenth century, the rise in the population — particularly in the Western world — began to accelerate rapidly, taking another one hundred years to reach 2,000 million and only another thirty to reach 3,000 million.

Many explanations have been offered for this rapid increase in the world's population. It has been said that improved medical facilities, techniques and knowledge helped to reduce death rates and, to a small extent, this is probably true. It has also been said that, on purely statistical grounds, when a population reaches a certain size it will begin to grow at a far more rapid rate. That, too, is certainly true. It is also argued that, with time, even the most threatening infectious disorders lose some of their potency as people acquire immunity. There is undoubtedly evidence to support that hypothesis.

But there were other important factors which were probably just as responsible for the fact that the population of the world first began to rise rapidly towards the end of the nineteenth century. There were far better food supplies and better public health facilities; clean water was widely available, and many countries had introduced sewage disposal schemes; the Industrial Revolution had produced enormous changes in general living standards, and the introduction of the railways and the motor car had meant that supplies of all kinds could be distributed far more equitably.

The influence of all these factors on the incidence of important infectious diseases, which had a century or two before proved to be such an enormous threat, was dramatic. Better fed, fitter people, living in cleaner houses and drinking cleaner water, are far more likely to be able to resist infection than poorly fed individuals living in damp, cold homes. In particular, babies and young children became far better able to survive attacks of gastro-enteritis and the many other infections which cause some havoc among the young.

Whatever the cause may have been, and it is likely that it was a combination of these explanations, the fact is that the population of the world began to rise most rapidly at the end of the nineteenth century, with the population of the developed Western world rising far more dramatically than the population of the rest of the world.

The effect on individual families at this time was undoubtedly a powerful one. A few decades previously a woman could expect to lose at least half her children in their first year of life. By the end of the nineteenth century that had changed and she could now expect most of them to survive.

Whereas the increase in the total population of the world had produced only a slight effect on individual families, the decrease in the infant mortality rate obviously produced an important and dramatic effect on individual family life. If the population of a country increases by a third, the impact on a working man and woman will not be noticeable. If the population of a family increases by a third, however, the impact will be very noticeable.

It was, therefore, through sheer necessity that many people began to demand contraceptive advice and practical help. Those politicians and statisticians who claim that the size of the current world population is a threat might, perhaps, be comforted by the knowledge that, if the birth rate in England and Wales had stayed at the level that it had reached in 1870, the population of England and Wales today would have been something in the region of 150 million. That such a disastrous rise was prevented is due almost entirely to the good sense of those individuals who first recognised that contraception is a social weapon without which we could not survive.

Contraceptives have been used since men and women first recognised the consequences of making love. Coitus interruptus, needing no special skills or equipment, is probably the oldest form of birth control, and the Hebrews, in particular, practised it. Recognising the aesthetic disadvantages of this method, however, many women have, over the years, experimented with different forms of chemical contraception. Four thousand years ago Egyptian women were mixing and moulding honey and crocodile dung into contraceptive pessaries. Arabian women were said to have made contraceptives from pomegranate pulps treated with alum and rocksalt, and Aristotle described a chemical concoction consisting of cedar oil, frankincense and olive oil, which was said to prevent conception. It is quite possible that all these preparations might have had contraceptive value, since they would have affected the acidity of the internal environment of the vagina, and sperm are very sensitive to changes of this nature.

The sheath is also a fairly well-established device, although its use does not seem to go back beyond the sixteenth century. At that time venereal disease was common, and the sheath was used more as a protection against infection than as a contraceptive. Japanese men are said to have worn sheaths made of tortoiseshell, horn or leather, but Europeans usually followed the example of the Italian Gabriele Fallopio who recommended a moistened linen sheath.

Diaphragms and caps have been used for many years, and Chinese and Japanese women are said to have covered their cervices with discs of oiled tissue paper. Anal intercourse was favoured by some, and there is evidence that the Greeks at the time of Hippocrates used intra-uterine devices.

Dioscorides suggested that after intercourse women who did not want to get pregnant should get up, sneeze, douche and then drink something cold, before making violent bodily contortions designed to displace the sperm, and an ancient Persian writer suggested that in order to dislodge sperm any women reluctant to become a mother should take nine backward jumps before sitting on her toes stroking her navel with her thumb. He does not seem to have specified which thumb. Those who failed with their precautions to prevent pregnancy often tried to remedy the situation later, and both abortion and infanticide were used to limit the size of individual families. Indeed, although we may equate infanticide with primitive cultures, it was practised in Europe until the nineteenth century.

But none of these contraceptive techniques had any great popular support at the end of the nineteenth century, and the average man and woman were obviously expecting something more effective and more acceptable than crocodile dung or coitus interruptus. In the second half of the nineteenth century considerable progress was made in the development of new forms of contraception. An English pharmacist, Walter Rendell, began to sell moderately effective pessaries containing quinine sulphate in 1885. After it became possible to manufacture rubber, contraceptives made of the material began to replace the older variety prepared from animal skins or linen. In 1882 a German, Dr Hasse, invented the type of diaphragm that many women still use today, and in 1883 a Dutch physician, Aletta Jacobs, built and described the first Dutch Cap — a special device intended to cover the entrance to the cervix itself. The *Lancet* of 1868 contained illustrations of small devices made of gold, silver, wood and ivory which were recommended for various complaints affecting the womb, and ten years later it was recognised that these devices were both used and useful in the prevention of conception.

But these technical advances in the development of effective contraceptives were not all that was needed. Even by the end of the nineteenth century there was still a considerable amount of ignorance about the mechanics of reproduction and about the various ways in which conception could be prevented. And, even more important, there were enormous social, political and religious barriers to be overcome. Progress in the availability of contraceptives and the effect that they could have on both the population growth and the size of individual families did not come until some of the opposition to the introduction of contraception had been brought out into the open.

The idea of controlling the size of the population by some form of birth-control, as opposed simply to preventing an individual conception, had been first suggested by a clergyman, Thomas Malthus, at the end of the eighteenth century. Malthus had suggested that sexual abstinence was a good way to cut down the birth rate and had also advocated later marriages. Then in 1832 Charles Knowlton published, in America, a book entitled *The Fruits of Philosophy: or, the Private Companion of Young Married People,* which contained an account of the various forms of contraception available at the time. Knowlton was fined and sent to prison for his impertinence.

In the 1860s George Dysdale started the Malthusian League, which tried again to propagate the idea of birth control. Dysdale was joined by one of the first female reformers, Annie Besant, but they made little progress at first because of the opposition to birth control which came from both the Church and the medical profession. An Act of 1857 had made it illegal to sell books describing contraceptive techniques, simply by categorising them as obscene, and Annie Besant managed to obtain a considerable amount of useful publicity and support for the Malthusian League by deliberately republishing Knowlton’s book and attracting prosecution.

The eventual success of the Malthusian League in Britain was followed by the formation of similar groups in the Netherlands, France and Germany. A small number of clinics were opened in the Netherlands in the final decade of the nineteenth century under the leadership of Aletta Jacobs, and slowly the supporters of the various leagues began to make progress in their fight to make contraceptive advice freely available.

The greatest impact in the field of birth control was made by two women. In America, the fight to provide contraceptive advice was led by Margaret Sanger. In Europe one of the most important campaigners was Marie Stopes. These two women, both determined feminists, were together responsible for the introduction and organisation of birth control clinics and for the dissemination of advice and equipment.

Margaret Sanger, herself the sixth of eleven children, began her career as a nurse in New York City, where she saw at first hand the close links between poverty, large families and disease. There were at that time, in America, laws forbidding the promotion of any information about contraception, and so when, in 1914, Mrs Sanger published a magazine and a pamphlet including details about contraception, she was arrested. That case was dismissed, but when, in 1916, she opened the first birth-control clinic, she was charged with maintaining a public nuisance and sent to the workhouse for thirty days. (Mrs Sanger invented the phrase birth-control’.) The publicity aroused by the case and the furore that followed other similar battles eventually led to a relaxation of the law. The 1873 Comstock Act, under which contraceptive devices and literature describing them had been classified as obscene, was, in 1936, interpreted as allowing doctors to prescribe contraceptives if they were essential to the health of their patients.

Marie Stopes, born three years earlier than Margaret Sanger, in 1880, qualified as a botanist in Munich and taught her subject at Manchester University, until the failure of her marriage led her to a study of the problems of matrimony. Her research in this area led her to believe that birth control could help to save some marriages, and in 1921 she founded Britain's first birth-control clinic.

The opposition which Sanger and Stopes faced came mainly from the Church, and in particular from the Roman Catholic Church, which considered contraception of any kind to be a sin. Most members of the medical profession were fairly easily convinced that contraception was essential for women, families and society in general.

The moral and religious arguments put forward in opposition to the campaign, led first by Margaret Sanger, are complex and probably of genuine interest only to those who follow the religions concerned. What is far more important on purely social and medical grounds is the influence that those views had on the success of Mrs Sanger and her followers.

In general, it seems that the influence of those who oppose the free availability of contraception has been greatest in those undeveloped countries which are most in need of some form of population control but which, because of their low economic status and political instability, are most vulnerable to pressure. In the developed Western countries many thousands of individuals may have been prevented from using contraceptive techniques by the stated preferences of their religious leaders or by feelings of guilt and shame engendered by religious teachings, but religious leaders have found it impossible to stem the force of Mrs Sanger's arguments, and even in those countries which are predominantly Catholic, such as Spain and Italy, birth control is not unknown.

Unfortunately, and paradoxically, the availability of contraceptives and contraceptive advice in the developing countries, where population growth frequently exceeds food supplies and prevents further development, has been prevented not by inherent national fears or superstitions but by the prejudices of a powerful minority group in the West which, by applying political and economic pressure to those most vulnerable, has succeeded in delaying the ready availability of birth control.

Technically, Margaret Sanger and Marie Stopes had only the simplest forms of contraceptives to offer; intra-uterine devices were available only to a very small number of women, oral contraceptives did not come onto the market until the 1950s, and sterilisation did not become popular until surgical techniques had made it a simple and relatively painless operation. But socially and politically modern attitudes towards birth control were formed in those early years of the twentieth century when the establishment was confronted by that small but determined group of women.

Chapter 51: Magic Bullets

Limitations facing the general practitioner — The bottle of medicine — Ehrlich s magic bullet — Fleming and penicillin — Domagk and the first synthetic anti-bacterial drug — Penicillin production stepped up for the Second World War — Other pharmacological developments in the twentieth century

The wider availability of professional medical care may have had several theoretical advantages but in practice there was not a lot that an ordinary general practitioner could do to treat his patients. He could help protect them from infections by vaccination and he could, either by himself or with the aid of a local surgeon, deal effectively with their accidental injuries. But the variety of drugs that he could prescribe was small, and most were ineffective. The four most important products available were quinine, opium (or morphine), digitalis and aspirin. The first three had been readily available for several centuries and the fourth, available since 1899, could be obtained without a doctor's prescription.

Most of the bottles made up by general practitioners contained relatively ineffective and generally harmless mixtures of herbal extracts. The best medicines were expected to taste unpleasant, to be prepared in such a way that they needed shaking in order to disturb some sort of sediment, to have an offensive smell which would impress anyone within range and to need taking at least three times a day, preferably before or after meals. Arsenic, strychnine and sarsaparilla were just three of the popular ingredients employed by many doctors at the end of the nineteenth century.

The revolution within the world of pharmacology began in Germany, where Paul Ehrlich, a chemist, began the search for what he called the 'magic bullet', a drug that would have a specific action against a particular disease. Undoubtedly inspired to some extent by the success that Lister had enjoyed with antiseptics, Ehrlich's aim was to find a type of antiseptic which could be used inside the body. He believed that, if ordinary antiseptics could kill bacteria outside the body, antiseptics designed to be taken internally might attack bacteria within the body.

With great patience and determination Ehrlich experimented with compound after compound in an attempt to find a product which would do as he wanted. Finally, in 1910, after no fewer that 605 failures, he produced a substance called Salvarsan, which included some arsenic but which seemed both safe and effective when used against the organism responsible for syphilis. To prove the effectiveness of the product, Ehrlich and the company which had worked with him on the project, Farbwerke Hoechst, gave 65,000 units of Salvarsan free to doctors around the world. As a result of this massive clinical trial, the compound was proved both safe and effective.

Remarkably, Salvarsan was only the second drug to be identified as having a specific action against a particular disease. The first, quinine, had been used in the treatment of malaria since its discovery in Peru many centuries before. It is perhaps hardly surprising that it has been said that it was not until 1910 that a patient stood a better than fifty per cent chance of benefiting from an encounter with a physician.

Ehrlich's research had been specifically directed towards the discovery of an anti-infective substance, but the next major step in this direction – Alexander Fleming's discovery of penicillin in 1928 – was as much the result of good fortune as of careful planning.

According to the now well-established legend, Fleming had been working in his laboratory at St. Mary's Hospital in London on a study of the staphylococcus bacteria when he noticed that a culture dish containing the bacteria appeared to have been contaminated. The contaminant had in some way stopped the growth of the bacteria. In retrospect it seems that someone had left a laboratory window open through which spores of a common fungus had blown. (Historians have in fact argued about this, and while some agree with the window theory, others say that the spores entered through a door, while a third group claim that the spores reached the culture dish through a ventilation shaft.) Contamination is a common problem in laboratories, and normally such cultures are simply thrown away. Fleming, however, like Röntgen and so many others, was too good a scientist just to toss away the contents of the dish and forget about the incident. He made careful notes on the culture and the following year published a paper in the *British Journal of Experimental Pathology* describing the way in which the growing spores (which he had identified as being those of penicillium notarum) had contaminated the culture dish and prevented the growth of the bacteria. Tests showed that the penicillin mould was safe for human use, and Fleming realised that one day it would prove useful as a drug, but he found that it was too unstable to be manufactured in any quantity.

Fleming's work on penicillin was to lie untouched for a decade. During that period, however, research for effective anti-infective agents made progress in Germany. In 1932 Gerhard Domagk, a director at the Bayer Laboratory for Experimental Pathology and Bacteriology in Wuppertal-Elberfeld, who had been experimenting on new dyes and drugs, decided to investigate a new wool dye, prontosil red, to evaluate its use as a drug.

The story goes that Domagk's daughter, Hildegarde, had pricked her finger with a knitting needle and had developed blood poisoning at just about the time that the therapeutic effect of prontosil was discovered, and that in an attempt to save her Domagk decided to try the new drug. The drug worked, and realising the commercial value of a synthetic product which could be used to combat infection, many of the world's major drug companies began work in attempts to develop similar products. (One of the products which resulted from this international search was M & B 693, an anti-bacterial developed by a company called May & Baker which was used to treat a patient called Winston Churchill when he developed pneumonia during the Second World War.)

The success of prontosil encouraged other scientists to begin work again on penicillin. The next vital step took place in Oxford, where a team of scientists led by Professor Howard Florey and Dr Ernst Chain solved the problem of how to manufacture penicillin in a stable form. Their research coincided with the outbreak of the Second World War, and when it was realised that the new drug would be an important asset to any army, many scientists and drug companies on both sides of the Atlantic began to study ways of manufacturing penicillin in large quantities. By the end of the war, thanks to the combined efforts of British and American manufacturers, penicillin was being produced with comparative ease. (Undoubtedly the drug's military significance resulted in its large-scale production being achieved at an earlier date than would otherwise have been the case.)

During the years following Ehrlich's first discovery, many drugs were produced, and in recent years the production of new compounds has reached almost epidemic proportions. But no other drugs have had such an important effect on the community as the anti-infective products — the antibiotics. In the 1930s, before antibiotics were widely available, the number of people dying from pneumonia in the United States sometimes exceeded fifty per cent of those who had contracted the infection. After the introduction of antibiotics, the death rate fell to about one in twenty. Similar improvements were noticed with other infectious disorders. Once general practitioners were able to provide prescriptions for antibiotics, the number of people needing prolonged bed rest or nursing care for the duration of an infective illness also fell.

Antibiotic drugs were the most important weapons to be added to the doctor's armoury in the twentieth century, but the ever-expanding pharmaceutical industry, which had begun with William Brockeden's first tablet-making machine back in the first half of the nineteenth century, prepared and marketed a great many drugs besides antibiotics. Some of these were of enormous clinical importance to individual patients, but others were of dubious value to anyone except those involved in their manufacture and distribution.

In the field of chemotherapeutics, one of the most profitable areas turned out to be the development of drugs for the treatment of mental disorders, and the absence of any single product with clear advantages over all other products meant that there were soon many alternatives on the market. Barbiturates were among the earliest drugs in this field, and they were soon followed by many other sedatives and tranquillisers.

Just after the conclusion of the Second World War, doctors at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota isolated a substance called cortisone, a vitally important hormone which proved invaluable in the treatment of diseases as superficially different as rheumatoid arthritis and asthma.

Perhaps even more important than cortisone, in terms of problems facing the world, was the manufacture of synthetic sex hormones, with which researchers in the 1950s succeeded in preparing the first contraceptive pills.

The twentieth century also saw the introduction of new vaccines against tetanus, diphtheria, tuberculosis and poliomyelitis, while nutritional scientists managed for the first time to identify and establish the importance of the individual vitamins, with the result that those suffering from vitamin shortages could also be identified and treated appropriately.

Together, these individual advances helped to give the medical profession a restricted but useful armoury of weapons against a relatively small but important group of diseases. To a certain extent, however, the success in these few areas was misleading. Undoubtedly encouraged by the medical profession and the pharmaceutical industry, the public began to believe that scientists had solved most of the existing problems facing the world and that doctors had cures for all ailments. Although considerable progress had been made in combating disease by drugs, there were still far more disorders that doctors could not treat than could be treated.

This false faith was to lead to much public frustration, dissatisfaction and even anger, most of which was directed against the medical profession and which manifested itself in complaints, litigation and a popular search for support and advice from the alternative practitioners who, ironically, had been more or less outlawed a century before by members of the orthodox medical profession.

Chapter 52: International Control of Disease

Infectious diseases know no barriers — The need for international control — The World Health Organisation – The fight against smallpox — Other contributions made by the WHO

The struggle to deal with the major communicable diseases had been an almost continuous process for many centuries. There had been quiescent periods, when it must have seemed as though no progress would ever be made, and there had been moments when it must have appeared as though man's susceptibility and invincibility to infection must have been almost at an end. Jenner's first trials with the smallpox vaccine, Chadwick's first successes in persuading the mid-nineteenth century politicians in London to spend money on improving the public health facilities in London, Pasteur's idea about the vulnerability of infections to antiseptics, Ross's discovery of the link between malaria and the mosquito, and Ehrlich's first magic bullet — all these breakthroughs must have promised an end to the tyranny of infection.

But the truth was that each one of these innovations depended not just upon the individual man nor upon the effectiveness of his proposal but also upon the willingness of the world's leaders to act upon the advice given and to put into practice the suggestions made. A vaccination programme will not work unless there are political leaders prepared to allocate the necessary funds; a campaign for clean water and clean streets does no good if the appropriate legislation is not passed; the effectiveness of antiseptics goes unnoticed if the principle behind their use is not accepted by the establishment; the knowledge about the links between specific parasites and insects is valueless if funds and campaigns are not available to use that information; the availability of a magic bullet does no good if there is no one to pay for the gun or to hire a man to fire it.

Gradually during the nineteenth century, as more and more effective ideas became available, they were put into practice in most of the developed countries. The Industrial Revolution had produced social changes which had made it politically desirable for politicians to take advantage of these developments as quickly as possible, and the economic growth which had accompanied the Industrial Revolution had made it possible for them to do so. Working men and women were demanding cleaner homes, cleaner streets and better air to breathe, and their employers were anxious to keep morbidity and mortality rates as low as possible in order to keep their factories running smoothly.

But while there were immense social and political pressures in northern Europe and in North America which ensured that every new advance in the fight against such diseases as smallpox, cholera and malaria was eventually greeted, if not with enthusiasm, at least with some sense of resigned acceptance, the same was not true of the under-developed countries of eastern Europe, Africa, Asia and South America. In those countries there was little if any enthusiasm for the fight against infection, and there was no money to pay for the fight even if there had been any enthusiasm for it

This state of affairs might have continued but for the fact that it slowly became clear that the organisms responsible for the infectious diseases concerned do not respect any of the international boundaries which exist between developed countries (those making every effort to defeat infection), and the underdeveloped countries (which were making either a minimal effort or no effort at all).

It quickly became apparent, therefore, that there was very little point in struggling to eradicate smallpox, cholera or whatever from one country if the causative organisms were breeding unchecked a few miles away. Indeed, there were positive dangers in such an approach since, with the improvement in forms of personal communication which had followed the building of the first steam train and which later followed the building of the first motor car and the first aeroplane, the eradication of a disease in one country would eventually make the citizens of that country exceptionally vulnerable to that very same disease were they to be exposed to it elsewhere.

Consequently, the enthusiasm of the developed countries for some way of controlling infectious diseases internationally, and for some way of dealing with infection within the national borders of the undeveloped countries, was not entirely altruistic.

The first active sign of any cooperation between different countries in the fight against infection involved the holding of an International Sanitary Conference in Paris in 1851. The aim of this meeting was simply to try to produce a single quarantine regulation which could be imposed in all European countries and, in particular, in all their Mediterranean ports. The meeting, and the four others which followed in the subsequent thirty-four years, failed mainly because no one had any real idea about what caused plague, cholera or yellow fever, and those attending the conferences could not agree on the best way to avoid any one of these three diseases.

Eventually, at the seventh International Sanitary Conference, held in Venice in 1892, an agreement was reached with regard to cholera. That was the first step in the development of international co-operation in the fight against disease, and it was followed in 1907 by the establishment in Paris of an Office International d'Hygiene Publique which included America as well as most European countries.

A number of meetings followed, but not a lot happened until after the First World War, when the League of Nations was created and formed its own organisation known as the Health Organisation of the League of Nations. Exhausted by this effort, the nations of the world did little more until the outbreak of the Second World War, when international health work naturally came to an entire standstill.

It was only after the Second World War, when the World Health Organisation (WHO) was founded in 1946, that progress really began and an international campaign was started in an attempt to control and eradicate the major infectious diseases.

The new organisation was instructed to keep records of the statistics and patterns of disease, to stimulate the eradication of epidemic and endemic diseases and to assist in the development and improvement of national health services around the world. It also had other objectives, such as the improvement of working conditions, the promotion of co-operation between health professionals in different parts of the world, the promotion of health education and the development of international standards for all areas of health; but its single most important task was the eradication of infectious disorders.

The WHO’s success in this endeavour has, perhaps inevitably, been mixed. One of the major problems facing the Organisation was its Charter, which gives it authority to assist in any particular country only when that country has requested advice or practical help. This has meant that attempts to eradicate infectious diseases have often been hampered by a country’s refusal, on either political or military grounds, to invite observers in.

However, the Organisation has made a particular effort to eradicate two diseases.

In 1955 the WHO declared that an all-out campaign should be waged against malaria, a disorder which was by then virtually unknown in most of the developed countries but which was still responsible for many thousands of deaths each year in other countries. The most important weapons in this battle were considered to be the insecticides, such as DDT, which kill the mosquitoes which transmit the disease, and although a great many insects have acquired immunity to these chemicals, it was believed that the number of mosquitoes could be reduced to a point where the disease could be threatened with extinction. The theory was that, if the total number of mosquitoes is cut, the number of malaria-carrying mosquitoes must also be cut. This reduction will then inevitably mean that the number of people contracting the disease after a mosquito bite will fall, and that, in turn, would mean that the number of mosquitoes picking up the parasite by biting infected sufferers would fall as well. Eventually, the argument was, the life cycle of the parasite would be broken and the disease would be made extinct.

Unfortunately, the Organisation’s programme did not go entirely according to plan, since not all countries were prepared to operate in the necessarily expensive campaign to destroy the mosquito. This inevitably meant that successful campaigns within one country’s borders were negated by token or absent campaigns in neighbouring countries. The Organisation’s plan was defeated by the very problem which had inspired its own development in the first place.

The campaign to get rid of smallpox, which began in 1966, has been much more successful, and within fifteen years of the beginnings of the campaign the World Health Organisation was able proudly to boast that smallpox had been eradicated from the earth. This had been done despite the fact that even today no treatment against smallpox is available. The WHO had relied on vaccination, which was first organised in the late eighteenth century by Dr Jenner and which is a recognised and effective way of preventing the disease. It was simply by vaccinating whole populations that the WHO succeeded in dealing with smallpox and fulfilling the prophecy made by President Jefferson, who nearly two centuries before had forecast that with the aid of Jenner’s vaccine the world would eventually be rid of smallpox.

The contributions made by the World Health Organisation to the living standards and good health of the people of the world have been many. There have been numerous campaigns designed to make people more aware of the hazards of smoking, of the needs of pregnant women and young children and of the dangers associated with specific occupations. There have been a great many successful educational programmes organised in attempts to improve the quality of health care in underdeveloped countries. There have been many important research programmes produced in an attempt to improve the extent and availability of medical knowledge. And there have been many instances where the Organisation has undoubtedly been able to offer individual governments important advice on the administration of health services and on the practical problems likely to be met during the development of any one of a wide range of health-care plans.

But the Organisation’s most important role has undoubtedly been to co-ordinate efforts designed to attack and defeat the major communicable diseases. To the citizens of developing countries these infections can be as crippling and as damaging in commercial and social terms as they were in Europe and North America more than a century ago. Until they are finally eradicated, they remain a threat to everyone.

Chapter 53: Modern Health Care

Better national health schemes are suggested — Mr Bevan takes on the doctors and wins — The balance of power moves towards the bureaucrats — The effects of this change on health — Judging the quality of a country's health services

In 1948, the year in which the World Health Organisation first became fully operational, health care was the subject of much discussion and many arguments in individual countries around the world. The insurance schemes founded at the beginning of the century were no longer considered adequate, and many brave new proposals had been put forward.

Until Labour politician Aneurin Bevan became Minister of Health in 1945, politicians and doctors had repeatedly failed to agree on the best ways in which to administer such a scheme. Bevan, however, was a determined, thoughtful and immensely skilful politician who was determined to put theory into practice. He succeeded by deliberately driving a wedge between the hospital consultants and the general practitioners, so that he would not have to negotiate with a united and strong profession. Later, after the ink had dried on the agreements, he confessed that he had silenced the protests of the hospital doctors by 'stuffing their mouths with gold'. Once the consultants had been won over, he succeeded in forcing the general practitioners to accept his proposals and his conditions of employment.

Before the National Health Service came into being, general practice in Britain had been run by a large number of individualists, operating very much on their own. Most general practitioners worked without partners or ancillary workers of any kind and provided their own comprehensive service for patients under their care. While some patients had paid private fees for consultations and prescriptions, many paid for their care through the insurance scheme that had been introduced in 1911. When a general practitioner wanted to retire, he would sell his list of patients to his successor.

Before 1948, Britain's hospital service consisted of an incredible assortment of mixed hospitals and institutions which varied enormously in quality and size. Some of the hospitals had been organised in response to the Poor Law Act of 1835, but many were run on an entirely voluntary basis. All these hospitals were brought into the health service, as were the doctors employed within them as specialists.

The third type of medical care which had existed prior to the formation of the National Health Service involved the Medical Officers of Health and their nurses, midwives and health visitors.

Bevan brought these three groups together under one administration so that, although the same general practitioners, the same hospitals, the same Medical Officers of Health and the same district nurses still provided exactly the same sort of service, there was no longer any question of individual patients having to pay for any services. Private practice was allowed to persist but the National Health Service ensured that anyone who wanted free treatment could get it. For the first time in modern history the doctor was employed not by the patient himself but by a third party.

Incidentally, it is no coincidence that the birth of the world's first comprehensive health service followed the end of the Second World War. The war had led to the introduction of many emergency services and had given many hundreds of thousands of soldiers and civilians the chance to see the advantages of a well-organised free health service. The proposal for a similar service in peace time was therefore welcomed.

Following the formation of the British National Health Service, many other countries introduced similar schemes. In some places, notably the United States, the emphasis remained on the provision of private medical care, and the majority of potential patients enrolled with private insurance companies. Several countries, however, introduced state-run schemes, and these, like the British system, also introduced schemes whereby the sick, elderly, disabled and otherwise unfortunate could obtain state support. The provision of such payments did a great deal to eradicate poverty and to minimise the social and economic pains traditionally associated with illness.

The introduction of state-controlled health care and state run benefit schemes marked the beginning of a new era for many developed countries. During the Industrial Revolution, dominated by capitalism, most of the developed countries had supported the concept of survival for the fittest. During the 1950s and the 1960s, however, those countries which had introduced public control over the provision of health care, disability benefits, sickness insurance and old-age pensions began to show signs of social and economic changes which were to alter dramatically the balance of control and authority, giving more of both to the bureaucracies which had evolved during that period and which, by the end of the 1960s, were expanding in size and influence without opposition from politicians, electors or consumers.

There are many examples of the ways in which bureaucratic control has affected health care but many critics looking for specific targets would probably choose the hospital services. In several countries, such as Britain, the percentage of hospital employees directly involved in the care of patients has fallen since the inception of the Health Service, while the number of hospital employees not directly involved in the care of patients had risen dramatically. This change in emphasis, from medical care to general administration, has not only produced a change in the quality of care provided but also changed the ways in which the hospitals themselves are organised. As a result, many new hospitals now being planned and built are designed according to the requirements of the administrators rather than to the needs of the patients. It is, for example, better for administrators if a hospital is built as a multistorey building. It is far easier to manage such a unit than a sprawling hospital which follows the designs recommended by Florence Nightingale. On the other hand, all the modern evidence suggests that her favoured pavilion type of hospital is much better for patients than the multistorey building. It is remarkable but true, that, whereas in a twelfth-century monastery hospital the patients' ward was the most important part of the hospital, in a modern centre of medical excellence, wards for the patients may take up only about one-fifth of the available space.

Another problem often associated with the increase in the number of administration-heavy, high-technology hospitals has been the deterioration in the quality of the doctor-patient relationship. Florence Nightingale described with remarkable accuracy the damage that apprehension, uncertainty, waiting and fear can do to patients. It is daunting to contemplate what she might have had to say about the fact that some hospitals, for administrative convenience, do not have casualty departments and must turn away unexpected patients. In the whole history of medicine, I doubt if there has ever been a time before when a patient would be turned away from a hospital.

Chapter 54: The End of an Era?

Medicine has lost its impetus — The medical profession is devoted to a search for cures — Iatrogenic diseases – Problems in the developing countries — Threats for the future — The end of an era?

Medicine has lost much of the impetus which took it through the nineteenth century and brought it into the twentieth. In some of the developed countries, life expectation is actually less today than it was several decades ago, while in the developing countries there is evidence that the fight against disease is making little, if any, progress.

In the developed countries, both those which have favoured state control and those in which private medical schemes predominate, the medical profession has acquired almost total control over the provision of health-care facilities. Alternative medical groups may be attracting an increasing amount of support, but it is the orthodox and registered medical practitioners who control both the quantity and variety of medical services generally available.

Unhappily, the medical profession has always been organised in such a way that it operates most effectively in a society which expects doctors to provide treatments for existing disorders and which offers rewards accordingly. This ‘interventionist’ philosophy was developed many centuries ago when the cause of most disorders was unrecognised and when doctors could do little more than offer hypotheses and theories.

Today we know a great deal more about the background to many disorders. In particular, we know that most of the major diseases are preventable. Logically, medical care should be organised with the greatest emphasis on prevention. But that logical interpretation of our present needs does not suit a medical profession dedicated to the provision of cures. So much of the effort in today’s developed countries is devoted to the accumulation of information designed to satisfy this particular ambition either by assisting in the diagnosis of specific disorders or by providing new therapies, regardless of the fact that improvements in the quantity of knowledge and the quality of technology available are not always accompanied by improvements in either the quality or quantity of medical care for the individual patient. Put simply, this means that late twentieth-century medicine is often practised to satisfy the needs and ambitions of the doctors rather than the patients.

Indeed, the type of medicine practised today in the developed countries seems to some observers to be a considerable threat to the patients, and today, if a patient is suffering from two diseases, the second disease was probably caused by the treatment for the first disease.

In the developing countries the major tragedy has been the comparative failure of groups such as the World Health Organisation to convince local health administrators and medical professionals that improvements in the quality of care can best be provided by the provision of clean water supplies, sanitation facilities, good food and a basic foundation of public services, rather than by modern, high-technology hospitals.

Leaders in many developing countries have tried to leap straight from conditions comparable to those in Stone Age or medieval Europe to conditions similar to those in twentieth century Europe, with the result that, while citizens in the major cities have access to modern scanners, heart transplant surgery and other wonders of medicine, the majority of citizens outside those cities are still exposed to threats of infection. Approximately half of the world’s population is still without clean water or sanitation facilities. Since it is now recognised that something like eighty per cent of all common disorders in developing countries are associated with polluted water supplies, this is no simple political misjudgement but a catastrophe of astronomical proportions. The number of infants dying each year from diarrhoeal diseases caught through drinking dirty water is in the region of five million.

The leap from a Stone Age civilisation to an Atomic civilisation has produced, and will continue to produce, other problems in the developing countries. For example, in regions where the number of people dying from infectious diseases has fallen but agricultural developments have failed to produce an equivalent improvement in food supplies, the number of people dying from starvation has naturally risen. The size of this problem has been increased by the fact that the provision of birth-control facilities has often been denied or delayed by health organisations under pressure from religious groups.

The almost universal failure to recognise the major areas requiring medical attention and to acknowledge the outstanding importance of preventive medicine as opposed to curative medicine (in both the developed and the developing countries) means that there is a real risk that infectious disorders now considered rare in the developed world may become common again in the future. Experts believe, for example, not only that there is a risk of diseases such as plague or cholera recurring on a worldwide basis but that viral diseases may wreak havoc if the emphasis on high-technology curative medicine is allowed to persist (very few drugs are effective against viruses). The impact made by the two major influenza epidemics to hit the world in the twentieth century showed our vulnerability to virus infection. In the 1918 epidemic about half the world’s population is believed to have contracted the virus, and at least twenty million died. In the more recent 1957 epidemic, only about half as many people caught the bug and fewer died, but the social and economic impact was still considerable.

Not that the threat comes only from infectious disorders.

Although the factors responsible for eighty per cent of all cancers have been identified, very little effort is made to reduce human exposure to these substances (such as meat and tobacco).

Similarly, other industrial hazards are recognised as common causes of disease but, although the diseases themselves may be subjected to close study, the causes are rarely considered. The same is true for the factors recognised as responsible for the high death rate due to heart disease and other degenerative disorders.

The conclusion has to be that, unless a medical paradigm, which was formulated centuries ago and which is demonstrably unsuitable for today’s conditions, can be overthrown and replaced by one more in keeping with our understanding of history, the extent of our knowledge today and the peculiar requirements of a world united by progress but divided by unequal technological advances, the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty first will be seen by future historians as having marked the end of a remarkable era, during which the availability and quality of public and personal medical care improved far more rapidly than at any previous time in the history of the world.

Dramatis Personae

I have included dates and biographical details in the text only where they seem relevant. Brief notes on the individuals who appear in this book are included in the following alphabetically arranged list.

ACHILLES Brave, handsome, powerful but mythical Greek said to have been dipped in River Styx by Thetis and thereby to have gained invulnerability.

ADDISON, Thomas: (1793-1860) British physician after whom a disease is named. He claimed that Laennec contributed more towards the advancement of medical art than any other single individual of ancient or modern times.

AESCULAPIUS: Otherwise known as Asklepios and Asclepius. Greek god of medicine. Reputed to have lived about 1250 BC.

ALEXANDER THE GREAT: (356-323 BC) King of Macedonia and one of the world's greatest generals. Taught by Aristotle. Said to have died after eating and drinking too much.

ALEXIS: (1904-18) Otherwise known as Alexei Nikolayevich. Son and heir of Nicholas II of Russia. A haemophiliac. Alexis was the boy Rasputin looked after so well.

AMHERST, Jeffery: (1717-97) Created a baron 1776. Englishman who fought in America and captured Canada.

ANSON, George: (1697-1762) British Admiral who spent four years sailing round the world and unhappily lost half his crew, most of them dying from scurvy.

APOLLO: Most influential Greek god. Primarily concerned with healing and prophecy.

ARISTOPHANES: (446-380 BC) Greek playwright who described doctors as lazy, long-haired, foppish individuals and who produced the lines: 'My wind exploded like a thunder clap,...I also blushed a rosy red, And Panacea turned away her head, Holding her nose: my wind's not frankincense.' This is believed to be the first medical reference to flatulence.

ARISTOTLE: (384-322 BC) Greek philosopher and scientist. Author of many important books. Said to have written that, 'It is easy to fly into a passion — anybody can do that — but to be angry with the right person and to the right extent and at the right time and *with* the right objects and in the right way — that is not easy and it is not everyone who can do it.'

ARKWRIGHT, Richard: (1732-92) British businessman and inventor at the forefront of the Industrial Revolution. Knighted in 1786.

AUENBRUGGER, Leopold: (1722-1809) Austrian physician who discovered that by tapping the human chest it is possible to diagnose the condition of the organs within. Composed an opera entitled The *Chimney-sweep* at the request of the Empress Maria Theresa. The importance of his discovery was not recognised until after his death.

BACON, Roger (1214-94) Born in England but worked for many years in Paris. A Franciscan monk, he has been described as a mathematician, physicist, chemist, physician, astronomer, geographer, philosopher, comparative philologist; he was known as 'Doctor Mirabilis'. Bacon is sometimes credited with the invention of the telescope, the microscope, the diving bell, spectacles, gunpowder, locomotives and flying machines and is said to have moaned that, 'Medical men don't know the drugs they use, nor their prices.'

BAGLIVI, Giorgio: (1668-1706) Described by anglophiles as 'the Italian Sydenham'. A physician and professor of Anatomy in Rome. Early experimental physiologist but believed in the value of astrology. Follower of Hippocrates.

BAUER, George: (1494-1555) Also known as Georgius Agricola. Studied in Leipzig, Bologna, Padua and Venice. Expert on mines and mining.

BEAUMONT, William: (1785-1853) Surgeon in the US Army and famed for his early studies of digestion. Wrote in his notebook that, 'Of all the lessons which a young man entering upon the profession of medicine needs to learn, this is perhaps the first — that he should resist the fascination of doctrines and hypotheses till he has won the privilege of such studies by honest labour and faithful pursuit of real and useful knowledge.'

BECKET, Thomas: (1118-70) Also known as Thomas à Becket. Archbishop of Canterbury killed by four knights in Canterbury Cathedral because he persistently argued with King Henry II.

BESANT, Annie: (1847-1933) Born in Britain, died in India. Socialist, social reformer, women's liberation leader and general rebel. Married an Anglican clergyman but became good friends with an atheist. Became a strong advocate of birth control.

BICHAT, Marie-François-Xavier: (1771-1802) French anatomist and surgeon who influenced many students of his time. An early histologist, Bichat studied and described human tissues.

BILLROTH, Theodor: (1829-94) German surgeon who pioneered intestinal surgery. Remembered today by an operation which bears his name.

BLACKWELL, Elizabeth: (1821-1910) Born in Britain, emigrated to the USA with her family in 1832 and established a school for girls in 1838. Began her medical education informally and after repeated applications was accepted for full-time study in 1847. Later became Professor of Gynaecology in London.

BLANE, Gilbert: (1749-1834) Powerful naval physician who introduced lime juice to the British navy and subsequently saw a dramatic decline in the incidence of scurvy. Blane was by no means the first man to see the value of lime or lemon juice but he was the first with sufficient influence to use the information effectively. British sailors are known as ‘limeys’ around the world because of their use of lime juice. It is perhaps fortunate that Blane did not choose to favour lemons. Created Baronet in 1812.

BOERHAAVE, Herman: (1668-1738) Professor of Chemistry at Leyden University, who influenced medical education and medical thinking throughout the world in the eighteenth century. Said to have had the largest practice in Europe. First man to establish real bedside teaching methods. In addition to teaching clinical medicine, he also taught chemistry, physics and botany. It is said that a letter addressed to ‘The Greatest Physician in the World’ reached him safely. His reputation even reached China.

BORELLI, Giovanni: (1608-79) Italian physiologist who tried to explain the movement of animals on mechanical grounds.

BOUQUET, Henry: (1719-65) Born in Switzerland, fought with the British army and ended up in command of all the troops in the southern colonies of British North America.

BOYLE, Robert: (1627-91) Distinguished English chemist. Remembered today by schoolboys who must learn his law.

BRIGHT, Richard: (1789-1858) British-born physician who studied in Berlin and Vienna and worked in London. His work on kidney disorders earned him immortality. In an address given at the beginning of a course of lectures he told students that, ‘Acute disease must be seen at least once a day by those who wish to learn; in many cases twice a day will not be too often.’

BROCKEDEN, William: (1787-1854) Watchmaker’s son who invented the compressed tablet and inadvertently founded the modern pharmaceutical industry.

BURKE, William: (1792-1829) Friend of Hare. Enterprising but over-enthusiastic supplier of cadavers to the medical profession.

CABOT, Richard: (1868-1939) Innovative American physician who, among other things, introduced social workers to medical care

CAESAR, Julius: (110-44 BC) Great Roman general who had enormous influence on the development of the Roman Empire and on later European history.

CALVIN, John: (1509-64) French Protestant Reformer who settled in Switzerland. Not above indulging in a bit of persecution.

CARNEGIE, Andrew: (1835-1919) Born in Scotland, died in America. He stated that, ‘A rich man should, after acquiring his wealth, distribute the surplus for .the general welfare’ and followed his own philosophy. His generosity helped the development of many American medical schools and hospitals.

CARROLL, James: (1854-1907) British-born physician who worked in America and was a member of Walter Reed’s team of researchers who investigated yellow fever in Cuba.

CARTIER, Jacques: (1491-1557) French mariner, born and died in St. Malo. Cartier’s explorations of the North American coast enabled the French to claim Canada.

CATHERINE II: (1729-96) Also known as Catherine ‘the Great’ of Russia. Ambitious, astute, German-born Empress. Did much to stimulate interest in medicine. Said to have suffered from insomnia and to have had a hearty sexual appetite. She advocated intercourse six times a day, had twenty-one official lovers and employed a procurer and physician to test and examine all new applicants.

CELSUS, Aulus: (Lived during first century AD) Roman medical writer who produced a massive, encyclopaedic work which remained popular until the Renaissance. This is still a vital source of information for historians.

CESALPINO, Andrea: (1519-1603) Also known as CaesalpinusAndreas. Italian physiologist.

CHADWICK, Edwin: (1800-1890) Civil servant, lawyer, journalist and reformer who probably did more than anyone to help ‘keep Britain tidy’. His influence spread around the world and led to sanitary reforms in many other countries.

CHAIN, Ernst: (1906-79) The biochemist who, working with Florey, turned Fleming’s theoretical discovery of penicillin into a useful practical drug.

CHAMBERLEN, Peter: (1560 — 1631) A French surgeon and male midwife said to have invented the obstetric forceps for the delivery of babies. Peter died in London, where his heirs also practised. The forceps remained a secret of the Chamberlen family for well over a century, which must give them a head start in any race to find the least public-spirited family in history.

CHARCOT, Jean-Marie: (1825-93) French physician who worked at the Salpetriere hospital. His neurology clinics

attracted students from all over the world. Sigmund Freud was one of his students.
CHAUCER, Geoffrey: (c.1342-1400) English poet and author of ‘*Canterbury Tales.*
CHESTERFIELD, Philip: (1694-1773) English statesman and author. He became an earl in 1726. Was a friend of Pope, Swift and Voltaire. Famed for his *Letters to His Son.*
CLOVIS: (c.446-511) Known as Clovis the Frank (not because of his reputation for straight talking but because he was found of the Frankish kingdom which made up a large part of Western Europe in the Middle Ages).
COBBETT, William: (1763-1835) Journalist who fought to protect rural England from the ravages of the Industrial Revolution. Shortly before his death he was elected to Parliament.
COHN, Ferdinand: (1828-98) Bacteriologist born in Poland.
COLBERT, Jean-Baptiste: (1619-83) Finance minister to Louis XIV with considerable power.
COLUMBUS, Christopher: (1451-1506) Born in Italy, died in Spain. His voyages had tremendous effects on all aspects of life. Financed by the King and Queen of Spain but did not always do what they wanted.
COOK, James:(1728-79) Explorer and navigator who was not, in fact, promoted to Captain until after his most famous voyage to Australia and New Zealand. Cook managed to keep his crews free from scurvy.
COPERNICUS, Nicolaus (1473-1543) Polish astronomer.
CORTEZ, Hernan: (1485-1547) Also Cortes. Spanish lawyer, farmer and traveller who conquered Mexico.
CROMWELL, Oliver: (1599-1658) Major English soldier and statesman who led the Parliamentary forces in the English Civil War. He seems to have been badly plagued by warts.
CUGNOT, Nicolas-Joseph: (1725-1804) Frenchman who designed, built and presumably drove the world’s first automobile. His vehicle was powered by steam.
CURIE, Marie: (1867-1934) First woman professor at the Sorbonne University in Paris. Born in Poland. Discovered radium and worked on the use of radioactivity in medicine. Attractive figure for historians but her contribution to practical medical care was much less than that of Röntgen, who is usually ignored.
CURIE, Pierre: (1859-1906) French Professor of Physics at the Sorbonne, who worked with his wife on radioactivity.
DARWIN, Charles: (1809-82) British naturalist best known for his book *On the Origin of Species*. Provocative and influential among scientist and religious students. He wrote that ‘Natural selection ... implies that the individuals which are best fitted for the complex, and in the course of ages changing conditions to which they are exposed, generally survive and procreate their kind.’
DAVY, Humphry: (1778-1829) British chemist remembered for his Davy Lamp and his work with Michael Faraday. He experimented with laughing gas and gave many popular lectures in London. In 1813 Napoleon granted him safe conduct across Europe to study volcanoes.
DEFOE, Daniel: (1660-1731) Sometimes described as the first English novelist. He was interested in trade and politics but is best remembered for having written *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders*. He also wrote *A Journal of the Plague Year*.
DESCARTES, René: (1596-1650) French philosopher and physiologist who lived for most of his life in the Netherlands and died in Sweden. He wrote that, ‘The mind is so intimately dependent upon the condition and relation of the organs of the body, that if any means can ever be found to render men wiser and more ingenious than hitherto, I believe that it is in medicine they must be sought for.’
DEVENTER, Hendrik van: (1651-1724) Dutch goldsmith who has been called the father of modern midwifery. He was the first to describe the pelvis and its importance in labour.
DIOSCORIDES, Pedanius: (AD 40-90) Greek pharmacist and physician who wrote *In Re Materia Medica.* He travelled to Italy, France, Spain and Germany, usually as a surgeon with Nero’s army, and described the distribution and medicinal properties of many plants and minerals. His book remained a popular best seller for sixteen hundred years.
DOMAGK, Gerhard: (1895-1964) Born in Poland. Discovered the first sulphonamide drug (prontosil). He was unable to receive his Nobel award in 1939 because of Nazi policy.
DOYLE, Conan: (1859-1930) Usually known as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Scottish writer who created the character Sherlock Holmes, based on a teacher in Edinburgh whose diagnostic skills were founded on an ability to observe and assess small titbits of information. Conan Doyle was knighted in 1902 for his work in the Boer War.
DUNANT, Henri: (1828-1910) Swiss founder of the Red Cross and a joint winner of the first Nobel Prize for Peace in 1901. Dunant neglected his business work and went bankrupt.
DURER, Albrecht: (1471-1528) German Renaissance artist.
EDWARD the CONFESSOR: (1003-66) Weak but pious King of England.
EHRLICH, Paul: (1854-1915) Born in Poland. Described his work as ‘Much testing: accuracy and precision in experiment; no guess work or self deception’. Pioneer in work on chemotherapy.

ERASISTRATUS: (Lived around 250 BC) Anatomist and physician and early student of physiology.

ERASMUS, Desiderius: (c.1466-1536) Born in the Low Countries, died in Switzerland. Great scholar, who wrote that, 'No reward could be found worthy enough for a learned and faithful doctor.' He also asked: 'Who is so persistent a preacher of abstinence, sobriety, restraining anger, fleeing care, avoiding gluttony, rejecting love, moderating sex, as the doctor?'

EURIPIDES: (c.484-406 BC) Gloomy Greek scholar and poet.

FARADAY, Michael: (1791-1867) British physicist and chemist.

FÈLIX, Charles-François: Royal seventeenth-century French surgeon who operated on a fistula which had troubled King Louis XIV. For his fee Felix received a farm, a lot of money and a title.

FINLAY, Carlos: (1833-1915) Cuban physician who first guessed that yellow fever might be transmitted from human to human by the mosquito. He did some important experimental work to prove his theory but was ignored until Walter Reed and his party reached Cuba.

FLEMING, Alexander: (1881-1955) British bacteriologist who received the Nobel Prize and knighthood for his early work on penicillin. When asked for his advice about treatment for colds, he said, 'A good gulp of hot whisky at bedtime — it's not very scientific, but it helps.'

FLEXNER, Abraham: (1860-1959) American remembered for his study of medical education. He wrote that, 'From the earliest time, medicine has been a curious blend of superstition, empiricism and that kind of sagacious observation which is the stuff out of which ultimately science is made.'

FLIEDNER, Theodor: (1800-1864) A German Protestant minister perhaps most remembered for the fact that he inspired Florence Nightingale.

FLOREY, Howard: (1898-1968) Born in Austria, died in Britain. Worked with Ernst Chain on penicillin and shared a Nobel Prize. He was made a life peer in 1965.

FORD, Henry: (1863-1947) The industrialist who introduced assembly-line methods into car manufacture. Increasing the number of cars being produced enabled him to reduce the price.

FRACASTORO, Girolamo: (1478-1553) Also known as Hieronymus Fracastorius. Italian astronomer and physician who put forward a theory explaining diseases by the existence of germs some three hundred years ahead of Louis Pasteur.

FRANKLIN, Benjamin (1706-90) American author of an apparently endless series of aphorisms and epigrams. Franklin was an eighteenth-century Renaissance man. For years afterwards every other American mother seems to have christened her boys after him. He wrote that, 'Quacks are the greatest liars in the world except their patients.'

FREUD, Sigmund: (1856-1939) Born in what was until 1993 Czechoslovakia, died in London.

FRY, Elizabeth: (1780-1845) Independent British reformer who studied prisons and hospitals and had considerable influence. Her maiden name was Gurney.

GALEN: (129-99 AD) Greek physician who worked with the gladiators for a while, but later in his career became immensely powerful. His theories and writings influenced medical practice for more than a thousand years. He was a clever physician and imaginative writer, and it is not his fault that his work was treated so seriously by later members of the medical profession that progress was effectively stifled.

GALILEO: (1564-1642) Italian mathematician, astrologer and scientist who also studied medicine. He supported Copernicus, who had claimed that the planets revolve around the sun, and this got him into rouble with the all-powerful Church.

GAMA, Vasco da: (c.1460-1524) Portuguese navigator and explorer who opened up a trade route to the East round the Cape of Good Hope.

GARRISON, Fielding: (1870-1935) American medical historian whose book *History of Medicine* (published by W.B. Saunders of Philadelphia) is a vital reference source for any historian.

GIBBON, Edward: (1737-94) British historian who wrote *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.*

GOETHE, Johann Wolfgang von: (1749-1832) German Renaissance man who acquired a reputation as a novelist, playwright, poet, scientist, philosopher, critic, journalist, painter, statesman, administrator and educationalist. There is no record of his having been a successful sportsman.

GORGAS, William: (1854-1920) American surgeon-general whose war against the mosquito ensured that the Panama Canal could be built.

GUILLOTIN, Joseph-Ignace: (1738-1814) The instrument known as the 'guillotine' was introduced into popular usage by a bill passed through the efforts of the Frenchman Dr Guillotin. His aim was to make execution as painless as possible.

GUTENBERG, Johann: (c.1398-c.1468) Also known as Johann Gensfleisch zur Laden. Successful German inventor of improved printing techniques but not a successful businessman.

HAMILTON, Emma: (1765-1815) Also known as Amy Lyon and as Lady Hamilton. British mistress of Admiral Horatio Nelson. Her unusual life style ended when she died in impecunious exile.

HAMMURABI: (Lived about 2000 BC) The King of Babylon who produced the famous Code of Laws which bears his name. Part of the Code which relates to medical practice translates as follows: 'If a doctor has treated a gentleman for a severe wound with a bronze lancet and has cured the man, or has opened an abscess of the eye for a gentleman with a bronze lancet and has cured the eye of the gentle man, he shall take ten shekels of silver. If he (the patient) be the son of a poor man, he shall take five shekels of silver.... 'if he be a gentleman's servant, the master of the servant shall give two shekels of silver to the doctor.... 'If a doctor has cured the shattered limb of a gentleman or has cured the diseased bowel, the patient shall give five shekels of silver to the doctor.... 'If he be the son of a poor man, he shall give three shekels of silver.... 'If a gentleman's servant, the master of the slave shall give two shekels of silver to the doctor.'

HARE, William: Partner of William Burke.

HARGREAVES, James: (?-1778) The British inventor of the spinning-jenny had a young daughter called Jenny who one day knocked over a spinning wheel...

HARVEY, William: (1578-1657) English anatomist and physician whose book describing the circulation of the blood (*Exercitatio anatomica de motu cordis et sanguinis*) was dedicated to Charles I.

HASTINGS, Charles: (1794-1866) Physician at the Worcester Infirmary and founder of the British Medical Association in 1832.

HEBERDEN, William: (1710-1801) British scholar and physician who refused to have anything to do with some of the more curious medical superstitions.

HERBERT, Sidney: (1810-1861) Also known as first Baron Herbert of Lea. Secretary of War from 1859 to 1861 but is now remembered largely for his association with Florence Nightingale.

HERODOTUS: (Lived about 450 BC) Greek author and historian.

HEROPHILUS: (Lived about 300 BC) Early anatomist who lived in Alexandria and took advantage of a lifting on the ban on human dissection to study human anatomy.

HIPPOCRATES: (Lived about 400 BC) Believed to have lived on the island of Cos. Widely described as 'the Father of Medicine'. An original thinker, observer, wise teacher, thoughtful physician and prolific author. The true practice of medicine began with Hippocrates, and his theories have been revived time and again throughout the centuries. Historians argue about whether or not Hippocrates was one man or a whole medical school. The Hippocratic Oath is still used by many medical schools today as a basic principle for medical ethics. It is: "I swear by Apollo the physician, and Aesculapius, and Health and Allheal [these two are sometimes known as Hygeia and Panacea], and all the gods and goddesses, that according to my ability and judgement, I will keep this Oath and this stipulation — to reckon him who taught me this Art equally dear to me as my parents, to share my substance with him, and relieve his necessities if required; to look upon his offspring in the same footing as my own brothers and to teach them this Art, if they shall wish to learn it, without fee or stipulation; and that by precept, lecture and every other mode of instruction, I will impart a knowledge of the Art to my own sons, and those of my teachers, and to disciples, bound by a stipulation and oath according to the law of medicine, but to none others. I will follow that system of regimen which, according to my ability and judgement, I consider for the benefit of my patients, and abstain from whatever is deleterious and mischievous. I will give no deadly medicine to anyone if asked, nor suggest any such counsel; and in like manner I will not give to a woman a pessary to produce abortion. With purity and holiness I will pass my life and practise my Art. I will not cut persons labouring under the stone, but will leave this to be done by men who are practitioners of this work. Into whatever houses I enter, I will go into them for the benefit of the sick and will abstain from every voluntary act of mischief and corruption and, further, from the seduction of females or males, of freemen and slaves. Whatever, in connection with my medical practice, or not in connection with it, I see or hear, in the life of men, which ought not to be spoken of abroad, I will not divulge, as reckoning that all such should be kept secret. While I continue to keep this Oath unviolated, may it be granted to me to enjoy life and the practice of the Art, respected by all men, in all times! But should I trespass and violate this Oath, may the reverse be my lot!" This version taken from *Familiar Medical Quotations* edited by Maurice B. Strauss, MD (Little Brown and Co. 1968)

HODGKIN, Thomas: (1798-1866) British-born anatomist who in 1832 described the condition which still bears his name.

HOLMES, Oliver Wendell: (1809-94) Physician, anatomist and author of several books, including *The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table*, *The Professor of the Breakfast Table*, *The Poet of the Breakfast Table* and *Over the Teacups.* His son, Oliver Wendell Holmes, be came a justice of the United States Supreme Court. Famous for having said, 'I firmly believe that if the whole materia medica, as now used, could be sunk to the bottom of the sea, it would be all the better for mankind — and all the worse for the fishes.' His formula for longevity was, 'Have a chronic disease and take care of it.’

HOOKE, Robert: (1635-1703) English microscopist.

HOPKINS, Matthew: (?-1647) Professional English witch-hunter.

HOWARD, John: There was an eighteenth-century surgeon called Dr John Howard who wrote that, ‘Every childbearing woman may be satisfied that it is impossible for women to generate and bring forth rabbits, as it is impossible for rabbits to bring forth women’, but the John Howard who made the most significant contribution to medical progress was a British philanthropist who also lived in the eighteenth century (1726-90) but who spent his life investigating conditions in prisons and hospitals.

HUNTER, John: (1728-93) A surgeon and anatomist and an exceedingly brave man. In an attempt to study syphilis and gonorrhoea, he infected himself with both diseases. He once stated that he was at the mercy of any man who made him angry. He died of a heart attack at a hospital board meeting. His brother William was also an eminent surgeon and anatomist. John Hunter was a friend of Edward Jenner.

IVAN IV: (1530-84) Also known as Ivan ‘the Terrible’. First Tsar of Russia.

JACOBS, Aletta: First woman in the Netherlands to study medicine. She qualified in 1878 and took a keen interest in birth control.

JEFFERSON, Thomas: (1743-1826) Third President of the United States of America. Principal author of the Declaration of Independence.

JENNER, Edward: (1749-1823) Born, worked and died in Berkeley, Gloucestershire, where his father was vicar. He studied under John Hunter, used to vaccinate the poor in an arbour in his garden and was also a keen naturalist. He wrote that, ‘The deviation of man from the state in which he was originally placed by nature seems to have proved to him a prolific source of diseases’ and reflected that, The scepticism that appeared, even among the most enlightened of medical men when my sentiments on the important subject of the cowpox were first promulgated was highly laudable. To have admitted the truth of a doctrine at once so novel and so unlike any thing that ever had appeared in the annals of medicine without the test of the most rigid scrutiny, would have bordered upon temerity.’

JOHN OF GADDESDEN: (c.1280-1361) English physician and author, said to have cured the son of Edward I of smallpox by draping him in scarlet. Thought to be the model for Chaucer’s Doctor of Physic, ‘that verrey parfit practisour’.

JOHNSON, Samuel: (1709-84) Englishman usually known as Dr Johnson. Famous for his Dictionary, Johnson earned his living as a critic and journalist. A notoriously good talker, much of his wit was recorded by his biographer James Boswell.

KIRCHER, Athanasius: (1602-80) German Jesuit priest who was a mathematician, physicist, optician and microscopist. Probably the first man to use the microscope in attempts to investigate the causes of disease. In 1658 he described how he had seen ‘worms’ in the blood of plague patients.

KNOWLTON, Charles: (1800-1850) American physician with a special interest in birth control. In 1832 he published anonymously a book called *The Fruits of Philosophy: or, the Private Companion of Young Married People.*

KNOX, Robert: (1791-1862) British anatomist who worked as a surgeon at Waterloo and whose career was effectively ruined by the Burke and Hare scandal.

KOCH, Robert: (1843-1910) German physician and bacteriologist. Won a Nobel Prize in 1905.

LAENNEC, René: (1781-1826) Full name René Theophile Hyacynthe Laennec. French physician who invented the stethoscope but was prouder of his proficiency on horseback. Laennec wrote: ‘Do not fear to repeat what has already been said. Men need the truth dinned into their ears many times and from all sides. The first rumour makes them prick up their ears, the second registers and the third enters.’

LANDSTEINER, Karl: (1868-1943) Austrian immunologist and pathologist who discovered the major blood groups and received a Nobel Prize in 1930.

LARREY, Jean: (1766-1842) Also known as Baron Dominique-Jean Larrey. Served with Napoleon throughout all his great wars. Is reputed to have performed two hundred amputations in one day and to have been the first man to amputate at the hip joint.

LAVERAN, Alphonse: (1845-1922) French physician, pathologist and parasitologist who discovered the parasite that causes malaria. His work provided the background information necessary for Ross to study the practical problems associated with malaria. Laveran also studied many other tropical disorders.

LAVOISIER, Antoine-Laurent: (1743-94) French scientist and chemist. He was a member of the commission which led to the adoption of the metric system, and was executed during the French Revolution.

LAZEAR, Jesse: (1866-1900) Died as a result of a mosquito bite intended to prove how yellow fever was transmitted. He was a surgeon with Walter Reed.

LEEUWENHOEK, Antoni van: (1632-1723) Former draper’s apprentice and prolific paper-writer and lens-grinder.

LESSEPS, Ferdinand de: (1805-94) French diplomat who built the Suez Canal and tried to build the Panama Canal. After his failure, the French Government sentenced him to five years imprisonment but this decision was reversed on appeal.

LETTSOM, John: (1744-1815) Born in the Virgin Islands, studied in Edinburgh, Paris and Leyden and practised in London. He was called 'the Friend of Humanity', 'the Patron of Science'. Supported Jenner and vaccination and helped found the Royal Sea Bathing Hospital in Margate.

LINACRE, Thomas: (c.1460-1524) English scholar and physician.

LIND, James: (1716-94) Born and educated in Edinburgh. Remembered for his publication *A Treatise on the Scurvy* published in 1753 and based on his naval experience. He wrote that: 'Armies have been supposed to lose more of their men by sickness, than by the sword. But this observation has been much more verified in our fleets and squadrons; where the scurvy alone, during the last war, proved a more destructive enemy, and cut off more valuable lives, than the united efforts of the French and Spanish arms.'

LISTER, Joseph: (1827-1912) Later Lord Lister (1897). Met Pasteur at the Sorbonne in 1892, and it is said that there was not a dry eye in the lecture hall. His wife, Agnes Syme, is said to have been the woman behind the great British man.

LISTON, Robert: (1794-1847) Scottish surgeon who was swift in the operating theatre, kind to the poor, abrupt in public and gentle in the sick-room.

LOCKE, John: (1632-1704) English philosopher and scientist. Worked variously as a diplomat and physician. He wrote: 'And thus I have done with what concerns the body and health, which reduces itself to these few and easily observable rules. Plenty of open air, exercise and sleep; plain diet, no wine or strong drink, and very little or no physick; not too warm and straight clothing, especially the head and feet kept cold, and the feet often used to cold water, and exposed to wet.'

LOWER, Robert: (1631-91) English anatomist and physician.

MAGELLAN, Ferdinand: Early sixteenth-century explorer and traveller. First to cross the Pacific Ocean from east to west and, although he died before the voyage was over, he led the first expedition to circumnavigate the earth.

MAGENDIE, François: (1783-1855) French physiologist.

MALPIGHI, Marcello: (1628-94) Italian physician, anatomist, microscopist and biologist. Served as chief physician to Pope Innocent XII in Rome.

MALTHUS, Thomas: (1766-1834) British economist who believed that the size of the population will always exceed the available food supply.

MANSON, Patrick: (1844-1922) British physician who did much work on tropical diseases and spent twenty-four years in China. Knighted in 1903.

MAURICEAU, François: (1637-1709) French obstetrician and author of *Traite des maladies des femmes grosses.*

MESMER, Franz: (1734-1815) German physician who qualified in Vienna and had much influence on Charcot and Freud.

MICHELANGELO: (1475-1564) Also known as Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni. Italian painter, sculptor, architect and poet. A leading figure in the Renaissance, he designed the dome of St. Peter's in Rome, painted in the Sistine Chapel and sculpted the Pieta inside St. Peter's.

MOLIÈRE: (1622-73) The pen-name of Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, French dramatist, satirist and actor. He died after collapsing on the stage during an early performance of his play *Le Malade Imaginaire.* He said a lot of rude things about medicine and about doctors, including: 'I find medicine one of the greatest follies of mankind; and if I look at it from a philosophical point of view, I've never seen a sillier lot of humbuggery. I don't think there is anything more ridiculous than that one man should undertake to cure another....'

MONRO, Alexander: (1773-1859) Like his father and his grandfather, Alexander Monro was Professor of Anatomy at Edinburgh University. The three members of this Scottish family were known as Monro primus, secondus and tertius. It is said to be largely due to these three men that Edinburgh became a major teaching centre. Monro tertius was professor during the unhappy Knox, Burke and Hare affair, but he managed to keep the university out of trouble.

MONTAGU, Mary: (1689-1762) Also Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. British writer, traveller, feminist and distinguished supporter of the use of smallpox inoculation. She had been scarred by an attack as a young girl.

MORGAGNI, Giovanni: (1682-1771) The first man to correlate pathology findings with clinical records.

MORGAN, John: (1735-89) American physician who served as a surgeon in the French wars, graduated in Edinburgh and wrote *Discourse upon the Institution of Medical Schools in America.* He was co-founder of the medical department of the University of Pennsylvania and was appointed Director General and Physician in Chief of the American Army in 1775. Unfortunately, he made several enemies and died rather poor in health and wealth.

MORTON, William Thomas Green: (1819-68) An American dentist who practised in Boston and was awarded an honorary MD in 1852 by the College of Physicians and Surgeons in Baltimore. The story of who was actually the first to use anaesthesia is confused and full of controversy, but Morton was undoubtedly important in introducing anaesthesia to the practice of medicine.

NAPOLEON: (1769-1821) Full name Napoleon Bonaparte. A Corsican who temporarily extended the French territories to cover most of Europe. He was a Brigadier General at the age of twenty-four and crowned himself Emperor in 1804. In 1814, when France was defeated, Napoleon was exiled to Elba. He made a historic and heroic comeback for the Hundred Days but was defeated at Waterloo by the British and the Prussians. He was then exiled again, this time further away, on St. Helena in the South Atlantic, where he died.

NELSON, Horatio: (1758-1805) Also known as Admiral Nelson and as Lord Nelson. He had a scandalous affair with Lady Hamilton and died at the Battle of Trafalgar which was, ironically, a great victory for the British navy.

NESTORIUS: (Lived around AD 400) Early Bishop of Constantinople. He started a theological debate, which still continues, by claiming that Mary should not be called the Mother of God, his argument being that a God does not have a mother.

NEWTON, Isaac: (1643-1727) English physicist and mathematician who developed the law of gravity. A leading figure in the seventeenth-century scientific revolution and, indeed, one of the most important scientists of all time.

NICOLLE, Charles-Jules-Henri: (1866-1936) French bacteriologist who established the link between the disease typhus and the louse.

NIGHTINGALE, Florence: (1820-1910) British lady who revolutionised nursing. She is said to have enjoyed poor health.

NOSTRADAMUS: (1503-66) Also known as Michel de Notredame. French astrologer and physician. Published rhymed quatrains which are said to forecast the future, but cynics claim that the forecasts are vague and open to many interpretations.

ORACELSUS: (1493-1541) Also known as Aureolus Philippus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim. Born in Switzerland, travelled over most of Europe (very well travelled even by the standards of today's jetset) but made enemies by lecturing in German rather than in Latin. He was undoubtedly something of a showman but also a vital figure in the re-emergence of medicine as a science.

PARÉ, Ambroise: (1510-90) A French barber-surgeon who served with the French army and later became surgeon to royalty. He devised many instruments and techniques but is best remembered for his approach and philosophy. He was the first great surgeon of modern times, and wrote, 'Always give the patient hope, even when death seems at hand'; 'Better a tried remedy than a new one', and 'I dressed him and God healed him.'

PARKINSON, James: (1755-1824) One of John Hunter's pupils, he is today remembered by the disease which bears his name. In addition to being a physician, Parkinson was a radical and a reformer, who seems often to have been in trouble with the government.

PASTEUR, Louis: (1822-95) French chemist who founded the science of bacteriology. An Institute in Paris still bears his name, and many milk-users remember him eponymously. He wrote, 'To him who devotes his life to science, nothing can give more happiness than increasing the number of discoveries, but his cup of joy is full when the results of his studies immediately find practical applications.' His cup was often full.

PEPYS, Samuel: (1633-1703) English diarist and also a naval administrator but best remembered for his diary. Sometimes saucy and full of gossip, it provides an excellent picture of seventeenth-century London.

PERICLES: (Lived about 450 BC) Greek statesman who aimed to make Athens the political and cultural centre of Greece. The Acropolis was built on his instructions.

PETTY, William: (1623-87) English economist and statistician. Studied medicine at Leyden, Paris and Oxford and worked as a Professor of Music, Professor of Anatomy and Member of Parliament. He argued that sanitary reform and health care could be cost-effective.

PEYRONIE, François de la: (1678-1747) Eminent surgeon from Montpellier who, with Georges Mareschal (1658-1736) founded the French Academy of Surgery.

PINEL, Phillipe: (1745-1826) French physician and the first practical, humane psychiatrist. He regarded mental illness as being linked to stress, physiological damage and heredity rather than demoniacal possession. Despite much opposition he led the way for a more humane approach to the treatment of the mentally ill.

PLATO: (Lived about 400 BC) Greek philosopher who, together with Aristotle and Socrates, provided much of the framework for our culture. He wrote: 'Medicine is an art, and attends to the nature and constitution of the patient, and has principles of action and reason in each case.'

POLO, Marco: (1254-1324) An Italian merchant and adventurer who was born and died in Venice but who spent many of the intervening years away from home. His book *Travels with Marco Polo* is considered a classic, and thousands of schoolchildren around the world have plotted his route with crayon. He lived in China for nearly twenty years. His father, Niccolo Polo, was also a traveller and explorer.

POPE, Alexander: (1688-1744) British writer, poet and satirist

POTT, Percival: (1714-88) A British surgeon who worked at St. Bartholomew's in London. He had a large and successful private practice and wrote on many subjects. A particular type of fracture of the leg still bears his name — he sustained the fracture himself from a fall in the street.

QUINCE, Thomas de: (1785-1859) British author of *The Confessions of an English Opium Eater*. He wrote: 'A due balance and equilibrium of the mind is best preserved by a large and multiform knowledge; but knowledge itself is best served by an exclusive (or at least paramount) dedication of one mind to one science.' He is said to have taken opium for the first time when aged nineteen, at Oxford University. He spent much of his life under the influence of the drug but wrote a great deal and lived to the age of seventy-four years.

RALEIGH, Walter: (1554-1618) English adventurer, importer and favourite of Queen Elizabeth I. Knighted in 1585.

RAMAZZINI, Bernardino: (1633-1714) Italian Professor of Medicine and founder of industrial medicine. He is thought to have been the first doctor regularly to ask his patients: 'What is your occupation?'

RAMSES V: King of Egypt perhaps best remembered for the fact that he died of smallpox.

RAPHAEL; (1483-1520) Also known as Raffaello Sanzio. Italian painter and architect.

RASPUTIN, Grigory: (c.1872-1916) Russian peasant and monk who obtained great power over the Russian imperial family by his apparent ability to improve the medical condition of Alexis Nikolayevitch, the Empress's son, who had haemophilia. He was grubby, satyric, mysterious and brilliant. His behaviour started rumours of an affair with the Empress, and eventually a group of ousted aristocrats decided to assassinate him. They gave him poisoned cakes but he did not die (it is thought that his high intake of alcohol had given him certain immunity) so they shot him. When he still refused to die, they tied him up and threw him through a hole in the ice into the nearest river. He then died.

REED, Walter: (1851-1902) American army surgeon remembered for the fact that he led the Commission to investigate the cause and mode of transmission of yellow fever. The Walter Reed Hospital in Washington is named after him.

REHN, Ludwig: (1849-1930) German surgeon who pioneered work on the human heart.

RHAZES: (c.850-932) Also known as Abu Baker Muhammad ibn Zakariyya. Persian physician, sometimes referred to as 'the Arabian Hippocrates'. He was also a mathematician, philosopher, astronomer, chemist and musician. He wrote several books on medicine but died in poverty. He wrote: 'When the disease is stronger than the patient, the physician will not be able to help him at all, and if the strength of the patient is greater than the strength of the disease, he does not need a physician at all. But when both are equal, then one needs a physician who will support the patient's strength and help him against the disease.'

RÖNTGEN, Wilhelm: (1845-1923) German physicist who, while Professor at the University of Würzburg, discovered X-rays. He received the Nobel Prize for physics in 1901. He wrote: 'For brevity's sake I shall use the expression "rays" and to distinguish them from others of this name I shall call them "X-rays".'

ROONHUYZE**, Hendrik van: Seventeenth-century** Dutch male midwife who performed several Caesarian sections. His son, Rogier, is said to have bought the secret of obstetric forceps from Hugh Chamberlen in about 1693.

ROSS, Ronald: (1857-1932) British zoologist and bacteriologist who worked in the Indian Medical Service for eighteen years and studied the relationship between malaria and mosquitoes. He was awarded a Nobel Prize in 1902 and knighted in 1911. He wrote: 'I was tired and what was the use? I must have examined the stomachs of a thousand mosquitoes by this time. But the Angel of Fate fortunately laid his hand on my head.'

RUSH, Benjamin: (1745-1813) American physician, signatory of the Declaration of Independence and friend of Benjamin Franklin. He was Treasurer of the US Mint from 1797 to 1813.

SANCTORIUS: (1516-1636) Also known as Santorio Santorio. Italian physician, physicist and physiologist. He devised a watch, a thermometer and a weighing machine and was the first person to employ precision instruments in medicine, adapting several of Galileo's inventions to medical practice. For one experiment he weighed himself before, during and after meals to estimate the weight of invisible perspiration.

SANGER, Margaret: (1883-1966) Born Margaret Higgins. An American who had ten brothers and sisters and two husbands. Having first taught and nursed, she then devoted herself to the promotion of birth control and founded the American Birth-Control League in 1921. She became the first President of the International Planned Parenthood Federation which was founded in 1953.

SEMMELWEISS, Ignaz: (1815-65) Obstetrician whose views on puerperal fever brought him ridicule. He was depressed by the opposition from the medical establishment and became insane. He died, ironically, from a septic wound. Semmelweiss worked most of his life in Vienna but was born in Budapest, Hungary.

SERVETUS, Michael: (c.1511-53) Spanish physician who, with his heretical beliefs, annoyed both the Protestants and the Catholics and was eventually executed by Calvinists. Calvin himself played a major part in the trial. Servetus's major contribution to medical thinking was his discovery of the circulation of blood to and from the lungs.

SHIPPEN, William: (1736-1808) American teacher of medicine and supporter of male midwifery.

SIMPSON, **James: (1811-70) British obstetrician,** gynaecologist and archaeologist who introduced chloroform anaesthesia in midwifery. He was a professor at Edinburgh and knighted in 1866.

SMITH, Adam: (1723-90) Scottish economist who wrote *An Inquiry into the nature and causes of the Wealth of Nations.* He had tremendous influence on many politicians, and his theories about free trade, individual self-interest and competition are followed by many modern economists.

SNOW, John: (1813-58) British physician who proved the relationship between cholera and contaminated water supplies. He was also one of the first anaesthetists.

SOCRATES: (c.470-399 BC) Born and died in Athens. Philosopher who said 'Know thyself' and spent much time talking and teaching in public places. With Plato and Aristotle, Socrates was one of the 'big three' Greek philosophers. He was sentenced to death for neglect of the gods and corruption of the young, and committed suicide by drinking hemlock. He said: 'Base men live to eat and drink, and good men eat and drink to live.'

SOPHOCLES: (c.50-06 BC) Classic, tragic Greek playwright, who wrote 123 plays, including *Oedipus Rex.* He was also a statesman and an army general.

STERNE, Laurence: (1713-68) British novelist who wrote *Tristram Shandy.* He suffered from tuberculosis.

STOPES, Marie: (1880-1958) British advocate of birth control. She influenced the Church of England but made little headway with the Roman Catholic Church.

SUSRUTA: (Lived about the fourth century AD) Indian medical writer.

SYLVIUS, Franciscus: (1614-72) Also known as Franz de le Boe, François du Bois and by other combinations of those names. German physician, physiologist, anatomist and chemist who believed that disorders are caused by chemical actions and can therefore be diagnosed and treated logically. Professor of Medicine at Leyden University, where he acquired a considerable reputation as a teacher.

TENON Jacobus René Eighteenth-century French writer who in 1788, published *Memoires sur les hôpitaux de Paris*

THACKRAH, Charles: (1795-1833) British physician who specialised in industrial medicine.

THUCYDIDES: (Lived about 450 BC) Greek politician.

TULL, Jethro: (1674-1741) English inventor who, in 1701, invented a seed drill which sowed in neat rows. The improvement in farming techniques that followed his inventions had a tremendous effect on agricultural productivity.

VESALIUS, Andreas: (1514-64) Belgian physician whose descriptions of human anatomy made an important contribution to the Renaissance in medicine.

VINCI, Leonardo da: (1452-1519) Italian artist and scientist, generally regarded as the real Renaissance man. In addition to his many drawings and paintings, he left a vast number of sketches and notes describing the structure of the human body.

VIRCHOW, Rudolf: (1821-1902) Born in Poland. Pathologist, statesman and advocate of public health.

WARREN, John: (1778-1856) American surgeon who gave the first public demonstration of ether anaesthesia (*cf* Morton).

WATERHOUSE, Benjamin: (1745-1846) American physician who pioneered smallpox vaccination.

WATT, James: (1736-1819) British inventor whose steam-engine helped to get the Industrial Revolution under way.

WITHERING, William: (1741-99) British physician who introduced digitalis into clinical practice. He wrote: 'It is much easier to write upon a disease than upon a remedy. The former is in the hands of nature and a faithful observer with an eye of tolerable judgment can not fail to delineate a likeness. The latter will ever be subject to the whim, the inaccuracies and the blunders of mankind.'

WRIGHT, Orville: (1871-1948) American joint inventor of the first aeroplane. Brother of Wilbur.

WRIGHT, Wilbur: (1867-1912) American joint inventor of the first aeroplane. Brother of Orville.

ZEPPELIN, Ferdinand: (1838-1917) German army officer who rose to the rank of Lieutenant General before concentrating on developing the rigid airship which bears his name.

Turning Points

A summary of some of the major influences on the social history of medicine.

1. Hippocrates: About 400 BC

Medicine really began in Greece in the time of Hippocrates. The Greek scholars brought together information from many sources. Hippocrates taught a logical approach to clinical medicine.

2. Rome: Approximately 100 BC to AD 200

The Romans were not great scholars but they were great engineers. They built roads, baths and aqueducts, and public health in their cities was generally good. Galen was to have influence on medical thinking for many centuries.

3. The Renaissance: About 1400 to 1600

Medical care regressed during the Middle Ages. There were many advances during the Renaissance. Anatomy studies began again, and men like Vesalius helped to spread basic information. Paracelsus was one of the most spectacular leaders during this period. Travellers such as Columbus helped to break down geographical barriers, and the development of printing improved communications. Paré began to make surgery respectable once again.

4. The Scientific Revolution Continues: 1600 to 1700

Galileo and Sanctorius introduced medical instruments, and Harvey introduced logic to experimental science.

5. A Century of Social Change: 1700 to 1800

The Industrial Revolution begins in Britain, and America declares her independence. In France the Revolution starts.

6. The Control of Infection: 1800 to 1850

Jenner introduces vaccination and smallpox declines around the world. Chadwick and others press for reforms designed to improve public health facilities. Agricultural advances, industrial improvements, economic growth and political changes all improve living standards. Cholera and tuberculosis also decline in importance.

7. Improvements in Practical Medical Care: 1850 to 1900

This half-century saw many changes. Florence Nightingale revolutionised nursing. Pasteur and Lister introduced the principles of asepsis and antisepsis. Anaesthesia was introduced. Röntgen introduced X-rays. Ross recognised and proved the relationship between mosquitoes and malaria. Ehrlich began the search for a ‘magic bullet’. The aims of the medical profession came closer to meeting the needs of the population, and the advances of the twentieth century resulted largely from work begun in this period.

Further Reading

I consulted hundreds of books and journals while writing *The Story of Medicine.* I particularly recommend the following:

An Introduction to the History of Medicine, Fielding H. Garrison, (W.B. Saunders Co. Philadelphia and London 1929)

An Introduction to Social Medicine, Thomas McKeown and C.R. Lowe, (Blackwell Scientific Publications, Oxford, 1966)

A Social History of Medicine, F.F. Cartwright, (Longman, London and New York, 1977)

Familiar Medical Quotations, M.B. Strauss, (Little Brown & Co, Boston, 1968)

Doctors by Themselves, Edward F. Griffith, (Cassell, London, 1951)

Florence Nightingale, Cecil Woodham-Smith, (Fontana, London, 1964)

Medical History and Medical Care, A Symposium of Perspectives, (Oxford University Press, London, New York and Toronto, 1971)

Magic, Myth and Medicine, John Camp, (Priory Press, London)

Witches, Midwives and Nurses, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, (Feminist Press, New York, 1974)

Call the Doctor, E.S. Turner, (Michael Joseph, London, 1958)

We hope you found this book useful. If so we would be grateful if you would post a favourable review on Amazon.

Dr Vernon Coleman is a qualified doctor and professional author who has written over 100 books; these have sold more than two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK alone. His books have been translated into 25 languages and sold around the world. Many books by Vernon Coleman are available as Kindle books on Amazon. For more details about available books please see his author page on Amazon and for more about Vernon Coleman please visit http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

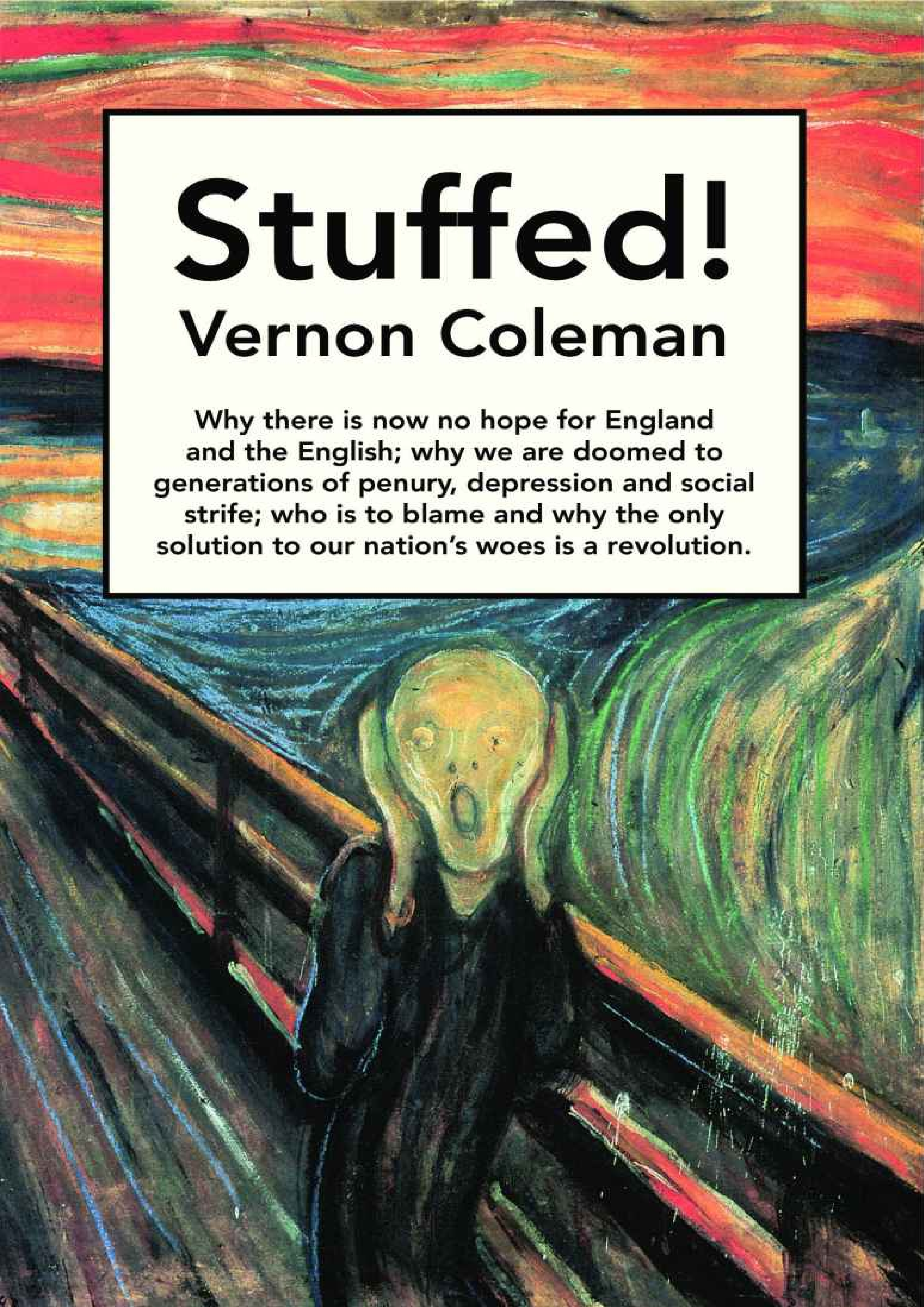

Stuffed!

Vernon Coleman

Why there is now no hope for England and the English; why we are doomed to generations of penury, depression and social strife; who is to blame and why the only solution to our nation's woes is a revolution.

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DEDICATION

To Donna Antoinette, my love, my wife, my friend, my life. Without you the world would be cold and dark, cruel and pointless. With you there is hope and purpose. Amidst the chaos, uncertainty, injustice, frustration and despair there is beauty, love and happiness because I share my days with you.

NOTE

All opinions, predictions and ramblings found in this book are aired in public purely as entertainment. I certainly do not recommend that any reader makes any decisions of any kind based on any of the material in this book. Disclaimers invariably go on to insist that readers who rely on anything in the book they are reading do so at their own risk. These warnings are included because the world is now full of lawyers and litigants who, under the often misguided impression that there might be money to be made, will leap at every opportunity to gouge lolly out of anyone who can be blamed for fates little tricks. And so, as author and publisher, I feel that I must follow fashion and warn readers that if they act on any of the alleged facts in this book, or decide to follow any advice which has crept, uninvited, onto the pages therein, they do so entirely at their own risk. I recommend that advice and opinions should be disregarded or treated with great suspicion. Any reader who believes the alleged facts in this book, or follows any advice the book may accidentally include, does so entirely at their own risk. Moreover, I would also like to make it clear that books can be dangerous objects and should not be dropped, thrown or otherwise projected into areas where people or delicate objects might be damaged. In other words, dear reader, drop this book onto a passing health and safety official and youre on your own.

PREFACE

A reader wrote to me recently to tell me how much he had enjoyed my book *2020* and how much fun he was having watching the predictions come true. He had, he wrote, told many friends about the book and had been surprised by the response of one. `Why would you want a book that tells you what might happen? What's the point?'

My reader was puzzled by this response. It seemed to him to be enormously valuable to have some sort of idea of what the future may bring. We are living in a time of great change. Very little stays the same for more than a few months and many aspects of life which we took for granted just a year or two ago have changed beyond recognition.

There are, of course, many reasons for wanting to have some idea of what might happen next, and how those developments might affect our daily lives. For a start, it is difficult to plan any sort of future for yourself and your family unless you have some idea of the nature of the world in which you will be living. It seems clear to me that unless you have a rough idea of the possibilities it is impossible to make decisions about where to live, how to live and how to invest.

It is not, of course, possible to predict the future with 100% accuracy. The last few years have reminded us that all sorts of strange things can, and do, happen. But it is possible to assess many of the possibilities and, by understanding how politicians work, and why they do the things they do, it is possible to make some useful guesses.

In some ways this is a depressing book (to write as well as to read) because we are living through a time when expectations must be kept low. Our present and future lives are shaped by lobbyists, self-interest and hidden agendas. (To some extent this makes it easier, not harder, to predict the future. All we must do is work out which lobbyists, whose self-interest and which hidden agendas are likely to take precedence.)

There are two ways to be a successful forecaster without actually making any accurate forecasts. The first is to produce a barrage of forecasts (preferably contradictory) and then promote the ones you got right. Organisations such as banks manage this by allowing named individuals or subsidiaries to make opposing predictions. The bank can then draw attention to the ones that came true. The other way to be successful is to forecast so far into the future that no one will remember what you predicted. If you make predictions about what is going to happen in 2050 then the chances are that many of the people who read your predictions will be dead and the rest will have long ago forgotten everything you said.

I have always eschewed these two safe ways to forecast; preferring to take my chances on the tightrope by making specific, fairly short-term predictions. And, I'm relieved to say, my success rate to date has been high enough to encourage me to carry on a little longer.

A growing number of people now agree with a position I have held for a number of years concerning our economy. Thanks to the egregious and wilful incompetence of politicians and bankers the future promises endless chaos and disappointments.

But this book deals with far, far more than the economic problems we face. In this book I have described the underlying problems, the reasons why our society is going to have to change dramatically; why things are never again going to be the way they used to be.

I believe that the views in this book are fairly cautious and certainly not extreme. I know of people who have bought a lot of gold, a good many guns and rolls of razor wire and retired to far away homes. (It may well be that they were the sensible ones). I prefer to hang around on the fringe of civilisation for a while, protect the Princess and myself as best I can, and see how things work out.

I chose to write this book in the style of *England Our England*, packaging the information in relatively small sections, because I feel it helps to define and draw attention to the salient facts. It's a style which I first used for my book *England Our England* (which has sold well over 40,000 copies, which isn't bad for a book on politics in general and for a book on English nationalism in particular, especially since advertisements were widely banned and the book received no national newspaper coverage whatsoever). This style has been rudely attacked by the few people who have ever bothered to review my political books (and by more who have criticised them but haven't bothered to read them) but I would point out that this format isn't new. It is, after all, the style in which The Bible is written.

I wrote this book for the small number of faithful readers who have been kind enough to read my books for the last few years. The print run will be limited to 750 copies and the book will not be reprinted. When the 750 have gone there will be no more. I want to share the thoughts in this book with my readers so that they may share my ideas of the future that awaits us. This book will not be offered for review or for general sale and so it will have no influence on the world at large. But I offer it to my loyal readers because I believe everything in it is true and everything in it is important.

The truth is that I now find myself in the position of that gentle man who used to parade up and down Oxford Street holding a placard announcing that *The end is nigh*. (He would not, today, be allowed to make such a prognosis in public. I suspect that he would be arrested for some breach of the peace as defined by the European Union.)

And to what end are we nigh?

That's simple.

The end of our country, our culture, our history. The end of ambition, entrepreneurship, respect, honesty, integrity in public life. The end of growth. The end of house prices rising indefinitely. The end of secure employment. The end of safe pensions. The end of equity market growth.

We aren't all going to die. It isn't that sort of end. The world is not going to implode overnight because of global warming. We aren't all going to boil to death as glaciers melt and coastal towns flood. Those, if they are real, are relatively trivial problems; exaggerated and promoted to distract us from more serious issues and to explain and excuse energy policies designed to hide from the mass of people the fact that the oil (and just about everything else) is running out.

And, as with most ends, it is also a beginning.

The beginning of widespread poverty. The beginning of lawlessness and street fighting and frustration and unrest. The rise, rise and rise of crimes against property and crimes against people. The beginning of the first steps towards a revolution. The beginning of the return of nationalism.

This is, at last, my final book on politics, economics, the state of the nation and the future of our world. It is the last because the factors described in this book aren't going to change in my lifetime. You and I know that things shouldn't be like this. But they are. And until the people are ready for a revolution we can do nothing but learn how to survive.

My remaining books will, I promise you faithfully, dear and loyal reader, be more fun than this one.

Vernon Coleman Summer 2012

PROLOGUE

`These are the times that try men's souls. '

- Thomas Paine, Englishman

There is a widespread feeling (particularly popular on the financial pages and in investment magazines) that this is just another bust (following a boom) and that everything will soon be tickety boo again.

Wrong.

The planet's future is very bleak indeed. And I'm sorry to have to tell you that the future for England is particularly gloomy. Our country has lived beyond its means for decades, living on borrowed money and with governments dependant upon people buying lots of stuff they didn't need with money they didn't have. And, with money raised and borrowed, governments also spent wildly; throwing money around on vote-winning benefits programmes, disguising debts and ignoring long-term liabilities such as the Ponzi scheme that is State employee pension liabilities (whereby future liabilities are ignored and left to be paid by future generations).

The world (or, more specifically, the Western world) also has a massive debt problem. Our apparent wealth has been built on credit. The money we have used to enrich our nations and ourselves was created out of thin air by greedy bankers. Our monetary system is based entirely on debt, and servicing the massive debts requires constant economic growth. Governments need more and more money to pay for all the salaries and pensions of their public employees and to pay the debts they have incurred in building huge bureaucracies and huge buildings in which to house the bureaucrats. Companies need more and more money to pay for the pensions and bonuses to which their employees have become accustomed and to pay the interest on the loans they took out to buy over-priced property. And individual families need growth to pay back the debts they incurred in buying houses, cars and television sets they could not afford.

Everyone needs growth.

But there isn't any. And (unless the politicians decide to start a major war to trigger manufacturing growth in the armaments industry) there probably isn't going to be any. Japan has been stagnating for decades. An elderly population, overpriced real estate and huge debts have left the country forever doomed to deal with yesterday. Greece isn't the only Western economy to have been built on deceit, fraud, corruption and debt. But it is probably the only Western economy that will be bailed out and allowed to default on its debts at someone else's expense. There isn't enough money left to bail out America, England, Italy, Spain, France and all the other heavily indebted superpowers. It sounds like a cliché but it really is different this time.

The only global solution to this global problem is inflation. State organised, State controlled and State endorsed inflation.

And that is why the English and American governments have been busy printing money and devaluing their currencies. They simply do not care about the consequences for the prudent and the sensible; they care nothing about the consequences for pensioners, widows and orphans. Our economic policy is specifically, deliberately designed to transfer wealth from the middle classes (the hard-working, taxpaying savers) to the imprudent, the reckless and the lazy. (The rich will not be affected because they will receive special treatment and very special advice and will either move their money or themselves offshore.) The vaguely disguised (but never admitted) reason for this transfer of wealth is to eradicate debt (both private and government) and so, ultimately, to encourage growth. The programme isn't going to work because the debt is simply too huge and because the need to cut costs will never be matched by the will or (in the face of political opposition from public sector unions jealously guarding the absurd rights of their over-fatted, over-indulged members) the ability.

But I want to go further and examine other, deeper problems which will, I believe, ensure that England (and, indeed, the rest of the United Kingdom) remains in decline for the foreseeable future (by which I mean for at least another two or three generations, taking us well into the second half of the 21st century).

We aren't facing World War III or the Great Plague (well, at least as far as I know, we're not). And I have no reason to suspect that the fellow who used to wander the streets with a placard warning of the end of the world is going to be saying `I told you so' anytime soon. But we are facing the end of the superior sort of lifestyle to which those of us in the so-called developed countries have grown accustomed and which we've grown to like very much indeed. We are coming to the end of a way of life. Things are going to change a great deal and they're going to change permanently.

We've had the rise, now comes the fall.

It would have eventually come anyway but it was brought forward and made worse by Brown, the Bank of England and a legion of greedy bankers (many of them foreign). The economic crash was caused by governments and people spending money they didn't have on stuff they didn't need.

The other problems we face were caused or exacerbated by inequality, greed, corruption, globalisation, multiculturalism, State imposed targets, political correctness, regulatory nonsenses emanating from a fascist bureaucracy and institutional thuggery. Even charity shops now exist to rip off local communities (by charging high prices for low quality goods) so that overpaid executives in fancy offices can receive undeserved bonuses and over-generous pensions. (Charities in general have become infamous for self-aggrandisement and luxury living for staff members. In 2008, something called *The One Foundation*, started by a tax exile and pop singer called Bono, was alleged to have raised £9.5 million but to have spent just £118,000 on good causes. Over half the money raised apparently went on `running costs'. And, surprisingly, some charities are now no more than Government funded pressure groups running campaigns to influence public opinion and change laws. For example, the anti-smoking group ASH is funded by various Government bodies and then uses the money the Government gives it to influence public policy. (So the Government gives our money to a charity which spends the money lobbying the Government.) The Government also now uses charities to campaign for unpopular causes - such as greater State power. The theory is that the Government can then announce that it is merely responding to public opinion.

I confess that I have been pessimistic about our world for some years. When I wrote *Why Everything Is Going To Get Worse (Before It Gets Better)* I added the last bit to the title simply so that the book didn't sound too gloomy. I did not, I'm afraid, really believe that things were about to get better. (And many readers wrote to tell me that they didn't either.)

We know in our hearts that we are living through an unprecedented crisis and that we live in a world without values and meaning. We live in a world where the elderly are unwilling to go into hospital because they will, they know, be killed or allowed to die (and there is no difference). We know that most of our problems are caused by stupid politicians and bureaucrats deliberately making life more difficult for us because that makes life easier for them; they pretend they are protecting us but that's as ingenuous and dishonest as a supermarket manager claiming that he is in business to provide the community with good healthy comestibles at prices they can afford. We live in a world where we are refugees with no sense of place or presence or significance or importance. We know that if the State were a human being even those fervently opposed to capital punishment would vote to hang it. But the State controls all. We struggle to survive in a bureaucratic society where it is the form filler, the networker, the lobbyist, the creep, who succeeds; anyone truly original and daring is oppressed by the system. We live in a world where the individuals fêted, enriched and honoured are bureaucrats, bankers, politicians and tawdry, hollow celebrities whose fame and fortune is built upon shallow, shifting sands. We live in a world scarred by the incessant vulgarity of S. Cowell, W. Rooney, G. Ramsey and the Beckhams. We live in a world where cruelty is accepted as humour and entertainment, in the same way that throwing Christians to the lions was considered good entertainment in a fading empire 2,000 years ago. We live in an insensitive world where millions are obsessed by the tawdry excesses of celebrities famous for little more than being famous, sleeping with someone famous or being prepared to spend their days on the operating table and their evenings displaying the results. It's impossible to avoid the comparison with the final days of Rome: self-indulgence, corruption and superficiality.

We live in a Statist country where everyone is exhausted by the little things which have joined together to become big things: the red tape, the forms, the rules. We are worn out by frustration, disappointment and the searing knowledge that we are surrounded by cruelty and injustice; worn out by constant battling against casual lies, deliberate deceit and incompetence. Tired of, and frustrated by, a world in which the law is what we live with and justice is now just our hope and aspiration. We live lives flecked with disappointment and we have constantly to fight the tendency to become bitter and angry. We know that in our inexhaustibly corrupt society standing by your convictions will get you nowhere, except convictions (the best way to get convicted is to stand by your convictions). We are confused by a modern world which is run by politically correct fanatics who are enraged if a man is crass enough to hold a door open for a woman because to them good manners are worse than no manners. We are bewildered by a world in which the establishment, and the individuals in it, always take longer than seems possible to recognise and accept obvious truths. We are weary of expecting courtesy and constantly being disappointed, weary of change without purpose, weary of believing that truth will always prevail, if only it is given a chance to breathe, walk about and meet people, but knowing that any truth considered damaging or embarrassing to those in authority will be forever suppressed. We all depend on one another more than ever. But we have been encouraged by the system to be ever more selfish.

We live in a world where the breakdown of family and community has led to almost universal depression, loneliness and despair and where the never-ending onslaught of laws (disguised as rules and regulations) have added fear to the mixture.

We despair at living in a world where the weak and powerless (the mentally ill, the aged, animals) are abused, taken advantage of and mistreated by the people who are trusted (and paid) to look after them. We live in confusion because it seems as though the structure of society has been disassembled and reassembled the wrong way. Politicians, bureaucrats, judges, doctors, nurses, teachers, lawyers, bankers, journalists and editors no longer do what they are supposed to do but do what will benefit themselves.

Our leaders have, through incompetence, greed and dishonesty, betrayed us and created a political system which combines the worst of fascism, the worst of a dictatorship and the worst aspects of communism. We have the worst of everything. We are bewildered by a world in which respect and loyalty are regarded as signs of weakness; where national pride is a sin if you are English but a virtue if you are anything else.

These days corruption among senior politicians is the rule rather than the exception. In the wake of the parliamentary expenses scandal I cannot name a single modern politician whom I would not describe as fundamentally `corrupt'. Elliot Morley, a former Government Minister, was jailed for 16 months for claiming over £30,000 in bogus mortgage payments while he was an MP. The judge said that Morley avoided a longer jail sentence because of the lack of sophistication of his fraud. Since it seems fair to assume that Morley isn't entirely stupid one can only assume that he hadn't even bothered to be `clever' in his deceit. The leader of the Opposition, Ed Miliband, recently pretended to be ill in order to avoid a public engagement which he didn't want to attend. (He was due to talk about boring health care). He was spotted at a Hull football match. Was he so arrogant and stupid that he thought he would get away with it? Or did he simply not care? He did not offer to resign. It can hardly be surprising that millions of people now routinely take time off work so that they can attend sporting events or watch television programmes. It is common for presenters working for the BBC to advise listeners to stay at home in order to watch particular programmes.

Politicians today don't even start off with real passion and purpose. They start off expecting to be corrupted and hoping to be corrupted. They are ready to be corrupted and I suspect that they will be disappointed if they aren't corrupted. To today's politicians politics is a business, a career, an alternative to a lifetime spent working in a windowless office in some huge State bureaucracy. Modern politicians don't care about anything except themselves. I doubt if there is more than a handful of people in the Palace of Westminster with anything that could be described as a vocation. Honour and integrity are now simply words in history books. Government leaders routinely bestow favours on particular businesses or individuals - usually in return for political or financial support. That isn't capitalism, it's corruption. And socialists, who tend to be greedier than conservatives, are invariably more open to corruption. If they cannot get what they want by deception and intrigue they will get it by brute force - using the police and the army. Politicians no longer resign, however terrible their crime, because being a politician is all that they know what to do. They know nothing else. Only after several years in the job, some fame (or, more likely, notoriety) and a thick contacts book full of names and e-mail addresses of people for whom favours were done can there be another life and can the financial rewards for all these years of misplaced service really begin to accumulate. Most disturbing of all, perhaps, is the fact that politicians tell barefaced lies so often that voters actually expect them to lie. When, I wonder, will an aggrieved voter sue a politician for fraudulently making a promise which he has broken? Why should politicians be exempt from the sort of legal requirements which govern the ordinary person's life? If a tradesman or businessman broke promises so blatantly he would undoubtedly be found guilty of fraud. Why should politicians be immune to the laws they force the rest of us to obey?

Our society has encouraged gross dishonesty. Just 55% of the over 65s say that they would never lie on a job application form. But among those under the age of 25 only 30% would never lie on a job application form - which means that 70% would and, since no one can tell who is lying, all job application forms are, therefore, effectively worthless. How can we be surprised by this when Tony Blair is, it seems to me, now largely remembered by many for his lying?

Not surprisingly, corruption and dishonesty have spread through society and are now commonplace rather than unusual. Morality has been replaced by box-ticking, bureaucratic pseudo-compliance. Dishonesty is now normal in every aspect of English public life. Doctors lie. Policemen lie. Journalists lie. Civil servants lie as though born to it. Justice is a forgotten concept. Estate agents lie so much they wouldn't know the truth if it were chiselled onto their stony hearts. Our society sometimes seems to encourage greed and dishonesty. `You cannot have morality without community,' said G. K. Chesterton but there cannot be much sense of community in a world where people spend their days stealing from one another.

In February 2011, the magazine *Readers Digest* contained an article entitled *Skive, but don't get caught*. According to *Readers Digest* (a magazine which used to respect and promote strong, honest principles) the first Monday in February is National Sickie Day `the high point of the year for people calling work to say they're ill.' And then *Readers Digest*, in what must be the most irresponsible piece of writing ever published, gave a number of tips for people wanting to pretend they are ill and avoid going to work. `Join the duvet-day legion with these tips on fooling your boss.' The tips include: `Sound genuinely concerned about having to take time off' and `give lots of gory details about your illness. Cough loudly.'

No wonder the country is in a mess.

A rather pompous and self-righteous newspaper called the *Guardian* ran an article telling its readers how to circumvent the *Times's* pay-to-read policy for its website. (In short, telling readers how to steal.) Subsequently, the *Financial Times* suggested that the *Times* might consider running an article telling readers how to nick copies of the *Guardian* from W.H. Smith.

Some insurance companies have stopped offering cover for mobile phone theft. It was revealed that approximately 40% of mobile phone claims are fraudulent. Most of the fraudsters are pretty stupid. People ring up on Monday and say: `Will I be covered if I drop my phone out of a train window?' They are told they will. Then on Wednesday they ring up and report that they have dropped their phone out of a train window. Corruption, deceit, thoughtlessness and uncaring behaviour are commonplace. Desperate shoppers at a store sale stepped over a man who had collapsed with a heart attack (he died). When does such behaviour stop being simple rudeness and start being criminal behaviour?

Corruption is rife within the scientific community too. The difficulty with science these days is in finding any scientist without a personal financial interest in supporting the relevant industry. Most scientists (and I include medical doctors in that generalisation) are paid lobbyists, professional whores. Global warming may well be happening (though there isn't any convincing scientific evidence for the theory) but if it is then whether or not it is man-made is just a guess. It would be just as scientific to say it was caused by Martians pointing big flaming torches in the direction of our planet. Professional science journalists support genetic engineering and global warming and deny that vaccination could ever do any harm, let alone be responsible for problems such as autism, because they are blind, ill-informed, prejudiced and bought by the relevant industries.

We are ruled by, and surrounded by, people who have absolutely no interest in our health or well-being and who will, for their own ends (or the ends of the organisation they serve) oppress, suppress and cheat. We now go through life expecting to be ignored, treated unfairly, abused, accused, suspected and mistreated. In these things we are rarely disappointed. Values, principles and respect are largely forgotten. In our curiously distorted society serious corruption is largely ignored while the authorities are relentless in their persecution of politically incorrect trivialities. Until there is more intolerance of corrupt and greedy officials the country will continue to be run by corrupt and greedy officials. Corruption, lobbying and fraud are endemic and, in varying proportions, now embedded in politics, the civil service, banking, medicine, utilities, pension fund management and every other area of public life and big business.

When the people who are paid and trusted to lead are shamelessly corrupt (and largely get away with it) the lesson percolates down through society, and it is hardly surprising if corruption becomes regarded as `normal' and `acceptable'. Nothing will change until our senior politicians and our top civil servants are honest, honourable and trustworthy. And that isn't likely to happen soon.

Ironically, as the population of cheats and fraudsters has rocketed so has the number of people prepared to cooperate with the authorities and to sneak on friends and neighbours as well as strangers. There are, of course, financial incentives for sneaking. (And people who are being investigated by the tax authorities may receive friendlier treatment if they provide the names and addresses of suitable targets). But much of the dobbing in is, it seems, done by folk who do it merely for the joy of the thing. Yesterday, while performing an entirely legal U turn on a deserted road a man on the pavement glared and wrote down my car number. At a garage where I had spent £98 on diesel fuel and logs the attendant told me that my broken taillight was illegal and that I could be fined £300. He was clearly about to pick up his telephone and ring the authorities when I pointed out that the piece which was broken was merely an outer piece of irrelevant plastic. He made a disapproving noise and did nothing. He was foreign and spoke English the way I speak French but he knew all about dobbing in and doubtless thought he might receive a reward or bonus of some kind.

I'm afraid that everything in our rotting civilisation is going to get worse, much worse. And then, eventually, things may get a little better and the gloom may lift a little. But things will never get back to the way they used to be and they will certainly never arrive at the place where today's young people expect them to be. Moreover, the improvement will only occur after a huge, painful, social, political and economic revolution.

The underlying difficulty is that our current crisis isn't just caused by financial problems. The crisis we are facing is one which is caused by underlying, deep-rooted, social, cultural and political problems. Our whole society has gone bad. And politicians and economists are so blinkered, so confined in their thinking, that they have been unable to see the truth. Most don't even recognise the existence of these problems, let alone plan to do anything about them. The few who do see at least some of these hazards are too frightened of the beneficiaries of the problems to do anything much to deal with them. Our so-called leaders don't look at the big picture and they never ask the right questions. When they do make decisions they can invariably be relied upon to make the wrong decisions. If they can screw up they will; even if it involves doing things the very difficult way. (This is, indeed, the one thing that we can rely upon. It has, as I have pointed out in other books, long been a foundation stone of my investment philosophy. As an investor, one can always rely upon the people in charge, the ones who make the important decisions, to do the wrong thing and make the wrong decisions.) Our world is constantly changing in ways most people cannot understand or control. Worse still our world is constantly changing in ways our leaders cannot understand or control.

Today, the big issues are ignored and suppressed and those who raise them are dismissed as lunatics, heretics or fanatics. Anyone who dares to spread the truth, or raise questions about perceived truths, will be subjected to smear campaigns. Our liberty and our freedom of speech have been strangled by cross party consensus and an obedient media. Politicians and commentators concentrate their efforts on narrow, specific questions. The big questions, the important questions, the fundamental questions, are never asked. And so, not surprisingly, no answers are forthcoming. As Texan congressman and USA Presidential Candidate Ron Paul put it: truth is treason in the empire of lies.

The end result is that no one is attempting to deal with the real underlying problems - the problems which helped create the mess in the first place. And so the problems are still there, real and untouched and getting worse by the day. Although there are very simple answers to these very serious, very complex problems, nothing will be done about them until we, the people, decide that something has to be done. Until then we are utterly, completely, totally and permanently stuffed. Expect the worst and be prepared for it. Everything is now going to get very, very bad.

The problems which we are ignoring or suppressing are serious structural faults which are causing irreparable damage to our society. In exactly the same way that a bridge will collapse (or a family will break up) if there are fundamental problems with the structure, so our society will implode if we do nothing to repair the serious faults which exist.

What do I mean by `implode'?

Remember what happened in Egypt, Libya and other Middle Eastern countries?

Riots. The oppressive use of force by the police and, when they cannot cope, the military.

We're heading for a revolution.

And it's really not very far away.

To use a motoring analogy we're sitting in a motor car which is careering downhill at an increasing speed. The steering doesn't work. The brakes don't work. And the driver is sending a text message to his garage complaining that the interior light doesn't work properly.

That's the sort of mess we're in.

Only worse. Much worse.

As long as the basic problems are ignored (or made worse rather than better) the world in which we live will become increasingly violent; there will be more anger, frustration and resentment and our lives will in every conceivable way become worse. We cannot do anything to change any of this until a majority of the voters know and understand this truth. Curiously, the problems we face are simpler, more specific and easier to deal with than our politicians and commentators admit. But that does not, of course, mean that they will take the necessary action. And so, in the meantime, all we can do is know what is happening, understand why it is happening and use our knowledge to help us survive.

Things aren't going to get better because the people making the decisions, and pulling our strings, aren't tackling the real problems. And they aren't tackling the real problems because when they recognise them (which is rare) they know them to be fundamental and to require huge, brave decisions which will be unpopular with the millions in our society (public sector workers and those on benefits) who are soft, flabby and spoiled and who expect and demand that they continue to be mollycoddled. The obvious improvements are not going to be made because there are too many people who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. And so all the problems I have defined in this book will remain, unaltered. Sadly, I no longer expect anyone in authority to care about me or those I care about: I don't expect to see any change for the better and I don't expect those in power to be subjective to effective control. None of the problems I outline in this book will be dealt with. Our politicians and civil servants are not going to put things right. For heaven's sake, they never even manage to sort out minor problems successfully. And the problems I've defined in this book are certainly not minor problems. Our leaders will fail because they are too short-sighted, too narrow-minded, too unoriginal and too beholden to a variety of vested interests. It doesn't help that they are also cowardly and stupid. Even if they recognise the enormity and significance of these problems there is little or no chance that they will look for any solutions and no chance at all that they will find them.

In that marvellous old movie *Mr Smith Goes To Washington*, James Stewart plays an ordinary guy who confronts the politicians with some simple truths. `Either I'm dead right,' he says, `Or I'm crazy.'

You decide.

CHAPTER 1: AN ECONOMY IN TATTERS

Introduction

When, a couple of decades ago, I pointed out that the Government's old age pension programme was (it still is) a Ponzi scheme the remark seemed to cause much amusement. There are, today, still those who do not believe me and who genuinely believe that the money they pay in national insurance is invested for them and will be paid back to them when they retire.

The problem is that in the same way that most people cannot imagine that anyone could be as crooked as Ponzi was so there are also many who believe that things cannot be as bad as all that because the smart men and women in suits at the central banks, and the smooth politicians in positions of power, must know what they are doing.

Well, I have news for them.

The people in charge have absolutely no idea what they are doing. They don't know how things got into the mess they're in. And they certainly don't know how to deal with the problems. Their sole concern is looking after themselves, their salaries, their pensions, their perks, their bonuses and their reputations.

The result of this potent mixture of ignorance, selfishness and greed is that things are worse than most people imagine them to be.

The indefensible printing of money by the Bank of England (without the authority of the people) has destroyed our currency, created inflation, increased our national debt and deliberately impoverished the prudent and the elderly. If there were gold medals for the `World's Most Indebted Country', England would win them all.

Thanks largely to the imprudent policies of Gordon Brown we are now in debt in a slightly absurd, almost unbelievable, South American sort of way. It was Gordon Brown who destroyed this country's economy. Between 2000 and 2010 our Government's real expenditure increased by 53%. Welfare costs alone rose by 40% between 2002 and 2007 and welfare now consumes a third of all State expenditure. (All these costs will be difficult to reverse but they must be. There is going to be much unhappiness.)

The economic crisis that Brown's policies created was made a thousand times worse when the bad-tempered Scotsman decided to bail out incompetently run Scottish banks in order to preserve Scottish banking jobs and Scottish bankers' bonuses. (The only other people protected by Brown's bailouts were largely foreign bank creditors. If you or I invest badly, but honestly, we lose our money. But Brown bailed out fools and crooks because they were Scottish - when he should have been putting them in prison. I suspect that to him the people paying all the bills were the enemy: English taxpayers.)

Thanks to Brown, private debts became public debts. And Brown's banker chums were able to continue paying themselves huge, undeserved salaries and bonuses. Brown has weakened England so much that we are going to be vulnerable, and in recession, for many, many years. In fact, to be precise, our recession is going to become a depression. It gives me no pleasure at all to say that I forecast this some years ago. (I started buying gold when Gordon Brown was selling it.) Brown really didn't have a clue about what he was doing. According to Alastair Darling, who was Chancellor of the Exchequer when Brown was Prime Minister, the hapless Scottish son of the manse predicted that the global financial crisis would all blow over in six months. (The Bank of England has recently estimated that the global crisis will cost between £40 trillion and £70 trillion. Give or take a trillion or ten.)

We think we have a capitalist society but we don't. We have a crony capitalist society, we have a corrupt version in which insiders help themselves and their pals to everything they can grab.

The State is far too big and has far too many functionaries and far too much power. We have far too many regulators and far too many regulations. We have an incomprehensible, over complicated and unfair tax system. But now the spenders and scroungers have pretty well run out of other peoples money. And so things are going to get really nasty.

And, finally, there's another aspect to our problems. We are part of the planet earth. And, as you may have noticed, there isn't a country in the developed, Western world which isn't in rather a mess. The global financial crisis (which involves America, Europe, Japan and just about anywhere else you can think of) is pretty well out of control. What happens to us depends to a large extent on what happens everywhere else. That isn't good news because although there is, thankfully, only one Gordon Brown, there are a good many other incompetent buffoons out there still busily creating chaos.

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In Brown's years most people spent every penny they earned and saved nothing. They felt rich because their homes kept rising in value. Brown's government spent every penny they could gouge out of people. They didn't spend it building new hospitals or roads or repairing our Victorian water and sewage systems. They didn't invest in boring infrastructure because that is as dull as buying paint to preserve the fence when you could be spending your money on chocolate and Sky television. Brown spent billions on hiring expensive consultants to teach people how to blow their noses and these were, of course, long-term commitments which came with a whole host of responsibilities not including pension commitments. Every one who has ever run a business knows that buying a new computer is a one off cost which can be defined but that hiring a new employee has always been something more substantial and is now, thanks to rules and regulations which make it damned near impossible to sack anyone, a massive long-term financial commitment. And Brown, who seemed to me to know nothing about anything except supporting Scotland and making sure that the Scots made as much money as possible out of the English, sent billions up North so that he could prove to the Scottish voters that he loved them dearly and that when he signed the Scottish Claim of Rights he meant it. And, because he was (and probably still is) a complete moron he also spent more money introducing new laws and regulations designed to really bugger up business. Many of these came from the EU, of course, but some he actually managed to think up all by his Scottish selfness. And he hired loads more stormtroopers to enforce the new laws. Businesses stagnated as legislation piled up so thick and fast that no one could keep track of what was legal or not legal and effectively it soon became easier to assume that anything that wasnt compulsory was probably illegal. Overwhelmed by taxes and rules, wages in the private sector stagnated. And just to make things worse (and acquire yet more money to give to the Scots) Brown destroyed private pension schemes. Unemployment continued but was, like everything else, relabelled and millions of hoodies suddenly found that instead of being unemployed they were actually on training schemes.

Why does no one now blame Brown for all this? The moron screwed up big time.

None of Brown's spending delivered a boom except among public sector workers, the unemployed and the Scots (many of whom were the same person). Much money was spent on expensive 22-year-old consultants, hired to tell people how to measure the amount of insulation in their airing cupboards. They were sent on six week courses, given diplomas and licences and made to feel very, very important and they generally buggered up peoples lives very nicely. None of the money was spent on helping industry. Manufacturing, which had been enfeebled for years, collapsed.

Generally, folk thought everything was still OK because borrowing money was easy and cheap and house values kept going up and so the middle classes were merry enough. Even people who didn't know Bernie Madoff or Allen Stanford could get rich.

Manufacturing was screwed, of course, because productivity had gone up in other parts of the world (it hadn't gone up much in England because the unions insisted on no one starting work until they had at least three cups of tea, and health and safety regulations insisted that two men be hired to ensure that the teapot was protected with a knitted cosy at all times so that no one could burn themselves if they stumbled and came into contact with it) and employment of the sort not requiring more than half a dozen neurones was pretty well down everywhere but particularly in England. The uneducated, who used to work in factories, where they were often well-paid, suddenly found that the only jobs they could get were in McDonalds, Tescos, phone shops, the Royal Bank of Scotland or call centres for banks and insurance companies. The jobs were very low paid (except for the ones at the Royal Bank of Scotland where even half-wits were given so much money that they had to hire men with wheelbarrows to take it all to a proper bank) and even duller than factory jobs where people could at least see that they had made something and could have a laugh and a joke with the person sitting next to them on the production line stamping out tail lights or kettle lids. And most of the call centres were either in Scotland or the Philippines or just outside Delhi and it's a real bugger to get to any of these godforsaken places on a bus because the bus services have largely disappeared and the ones still running charge an arm and a leg and are about as reliable as a politician's expenses sheet. The result was that people preferred to go on the dole and let the foreigners take the miserable jobs that were available because the dole paid better, offered better career prospects and meant that they could get up late, sit at home, watch Sky television and do a little black market moonlighting to pay for the second car and the foreign holidays. And they quickly learned that if they acquired an illness of some nebulous kind (stress soon overtook backache as the general favourite) they could claim even more money and so move up the career structure very quickly.

Some of this had happened in the 1930s in the USA when agriculture was destroyed by combine harvesters and fertilisers. Redundant farm workers couldn't do anything else (phone shops hadn't been invented) and couldn't sell their houses and move somewhere else because no one wanted a house in the middle of 20,000 acres of bleak and boring farmland where the only excitement was the occasional visit of a combine harvester.

The USA Government screwed things up really well (as all governments do) by introducing legislation to `solve' the problem and hold back the sea. Roosevelt's new laws kept agricultural wages high so that the agricultural workers wouldn't suddenly find themselves facing pay cuts. Of course, what Roosevelt hadn't realised was that by insisting that wages be kept high he was destroying even more jobs and making fertilisers and combine harvesters an even better bet. Politicians always feel a desperate need to interfere and they always muck things up. It is the one uncertainty in a desperately confusing world and if you understand it well enough you can use it to help you make quite a lot of money.

Our current lot of politicians (led by Brown but quickly followed by the terrible Cameron and the even worse Clegg) should have let the banks go bust and let the boil burst. There would have been pus everywhere for a while and things would have been unpleasant and messy but we would, by now, be better off than we are. (If you doubt this consider Iceland. They couldn't bail out their banks because the banks owed more money than the country could raise and so the politicians couldn't do anything other than sit around polishing their glasses and going harumph a lot. The result is that Iceland, which had mega problems, is now recovering very nicely and should be able to buy sweets and comics again any time soon.)

The one thing that wasn't Brown's fault (and it is tempting to try to blame him for this but we must be fair) was globalisation. He did however get excited about it and enthuse about it almost as much as he enthused about multiculturalism, means testing, targets and giving loads of money to Scotland. Globalisation meant that instead of television sets being made in Wales they were made in Japan (by robots of course) and then, when Japan discovered commercial hubris and stopped being fashionable, in China.

Politicians everywhere shouted about the virtues of globalisation and a flat earth and a level playing field and all working together and then went mad when they realised that globalisation meant that China was going to win all the medals and eat all the ice cream. England was left with a financial services industry which was run by and for a bunch of self-serving crooks and thieves, and a massive `State'.

Here are the basic facts about our nation's financial crisis:

i. The whole thing was originally caused by bankers in America doing draft and greedy things. A bunch of get-very-rich-very-quickly crooks set up what were effectively Ponzi schemes disguised as investments. They used customers' money, heavily leveraged, and should have all ended up in prison but instead all ended up very rich. English bankers (or, more accurately, bankers working in England) joined in the Ponzi scheme and although many of them became multi-millionaires some of their banks went bust as a result. None of the bankers has been sent to prison. None of them has been fined. Most of them still have all the money they made. And most of them are still in business, still making exactly the same mistakes and still taking home huge, undeserved and unsupportable salaries and bonuses. Guys on multi million pound salaries claimed that they weren't a `substantive part of the decision making process'. Or they blame computer software. Or they blame the collegiate process or excuse themselves with the `collective responsibility' argument so popular with Labour Party politicians who are now terrified of facing a war crimes tribunal. These guys have loads of money and the best lawyers and, by a curious coincidence, they also have the best excuses. If a teenager breaks a window he will, if caught, be fined. He may even be sent to prison (one young man was, not long ago, given 14 years in prison for damaging a butcher's van) but bankers who have cost taxpayers billions remain unpunished.

ii. There was little or no regulation of the banks in America or in England. There are lots of highly paid regulators. But, although the regulators enjoyed lovely, big bonuses, they were stupid, cowardly and too busy counting their bonuses to do anything to stop the damage.

iii. The banks could have just gone bust, with bankers losing their jobs, but Brown decided to bail them out. In England, Brown's Government took over the debts of Scottish banks for political reasons. Gordon Brown had, after all, signed The Scottish Claim of Rights. The Scottish Claim of Rights states: *`We...do hereby declare and pledge that in all our actions and deliberations (the) interests (of the Scottish people) shall be paramount.'* The result was that England was left with debts which were equal to the nation's Gross Domestic Product.

iv. When governments take on debts it is sometimes thought that they have access to money of their own. They don't. When a government is in debt, it is the taxpayers who will have to pay the bills. Our governments have borrowed huge sums of money in order to bail out banks and bankers. Whenever a government borrows money it is saddling the next generation with these debts. This is acceptable if the country is fighting a war for survival. (Wars can be expensive. It is worth mentioning that the Government has not yet paid off the debts it acquired when fighting the First World War.) But it is not acceptable when the debts are accumulated in order to protect the interests of a small group of bankers. Such activity is, in my view, immoral. In a just and decent world Brown (and those who let him do what he did) would now be serving a very long prison sentence instead of giving highly paid lectures to the bankers whose world he helped protect.

v. England was already in a terrible financial state when it took on financial responsibility for the bankrupt Scottish banks. Gordon Brown's imprudent policies had impoverished the nation. He had behaved like a financially incontinent pools winner and his spend, spend, spend policies had done permanent damage to the economy.

vi. When the Coalition Government was elected (after Brown's inevitable defeat) it announced that it would introduce a programme of austerity to pay off the nation's debts. However, the Coalition has not cut Government spending (they merely cut the rate at which the spending was increasing). In an attempt to deal with the problem they raised taxes and fees and forced private individuals and companies to pay off the debt. Public spending continued to rise before Osbourne's March 2012 budget and it continued to rise after it. Tax receipts are falling because people are poorer, or have given up work because of higher taxes. (The Government did, however, lower tax rates for the wealthiest of Gordon Brown's banker friends, thereby saving Brown's chum Fred Goodwin huge amounts of money.) It is salutary to note that our Government debt doubled between 2007 and 2011. And in May 2012, in the same week that the Chancellor announced that he had changed his mind about three tax increases, doctors and teachers announced that they were going on strike in protest about proposed modest amendments to their pensions.

vii. The bankers have not changed their ways at all. They have continued to behave recklessly, using their clients' money for their own gambling and insisting on paying themselves indecently large and completely undeserved salaries and bonuses.

viii. The current financial problem is global. A number of countries (including the USA, Japan, Italy, Spain, Ireland, Portugal and Greece) would be bankrupt if they were people. The global mess has been caused by greedy, incompetent and reckless bankers, complacent and incompetent regulators and venal, self-serving, dishonest politicians. England is probably in a worse state than any other country on the planet.

2

It is worth repeating that Chancellor Obsorne hasn't cut the deficit and he hasn't reduced Government spending. He has slowed the rate at which the deficit is growing by increasing taxes. Total Government spending in 2011-12 was £22.6 billion higher than in 2008-9 (that's 2.4% higher). Taxes have increased by £30 billion since 2009-11. The Government's austerity programme has been aimed at the wrong people - businesses and taxpayers. Check out the figures if you don't believe me

3

`A Ponzi scheme is an investment fraud that involves the payment of purported returns to existing investors from funds contributed by new investors. Ponzi scheme organisers often solicit new investors by promising to invest funds in opportunities claimed to generate high returns with little or no risk. In many Ponzi schemes, the fraudsters focus on attracting new money to make promised payments to earlier-stage investors and to use for personal expenses, instead of engaging in any legitimate investment activity.' - US Securities and Exchange Commission

4

England's national debt is currently around £1 trillion. If the Cameron-Clegg Alliance carries on the way it is going then within five years the debt will have risen to £1.5 trillion. (The interest on the debt just keeps growing.) In cash terms Government expenditure was 4% higher in May 2012 than it was at the end of Labour's disastrous term of office. Thats some austerity programme.

5

The Government employs forecasters who live in la la land and the Government's financial planning is based on the predictions of these la la land dwellers. Their predictions are invariably optimistic. So, for example, the forecasters are claiming that growth will rise, unemployment will fall, inflation will fall and tax revenue will rise. (Those are pretty much the standard official forecasts). The Government's plans are based on these la la land expectations. That would be fine except for the rather annoying fact that the forecasters are always wrong. They are not just wrong a bit of the time. History shows us that they are always wrong. But the Government keeps the la la land residents on the staff and keeps listening to what they say because what they say is always optimistic. (The latest figures show just how wrong the forecasters are. HMRC's tax income fell by 3.9% as earnings were down just about everywhere and VAT fell because people were spending less. The only thing that went up was central government spending.)

6

`The price of this financial crisis is being borne by people who absolutely did not cause it. Now is the period when the cost is being paid. I'm surprised that the degree of public anger has not been greater than it has.' - Mervyn King, Bank of England Governor, speaking at the House of Commons Treasury Select Committee in spring 2011. King went on to say that the impact on living standards would be `long-term and severe' and to predict that `we may not get the lost output back for very many years, if ever.'

7

There has been an oil fired super boom for half a century or more. For a variety of reasons (not least the fact that the days of cheap oil are over) the super boom is now finished. For a number of glorious years investors believed that they were automatically entitled to an annual profit (after tax and inflation) of 10% on their investments. For the last ten years most investors have had to make do with no gain on their investments. Investors who still have the money they started off with are lucky for many investment funds have succeeded in losing money. High fees mean that on average, money which was put into a pension fund or unit trust ten years ago is now worth less than it was worth when it was invested. The ravages of inflation (and tax) mean that, in real terms, the wealth of those investors has, in many cases, more than halved. Just about the only people who've been making money have been the fund managers. (If you consider a million quid a year satisfactory then they've been doing nicely thank you.) In real terms, after inflation, the Dow Jones Index in the USA is still 17% below its 1999 peak. In other words, if you bought the American index in 1999, you are, after a decade and a quarter, 17% poorer than you were when you started.

8

The problems haven't been solved and aren't going to go away. Reckless fiscal policies, mixed with lies, incompetence and greed, will lead to regular, recurring crises for the foreseeable future. We aren't going to get out of this mess through growth for several reasons. First, the banks aren't interested in lending money because they are still too busy playing silly gambling games. Second, the size of our national (and private) debt is so great that any potential growth will be stunted by our debts and the interest on our debts. Third, the red tape created by the European Union (and gold plated by successive Parliaments) means that our industry has no chance of making decent profits - let alone growing. Finally, we no longer have much of a manufacturing industry. We import most of the things we buy.

9

Individuals and companies are deleveraging but the public sector is borrowing and spending more than ever. Despite their austerity claims, the Cameron-Clegg Government has been throwing money at civil servants with even more enthusiasm than the infamous Brown-Darling duo. The Government seems to be under the misapprehension that if they allow the public sector to keep spending, while they cut the private sector and put up taxes, the country will grow its way out of debt and recession. Unfortunately, things don't quite work like that. The public sector is a huge leech, sucking the blood and the life out of the nation. Civil servants don't make anything and don't bring any money into the country. They are always an expense and never a source of profit.

10

Many of our current problems were caused by unwarranted Government interference. For example, if the Government had not deliberately encouraged the constant rise in house prices there would not have been a bubble. And many of our future problems are being created by Government policies. If the Government had allowed house prices to fall gently and naturally when they were too high the eventual crash would have been smaller. As it is house prices have been kept artificially high. They are falling artificially (as inflation rises) but there is still a bubble and there is still a crash to come. My guess is still that house prices are 30% too high and could, therefore, still fall by 50%. (Prices which have risen too high always fall too far when they eventually fall.) When the crash eventually arrives it will be harder and last longer because of the Government's actions.

11

Many English companies are struggling to survive and will undoubtedly fail within the next year or two. They are being kept alive by the fact that the Government is putting pressure on banks not to allow companies to fail. And so companies which are constantly at the limit of their overdraft facility, and which are building up bigger and bigger debts, are kept alive artificially. They will fail eventually, of course. But in the meantime those companies are taking business from other, healthier companies which may, as a result, also fail. Government interference almost always makes things worse.

12

It wasn't just State functionaries who became addicted to Brown's spend, spend, spend philosophy. Millions of individuals also became accustomed to spending for no good reason, becoming obsessed with bed cushions and scented candles. As a result, tens of millions won't have their personal debts under control for another decade at least. Most of those people will be hit hard when interest rates go up and when inflation pushes up the cost of food, energy and petrol.

13

Half the population is now totally or partly dependent on the State and the situation is getting worse. England is also responsible for looking after Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. A relatively small number of weary, English taxpayers are expected to pay all the bills.

14

The Government has insisted that banks go easy on homeowners who borrowed too much and (even with interest rates at an all time low) cannot pay it back. When interest rates eventually go up there will be millions of people who will suddenly find that they really do have to sell up and move. The Government's `ostrich' plan is merely delaying things and will make the eventual crash even more painful.

15

The USA has, for years, been regarded as the power-house of the world. But things are bad in America too. Like England, the USA is leveraging up. It is borrowing more and more money so that it can pay the interest on its debts. (Although the dullards working for the European Union seem to believe that you can solve your debt problems by borrowing more money this really isn't a sound economic theory and must eventually lead to tears.) And America is, like the rest of the Western world, very vulnerable. Investors have been receiving 3% to 5% on USA bonds since around 1850. They are now receiving a fraction of that. If the American Government suddenly had to pay 5% interest it would be paying out £500 billion a year in interest charges. That is equivalent to the military budget. It's around a third of the total USA tax revenue.

16

Many of the world's leading politicians, regulators and bankers now follow the teachings of an economist called Joseph A. Schumpeter. Let me tell you about Schumpeter. First, he made a fortune as an investment banker (not difficult) but lost it all (not easy). Second, he wrote that Marx was wrong to believe that capitalism would result in a greater divide between the very rich and the poor. He was wrong about that. Although he was an economist and had no medical training he claimed that victories over cancer (and other disorders) were just around the corner. He was wrong about that too. Schumpeter, who started life as an Austrian and ended it as an American, was, like most modern economists, a buffoon. I'm not surprised that many of the people now trying to run the world regard him as a wise man.

17

In a desperate attempt to keep house prices high the Government is using taxpayers' money to guarantee loans of up to £500,000 to people wanting to buy houses but unable to afford or obtain a mortgage. Once again prudent savers are being punished to help the imprudent, the reckless and the greedy. Around 100,000 lucky people (probably mostly Romanians) will be given these taxpayer guaranteed loans.

18

John Maynard Keynes believed that during any sort of slump a government should borrow money and spend it on public works - employing the unemployed to build roads and so on. This philosophy is enormously popular with politicians because they love spending other people's money. (Friedrich Hayek, on the other hand, was always opposed to politicians spending money. He wanted to cut back the power of the State. He was not terribly popular with politicians.)

19

The clear and consistent message from Gordon Brown and his successors is to `spend spend spend'. It has repeatedly been made clear to citizens that if they save, their Government will punish them but that if they spend every penny they earn then they will be rewarded with benefits and credits and loans and cheap money. The result is that in old age the standard of living of the wastrels and the spendthrifts now easily matches, and often surpasses, that of the prudent and the fiscally responsible.

20

Our economic problems were started when the USA and England deregulated and globalised the financial markets. We were told by the self-styled experts that this was a good thing which would lead to wealth for everyone. But the globalisation we were sold was a fraud and deregulating the markets merely left everything open to abuse by pinstriped crooks and fraudsters, who proceeded to take over the financial system.

Ever since they were first invented financial markets have generated financial crises and the crises have only ever been solved when the authorities had the courage to regulate the banks and stamp on the sneaky fingers of the greediest bankers and usurists.

The problem in 2007, 2008 and 2009 was that the authorities, the regulators, had been taken over by bankers who naturally wanted to protect their chums. So, for example, the man in America charged with sorting out the crisis was the newly appointed US Secretary of the Treasury, Henry M. Paulson.

Paulson, who was George W. Bush's Secretary of the Treasury from July 2006 until January 2009 had spent the previous 32 years working at the world's most evil and socially irresponsible company: Goldman Sachs. As an employer of the world's worst company Paulson had become enormously rich. And a lot of his chums were bankers who had also become enormously rich. (Goldman Sachs has been responsible for a lot of very bad things. It was Goldman Sachs who helped the Greeks lie about their debts. And so it was Goldman Sachs which has impoverished millions of Europeans. Bernie Madoff was a misunderstood angel compared to the Goldman Sachs Gang. Wherever there is deceit will be found the cold, clammy hand of Goldman Sachs.)

So it was no real surprise when the authorities, led by Paulson, responded to the problem by protecting the bankers rather than investors or taxpayers.

Bubbles usually go bang and the people who lose out are usually the greedy bastards who caused the bubbles. This time was different. In both the USA and England the people who had caused the bubble (and done all the damage) were protected and everyone else paid the price.

This wasn't the first time that a bubble (and the bubble makers) had been protected. When the dot-com bubble burst early in the 21st century a dolt called Alan Greenspan kept interest rates so low for so long that America had a housing boom. The housing boom peaked in 2006 and, because in the end it wasn't an ordinary housing boom, it helped create the crises and crash that followed shortly thereafter. Very low interest rates may seem attractive to home buyers but they always cause problems. They encourage inflation (the debtor's friend), they encourage unwise and unproductive investment (the money is so cheap how can we lose?) and they create asset priced bubbles which always burst.

The housing bubble was different from other bubbles in that it brought with it a whole host of seemingly sophisticated risk management techniques which were based on a nutty piece of financial nonsense called the efficient market hypothesis. Mortgages were converted into Collateralized Debt Obligations (CDOs). The half-witted bankers who thought these up believed that real estate prices never fall everywhere at once and that their new financial instruments would reduce risk through geographic diversification. Other idiot bankers (many of them in England) believed this obvious nonsense and bought the CDOs by the barrow load.

Within months there had been an explosion in the demand for these damned things. There were more CDOs than mortgages. In order to keep the whole Ponzi scheme going bankers and brokers were (almost literally) throwing money at people who wanted to buy homes. If you were an unemployed alcoholic with no savings and no hope you would still find bankers eager for you to borrow $500,000 and buy a six bedroom house with three garages. `Don't worry about paying back the loan. We'll make the payments real easy.'

And when the bust came (as it was bound to do) the entire international banking system fell apart. Bankers and regulators, who had been taken in by this nonsense, seemed genuinely surprised to find that the magician doesn't really saw the lady in half.

Then, as the crisis developed the authorities (many of them alumni of Goldman Sachs) in England and the USA found new and exciting ways to make things worse. Gordon Brown put his underpants on over his trousers and announced himself ready, willing and able to save the world. Both in England and America the authorities sent lorry loads of cash round to the banks and turned commercial losses into State losses. Many of the politicians were good pals with the bankers (it was, don't forget Gordon Brown who gave Fred Goodwin a knighthood for services to banking) and wanted to do everything they could to rescue their chums.

21

According to Mitch Feierstein, writing in his book *Planet Ponzi* `The United Kingdom and Japan are currently duking it out for the title of World's Most Indebted Country.' Our total indebtedness is close to 500% of GDP. Our indebtedness as a percentage of GDP doubled during the dark years of Brown. We have a net `international investment position' of minus £180 billion. Thanks to the banks we will have to sell the Queen, Stonehenge and the Isle of Wight if we want to avoid bankruptcy. (Actually, I'd much rather we sold Scotland which is, after all, the cause of most of our troubles.)

22

The Government doesn't manage its accounts like anyone else. Here's an example. In April 2012, the English public sector posted a surplus of £16.5 billion. Now how, you might ask, could the civil service make such a decent sized profit? That's almost enough to buy a Premier League footballer. Are all those civil servants now moonlighting at their local supermarket and handing their wages over to the Government? Sadly, no. The surplus comes from the fact that the Royal Mail transferred its £28 billion pension plan to the Government so that the Government can sell the damned organisation to some foreigners who will doubtless demand that second class stamps cost a fiver and insist that anyone not living within 100 yards of their local sorting office collect their own mail. This transfer means, of course, that the Government (in this case aka taxpayers, because when there are debts around that is what the word `Government' means) will be responsible for paying out massive pensions to around 82 million postmen and postwomen. That's another massive cost for the next generation to worry about. But meanwhile, let's celebrate because the Government made a profit this month.

23

The world is changing. America's exceptional status as originator of the world's reserve currency is coming to an end. The USA is about to come face to face with its own huge debts and the deficit which has been building rapidly since the 1980s will bite America hard. Globalisation allowed the USA to consume more than it produced and to live on the backs of the workers of the rest of the world. Every time the financial system seemed at risk the authorities (staffed largely by former bankers) removed more and more regulations, intervening whenever the bankers looked as if they might be at risk.

Everything got out of hand when new financial products became so complex that no one (not even the people who had invented them) understood them or comprehended the consequences of their inventions. The banks relied on what the inventors of these arcane financial weapons told them. Worst still, so did the ratings agencies. No one took the responsibility they were paid to take. Everyone simply assumed that things would turn out well. And a great many people thought they were much cleverer than they were and that because they were taking home £20 million a year they must be cleverer than everyone else.

Eventually the banks stopped trusting each other and the world's financial system looked as if it was about to grind to a halt. And that's when the politicians made a bad situation worse. Instead of allowing the banks to go bust and forcing them to separate their basic banking facilities from their investment banking gambling, morons like Brown simply bailed out the banks and allowed them to carry on as before - this time gambling with taxpayers money instead of money loaned to them by depositors.

The result of this will be a global realignment. The USA will continue to decline. China (and to a lesser extent India) will rise, rise and rise again.

24

The USA controls the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and insists that all countries (with one exception) follow strict market discipline. The exception, of course, is the USA, which has built up a massive current account deficit.

25

Once the Government had bailed out the banks (with taxpayers' money) taxpayers were surprised to see that the banks were pushing up the interest rates they were charging for overdrafts and, at the same time, introducing a mass of new fees. Public anger was fuelled by the knowledge that the bankers had been bailed out with taxpayers money and were still giving one another huge bonuses and carrying on as though there had never been a crisis. As the absurdities of the situation created yet more anger, both bankers and politicians called for an end to banker bashing and said how unfair it was. Some of the best paid bankers threatened to leave their jobs and quit the country. They did not say what they would do or where they would go.

26

Prudence has become the new paedophilia. A woman on benefits who was worried about surviving in her old age, and who scrimped and saved and managed to save £20,000 out of her benefit money (by living an incredibly frugal existence) has apparently been arrested, told to give all her savings to the Government, fined £6,000 for not spending her money and threatened with imprisonment. And, of course, savers everywhere have to make do with 0.1% interest on their money while banks routinely charge 17% or more on overdrafts.

27

England has come to terms with the fact that it is no longer a global force. America is still in denial. The future belongs to China and the global currency system, and the global economy, are now linked inextricably to the Chinese currency and the Chinese economy. It will not be long before it is the Chinese yuan, rather than the American dollar, which is the world's reserve currency. When that happens America will fall fast and far. The so-called `special relationship' which our politicians have nurtured will become an even greater drag on our reputation and our economy.

28

`The issuers may have, and in the case of a government paper, always have, a direct interest in lowering the value of the currency, because it is the medium in which their own debts are computed.' - John Stuart Mill, 1848, The Principles of Political Economy

29

Balancing the budget by cutting spending or raising interest rates would penalise those who are employed by the public sector, those in debt and those receiving benefits. Those are now the voters who control the politicians and so what needs to be done will not be done. As I have previously pointed out, those who earn and pay tax are now in a minority. They have, therefore, been disenfranchised.

30

It is widely believed by economists that credit is essential to make an economy function because without debt businesses can't grow. This is, of course, dangerous nonsense. Economists spend their lives thinking about money and dealing with money. If they are so clever why aren't they all rich?

31

The English Government now owes over £1,000,000,000. That's a trillion pounds. And that figure doesn't include the cost of paying pensions to civil servants as they retire. Nor does it include the cost of providing health care and social security and benefits for the millions of retired and `disabled' citizens who rely upon the State for their food and shelter.

32

When you borrow money you are importing your imagined (and hoped for) future into the present. When you borrow money in order to increase your investment risks you are buying a hoped for prosperity that hasn't been earned and that can easily be taken away. These simple truths are not understood. Many people now have the gall to complain that they borrowed money because they were offered it and so it wasn't their fault and it is unfair that they are now in trouble.

33

The Bank of England, the Federal Reserve in the USA and the European Central Bank (for the European Union) have made things far, far worse than they were and have turned an acute problem into a chronic one. We are now entering an economic depression which will last for generations. The people running these institutions have proved themselves to be incompetent, dishonest and reckless. For several years the Bank of England has regularly expressed surprise at the way inflation keeps rising. They usually say that the inflation is temporary or a result of factors entirely outside England's control (such as the price of oil or the price of food) but either the people running the Bank of England are too stupid to be running a village hall or they are deliberately using inflation to get rid of our debts and, in the process, to rob savers and investors and private sector pensioners of what little wealth they may have managed to secure. Now, the Bank of England is about to be given even greater powers. The staff of the Bank of England are accountable to the public but have never shown any signs of understanding this. The people of England would be in a far better financial state if we dumped the Bank of England and let the market decide interest rates.

34

Consumer debt rose by 66% in the last decade. Much of this debt was created when people bought houses they couldn't possibly afford and shouldn't have been allowed to buy.

35

In 1988, in my book *Health Scandal* I forecast that we would have real problems when the number of people working, earning and paying tax fell below the number of people dependent on the Government. I forecast that the real problems would come to a head in the year 2020. (I obviously picked the date because it has a nicer ring to it than 2019 or 2021. But I still think that forecast was pretty accurate.) We are heading for more big bankruptcies, for apparently never ending crashes and turmoil and the worst financial crisis in history. Whenever G7 and G20 ministers meet it is obvious that they don't have the foggiest idea what to do about the problems. (The G20 is, I confess, something of a curiosity in that it consists of 19 proper countries and someone representing the European Union.) They mess around rearranging the flowers while the roof caves in and an uncontrollable fire rages in the west wing. Reality awaits and will win. The next bull market won't be for quite a while.

36

England's debts are unlikely to be repaid in real terms. (In other words, with money which has the same purchasing power as the money had when it was borrowed). The politicians have three choices: inflation, default and (the Japanese solution) stagnation.

The politicians are unlikely to want to default (that is embarrassing) and although they are so far following the Japanese route they will soon find that humiliating (Japan has been in decline for two decades) so they are likely to take the easy way out and to get rid of the debt by inflating it away.

Actually, there is a fourth choice: staying out of the way and allowing market forces to take over (which means allowing the grotesquely indebted to go bust). That is the only method that would really work but it would mean doing nothing and no politician will do that.

37

When Queen Elizabeth II asked why no one had foreseen the coming problem no one knew what to say. Sadly, she asked the wrong people. She asked the people who had created the problem, or who had stood by while it happened and who had not, of course, seen what was coming.

38

A third of England's adult working age population is now unemployed, non-earning, non-tax paying (that includes people who are sick, who are on benefits, who are unemployed and who are studying). But if you then add in children and pensioners (including civil service pensioners who retired at 60, 55 or 50) and you add on the millions who are employed by the Government, councils or quangos (and who are therefore, by definition, non-productive workers) it is clear that the country is being held together by a hard-working minority. It is also clear that this state of affairs is unsustainable.

39

England is now paying £43 billion a year in interest on the £1 trillion we owe in debt. And our debt is rising at the rate of £120 billion a year. In other words, despite the best efforts of our Coalition Government, the debt is getting bigger not smaller. A third of our new debt is interest on the old debt. And of course, thanks to the wonders of compound interest we pay interest on the interest. Meanwhile, the much-publicised Government cuts haven't started yet.

40

The Labour Party stayed in power by making sure that house prices kept rising. People borrowed more than they could afford to spend and were delighted when the value of their homes rose (as they were bound to do). The rising value of their homes made them feel rich beyond their wildest dreams. Many were earning far more from their homes than from their jobs. `I earned £500 this week but my house went up by double that!' `The house made £1,000 this week so if we spend just £500 on DVDs, meals out and toys we are still ahead.' Millions of the new rich borrowed against their ever more valuable homes and spent the money the banks gave them on wide screen television sets and second cars. As they borrowed so the banks made more money and as they spent so the Government's tax income rose. Everyone, it seemed, was getting richer. But the wealth was based on debt and it was all a trick.

41

The Bank of England's official solution to our problems has been quantitative easing - an Orwellian term which simply means printing more money and devaluing the currency. The official aim of quantitative easing is to make more money available so that banks can lend it out to companies so that they can employ more people and make more things. Naturally, however, the banks have been keeping the virtually free money they've been given because they realise that if they simply lend it back to other governments they can make free profits without actually doing anything. The whole idea of quantitative easing was flawed from the start because it was always pretty damned obvious that even if the plan had worked it would have had to stop one day. And when it stopped things would go wrong again: falling house prices and rising unemployment being the obvious consequences. Quantitative easing was an attempt to keep the whole crumbling financial edifice standing for longer. It was an attempt to protect the bankers from their own idiotic and venal behaviour. It is not surprising that it was also popular in America. Politicians and central bankers there are as much in the pockets of the bankers as are the politicians and central bankers in England. The people who devised this barmy solution to our problems must surely have been aware that government actions and interventions helped create the problem and have consistently made things far, far worse. The credit crisis developed because of too much debt (encouraged by too much irresponsible lending), reckless Statist overspending, waste everywhere, absurdly inflated expectations and wildly overgenerous monetary policies. Or maybe they weren't aware of any of this. Maybe they had all spent the last few decades in a holiday camp on Mars.

The combination of quantitative easing (QE) and low interest rates has devastated the living standards of the retired and destroyed the value of the savings of the prudent. Quantitative easing takes money from the cautious, the hard-working and the poor and gives it in bucketfuls to the reckless, the greedy and the very, very rich. The whole idea is wicked beyond belief. The Government prints more money and then uses the money to buy its own gilts. That's a financial plan? The Bank of England now owns a third of all gilts. So the Government prints them and then buys them. What's the *future* plan? Is it going to keep its own gilts or destroy them and pretend they never existed? QE was designed to bring gilt yields down and has resulted in a slump in annuity rates. Those who retire now, and who are dependent upon a private pension, as opposed to a civil service pension, will be locked into a pitifully low return on their pension savings. The people who decided to introduce QE are, of course, immune to these bad effects. Quantitative easing has dramatically reduced the income available to pensioners who are taking money from their private pension, forced investors seeking income to take huge risks for little reward and hastened the death of defined-benefit pensions. All this is being done in a vain attempt to clear up the mess Gordon Brown left behind; a decade of uncontrolled, debt-fuelled consumption. Quantitative easing is a shameful and morally repugnant policy: it is nothing more than a State-controlled mugging of the elderly, the careful and the responsible.

Company pensions are being battered too. When gilt yields are low it is harder for fund managers to match their income with their expenditure and so they are closing down pension schemes completely.

The promoters of QE claim that increasing the amount of money in circulation makes it easier for companies to borrow and grow. This would be very nice if it were true. But it isn't. QE has resulted in the banks acquiring vast amounts of money at virtually no cost, thereby enabling them to maintain their absurdly obscene bonus levels. But the low interest rates, and the billions of new money, have not filtered through into the real economy. Entrepreneurs and company owners who can borrow money are paying 20% interest rates (or more) as the bankers who caused the recession take advantage of the recession to boost their own bonuses still more. The banks' shareholders (which in the case of RBS and Lloyds means taxpayers) have not benefitted from this lunacy since the profits have been scooped up by senior bankers greedily grabbing multi-million pound bonuses for themselves. When you make more of anything, you damage the value of whatever it is you are making. If a baker produces twice as many loaves then the price per loaf will inevitably fall. If a nation prints more money then the perceived and real value of the currency on the international market will fall. Even the Chancellor and the Governor of the Bank of England should know that.

The real truth (never admitted) is that politicians and central bankers devised and chose to introduce QE and low interest rates in a deliberate attempt to boost inflation. They want to inflate away the significance of the Government's debt, to help those who had bought houses they couldn't afford and to keep the bankers happy. (Gordon Brown's love affair with the bankers is well-known - and was a major factor in the destruction of England - but the love affair between politicians and bankers is not over. The leaders of the Coalition Government are just as desperate as Brown was to please the bankers.)

The big beneficiaries of QE have been the bankers and the borrowers. The big losers have been the people who have `done the right thing', saved their money, invested carefully and saved for their retirement. The prudent have been severely punished and have now no doubt realised that they would have been better off if they'd spent their earnings on folderols and fripperies. QE transfers money from savers to borrowers. The lesson for the young is clear and simple: spend, spend, spend. Do not, under any circumstances, save or trust your Government.

No one in the Government or at the Bank of England had the courtesy to ask the taxpayers whether they wanted debts and savings to be destroyed by deliberate inflation (which will be very difficult to control once it gets going properly).

42

The leading advocate of quantitative easing in England is not, an Englishman. But he is not, rather surprisingly perhaps, Scottish. The man promoting QE in England is called Adam Posen. He is an American economist, described by the *Jewish Chronicle* as an important Jewish policy-maker. Just what he is doing deciding what happens to our economy is beyond me.

43

The Government (and its spokesidiots) claim (with no regard whatsoever for the truth) that the people who are suffering most from its austerity policies are the people who gained most from the years of over-borrowing, over-spending and over-indulgence. Even for politicians this is a lie of Brobdigean proportions. The people who over-consumed are not suffering at all because their debts are being reduced by inflation and made palatable by the lowest interest rates in history. The people who did not over-consume, the individuals who were sensible and cautious, are the ones being deliberately destroyed by the Government's policies. The Bank of England and the Government have proved that they have no respect for electors or their money and in the long-term their policies will encourage workers to spend every penny they earn.

44

Central banks are supporting the banks at the expense of ordinary taxpayers. The cost of this support will grow and grow as inflation leaps higher (and eventually goes out of control) and as jobs are lost because of the long-term depression the policies will create. The deliberately engineered rise in inflation will lead to massive rises in the price of imported fuel and food and this will hurt the hard-working poor (whose travel costs will soar) and damage growing businesses (many of which will falter and fail as a direct result). Instead of making things better (as we were promised) QE has created huge short-term problems for the poor, the elderly and the prudent. And it will create massive medium and long-term problems. Only the bankers have been helped.

45

Most of us are poorer than we think we are. And will get poorer. Our houses are worth less than we think they are. Our pensions are worth less than we think they are (and nowhere near as reliable). Our investments will probably soon be worth less than their current prices. It isn't our fault that the country is in a mess. The politicians and the bankers caused the problems. But we are paying the price and they are not.

46

We are so broke that the Government is toying with the idea of flogging off some of our assets. They're trying to get a price for things like Stonehenge and Westminster Palace. They will then presumably flog them off to the highest bidding Sovereign fund. Nothing, it seems, is not for sale. How much could we get for the Isle of Wight? And the Royal Family? Maybe we could flog off the Queen? Or one of the Princes? Lots of countries love our royalty. The French would love to have a queen. Or a king. We could get a damned decent price for William and probably a pretty decent price for Harry. Maybe we could even flog off their uncle Edward? Well, perhaps not. Maybe that's a prince too far.

47

The politicians and central bankers have continually intervened to protect the greedy from their greed and to protect the bankers from their stupidity. In doing so they have prevented the healing, financial catharsis which we need. And so when the pain comes, which it will, it will last longer and be chronic; rather than being sudden and acute and nasty it will last generations and cause enormous damage. How can anyone with a functioning cortical matter regard spending, borrowing and printing as a solution to the worst economic crisis in our history?

48

Today, the only growth industry in England consists of groups of Eastern Europeans washing cars (for cash) on otherwise deserted garage forecourts.

49

Central banks have enormous power over printing, money managing interest rates, controlling the value of the currency and keeping inflation under control. The Bank of England has increased the money supply by 400% over the last decade; they mortgaged our future (and our children's future and our grandchildren's future) so that Brown could spend billions on projects which the nation didn't need and certainly couldn't afford.

Let me remind you, that Brown signed The Scottish Claim of Rights. That is why so much English money has headed north of the border. Let me remind you that The Scottish Claim of Rights states: `We...do hereby declare and pledge that in all our actions and deliberations (the) interests (of the Scottish people) shall be paramount.'

Gordon Brown, former Prime Minister of Great Britain, signed that.

50

The way quantitative easing works is like this: the Bank of England gives money to anyone who wants to sell gilts (banks and pension funds and other institutions). The plan is that the people who sell their gilts will then use the money they've been given to buy shares and bonds, thereby giving money to companies which can grow. This is such an utterly stupid idea that it is difficult to believe that anyone with an IQ bigger than their shoe size actually thought it up. In reality QE is just a welfare state for bankers. It pushes up corporate bond prices and makes banks richer. It hasn't encouraged bank lending in practice. The sole *real* purpose of quantitative easing (an absurd euphemism for `printing money and therefore devaluing the currency') has been to create inflation and get rid of the nation's private and sovereign debts. And all this has been done by a bunch of employed civil servants and advisors. These were major political decisions (probably the most significant decisions made for decades) which will affect the lives of everyone. And the decisions were made by State employees without debate, without discussion, without contradiction, without supervision and without any public mandate. It would have made more sense to allow traffic wardens to create the law.

It was, of course, Gordon Brown (the main architect of our misery) who gave the Bank of England these powers. Maybe he did so hoping that his newly empowered public sector workers would help him destroy the hard-working English and devalue the English currency with a massive currency printing exercise. Before you dismiss this notion as fanciful we should remember, as always, that Gordon Brown was a signatory to The Scottish Claim of Rights.

Still think it an entirely fanciful notion?

51

There have been 122 stimulative policy initiatives from central banks in the recent months. That means that on 122 occasions, governments have printed more money in order to inflate away their debts. Not one government on the planet has yet decided to get to grips with the idea of spending less and borrowing less.

52

It is estimated that in 2011 quantitative easing took an additional £90 billion out of corporate pension schemes (affecting shareholders as well as employees). Quantitative easing did not, of course, affect in any way the pensions given to politicians, public sector workers or Bank of England employees.

53

When the Bank of England prints more currency the value of the pound goes down in the international markets. And so the cost of our imports goes up. Oil becomes more expensive. Food becomes more expensive. And then the Governor of the Bank of England has the gall to say that inflation is caused by international factors outside the Bank's control.

54

Our current problems were caused by too many people and governments buying things they didn't need with money they didn't have. Simple.

55

Economic chaos is common within the European Union. The only countries in Europe whose economies are growing are Poland, Latvia and Finland. The next best countries are Lithuania, Slovakia, Estonia, Germany and Norway. The rest are either in a bit of trouble, a lot of trouble or (like us) dire straits.

56

In February 2012, India said it didn't want any more aid from England. Since India is now growing far faster than we are, and is an extremely rich and powerful country, I can understand their embarrassment at our continuing to dump money on them like an impoverished maiden aunt insisting on stuffing fivers into her banker nephew's pocket at Christmas.

Those who still believe that we should send money to India might like to know that most of the money is dribbled away on the flimsiest of projects. For example, we gave £118,000 to the city of Bhopal so that it could fit its buses and dustcarts with GPS satellite tracking systems. Hundreds of thousands of pounds of taxpayers money was spent on delivering 7,000 television sets to Indian schools.

India has a £6 billion space programme, nuclear weapons and an aid programme of its own. India is buying $11 billion worth of American fighter jets. They are presumably using the foreign aid we are giving them to help pay for these.

And still we send them billions every year.

We give money to China too. Giving money to India and China is like sending money to the Queen so that she can have a nice Christmas.

57

It is fashionable to regard globalisation as a new phenomenon, a 21st century innovation which will transform our lives.

But globalisation really began with the growth of the English Empire in the 17th century. (Everything of note started in England. And the English invented globalisation.). English sailors and English merchants took gold (earned by bringing sugar and tobacco from the Americas) and used it to buy silks in India. It was the gold standard which helped create globalisation. England had a navy protecting trade routes, a sound currency in sterling and a willingness to invest overseas. Steamships enabled England to import wheat and meat from across the Atlantic and freed up agricultural workers to take employment in factories, enabling the industrial revolution to get going.

Globalisation isn't new.

But the idea, propagated by wide-eyed liberals, that globalisation will somehow benefit everyone and create a world of people living in joyful harmony is new. And it's a crazy idea - particularly since the era of cheap energy is rapidly coming to an end.

Globalisation means that we are now all dependent on one another.

We have, of course, been becoming more reliant on others (for heat and food, etc.) for years. Just a few generations ago people in England grew their own food, found their own wood for their hearth and dealt with their own rubbish. They made their own clothes and, indeed, often made their own furniture and household equipment too. For years we've been reliant on others for everything in our lives. This has meant that a strike, a protest or a slow down in another part of the country could cause great disruption.

But now that we've become a global economy our lives are likely to be affected by things happening thousands of miles away. The number of people upon whom we rely totally has increased dramatically. We rely on the Middle East for oil. We rely on Russia for gas. We rely on China for the goods we seem to need. We rely on farmers all around the world for the food we eat. Our local industries and local farmers simply cannot compete with industries and farmers operating in countries where the cost of living is much lower, wages are much lower and regulations are almost non-existent. Huge ships constantly move between China and England. The ships bringing stuff over are packed with television sets and dishwashers. The ships going back are full of our recyclables. We pay the Chinese to take them off our hands and then they dump them. They must think we're mad; a failing, doomed segment of civilisation. (We do import some rubbish. We take America's nuclear waste.)

Globalisation may have enabled the lucky few to make fortunes out of clever financial juggling but it has increased our dependence and our vulnerability and it is time to end the myth that it's good for us.

58

The size of England's national debt is now so great that every man, woman, child, scrounger, pensioner and civil servant in the country owes around £20,000. Each. And the interest on that means that the debt is rising by the minute. You'd think that as a nation we would be rich. After all, we seem to own a lot of stuff: buildings, roads, and so on. But we've mortgaged just about everything.

59

The bankers and politicians who caused our economic mess sometimes seem to be the only people in our society who are not being expected to pay the price of dealing with the chaos. Indeed, shameless fools who helped cause the mess (and who should now either be bankrupt or in prison or both) now generously offer advice on how we should reform the banks and our world.

60

Economics is almost alone in being the only profession never to have solved any of the problems its practitioners struggle so unsuccessfully to define. There are university departments, books and magazines devoted to economics but the world's economic position is in a worst state than ever and the economists (who never successfully predict anything) have no answers. There were 60 recessions around the world between 1989 and 1998 and economists forecast just three of them.

61

Am I the only one to think it dotty that governments should try to solve debt problems by issuing more debt? Am I crazy or are they? It seems to me that the people who insist on handing out more cheap money to countries and individuals who cannot afford to pay their old debts are ignoring democracy, reality and common sense.

62

England is twice as much in debt as any other EU nation. The total extent of our debt is difficult to measure. But it's a lot. Our Government claims to be putting straight the mess created by Gordon Brown but government spending is still more than government earnings and none of the cutbacks announced so far will solve the debt or the interest on the debt.

63

Whenever there is doubt about the state of the economy, or the abilities of politicians to put right what they have put wrong, then there is no doubt.

64

Our manufacturing industry is a third of the size it was just 30 years ago. And yet it is a nation's manufacturing sector which gives a nation wealth by bringing money into the country (it is, for example, difficult to export hairdressing). Our entire manufacturing industry would now not pay the nations benefits bill.

65

The Government is pushing banks to lend more money to businesses. But people running businesses don't want to borrow money. They don't want to borrow because they don't trust the Government (which, they suspect, will introduce yet more destructive legislation); they don't trust the banks (which, they fear, will suddenly demand the repayment of loans at an inconvenient moment) and they don't trust suppliers or buyers (all of whom might well go bust). So, why on earth would they borrow any money?

66

Most people in England are aware that the Greek economy is pretty well stuffed. But how many realise that we owe three times as much money as they do?

67

After the 2012 Budget, bankers enjoyed a cut in their tax rate whereas pensioners found themselves left with a tax rise. After the Budget, caviar (a favourite of bankers) was taxed at 0% but hot pasties (favourites among shop assistants, tramps and impoverished pensioners) were taxed at 20%. Clegg's wife, reputed to be earning £600,000 a year as a political lobbyist (she apparently helped the nasty Kraft take over iconic English chocolate maker Cadbury) enjoyed a tax cut which must have saved her far more than the average national wage.

68

Usually, when a Ponzi scheme is running, someone gets very rich. Usually, the money sticks to quite a lot of people.

Our Government (and most other western governments are pretty well as bad) has been running a complicated Ponzi scheme for years. The debts have been mounting and each new generation pays off the debts of the previous generations.

But who has been getting rich? If we now owe a trillion pounds or more, and the American people owe endless trillions of dollars, who has been getting rich?

It's a hypothetical question, of course.

You already know the answer.

It's the people who have been hiring the lobbyists to persuade the Government to treat them kindly. Its the people who run the drug companies, the arms companies and all the other companies which own parliamentarians.

But mostly it's the bankers and the people working in what is usually summarised as `the finance industry'.

Nick Clegg's wife is a lobbyist.

Nick Clegg's dad? Banker.

David Cameron's father? Stock broker.

Keep it in the family, eh?

69

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development has warned that the current austerity programme will not bring down the level of debt. Despite the Coalition Governments five-year programme of spending cuts and tax increases, the national debt is still rising rapidly and will reach £1.5 trillion by 2016. To bring this down to a manageable and sustainable level will require years of severe cuts (far more severe than anything suggested). The Government needs to cut another £120-£150 billion off the annual bill (just under 10% of the economy) and that can really only come by sacking unnecessary public sector workers, reducing public sector pensions and cutting State benefits. (Around 30% of all public sector spending goes on salaries for public sector workers.) It isn't possible to raise taxes any further without doing serious damage to the economy. People need to be encouraged to work and save and overtaxing and grabbing more money from peoples savings and private pensions is exactly the wrong thing to do. Just to make things worse we have an ageing population and (thanks to EU rules) a massive and unstoppable influx of immigrants who want to take advantage of our absurdly over generous benefits system. Just as we need to cut costs so our costs will rise remorselessly.

70

George Osbourne increased the national debt by 60% in his first parliament alone. Austerity, anyone?

71

The number of people who are dependent on the State is now greater than the number of people working, earning and paying tax. (It happened eight years earlier than I predicted in my book *The Health Scandal*.)

72

If the crisis had been allowed to do what crises are supposed to do then the knaves working at places like Goldman Sachs and the Royal Bank of Scotland would all be looking for proper jobs instead of having been bailed out by taxpayers.

73

Before 2030, England will need to increase the breadth and depth of its austerity programme. Only the USA, Japan and Ireland have a more worrying demographic problem. Few, if any, countries are embedded as deeply in the mire as England is. But then no other country had Gordon the Moron holding the national wallet. Actually it wasn't the holding that did the damage, so much as the constant opening.

74

Here's another way of summing up what went wrong. Appallingly ignorant people borrowed too much and appallingly ignorant people lent too much.

75

All over Europe people are voting out politicians who have tried to deal with their nation's debts by introducing mild austerity measures. In most of those countries the measures were far too mild to have any real effect. In the May elections in France, for example, Sarkozy was rejected for merely suggesting an increase in the official retirement age from 60 to 62. In England, the Coalition was thrashed by Labour in local elections even though Cameron, Clegg and Company had done so little that the nation's debt was greater than it had been when they had started, but even these modest measures were far too painful for the majority of voters to accept. People will always vote for the bread and the circuses even though they surely know that they are destroying their children's futures. The inevitable result must be that the financial crisis will now continue for decades - and there will be more crashes to come. In my more pessimistic moments I can see England remaining in recession permanently. We will not escape from it without some form of economic or political revolution. People have become accustomed to being able to spend more than they earn and they want to carry on living the very good life without actually having to work hard enough to earn the money to pay for it. The euro will go bust (and the EU will break up) because the austerity measures necessary to correct the EU's financial problems will not be accepted either by EU bureaucrats or by voters. The pound will merely remain in an unstoppable decline.

76

Politicians are encouraged by the party system, and the voting system, to penalise the diligent and to subsidise the feckless. They have done so with rare enthusiasm. Low interest rates, high taxes on savings and a constant hailstorm of legislation designed to punish those stupid enough to save their money, rather than spend it, have disappointed the current generation of savers and made it perfectly clear to future generations that there is absolutely no point at all in saving, investing or putting money into any sort of pension fund. And then the politicians pretend to wonder why we are in a mess. If they had wanted to destroy our nation's economic stability they could not have done so more efficiently.

77

The Government knows that our nation's debts and our personal debts will last for generations (and possibly for ever) unless they are inflated away. And so that is what they are doing. Of course, when you deliberately devalue the currency by printing money, lowering interest rates and doing everything you can to encourage inflation (while at the same time expressing certainty that inflation will soon be under control and surprise when it is not) you will knowingly destroy the savings of the daft souls who, not having a public sector pension to look forward to, have prudently put aside a chunk of their earnings so that they can look after themselves in their old age.

78

EU countries (except England and Czech Republic) have signed an agreement to keep government debt to below 60% of GDP and to reduce it if it breaches this level, or face a fine of up to 0.1% of GDP. (I love rules like this. If a country is in deep financial trouble the EU will take more money from it so that it goes into deeper financial trouble. But at least the EU bureaucrats get more funding for long lunches and even longer holidays.) Of the countries which signed the agreement the following were (at the time) in breach of it: Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece, Netherlands, Germany, France, Hungary, Ireland, Austria, Malta, Cyprus. Naturally, England was also in breach. The really stupid thing about this is that those countries signed a document knowing that they were in breach, knowing that they would remain in breach for the forseeable future and knowing that their nations would be fined huge sums of money until the sky started raining down money and they were able to buy their way out of their mess.

79

Central banks are now preventing the prices of property, bonds and shares from falling to their natural levels. Markets are regulated, controlled and artificially inflated by governments. The State now controls the housing market and the price of bonds and shares (though not, of course, their true value).

80

Companies and households are deleveraging. They are scared and they are cutting back on discretionary spending. (They worry, for example, about what heating and petrol prices are going to be next winter.) This will lead to lower corporate profits and a lower tax take for the Government.

81

Governments need money to pay their debts but dare not cut the public sector as much as they should and so they will push up taxes and introduce a mass of new fees and fines. These will damage business and households and push up unemployment.

82

Central banks are printing money to try to get people borrowing and spending in the utterly insane belief that debt problems can be solved by spending more money. (This is what I call Brownian Economics - which I define as economic theory devised by a moron.) Everyone working at the Bank of England should be locked up or, ideally, executed for a new offence called treasonous stupidity. The plan isnt working (and wont work) because the commercial banks aren't lending because they are too frightened of not getting their money back. And they need the money to pay off their own debts and to satisfy barking new EU rules about solvency. And even if they wanted to lend money no one wants to borrow.

83

The Government and the EU now force pension funds to invest most of their money in gilts. (The Government also wants the pension funds to invest in infrastructure funds but they are not allowed to do this by the EU.) At the same time the Government is buying vast amounts of gilts. The result is that the price of gilts is rising and the yields obtained are falling. This is very bad for pensioners because their pensions are directly linked to gilt yields.

84

Retailers usually make their money out of consumers aged between 18 and 34 but for most manufacturers and retailers the current generation are a dead loss. They simply don't have the money to spend. Those who have been to university have huge debts, little or no net worth and, unless they've been lucky enough to obtain work as investment bankers, barely enough cash to buy food and shelter. Many have either never left home or have had to go back home in order to survive. Most have already had to cut back their expenditure. They have had to postpone marriage. Many have huge credit card debts. They take boring, low paid jobs to try to pay some of their bills. The two things they still spend money on are clothes and mobile phones. Self-image is important. And when you're broke and facing a bleak future it is pretty well all there is left. The young dress well, text well and surf well. But they store up problems for the future by eating crappy food and cheap booze.

85

In 2010, just 29 people were declared bankrupt in Ireland. In contrast, in England and Wales there were 135,089 bankruptcies and in Scotland there were 20,323. The difference? In Ireland it takes 12 years to be discharged. In England, Wales and Scotland it takes just 12 months and bankrupts can hold onto their homes, cars and mobile telephones. Bankruptcy in England is now no big deal and under an IVA (individual voluntary arrangement) the court which decides what a borrower can afford to pay allows him money for essentials such as a mobile phone contract and a satellite TV subscription. Corporate bankruptcies are even worse. Companies go bust and then reappear within minutes with all the previous creditors furious but legally stuffed and the borrower free to carry on regardless. It is hardly surprising that people from all over Europe are now coming to England to go bust. England has become known as the bankruptcy centre of the world; people flock to England for their debts to be forgiven and forgotten.

86

Much of the personal debt crisis which will hold back the economy for generations to come was caused by the availability of easy credit - available through banks and credit cards. Banks have stopped offering easy credit but credit cards are booming and old-fashioned cash is in decline. In Sweden only around 3% of all transactions involve cash, and Canada has just decided to phase out the penny (one cent) coin, telling retailers to round up their transactions. (This is a tax on the poor because it is the poor who tend to use cash most often for small purchases). In late July 2012, a Government minister actually announced that it was immoral to pay tradesmen in cash. He was presumably unaware that cheques bounce and that credit card companies charge crippling levels of commission. Governments claim that manufacturing coins is expensive and banks hate cash, partly because moving money around is expensive and partly because cash is anonymous. Plus, there is the advantage that credit card companies can charge both retailers and consumers huge fees for the privilege of using their plastic. These days every financial institution is jumping onto the bandwagon and producing their own cash replacements. Barclays has devised a system which allows mobile phone owners to pay for stuff by swiping a sticker on their phones. As if to help them the EU has insisted that nations introduce strict limits on the amount of cash that can be used in any one transaction. (They argue, naturally, that cash is being phased out to stop terrorism, money laundering and, for all I know, the spread of fungal infections.) All this is rather sad because cash does have many advantages. It is anonymous, secure (the most you can lose is the amount you are carrying) and, most important of all, it imposes a discipline on the user. If you don't have the cash you can't spend it. Credit and debit cards encourage spending and they encourage over spending.

87

I try desperately hard to avoid any feelings of paranoia but is it possible that the plan is just to kill off the middle classes for political reasons? To weaken the one group of people who might start a real revolution (all real revolutions begin not with the dispossessed but with the middle classes) and to give strength to the principles of the statist branch of fascism espoused by the EU? The Government and the EU have already done everything they can to damage marriage (one of the most important strengtheners for individuals and one which turns weak, nervous individuals into strong, determined couples) but are they now planning to kill off the middle classes (and particularly those middle classes who are, by their work, independent of the State) by removing their wealth? Private pension funds have been steadily and deliberately destroyed over recent years. (Gordon Brown started the process but he has not been the only culprit.) Investment money has been steadily transferred away from the middle classes by rapacious governments and fund managers. And now, by devaluing savings, by encouraging inflation, the Government is destroying the financial independence of those wary souls who saved and put their spare pennies into a sock under the bed.

88

All investing is now gambling because everything that affects stock and bond prices, interest rates and inflation, is political and is, therefore, decided by selfish, irrational psychopaths. Investors who do not understand and accept this truth will lose their money. (My investment philosophy is contained in my book *Moneypower*.)

89

When it was clear that the world was facing a huge economic crisis (back in 2007) governments would have been wise to stand clear. Bad banks should have been allowed to go bust. Bad bankers should have been allowed to lose their mansions, town houses, yachts and private jets. Bad companies should have gone out of business.

Greedy house buyers who bought more than they could afford should have been allowed to lose their homes. There would have been a lot of pain. Many hedge fund managers and investment managers would have gone bust. Millions of people would have got poorer. Millions would have lost their jobs. There would have been a Great Correction. And by now everything would be much better. There would be sunshine on the horizon. We would have a growing economy. New businesses would be springing up.

But the politicians couldn't leave things alone. They had to interfere. And, inevitably, the Gordon Browns of this world made things much, much worse. The politicians failed to understand the basic principle of money: you need to balance your outgoings with your income. Mr Micawber understood it. Most housewives and entrepreneurs understand it. But politicians, Treasury officials and bankers don't think it applies to them in their official capacity (though they probably accept it in their private capacity). The outgoings and the incomings have to be managed and balanced. There is no other way. It's really quite simple. But hubris clearly overwhelms the Browns and Goodwins of this world.

Conclusion

Many middle class citizens have lost their jobs, their homes, their pensions, their standards of living and their hopes. The rich bankers have got richer and the politicians have acquired ever more money and power.

The Treasury, the Bank of England and the regulators have not got anything right for decades. You would think they would get the odd forecast right occasionally just out of luck - but, sadly, they don't. A bunch of monkeys sitting at typewriters would have done better. You would think they might make a correct decision from time to time. But they don't. With unerring stupidity, and a very special brand of financial genius, they get everything wrong. Whatever they do makes things worse.

We are going to take a long, long time to recover from the coming deep depression. However gloomy you feel you probably do not feel glum enough. We cannot grow our way out of our financial problems because our banks are too bust and as a nation we owe too much. (Only once in history has an economy grown its way out of serious financial problems. That was America between 1938 and 1943. And the growth came as America charged England top prices for arms and armaments and made a fortune out of our misfortune.)

There are only two ways out of this financial crisis: inflation and austerity. The people aren't going to accept austerity. And so it's going to be inflation. Loads of it.

Our only defence is to recognise what is going to happen and to make our personal plans accordingly.

Our politicians aren't ever going to do that. Gordon Brown always used to blame the rest of the world for any problems the economy encountered when he was `in charge'. It was, he suggested, crazy foreigners who had pushed us back into a boom and bust economy. And the Coalition is now blaming the euro for our problems. (At least they are when they don't think anyone from Brussels is listening).

The truth (a rare commodity in political circles) is that the eurozone has very little effect on our economy. We hardly manufacture anything any more (the few things we do make are usually glued together, like IKEA furniture, on behalf of foreign companies) and our exports to the eurozone make up a fairly measly 13% of GDP. Looked at from the other direction that means that 87% of our economy has nothing whatsoever to do with Europe. And, just for the record, the 13% that we do sell to euro countries goes mostly to Germany and France - and not to Greece or Spain.

Cameron, Osborne, Clegg and company will never tell you this (even if they know it) but our economy is stuffed for entirely home-grown reasons. Our State is too big and far too expensive. No country can survive when the State spends 50 pence in the pound (which ours now does). The public sector has grown far too fat and much of what it does actually damages productivity in the relatively small part of the economy that actually makes things. And our debts are far too high. Only Japan owes more than we do and Japan has been in a mess for decades. If you add together sovereign, corporate and personal debt we owe more than 500% of GDP. That's bad. Actually, it's way past bad. Most of that debt was financed by borrowing that isn't available any more and companies and individuals are trying to pay back what they owe. For growth to increase, spending has to rise and spending isn't going to increase while people are busy paying their debts and worrying about their jobs. Besides, the banks are too much in debt to do any serious lending. Finally, the Bank of England's insane enthusiasm for destroying the strength of the currency by printing money is doing massive harm. And taking interest rates down to just about zero for savers isn't helping. These are the policies which have been popular in Japan since the 1980s and if you want to know how healthy Japan is just take a look at how their stock market has done in the last quarter of a century. (To save you the bother it's been going down with relentless enthusiasm.)

The Government isn't going to deal with any of our very real home-grown problems. And so the problems are going to get worse.

CHAPTER 2: BENEFITS, ENTITLEMENTS AND THE NANNY STATE

Introduction

We live in a world of rights, demands and expectations. The phrase `my rights' is as common as the phrase `my duty' is rare. We live in a world dedicated to the survival of the weakest. Millions of people are now brought up in homes where no one has ever worked and where no one intends to work. We have created a culture of expectation and a massive army of scroungers who feed from the State in the same utterly dependant, unquestioning way that a baby feeds from his mother's breast. The demands of the parasites are sucking the life out of our nation so rapidly that they will soon have run out of other people's money. Our society has broken down. All we have left is survival. Just about everyone we are in contact with makes us frightened, frustrated or angry. We distrust politicians, bankers, estate agents, doctors, business leaders, courts and the police. Behind everything lies the State. People are encouraged to have demands, rights and expectations but not to have any respect for others or any sense of service. Integrity is a word which appears only in dictionaries. Our society has encouraged people to mistake wants for needs. International corporations have grown rich by devising ways to encourage demands and to glorify instant gratification and short-term delights. People are encouraged to think short term; they eat too much, drink too much, take too many drugs (prescribed and otherwise), watch too much TV, use the Internet too much and gamble too much. People have become fat, like greedy pheasants gorging themselves so much that eventually they can hardly take off from the ground. Easy targets for foxes and weekend shooters. We are too harassed and too troubled by trivia, spewed forth by the mediocre-minded and those whose minds are closed, to be able to concentrate on, or dare to deal with, the really important stuff in our lives. As a result our State ruled society is rotten, intrinsically corrupt, bent, out of balance. Our society is organised to benefit the bad guys. Too many bad things happen to good people and too many good things happen to bad people.

The basic problem, of course, is that the State controls the way we think and the way we act. We need (but do not have) proper hierarchies with people responsible to someone above them and responsible for the actions of the individuals below them in the hierarchy. But we don't have hierarchical systems because that's not how fascist States operate.

We spend our formative years at school. We worry about, take and hopefully pass a seemingly endless series of virtually pointless examinations. The aim of each examination is to allow us to take another examination. After we have learned to read and write most of the education we acquire at school is a waste of time. We are taught a toxic mixture of lies, propaganda and useless information but we are never taught to think for ourselves. (In fact, in many educational establishments, thinking for yourself is punished.) Young people who might be expected to grow up wanting to change the wrongs they see around them are told what to read and when to read it. They are told what to think and when to think it. At school they are told which staircase to go up and which staircase to do down. They are told what they must eat and when they must eat it. They are told which games they are allowed to play, how to play them and when they are allowed to play them. They are told what to read and when to read it and what to think about it when they have read it. They are told when to talk and when not to talk (and what to say and how to say it). In order to fit neatly into their peer group they must have the right hairstyle, favour the right music and watch the right television programmes. They are prepared for corporate life (or bureaucratic life) right from the very start.

When they're older they will be told which receptacle to put their rubbish into, how fast they can drive their car, which forms they must fill in to do this and which forms they must fill in to do that. They will be treated like children at the age of 10, 20, 30, 40, 50 and beyond. It is no wonder that most adults still behave like obedient children. It is no wonder that although they may feel that much around them is wrong they do not fight, or revolt. (Occasionally, there will be mild protests but these are, generally speaking, inspired by mercenary motives. There was some dissent when the sensible Poll Tax was suggested. There are occasional protests about the price of petrol. There is little protest about the things that really matter: the big issues which do not have an immediate, obvious effect on our pockets.)

The people who might be expected to think about our country, and to think about the terrible things that are happening, have been trained not to think, not to rebel. They have been trained to do as they are told. Those who know what is wrong are often frightened to speak out. They know that if they stick their heads above the parapet then the police will film them and, if they keep still, they may well be shot. (If you wear a bomber jacket and carry a rucksack they will shoot you a lot.)

And, the State ensures that people take little interest in big questions such as liberty and democracy (and their absence) because they are overwhelmed by problems of daily existence. People are battling rules and regulations for so much of the time that they have no time to see, or fight for, the things that really matter. Our prejudices, beliefs and expectations are a result of very skilful, long-term indoctrination. The indoctrination has been managed by experts.

1

The Big State is constantly getting bigger. And many aspects of the State's interference are taken for granted. Why, for example, should we accept that the State should pay for all school education? Free education was introduced so that factory workers had somewhere to leave their children when they went off to work. Free schools weren't introduced because education is a right (as many people seem to think). There is no more fundamental human need than for food. But I haven't yet heard even the most ardent Statist argue that supermarkets should offer free food to everyone.

Why should women have a year's maternity leave when they have a baby? This rule has done more to damage industry than any other and has proved particularly damaging to entrepreneurs who, if they are daft enough to hire female employees of childbearing age, must risk losing key members of staff and being prevented by law from replacing them. If women want to have children then they should give up their jobs and stay at home. And why should men receive paternity leave?

2

We need to start asking some fundamental questions. If people want to have children why should the State pay for them? If people choose to have 19 children shouldn't they work hard and feed those children themselves? Should people on benefits be rich enough to have two cars, three digital television sets and a full sports and movie subscription to Sky TV? Many women seem to regard having babies as a career. And they expect taxpayers to pay their `wages'. Should anyone receiving benefits receive more than the minimum wage? Why should anyone who is a parent receive money simply because they have become a parent? Why is there no VAT on clothing for children? Why are the unemployed allowed free, or cut price, access to events and buildings where the employed have to pay full price? Why should people who are on benefits receive travel expenses if they need to go to hospital? Low paid workers (who may well have less money coming in) have to pay for themselves. Why are single mothers given a free flat? This encourages teenage girls to become pregnant. (Not surprisingly, England has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates on the planet). Wouldn't girls be less enthusiastic about becoming pregnant if they were housed in a dormitory?

3

In 2012 it was revealed that one family was claiming £50,000 a year in benefits, and living in a five bedroom house - all at taxpayers' expense. The lady of the house explained `We're taking advantage of the system, but that's the system's fault. We'd be silly not to.' She added: `I feel this situation has been forced upon us by the Government. The minimum wage is too low and you lose your benefits if you work, but they're too easy to get if you don't work. If I have to get a job I want a good one. For now, I have to make the most of the system.' She admitted that she could work and said that she did voluntary work at a charity shop. `I'm better off volunteering than earning - we're well off and I'm not going to give that up until I have to.' She said that they didn't need a five bedroom house with a large garden but that it was in a nice area with good schools. `I know taxpayers are being punished,' she said. `I hate taking their money. But we're being allowed to get away with it.'

Her husband, a former factory worker, said that he would love to get a job but that `if I work more than an hour I feel ill and get stressed. I only get migraines every three weeks but I qualify for sick pay.'

A Department for Work and Pensions spokesman said that a handout of £50,000 a year is the equivalent of a salary of £72,000 a year before tax.

4

`If the maintenance of public credit, then, be truly so important, the next enquiry which suggests itself is, by what means is it to be effected? The ready answer to which question is, by good faith, by a punctual performance of contracts. States, like individuals, who observe their engagements, are respected and trusted: while the reverse is the fate of those who pursue an opposite conduct.' - Alexander Hamilton, first US Secretary of the Treasury 1790

5

The Statists always have an excuse for the latest bit of nonsense. They say that what they are doing is to protect us from money launderers, terrorists or ourselves. You can excuse anything with these three. Fans cannot take pasties and plastic bottles of water into sports grounds for security reasons (although once you are safely inside they will happily sell you as much as you can eat and drink). Health and safety idiots chop down conker trees, bulldoze gravestones and stop clowns blowing bubbles (lest children get the soap in their eyes). In all these cases the spoiltsports are protecting us from our greatest threat: ourselves. These all seem rather silly things. But they aren't; they are part of a pattern of oppression and it is easy to believe that there is a purpose. Oppress and suppress at every possible opportunity and you will soon acquire a compliant and silent population.

6

Today, nothing remains the same for long. We live in times of deliberately unsettling instability. The State (and its ever-loyal servants) doesn't want us to feel at peace. The State wants us to feel nervous and unsettled because then the State can do with us what it will.

7

`A democracy will continue to exist up until the time that voters discover that they can vote themselves generous gifts from the public treasury. From that moment on, the majority always votes for the candidates who promise the most benefits from the public treasury, with the result that every democracy will finally collapse due to loose fiscal policy, which is always followed by a dictatorship.' - Alexander Tyler, history professor at University of Edinburgh in 1787

8

People on benefits are given cheap transport, cheap stamps, free prescriptions and all sorts of other perks. This is a nonsense and seems further designed to make employment unpalatable and to encourage those who regard permanent unemployment as a viable and preferable career structure. Why should someone who is living on benefits, and receiving more money than someone with a job, receive special financial treatment?

Providing public service housing, free home care for people with disabled children, free transport to hospital for patients who are unemployed and so on and so on is just another form of taxation; charging the better off for the benefit of those who are more demanding, or more adept at understanding the system. The trouble is that these benefits are not free at all. They destroy real jobs because the better off families have less money to spend on cars, holidays, books and so on and so jobs are not created or are lost. Since public services are always inefficient and expensive, purchasing power is lost and wasted for ever on projects and staff and on people who frequently have wants rather than needs. And, because we spend so much money on these things, thousands of old people die of starvation and dehydration.

9

Employers used to pay people when they were off sick as a kindness. Today, employees regard it as a right that they will be paid when they are too ill to work. Indeed, many workers now insist that if they have not taken their `allotted' sick days then they must be allowed to take those days off as holiday. And Europes highest court has ruled that workers who become sick while on holiday can take another paid vacation. This is utter madness.

10

`Mr Tucky's farm exhibited to me what I never saw before, four score oxen, all grazing upon one farm, and all nearly fat! They were some Devonshire and some Herefordshire. They were fatting on the grass only, and I should suppose that they are worth, or shortly will be, thirty pounds each. But the great pleasure with which the contemplation of this fine sight was naturally calculated to inspire me was more than counterbalanced by the thought that these fine oxen, this primest of human food, was, aye, every mouthful of it, destined to be devoured

in the Wen, and that too, for the greater part, by the Jews, loan-jobbers, tax-eaters, and their base and prostituted followers...literary as well as other wretches who, if suffered to live at all, ought to partake of nothing but the offal, and ought to come but one cut before the dogs and cats!' - William Cobbett, Rural Rides

11

The State provides far better protection for those for whom it has direct responsibility than for others. This is particularly true for those who work for the State (who have far more rights than anyone else) but, in addition, people who receive benefits from the State, or who are looked after by the State, have far more rights than people who work. For example, elderly people who pay for their own care do not have the same protections under the Human Rights Act as those whose care is provided by the State. The elderly who have saved their money, and who are, consequently, forced to pay for their care, are less able to sue unscrupulous or badly run care homes if they are poorly fed or left lying in soiled sheets. And so, although it may seem bizarre, it is perfectly true that the middle class elderly have far fewer rights, and far less dignity, than the elderly who have spent all their money and who are being looked after by the State. (The legal reason for this is that care homes can be treated as `public bodies' under the Human Rights Act, meaning that they could be sued for failing to treat elderly people with respect. But this law only applies to residents who are funded by the State - excluding those who have saved for their old age - and providing yet more evidence showing that the bureaucrats and legislators in Europe despise the prudent and the independent.)

12

We have created a society in which many people are born with unreasonable expectations. There has also been a dramatic, unaffordable and unsustainable increase in both the number and extent of the rights which are regarded as inalienable. An increasing proportion of the population now expect to be given a life free from work, and full of pleasure, at the State's expense. This is clearly unsustainable.

13

All attempts to cut Government spending are opposed by two groups: public sector workers and those on benefits. For selfish reasons these two groups want the rest of the country to continue to support them in the style to which they have become accustomed. And since the number of electors employed by the State, or being supported by the State, is now great enough to ensure a Parliamentary majority there is little or no chance that anything will change until the nation goes bankrupt or there is a revolution and those who are paying the bills say `enough'.

14

Our unwieldily benefits system penalises the genuinely needy who also happen to wish to remain dignified, while allowing those who are prepared to work the system, and who put their effort into manipulating and taking advantage, to get rich at the expense of the State. Englands 120,000 problem families cost taxpayers an estimated £9 billion!

15

`Just because you do not take an interest in politics doesn't mean politics won't take an interest in you.' - Pericles 430 BC

16

Travel within England is now so expensive that employment is, for many people, not a realistic option. For example, someone who goes to work in central London will pay £30 to £35 a week to travel by bus or train. (Travelling into London by car, and then parking, would cost so much that even bankers might blanch.) In small market towns it costs £20 to £50 a week to park for a five day week. How can shop assistants and office staff afford that? The payment isn't even tax deductible.

17

The availability of generous benefits has made it difficult for employers to hold onto staff. Low paid employees know that they will almost certainly be better off if they are fired.

18

Millions of people who are officially regarded as unfit to work are nevertheless able to enjoy active lifestyles. Anyone who can visit a racecourse, sit in a pub or play a computer game is fit to work.

19

Folk who don't have at least one job by the age of 25 are likely to spend their entire lives on benefits. Many of them will supplement their money by turning to crime. This has the added advantage of giving them something to do in the evenings.

20

Our courts now pass greater sentences on those who have been found guilty of `hate crime' or `racially motivated crime'. This, of course, is politically correct nonsense and I suspect that every judge must see it as such. The cause of a crime is irrelevant and to suggest otherwise is clearly discriminatory because it implies that the woman mugged and maimed by a thug is less injured or less important than the woman mugged and maimed for reasons which can be described as `racial'. I doubt very much if the two women see their injuries as lesser or greater. In political terms the advantage of this sort of legislation is, I suppose, that it has taken us down a road which enables the courts to send people to prison for many years simply for saying something which can be judged politically incorrect. Or, indeed, for *listening* to someone else say something which can be judged to be politically incorrect.

21

Incompetence is now the norm among State employees. Money is wasted by the train load and incompetence is rewarded with yet more bonuses. In May 2012, I was sent a new red logbook for our truck. The Government department responsible for this unexpected act of generosity, the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA), told me that I must destroy my old blue log book. They explained: `We are replacing all existing blue V5Cs (their name for a log book). The new certificate is being introduced following the theft of a number of blank blue V5Cs. The aim is to reduce the risks to motorists of buying a stolen or cloned vehicle.' Don't they lock up the damned certificates at night? Put them in a drawer? How much has this cost us all? Tens of millions? Hundreds of millions?

22

Everyone now wants to be bailed out by the State when things go wrong. Originally, the State took on responsibility for caring for people who were old, ill or unable to find work. Today, that responsibility has exploded. Even bankers and house owners expect to be bailed out by the State when things go wrong. The only people operating without a safety net are the self-employed and the small businessman.

23

Our politically correct society now actively encourages those with severe learning difficulties to form relationships with members of the opposite sex. The result is, inevitably, children who either have to be adopted (because the parents cannot possibly care for them) or, if the parents keep the children, a phenomenal cost to the nation in attendant social workers and services.

24

The rising cost of the National Health Service is due not so much to providing care for the elderly but because of the rise in the number of people demanding surgery and treatment for non-life threatening health problems: women who demand infertility treatment and breast enhancement surgery and would-be transsexuals who demand free treatment. These are all lifestyle choices which should not and cannot be paid for by the National Health Service. It is, indeed, arguable that the State-run NHS should not provide free maternity care. Women who choose to have babies aren't ill. They are pregnant because they want to have a baby. Why should the impoverished State fund these parental ambitions?

25

When it was suggested that benefits should be limited to £26,000 per family the plan was voted down by unelected Bishops in the House of Lords.

26

There are now millions of people for whom life on benefits has become a lifestyle choice. And many of those have been extremely adept at understanding how best they can manage the system to their advantage. The number of households in England where no one has ever, ever worked has doubled in the last decade and is now around 300,000. The children of those households will grow up accustomed to think of unemployment as normal. Some will be taught to think that getting a job is a mug's game. The modern welfare state discourages self-responsibility and encourages a sense of entitlement. It is immoral in principle to take money from a man who works in order to give it to someone who doesn't want to work. We have created a world in which it is the unfittest who are most likely to survive. And we cannot afford the world we've made. Supporting a welfare state is a rich country's game (rather like paying for a yacht big enough to have its own helipad is a rich man's game). And we're not rich enough for such luxuries.

The people who live on benefits remind me of the inhabitants of those remote Pacific islands who pray for gifts from their mythical deity. The English have, as a nation, virtually lost the idea of self-reliance and personal responsibility.

27

There are so many laws that we are all criminals now. England now struggles along under 21,000 different regulations. I bet you that within the last week (probably less) you have, probably unknowingly, broken at least one law. If you run a business then you doubtless break at least one law a day. (It will, of course, have been defined as a `regulation' or `rule' but in my world when the punishment for breaking a `regulation' or `rule' is arrest, charge, court appearance, fine and possible imprisonment then the `regulation' or the `rule' is a law.) We are all of us drowning in information about new laws. And yet if you don't act in accordance with the rules you are in trouble. We are all ignorant but ignorance is no excuse. A specialist lawyer admitted to me that he can no longer keep up with the new laws relating to his own very specialised area of the law. If he cannot keep up with his own speciality what chance do the rest of us have?

28

In England today, the State allows burglars to stay out of prison but puts old age pensioners into prison if they make protests about paying unjust taxes or refuse to pay the BBC's annual licence fee on the perfectly accurate and reasonable grounds that the BBC is outrageously biased (for example in favour of the European Union) and is not doing what it is supposed to do.

All this is practical fascism. The burglar is no threat to the State but the old aged pensioner is. And in our world today, the State always comes first.

Despite (or, perhaps, because of) these topsy-turvy interpretations of the law, there are now around nine million people in England with criminal records (common or garden motoring offences don't count as criminal offences). This means that one in six people is a criminal. Maybe Royal Mail should have thought of this when they decided to leave mail with neighbours. Their new policy means that one in six parcels will be handed to a criminal instead of to the rightful recipient.

Our oppressive, law-laden society has created a sense of lawlessness and contempt and disregard for the law.

29

I doubt if there is any legislation which has done more harm to the economy than the law which gives women who choose to leave work to have a baby the right to insist that their employer holds their job for them for a year. It is hardly surprising that no sensible employer will hire a woman of child bearing age unless there is no other suitable candidate available.

30

Social services do bugger all for real people in real need. Yesterday my wife saw a middle aged woman rummaging in a bin for food. This was on the main street in the Cathedral City of Wells. The Princess opened her handbag and gave the woman all the money she had. Social workers everywhere are too busy attending meetings to deal with the people who really need help.

31

In our State-run world there is no justice. Now, all we have left is knowing what is right and what is wrong and being able to differentiate in our hearts and minds between what is wrong and what is right and then living our lives accordingly.

32

In our courts today people of power and influence are rarely if ever to blame for anything. Politicians and public sector employees are hardly ever found guilty. The only people who are to blame are those who are regarded as being outside the system - e.g. the self-employed. And so we learn never to start a lawsuit unless the reason for the lawsuit is so dear to us that we are prepared to fight until we are bankrupt and destroyed. We do not start lawsuits expecting justice. We start them only because we want revenge so badly that we are prepared to destroy ourselves while nibbling at them. And we learn not to start a lawsuit because we know we are right. If we do then we will probably lose and our sense of injustice will destroy us. (It is fairly well known among lawyers that in order to get an innocent person's conviction squashed the judges must be assured that no one in an official capacity was to blame, and certainly not the police.)

33

I have for some years been confused by the fact that while driving on speed restricted stretches of motorways I am invariably overtaken by lorries travelling at 10 mph to 20 mph faster than the ordained limit. The explanation is simple: lorry drivers simply don't care whether or not they lose their licences. Most are poorly paid and know that if they lose their licences (and, therefore, their jobs) they will receive just as much money in benefits and, instead of racing up and down motorways, they will be able to stay at home and watch daytime television.

34

The State has steadily destroyed the middle classes. Today, only the very rich, and people on benefits, can afford to have lots of children. In our new world you need to be very poor (and to allow the State to worry about everything) or very rich (and able to look after yourself). The middle classes are stuffed. And will be stuffed for some considerable time to come. This matters because the middle classes are always the backbone of any nation and any community.

35

If you give people free homes, free food, free satellite television, free Internet access, and free mobile phones then they soon begin to regard all these as their bread and butter rights. They resent the fact that other people, people who work hard, have more `things'. And so they too want more. They become resentful, angry and bitter. They demand more money, more gadgets, more rights. And if they aren't given them they steal them. In our nation today the people who demand the most receive the most. The ready availability of free money encourages a huge sense of expectations and entitlements. People regard free money as their right. Increasing numbers of young people believe the world owes them a living, an iPhone, a Play Station and a nice, late model BMW with tinted windows and wire wheels.

36

`Early-rising, sobriety, provident carefulness, attentive observation, a regard for reputation, reasoning on causes and effects, skill in the performance of labour, arts, sciences, even public-spirit and military valour and renown, will all be found, at last, to have had their foundation in a fear of poverty: and, therefore, it is manifest that the existence of poverty is indispensably necessary, whether a people be in a wild or a civilised state; because without its existence mankind would be unpossessed of this salutary fear.' - William Cobbett (Cobbett's Sermons: On the Rights of the Poor)

37

It seems obvious that the lowest paid worker should receive more than the highest non-worker paid on benefits. But this is not an accepted truth among those who make the decisions about how public money should be spent.

38

If being grown up means taking responsibility for your own actions (a definition which the law seems to suggest) then we have a nation dominated by scrounging layabouts who behave like children.

39

No one ever measures the value of projects the Government pays for. When a new building is commissioned, or a road is built, no one ever bothers to see whether the project has been financially sound. When a company opens a new factory or a new shop they will want to know whether their investment has paid off; they will want to know whether the money was spent wisely or not. Governments never bother to find out whether or not they are spending taxpayers money wisely.

40

Our interfering State, speaking with the voice of health and safety experts, took down celebratory Jubilee bunting in Whitehall and stopped people putting it up elsewhere. In almost every imaginable way, the State now decides what we can and cannot do.

41

As the State gives more, so people demand more. A woman recently complained because a 700-year-old castle provided no access for her pram. As a result the building had to be closed to the public.

42

The State no longer approves of individuals (soldiers and boy scouts) being required to take an oath of loyalty to the Queen and to God. In future the oath of loyalty must be to the European Union.

43

The State has decided that same sex marriages must be allowed. And so, although the vast majority of electors are opposed to the idea, the State will get its way.

44

Over 1,000 different agencies can enter your home without a warrant.

45

The Government now spends very nearly half of the English economy. One in five people in England works for the Government, local authorities or public corporations of one sort or another. The vast majority of them are clerks and petty bureaucrats without whom the State would function more, not less, effectively. In other words nearly one in five people is holding their country back, doing more harm than good. We would all be better off if they went on permanent strike and stayed at home to watch television.

46

The Government should encourage job creation not through daft schemes but by cutting red tape and taxes for entrepreneurs. Politicians and commentators claim that the EU does not allow us to cut red tape. But Germany has done so (with great success) despite being a committed, leading member of the EU and being bound by the same rules as England.

47

The Government has produced a 200-page document telling people how to use ladders. I assume that someone will soon write a 20-page document explaining to citizens how they should lift and carry 200-page documents without hurting themselves.

48

`A nation can survive its fools, and even the ambitious. But it cannot survive treason from within. An enemy at the gates is less formidable, for he is known and he carries his banners openly. But the traitor moves among those within the gate freely, his sly whispers rustling through all the alleys, heard in the very halls of government itself. For the traitor appears no traitor; he speaks in the accents familiar to his victims, and he wears their face and their garments, and he appeals to the baseness that lies deep in the hearts of all men. He rots the soul of a nation; he works secretly and unknown in the night to undermine the pillars of a city; he infects the body politic so that it can no longer resist. A murderer is less to be feared.' - Marcus Tullius Cicero

49

My insurance company tells me that in order to satisfy the regulations I must keep all my insurance documents for a minimum of 40 years.

50

Many of the new regulations which are introduced hit small firms badly. Big companies have whole departments filling in and filing forms but small businesses have to struggle. On the whole, big companies welcome complex new red tape because new regulations keep out new competitors. In fact big companies often encourage new regulations, and pay lobbyists to suggest them to European Union officials.

51

Despite our nation being wrapped in red tape, and bludgeoned by health and safety regulations, the evidence shows that the rules and regulations simply do not work. A recent study showed that 60% of the people who work in cafés preparing food have faecal matter on their hands. That really isn't surprising because the same survey showed that 30% of all people in cafés never wash their hands after going to lavatory. Staff who prepare food, or touch it at all, should wear plastic gloves.

52

Vince Cable (surely the most dangerous man in England now that no one with functioning cortical tissue takes Clegg seriously) is a dedicated advocate of State intervention. Like most people in Government he seems to have no affinity with, or sympathy for, people who try to run small businesses. As business secretary he has opposed sensible attempts to reduce the number of regulations affecting small businesses. He, like endless eurocrats, doesnt seem to understand that too many rules destroy common sense and make people intellectually, morally and spiritually flabby.

53

Small companies pay £6 billion a year to consultants for help in complying with State regulations. The total spent on complying with regulations is estimated to be £16.8 billion a year for small companies.

54

The cost of the red tape introduced by the State is, of course, passed on to the consumer. And the weight of all the purposeless and suffocating regulations pushes up the cost of products and services and pushes down the quality of what is made and what is done.

55

Computer aficionados like to claim that the Internet helped produce the on-going revolution in the Middle East. This is nonsense. The revolutions which produced such changes in Turkey and Libya were not sparked by the Internet. They happened after a young Tunisian fruit seller called Muhammad Bouazizi set himself on fire when municipal inspectors not only made it impossible for him to make a living but upended his cart (tipping his fruit and vegetables onto the road) and spat in his face when they found that he was trying to sell fruit and vegetables without a licence. All over the world governments have started to license and regulate jobs. They are doing this not because they want to protect people from incompetence but because they realise that it's a rather sneaky way to charge a good many annual fees. Within the EU and the Middle East armies of State-employed regulators strut around enforcing pointless rules and charging fees which few people can afford. It's real fascism in action.

England is now introducing licences and certificates for all trades and professions. These must, of course, be paid for. Some of these new rules come from the EU. Others seem to be modelled on American regulations. (In the USA, 40% of all workers need certification: including hairdressers, florists, second-hand booksellers and ballroom dancing teachers). Naturally, all the fees paid for these annual licences and certificates are paid to the Government (or to some Government run quango).

56

When Governments steal with force (or the threat of it) but then fail to do what they have promised, then they are behaving fraudulently. Today, politics in England is a cesspit of corruption, cynicism, greed and self-interest. Our State is too powerful, too invasive and far too expensive. But until there is some sort of genuine revolution nothing will change. The people who work for the State will never do anything to reduce its size, power or cost.

57

We live in a Christian country but we have been told that we have to suppress our Christianity. Employees are banned from wearing Christian crosses but no one dares stop Muslim women covering their heads. No one tells Jewish men that they cannot wear their skullcaps.

Christian adoption agencies, understandably opposed to the idea of homosexual couples adopting children, have had to close because their honestly held beliefs must take second place to the demands of the State. Under intense pressure from lobbyists the State is moving from enforcing tolerance of homosexuality to enforcing approval of it. The first gives freedom to homosexuals but the second is plain and simple censorship which takes freedom away from everyone else. The Government Equalities Office (yet another department straight out of Orwell) has begun what it calls a `consultation' with the public and is asking citizens whether they agree or disagree with the plan to open marriage to all. But, and this is the key, they also say that `this consultation is about how we best remove the ban on same-sex couples having a civil marriage, not on whether this should or should not happen'. That doesn't sound like much of a consultation to me. It's a prejudiced, bigoted fait-accompli. The State is now deciding how we think about things which have nothing to do with it and anyone who values their liberty should protest. (The problem, of course, is that when the State makes up its mind about something it uses all its power to enforce its view. Anyone who questions the new, politically correct attitude on same-sex marriage is likely to find him or herself sitting in an interrogation room at their local police station. That's pure fascism in practical action. You will think how we tell you to think.)

Citizens who want to celebrate Christmas are told that they cannot decorate their windows or their streets because to do so might upset people of other faiths. No one in authority ever seems to realise that this is our country, that we are a Christian country and that if visitors don't like what they see they can always move somewhere else. No one in authority seems to care that if we travel to a country where another God is worshipped, and where the laws and customs are different, we are, quite rightly, expected to behave respectfully and politely. No one in authority even seems to give a damn that the very people whom they claim they are protecting (the Muslims, for example) really don't give a damn whether or not we all wear crosses and hang Merry Christmas banners from every tree and every lamppost. The State (and those who promote it and those who serve it) has no time for Christianity because people who have a religion to comfort them will always be more difficult to oppress.

58

Even though common sense would suggest the opposite, I have no doubt that the financial crisis will result in more regulations and more Government. This will reduce the ability of private businesses to survive, let alone grow. The irony is that the crisis was largely caused by too many bad regulations and too much bad government.

59

Governments should concentrate on looking after their citizens, providing a decent infrastructure, sorting out disputes and providing protection from bad people (whether home-grown or foreign). But, increasingly, our Governments have taken our resources and used them to protect themselves and their pals and to promote their own agenda. They use the police to protect themselves and they use the State to enrich themselves. Hitler and Stalin are rightly regarded as bad leaders but even they didn't steal the citizen's money for themselves. They did their best to protect their nations. Our new breed of leaders have taken leadership to new depths of corruption and dishonesty. All around the world (including in England) prisons are stuffed with leading politicians who lied and deceived. But it is not those who are in prison who are my main worry: it is those who ought to be in prison but who are in still in power.

60

We now live in a world of `targets'. (They came originally from the USSR). All State departments use targets. The problem is that the targets can be adjusted to fit reality. And too often the targets are never set very high at all. For example, I have just seen a `How are the police performing?' leaflet from North Somerset. Their current performance for `sanction detection rates for overall crime' is a woeful 30.5%. This makes them 19th out of 43 nationally, and since their target was to be 20th they have clearly achieved their target. Their detection rate for serious acquisitive crimes was an even more woeful 14.7%. They came 26th out of 43 and conveniently their target was 26th and so they achieved that too. I can imagine there was much celebrating and possibly even handing out of bonuses. There are targets in hospitals these days and, at long last, leading members of the medical establishment are complaining that the Government's target figures for hospitals are affecting the quality of care provided. (I think I wrote about this problem around seven or eight years ago.) The problem, as ever, is that doctors, and hospitals, are now judged by targets which are set by bureaucrats who know nothing about medicine, patients needs or the basic principles of good health care, and who make sure that they, and their families, are well protected by private health subscriptions - usually paid for by taxpayers.

61

The tragedy is that people who think they have a relationship with any professional (doctor, banker, lawyer or whomsoever) are naive and doomed to disappointment because all professionals now belong to the system. Some (doctors) have been bought and turned into public sector workers. Others have been brought under control with legislation (lawyers). And others (bankers) are controlled by a State approved corporate culture which puts short-term profits above everything else. Everywhere we look the State comes first and people come a long way last. The sad result is that many doctors, lawyers and other professionals now aim only to make enough money from their jobs to enable them to retire and to do something else with the rest of their lives. Thanks to Statism, words such as `vocation' are now of purely historical interest.

62

On Monday 8th August 2011, London looked uncomfortably like a Middle East hotspot. The only big difference was that the looters and thugs in London were not politically motivated. They were mostly criminals and they were using the Internet to communicate with one another and to plan their thieving.

Do none of those in power understand that the hoodies who were having fun smashing up shops and stealing mobile phones don't care what anyone says (or does) to them?

Forty years ago I worked as a Community Service Volunteer in the toughest part of Liverpool and later, when I was a medical student in Birmingham, I ran a nightclub called `The Gallows' for kids who would otherwise have been on the streets.

Time and time again the kids I was working with got involved in fights which resulted in serious injuries. They simply didn't care because they didn't have anything to lose. Only when they felt they belonged, had responsibilities, and had a future to lose, did they behave responsibly.

When life is so bad that there is no downside, the bleatings of politicians and the threats from the police aren't going to make any difference to young people who have become feral.

And today things are far, far worse because today's young people have been brought up knowing that they have rights. For a new generation life is now all about rights. There are no responsibilities.

There are only two solutions. A short-term one and a long-term one.

The short-term solution is that street violence has to be subdued with violence. The looting and the destroying have to be stopped with truncheons and firm arrests in order to protect the innocent, the hard-working and the honest. Nothing else will work.

The long-term solution is that life must be made better so that the looters and destroyers have something to lose: homes, belongings, work, pride and hope. They have to learn respect and dignity. And none of that will happen until politicians and policemen start behaving honestly and honourably. And I can't see much danger of that happening.

Meanwhile, the police must be firmly told a few home truths.

i. Stop shooting people who aren't shooting. It tends to annoy and frighten people who don't have guns.

ii. Policemen who shoot citizens who aren't shooting must be suspended and arrested. No exceptions. The police shoot far too many people these days. And there never seems to be any justice.

iii. People who loot buildings and set fires must be arrested immediately. Even the ones who look frightening (because they are wearing balaclavas) must be arrested. The police are paid very well to take personal risks. That's the job. Any officers who don't want to be policemen, protecting life and property, should become librarians and take a massive pay cut. Too often the reaction of the police (standing around or running backwards and forwards) seems egregiously incompetent at best and cowardly at worst. It is the failure of the police to take action which leads to the exacerbation of looting and vandalism.

63

Too many of the people working for the State spend public money in a way that they would never dream of spending their own money. When spending ten million pounds, or a billion pounds, they do not think of that money as being made up of £50 taken from this person's wage packet and £20 from this driver's petrol bill. They think of it as Monopoly money and they treat it as such. They spend and waste public money in a way that they would never dream of spending and wasting their own money.

64

The English Government is the worst investor in the world. And Gordon Brown was the worst of the lot. It was, of course, Brown who sold our gold at the very bottom and lost the nation billions as a result. And now Cameron, Osbourne and Clegg (a trio which sounds suspiciously like an upmarket estate agency) are desperately trying to flog off RBS (the bankrupt and disgraced bank) at a 50% loss.

65

The State, or rather the people who make the decisions on its behalf, seem to have no idea at all how the real world operates. The big motorways near Bristol (the M4 and the M5) are currently undergoing some sort of repair or improvement. I have no idea what the workmen are supposed to be doing, although I do know that hardly any of them seem to be doing it whenever I pass by. There is no notice telling motorists what is being done but there is a large notice informing travellers that the road works and inconvenience will last two and a half years. Two and a half years! You could build a motorway in less time than that. The Chinese could put up a motorway in less time than our workmen spent erecting the speed cameras (which were, of course, the first things to go up). The cost to motorists, business and the nation will surely be measured in billions. These are busy roads and every journey involving these two motorways now takes at least half an hour longer than it should do. There is, in addition, a huge extra cost in terms of the petrol used up by cars and lorries idling or going too slowly. The damage to the economy will be vast.

66

The State now spends over half our money. That's a dangerously high figure. State spending in Russia is approaching 50% and outside observers regard that as a very dangerous sign. We're more of a statist State than

Russia.

67

A writer in the *Guardian* recently suggested that we should all be able to examine any citizens finances. `Transparency underpins a culture of social justice and civic duty,' she claimed, suggesting that `secrecy encourages inequality'. Apparently the citizens of Norway, Finland and Sweden can already study one another's earnings, savings and finances online. Wonderful. Pure Statism. Pure fascism.

68

The State now runs medical care in England and it is important to remember that all the doctors and nurses who work for the NHS are civil servants. As they have shown time and time again their primary professional allegiance is not to their patients but to the State. The doctors strike in June 2012 (organised to protest about the Government's proposal that taxpayer funded pensions for doctors should be altered very slightly) was typical of the sort of unadulterated greed exhibited by public sector workers. It was notable that the striking doctors chose to withdraw their services to patients rather than do anything - such as failing to fill in forms - which might inconvenience bureaucrats or the Government. (The General Medical Council, which exists to maintain standards in the medical profession, was predictably silent when the strike took place.)

69

`If you give me six lines written by the hand of the most honest man, I would find something in them to have him hanged.' - Cardinal Richelieu

70

Official letters are always written in such a way as to make the recipient fearful, frustrated and powerless. Everything the State does is designed to threaten and terrify. Every official document comes with `urgent' printed on it and with threats and punishments defined or implied. We live in a new EU world which resembles the USSR more than it resembles the England whose history and culture we are now forbidden to remember and celebrate.

71

`*A paranoid schizophrenic is a guy who just found out what is going on.' - William Burroughs*

72

Back in 1988, in my book *The Health Scandal,* I forecast that by the year 2020 one third of the population in the developed world would be over the age of 65 and that in every home where there were two healthy parents and two healthy children there would be four disabled or dependent individuals needing constant care.

I predicted that unemployment would be common, that stress related diseases would be endemic and that developed countries around the world would face bankruptcy as they struggled to find the cash to pay pensions, sick pay and unemployment benefits.

I forecast that, tragically and unfairly, resentment, bitterness and anger would divide the young and the old, the able bodied and the dependent, the employed and the unemployed, that there would, within 20 years of the start of the 21st century, be anarchy, despair and civil war with ghettoes of elderly and disabled citizens abandoned to care for themselves.

For years those who have forecast the end of the human race have talked of nuclear war, starvation in the Third World and pollution as being the major threats to our survival. But, back in 1988, I argued that the decline I predicted for the year 2020 would be triggered not by any of these forces but by these much simpler and entirely predictable developments. And I was absolutely right. We are heading for a medical and social catastrophe. Every day that goes by makes that catastrophe increasingly inevitable. Everyone will suffer: today's elderly, tomorrow's elderly and tomorrow's young too.

When I first published this forecast, the medical and political establishments refused to take my warning seriously. I was dismissed as a scaremonger. No one would broadcast the TV series I wanted to make and my book was studiously ignored. Even though I personally bought around two thousand hardback copies of the book and sent them to every Member of Parliament, most leading journalists, many doctors and hundreds of public libraries the whole issue remained largely undiscussed.

In recent weeks some sections of the media have at long last begun to recognise that we are truly facing a colossal problem - and that the growing size of our elderly and disabled populations will pose enormous problems to our society. But neither politicians nor commentators have yet stumbled on the true background explanation for what is happening - and nor have they offered any practical advice on how we can best protect ourselves against the problems which are coming.

When I wrote *The Health Scandal* I estimated that by the year 2020 we would have reached the position whereby more than half the population would be `dependant' - either through age or disability. It now looks as if my calculations were accurate. If anything they were rather conservative. There seems to me to be little doubt that, in the next thirty years, age will have a far more divisive effect on our society than race, sex or class have ever had.

In developed countries total populations are increasing very slowly but ageing populations are increasing at a dramatic rate. For example, during one recent decade the total population of England increased by less than one per cent. But in the same period the pensionable population rose by ten per cent. In many westernised nations one person in five is already a pensioner. By the year 2020, a third of the population in most developed countries will be pensioners.

Several things make this explosion in the size of the elderly population particularly significant.

First, there is the fact that among older populations there is inevitably a higher proportion of disabled and dependent individuals. The incidence of chronic disease rises rapidly among older age groups. Half the beds in National Health Service hospitals are occupied by patients suffering from some sort of stroke. Stroke patients generally need to stay in hospital for long periods of time and they need intensive nursing care. More and more of our hospital beds will be blocked and unavailable for emergencies. All this will inevitably mean that waiting lists for non-urgent surgery will get longer and longer and the number of people in our community suffering from disabling and untreated problems such as arthritic hips will grow even faster. The steady increase in our elderly population will mean that the quality of health care will steadily deteriorate. Our population is getting older and sicker. The general population was never as unhealthy as it is now. Millions are encouraged to be aware of every symptom and to insist that every sign of physical or mental illness be investigated. The Internet taught us to expect all information and entertainment to be free. But the NHS taught us to expect free everything for every symptom; it taught us to abdicate all personal responsibility. The body is able to cure nine out of ten illnesses itself but this extraordinary self-healing ability is ignored and often suppressed. Inevitably, the incidence of iatrogenesis (doctor induced disease) has been rising rapidly for years. Today, doctors and nurses are, along with cancer and circulatory disease, one of the biggest killers in the country.

The second reason why the explosion in the size of the elderly population is dangerous is that the number of young people is falling. And the result is that in the future a smaller and smaller working population will have to support a larger and larger dependent population.

That takes us neatly into the third reason why the explosion in the size of our over 60 population is likely to produce real problems: money.

Most workers who are currently paying pension contributions still assume that the money they are paying will be invested and repaid to them when they reach pensionable age. But that is not the case. The pension contributions paid by today's workers are used to pay the pensions of yesterday's workers - today's pensioners. If pension programmes were being organised by private individuals they would be described as pyramid or Ponzi schemes and the organisers would be in prison.

The pensions that today's workers will receive when they retire will be paid by the regular contributions made by tomorrow's workers. But the working population is getting smaller and smaller. And the retired population is getting bigger and bigger. You don't have to be a genius to see the disaster we are heading for. Within a decade or so the size of our elderly population will have begun to concern politicians. By then it will be too late.

This is a problem that we should be worrying about now. It is, without a doubt, one of the biggest problems our society must face. It is something I've been writing about, in detail, for nearly 30 years but our politicians still don't seem to have noticed it and very few members of the public seem to understand it.

The inescapable overall conclusion is that the incidence of illness and disability is going to rise and rise and the availability of public resources is going to fall and fall. And if you are currently between the ages of 35 and 55 then the chances are that by the time you reach the sort of age at which you might hope to retire you will discover that any publicly funded pension you might receive will either be very small or non-existent and the availability of sheltered or nursing home accommodation will be extremely limited.

If you are currently under the age of 35 then you are going to have to pay a steadily increasing percentage of your earnings in income tax and national insurance deductions. You can safely ignore anything politicians say about cutting taxes. The fact is that taxes are probably never going to be lower than they are at the moment. The young are, I suppose, in the very worst position of all. Throughout their working lives they are going to have to struggle to pay towards the care of a relatively larger and larger elderly population. When they themselves reach retirement age they will be in even bigger trouble for they will probably not have been able to save anything to look after themselves. And State pensions will, if they exist at all, be minute.

73

Our ancestors lived in a world about which they understood very little and where they were constantly in danger. They had many things to be afraid of: death, pain, starvation and being eaten alive by wild animals to mention but four.

We, in contrast, should lead relatively fear free lives. But we don't. All the evidence firmly shows that fear plays a much bigger part in our lives than it ever played in the lives of our ancestors. Why? Because society needs us to be frightened so that we remain subservient.

Fear is a powerful driving force which helps to push us forwards. Fear encourages us to accept things we do not like, to do work we do not enjoy and to spend money on things we neither want nor need. Fear cripples us but keeps us compliant. It is not by accident that countless people - politicians, commentators, experts, industries and advertising agencies - all deliberately do what they can to keep us afraid. When did you last hear a politician, pundit or expert offering undiluted comfort and reassurance?

Fear is one of the most potent of all forces and it used to control us and to manipulate our emotions. Fear is everywhere and is constantly used by people who want to manipulate us. Politicians and police chiefs frighten us about street violence in order to encourage us to give them more power. Politicians make us frightened of our enemies abroad for the same reason. If they cannot find some useful enemies then they will create some. Television and radio mean that we can be frightened more speedily and more effectively than ever before. Fear helps our society to sustain itself and to increase its power.

Science fiction writers have, in the past, often written about a future in which man loses power over his world because computers and robots have take control.

That hasn't happened. But we have, unthinkingly, lost power in a quite different way. We have lost power and handed over control of our lives to an untouchable, nebulous, almost indefinable force. When we are feeling angry or upset with the world we often blame `them'. When we feel that we are being forced to do things against our will we blame `them'. When we feel frustrated or cheated we blame `them'. When we are hampered by injustice or wounded by unfairness we say that it is `their' fault.

But there is no `them', of course.

The man who seems to represent injustice - and who may seem one minute to be one of `them' - will, the next minute, be standing shoulder to shoulder with us sharing our complaints. The man in a suit who, when sitting behind his desk, seems to be cruel, uncaring and utterly devoid of understanding, will, when he finds himself in a different situation become nervous and uncertain. The woman who works in a government office and treats supplicants with more contempt than compassion (and who seems to her victims to be one of `them') will find herself becoming a victim if she needs to visit a hospital as a patient. The customs officer who greets passengers with a sneer and a scowl (and therefore seems to be one of `them') will lose all his authority and power when he has to queue in his local post office to buy stamps.

The men and women who seem to be `them' aren't really `them' at all. They are each of them given their temporary `them' quality by the institutions for which they work. It is the institutions which have the real power.

The man who sits behind the desk is merely borrowing or representing that power. When he steps out from behind his desk (either temporarily, to go home at night, or permanently, to retire) he loses all his `themness' and once again becomes an innocent in a cruel and distant world.

If you carefully examine the way the world is being run at the moment you could reasonably come to the conclusion that most multinational corporations and most governments are more or less exclusively controlled by ruthless, James Bond villain style psychopathic megalomaniacs.

What other explanation could there be for the fact that drug companies make and sell drugs which they know are both dangerous and ineffective? What other explanation could there be for the fact that food companies make and sell food which they must know causes cancer and contains very little of nutritional value? What other explanation could there be for the fact that arms companies sell products deliberately designed to blow the legs off small children? What other explanation could there be for the fact that tobacco companies continue to make, promote and sell products which they know kill a high proportion of their customers?

And what other explanation could there possibly be for the fact that bureaucrats, civil servants and politicians allow all this to happen?

There is another explanation for all these things.

For the very first time in history the main opponents of justice and fair play, the proponents of abuse and tyranny, have no human form. We have created new monsters: new monsters which we cannot see or touch (we cannot see or touch them for the excellent reason that they do not exist in reality). Over twenty years ago (in a book entitled *Animal Rights Human Wrongs*) I put forward the idea that modern corporate structures have acquired lives of their own; that these inanimate creations have ambitions, aims, purposes and needs of their own. Companies need to keep making regular profits in order to satisfy the shareholders, the directors and the employees. And they need to keep making profits in order to survive. In the end the company's needs overrule the needs and consciences of the people working for it. The employees, particularly the directors and executives, become slaves to the needs of this all-devouring entity. (Clearly, what is true of companies is also true of countries.)

74

Much unhappiness and frustration is caused by the fact that in our society the law is commonly confused with justice, liberty, freedom and equality.

In truth the law has very little to do with these fundamental moral principles. The law exists to help society defend itself; it is used by those who represent society as a weapon with which to dominate and discriminate against individual powers and freedoms. The law is man's inadequate attempt to turn justice - an abstract theoretically concept - into practical reality. Sadly, it is invariably inspired more by the prejudices and self-interest of the lawmakers than by respect or concern for the rights of innocent individuals.

These misconceptions about the purpose of our law lead to much disappointment. And these misconceptions help to create a considerable amount of underlying stress.

No society has ever had as many laws as we have and yet few societies can have ever had less justice.

Many of the laws which exist today were created not to protect individuals or communities but to protect the system. It is because such crimes threaten the security and sanctity of the system that theft and fraud often attract harsher sentences than crimes such as rape and murder which affect individuals, whose rights are seen as less significant.

The irony is that although the law was originally introduced to protect individuals and to reduce their stresses the law has itself become a tyrant and a major cause of stress. Today few individuals can afford to take advantage of the protection offered by the law. The law oppresses the weak, the poor and the powerless and sustains itself and the powers which preserve it. The enormous costs of litigation mean that there is one law for the rich and no law at all for the poor. The result is that the law threatens and reduces the rights of the weak and strengthens and augments the rights of the powerful.

Things are made worse by the fact that the people employed by society to uphold and administer the law on behalf of the ordinary people too often take advantage of their positions to abuse their powers. The interpretation of the law is so often at the discretion of those who are paid to uphold it that those who have been hired by society become the law itself. Neatly and effectively, society protects itself against threat and bypasses the rights of individual citizens.

Too often society allows officers of the courts to abuse their power to satisfy their own personal ambitions, grievances and prejudices. In return, society in its broadest and most undemocratic and domineering sense is protected by the people who benefit from its patronage. It is the worst sort of symbiotic relationship.

The final irony is that as respect for the law (and those hired to uphold it) diminishes so the divide between the law and justice grows ever wider.

When people who are given the power to protect society disapprove of something which threatens their status they introduce a new law. As political parties come and go so we accumulate layer after layer of new laws. To the lawmakers it doesn't matter if the new laws conflict with the old laws as long as all the laws help to strengthen the status of the State.

Meanwhile, as the oppression of individuals continues, lawlessness (and disrespect for the law) grows among officials and those in power. Brutality, arrogance, corruption and hypocrisy have all damaged public faith in the law but the only response from society has been to create new laws to outlaw disapproval. Society's primary interest is to protect itself, and society is not concerned with justice, freedom or equality since those are values which are appreciated only by individuals. Those who have power are concerned only with their own survival and with perpetuating their power. The simple truth is that we live in a corrupt society which creates countless stresses for ordinary people.

When we complain about `them' we are really complaining about the world we have created for ourselves; we are complaining about unseen forces which structure and rule our society; we are complaining about forces which are now utterly out of our control.

For the first time in history we have succeeded in creating a world, a society, which now exists solely to defend, protect and develop itself. We have created a society whose institutions have acquired power of their own. These institutions - governments, multinational corporations, multinational bureaucracies and so on - now exist solely to maintain, improve and strengthen themselves. These institutions have their own hidden agendas and the human beings who work for them may think that they are in control - but they aren't.

The biggest threat to the survival of the human race (and the planet upon which we live) comes not from the atomic bomb, or the fact that we are steadily destroying the very fabric of our world by polluting our seas, our rivers, the air we breathe and even the space which separates us from other planets, but from the fact that we have created a social structure in which we, as human beings, now exist as mere drones. It is this new social structure which is pushing us along at a great speed and `forcing' us not only to destroy our environment but also to abandon all those moral and ethical values which it is reasonable to expect to be fundamental in a `civilised' society.

It may be a little difficult to accept the concept of institutions having agendas of their own but the reality is that this is exactly what has happened.

The people who appear to run large institutions, and who themselves undoubtedly believe that they are in charge, are simply institutional servants.

Consider, for example, the chairman and directors of a large multinational pharmaceutical company. These well-paid men and women will regard themselves as being responsible for the tactics and strategy followed by the company for which they work. But in reality it is the company itself - an institution which only really exists on paper - which is in real control.

Every multinational company has a constant thirst for cash. In order to satisfy bankers, brokers and shareholders companies need to produce quarterly figures which show a nice big, fat profit on the bottom line.

The people who work for a company may think that they are in control but in reality they aren't. The directors have to do what is in their company's best interests. If they don't then their company will falter and that can't be allowed to happen. The company, the unimaginably powerful corporate demon, must come first.

So, for example, if the directors of a drug company find that one of their products causes lethal side effects they may, as human beings, feel ashamed about this. Individually the directors may want to withdraw the drug immediately and to apologise to the people who have been injured by their product. But this course of action would not be in the company's best short-term interests. Withdrawing the drug would doubtless cost the company money. Research and development costs would have to be written off. And apologising would expose the company to lawsuits. So the directors, acting in the company's best interests, must keep the drug on the market and deny that there are any problems. In these circumstances the company (a non-human entity which only exists on paper) is in control. The decisions are made not in the interests of people (whether they be customers or directors) but in the interests of the corporate `being'.

The problem is compounded by the fact that, big as they are, multinational companies have no souls and no sense of responsibility. Moreover they never think beyond the next set of profit figures; they are ultimately ruthless and (since they are inanimate and bloodless) utterly `cold blooded', but they are also ultimately short-sighted. Big institutions, like computers, are inherently, irretrievably, stupid. They do not realise that their behaviour will, in the long run, lead to their total destruction - partly because it will annoy and alienate their customers and partly because it will eventually result in the deaths of many of their customers!

By and large, the men and women who run large drug companies, arms companies, food companies and genetic engineering companies don't really want to destroy the world in which we all live. They know that their families have to breathe the same air as everyone else. They know that they too need good food, clean drinking water and a healthy environment.

However, despite the evidence being to the contrary the people who run these companies probably think that they are doing good and useful work. They have denied the truth to themselves in order to avoid coming face to face with a reality which would probably drive them insane if they accepted it. It is only through denial and self-deceit that most of the men and women who work for tobacco companies can continue to sell a product which causes so much misery and so much death. Adolf Hitler killed fewer people than the big tobacco companies have killed. But I doubt if many of the people running big tobacco companies think of themselves as evil.

I have met men and women who run large organisations (such as drug companies). Some recognise that what they are doing is immoral and they excuse themselves with such trite and shallow phrases as `If I didn't do it someone else would' and `I've got to pay the mortgage'. These are, of course, variations on the same excuses favoured by the men and women who operated the gas chambers during the Second World War. The brighter and more sensitive individuals usually see through these excuses in the end; they often become depressed and accept treatment with their own products. But many men and women who work for such companies quite honestly and sincerely believe that they are doing useful and indeed valuable work. They have become so deeply institutionalised, and are driven so completely by the needs of the corporate beast, that they genuinely feel no shame about what they do. They have rationalised their actions and denied to themselves the truths which are apparent to outside observers.

Occasionally, this constant denial and self-deceit breaks down and absurdities appear. For example, England's Members of Parliament have, as members of an institution, consistently voted to allow multinational corporations to pollute our drinking water and to tamper with and pollute our food. And yet MPs themselves, as individuals, are so conscious of the value of the pure food and clean drinking water that in the House of Commons they have arranged to be given spring water to drink and to be fed on organic food which has not been genetically modified. The men and women who vote to allow our water to be polluted and our food to be genetically modified are voting as representatives of institutions rather than as representatives of people. They know that they are creating a world in which the food is unfit to eat and the water unfit to drink. But they can't stop it happening because they are operating for the benefit of institutions rather than people.

The huge organisations which now run the world have developed identities, strengths, purposes and needs of their own. And in order to continue to grow in size and in strength those organisations need to ignore or suppress as much of the truth as they can - and to ignore the truths which they cannot suppress. The world is now full of evil companies (Goldman Sachs, Google, Monsanto and virtually every drug company on the planet to name but just a few) which exist for no other reason than to make profits and to grow. Obviously, the people who work for those institutions must also ignore and suppress the unpalatable truths (and they must find ways to hide from the reality of what they are doing).

How else can anyone explain the fact that the American Government has decided to continue to damage the ozone layer - despite knowing the consequences? How else can anyone explain the fact that because antibiotics are being consistently and deliberately and knowingly used irresponsibly infectious diseases are once again a major cause of death? How else can anyone explain the fact that genetic engineers are creating foods which may or may not be safe to eat? How else can anyone explain the fact that drug companies keep on producing - and selling - products which do more harm than good?

The industrialists, the politicians and the administrators who allow these things to happen are just as vulnerable to the consequences of their actions as you and I. They - and their families - cannot buy immunity to the problems which they are creating. And yet nothing changes.

The same self-centred, amoral materialism which has characterised political life for the last few decades, and which has simultaneously accompanied a downfall in morality, can no longer be seen as just another unfortunate blip in human development. The horrors of today will not be easily conquered, and will not be conquered at all unless we acknowledge the breadth and depth of the exceptional problem we now face.

Some years ago, Dr Albert Schweizer saw the first signs of what has happened. `Another hindrance to civilisation today,' he wrote, `is the over-organisation of our public life. While it is certain that a properly ordered environment is the condition and, at the same time, the result of civilisation, it is also undeniable that, after a certain point has been reached, external organisation is developed at the expense of spiritual life. Personality and ideas are often subordinated to institutions, when it is really these which ought to influence the latter and keep them inwardly alive.'

We cannot trust our existing politicians, or the systems which they wrongly believe they control, and so what is the point of trying to persuade them to do what we want them to do - and what is right?

We have only one option: to take back the political power which is rightfully ours. We have to take back power from the institutions which now rule our lives. And we have to take back power from the weak, spineless and unthinking politicians who serve these many political and commercial institutions with such uncritical faithfulness.

Conclusion

England has, for some years now, been run by the elected representatives of people who don't work, have no intention of ever working, and don't pay tax. The organisation of the electoral system, and the importance of the three party system, means that this is unlikely to change until there is a revolution and the people who work, and pay tax, demand some serious changes and announce that they *will*, in future, be treated with dignity and respect by those who represent the State. It is difficult to avoid the feeling that the country is now being run for the greedy, the selfish and the lazy. Our young folk need to tie their shoelaces, pull up their trousers to hide their hideous underpants, grit their teeth and contemplate the awfulness and the rigours of going to work. And while they are being encouraged to recognise that authority comes with responsibility and that scented candles and bed cushions are a choice not a right, we must also take action to restrict the power of the numerous organisations and institutions which have grown in power, stature, wealth, status and authority and which would treat us all as slaves.

CHAPTER 3: BANKERS: GREED, FRAUD AND HUBRIS

Introduction

Just why no bankers have been arrested, humiliated and jailed is a mystery. They should, by now, be learning to bend over and grab their ankles whenever they see large men with cauliflower ears and a fundamental yearning approaching down the corridor. The bankers who oversaw the disastrous fall of Northern Rock, RBS, HBOS, etc., have mostly found highly-paid employment. They helped cause the economic mess which will now dominate our lives for decades but they are largely immune to the consequences. Even the appalling Fred Goodwin (the worlds worst banker), who would, in a decently run society, now be prisoner 628362 serving a long sentence in Wormwood Scrubs, has found new employment. (It is worth remembering that his bank, RBS, reported pretax losses of almost £41 billion in 2008.) Goodwin should have been put into the stocks for a week, dragged through the high street of every town in England, pelted with household rubbish and sewage and then taken to court and sentenced to a lifetime in a small, bare cell. All Goodwin's chums in the banking world should have received the same treatment. But the difference between what should have happened and what really happened is vast. In 2012, the banks in England were paying out still increasing amounts of money on salaries and bonuses, leaving next to nothing (and in many cases nothing) for the owners (and bosses) of the banks. There are, literally, thousands of bankers in London who are paid over £1,000,000 a year. But I wouldn't trust any one of these idiots to go to the post office and buy me a stamp. If I had a stamp and asked one of their absurdly overpaid idiots to stick it on they would, I have no doubt, somehow manage to stick it on upside down. These, remember, are idiots who can borrow money at 1%, lend it out 30 times at 20% and still make a loss. That's quite a skill. Rioters in London were (rightly) sentenced to two years imprisonment for stealing a pair of pumps. But Goodwin receives £700,000 a year for life for helping to bankrupt the nation. He is not alone. Matt Ridley, of Northern Rock shame, still seems to think his institution failed through bad luck. None of the guilty bankers seems to have exchanged their expensive suits for sackcloth and ashes.

American born London mayor Boris Johnson has said that it is time to stop abusing the bankers. He is, as he usually is, quite wrong. If our economy ever recovers it will be despite the banks rather than because of them. They are still sucking the life blood out of the system. Their staff, like bloated leeches, are never satisfied.

1

During the banking meltdown of 2007 and 2008, top bankers argued that if pay and bonuses were cut for their staff, and if the traditional `heads we win, tails you lose' philosophy were ended, the banks would have difficulty in keeping their good people. It did not occur to them that companies which go bankrupt are not, by definition, run by competent people. It was, perhaps, not entirely surprising that bankers failed to see the flaw in their pathetic argument. I did, however, find it alarming that regulators and politicians also failed to see the flaw. No banker explained precisely what their staff members would do for a living if they were dumped from jobs carrying multi million pound a year salaries. (I think it is fair to assume that none of them was likely to be in line for the only other overpaid employment - as professional footballers.) I cannot think of any easier job than being a banker. Even being a catwalk model or a newsreader probably requires more talent.

2

Bankers, chief executives and EU staff members seem to enjoy flaunting their wealth. They are, on the whole, enjoying the delights of conspicuous waste at someone else's expense. I read this morning about someone who had used a private jet to fly her dog to the doggie stylist for a trim. And I hear that £50,000 birthday parties for children are, in banking circles, now considered rather commonplace.

3

It is not only bankers who are enjoying a ride on an overloaded gravy train. The staff of organisations such as the International Monetary Fund do pretty well too. For example, the boss of the IMF receives a salary of $467,940 plus additional allowances of $83,760. And, like all staff at the IMF she pays no tax whatsoever. (This makes it rather difficult for the IMF to complain about people, such as the citizens of Greece, who also prefer not to pay any taxes.)

4

`It's Goldman Sach's world - we just live in it.' - Barry Ritholtz of Fusion IQ

5

Long after RBS had been rescued by English taxpayers the Scottish bank was still sponsoring the Scottish rugby team. Was I the only Englishman to be more than slightly peeved by this? If you are ever looking for a definition of irony or barefaced cheek try this: when Scotland played England in the Six Nations Cup, the Scottish team was sponsored by RBS. Remember, RBS, surely the world's worst bank, was rescued at enormous cost by English taxpayers and is now owned by English taxpayers. And it was rescued to save Scotland from a mess, to save Scottish politicians from embarrassment and so that Gordon Brown could prove that he was sticking to The Scottish Claim of Rights. Sitting in the stands there were, I suspect, more than a few RBS employees enjoying English taxpayers' hospitality while they cheered on Scotland.

6

RBS has turned into a catastrophe. The £49 billion spent by Brown to buy the loyalty of Scottish voters has gone down the drain. So has the additional £40 billion taxpayers have forked out to keep alive a worthless, overleveraged institution built on the vanity of the world's worst banker and a bunch of clowns which made poorly designed acquisitions. Executives at the bank are still encouraged to back trucks up the vault door and fill them with packets of brand new fifties. A bunch of illiterate hoodies high on cheap lager could have run the bank more efficiently and probably even made a profit. And yet the idiots who are working there are still being rewarded like heroes. Moreover, bankers at RBS are constantly whingeing about the fact that the Government (which damned near owns the bank on behalf of taxpayers) wants to interfere with the running of the bank and the distribution of bonuses. I don't understand this. The bank went bust. The people running it screwed up. And now RBS complains because the owners want the right to say how the bank is managed. Isn't that what company owners are supposed to do? The truth is that the long-serving executives working at RBS don't deserve a salary let alone a bonus.

7

Thanks to morons like Gordon Brown the booms and busts are getting worse. As Karl Marx predicted it is the booms and busts that will cause our ruin. Sadly, our current bust is not going to be followed by a boom.

8

Bankers got away with their absurdly incompetent behaviour because over-lobbied politicians have for years been far too banker friendly. The Labour Party of Blair and Brown was desperately close to the bankers. And the Coalition Government is owned by the finance industry too. (Clegg's daddy? You have three guesses: fishmonger, male model or banker. If you chose anything other than banker I am very disappointed in you.) More than half of the Tory Party's funding comes from bankers. It has been hardly surprising that our recent governments have bent over forwards to accommodate the needs of the people who have cost us untold billions. Not one banker, let me remind you, has been fined or sent to prison. Our so-called leaders have, on the contrary, stayed on good terms with most of them. The bankers must be blinking with astonishment at the fact that they have got away with the biggest heist in history. Moreover, bankers still don't understand the meaning of the word responsibility. In June 2012, the Royal Bank of Scotland managed to create chaos for 17 million customers. For six days those customers could not access their own money. It turned out that someone at RBS had decided to change the bank's software system while it was operating. (This was later described as being akin to an airline trying to service an engine with the plane flying at 30,000 feet.) Afterwards, in what I assume he intended to be a sign of contrition, the boss, the man responsible for this fiasco, offered to forgo his annual bonus. The humungous error, which left people hungry and unable to pay their bills, was described by the bank as a `glitch'. I bet they wouldn't have described it as a `glitch' if everyone earning more than £50,000 a year had been sacked. The basic problem, of course, is that the Royal Bank of Scotland is now a State-owned institution. And this creates three problems. First, the people who work for RBS are civil servants and, like civil servants working for the NHS or the Royal Mail, they don't give a damn about members of the public. Second, all State-run businesses turn into a shambles in the end. Third, the Government seems unable to operate any sort of computer system without producing huge problems. The NHS paid around £12 billion for a computer system that didn't work and wasn't ever likely to work. (Simply putting everyone's medical records onto Facebook would have been quicker, free and just as private.) The Inland Revenue makes endless errors with its computerised records and when it isn't making mistakes it simply loses millions of confidential tax records at a time. Now that RBS has become a State-run enterprise it is, perhaps, hardly surprising that it is an even greater shambles.

9

The banking disaster proves (if there was ever any doubt) that we live in a kleptocracy. There are more democratic banana republics around. Everything is run for the politicians and the bankers whose interests must be protected. We are even importing more highly-paid bankers because they are, apparently, essential immigrants. Maybe our home-grown bankers can't screw up the economy adequately without outside help. If you or I made the sort of egregious errors bankers and politicians have made we would be limbering up our fingers for some long-term mailbag sewing. But bankers and politicians simply demand bonuses and forgiveness. `Whoops, sorry pardon,' they mutter. `Simple human mistake.' And that, it seems, makes everything fine. I must try that next time I'm in trouble for doing 61 mph on a dual carriageway.

Taxpayers are having to bail out banks so that the people who work there don't suffer. Taxes are being used to cover the private losses of investment banks. It seems to me that capitalism has collapsed and has been replaced by a particularly nasty version of statism or socialism.

10

`When I was young, people called me a gambler. As the scale of my operations increased I was known as a speculator. Now I'm called a banker. But I have been doing the same thing all the time.' - Sir Ernest Cassel, private banker to King Edward VII

11

During the last half a dozen years, when the world's banks stuffed the rest of us, only the American bank Lehman Brothers was allowed to go bust. (In the years during which he destroyed the firm, the boss, Fuld, received $484 million in salary and other payments. This was by no means an abnormal level of compensation.) A zillion other banks shared lorry loads of free taxpayers' money so that they could stay in business and keep paying salaries and bonuses. (Goldman Sachs boasted that it required no government bailout. The truth is, however, that the world's worst company did receive $69 billion from the Federal Reserve. Maybe $69 billion wasn't a big enough sum to appear in the Goldman Sachs accounts. Or maybe they've got into the habit of lying so much that they just couldn't help themselves.)

If you or I take a gamble and we lose money then we lose money. If it's a big gamble we go bust. If we listen to the advice of our investment adviser and lose money then we lose money. If we invest in a badly regulated pension fund we get stuffed and lose our pension. But the bankers can't lose. If they make money they win and they keep it. If they lose money the taxpayers cough up and the bankers use the bail out money to give themselves bonuses.

It is unbelievable but true that in the weeks after the start of the financial crash in 2007, bankers in London received around £12 billion in bonuses. More than 4,200 individual bankers received bonuses of at least £1.5 million each, on top of their multi million pound salaries. This, remember, was immediately after the banks had to be bailed out because some of them had gone bankrupt. This was in London alone. And much of this money was handed over to bankers working at Scottish banks that had gone bankrupt; people who should have been receiving writs and jail sentences, not bonuses. A teenage hoodie who smashes a car window and steals a radio will be punished. A driver who causes an accident while talking on his mobile telephone should expect to go to prison. A businessman who doesn't realise that the tax laws have changed and pays too little tax can expect to have the full wrath of the courts wrapped around his neck. But none of the bankers who caused financial mayhem in England has been punished. These selfish, shameless idiots wrecked businesses and destroyed savings. Today's bankers and investment advisers will always act exclusively in their own interests and never in the interests of their customers or clients. They always think short-term and are always incurably greedy. (The question remains: `Why does a man or woman who has £100 million in the bank still feel so greedy that they must steal another £100 million?')

Millions of innocent people have been deeply affected by the greed and stupidity of the bankers. I have no doubt that some people were killed by the stress the bankers caused. There were probably banker-induced suicides. But the bankers have been protected from the law by their political friends, their lobbyists and their wealth. Savers, pensioners and those on fixed incomes have seen their savings disappear so that those with financial incontinence could be saved from the consequences of their actions.

Why aren't hard-working people rioting in the streets, hanging bankers from lampposts and burning down the damned banks? (I'm not recommending that people should do any of these things, you understand. Just curious as to why they aren't.)

12

The number of individuals who say they trust Government institutions has, in recent years, fallen to around a third. (Given that a large number of people earn their living from the Government this figure is extraordinarily high.) Similarly only about a third of the population regard business bosses as credible, or worth their money. But for banks the figure is even lower and studies show that it is now almost impossible to discover anyone in the country who trusts, or has respect for, bank executives and directors. The fact that bankers are forever protesting that they are misunderstood makes not one jot of difference. Most people now trust bank staff less than they trust second-hand care salesmen and estate agents. And rightly so.

13

The structure of our once stable economy was destroyed by Gordon Brown. (I explained why and how in terrifying detail in my book *Gordon is a Moron,* which is now out of print but which should be available in well-run charity shops and in the car boots of discerning Sunday salespersons.)

Brown has been responsible for destroying the lives of millions of honest, hard-working citizens. He deserves to be hung for his crimes. Or at the very least drawn and quartered. No, that's too light. He, together with his banker pals, should be put in the stocks, whipped, stoned, burned, buried, dug up and subjected to the whole damned process until hell freezes over or a politician tells the truth whichever is the sooner.

14

In my book *What Happens Next?* I suggested that high street banks and investment banks should be kept separate, so that depositors money wasnt at risk. The Government has accepted the suggestion but isnt likely to act on it until 2019 at the earliest because investment bankers have protested that if the new rule is introduced theyll have to gamble with their *own* money.

15

Today, nothing has changed. The banks are still poorly regulated. The accounting rules are still weak. The bankers are still allowed to lie, cheat, steal and be unbearably stupid. Modern bankers think up amazing ways to cheat their customers. They will, it seems, do anything and everything to gouge more money out of the trusting, the susceptible and the honest. For example, banks and building societies offer special deposit accounts for the over 50s. You might imagine that since these accounts are described as special and are limited to a particular age group, the bankers would be offering some sort of incentive, a bonus attraction. Not a bit of it. The average interest rate on the most popular 20 accounts for the over 50s is, as I write, around two thirds of the average overall interest rate on offer. In the early summer of 2012, an investor who put money into a top paying deposit account could expect, on average, to earn (a miserly) 3.17% interest. But an investor who put money into a special deposit account designed for the over 50s would receive, on average, an interest rate of 2.23%.

Our banks have huge debts and poor assets and they're getting weaker and less solvent by the week. Most banks have overstated their assets. They have lied, lied and lied again and are in a far worse mess than we can imagine. The banks aren't going to want to lend money to strangers for a long, long time.

16

In 2012, as England sank deeper into economic chaos caused largely by daft bankers, it was estimated that 200 staff at Barclays would receive bonuses of at least £1,000,000 each. One bank. Two hundred employees. All receiving a million pound bonus. What did they do for that money? Hand out paying in books? Fill up the ATMs? Three Barclays employees shared £100 million in bonuses. If they shared it equally they received £33 million each.

Barclays' boss, an American called Diamond, moaned about the use of words such as `casino banking' and `rogue trading' to describe what goes on in our banks. He boasted that `we have some fantastically strong financial institutions in this country' but he didn't explain how strong financial institutions had cost England the best part of £1,000,000,000 and nor did he name the strong institutions. He certainly could not have been talking about Barclays because although the bank had paid him £50 million in salary, bonuses and sweet allowances its share price had slumped by 80% in five years. I wonder if the shareholders think Diamond was worth all that loot. In March 2012, Diamond finally described the banks performance as unacceptable. Nevertheless, he was given a pay package of £17.7 million, including a multi million bonus. He happily accepted all this loot. The bank also paid a tax bill of £5.75 million for him so that he didn't have to pay it himself out of his miserly pay packet. No one mentioned it but they presumably paid for someone to chew his food for him too.

17

The world is awash with wasteful, crooked governments, insolvent, badly run banks (fraudulently giving illusions of solvency), overleveraged companies struggling to compete with companies in emerging economies, rising millions who are unemployed, millions who have huge credit card debts which they cannot possibly pay back and millions whose homes are worth far less than the debt owed to the mortgage company. The future is bleak. It is going to be difficult (a euphemism for damned near impossible) for investors to make any money in these circumstances. And people need to take care with their savings, to invest cautiously and to do whatever they can to preserve what is left of their wealth in order to help them survive the harder times which lie ahead. It was, therefore, with some horror that I spotted a Barclays Bank advertisement in February 2012 which screamed: `Why wait? Have it now.' How very irresponsible. How very Barclays.

18

Meanwhile, and rather frighteningly, Barclays is building up its debts. The bank, once regarded as safe and even dull, has leverage of 33 times, and institutions with that sort of leverage can get into real trouble very quickly. Barclays currently has £1.6 trillion on its balance sheet, more than our country's entire annual output of goods and services.

Credit given to bankers or investors is like steroids or amphetamines when given to an athlete. A bit of it helps performance and, although extremely dangerous, seems harmless enough. Since everyone is doing it no one thinks anything much of it. And so usage increases. And is eventually deadly.

19

No one can argue that bankers are highly-paid because they are clever or good at what they do. They aren't either. And bankers today are as arrogant, cruel, self-serving and deluded as they ever were. Most of all they are still greedy and stupid.

20

Here's the way the EU is operating at the moment. Commercial banks (many of which are either bankrupt or knocking on the door of bankruptcy) lend money to the European Central Bank so that it can use the money to bail out bankrupt countries such as Greece and Ireland. These bankrupt countries need the money so that they can bail out their own bankrupt banks. So our banks (some of which are owned by taxpayers) are bailing out the bankrupt banks in bankrupt countries. And it seems that there are an endless number of bankrupt banks hanging around outside the ECB with their begging bowls, waiting for a few billion euros. I sincerely wish I was making this up but, sadly, I'm not. The ECB is lending this money to European banks at 1%. In February 2012, Scotland's great bank, RBS, borrowed five billion euros of this virtually free European money and still can't make a profit. I don't know about you but if I could borrow endless money at 1% interest I would buy Tesco bonds at 5% or gilts at 3%. Oh, silly me, that's what they do. It's no wonder they don't want to bother making loans to small businesses which might need help, guidance and money. (But how do they make a loss, you ask? Surely they can't possibly not make a profit. Look at the salaries and bonuses they pay out, I reply.)

21

The number of clients at the State owned bank RBS went down from 26,000 to 5,000 after Goodwin and his pals destroyed the company, so the bank reduced its staff from 24,000 incompetent buffoons to 19,000 incompetent buffoons. Look at the figures and you may feel you need to scratch your head. There are still over 1,000 individuals at RBS earning (or, rather, being paid) over £1,000,000 each a year. Plus huge bonuses. In 2010, RBS (84% owned by taxpayers, which makes its employees civil servants) handed out bonuses of £1 billion, despite making a £1 billion loss.

22

RBS lost money, jobs, reputation and everything else a group of bankers can possibly lose and yet it is still constantly offering investment advice to the world at large. Who the hell takes any notice of anything anyone working for RBS has to say?

23

At the end of May 2012, the chairman of the Royal Bank of Scotland (Sir Philip Hampton - and what the blazes did he do to deserve a knighthood?) told the bank's investors that they may never recoup the losses they had suffered. `I don't think shareholders' wealth is likely to be restored any time in my lifetime or some lifetimes beyond,' he said. A few days later it was leaked that the Government was planning to give RBS a few more billion of taxpayers money. As my Princess pointed out it is extremely unlikely that if the bank had been called the Royal Bank of England it would have received a penny in support. RBS was saved solely for political reasons. And it was saved by Gordon Brown, a Scotsman who had signed a document in which he promised that he would always put Scotland first. And, yet again, it was English taxpayers who paid the price.

24

While cautious, prudent, hard-working savers and taxpayers suffer in order to help pay back the debts incurred while their governments were running things, Blair and Brown are earning vast sums for advising and lecturing the world on financial matters. Brown receives £60,000 for lecturing on finance (which must surely be the new definition of chutzpa) while Blair's cheques usually have more noughts. Any sensible person who is not now tempted to become an anarchist should receive medical attention.

25

Banks have become so accustomed to gambling with other peoples money that they are now encouraging people to gamble with their own money. In February 2012, I saw an advert for spread trading (a form of betting) from the Halifax. `Now there's a way to make the most of markets that fall as well as rise' promised the advert. The Halifax is, of course, a part of one of the bankrupt Scottish banks, so at least they know a lot about market falls.

What I find astonishing is that our Government, which effectively owns this sorry organisation, is encouraging people to gamble with whatever savings they have left.

26

Iceland didn't support its banks when they went bust in 2008. They didn't bail them out because they couldn't afford to. Iceland is now relatively healthy again. Creative destruction is a vital form of therapy for mouldy capitalism.

27

In early 2012, the difference between bank rate (0.5%) and the ordinary overdraft rate (19.5) was higher than ever before. Not surprisingly, two thirds of Britons admitted that they were worried about their levels of debt. It was surprising, however, to discover that the banks could still not make a profit - even with a guaranteed 19% gross profit on every loan.

Bankers constantly claim that they need to pay huge salaries for staff in order to attract the brains they need. I would have thought that recruiting a bunch of cretins and morons would prove more efficacious. Even they would surely be able to make a profit under such advantageous circumstances.

28

In late June 2012, it was revealed that thieves working at Barclays Bank (surely one of the most irresponsible institutions on the planet) had deliberately altered LIBOR (the rate at which banks lend money to one another and, therefore, to businesses and individuals) to benefit themselves. Other banks were almost certainly involved in this blatantly fraudulent activity (possibly including two banks largely owned by English taxpayers) and there have even been suggestions that someone at the Bank of England might have been in some way involved in the decision to make money out of cheating taxpayers, savers, pensioners, mortgage holders and just about every other English citizen. The result was that shareholders in Barclays Bank were fined £290 million. That's a perfect example of moral hazard. The bankers steal and, when they get caught, the shareholders pay the price. The thieving villains who had deceived, cheated and stolen have not been imprisoned or even fined and I doubt if they will be. How much did they steal? How much did they try to steal? Billions. It was one of the most fundamental betrayals in banking history. (As an aside, the responsible thieves must be among the most stupid people on the planet. They conducted their thieving by e-mail.) In one of the most empty gestures of all time, the American boss of Barclays, Bob Diamond, originally said that he would waive some or part of his bonus for the year. Well, yippee. That was rather like an 18-year-old burglar, who had stolen money from a thousand elderly widows, offering to give up sweets for a day in recompense. Diamond, after some inappropriate resistance, eventually resigned but the entire contents of the executive suite at Barclays should have been arrested, tried and sent to prison for life. And every penny they'd earned from banking should have been confiscated before they were tried so that they couldn't afford fancy lawyers. The failure of the bank to understand just how banking has to change was illustrated by the fact that when he resigned in disgrace the hubristic Diamond was rumoured to have taken with him a £2 million pay off. Was he party to major league crookery or an incompetent buffoon who didnt know what was going on at his bank? I have no idea but any severance payment was entirely inappropriate and undeserved and simply served to further damage the already flimsy level of trust in our banks.

29

Lloyds Bank, once a decent and profitable enterprise, was wrecked by the merger with HBOS because of absurdly reckless lending by Bank of Scotland bankers. (It seems that both RBS and HBOS bankers had been contaminated by something in the Scottish air and had gone quite mad. Traditional Scottish meanness had somehow been transformed into egregious greed.) When it was decided that the combined bank needed to lose a lot of lower paid staff, thousands of employees at Lloyds Bank branches were sacked. To add insult to injury the EU then forced Lloyds to sell hundreds of branches against the wishes of three million long-standing, long-suffering customers.

30

Speaking in Glasgow in November 2011, Scotsman Alistair Darling, the former Chancellor of the Exchequer who authorised the multi-billion bail outs of Scottish banks RBS and HBOS, said that the banking crisis didn't happen because of subprime market problems but because of bad decisions taken by Scottish bankers - bankers who are now enjoying huge billionaire lifestyles on their payoffs, pensions and bonuses.

If the Scots truly want independence (and I sincerely hope they do) then they will owe England about a trillion pounds for saving their damned banks. (In reality, of course, an organisation called SNP, representing the meanest and nastiest of Scots and the main proponents of independence, want to keep England's oil and dump the toxic Scottish banks on England. (Much of the North Sea oil is in English water and the wells were developed by English companies and by English taxpayers.) To be fair, I don't blame the Scots for trying to grab what they can. If I could declare independence and keep all my money while donating my debts to some dumb Scotsman I would do so in a flash. The reality is that the current Scottish nation is built on health and social work, education, administration and defence and social security. All public sector work. There is very little industry remaining north of Carlisle. There is a little bit of tartan kilt manufacture and a few whisky distilleries but that's about it.

31

People who work in fish shops probably take home a lot of fish. People who work in bookshops are undoubtedly rarely short of a good book to read. And people who work in investment banks take home samples too. They've rigged the rules so that it doesn't seem like stealing: but by any sensible interpretation of the rules that's exactly what it is. Today, the bank robbers are the people working inside the bank.

32

Central banks such as the Bank of England seem to be working for and on behalf of the big banks and hedge funds. They are destroying the lives of hard-working taxpayers (their employers) in order to preserve the financial system.

33

`I believe that banking institutions are more dangerous to our liberties than standing armies. If the American people ever allow private banks to control the issue of their currency, first by inflation, then by deflation, the banks and corporations that will grow up around the banks will deprive the people of all property until their children wake up homeless on the continent their fathers conquered.' - Thomas Jefferson

34

In March 2012, when Cameron went to the USA to meet Obama he also met the boss of Goldman Sachs, the world's most reviled financial institution. (He may, for all I know, have gone to the USA to meet the guy from Goldman Sachs and just bumped into Obama as an afterthought.) Whenever there is news of financial malpractice there is, it seems, always an alumni of Goldman Sachs in there somewhere. Goldman Sachs might have died if the Federal Reserve (stuffed to the gills with Goldman alumni) hadn't allowed the firm to convert itself into a bank so that it could borrow emergency funds from taxpayers (the villains at Goldman Sachs afterwards claimed that they hadn't borrowed anything). Goldman Sachs alumni are all over the world in positions of great power. Italy is being run by an ex Goldman Sachs employee. The head of Greece's debt management agency began there. The president of the ECB was employed by Goldman until 2006. Henry M. Paulson, who was George W. Bush's Secretary of the Treasury from July 2006 until January 2009 had spent the previous 32 years working at Goldman Sachs. And, of course, it was Goldman Sachs who helped Greece cook the books and deceive the rest of the world about its economy. Goldman Sachs has done as much as any other organisation to create the worlds economic problem. And now they're `helping' to put things right. The current CEO of Goldman is worth around $450 million. If we must be at war with someone we should be at war with Goldman Sachs. We would have all been a lot better off (financially and spiritually) if, instead of waging war in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya our spineless leaders had declared war on the loathsome Goldman Sachs and the bosses of RBS, HBOS and a couple of dozen other similarly obscene financial outfits.

35

When Matt Ridley, the vastly overpaid former chairman of the failed bank Northern Rock, was questioned by MPs after his bank had collapsed (the first bank run for 150 years) Ridley moaned: `The idea that all markets would close simultaneously was unforeseen by any major authority. We were hit by an unexpected and unpredictable concatenation of events.'

With people like Ridley at the helm it is hardly surprising that our banks collapsed. If people didn't expect the unexpected (and make plans accordingly) they would never buy insurance. Every imaginative and cautious investor knows that you have to expect the unexpected. It's what investing is all about. Its what life is about, for heavens sake.

The collapse of Northern Rock added around £100 billion to our debts.

36

Here's yet more proof that the people who work in investment banking are, at best, half-wits. These people operate by making trades. One of the half-wits sells something and another half-wit buys it. It's hardly brain surgery. It's like shopping except that you don't have to go anywhere to do it. You just sit there and peck away at a computer keyboard or hold a telephone to your ear. And yet they get these simple trades wrong with ruthless efficiency. Every day, on Wall Street, the traders make over $500 billion worth of failed trades. They get it wrong to the tune of half a trillion dollars a day. An old lady who made that many mistakes when out shopping would be quietly taken into care for her own protection.

37

Even the banks that haven't gone bankrupt have still managed to make huge errors. It seems commonplace now for banks to admit that an employee has lost a few billion pounds in error. These are big, big banks with risk management systems and backroom people paid to keep an eye on things. And yet they manage to lose billions of pounds before anyone notices. These days a mistake involving only a couple of billion doesn't really attract much attention. You have to lose £5 billion or so to make anyone take notice. Only idiots operating in chaos could consistently screw up as much as the bankers screw up.

38

One half-witted bank employee was offered a special $50 million bonus because one of his bets had paid off. He was so insulted by this derisory offer that he walked out.

39

Bankers like you to think that the money they lend out is the money that has been deposited with them for safe keeping. Mrs A takes her savings of £1,000 to the bank and puts it into a deposit account. This is real money which she has earned by scrubbing floors. The bank then lends that £1,000 to Mrs B so that she can buy a new house, a new car and a new coat. But the bank also lends the £1,000 to Mrs C, Mrs D, Mrs E, Mrs F, Mrs G, Mrs H, Mrs I, Mrs J and so on down the alphabet. The same £1,000 is lent out many, many times.

The money which is deposited is real. But the money the banks lend out is created money and so the banks lend out vastly more money than has been deposited with them. The argument is that all the depositors are unlikely to want their money back at once and so the real money which they have can be lent out many, many times. (When there is a panic, à la Northern Rock, the Government steps in and bails out the bank with taxpayers money.)

The bottom line is that the bankers are being paid interest, fees and penalties on far more money than actually exists because the money they lent was simply created out of thin air.

In return for the loan of its imaginary money the bank receives real money from Mrs B (and the rest of the alphabet). Moreover, if Mrs B cannot pay the interest on what she has borrowed the bank will take the house, the car and the coat from her. And if she has had to provide other security they will keep that too.

On the face of it, it is difficult to see why the banks aren't making a fortune for their shareholders. As I write this the big clearing banks are paying many of their depositors interest of less than 1% on the real money which has been deposited. And they are routinely charging 20% on the money they lend out. So the bank has £1,000 on deposit from Mrs A and pays 1% a year interest. And it lends out that £1,000 to Mrs B, Mrs C, Mrs D and so on. And charges 20% a year interest from each of them.

How, you might think, can banks possibly not make a profit?

The answer is as simple as it is shocking.

Over the last six years seven of the worlds largest banks have generated pre tax profits of $124 billion but during the same period they paid their staff $362 billion. In other words the banks paid their staff almost three times as much as their entire profits leaving huge debts and nothing left for improving the business or paying shareholders.

Incidentally, the profits should have been much, much higher. All those interest payments from Mrs A and millions like her add up to quite a chunk of change. But the bankers used the money they were taking in for their own `investments'. The bankers could do this because the banks have special departments which make investments in complex financial instruments which no one much understands. Mrs A's money isn't put into a vault and protected. It is the basis for all those loans to Mrs B, Mrs C and the rest of them. Plus the bankers use Mrs A's money as seed money for the gambling and they leverage up the money they have by taking huge gambles. The bankers are keen to do this because if the bank makes a profit with Mrs A's money they are paid huge additional bonuses. And if the bank loses some or all of Mrs A's hard earned money the bankers still get their salaries and are still paid bonuses for trying. It's a no risk gamble. Unfortunately, in recent years the bankers have proved to be extraordinarily inept at making investment gambles. They have lost billions. The men and women who threaten to go elsewhere if they are not paid millions of pounds in bonuses for losing money are stupid and incompetent beyond belief. Where did the money go to, you may ask. Well, much of it went to the people running hedge funds who turned out to be much smarter than the people working for the banks.) So, that's exactly why the banks went bust.

And that is why the Government had to use taxpayers money to bail out the banks so that Mrs A didn't realise that her money had disappeared.

You might think that the Government would have insisted that the banks change their ways and stop paying out more than they were making. You might have imagined that the politicians would say to the bankers: `Hey, you morons, stop using Mrs A's money for your gambling. If you want to gamble use your own damned money. And no more million pound bonuses for losing money.'

Not a bit of it.

40

In the simple old days a bank would make a loan and manage it. Employees at the bank (ones who wore smart dark suits made in Savile Row, rather than flashy Italian silk rubbish) were responsible for approving the loans and for making sure that the customers were sound. If something went wrong action could be taken quickly. Today, the derivatives market means that no one checks, no one cares and no one knows who has lent what to whom. But the bank bosses, like robber barons, take money from everywhere, impoverishing their shareholders and the lesser workers. And the banks have created a bizarre parallel world for themselves in order to delay the embarrassing consequences of their actions. So, for example, if an official for a large, international company or a country somewhere goes to a bank and says: `Sorry, lads, but we can no longer pay the interest on our debt, let alone pay back any of the loan' the bank's response will be to say: `Don't worry. We will lend you some more money so that you can pay back the interest on the first loan, the interest on the new loan and also pay back some of the first loan.' And that is exactly what has been happening for the last few years. The banks benefit because they can say to the world that they have good assets, good loans and good borrowers who are paying back what they have been lent. The problem will come in the future, of course.

41

In a healthy society there is a gradual transfer of wealth from those who borrow to those who do not borrow. In our society low interest rates and high inflation have produced the opposite effect. That's not healthy. It discourages thrift and prudence and encourages waste and Brownian economics.

42

Toyota's long established financial rule No 1 is: `Other peoples money, borrowed money, quickly turns into an enemy. Money is a trustworthy ally only when you earn it yourself.' I think its safe to assume that Fred Goodwin never worked at Toyota.

43

Economists, politicians and bankers all sneer at the idea of a gold standard. Of course they do. They hate gold because it is something they cannot control. But if countries were forced to link their currencies to gold then everyone would benefit. Oh, everyone except economists, politicians and bankers. You don't think that could be why they object to the idea do you?

If countries had to link their currency to the amount of gold in their national vaults then central banks would be forced to control their printing of money and their lending. Debt bubbles would not develop, inflation would be controlled and solid investment would be encouraged.

Politicians hate the idea of being constrained by their nation's gold stocks because being free to print as much money as they like enables them to take control of every aspect of their country's economy. By printing money they can devalue the currency (this upsets people who have saved their money but it helps exporters) and they can eradicate the nation's debts by increasing inflation.

Bankers hate gold because if they can't create money out of nothing their profits will be severely limited.

And economists hate gold because if currencies have to be fixed to gold and the amount of a currency available is linked directly to the amount of gold stored then there will be very little opportunity for chaos. And without chaos there will be nothing for economists to do. (For decades many of them have made their living out of commenting on and making forecasts about national finances. They are invariably wrong but that doesn't seem to stop people hiring them.)

44

As recently as the 1980s, banking was a dull business. Banks were solid, trustworthy businesses suitable, as investments, for little old ladies, widows and orphans. Men in striped trousers and frock coats looked after their customers' savings and lent money to solid, respectable businessmen and home buyers. In those good old days bankers followed the 3.6.3. system. They borrowed at 3 %, they lent at 6% and they were on the golf course at 3 p.m. But the customers weren't cheated. And taxpayers didn't have to bail out the banks.

But, almost overnight, banking went from dull to a credit fuelled spending spree. Bankers were suddenly teenagers enjoying a bank holiday weekend at the fair. Everyone leaving university wanted to become a banker and become very rich.

In 1980 the big four banks (Barclays, HSBC (including Midland), Lloyds and Royal Bank of Scotland (including National Westminster) were stable, boring and reliable. Customers and shareholders felt that they were `safe'. By 2012 those same banks had become anything but stable and definitely weren't reliable. Neither customers nor shareholders felt that they were `safe'. In 1980 all the directors of those banks were English. By 2012 a third of them were foreign (many, heaven forbid, American.)

45

In the old world people got rich through building up businesses, discovering oil or buying and improving old properties. It was easy to argue that those people deserved to get rich. And easy to argue, too, that what they did helped the world around them. Today, talentless people get rich through luck and leverage and through gambling with other peoples money (heads we win, tails you lose). There is little hard work, little inspiration and no social worth. Today there is, it seems, no part of the banking system that is not corrupt, fraudulent and working against the interests of private investors and pensioners.

46

Most of the banks in London are American owned. The staff and the banks pay little or no tax to our Government.

47

In most companies it is traditional for the owners, the people who take the risks, to take the biggest share of the profits. In the film world it is the producer who makes the big money. In the shipping industry it is the ship owners who get very rich. But in banking it is the gambling traders and the bosses who make all the money. The owners (the shareholders) just take the risks. That's not a fair or sustainable form of business.

48

Between the years 2005 and 2010 HSBC deliberately missold unsuitable financial products to nearly 2,500 customers (average age 83), selling them bonds designed to fund long-term care. In reality the customers were too old and too ill to benefit from the bonds because there was a high penalty if the five year bond was redeemed early. (Not surprisingly a number of the 83-year-olds found that they needed the money for care before the five year period was up.) The bank was fined £10.5 million for this fraud. The shareholders paid the fine. The bankers who did the selling were not punished. They kept their salaries and bonuses. Why was this fraud not investigated by the police? Why were the perpetrators not arrested, charged, convicted and imprisoned? When is a fraud not a fraud? When it's conducted by a bank. When banks and insurance companies commit heinous crimes against innocent, trusting members of the public, it is always the shareholders who pay the fines. The bankers who committed the frauds, and who benefitted by receiving huge bonuses, suffer not at all. Other banks sold unemployment insurance to the self-employed knowing that self-employed customers couldn't claim on the policies. Why aren't these bankers in prison? The bottom line is simple: don't ever believe anything anyone at a bank tells you. Modern bankers are commission driven crooks.

49

When Lloyds Bank had the bright idea of buying HBOS (one of the Scottish banks which had gone bust as a result of a mixture of greed and incompetence) I wonder if they realised exactly what a crock they were buying. Did they realise that HBOS had managed to lose £10 billion in one year? If they knew this then the bosses of

Lloyds should have been arrested for going ahead with the deal. If they didn't know this then they should have been arrested for failing to protect their shareholders.

50

An executive director at the Bank of England has described the banking industry as a pollutant.

51

When Goldman Sachs was accused by a former employee of ripping off clients, a columnist in the *Financial Times* wrote: `surely there isn't a commercial enterprise in the world that doesn't set out to do this (rip off clients).

If that is the world that *Financial Times* staff inhabit then I find that quite depressing. It's not a world I want to inhabit.

52

American finance organisations are now targeting the English poor. They are lending money to people who cannot get loans from traditional banks and charging 5,000% interest. One company currently advertising loans on television proudly announces that it has an APR of 4,214%. These usurious practices are, apparently, perfectly legal.

53

When Napoleon returned from Austria, where he had been launching his campaign against the Austro-Russian alliance (and probably promoting his new book, film and CD) there was a run on the Banque de France which was almost forced into liquidation as a result. Napoleon immediately summoned his council of ministers and fired his Minister of Finance. He then offered the three man management committee a choice between prison or a fine of 87 million francs. (They chose the fine).

54

Lloyds bank was recently named Bank of the Year. This was presumably because it won the competition for getting most complaints, cheating the most customers and being almost bankrupt. But I don't understand. RBS has lost even more money and cost taxpayers more. So, why didn't RBS get the award?

55

Anyone could run a bank. It's not as if it's as hard as being a paediatric cardiologist, opening the batting for England or even cleaning public lavatories (not that that is something anyone does any more). It is quite true that modern banks have some very complicated products. But the staff don't understand them. History has clearly shown that the intricacies and problems of collateral swaps, security lending and counterparty risks are underestimated and poorly understood - even by the people who created them and sold them.

56

If I am paid to look after a neighbour's £100 but I put the money on a horse and the horse loses I am responsible. Morally and legally the loss of the money is my responsibility. This doesn't work for bankers. They can put your money on a horse, lose it and walk away with no penalty.

57

In 2009, the *Financial Times* named Lloyd Blankfein, the CEO of Goldman Sachs, as its person of the year. This probably tells us more about the *Financial Times* than Blankfein who would, in a decent world, be on America's Most Wanted List.

58

It hasn't only been commercial bankers who have betrayed our trust. Central bankers have, if anything, done even more damage. The Bank of England has for three years either been run by highly-paid rolls of carpet or its taxpayer-funded employees have been deliberately using inflation to get rid of the nation's debts. The Bank has consistently missed its own inflation targets so badly that there are only two possible conclusions: either the people running the Bank are half-witted morons of the Gordon Brown variety or else they have been deliberately misleading the nation about inflation and then allowing inflation rates to rise.

Inflating away the nation's debts may be a slick, sleazy and efficient way to get rid of Gordon Brown's reckless, imprudent extravagances but it has had a massive effect on the citizens.

The individuals who helped create the financial crisis by greedily borrowing far more money than they could pay back have benefitted enormously. Over-ambitious house buyers who took on mortgages they couldn't afford have seen their interest rates fall and house prices remain absurdly high. They, like the greedy bankers, have made money out of the crisis they helped create. The people who are too lazy to work, earn or save have not been badly affected at all. Government employees have done very nicely. They still have their absurdly over-generous pensions. And the cuts to the public sector have, so far, been insignificant. But savers, people who have worked hard and carefully spent within their means, have been hammered by the Bank of England's policies. And non civil servant pensioners, relying on private pensions, have also been beaten up, battered, mugged and left to beg for scraps.

All this happened without any debate and without any public approval. The Bank of England has simply imposed their policies on the nation without discussion. When you really need it democracy is hiding in the cupboard under the stairs. It is my considered opinion that the biggest threat to the prudent comes not from crooks like Madoff and Stanford but from governments, the European Union, regulators and central banks. They are the thieves who are stealing the value from hard-won savings and pensions.

59

It has recently become clear that financial services groups such as brokers and banks (even large, well-known ones) no longer keep client money ringfenced from their own cash.

Banks are supposed to keep the customers' money separate from their own in order to protect customers in the event of insolvency. But the money isn't separated. American banks and brokers seem to be the most likely offenders, and auditors can no longer be relied upon to spot any such problem.

PwC, the nation's biggest accountant by sales, was recently fined £1.4 million for failing to discover that billions of dollars of client money had not been properly ringfenced at JPMorgan Chase, the American bank. The same accountant was auditor to MF Global, the broker-dealer which collapsed in 2011 leaving $1.2 billion of customers funds missing.

60

There are two main reasons why investment bank traders are so reckless. The first is that they are playing with other peoples money. They don't care if they lose money because they themselves cannot lose: they can only win. If their gambles produce profits then they receive huge bonuses. If their gambles result in huge losses they still receive their vast salaries and, believe it or not, they also receive bonuses. The bonuses they receive when they lose money aren't as big. But they are still bonuses. That's the first reason why investment bank traders are reckless. The second is that these days traders are young and aggressive. Studies have suggested that financial traders have relatively high levels of testosterone relative to the general population. These high levels of testosterone rise when a young trader starts work. The shouting and cheering and general pressure encourages a high testosterone environment: a mixture of dangerous over-confidence and aggression.

So, the people who are looking after investment funds and pension funds are inveterate gamblers (who cannot lose) and they are also aggressive and highly fuelled with testosterone. Is it any wonder that investment managers and hedge fund managers do so badly? The only surprise is that they have not yet caused a global melt down and lost the savings of every investor on the planet.

61

Robot trading (computers trading with other computers) now accounts for 70% of all equity trades. A new computer chip designed and built solely to trade can now do deals in 0.000000074 seconds. Investment banks have spent $300 million on new transatlantic cabling so that they can cut 0.006 seconds off equity orders between London and New York. The traders who use all these facilities are not investing because they think something is a sound business proposition. They aren't interested in capital growth or dividends. They are investing to make a few billion in the next half a second. And that's gambling not investing though for the people who do it it isn't gambling because they can't lose. If they lose money they get fat fees and small bonuses. If they win money they get fat fees and big bonuses.

62

Virtually all the growth of the last 50 years has gone into the pockets of the very rich. The middle classes and the poor are no better off in real terms. Countless billions have been stolen by bankers, investment fund managers and company directors, very few of whom have done anything to earn it.

The sad truth about modern banks is that they frequently play customers for marks. They keep the best investments for themselves. They put their clients' money in stuff they themselves want to sell. They use their knowledge of how people are trading to make money themselves. They advise companies to merge or make acquisitions not because it is good for the shareholders or employees of those companies (except the ones at the top) but because it is good for the bank.

63

Bankers and investment company managers are cheating customers out of billions. An investor who puts £50,000 into an active fund that provides typical returns over 25 years will pay out more than £100,000 in charges (most of which are unnecessary and unjustifiable). The bottom line is that private investors pay at least £3 billion a year more in annual fees than they should be paying. And things are getting worse. Many managers are now charging performance fees on top of the usual variety of management fees. Performance fees encourage managers to gamble with their clients money. Churning (constantly buying and selling) also helps to increase the costs which can be added to the bill. Modern financial services are all flim flam, Ponzi schemes and much gambling on obscure and complex securities which no one (certainly not the people using them) understand. There are endless hidden charges and commissions and enormous moral hazards. The average active fund charges twelve times as much as a passive index fund and yet produces a worse performance.

64

A survey in the *Boston Review* in USA showed that 25% of non-Jewish Americans blamed Jews for the financial crisis. This news was greeted with much talk about ethnic hatred and the invariably inaccurate accusation of anti-semitism. But one observer commented that it is difficult to see why it was only 25% and wondered if, perhaps, the other 75% were simply afraid to say what they felt because they suspected that they would be accused of anti-semitism.

65

Money managers didn't see the financial crisis coming because they weren't looking for it. They don't `do' macroeconomics and they have no time for geopolitical risk assessment. It is here that the private investor can beat the bankers and fund managers. I always find it a good idea to look ahead when driving.

66

There's a myth that hedge fund operators, venture capitalists and private equity specialists are clever people who are worth the billions they take home. Wrong. These people aren't bright. They're just people who have no sense of right or wrong and a burning desire to make money at any cost. Here's how they work.

Imagine a man who makes his living as a freelance gardener. He earns £5 an hour. A private equity specialist sees him and is impressed. The private equity specialist offers to manage the gardener. He negotiates with the garden owners and charges them £6 an hour. He pays the gardener his £5 an hour and keeps £1. He sells shares to the public at a P/E ratio of 100 because its a brilliant new company that is better than anything involving mobile telephones or the Internet.

So the gardener now has a capital value of £125,000. (That's 100 x £5 x 250 days a year.)

The private equity manager now goes to a hedge fund and borrows £100,000 against the value of the gardener. He keeps the £100,000 as his fee for structuring the whole deal. He now has £100,000 to spend on champagne. The hedge fund has a bond which is worth £100,000 and the shareholders in the company owning the gardener have stock worth £125,000.

Everyone is getting rich. But they want to get richer and so the gardener is under pressure to work harder and longer hours. Next, the private equity specialist brings together a group of gardeners to create a Multinational Garden Tidying Conglomerate. Soon pension funds, insurance companies and hedge funds have investments (either bonds or shares) in this new business.

The final move is that the private equity specialist sells the business to a new investor who borrows money to finance the purchase. Everything then collapses because there is too much debt and the money earned by the gardeners doesn't cover all the costs.

The postscript to the story is that the gardeners get fired and the weeds grow unhindered.

That's how the modern finance industry works.

In the old days a company would go to a bank or investors for capital and there would be a relationship between the various parties concerned. There would be trust. Today, finance is all about speed and leverage and dumping the business on to the next guy before the music stops.

67

Never in the field of finance has so much money been charged by so many for so little as is now being charged by hedge funds.

Investors in hedge funds would have done twice as well between 1998 and 2010 if they had invested in US treasury bills (which paid 2.3% a year in that period). When inflation is considered the average hedge fund investor lost money. But the average hedge fund manager became very rich indeed.

In that twelve year period, investors received a grand total of £6 billion while the managers charged £275 billion in fees. This is not surprising since hedge fund managers charge massively more than conventional managers. But over the years since 1998, hedge funds have been beaten dramatically by corporate bonds and tracker funds.

Another set of research showed that hedge funds delivered returns of zero between 2004 and 2009 (actually they managed a return of 0.05% but that was before inflation). The real figures are even lower than this because they don't include the figures for hedge funds which went bust (which is quite a lot of them) and simply stopped reporting their results.

And who was investing money in hedge funds? Pension funds - themselves run by overpaid professionals. And so the real losers were small investors and pensioners.

The truth is that very few, if any, clients have got rich by investing in hedge funds. But there are quite a number of hedge fund managers who are now billionaires.

68

It isn't only hedge fund managers who have failed their customers. Private equity managers and venture capitalists have also done very badly for their investors (though they too have mostly done very well for themselves).

69

One of the great, enduring mysteries of life is how banks manage to make a loss. Just think about it. Fred and Freda lend their savings of £1,000 to the bank. They put it in a deposit account and receive a gross, before tax, interest payment of 2%. The bank pays them £20 a year. The bank then lends out that £1,000 to 30 individuals or companies. That's leverage. The bank takes the £1,000 and pretends it is £30,000. The other £29,000 doesn't actually exist. The bank just pretends that it exists and lends it out. The people borrowing the money pay an average of 20% for the privilege. So, from that £1,000, the bank receives a total of £6,000 a year in interest (30 x £200). The bank's gross profit is £6,000 less the £20 they pay out in interest to Fred and Freda. I know that the bank has to pay wages, heat and lighting and so on. But how on earth do they manage to make a loss? The answer, of course, is devastatingly simple. They manage to make a loss partly because they pay out absurd amounts out in salaries and bonuses to senior employees. Last year, for example, well over 4,000 bankers in London received an annual bonus of £2,000,000 or more each. And those huge, undeserved bonuses were awarded on top of equally huge and undeserved salaries. And the other reason for the losses is that they also gamble with the £1,000 lent to the bank by Fred and Freda. They use the money lent to them to gamble on buying bizarre financial derivatives. If these high-risk investments are profitable the bankers give themselves more money in bonuses. If these risky investments go bad, and the money is lost, then it is the bank which takes the losses. The bankers just give themselves slightly smaller bonuses. It's not surprising they don't make any profits for the shareholders. The only mystery is why these people aren't all in prison. Why are they allowed to get away with what is, in reality, nothing more than fraud and theft?

70

When we buy investment products we rely on ratings agencies. These are highly-paid companies which make a fortune out of giving little stars to countries and companies and products. They decide how safe something is financially and then give it a rating. Sounds good. But there are two problems. The first problem is that the people who pay the ratings agencies are the people who are being rated. This is, of course, utterly absurd. The second problem is that the ratings are so often just plain wrong that they really aren't worth the electricity needed to pull them up on your computer screen. I have a crazy thought: could the first problem and the second problem possibly be related in some way?

71

Hedge funds rely on bullshit and luck. Most funds lose money. A few funds make a lot of money (largely through luck) and they receive all the publicity. Hedge fund managers make their money by charging outrageous fees. The usual fee structure is a 2% basic fee, expenses and 20% of any profits. There are funds of funds as well. These invest in a number of hedge funds and charge a 1% fee, plus expenses and expenses. They take a 10% performance fee for investing in the hedge funds. No one investing in a fund of funds stands a chance of making any money.

72

When hedge funds and other investment ventures fail it is never their fault, it is always the result of an unexpected, unprecedented event. They even have a name for these rare events: they call them black swans.

But rare events aren't all that rare and should never be unexpected by wise investors. Anyone who fails to plan for disaster when preparing an investment portfolio is behaving recklessly. And, for the record, black swans are not uncommon. The town of Dawlish in Devon is awash with them. I even have a photograph, which I took, of a black swan sitting on her nest.

What do I know? How dare I criticise these billionaire fund managers? Well, I've run five investment portfolios for many years now. With no leverage whatsoever I've averaged nearly 20% a year gain for the last decade.

73

In May 2012, it was revealed that a huge American bank called JP Morgan had lost billions of dollars in a financial gamble (bankers called it a trade) which, it seemed, no one on the planet really understood. The boss of the bank, Jamie Dimon, had been a firm opponent of the idea that banks with government guaranteed deposits should not be allowed to speculate on their own behalf with depositors' money.

74

Also in May 2012, it was revealed that an RBS banker was being investigated for lying.

They caught just one?

75

Bankers receive huge taxpayer subsidies that aren't even counted by governments when they are working out how much banks cost the taxpayers. For example, the value of the Government guarantee of £85,000 per depositor is said to be worth £200 billion a year to the banks. Without that guarantee, banks would have to pay depositors a far higher rate of interest.

76

Bankers have proved themselves incapable of coping satisfactorily with the fractional reserve banking system which enables them to borrow £1 and lend it out many, many times to other customers. And so we need to abandon the damned silly system. Bankers should be allowed to lend out a maximum of 80% of what they can borrow from real life customers.

77

The fact is that investment managers are not as clever as they tell people they are, nor as clever as they are paid to be. Irrational human behaviour influences everything including investments. It is laughable to claim that the financial markets are efficient. Only someone brought up to believe that computers are clever could possibly believe that.

Conclusion

We should attack and vilify the investment bankers far more than we have done. We've been far too lenient with them. Our bankers have no standards, no dignity and no respect for their customers. They are semi-literate, half-witted, duplicitous, shameless, greedy and dishonest. They exhibit a level of ruthless selfishness which is staggering. I find it impossible to think of `bad' adjectives which do not apply to bankers. These are people who have no real reason to exist. They do not have any social purpose. Their simpler brethren, the bank employees who hand out cheque books and fill up the hole-in-the-wall cash machines, have a reason to exist. The men and women who gamble with other people's money, the investment bankers, the Goldman Sachs operatives, exist only to steal money from the rest of us; they are absurdly overpaid confidence tricksters who operate above the law because they have bought the law and the politicians who make it. Nothing will improve until the banks are forced to start behaving responsibly. And that won't happen until we have politicians in power who regard bankers as a menace instead of as an endless source of party funding, fine wine and expensive meals.

CHAPTER :4: INFLATION: UP, UP AND AWAY

Introduction

By printing more money the Bank of England has pushed down the value of sterling. If you expand the money supply you must inevitably reduce the value of the money. That is the definition of inflation. Prices go up as a result of inflation because suppliers, manufacturers, importers and so on must still meet their costs. When the value of a currency falls the price of all imports (including such basic essentials as food and oil) must rise. When a country imports much or most of its food and oil then the inflation rate will be particularly high. And yet spokesidiots for the Bank of England constantly express surprise that their printing of more money always seems followed by a rise in the inflation figure. They are either very, very stupid or else they are lying to us. The Governor of the Bank of England has recently written nine successive letters explaining why inflation was higher than allowed or expected. (I assume he just simply told a secretary `Send the inflation letter'.)

1

The Government should encourage job creation not through daft schemes (which largely seem to involve shovelling millions into the outstretched hands of their pals) but by cutting red tape and taxes for entrepreneurs. Despite its membership of the EU (the source of most of the daft and destructive regulations which make life so impossible for entrepreneurs and which seem designed to discourage any sort of investment) Germany did this some years ago. For example, they repealed much of the legislation controlling small companies with less than ten employees and allowed entrepreneurs to make staff redundant if things weren't going well. When the Conservatives wanted to introduce similar legislation to that existing in Germany the Liberal Democrats immediately stomped on it. Because they are Statist organisations committed to creating a Statist society both the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats do everything they can to discourage new non-public sector jobs.

So everything is stuffed.

Companies wont spend. Companies wont invest or hire. And the Government cant raise enough in taxes to pay its current liabilities, let alone pay off its debts.

We cannot increase our exports because we don't make anything much to export and no one would want to buy anything from us anyway (because it would be too expensive and too shoddily made) even if they could afford to buy it.

We could reduce our imports but that would mean doing without food, oil and high definition 3D television sets.

Moreover, the Government, which doesn't know what else to do about the stuffed economy, keeps destroying the currency. The buffoons who run the Bank of England give the appearance of having not yet worked out that this makes imports more expensive and therefore guarantees a high inflation rate. Their constant bleating about inflation coming down might suggest that they are either drunkenly optimistic or as stupid as Gordon Brown. But the truth is worse than either of these possibilities: the men in expensive suits know that printing more money pushes up inflation because that's why they are doing it. They are deliberately impoverishing the elderly and the prudent in order to try to protect the stupid, the reckless, the feckless and their chums working for the penniless banks.

Of course, all other governments are doing exactly the same thing for exactly the same reasons. And so, in order to compete in this bizarre downward spiral, the Bank of England will carry on printing more money. (They say they aren't printing money but that's a weaselly way with words. They may not be actually printing money but pushing a button and doubling the amount of currency in existence isn't not printing money just because you haven't actually gone to the trouble of producing the notes.)

And the end result is that inflation is eventually going to soar. Everything will be alright for a while and then the inflation will come with a rush and neither the Bank of England nor anyone else will be able to stop it and if they think they can then they should all be locked up and sedated.

I'm not an officially accredited financial adviser and I can't even make suggestions about how to beat this lunacy without ending up sharing a cell with a former MP or a bloke with cauliflower ears, a broken nose and a penchant for throwing bricks through jewellery shop windows but I have a suspicion that wise folk have been buying real stuff that will still have a value when a £50 note won't be worth picking up off the pavement. I bet there are quite a few wise old owls who have stocked up on precious metals such as gold, silver and platinum and on things like rare stamps, rare coins and rare books. The wise know that all fiat currencies are vulnerable. There are no exceptions. There is only one really reliable currency: gold. The economists may scoff. But the economists are invariably both wrong and poor.

2

The Government always likes to keep the inflation figure as low as possible. There is a political reason for this in that it looks good if the Chancellor can tell Parliament and the country that the nation's inflation rate is under control. But there is also a (more important) economic reason: many of the payments the Government makes are related to one of the official inflation rates. (There are two: the Consumer Price Index and the Retail Price Index. Having two gives the Government more room for manoeuvre.) The amount of money that pensioners will receive depends upon these official rates and so it is in the interests of the Government (and those running private sector occupational pension schemes) to keep the rates low. Even more important, however, is the fact that the Retail Price Index decides the money the Government has to pay out on index-linked gilts. Adjusting the RPI downwards (in commercial terms this is more commonly known as fiddling the figures) enables the Government to make a dramatic reduction (probably as much as 40%) in the sums which will be paid out to private pensioners, for whom politicians and civil servants, who have enormously advantageous pension schemes paid by taxpayers, have absolutely no sympathy whatsoever.

(Those who bought index-linked gilts to try to protect their savings or pension fund might take some comfort from the fact that the Bank of England has around 80% of its own pension fund in index-linked bonds - which rather suggests to me that despite their apparent surprise at rising inflation rates the bozos at the Bank of England were, despite appearances, bright enough to know very well that inflation was likely to go up, up and away. And the Bank of England has the right to object to any changes which it considers might damage the wealth of the holders of these bonds. Since the Bank of England's employees have shown that they don't give a damn about other people's pensions we will have to rely on them caring about their own. I'm confident that they will.)

3

I have explained how the Government fiddles the inflation figures in several previous books (including *Moneypower*) but the best of their little tricks must surely be this one: if something which is normally measured as part of the inflation figure goes up in price then it is removed from the basket of items used to measure inflation! If that isn't fiddling the results then I don't know what is. This (and numerous other examples of egregious dishonesty) ensure that the official inflation rate bears absolutely no resemblance to the real one which will usually be two, three or four times as high as the official one. My estimate is that the real inflation rate in England has rarely (if ever) been below 10% for the last couple of decades. This means that if you have £100 on deposit in the bank and you are receiving 1% interest (after tax) then the real value of your £100 will, at the end of the year, be reduced to £91. If this continues for a few more years your wealth will, literally, disappear. Deliberately induced inflation is nothing more or less than officially sanctioned, officially organised theft.

4

Even without the money printing efforts of the Bank of England, inflation is bound to rise because in China the Communist Party is keen to create an additional 45 million jobs. You can't create that many jobs merely by taking in more laundry. This huge need for jobs will inevitably drive the demand for commodities of all kinds (including copper, which will probably be in deficit by the end of 2012). The 45 million people who get those nice, sparkly new jobs will all want to spend their money buying goodies made with the aid of stuff (such as oil or wheat) that we need too. And so the price of everything will rise. And as the value of our currency is driven lower and lower so that will mean more inflation at home.

Plus, I hate to mention this, but there is another problem.

There aren't another 45 million people in China still looking for jobs.

Most of the people who wanted to move into cities and towns have already done so. And there simply aren't many people left to be sucked up by growing factories.

Why is this a problem?

Because when there are more jobs than applicants there is only one possible result: wages will rise.

And when wages in China go up the result is higher prices.

And that means more inflation in England.

5

In the last ten years China has grown to be the biggest car market in the world. And the Chinese don't want cheap Chinese rubbish. Last year Rolls Royce sold more cars in China than it sold in England, Wales and Scotland. Within another decade one third of all the world's new cars will be sold in China. (Why else do you think the car companies are keen to hold a Formula One Grand Prix in a country where they have to paint the seats in such a way as to make it look as though real people are actually watching the race?)

6

I read recently that workers at Unilever in Nepal want a 50% pay rise. They've just had a 69% pay rise. I don't blame them. They've been working for beads and blankets for far too long. Their wage increases will affect the prices of everything we buy because those workers will have more money to spend. We will be competing for the raw materials used to make things and so the prices of things will go up.

7

Those who regard globalisation as something new and shiny should know that in the early 19th century around 60% of the worlds GDP was in Asia. The Industrial Revolution, which started in England and eventually spread to the rest of Europe and to America, left Asia behind and by the 1950s the Asian economies constituted less than 18% of global GDP.

8

In February 2012, Apple gave its Chinese workers a 25% pay rise. This will increase inflation in two ways. First, it means that the cost of the stuff they make will inevitably go up. Second, those workers will have more money to spend on shoes, burgers and cars and so the cost of the ingredients used to make shoes, burgers and cars must also rise. Apple is not, of course, the only foreign owned company to be increasing the wages it pays its employees in China. The Chinese Government is encouraging Chinese unions to demand that foreign owned companies pay higher wages. Why? Because this brings more money into China.

9

The Chinese Government is also encouraging the local citizens to buy gold with their savings. They don't want their people putting too much of their money into dollars, euros or English pounds - all of which will soon be pretty worthless.

10

The Bank of England's policies have hit pensioners and savers particularly hard. By bringing interest rates down to an all time low the Bank's public employees have wrecked annuity rates. Those reliant on private pensions have suffered most.

11

The Government and the Bank of England constantly predict a fall in the rate of inflation. How can they possibly say this when they must know that their policies are pushing inflation up? The only conclusion is that people whom we are paying to regulate our economy are lying. When inflation rises, rises and rises still more they will claim it is because the price of food and oil has gone up. This is as bad as a kid blaming the ball when he kicks it through a window. The Bank of England, the Office of Budget Responsibility (did they get the name of that quango out of a George Orwell novel?) and the Government constantly blames our problems on unexpected increases in world energy and commodity prices. Unexpected?

12

The Bank of England is also using inflation to bring house prices down. During the Gordon Brown inspired spending boom, the price of houses rose to absurd and unprecedented levels. Most sensible observers suggested that house prices had to fall by around 50% to be affordable. The Bank and the Government knew that this would be disastrous. Millions of people had borrowed money to buy overpriced homes that they couldn't afford. If house prices crashed, the lending banks would lose billions more and millions of greedy people would be thrown out of their homes and would have to live more modest lives. And so the Bank, and the Government, deliberately created policies designed to protect those who had borrowed too much to buy houses they couldn't possibly afford. Instead of allowing the price of houses to fall to a sensible level the Government is destroying the prudent and the elderly by reducing the value of the money that was used to buy those houses. And the beauty of inflation is that it can help bring house prices down to a more sensible level without anyone really noticing what is happening. The house that costs £300,000 today may well be wildly overpriced in today's money. But when a bag of chips costs £10 and a motorist has to pay £200 to fill up his tank the £300,000 house will seem far more reasonable. The house will probably still cost £300,000 in a few years time (because the seemingly inexorable rise in house prices has slowed) but the £300,000 will be worth less. In England, the real rate of inflation is now higher than it has been for decades and rising inflation means that house prices can fall without obviously falling. The cost of a house in 2012 wasn't much below the cost of the same house in 2008 in real terms. But when inflation is taken into account house prices have fallen fairly dramatically in value.

13

`The global system of fiat currencies will eventually end up in a devaluation race.' - Ludwig von Mises.

14

In 2009 in North Korea, Kim Jong II announced that the country's old won bills, worth 10,000 won each, would be replaced with new 10 won notes. To make things worse he announced that only amounts of up to 150,000 won could be changed. Any more than that would be lost for ever. Two and a half thousand years earlier Dionysius of Syracuse restamped one drachma coins as being worth two drachma, thereby halving the value of the coins. In the past, governments shaved the edges off coins, or diluted the quality of the gold or silver used in making coins. Today, they just print money or add another zero onto the computer balance sheet. Governments deliberately use inflation as a weapon because they know that even quite modest rates of inflation can halve a nations debts in less than a decade. Our caring Government (the one we elected to look after our interests) will keep interest rates low and encourage high levels of inflation both to reduce its own debts and to help greedy house owners get out of the debts they incurred when they bought houses they couldn't afford. Since equities always suffer when interest rates are low, and since the Government's policies have resulted in poor returns from gilts and bonds, investors are doomed to become even poorer. It is important to understand that this is not an accident. It is Government policy. And the Government will continue to take money from those who have saved and to give it (in large quantities) to those who have been imprudent and who have spent more than they should have.

15

With inflation officially at 5.2% (it is of course far higher than this in reality) those on benefits will receive a 5.2% increase while workers have a pay freeze and investors receive 0.5% gross return on their money

Conclusion

Politicians talk about inflation as though it were something out of their control. They discuss it as though it were some supernatural force, like a tornado or a heat wave. Ignore this bleating nonsense. Inflation is man-made. Governments like it because inflation helps eradicate past debts. The problem is that once you've set it in motion, inflation is impossible to control. I have written in previous books about inflation in Germany and Zimbabwe. Just for a change, consider what happened in Brazil in the 1990s. Inflation then peaked at an annual rate of 2,100% and prices rose so fast that cheques lost 30% of their value while being cleared.

CHAPTER 5: A DISENFRANCHISED NATION

Introduction

We have been disenfranchised by the party system and by the rise, rise and rise of corrupt, immoral politicians - many of whom could accurately be described as psychopaths. Most people in England want to leave the EU, want a halt to immigration and want all illegal wars to stop. But no leading party, or politicians, ever talk about offering these options to the electorate. There is no sense of public service and the concept of `duty' remains a mystery to politicians and their regiments of advisers. We have been disenfranchised and we now live in the sort of kleptocracy which has, for decades, given Africa a bad name. It is hardly surprising that disillusionment with politicians is widespread. We have been ill-served by a new breed of professional politicians who largely began their careers in student politics and who now regard politics as a career, a business. Most are, at best, inept. Modern politicians, who would be best advised to just stand there, always feel the need to do something. Invariably the something they choose to do is self-serving and damaging. Until the electors are better served little is likely to change for the better but much is likely to change for the worse.

For the time being, there is much fatalism; people have lost their will as well as their independence. Many electors assume that there is now no alternative to deceit and corruption. Those who know that they are being lied to don't know what to do. And those who know what to do are fearful of the consequences.

1

We describe ourselves as free people living in a free country. But we have little or no control over our destiny and our votes are of little consequence. We live in a country where the police kill innocent citizens and go unpunished and where the Government spends billions of pounds of our money to protect the absurd salaries and bonuses of a few well placed bankers. We live in a country where people like Blair, Brown, Cameron and Clegg acquire all the power and treat the rest of us like serfs. The only voters who count now are the zombies (the state employed and the scroungers). There are enough of them to vote to defend the generous State.

Voting is now a pointless exercise because there is little discernible difference between the three main parties. Millions who are on benefits will simply vote for the Government which gives them the most money. And since the majority of citizens are dependent upon the Government for their daily bread it is easy for politicians to buy votes and ignore taxpayers. There are tens of thousands of lobbyists who will bribe politicians to do what their masters want them to do and the result is that our politicians (for whom dignity, honour and respect appear to be alien) have allowed government by lobbyist rather than government by voters. I'd rather have whatever the electorate choose to throw at me than a world designed exclusively by a mixture of Murdochs, arms dealers and drug companies.

And, of course, if you are a desperate politician you can always just fiddle the results. This isn't just something that happens in the scruffier parts of the world. Stealing elections happens in America. And there is no reason at all why it cannot, and does not, happen in England. The use of postal votes and voting machines has made it extraordinarily easy to fiddle the results. (Not everyone is quite as stupid as Bernadette Chirac, the 78-year-old widow of the former French president. Her election as a local councillor in her husbands old constituency area was annulled after a tribunal in the town of Limoges decided that the election had to be rerun. Tellers found that Mrs Chirac had done exceptionally well in the election. Indeed, she had done rather too well. She had acquired two more votes than the number of registered voters in the area.)

2

In the 16th and 17th centuries every man who entered public life did so knowing that there was an excellent chance that he would end his career in the tower or on the scaffold. Those of us not in public life went wrong somewhere and allowed the politicians too much freedom. Perhaps the problem is that we treated them too damned decently.

3

Our politicians loudly instruct other nations to become more democratic but it sometimes seems as though modern English democracy is just a way for insiders to give themselves and their cronies huge sums of money gouged out of trusting taxpayers. How many English voters wanted their Government to build up huge debts, to give billions to the European Union, to fight illegal wars so that the Americans could grab other people's oil or to take money from the prudent and give it to Fred Goodwin, scroungers, and bankrupt Scottish banks?

Voters don't get the chance to vote on issues which affect them, they simply end up voting for parties with hidden agendas and deals.

When democracy started, the idea was that electors would be invited to vote on specific issues. For example: `Shall we go to war?' Even Italy, one of the countries now run by an EU appointed ex Goldman Sachs dictator, once practised proper democracy. Back in the 15th century, voters in Florence were invited to decide whether or not their money should be used to build a cathedral and if so how big the cathedral should be, how it should be designed and how much should be spent. That's democracy in action.

In Paris, the Princess and I were recently asked by the mayor of our arrondissement for our views on whether our street should be pedestrian only and where the buses should run. That's proper democracy.

In England (and, indeed, the USA) democracy (like capitalism) is now so far removed from the original meaning of the word that those who talk about it should be arrested for fraudulent trading. Our democracy is a corrupt and degenerate version which has nothing to do with real democracy, just as the form of capitalism now practised has nothing to do with real capitalism. (`Ah diddums has the poor little banker lost all the other peoples money and got nothing left to play with? Have some more and let mama know when its all gone.')

Once they are elected and in power our governments categorically ignore the public view on everything. Petitions are shredded or burnt without even being read. They go into the front door of Number 10 and straight out of the back into the shredding van.

4

One of our problems is that too many of the people who have grabbed power in England in recent years are devout worshippers at the twin shrines of political correctness and multiculturalism.

What ill-defined, dangerous and bizarre social nuisances these are.

What exactly are they? What are the rules? No one really knows except that they are aspects of a levelling process, conducted with menacing thoroughness by the enthusiastic followers of an errant branch of McCarthyism for whom the enemy is western culture in general and English culture in particular.

The irony, of course, is that most of the proponents of these twin evils (and certainly the most vociferous and powerful of them) speak only one language (English) and earn their living as paid servants of the English State. Their aim is merely to destroy for they have no other culture to offer, other than the general principle that anything which can be branded `ethnic' trumps everything else.

What do they mean by `multiculturalism'? Wearing a sari occasionally? Listening to native Indian music from time to time? Eating a curry every Thursday evening?

For what are we throwing away our traditions, our history and culture?

When these people (who seem embarrassed and ashamed by the success of their cultural ancestors) call for the end of western culture (or English culture) they are calling for the demise of the only culture they have. With what do they intend to replace it?

The odd thing is that the English are the only proponents of multiculturalism. I haven't noticed the Chinese, the Arabs, the Israelis, the Scots or the Indians promoting multiculturalism. I haven't seen the French get too excited about erasing Napoleon from their culture or removing Charlemagne from the history books. For heavens sake the French still get excited about Joan of Arc.

In the cold light of day the proponents of multiculturalism and political correctness are truly stupid, soulless people. But we laugh at them at our peril for they have aided in the destruction of our national identity and they have done enormous damage to our democracy. They, more than any other group, have damaged our lives and disenfranchised us. Toxic multiculturalism and political correctness are elitist (in that they are favoured by academics, civil servants and BBC journalists - all of whom are public sector workers, paid by the

State) and destructive.

5

I believe that England would be best served by a sovereign independent English parliament, packed with passionate, independent voices representing every shade of opinion. We need dignity and respect back in politics. Instead, we have just over six hundred clipped and shampooed poodles representing the three parties and obeying every instruction from Brussels. The poodles are isolated and protected from reality and they have little or no idea what the voters really want. England is now run by a toxic mixture of Scottish nationalists and politically correct, cryptorchid incompetents who think there is nothing wrong with armies of Romanians coming into the country, claiming a small fortune in benefits and then selling the *Big Issue* for extra money to pay for their holiday home in Greece. Our future is controlled by undistinguished self-serving poseurs and buffoons.

6

What we really need are politicians who have achieved enough in real life to be able to go into politics without bowing to pressure from lobbyists and bureaucrats. Arnold Schwarzenegger uniquely ran California for the benefit of the people - because he could. Sadly, we get politicians who have no experience of life and no achievements outside politics. Our politicians know so little that they think they know what is good for us. They want a world full of rules and regulations, rather than leaving us to make our own decisions, and they desperately want to decide how we spend our time and our money. Politics is now a profession that attracts hustlers, tricksters, grasping power-hungry psychopaths, men and women who don't have the brains or application for proper jobs but who fancy the idea of making a good few bob (and becoming famous) out of politics. They are opportunistic psychopaths.

A few decades ago Tory sleaze was largely sexual in nature. Much of it was of little real consequence and simply provided entertainment for the readers of the sort of tabloids produced by the Murdoch empire. Only Labour politicians stooped to taking bribes, cheating on their expenses or selling out their country, their Government and their electors for a fistful of fivers. Today, nearly all political sleaze is financial. This is a result of the fact that most modern politicians are in politics solely for the money. They have had no other career, they have no other source of income, they have no skills, no knowledge and no personally acquired wealth. All this is bad for the country because men who are independently wealthy (either in hard cash or in terms of marketable skills) are far less likely to give in to financial temptation than men who are struggling to maintain three homes, several cars and a mistress on a Parliamentary salary.

7

When the Beatles were cheered at JFK airport as they arrived in the USA for the first time, the 5,000 teenagers doing the wild cheering were there because they had been paid a dollar each and given a free T-shirt. Politicians learn from entertainers. When Tony Blair entered Downing Street the cheering hordes, waving flags and wearing their Party T-shirts, were Labour Party workers and supporters planted there to make Blair look popular.

8

Our politicians are constantly discovering new and complicated solutions to some very simple problems. Invariably and inevitably these so-called solutions make things worse.

9

In 1944, when our last Coalition Government was fighting Hitler, a poll of Britons showed that 57% thought that the politicians were acting in the their own interests, or the interests of their party, rather than in the interests of the country.

10

The chances are high that the disgraced Labour Party (the one that destroyed our country) will be back in power at the next election. The necessary but controversial austerity programme will make the Tories so unpopular that, almost unbelievably, the deeply uncharismatic Miliband will win power. The only good news is that

Clegg's party (destructive, fascist, dangerous and the most utterly nannyish, repressive party ever invented) will secure fewer votes than UKIP, the BNP, the Green Party and whatever remains of the Monster Raving Loony Party. Clegg, the inhuman face of the EU, is surely finished as a politician in England but doubtless has a great future as an EU Something Well-Paid, working at an institution where incompetence and unpopularity are not regarded as a disadvantage. When he loses his party, his seat and his ministerial car at the next general election the country's most unpopular politician will doubtless want to start with a nice well-paid job as an EU Commissioner. (The people who voted for Clegg have such poor judgement and such low intelligence that they should be banned from driving, owning scissors, having responsible jobs or going shopping unless under adult supervision.)

11

According to acting guru Stanislavski one quality is more important than any other for an actor: charm. The party political spin doctors realised some time ago that the same thing is also true for politicians. It is why Blair (who has plenty) got away with mass murder and why Brown (who has none) didn't get away with gross incompetence. The great weakness of the party system (and its way of forming up behind a telegenic leader) is that these days our leaders are people who win popularity contests not because they say wise things but because they look good on the television. The party system gives us unoriginal, unimaginative, smug and pointless drones. It gives us Cameron and Clegg - a pair of upper class, privileged twits with little experience of business or the real world (though Clegg did once, thanks to his banker father, have a work experience post in a bank). My first thought is that it is perhaps hardly surprising that we are in a mess. My second thought is that the unelected (and unelectable) professional Scotsman Gordon Brown was not telegenic but did succeed in destroying our economy. My third thought is that our party political structure is irreparably corrupt and there is an easily sustainable argument that all wise and sensitive individuals should become anarchists, with the avowed hope that the whole damned, dishonest edifice will collapse so that we can rebuild something better in its place.

12

`Why do you want a political career? Have you ever been in the House of Commons and taken a good look at the inmates? As weird a gaggle of freaks and sub-humans as was ever collected in one spot.' - P. G. Wodehouse, Cocktail Time

13

Politicians who fail are routinely kicked upstairs to the House of Lords. The ones with better contacts become President of the World Bank, President of the IMF, one of the many Presidents of the European Union and, indeed, President of anything which carries a huge salary, a huge pension, a huge staff, a huge expense account and a huge office.

14

If 600 MPs are corrupt enough to fiddle their expenses, how many are corrupt enough to sell out their constituents or their country? And how surprising is it that public sector workers take advantage of their status and power to steal and cheat and lie, when MPs do it?

15

In our increasing complex world it is absurd that anyone should become an MP under the age of 50.

16

Is Clegg an alien? He is certainly not of this world. How did anyone come to vote for him? Were they drugged? If someone asked me to sign the forms to have him locked up as a danger to himself and the community I'd have my pen out in a shot. The man is barking, but dangerously barking. He doesn't think he's a tree or Napoleon or a rice pudding. He thinks the EU is a good thing. And that is infinitely more dangerous than thinking you're a tree.

17

Lobbying is legalised bribery which no one objects to because the people being bribed are the people making the laws and the people doing the bribing have money, sports tickets and crates of champagne in their armoury. It is because of lobbyists that it is impossible for those who oppose vaccination, vivisection, genetic engineering and other dangerous activities to get any sort of hearing from politicians.

18

Every few years electors get to overthrow the Government as long as they immediately reelect them (or another one which is quite indistinguishable). The basic problems remain uncorrected. Our political system needs fundamental reform. But, without a revolution, that is not something for which our politicians are ever going to vote.

19

In our bizarre society there are no penalties for lying or gross incompetence. Gordon Brown, Tony Blair and Fred Goodwin all got rich and are getting richer. None has been to prison. Journalists still ask Brown and Blair for views on world affairs and the economy when they should in reality ask them only about prison conditions and the likelihood of their acquiring first hand experience of our legal system. Have there ever been former Prime Ministers more regarded with contempt than Tony Blair and Gordon Brown? No one person in history has done more harm to England than Gordon Brown and yet Brown, who has now apologised for everything he didn't do (such as the sending of orphans to Australia a zillion years ago) steadfastly refuses to apologise for destroying the country and helping to take us into two illegal wars. Who will apologise for Brown's bad actions? Certainly not Miliband who was a member of a cabinet which took us into an illegal war and is, in my opinion, just as much a war criminal as his predecessors.

20

Politicians have made it clear to journalists that the publication of unpleasant, scary truths is not welcomed. And so much of our media (including that most compliant of media organisations, the BBC) obediently reinforces the EUs propaganda, protects the political establishment, steadfastly refuses to question the official line on anything and does its determined best to destroy any opposition and to keep original thinkers well away from its publicly-funded studios.

But politicians really don't have to worry too much for even when `bad news' is published it will likely be ignored or, at least, quickly forgotten. If it cannot be suppressed it will be glossed over and overwhelmed by the constant influx of new irrelevant nonsense.

In his book *Fog Facts*, Larry Beinhart (the author of the novel which became the magnificent film *Wag the Dog*) explains that although the important facts are there, available to anyone who has the time to find them, we tend not to see them because they are lost in a confusing fog of information. And so, explains Beinhart, George W. Bush got away with stealing an American election partly because the media covered up the truth and partly because the American people didn't want to see the truth. Sometimes it takes more courage than most people can find to face up to the truth when doing so is likely to make you feel you have to do something about it.

21

Appeasement encourages aggression and abasement encourages oppression.

22

Around the world there is a far higher proportion of crooks among senior politicians than among any other group of citizens. A surprising number move straight to prison when they leave office. Most have done far better for themselves than charging taxpayers for packets of biscuits or moat cleaning operations. (It is no exaggeration to say that most corporate chief executives and senior civil servants are also crooks - and most abuse their positions of power.)

23

`Egotism is an infirmity that perpetually grows upon a man, till at last he cannot bear to think of anything but himself, or even to suppose that others do.' - Hazlitt, writing about politicians

24

Archaeologists found the 10,000-year-old skeleton of a politician. How could they tell it was a politician? By the way it was lying.

25

Our world has been ruined by overachievers, people who have risen further than their talent merited. Brown, Clegg and Goodwin are three obvious examples.

26

I have decided to award the first Bono Award for Sanctimonious Hypocrisy to our deputy Prime Minister, Clegg, who makes the nauseating Bono (for whom, in my opinion, the word hypocrisy was invented) look modest and decent and Prince Edward look brainy and charismatic.

The Bono Award, which consists of a large mirror, will be given to individuals, countries and companies who have shown exceptionally high levels of self-glorification, self-importance, hypocrisy and nauseating general sliminess.

Clegg won the first award against determined competition from David Cameron and Vince Cable. He won because, in my view, he manages to be weedy, loathsome, patronising, supercilious, hypocritical, stupid and arrogant all at the same time. After John Prescott I didn't think we'd ever have a worse deputy Prime Minister. But Clegg has succeeded in out-Prescotting Prescott and must now surely be the most unpopular politician in England since Blunkett.

Despite Clegg's success, I suspect that Vince Cable is now the most dangerous man in the country (no one takes Clegg seriously). Cable, who makes Prescott and Brown look like intellectual giants and stalwarts of integrity, will be personally responsible for keeping us in depression for years. He is officially in the Government as Business Secretary but he won't hear of getting rid of red tape and actually wants more of the damned stuff. It seems to me that he doesn't know anything about how small businesses are run or much care about the travails of the people who try to run them. If he thinks small businesses are beneath him he should remember how big businesses start.

27

Our `leaders' have no strategic plan for the country. We are, at the same time, America's poodle, a half-hearted member of the European Union and leader of the Commonwealth. We fail in everything we do.

28

Gordon Brown should be put into the stocks. The entire country should then be entitled to file past and make him aware of their feelings. (Women could take theirs prepared in a bottle).

29

Politicians always mess things up. They are constitutionally dysfunctional.

30

The Liberal Democrats act as though they are a department of the European Union commission. They seem opposed to anything which might improve the chances of small businesses surviving let alone growing. I suspect that Liberal Democrats hate entrepreneurs because they aren't part of the State.

31

Scottish politicians are helping to run (and ruin) English life. I have never seen it mentioned anywhere (other than in my own books) that Gordon Brown (and many other leading Westminster politicians) have signed The Scottish Claim of Rights. This document states: `We...do hereby declare and pledge that in all our actions and deliberations (the) interests (of the Scottish people) shall be paramount.'

The Scottish Claim of Rights has also been signed and approved by (among others) the former Chancellor Alistair Darling, the former speaker of the House of Commons, Michael Martin and all rabid, rancid, tartan-wearing Scottish nationalists.

32

Stupid people and intelligent people all get one vote each. Since there are more stupid people than intelligent people in the world it is obviously the case that stupid people run the world. England is run by people who have been elected by morons, cretins and village idiots. In a world dominated by stupid people it is perhaps hardly surprising that the people who become most successful are increasingly stupid. I offer Tony Blair, John Prescott, David Blunkett and Nick Clegg as evidence. Gordon Brown had a brain put together by unskilled labourers using bits and pieces which they had picked up from a pathology department car boot sale.

Remember, you only have to fool 40% of the 60% who vote in order to control a country.

33

Myrmidons are unscrupulous followers or subordinates who do stuff unquestioningly. Our modern politicians are surrounded by myrmidons.

34

Ministers are appointed to their posts because they are particularly well suited to the work they are expected to do. So, for example, our Foreign Secretaries know lots of foreigners and our Home Secretaries are expected to have lots of homes.

35

It is rational for individuals to fill up their petrol tanks whenever the nation is threatened with a petrol strike. But when lots of people behave in this rational way the result is chaos. How could the Coalition Government not understand that when they recommended that we should all fill up our petrol tanks and, for good measure, fill up spare cans with petrol, the result would be a petrol shortage and *total* chaos?

36

Cameron, public relations man and lounge lizard, made a huge mistake in accepting a Coalition with Clegg. The problem was that the Tories were so desperate to get hold of the perks of power (the chauffeur-driven limousines and so on) that they were prepared to do anything - even form an alliance with Clegg's boys. If, after Gordon Brown had been booted out Cameron had had the balls to hold another election, and to ask for a clear majority, he would have won. No one with functioning cortical tissue wanted Labour in charge of anything. But Cameron clung to Clegg and landed the country with an appalling portfolio of promises and policies which have continued to damage England. In my opinion, neither Clegg nor his pathetic pal Cable has any understanding of, or enthusiasm for, enterprising businesses, and the libraries full of rules and regulations which they have enthusiastically imported from their very best pals in Brussels have finished off what small chance we might have had of getting through the next few decades without sliding into a lengthy economic depression.

37

The world has changed in recent years. Today, whatever the politicians can do which will screw up the country they will do. They will always find a way to make things bad and then to make things worse. They are selfish and incompetent. Actually, they are, almost to a man or woman, psychopaths. Instead of being led by clear-minded, passionate professionals we get interchangeable, egocentric megalomaniacs.

38

Enoch Powell was probably the last thinking politician, the last one who had the intelligence to understand that politicians need a strategy for leadership. Naturally, politicians also need the intelligence to create a strategy and to follow it through with the appropriate tactics.

39

You can tell a politician is lying by the fact that his mouth is open and words are coming out.

40

Too many people mind their own business these days. That's why there is so much violence and its why our streets aren't safe and our politicians cant be trusted.

41

According to England's official sleaze watchdog, the chairman of the committee on standards in public life, Tony Blair is personally responsible for a collapse in public trust. His seven sins were:

1. The cash for peerages scandal. (`Lend us money secretly and we will give you a peerage.')

2. The illegal Iraq war.

3. Overriding Cabinet and Parliament.

4. Political interference in a fraud investigation. (Blair ended an enquiry into alleged corruption over BAE's arms deal with Saudi Arabia.)

5. A failure to properly investigate alleged breaches of ministerial code. (Those involved included John Prescott, David Blunkett and Tessa Jowell.)

6. Leaving the postal voting system open to fraud.

7. A reliance on spin doctors and special advisers.

Not surprisingly, the chairman was not reappointed when his three year term expired.

42

Both Labour and Conservative Governments have recently supported `crony capitalism' - by which I mean supporting, and representing the interests of, their rich friends rather than the interests of business in general and entrepreneurs in particular. The result is that the poor suffer and get poorer (because prices keep rising through a lack of competition, incompetence and too much regulation) while the rich pals of the politicians get ever richer.

43

Politics and campaigning are now no longer about policy or information or promises. They are about image and perception.

44

The political parties have ensured that only existing political parties are allowed publicity. Broadcasters are only allowed to give airtime to candidates representing one of the parties that has already screwed up the country.

45

England is the only country without nationalistic leaders. It is politically incorrect for any politician in any of the major parties to defend England or the English in the way that politicians overtly promote Scotland and the Scots and Wales and the Welsh.

46

Blair and Brown led us into a bad, bad, bad, bad world. Blair, claiming his reward for taking us into an illegal war, has gone on to better paid things. Brown, however, is still working as an MP. He is still drawing an MP's salary. He is still building up a massive pension. And the man who wrecked our economy and destroyed the future for generations to come is still allowed to vote on our future.

47

Our country is being run by self-styled experts (e.g. management consultants and advisors) who have no experience and not much learning, who know little and have no common sense. Gordon Brown was a great believer in experts (possibly because just about everyone in the world knew more than him about everything and, therefore, appeared to be an expert).

48

A country needs governmental organisations which are managed well and serve some useful purpose. But our government departments would fail any `fit for purpose' test.

49

Successive governments, and councils everywhere, have got into the habit of wasting other peoples money with considerable abandon. Politicians don't seem to understand the value of real money (money that has been earned, saved and taxed). National and local politicians who might worry about spending £100 of their own money will willingly spend £1,000,000,000 of other peoples money on a small war or an administrative whim, without a second thought or, indeed, a first thought.

50

The people who created the world's problems are the same people who are trying to solve them and they are using the same policies to try to solve the problems that they used to create them. Brilliant.

51

In an attempt to save money (or, rather, to show that they are trying to save money and to manufacture public dissatisfaction with the idea of austerity) councils everywhere are turning off the street lights at night (when it's dark). Councils which do this save, on average, the cost of one medium sized and entirely pointless bureaucratic functionary. There are now hundreds of council bosses receiving pay of over £250,000. These are, of course, accompanied by the appropriate pension arrangements, more than adequate holidays and large expense accounts.

Councils are concreting over their remaining grass and flower beds and closing the few remaining public lavatories in order to cut costs. They ignore the fact that public gardens with flowers make life much better for us all (isn't that what progress is?) and provide real employment and training for gardeners and they ignore the fact that when public lavatories are shut people stop visiting town centres. Curiously, councils which are turning off the street lights still allow their staff to leave office lights on all through the night. Is any of this what the local taxpayers really want? I don't think so. But they're paying the bills. And if they're not getting what they want then they've been disenfranchised.

52

Plans from the Liberal Democrats for the reform of the House of Lords were attacked on the grounds that proportional representation would result in the two political parties UKIP and the BNP having seats in the new House. It never seems to occur to people who say these things that when they try to suppress political parties whose views they do not agree with they are suppressing the very essence of democracy.

53

The BBC, and other media, do not give any coverage to politicians who are not members of the three major parties, unless they are members or supporters of the Scottish National Party in which case they will be given as much coverage as they can cope with.

54

As Lenin pointed out, the purpose of terrorism is to terrorise. What he didn't point out (probably because he didn't spot it coming) was that today the biggest terrorists we have to face are our own Government. They are the real threat. Government officials tell us we have to behave normally in the face of terrorist attacks, but whenever there is a bomb scare they immediately close down vast amounts of surrounding area for hours or even days. Two days after an attempted (and failed) bombing of Glasgow Airport, flights were still being cancelled. This is behaving normally? It is, of course, all done quite deliberately. When a former Home Secretary sent tanks to Heathrow to deal with a `suspected' terrorist threat he didn't really imagine (at least I hope he didn't) that tanks were a good way to combat terrorists with bombs in their underwear. He sent tanks to the airport because it was a highly visible way to scare everyone travelling and everyone watching television and to persuade us to let them (the politicians) do whatever they like to keep us `safe'. It was a typical propaganda move for a bunch of politicians who will do anything - anything - to cement their hold on power. (The alternative explanation, of course, is that the Home Secretary concerned was a blithering idiot. And since the Home Secretary concerned was Blunkett that option cannot be entirely discounted.)

55

During a discussion about House of Lords reform, the sanctimonious Clegg rejected suggestions that the issue should be subjected to a referendum on the grounds that all three parties supported reform. It clearly did not occur to him, the arrogant little liberal, that all three parties could be wrong. And it is this same arrogance which prevents our paid for political servants allowing the electorate the chance to vote to leave the European Union.

56

European politicians in general, and English politicians in particular, know that the greatest threat they and the EU face is nationalism (aka patriotism). They are aware that as anger with the EU, and its vast army of overpaid eurocrats, continues to rise, so voters will turn back to small political groups which talk about sovereignty, national respect, culture and history and which offer a return to old-fashioned values. These are serious times. Our country is facing the greatest threat it has ever faced (including Hitler and Napoleon). Our future is as bleak as it has ever been. Our economy has never been as bad. And yet in 2012 the Queen's Speech ignored everything happening in Europe, ignored immigration (possibly the problem most people would put top of their list of worries), ignored fuel prices and ignored the economy in general and the problems facing businesses in particular. Instead, the Coalition promised to create six new quangos, reform the House of Lords, introduce a gold plated charter for snoopers and force businesses to give yet more rights (and between six and twelve months paid leave) to the fathers of unborn babies.

57

We have been told that we must tighten our belts because we are responsible for the mess the country is in. That isn't true. Gordon Brown, a few other politicians and the bankers are responsible for the mess we are in. But we, not they, are expected to pay the price. The bailout money has gone to the people who caused the problems. Many of the people who caused the problems are now claiming that they can solve them. We're being punished for their stupidity. And when it comes to elections we are offered a choice of idiots all offering the same policies and a bent voting system that protects the party system and oppresses intelligent, independent, honest politicians.

58

`If the right to have a share in making the laws were merely a feather; if it were a fanciful thing; if it were only a speculative theory; if it were but an abstract principle: on any of these suppositions, it might be considered as of little importance. But it is none of these; it is a practical matter; the want of it not only is, but must of necessity be, felt by every man who lives under that want. The natural and inevitable consequences of a want of this right in the people have, in all countries, been pressing the industrious and laborious to the earth; severe laws and standing armies to compel the people to submit to those taxes; wealth, luxury and splendour, among those who make the laws and receive the taxes; poverty, misery, immorality and crime, among those who bear the burdens; and at last commotion, revolt, revenge and rivers of blood.' - William Cobbett, Advice to Young Men

Conclusion

Since the days of the most treacherous of the treacherous, Ted Heath, we have been betrayed, not led, by a series of traitors and war criminals. (Some were both. For example, anyone who served in Blair's governments should be tried as a war criminal and traitor.) Politicians no longer listen to voters, but do things to them not for them. The Government will always screw things up. You can rely on it. And since lobbyists now control scientists, media and politicians you and I will learn no truths about important issues unless we ourselves have the courage to dig deep.

Our current breed of politicians cannot solve our problems because they caused them and they don't understand what they did wrong. Moreover, as long as they can wriggle out of taking the blame they don't care.

Most people want fairly simple things from their Government. They want stability. They want a halt to unlimited immigration. They want England to leave the EU. They want a halt in globalisation because it clearly doesn't work. They want an end to multiculturalism. They want more freedom and less Government interference. They want an end to health and safety nonsenses (which haven't made us healthier or safer). They want an end to political correctness. And they want an end to waste and greed in public life. None of this is likely to happen until the party system is broken. And, since the three parties control our electoral system that won't happen without some sort of revolution. So, sadly, it will be a long time before voters get the chance to change things. The lawyers, the lobbyists, the propagandists, the contractors, the cheats, the confidence tricksters, the scroungers, the bureaucrats have taken control and will not readily release their fingers from the levels of power. We cannot do anything about the problems we face because we no longer live in a democracy. Elections (even those of the landslide variety) are won by less than 25% of the vote and Governments are now kept in power in England by non-taxpayers and civil servants. Until there is a revolution we can only learn to adapt and survive.

CHAPTER 6: THE RISE AND RISE OF PSYCHOPATHS

Introduction

Research has shown that top jobs in politics, as indeed in many other walks of life, are frequently successfully held by people with psychopathic traits. Throughout history the possession of psychopathic traits has proved a useful passport to high office and today the party system actually makes it easy for psychopaths to rise to the top.

1

I doubt if I am the only doctor to have noticed this. But I'm probably the only doctor who will tell you. Our world is now being run by psychopaths. Most of the people we describe as `leaders' are psychopaths. They have taken over the world. (Incidentally, the terms psychopath and sociopath are effectively interchangeable - though academics do argue about them in ways which are of no practical relevance.) It should be no surprise that criminality is common among the world's leaders. A remarkably high proportion of Presidents and Prime Ministers end up in prison (and many of those who escape confinement only do so because they change their countrys laws in their favour or because they bribe, bully or kill their opponents). If the percentage of convicted criminals among solicitors or doctors was a tiny fraction of the percentage of convicted criminals among former State leaders serious questions would be asked about the way in which solicitors and doctors were selected.

Psychopaths are selected for success because of their superficial charm, their ruthlessness, their overriding sense of ambition, their vanity and their selfishness. Psychopaths can kill (literally and figuratively) and we can't. It is their strength and, in their world, it is our weakness. They are insensitive overachievers. They suffer very little, if at all, from stress related disorders and are, therefore, at an enormous advantage in our stressful society. Look around you at modern television celebrities and sports stars and you will, I believe, see that many of them behave as they would if they were psychopaths. Is this because those who want to be really successful in sport or television learn to be ruthless, ungrateful, uncaring, dishonest and graceless? Or is it because the people who become most successful are psychopaths to start with? (Does it matter?)

When ordinary folk make mistakes they apologise, try to put things right and, quite probably, resign. When psychopaths make mistakes they lie and lie and lie again. When psychopaths lie they do so convincingly and without a blush; they don't apologise. They don't put things right. And, unless they are forced to do so, they don't resign. (Actually, psychopaths do occasionally apologise if they think that an apology can prove beneficial to their cause. And in those circumstances their apologies can be breathtakingly convincing.) The psychopath's default position is to lie, and their fallback default position is to blame someone else. Psychopaths are well suited to our world; they are the fittest and so they survive. And so the world becomes nastier and nastier and the sensitive and the meek and the mild are trodden on and crushed.

Men or women who are unfettered by moral scruples, who are prepared to lie or cheat their way to the top and who will make promises they know they cannot keep have a huge advantage over those held back by notions of decency and fair play. These days you almost have to be a psychopath in order to rise to the top without worrying about the lies you have to tell and the bad things you end up doing to stay in power. In our world, the acquisition of power depends on what you are prepared to do to get it. And psychopaths will do what it takes.

The top jobs in almost every walk of life are held by people who are psychopaths. These people aren't just a little bit psychopathic. They're full-blooded, dangerous, lock the doors and bolt the windows psychopaths. This is why everything is going wrong. Our world is now controlled by bad people whose actions are directed purely by their own purely selfish desires. It's why bankers and politicians do incredibly selfish and stupid things and keep doing them. Psychopaths are self-centered, callous and remorseless. They may appear to have many friends and associates but they don't ever form close relationships with people. They function without conscience and are, therefore, at an enormous advantage in our society. Our leaders are bad men and women and most of us do not understand just how evil they are and how uncontrolled and endless their wickedness really is.

It is important that we understand and acknowledge that psychopaths don't all become serial killers, rapists, swindlers, confidence tricksters and boiler room operators. They aren't all child abusers, gang leaders, cult organisers, mercenaries, drug barons or unscrupulous crooks. It is no secret among psychiatrists that many psychopaths become lawyers, doctors (including psychiatrists) and politicians. Psychopaths are ruthless, manipulative and permanently dishonest; they show significant personality traits and socially deviant behaviour; they show no lack of restraint and are remorseless in their dealings with others; they never learn from experience and will do things which you and I would regard as terrible to satisfy quite insignificant yearnings: actions and motives don't necessarily match in significance. Psychopaths lie far more than any normal person could believe possible and, partly as a result of that, have significant social skills. Psychopaths lie far more than most people can believe anyone would lie. And they do it so well. They are uninterested in anyone else's tragedy or joy and are indifferent to literature or art. They are unmoved, except in a very superficial way, by beauty, love, evil or horror. They have little or no genuine sense of humour (though they can fake a sense of humour just as well as they can fake other emotions). Most, of course, don't think that they are `different' and certainly do not regard themselves as in any way `ill' (unless they can use the idea of illness to their advantage). Psychopaths can use the truth (as they see it) to their advantage, they will create their own personal profiles to satisfy the needs of a professional questioner. (In prison, psychopaths are incredibly good at convincing parole boards and others that they feel sorry for any crimes they have committed, that they have changed and that all they need is a good hug and they will be fine. Myra Hindley, for example, was exceedingly skilful at persuading prison visitors such as Lord Longford that she was a changed woman.)

Just think of some of the lies politicians have told in recent years. Blair's infamous deception about weapons of mass destruction springs to mind. These days it isn't the small lies that trick us - its the big ones, the Blair sized lies, the ones that take us into entirely unnecessary wars and make criminals of us all.

`It would never come into (average people's) heads to fabricate colossal untruths,' wrote Adolf Hitler. `And they would not believe that others could have the impudence to distort the truth so infamously.'

But politicians do tell big, deliberate, determined, self-serving lies. They lie and we believe them because, as Hitler pointed out, we cannot truly believe that they would tell lies that big. And they know that if they just keep lying they will manage to fool most of the people most of the time. Especially if they do it with a smile and a few disarming words. `I am a trustworthy sort of guy,' always works well when murmured softly with a smile and an air of surprise and disappointment that anyone could even contemplate thinking otherwise. (Of course, not all modern politicians are psychopaths. Some are just morons; far too stupid and far too emotional to be high level, well-functioning psychopaths.)

Psychopaths are not mad in the same way that the average serial killer is mad. They aren't driven by God to kill fallen women, like the Yorkshire Ripper. When psychopaths kill it is not because they are deranged but partly because they do not treat other human beings as thinking, feeling beings and partly because they themselves are cold, calculating and selfishly rational. Psychopaths understand when they are behaving badly, they know when they are breaking the rules and they are quite capable of stopping themselves. They continue to behave badly not because they can't stop themselves but because they don't see why they should change and they don't want to change because their behaviour is of enormous benefit to them.

Their behaviour leaves normal people feeling helpless, betrayed and bewildered; their behaviour is morally incomprehensible to the rest of us. Stupid psychopaths kill passers-by to steal their wallets. They do this without a second thought, and without remorse because the deed seems to them to be logical and justified. But most psychopaths aren't stupid and don't behave in this way. The most intelligent psychopaths manipulate and lie and use people in order to further their own ends. Its easier and more productive than banging people on the head with a brick. They deceive with a directness and a smoothness that can disarm and convince even the most experienced and cynical prison staff. They often seem witty and charming. They have difficulty understanding why other people become emotional and they tend to use their hands a good deal when they talk - even though this may be unnecessary and inappropriate. Their eyes may seem `dead' and their stare intense. They look people in the eye because they know it is a good way to obtain power over others. They can be captivating and skilful at finding out how to make other people do their bidding. They are quick to take advantage of the vulnerable, the lonely (and, when working as confidence tricksters or bankers, the greedy or larcenous) and skilled at making themselves look like victims. They smile and take your pride and your money and your innocence and your love and your hopes and your dreams; they casually and flagrantly violate all the social norms without being bothered by a twinge of conscience. Obligations and commitments mean nothing to them and they feel no need to honour promises or principles unless there is some obvious benefit to themselves in doing so. They are unmoved by the knowledge that their actions may cause hardship or create risk for others They leave everyone they meet sad but not much wiser. Most of their victims end up feeling that *they* have done something wrong. Onlookers and observers often sympathise with the psychopath because they too have been taken in by the smiles and the undoubted presence. Men or women who are unfettered by moral scruples, who are prepared to lie or cheat their way to the top, and who will make promises they know they cannot keep, have a huge advantage over those held back by notions of decency and fair play. Individuals prepared to tell the `big lie' (in the belief that no one will suspect that its a lie because it's simply too outrageous) have always had a tremendous advantage over sensitive, caring, honest folk. Most of us aren't used to dealing with people who lie consistently and shamelessly, we don't believe that anyone lies consistently and shamelessly, and so we are easily conned. Most of us have an unshakeable confidence in the goodness of man and so we are extremely gullible.

There is no doubt that leaders who possess psychopathic traits are at an enormous advantage. They have more freedom in their dealings with the public, with those with whom they work and with their potential enemies. They are good at self-promotion, they have enormous self-belief and they are able to control and manipulate people calmly, confidently, coolly and without any qualms. Psychopaths fake their emotions (which they learn by studying other people) and so suffer very little in circumstances which healthy people would find emotionally difficult. It is not surprising, perhaps, that many people in positions of power and many people who seem especially pushy are psychopaths. We should not be too surprised at this; after all psychopaths are surprisingly numerous and the incidence of psychopathic traits in our society is increasing rapidly. A few years ago it was estimated that just one in every 100 people was a psychopath. Today that figure is known to be much higher and it is believed that around 3% of people are psychopaths. The number of psychopaths living in fragmented families, or slum areas of inner cities, is likely to be considerably higher than this. This means that in every decent sized city or town there will probably be 100,000 psychopaths. A city of 5 million citizens is likely to contain 150,000 psychopaths. The average school or college or business will have several psychopaths in the building. And the psychopaths will not be cleaning the lavatories or filing bits of paper. They will be sitting in the best offices, planning how to take over their boss's job. How else can we possibly explain the number of bankers and chief executives who leave their companies in disarray and take with them huge bonuses and pensions but show absolutely no regret or remorse?

If you doubt my assertion that most countries and large companies are now run by people who are criminally insane just make a list of the leaders you can think of and then look at the following list of the signs, symptoms and traits commonly associated with psychopaths. If you go through the list (which was, incidentally, compiled using the data psychiatrists and psychologists use) while you are thinking of political figures you will, I suspect, be surprised to see how many people you can identify as psychopaths. Once you've completed this simple exercise you will realise why it is hardly surprising that there is no morality and no respect in our society.

Think your way through our leadership and compare their individual, personal qualities with the qualities of a rip roaring, cold-blooded officially diagnosed standard psychopath. You will notice, by the way, that I have not included violent behaviour on this list. That's because most psychopaths aren't violent. Why resort to violence when you can achieve your ambitions by other methods?

Psychopaths are often some of the following:

1. Exceptionally selfish.

2. Compulsive liars but skilful enough to `salt the mine' with an occasional nugget of truth or some small apparent revelation.

3. Deceitful and manipulative and prepared to con friends and enemies alike.

4. Egocentric.

5. Callous and indifferent to suffering; they don't experience fear themselves in the same way and so don't show compassion when others are fearful.

6. Grandiose and prone to dramatic, shallow and meaningless displays of feeling.

7. Filled with a sense of entitlement.

8. Lacking in personal insight.

9. Parasitic - they are accustomed to living off others or the State.

10. Bullying and abusive.

11. Able to trick and con people successfully and, if they have been caught lying or cheating, likely to claim that they made a mistake, that they've learned their lesson and that it was all a big misunderstanding. `Trust me,' they will say. `I'm really a trustworthy fellow.'

12. Superficially charming and glib.

13. Apparently strong, calm and confident.

14. Unable to experience love or compassion and, as a result, are insensitive and callous.

15. Not anxious and never irrational.

16. Filled with anger, rage and frustration.

17. Apparently sincere but invariably insincere.

18. Apparently likeable and sane.

19. Without shame or remorse; uncaring about the feelings of others; without any sense of guilt.

20. Unable to learn from experience.

21. Impulsive and unable to control their behaviour.

22. Constantly searching for excitement. They may, for example, engage in an unending series of casual sexual relationships.

23. Without any sense of responsibility (when things go wrong it is always someone else's fault).

24. Likely to neglect their family in every conceivable way.

Now try applying those criteria to the politicians, bankers and other leaders of whom you can think.

You will, I suspect, be surprised at the number of people whom you can identify as satisfying some of the basic criteria as psychopaths. But, then, how else could you possibly explain what has been going on?

Things aren't going to get better without a revolution. And that's not going to happen for a while (until more wpeople see the light) because the psychopaths now control everything and, not surprisingly, they don't want anything to change. We can't vote our way out of trouble. So, until there is a revolution, all we can do is survive.

2

`It would be nice to have a world devoid of psychopathic leaders. For two reasons this is unlikely ever to come about. First, throughout history the possession of psychopathic traits has proved a useful passport to high office. Men or women who are unfettered by moral scruples, who are prepared to lie or cheat their way to the top, who will make promises they know they cannot keep and may, in extreme cases, think nothing of assassinating their rivals, have a huge advantage over those held back by notions of fair play. A second reason for finding that top jobs in politics, as indeed in many other walks of life, are successfully held on to by people with psychopathic traits is that such characters are (though they may not know it) fulfilling Ashby's Law of Requisitive Variety. According to this law the successful control of any system depends upon the latter's complexity being matched by that of its controller. The possession of psychopathic traits is advantageous to a leader. They give him more degrees of freedom in his control and manipulation of those under him and most particularly in his dealings with potential enemies.' - Norman F.Dixon, Our Own Worst Enemy.

Conclusion

Bad things break the sensitive (Nietzche was wrong when he said that things that don't kill you make you stronger) but psychopaths ignore or brush aside genuine worries that would destroy ordinary people. It is the mental strength of psychopaths that enables them to rise to the top and it is that strength, that unswerving, uncaring, committed determination to achieve their own ambitions, whatever the cost, that is such a danger to society.

CHAPTER 7: OUT OF CONTROL COMPANIES AND OVERPAID BOSSES

Introduction

When company bosses (who are among the least talented and least hard-working of all employees) earn 300 to 400 times as much as the lowest paid worker it does not take long for the mass of people to see the injustice. When times are hard, and the average family is struggling to survive, the greed and excesses of company bosses arouse more than envy. But until there is rioting in the streets there will be little chance of much progress. The bosses enjoy their absurdly decadent lifestyles and will be reluctant to give up the chauffeurs, yachts and third homes.

1

The rich have become much richer. And everyone else has become poorer. This growing inequality is one of the causes of the economic crisis. When wages fall the wage earners have less money to spend. English workers now have £100 billion a year less to spend than they would have had if the bosses and investment bankers hadn't nicked all the money. That's a huge amount of money and it would have doubtless helped many manufacturers and retailers stay in business. The very rich spend their money in different ways to ordinary folk. There's another problem too: as wages have fallen in real terms so the incentive to work has disappeared. Giving too much money to the very rich and too little to everyone else has encouraged people to choose benefits over work.

This isn't a new phenomenon. The Great Depression of the 1930's was preceded by a sharp rise in inequality. History tells us that when wages lag behind output the result is a prolonged slump. High levels of inequality result in slowing growth and a leveraging down of demand which feeds on itself. The greedy bankers and corporate bosses have led us into a spiralling depression. We're on the road to self-destruction.

2

England is one of the most unequal countries in the world. Bosses earn massively more than other employees (and it is vital to remember that bosses are employees too). And things are getting worse. The salaries of England's top bosses, rose 187% in 2011 while the average pay rise for their employees was 3.2%. The people who own the companies (the shareholders) did worst of all. Dividends have been frozen or have fallen, while individual capital values are, in many cases, lower than they were ten, fifteen or twenty years ago. Between 2000 and 2010 the pay of chief executives went up by 108% despite the fact that shares as a whole are today worth less than they were worth in 1999. Bosses (for which read `barely competent managers and administrators') made millions while the actual owners of the businesses lost money and received little or nothing in dividends. The massive escalation in executive pay has impoverished everyone except the lucky executives themselves.

Why aren't shareholders screaming about this? Well, they are, of course. But no one listens. Shareholders can vote against directors' pay and bonuses but even though the company legally belongs to the shareholders the directors can ignore the vote. There's a real example of anti-democracy in action. The lunatics really have taken over the asylum. Moreover, institutional fund managers (who do the voting for shareholders who use nominee accounts, for unit trust investors, for pension fund investors and for investment trust shareholders, all of whom they are paid to represent) don't say anything about the obscene and undeserved salaries paid to company bosses because their own salaries are obscene and undeserved.

3

English companies are loaded up with debt, intangible assets and acquisition related goodwill. This is something that happens to English companies far more than to companies in Germany for example. It happens partly because the interest on all debt is deductible from taxes and partly because the boss who `grows' his company rapidly (by buying other companies) will have a grand excuse to demand a bigger pay cheque, bigger perks, more pension contributions, a more glorious office, more secretaries and a bigger jet.

4

Many of the bosses who have become enormously, obscenely, rich in recent years have done so not through talent or even luck but through knowing the right people. Capitalism has become crony capitalism. Those in power appoint their friends to positions of authority and wealth and the money then flows sideways in pay offs and kickbacks. Favours beget favours and the same group of corrupt individuals wallow in undeserved wealth. Chief executives use weak corporate governance (supplied by corrupt politicians) to steal from workers, shareholders, pensioners and taxpayers. Bankers in particular use political connections to cheat, cheat and cheat again. There are real problems with this brand of indecent behaviour. First, incompetent bosses hire incompetent subordinates (since they don't want to be threatened or shown up) and so talented individuals remain overlooked, oppressed and resentful. The consequences for the department, company or quango are disastrous. When the mediocre hold all the power then the results are, at best, mediocre. As the resentment and corruption grow so do the favours. Tax laws are changed. Regulatory exemptions are introduced to suit particular individuals and companies. And failure is rewarded richly.

5

It has been shown time and time again that all those absurdly highly-paid, pompous megalomaniacs running big companies play very little part in the success or failure of their companies. It is the external economy, credit bubbles and so on that result in company profits soaring or plunging. The bosses of financial firms are, in particular, linked to the national and global economy. In any company there are huge numbers of people who could do the top job just as well as the person in power. The boss just happens to be the person who is there. It has repeatedly been shown that if bosses make expensive changes to the companies they run then they will cost their shareholders money. The unchanged company, left to run passively, would have made more money. Interfering bosses destroy vast amounts of value. They make huge changes and organise takeovers in order to justify bigger staff numbers and, therefore, bigger salaries. These ambitious bosses take huge bonuses and, at the end of their tenure, leave shareholders with small dividends and a lower share price. Company bosses are just cheerleaders. Most don't create anything or do anything very much except have long lunches and give away shareholders money to political parties and charities. They are smoochers. While underlings do the actual work (deciding what to make, making it, selling it, collecting the money and so on) the absurdly overpaid executives spend their days working out new ways to be paid: bonuses, share handouts, pensions, and allowances. It may be legal but by any decent standards you don't need to be a socialist to regard it as a sort of fraud.

6

Percy Shelley and Karl Marx didn't have much in common but while it was the poet Shelley who wrote that `the rich have become richer and the poor have become poorer' it was Karl Marx who observed that the gap was widening. Both have been shown right. Shelley should, perhaps, not be regarded just as a great poet but also as a predictive economist.

7

If the regulators made directors personally, and legally, liable when companies did bad things there would be very little need for regulators.

8

It used to be true that you could never get really rich on a salary. That was right and proper, it meant that only the creative and innovative got really rich. It was called incentive. Today, you can become obscenely rich just by being a chairman or chief executive; a gormless company man; an empty suit; scowling at the staff and enjoying the perks. Most large organisation bosses are overpaid self-important morons and their work could be done by anyone. It would make good sense to make their jobs a lottery prize. `Pay £1 for a ticket and you could be boss of BT/BP/Tesco for a year.'

9

The best-paid boss in America took home $378 million last year. That was someone called Tim Cook, the CEO of Apple. Now Apple is the biggest company in the world (a fact which, in itself, rather draws attention to the madness of our time) but Cook didn't create the company or its slightly absurd products. The man who did create Apple, Steve Jobs, took a salary of $1 a year for each of the last four years he ran the company.

Apple, let us remember, is constantly being accused of taking advantage of workers in China. The company's slick and shiny iPads and iPhones are allegedly stuck together for a tenner and then sold for £500. That's the sort of mark up that is usually enjoyed by couturiers in the fanciest parts of the 8th arrondissement in Paris. There are bizarre stories about Apple employees in the Far East being paid $2 for a 14 hour day on a production line. If any of those allegations are even partly true then Apple's shiny products don't look quite so shiny. But it would be possible to see how Mr Cook can make so much money.

10

In the long-term, companies run by underpaid bosses generate much better profits for shareholders than companies run by overpaid bosses. Given the size of the goody bags some bosses take home that really isn't that surprising. Too many, it seems, forget who owns the company and who is entitled to some return on their money. They also forget two other truths: without shareholders there would be no bosses and most of the bosses employed today are interchangeable and replaceable.

11

A bunch of unelected, eurocrats working for the European Union have decided that companies must put more women on their boards - whether the women are competent or not. (Much the same thing happened in medicine when, several decades ago medical schools were forced to increase their intake of female students. The results have been disastrous.)

The tough targets, introduced by anonymous EU employees, will lead to mandatory quotas for female directors. The EU intends to introduce legislation across all 27 member nations of the EU stipulating the minium number of women that every company board must have. (Incidentally, the enthusiasm for `targets' which is now ruining every aspect of life in England and which comes largely from the European Union originated with Russia and the USSR. Targets were introduced to give the workers something to aim at, something to strive for. In practice, targets don't work, of course. The big problem is that the authorities tend to lighten targets so that they are always met. And so, for example, train companies will lower their punctuality targets to fit reality.)

Our world is falling apart and this is what the EU is doing to sort things out: introducing more blatantly sexist legislation.

And the legislation won't mean that *lots* of women will become company directors. It will almost certainly mean that a few women acquire a lot of directorships. Quota filling women will queue up to be put on company boards. In Norway (where it has been the law that company boards must include 40% women since 2003) there are a few `golden skirts' who sit on numerous boards and take home huge amounts of money. It is also a fact that as more regulations are introduced so more companies de-list from stock exchanges - leaving shareholders unable to sell (or buy) shares.

The big problem is that quotas distract from real issues. The real owners of companies (the shareholders) are the ones who need more powers. But the EU, being a fascist organisation, will not do anything to move power back from the boardroom to the shareholders. Nor will the EU do anything to persuade companies to put more effort into introducing medium and long-term strategies, rather than satisfying short-term targets.

12

An increasing number of companies now insist that their customers conduct all their business via the Internet. (In this they are following the bad example set by Government departments such as HMRC.) Personally, I believe that one should, whenever possible, avoid using either the telephone or the Internet when communicating with big businesses. You will waste hours and afterwards they will, if it is convenient to them, deny everything they said. Send a letter through the post. I know that many large organisations don't give street addresses (try obtaining one for that arch baddy the Royal Mail, for example) but it is usually possible to find one in the end. Send your mail by recorded delivery so that there is evidence of it having been sent (because if you don't they will claim that they never received your letter). When dealing with large Governmental or quasi Governmental organisations you must recognise that you are fighting a war. These people are not, and never will be, your friends. They are not on your side.

13

If you want evidence illustrating the level of corruption in the business section of our society consider tobacco companies. Vast numbers of highly-paid individuals are dedicated to opening up new markets for a product proven to cause an early death among its consumers.

14

Whatever else you do with your life you will always be a consumer. To the people who make items as varied as motorcars, refrigerators, underwear, indigestion remedies, biscuits, coat hangers and kitchen sinks you are a consumer. To lawyers, accountants, surveyors, estate agents and even doctors you are a consumer.

In order to persuade you to become a customer the people who provide these products and services spend considerable amounts of money on trying to convince you that *their* products or services are better than anyone else's.

Every day your custom is solicited in a thousand different ways - some crude and some subtle. Every day you are bombarded with advertisements telling you to buy one of these and begging you to buy some of those and explaining why your life will be incomplete if you do not spend your money on a little of this and a little of that.

The professionals who prepare the advertisements with which you are confronted each day are only too aware of the fact that it is no longer enough for them to tell you the value of the product they are selling. These days the competition is so great that advertising agencies are no longer content to tell you how to satisfy your basic needs. Advertising agencies know very well that in order to succeed in the modern market place they must create new needs; they know that their advertising must, through a mixture of exaggeration and deceit, and through exploiting your fears and your weaknesses, create wants and desires, hopes and aspirations and then turn those wants, desires, hopes and aspirations into needs. Modern advertising is a scientifically based creative art which is designed to raise the intensity of our desires and build our dissatisfaction and our fears. The advertising copywriter is hired to create unhappiness. Advertising is, in short, an industry which only works when it puts us under unnecessary stress.

Modern advertising agencies know (because they have done the necessary research) that it is impossible to sell anything to a satisfied man. But, in order, to keep the money coming in, the advertising agencies must constantly encourage us to buy and so they constantly need to find better ways to sell us stuff and services that we do not really need.

Any fool can sell a product or a service that people need. If your shoes wear out then you will buy new ones or have the old ones repaired. If you are hungry and there is only one restaurant for miles then that restaurant will get your service. If your car is about to run out of petrol then a garage doesn't need to offer you free offers to get your custom.

As far as the advertising agencies are concerned the trick is to get you to buy shoes when you don't need to, and to buy shoes that are more expensive than they need be. In order to do this, advertising agencies use all their professional skills to make you dissatisfied with what you already have. They need you to be constantly dissatisfied and frustrated. Advertising copywriters want to take away your appreciation of the simple things in life because they know that there is more profit in making things more complicated, more expensive and more unreliable. They want you to be in so much of a hurry that you eat instant foods rather than growing and preparing your own vegetables. They want you to ride in a car rather than walk or ride a bicycle. They want to make you feel guilty if you don't smell right or don't buy the right breakfast cereal for your children. They want you to feel a failure if you don't have the latest clothes on your back and the latest gadgets in your home. Advertising is most successful when it persuades you to forget your real needs and to replace them with wants.

There is no doubt that the advertising industry is responsible for much of the sickness and much of the unhappiness in our society. Even if you do buy the products they want to sell you, you will still not find the satisfaction that they promise you for the advertisements are shallow and the promises hollow. Whatever exaggerated claims they make, you will be disappointed. Your sex life will not suddenly improve just because you change your perfume or deodorant. Your social life will not change because you buy the latest clothes. You will not be immune to traffic jams just because you buy a new car with metallic paint and electric windows.

The advertising professionals make many promises which they know they cannot keep and whatever claims they make the chances are that you will remain frustrated and even more dissatisfied than you were before you spent your money. Your hopes and expectations will be aroused and then disappointed.

To the spiritual and mental frustration created by all this disappointment you must add physical frustration too for the chances are high that the product you buy will soon fail. Obsolescence is built in and is essential to all new products. Built in mechanical or fashionable obsolescence enables the car companies to keep making and selling us new cars even though most of us already have perfectly functional vehicles parked outside our homes. You might think you change your car because you want something more reliable or more comfortable but you probably don't: the chances are that you change your car because the advertising copywriters have succeeded in persuading you that your present vehicle is out-of-date and unfashionable.

Even if you don't have the money to spend on new cars, kitchen furniture, clothes and other goods you will not escape. Advertising, designed to inflame your desires, will show you services you cannot buy and things you cannot have. It will create wants and then turn those wants into needs. Advertising creates frustration and disappointment, envy and dissatisfaction. If you are too poor to buy the things which are advertised you will simply never discover that the products on offer do not to satisfy the promises made for them.

Advertising is, without a doubt, one of the greatest causes of stress and is one of the greatest of modern threats to physical and mental health. Advertising agencies kill far more people than industries which pollute the atmosphere. Advertising is the symbol of modern society; it represents false temptations, hollow hopes and unhappiness and disenchantment; it inspires values which are based on fear and greed. Advertising succeeds by making people dissatisfied, restless and, ultimately, unhappy.

15

I received a text today to tell me that calls to one of the popular directory enquiries numbers will now cost £2.50 a minute. So, if I use this basic service to enquire about a number, and allow them to put the call through (taking two minutes) and I then speak for a modest 10 minutes the call will cost me £30.00. It is, I suspect, the poor and the elderly who will suffer most from this scandalous but authorised theft. I have no doubt that the bosses who benefit from this sort of chicanery sleep well at night.

16

The so-called captains of industry now regard themselves as special in some way. But most have created nothing and have, by and large, contributed little or nothing to the success of the company they run. Moreover, their greed and extravagance have usually done little or nothing for the wealth and well-being of investors, pension fund holders and employees. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the bosses of large companies are driven not by a desire to see a better world (or even a better company) but by a yearning to grab as much money as they can for themselves. And that's simple, old-fashioned detestable greed. Gluttony. Our corporate entities are run by people corrupted by financial lust. These are the new corporate heroes; the men and women who tell us that it is our duty to buy things, that pillaging the earth is good for the economy and that exploiting the poor and the disadvantaged around the world is in some curious way `for their own benefit'.

17

Bonuses (or tips) used to be something that posh people gave to poor people. Taxi drivers, waiters and hotel doormen got tips because they were poorly paid and it was a way for their temporary employers to show their gratitude (and superiority). Factory workers making things on a production line were given bonuses if they made things faster than expected (or faster than time and motion experts thought was possible). Today, everyone with a job expects a bonus and vast bonuses are paid out to people who haven't even done what they have been paid to do - let alone done something special. Bizarrely, even public sector workers, following enthusiastically in the greedy footsteps of company directors and executives, now demand bonuses simply for turning up and doing their jobs.

Just a decade or two ago no self-respecting banker, company director or civil servant would have accepted a tip (or a bonus) for doing their job. They would have been as unwilling to accept the idea that they needed fiscal encouragement as would a doctor or priest. (Try offering £50 to your surgeon as an incentive for him to make a neat scar and I hope you'll see what I mean.) Bonuses were popular in the Soviet Union where it was generally believed that they helped increase productivity. They were also used to encourage informers to snitch on their neighbours.

But bankers and public sector workers have lowered their social vision of themselves. These days they are quite happy to be lumped in with cabbies and bellhops and very pleased indeed to be able to trouser extra cash for doing what they get paid to do anyway. If bank staff had pocketed just 10% less in pay and bonuses over the last decade the banks would have had £50 billion more in capital. If they'd taken just slightly less in undeserved bonuses the banks would have been awash with cash when the crisis hit. Was it any wonder that in Greece demonstrators set fire to a bank? The only wonder is that banks all over the world aren't all still smouldering.

The big myth about bonuses is that giving people bonuses encourages them to work harder and better. The Labour Government of 1997 (the one which led England down the road to ruin) believed that our world could be transformed by targets, awards and bonuses. They were right. But it has not been transformed in a good way.

The bonus system works for production line staff whose productivity can easily be measured but it doesn't work for most other people. Giving a doorman a tip may mean that he remembers your name. Giving a waiter a tip may mean that (if you visit often enough and he remembers you) you will get a smile when he hands you the menu. But the door won't be opened any more effectively. And the tea and crumpets won't taste any better.

In order to check the effect of bonuses on performance, four North American professors conducted two experiments. In one they gave subjects tasks that demanded attention, memory, concentration and creativity. A third of the subjects were promised a day's pay if they performed well. A third were promised two weeks pay. The final third were promised five months pay. The result was that the low and medium bonus groups performed the same. The group offered the big bonus performed worst of the three. In a second experiment graduate students were given an opportunity to earn either $600 or $60 by performing one four minute task. The result again showed that a big carrot led to poorer performance.

Bonuses clearly don't work. They cost employers (and when the people receiving the bonuses are public sector workers that means taxpayers) a good deal of money and they result in less effective work being done. But banks, big companies and the civil service will, without a shadow of doubt, ignore this evidence and continue to hand out big bonuses. Civil servants now expect bonuses for not having holidays all the time. They regard their bonus as another part of their salary - for turning up and doing their jobs. They will protest vigorously if any government tries to take away their new perks.

And the money for the bonuses will be provided by shareholders and taxpayers.

In America, between 90% and 100% of the earnings achieved by the major banks are now being shared among employees as salaries, bonuses and benefits. Nothing is being put aside for a rainy day and nothing is left for shareholders. Bonuses were originally designed to encourage but today they are often paid to directors, civil servants and executives just for breathing and turning up occasionally. Bosses and civil servants who have, by any conceivable standard, failed miserably, still get their bonuses. Today, even tax inspectors receive bonuses for doing the work they are well paid to do.

The bonus system has, for decades now been destroying our world in every imaginable way. The My Lai massacre of 128 civilians during the Vietnam War occurred because the USA army was giving awards for the number of deaths that could be filed. `Kill more of the enemy and get a medal or a bonus.'

The bonus culture has helped create a thousand inequalities and injustices. Much of the banking crisis can be traced back to the enthusiasm of bankers for bonuses acquired by gambling with other people's money. Endless public sector workers receive huge bonuses for being pathetic. In June 2012, it was merrily announced that the boss of Royal Mail (surely the most badly run organisation on the entire planet) would receive a bonus of over £300,000. What the hell for? Turning up? Wearing a nice suit? Not falling down the stairs? I hope he wasnt given it for running an organisation efficiently and for providing the public with a reliable, competent service.

The problem, of course, is that the bonus system is here to stay. The people who decide whether or not bonuses are given all receive bonuses.

Within corporate structures the shareholders (who own the company in which they have shares) cannot vote against absurd bonus schemes because nominee accounts pool shareholdings in the name of the nominee company. The individual shareholders cannot vote. And the fund managers, who represent investment trusts, unit trusts and pension funds won't vote against excess because they are part of the problem. They hardly ever vote against remuneration reports because they don't want to rock the boat. After all they too are enjoying the same delights. They too receive bonuses for failing to do their job properly.

Until the bonus culture is destroyed (or employees are, at the very least, prepared to accept bonuses only when they have done something clearly very special) the economy will continue to be sucked dry. Money that could have been used to create jobs will be used to sustain jobs that, in many cases, should never have been created in the first place and in other cases involve employees who are already overpaid and underworked.

Conclusion

During the last 30 years the real incomes of the richest 1% of Americans has risen by 300% and their share of the national income has more than trebled. In the same period the median household income has risen by just 40% and that rise has been largely a result of the fact that there are now two people working instead of one). The assets of the top 400 people in the USA are equal to the assets of the lowest 140 million. The situation in England is identical. We live in an unequal society which is ripe for a revolution.

CHAPTER 8: THE STORY OF HITLER'S BASTARD LOVE CHILD

Introduction

It is difficult to think of any aspect of our lives which has not already been adversely affected by the EU and it is difficult to think of any way in which the EU has contributed positive values to our health, wealth or well being. The EU as we now know it, the modern super-bureaucratic fascist version, was conceived by Adolf Hitler. Anyone who doubts this has only to check the history books. Talk of the EU being a result of Mitterand and Khol honourably attempting to prevent another war (the sort of explanation youre likely to hear on the BBC) is entirely fanciful and a result either of woeful ignorance or politically motivated deceit. Today, the eurocrats who run the EU ignore democracy and reality and impose their will upon the European population without allowing their malignant megalomania to be disrupted by good sense, respect or compassion. They are too swamped with conceit to entertain the idea that they can ever be wrong; they are overwhelmed by a conviction that they always know best what we should do with our lives, how we should live and how we should behave. Like all true fascists, eager to obey the strictures of Mussolini, they have discovered ways to meld corporate power with political power for the benefit of all those directly involved.

I have already described the extraordinary evils of the European Union in previous books (most recently in *OFPIS*) and this chapter is merely intended as an updated summary of a few of the ways in which the EU is ruining our lives, our country, our future and our hopes.

1

Two decades ago, when the EU fanatics decided that the best way to seal their slightly dodgy union was to create a single currency, the euro, just about every economist on the planet warned that the new currency wouldn't work.

But the hubristic EU fanatics didn't care. When they asked economists to give their opinions they rejected the views of those who warned that the euro was flawed and listened only to craven fools who supported the idea.

The euro was designed to glue disparate European countries and to force them to work together. And the people who designed the new currency knew that in doing so they were messing around with peoples lives. They knew that unless they could arrange complete fiscal union there was a very real risk that the new currency would collapse; they knew that people and companies would be at great risk. They knew that if one nation collapsed then its citizens would be in dire trouble if their debts were outside their country and their savings and assets were within a bankrupt nation. They knew that banks would collapse and that there would be utter chaos, civil unrest and probably deaths.

The EU has always been the European version of the USSR, more closely allied to the old Soviet Union than the USA. The EU imposes a way of life on people who don't want it. Most citizens of Europe want nothing to do with the EU. But they have no choice. Democracy has been suspended indefinitely.

And the eurocrats and europhiles are going to use the weakness of the euro to take the one big step forward that they are dreaming of.

There are only two things that can happen to the euro.

Either it disappears (and all the constituent countries of the EU go back to using their francs and marks and whatever) or else the countries which use the euro join together in complete fiscal harmony with a single exchequer. That, of course, will mark the formation of Hitler's dream: the United States of Europe.

2

The European Commission's economic directorate, which issues policy recommendations which have the force of law, employs 544 staff. There are just a dozen or so English citizens among these employees. There are more

Romanians than Englishmen making the laws which rule our lives.

3

There is so much corruption and deceit practised by and within the EU that it is impossible for one man to keep track of it all. The EU has made freedom a dirty word and has turned patriotism into a sin. When MPs voted to approve the signing of the Treaty of Lisbon (which Gordon Brown had signed in December 2007) they signed the final death warrant for England. I am certain now that it is no exaggeration to say that almost everything bad that has happened to England in the last few decades is the fault of the EU.

There is no doubt that the Lisbon Treaty diluted (yet again) English sovereignty. Indeed, the Lisbon Treaty formally gave the EU the characteristics that international law recognises as the usual attributes of statehood. Thanks to Gordon Brown and the other signatories, the EU now has a head of state, a foreign office, a criminal justice system and the right to sign international treaties.

The Treaty also gave the EU the authority to abolish any controls on individuals, whatever their nationality, when crossing internal borders. If 20 million Russians manage to enter the EU then our Government will be powerless to stop them from entering England and staying there. The Labour Government, headed by a Scotsman, broke its promise to hold a referendum because it would have had to reveal just how much of our sovereignty had been ceded to Brussels and how much more it was giving away. Brown knew that if he had a referendum he - and the EU - would lose. And so, just as he had chickened out of holding an election in the autumn of 2007 because he had been frightened that he would lose, so he broke his partys promise about a referendum.

The new Treaty which Brown signed in December 2007 extended the powers of the EU in every conceivable direction. The treaty gave the EU `primacy' over the laws of the member states, it gave the EU power over England's economic and employment policies (despite the fact that we are not in the euro) and it abolished national vetoes. The Treaty created a full European criminal justice system, with a European public prosecutor and an EU legal code. (The new EU legal codes run directly counter to our own common law traditions.). The treaty Brown signed gave the EU jurisdiction over transport, energy, public health, trade, employment, social policy, competition, agriculture, fisheries, defence, foreign affairs, space exploration, and asylum and immigration. The EU now has ownership and command of our police, army, Royal Navy, RAF, currency reserves, North Sea oil and nuclear weapons. Serving officers in the forces will have to take an oath of allegiance to the EU instead of the Queen. It is now illegal to criticise the EU.

Oh, and the Lisbon Treaty gave the EU the right to make up any new laws it wants and to change the Treaty that Brown signed if it wants to do so. The Lisbon Treaty is `self-amending'. It can be altered for any purpose, at any time. Neither you nor Gordon Brown can do anything about it.

On the day that the Lisbon Treaty was signed the EU stopped being an association of states and became a state in its own right.

Among other things, the EU constitution which Gordon Brown signed in Lisbon in 2007, proposed:

* Europe wide taxes (probably on top of national taxes).

* Massive increases in workers rights - even guaranteeing a job for life.

* A Europe-wide minimum wage.

* A common education curriculum throughout the EU (which must include pro EU propaganda).

* A more powerful EU army.

* The abolition of national sovereignty.

* A huge rise in the EU budget.

* Recognition that the new constitution be regarded as the first step towards political unity.

I feel sure that the Labour Government meant to tell you about these things. Perhaps they just forgot.

The Lisbon Treaty is, according to EU insiders, the last EU treaty. It is the last EU treaty because it provides the EU with all the powers it will ever need.

4

`Despite the political, economic and cultural legacy that has perpetuated its name, England no longer officially exists as a country and enjoys no separate political status within the United Kingdom.' - Encyclopaedia Britannica

5

Europhile fascists (something of a tautology I know, but I like the phrase so please humour me) often dismiss those who want England to leave the EU as Little Englanders. Those who use this term in a pejorative fashion clearly don't understand its origin or meaning. But the euro aficionados are not renowned for their understanding of history, their sense of culture or their intelligence. (The term Little Englander dates from the Boer War and refers to people who were, at the time, opposed to the English Empire and were anti-Imperialist. The Little Englanders wanted the English to stop taking over the world. Such folk were regarded as unpatriotic. Today, ignorant pro EU fascists use the term as one of abuse; it is usually applied to those who are aware that removing England from maps and history books is an essential part of the EU project and who don't want England to disappear and be converted into nine EU regions. Europhiles, who also tend to know nothing much about European history, are also usually woefully ignorant about the word `fascist'. I have described the definition (in Mussolini's words) in previous books. It is, I hope, sufficient here to say that Mussolini would, like Hitler, have been an enthusiastic supporter of the European Union.

6

When, at the turn of the millennium, other nations all celebrated their history and their culture, the English celebrations were pathetically multi-ethnic, cravenly politically correct, appallingly embarrassing and an insult to our history, our culture, our ancestors and the millions who have died to help make the world a better, safer place. Since then the English establishment has done everything in its power to diminish English history and to apologise unnecessarily for past, redefined sins.

The result, of course, is a nation which has lost its way in the world and a nation whose citizens no longer have pride in who they are. The authorities have even decided that `English' is not a nationality. You can be Welsh, Irish or Scottish but you cannot be English. Without an identity, without an ethnicity (what an awful word that is), the English are lost souls in a regimented, bureaucratic world.

7

The EU has supposedly made it easier for us to travel around Europe. This is a lie. It is now far more difficult to travel to France than it was a year ago. And then it was far more difficult than it had been ten years earlier. And then it was far more difficult than it had been a generation before. The truth is that the EU's absurd immigration policies have resulted in our Government having to introduce stricter controls at our borders. And so, thanks entirely to the European Union, it is now far, far more difficult for English folk to travel to foreign lands. And far, far more difficult for foreign tourists to come to England.

8

Making a speech or writing a book which criticises the EU (or the laws of the EU) may be regarded as a crime if it is considered subversive. It is, of course, up to the bureaucrats of the EU to decide whether or not something is `subversive'.

9

Fascist supporters of the EU (which I prefer to call Hitler's Bastard Love Child) claim that membership of the EU is essential for the English economy. To put it diplomatically, this is a barefaced lie. According to official Government figures, membership of the EU costs us a fortune - both in terms of direct contributions to the EU and the indirect costs of high levels of regulation and red tape. A 2005 Treasury report suggested `that the likely EU cost was around 7% of GDP'. This would be well over £100 billion in today's money. Other studies have suggested that the cost of our membership of the EU is around 10% of GDP. If we were not members of the EU we would have at least an extra £100 billion to spend on ourselves. And that, to save you the bother of working it out, is around £2,000 for every man, woman and child in England. Put another way, the average family in England would be £8,000 a year better off if we left the EU. And then, of course, we would be free to do what we should have done all along: enhance our ties with the Commonwealth. Those who favour the EU forget that the members of the Commonwealth (including India, South Africa and Australia) are among the strongest and fastest growing countries in the world. Many are rich in essential commodities. Growth rate in the eurozone will probably be stagnant for years to come (assuming that things go better than forecast and better than expected) whereas the countries of the Commonwealth have a combined growth rate of 7.3%.

10

The English don't like to complain. We put up with our statist society because it's what we have. We put up with gold plated EU regulations that the French wont accept even in their original vanilla flavour. We obey the rules, politely and obediently. We allow our pavements to be made pink and knobbly and we spend untold millions making unnecessary and disruptive changes to our motorways. We cope with absurd rules about rubbish collection and we sit quietly by as our history and our culture are slowly but efficiently dismantled. We have sleepwalked into statism, communism and fascism - which are all the same thing. If the EU survives, the organisation will presumably build statues to the founding father: Adolf Hitler. (Hitler had a house in Saltzberg. The EU now has offices in Saltzberg. Just a coincidence? Well, there are several thousand towns and cities of comparable size in Europe.)

11

European Commission Bureaucrats (our new rulers) want to introduce a Tobin tax on all financial transactions. The EU says that the new Tobin tax is being introduced to punish the banks for making such a mess of Europe's economy. The tax has been welcomed by experts such as the Archbishop of Canterbury. But the tax will consist of a tax of 0.1% on all share dealings. So it will not be financial institutions which suffer but small savers and investors and pension holders. This is a typical EU trick - an inverted Robin Hood scheme - which takes money from the poor to give to the rich. For English investors this will be particularly unfair since they already pay stamp duty on many transactions and so will be paying two lots of tax on every financial decision they make. And where will the money go? To the EU bureaucrats of course. To pay for more expensive dinners and weekends away and private planes.

12

Cameron has become ever more gutless. He is now apparently considering getting rid of Greenwich Mean Time and making us all match our clocks to those of the rest of the EU. I suspect that he is doing this to please the awful Clegg. Clegg, a former EU employee (who will receive an EU pension until he dies), is of course mad keen on Hitler's Bastard Love Child and has threatened to walk out of the Coalition if England stands up for its national interest. (I suspect that the Deputy Prime Minister isn't much of a patriot.) Clegg seems to think that the boys and girls in Brussels can do no wrong. His arrogance matches that of all the EU lovers. It is because of them that extremist, populist, nationalistic parties are springing up all over Europe (precisely as I predicted they would in my book *England Our England*).

13

I sometimes suspect that not all politicians are entirely au fait with what is going on in the world. This is true of national politicians but it is also true of regional and local politicians. For example, the English county of Cornwall has its own political party - Mebyon Kernow - which wants independence for Cornwall. Mebyon Kernow supports the European Union. Fair enough. They're entitled to support anyone they like and since it is one of the poorer parts of England, Cornwall has, from time to time, received money from the EU. (`Here's some of your own money to build a bridge. But make sure you put a big sign on it saying `Money donated by the EU'. And don't mention that the money originally came from English taxpayers.'). But I can't help wondering if the members of Mebyon Kernow are aware that the EU plans to abolish Cornwall completely. Cornwall will be part of the South West Region which will stretch from Lands End and include Gloucestershire and Wiltshire. Its regional capital will be Exeter.

By supporting the EU, the Cornish party has, in my view, helped sign Cornwall's death warrant.

Whoops.

14

For some time now one of the strongest currencies in the world has been the Norwegian krone. Norway is not of course a member of the EU.

15

Back in 1995, an economist with the European Commission published a book entitled *The Rotten Heart of Europe*. He was fired because his book was seen as an attack on the EU and the euro. You don't get fired for fraud or misconduct in the EU. But you do get fired for telling the truth. The author, a brave man called Connolly, brought an action against the EU and in May 2011 (after 16 years deliberations) the European Court of Justice finally decreed that the EU Commission can restrict dissent in order to `protect the rights of others' and `punish individuals who damage the institutions's image and reputation'.

16

The EU, Hitler's Bastard Love Child, represents intellectual terrorism, power, bureaucracy and regulation. It exists to give power to those who work for the organisation and to force responsibility on those who don't. The only people who support the EU are the ones who don't understand what it is, and what it is for. The vast majority of its supporters are bureaucrats. Creative and productive individuals loathe the EU for the barrage of pointless, self-serving and restrictive legislation it has forced us to accept. The EU is run by nerdy, geeky, incompetent buffoons (think Caroline Ashton, the Queen of Geeks) who never seem to question their own competence and so do not recognise their shortcomings. If a film were ever made about the EU the title would surely be *The Revenge Of The Nerds*. There hasn't been a statesman in Europe since the whole damned fiasco started. I hope that the mean-spirited nerds working for the EU do not regard this paragraph as a criticism.

17

The EU has introduced a new law called `droit de suite' whereby artists receive extra money every time their paintings are resold. This only happens to art sold within the EU and will, therefore, do permanent, serious damage to auction houses operating within the EU. (The biggest and most successful auction houses in the EU operate in London.)

18

The EU is introducing more regulations which will increase bank charges and red tape. It will be increasingly difficult for customers to get hold of their own money or to move it around or, indeed, to do anything with it other than let it just sit where it is.

19

`The British deputies to Strasbourg will derive their authority from the same electorate and by the same process as Members of Parliament derive theirs. It will soon be perceived that whatever they decide or approve along with the directly elected members representing the rest of the inhabitants of the Community can no more be reviewed or overturned by the British House of Commons than the Worcestershire County Council can reject an Act of Parliament. There will be an end to the fiction that British ministers in the council of ministers will have to take their orders from the House of Commons or accept its censure. They will say to the House of Commons thereafter `What we have done has already been approved under the constitution of the Community (which England has accepted) by the representatives of the English people, directly elected and sent precisely for that purpose, being duly authorised thereto by the electorate from the very fact of their being elected. Who are you, and what is your authority to interfere, you minnows of Westminster? Did you not yourself authorise, back in 1972, the supremacy of the Community and its laws over your own assembly and its laws? Be off with you and mind what little business we are good enough to leave for you to do...We take no orders from you...we take them from the representatives of the whole people of the Community.' - Enoch Powell, in a speech to the Croydon Monday Club 27.2.1975

20

In December 2010 the leaders of England, Germany, France, the Netherlands and Finland wrote to Jose Barroso, the president of the European Commission (all genuflect in the direction of Brussels, please) demanding that the EU increase its spending by no more than inflation from the year 2013. Cameron and the others suggested that the EU might perhaps consider making a few cuts - reducing the absurdly high salaries for EU officials, increasing the working week, increasing the retirement age and even cutting a few jobs.

The EU bureaucrats (who are overpaid, underworked and immune to taxes) thought about this and have replied with what can only be described as an artfully displayed two fingers.

The EU has decided that it will be spending around £1,000 billion between 2014 and 2020. And since the unelected EU bureaucrats run things that is what will happen. While individual countries are cutting back and struggling to deal with their debts the unelected bureaucrats will be on a spending mission. Spend, spend, spend is the new EU theme song.

The bureaucrats are introducing an EU wide tax on financial transactions to top up their coffers even further. (Yes, that means that you and I will be paying a new tax direct to Brussels. On top of all the other multi-billion contributions. No chance of voting on this, of course.)

None of this should come as a surprise to any of us. And it certainly shouldn't come as a surprise to readers of my book *OFPIS*. When the Treaty of Lisbon was signed we became citizens of the new EU state. Our politicians handed over all rights and responsibilities to the unelected bureaucrats. The most important thing politicians sitting in the House of Commons have to deal with these days are expenses forms. (Admittedly, this is something at which they have become very adept.)

The EU rules. OK?

Naturally, Cameron and the rest will not complain about any of this since the EU rules mean that even if they want to they can't.

21

Those of us who loathe the EU and everything it stands for can only hope that the Greek debt fiasco gets worse because if Greece goes bankrupt (as it really should) then the euro will quite probably collapse. (If Greek bankruptcy doesn't trigger a euro collapse then maybe the bankruptcies of Ireland, Spain, Portugal or Italy will do the job. As I write this in early summer 2012, unemployment in Spain has risen above 25%. Among the under 25s unemployment has topped 50%)

And (as forecast in my book *2020*) if the euro goes then the banks will go down all across Europe and the EU itself will quite probably also collapse.

Let's keep our fingers crossed.

There could be good times ahead for those of us who loathe the Fascist State of the EU.

But there is a snag.

The EU bosses also know this and so they will bail out Greece (and, if necessary, Portugal, Spain, Ireland and wherever) until they run out of money.

And when things get really bad they will take the opportunity to explain to us that it is necessary, for our own good, to create a more closely linked United States of Europe. And, as all this happens, so the resentment will grow among those hard-working tax-paying populations (expected to retire at 67 years of age) who are being forced to subsidise lazy, tax-evading populations (allowed to retire at 60 years of age or even earlier).

The fascist politicians who love the EU are so devoted to Hitler's Bastard Love Child that they do not understand that you cannot build a new state (or, indeed, anything very much) upon a basis of unfairness and resentment. The result will be a political and economic catastrophe.

22

A new plan to rescue the euro means handing over enormous powers to the European Commission and the European Central Bank without bothering to ask for the approval of the voters. The series of treaties which have been signed, without voters' approval, have given the EU bureaucrats the power to damned well do whatever they please. If they want to ban football, chips and television they can.

23

The eurocrats aren't the only people making a fortune out of the EU. The politicians are doing well too. MEPs' salaries and allowances have risen 78% in the last seven years.

24

The euro was never going to work and to be honest I doubt if the people who thought it up expected it to work. The euro was set up for entirely political reasons by fascists whose only aim was the acquisition of power and who didn't give a damn what happened to the countries whose currencies were being destroyed. The euro fanatics were (and are) perfectly prepared to screw up the lives of hundreds of millions of Europeans in order to get what they wanted. Hitler would have admired such ruthlessness, such efficiency and such singlemindedness.

25

The eurocrats can bend the rules as much as they like. When EU bosses find something inconvenient (such as the debt levels of member countries) they ignore the problem, they suspend the laws and they carry on regardless. These are the actions of hubristic, deceitful, corrupt and irresponsible fascists. Bailing out Greece was against the law but, in their desperation to save their manufactured currency, the eurocrats ignored reality. However, the same eurocrats force you and I to obey every single one of their laws. If we don't then we go to prison.

26

Every survey done shows that the vast majority of English citizens want to leave the EU. (Actually, similar surveys have shown that the citizens of France, Germany and just about every one of the early joiners want to leave.) If any one of the three major parties campaigned on a `We will take England out of the EU' slogan they would win hands down. So, why don't they? Simple. Bribery, corruption and orders from Brussels.

27

The euro should have been allowed to die. It is only being kept alive in order to protect Hitler's political dream of a European superstate. The euro was a stupid idea (designed for political rather than economic reasons) and, like everything else the EU does, it was badly planned. If the EU were run by sensible, thoughtful, intelligent people who gave a damn for the lives of the European people, the euro would have been killed off a year or two ago, and individual countries allowed to revert to their original currencies. Allowing the euro to die would result in some immediate pain but the pain would soon be followed by recovery and growth. Maintaining the euro simply prolongs the agony and causes needless real suffering. But the EU and its servants will fight to the last breath to save the euro.

28

The EU's environment levies, designed to support inefficient and uneconomic energy sources such as wind and solar power, are destroying English industry. Companies are having to pay far more money for electricity than companies in other countries (including France and Germany which may also be in the EU but which do not take the EU's regulations so seriously). Our Government takes all EU nonsenses more seriously than any other government. The result will be that many large companies will close their factories in England and move them to Germany and other EU countries. This was, I suspect, all part of the original plan. (Remember, please, that the two most powerful countries in the EU, Germany and France, hate England. We beat Germany twice at war and we humiliated the French by saving them.)

29

`He perceived that he was up against French red tape, compared to which that of Great Britain and America is only pinkish. Where in the matter of rules and regulations London and New York merely scratch the surface, these Gauls plumb the depths. It is estimated that a French minor official, with his heart really in his work, can turn more hairs grey and have more clients tearing those hairs than any six of his opposite numbers on the pay

rolls of other nations.' - P. G. Wodehouse, Frozen Assets

(NB The French no longer take their red tape seriously. But we gold plate it. And take it very seriously indeed).

30

The European Court has decided that England must allow prisoners to vote. It is, apparently, unfair to prisoners to deprive them of their liberty and their vote. I look forward to seeing who is elected the next MP for the Dartmoor District.

31

Under the terms of the Greek bailout, the ECB and various national banks will take no losses on their Greek debt but private investors (through pension funds and insurance funds) will lose 75% of their money.

The ECB I should mention includes no elected officials and is not subject to any real democratic oversight. It's a bunch of hybrid bureaucrat-bankers with all the authority in the world and none of the responsibility. These are the people who believe that you can always solve a debt problem by throwing more money at it. If a country is in debt, give it more money. If a bank is in debt, give it more money. This is utter, unbridled madness. But the money they use belongs to ordinary, small investors and pensioners so they care not one jot. Pure fascism in action. The EU staff are constantly changing the goalposts, the referee and the rules as they go along. But there is one constant: official creditors are spared any pain, the banker-gamblers who bet against Greece are protected and `small' investors pay all the bills.

32

According to every definition of `fascism' the EU (Hitler's Bastard Love Child) is the most fascist state ever invented. (Commentators who don't understand what fascism means happily jump on the EU's propaganda bandwagon and claim that anyone who criticises the EU is a fascist.)

Here are some of the things all fascist regimes have in common:

1. Enthusiasm for the State is encouraged. (In our case we are encouraged to be enthusiastic about the EU rather than our real countries.)

2. There is an obsession with national security. There is constant talk about the need for vigilance. Armed police patrol airports.

3. Elections are dodgy. Candidates are imposed on the electorate and questions are often asked about the results. But nothing much ever changes.

4. Fascist countries need enemies in order to keep the people frightened. In a fascist country there is usually at least one war going on.

5. Huge amounts of money are spent on the military.

6. Politicians and bureaucrats have contempt for the rights of ordinary citizens.

7. There is control of the mass media. Critics are silenced. Serious opponents of the regime's activities are labelled `terrorists'.

8. Public money is spent to protect corporate power. Bankers, for example, are given public money even though their businesses are run along private lines. The lines between public and corporate money are blurred.

9. Money is transferred in huge quantities to those loyal supporters who work for large organisations such as banks which support the `leadership'.

10. There is an obsession with creating new laws. (Within the EU, these are usually described as `rules', `regulations' and `guidelines' but any `rules', `regulations' and `guidelines' which are enforced with severe penalties, including imprisonment, are, in my view, best described as laws.)

11. The police have almost unlimited powers - and constantly demand greater powers. Remember: the police

regularly shoot people in England - and get away with it.

12. Cronyism and corruption are rife among those in power.

33

England is a fascist country. Or, rather, it would be if it still existed. Officially, England is now just a series of EU regions. And although idiotic Scottish nationalists believe that they have acquired quasi independence, Scotland and Wales are EU regions too.

34

The number of trials for which we have the right to be tried by a jury will, in the future, be dramatically reduced. Instead individuals will be tried by EU approved state appointed functionaries.

35

In an attempt to reduce heavy drinking (and the rapidly growing incidence of alcoholism among the young of both sexes) politicians wanted to introduce legislation forbidding supermarkets to sell lager and beer at absurdly low prices. (At the moment they are cheaper than water). Unelected, anonymous bureaucrats working at the European Union forbad the Government to introduce any sort of minimum pricing policy, thereby guaranteeing an ever higher incidence of alcoholism.

36

In March 2012, the Hungarian Prime Minister told a rally in Budapest that he would not bow to EU pressure to amend legislation on the country's central bank. He compared European bureaucrats to Soviet apparatchiks (as a Hungarian he should know) and said his country was still fighting for freedom. `Hungary will not be a colony,' he told a rally. `We are more than familiar with the character of unsolicited comradely assistance, even if it comes wearing a finely tailored suit.'

I have for many years compared the EU to the USSR and it seems that even some nations are now recognising the truth of this.

37

There are 4.5 million businesses in England but three quarters of them have no employees at all: they are sole traders. Politicians and commentators seem puzzled by this. I am not. Sensible businessmen no longer want to grow their businesses because it means hiring staff and, thanks to the EU's employment rules and regulations, no one who wants to run a business, make a living and stay sane wants to employ people.

38

Diplomats working in Baroness Ashton's European Union foreign service are entitled to 17 weeks holiday a year. They are also entitled to two weeks off for `professional training' (reading menus, wine lists and so forth). So that's 19 weeks away from work. As if all that wasn't enough, diplomats working in the 30 EU delegations in the Far East, Asia and Africa (I bet you didn't know we were paying for 30 EU delegations in the Far East, Asia and Africa) are also entitled to another four or five weeks off work. That means that they have 24 weeks holiday (by which time even school teachers are probably feeling envious). And if they have to go somewhere further than the nearest five star restaurant they are entitled to two days travelling time and paid business class tickets for themselves and their families. With all this free time the EU officials obviously need lots of money to spend on hobbies and having fun and so they receive very high net salaries (largely tax free) and their accommodation is provided free of charge.

39

The EU has always been deeply opposed to the basic principles of democracy. Remember when the Danes held a referendum in 1992? Vast amounts of money were spent by the EU on propaganda. There were leaflets, magazines, newspaper advertising, radio and television programmes and a massive door to door canvassing campaign. All this was paid for by the EU. Those who opposed Denmark joining the EU had to rely on what meagre resources they could scrape together. Despite this unfairness, the Danes voted against joining the European Union. The EU panjandrums did not accept this. The EU simply ordered another referendum. This time they spent ever more money on lies and deceits. It was the sort of political propaganda the Nazis created. And this time, by a narrow vote, the Danish people were conned into voting `yes' for slavery and fascist control.

Just under a decade later much the same thing happened in Ireland. The first vote was won massively by those who opposed the European Union and who did not want to give up the remains of their national independence. Naturally, the EU demanded that another referendum be organised. By this time the EU's opponents had spent all their money. And the EU propaganda machine won. Within just a few years Ireland had been led by the EU into virtual bankruptcy.

The EU's supporters don't believe in democracy

Whatever we do, short of a bloody revolution (a civil war), will make no difference. They won't allow us to vote. There will be no clear cut `in or out' referendum. And if we did ever get the chance to vote and they didn't like the result, they would simply make us vote again. And again. It's what they do. And if we still get it wrong, or they suspect that democracy is getting out of hand, they will simply impose a dictatorship. As they have done in Greece and Italy. Politicians who offer the hope of protest will be bought or silenced. The media will be bought and controlled. Dissident writers will be suppressed and oppressed. News and feature programmes on broadcasters such as the BBC will be turned into propaganda broadcasts.

40

Despite the fact that the bureaucrats working in Brussels are hardly ever in their offices, new laws are being introduced by the minute. Here's one: firms with over 15 employees cannot get rid of staff without risking legal proceedings which can last for years. Not surprisingly this makes companies loathe to take on new staff. And so unemployment soars. Here's another: Shops and supermarkets can now be fined £5,000 for failing to hide tobacco products from public view. Smokers who want to buy these products have to ask for them. And staff aren't allowed to show customers what choices are available.

41

Every time a workman visits our home they tell us about some daft new rule (they don't usually know that it originated in Brussels) which means that we must pay to have a chimney moved, a flue opened or perfectly good wiring replaced. Millions of people are forced to have their homes knocked about to satisfy the utterly pointless and absurd requirements of a bunch of faceless, brainless EU bureaucrats.

It all started with MOTs for cars, which were introduced not to make our roads safer (they haven't) but to make more work for motor manufacturers and garages. Now every industry is at it. All they have to do is take a few EU idiots out to lunch and persuade them that there is a real health and safety risk if (fill in the blanks). Then, before you know it and without any discussion, the new regulation is introduced and everyone in the world has to wear steel capped bedroom slippers in case they stub a toe against the bed or drop a tooth glass onto the bathroom floor. The uselessness of all these regulations is proved by the fact that despite the vast number of rules and regulations designed to stop people tap dancing on the top of stepladders, or standing on the window ledge of their 19th floor flat to clean the windows, the incidence of accidental injury continues to rise remorselessly. Our legions of health and safety professionals are useless because (having been misdirected by the EU) they allow themselves to concentrate on the wrong things and because the existence of too many rules means that everyone concentrates on the rules and forgets about common sense.

42

When the euro was founded, the eurocrats were creating a monetary union and not a political one. The participating States (the ones which agreed to abandon their own currencies and to join the euro) established a common central bank but refused to give up the right to tax their own citizens.

This was really stupid. Why did the eurofanatics start monetary union before political union? My guess is that they did it deliberately (knowing that it would fail) because they hoped that it would allow them to push through the tricky stage of creating a full political union; the United States of Europe. The eurofanatics knew that they were creating future problems but believed that they could use the inevitable chaos as an excuse to push through their plans for a united Europe.

The EU is a dysfunctional organisation and the euro is a dysfunctional currency. What most people don't realise is that they were designed that way; they were designed to fail in their present form. The people who set them up knew that if they tried to get all the power they wanted right at the start they would encounter great opposition and that Hitler's project would fail.

43

The EU was brought into existence by what Karl Popper called `piecemeal social engineering'. A group of megalomaniacs, inspired by Hitler's vision of a United States of Europe, and realising that their dream could only be approached little by little, set limited objectives, mobilised the political will needed to achieve them, ignored public opposition and prepared treaties which required individual states to relinquish only a little of their sovereignty at a time. This enabled local politicians to sell the latest development to their reluctant and suspicious citizens.

And so a relatively innocuous Coal and Steel Community was slowly transformed into the EU.

The whole project was built on dishonesty. It was never wanted by the people of Europe and it was always based on deceit, corruption and a whole library of hidden agendas. German politicians who favoured the EU realised that Germany could only be reunified within the context of a greater European unification. The French EU fanatics wanted support for their farmers through the CAP. England entered the EU to please the USA. (There is more detail about this in my book *OFPIS*.)

44

A reader wrote to me about *OFPIS* saying `I can see why you are so unhappy with England in the EU. However, writing such a book and upsetting so many readers is not likely to change the situation is it? Perhaps you could develop a happier attitude by applying the wonderful pattern for happy living in the Serenity Prayer.'

45

The EU is very short of money. The eurocrats have their eyes on English pension funds. English savers who aren't civil servants (and who will not, therefore, receive a fat pension) have around £2,000,000,000,000 invested in their pension funds. That is more than all the investors have saved in the rest of the EU. The French have just £25,000 million. The Germans have £120,000 million. The EU wants our savings. And they are determined to have them.

46

Within the EU, democracy is regarded as an irrelevant nuisance. Elected governments in Greece and Italy were summarily dismissed as surplus to requirements by our bureaucratic masters. EU-approved ex Goldman Sachs administrators were put in charge (bypassing inconvenient non EU-acceptable concepts such as voting). The Prime Minister of Greece was thrown out of office after he suggested that asking the public what they thought about things might be the honourable thing to do. (It was, of course, Goldman Sachs who helped Greece fiddle the books and get into trouble in the first place.) In Italy the Government which replaced Berlusconi contained not one elected official. Not one.

47

The pain the EU has caused by its attempts to protect the euro and the bankers is vast. When I last looked, youth employment in Greece was over 50%. It was 35% in Portugal. The suicide rate in Greece has doubled and psychiatric helplines can hardly cope. They are 20,000 homeless people on the streets of Athens and crime rates are soaring. There are soup kitchens everywhere in Greece. (The Archbishop of Athens runs 73.) In Lisbon 200,000 people rely on soup kitchens to stay alive. The eurocrats don't care about any of this. They are fighting for Hitler's dream: the United States of Europe.

48

`One day the whole of Europe will be one vast socialist state...even England.' - Lenin

49

I have mentioned Hitler a good deal. There may be some readers who doubt my assertion that the European Union is Hitler's Bastard Love Child.

They should read these paragraphs carefully.

In 1936, Hitler told the Reichstag: `It is not very intelligent to imagine that in such a cramped house like that of Europe, a community of peoples can maintain different legal systems and different concepts of law for long.' His pal Mussolini, the father of fascism, said in 1933 that: `Europe may once again grasp the helm of world civilisation if it can develop a modicum of political unity.' Oswald Mosley, Englands leading fascist in the 1930s, also supported the idea of a European Union.

In 1941, Walter Funk, Hitler's economics Minister, launched the Europaische Wirtschafts Gemeinschaft (the European Economic Community - EEC) to establish a single European currency - the reichsmark. Hitler's plan was to integrate the European economy into a single market.

In 1945 Hitler's Masterplan (captured by the Allies) included a scheme to create an economic integration of Europe and to found a European Union on a federal basis. The Nazi plan for a federal Europe was based on Lenin's belief that: `Federation is a transitional form towards complete union of all nations.'

No more doubts please.

The European Union is Hitler's Bastard Love Child.

(I was going to add a line here to the effect that anyone who supports the EU, and who knows anything at all about history, must be a Nazi at heart but my Princess advised me that if I did so men in sharply pressed uniforms might be inclined to seek out our front door and kick it down. So, with great reluctance, I will cut that bit out.)

50

Decisions used to be made by those who showed up and took an interest. No more. Today, the big decisions are made by Goldman Sachs and the European Union (and it is not always easy to tell where one ends and the other starts).

51

In a letter to the *Daily Telegraph* in January 2012, the President of the Royal College of Surgeons and the President of the Royal College of Physicians complained that EU laws are having unintended consequences on health care and putting patients at risk. They were particularly worried by the EU laws which result in doctors from other countries within the EU being able to work in England without being able to speak English and by the legislation which reduces the time that young doctors have available for looking after patients and learning. I'm so pleased that these eminent leaders of the profession have noticed. But what took them so long? And why didn't someone representing GPs mention that GPs are still preening themselves at having used EU legislation to opt out of 24 hour cover and to wriggle out of their traditional responsibility of doctors to patients. As a result of EU legislation today's GPs are simply uncivil servants, public sector workers committed to feathering their own nests and supporting the needs and demands of the State.

52

The NHS pays people £50,000 a year to make sure that young doctors in hospital don't break EU rules and spend too much time with their patients. How absurd can you get? Other EU countries simply ignore the dafter EU laws.

53

The weight of a huge, intolerant and committed eurocracy lies behind every order and every form. Every institutional demand, however meaningless and trivial, pointless and wrong-headed in concept, is carved in stone and delivered by truck. There is never room for dissent, discussion or such old-fashioned luxuries as logic and common sense.

54

Many years ago I forecast the rise, rise and rise again of nationalism. It is happening.

Inevitably, there is much fear that nationalism will affect the success of Hitler's dream.

In England politicians and unions have spoken about banning pro-nationalist organisations which dare to promote England (or Britain).

55

The EU is run by people who are probably among the worlds most stupid. They are there because they fit certain criteria: the right nationality; an outstanding ability to please an appointments committee by making the right oink and moo noises; the ability to kiss ass; no knowledge whatsoever of anything and a complete absence of moral compass or common sense.

56

In April 2012, it was revealed that the EU was forcing England to allow member states to store waste carbon dioxide in the North Sea off the English coast. Experts admitted that England risked unknown levels of environmental damage if the gas leaked. Germany and other European countries have banned the storage of the waste in their countries because of safety fears. So the EU has ordered that England must store the stuff instead.

57

The French regard EU legislation as optional. The Princess and I saw a splendid example of this the other day while driving through the heart of Paris. We drew up alongside a police van. Inside the van there were around a dozen policemen. Half of them were puffing on cigarettes.

I suspect that the French regard EU legislation as a menu. They go through the list of laws, tick the ones they will take and ignore the rest. `Ah this one looks useful, we will adopt this one. But no, no, no this one is absurd. This one we will not take thank you.'

58

Two psychologists, Leif Nelson and Tom Meyvis, asked a group of students to listen to a very loud industrial vacuum cleaner. Some had to listen to it for 40 seconds, others for just five seconds. They found that the students who endured the 40 seconds of noise rated the last five seconds of the experience as significantly less unpleasant than those who heard only the five seconds. The explanation is simple: people adapt to unpleasant experiences. Nasty experiences become tolerable. And that's why so many people put up with the EU.

59

Occasionally, we hear a refreshing voice from a politician who opposes the European Union and the euro. He or she will make great promises and talk loudly about how and why the organisation must be opposed. There will be promises and threats and talk of serious opposition. And then: silence.

Such opponents are silenced by threats or bribes. They are never heard from again. After politicians in Slovakia voted against the EU giving boat loads of money to Europe's impoverished bankers the parliament was told to think again. Within hours they had changed their minds and voted for the EU to give away tons of money to the bankers. It took just hours for an entire parliament of determined, committed parliamentarians to change their minds completely.

60

Early in 2009, the regulators in England suggested that house buyers needed protection from bank failure in the weeks during which they were buying a new home. They suggested that the Government should provide security for temporary balances of up to £500,000 (presumably deciding that anyone buying a more valuable house was too rich to deserve help). Three years later the EU had still not decided whether or not this would be allowed. And so, house buyers who have enough money to purchase a house without a mortgage (perhaps because they have sold their previous home) will lose everything if the bank they are using for the house purchase decides to go bust while the money is sitting in an account.

61

The eurocrats have designed employment laws to suit themselves. The problem is that the eurocrats don't do essential work. They can have a year off without anyone noticing. They can turn up for half an hour a day without anyone going bust. They can take long holidays and enjoy vast expense accounts without their employer going bust. Sadly, however, these laws make life extraordinarily difficult for people trying to run real businesses in the real world. The arrogance of the eurocrats is well illustrated by the absurd working hours directive (in real life a directive is a law which has not been passed by any democrat body) which forces Tour de France cyclists to have rest days. The cyclists dont want to stop (because their muscles seize up) and so they spend their rest day riding anyway.

62

Here's a thought: was the economic chaos suffocating Europe deliberately devised? Did the EU's proponents want economic instability so that they could force us to accept a United States of Europe? I wouldn't put it past them. I wouldn't put *anything* past them. And if the Americans can fly aeroplanes into their own high rise buildings why shouldn't the EU create poverty, unemployment and fear throughout Europe? Even the most conservative of historians now accept that it was the Nazis, the founding fathers of the EU, who burned down the Reichstag in order to obtain more control of pre-war Germany.

63

I have detailed the idiocy of the EU at length e.g. in my book *OFPIS* but few things illustrate the idiocy of the EU more effectively than the replacing of our safe, effective and inexpensive light bulbs with costly, dangerous and ineffective bulbs.

64

Anyone who doesn't believe that the Lisbon Treaty took away our sovereignty probably believes that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

65

The EU is run by unelected, incompetent, arrogant, sanctimonious bureaucratic Cleggies who have never done anything useful, practical or creative in their miserable useless lives and whose skills are in obtaining jobs, manipulating expense accounts and ordering a good wine to go with a taxpayer funded luncheon. The eurocrats want a bigger EU so that they can justify bigger budgets, bigger salaries and longer lunches. Eurocrats have loads of authority but no responsibility; endless arrogance and no empathy. They are the storm troopers of Europe.

66

The EU's carbon emission policies mean that power bills in England will double in the next decade (in real terms). And there will be frequent power outages.

67

During demonstrations in 2011 there was much talk on television about demonstrators attacking the centuries old Supreme Court, our ultimate court.

Actually, although it may sound very old and very important, the Supreme Court was established in October 2009. It was authorised by the Constitutional Reform Act 2005 and is just another bit of EU junk. The building may be old but the Supreme Court isn't yet old enough to start school. The legislation allowed the Supreme Court to take over the Law Lords, part of the Privy Council, and remove the functions of the centuries old Lord Chancellor.

The changes were made because of the European Convention of Human Rights.

68

At the beginning of March 2012, the EU ruled that staff who fall ill while they are on holiday have to be given extra holiday to make up for the holiday they have lost. The Liberal Democrat part of the Coalition welcomed the proposal as a really good idea.

69

`If England had sided with Germany in World War II we would be much better off financially than we are. The Americans would be much poorer and we, with the Germans, would be running the European Union.'- Reader's letter

70

Lorries designed for trans-European autobahns are allowed to enter England and to struggle through small towns and villages, knocking bits off centuries old houses and cottages and destroying the foundations as they rumble by. The EU says it must be and so it must be.

71

In April 2012, it was announced that rather than take a cut in its income, or even hold down costs, the EU was demanding an extra £900 million - an effective pay rise for every employee of 7%.

72

The EU is opposed to copyright. They are planning to regard anyone who tries to protect the copyright of their work as a criminal.

73

EU policies have destroyed the quality of products and services. Every manufacturer and every service industry now spends a huge proportion of its income not on improving quality but on satisfying the EU's unending stream of rules and regulations.

74

The high costs of dealing with bureaucracy and buying licenses mean that small companies and sole traders now really struggle to stay in business. This is no accident. Most of the new regulations and licenses are introduced at the behest of, or with the approval of, large international corporations. The lobbyists working for these companies ensure that any new rules which are introduced are designed to suit their own corporate interests. These corporations know that a large company, with a special department of people hired to do nothing but fill in forms, can cope much better with newly introduced regulations than a small, growing company. According to the official definition of fascism (as composed by Mussolini himself) this is pure, practical fascism in action.

75

In September 2011, it was announced that EU staff were refusing to work a 40 hour week. They claimed that having to work so hard would ruin the attractiveness of their jobs. The 55,000 officials refused even to discuss working as many as 40 hours a week, despite the fact that people in ordinary jobs all over Europe are having to work harder for less money, or have no jobs at all.

A large proportion of EU officials earn between £104,000 and £185,000 and have three months holiday a year. Among their perks they are given an extra 24 days off work every year if they put in an extra 45 minutes at the office chatting or surfing the Web. And in addition to the additional 24 days of annual holiday they also get seven days of public holidays and an additional 11 non-working days when the offices are closed at Christmas.

A union representative, explaining the long holidays, said that `the principle of recuperation needs to be consolidated'.

76

During World War II, England was ruled by eleven regional commissioners.

77

The world is full of people who claim they know better than I do how I should run my life. Most of those people live in another country and know nothing whatsoever about my life.

78

The Government plans to knock down perfectly well-built Victorian houses because they are too expensive to renovate to modern EU-acceptable environmental standards.

79

We are oppressed by a secret fascist state which dare not give its name to its orders. Our politicians are prevented from admitting that new laws come from the EU. Instead, they pretend to be the originators of the legislation (however unpopular it may be).

80

At the start of 2012, as the EU started to crumble, a spokesidiot announced that if the EU collapsed there would be a European war.

81

`It was decided some years ago that we didn't have enough goons in England, telling us what to do, so we went offshore and hired goons working in Brussels. Now these goons tell us how to run our lives - and charge us huge fees for the privilege. Is the EU some sort of joke?' - Reader's letter

82

The EU is introducing licences for just about every job imaginable. Even agents handling professional cyclists have to have a licence. What next? Licences for strippers? Licences for beggars, perhaps? Everyone who wants a job has to attend a degree course in their chosen speciality, pass an examination and then pay an annual licence fee. I think the begging course will be particularly popular.

83

When you see lorries with `limited to 56 mph' labels on their tailgate do you ever wonder why anyone would pick such an odd number? Convert it into kph for the answer. And lo, you will suddenly remember all those continental lorries you've seen whizzing along the French motorways with 90 kph labels on their tailgates.

84

School children are taught to be ashamed of England and indoctrinated with EU validated, politically correct McNuggets of history, designed to make anyone English feel guilty about their heritage.

85

EU bureaucrats have 380 billion euros in unused structural funds to help out poor countries such as Greece but those countries can only access the money if they match the EU money with their own funds. But they don't have any money (that's why they need EU help) and they can't access the funds the EU has available. So the EU bureaucrats keep the money, and hand it out to their pals at the big banks. Or they spend it on expensive lunches.

86

Turkey used to be very keen to join the EU. But they've seen the mess the EU has made of things and, surprise, surprise, the Turks are no longer keen to be part of the chaos. (And they probably don't much fancy being asked to bail out Greece.)

87

Thanks to the EU, we are no longer living in a civilised country. Justice, honours and access to power can all be bought.

88

The Greeks spent their money on having a good time but, with the help of Goldman Sachs, fiddled the accounts to suggest that they were behaving responsibly and spending their loot on roads and sensible underwear. When it became clear that the Greeks had spent their money on booze, dancing and having a good time the EU, worried about the banks losing money, and the bankers being embarrassed, lent the Greeks even more money (taken, in one way or another, from unwilling taxpayers throughout the rest of Europe in a way that would be called highway robbery if done by a man in a mask on a horse). The theory behind this was that if someone is in debt and you lend them more money then they will be able to pay off the interest on the first debt and so one will notice that they are now in even more debt that before. This is a technique not widely favoured by bankers when dealing with small businesses but it is now popular with the EU when dealing with bankrupt sovereign nations. The bankers love this sort of arrangement because whenever they do a deal to lend out money they can give themselves another bonus. They borrow money from the ECB and that triggers bonus no 1. They then lend that money to a bankrupt country and that triggers bonus no 2. Brilliant.

89

Whenever the EU adds to the debt pile it is always the middle classes who lose money. The poor don't have anything to lose and so they are the same as before. And the really rich have all their money in Singapore, the Turks and Caicos islands and Delaware and so they don't suffer at all either.

90

It takes the average citizen an extra hour a week to sort out their rubbish, put out the bins, bring them back in again and, in general, obey the EU laws about rubbish disposal. So, if 20 million people a week do this that's 20,000,000 hours wasted a week. And that's around a billion hours a year. If we assume that the average person is worth £20 an hour (some charge less but bankers push up the average) then the EU's rubbish directives cost the nation £20 billion a year. But that's not the whole of the cost. There are also massive risks in having rubbish lying around in kitchens, back gardens and streets for weeks at a time. In addition, the EU has scarred our streets with huge plastic rubbish containers; so large and so numerous that they never disappear. In towns they stand permanent guard outside terraced houses because no sensible householder is going to drag the bins through their home.

Scariest of all, however, the billions of gallons of water wasted on washing out tin cans, yoghurt cartons and jam jars will contribute to the planet's growing water shortage problem. Our most valuable natural resource is in short supply and, thanks to the European Union, millions of people are using it to wash out empty containers that will, scrubbed and shiny bright, end up as landfill in China. Plus there's another problem that the bureaucrats, in their bottomless ignorance, haven't considered. Most people go on holiday in the summer. Even non EU bureaucrats usually manage to grab a fortnight away from work. (EU bureaucrats measure their holidays in months rather than weeks.) Many of those will miss their fortnightly rubbish collection with the result that stinking, rotting household refuse will stay in the bin for four weeks. Does no one working for the EU realise that this is a huge health hazard?

91

It is impossible for any entrepreneur or investor to plan properly because the rules are constantly changing. And, to make things even more challenging, the rules are changing retrospectively. So, what might have been legal last week may, in six months time, become illegal. The constant changing of regulations also means that house buyers are constantly being forced to spend money hiring builders to redesign their homes. For example, new regulations being introduced in 2013 mean that many home owners will have to rip apart ceilings and walls so that flues from gas boilers, etc., can be fitted with inspection hatches. Rarely a month goes by without a new regulation being introduced. The building industry welcomes these changes, of course, for the same reason that the motorcar industry welcomes changes to the regulations governing motor vehicles. Within the EU, and among those who now control the minutiae of our lives, `different' is a synonym for `better' and `change' a synonym for `progress'.

92

It is no exaggeration to say that nearly everything bad that has happened to England in the last decade or so has happened as a result of our membership of the EU. The legislation may have been `accepted' and put into place by Blair, Brown or Cameron (the BBC of modern politics) but it originated in Brussels. (The bad stuff that didn't come from the EU came from the USA.) Regulations which have come from the EU have led to a dramatically reduced quality of products and service and to reduced corporate profits (leading to smaller dividends and more inadequate pensions for those not fortunate enough to have public sector pensions or, better still, EU pensions).

93

In general, people do bad things because they can. The bad people of the EU do bad things because we let them. And we let them because their propaganda system is so good. (It should be. It seems to be based on the work of ace Nazi propagandists led by Joseph Goebbels.)

94

English legal tradition is that everything is legal except that which is banned. The EU philosophy is that everything is banned unless it has been authorised. We are remorselessly moving towards the second.

95

As Machiavelli said, you can make someone fear you but you can't make someone love you. Creating fear among the people is the basic philosophy followed by the whole of the EU and its supporters. Anyone who attacks the EU is dismissed as an oddball, an extremist or, ironically, a fascist. One of most critical failings of the EU is that the officials do not understand that when you have too many regulations, people stop behaving morally. The existence of too many laws makes it seem that there is no need for good behaviour; morality, having been taken over by the State, is no longer the responsibility of the individual. And, in addition, the existence of so many laws means that people are so busy struggling to avoid breaking the law that they simply don't have time to think about their behaviour.

96

The people who run the European Union know well that the only way out of the economic crisis created by the chaos in Greece, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Ireland (and other countries) is for the birth of the true EU superstate to be brought forward. And that is what the devoted fans of Hitler's Bastard Lovechild will insist must happen. There will be firm calls for a Central Finance Ministry to manage the economies of all the countries using the euro currency. And such a Ministry will, I suspect, be born.

Conclusion

The EU was an evil idea. The euro was just a stupid idea and was a result of the pro EU fascists trying to speed up their process of political assimilation. The founders and supporters of the EU will not be satisfied, and will not have achieved their aims, until England and other individual member nations have disappeared and their identity has been merged into the United States of Europe; that is, and always has been, the aim. Hitler's plan was to produce a socialist superstate and there is, of course, no practical difference between that brand of socialism and fascism. The two are indistinguishable. The europhiles always believed that they could bleed capitalists (of every size, shape and nationality) and use the proceeds to pay for entitlements, regulatory regimes and Europe-wide social security. It was always an insane dream. (Or, more precisely, it was always their dream and our nightmare.) Meanwhile, the eurocrats in charge of the EU aren't fit to run a bus let alone an entire continent. And thanks to the parade of dishonourable, treacherous politicians who signed away our rights and our history, we have lost our liberty, our culture, our democracy and our self-respect and been taken over by a fascist organisation whose mantra is `control, regulate and tax'. May the politicians who betrayed us be forever flushed with embarrassment and shame. The europhiles will not allow the current European crisis to go to waste. They will take full advantage of the chaos to promote their cause and to expand the power of the new United States of Europe. But it will all be in vain. The single currency and the EU will collapse - though not until they both have done terrible damage to every country in Europe. Neither of these sad creations can survive. I don't know when they will go (the sooner the better) but they are doomed.

CHAPTER 9: IMMIGRATION: OUT OF CONTROL

Introduction

Having paid to bail out the Scottish banks, England is now bankrupt. We have six million citizens living on State benefits. Millions more are registered as disabled. Our infrastructure is creaking at the seams. And yet immigrants continue to pour into the country.

1

In July 2012, Ed Miliband, the leader of the Labour Party, finally admitted that Eastern Europeans had kept English youngsters out of work. (Those who say that there are no jobs available in England might like to ask themselves how 750,000 Poles managed to find employment.)

2

There is a Romanian woman in Bristol who sells the *Big Issue* magazine and claims £2,600 in housing benefit from the local council. In fact, in addition to whatever she makes out of flogging what must surely be the world's least readable magazine, she receives a total State handout of £28,000 a year. That is, of course, considerably more than the average wage in England. (I am puzzled by the fact that it is possible to sell the *Big Issue* magazine and have somewhere to live.) It is hardly surprising that Eastern Europeans are queuing up to come to England. They don't want to come here because they admire William Shakespeare or want to visit the Lake District or because they adore Yorkshire pudding. They aren't attracted by our culture, our history or our weather. They are attracted by the fact that we give away free money. Imported beggars make life infinitely harder for our home-grown homeless.

3

In one short period in early 2012 the Government lost track of 106,000 criminal immigrants and asylum seekers. This is equivalent to the population of Cambridge.

4

Criticism of immigration is always demonised as racist and those who politely ask if we haven't perhaps got enough people living on our crowded isle (and straining our already overstretched infrastructure) are likely to find themselves answering questions down at the nearest police station. The sting of this politically motivated calumny is removed by the fact that many of those calling for controls are immigrants themselves who realise that even in the five to ten years they have been in England everything has deteriorated enormously. The immigrants don't want any more immigrants cluttering up the countryside and competing for jobs, homes and hospital beds.

5

People who decide to move to France or Italy usually go because they approve of the lifestyle enjoyed by the locals. Many know more about the culture and history of the country to which they are moving than the indigenous population. But it is a sad but inescapable truth that many of the people who come to England come for what they can get out of it and have no interest in our culture or our way of life.

6

There are 18 million people with long-term health problems in England and more than 20% of the population are over 60. Our infrastructure simply cannot cope. And yet we are encouraging immigrants to pour into the country. After one new EU law was introduced the Government announced that around 10,000 people would come into the country as a result. A year or two later they admitted that 700,000 a year had poured in. Our small, overcrowded island is unable to cope with the needs of the indigenous population (a phrase which may, I suspect, be frowned upon if not downright illegal). Our infrastructure certainly cannot cope with the endless stream of immigrants pouring across our borders.

7

As a result of our immigration policies (which were kindly donated by the European Union) thousands of English born children now go to schools where English speakers are in a minority and where lessons are conducted in the language of the majority. This is utter madness. It doesn't happen anywhere else on our planet.

8

Fighting wars with Muslims while at the same time inviting them to immigrate is plain, unvarnished lunacy. We should, perhaps, choose one of the two.

9

Rich people such as politicians approve of immigration because the immigrants don't threaten their homes and jobs. On the contrary lots of low paid immigrants provide a steady supply of eager gardeners and nannies.

10

Citizens from Eastern European countries which are now members of the EU go straight through Europe like a severe case of diarrhoea. They don't hang around in France (where the weather and food are better). They much prefer to come to England, which has the best benefits system around. Many then head directly for a place with a high unemployment level where they can settle down and nurse their newly acquired long-term backache.

11

In the three months to December 2011 the number of English nationals in employment fell by 166,000 compared with the previous year. By one of those strange coincidences the number of non-English nationals in employment rose, in the same period, by 166,000.

12

Although it has clearly become much easier for foreigners to enter England, stay here and take full advantage of our absurdly and unaffordable generosity and our crumbling infrastructure it has, paradoxically, become considerably more difficult for the English to travel abroad. A decade or two ago it was relatively easy to go abroad (and come back again) as long as the traveller held a valid United Kingdom passport. I remember that my father used to make day trips to towns and cities throughout Europe without any difficulty. He certainly didn't have to spend hours queuing to leave and enter the country. These days the whole business of getting through customs has become absurdly time consuming. The official argument is, of course, that we must protect our borders against terrorists, money launderers and illegal immigrants. The reality is that we never catch any of these people and the systems, as they are designed, merely make life difficult for the honest, legal traveller. (In exactly the same way, of course, as our banking regulations don't prevent any illegal activity but do make life difficult for the honest citizen trying to access his own money.) It is now not at all uncommon for travellers passing through Heathrow to have to spend two to three hours queuing to pass through a customs post. The anger felt by travellers is often enhanced by the fact that immigration officials may be seen standing chatting to one another as the queues mount up. The problem has even spread to Eurostar with the result that trains are now frequently delayed as passengers wait in long queues to be processed by officials who seem to be suffering from some sort of disease which makes them work at a pace that even a lethargic snail would find embarrassingly slow. If the immigration officers worked in shops or banks (or any other real world concern) the queues would go three times round the world. The surly, French customs officers placed at St Pancras, to balance the English ones at the Gare du Nord, deal with passports as snappily as a baccarat dealer deals with cards but the surly, leaden fingered English officials at the Gare du Nord seem to delight in building up massive queues.

13

Many immigrants are now leaving England and going home. They have taken money out of our economy but now realise that the infrastructure is better back home. `We are going back because health care and education are better back home,' said one Polish family. `Crime rates in Romania are much lower than in England,' explained another family of returning exiles. `There are too many immigrants in England,' admitted a spokesman for another Eastern European family. Countries which like to think of as rather poor are doing quite well, thank you. The average Russian now has at least two top end mobile telephones. Three quarters of the Chinese have at least one.

14

There have been many attempts to turn us all into multinationals but few of the attempts have been as blatant as the way our national cricket team has been altered. Just a few years ago all members of the team which represents England were born in England. A random, recent representative side included four players who were born in South Africa, one born in Ireland and one born in Australia. That means that more than half of the England cricket side were foreign born.

15

People who move to live in the USA are strongly encouraged to become American (and most do) but people who move to England are strongly encouraged to retain their traditional roots and to remain `Scots', `Pakistanis' or `Poles' at heart. Such immigrants never become citizens. They simply live in England because it provides them with financial benefits they would not obtain if they had stayed at home.

16

Rich foreigners who want to move to England but have no links with our nation, or any interest in its past and future, can buy English citizenship and a passport. (Curiously, Government ministers don't often talk about this cute example of sovereign prostitution.) However, most rich foreigners who move to England don't bother taking out citizenship. It is far more profitable to stay in London as a non-resident, non-domiciled visitor because this turns England into a tax haven: a dream destination for tax dodgers.

17

Some countries (such as Greece) have porous borders which allow virtually anyone into the EU. And once people are in the EU they can travel to England.

18

Politicians, judges and many highly-paid commentators defend the right of Muslim extremists to live in England and to create communities which are set apart from the English. Curiously, the same people are often quick to want to ban people from promoting Christianity (though they are invariably happy to take time off to celebrate Christmas and Easter). And they are, of course, also eager to ban political parties such as the British National Party, which has a good many home-grown English supporters. (It does not, apparently, seem strange to these people that they should want to ban a political party which represents a large proportion of the population. The party, and its supporters, may not be to their taste but the fact is that when you ban or suppress political groups because you don't approve of them you are running a type of country which cannot possibly be described as a democracy.)

19

Immigrants complain a good deal about the way we run our country and they often have many fundamental ideas for improving our society. And yet their own societies, in the countries from which they have often fled, are frequently repressive, invariably misogynistic and often run as dictatorships. It is, I confess, sometimes difficult to understand why they are prepared to put up with living in our country. I suppose we should be grateful for their generosity in allowing us to give them money and houses and for encouraging them to make the effort to change our society, our culture and our way of life.

20

Now that rabid Scots want to be an EU region rather than a UK region one assumes that many of the most annoying and incomprehensible Scots (particularly those who have taken over our media) will be loading their ill-gotten gains into their motorcars and driving back to live in Glasgow. But we should warn them that they aren't getting what is left of the oil. Most of it lies off the English coast. And it was found with English money. When the separation papers are signed they can keep the haggis and the bagpipes. We'll keep the oil. Incidentally, during the 2102 London Olympic Games, Scottish (and Welsh) members of some teams were told that they did not have to sing the National Anthem.

Conclusion

Our immigration policies are outside our control. Until or unless we leave the European Union (or the European Union collapses in an explosion of hubris and ignorance) we will be forced to continue to accept boat, plane and trainloads full of immigrants - most of whom are coming not because they want to live in England but because they don't want to be where they were and England offers the best financial incentives. And there is another, infrequently discussed, side to this problem. One in three English born citizens is now considering emigration. Many have already gone; disappointed and frustrated by the decline of their country. England will soon be left with just the civil servants, the unemployed immigrants, the hard core scroungers, the international tax evaders and the money launderers. The producers and taxpayers will have gone. It may soon be time for us all to consider leaving.

CHAPTER 10: EDUCATION: MISDIRECTED AND MISMANAGED

Introduction

Politicians talk about education a great deal. They say how important it is and they repeat this mantra as though saying it is enough. As with the health service there is much talk of targets and there are many managers. But if you measure the quality of education in England by the number of adults who can read and write then the quality of education is deteriorating rapidly. Our teachers and our schools are failing. Education has been dumbed down to suit the absence of ambition and enthusiasm among the laziest and greediest of our teachers. Schools are forced to try to hit targets and since the trick with targets is that those setting them always remember to make sure that they are always slightly lower than the latest set of results, everything gets worse. The EU has warned that our chances of fighting our way out of recession are being damaged by our poor educational standards.

1

We are taught to take education seriously. We are told that the quality and extent of our education will shape and govern our lives. We are told that if we work hard at school and at college then we will reap the benefits later. `Education, education, education' was an early communist mantra which was borrowed by the Labour Government in the 1990s.

`Study hard, pass your examinations and you will obtain a better job, earn more money and be able to enjoy a more luxurious lifestyle than those who spurn their educational opportunities.'

How many children hear that each year? It is the standard stuff of school speech days.

What we are told is, to a large extent, true. But there is another truth about education which is even more important and which is never talked about. We are never told the real price that we will have to pay for our years of education. We are never told the spiritual price that society expects us to pay in return for having our lives shaped and improved.

To understand the potential costs to the spirit and the soul it is necessary to understand the *purpose* of the education society offers us all. We must understand what society stands to gain from the deal we are offered.

Sadly, nothing that society offers ever comes free and an education is certainly no exception. The main reason society offers to educate us all is to prepare us for work. Society doesn't want to educate us so that we become more thoughtful, more creative or wiser individuals. Society doesn't want to broaden our horizons or enhance our sense of vision. Society doesn't want to instill passion in us (that can be troublesome and inconvenient) and it doesn't want us to know how to think for ourselves (that can be costly and disruptive).

What society really wants is obedience.

Society - the social structure which we have created but which has now acquired a strength and a force of its own - values obedience highly and rewards the obedient more than any other group. Society knows that the obedient will work hard without question. Society knows that the obedient can be relied upon to do work that is dull, repetitive and possibly even dangerous. Society knows that the obedient are unlikely to be troubled by spiritual or moral fears. Society knows that the obedient will fit neatly into whatever hierarchy may exist and society knows that the obedient will always put loyalty above honesty and integrity. Society will always reward those who are obedient because by doing so it can demonstrate to others the value of obedience!

The obedient are always prepared to do what others tell them to do. The obedient are allowed to climb higher up the ladder. But because they are obedient they always do what they are told - however high they climb. The obedient obey the politicians, the administrators and the bureaucrats. Millions of men and women are blindly obedient because of the lessons they learned at school. They do work they dislike. They listen to people they despise. They do what they are told without questioning. They are blindly obedient because that is what the educational system taught them to be.

The obedient also become good and reliable customers. The obedient obey the advertisers and buy things that they don't need. By doing so they help society to evolve and stay strong. The obedient accept shoddy workmanship and unreliability without complaint. They accept new fashions as necessary and they buy new clothes and new cars when society wants them to buy those things - not when they need them. The obedient customer is a passive customer and the passive customer is the best customer.

Think back to your own education and you'll see how important obedience was. With some honourable exceptions most courses which involve a textbook and a teacher, and conclude with an examination, are designed to prevent thought and to encourage obedience.

The educational system prepared us all for a life in a meritocracy where nothing is more meritorious than silent obedience.

If you were a good student then you will have been rewarded.

If your education was successful - on society's terms - then you will have been offered choices that marked you for life. Whatever profession you chose to follow, society will have taught you to feel special. You will have been encouraged to believe that you are superior to those who do not have your own specific skills. You will have been taught prejudices rather than truths.

You must remember that one aim of a modern education is to harness the minds of the imaginative or potentially disruptive. Such individuals are dangerous to a smooth running society.

Society's schoolteachers - the handmaidens of the system - are prepared and willing to manipulate the minds of the young because that is what society expects them to do in return for their own status in society.

Education, the most fundamental force of all, is designed to help produce a neat and layered world. But the price we pay for our education is a high one. And the more successful our education is in society's terms (and the higher our subsequent position in the meritocracy) the greater the price we must pay.

Our choices - or the choices that society helped us make - will have strictly defined the boundaries of our lives. We may be better rewarded (in material terms) than many of those who were less capable of satisfying the system but the price we pay will be higher too. The price we pay for educational success is intellectual constraint. We pay for our success with our freedom. We pay for our success with guilt, frustration, dissatisfaction and boredom.

The modern educational system is designed to support the structure of our society but it is also a major force in the development of stress and misery.

If it is true that our schooldays are the happiest days of our lives it is because by the time we leave school freedom is, for most of us, nothing more than a faint memory.

`The best part of every man's education, is that which he gives to himself,' wrote Sir Walter Scott

Regular, mass-market schooling for everyone was originally a by-product of the industrial revolution. Prior to the industrial revolution most people lived in villages and hamlets and only a relatively small percentage of the population lived in towns and cities. The first factories and industrial towns developed in England when industrial machinery such as spinning wheels which had been installed in cottages, barns and village halls were smashed by the Luddites; rebellious workers who believed that the introduction of machinery threatened their livelihoods. As a direct result of the Luddite activities the machine owners put their replacement equipment into specially built `factories' so that they could be protected against vandalism. Since public transport did not exist this, inevitably, meant that the people who were going to work in those factories had to be housed nearby. In this way the first new, purpose built industrial towns developed.

The first schools were built not to educate or to inform but because unless some provision was made for looking after children, factory owners could not employ women as well as men. The development of the first towns had meant that family units had been splintered and it was no longer possible for young parents to turn to their own parents for help and support.

Either by purpose, design or simple good fortune it was quickly discovered that the development of formal schooling had an additional benefit. Employers found that children who got into the habit of attending a school for regular hours during the day adapted more readily to work in a factory. Many of their parents, who had been brought up working as farm labourers, found factory hours and discipline difficult to get used to. Children who were accustomed to school hours and discipline had no such problems.

Today a formal education is still primarily designed to occupy pupils, to keep them busy and out of mischief and to prepare them for an ordinary working life. Very little of the tedious by rote learning which goes on in schools has any practical purpose. Children are taught algebra, trigonometry and Latin - and then subjected to examinations designed to find out how well they have absorbed the entirely useless material they have been taught. The aim is to not to teach or impart learning but to produce school leavers who will feel comfortable with the standard working ritual of modern life.

Schooling is a disciplinary activity rather than an educational one (although the latest and most fashionable educational methods - those which are designed to educate without work, study, labour or pain - fail even to instil much discipline into pupils). Students are certainly not being given information which will enable them to live independent lives. They are being taught to fit into society's demands for them, rather than taught how to think.

Why, after all, would society want to teach young people how to think for themselves? People who can think for themselves are likely to be a nuisance rather than an asset to a closely structured society which depends more on discipline and routine than on innovation or imagination.

Students, at schools, colleges and universities, are trained to do as they are told. It is for this reason that rules play such a crucial part in all educational establishments. Learning to obey the rules and do as you are told is a more important part of any educational establishment than learning to create or to question. Most education and training is designed to make sure that people do not maximise or optimise their own skills but that they accept whatever life or fate offers. The `society' which we have created, which now has a purpose and an agenda of its own, does not want thinking citizens. People who think are likely to threaten the status quo.

And yet there are many citizens in our society who believe (with apparent sincerity) that once their formal education is over they can stop learning. They assume that when they leave school, college or university they do so as educationally complete individuals, and that they can, from that point in their lives onwards, stop expanding, exploring and discovering.

This is no accident. It is exactly what `society' wants.

When graduating students believe that they no longer need to learn they inevitably become content and stable cogs in society's complex machinery.

The truth, of course, is very different. The truth is that a genuine education, one which encouraged original and creative thinking, would be merely a beginning.

The word `educate' is derived from the word `educo' which means to draw out and develop. Once a child has learned to read and write education should not be about learning and remembering dates and mathematical formulae. A truly educated man is one who has developed his mind to take advantage of his skills and talents and to get where he wants to be without hurting the innocent. An ignorant man who has been taught to think can get hold of all the knowledge he needs in order to deal with his ignorance - either from a library or from people who have the knowledge.

The truth is that a modern, formal education is irrelevant to life. And so it is not surprising that many people do well without any formal education and why many modern employers prefer to hire intelligent and enthusiastic staff who do not have any formal (and often stifling) education.

Knowledge is only valuable when it is used. The knowledge you have stored - but which you do not use - is of no value to you or anyone else. Knowledge is potential power and potential wealth. But knowledge and wisdom, unlike money, only really show their value when you put them to use. And knowledge and wisdom can, unlike money, be spent more than once. A good formal education should (in theory) show you how to acquire knowledge and how to use knowledge when you have acquired it. Sadly, however, very little modern formal education teaches people where or how to acquire more knowledge for themselves, and hardly any formal education is designed to show people how to use what they have learned.

Too many students assume that their education ends when they finish their formal schooling or university or college course. A frightening number of people who regard themselves as `well-educated' have never read a non-fiction book since qualifying and leaving college. Too many teachers regard education as meaning `acquiring skills and training'. Too many parents and politicians expect the educational system to teach children nothing more than the information they need to get a job - and how to obey the rules. It is a dangerous myth to assume that education is designed to teach wisdom. It certainly doesn't do that. And nor does it teach students how to think.

2

It is important to remember that schools were only ever invented so that parents could go to work and have somewhere safe and secure to leave their children. After the industrial revolution factories in England were in desperate need of hands and bodies to operate lathes and looms. Children were a nuisance to factory owners because the women who could be hired often felt they had to stay at home to make sure that Tom, Dick and Harry didn't fall on the fire and ate a slice of bread and dripping occasionally.

So the principle of education for all, including the poor and dirty, was born.

From this unpromising beginning has developed the idea that education is a universal right, more important than food, drinking water and a rain proof roof. In political terms education has become untouchable and fundamental.

Sadly, the quality of education has deteriorated massively in recent years. Naturally, the politicians have not allowed this uncomfortable truth to interfere. They have got round reality by making exams easier and easier to pass. It's known in the trade as grade inflation and it means that each year students get better marks than they would have done if they had taken their exams a year earlier. As a result many universities now set their own entrance examinations for prospective students.

Meanwhile, despite the high marks, illiteracy rates soar.

We now have a politically correct, distorted, manipulated education system which produces illiterates and semi-literates by the regiment. We have an education system which uses official EU propaganda and refuses to teach English history or English culture for fear of upsetting racists who feel full of resentment about England because they aren't English themselves and because their country (be it Scotland or Pakistan) doesn't have a comparable history or a comparable culture.

3

When asked why they are emigrating to France one of the first reasons English citizens give is `education'. They are, they say, leaving because they want to send their children to French schools.

4

Immigrants from developing countries in Europe (such as Poland and Romania) may come to England to take advantage of the financial benefits but they often send their children back home to be educated. (They also go back themselves if they need medical treatment. They know that our infrastructure and our basic services are now of Third World quality.)

5

Teachers are now so keen for their students to pass their exams (because if enough students pass enough exams the teacher can take home a financial bonus) that more and more of them are showing their students the questions beforehand. This may not quite be according to the Marquess of Queensberry rules but it does boost the success rate and increases the teachers take home pay.

6

Too many students now waste their time and money studying subjects that were never really designed to be anything more than a hobby. Just how many graduates in `gender studies' and `art history' does a country need?

7

Most people today are over-educated for the work they will be fit to do, will need to do and will do. The wild enthusiasm for further education (a phrase which rather ambitiously implies that those going into further education have already been educated to some degree) is inspired by the need to keep the unemployment figures low and is merely yet another example of political dishonesty.

8

Montaigne advised that pain should be part of every boys education because of the risk of him one day having to undergo torture. Modern children are denied pain at the time when it will do them most good. No one is allowed to compete and fail. School sports days are banned because they are considered `elitist' by the politically correct (and, partly, too because the sports fields have been sold off by the local council and are now covered with a supermarket and low grade housing). The result is young adults who expect nothing but success from life, and who regard any sort of failure and disappointment as an unjustifiable personal affront, require counselling and lengthy courses of anti-depressant medication.

9

The Government is now paying for care for 15 hours a week for two-year-olds. It is called, rather pompously, `pre-school education' but is clearly really just childcare designed to enable women to go to work (or the park). Playschools and nursery schools were only invented so that mothers could go to work and avoid the responsibilities of parenthood. Why do women have children if they don't want to look after them?

10

Astonishingly, just under half of young people now go to University. This is a staggering notion. I have absolutely no doubt that most of those now officially described as attending university are neither attending an establishment that could properly be described as a university nor suited to a post-school education.

11

The Government is planning to make it possible for students to obtain a university degree within two years. They're doing this because the cost of a three year course is rapidly becoming scary. The Government has to keep students signing up for courses so that they can continue to disguise the unemployment figures (and save money on unemployment benefit). Hence the reduction in course time. Politicians don't give a damn about whether citizens are educated or not, and if the Government thought it would prove profitable they would give away degrees with packets of cornflakes. (Actually, that's not quite true. Politicians do care a bit about whether or not the citizens are educated. They prefer them to remain ignorant and unable to tell the difference between a sponsored website, keeping them on message, and a real website, offering genuine news and views.)

12

Exams have to be dumbed down because most of those who stay on for `further education' are neither keen on studying nor are they any good at it. The Government doesn't want thousands of students failing their exams and so they make the exams easier and easier to pass. And to persuade unwilling students to go to `university' they also insist that departments teaching dull, difficult subjects such as mathematics receive less money (even though a good country does rather need one or two people who can add up) and that oodles of boodle is given to departments which teach courses in attractive, intellectually less demanding subjects such as tourism, physical education (actually, I think they now call it Sport and Exercise Science but it still means shouting at the unwilling while they leap over wooden horses and run round the field in a singlet and shorts), hairdressing and nailcare. (I wonder if it is possible to do a PhD in nailcare. Probably.)

13

School discipline has declined since corporal punishment was outlawed in 1986. And attacks on pupils and teachers have increased. Officially this is, of course, merely one of those odd coincidences. Of course it is.

14

How long will it be before primary schoolchildren who attend school at least once a week are automatically given a degree in anything they can spell? Teachers will talk proudly of children aged 12 who have so many degrees that it takes them ten minutes to recite the list. Politicians will claim that news showing that our nation is awash with four-year-olds who have fistfuls of degrees proves conclusively that standards have been raised and teaching methods improved.

15

I rang a broker at one of the big State subsidised banks in order to buy some Exchange Traded Fund shares in silver. The price was 13$ U.S. and the broker at the other end converted this first of all to 50 pence and then, after some giggling, to 90 pence. After yet more giggling she said she thought I ought to speak to someone more senior. I frequently find that dealing staff have no idea that the American dollar is a different currency to the English pound, that there are, in fact, several types of dollar and that the position of a decimal place can be of considerable significance when quoting a price. This was Lloyds TSB (the bank which was ruined by its links with one of the bankrupt Scottish institutions).

16

Why aren't children taught how to manage their money? Most schoolchildren would be better served by being taught basic accounts, domestic science, typing (now known rather pompously as keyboard skills) and basic plumbing. Girls should be taught to make curtains and boys to grow vegetables and mend bicycles. But these subjects are ignored - and my suggestion will be regarded by many as politically incorrect and sexist. Children are forcibly slotted into a pseudo academic environment and encouraged to waste their time and money studying subjects which will never be of any real value to them or to anyone else.

17

A reader recently told me that her (perfectly healthy) young son was being taught sign language at his nursery school. The teachers were, for example, teaching him to pretend to milk a cow when he wanted to say `milk'. What sort of lunacy is this?

18

Creativity, inventiveness and independence of thought are now regarded as dangerous and are, therefore, suppressed in schools and universities. Schools do, however, seem to have plenty of time for sex education, a subject which arrives on the curriculum when pupils are five or six-years-old and very easy to terrify, confuse and bewilder. Naturally, to satisfy the politically correct, there is much talk about homosexuality in these harmful sex education courses.

19

Teachers no longer seem to bother trying to make their pupils behave decently. The Princess and I always veer away if we see a party of schoolchildren under the supervision of their teachers. The children are invariably rowdy, undisciplined and rude. The teachers are far too busy chatting to give a damn. Pedestrians are frequently forced off the pavement by unruly snakes of venomous kids. I am ashamed to report that when we see unruly children in Paris we know, before we hear them speak, that they will be English. Neither the Princess nor I have much time for the French (the city and the country are wasted on them) but they do ensure that their children know how to behave decently.

20

School sex education programmes seem designed to teach children to say that they are homosexual even if they really aren't and our politicians and State-run television programmes reinforce the message at every opportunity. Could this be because politicians know that gay relationships tend to be short-term and that it is in their interests to break down the sort of long-term relationships which exist in marriage because individuals gain great strength from such relationships?

21

Teaching English children in languages other than English is racist and a form of child abuse. It creates ghettoes. And yet it is increasingly common today in England.

22

Citizens in their 60s can add up the cost of their shopping in moments. It used to be called mental arithmetic and it was a consequence of old-fashioned, learning by rote. Younger people, trained in something called `new maths', can't add up two and two without the aid of a calculator. But despite this clear evidence that the old methods were best, teachers (who clearly don't like listening to children chanting out their tables) insist that the new methods are preferable.

23

From September 2012, English universities can charge students up to £9,000 a year for tuition. (Scottish students don't pay a penny. They are generously subsidised by English taxpayers, most of whom have no idea they are being so generous.) The £9,000 a year is a rise of £6,000 on the £3,000 maximum that previously existed, and even Government ministers of the Clegg variety will doubtless be able to work out that this is slightly above the official inflation rate. Students also need to borrow money to pay for their accommodation costs since they are unlikely to receive grants. All this means that the average student attending a three year university course will leave with debts of around £40,000 give or take a textbook or two. Students who leave after a longer course (medicine, dentistry or veterinary science for example) will have much higher debts and will doubtless be disappointed to discover that it is no longer possible to avoid these debts by electing to go bankrupt. There is nothing wrong with the principle that students should pay for their education. Why, after all, should those who do not go to university pay for those who do? But there is a strong argument that the fees being charged are absurdly high and that universities and colleges are now in the exploitation rather than the education business. It is difficult to understand why students should pay £9,000 a year for the privilege of attending a few mouldy lectures.

It is only since 1998 that students in England have had to pay for their education but in America, where students have had to pay for many years there are now (literally) millions of students with huge debts. Amazingly, there are two million pensioners in the USA who are still paying off their student debts.

24

Blair and Brown worked out that by encouraging young people to go to university (on the spurious grounds that after being educated they would find it easier to obtain employment) the Government would be able to keep the unemployment figures down (because young people who are studying don't count as unemployed and cannot, of course, claim unemployment benefit, thereby saving the Government another ton and a half of money a week) and (if you're still following this sentence this is the really nasty bit) could actually make money out of unemployment by moving the cost of higher education from Central Government to the English students themselves. (The careful Scots ensured that Scottish students don't have to pay anything. Remember that Gordon Brown had signed The Scottish Claim of Rights, giving his eternal allegiance to Scotland over England.) This was short-term barrow boy politics. And it is difficult to see how it was not racist - other than for the fact that the English are almost alone on the planet as not officially allowed to describe themselves as a `race'.

25

Thanks to the appalling polices of the last few Governments, young people who choose to better themselves through education will not start their lives with a clean slate. Most are starting with huge university debts. And with housing still far too expensive (in historical terms) they have very little hope of clambering onto the housing ladder. They will, therefore, need to live with their parents or (if they can find the money) rent somewhere to live.

It is this debt problem which will stop the housing market recovering. It is, of course, usually younger people who buy houses at the cheapest end of the market. The people who sell those houses move up into something bigger and more expensive. And eventually, at the end of the chain, older folk, approaching retirement, sell their larger homes so that they can move into a little cottage in the country or at the seaside.

The inability of the young to buy means that no one can sell.

The young are also doomed because in addition to their personal debts they will have to pay back the nation's huge debts. England's debt, still rising as I write, is already well over a trillion pounds. That will have to be paid back through higher taxes. And higher taxes will mean lower growth, greater unemployment and a long-term economic depression. How many of today's teenagers realise that they will spend their entire lives suffering for Gordon Brown's stupidity? How many will, as they shiver their way through an ever-hungry old age, curse the memory of Gordon Brown?

And, as if all that were not bad enough, today's young people also have to pay the costs of pensions for tomorrow's old people. All those millions of public sector workers promised and expecting huge pensions will want their money to come from somewhere. Higher taxes and fewer public services will be the only answer.

The pain will be greater because young people are brought up expecting to become rich and famous, without realising that generally speaking you have to do something to acquire either or both. There is a great sense of entitlement and a lack of awareness of the realities of life (engendered by school policies which are designed by people who wrongly believe that a child who fails anything will be scarred for life and will grow up to become a psychopathic mass murderer). Children grow up unable to understand the meaning of words such as `honour' and `gratitude' and with a sense of entitlement that would embarrass Royal Princes.

There is going to be much anger, frustration, disappointment and resentment.

At what point will there be a revolution?

At what point will young people refuse point blank to pay all those pensions for all those greedy public sector workers?

26

A new survey shows that three out of ten students believe it is their right to work from home once they get jobs (if they get jobs). This rather reminds me of a survey conducted at the height of the dot-com madness in America. The survey showed that a majority of American college students planned to retire as millionaires at the age of 25.

27

When they reach the grand old age of 50, today's 20-year-olds will have the debts of several generations to worry about. They will have to pay off their own student loan debts. They will have to help out their starving and shivering parents (struggling to survive without employment or pension) and they will have to help feed, shelter and clothe their own children.

28

Children don't learn much these days because school terms are getting shorter and shorter. Even when the children are supposed to be at school they are hardly ever learning. There are days off for snow, days off so that teachers can be trained and days out on coaches so that the teachers can get out of the classroom and visit places they enjoy.

Conclusion

Nothing will change until there is a real revolution forcing teachers to put children first and their own interests second. Until things change, the incidence of illiteracy and innumeracy will continue to rise. The basic problem is that education is organised and run by and for teachers - just as health care is now run by and for health care professionals.

CHAPTER 11: THE GROWING SHORTAGE OF OIL, METALS, FOOD AND OTHER COMMODITIES

Introduction

Reserves of all commodities are falling by 6% a year and replacements are expensive and difficult to find. There seems to be some public resistance to the idea that all the earth's resources are, inevitably, limited and there seems to be little or no understanding of the fact that, for non renewable commodities, the easy to obtain stuff has been obtained. Everything left is difficult to get at and, therefore, expensive. For England there are three serious problems. First, we import most of our essential commodities. Second, EU regulators are constantly bringing in onerous new laws governing the extraction and use of energy. Third, environmental campaigners protest about all the possible energy sources - whether they be oil, coal, nuclear or windpower.

1

The cost of all utility bills (water, sewage, gas and electricity) will rocket in the next ten years. Be prepared to pay a good deal more for these services than you pay now.

Gas and electricity bills will soar because the price of energy will go up. And because our infrastructure providing us with these things is old, falling apart and totally inadequate. The amazingly short-sighted decision by the Germans to abandon nuclear power means that the price of natural gas must soar. There is absolutely no chance whatsoever of the Germans (or anyone else) obtaining all the electricity they need from windmills, wave power or the sun. Because it has turned governments away from nuclear power, the Japanese nuclear disaster will add thousands of pounds to the average annual energy bill.

Water and sewage bills will soar because our infrastructure in these areas was built in Victorian times and is now in need of repair. A conservative estimate suggests that bringing the system up-to-date will cost around £100 billion. The real cost will, of course, be considerably higher. Until the improvements are made, huge amounts of money will have to be spent on keeping the systems working. Once the improvements have been made huge amounts of money will have to be spent on servicing and repaying the related debt. Global water shortages won't help the price problem, either.

In addition, the costs of all services will rise because new EU regulations require water to be treated in a more energy efficient manner in the future. Sadly, the more energy efficient treatment programmes are less acceptable from an environmental point of view. But the EU will doubtless introduce a new system of fines to ensure that the industry pays extra for adopting the new treatment programmes.

The shortage of energy supplies, combined with the constant introduction of new EU laws, mean that utility bills will soar. Anyone who has difficulty paying utility bills now should perhaps consider downsizing to a smaller property.

2

According to the latest figures, oil companies now have to spend nearly seven times as much to find, develop and `commercialise' a barrel of oil as they had to spend in 1997. Finding new oil costs far more. And upstream spending has increased four fold as oil companies have to deal with every possible variety of inflation (including wage inflation in developing countries). Geology, geography and politics are all making oil more expensive. (The price of oil has risen about 1500% in the last 15 years.) And that's before we cover the fact that existing fields are running out. Or the fact that countries such as China are increasing their consumption.

3

Campaigners who protest about the ways in which we obtain our energy are among the biggest users of computers, which are massive users of electricity.

4

New driving tests are being introduced for the over 65s even though they are proven to be the safest drivers on the roads. The idea is simple: get pensioners off the roads and keep the oil for ministers, armed forces, public sector workers and taxpaying workers. This is age discrimination but politicians always ignore rules which they don't like when they seem inconvenient.

5

Those who claim that there is plenty of oil around will frequently claim that there are now many new ways of taking oil out of the ground. They're right, of course. Oil exploration companies do have new and improved ways to extract oil. The problem is that finding and obtaining this oil is expensive, dirty and dangerous work (and very likely to arouse indignant opposition from environmentalists). Here's a list of the new ways of finding oil. You will see that it is clear that the days of cheap oil are over. And they aren't coming back. Ever.

a) Oil Sands

The phrase `oil sands' refers to loose sand or sandstone that is saturated with a form of petroleum known as bitumen. The oil is obtained either by digging vast open mines or by processing the bitumen underground. The problem is that open pit mines leave huge piles of toxic waste that can pollute nearby water sources. Also, the petrol obtained from oil sands results in 10% to 15% more greenhouse gas emissions per barrel because of the extra energy needed to refine the bitumen. The cost of producing a barrel of oil this way is around $75 a barrel.

b) Oil Shale

Shale may include a solid material called kerogen which contains oil. The problem is that the rock has to be mined and then heated to a high temperature if the oil is to be released. Extracting this oil requires vast amounts of land and water and produces a great deal of toxic material. Vast amounts of energy are used in obtaining the oil. The cost of obtaining oil from shale is well in excess of $100 a barrel.

c) Deepwater Oil

There is oil beneath the ocean floor that was deposited there more than 150 million years ago. Obtaining this oil requires drilling down through two miles of water, then through rock and then through a mile of salt. There are huge environmental dangers involved in extracting this oil. And the oil is expensive - probably costing $60 to $70 dollars a barrel at least.

d) Arctic Oil

Vast areas of ice have melted in the Arctic. This means that the oil underneath can now be obtained by drilling. There are, however, huge difficulties and dangers. Oil from the Arctic is likely to cost well over $100 a barrel.

e) Tight oil

When light crude oil is bound into permaneable shale it can be released by a process known as hydraulic fracturing. The rock is broken up and the oil then flows up the well. (That's the theory anyway). Obtaining tight oil requires a process known as fracking in which millions of gallons of water are mixed with chemicals and injected deep into the ground. There are a number of problems. The process requires vast amounts of water (a scarce commodity in its own right. There is a real risk of contaminating other water supplies. Burning off excess methane can cause serious air pollution. And fracking seems to cause earthquakes. (These problems don't seem to worry the energy hungry hordes who talk with enthusiasm about fracking and who cannot bear the thought of life without regular access to Facebook, Twitter and the X Factor.) The cash cost of oil obtained this way is likely to be well over $50 per barrel.

6

The cost of adhering to absurd EU regulations controlling the production of energy will destroy what remains of our future prosperity. Other EU countries will, of course, ignore regulations which they consider inconvenient or expensive. And countries such as the USA and China (the countries which produce most of the world's pollution) are doing little or nothing to reduce their energy consumption.

7

The fact that the planet is running out of natural resources is exacerbated by the growth in the size of the world's population. (This was widely discussed in the 1960s but, since then, has been generally overlooked.)

Back at the start of the 19th century, the world population was, give or take a village or two, around one billion. Today, the world population, once again give or take a village or two, is seven billion.

The same area of land and sea is now expected to provide natural resources for seven times as many people.

And there's another problem (which I described in detail in my book *Oil Apocalypse*): for the last century or more we have survived the growth in the world's population because we learned how to harness the power of natural resources such as oil. It was oil that enabled us to create fertilisers increasing our food supplies. It was oil that enabled us to harvest and transport our food supplies. It was oil which enabled us to do everything we needed to do.

And now the oil is running out. It's not going to be gone by next Wednesday. But it's running out. The cheap, easy to get at stuff has all been burned up. Now we have to extract the difficult to reach, expensive stuff. And the environmentalists (even though they are in love with their energy-powered computers and mobile telephones) don't want us to get at it.

So we have to feed, clothe and house seven times as many people and we are heading, rapidly, for a world which will, in terms of energy availability, resemble the early 19th century.

Discovering the value of oil as an energy source changed the world. It gave us apparently endless access to relatively cheap power. Running out of oil will change the world again. As I described in *Oil Apocalypse* it will affect every aspect of our lives. Sadly, we have made no plans for the oil running out because our politicians are either in denial or they don't want to think about the problem in private, let alone in public. And yet there are things we could be doing to plan for the future. We should, for example, be reopening our network of canals. Along with bicycles, canals were one of the greatest of man's inventions. They enabled one man with a horse to move vast amounts of material easily and cheaply. No need for coal, oil, nuclear power or hideous solar panels.

8

All around the world, governments run by half-wits are taking every opportunity to increase taxes on oil exploration companies. (Our Government has, of course, already done this with predictably disastrous results). When the profits to be obtained from finding oil are dramatically reduced the incentive to look for oil is also reduced.

9

The cheap oil has gone for ever. Not all barrels of oil are equal. A barrel of oil taken out of the desert in Saudi Arabia is a damned sight cheaper to acquire than a barrel hidden a few miles under the water in the Gulf of Mexico or beneath massive ice floes in the Arctic.

10

In 2012, the EU imposed a ban on oil imports from Iran to please Israel. This was, of course, breathtakingly stupid (unless the EU officials are all individually long on oil shares) since the one thing guaranteed to prevent the EU's economy from recovering is a shortage of oil and a high oil price.

11

The global demand for energy is going to grow as the developing economies grow. In 2009, China overtook the USA and became the world's largest energy consumer.

12

The cost of alternative fuels will only fall if a great deal of money is spent exploring ways to make them cheaper and more effective. But governments no longer have the money to spend on research. And neither have energy companies. Meanwhile, the cost of our disappearing, traditional energy supplies will continue to rise remorselessly.

13

Windmills in Wales are frequently net users of electricity. When there isn't enough wind to turn them round they have to be kept turning using electricity taken from the National Grid. (If they aren't kept turning then they seize up and need expensive maintenance.) Other attempts to replace oil, coal and gas as energy sources have been equally disastrous. And the absurd plan to replace petrol with biofuels has resulted in soaring food prices and the destruction of huge areas of woodland - inevitably causing massive environmental damage.

14

Global warming may turn out to be a real phenomenon (though the scientific evidence is confusing and has been deliberately made more confusing by scientists peddling a particular line) but there is no evidence that global warming is a result of man-made activities and it is unlikely that any evidence will be produced because scientists who are paid to favour the hypothesis now claim that the subject is beyond debate. (This is a common fault among scientists. For example, medical scientists frequently claim that vivisection and vaccination should not be debated because they are `known' to be of value. The reality is that the evidence proves the exact opposite to be true.) I believe that the oft-repeated and fashionable warnings about global warming and climate change were politically motivated and designed to encourage us to use less energy in general and oil in particular. The enthusiastic support for the paper-thin man-made-global-warming argument is merely an excuse for preparing us for a world in which oil is a scarce and increasingly expensive commodity. Politicians are using the global warming argument in the same way that a magician attracts attention to his left hand when he is about to do something with his right hand (or uses an under-dressed assistant to distract attention from himself completely). They want us to worry about the global warming argument because the oil is running out and all (or at least most of) the things they want us to do `to protect the planet' will also help them to deal with the inevitable reduction in the supply of available oil.

The problem for England is that successive Governments have decided that we must accept the unproven theory that the world is getting hotter because of our bad habits and they have decided that we must lead the way in controlling our energy usage. And so, while big users such as China and the USA do little or nothing to curb their polluting habits, England is obeying and gold plating nonsensical and economically damaging rules from the EU. The result is that whatever happens to the planet, England is doomed.

15

As a knee-jerk response to the unfortunate incident in Japan in 2011, Germany decided to dump all its nuclear energy by the year 2022. They closed one nuclear power station immediately and electricity prices immediately rose by 17%. There was much talk of replacing the nuclear power stations with windmills but protestors immediately announced that they would campaign against the proposal. If the Germans go ahead with this plan it will be the end of the German manufacturing miracle. I wonder how the protestors will persuade their computers to work without electricity.

16

Solar energy sounds wonderful. But most of the world just isn't sunny enough and the cost of making and fitting solar panels means that solar power is at least four times more costly than energy produced by fossil fuels. And there are a few snags. It doesn't work at night or for much of the winter. And since environmentalists like to e-mail one another at night and throughout the winter this means that electricity for heating and cooking becomes very expensive. Every country that has tried solar power has given up. Only if you live in the middle of the Sahara do solar panels work.

17

Food is running out and prices are going to soar. There are several reasons for this. But, here's one: the average

age of farmers in England is around 60 and in some parts of the world it is higher. Farming is hard work (there are massively high suicide rates among farmers) and young people simply don't want to do it. In addition, as people in Asia become richer, so they want to enjoy a Western-style diet of hamburgers and hot dogs. And providing all that meat needs a lot of grain. Inevitably, the genetic engineering industry has sold itself as our saviour - and has managed to convince a number of people that it has the answers. Bill Gates (the well-known expert on food and vaccines) seems to believe that genetic engineering, along with vaccines, can save the world. I think he's a fool. The enthusiastic supporters of genetic engineering (most of whom, it has to be said, have been bought by big companies) point out that according to the United Nations and the Food and Agriculture Organisation there are over one billion people in the world today who don't have enough food to eat. Genetic engineering is, they say, the answer. They avoid the fact that there is a much, much simpler and safer answer: persuade more people to become vegetarian. If the world stopped eating meat there would be more than enough food to go round. But the meat industry wouldn't like that.

I've discussed my many objections to genetic engineering in previous books but my biggest objection is the fact that there is no evidence that genetically modified food is safe and plenty of reasons to suspect that it isn't. And, in a world which relies completely on one variety of genetically modified seed, a problem would be a big problem.

Meanwhile it is also worth remembering that food production is being affected by a dramatic reduction in the number of bees and my bet is that in the end it will be clear that genetically engineered and genetically modified crops are the problem. I've been warning about the dangers of genetic engineering for many, many years (and Monsanto has regularly been high up on my list of the world's worst companies) but no one has ever wanted to listen. The word `Luddite' has been widely used. The GM enthusiasts will perhaps listen when the bees have gone and pollination has to be done by hand. (Just what other problems genetic engineering will bring are yet to be seen. The main danger is that by persuading farmers to grow exactly the same crops the big multinational companies will create a problem which will make the Irish potato famine look like a minor menu malfunction.

18

Expensive, scarce resources are being wasted on building tatty new homes (with tiny rooms and walls made of plaster board) while beautiful, well-proportioned Victorian and Edwardian homes with solid walls are being knocked down because they don't satisfy the EU's absurd requirements.

19

As countries which have resources discover environmental concerns, decent wages and sovereign rights so they will insist on taking a closer control of their copper, uranium, rare earths or food growing capacity. They will insist that foreign countries and companies pay far more for the privilege of using those resources. It is worth noting that 60% of all the uncultivated arable land in the world is in the sub Saharan region which has good rainfall and sunshine and a big labour force. The proprietors are more determined than ever to keep their natural resource wealth instead of allowing the Americans to steal it.

20

Forty years ago there were 700 listed plantation owners in London. These companies made up 10% of the FTSE. Today there are hardly any plantation owners left. Food is in the hands of countries and huge international conglomerates. England has been left out of the loop.

21

It isn't just oil that is running out, of course. Just about every basic commodity you can think of is running out. As China and India use up greater and greater quantities of basic commercial ingredients such as copper so shortages appear and prices rise.

But there is one commodity which is running out that very few people take seriously; and yet it is the one commodity that matters more than any other: water.

In March 2012, all intelligence agencies in the USA got together to produce a semi-secret report warning about what they defined as the big future threat to America: water shortage.

They argued that the reducing availability of useable water, and the problem of pollution in drinking water, will lead to the collapse of governments and a rise in the number of extremist groups. The big, big problem for tomorrow is water shortage. And there is a massive need for more money to be spent on water infrastructure programmes.

There is, of course, plenty of water on the planet. Two thirds of the earth is covered in the stuff. But less than 1% of the water available is accessible, fresh and useable.

And there are several reasons why the world is facing a water shortage crisis and why England is facing a bigger problem than almost anywhere else.

First, the world's population is constantly growing and constantly pushing up the demand for water. In the year 2000 there were six billion of us sharing the planet. Today, just a decade or so later, there are seven billion. There is only so much useable water on the planet and the demand for that water is growing dramatically. Suddenly, millions of people who didn't use flush toilets or baths because they didn't have them now have them and use them regularly. The result is that around the world lakes and reservoirs are running low and rivers are running dry. Some nations are already towing icebergs half way across the world in order to obtain fresh water. (Much, but not all, of the ice will melt before it reaches its destination but there will be enough ice remaining to make the exercise worthwhile commercially.) Others (particularly rich Arab countries) are experimenting with desalination plants. These are expensive and use up a lot of energy but as the water shortage grows, and the price of water rises, so it will become an increasingly viable solution. The problem, of course, is that the oil (and therefore the energy) is also running out.

Second, as the population has grown so the amount of water needed for farming has increased. And as the number of people eating meat has increased so the need for water has increased still faster. A diet that is 20% meat uses twice as much water as a purely vegetarian diet. Agriculture already uses over two thirds of our fresh water. And farms need more and more water to grow the crops their cattle need. (And, of course, to give the cattle to drink directly.)

Third, industry uses up vast quantities of water. It takes around 20 gallons of water to make a pound of plastic. Making electricity uses up vast amounts of water - even if only as a coolant. Amazingly, around half of all the water used each day is spent cooling power plants.

Fourth, much of the world's drinking water is now polluted. In China around 90% of the freshwater has been contaminated by industry. Even in America, where there are strict rules about contaminating rivers and lakes, around 40% of all the water is dangerously polluted. And, of course, polluted water is of no use for drinking, growing plants or feeding to animals. You can't even use the damned stuff for industrial purposes. In England too, much of our drinking water is polluted. And the number of pollutants is rising rapidly. Decades ago I warned that our drinking water is polluted with prescription drug residues (which pass into the drinking water supplies when waste water from sewage farms is recycled but not properly filtered). This problem is getting worse.

Fifth, many of England's water companies are owned by foreigners whose primary concern is profits and who don't really give a damn about whether or not our drinking water is fresh or is reliably supplied. It is, sadly, perfectly possible to make huge profits without providing a good service. (If you have difficulty accepting this notion just think of English airports which provide an appalling service, are largely foreign owned and make plenty of money.)

Sixth, planners in England just don't understand how serious the water shortage already is and have no idea how really serious it is about to become. It makes sense to build new reservoirs to capture and store rain. But when Thames Water applied for permission to spend £1 billion building a new reservoir the company was turned down. In Singapore they are planning to build underground reservoirs (like the huge one in Istanbul) but in England the planners won't even allow empty land to be used for water collecting.

Seventh, more and more people live in cities and towns. In England the water supplies (like the sewage facilities) were largely built by the Victorians. As the number of people moving to towns and cities grows so the demand for a better infrastructure will rise. Private companies aren't prepared to spend the money and so eventually the Government is going to have to do something - or stand by as millions of people die of thirst or infections caused by polluted water. The cost to taxpayers will be vast as money which could be spent on growing the economy will have to be spent on standing still.

Eighth, our problems in England are exacerbated by the fact that our water supplies are managed by a number of different companies which don't work together very well. This means that there can be a shortage of water in one part of the country and a glut just a few miles away.

And finally, much of the water we have is wasted. Around 30% of our fresh water is used for flushing lavatories (surely it cannot be beyond the wit of the water companies to find a way to recycle used shower and bath water for flushing purposes). In England around 25% of the water sent out by the water companies never reaches its destination. It is lost through leaky pipes. In America the nation's water systems were recently awarded a D- by the American Society of Civil Engineers. As their economy crumbles the Americans need to spend trillions on upgrading their water supplies.

22

In May 2012, the International Monetary Fund warned that within ten years the price of oil would have doubled. They explained that the world's oil was running out and that demand was rising. This warning was, I repeat, issued in May 2012. I first made exactly the same points in my book *Living in a Fascist Country*, which was published in 2006, just six years earlier. My book *Oil Apocalypse* was dismissed as scaremongering by those who bothered to read it. Proof, yet again, that those who claim to lead us are in truth wallowing in ignorance and bewilderment.

23

We're coming to the end of an oil coloured age but there are a number of silver linings to the coming oil shortage. There will be less aeroplane travel, and so the risk of bacteria and viruses spreading around the world will be reduced. We will have to walk or cycle more, and so we will be healthier.

Conclusion

It is an unarguable truth that all commodities are becoming scarcer. We face a mass of commodity shortages and our supplies of natural energy are running out. The chances of there being an interruption to world oil supplies in each twelve month period are better than good - there is always likely to be a crisis somewhere. Supplies of drinking water and food are both scarce. No one is doing anything to deal with these problems. The cost of extracting commodities is rising for three main reasons. First, many essentials are running out. The supplies that are left are increasingly difficult to reach and extract. Second, the energy costs involved in running mines, ships and tractors are rising rapidly. Third, governments everywhere are insisting on sharing in the profits made by commodity companies. This puts up the cost of extracting materials and means that only the most profitable mines will still be worked. The overall result will be shortages, outages and constant, steep price rises. None of these will have an advantageous effect on our economy. And it's all going to get worse. Much worse.

CHAPTER 12: TAX, TAX AND MORE TAXES

Introduction

Thanks to decades of tinkering and micromanaging, contradictory complications and retrospective legislation, England's tax system is now a great brake on the economy. It is the tax system (allied to an utterly absurd benefits system) which encourages the rich to emigrate or retire early and the would-be lower paid to stay at home and watch television.

1

Governments waste money because the people in charge of the purse strings aren't spending real money. They're spending monopoly money and they really don't care about it. Over a quarter of a century ago I exposed the fact that the NHS was spending more on such items as toilet rolls, washing powder and envelopes than I would pay if I bought them at a local supermarket. (I was writing a column for the *Daily Star* newspaper and an NHS employee had sent me a print-out listing all the prices paid by the NHS for standard items). After my exposé, NHS bosses launched an enquiry but, inevitably, the enquiry was not to look at their purchasing processes but to find out how I had obtained my information. I was not at all surprised when, in May 2012, newspapers reported that a survey had shown that the NHS still spent considerably more on staple items of stationery than you or I would pay if we bought the same items at a local retail store.

What is true of the NHS is true of all government departments. They all waste billions of pounds of taxpayers' money.

And nothing will ever change.

For one simple reason.

The money being wasted isn't their money.

2

A number of basic questions are never asked by those who collect and spend our money. It may well be that there are sensible answers to these questions. But that is not the point. The point is that the questions should be asked and debated and the voters given a chance to make their views known.

Here are just a few of the questions which are never asked because our `leaders' assume that they already know all the answers.

Why should the State provide people with free education? (The Nation doesn't provide people with free food which is patently more important). Why do we give foreign aid to countries such as India which don't want it and don't need it? Why do we run a National Health Service which is more expensive and less efficient than a private system would be?

Why should people pay more tax when they earn more money - and yet receive the same benefits as everyone else? Why is there no tax on lottery winnings? Why should people pay tax on the income from money they have earned, paid tax on, and saved? Why should people be punished by inflation for holding onto shares for a long time and then allowed nothing for the inflation part of their profit? Why should people work, earn and save and their estate then pay tax on what they leave when they die?

There may well be sensible and honourable answers to these questions. Or they may just be things we accept because its the way things are done.

3

I doubt if any organisation in England makes anywhere near as many mistakes as Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC). For incompetence the taxmen are in a league of their own. HMRC has admitted that they aim for a 75% accuracy rate when calculating bills. Their excuse for this pathetic target is that tax is a very complicated subject these days. Indeed, tax is now so complicated that the advice given by HMRC employees is often inaccurate or misleading and HMRC's technical advisers are often unable to answer simple queries. One in six tax bills is wrong. (A level of extraordinary incompetence that would result in an employee being fired from any normal institution.) Apparently none of this matters a damn. The Court of Appeal has confirmed that HMRC is not liable for administrative errors and does not owe a duty of care to process tax forms with reasonable expedition

4

If I have to pay the VAT man it takes three days for the money to get to them. If they have to pay me I have to allow 30 days for the money to reach me.

5

Tax collectors have always been loathed and despised, not just because they do an unpopular job but because they are, like traffic wardens, intrinsically unpleasant people. It is a self-selection process. No one with a beating heart wants to be a taxman or a traffic warden. And here's an idle thought: are HMRC employees born with an air of condescending authority and a delight in lightly restrained bureaucratic violence (HMRC Motto: `We can screw up your life and it will be a pleasure') or is it something they acquire at a special indoctrination course?

6

`The baseness of the English land-owners surpasses that of any other men that ever lived in the world. The cowards know well that labourers that give value to their land are skin and bone. They are not such brutes as not to know that this starvation is produced by taxation.' - William Cobbett, in Rural Rides

7

The Government gives charities nearly £13 billion a year of taxpayers' money. Shouldn't it be up to us to decide which charities to support? Charities which rely on Government grants are just quangos by another name. I am similarly annoyed by company bosses who give vast amounts of money which isn't theirs to charities and political parties. The bosses then receive honours and awards while the shareholders (whose money it was) are merely impoverished.

8

`The only difference between a tax man and a taxidermist is that the taxidermist leaves the skin.' - Mark Twain

9

A growing number of previously honourable people now feel that they have a moral responsibility to pay as little tax as possible - not because most of the money is wasted (although that is a small reason in itself) but because so much of it is spent on bad things (such as waging illegal wars and supporting Hitler's Bastard Love Child). Politicians claim they have a right to spend an increasing proportion of our money for us because, they say, they know better than we do how it should be spent. This is now a provable nonsense. Very few taxpayers are content with the way that their Government now uses their money to support private banking companies and to ensure that overpaid bankers continue to receive their undeserved multi-million pound salaries and their equally undeserved multi-million pound bonuses.

10

`Every man is entitled, if he can, to order his affairs so that the tax attaching under the appropriate Act is less than it would otherwise be.' - Lord Tomlin

11

We desperately need to simplify taxes and cut red tape but neither of these things will ever be done because the people who would have to make the necessary decisions are the people who complicate taxes and generate red tape. And they know that the more complicated things are, and the more red tape there is, the bigger their departments will become. And bigger departments mean greater security, more chances of promotion and bigger bonuses.

12

Why do so many people let HMRC employees get away with being so damned rude? People who work for HMRC are civil servants. We pay them. We are entitled to expect that HMRC employees behave politely and with respect. If they don't then we are entitled to complain about them and to use such pleasantries as the Human Rights Act to help us defend ourselves. (Always remember: the taxman has a job and can be fired.) After many years of experience with HMRC I am convinced that honest folk who kneel before them, and grovel before their arrogance, are far more likely to end up broken and weeping than people who stand up for themselves, refuse to be bullied and demand to be treated with respect.

13

Every time I have to visit the HMRC website to complete my VAT return, or an employer's return, I am reminded that the official tax and customs website is the worst designed piece of rubbish on the planet. It is now compulsory to fill in these forms online and it always takes me far longer to make my way through the HMRC's badly designed website than it ever took to fill in paper forms. (The Government's enthusiasm for forcing people to fill in forms online has been followed by most utilities and other large companies. Since it is difficult for non-governmental organisations to `force' customers to conduct their business online these companies usually charge those who *don't* go online a substantial penalty for preferring old-fashioned paperwork. Web based accounting is always promoted as advantageous for the customer when it is, of course, always the company concerned with benefits.) The HMRC website appears to have been written by Kafka with a little help from the Marx Brothers. I have seen deliberately complicated computer games which are easier to work my way through than the HMRC website. I do as little online as I have to and I have refused to give them an e-mail address. (I also refuse to give them a telephone number so if they want to get in touch with me they have to send me a letter. And, naturally, they don't have my home address.)

14

The Government is planning to make tax avoidance illegal. I wonder when the half wits at The Treasury will realise that this will mean that it will be illegal to invest in National Savings schemes (such as Premium Bonds) which offer tax free prizes. It will be illegal to buy gifts (because they are exempt from capital gains tax). Those politicians who publicly excoriate members of the public who sensibly take advantage of perfectly legal tax avoidance schemes (while themselves fiddling their expenses) should perhaps understand that citizens would pay their taxes with far more enthusiasm if the money collected were spent usefully, instead of being wasted on illegal wars and supporting Hitler's Bastard Love Child.

15

Everywhere you look there are hidden taxes. For example, whenever more roadworks are planned the first thing that will happen will be the installation of speed cameras. These will go up (and become operational) weeks or even months before any work actually starts. And the cameras will remain in position long after the last workman has screwed the top back on his thermos and folded up his copy of *The Sun*. No one in Government understands, or gives a damn, that these unnecessary speed restrictions mean that billions of pounds are lost to the economy as people struggling to do business waste hours on journeys that become ever longer and more tedious.

Every Government department has become adept at gouging extra money out of the voters. The Royal Mail, possibly the worst run organisation on the planet (and the most incompetently run in the history of the world) offers many examples of this brand of aggravated meanness. For example, a reader sent me a letter in an old envelope which he had carefully sealed with sticky tape. Unfortunately, the sticky tape had extended the length of the envelope by approximately a millimetre. When I collected my mail I had to pay a fine and an additional fee because the letter did not conform to standard sizes.

16

In May 2012, HMRC introduced a new online tax gizmo designed to enable taxpayers to find out how and where their taxes had been spent. The new tool crashed on the first day.

17

Some of the taxes introduced recently have been so unfair (and so little understood by the people introducing them) that they make me want to weep. When, in the spring of 2012, it was announced that the Government was putting a 20% VAT tax on the sale price of static caravans, increasing the average price of £35,000 by a massive £7,000, the idiotic Cameron explained that it was unfair for there to be a tax on mobile caravans but no tax on static caravans. How stupid can you get and still be able to put on your own socks in the morning? The people who buy static caravans tend to buy them so that they will have somewhere to live. They cannot afford to buy their own home because politicians have deliberately pushed up the price of houses to stratospheric levels. And so they want to buy a static caravan. The people who buy mobile caravans want to tow them behind their Range Rover or their Volvo estate car so that they can spend weekends causing traffic jams in the lanes of Cornwall, Devon and Wales. It's not as if this was a big money maker for the Government. It certainly wouldn't go anywhere near covering the cost of the tax cut for bankers (reducing the top rate of tax from 50% to 45%). The Chancellor could, I suspect, have made far more money for the economy by cancelling Fred Goodwin's obscene pension.

18

Looking for examples of taxes that are unfair? Try this one: the cost of driving is not related to the time travelled on the roads. If you have a car and use it every other Sunday for a three mile drive to your granny's you will (assuming that you own the same sort of car) pay the same annual car tax as the road warrior who travels 100,000 miles a year racing up and down the motorways on business. And what about foreign haulage drivers, the ones who block our roads and knock the corners off our ancient buildings so that they can bring cheap imports into the country? They don't pay a penny for the privilege of using our roads. We let them wreck our roads and our economy entirely without charge. Barking.

19

More annoying than almost anything else they do is the fact that HMRC makes sweetheart deals with large companies (so that they don't have to pay too much tax) although they will, of course, go after private individuals with abrasive enthusiasm bordering on vindictiveness. The taxman let evil American company Goldman Sachs off some of its taxes (after a multi million pound `mistake') as a result of some very cosy chats over rather expensive meals. The latest annual accounts for Goldman Sachs show that the world's most evil company paid just £4.1 million in corporation tax despite making profits of £1.9 billion. `These are people who are at the heart of the problem in the financial world, who've paid extraordinary bonuses to their partners and aren't prepared to pay a fair amount of tax,' said a member of the Commons Treasury select committee. `It's pure unadulterated greed.' Naturally, no one did anything about this outrage. Goldman Sachs can, it seems, do anything it likes. It was revealed that Goldman Sachs hadn't even been charged interest by HMRC when settling a tax dispute. The company was, according to the chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, `let off'. Next time I receive a nasty letter from HMRC I intend to reply demanding that I be given the same treatment as Goldman Sachs.

When an HMRC boss, `Call me Dave' Hartnett, was questioned by a Commons committee, he played around with words in a way that would be considered reprehensible if done by a taxpayer being investigated by HMRC. It seemed to me that he was covering up huge multi million losses and shaky deals with his dining chums at Goldman Sachs. After it was announced that Hartnett (who allegedly had 107 free lunches and dinners with big company staffers) would retire early on a huge pension I wrote to my local tax office asking if the taxman would let me off what I owed if I took him out for egg and chips and a mug of tea.

20

You can still see the evidence of the windows which were bricked up when the window tax was introduced in the late 17th century. (Property owners had to pay double the regular tax if they had more than 10 windows and quadruple the regular tax if they had more than 20 windows). Will the window tax come back? Well, in a way it is with the various types of mansion tax now being proposed by the Coalition. Those advocating these taxes should take note of the bricked up windows. People will always find ways round silly taxes and doubtless mansion owners will simply knock down a wing or two or find some other way to devalue their properties. (The owners of empty factories and warehouses who have found themselves forced to pay council taxes have avoided this absurdity by having their buildings demolished.)

21

There are plans to charge houseowners a new tax called `net imputed rental income' on their homes. The tax (another piece of legislation from the EU) will be equivalent to the rent you would get if you were not living in your house but renting it out to other people. Taxes such as these are designed to help the Government pay its debts by gouging money out of middle class families.

22

Inheritance tax is exquisitely absurd. If you inherit a house you have to pay tax on the proceeds before you are allowed to sell the house.

23

Here's a quick way to end terrorism: put a tax on bombs and bombers. Put a small tax on small bombs and a big tax on big bombs and make all bombs subject to VAT. The red tape would bring terrorism to a grinding halt.

24

HMRC employees never say `thank you' at the end of an investigation, even when they've found that the person under investigation is entirely innocent, and that they have been wasting his time. Instead they invariably lose poorly by sending a bad tempered letter saying `we can reopen this whenever we like'. My experience (after two lengthy investigations) is that HMRC employees are far more ignorant than anyone would believe, far more stupid than any living creature deserves to be, and ruder and more vengeful than the nastiest, meanest psychopathic hoodie.

25

Even Einstein found doing his income tax impossibly complicated. And he didn't have to try dealing with HMRCs 21st century nonsenses.

26

Don't tell friends or relatives anything about your tax affairs. One HMRC trick is to offer someone under investigation a lighter ride if they dob in someone they know.

27

If there is a post strike (caused by one government department) and tax returns are late then the taxman (another government department) fines people.

28

Most taxpayers have little or no idea how their money is spent. But from 2013 the taxman will send us all statements showing how much money has gone where. Lots of people are going to get a shock. A taxpayer whose earnings are £60,000 a year will pay a total of £18,401.24 in tax. Of this £6,127 goes towards paying out benefits, £3,201.82 goes on health care (private health insurance would be about a third of the cost), £368 goes on housing and local services (council tax has to be added to this, of course), £1,060 goes on defence, £920 goes on recreation, culture and religion, £400 is spent on administration and £1,177 is spent on paying the interest on the national debt (so you can see what Gordon Brown and the banks are costing us). This isn't the end of the story of course. Most of the Government's income comes from VAT and in addition there are business rates, council taxes, corporation taxes (which affect all shareholders and pensioners), excise duties and all the rest.

29

High-grade taxmen who make huge mistakes aren't usually fired. They are allowed to resign and to take with them their multi-million pound pensions and their contacts book.

30

If the taxman owes you money you will probably have to wait a long time to receive it. You are unlikely to receive much or any interest. If you owe the taxman money you will have to pay interest and huge penalties if you don't pay it immediately. And you may go to prison.

31

I invariably receive an HMRC demand on Christmas Eve. I am convinced they do this out of sheer nastiness. I now avoid this unpleasantness by not collecting any mail for a week before Christmas and a week after the New Year holiday.

32

The tax rules are designed to discourage marriage. For example, two unmarried people can have two residences, both of which are exempt from capital gains tax, but a married couple can only have one such residence. This illogical and unreasonable tax on marriage can be worth hundreds of thousands of pounds to unmarried couples.

33

High inflation rates, combined with capital gains taxes, mean that there is a huge incentive for investors to take big risks when selecting investments.

34

`It's not personal,' said an HMRC inspector when I chided him for his department's behaviour. Of course, it's bloody personal. It's always bloody personal.

35

If the Government introduced a simple consumption tax they could get rid of all other forms of taxation. To make things fair there could be two or three different rates (one low rate for bread and bicycles and another high rate for yachts and caviar). Taxing through consumption works and is very simple to operate. It makes dishonesty pretty well impossible. And it gets rid of the need for millions of inspectors and accountants. There would be no need for financial records and form filling in. What's the problem? It would, of course, be too straightforward and too simple and would require the turkeys to vote for Christmas. So meanwhile tax continues to become ever more complex. *Tolley's Tax Handbook* is now 17,795 pages long. During Gordon Brown's disastrous reign as Chancellor of the Exchequer, the book nearly tripled in size.

36

Politicians have a loose attitude to tax avoidance. Ken Livingstone, the left wing former Mayor of London, has criticised personal tax avoidance through company structures. But, Livingstone set up a personal company (he and his wife are shareholders) and in one recent year Livingstone (who has said that tax avoiders should not be allowed to vote) avoided paying £50,000 in tax by having his writing and speaking fees paid into a company.

37

HMRC now wants to change the self-employment tax system. The new, proposed, system gives taxpayers online access to their own tax records. New tax returns will be completed by HMRC with data collected from all the sources it can find. The taxpayer will then be expected to sign or correct the return. HMRC can do this because it now has access to masses of information from banks, businesses, public companies. Big brother. HMRC wants to introduce this new system for several reasons. First, HMRC will reduce its costs because it will be the taxpayers responsibility to check all the data submitted. (HMRC will be saved the responsibility of doing the checking). Second, many taxpayers will sign and pay and won't spot the errors. Third, the whole damned scheme will be run on the Internet. Fourth, it will be the taxpayers responsibility to argue about any of the figures of which they disapprove. (Trying to get banks and public companies to correct information will be the responsibility of the taxpayer). And finally, taxpayers will be forced to complete their forms on the Internet and so HMRC will save money on printing forms and sending them out. Anyone who doesn't have access to the Internet will be stuffed. I object to this proposal on many grounds. But my main one is that since HMRC's idea of confidentiality is not the same as mine I believe that this scheme will result in a complete end to financial privacy.

38

If we must have an income tax, a flat rate tax of 10% on everything earned would be better than the present system. It would remove all the paperwork and zillion pointless jobs and many regulators. It would ensure that everyone paid the same rate of tax and it would be fair. There would be no deductions. The tax would be paid on overall income. Many countries have already introduced a flat tax of 10% and it has proved simple, effective and inescapable. The 10% is charged on absolutely every penny earned by individuals or companies. Such a simple method of taxation (which would bring in just as much Government income as our absurdly overcomplicated system) would be unwelcome only with HMRC employees and accountants.

39

The politicians and the Hectors at HMRC want a law saying that `anyone who does anything to save tax will be taxed as if he hadn't taken this action'. That's really well thought out. Anyone who gives up smoking will, presumably, still have to pay the tax on the cigarettes he no longer smokes. Anyone can no longer afford to drive a car will still have to pay the tax on the petrol he can no longer afford to buy.

40

Retrospective tax clampdowns are now common. When the laws change retrospectively something which is proper and legal becomes improper and illegal. Honest, decent folk can find, overnight, that they have become criminals. Retrospective tax legislation makes it impossible for anyone to make plans. All retrospective legislation is grossly unfair. And yet governments everywhere are becoming increasing enthusiastic about introducing retrospective legislation.

41

HMRC staff can claim hundreds of pounds in generous expenses without producing any receipts. Hard-working businessmen who want to claim for expenses incurred in their work must always produce receipts.

42

Tax inspectors are now offered bonuses of up to £2,000 (3% of their salary) if they succeed in forcing taxpayers to give more money to the Government. The money paid by the taxpayers doesn't actually have to be owed, of course. The tax inspector must merely bully the taxpayer into believing that it is owed.

Giving tax inspectors bonuses creates a conflict of interest by encouraging inspectors to pursue questionable investigations in order to boost tax receipts and give themselves a bonus.

43

HMRC employees are like attack dogs. Anyone who lets them know that they are sensitive or delicate will be attacked twice as hard. HMRC employees, like dogs, can smell weakness and fear. In the same way that policemen prefer to harass middle class motorists rather than real thugs (there is less chance of being hit on the head or knifed in the stomach) and journalists prefer to harass small businessmen rather than huge conglomerates (there is less chance of advertising being withdrawn, or writs being delivered) so HMRC prefers to target the mild, the honest and the easily bullied.

44

HMRC recently paid £100,000 to a convicted thief for the information he had stolen about bank customers (there was no evidence that the customers had done anything wrong, HMRC just wanted the information). If you or I paid money for stolen information we would doubtless be arrested, charged and imprisoned. HMRC employees are clearly operating outside the law.

45

Taxpayers will soon be forced to file all their returns electronically because the Internet makes life much easier and more cost effective for HMRC. (Naturally, HMRC will claim that they are doing it for our convenience). Online filing enables HMRC to compare taxpayers in similar lines of work. HMRC assumes that all plumbers, café owners, dentists or stand-up comedians have exactly the same expenses, exactly the same earnings and exactly the same level of profits.

46

A few years ago the Inland Revenue sold properties to a private company based in the tax haven of Bermuda and owned by George Soros. Mr Soros did not live in England and was not, therefore, liable to pay any capital gains tax on the properties. The contract to sell HMRC's entire 600 property portfolio was signed despite a Treasury crackdown on tax dodges using offshore islands. HMRC deliberately conspired to lose the nation millions in lost tax revenues. No one was fired or punished.

47

Overbearing, interventionist State employees want to control, regulate and tax every human activity in order to protect and extend their budgetary turf. The more regulations you introduce the more fees and fines you can collect and so your department gets bigger. A bigger department means a higher salary and more perks. The civil servants never understand that the rules and regulations they are introducing are destroying the goose that lays the golden eggs.

48

All the evidence shows clearly that reducing the tax rate will, quite quickly, result in an increase in economic growth. When tax rates are high people make a real effort to reduce their burden; they reduce their earnings by taking more time off, they enter into complicated tax planning plans, they use National Savings schemes or they simply pack their bags and move abroad. When, in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis, most countries started printing money and increasing taxes (in order to avoid having to make cuts in public spending) the Swedish Government reacted differently. Taxes were cut for everyone and welfare spending was cut to pay for the tax cuts. The result was a dramatic increase in economic growth. Everyone got richer. Once again a Government had proved that cutting taxes is the only logical, sensible way out of debt and economic disaster.

Sadly, none of this is going to happen in England because there are too many people who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

49

How curious that the people promoting the Inland Revenue should invent a little character called Hector as a mascot. To `hector' someone is, of course, to talk to them in a bullying way.

50

I don't trust financial advisers. On two occasions I have been subjected to a lengthy investigation by HMRC. Both times I was, I suspect, dobbed in by people who were working for me. These days the primary loyalty of accountants, and other financial advisors, is to the Government. Accountants, like solicitors, are required by law to make secret reports to the Government - and are not allowed to tell their clients that they are doing this.

51

It annoys me enormously to hear politicians describe the interest I receive on my savings (or the dividends on investments) as `unearned income'. The money I save and invest is just as `earned' as the money I save and spend. For politicians to decide that they are entitled to take bigger chunks of it by describing it as `unearned' is offensive.

52

When politicians introduced plans to put a cap on bonuses paid to bankers, and related the cap to the bankers' salaries, the banks immediately got around this by increasing basic salaries. Neither the politicians nor their advisors had thought of this. The quality of financial advice available through HMRC and The Treasury is appalling.

53

It is not widely understood (especially by politicians and civil servants who, together, have little or no experience of poverty or industry) that higher taxes on companies actually hurt the poorest people. The higher taxes don't affect the salaries, bonuses or perks of bosses (which remain the same) but affect lower paid employees in several ways. First, the number of jobs will be cut. Second, wages will be reduced (or productivity increased). Generally speaking, it will be lower paid employees who will suffer most when corporate taxes go up. A study of European countries found that £1 of additional corporate tax reduced wages by 92p. Trade unions might do well to remember this next time they campaign for higher company taxes. Third, prices will be increased. Fourth, dividends will be cut with the result that pensioners will suffer.

54

It sometimes seems that half the nation's energy is spent avoiding tax and a half of what is left is spent filling in forms and discussing tax problems. This is particularly bad for small businesses which need to be concentrating their energies on trying to make a profit.

55

The Government will attack the middle classes because the poor have no money and the rich will simply leave the country if they are threatened (and, moreover, they will stop acting as benefactors to the political parties).

56

The Government realises that income is already taxed to the hilt (to pay for all those scroungers and unnecessary public sector workers) and so, with the official encouragement of the EU, they will now turn to taxing wealth. If by this they meant taxing billionaires (no one makes a billion by entirely honest means) there would be few complaints. But billionaires (and bankers) have clout and power and anyway there aren't really enough of them to make much of a difference so politicians will instead tax the thrifty and the prudent; they will take from those who have saved, not bought the flashy car or taken the endless foreign holidays; they will target those who have put a few pounds away into the building society or a pension plan. Those are the people who will be targeted with the new wealth taxes.

57

Billions of pounds worth of labour is wasted on filling in tax forms. In America it has been estimated that filling in tax forms wastes the equivalent of three million full-time jobs a year. Our tax forms are worse.

58

The Coalition (seemingly quite unable to grasp how business works and determined to put entrepreneurs at a disadvantage when compared with big companies) is planning to limit the tax relief for losses incurred either on trading activities or in unsuccessful investments in unquoted companies. The result will be that entrepreneurs will no longer be willing to take risks. The man who owns one shop will stick with the one shop instead of trying to build up a business. The businessman tempted to invest in a small company will realise that if the company is successful he will have to pay tax but that if the company fails he won't be able to claim tax relief on the loss. Just how that will help the country grow its way out of its debts is something HMRC and the Chancellor haven't been prepared to share. The problem, of course, is that these rules (and many similar ones) are devised by politicians and civil servants who have never, ever had to meet a payroll or run a business. Such laws are ultimately short-term. They may increase the tax take for a while but in the long-term they will damage entrepreneurial activity and destroy the nation's growth and productivity. Many businessmen will give up plans to expand, or decide to retire early, because of these laws.

59

The Government is planning to introduce a tax on house values. This will mean that people in retirement who have spent their lives building up equity in their home and who suddenly find themselves asset rich and income poor will suddenly find themselves in a sticky position. Their home will have been bought with taxed income. Now, with little income, they will find themselves faced with a tax on the home their taxed income bought. Many will be unable to pay the new tax and will be forced to sell their homes. This is, undoubtedly, the sort of tax that would have gone down well with the communist aristocracy in the USSR. It will undoubtedly suit very nicely the union leader on £140,000 a year who lives in a council owned property and who is guaranteed lifetime occupation.

60

The EU harmonisation of tax is coming but until then more complexities and unfairnesses are inevitable as EU legislation is layered upon English law.

61

Increasingly, these days, HMRC is insisting that taxpayers must prove that they have not done something. So, for example, taxpayers who have foreign property must prove that they have not let it out to anyone else. And just how do you do that? It is, of course, impossible.

62

HMRC has recently announced that it is not bound by its own published guidance. (So, why waste money publishing any guidance?)

63

Every year tax legislation is made more confusing, more complex and more absurd. `Yes it seems unclear...I think it means...' said one HMRC employee whom I had telephoned to ask for advice. `We're not always perfect,' protested another when I pointed out that he had just contradicted himself. Still, I suppose I was lucky, or persistent. Over a quarter of all the people who ring the tax helpline never have their call answered. HMRC, aware of this, says that they are aiming to answer 90% of calls by 2014/15. That's good of them.

64

HMRC claims that its website is there `to save you time and paperwork'. Is it hell. Using the website is compulsory for all employers and small businesses. And the site is surely the worst organised on the Web. It takes HMRC six days to send an automatic response e-mail. And the site actually warns users to beware of security problems.

65

HMRC inspectors can change their minds, act retrospectively and ignore inconvenient evidence. They can and do ignore correspondence, behave with no respect for common sense or the spirit of the law, bully and bend the rules in order to boost their own bonuses. They do all this with arrogance and a clear belief that everyone they meet is a criminal to be despised and treated like dirt.

66

Fees and fines have become an essential part of national and local government income. They are new taxes, not punishments or payments for services rendered. No fee is ever withdrawn or reduced.

67

Our tax system encourages companies to borrow money and take risks. Interest on loans is a tax deductible expense for banks and other companies and so loans are subsidised by taxpayers.

68

When a government puts taxes up too high the system doesn't work properly. An economist called Arther Laffer pointed out that at 0% rate of tax you raise no money and that at 100% you also raise no money because no one works. Somewhere in the middle is a point where taxes and earnings are in balance.

69

A group of senior tax consultants recently criticised HMRC for introducing secondary legislation (e.g. in press releases put out after the budget) which had not been scrutinised by Parliament; for constantly requesting new powers, without showing why they were necessary; and for making errors and failing to answer mail (or treat taxpayers, their employers, with any respect at all). HMRC was also criticised for pushing for retrospective legislation and for interpreting the law in a selective and erratic way with the result that many `grey' areas are produced.

70

Every chancellor promises to make tax rules simpler and every one makes them more complex. George Osbourne actually had the nerve to claim his granny tax (punishing pensioners for being alive) was merely a simplification. And as if in compensation he then made child benefit unbelievably complex. Do they do this through mischief and a sense of fun? Or a toxic mixture of arrogance and stupidity? I leave you to answer that yourself. If you told me that our tax system had been devised by lunatics I would believe you.

71

HMRC receives around 200,000 tip offs a year - many vindictive or trouble making. All result in investigations.

72

HMRC has asked for power to take money from bank accounts, or to freeze assets such as houses without any legal proceedings. If they are given these rights the taxman will become investigator, prosecutor, judge, jury and executioner. And just think of those bonuses. (How fair do you think judges would be if they received a bonus every time they sentenced someone - and if their bonuses depended upon the length of the sentence?)

73

HMRC can now intercept letters and bug phone calls and e-mails and can visit homes and premises to inspect whatever they want to inspect.

74

A survey of HMRC staff found that 30% of all employees had no idea that HMRCs role was `to administer England's tax and custom systems'. Just what they thought they were hired to do was never released (or, probably, ever discovered).

75

Two thirds of businessmen and women say that they find dealing with HMRC more burdensome than five years ago. Not surprisingly, 88% say that simplifying the tax system would improve things. Half say that HMRC staff have inadequate commercial knowledge and two thirds are so confused that they no longer know what is legitimate tax planning and what might result in their being charged with tax evasion.

76

In 2011, a former tax inspector, giving evidence to an employment tribunal, claimed that tax inspectors exaggerated business tax bills in order to increase their own bonuses.

77

HMRC has, like the NHS, been especially criticised for its dealings with older people. It is always the elderly who get screwed by public sector workers because they are an easy target.

78

If tax levels had been kept at 1960 levels (30% of GDP instead of half) England would now be twice as rich.

79

The second most stupid thing people say is: `If you are being investigated by HMRC you must have done something wrong'. (The first most stupid thing folk say is: `If you don't have anything to hide you don't need to worry about privacy'.) The fact is that tax investigations can be triggered by ex-employees, neighbours, ex-spouses or anyone with half a grudge. They can also be started at random.

It used to be said that ignorance was no defence. These days innocence is not much of a defence either.

80

As governments everywhere struggle to balance their books they will introduce yet more taxes. Windfall taxes, designed to take advantage of companies or groups of companies which have defied austerity and managed to continue to make profits, will become increasingly popular. These new taxes will make life almost impossible for investors and pensioners.

Conclusion

Our tax system has become so complex and intrusive that it has become counterproductive; it is cumbersome, unfair, expensive and unwieldy. Much of it exists not to collect money but as a sort of organised vengeance. Taxes are devised which actually cost money to collect and, increasingly, HMRC is seen as an organisation of thugs hired to demand money with menaces. In the future, anyone with any money will be targeted by the tax collectors.

CHAPTER 13: PUBLIC SECTOR WORKERS: GREEDY AND OUT OF TOUCH WITH REALITY

Introduction

Few things have ever better illustrated the divide between private and public sector workers than the sight of striking Government employees demanding that their absurdly generous and unaffordable pensions remain untouched.

England has become two nations, divided not by race, sex or age but by employment. On the one hand there are those who work for themselves or for private employers. They tend to work long, hard hours, they have little job security and many know that in their retirement years they will probably struggle to make ends meet. On the other hand there are those who are public sector workers. They tend to work short hours, their work is invariably undemanding (the ideal Government department does something for which there is absolutely no demand), they have tremendous job security and they can look forward to early retirement and a generous, inflation-proofed pension paid for largely by taxpayers. These employees are, like bank executives, greedy and selfish. And they will fight tooth and nail to preserve their undeserved standard and style of living.

We have acquired as overladen a public sector as France. (My Princess and I once travelled on an SNCF train in France which had 11 ticket collectors. They walked up and down the train in a bunch and examined the tickets one at a time, each checking on the other's work. Our tickets looked exhausted when the inspectors had finished with them. I would not have believed that so many people could have taken so much apparently genuine interest in such small pieces of paper. England has followed France. In recent years public sector employment as a percentage of total employment has risen dramatically. In Wales, for example, a third of all employment is public sector work. To keep the Welsh employment figures looking close to respectable, all vehicle, driving licence, pension and tax records now seem to be mismanaged in Wales. Swansea and Cardiff have become public sector ghettoes where private companies have enormous difficulty in hiring employees because they cannot compete with the advantages offered by the public sector (higher pay, pension perks and not much work). The inhabitants of the north east of England, Northern Ireland and the whole of Scotland are similarly reliant upon the Government for jobs. Even in London, where Government employment is at its lowest, just under a quarter of all the people with jobs are public sector workers.

1

The gap between public sector and private sector pay is now, on average, around 20% but in vast areas of the country (such as the north and west) it is well over 25%. In other words civil servants, who work short hours, enjoy the world's most generous pension (paid by other people), have longer holidays than anyone else and can stay at home to watch television without the risk of losing their jobs (or anyone noticing) are paid vastly better than the people whose work keeps the country alive. This is madness. Incidentally, the self-employed (who tend to earn even less than employees in the private sector) are excluded from these figures.

2

Unions, many of which are led by bosses paid over £100,000 a year, are threatening to cause chaos because the Government wants to limit absurdly over-generous public sector pensions. Ordinary teachers have taxpayer funded pension pots of £500,000. Headmasters and police chiefs have pension pots measured in millions. In contrast, millions of private sector workers can look forward to pensions which will just about pay for a twice weekly bowl of gruel.

I've been warning about the public sector pension crisis for nearly a decade and now I believe that the planned strikes could produce a social explosion and finally split the country. It's no exaggeration to say that we could be heading for a new civil war. Those who don't work for the Government are getting fed up with the wretches who do. And its not surprising that the people who do the real, productive work find it offensive that greedy, selfish public sector workers should have the brass neck to go on strike to maintain their absurd pension rights. Moreover, teachers who close schools and force proper workers to take time off work to look after their children will do enormous damage to the state of the nation.

Public sector workers clearly don't give a fig about the country or the economy. Their strikes say it all. These are me me me me me people. Their strikes will lead to more redundancies and more real pain for the millions who live in the real world. Companies will close. And, inevitably, selfish, traitorous doctors, schoolteachers and all the rest of the public sector workforce will find themselves loathed in a way that strikers never have been hated before. These strikes are not for a living wage or a decent standard of living. These strikes are all about greed and selfishness. The people striking already have far more than their fair share. They are vastly overpaid. Their pensions are absurdly over-generous. And now they are fighting simply to keep their ill-gotten, undeserved gains.

I suspect that there will be some real resentment in the country during the coming months. People will begin to resent their neighbours who are overpaid, and who have unaffordable, taxpayer funded pensions, but who have the outrageous cheek to cause disruption by striking.

This could be the end of the Big State.

I suspect that these selfish strikes may eventually result in an awakening: a civil war that leads to a society in which the State plays a much smaller role. A society in which there are far fewer State employees. A society in which State employees are no longer overpaid.

There's a cheerful thought.

A happy ending, after all.

3

`Our contemporary Western society, in spite of its material, intellectual and political progress, is increasingly less conducive to mental health, and tends to undermine the inner security, happiness, reason and the capacity for life in the individual; it tends to turn him into an automaton who pays for his human failure with increasing mental sickness, and with despair hidden under a frantic drive for work and so-called pleasure.' - Dr Erich Fromm

4

It has been reported that civil servants who finish their work by 10.30 a.m. and then ask for something else to do are told to amuse themselves and shut up. Bosses don't want anyone to draw attention to the fact that civil servants are invariably under-employed. Public sector jobs are cushy and attractive jobs for the lazy, supercilious and unambitious and, perhaps most damaging of all, for those who have little or no interest in serving the public. The vast majority of public sector workers do jobs which require no more than a day or two of training.

5

One cannot blame young people for wanting to work for the Government. It's the safest place to work these days. And the pension and perks are better than anywhere else. But, sadly, the people who are now choosing to find work with the Government are making a big mistake. They have picked the wrong time to become public sector workers. The future for the public sector is extremely poor. There will, within the next decade, be many redundancies. And many who believe that they will be paid fat, inflation-proofed pensions are in for a big shock. Those pensions are not going to be paid.

6

Public sector fraud and incompetence will continue to go unpunished because the people who decide whether the fraud and incompetence should be punished are public sector employees. Why would incompetent and fraudulent people decide to punish themselves and their colleagues?

7

Between the years 2000 and 2010 State spending increased by a real 53% (that is to say that the figure is inflation adjusted) and much of that increase in spending went on hiring people who were given permanent jobs and paid huge sums to do trivial, unnecessary work. Many were hired to devise new rules and regulations designed to make life difficult or impossible for those in the private sector, and were encouraged to regard anyone struggling to make a living as in some way reprehensible.

8

Public sector workers may retire at 50 or 55, and receive huge pensions. They then take part time jobs for a little fun and pin money. Private sector workers must carry on working indefinitely. And they frequently find themselves competing with `rich', retired public sector workers for employment.

9

In the North East of England, paramedics (not the most highly paid of public sector workers) earn 60% above the average local wage. It is absurd to pay all public sector workers the same when wages and costs are so different around the country. The result of the national wage policy is that essential health workers in the South East can hardly survive while people doing the same job in the North can live like princes.

10

Private sector employees take around six sick days a year. Public sector workers take an average of ten. That, I suspect, is a fair representation of the effort the two sets of workers put into what they do. And yet the rewards are inverse to the effort. It cannot possibly last. Moreover, public sector workers are frequently allowed to retire, on a full pension, for the slightest of reasons. I know of a former fireman who retired in his 30s because he came out in a rash when exposed to heat. He now lives on a generous disability pension. He has a large, executive style home and a brand new sports car which he changes every two years. I know a former policeman who retired from the police force on full pay at the age of 41 because he had a skin rash which was made worse by wearing a uniform. He drives a Porsche Boxster. Police officers can retire at 50 (sitting in a luxury police saloon on motorway bridges is obviously considered more dangerous and tiring than one might imagine) and can only be made redundant after 30 years of service. Policemen and firemen who have to visit unpleasant scenes frequently claim that they are mentally scarred and unable to work. The words `post traumatic stress disorder' are steadily increasing in popularity. Surely, anyone who takes a job as a policeman or fireman must expect to come across unpleasant scenes? When I worked as a doctor I was occasionally called out by the police to certify dead bodies as, well, dead. On one occasion I unwrapped a woman in a black plastic bag. She had been murdered by her husband, put into a supersize black plastic bag and left out with the rubbish. The dustmen called the police because they couldn't lift the bag and they thought they could feel bits of bone. I certified a man who had been burnt to a crisp in a house fire (you could smell the burning flesh half a mile away) and a man and his dog who had been bludgeoned to death by two killers. I then examined the two killers, alone, in a police examination room. And so on. I was doing what I was paid to do.

11

The police, like members of the armed forces, are paid to take chances and put their lives on the line to protect us. That is why they are paid so well and, perhaps, why they are entitled to retire so early on such excellent pensions. In reality, therefore, the murder of a policeman is a minor crime compared to the murder of a citizen. Policemen are paid to protect the public and to take risks.

12

The people who work for the State have power of the State behind them and so they tend to behave badly. The police do things because they can (and because it gives them pleasure). So, for example, the police turn minor motorway incidents into five hour holdups with 20 mile queues in both directions because it makes them feel and look important. They clearly enjoy competing to see who can create the longest queues. They put up the cones, leave a car parked with flashing lights and wait for the chaos to ensue. You only have to look at them standing around with plastic gloves, clipboards, two way radios and bullet proof waistcoats to see how much they are enjoying themselves. They chat away like waiting mothers outside primary school gates. It is hardly surprising that the average driver spends 35-40 hours a year stuck in traffic.

The guards at border posts are invariably unbelievably rude. They bark instructions as though talking to concentration camp inmates. I am not so much surprised that the people in uniforms behave like that as I am that people obey them blindly and stupidly and without protest.

13

I once interviewed a potential new employee. He seemed bright and reasonably literate but he turned down my job offer and explained that he had decided to take a job with the council instead. He told me that he wanted an undemanding job with fixed hours, long holidays and a good pension. He was 24-years-old.

14

People with responsible jobs in the private sector live by their wits. Their daily aim is to make things happen. Civil servants and bureaucrats consider that their job is to prevent things happening. Our state functionaries exhibit undisguised contempt for everyone else and revel in their glorious inefficiency and incompetence. The main aim of civil servants is to avoid blame and deflect criticism. (That is why they aren't fit to run enterprises or organisations upon which the public rely). It is hardly surprising that if they leave the public sector, expecting to find employment in the private sector, they invariably find that no one wants to hire them.

15

Bureaucrats have all the time in the world to attend entirely pointless functions and meetings and to create incomprehensible forms (complete with accompanying thick books of notes). This would be fine if these time consuming activities kept them out of the hair of people struggling to do real work. But it doesn't work that way for the bureaucrats enjoy nothing more than to use their time and their form creating to interfere with the rest of the world. It makes them feel important.

16

It is almost impossible to get fired if you are a civil servant. Selling secrets to the enemy and not handing the money over to your superior will probably get you a reprimand and a delay in promotion but offences which would lead to an immediate sacking in the private world are ignored in the comforting tea and biscuits world which public sector employees inhabit. Civil servants can make multi-million pound errors without fear of censure. They probably won't even lose their bonus. On the very rare occasions when a civil servant resigns in disgrace he will still receive a generous pay off, his pension and, of course, a bonus. And within a month or so he will be rehired as a consultant.

17

Civil servants are parasites. But when parasites become too greedy, they kill their host. And then they themselves will also die.

18

In France students have for years dreamt of growing up to become civil servants - attracted by the money, the status, the power and the perks. Things are now the same in England.

19

During a recent spell of bad weather a Government spokesman announced that only essential civil servants needed to turn up for work. It was widely reported that many Government offices were completely empty. When civil servants go on strike (which they do with increasing frequency) the invariable response from the public is: `How will we know?'

20

Civil servants (such as tax inspectors) love conferences. When they go to a conference they can claim all sorts of generous per diem expenses. Naturally, very little work goes on at these expensive conferences, but people do tend to have a rather good time at public expense.

21

Civil servants have the power because when we come into contact with them we usually want something from them. In all our encounters with them they have the key to something we need to open. They have a form we need to complete. They have a licence we need in order to do our work. Or they may have access to the bedpans.

22

The average salary for a State employee is £28,802 compared to £25,000 for a private sector worker. The average pension for a State employee is a safe £7,800. In the private sector the average pension is £1,800. (Both sums are paid on top of the official old age pension). Public sector workers also enjoy greater job security, shorter working hours, longer holidays and unlimited sick pay. And they receive much grander perks (such as private health care, free car parking, subsidised food and generous travel and subsistence allowances).

23

Inside every uniform (even a cheap suit) there is an SS guard struggling to escape the confines of bureaucracy and jab his or her cheap biro into an eyeball.

24

When considering the number of public sector workers in England we must now include doctors and nurses who work for the National Health Service. They work for the State and their loyalty is to the State rather than to their patients. (Their primary loyalty is, of course, to themselves.). BBC employees are also civil servants, of course.

25

In February 2012, it was revealed that around £100 million was being paid in bonuses to civil servants. Despite egregious, collegiate incompetence hugely overpaid employees at the Ministry of Defence were taking home bonuses of up to £85,831 just for doing their jobs rather badly.

26

If a man bakes bread every day of his working life then it is reasonable to describe him as a baker; baking bread is what he does. Similarly, if a Government employee wastes money efficiently and with regularity it becomes difficult to argue with the thesis that the primary purpose of the civil servant concerned is just that: to waste money.

27

Government employees acquire a tendency to treat members of the public (their employers) as half-witted irritants who are interrupting their crossword, magazine reading or chat. They like to give the impression that they are bored and impatient and far too important to be doing whatever menial task they are doing (`My normal job is as a brain surgeon/racing driver/international film star but I'm just filling in as a local council planning office clerk/hospital trolley pusher/postman/doctor's receptionist/passport office employee'). The problem is that the people employed by the State have assumed the role and authority of the State, and the EU has given them (and indeed all employees) the confidence to know that they are effectively unsackable.

28

In the old days the best brains used to go into science or engineering. But in the early years of the 21st century the brightest students choose jobs with the Government (it's a safe, undemanding job with a good salary and a fantastic pension) or banking (it's a safe, undemanding job with a ridiculous salary and an incredible pension). Today, three quarters of young people say that they want to be public employees. That is their ambition.

29

When I see a throng of protesting public sector workers I am reminded of Nietzsche who foresaw much of what has happened in the last 100 years and who wrote: `the great majority of men have no right to existence, but are a misfortune to higher men.'

30

Public sector workers will not work on bank holidays. And so, for example, public libraries are invariably closed at the very time when most people are likely to want to use them. It is as though amusement park employees refused to work on bank holidays.

31

To Government employees we are all enemies, available to be bullied, forced into queues and lied to. It seems that public sector workers have forgotten that they are our employees; paid to serve us. And although many existing utilities (such as gas and water companies and train companies) are public companies, they are often still run like Government departments (with rude and uncaring staff) because they still have the in-house culture that was devised when those companies were nationalised, and the employees worked for the State.

32

`People who hold positions of power or trust and violate them are probably a more serious danger to a democratic society than organised crime or crime in the streets.' - Robert Morgenthau, former New York District Attorney

33

In May 2012, it was announced that civil servants employed in London would be allowed to stay at home for a seven week period during the Olympics `to reduce traffic congestion'.

This announcement was made just three days after a Government Minister had announced that everyone must work harder to pay off the national debt. Presumably, having suddenly noticed that London's infrastructure was not capable of coping with an influx of Olympic delegates and sponsoring executives all looking to have a good time with someone else paying the expenses, the Government had looked around looking for a group of people who could be kept at home without causing any inconvenience or, indeed, without anyone noticing. It wouldn't have taken them long to plump for civil servants as the obvious choice. And then someone had a brilliant idea. Instead of just telling the civil servants to stay at home for two weeks (so that they could watch the Olympics on television, or use their free Government tickets to go and watch them live) why not tell them to stay at home for longer? If they stayed at home until, say, the end of the school summer holidays then the Government would save a fortune on light, heat, air conditioning, private telephone calls and so on. And thus it was. `Will anyone think that the seven week period of extra holiday seems rather excessive when the Olympics are only lasting for two weeks?' asked a junior in the office. His fears were dismissed airily. `Don't be daft,' said a senior principal deputy adviser who had more wisdom than is common in such circles. `The common folk don't give a damn about the Olympics. They won't notice that they only last for two weeks.'

34

I can't remember the last time I had a holiday. A man I know who works for the Government told me recently that he has eight weeks holiday owing to him.

35

It is impossible to fight State employees because they have unlimited time and money and no personal liability.

36

`The standard of morality in the public sector frequently does not reach the very minimum that private industry would regard as essential to its survival.' - Lord Chandos, former chairman of AEI

Conclusion

Government expenditure now accounts for half the English economy. Over one fifth of all English workers have jobs in the public sector - with absurdly generous salaries, pensions, perks and employment conditions. Too many of the millions who are state employees behave like employees in old communist USSR - they don't care, or have any pride in the work they do. The country can no longer afford such a large workforce of under-productive civil servants. Things have to change. Until they do change the nation's economic situation will continue to get worse. Since turkeys never vote for Christmas the problem isn't going to be solved soon.

CHAPTER 14: THE PENSION SCANDAL

Introduction

The Government can no longer afford to pay the pensions it has promised to public sector workers. Nor can the Government afford to pay the State pension. And, just to make things worse, Government and EU policies have destroyed the attractiveness of private pensions. In a generation's time our streets will be packed with geriatric English beggars pleading to be given enough money to buy a little food.

1

A pension is (or should be) a fairly simple thing to understand. In his or her prime years a man or woman regularly puts aside some money so that when they are old, and either want to stop working or can no longer work, they will have money with which to pay heating bills, buy food and enjoy a few little luxuries. The money that is saved is put somewhere safe where it can grow quietly and consistently. You can't get any simpler than that. But governments and finance companies have made pensions unbearably complicated and, in financial terms, extremely unreliable. The main problem, of course, is that our governments have for years run a Ponzi scheme for pensioners. The money you pay in taxes and National Insurance (and which many people still think is being put safely on one side for their retirement years) is being used to pay today's generation of pensioners. Pensions for tomorrow's generation of pensioners will be paid by tomorrow's generation of workers. That is a Ponzi scheme. It's crooked, dishonest and downright illegal. The same sort of scheme is run for public sector workers. Their pensions will be paid by tomorrow's taxpayers. And the same is true for councils too. Tomorrow's council tax payers will pay the pensions for today's council workers. These too are Ponzi schemes and none of them is sustainable.

2

Although their Government may rely on Ponzi schemes to pay pensions, a number of Englishmen and women have saved for their older years in the proper, more traditional way. In fact, in no country in the world have citizens saved more money for their pensions. (We mustn't get too excited about this. The average English citizen with a private pension has saved around 90% of their annual salary. That is the pension pot from which an annuity must be taken. So, a man with a £20,000 salary may have £18,000 saved and will probably be lucky to receive a pension of £1,000 a year. Still it's something.) In contrast the people of the other EU countries have saved next to nothing. And therein lies a problem. You won't be surprised to hear that the EU wants our savings - and there is a scary chance that they'll find a way to get hold of them. If you have a private pension fund beware: the EU has had its eyes on your pension fund for years and your Government wants it too. Your savings would help pay off a large chunk of England's Gordon Brown debt. In the end they may just take it (by introducing some form of confiscatory legislation) but I suspect that for the time being they are more likely to nibble away at it by more changes to the rules.

3

The rules about private pensions (and company pensions) change so often that it is impossible to keep up with what is, and is not, allowed. Even the professionals get confused. The pension plan you thought you signed up to will have changed many times in scope and prospects by the time you eventually get to an age where you need to try to take the money. The complexities, made infinitely worse by retrospective legislation, are now so absurd that many professional advisers no longer recommend that people invest in a pension at all. There are better, safer ways to save money and to have some hope of being able to get hold of a little of the cash when you eventually need it. The end result is that the number of people putting money into a pension fund is falling rapidly and the amount people save for their old age is dropping by 5% a year. The Government has only itself to thank for creating yet another future disaster. Osbourne, Clegg and other public sector workers with vast, taxpayer funded pensions probably don't understand that for many people the State pension will be all that stands between them and penury. Those who struggle to cope on the meagre state pension (one of the meanest in the world) and who have difficulty finding any money for luxuries such as food after paying local taxes, the BBC television licence fee and heating bills will in the future find that they have even less money to spend.

4

In the 2012 budget, the Coalition Government stole £1 billion a year from poorer pensioners but took on a multi billion pound debt for Royal Mail employees. (The Government is desperate to sell the Royal Mail and the pension fund liabilities put off all prospective purchasers). And so taxpayers will in future be responsible for paying pensions to yet more public sector workers. I wonder if the postmen realise that the public sector pension bill will soon be impossible to pay - and their pensions too will simply melt away into nothingness. Naturally, this huge additional deficit wont appear on the nations balance sheet.

5

English private sector workers used to have the world's best pensions but they were buggered by Gordon Brown who took £5 billion a year out of private pensions to help subsidise his massive spending spree. It was as though Brown (realising that he could use the cash on some of his absurd schemes) was deliberately creating a two-tone State - those on civil service pensions and those without. Brown's grab pushed millions of pensioners into needing State aid (which it will not be able to provide), created the makings of a civil war (between civil servants and the rest of the country) and made the whole idea of pensions brutally unattractive. Gordon isn't just a moron; he is a nasty man who seems to have been opposed to self-sufficiency and independence. Together with the war criminal Blair, I believe, he did more damage to England than anyone else in history. In a couple of decades time our streets will be knee deep in geriatric beggars. These won't be the professionals we are currently used to, whining *Big Issue* sellers imported from Romania by the lorry load, but home-grown grannies and granddads; starving, frightened and desperate; hard-working former taxpayers sitting on the pavement, watching bureaucrats driving past in expensive cars and tututting at the human mess on the streets.

6

Towards the end of 2011, I read in the *Financial Times* about a woman who had put £50,000 into a pension fund twenty years ago. Today, her fund, after the efforts and charges of hugely overpaid advisers, is worth just £8,000. Why aren't her advisers doing time? Sadly, this is neither exceptional nor unusual.

7

How long will it before there is huge resentment among private sector workers who realise that although they may have worked hard, and earned comparable sums to their former civil servant neighbour, he is receiving three, four, five times as much pension as they are - and they are paying for it.

8

One in six people already relies totally on the State pension. The number so doing is rising rapidly. And the value of the State pension is falling rapidly too. There will come a time (not far away) when almost all of those struggling to live on the State pension will slowly starve or freeze to death.

Two decades ago we, as a nation, saved around 12% of our disposable income. Today, that figure has pretty well halved. High inflation and low interest rates have made saving singularly unattractive.

9

Public sector workers who feel smug when they look around and see the way that successive governments have destroyed private pensions should know that their pensions are not as safe as they think they are. I have for several years been predicting that the Government will one day be unable to honour its pension obligations to public sector workers - and that day is getting closer. Those who believe that this cannot possibly ever happen should know that at the end of December 2011, almost 300,000 retired employees of SNCF, the French rail company, discovered that they had only been paid a third of their normal pension (the French Government normally pays pensions quarterly in advance). Similar situations were narrowly avoided at other public utility companies such as EdF (Electricity de France, the electricity utility) and GdF (Gaz de France). The Government eventually managed to find the necessary funds. But what will happen next year?

It is safe to assume that if you work for the Government (central or local) and are under the age of 50 your employer will not be able to pay you a pension at all. Public sector workers will not receive the pensions they are expecting. Let me put that another way: if you work for the Government or a quango (the same thing really), or a local council, then your chances of receiving the pension you were promised are directly related to your age. If you are over 50 then you have a good chance of getting your pension. If you are under 30 you have approximately no chance of receiving the pension you were promised and are expecting. Council workers may think that they have an enforceable contract with their employers. They may think that their union will look after them. Wrong. I suspect that councils will merely file for bankruptcy.

Central and local government officials in England are notoriously shy about revealing the figures relating to their pension debts but in America these figures are available. And those figures are scary.

The pension benefits that have been already promised to folk who work for the Government in Ohio will cost the State more than 50% of its future total tax revenues. Much the same is true of government employees in Colorado, Rhode Island and many other American states where pension benefits are projected to use up between a third and a half of total State tax revenues. Countless employees simply won't receive the pensions they thought they were entitled to. And exactly the same is true for England. The doctors and teachers and whoever else who voted to go on strike to defend indefensible pension rights might like to think about this. Their pensions arent as safe as they think they are.

If public sector workers cannot rely on their occupational pensions what about the old aged pension? Surely they can rely on that?

Well, er, sadly, no.

The Government has been running a pension Ponzi scheme and sooner or later it is going to explode in exactly the way that all such schemes explode. Tax revenues are going to have to rise and expenditure is going to have be cut drastically just to keep the nation afloat financially. The chances of today's 30-year-olds receiving a State pension are approximately the same as the chances of England winning the World Cup ten times in a row. (Actually, I suspect that the chances of England winning the World Cup are better. There is at least a chance, albeit remote, of that happening.) We all expect to receive our pension because we have been led to believe that it will be there, patiently waiting for us, when we retire. But there is no legal liability. The money isn't there. And if the Government cannot afford to pay out pensions (because it has given all the money to Fred Goodwin et al) then there won't be any pensions and there won't be a thing anyone can do about it. There is no contractual liability. Just hope and naive expectation.

10

`Retirement at 65 is ridiculous. When I was 65 I still had pimples.' - George Burns

11

In a final, desperate attempt to find the money to pay pensions to public sector workers, the Government will undoubtedly mess around still more with private section pensions. The age at which we can take our pensions will rise yet again. The amount we can save will fall yet again. (Any excess will be taxed at punitive rates). The size of the tax free lump sum we can take (promised as part of the original deal) will fall and fall and then disappear completely. If we save too much for our pensions the excess saving will be subject to a hefty tax charge and a huge lump sum levy of at least 55%.

12

Most private pensioners are forced to purchase an annuity when they want to access the money they have saved. Annuities are one of the great financial scandals of our time. The pensioner must hand over all his money to an insurance company. In return he will receive a small, annual payment. When he or she dies the insurance company gets to keep the lump sum.

Annuity rates collapsed when interest rates were brought down and new rules have cut the amount that can be taken still further. Pensioners are paying the bill for the greed of the American and Scottish bankers and the stupidity of Gordon Brown. Thanks to EU and Government policies, annuity rates are down 20% over the last year or two. And things are going to get worse. New EU legislation means that there will be yet another huge drop in annuity rates - with male customers hit particularly hard.

13

Here's a question no one ever asks: why should jobs come with a pension at all? Most people don't receive a house or any other form of accommodation with their job. Surely, it is patronising and misleading to link jobs and pensions. It is bad for companies (which end up running huge pension funds) and bad for individuals (who end up serf-like, reliant on the company they work for and afraid to move to another job because of what might happen to their pension).

14

In 2012, the Chancellor of the Exchequer claimed that pensioners could no longer expect young people to pay for the costs of their old age. He said that this was an intolerable burden on the young. The statement suggests to me that Osbourne does not understand that successive governments have, for decades, been running one of the world's largest Ponzi schemes. The people who now become pensioners (and who worked) paid taxes and National Insurance contributions all their lives. Many probably assumed that some of the money they paid was being put on one side to pay for their pensions. They were, of course, quite wrong. The money that they paid in taxes was always used to pay for the pensions of those who were elderly at the time. Today's pensioners are not taking advantage of today's youth any more than any other generation has done so.

The reality is that the Coalition Government's policies have hit pensioners hard. It has hit those relying on private pensions and savings particularly hard. Low interest rates, high inflation, increased taxes and drastic changes to private pension rates mean that the elderly have been forced to pay an unreasonably large part of the burden created by Gordon Brown's Scotland-friendly policies. If the Coalition stick to their current, morally repugnant policies then it seems likely that interest rates will stay low for many years to come.

Osbourne has turned out to be a hoodie in a posh suit: mugging the elderly because they are the easiest to mug. It is clear that the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats regard people who are responsible, sensible and prudent with their money as easy targets.

15

When Osbourne changed tax law to hit pensioners in his 2012 Budget, he described the change as a `simplification'. It seemed a misleading, uncaring, deceitful and stupid word to use. If Osbourne really wanted to raise money in a fair way he would have cut the absurdly overgenerous pension scheme enjoyed by MPs. Or taken a larger chunk of money from the greedy public sector workers whose pension demands are bleeding the economy dry. Instead he turned yet again to England's uncomplaining pensioners.

16

Much of the money you pay to your local council is spent on providing pensions for former council workers. Astonishingly, 4% of English council workers retire on an annual pension of £67,000 or more.

As the recession deepens (and turns into a chronic depression) councils are cutting vital services to save money. They never think of cutting the number of bureaucrats, the size of the expense accounts or the generosity of the staff pensions. Councils are cutting libraries and social services but the top layer of staff aren't suffering at all; they still enjoy their big salaries, their big pensions, their generous expense accounts and their annual pay rises and bonuses. Councils all over England are reducing the frequency of rubbish collections, turning off street lights, closing libraries and reducing services for the elderly. But the bosses, ignoring requests from central Government to cut their own salaries, are giving themselves pay rises and bonuses.

Most of your council tax now goes towards paying the pensions of retired council workers. And things are going to get worse. Soon there wont be any money left to pay for services and council tax payers will merely be paying for someone else's pension fund.

17

Companies exist to make profits for their shareholders (the owners). That is it. There is no other primary purpose. Companies don't exist to provide jobs, to offer a service to customers or the community or to pay taxes. Companies exist to make a profit for the shareholders. It is certainly not the job of any company to provide pensions for workers. In a sane and sensible society, where individuals take responsibility for themselves, providing a pension would be the responsibility of each individual. Only in a statist or communist society, where individuals have lost their rights, should companies be expected to provide pensions. (It is similarly difficult to understand why companies should be expected to pay workers holiday pay or sick pay. Why should a company pay its employees not to do anything?)

18

When I telephoned the Government's Department of pensions to ask a question about my pension I was told (by a recorded machine: `If you don't speak English ring (another number) and an interpreter and adviser will phone you back.' I wonder how much that particular service costs.

19

A third of the over 50's have no savings whatsoever for their retirement. The figure is greater (and therefore worse) for those under 50 and it is likely to rise, rise and rise for the foreseeable future. For over a decade now Government policies have discouraged people from saving money or putting money into a pension fund.

20

Doctors, teachers and other public sector workers are so out of touch with reality, and stuffed with selfishness, that they are striking to retain pensions which were never fair or sustainable and are, indeed, so absurdly generous that it is akin to giving everyone working for the Government a winning lottery ticket. GPs were, at one point, threatening to protest against pension changes by prescribing branded drugs rather than generic drugs. Their aim was to deliberately damage the Governments attempt to save money and cut the budget deficit.

21

In June 2012, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) announced that English savers had suffered bigger losses from their workplace pensions in the last decade than the citizens of virtually every other nation in the developed world. The OECD said that returns on money invested by pension companies on behalf of savers fell every year between 2001 and 2010. That's pretty good going and suggests that the people managing the money were pretty high-grade incompetents. (To put their failure in perspective I will point out that I have made a return of an average of nearly 20% a year on our investment portfolios during that time. I have no qualifications relevant to the investment business. One of my bankers dismissed my investment record by saying: `Ah, but you've been lucky. You've been holding a lot of gold through the bad years.') It is not surprising that many people have stopped contributing to their pension schemes. Poor stock market returns have been made worse by incompetent fund managers (who seem to spend most of their time thinking up new fees), by high management charges and by derisory annuity rates (deliberately brought to an all time low by Government and EU policies). People have also been put off pension funds by ever-changing regulations (many of them retrospective) affecting what savers can do with their money, what tax savings they might enjoy and when they might be allowed access to their own savings. Pension funds and investment companies, forced by the EU to invest in products which eurocrats regard as `safe' have, for the last year or two, been piling into government bonds. They are buying these because they are told, and they believe, that they are safer than shares, property or gold. I think they're stark raving mad. These bonds are yielding 2% or less and inflation is already far higher than that. Governments everywhere are busy debasing their currency by printing more of it and it seems certain that anyone who holds sovereign bonds for several years will lose some of their capital. And with inflation running at 5% officially and at least 10% unofficially they're losing money annually as well. Craziest of all are those investment `experts' buying US Treasury bonds in the belief that they are buying the safest of the safe. The truth is that America is bankrupt and the dollar is in long-term decline. There doesn't seem anything very safe about choosing an investment that is guaranteed to lose great chunks of its value on a regular basis.

22

There is something almost indecent about the fact that pension rule changes which affect non-public sector workers are made, without exception, by people who are public sector workers and who are, consequently entitled to pensions which are not affected by the absurd, unfair, unjust and damaging changes which they make. For example, it is clearly unfair for judges and MPs with unlimited, inflation-proof, taxpayer-guaranteed pensions to impose limits on the amounts the self-employed can save for their old age. But they do. Moreover, the public sector workers who mess with the pensions of the people in the private sector are perfectly happy to introduce destructive retrospective legislation when it comes to other peoples pensions, but wont have their own pensions changed at any price. The fiasco involving Equitable Life pensions was caused by idiotic managers (who remain unpunished) but Government regulators did nothing to stop the financial mayhem which resulted in hundreds of thousands of private sector workers losing a great deal of their pension savings. Public sector workers did nothing to correct the problem for many years (waiting until many of the claimants had died or were impoverished and hungry). When it was finally agreed that a derisory amount of compensation would be paid it was announced that it would not be fair to taxpayers to pay more. Public sector workers don't worry about taxpayers when their obscenely generous pension schemes are under discussion.

23

Many retired State employees receive more money when they retire than they received in salary when they were working. Their pensions are heavily subsidised by taxpayers. This cannot continue indefinitely.

24

There is much call from civil servants at The Treasury (all of whom enjoy massive pension benefits at little or no cost to themselves) for all tax relief for private pension contributions to be stopped. Many advisers now agree that the charges and costs associated with private pensions mean that they aren't worth contributing to and so without tax relief they will be utterly pointless.

25

The age at which people can retire is going to rise, rise and rise again. Those who are now in their 40s will probably not receive any sort of pension until they are at least 70-years-old and the current generation of young people will have to work until they are in their 80s. The blame for this will fall at least in part on the reckless excesses of Gordon Brown's years as Chancellor and partly on the incompetence and greed of Scottish bankers.

Conclusion

The Government cannot afford to satisfy any of its pension obligations. Many public sector pensions will not be paid out. The State pension will have to be subject to dramatic cuts. And the age at which it is paid will have to rise dramatically. The nation will go bankrupt if we continue to try to pay out State pensions as we do at the moment. Part of the problem is caused by the fact that our population is ageing rapidly. There are, today, more people over 65 than under 16 and the demographic situation is rapidly deteriorating. Within a decade this population time bomb (which I first described in my book *The Health Scandal* in 1988) will explode.

CHAPTER 15 WARS WITHOUT END

Introduction

Not all our recent wars have been conducted on the instructions of Jewish American lobbyists. Some of our recent military excursions were (apparently) home-grown.

Since war criminal Tony Blair used imaginary weapons of mass destruction to drag us into an entirely unnecessary and immoral war on Iraq the English people have been constantly at war. We are, as I write, bombing and killing people in three different countries. (In all of which there is, by coincidence, a strong American oil interest.)

Within months of staggering into power, the Cameron-Clegg Fiasco started yet another bloody war - in Libya. And this time they didn't seem to me to be desperately keen to stick to the ground rules laid down by the United Nations. The result was that the Libyan leader, Colonel Gaddafi was executed by rebel soldiers. The United Nations calls this execution unacceptable and suggested that if those responsible were caught they would find themselves before a war crimes tribunal.

(So why, I wonder, is Obama not before a war crimes tribunal? He is, after all, busy executing people all over the place without the inconvenience of trials. Two problems I suppose. First, America doesn't recognise international law. Second, Obama has acquired a taste for executing those who disagree with him. (Republican party presidential candidates might like to lock their windows at night.))

Cameron and Cleggs illegal excursion into Libya ensured that the English will continue to be the world's prime targets for terrorists. Even the Americans shied away from attacking Gaddafi too strenuously. But our brave and well-guarded leaders recklessly risked the lives of English nationals everywhere by making England the prime target for militant Muslims. And just why? Bad things happen in China, Zimbabwe and several dozen other countries around the globe. In what way is Gaddafi worse than Mugabe? Surely, it couldnt be the oil again?

The truth is that there is a bigger war our leaders should be fighting. And that's a war against the greed of global capitalism (led by corporate America). That's the war which would truly save millions of lives, make the world a better place and enable more people to enjoy physical, mental and spiritual good health. But that's a war our leaders will never fight. Because they are part of the problem.

Look at the big issues - and what our so-called leaders are doing to deal with them.

a) Every year several million people in America and Europe die from cancer. The vast majority of cancers are preventable. We know what causes eight out of ten cancers. The simplest and most obvious truth is that meat causes cancer. Simply persuading people to stop eating meat would save millions of lives. To that truth we must add the fact that current methods of cancer treatment are destructive and ineffective - the cancer `industry' has consistently suppressed new therapies which might work and promoted therapies (surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy) which often kill people. If politicians cared a damn they could reduce cancer deaths by 80% without any effort.

b) Heart disease is a major killer. Every day far more Britons die from heart disease than have ever died in terrorism attacks. Most cases of heart disease could be prevented. Most people with heart disease can be cured with a simple regime which costs almost nothing to follow and which is more effective than drugs and surgery. But food and tobacco companies (and drug companies) would stand to lose billions.

c) Infectious diseases are coming back in a big way, and antibiotics are no longer as effective as they were. One big reason is that farmers are allowed to put antibiotics into animal feed to boost farm profits.

d) The food available in our shops is bereft of essential ingredients and laden with additives. Poor and misleading labelling (approved by the EU) prevents consumers from eating healthily.

Our governments have chosen to put all their current (and, probably, future) effort into one target - terrorism - which will not cost them corporate friends. The politicians aren't fighting unending wars to preserve our freedom. They are fighting them for money and for oil. They are fighting wars to terrify us. And they are fighting them to distract us from the real wars we should be fighting. The loathsome duo, Cameron and Clegg, are fighting the wrong wars. If they really cared about people they would be fighting the global corporations which are destroying the world - and creating poverty, pain and illness on a massive scale. They should be fighting the global corporations which are knowingly killing millions through their ruthlessly wicked profit making policies. But the Coalition won't fight that war. For them the price (in perks and campaign contributions) would be far too high.

The ultimate irony is surely the fact that if this world really needs a war then multi-national banks and corporations should be on one side and the rest of us - Muslims and Christians - should be fighting shoulder to shoulder against them.

Our leaders have for years turned a blind eye to the world's real problems. They have forsaken the sick, the dying, the hungry and the bereaved so as not to distress their corporate masters. Now they want us to cheer them on in wars very few people understand, wars that will probably never end and wars that aren't even legal or just. Meanwhile they do nothing to protect us from the very real threats which affect all of us every day of our lives.

1

`Let us learn our lessons. Never, never, never believe any war will be smooth and easy, or that anyone who embarks on that strange voyage can measure the tides and hurricanes he will encounter. The statesman who yields to war fever must realise that, once the signal is given, he is no longer the master of policy but the slave of unforeseeable and uncontrollable events. Antiquated war officers, weak, incompetent or arrogant commanders, untrustworthy allies, hostile neutrals, malignant fortune, ugly surprises, awful miscalculations - all take their seat on the morrow of a declaration of war.' - Winston Churchill

2

Ed Miliband, and other current leaders of the Labour party, say that if they had known then what they know now they would not have supported the invasion of Iraq. Unfortunately, we all knew then what we know now so this argument doesn't hold a good deal of water.

Ed Miliband served in the Labour Government under its war criminal leadership but says he is not guilty of anything because of `collective responsibility'.

I don't think that will be much of an argument when he is standing before a War Crimes Tribunal. It didn't do the Nazis much good and it won't help him. Collective responsibility just means that he can be hung alongside the others.

Miliband, who does what I thought impossible and makes Gordon Brown seem charismatic, admits that the Government of which he was a member destroyed the economy (`it was just an unfortunate mistake, honest guv; could have happened to anyone'), started two illegal wars and took away our civil liberties. So what the hell is he now doing leading the Opposition? The man isn't fit to confiscate nail files let alone run the country.

3

The war on terror has resulted in moral bankruptcy, it will also help lead both us and the Americans into economic bankruptcy. One cannot help feeling that bin Laden's aim all along was to bleed the USA until it was bankrupt; to obtain revenge for all the oil that has been stolen.

Today, the threat to our future from terrorism is extremely small but the threat to our future from our broken economy is massive.

4

In my book *Rogue Nation* (published before the invasion of Iraq but predicting that it would happen) I estimated that the Iraq War would cost over $1 trillion. This was far, far more than the official estimates and was dismissed as wild exaggeration. The Joint Economic Committee of Congress recently put the cost at $3.5 trillion (that's over $30,000 per American household). The cost of the war to England has never been officially estimated but it was certainly far too much.

5

Not content with being the only nation on earth to use nuclear weapons, chemical weapons and biological weapons the Americans are now proud to have started something they call `cybergeddon'. Under the guidance of Nobel Peace Prize winner Obama, the Americans combined forces with the Israelis to create a computer virus which disables software systems. They have already used this to attack a nation with which neither of them is at war. Hacking and Internet vandalism are, it seems, acceptable if they are Obama approved. Where will this end? Well, it will pretty certainly end in tears. It cannot be long before Iranian software engineers have re-engineered the American bug and fed it back into American computers. Computer virus warfare will be neither expensive nor overtly dangerous for the participants. The result will, of course, be chaos, chaos and more chaos. America, England and the rest of the so-called developed world now depend entirely on computers. Remember the fear that was triggered by the thought that computers might stop working at the start of the 21st century? Millions of people watched the clocks tick to midnight, trembling lest their computers suddenly stopped working. A decade or so on and the damage done would be incalculably greater. All banking would stop. Shops would stop operating. Logistic operations would come to a halt. There would be no traffic controls, no aeroplanes, no trains and no petrol. There would be no fuel deliveries and the only food available would be whatever people had growing in their gardens. And this is the new American choice for modern warfare.

6

`Why of course the people don't want war. Why should some poor slob on a farm want to risk his life in a war when the best he can get out of it is to come back to his farm in one piece? Naturally the common people don't want war, neither in Russia nor in England for that matter in our Germany. That is understood. But it is the leaders of a country who decide policy and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy or a fascist dictatorship, a parliament or a communist dictatorship. Voice or no voice the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them that they are being attacked and denounce the peacemakers for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same in any country. - Hermann Goering, President of the Reichstag, and Hitler's designated successor.

7

In our recent military adventures our political strategies and military tactics have been woeful. Our expensive and illegal wars (expensive in both human and financial terms) have destabilised Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Libya and created states where terrorism has become popular and fashionable.

8

The war in Afghanistan will finish at the end of 2014 said Prime Minister Cameron in early 2012. If it is a war, how can he possibly know when it is going to end? Road building schemes and weddings can be given dates. But wars?

Conclusion

Our illegal wars have made us enormously unpopular around the world. Just check out our success in the Eurovision Song Contest since Blair started killing innocent foreigners. But there are, ahead of us, many wars and much rioting. The wars will be fought to distract us from our other concerns. The rioting, when it comes, will be home-grown, natural and a part of the coming revolution.

CHAPTER 16: THE USA: A DARK PAST AND A GLOOMY FUTURE

Introduction

Our unswerving, unquestioning allegiance to America has damaged England in every imaginable way. (We are unique in suffering both from our relationship with the EU and from our relationship with the USA.) The so-called special relationship with the USA, so loved by politicians, has taken us into illegal wars, made us targets for terrorists, turned us into a nation which condones torture and assassination, contaminated our culture and impoverished us. The special relationship with America will be sustained for as long as politicians and advisers make money out of it. And, for as long as the special relationship is sustained, our status, reputation and wealth will continue to decline.

1

David Cameron, Conservative Prime Minister and leader of the utterly absurd Coalition which replaced the long running and never popular Gordon Brown financial fandango fiasco, has accepted (and gold plated) the age old post war doctrine, favoured by idiotic time-servers at the Foreign Office and the SIS, that without the USA we are nothing. Cameron was so desperate to ingratiate himself with the Americans that he has described England as having played a junior role in the Second World War - the one which made America rich and which damned near destroyed England.

And so, bit by bit, sin by sin, like the unfortunate frog in a pan of warming water, we have steadily demeaned and diminished ourselves until now it apparently seems right and proper to those who call themselves our leaders that we should accept the use of torture and illegal prisons, the kidnapping of suspects, the execution of individuals of whom the American President does not approve and the systematic denial of fundamental human rights to selected citizens of other nations (particularly if they are unfortunate enough to be neither Jewish nor Christian). If American citizens were denied these simple human rights the entire American Government would be up in arms but the wrong sort of citizens can, in American eyes, be treated like indentured slaves. (How ironic that a black American president should be the one to take these methods to their illogical and most inhuman conclusion.)

The use of torture (which now has full American approval and must, therefore, be tacitly approved by our politicians) is worth a short detour. People use torture to obtain information. But if you are doing it to find something out then, by definition, you are torturing people you only suspect of doing something wrong. And sometimes you must be torturing innocent people. That is bad. If you torture people when you are certain they did something bad then whatever you do will look like revenge. And that's bad. And when you torture, how do you know that you are being told the truth? That's bad too. Nothing about torture is good. The whole idea of it is repugnant to any civilised human being. But the Americans are our allies. And so we officially endorse torture and are deemed to be responsible too.

The bottom line truth is that our junior partnership with America has resulted in thousands of loyal and patriotic English citizens giving their lives to help America persuade the world that its oil grabbing wars are `world peace making ventures'. We have wasted billions we cannot afford to spend on immoral, indefensible military adventures.

Why have our leaders bent over forwards to accommodate the leaders of a country which still believes in executing children?

In my book *Rogue Nation* I made the point that I believed that Blair would take England into the Iraq War in order to endear himself to the USA and, from a selfish point of view, to enhance his commercial value after his political career had ended. Everything that has happened subsequently confirms that I was being neither imaginative nor cynical.

2

History shows that America, the home of barbed wire, pantyhose and plastic Ken (the doll devised, designed and built to partner plastic Barbie), has never helped England (or any other country) unless there was a clear route via which the USA itself could profit financially.

America made huge amounts of money out of World War I and World War II (which it only entered when clear profit opportunities had been identified) and the sly greed of American politicians has left England permanently impoverished. (The bravery and courage of American service personnel in helping the English combat an early brand of EU fascism is not in question but is, in the wider picture, irrelevant.)

American treachery has known no bounds (they have fought against us as often as they have fought with us, and in the 1950s for example, the Americans used their financial muscle to stop us continuing with military action against Egypt after President Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal) but anyone looking for American treachery need look no further than Ireland.

Politicians, journalists and commentators have been careful to conceal the truth but America's long-established and unstinting support for the IRA was, to say the very least, the act of an enemy rather than a friend.

In his book *The Millennium: The Future of Democracy Through An Age Of Unreason* (1994), the distinguished Irish statesman and author, Conor Cruise O'Brien wrote: `Other terrorist organisations, some of them with designs on the United States itself, will have been studying the tactics through which the IRA has managed to enlist the support of the United States for their programme of destabilising Northern Ireland and disrupting the present United Kingdom. They will note the demonstrated potential of combining blandishments with blackmail. They will note the general vulnerability of democratic governments, in the field of security. And they will note how the word `peace' and the hopes associated with it can be made to serve a terrorist cause. They will note especially the artistry with which a conditional suspension of violence can be made to supplement the violence itself and enhance its effectiveness.'

3

`It is part of the general pattern of misguided policy that our country is now geared to an arms economy which was bred in an artificially induced psychosis of war hysteria and nurtured upon an incessant propaganda of fear.'
- General Douglas MacArthur

4

It is common these days for American owned economists to claim that war boosts the economy of any country fighting one. This is, of course, a manipulated piece of nonsense designed to allow politicians to sell war in order to benefit their friends in the arms industry. The meagre benefits and high cost of war were first defined by Norman Angel in 1909 in a pamphlet called *Europes Optical Illusion*.

War may mean that a country spends more on guns and bullets (which means fantastic profits for the companies making them and the salesmen flogging them) but it also means that it spends more on bandages and hospitals (which tend not to be terribly profitable) and on disability payments for men, women and children with no legs, no arms or no eyes (and unless you're in the artificial limb or glass eye business it's tricky to see those as profitable).

War means that young men, young women and children are killed. There is no nice neat, selective killing of the old economically inactive citizens. War means that buildings are destroyed and resources wasted making bombs and then repairing the damage that has been done.

Lots of people do make money out of war, of course. Arms companies and building repair companies do terribly well and crooks, racketeers and politicians can make fortunes as well as reputations. The Iraq war put $3,000 per second into the bloated bank accounts of American arms dealers. Politicians can also start wars to help them win elections and anyone who thinks Thatcher would have invaded the Falklands if she hadn't been struggling in the polls probably also believes that Mickey Mouse lives in the wainscoting and comes out only when the cameras are rolling. Countries (such as America) can make their fortunes too, by helping themselves to valuable resources such as oil which they steal from the countries they attack.

But the damage done by war far outweighs these modest gains. And our enthusiastic support for America's military adventures has cost us much (not least our reputation) and delivered nothing (in Iraq et al the Americans stole all the oil and all the antiquities and got the contracts for repairing the damage they had done, thereby enabling America to make big bucks out of killing babies and small children).

There is a feeling that the wars in which we have recently been involved at America's behest (and in which we are, indeed, still involved) are in some way not proper wars and so the fact that we have started them all doesn't really count. There is a feeling that proper wars should involve the whole nation and that proper wars should dominate the daily headlines and be in our thoughts when we get up in the morning and when we go to bed at night.

The wars given to us by Blair, and resulting from the sale of our nation's integrity to the Americans, may not seem real but I have no doubt that they are real enough to the people fighting them and dying in them. And I have no doubt they are real enough to the families and friends of those who are fighting and dying.

The bottom line is that most modern wars (the sort we allow ourselves to be dragged into as accomplices of America) sacrifice the young, the brave and the patriotic for the benefit of the middle aged, the craven and the treacherous. Were Blair and Brown worth one private, one lance corporal? Are the Coalition warmongers Cameron and Clegg worth the lives of all the people who have died in their almost certainly illegal military adventures?

5

The American President has given himself the right to kill or imprison anyone he wants to kill or imprison without bothering to ask the courts for permission. Obama is, in short, a President who has given himself a licence to kill. There's a name for Presidents who kill their enemies without bothering to ask for help from the judicial authorities and it isn't `democrat'. After the excitement of killing Bin Laden and his family, Obama seems to have developed blood lust and to have become a serial killer. No trials. No convictions. Just execution because Obama thinks so. In September 2011, Obama had two American citizens officially murdered without bothering with the annoying trivialities of arrest, trial or conviction. The killings went almost unreported. The crime of the two assassinated citizens? They criticised the American Government. They were murdered because they hadnt broken any laws and so couldnt be taken to court and sent to prison. It is of course a fact that Americans have been killing people for decades (most of them foreigners) but presidents have, in the past, always denied any involvement. Everything has been done under the table. Now Obama has gone further than either Bush would have dared. He has become a murdering president. What a joy it must be to be able to deal with your critics by killing them. (This all sounds so scary that it seems as though Ive made it up. I havent. Its all true.)

Obama, Nobel Prize winner, the black prince of hypocrisy, and surely an Olympic standard serial deceiver, merits consideration, in my view, as the most deceitful politician in modern history. (Readers of my book *What Happens Next?* would not have been surprised.) If Obama were the leader of any other country in the world he would, I suspect, be standing, shamed, before a war crimes tribunal. (Note that his predecessor, George W. Bush recently cancelled a trip to speak at a private event in Switzerland because he was frightened that he would be arrested as a war criminal, suggesting to me that he is not only a war criminal but also a coward.)

6

By the year 2040, white Americans will be a minority in the USA. And then the fun should start. Think about it.

7

The enthusiasm for `targets' mean that American politicians now measure the success of their wars by the numerical relationship between their dead (defined as `imports') and the other side's dead (defined as `exports'). As long as exports exceed imports the politicians are happy. I kid you not.

8

Thanks to our links with the Americans we are now the aggressors, the bad guys our fathers warned us about, the cowboys in black hats whose deaths in the final reel are always greeted with much cheering and a great sense of relief.

9

When he had managed to cheat his way to President of the USA, George W. Bush found a unique way to deal with the decline of his nation's manufacturing industry. Bush suggested that fast food jobs be listed as manufacturing for the purposes of the official statistics. And thus it was. And is.

10

In the middle of the banking crisis, US Senator Dick Durbin said he was astonished at all the bankers and bank lobbyists running around the halls of Congress. He said: `I can't believe these guys - they act as if they own the place.' And then he added. `The fact is, it's not an act - they do own the place.'

11

Executives at Americas most respected companies hire people at near slave wages to work in inhuman conditions in Asian sweatshops. Oil companies pump poisons into rain forest rivers, killing people, animals and plants without a second thought. (In contrast to the waste products and residues dumped in emerging countries, the BP leak which aroused such hostility in the USA was a coffee cup spill. Naturally, the Americans did well out of it, with otherwise unemployed and probably unemployable Americans being hired to wipe individual blades of oil stained grass with paper tissues.) Vast areas of rain forest have disappeared. Three Ecuadorian cultures have been made virtually extinct so that the Americans can obtain the oil they want. Clear rivers have been turned into dangerous, deadly, stagnant cesspools. Between 1971 and 1992 American oil giants dumped four million gallons of toxic waste water (containing carcinogens) into open holes and rivers. Every day. It's still there, killing people and animals. During the Ecuadorian Oil Boom the official poverty level grew from 50% to 70% and public debt increased from $240 million to $16 billion. The share of national resources allocated to the poorer parts of the nation fell from 20% to just 6%. The American controlled pharmaceutical industry sells products which probably kill more people than they save, and denies lifesaving drugs to the people who really need them by keeping prices obscenely high. Companies such as Enron and crooks like Madoff are not unusual and the people involved usually claim that they weren't well or didn't know what was going on or were in the bathroom when all the really evil deals were done. Accountants and ratings agencies cheat and lie and do anything for another buck.

Throughout its rise America has grown rich at the expense of other countries. During the First and Second World Wars America grew rich and fat by bleeding England dry. The First World War was, for example, a boon for the USA. The emerging nation entered late and suffered few casualties but was able to expand its exports of war supplies (including raw materials, weapons and food) in a way that provided a huge boost to economy. Before the Great War America's GDP was $40 billion per annum. By 1919 it was 50 per cent larger.

12

While in Paris recently I picked up a copy of a book entitled *The Inter-Ally Debts, - An analysis of War and Post-War Public Finance 1914-1923*. One of the fascinating items in this apparently dull book was a table of the relative cost of the war to the great powers, measured in 1913 dollars.

It is clear from this that the war was a far greater strain on England than any other nation involved. The Gross Cost of War per head for England was £524.85, for France it was £280.2, for Russia it was £44.01, for the USA it was £176.91 and for Germany it was £292.57. More crucially, the gross cost of the war as a percentage of national wealth was for England: 34.49%, for France 19.36%, for Russia 13.11%, for Germany 24.71% and for the USA a relatively minute 8.67%.

The accounts show clearly that England was by far the biggest loser in the Great War. No other country suffered anywhere near as big a charge on its Exchequer. In financial terms, the American contribution was negligible.

And the human cost?

Well, England lost 1.44% of its population whereas the USA lost 0.05% of its population.

England never really recovered from the First World War. The Second World War put the finishing touches to a battered economy. In economic terms England lost both wars.

American politicians learned an important lesson from the First World War; they applied those lessons and they did even better out of the Second World War.

The truth is that America only entered those global wars when it could see its way to making huge profits. And the Americans did so ruthlessly and without a shred of compassion. America was built upon greed and cruelty. Remember, the first settlers gave blankets impregnated with smallpox to the Native Americans. And Americans still shamelessly celebrate the theft of the land they call home with an annual event called `Thanksgiving Day'. American children are taught that European colonial powers were ruthless and wicked. But modern America makes the conquistadors look like missionaries. Modern Americans conquer and destroy resource rich countries with spreadsheets and power point presentations. They don't hand out glass beads and blankets. They give the leaders money to buy large cars and foreign apartments. The bribes are bigger because they are more concentrated. The American corporate salesmen claim to be altruistic and they talk about the humanitarian things they are doing. They have MBAs instead of swords but they kill far more effectively than any other generation of conquerors. If bribery and flattery doesn't work then unhelpful, honest politicians die in sudden, violent accidents and replacement, more pliable politicians are promoted.

13

The USA and England spent trillions of dollars on the war in Iraq. They could, if they had been so minded, have used the money to provide clean drinking water, decent food, sanitation services, schooling, health care and good roads for everyone on the planet. If we'd used the money we wasted on killing people in Afghanistan in the same way we could have also given everyone a TV set, a mobile telephone and a Play Station. And if the money had been used in such a way there wouldn't be a terrorist left on the planet and America and England would be smothered with love and respect. But modern wars are fought over commodities such as oil and the people organising the wars don't give a damn about the fact that their policies are creating terrorists.

14

America now has armies of besuited men and women around the world using international financial organisations (such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund) to create conditions that will force whole nations to become slaves to American corporations. It is a world of favours. An American company arranges for a country to receive a loan to build roads, ports, airports, industrial parks or electric generating plants. But in each and every case it is a condition of the loan that American engineering and construction companies must build the projects. And so the money that is borrowed is transferred from the World Bank (or wherever) direct to the construction company. Bribes, kickbacks, agency fees, commissions and other generous (but relatively small) payments are handed over to the country's ruling politicians. The country which borrowed the money must then pay it all back to the World Bank. The principal and the interest. The loans will usually be so large that the debtor nation will inevitably default on its payments. And then America, the Shylock of nations, takes its pound of flesh. It demands control over the country's vote at the United Nations. It demands access for the building of military bases. It demands access to natural resources such as oil. It demands whatever the country has that America wants. And, of course, the debt remains and the poor people in the country are further impoverished while America's global empire grows. Leaders who protest and dare not to cooperate are either bought, overthrown (with the aid of a CIA fuelled coup), demonised (with the aid of American controlled media) or killed (either in an automobile accident or in some way which suggests that the deceased was in some way dishonourable and unreliable.)

The admitted aim, when America moves into a resource rich country (and the resource, remember, may be something as simple as a United Nations vote) is to bankrupt the country, to make it beholden, to own it so that favours can be demanded as and when they are required. Naturally, the Americans also want to make an immediate profit on the deal. And they are prepared to make a handful of influential and ruthless locals fairly rich in the process. They arrange for huge loans to be given out (using money from other nations, of course), knowing that the unpayable debt will give America control and yet deprive the poor nation's most impoverished citizens of health, education and even food and water for decades. The fact that America controls, and effectively owns, the World Bank, makes all this ridiculously easy. Naive employees of the American companies involved in building dams, roads and generator plants may innocently believe that their company is being helpful. If they knew the truth some, perhaps, might actually feel guilty at the part they have played in America's desperate, feudal, ruthless yearning to rule the world.

The result of all this frantic activity is that America gets richer and poor countries get poorer; with the poorest people in the poorest countries suffering most. But in America the wealth goes not to the people (most of whom are poorer today than they were a generation ago) but to the already rich. The wealth America has stolen from poor countries has been reserved for the lucky few.

Furthermore, as America has spread its activities around the world so the modern day American slave traders have been busy setting up factories so that they can exploit low paid workers. Time after time American companies have moved into impoverished countries and set up factories where susceptible, vulnerable, workers can be exploited and turned into slaves making pumps, jeans and mobile telephones. What is this if it isn't just a modern version of slavery?

This is the country that England has protected, supported and fawned over. And although America has become rich through these tawdry schemes England has been impoverished by them in every conceivable way. We have never made money out of them. And instead of gaining power and authority (through sovereign blackmail) we have lost popularity and risen to become the most favoured target nation of terrorists. It is no secret that America is without a doubt the most hated nation on the planet. Americans are, quite reasonably, reviled worldwide for their grasping, selfish nature. And, by allying England with America, our Prime Ministers have squandered our good name, our well-established respect and our reputation for fairness and integrity and, instead, made us hated too.

15

The Monroe Doctrine (the work of President James Monroe in 1823) and the Manifest Destiny of the 1840s led many Americans to believe that the taking of North America was divinely ordained and that it was God who ordered the destruction of the Native Indians and the theft of their resources. The Doctrine was used in the 1850s to assert that the United States had special rights over the whole hemisphere and that the USA had the right to invade any nation in Central or South America which refused to back USA policies. In the 20th century, Teddy Roosevelt invoked the Monroe Doctrine to justify American intervention in Venezuela, in the Dominican Republic and in Panama. Since then American presidents have used the same nonsense to justify interventions in Vietnam, Indonesia and much of the rest of the world (especially those bits of the world rich in oil and other valuable natural resources).

16

American politicians admit privately that Israel is a liability but they will never say this in public; they know that they have to placate the Jewish vote (and the Jewish money which buys political favours) and so America is only ever going to back one side in the Middle East. For the USA this is a relatively small problem. They have a small Muslim population. For England, America's Number One Fall Guy, this is a huge problem - and a massive social and security headache. England has a huge, vocal and constantly growing Muslim population and our membership of the EU means that the number of Muslims in England is going to increase indefinitely.

17

The owner of the *Atlanta Jewish Times* recently called for Mossad to assassinate President Obama for having refused to go to war with Iran.

18

In Afghanistan, our allies (American soldiers) have been filmed urinating on dead soldiers. And they've burned copies of the Koran. And they have, of course, killed large numbers of entirely innocent women and children. It seems that whenever Americans occupy a country they simply cannot behave like civilised human beings.

19

The figures are impossible to obtain (probably because they do not exist) but I strongly suspect that in all the recent wars we have fought alongside the Americans the biggest threat to our troops has come not from the official enemy but from our alleged Allies. In other words, I believe that the number of our service personnel killed and injured by `friendly fire' exceeds the number killed or injured by `enemy fire'.

20

America's absurd War on Drugs, supported, endorsed and promoted by all recent Presidents, has done great work to help those who sell illegal drugs. As I pointed out many years ago in my book *The Drugs Myth*, the legalisation of drugs such as heroin and cocaine (or the slightly squirmy alternative decriminalisation) would have brought down prices, removed glamour and excitement, taken away the power of the drug czars (on both sides of the war) and dramatically reduced the number of users. The war on drugs, which has been dutifully echoed in England, has been welcomed by the leading wholesalers of illegal drugs because they know that their empires have been built up and sustained by the activities of the expensive, public sector leaders of this absurd and badly managed war.

Conclusion

The absurd belief, fostered by our diplomats, spies and politicians, that England gains power and credibility by hanging around with the USA was never based on any credible arguments. Many of those who most enthusiastically promoted the `special relationship' were more concerned with their own `special relationships' with American corporations and lobbyists.

For the last few decades our close links with America have done us no good and a great deal of harm. We have been dragged into the murky world controlled by the CIA (a world of torture, kidnapping and assassination) and our reputation as a nation has been trashed.

And, if we must ally ourselves closely with another country, wouldn't it be wiser to find a winner? Encouraged by its own massive arms industry and by politicians searching for power and oil, America has been fighting wars for decades without actually winning one. Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan...it's not exactly a military roll of honour is it? So many wars and so much failure.

Finally, if you thought that Greece was in a financial mess then you should take a close look at the United States of America. They are (as we are) truly, totally, completely and definitely stuffed. The merry days of American hubris are strictly limited. Back in 2005, two economists called Jagadeesh Gokhale and Kent Smetters estimated that the real American debt was $65.9 trillion. That isn't just bigger than the American Gross Domestic Product - its much bigger than the Gross Domestic Products of all the countries in the world added together. To reach that figure they simply looked at the USA, using the same accounting standards that any private sector company is obliged, by law, to use when it draws up a set of accounts. And if you are thinking, well the USA can't possibly default you might like to think again. They've already done it twice. (In 1790 and 1933 if you're interested.)

As Mitch Feierstein points out in his book *Planet Ponzi*, the United States of America's Government now owes over $75 trillion and the median household income in the USA is approximately $50,000 a year. (That's the combined income of all the members of each household). If everyone in every household gave all their earnings to pay off the American debt it would take them all 1.5 billion years to do it. And that is assuming that the American Government hasn't been lying and that the figures aren't worse than we've been told.

The bottom line is that the USA is bankrupt. Anyone who buys dollars, or American bonds or shares, because America is `safe', is heading for disaster.

CHAPTER 17: DISAPPEARING JOBS AND RISING UNEMPLOYMENT

Introduction

Unemployment figures are high and going to go higher. If the official unemployment figures included people in part time jobs, and people recently made redundant, the figure would be 6.3 million - more than double the official figures. If the figures included young people on pointless training schemes, and those avoiding work because of non-existent illnesses, the figure would be doubled again. The official figures now show that unemployment among 15-24 year olds in England is close to 25%. One in four young people doesn't have a job; they are being trained for life on the dole and learning to find a life outside society. The chances of those young people *ever* finding employment (or ever being able to hold down jobs) are as close to nil as you can get.

There are several reasons for this plague of unemployment. First, we are in a recession which is going to become a depression. The money has all gone to the bankers and speculators. And, instead of lending it out to entrepreneurs setting up widget factories, they are hoarding every penny they don't spend on yachts and champagne. Second, the EU has introduced a mass of legislation which has made life nigh on impossible for people running, or setting up, small companies.

1

An increasing number of people don't do jobs they actually want to do; instead they do jobs they don't like because they need the money. When people do jobs which provide them with little or no satisfaction, which are in a way forcing them into self-imposed exile from real life, they have to find their satisfaction in other ways: one result is that they borrow more money than they should and they spend more than they can afford to spend.

2

Ordinary workers (by which I mean the people in a business who do the hard work, and not the people who swan around the globe in private jets and chauffeur-driven limousines) have done very badly in the last few decades. Most earn less (in real money) than they did a generation ago. There are several reasons for this. First, company bosses are taking all the money. And so wages and salaries have to be cut. Second, Asian companies have lowered the going rate for many jobs. Globalisation (so loved by politicians) means that workers in Birmingham can be replaced by workers in Peking or Delhi at a fraction of the cost. Even service industry employees have discovered the significance of this sort of competition. Third, automation has made it possible for factories to manage with less people. Robots have taken over in many industries.

And, finally, of course, there is the wretched Internet which has destroyed zillions of real jobs and done far more than any other invention in history to destroy our quality of life.

3

People who lose their jobs almost always obtain less well-paid employment (if they find anything at all). And their children earn less too.

4

The unemployed, the underemployed, the pointlessly employed and the malemployed all suffer from loss of self-esteem because work is an essential part of our lives. The man who makes chairs or puts roofs on houses can, at the end of the week, take great pride in what he has done. Where is the pride and respect in selling motorcar insurance over the telephone, being a traffic warden or flipping burgers? The man in charge of nothing much at the local council will probably go home unsatisfied, frustrated and restless. Sadly, more and more people don't like their jobs; they don't want to do them and so they either find a way to refuse work (benefits have become a genuinely better career option for millions and faking stress illness or a bad back is easy) or they demand big money (as with doctors and bankers), do as little work as possible and plan to retire as soon as they can. When job dissatisfaction is low there is really only one reason to get out of bed in the morning and go to work: money. And when `compensation' is no longer just one of a number of reasons to work its importance obviously rises. And the union representative who offers workers better pay and shorter working hours will receive a better hearing. Workers who are content don't need unions and don't contemplate taking industrial action. When Eiffel built his tower in Paris he put the names of the men who had helped him around the ironwork on the first floor. They can still be seen. Maybe modern employers should find ways to give a feeling of pride to their employees. Workers who have pride in what they do work harder and work better. Productivity is higher, there is less sickness, more happiness and fewer strikes. Sadly, a recent survey showed that well over half of all employees take no pride at all in their work.

5

Politicians puzzle about why young women are having particular difficulty in finding jobs with small and medium sized companies. If anyone is interested I have the answer. No employer with more then three functioning brain cells will employ a young woman because if she is pregnant when she starts work, or subsequently becomes pregnant, she will be entitled to stay at home for up to a year. The employer will have to continue to employ her and he will not be able to hire a replacement. Government departments can cope with this daft law because no one does very much work and the absence of a young mother won't be noticed. Large companies can cope because they have had to over-employ in order to deal with the problem. But small and medium sized companies cannot cope with it. If a shopkeeper has two employees and one of them becomes pregnant he will be in an impossible situation. He is forced by law to allow the pregnant woman to take a year off but the law does not allow him to hire a replacement. He has to keep the woman's job open for her. She can have ten children, one after the other, and the law still applies. And so people running small and medium sized businesses do their very best to ensure that they do not hire women of childbearing age. And now that there are new laws giving men the right to take huge amounts of time off work when their wives (or girlfriends) become pregnant it is a fair bet that employers will start avoiding young male employees too. The European Union has forced employers into discriminating against the fecund. Still, all this means that older job applicants now have a good chance of finding employment.

6

The EU is constantly bleating about equality. The eurocrats should be aware that among 22 to 29-year-olds, women now earn more on average than their male counterparts. If the EU cares about equality then the eurocrats clearly need to introduce legislation forcing companies to pay young men as much as they pay young women. If any group of citizens needs help it is low-skilled males - who are now virtually unemployable.

7

If two candidates for a position have the same qualifications and one is black or brown and the other is white then the candidate who is black or brown will get the job. If one of the two candidates is a woman and the other is a man the woman will get the job. Officially, that's called positive discrimination. Personally, I call it racism and sexism. (Incidentally, if the only two candidates are male then the one with the most hair will be appointed.)

Positive discrimination of all sorts is bad because it is nothing more than officially sanctioned prejudice; legalised bigotry. And just because prejudice is official it isn't right. Black or female candidates are appointed and promoted ahead of white males because of some bizarre attempt to put right something that happened a century or more ago. I don't quite understand how punishing one group of people today corrects discrimination against another group of people a generation or two ago. The whole absurd thing goes on because no one dares criticise because they know that to protest about the discrimination and the prejudice will be regarded as racist or sexist. If that isn't a perfect example of utter madness I don't know what is.

8

One of Japan's television manufacturers recently cut its workforce from 5,000 to 15 (yes, from five thousand to fifteen) after automating a plant. However many burger joints and call centres are opened those jobs will never be recovered or even re-created. The bottom line is that, thanks to automation and computerisation, there will, in future, be less jobs available than there are now.

9

Many central and local government policies seem designed to prevent people getting jobs. For example, many workers travel to work by bus. But bus services are being cut and many of the cuts are a direct result of Government policies. There has been a 20% cut in fuel duty relief for bus operators. There have been cuts to bus subsidies. And cuts to concessionary fares. All these cuts mean that people who want to work but don't have motorcars can't travel and so must stay at home and remain unemployed. It's difficult to see how cuts of this type help the country grow. If the Government really wanted to help the poor (and especially the working poor) they would subsidise local public transport. Many people cannot afford to take jobs because the cost of bus or rail fares are so high.

10

Even those who can find work no longer regard what they do as rewarding or worthwhile. Labour is too often demeaning; repetitive, uniform and without skill or pride. Men have become machine minders and instead of being allowed to acquire skills and master the materials with which they work they are now subordinated to serving machines stamping out parts. Or they are reduced to serving pre-prepared `food' that contains little of nutritional value.

The reward for all this is higher living standards for those who can find employment. Aeroplane journeys to foreign resorts (where fast food is available), huge television screens which dominate the home, constant access to the Internet (so that everyone can share their prejudices in a me, me, me way). We consume more. We throw away more. But are our standards of living higher? How much progress is progress?

11

Strikes used to be about making enough money to eat and live. These days strikers want money to buy a larger TV set, a third car and a foreign holiday home. The damage done by trade unions will increase as austerity really starts to bite. The selfishness of union members will further increase the damage done and increase the depth and length of the depression. The slow down in growth, productivity, efficiency, competence and quality of service has been caused by three things. First, a decline in corporate and general management quality. Second, an abundance of rules and regulations (largely emanating from the European Union). EU regulations mean that people work less than they used to do. Roads used to be busy between 5pm and 6pm, when everyone went home, these days they are at their busiest between 4pm and 5pm. Working hours have, thanks to the EU, fallen by a quarter in recent years. It is hardly surprising that productivity has fallen. Third, the rising power of trade unions. The labour market today is dominated by the vested interests of regulators, unions and big employers (especially governments). Too generous a welfare system, added in, helps to sustain the ultimately unsustainable.

The pound has fallen by 20% since 2007 but there has been no useful impact on growth through trade as a result because, thanks to the unions, our home-grown regulations (brought in by two Labour governments) and our habit of enthusiastically gold plating EU regulations, we no longer have much of an industry.

12

Productivity in England is terrible (pretty well the worst in the world). It seems to be a puzzle to our leaders. They cannot understand how productivity can be so low when we have more regulations than any other country, longer holidays, more tea breaks and a massive social security system which encourages laziness and a feeling that `I don't care if I lose my job because if I do the State will give me a ton of money to stay at home'.

Productivity has also been damaged by our enthusiasm for taking time off work. If an official bank holiday falls on a weekend we take another day off in lieu. In other countries it is simply regarded as hard luck if Christmas Day is on a Saturday. Over the Christmas period many businesses simply close down for a week or two. Isn't it about time that we abandoned bank holidays? They were introduced at a time when workers had very little holiday. Today, some employees (particularly public sector workers and EU employees) seem to be away from work more often than they are there. Many employees (particularly those with public sector jobs) insist that if they don't take their allowed sick days they should be allowed to take those days as extra holiday. And people with jobs which require training (such as teachers) always insist that the training is done when they are paid to be working.

13

When tradesmen and shopkeepers worked for themselves, the services they provided and the products they sold were better and cheaper. Today, the paperwork, the red tape, the health and safety regulations, the essential licensing, the insurance costs and so on and so on mean that small businessmen have to hire professional help to enable them to deal with the problems they face. The result is that everything has become infinitely more complicated. Prices have risen, product quality has fallen and service is poorer.

14

The Government is systematically destroying small business. Is this deliberate? Well, yes it is. But we have to remember that the rules which are destroying small businesses are being brought in by the EU on the instructions of international goliaths - who obviously have a vested financial interest in destroying small companies before they become competitors. The problem is that our political leaders haven't yet worked out what is happening. Leaders in other EU countries simply refuse to accept new EU legislation which they believe would be damaging to their industries.

15

Now that unions have far too much power it is increasingly easy for a small group of selfish workers to hold the country to ransom. Around 2,000 greedy tanker drivers who can, more readily than almost any other small group of greedy extremists hold the country to ransom, were in the spring of 2012 threatening to go on strike. These semi-skilled workers were being paid £45,000 a year to drive trucks with round bodies. That's about twice the amount paid to a driver who looks after a truck with a flat-sided body. And, like all overpaid, greedy dastards, they wanted yet more money. There are 8,000 petrol stations and 2,000 drivers. All these fellows have to do is to remember to drive from one petrol station to the next. There is no heavy furniture to unload. Just deliver the petrol, have a good lunch and remember to go home at the end of the day. Why didn't the Government announce that they would allow the companies concerned to sack all the drivers and hire replacements? It was agreed that it would take no more than a week to hire new drivers (there would be no shortage of applicants) and the new ones would be unlikely to go on strike when they realised how easy it was to do the work. (And just for fun I would, after firing the idiots, print the names and addresses of all the dastardly tanker drivers threatening to hold the country to ransom.) But, instead of acting firmly, and telling people to stay calm, the Government did nothing but encourage drivers to rush out and fill up containers with petrol. (They always do the same thing whenever there is the faintest whiff of a terrorist attack; they panic.)

I was particularly depressed by the activity of the trade unions in all this threatening behaviour. Unions weren't created to look after pampered lorry drivers taking home more than twice as much as a highly-trained ambulance driver. Unions were created to look after the oppressed. Unions seem to me to have no place in our society.

16

English workers no longer go to work if they want to watch a football match or enjoy a television programme or sit out in the sunshine. This is not surprising. Even the leader of the Labour Party recently chose to sneak off work to watch a football match.

17

In the bad old days shops employed assistants who helped customers and provided cheery smiles and words about the weather for the elderly and lonely. Those days have gone and more and more shops now have self-service tills where customers are hectored by a computerised voice if their scanning and packing skills fall below the accepted European standards. Even public libraries are introducing these awful scanners. The machines are, of course, introduced because they allow employers to employ less people but the staff who work in these places don't seem to have worked this out and are universally delighted that they can stand around doing nothing. `Oh there will always be things for us to do,' said a smug librarian as he watched an old lady struggling with the machine that had replaced him. What a stupid sod. If trade unions truly cared about their members they would be fighting this latest takeover by computers, for our supermarkets and high street shops will soon have hardly any staff at all. For a while I used to insist on being served by a person to help preserve their jobs. But the assistants are mostly sullen and uninterested and would clearly prefer that we all use the machines. So in future I will. And they will join the ranks of the unemployed.

18

A friend of the Princess's, who has a job working for a local council, has been told that she must take a 10% cut in her wages. Her income is already low and she told The Princess that the cut means that she will have no holidays and no luxuries and will have to give up her car. Councils everywhere are, it seems, making the public and the lower paid pay for the Brown induced cuts. Meanwhile, so-called executives are giving themselves pay rises, bonuses and increased expense allowances.

19

Most politicians don't understand the problems employers face because most politicians have never run a business and never employed people themselves. Pompous, patronising politicians such as Vince Cable dismiss out of hand the common anxieties of employers, such as not being able to sack lazy and incompetent employees and having to deal with ever more onerous rules about pregnant employees and their husbands.

20

`The surly young man in a hoodie who turns up looking unwilling to work can turn into an excited and motivated employee,' said one Government minister, trying to encourage employers to hire hoodies but, to many employers, merely showing just how out of touch a Government minister can be.

Conclusion

Politicians have used a number of tricks to disguise the facts but unemployment has been rising steadily for years. Thanks to the failing economy, the coming global depression and the Internet, unemployment is likely to stay high (and steadily go higher) until there is a revolution.

CHAPTER 18: OUR CREAKING INFRASTRUCTURE

Introduction

Like the worst dictators in the worst slum countries in the world, our leaders (or, more accurately, misleaders) have allowed our nation's infrastructure to fall into appalling disrepair. Our Victorian forefathers (now widely regarded with contempt by young politicians who need to visit You Tube in order to find out how to tie their shoelaces) gave us the world's most impressive infrastructure. English engineers such as Brunel built roads, bridges and railways that were (and still are) the envy of the world.

1

We need to spend at least £500 billion if we are to repair and restore our infrastructure. Much of our current infrastructure was built by the Victorians who did a marvellous job but their needs were rather different to ours. Actually, the truth is that the Victorians did too good a job. Their buildings, railway stations, bridges, sewers and water supply pipes have, by and large, received attention only when they needed repairing. What we should have been doing, of course, was making serious improvements to our infrastructure when we were making oodles of cash as a result of the wonders of all the extra energy provided by oil. That would have been the sensible, responsible thing to do. But none of our recent political leaders has been guilty of doing anything sensible or responsible. They've spent the money on sweeties and doughnuts when they should have spent it laying new sewage pipes and building new water treatment works.

2

Our sewers, water pipes, roads, bridges and power stations are all falling apart. Our elderly hospitals and public buildings (such as town halls and libraries) are dignified, spacious and stout but dilapidated and need a little love. We don't need to replace them but we do need to freshen them up. And we need more of them (all apart from the town halls).

Much of our power network will have to shut down by 2019. Our coal-fired power stations will be closed by new EU emission regulations. And our nuclear power plants are reaching the end of their safe and useful lives. (It takes a decade to build and commission a new nuclear power station. And the Government, full of people who failed, or should have failed, O level maths, still seems to think it can cram a decade into the years between 2012 and 2019.)

3

Instead of using the taxes it collects to improve our infrastructure, our governments have, for some considerable time, been busy selling bits of our infrastructure to foreign sovereign funds who won't give a bowl of rice if things don't work properly.

Roughly half of all our essential services (bridges, water supplies, airports, seaports, etc.) now have foreign owners who are not at all concerned about English public opinion and who owe no allegiance to England or the English.

Consider, for example, Scottish Power which supplies gas and electricity throughout England and which is now owned by a Spanish company. Like other energy companies Scottish Power is constantly pushing up its prices. It recently made such vast profits that it was able to lend £800 million to a sister company in America, where it couldnt raise its prices for energy customers because of local regulations. (The American Government, and individual American states, are much tougher on foreign companies than we are.)

England has such weak controls on foreign companies that we have become the first port of call for foreign investors (private or sovereign) looking for a place to invest where big profits can be made without too much trouble from lawmakers or regulators. Our liberal takeover rules, our pliant politicians and our servile media (misled, as always, by the State-run broadcasting service the BBC) have enabled foreign companies to acquire vast amounts of English industry.

In 2009, foreign companies and sovereign funds bought £30 billion worth of English companies. In 2010, they bought just under £55 billion. The Chinese are expected to be spending £400 billion a year on buying big companies. (The Chinese Government already owns 3% of the FTSE 100 and has £2 trillion in cash to invest.) Every year. It won't be long before everyone who isn't working for our Government will be working for a foreign one. It has been easy for them to do this. Foreign banks can and do create billions out of nothing and central banks have been printing money with great enthusiasm for years. So our vital utilities have been sold to foreigners using funny money as currency. It wouldn't have been so bad if they'd bought our stuff with gold - which we could have used to replenish our stocks (since Gordon the Moron flogged off the family holdings for a rock bottom price the minute he got control of the keys). Other countries protect their companies and their infrastructure with great enthusiasm. The Americans are very strict about what foreign companies can and cannot do. And foreigners cannot buy oil companies, TV companies, airlines and other essential services. The French don't allow key technologies or companies to fall into foreign hands. The Spanish insist on holding onto their energy companies. And although India has bought English companies such as Land Rover and Jaguar it won't allow English companies to take full control of Indian companies.

There are big problems in all this.

First, foreign owners don't give a toss about what happens to customers in England. All they are concerned about are profits. Costs are cut in order to maximise profits. If you doubt the truth of that just remember that Heathrow is foreign owned.

Second, foreign owners are invariably quick to close English factories and move manufacturing abroad. Executives don't give a damn about their popularity or unpopularity in England. And, in the absence of strict laws, they don't give a damn for what politicians think either. If you doubt the truth of that just think what happened when American baddie Kraft bought iconic English company Cadburys.

The irony is that much of the stuff which foreign companies and sovereign funds own was built with taxpayers' money and so foreigners are now charging us to use facilities which we paid for and maintained. Worse still, most of the new owners are slum landlords and aren't particularly enthusiastic about doing any repairs. Foreign companies (and sovereign investment funds) are buying up England's crumbling infrastructure, and manufacturing companies and will run them into the ground with no regard for the well being of the English people or English workers.

It may or not be because much of it is foreign owned but England is now officially 33rd in the world for the quality of its infrastructure. We are behind Tunisia and Cyprus and alongside Slovenia. And because of union rules, tea breaks and absurd regulations, big civil engineering projects cost 60% more in England than in Germany.

4

Politicians have been crooked for decades. A politician called Ernest Marples is now largely forgotten but he played a huge part in defining our society and, most significantly, in destroying the railways.

(As an aside it was Englishman Richard Trevithick who devised the first motorised transport. Back in 1802 Trevithick invented the motorcar. Without pausing to take a bow, he then immediately invented the bus. And, because the roads weren't good enough for his new vehicles, he built tracks and invented the train. These days EU regulations and the health and safety people would have stopped him before he sharpened his quill. The first mass production of cars was organised by Thomas Rickett in England in 1860. Karl Benz, the German, was laughably later in 1885 and by the time Henry Ford started experimenting with cars Trevithick's invention was near a century old. Today, most Englishmen and women probably think foreigners invented all these things. This is because foreigners tell us they invented them and, as a nation, we tend to be polite and self-effacing almost to the point of non-existence. But Trevithick was the first. In a single flurry of concentrated genius, he invented the car, the bus and the train.)

Anyway, back down to earth and back to Ernest Marples.

Marples had been a pushy Minister who in the pre-Blair days probably did more to screw up the country than anyone except the utterly repulsive and traitorous Ted Heath. He joined the Government in 1957 as Postmaster General and introduced subscriber trunk dialling which got rid of operators for national telephone calls and, at a stroke, did immeasurable damage to the ability of lonely, middle-aged women to cement their place in society with gossip. He also introduced postcodes and Premium Bonds.

A couple of years later Marples became the Transport Minister and he immediately started making his mark there too. He introduced seat belts, yellow lines and parking meters. And he introduced motorways which quickly became famous for having `Marples Must Go' painted on virtually every bridge. In 1959 Marples opened the first section of the M1 motorway.

Now Marples knew about roads. He had founded Marples-Ridgway, a construction firm that had built many roads, and so he naturally stood to gain enormously from his own enthusiasm for bigger and more expensive roads.

In order to avoid public criticism of a clear conflict of interest, Marples announced that he would sell his controlling interest in Marples-Ridgway and this he duly did. He then not only began furiously building more roads, but also started getting rid of the railways. It was Marples who appointed the notorious and woefully short-sighted Dr Beeching who immediately started cutting the best railway service in the world. All requests for money for the railways had to go to Marples. And most were rejected. Marples the road builder destroyed our railways.

Oh, one other thing is worth mentioning.

I mentioned earlier that Marples sold his shareholding in his eponymous road-building company. He did. He sold the shares to his wife, proving that corruption in English politics is no new thing.

Today, thanks to Marples and Beeching, our rail network is a disaster and a disgrace. What a pity no one, then or later, had the foresight to realise that with the oil running out the railways are the easiest, most energy efficient, most economical way to move people and goods around the country. What a pity all the rails were ripped up and all the local railway stations sold as holiday cottages. The lunatic Dr Beeching destroyed communities and isolated towns and villages. His short-sighted stupidity resulted in overcrowded roads, and a good deal of pollution.

5

Other European countries have fantastic infrastructures. France, for example, has marvellous roads, public buildings, airports and all the rest. The French are now pretty well as broke as we are but when they had some money they spent it wisely. They could have spent all their money on frogs legs and snails but instead they used some of it on sensible stuff like nuclear power stations. They too spent too much, but they have something to show for their spending.

6

No other country has copied our experiment with railway privatisation. I'm not surprised. The mess we now have is more complex and confusing (and worse value) than it was when it was called British Rail and we all laughed at the sandwiches. At least in those days you could always take your own sandwiches. These days, the reliability and punctuality record is so poor that, if you want to go anywhere by rail, you really need to take your own train. Taxpayers still pay out as much as when the railways were State-owned, fares are far more expensive and there are more accidents.

7

Here's another example showing that privatisation may not always be a good idea. In the spring of 2012, it was announced that a hosepipe ban would be introduced into much of England (though not the bits due to host the Olympics, where nice green grass was considered far more important than the growing of potatoes or runner beans). Why was England short of water? Well, the privatised water companies are very good at collecting money but not terribly good at looking after water. Anglian Water, one of the companies introducing a hosepipe ban, made £447 million operating profit in 2011 but spent just £14 million fixing water leaks. Other water companies are much the same. And so, as a result, a quarter of the water sent to customers never arrives at its destination but pours out through mendable leaks.

There's another problem.

You might imagine that if a water company supplying one part of the country had a water shortage then a company supplying another part of the country would help out (for a few million quid, of course). No chance. The water companies (sometimes controlled by people living on the other side of the planet) are focused regionally and they don't see the nation as a whole. So there are no national solutions to water shortage problems.

8

Anyone who argues that our national infrastructure should remain English will be denounced as jingoistic, nationalistic, racist and someone who probably tucks his shirt into his underpants (if male) or shaves her moustache (if female). But England is just about the only country in the world which allows its national infrastructure to be bought and managed by companies and individuals who live thousands of miles away and who care only about profits. It is easy to argue that the utility companies should be privatised. But there have to be controls. And for the controls to work the companies have to be owned by people who at least spend their holidays in England. At the moment much of our infrastructure is owned by businessmen who are intent only on gouging the last penny out of the elderly, the frail and the weak and who don't give a damn what anyone says about them.

9

Successive governments have been criminally incompetent in failing to repair our infrastructure in order to prepare us for the hard times ahead.

In March 2012, it was announced that standpipes would become a regular sight in summers to come. We were encouraged to blame the weather for this (and, presumably, a Christian rather than a Muslim god) but the truth is that for decades governments have failed to plan, organise and pay for proper water storage facilities. They have always assumed that it will rain and that everything will be fine. Proposals for a national water grid were abandoned in the 1970s because it was deemed to be too expensive. Since then we've always had plenty of money to wage illegal wars, and to set up pointless quangos, but we've never had enough money to do something about our creaky water supply infrastructure.

And now we're in a mess.

The shortage of water will lead to higher food prices.

And, as the global supplies of water become scarcer (it is not news that water is in scarce supply and is now the planets most valuable asset) it is absurd that we waste so much water. Do motorcars have to be washed every Sunday? Are daily baths a real necessity? Does it really help the environment if we all wash out our empty yoghurt cartons?

10

The global shortage of food will, as I forecast some years ago, be exacerbated by the massive increase in the number of Chinese and Indians now eating meat and meat products such as burgers and sausages. The amount of grain used to feed cattle and other animals is so great that if the world became vegetarian or vegan there would be no shortage of food and no starving millions. (And, as a bonus, there would be much less illness.)

11

Our energy supplies are heavily dependent on foreign suppliers. Our existing nuclear power stations are being phased out. Most of our gas and oil comes from the Gulf (hardly the most stable area of the world). The EU is forcing us to abandon our coal-fired power stations. We will soon have regular electricity outages. Politicians haven't yet worked out that it won't be easy for the economy to grow when there isn't any electricity.

12

Our party system has meant that we no longer have national strategies. Everything is short-term. No politicians think more than four or five years ahead. Decisions that should have been taken years ago have been delayed. Politicians refuse to consider `big' issues because they regard the long-term as someone else's problem.

Conclusion

The Victorians found enough money and time to build magnificent hospitals, public buildings, railways, bridges, and railway stations. They built water works and sewage plants and schools galore. What have we produced with all our wealth? Our legacy to the next generation is an outdated and constantly crumbling infrastructure. And our Government will continue to do nothing, partly because they cannot now afford to do anything and partly because our politicians are too damned stupid to do anything until the sewage reaches the level of the extractor fan.

CHAPTER 19 : DISAPPEARING PRIVACY AND LOST FREEDOM

Introduction

Our lives are dominated by people who believe they have a right to control our lives in every conceivable way. They believe they have a right to tell us how to behave and a right to spend our money for us. Busy bodies working for the EU have given themselves the authority to remove our freedom and our liberty and to make all our decisions for us. Economic and social freedom is now just a memory.

The problem with the nanny State (and that's a rather kindly way of referring to the most fascist organisation in human history) is that when you treat adults like children they inevitably start behaving like children. And so we now have a culture built on irresponsibility and entitlement. Millions expect the State to look after their every need, and their daily lives are driven forward not by ambition, determination or the intention to survive but by a sense of constant expectation. And a feeling of grievance when they are occasionally left to make decisions for themselves or, worse still, have to deal with thwarted desires.

The rules and regulations produced with such relentless enthusiasm by the fascist storm troopers in Brussels have created a stagnant society in which too many adults always expect someone else to make their decisions for them, always expect someone else to take all the responsibility and someone else to provide for their every need.

Taking responsibility for your own life isn't easy. Making decisions for yourself is always difficult.

1

There is a State encouraged assumption that anyone who wants to be private must have something to hide. This is nonsense. Even those of us who have no secrets, no hidden skeletons and no shame in our lives like to preserve some privacy. But the State (and its enforcers) don't like the idea of privacy. The State likes to know everything about everyone because knowledge is power and total knowledge is total power.

2

Doctors and lawyers always used to take patient or client confidentiality very seriously. That confidentiality has now gone. Anything you tell your doctor or lawyer is about as private as if you broadcast it on prime time television, or talked about it on your mobile phone. The Government (acting on instructions from Hitler's Bastard Love Child) has made it illegal for members of either profession (and, indeed, other professions) to offer confidentiality as part of their professional service. Moreover, the Government has introduced a law making it illegal for professionals to tell you that they are going to share your secrets with the authorities. Or to even admit that they might.

3

The only people who can rely on their lives being kept private are senior politicians who rely on people whose wages are paid for by us to provide them with the sort of privacy we would like to enjoy if it had not been taken away by people working for the Government and, again, paid for by us.

4

Most decent passwords used for the Internet and so on end up being written down because they are impossible to remember. The more passwords we acquire, and the more complex we are encouraged to make them (using a mixture of letters and numbers, upper and lower case and the funny bits from the keyboard) the more we are likely to write them down. But written down is a synonym for insecure. The more complex you make security, the more vulnerable it becomes. I have an employer's account with the HMRC and to operate the account the idiots working there sent me (through the post) an absurdly long password which has to be written down. No one not working as a memory man on the music halls could ever remember such a password. But, then, the people at HMRC are not the folk to whom I would automatically turn for advice on personal security.

5

`Every man should know that his conversations, his correspondence and his personal life are private.' - Lyndon B. Johnson, forner USA President

6

Government departments regard privacy as irrelevant - unless it is their privacy that is being discussed. Government buffoon Vince Cable recently apologised for the fact that transparent sackfuls of private mail and confidential documents were dumped outside his constituency office. A resignation letter would have been more acceptable than an apology.

7

All cabs licensed in Oxford will soon have to carry a CCTV camera that will routinely record all discussions in the vehicle. This is, of course, being done `to protect passengers'.

8

`How many of us have paused during conversation in the past (few) years, suddenly aware that we might be eavesdropped on? Probably it was a phone conversation; maybe it was an e-mail or instant-message exchange or a talk in a public place. Maybe the topic was terrorism, politics or Islam. We stop suddenly, momentarily afraid that our words might be taken out of context, then we laugh at our paranoia and go on. But our demeanour has changed, and our words are subtly altered.' - Bruce Schneier

9

The Internet has generated vast stores of information. Much of this material is entirely without value. A good deal of the stored information is dangerously misleading, either by design or through ignorance. A good deal is libellous. Some is useful. The problem is that it is almost impossible for the non-expert user to know which information is of value and which is dangerously misleading. Moreover our growing dependency on the Internet is destroying just about every aspect of our society. Crucially, the Internet is enabling the State (and all international corporations) to deprive us of our individuality, our freedom, our rights and our privacy. Almost every Government department, and every company with whom you and I are likely to come into contact, forces us to conduct our business on the Internet, charges us more if we choose not to, or are unable to use the Internet, will constantly cajole us to visit their damned websites, to ask all our questions on their websites and to manage our businesses on their websites. If we telephone for help or information the accursed `press one, press two...' response will constantly be interrupted by irritating exhortations promoting the damned wonders of the damned website. (The promotion for their website is the second thing they record after the message containing the words `due to a high volume of calls'.) And when you do get to the accursed website (because there is simply no other way to contact anyone) you will usually find something badly designed, incompetently run, littered with annoying, patronising messages and `quite unfit for purpose'.

10

It has been proven that better lighting is four times better than CCTV cameras at preventing crime in towns and cities. Despite this evidence councils everywhere are turning off the lights and putting up more cameras. Lights help people. Cameras invade our privacy and help the authorities.

11

In May 2012, it was announced that the Information Commissioner (someone or something straight out of George Orwell's *1984,* but in this instance perhaps not entirely evil) was investigating allegations that Google used its Street View cars (the ones that wander around taking pictures of everything they see, and then putting the pictures on the Web) to gather personal information from *inside* the houses they were photographing. Google's camera cars were apparently collecting complete e-mails, texts, Internet passwords, private documents, photographs and online dating searches. They were using wireless connections and specially designed software to steal all this information. Google was, at the time, already facing a possible anti-trust suit by the European Commission, which was considering whether the Google search engine promoted its own products over those of its rivals. (Surely not?) I don't care whether the authorities do or do not decide that Google behaved illegally. In my view they behaved immorally.

I have repeatedly described Google as being, in my view, one of the most evil companies on the planet. It is worth remembering that whatever you delete from your Google searches isn't really deleted because Google keeps a full list of everywhere you go and everything you do. Why? Commercial reasons. What are they going to do with all that private information? Your guess is as good as mine but if that's not Big Brother in operation I don't know what is.

12

Companies always highlight changes to their privacy policies but how many people read these documents? The average website privacy policy takes 10 minutes to read and since the average Web user encounters over 1400 privacy policies in a year that's a lot of small print to read. In fact it would take more than 76 working days to read all those policies and the cost to the economy would be vast.

So, no one can seriously, or realistically, understand what rights they are giving away. Nor can they control their privacy any more.

Companies should be required to adhere to a single, easily read and readily available statement.

13

Some time ago the EU proposed a new right to be forgotten - and to have all personal data removed from Internet sites. This would free many of us from the tyranny of Google et al. Inevitably, nothing has happened and nothing is likely to happen.

14

Facebook has assembled personal data from 850 million people. All these folk have given intimate information away, entirely free of charge, to a ruthless, large American company. The worlds largest library of marketing information can now be shared with advertisers, political parties, the CIA and every other commercial and political organisation in the world which has the cash to spend. All the information collected on Facebook is owned by Facebook. (I am not on Facebook by the way, though a site was apparently set up in my name some time ago. I have never visited it.)

15

In early 2012, an international agreement designed to stop online piracy and the theft of intellectual property (books, articles, films and music) was shelved after online campaigns were organised by some of the biggest websites. They used hacking and demonstrations to oppose the legislation which had been planned by the American Government (the *Stop Online Piracy Act* and the *Protect Intellectual Property Act*). In January 2012, Wikipaedia, Google and a bunch of other Web based companies staged a one day protest about these proposed anti-piracy bills which were designed to protect creators and copyright holders.

16

Stores have been trawling their customer databases for years looking for commercial useful information. For example, stores often look through their available information looking for evidence of second trimester pregnancy. (One store recently mailed baby advertising to a teenager before her own father realised she was pregnant.) And political parties and candidates regularly buy data from credit agencies so that they can advertise to specific groups of voters. The electoral register is the most readily available source of private information. (A friend says it isn't difficult to avoid having your name on the register. He suggests you simply tell the authorities that your home is a `holiday home'. He says that as long as you pay the full council tax they won't care.)

17

Nothing is secure on the Internet. In June 2011, it was revealed that hackers had stolen the entire 2011 census.

(You might argue that this serves people right for trusting the Government with private information.) A few months earlier, in January 2012 a Web meeting between Scotland Yard and the FBI to discuss hacking was hacked into.

18

`Just because you do not take an interest in politics doesn't mean politics wont take an interest in you.' - Pericles 430 BC

19

Our Government is more likely to request details of our Web usage than the authorities in almost any other country. Only Singapore (which has been criticised by Human Rights Watch as an authoritarian state) beats England. And, of course, we have more CCTV cameras than anywhere else in the world. The English are the most spied upon people on the planet.

20

Prisoners are now being hired to do computer work for the Government. It seems safe to assume that they will soon be hired to do call centre work and to manage online banking services. This sort of work should provide all sorts of ideas and possibilities for post-prison employment.

21

Wishing to maintain any degree of confidentiality is now regarded as a crime by the State, and by many who do not understand the value of privacy. `If you have done nothing wrong you have nothing to fear' is the mantra of the dumb and is the argument against privacy and confidentiality and for snooping by the Government and all its myrmidons.

22

Here are my tips for surviving in our modern world:

a) Always pay cash whenever possible.

b) Assume that everything you write on the Internet, or say on the telephone, will be broadcast on the evening news and published in the daily press.

c) Assume everything is bugged.

d) Know and understand your rights under the Human Rights Act.

e) Don't use the same computer for Internet work and for private work.

23

Your bank probably persists in regarding your birth date as a secure and secret password. But the number of people who know your birth date includes everyone working at HMRC, the DVLA, and every Government department, all insurance companies with whom you have done business, the passport office, all foreign tax organisations with whom you have had encounters, your doctor, your dentist, all the clubs of which you are a member, everyone to whom you are related, everyone who has read any of the reference books and websites which decorate your biography with your date of birth and anyone with access to the Internet.

I doubt if there is a thief on the planet too stupid to find your date of birth within a minute. Even Fred Goodwin could probably find it. Well, perhaps not, but you get the general idea.

And yet your bank still regards your birth date as the fundamental key to your private world.

24

In the spring of 2012, England's newspaper commentators seemed desperately confused when it was announced that the Government was planning to introduce new surveillance laws allowing the police to have real time access to our telephone calls, e-mails and texts. Oh, and also to have details of our entire Internet search histories. The puzzle was that the Tories had opposed exactly the same policy when it had been first suggested by the last Labour Government. At that time the Tories had promised to roll back surveillance legislation. What no one mentioned was that the EU was behind the new laws and so our politicians have no say in whether or not the legislation was introduced. Of the 1,000 plus public bodies already entitled (under existing surveillance laws) to monitor your electronic communications, two thirds are local authorities. Precisely why your council should concern itself with reading your e-mails, listening to your phone calls and looking at your list of Web searches is a mystery. They would, perhaps, be better occupied emptying dustbins and filling in potholes.

25

Here's a thought. Every time I go out of the house I can't help noticing that every other person I see is on the telephone. Where is the Government going to find the 20 million people they will need to monitor all the phone calls being made?

26

`Everyone has the right of freedom of opinions and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.' - United Nations Charter Article 19

27

The Government is planning to store everyone's e-mails and search histories indefinitely. This may appeal to those politicians who believe that freedom and privacy must be sacrificed in the name of protecting our civilised society but when you remove the freedom and privacy there isn't much left of a civilised society.

Freidrich Hayek pointed out that pragmatists are often willing to sacrifice a little liberty here and there for some theoretical advantage but we already have CCTV cameras everywhere, and everything we do is constantly watched and detailed by covert employees of our councils and police forces. At what point will we say `enough'? Hayek's great book was called *The Road to Serfdom* and he was right. We are constantly giving up little bits of freedom and before we know it we will be in a world where the Government does whatever it likes. And we are mere serfs.

Or, perhaps, we are already there.

28

That sanctimonious newspaper the *Guardian* is probably the most establishment newspaper in the country. It is always opposed to anything revolutionary or rebellious. According to an opinion poll published in the *Guardian* an alarming 71% of *Guardian* readers said they thought that compulsory ID cards would be a price worth paying to reduce the threat of terrorism. An astonishing 35% said they would accept a ban on peaceful protests and 22% said they would accept the torture of terror suspects in English jails if it could prevent an attack on our country. What I find particularly scary about all this is that it is the *Guardian* which carries nearly all job advertising for the Government and the BBC and which is, in effect, the house journal for the establishment.

29

The security services, police forces and other agencies made over 500,000 requests to access phone and e-mail records last year. (I hope they found my calls and e-mails edifying.)

30

Part of the problem in our society is that the wrong things are protected by the rules.

Our dentist has a sign up in his waiting room saying that when receptionists are ringing to remind patients of an impending appointment (an annoying habit) receptionists can't share information with patients' relatives about appointments which have been made, might be made or need to be made. They are not allowed to say why they are ringing or to mention the time of any appointment. They are probably not even allowed to say who is ringing. I can imagine the bizarre conversations which might ensue from this nonsense.

Once we get into the surgery, of course, health and safety regulations take over from the Data Protection Act. We have to wear silly spectacles and a plastic bib. There was some consternation when I recently complained that there was no seat belt and that as a result I might fall out of the chair.

31

The USSR and the Eastern Bloc countries maintained power over their citizens by encouraging them to report one another - creating nations of spies and informers. England has done the same. The Government now actively encourages people to report their neighbours or family to the authorities if they suspect they are claiming benefits to which they are not entitled, avoiding taxes they should pay or are driving a motorcar without a valid road tax licence.

32

`No man hath power over my rights and liberties and I over no man's.' - Richard Overton (political activist in the time of Oliver Cromwell)

33

Drug companies and firms which do animal testing are to be given private, personal medical records. This means that they will be able to access the home addresses and telephone numbers of those who have publicly opposed animal experimentation.

34

I recently visited a mobile phone shop. I wanted to buy a Pay as You Go telephone with cash. They refused to sell me the telephone unless I showed them a copy of a recent bank statement.

35

We recently registered with a new doctor. A receptionist told us that we must provide a passport, driving licence (with photograph), utility bill and heaven knows what else. We took along the paperwork they required (minus passports) but when they tried to take them away to photocopy I gently demurred. `You don't have the right to do that,' I told the woman, politely. `You've seen the documents. That's all youre entitled to do.'

And so there are no photocopies.

We were, as always, the only people to protest about this nonsense.

And so, at every doctor's surgery up and down the land there are photocopies of several thousand passports and utility bills - quite enough paperwork for an identity thief to have fun for years.

(If you are pushed into a corner and cannot avoid allowing someone to photocopy a potentially sensitive document then I suggest that you at least insist on writing the date, and the purpose for which the copy has been made, across a corner of the photocopy. This may provide you with a little protection against future fraud.)

36

When we want to travel abroad we must be inspected, pawed, groped, humiliated, hassled and shouted at to prepare us for the round ups, interrogations, disappearances and camps on the Isle of Wight.

And yet the whole damned `security' apparatus is a wild and pointless nonsense. It was recently reported that airport face scanners cant tell the difference between Osama bin Laden and the actress Winona Ryder. Ms Ryder would be well advised to stay at home. Actually, so, indeed would the rest of us. Flying has become dangerous. Wheezing, crippled, 90-year-old Episcopalians making a last pilgrimage to their favourite holiday resort are groped by minimum wage penknife thieves and people quiver and shake as non-English customs men shout at them in badly broken English. Shoes off, pockets empty, belt undone, jacket off, hat off, scarf off. At airports (and, these days, even at Eurostar stations) the immigration police seem to spend ages looking at passports. Why? To build up the queues? Or to make innocent old ladies worry whether the man looking at their passport knows that they put their rubbish out a day early three months ago or, horror of horrors, put a folded cornflake packet into the rubbish instead of the recycling. Complain about the nonsense and you are trouble. A sign says `Jokes or inappropriate remarks regarding security could lead to your arrest.' Everyone takes this nonsense as normal. Its the new normal. All the rudeness is accepted. I dare not fly. Not because of what they will do but because of what they will do to me when I complain about them doing what they will do. Most people have worked out that the only way to survive is to lower their profile to that of a snake. Sadly, I have yet to learn that lesson.

The problem is that I know that the whole demeaning experience is a farce. Have metal detectors airports ever found anything? No. And they are clearly a waste of time and money since guns, ammunition and explosives are available in non-metallic materials which don't go `ping' or show up on scanners. The whole process, so enjoyed by the minimum wage granny gropers and the voyeurs, is designed solely to humiliate and frighten us; to put us in our places and to keep us there. Airport security is nothing to do with stopping terrorists but everything to do with making us realise who's in charge. That, indeed, seems to be the sole purpose of much modern legislation.

37

The aggressive silliness at airports and international railway stations is, of course, part of the utterly nonsensical war on terror.

The war on terrorism is a misnomer for we are at war only with the terrorists we dislike. There are many terrorists who have been accepted into polite society (think of the IRA, Nelson Mandela and many historic figures in Israel). Terrorism is, in reality, very successful. Governments refuse to give in to hijackers or kidnappers but if the terrorists activities are extensive enough, and long lasting, the results can be enormously successful. Look at the success Mandela had in South Africa (terrorist to saint within one lifetime). In Israel, former terrorists do very well indeed. And, former IRA members are today regarded as members of the political establishment.

38

The Princess and I recently went through a Customs checkpoint using each others passports. Worse still the passport officer examined both passports and allowed us through. It was, I promise you, an honest mistake on our part. But if customs officers can't tell the difference between a balding, male pensioner and a bright, beautiful young princess with long hair then there isn't much point in them being there.

39

It has recently become known that customs officers now deliberately search white passengers in order to make sure that they meet their race quotas. And so, for every sweaty, bearded Muslim in a bomber jacket, with a haversack on his back, they harass an old, white lady with a white stick and a hearing aid. Brilliant.

40

In America, travellers must produce two examples of personal paperwork containing photo identification. Who the hell travels with two photographs of themselves? My guess is that the only people who do so are terrorists. And so the authorities should immediately arrest anyone who has the required paperwork.

41

It has become illegal for Christians to oppose, or even criticise, social eccentricities such as gay marriage. England is supposed to be liberal, tolerant and forward looking but we are more repressive than ever before. You can now get arrested in England just for thinking or saying the wrong things. We have thought crimes and a politically correct culture. An evangelist who held up a poster saying `Stop homosexuality. Stop lesbianism. Jesus is Lord' was attacked by members of the public; politically correct thugs poured soil and water over him. Naturally, the police arrested the evangelist and not his attackers. The attackers had merely been guilty of physical abuse. The evangelist had been guilty of a thought crime.

Pensioners were visited by the police for daring to ask their council if they could distribute Christian leaflets alongside gay rights leaflets. Write or say something which isn't approved by the thought police and you too could be in trouble. Offering advice which is regarded as offensive is a hate crime.

I think it all started to go wrong when it was decided that a white man raping a black woman is a more serious crime than a black man raping a white woman. Anyone who questions the wisdom of the EU, or the scientific validity of vaccination, vivisection or genetic engineering is regarded as dangerous and will probably be reported to the authorities. Anyone who questions immigration must be a racist. The validity of the global warming argument is accepted by the scientific establishment and anyone who still questions the value of the argument is regarded as akin to a Holocaust denier. Questioning multiculturalism, positive discrimination, feminism and other tenets of a dogmatic, dangerous and oppressive tyranny is a dangerous business. In our Stalinistic world dissent must be stifled because, well, because the establishment can stifle it and so they will. `We don't agree with what they are saying so they must not be allowed to say it.' A white, Christian heterosexual male who thinks immigration has got out of control, who wants England to leave the EU, who is sceptical about global warming and who doesn't want his children to be given 30 vaccinations is regarded as a dangerous heretic and likely to be a police target.

42

I am fed up with being bullied. Even banks no longer ask us to do something, they tell us what we must do. There are no longer any requests, just orders. Institutionalised bullying has filtered down from the top with the result that threats now come from every quarter; there are bullies everywhere and bullying has become the official national pastime of civil servants and employees of all national companies.

Conclusion

What is left of our privacy is disappearing rapidly. Our freedom and our traditional rights of free speech are also disappearing. Our politicians take the blame for all the oppressive new legislation being introduced (they have no choice, the rules are that no one can `blame' the EU for anything) and they claim that the new laws are necessary to protect us from terrorists and moneylaunderers. This argument is nonsensical to say the least since none of the legislation has any effect whatsoever on either of these groups. (Ironically, London is, along with New York, one of the official moneylaundering centres of the planet.) The new laws are being brought in for one purpose only: to spy on us, to prevent dissent and to keep us quiet and docile. None of these laws will be removed and nothing will improve until we leave the European Union and elect an independent bunch of MPs to represent us in the Mother of all Parliaments. That will take some time. Meanwhile, all these intrusions (and the delays they create) dramatically reduce productivity and affect Englands attractiveness to businessmen and tourists alike. Even more importantly, people who are oppressed quickly lose their courage, initiative and imagination.

EPILOGUE

`The harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap we esteem too lightly. Tis dearness only that gives everything its value.' - Thomas Paine, Englishman

I sometimes suspect that I have spent too many hours, days, weeks, months and years of my life hurling myself at windmills and barricades and battering myself senseless against unprincipled bastions of cruelty and wickedness, when the sensible course of action would have been to make a detour, go home, settle down on the sofa with a mug of hot cocoa, draw the curtains and watch Coronation Street, Newsnight or some other trivial, eye numbing light entertainment.

But I have always had a burning yearning to conquer injustices and at the same time I have always been conscious that if you don't fight any battles, you don't win any wars. And so these Sisyphean labours have been part of my life.

However, I am constantly dispirited not just by what has happened to our world (and by what is happening now) but also by the fact that so many good people are now suffocated by their own apathy, and terrified into silence by the justified suspicion that anyone who sticks a nose above the parapet is likely to have it shot off.

The hoodies and the feral youths who roam our streets in increasing numbers are not frightened, of course. They don't give a damn about anything or anyone. They are not cowed by tradition, uniform, expectation or duty. But they aren't interested in making things better or righting wrongs either. They just want short-term joys and excitement. They don't think about next week, let alone next year. They are driven by a pure and toxic mixture of hedonism, selfishness, materialism and by a sense of entitlement.

Sadly, many of the citizens who are sensitive, educated and knowledgable, and who might be expected to do a little windmill tilting of their own, have had the get up and go knocked out of them. Their lives, hopes and aspirations have been overwhelmed by survival induced exhaustion. By the time they are old enough to have acquired the wit and cunning to do something about the ideals they had when they were young, they have become too busy, too beholden, too fearful and too cautious. They have been persuaded (probably unwillingly and almost certainly against their better judgement) to trust those in authority. They are exhausted by the constant demands of the trivial problems and endless unnecessary changes which decimate our days and tear the heart out of weeks. (None of the trivial problems appears trivial when they are confronted, of course. Our bureaucratic masters have a way of imbuing every order and every demand with a sense of urgency and importance.) And, eventually, they will have probably forgotten the ideals which burnt into their hearts when they were young and they will have lost the passion that fed them.

The result is that there are no intellectual radicals around these days. Where are our Paines, Bunyans, Cobbetts or Wilkes? Where, for heavens sake, are our Shelleys or our Byrons? I have no doubt that they exist but they have been silenced. They certainly will not have been given any airtime by the BBC or any column inches by our broadsheets. They self-publish books, booklets, magazines and newsletters. They have been marginalised by the State-controlled media aristocracy.

But all is not lost. I have no doubt that eventually the people will have had enough. There will be anger at the public graft and private plunder; anger at the greed of the bankers and the corporate bosses who bleed their companies dry; anger at the pension fund managers whose investment style is simple smash and grab; anger at the extent of public graft; anger at wasteful government spending; anger at the absurdity of the pensions given to public sector workers; anger at the demands of the scroungers; anger at the extent of corruption in our society; anger at the ever growing taxes; and anger at the all invasive bureaucracy. The anger will result in a demand for change and some sort of revolution will be inevitable.

So, in the end there will be changes. The anger at the bureaucratic fascism of the European Union will lead to a resurgence of strong bordered nationalism. The anger at a combination of unreasonably high taxes and unreasonably low services will lead to mass tax avoidance and evasion and the bankruptcy of State after State around Europe. The European Union will implode and collapse. The United States of America will be bankrupted by its massive debts to China. Globalisation will lead us remorselessly into a global slowdown that will last for decades. (With Europe and America broken and impoverished who will buy all those Chinese television sets?)

But, that's for the future. Meanwhile, there is a good deal more pain to come before we get where we are going.

In the short and medium term we face a bleak future. Governments will spend less and tax more. People will work more but have less to spend. Nationalism and racism will rise in popularity; often with unpleasant and violent consequences. The anger directed at bankers will lead to renewed bouts of anti-Jewish activity. Enthusiasm for globalisation will disappear and be replaced by isolationism and protectionism. As the EU collapses the eurocrats will, in desperation, demand (and take) more and more power. Inflation will soar, bringing back memories of German citizens buying loaves of bread with wheelbarrows full of money. Growth and productivity will plummet. There will be more wars and revolutions.

Our society is broken; we are controlled by fascist overseers and living in a foreign land. Within England there is not one Government department which is fit for purpose. We have not been led, we have been misled. We are persecuted and harassed by greedy, corrupt, petty, mean and incompetent bureaucrats (largely foreign) who spend their days and our money devising an endless array of pointless, damaging new laws designed for their benefit not ours. Our society is so grotesquely mismanaged that it is possible to argue that it is now immoral to pay tax, immoral to obey the law and immoral to support anyone boasting membership of one of the three main parties. It is possible to argue that in our world, the only true patriots are revolutionary anarchists who know that before we can rebuild our society we must break down the corrupt structure which exists.

So, where is the hope?

With our more thoughtful citizens oppressed and suppressed by police-state broadcasters, fascist politicians and heavily booted forces of law and order the future lies in the hands of the middle classes and the revolution that ferments will not be a peaceful one.

All revolutions are started by middle class people. It isn't the unemployed or the privileged classes who start revolutions. The former are too busy hunting for scraps. The latter are too busy running super-yachts and premier league football clubs. It has always been the same. It is hard-working individuals who realise that things could and should be better. Most of the rebellions and nearly all the reforms which occurred in English history were backed by individuals who were not themselves suffering from the grievances they worked to remove. This is true philanthropy (not the modern kind, which involves a tax dodge, a publicity stunt and a cheque which never actually arrives). Among England's greatest reformers were William Wilberforce, John Howard, Elizabeth Fry and Florence Nightingale. Their reforms changed the world, not just England, and they all relied upon changing public opinion. Revolutionary social ideas were popularised by great artists such as Milton in the 17th century, Blake and Shelley in the early part of the 19th century and, in the later part of the century John Ruskin and William Morris. The world has only ever been changed by small groups of dedicated and determined people, naturally irreverent and uneasy with authority (the sort of behaviour that is banned these days and likely to get you into a lot of trouble.) Tomorrow's revolutionaries will have to work hard and it will, I suspect, be the old-fashioned printing press, rather than the computer or the Internet or the mobile telephone, which will give them power.

And the violence?

Well, there is plenty of historical evidence to show that revolutionary violence works while peaceful forms of protest are easily suppressed. And when violent revolutions work the leaders quickly become the new establishment. Nelson Mandela, the most famous and successful terrorist of the 20th century, is now revered by the fascist establishment as some sort of god-like figure.

So, the bottom, bottom line is that the medium term is bleak. Life for our children, our children's children and their children too, will be dark and hard.

But the long-term...well, the long-term will be what tomorrow's revolutionaries choose to make it.

Vernon Coleman, Summer 2012

Other books by Vernon Coleman

For a list of other books please see either www.vernoncoleman.com or Vernon Colemans Amazon author page.

THE AUTHOR

Vernon Coleman qualified as a doctor in 1970 and has worked both in hospitals and as a GP. He is (for now) still registered and licensed to practise as a GP principal. He has founded and organised many campaigns concerning iatrogenesis, drug addiction and the abuse of animals and has given evidence to committees at the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Dr Coleman's campaigns have often proved successful. For example, after a 15 year campaign (which started in 1973) he eventually persuaded the British Government to introduce stricter controls governing the prescribing of benzodiazepine tranquillisers. `Dr Vernon Coleman's articles, to which I refer with approval, raised concern about these important matters,' said the Parliamentary Secretary for Health in the House of Commons in 1988.

He has worked as a columnist for numerous national newspapers including *The Sun, The Daily Star, The Sunday Express* and *The People*. He once wrote three columns at the same time for national papers (he wrote them under three different names, Dr Duncan Scott in *The Sunday People*, Dr James in *The Sun* and Dr Vernon Coleman in the *Daily Star*). At the same time he was also writing weekly columns for the *Evening Times* in Glasgow and for the *Sunday Scot*. His syndicated columns have appeared in over 50 regional newspapers. His columns and articles have appeared in newspapers and magazines around the world and he has contributed articles and stories to hundreds of other publications including *The Sunday Times, Observer, Guardian, Daily Telegraph, Sunday Telegraph, Daily Express, Daily Mail, Mail on Sunday, Daily Mirror, Sunday Mirror, Punch, Woman, Woman's Own, The Lady, Spectator* and *British Medical Journal*. He was the founding editor of the *British Clinical Journal.*

For many years he wrote a monthly newsletter. He has worked with the Open University and lectured doctors and nurses on a variety of medical matters.

He has presented numerous programmes on television and radio and was the original breakfast television doctor. He was television's first agony uncle (on BBC1's *The Afternoon Show*) and presented three TV series based on his bestselling book *Bodypower*. In the now long-gone days when producers and editors were less wary of annoying the establishment he was a regular broadcaster on radio and television.

In recent years he has worried many parts of the establishment and today he is widely banned from television and radio and his books are no longer reviewed in newspapers where editors hope to be remembered in the honours lists.

In the 1980s he wrote the algorithms for the first computerised health programmes - which sold around the world to those far-sighted individuals who had bought the world's first home computers.

His books have been published in the UK *by Arrow, Pan, Penguin, Corgi, Mandarin, Star, Piatkus, RKP, Thames and Hudson, Sidgwick and Jackson, Macmillan* and many other leading publishing houses and translated into 25 languages. English language versions sell in the USA, Australia, Canada and South Africa as well as the UK. Several of his books have appeared on both the *Sunday Times* and *Bookseller* bestseller lists. Altogether, he has written over 100 books which have, together, sold over two million copies in the UK alone. His novel *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War* has been filmed and is, like many of his other novels, available in an audio version. He has co-written four books with his wife, Donna Antoinette Coleman. He has, in addition, written numerous articles (and some books) under a vast variety of pennames (many of which he has now forgotten). When he feels tired (which happens with increasing frequency) the Princess reminds him of all this and he sometimes feels better for a little while.

He has never had a proper job (in the sense of working for someone else in regular, paid employment, with a cheque or pay packet at the end of the week or month) but he has had freelance and temporary employment in many forms. He has, for example, had paid employment as: magician's assistant, postman, fish delivery van driver, production line worker, chemical laboratory assistant, author, publisher, draughtsman, meals on wheels driver, feature writer, drama critic, book reviewer, columnist, surgeon, police surgeon, industrial medical officer, social worker, night club operator, property developer, magazine editor, general practitioner, private doctor, television presenter, radio presenter, agony aunt, university lecturer, casualty doctor and care home assistant.

Today, he likes books, films and writing. He writes, reads and collects books and has a larger library than most towns. A list of his favourite authors would require another book. He has never been much of an athlete, though he once won a certificate for swimming a width of the public baths in Walsall (which was, at the time, in Staffordshire but has now, apparently, been moved elsewhere). He no longer cherishes hopes of being called upon to play cricket for England and is resigned to the fact that he will now never drive a Formula 1 racing car in anger.

He doesn't like yappy dogs, big snarly dogs with saliva dripping from their fangs or people who think that wearing a uniform automatically gives them status and rights over everyone else. He likes trains, dislikes planes and used to like cars until spoilsports invented speed cameras, bus lanes and car parks where the spaces are so narrow that only the slimmest, and tinniest of vehicles will fit in.

He is inordinately fond of cats, likes pens and notebooks and used to enjoy watching cricket until the authorities sold out and allowed people to paint slogans on the grass. His interests and hobbies include animals, books, photography, drawing, chess, backgammon, cinema, philately, billiards, sitting in cafés and on benches and collecting Napoleana and old books that were written and published before dustwrappers were invented. He likes log fires and bonfires, motor racing and music by Beethoven, Mozart and Mahler and dislikes politicians, bureaucrats and cauliflower cheese. He likes videos but loathes DVDs.

Vernon Coleman lives in the delightful if isolated village of Bilbury in Devon where he and his wife have designed for themselves a unique world to sustain and nourish them in these dark and difficult times. He enjoys malt whisky, toasted muffins and old films. He is devoted to Donna Antoinette who is the kindest, sweetest, most sensitive woman a man could hope to meet and who, as an undeserved but welcome bonus, makes the very best roast parsnips on the planet. He says that gourmands and gourmets would come from far and wide if they knew what they were missing but admits that since he and his pal Thumper Robinson took down the road signs (in order to discourage American tourists travelling to Bilbury on coaches) the village where he lives has become exceedingly difficult to find.

REFERENCE ARTICLES REFERRING TO VERNON COLEMAN

`Volunteer for Kirkby'

The Guardian, 14.5.1965

(Article re VC's work in Kirkby, Liverpool as a Community Service Volunteer in 1964-5)

`Bumbledom forced me to leave the NHS'

Pulse, 28.11.1981

Vernon Coleman resigns as a GP after refusing to disclose confidential information on sick note forms.

`Medicine Becomes Computerised: Plug In Your Doctor.*'*

The Times, 29.3.1983

Sample quote: `When the children have finished playing the games on your Sinclair or Commodore Vic 20 computer, you can turn it to more practical purposes. For what is probably Britain's first home doctor programme for computers is now available. `Dr Vernon Coleman, one of the country's leading medical authors, has prepared the text for a remarkable set of six cassettes called *The Home Doctor Series.* Dr Coleman, author of the new book *Bodypower,* which is a new self-help approach to medicine, has turned his attention to computers.'

`Computer aided decision making in medicine'

British Medical Journal, 8.9.1984 and 27.10.1984

Editorial (and subsequent letter) discussing Vernon Coleman's computer software.

`Doctor with the Common Touch.'

Birmingham Post, 9.10.1984

Sample quote: `Dr Coleman has the golden gift of being able to sweeten the bitter pill of knowledge with a coating of humour, and of presenting revolutionary concepts in words everyone can understand.'

`Sacred Cows Beware: Vernon Coleman publishing again.'

The Scotsman, 6.12.1984

Sample quote: `Vernon Coleman's books combine straightforward advice with stern criticism of techniques, products or services which he believes to be a waste of time and money or which may cause actual harm.'

`I'm Addicted To The Star'

The Star, 10.3.1988

Sample quote: `Dr Coleman has consistently called for rethinking on the drugs known as benzodiazepines. Now the Government's Committee on Safety of Medicines has reacted to Dr Coleman's campaign. They have issued stringent guidelines for the prescribing of the drugs. Mrs Currie (Health Minister) told a Commons standing committee that the Government acted because of Dr Coleman's columns in *The Star.* She said `Dr Coleman's articles, to which I refer with approval, raised concern about these important matters and I sent them to the appropriate bodies.'

`Our Doctor Coleman Is Mustard'

The Sun, 29.6.1988

Sample quote: `Dr Coleman cuts like a scalpel through all the jargon to bring you fresh information on the medical matters that mean most to you...Dr Coleman's controversial views have often rocked the medical profession but that has never stopped him saying what he thinks.'

`The Sun's Medic reveals his all.'

GP, 12.7.1991

Sample quote: `He clearly believes what he writes and nobody `not the editor of *The Sun* or anyone else' tells him what stance to take. And once he gets his teeth into an issue he will campaign in partisan and highly effective style.'

`Reading the mind between the lines.'

BMA News Review, November 1991

Sample quote: `Not someone to mince his words.'

Doctors' Firsts

BMA News Review, 21.2.1996

Interview with VC.

`The big league of self publishing.'

Daily Telegraph, 17.8.1996

Sample quote: `Dr Coleman is one of a growing band of go-it-alone novelists who have taken the risk of publishing their own books. Dr Coleman's books are published in 22 languages and he was published for many years by mainstream publishers like *Penguin, Reed* and *Harper Collins,* before going it alone.'

`Doctoring the books'

Independent, 16.3.1999

Sample quote: `He says there are three things in life worth doing: trying to change the world, trying to have fun and trying to make money. If you can do all three things at the same time then that's fantastic.'

`Conscientious Objectors'

Financial Times magazine, 9.8.2003

Interview with VC after he resigned from The People.

`Sick Practices'

Ode Magazine, July/August 2003

Sample quote: `Dr Vernon Coleman has made it his life's work to teach us about our self-healing abilities. The erudite Englishman wrote over 90 books on the subject.'

`You have been warned, Mr Blair.'

Spectator, 6.3.2004 and 20.3.2004

Sample quote: `He doesn't have an agent, a publisher, a distributor or a heap of remaindered copies reminding him he never earned out his advance, because he does all these jobs himself. As a result our doctor is completely independent, and can afford to stick two fingers up not only at medicine and mainstream publishing but also at Bush, Blair, Lord Hutton, those who want to surrender British sovereignty to a European superstate, the pharmaceutical industry, animal experimenters, Dr Atkins, Uncle Tom Cobley and everyone who eats meat.'

`Food for thought with a real live Maverick.'

Western Daily Press, 5.9.2006

Sample quote: `Simply a very good and genial individual and its a great pity there aren't more like him.'

`The doctor will see you now'

Independent, 14.5.2008

Sample quote: `He's frank, fearless and prolific. He's outrageous, outspoken and iconoclastic. A Vernon Coleman book will change your life...and may even save your life.'

NOTE 1: Vernon Coleman gave evidence to the *House of Lords Select Committee on Animals in Scientific Procedures* (2001-2) on Tuesday 12.2.02

NOTE 2: Significant interviews with Vernon Coleman have appeared in *Devon Life* (`Vernon Coleman Scourge of the BMA.'), *National Health Executive,* (`An interview with Vernon Coleman'), *The Therapist* (`Vernon Coleman - the doctor's dilemma.' and *The Flag* (`Interview with Dr Vernon Coleman.'

SUPERBODY

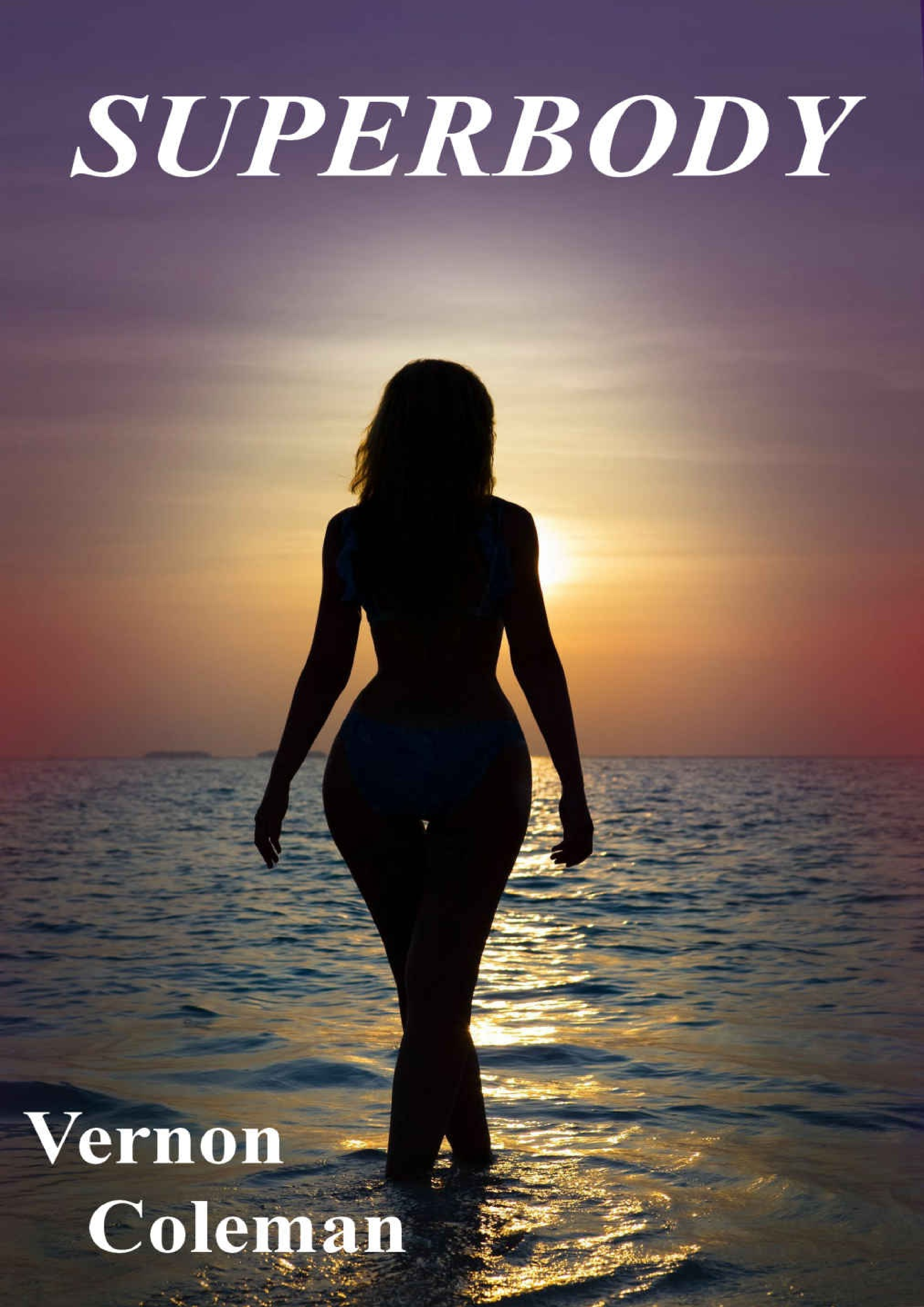

Vernon
Coleman

SUPERBODY

The Secret of Survival
in the 21st Century

Vernon Coleman

Dedicated to Donna Antoinette

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Vernon Coleman has written over 100 books – many of which are available as Kindle books on Amazon. For a full list of books available please see Vernon Coleman's Author page on Amazon. For more information please see http://www.vernoncoleman.com
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Warning

This book is not intended to be, and cannot be, an alternative to personal, professional, medical advice.

Readers should immediately consult a trained and properly qualified health professional, whom they trust and respect, for advice about any symptom or health problem which requires diagnosis, treatment or any kind of medical attention.

While the advice and information in this book are believed to be accurate at the time of going to press, neither the author nor the publisher can accept any legal responsibility for errors or omission which may be made.

Part One: Why You Need A Superbody

We spend more on health care than ever before but people are now far more likely to fall ill than they were a generation ago.

A major survey showed that today 95% of the population are ill at least once a fortnight. The commonest illnesses are coughs, colds, sore throats, sinus troubles and chest infections. The biggest and healthiest industry in the world is the one which makes and markets pills and potions designed to help us stay well and get better when we fall ill.

Infectious diseases are commoner today than at any time in living memory: diseases as varied as pneumonia and tuberculosis are becoming commoner and are killing more people than they did a decade ago. But they are not the only cause of death and serious illness to be on the rise. And they are not the only cause of death and serious illness to be rising because of damaged immune systems. Our susceptibility to cancer is also increasing as our immune systems become weaker.

* * *

Part Two of *Superbody* explains why and how our bodies are under siege and why the incidence of cancer and infectious disease is rising rapidly (and likely to continue rising).

I first forecast that infectious diseases were becoming resistant to antibiotics a quarter of a century ago. Since then the situation has steadily worsened. I believe that it is now too late for the medical profession to reverse the situation. Infectious diseases are coming back in a big way. There are a number of reasons for this and little that you and I (or, indeed, anyone else) can now do to alter this tragic state of affairs. Our vulnerability is increased because our immune systems are weakened by stress, poor diet and too many drugs.

The incidence of cancer is also rising dramatically – and all the evidence suggests that it is going to continue to rise. We are constantly exposed to carcinogenic hazards (even in the food we eat) and our weakened immune systems make us more vulnerable to cancer than any of our ancestors ever were.

We have polluted our environment in every conceivable way – using it as a global rubbish dump. Most people in the developed world eat too much food but are malnourished. The food they eat is fatty, full of additives and chemicals and often poor in vitamins and minerals. Even the drinking water which comes out of our taps is often heavily polluted with chemicals.

The air we breathe is frequently polluted. The land upon which we walk is polluted. The sea is polluted. And we surround ourselves with equipment – for example, our mobile telephones – which may appear to make our lives easier but which, in reality, may damage our health.

Our bodies, weakened by poor food and too much stress, simply cannot cope with the enormous quantities of pollutants and contaminants.

* * *

The Action Plan in Part Three of Superbody explains exactly how you can protect yourself against these, and other threats.

First, you can reduce your chances of developing cancer or acquiring a potentially deadly infection by learning how to avoid, and how to protect yourself against, external threats.

Secondly, you can improve your body's ability to survive external threats by improving the strength, efficiency and effectiveness of your body's natural immune system.

A healthy immune system – the key to a superbody – won't simply protect you against infection but will also prove to be an essential factor in your body's ability to fight off all other diseases including cancer.

However hard you try it isn't possible to avoid all the external dangers and pollutants which threaten you. Our environment is now irretrievably polluted.

But there is a great deal that you can do to protect yourself, to strengthen your immune system and to improve your body's ability to protect itself against threats such as infective organisms and carcinogens. For example, by taking care over the foods you choose to eat and by strengthening your mind you can dramatically improve your ability to fight off potentially lethal hazards.

Part Two: Why Infections And Cancer Are Getting Commoner

In this part of Superbody I intend to explain why there has, in recent years, been an increase in the incidence of cancer and infectious disease and why the incidence of these diseases is set to explode in the next few years.

Why have we become such weedy, sniffling, never-wells? Why are we so prone to coughs and colds? Why is it that most people seem to get two or three colds every winter – and a never ending sniffle in between? Why are so many children constantly ill? Why are more and more people dying from infectious diseases? Why do antibiotics seem to have stopped working?

1. Central Heating and Air Conditioning

First, we can blame the engineers whose inventive genius gave us air conditioning and central heating. To help keep our buildings warm – and prevent the loss of expensively produced heat – they devised ways to send air circulating round and round and round again.

In the harsh old days before central heating and air conditioning bugs were killed by the cold. When someone sneezed his germs died a quick death. But these days our bugs have a wonderful life! Modern buildings are designed to spread colds and flu speedily and effectively. When someone in one room sneezes, his or her bugs are kept at a stable temperature for hours and circulated throughout the whole building! Is it any surprise that within 24 hours everyone else in the building is sneezing? If we'd wanted to design a perfect breeding ground for bugs we couldn't have done better than design a modern centrally-heated building.

It's undoubtedly very nice to wake up and find the temperature in your bedroom comfortable and cosy. It's nice to be able to wander around naked in January. It's nice to work in shirtsleeves or a summer blouse in mid-winter. But there's a price to pay for this luxury. When you go out from a hot building into cold winter air your body has to struggle to cope with the dramatic temperature difference.

Our ancestors were hardy and better able to cope with the ravages of winter because through the months of autumn their bodies gradually became accustomed to the change in temperature. Their homes and places of work were often kept little above freezing. To stay warm they had to keep moving.

But today, in the middle of winter, we wake up in mid-summer heat, dash out into the January cold to get to work, slip back into mid-summer when we reach our destination and then confuse our bodies again at lunchtime and in the evening.

And then we're surprised at the fact that our bodies have difficulty in coping with these sudden, massive temperature changes and that we seem more susceptible to colds and flu.

2. Our Enthusiasm For Travel

The second big problem is that we all move around far more these days than our ancestors did a few decades ago. Half a century ago the man who travelled more than a thousand miles a year was considered an experienced traveller. The majority of people lived in small, stable communities. These days most of us travel at least ten thousand miles a year. And as we travel we don't just take our bugs with us but we also expose ourselves to new strains of germs and exposure to new types of virus. Aeroplanes, motor cars, ships and trains enable bugs to move around the world at a dramatic rate. Today, many of our most lethal bugs come from other parts of the world. You and I may have to worry about customs and immigration forms. But bugs have no such worries. They just stowaway in a handy nose and can be around the world in a day.

My long-standing warning about tuberculosis was given added force when it was reported that two women had caught multi-drug-resistant tuberculosis (the most difficult type to treat – and therefore the most dangerous) while on a flight from Europe to America.

These two women are not the only passengers to have been infected while flying. A total of 179 people are now known to have caught tuberculosis (and other potentially fatal diseases) while travelling on aeroplanes. The figure of 179 is almost certainly merely the tip of a very large iceberg.

How many air travellers develop infections which they do not realise they caught while flying? How often do doctors ask a patient with TB (or some other infectious disease) whether they have been in an aeroplane recently?

The most worrying aspect of the case in which the two women I've mentioned caught TB is the fact that they possibly did not catch the disease through sitting close to the infected passenger (the passenger with TB was sitting more than a dozen rows away) but through breathing in contaminated air circulated within the aeroplane's air supply system.

I don't know what happened in that particular case but there is an underlying problem to which this incident draws attention: the fact that in order to save money some airlines are cutting down on the fresh air used on aircraft. Instead of giving their passengers fresh air to breathe they simply re-circulate the old air – together with all the infective organisms it contains.

The re-circulating of air is now a health hazard of which all air travellers should be aware.

One of the main reasons why people are so likely to fall ill after flying is that the passengers on board are likely to have come from many different parts of the world – and, therefore, to be carrying a wide variety of infection-causing bugs.

We all tend to develop a certain level of immunity to infections which are common in the areas where we live. But we are much more susceptible to infections from other parts of the world. The result is that all of us are probably more likely to develop an infection on an aeroplane than just about anywhere else in the world (with the exception, of course, of hospitals.)

The UK government doesn't seem too concerned about the general risk of contracting an infection while flying. One spokesman has been quoted as saying that they had no 'hard evidence that suggests that the cabin air system is responsible for spreading infectious diseases'.

But in the US, the government admits that it is concerned and is carrying out long-term research into the transmission of viruses on aeroplanes.

Catching infections isn't the only hazard associated with breathing used air. Second-hand air has a higher concentration of carbon dioxide than fresh air and breathing in this second-hand air causes tiredness and dizziness.

After an airline meal has been served many airlines routinely turn down the amount of fresh air feeding into a cabin and turn up the fans which re-circulate the stale air. It is this stale air (rather than the food or the wine) which explains why many passengers tend to feel sleepy after an airline meal.

(There is, of course, an additional risk associated with this practice. The pilot and crew are inevitably all breathing the same, carbon dioxide heavy air as the passengers. I am surprised that crews have so little regard for their own safety that they allow airline bosses to get away with this reckless disregard for safety.)

It is, incidentally, worth remembering that it isn't only when the aircraft is in the air that passengers are at risk. These days many aircraft spend just as long sitting on the ground waiting to take off, or waiting to park after landing, as they do in the air. Your chances of acquiring a dangerous infection (as you sit breathing increasingly contaminated air) are therefore increased unnecessarily.

It isn't easy to avoid these problems. Wearing a mask to filter the air you breathe (though theoretically a good idea) would obviously make air travel unbearable.

Sitting towards the front of the plane may help a little since on some planes fresh air enters the first class and business cabins up to twenty times more often than it enters the standard or economy class cabin at the rear of the plane.

But even this isn't a sure-fire way to protect yourself: passengers at the front of the plane do catch infections.

Some people may laugh off the hazard of aircraft acquired infection (AAI) on the grounds that there seem to be risks associated with just about all activities which involve any sort of relationship between a human being and a piece of technology.

Such laughter would, however, be misplaced since the evidence clearly shows that modern technology often is dangerous and does pose many very real threats. The fact that there are many such hazards does not mean that any individual threat should not be taken seriously.

Others may try to find comfort and consolation in the belief that the authorities will soon clamp down and instruct airlines to behave more responsibly towards their customers – protecting them against AAI by installing better and safer air supply systems. Sadly, a quick trawl through recent history shows that there is no foundation for any such feeling. Only the naive, who wish to delude themselves in order to protect themselves from reality, could possibly believe that governments, industry watchdogs or allegedly independent authorities will provide the protection that is required.

Finally, it is also important to remember that many modern trains have no opening windows – with the result that the risks on board are similar to the risks in aeroplanes: if one person sneezes in a carriage the chances are that everyone else will be exposed to (and possibly catch) their disease.

3. Our Exposure To More and More Stress & Emotional Trauma

Most of us are, these days, under far more stress than our ancestors. Stress isn't just a major cause of heart disease and cancer. It is also a far more significant factor than most people realise in making us vulnerable to infectious diseases.

Back in 1919, when a Japanese scientist called Ishigami did research on the incidence of tuberculosis in children, he noticed that the incidence of TB went up when the children were under stress or pressure, or, as he put it (since the word 'stress' was not then in common usage): 'emotionally excited'. By measuring the ability of white blood cells to kill bacteria (a basic function of the immune system) Ishigami showed that the children were more susceptible to TB when their immune systems were not working effectively.

The conclusion Ishigami made was that the emotional stress caused the decline in immunity which then led to the increase in the incidence of tuberculosis.

This was, as far as I know, the first piece of research to prove the existence of a link between stress and infection. Since then many other scientists have confirmed this crucial observation and have confirmed that the greater the amount of stress someone is under – and the less capable they are of coping with stress – the more their immune system will suffer and the more likely they are to fall ill.

The effect of stress on the immune system is one of the reasons stress is known to be associated with – either as a direct cause or as a contributory factor – at least nine out of ten illnesses.

Bereavement, separation and divorce, imprisonment, financial problems, anxieties at work, school examinations and even worry about environmental concerns can all damage the immune system – with disastrous consequences.

Since medical students make convenient subjects, a good deal of research has been done to assess the impact of examinations on the immune systems of medical students. The evidence shows that students have badly damaged immune systems while taking examinations.

Generally speaking, we live in a world where there is more stress than at any other time in history. Much of the stress to which we are exposed is outside our control. Stress is created by politicians, bureaucrats, administrators and others who have plenty of authority but do not need to take responsibility for their actions. (My book *How To Overcome Toxic Stress* – published by the European Medical Journal – details the phenomenon of social stress which arises from sources we cannot control.)

Frustration and dissatisfaction are now much commoner than at any time in history. We take pride in our allegedly civilised and so-called sophisticated society but our complex and ever changing world is constantly creating new pressures and stresses.

Most of us are totally dependent on other people and quite unable to control our own destinies. If someone else's motor car breaks down on our route to work then we will be late. Frustration (a major cause of stress, anxiety and depression) is inevitable.

We have created a world in which we are strangers to ourselves; prisoners of the expectations of others.

Millions feel isolated and lonely. Old, simple truths are constantly being replaced with new, complex, half truths.

The bottom line is that although the human soul is fragile it is constantly subjected to great strain.

It is hardly surprising that a massive amount of damage is being done by all this uncontrollable stress. An extremely high percentage of people living in the developed world are suffering from stress burn out which has been created by the actions of other people.

4. The Deteriorating Quality of The Food We Eat

Contaminated with chemicals (many of which are carcinogenic), modern food puts a tremendous strain on an already overworked immune system. I have dealt with this problem at some length in other books such as *Power over Cancer* and *Food for Thought* (both published by the European Medical Journal).

Although it may seem rather obvious to point out that the quality of the food we eat has a tremendous impact upon our health and life expectancy, and upon our vulnerability and susceptibility to disease, the fact is that most people's eating habits suggest that they do not believe that there is any link between food and health.

This may partly be explained by the fact that most people are confused. So much misinformation has been published that it can be difficult to find the truth about food and health. The fact that farmers, food companies and politicians have for years consistently conspired to hide the truth about food has not made it easy for consumers to eat a healthy diet.

Mad Cow Disease

Britain's Mad Cow Disease scandal was caused when farmers turned herbivores into cannibals. It was a direct result of greed. But politicians consistently defended and protected farmers, and for years deliberately hid the truth about this exceptional – but very real – hazard.

When, in 1990, I first warned that Mad Cow Disease could prove to be a major problem (and cause serious health problems – and death – in human beings) I was vilified by the Government for 'scaremongering'. When in 1993 I repeated my warning that people who ate beef, and beef products, were taking a real risk with their health Sir Kenneth Calman, at the time Britain's chief medical officer, assured people that beef could safely be eaten by everyone. 'To say that Dr Coleman's views are alarmist would be an understatement,' Calman announced. (Since this senior government spokesman used the word 'alarmist' I feel justified in pointing out that it was politicians who warned us that we were all going to die of AIDS – deliberately creating the biggest false scare of the century.)

When I exclusively revealed that Mad Cow Disease was being transmitted back to sheep by feeding the carcases of cows suffering from Mad Cow Disease to sheep I was again dismissed as a scaremonger. Subsequently, I was once again proved right.

It seems to me that the whole Mad Cow saga confirms my thesis that far too much decision making in our world is done in the interests of institutions and corporations – and business in general – rather than in the interests of individuals.

Details of how politicians allow farmers to feed their animals are coming to light with greater frequency in the wake of the appalling Mad Cow Disease scandal in the UK.

For example, among the cheap 'foods' fed to cattle and pigs on farms in the US are: human sewage sludge, dead cats and dogs, chicken manure, slaughterhouse waste (blood, bones, intestines), cement kiln dust, old newspapers, waste cardboard, agricultural waste (corn cobs, fruit and vegetable peelings) and old fat from restaurants and grease traps. Those who eat meat are, of course, consuming the residues of all these delectables. What a tribute all this is to the glory of twenty first century civilisation.

If it is true (as I believe it is) that we are what we eat then this news should alarm all meat eaters. What farmers choose to include in animal feed is crucial to human health.

Animal Feed

Approximately seven million Americans suffer from food-borne illnesses every year. (The figures for other western nations are proportionately similar.)

One reason for what is now undeniably a major epidemic is the fact that animal manure remains attached to or mixed with meat which is sent to the shops for human consumption.

Another reason for the food-borne epidemic is the fact that many cooks do not prepare meat properly – often by not cooking it thoroughly.

But the use of animal excrement as animal feed must be another major cause of illness.

The millions of farm animals reared to satisfy the western world's apparently insatiable demand for meat between them produce an enormous amount of waste. Farm animals in the United States produce ten times as much waste as the human population and an expert working at the University of Georgia recently pointed out that just seven chickens produce as much manure as one human being. In America, where around seven billion chickens are raised and killed every year, the annual production of excrement now totals in excess of 1.5 billion tons.

Getting rid of this enormous quantity of excrement obviously poses something of a problem to farmers. You simply can't spread it all on the fields as fertiliser. (Getting rid of just some of that excrement by dumping it onto the land is one reason that drinking water supplies are so polluted.)

And so, in an attempt to get rid of all this toxic waste, farmers now frequently mix animal waste into livestock feed. Chicken litter is particularly commonly dealt with in this way (perhaps because its composition makes it easier to deal with – and the quantity of it makes its disposal a real problem).

In some areas of America roughly one in every five chicken farmers now uses their chicken manure for cattle feed. Such laws as there are only seem to apply to commercial feed manufacturers, and so farmers who keep both chicken and cattle seem to be able to feed chicken manure to cows with impunity. I have no doubt that this same practice is followed in other areas of the world where farmers keep chicken and cattle.

I am convinced that the mixing of chicken manure in with animal feed is an important cause of infection. Chicken commonly carries the salmonella bug (among others). And so the cattle who eat the chicken manure also then become infected with the salmonella.

It is hardly surprising that food borne disease is now commonplace. Food from the US is, of course, imported freely into Britain and other parts of Europe.

Antibiotics

During 1999 there was a huge row between American farmers and European Union officials. The American government had introduced a ban on some European imports (more out of spite than through any sense of commercial logic) because the EU had banned American beef which contained hormones. American farmers claimed that giving hormones to cattle was perfectly safe. But beef from such cattle was banned in the EU.

Farmers give six sex hormones to their cattle for exactly the same reason that body-builders and weight-lifters take hormones: they do it because it helps the animals to build more muscle. The benefit to a farmer is simple and financial: there is obviously more saleable beef on a heavily muscled cow.

The row, which has, as I write this book, been going on for well over a decade, is simply about whether or not beef taken from cows which have been given extra hormones is safe to eat. Although there is no evidence to show that hormone-soaked beef is safe American farmers say that it is. And that, of course, is good enough for their government.

However, European farmers are not allowed to give extra hormones to cattle. And so, not surprisingly, they have put pressure on European politicians to ban the American beef, which, because of the help from the hormones, is cheaper to produce.

The American claim that it is safe to give hormones to cattle is based upon the argument that there is, as yet, not very much scientific proof that it is dangerous to do this. (This is an argument which is popular among many big companies. It is popular because it is difficult to counter. If you think about it carefully you will realise that you can defend virtually any activity, or any food, with this argument.)

What we do know, is that the amount of hormone in 500 grams of meat can be more than a pubertal boy produces in a day. And that's a lot. And we also know that sex hormones can and do have a dramatic effect on any human body (and mind).

Moreover, research has been done showing that there is a convincing epidemiological link between one of the six hormones used by American farmers and endometrial and breast cancers. The hormone causes cancer by interfering with a cell's DNA – a process known as genotoxicity. It is generally accepted that there are no safe levels for genotoxic substances.

You might think that would be enough to embarrass the American politicians into telling their farmers to stop using hormones. After all, the incidence of cancer is rising dramatically in the US – and has been doing so for some years.

However, the American farmers (and their government) have taken comfort from the fact that although a joint committee set up by the World Health Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organization has agreed that one of the hormones in use (estradiol-17-beta) has what it calls 'genotoxic properties', and does cause cancer, it has argued that it is safe to allow people to consume modest amounts of this cancer-inducing hormone. Moreover, much to the delight of the Americans, the committee claims to know what the safe level is. You will not be surprised to hear that the American farmers and their government claim that their beef contains less than this safe amount of this known cancerinducing substance.

In my view anyone who eats American beef is playing a modern version of Russian roulette and is exhibiting an extraordinary amount of trust in a group of people (American politicians, farmers and businessmen) who have consistently shown that they do not give a fig for human health or human life. Just what impact these hormones are likely to have on the consumer's immune system, health or life expectation I do not know. Moreover, I doubt if anyone else knows either.

Genetic Engineering

Science has, during the last few decades, presented us with a steadily increasing and apparently endless variety of moral dilemmas and practical threats. The subject of genetic engineering is a perfect example of how politicians have betrayed us all and are, through their refusal to take on big industry, threatening our very future.

In two decades or so genetic engineering has evolved so rapidly as a branch of science (if science is the right word for a form of alchemy which seems to pay little or no attention to logic or research) that the future of our species is now threatened. Genetic engineering enables scientists to transfer genes between species in an entirely unnatural way. Human genes can be transferred to pigs, sheep, fish or bacteria. And genes from bacteria, slugs, elephants, fish, tomatoes and anything else can be put into human beings.

Genetic engineering started in the 1970s. The technique involves putting genes from one species into another species. In order to do this the genetic engineers put the genes they want to move into viruses. They then put the virus into the animal or plant which is to be the recipient. Genetic engineering is nothing at all like conventional breeding techniques (such as are used by dog breeders who want dogs with very floppy ears or by people who want to grow black tulips).

Listen to the boastful, extraordinarily arrogant claims of genetic scientists and you might believe that they had all the answers to hunger and disease. They talk grandly about eradicating starvation by creating new high yield, pest resistant versions of existing foods and manipulating genes to banish physical ailments, aggression and depression. They will, they say, be able to eradicate homosexuality, control the overpopulation problem, purify water supplies, remove crime from our streets and deal with deforestation. Genetic engineers have even talked of modified strains of bacteria able to eat up plastics, heavy metals and other toxic wastes.

Vast amounts of money (at least $3 billion) have been poured into identifying the human genome (the genetic blue print for human life). There has even been talk that we will be able to clone ourselves so that we need never die.

Moral and ethical questions have been brushed aside as the unnecessary anxieties of ignorant Luddites who either do not understand what is going on or are temperamentally opposed to progress.

But if it all sounds too good to be true – and all rather reminiscent of the sort of cheap promises with which confidence tricksters make their money – that is because it simply isn’t true. Genetic scientists don’t have the answers to any of our problems. On the contrary they have created a hugely successful money making myth which keeps them in fat grants and huge salaries. (It is important not to underestimate the importance of money in the world of genetic engineering. The world market for biotechnology products is growing at 30% a year.)

None of this would matter too much if what they were doing was as harmless as it is useless. But harmless it is definitely not. Fiddling around with genes is an exceedingly hazardous business. Simply inserting a gene from one creature into another can cause cancer.

Genetic engineering is not something we can simply ignore until the thousands who are making the grand claims are exposed as fraudsters, or until their poorly based pseudoscience falls out of fashion. It is time that the insane burblings of the geneticists were exposed for what they are. I have been writing about the horrors of genetic engineering for over twenty years since I first realised that scientists were making promises it was clear they couldn’t keep but most doctors, critics and journalists have so far been too frightened (or ignorant) to oppose the torrent of undiluted praise for genetic engineering and point a firm finger at just another invisible suit of clothes for the same old naked Emperor.

When genetic engineering first hit the headlines, the public was promised that there would be strict rules about just what could and could not be done. But the rules that were intended to protect us have been bent, pushed aside and ignored. Regulations were, it was claimed, slowing down progress, interfering with the competitiveness of the developing new industry and getting in the way of individual scientists keen to get on with their plan for improving the world. It is wrong, say the scientists, to try to ban new thinking or new research.

Genetic engineers claim that there is no need for caution and that only the narrow minded and the reactionary have reservations about this exciting new branch of scientific endeavour.

But the fact is that the genetic engineering industry has even succeeded in ‘persuading’ politicians and administrators that there is no need to segregate genetically engineered produce from naturally grown produce.

The risks associated with genetic engineering are numerous and widespread. There is little doubt that genetic engineering is at least partly responsible for the problem of antibiotic-resistant organisms. And there is even less doubt that genetic engineering is responsible for some, and possibly many, of the new infective organisms now threatening human health.

Under normal circumstances viruses are species specific. A virus that attacks a cat will not attack a human being. And a virus that attacks a human being will not attack a cow. But the genetic engineers have changed all that. They have deliberately glued together different bits of viruses in order to cross species barriers. These genetically engineered viruses can then become virulent again. Genetically engineered viruses are extremely infectious. None of this happens by accident – this is how genetic engineering works.

Naturally, the men and women in white coats who were convinced that they knew best (‘Trust us – nothing can go wrong’) have been releasing genetic material that they have been fiddling with into the environment for years. A year or two ago we thought that the dumping of waste chemicals was bad news. But the dumping of genetic misshapes and off-cuts will, I believe, create a problem infinitely larger than the dumping of chemical waste or even nuclear waste. Genes, once they start moving and reproducing, can keep spreading, recombining and affecting new species for ever. Once the door has been opened it cannot be shut. And the door has been opened.

‘Don’t worry!’ said the genetic engineers, when this problem was identified. ‘Genetic material is easily digested by gut enzymes.’

Sadly, they were wrong about that too.

Genetic material can survive a journey through an intestine and find its way, via the blood stream, into all sorts of body cells. And once inside a new body the genetic material can begin to affect host cells. If you eat a genetically engineered tomato the foreign genes in the tomato could end up in your cells. Cancer is an obvious possible consequence of this. Exactly what are the risks? I'm afraid that your guess is as good as mine. And our guesses are just as good as the guesses made by genetic engineers. They don't have the foggiest idea what will happen. But they know that something terrible could happen.

Readers will, I am sure, have realised that this poses a new and startling question: what about the altered genetic material in new types of food? What happens to genetically altered food when it is eaten? Will the altered genes find their way into our own genetic material? Could genetically engineered food cause cancer? Could genetically engineered food affect the human immune system?

Asking the questions is easy. But no one knows the answers.

Genetically engineered foods have already been shown to produce allergy problems – and to be toxic. One major hazard is that plants which have been genetically engineered to be resistant to disease may be more likely to produce allergy problems. A soya bean genetically engineered with a gene from a brazil nut was found to cause allergy problems when eaten by people sensitive to Brazil nuts. A strain of yeast, genetically altered in order to ferment more quickly, acquired cancer inducing qualities. Contaminants in an amino acid produced by a Japanese company led to 1,500 people falling ill and to the deaths of 37 individuals.

And yet, amazingly, politicians have done nothing to protect the public. The manufacturers of genetically engineered foods do not have to identify foods that have been genetically engineered. No one tests genetically engineered foods to see whether or not they are particularly likely to cause allergy problems. The new food is tested when it is put onto the market. You and I are the unwitting test subjects. Even drug companies have to do some tests before they can launch new products. Food companies seem to be entirely free of controls.

Amazingly, the politicians and administrators whom we pay to protect us allow the manufacturers to get away with the argument that it would be impossible to separate and identify genetically engineered foods! 'Segregation of bulk commodities is not scientifically justified and is economically unrealistic,' said the industries involved in genetic engineering. 'Certainly!' said the politicians and the bureaucrats. 'If you say so.' The US government announced that it would not tolerate the segregation or labelling of genetically engineered crops. The US government has stated: 'We do not find any scientific evidence to support the assertion that bio-engineered foods are inherently less safe. Therefore they should not be singled out for special labelling requirements.' In my view this must rank as one of the most hollow and absurd statements of the century since as far as I am aware no one has done any clinical investigations to find out whether or not bioengineered foods are safe, a bit unsafe or completely deadly.

European politicians do not have the guts to stand up to American politicians. They are frightened that if they upset the Americans the Americans will introduce trade embargoes. (The American government, desperate as ever not to annoy big American companies, has already warned food companies that if they label their products as not containing genetically engineered food they will not be looked upon favourably if they attempt to market their products in the US.)

The problems are only just beginning but already they are already frightening. Potatoes and oilseed rape were genetically engineered to be resistant to herbicide. The resistance spread to weeds within a single growing season. Thanks to the irresponsible overuse and abuse of pesticides, and the widespread introduction of crops genetically engineered to produce 'natural' insecticides, more than 1,000 agricultural pests have now acquired so much resistance that they are immune to chemical control. Crops which have been genetically engineered to tolerate herbicides have already begun to make weeds immune to the same herbicides.

If the big seed companies and the politicians have their way then within a year or two farmers throughout the world will be growing the same variety of genetically engineered soya, the same type of genetically engineered potato and the same genetically engineered corn. That is not a prediction which is difficult to make. It is exactly what the big seed manufacturers are planning. And when the world's single crop of soya/potatoes/corn is destroyed by an insect or plant disease which is immune to every pesticide known to man (and remember there are already 1,000 insects and plant diseases which satisfy that requirement) countless millions around the world will die of starvation.

5. The Contamination of Our Drinking Water

Back in 1982 – in a column I was writing in a medical journal – I raised the question of whether or not public drinking water supplies could be polluted with female hormone residues which might affect the development of male babies.

I tried to get television and radio journalists to take up the problem. And I tried to interest politicians in the topic too. But although many were horrified by the idea all quickly decided that it was far too controversial a subject.

'It'll frighten people far too much!' was the common view. However, it wasn't just the possibility of female hormones – residues from the contraceptive pill – which might be causing problems which worried me.

At the time when I first wrote about this subject I was so alarmed by what I had discovered that I spent over a year doing research before I wrote the article and my fear was built on several pieces of information.

* *Fact one*: More and more people are taking increasingly powerful medicinal drugs such as antibiotics, painkillers, tranquillisers, sleeping tablets, hormones (particularly those in the contraceptive pill) and steroids. Huge numbers of people take drugs every day. Not many people go through a whole year without taking at least one course of tablets. Half of the population will take a prescribed medicine today (and tomorrow and the day after that). And on top of the prescribed drugs there are all the non prescription drugs that are taken – pills bought over the chemists counter and taken day in and day out.

* *Fact two*: Many drugs are excreted in the urine when the body has finished with them. For example, up to 75% of a dose of a tranquilliser may be excreted in the urine. With other drugs the figure may be as high as 90%. Some drugs which are degraded can chemically react with the environment and become active again.

* *Fact three*: After going through standard purification procedures waste water is often discharged into fresh water rivers.

* *Fact four*: Drinking water supplies are often taken from fresh water rivers – the same rivers into which the waste water has been discharged.

* *Fact five*: Water purification programmes were designed many years ago – before doctors started prescribing vast quantities of drugs for millions of patients and before the problem of removing drug residues had been thought of.

I felt that even someone with a modest IQ should be able to see where all this was leading.

It seemed clear to me that anyone who turned on a tap and made a cup of tea could be getting a cocktail containing leftover chemicals from other people's tranquillisers, sleeping pills, antibiotics, contraceptive pills, heart drugs, anti-arthritis pills and so on.

Back in 1982 I wrote that: 'with an increasing number of people taking drugs there must be a risk that the drinking water supplies will eventually become contaminated so heavily that people using ordinary drinking water will effectively be taking drugs. Or have we already reached that point: and are people who drink water in certain areas of the country already passively involved in daily drug taking?'

Back in 1982 no one seemed to know the answer to that frightening question.

And today I still don't know the answer. Does anyone?

Are you an involuntary drug taker? Could you be addicted to any of the drug residues which might be in your drinking water? Could you be taking regular supplies of bits and pieces of other people's antibiotics? Are you taking contraceptive hormone leftovers? Could these drug residues be affecting your fertility? Could drug residues affect the health of any unborn children?

No one in the government seems concerned by these questions.

I think they should be.

It may soon be too late, for evidence is already appearing to suggest that my original fears were accurate.

A report published in 1999 by the Environmental Agency in the UK reports that 57% of the roach in one river had changed sex. Chemicals in treated sewage and factory waste were blamed for upsetting natural fish hormones. The researchers found that the fish were more likely to be affected when they spent time close to a sewage outlet. They also found that fish who lived upstream (away from the sewage outlet) were much less likely to be affected. Apparently, the chemicals in sewage which are most likely to affect fish are female hormones such as oestrogens.

Strangely, some scientists still seem puzzled about the source of the female hormones. (Since the average scientist seems to have the IQ of a dead tree one should not, I suppose, be too surprised by this.)

While they were studying lake water for pesticide contamination Swiss chemists were surprised to find that the lake was polluted with clofibric acid – a drug which is used to lower blood cholesterol levels. The possibility that this could have been caused by industrial spillage was ruled out when it was established that clofibric acid is not manufactured in Switzerland. When the chemists checked other lakes and rivers they found low concentrates of the drug everywhere.

When researchers in Germany started looking for clofibric acid they found the drug in all sorts of water supplies – including tap water.

Intrigued, the researchers looked harder.

And they found lipid-lowering drugs, analgesics (including diclofenac and ibuprofen), beta blocker heart drugs, antibiotics, chemotherapy drugs and hormones. They found all these drugs in water bodies and in drinking water. And they found that the concentrations were highest in heavily populated areas. Once they had ruled out industrial spillage the researchers realised that the drugs had come from human body wastes. Exactly what I had predicted in 1982.

The chances are that no one knows what drugs can be found in your drinking water. Why? Because no one is looking. Most governments do not monitor water supplies to see if they contain drug residues. Nor do they require anyone else to do this.

But there seems little doubt that drinking water is now heavily contaminated with drug residues. And the long term effect of all this is difficult to estimate. Minute amounts of antibiotic in drinking water can affect bacteria in many different ways. They can surely have a dramatic effect on the development of antibiotic-resistant organisms.

There is not yet any evidence showing a clear link between water pollution and problems (such as fertility) affecting human beings. But the absence of any such evidence may possibly be a result of the fact that as far as I know no one has yet done any research into this issue. The research would be extremely simple to do and wouldn't cost very much. Scientists would simply count the number of people with fertility problems (or some other specific disorder) who had drunk re-circulated water and then compare that figure with the incidence of fertility problems among people who had drunk fresh spring or borehole water. But who would want to do such research? Certainly not the water companies.

How are the drugs in your drinking water affecting your health? Is your daily cocktail of tranquillisers, antibiotics, hormones, steroids, chemotherapy drugs, heart drugs, pain killers and so on making you ill? How do all these drugs interact? Are they likely to be at least partly responsible for the way the incidence of cancer is increasing? Are they affecting your immune system?

No one knows.

And no one in authority seems to want to know.

Maybe they are frightened to discover the truth.

Meanwhile, politicians around the world now drink spring water, at taxpayers' expense, which is bottled at source before it has too much chance of becoming contaminated.

6. The Popularity Of Microwave Ovens

It isn't just the poor quality of the food we buy which makes us ill – damaging our immune systems and making us vulnerable to infections and to cancer.

The way we prepare our food can also have a dramatic effect on our health. Overcooking food can destroy the vitamin content, for example.

And consider the microwave oven.

There are millions of microwave ovens in use around the world. Unlike traditional ovens they work by using short wave electromagnetic radiation to heat up food.

But, although microwave ovens are widely sold, widely used and sit in millions of kitchens heating (and affecting) the food that people eat, neither governments nor manufacturers seem keen to provide or publish information showing exactly how safe these products are.

In my book *Food for Thought* (first published in 1994 by the European Medical Journal) I asked specific questions about microwave ovens.

The first questions were: 'Are the waves that are used to do the cooking harmful to human beings?' and 'If any of the microwaves escape from the oven will they harm your health?'

The other question, possibly even more alarming, was even simpler: 'Does using a microwave oven affect the food you at in any harmful way?'

In 1998 *The Journal of Natural Science* published an extremely significant paper dealing with the effects of microwaves on humans. The paper, was written by William Kopp, who worked at the Atlantis Rising Educational Center in Portland, Oregon from 1977 to 1979 and who, while working there, gathered together early documents detailing what was then known about the harmful effects of microwave ovens on human beings.

By writing this paper Kopp annoyed a powerful lobby. According to the *Journal of Natural Science* he subsequently changed his name and disappeared. This may sound dramatic but I have met another researcher who examined the dangers of microwave ovens who has been subjected to threats, and whose attempts to publicise the truth about microwave ovens has been met with lawsuits and other attempts to silence him.

Kopp reported that microwave ovens were originally developed by the Nazis for use by mobile support operations during the planned invasion of the Soviet Union. The aim was to eliminate the logistical problem of finding cooking fuels – as well as to cut down cooking times. The initial German research was conducted by the Germans in 1942-3 at the Humboldt-Universitat zu Berlin.

After the end of World War II, wrote Kopp, the Allies discovered the medical research which related to microwave ovens. Experimental microwave equipment was transferred both to the US War Department and to the Soviet Union for investigation. In the Soviet Union research work was done at the Institute of Radio Technology at Kinsk and the Institute of Radio Technology at Rajasthan.

It was in the Soviet Union that most of the research was done and published. And it was the Soviet Union, reported Kopp, which found that a human did not even need to ingest microwaved food substances to be in danger, because even exposure to the energy field itself was sufficient to cause serious adverse side effects.

Kopp pointed out that Soviet scientists were so alarmed about the hazards associated with microwave ovens that the Soviet Union produced a state law in 1976 which forbad the use of any microwave apparatus.

Here is a list of some of the adverse effects listed by the Soviet scientists back in the 1970s as having been observed when human beings were exposed to microwaves.

* A destabilisation in the production of hormones and the maintenance of hormone balance in both males and females.
* Brainwave disturbance in the alpha, theta and delta wave signal patterns.
* A breakdown of the human 'life energy field'.
* A degeneration and destabilisation of internal cellular membrane properties.
* A degeneration and breakdown of electrical nerve impulses within the cerebrum.
* A long term cumulative loss of vital energies within humans, animals and plants which were located within a 500m radius of the operational equipment.
* Long lasting residual effects in the nervous system and lymphatic systems.
* Negative psychological effects (produced as a result of the brain wave pattern changes) which included: loss of memory, loss of ability to concentrate, changes in intellect and emotional responses and sleep disturbances.

More recently obtained evidence seems to confirm that the danger of microwave ovens is not confined to what happens to the food that is cooked inside them.

Despite the protective shields with which they may be fitted microwave ovens give out extra low frequency electromagnetic fields which may be high enough to produce lymphatic cancer in children.

And when white blood cells are exposed to the sort of electromagnetic fields given out by microwave ovens their ability to fight disease may be reduced dramatically.

World wide there are now over 7,000 scientific publications in existence dealing with the health damage caused by short wave transmitters. The damage to cells and cell membranes caused by electromagnetic fields has been well known to scientists for years. (Although, naturally, the electrical and telecommunications industries have steadfastly followed the early example of the tobacco industry and denied that their products could possibly cause cancer or, indeed, any other serious health problem).

The scientists who examined food which had been cooked in microwave ovens came across a number of serious problems. Here is a summary, listed in William Kopp's paper in the *Journal of Natural Science* of some of the serious changes which have been identified:

* In a statistically high percentage of persons, microwaved foods caused stomach and intestinal cancerous growths, as well as a gradual breakdown of the function of the digestive and excretive systems.

* When meat was heated sufficiently for eating the cancer causing agent d-nitrosodiethanoloamine was created.

* Cancer causing agents in milk and cereal grains were produced.

* Eating food that had been heated by microwave resulted in a higher percentage of cancer cells within the blood.

* Microwave emissions caused serious alterations to frozen fruits when they were thawed in a microwave oven.

* Changes took place in raw, cooked or frozen vegetables when they were exposed to microwaves for 'extremely short' periods of time.

* Because of chemical changes which had taken place in food that was heated in a microwave oven human lymphatic systems malfunctioned with a result that the human body did not adequately protect itself against some types of cancerous growth.

In addition, scientists have found that microwave heating also causes 'significant decreases in the nutritive value of all foods researched'.

Among other serious problems they found that there was a drop in the availability of B complex vitamins, vitamin C, vitamin E and essential minerals in foods that had been heated in a microwave oven.

The September 1998 edition of *The Journal of Natural Science* contained yet more evidence drawing attention to the possible hazards associated with microwave ovens.

* In 1990 researchers in Berlin found that all the microwave ovens it tested emitted microwaves while operating.

* As far as microwaves are concerned the most sensitive part of the body is the lens in the eye. Anyone who operates a microwave oven (particularly at eye level) which leaks could go blind.

* Studies with broccoli and carrots have revealed that cell structures are destroyed in the microwave oven. (In conventional ovens the cell walls remain intact.)

* Cooking in a microwave oven creates free radicals – known to be a possible cancer trigger.

* Food cooked in a microwave oven may be cooked unevenly – leaving possible 'cold spots' inside the food. This may result in the possible development of listeria or salmonella infection.

* Water samples were heated, both conventionally and in a microwave oven. The water samples were then used to help grain germinate. Grain did not germinate when in contact with water which had been heated in a microwave oven.

* At the end of the 1980s it was reported that there was an increased incidence of malformations among children of mothers exposed to microwave ovens.

* In 1991 a patient in Oklahoma is alleged to have died of anaphylaxis after receiving a blood transfusion with blood warmed in a microwave oven. It is claimed that the microwave irradiation had altered the blood and thereby caused the patient's death.

* Scientists have discovered that microwaving human breast milk at high temperatures produced a marked decrease in activity of all the tested anti-infective factors naturally present in breast milk. The growth of E.coli was 18 times that observed in normal human breast milk.

* In 1989 the Swiss biologist Dr Hans Hertel, together with another researcher, conducted a study on the effects of microwaved food which proved that food which had been cooked in a microwave oven caused significant changes in the blood. The authors noted that these changes indicated the beginning of a pathological process (e.g. the beginning of cancer). Afterwards the second researcher, who had worked with Dr Hertel, disassociated himself from the results and his earlier interpretation of the results. In a private letter to Dr Hertel the second researcher admitted that he feared 'consequences' and that the safety of his family was more important to him than anything else.

The October/November 1998 issue of *Nexus* magazine reported that a physicist had presented research showing that the human body generates and emits its own low intensity radiation.

The physicist claimed that the human body's metabolism generates its own electromagnetic field. The weak emissions of light which are produced by the body are an outward sign of an orderly, functioning metabolism. This research opens up another series of questions about the effect external sources of microwave radiation may have on living tissues.

It seems perfectly clear to me that microwave ovens should be banned. And any such ban should only be lifted if the manufacturers are prepared to do research which either shows that these original research findings are inaccurate or shows that there are ways to counteract the problems.

But a ban on microwave ovens seems about as likely as the medical profession standing up and admitting that the orthodox approach to cancer treatment has failed.

The manufacture and sale of microwave ovens is now big business and these convenient items have become fixtures in canteens, restaurants, hotels and homes all over the world.

In *The Journal of Natural Science* Dr Hertel points out that: '...research of the biological effects of electromagnetic fields on life, especially connected with technical microwaves, is successfully being suppressed. Such research projects are, therefore, only possible on a private basis while the relevant authorities do everything they can to keep the findings from the public, denying them, making them look ridiculous or dismissing them as non scientific.'

I believe that Dr Hertel is absolutely right.

Mainstream newspapers, magazines, television and radio have consistently ignored or denied the threat posed by microwave ovens. Politicians have refused to ask for these devices to be properly tested. In my experience, attempts to publicise the possible hazards (and the fact that the industry making and selling microwave ovens has never done adequate testing on the effects on human health) seem to have been met with more concern for the health of the microwave industry than for the health and safety of consumers.

Back in January 1990 I warned, in a newspaper article, that thousands could die every year from the effect of food cooked in microwave ovens. I pointed out that it could be 10, 20 or 30 years before the damage done by microwave ovens could be fully assessed and added that I was appalled that manufacturers had not fully tested microwave ovens.

In the UK the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) subsequently broadcast a programme attacking me for this warning and blaming me as the source of a 'scare' about the heating of milk in microwave ovens. My offer to appear on the programme to discuss the issue and defend my point of view was rejected.

(Rather to my surprise, my complaint about the BBC's *Food and Drink* programme was duly upheld by the Broadcasting Complaints Commission which described the BBC programme as 'unfair to Dr Coleman'.)

7. Doctors, Drugs And Vaccines

Back in the middle ages people were reluctant to go into hospital. They knew that they were unlikely to get out alive. Those patients who survived the incompetent ministrations of doctors and nurses were likely to die of infections contracted on the ward.

Things didn't get much better until well into this century when the discovery of anaesthetics, antiseptics and antibiotics gradually meant that patients going into hospital had a reasonable chance of benefiting from the experience.

But those good days are now over.

Medicine has again become a major hazard.

And doctors are again one of the most significant causes of death and ill health. They are, I fear, often responsible for helping to make their patients more susceptible to infections and to cancer.

The quality of care provided by doctors has fallen dramatically within the last few decades. Doctors frequently do too many tests, they prescribe drugs which aren't necessary, they prescribe drugs which may not have been adequately tested, they routinely give vaccines which may do more harm than good and they perform too much surgery: all these activities (and others) damage the immune system and make patients more vulnerable to disease. As I have shown in books such as *Betrayal of Trust* (published by the European Medical Journal) doctors are now routinely making people ill and are a major health hazard.

It is vaccines which, I suspect, best illustrate the recklessness and ruthlessness of the medical profession and the pharmaceutical industry and the way in which both have helped damage the human immune system.

Vaccination programmes are a particularly poignant example of the way in which doctors can do harm, partly because just about every individual in the 'developed' world will at some time or another be vaccinated and partly because vaccines are given to perfectly healthy people. Individuals who have absolutely nothing wrong with them visit their doctor and allow themselves to be vaccinated in the belief that they are being injected with something perfectly safe which will protect them from disease in the future. Sadly, there is now a dramatic amount of evidence to show that their faith is misplaced and that vaccines may cause an enormous amount of trouble – and do serious and possibly sometimes irreparable harm to the body's immune system.

Most practising doctors and nurses at the sharp end of medicine undoubtedly believe that vaccines have helped wipe out some of the deadliest infectious diseases. Many members of the medical profession would put vaccination high on any list of great medical discoveries.

The perceived value of vaccination is so great that even though I have, for many years, been a vociferous critic of some specific vaccines I have up until now always been reluctant to damn all vaccination programmes as worthless and dangerous.

The mythical power of vaccination programmes has been sustained by governments and organisations such as the World Health Organization announcing, apparently with complete conviction, that such and such a disease will be eradicated when the relevant vaccination programme has been completed.

The principle behind vaccination is a convincing one.

The theory is that when an individual is given a vaccine – which consists of a weakened or dead version of the disease against which protection is required – his or her body will be tricked into developing antibodies to the disease in exactly the same way that a body develops antibodies when it is exposed to the disease itself.

But in reality things aren't quite so simple. How long do the antibodies last? Do they always work? What about those individuals who don't produce antibodies at all? Vaccination, like so much of medicine, is a far more inexact science than doctors (and drug companies) would like us to think.

Vaccination is widely respected by doctors and others in the health care industry because of the assumption that it is through vaccination that many of the world's most lethal infectious diseases have been eradicated. But this simply isn't true. As I have shown in many of my books infectious diseases were conquered by the provision of cleaner drinking water and better sewage facilities. The introduction of vaccination programmes came along either just at the same time or later when the death rates from the major infectious diseases had already fallen. There really isn't any evidence to show that vaccination programmes have ever been of any real value – either to individuals or to communities.

Smallpox

One of the medical profession's greatest boasts is that it eradicated smallpox through the use of the smallpox vaccine. I myself believed this claim for many years. But it simply isn't true.

One of the worst smallpox epidemics of all time took place in England between 1870 and 1872 – nearly two decades after compulsory vaccination was introduced. After this evidence that smallpox vaccination didn't work the people of Leicester in the English Midlands refused to have the vaccine any more. When the next smallpox epidemic struck in the early 1890s the people of Leicester relied upon good sanitation and a system of quarantine. There was only one death from smallpox in Leicester during that epidemic. In contrast the citizens of other towns (who had been vaccinated) died in vast numbers.

Obligatory vaccination against smallpox was introduced in Germany in around 1816, largely as a result of state by-laws, but these vaccination programmes had no influence on the incidence of the disease. On the contrary, the smallpox epidemic continued to grow and in 1870 the war with France led to the gravest smallpox epidemic in German history. At that point the new German Reich introduced a new national law making vaccination against smallpox an even stricter legal requirement. The police were given the power to enforce the new law.

German doctors (and medical students) are taught that it was the Reich Vaccination Law which led to a dramatic reduction in the incidence of smallpox in Germany. But a close look at the figures shows that the incidence of smallpox had already started to fall before the law came into action. And the legally enforced national smallpox vaccination programme did not eradicate the disease.

Doctors and drug companies may not like it but the truth is that surveillance, quarantine and better living conditions got rid of smallpox – not the smallpox vaccine.

When the international campaign to rid the world of smallpox was at its height the number of cases of smallpox went up each time there was a large scale (and expensive) mass vaccination of populations in susceptible countries. As a result of this the strategy was changed. Mass vaccination programmes were abandoned and replaced with surveillance, isolation and quarantine.

The myth that smallpox was eradicated through a mass vaccination programme is just that – a myth. Smallpox was eradicated through identifying and isolating patients with the disease.

It is worth pointing out that Edward Jenner, widely fêted as the inventor of the smallpox vaccine, tried out the first smallpox vaccination on his own 10 month old son. His son remained mentally retarded until his death at the age of 21. Jenner refused to have his second child vaccinated.

Tuberculosis

Vaccination against tuberculosis is often given as the reason why this disease stopped being quite the threat to life that it had been in the 18th century.

But again, this isn't true.

Robert Koch discovered the pathogen that causes tuberculosis (TB) back in 1883. After that BCG vaccination was introduced and then, subsequently, mass treatment programmes were devised with chemotherapy.

None of these discoveries or introductions had a significant effect on the incidence of tuberculosis.

Contracting TB doesn't provide any immunity against a second infection. And if a natural infection doesn't provide protection then a vaccination certainly won't provide protection. How on earth can it?

It was noticed decades ago that in the lung sanatoriums that specialised in the treatment of TB patients there was no difference in the survival rates of patients who had been 'protected' against TB by vaccination when compared to the survival rates of patients who had received no such 'protection'.

The tuberculosis vaccination (the Bacillus Calmette-Guerin – known as BCG) consists of a weakened, living bovine mycobacteria. The vaccine was used for many years but a trial in India showed that the vaccine offers no protection against the disease. Indeed, when new cases of tuberculosis increased annually in the area where people had been vaccinated against the disease the trial seemed to suggest that there might be a link between the vaccine and outbreaks of the disease.

Many countries have now abandoned the TB vaccine – and have no plans to reintroduce it even though the disease is now once again a major health problem.

Diphtheria

Vaccination against diphtheria was introduced to Germany in 1925. After the introduction of the vaccine the number of cases of diphtheria steadily increased until, shortly after the Second World War, production of the vaccine was halted. There was a decline in the incidence of the disease which coincided with the fact that the vaccination was no longer being used. When the vaccine was subsequently reintroduced the decline in the incidence of the disease slowed down.

As with whooping cough, tetanus and other diseases the incidence, and number of deaths from diphtheria, were in decline long before the vaccine was introduced.

Poliomyelitis

Paralysis caused by poliomyelitis is now unheard of in Germany. But every year there are some cases of paralysis caused by the oral polio vaccine.

In America the incidence of polio increased dramatically (by around 50%) after the introduction of mass immunisation. In some states the incidence of polio roughly doubled after the polio vaccine was introduced. The number of deaths from polio had fallen dramatically before the first polio vaccine was introduced.

As with other infectious diseases the significance of polio dropped as better sanitation, better housing, cleaner water and more food were all made available in the second half of the nineteenth century. It was social developments rather than medical ones which increased human resistance to infectious diseases.

Proof that the introduction of the polio vaccine wasn't the success it is often made out to be isn't difficult to find. In Tennessee, US, the number of polio victims the year before vaccination became compulsory was 119. The year after vaccination was introduced the figure rose to 386. In North Carolina, the number of cases before vaccination was introduced was 78, while the number after the vaccine became compulsory rose to 313. There are similar figures for other American states.

The fact is that polio (like many other infectious diseases) comes in cycles. When a disease is at a high point in its cycle the authorities (egged on by doctors and drug companies) will use this to frighten citizens into agreeing to be vaccinated. And when a disease is at a low point in its natural cycle it is often vaccination programmes which get the credit. This is exactly what happened with polio.

However, whether or not the polio vaccine actually works is, for many people, a relatively unimportant health issue.

Of far more significance is the fact (revealed in my book *Why Animal Experiments Must Stop* in 1991) that millions of people who were given polio jabs as children in the 1950s and 1960s may now be at a greatly increased risk of developing cancer.

Although an early breakthrough in the development of a polio vaccine was made in 1949 with the aid of a human tissue culture, monkey kidney tissue was used when the first practical vaccine was prepared in the 1950s. The monkey tissue was used simply because that was standard laboratory practice, but no one realised that one of the viruses commonly found in monkey kidney cells can cause cancer in human beings.

(As a side issue this is yet another example of the stupidity of using animal tissue in the treatment of human patients. The popularity of using transplants derived from animals suggests that doctors and scientists have learned nothing from this error. I sometimes despair of those who claim to be in the healing profession.)

Bone, brain, liver and lung cancers have all been linked to the monkey kidney virus SV40 and something like seventeen million people who were given the polio vaccine in the 1950s and 1960s are probably now at risk. Moreover, there now seems to be evidence that the virus may be passed on to the children of those who were given the contaminated vaccine. The SV40 virus from the polio vaccine has already been found in cancers which have developed both in individuals who were given the vaccine as protection against polio and in the children of individuals who were given the vaccine. It seems inconceivable that the virus could have got into the tumours other than through the polio vaccine.

The American government was warned of this danger back in 1956 but the doctor who made the discovery was ignored and her laboratory was closed down. Surprise, surprise. It was five years after this discovery before drug companies started screening out the virus. And even then Britain had millions of doses of the infected polio vaccine in stock. There is no evidence that the government withdrew the vaccine. In Britain official records which would identify those who received the contaminated vaccine were all destroyed by the Department of Health in 1987. Oddly enough this means that no one can take legal action against the government. Gosh. Another surprise.

Whooping cough

Throughout the 1970s and the 1980s I was a critic of a number of vaccines – most notably the whooping cough vaccine.

The story of the whooping cough vaccine provides us with a remarkable example of dishonesty and deceit in medicine.

There has been controversy about the whooping cough vaccine for many years but in the UK the Department of Health and Social Security has, through the years, consistently managed to convince the majority of medical and nursing staff to support the official line that the vaccine is both safe and effective. The official line has for years paid little attention to the facts. Put bluntly successive governments have consistently lied about the risks and problems associated with the whooping cough vaccine.

I will explain exactly why I think that governments have lied to their employers (the public) a little later. For the time being I would like to concentrate on the facts.

The first point that should be made is that although official spokesmen claim otherwise, the whooping cough vaccine has never had much of an influence on the number of children dying from whooping cough. The dramatic fall in the number of deaths caused by the disease came well before the vaccine was widely available and was, historians agree, the result of improved public health measures and, indirectly, the use of antibiotics.

It was in 1957 that the whooping cough vaccine was first introduced nationally in Britain – although the vaccine was tried out in the late 1940s and the early 1950s. But the incidence of whooping cough, and the number of children dying from the disease, had both fallen very considerably well before 1957. So, for example, while doctors reported 170,000 cases of whooping cough in 1950 they reported only about 80,000 cases in 1955.The introduction of the vaccine really didn't make very much, if any, difference to the fall in the incidence of the disease. Thirty years after the introduction of the vaccine, whooping cough cases were still running at about 1,000 a week in Britain.

Similarly, the figures show that the introduction of the vaccine had no effect on the number of children dying from whooping cough. The mortality rate associated with the disease had been falling appreciably since the early part of the twentieth century and rapidly since the 1930s and 1940s – showing a particularly steep decline after the introduction of the sulphonamide drugs. Whooping cough is undoubtedly an extremely unpleasant disease but it has not been a major killer for many years. Successive governments have frequently forecast fresh whooping cough epidemics but none of the forecast epidemics has produced the devastation predicted.

My second point is that the whooping cough vaccine is neither very efficient nor is it safe. The efficiency of the vaccine is of subsidiary interest – although thousands of children who have been vaccinated do still get the disease – for the greatest controversy surrounds the safety of the vaccine. The British government has always claimed that serious adverse reactions to the whooping cough vaccine are extremely rare and for years the official suggestion was that the risk of a child being brain damaged by the vaccine was no higher than one in 100,000. Leaving aside the fact that I find a risk of one in 100,000 unacceptable, it is interesting to examine this figure more closely, for after a little research work it becomes clear that the figure of one in 100,000 is a guess.

Numerous researchers studied the risks of brain damage following whooping cough vaccination, and between 1960 and 1981 nine reports were published showing that the risk of brain damage varied between one in 6,000 and one in 100,000. The average was a risk of one in 50,000. It is clear from these figures that the government simply chose the figure which showed the whooping cough vaccine to be least risky. Moreover, the one in 100,000 figure was itself an estimate – a guess.

Although the British government consistently claims that whooping cough is a dangerous disease, the figures show that it is not the indiscriminate killer it is made out to be. Whooping cough causes around four deaths a year in Britain. Many more deaths are caused by tuberculosis and meningitis. Furthermore, for many years most of the victims of whooping cough have been babies too young to have had the vaccine.

The truth about the whooping cough vaccine is that it has always been a disaster. The vaccine has been withdrawn in some countries because of the amount of brain damage associated with its use. In Japan, Sweden and West Germany the vaccine has been omitted from regular vaccination schedules. In America two out of three whooping cough vaccine manufacturers stopped making the vaccine because of the cost of lawsuits. On 6th December 1985 the Journal of the American Medical Association published a major report showing that the whooping cough vaccine is, without doubt, linked to the development of serious brain damage.

The final nail in the coffin lid is the fact that the British government has already paid out compensation to the parents of hundreds of children who have been brain damaged by the whooping cough vaccine. Some parents who accepted damages in the early years were given £10,000. Later the sum was raised to £20,000.

It is a startling fact that for many years now the whooping cough vaccine has been killing or severely injuring more children than the disease itself. In the decade after 1979 around 800 children (or their parents) received money from the government for vaccine produced brain damage. In the same period less than 100 children were killed by whooping cough. I think that makes the vaccine more dangerous than the disease. And that, surely is quite unacceptable. So, why has the British government continued to encourage doctors to use the vaccine?

There are two possible explanations. The first explanation is the more generous of the two and concerns the government's responsibility for the health of the community as a whole. The theory here is that by encouraging millions of parents to have their children vaccinated the government can reduce the incidence of the disease in the community. In the long run this (theoretically) reduces the risk of there being any future epidemics of whooping cough. In other words the government risks the lives of individual children for the good of the next generation.

The second, less charitable explanation is that the British government has been looking after its own interests by continuing to claim that the whooping cough vaccine is safe enough to use. If the British government stopped recommending vaccination against whooping cough it would be admitting that the vaccine was dangerous. And it would obviously have to pay out a great deal of money in compensation.

Whatever explanation you consider most accurate the unavoidable fact is that the government has consistently lied about the whooping cough vaccine, has distorted the truth and has deceived both the medical profession (for the majority of doctors and nurses who give these injections accept the recommendations made by the government without question) and millions of parents.

The British government may have saved itself a tidy sum in damages. But the cost to the nation's health has been enormous.

The growing vaccine industry

As the years have gone by the number of vaccines available has increased steadily. Modern American children receive around thirty vaccinations by the time they go to school.

A decade or two ago the only vaccines available were against a relatively small number of diseases including smallpox, tuberculosis, polio, cholera, diphtheria, tetanus and whooping cough. Today, the number of available vaccines seems to grow almost daily. In the past vaccines were produced against major killer diseases. Today vaccines are produced against diseases such as measles, mumps and chickenpox which have been traditionally regarded as relatively benign inconveniences of childhood.

In the UK the death rate from measles had dropped dramatically decades before the vaccine was introduced. Today the incidence of measles is rising again.

In attempts to persuade parents to have their children vaccinated against measles governments and doctors around the world have thought up an apparently unending – and hysterical – series of scare campaigns. Now that there is a vaccine against it measles has, by a strange coincidence, stopped being an annoying childhood disease and has, instead, become a deadly killer.

Scares often consist of claiming that a major epidemic is just around the corner and that only vaccination can offer protection. I have lost count of the number of whooping cough epidemics which governments have wrongly forecast. Governments are either unbelievably stupid or else they are deliberately lying to help boost drug company profits.

Naturally, countless scientists around the world have spent vast fortunes trying to create a vaccine against AIDS (in view of the fact that AIDS may not exist they may find this trickier than expected).

And scientists have apparently developed a banana vaccine by creating genetically engineered banana plants. There are plans to develop bananas which ‘protect’ against hepatitis B, measles, yellow fever and poliomyelitis.

Other scientists have developed a genetically engineered potato which it may be possible to use as a vaccine against cholera. The active part of the potato remains active during the process of cooking and so a portion of genetically engineered chips could soon be a vaccine against cholera. (I am not making this up.)

Naturally; the pharmaceutical industry is constantly searching for more and more new vaccines. I have lost count of the number of times I have read of researchers working on a vaccine to prevent cancer. Every year new flu jabs appear on the market. There are, so I am told, vaccines in the pipeline for just about everything ranging from asthma to earache. There is a planned genetically engineered vaccine which will provide protection against forty different diseases. The vaccine, which will contain the raw DNA of all those different diseases, will be given to newborn babies to provide them with protection for life.

I don’t know about you but I can no longer keep up with what is going on. I have long since given up trying to work out which vaccines are very dangerous and which are just a bit dangerous – and to whom.

Nor can I keep up with which vaccines might work a bit and which don’t seem to do much good at all. Does anyone know what the hell happens inside the body when all these different vaccinations are given together? Do different vaccines work with or against one another? What about the risk of interactions? Exactly how does the immune system cope when it is suddenly bombarded with so much foreign material?

I am an enthusiastic supporter of the principle of preventive medicine. It is usually much easier to avoid an illness than it is to treat one.

Vaccination programmes are usually sold to the public as though they are an integral part of a general preventive medicine programme.

But over the years I have steadily come around to the view that vaccination programmes cannot truly be described as preventive medicine but are, rather, a part of the interventionist approach to medical care.

Vaccine problems

I have for decades argued that some vaccines may be unnecessary and/or even potentially dangerous in some circumstances, and may sometimes be promoted too enthusiastically by both politicians and doctors.

Vaccinations have been linked to a number of general health problems. It now seems possible, for example, that individuals who receive vaccinations may be more prone to develop diabetes, allergies (such as asthma), eczema and bowel disease (such as Irritable Bowel Syndrome). The explanation – which makes sense to me – is that vaccinations interfere with the immune system and make the recipients more susceptible to disease. It has also been suggested that vaccinations may be the explanation for the mystery problem ‘cot death’. And it now seems that in cases where parents (and others) have been accused of murdering their children by shaking them or in some other way abusing them the real culprit may well have been a vaccine. Brain swelling, intracranial bleeding and other symptoms of ‘shaken baby syndrome’ can all be produced by vaccines. However, this isn’t widely known – perhaps because doctors and drug companies would rather that unfortunate parents took the blame for these deaths. Incidentally, vaccination damage can occur weeks, months or years after a vaccination.

Vaccines have to be developed using living systems. They are, therefore, usually cultivated in material taken from animals – in cell cultures, in fertilised hen’s eggs or in the blood of infected animals. Tissues which are used include brain tissue from rabbits, kidney tissue from dogs, rabbits and monkeys, protein from hen’s or duck’s eggs, blood from horses or pigs. This system can, of course, be dangerous since cell cultures may be contaminated (as was the case with the polio vaccine made with monkey tissue). Some vaccines have been prepared using bovine serum and it now appears that during the early 1990s an unknown number of British children received vaccinations which may have been prepared using material from British cattle which could have been infected with BSE.

Naturally, no one knows the size of the risk that was taken at the time (though it seems that the British government was warned of the hazard).

And no one is likely to know the size of any problem resulting from this for at least a decade. This is yet another piece of powerful evidence supporting those who are opposed to mass vaccination programmes.

(It is perhaps relevant to point out that vaccines also often contain additives. Antibiotics may be added to dampen down the immune system response. And stabilisers of various kinds may also be included.)

Evidence that vaccines may do more harm than good is supported by experiences with animals. Between 1968 and 1988 there were considerably more outbreaks of foot and mouth disease in countries where vaccination against foot and mouth disease was compulsory than in countries where there were no such regulations. Epidemics always started in countries where vaccination was compulsory. This experience clearly shows that the alleged advantage to the community of vaccinating individuals simply does not exist.

Similar observations were made about the hyena dog, which was in 1989 threatened with extinction. Scientists vaccinated individual animals to protect them against rabies but more than a dozen packs then died within a year – of rabies. This happened even in areas where rabies had never been seen before. When researchers tried using a non infectious form of the pathogen (to prevent the deaths of the remaining animals) all members of seven packs of dogs disappeared. And yet the rabies vaccine is now compulsory in many parts of the world. Is it not possible that it is the vaccine which is keeping this disease alive?

Those who eat meat should be aware that cattle (and other animals reared for slaughter) are regularly vaccinated. The meat that is taken from those animals may, therefore, contain vaccine residues in addition to hormones, antibiotics and other drugs.

Tragically, many doctors seem to know very little about the vaccines they advocate. In my view, if a doctor wants to vaccinate you or a member of your family you should insist that he confirm in writing that the vaccine is both entirely safe and absolutely essential. You may notice his enthusiasm for the vaccine suddenly diminish.

Finally, despite all this evidence vaccines for children and adults are compulsory in some countries. In other countries (such as the UK) doctors are given a financial bonus as a reward when they ‘sell’ vaccination to a large proportion of their patients.

As more and more people become wary about vaccines so it is likely that more and more countries will make vaccination compulsory.

8. The Destruction Of Antibiotic Power

A few decades ago the development of antibiotics led many people to believe that the threat offered by infectious diseases had, to a large extent, been conquered.

But a combination of greed and stupidity has changed all that. The effectiveness of antibiotics has been dramatically weakened by three main groups: the companies making them, the medical profession and the farming industry. Each of these groups has acted irresponsibly and dangerously. Since they cannot possibly have been unaware of the impact their actions would have it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that the effectiveness of antibiotics has been deliberately destroyed for short term profit. The drug companies, the medical establishment and the farming industry will together be responsible for millions of deaths. The politicians who have stood to one side and allowed all this to happen must share the responsibility.

The destruction of antibiotics as a weapon in the fight against infection is not a reason why we are now more vulnerable to infection. But it is an important reason why the number of people dying from infections is rising – and will rise dramatically during the next decade or so.

During the last two decades simple, widespread infections have been striking back and once again re-establishing themselves as serious threats to our health – as serious as cancer and heart disease.

In 1952 virtually all infections caused by staphylococcus could be cured by penicillin. But by 1982 a worrying 90% of patients infected with the staphylococcus bug needed treatment with other antibiotics. Penicillin – the best known, cheapest and most widely available antibiotic in the world – no longer worked against staphylococcus.

Doctors didn't worry about this because they had other antibiotics to prescribe. With remarkable arrogance the medical profession assumed that it could always stay one step ahead of the bugs.

What many doctors failed to realise was that yeasts, fungi and bacteria have been producing antibiotics more or less since time began. They use the antibiotics they make to protect themselves. Other yeasts, fungi and bacteria mutate naturally in order to protect themselves against those antibiotics. Through a mixture of ignorance and arrogance doctors speeded up the rate at which bugs acquired resistance by spreading antibiotics around with reckless abandon.

The staphylococcus bug is widespread and constantly being passed from one person to another. It is possible to pick up staphylococcus simply through a handshake. It also affects some mammalian pets and so can be picked up that way too.

Most of the time the body's immune system deals with the bug fairly quickly and effectively. The staphylococcus only becomes a real problem when it is picked up by a human being with a wound of some kind – or an immune system that is out of condition or already stretched so much that it cannot cope. Under those circumstances the staphylococcus can kill.

In order to try to stop staphylococcus bugs causing so many deaths in hospitals doctors started routinely giving antibiotics to all the patients whom they thought might be at risk – and this category naturally included all those patients who were destined for surgery.

The prescribing doctors either didn't realise or didn't care that by dishing out antibiotics so freely they were giving the bugs a greatly increased chance of acquiring immunity.

Staphylococcus has not, of course, been the only bug to become resistant. In 1990 Jim Henson, the inventor of TV puppet stars The Muppets, died of a new, resistant streptococcal infection. Doctors suddenly started to report the existence of antibiotic-resistant strains of streptococcus pneumoniae – which were new enough and virulent enough to kill individuals with weakened immune systems.

Leprosy, easily treated until the late 1970s, became a major problem again when a new, resistant type of the bacterium mycobacterium leprae appeared in Ethiopia. Gonorrhoea acquired worldwide resistance to penicillin and other drugs. By 1990 eight out of ten illnesses caused by shigella were resistant to antibiotics. Malaria, apparently almost under control in the 1950s, has be come a major killer because of the drug-resistant plasmodium falciparum parasites. Tuberculosis, still apparently regarded by many doctors as a disease of the 19th century, has come back with a vengeance with the development of a drug-resistant strain. UNICEF is now warning that antibiotic-resistant strains of tuberculosis need to be taken seriously. Tuberculosis kills over three million people every year. I have been warning about the resurgence of tuberculosis for a decade.

Throughout the early 1990s doctors in the developed world tried to combat new outbreaks of infectious disease by prescribing antibiotics in ever increasing quantities. They also tried to protect patients against infection by prescribing antibiotics for healthy patients. Naturally enough the drug industry, which was making huge profits out of the sale of antibiotics, did not object to this. Politicians, constantly afraid of offending the drug companies, did everything they could to stifle protests by people like me who wrote about this problem and warned about the future consequences.

In the developing countries, where doctors were not always available, patients simply bought their own antibiotics. (Ironically – and in my view with considerable cheek – some observers in the developed world are now blaming the overuse of antibiotics in the developing world for the fact that new antibiotic-resistant bugs are now a serious worldwide threat.)

Today the future is truly bleak. Infectious diseases which we thought we had conquered are coming back with a vengeance. More and more people are dying of simple, uncomplicated infections. The bugs are getting stronger. And our ability to zap them is diminishing almost daily.

I have, for many years, written about the way that doctors do harm by over-prescribing. The best example of the modern tendency to over-prescribe probably lies in the way that antibiotics are used. One in six prescriptions is for an antibiotic and there are at least a hundred different antibiotics available for doctors to choose from.

When antibiotics – drugs such as penicillin – were first introduced in the 1930s they gave doctors a chance to kill the bacteria causing infections. My educated guestimate is that for several decades between half and three quarters of all the prescriptions written for antibiotics have been unnecessary or inappropriate. That is still the situation today.

To a certain extent doctors over-prescribe because they like to do something when faced with a patient – and prescribing a drug is virtually the only thing most of them can do. Prescribing a drug is also a defence against any possible future charge of negligence (on the basis that if the patient dies it is better to have done something than to have done nothing).

But the main reason for the over-prescribing of antibiotics is, without doubt, the fact that doctors are under the influence of the drug companies. The makers of the antibiotics want their drugs prescribed in vast quantities. It makes no difference to them whether or not the prescriptions are necessary. There is now no doubt that many of our most useful drugs have been devalued by overuse and are no longer effective.

Doctors regularly hand out these potentially life-saving pills for minor coughs and infections that would have got better anyway within days. Colds and flu are caused by viruses – which are not susceptible to antibiotics.

The excessive quantities of antibiotics we have swallowed by the ton have weakened our general resistance to infection and paradoxically, strengthened the power of the bugs.

The existence of many antibiotic-resistant organisms is the main reason why infections are such a major problem in hospitals.

Alarmingly, at least 1 in 20 of all hospital patients will pick up an infection in hospital – mostly urinary tract, chest or wound infections. Bizarrely, the spread of these antibiotic-resistant organisms is mostly caused by doctors and nurses failing to wash their hands often enough. Since Ignaz Philipp Semmelweiss first demonstrated (in the mid-19th century) that deaths in the delivery room were caused by dirty hands every child has been taught the importance of basic personal hygiene. Sadly, the message does not seem to have got through to the medical and nursing professions. Several recent studies have shown that neither doctors nor nurses wash their hands anywhere near as often as they should. At least one-third of all hospital infections are caused by dirty hands and the cost in simple financial terms is colossal (though not, of course, as horrendous or as unforgivable as the cost in human terms). It is hardly surprising that people who stay at home to be treated – or who go home quickly after day-case or short-stay surgery – usually get better much quicker than people who need long-stay treatment.

By the mid 1980s it was already becoming clear that bad prescribing was causing serious problems. Strains of staphylococcus were appearing which were resistant to many antibiotics.

At first the new superbugs only caused problems within hospitals – where they caused many deaths among patients whose immune systems had been compromised by other diseases or by physical or mental stresses. It was in hospitals that many superbugs first started to appear but by the early 1990s the staphylococcal superbugs were appearing inside and outside hospitals all around the world.

The problem was so great that the extra costs incurred when doctors had to prescribe increasingly expensive antibiotics was beginning to add an enormous burden to all those responsible for providing health care facilities. In America the extra cost of dealing with antibiotic-resistant organisms was, by the end of the 1980s, estimated at being in excess of $30 billion a year.

Salmonella became a more or less untreatable disease in 1993 and now poses a serious health threat. According to the US Department of Agriculture 661,000 people are made ill every year by salmonella-infected eggs. Of those around 400 people die. The Department of Agriculture’s original count was considerably higher. The figure of 661,000 was obtained after a recount. I don’t have any figures I trust for any other country. In the UK I certainly wouldn’t trust any figures produced by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries.

The big problem with salmonella bacteria is that some strains are already resistant to ampicillin, streptomycin, tetracycline, sulphonamides and chloramphenicol. It won’t be long before some salmonella bacteria are resistant to all known antibiotics. When that happens the death rate from salmonella will rocket.

Most salmonella antibiotic resistance develops on farms where more than half of all antibiotics produced are used (I will explain why in a moment or two). Naturally, the salmonella bacteria in chickens affect the flesh of the birds as well as their eggs. And the bacteria can easily spread from chicken flesh to other products.

My informed and considered view is that if you are an egg eating heterosexual and you don’t mainline illegal drugs with dirty needles then you are more likely to contract and/or die of salmonella poisoning than you are to contract and/ or die of the group of diseases known as AIDS.

Moreover, there seems little doubt that unless the mass use of antibiotics on farms is stopped then salmonella poisoning will pose a considerably greater threat to future generations of the human race than AIDS. Nevertheless, I have no doubt that governments will continue to spend billions on researching still fashionable AIDS but will not risk offending the rich farming lobby by suggesting that antibiotic use be reduced.

Partly thanks to doctors and drug companies the future is truly bleak. Infectious diseases which we thought we had conquered are coming back with a vengeance. More and more people are dying of simple, uncomplicated infections. The bugs are getting stronger. And our ability to kill them is diminishing almost daily.

Scientists messing around with genes are making things considerably worse and ensuring that the future is even more bleak than the present.

However, it is the overuse of antibiotics by farmers which is one of the main reasons why infectious diseases are making a dramatic comeback. Farmers are going to be directly responsible for millions of deaths.

Astonishingly, considerably more than half of all the antibiotics sold are given by farmers to healthy animals. Giving antibiotics helps improve the size and therefore the value of animals. I first wrote about this grossly irresponsible but profitable habit back in the 1970s but politicians have steadfastly refused to take on the farming community and stop farmers using antibiotics.

Why do farmers give their animals so many antibiotics?

Well, to start with, farmers give some antibiotics to animals to help prevent (and treat) disease. Animals on modern farms are exceptionally susceptible to disease because they are kept in overcrowded conditions and they are constantly highly stressed. Antibiotics help to keep sick animals alive long enough to be slaughtered and fed into the food chain. Antibiotics are also given because they help to stop diseases spreading quickly among animals who are kept in cramped and entirely unnatural conditions. When animals live in hideously confined quarters it is nigh on impossible to stop infections spreading without using antibiotics.

Many farmers also routinely put antibiotics into the feed they give their animals to prevent infections developing and the antibiotics that are dished out in this grossly irresponsible way are often the same antibiotics that are becoming dramatically less effective in the treatment of human diseases.

But farmers don’t just give antibiotics to animals in order to deal with disease. It was reported in 1998 that some 10,000 pig, poultry and beef farms in Britain alone were mixing antibiotics into their animal feed in order to promote growth.

Back in the 1940s it was noticed that animals who were regularly given antibiotics put on weight more rapidly than animals who weren’t. I don’t think anyone knows why this happens but antibiotics increase the muscle bulk of animals – and therefore increase their value and the farmer’s eventual profit.

Despite the fact that antibiotic resistance was, even then, acknowledged to be a problem, farmers started to give their animals antibiotics in order to increase their profits. To their eternal shame vets and politicians succumbed to pressure from the farmers and allowed this to happen. (In an attempt to disguise their guilt – and to hide what they are doing – farmers describe the antibiotics they give to animals as ‘digestive enhancers’.) Amazingly, farmers do not need a prescription from a vet in order to give antibiotics to their animals on a regular, daily basis. You need to visit a doctor to get an antibiotic if you have an infection which needs treatment. But farmers can buy their antibiotics in bulk – and throw them into the animal feed by the fistful.

Of course, there have over the years been a few pretty half hearted attempts to stop this grossly irresponsible practice. Various committees and organisations (including the World Health Organization) have recommended phasing out the routine use of antibiotics as growth enhancers.

(I am afraid I cannot explain why ‘phasing out’ has been recommended instead of simply halting this outrageous practice – though undoubtedly the power of the farming industry has much to do with this.)

In December 1998 the European Union finally proposed a ban on the use of some antibiotics by farmers. The British government said it would probably support such a ban but it was clear that any such move would probably prove pointless when drug companies said they would challenge any such ban in the courts. A legal battle on such a complex issue would, with all the appropriate appeals, probably last for at least a decade. In the end the EU announced with a great fanfare that it had banned farmers from using just four antibiotics. But they did not introduce a general ban on the use of the tetracyclines and penicillins – the drugs which are most commonly used both on animals and for human patients. In my view this was akin to making murder illegal between 10.45 pm and 10.50 pm on alternate Wednesdays.

The process by which antibiotic resistance develops is simple to explain. When animals are given antibiotics the bacteria in their intestines build up an immunity to those antibiotics. Those antibiotic-resistant organisms then pass on to farmers and others who have contact with the animals. They pass into the environment (even though most animals are denied access to fields their faeces and urine still reach the environment when they are dumped onto fields or discharged into rivers). And, of course, the antibiotic-resistant organisms pass into the food chain directly when animals are killed, chopped up and eaten by humans. When milk in the US was tested researchers identified 52 different antibiotic residues.

As if all this wasn’t bad enough there is also evidence that the antibiotic-resistant organisms can pass their resistance on to other, more dangerous bacteria. There are already some dangerous infections which are virtually untreatable because the bugs involved are resistant to all the available antibiotics.

Genetic Engineering and Antiobiotics

In addition to the two obvious causes of the increase in the growth of antibiotic-resistant organisms (the use of antibiotics by farmers and the overprescribing of antibiotics by doctors) there is another reason for this problem: genetic engineering.

It has been found that the emergence of antibiotic-resistant bacteria is associated with something known as 'horizontal gene transfer' – in which genes move from species to species. You will, I suspect, not be surprised to hear that 'horizontal gene transfer' is exactly what genetic engineers do. Genetic engineers have spent years, and much money, finding ways to break down the natural barriers which prevent the transfer of genes from one species to another. Genetic engineering has enabled bacteria to share their acquired ability to resist antibiotics and to grow stronger and stronger.

Even more frightening is the fact that once horizontal gene transfer starts it is speeded up by the use of antibiotics – which encourage the exchange of genes between different species. So, the more we use antibiotics to try to deal with these new and resistant organisms the more resistant organisms there will be. Things aren't helped by the fact that genetic engineers use antibiotic-resistant genes to tag and mark the bits and pieces of genetic material they are moving about.

For a while scientists believed that horizontal gene transfer was something that only happened between bacteria. But this isn't true. It is possible for genes to move from virtually any species to any other species. Genetic engineers have made this process faster and more efficient.

9. Cancer Is Often Caused By The Chemical Poisons And Toxins Which Pollute Our World (But The Cancer Industry Fiddles While The World Is Dying)

The mortality figures show that more people than ever are dying from cancer. One in three people already have, or will develop, cancer. The figure will be one in two before long. And figures from around the world show that the picture is much the same everywhere.

Wherever you live, and whatever you do for a living, you are almost certainly exposed to an almost endless variety of carcinogens (cancer causing substances) every day of your life.

There are carcinogens in tobacco and in the food we eat. Many of the chemicals which farmers spray around the country side (and, more potently, onto farm land) are known to be carcinogenic. Many of the substances fed to farm animals are known to cause cancer too.

It is nigh on impossible to avoid contact with these deadly substances.

Chemicals from diesel fumes are believed to cause 10,000 deaths a year in the UK alone. Japanese researchers who have discovered a compound called 3 nitro benzathrone in the exhaust emissions of diesel engines claim that it is the most carcinogenic substance ever analysed. As a result fumes from lorries are probably responsible for the high incidence of lung cancer among city dwellers.

(The production of 3 nitro benzathrone increases dramatically when engines are pulling heavy loads. One obvious answer is to regulate the size of loads that diesel trucks can pull. Putting heavier taxes on lorries would be an even better idea – that would force haulage companies to use the railways more. But since politicians are reluctant to take action the only practical answer is for you and me to do our best to avoid areas where diesel trucks congregate. The most dangerous spots are probably steep or long hills where truck engines will be under great strain.)

Poisoned water supplies, dangerous prescription drugs and the over use of X rays have also contributed to the incidence of cancer.

With immune systems constantly battered by polluted air, adulterated and chemically impregnated food and a constant onslaught from the drugs we buy for ourselves, or allow our doctors to prescribe for us, it is not surprising that increasing numbers of people succumb to one of the many different types of cancer. Eight out of ten people who develop cancer could have been saved if money and effort had been put into prevention.

I seriously believe that if I had the annual income the cancer industry enjoys I could turn cancer into a relatively minor disease within five years. (I would also annoy a lot of big industries and most of the medical establishment but I could live with that.)

The suppression of cures

Cancer is the major league killer of our age and despite the expenditure of billions of dollars and an enormous amount of effort it is getting commoner every year.

However, the medical establishment – operating on behalf of the international pharmaceutical industry and the international food industry – and working with the support of politicians, has deliberately hidden the truth about how cancer is caused. And possible cancer cures have been deliberately suppressed.

The most repressive, most prejudiced, most obscenely intolerant and most ruthlessly dishonest branch of the international medical industry is undoubtedly that part of it which claims to deal with cancer.

Doctors and politicians have cold-bloodedly sacrificed the lives of hundreds of thousands of innocent people solely to protect the interests of a number of major industries.

When a government puts the wealth of a minority above the health of the majority it is fair to conclude that the government is no longer of the people or for the people but has abdicated all responsibility and forfeited the right to respect. Similarly, the medical establishment has forfeited the right to public trust.

The cancer industry

The cancer industry is now so huge that it requires vast amounts of money simply in order to stay alive. Since a good deal of that money comes from the drug industry (which is, not surprisingly, only interested in pharmacological solutions) the cancer industry's aims, methods and motives are now indistinguishable from the drug industry's aims, methods and motives. Around the world the drug industry has so much control over many cancer charities (because it gives them money) that those cancer charities seem to me to be unhealthily interested in research that is likely to uncover drug based cures. (How could a drug company ever make money out of a treatment programme that involved meditation or a change in diet?)

In addition to being the most intolerant, the modern cancer industry must surely be the least successful branch of medical science ever to have existed. (In my view it is also probably the most corrupt and self-serving. If the cancer industry ever accidentally hit upon a cure for cancer I honestly very much doubt if anyone would hear about it, for finding and publicising a cure for cancer would put the cancer industry employees out of business.)

In order to ensure that money continues to pour in the cancer industry must persuade potential contributors and supporters that it is making progress in the fight against cancer.

But despite the expenditure of billions of dollars on research the cancer industry has consistently and reliably failed to find any answers. Indeed, as has been well documented, the incidence of cancer has been steadily increasing for decades. Chemotherapy does not work and has never worked for the cancers which kill nine out of ten cancer patients. Many patients given chemotherapy and classified as 'cured' go on to develop another cancer within a short period. The cancer establishment has insisted on sticking with radiotherapy and chemotherapy despite the fact that there is much evidence that these approaches do not work. Today, even ordinary patients who have no idea that there are alternatives are turning them down; preferring to die quietly and in peace rather than to die of a painful and pointless treatment programme.

The real problem for the cancer industry is that the enemy isn't just invisible – it simply doesn't exist in the same way that smallpox, tuberculosis or influenza exist. The real problem, the real enemy which has to be confronted, is not a bunch of malignant cells but a weakened, toxin infiltrated body. And since cancer develops when a body is ill and weak it seems pretty obvious to me that the very last thing the body needs when it is ill is to be attacked with toxic chemicals.

(Ironically, the same huge multinational corporations which produce the toxic chemicals which weaken and damage the body and cause cancer to develop also sell the toxic chemicals which are prescribed as a 'cure'. This is the ultimate, exclusively self serving perpetual motion money machine.)

In America around $110 billion a year is spent on cancer research and treatment. That is more than ten per cent of American's entire health care bill. But, in America, during the last fifteen years or so, the incidence of cancer has steadily risen as has the number of people dying of cancer.

Writing in *The European Medical Journal* Dr Jack Tropp pointed out that: 'despite the billions of dollars spent each year for cancer research and treatment, using the traditional methods of choice: surgery, chemotherapy and radiation therapy, in the overall picture nothing has changed in the mortality rates in the last thirty five years.'

The only people who benefit from the modern cancer industry are doctors, drug companies and the people who make radiotherapy equipment.

The effort, the money, and all the misguided hope and faith that have been poured into cancer research by the international cancer industry simply haven't worked.

The cancer industry has failed because it has (in my opinion) deliberately and cold-bloodedly concentrated its efforts on the wrong targets.

'Alternative' cancer treatments

One of the great ironies of our age is the fact that for years now cancer treatments which might work have been made illegal.

Throughout the world, politicians have made sure that the modern cancer industry is protected by law. Bizarrely, in most western countries it is now actually illegal to offer a treatment for cancer that stands a chance of working. Even qualified doctors are only allowed to prescribe chemotherapy or radiotherapy or to send their patients for surgery – despite the fact that the evidence shows that these treatments frequently do more harm than good.

The authorities relentlessly persecute those who offer new and possibly effective and non toxic therapies (ignoring the wishes of patients who want to try those therapies) while condoning, paying for and protecting by law therapies which are known to be often toxic and frequently ineffective.

It is bizarre to see the way that governments tell their citizens that vaccines are all safe, that beef is safe to eat and that chemotherapy is the treatment of choice for cancer.

Doctors who dare to offer patients new hope and new treatments are scorned, abused, persecuted, vilified, forced to go into hiding or threatened with imprisonment.

I could fill pages with the names of honest, caring doctors whose work with cancer patients has won them many followers among the sick and their relatives but has earned them nothing but trouble from the authorities.

The problems faced by the proponents of remedies not made by drug companies have been well documented. Anyone who dares to offer an unofficial remedy for cancer is accused of being simply out to make money. Curiously, this accusation is never made about doctors or drug companies.

In Britain it is illegal for anyone to claim to have a cure for cancer that is not approved by the medical establishment and the pharmaceutical industry. In the US countless cancer pioneers – including some of the brightest medical brains of the century – have been hounded out of the country and forced to open clinics elsewhere.

There are now many alternative therapies available for the treatment of cancer. Some are available very cheaply. Some are extremely expensive. Some are simple to follow. Some are extremely complex. But the one thing that the successful 'alternative' anti-cancer therapies all have in common is that they improve the health and vitality of the body's immune system and help eradicate chemical toxins from the body.

It seems to me that alternative cancer therapies which work invariably offer diets which are rich in vitamin-packed organic fruit and vegetables and low in toxic chemicals. They also encourage patients to learn how to relax and to find some peace in their lives. It doesn't matter whether the peace comes through meditation, relaxation, religion or love and comfort supplied by people who care.

Those are the stable, ever present qualities of the effective anti-cancer cures which work.

The coffee enemas, the hormone injections and the obscure herbal additions may, in my considered view, be little more than bits of fine tuning which may or may not have an additional healing effect. There is some evidence suggesting that herbal remedies do contain substances which have effective anti-cancer properties but I believe that it is the immune system which is the real key to cancer treatment. I believe that the real benefit from these alternative approaches to cancer comes from the boost the immune system gets from the absence of stress and the high natural vitamin content of the largely fruit and vegetable diet.

With the wholehearted support of politicians being given to the cancer industry, rather than to the welfare of the people who put them in office, the war against cancer will continue to fail. Avoidable cancers will continue to become commoner and commoner and the establishment will continue to ensure that only the toxic (but highly profitable) alleged treatments of cancer which are produced by the pharmaceutical industry will be authorised by governments.

The 'magic bullet' cure

The cancer industry will not find the all powerful magic bullet cure for which it has been searching now for decades.

It will fail because it is wedded to an interventionist paradigm which depends upon treating the body as a battlefield and the disease as an enemy, and which is modelled upon the way that medicine was practised at the start of the twentieth century when the diseases which worried doctors most were those which were caused by infections – tuberculosis, smallpox, influenza, pneumonia, syphilis, cholera, typhoid fever and so on.

The incidence of these diseases was to a certain extent controlled at the end of the nineteenth century, and the beginning of the twentieth century, and as a result the medical profession as a whole made two crucial and fundamental mistakes.

The first mistake was a retrospective one: it was to assume that the reduction in death rate from these diseases was a result of things which doctors had done. This was quite wrong. The reduction in the incidence of infectious diseases (and, more importantly, the reduction in the number of deaths from those diseases) was a result of better water supplies, better sewage facilities, better transport and better food. The man who invented the water closet saved far more lives than any dozen members of the medical establishment. Mortality rates from infectious diseases had fallen long before the introduction of vaccines and antibiotics (the two remedies favoured by the medical establishment). I will show later in this book that life expectancy for adults has not risen much, if at all, in recent decades or even centuries. Any improvement which has been made has been a result of better living conditions rather than better medicine.

The second fundamental mistake was a prospective one: it was to assume that the interventionist 'magic bullet' approach which appeared to have worked in the war against infectious disease would enable doctors to tackle all other health and life threatening diseases – including cancer. This was a pretty daft mistake to make because most modern killer diseases develop in a very different way to infectious diseases. People get heart disease because they eat too much of the wrong sort of food and not enough of the right sort of food, and because they take too little exercise. And people get cancer because they eat too much of the wrong sort of food and not enough of the right sort of food and because their bodies have been contaminated by toxic, carcinogenic chemicals.

One might have thought that some of the brighter members of the medical establishment might have realised that since modern killer diseases are plainly different to the infectious diseases it might be necessary to think up a different type of treatment approach. But that hasn't happened yet.

And it is this error (no doubt encouraged and compounded by the affection of the medical profession for the money so generously distributed by the pharmaceutical industry) which has led researchers (and doctors) to experiment with increasingly toxic drugs in order to try to 'kill' cancer.

Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy has repeatedly failed. The medical profession, the pharmaceutical industry and the cancer industry are so desperate to hide this fact that they now probably consider it a success if the survival rate of patients who take chemotherapy actually matches the survival rate of patients who don't take chemotherapy.

There are two fundamental problems with chemotherapy.

First, in order to kill the cancer cells (which are, after all, merely ordinary human cells which have got out of control) the drug which is prescribed must be so toxic that it inevitably causes a great deal of damage to other, healthy, cells. When chemotherapy is given by mouth (or by any other general, system route) the whole body may be affected – even though the drug is aimed only at one very specific site in the body.

When chemotherapy fails to work the doctors invariably respond by increasing the dose or making the chemotherapy even more toxic. The end result is that the chemotherapy may well kill the cancer cells but it will probably also kill the patient. (Thereby helping to perpetuate the old medical comment about the treatment being a success but the patient dying.)

Second, even when chemotherapy (or radiotherapy) does succeed in apparently 'killing' a cancer (and doctors like to give themselves a decent chance at a good cure rate by claiming that any patient who survives an extremely modest five years has been cured) there is a considerable risk that the cancer will recur. When you stop and think about it this isn't difficult to understand for chemotherapy (or radiotherapy or surgery for that matter) does absolutely nothing to alter the circumstances which led to the cancer developing in the first place.

When a cancer recurs it isn't necessarily because the surgeon, the radiotherapist or the physician prescribing the chemotherapy has failed to kill all the cancer cells, but because nothing in the body has changed. The circumstances which led to the development of a first cancer can just as easily lead to the development of a second cancer.

It is for this reason that one often hears of extremely unfortunate individuals who have developed two or even three cancers in separate organs.

However, here's an interesting observation which I bet you won't see plastered all over the official medical journals: twenty years ago when a group of leukaemia patients were treated by having their own bone marrow removed and replaced with bone marrow from a donor, the leukaemia returned in a number of the patients. But – and this is the fascinating bit of the story – DNA checks showed that the new, second bout of leukaemia, consisted of cells which had belonged to the healthy donor. The patient's original bone marrow had all been removed and this time it was the donor's bone marrow which had turned into leukaemia cells.

It seems to me pretty clear from this that there must have been something within those patients' bodies which was turning healthy cells into cancer cells.

And the simple answer is that the cause of the cancer is inside the patient and is untouched by a treatment which simply attacks the cancer cells. It is because the cancer industry either fails to understand this (or doesn't want to believe it) that the cancer industry will never succeed in beating cancer.

All those billions of dollars being pumped into cancer research are being wasted because scientists and doctors insist on attacking an enemy they cannot see and do not understand.

The underlying cause of cancer

I believe that cancer often develops because the body is weakened and badly damaged. (Although the owner of the body may not be aware of this. Many people who have been under stress and overexposed to toxins for long periods succeed in suppressing and ignoring the physical and mental signs of distress. They don't feel 'well' but they don't feel 'ill' either – until, one day, a lump is found or an unmistakeable symptom of cancer appears.)

Because of the accumulated stresses, the immune system doesn't work properly and so the toxic chemicals and other irritants which have collected in the body trigger off the development of a cancer.

Where do the toxins and irritants come from?

There is pretty convincing evidence showing that tobacco and toxin-contaminated food (particularly meat) are by far the two biggest causes of cancer. (It is, I believe, because they eat more than their fair share of contaminated food and have toxin-rich fat deposits that overweight individuals are more prone to cancer). Other possible irritants include radiation, polluted air and water, alcohol, drugs, toxins in household and industrial chemicals and electrical fields.

If you don't want to get cancer – or you have cancer and you want to get rid of it – then I believe that the answer is clear: you must reduce your intake of and exposure to toxins and build up your immune system so that it can work harder to defend your body. With an immune system working well you will be less likely to develop cancer.

And if you develop cancer then it is my belief that your body will be better able to destroy the cancer if you improve the efficiency of your immune system and reduce your exposure to toxins.

The importance and vulnerability of the body's immune system cannot be exaggerated. I believe that it is because they overwork their bodies and damage their immune systems that many top international athletes often suffer so much from illness – and tend to die earlier than non athletes. There is a huge difference between fitness and good health.

Sadly, I rather doubt if the medical establishment will ever support this approach for it is an approach to cancer which offers little or nothing in the way of profit to the shareholders and employees of large international companies.

And our existing sad and ineffectual politicians, beholden to big business, will continue to support the cancer industry and for the foreseeable future the official answer to cancer is likely to remain the same as it is at the moment: blast the body with toxic chemicals in the hope that these will kill the cancer tissue. Ironically, the medical establishment, committed as it is to supporting the pharmaceutical industry and the cancer industry, seems unlikely or unwilling to recognise that the other effect of this approach is to damage the immune system, weaken the body and make the organs and tissues within the body more vulnerable not only to the existing cancer but to the development of new cancers too.

How governments promote cancer

It isn't just the drug industry and the cancer industry which the politicians are trying to protect by denying and suppressing the truth about how cancer develops.

Astonishingly, politicians have also shown themselves to be keen to protect the industries which are known to cause cancer. Of these the two most obvious are the tobacco and food industries.

Despite the fact that the link between tobacco and cancer has been well established for many years, politicians have protected and subsidised the tobacco industry for a considerable time. Modern politicians seem to have absolutely no sense of shame. For them hypocrisy is a way of life. Although European governments force tobacco companies to publish health warnings on cigarette packs and advertisements, they still give massive subsidies to tobacco farmers. And the Labour government of the late 1990s fought hard to enable tobacco companies to continue promoting their products.

Those of us who prefer to study the evidence and make our own judgements about health issues, rather than listen to and take advice from the various facets of the industry controlled medical and health care establishment, were entitled to feel well justified when the British government at long last looked to be about to warn its citizens that the consumption of meat is linked to the development of cancer.

But after considering the (incontrovertible) evidence for some months, Britain's much welcomed Labour government responded instead to a warning from the meat industry that publishing the truth about the link between meat and cancer would result in lost jobs and a blow to the economy. The financial threat was enough to end the possibility of the government publicising the truth about the link between meat and cancer.

Politicians have actually gone further than simply refusing to publicise the true facts about meat and cancer – they (and other members of the establishment) have done everything they can to suppress the truth – purely because of the fear that the truth might damage the meat industry.

I have repeatedly warned readers that eating meat can lead to the development of cancers of the breast, colon, prostate, endometrium (lining of the uterus), rectum, pancreas and kidney (see my book *Power Over Cancer,* published by the European Medical Journal for the evidence) but to their eternal shame, politicians, doctors and bureaucrats still insist on ignoring the evidence – and protecting the meat industry.

10. The Danger Of Electromagnetic Fields

There are many ways in which our modern environment can cause cancer, can damage the human immune system and can increase our susceptibility and vulnerability to many different types of disease – including infections and cancer.

But electricity is almost certainly a much bigger cause of problems – and far more dangerous – than most people imagine.

If you spend most of your time working with or close to an electrical appliance, if you live or work near to an electricity supply line or if you spend your days working with electrical equipment then the chances of you developing cancer of one sort or another are considerably increased.

Of course, the men in suits won't tell you this. They'll frighten you half to death about minority threats such as AIDS and radon because the former is a politically and commercially useful threat and the latter seems like an excellent way to boost the building industry, but they won't give you any warning about the danger of electricity because they don't want to annoy the many large and powerful business interests which sell, market, service or supply electricity and electrical equipment.

I certainly think that the evidence is pretty convincing. And in America, where people only vote with their wallets when they really believe something, house prices near to electricity supply lines have fallen dramatically in recent years.

Just look at these facts:

* The dean of a school of public health has said: 'The present state of affairs is like the correlation between smoking and lung cancer 30 years ago'. He added that, at a conservative estimate, a third of all childhood cancers are caused by electrical fields.

* A study of nearly 500 children showed that children whose mothers used electric blankets when they were pregnant were two and a half times as likely to develop brain tumours.

* A study of nearly 700 children showed that children who lived in houses near to power distribution lines were two or three times as likely to die of leukaemia or brain tumours.

* A study at an American University showed that men who work as electricians or electrical engineers are ten times as likely to develop certain types of brain tumour.

* Experts found that workers for a telephone company who worked alongside electricity power lines were seven times as likely to develop leukaemia.

In my view the threat doesn't just come from power lines – any electromagnetic field can be a danger. The closer you are to an electrical or magnetic field – the greater the danger.

The industry experts don't agree with me about these hazards. They insist that electricity is safe. But would they tell you if they thought it wasn't? And can you trust them?

In my view there is ample evidence to show that people who spend too much time close to electrical appliances (and, in particular, to power lines) are more likely to develop cancer. Not that cancer is the only possible hazard associated with electricity. Severe and persistent headaches, muscle pain, otherwise unexplained fatigue, damaged immune system (with a resultant increased susceptibility to infection as well as cancer), Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease, multiple sclerosis, chronic fatigue syndrome (myalgic encephalomyelitis), cataracts and pregnancy problems are some of the other possible dangers which may be linked to exposure to electromagnetic fields and radiation.

While writing this book I received information that the American government has suppressed research work which took nine years to complete and which verified the link between electrosmog (electromagnetic fields), cerebral illnesses and cancer.

The suppressed report was compiled for the US government and I am informed that it concludes: 'Even weak electro magnetic fields can impair health... They lead to disturbance of the production of the hormone melatonin, which is known to be an important biochemical link. A deficit in this hormone favours the developing of, for example, breast cancer as well as the developing of degenerative cerebral illnesses such as Parkinson's disease or Alzheimer's disease, but also brings on heart problems.'

The suppressed report also confirms that electromagnetic fields can bring on leukaemia in children.

'In addition,' continue the authors of the report, 'there is an increased risk of developing leukaemia and also brain tumours for adults who are exposed to strong fields due to their professions.'

The assumption is that the electromagnetic fields cause a disturbance in the biochemical function of the cells, or influence certain genes. Both mechanisms can cause permanent damage to the cells. (Genetic engineers use electromagnetic radiation to open cell membranes and insert alien genes.)

The authors of this suppressed report also point out that interactions between electromagnetic rays and the cells of the immune system can favour the beginning of cancer – and that the influence of electromagnetic fields on the reproductive organs may cause disease there too.

The authors of this suppressed study demand that more research be done and that threshold values for the intensity of electromagnetic fields be lowered to a level that would be exceeded by modern electrical wiring and ordinary household appliances.

The study also suggests that overhead power lines may be a significant threat to human health. The threshold values recommended by this suppressed US report are 5000 times lower than the internationally recognised threshold values.

It is not difficult to see why the US government has suppressed this report. If the findings of the report were implemented vast industries would be affected and very few factories, offices or homes would be considered safe.

As an interim measure the authors of this study demand that what they call the 'permanent radiation bombardment' to which we are all subjected should be reduced step by step. They recommend that all overhead power lines should be removed from residential areas and that houses and schools should no longer be built anywhere near to power lines.

Sadly, I am less surprised by the fact that this report was suppressed than I would have been if it had been published. Modern politicians are controlled by big companies and their lobbyists.

Mobile phones and transmitters

Mobile telephones are a fast developing major source of hazardous electromagnetic fields.

Mobile telephones use microwave radiation to transmit conversations between handsets and base stations and between base stations and handsets.

The early (and most obvious fear) was that using a mobile telephone while driving, or performing any other intricate and potential hazardous activity, would inevitably increase any individual's chances of having an accident.

However, since the early 1980s, when mobile telephones first became popular, there have been worries about the possible damage that these microwaves could do to the human brain. Some experts have suggested that using one of these telephones could create short-term memory loss while others have argued that they could cause brain tumours.

When mobile phones were bulky, extremely expensive and scarce no one worried much about these fears. But today the number of people using mobile telephones is increasing dramatically.

This rapid increase in the number of people using mobile phones means that governments and health authorities have to pretend to take notice (although if the commercial opposition to action is powerful enough the discovery of worrying information will not necessarily mean that they will do anything). If mobile phones prove to be as hazardous to health as some people say they could be the implications for government health care expenditure could be awesome.

Insurance companies are never slow to take notice of new health risks. It may, therefore, be of some significance that one of the world's largest insurance companies is now reported to be including a clause in its personal liability policies which excludes: 'Damage to persons caused by electromagnetic fields'.

When thousands of people used mobile telephones, a small increase in the chances of developing a brain tumour would only result in a tiny increase in the overall incidence of brain cancer. However, now that millions use mobile telephones the same modest risk could result in a huge rise in the number of people requiring attention for serious health problems. Studies have shown that 20-80% of the electromagnetic radiation generated by mobile telephones is absorbed directly into the user's brain. (The rest of the radiation goes in other directions and can affect other human beings nearby.) Just a few minutes' exposure to cell phone radiation can turn a 5% active cancer into a 95% active cancer.

Several research groups have begun studies to find out if there really is a link between the long-term use of mobile telephones and the incidence of brain tumours.

But at the moment the short answer to the questions about this hazard is that no one really seems to know what the risks are.

In America there have (inevitably perhaps) already been a number of lawsuits brought by mobile telephone users who have developed brain tumours. The number of lawsuits is rising. As far as I am aware none of these lawsuits has been successful though doctors have observed that when mobile phone users develop brain cancers the cancer tends to be behind the ear against which the telephone is habitually held. (So, if you prefer a left sided brain tumour hold your mobile telephone against your left ear).

Lawyers defending mobile phone companies will undoubtedly argue that all this is just a coincidence but in Australia an oncologist has suggested that a 50% increase in the incidence of brain tumours in Western Australia between 1982 and 1992 could have been caused by the increase in the use of mobile telephones during that period. You will, I know, be surprised to hear that there does not seem to be a great deal of support within the mobile telephone industry for this point of view.

In theory I don't think there is much doubt that the sort of microwaves used by mobile telephones could harm the brain. In Denmark scientists have expressed surprise that people who would (presumably) be reluctant to put their heads into a microwave oven are happy to 'cook' their brains by holding a mobile telephone to the side of their head for hours on end. Like other forms of electromagnetic radiation mobile telephones can induce electrical currents and they can make body tissues hotter. There is a real possibility that these effects could disrupt electrical activity within brain cells – or even damage DNA.

In one way the risks associated with mobile telephones are relatively slight. A mobile phone produces only around 1 watt of energy – a great deal less than a microwave oven which will probably produce around 600 watts.

But, on the other hand, the big problem is that mobile telephones are, inevitably, held close to the brain while being used. Not many people stand holding microwave ovens next to their brains for minutes at a time! Worse still is the fact that the mobile telephone is likely to be held in pretty much the same position every time it is used – with the same portion of brain being affected. And, of course, some people seem to spend hours talking on their mobile telephones.

Whatever the risks associated with mobile telephones may be, the risks associated with the base transmitting stations (which are essential for the functioning of the mobile telephone service) may be considerably greater for those individuals who live close by.

Base stations continually irradiate those living, working and studying nearby and although the doses of radiation are much lower than the doses produced by portable telephones or microwave ovens there may be a serious health risk. I just don't think anyone really knows just how great that risk may be – or whether it is greater or smaller than the risk associated with overhead power lines. Given the option I would prefer not to live next to a mobile telephone base station just as I would prefer not to live under a power line.

How far away is safe? I can't tell you and I don't think anyone else can either. I certainly wouldn't want to be nearer than 150 yards to a transmitter.

Up until recently there has been very little evidence available to show that transmitters can be dangerous. However, a good deal of work has been done in Switzerland in the last couple of years. For example, researchers have shown that trees have been severely damaged by mobile phone transmitter masts.

And in Schwarzenburg, Switzerland, protestors managed to close down an international radio station.

After complaints from the public, 200 people living in the irradiated area were compared with 200 people in a radiation free zone in order to find out whether the transmitter did have an effect on the health of local individuals.

The study showed that serious sleep disorders were five times as common among individuals living in the irradiated area; that depressions were four times as common; that cancer was three times as common and that diabetes was twice as common. Interestingly, these disorders occurred in areas where the electromagnetic field intensity was much lower than the official accepted safety level.

(Official safety levels do not seem to be high. Indeed, the safety levels in some countries seem to have been set at a point that will enable companies to put antenna masts right in the heart of residential areas and alongside schools and hospitals.)

The results of the study in Schwarzenburg were so alarming that the authorities took action and the transmitter was taken down.

When the transmitter had been demolished numerous residents stated that they were sleeping better and that pains in joints and limbs had all but disappeared. Depressed residents said that they felt better and overactive children became much quieter.

We still don't know the health risks involved with using a mobile phone and we don't know yet whether long-term use will increase your chances of developing brain cancer. I would like to see a good deal more research being done to investigate a health hazard which affects vast numbers of people. However, official money is unlikely to be available to investigate a potential problem which could threaten one of the world's fastest growing industries.

As I was preparing this book I learned that the Australian government was giving researchers £500,000 to expose genetically engineered mice to radio waves from mobile phones. Allegedly, this was being done to 'study the possible dangers to human users'. I wrote an article forecasting that if the results show that the mice were undamaged by the radio waves the research might be hailed as proof that phones are safe for human use, whereas if the results showed that the mice developed cancer the research might be dismissed on the grounds that animals are different to people. (This is the technique which was used for years by the tobacco industry when animals were forced to smoke cigarettes. The same double-edged trick is also commonly used by the drug industry.)

After hearing about the proposed Australian research I learned that experiments on genetically engineered mice had already shown that mice who are exposed to cell phone radiation are twice as likely to develop lymphoma (a type of cancer).

And, as predicted, this evidence had been dismissed as irrelevant on the grounds that results obtained from experiments on animals cannot be applied to human beings.

The mobile phone industry is now one of the fastest growing and most profitable industries in the world. My cynical but honest (and, I fear, accurate) prediction is that whatever evidence is unearthed no research establishing a firm link between mobile telephones and brain cancer will be officially recognised and accepted for at least two decades – if ever.

Incidentally, in 1999 a report was published claiming that people who use mobile telephones had faster reaction times. Some users of mobile telephones leapt upon this report as evidence that mobile phones must be safe to use. However, this research found a very modest (4%) improvement in reaction times among people who had used an (artificial) mobile phone for half an hour. It is possible that the slight improvement in reaction time might have been due to the heating effect of the microwaves – possibly because the heating speeded up some chemical reaction in the brain or stimulated blood flow. In my view, this research certainly doesn’t prove that mobile telephones are safe. My serious fear about mobile phones is that long term exposure may cause brain damage.

Part Three: How You Can Strengthen Your Immune System And Protect Yourself From Infections And Cancer

In this, the final part of Superbody, I will explain how you can reduce your exposure to cancer and infectious disease and how you can strengthen your body's immune system – and keep it in tip top condition – so that you will be better able to survive in the 21st century.

1. Eat Foods That Will Boost Your Immune System

Your body's immune system helps to protect you against infection. If your immune system – your inbuilt defence system – is in tip-top condition then you will be far less vulnerable to marauding viruses or bacteria. Your body will also be better able to fight cancer – and win. What you choose to eat can have a big effect on the strength and effectiveness of your immune system.

Most people know what foods they shouldn't eat. They understand that if they live on a diet of hamburgers and chips, followed by chocolate pudding covered with lashings of double cream, and all washed down with a cola drink, then their health will suffer.

If you eat meat it is important that you give it up – particularly if you have an infection which is being treated with antibiotics – or eat only organically grown meat. The spread of a number of killer infections has been traced to meat shipments. The basic cause is simple: farmers routinely feed antibiotics to their animals to keep them healthy. Animals which are fed with antibiotics inevitably acquire antibiotic-resistant organisms. Repeated problems caused by meat infected with antibiotic-resistant bugs are a direct result of this still unregulated and uncontrolled farming practice.

Many of the people who fall ill after eating infected meat have been taking antibiotics – for throat or ear infections for example. The antibiotic prescribed for the throat or ear infection clears the body of many of its natural infections, allowing the antibiotic-resistant superbug to take over a virtually competitor-free body.

If you eat eggs do not ever buy (or eat) eggs with cracked shells. It is much easier for an infection to enter an egg with a cracked shell. Eggs laid by genuinely free range chickens are likely to be healthier than eggs laid by hens kept in battery cages.

Finding out exactly what you should eat isn't quite so easy. The truth is shrouded in mystery and confusion – much of it created, quite deliberately, on behalf of vested interests, by lobbyists, advertising agencies and public relations groups.

The far reaching tentacles of the big food companies are as powerful as those of the big drug companies. Finding the truth is made particularly difficult by the fact that many newspapers, magazines and journals readily publish material they are given by companies with products to sell. Television and radio are, of course, just as likely to publicise these commercial messages disguised as independent news items.

Frequently, undue emphasis is placed on small – often almost irrelevant bits and pieces of scientific information – which are fed to the media because they help to build up and strengthen some hidden agenda. Too many observers (by which I mean editors, journalists and commentators) fail to analyse the information which appears; seemingly ignorant of the fact that an overview is necessary if any information is going to be put into perspective and used effectively.

Hyperbole and exaggeration used to be the preserve of the tabloid newspapers. These days they are everyday tools for broadsheet journalists and for just about everyone working in television and radio.

Sponsorship is widespread and often subtle, and this can make it difficult to decide exactly what is true and what isn't. Hidden agendas are sometimes well hidden, sometimes hidden only a little and sometimes not hidden at all.

I have prepared a list of the 101 healthiest, tastiest and very best foods in the world. These are foods that don't just taste good and look good – they will provide you with a massive amount of protection against cancer and heart disease, they will boost your immune system and they will help reduce your susceptibility to infection.

And whether you agree or disagree with the contents of this list you can be confident that no one has sponsored this list.

Naturally, you don't have to limit yourself to the foods on this list which I have compiled as a starting point: a healthy basis for any good, well-balanced, diet.

The list will, I hope, also help the many readers who have written to me explaining that they plan to become vegetarian (or vegan) but confessing that they really don't know what to eat.

I've arranged this list in alphabetical order – partly because I think it will make it easier to use, and partly because I didn't want to print a list that suggested that any one particular food was 'number one'!

To make the list more accessible I haven't listed all the specific nutrients and health giving ingredients these foods contain but have simply given a very brief summary of the main qualities of individual foods.

Foods which contain antioxidants (such as vitamins C and E, the mineral selenium and beta-carotene, which are converted in the human body to vitamin A) help prevent cancer and heart disease and reduce susceptibility to infection.

My recommended healthy diet would contain a good and varied selection of foods from this list.

1. Alfalfa sprouts

Low in protein and don't contain much in the way of minerals or vitamins but they are also low in fat, calories and sodium. They are a tasty filler for salads and sandwiches.

2. Almonds

Rich in vitamin E (an antioxidant), plus calcium and protein. (But watch out: they also contain a high proportion of fat.)

3. Apple
Contain antioxidants. Will help strengthen your immune system. Plenty of fibre and vitamin C.

4. Apricots
Like all orange-coloured fruits and vegetables apricots are packed with the antioxidant beta-carotene which helps protect against cancer. Apricots are also full of fibre. Dried apricots make an excellent snack food. (Buy organic dried apricots not the bright orange ones).

5.Artichoke
May help reduce blood fat and cholesterol levels and may help with liver, gall bladder and digestive problems.

6. Asparagus
Has a diuretic effect and is also believed to be useful in the treatment of nausea, heartburn and hiatus hernia.

7. Aubergine (eggplant)
In South East Asia some people use it to treat stomach cancer. Not a food to fry because it absorbs huge amounts of fat.

8. Avocado pear
Technically a berry rather than a pear. Contains 14 minerals, 11 vitamins and plenty of protein. Low in sodium. May contain special anti-bacterial and anti-fungal ingredients. Some say that the avocado has anti-cancer properties.

9. Baked beans
Excellent source of fibre.

10. Bananas
Packed with vitamins, minerals, fibre and carbohydrate and low in fat. Excellent source of potassium.

11. Bean sprouts
A good source of vitamins B and C. Also contain protein.

12. Beans
A good source of potassium and folate. May help prevent or treat anaemia. May help reduce the risk of heart disease. High in fibre and protein. Pulses are usually low in fat.

13. Beetroot
Good source of folate and iron.

14. Bilberry (a.k.a. blueberry)
Believed to help improve the circulation and to counteract urinary tract infections. Bilberries have antioxidant, anti-inflammatory and anti-infective effects.

15. Blackberries
Excellent low fat source of vitamin E.

16. Blackcurrant
An excellent source of vitamin C. (Weight for weight blackcurrants contain four times as much vitamin C as oranges). Moreover the blackcurrant retains its vitamin C content well. Blackcurrants contain anthocyanins which are anti-inflammatory and which inhibit bacteria such as E.coli, holidaying merrily among the villae of the intestinal riviera.

17. Bread
Wholemeal bread is rich in fibre and vitamins and minerals.

18. Broad beans
A good source of protein and soluble fibre.

19. Broccoli
Contain antioxidants and other substances which provide protection against cancer. Cancers which may be prevented – or slowed – by broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage and Brussels sprouts include cancer of the breast, cancer of the colon and stomach cancer. Most useful when eaten raw. Overcooking dramatically reduces its value.

20. Brussels sprouts
Contain antioxidants and other substances which provide protection against cancer.

21. Cabbage
Contains substances which provide protection against cancer.

22. Carrot

Contain antioxidants. Full of fibre, vitamins and minerals. A great, healthy snack food. I often stuff a carrot and an apple in my bag when travelling.

23. Cauliflower
Contain antioxidants and other substances which provide protection against cancer.

24. Celeriac
A good source of potassium. When eaten raw (e.g. in salads) it is also a good source of vitamin C.

25. Celery
Nearly calorie free but nevertheless nutritious.

26. Cherries
Contain potassium and vitamin C.

27. Chestnuts
High in carbohydrates and fibre but, unusually for nuts, low in fat. Brazil nuts, walnuts and hazelnuts have more than twenty times as much fat as chestnuts. Contain vitamin E and vitamin B6.

28. Chickpeas
Will help reduce cholesterol levels. Impecunious Indians who live on a chickpea diet have low blood cholesterol. Contain antioxidants.

29. Chillies
Chilli pepper may help desensitise the airways and may help stop an asthma attack. By having a mildly irritant effect on the stomach chillies may also stimulate the stomach to defend itself against more serious threats – and may help to protect against damage and the development of ulcers. The substance which gives chillies their fierce flavour is capsaicin which is an antioxidant which helps provide protection against cancer.

30. Corn
Contains protein, iron, zinc and potassium. Low in sodium. The Tarahumara Indians of Mexico live on a diet of corn and beans. High blood cholesterol and artery clogging and their fateful consequences are virtually unknown among these people. Contain antioxidants.

31. Courgettes (Zucchini)
A type of small marrow and a useful source of vitamin C and folate. Also a good source of beta-carotene. Most of the nutrients are stored in the skins, which are edible.

32. Cranberry
Widely used as a home remedy in the treatment of bladder, kidney and urinary tract infection. It used to be thought that this was because cranberries have a high acid content but recent research has shown that cranberries contain something which prevents infectious bacteria from multiplying in the urinary tract. The only other fruit to have a similar effect is the bilberry (a.k.a. blueberry).

33. Cress
A cruciferous vegetable which can help prevent the development of cancer. Rich in vitamins and minerals. May help prevent anaemia and heart disease.

34. Dates
Dried dates are rich in potassium and a good source of many other nutrients too (including iron). A nourishing source of sugar.

35. Fennel
Toasted fennel seeds are chewed in India to prevent indigestion and bad breath. Alternatively the seeds can be used to make a tea which helps digestive problems including flatulence and colic. Fennel seeds should be avoided during pregnancy.

36. Figs
Rich in potassium and fibre. Also contain pectin which can help lower blood cholesterol levels.

37. Garlic
Garlic, onions, chives, leeks and shallots will all provide protection against cancer, infection and heart disease. I believe that garlic can help bring down high blood pressure, lower blood cholesterol levels, help prevent blood clotting and dilate blood vessels. Probably my No 1 'magic' food.

38. Ginger
Helps relieve nausea, flatulence and indigestion. May stimulate the circulation and prevent blood clots. May also relieve rheumatism. Ginger keeps many of its properties when dried.

39. Grapefruit
Packed with vitamins (especially vitamin C) and rich in fibre. Will help strengthen the immune system.

Contains antioxidants. Pink grapefruit contains lycopene which helps provide protection against cancer (particularly prostate cancer) and heart disease.

40. Grapes
Grapes contain ellagic acid which may help prevent cancer developing. (Cherries and strawberries contain the same substance).

41. Hazelnuts
Contain vitamin E (an antioxidant) plus vitamins B1 and B6. Also contain protein. The downside is a high fat content.

42. Hummus
Contains chickpeas, sesame seeds, garlic, coriander seeds, lemon juice and olive oil. It is, consequently, packed with goodness (but buy a low fat version).

43. Kale
A very good source of vitamin C and beta-carotene. Also, like other deep green vegetables, kale is a good source of calcium and iron. It also contains compounds which may provide protection against cancer.

44. Kidney beans
A good source of protein. Contains potassium, zinc and iron. But be careful: raw or undercooked kidney beans can cause serious food poisoning.

45. Lentils
A good source of protein, fibre, minerals and vitamins.

46. Lettuce
Lettuce (and other salad greens) provides protection against cancer (particularly cancer of the stomach). Also contains the antioxidant vitamins C and E. A good source of iron. May also aid digestion.

47. Lime
May help to reduce cancer risk. May also help to prevent infection. A good source of potassium.

48. Linseed
A good source of omega 3 fatty acids which lower the risk of colorectal cancer by reducing the amount of prostaglandin in the bowel. May aid digestion and prevent constipation. May also help prevent breast cancer and may help ease menopausal symptoms.

49. Lychees
An excellent source of vitamin C.

50. Mango
A useful source of vitamins C and E when raw. Also contain iron. A good source of carotene – particularly when ripe.

51. Melon
Water melon contains lycopene which helps provide protection against cancer (particularly prostate cancer) and heart disease. Melon with orange flesh (such as cantaloupe) is rich in carotene.

52. Mushrooms
Contain protein, vitamins and minerals but are low in fat and calories. Rich in potassium, iron and niacin. Some varieties may discourage the development of cancer.

53. Mustard
Mustard (commonly grown with cress) may help prevent cancer and heart disease.

54. Oats
Oat bran contains protein, carbohydrate and vitamin B – and is packed with fibre. Oat bran will help reduce your blood cholesterol level.

55. Olive oil
Cold pressed extra virgin olive oil is a good source of vitamin E.

56. Olives
A good source of vitamin E.

57. Onions
Onions, chives, leeks and shallots may all provide protection against cancer, infection and heart disease.

58. Orange
Contain antioxidants. Packed with vitamins (particularly vitamin C) and rich in fibre.

59. Papaya (pawpaw)
Contains carotene and vitamin C and, when raw, an enzyme which digests protein.

60. Parsley
Contains protein and useful amounts of vitamins and minerals.

61. Parsnip
A useful source of starch and fibre and of vitamins C and E.

62. Passion fruit
Contain vitamin C.

63. Pasta
Contain lots of complex carbohydrate and fibre and is low in fat.

64. Peaches
Rich in vitamin C. Dried peaches contain a good deal of potassium.

65. Pears
A good source of natural sugar. Contain some vitamins.

66. Peas
Rich in vitamin B1 and a good source of vitamin C. Contain fibre, protein, phosphorus and folate.

67. Peppers
An excellent source of vitamin C. Red peppers contain more vitamin C than green peppers and are also an excellent source of beta-carotene.

68. Pine nuts
Contain iron, manganese, magnesium and zinc – as well as vitamin B1 and vitamin E (an antioxidant). Also contain protein. Downside is a high fat content.

69. Pineapple
Contain antioxidants.

70. Pinto beans
High in protein and fibre and low in fat.

71. Plums
Contain vitamin E and potassium.

72. Pomegranate
A good source of vitamin C.

73. Potato
Perhaps the most undervalued food in the world. Rich in vitamins (particularly vitamin C) – especially if eaten in their jackets.

74. Prunes
Contain vitamins and minerals as well as heaps of fibre. Good to add to breakfast cereals or salads. Gentle laxative effect.

75. Pumpkin
Packed with cancer preventing beta-carotene plus plenty of other vitamins and minerals – and fibre too. Pumpkin seeds, which contain zinc, are widely used to help prevent (and treat) prostate enlargement.

76. Radishes
Useful source of vitamin C.

77. Raspberries
Rich in vitamin C.

78. Redcurrant
Rich in vitamin C and potassium.

79. Rhubarb
A good source of potassium.

80. Rice
Brown rice contains antioxidants. Rice bran may help reduce the risk of bowel cancer. A good source of starch.

81. Runner beans
Contain iron, folate and vitamin C.

82. Seaweed
Contains beta-carotene and B vitamins as well as many minerals. Most types of seaweed are a good source of iodine.

83. Sesame seeds
Contain vitamin E and calcium.

84. Soya beans
Contains antioxidants. Excellent source of protein. Soya milks and yoghurts contain plenty of protein and little sugar. Soya is used in the production of textured vegetable protein (TVP) which is (in addition to being a good protein source) an excellent source of zinc, calcium, iron and B vitamins.

85. Spinach
Contains antioxidants. Rich in minerals, fibre and protein as well as vitamins. Can be used in salads as well as cooked. (The usual mistake is to overcook it so that it becomes tasteless and of little nutritional value.)

86. Squash (Winter)
Pumpkins and other winter squash are a good source of beta carotene.

87. Strawberries
Contains antioxidants. One of the richest sources of vitamin C.

88. Sunflower oil
Rich in vitamin E.

89. Sunflower seeds
Rich in zinc.

90. Swedes
May help to prevent cancer. A good source of vitamin C.

91. Sweet Potato (yam)
Contains antioxidants.

92. Tea
A gentle stimulant which also supplies an antioxidant which may lower the risk of cancer and heart disease.

93. Tomatoes
Contain lycopene which helps provide protection against cancer particularly prostate cancer. Men who eat tomato based foods (particularly tomato ketchup, canned tomatoes, tomato soup, tomato based spaghetti sauce and the tomato sauce used in preparing pizza) are less likely to develop prostate cancer. Lycopene may also protect against heart disease and other cancers. It is the heat processing which seems to increase the availability of lycopene in tomatoes. So frying tomatoes should also increase their lycopene availability.

94. Turnip
A good source of fibre and vitamin C.

95. Walnut
Help lower blood cholesterol and may help prevent heart disease. Rich in essential fatty acids which are vital for tissue growth and development.

96. Watercress
Rich in vitamins and minerals but virtually calorie free.

97. Wheat
The consumption of wheat fibre is linked to a lower cancer risk (particularly breast cancer). May help relieve menopausal symptoms and prevent heart disease.

98. Wheatgerm
The most nutrient rich part of wheat. Provides vitamins B and E.

99. Wine
Red wine drinkers seem to have a reduced incidence of heart disease. Moderation is the key. One or two glasses a day seems ideal. Red wine is also believed to have an antioxidant effect (and may provide some protection against viruses too).

100. Wholegrains
Wholegrain barley, buckwheat, maize and rye may help prevent heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes and some cancers.

101. Yoghurt
Natural yoghurt is high in calcium and protein and a good source of iron and vitamins in the B group. Most important, perhaps, yoghurt often contains lactobacilli which compete with and oust numerous infections including thrush. Soya yoghurt is also available.

2. Cut Your Fat Consumption

If you eat too much cholesterol there is a risk that your body's white cells – crucial warriors in your body's immune system defences – may be damaged. And if you have lots of fat in your blood that will also affect your body's ability to deal with infections.

In a normal, healthy body white cells constantly patrol your blood stream hunting out bacteria (and stray cancer cells). If your blood stream is clogged with fat your white cells simply cannot move around effectively.

Imagine how difficult it would be for a group of lifeguards to swim through an oilslick and you'll have an idea of just how difficult it is for white cells to move through fat soaked blood.

Incidentally, all fats are bad for your immune system but animal fats are probably worse than others, and can probably do more damage to your immune system. One of the reasons for this is the fact that animal fat is often contaminated with chemical residues – toxic and possibly carcinogenic residues of drugs consumed (accidentally or deliberately) by feeding animals.

It is often difficult to find out how much fat there is in particular foods. And it is often terribly easy to eat foods which contain a lot of fat without realising it. This specially produced list below is designed to help solve that problem. It may contain a few surprises!

Remember that the figures on this list are only approximate figures intended to be used as a general guide. And remember that if you cook in additional fat the effective fat content of the food you are cooking will rise – often dramatically!

Governments often recommend that a healthy diet should contain no more than 30% fat. I think that figure is far too high (probably because a relatively high fat diet helps keep the food industry rich and happy). I believe that you should aim to have no more than 15-20% fat in your diet. If for some reason you need to follow a low fat diet you may wish to cut your consumption of fat to 10-15%. (There is more about fat – and other foodstuffs – in my book *Food for Thought*.)

To calculate the percentage of fat in foods which are not on this list look at the calorie list on the package label and divide the number of calories obtained from fat by the total number of calories; then multiply that total by 100 to obtain the percentage.

Almonds 56%
Anchovies 20%
Anchovy, canned, drained 20%
Apple 1%
Apple juice 0%
Apple, baked 0%
Apricot 0%
Artichoke 0%
Asparagus 0%
Aubergine 0%
Avocado pear 22%
Bacon, back fried 44%
Bacon, back grilled 35%
Bacon, streaky 38%
Baked beans 1%
Banana 0%
Beans, green 0%
Beans, kidney 1%
Beans, lentils 0%
Beans, lima 0%
Beans, pinto 0%
Beef, minced 26%
Beef, roast 34%
Beef suet 95%
Beefburger 27%
Beer 0%
Beetroot 0%
Biscuits, chocolate (digestives) 24%
Biscuits, chocolate chip 20%
Biscuits, cream sandwich 26%
Biscuits, digestive 20%
Biscuits, macaroon 23%
Biscuits, plain (rich tea/lincoln) 17%

Black pudding 25%
Blackberries 0%
Blackcurrant drink 0%
Blackcurrants 0%
Bran 6%
Bran flakes 2%
Bran wheat 5%
Brazil nuts 61%
Bread, brown 2%
Bread, Currant 8%
Bread, English muffin 2%
Bread, French stick 3%
Bread, granary 3%
Bread roll (white) 7%
Bread, rye 2%
Bread, soda 3%
Bread, wheatgerm 2%
Bread, white 2%
Bread, white, fried 32%
Bread, white, toasted 1%
Bread, wholemea1 3%
Broad beans 1%
Broccoli 0%
Brown sauce 0%
Brussels sprouts 0%
Butter 82%
Cabbage 0%
Carrot 0%
Cashew nuts, roasted, unsalted 46%
Cauliflower 0%
Caviar, black 16%
Celery 0%
Chapatti 1%
Cheese, Austrian smoked 22%
Cheese, Blue Brie 38%
Cheese, Boursin 42%
Cheese, Brie 27%
Cheese, Caerphilly 31%
Cheese, Camembert 23%
Cheese, Cheddar 33%
Cheese, Cheshire 31%
Cheese, Cottage (low fat) 2%
Cheese, Cream 47%
Cheese, Danish Blue 30%
Cheese, Double Gloucester 34%
Cheese, Edam 28%
Cheese, Emmenthal 30%
Cheese, Feta 20%
Cheese, Fromage Frais 7%
Cheese, Gorgonzola 34%
Cheese, Gouda 31%
Cheese, Gruyere 32%
Cheese, Lancashire 31%
Cheese, Leicester 34%
Cheese, Marscarpone 46%
Cheese, Mozarella 21%
Cheese, Parmesan 33%
Cheese, Roquefort 31%
Cheese, Stilton, blue 35%
Cheese, Stilton, white 31%

Cheese, Wensleydale 31%
Cherries 0%
Chestnuts 3%
Chickpeas 2%
Chicken, dark meat, no skin 6%
Chicken, light meat, no skin 5%
Chicken, roast 14%
Chicory 0%
Chilies 1%
Chinese leaves 0%
Chocolate bar, milk 30%
Chocolate bar, plain 30%
Chocolate bar with nuts 26%
Chocolate drink 6%
Chutney 0%
Cider 0%
Cockles, shelled 1%
Cocoa 20%
Coconut, shredded 35%
Cod, steamed 1%
Cod, grilled 1%
Cod fillet in batter 10%
Cod’s roe 4%
Coffee 0%
Cola drink 0%
Coleslaw 5%
Coley, raw 1%
Corn, canned, cream style 1%
Corn, canned 1%
Corn on the cob, fresh 0%
Cornflakes 1%
Corned beef 33%
Courgettes 0%
Crabmeat 5%
Cranberry sauce 0%
Cream, aerosol spray 32%
Cream, clotted 64%
Cream, double 48%
Cream, Fraiche, half fat 10%
Cream, Fraiche 27%
Cream, half cream 14%
Cream, single 20%
Cream, sour 20%
Cream, whipping 39%
Cream crackers 16%
Crispbread 2%
Crumpet 1%
Cucumber 0%
Custard 4%
Danish pastry 26%
Dates, dried 1%
Duck, roasted without skin 10%
Duck’s egg 14%
Egg, boiled 11%
Egg, fried 19%
Egg, omelette 16%
Figs, dried 0%
Figs, fresh 0%
Fish cakes (fried) 11%
Fish fingers (fried) 13%

Fish paste 10%
Flour, white 1%
Flour, wholemeal 2%
Gammon rasher 12%
Garlic 0%
Gin, whisky, vodka, brandy 0%
Ginger ale 0%
Goat’s milk 5%
Golden syrup 0%
Goose 22%
Gooseberries 0%
Grapefruit 0%
Grapefruit juice, unsweetened 0%
Grapes, black 0%
Grapes, white 0%
Gravy (meat juices, fat, flour and stock) 9%
Haddock fillet, smoked 1%
Halibut, steamed 16%
Ham 26%
Hazel nuts 36%
Herring, grilled 13%
Herring, pickled 18%
Herring, raw 18%
Herring, rollmop 10%
Honey 0%
Horseradish sauce 8%
Hot dog sausages 25%
Ice cream 16%
Jam 0%
Jelly 0%
Kidney, fried 6%
Kipper, baked 45%
Kipper, grilled 11%
Kiwi fruit 1%
Lager 0%
Lamb chop, grilled 22%
Lamb leg, roasted 24%
Lamb shoulder, roasted 29%
Lard 99%
Leeks 0%
Lemon 0%
Lemon curd 5%
Lemonade 0%
Lentils 1%
Lettuce 1%
Liver, lamb’s, fried 14%
Liver, pig’s, braised 8%
Lobster 3%
Low fat spread 40%
Luncheon meat 27%
Lychees 0%
Macadamia nuts 73%
Mackerel 11%
Mackerel flesh, raw 16%
Mackerel, fillet, smoked 13%
Malt loaf 3%
Malted milk drink 7%
Mandarin oranges 0%
Mango 0%
Margarine, low fat 40%

Margarine, very low fat 25%
Margarine, full fat, hard and soft 81%
Margarine, full fat, polyunsaturated 81%
Marmalade 0%
Marrow 0%
Marzipan 25%
Mayonnaise 79%
Meat pie 24%
Melon, cantaloupe 0%
Melon, honeydew 0%
Milk, condensed 9%
Milk, evaporated 9%
Milk, fresh semi-skimmed 2%
Milk, fresh skimmed 1%
Milk, fresh whole 4%
Milk, skimmed, powder 1%
Mince pie 21%
Mincemeat 4%
Mints 1%
Mixed vegetables (frozen) 0%
Molasses 0%
Mousse (fruit) 7%
Muesli 8%
Mushrooms, fried 22%
Mushrooms, raw 1%
Mussels 2%
Mustard and cress 0%
Mustard 8%
Nectarine 0%
Noodles, egg 2%
Oil, coconut 97%
Oil, corn 97%
Oil, olive 96%
Oil, peanut 96%
Oil, soybean 97%
Oil, sunflower 97%
Okra 0%
Olives (in brine) 11%
Onion, fried 33%
Onion, raw 0%
Orange 0%
Orange juice, unsweetened 0%
Orange squash 0%
Oysters 1%
Pancake 7%
Parsley 0%
Parsnips 0%
Passion fruit 0%
Pasta, boiled 1%
Peach, fresh 0%
Peaches, tinned 0%
Peanut butter 51%
Peanuts, salted 49%
Pear 0%
Peas, frozen 0%
Peas, tinned 0%
Pecans 74%
Pepper, green 0%
Pepper, red 0%
Pickle 0%

Pilchards 5%
Pineapple juice 0%
Pineapple, fresh 0%
Pineapple, tinned 0%
Pitta bread 1%
Plaice, steamed 2%
Plum 0%
Popcorn (no salt or fat added) 5%
Pork chop 18%
Pork leg, roasted 32%
Pork pie 29%
Pork, spare ribs 39%
Porridge with water 1%
Port 0%
Potatoes, boiled 0%
Potatoes, deep fried chips 40%
Potatoes, jacket 0%
Potatoes, oven chips 8%
Potatoes, roasted 5%
Potatoes, sweet, baked 0%
Prawns 2%
Prunes 1%
Quiche 28%
Rabbit 8%
Radishes 0%
Raisins 0%
Raspberries 0%
Ratatouille 6%
Red wine 0%
Rhubarb (stewed) 0%
Rice, brown, boiled 1%
Rice, white, boiled 0%
Runner beans 0%
Salad dressing: French 39%
Salad dressing: French, low cal 4%
Salad dressing: Italian 60%
Salad dressing: Italian, low cal 5%
Salad dressing: mayonnaise, low calorie 12%
Salad dressing: mayonnaise: 75%
Salami 47%
Salmon, fresh 13%
Salmon, tinned 8%
Sardines 14%
Sausages, beef, grilled 21%
Sausages, pork, grilled 30%
Scampi 21%
Scotch egg 21%
Sesame seeds, dry, hulled 55%
Sherry 0%
Shortbread 26%
Smoked haddock 1%
Smoked salmon 4%
Soy sauce 1%
Soybean curd (tofu) 6%
Spinach 1%
Sponge pudding 16%
Spring greens 0%
Squid 1%
Steak, grilled 6%
Steak and kidney pie 21%

Steak pudding 12%
Stock cube 3%
Strawberries 0%
Stuffing, sage and onion 0%
Sugar, demerara 0%
Sugar, muscavado 0%
Sugar, white 0%
Sultanas 0%
Sunflower seed kernels, dry, hulled 48%
Swede 0%
Sweet potato 1%
Sweetcorn 1%
Sweets, boiled 0%
Swiss roll 5%
Syrup, cane and maple 0%
Taco shell, fried tortilla 19%
Tangerine 0%
Taramasalata 46%
Tartar sauce 59%
Tea 0%
Tinned fruit salad 0%
Toffee apple 0%
Toffees 17%
Tomato, fried 6%
Tomato juice 0%
Tomato paste 0%
Tomato puree 0%
Tomato, raw 0%
Tomato soup 3%
Tomatoes, tinned 0%
Tonic water 0%
Treacle 0%
Tripe, stewed 4%
Trout 5%
Tuna fish tinned in oil 22%
Turkey, roast 10%
Turnip 0%
Veal 28%
Vegetable soup 1%
Venison 6%
Vinegar 0%
Walnuts 52%
Water biscuits 13%
Water chestnuts 1%
Watercress 0%
Watermelon 0%
White wine 0%
Whitebait 48%
Wine, dessert (port, madeira, sweet sherry) 0%
Wine, table (burgundy, rose, white, dry sherry) 0%
Yam 0%
Yeast extract (Marmite) 0%
Yoghurt, fruit (low-fat) 1%
Yoghurt, plain (low-fat) 1%
Yoghurt, soya 2%

3. Prepare Food Carefully To Reduce The Risk Of Infection And To Preserve The Vitamin Content

Your body's immune system needs supplies of vitamins and minerals in order to function effectively. In particular, in order to help build up your immune system and fight off infections and cancer your body needs regular supplies of foods which contain antioxidants (beta-carotene, vitamin C and vitamin E) and other substances.

The modern 'meat, butter, cheese, milk' diet is death to your body's immune system not just because those foods are rich in fat but also because they don't contain much in the way of immuneboosting vitamins and minerals.

The healthiest, safest, most efficient and most effective way to obtain the vitamins and minerals you need is to get them from the food you eat. If you eat a good diet you won't have to worry about recommended daily allowances (RDAs) or which sort of supplements to buy.

Your body will get the vitamins and minerals it needs to keep your immune system healthy if you eat a diet which is rich in vegetables, fruits and grains.

However, it is vital to be aware that vitamins can easily be destroyed. Mushrooms, lettuce, broccoli, asparagus and strawberries, for example, all lose their vitamins very quickly. Food which has to be cooked should be cooked for the shortest possible time and at the lowest possible temperature.

In order to ensure that the food you eat retains a high vitamin content – and to minimise the risk of acquiring an infection from your food – you should follow these simple rules:

* Food processing tends to reduce the nutritional quality of food and so where possible you should try to buy fresh food and either eat it raw (if appropriate) or eat it after cooking for the shortest length of time.
* Buy vegetables whole. Don't have the leaves removed from carrots or the stalk removed from a cabbage or cauliflower. If you buy the vegetable whole vitamin C will continue to be produced and moved into the edible parts of the plant.
* Cook foods in the minimum amount of water or steam.
* Avoid high cooking temperatures and long heat exposure.
* Do not allow food to stand for long periods at room temperature. Do not store food in warm places.
* Do not soak vegetables for long periods.
* Do not peel fruit or vegetables unless necessary. (For example, do not peel apples or skin potatoes).
* Try to use food the day you have bought it rather than use frozen foods. Use foods the day you buy them to get the best out of them.
* You can keep fresh products for longer by freezing as soon as you buy them. Deep freezing preserves vitamins and other nutrients. Vegetables should be blanched before freezing. Put them in hot water for a short time. This inactivates enzymes which might otherwise degrade vitamin C.
* Make sure that your fridge is kept cold enough. The temperature inside your fridge should be below 3 degrees Centigrade.
* Make sure that you wash your hands thoroughly before preparing food. Staphylococcus, for example, can be transmitted hand to hand.
* Never re-freeze food which has been previously frozen and then thawed. Thawing increases the number of bacteria and re-freezing food increases the chances of infection.
* If you eat meat make sure that it is completely thawed before you start to cook it. If you do not do this then the chances are that the middle of the meat will still be frozen when you start to cook it – and will not be properly cooked when the rest of the meat is ready. Meat which is raw will probably be full of bugs.
* Keep foods apart from one another in your fridge in order to reduce the risk of cross contamination. Put meat (a high risk source of infection) at the bottom of the fridge and keep it away from other foods.
* Don't ever buy tins which are rusty, bulging or badly damaged.
* Always check the sell by date before buying food. Don't be tempted to buy (or use) food which has passed its sell by date.

4. Buy Organic Food Whenever Possible

I recommend that whenever possible you purchase ‘organic’ produce which has been prepared without chemicals.

Nearly half of all the food sold in supermarkets and stores including fruits, vegetables, bread and meat – contains potentially dangerous pesticide residues. Some chemicals are sprayed onto foods which have grown and which are being picked or shipped to the stores but many chemicals are absorbed when foods are growing and obviously cannot be removed by washing or scraping. Some of the chemicals used by modern farmers are known to cause cancer, asthma and a wide variety of other serious disorders.

Meat is contaminated partly because of the chemicals which are given to animals (to keep them ‘healthy’ and to make them grow more speedily) and partly because of the chemicals which are put into or onto the food they eat.

Organic food is grown without the use of artificial fertilizers and pesticides and the extra money you have to pay for such food is extremely well spent. Organic farmers use natural fertilisers (such as animal manure and seaweed) and rely on natural biological pest controllers, though some use natural plant based pesticides.

Moreover organic farmers also grow crops in rotation so that their soil is kept in good condition. Growing the same crop year after year in the same massive field probably makes good commercial sense but it means that the food produced will probably be lower in nutritional value.

Organic food is often more expensive than food grown with the aid of large quantities of chemicals simply because farmers who use artificial fertilisers and chemicals to kill bugs, insects and infections can produce bigger, more reliable, more uniform, more predictable and more attractive looking crops. Organic farmers, who have to rely on growing food the way nature intended, tend to have smaller crops and they are more likely to lose their crop through disease.

When buying food and looking for organic produce you should check labels carefully and make sure that you find good, reliable local suppliers. Many organic farmers sell their produce direct to the public and there are now many shops selling organic produce, either as an alternative to food grown with the aid of chemicals or alongside such produce.

In my opinion it is also well worthwhile looking for flour which has been ground in a traditional stone grinding mill. Modern steel rollers, used to crush wheat germ, create a great deal of destructive heat; natural oils are removed and essential vitamins and minerals which are lost have to be added artificially. An old fashioned, slowing turning millstone crushes the wheat germ slowly – and without it overheating.

5. Don’t Drink Unfiltered Tap Water

You should drink six to eight decent sized glasses of water a day. Fizzy drinks and caffeinated teas and coffees don’t count. Nor do alcoholic drinks. If you can’t bear the idea of drinking that much water look for drinks that contain no alcohol, no caffeine and no sugar or sodium. Herbal, fruit or mint teas are fine as are decaffeinated drinks. Alternatively, you can try drinking pure fruit juice diluted with water.

If you want to drink plain water I suggest you avoid tap water. In most countries governments make sure that tap water is regulated and undergoes rigorous tests which means, I’m afraid, that it is pretty much undrinkable and best used for doing the washing up unless you use a filter. Bottled drinking water isn’t necessarily pure. Some ‘spring water’ has been purified or chemically treated while the stuff sold as ‘table water’ may be nothing more than filtered tap water.

The best bet is probably ‘natural mineral water’ which comes from a protected, pure, unadulterated source and should not have been treated or tampered with. Natural mineral water may contain some bacteria (though not usually enough to do you any harm) and so you shouldn’t keep bottled natural mineral water lying around once the bottle has been opened.

6. Improve The Way You Deal With Stress

The evidence shows that the kinder and more thoughtful you are, the more your immune system is likely to be damaged. Worries of any kind can cause serious damage.

We live in a world which is already complex and which is getting steadily more complex by the day. I believe that the conditions which we often describe as anxiety and ‘depression’ (along with some other troublesome and significant mental disorders) frequently develop because the individual concerned can no longer cope with the barrage of pressures and problems to which they are repeatedly subjected.

Expectations are raised and then left unfulfilled. Feelings of pointlessness and a sense of general despair about the way the world is going are commonplace.

Frustrations, disappointments, ‘toxic stresses’ and an apparently unending sequence of problems over which the individual has little or no control are common causes of the condition now often officially (and profitably) labelled as ‘depression’.

The first step should be to examine and dissect a ‘depression’ (or anxiety state) so that instead of struggling vainly to tackle a vague, amorphous, ill defined sense of ‘depression’ it is possible to assess all the influences and factors which might be responsible for the ‘depression’ and to then tackle each specific cause of the unhappiness.

Understanding what has gone on may lead to a non pharmacological cure for anxiety and ‘depression’ which will work far more effectively than drugs (and last longer) because it offers a fundamental solution which strikes at the very root of the problem instead of merely papering over the cracks.

Learn to pay attention

If you learn to pay attention to each moment in your life then you will get far more from your life. You will be living your life to the full and far better able to take advantage of every opportunity and experience which comes your way.

By experiencing each moment in your life with some intensity you will also become far more aware of the ways in which you are damaging your physical and mental health.

Instead of meandering through life in a job you hate or a relationship which isn’t ever going to give you any real satisfaction (and ending up miserable and depressed) you will be far more likely to take action that will liberate yourself and allow yourself to live your life to the full.

Many people go through life hardly ever getting out of first gear. They meander along from day to day, hardly ever truly awake and aware of what is going on around them. Only on rare and special occasions (such as the death of someone significant or a birthday, wedding or funeral) do they wake up and become alert and alive.

Because they go through life without really waking up to what is going on around them such individuals ignore the messages their bodies give them.

They never listen to their bodies and so never take advantage of their body’s self healing powers.

Your life will become more intense and more enjoyable if you learn to pay complete attention to each moment. Consciously and knowingly experience where you are, what you do and how you feel. Let yourself go. Don’t worry about trying to control the present or the future.

We are often encouraged to think that we will be happy when something happens in the future. We decide that we will be happy when we give up the job we hate, when the kids leave home, when we get a promotion, when we lose weight, when the business begins to take off, when we have a new car and so on.

But if you are constantly postponing happiness when will you ever give yourself a chance to be happy?

Life is only really present in the here and now. Life isn’t in the future because the future isn’t yet here. And it isn’t in the past because the past is gone.

But be warned.

Once you become aware of your life – and the way you are living it – you may need to make changes.

We often shut off our awareness of the world outside be cause we simply can’t bear the reality which surrounds us.

When you become truly aware of the world around you then you may suddenly discover that you have acquired the strength to stand up for yourself, to turn away from bad relationships or to leave a job you hate.

There’s More To Life Than Having Everything

We have more ‘things’ and more ‘comfort’ than any other civilisation in history. But ‘depression’ and unhappiness are probably commoner than in any other civilisation.

Our society values material acquisitions more than anything else. We are taught that we will only find contentment by increasing our level of consumption.

Happiness comes with a bigger house, a bigger car and more expensive clothes.

And so we are pushed to go through our lives acquiring expensive ‘stuff’ which we may neither really need nor truly want. Our goals become materialistic instead of personal.

We forget to live because we believe that we will only truly be happy when we have achieved another goal. But when will we know when we have enough? Will $50,000 be enough? What about $500,000? $5,000,000?

$50,000,000?

And if we are driven only by the happiness we think we will find when we have reached a certain goal what will we have to look forward if we ever do have enough? (And if we admit that we will never have enough then we are admitting that we are dooming ourselves to permanent disappointment and frustration.)

As a wise man once said: ‘There must be more to life than having everything.’

Protect Yourself From Misery

I have given up watching the TV news. And I only rarely buy newspapers. I no longer expose myself to a daily diet of misery. This is not because I am disinterested in the problems of the world – I fight for the things I believe in and I read enough news magazines and news agency summaries to know about the important things going on in the world. But I know that I can only cope with so much misery and sadness.

I protect myself because if I allowed myself to be subjected to a constant daily diet of misery and horror I would not be able to cope – or have the strength to fight for the things in which I believe.

I don’t know whether there is any more violence or horror in the world today than there was five hundred years ago. I suspect not. But that is an academic and irrelevant question. The point is that modern communications methods make these horrors available to us all on an hourly basis. At any one time there are around forty wars going on around the world. All these wars – and the accompanying horrors – are brought into our homes through the magic of television.

Modern communications techniques mean that you and I receive more information every day than our ancestors had to cope with in years.

The modern media enables us to expose ourselves to many horrors and injustices about which we can do nothing. Television gives us instant access to other people’s pain.

But however much we care we can’t fight against every injustice in the world.

I believe that one of the reasons why so many people do not seem to care these days is that they are protecting themselves by deliberately staying aloof and not allowing themselves to respond to what they hear about.

People numb themselves and suppress their emotions in order to survive.

They become unfeeling because they are overexposed to horror and they simply cannot cope. They close their eyes and their hearts to protect themselves (and because the horrors they see and hear about are endless they do not believe they can do anything that will make a difference).

If you want to stay alert but sensitive to the world’s problems then I suggest that you too limit your exposure to news programmes.

Limiting your exposure to the daily diet of horror and injustice will enable you to retain the strength to do what you can to fight for truth and justice.

What Do You Really Want?

Do you know what makes you happy? Do you know when you are happy? How many moments of happiness did you have last week?

You have to make time for happiness. You have to be ready for it. And you have to work at it.

When the good times come you have to make a real effort to enjoy them; to look around and take notice of the world so that you can savour and remember your happiness (and use it to keep you going when the times get rough).

Ask yourself these four simple questions – you might find the answers illuminating.

What in your life gives you most fun? How much time do you spend doing it?

What in your life gives you least enjoyment? How much time do you spend doing that?

Another question to ask yourself is ‘Why?’

Why do you want a better job? Why do you want to save money? Why do you want to move house? Why do you want to buy a holiday home?

Only when you ask yourself ‘Why?’ will you know what you really need and what you are prepared to do for it.

Most people earn and spend without ever asking themselves ‘Why?’ They blindly sell their time (which is the same as selling their lives) for money which they spend on things they neither want nor need.

Ask yourself ‘Why?’ more often and you will learn more about yourself and what you are doing.

But be warned. Asking yourself this simple question can be unnerving.

You may get answers.

And if you have been going through life for years without knowing where you were headed (or why) then you may find the answers you get rather startling.

Assess all the influences on your life and ask yourself how these things contribute to your life and potential for enjoyment and satisfaction.

Consider each influence and ask yourself: ‘Should I discard it or give it more of my energy?’

Protest And Preserve Yourself

Finally, here are some simple, specific ways to help protect and preserve your immune system.

* Be prepared to admit when you're feeling tired. If you keep going when you're exhausted you'll not only make yourself worse (by doing further damage to your immune system) but you'll also let yourself – and the people around you – down. You can't do your best work when you're suffering from burn out.

* Learn to manage your time as efficiently as possible. Plan your day. Keep a diary so that important engagements and commitments don't suddenly creep up on you.

* If you feel ill take time off. Don't think that you're indispensable and must carry on. The cemeteries are full of people who thought they were indispensable but life goes on without them. If you feel exhausted then your body is telling you that it needs to rest. Remember that regular holidays are important – and make sure that the holiday you choose is relaxing! Your immune system will automatically repair and rebuild itself when you take a break.

* If your life is full of battles and arguments make sure that you take time out to relax and enjoy yourself. And make sure that you differentiate between those battles which are worth fighting and those which are merely adding to the stress in your life. If you learn to walk away from trivial and insignificant problems you will retain your strength for the battles which really matter. Stand up for yourself over important issues but be prepared to walk away from arguments when the underlying issue isn't truly important. People who are always complaining burn themselves out with anger so think very carefully before allowing yourself to get heated up. If the battle is important then do what you think is right – and fight to the last breath if necessary. If the battle isn't important then try to shrug your shoulders and walk away.

* Make sure that you get enough sleep. If you have difficulty in relaxing at night try having a hot bath before you go to bed. Don't do any work for at least an hour before you try to get to sleep. Watch a relaxing video or read an amusing or entertaining book. Poor sleep is a symptom of burn out – and it makes things steadily worse. Your immune system gets recharged while you're sleeping – as long as you are relaxed.

* Learn to say 'no' more often. Don't let yourself be tricked into taking on too many responsibilities by people who know how to make you feel guilty! Get your priorities sorted out and remember that you – and your family and friends – need some of your life.

* Try not to get too upset when things go wrong. Remember that you can't get anywhere in life without taking risks or without making mistakes. Try not to brood over your failures but try to learn from your mistakes. Otherwise your bad days will smoulder and add to your burn out.

* Do you touch the people you love often enough? If your immune system is being damaged by stress – then the chances are high that you touch the people you love far too little. And you probably need to give out more cuddles too.

Touching – and being touched – will help improve the effectiveness of your immune system and increase your body's resistance to infection and cancer.

Ask yourself how many times you've hugged the people who are closest to you in the last 24 hours. And ask yourself how often you've touched the people you love.

If you don't touch or hug or cuddle people often it may be that you have to battle against a long established feeling that such outward signs of affection are wrong.

If your parents didn't hug or cuddle you very often you may find it difficult to let yourself go.

You may have even been encouraged to believe that hugging, cuddling and touching are embarrassing or too 'showy'.

Boys are often told off for wanting a hug.

'You're too old for that sort of thing,' Father will say because he feels uncomfortable at the prospect of close physical contact.

If you think that you need to touch – and be touched – more often make today the day you start:

* When you greet a loved one – even if it's only after a few hours parting – put an arm around them. You don't have to start with a full blooded hug if that makes you feel embarrassed. Build up to a hug slowly!

* When you're leaving someone – again if it's only for a few hours – touch them on the arm or shoulder. Try a peck on the cheek if you're shy about a full mouth to mouth kiss. Again, build up to a proper cuddle.

* When you kiss someone 'hello' or 'goodbye' don't be content with a distant peck on the cheek. Put your arms around them, give them a big hug.

* When you greet close friends get into the habit of touching them – maybe clasping their hands or forearm, or perhaps putting an arm around them.

Hugging, touching and kissing aren't just for lovers. If you regularly hug, touch and kiss all the people who matter to you then you'll feel better – and so will they!

7. General Advice

Don't Be Too Obsessed With Cleanliness

Have you ever wondered whether the modern obsession with hygiene could have possibly made us more susceptible to illness? Poor living conditions are known to be a significant factor in the development of many diseases (for example tuberculosis) but could too much of a good thing be a bad thing? There is growing evidence to show that it could.

Research has now shown that the level of pollutants (such as dangerous gases) is usually higher in the home than outside it. This is true even in the most polluted cities. Two environmental engineers working at the University of Texas in Austin, US have recently suggested that by trying to keep our homes clean we may be creating more pollution. Baths, showers, washing machines and dishwashers can all be serious sources of pollution because they extract small amounts of chemicals from the water they use and push those chemicals out into the air. Most public water supplies contain small amounts of toxic chemicals (mostly these are the remains of chemicals used in the chlorination process) and these chemicals are released when the water is heated and splashed about a good deal. It appears that a dishwasher is particularly good at extracting toxic chemicals from tap water but even a shower head can do quite a job of this.

Children who live in an unhealthily artificial (and clean) environment, and who have very little contact with infective organisms, may grow up without having acquired the immunity which might help protect them from some infections later in life.

And children who 'miss' common childhood illnesses (such as the big four: measles, rubella, mumps and chickenpox) may suffer far more seriously if they get those infections when they are adults.

Too much cleanliness may result in an increased susceptibility to infection and in addition some immunologists now believe that the dramatic increase in allergy problems such as asthma, eczema and hayfever in recent years may be due to excessive hygiene.

Modern babies have very little contact with mycobacteria (which live in soil and streams) and this could result in their immune systems becoming too quick to develop allergy responses (as well as too slow to kill bacteria and viruses).

It's too early to offer definitive advice on this just yet. But my instinct tells me that children just might grow up stronger, healthier and less likely to develop allergies if they spent more time playing in the garden and less time living in a sterile antiseptic-soaked environment.

If I'm right doctors and drug companies will probably soon find a way of cashing in on this. What odds against the next generation of doctors prescribing 'mud pie dabbling' three times a week? The mud pies will, of course, come courtesy of the pharmaceutical industry. They will be expensively pre-packed and guaranteed to contain just the right number of mycobacteria.

Meanwhile, a tad more soil, a dab more mud and a spray or two less of antiseptic may be a wise move.

Minimise Your Risk Of Being Made Ill By Electricity

* Don't have mains powered radios, answering machines, clocks or other electrical devices unnecessarily close to you – on your desk, in the kitchen or by your bed. Battery operated appliances are probably safer.

* Don't sit within two and a half or three feet of the front, sides or the back of a Visual Display Unit on a computer or word processor.

* If you are pregnant try to keep away from Visual Display Units completely. A study of over 1,500 women showed that pregnant women who spend more than 20 hours a week working on such terminals have a greater chance of having a miscarriage.

* If your child's school is within 150 yards of a major electricity supply line ask the authorities to test the electrical fields in classrooms, playground and sports fields.

* Don't sit (and don't let children sit) closer than three feet from your television set when it is switched on. TV sets produce potentially dangerous electrical fields which are stronger the closer you get.

* Unplug electrical blankets before you get into bed.

* Don't sit or stand in front of household appliances such as microwave ovens when they are switched on.

* Try not to live in a home within 150 yards of a major electricity supply line. I think this is probably particularly important if you have small children or are pregnant.

Use Your Mobile Telephone As Safely As Possible

* Use your mobile phone only when absolutely necessary – and keep calls as brief as possible. Mobile phones should be used for emergency calls rather than routine calls.

* Use the forwarding facility when using the phone indoors. Most mobile phones can be adapted so that callers are re-directed to a landline telephone.

* A hands-free kit (with microphone and ear piece) enables mobile phone users to use their telephones without holding them to the side of their heads.

* Mobile telephone users can protect themselves by opening a window when using their telephone. I confess that at first reading this sounded to me the sort of thing that might have been put about by James Thurber's aunt

(the one who, the American humorist said, claimed that if you didn't put plugs in electrical sockets at night then electricity would dribble out onto the floor). But my scepticism was unfounded. Whenever a mobile phone is switched on it searches for a signal. If the phone can't find a signal it increases its power. Naturally, this means that anything that gets in the way of the signal (such as a plate glass window) will mean that the phone has to use more power. Every mobile phone I've seen comes equipped with a meter which measures and reports the level of the signal. The better the signal the less power the phone will be using – and so the safer it will be. When the signal is poor the health threat is increased. It is clear therefore that anything you can do to reduce the amount of power your phone needs to use in order to work properly will be a help in reducing the health risk. Fitting an external aerial in your car may help. And opening a window (whether you are at home or in a car) may help.

* Because of the concern about the risks which may be associated with the use of mobile telephones it is now possible to purchase devices which are designed to help protect the brain from the microwaves being produced. However, some of these devices make a portable telephone heavier, bulkier and more difficult to carry around. There is also a risk that they may have an adverse effect on the telephone's performance. I haven't yet seen any evidence showing that these devices work. But I haven't seen any evidence suggesting that they could be dangerous either. They may be worth using.

* One leading car manufacturer now warns customers not to use mobile phones inside cars because of the danger that the electromagnetic fields produced by the phone working within the car's metal shell may be a health hazard.

* Possibly the most useful health protection tip I've heard came from the boss of a telephone company. He says he wraps his fingers around his telephone so that the phone itself is always an inch or so away from the side of his head. Not surprisingly this can make it difficult to conduct a conversation if there is a lot of background noise (in a railway station for example) but it does reduce the dose of microwave radiation next to the head.

* If for some reason you can't use a hand free microphone and earpiece turn up the volume so that you can hold the phone some distance from your head.

Watch Out For The Early Warning Signs Of Cancer

* Many cancers are curable – especially if caught early. Here are some cancer signs you should watch out for. Remember:

a) a patient with cancer may suffer from one, all or none of these symptoms

b) this list is not comprehensive (there are other symptoms and signs of cancer)

c) a symptom on this list may be caused by something other than cancer. If you are at all worried you should always see your doctor as soon as possible for advice.

* Cancer of the large bowel: change in bowel habits (diarrhoea or constipation), unexplained weight loss, pain, passing blood.

* Cancer of the cervix: unexplained bleeding or discharge, pain or bleeding after sex, weight loss.

* Cancer of the breast: swelling or lump in breast, bloody discharge from nipple, enlarged glands in armpit, dimpling of the skin of the breast.

* Cancer of the lung: persistent bad cough, blood in sputum, chest pain, wheezing, weight loss.

* Cancer of the stomach: weight loss, persistent indigestion, vomiting blood, lump in abdomen, feeling full after very small meals.

* Cancer of the liver: pain in abdomen, loss of appetite, weight loss, yellow eyes and skin, abdomen swollen.

* Cancer of the ovary: irregular periods, hard lump in abdomen, pain during sex, bowel problems, excessive hair growth, voice gets deeper.

* Cancer of the brain: headaches, vomiting, visual disturbances, weakness or paralysis, dizziness, fits, memory loss, personality changes.

* Cancer of the skin: skin lesion that doesn't heal, bleeds, gets larger, changes shape, size or colour.

* Cancer of the prostate: pain, urine retention, difficulty in passing urine.

* Cancer of the testicle: swelling in testicle.

* Cancer of the blood (leukaemia): tiredness, paleness, bruising, bleeding easily, lots of infections.

* Cancer of the womb: bleeding after sex, lump felt in abdomen.

* Cancer of the throat: hoarseness, lump in throat, difficulty in swallowing, swollen glands in neck.

Beware of Vaccines

Many readers who have tried to discuss vaccines with their doctors have complained that their physicians simply insist that vaccines are perfectly safe and that that is the end of the matter.

In my view, everyone should be told the facts so that they can make up their own minds about the value of any vaccine. Deciding whether or not to have a vaccination is a big decision. It isn't something to be done lightly. The wrong decision can easily lead to a lifetime of regrets. Sadly, however, one big problem is undoubtedly the fact that many doctors simply don't know very much about the safety or effectiveness of vaccines. They know what the government tells them and they know what the company which makes the vaccine tells them. But I don't trust governments and I don't think that companies making vaccines are the right source of unbiased information about effectiveness and safety.

'My doctor implied that I was being stupid when I said I wasn't sure that I wanted my child vaccinated,' complained one reader of mine. 'His attitude was that it had nothing to do with me and that I should allow him to do whatever he thought best.'

'My wife came home crying,' complained another reader. 'She had had the temerity to question her doctor about vaccination. He told her that if she refused to have our child vaccinated he would call in the social workers since in his view our refusal to allow vaccination made us unfit to be parents. What really upset me is that my wife hadn't refused to have our child vaccinated. She just wanted to talk about it.'

This paternalistic attitude seems strong among doctors and other health workers, most of whom seem to prefer to answer any questions with abuse rather than facts.

Before you allow your doctor to vaccinate your child (or you) ask your doctor these essential questions:

* How dangerous is the disease for which the vaccine is being given? (Exactly what are the chances that it will kill or cripple?)
* How effective is the vaccine?
* How dangerous is the vaccine? (Exactly what are the chances that it will kill or cripple?) What side effects are associated with the vaccine?
* Which patients should not be given the vaccine?

I advise patients to ask doctors to give them written confirmation that they have personally investigated the risk-benefit ratio of the vaccine and that, having looked at all the evidence, they believe that the vaccine is safe and essential for that particular patient. How could any doctor object to signing such a confirmation?

I cannot give you specific advice about whether or not you should have your child vaccinated against whooping cough, measles or any other disease. It would be dangerous and irresponsible for me to try to offer you specific advice because we are all different and circumstances change from day to day.

My own personal view is that vaccines are unsafe and worthless. I would not allow myself to be vaccinated again. Readers must, however, make their own judgements based on all the available evidence. I strongly recommend that anyone contemplating vaccination discuss the issue with their own medical adviser.

Infectious diseases are least likely to affect (and to kill) those who have healthy immune systems. I no longer believe that vaccines have any role to play in the protection of the community or the individual. Vaccines may be profitable but, in my view, they are neither safe nor effective. I prefer to put my trust in building up my immune system.

Since vaccines are usually given by injection they by pass the body's normal defence systems (the skin, tonsils and so on). Vaccination is an extremely unnatural process.

I have for many years been concerned about the safety and efficacy of specific vaccines. Those fears have gradually gelled into a general conviction that vaccination programmes are neither sufficiently safe nor sufficiently effective to be acceptable. It is worth remembering that those involved in trying to 'sell' vaccination programmes to the public have repeatedly lied and tried to prevent the publication of the truth.

Avoid aeroplanes whenever possible

The time has come when we should all question our travel plans a little more closely.

Is your next trip really necessary? And if the trip is necessary would it be possible to make the same journey by train or boat? Some modern trains are 'closed systems' but since doors are opened occasionally there is a decent chance that you might get a little fresh air to breathe occasionally.

Try to avoid buildings which have closed circuit air conditioning or heating systems

When air is constantly re-circulated your chances of acquiring an infection are dramatically increased. If one person sneezes or coughs then the chances are high that everyone in the building will be exposed to the bug.

Try to keep away from hospitals, doctors' clinics and other places where sick people congregate

I used to favour open plan wards (as designed by Florence Nightingale) since patients in such wards can be kept constantly under supervision by nurses. The explosion in the incidence of antibiotic-resistant bugs means that single rooms are now preferable for any patient requiring hospital treatment.

Remember Coleman's first law!

Most doctors prescribe far too many different drugs and as a result they have no idea what side effects are associated with the drugs they are handing out.

You should always remember Coleman's First Law of Modern Medicine: 'If you develop new symptoms while being treated for any medical condition the chances are that the new symptoms are caused by the treatment you are receiving.'

One in six patients in hospital is there because he or she has been made ill by doctors. The reason is simple. Few doctors know Coleman's First Law of Modern Medicine. You should never forget it. It will be a vital weapon in your armoury in the years ahead.

Never forget that many of the chronically disabling illnesses of the twenty first century are actually caused by drug therapy.

Be wary, too, of taking drugs which aren't essential. For example, if your doctor wants to prescribe an antibiotic ask him if he thinks it is really essential – or if he is just giving you the prescription because he thinks you want an antibiotic. Don't take drugs unless you really need them. Ask if there is a non-drug alternative and ask exactly why the drug is being prescribed and what the consequences could be if you don't take it.

In short: don't take drugs (either prescribed or bought over the pharmacy counter) unless you really need them. Always investigate other ways to deal with health problems.

Vernon Coleman is a qualified and registered GP. For a list of over 100 other books by Vernon Coleman please see his author page on Amazon. Many of his books are available as kindle books on Amazon. For more information about the author visit www.vernoncoleman.com

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THE GAME'S AFOOT!

VERNON COLEMAN

The Game’s Afoot

Vernon Coleman

Note from the author
The previous books in this series are *Diary of a Disgruntled Man*, *Just another Bloody Year*, *Bugger Off And Leave Me Alone*, *Return of the Disgruntled Man* and *Life on the Edge*. So that makes this approximately the sixth diary in the series unless you are an innumerate millennial in which case it is possibly the fifth or maybe the seventh.

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Dedication

To Antoinette with all my love always and all ways. You are everyone and everything to me.

Precis

Strange things continue to happen in the Coleman household. If anything unusual can happen then it will. The sixth volume of Vernon Coleman's diary contains an unbelievable but true saga of what happened when V&A tried to sell their Parisian apartment and (thanks to the absurd laws which control French property sales) were forced to accept a buyer who couldn't afford to buy it and didn't even have the money for the deposit. You'll read why Vernon paid £2,500 to have the grass cut and sold a car for very little more than half price. Plus Vernon explains why we should declare war on the EU and precisely why we would win in a matter of days. He also explains how and why he thinks everyone would benefit if the McCanns were taken to court. All predictions made in the book have been left as they were written on the day – even if they now look stupid.

The Author

Although he has a medical degree, Vernon Coleman has earned his living solely with his pen for 40 years. The pen has now worn out and the author isn't in much better condition.

Coleman has been described as the king of conspiracy theorists (*Talk Radio*), the king of media docs (*Independent*) and the king of the self-publishers (*Daily Telegraph*). That makes him three kings, but he isn't stuck up about it.

On the other hand, he was described by a despairing (and former) literary agent as a prophet crying in the wilderness but he doesn't talk much about that.

'All progress depends upon the unreasonable man,' wrote George Bernard Shaw. And so, once again, the curmudgeon awakes.

Note

All the errors, literals, grammatical cock-ups, blots, crumpled pages, misspellings, msitakes, scruffy covers, weak bindings and remains of little sticky labels disfiguring the cover are entirely my fault and my responsibility. (There are 183.5 of them altogether. The half is arguable.)

Antoinette, who understands the magic of these things, removes the most egregious errors and turns these books into kindle-friendly volumes but I insist on leaving errors scattered around in order to give the diary a natural flavour, a freshness and matchless literary verisimilitude. A garden without weeds has as much soul and spirit as a municipal clock or one of those traffic islands covered in bushes. These little idiosyncrasies are not unique. James Agate managed to refer to Johnson's Boswell and to the Wimpoles of Barratt Street. And the book *Dew on the Grass* by Eiluned Lewis, went through eight editions containing a reference to the Twelve Commandments. In January 1935, *The Times* court pages carried an advance notice of an upper class entertainment which read: 'Miss X will sin and a number of well-known young girls will take part'. And Agate himself once wrote a review of an actress's performance which included the words 'she was mistress of herself, the situation and everybody in the audience'.

If you find any of the questionable artefacts within my insubstantial pageant, you can give yourself a pat on the back. The more you find the prouder you should feel. (Though, if you find things like crumpled pages I am very impressed since this book is only available as an ebook.)

But please do not share your secret discoveries with anyone else. These secrets are best kept tucked away in some deep, dark, special place.

Foreword

Why write a diary? Well, I'm a writer. It's what I do and the stuff all builds up inside my head if I don't write it down. After a while, the inside of my skull gets clogged and feels uncomfortable. I feel better when the gubbins and the flapdoodle are all out in the open. Plus, writing down the bad stuff is truly cathartic. I feel better when I have written about some of the awful things that happen. I'm absolutely certain other people have worse things happen to them – and doubtless funnier things too. But I have to work with the things that have happened to us. To be honest, it's a joy to share the stuff that has happened in the past year – you're welcome to it. Much of it may be no more than adscititious persiflage. But it's my adscititious persiflage. (And the rest is shamelessly wanton and picayune.)

Of course, some people will object that there are bits and pieces about politics, news and medicine in the diary.

'A diary should be all about where you go and the people you meet,' they will say snootily. 'What did you order for lunch? Who was at the next table? Did you see anyone famous?'

'Well, bugger all that,' I will say in response.

I have no interest in writing (or reading) a diary which sounds like an appointments book. I'm not interested in recording what I had for breakfast or who I met for lunch (unless they said or did something exceptionally interesting). Someone else can hear all about Mr Cowell, Mr Morgan and the rest of them. Someone else can write about solemn stillness.

I include stuff about politics et al because these are things which affect me physically, mentally and spiritually. The book would be a lot shorter (and take far less time to put together) if I left these entries out but it wouldn't really be my diary of the year. (It would probably also receive much better reviews.)

Most of this diary is, like the five which preceded it, a record of things that happened in one particular year, how those things appeared to me and how they affected Antoinette and me. I cannot explain how things affect other people as well as I can explain how they affect my wife and me. Readers who have seen the previous five diaries will doubtless notice certain themes developing in my life.

Some people will doubtless object that there is too much about me in the book. Ah, well, that's a bit of a problem. It's my diary. And it must, therefore, be largely about me. I'm sorry about that. The truth is that I am not someone who enjoys being centre stage. (If I were, then I would still be appearing on television and radio and I would have accounts with Facebook, Twitter and other aspects of social media.) But I would find it difficult to write a diary about someone else – unless it was fictional. (Funnily enough, I did help one of my cats write two diaries. There is no little irony in the fact that Alice's diaries have sold far, far more copies than this series of diaries; probably a hundred times as many. There's a lesson there somewhere but I'm not sure I'm brave enough to look for it.)

I also know some people take a peep at one of my diaries and become incensed at the fact that I have dared to say frankly what I feel.

Others complain that publishing a diary is self-indulgent. Well, maybe it is. And maybe, just maybe, it's a useful record of the days we are living through. There are not, after all, all that many honest diaries published these days. Most of the ones I've seen seem designed to glorify the writer or his mates.

And maybe, just maybe, our experiences of life might help some readers deal with their own bizarre and unwelcome experiences.

And, as I have already pointed out, writing is what I do for a living. I worked out this morning that I have, over the years, written over 21 million words which have been published. (It may be a little more and it may be a little less. It's within 5% of the 21 million. I'm not going to spend the next year counting every word I've written just to get it exactly right.) That total doesn't include television and radio scripts or web articles or articles or books which haven't been published. (Though to be honest, like all professional writers, most of the stuff I have written has ended up in print because anything which doesn't get used gets recycled.) Books take up just under half of that total – the rest is made up of newspaper and magazine articles and columns. I've written weekly columns for six national newspapers, several syndicated columns for local newspapers and columns for numerous magazines.

This probably explains why my fingers and brain are tired.

I try not to think too much about editing out the stuff that will probably result in one of those one star reviews which will kill a book. And I always put down what I really think about something rather than what I think I should think, or what other people might prefer me to think. Some of the entries are quite short. Some are longer. That's just the way things worked out. Some come at a tangent, because that is how my brain worked that day.

And (this is perhaps a little grandiose) I think that I am probably not alone in thinking some of the stuff in this book. Moreover, the chances are that if I don't put it down then no one else will. Editors everywhere are terrified of being accused of being politically incorrect. One result is that *Fortune* magazine is for ever running lists of powerful women (is there anything more patronising, demeaning and sexist than a list of the world's most powerful women?) and British television programmes now include *Loose Women* and *Women's Hour* when any suggestion of broadcasting *Loose Men* or *Men's Hour* would result in a mass attack of the vapours. (I would love to hack into the *Fortune* website and announce that they were producing a list of the 'Top 100 Businesswomen Who Look Really Good in Short Skirts and Low Cut Tops'. No more patronising than any of their own silly lists.)

There are many subjects which are now pretty well forbidden for writers and broadcasters. It is impossible to debate climate change, vaccination, the significance of iatrogenesis, racism against the English, ageism and the cultural threat posed by unlimited immigration. No one dares write about the EU being a Nazi plot. These are subjects which are considered too scary and too threatening and so they are suppressed. Fake news in the classroom is a major problem and the trouble is that most of the fake news is official (relating to the EU, vaccination, climate change and so on).

And so, when it comes down to it, that is another reason for this series of diaries: to tell the truth about things which no one else will talk about; to put those truths on the record so that those who share my views won't feel quite so alone.

I have also included pieces describing my almost daily battles with bureaucracy, banks and so on, in the hope that readers, who have probably been exposed to the same annoyances, can share my frustration. You know what they ought to say: a frustration shared is a frustration laughed about. Reading through the diary, I see, once again, that I am overly independent, stubborn, impatient and sensitive to the point of touchiness. I hate bullies and oppressors of all kinds. And I hate being taken for a fool. Hey-ho. It's probably too late to change.

To me a personal diary should include more than just a series of 'On Tuesday I had lunch with Nubar Gulbenkian', 'On Wednesday I had dinner with Basil Zacharov' and; 'On Thursday I stayed in and washed my hair.'

Would I write this if no one ever read it?

Samuel Pepys never intended his diary to be read by anyone. Would an actor still act if there were no audience? Some painters certainly paint without any intention of showing their work. People make sand sculptures knowing that the next tide will wash them away. Poets write on cigarette papers and then burn them or throw them to the wind. Would I write this if it wasn't intended for publication? Honestly? I don't know.

So, without further ado, this is my history of the world for 2017: complete with violations, exploitations, regrets, indignities, betrayals, humiliations, boredom, abuses, insecurities, fears, joys, hopes, failures annoyances and frustrations. Oh, my heaven, the annoyances and the frustrations. Bad people of all kinds (Nazis, eurocrats, Blair, almost everyone working for the BBC, *The Guardian* or the *Financial Times*,) have always endeavoured to manipulate public opinion through fear, rumours, terrifying incidents, scandals, lies and propaganda (described by Eric Ambler, the first and still the best real spy writer, as political sabotage). Today all this is dismissed as spin, as though it were harmless. But it is more important than that.

I know I cannot compete with the propagandists, such as the BBC. They have the big audiences, the money and therefore the power. But I can try. I do what I can. And, as they say, the truth will set you free. Not yet, maybe. But eventually, perhaps.

It has, it seems, been another bloody year. The French tried to fuck us over. No, that's wrong. They did fuck us over. I am convinced they hate the English more than ever now that we have voted to leave the European Union. (Many ignorant French people still believe that the EU was their idea.) We had numerous battles with large organisations (the phone company, a bank, etc.). Oh and I nearly died.

Finally, I do apologise if anything herein is offensive. That is not my intention. There are probably more than a thousand viewpoints in this book and none is included as gratuitously offensive. They're just there because they explain how I feel about things. It is, I know, the fashion these days for readers to condemn a book if they find one thing with which they disagree. Indeed, it is now illegal to hold and express certain ideas and beliefs. However, those readers who have survived this series of diaries are, I know, patient and broad-minded enough to accept that the world would be a strange place if we all agreed with everything someone else said or wrote. And my apologies to the kind, patient and ever-supportive American readers who stick with me despite the inevitably parochial aspect of many of these entries which deal with British and European matters.

And, finally, finally, I would like to thank the kind readers, mostly from the UK and America, who have reviewed the previous diaries so generously. In a way, I think of the reviews, both good and bad, as being part of the book. I once saw a television programme in which the artist David Hockney was describing how his joiner photographs worked. Sadly, a chemist who was developing one of the rolls of film Hockney had taken, made some sort of mistake in the laboratory and when Hockney received his pictures there was also a note from the chemist, apologising and explaining what had happened. Instead of getting excited, Hockney merely pinned the note into the sequence of photographs, taking its place where the missing pictures should have been. The note became part of the work of art. Similarly, maybe the reviews should become part of the book.

Vernon Coleman
Devon, Gloucestershire and Paris

January

1

It is fashionable to make lists of things one hopes to do with the rest of one's life. Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman made an excellent film called *The Bucket List*. I've turned the premise on its head. Here is a bucket list of things I don't want to do or, in the case of the ones I've done, don't want to do again:

Take an examination
Go to a funeral
Go anywhere in an aeroplane
Go on a cruise that lasts more than an hour
Eat in a restaurant where there is a wine list
Play any team sport
Take any drug stronger than aspirin
Eat anything derived from an animal
Go to London
Sleep in a tent
Drive a car with a manual gearbox
Move house

2

When I was four or five-years-old my parents used to visit an elderly relative who lived in one of a row of Alms Houses in Aldridge, then in Staffordshire. (It is probably now in Romania or Western France.) Naturally, I went with them. I knew her as Aunt Hannah but she was actually my great, great aunt and at the time she was in her mid 80s. (The Alms Houses, which had been there for donkeys' years seem to have disappeared without trace and have probably been knocked down and turned into a supermarket and mobile phone mast repository.)

I remember being puzzled by the fact that my parents had to give Aunt Hannah at least two weeks' notice of any intended visit. She had no telephone, of course, and so the arrangements would be fixed through the mail.

At the time, I could not understand why everything had to be planned beforehand. Aunt Hannah didn't ever go anywhere except to church on Sunday mornings. Why, I wondered, couldn't we just turn up and surprise her.

Now, thinking about it, I understand.

As Antoinette pointed out, she wanted to be properly prepared for our visit. She had respect for us and for herself. She wanted to bake a cake and make sure that she had in stocks of tea for my parents and lemon barley water for me. She wanted to make sure that her home was immaculate and that she had on a nice frock and had had time to brush her hair.

And she did not want to find herself being rushed and hurried. She did not like alarms, surprises or sudden excitements.

In all these respects I have become my great, great aunt.

3

The Liverpool Care Pathway (a murderers' charter, which allows doctors and nurses to withhold food, water and essential treatment from patients who are over 65 and who are, therefore, regarded as an expensive nuisance) is being replaced by something called Sustainable Development Goals (which originated with the United Nations).

Sustainable Development Goals allows the NHS to discriminate against anyone over the age of 70 on the grounds that people who die when they are over 70 cannot be said to have died 'prematurely' and so will not count when the nation's healthcare is being assessed.

The Government loves this new rule because it gives the State permission to get rid of citizens who are of pensionable age and, therefore, regarded by society's accountants as a 'burden'.

It is hardly surprising, I suppose, that this officially sponsored disdain for the elderly has trickled through into our courts. If you mug a 40-year-old you are likely to go to prison for a good length of time. But if you mug and kill an 80-year-old you will be unlucky if you go to prison for more than a few months. The lives of the elderly do not count for much. Indeed, you could be forgiven for assuming that the killing of the elderly was regarded as a socially responsible thing to do. How much longer before those who kill old folk are given a knighthood and a free flat in Kensington? This is particularly surprising since most of our judges are not exactly in the bloom of life.

Politicians are forever making decisions which directly affect people's lives. If you push up the spending on benefits then taxes have to rise. And if taxes rise then growth falls and the Government has less income to spend on hospitals. If you spend more on policing, then there is less money to spend on making roads safer. But if you spend less on policing, then people are more likely to be mugged or murdered.

And there have to be priorities within the health service. There isn't enough money for everything. Personally, I find it wrong that the NHS finds the money to pay for infertility treatment, cosmetic surgery and sex change operations but doesn't find the money for diagnosing and treating cancer and heart disease. I think it is wrong that there is no money for drugs which will treat macular degeneration and prevent old people from going blind, and no money for removing benign but unsightly and worrying growths, but that there seems to be plenty of money for gender reassignment programmes.

But what I find particularly distressing is the fact that governments everywhere (but particularly successive British governments) seem to have decided that the elderly are surplus to requirements.

There are clear policies designed to get rid of everyone who reaches the age of 60 or older. Pensions are kept pitifully small. (The UK's State pension is the worst in any developed economy.) Energy prices are allowed to soar so that subsidies can be given to wind and solar energy programmes (satisfying the 'green' lobbyists who care nothing about the elderly). The result is that tens of thousands of older people die of the cold because they can't afford to eat and to keep warm. (How long will it be before energy prices are subject to postcode pricing – whereby people who live in more expensive houses pay more for their energy?)

The Sustainable Development Goals are just another example of the anti-old people policy which is prevalent these days.

4

I was cutting some overhanging branches outside in the lane when one of our Devon neighbours came out to say hello. The folk in Devon are much friendlier than the folk in the Gloucestershire 'Clotswolds' where we have our other house.

We don't have any near neighbours but this fellow lives close enough for us to hear his lawnmower. I'd met him a couple of months earlier but hadn't seen him since. He waved and smiled. 'I never forget a name,' he said, when we'd shaken hands. He pointed at me and then held up a hand to stop me from saying anything. 'I'll get it in a moment,' he said. 'Got it! Your name is Eugene isn't it?'

'Er, actually, no, it isn't,' I admitted, rather shamefacedly. He had looked so pleased with himself that I had genuinely thought of saying my name was indeed Eugene.

'No? Are you sure?'

I said I was pretty sure it wasn't Eugene.

'I was sure it was Eugene,' he said, shaking his head and walking away. He turned back and looked at me quizzically. 'Are you positive it isn't?'

'I'm afraid it isn't.'

'Then who is Eugene?' he asked me, genuinely puzzled.

'I'm afraid I don't know,' I had to admit. 'I don't know anyone called Eugene.'

He tottered off, looking very bewildered.

Do these things happen to everyone? Or is it just me?

5

A friend of mine visited his brother and sister- in- law and broke a mug. Knowing that his sister-in-law takes such things seriously, he didn't say anything but took the mug away with him, hoping to be able to mend it. When he realised that there was a small piece missing and that the mug was entirely irreparable, he spent half a day wandering around the shops looking for a replacement. Eventually, he managed to find one. It was, inevitably, the most expensive mug in the shop.

When he next visited his brother and sister-in-law, he put the replacement mug on the kitchen table, when no one was looking, hoping that it would just be recycled into household life.

'What on earth is this doing here?' demanded his sister-in-law when she saw it. 'This is one of those awful old mugs I used to give to workmen. I thought I'd taken them all to the charity shop yesterday.'

6

I purchased some wing nuts on eBay and made the classic mistake of not looking at the measurements. When they arrived, they were so small that they were utterly useless for anything other than maintenance work inside a dolls' house.

Careless suckers like me are, it seems, still getting conned by the oldest trick on eBay.

I have been told repeatedly, by the way, that I should only buy from websites which are decorated with a little padlock. The implication is that this somehow means they are 'safe'. Do the people who say this genuinely believe that hackers and scammers are incapable of faking a little padlock to put on their websites?

7

Cyclists cause lots of accidents and delay traffic.

In cities they ride along on racing cycles, heads down, arrogant dismissing the rights of other road users and of pedestrians. They seem to think they are entitled to priority everywhere.

Because of the traffic jams they create, cyclists have much bigger carbon footprints than motorists. It seems absurd that only drivers of motorised vehicles pay a tax to use the roads. Cyclists are, ipso facto, there by the generosity of paying road users.

In a genuine attempt to improve safety on the road and to enhance the relationship between motorists and cyclists, I have created some new rules.

When coming up to pass a cyclist, a motorist should give a long beep on the vehicle's horn.

When a cyclist hears a car approaching from either direction, he or she must dismount from his or her machine and stand to attention beside it on the pavement.

When passing a cyclist, the motorist should wave two fingers in recognition of the fact that the cyclist is operating a machine with two wheels.

Cyclists must not re-join the highway until they are satisfied that there are no vehicles approaching from either direction.

In towns and cities, all cyclists must walk alongside their machines. Riding a bicycle in a built up area is an offence under the 'Don't Annoy Motorists Because They Pay For The Roads Act'.

It is an offence for any cyclist to wear tight fitting Lycra. Research conducted at great expense has shown that many motorists find Lycra particularly offensive.

It is an offence for any cyclist to have a camera fitted to his person or machine.

Cyclists who fall off their machines should remove themselves and their machines to the side of the road with all haste in order to avoid inconveniencing motorists.

If a cyclist and a motorist are in dispute then the motorist is always right.

Cyclists must carry a large flashing light on their heads at all times to ensure that they are clearly visible to proper road users.

8

On the beach, a mother was having trouble with a petulant child. She gently slapped him on the thigh. He was wearing trousers. The slap couldn't have hurt. He probably hardly felt it. He sniffled a bit, but he stopped shouting and stamping. He snuffled for a moment. Then mother and son had a hug and all was forgotten. But, inevitably, the camera phones came out and the interfering fusspots started tutting.

Smacking is now firmly out of fashion – I suspect it is now probably somewhere between paedophilia and hatred of the EU on the Lineker-Allen Official Scale of Political Incorrectness.

Parents who read *The Guardian*, live in Islington and still have faith in the BBC, prefer to punish their children by depriving them of their Facebook and Twitter accounts for a week or by refusing to allow them access to the family guacamole dish for a month. A modest infraction of family rules will result in a week without television or a weekend's forced confinement to the home.

The truth is that punishments, by virtue of the fact that they tend to continue long after the cause of the punishment has been forgotten, are cruel and unusual and likely to do lasting damage to the punishee and to the child-parent relationship.

A gentle, smack on the bottom is, when applied rarely and judiciously, still the fairest and healthiest way to punish children. There's a lot of sense in the old saying 'spare the rod and spoil the child'. Dr Benjamin Spock, author of the most successful childcare book of all time, eventually concluded that mild physical punishment was the best way to admonish an erring child.

It is, after all, what animals do with their young.

I once watched an older cat trying to teach a pair of kittens how to hunt. When the cat wasn't looking, the kittens would fool around, not paying attention. Spotting this, the cat tutor bopped the kittens firmly but with love. The kittens, duly chastised, then paid attention to their lesson.

Punishments work best when they are over quickly – and when they are clearly related in time to the sin involved.

Stretching out a punishment over time is more likely to lead to anger and resentment.

The essence of the smack is the fact that it shows disapproval. It is a clear expression of parental criticism and dissatisfaction.

It definitely isn't about pain.

The advantage for all concerned is that a timely applied smack is over quickly.

Of course, there are now officious social workers, policemen and even doctors who will regard an occasional smack as something irredeemably wicked. Parents who dare to punish their children this way are likely to find themselves arrested, humiliated or demonised. Parents who smack in public are likely to find themselves starring on YouTube.

So, sadly, it can't be done.

Smacking, the best way to punish naughty children, is a definite no-no.

But, to balance the debate, I would just point out that we should all bear in mind that those individuals who prefer the long, drawn out punishment, the week-long ban from television or mobile phone use, and who may like to consider themselves to be on the high moral side of every equation, politically correct and beyond reproach, are deliberately extending the punishment they choose to give.

And that, let us all remember, is one of the definitive qualities of sadism.

9

Antoinette was quite ill today. She gets a lot of oedema (affecting her ankles and her hands) and frequently suffers from heart arrhythmias. As a result, she gets very tired on bad days. She has all the symptoms of a leaky heart valve and when I listened to her heart, I was sure I could hear a valve problem. Her systolic blood pressure rarely rises above 100 mm Hg and her diastolic is often down to 60 mm Hg. The trouble is it is a long time since I listened to hearts and I am no longer very good at defining the type of problem or the nature of the valve abnormality.

And Antoinette refuses point blank to see a hospital specialist and has a real and understandable phobia about hospitals. Some years ago she had extensive neurological investigations done at Frenchay Hospital near Bristol and she has lost all faith in the medical profession. Despite numerous visits and investigations, and visits to a variety of doctors, I don't think anyone actually bothered to listen to her heart. They did a scan and so on but didn't pick up anything relating to her heart. The polite way to describe the whole investigative process was that it was a shambles. (I wrote about it in a previous diary.) She was treated appallingly by a bunch of neurologists who seemed to me to be both uncaring and incompetent.

Through a variety of incompetences, doctors were responsible for the deaths of my mother and my father (both of whom Antoinette adored). It is not impossible that these factors may have also influenced her refusal to seek medical advice.

I am ashamed of my own former profession and I understand entirely why she is now reluctant to see any healthcare professional.

10

At breakfast I was reading a small book called *Battlefields in Britain* by C.V.Wedgewood. The book is in the Britain in Pictures series (I managed to complete my collection of the set a few years ago) and Wedgewood, of course, is an excellent biographer and historian. (Her books on Florence Nightingale and the Charge of the Light Brigade are classics.)

But I couldn't help feeling that she'd rather missed an opportunity in this book. Or maybe it is just that I have a tabloid sort of brain. All those years working for *The Daily Star*, *The Sun*, the *Mirror* and the *Sunday People* probably did something to my neuronal networks.

Here's a paragraph I found:

'A false alarm caused by an accidental fire in Northumberland set the beacons leaping across the lowlands of Scotland in Napoleon's time. The borderers sprang to arms and marched to defend the coasts.'

That's it. That's all she gave us.

I know that in those days lookouts kept watch and in case of invasion used to arouse other citizens by using beacons. Throughout the years, when there were threats from the Spanish Armada and Napoleon, brushwood was piled up around the coasts and inland too and watchers stood ready with the flints – waiting to start their beacon the moment they spotted a ship approaching. Once one beacon was blazing, other watchers along the coast and inland would light their fires. And the defence armies would be warned and ready.

So, how the hell do you set fire to a brushwood beacon by mistake? Who did it? Did they try to put out the fire? Were they drunk? Did they get severely bollocked afterwards? You'd think so, wouldn't you?

The watchers didn't have Zippo lighters or Bryant and May matches in those days. They had to rely on a couple of bits of flint, some dry straw and a lot of patience.

Incidentally, Wedgewood also pointed out that whereas the English were considered to be excellent shots with bows and muskets, the same could not be said of the Scots. It occurred to me that no historian writing a similar book today would dare make this point. Our history is being rewritten for us by teenage reviewers with racist tendencies.

11

A friend of mine who is trying to give up smoking is chewing nicotine gum.

I can't understand why this stuff is still sold.

Nicotine gum contains the same sort of nicotine which is a vital ingredient of tobacco. What most people probably don't realise is that smoking cigarettes causes more deaths from heart disease than from lung cancer. And it is the nicotine in the tobacco which causes the problem.

So taking your nicotine fix as gum rather than as a cigarette, a cigar or a pipe may help your lungs but it won't do anything to protect your heart.

In fact, chewing nicotine gum to help yourself give up smoking is like stopping hitting yourself on the head with a brick and, instead, hitting yourself on the head with a plank of wood. Not much sense to it.

12

Less than a fifth of children now walk to school. Most of the rest are driven by car. And many of the car journeys are for less than half a mile.

When Antoinette and I lived in Weston-super-Mare, we lived not far from a school and every morning hordes of parents would arrive, bringing their offspring. The parents would park their cars across driveways, double park and often block the road completely. Worst of all, the moronic parents would leave their cars running for ten or fifteen minutes at a time. By half past nine every morning, the air in the locality was poisonous. And it would have just about become breathable by the time all the cars returned to pick up the children and pump out some more lung destroying pollution. These were probably the same parents who complain bitterly about air pollution. (There were numerous mobile phone masts right by the school. I complained because there's a real risk they could harm young children. But the parents thought the masts were brilliant because they ensured good reception for their phones.)

It is hardly surprising that a fifth of all children are obese by the age of 10.

Naturally, however, most of the parents of these fat kids insist that their children are 'just right' or 'perhaps a tiny bit chubby but who wants a skinny child?'.

The British are now the fattest and laziest people in Europe (and, outside the US, that means in the world). Nearly 10% of the NHS budget is spent on looking after people who suffer from the type of diabetes which is caused by eating too much and being overweight. Astonishingly, around 700,000 NHS employees are overweight or obese and half of our policemen and policewomen are either overweight or overtly obese.

We tend to blame the hypocrisy of the food companies who, obeying EU nonsenses, make their chocolate bars smaller so that people buy two and eat two. But parents are just as responsible. You don't see kids running around in the parks during the school holidays these days. They're all indoors bent over their computers, their game consoles and their bloody mobile telephones. A bag of crisps and a bottle of soda to keep them stocked up with calories.

13

When Nubar Gulbenkian, the Armenian millionaire, was getting old, he chose a burial site above the village of Grasse in southern France. He chose his final resting place solely for the view but when he made an inspection of his chosen site a year or two later, he found that the view from his grave was egregiously impeded by a new Shell petrol station.

Gulbenkian wrote to the oil company and complained, suggesting that they might like to consider moving the petrol station to another site.

An executive from the company wrote back hoping that Mr Gulbenkian, who was famous for having made a vast fortune out of trading oil, would perhaps agree that of all men he had little cause for complaint should a petrol station diminish the view from his grave.

Mr Gulbenkian, after some thought, agreed that this was a fair appraisal of the situation, and withdrew his opposition.

14

A woman who lives in Lewisham has been threatened with unspeakable consequences for putting up posters in the windows of her own home. The posters advise passers-by to support Brexit and vote Conservative, and officious officials from the council have written to her demanding that she remove her posters immediately or they will ‘take action’.

I wonder if councils anywhere are threatening citizens with ‘action’ for putting up posters or flags supporting the European Union. I suspect not.

Do the people responsible for this attempted infringement of freedom not realise that the vote to leave the EU was the largest vote for or against anything in British history. A substantial majority of the people voted to leave the EU. And yet numerous little Hitlers (including a good many of them paid by taxpayers and working at the BBC, the Bank of England and the Treasury) conspire still to thwart the will of the people. To hear them talk you would imagine that Britons will starve if we leave the EU. Do they not know that just over 7% of London’s economy relies on trade with the EU? Looked at another way, nearly 93% of London’s trade is with non-EU countries. If they don’t know this then they should all be shot for ignorance. If they do know then they should be shot for being stupid. This makes a complete nonsense of the absurd and entirely impractical claims by some half-wits that London should remain within the EU when the rest of England leaves.

In another age there would be heads on pikes. That there are not is a tribute to the good manners of those who understood the history and purpose of the EU and therefore wanted Britain to leave and to regain its freedom.

15

There is a house nearby in Gloucestershire which Antoinette and I refer to as the roundabout house because the garden looks like a traffic island.

The people who live there seem to insist on having their grass cut twice a week in the summer and their bushes and trees trimmed and shaped and cosmetically enhanced at very regular intervals. The sound of machinery whining is incessant.

Today, I suggested to the owner that they would be better off if they concreted the entire garden and then painted the concrete green.

‘That’s a very good idea,’ he said, quite seriously. ‘Or maybe I could look at laying down artificial grass. They make very good artificial grass these days.’

He is not a man who jokes.

Crumbs, what have I done?

16

Greedy lawyers (and unhappy patients) are destroying what is left of the NHS.

The NHS is now spending almost half its entire budget on compensation payments and legal costs. This means that the NHS spends far more on lawyers than on doctors and nurses.

Over the last year or two the money spent on compensation has rocketed.

Just two years ago, the NHS spent £31 billion on legal fees and costs. (That was a mere one third of the NHS budget).

But the figure has now risen dramatically.

Who is to blame?

It’s easy to blame greedy lawyers.

But the NHS loses 76% of all the cases which are taken to court. And it pays out billions in compensation without even trying to provide a legal defence.

So it is clear that it isn’t just greedy lawyers who are to blame.

The real problem is incompetence.

Doctors and nurses working for the NHS are providing a rotten service.

Errors are made so often that anyone who sees a GP or ventures into an NHS hospital is taking their life in their hands.

The main reason for the huge rise in the amount of damages which are paid out is that the NHS does not appear to have learned that what wronged patients want more than anything else is an admission that something went wrong, an apology and an assurance that it won't happen again. Patients who sue the NHS often do so in anger as much as in the need for compensation. I still feel aggrieved that although doctors killed both of my parents I never received even the flimsiest of apologies.

It is absurd to have one person in charge of the NHS. It is absurd to pretend that it is a 'national' health service. And the real absurdity is that the wrong people are making all the big decisions.

The result is an organisation which is intrinsically corrupt, incompetent and uncaring and which encourages the suppression of debate or criticism. The NHS has, for years, been failing, over-spending and over-performing.

The organisation survives not because the staff believes in it but because people have become addicted to the fact that it appears to be 'free' (in the same way that the internet appears to be free) and because the occasional innocent and naïve customer boasts about how pleased they were with the service they received.

Could it be, I wonder, that one of many problems is the fact that the NHS is now dominated by women. Nine out of ten nurses are women. The majority of doctors are women. Most social workers, ancillary workers and admin workers are women. And the problem is that a huge number of women employees want to work part time.

The time has come to put the NHS out of its misery.

The nation would save money – and the citizens would be healthier – if everyone in Britain was given free, private medical insurance.

The NHS has been a disaster for years. It was always doomed because it is all about rights and authority. Responsibility has been forgotten. Patients' wants (which aren't necessarily the same as their needs) are endless and impossible to satisfy because everything is free. All power has been handed over to administrators. No one accepts responsibility any more. When things go wrong, the lawyers negotiate another fat settlement and no one ever gets punished. A jumped up traffic warden and a former journalist at the General Medical Council destroyed general practice with their utterly absurd revalidation programme.

The latest figures, which show that the NHS now spends more on lawyers than on doctors, proves that the time has come to close it down.

17

Two immigrants, a woman from British Guiana (who seems to me to be the smuggest, most self-satisfied woman I have seen in my life and who, it has been said, has an even bigger ego than Richard Branson, though this seems unlikely bordering on the impossible) and a hairdresser from Brazil, have used the law to defeat the will of the British electorate in the battle for democracy and freedom from Nazi born tyranny.

The Supreme Court, which sounds very ancient and grand but which dates back to the dark and distant days of 2009, was set up so that the British would satisfy the demands of the European Convention on Human Rights (the ECHR).

And the ECHR is, surprise, surprise, so closely linked to the European Union that both have the same silly flag and Teutonic anthem. Surprisingly, this is not something that the British media have made clear.

So, to summarise:

The British Parliament gave the British people a Referendum. It was agreed by Parliament that the Government would act according to the wishes of the British people.

The British people voted clearly to leave the European Union.

The Supreme Court, which was set up to satisfy the EU, has agreed with two immigrants that the will of the British people must be ignored. As, indeed, must the will of Parliament which, don't forget, gave the British people the right to determine whether or not we stayed in the EU or left. So much for democracy EU style. Thanks to their arrogance, the pound will slide and investment in Britain will falter. And EU officials (who now hate Britain with a vengeance) will laugh themselves silly. The Immigrant Two and the Supreme Court have not only stuck two fingers up at the British people, they have also made Britain a laughing stock; they have unsettled the nation and they have weakened Britain for generations to come.

Meanwhile, the Remainers continue to lie and deceive the British people.

They say that we will be leaving the world's most successful economic bloc but that is a lie. Since the euro was formed, the euro-zone has grown by 27% while the UK has grown by 40%.

They say that we will be leaving our biggest market. But that is nonsense. We will still be able to sell to other

European countries (just as they will want to sell to us).

They say that we will not be able to trade unless we have a trade deal with the EU but we trade with the US and we don’t have a trade deal with them.

They say that studies have shown that the UK will be worse off outside the EU. But that isn’t true. Because we won’t be paying billions to the EU, and supporting the absurd Common Agricultural Policy, we will be much better off. And our food will be a good deal cheaper.

And they say we have to be members of the Single Market if we are going to trade with it. But that’s yet another lie. America and China aren’t in the Single Market but they trade with the EU. Of course, the less intelligent young Remainers have good reason to believe in the EU. They have been indoctrinated and most are so poorly educated that they have no idea how to set about finding the truth. They rely on the internet, which is a considerably less reliable source of information than the toxic old witch who lives at No 23.

The older Remainers, (Cable, Heseltine, Clarke et al) have no such excuse and I can only put their perfidious behaviour down to a woeful lack of patriotism.

My oh my, we have become so terribly flabby as a nation. We are so damned weak and masochistic.

18

Lefty liberal luvvies (most of whom who don’t actually do any work or pay any tax) frequently argue that Britain should welcome everyone who wants to take advantage of the NHS.

We should, they say, be happy to provide cosmetic surgery, AIDS treatment, infertility treatment and obstetrics care for everyone who wants to come.

This is lunacy.

Nowhere else in Europe offers free State paid for health care, and so the UK is a magnet for health tourists who have no interest in Britain other than as a source of free treatment.

Consequently, the NHS is besieged by thousands of foreigners arriving in Britain for free health care.

Many want to have their babies on the NHS.

Some want cosmetic surgery or sex change operations.

A good many want treatment for AIDS.

The cost of providing treatment runs into billions.

And it is one of the reasons Britons have to wait months or years for essential investigations, treatment or surgery. It is the reason expensive treatments are often withdrawn.

Those who believe that foreigners are entitled to use the NHS probably don’t have friends or relatives who have suffered or died because of NHS shortages. And they probably don’t realise that NHS resources are finite.

When thousands of pounds are spent treating a foreign patient then another patient, usually a British patient, must be denied treatment they need.

The fact is that every time our NHS resources are used to treat a foreigner, a British patient will die because he or she has had to wait months for an essential X-ray or because the NHS can’t afford to provide vital treatment.

The bottom line is that the lefty luvvies who insist that the NHS should provide free care for everyone in the world are directly responsible for thousands of British deaths. But maybe they’re happy about that.

19

Someone called Guy Verhofstadt, who is apparently the Brexit negotiator for the European Parliament, has claimed that Sir Winston Churchill would have voted Remain – to stay in the European Union.

This is, to put it mildly, pie in the sky: yet another piece of wishful thinking from a representative of Adolf Hitler’s Nazi theme park dreamland.

Here are two genuine Churchill quotes which relate to the EU (both taken from my book *OFPIS*):

‘Britain could not be an ordinary member of a federal union limited to Europe in any period which can be… foreseen.’ – Winston Churchill

‘If you ask me to choose between Europe and the open sea, I choose the open sea.’ – Winston Churchill.

So let’s have no more nonsense from the desperadoes at the European Union.

Sir Winston Churchill, who knew that the EU was Hitler’s dream, would have hated the European Union, would have recognised it for what it is, and would have fought against our membership with all his heart.

20

In order to please the EU, Britain is closing down its old-fashioned, traditional coal fired power stations. China and India are, on the other hand, planning to build 800 new coal fired power stations.

Britain is reducing its carbon emissions faster than any other major country.

By pushing up the price of heating our homes, the EU's mad policies have endangered the health of millions. Thousands of elderly Britons have been killed as a direct result of the EU's crazy policies.

We haven't replaced our old coal stations with anything else. Green campaigners won't allow the Government to build nuclear power stations. Wind, solar and wave power generation is inefficient and expensive. America's solar industry employs nearly 400,000 people and provides only 1% of America's electricity production. Global subsidies for the fashionable renewables, cost taxpayers and energy users $100 billion a year and yet the renewable industry still hasn't worked out how to cope with peak demand hours. The renewables have been subsidised for nearly half a century, and you'd have thought that if they were going to prove viable they'd be viable by now.

Other countries with low carbon electricity have long established electricity production methods which we cannot possibly emulate. Norway and Sweden use vast amounts of hydroelectricity and France relies mainly on nuclear power.

It takes more electricity to produce and run those huge windmills which scar the countryside and the sea than the ugly things ever produce. (Our ancestors, particularly the Victorians, produced great buildings, beautiful bridges and so on. We have built ugly windmills and solar farms. We sneer at the Victorians but without their creative skills we would not have any infrastructure.)

Moreover, even if we covered the country with solar panels and wind farms, there still wouldn't be enough electricity to keep us all warm.

Thanks to the EU and a bunch of hypocritical pseudo-environmentalists (celebrity pseudo-environmentalists are the ones who tell the rest of us what we should and should not do while they themselves own private jets which enable them to fly around the world without coming into painful contact with the hoi polloi), England, the most overcrowded country in Europe, will soon be the only country in the world without any electricity!

And the selfish many who drive electric cars are making things worse.

Selfish greens and sanctimonious and hypocritical electric car drivers will result in thousands of deaths when the electricity runs out – which it soon will.

Where do these folk who drive electric cars think the electricity comes from? Britain has had to introduce special diesel powered generators to provide enough electricity to keep electric cars on the move. It has been proved that the sad and sanctimonious, self-satisfied fools who buy electric cars are doing far more harm to the environment than people who drive diesel and petrol driven vehicles. (As an aside, driverless cars are an even more stupid idea. They may work on the wide, open roads of America but on English country lanes they will be a disaster. What happens when two driverless cars meet on a single track Devon lane? The two cars will never move and the passengers will starve to death waiting for one car to back up.)

Hospitals and factories have been asked to install back up diesel generators because Britain now has just 0.1% of spare electricity. As I have warned many, many times over the last decade and a half, our electricity generating system is about to collapse.

Every motorist who buys an electric car is making things worse.

The chances are that electricity will soon have to be rationed.

Shops, factories and homes will have to go back to the three day week.

Energy prices will rise rapidly.

The cuts in electricity supply will endanger the health of millions.

And it will be the EU, the Greens and the electric car owners who must share the blame.

Here, in summary, are some good reasons why you should blame the Greens when the electricity runs out.

Many Greens ride bicycles on public roads. But bike riders invariably produce queues of cars driving along at 10 or 15 miles an hour. At those speeds, motor vehicles are very inefficient and use far more fuel than when travelling three or four times as fast.

Greens are madly enthusiastic about wind power – and they pressurise governments to give subsidies to wind power installations. (These subsidies have distorted energy prices and mean that the poor and the elderly pay most of the cost of wind power.) But windmills are not just ugly and dangerous to birds – they are also horrendously inefficient. They require vast amounts of energy to build. And they are never energy efficient.

Greens campaign to stop governments building coal or nuclear power stations. Without those power stations, the electricity will soon run out.

Greens are enthusiastic about solar power. But solar power is, like wind power, inefficient and expensive. And it won't ever produce enough electricity to keep us warm and fed with hot food.

The Greens are forever flying around the world to attend conferences on global warming. All that pointless travel uses up vast amounts of valuable energy. Internet banking and Bitcoin also use up huge amounts of electricity. (And what will happen to all those internet accounts when there isn't any electricity? It hardly bears thinking about.)

Greens seem convinced that renewables can be used for all our energy needs. Someone should point out to them that renewables only produce electricity and electricity provides less than a fifth of the world's energy needs. Imagine a world without 80% of our energy supplies and you will have a vision of the sort of world the Greens would like us to inhabit.

21

The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, has supported a ban on smoking in pub gardens.

I've been campaigning against smoking since the 1950s (which is probably longer than the Mayor has been interested in the health problems of smoking) and, as a doctor, I've probably treated more patients suffering from the effects of smoking than he has.

But banning smoking in pub gardens is daft.

There is now clear evidence that banning smoking in pubs has simply pushed smokers into smoking (and drinking) at home.

And since booze is cheaper when you buy it at the supermarket, the exiled smokers drink far more than they did when they drank and smoked in pubs.

Publicans have made it clear that if smoking in pubs is banned completely then more of them will go bust.

We have now reached the point where I am prepared to argue that, for the sake of the nation's health, we should have 'smoking pubs' where patrons are allowed to smoke indoors. Non-smokers who objected to cigarette smoke would be invited to do their drinking elsewhere.

Of course, the issue of passive smoking is also important.

And once again I have considerably more experience of this problem than the Mayor. Decades ago, I was the first doctor to write about the hazard of passive smoking and the opposition was vociferous for many years.

But if pubs which allow smoking in their beer gardens ban children, and make it clear to patrons that entrance to their beer garden is voluntary and not compulsory, then the risks are ameliorated.

The only potential victims are the smokers themselves.

So, why is the Mayor of London so determined to stop smoking in pub gardens when he must know that if he succeeds then many more pubs will close?

Could it be possible that the Mayor is supporting this proposed ban, in part at least, because he is a devout Muslim – and Muslims are fiercely opposed to the consumption of alcohol?

When their customers are banned from smoking outside, as well as inside, a good many pubs will go bust and close.

22

In Britain, it is now against the law to let a dog be dangerously out of control anywhere, including in public places, in private places and even in the owner's own home.

According to the law, a dog is considered to be dangerously out of control if it injures someone or makes someone worried that it might injure them.

The second part of that sentence is the crucial one.

The dog doesn't have to bite to be dangerous.

All the law requires is that someone FEARS that the dog might do them harm.

The penalties are severe.

A dog owner can get an unlimited fine or be sent to prison for up to six months (or both) if their dog is dangerously out of control. And the dog owner convicted may not be able to own a dog in the future. The dog may be destroyed.

Astonishingly, very few dog owners know the law.

This morning an out of control dog ran up to me and pinned me against the side of my car. When I politely pointed out to the owner that she was breaking the law, and liable to severe punishment, she called me a liar and insisted that there is no such law.

Well, she was wrong.

I suggest that all dog owners in the UK visit the British Government's website and look for the heading 'Controlling your dog in public'.

Or simply key the words 'Controlling your dog in public' into a search engine.

Those who are nervous of dogs might also like to take a look at the details of the new law. It is well worth knowing.

And it might also be a good idea if a few police officers updated their knowledge of the law relating to dogs.

Sadly, a surprising number of police officers don't seem to understand the importance of the new law.

I suggest that anyone who has difficulty in persuading the police to take a complaint seriously might consider making a formal complaint against the police officers concerned, reporting the incident to the press and threatening legal action against the police and the owner of the errant dog. (Complaining, by the way, is very good for you. It provides exercise for the brain and it's much better for you to find a target for your anger than to allow it to fester inside.)

There are far too many dangerous, unstable and ill-controlled dogs in Britain. And every year, thousands of people are injured (some of them fatally) by out of control dogs. My credentials as an animal lover are beyond question but I believe that the full force of the law (now that it is available) must be used to force owners and the police to take the situation seriously.

There are many wonderful parts of Britain where I used to walk or cycle but which are now so dominated by uncontrolled dogs that they are effectively no go areas. I used to walk along the cliffs near Mortehoe in North Devon but no more. I loved walking along the river to Watersmeet at Lynmouth but no more. And I have ridden the cycle path between Bideford and Barnstaple hundreds of times. But I haven't done that for years. In each case, the uncontrolled dogs, many of which seem dangerous, own the areas.

In 2016, a record number of 7,673 people were admitted to hospital as a result of dog bites.

23

The tax authorities are clamping down on everything that could possibly be described as tax avoidance.

Tax avoidance used to be entirely legal.

It was tax evasion that led to trouble.

But the Government and HMRC are now desperate to raise more money (to pay for wars, foreign aid, interest on the nation's massive debts and Ministers' expense accounts) that they are clamping down on everything that could possibly be described as tax avoidance.

And accountants are now worried that anyone who gives up smoking or drinking alcohol could face the wrath of HMRC.

Cigarettes and tobacco carry a huge amount of tax.

As does alcohol.

Anyone who gives up either will save a good deal of money.

And the Government will lose tax income.

So what will happen?

Accounting experts say that there is a real risk that the tax authorities will charge those who give up smoking or boozing with the new crime of tax avoidance.

I love it.

Welcome to the mad, mad world we now live in.

24

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) has issued a warning about a chemical called acrylamide which, it says, may cause cancer.

But their warning is rubbish and is NOT based on scientific evidence.

Acrylamide is, says the FSA, produced when starchy foods (such as bread and potatoes) are roasted, fried or grilled for too long at high temperatures.

And so the FSA has issued a standard nanny state warning that people shouldn't eat nicely browned toast or, presumably, the nice crispy bits you get in the bottom of a bag of chips.

But the evidence upon which the FSA has based its warning is a result of research on animals.

The idiots at the FSA have assumed that what happens in animals also happens in humans.

But this is not true.

And the FSA should know that the animal research evidence they're using is utterly valueless.

You don't have to just take my word for this.

Drug safety agencies around the world now ignore scientific evidence showing that drugs cause cancer and other serious health problems when given to animals – because they know that research on animals is utterly without value.

As proof, I have published on my website (www.vernoncoleman.com) a list of several dozen widely prescribed drugs which are known to cause serious health problems when given to animals but which are considered safe for human use.

If the FSA really wanted to cut the incidence of cancer, they would warn people not to eat meat.

Meat is known to cause cancer. There's a ton of research involving humans which proves this beyond a doubt. (My book *Food for Thought* contains a list of 26 scientific papers providing proof that meat causes cancer in humans.)

But the FSA won't dare take on the powerful meat industry. And they won't dare upset the burger eating millions. They prefer to believe that several million lemmings cannot possibly be wrong.

So they're cowards as well as idiots.

Any why does the FSA hand over huge amounts of taxpayers' money to 'celebrities'?

For example, a retired athlete called Denise Lewis received £10,000 earlier this year from the FSA for supporting this campaign.

I wonder if this is the same athlete called Denise Lewis who at one stage in her career hired a coach who was the former head of East German's drug assisted athletics team.

Good role model for giving out health advice?

Incidentally, I am always shocked to see 'celebrities' charging fees for public service works. A great many also charge exorbitant fees for charity appearances – slamming in huge invoices for turning on Christmas lights or opening fetes.

25

It has been reported that the McCanns (the parents of missing Madeleine) are threatening to sue Goncalo Amaral, if the Portuguese policeman's book *The Truth of the Lie* is published in the UK. This is odd because an English translation of Goncalo Amaral's book has been freely available on the internet for some time. I know because I've read it. The UK libel laws are, however, still the most stringent in the world.

But do the McCanns really want to go to court?

Do they really want a UK libel trial – where they would be on trial as much as the defendant? A lot of people could tell them just how dangerous it is to bring a libel action in the UK. Oscar Wilde was ruined after he brought a libel action. So was Jonathan Aitken. Bringing a legal action for libel didn't ruin Jeffrey Archer but it put him in prison. Music hall star Maud Allan was ruined by a libel case which she lost. An MP called Neil Hamilton was damned near ruined by a libel case he brought.

And if there is going to be a court case about the McCann case, maybe the McCanns themselves should be the defendants.

The McCanns are, of course, famous (or should that be infamous?) for having left three small children in their holiday apartment while they went out for dinner with friends. One of the children, a little girl called Madeleine, disappeared.

It is, of course, inconceivable that the McCanns could be in any way responsible for the death of their daughter. It would have been the most heinous family crime in history. (Although they did, of course, leave her unattended and so have to accept some of the responsibility for whatever happened.)

But there still seem to be many unanswered questions and puzzles about this enormously high profile case.

Isn't it about time a relatively small amount of money was spent taking the McCanns to court so that their story could be properly investigated?

I suspect that some parents might welcome an opportunity to put all the available evidence in the public domain and to have witnesses and critics properly and publicly questioned.

Some might think that discussions about the case have in the past been limited by the McCanns' alleged reluctance to answer some of the questions which have been asked, and by their perhaps understandable willingness to take legal action against critics.

Would not everyone – especially Madeleine – benefit if all the confusions and contradictions could be cleared away by a clear cut, forensic examination of all those involved and a proper analysis of the available facts?

Much taxpayers' money has been spent on looking for Madeleine. Surely, there could be no complaint if a little more public money were spent on a proper investigation in a court of law. Indeed, would the McCanns themselves not benefit from an opportunity to put all the facts before a court? Would not an analysis of the evidence help in finding a conclusion to this tragic case?

There are, it seems to me, a vast number of questions which could usefully be asked in a courtroom – questions for which very few answers have been forthcoming. I am sure that the McCanns have reasonable explanations for them all. Given all the circumstances, the questions do not seem to me to be intrusive or unfair. And surely the answers to them might, just might, help the police. Might not the answers also help members of the public understand the background to Madeleine's disappearance a little more clearly? Might not lessons be learned which could help other parents? And aren't those things which everyone wants?

There are few couples in Britain who are better known than the McCanns. And yet the paradox is that there are few public couples about whom less seems to be known. They are surrounded by mystery, confusion, controversy and contradictions. Has any couple ever sought publicity quite so determinedly and yet managed to remain quite so enigmatic? Has there been a crime in British history so well publicised and yet so full of unanswered questions? Has there ever been a crime where the truth has become quite so lost amidst rumour and what seems to me to be a lot of spin – some of it apparently organised by professionals rather than a pair of doctors on a holiday.

Whatever the truth, we should not forget that the McCanns left their daughter unattended and so have to accept a good part of the responsibility for whatever crime occurred. And in February 2017, a judge in Portugal's highest court pointed out that the McCanns had not been ruled innocent.

The questions below are all genuine questions. I do not know the answers to any of them. (If I did I would write them as statements.) But I think it is in the public interest that the questions are asked. And I hope that one day they will all be answered.

Surely a trial would help the couple by enabling them to answer many of the often asked questions? Otherwise, the suspicions will never go away. Indeed, I fear that the suspicions and doubts and rumours will grow stronger as the years go by. It is almost certain that whatever any of the Tapas Nine do with their lives, the first sentence of their obituaries has already been written.

It seems to me that the McCanns, the police and the politicians (how they became involved is a mystery in itself) have made things worse by what appears to be an endless publicity circus, which it seems to me was to some extent made worse by them or their associates. Precisely, what did Tony Blair and Oprah have to do with helping to find a small girl? What on earth made Prince Charles think he needed to get involved? It has, I understand, been claimed that in such cases too much publicity can actually be harmful and can frighten abductors into doing something which they might not have planned. I suspect that is true.

Would not everyone – especially Madeleine – benefit if all the confusions and contradictions could be cleared away by a clear cut, forensic examination of all those involved and a proper analysis of the available facts? Would not questions asked, and answers given, under oath, help clear away the rumours and the fabrications – whatever their source?

Why am I constantly reminded of the confusion after the extremely mysterious death of Dr David Kelly?

Over £12 million of taxpayers' money has, it is said, been largely spent on looking for the alleged paedophile ring that the British police apparently believe is responsible for abducting Madeleine. To some, the police seem to be following the McCanns' strong assertion, right from the start, that Madeleine had been abducted rather than following the possibility that she might have wandered or been killed in the locality.

The police will, of course, know that 70% of child murders are committed by people who know, or who are in some way close to, the child who is the victim.

(In reality, if Madeleine had wandered off then surely she would have been far more likely to have encountered someone who would have taken her home than that she would have happened to meet a wandering paedophile or paedophile gang?)

Is it true, as Kate McCann is reported to have claimed, that the shutters to the window of Madeleine's room had been forced up? Or is it true, as others have suggested, that they might not have been forced? This is a simple and crucial question.

And here's another mystery.

The loss of any human being is a tragedy.

But £12 million and more on an investigation into one missing child seems a good deal when untold thousands of other children go missing without any notable expenditure of public funds, when the police do virtually nothing to stop slavery in Britain, when rape gangs rampage unhindered and when enforced prostitution is commonplace.

To put this in perspective, the current official 'value of a prevented fatality' in the UK is £1.83 million. In other words, that is how much the Government thinks it is reasonable to spend to prevent a single death. Every year, thousands of people die because the Government doesn't think it is worth spending taxpayers' money on drugs or surgery that would save their lives. This same figure must be used to justify road safety improvements. The NHS would not spend a fraction of the money which has been spent on the search for a possibly imaginary paedophile gang even if it knew for certain that a life could be saved. This is of significance because the nation's financial resources are inevitably finite. David Cameron, when Prime Minister, authorised the spending of this huge sum in this seemingly quixotic way.

Why was that?

Why are the McCanns apparently considered so very, very special and more worthy than thousands of other parents, grieving in similar circumstances? A growing number of people seem to feel that this is one of many mysteries that ought to be aired. It isn't entirely absurd to say that anyone whose child goes missing abroad and who doesn't have at least a bus load of Government employees fawning over them within a week should now feel cheated. And anyone who doesn't have at least three cabinet ministers on the phone might also feel hard done by. Is it true that special branch officers escorted the McCanns back from Portugal? If so, is this now normal practice for all parents in such circumstances?

Here are just a few of the obvious questions which might usefully be asked in a courtroom and which would help remove for ever any undoubtedly unjust fears and suspicions some people might still have about Madeleine's disappearance:

Is it true that the McCanns left their children at a crèche or play area in the mornings and the afternoons, and then left them unattended on at least some of the evenings while they were in Portugal? This seems odd to me because I would have thought that most people would, when taking their children on a family holiday, want to spend most of their time in their company. What was the relationship like between the McCanns and Madeleine before the trip to Portugal? Was Madeleine seen at the crèche or play area on the afternoon of the day she disappeared? And if so, by whom?

Is it really true that when the McCanns left their children unattended in the apartment, one of the doors was unlocked? I suspect that some people wouldn't leave their camera or mobile telephone in an unlocked, rented apartment in a holiday area. Doesn't it seem strange to leave three small children in such a situation? Have the McCanns ever taken public responsibility for their behaviour? Have they ever apologised for their behaviour? Is it true that Gerry McCann was playing tennis within days of Madeleine's disappearance?

There is some confusion about how far away the McCanns were when they were dining. It has been said by Kate McCann that dining at the restaurant was akin to having a meal in the garden with the children upstairs in a nearby bedroom. ('We were sitting outside and could just as easily have been eating on a fine spring evening in a friend's garden, with the kids asleep upstairs in the house,' she writes in her book.) But there seems to be evidence that the dining table was between 70 and 150 yards away from the apartment (different reports give different figures) and it seems to me unlikely that anyone dining there could see or hear what was happening in the apartment. (I have seen it claimed that Gerry McCann has suggested that they were 'essentially performing (their) own baby listening service', though I find it difficult to understand this claim.) It has been claimed that the couple could see the apartment but this has been disputed. What is the truth? And even if they could see one outside wall of the apartment then, unless they are claiming to have X-ray vision, they wouldn't be able to see what was happening inside.

The law in Britain is that if parents leave a child alone, and in such a way that the child might be at risk, then the parents can be prosecuted. Hundreds of parents are arrested every year for leaving their children (sometimes much older than the McCann children and sometimes for much shorter periods of time) without adult supervision. One father was arrested for leaving his child alone for just two minutes. Why was the behaviour of the McCanns considered acceptable? Since the McCanns claim that Madeleine was abducted (and this theory seems to be accepted by the British police) and that she must, therefore, have been left at risk, why have the McCanns not been charged by the British police? I believe the McCanns claim that their actions were 'within the bounds of responsible parenting' but is it not also the law in Portugal that it is an offence to leave children unattended? Why did social workers not take action over the fact that three small children had been left 'at risk'? Would a single mother living in a council flat have been treated with such leniency if she had left three young children alone in an unlocked apartment? (In her book, Kate McCann writes: '…we had a meeting with a social services manager and a local child protection officer. They went through various formalities with us and, while they took care to keep everything on a totally professional footing, I could tell they felt uncomfortable about having to subject us to this sort of scrutiny. But we'd resigned ourselves to it. We'd expected it, accepted it and we had nothing to hide.') Whatever happened to Madeleine, there are doubtless many who find it difficult to avoid the feeling that her parents were at least partly responsible and that the authorities have behaved very strangely in taking no action. Am I alone in thinking that the McCanns should have been charged with child neglect? And should they have been allowed to remain in charge of their two remaining children? Indeed, should the two McCanns have been allowed to retain their medical certificates? These are surely serious questions.

It has been alleged that Madeleine was a poor sleeper who occasionally walked in her sleep. Is this true? If so, was not it particularly risky for two doctors to leave her unattended in a strange, unlocked apartment in a foreign country? Did it not occur to either of them that a young child who was a poor sleeper and possibly a sleep walker might wander off through the unlocked door and then come to some harm? Is it not true that a babysitter could have been hired?

Prior to the holiday, was Madeleine ever given any form of medicine to help her sleep? Is it true that none of the McCann children was given anything at all by the McCanns to help them sleep during a holiday where their restlessness or failure to sleep might prove particularly inconvenient? Were any of the children given medication by anyone else?

How much alcohol did the McCanns consume while dining with their friends? Precisely how often did they check on their children? Are there no independent witnesses who can provide precise answers?

It is alleged that after Madeleine's disappearance, the McCanns received telephone calls and/or support from Cherie Blair (the Prime Minister's wife), Gordon Brown (the Chancellor of the Exchequer, due to become Prime Minister within weeks), Margaret Beckett (the foreign secretary) and the Pope. The local Ambassador is reported to have been involved. Is there any explanation for all this high profile support? The official figures in the UK show that another child goes missing every three minutes – well over 100,000 children a year. Do Cabinet Ministers telephone the parents of all these missing children? According to these figures, it is reasonable to estimate that several hundred children went missing on the same day that the McCanns lost their child. Did all those parents receive the same level of official support? If not, why not? Did Blair and Brown really provide the McCanns with a public relations representative? Who paid the bill? Can it conceivably be true (as has been alleged) that the British Government threatened to use the McCann investigation as a reason not to sign the Lisbon Treaty? Were SIS (MI5 and/or MI6) officers involved? Was it just a coincidence that alleged paedophile Sir Clement Freud had a holiday home close to the McCanns' apartment? Is or was Gerry McCann a member of the Freemasons or any other private body? Has he signed the Scottish Bill of Rights?

Is it true that the McCanns continued to take their remaining children to the children's play area after they had lost Madeleine?

What is the truth about the trained sniffer dogs which allegedly picked up the scent of a dead body in the McCanns' apartment and in their hire car – as well as on Madeleine's toy? Were these findings of any value? Were the dogs reliable? Was blood really found in the McCanns' holiday apartment? If so, is it true that the blood was identified as Madeleine's? If not, whose was it? There seems to be confusion about all these issues.

Is it true that Kate McCann refused to answer some of the questions posed by the Portuguese police? If so, why was this? Were any or all of the McCanns' children conceived using IVF? Was Gerald McCann the father of them all?

Is it true that the McCanns have appointed a number of PR experts and high-powered lawyers (including extradition specialists and libel lawyers)?

Is it true that the McCanns' friends had a 'pact of silence'? If so, what was the reason for this?

Is it true that the McCanns refused to take a lie detector test? If so, what was the reason? Even if the test had not been admissible in court, it might have silenced some critics.

Is it true that the McCanns deleted some mobile phone records and that the Portuguese police were refused permission to examine medical, financial and credit card records? If so, why was this? Were the Portuguese police helped in every way possible by the British authorities?

Why did the McCanns form a fund raising company within less than a month of Madeleine's disappearance? How did their limited company manage to spend £141,747 on administrative expenses in less than the first year? And was it really necessary to spend £26,113 on media monitoring? Precisely how has all the money donated to the Madeleine fund been spent? It has been claimed that the McCanns did not receive any remuneration from the fund but is it true that some of the money was used to help to pay the McCanns' mortgage? If so, was that really what donors expected their money to be used for? Exactly how much of the money donated has been spent on legal fees on behalf of the McCanns? What was the McCanns' financial situation before Madeleine's disappearance? Why did directors of the fund resign? Why did last year's accounts for Madeleine's Fund: Leaving No Stone Unturned Limited (as published on the 'beta.companieshouse.gov.uk' website) show that Madeleine's Fund had £490,839 in 'investments'? What were the 'investments'?

As mentioned above, the British police are alleged to have spent £12 million of taxpayers' money on investigating one particular possibility – the abduction by a gang. Have they spent any effort (and any of our money) on investigating other possible scenarios – such as, for example, the one which appears to be favoured by the Portuguese police chief who investigated Madeleine's disappearance? If not, why not. Are not taxpayers entitled to know exactly how their money has been spent? What was the police reaction to the fact that a number of people thought that one of the photo fit suspects looked remarkably like Gerry McCann? (As an aside, the Portuguese police investigation seems to me to have been extremely thorough and professional.)

Why, within months of Madeleine's disappearance, did Gerry McCann go to the United States of America to appear on television and visit the White House? Was there ever any suggestion that Americans might have been involved in the alleged abduction? Was there a theory that Madeleine might have been taken to the USA? Might it not seem odd to some that a parent should fly across the Atlantic when their daughter had gone missing in Portugal?

Have all the friends with whom the McCanns were dining been thoroughly investigated and cleared by the British police?

The chief of police who was initially responsible for the search for Madeleine has made some serious allegations. Have any or all of these allegations been investigated by the British police?

Is it true, as has been claimed by a former British Ambassador (though not to Portugal), that British diplomatic staff were under instructions to put pressure on the Portuguese authorities? Is it true, as has been alleged, that British authorities were ordered to be present at every contact between the McCanns and the Portuguese police? If so, who initiated these orders? And why?

These are all simple and straightforward questions and to most of them there should, surely, be some simple and straightforward answers. There are, of course, many more questions. How many photographs of Madeleine did the McCanns take with them to Portugal? What happened to Gerry McCann's sports bag? Were the contents also missing?

Given all the circumstances, the questions do not seem to me to be intrusive or unfair and they are not intended to be.

And surely the answers to them might, just might, help the police. It seems to me hardly believable that after ten years there is still so much mystery over some of the answers.

Might not the answers also help members of the public understand the background to Madeleine's disappearance a little more clearly? And might not some of the answers help counteract some of the remarkable rumours, insinuations and assertions which now surround this case?

The McCanns seem to have been protected by some very powerful individuals. Inevitably, there are questions being asked. Why did three Prime Ministers, a Foreign Secretary, a Pope, much of the Foreign Service, a Prince, the police and most of the mainstream media put so much effort into protecting a fairly ordinary pair of middle class doctors from the sort of natural suspicion which would, in any normal circumstances, be considered perfectly proper and reasonable? Why was the abduction claim (made so immediately and without much if any serious evidential support) be regarded as the only real explanation for Madeleine's disappearance?

Might not lessons be learned which could help other parents and help prevent something similar happening in the future?

Every few minutes a British child disappears. The problem of missing children is a huge one.

Surely every step should be taken to safeguard all other children.

Isn't that what everyone wants?

26

There are some subjects which can no longer be discussed in public.

No one is allowed to question the existence or extent of Hitler's concentration camps. To do so is likely to lead not to a contemptuous dismissal but to arrest and imprisonment.

Anyone who publicly questions the popular myth of climate change will be barred from BBC programmes and university lecture halls. (The BBC will occasionally allow an honest discussion but the station is required to ensure that controversial subjects are treated with 'due impartiality' and this it clearly does not do.) Those who dare to question the commercially and politically convenient myth of climate change will have to be prepared to be demonised by the Climate Change Industry and its media apologists.

Climate change is, in almost every respect, the 21st century equivalent to AIDS in the 1990s. I know for a fact that the AIDS crisis was blown up by homosexuals as a ruthless public relations campaign designed to gather attention, sympathy and support. Aggressive homosexuals spread misinformation widely.

Today, lobbyists and vested interests and crooked scientists have again hyped and spun a modest problem into a money-spinning apocalyptic threat. It changed its name from global warming because too many people wanted to know when the warming was going to start because it didn't seem to be getting any warmer and their heating bills were quite definitely going up. They changed the threat from Global Warming to the considerably more 'wishy washy' Climate Change when it became abundantly clear that the world wasn't getting warmer. The global warming moniker didn't do well since people who were looking forward to the chance to wear their shorts and skimpy tops more frequently, were inevitably disappointed.

Every unusual weather event is blamed on climate change. Scientists are supposed to declare conflicts of interest and to present evidence accurately and honestly. Sadly, according to those criteria, most of the scientists who are quoted these days are not entitled to call themselves 'scientists'.

(The simple truth, of course, is that there have been unusual weather events since the beginning of records. For example, back in 1709, Europe froze for several months. It was so cold that people skated on the canals in Venice. Church bells shattered when they were rung. It was possible to ride across the Baltic Sea on horseback. Was this due to man-made climate change?)

During the 1980s, it was not considered acceptable to question the widely held (but unsustainable) belief that AIDS was about to kill us all. I was repeatedly banned from television and radio programmes because the scientific truths I wished to share were considered politically unacceptable. I seem to remember listening agog as the British Medical Association and the Royal College of Nursing both forecast, quite seriously that we would all be affected by AIDS by the year 2000. These organisations created panic, mass fear and hysteria and were responsible for many suicides. More people were killing themselves because they were frightened of AIDS than were dying because they had AIDS. Representatives of both organisations attacked me frequently and robustly when I disagreed.

The enthusiasm for the climate change myth reminds me very much of the enthusiasm for the AIDS myth. In both cases, the facts have been ignored by ignoramuses who do not realise that science is, or should be, about facts and that facts demand scientific integrity and accuracy. And in both cases, the promoters of the myth have a good deal to gain and the whole thing smacks of good old-fashioned lobbying.

Even though many eminent Victorians did so with immense effectiveness it has never been thought acceptable to question vivisection. The medical establishment (sponsored and controlled by the pharmaceutical industry) says that animal experiments are valuable, indeed essential, and so anyone who says otherwise, however much evidence they may be able to produce on behalf of their point of view, will be regarded by the media as, at best, an oddball and at worst a dangerous lunatic. (To be fair, several hundred A-list celebrities signed my anti-vivisection campaign and although they received libellous letters from the pro-vivisection lobby most remained steadfast and loyal.)

And the same is true of vaccination.

For some years now, there has been no public debate about vaccination. No debate is allowed. The subject is closed. Decades ago, I debated the issue many times and never lost – not because I am good at debating but because the facts are all on my side. Today, no television or radio station in Britain would dream of organising an interview or a debate on the subject because to do so would risk exposing their innuendo, bigotry, prejudice and evasions against the harsh light of unwelcome scientific evidence. They would as soon organise a debate questioning the truth of the holocaust. On the other hand, all media outlets will happily promote scares designed to increase vaccine uptake figures. (Just before the annual flu vaccine jab bonanza, there are always scares about the flu. Similarly, when measles vaccinations are due there will be false, scare stories about measles epidemics.)

I have been campaigning about vaccination for nearly half a century, and many years ago I wrote a book collecting together the scientific evidence which proves conclusively that vaccination does not work and is not safe. We sent out 600 review copies. Not one review appeared. If I had proof that vaccination programmes were deliberately designed to kill people, I really don't think anyone in the media would be interested.

I wonder how many parents realise that vaccination programmes for children are designed to protect the health of the community, at the possible expense of the health of the individual child. No one ever tells parents this because the establishment fears that if parents knew then they would not allow their children to be used. Vaccination is fascism in action.

A year or two ago I offered $1,000,000 to anyone who could produce incontrovertible clinical evidence which satisfies me that all vaccines are completely safe and effective. I sent details of the challenge to the national press.

The result?

Silence.

You would have thought, would you not, that a journalist somewhere would consider such an offer newsworthy?

But no.

I am a doctor and I know the facts about vaccines and vaccination and I am considered too dangerous to be allowed to air my challenge outside my website.

The pro-vaccine industry (consisting of drug companies and doctors – all of whom make a huge amount of money out of vaccines) has been so effective in brain washing the media that no one will even report the existence of the challenge.

And so the vaccination myth must remain unchallenged.

Meanwhile, millions of men, women, children and infants continue to be vaccinated, injured and killed. Vaccines are never tested to see if they work long term or if they are safe long term. No one ever tests to see how well (or badly) vaccines react with other vaccines. And no one deliberately looks for or measures the side effects – however deadly those side effects might be.

And the scandal continues unchecked.

History will show that vaccination is a bad thing.

In a few decades time our descendants will look back upon vaccination and find it difficult to believe that doctors actually injected children with such dangerous and ineffective substances.

And when vaccination has finally been banned, as far too dangerous to allow, the tide will turn and anyone proposing or defending vaccination will be banned from the airwaves and the media.

The funny thing is that if I am still around by then I will not support such a ban.

I'll be happy to debate the issue of vaccination with anyone.

Because freedom of speech is crucial.

And I know the facts are on my side.

'All great truths begin as blasphemies', said George Bernard Shaw, who was an opponent of vaccination.

It's just a matter of trying to make a difference.

27

The eurocrats are demanding that we hand over huge amounts of money to leave the European Union? Some call it the price of a divorce. Others call it a punishment (to deter other countries which might be toying with the same idea). But why should we pay a penny to quit?

EU staffers want us to give them £60 billion to leave Hitler's one remaining concentration camp.

Stuff that.

We don't need to give them one penny in severance.

Indeed, if money is going to change hands then the EU should pay us for all the damage the wretched organisation has done to our economy and our culture.

Looking after immigrants forced upon us by the EU will cost us at least £100 billion in NHS bills alone.

Providing benefit payments for immigrants who don't want to work will cost us another £100 billion. One in five unemployed in Britain is an immigrant.

And sorting out the legal mess their daft rules has created will cost another £50 billion.

So, even if we don't charge them damages for the chaos caused by stupid EU laws about light bulbs and cucumbers they are still on the hook for at least £250 billion. (And we'll have that in sterling, please: a proper currency. Not their toy town euro stuff

If they make a fuss about paying our bill then we'll bill them for cultural losses. And we'll charge them for the stress of EU membership.

That'll be at least another £250 billion.

That's the bottom line.

We aren't paying the EU to leave the damned club.

We will demand that they pay us at least £250 billion in the divorce settlement.

And since the euro is a rather dodgy currency we'll take it in cash, please.

Real money: sterling.

28

I heard today from a friend who lives in Northern Ireland. He tells me that he waited in all week for a new fridge to be delivered. Each day he telephoned the company from which he had bought the fridge. Each day they told him that the fridge was on its way. Each day he stayed in. Each day there was no fridge delivered: five wasted days and still no fridge.

As I have got older I worry more because I know just how many things that can go wrong with everything we do but particularly with everything where some corporate or business entity is crucial to the success of the endeavour. The amount of time we all waste waiting for stuff to be delivered or for workmen to turn up is phenomenal.

Thinking of workmen: why don't they ever make notes?

You walk round the house or garden with them, telling them exactly what you want them to do. You explain in detail. They make no notes whatsoever. 'Do you want to write this down?' you ask. 'Oh no,' they say, clearly insulted. And then when they turn up they have forgotten everything. 'What was it you wanted me to do?' they ask. 'You wanted a stone arch building over here didn't you?' 'No, I wanted you to sort out the blocked drains.' 'You wanted the hall painting?' 'No, I wanted you to repair the woodwork on the conservatory roof.'

29

A pal who smokes has written to me pointing out that Parkinson's Disease and Alzheimer's are both less common among smokers. I don’t know whether or not to point out to him that these are both diseases which tend to affect older citizens. And many smokers simply don’t live long enough to suffer from disorders of old age.

30

In Devon I saw our nearest neighbour again today. He is a nice fellow who always has a cheery smile.

‘Good morning, Eugene!’ he said brightly, holding out his hand.

We shook.

‘I never forget a name,’ he said proudly. ‘You’re Eugene, aren’t you?’

I smiled and sort of nodded.

I think I will become Eugene for him. It is an insignificant price to pay to please a fellow man.

31

There are, we are told, far more EU citizens living in the UK than there are Britons living in other European countries. They’ve got three million living here and we have one million living there.

Why could this be?

I have come up with four possible explanations:

They love our climate.

They want to be here so that they can stand outside Buckingham Palace and watch the changing of the guard.

They love our food and prefer our cooking to anything available in their home land.

They love the fact that Britain is the only country to hand out free money to EU citizens.

February

1

Every time you wash out a jam jar, three small African children die of thirst.

I can't prove that, of course.

It might be five small African children who die. It might be ten.

But my headline is more accurate than anything the local council, the Government or the European Union will tell you about recycling.

The simple truth is that water is in desperately short supply.

That's why pure drinking water often costs more than oil products such as gas and petrol.

Local councils in the UK insist that citizens wash out bottles, jars and tins. They are obeying absurd recycling rules introduced by the EU. (There is no little irony in the fact that local councils everywhere spend a fortune printing and distributing expensively designed and produced leaflets, booklets and newspapers describing the true Joy of Recycling.)

But anyone who washes out tins or bottles with fresh, drinking water is wasting the planet's most valuable natural resource.

And that is a crime against humanity.

If local councils really cared one jot about the environment and about people they would abandon their absurd recycling programmes and spend the money they saved trying to persuade more people to turn vegetarian. That would dramatically reduce global starvation and do infinitely more good for the environment than all the recycling programmes on the planet. It won't happen, of course. The meat industry is far too powerful and would never allow it. Bottom line is that you cannot be 'green' or claim to care about the environment or be a logical recycling fan if you continue to eat meat. Keeping of cattle is the biggest single cause of starvation, environmental damage and water shortage on the planet. Millions of people die so that the rich can eat steaks and hamburgers. And if global warming ever turns out to have been anything other than a marketing strategy to sell peak oil then it will have been because of our affection for eating meat.

Incidentally, I read today that the biggest use of plastics is now for making recycling boxes. It would be much better for hygiene and the environment if all rubbish was collected in black plastic bags and used as landfill. There would be less expenditure on sorting, washing, putting into lots of different plastic boxes and sending round lots of different trucks.

Throw the black bags into the crusher and bob's your uncle (or, these days, quite possibly your aunty).

2

While standing in a queue in the bank I heard a man admit to a friend that he had started to dye his hair. His companion, who was quite bald, smiled at him and replied: 'My hair died all by itself.'

3

We were expecting a parcel today but it didn't come.

I later discovered that the delivery driver who was supposed to bring the parcel was a woman who refused to bring it because it weighed too much. I am told I have to collect the parcel myself.

The parcel weighs 1.5 lb and is smaller than a shoebox.

I was told by a representative of the delivery company that they couldn't do anything about this nonsense because if they reprimanded the woman they would be accused of sexism.

This is the second time this has happened to us – and I think this was a different driver.

4

The correct relationship between society and the individual is conflict, because society forces people to do things they don't want to do and charges them money for the doubtful privilege of doing it.

That's how things have always been – until now.

But in our 21st century society things have changed, and for millions the relationship with society contains no conflict because they are in debt to society; they have become its slaves, because they are totally reliant on the handouts they receive.

5

Re-reading ‘Leave it to Psmith’ by the immortal P.G.Wodehouse I found this sentence: ‘Even head-gardener Angus McAllister was as happy as a Scotsman can ever be.’

If Wodehouse had been writing this today, his editor would have encouraged him to remove the sentence simply because some readers today are raddled with political correctness. And if 1,000 people read a book it only takes a few to be offended for the book to be trashed and destroyed.

And that’s the frightening thought.

Writers of all kinds, of fiction and of non-fiction, are removing anything contentious from their work lest they upset a tiny minority of over-sensitive and snappy readers.

Not for the first time I am glad I am not a young writer, just setting out on my journey. The road was always rocky but these days there are many more hazards and the cautious will doubtless be inclined to stay on the safe and well-trodden paths. Books are gilded or gelded on whims.

Writing about reviewers reminds me that the other day I saw a review of a book by C.S.Forester. The writer of the review damned the book simply because it wasn’t another in his famous Hornblower series.

(Forester, who was a doctor, wrote a good many other marvellous books including African Queen and The Gun, both of which were filmed).

To give a bad review of a book because it isn’t something else (which no one ever said it was) is mean and spiteful.

Oddly enough, however, the biggest problem with reviewers isn’t with amateur reviewers but with the professionals. Many reviewers work for big publishers (usually as ‘readers’) and there is far too much back scratching going on. (‘If I give good reviews to the books published by Scrumpley and McHair they’ll give me more work.’)

The whole business reaches a nadir when it comes to authors reviewing books. Then there is an obscene amount of back scratching. (‘I’ll give your book a good review if you’ll write a good review of my book.’).

Finally, there is the fact that the few professional reviewers around tend to be people who want to be creative artists but don’t have the talent, the temperament or the imagination. And they are probably the worst because they hate authors who can make a living out of their books.

6

I amused myself this morning by making a list of twelve things the EU has given us. Here it is:

1) Giant rats: Because of the EU’s absurd and scientifically unsound obsession with climate change local councils are not allowed to collect rubbish in the sensible, old-fashioned way. Councils are heavily fined if they do not force householders to put their rubbish into recycling containers. Residents in some areas are told that their rubbish must be out on the pavement before 7.00 a.m. and they will be fined if they put out their bins and boxes before midnight. No one cares that the carefully sorted recycling rubbish is then sent to China to be dumped. Not collecting rubbish regularly means that the rat population in Europe is soaring. And rats are getting healthier and bigger. Rats have up to 14 babies in a single litter and the young rats are themselves reproducing within five weeks. The increase in the rat population is pretty well entirely dependent upon the amount of available food and so it’s a fair bet that the total rat population of Britain will be rising fairly dramatically in the coming years. Local councils don’t seem to understand that rats are perfectly capable of eating their way into those disgusting plastic food containers which householders are encouraged to put outside their homes. Indeed, in towns and cities the rats are now probably big enough to carry the containers away with them. There are other problems in addition to the rats. Councils are increasing their income by fining local residents who make mistakes. Last year councils in Britain fined seven million people for failing to put their bins out at the right time, for not washing their yoghurt cartons properly or for mistakenly putting the right piece of recycling into the wrong container. The new system dramatically increases the spread of infection with bin men transferring bugs from one container to all the others they touch. And, of course, strict rules about when bins are put out and brought in cause chaos and confusion (particularly among the elderly). I firmly believe that the EU bin policies are spreading dangerous bugs. How many people wash their hands thoroughly when they have collected their variety of bins and plastic boxes from the pavement outside their home? (Wherein the tidiest of passers-by will have doubtless deposited their unwanted cans and wrappers). The bin men who empty these bins and boxes will have spread bugs from everyone else’s bins and boxes onto yours and, unless

you wear disposable gloves when handling the bin, or wash your hands very thoroughly after doing so, you will have contaminated yourself and your home with every possibly lethal bug in the neighbourhood.

2) Short-term contracts and insecurity for low paid workers. The EU's employment legislation has forced employers to put many low paid workers on short-term contracts. The result is a loss of security for millions of workers. Eurocrats who created this daft legislation have no understanding of the real world because their own working lives are so protected and undemanding.

3) Rising unemployment among young women. EU legislation on maternity benefits means that employers are now unwilling to hire young women who might become pregnant. The whole damned benefits programme has destroyed generations. Providing benefits with such freedom has enabled the idle and created the entitlement generation. The system has gone so mad that politicians are now demanding that unemployed parents must be given extra money to pay for child care. I am mystified by the claim that parents who don't go out to work need child care more than parents who have jobs.

4) Soaring food prices. The Common Agricultural Policy which rewards farmers with vast profits has pushed up food prices throughout Europe. British citizens pay thousands more because of the EU farming subsidies. The poorest suffer most – and either go hungry or eat cheap, rubbishy food.

5) Massive queues in shops. The lack of staff in shops is a direct result of EU employment legislation. More and more shops are introducing self-pay tills but there often isn't enough space and so there are queues at these too.

6) Poor GP service. If you have to wait a month to see your GP, you can blame the EU. Once again, employment legislation forced upon us by the EU has resulted in GPs working a 35 hour week. At nights and at weekends there is no GP availability because of the EU. It is this absence of out of hours GP services which has forced Accident and Emergency Departments to break down under the strain of too much work. (Why, incidentally, was the name changed from 'Casualty' to 'Accident and Emergency Department'?)

7) Rotten hospital services. Hospitals are now punished by the EU if doctors work more than 40 hour weeks. And so there are often no doctors in hospitals at night or at weekends.

8) Rising cancer rates. EU laws have resulted in cancer rates soaring. Food sold within the EU is often packed with approved carcinogens, toxins, hormones and antibiotics. And no one yet knows what damage will be done by the EU allowing food manufacturers to sell genetically engineered food. It was the EU which pushed diesel cars onto our roads – now known to be a major cause of pollution.

9) Buggered up pensions. Finance laws and policies introduced by the EU have helped to destroy private pensions. EU employees , however, have massive, inflation-linked pensions which are unaffected by EU legislation.

10) Disappearing bees. Genetically engineered crops packed with insecticides mean that the bees are dying in their millions. Many people don't think that this matters much but without bees, crops are not pollinated. And this is another reason why food prices are soaring.

11) Red tape affecting profits. Small businesses have been hit hard by red tape introduced by the EU. When small businesses are damaged, they cannot grow or hire extra employees. Large businesses are not affected by red tape because they can employ specialist departments to deal with the bureaucracy. Indeed, most EU red tape was introduced in response to requests from big corporations. That is a perfect example of practical fascism. The people who make any country great are the people who start businesses, not the people who run businesses which were started by someone else. The people who create wealth are the ones who have ideas, visions and take risks, work nights and weekends and mortgage their homes to raise the capital they need. They are the sort of people who wade through acres of rules and regulations and deal with all the EU inspired problems of starting a business and hiring employees.

12) Electricity shortages. Britain is about to run out of electricity because nutty EU laws have forced us to close many of our existing power stations. And electric cars, which use vast amounts of electricity, are making things worse. Unsightly windmills and solar panels are grossly inefficient and rely on massive taxpayer subsidies.

(Biofuels, which led to increasing starvation around the world, were another EU enthusiasm.)

7

We are beginning to toy seriously with the idea of selling our apartment in Paris.

The fact is that we will both be glad to sell up.

The tragedy is that for us Paris has stopped being fun. It has also become (whisper it softly) very ugly. I have been travelling to Paris for over 60 years but I now dread going there.

The process of travel (moving from one country to another) has become unbearable. Motorway travel in the UK is slow and tiresome. Border guards have become rude and aggressive. Eurostar has lost all its charm and has become as much fun as the 8.15 to Wapping. Eurostar used to have comfortable seats, good lighting and old-fashioned lamps. The attentive staff wore smart uniforms. There was champagne before a three-course lunch and hot towels and chocolates afterwards. Eurostar has cut so many corners that I can see them expecting customers to pedal in a couple of years' time. I always thought trains were much more exciting than planes because they were far more comfortable and they made the journey slower and therefore an adventure.

The Parisians are ruder than ever. And Paris itself has given in to the terrorists and is awash with armed police, concrete blocks and barbed wire. In every conceivable way, Paris has become uglier. The city is full of pickpockets and confidence tricksters.

Our home in Paris has lost its charm too. Since the electricity people dug out the foundations last year the whole building has acquired serious cracks. It wouldn't surprise me if all the buildings in the street were showing signs of subsidence. In fact, it is only the fact that the buildings are attached that stops them all falling down. The electricity company dug a deep trench underneath the front part of the entire street. They actually dug out the rock and stone from underneath the front few feet of the building and then, when they'd finished, they replaced the rock and stone with sandy soil. So, now our building has developed huge cracks as a result of the inevitable subsidence.

The other residents of our building are now young millennial renters who don't care about the building or about anyone else. They make too much noise, they throw their rubbish about and they leave the front door and the cellar gate wide open. The building used to be occupied by older residents who were polite, quiet and respectful. Those residents have either died or moved away.

The owners of a building next to ours allowed someone to build a metalwork workshop in their courtyard. Amazingly, the French planning people didn't seem to object. So now we can hear nothing all day but the sound of grinding and hammering. The owner of the workshop must live nearby for he works weekends too. There is always someone doing something noisy – usually involving drills. The floor below in our apartment building is occupied by three apartments and the people in one of the apartments have been noisily renovating their apartment for six months. Their apartment has two rooms. What can you do to a two room apartment that takes six months?

My advice to travellers is simple. If you have already been to Paris: don't go back. If you have never been to Paris: stay away.

8

If you spend more than an hour in Paris then, sooner or later, you will need to abuse a Frenchman (or woman). This is just the way things are and it is no shame on you or the French person you will be abusing.

When this happens there is one very important thing to remember: however well you speak French you should revert to English.

English friends of ours who are quite fluent in French admit that they always revert to English when they need to berate a workman, traffic warden or difficult concierge. (If you feel you must speak French to the natives then the trick, I am told, is to speak quickly, firmly, confidently and loudly. Allow no dissent, interruption and definitely no corrections. Once you allow a French person to correct your French you are lost for ever.)

'I always freeze and forget what I want to say if I try to shout in French,' admits the husband, who, to our ear, speaks French like a native. 'You are at a huge disadvantage if you try to have a row in their language,' he says. 'Their invective will always be better than yours. Your only chance of getting the upper hand is to shout in English – and speak very quickly. You will know better words and there is a good chance that, if you show sufficient imagination, they won't have the faintest idea what you are saying. If you should lose your temper and say something quite unforgivable you will get away with it because they won't know what you've said.'

The important thing to remember is that although nearly all French folk speak English it is a sad fact that no Frenchman has ever learned to speak English properly although, of course, they always think they speak it fluently. They think they speak perfect, idiomatic English but in reality they speak atrocious English and we don't say anything to them because we are far too polite. But that's part of the fun. I never correct them. Indeed, I always encourage their mistakes and the worse they speak French the more I praise them. (The French do not suffer from self-doubt or regret. And since these are the two big causes of heart disease this is why the French who smoke a good deal and drink even more, suffer surprisingly little from heart disease).

The other thing which is important to remember is that although the French think they have a great and sophisticated sense of humour – they don't. And they don't have any sense of irony. So, if you say to a Frenchman : 'My word, your English is very good' (even if it isn't) they will purr with self-satisfaction because they will accept the compliment at face value.

Usually, the English are far too polite to tell the French that they're making zillions of mistakes every time they open their mouths.

But if you want to annoy one just correct his grammar, choice of vocabulary or, best of all, his pronunciation.

Don't feel in the slightest bit bad about doing this because all French citizens, but particularly the ones in Paris, absolutely delight in correcting foreigners who try to speak their language. (It is strange, I know, but to the French we are 'foreigners'. Quite absurd.) Anyone who gets a tense or a conjugation wrong will be subjected to a deep sigh and a French lesson.

And every foreigner always pronounces French words incorrectly.

So, go to it! Enjoy yourself! Abuse a Frenchman – but do it in English.

9

We are still in Paris, trying to decide when and how to sell our apartment.

Here are some of the things we have discovered:

There is a 21% tax on any capital gains.

There is another 15.5% social charge on any capital gains. This is not officially a tax and so it cannot be put against the capital gains tax which will be charged by the British authorities. The EU seems to have ruled that taking the social charge from foreigners is illegal but the French never take any notice of EU rulings which they do not like.

There is an additional 5% tax on any capital gains if the property being sold is worth more than about ninepence.

The estate agent must be paid between 5% and 10% commission on the sale price. They will not produce a brochure though they may put up a snap in their window and on their website. (With this sort of commission, why isn't everyone in France an estate agent? I can't imagine why anyone does anything else for a living. Indeed, I am told that every ambitious French boy and girl grows up wanting to be an estate agent, it pays better than medicine, lawyering or anything else.)

Huge fees must be paid to the notaire so that he can make sure that all the necessary taxes are all paid.

Special tests must be done to ensure that the property satisfies EU regulations about energy use, the presence of asbestos, the suitability of the gas and electricity supplies, the presence or absence of termites and/or aliens in the cellar. A fairly standard report on a small property will run to 100 pages, not be as useful as a survey, and be incomprehensible to anyone who hasn't been trained to read EU technical reports. Absolutely wrong.

There is a currency charge of 5% or more to convert euros back to sterling.

A cruel and quite incomprehensible wealth tax will be charged on any savings or properties which suggest that the owner has earned more than a low level bureaucrat.

A good deal of paperwork will be involved in the actual sale – which will be protracted. A simple proxy or power of attorney will be at least six pages long. The French bureaucrats have a simple rule: 'Never limit yourself to one page of waffle when you can produce six.'

10

I was reading July 10th 1954 issue of *The Cricketer* magazine at breakfast time and spotted a full page advertisement headed 'What's Jeff got that I haven't got?' The advertisement, presented as a cartoon strip, showed the 'hero' looking on wistfully as another chap (Jeff) stands surrounded by lovely young ladies.

'Looks! Personality! If that's what it is, I just can't compete. Or maybe it's physique,' thinks our hero.

In the next frame he is in the gym, struggling to lift some weights. 'Must be a better way than this. Gosh, yes! Always drinks Guinness Jeff does.'

And then there is our hero, with a glass of Guinness in his hand and a big smile on his face. In the background, a waitress looks at him approvingly.

And in the final frame there's a simple message from our hero: 'No, I can't say I get any more dates, but I enjoy everything much more than I used to.’

So that was how alcohol was promoted in the 1950s.

11

A man who lives in our building in Paris told us that his aunt occasionally used to dance naked on the table at dinner parties.

No one ever knew when she would do this but eventually someone noticed that it only happened when she ate shellfish.

It had not, apparently, occurred to anyone until I mentioned it that when she ate oysters she always drank copious amounts of champagne to wash them down.

12

We watched a documentary called *Citizenfour* – a film about Edward Snowden, the American who leaked valuable information about how we are all spied upon by our Governments.

What Snowden did was vital but the film seemed to me to show that Snowden’s motive was at least partly inspired by vanity. He talked beforehand about allowing himself to be nailed to the cross and when expecting to be photographed by the world’s press, he spent ages putting gel onto his hair and making sure it looked pretty. The journalists who were involved in the release of the information he stole also seemed to be more interested in the media than in the message. And did *The Guardian* newspaper (which published the leaked information) pay Snowden for the information he leaked?

I found the film one of the most boring and badly made I’ve ever seen. It apparently won the Best Documentary Oscar in 2015 but it could have done with a bit more planning and editing. I fell asleep after an hour or so of interminable smug, self-congratulatory nonsense but naturally, however, *The Guardian* gave the film a plump five star rating. (They would do though, wouldn’t they?)

I found, some time ago, that the quickest way to find out if a film is worth watching is to see if it has been reviewed by *The Guardian*. If it has, and *The Guardian* liked it, then the film will be dull and unwatchable. We use this as an easy, quick rule of thumb guide when finding new movies. The mistake *The Guardian* writers always seem to make is in assuming that incomprehensible, unintelligible, badly made and dull combine to mean highbrow and superior. The corollary, of course, is that they also assume that anything which is readable, and which gives pleasure to people or, heaven forbid, makes them think, is lowbrow and worthless. In addition, anything which is popular, must by their definition be worthless. This is intellectual snobbishness at its worst.

The tragedy, of course, is that *The Guardian’s* strange, upside down philosophies have contaminated many other sections of our world because, for example, it is pretty well impossible to obtain a job working for the BBC unless you are an avid *Guardian* reader.

13

We spent a pleasant afternoon in the little park near to Les Invalides.

While we sat in winter sunshine, Antoinette studied her Russian grammar. I read a small volume of essays by E.V. Lucas. It is strange, is it not, how authors can go out of fashion. In his day, Lucas was one of the most popular and prolific of authors. Many of his books consist of essays which first appeared as newspaper articles. They are erudite, humorous and delicate. I would rate him alongside Hazlitt as one of the greatest of English novelists. Alas, he is now pretty well forgotten and his books can be picked up very cheaply in second hand bookshops or, I assume, from Amazon or eBay. Most of his volumes are small and pocket sized and therefore extremely handy for travellers.

Of course, Lucas isn’t the only author to have fallen out of fashion. Who reads Arnold Bennett these days? I worked my way through some of his forgotten novels recently and found a number of delights. *Riceyman Steps* is one of his best. I’ve also managed to obtain a copy of his Journals, which I thought I had read half a century or so ago but which I don’t remember at all and so cannot possibly have done. They are wonderful. I bet no one alive when he was in his pomp thought that Bennett’s oeuvre would be largely out of print less than a century after his death. Sic transit and all that.

The full edition of the Bennett journals is over a million words long and runs to four volumes but the copy I have is the Penguin edition, edited by Frank Swinnerton and published in 1954. It consists of selected bits and pieces and runs to 493 pages. There is a selection of Bennett’s handwriting on the cover of my Penguin and it is more illegible than mine. I pity whoever had the job of turning the stuff into print. Bennett was not a doctor but maybe he had aspirations.

14

One of our squirrels in Devon has carefully removed the Perspex front from the feeder box I fill with nuts and seeds. He hasn't just removed the front, however. He has taken it and hidden it somewhere. Squirrels always do this. If a feeder is in some way troublesome or a challenge, they will alter it or adapt it to better suit their requirements.

I now put food in the feeder and the squirrel no longer has to lift the lid to get at it.

The unexpected beneficiary is our robin who can now hop into the box and help himself to nuts and seeds.

15

I have always found things to worry about but there is so much to fear these days that on some days my capacity for fear is so overladen that it breaks down and I don't fear anything.

Never in my lifetime have there been so many things to worry about.

The media live on creating fear.

Politicians thrive and survive according to the fear they have created.

Central bankers create fear whenever they open their mouths.

Social media fanatics spread fear as though their lives depended upon it: fear about health, fear about legal hazards, fear about terrorism, fear about muggers and murderers, fear about the roads, fear about the food we eat. And on and on and on ad infinitum.

Governments, armies, police and spies depend entirely upon a sense of fear and impending doom among the public. It is in their interest to promote fear in order to exploit its consequences. Without impending disaster and doom, governments can do nothing.

When the iron curtain fell, security services targeted animal rights campaigners as the big threat, not because they were but because there was a fear vacuum. Today, the security services never bother with animal rights because they don't need them.

16

The mad greens and other proponents of the myth of climate change (nee global warming) say that the oil in the ground (or under the sea) will have to stay there as their campaign gains more power. They are wrong, of course, for several reasons.

First, the climate change silliness has been developing for well over a century. The campaigners like to think they invented it but pseudo-scientists have, since the 19th century, been putting forward the theory that greenhouse gases could change the climate. Only the converts think the evidence is convincing.

Second, the alternatives to fossil fuels are frighteningly inefficient. For example, it takes more energy to make a windmill than the windmill will ever produce. So, the more windmills we produce the more energy we waste.

Third, the clever alternatives to oil and the internal combustion engine are also silly. Using food to make fuel (the biofuels nonsense) exacerbated the starvation problem and the Greens have condemned hundreds of thousands to death by campaigning for yet more food to be turned into fuel for rich people.

Fourth, the whole idea of electric cars is daft. Making them requires massive amounts of polluting energy. And running them requires vast quantities of electricity – most of which is produced inefficiently using oil or coal. Then there is the problem of what to do with all the batteries when they need to be thrown away. And how big will the batteries need to be to power lorries, let alone aeroplanes? And because electric cars are inefficient they use more fossil fuel than traditional cars running on oil. I wonder how many fans of Tesla (the electric car company) know that the company deliberately stunts its batteries – reducing the range that drivers can travel between charges. If you own a Tesla motor car and want it to travel further, you have to pay the company an extra fee to have your battery upgraded. Nice. And I wonder if any Tesla fans realise that some petrol fuelled cars are allegedly 'greener' than Tesla's electric cars. How can that possibly be? Well, the answer is simple. Some electric cars have higher lifecycle greenhouse gas emissions than petrol driven vehicles. Sanctimonious enthusiasts point out that electric vehicles have no exhaust pipes. But they conveniently forget that making electric cars requires massive amounts of energy and that quantities of rare earth metals such as lithium and cobalt required for the batteries have to be dug out of the ground. (Much of it is apparently dug out of the mines by children as young as seven so it is nice to know that the Greens are providing work for so many under 12s.) An electric car can require 10 kg of cobalt and 60 kg of lithium. Recycling the parts of an electric car (and its batteries) requires more energy. And, of course, the electricity to fuel an electric car has to be produced (usually by burning coal or diesel). It is a plain, old-fashioned lie to claim that electric cars are ‘zero emission vehicles’. Tesla is the most over-rated, over promoted company on the planet. I suspect that the shares are due for a massive collapse in the next year or two.

The media, which is as potty over electric cars as they were over the equally daft enthusiasm for biofuels are busy telling us all that electric cars are going to save the planet and that the big car manufacturers are going to stop making diesel or petrol driven cars.

How long will it be before we are forced to buy and drive the damned things either because there isn’t any alternative or because we will be punished so severely if we dare disobey?

Has anyone realised that, as Antoinette has pointed out, because electric cars are silent there will doubtless be a good many accidents involving pedestrians?

The fact is that electric cars have been around for 100 years and they don’t have a future (unless we are all forced to buy them) because they are a crap idea.

Fifth, if we stop using fossil fuels then the greens will have to give up using their beloved laptops and mobile phones and they will have to walk everywhere. All those lovely climate change conferences in wonderful locations will have to stop. And no electricity means that there won’t be any Skype or video conferencing either. It is one of the strange ironies that greens are among the world’s most enthusiastic travellers (and, therefore, users of fossil fuels). It apparently does not occur to them that until someone invents a solar powered aeroplane they will be using up vast amounts of the world’s depleting supply of natural energy.

The real truth is that the oil is running out and the recent enthusiasm for the ancient climate change theory was created by politicians who wanted to introduce a whole raft of new laws restricting our use of energy so that there would be plenty of oil left for tanks and jet fighters.

The final irony is the fact that if more of the greens would give up eating meat then the world’s environmental problems would disappear pretty well immediately. And there would be no more starving people in Africa, or anywhere else.

But the greens want to be self-righteous and to keep their hamburgers and their social media accounts.

17

Tidying a stationery cupboard in my study, I realised today that I have accumulated a four year supply of notebooks. I use an average of two notebooks a week and they must have good plain paper, stout covers, a marker ribbon and some sort of elastic band to use when closing the notebook. Oh, and they must be pocket sized. (I keep larger notebooks for use in and around the house.) The Moleskin notebooks are perfect and even have a small expanding pocket inside the back cover wherein can be stored small pieces of loose paper upon which scribbled notes have been written.

But a four year supply of notebooks seems a trifle over the top and so I think I must stop buying them for a while.

18

I am delighted to see that the Government is planning to give people marks according to behaviour.

The Government will measure people’s behaviour in order to decide what services they are entitled to.

Anyone who incurs black marks for traffic offences, fare dodging or jay working will find that they are no longer entitled to the full range of public services and rights.

Moreover, internet activity will also be used to assess behaviour.

Individuals who do bad things on the internet (or whose searches are considered questionable) will find themselves ‘black marked’.

Individuals who have ‘responsible’ jobs will be subjected to enhanced scrutiny.

At the moment, it is only the Chinese Government who is planning to give its citizens a ‘social credit score’.

But who wants to bet that Western Governments won’t soon follow suit?

19

Scientists have (again) proved what most of us have known ever since we were old enough to use a knife and fork: that if you think of nice things, good memories, happy places, then you will feel better.

I’m waiting for news that scientists have done research showing that eating food is good for us.

Juncker and the bunch of thugs and crooks at the EU are cross with Britain because we dared to say ‘No’ and to mean it.

We are the only country brave enough to stand up to the EU’s brand of Nazi fascism.

The EU has, in the past, always succeeded in overturning national votes which it found inconvenient or threatening. When the Irish voted ‘No’ to the Nice treaty, the EU forced through a reversal.

Again when the Irish voted ‘No’ to the Lisbon treaty, the EU managed to fiddle a reversal.

When the Danes voted ‘No’ to the Maastricht treaty, the EU forced a change of heart.

When the Dutch and the French both voted ‘No’ to the European Constitution, they merely renamed the European Constitution the Lisbon Treaty and that was that for the Dutch and the French voters.

When the Greeks voted ‘No’ in 2015, the EU just ignored the inconvenience of a democratic vote they did not like.

The EU has always opposed democracy. The EU has always been crooked and incompetent and run by bullies and thugs. And as Brexit continues, it will be increasingly clear to anyone who wants to look, that the EU has not matured or softened its attitudes but that it has hardened its approach. The plan, it is clear to see, is to do away with democracy completely, to form the United States of Europe which was Hitler’s dream and for a small group of unelected, overpaid eurocrats to make all the rules and take all the decisions.

In addition to being the genuine home of fascism, the European Union is the ultimate home of cronyism, jobs for the boys (and girls), crookedness, greed and self-interest. It will be interesting for Britons to sit and watch the whole crooked edifice crumble. Incidentally, those who think the EU is a ‘good idea’ should read Stanley Adams’s book *Roche v Adams*. It is one of the earliest and most terrifying accounts of EU wickedness and it will make your blood run cold. Anyone who reads it and still believes in the EU has to be a psychopath.

I wrote a letter to Juncker of the European Union:

‘Dear Juncker,

First let me say, on behalf of all the British people (except Lily Allen whose dad was an actor and Gary Linker who was a footballer) that I think the EU stinks and you are an uppity twat.

We have decided to leave the EU without more ado and we will be off next Monday as soon as we’ve had breakfast.

Here’s the deal.

And, by the way, you can take it because there is no option.

We leave the EU and all your stupid rules.

We will not pay one penny more to the EU.

We will not buy any more German cars, French cheeses or anything else made within the EU.

We will not sell anything to EU countries.

All EU citizens currently living in the British Isles must piss off immediately. They will not be allowed back.

In future, all our trade will be done with the Commonwealth, the United States of America and Asia. That should be quite sufficient for all our needs.

Travellers from other EU countries will in future need visas. Only short-term two week visas will be issued for the purposes of tourism.

And if you want a war that’s fine with us.

We’re already two nil up against the Krauts and the Eyeties. The Frogs all keep a white flag in their knapsacks and they’ll roll over in an instant. The only way the French will win a war will be if they declare war on themselves.

Finally, let us suggest that you ignore all those morons (such as George Soros) who have suggested that Britain will one day rejoin the European Union.

Soros once made a bundle betting against sterling and has, ever since, liked to think of himself as some sort of genius. He is, in fact, just another twat who is completely out of touch with the public mood in England. There is absolutely no chance that the British people will ever vote to rejoin Hitler’s gloomy band of fascists. We will enjoy watching Hitler’s dream collapse and fail.

Just don’t ask us to bail you out.

Vernon Coleman’

Meanwhile, the British Government seems to misunderstand the meaning and purpose of Brexit.

Our politicians are, it seems, consumed by fear of everything. The whole thing is quite simple. We are divorcing the EU. We don’t want to live together. There has to be a deal. A bloke I know suggests that it’s really very simple: we should invite the EU to take Northern Ireland to the zoo every alternate Saturdays. And if we want a hard Brexit let's just fill the Channel Tunnel with stuff we don't want. In the absence of anything more suitably sized. we could fill it and block it permanently with Gary Lineker's head.

There's a couplet that Theresa May and her Ministers should remember:

'Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it
Boldness has genius, power and magic in it.'

Under the circumstances, the irony is that it was written by Germany's solitary literary giant: Goethe.

I fear that our Prime Minister does not seem to be bold in any way. She seems rather woeful and beaten. The EU negotiators will eat her up and spit out the bones. We desperately need a Prime Minister (male or female) who has balls. And it would be good to have a cabinet which did not consist almost entirely of cryptorchid eunuchs. Where, among our political leaders, is the passion, the defiance, the pride, the strength or the brains? Where, indeed, is the leadership.

21

I have two parcels to send off to a friend who has decided to have a birthday. I have scales and all the appropriate measuring devices produced by Royal Mail at home but after some minutes, I gave up. I was hoping to be able to weigh and stamp the parcels and then slip them into a nice wide Post Box mouth. But now I will have to stand and queue for an hour. The rules and regulations produced by Royal Mail are incomprehensible and require anyone doing the posting to be able to measure weight, height, width, depth and then decide whether the object for posting is a letter, a large letter a small parcel or a medium sized parcel.

I am quite sure that Royal Mail makes the rules so complex in the knowledge that it will receive huge additional payments in fines and penalties.

22

I found an old T-shirt today. It was one of thousands printed by the *Sunday Mirror* when the paper serialised my book *Bodypower*. The next time someone complains that I don't do social media, I must point out that I have been a T-shirt.

And you really can't get much more multi-media than that.

23

The leaders of nationalists in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all want their countries to leave home and fend for themselves in the outside world. There is, say the Scottish Nationalists, going to be another referendum on the issue of independence. And then another referendum. And another, until the Scottish voters get the answer right. The Welsh nationalists also want a referendum.

Why am I reminded of a trio of parasitic, grown up children threatening to leave home?

Just what the unhappy trio plan to do for money is a mystery.

Obviously, of these three, only Scotland needs to be taken seriously.

Scottish nationalists want independence so that they can spend English money the way they want to spend it – without the English having any say. But the nationalists haven't yet realised that when Scotland is independent it will have to find its own money. England will cut the purse strings. The Sturgeon must have great faith that the sale of kilts and sporrans can be boosted and that Americans, Greeks and Arabs can all be persuaded to buy armfuls of Tam o'Shanter hats.

Fat chance.

Truth is that the majority of the English are cheering the SNP's demand for a second referendum.

They know they can look forward to an independent England with joy in their hearts and oodles of extra cash in their pockets.

So why shouldn't England have a vote in whether or not Scotland leaves the Union?

The departure of Scotland will have a big impact on England. We are entitled to vote on whether or not Scotland leaves.

Actually, if they had any sense, the Scottish Nationalists would campaign to allow England to vote on whether Scotland leaves the Union for there is no doubt that the majority of English voters would enthusiastically support the SNP and vote for Scotland to leave.

Without having to support Scotland, the Chancellor should be able to knock at least 10p to 20p off the basic rate of income tax in England.

Surely, the English are entitled to a vote on whether or not they want their income tax to be reduced so dramatically.

Here are ten other things we can look forward to if the Sturgeon woman ever gets her way and is allowed the Second Referendum she seemed to have promised but has now discovered that she can't have.

If Scotland votes for independence:

Everyone in England will be much richer. The UK spends more than £3,000 a year each more on the Scots than it spends on the English. Everyone agrees this is completely unfair but the Scots whinge so much that no one dares suggest sharing out the loot more equitably. If Scotland leaves the Union, the English will enjoy a massive fiscal boost to their wallets.

We can make bagpipes illegal in England. Bagpipes are, in any case, a recent invention. If Scots were true to their own history, they would play the harp – which was the instrument of choice for their ancestors.

The Sturgeon woman will disappear from our lives forever. She will get no more airtime or print inches than the Prime Minister of Ruritania. Can you name the Ministers of Ireland, Northern Ireland or Wales? No, I thought not. Sturgeon, who has the sour, disappointed look of someone who has been given a dead cat for Christmas, will disappear from our consciousness and we will be all the better for it.

The SNP will disappear from our Parliament.

Thousands of minor but intensely annoying Scottish celebrities will have to go back to Glasgow. They obviously won't want to remain in England as foreigners.

We won't have to pretend to support Andy Murray. (Or his ever present mother.)

The Scots can have their banks back. The Royal Bank of Scotland and HBOS were the cause of our economic collapse in 2008. They have cost English taxpayers billions. And hundreds of thousands of jobs were lost as a result of Scottish banking ineptitude. The Royal Bank of Scotland is still losing money at an indecent rate. We will all be richer without it though quite what the Scots will do with it I cannot imagine. They certainly won't be able to afford to keep it. Incidentally, I find it strange that the RBS is allowed to issue its own banknotes. And stranger still that its new £5, £10 and £20 notes will all contain pictures of women no one outside Scottish universities has ever heard of. Actually, I rather think that these were done as a joke. The woman on one note, Catherine Cranston, is described as a 'leading figure in the development of tea rooms'. Actually, I suppose it is rather sweet that the world's most incompetent bank should celebrate Scottish history with a picture of a woman who ran a chain of tea rooms.

There will be more jobs in England because English companies will bring their call centres back home. And there is a chance we may understand what the people on the other end of the phone are saying.

We will be freed from all that whingeing and ingratitude.

The BBC will have to sack all those Scottish employees whose accents we cannot understand. We cannot have foreigners on our national stations.

We won't have to change our clocks twice a year. (Summer Time was originally introduced so that Scottish farmers wouldn't have to go out in the dark. It has resulted in thousands of unnecessary deaths.)

We can pass another law to ban the kilt. The kilt, incidentally, was invented by a kindly Englishman called Thomas Rawlinson in the early 18th century. Rawlinson, who was an industrialist, invented the kilt because it was cheaper to make than a pair of trousers – and the Scots were poor. However, about two decades later, in 1746, the British Parliament banned the kilt (in the 1746 Dress Act) because it was considered an embarrassment and too different to be an acceptable form of attire. We can pass another Dress Act.

It will be fascinating to watch how Scotland survives without immensely generous hand-outs from the English.

Scotland has very little industry and the little remaining oil in the North Sea is now worse than worthless because closing down the drilling platforms will cost more than the remaining oil will earn. (Why don't they just leave the oil rigs where they are? They will stand there like the forts which are scattered around off the British coast. The sea will slowly claim them. Any dangerous materials could be removed. And permanent lights could be put aboard to warn shipping. It would save a fortune and avoid the problem of what to do with them when they are brought ashore.) A reliable industry estimate is that Scotland's share of the oil industry is now worth minus £50 billion. I find it mind boggling that there are people in Scotland who still believe that their country can survive as an independent nation. If they do leave the Union, they will be living on bread and dripping without the dripping.

Never in a million years will the EU allow Scotland to become a member. The eurocrats know that Scotland would be a drain on the remaining EU resources. And countries such as Spain will block Scotland's membership.

The new Scotland will have to invent its own currency. Called 'The Sporran' perhaps? They could have 100 'kilts' to the 'sporran'. (The New Scotland will not be allowed to use the pound. The name 'Bank of England' should give a clue as to why.)

But England will be rich and free. And so, the English should now start campaigning ferociously for Scotland to leave the Union. And they should demand a chance to vote in the Scottish independence referendum. The campaign to aid the Scots should, perhaps, be titled: ‘Bugger off Scotland’.

24

The phrase ‘bed blocking’ is once again being bandied about in discussions about the National Health Service.

‘Bed blocking’ is a phrase which is used exclusively when an elderly patient occupies a hospital bed and is too ill to go home.

The phrase ‘bed blocking’ is never used about patients under the age of 60 or so, however long they need to stay in hospital.

It is clear, therefore, that the phrase is ageist.

25

I had to telephone the company which provides the server for my website. (It is, quite possibly, the most incompetent company in the history of companies.) The man to whom I spoke, needed to look at the website.

‘Is this the one?’ he asked. ‘There’s a picture of an old bloke in a hat on the front page. He’s wearing a mac.’

‘That’s the one,’ I said. ‘I’m the old bloke in the hat and the mac.’

The photograph, incidentally, was taken at a corner of first floor cloisters of Les Invalides in Paris. Antoinette took the picture.

26

Britain is rich enough to spend £50 billion on a new rail link (widely regarded as unnecessary) between London and wherever you can reach with the amount of railway line you can buy for £50 billion. (My bet is that the total cost will be well in excess of £100 billion. Politicians and civil servants are ‘careful’ with their own money and greedy when claiming expenses but they are always profligate when dealing with public money.)

I wonder how many people know, incidentally, that the spending per capita on transport infrastructure in London is £1,000 whereas the spending per capita on transport infrastructure in other parts of the country is as low as £200 per capita. London has excellent infrastructure, excellent broadband and massive mobile phone coverage. Much of England has rotten roads, very slow broadband and absolutely no mobile phone coverage.

Britain is rich enough to waste billions every year on foreign aid (most of it is creamed off by greedy consultants and self-serving charities).

And, apparently, we are, as a nation, rich enough to pay £350 million a week for membership of the European Union.

And yet 40,000 to 60,000 elderly citizens die of cold every winter in the United Kingdom. (The number varies according to the extent of the cold).

Surely this is proof, if proof be needed, that we do not live in a civilised country?

How can we possibly call ourselves civilised when 40,000 of our citizens can’t afford to keep warm in cold weather?

If 40,000 asylum seekers died of the cold, the liberal lefty luvvies would be twittering as fast as their fingers could fly. They would be appalled. They would demand action.

But they don’t give a toss about elderly Britons.

Liberal lefty luvvies make a huge fuss about foreigners who want to come to Britain to grab some of our free money.

But you don’t often hear them worrying about the plight of the elderly, do you?

The truth is that the elderly are our oppressed and forgotten people.

More than a million old people who have trouble with basic activities receive no help whatsoever. Nothing.

A contact working in an English hospital tells me that elderly patients are deliberately put onto a ward where MRSA is endemic in order to get rid of them as quickly as possible.

(Could this be one of the reasons hospitals seem apparently reluctant to take the simple steps that would eradicate killer, antibiotic resistant bugs?)

In every conceivable way, the elderly are poorer today than ever before.

And things seem about to get worse.

Politicians are now talking about taking the State pension away from people who have savings on which they can live. State pensions are a not a luxury or a favour. They are an entitlement. They are paid for. But I suspect that within a decade or so those who have savings or pensions of their own will find that they no longer receive the State pension. (The State pension in the UK is lower than it is anywhere else in the developed world. Nowhere in any industrialised country are old people so destitute; so likely to starve to death or freeze to death.)

What is going to be next?

Are insurance companies going to refuse to pay out because they think you've got enough money? Are the slightly better off elderly going to be banned from using the roads or calling the fire brigade?

This is ageism and it stinks. This is as much ageism as calling 70-year-olds 'Pops', 'Grandpa' 'Old Man' or 'Grandma'.

And yet our politicians don't give a stuff. As far as they are concerned, the elderly are merely a nuisance – and an expensive nuisance at that. Worse still, they tend to be patriotic, remember Hitler, understand German ambition and want to leave the EU.

Modern politicians (particularly Labour ones) use politics as a stepping stone to self-enrichment. Politicians have proved themselves to be more incompetent, more stupid and more crooked than almost any section of society. National policies which waste tens of billions of pounds of taxpayers' money are launched for whimsical, personal reasons and then abandoned as quickly as they had been introduced. Look at the number of politicians who are in, or have been to, prison and who then generally assume they can simply continue their political and public careers. Let us never forget the expenses scandal which showed that virtually every national politician in Britain was a chiselling crook. I described some of the idiocies of one leading politician in my book *Gordon is a Moron* in which I described how Gordon Brown, a former Chancellor of the Exchequer and later one time Prime Minister, had damned near destroyed the country he was supposed to be helping to govern. The Royal Bank of Scotland, which Scot Brown rescued with our money, has cost taxpayers nearly £30 billion.

And the Entitlement Generation are too busy thinking of themselves to give a toss about the elderly or, indeed, about anyone else in need. There are, I fear, too many people now who want to milk the system, grab their entitlements and take full advantage of everything they can grab. That is the pinnacle of their ambition.

This is not a new thing, of course. Since the Welfare State was born, there have been people who think like this. But there are more, far more of them now than ever before. The spirit of entitlement and expectation has become endemic.

What the politicians and the Entitlement Generation forget is that one day they too will be old.

By then they will have helped build a society in which anyone over the age of 60 will be regarded as worthless and disposable.

Incidentally, I have discovered that one trick to surviving increasing old age is to expect the number and variety of small frailties to increase and to be prepared to put up with them. I have friends, sadly both dead now, who were both investigated, treated and medicated to death. They were long-term members of a health insurance scheme and I sometimes felt that they were forever eager to get their money's worth.

And Antoinette and I know an octogenarian who went to her doctor demanding to have her varicose veins dealt with 'because they looked unsightly in the summer'.

For heaven's sake! Don't people realise that every surgical procedure is risky. And that the risks increase with age.

27

The latest news from the 'entitlement generation' (aka millennials, aka snowflakes) is that 20-30 year olds are now again complaining that they are so hard done by that they need their parents to re-mortgage their homes and give them the money. They presumably intend to spend it on coffees made with hand-crushed beans and served in sun-dried avocado skins. They insist that they must buy their expensive, little treats, and to pay the price they think nothing of selling their souls, their dignity, their integrity, their honour and their parents' dignity and honour too. They are like cuckoos, forever demanding, never satisfied.

This is the way the millennials deal with their own sense of unbridled expectation. A whole generation of people has turned into beggars.

Members of the entitlement generation claim that they cannot afford to buy a house of their own because they don't have enough money. They claim that their parents should keep them indefinitely or should, at the very least, provide them bags full of free money.

Millennials are divas without the talent and they live in cloud cuckooland. They appear to have no comprehension of the concept of 'consequences'. They do, however, exhibit the same assumption of all-knowing infallibility that used to be common among young teenagers; they are bumptious and chock full of 'it' but don't yet realise that for everyone else there are two letters missing from the front of the word 'it'. The millennials are afflicted with the teenage affliction of false omniscience; convinced that they know all and that, therefore, their opinions are more valuable than everyone else's. They learn only what they are taught in school and, tragically, they never learn how to learn or even that they need to keep learning.

Not all millennials are still in their 20s. There are millennials in their 60s and beyond. Stand up Jeremy Corbyn. A world run by millennials is going to be totally unbearable. My only consolation is that it is going to be totally unbearable for them too.

Am I the only person to have noticed that millennials in general, and the generation which follows them, are not only mostly spoilt, snotty, smug, self-absorbed, self-satisfied, self-important whingers but all look small, weedy and very young? The millennials all behave like school prefects (the junior equivalent of prison trustees); fussing around and oozing condescension. If they achieve a modicum of success in their chosen field, they expect to have a retinue, a team of 'people' headed by a Chief of Staff. (As in 'my people' will be in contact with 'your people'.) And they practise grievance or insult politics. They find a sore, scratch it until it bleeds and then blame someone, anyone, everyone, and build a career out of the vengeance.

And there is something else odd: the males look rather effeminate and the females are confused.

There are good reasons for all this, of course.

First, I have been pointing out for 30 years that our drinking water is enriched with female hormones (the reasons are explained on my website). It is clear that those hormones are now having a dramatic effect on the human race.

Second, no generation in the history of mankind has been more spoilt than the entitlement generation. A toxic mixture of reality television and social media has created life goals that are far removed from reality. It is salutary that social media users don't have 'friends' or 'contacts': they have 'followers' and 'fans'. There is little proper debate on social media for disagreement invariably leads to abuse and a sense of outrage that someone should hold another point of view. I wonder how many millennials know that the personality traits which trigger heart disease (and which are just as potent as smoking and fatty food) are hostility, cynicism, isolation and extreme self-involvement. There is going to be a veritable epidemic of heart disease in another decade's time, and thousands of men and women in their 40s will be demanding instant heart transplants.

Here are some basic facts about millennials:

1) They cannot empathise, don't understand the concept even.

2) They are strangely puritanical in some respects (but only when it suits them).

3) They can't adapt at all well.

4) They say that all they want are experiences. All new generations say that but the millennials are lying a lot. They want experiences plus a home, a washing machine and a laptop and a printer and at least two telephones. They are painfully materialistic. These are people who spend £1000 each going to Glastonbury Festival and then complain they can't afford to pay the rent.

5) They want to isolate themselves from real contact with people but to spread their opinions as widely as possible. Their meaningless self-serving chitchat is nothing but self-aggrandisement.

6) They are proud collectors of prejudices.

7) They whinge. All the time. About everything. They want all the good things that the previous generation enjoyed but they don't want any of the bad stuff. And they want to enjoy a pleasant work-life balance. They don't want 24% interest rates. They object to paying university fees and would presumably rather go back to the days when interest rates were between 15 and 20% if you were lucky and 24% was not uncommon and the basic rate of income tax was 33%.

8) They are confused about what is 'stressful' and what isn't. They appear generally unmarked by life's vicissitudes but decorated with superficial signs of anxiety as deep as their tattoos. I was the first writer to draw attention to the significance of stress on human health and I have to say that worrying about whether to have a tattoo of a pirate ship on your left buttock or a tattoo of a wolf disappearing into a closely situated orifice is not stressful. Not being able to have your latte served in an avocado skin is not a stressful experience. Millennials despairing of stress because of keeping up with the demands of Twitter and Facebook. Why not just keep off social media? Maybe they should study John Milton's *Paradise Lost*: 'The mind is its own place in itself, can create a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven. What matter where, if I be still the same.' There is very little awareness of the fact that millions are now

addicted to social media. They get a ‘pleasure hit’ every time they receive a ‘like’ and do not realise that they are being exploited. The social media sites are providing short-term joy and creating long-term problems. Millions of social media users are addicted but do not realise just how much they are harming themselves. This is a problem which will bubble away quietly and become an obvious crisis in a generation’s time.

9) They cannot cope with bad days. People have always had bad days. They would face them, deal with them, get through them and go on to the next day. But millennials don’t get through them. They become incensed that all is not perfect for them; angry, resentful and endlessly demanding. ‘Make it right!’ ‘It’s not fair’. ‘How can this be allowed to happen to us?’ Millennials always blame someone else for what goes wrong. They are never willing to take any responsibility. When things go wrong they want someone else to solve the problem for them so that things go their way. Like spoilt children. They lead mean and carping lives of dissatisfaction and complaint.

10) They are supercilious and painfully hypocritical; and not as rebellious as they like to pretend they are.

11) They want reforms but only as long as the reforms pander to their own, largely financial, needs. Other than that they don’t really seem to know what they want.

12) They are afraid of independence and freedom and so they tend to be keen supporters of the European Union; millions of millennials have been institutionalised; and they are as afraid to live outside the stultifying embrace of the EU as lunatics are afraid to live outside the asylum.

13) They refuse to accept defeat not in an old-fashioned, healthy way (we will fight on) but in a delusional ‘it didn’t happen because we didn’t want it to happen’ sort of way. They have all the arrogance which used to be associated with thirteen-year-olds who didn’t yet know that they didn’t know everything and weren’t the only clever people in the world.

14) They have blessings previous generations never even dreamt about but all they see are grievances. Never satisfied, they whinge like wheezy red-faced old men in the members stand at a cricket club but they complain not about what is happening but about what has happened. The saddest thing is that millennials, who are already soaked in resentment, are being constantly encouraged to hate the elderly. The result, of course, will be that euthanasia will become compulsory. It won’t be long before anyone over 70 who dares to keep on living will be put to sleep to keep the millennials happy. Aristotle liked the young because he felt their innocence was attractive. ‘They are not cynical but guileless, because they have not seen much wickedness; credulous because they have not often been deceived; and optimistic, because they have not often experienced failure.’ And all that makes the young easy to deceive, of course. And that is what Corbyn has been doing, taking advantage of their inexperience to Pied Pipering them into a never-never land where their parents are responsible for everything that is bad in the world and where the impossible can easily be promised. What is surprising, of course, is that Aristotle was talking about children. But today those children are in their 20s and 30s. They never grew up and maybe they never will.

15) They are too naïve, too protected from reality by an education system which is designed to ensure that everyone wins a prize and no one ever fails.

16) They claim to be without fear but they mistake fearlessness for bravery. In fact, you cannot be brave if you are fearless. They are attention seeking because they have been taught that they are invincible. They are intolerant and unquestioning because they have been taught that their hubris is justified. They are uncaring, demanding and selfish as that is how they have been brought up to be. And if they work, they favour non-jobs such as ‘influencer’ on the internet. Or ‘life coach’. The fastest growing profession in America is now that of ‘life coach’. There are millions of them and their industry is worth $2 billion a year. Who are these 20-year-olds who deign to tell other people how to run their lives? And who the hell hires them? (These people have joined the elite, alongside charity executives, quango directors, fundraising professionals, lobbyists and spin doctors. These are all people who earn vast salaries but do nothing of any value.)

17) They refuse to accept responsibility for their actions and seem unable to deal with defeat of any kind – result of no such sports or prizes for everyone.

18) They adore the idea of socialism because it offers them the hope of not working but living on the State and not

paying any student fees or taxes. They want to be able to continue to buy stuff they don't need and don't particularly like, with money they haven't got so that they can impress people they don't know and whose opinions are of no practical consequence. Why else would so many millennials spend good money buying 1970s ripped jeans?

19) Modern socialism is not about caring, it is about greed, resentment, selfishness and a sullen reluctance to accept any responsibility married to an equally sullen grandiose expectation that all will be provided by someone else, at their expense (it doesn't matter if the someone else is the state, a relative or an elderly, hard done by taxpayer – anyone's money will do nicely) it is about a self-righteous sense of moral outrage and, when things go well, some good old-fashioned tax avoidance since, after all, it is the State's responsibility to pay for everything and only the little people who don't work for the BBC should contribute.

20) Millennials say they want experiences not things but they don't realise that is what every generation says. Then as they get older, they realise that bungee jumping and sleeping on trains isn't as much fun as it used to be. The millennials think they are being original, of course.

21) They don't understand that there are always Consequences.

22) Millennials are sometimes known as snowflakes because they are so bloody sensitive. It's odd that they should be both mega critical and also mega sensitive because you don't have to be particularly intelligent or insightful to realise that these are pretty incompatible, and today's snowflakes are creating for themselves a world of unending misery in which they do little but criticise, whinge and sulk, criticise, whinge and sulk, criticise whinge and sulk. The constant sharing of opinions goes to their heads. (It is this fact which explains why millennials, who are forever giving out opinions on social media, are so unbearably full of themselves.)

23) Their role model is Jordan, famous for her ability to breathe and for her breast enlargement operations, has built an industry on thin air, which was fine and good for her but is hardly a sustainable role model. Girls in the 1970s and 1980s used to dream of becoming actresses or singers or ballet dancers and though occasionally they would work towards those goals they would mostly recognise them as dreams and their real hopes would be simpler and more realisable: a faithful, sober husband, a nice home, a television set that worked and a couple of kids who didn't get into trouble with the police. Today, girls simply know that they will become stars if they disguise their imperfections and enhance marketable body parts with plastic surgery, cover themselves in tattoos, turn themselves into blowsy Barbies and publish enough trivia on social media. Ambition and hope have been replaced by expectations, driven by a sense of entitlement, which are invariably followed by the disappointment and resentment which fuel their anger and their rage at the world.

24) Millennials have not yet worked out that their only true destiny is old age. So why do they hate old people so much?

25) Millennials don't want a fair society. They all want to be as famous like Jordan, the woman with the inflated boobs, and vastly overpaid like Gary Lineker. They have been brought up to whinge every time they don't get their own way or their feelings are hurt. TV reality shows which offer a brief taste of fame and a little money are inundated with applications. Over 80,000 people applied to appear on an edition of a British programme called 'Love Island'. I suspect that they know they will be used, abused and spat out when the programme makers have finished with them but their desperation for fame is greater than their common sense fears.

The entitlement generation will not, of course, have read Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*. It was written over 4,000 years BG (before Gates) and is therefore undoubtedly considered out of date by millennials weaned on mobile telephones and Twitter wisdom. Indeed, in our universities it has probably been stigmatised and categorised as unsuitable.

But here's a quote from the *Tao Te Ching* that all millennials might benefit from reading:

Fill your bowl to the brim
And it will spill
Keep sharpening your knife
And it will blunt
Chase after money and security
And your heart will never unclench

Care about people's approval
And you will be their prisoner
Do your work, then step back
The only path to serenity

None of this, of course, is how we live now. Today we live in a world of constant criticisms, judgements, approvals offered or withheld, YouTube videos and raw, cold, ruthless ambition. The millennials are doomed because they are always wanting and waiting for something better, never satisfied. And all this is because they have had things too easy. They had examinations which everyone could pass. No school sports because someone might lose.

The more we feel the need to succeed, and the more our happiness and contentment depend upon our succeeding, the more stressed we become and the more disappointed and frustrated we feel. And this eternal dissatisfaction and discontent is the curse of the millennials bred to think of themselves as entitled to success, fame, glory and riches without the annoyance of having to do anything to earn those things.

And all that explains why today's young movers and shakers are such a pathetic, bigoted, hypocritical pain in the butt.

28

I had so much to do I didn't know where to start so I sat outside in a bout of unexpected sunshine.

After a while I took out a notebook and made a list of my favourite 12 medical people of all time. It was going to be doctors but I had to include Florence Nightingale.

Here is the list I made – in no particular order. (I confess I looked up the dates when I went indoors):

1) Dr John Snow (1813-1858) was an English physician who proved the relationship between cholera and contaminated water supplies. He was also one of the first anaesthetists.

2) Dr Ignaz Semmelweiss (1815-1865) was a Hungarian obstetrician who worked in Austria and whose views on infection and puerperal fever brought him ridicule. Depressed by the criticism he became insane and died early.

3) Dr Ernesto 'Che' Guevera (1928-1967) was an Argentinian physician, military theorist, politician, revolutionary and guerrilla leader.

4) Edwin Chadwick (1800-1890) was an English civil servant, lawyer and journalist whose work to improve sanitation around the world probably saved more lives than any practising physician.

5) Rhazes aka Muhammad Ibn Zakariya al-Razi (c 850-c 932) was a Persian physician who was also a mathematician, philosopher, astronomer, chemist and musician.

6) Roger Bacon (1214-1294) was born in England but worked in Paris. Known as Doctor Mirabilis he was a physician but also a mathematician, physicist, chemist, astronomer, geographer, philosopher and comparative philologist.

7) Dr William Harvey 1578-1657) was an English physician and anatomist who was the first to describe the circulation of the blood.

8) Dr John Hunter (1728-1793) was an English surgeon and anatomist.

9) Dr Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809-1894) was an American physician, anatomist and author of the Breakfast Table series of books. (Not to be confused with his son who became a justice of the US Supreme Court.)

10) Dr Joseph Lister (1827-1912) was the English doctor who (while working in Scotland) introduced the principle of asepsis into the operating theatre.

11) Paracelsus aka Aureolus Philippus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim (1493-1541) was something of a showman but helped turn medicine into a science.

12) Dr William Thomas Green Morton (1819-1868) was an American dentist and honorary MD who played an important role in introducing anaesthesia into medical practice.

13) Florence Nightingale (1820-1910) was an Englishwoman who revolutionised nursing.

And here is a list of my favourite authors who were medically qualified: Dr Arthur Conan Doyle, Dr W.Somerset Maugham, Dr C.S.Forester, Dr James Bridie and Dr Anton Chekov.

March

1

In 1975, I wrote a book called *The Medicine Men*. It was the first book to draw attention to the oh-so-friendly relationship between the medical profession and the drug industry.

In 1977, I wrote a book called *Paper Doctors* in which I explained how and why researchers waste money and effort on doing research (and writing scientific papers) which are of little or no value.

Those two books began a small revolution and spawned scores of copycat books.

Suddenly it was acceptable to criticise doctors, scientists and drug companies.

But the medical establishment never forgave me for shining light on some of the profession's most corrupt practices.

And with drug company money backing them, doctors have done everything possible to suppress my books and to ensure that people cannot hear my warnings or follow my advice. (It is important to remember that drug companies could not do 'bad' things without the support of doctors.)

Anyone who upsets the establishment must be portrayed as a dangerous and ill-informed lunatic and the lobbyists do that with great enthusiasm, aided and abetted by quangos, committees and lobby groups which exist to defend the establishment's right to rule without question, opposition or discussion.

As a result of those early books, I have been threatened, spied upon and burgled. I have been lied about and banned in many different but effective ways. I've been threatened with legal action and my books have been suppressed. My website has been hacked and taken down more times than I can remember. And within the medical profession my name has been muddied and the mud has stuck. (When my father was in his 80s, he told me that his GP in Budleigh Salterton had instructed him to ignore any medical advice I gave because I was not practising and therefore out-of-date. That GP subsequently managed to help kill my mother by failing ever to make the diagnosis of normal pressure hydrocephalus, and his colleague managed to kill my father by prescribing a drug he should not have been given.)

But I'm still here.

Now here are 50 biggest, fattest lies which doctors commonly tell.

(If you want to find more information about these lies (and the truth) you will find everything you need to know in books such as *Coleman's Laws*, *How to Stop Your Doctor Killing You*, *Anyone who tells you Vaccines are safe and effective is lying*, *Power over Cancer* and *Doctors Kill More People than Cancer*. All these are available as ebooks on Amazon. I'm not pushing these books, you understand, but merely making their availability known.)

Lie no 1: Doctors say it is important to reduce cholesterol levels (the truth is that evidence suggests that reducing cholesterol levels can be dangerous – and make no difference to a patient's health)

Lie no 2: Doctors say statins are safe (the truth is that there are horrendous side effects with these drugs – which are commonly prescribed for healthy individuals)
Lie no 3: Doctors say vaccines are safe (the truth is that there is no evidence proving that vaccines are safe – but there is plenty of evidence showing that they can be dangerous)

Lie no 4: Doctors say vaccines are effective (the truth is that there is no evidence proving that vaccines are effective – but there is plenty of evidence showing that they are often not effective)

Lie no 5: Doctors say prostate screening is valuable (the truth is that the standard prostate screening test is useless and does more harm than good)

Lie no 6: Doctors say high blood pressure cannot be cured (the truth is that thousands of patients who have dealt with the problem which has caused their high blood pressure have been cured – stress and overweight are common causes of high blood pressure)

Lie no 7: Doctors say you can't catch flu from the flu vaccine (the truth is that the nasal flu vaccine is attenuated but it can help spread the flu)

Lie no 8: Doctors say breast screening is safe and effective (the truth is that X-ray screening programmes actually cause cancer of the breast)

Lie no 9: Doctors say vegetarian diets are dangerous (the truth is that research shows that a vegetarian diet is by far the healthiest human diet, meat is a major cause of cancer and death but contains nothing that cannot be obtained in healthier foods)

Lie no 10: Doctors say hospital infections are under control (the truth is that, as a result of poor hygiene, killer infections caught in hospital are totally out of control and are now spreading into the community)

Lie no 11: Doctors say aspirin is too dangerous to use (the truth is that aspirin taken in soluble form is probably the safest effective painkiller available over the counter)

Lie no 12: Doctors say dementia and Alzheimer's disease are the same thing (the truth is that only just over half of patients with dementia have Alzheimer's disease)

Lie no 13: Doctors say tests and investigations are important but harmless (the truth is that routine investigations help doctors make a diagnosis in only 1 in 100 patients – and many tests are so hazardous that patients can be killed)

Lie no 14: Doctors say chemotherapy is the best way to treat cancer (the truth is that chemotherapy has been shown to do more harm than good in most patients who take it; it often doesn't do any good but it frequently does a great deal of harm to the body and to the patient's quality of life). Chemotherapy is favoured by drug companies (who make big money out of it) and the charities which earn huge sums by working with drug companies.

Lie no 15: Doctors say depression can be safely and effectively treated with drugs (the truth is that most cases of depression cannot be helped with drugs – when doctors say 'let's try this' then you know that they are guessing because they don't have the faintest what to do)

Lie no 16: Doctors say drug side effects are uncommon (the truth is that drug side effects are very common and dangerous side effects are frequent; it is also a fact that prescribing is a very hit and miss affair and (as above) it is no coincidence that doctors often say 'I will try you on this drug' – the word 'try' is very significant)

Lie no 17: Doctors say drugs are tested on thousands of guinea-pig patients before being prescribed (the truth is that drugs are often tested on very few patients before being made available to GPs for mass prescribing – side effects then only appear months or years later)

Lie no 18: Doctors say dementia cannot be cured (the truth is that many cases of dementia can be cured – for example, thousands of dementia patients have a condition called normal pressure hydrocephalus which can be cured with a small operation – but GPs and hospital doctors admit they don't bother to test for this because 'old people aren't worth the trouble')

Lie no 19: Doctors say experiments on animals help doctors find new cures (the truth is that evidence shows clearly that animal experiments are entirely worthless but that they help drug companies put useless and dangerous drugs onto the market)

Lie no 20: Doctors say radiotherapy is safe and effective (the truth is that it is often dangerous and ineffective)

Lie no 21: Doctors say tobacco is the biggest cause of cancer (the truth is that the biggest cause of cancer in humans is meat – but the meat industry is powerful and has suppressed the truth very effectively)

Lie no 22: Doctors say medical screening is worthwhile (the truth is that evidence shows that medical screening is wonderful for doctors and screening clinics but not very good for patients)

Lie no 23: Doctors say drugs prescribed for children have been properly tested (the truth is that most of the drugs given to babies and children have never been tested on babies or children but have only ever been tested on adults)

Lie no 24: Doctors say that alternative remedies are ineffective and dangerous (many alternative remedies are safer and more effective than orthodox treatments)

Lie no 25: Doctors say psychiatry is a science (the truth is that psychiatry is a pseudo-science, more akin to black magic than anything else)

Lie no 26: Doctors say heart surgery is the only way to deal with heart disease (the truth is that many patients with serious heart disease can be cured by losing weight, adopting a vegetarian diet and controlling their exposure to stress)

Lie no 27: Doctors say antibiotic resistance is caused by patients not completing the course of drugs they have been prescribed (the truth is that antibiotic resistance is partly a result of wild and careless overprescribing by doctors and partly a result of the fact that farmers frequently give antibiotics to their animals)

Lie no 28: Doctors say hormone replacement therapy is a safe and effective way of dealing with the menopause (the truth is that it is dangerous and usually quite unnecessary)

Lie no 29: Osteoporosis occurs only in menopausal women (the truth is that osteoporosis occurs in adult men and women of all ages)

Lie no 30: Doctors say that thanks to doctors and drug companies, we are all living longer than ever before (the truth is, life expectancy has hardly changed for adults – it is the reduction in infant mortality rates, resulting from better sanitation and drinking water, that has made the difference in average life expectation)

Lie no 31: Doctors say that cow's milk is good for children (the truth is that it causes allergy problems, is very unhealthy and should be avoided)

Lie no 32: Doctors say that women naturally live longer than men (the truth is that they don't; now that women are drinking and smoking as much as men, and living stressful lives, male and female life expectancy are equalising.)

Lie no 33: Doctors say that asthma is a common disease (the truth is that it is commonly diagnosed but it isn't particularly common – only around one in ten of the people diagnosed as having asthma actually have the condition)

Lie no 34: Doctors say that neurosurgery can help patients with a variety of psychiatric problems (the truth is that in these circumstances brain surgery is about as much use as being run over by a bus)

Lie no 35: Doctors say that women who have a genetic susceptibility to breast cancer should have their breasts removed (the truth is that surgery is brutal and unnecessary; women who have a genetic susceptibility to breast cancer should simply adapt their lifestyle – and give up eating meat – to normalise the risk)

Lie no 36: Doctors say that tamoxifen is a safe drug which will prevent breast cancer (the truth is that tamoxifen causes cancer of the uterus – so it might prevent one cancer but cause another)

Lie no 37: Doctors say that drugs and surgery are the only two ways to deal illness (the truth is that in nine out of ten illnesses the body will heal itself)

Lie no 38: Doctors say that X-rays are harmless (the truth is that they aren't – X-rays are a major cause of cancer)

Lie no 39: Doctors say that as a result of vaccine programmes and antibiotics, infectious diseases are under control (the truth is that infectious diseases are coming back with a vengeance; vaccine programmes have failed miserably and many bugs are now immune to antibiotics)

Lie no 40: Doctors say that repeat prescribing is a safe way to supply patients with essential drugs (the truth is that repeat prescribing saves doctors time and money but helps boost drug company profits at the expense of patient safety – thousands of patients regularly take potentially damaging drugs which they don't need)

Lie no 41: Doctors say that psychotherapy is a powerful way of dealing with mental health problems (the truth is that chatting to a hairdresser or barman probably does more good than talking to a psychotherapist)

Lie no 42: Doctors say that eczema and dermatitis always need to be treated with powerful creams and ointments (the truth is that most skin conditions of this type are caused by some sort of allergy problem – and the best way to cure them is to remove the cause of the allergy)

Lie no 43: Doctors say that medicines bought over the counter are always safe (the truth is that the medicines sold in pharmacies can cause serious side effects and can mask symptoms and signs which indicate serious illness)

Lie no 44: Doctors say that maturity onset (type II) diabetes always needs treatment with drugs (the truth is that type II diabetes can best be treated by diet – without any drugs at all)

Lie no 45: Doctors say that gallstones always need surgery (the truth is that many patients with gallstones need no treatment at all – except cutting down on their consumption of fatty foods)

Lie no 46: Doctors say that tap water is just as good for you as bottled water (the truth is that much tap water contains drug residues which can cause serious and permanent health problems)

Lie no 47: Doctors say that they can be trusted to keep secrets (the truth is that doctors are no longer allowed to respect patient confidentiality)

Lie no 48: Doctors say that patients who ask too many questions are likely to be unpopular with doctors (the truth is that patients who take an active interest in their own health, and who regularly ask questions, are more likely to survive than patients who merely allow themselves to be treated as objects)

Lie no 49: Doctors say that they can be trusted to give you all the options (the truth is that you cannot because surgeons tend to operate and physicians tend to prescribe drugs – it's what they do)

Lie no 50: Doctors say that they can always be trusted to give you good, impartial advice (the truth is that these doctors do what they are told to do by their government and by drug companies – very few bother to do their own critical reading or research)

All this may sound a little depressing.

Indeed, the more you know about the quality of care currently provided by GPs, the more depressed you are likely to become – especially if you are over the age of 60. For example, research involving over 28,000 patients and more than 5,000 GP surgeries recently showed that GPs miss two out of every three cases of pneumonia because they are (to put it bluntly) lazy and incompetent.

There are four easy checks a GP can do to find out if a patient has pneumonia. The first is to check the pulse rate. (It's a bad sign if it is unusually high.) The second is to check the temperature. (High is not good). The third is to check oxygen levels in the blood. (You can buy a device to do this at the local pharmacy.) The fourth is to listen to the chest to see if the patient's breathing sounds rough and crackly. (Any GP with a stethoscope should be able to do this – or should retrain as a car mechanic.)

Once pneumonia has been diagnosed, it can usually be treated with antibiotics. But when GPs don't do those simple checks, the diagnosis is missed and treatment starts too late and the patient often dies 'of pneumonia'. It is, of course, the over 60s who are more likely to die this way.

But there is an answer: we all need to learn to take control of own bodies and our own health.

When you are well, take the time and the effort to learn how your body works and what signs and symptoms to look out for. And if you are unfortunate enough to fall ill, then spend time doing your own research into your illness. Within a surprisingly short time, you will probably know more about your illness than your doctor.

Moreover, don't be afraid to nag your doctors. Patients who sit (or lie) quietly and wait for treatment are too often dead before they get it.

2

I recently unearthed an old copy of *Horizon* magazine which included an article by Beverley Nichols, writing about the time he met Oscar Wilde. The Great Man with the Green Carnation (Wilde not Nichols) was speaking in Leeds and had been invited to stay for one night at the Nichols home.

It was 1883 and the ever strapped for cash Wilde was probably happy to save the cost of a hotel.

For breakfast, Beverley Nichols's grandmother had prepared a feast that appeared 'almost ostentatious'. She was clearly eager to impress her guest. There was a chafing dish filled with kedgeree, Georgian silver platters piled with sliced ham, a Regency sauceboat full of picked cranberries, Sheffield plate well stocked with cold grouse and a cumbersome Victorian device, sitting on top of a spirit lamp, which contained eggs, bacon and sausages.

This was no ordinary breakfast in the Nichols household. This was a very special breakfast for a very special guest. No trouble or expense had been spared.

Eventually, Oscar arrived for breakfast. He was wearing his famous fur coat.

'What would you like to begin with?' asked Beverley's grandmother, confident that she could supply any requirement the Great Man might have.

Oscar studied the sideboard and stood in silence. Then he walked to the window and looked out at a cheerless, snow-laden winter landscape.

'I should,' he said, speaking softly, 'like some raspberries'.

'I beg your pardon, Mr Wilde?' said the grandmother, feeling that she could not have heard correctly.

'Some pale yellow raspberries,' said Oscar.

3

A man in a car park swerved in front of me causing me to brake suddenly. Responding to some primeval driving force I yelled, 'Wanker!' through the open window.

When the driver got out of his car, I could see that this might have been unwise. He was about seven foot tall, five feet wide and as solid as a pyramid. He also looked belligerent.

'What did you say?' he demanded gruffly.

'I said 'danke',' I lied. 'It's German for Thank you,' I said in my best German accent.

'Thank you for what?'

'Just 'thank you',' I said.

He looked puzzled, but he went away and did not kill me so I count it as a win.

4

I wonder how many people who support the EU know that it is now planning something called Bail-ins if banks look like collapsing.

They did it in Cyprus of course but the future plans are much tougher.

It will mean that if one or more banks look dodgy then all bank deposits will be controlled by the EU – and effectively owned by the EU.

There will be an outcry when it happens. Even the Remainers will be upset to have lost all their money.

But it will then be too late.

5

I am reading a brilliant biography of James Agate, the diarist and dramatic critic. Written by James Harding it is without a doubt one of the best biographies I have ever read. And although Harding clearly respects, admires and enjoys his subject's peccadilloes, he does not spare the rod. So, for example, he quotes Hugh Walpole (now forgotten but at the time a major novelist whose books sold by the truckload) complaining about the fact that Agate would often review books without reading them properly (or sometimes at all). 'Now, you may be right in your attitude to current literature, but as you know, a book is a book to the author of it. One has been a year or more living with it, caring for it, cursing it. Why should one deliver it over to someone who will certainly mock it without reading it?'

6

The NHS, designed as a health care service to provide good health care for everyone is now run by administrators and is controlled by a potent mix of vested interests and lobby groups. The vested interests include drug companies and trade unions representing medical professionals such as doctors and nurses. There is little or no concern for the needs or rights of patients and the majority of those who work for the NHS take out private health care insurance because they would never entrust their own health (or that of their relatives) to the service which employs them.

All the important decisions, including vital decisions relating to the allocation of resources, are made by people who know absolutely nothing about medicine, patients or illness.

Today, so much money is spent on the wrong things that before long our ambulance service will consist of a bloke on a pushbike with a box of plasters and a bottle of aspirin in his saddle bag.

7

I am beginning to feel sorry for Lance Armstrong, the disgraced cyclist and seven times Tour de France winner. Just about every cyclist who was convicted of using drugs has been forgiven. Alberto Contador is a hero in Spain. David Millar is a respected television commentator.

And so on and on.

But Armstrong is still the black sheep.

Why?

Could it be simply because he cheated better and more effectively than the rest when putting himself on level terms with those who were born with a clear physiological advantage?

8

Something called 'The Wildlife Trust' has announced plans to recruit 5,000 volunteers for a 'Squirrel Crushing' campaign. Recruits will be trained how to bludgeon grey squirrels to death; to crush squirrels' skulls with rocks, hammers or whatever else useful comes to hand. Seriously, someone called Dr Cathleen Thomas, representing the Wildlife Trust and programme manager of 'Red Squirrels United' wants volunteers to trap and kill grey squirrels by putting them into a bag and knocking them over the head. Their ultimate aim is to kill grey squirrels so that there will, they hope, be more red squirrels. This is, of course, the animal equivalent of racism based on colour and it is utterly unacceptable.

My guess is that the Wildlife Trust, which complains that the grey squirrels are immigrants, wants to kill grey squirrels for cosmetic reasons: maybe Dr Thomas and her little chums think the red ones look prettier and will attract more customers to their bits of sanitised woodland. 'Oh, look, there's a pretty red one, Doris! Take a selfie.'

Inevitably, the Wildlife Trust has created some arguments in favour of its brutal form of ethnic cleansing. They seem to believe that if the grey squirrels are eradicated then the red squirrels will come bouncing back and they presumably want the squirrels which they think are 'prettier' posing daintily in their domesticated bits of woodland. In my view, this is nothing more than a murderous fashion statement and is entirely inappropriate for an organisation which claims to be a friend of animals.

There are, I believe, some serious errors in the thinking of all those who believe that grey squirrels are foreign invaders who do much damage, while red squirrels are charming, home grown and harmless.

First, the red squirrel does every bit as much damage as the grey squirrel and was itself, not long ago, regarded as a pest.

Second, the red squirrel does not help trees by planting their seeds. The red squirrel piles up its stored nuts and this is of no value whatsoever to trees. In contrast, the grey squirrel buries nuts and forgets where they are – with the result that thousands of trees are inadvertently planted. (The grey squirrel plants nuts with great care and precision, digging a hole just the right depth and then covering the buried nut with soil and leaves.)

Third, because of its habit of planting nuts and then forgetting about them, the grey squirrel has been shown to do a vital service for oak, walnut and beech trees. And woodland experts believe that if the grey squirrel is driven out then our forests will suffer enormously. In our garden, grey squirrels have damaged just two branches of a beech tree by ring barking them (and the tree thrives without those branches) and they have (to my knowledge) planted at the very least 50 hazel and beech trees – a dozen or so of which I have dug up, moved and replanted in more convenient positions.

Fourth, the sort of evil discrimination being planned by the Wildlife Trust isn't new, of course. But it is strangely reminiscent of a cull that took place a century or so ago. The irony is that the last time there was a cull it was red squirrels which were targeted. Red squirrels were once considered a real menace in this country; so much so, that in response to the damage they had caused to woodlands, the Highland Squirrel Club was formed in 1903 with the aim of exterminating as many red squirrels as possible. The members of the Club set about doing this with great gusto. In the first 30 years of its existence, the Highland Squirrel Club managed to kill 82,000 red squirrels.

Fifth, the Wildlife Trust doesn't like grey squirrels because they came from America. They seem to regard them as unwanted immigrants. If they'd done their research properly they would know that many of the red squirrels are immigrants too. Back in 1844, someone called Lady Lovat imported a good many red squirrels from Sweden. It is not the greys' fault that they were introduced into this country. They have been in Britain for over 100 years; how long do they have to live here before they are considered native? There is even some debate as to whether or not the red squirrel was ever native to this country, but this is not something that the anti-grey squirrel brigade likes to discuss openly.

Sixth, the Wildlife Trust seems to think that the grey squirrel can be blamed for the decline in the number of red squirrels. But they're wrong about that too. The main culprit for the massive decline in the red squirrel population in Britain is the loss of habitat. Greys are far better suited to deciduous woodlands or mixed woodlands and are able to eat a wider variety of foods; much of the food that makes up the diet of the grey squirrel is indigestible for the red squirrels. The red squirrels thrive best in coniferous woodlands, which is why they do well in Scotland where many of the pine forests are. It seems obvious, therefore, that for red squirrels to flourish in this country then they need more of their right sort of habitat: coniferous woodlands. So, if the Wildlife Trust really wants more red squirrels they should just plant a few more trees.

Seventh, the Wildlife Trust also claims that the grey squirrels are passing the squirrelpox onto the red squirrels. However, research has shown that the red squirrels had this deadly disease before the greys were even introduced into this country. And if their numbers had not been so badly decimated in the early part of the 20th century, then they too would have probably acquired immunity to the disease by now – just as the greys have done. In fact, there have been recent reports that red squirrels have shown signs of acquiring immunity to the virus. So the squirrelpox argument is hollow.

The bottom line is that red squirrels, being prettier and not so ubiquitous, are boosting tourism in the areas where they have been artificially reintroduced. Grey squirrels are suffering from commercial expediency and a bad press. And I suspect that it is for commercial reasons that 'Squirrel Coshing' is being encouraged.

The Wildlife Trust has received millions from Heritage Lottery and EU Life Funding for this foul work. I know that anyone working for the EU must be a mad fascist with a strong streak of racism running through their cold veins. But is the same true for those at the Heritage Lottery?

The Wildlife Trust's ultimate aim is to kill grey squirrels in the hope that there will, in due course, be more red squirrels. But the Wildlife Trust's desire to get rid of grey squirrels is neither logical nor scientific.

There is much wrong with the Wildlife Trust's bit of blatant colour prejudice.

But there is another problem.

I am especially worried about the effect this bizarre squirrel bashing policy will have on the people recruited to do the squirrel bashing – and on their friends, relatives and neighbours.

The Wildlife Trust staff are encouraging people to stuff living creatures into a bag and to then hit them on the head with something – presumably a handy rock.

Amazingly, this is legal.

But in my professional view (as a doctor) anyone who can do this must either be a psychopath or have psychopathic tendencies.

Serial killers and mass murderers usually start their evil work by killing animals.

And that is the truly scary thing: The Wildlife Trust is not just recruiting psychopaths. (Who else is going to volunteer to stuff squirrels into bags and then hit them on the head?) It is turning the psychopaths who volunteer into potential murderers.

Does the Wildlife Trust not realise that killing small animals will appeal to psychopaths? Do they think sweet, little, old ladies are going to volunteer for this evil work? Of course not. The Wildlife Trust will be recruiting its own small army of thugs. Are they incredibly naïve or incredibly stupid or both?

Do they not know that psychopaths who kill small animals may then progress to killing humans? Nearly all serial killers started their 'careers' by killing animals.

In my opinion, the 'Crush a Squirrel' campaign is nothing more nor less than an officially approved apprenticeship scheme which will train thousands of potential murderers, wife beaters and child abusers.

It is important to understand that the Wildlife Trust is organising a scheme which will be more barbaric and more harmful to mankind than fox hunting, bear baiting or cock fighting.

How can I make such a claim?

Simple.

In fox hunting, dog fighting and cock fighting, the humans involved are at a distance to the actual killing. In fox hunting, it is the dogs which do the killing. In dog and cock fighting, the killing is done by animals – not humans.

But the Wildlife Trust's scheme demands that human beings do the killing themselves. It's a hands-on killing programme which is, I believe, pretty well guaranteed to create thousands of bullies, thugs, muggers and murderers.

There is, of course, a mass of evidence available showing that people who are cruel to animals may progress to being cruel to people.

Cruelty to small animals is, indeed, regarded by criminologists as an important stepping stone in the development of dangerous criminals, wife beaters or child abusers.

The Wildlife Trust's members may start off by bashing the skulls of squirrels but some of them will enjoy what they are doing so much that they could end up doing the same thing to humans. There is clear evidence showing a relationship between those who are cruel to animals and those who are cruel to humans. The sort of people who abuse animals (whether by killing dogs or cats, or by putting squirrels into a sack and then bashing them on the head) are the sort of people who end up abusing humans.

Here are some facts to back up my claim:

The police in the UK have been urged to keep records of people who have been cruel to animals. Members of the Wildlife Trust will presumably have to be included in those records.

'Violent behaviour towards animals is often a pointer to violent behaviour towards humans,' said one police spokesman.

A spokesman for the probation officers' union has stated: 'There is a clear link between the torture and abuse of animals and violence against the person.'

A study performed in New Jersey, US found animal abuse in nine out of ten households where there was violence against children. Frighteningly, a third of child victims of violence aged between four and twelve, had physically or sexually abused animals.

Research in the US has shown that animal cruelty is a common factor among serial killers and so-called spree murderers.

A survey of 57 families guilty of child neglect or abuse, conducted by child protection teams around Newcastle, found examples of animal cruelty in 80% of cases.

Robert Thompson, who murdered toddler James Bulger, had a long history of cruelty and boasted of tying fireworks to the tails of dogs.

Railway rapist and multiple killer David Mulcahy bludgeoned a hedgehog to death in his school yard when he was 13-years-old.

Ian Kay, who killed a Woolworth manager in a raid (and later stabbed Yorkshire Ripper Peter Sutcliffe in Broadmoor) once fed a stray kitten to his dog.

Boston Strangler Albert de Salvo killed cats and dogs.

Cannibal Jeffrey Dahmer killed 17 men and many animals and impaled the heads of dogs on sticks.

Peter Kurten, known as the Dusseldorf Monster, who murdered more than 50 people, practised bestiality on dogs as he tortured and killed them.

Luke Woodham set fire to his own dog and also stabbed his mother and killed two teenage girls.

David Berkowitz, who killed six people, also shot his neighbour's dog and poisoned his mother's parakeet.

Patrick Sherrill murdered 14 people and stole local pets for his dog to attack.

Jack Bassenti, a murderer and rapist, buried puppies alive.

Randy Roth who killed two wives, used an industrial sander on a frog and taped a cat to a car engine.

Edward Kemperer chopped up cats and killed his grandparents, mother and seven other women.

Henry Lee Lucas killed animals and had sex with their corpses and also killed his mother and his wife.

Michael Cartier, a murderer, threw a kitten through a closed window and pulled a rabbit's legs out of their sockets.

Opponents of animal cruelty included Lord Shaftesbury, George Bernard Shaw, Abraham Lincoln, Gandhi, Mark Twain, Voltaire, Sir Isaac Newton, C.S.Lewis, Robert Browning, Buddha, Charles Darwin, Leonard da Vinci, Albert Einstein, John Locke and Dr Albert Schweitzer. Most also campaigned against vivisection.

Those are the facts. There is a painfully strong link between cruelty to animals and cruelty to people. The link is well substantiated.

So, how dare the Wildlife Trust organise such a terrible scheme.

What makes the red squirrel so special that the Wildlife Trust wants to encourage us to go out into the woods and beat grey squirrels to death with bricks and clubs?

I'll tell you.

The only discernible difference is their colour. And their colour (and relative rarity in some parts of the country) makes the red squirrel more attractive to tourists and, therefore, to hoteliers.

The Wildlife Trust is a charity which claims to be 'dedicated to the protection of nature'.

Huh?

Did they forget to mention in their mission statement that the bits of nature being protected must be both pretty and commercially attractive?

It seems to me that the raison d'etre of the Wildlife Trust is fraudulent; a downright lie.

What the hell difference does it make whether a squirrel is red or grey?

It's like suggesting that a man (or woman) who is white (or black) is better than a man (or woman) who is black (or white).

It's plain, unvarnished colour prejudice.

Try getting a Heritage Lottery grant for that!

Are we now going to kill people because they're the wrong colour?

If the Wildlife Trust ever rules the world, will volunteers be recruited to kill all the whites because they stand in the way of the black people? Will the Wildlife Trust want to kill black people so that there will be more food for white people?

That's the bottom line; that's what the Wildlife Trust's policy is really all about. It's animal racism taken to the ultimate, blood curdling conclusion.

This is the most ill-conceived, nauseatingly indefensible scheme ever devised by a charity which claims it exists to protect 'nature'.

I've studied squirrels for years and they are intelligent creatures. They have complex social lives. They have families. They are no threat to human life. They don't attack babies. All they really want to do is to eat some nuts, bury some nuts ready for the winter, play games, enjoy an energetic courtship ritual and have some babies. They are intelligent enough to organise the nuts they store by quality and variety. Some squirrels can stockpile up to 10,000 nuts a year and can separate their caches according to the types of nuts they are storing. So, they store one sort of nut in one place and another sort of nut in another place – in just the same way that humans will store different groceries on different shelves.

Criminals, eh?

And the liberal luvvies (who I suspect were the ones who thought up this disgusting scheme) can be comforted by the knowledge that squirrels have never been known to vote Brexit or wave an England flag.

The people who support this wretched scheme, the ones who cheerfully endorse this unprovoked mass slaughter, probably think of themselves as environmentalists.

But though I suspect they are stupid enough and ignorant enough to drive electric cars, I bet they're the sort of superficial environmentalists who aren't quite prepared to go as far as giving up eating meat. The supporters of the 'Squirrel Slaughter' are, I bet, the sort of morons who favour a view of the world which is dominated by superficial, *Guardian*-style environmentalism; city-driven sentimentality devoid of understanding or genuine caring.

(The more extreme environmentalists are, in my experience, not nice people. They are humourless, spiteful and vindictive and rather toxic. 'Trash him and his books' was the advice given online by one Totnes green environmentalist who knew nothing about me or my work except that her leader had published a book on the oil shortage and that she wanted to kill the sales of my book on the same subject. The trashing, still visible was inspired by nothing more than old-fashioned jealousy and it was very effective. I suspect the average mad Green Party supporter doesn't work but spends their time washing out yoghurt pots and putting their recycling neatly into the boxes and bags duly provided by the State Apparatus. Any time left over is utilised taking and distributing photographs of their recycling on Facebook and Twitter to like-minded friends. (I recently had what I think is a great idea. The best way to run the country would be to find out what the Green Party proposes and then do the exact opposite. The result would be happiness and wealth all round.)

The BBC will, I have no doubt, support this squirrel slaughter scheme.

The damnable Springwatch programme endorsed and promoted a similar scheme when it was launched in a smaller way by a bunch of animal racists on the Isle of Anglesey.

In my view, the people behind this scheme have completely lost touch with reality and have been consumed by a twitter-like superficiality.

They have forgotten that we share our planet with animals. We don't own planet earth. Grey squirrels aren't visitors. They live here. They aren't a threat to us in any way. Killing them is as absurd and as indecent as would be a scheme to kill horses because they aren't striped like zebras.

The Wildlife Trust has forgotten that our superiority gives us massive responsibilities.

The Wildlife Trust has ridden roughshod over the notion that animals have rights and has come up with a grotesque idea which values grey squirrels as fashion accessories and regards grey squirrels as a commercial and aesthetic nuisance.

The bottom line is that people who can support a scheme like this cannot really give a stuff about animals – other than the cute cats seen on YouTube.

Anyone who believes in decency, morality and the rights of animals to be left alone whenever possible must object strongly to the policy now espoused, endorsed and promoted by the Wildlife Trust.

One thing is for sure: I bet the Wildlife Trust visitors wouldn't like to be put into a sack and hit on the head.

Let's hope the Trust's psychopath training programme doesn't result in too many mass murderers wandering their woodland glades.

I hope no one ever gives any more money or help to the Wildlife Trust. It is a disgusting organisation which deserves to be culled. This is an organisation which needs to be put into a bag and hit on the head with a big rock.

9

Worries come along en masse these days.

Every day seems to bring news, by mail or email, that will necessitate changing something that really doesn't need to be changed, complicating something that once was simple and efficient and which has, as a result of the change, become complex and unworkable and which in future will doubtless be incomprehensible and intolerable.

10

I have noticed that sellers on eBay do some funny things with their prices.

I was looking for a biography of Arthur Henry Sarsfield Ward, better known as Sax Rohmer (the creator of the *Fu Manchu* novels) and found one on eBay priced at £12.95. I thought this a trifle high so I didn't buy it. A few days later, I changed my mind and decided to buy it. The price had then risen to £42.50. Once again, I decided not to buy it. A week later, out of curiosity, I looked to see what the price had become. It had fallen to £2.96 including postage and packing. I bought the book.

11

I read that a woman in Kansas who is on the FBI's most wanted list had complained about the fact that the police used an unflattering mugshot.

12

I read today that a couple preparing for their wedding are charging their 60 guests £150 each to cover the costs of hiring a posh venue.

13

Here's a rather jolly quote from Arthur Schopenhauer, the great philosopher: 'One need only look at a woman's shape to discover that she is not intended for either too much mental or too much physical work.'

I offer that as probably the most sexist remark ever made by a great philosopher

Or, quite possibly, anyone else.

Oh, no, it can't be.

Noel Coward once wrote that 'women should be beaten regularly, like gongs'.

I think Schopenhauer actually meant what he said (and that's what makes it wonderfully, absurdly hysterical) but Noel was simply being Noel and he got away with it because he recognised that he was a genius.

14

We drove through Chard and saw an advertisement for the local hospital which apparently has a Minor Injury Unit only. How do you know if your injury is 'minor'? What is a 'minor injury'? Is a broken arm a minor injury? A sprained ankle? A two inch cut? A four inch cut? A six inch cut? I ask because I am honestly curious.

The sign also says 'Not 24 hours'. But it doesn't say what the opening hours are. So, presumably, there is a constant stream of wounded individuals being turned away because their injuries aren't considered 'minor' enough or because they don't arrive in bandaging hours.

15

Here are the ten fundamental building blocks upon which the EU has been erected:

1) Lie
2) Steal
3) Threaten
4) Bribe
5) Cheat
6) Bully
7) Deceive
8) Misinform
9) Blackmail
10) Suppress

16

In most decent lives the regrets of omission (the things we didn't do) far outweigh the regrets of commission (the things we did but shouldn't have done).

And that's because in any civilised group, our sensitivities, our feelings, our guilts, our fears, hold us back.

The politically correct won't like me saying this but in some cultures and societies people think differently. This isn't opinion; it's fact.

So, to take an extreme example, cannibals don't feel bad about eating human flesh. We would be filled with remorse. But the cannibals just wonder whether this nice piece of thigh needed another 15 minutes and a little more horseradish sauce.

It's just cultural.

Cultures are different. And pretending that they're not is infantile, dangerous and self-destructive.

It seems to me that this is an important thought and one that is either overlooked or suppressed by the folk who believe that we are all the same, that globalisation is a Good Thing and that forcing people of different cultures to live together in a multicultural melting pot is also a Good Thing.

What the liberals don't realise, perhaps, is that when you force different cultures to live together, the different groups will not meld together to form a sort of human soup. Instead, the strongest and most ruthless group will win out and will overpower (physically and culturally) the weaker groups.

And that is exactly what is happening in Britain these days.

To take just one example: the police in many parts of the country have refused to take action against Muslims accused of raping white girls on the grounds that to do so might upset the Muslim community. Our weakness (which we like to describe as broad-mindedness) has resulted in our society being demeaned.

17

Antoinette bought me three wonderful CDs – The Squadronaires (the Royal Air Force Dance Orchestra playing music from 1941-1953), Glorious Victory (the best of military bands playing such standards as '633 Squadron') and Wartime Memories which includes a wonderful track in which George Formby sings 'Mr Wu's an Air Raid Warden Now'. The song includes the line: 'If you've got a chink in your window you'll have another one at your door' (suggesting, in the nicest possible manner that a defect in your blackout could result in the oriental Air Raid Warden becoming frisky). I can't understand why no one has done a modern version of the song.

Listening, I am reminded that the British charts were often dominated by what were called novelty records: I remember Benny Hill and the 'Fastest Milkman in the West', Rolf Harris and 'Two Little Boys' and Ken Dodd with 'Tears' and 'Happiness'.

If you compile a list of the ten biggest selling singles in British chart history, those four should be in there. But the compilers never put them in of course because they are considered too embarrassing. (The Rolf Harris record wouldn't be there anyway, of course. It would be in the locked box in the cellar, together with the Gary Glitter records and a bucketful of radioactive waste.)

There was even a group called the Rockin' Berries which specialised in novelty records for the Christmas market.

The music industry takes itself far too seriously these days.

Where are the fun, novelty records of today?

18

Thinking again about the Wildlife Trust, I dug out a poem about squirrels which I wrote and published in a book called *Animal Miscellany* which Antoinette and I wrote together a few years ago:

Who stole my nuts?
The squirrel demanded
When I capture the culprit
I'll see he's remanded

There were acorns and beech nuts
And cob nuts galore
When I find out who stole them
I'll start a small war

I know where I put them
It was just about here
I tell you quite firmly
Of that I am clear

They were under the oak tree
Two steps to the left
And now that they're gone
I feel quite bereft

Or could it just be
Now here's a strange thought
That the tree that they're under
Is not the same sort

And ten minute later
There's a glorious screech
As the squirrel declares
They're under this beech!

19

Whenever I switch on an internet related computer, I receive tons of adverts for stuff I've already bought. The advertisers buy my name from companies who have sold me stuff which I no longer need because I've already bought it.

However, I learned today that some of these marketing companies have managed to put together mailing lists of gambling addicts.

And, naturally, when the gambling addicts turn on their computers they see nothing but attractive adverts from gambling sites.

Nice, eh?

20

In just six years, as a direct result of EU legislation, the sum of £900 million has been spent by Britain on shipping carefully collected rubbish over to continental Europe.

And what did the EU do with all those yoghurt cartons, etc. which it had insisted that kind-hearted, well-meaning citizens spend time and water washing out so carefully? (To save the planet.)

They burnt them.

And turned them into smoke and hot air.

Meanwhile, the fastest growing industry in Britain today is the small, local private collecting of rubbish.

Councils everywhere have become increasingly unreasonable and unwilling to provide the services (such as refuse collection) which they are paid to provide. Councils can blame the EU for all this of course. It is EU laws which have forced them to institute utterly pointless recycling regulations which result in ship loads of carefully sorted waste being shipped abroad, to China or the European mainland, to be burnt or buried. (Heaven knows what will happen when China stops taking our rubbish. My guess is that it will be quietly burnt.)

It is EU regulations which have forced upon us a system of recycling which does far more harm than good. It is EU regulations which have resulted in time and energy being wasted on pointless sorting, washing and collecting. It is EU regulations which have resulted in the manufacture of millions of plastic containers and specially designed collection lorries. The whole recycling nonsense wastes far more energy than it saves and has wrecked our society in numerous ways.

But councils are forced by a system of EU punishment fines to accept the nonsensical legislation designed in Brussels and they have leapt on laws which help them avoid spending money on useful services.

And so now small private contractors are filling in the gaps and will take away your rubbish if you can afford their services.

21

Back in the days when *Private Eye* used to be funny, pertinent and dependably intrusive they used to hammer me a good deal but much of the jolly nonsense was so inaccurate that I never minded much. (At least one high-powered libel lawyer wrote inviting me to sue the magazine. I didn't bother.) Other scrofulous publications, such as *The Independent on Sunday*, also published nasty stuff.

I probably should have minded (and sued) because some of the garbage that was printed so carelessly in a variety of publications has settled onto the wastelands of the internet like dandruff on the shoulders of a car salesman's cheap suit.

Instead of suing, I invariably merely accepted a published apology. It seemed the sensible thing to do at the time.

And today the original articles still exist on the internet. But the apologies have long since disappeared.

And there the harmful nonsense will doubtless remain until the Greens ensure that the electricity runs out and the internet dies an un-mourned death.

22

For the umpteenth time, we watched the first of the Jason Bourne films. It is, I think, the best of the series. The quality steadily deteriorated and the fourth film in the series is so bad that after watching it we threw the DVD straight into our charity bag.

The most unbelievable bit in the first film is the fact that Bourne always seems to be able to find a parking space in central Paris.

23

I picked up a copy of one of the Toff novels by John Creasey in a junk shop. Creasey wrote over 600 novels using 28 different pen names, and I am ashamed to say that I don't think I've read any of them – though I have seen some of the films made about his Gideon character. I have no idea how he kept up with what he was doing and what he'd done. I have a job keeping up with my miniscule output.

After receiving hundreds of rejections, Creasey wrote crime thrillers, romantic novels, science fiction and westerns and was, like Leslie Charteris, pretty well ignored by the critics. (I read most of the Saint books when I was 12, interspersing them with Dickens, Tolstoy et al and enjoying them all in their very different ways).

Creasey's long running characters include The Baron, Gideon of Scotland Yard and The Toff. And, boy, did he write! In 1937 alone, he published 29 novels. I don't think even Dame Barbara Cartland managed that sort of output. Creasey founded the Crime Writers Association in 1953 and his total sales are measured in tens of millions.

Creasey knew how to write a damned good book. And I'm always prepared to keep learning my craft so I'll read a few of Mr Creasey's.

24

We received a council tax bill today. The council tell me that if I pay by credit card there will be a surcharge of £40 for the privilege.

Naturally, I sent the bastards a cheque.

25

Today I found myself absent-mindedly saying ‘thank you’ to a recorded voice which had told me how important my call was and that an agent would be with me shortly.

I was so cross with myself that I put the receiver down, lost my place in the queue and afterwards couldn’t remember who I’d been calling or why.

26

A man whose dog was attacked by cows has written to the papers complaining and demanding that farmers should not be allowed to keep cows in fields where there are footpaths or where people walk their dogs.

It apparently did not occur to the idiot that he should not take his dog into fields where cows were grazing.

Or that he should keep his dog on a lead.

27

I changed some euros for sterling at a Post Office (where the rate is awful but slightly better than the bank). I pushed the euros across the counter and asked the clerk if she would be kind enough to give me some proper money in return.

She looked at me very sternly and said: ‘That’s a xenophobic remark.’

I think she will probably report me to the authorities.

I don’t care.

28

A fellow came round to our home in Gloucestershire. He was wearing one of those fluorescent jackets which people wear when they are out of the office so that passers-by realise they are especially important and must not be run over.

I didn’t open the door but found a coloured leaflet, expensively printed, about our not having put out our proper assortment of waste boxes.

We have obviously been dobbed in by someone.

If they come back, I will tell them that I eat all our rubbish.

Or maybe I will tell them that I am a member of a religious group and not allowed to touch or sort rubbish. I will say that we are ‘Humanitarian Theoperceptualists’ and associated with the ‘Brother and Sisterhood of Humanitarian Muslims and United Semites’ and that any attempt to force me to put out our recycling rubbish will be regarded as a racist assault.

Or maybe I will just be very old and slightly senile when the council’s recycling specialist calls. It’s not a stretch, as they say.

‘What did you say? You want to know if I’m interested in going cycling with you? Oh dear, no thank you. I used to be very keen but I’m a bit wobbly these days. It’s nice of you to ask though. Just wait a moment and I’ll find you a shilling to buy yourself some new tyres.’

29

Friends of friends of friends were burgled a few months ago and the burglar was caught. Today he was sentenced. The police caught him because the burglar left behind his torch. He wore gloves but didn’t wear gloves when putting new batteries into the torch and the police caught him from the fingerprints on the batteries.

Wonderful!

Worthy of S.Holmes Esq.

30

It is often forgotten that schools were originally designed to keep children occupied while their parents worked. That was the aim – nothing more and nothing less. The idea of educating children while they were being minded came along later.

Today, however, the basic, original purpose seems to have been subverted by teachers who, unsatisfied with holidays which seem to stretch forever, are now choosing to close their schools on Fridays at lunchtime.

This may be jolly nice for teachers, who can have a long weekend every weekend, but it’s a bit glum for parents, who have to take time off work or else leave their offspring wandering around snorting coke and having sex in the street.

31

I am fed up with rich celebrities sharing their ‘liberal’ views on immigration. I’m also fed up with them demonising patriotism and talking up the benefits of globalisation, world government and the glories of Adolf Hitler’s European Union.

(The strange thing about patriotism is that the politically correct, metropolitan, elite, liberal democratic establishment has a two-faced view of patriotism. The members of the establishment, the Blairs et al, expect us to be patriotic when they want us to support one of the many wars they promote. They want us to love and respect our country, and to feel a strong sense of duty, when they want us to fight and die or pay for the bullets and bombs. But they want us to forget all about patriotism when they are promoting the United States of Europe. They are so unpatriotic themselves that they think that patriotism is something that can be switched on and off at will.)

I really loathe wealthy, liberal luvvies.

They never have to wait a year for hospital treatment. They go straight into a private hospital or, better still, a private ward in an NHS hospital. They never have to watch their kids struggle at a school where no one else speaks English. They unblushingly send their children to private school or they cherry pick a ‘good’ school where there are no foreign pupils holding everyone back. They don’t have to worry about rising taxes (because they know how to take full advantage of the available tax avoidance schemes). And they don’t have to sort their own rubbish and put it into nine separate plastic containers because, thanks to the EU’s immigration policies, they have their cheap immigrant labour to do that for them.

It’s normal and healthy for immature 18-year-olds to believe in socialism. But sensible grown-ups usually grow out of this nonsense as they learn a little about the real world.

Socialism and communism never ever provide the good times they promise. There was mass starvation in the Soviet Union and in China. And more recently there has been mass starvation in Korea too. When China allowed a little capitalism to temper the communism, the people suddenly started to eat regularly.

In all countries where socialism has leant towards towards communism (in the way favoured by the Corbynistas), people have been killed or imprisoned (or both) without trial and political opponents have disappeared.

That, sadly, is a real fact of life.

But the rich liberal luvvies don’t know much about those facts of life.

April

1

I put this April Fool gag on my website as a news item: 'BBC is to celebrate men and is planning a regular 'Men's Hour' programme. The new programme will be launched on International Men's Day and will deal exclusively with male issues. The presenters and contributors will all be male.'

Unfortunately, everyone who saw it knew immediately that it was a joke.

Antoinette's idea was much better.

She wrote a piece reporting that an American company was planning an electric car which would be powered by lightning. The car would have a large battery which would store energy taken into the vehicle through a specially adapted lightning conductor.

More seriously, it has been confirmed (again) that in recent years alone, the BBC has received millions of pounds from the European Union. I first revealed this in my book *England Our England* in 2002.

So now no one need wonder why the BBC is biased in favour of the European Union and why its news and documentary programmes are bent. It is, of course, also why the BBC was biased in favour of the Remain vote during the run up to the Referendum.

2

It is my honest opinion that Tony Blair is a war criminal who should be locked up for the rest of his life. His lies and deceit and personal ambitions took us into an unjust and unjustifiable war. He is responsible for far more deaths than Harold Shipman, Ian Brady and all the other infamous murderers of the 20th century.

I firmly believe that Blair has become rich because of his support for that illegal war.

But I'm now pretty certain that Blair (who, remember, used to be a critic of the EU) has also gone stark raving mad.

Blair led us into war in the Middle East. British armed forces killed many innocent people.

He is surely one of the main reasons that so many Muslims hate Britain.

Now Blair, a fanatical supporter of the EU and its immigration policy, wants the people he bombed and made homeless – including Muslim extremists who hate us and our culture – to come and live in Britain through the ever-generous auspices of Hitler's European Union. It's as though Churchill had invited Nazis to come and live in Britain in 1940 and then been surprised at the outcome. We bomb Muslims and seem surprised so many hate us. We then invite them into the country in their millions, allow them to live under their rules, and then surprised when we get attacked and bombed.

It is important to remember that a well-established Muslim target is the takeover of a nation without the effort and expense of going to war. And they are doing very well. There are already a number of Muslim mayors in English cities (including London, of course). There are over 3,000 mosques in England and over 130 Muslim Sharia courts. There are areas of England which are no-go areas for whites and where pubs and off-licences are unwelcome. More than three quarters of Muslim women are unemployed and accepting free benefits and free housing. The incidence of unemployment among Muslim men is almost as high. Muslims often have half a dozen children or more – all paid for by British taxpayers. And British schools now serve halal meat to all children – despite the fact that this method of killing animals is unbelievably cruel and regarded as uncivilised by most Britons. Not long ago, 100,000 Muslim men met in a park and everyone seemed to think this entirely acceptable. If 100,000 BNP members met, they would be arrested and vilified in the press.

3

The number of council staff in England and Wales earning over £100,000 a year soared by 53% last year. There are now 2,314 council workers earning over £100,000. And there are 539 council workers earning over £150,000. And these aren't just bosses with big responsibilities.

For example, one London council has 44 members of staff earning over £100,000. They can't all be running things.

The people who do the real work (dig holes and file bits of paper) are subjected to a pay freeze. But council bosses have stuck their noses deep into the trough.

Making it worse, far worse, is the fact that these overpaid council bosses have massive and wildly over-generous pension plans.

And they can retire in their 50s or early 60s.

The result is that councils are now spending a huge proportion of their income on salaries and pensions for council workers who sit around in big offices doing very little. Or sit around in the golf club bar.

The average big company boss now receives 300 times the pay of lower paid workers. That's a disgrace. They are stealing money from other workers and from shareholders.

But council workers who are earning these massive salaries (rather, that should be 'receiving' rather than 'earning') are an even bigger disgrace.

Their greed is destroying local services and putting a huge financial burden on the elderly for whom council rates are a massive proportion of their unavoidable expenditure.

There is no excuse for any council worker to be paid over £100,000.

They will all claim that they deserve these huge salaries.

But cut them down to £50,000 a year (with lower pensions) and see how many quit to take their chances in the real world.

Of course, the chances of this happening are as great as the chances of the BBC planning a regular 'Men's Hour' programme to celebrate International Men's Day.

In other words, no chance at all.

4

Would you let a bunch of strangers put their unwashed fingers into your mouth?

I thought not.

You know as well as I do that this would be a great way to pick up all sorts of nasty bugs and, at the very least, end up with a two day bout of vomiting and diarrhoea.

So, why on earth would anyone buy a huge bag of crisps designed to be shared among a lot of people with grubby fingers?

I mention this because I see that Gary Lineker, a former footballer and now the unthinking person's liberal luvvie crisp salesman, is flogging very big bags of crisps designed to be shared.

This is utter lunacy. Crisps are not good food because they tend to contain far too much fat. And in my view, the crisps which Lineker promotes (Walkers) are, like all similar products, likely to lead to obesity, heart disease and an early death.

(It is a salutary thought that children die because of the product which is helping to make Lineker rich.)

Now, the 'sharing bags' are likely to add a variety of nasty infections to that list of illnesses.

Incidentally, am I the only person who is offended when this damned crisp salesman tries to take the high moral ground on political issues such as Brexit and on immigration and opening our doors to endless refugees?

I respectfully suggest that in my opinion, Lineker possibly knows less about the EU than he knows about nutrition and child obesity.

Lineker has been reported to have very good advisors who help him minimise the amount of tax he pays. Don't you just love these people? Bono is the King of these tax avoiding hypocrites but Lineker appears to come a close second.

I am quite prepared to accept that Lineker may not have done anything illegal – in the sense of going to prison illegal – but the sort of crafty tax avoidance of which he has been accused is certainly morally questionable.

And for a multi-millionaire who pontificates about how the Government should spend taxpayers' money, it is definitely, quite definitely, grotesquely hypocritical.

5

Contrary to the claims being made by the Greens and Liberal Democrats who are closet fascists and who adore Hitler's plans for Europe, the vast majority of Britons who oppose the EU and unlimited immigration are not racists.

The patriots who voted for Brexit, partly because of the problems created by immigration, didn't do it because they are racists but because they are wise enough to realise that a substantial number of immigrants who come to Britain, through the auspices of the EU, are not coming because they admire our culture, our history or our way of life but for other, largely mercenary, reasons.

Many older Brexit voters, now being unjustly abused and reviled, fought for Britain against fascism.

Many are voting to leave the EU because they understand that the next generations will be better off if Britain is outside the EU.

'If we want things to stay as they are then things will have to change,' wrote Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa in *The Leopard*.

The wise folk who voted Brexit realise that many immigrants do not intend to merge into our society, to be part of our nation. On the contrary, they want to retain their own culture; an attitude which is ungenerous and discourteous in itself.

Amazingly, 1.3 million children in England do not speak English as their first language and English is no longer the first language for the majority of pupils in more than 2,000 primary and secondary schools. In more than 200 schools, English is not the native language for nine out of ten pupils.

It is hardly surprising that schools are now struggling to teach pupils how to read and write and it is hardly surprising that the incidence of illiteracy and innumeracy in Britain is increasing at an alarming rate.

Many immigrants insist on us adopting their culture and way of life because they believe it to be superior, and to them the only acceptable way of life. A good number continue to wear their native dress although it is hardly appropriate for our climate. (One reader asked me why Arab men wear white robes whereas Arab women wear black. The answer is simple: white clothing reflects the desert heat and keeps the wearer nice and cool on hot days and black clothing, on the other hand, absorbs heat and keeps the wearer uncomfortably hot. Feminists may see some significance in this.)

Many even want to discredit our history by, for example, tearing down statues of great English heroes.

That is where the racism comes in; for that is a racist attitude.

And it isn't immigration in the way that many Britons emigrated to Australia and became Australians.

Or the way that the Irish emigrated to America and became Americans.

In both cases, these emigrants took to their new countries with enthusiasm. They embraced their new nations and the way of life they found. They became proud Australians and proud Americans.

But Britain is now suffering an invasion; a subtle but deliberate and significant act of war. Immigrants who enter the country with a passion and a ruthlessness and a belief in their own culture (and who believe that their culture is better than anyone else's) will overcome the weak who do not have enough pride in themselves and do not have the mental strength to defend themselves, their culture, their history and their future.

I don't know why the Remainers don't understand any of this.

I suspect that many of the older Remainers have been bought with money and promises.

And they have persuaded younger Remainers to support the EU with lies and false threats.

6

A year or so ago, I bought a couple of hundred copies of *Punch* magazine from the early 1950s. They are a joy to read. I enjoy them as a substitute for modern periodicals. P.G.Wodehouse and John Steinbeck were among an impressive list of regular contributors.

There doesn't appear to be much of a market for old magazines and these cost me £1 each which was a snip. (Especially when you consider that the issues containing pieces by authors such as Wodehouse have a considerably enhanced value for collectors.) You can even buy old magazines from the mid 19th century for little more than pennies. Many, such as *Punch*, are much sharper than modern magazines such as *Private Eye* and *Viz*.

And they contain some surprising news features.

In the *Punch* issue dated June 22nd 1955, there is an article by Lord Kinross in which he describes a scheme devised by the brothers Bernstein who were apparently aiming to make shopping 'a more alluring experience for housewives'.

The brothers had hired a small army of housewives whose job it was to shop all day long. They were paid ten shillings for each purchase they made and at every shop they visited, they filled in a form, giving marks for Sales Efficiency, Customer Contact, General Appearance of sales assistant and even what the assistant said at the end of the sale. The form also contained a place for the shopper to make remarks about the whole shopping experience.

And it wasn't just shops which were the target of this survey.

Cafés and pubs were also being investigated, with marks being given for cleanliness and the demeanour of the waitress or barmaid.

So the review system now so popular on the internet isn't new after all.

7

I was, for a while, almost a little bit famous. I was on television several times a week, on the wireless even more frequently (through the miracle that is provided by pre-recording programmes) and my picture was printed in the national press several times a week. I was a T-shirt, and posters advertising my books and columns appeared in bus shelters and on television. People occasionally recognised me in the street, in shops and on railway platforms.

(In those days, it was perfectly acceptable for a publisher to advertise an author. It was not, however, acceptable, for a self-published author to advertise his own books. The rules have now changed and I don't have the foggiest idea what the rules are. I'm not even sure if there are any rules.)

I never much liked being a little bit famous.

But I have met people who would do anything, only just short of dying, to be famous.

A friend of mine once admitted to me that his only ambition in life was to be recognised in the supermarket where he did his weekly shopping. He confessed that he would do anything to achieve this aim. Sadly, it never happened. He touched the hem but at the last moment it was always whisked away from him. Someone else always got the plum part in a television advertisement. Someone else got the TV presenting job. Someone else got the show on national radio. It must have been excrutiating, tantalising and endlessly frustrating. No one could have tried harder.

He was yet another example of why I always get cross when I hear people who have been successful crediting their glory on 'hard work' and ignoring the two other essentials: talent and, most important of all, good luck. It's intensely depressing to those who work hard without great success.

Success comes from talent, timing, work and luck. My pal had plenty of talent and he worked hard.

But he didn't have the luck. He was never in the right place at the right time.

He got enough work to live but I very much doubt if anyone ever recognised him at the cheese counter or at the cooked meats counter.

He went recently to the Great Studio in the sky.

I hope lots of people recognised him when he got there.

8

I needed to print something today. We have three printers in the house and I cannot make any of them work. One of them requires a disk but the laptop I am using has no disk drive. The other two printers require me to connect my computer to the internet and I refuse point blank to do this.

Fortunately, Antoinette remembered that we keep a 'dirty' laptop which we do connect to the internet. So I moved the stuff I wanted to print to the 'dirty' laptop and printed it out.

In the bad old days, twenty years ago, I had a printer which I had attached to my laptop without any outside assistance. I just connected a lead from the printer to the computer. And plugged the printer into the wall socket.

It worked and did everything you can ask of a printer.

Now everything is just too complicated.

9

There aren't many great English eccentrics about these days. Most have been crushed by the need to conform.

No one would have crushed Lt Col Jack Churchill.

In France, early in the Second World War, he was the last soldier in history to kill an enemy soldier with a longbow.

In a raid on a Nazi post in Norway in 1940, he stood on one of the landing boats playing his bagpipes. When he landed, he swapped the bagpipes for a claymore sword. I bet the Germans were terrified. I would have been. He then threw a grenade before charging at the enemy.

In 1944, he was captured but a year later he escaped and walked over the Alps to rejoin the Allied forces.

Can't see many millennials doing any of that stuff can you?

10

Hackers are taking over the world and the frightening thing is that the big computer companies and banks seem to be just as vulnerable as the rest of us. Tens of millions of pounds have been stolen through the SWIFT banking network. More than a billion Yahoo accounts were compromised. That's a billion with a 'b' and not a million with a 'm'. Hackers have stolen credit card details from Home Depot and Neiman Marcus and they have managed to wriggle inside banks such as JP Morgan Chase. Google and Facebook were conned by a hacker who took them for $100 million. A company called OneLogin, which promoted itself as a secure password management service, lost some of its customer data to hackers. Linkedin said that 6.5 million accounts had been hacked but later it turned out that they had slightly underestimated, since 117 million names and passwords had been put up for sale by the hacker. Over 9,000 bank accounts at Tesco were emptied by hackers. It appears that Uber, the sort of taxi service, lost the personal details of 57 million people but kept quiet about it for a year (after paying the hackers $100,000 to keep silent and to destroy the stolen material).

An American credit rating company called Equifax which promises its customers that it 'help protect you against fraud' has admitted that data from between 143 million and 145.5 million customers may have been compromised in a security breach. The company's job, its reason for existing, is 'to collect, securely store and aggregate information'. They didn't do it very well. The information stolen included: names, social security numbers, birth dates, addresses, driving license numbers and credit card details. And the company, which promises to protect its customers (that, after all, is part of its raison d'etre), didn't get round to telling them that their personal information had been stolen for 40 days. That makes the whole thing a real scandal because if people had been warned they could have been more careful. The company initially claimed that less than 400,000 customers in the UK had been affected. A couple of months later, they admitted that actually they'd got that slightly wrong too because the hack wasn't limited to 400,000 but affected 15,200,000 customers. An easy mistake to make if you are a complete idiot, I suppose.

Why aren't these companies ever brought to book? Why is no one ever arrested for incompetence? Why hasn't Equifax been shut down and all its executives fed to the lions? With companies like this looking after our security we might as well have all personal details tattooed in some visible part of our bodies for all to see. Most of us could have our details on our foreheads and starlet, reality TV types could have their bank numbers, passport details and so on emblazoned on their bosoms. There would be more room there and the details would be seen by more people.

Incidentally, by one of those odd, little coincidences which seem to happen so often to overpaid individuals working in large, powerful companies, three executives of the company, including the finance chief, sold some shares (worth $1.8 million) just after the theft was discovered. What a surprise they must have had when they realised what they had done, for according to the company, the three had no idea about what had happened. You'd think, wouldn't you, that senior executives in a company, senior enough to hold loads of shares, would know what was going on and would have an inkling when 143,000,000 of their customers had had their personal details stolen and are now at risk of having their identities stolen. (I've had a small taste of that and it is no fun at all. Last year Americans lost $16 billion as a result of identity theft. And they will have also lost a great deal of time and suffered an enormous amount of stress.) But hey-ho we are told that the three executives who flogged their shares knew nothing of the hack.

(The company, by the way, referred to the theft as an 'intrusion' which we can add to all those other mealy mouthed misnaming words which are so popular with executives these days.)

And what lucky folk the three were for the shares they had so fortuitously sold went clunk and lost 35% when the theft was finally revealed.

The chief executive of Equifax earned almost $15 million last year. (Mind you, Tim Cook, the chief executive of Apple, received a total of over $150 million in salary and bonuses and vested shares so the boundaries and expectations for company bosses these days seem limitless.)

Still, justice has been done. After the hacking debacle, the chief executive retired in disgrace and had to leave with only $70 million in benefits and bonuses. I bet that was a lesson for all chief executives.

There are, it seems, few if any penalties for such egregious incompetence.

Indeed, it seems likely that Equifax will make money out of the fiasco. If just one in ten victims buys its credit monitoring services as a result of what happened then Equifax will double its annual income and the company's remaining executives will be in line for even bigger bonuses.

I do not believe anyone who ever tells me that their system is immune to fraudulent hacking. Children in their bedrooms are forever hacking into the personal computers of CIA and FBI bosses. (They are, of course, always autistic since this ensures that they cannot be extradited). I really don't understand why the authorities don't simply hire the child hackers instead of wasting money prosecuting them.

My pension company is still trying to force me to go online by claiming that their website cannot possibly be hacked. I am punished for refusing to do so not just because I have to pay more to do anything but because they won't send me any paperwork if I deal in shares on the telephone. And nor will they let me know what cash I have available for investing. The result is that I don't change anything and so they don't earn any commissions at all.

All companies can be hacked (whatever their assurances) and none can be trusted to tell you when your personal details have been stolen. This is Coleman's First Law of Privacy.

And yet no one seems to take online fraud seriously.

Four out of five IT managers admit that their company has released computer code before testing it for bugs or resolving security issues.

11

There is no political party standing up for the English. (Although I realise that UKIP gets close it isn’t a party for England).

There is no one asking who will pay for the asylum seekers. There is no one pointing out that the NHS cannot cope with an endless series of foreign patients demanding treatment for their AIDS or providing them with free obstetrics care or heart surgery. There is no one explaining that the NHS has collapsed and that English taxpayers (the least well looked after citizens in the British Isles and yet the ones who pay for just about everything) are dying because of long waiting lists. There is no political party wondering if women should be allowed to breast feed in restaurants. There is no political party wondering whether or not homosexuals should be allowed to marry and adopt children from far off countries. There is no political party promoting the virtues of a Christian life (with or without the formal church). There is no political party brave enough to question the myth of climate change.

England is definitely, completely, permanently stuffed.

12

I think I first noticed the end beginning around 25 years ago.

I used to make regular appearances on a late night live television show which came from studios in Birmingham. At the end of one programme, I said goodnight to the director and producer and announced my intention of walking back to my hotel. The director and the producer looked at me as if I were completely mad. ‘You can’t do that!’ they said. ‘You’ll never get there!’

I stared at them in astonishment.

I went to medical school in Birmingham. Even though the city centre has been turned inside out several times, I still know my way around. Besides, I could see my hotel. I could see my room window. It was no more than a few hundred yards away. I could walk there in five or ten minutes at the most.

‘We’ll get you a taxi,’ said the producer. He sent someone off to order a taxi. Television companies always have someone ready to go off and order a taxi.

And they stood in the doorway to prevent me going outside by myself.

Thanks to Birmingham’s traffic system, it took three times as long to get to the hotel by cab as it would have taken me to walk there.

Today, there isn’t a city in England where I would feel able to take a walk after ten or so at night. In many parts of many cities, I wouldn’t feel comfortable going out after dark.

The sad thing is that most English cities are not just unsafe, but they have also lost their identity. Treasured landmarks are being demolished without hesitation. Traditions are abandoned. Bits and pieces of Victoriana are smashed away with enthusiasm.

And though it is undoubtedly considered racist to say this, this is because the immigrants the EU has forced us to accept have taken over our nation. They have absolutely no interest in our culture or our history.

It is not fashionable, and probably not even legal, to say this but large numbers of immigrants came to England not because they admire our culture, our approach to civilisation, our interpretation of democracy, our history of generosity to those in need, our inventiveness or our attempt at a judicial system but because they want our money and, when they’ve got it, they want to replace our world with their world.

Immigrants don’t come to London because they like our London. They come to London because they want to use our money to turn it into their London.

And they are doing well.

In the last 12 months for which figures are available, 93,000 Britons moved out of London. That figure is 80% higher than the figure five years ago and the total is rising at a massive rate. Just about every home born citizen who can afford to leave is quitting – selling their overpriced home and buggering off. Most are going abroad. Some are simply heading out into the countryside.

But the population figures do not reflect this.

London’s population is now 8.8 million and rising fast as more and more immigrants pour in – ensuring that there will never again be a white English mayor in charge of England’s capital.

Does it matter? Of course it bloody well does.

Ancient Rome ended up with slaves doing all the work and the ordinary citizens living on hand-outs. The toga-wearing bosses just had a good time.

That didn’t turn out too well for them did it?

It is not a bit like London today. It is exactly like London today. The slaves are the immigrants who work for sub-minimum wages. The citizens living on hand-outs are the remaining Britons. The few happy middle and upper class Britons remaining in London are the liberal luvvies who enjoy having immigrants to do their menial work: the cleaning, the gardening, driving the Uber car, digging out the basement, caring for the children.

It is because of the liberal luvvies that the immigrants are paid wages which keep them in poverty and turn huge areas of London into slums and ghettoes.

London is a lost city. The rest of England should, perhaps, just build a wall around it and abandon it.

London has become a city where terrorists are acclaimed as long as they are foreign born, hating Britain.

It is a city where brain-dead liberal luvvies and millennials offer the incomers everything we have left – on a platter.

London is a city of political correctness, gender awareness, action days, grinding poverty, blatant racism, violence and ageism (if you are English and elderly). London is now more crime ridden and dangerous than New York City with rape, robbery and violent offences far higher in London. London is a city of rage and noise and bowls of cornflakes sold to the millennials for a fiver. It is a city of vigils and crocodile tears and clichéd nonsenses. It is a city where Islamic terrorists are reared. It is a city where immigrants take endless advantage of our generosity, our welcome, our everything.

Our security bosses will eventually realise that the terrorism risk, now being home grown and home sustained, will soon be a permanent part of British life. When a white man, probably mentally disturbed, made a pretty half-hearted attack on Muslims, it was instantly branded a terrorist attack. But when Muslims attack Britons, which they do with rather more consistency and determination, no one likes to call it terrorism. It's dismissed as just an isolated instance of extremism. But it is yet another isolated instance of extremism.

London is filling up with the dregs from other countries while many of the best and hardest working home-grown citizens are emigrating.

Most young professionals now say that if they had the opportunity to do so they would quit Britain, which they see as having no present and no future. Most of those who are quitting say they are leaving because Britain has been changed too much by immigration. Some, of course, leave for more lenient tax regimes. (You can be resident in Malta, which is an EU country, without spending a single day there.)

But it is a politically motivated nonsense to say that Britons are leaving because they want to live in sunnier countries or because they are attracted by lower tax rates. Britons, and especially Londoners, are merely abandoning a half sunken ship.

London may now be a city of diversity. But it is no longer a city of tolerance.

In London today there is more religious and cultural intolerance than ever before. London is a city which even Dr Johnson would be tired of.

In the days of Daniel Defoe, around 11% of the English population lived in London. Today, that figure is falling dramatically as the English sell their overpriced flats and buy country homes with a few acres and a barn.

London an international city? Don't make me laugh.

We now do everything we can to avoid it.

Britons will continue to leave and within ten years there won't be a Brit left in the damned place and you'll be unlikely to meet a native English speaker anywhere within Mr Khan's sheikdom.

I used to love London.

I loved walking up from Whitehall, through Trafalgar Square (which used to be full of tourists photographing the pigeons but which is now full of tourists looking lost), up Charing Cross Road (which used to be packed with bookshops), into Shaftsbury Avenue (where there are still some theatres), to Leicester Square, then cut down along Jermyn Street (where the tailors and hatters which remain are usually offering massive sale offers), back up to the Burlington Arcade (which now sells only overpriced tat to the richest tourists) then up Bond Street. We would take a taxi to Paddington from the top end of Bond Street.

It was a walk best done on a misty, drizzly night.

I doubt if I will ever enjoy that walk again.

London is now too dirty and too unsafe.

It isn't just London, of course.

Despite the fact that disillusioned, saddened Britons are leaving their country in huge numbers, the population is rising rapidly as immigrants continue to pour in.

The inevitable result is that the nature of our country has changed.

Even our prison service has been bloated by immigrants who now make up 14% of the UK's jail population.

It's madness.

13

I read today that Britain's sandwich industry now employs more people than work in agriculture. The sandwich industry is far larger and far more advanced than anywhere else in Europe. Around four billion sandwiches are produced and packed in Britain each year.

Why?

The obvious answer is that people are too busy to sit down to a meal and far, far too busy to make their own sandwiches. Most of those sandwiches, by the way, are infected with potentially unpleasant bugs such as Escherichia coli.

We all spend too much of our lives rushing around. My list of things to do before I die includes a lot of sitting around in the garden with a good book.

14

Drug companies are spending big money on looking for drugs that will boost the body's immune system so that it can tackle cancer.

They're all in it now.

What a pity they waited so long.

And what a pity that the *Daily Mirror* (encouraged and aided and abetted by a major cancer charity linked with the drug industry) chose to help shut down my website 20 years ago when I first suggested that strengthening the human body's immune system was the way to fight cancer most affectively.

15

People used to say that things were better 'then' and when the 'then' was 100 years ago everyone knew it was bollocks. Things were only better if you were rich.

Now, I'm not so sure.

Thinking about it as objectively as is possible, I do think things were better 'then' if then was just half a century ago.

Back in the 1950s and 1960s we had antibiotics which worked, anaesthesia, antiseptics (with no hospital acquired resistant bugs) and roads you could drive on with a reasonable expectation of getting where you were going before the seasons changed. Women wore frocks and dresses and skirts and men wore hats and took them off when greeting women. On buses, men would offer their seats to women without being abused. Obesity was far less common and infant mortality rates had fallen dramatically. Life expectancy for adults was much the same as it is now.

16

I have for some years been collecting evidence which shows clearly that the framework for the EU was built in the 1940s by Adolf Hitler and other Nazis.

Everyone who now supports or defends the EU is ipso facto a Nazi sympathiser. There is no doubt that the truth makes uncomfortable reading for the EU's many supporters – most of whom stick their fingers in their ears and shout a lot if I ever try to tell them about it.

Liberal Democrats and liberal lefty luvvies don't like to be told that in supporting the EU they are helping to promote the work of Adolf Hitler and other Nazis. But the facts show that they are. Anyone who claims otherwise is either ignorant or in denial. The EU, an undemocratic, truly fascist and much reviled organisation, was created exactly as Hitler and his Nazi colleagues said it should be. Even the euro was planned by the Nazis.

(There is much irony in the fact that the EU's critics are often denounced as 'fascists'. Fascism was invented by Mussolini and it is perfectly clear to anyone who has studied the subject that the EU is the most perfectly fascist organisation ever invented.)

The EU was designed by Nazis, and, moreover, was designed to make Germany stronger. It is no coincidence that Germany is the one country to have benefited from the EU's formation.

Ignorant members of the Entitlement Generation do not realise that the European Union was designed by Adolf Hitler and his Nazi chums and that the EU as it exists is designed to promote Germany's interests.

You only have to look at how the euro has advanced Germany's economic position in the world to see just how this happened in practice. Thanks to the way the euro was structured, Germany makes a huge financial surplus each year and is destroying the economies of other euro-zone countries. The Germans are getting rapidly richer and the citizens of other countries are becoming poorer. It is no exaggeration to say that the EU has killed Europe in order to enrich Germany.

And that, of course, was the plan. It is why the EU was founded.

It is nonsense to claim, as some Remainers still do, that the EU is a modern creation, founded by Kohl of Germany and Mitterand of France. We have heard it suggested on the BBC that these two politicians were so scarred by their memories of World War II that they decided to build a new Europe 'where there would be peace, happiness and prosperity for all'.

This is patently untrue, and yet there are many credulous citizens who believe it.

The truth is that the history of the EU goes back much, much further than its proponents will usually admit. I have exposed the Nazi background to the EU before but much of the important material below is new.

It was back in the 1930's, in Hitler's Germany, that the European Union was invented and designed. Hitler wanted to destroy national identities and create a united Europe, consisting of new regions to be ruled from Berlin. In 1936, Hitler told the Reichstag: 'It is not very intelligent to imagine that in such a cramped house like that of Europe, a community of peoples can maintain different legal systems and different concepts of law for long.' Even before that, in Italy, the founding father of fascism, Mussolini, said in 1933 that: 'Europe may once again grasp the helm of world civilisation if it can develop a modicum of political unity.'

Adolf Hitler wanted to get rid of the plethora of nations in Europe. His advisor, Funk, agreed that 'there must be a readiness to subordinate one's own interests…to that of the European Community'.

In 1940, Herr Arthur Seyss-Inquart called for a new European community which would be above the concept of the nation state. Seyss-Inquart was, at the time, the Nazi in charge of the occupied Netherlands. He predicted that once national barriers had been removed there would be increased prosperity in Europe.

Hitler was the man who gave bones to the dreams first expressed by Charlemagne and Napoleon but the finishing touches to the EU as we know it were put in place during World War II by a man called Walther Funk, who was President of the Reichsbank and a director of the Bank for International Settlements (BIS). It was Funk who laid the foundations for European economic unity – and the euro. Funk was also Adolf Hitler's key economics advisor.

The European Union was designed by Nazis and it has been carefully created according to the original design. It is not, you will note, a 'group' or an 'association'. It was always a union. And in a union the members are not affiliated, they are joined. 'What good fortune for governments that the people do not think,' said Adolf Hitler.

The BIS was then and still is the world's most powerful and secret global financial institution. During the Second World War, the BIS accepted looted Nazi gold (handling 21.5 metric tons of Nazi gold) and supported the development and launch of what would, in 2002, become the euro. The Bank for International Settlements (BIS) was set up by the governors of the Reichsbank and the Bank of England in 1930. It still exists and no one controls it and yet it is, to a large extent, in charge of the world's finances.

During WWII, the BIS was used by the Nazis and the Allies as a point of contact. Walther Funk's deputy, Emil Puhl, described the BIS as the 'foreign branch' of the Reichsbank. At the end of WWII, the Reichsbank became the Bank deutscher Lander and the Bundesbank. The BIS helped these to ensure that Germany continued to dominate Europe – despite its having come a poor second in the Second World War.

There were many connections between the BIS and the German banks. For example, Karl Blessing worked at the BIS during the 1930s before transferring to the Reichsbank. While at the Reichsbank, Blessing oversaw slave labourers in Germany. He later became president of the Bundesbank.

It was Hitler and Funk, working with the BIS, who designed the EU as it exists today. The Nazis wanted to get rid of the clutter of small nations which made up Europe and their plan was quite simple. The EU was Hitler's dream but it was Funk who outlined the practical work which needed to be done.

In 1940, Funk prepared a lengthy memo called 'Economic Reorganisation of Europe' which was passed to the President of the BIS (who was an American called Thomas McKittrick) on July 26th 1940. (A copy of this historic document is stored at the BIS in Basel.)

'The new European economy will result from close economic collaboration between German and European countries,' wrote Funk. It is important to note that even then the EU was seen as a union between Germany, on the one hand, and the rest of Europe, on the other. There was never any doubt which nation would be in charge of the new United States of Europe. (The phrase United States of Europe was devised by Adolf Hitler himself).

There are commentators and economists today who note Germany's control of today's EU with surprise, and who seem puzzled by the fact that Germany is booming and has by far the largest and most dominant economy in the EU. No one should be surprised because the EU was always planned that way. Germany is benefitting enormously from the euro crisis but Funk knew that would be the case. Back in 1940, Funk had the idea for the euro but warned that even after monetary union it would be impossible to have one standard of living throughout Europe. He knew that the euro would be flawed but he also knew that Germany would come out on top. He would not be in the slightest bit surprised by the fact that modern Germany is by far the largest and most dominant economy in the European Union. That was always the Plan. In reality, of course, the euro was bound to cause chaos and massive unemployment throughout many parts of the European Union because of policies which German politicians set in process after the unification of West and East Germany and before the foundation of the euro. The policies, which were designed to enable a unified Germany to control the EU, involved Germany entering the euro at an advantageously low exchange rate, thereby giving it a huge competitive advantage over other euro countries. The aim was that Germany would get richer while other countries got poorer and that is exactly what is happening. (The French stupidly and short-sightedly chose to join the euro with a strong franc because it meant that they could enjoy cheap holidays in the rest of Europe.)

Because the euro is undervalued relative to the German economy, Germany exports far more than it imports and grows ever richer and stronger at the expense of its other euro 'partners'. Germany currently runs the world's biggest trade surplus – and has been running big surpluses for a decade. German politicians have refused to spend the money they have been accumulating and so other countries in Europe, struggling to cope with a euro artificially strengthened by a rich Germany, have slumped further and further into depression and their unemployment rates have soared.

The Germans are fighting hard to protect and preserve the euro, and will continue to pay money to preserve the status quo, because if the European currency breaks up, two things will happen: first, Hitler's plan for a German dominated United States of Europe will be in tatters and second, the Germany mark will suddenly be as strong as the Swiss franc, and cars and refrigerators made in Germany will be priced out of many markets.

If the Germans can keep the euro alive then in due course, the inevitable will happen: Germany will control the European Union and Hitler will have a posthumous victory.

Economists, who tend to have a limited understanding of the world, are constantly producing articles expressing surprise at the fact that the euro was created at all and dismay that, despite all the evidence showing that it has caused enormous damage to countries and individuals, it is being kept alive. If they understood how and why the European Union was created (and who created it) they would, perhaps, have a better understanding of why it exists and why those who support it will fight to the death to preserve it.

Remember all this the next time you see a British politician claiming that our enormously expensive membership of the EU is vital for Britain. And remember too that many of the EU's loudest and most persistent supporters have received massive financial support from the EU; sometimes in the form of grants and sometimes as fees. The EU spends billions every year on keeping its supporters happy. The BBC, a renowned supporter of the European Union and an organisation which has confessed to being biased in the EU's favour, has received millions of pounds from the EU. The money is invariably described as being given as a 'grant' but the word 'bribe' might be more appropriate. The BBC seems to repay this financial support by opposing Brexit, by defending unpopular EU policies (such as those on immigration), by insisting that all measurements referred to in its programmes are in EU friendly metric units rather than proper British imperial measurements and by taking every opportunity to disparage England and the English. The BBC, like most organisations which depend upon the State, has a powerful liberal-socialist bias and I doubt if you could find more than a handful of Tories in any such institution. Why should you? All these organisations depend upon the benevolence of the State and will therefore support it to the hilt. Plus the BBC recruits pretty well exclusively from the readers of *The Guardian*; the house journal of lefty liberal heads in the sand luvvies who like lots of immigration because the immigrants make excellent, cheap domestic staff.

Joseph Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda in the Third Reich, would have been proud of the BBC which is now an essential part of the Fourth Reich. Goebbels would have probably also been proud of the fact that scores of universities have professors funded by the EU. The professors are paid to teach students the value of European integration. And, naturally, the EU has, over the years, spent many large fortunes producing literature and teaching aids for teachers to use in European schools. (A recent survey showed that 80% of university lecturers in the UK are left wingers; which, assuming they are adults, means they are immature, ill-informed and far too stupid to be teaching anyone.)

On the rare occasions when voters in European countries have been invited to vote on EU issues, the EU has been the main financial contributor to 'Vote Yes' campaigns. That's another example of the way the EU views democracy. (And European politicians have the nerve to point the finger at Russia's President Putin!)

In 1941, Walther Funk was still planning the new European Union. He launched the Europaische Wirtschafts Gemeinschaft (European Economic Community) to integrate the European economy into a single market and to establish his idea for a single European currency. It was Funk who helped plan the European Union Community although when it was established he was still labelled a war criminal and still a resident of Spandau Prison in Berlin and it wasn't considered a terribly good idea to give him medals or to organise a thank you 'roast'. All subsequent suggestions that Funk be recognised as the founding father of the European Union have been rejected on the grounds that it is too soon to put up a statue to the man to whom Hitler handed the responsibility of ensuring the good health of the Fourth Reich. Funk planned the EU in precise detail. It was Funk who planned a Europe free of trade and currency restrictions.

In June 1942, German officials prepared a document entitled *Basic Elements of a Plan for the New Europe* which called, among other things, for a European clearing centre to stabilise currency rates with the aim of removing foreign exchange restrictions, securing European monetary union and 'the harmonisation of labour conditions and social welfare'.

The original plan was for the Reichsmark to be the new European currency but Funk, a far sighted pragmatist, never saw this as crucial, or being as important as Germany having economic leadership of Europe. The far-sighted Funk saw Germany as central to the planned EU, and argued that it would result in 'better outlets for German goods on European markets'. Back in 1940, it was Funk who planned to introduce a United States of Europe via a common currency. Today, it is clear that Walther Funk, economist, banker and war criminal, is the true father of the modern European Union and is one of the most influential figures in European history.

Hitler and the rest of the Nazi leadership welcomed Funk's plans and in 1942, the German Foreign Ministry made detailed plans for a European confederation to be dominated by Germany. In the same year, a group of German businessmen held a conference in Berlin entitled 'European Economic Community'. (The phrase 'European Economic Community' had been first used by Hermann Goering in 1940.)

In 1942, Reinhard Heydrich, who was head of the Reich Security Central Office and renowned for his ruthlessness against enemies of the State, published *The Reich Plan for the Domination of Europe* – a document which is notable for its remarkable similarity to the EU's Treaty of Rome.

In March 1943, 13 countries (including France and Italy) were invited to join a new European federation which would be under German military control.

When the Nazis realised that they were losing the war they knew that they had to make a deal in order to preserve German domination in Europe. Thomas McKittrick, the president of the BIS, acted as go between and helped set up the negotiations. The underlying plan was to ensure that Germany dominated post-war Europe and Funk and his colleagues decided to talk about European spirit, liberty, equality, fraternity and worldwide cooperation as the basis for their planned European Union. They decided to agree to share power, and even to allow other countries to take charge for a while. The Nazis knew that all they needed to do was retain men in power in crucial posts. And this they succeeded in doing.

In 1943, Heinz Pol, a former newspaper editor from Berlin, who had fled to the US, published a book entitled *The Hidden Enemy* in which he explained that Germany realised that the war was lost and was planning to preserve its domination over Europe. Pol explained that the BIS was playing a vital part in the Nazi plan.

Here is how Pol predicted that post war German leaders would trick the rest of the world into accepting that they had abandoned Nazi ideals: 'To obtain a peace, which would leave them in power, they will suddenly flaunt 'European spirit' and offer worldwide 'cooperation'. They will chatter about liberty, equality and fraternity. They will, all of a sudden, make up to the Jews. They will swear to live up to the demands of the Atlantic Charter and any other charter. They will share power with everybody and they will even let others rule for a while. They will do all this and more, if only they are allowed to keep some positions of power and control, that is, the only positions that count: in the army – were it even reduced to a few thousand men; in the key economic organisations; in the courts; in the universities; in the schools.'

This is precisely what happened. Pol had predicted with startling accuracy just how the Nazis would win the peace.

In 1944, a secret conference was held in Berlin entitled 'How Will Germany Dominate The Peace When It Loses The War'. Rich and powerful Germans decided to move a huge amount of money out of Germany and to take it to America. (The money stayed there until after the Nurnberg Trials when it came back to Europe.)

In August 1944, the heads of the Nazi Government and a group of leading German industrialists, met at a hotel in Strasbourg and decided to hide more large sums of money in order to pay for the fight for a German dominated Europe to continue if their country lost the war. The Nazis realised that their back-up plan for European domination would take years to reach fruition but they believed that if their military tactics failed then their subtle economic and political tactics would prove successful.

Today, of course, Strasbourg is the seat of the Council of Europe and the European Parliament. (Strasbourg was occupied by Germany and the Nazis during World War II but became French again after that war.)

The technical preparations for Funk's 'European Large Unit Economy' (now better known as the Eurozone) began in 1947 when the Paris accord on multilateral payments was signed, were strengthened in 1951 when the European Coal and Steel Community was created as the first step towards the development of a new European nation to be run by Germany, and continued in 1964 when the Committee of European Central Banks (made up of

Bank Governors) met at the BIS to coordinate monetary policy.

In 1961, US President Kennedy told British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan that the White House would only support Britain's application to join the Common Market if Britain accepted that the true goal of the Common Market was political integration – Hitler's famous United States of Europe.

In 1966, American President Johnson encouraged Britain's membership of the developing European Economic Community and so Foreign Office civil servants in London decided that the 'special relationship' with the USA would be enhanced if Britain joined the Common Market. In 1968, the Foreign Office warned that 'if we fail to become part of a more united Europe, Britain's links with the USA will not be enough to prevent us becoming increasingly peripheral to USA concerns'.

The European Central Bank (ECB), (which today has so much power over European citizens) was designed and set up by the German Bundesbank which was Germany's post war central bank. The Bundesbank was the son of the Reichsbank which was the name of Germany's central bank before and during World War II. The President of the Reichsbank before and during World War II was, of course, Walther Funk.

The ECB would probably have a Walther Funk Founder's Day if they thought they could get away with it and the only surprise that Funk hasn't yet found himself portrayed on euro coins and notes. He has more of a right to appear on them than anyone else because they were his idea.

Today, thanks to the Maastricht Treaty, each EU member's gold reserves belong to the EU and are effectively controlled by the ECB. As planned, the ECB (grandson of Hitler's Reichsbank) is not democratically accountable to anyone. It is actually prohibited from taking advice from Eurozone Governments and the European Parliament has no authority over it. No one knows how the ECB makes decisions because everything is done in great secrecy.

There are some supporters of the EU who claim that the absence of democracy within the organisation was never the original intention. They are wrong. The EU was always designed to be an undemocratic organisation: it is the Anti-Democracy.

Way back in 1950, Clement Attlee, Britain's Labour Prime Minister recognised the problems associated with the planned European unity. He said, when responding to the Schuman plan for the European Coal and Steel Community (the initial version of the EU): 'It (is) impossible for Britain to accept the principle that the economic forces of this country should be handed over to an authority that is utterly undemocratic and is responsible to nobody.'

The unwritten, unspoken aims of the European Union are to regulate every activity and to ensure that everything which every citizen does will be controlled by the State. The plan is to eliminate small businesses, small hospitals and small everything else. As far as the EU is concerned 'small is bad'. It is much easier for the State to control production and tax gathering if it only has to deal with large international companies.

(It is hardly surprising that the executives of large companies are among the most vocal of the EU's supporters. In the UK, for example, they will often threaten to close down factories if citizens vote to leave the EU.)

By licensing every occupation, and insisting that individuals pay annual licensing fees, the EU can control citizens and take in more taxes. Individuals who speak out or protest can be controlled by having their licenses withdrawn.

On January 1st 1999, eleven countries launched the euro and in January 2002, Funk's dream currency finally replaced national currencies. The secretive BIS was crucial in helping to force through the euro – the first step towards the new European state. The truth is that the introduction of the euro was nothing more than the final instalment of World War II – the realisation of the Nazi dream shared by Adolf Hitler and Walther Funk. Herr Funk had predicted that uniting countries with different cultures and economic policies would be disastrous. But he knew Germany would come out on top.

Members of the British press were massively enthusiastic about the euro but got so excited that they forgot to give due credit to Herr Funk and his boss. Commentators drew attention to the fact that travellers could now use the same currency over much of Europe and could buy ice creams in Italy with money they'd taken out of the bank in France. No attention was paid to the fact that when countries decide to share a currency they are making a significant political decision. No one seemed to care that the majority of people in all the countries which gave up their currencies were opposed to the euro. (The EU has never pretended to be a democratic organisation. Hitler and Funk believed in federalism and centralisation but they weren't desperately enthusiastic about democracy which they regarded as a sign of weak leadership.)

'It was a very peculiar thing to have a central bank without a Government,' said Paul Volcker, chairman of the Federal Reserve in the USA. French politicians believed that the single currency meant that Germany would not be able to start any more wars. They also believed (quite wrongly, of course) that Germany would no longer be able to dominate the European economy.

Everyone involved with the creation of the euro knew that the new currency was fatally flawed. The aim was to use the euro to force through a political union, against the will of the European people and in spite of the massive, inevitable cost in terms of unemployment and hardship. Millions of people now face a lifetime of poverty and unemployment because of the hasty introduction of a new currency which no one needed and no one wanted.

Economists recognised from the start that the euro would be problematic and would create huge social difficulties (including terrible levels of unemployment) but politicians ignored all the warnings. They knew that introducing the euro would make the creation of a federal Europe inevitable and unstoppable.

In 1945, Hitler's Masterplan was captured by the Allies. The Plan included details of his scheme to create an economic integration of Europe and to found a European Union on a federal basis. The Nazi plan for a federal Europe was based on Lenin's belief that 'federation is a transitional form towards complete union of all nations'.

It is impossible to find any difference between Hitler's plan for a new United States of Europe, dominated by Germany, and the European Union we have today.

The EU was never wanted by the people of Europe and it has been built on years of deceit, corruption and hidden agendas. A group of fanatics, inspired by Hitler's dream of a United States of Europe, realised that their dream could only be turned into reality if they moved one small step at a time, set limited objectives, ignored public opinion and prepared treaties which required individual countries to relinquish only a little of their sovereignty in any one agreement.

And so a relatively innocuous Coal and Steel Community was slowly transformed into Hitler's dream: the European Union.

The Remainers who are so vocal in their support of the EU are nothing more nor less than Nazi sympathisers; fighting to sustain the Nazi plan for Europe.

You won't hear any of this on the BBC.

And no one else will publish it.

Which is why I've included it here.

At least you and I know the truth.

17

It is widely acknowledged that people benefit enormously from sharing their lives with a pet of some sort – a cat, an aardvark, a dog, a goldfish or a giraffe will all produce significant improvements in physical and mental health. If you have a dog you can take it for a walk and talk to it. If you have a goldfish you can take it for a swim.

But I suspect that there are also benefits to be gained by having a stuffed toy in your life. Stuffed toys require no feeding. They produce no mess. You can cuddle them. If you have to leave them then you can do so easily – knowing that they will be there when you return. You can take them on holiday with you.

18

We are back in Paris. Having spent much of the last 20 years in Paris, the most important thing I have learned is that one should never admit to speaking French. Not a word. None. Nothing. Not even 'mercy buckets'.

Here's why:

If you speak French, the locals (especially in Paris) will criticise everything you say. They will delight in picking holes in your grammar and they will constantly correct your pronunciation.

If you speak French to a Frenchman (or German to a German), you will always be searching for the appropriate word. You will be forever on the back foot, struggling to make sure that you aren't making a mistake which will result in your listener collapsing onto the floor and holding his stomach as he struggles to contain his laughter. If he's trying to speak your language you can chuckle merrily and raise eyebrows occasionally.

If you insist on having all your conversations in English, the French person will be on the back foot. They will have to put a lot of effort into struggling to cope with a foreign language and they will have less brain available to deal with the problem at hand. And you can help to destabilise them by constantly correcting their English. (All native French speakers, however cocky they may be about their language skills, make terrible mistakes when they speak English.) When correcting a foreigner who is speaking English I always try to be understanding and patronising. I tell them they are doing really well and I ask them if they learned their English at school. If they seem fluent, I ask them how many weeks they have been learning English. This drives most of them almost insane.

If you need time to decide what to say or do, you can pretend not to understand what they are saying. If they say 'I am unhappy with clause 17 in our contract', you reply 'I'm sorry, did you say you are having trouble with your carburettor?'

If a foreigner is forced to speak English they will feel inferior and intimidated. This is always a Good Thing.

Acquire a good knowledge of English idioms and distribute them at random. Also, try using unusual words. So, for example, when saying goodbye, I always say ‘Toodle-pip’ or ‘Pip pip’. This leaves foreigners who profess to speak perfect English blank-faced and rather bewildered. ‘Tinkerty tonk’ is, I find, also quite extraordinarily effective and firmly to be recommended when dealing with those unfortunate enough to have originated somewhere on continental Europe.

19

There is much talk about class distinction in Britain. But the truth is that the real distinction is between those who work for the Government and those who do not.

Those who have worked for the Government receive massive, inflation-proofed pensions. Those who have never worked for the Government struggle by on derisory pensions.

Those who survive on universal tax credits must wait weeks for the money, starving and shivering but those who manage the system are egregiously overpaid.

I read today that civil servants at the Department for Work and Pensions have been receiving massive bonuses despite the fact that the nation’s key welfare system, the Universal Credit, is woefully mismanaged. The permanent secretary, the director general of digital technology and the director general of Universal Credit all of whom seemed to be about as much use as elastic tape measures received bonuses of up to £20,000 a piece last year – on top of salaries of around £200,000 a year.

And, of course, there will doubtless be a knighthood in due course.

Civil servants are punished rather than rewarded when they make egregious mistakes.

20

Reading a book about English wars, I read today that in the hands of a skilful archer a longbow can be a remarkably deadly weapon.

Back in the 13th century, it was known for an iron tipped arrow to pin an armoured knight to his horse, piercing chain mail, human thigh and wooden saddle.

Ouch.

21

French people demanded the other day that I provide evidence that I am English. I was, at the time, wearing a worn tweed sports jacket, a pair of rather ropey corduroy trousers, a checked shirt, an MCC tie and brown brogues.

‘What the hell do I look like?’ I demanded back. ‘I’m certainly not a frog, am I?’

22

The Paris police have been busy taking the blankets from homeless tramps in the city. I assume that someone in the Police department (or the Mayor’s office) thinks that if the tramps just lay on the pavement without blankets they would look neater. They would, of course, die sooner and it would therefore, be permissible to take them away and cremate them.

The Mayor and the Police Chief might like to reflect on the fact that the clochards of Paris are something of a tourist attraction.

On the other, the tons of concrete bollards, miles of wire fencing and presence of armed policemen make the city distinctly unattractive.

The gutless, lily-livered bosses of Paris have handed the city over to the terrorists. They might just as well let the clochards have a bit of it too.

23

Around £645 million worth of stuff is confiscated at security gates at British airports each year.

Where does the stuff go?

Who helps themselves to all those expensive penknives?

24

I heard a young woman of 16 going on 36 (or maybe that should be the other way round) quoting Nietzsche today. Naturally, she quoted that silly remark about ‘that which does not kill us makes us stronger’. It is just about the only thing that is widely remembered about Nietzsche’s work.

But even Nietzsche must have realised that what he wrote was absolute garbage – especially since he later went mad when he saw a horse being mistreated in the street. That didn’t make him stronger did it?

Nietzsche was, as I’m afraid he often was, talking absolute bollocks.

The truth is that the crap that doesn’t kill you just makes you weaker and more wary. Only psychopaths are made stronger by adversity.

Over the years, both Antoinette and I have been through some troublesome times. And we both agree that although the troubles, worries and anxieties have not killed us they have certainly not made us stronger. On the contrary, they have doubtless weakened us and made us far more vulnerable.

25

A day or two ago, I was wondering why writers today produce so few words compared to their predecessors. Frank Richards, for example, used to write 10,000 words day in day out on an old sit up and beg typewriter. Heaven knows how many words Mark Twain produced even before he discovered the typewriter.

But when you stop and think about it there is no real mystery.

We all waste hours every day dealing with the unavoidable crap and the endless stream of emails, trashy advertisements and so on. (I used to try to deal with the crap before doing fun things. In olden times, this was possible. But today there is so much crap that I have changed my attitude to the crap. It now takes second place. Annoying emails and letters are deleted or burnt. Most of the time I don’t even bother to check that our utility companies aren’t over-charging by putting us on a high tariff programme.)

This afternoon my Windows programme suddenly stole my work. I always, always save my stuff every few minutes but I had been so engrossed in what I was doing that I worked for three quarters of an hour without saving.

And then one of those bloody irritating anti-virus ads popped up and in the confusion of trying to get rid of it, I exited my programme and lost my work.

It is no wonder that I sometimes write my stuff with a pen on pieces of paper or in a notebook.

The computer and the internet have made life more complicated than it was and have, I suspect, done great damage to our personal productivity. The average person now looks at their phone between 150 and 200 times a day. Millions are constantly distracted by their internet connected gadgets and forever shopping or checking their social media status. All this matters because it takes around half an hour for an individual to recover from each interruption and to settle down to what they are supposed to be doing. A rush of emails is so deadening that it reduces an individual’s IQ by around 10 points.

26

I parked the car close to a charity shop so that we could take in several boxes of books without having to carry them too far. (I don’t know why I do this. When we closed Publishing House, we gave 30-40,000 books to three big charities for them to sell in their shops. The books ended up online, wrecking my income for years.) The car was parked legally and off the road. I had just lifted the final box from the boot when a motorist turned up. Antoinette was in the shop dropping off several bags of stuff and I couldn’t move the car without putting down the box so I hurried and was back in less than a minute. The driver of the vehicle and his passenger could see exactly what I was doing but when I returned they shouted abuse at me. (The driver could have driven around my car but that would have meant turning the steering wheel which is, of course, against health and safety regulations.) The merry pair also pulled out the inevitable and ubiquitous mobile phones and filmed me, shouting that they would report me to the police and put the film on YouTube. Though the pair of them were several decades younger than I am I snarled, ‘piss off you old farts’. I was cross with myself afterwards: if I’d been quick enough I’d have shouted the title of my latest book and got a free advertisement on YouTube.

I assume I will now be issued with one of those ASBO things.

What a treat.

27

I overheard this today in the local newsagents.

‘I’ve just come past your cottage. I noticed that you had left the key in the front door.’

‘Oh, it’s OK I locked the door.’

‘But the key…’

‘If I take it with me I might lose it. If I leave it in the door then I always know where it is and I know that it will be safe.’

Pure Bilbury.

28

I spent the afternoon making walking sticks. If you have as many hazel bushes as we have it is easy to find very suitable straight pieces of wood. And I managed to buy a collection of suitable ferrules and ornate handle ornaments through the internet last year. I’m particularly proud of a five foot high thumb stick which is both stout and as straight as an arrow. God grew it. But I picked it out. So we share the credit.

29

I noticed today that a number of commercial vans now have dash cams fitted front and aft.

It seems that everything is filmed these days.

I’m thinking of having advertising slogans painted on the bonnet and boot of the Bentley to take advantage of these outstanding commercial opportunities.

30

I realised today that I have been looking at my emails four or five times a day. I have also found myself checking the news several times a day and looking at the stock market and currency markets just as often. I have even been checking to see how well my books are selling.

This is just plain silly.

There is really no need to look at emails more than once a day. And nor is there any need to look at the news or the markets more than once a day.

Most of the emails I get can be deleted without reading. The interesting ones (which are pretty few and far between) can always wait. No one is going to change their minds about buying Estonian rights in a book I wrote in 1983 if I make them wait a day.

I don’t trade shares on the markets and so I don’t need to look at prices more than once or twice a week at most. (Share trading is the quickest way to lose all your money because the trading costs will ruin you. Proper investing requires making a macroeconomic geopolitical decision and then sticking to it for a decent time interval.)

The news largely is depressing (and deliberately made so by news providers who are desperate to gain more readers) and I subscribe to a free service which sends me news updates, I am not going to miss some important event if I don’t look at the news every day.

May

1

American doctors have noticed that an increasing number of elderly citizens are falling. No one seems able to understand this phenomenon. They're really genuinely puzzled. The same thing is happening in Britain. More and more elderly patients are falling and breaking bones.

I'm standing at the back of the room waving my arms in the air but no one notices.

I know what the problem is.

And I know what the solution is.

Many of these elderly patients have a condition called 'normal pressure hydrocephalus'. Falling for no apparent reason is one of the early symptoms.

I believe that the Alzheimer industry is helping to suppress the truth because those involved want the words 'Alzheimer's' and 'dementia' to be synonymous.

(Many health problems have spawned industries. There is a cancer industry. And an AIDS industry.)

The fact is that NPH affects 1 in every 1,000 people. And that isn't rare. In fact, normal pressure hydrocephalus is, for example, commoner than Parkinson's disease. It is one of the commonest causes of dementia. And it is the only common cause of dementia which is curable. It's curable with a simple, cheap operation. And yet a huge proportion of all the patients treated in the UK for this disorder are seen by a single neurologist working in Bristol. Meanwhile, thousands of elderly folk who could be cured are falling and breaking bones. Falling is the first symptom of normal pressure hydrocephalus. Dementia comes next.

I have been exposing medical scandals for decades.

Believe me when I tell you that this is the biggest medical scandal of our time. And no one seems to give a damn. Why? That's simple. Because the people involved are elderly.

Oh, and today's medical journalists are so ignorant that they wouldn't recognise a real medical story if it sat on their head and hiccupped.

I will not be shocked when I see a headline reporting that 'People Who Stop Breathing are at Risk of Dying'.

2

I feel much, much better now that I have stopped looking at emails more than once a day. And avoiding the news has freed up much time for reading books, planning books, writing books and looking out of the window.

A few years ago, when I had an office with staff, I didn't look at emails at all. I had the important ones printed out and faxed to me. It seemed a civilised way to deal with them. I would then scribble my replies on the faxed message and sent them back to the office to be turned into emails.

Although I've had a website since websites were first invented, I didn't really look at the internet at all until relatively recently.

And I still prefer my small electronic Seiko device for doing simple, basic research. Antoinette bought it for me a few years ago, though the model I now use is a more modern version which she also bought for me. The Seiko contains the Oxford Dictionary, the Oxford Thesaurus, the Oxford Dictionary of Quotations, the Oxford Dictionary of Modern Slang and Abbreviations, Flower's Modern English Usage and the Britannica Concise Encyclopaedia.

There are no advertisements.

And, I have just re-discovered there is even a Game section.

I pressed the General Knowledge quiz and was asked the name describing 14 species of 'stout-bodied, diurnal, terrestrial squirrels'.

I typed in Marmot and was congratulated.

Brilliant.

Now I just have to forget the Game section is there or else I'm pretty much back where I started.

3

On the 23rd of February of this year, our telephone started to play up. The phone would sometimes work for a couple of minutes at a time. But the crackles made it nigh on impossible to hear anything the other person said. And our broadband and wifi had disappeared completely. Since we have no mobile telephone service where we live in Gloucestershire we were, to say the least, rather stuffed.

I rang our phone supplier, a company called Phone Coop. They seem to me to be expensive but they claim to be for the people and of the people.

They did tests on the phone line and found no problem.

They then told me to take the front plate off the incoming phone line box. To my surprise, I managed to do this. But it did no good.

They told us that we should buy some filters.

I bought these on the 27th February. It took me a day to find the darned things which seem to be somewhere between mare's nests and hen's teeth in rarity. I wandered around Cheltenham for hours (literally) trying to find a shop which sold telephone filters.

Eventually, I found some. I bought three in case the first two didn't work. I took them home. I fitted one, and then another and then the third.

None of them made a damn of difference.

I rang again. And explained once again what the problem was.

This time I was told that we probably needed a new router.

I ordered a router from Phone Coop. That was another £60.

For some reason which I don't understand ('it's the way we do things') we had to wait the best part of a week for that to arrive.

The new router made no more difference than if I'd attached a banana to the telephone.

Eventually, after more thinking and talking, Phone Coop agreed to call Open Reach to come and check our telephone line.

They warned me, with great solemnity, that if Open Reach didn't like the look of us and thought that the problem was in some way our fault they would charge huge fees which would be taken out of my bank account. How much would they charge? None of the Phone Coop employees I spoke to had any idea.

Would I be told how much it was costing?

No. But the fee would be taken out of my bank account so I'd find out when I got my bank statement in six weeks' time.

I was becoming accustomed to, and rather fed up with, the largely uncaring, unsympathetic attitude of the staff at Phone Coop.

By now we had been without a phone, broadband or email for weeks. The absence of any mobile telephone coverage meant that this was not funny. We were marooned.

'What do we do if we have an emergency?' asked Antoinette.

We moved down to the Devon house.

Eventually, we were told that we would have a visit from Open Reach. So we raced back up to Gloucestershire.

The guy they sent was very pleasant but he'd only been a phone engineer for six months and he had never seen a system like ours.

After several hours of messing around all over the house (including spending sometime in the loft) he decided that the problem lay in the wire which connected the house to the telegraph pole at the top of the garden. The pole, which seems quite a small one as telegraph poles go, supplies no one else and it is on our land, about 100 yards from the house.

The engineer rang his boss and got permission to put up a new wire.

But then he decided that he couldn't do that because he didn't think the telegraph pole was safe to climb.

He told us that they would have to send people round to take out the telegraph pole and put in a new one. And then, when they had replaced the pole, they would be able to replace the wire.

'How do they put in a new pole?' I asked.

'They use a crane.'

Neither he nor I had any idea how they would get the necessary crane to the house which is difficult to reach even for a car or small van.

He went away.

So did we.

While we were away, another Open Reach man visited the house. Phone Coop telephoned my mobile (which worked where we were) and told me that the problem had been sorted and that everything was working perfectly.

We went back to Gloucester.

Nothing had changed except that the phone line was worse than ever.

There was no sign that anyone had been except that whoever had called had left a garden gate wide open and dog walkers had, inevitably, allowed their dogs to roam around our lawns.

On 29th March, I rang again. And answered all the usual questions. And had the line tested by the Phone Coop people. They said there was nothing wrong at their end. I said I knew there was nothing wrong at their end but that there was a fault on the line near to the house. I asked when Open Reach would replace the pole and if they did would we have to pay to have it replaced. Phone coop didn't know. I asked if we would have to pay to have the line replaced. Phone coop didn't know that either. They told me that they would just take whatever they needed from my bank account and that I would know what they'd taken when I got my bank statement. I got the impression they didn't care much either.

I asked if Open Reach would come and have another look at the pole. I was told that they would fix up an appointment for a few days hence. I pointed out that we weren't living at the house because without a phone we did not feel safe. Phone Coop didn't seem to mind. They refused to ring Open Reach to ask them if they could come tomorrow. I asked if I could telephone Open Reach to try to fix an appointment. I was told that I was not allowed to ring Open Reach myself. I got the impression that Phone Coop was fed up with our broken telephone.

On 31st March, another Open Reach employee arrived.

He did all the usual stuff. He went into the loft and wandered around and came to the conclusion that the problem lay with the line or the pole. He couldn't go up it, he said. I asked what the previous engineer had done. He said he didn't know. He said they would have to send contractors with some scaffolding and another Open Reach man to do things to the wire.

I asked how long we would have to wait.

He said that he hoped something might happen within a week.

That would mean another week without a viable telephone service; another week without email; another week without internet access.

And this, remember, is a house in an area which has absolutely no mobile phone coverage. (Visiting workmen, including the Open Reach technicians, had to walk or drive to the nearest village in order to get any reception on their mobiles.) We couldn't order food, pay bills or ring for a taxi.

We locked up and left the house. The Open Reach guy said he would make a note that whoever came should go into the garden without us being there and do what needed to be done.

We went back to Devon.

On the 3rd April, I received an email telling me that Open Reach had decided that they needed to put up scaffolding before they could deal with the problem.

I then had another message to tell me that Open Reach had applied to the council for permission to close a road. Since the road concerned cannot be closed because it is the only access to half a dozen houses, I pointed out that this would mean that our telephone would never be repaired. I asked why they needed to close the road and was told that they needed to dig it up. I asked why they felt it necessary to dig a hole in order to deal with a problem at the top of a pole, and pointed out in addition that the pole is in our garden and not adjacent to a road of any description.

The woman at Phone Coop told me that Open Reach would not waste money doing something that was unnecessary. I am afraid that I laughed. I couldn't help it. Clearly offended by my laughter the Phone Coop woman put down the phone. Phone Coop describes itself as the 'ethical phone provider'.

By 20th April, Open Reach had visited four times. They had twice claimed (wrongly) to have mended the fault.

The fact is that it has become difficult, bordering on impossible, to survive without broadband. More and more companies now save money by pressurising customers to pay bills online. Some like Phone Coop itself, penalised customers who want to continue receiving paper bills. HMRC has announced that all citizens will soon have to submit their new quarterly returns online. (There is a suggestion, however, that they may excuse people who are not VAT registered from this regulation. If they do this then my bet is that they will reduce the VAT registration threshold to make sure that they catch everyone.)

My pension company refuses to post vital information. I even need internet access in order to find the date of our next rubbish collection.

Phone companies must be forced to take their responsibilities more seriously. They have an obligation to provide a useable broadband service since broadband is now as fundamental as an electricity supply.

But although we begged for help, we received none. And Phone Coop continued to take money for providing us with a telephone line.

A fourth Open Reach engineer came. He wouldn't go up the pole either. I compiled a list of reasons the engineers had given explaining why they would not climb up our pole and replace the damaged wire:

I'm not trained to climb a pole.
I'm not allowed to climb poles
The pole is too old to be climbed
The pole is not quite straight
The pole does not have a sign to show that it has been recently inspected

The pole is made of wood and might be rotten

I'm not sure how far down into the ground the pole goes

The pole is too close to a tree

There are no supporting stays holding up the pole

All this was offered in the name of health and safety. I'm surprised that Open Reach engineers are allowed to climb a doorstep without a helmet and a safety rail.

No one seemed to give a damn about our health and safety.

When the fifth arrived, I told him the problem was the pole

'That's what you think is it?' he said, rather snottily.

'No,' I replied. 'That's what the previous four OR engineers told me.

This engineer wasted an hour and a half repeating the checks the other engineers had done and then decided that the junction box hanging open on the pole might be the problem and buggered off. I assumed he was going to come back but he didn't.

We were given another date for another visit. We waited. No one came. That was another waste of a day and a good deal of petrol.

We decided that the Open Reach engineers didn't need us there. Indeed, our only function seemed to be to provide cups of coffee. All five engineers had agreed that the problem was in the wire or the junction box at the top of the pole. None had done anything to repair the problem. We left the gate open and told Phone Coop that they could tell Open Reach that they had permission to mend the line without us being present.

Eventually, on 28th April, someone at Phone Coop contacted a manager at Open Reach (as I had repeatedly asked them to do) and reported the problem to someone in authority.

Within a couple of days Open Reach managed to replace the line without closing the road, putting up scaffolding or hiring a helicopter.

They sent a bloke with a ladder and enough courage to climb up a telegraph pole.

We had gone 47 days without a usable telephone or any reliable internet access.

Phone Coop offered to knock a few quid off our bill.

It seems to me that between them Phone Coop and Open Reach have mastered the art of making the simple as complicated as possible.

And in the case of Open Reach of putting the interests of their employees first second third and fourth and the interests of their customers absolutely nowhere.

When, I wonder, did 'The Customer is always Right' become 'The Customer is an idiot, always wrong and a wazoo to boot. We must scam and ignore the customer.'

4

Whatever happened to car bumpers? In the bad old days car manufacturers used to build cars with bumpers at both ends. Minor collisions resulted in dents to the chromium-plated bumper. If the bumper got badly damaged it could be removed and replaced. Today, I counted four cars which had dents in their back ends. All the dents were clearly a result of the owners backing into posts or trees. (I know from bitter experience that a car's sensors are useless if there is a single post or tree behind when you're reversing.) Repairing the dents costs a fortune, and often means replacing a huge chunk of bodywork.

I've probably answered my own question about why car manufacturers have stopped fitting bumpers.

I suspect that British drivers will soon adopt the French way of dealing with dents: ignore them or regard them with the same pride that the Heidelbergers used to regard duelling scars.

5

eSports is the fastest growing business in the world. Nearly 400 million people will watch eSports events in 2017 – mostly online, but also on television and at live events.

I couldn't believe this when I heard about it but it's true. The revenue from eSports is fast approaching $1 billion a year.

To my astonishment, people pay good money to watch other people play computer games. Some watch game players online. Some sit in a hall and watch big screens showing pictures of other people in the hall playing computer games against one another.

eSports are becoming so popular that some say they would soon be bigger than real sports. The best computer game players are becoming stars. They are paid huge sums and they have coaches and managers. Amazingly, the

University of York, now teaches eSports. All around the world, it seems, you can now get a degree in playing computer games.

Why not?

What’s next?

How about a B.A. in hopscotch?

Or maybe a B.Sc. in thumb twiddling?

Perhaps a Ph.D. in watching television?

It wouldn’t surprise me at all. I have lived long enough to see it all and I am very tired of the ‘it all’.

Most amazing of all is the fact that computer games seem set to be medal events at the 2022 Asian Games. There is lots of money involved so it seems inevitable that computer games will shortly be medal events at the Olympic Games as well.

But I suspect that the ‘disruptors’ will soon themselves be disrupted. eSports may be the future for sport and entertainment but where is the role for humans? Human players and commentators are easily replaced with computers which will be better and faster. Humans will have a role only as team owners and spectator management. The eSports industry will be disrupted and totally computerised within three to five years. It will be machine versus machine; all self-operating and self-programming.

There will be robots in other sports too.

For example, in motor racing, the drivers are utterly superfluous and virtually invisible and interchangeable at the moment. Most are so characterless that they are effectively no more than plug-in components like carburettors or batteries. So the whingeing, overpaid stars will be replaced by computers. And boxing will be far more fun when the combatants are a pair of robots who can fight to the death.

Sometimes I think that the world is changing too fast for the millennials but nowhere near fast enough for me.

6

Hackers from North Korea have done their best to close down my website and prevent my emails getting through.

They were moderately successful for several days and many emails were lost.

I have no idea why the North Koreans were so annoyed, though it is possible that the offenders were using a North Korean address in an attempt to disguise their identity.

7

Here are a few health facts which the BBC almost certainly forgot to tell its viewers and listeners:

In 2007, the Labour Government gave patients the right to choose to be treated in a nice, clean, private hospital (instead of a nasty, dirty NHS hospital) for non-urgent operations. For some inexplicable reason, the number choosing this option is soaring. But doctors rarely tell their patients that they have this choice.

More Britons are given flu vaccinations than the citizens of any other country. The flu vaccine doesn’t work very well (especially in the over 65s in whom it certainly does more harm than good) and can be dangerous but British doctors receive huge fees for promoting it.

More British women are screened for cancer than women in any other country. It is now (at last) widely accepted that cancer screening programmes do more harm than good. But in Britain, cancer screening is big business.

More than half of all individuals over the age of 70 have at least two medical conditions. The drugs prescribed (often unnecessarily) for the two conditions often interact dangerously. Doctors spend next to no time studying the problem of drug interactions.

Research shows that an astonishing 48.7% of medical stories published in newspapers are utter rubbish. Most of the health stories published are a result of self-serving press releases issued by drug companies, charities or grant-seeking researchers. Since you probably don’t know which stories are trustworthy and which are nonsense it is clearly wise to ignore all health stories published in newspapers (or in magazines or on television or radio). There seems to be nothing new these days. I can’t remember seeing a worthwhile health story in any national newspaper that I hadn’t first written 30 or more years ago. (Buy a copy of *How to Stop Your Doctor Killing You* and you don’t need to buy a newspaper for the health stories.)

Local authorities in the UK have closed 214 playgrounds in the last two years. And they have immediate plans to close another 234 playgrounds. And then folk wonder why children are obese and spend all their days playing computer games.

A study published in an American medical journal showed that patients are far more likely to be treated well when the hospital is being inspected. Teaching hospitals are particularly likely to try harder when they are being assessed.

We now have so many laws that it is almost impossible to get through a day without committing a crime. This, inevitably, causes a constant and underlying quantity of toxic stress. Doctors treat this stress with vast quantities of addictive and harmful tranquillisers.

8

Today, Antoinette and I had a pleasant day out in Cheltenham.

Antoinette and I took coffee and ginger biscuits at the Café Nero within the House of Fraser store. The biscuits they serve are excellent for dunking. It isn't widely appreciated but dunking is both an art and a science. It is important not to dip too much of the biscuit into the liquid. Between half and three quarters of an inch at most. And the biscuit must be held in the liquid for just the right length of time. Antoinette reckons a count of 'one and two' should suffice for most biscuits, though double biscuits such as custard creams and bourbons would require longer if you were to consider them appropriate dunkers. I have it on the best authority that the Queen of England is a committed dunker. So too was Bill Hayden of the television series of 'Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Sailor.' Incidentally, I have found that Café Nero is the only coffee house chain capable of producing drinkable coffee. Costa Coffee and Starbucks produce stuff which reminds me of British Rail coffee from the 1970s. Even Café Nero can't make coffee to compare with the stuff Antoinette makes with the aid of a Bialetti and a can of Illy Espresso coffee.

In Cheltenham town centre, I saw a man wearing a T-shirt which carried the following message: 'GCHQ: Always listening to our customers.' The man told me he worked at GCHQ. I got the impression he didn't think of the slogan as a joke. They clearly take their spying seriously in Cheltenham.

I noticed that the fashion of wearing jeans with holes at the knees has been resuscitated. This fashion was first popular two or three generations ago. It is, I assume, designed to suggest that the wearer spends her life alternately scrubbing floors and giving blow jobs

Attracted by the lovely carpets therein, I bought some books and magazines in the local branch of WH Smith. The till wouldn't work so I persuaded the cashier to write out a receipt using a pen and a piece of paper torn from a till roll. It took him quite a while to find a pen, though there were several hundred on sale just a few feet away. I shall cherish my hand-written receipt – possibly the last in Britain.

Later, I had my hair cut. I asked for a trim and settled down for a nap. When I woke up, I was shocked to discover that the demon barber had given me one of those haircuts which are favoured by men in their 30s who are hoping to hide the fact that they are going bald. I shall not be going out of the house again until my hair has grown back to a decent length. The barber was a trifle clumsy and managed to cut my neck with his clippers. This was my first ever hairdressing injury. A multi million pound lawsuit beckons and pictures of the wound will be published on my Snippy-Snappy social media account.

9

While clearing out an old filing cabinet, I found an old invitation to speak at a Birmingham Post literary luncheon. I seem to remember speaking at a few of these (though naturally they never ask me anymore). The one I remember, however, is the one I missed.

After I'd written my book *Mindpower* I was booked to go on a long author tour. Two days before the tour started, I went down with flu. I felt awful. But there was no way I could cancel scores of TV and radio interviews – particularly since the book was about the ability of the mind to heal the body. And so I told my body not to be silly and I got better and completed the tour without mishap. (Except that a journalist in Yorkshire wrote a lengthy article about the fact that I had developed cramp through sitting on a hard chair for an hour. She used this as an example that I was as susceptible to illness as people who didn't have *Mindpower*.)

However, a week after the tour finished, I was booked to appear at a *Birmingham Post* literary luncheon or dinner (I can't remember which it was) with American thriller writer Ed McBain (whom I was keen to meet).

And, inevitably, two days before the luncheon the flu came back.

My body had kept it away during the tour but when I got back home, I relaxed and the flu decided to reappear.

I had to cancel the damned luncheon/dinner – and was mortally embarrassed

10

The average millennial now spends five hours a day watching television and 5.6 hours a day messing around on digital media (posting and reading tweets, sending selfies and updating the holy Facebook page.

All this use of mobile phones, and the internet, has encouraged selfishness and self- obsession.

Evidence shows that when millennials use the internet they are usually ranting, complaining or reviewing.

Politically, the internet is controlled by loony lefties and Greens. They have the hubris, the conceit, to believe firmly not just that they are right but that no one who disagrees with them could possibly ever be entitled to hold an opinion or be heard. The one thing they aren't doing is learning or increasing their (or their employer's) productivity. UK productivity is way below that in Germany. I don't believe it is a coincidence that Britons use social media far more than Germans.

When will someone notice that there could be a link?

The internet is a great learning tool for the discerning who can use it to learn how to paint, speak Mandarin or grow azaleas.

But I find it terrifying that schoolteachers still regard the internet as a useful teaching tool and encourage their students to use it for research. The internet is so full of unreliable rubbish that it is really only useful for research when you are looking in an area in which you are already an expert.

Yesterday, I saw an online entry in which an innocent user had asked what caused 'chills on the kidney'.

The reply, provided by someone who called themselves a doctor but who must have had a doctorate in divinity or metallurgy, was that wearing clothes which didn't meet and which left an expanse of skin open to the air was a likely cause of kidney chills.

Everything that happens is fine, say the millennials, because things are now different.

'This is the 21st century. The world has changed forever.'

Nuts.

Nothing has changed except that people have become more stupid.

11

There's apparently another storm been generated on the internet by a cyclist. He has published a photograph of a driver whom, he claimed, upset him in some modest and fairly ill-defined sort of way. Cyclists do this a great deal these days. They have little cameras glued to their helmets and they ride around trying to annoy motorists so that they can put the resulting snaps and bits of film onto their Facebook or Twitter pages. I wonder how many cyclists realise that the helmets they wear probably make them more, not less, liable to serious injury.

Why don't cyclists pay a road tax? They use the roads, they demand special privileges (for which they pay nothing) and by impeding traffic flow they add enormously to congestion and delays.

By slowing motorised vehicles to a crawl they add massively to petrol and diesel consumption and therefore add to air pollution. (It is, of course, cyclists who suffer most from the pollution they create. Anyone who rides a bicycle on a busy road is committing slow suicide.)

Cars often collide when forced to overtake cyclists on narrow, busy roads.

The bottom line is that cyclists are a clear danger to motorists and pedestrians. They should pay the same level of road tax as small vans. The road tax on a Bentley Continental W12 is £500 a year and rising annually. Why should cyclists (who cause far more pollution) pay nothing?

I write as someone who has been a keen cyclist for 65 years – which is considerably longer than I have been a motorist and only slightly shorter than I have been a pedestrian.

And I write also as someone who is fed up with the fact that hardly a day goes by without a cyclist complaining online that he or she has been inconvenienced in some modest way by tax paying road traffic.

Every time I go out onto the roads in a car, I find that I am inconvenienced by discourteous, arrogant and often aggressive cyclists. There are so many cyclists around, and they are so aggressive, that pedestrians are now seriously at risk. The number being killed by cyclists is increasing at a rather frightening rate.

The other day we drove back from Cheltenham behind a pair of cyclists who were travelling at 10 mph and keeping to the middle of the road as they chatted away. Both were wearing black Lycra so it was impossible to see them in the gloaming. It was impossible to overtake safely. Within a mile or two, we had a massive queue behind us – all travelling at the same speed.

Internal combustion engines burn up far more fuel when travelling slowly and those smug and selfish cyclists doubtless did more harm to the environment than a thousand motorists.

Cyclists are almost as big a menace to road users and pedestrians as are dog walkers.

It seems good sense to me to ban cyclists from all roads and pavements. They should be allowed to ride their bicycles on cycle tracks only. Where there is no cycle track, the cyclist should carry his machine. Cycling is a good activity for children and a fine sporting endeavour but why would anyone want to risk life and limb cycling to work?

And cyclists should pay a road tax like every other road user.

12
We are in Gloucestershire today. Looking around I realised that all the local gardens now look like traffic islands.

There are plenty of neatly trimmed bushes and billiard table lawns but nothing that will bear any flowers. There's lots of nice, neat decking too. It is no wonder that there were no bees or butterflies around last summer. There won't be many around this summer, either. And people will doubtless wonder why.

13
The hysterical 'scientists', bureaucrats and commentators who insist that they are right about climate change, that there is nothing to debate and that those who dare to disagree must be crushed, have (as I seem to remember I pointed out a few months ago) been captured by the same irrational mood of intolerant enthusiasm as was apparent among those who, back in the 1980s, stated so vehemently that AIDS was going to kill us all within a decade.

The odd thing is that the climate change mythologists (who describe their opponents as 'deniers' in order to demonise them) never care to mention that if the world really were getting hotter, then it would benefit in almost every conceivable way if people stopped eating meat.

They don't mention this because to do so would risk annoying the meat industry which is one of the most powerful (and rich) lobby groups in the world.

The world is, it seems, full of people who are provably wrong but who 'know' they are right.

For example, in other areas, such as vaccination, the scientific evidence shows quite clearly that the proselytisers are wrong. I have no doubt that vaccination does more harm than good. But doctors and journalists have been bought or indoctrinated into believing that vaccines are essential and so that is the only story that people hear. Politicians and others are fond of using the phrase 'informed consent' when talking about vaccines but you can only have 'informed consent' when both sides of an argument are being aired. I have resounding evidence that attempts to question the validity of statements about vaccination are totally suppressed in the UK. Parents are constantly pressured by doctors, nurses and health visitors who offer no evidence to support their brazen insistence, merely conviction founded on Government exhortations, drug company propaganda and (in the case of the doctors) the prospect of healthy fees for doing something between nothing and very little.

And the same, of course, is true about the European Union. The evidence shows that the EU is a corrupt, incompetent, truly fascist organisation but none of the evidence is ever published or even discussed.

These days, experts are entirely unreliable because they have been corrupted and no one knows or cares about the corruption because newspaper proprietors and editors do not give a damn about publishing the truth. They know that all readers really care about is gossip. Moreover, they have been bought by industries and their lobbyists.

14
I have compiled a list of 10 countries which are members of the United Nations but have considerably smaller populations than, say, Manchester:

Grenada
Liechtenstein
Maldives
Malta
Marshall Islands
Monaco
Nauru
Saint Kitts
San Marino
Tuvalu

Tuvalu has a population of just over 11,000 and Nauru has around 13,000 citizens. If they were in Britain or America these would be classed as large villages. It seems odd to think that all these tiny countries have a say in world affairs. It is hardly surprising that some of these tiny countries can be 'bought' by large superpowers who want their votes.

15

Antoinette had another bad day with her heart. I believe she has a malfunctioning heart valve but she refuses to see what I would describe as a ‘proper doctor’. She has a weak pulse and an incredibly low blood pressure and today her heart beat was all over the place. Her ankles and hands swell regularly – standard signs of a heart that isn’t working properly. Exceptional stresses make things considerably worse.

I realise that most people would not believe this but I can steady and slightly improve Antoinette’s heart rate simply by holding her hand and keeping my fingers on her pulse.

I have long been a believer in ‘healing’ and Antoinette has twice healed me of quite serious muscle and joint problems. She healed a bad shoulder and a bad knee – both of which were extremely painful. In neither case did I have any surgery or take any medication.

How does it work?

Love.

The person being treated doesn’t need to do anything. The person doing the healing has to donate love.

16

I spent a pleasant evening fiddling with our central heating system.

I have to put more water into the system every few days.

This is not, as heating engineers would insist, because we have a leak but because our Edwardian pipes and radiators are so capacious that the system still contains vast amounts of air. Whenever the system is turned on, the rumbling of air through the pipes suggests that our system is a sufferer from a particularly bad case of irritable bowel syndrome.

As the air leaks out through a valve in the loft, so the system pressure falls and needs topping up with another 20 gallons of water.

17

The TV Licensing people have taken to sending us letters informing us when their door-to-door thugs will visit us to make sure that we aren’t watching television. I think the letters are supposed to be frightening but in fact they are quite useful because they remind us to make sure that the big gate at the bottom of the drive is locked, bolted and very barred against intruders. We can’t see the gate from the house and so they definitely can’t see us. One of the many things which annoys me about the TV Licensing Gestapo is that they insist that we have two licences for two houses. Since we never rent out either house, just how do they think we can possibly watch television in two places at once?

I expect they’ll soon revive their hoary old myth about TV licence detector vans.

(Has anyone ever been caught by one of these fictional vans? If they existed, we would know because someone would have leaked the story. The myth of the BBC having a fleet of vans equipped with special equipment which can tell who is watching television is as fictional as the idea of BBC impartiality.)

However, I have this week discovered that sending rude and vaguely threatening demands through the post, and inventing imaginary detector vans, is not enough for the TV Licensing thugs.

They have now taken to sending out spam emails inviting me to pay a fee online for watching television. They claim that loads of people already do this though why I cannot imagine. Since the BBC is an unpatriotic (bordering on treacherous), sexist and racist organisation, I would have thought it is our duty to make it as difficult as possible for their Shylocks to collect money to pay obscene salaries to thousands of bureaucrats. The BBC licence fee is a bizarre anachronism. I refuse to pay a BBC licence fee and support a corrupt, bigoted, sexist, ageist and racist organisation which pursues an agenda favoured by its fascist staff rather than the agenda favoured by the people who pay the bills. The price, not watching television, is well worth paying.

I’ve received two of these emails in the last two days, explaining to me the joy of paying for a TV licence by some sort of online system. Actually, the letters were sent to my email address but addressed to someone else.

I wrote to the TV Licensing thugs demanding that they stop sending me junk mail.

They didn’t bother to reply and I doubt if they will take any notice.

I hate the TV Licensing thugs so much that I think I would vote for anyone (even Jeremiah Corbyn) who promised in blood that they would get rid of the BBC Licence fee (well, maybe not Jeremiah Corbyn).

The good thing is that in my experience, the Licence Thugs eventually give up and stop sending threatening letters. I always post back all the letters I receive. I’m tempted to wrap them around something heavy (like a house brick) so that the recipients have to pay huge amounts of postage but sending bricks through the mail is probably illegal these days.

Paying the BBC licence fee in order to watch or listen to anything broadcast, is as rational as having to pay a licence to consume food knowing that all the money will go to a State owned, State friendly supermarket chain which only sells you the food it wants you to buy.

The BBC resolutely sneers at and attacks Brexiteers, English nationalists, Christianity, proposed Government cuts, old, white men (unless they work for the BBC or are Labour MPs), American Presidents (unless they are black) and supports the EU, the NHS, pressure groups, subsidises, actresses who claim to have been propositioned, victims who claim racial or sexual abuse (unless the abuse has been perpetrated by a BBC employee) and scientific myths such as vaccination, vivisection and global warming.

18

It is my birthday so we stayed in, turned off all electronic devices and left the postbox unopened. (The post at both our houses goes into a box rather than onto the mat. Actually, the post in Paris also goes into a box.)

We like to protect our birthdays from the horrors of the real world.

19

Antoinette bought me a beautiful silver penknife. She has bought so many penknives from the same shop that they know her by name and they buy in stock especially for her. But the penknife she bought today is the second one she's bought from that shop which is faulty. This one (which was displayed with the blades open) doesn't close properly. The previous disappointment (which was displayed with the blades shut) had one blade which wouldn't open at all.

When you take advantage of your regular customers by cheating them, they stop being your regular customers.

Why do so many people feel it necessary to rip off their customers? I simply don't understand it.

I find it increasingly difficult to trust businesses, shopkeepers or workmen these days. Banks rip me off. Utility companies rip me off by making it difficult for me to work out which tariff I should be on. Telephone companies rip me off. It sometimes seems that no one offers a fair deal for a decent price.

20

In the last 20 years, nearly 40% of Britain's top paid chief executives have been sacked after presiding over disasters, incompetence or crookery.

This astonishing fact rather damages the claim that chief executives are worth their multi-million pound pay packages.

21

Someone called Richard Dawkins has got a lot of publicity for saying that he does not believe in God.

Well, I've never met this chap Dawkins and I've seen no evidence whatsoever that he really exists.

And, therefore, I do not believe he exists.

And since I do not believe that he exists he clearly does not exist.

Quod erat demonstrandum.

Seriously, I consider that Dawkins is a bad man. I think he has done a vast amount of damage. Indeed, I don't think it is any exaggeration to say that he and his ilk are responsible for causing much misery and probably some deaths.

I don't care whether or not he believes in God.

But what harm is done by personal belief in a superior being and an afterlife? It is undoubtedly possible to argue that religions have done much harm but there can also be no doubt that a good deal of good has been done not least in that religion has provided support, guidance and strength to millions – especially the bereaved. Any attempt to take away that comfort on what amounts to no more than an unsupportable and insignificant hunch is bordering on the criminal.

The biggest cause of mental illness (and much physical illness) is loneliness. And it's a deep, scalding loneliness which is not assuaged by the sort of relationships created and sustained by social media.

People today aren't just lonely – they are also isolated.

We are, as a race isolated from others, isolated from our inner selves and our real feelings and the prospect of anything resembling inner peace.

Of course, the problem isn't entirely down to Dawkins et al. The Christian Church must also take much responsibility for failing to stick up for Christians. In our society today, it is commonplace for Christians to be treated with contempt and disrespect that would never be tolerated in the treatment of Muslims. The habit of shutting churches during weekdays doesn't help. I realise that theft and vandalism are problems but what is the point of a closed church?

And, thanks to the failures of the Church, and to the efforts of people like Dawkins, we are isolated from the comfort of a higher force; the love and support which previous generations took from religion, in all its various forms.

Edgar Baerlein, thirteen times winner of the Amateur Tennis Championship, once said that he had worked out the odds against a future life and decided that they were 'a shade worse than five to two'.

22

We have just had a note from Sainsbury's which, for some bizarre reason which I still don't entirely understand, sells us our gas and electricity – though I am pleased to say that they send it along in pipes rather than bringing it round in orange, plastic bags. They tell us that our current tariff ends in June and that our prices will double unless we move to another tariff or take our business elsewhere.

Double! That is price gouging. It's the worst sort of Shylocking.

The bastards are talking of doubling the price of our gas and electricity!

That is inexcusable.

Sarwjit Sambhi, the Managing Director who wrote to tell me this jolly news, should be horse whipped in public.

We can, of course, do something about this deliberate and premeditated mugging.

But millions won't, don't or can't.

The elderly, the frail and the poor often don't have internet access. They still assume that energy costs are pretty well uniform. And so, largely out of trust and loyalty, they do nothing.

And Sainsbury's (and the other gas and electricity suppliers) take advantage of them.

Bastards.

Every year tens of thousands of elderly folk die of the cold because they can't afford to heat their homes properly.

Sarwjit Sambhi and Sainsbury's know this, of course.

And yet they have a price policy which results in thousands of deaths.

I find it difficult to see why that isn't manslaughter.

Sainsbury's will be responsible for many more deaths than the late and very unlamented Ian Brady.

This is, of course, also true of the other big energy suppliers.

23

John Adams, the second president of America and one of the nation's founders warned against two party systems: 'There is nothing which I dread so much as a division of the republic into two great parties, each arranged under its leader, and concerting measures in opposition to each other'.

But that is exactly what we have.

Politics today is an industry, designed not to improve, protect and defend the nation, but to provide well-paid employment to armies of politicians, advisors, researchers, spin doctors and hangers on. The only people who benefit from the two party system are the people who are directly involved in the world which has been created: the pollsters, consultants, fundraisers, think tanks, lobbyists and correspondents.

Added to this dross are the media representatives who have all aligned themselves with specific parties.

Our political system is designed to serve the interest of the big parties and their associates. The rules and regulations which exist are designed to enhance their power, defend themselves against intruders (at the last election UKIP received millions of votes and one seat in the Commons) and take power away from the electorate.

Political boundaries, and the structure of the House of Commons (and the ever-looming presence of the House of Lords) mean that there is now no point at all in voting in parliamentary or local elections. The number of union officials, PR people and ex-charity executives in the Commons has gone from virtually none to 11% and the number of spin doctors in the Commons has gone up to 17% – so at least a third of the House of Commons is made up of people who have no knowledge of or connection with the real world and whose previous training has been largely in learning how to deceive and lie. The House of Lords is full of failed and former MPs who have been given jobs for life simply because they know someone. The place is packed with former EU employees receiving EU pensions and doubtless under written or implicit instructions not to criticise their benefactors. There are at least eight former EU commissioners sitting in the House of Lords. It is no surprise that the wishes of the British people who pay their wages, and who voted for Brexit, are dismissed with ignorant disdain. As for MEPs! Well, they are just politicians who couldn't get on either of the UK gravy trains.

The same thing is happening everywhere in the western world – and it explains the worldwide revolt against the political system.

The Brexit Vote and the rise of Donald Trump were, in part, signs of the disconnect and the dissatisfaction.

This is an attitude with which I can readily sympathise.

I have, throughout my life, always voted against the status quo and the establishment.

When I am asked to vote I always vote against the Committee's recommendations or the Board's advice. This way the dissenters (who probably have a good case) will be guaranteed of a little support.

24

Here's a revolutionary thought: only people over the age of 30, who have paid taxes for at least five years, should be allowed to vote.

25

Today, we met our estate agent in Paris. I picked his firm because they have the biggest, smartest offices near to our apartment. I fixed up the appointment by email.

So we now have an estate agent in Paris. His name, though he may not know it, is Monsieur Pompadour de Snootsville.

His fee for selling our apartment will be 50,000 euros. So an estate agent in Paris only needs to sell one apartment a month to have an income of £500,000 a year.

And that, believe it or not, is a cut price rate in Paris.

Our agent is a 40 something Frenchman who wears a blue blazer with gold buttons, jeans and a scarf thrown negligently around his neck. You know he doesn't garden or put up shelves in those jeans. They probably cost more than an Armani suit. The scarf is tied in that negligent way the French own but which takes them ten minutes to tie and 30 years to learn. Whenever I try it, I look as though the scarf got there by mistake. He already seems to me to be patronising, precious, self-important and arrogant; though he is far too old to be within sneering distance of being a millennial. It is probably the fact that he is French which explains all this.

Blindly faithful, innocent and more full of hope than expectation, I trusted him and signed the documents I was given. It seemed reasonable to expect that for a fee of 50,000 euros for finding a buyer for our apartment I might get a little loyalty and honour and respect.

26

The EU is very, very bad for our health.

Many of its policies, dreamt up and imposed upon us by overpaid, unelected eurocrats in Brussels have resulted in death; a lot of deaths; tens of thousands of deaths.

It is worth remembering that in addition to the unelected eurocrats, the EU is run by a bunch of commissioners – many of whom are failed national politicians who ended up running Europe because they had pretty well messed up their domestic careers. British examples include His Highness Lord Mandelson of building society notoriety and the awful Kinnock of Sheffield election rally infamy. The rest were unelected bozos such as Jonathan Hill (a former PR person and lobbyist) and Catherine Ashton who had never been elected but seems to me to have skills which enabled her to be in the right place and to know the right people. Both were, for some reason, appointed to the House of Lords and given power over the rest of us.

Here are just a few specific examples of ways in which EU policies kill people.

The number of people smoking roll-up cigarettes is increasing rapidly. This is a direct result of EU laws. Instead of giving up cigarettes, smokers have merely turned to rolling their own cigarettes. The EU's well-meant but ill-thought out policy has pushed people into smoking much more dangerous products than they smoked before. How many cigarette smokers put filters onto their cigarettes when they roll their own? The real irony is that the EU has given millions of euros to farmers to help them grow cheap tobacco.

Laws on rubbish collecting are stressful and probably cause heart attacks and other stress related disorders. But the big health problem is the rise in the number of huge rats in towns and cities. Few cities employ dedicated rat catchers because the job is too dangerous. I know of one city where the last such employee had to retire after developing leptospirosis as a result of a rat bite. He has not been replaced. Rats can and do kill people and this is a growing health problem – caused entirely by EU policies.

The EU's daft energy policies mean that street lights are often switched off at night – or turned so dim that they are worse than useless. The result is that there are far more accidents – with far more pedestrians being injured or killed. Pedestrians are run over. And those who have been to the pub and are wandering home are more likely to trip and fall.

The EU's agriculture policy means that food prices have soared. Many poorer families, and elderly folk trying to live on pensions, can no longer afford to eat properly. This is entirely the fault of the EU's pro-French farmer policies. If we left the EU, the cost of food will fall dramatically and more people would be able to eat properly.

Domestic energy prices in the UK have soared to unprecedented levels entirely because of EU rules which have forced us to close down power stations and subsidise anything that the EU decides is a green source of energy. The result is that 40,000 old people die of the cold every year. The EU is responsible for most of those deaths.

EU legislation banning smoking in pubs has led to more and more people drinking at home with booze which they buy at the supermarket. It is, of course, well known that because the booze bought in shops is much cheaper than the booze bought in pubs, people who drink alone tend to drink more.

The new EU approved light bulbs are dim and take forever to work. The result is a massive increase in the incidence of accidents in the home. Thousands of old people have tripped and fallen because EU lights meant that they could not see properly. This massive rise in the number of accidents at home has added to the pressure on failing Accident and Emergency services. The light bulbs also contain large amounts of mercury – which is toxic.

EU employment legislation means that hospitals no longer provide 24 hour medical cover. Many small hospitals are closing because the new laws mean that they cannot hire enough doctors and nurses. (Even when they are sleeping but on call, doctors are deemed by the EU to be working.) It is now common for hospitals to have no doctors available at weekends. The same EU employment legislation means that GPs now work the same hours as librarians. It is almost impossible to find a GP at night, at weekends or on bank holidays. The result is increased pressure on hospital departments. The average wait in Accident and Emergency departments in British hospitals is now between four and nine hours. There is no point at all in the Government buying TV ads telling patients to get to hospital quickly if they have a stroke, when they may have to wait for nine hours when they get there. (The target waiting time in hospitals is just four hours. Can you imagine a member of the Cabinet waiting four hours to be treated? Do you think Prince William has to sit and wait for four hours if George has earache? Thanks to the EU, more and more people are dying, untreated in British hospitals.)

The immigration policies forced upon us by the EU have created a good deal of stress. And, of course, every country in the EU has shown increased levels of violence (particularly against women) as the number of immigrants against women has soared. EU immigration policies also have led to a fall in average wages (because those immigrants who are prepared to work are often happy to do so for lower wages)

EU laws mean that many shops now routinely fire workers who reach the age of 25 and hire younger ones who don't have to be paid so much. For customers this means poorer service in shops and restaurants. (It won't be long before cafés will have the automatic self-serve coffee machines which are already popular in petrol stations. Drinks will be served in waxed cardboard containers and customers will be asked to clear their own tables and put their rubbish into the bins provided.) But for the workers who are fired, it often means tragedy and poverty and an early death.

The EU's policy on diesel engines has resulted in considerable pollution in Europe. Americans who bought German diesel cars made by the appalling VW company are up to their knees in compensation. But in Britain, the unfortunate sods who bought VW cars will (thanks to the awful Merkel and the EU) have to pay for their mistake. In America, VW is paying out $30 billion but the company sold very few cars in the USA. In Europe in general, and the UK in particular, VW sold gazillions of vehicles and tens of thousands of EU citizens have been killed by the resulting air pollution. But VW, protected by Germany and the EU, will pay out approximately nine pence halfpenny. For example, in Europe last year, 257,000 people were listed as having died as a result of air pollution. What did the EU do about that? It made things worse by encouraging the manufacture of diesel cars to support the German automobile industry. Moreover, it seems that anyone who listened to the Labour Party and bought any sort of diesel-powered vehicle will be publicly whipped and humiliated. (There is some irony in the fact that the electric cars which are so fashionable run on electricity derived largely from burning diesel.) The EU's laws favoured diesel cars because that was what the German car industry wanted. Once again, the EU sold out to big industry. Another example of pure fascism in action.

The EU's attempts to create a single superstate, and to take away national identities, have predictably, led to extreme nationalism in many European countries. Many people have been killed or injured in the resultant demonstrations. This will only get worse.

Like all truly fascist organisations, the EU's laws are designed to help the rich (particularly big companies) and to punish the poor; it protects big industry and doesn't give a damn about people.

The EU, the organisation which imposed VAT upon us without so much as a by your leave and which now wants to eradicate nationalism, culture, independence and freedom is an organisation which is run by a mixture of unelected fools, drunks, crooks and freeloaders. (Not many people seem to remember that VAT was a Common Market invention. It began at 8% and has steadily worked its way up to 20%. When we leave the EU we will, if we wish, be able to say goodbye to value added tax.)

In the UK, the EU is supported most enthusiastically by those who have been employed by it and who are now comfortably ensconced in first class compartments on the EU gravy train – with magnificent pensions due to them. In this category, we can put the many malodorous buffoons who have previously worked for the EU (and are therefore entitled to massively generous pensions). These EU-lovers don't spend a lot of time reminding us all of their financial links with the EU.

The rest of the EU's support comes largely from tax avoiders, tax exiles, foreigners, traitors and the intellectually deprived.

27

In most parts of the world, queues are getting longer.

The British queue because it is the polite thing to do.

The Russians queue because they have grown up queuing and it is, for them, a sort of national sport. They enjoy it. A day without a good long four-hour queue to buy half a loaf of stale bread or a pair of second-hand shoelaces would be a wasted day. To them queuing is like breathing or walking.

But the French don't queue. In shops and at bus stops they just mill around. It is, I believe, a serious character flaw.

28

We are conditioned early on in our lives to accept certain values. Those values rarely change by much or for long. Indeed, we tend to become more committed to them with age. Only war changes them.

Our values are, however, being damaged, questioned and destroyed by massive, uncontrolled immigration.

And when our values suffer in this way we tend to feel uncomfortable and frightened – though we mostly don't know why we feel uncomfortable and frightened.

29

French pharmacies sell plenty of dental floss but they don't seem to sell interdental brushes. This is rather strange because many dentists now agree that dental floss does far more harm than good. The problem is that when you pull the floss downwards, it is very easy to cut into the gum and to push the food debris into the gum too. This inevitably causes infection. Interdental brushes which enable the user to remove bits of food from the spaces are far safer and much more effective.

Antoinette was, I believe, the first person to realise the problems with dental floss.

I wrote about her conclusions in my now defunct Health Letter and we included the advice in our (now out of print book) *Health Secrets Doctors Share With Their Families*.

The people making interdental brushes produce them in all sorts of different sizes and the trick is to find the biggest size you can use. I find that I need two brushes of two different sizes and I suspect this is the case for most people.

Talking of dentists reminds me of my other bugbear: why don't dental records travel with patients in the same way that medical records do? I realise that a new dentist can see which teeth are missing and which are filled but there is (or should be) much more to dentistry than simply removing and filling teeth. The fact that dental records do not move with patients means that much time is wasted. So, given that fact, I am confident in predicting that nothing will change.

30

We have a lot of stuff in our Paris apartment which we want to take to England now that we are selling up. Most important of all we have a good many books which we don't want to abandon. There isn't enough stuff to hire a removal company (which would, in any case, pose horrific logistical problems) so we have solved the problem in our own way.

Today we posted 22 parcels full of books to England. We carried them to a nearby Post Office a few parcels at a time – using suitcases to carry the parcels.

At the Post Office, there was much confusion and I paid different prices for all the parcels – even though they all fell within certain guideline weights. (The key, it seems, is simply to keep the parcel weight under 5 kilos.)

Three or four different counter clerks gave entirely different instructions and put different stickers on the parcels they handled. One said that we could have a cut price rate for sending books abroad. Another said that the cut price rate only applied if the books were printed in the French language.

Once again, I was reminded that posting stuff to Britain costs considerably less than posting stuff from Britain. Our parcels, all weighing around 5kg each, were posted air mail for between £5 and £10 a parcel (depending upon the mood of the counter clerk who took them in) and arrived at our home in England a couple of days later.

I dread to think what the parcels would have cost if they had been travelling in the other direction.

31

The people who believe most fervently in the EU want it to become a superstate, a United States of Europe.

The problem is that they know absolutely nothing of history.

Look at the mess the British and the Americans made of the Middle East by drawing up artificial boundaries and creating fake countries.

Look at the mess colonialists made of Africa.

Look how the USSR (an artificially created stew of different countries) ended.

Look at Yugoslavia.

Look at Czechoslovakia.

Look at Belgium, for heaven's sake. (An artificially constructed country which is being torn in two.)

How can anyone seriously believe that the EU (designed to give Germany the control of Europe which they weren't good enough to win through violence) could possibly survive?

June

1

We never used to think of Paris as being dangerous. The City of Light was always well lit and well policed. It was possible to walk just about anywhere at any time of night. No more. At night, Paris is now pitch black and the streets are too dangerous to walk about. Paris is now the city of concrete anti-tank blockades, automatic weapons and suspicion.

Clearing out some cupboards, ready for our possible sale of the apartment, I came across some old videotapes of me speaking to animal rights campaigners. I used to do a good deal of it in the 1980s and 1990s and travelled all over the country to attend and speak at rallies and protests.

I often used to meet up with a friend who ran the Animal Liberation Front (better known as ALF) and when we got together there would always be quite a crowd of us. Actually, he didn't tell anyone he ran the organisation but always called himself the Press Office which sounded and seemed perfectly proper. At the time, the animal rights movement was considered the nation's most serious terrorist threat. The security services had talked up the threat because there were then no other real dangers and they needed a reason to exist. My pal was always followed by a bunch of special branch detectives and MI5 agents and because I had a fairly high profile as an animal rights campaigner, I was also followed around by a similar band of security guys. The result was that when we met, his gang of policemen and my gang of policemen would bump into one another. We both had camera crews following us, equipped both with video cameras and still cameras, and to tease them we would hide our mouths and whisper to each other. The authorities took it all far more seriously than we did. What they did not know was that my pal was the ALF. There was no organisation and there was no membership. It was really just him. Special Branch and MI5 were devoting millions to a spectre.

I remember that some very strange things happened to us both but particularly to him.

He believed that the police had once put a gun into his car boot, which was rather silly of them since, as he pointed out, he knew they were following him and even if he had possessed a gun (unlikely since he was the most peaceful fellow I ever knew) he would be hardly likely to keep it in his car. He was arrested and taken to court but the case fell apart because the police forgot to put any bullets in with the gun. They also made another fundamental mistake. Armed policemen surrounded his car and waited for him to come back to it though they could never explain why they thought he had a firearm. Their worst mistake, however, was in not wearing any bulletproof vests. They knew he didn't have any bullets for the gun they'd planted so they didn't bother putting them on. Since they would have worn the vests if they'd really thought there was a risk, their case fell to pieces.

On another occasion he was arrested for being part of a conspiracy to do something or other but by the time the case got to court, the co-defendants had all fallen by the wayside (they had alibis and the police had abandoned the case against them). That case, which had cost something like £10 million to put together, fell apart when my pal's barrister pointed out to the judge that it is impossible to have a conspiracy when only one person is involved. The case never even got started and the red-faced prosecuting counsel had to go home with his tail dangling between his legs.

On one occasion, the police did manage to get my pal into a holding cell on some charge or other. Sitting in the cell with a pile of rough looking fellows, my rather small and very gentle pal protested when one of them was about to stamp on an insect.

'Who the hell are you?' demanded one of the toughs. 'What are you in here for?'

'The ALF,' explained my pal.

At the time, the ALF was considered to be the most dangerous terrorist organisation in the country. Police and gangsters quailed at the very mention.

The tough guys apologised and treated my pal as though the Kray Twins were his underlings.

2

A month ago, the Tories were a shoe-in to win the election. But slowly, deliberately and vote by vote they have thrown away every advantage they had.

Now, it seems possible that the Prime Minister could have a smaller majority than she had before she called the election!

Worse still, there could be a hung parliament.

Unimaginably, Diane Abbott could be Home Secretary and Jeremy Corbyn could be Prime Minister. The unbelievably awful Thornberry could be Foreign Secretary! I wouldn't trust any of them to mow the lawn or clean a pair of shoes.

What happened?

Complacency? Arrogance? Stupidity?

Those are possible explanations.

The Tories have certainly made one serious error after another. To describe the Tory campaign as 'lacklustre' is being generous.

Taking money from English pensioners and then taxing the same people so that Scottish pensioners wouldn't lose out was an electoral disaster (though pretty good for the SNP).

Introducing new laws designed to make life harder for small businesses wasn't exactly a vote winner.

Not even the EU would dare to suggest some of the daft legislation proposed by the Tories.

Theresa May chickening out of a TV debate made her look like a loser.

The dementia tax was madness.

Promises on immigration numbers have been wishy washy to the point of ineffectual.

There is another, more sinister explanation: what if the Tories have been paid to lose this election?

Sounds mad, I know.

But think about it.

If the Tories lose the election (or have a very slender majority) the EU will benefit enormously. A Labour Government (or a hung Parliament) would probably hand over the £100 billion the eurocrats want us to pay – and which Theresa May says she wouldn't pay.

The banks which didn't want us to leave the EU will be happy. Currency speculators will make huge profits if the Tories lose. A Conservative loss could be worth several hundred billion to banks and financiers. Is it really irrelevant that Theresa May's husband works in financial services?

A hung Parliament, with a Government controlled by the SNP, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens would destroy Britain's hopes for a decent exit from Hitler's dream organisation.

The members of these parties all think they are taking part in a revolution but in reality they are fascists, desperately supporting the establishment. The soft lefties and self-indulgent greens are nasty, spiteful, jealous, vindictive, hypocritical, selfish, self-importent, self-centred, stupid and often wicked people.

Britain would be destroyed if Labour won the election or if there were a hung Parliament.

But the EU would benefit enormously. And so would the bankers and hedge fund operators.

(The bankers tend to make the rules these days. Bankers and hedge fund operators have taken over from big oil companies, drug companies and arms companies and now control the world. There are just under two million people working in financial services in England. Just think how rich the country would be if they all did something useful for a living instead.)

So, have the Tories been paid to lose this election?

Doesn't sound so mad, does it?

3

Selling an apartment in France has been designed by bureaucrats to be as incomprehensible, difficult and time consuming as possible.

I was told by our agent that I must first sign an Achat – which is, I was assured, a meaningless document drawn up by the estate agent. This, I was told is not a legally binding document but merely showed that the would-be buyer wanted to buy and the would-be seller wanted to sell.

Then, when all the paperwork has been done, there will be two contracts to sign. This will be when the notaires come into the whole affair.

But I am assured by our estate agent that the first signature is entirely meaningless; just another piece of pointless French bureaucracy. I am told that when I sign I am agreeing that I might sell the apartment if I decide that I will sell it and that if I do agree to sell it then I might possibly sell it to the person who has expressed an interest and the prospective buyer signs to say that he might possibly buy it at the price agreed if he decides to buy it and not to buy something else instead or decides not to buy anything but to move to Switzerland instead. It is as worthless a legal contract as it is possible to sign, and I'm surprised that those involved in printing these things do not die of shame and embarrassment every time they get one signed.

I asked if our would-be buyer had the cash for the purchase or if he needed to borrow money. I was assured that he was not signing the special document which implied taking out a loan.

I must say that the French seem to want to make the whole business of buying and selling a property as uncomfortable, as time consuming as expensive and as annoying as possible.

I thought that buying and selling property in Britain was difficult but the French have taken the whole business of contemptuous arrogance and lack of concern to new levels. The French have made it unattractive to buy, sell or hold property and so foreign owners cannot unload properties without a great deal of fuss and nonsense.

I don't wish to be cruel to our little Gallic friends but this quote from Hot Water by P.G.Wodehouse seems appropriate: 'If you ask me what's wrong with the world, there's too many Frenchmen in it. Never liked them and never shall.'

This was written by a man who spent several years living in France.

4

Our Devon garden robin has gone. Antoinette saw him perched on a bench singing his heart out. Then, in a flash, a sparrow hawk swooped and he was gone.

All robins are lovely little birds. They love people and wherever I work in the garden (even if I am not digging and therefore unlikely to unearth a quick meal or two) the robin turns up to say hello.

In Gloucestershire we have numerous bird feeders hanging on poles and branches (we daren't in Devon because of the seagulls) and whenever I put out food the resident robin is there within seconds, taking food out of the feeder as I put it in.

We miss our Devon robin terribly.

He used to sing all day long and spent much of his time on the back of a garden bench. When he saw our car coming off the driveway he would fly to a bush near the house to greet us. (He knew that I would brush crumbs off my trousers when I got out of the car. I don't know how the crumbs get there because I never eat while driving, of course.)

Another robin will take over the garden in a day or two.

And we will enjoy his company. And in due course he will doubtless learn about the crumbs. But we miss the one who has gone. I doubt we will see his like again.

5

Our ageing population and a consequently shrinking workforce are supposed to be major socio-economic problems and are certainly the excuse for encouraging mass immigration.

Governments everywhere claim that their nations need hordes of immigrants because they have ageing and dependant populations of pensioners.

This is an immensely stupid argument.

Many (though not all) pensioners would like to work. Most are perfectly capable of doing excellent work. Most have extremely marketable skills. Most need to work. Most have been forced to give up work solely because of their age.

The solution is simple enough even for politicians to understand: allow all pensioners to work if they want to and punish anyone who forces an over 65-year-old into retirement against their wishes.

And lo and behold!

The need for vast numbers of immigrant (and the massive cultural disruption they bring) will disappear overnight.

Or is that too simple for politicians to understand?

6

There is a local literary festival and a nearby town is full of would-be authors, members of the literary establishment (nothing to do with authors) and the metropolitan elite who buy books as display items rather than to read. These people are not authors. Authors, people who write books for a living and who struggle each day with the twin demons of an empty sheet of paper (or an empty screen) and a need to put words into the space in order to pay the bills, are shy, private people who, given a choice of root canal dental surgery or a Question and Answer session at a literary festival would, with no hesitation opt for the dentist's chair.

The people who appear at literary festivals are mostly folk who do something else for a living (television celebrities, politicians and so on) but who have written a book. Or more accurately written some captions to go with the illustrations in their book. Or, even more accurately, put their name on the front cover of a book for which someone else has written the captions to accompany the illustrations which were taken by yet someone else.

They are, these so-called authors, chefs and politicians, television presenters and people who are famous because they are loud mouthed enough to be selected to appear on one of those cheap to make reality television programmes.

7

I spent hours at the dentist's surgery.

My last dentist was awful. My six monthly examinations took about three seconds. He would look into my mouth, grunt and tell me to make another appointment. He never said or did anything.

When your new dentist says: 'All dentists do things differently. It doesn't mean that one is right and the other wrong' you know that your last dentist fucked up.

I had numerous fillings, an abscess cleared and the gums underneath my teeth scraped.

Oh, what fun that was.

8

I have been trying to work out why millennials (aka snowflakes) are the way they are and I have decided that it is also partly the fault of our educational system.

Education has failed us, and teachers are responsible for creating a generation of self-centred, ill-educated folk who, for no sensible reason, like to call themselves the 'millennials', though nearly all of them were born in the last millennium. I think a far more appropriate label would be 'the entitlement generation'.

It is because of bad teaching methods that vast numbers of young people are illiterate and innumerate. Maths and English appear to be optional subjects and have been replaced by gender studies, sex education and ethnic diversity training.

Bizarre new ways of teaching, designed so that teachers don't have to work as hard, haven't helped much.

It is because of naivety that millions now believe that the internet is a valuable and reliable source of information.

Incidentally, whenever I go into a card shop, I am astonished to see the number of cards, banners, pens, mugs and other rubbish marked 'For the Best Teacher in the World' or some such nonsense.

I assume that teachers go home at the end of each term laden with this junk. What the hell do they do with it all? Do they have staff room competitions? 'I had 14 cards, 9 mugs and7 pens from Form 4B'. 'I got 17 cards, 11 mugs and 2 pens from 5A'.

Actually, it is all a bit scary and it shows just why today's kids are growing up into such whingy, pathetic, little creeps.

Marketing companies say that the millennials like natural, colourful and hedonistic products and that they upgrade their mobile phones even if only incremental improvements have been made. And then wonder why they cannot afford to buy a house.

Children are taught not to think but simply to absorb the virtuous and morally superior views which have been pre-selected and prepared for them. That's why millennials are unable to think for themselves. Schools indoctrinate pupils into believing that the EU is a wonderful organisation which will save us all from war and ruination, that those voting to remain within the EU must be wise and tolerant internationalists, and that anyone voting to leave the EU must be a dangerous, war-mongering and insular racist, that recycling old yoghurt cartons will save the planet and that the planet is overheating because we aren't recycling enough old cola cans. It's the indoctrination which has created such a stupid generation.

There are other problems with our educational system.

It is because school sports days, and their innate competitiveness, have been banned, lest pupils be faced with the damaging possibility of defeat, that the millennials always expect to get their own way.

Millennials are dogmatic and exceedingly judgemental because they were brought up to believe that they were the centre of the universe.

As a result of all this, we have a generation of people who are fundamentally flawed and psychologically damaged. They whinged and moaned when they lost the EU vote and when their unlikely champion, Jeremy Corbyn, lost the election. (Many of the most innumerate argued, quite bizarrely, that he had won and should be Prime Minister.)

And it is because of the obsession with sex lessons and unisex uniforms that we have created a generation or two of mixed up young people who are transgender, bisexual, homosexual or just plain mixed up. There has been a steep rise in sexual assaults on children by children and though this is blamed on the internet it is, in my view, almost certainly a result of the obsession with sex which seems to be rife in British schools.

In a decade, probably less, half of the coming generation will think they are gay and the other half will demand sex change surgery with half of those demanding even more expensive reversal operations a few years later. Only the growing Muslim population will be exempt from this sexual hysteria.

So, in short, I blame schools and teachers for many of the problems with the millennials.

9

I am waiting for Jeremy Corbyn and his team of 14-year-old advisors from the Young Communist Party to publish a new and improved manifesto. They are so desperate for power and excited by the enthusiastic welcome for their last, generous, gift-packed manifesto that it can't possibly be long before they publish an improved, even more exciting, revised, supercharged version.

I expect they will promise that if they win the General Election they will:

Make every weekday a bank holiday. The proposal to make four new bank holidays was massively popular. So, now they are adding five new bank holidays every week – a minimum of 260 new bank holidays a year. 'This will boost productivity enormously,' said a spokesperson.

Give everyone in the country a house worth £1 million. And a Ferrari and a yacht. At least one big yacht or two small ones.

Provide unlimited free plastic surgery and sex change surgery to everyone over the age of six.

Reduce the voting age to five. 'If kids is old enough to go to school they is old enough to vote,' said Corbyn's spokeschild.

Allow children aged two or more to choose their own sex, parents and names. 'It's wrong to force young kids to grow up with parents they might not like and names they don't like,' said Korky the cat, a cartoon character and one of Jezza's closest advisors.

Allow stuffed toys to vote in constituencies where the Labour Party does not usually do well.

Give everyone in Scotland an extra 12 extra bank holidays. This will be achieved by making the Scottish year last 377 days and it should help restore Labour's dominance north of the border.

10

The electorate's rejection of Theresa May is being seen by the metropolitan, liberal elite who control the media (conveniently) as a second referendum on Brexit.

It wasn't.

It was a rejection of a cold and arrogant Prime Minister, a Tory Party which had moved so far to the left that it has damned near collided with the Labour Party and alienated many of its traditional supporters and a manifesto which appeared to have been written by infiltrators from the Labour Party.

It seems that Theresa May is a prime example of the Peter Principle. She has risen to a point where she cannot operate efficiently or effectively.

Cameron and Blair both chose aggressive and well-known tabloid journalists as media advisors, but for some absurd reason May seems to have chosen unknown journalists – from a paper in Scotland!

11

A good friend who is a reader of mine has sent me a letter from someone called Elaine Way CBE, who is Chief Executive of Western Health and Social Care Trust in Londonderry, Northern Ireland.

My friend had written to the Trust, quoting my book on Alzheimer's disease – and the way that thousands of patients are being misdiagnosed with untreatable Alzheimer's when they are suffering from treatable Idiopathic Normal Pressure Hydrocephalus.

Ms Way consulted the Trust's three 'Memory Service Clinicians' (Dr Gillian Mullan, Consultant Clinical Psychologist for Older People, Dr Stephen Todd, Consultant Geriatrician and Dr Tuoyo Awani, Consultant Old Age Psychiatrist.)

According to Ms Way, these three told her that 'There is no definitive cure for idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus'.

They apparently also told her that they were unaware of any recent scientific literature that reports misdiagnosis rates for Alzheimer's disease to the degree I reported in my book.

When I read their letter, I was several hundred miles away from Northern Ireland but I wouldn't mind betting that they heard my scream of anguish.

Did these experts really say there is no cure for idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus?

If they did say this then in my view they are a disgrace.

Idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus is the one major cause of dementia which can be cured – by a simple shunt operation. The operation is very effective.

I am appalled that three people who are supposed to be experts should not know this. The scientific evidence is listed in the three-page selection of scientific references in my book entitled *Millions of Alzheimer's Patients Have Been Misdiagnosed (And Could be Cured)*. It is available cheaply on Amazon as an ebook.

My book also contains scientific evidence showing that between 5% and 10% of all individuals diagnosed as suffering from Alzheimer's Disease have been misdiagnosed and are suffering from idiopathic normal pressure hydrocephalus.

How many other hospital doctors and GPs still don't realise that Normal Pressure Hydrocephalus is a major cause of dementia and can be cured?

Thousands, I suspect.

It is, without a doubt, one of the great health scandals of the 21st century.

12

I jotted down some thoughts on politics.

Diane Abbott is rapidly turning out to be the brains of the Labour party. Who'd have thought it? It is comforting to think that Corbyn's former mistress will be in charge of a major Ministry if the Labour Party wins the election. Goody. Diane Abbott is, in my irrelevant opinion, so bereft of intelligence, so ignorant of things she should know that even in Westminster she stands out as a dangerously ill-informed buffoon.

The enthusiasm for elected mayors is entertaining. No one has yet noticed that bringing in all these new mayors is merely a crafty way to reintroduce the Regional Parliaments which the EU wanted to foist upon us and which the British electorate rejected. (The London Assembly and the mini parliaments in Scotland and Wales are merely Regional Parliaments as devised and approved by Adolf's ever enthusiastic followers.)

It's sad to see Poland and France deciding to make Brexit as difficult as possible. Didn't we save those two sorry nations in WWII when they were overrun by Adolf and the boys? Ungrateful bastards. We only fought WWII because the Krauts had invaded Poland. And now they've forgotten and they seem to take great delight in back stabbing us.

I see, by the way, that Poland is now demanding £758 billion from Germany as a result of World War II. Poland is apparently claiming it needs the money to overcome its 'national inferiority complex'. I hope Poland will be giving at least half of that to Britain since we fought that war to save their sorry asses.

Did the EU interfere with the British election?

Nigel Farage has once again proved himself to be the most able and astute politician in Britain. Keeping out of the election which saw the demise of UKIP was a masterstroke. But I bet he doesn't receive the knighthood he so richly deserves. The establishment will block any gong for Mr Farage.

Corbyn et al will probably vote against any Brexit deal. This is great news. No deal at all would be the best deal for the United Kingdom. We need the EU about as much as we need Luxembourg. The EU, on the other hand, needs to keep flogging us cars, washing machines and soggy, infected cheese. Our negotiators will screw things up and if a deal is done it will doubtless be appallingly lily-livered. So, we'll be better off without a deal. The EU has already made it clear that it hates the idea of Britain leaving without a deal. So, isn't that exactly what we should be offering?

In France, the pro EU presidential candidate is being supported by anarchists and anti-fascism groups. This is a sign of intense stupidity since the EU is acknowledged to be the most fascist organisation ever created. Still, no one ever claimed the French were bright, did they?

Populism is the latest term of abuse among the metropolitan elite. But what precisely is populism? It's political control by the people, for the people. The word 'populism' is a synonym for democracy. And that, of course, is why it is so hated by the metropolitan elite.

The SNP and the Welsh nationalists are going to be slaughtered in the General Election. The leaders of both have replaced the idea of representation with disconnected hubris and, as a result, their days are over. Couldn't happen to a nicer bunch of nonentities.

13

The National Trust appears to me to be a symbol of everything that is wrong with England.

Their task is to preserve and present our heritage and our culture but the organisation has succumbed to the virus of political correctness and is, in consequence, in its death throes.

It is now neither one thing nor the other and has betrayed its purpose and its supporters.

14

The media in Britain is totally compliant, bought and unquestioning. The BBC, of course is the voice of the leftie State. (The words 'leftie' and 'fascist' are, and always have been, interchangeable.)

The BBC is well regarded around the world by people who rarely listen to it and who, if they do, have no idea what bilge is being broadcast. Most listeners outside the UK don't understand the Corporation's purposes, obligations and financing. The wise and discerning know that the BBC is pompous, corrupt, dishonest, deceitful, unpatriotic, undemocratic, ageist, bureaucratic, racist, sexist and patronising. The BBC's news and current affairs programmes, and the majority of its dramas, are third rate at best. Its world service programmes are biased. The stuff the BBC sells to America is, of course, the pick of the bunch and so the Americans, who know nothing of the BBC's appalling bias, believe the organisation is wonderful.

The English hating staff of the BBC waste a huge amount of the British Public's money providing superficial tat and overpaying modestly talented individuals who would, without the BBC, be unable to earn a fraction of what they are paid. The organisation has repeatedly refused to allow proper debates on subjects of real importance. Instead, the staff take a position and the corporation is therefore committed.

One reason for this is that the BBC recruits staff from the readership of *The Guardian*, a painfully left wing pro EU newspaper. There are, I suspect, very few English patriots working either for *The Guardian* or the BBC.

The BBC has abandoned its public service ethos and now serves the dishonest, racist, sexist, politically motivated needs of its deeply unpleasant employees whose most notable quality are hubris and a sense of entitlement. They are also traitorous in that they seem to take the EU's side against their employers – the British people. I can understand the awful Nick Clegg and the even more awful Peter Mandelson doing a little scaremongering of the innocent and easily frightened and promoting the EU at every opportunity. They are both, after all, receiving or going to receive pensions from the EU and they have a vested interest in maintaining its strength. But although the BBC has received some money from the EU it receives most of its massive income from the British people and it should learn to be a little more respectful towards its employers. It is easy to see how bent the BBC is – just check their selection of news items (and the way they cover them) with just about any other media organisation (except, perhaps, *The Guardian* and the *Financial Times* which seem to me to be as bent as fish hooks). It is illuminating is it not to realise that the most vocal supporters of the EU are Clegg, Mandelson, Blair and Goldman Sachs.

What a bunch. Clegg, Mandelson, Blair and Goldman Sachs! Says it all, doesn't it?

Incidentally, Channel 4, the other State owned and taxpayer funded broadcaster in the UK, appears to me to be outrageously lefty, anti-Britain, anti-England, anti-English history or culture and, like its big State controlled brother, the BBC is pro EU.

The apparently left wing newspapers *The Guardian* and the *Daily Mirror* may appear to be questioning but they are not.

In many ways, they are even more committed to the status quo than any other outlet.

I have worked for most of the national papers (written columns for quite a few) and the papers take stances but don't let anyone know what those stances are. Sometimes it looks as if a paper is defending X when in reality it is promoting Y. They are very good at it.

The bottom line is that there is not one, large, truly independent media outlet in Britain. And I suspect this is true everywhere else.

As for the internet…well, you would do as well relying on the news provided by the woman behind the fish counter in your local supermarket.

15

The *Daily Mail* appears to have decided not to print the story about normal pressure hydrocephalus (based on my book) which has, so I've been told, been waiting to appear for many weeks.

Maybe the story is too scary for them. Or maybe they don't care about the elderly.

Or maybe they would print the story if the author of the book on which the article was based were 19, buxom and photogenic. Especially if she had a theory that eating sherbet twice a day would cure Alzheimer's and give you cleaner skin, shiny hair and a bigger bottom.

16

These days, every mail seems to bring another batch of problems. No company can, it seems, go a whole month without changing some fundamentals about the way it operates. I then receive a six page single spaced letter demanding that I waste time, money and effort making a choice.

It is, undoubtedly, all made much worse by the fact that I never like being told what to do.

Why can't I just put up with rules and instructions, however absurd?

Life would be so much easier.

17

NHS managers are campaigning to make tests easier for nurses.

They want to be able to employ nurses whose basic knowledge of nursing is not extensive and who don't speak or understand English very well.

I am surprised.

I thought they'd been doing that for years.

18

A politician called Tim Farron resigned as leader of the Liberal Party because he is a Christian and does not support homosexual marriage.

So that is what 'liberal' means these days.

The people who proclaim themselves to be liberal are too prejudiced and bigoted to allow others to hold beliefs.

Actually, I strongly suspect that the vast majority of British citizens do not approve of homosexual marriage. They have, however, had it foisted on them by politically correct politicians.

My guess is that 90% of the population don't approve but it is of no benefit to them to stick their heads above the parapet and so they say nothing rather than risk being pilloried or arrested.

Incidentally, I still refuse to use the word 'gay' as an alternative to homosexual.

The word gay means carefree and light-hearted. This is not, as my politically correct *Oxford Dictionary* says, a dated use of the word. It is the proper use of the word.

I am fed up with the way homosexuals have become so pushy.

A friend of mine once said that he could put up with homosexuals as long as they didn't ram it down your throat.

19

'If you play by the rules nothing can go wrong,' said the man in the café. His companions nodded sagely, clearly agreeing with him.

Wait until he gets their first full-blooded tax investigation.

He will then discover that playing by the rules does you no bloody good at all.

20

According to a 1954 edition of the *Cricketer* magazine, Essex County Cricket club had 500 odd members at the end of the Second World War.

Surely they can't all have been odd?

21

Right wing political groups have been made illegal in Britain (though it is perfectly legal to be a communist or a member of a rabidly unpatriotic left wing party).

And it is perfectly legal to be a supporter of the European Union which is the ultimate neo-Nazi organisation since it was founded by Nazis and still has entirely fascist aims.

The EU supporters ignore the fact that Britain is the most important country in the European Union. The number of British inventors on the list is far, far longer than a list compiled of citizens from all other European countries.

What have the French ever invented except a few smelly, lethal cheeses? Their most famous product (champagne) was invented by an Englishman called Christopher Merrett in the Cotswolds. And what have the Germans given the world except sauerkraut and the silly goose-step?

And now, to our shame, we sit demurely by and allow the French, the Germans and even the Poles, damn it, make demands upon us. Even a damned Luxembourger thinks he can tell us what we can and cannot do!

If we had a Government worth its salt, we would now not be negotiating our release from the EU's clutches but simply announcing our imminent departure.

Why waste time debating, arguing and pleading with such ungrateful bastards?

We should wave two Agincourt fingers at the EU and tell the sniffy little cretins who run it that if they don't roll over and let us leave as planned, we will leave now, immediately and without further ado. (The Agincourt Wave, named after the English archers who waved two fingers at the French just to show they still had their bow twanging digits, should become our national gesture.)

And we should not pay the EU one penny to leave their damned silly fascist organisation. Thanks to the cheaply bought Edward Heath, we have paid out billions to be members of a club no one in their right mind would want to join.

We should tell the EU fascists that unless they roll over quickly we will close down the Channel Tunnel, introduce an Embargo on all EU products (including German cars, French cheese and whatever the Italians are struggling to make this week) and repatriate all foreign EU citizens currently living in the UK (most of whom only came for our free money, houses, benefits and health care).

If the eurocrats object to our simple deal, we should declare war on the EU.

The whole business would be over in days.

We have beaten the Germans twice in the last hundred years and they have no stomach for a third thrashing.

The Italians always run around in circles getting absolutely nowhere if they are under threat.

The Poles are plumbers not fighters.

The Spanish are pathetic whingers who are too busy fighting among themselves. And they don't fight in the afternoons.

And the French all carry white flags in their pockets so that they can surrender within moments of any conflict starting.

Our war with the EU would be over in days; a week at most.

22

Investors are being advised that they should regularly 'rebalance' their investments. What this means in practice is that they are being encouraged to sell investments which are doing well and to buy more of the crappy stuff which is doing badly.

It is perfectly true that it is occasionally possible to do well by buying more of a share which has gone down for no good reason. In such a case, it can make good sense to buy more. I have done this to good effect myself. But to make this a general rule makes no sense at all – except for the banks and brokers who make their money from the commissions they gouge out of the poor investors who are forever selling and buying. What is sensible about selling the successful investments and buying more of the shares which are failing? It may be a brave version of contrarian investing but it isn't particularly rational or sensible and it certainly isn't safe.

Stock markets everywhere are rising and commentators are desperately trying to explain why investors are willing to take stock markets to ever greater heights. There is much talk of rising profits and of things being 'different this time' (again). This is all bollocks, of course. The real explanation for the rise in stock prices is very simple.

Central banks have been printing money for years and have kept interest rates absurdly, dangerously, unnecessarily and destructively low for a decade.

So if you have some savings, the choice is simple: put your money into a deposit account and lose a big chunk of it every year as inflation eats away at your capital, or buy shares and accept the dividends and the chances of a capital gain that will help you beat inflation.

Commentators warn that share prices will collapse. I can't see this happening for a while. Why would investors take their money out of shares and put it into deposit accounts paying noticeably less than inflation?

With interest rates so low and so many older people suffering as a result, I really cannot understand why more 70 and 80-year-olds who are struggling to cope on low incomes don't rob banks. Many have nothing to lose. If they get away with the robbery they will have won back some of the money the Government and the banks stole from them. If they get arrested they will receive warm accommodation and free food. It's a win-win situation.

As someone who has been investing for well over 50 years, I am pleased to see that people my age beat millennials hands down at investing.

The millennials are still naïve enough to think that when a share goes down, they are simply suffering a paper loss but when it goes up, they are making real money. In fact, of course, the profit isn't real money until the shares have been sold and converted into the stuff the Bitcoin generation despise and call 'money'.

23

Kids used to play at sports. They don't do that much anymore. It's a long time since I saw kids playing cricket or football.

Then they watched sports. Some actually went to stadia with the Dads. Most watched sport on television.

Then they played games on their computers.

Then the eSports industry took off and they watched other people playing games on their computers.

And soon kids will watch computers playing one another. Maybe computer robots will fight one another. The loser will lie there, bleeding oil, cogs awry and the victor will disconnect his battery to denote and define his victory.

I wonder, by the way, why it is that so many of today's generation are overweight and under fit.

I have no doubt that somewhere there is a band of fearless researchers using taxpayers' money to try to find an answer to this puzzle.

Meanwhile, I am still trying to find out what 'copy and paste into your browser' means. I don't even know what a browser is.

24

A week before the election I wondered if the Tory Party could have been paid to lose the election. There was an element of tongue in cheek to it.

Now I'm really not so sure.

Look what's happened.

The Conservative Party seems to have deliberately thrown an election. I can't think of anything they could have done to make things worse for themselves.

Now we have that worst of all worlds: a hung parliament.

Millions of sensible folk who voted Labour or LibDem because they didn't like Mrs May's hubris and wanted to give her a good spanking probably now realise how stupid they have been.

But it doesn't really matter.

The democratic dream of the majority who sensibly voted Brexit is over.

Supporters of Hitler's child, the European Union, may have lost the vote but they have won the war.

War criminal Tony Blair, aided by a small army of pathetic, whingeing remainers and middle aged Millennials are about to get their wish. (Am I the only one in Britain who believes that anyone who supports the EU in this battle, and who questions the integrity of the British people and their clear mandate for a full Brexit, is a traitor?)

The Brexit we are going to get will be so soft that we'll be worse off than if we'd stayed in the EU. We will be doomed.

We have to start the fight all over again.

And there is only one way that we can now win.

We must point out to everyone the truth that no one talks about: the EU was founded by Adolf Hitler and the Nazis. It was created to ensure that Germany won the Second World War.

(The number of people who still fail to understand this astonishes me. In his book *Flying High*, Asian businessman Tony Fernandes, who seems like a nice fellow, makes it clear that he thinks that the EU is a good idea because it was created out of the bombed ruins of WWII. How can anyone not now know that the EU was deliberately set up by the Nazis to ensure that Germany gained control of Europe? This is not a myth. It is fact.)

And, as planned, post-war Germany was dominated by old Nazis in positions of power in the worlds of politics, the police, banking, industry and the church. Germany is a fascist country and the EU mirrors that ideology.

The strange thing is that quite a number of Polish politicians seem to take special pleasure in trying to kick Britain – and to support the German controlled European Union. This is odd because it was Britain who, in 1939, fought Germany to save Poland from annexation. There are still people alive who fought in the Second World War but too many Poles seem to have forgotten how many Britons died for them.

The same is true of the French, of course. If we hadn't saved their butts, the French would now all be speaking German and kowtowing every time a German went by.

In addition to this, Britain has for years welcomed Poles to its shores. Many have made a good deal of money out of Britain (with many of them sending the money back to Poland).

I find the Poles particularly ungrateful. We saved them from Germany in 1939. Have these wretched, rude and ungrateful people no sense of gratitude? What have the Poles ever given the world except a good many plumbers and a language that looks like misprints?

25
I’ve written to Jeremy Corbyn. Here’s what I wrote:

Dear Jezza,
The free stuff bribe worked well, didn’t it? All the students fell for the gimmick about ‘no fees’ hook, line and sinker. Stunning. And the lots of free bank holidays and loads more benefits and great pensions – they all went down well. Voters lapped it all up. Meanwhile, those idiots in the Tory party were making loads of really dull, sensible promises which were never going to look good on social media.

But I desperately need you to win the next election so that you fuck up the country properly. I’m counting on you. The bill for all the money you’re going to spend won’t be paid for a few decades. By which time you and I won’t give a damn. The millennials will have to pick up the tab. And sadly they won’t ever be able to retire and if they don’t work they won’t get any sort of pension so about five million of them will be busking or begging. They will have to rediscover the joy of darning socks and making bubble and squeak with food leftovers. I bet the average millennial doesn’t even know that people used to darn holey socks. So that’s their hard luck, as you know. So this is a great time. And you’re doing brilliantly.

Now, Jezza, I reckon we can make a bundle on the currency markets and stock markets when you become Prime Minister. The pound will crash and the price of essential imports such as food and oil will soar. That’ll push up inflation, and so Carney (who seems to have turned into a full-blown party and festival attendee) won’t have any choice but to raise interest rates. Actually, I wish Carney would spend more time at parties and festivals and tennis matches instead of contributing so enthusiastically to the nonsense which is Project Fear.

Whoopee! Us oldies will do well. Interest rates up, shares in gold and mining companies soaring. Great.

But you’ve got to do a lot more, Jezza.

If you’re definitely going to win the next election you need more of those free offers. Nice big £2 million homes for everyone. Free. A nice packet containing £1,000 in freshly minted notes for every voter in the land. A cut in all taxes except for rich bastards earning over £40,000 a year – except MPs of course. The rich bastards can pay 90% tax because they can afford it. Oh, and promise £25,000 a year in tax free cash for anyone who doesn’t want to work because it’s boring. Make sure that it’s payable to anyone who votes. And bring the voting age down to 16. And the pension age down to 30. And guarantee everyone £39,999 a year State pension, collectable at the age of 50.

That should do it.

Oh, and every time there’s a disaster anywhere make sure you get there fast for the huggies and the selfies. Don’t bother talking. Just hug and pose. Hug and pose. Great stuff, comrade.

You’ll be in Downing Street and we’ll both make an absolute bundle.

The silly millennials will eventually pay the price but what do we care?

Rock on, Jezza!

Up the Revolution!

Your comrade
Vernoninski Colemanovitch

26
A young woman who is apparently a bit famous is insisting that Corbyn had won the election and is now Prime Minister.

She seemed to me to be clinically deluded but the media are allowing her to rant on as though she were a sane person. I had never heard of her and have now forgotten her name. I have no idea who she was.

I also read that an actor called Andrew Scott says that Hamlet cannot now be played as ‘mad’ because audiences are too tuned in to mental health issues.

I look forward to some lefty playwright rewriting Hamlet and adding a couple of social workers and a mental welfare officer to support and comfort the potty Prince.

Meanwhile, we are now all so tuned in to mental health issues that GPs report that one in three sick notes is written for ‘mental health issues’. Glory be. I doubt if there is a millennial in the country who doesn’t complain that he is suffering from stress. Staggeringly, around 300,000 people a year are giving up work because of long-term mental health problems. The problem, I fear, is that people are increasingly unwilling to accept responsibility for their own lives. They always demand a solution from someone else.

When I was a GP, I refused to put full diagnoses onto sick notes because patients had to take their sick notes into their place of work where the sick note would be copied and everyone would know what their illness was. I remember one manager for a chain store telling me that if I put down that he was suffering from depression then he would lose his job. I was hauled before an NHS committee and fined quite heavily for this. That was why I resigned from the National Health Service. I was facing a lifetime of heavy fines. No one supported my stance and I was dismissed as a nutty Don Quixote character but within a year or two, the rules had been changed so someone must have been listening.

I honestly don't believe that anyone has better credentials than I have in the area of mental health issues. I have fought hard for individuals suffering from real mental health problems and I've written a number of books on the subject.

But things have now become rather silly.

The young royals (who live on their own exclusively luxurious brand of benefits and can have few complaints about what life has thrown at them) have made the whole issue fashionable and as a result every minor setback or disappointment is a depression and every hiccup is 'stressful'. People wear their mental illness with pride – as though it were a war injury.

The result is that we have a nation of people taking drugs they don't need and staying home from work. The young royals might do more good if they put a little effort into persuading millennials that life sucks and sometimes you just have to put up with it and move on.

Actually, the problem doesn't just involve mental health issues.

I saw a health website the other day which advised readers to visit their doctor as a matter of urgency if they had any pain in their chest, arms or back in case it was a heart attack. No wonder it is impossible to get an appointment with a GP.

And why, I wonder, are there now so many websites dealing with illnesses such as chest pain as though they were purely feminine problems? If there were websites suggesting that chest pain were an exclusively male problem they would be attacked as misleadingly sexist.

27

All is well with the world.

At Starbucks it is apparently now possible to order a lavender cortado from a barista who is wearing flannel rather than a green apron. The company has conducted research on what it calls 'credibility cues' and has found that baristas who have tattoos are thought to make better coffee.

Other research has shown that ice used at some Starbucks shops contains faecal matter. But who cares. As long as the faecal matter laden ice is served up by a geezer with tattoos and, preferably, served in an old avocado skin.

28

When Camden council announced that it was going to close down a block of flats (and force all the occupants to leave) because another block of flats had caught fire, all the commentators seemed to think it was a wise and good thing to do.

But it wasn't.

It was a narrow minded and very stupid knee-jerk response which will do genuine harm and it showed a complete failure to understand the concept of risk.

A girl from the council said they had done it because the local fire boss could not guarantee the safety of the people inside.

Of course he couldn't.

What a stupid question to ask the bloke.

Of course he couldn't guarantee the safety of all the people in this block'.

Can he guarantee the building won't be hit by a meteor? Of course he can't. No one can. By Camden's standards every building in the country should be emptied.

What Camden Council has failed to do is to understand the concept of risk. The residents should be told the risk and allowed to make their own choice instead of being oppressed by the nanny state. (Incidentally, French economist Frederic Bastiat defined the state as: 'that great fiction by which everyone tries to live at the expense of everyone else.')

There are in our modern world two sorts of people: the risk takers and the non-risk takers.

The people in the second group completely misunderstand the meaning of risk and they spend their lives (largely through ignorance) making life difficult (or impossible) for the risk takers who are, by definition, the people who service today and create tomorrow.

29

Today I watched a beggar sending a mate into a betting shop for him. When I asked him why he had sent his pal into the shop on his behalf, the beggar told me that he had a good begging pitch and didn't want to leave it.

I am told that in China, buskers and beggars hold up signs with details of their QR code (whatever that is) so that people can give them money via their mobile phones.

Cash is no longer acceptable.

I saw today that W.H.Smith, the newsagent, is selling next year's calendars and half year diaries.

Apparently, a half year diary enables you to write down your appointments for half the year. You then buy the diary for the other half of the year.

30

I used a telephone answering machine to move some money from one bank account to another.

I completed the whole transaction with the aid of a recorded voice which actually worked. At the end I said, 'thank you very much you have been very helpful'.

Afterwards, I watched a pair of blackbirds feeding a baby blackbird. In between mouthfuls, the baby bird sat on the back of a wooden swing seat in the garden and waited for mum and then dad to come with more food.

Mum, dad, mum, dad, mum, dad.

Fortunately, some things in the world don't change.

July

1

The Scottish government is changing the law about transplantation so that more transplants can be performed.

Organ transplantation has long worried me.

Back in the 1960s, I took part in a television programme with Dr Christiaan Barnard who performed the first heart transplant.

Many things about transplants worried me – but nothing more than the fact that it was impossible to be sure that the donor was really dead when his organs were removed.

You can’t wait until the body is properly dead to ‘harvest’ the organs. You need them fresh and in good condition. So it’s a moot point whether the donor is, or is not, still alive when his or her heart and kidneys are removed.

To start with, surgeons relied on ECG machines to tell if a patient had died. Then it became clear that this really wasn’t a very safe way to decide whether or not it was OK to start ripping organs out of a patient. So, ‘brain death’ became the fashionable way to decide if a patient had ‘died’. If there was no trace of life on the machine which measures brain activity then the surgeons could move in.

But.

This morning I read about a young Palestinian who was hit in the head by an Israeli bullet and lay in bed comatose in an Israeli hospital. The hospital doctors pronounced the young man brain dead and sent him home to Gaza strip to die. He recovered and five years later had a wife and three sons. The only sign of his injury was a limp.

And this, remember, is the same definition of death which is used as a sign for the transplant surgeons to move in and start removing vital organs.

There’s another problem with transplantation.

No nation can possibly afford to perform transplants on everyone who needs one.

And so social workers, nurses and doctors sit around a big table, drink coffee, munch biscuits and decide which patients will live and which will die. The social workers pretty much run the thing.

They have a sort of points system for doing this.

So, if you’re foreign and you’ve got 16 kids and you’ve never done a day’s work in your life, you will get lots of points and you will probably get a new heart. If you’re English and have no kids or are single then they let you die. If you happen to be the greatest composer or film maker in the country they will still let you die because the NHS selection process has become racist and politically correct.

The system is absurd, cruel, unfair and indefensible.

Mozart and Beethoven wouldn’t be chosen for transplants. But an unemployed yahoo with a wife, a mistress and two council houses full of kids would be top of the list.

So, between the fact that the system is grossly unfair and no one can tell if the donor is really dead, I think we should abandon transplant surgery.

The vast amounts of money spent on transplants could be used to improve diagnostic services and to reduce waiting times for routine but life-saving surgery.

It’s impossible to know what the NHS costs are for a transplant but it is known that in the United States a heart transplant costs, on average, $1,382,400. A lung transplant costs an average of $861,700, a liver transplant costs $812,500 and an intestine transplant costs $1,147,300. My guess would be that the costs in the NHS would be comparable and certainly not any cheaper.

Remember, the money available for health services is finite.

Remember that it is not at all unknown in NHS hospitals for patients to be put into beds without the sheets being changed!

Choices have to be made.

And I guarantee that far more lives would be saved if transplants were halted.

The good news today is that we have a new robin living in our garden.

2

Stephen Hawking, the author of a book which was bought by millions and read by dozens, seems to have decided that he is an expert on everything and must share his cockeyed views with the world. He appears to have claimed that the earth is going to turn into Venus and that the temperature in Wolverhampton will be 250 degrees Celsius by next Wednesday. We will apparently have acid rain. He was reported as having forecast that we are all going to have to climb into little spaceships and set up colonies on other (unspecified) planets.

I have never been convinced that Hawking had a riotous sense of humour. Maybe he has gone barking. Who knows? Although, of course, we must not lose sight of the fact that he may have been misquoted. He may have merely made a comment about the prospects of the England football team in some tournament or other. Reporters do have a way of misunderstanding.

Or maybe this is another Stephen Hawking. There are probably loads of them about. Maybe this Steven Hawking is a seven-year-old with a Twitter account and an inflated sense of his own importance.

On the other hand, if we assume that this was 'the' Hawking and he wasn't misquoted then we must remember Kipling, who wrote: if you don't exaggerate then no one will take any notice'.

The Web has, of course, taken this to heart. It is, I suspect, the tweeters' secret mantra. And it would seem to me that Hawking may have now adopted Kipling as his guide to life.

Looked at more widely, the fact is that the climate change nutters don't much care about facts or the truth.

All they are interested in is in maintaining and spreading the myth.

As far as I am aware, there is not one shred of scientific evidence to support this latest nonsense and Hawking has, in my view, just destroyed whatever small reputation he may have had as a serious scientist.

Moreover, he should surely be ashamed of himself for seeking to frighten and mislead.

I am totally in favour of creating cleaner vehicles, which go further on less petrol and which spew out less toxic gases, but that is because I want to breathe cleaner air and because I know that the oil is running out but there was never any justification for confusing these two issues with the climate change myth.

An entire global warming industry has built up with tons of folk flying around the world, having meetings, taking huge fees and thinking up new ways to punish ordinary people and sustaining the whole myth. The vast majority of people see the whole thing as the scam it is – surveys have consistently shown that most people don't believe in global warming (man-made or not).

Every time there is a weather related problem, it is blamed on climate change. Look back in history, we can see that storms and hurricanes and tempests and tsunamis have always been a part of our climatic history. Things appear worse today because the authorities insist on categorising every minor event as a major incident.

Do you remember all that talk about Cornwall being turned into a desert by 2010? They didn't quite get that right, did they?

Incidentally, why do so many people insist on writing Climate Change instead of climate change?

I have noticed that newspapers which would use lower case initials when writing about God or the Queen seem to favour upper case initials when writing about their favourite myth.

3

I have seen the light.

Modern politics is all about self-interest; the self-interest of the politicians and the self-interest of the voters.

The Millennials want Corbyn in power because he has promised them loads of free money and extra holidays. They aren't bright enough to realise that every time the minimum wage goes up a load of businesses stop hiring and thousands of workers are made redundant.

Corbyn appears to be a manipulative little bugger, and it is no wonder that liberal lefty brainless luvvies adore him. He is all promise and no policy, all tacky style and no serious substance. Most of his supporters favour higher taxes because most of them don't have jobs and therefore don't pay any tax at all.

He does not appear to be a wise or intelligent man; I get the impression that when brains were being allocated he stood in the line between the garden bench and the French accordion. Nor is he a great leader. But he seems to have the naïve charm of a village idiot and his insane burblings attract the lost, the bewildered and the resentful. His followers appear to be the sort of people who do a lot of jumping up and down on social media.

He talks about investing in our future, in a fairer society and in ways designed to stimulate the economy.

This is, of course, all complete bollocks.

Whenever the State spends money, the money just disappears and nothing ever comes of it. When administrators and politicians are given buckets full of money to spend, you can be sure that every last penny of it will be wasted and there will be no profit, no dividend and no gain. It is usually said that the fruit of experience is wisdom. This does not, however, work with politicians or bureaucrats.

Corbyn promised to abandon student loans, and to abolish fees. Then someone told him how much this would cost and apparently, he quietly abandoned the idea during the university holidays.

He wants the minimum wage to go up to £10 an hour for 16-year-olds. That will win over some of the teenagers with low paid jobs but it will soon prove unpopular when all the jobs disappear.

I assume that no one has told him that 900,000 retail jobs will go in the next few years because the minimum wage has already risen too far too quickly.

Corbyn's millennials want to stay in the EU because they are worried that if we leave they won't be able to buy BMWs and cappuccinos. A true Brexit would have led to freedom, independence, democracy and wealth. But those things aren't as much fun as camembert cheese and claret.

It all sounds superficial and selfish but it's the new socialist, lefty, way. (Socialists are mostly driven by envy so it's not surprising that most millennials are socialists.)

And Corbyn, who seems to me to have the intellectual and emotional age of a poorly developed 15-year-old, has captured the mood of the new zeitgeist perfectly.

After the recent fire in London, Theresa May did the adult, useful, boring thing. She went to talk to the fire chiefs and the emergency services. Corbyn was out there giving out hugs and posing for selfies and probably some of his trademark misplaced bosom slapping high fives too. Social media despised the sensible approach and enthusiastically applauded the promotional alternative. Corbyn is a politician in the same way that Lily Allen and Gary Lineker are politicians.

My old-fashioned sense of responsibility for the future leads me to believe that austerity was essential for our nation's survival.

Gordon Brown left Britain with massive debts which have been growing ever since.

The debt continued to grow throughout the Osborne years and it is still growing. We haven't really had any austerity yet. We've just had the warm up. Britain is still borrowing more than £1 billion a week, national debt interest payments exceed the nation's defence budget and our deficit now is greater than ever. We already have higher tax rates than at any time in the last 30 years and not many people would bet against more tax rises. The plan to cut the annual overspend by the mid-2020s is now clearly just a pipe dream.

The logical, sensible inclination is to believe that the national debt must be reduced. After all, a nation which has unpaid, growing debts eventually finds itself impoverished and unable to fund any government programmes. Ask the Greeks or the Argentinians. The UK's national debt is now worse than that of France or Italy (two recognised basket cases in Europe) because Brown and Osborne have left Britain's economy in a terrible mess. The UK's debts are massive and still growing. All attempts to deal with them are vociferously opposed by people with a personal, vested interest in resisting cuts in public expenditure. These categories include unions, public service staff and people existing on government hand-outs aka benefits.

Millennials, who now control the nation through social media, (the latest job is apparently that of 'social media influencer') don't want any austerity because it is a painful process. They don't give a damn about the future. They care only about now. They want more free money and more free holidays. And they want it now. And a cappuccino with extra double sprinkles too and be quick about it. They take offence very easily for theirs is the Diva Generation. They all think they are so very, very special, so superior. If someone thwarts them, or fails to agree with them then, in lieu of offering a sensible argument they will, like the average thick-skulled mugger, resort to violence – usually verbal, because they don't do physical unless they're in their lycra.

Well, I'm tired.

Let the daft buggers have what they want.

The nation will be utterly fucked, of course.

But that's a small price to pay.

A few decades down the line (just when today's 25-year-olds are feeling creaky and thinking of retirement) there won't be any money left for pensions, health care or anything else. And Britain won't be able to borrow because our debts will be too huge for anyone to trust us with more loans. Taxes will rise to such high levels that no one will bother to work. Everyone will want to leech off the State.

Actually, we won't have to wait long for the tax rises. New taxes are coming whoever gets in at the next election. The Tories have gone left. Labour supporters have raced into communism. Millennials don't approve of paying taxes themselves (it doesn't fit in with their feelings of entitlement and expectation) and since they control social media it will be the older citizens who will pay higher taxes. There will be wealth taxes, high capital gains taxes and so on ad infinitum.

But that's not my problem, is it?

I believe in patriotism and paying off debts because I'm an old fart.

But that's all out of fashion now.

As far as I am concerned, the present will be much better if the nation borrows more and spends more money it hasn't got. The millennials will shut up and enjoy the extra spending. And, who knows, the council might go back to collecting the rubbish as often as once a fortnight.

As I said in my letter to Jezza, we oldies will be the recipients of this borrowed largesse and we won't ever have to pay for it.

And we can make money out of it too.

The minute Corbyn gets into Downing Street, the pound will collapse. Inflation will then soar and interest rates will have to rise to more sensible and rewarding levels. Will we manage to match Zimbabwe in 1999? Inflation reached a magnificent 500 billion per cent. Sadly, I rather doubt that this sort of inflation rate is as entertaining as it might sound from afar.

We can get rich by selling UK investments and buying foreign shares and property so that we are hedged against the fall in sterling. We can hold gold, oil, dollars and even euros. (Note: the use of oil is still soaring globally – and it's running out.)

So, bring it on!

Let's have Corbyn in No 10. Let's abandon austerity, good sense and responsibility for the future.

The price will be massive.

But we old farts won't have to pay it.

The older you are the more sense a Corbyn government makes.

We will have happy, wealthy years, enjoying a present paid for by the millennials.

The millennials will eventually have to pay the price for the Corbyn largesse with very high taxes, no benefits, no pensions and a total collapse in public services.

But that's their choice.

I'm not sure that I care anymore.

4

I saw a survey today which showed that newspaper prices have soared over the last decade. During the same period, their sales have fallen by almost the same amount that the prices have risen.

This is a classic error and it's surprising to see newspapers making it.

When sales and income fall, there is a tremendous temptation to put up prices in order to help counter the fall in sales and maintain income. But if you do that then, inevitably, the sales collapse is exacerbated.

5

July 5th used to be Cecil Rhodes day. (It was his birthday) I think we should bring it back. So today, in my world, is Cecil Rhodes day. Cecil Rhodes helped free Africa from poverty by exploring and liberating the country's intrinsic wealth and then helping to turn a wasteland into a country.

Cecil Rhodes day will not be widely celebrated, of course, because those outrageously hypocritical, foreign youths who accept Rhodes scholarships to Oxford and then, when they get there, campaign vociferously to have the statue of their benefactor removed because they don't like what they think he did to earn the money which they are now so eagerly grasping. If the halfwits who protest about Rhodes had any brains, they would salute his memory and give thanks for his life.

It is no longer considered acceptable to defend titans such as Cecil Rhodes or Sir Thomas Stafford Raffles. They did great things but they were of their time, and members of the Entitlement Generation do not understand that history means that what is acceptable today will probably not be acceptable tomorrow, and that social change is a long, slow process which can, and probably will, eventually leave us all stranded on the wave washed rocks of unacceptability.

Few of the anti-Rhodes campaigners seem to have bothered to do any research. Rhodes was far less of a racist than many black and Asian politicians and far, far less of a racist than most of those who sneer at him and his work. Africans, in particular, should salute his determination and skills and respect his memory. I suspect that most know very little of what he achieved in a tragically short life. (When liberal luvvies talk about racism they never mention the fact that Arab men wear white robes while Arab women wear black. White clothing reflects the heat and keeps the wearer cool but black clothing absorbs heat and is very uncomfortable in hot climates. What's that if it isn't an expression of a racist attitude?)

How can you remove certain parts of our history, pretend that they do not exist, refuse point blank to study them or refer to them and then claim to understand the world in which we live?

Rhodes, like Raffles and many others, helped shape our modern world. They were courageous and imaginative men and just because we would do things differently now doesn't mean that the way they did things was wrong then – and nor does it make them bad men.

Standards, boundaries, expectations, beliefs were all different then.

Those who judge so enthusiastically today will doubtless find themselves with serious explaining to do about their own activities in another decade or two's time. They will then realise that to make judgements about an individual's behaviour when he lived in a different culture, when expectations were very different, is absurd and utterly unfair. I wonder how Rhodes's attackers will be viewed in 100 years' time. Maybe they will be vilified for accepting his charity. Maybe they will be vilified for criticising him. And maybe a coming generation will demand that Blair Avenue, Prescott Street and the Corbyn Primary School all have their names changed to something more acceptable.

As an anonymous reader of mine pointed out: 'The fact is that if it weren't for the imagination and energy of Cecil Rhodes, many of those who now besmirch his name would still be running around wearing loin cloths. They would be waving spears and supplementing their diet with the occasional 'rump of missionary'.'

I couldn't possibly comment.

6

Many of the residents from Grenfell tower, mostly immigrants, have refused the temporary housing offered to them, though the accommodation on offer looked damned good to me and would, I suspect, have looked damned good to most Britons.

Now, here is a thing: several hundred people die in fires in domestic properties in England every year.

How many of them are offered wonderful alternative accommodation and huge cash payments?

Some of the Grenfell residents have been put into 68 flats which cost £2,000,000 and where the rates and services charge is £15,000 a year. The flats have been bought by the council which has apparently got money to burn. The flats are in a building where some residents paid up to £25,000,000 for their accommodation.

Those who dared to question whether this is fair to the folk who had bought their flats, or the right use of taxpayers' money, were naturally vilified as racists.

The other curious thing is that the residents who owned their own apartments in the Grenfell Tower block appear to have been completely left out in the cold. They haven't been offered vastly expensive accommodation and nor have they found themselves being forced to accept huge cash payments from the charities which have been collecting voluntary donations.

Around £19 million in cash has been collected and I have to say I can't help wondering why. Do the people who give so generously to foreigners who have lost their homes also give so generously when people who live in their own homes lose everything in a fire?

(Actually, the whole thing reminds me of the Aberfan tragedy. Huge amounts of money were raised for the parents who had lost children, as though the money would help in some way, and decades later the money was still causing problems.)

The most annoying aspect of the Grenfell tragedy is that the bureaucrats and planning officers who are responsible will go scot free. Nothing ever happens to government or council employees.

And when will politicians and planners decide to stop building these monstrosities? They are blots on our landscape and unsuitable for human habitation. When I was a medical student, I spent two years living on the 16th floor of a hall of residence. And when I worked as a GP through the 1970s and early 1980s, I used to visit patients living in the damned things almost every day of my life. The people who build them should be forced to live in them. They would soon change their minds and build rows of neat villas, with gardens, instead.

7

I bought a pair of walkie talkies so that when I am in the garden Antoinette can reach me if something important happens – such as the kettle boiling. I will be spending the next few months hacking down weeds. Every summer our forest of hogweed in Gloucestershire grows to around ten feet tall. I have tried everything. The giant hogweed is the flora equivalent of the cockroach. When the world finally ends, there will be just cockroaches and giant hogweed.

I also bought a couple of helium filled balloons. They were huge. As I carried them to the car most people smiled (though one or two youths thought it would be funny to try to burst them with their cigarettes or by deliberately bumping into me).

When I got the balloons home, I took off the heavy weights which the shop had attached and Antoinette put on toy soldiers and some of that blue sticky stuff that has so many odd uses.

We then had tremendous fun watching the balloons floating around the house.

At night, we have to tether them, in case they trigger a burglar alarm. In the daytime, they float around the house eerily and move from room to room. They would, I suspect, scare the shit out of an intruder.

8

Antoinette and I watched a rather sanctimonious film called *Denial* which is about Jews who sued a chap called David Irving who made himself unpopular by making comments about the holocaust which they didn't like.

The lawsuit, as portrayed in the film, didn't seem to me to prove anything except that the two sides disagreed about the facts. The plaintiffs didn't seem to me to prove that the holocaust happened, merely that they regarded Irving as something of a monster.

There always seems to be a good excuse for suppressing facts, ideas or debate as in 'We must not talk about vaccination because if people get to hear the truth they won't want to be vaccinated and then where will we be?' The penalties for telling the truth, or daring to be original or to share a viewpoint which is out of kilter with the establishment's accepted norm are, in their way, just as bad as they were in the days of Galileo. Scientists, especially when they have been bought by drug companies and other commercial enterprises, become indignant and aggressive in defending their immorality. They also become determined to destroy any embarrassing opposition. In no area is this more apparent than in the world of vaccination. Any doctor who dares to promote or defend vaccination is a fraud and a charlatan, a professional whore or an ignorant incompetent. There are no other choices.

I always find it rather frightening when a group of people try to suppress free speech and then endeavour to justify the suppression in some way. I rather doubt that this film will appeal to anyone who does not already believe in the unproven theory which Irving questioned. This seems to me to be a propaganda film which will appeal only to people who already believe the propaganda. So, a bit of a waste of time, I fear.

I confess that at the end of the film, I found myself feeling rather sorry for Irving and disliking the lawyers representing the Jewish woman who initiated the lawsuit and seemed intent only on destroying a man's reputation. The lawyers opposing Irving made a great deal of fuss over mistakes he had made in his interpretation of history. The woman behind the lawsuit seemed to imply that the people who denied the holocaust were as daft as the people who believe that Elvis is still alive or that climate change isn't happening.

I found this a very interesting comparison for there appears to me to be about as much plain, old-fashioned evidence proving the existence of the holocaust as there is proving that Elvis is dead. And there is no scientific evidence proving that climate change is happening and is man-made. Indeed, the available evidence seems to prove the opposite.

The fact that you believe something strongly doesn't turn it into an undeniable truth. I am prepared to accept that the slaughter commonly described as the holocaust did take place (though I don't for a moment think that only Jews were involved) but the fact that I believe it happened doesn't prove that it happened. And why is it illegal or improper for anyone to admit that they have a sneaking suspicion that the numbers so often quoted might owe more to politically inspired imaginations than to fact?

A disappointed Labour Party, upset that they did not win the election, called for a million people to hit the streets and demand that Corbyn be crowned king.

Unfortunately, only 23 people turned up but they had a good time and drank lattes served in avocado skins with double chocolate sprinkles.

It was, as so many things are these days, a party for bad losers.

I wrote to UKIP offering to speak or help in any way they thought appropriate but didn't even have a reply except an automatic acknowledgement. How things change. Some years ago, Nigel Farage wanted to print 1,000,000 copies of my book *England Our England*. And when I spoke at a UKIP conference, I received a standing ovation. Sic transit Gloria.

This evening an ocean going yacht parked in the sea at the bottom of our garden; close enough to pop a golf ball onto the deck with a modest seven iron. I was tempted but I am proud to say that I did not succumb. The yacht's crew and passengers swam alongside it.

The sea in many areas may be polluted but these days it is probably safer than most swimming pools. The average swimming pool contains around 50 gallons of urine and, in an attempt to counteract this, far too much chlorine. The chlorine can cause eye problems. Chest infections are commonly shared in the warm air of changing rooms and foot infections are endemic. So the sea is probably cleaner and safer.

9

According to the news today, the incidence of gender identity problems has quadrupled in the last five years. Thousands of children need gender guidance counselling because, despite the evidence which is available every time they have a bath or a shower, they aren't sure what sex they are or should be.

I'm not in the slightest bit surprised.

Schools now do everything they can to confuse kids. They have installed unisex loos and forced children to wear unisex uniforms. More and more stores are now providing unisex clothes for all those under the age of 14 years. All this is being done despite the fact that all the available scientific evidence shows, quite conclusively, that boys and girls are different, have a different outlook and different needs.

By forcing their own politically correct views on children, there is no doubt that teachers and the media (and some parents) have made gender identity problems fashionable.

The result is that no self-respecting kid wants to be without a gender crisis. The incidence of homosexuality (both varieties) is soaring. It will soon be illegal to reach 18 without at least one meaningful (and possibly compulsory) homosexual experience.

And, on top of all this, sex education is encouraging kids to experiment. Naturally, they do it in the unisex loos. And so the incidence of teenage pregnancies is also soaring and every year, thousands of children need psychological or psychiatric advice because they have sex problems or gender problems. The incidence of homosexuality is soaring.

Worse still, thousands of children (boys, of course) are put on sex offender registers because they have been caught committing sex crimes. A ten-year-old boy who pings a bra strap or draws graffiti with a sexual connotation can now be ruined for life. Thousands of primary school children have been in trouble (sometimes expelled) for sexual crimes – over 2,000 young children have been expelled from school for sex offences. This figure was welcomed by mad feminists who seemed to think it was good news that child sex offenders were being caught at any early age.

The politically correct do-gooders responsible for this mayhem aren't bright enough to connect the dots and understand that all these changes are linked. I have heard that some politically correct lunatics now want to have loos without doors on the cubicles. They claim that having no doors would prevent drug using and illicit sex and break down barriers between the sexes. I wouldn't bet against it happening at a lavatory near you soon.

In a sensible world, all sex education and gender studies classes would be done with the two sexes segregated. The classes would take place when children were 10-years-old and repeated at 14.

The lecture to boys would go something like this: 'Some of you will have noticed that there are pupils in this school who do not look like you. They are called girls and they traditionally wear skirts and blouses rather than trousers and shirts. They do not have dangly bits between their legs but they do have protuberances on their chests. These are called breasts. Your role as boys is to chase girls around the playground but not to catch them. The main difference between the sexes is that whereas you lot like playing with toy cars and guns, the girls like playing with dolls. The second difference is that whereas you don't care what you wear as long as it's scuffed and grubby, girls like nice clothes and shoes. Also, girls like to spend a good deal of time in the lavatories talking about stuff. Girls will still do this when they grow up.'

The lecture to girls would be like this: 'There are pupils in this school who are different to you. They are called boys. They are flat chested but have dangly bits in their shorts. While you and your friends are talking in the lavatories about boys and periods, the boys will be out in the playground playing games which enable them to break windows, tear their clothes and remove the skin from their knees. Boys tend to grow out of these activities when they get older but they are likely to develop an unhealthy interest in cars, sports and alcohol.'

That's it. That's all they need. They'll find out everything else they need to know.

It isn't just schools which have gone potty.

Most big organisations now have gender equality and diversity advisors and a whole host of folk eager to jump down the throats of anyone perceived as being politically incorrect.

Of course you can discriminate as much as you like against English men, especially if they're old. Indeed, you can probably go to prison now if you don't discriminate against older English men.

10

A flock of sheep escaped from their field and were gathered in the lane outside our gate. I had to go down the driveway to retrieve our big, black, plastic bin which the kindly local Non-recyclable Waste Removal Collection Specialist Executives had emptied into their lorry and I discovered that there was a police car parked right on the double yellow lines outside our gate. It took me three months to get the council to paint the yellow lines but no one takes any notice of them because we are right next to the steps down to the beach. Two men in their fifties were standing staring at a piece of road which the sheep had recently occupied. Whenever anything happens there are always two men staring at the place where it happened. I doubt if this pair had ever seen a sheep before. They'd probably tottered round to see what they looked like.

‘What are the police doing here?’ I asked, mildly curious.

‘Dunno,’ replied one of the men.

‘Maybe they’re here for the sheep,’ I said. ‘Perhaps the sheep are down on the beach making sand castles and the police are rounding them up. I don’t think unattended sheep are allowed on the beach during the summer months.’

The man thought for a moment. ‘Oh no,’ he said at last. ‘I don’t think it would be that.’ He and his pal gave me a funny look and wandered off.

I looked around for the police officers who had parked their car across our gate. Eventually I found one. She was wearing a bullet, knife and bomb proof waistcoat in the way that even rural police officers do these days and she looked so full of self-importance that I thought she might burst and make a mess all over the neighbourhood.

I politely asked if she was in any way associated with the police car parked on our yellow lines. She wanted to know why I was asking. I explained that the car was blocking our gateway. She asked if I wanted to get a car in or out. I said I might. She said she would have to consult her partner and see what he thought about moving the car. I said fine. She went away and consulted her partner. She came back, looking crosser and even fuller of self-importance, got into the car (which I was surprised to see they had left unlocked) and moved it away from our gateway.

I waved a hand in thanks, took the bin back in and relocked and bolted the gate.

I always feel more comfortable when the gate is firmly bolted and locked. I don’t know why, except that I like to keep the world shut out. I feel happier that way.

We recently bought an iPad stand so that we could record YouTube videos without having to balance the camera on a pile of books and two umbrellas (don’t ask).

Here are the instructions which came with the stand:

‘Twist the adjustable valve to assemble the console bracket, then fixed the adjustable valve. User could adjust the angle of console with the adjustable valve. Open the bracket lock and Place the console on the bracket also lock fixed, then fasten the bracket lock until the console can be fixed to live. Fixator clip is adjustable According to the Tablet PC thickness.’

Brilliant. I read it three times and had a dizzy attack.

11

The millennials and the Corbynistas are again insisting that they don’t want any more austerity. They want the nation to spend, spend, spend. They want free money, lots of holidays and as little work as possible.

Those of us with brains have frowned on this Pools Winner mentality.

We have argued that Britain owes so much money that it has to start cutting the national debt – otherwise today’s children, teenagers and self-styled millennials, will pay a heavy price.

But, you know what?

Bugger it.

As I have already said, old farts like me have favoured austerity because we know that in 40 to 50 years there will be absolutely no money at all for pensions, health care, education or any public services.

Britain will not be able to borrow any money because our debts will be unpayable.

Taxes will soar.

The fact is that we know that without austerity, Britain faces a bleak future.

But I’m fed up with fighting for austerity.

Fuck ‘em.

Let the stupid millennials and Corbynistas have their spend, spend, spend policies.

They will be the ones who will pay the price.

I’m fed up with being ‘sensible’ and trying to protect a generation which is too stupid to care about its own future.

So, let’s spend, spend, spend.

This will be a GOOD thing for most of us old farts.

As soon as the madness starts, interest rates will soar and the pound will collapse.

Our £1000 in the building society will pay us £100 in interest, instead of 50 pence.

Great. That will be nice.

And the millennials will find themselves paying 10% to 20% on a mortgage loan, a car loan or a loan to have more tattoos done.

Since most millennials assume that interest rates will always be in low, single figures this will come as something of a shock to the little buggers.

But we old farts won’t care. Most old farts are lenders and not borrowers.

And when the spending starts, and austerity is brushed aside, we will be big winners.

So – bring it on!

I just became a Corbyinsta and a self-appointed honorary Millennial.

12

I keep thinking that things can't get any worse in Paris and then they do.

Our bank in France, Barclays, is now refusing to reply to my emails because they say they won't accept my email address. They will only ring me on phone numbers which are at least 10 years out of date. They are therefore leaving messages about my account with complete strangers who now have those numbers. They insist on writing to an address which is 12 years old.

I have repeatedly given them up-to-date information but they won't change any of the wrong information until I send them a gas bill which has our address printed on it. I sent them what I had but they demand a proper printed bill which contains my name, the address and the date. I can't send them a proper bill, the sort which they send through the post, because I don't get those now. The energy company insists on sending our bills by email.

So in the end I sent them a gas bill for a house in England, though that could have been someone else with the same name and they really wouldn't know. When I rang and managed to get through, they said that they would now post me a form to fill in and a password so that I could change my address and phone numbers.

I don't have a Barclays branch to go to in Paris because a year or two ago, without asking, they put me onto an internet/phone banking system but never bothered to explain how to use it. Nor did they send me any of the codes they now say I need. They keep telling me to use it but I can't.

I have wasted days of my life dealing with this nonsense.

13

I read an awful story about a man who was arrested because he was foolish enough to criticise the number of Muslim immigrants while talking to a customer.

Instead of just walking away, the customer complained about the conversation to the police. The police then arrested the man and took him to court where he was fined and told to pay £50 to the man who had complained, though whether this was to soothe his hurt feelings or to reward him for being a snitch I do not know.

Meanwhile, the police appear to have so far allowed Muslim men to rape at least 47,000 young, English girls (many Muslims regard white girls as a disposable commodity to do with what they will) and have done nothing in order not to cause offence to the immigrant community.

The Labour Party, exhibiting a rare degree of cowardice, seems to be so desperate to avoid being accused of being racist that it is keen to avoid offering any criticism of the responsible Muslims. Muslim rapists must apparently be left alone for the sake of community cohesion.

I don't understand why the police who decided not to charge the rapists have not been charged with a race crime for treating Muslims differently to Christians. Shouldn't they be charged with aiding and abetting the rapists?

We are accustomed to the police ignoring attacks on old people but it seems a bit thick that they ignore attacks on young girls simply because they are white.

In Dubai, on the other hand, the authorities arrested a British man, confiscated his passport and threatened him with three years in jail for accidentally touching a local man in a bar while taking a drink back to his table.

And in the UK, it is apparently illegal to point out that the massive, unexpected sudden influx of people has created all sorts of problems with health care, roads, education and housing.

The sale of our Paris apartment seems to have hit a snag. We should have signed the initial contract by now but our notaire says it will take another 2-3 weeks.

After some chasing, I discovered that part of the problem was that our notaire has taken five weeks to do what I would have thought any sensible person could do in five minutes. In France, the notaires are really just conveyancing clerks but they consider themselves terribly important, have big, gold plaques outside their offices and call themselves maître.

The rest of the problem is caused by the fact that our buyer keeps disappearing for days or weeks at a time. We are told that no one knows where he goes.

And there is now some talk a translator may be necessary at a fee of 600 euros (over £500) for an hour. That works out at slightly more than £1,000,000 a year which seems a trifle on the steep side, though I realise that is probably what the EU pays its 12 million translators.

The French are impossible. If they can make things impossibly difficult they will. The delays are making it difficult and harder emotionally because I have enjoyed the apartment very much and we had many good times there.

Our buyer seems keen to delay everything.

Buying and selling property is, in my experience, always a nightmare; it is always made worse by obstructive, uncaring and incompetent professionals.

Buying and selling abroad is a double nightmare because of the language, currency and foreign bureaucracy and tax issues. The fees all these people charge are out of this world.

The one thing the French do well is to cheat.

After the end of today's Tour de France, the commissars punished two riders for taking drink bottles near to the finish. There is a rule about this since crowds mean that it is difficult for all team cars to be available to provide liquid support. Unfortunately, it was subsequently pointed out that the winner of the race, a Frenchman, had also taken an illegal drink bottle. However, instead of punishing him (and taking the stage win from him) the commissars simply removed the punishments from the other two riders.

Drug taking seems fairly uncontroversial compared to this sort of official cheating.

14

Our helium balloons are still wandering around, wafted hither and thither by every little draught. After considerable experimentation, we discovered that weighing them down with four plastic soldiers (one with the base cut off) and eight and a half sticker fixers worked perfectly.

The balloons then wander about the house.

We would be sitting having dinner, when the balloon would float into the room, hang around for a while, and then float out again. Sometimes it floated upstairs. Sometimes it hung around on the stairs. Sometimes it wandered around downstairs.

It is much more fun than tying it down with a heavy weight or fixing it to a drawer handle.

After lunch, I read that a female MP is in terrible trouble for using the phrase 'nigger in the woodpile'. The Green half-wits are hysterical. Women with their babies hanging on their chests are jumping up and down in an uncontrollable fury. The babies are probably feeling sick.

If the phrase had been used by a black man, it would have been acceptable. Isn't that racist? Actually, if a black man called the white MP a 'white honky bitch' that would be fine and if she complained, the police would probably arrest her for wasting police time.

15

The new French President, Macron, celebrated his recent win to the sound of Ode to Joy – the EU's anthem – rather than the French anthem. Macron, a thoroughbred fascist, likes to think of himself as a liberal democrat. But like all those of his ilk he sneers at populists (who are really offering what the people want).

Macron's first action was to announce a centralised tax and spend account for the EU – a new Finance Ministry for Hitler's dream: the United States of Europe. Macron wants to hand over Europe's democracy to a self-selected group of elite eurocrats.

It is, in my view, no exaggeration to say that Macron is Europe's new Hitler; he is the most dangerous leader to rise to the top of the European cesspit since Adolf attempted to turn Europe into Germany's Empire.

Like his hero, the EU founder, Macron believes that he knows best how to organise society. He wants to engineer the EU so that everyone can live in and enjoy his idea of the perfect state. He does not approve of vulgar individualism or freedom. He believes in the superiority of the French intellectual and so supposes that we will all be better off if we just stand aside and allow him to design and run the new United States of Europe.

If the new President has his way, France will soon disappear completely – lost in the new European superstate.

I wonder what the enthusiastic Macronites will think of that when they wake up and realise what is happening.

The Nazis who created the EU must be pinching themselves – unable to believe their luck. The loathsome Macron, a former banker, has sold his country to the Nazi legacy and is channelling the man whose dream was to see Germany control Europe. It is true that Charlemagne and Napoleon both dreamt of a united Europe. But their vision of a European state was quite different. They envisaged a Europe controlled by France. Macron is fighting for an EU state which will be run by Germany.

Macron is, presumably, unaware that the euro was designed to fit Germany's purposes and that it is, as a result, destroying France. France hasn't had a positive trade balance since 1997. Since then Germany has repeatedly recorded huge trade surpluses. Gosh. I wonder why that could be.

British Remainers should now be grateful to those of us who chose to leave the EU and they should work with us to escape the EU's evil clutches. The Liberal Democrats and war criminals such as Blair should be bowing down to the UKIP members who worked so hard to win the Brexit vote.

The fact is that only the most fascist of the Remainers will still support the EU; and they will doubtless be practising their 'Heil Hitler' salutes. Most Remainers are thick (Lamy, Abbott and Clegg) or criminal (Blair).

I am appalled by the fact that John Bercow, the appalling speaker of the House of Commons, has made no secret of the fact that he is a Remain supporter. The Speaker of the House of Commons is supposed to be neutral. Bercow should be fired but he won't be.

It is pertinent to point out that the vast majority of people who still want us to stay in the EU wanted us to join the euro.

There's really no need to say anything else, is there?

British political life is now dominated by some curious people.

Every time I look at the news I see little but the latest views of Allen, Lineker, Bono, a woman who sits in the Lords because she used to present children's TV programmes, a woman who sits in the Lords as a reward for selling bras and David Larmy MP, a former shadow minister of state for culture, who is probably nice and well-meaning but comes across as being a little out of his depth when trying to talk about things with the grown-ups. I really don't wish to be unkind but he, like Abbott and Thornberry are the sort who, if you ran a small shop, you would think long and hard before considering letting them take on any responsibility – such as stacking the shelves. 'No, Emily, the tins of sardines all go on that shelf and the tinned pears go on that other shelf.'

Meanwhile, over in France, I wonder if French voters will realise what's happening.

If they don't then the ghosts of Adolf Hitler and his evil chums will be dancing for joy (to the sound of Ode to Joy). The Nazis who devised the EU will be enjoying one wet dream after another now that Macron has handed them France on a plate.

Macron, surely as smarmy a little git as ever stood on the top step, is a traitor to France and to all those Britons and Americans who gave their lives defending France against the Nazis.

Meanwhile, we should ask ourselves how it came about that Macron ended up in the Elysee Palace.

A few weeks ago, the polls showed that the French were even more anti-EU than the British. A vast majority wanted to exit the EU, leave the euro and reclaim the French Franc.

The EU was in full panic mode. If the French had chosen to leave the EU then the eurocrats would have been out of work – unemployed, unwanted on voyage or anywhere else.

But on election night, the French voters chose a man who wants France to disappear still further into the maw of the evil European Union.

Puzzling, eh?

Am I the only person on the planet who is just a tad suspicious of this unbelievable result?

Surely, there couldn't have been a fiddle?

Or is it possible that the EU was terrified of losing another nation from its portfolio?

Would the crooks at the EU really stoop so low as to impede the democratic process by rigging a vote result?

Of course they bloody well would.

16

Chris Froome, the cyclist, is again being booed by the French who cannot bear the fact that they haven't had a winner of the Tour de France for 29 years since the glory days of Bernard Hinault and the best of them all, Laurent Fignon.

Later, I read that Squadron Leader George 'Johnny' Johnson was recently awarded the MBE in the Queen's birthday honours list. Squadron Leader Johnson is the sole surviving British Dambuster.

Two thoughts.

First, why has it taken so long to reward a man who took part in one of Britain's most famous (and war-changing raids)? The Dambuster raid gave Britain hope and did enormous damage to the German war machine. Our morale was boosted and their morale was damaged. Guy Gibson, who led the raid, played a vital part in helping Churchill bring America into the Second World War.

Second, why did the Queen give him a measly MBE?

These days any drug soaked professional athlete who wins a medal at the Olympics gets a knighthood. And the world of show business is full to the brim with tax exiled actors and singers who have been knighted for services to themselves.

In truth, the whole honours system has long passed its sell-by-date.

Why did Rod Stewart or Mick Jagger get knighthoods?

I am so disgusted that I have decided that everyone I know is now Sir.

The Government and the Queen should give awards to life-boatmen and others who do stuff, not for money or publicity, but because they believe it is the right thing to do and they want to help their community.

Just as potty, incidentally, is the business of universities handing out honorary degrees.

Most universities now give out honorary degrees to pop singers, politicians and wealthy businessmen and women who can be relied upon to make a financial donation.

This is the same the whole word over. For example, Bill Cosby, the American comedian, is alleged to have been given over 100 honorary degrees.

Daft.

17

We tried out our new two-way radios at last.

My call sign is Danny Boy and Antoinette is Broadsword.

We borrowed the call signs from that marvellous film, *Where Eagles Dare* which is one of my favourite war movies. We watch it from time to time and imagine that all the Germans who are shot are really French.

I wandered down towards the beach to try out the radios.

‘Danny Boy calling Broadsword,’ I said, in my very best Richard Burton voice (in the film I think he was Broadsword but it really doesn’t matter).

‘Broadsword to Danny Boy,’ said Antoinette.

The radio was remarkably clear, though I was only a couple of hundred yards away.

We then had a silly pseudo-military conversation and finished with me saying: ‘Wilko. Roger and out.’

As I put my radio back into my pocket, I saw a small group of holidaymakers staring at me.

‘It’s a military exercise,’ I explained. ‘I work for MI6 and we’re preparing for a possible invasion by EU forces.’

They stared at me.

‘But please don’t tell anyone I told you this,’ I said earnestly. ‘Or we’ll all get into terrible trouble.’

‘We won’t tell a soul,’ whispered a woman in a blue anorak. She was carrying one of those blue metal walking sticks and had a matching blue rucksack on her back.

I thanked her and marched back to the house in my best military style.

18

Our new toys (aka two-way radio sets) are unlike mobile phones in that they don’t ring to let you know that the user of the other radio wants to speak. I still haven’t got used to the fact that the radio will suddenly start to talk to me without warning.

Today, I was sitting on a bench in the garden when it appeared that the ground under the bench was talking to me. I had placed my two-way radio on the grass underneath the bench and suddenly Antoinette’s voice came out of the earth. It scared me half to death.

19

A bloke I know rang me. He told me in precise and painful detail every symptom and every sign of ill health he had enjoyed in the previous six months. Then, after 35 minutes, he slowed, empty of ammunition. ‘Well, that’s about it,’ he said. ‘I don’t think there is anything else to tell you. Bye.’

And he rang off.

Not a ‘how is Antoinette?’, ‘how are you?’ or a ‘do you have any news?’ or even a ‘did you enjoy hearing about my piles?’

I sometimes think I’m a bit odd.

But, to be honest, I often think other people are even odder.

Talking of nuts, our hazel bushes are already laden with hazel nuts. The squirrels are already busy picking and burying. The nuts aren’t properly ripe but the squirrels don’t seem to mind in the slightest. A nut is a nut is a nut is a nut is a nut as Gertrude would have doubtless said.

20

A friend of mine was looking forward to watching the Open Golf Championship on the television and had rather trustingly taken a week off work so that he could watch the tournament on television. But oddly, however, the BBC isn't showing the world's premier golf tournament this year, or any other year. Golf, like cricket, motor racing and horse racing are all regarded as too much enthusiasms for middle class, white males.

Still, I gather that the BBC will instead be showing women's rugby. That will doubtless be a joy for some.

A friend of mine who is a great rugby fan says he is unable to watch any sort of rugby on television. The organisers are apparently so greedy that in addition to making millions from the gate, and millions more from the TV rights and sponsorship and from selling advertising on the players' shirts, on the referee and on the grass, insist on setting up moving advertising boards around the touchline. These move about constantly, causing headaches and nausea.

Showing the women's rugby will doubtless gather the BBC brownie points from those who favour political correctness over all else and may help deflect some of the criticism currently directed at the BBC now that it has been shown to pay some of its female employees far less than it pays male employees doing pretty much the same jobs.

Meanwhile, anyone who pays the extortionate BBC licence fee in the vain hope that they might be able to watch Britain's cultural and sporting year highlights must again be disappointed.

The fee for a licence to watch television is now £145 (paid exclusively to the biased and prejudiced State broadcaster, the BBC, a propaganda broadcaster in the worst traditions of the USSR, a proven sexist and ageist organisation and one which is in my view both racist and treacherous) and the maximum fine for not buying the licence is £1,000 with costs. Those struggling to pay the £145 cannot, of course, afford to pay the £1,000 and so they, poor devils, must go to jail at great expense to the taxpayers.

Some might think these rather reasonable odds since if the wretched TV licensing gestapo bang on your door you are under no obligation to open it and let them in and unless they actually see or hear you watching television, I don't think they can do much about it.

Sensible people have for decades argued that the BBC licence fee is an absurd anachronism. And even insensible people have long realised that not paying the licence fee should be a civil rather than a criminal offence.

I notice, by the way, that although the BBC is a firm proponent of the climate change myth, it still sells its overpriced DVDs (programmes for which we have already paid) wrapped in two layers of plastic and one of cardboard. Indeed, I rather suspect that some of the series it sells on four DVDs could be fitted onto two disks or even one disk – thereby saving even more of our planet and reducing the Corporation's carbon footprint considerably. Indeed, if they used both sides of each disk (as some companies do) the BBC could save even more material, weight and production costs.

Still, we must not confuse 'saying' with 'doing', must we?

And we can add hypocrisy to the list of charges to lay against the BBC.

21

1973 seems a long time ago.

It was the year when VAT was first introduced in Britain.

Pink Floyd released 'The Dark Side of the Moon'.

Edward Heath was Prime Minister.

£20 million in compensation was paid to thalidomide victims.

The IRA conducted a bombing campaign in London.

Pay rises were limited to 7% and inflation reached as high as 24%

Coal shortages led to the introduction of the three day working week.

And it was the year that I first started writing about benzodiazepines – and warning that they were dangerously addictive drugs.

In 1973, I edited the *British Clinical Journal* and published a leading symposium dealing with the addictive problems of benzodiazepine tranquillisers.

In the 1970s and the 1980s, I wrote hundreds of articles about benzodiazepine tranquillisers and sleeping tablets. I made countless television programmes. I wrote three books about addiction. I made a series of radio programmes which were broadcast nationally on the BBC local radio network. I set up a help group for tranquilliser addicts. I produced a newsletter containing information and advice about benzodiazepines.

Throughout those two decades, I was violently opposed by members of the BMA and the RCGP who insisted (contrary to all the evidence) that drugs such as Ativan and Valium were perfectly safe and not in the slightest bit addictive.

And all the time I was receiving letters from patients telling me that these drugs had ruined their lives. The phrase I heard time and time again was; 'I have been to hell and back'. For years my mail from readers was delivered in grey Royal Mail sacks. Patients were numb when they were on the drugs. And they were in torment when they tried to stop them.

The size of the problem has been consistently underestimated. When my book *Life Without Tranquillisers* smashed into the *Bookseller* and *Sunday Times* bestseller lists in 1985 many were astonished because, for the first time, it became clear that the issue was one which concerned many people.

But then, in 1988, there was a breakthrough.

The medical establishment still insisted that benzodiazepines were perfectly safe but the Government took action and told GPs that benzodiazepines should not be prescribed for patients for longer than two to four weeks because of the risk of addiction.

'Dr Vernon Coleman's articles, to which I refer with approval, raised concern about these important matters,' said Edwina Currie, British Parliamentary Secretary for Health in the House of Commons in 1988.

I helped launch a massive lawsuit which had to be abandoned when legal aid was withdrawn and patients were warned (by one of the drug companies involved) that if they lost the case they would risk losing their homes. The letters were aggressive, terrifying and effective.

With surprising naivety I thought we'd won.

Sadly, doctors took no notice. GPs were as addicted to prescribing the drugs as patients were addicted to taking them. One generation of doctors retired only for another to appear and to adopt the same egregious prescribing habits. Benzodiazepines have been prescribed for every ailment known to man or woman.

And in 2011, it was revealed that in Britain a staggering 11.5 million prescriptions a year were still being written for benzodiazepine tranquillisers. And over a third of those prescriptions were for more than eight weeks supply.

Here is what I wrote in my book *Doctors and Nurses Kill More People than Cancer*:

'Any doctor who signs a prescription for a benzodiazepine (such as Valium) for more than two weeks is not fit to practise medicine and would, if the General Medical Council did what it is supposed to do, be struck off the medical register. It annoys me intensely that patients who have become addicted to these wretched drugs should be ignored by the NHS whereas whingeing idiots who take drugs such as heroin and cocaine for entertainment are, when they moan about their inevitable condition and demand treatment, instantly provided with vast amounts of support. For the record, benzodiazepines are considerably more addictive than any of the so-called recreational drugs.'

And still nothing has changed.

Doctors (mainly GPs) are still handing out prescriptions for these deadly drugs as if they were sweets.

This is the medical horror story of this century and last century. It is the most disgraceful medical scandal of modern times. It is the biggest addiction problem Britain has ever known. It is no exaggeration to say that these drugs have caused endless misery and undying pain; they have ruined millions of lives.

That is not rhetoric or exaggeration. It's fact. Benzodiazepines have ruined millions of lives. And those who created the pain still refuse to accept responsibility.

And no one in the Government, the NHS, the BMA or the RCGP seems to give a damn.

Oh, there is some modest concern.

Committees have been set up. Enquiries have been initiated. People from the Department of Health, the BMA and the RCGP have sat around tables and talked about the problem for years.

But they have, grossly misunderstood the nature of the problem, and they have underestimated the size of it.

Worse still, they seem to regard benzodiazepine addiction as being in the same category as heroin addiction or cocaine addiction. Those who are hooked on tranquillisers are blamed for their addiction as if they were in some way responsible for their circumstances.

Let us be crystal clear about this: anyone who has, since 1988, been prescribed benzodiazepine drugs for more than two to four weeks, has been betrayed by their doctor.

Any doctor who has prescribed these drugs for longer than a month, or has made them available on repeat prescription, should be struck off the medical register and banned from practising medicine.

It is, perhaps, possible to claim that doctors who mis-prescribed the drugs prior to 1988 were simply ignorant buffoons. Many could claim, with some justification, that their patients asked for the drugs. The BMA and the RCGP were roundly condemning me for drawing attention to the addictive nature of the drugs and so it was relatively easy for doctors to say 'Oh, that fellow Coleman is talking nonsense – the BMA says benzodiazepines are perfectly safe'.

But things changed in 1988.

Since the Government warned doctors not to prescribe these drugs for more than two to four weeks, the rules have been different.

Doctors are now completely responsible for the biggest addiction problem this country has ever seen. This is a far bigger problem than barbiturate addiction or other prescription drug addictions.

One Minister after another has promised help. Every promise has turned to dust.

The time for committees and discussion groups is long past. It is obscene that the BMA should now offer a view on what needs to be done. It is moderately pleasing only that the BMA and the RCGP now seem to understand that there is a problem.

But there is no need for more talk or more research. Dr Johnson talked about people being 'encumbered with help' and he could have been writing about the people still running campaigns to reinvent the wheel.

The patients who are still addicted to benzodiazepines need help now.

And doctors who are still prescribing these damned drugs without any understanding of the consequences need to be punished.

The BMA and the RCGP cannot be allowed to get away with blaming patients for taking these drugs for long periods of time.

Doctors, and only doctors, are to blame for this appalling state of affairs. (Though I confess I do sometimes wonder why so many people still willingly take them for such long periods. The evidence showing that these drugs are dangerously addictive has been widely available for decades.)

A reader of mine who is the ex-chairman of Oldham Tranx, asked George Roycroft, who is Head of Science and Public Health Policy at the BMA if the BMA might consider setting up some sort of helpline service for benzodiazepine addicts.

Roycroft replied that the BMA did not have the expertise or the resources!

At my request Barry then asked George Roycroft how much money the BMA receives from drug companies in advertising.

Silence.

Well, I can probably make a good guess.

The BMA publishes many journals, including the *British Medical Journal* and the current advertising rate for the BMJ is around £10,000 a page.

I reckon that the BMA (which is actually the official trades union for doctors) receives around £30,000,000 a year from drug companies (including the companies which make benzodiazepines). That is a conservative, low estimate.

BMA members have, through ignorance and incompetence, created this addiction problem.

And it is, therefore, the BMA and its members which have the responsibility to help clear up the mess they have made.

If the BMA does not have the expertise then who has?

The BMA certainly has the resources.

I estimate that since 1988, the BMA has received nearly £1 billion from drug companies – much of it from the makers of benzodiazepine drugs. Many BMA committee members have strong, personal links with drug companies. There are very few doctors in the medical establishment who do not receive drug company funding in one way or another.

(Drug companies buy up doctors with great enthusiasm. When in 1975 I wrote a book called *The Medicine Men*, my first attack on the drug industry, a major drug company offered to pay for me to go on a nationwide tour to talk to doctors! I obviously refused. I am probably one of very few doctors in Britain to have consistently turned down drug company money.)

Those campaigning for and behalf of benzodiazepine addicts should, in my professional view, stop cooperating with the BMA and the RCGP. Nothing good will ever come of it. It is a mistake to think of the BMA as a friend. The BMA is, and always has been, the patients' enemy.

But there is one thing the BMA understands: money.

Energy should be spent on taking legal advice about suing the BMA and its members. I would suggest demanding that the organisation, on behalf of its members, be required to pay £50,000 in compensation to every benzodiazepine addict. That should make a sizeable hole in the BMA's finances. And it might make them think a little about their responsibilities.

There are plenty of legal firms around who eagerly take on class action lawsuits.

The time for discussion and committees is long gone.

The time has come for an all-out war on the BMA, the RCGP and their members.

Doctors still prescribing these drugs for more than two to four weeks should be reported to the GMC.

Doctors, and their representative organisations, have consistently betrayed patients.

It is about time that those responsible for this on-going addiction scandal be required to take responsibility and face the awful consequences of their careless actions.

But that isn't what doctors do.

There was a cartoon in the *Wall Street Journal* a few years ago which I still remember. The cartoon showed a nervous looking patient and a very haughty looking doctor sitting behind a huge desk.

'What you need, Mr Terwilliger, is a bit of human caring; a gentle, reassuring touch; a warm smile that shows concern – all of which, I'm afraid, were not part of my medical training.'

In the old days, these essentials were provided by nurses. Sadly, this no longer happens. Nurses have been pushed (sometimes unwillingly) by ambitious professionals who wish they were doctors and are desperate to be taken more seriously as academics. Listening, soothing brows, holding hands and offering comfort are no longer within the remit of the modern nurse.

Empathy is in very short supply in doctor's surgeries and offices and almost non-existent in clinics and hospitals.

However, nothing will change for one good reason.

The people now campaigning on behalf of benzodiazepine addicts are now part of the problem. They have become entangled with the establishment and they are, I suspect, more interested in claiming grants, having meetings and collecting credit for caring to do anything likely to change the status quo.

22

I put an article entitled *Benzos, the BMA and Betrayal* on my website and it has, with one exception, attracted nothing but complaints and criticism. Some of the complaints have been patronising. Some have simply been rude. And some have managed to be both. My article was intended to be helpful, to provide some vital, historical background and some hints and clues on which way the battle might best be directed.

But it seems that everyone is now an 'expert'. And campaigning for change has become an industry. I suspect there may be grants to be won, advertising to be gained and power to be enjoyed. There is, sadly, very little understanding of how much influence the drug companies have over the medical establishment. Until there is, then nothing useful will happen. The drug industry controls the medical establishment. I've been studying the drug industry since the 60s and, as a result, I have been threatened, libelled, sued, burgled, etc. There is a good deal of innocence and naivety about. It is worth remembering that in order to please the drug industry, the medical establishment has consistently suppressed all alternative remedies – including many which work very well.

There have even been suggestions that the word 'addiction' is now less acceptable than the word 'dependence' to some benzodiazepine addicts.

This is, I fear, a result of a bow in the direction of fashion rather than a result of any scientific thought process.

As I pointed out in my book *Addicts and Addictions* in 1986 (now out of print), when this discussion was first aired, the words 'addiction', 'dependence' and 'habituation' are pretty much interchangeable. Every expert in the world agreed with this then and I believe that all would agree with it now.

Fussing about terminology is as pertinent and helpful as worrying about the colour of the tablets prescribed and is likely to lead only to confusion. It is a pointless distraction.

Since I am the only person whose campaigning has led to any positive and useful change (the legislation of 1988), it seems pertinent to point out that this was done by me working alone and it was done by fighting an all-out battle against the medical profession, the drug industry, governments everywhere and civil servants and bureaucrats. They said nasty things about me. I said nasty things about them. I spent a lot of my own money. I received no grants and no advertising. And after 15 years they rolled over and I won.

Since then, in the aftermath of that judgement, thousands of self-appointed experts, working in hundreds of small groups, organisations and charities, have, for nearly 30 years, cooperated with governments and the medical profession in a search for some sort of further solution to a continuing problem.

They have, predictably, got absolutely nowhere. The medical establishment and the Government are far too influenced by the drug industry to be truly sympathetic to the needs of patients who have been abused and betrayed. Doctors caused this problem and now have a duty to provide real help.

Over the years, I have become accustomed to the fact that so many charities and lobby groups prefer to spend their time fighting one another and arguing about terminology rather than actually dealing with the important issue which they were formed to attack. I spent many years fighting for an end to vivisection and worked, without charge, for many organisations. I gave up working with other organisations when, after a particularly passionate speech at the House of Commons, in which I produced documentary evidence proving that experiments on animals are entirely futile, a representative from an organisation called BUAV stood up and announced that his organisation was campaigning for an improvement in cage sizes for the transport of animals used in experiments.

It is my considered opinion today that most charities and organisations which appear to have been formed to fight for people or animals or whatever, will spend most of their time and money fighting one another and that their primary purpose will not be changing things for the better but merely gaining grant money and more charitable donations. I was once told by an employee of a large organisation which purported to oppose vivisection that the staff there could not support my campaigning for a total end to animal experiments because if animal experiments ended, their charity would have no purpose and they would be out of a job. An employee of an organisation purporting to oppose hunting told me exactly the same thing. It is by no means unknown for well-known charities to give no more than 5% to 10% of the money they receive to the cause for which the donations were intended. The rest goes in salaries, pensions and marketing.

Today's campaigners seem to have lost sight of the wood but prefer to stand around examining the bark of one of the trees. Today, everything is about power and money and the infighting is so ferocious that nothing will ever get done. It's more than a pity, it's a tragedy. I called my article Benzos, the BMA and Betrayal and I intended the betrayal to refer to doctors but actually I think it refers as much as anything to those self-appointed do-gooders who claim to be representing the addicts.

This isn't the first time I have had trouble with activists. Back in the early 1990s, I bought and gave away thousands of copies of my book *Life Without Tranquillisers* and I was patron of a couple of organisations.

Even earlier, back in the early 1980s, I devised a tapering programme designed to help patients wean themselves off their drugs. (At that time there were no low dose pills available and my programme required cutting some tablets up with a knife. Critics complained that the tablets didn't always break neatly and attacked me for that.) A refined version of that programme is now widely accepted and is used by doctors and patients. It has been refined and improved but I am delighted it has been of help.

A group in America who seem to think they have just discovered benzodiazepine addiction have invited me to attend a conference which they seem to think is a unique and original enterprise. They want to discuss the benefits of benzodiazepines and the hazards of using the word 'addiction'.

I think it is far more important to try to persuade patients not to take benzodiazepines – and to understand that any modest short-term benefits are massively outweighed by the vast medium and long-term problems. It is also important to try to stop doctors prescribing them.

There are no benefits to the benzodiazepines as tranquillisers or sleeping tablets.

They undoubtedly have very short-term value in anaesthesia and the treatment of certain brain disorders.

But they have no place in the treatment of patients who are nervous or anxious.

Doctors have to be educated. They have to be trained not to prescribe benzodiazepines in such vast quantities.

And history tells us that will never happen unless doctors are startled, shocked and frightened into changing their ways.

Until more people are prepared to fight the medical profession (which is backed and supported by the drug industry), this problem will never be conquered.

Unfortunately, many of those who have only recently discovered the benzodiazepine disaster, still do not realise just how evil and powerful the drug companies are and how totally they control the medical profession.

However, since I am now too old and too tired to put up with more patronising abuse I will retire from this particular fray and fight other battles.

I will leave the self-appointed experts, who are so eager to battle on in cooperation with the medical profession and the Government, to enjoy their committee meetings (sorry these people don't have meetings. Even when there are only two of them they are in conference) and their neatly printed minutes. Maybe they will eventually succeed in changing the colour of one or two of the most popularly prescribed benzodiazepines.

But that, I am afraid, is all they will succeed in doing.

You don't change the course of a steamship by worrying about the colour the funnel is painted.

23

The council in San Pedro del Pinatar, southern Spain, has issued a decree banning urinating in the sea.

Sensible move but policing that one should be fun.

Of course, the Spanish will probably still allow untreated sewage to be discharged into the sea.

At home, MCC members have been accused of snubbing a women's cricket match at Lords because hardly any of them turned up to watch.

They weren't snubbing the match.

They just knew that the cricket match wouldn't be worth watching.

Women's cricket is inordinately dull unless you can say 'Oh look there is our Thelma – isn't she bowling well?' or 'Doesn't Aunt Betty look good in those blue trousers?' No one who cares about cricket enjoys watching women playing the game, just as no one in their right mind wants to watch women playing football or rugby. It's neither seemly nor appropriate. Why cannot women sports players stick to synchronised swimming and that gymnastics thing they do with a long piece of ribbon? (I harbour the delicious thought that one day a transsexual tennis player, once a competent male amateur, will join the women's tennis tour, win all the money and use the proceeds to change back to his original sex. It would, these days, be politically incorrect for anyone to object.)

The sexist thing about all this is not that no one watches women's cricket. it is that women insist that their form of cricket should receive the same money and publicity as men's cricket. There is no doubt that there is a place for women in cricket for I have yet to meet a man who can make a decent sandwich or bake an edible Victoria sponge and so without women what will happen to those splendid teas in the pavilion which are such an essential part of village cricket?

(I put this last bit in to remind delicate millennial readers what ironic humour looks like. This sort of remark is now outlawed by the thought police who disapprove of any remark which could be construed as desecrating a sacred cow. I am not, by the way, suggesting that women rugby players et al can be likened to sacred cows.)

I used to follow sport in general quite closely.

And I was keen on two sports in particular: cricket and Formula I motor racing.

For the last decade, however, I have realised that in both sports the in-fighting and politics are far more fun than their sports. Both sports are dying but just haven't realised it yet. Financial greed has done for them because the administrators have, in both cases, sold the rights to satellite television rather than terrestrial television. The result? Dramatically falling viewing figures and little interest among the next generation. What a surprise.

Both sports also seem to be doing everything they can think of to discourage fans. Formula 1 lost fans because instead of a showcase for talent it became a playground for an endless train of plug-in drivers with interchangeable skills and personalities driving round and round circuits without boundaries. Instead of any sense of wonderment, there is now only a sense of 'so what' and 'I could do that'. Formula 1 has now decided to put metal protective shields over the drivers. They are doing this not because it is really necessary but because they can, and the organisers are frightened that if they don't do everything they can then, if there is a freak accident and someone is injured, they will be liable.

Seriously, it won't be long before drivers are done away with completely. If motor racing continues, it will be done with radio controlled cars 'driven' from the pits. To be honest, they might as well do that now since the engineers in the pits can control many things on the cars. Controlling the steering would require little extra effort on their part.

The sport has had its day; killed not by the politically correct who consider it outdated but by the fact that it has become extremely dull, monotonous and soporific. I doubt if anyone will be watching in a decade's time.

Cricket is also moribund and the MCC, once the world's premier cricket club, is now an administration club not a cricket club. It is also very politically correct, making a huge fuss of women's cricket, which no one watches. (As I have already pointed out, watching women play cricket is about as popular as watching men making jam.)

I found the other day that the MCC now has eight members of staff with incomes between 100 and 200 k plus pension funds and there is £29 million in cash in the bank. In 2012, the MCC spent £10,589,000 on administration and £11,056,000 on cricket. In 2016, the MCC spent £12,773,000 on administration and £8,624,000 on cricket. That suggests to me that the MCC is now not a cricket club but an administration club.

As a matter of principle, I have for 40 years always voted against anything the Committee recommended. I have never felt I made a mistake in so doing.

24

I spent several miserable hours trying to find out why Barclays bank has not still changed my address (as I asked them to do nearly two months ago).

My relationship with them has become entirely Kafkaesque.

I have spoken to numerous members of staff on the telephone.

They now won't change my address until I email them photographs of a variety of documents. The words 'uncaring' and 'indifferent' are far too generous.

They still want a gas bill for the French apartment and won't accept the emailed account I sent. They demanded a paper bill which I can't send because I don't get one. They did accept a gas bill for an English address but they want more.

They still won't email me or telephone me because they won't accept the email address and telephone number I give them until I have changed my street address which they won't let me do.

Instead, they prefer to keep on file a street address which is around 10-years-old and a phone number which is so old and out-of-date that I can't remember ever having used it.

In order to protect my privacy, they are still sending bills to old addresses and leaving messages for me at old telephone numbers.

Conversations with the bank staff were limited by the fact that I insist on speaking in English and although they have an English department, the people who staff it don't speak English terribly well.

So, for example, I had some difficulty explaining what is meant by the phrase 'direct debit'.

Eventually, they said again they would post me a special, very secret, password so that I could open an internet account. They said I wouldn't have to sign for the secret password since it would just come in the ordinary post.

When it comes, I can pop it on the internet for there is, I gather, now an App available wherein the innocent and naïve can store all their passwords online. I have no doubt that for safety and security, they also recommend putting your purse or wallet out on the garden wall when you go to bed at night.

25

My book listing my favourite 100 English heroes attracts constant criticism. Another reader has written attacking me for including Winston Churchill and Elizabeth I.

Both had their faults (who doesn't except for my critic) but how could anyone produce a list of England's greatest 100 and not include them?

26

Michael Spurr, the head of Britain's prison and probation service received a bonus of between £15,000 and £20,000 to pad out his inadequate £160,000 salary in 2016. The bonus was awarded after jails in England and Wales were described as 'unacceptably violent and dangerous' by the chief inspector of prisons.

Now, I know what I've been doing wrong all my life.

Can anyone explain why we pay for free internet access but we pay more if we use it?

I can only assume that the phone company's definition of the word 'free' is rather different to my own, rather old-fashioned definition.

27

A few days ago, Antoinette decided that she wanted to try some macaroni cheese. It was, she said, one of her favourite meals when she was small.

Today, she put opened a can of the stuff and put it into a saucepan on the stove. Minutes later, she came running into the conservatory where I was sitting asking me in between retches to get rid of the macaroni quickly because the smell was making her ill.

The macaroni cheese looks horrid and smells disgusting. If the Germans had used this stuff they could have got people to admit to anything. If they used this instead of beetles and bits of snake on 'I'm a Celebrity Get Me Out Of Here' they would have minor celebrities fleeing the jungle in droves.

I see that Panorama is going to run a programme next week explaining how Prozac makes people violent. I did exactly this on ITV in the early 1990s. I remember it because I was subsequently banned from that television station.

I feel like I am living in a time warp.

28

A five-year-old girl who set up a lemonade stall outside her home in Tower Hamlets (selling lemonade at the princely price of 50 pence a cup) got more than she bargained for when four (count them, four) local council enforcement officers approached her, took pictures (which, in view of her age, I would have thought would have got them into trouble with the police) and read her a statement telling her that because she didn't have a trading permit she would have to pay a fine of £150.

Barking.

Where do they find these idiotic people? There are so many of them about that I suspect the EU is breeding them in a disused mineshaft somewhere deep in Poland.

29

The threats from the EU are becoming nastier and nastier. There are tales of Brits being forced to wait four hours to have their passports checked at airports in Europe (even though we are, of course, still members of the EU) and these have led even more people to announce that they want to stay in the EU.

I feel ashamed.

Instead of waving two fingers at the EU, the Remainers are grovelling and increasingly desperate for a second referendum so that they can show their affection for Hitler.

If the Remainers had been around when Hitler invaded Poland they would have bowed down to Hitler and the Poles would all be speaking German.

The joke these days, of course, is that it is pitifully possible for outsiders to buy EU passports and if Remainers really want to keep their EU passports, they will not find it difficult.

Cyprus is an EU member state and has earned more than four billion euros in the last four years from flogging passports to crooks, money launderers and terrorists. They don't sell passports per se, of course, but they sell citizenship to philanthropic folk who want to buy property in Cyprus. And then you get the passport.

Still, it is not widely realised that the passport game is global these days.

You can buy access to the US for $500,000. The Americans flog around 10,000 visas a year. Another country which does well out of the passport game is Dominica which flogs 2,000 passports a year for a minimum of $100,000 a pop.

30

Senior members of the medical profession have at last expressed fears about the fact that statins are being given to everyone over 50 who is strong enough to swallow a pill.

I first warned about the risks associated with these drugs in 1995.

Maybe I'm stuck on Groundhog Day.

31

I spent an hour listening to Test Match Special on a chum's wireless set. What an utter disappointment.

Brian Johnson, arguably the best known and best loved of all British sports commentators, used to say that when commentating he used to pretend that he was talking to a blind friend who was sitting beside him and needed a running account of what was happening. He called upon summarisers and statisticians for support. He gave the score and details regularly and whenever you tuned in you knew within five minutes what had happened and what was happening in the day's play. Listeners felt that they were eavesdropping on a private conversation among cultured experts.

I have listened to this programme since I was a boy. The commentators were summer friends. I have made radio and television programmes while having an earpiece in – not so that I could listen to the director but so that I could listen to Test Match Special.

Today was a disaster.

After listening to meaningless, pointless, humourless drivel for half an hour, I still didn't know who was playing, where they were playing or what the score was. When a batsman was dismissed, I was not told what he had scored. Maybe it was me. Perhaps I was distracted by the sun shining or the grass growing. It seemed to me to be like listening to an endless parade of selfies. I switched off the radio, found the score from the internet, realised I really didn't care anymore and then did something else.

The commentators seemed too pleased with themselves to bother commentating. And the magic had gone completely. There was far too much coy, self-conscious awareness of the audience. The commentators, some of whom were definitely still millennials in spirit if not in body, talked endlessly about themselves, interrupting one another occasionally to mention, en passant, that a cricket match was being played in the background. Giving the score, and details of what was happening, seemed to them to be an irritation. It really was the radio equivalent of an album of selfies. I was not surprised to hear that Henry Blofeld, the idiosyncratic doyen of cricket commentators, has been told that he won't be needed in future. I bet this is true. If so then I suspect that Blofeld's fault was simple: he actually told listeners what was happening on the pitch.

Cricket commentaries in particular have lost their way and are rather pointless. But sports commentaries in general are poor too. The problem is that stations insist on hiring former practitioners of the sport in question instead of professional communicators.

Our French buyer is allegedly on holiday. But a character of the same name is a guitarist who is on tour in the U.S. I have asked our agent if this is the buyer but I have received no reply.

August

1

It was back in the late 18th century that Henry Bate Dudley, the founder of the *Morning Post* newspaper, realised that his readers wanted more than straightforward news from his paper. He filled the columns with reviews, sport, poetry, anecdotes, gossip and smut. He suddenly started to make huge profits and launched a second paper called the *Morning Herald*.

And so British newspaper journalism was changed for ever.

All other newspapers had to adapt or die.

And so they printed scandals – the activities of the royals and the rich, their divorces, their arguments, their affairs, their gambling losses. The demi-monde loved the publicity with shamelessness and their fame delighted the rich and the wealthy and the powerful such as the Prince of Wales who also became part of the game.

And so today's nonsense is nothing new.

The broadsheets pretend to look askance at the red top tabloids but they are just as bad. I have met hundreds, if not thousands, of journalists over the years and I reckon that whereas some of the nicest and most honourable people I've ever met were tabloid journalists, many of the nastiest, greediest, most devious and least honourable people I've ever met were broadsheet journalists. For the record, television journalists, editors and producers are even worse than broadsheet journalists. Many are ruthless and untrustworthy while also managing to be sanctimonious.

The only difference today is that newspapers and magazines have stopped printing news or information at all. Now all they print is gossip and opinion pieces (mainly written by 20-year-olds) masquerading as news.

In the distant old days, reporters (whether working for print or broadcast media) used to report the news. Now, all reporters want to do is share their opinions and so it is impossible to find any truths. Millennials readily admit that they do not care a jot for editorial integrity or objectivity.

In the Cotswolds, our squirrels have eaten into the large, plastic box where we keep the sunflower seeds. No sunflower seeds were available so I bought four large bags of sunflower hearts at Holland Barratt health food store

I read today that it is now quite common for large companies to employ Chief Happiness Officers. These are employed, apparently, to satisfy the demands of millennials who worry that without help they will miss out on some of the happiness to which they are entitled.

Gee whiz.

2

I spotted four strange news stories which typify the world in 2017.

First, it has now become popular to put pre-school children into retirement homes so that the decrepit old folk therein will benefit from the association.

The idea is that the oldsters play games with the children and thereby regain their youthful attitudes.

This, surely, is the most utterly patronising idea of all time.

The residents of retirement homes need to be treated with respect not humiliated in this grotesque way. But these days respect is as rare as discretion, courage, patriotism, integrity and common sense. (There is also no sense of history – but that is the result of the EU which has spent billions of our money brainwashing children and students into ignoring their nation's history.)

The woeful morons who thought this one up should be executed for initiating a crime against humanity.

Second, Britain's tax collectors, HMRC, are now charging small businesses a penalty of 30% if they fail to pay enough tax because the taxman has failed to ask for enough money. According to the taxman, small business owners now have a responsibility to check the taxman's calculations and to notify the authorities if a mistake has been made.

This is utter madness. It provides HMRC with a clear incentive to get bills wrong. Theoretically, the taxman could under bill every small business and then claim an extra 30% on every bill. And, as thousands of unhappy taxpayers can confirm, getting things wrong is something of a speciality of HMRC. Indeed, a judge recently decided that HMRC could 'challenge tax calculations that relied on its own algorithms'. It was ruled that users of tax computation software could 'not rely on its results' even though the specifications for the software had been provided by HMRC. So, the staff of HMRC can now make as many mistakes as they like without being held responsible.

Third, I read about a man who cuts his lawn six times a week. His life is clearly both a very full one and a very empty one.

Finally, it has apparently now become quite normal to propose that illegal drugs be decriminalised or legalised. The odd thing is that when I first proposed this around 30 years ago, I was mercilessly attacked for the notion was regarded as something only the devil could possibly endorse.

3

It's Antoinette's birthday so I won't even go to our post box today.

We will not be interrupted by the world.

Both our gates are locked and impenetrable unless we are attacked by a military force equipped with tanks. My mobile telephone is never on. No one has the house telephone number. My iPhone and iPad (which are the only devices which carry emails) have been switched off since the beginning of the week.

Bliss. I may never turn them back on again.

Since it is a special day, our boiler decided to stop working.

It doesn't really matter because we don't need the central heating and we have an immersion heater but since the system is less than a year old and cost about £15,000 (and we already had our own radiators and piping) it is rather annoying to say the least.

We tried undoing the filter in order to see if it was blocked with sludge but I couldn't turn off the taps properly and water poured out soaking us both.

We went and sat on the wooden bench at the bottom of our cliff top garden. The beach was deserted. Not one soul on a mile of beach. For a change, there were no dogs. There are usually two or three noisy, wild looking dogs roaming free with owners nowhere to be seen. We thought we might go for a walk and then realised that the tide was in at the bottom of our cliff. The rest of the beach was empty and our bit was wet. Unless we want to scramble over rocks, we can only walk to the nearby town when the tide is out.

So, instead, we watched the rabbits eating our lawn, our raven sitting on the metal railing which stops us falling into the sea, a thrush and a lady blackbird both looking for worms and one of our resident squirrels. At one point we had three rabbits in view (one just eating and two chasing each other round and round in ever decreasing circles, presumably in some lapine version of a turf war or more hopefully as a prelude to bunny production).

Our rabbits are crepuscular in habit and charming in every way.

I am constantly astonished that the previous owner of this house hired a man to sit in the conservatory and shoot rabbits through the open door. He didn't like the rabbits because they ate things.

Out at sea, the buoys and gulls bounced gently on the breeze driven waves. The sky was a sky of a thousand colours. Antoinette sees the sky as a painter sees it and now, thanks to her eye, I see a whole palette from amethyst to zucchini green.

'No time to turn at Beauty's glance, And watch her feet, how they can dance. A poor life this is if, full of care, we have no time to stand and stare.' Thus wrote W.H.Davies, the Welsh poet tramp.

Davies, incidentally, wrote a number of books but in my view the most moving was the very first diary of his years tramping.

But the best of his books by far was called 'Emma' and was about his young wife.

4

The prospective purchaser of our apartment in Paris is still refusing to fix a date when we can sign the Promesse, the initial part of the sale procedure.

I had suggested September 6th but no one seems prepared to say whether or not the date suits them.

Our notaire wrote to the buyer's notaire a week ago but there is still no reply.

I must say I do love the affectionate way in which notaires write to one another. It all sounds as if it has come from Jane Austen's pen.

Today I suggested to our estate agent that we should show the apartment to other prospective buyers. He says that this is against the law in France. So we are in the absurd position of having received an offer but having to wait for the buyer to decide when, or if, he will agree to take the first formal step. Until he does so, we are prevented from even offering the apartment to anyone else.

I made two huge mistakes right at the start of this fiasco. First, I signed an agreement which didn't have a concluding date on it. Second, I believed the estate agent when he told me that the buyer had the money to buy the apartment. I now don't believe he has the money.

Every piece of legislation in the country favours buyers. This is all very well if you are a buyer, and intend to hold the property you buy for eternity, but anyone who thinks that they might one day want to sell should think twice about purchasing a property in France. And then, having thought twice, they should decide against it.

According to the French, there are 100,000 empty apartments in Paris – all owned by foreigners. The Mayor of Paris has increased taxes to eye watering levels in order to try to force foreigners to sell and leave but the problem is that the capital gains taxes and property legislation introduced by the former President Hollande are so awful that people prefer to pay the local taxes in order to avoid the complexities and costs of selling. Lots of potential sales fall through as a result of boredom or inertia.

Paris has become so unpopular with property buyers that since 2012, the value of property in Paris has fallen by almost a third. Low interest rates mean that property prices just about everywhere in the world have been soaring since the financial crisis of 2008. In London, the value of property has reached absurdly high levels. But the French have shown that they are able to buck the trend simply by introducing daft laws. And as a result of absurd regulations, bureaucracy and new property taxes, the value of property in Paris has declined by a third since 2012. In an era when property prices around the world have been soaring, only the French could screw things up so well that property prices fall by over 30% in a five year period.

Owners are reluctant to sell (because of the absurd and in some cases probably illegal taxes) and buyers are reluctant to buy because the costs of buying are absurd and they know that one day they too will have to face the problems associated with selling. Not even property developers are interested. And that's why there are 100,000 empty flats in Paris. You'd think there would be someone in the Mayor's office with the brains to see what is wrong. But there isn't. Maybe they need to hire a foreigner with some brains.

It is uncertainty that is the killer.

We also have the problem of what to do with our furniture. The depo vente, from which we bought much stuff, has closed and there are no nearby antique shops to whom to offer it. We tried to get auctioneers to handle it but they did not reply. Our estate agent, who can do snotty well enough to be on the stage, said: 'We have a partnership with Christies, but I don't think there is anything here they would be interested in'. As he said this, he looked around as though he had suddenly found himself in a low level junk shop. Snooty French bastard. I would have thrown him out of the window but the rules against littering are powerful in France.

We decided to go to Paris in the middle of September, hoping to sign the sale agreement. The estate agent has emailed to say that I must give permission if the furniture is to be removed. I emailed back to tell him that nothing is being removed until the final part of the sale has been completed and the money is sitting in our bank account. I don't trust the buyer. In my experience, serious buyers are always eager to get on with things. Our buyer has done everything he can to delay the transaction. And although I was originally told that it was a 'cash' purchase, I now don't believe this. I have a horrible suspicion that we're going to find that our buyer is either a dreamer or a crook.

I read today that in England it is now possible to complete the sale and purchase of a house within four hours. I once managed to buy a property in a week, and I have on several occasions bought properties within less than two weeks of first seeing them. But four hours is pretty sharp.

5

Today I had a letter from Lloyds to say that their overdraft fees are changing.

Now they will charge £7 for every 1p I go overdrawn each day. Or is it the other way round? Not that it makes a lot of difference. It is egregiously greedy either way – especially for a bonus-soaked bank which was bailed out by taxpayers.

So if I borrow £7 for a year they will charge me 365p which is £3.65 which is an usurious rate which would bring a smile to Shylock's face.

This at a time when the bank of England is still refusing to raise interest rates and Lloyds is paying approximately no interest on deposit accounts.

National Savings are now paying 0.01% on investments. That means that if you have £1,000,000 with them you will receive £100 a year in interest. To achieve the national average income of around £25,000, you would need to have £250,000,000 invested. And, to rub salt into the wound, inflation would have eaten huge chunks out of the capital. It is not surprising that politicians and economists are constantly complaining that people aren't saving money any more. Why the hell should they? The incentive now is to spend not to save.

Much of this is, of course, a result of the 2007/8 banking fiasco (made considerably worse by Gordon 'the Moron' Brown). But Lloyds made things considerably worse. The ill-fated takeover of the naughty Scottish HSBO bank trashed the share price and cost shareholders dearly. It was rumoured to have been done at Brown's suggestion and I still believe that. And, of course, Lloyds has been badly run for years. The bank paid out £18 billion in costs and compensation to suckers who were sold worthless insurance policies. And I've forgotten how much they've had to pay the regulators for their dirty deeds. How many Lloyds bosses have been punished for all this? Approximately none. How many have been sacked? Approximately none. How many have continued to receive indecently huge salaries, pensions and bonuses? Approximately all of them. Only shareholders and customers have paid the price for all this incompetence and crookedness.

The Bank of England's philosophy is along the lines of: 'there is a light at the end of the tunnel, so quick, build more tunnel'. They keep worrying about the fact that no one is saving but they keep saving rates at an all-time low and don't seem able to connect the two dots. These are not people I would like to be managing a child's pocket money and yet they seem to be attempting to run the nation's finances.

6

I saw two butterflies today.

There used to be scores. Now butterflies are rare. Farmers and gardeners use vast quantities of pesticide. Gardens are covered with decking or concrete. Bushes are all torn up.

The butterflies' courtship dance is incredibly complicated and there is nothing we could do to replicate it.

Thought for the day: Is a mullionaire a man who made his fortune installing mullion windows?

7

A new law has crept in under which a business will be guilty if an employee, or an associated person, facilitates another person's tax evasion.

This will be a criminal offence even if the directors and senior management are not involved, or don't know what is going on.

Makes you want to start a business, doesn't it?

I see that Vodafone, one of the world's top 100 Evil Companies, is now charging punters £5 a day when they are abroad.

This is a brilliant way around the EU ruling limiting costs.

I never used to spend that much when abroad because I only ever checked emails.

So now, thanks to the EU and clever Vodafone I will pay more.

Mind you, it looks as though Vodafone needs the money. Despite being one of the nastiest, greediest and most uncaring companies in the world, they managed to make a loss of $6,904,000,000 last year.

We can still not get any reception at or anywhere near our home in the Cotswolds. And our attempts to get anyone interested have been ignored.

Tragically, the area around us is now as sterile as a road traffic island in a city centre. Locals pretend to love the countryside but they kill everything. They have colourless, sterile gardens with neatly clipped bushes.

When I signed the Achat for the sale of our apartment, I was told that it was merely a preliminary to the main business. I was told that it was not a legal document. My signature was not witnessed and I signed under false pretences because I was told that the buyer had the cash for the purchase but it now transpires that he does not have the cash and is struggling to raise it from his mother and a variety of banks.

I made huge mistakes in signing the Achat and the contract with the agency. But I really made only one mistake: trusting the estate agent. (The second mistake was letting him know that I trusted him. I remember telling him that I had to trust him. Oh boy. Oh boy, that was so stupid of me.)

It now appears that things have changed and the Achat has mysteriously morphed into a legally binding contract which forces me to sell to our buyer and to wait until he is ready to buy.

If, after a few years, or a decade or two, I dare to get restless then I will have to take him to court in an attempt to demolish the Achat. It seems that although the wretched document is binding on us (the sellers) it is not binding on him (the buyer). If I sell the apartment to anyone else then he will be able to sue me for an undisclosed sum.

This figures.

Recent French legislation, designed by mad socialists and barmy communists, is designed to give masses of protection to buyers but absolutely no protection to sellers who are regarded as evil capitalists who must be taught a lesson.

I am a restless, impatient person and I hate being treated with contempt. I also hate not knowing what is happening because other people won't make decisions or won't tell me what decision they have made.

According to our estate agent and our notaire, our buyer is supposed to be returning to Paris on September 15th to sign another part of the endless documentation that is required in France in order to sell an apartment. Every time I try to gouge information out of our agents, I feel as though I'm being a difficult bastard for having the impertinence to ask questions.

In the UK, a rather obnoxious British politician called Vince Cable is still moaning about the result of last year's referendum on the EU. He constantly complains that the people who voted to leave the EU were mostly over 65 and therefore too stupid to know what they were doing.

Mr Cable is 174-years-old and clearly too stupid to know what he is saying.

8

I spent an hour buying some Eurostar tickets today. Afterwards I prayed that I never have to book Eurostar tickets again.

It took them 25 minutes to answer the telephone. I protested mildly and politely at the long wait. I have no idea how much it costs to phone Eurostar. I didn't dare look. I get so infuriated at the amount of my life I waste on the telephone; usually waiting for some company which has so little respect for its customers that it refuses to hire enough operators.

'People usually wait at least 40 minutes,' said a bloke called Charlie. 'We get a lot of calls.'

There was no hint of an apology. I felt I should apologise for bothering him – them being so more important than anyone else. It's always the same with Eurostar. They really don't seem to give a fig about their customers. No one in the world is as important as a Eurostar telephone operator.

He didn't seem to me to be very good at his job.

When I told him what train I wanted, he told me there was no train at that time. I knew there was because I had tried to book it on the Eurostar website. I asked him to look again. He then admitted that he was wrong. No apology, of course.

Eurostar is keen on extra payments. You have to pay an extra £10 if you want to book seats by telephone, £3 if you want to pay with a credit card (instead of the more usual beads and trinkets which, to be honest, I find damned difficult to squeeze down the phone) and £8 if you want to have the tickets posted. You have to book by phone because if you book on their damned website you can't pick your seats until you've paid for the tickets. Antoinette and I are a bit old-fashioned in that we like to sit together when we travel. If I book online, we could well end up sitting in different carriages.

I then told Charlie which seats I wanted. He said there were no such seats on their new train. I told him that we had been on the new train and that we had sat in the seats I was asking for. He looked again and then admitted that the seats I wanted did exist. No apology. At least he was getting full marks for consistency.

I had to tell him my name several times. I had to keep reminding him that two adults were travelling. He did apologise that their system was not working properly. I politely refrained from pointing out that it never does. It is either slow or down. The bill for the seats I wanted (six weeks ahead) came to over £600. I have to travel first class because the seats in second class are so close together that I cannot squeeze into them.

'Can I use my Frequent Traveller Points towards the cost of the tickets?' I asked.

He told me that I couldn't. The Frequent Traveller Points can apparently only be used on journeys starting or ending in London. I was starting and ending in Ebbsfleet and paying the same price as if I were starting and ending in London. This must go down in history as one of the Great Rip Offs of all time.

'Shall I put your frequent traveller numbers into the system so that you can earn more points?'

I told him not to bother.

What's the point? The damned things are useless.

It took me 53 minutes to buy my train tickets. Eurostar will post them but only by special delivery, presumably so that they can charge me £8. They will no longer send them by ordinary post though it hardly matters if they are lost or stolen. This means that I will have to go to the local sorting office and queue in order to collect them.

Tonight, I will pray that we never have to travel on Eurostar again. Eurostar always tell customers that they record their calls. I rather doubt if anyone ever listens to them.

To be honest, if I live another 30 years (and hit my century) I don't think I will ever go abroad again. The hassle of travelling overseas is just too much. I gave up travelling by plane years ago and I certainly would never fly again. And now that the quality of service provided by Eurostar has sunk to a new low, I really don't want to go abroad by train either. I don't much fancy using the ferry or Eurotunnel either. Fortunately, Antoinette feels the same way that I do.

But who cares? There are plenty of places to visit or revisit in Britain. And we can go there in the car. We can rent cottages and tour around.

After my disaster on the phone with Eurostar, we went to Sidmouth for the Folk Festival.

They've been having a Folk Festival in Sidmouth every August since 1955 and we've never been.

It seems an odd time to have a Festival.

Most seaside towns are full in August and don't need any extra activity to encourage visitors. But the council there seems pretty sensible, by and large. It is certainly much more sensible than the councils looking after most seaside towns. In Ilfracombe and Weston-super-Mare, for example, the entire local councils should be taken out to sea and buried.

Since we guessed that the car parks would be busy, we paid £15 through a company called JustPark so that we could park in a local householder's driveway just a short walk from the town centre. What a brilliant idea.

Sidmouth was packed. The men were wearing those odd below the knee shorts, flowery shirts, army boots and wonderfully silly hats, many with feathers, the sort that go better with lederhosen and well-slapped thighs. The women were wearing hippy frocks and had their faces painted and flower garlands in their hair.

The vast majority of visitors seemed to be either pensioners or aggressive under 10-year-olds. (Two children elbowed me out of the way in order to get ahead of me in a coffee shop.) Maybe the ones in between were in a beer tent somewhere, manning the stalls on the Promenade or just busking.

Highlights included a man playing a didgeridoo and a group of unconnected pensioners dancing in the street while a couple of young performers (one playing a clarinet the other an accordion) looked on rather bemusedly. And there was a band of what can only be called geriatrics who were having far more fun than any of the younger buskers. I got the impression that one or two of the band members weren't entirely sure what instrument they were playing, or what they should be doing with it, but by golly they were having fun and providing excellent entertainment. They would have won first, second and third prizes if I'd been judging. And they'd have received a Special Entertainment Award too. Bravo a thousand times.

I read an article by an organiser who said that 'young people were a priority'. Why? Surely, that is blatant ageism? Can you imagine the fuss if an organiser had said that 'old people were a priority'? The millennials would have been protesting in the streets, not dancing. Injustice is injustice whatever the age of the victim.

The young musicians all seemed precious, serious and very professional in demeanour if not in skill. But the members of the geriatric band were having a whale of a time with the ones in wheelchairs and mobility scooters joining in with what can only be described as gusto.

Sadly, I have to say that the general quality of busking was lower than you'd find in any old town on any old Saturday afternoon. Most of the buskers seemed to be pretentious students, earnest, precious and self-important, with plenty of attitude; most seemed to find the whole experience rather beneath them. There wasn't a smile to be seen. And whatever happened to the one man band? I used to love one man bands but I haven't seen one for decades. The EU has probably published an edict forbidding them either on health and safety grounds or because each musician is only allowed to play one instrument at a time in order to preserve job opportunities.

I hate to admit it but we found the whole experience disappointing.

The young buskers and dancers all looked as if they were revising for exams in street theatre or historical dancing. They were all trying to look different but all ended up looking exactly the same.

The local shopkeepers couldn't have been having a good time. Many shops were closed (partly because the shopkeepers wanted to open at the weekend and thanks to crazy EU laws could not, therefore, stay open during the week).

Sidmouth is, for the rest of the year, a peaceful, Victorian town with much to commend it. Though I can't see that it has a big future. Will today's millennials be visiting Sidmouth in a few decades time? Somehow, I doubt it.

But the Folk Week turned it into a rather bad tempered place. When a troupe of dour-faced Morris Dancers jiggled their way past, we stood aside to let them by and a man selling kites shouted at us accusing us of standing in front of his stall. We were there for less than 30 seconds and I don't think anyone was interested in his damned silly kites. The Morris Dancers looked as miserable as sin. How can you take yourself so seriously when you're wrapped up in jingly bells?

Part of the problem seemed to me that the whole darned thing was just too well organised. It all seemed a bit officious but, at the same time, rather woefully amateurish. I know that seems to be a contradiction but whereas the dancers were timed by the minute to appear and then disappear (the officious bit) the stalls along the promenade were made of flimsy plastic and looked as though they would blow away in a mild wind (the amateurish bit). The poor stallholders would have had to pack up their wares every evening and then fetch them out every morning.

I thought the whole thing would have looked better and been far better all round if the organisers had rented (and then hired out) a collection of the wooden chalet like shops which appear everywhere these days at Christmas time.

Next time, I'm going to the Sidmouth folk festival with my harmonica.

I have been blowing into a harmonica for over 50 years. I have never taken a lesson or studied any books.

And I still can't play the damned thing.

The truth is that Sidmouth is much more fun without its festival. The bad news is that locals want more festivals. I hope they don’t go as potty as Cheltenham where there seems to be a Festival (with a capital F) at least once a week.

One sweet memory, however.

I saw a child throw down a half-eaten apple.

‘Why did you do that?’ demanded the angry mother.

‘I didn’t want any more,’ moaned the stroppy child.

‘Apples don’t grow on trees!’ snapped the mother.

I saw a headline in one of today’s newspapers announcing, as though revealing a great secret: ‘Avoid Alzheimer’s by Staying Active’.

Crumbs.

What will they put on tomorrow’s front page? I recommend: ‘Stay Alive by Breathing Air’.

Later in the afternoon, we were sitting in the conservatory having afternoon tea (standards have to be maintained and we are English, after all) when one of our many regular rabbits appeared on the lawn eight feet away. The many entrances to their burrow all in our grounds.

He started to wash.

He washed his face, then his feet and then behind his ears. He spent a lot of time washing behind his ears. Then he washed his chest, and his thighs and his legs. He could not have looked better if he’d spent an hour at the furdresser’s.

When he’d finished washing, he ate some grass and then finished off his meal by eating half a windfall apple which he had found in our courtyard. The apple had fallen from apple trees high up in the garden and rolled down the garage roof before rolling under the car.

The other half of the apple he carried off with him, presumably to take to his burrow. I have seen rabbits running around with a whole apple in their teeth. Despite their huge eyes they have terrible eyesight, however. If they drop an apple, it takes them ages to find it again. If they take the apples into their burrow, which I assume they do, I hope they don’t leave them until they start to ferment. Squirrels often get drunk on windfall apples. Maybe rabbits do too.

9

We are living in the age of the sneak. And it is deeply unpleasant.

A couple of hundred years ago, when I was younger, there were few lower forms of human being than the sneak.

Children who ‘told tales’ on their classmates would be ostracised.

Neighbours who maliciously spied on others and spread gossip would find themselves ‘sent to Coventry’.

Back in the ridiculously simple days of honesty and decency and respect and privacy, sneaks were strongly disliked. Sneaking was not the right thing to do. It wasn’t what good, honest people did.

Indeed, rather than tell tales on their contemporaries people would lie, take the blame themselves or claim that they’d walked into a door.

Sneaks were thought to be bad, bad people. They were traitors; the lowest of the low. They were people who happily sold their souls for a mess of potage or anything else that was on offer.

But today every other person is a sneak, damn their hides.

It is the new fashion, the new industry, the latest trend. And the little bastards are everywhere.

They are the cyclists with little cameras fitted to their helmets. The slimy, little, Lycra-clad toads will turn you in if they managed to catch you sliding a wheel into a bus lane.

They are the motorists and lorry drivers with dash cameras. If they catch you hogging the centre lane, they send off their little films to the police. If they film you eating a toffee then they report you to the authorities. (And yet I have, on numerous occasions, spotted lorry drivers reading books, reading newspapers or, in one case, working on a laptop which they have resting on the steering wheel. It is still commonplace to see drivers using their telephone to talk or to text. And I cannot, for the life of me, see why using a hands-free telephone should be allowed. It is still a serious distraction and certainly far more of a distraction than nibbling while driving – an activity which requires no more loss of attention than smoking or trying to work out what all the road signs mean.)

They are the concerned local citizens who set up private speed cameras and report motorists to the police if they travel at 22 mph in a 20 mph school zone even if it’s 6.30 p.m. on a Saturday night.

They are the people with mobile phones who film you if you dare to put your rubbish bin out an hour early or cram a little something forbidden into your wheelie bin. And then they send off their bit of film to the council.

They are the people who film you parked on double yellow lines while you pop into the chemist to pick up a prescription. And then put their little film online and send a copy to the local Plod.

They are the doctors who dob you in to the police at the drop of a hat and the accountants and lawyers who dob you in to the tax people if they think you might have forgotten to declare £1.09 in interest from a forgotten savings account.

(I discovered earlier this week that there are now 693,000 lawyers and accountants working in the UK. Could this possibly have anything to do with the fact that our laws in general, and our tax laws in particular, are ridiculously overcomplicated and incomprehensible?)

They are the relatives and neighbours who dob in the woman next door to anyone who will listen, if they suspect she is sharing a bed and seeking a little human warmth on cold winter nights, heaven forbid.

They are the neighbours, friends and relatives who will telephone the tax people with tidbits of information, in the hope of claiming a handsome ‘snooper reward’. (‘The bloke next door has just bought a new lawnmower. I don’t know he can afford it.’)

In the old days, it was Us versus Them.

Now, it seems that everyone has joined the forces of Them.

It hasn’t happened by accident, of course.

It has been engineered deliberately to make us all feel uncomfortable, threatened, anxious and, most of all, oh yes most certainly most of all, paranoid.

The people who do the sneaking, bought with bribes if they do or threatened with prison if they don’t, think they are doing the right thing; probably believe (like the naïve citizens who wash out their yoghurt pots and their beer cans and think they are saving the planet from certain doom) that they are making the world a better, safer, fairer place.

They aren’t, of course.

They are doing just the opposite.

It may seem difficult to blame the ones who are sneaking because they are forced to do so: the doctors, the accountants and the lawyers who spill the beans on their clients.

Individually they don’t have much choice.

But as a group they should have resisted and refused to cooperate with laws which threatened their relationship with their patients or clients.

But the ones who choose to sneak just for the hell of it, and because they can, are despicable and treacherous.

They have sold out to the bad guys.

And now they are the bad guys.

Everyone is terrified of being dobbed in.

And there appears to be no escape.

‘We can evade reality,’ said Ayn Rand. ‘But we cannot evade the consequences of evading reality.’

News from France is that Paris is now going to triple the taxes that foreign property owners must pay. That seems to me to be a racially motivated tax. If you aren’t French you pay three times as much as the French pay.

How can that possibly be legal?

Racism is, after all, defined as prejudice or discrimination against someone of a different race.

And how can it possibly fit in with EU law?

The EU is trying to introduce standard taxes across all member nations.

And Macron, who is already on course to be another despised French President, wants the EU to have the power to introduce standard taxes across EU countries.

So how can Paris introduce special taxes for Europeans who don’t happen to be French?

And, while we’re on this subject, why does Paris hate foreigners and tourists so much? Dante Alighieri, one of the first package tourists, the fellow who went on a guided tour through the nine circles of hell, would have found that modern Paris reminded him of his previous adventure.

The new taxes will backfire.

Foreigners, now knowing that they are unwanted, will not travel to Paris.

Tourists (who provide the French city with much of its income) will stay away.

A fear of what else might happen will stop foreigners buying property in a city which already has the lowest capital city prices in the world.

There are said to be just 100,000 foreign property owners in Paris.

But my guess is that many of them are influential.

And the city just pissed them all off.

There is already talk of a boycott of the French capital by investors, businessmen and tourists.

Though, sadly, tourism levels in Paris are down so much that I doubt if anyone would notice. Paris, always renowned for its rudeness to visitors has become even ruder and less welcoming in recent years. It is now known as the rip off capital of Europe. And it has become mean and nasty. The damned city even cut off all the much admired and rather wonderful love locks attached to a couple of bridges.

Macron and co don't have the brains to realise it but the EU has destroyed Paris. It was the EU which forced millions of immigrants and terrorists into France. It was EU rules which have led to the street lights being turned off at night. It was EU regulations which mean that cafes and shops are now shut on Mondays (giving the city two Sundays). It was EU rules which have meant that the city is now awash with rubbish.

The socialists who now run Paris don't understand that there are 100,000 empty apartments in Paris because absurdly nasty rules and tax laws make it unprofitable and risky to let out an apartment. There are awful rules if you sell an apartment and awful laws if you keep one. It is no wonder that property prices in Paris are the lowest in the developed world. Only a fool would buy, only a fool would hold and, it seems from my experience, that only a fool would attempt to sell property in the city.

Finally, as an Englishman, I am rather peeved that the French want to punish me for having fallen in love with their capital city.

In the last century, foreigners twice saved Paris from the Germans.

You'd think the frog-eating bastards (all of whom carry a white flag in their knapsack) would be just a teeny bit grateful, wouldn't you?

10

In my last diary, I mentioned having taken shelfies (photographs of books on shelves).

It seems that Antoinette has added a word to the English language, for millennials are apparently now busy taking loads of shelfies with which to impress their friends. The idea, apparently, is to buy a load of books (paperbacks by the yard will do) and stick them on the shelves of a bookcase. You then take pictures and send them to all your friends, put them on your Facebook page and distribute them via Twitter.

This is actually rather sad.

Millennials are always trying to impress other people with their petty achievements. Instead of enjoying a view or an experience, they have to take a picture of it to prove that they were there.

And now they want to pretend that they read books.

The problem is, I fear, that millennials have no foundation in their life. They have no sense of their place in the world around them and this is because they were brought up without rules, taught to exist in a world where they were encouraged to believe that the world belonged to them. We have a nation of divas. Everyone is now a royal; full of self-importance, filled with a sense of inner certainty and deprived of the capacity for fun.

And in trying forever to live for the acclaim of others, they fail to live their own lives. It is all a bit sad really.

I tried reversing our Mitsubishi up our driveway today. The Bentley was parked in the courtyard next to the house which is the only place where I can turn round. To my astonishment, the damned Mitsubishi Barbarian had enormous difficulty in getting up the hill. Even when I tried out the quartet of four wheel drive options, the car just span and struggled. There was no ice, no wet leaves, no spilt diesel – just a slight dampness caused by a little light rain. Our Ford Ranger would have got up easily. And so would the Bentley (which is four wheel drive). Maybe it's just me. Maybe I need to learn a few words of Japanese so that I can offer appropriate encouragement. What, I wonder is Japanese for 'Giddy up'?

I had to leave the Mitsubishi parked half way up the drive where we have a space where two or three cars can be parked. The Mitsubishi is toast. I think maybe I'll get one of the new four wheel drive Maseratis.

When I looked at a recent car magazine, I was disappointed to see that most of the advertisements now give carbon dioxide emissions and miles per gallon in every imaginable circumstance but never give acceleration, maximum speed or price.

Well bugger it all, I am going to add a Maserati to our garage. I realise I am paying a chunk for the name but sod it, it is a Maserati. Money needs to be spent otherwise it has no function other than to enrich bankers, money managers and other riff raff who will steal whatever they can lay their hands on. Funds which are superfluous to purpose of staying warm and fed (and for fuck you money) need to be spent on toys.

Meanwhile, I have rediscovered Dandelion and Burdock.

If the Americans and the North Koreans start a war I have no doubt that Britain will somehow become involved. Antoinette and I will hide under the table with a bottle of Dandelion and Burdock and a packet of Hula Hoops.

11

A few weeks ago, I ordered a jacket from an American company called Orvis. I like their jackets because they are equipped with a variety of pockets – several of them large, zipped and inside the coat.

The website told me that there would be a delay of a week or two but that was fine. I ordered the coat and paid extra for express delivery. Orvis sent me an email letting me know that the jacket would be available on 8th August.

But when I chased them by email the other day, they told me that the jacket would now not be available until December.

I was cross not because they didn't have the jacket but because they twice told me that they had it and gave me a date when it would be delivered. That's sloppy and unprofessional. When I cancelled the order and told them to remove my name from their mailing list, I received nothing but a simple confirmation. They offered no explanation and made no effort to keep me as a customer. I'm glad I don't have any shares in the company. If I did, I would sell them. And I bet I continue to get a zillion advertising emails for the company.

It was raining again today. It has been a pretty miserable summer. Still, we can perhaps enjoy the parallel universe occupied by the climate change mythologists who claim that we are once again experiencing one of the hottest years on record.

They claim indeed that for the past several years the weather has been hotter than ever.

Why does anyone with a brain still listen to these completely discredited buffoons?

The climate change industry fiddles the figures and makes up the 'facts' to suit its own commercial and political purposes.

After a massive manhunt police arrested a jogger who had apparently pushed a woman pedestrian and nearly knocked her under a bus.

They were not helped by the fact that the CCTV pictures were, as usual, pretty useless and told them only that the culprit was almost certainly two legged.

The man they named, after their extensive manhunt, quickly claimed to have been in America at the time. It seems a pity that the police didn't do a little basic checking before arresting the poor fellow. And an even bigger pity that they didn't check before releasing his name. These days I rather suspect that the police are more interested in getting publicity than in getting things right. Naturally, they still haven't arrested the culprit.

I have noticed two things about public car parks.

First, the width of each space will be in inverse proportion to the age of the car park. The newer the car park the narrower the spaces will be.

Second, in a busy car park the car selfishly parked across two spaces will always be a black Audi.

12

Students who claim they are suffering from ADHD, OCD, hyperactivity and dyslexia (not just one, you understand, but all these and more) are suing universities which do not allow them more time than other students to learn their stuff and then regurgitate it at exam time. They want special privileges too – such as a room of their own.

Maybe they would also like an hour beforehand with the answers? And perhaps an adviser sitting at each elbow while they sit the examination.

If you think about it logically, it will soon be necessary to offer all intellectually disadvantaged students the chance to study for four, five, six or more years in order to master their course. And then give them double or triple time to sit their exams. Academia will become like a golf club – with the brighter students given a handicap so that the less intellectually endowed students have a chance to compete with them.

Actually, I am surprised that students aren't suing universities for making them sit exams at all.

'Not taking my word that I know the stuff is insulting and defamatory.'

I have no doubt that universities will roll over when faced with new demands. They have become soppy. If one student complains that a book has upset them (for some undisclosed reason), the university will remove it from the curriculum. Students demand to feel 'comfortable' at all times. They never want to be stretched, offended or faced with anything controversial. They want to rewrite history to remove the bits which distress them. It is, apparently, official National Union of Students policy to prevent controversial people from speaking at universities because they might imperil the 'safe space' of university campuses where students must now be protected from 'upsetting views'. I despair, I really do. And these, remember, are members of a generation which seems to worship at the shrine of disruption. The only disruption they will tolerate is the sort they themselves initiate. Any disruption offered by the over 30s is regarded as terrifying, appalling and entirely unacceptable.

13

I read yet again that Zuckerberg, the Facebook billionaire has promised to give away 99% of his wealth.

Am I nit picking in pointing out that until he says exactly when he is going to do this, the promise is rather meaningless.

Talking of wealth, I see that someone called Glynis Breakwell, who is the vice-chancellor of the University of Bath (I wonder how many people knew they'd got a university there) receives a salary of £451,000 plus £19,000 in living expenses. The university (for which I suspect we can, in part, read 'taxpayers') also paid her utility bills, council tax and £8,000 laundry bill.

There is, of course, absolutely no connection between the absurd salaries paid to university vice chancellors and the massive debts incurred by students.

Someone Antoinette knows was bitten by a tick while walking in the countryside. She rang her doctor's surgery. The receptionist told her that they didn't deal with tick bites.

Maybe someone should tell the receptionist and her employers about Lyme disease.

14

I spoke to three people who all said it took at least three weeks to get appointments with their doctors, though one said they could get an appointment with a trainee or a locum but that these stand-in doctors 'never seem to know anything and never like to change anything prescribed for them by one of the principals'.

There are few doctors available these days because a majority of GPs are women who all want to work part time with no evenings, nights, weekends or bank holidays. This attitude doesn't matter in banking or architecture but it does matter in medicine.

Many female GPs work only two or possibly three days a week. Some female doctors like to share jobs. One works half a week and the other works the other half of the week. This suits them very nicely. It means that they earn quite good money, have lots of time off and pay very little income tax. Unfortunately, of course, it means that patient care is somewhere between terrible and awful. A patient has little chance of seeing the same doctor more than once. And since the female doctors don't like providing night time cover, or working at weekends or on bank holidays, the patients get a really rough deal. (The establishment should have known this because it has been a problem for decades. When I was in practice over 30 years ago, it was well-known that some women doctors did not want to accept their full share of out of hours responsibility.)

This was a result of government policy years ago to increase the number of women doctors. It has been a disaster not least because with women doctors working part time there is no continuity for patients. Patients prefer to see the same doctor and it is safer for them to do so. Many patients find it harder to share confidential information with a doctor they don't really know well enough to trust. There is absolutely no doubt that the increase in the number of women doctors has resulted in a massive increase in patient morbidity and mortality – not because women doctors are poorer diagnosticians but because their personal working preferences disadvantage their patients.

The latest bit of politically correct nonsense to hit the world comes courtesy of those promoting a gender neutral world. These idiots claim that there is no difference between boys and girls and men and women and that allowing girls to dress in pink or giving boys toy cars to play with is a major sin. Apart from being scientific balderdash, this is dangerous and damaging nonsense and it is frightening that some people are apparently taking it seriously.

In schools everywhere pupils of both sexes are now expected to share loos. In Berlin, someone has allegedly opened a loo where urinals designed for women to use have been installed alongside traditional male urinals. Who, I wonder, is responsible for this absurd nonsense? Why were they let out without supervision? If it isn't stopped now, I have no doubt that the gender neutral movement will lead to a massive increase in gender confusion among children and teenagers. Young girls going through the menarche will be devastated. Sex assaults will rocket and indecent exposure (accidental and deliberate) will become endemic. If we don't stop it this is another piece of social engineering that will be accepted and eventually become compulsory.

15

I found an old album recorded by Emperor Rosko, the greatest disc jockey of all time. It occurred to me that nothing since the 1960s (certainly not the internet) has been so big a cultural shock as pirate radio.

Have you noticed that people will often say 'they must know what they are doing' when talking about people in authority. Most people assume that the folk in authority know what they are doing. This is wrong. The people in authority may know what you are doing and they almost certainly know what I am doing but they don't have the faintest idea what they themselves are doing. Most of the time they are too busy feathering their own nests to know which way is up or what day it is.

The Eurostar tickets for which I paid an extortionate £8.50 postage charge still haven't arrived. Rather than waiting for 40 minutes for one of their agents to speak to me I sent them an email asking where the tickets are.

And I was right about Orvis. I am being bombarded with advertisements for the coat they couldn't provide until

December.

16

A woman has noisily complained that every woman in Britain has been the victim of sexual harassment. Many others have joined in and endorsed the claim though just how they know this is true is a mystery. Every female Z list celebrity in the country now claims to have been fondled, propositioned or touched inappropriately at some time in the 1970s or 1980s. One woman complained that back in the 1980s, she was asked to do a twirl to show off a new dress. Another complained that her boss told her that she looked 'nice'.

'Give us a twirl!' is harassment? What the hell is wrong with these people? What strange world do they inhabit?

The folk complaining, of course, mostly celebrities of a certain age and most seem strangely eager to talk about (in surprising detail) things that happened half a lifetime ago.

Suddenly, there is fame to be revived, sympathy to be garnered, victimhood to be enjoyed, interviews to be done, and television programmes on which to appear.

As a result, reputations are being ruined with nary a shred of real evidence. The accusation is, it seems, usually enough for the court of social media.

Moreover, there seems no interest in the fact that the culture was different then and, dare I say it, some women were as guilty of touching as were some men and many were more likely to be disappointed if they weren't touched somewhere than if they were. The world was very different and expectations were a world away from today's much stricter, politically correct environment. It may have all been wrong but it was the way it was, and to judge behaviour of the 1970s by the rules of the 21st century seems as wrong as making judgements about Cecil Rhodes et al according to the world in which we now live. You can't fairly judge one generation by another generation's standards.

In reality, I confess that I rather doubt this claim is true but I do think it is true that every man has most certainly been the victim of sexual harassment.

Women use sex in many ways, the most obvious of which is the wearing of provocative clothes, sexually appealing make-up and scents.

It is not difficult to argue that women who wear revealing and sexually provocative clothes (short skirts, lots of cleavage) when they are at work are just as guilty of sexual harassment as are men who make sexual comments. No one ever dares say this might be true because it is politically incorrect to say so. And yet I have frequently read about women (actresses, journalists, businesswomen and politicians) who have claimed that they 'show a little leg' or 'flash a little cleavage' in order to attract attention to themselves. Many women who are successful in business have admitted, without criticism, that they have deliberately used their charms to help advance their careers in some way. And how many actresses dress in polo neck sweaters and old jeans when attending events where the press and public will be gathered?

It is worth remembering that it wasn't all that long ago that in Britain an Act of Parliament was passed allowing men to annul a marriage if their wife had used perfume, padding, attractive clothing or make-up to enhance their appearance.

If it is true, as has been claimed, that every woman in the world has been the victim of sexual harassment (though there are doubtless many would argue that the word 'victim' has been misapplied in many of these cases and there are others who would simply argue that the claim is a wildly emotive exaggeration) then I would say it is absolutely rock solid certain that every man in Britain has been a victim of sexual harassment by women and none of the guilty women has been charged with anything, let alone convicted.

I realise with some horror that I would not dare to make this point online for it would immediately result in trolling, abuse and, quite probably, the arrival of a couple of dozen police officers at our front door.

Today I ventured further into the nightmare world of modern banking as exemplified by Barclays France.

I still hadn't received the statements and other documents which Barclays in France had been promising me since early June.

So, today I telephoned again.

I have lost count of the number of times I've rung and emailed, and my phone bill must be a serious drag on Britain's national economy. Barclays in France makes the Post Office look like a citadel of efficiency. Indeed, I suspect that the star pupils from the Finishing School for British Post Office staff, la crème de la crème as Miss Jean Brodie might have put it, the rudest, the most incompetent, the most brazenly uncaring, are all selected by Barclays bank to work in France. Barclays surely have an option on each year's prize pupils. It is no doubt quite the thing to get the call. For pupils at the Post Office Finishing School a posting to Barclays must be a tribute to be savoured and boasted about. To be so rude and egregiously incompetent that you are picked to work for Barclays in France, is doubtless an honour to be savoured.

With one thing and another, I am now full up with disputes and anxieties. There really is no room for any more.

The Barclays employee to whom I spoke today confirmed that absolutely nothing I had asked them to do had been done. They have not cancelled the direct debits they promised to cancel weeks ago. I have a suspicion that they perhaps have some sort of staff bonus scheme whereby employees are given extra money according to the number of emails and phone calls they generate when asked to perform simple tasks. Their files still show my phone number as two numbers I last used nearly a decade ago. When they do bother to communicate with me they insist on trying to use these ten-year-old numbers because they refuse to update their records. I don't think I have ever encountered such gross incompetence.

And the French staff who are supposed to speak English are so unilingual that I talked to them in French (it doesn't say much when my French is better than their English). Pleasantly, they do not complain about my French when they realise just how hard it can be to discuss complex banking procedures in another language.

Feeling as though I had died and gone to some cruel French banking hell, and having completely run out of patience, I told them today that I now wanted to close the account.

I was told that I must send more email instructions and that once the instructions were received it would take three weeks for someone to pluck up the necessary energy to press the button required to make the closure. I was told that an email instruction would be acceptable if I photographed a written instruction and sent the photograph with the email. I was also assured that someone would ring me to confirm that the emails had been received. I also sent yet more emails cancelling my unwanted direct debits and updating my phone number.

Some hours later, when no one had telephoned, as promised, to confirm that Barclays had received the emails I rang again.

This time, another employee told me that an email instruction would not be acceptable and that I would need to put the same instruction in the ordinary mail. I couldn't help feeling that this was all being done to slow down the whole process still further and leave them controlling my money for a little longer. I wrote myself a euro cheque for the bulk of the money in the account and sent it to my bank in the UK. Maybe it will be possible to salvage some of the money Barclays are holding.

Everything in France seems to be done at a snail pace. Appropriate, I suppose.

I jotted down a list of all the calls I've made and letters I have written and I reckon I have so far wasted just under a week of my life trying to persuade Barclays France to do things which should have taken me at most 15 minutes. Writing needs a routine environment and peace. It doesn't need constant interruptions and uncertainties.

Looking at the news later in the day, I saw that four senior Barclays executives from the British part of the bank have been arrested. This does not seem to be enough. Surely more should be charged. Actually, why waste time with charges and trials. Why not just put all Barclays staff into jail?

Thanks to the French, we have had a summer of discontent, deceit and disloyalty. I suppose we should not have been surprised. It was, after all, the French, in the person of Cardinal Richelieu, who perfected the modern art of manipulation and deceit. The French are, in addition, an exceptionally ungrateful and grasping nation.

Antoinette and I spent half an hour looking for a film in which lots of French bankers get slaughtered. In the end, we settled on 22 Bullets (in which Jean Reno slaughters a good many Frenchmen) and 'Attack on Wall Street' in which an aggrieved citizen kills a lot of bankers.

Anyone contemplating buying a property in France should think again. Buying is a nightmare. Selling is a double nightmare.

I'm now also fighting the French gas and electricity suppliers who know damned well that our consumption is light (partly because we haven't been there much recently). They know that our consumption is light because I've given them the readings. However, they still insist on charging us more than we owe and then generously telling us that we can eventually reclaim the overpaid sums. Bugger that. In future they will get paid what I think we owe rather than what they want. What are they going to do? Cut us off? See if I care.

Having decided to sack Barclays, I realised that I would still need some sort of banking facility with a euro account so that I could carry on paying bills relating to the damned apartment in Paris. Having done a little research, I telephoned Lloyds Bank who appeared to offer a simple euro account, complete with a euro cheque book facility.

I then entered the nightmare world of the bit of Lloyds Bank which deals with poor sods who want to open euro accounts.

In a call which lasted over 50 minutes, and in which I spoke to several people, I endured the sort of interrogation which usually requires a powerful light and ends with the removal of some fingernails.

Having told me that they didn't offer cheque books ('None of our customers requires them,' said a teenage banker who was completely stumped when I asked him how he knew this if the bank didn't offer them to their customers) I was passed from one interrogator to another.

They wanted to know if I had any political affiliations, where my money came from and where it was going. They reserved the right to share my personal information with Uncle Tom Cobbleigh and they wanted to know my income (and who paid me) and what I was planning to do with the money which went into my account (and where it would be coming from). They wanted to know my street address, my national insurance number, my date of birth, where I was born and my bank details (I pointed out that I had five accounts with their bank but they said they were a different department). They wanted me to take my passport into a local branch (where it would be copied) and they wanted the usual utility bill to prove that I heated the house and had electric lights. They wanted a copy of a bank statement issued by themselves. They wanted to know my nationality and they wanted my telephone number and my email address. I lost track of the questions and eventually when I demurred, someone actually assured me that all this information was being collected for my benefit and that it would be 'kept secure on file'.

I was told that there would be another form to fill in before I would be told whether or not I would be accepted for a euro account. I would have to print out the form myself, sign it and return it. I asked if they could post me a form but they didn't seem to think that would be possible.

In the end, I pointed out that their interrogation would help identity thieves and terrorists but would not help me and that they could keep their damned euro account. I pointed out that they could not promise to keep my information secure since they were a bank and banks had an appalling record when it came to preserving information gleaned from customers. I forgot to mention that they had already told me that they intended to share the information I gave them with whatever other organisations they felt would benefit from it (or, perhaps, pay them for it). I was also told that the absurd questions were set by the Isle of Man Government since the Isle of Man is a separate country (though I bet it isn't a separate country if the Germans threaten to invade).

I ended the conversation by making a formal complaint about their absurdly impertinent and completely unnecessary questionnaire. I am willing to guarantee that I will never receive a response to my complaint.

I am now left with no way of paying bills on the apartment but I really don't care about that either.

17

I bought a Bosch grass trimmer. It is battery operated and rather feeble looking but it will, I hope, be a useful back up to our collection of petrol strimmers.

The Bosch product came with a thick book (in many languages) but the book doesn't seem to contain any instructions about how to put the device together. This is presumably a crafty German ploy to avoid having to hire one of those illiterate Japanese people who usually write instruction booklets.

The strimmer doesn't seem very strong. Indeed, I have nail clippers which seem to weigh more and which appear to be considerably more robust. Still, it will probably do for a little light strimming where required and it should be useful for cutting back the nose and ear hair which seems to grow with such enthusiasm these days.

I read today that all comments on the internet should be written in a light and entertaining way.

Hmmm.

Announcing the start of World War III should be something of a challenge.

'Hey, folks! You'll never guess what Germany just did…'

18

I received an automated acknowledgement from Eurostar in response to my email complaining that our tickets have not arrived. But no one has bothered to reply to me. I don't think I have ever known a company fall so far and so fast. When Eurostar started, it provided an excellent service. Today it must be one of the worst and least caring companies on the planet. Thankfully, Antoinette succeeded in downloading the tickets from my iPad. Still, it would be nice to have received the tickets since I paid extra to have them posted by special delivery.

After months of consideration, and consultation with one another, Britain's top experts on terrorist attacks have published advice on how citizens can best survive an attack.

The advice can be summed up neatly in two words: run and hide.

Crumbs! It's nice to know that we have experts looking after our interests.

Without them which of us would have thought of 'run and hide'? I hope and expect these geniuses will all receive massive bonuses and knighthoods for their wise advice.

I have written their advice on a small piece of cardboard which I have placed in my wallet, lest I forget.

'Run and hide.'

Maybe the Government might like to print 60,000,000 small reminder cards with these words printed on them. Then every one of us could carry a reminder card with us at all times. Nike or Adidas would doubtless buy advertising space on the reverse of the card.

Oh, and the experts also suggested that later, when it is safe to do so, we should tell someone what has happened.

I don't know about you, but I'd never have thought of that either.

Actually, Antoinette and I are much better prepared than this.

Whenever we go to London or Paris or any other popular terrorist centre, Antoinette wears a simple black headscarf around her neck (or carries one in her handbag) so that in extremis she can wrap the scarf over her head and cover her hair. I refrain from shaving, dress scruffily and scowl a good deal. We have both learned the words Allahu Akbar which we will, if necessary, shout with great gusto.

We had a sudden attack of thunder at 1 p.m. today. It hadn't been forecast so I checked the Met Office website to see what they were saying. They said we were having a nice sunny day. Outside a real storm was developing.

At 5 p.m. this afternoon the sun was shining and I checked the Met Office website again. They said that it was now raining heavily with thunder and lightning.

Sadly, it seems that the Met Office staff have not yet mastered the art of looking out of the window to see what the weather is like. If they can't get the weather right when it is happening then it's perhaps not surprising that they can't get tomorrow's weather right. And it is, perhaps, no wonder they seem to think this is the hottest summer ever in the entire history of this or any other planet.

Most surprising is the fact that they seem able to pontificate on the dangers of global warming when they can't even tell us what today's weather is like when it's happening.

Still, all is not all gloomy. It has been announced that Met Office forecasters will split a £1 million bonus (the biggest since the Met Office was set up 163 years ago) for making 'more accurate' weather forecasts. 'More accurate' than what I don't know but my guess would be 'more accurate' than a drunken sot dangling a piece of seaweed out of his window.

Actually, I am, I confess, completely fed up with the hubristic bastards who read us the weather these days. They, almost more than anyone in our patronising society, seem determined to belittle us and to pat us on the head at every possible opportunity. They have the affrontery to tell us when to use umbrellas, when to use sun-cream and when to stay indoors. And we must keep warm and put on a clean vest and wash behind our ears.

It would be nice if they could, just occasionally, get the bloody weather forecast right.

19

A couple I read about today want to know when they will be able to buy a house. They are both in their mid-20s and have a combined income of around £40,000. They are not married but live with parents. They pay around £5,000 a year in board and I doubt if their tax bill is much more than £5,000 so they have an available £30,000 to spend on themselves. They have so far managed to save just £2,000 from this considerable disposable income.

They seem to me to typify the millennials. They expect to be able to buy a house without having to make any real sacrifices. I have no idea what they spend their £30,000 a year on but I'm willing to bet that there are some nice cars, good holidays, expensive coffees and quite a few internet expenditures.

The sad truth is that members of the entitlement generation cannot afford to buy a home of their own because:

They don't like work very much. They expected to be millionaires at 25 but don't want to have to do much to earn the money. They prefer to spend their days sending Twitter messages and updating their Facebook page. They are addicted to taking selfies which they much prefer to work. I discovered today that Cirque du Soleil now has 'selfie breaks' built into its shows so that entitlement generation customers can take pictures of themselves.

They spend vast quantities of money on gadgets and games. They feel deprived if they don't have the latest mobile phone, the latest iPad and the latest laptop. They also spend a fortune on shoes, clothing and grooming. Strangely, male millennials now spend more on clothing and grooming than female millennials.

They spend much of their cash on tattoos. These silly expressions of self-self are far more expensive than most people realise. A moderately successful tattooist can earn £240,000 a year and a fashionable one can enjoy an annual income of £320,000. Overheads and the cost of ink are almost insignificant. This sort of money is considerably more than a trained consultant surgeon can earn – even with a large private practice. I suspect that the training to be a tattooist is rather less extensive and expensive than the training to be a surgeon. Those absurd bits of graffiti with which members of the entitlement generation have themselves decorated cost a small fortune to have done. I don't wish to spread bad news but many will become infected and produce serious blood poisoning problems in the years ahead. The long-term problems with tattoos mean that no one under the age of 65 should ever have any part of their body tattooed. Tattoos were all very well when they were confined to a neat anchor and the word 'Mum' tattooed on a sailor's upper arm. These days just about everyone seems to be tattooed. I have seen several individuals with their faces covered with tattoos. It is a peculiarly British fad and today women are as likely to cover their bodies with tattoos as are men. I have even seen nurses with visible tattoos. Awful.

The average entitlement generation couple spend over £27,000 on their wedding and a quarter of couples borrow money not to buy a home of their own but to pay for an expensive shindig for their chums. That sum alone would provide a big chunk of a down payment on a new home.

The entitlement generation waste vast amounts of money. For example, they spend £310 million a year on Halloween fripperies.

They don't save any of their money. To be fair, I can see their point. For the last 10 years the rewards on savings have been somewhere between derisory and non-existent. But the real answer to this problem is not to save less but to save more. It is worth noting that the low interest policy was at least partly designed to transfer wealth from the elderly to the entitlement generation. It has done this very successfully. The elderly, who saved hard for much of their lives, are now rapidly become impoverished. Someone who saved £100,000 out of their taxed income, and who might have been expecting that the interest would help them live more comfortably, will now be lucky to receive an after tax income of £1,000 a year. The money has been stolen from the cautious and the prudent and transferred (in a variety of ways) to the pockets of the greedy millions of the entitlement generation.

20

I occasionally buy the *Daily Telegraph* on Saturdays since it provides around 2.3 acres of inflammable newsprint with which to light fires and to trigger my double twin incinerators into action. I don't usually bother reading it because there isn't usually anything in it worth reading (and, if I take my time and look at everything and do the crossword I find I have wasted five minutes of the day) but this afternoon, while lighting a fire in the incinerator, I noticed that according to yesterday's paper the National Trust has sacked a gardener who has 50 years' experience because he doesn't have the requisite paper qualifications. The gardener's main task was cutting grass with a ride on mower but it seems that the National Trust demands that those responsible for such delicate work must have formal qualifications. Gosh, how I dislike the National Trust. Has there ever been a more aggressively worthy, more sanctimonious organisation?

The National Trust has become the Eurostar of charities: once respected now reviled. They were in the news recently for exposing a donor as homosexual and for trying to force volunteer staff to wear ribbons, ties or whatever celebrating homosexuality. They seemed surprised when there were complaints.

Sacking people because they don't have paper qualifications happens a good deal these days.

We know of a delivery driver, with many years' experience, who was threatened with redundancy because she didn't have the required certificates. And Antoinette knows of a cleaner, keen and eager to work, who was fired because she too didn't have the paperwork her employers deemed necessary.

And here's another odd thought: Why is it so difficult to buy decent cheese these days? Most of the stuff on sale seems to have been made from old car seats.

Ah, well. They probably do make it from old car seats as part of the recycling process.

Cutting the grass in Gloucestershire with our massive and frighteningly powerful wheeled strimmer, I suddenly discovered that I had cut through the armoured cable which supplies the outside lights in the garden with electricity. It made me realise just how strong the strimmer blades are. I must remember to keep my toes out of the way in the future.

I blame the EU for allowing manufacturers to sell strimmers which can cut through armoured cable. Mind you, I also blame the EU for allowing manufacturers to sell armoured cable which can be cut through with a strimmer.

And, of course, I blame the EU for the fact that the grass grows at all.

Since our esteemed neighbour His Serene Highness the Prince of all Gloucestershire ordered trees and bushes to be banned from his small estate and, with council approval, had them hacked and cut and burnt and sprayed, the deer have disappeared and the squirrels have virtually gone. There are very few blackbirds, virtually no butterflies, no cowslips, and far fewer other birds too.

What's the difference between this and city vandalism?

Well, rural vandalism is worse because it affects many other creatures and it affects the health of our environment.

21

The newspapers are warning of snow and blizzards later this year.

When I look, I always find that the snow is forecast for Scotland.

Who cares? It always snows in Scotland.

It snows in Iceland too but I don't much care about that either.

Stephen Hawking is in the news again, again, this time complaining about the NHS. It occurs to me to wonder whether any NHS money has been spent keeping this intolerable, old windbag alive at the expense of other less media savvy individuals.

A helicopter comes round once or twice a day and takes a close look at our Jolly Roger flag. It then flies over the bay and disappears. If it is a sea rescue helicopter then I have to confess, I fail to see the point of these regular fly pasts. If you are drowning at 11.37 a.m., when the thing flies overhead, then you will doubtless be saved. But if you get into trouble a minute later you've got a long wait before it comes around again. It seems as pointless an exercise as health screening.

Five minutes later another helicopter came round for a look at our flag. It is, I think, a commercial flight and probably taking tourists for a ride.

Time I think to do some kite flying. That should keep them away.

22

Most medical research has always been sloppily done. In my second book (*Paper Doctors*, 1977) I drew attention to just some of the many flaws in published research papers. Despite the sloppiness, much medical research gets reported as front page news by medical journalists who seem to me to know little or nothing about medicine or journalism.

I saw research the other day which showed (or claimed to show) that people who drink even small amounts of alcohol are more likely to develop cancer.

Here are the problems with the research I saw.

First, some drinkers also smoke. Some drinkers do not smoke. The researchers did not separate the two groups. I think it is a fair bet that people who drink alcohol and smoke are more likely to develop cancer.

Second, no attempt was made to divide the drinkers (or the non-drinkers for that matter) into groups who ate meat and groups who did not eat meat. Since it has been proven beyond doubt that meat eaters are more likely to develop cancer it was essential to do this. If there were more meat eaters among the drinkers than among the non-drinkers then they would inevitably be more likely to develop cancer. (I would expect there to be more meat eaters than vegetarians among a cohort of regular drinkers.)

Third, no attempt was made to measure the amount of stress endured by the two groups. Maybe the drinkers suffered more stress than the non-drinkers. That would, I suspect, be possible. And we know that people who suffer from a lot of stress are more likely to develop cancer.

It seems that medical researchers are still as ignorant and as sloppy today as they were when I wrote *Paper Doctors* in 1977.

When I wrote *Paper Doctors* I suggested that we would all benefit if medical research were stopped completely and we used the freed resources to use the information we already have. The fact is that we already know tons of stuff which could save millions of lives but we don't take advantage of it because the facts we have are commercially or politically inconvenient.

For example, (and this is just one example) the evidence shows quite clearly that eating meat is as big a cause of death as smoking cigarettes. Governments know this. The World Health Organisation knows it. But no one dare take useful action because the meat lobby is too powerful.

And so we ignore the evidence which would save millions of lives and we continue looking for 'magic bullet' cures which are probably never going to be found and which are not at all necessary.

23

I read today that someone called Kim Kardashian (I hope I have spelt that correctly) who is apparently a television reality performer (i.e. someone who has no talents or knowledge but who is filmed breathing and walking and who is therefore a person of considerable importance in the social media world) charges £380,000 for one photo on something called Instagram (I hope I have spelt that correctly).

Maybe this is what they mean by the New Economy.

I saw an advert in the September issue of a magazine called *Boat Trader* for a ketch priced £37,500. The advert included the following phrase: 'Lying Portugal UK Owners'.

I bet they now wish they'd put the comma in.

Curiously, the word used 'lying' used to be popular on land too.

A chum's grandmother once received a card from a very straight-laced friend in which she said 'Lay at Shrewsbury with your husband'.

I ordered a couple of paperbacks containing *The Times* crosswords. I got them from Amazon and today, I opened one of the books. I discovered to my astonishment that most of the crosswords had been completed by a previous owner.

This is a case of life imitating art.

One of the regular characters in my Bilbury books is a shopkeeper called Peter Marshall who is, to put it politely, a bit of a chancer. One of his tricks is to buy old crossword books which have been filled in with a pencil, rub out the completed entries and then sell the crossword books to customers.

But at least Mr Marshall used to rub out the completed answers. Whoever sold me this crossword book didn't even bother to do that.

Out of idle curiosity, I checked out the practice where, many decades ago, I used to work as a GP.

A friend and I founded the practice in a purpose built centre and for years we ran it together.

To begin with there were just the two of us with a small handful of receptionists. I think we had two full-time receptionists and two part-time members of staff. For nights and weekends and bank holidays, we had an arrangement with another local practice which had three doctors and together the five of us provided all our patients with care for 24 hours a day every day of the year (including Christmas Day).

Today, that same modest building where my friend and I ran our practice is occupied by eight doctors, five nurses, one health care assistant, a phlebotomist, four administrators, nine receptionists and three secretaries. That's a total of 31 people now employed by the NHS in that small surgery.

I suspect some of the medical and nursing staff work part-time. If they don't then they must be sitting on one another's laps to do their work. But that's still a hell of a lot of staff. I wonder how many patients see the same doctor every time they need help.

The sad thing is that with all those doctors and nurses and other staff there is no out of hours service provided. Patients who fall ill at night, at the weekend or on bank holidays must either drag themselves to the nearest hospital, call an ambulance or take their chances with the NHS helpline.

It's not surprising that Accident and Emergency Departments are overloaded.

24

Today I found a letter from a neighbour in our mail box. I don't know when it was written or sent. Most of our mail goes to other addresses in different parts of the country. The mail that comes to us at the seaside house goes into a box on a seven foot high locked gate. I open the box only every day or two.

The neighbour wants us to cut the top off one of a row of a dozen beautiful beech trees because it interferes with his view of the sea. He claims that the already mature tree has grown 25% since he bought his apartment two years ago. He has couched his request (his word) in the sort of way that the police usually couch their 'requests' when inviting motorists to explain why they were doing 41 mph in a clearly marked 40 mph zone.

The tree is at least 50-years-old and is quite beautiful. If we have the top lopped off one tree then we will have to have the whole row seriously damaged. The entire balance and integrity of our garden will be destroyed. I am tempted to ask the council to apply TPOs (tree protection orders) to all of our trees.

The roots and trunks are all on our land and if I spot that anyone has been messing with the trees in any way I shall be consulting the police and lawyers. I gather that in some seaside towns it has become commonplace for residents to poison trees which interfere with their view of the sea.

I had an email from Barclays in France today. They need to speak to me urgently. They say they have tried to call me but I suspect they must still be using the ten year out-of-date phone number which they refuse to remove from their files.

I rang them (the call on my Vodafone mobile cost me around £20 because the EU's abolition of absurdly high roaming charges doesn't seem to apply when calls are made from England to France) and eventually they rang me back. They insisted on my confirming all my bank details on an open mobile phone, while I was sitting in a busy café. They will now, presumably, send the contents of the account over to England. Once again, I spoke to two English speaking employees whose English is worse than my French. But I'm English and I try to be a gentleman so I said nothing.

I had hoped to put the money into a Lloyds account but Lloyds have taken a week to post me the form I needed to put the cheque into my account. (The form went via Andover for some reason). So stuff them. The money will go somewhere else.

Thinking of France, is Emmanuel Macron the vainest and most stupid man in Europe? The news that he spent 26,000 of taxpayers' money on make-up in just three months must certainly make him the vainest. (I bet Frau Merkel of Germany didn't spend a tenth of that).

What the hell did he buy? Where does a Frenchman put 26,000 euros worth of make-up in just three months? And his absurd pro EU policies must put him in line for the title of ‘the most stupid man in Europe’. If he could read, and knew the history of the EU, he would know that the EU was Hitler’s brain child. So where does that leave poor old Macron? Probably blushing so much he needs more make-up.

Actually, of course, French presidents are notoriously generous to themselves with taxpayers’ money.

Sarcozy was so generous to himself that even French voters got fed up with him.

And the shallow and unpopular Hollande, spent 30,000 euros a quarter on make-up and an additional 10,000 euros a month on barbers. Have you seen a picture of Hollande’s hair? The man only had about three strands. I doubt if any of Hollywood’s most extravagant madams spend that much on hairdressers. What a loathsome slug of a man he is.

Macron, the new President of France, is the Donald Trump of Europe. In fact, Macron is beginning to make Trump look modest and intelligent.

The new Chief Frog, told the press they weren’t bright enough to understand him and his thoughts.

Oh dear.

Hubris takes many forms.

The little fellow loves the EU and wants France to be part of a super state. But he also wants to restore the French economy.

Can’t do both, I am afraid.

Macron has now discovered that the German run EU won’t let him do what he plans. Anyone who understood the EU could have told him that would happen before he made a complete idiot of himself and showed that he doesn’t understand the first thing about the purpose of the EU.

I already predict that Macron, who seems to think that he is the new Sun King, rather than merely its President, will lose the next French elections and the National Front will get in. The French people will be fed up with his anti-French policies and his support for the Nazi created EU. His supporters talk as though he won the last election by a landslide but it was in reality a close run thing and the French are already fed up with him.

Over in the United States, La Trump has been a great disappointment to me. Within minutes of swaggering into the White House, the Diva of the political world hurried to recruit men from the arms industry to run the nation’s bloated defences and men from Goldman Sachs to ruin what was left of the nation’s economy.

Although he promised to put an end to it, he is also continuing with Nobel peace prize winning President Obama’s insane war in Afghanistan. That little adventure (for which no one can divine a purpose apart from the protection of some part of the oil industry and the expenditure of vast amounts of money on bombs, drones, bullets and mines, for which the arms industry is doubtless truly grateful) has already resulted in the deaths of nearly 2,500 American soldiers.

25

Singapore is now intending to take 10% of my Indian royalties. I’m not sure why or how this can possibly be legal. In fact, it seems more like mugging than tax collecting.

If I want to avoid this tax I will have to fill in a gazillion forms and send them to an address in the Ukraine. Honest. To avoid the tax people in Singapore taking a chunk of my Indian royalties I have to download some forms and send them to the Ukraine.

This sort of thing happens with monotonous regularity and I have pretty well given up filling in forms and sending them off to reduce foreign taxes. The British Government loses out. Since they take half my income, they will be losing 5% of my Indian royalties to the Singapore Government which appears to have financial representatives in the Ukraine.

Maybe that’s what they mean by globalisation.

26

‘I’ve waited my whole life for this’, said a 16-year-old, quoted in the papers after some success or other.

Wonderful. Her whole life!

Antoinette says I must not tell anyone about this but I have bought myself a year’s subscription to the *Beano* comic. I some time ago decided not to renew my subscription to *Fortune* magazine. It is woefully parochial and contains far too much stuff about millennials and internet companies and is therefore rather juvenile and pathetic. Every internet impresario is a genius, previously unparalleled in human history, and every profile is hagiographic. The magazine seems to me rather like an old man who wears a wig, has plastic surgery and wears clothes usually sold for 25-year-olds.

All very sad.

Amusingly, the magazine recently published an issue containing a list of companies which are, the editors claim, making the world a better place. They put J.P.Morgan Chase, the bank, number one on their list. I almost fell off my chair laughing when I saw that. The top Ten also included Apple, Novartis, Walmart, Toyota and Johnson and Johnson. It's impossible to take a magazine seriously which considers those companies to be making the world a better place.

Reading the *Beano* may not give me more smiles but it will give me a rounder, more thoughtful appreciation of the modern world.

When I want to read something I don't read a newspaper. I read PG Wodehouse or Dickens or Ambler. Or even an old *Dandy* annual.

27

I spent much of the afternoon sitting on the bench at the top of our stretch of private Devon cliff, looking down onto the beach and the sea. There were many Lego people on the beach (a kindly term which refers only to their apparent size from where we are) and quite a few boats of varying types and sizes in the sea. Quite a few brave souls were using those boards which are used like punts, with the user propelling themselves forward with a paddle.

From where we sit the seagulls, cormorants, crows, rooks, jackdaws and our two resident ravens fly past at or below eye level, sometimes with their young families. We have a huge jackdaw colony at the top of the garden. Several times a day the jackdaws practise communal swooping over the edge of the cliff. They disappear and then reappear as if by magic and for our entertainment.

Bees buzz around the clover and we now have a few peacock and admiral butterflies sunning themselves. A few cabbage whites flutter about.

There is so much to do: grass to cut, hedges to thin, a book to write. But I sit here watching, looking and seeing. A rabbit munches quite noisily on grass and daisies. In the distance, across the bay, I can see a couple of golfers trudging up the hill. Down on the beach I hear children shouting and a small dog barking. There is a splash as someone falls off one of those boards. A motorboat roars across the bay with a water skier in tow. There are all sorts of flowers around me. The noisy rabbit moves a few yards and starts again on a fresh piece of grass. A squirrel bounces about the lawn burying nuts. This is my life.

I sit here, away from the world, and never want to be anywhere else. This is where I want to spend the rest of my life. I no longer have any yearning to travel. Indeed, I feel positively opposed to travel. The world is too big, it is changing too fast and too much of the change is pointless. Travel used to be exciting and educational. Now travel is all about waiting and queuing. I think I will burn my passport if we ever manage to sell the apartment in Paris. The world is simply too rich for my taste; like a Christmas cake or pudding that contains too much fruit, too many nuts, too much brandy, too much richness. The world has become too greedy and mean.

Here, on this cliff, is where my spirit will rest for eternity.

I can see the Channel to the east and to the west and if I made the effort to walk to the top of the garden, and I borrowed Antoinette's powerful, new binoculars, I would be able to see France to the south. But I don't particularly want to see France.

You cannot sit here and not believe in God. I feel closer to God here than anywhere else I have been; this is nature's cathedral. I am at peace.

Our home is tucked into a sheltered nook. The people who built our house chose the spot with great care.

After a little while, Antoinette came out and joined me on the bench.

We sat and watched the world, as though we were ringmasters.

This evening, two DVDs stopped working.

We tried the usual tricks (wiping the disk on something innocuous) but neither resumed normal service. There were no scratches to be seen.

In the bad old days videos occasionally used to stick and sometimes not work at all.

The wonderful indestructible DVDs sometimes stick and occasionally don't work at all.

Progress.

28

I sat in a café while Antoinette was shopping and I was embarrassed when a 20-year-old employee loudly showed a new 50+ employer the ropes.

‘This is where we put the trays’.

‘When you are collecting the dirty crockery I find that if you put the plates on top of one another you can get more onto a tray’.

The word ‘patronising’ leapt into my head and wouldn’t leave.

In the end, I was so embarrassed for the 50-year-old that I had to leave.

I was reading a splendid book called *Patently Absurd* which describes a variety of objects which have been patented. There is a device for producing dimples, a mouth closing device, protecting armour for cyclists, a combustible gas-powered pogo stick, a birthday cake candle extinguisher, a derriere exerciser and a transparent brassiere in which the breasts float in water.

Most of those inventions were never turned into reality but they produced smiles.

Today, the world is full of inventions which have done an enormous amount of harm. And no smiles.

I amused myself today by making a list of ideas and inventions which have done more harm than good and which I would, if I could, happily uninvent.

I doubt if anyone else will agree with much, if any, of my list. But it’s my list. I could have gone on to 100 without any difficulty. Here it is: Health and safety rules with no concept of relative risk values (if something can happen and something can be done to prevent it happening then it must be done to avoid litigation or worse); political correctness; electric cars; the European Union; biofuels; the global warming myth; compulsory recycling; the continental quilt; computers; the internet; the atom bomb; guns; television; powered flight; genetic engineering; electric cars; comprehensive schools; university for all (the idea was that this would keep unemployment levels down among the young but the result has been to saddle countless thousands with worthless degrees and huge debts. Most graduates would be better off without the degrees and the debts); high rise residential blocks; mobile telephones; big hospitals; the NHS; the benefits system (one of the great mistakes of the 20th century since it has encouraged dependence upon the State); aeroplanes; the Beeching report; landmines and self-service tills.

29

One of the most popular videos on YouTube at the moment is a very short film in which a man is on a train. The train stops and the man jumps off shouting ‘I’ve shit my pants’. That’s it. Apparently 36 million people have watched this clip and think it is the funniest thing available. I think I have lost touch with the world. The world of YouTube is quite alien to me.

When we put up some short, home-made films which I had recorded, I ticked the box to ensure that no one could leave rude comments. It seemed sensible.

Within hours, I received an email telling me that my presence on YouTube was not credible because I had not allowed folk to abuse me online.

Surely, if people want to say things about me there are plenty of other ways for them to do so without my making life easy for them.

Antoinette bought me a small silver pen knife made by Tiffany of New York. There was a modest customs payment of £4.97. Royal Mail charged us £8 to handle the £4.97 payment.

30

Often, when we fall out of love with something (a food, a drink or a place) it is a result of something which has happened to us. We have changed. We have matured. We are no longer convinced that we could survive for the rest of our lives on a diet consisting exclusively of sherbet dip and dandelion and burdock.

But sometimes we fall out of love with something because the object of our affection has changed beyond all recognition. The cheese we once admired is manufactured by a process better designed for the production of car tyres than for the production of a favoured comestible.

And thus it is with Paris.

I have fallen out of love with the French capital because it has changed beyond recognition and now all that are left are the faults.

In the once wonderful parks, the weeds are high and the birds have gone – all killed. The parks now look like abandoned allotments except that they are silent.

It is illegal to feed the birds in Paris. Last year, when I bought packs of bird seed in the supermarket we have patronised for years, one of the uncivil staff members asked me if the bird seed was for birds in the park. I smiled, thinking it was a pleasant question, and said that it was. The next day all the bird seed had been removed from the shop’s shelves. The bird seed has never returned. Owners of caged birds must presumably now buy their bird seed elsewhere.

So the last time we were in Paris I managed to cause some concern.

When I bought a loaf of bread one day, I smiled at the loathsome assistant, held up the bread and said ‘Pour les oiseaux!’.

The woman stared at me in horror and when I left, I saw her scurrying away to see the manager.

But I bet they don’t dare stop selling bread.

Actually, looking for bird seed was rather a waste of time. There are hardly any birds left in the city. They have killed them all. Pigeons, sparrows and crows have pretty well all gone. It seems strange to me that the French worry so much about a few sparrows shitting on the grass when the streets of Paris are ankle deep in merde de chien. (The French never ‘pick up’ – they consider it beneath them. They prefer to walk around with their noses in the air and, indeed, they do so with good reason.) London, of course, is the same. Both cities are sterile and unwelcoming. I really don’t understand the mentality of those who want to destroy all our wildlife. It even happens in the countryside where death squads are constantly out searching for squirrels and badgers to kill. The fact is that politicians do far more harm than any wildlife. We would do better to exterminate them.

Those whose knowledge of Paris is confined to short stays in smart hotels will hate me for saying any of this, and they probably won’t understand. Many reviewers of my book on Paris (which was, believe me, written from the heart) attacked it because they had spent a week in the city and therefore claimed to know Paris better than I do.

They remind me of the P.G.Wodehouse character who spent a weekend in Brazil in order to write a guidebook.

31

A couple of decades ago, I received several invitations by promoters to tour Britain, speaking in town halls, village halls, parish halls and draughty halls. It was, I was told, to be a David Icke sort of tour. (Indeed, it was at one point suggested that David and I should do a tour together. That would have caused some fuss inside Special Branch.)

I decided against the tour for a variety of reasons.

But it is one of those things I wish I had done not because it would have started a new career or made a lot of money (I don’t think for a second that it would have done either of those things) but because it would have been a good way to see the country.

I used to tour radio and television stations and back in the 1980s and early 1990s, I frequently spent a month or so doing nothing but wander the country making appearances on radio and television chat shows. I found it an excellent way to see what was happening in parts of the country I would never normally visit.

I couldn’t do any sort of lecture or promotional tour now, of course. (No one alive has heard of me.)

But I would like to plan to tour Britain with Antoinette for a while.

The trouble is that we both like our house on the cliff too much to want to leave it.

Flicking through the papers today, I discovered the following:

English churches and cathedrals are now charging hefty admission fees. The average entrance fee is £10.17 and the church authorities seem surprised that fewer people now want to go into their buildings. Do they charge worshippers, I wonder? Or is it possible to sneak in and take a look around at Matins or Evensong? What a bloody world we live in. Still, we do now know the value the church puts on the provision of comfort and sanctuary from the world outside.

The metropolitan police are apparently asking for yet more money for their Madeleine McCann inquiry. They’ve spent around £12 million already and now want more taxpayers’ cash. Am I missing something here? Wouldn’t the police serve the public better by demanding that the McCanns answer some outstanding questions about their own behaviour before any more taxpayers’ money is spent on what has so far been an entirely fruitless search? The current official ‘value of a preventable fatality’ in the UK is £1.83 million. That’s what the Government thinks is fair to spend to prevent a single death. Every year thousands of people who could have been saved die because the Government didn’t think it was worth spending money to save them. Thousands of people die because the NHS isn’t allowed to spend money on needed drugs. Road safety improvements aren’t made because there isn’t enough money available. I estimate (and I admit it is an estimate) that the £12 million already spent on the McCanns could have saved at least 5,000 lives if the money had been used to reduce waiting times for essential hospital tests. The McCanns, of course, have been backed by numerous Prime Ministers and cabinet ministers. No one is quite sure why. And the McCanns are reported to have the best part of £1,000,000 still sitting in a Madeleine fund. If they think detectives would help, why don’t they spend that money? Wasn’t that why it was donated? (When I last looked, I noticed that around half a million was in an investment account.) Oh, and how much have the McCanns spent of their own after tax income on the search? If I lost a loved one and believed they could be found I would spend every penny I could raise. Finally, it is worthwhile pointing out that thousands of other children go missing –

but virtually no public money is spent looking for them. The official figures show that in Britain a child goes missing every three minutes. Why are the McCanns getting such special treatment? If the police are still working for us perhaps they wouldn't mind giving us a few answers.

A 17-year-old thug who killed a 65-year-old man who didn't have a cigarette to give him has been sentenced to four years and four months in prison. So he will doubtless be out in a couple of years. Once again the courts have shown that they do not value an elderly life very highly. Can you imagine how long the sentence would have been if the victim had been a 30-year-old MP or a 30-year-old policeman? Ageism is as rife in our courts as it is elsewhere in Britain.

A Google employee recently wrote a memo about the relative abilities of female programmers which caused some controversy and resulted in him being fired. Here's what Susan Wajcicki, the CEO of YouTube, said in response: 'While people may have a right to express their beliefs in public, that does not mean companies cannot take action when women are subjected to comments that perpetuate negative stereotypes about them based on their gender.' Ignoring the appalling, cliché ridden, politically correct English, there are two things about this which actually frighten me. First, the use of the word 'may'. So now we 'may' have a right to express our beliefs in public. And this from the boss of YouTube – a company which is owned by Google. If we may have a right to express our beliefs then, presumably, we may not have a right to express our beliefs in public if they offend one of the most powerful individuals on the internet. The comment which has caused so much offence did not break any laws. It was not inciting terrorism. It did not reveal privileged or secret information. No one was trolled. It was merely an expression of a perfectly valid opinion. But it clearly upset Ms Wajcicki and was, therefore, unacceptable. Second, I am startled by her suggestion that companies have a right to take action when selected individuals are offended by comments which other individuals have made. Isn't that how we define censorship? Scary stuff. And this from Google which is, in my view, one of the most evil companies on the planet.

September

1

Antoinette discovered that the loaf of bread which Tesco delivered is turning green so, wanting a bit of exercise and some fresh air, I walked along the beach to the nearest town in order to buy an edible staff of life in a colour we prefer.

We forgave Tesco this error since I worked out the other day that buying roughly the same weekly shop from Waitrose cost us around £3,000 a year more. That's £6,000 a year after tax.

We only switched because there is no Waitrose locally.

Apart from the financial saving, I'm glad we changed. The Tesco drivers are much jollier than the Waitrose staff.

It's only about a third of a mile on the shingle and another few hundred yards to the nearest shop but there's coming back as well as going so it's two thirds of a mile on shingle and if you've ever walked that far on shingle it becomes tiring, especially when the return journey is done carrying a shopping bag which gets heavier by the yard. While I was there, I bought two loaves, a bag of onions, a couple of magazines and, as a reward, a bag of doughnuts.

Oh, and I almost forgot, there are about 150 steep steps down to the beach.

That's 150 on the way down and another 300 on the way back (a step up takes twice as much effort as a step down).

But there's always something interesting to see on a walk on the beach.

I saw seven dogs running free, off their leads, and two clear notices which stated unequivocally that dogs must be kept on a lead at all times. Councils don't bother to enforce the laws about dogs.

I believe that if people are allowed to break the dog control laws then the rest of us must be allowed to carry Tasers and pepper sprays as protection.

Why don't the police uphold the laws which have been passed? They would do us all a favour if they arrested more dog owners and fewer motorists. The number of people injured and killed by out of control dogs has rocketed in recent years and will doubtless soon rival the number of people injured and killed on the roads.

On the beach, I saw a woman walking along with a papoose strapped to her chest. There was no baby in the papoose. The man walking with her had no baby either. Where was it? Did the woman routinely walk around with an empty papoose strapped to her chest?

I saw half a dozen people, all seemingly in their 20s, walking along in a group. Each and every one was studying a mobile telephone. I don't know whether they were texting or playing games. Every few steps they took they tripped on large pebbles. They blundered along regardless of the sea, the cliffs, the birds, the sky – seeing nothing of their surroundings. They were a menace to other walkers. I read somewhere that in Honolulu they have introduced a 'distracted walking' law, making it illegal for pedestrians to wander about staring at a small screen and taking no notice of other pedestrians or traffic.

I saw a middle aged woman wearing a headscarf in what is now the accepted Muslim style. She was self-consciously fingering the knot at her neck as though worrying that people might wonder if she was Muslim or a Muslim sympathiser. I suppose she might have just been wearing a headscarf in the way that women do, to protect her hair from the weather. Or maybe she really was a Muslim. I don't really care but I bet the sale of jolly headscarves with pictures of horses on them has nosedived. A year or two ago, the Cotswolds were the headscarf centre of the universe. Today you hardly ever see a headscarf of any description, except on the head of a woman walking three paces behind her husband.

At the top of the beach, I counted around 100 beach huts (I think the preferred technical term is chalets but they are to all extents and purposes nothing more than huts in that they look like garden sheds and are not equipped with either water or electricity) and although it was a lovely sunny day, only two of them were open. That is about as many as are ever open.

The council says that all the huts are sold, leased, rented or whatever they do with them so why do all those people bother to pay out good money if they never use them?

Just along the coast, a beach hut is for sale for £275,000 plus £3,000 a year to the council and no security because the council can tell you to take your hut away at any time.

You could buy a house on the beach front for not much more.

I suspect that many of those who rent, lease or own these huts find that, like boats, they seem more appealing than they really are.

Talking of boats, there are at least 100 very nice looking boats parked in the harbour. And most of them stay there. On a warm, calm Sunday, there may be half a dozen of the smaller boats out and about. But the bigger ones never move. It's probably just too much trouble to do all you have to do in order to go to sea. Most people probably just buy a boat so that they can say they own a boat. But I'm tempted by the prospect of messing about in boats, and all that.

I took my half of our set of two-way radios on my walk. They're supposed to work for about three miles but they don't, of course. They stopped working about half way along the beach. I didn't expect more so I wasn't disappointed. That's the way these days, isn't it? Don't expect too much in order to minimise disappointments. And that's rather sad in itself.

Still, I got there and back without collapsing so that's rather pleasing.

I went to bed grateful that I don't live in Birmingham.

The Unite union has said that its dustmen members are going to strike until the end of 2017 and that no rubbish will be collected this year. I think that if they go on strike for months on end, endangering lives and making millions of people miserable, they go back to being dustmen, possibly even binmen, rather than waste product redistribution management consultants. I am astonished that so many binmen should treat their neighbours with such complete disrespect. I have often thought that it if the Nazis had been recruiting in Britain they would not have found it difficult to recruit an endless number of concentration camp guards. Still, I suppose the same thing goes for most other countries too.

This is, of course, the problem with state control monopolies. It is true that the residents of Birmingham will be able to hire private rubbish collectors but then they will be paying twice and most people cannot afford to pay twice. (Those who pay for private health care or private education are paying twice of course).

It seems to me that strikes are becoming commoner again. But they don't always work well.

Paris tax drivers went on one of their regular strikes when Uber was making inroads into their business. It was not, perhaps, the brightest thing they could have done for the result was that all their stranded customers rang Uber and started to use the new alternative. Many would have probably never have dreamt of trying Uber if their usual taxi service hadn't been on strike. The Parisian taxi drivers found that their strike worked against them and made their lives much more difficult.

Serve 'em right, some might say.

2

As an experiment, in a mischievous moment I posted a comment on a well-known web forum (Linkedin since you ask) in which I argued that eSports as they now exist will have changed dramatically in three to five years and that players and commentators will have been replaced by computers. It was a rare and temporary excursion onto a social media site and I blame the coffee and walnut cake I ate the other evening.

The disruptors, I suggested, would have themselves been disrupted.

There are several good reasons for this and all relate to the psychological make-up of the millennials (sometimes known as 'snowflakes') and the Z generation – almost exclusively the sole consumers of eSports. For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to them collectively as 'snowflakes' though the more I think about it the more I think that the word 'divas' would be more accurate.

First, today's generations of divas are loners. They may be well linked on social media but intrinsically they are loners. They communicate with one another almost exclusively through mobile phones and other gadgets. They are poor at communicating face to face. One inevitable result will be that the market for arena eSports will collapse within the next few years. The demand will be exclusively for battles fought online – which can be viewed on personal screens, without any human contact. Excluding the human factor from eSports will improve the quality of the sport but it will also exclude people from the equation – and that is exactly what tomorrow's generation will demand.

Second, the enthusiasm for genuine violence has been increasing apace for decades. Horror films which were successful a generation or two ago (and regarded as terrifying by previous generations) are now regarded as so feeble as to be comedic. The problem is that each generation becomes immune to levels of violence which shocked the previous generation. Today's enthusiasts require a much greater level of violence. Tomorrow's enthusiasts are going to require even more violence. Games such as Grand Theft Auto and television programmes such as the BBC's appalling Eastenders have constantly and consistently encouraged violent attitudes.

However, the rise in the power of the health and safety police will mean that it will not be possible for there to be any real danger when humans are battling. (Incoming health and safety requirements will also dramatically limit the amount of time humans are allowed to spend playing games on computers.) Watching computers fight each other to death will satisfy all the new urges – while satisfying legal requirements. The viewing figures for battles between self-controlled humanoid robots will be huge. The humanoid robots will battle to the death – until the vanquished collapses in a puddle of cogs, wires and oil.

Third, divas are innately selfish. They see the world only as it exists to them. Tomorrow's divas will not want to watch other divas doing anything – let alone playing computer games. They are interested only in watching people humiliate themselves (as on reality television programmes). It is clear, therefore, that watching inanimate objects warring will allow them to be entertained without any genuine human contact being necessary and without them being expected to idolise other divas – an anathema to the next diva generation.

When I first suggested that eSports will change dramatically in the coming half a decade, the response from millennial eSports enthusiasts was immediate and dogmatic.

They insisted that what I suggested was quite impossible and, implied that people simply wouldn't stand for it. (As though the planned changes were going to be forced on people – rather than arising from human demands).

I was assured that the status quo was rock solid and that there could be no changes.

(One clearly offended individual admitted that what I postulated was possible. But not yet. Not in a way that might impinge on his career.)

This amused me for the millennials who control the internet have happily disrupted thousands of other businesses. They were happy to destroy other people's lifestyles and careers but they are clearly terrified that the same thing might happen to them.

Complainants seemed to think it was impossible and unthinkable that such a thing should happen to their industry. They are making a good living out of eSports and they are horrified that anything could happen to interfere with business.

The astonishing thing is that eSports people don't realise how fast things change. This is bizarre. Their entire industry was born just a blink ago. You would think those involved would recognise that they too could be obsolete in another blink. Most significantly they don't seem to understand the importance of human psychology and the way that rapid changes in human behaviour are having an impact on every aspect of our world.

The eSports industry is proud to boast that 380 million fans follow eSports. That is truly extraordinary. A few years ago, it would have seemed inconceivable – absurd even – that human beings would pay to watch other human beings playing computer games.

But those 380 million, and the next generation of fans, will follow new developments with matching eagerness.

And those who want to make money out of the new versions of eSports will have to adapt their business models. Those who are currently earning a living playing computer games will have to accept that they will need to look for some other way to pay their bills. The future in eSports lies with software engineers and mechanical engineers who can build robots and warring computers.

I took great delight in putting on another note telling the unhappy whingers to embrace the change (as the millennials are always saying) and to remember that progress is inevitable. I reminded him that thousands of publishers, bookshops and record shops hadn't thought that the internet would disrupt their business models.

Hours later, the responses to my original thesis were still coming in. And they were, I suppose, fifty fifty in that half of the people responding thought my scenario perfectly possible and said they rather liked the idea of watching computers playing against computers. (I can't imagine anything less fun myself but there you go). The other half, consisting exclusively of millennials involved in the eSports industry in one way or another, were hysterical and abusive, aggressive and, I thought, bullying in nature and accused me of trying to destroy their industry. One said I was trying to force him to accept my opinion. The majority of these respondents were bigoted, narrow-minded, intolerant and humourless and they clearly could not accept the possibility that they might be wrong or that the status quo could possible change in any way that they did not approve. All these respondents rejected outright and quite dogmatically any possibility that their tiny world could possibly be disrupted in the way I had outlined as a possibility. I was told that I must withdraw my prediction. The overriding attitude was 'we don't like what you say and therefore you must not be allowed to say it'. These were not children. They were, judging by their photographs, all in their 20s or early 30s and all male. Most were well educated. What struck me most was that the responses were judgemental and abusive, aggressive and threatening, rather than germane.

And when they weren't being personally abusive they were being, well, stupid.

In response to one complaint, I pointed out that many strange things had happened with startling speed and had shocked experts within a number of communities. As an example of something that had not been expected and which had shocked people, I gave negative interest rates. This immediately produced a response from a millennial eSports player who wanted to know what negative interest rates had got to do with eSports and who then compounded his ignorance by claiming that everyone expected negative interest rates and that hadn't come as a surprise to anyone. What can you say to people like that? I can't deal with these people.

Ah, the hubris of the millennial disruptor who only likes disruption when it doesn't affect his life or income. If it were not so alarming, the irony of it would make me smile.

(As an aside, millennial software designers all say they believe in disruption but what they really believe in is profit. All those kids with new software just want to be billionaires. I see that someone has become a billionaire after inventing a social messaging site called Snapchat. The selling point of this vastly over-valued site is that it destroys messages within a few seconds. Brilliant, eh? I'm expecting to become a trillionaire with my site called Crapchat which destroys messages before they are sent. People who subscribe will be able to send messages without worrying about there ever being any unpleasant consequences.)

The eSport afficionados should, more than most, have been aware of the possibility of change and they should have been anxious to confront any possibilities of change. But they were less able to comprehend the very idea of change than 70, 80 or 90-year-olds.

You would have thought these divas would have heard of Kodak, Polaroid and Xerox. All three thought they had irreplaceable technology and were, therefore, producing indispensable products. All were wrong. It is truly amazing that eSport fans, born in the Amazon generation, should not understand how quickly things can change.

My conclusion has to be that many millennials are not going to be able to cope as the next decade or so brings changes which will destroy all their plans and expectations. They are so hypersensitive that they actually seem to me to be mentally ill. They have no empathy, they misinterpret quickly because they don't read properly and their stupidity is matched only by their aggressiveness.

Now, even making allowance for the fact that these replies came from grown people who were dedicating their lives to playing computer games (and who are, therefore, nerdy beyond most nightmares) it seems to me that even the most avid disruptors lose their affection for disruption when it looks as though it might affect their own area of interest.

The fact is that no one is immune to change and sticking your head in the sand is a sure route to extinction. (It's also likely to result in your getting sand in your ear but that's another story.)

To be honest I found the responses alarming and rather frightening.

Free speech? Not acceptable.

Off the wall, original opinions? Not acceptable.

New ideas? Not acceptable.

Really, that's the way the world is now.

The millennials, or a large chunk of them, are so insular and self-absorbed that they reject anything which seems to them to threaten their view of life. They are like adolescents in that they think the world is about them. And when things don't go their way they whinge. They seem to be constantly surprised to discover that life isn't fair.

I have also noticed, by the way, that millennials welcome censorship. They love it. They can't get enough of it. As a generation they are uniquely, exclusively fascist. But when they are threatened by the censorship they become hysterical.

Maybe they need to read about Sisyphus who spent his days in Hades, pushing his damned boulder up the hill and then watching it roll down again. Or, at the other end of the cultural spectrum, listen to Homer Simpson who described life as 'just one crushing defeat after another'.

Alternatively, as usual, no one put it better than P.G. Woodhouse.

'What is life, asked Bertie Wooster once, 'but a series of sharp corners, round each of which Fate lies in wait for us with a stuffed eel-skin.'

No one has ever put it succinctly.

Life is one surprise after another, most of them unpleasant. And, just for fun, life usually ensures that the problems we worry about most, usually turn out to be of little consequence. It is the problems we don't see coming which really hit us hard on the back of the neck. Life's thunderbolts have a tendency to hit us all from time to time.

In a way, I think I understand squirrels, rabbits, cats and other animals more than I understand the millennials.

The people truly are a new breed.

I am certain that some of these critics will celebrate the fact that I deleted my remarks and that they succeeded in silencing me and forcing me to withdraw.

What happened, and what they won't understand, is that I have such complete contempt for these people that I no longer want to try to communicate with them. I can have a more sensible conversation with a rabbit.

Most of the millennials who responded appear to be spoilt brats; precious, touchy, selfish, greedy and headed for a life of endless disappointments. The world is now full of meddlesome, irritating, know it alls, who take instant and permanent offence at so many things, and must qualify as professional offendees.

Teachers who over-protect children from failure (by banning sports days and ensuring that no one fails an examination) and over-indulgent parents are partly to blame for this strange new breed of sub-humans.

Television is to blame, too, of course.

Rudeness is now endemic, both in drama and in entertainment. It isn't just joshing. It's deliberately conceived to be cruel and hurtful.

And the internet itself must be blamed too for it has divorced people from reality in a way that makes them feel able to be abusive and threatening from the safety of their armchair, their bedroom or a café table. They feel safe because the person they are abusing is miles away and doesn't know who they are or where they are.

Occasionally, of course, the person being abused will track down and punch the abuser. And the abuser will demand that the authorities deal with the retaliator.

A year or two ago, an author whose book had been savaged by a reviewer traced the culprit and punched her on the nose. As an author, I can't really blame him for that. My pseudonymous novel *Balancing the Books* (written by the deliciously named Donald Quixote) would have been my fictional extension of that incident if I hadn't written the book before the incident occurred. *Balancing the Books* was fun to write and contains lots of gruesome murders. It's about a sweet woman whose husband, an author, is destroyed by wicked reviewers. She sets about killing them – but making their deaths look like accidents. And she succeeds terribly, terribly well. She is probably still out there somewhere; plotting and killing, plotting and killing.

Incidentally, I have noticed that an increasing number of reviewers will complain that they do not like a book or a film or a whatever because it is not something else; it is not what they wanted it to be or wish it had been.

They are not reviewing what exists but what they wanted.

That is, of course, a fair criticism if the reviewer were misled. If you buy a movie which is promoted as a gentle romantic comedy and you find that it consists of Jason Statham killing people for 90 minutes then you are entitled to feel aggrieved.

But if you buy a movie which was advertised as consisting of Jason Statham killing people for 90 minutes, and you find that the film does include footage of Jason Statham killing people for 90 minutes then you do not, in my view, have a right to complain that the film was not a gentle romantic comedy starring the egregiously self-satisfied and sanctimonious Paltrow woman.

The problem today is that the needs, requirements and demands of the reader or viewer now over-shadow the importance of the artist's ability to produce the work which he had intended to produce.

People used to enjoy a book (or a film) even if they disagreed with the author's point of view. They would respect the writing and maybe learn something from the content.

These days it seems to me that too many reviewers (and I include professionals who write reviews for a living) write reviews in order to express their own view and to substantiate their own view by damning the author's opinion, point of view or carefully marshalled facts.

Young authors are already censoring and Bowdlerising their own work in order to avoid seeing their work destroyed.

People say that authors shouldn't take reviews personally. That, I am afraid, is a rather silly thing to say. Every book I write has some of my soul in it. I give my books some of my life. So of course I take it personally when someone slams a book because it isn't the book they wanted or because they bought it by mistake but still managed to find the right way to write a seering review.

Now here is what I find really scary: most authors would not dare write any of these paragraphs for public online consumption – either on a website or in a book.

The readers of these diaries are tolerant, intelligent and compassionate and sensible enough to understand that human beings cannot all agree about everything and that it is perfectly possible to debate issues, even those about which we feel passionate, without resorting to abuse and threats and violence.

That now sounds patronising but it wasn't meant to be.

What I'm trying to say, and perhaps doing it clumsily, is that the sort of people who read this book have to be tolerant and able to accept my foibles and eccentricities because if they aren't they would have given up at page two, written a one star review and deleted the book.

Silly complaints mean that writers amend how they write. And, in an important way, that is the beginning of the end of civilisation.

In their tone, the responses I saw reminded me of the gang led by a self-righteous and painfully vindictive author whose main objection to a book of mine seemed to me to be the fact that it had been published before his own book on the same subject. He rounded up his social media disciples, wound them up like clockwork soldiers and marched them off in my direction. The only thing that can be said for them is that they obeyed his implicit instructions to blacken my book to make room for his own tome with commendable enthusiasm and efficiency.

'Let's destroy all his books,' wrote one disciple. And thus it came to pass.

Once a book has been slaughtered on the internet, it is ruined for life. An initial one star review is often all it takes.

(It is possible to mine some comedy from the reviewing game. In my novel, *The Hotel Doctor* I described how customers at a Parisian brothel began to rate the girls working there and how, in response, the girls set up their own website and began rating the customers. In my book, that was the end of that particular piece of silliness.)

And so with a shudder, and the sound of jackboots in my ears, I deleted all my comments about the eSports business and vowed never again to enter into any online conversation. The thought of wasting my life with such people is frightening. How, I find myself wondering, do these people deal with one another? What sort of future do they have? I shudder to think.

I do think some of the people who communicate online have lost all sense of proportion. The other day, while sitting in a café, I overheard a conversation which included the following remark: ‘It was the worst day in history,’ he said. ‘There was something wrong with my connection. Even Twitter was down for an hour and a half.’

Ah, what joys and adventures lie ahead for these poor lost souls as they tip toe through life with such attenuated fears and high expectations.

Am I alone in thinking that Twitter has simply provided millions of self-obsessed, self-important millennials with a modern megaphone through which they can broadcast every stray, irrelevant, superficial and unconnected thought which pops into their heads? (The subsequent generation, known as Generation Z, is just as worryingly self-obsessed.) We now have a whole generation of self-obsessed individuals. Doubtless, psychologists will try to find a name for it. There is no need to bother. It’s known as narcissism and it has (appropriately) been recognised for millennia.

I have this vision of a 1970s world in which everyone is given one of those push button megaphones which police inspectors use to control crowds. It is a world in which the air is thick with the isolated, bigoted, promotional bleatings of the half and quarter witted; a world in which good sense is drowned out by the screaming of several million Linekers.

That’s what Twitter and Facebook have done.

The creators of social media are bad, bad people who have done a bad, bad thing.

3

One of the jailed Libor traders from Barclays has been whingeing. After serving less than half of a 33 month sentence, Alex Pabon, an American millennial, has been released. He complains that because of his legal costs he is not as well off as he used to be. A lot of other people could say that. Barclays shareholders had to pay £290 million in fines. And millions of people around the world lost out because he and his chums were fiddling interest rates.

Pabon claims he didn’t know that what he was doing was illegal. That may be true (though I have always understood that ignorance of the law is no excuse and I would have thought it was reasonable for a banker to have a pretty good idea that fiddling interest rates might break a law or two) but didn’t he think there might be something immoral about dishonestly manipulating interest rates for profit?

That’s a rhetorical question for he clearly still doesn’t see that there was anything immoral about what he did.

Is this yet another example of a millennial unable to comprehend the difference between right and wrong?

Many millennials seem to be completely out of touch with reality; too many of them think that what they believe matters more than reality.

And the ignorance of young people is staggering. One in eight people aged18-24 has never seen a cow. One in five young people has never left the town or city in which they live. The young have virtually no contact with nature. Most have never played conkers or made a daisy chain or planted an acorn or a lemon pip and waited with baited breath. Hardly any have ever built a dam across a stream. Few have ever seen, felt or acquired any understanding of nature in her raw beauty. Vast numbers have never heard of Adolf Hitler and have no idea that we fought two wars against Germany. (A History channel study of 2,000 adults showed that many thought that England and Germany had been on the same side during the Second World War, a third had no idea that the Blitz took place in the Second World War and several hundred did not know that someone called Adolf Hitler was involved in the War.)

Moreover, the millennials have more hang ups than the M&S women’s wear section. We have bred a nation of wimps who parade their feelings (especially when hurt) as though they were achievements. Their petulant, selfish, childish whingeing serves only to create more mental illness. If anyone asks them a question, or heaven forbid, dares to criticise, they become hysterical. Too many millennials think they own the world, and that the world exists solely for their benefit, delight and satisfaction. Their expectations are endless and eternal and their sense of entitlement is embedded in their souls.

The young Royals have jumped onto this out of control bandwagon and have made things infinitely worse by talking endlessly about their own apparent suffering. What we really need (and are unlikely to get) is a firmer understanding of what mental illness is and (just as important) what it is not. The young royals, and their fawning acolytes, have made it infinitely more difficult for professionals to provide essential care for those who are really in need because they have encouraged everyone to believe that their minor disappointment or unwanted setback is mental illness which requires full-blooded therapy. Especially with those magic drugs which they all believe are available at the squiggle of a pen.

The young Royals whinge constantly that they want to live 'normal lives'. And yet they are self-obsessed and self-important and what they really mean is that they want the privileges without paying the (modest) price.

'Yes, thank you, we will keep the titles, the privileges, the work-free money, the castles, the special medical care, the palaces, the holidays and the kudos but we want a normal life. Like Greta, we want to be left alone. We will take the cheering crowds and the taxpayers' money and the absence of any real responsibility and obligation but we will take a rain-check, thank you very much, on the opening of cupboards and the intrusive photography and the endless bloody on-line carping and criticism.'

It's pure, 22 carat millennialism.

4

A surprisingly small group of militant communists, most of who seem to hate England and a good many of who are foreign, now appear to control the Labour Party and they are campaigning hard for the referendum vote to be ignored. They clearly do not believe in democracy. Anyone who does not believe in democracy and who tries to interfere with our democratic process is our enemy and should be treated as such. What seems to be widely forgotten is that there is no practical difference between communism and fascism. And since the EU is the most fascist organisation in history, it is hardly surprising that the unelected left wing nutters who now control much of Parliament are also enthusiastic supporters of the EU and are demanding that, contrary to the will of the British people, we remain members of the EU.

Meanwhile, I am learning a few words of Russian.

Antoinette, who is brilliant at learning languages and can already converse in Mandarin, is learning Russian and I have learned a few words so when we are out together Antoinette, who is going a storm, can chatter away in Putin-speak and I can reply with a word or two from my limited vocab, just to confuse people.

5

Two weeks ago, I thought I had succeeded in persuading Barclays to close my account in Paris. They were supposed to send the proceeds of the account to a bank in England. Since I had heard nothing, I telephoned today to find out what had happened. They could not tell me anything because none of their computers was working. Has there ever, in the history of banking, been a bank quite as disorganised, inefficient and grossly incompetent as Barclays in France? It is absolutely no exaggeration to say that if you add up all the time I have spent telephoning, trying to telephone, waiting for the telephone to be answered, photocopying documents, taking documents to the post office, emailing and so on I have wasted a vast amount of my life trying first to persuade Barclays to change my address and then to persuade them to close the account and send me the money it contained.

Meanwhile, of course, they continue to have the use of our money.

There's only around 6,200 euros in the account but if they are doing the same nasty trick with everyone else and taking weeks to close accounts then they're giving themselves a ton of free money to play with. And then the bankers wonder why they are hated so much.

My attempt to sign a cheque to myself failed miserably, with the cheque I wrote being suffocated by bureaucracy and paperwork.

When I rang Barclays to see how they were getting on with closing my account, no one seemed to know or to care. They had, apparently, received the paperwork a fortnight ago.

One Barclays' employee, when doing a security check, told me the number of my bank account and asked, 'Is that your account number?' I said it was. That apparently satisfied him that I was the owner of the account. Bank security, Barclays style.

I spent about three quarters of an hour on the phone and spoke to several people.

In the end, someone promised to ring me tomorrow. They won't, of course. Time and time again they have promised to ring me 'this afternoon', 'tomorrow', 'immediately', 'this week' and every single time they have let me down.

I hate that because I cannot work when I am waiting for a phone call, so that too is time wasted and lost forever.

Still, today, some of the statements that they promised to send in June arrived. If the damned things had arrived a couple of months ago, I wouldn't have wanted to close the damned account. I know that without a bank account in

France I am going to be in trouble.

I wonder what sort of mail they used. I must remember to find out and use it when sending off cheques to local councils and utility companies.

This evening, I got myself into such a state over the stressful on-going Barclays fiasco that I cleaned my teeth with antifungal cream, applied gum lotion to my toe nails, put toothpaste on my athlete's foot and patted some mouth wash onto my cheeks.

To calm myself down I studied the Church Commissioners annual investment report.

Next time you slip five pence onto the offerings plate remember that the Church Commissioners have an investment fund of £7.9 billion. In 2016, their investment managers produced a return of a very impressive 17.1%.

Wheeee. That's seriously good.

Finally, I had some good news.

I have managed to order a complete set of James Agate's diaries (the first was called *Ego 1*, the ninth was called *Ego 9* and the ones in between were named appropriately). They are among the best diaries ever kept by anyone anywhere in the history of the universe.

The books are out of print in the UK and second-hand copies are difficult to find. This set is being sent over from Belgium so I hope they arrive safely.

Agate wrote a series of diaries (each called *Ego* with a number) in which he wrote with rare honestly about his life.

For example, in the entry for June 29th 1932 he wrote, 'A common fault with playgoers is to dislike a piece because it is not something else.'

How I can sympathise with that. A reader has written to complain that he bought a copy of my last diary, *Life on the Edge*, expecting it to contain a collection of Bilbury stories. He complained bitterly and threatened me with all sorts of terrible consequences. I can't help feeling that it is a bit like buying a coal scuttle and then complaining when it turns out not to make a very good teapot. The books are clearly labelled but it seems that as always authors are expected to write the same book time after time. Any variation is likely to cause trouble.

And here is another wonderful Agate quote: 'I don't know very much, but what I do know I know better than anybody, and I don't want to argue about it. My mind is not a bed to be made and remade.'

I don't know why Agate is so little read these days.

The rather nauseatingly saintly Reverend Kilvert is far more fashionable but extremely boring. ('I went for a walk and saw wonderful primroses on Wenvale Hill. Later Miss Pilkington played upon the organ with great success; giving me much pleasure and leaving me greatly satisfied.')

Pepys was the Diary Master, of course, and Fothergill the most outrageous and politically incorrect.

But James Agate was probably the consistently funniest and he undoubtedly provided the very best account of early and mid-20th century life.

6

In the US, less than 10% of retail transactions take place online. But in the UK, the figure has already risen to over 15% and is rising fast.

I was astonished to read that a quarter of all clothing sales in the UK are now made online.

Why could this be?

I can think of two explanations why shoppers in Britain don't like going to bricks and mortar stores.

First, car parking, usually controlled by local councils, is expensive and difficult. Greedy councils everywhere are putting up charges and making the spaces ever smaller. Nasty councils (naming and shaming Carmarthen, Dorchester and Buxton) are also insisting that drivers put their car number plate onto their ticket. This is done to prevent Good Samaritans giving tickets with unexpired time on them to other motorists. What sort of message does that send to people? Kindness will be punished? And, to save money, public loos are being closed and the space used to provide parking for another half a dozen vehicles.

Second, the whole shopping experience in Britain is painful. Staff are rude and unhelpful and have, in many stores, been replaced by self-service tills. It doesn't say much for the retail experience when many shoppers prefer to do their buying online because although it is impersonal it is friendlier than the sort of experience available in shops.

(Why, incidentally, are modern tills designed in such a way that the customer cannot see what they owe but must rely on understanding the assistant's mumbled demands. Old-fashioned tills used to show the total value owed to both the customer and the assistant. As our population ages and becomes increasingly hard of hearing, it would make good sense for those tills which remain, to offer this simple facility.)

Yesterday, Barclays in Paris promised to ring me today. They did not.

I think ill-manners come naturally to them. They refuse to email me for security reasons (though they will email me when it suits them because presumably the security issues don't matter then).

I hate Barclays France with a deep and inconsolable loathing. The company policies are absurd beyond belief and the people who work there are foul. They lie, lie and lie again. It is all the bastards seem to do. They have promised more times than I can remember to post me my statements. I haven't had one. Not one. They promised repeatedly, repeatedly, repeatedly that the statements were in the post but they never arrived. My main problem is the feeling of being betrayed, lied to and let down. If Barclays had said 'Look, old bean, we're all French and unreliable and we lie a good deal and you can rely upon us only to let you down' I would have accepted it and had correspondingly low expectations. But they feigned efficiency and competence and pretended they were a bank. And every time I obeyed the one set of absurd instructions they found another set of absurd instructions and when those were obeyed, suddenly they would find another hoop for me to jump through. It is intensely frustrating to be promised that this will happen and then that will happen – and for nothing to happen.

I gather that today Barclays sold the parts of the bank that are in France.

I've never heard of the company which has bought the branches being sold. I don't really care who they are, they can't make things any worse.

In a way, this is good news. I hope the new owner of Barclays France turns out to be an asset stripper and that he fires all the staff. With luck, they will all end up walking the streets of Paris searching for crusts of bread in the gutter. I know I should not feel like this. It is truly not my nature. But I do. The staff of this damned bank have wasted so much of my life since the beginning of June that I fear that my hatred for them will be sustained until I die. And at the rate I am going that won't be long.

Today, we got home to Devon to find that a man had parked half outside our gate on the double yellow lines which I persuaded the council to repaint. I tooted lightly, in that non angry way which means, 'Excuse me please do you mind very much just moving your car a few feet so that I can get through my gates and into my driveway.'

The driver didn't move an inch though there was plenty of space behind him. Instead, he watched while I jiggled and turned and tried to get the truck into the driveway around him.

In the end, predictably, I caught the front wing on one of the stone gateposts.

Only then, when he heard me do about £500 worth of bodywork damage to the paintwork and metal, did he condescend to move a few inches.

(Proving that things really do go in threes, over the next two days I managed to damage both our other cars. The Bentley I scratched on a twig while driving in a narrow, Devon lane. You'd be surprised at the damage a twig can do. The Ford I succeeded in backing into a tree which had evaded the sensors at the back of the vehicle and which I couldn't see because of the mud on the back window. I consider it a Parisian style parking adventure. Three out of three in three days must surely be some sort of appalling record. I shall not, of course, be claiming any of this on the insurance.)

When I remonstrated with the driver who was sitting in his car and watching my vehicular contortions, he just stared at me uncaringly and unseeing.

I think I have been abducted by aliens and moved to another planet. I want to go back to the old one where there were at least some kind and thoughtful people around.

When we got in, we settled down and picked out a suitable film to watch.

I feel so enraged by the world (particularly Barclays France) that I have a constant (and, I hope, temporary) need to watch violent films in which bad people are killed in huge quantities. I sit and imagine that the Russian or Chinese gangsters or Arab terrorists are all employees of Barclays France. It is a joy to watch them die bloody and painful deaths.

Suitable movies include *Where Eagles Dare*, *John Wick*, *The Equalizer*, *22 Bullets* and almost anything starring Jason Statham. In all these films, the baddies are all employees of Barclays France.

To be honest, I'd really like to watch something with Cary Grant, William Powell or Robert Donat but I know I wouldn't be able to concentrate on anything requiring brain matter.

If I didn't have Antoinette to love and to cherish I would dissect out a vein and bleed to death on the cliff top.

I don't think I have ever felt so bloody low.

7

Barclays France still refuses to send me my banks statements. They won't telephone or email me. But now they have managed to write to the UK address I gave them demanding the return of my cheque book. The letter is unsigned.

In the 17,000 conversations I have had with Barclays France, no one has previously mentioned the need for me to return my cheque book. I had assumed that burning it would suffice and it is a miracle it hasn't already gone into the incinerator because yesterday I tossed it into the bin in my study.

I must now go into town, queue in the Post Office and post them the cheque book by registered mail. If I don’t send it registered they will lose it or simply say they’ve never received it.

Whenever they want me to do something, Barclays France usually writes in both French and English. For this letter, they wrote only in incomprehensible banking French. They have also sent me, by separate post, a form I can fill in if I wish to change my telephone number in their records and get rid of the two phone numbers which they still hold on file – one of which has never been my number and the other of which is around a decade out of date.

Actually, they have sent me two separate and quite different letters about the telephone number.

And the letter demanding the return of the cheque book seems to contain something threatening about what will happen if I do not do as they demand. I do not give a fig what this is because I would rather welcome a chance to confront Barclays in court – even a French one.

I give thanks to the banking gods that if we ever sell our bloody apartment in Paris, I have no intention of using Barclays France to move the money back into a proper currency.

I took an aspirin tablet to help prevent my first heart attack and a decent measure of 23-year-old Bunnahabhain to help wash it down; one of my favourite scotch whiskies. (Do not try this at home. Only doctors are allowed to wash aspirin down with whisky. It was a soluble aspirin, dissolved in a little water.)

I wonder why the Bunnahabain people bottled it at 23 years of age.

Perhaps they intended to wait until it reached a quarter of a century but got tired of waiting.

‘Nearly there, folks.’

‘Oh bugger it. I’m tired of waiting. Let’s sell it now.’

I thought I would open the bottle because I hate the thought of dying and leaving it unopened. Whoever acquired it after my demise would never appreciate it as much as I will. As I think I’ve said before, it is like drinking Christmas.

8

David Lammy, the black MP who seems to me to have an ego the size of an Alp and the brainpower of a mushy pea, has apparently led an inquiry into young people in British prisons.

He found that a lot of them were BAMEs (an acronym which I had never heard before but which apparently stands for Black Asian Minority Ethnic) and that although BAMEs make up just 14% of the population, they make up 25% of our prison population.

One of Lammy’s solutions is brilliantly simple: give potential prisoners the chance not to go to prison.

This, he reckons, will reduce the number of BAMEs in our prisons.

Gosh, I suppose it would.

‘Would you like to go to prison or not go to prison?’

‘Can I ask my mum?’

Lammy seems to suggest that there are a lot of BAMEs in British prisons because they have been victimised.

No one seems to be brave enough to offer the politically incorrect theory that there might just be more BAMEs in prison because they are more likely to break the law.

(Surprisingly, I am pleased to say, there is not yet any suggestion that they are there because of a toxic combination of BREXIT and climate change.)

The suggestion that there is a high proportion of black and Asian citizens in prison because of racism in our judicial system is utter bollocks.

No one seems to have noticed that there are (literally) twenty times as many men as women in our prisons.

Is that because our judicial system is sexist as well as racist?

Or could it possibly be because men are more likely to commit crimes than women?

Similarly, is it not possible that people of different racial backgrounds might, just might, regard property and life in different ways?

Thanks to the efforts of the politically correct, we are all so busy trying to pretend that we are all the same that we sometimes forget that we are not.

The fact is that today London is far more dangerous than New York.

And there are only two possible explanations for this terrifying fact.

Either the police have become much more incompetent or the tremendous influx of immigrants has changed the nature of the city – and it is the immigrants who are responsible for the increase in violence. I am no apologist for the police but I know which answer I believe to be the correct one.

Another annoying piece of news came to light today.

Apparently, the NHS is planning to recruit 5,000 foreign GPs because of a shortage of home-grown doctors.

The new GPs probably won't be able to speak English very well (if at all) and they certainly won't understand idiomatic English.

So the recruiting campaign will be a disaster as far as patients are concerned.

But why does the NHS recruit so many foreign doctors when British medical schools are turning out more new doctors than ever?

Simple.

The first problem is that the General Medical Council (the bizarre and utterly useless charity cum quango which controls the licensing of doctors in the UK) has introduced mad rules which mean that many doctors – particularly older more experienced ones – are being forced out of the profession completely in their 60s and even 50s.

I have said before that I believe that the General Medical Council's mad policies are responsible for thousands of deaths every year.

And now that they have effectively forced the NHS to recruit more foreign doctors, I believe that the problems are going to get worse.

The second problem is that the Government (acting on sexist rules imposed by the EU) has forced medical schools to train more female doctors than male doctors. And thousands of female GPs want to work part time – many working just two or three days a week and refusing to do night time or weekend calls.

The result of all this is that all over Britain, patients are going to have to see doctors who understand very little English and next to nothing about our culture, our fears or our way of life.

What can we do?

Well, the first thing to do is to close down the General Medical Council – which does far more harm than good.

Patients would be far safer without it.

If we don't do something now then the NHS will continue to kill more people than it saves.

(And that is no exaggeration).

Finally, today, in the same news bulletin I discovered that the Government is claiming that the flu vaccine works with children though it doesn't work well with older folk. (Naturally, the fact that it doesn't work very well doesn't stop them trying to persuade the over 65s to be vaccinated against the flu.)

Just how did they arrive at those figures?

The reports I saw contained no background information of any value.

Did they just see how many children who had been vaccinated subsequently developed the flu?

If they didn't compare the vaccinated children with unvaccinated children then the study was utterly pointless and of no value whatsoever.

None of this is much of a surprise.

In my experience, much of the research work involving vaccines is of little or no scientific value.

Amazingly, no research has been done into the long-term effects of vaccination, the effects on the immune system or the consequences of mixing numerous vaccines in one small body.

Our current vaccination programmes are one huge experiment – with no one watching to see what happens. No one assesses compatibility of the consequence of interactions with other substances. We do know for sure that vaccines are often worthless because they don't work very well, and not safe because they can cause real and lasting damage. Maybe we will discover the answers to the unasked questions in a decade's time. Maybe the whole issue will continue to be smothered in silence with no one allowed to question vaccination programmes and with all debate systematically silenced.

Anyone who dares to question the establishment's authoritarian but unscientific claims is dismissed as a renegade, hounded and oppressed.

Here's an off the wall thought: could the strange and often inexplicable behaviour of the millennials be explained by the fact that they have all received vast numbers of vaccinations and are, therefore, brain damaged?

I am not kidding. That's a serious thought.

9

It's the Last Night of the Proms this evening: a night much enjoyed by all those who take delight from English and British traditions. It is part of the tradition of the event that people attending the event wave union jacks or flags for their part of Britain. It is a patriotic celebration of a patriotic event.

Knowing this to be the case, EU supporters (all, by definition, members of the Establishment) are handing out 10,000 of those horrid blue and yellow EU flags to those going into the royal Albert Hall. I suspect they are doing this solely because they know it will annoy, upset and spoil the occasion for the vast majority of those watching. I half suspect the flags are being paid for by the EU itself.

There is no doubt now that those who wanted Britain to remain in the EU are poor losers. It is perfectly clear now that we are going to leave the European Union and that nothing, however mean and nasty, will change that outcome.

The only conceivable reason for handing out so many EU flags, and encouraging those attending the music to wave them for the television cameras, is pure spite.

'You're going to make us leave the EU so we're going to do everything we can to spoil all your enjoyable experiences that celebrate Britain.'

Mind you, the BBC have done that very well. They appear to have politicised the Proms as they have politicised just about everything else they touch.

For example, when did the Proms last include a proper tribute to Gilbert and Sullivan, our most loved and most successful authors of opera?

I am left with a mystery.

Why do so many people still love the European Union so much that they are prepared to wave flags in support of it?

I can understand politicians like Blair, Mandelson, Clegg and Cable promoting the EU. Blair, who is so discredited that he has no chance of a second career in British politics, probably still believes he can be EU president but to attain that goal Britain must remain within the EU. Could it be that Clegg and Mendelson, who are both former EU employees, are loyal to the organisation which will pay them hefty pensions? Is Cable just a self-important, publicity seeker who sees the EU as a way to attract attention to himself?

All of this is despicable, but it is at least self-serving enough to be understandable.

But why do thousands of non-politicians revere the EU when the organisation has made them poorer than they would have been without it, has endangered their lives and has done a great deal to make their lives worse?

I think there are probably several explanations.

Some have undoubtedly been institutionalised. They feel threatened by the prospect of freedom and democracy. Some are monumentally ignorant and do not realise what the EU stands for, how it is run or what its future will be.

Some hate Britain in general and England in particular.

And, of course, many either do not realise that the EU is a Neo-Nazi organisation which was founded by Adolf Hitler. There are doubtless not a few fascists who do realise that the EU was founded by Nazis and who support it for that very reason.

So, the bottom line is that we won't be watching Last Night of the Proms when it doesn't come out on DVD. Instead, we will buy and watch the recording of the New Year's Day concert from Vienna. The Austrians have retained all their traditions and their event is a highlight for millions around the world. The Proms, in contrast, is now just a sordid and pointless embarrassment.

In Devon, we have so many hazelnuts in our garden that the nuts are thick like leaves on our driveway. Rather than crush them all (and make them worthless for the animals) I kicked a few hundred off the drive but the drive is too long and there are simply too many nuts to move them all. When I drove the car along the drive last night, the sound of crunching and cracking nuts seemed like a demented crowd of nutcracker wielding uncles at a wild Christmas party. I have a feeling that our resident squirrels won't eat nuts which have landed on the driveway because they don't approve of the smell of them. Squirrels, like all rodents, have an amazing sense of smell. I know of squirrels who can smell a nut when it is buried inside a solid wooden box.

I read a report today showing that 23% of consumers trust pension companies, 40% trust banks and 30% trust utility companies.

Why so much trust?

How can anyone with any functioning brain tissue trust any of these organisations?

Every pension company, bank and utility company in the country must be regarded as crooked unless proved otherwise.

And so far none has proved otherwise.

10

I am always astonished at how sports stars often react when they win things or do good things. So, for example, a golfer who has won a tournament will go to hug and kiss his children before he hugs and kisses his wife. And a sportsman will often mention his children before his wife.

So, for example, in yesterday's *Daily Telegraph* there was a quote from a cricket player who said he felt a bit emotional because 'I knew my family were there in the crowd: kids, Mum and Dad, my wife.'

The poor wife is mentioned last. Maybe last is best in sporting terms. Seems odd.

Something called Bitcoin is in the news again.

An anonymous bloke invented this currency. It doesn't exist except as a blip in a computer but he said it was a currency and so lots of people bought it, paying good honest dollars or pounds or euros for it. It is particularly popular with millennials who are very greedy and gullible. Greed and gullibility are a toxic mix.

For the last few years, the price has gone a zillionfold so that now people who had £50 in bitcoins are millionaires.

But nothing actually exists. You don't even get a tulip bulb.

The joke is that the people who are keen on Bitcoins think they have invented something entirely new. They haven't, of course. People have been inventing currencies since men decided that living in trees wasn't much fun. The advocates of Bitcoin claim that there is no opportunity for fraud. But this is rubbish. There have already been massive Bitcoin frauds.

The advocates also claim that the idea of a currency which only exists in computers is brilliant and innovative but this, too, is nonsense. When you buy a house and the bank moves money from one account to another, does anyone actually see any money? Of course, they don't. The money exists only in computers. When Central Banks 'print' more money they don't actually 'print' more money. They just tell the computers that the stuff is there.

Bitcoin is just another way for confidence tricksters to scam the gullible and the greedy. It will end in tears.

I don't really care about the greedy idiots who have invested in the scam. But I do worry that when Bitcoin collapses, the real economy will be affected. Internet investing is now all interlinked and a huge dotcom like crash in one area will doubtless affect other parts of the financial world. And many of those who have borrowed to buy Bitcoins will have to sell other investments to pay off their sudden debts.

The Bitcoin fever is just like the tulip fever that tore Holland apart. It is no more logical than the dotcom fever which led to a financial rout. And it is no more sensible than investing in mortgage based securities which were built upon the greed of estate agents, banks and speculators.

Incidentally, I have it on good authority that because of all the computers involved the whole Bitcoin nonsense uses up more electricity than Serbia. Honest.

11

We have an appointment to sign documents to sell the apartment in Paris. But we have to sign them in offices on the other side of the city. I asked our notaire in Paris why we couldn't sign the documents at her offices instead of at the buyer's notaire's office. Since the buyer has set the date and the time I thought it seemed fair that we had a choice of venue. But no, this is not possible.

Apparently, when a property is sold in France, the transaction must be conducted at the offices of the buyer's notaire. This is the law. The French have a law about everything. It is the way Napoleon Bonaparte wanted it.

It's a good job, I said, that the buyer's notaire isn't in Nice.

'Oh, if it were then the transaction would be conducted at my offices', responded our notaire.

It seems there is a law about that too.

The French don't rely on common sense for anything. There are laws governing absolutely every aspect of human behaviour. And whereas in the past the French used to regard the laws merely as an excuse for a little imagination, the modern French regard the law as the law and they take everything very, very seriously.

12

It is a little breezy today. The met office has given the breeze a name and called it a storm. We have been told to keep the cat indoors and to prepare for bits of tree to fall off.

The authorities will doubtless do this all through the winter so that they can say, at the end of the winter, that we have had more storms than ever. This will please the idiots who run the world and who believe in climate change.

(I note, incidentally, that in recent months both the Governor of the Bank of England and the Pope have become expert spokespersons on climate change. When, by the way, is there going to be a female Pope?)

The pound has strengthened and Barclays have still not sent our money. This incompetence has cost us the equivalent of several decent bottles of malt whisky.

13

My nine diaries by James Agate arrived safely and in good condition. Most of them are first editions. Looking through them, I am delighted that I bought them. The volumes I have are all 'best of' the diaries and selections taken out of a diary don't carry the flavour of the original. It's a bit like watching a DVD of the best of a favourite comedian. I once saw a DVD which consisted of highlights of Tommy Cooper's shows and contained very little but punch-lines. Without the build-up, the background and the patter, the shows weren't at all funny because the timing had disappeared. In good writing, like comedy, timing is everything.

We are off to Paris next week and so I have prepared some idioms to teach the French. As I mentioned earlier, I like to use idiomatic phrases such as 'Tally ho!', 'Right ho old boy!'. 'Odds bodkins', 'What ho!' and so on whenever I am speaking with foreign people. I particularly like to use the phrases 'crave a boon' and 'the game's afoot'. Other favourites include 'Hither and yon', 'Pip pip', 'Right ho!' and 'My dear old thing', as made famous by the irreplaceable Henry Blofeld.

'May I crave a boon?' I might say to the Frenchman who thinks he speaks excellent English. (All French folk think they speak excellent English. Even when they are unintelligible they think they speak excellent English.) Then, when he seems confused, I will explain and express surprise that he has never heard the phrase. 'English is a very tricky language,' I will say kindly. 'Foreigners always have difficulty in mastering it. But you're doing quite well. You should persevere. You will soon reach a point where English people will be able to understand you without too much difficulty.'

The ones who like to sound English always pick up these idioms and try to use them. And nothing sounds funnier than an earnest Frenchman saying 'He cocked a snook!' or 'The game's afoot, eh?'.

The trick, I find, is to bring the adapted idiom into an ordinary stretch of conversation. Usually the French person (though this works just as well with Germans and Belgians and would probably work well with the Italians and the Spanish if you could ever get a word in edgeways when talking to them) asks what the phrase means. If they don't ask then you repeat the idiom with an explanation casually tacked on after it. If they say, 'doesn't it mean XYZ?' you say 'Oh no that's something completely different,' laughing lightly and derisively as you speak.

It is, of course, more fun if you create slightly bastardised idioms. Here are some I created for distributing among the French: 'He dug himself into a corner'; 'Never punch a gift horse in the mouth'; 'He was as healthy as a harp'; 'It was like looking for a milkmaid in haystack'; 'Never steal someone's lightning'; 'Give someone the cold elbow' and 'He punched the bucket'.

Today Barclays have closed my account and sent me the euros it formerly contained. They have still not sent my statements. I've had no official notification of what was in my account, nor what was taken out of it, since May.

I changed the euros into sterling and bunged them into an investment account. The UK end of the operation took less than five minutes.

I then went onto the internet and gave Barclays a one star review. I've never done anything like this before but I couldn't help myself. There wasn't much point. They have over 600 reviews and 86% of them were for 1 star. The average rating is, therefore, 1 star.

Wouldn't you think a major clearing bank would be embarrassed enough to want to know what they were doing wrong?

No, of course you wouldn't.

14

The Greens want to stop us using oil, gas, coal and uranium. They want us to get all our energy from renewables such as solar and wind power. Through their power in the EU, they are forcing through policies which fit with these aims.

They say we should leave all the oil and gas in the ground. They want the big oil companies to go bust. Numerous investment companies (including pension funds) are refusing to invest in oil companies because of pressure from the silly, ignorant Greens who want to fly to their regular conferences by solar powered jet and power up their laptops with wind power. (Good luck with those, boys and girls).

Bless them, aren't they the little sweethearts? We need a jolly giant to whom we can say: 'Please eat up our greens.'

Sadly, there is a teeny weeny problem which the Greens haven't noticed.

Actually, there are several teeny weeny problems.

First, electricity, though very nice and useful stuff, only provides about 20% of our energy needs. The other 80% comes from nasty old gas, oil, coal and nuclear power.

Second, it is nigh on impossible to increase that proportion. It's impossible to power ships, aeroplanes, lorries and so on with electricity. It's a bummer but that's the way it is.

Third, an awful lot of people rely on gas for their central heating and cooking. If all those people are forced to use electricity for heating and cooking then there is going to be a great shortage of electricity because we are already using up every drop of the stuff that we can make.

Fourth, renewables such as solar energy and wind power provide only a quarter of our current electricity needs. We would need to carpet the countryside with solar farms and wind farms to increase that proportion significantly. And without subsidies (paid by consumers to rich landowners) the electricity produced would be horrifically expensive.

Fifth, (and this is a real heartbreaker for the Greens), manufacturing and maintaining windmills and solar panels requires more energy than the windmills and solar panels actually produce. The much loved renewables are actually a negative source of electricity.

Sixth, electric cars don't work either. Making electric cars (and the batteries they need) requires vast amounts of energy – far more than is needed to produce a non-electric car. And the electricity which electric cars use when they are running is taken from the 20% of our energy supply which is provided by electricity. (This is where it gets really painful for the Greens.) Moreover, despite all the subsidies which have been introduced, we still obtain 75% of our electricity from oil, gas, coal and nuclear power. So, three quarters of the electricity which keeps electric cars on the roads comes from (wait for it) oil, gas, coal and nuclear power. Despite all these simple truths, Britain and France have announced their intentions to ban the sale of all petrol and diesel cars. India wants all cars to be electric by 2030. And China has announced its intention to phase out the sale of all petrol and diesel powered cars.

Still, we mustn't despair.

If the Greens insist that we stop using gas, oil and so on then we must do that rather than upset them.

However, since renewables only produce electricity we will have to survive on a source of energy which provides just 20% of our current needs. (You can't make oil or gas from windmills or solar panels).

And since renewables only provide a quarter of our electricity we will have to survive on just 5% of the energy we use at the moment.

This is a bit of a problem because we can hardly cope on the energy supply we have now.

We can only cope with the Green's demands if we give up:

All forms of powered transport (including cars, planes and ships)

All forms of entertainment which require electricity (e.g. television, radio, computers, mobile phones, etc.)

All forms of heating

All factories which make things

All mechanised farming and all fertilisers

All hospitals, medical treatments and drug production

Of course, the real bummer is that the 5% of our energy which we have left will be needed to maintain and service our solar panels and our windmills.

If there is any energy left over, we may be able to boil a kettle and make a cup of hot water, though there won't be any tea leaves, milk or sugar to put in the hot water.

The good news is that our inability to use tractors and fertilisers will mean that most of us will starve to death, so we won't mind too much.

Welcome to the Green World.

All this is accurate. It is true and it is terrifying.

If the Greens have their way, our planet will plunge into the biggest war of all time. The survivors will be those countries which retain fossil fuels and use them to manufacture armaments and to make and fuel bombers and tanks. The citizens of countries which decide unilaterally to rely on renewables will die.

Our energy policies define our future.

And our current energy policies mean that we have no future.

15

Antoinette bought us each a pack of Whitworth dried apricots from Tesco. And then she noticed that on the back of the pack it said that the apricots had been hand stoned and left out in the sun to dry. All this had been done in Turkey. How well did the people who did the picking and the laying out wash their hands? Were the apricots laid out on the dirt or on old bits of carpet or old newspapers? How many birds shat on the drying apricots? Were the grubby apricots washed at all before they were packed?

We threw the two packs away.

16

'What do you think will kill you first?' asked Antoinette. 'The North Koreans nuking us all? Planet Nairobi smashing into Earth? Yellowstone Park erupting? The Green's crazy energy policies?'

‘Oh, definitely the bastard who is or is not supposed to be buying our ruddy apartment in Paris,’ I replied.

I am exhausted, full of anger and weary from the frustration, the feeling of uncertainty, the helplessness. I have been repeatedly ignored, lied to and I have felt unable to influence any of it. I’ve been depressed, suffered from repetitive brain strain. I have felt like bursting into tears through impotent rage. Fortunately, I know that there is no drug in the world that will help bring an end to the pain. The only solution is to push and push for conclusions. I have to remind myself of the Chinese saying: ‘We cannot help the birds of sadness flying over our heads, But we need not let them build their nests in our hair.’

Long ago, I wrote a book called *Toxic Stress* in which I argued that much of the stress which harms us is completely beyond our control. It is not there because we work too hard or put ourselves under pressure. It is there all the time; a result of society’s demands and uncaring. Stress comes not from what happens to us but from how we react to what happens to us. Well over forty years ago, I pointed out that it is how we react to what happens to us that does the damage; and part of that is how we perceive ourselves in the aftermath of stress. Chronic, persistent stress creates uncertainties, desperation and self-destructive behaviour as we lash around looking for unavailable comfort and invisible solutions.

17

A spider walked across our living room. It was so big you could hear it walking on the rug. We caught it with one of those suction tube things. It was then a toss-up whether we should send it to Longleat for their wildlife park or release it into the garden. We chose the latter for convenience but warned the spider not to come indoors again. There are plenty of suitable outbuildings.

There is no doubt that our spiders are becoming bigger and more powerful and I have no doubt the mythologists blame this on global warming.

I saw a cobweb yesterday which was tethered to a tree by a strand of web which was over fifteen feet long.

I don’t think any of this is a result of global warming. It makes just as much sense to blame the European Union.

18

We are off to Paris tomorrow and for the first time in my life I am not looking forward to it. I really don’t want to go.

A short while ago, looking through my library for something to read on the train I picked out a beautiful leather bound copy of *Barnaby Rudge* by Dickens. I realised the other day that when I was working my way through Dickens as a boy, I must have missed this one. What a joy. It is genuinely pocket-sized (six inches by four inches and two thirds of an inch thick). There are 668 pages but it is printed on Bible paper and that’s how they kept it so thin and light. I love small books which can be fitted into a pocket or shoulder bag and I cannot understand why publishers seem to make books bigger and ever more cumbersome. When I was publishing my own books as ‘proper’ books, I repeatedly, but unsuccessfully, tried to find a printer who had machinery which could print on Bible paper.

When I found this copy of *Barnaby Rudge* I looked on eBay to see if anyone had any more of this pocket sized leather bound series of Dickens. I have a fine collection of first editions but you can’t read those in the bath or on a train or in the garden. To my delight, I found a bookseller in Scotland prepared to send me all 14 books in the set for £20 plus £6 postage. I suspect that the price is low because Dickens is now out of favour.

The politically correct arbiters of taste (aka the sanctimonious censors) disapprove of Fagin because Fagin is both an unpleasant character and a Jew. In the same way *Guardian* readers, schoolteachers and the BBC disapprove of Shakespeare because Shylock, in the *Merchant of Venice* was a Jew. You can have bad Christians and bad Muslims but you aren’t allowed to have bad Jews.

Both Dickens and Shakespeare must also struggle against the huge disadvantage of being white, male and English. These are impedimenta of crushing weight.

Modern theatre directors dislike Shakespeare so much that when they are pressured into putting on performances of his plays, they frequently put the actors into modern dress. This is appalling bad manners and quite notably stupid since it creates an uncrossable schism between the words (which are clearly Elizabethan) and the costumes (which are clearly not – or at least not the right Elizabethan.) Also, it is a nonsense to insist on having a black actor play Othello. (It would make as much sense on insisting on finding someone with royal blood to play Lear or deliberately casting a Jewish moneylender as Shylock.) It is equally obscene to have all female casts, as is also popular now. This is merely feminism on a mad rampage. The director might as well have the actors naked and walking about on stilts. That would draw attention too.

The seller of my collection of Dickens even agreed to split the parcel so that it could travel by Royal Mail rather than a courier who would doubtless get lost and never arrive. (Our postman in the Cotswolds puts parcels into a huge, plastic storage box we keep hidden behind some hazel bushes near the front door.)

The books arrived today. What a dream. Well over 100-years-old but in beautiful condition. The leather is generally unmarked and the paper feels like silk. I'm going to reread the Master.

We are travelling to Paris for an appointment to sign the initial documents relating to the sale of our apartment.

But today, I received an email from our notaire in Paris telling us that the buyer will not be attending the signing.

We (and she) were initially assured by our estate agent that the buyer had the necessary cash and would be buying the apartment without any outside assistance.

Now it transpires that the buyer does not have the just over one million euros required and has co-opted his mother as joint buyer.

Unfortunately, they have just discovered that even together they don't have enough money and they have to apply for a bank loan. I don't understand this. You would think, would you not, that someone preparing to spend over a million euros on an apartment would know early on whether or not they had a million euros kicking around in a bank account.

Coincidentally, we are told that the mother of the buyer cannot attend the signing because she has decided to go into hospital on Wednesday for an operation. Her failure to sign is, allegedly nothing to do with a shortage of funds but entirely a result of this sudden desire for surgery. Our notaire doesn't have the foggiest what is going on.

The cancellation came with a promise that they would be able to sign the necessary paperwork on or after the 9th of October. It appears that they know for a fact that mother will have recovered from her surgery on that date. And they will have found the money by then.

I sent a note expressing sadness and hoping that the operation went successfully. I don't think anyone on our side of the fence believes that this is anything other than a clumsy delaying tactic. Still, they cannot keep using it.

The whole business is becoming tiresome beyond belief.

What I find most annoying is the fact that selling the apartment is, for me, a rather sad affair. Having owned it for nearly 20 years I have grown very much attached to it. It is spacious, light and airy and although Paris has changed dramatically, the apartment has stayed loyal. It is a little scruffy it is true (it is 17 years since Antoinette and I painted it ourselves because we couldn't find any reliable French workmen prepared to do it for us.)

19

When we arrived at the apartment, we found seven letters from Barclays bank. Each envelope contained at least one bank statement.

Each of the statements had been posted after we had officially changed our mailing address to an English address.

Sadly, when I turned on the boiler it made a hugely expensive sounding noise. I rang our boiler service people. They cannot come until tomorrow afternoon.

The apartment is cold. The water is cold. We could boil pans and the kettle for baths but the bath is huge. I turned on the electric fire. It blew up. The damned thing actually blew up and stopped working!

Things were not going well.

'Let's try the boiler again,' suggested Antoinette.

So I turned it on and we both ran out of the kitchen and hid in the hall while it made a hell of a lot of noise.

Suddenly the noise stopped and the boiler started to purr.

We tried a tap.

Hot water!

The radiators started to warm up.

It had been nothing more substantial than an air lock.

20

I'm 250 pages into *Barnaby Rudge*, which is subtitled *A Tale of the riots of Eighty*.

There is still no sign of riots.

And *Barnaby Rudge* hasn't been seen for so long I'm thinking of starting a search party. Only Dickens could get away with it. But I'm still reading and captivated.

Our telephone went early this morning.

This was odd because our phone in Paris never rings. We use it only for ordering workmen and taxis. The caller, a young woman, spoke in English and asked to speak to Henry. When I said that there was no one around called

Henry she asked to speak to Richard. I apologised and said that she had the wrong number. (I am English and so I always apologise if someone makes a mistake which inconveniences me in some way.)

When I had put the phone down, I explained to Antoinette that I had received a very strange call. She spotted instantly that the call had come from the estate agent's office and that our deeply unpleasant agent had doubtless been endeavouring to find out if I had come to Paris despite the buyer pulling out of the meeting.

Although we were no longer due to sign anything, I visited our notaire to discuss what we should do next.

While I sat in the reception area waiting to be seen (reading my *Barnaby Rudge*) our estate agent turned up.

He wanted to know if the buyer could call around the following day to measure up for alterations, carpets and so on.

I said that this would not be possible since we were sorting our possessions and that the apartment floor was covered entirely in books, CDs, DVDs and clothes. He was clearly put out by this and said that he would have to try to ring 'her' to cancel the appointment.

Is it possible that the woman who had an operation yesterday (on the arranged day of the signing) is now well enough to totter around our apartment armed with a tape measure? If so then I feel insulted that the deceit is so badly managed.

'By the way,' I asked him. 'Do we have to empty the apartment completely before the final signing?'

'Yes,' he said sternly. 'You must.'

They have a lot of laws in France and everything is taken very seriously.

'What about the kitchen equipment?' I asked. 'Cooker, fridge, sink, washing machine, dishwasher, boiler and so on?'

He thought about this. 'You can leave those,' he said at last. He made it sound as if he were doing us a favour by agreeing to this.

'And the bathroom?' I said. 'Should we leave the bath and the sink or should we have those taken out?'

He thought again and then nodded. 'You may leave those,' he said, making it clear that we shouldn't expect this sort of generosity as a rule.

We decided (or, rather, I decided and the notaire agreed) that we would give the bastard and his mother an ultimatum: 'Sign on the 9th October and complete the transaction by the end of the month or you're not buying it'.

The notaire admitted that she had never known a transaction go as badly as this one.

Why does everything strange happen to us?

The real problem is that right at the start of this procedure I and the putative buyer both signed an Achat. I was assured that this simple document (very short for anything produced by the French) was merely an indication of interest. I agreed to sell the apartment to the buyer and the buyer agreed to buy the apartment from me.

(The apartment is in my name because I bought it a few months before I met Antoinette and I was living by myself at the time – intending to move to Paris. Putting the apartment into both our names would create legal and tax problems that would keep the entire French judiciary busy for a century.)

The Achat is not supposed to be a legal document but it has, over the months, acquired legal standing. The estate agent (whom I now loathe even more than he doubtless loathes me) has warned me that if I do not sell the apartment to the putative buyer he will be able to sue me. The Achat is undated and it appears that the buyer can wait ten, twenty or a hundred years before buying the apartment if that suits him. He will then be able to buy the apartment at the price mentioned on the Achat.

The real problem is that the Achat contains no date.

If I ever sign one of these things again I will write on it that the Achat is only good for 30 days or whatever I deem appropriate at the time. Come to think of it, I don't think I will ever sign an Achat again. They can manage without one.

French law is now notoriously and absurdly in favour of the buyer of property. This is fine and dandy except that most buyers will eventually become sellers and then discover that laws which seemed rather jolly at one end of the procedure have become grotesque at the other end.

It seems logical that if the Achat has legal standing for the buyer then it must also have legal standing for me, as the seller.

But it doesn't seem to work that way.

The notaire then showed me a list of the taxes and deductions which will be made before I receive any of the proceeds from the sale of the apartment (if it is ever sold). There was one deduction for 600 euros.

'What is that for?' I asked.

'That is for the agents who look after the building,' she explained. 'They have to provide a letter confirming that you have paid all your bills – for repairs and maintenance.'

'And they charge 600 euros for that?'

‘I’m afraid so. It is outrageous but it is the law. They are allowed to charge.’

I then handed over 200 euros in cash to pay for copies of some documents which had been obtained.

(I had already given copies of the documents to the estate agent whose office is probably 200 yards away but it had apparently proved impossible to find anyone willing or able to carry the copies that enormous distance. So the process had to be delayed another month and I had to fork out another 200 euros.)

After I had finished at the notaire’s office, Antoinette and I filled another half a dozen boxes with books to post to the UK.

Each box weighed just under 5 kilograms and should have gone by the cheap book rate. Unfortunately, when we arrived at the French post office, the official on duty was a young girl who obviously hated foreigners.

‘Are all the books in French by French authors?’ she demanded. I said that sadly they were not. ‘Then they cannot go the special cheap book rate,’ she told me sternly.

I told her, in English but with a smile, that it was an enormous comfort to me to know that she would most likely spend her entirely pointless and miserable life working behind a Post Office counter.

There was a hearty round of applause from some English tourists who were standing behind us, queuing to buy stamps for their postcards.

Can it possibly be legal to charge more to post books written by English authors than it is to post books written by French authors?

It sounds racist and ethnicist and completely contrary to the principles of the European Union.

Is this the world of Macron, I ask myself?

The answers don’t matter a damn, or course, because the girl behind the counter is the one with the all the sticky labels and rubber stamps and all I have is a wallet stuffed with their silly euro money.

When we returned to the apartment, we continued sorting out.

I found a packet of balloons, blew them all up and put them into an empty cupboard which I could only just reach.

The French are all dwarves and when one eventually manages to open the cupboard he will be overwhelmed by balloons falling out onto and around him.

I then sent the estate agent (technically he is ‘our’ estate agent but he is ‘ours’ in the same sort of way that ‘Macron’ is our President of France and Mrs May is ‘our’ Prime Minister) a note in which I apologised to both him and the member of his staff who had made the phone call earlier in the day.

‘I am sorry,’ I said, ‘that I was confused by the call.’

He did not appear to be in the slightest bit embarrassed by this.

He sent me an email in reply which contained one of those childish smiley faces constructed out of punctuation marks.

In France, the estate agent is paid by the buyer not the seller (and so the fee of 5% of the price will be added to the bill). This is, it seems to me, one of many flaws in the French procedural process. It means that the estate agent’s loyalty is probably to the buyer not the seller.

Sometimes, I think I would like to have been born more patient and more tolerant. And then I realise that I would have been a completely different person if I had been. I think I have always been compassionate (a trait which has caused even more trouble than my impatience) but if I had been more tolerant of other people (such as vivisectors for example) would I have fought so hard for animals and people?

I rang to book a taxi for Saturday. The woman who took the booking insisted on taking my mobile phone number so that they could send me a text to let me know that the taxi was on its way. I thought this was pretty impressive.

When I’d done that I telephoned our phone company to cancel the phone. The woman to whom I spoke said they would not send the final bill to another address. It has to go to the address where the phone is registered. It would be sent out in one month’s time, undoubtedly so that we would have to pay for a month’s rental that we did not require.

‘But we are leaving Paris,’ I said, hopefully.

She shrugged. I could hear the shrug of indifference at the other end of the telephone.

‘It is the law,’ she said.

‘How do I pay the final bill?’

‘You must tell the postman to redirect the bill.’

Or not.

21

One of America’s most successful hedge fund operators, a man called James Simons, has revealed one method he and his firm used to make money.

He noticed that there was a correlation between weather data and stock market returns and that in Paris, in particular, the stock market did slightly better on sunny days.

So, by using leverage (with borrowed money) Simons' hedge fund made huge profits out of this absurd correlation.

22

Leaving the apartment today with two huge bags of rubbish, I turned on our stairs and asked Antoinette if I had my sunglasses on. (I couldn't remember if I was wearing my sunglasses or my reading glasses.)

'Yes, you are,' she replied.

'That's odd,' I said. 'I can see very well.'

'You're looking over the tops of them, just the same as you do when you're wearing reading glasses,' said Antoinette patiently.

I am delighted to see that the NHS is now warning that it is important to differentiate between Alzheimer's disease and normal pressure hydrocephalus because 'the symptoms of NPH can be relieved with treatment'.

I am delighted by this for it shows that my campaign to improve awareness of normal pressure hydrocephalus is beginning to have an effect. A few months ago, the NHS officially regarded NPH as very rare and made little official effort to encourage doctors, nurses and others to differentiate between the NPH (the curable dementia) and the other forms of dementia (such as Alzheimer's).

Antoinette spent much of the evening teasing me about my sunglasses remark earlier today. We finished our packing and then found five crystal champagne glasses in a cupboard. I stuffed them into Jiffy bags, wrapped them in clothing and crammed them into a suitcase.

'We're bound to break one of them,' said Antoinette.

'OK,' I said. 'Which one do you think will break? We might as well leave that one behind.'

23

Today we took the train from Paris to England.

When I booked our tickets I made sure that there were no big events in Paris today. No visits by Presidents. No major football matches. No marathons. No events likely to snarl up the city and prevent us travelling from the apartment to the Gare du Nord. Paris shuts down at the drop of a hat and I knew that we would have a number of heavy suitcases to carry.

When I checked this morning I discovered, to my horror, that Macron's opponents were planning a huge demonstration in Paris, that there were a number of transport strikes in operation (including a blockade by petrol tankers, preventing fresh supplies of petrol and diesel reaching the city) and that Eurostar was having trouble with its trains. Selfish civil servants of all kinds (who make up the larger part of what is laughingly and inaccurately referred to as the French workforce) are protesting that they may lose the chance to retire at 50 on full pay.

There are always big demonstrations in France whenever a President tries to drag the labour laws out of the 19th century. Macron wants employers to have the right to fire bad employees or make employees redundant if times are hard. Without any such rights, many employers are unwilling to expand or take on new staff.

But we were lucky.

Our taxi driver took us on a very pleasant route which took us past les Invalides and the Opera and managed to miss all signs of the demonstrators. After we'd been in the taxi for about twenty minutes, I received the promised text from the taxi company to let me know that our taxi was on its way. Perhaps they need to work on this use of modern technology.

As a result of the strikes, Paris was deserted. It looked like a Sunday. The shops and cafes which have not been permanently closed and shuttered were quiet and doing no business whatsoever. Macron may as well roll over now instead of dragging out the pain. Every French President since de Gaulle has tried to change French labour laws. Every single one has talked tough. Every single one has capitulated in the face of protests. Macron, who is very inexperienced politically and who has an ego bigger than the Eiffel Tower will give in quickly when the jeering becomes serious and he realises that he has become even more unpopular than the saucy Hollande.

Macron has made things worse for himself by describing his opponents as stupid slackers. Demonstrators have taken to the streets wearing T-shirts and carrying banners describing themselves as stupid slackers.

Macron's problem is simple: his arrogance drips off him. He is typical of the sort of French snob created by les grandes ecoles – the same colleges which train eurocrats and rulers of France. Macron et al are the sort who regard democracy as government by cobble hurling riff raff; something to be avoided at all costs.

At the bottom of the escalator leading up the Eurostar terminal (they put it on the first floor so that travellers have to go up with their baggage and then, when boarding, go back down) a genial black fellow stood with a board containing pictures of various types of guns, bullets and explosive devices. He showed it to Antoinette. She shook her head.

'No bombs?' said the black fellow with a huge grin. He seemed disappointed.

When he showed it to me, I studied the items on the board and then shook my head. 'Non merci. Je ne veux pas acheter quell que chose aujourdhui.' No thank you. I don't wish to purchase anything today.

He laughed.

I went through customs wearing a thin shirt, a thick shirt, a jumper I didn't want to leave behind, a jacket, a coat I had found, a scarf and a Grosvenor style hat made by Bates of Jermyn Street in London. I was cooking.

There were the usual long queues.

As always only one carousel was working (they have three but two always remain idle) and so there was a big queue of people waiting to hump their bags onto the conveyor belt.

Between us, Antoinette and I had seven cases and bags. No one at Gare du Nord offered any help whatsoever but just stood and watched as we struggled to load the bags and cases onto the conveyor belt. To be fair, the damned things were so heavy that they were probably outside the allowable range for health and safety reasons.

(Yet another thing that annoys me about the French is that they are such dirty people. It has always annoyed me that whereas travellers in England are told to put their jackets and outer clothes into a plastic box before putting the box onto the conveyor belt, travellers in France are offered no such facility and must put their jackets et al straight onto a filthy conveyor belt. Now that I have come to loathe the French I realise that many things which previously looked quaint and charming, such as dirty, dented motor cars, now look simply scruffy and lazy.)

My jacket pockets contained my small, leather bound copy of *Barnaby Rudge* by Charles Dickens, a paperback of *Uncommon Danger* by Eric Ambler, a rather fine French pepper grinder, some portable weighing scales, a pair of pliers, a silver hip flask full with Cardhu malt whisky (the remains of a bottle), three CDs, a DVD, a roll of sellotape, two clean pairs of socks and an unopened tube of toothpaste.

In short, the normal sort of detritus Englishmen slip into their pockets when travelling between countries.

Since porters are a thing of the past at the Gare du Nord and trolleys not provided (they are an unnecessary expense and their presence would add nothing to the SNCF's bottom line) I was dragging and carrying a pile of suitcases and bags while wearing enough clothing for an expedition to either Pole. I was, therefore, pouring with sweat.

Fortunately, the two dozen French security people who were standing around were too busy chatting to one another to remember their training and the bit in the manuals about bombers sweating. Or maybe they just didn't care.

We got all our cases and bags through customs without anyone bothering to take a look. Pity, really. Antoinette's largest suitcase contained, inter alia, 74 CDs, a full bottle of Cardhu and a very realistic stuffed cat. I had been looking forward to her case being opened.

'Francois! This woman's case contains a pile of CDs, a bottle of whisky and a dead cat. What should I do?'

'Is she English?'

'Yes.'

'That's OK then.'

I was waiting for someone to look at all our bags and cases and ask 'Are you moving house?' so that I could reply 'Yes.'

The Gare du Nord has now replaced many of the seats with benches which have no backs. Travellers must, therefore, sit on unbelievably uncomfortable benches.

Moreover, Eurostar express their solidarity with French socialists by putting the first class carriages at the far end of the train so that passengers who have paid the most (and who are, on the whole, the oldest and frailest) have furthest to stumble, dragging, carrying or pushing their luggage under the watchful eyes of unhelpful railway staff.

On the train back we sat across the aisle from a Frenchman who looked perfectly sane but who spent the whole journey reading a magazine out loud. Occasionally he would comment on the article he had read out. It was, I suppose, a variation on the rather eccentric habit of talking to yourself and then commenting on what you've said. Why do people do this? I glowered at the fellow several times but he was so captivated by the sound of his own voice that he didn't notice. I don't think he would have noticed if the train had gone across the English Channel without bothering to use the tunnel. I suspect that to describe him as an idiot would have been an upgrade.

This reading aloud business isn't just a French peculiarity because there is a fellow in Cirencester who favours a café we patronise and he is often in there sipping his latte, or whatever, and reading his book out loud. We always try to sit as far away from him as possible but the problem is that everyone else does too.

I read the papers (quite silently) and managed to do so without even moving my lips. This is a trick which I learned at school.

I was annoyed by an article written by someone called Tim Harford in the wretched and loathsome *Financial Times*.

Mr Harford obviously regards himself to be as much of an expert on vaccines as Jade Goody's ex-boyfriend. In an appalling piece entitled, 'The fatal attraction of cynical falsehoods' (in which he attacked people who misuse facts) Harford stated categorically that the flu vaccine cannot cause the flu.

He perhaps did not know that some flu vaccines are attenuated not killed and could revert. The nasal vaccine, for example, is not killed.

Second, he stated with equal certainty that vaccines cannot cause autism.

However, this is an open question and there is much convincing evidence that they can. Who knows what evidence will appear in the coming months and years?

Cynical falsehoods indeed – though it is easy to see why he made what I consider to be elementary mistakes.

Time and time again doctors, nurses and drug companies claim that vaccines are safe and effective. By this they imply that all vaccines are always safe and effective. They don't say 'some vaccines are safe some of the time' or 'a few vaccines are occasionally effective'. They say: vaccines are safe and effective. This is the establishment, official line but it is not true, of course. It is, indeed, a lie. All vaccines are potentially dangerous. And none of them is entirely effective for everyone.

Researchers don't look for problems with vaccines because they get paid by drug companies, and drug companies don't want anyone looking for problems. 'We think it appears safe' really isn't terribly reassuring when vaccines are being given to millions of people in the biggest drug trial ever. And no one is looking for problems.

I sent a letter to the *Financial Times* correcting the writer's errors but naturally, the Letters Editor declined to print my contribution. It would, I suppose, have been contrary to the *Financial Times* in-house philosophy to allow inconvenient facts to be given consideration on the pink pages.

The *Financial Times* is so appallingly, embarrassingly biased and bent over in favour of the EU that it makes the BBC look positively fair-minded. It is relentlessly in favour of the EU and establishment promoted myths such as vaccination and global warming. What a despicable newspaper it is; quite possibly the most treacherous and irresponsible newspaper ever printed in Britain. It is worse, I suspect, than Pravda and whatever the Nazis printed, because it pretends to be honest and fair when it patently is not.

And why would the *Financial Times* want to bother their readers with the uncomfortable fact that for a number of diseases far more people die of the vaccine, or are severely injured by it, than die of the diseases themselves, the ones for which the vaccinations are given?

This is a fact but no one cares about facts any more.

The prejudices and the propaganda must come first.

There is absolutely no point in complaining about the *Financial Times* which is a biased, prejudiced, bigoted and relentlessly inaccurate newspaper.

Indeed, to whom could I possibly complain? No one in the media cares about the truth.

So, the myths are strengthened and more people will suffer and die as a result.

When our train approached our stop, a sign came up on a screen above us: 'Enjoy Your Stay in Ebbsfleet'.

I laughed so much I nearly cried.

How can you enjoy your stay in Ebbsfleet? It's a soulless railway station and a windswept car park. But maybe the Russian railways put up a sign saying 'Enjoy Your Stay in Siberia'. Actually, I don't suppose Russian signs have little signs that light up. Maybe a bloke in a furry hat wanders about carrying a piece of cardboard with 'Enjoy Your Stay in Siberia' scrawled on it with a piece of charcoal.

When we left the train, Antoinette and I dragged our cases and bags a mile and a quarter along the interminable platform at Ebbsfleet (I could see no trolleys available there either though I heard a rumour that some had been seen huddled together out of the way – though my bet is that they required travellers returning from abroad to have British coinage in order to release them from confinement) and I muttered a silent prayer that I would never have to board another Eurostar train. An old couple struggled to get aboard with their luggage. Two young men in Eurostar uniforms just stood and watched as they struggled. Antoinette and I helped the couple onto the train. Travel has become an unpleasant business and I concluded some time ago that no one should now travel with more luggage than they can comfortably carry themselves for at least half a mile, including hauling it up or down several long staircases. Travellers should practise at home against the clock.

The Eurostar service has deteriorated dramatically in the nearly two decades we have been using it. The conductor no longer even bothers to warn travellers that the time is changing an hour forwards or backwards and no one announces that the train is entering the Channel Tunnel.

As far as I could see, there are no longer any individual lights and the overhead lights are so harsh and glaring I find it difficult to read on the train.

(It is well known to everyone except Eurostar carriage designers that general lighting is a lot less helpful than direct, focussed lighting. Those of us with developing cataracts find the absence of specific lighting makes life excruciatingly difficult. For example, I cannot see to read if an overhead light is switched on but I can see to read if I have a focussed light source. Even Samuel Pepys knew this for heaven's sake.)

The carriages now appear cheap and nasty.

Eurostar is just a faint imitation of the service which I first used nearly a quarter of a century ago. At one point I was travelling on Eurostar once a week, then we moved to once a month. When we have sold our apartment, I hope never to have to use it again. Even buying tickets is hard work and takes half an hour on the telephone. This is probably because they want everyone to use their damned website. One of my favourite Mont Blanc pens was stolen on the train. Antoinette and I both nodded off and someone took it from the table.

On our way back home on the motorway, our satellite navigation device wanted us to take the M3 but the gods were with us and I refused. I don't know why. It just didn't seem a good idea at the time.

Within minutes, we saw a sign warning that part of the M3 was closed. For the next 60 miles, we saw conflicting messages saying that the M3 was now open, that it was still closed, that it was now open, that it was still closed and so on.

As usual, the police and highways people seemed determined to cause confusion.

It turned out that a 12 hour closure was caused by some liquid being thrown onto the motorway. Huge traffic jams were created though for the life of me I cannot see why they couldn't test the liquid, confirm it wasn't deadly and then remove it from the motorway in less than 12 hours.

I am convinced that Britain's police forces are run by our nation's enemies (there are now many) and that the plan is to disrupt the country as much as possible.

I seriously believe that 'managed motorway schemes' are designed to increase the size of traffic jams and use up petrol and create traffic jams and more pollution. Britain is known to have the busiest, most overcrowded motorways in Europe and the Ministry of Transport seems determined to make things ever worse.

And why are motorways invariably shut down for a standard four hours or so whenever a selfish, attention seeking idiot threatens to throw themselves off a motorway bridge? Surely there must be a quick way to deal with the problem. Think of the pain, stress and distress caused to tens of thousands of motorists. We will never know how many innocents are made ill by these exhibitionists. (Motorway bridges aren't particularly high and if you jump then death is not an inevitability.) I did some basic sums and a four hour delay on a motorway will lead to a traffic queue of between seven and ten miles. That means around 10,000 cars being held up. And in cold weather those cars will use up between £150,000 and £200,000 of fuel just to keep the drivers and passengers from freezing to death. Just think of the pollution caused by all that wasted fuel. Just think of the missed appointments, the disappointments, the business disasters. How many surgeons and anaesthetists are caught up in these jams? How many patients miss vital hospital appointments? How many trains don't run because the driver couldn't get to work? How many children must wait on the pavement because their mothers can't get home on time? The big problem is that the publicity given to those who threaten to jump off motorway bridges means that it has become a popular way of attracting attention. It really is time that the police found a quicker way to deal with the problem. Nets or tranquilliser darts would speed up the process and save much stress and many innocent lives. Or park a few furniture lorries under the bridge. Or a row of bouncy castles.

Many people have supported the would-be jumpers (who hardly ever jump but usually abandon their suicidal thoughts when they become cold or hungry) but I rather doubt if those supporters have been stuck in a four hour motorway traffic jam.

The official estimate is that, overall, traffic jams cost Britain around £9 billion a year so, given the tendency of government agencies to under-estimate costs by a factor of two or more the cost is bound to be at least twice that.

I am not in the slightest surprised. Why has it taken until now for anyone in power to notice?

Back in the 1970s and 1980s, I used to do long radio and television tours which lasted for three or four weeks at a time. Each day I would visit three, four or five radio or television studios to do promotional interviews for my latest book. I often used to travel quite long distances between interviews but I don't remember ever missing an interview.

These days our roads and trains are so bad that I find I have to allow at least two extra hours for breakdowns, holdups, accidents or those stupid 40 mph signs which the police put up on motorways when the traffic is moving too freely and they feel the need to do something to bugger up everyone's journey.

One motorway was recently closed completely because a lorry needed to have a tyre changed. It would have been cheaper to have airlifted the lorry off the motorway with one of those massive helicopters – or to have blown it up. (Why doesn't our sat nav find us a route around the blockage? Why aren't sat nav devices pro active? Why doesn't my sat nav tell me I am approaching a problem and then guide me round it before I get there? Isn't that what satellites and computers are supposed to be able to do? To be honest, most sat nav schemes seem woefully primitive.)

These days when Antoinette and I have to travel on a motorway, we put a bag into the car containing enough food and water to last us 12 hours. I am not kidding. We don't stop at motorway service stations longer than we have to because we're conscious that the longer we are on or around a motorway the more likely we are to find ourselves in a motorway traffic jam. And as we trundle along at slightly more than walking speed, we entertain ourselves by trying to find Christian names to fit the personalised number plates which are now so ubiquitous. So GBW would be Gilbert Bertram Wilberforce and RTE would be Reginald Theophile Everard.

The real problem is, I suspect, that self-important traffic policemen and absurd health and safety rules are the cause of the huge queues which are now a regular aspect of our motorway system. All these unnecessary traffic holdups endanger lives, add massively to air pollution, waste millions in fuel and cost Britain billions in wasted time and lost production.

It seems safe to assume that variable speed limits on motorways are used in order to catch drivers speeding – and therefore make money out of them. The constant changing of speed limits means that drivers are forever braking and accelerating and that means that accidents are more likely. It also means that more fuel is used and more polluting gases are emitted. Moreover, there has, for years, been clear evidence that forcing motorists to drive slowly causes more accidents and that when speed cameras are removed there are fewer accidents. Drivers lose concentration when they are forced to travel at inappropriately low speeds. (Incidentally, am I the only one to have noticed that the police seem to use a good many grey, unmarked estate cars for motorway patrols? Wouldn't they do better to ring the changes occasionally?)

Too many policemen seem to take pride in the length of the queues on 'their' stretch of motorway.

Surely police forces should be fined if the queues on their piece of motorway are exceptionally lengthy?

Public service officials in Britain are far too fond of bonuses. We should use negative financial incentives more often.

We went back to our home in Gloucestershire and the minute we'd walked through the door, we decided to go back to Devon instead of staying in the Cotswolds. So we climbed back into the Mitsubishi truck and trundled on again. By the time we got to Devon, we had travelled across a chunk of France and much of England in one day and had, during the course of the day, visited all three of our homes.

When we unpacked the cases, we found that the crystal champagne glasses were all intact. What a miracle.

One final thought for the day: I hate the fact that so many motorway service stations now seem to be run by or for Messrs Marks and Spencers.

Our favourite service stations all seem to be converting to M&S and instead of selling decent doughnuts and edible snacks, they now sell overpriced and inedible food designed for nutty, Fairtrade millennials.

24

I tried to fix up a new email address. By mistake, I put in the wrong birthdate. 'Your application is rejected,' said the website sternly. 'You are too young to have an email address.' Realising my mistake I corrected the birthdate.

The website then accepted my application and allocated my chosen email address in the name I had selected. (The name, for the record, was Patchy Fogg. I think everyone should have an email in the name of Patchy Fogg. I use the poor fellow's name whenever possible.)

Surely this rather defeats the purpose of trying to exclude children from having email addresses? Or don't the people who make up these rules realise that nine-year-olds are probably perfectly capable of lying about their date of birth?

So, it is official, Mrs May has betrayed the country and makes James Joyce (Lord Haw Haw) look positively patriotic.

We voted to leave the EU but Mrs May seems to have decided not to bother. She now joins the long list of traitors in British politics. Britain voted to leave the European Union and it is a disgrace that we have as Prime Minister a woman who wanted us to stay in the EU. May is shovelling money into the EU's coffers, seemingly without a thought for the people who will be paying for it. A billion here, ten billion there. Politicians always talk about billions as though they don't matter. But they damned well do. And the irony is that these are the same politicians who will submit an expenses claim for an aspirin tablet or a biscuit if they are spending their own money. Our money doesn't matter so much.

We have too much politics.

Politicians should just look after things and keep quiet. But these days they have massive egos, hidden agendas and a yearning for the wealth they believe they deserve. Their only skill is making simple things complicated and using other people's money to make themselves obscenely rich.

This is something they have mastered and they are assisted in their endeavours by regiments of bureaucrats and eurocrats.

Anyway, Mrs May has now nailed her colours to the mast. She's come out of the closet as someone who clearly loves the EU more than she loves Britain. And in my book that makes her a neo Nazi.

And a pretty craven, weak, wishy washy neo Nazi too.

I suspect that calling that daft election was either done for her own benefit (so that she could say she had won an election rather than inheriting Number 10 from David Cameron) or it was done to wreck the Brexit process. I find it impossible to think of any way in which the election campaign could have been more badly run.

Britain is at a critical juncture. Never, since 1939, have we needed strong leadership more than we do now. And never have we had such weak leadership.

Is Theresa May a worse Prime Minister than the awful Gordon 'the moron' Brown?

Well, Brown just destroyed our economy.

May could destroy what is left of the country by failing to take advantage of the Brexit vote to leave the EU and frustrate Hitler's plan.

25

In Victorian days, a reformer was more likely to be successful if he could suggest that the victims of injustice whom he was trying to protect were in moral danger.

In his amazing and enormously readable book *Roads to Ruin* (published in 1950 and subtitled *The shocking history of social reform*) E.S.Turner points out that 'what shocked the middle classes, who read the reports on conditions in the mines a little more than a century ago, was not so much the system under which children crawled on all fours dragging sleds behind them, or in which men ruptured themselves lifting loads on to their daughters' backs; it was the revelation that lightly-clad young women working in proximity to naked men at the coalface made no strenuous efforts to save their honour when molested, which was fairly often'.

Turner's book should be daily reading for everyone interested in campaigning for reform. He points out that 'even if he suspects that he is a crank (and a crank rarely suspects any such thing) the reformer must not give up. 'Normal' people rarely exert themselves in the direction of reform, and sometimes fanatics draw added strength from being derided. How far would 'normal' persons have advanced the cause of the suffragettes?'

And Turner points out that moderate reformers (who begin small) always do better than those who push their principles to extremes. Moreover: 'It is hardly necessary to say that a reformer must not count on receiving any help from the victims of injustice'.

Shop assistants who were working fourteen hours a day were little interested in the Early Closing Association.

Seamen had little interest in Plimsoll's campaign to prevent the overloading of ships, and it took Samuel Plimsoll much of his life to improve safety at sea.

Until Plimsoll fought against the industry norm, it was customary for ship owners to overload their ships and then, if a ship sank, claim on the insurance. Plimsoll may be remembered by the load line that bears his name but today he is a largely forgotten man who deserves to be remembered alongside William Wilberforce.

And the women working in the mines mocked newcomers who 'were eccentric enough to wish to preserve their virginity'.

'When the reformer has risen above all the foregoing obstacles, when he has moved inertia, exposed self-interest, pricked apathy, dispelled ignorance, stimulated imagination, refused to be blinded with technicalities, shaken off undesirable supporters (ready to add their own enemies to his), and even moved those who are prejudiced against him because of his political colour, he must recognise that he is less than half way to success,' writes Turner.

And history shows that Turner was right to be pessimistic.

'The first of the chimney sweeping Bills was introduced into Parliament in 1788. It laid down that no boys should be apprenticed under eight years of age, that no sweep should have more than six apprentices, and that sweeps should be licensed.'

The apprentices, of course, were the boys who were sent up chimneys.

And the House of Lords moaned about that bill, only passing part of it.

The result was boys were still being sent up chimneys years later.

In 1819, the MP for Barnstaple in North Devon, F.M.Omnaney, introduced a petition from sweeps complaining that the boys who were recruited to clean chimneys were taken from poorhouses and that if Parliament prevented them from climbing chimneys, MPs would be depriving the boys of a way to earn a living.

Other MPs claimed that it was better that boys sweep chimneys than lie idle in the workhouse and one called

Joseph Foster Barham boasted that he had introduced climbing boys into the Stockbridge area of England.

(Incidentally, though most of the children climbing chimneys were boys, Windsor Castle was at one time swept by two girls.)

The Earl of Lauderdale wrote a booklet called *The Young Chimney Sweepers* in which he suggested that boys who had been chosen to sweep chimneys by a 'gracious God' should be grateful for their good fortune.

Women were united in support of keeping chimney sweeping boys. Virtually no women campaigned against the practice. Most middle and upper class women wanted to have their chimneys swept 'the old fashioned way'.

As the protests about chimney boys continued to grow, the Marquess of Londonderry joined in the campaign in favour of sending boys up chimneys, pointing out that if boys were not allowed to climb chimneys there was a chance that children would not be employed in other work.

It was not until Charles Kingsley wrote *The Water Babies* in 1863 that opinion was moved in favour of stopping the practice of sending boys (and girls) up chimneys. A Bill was passed making it illegal for a sweep to take children under 16 into a house with him. Naturally, neither magistrates nor police took any notice of the bill.

Eventually, in 1875, the practice of sending children up chimneys in England was finally stopped by an effective Act of Parliament. The practice continued abroad however and it was still practised in Italy up until the Second World War.

Turner's book is extraordinary. It's a pity more people don't read it – but it has been out of print for years.

I read today that one of Britain's biggest producers of postcards has given up the unequal struggle. It seems that people are no longer buying and sending postcards. They send emails instead. This is so sad. I am an enthusiastic sender of postcards but I understand that the cost of the stamps is probably a disincentive.

We have decided to go to Gloucester Cathedral tomorrow. I intend to write an extensive study of the cathedral architecture and decorations. There are, so I am reliably informed, no less than 46 misericords dating from the 14th century.

The excitement is gripping. I don't think I shall sleep tonight.

26

I have long argued that the Internet has done far more harm than good and I realise that this is an unpopular viewpoint.

I have a number of concerns but the most significant perhaps is the way that the big, powerful internet companies (such as Google and Facebook) have damaged entrepreneurial activity, removed the last vestiges of privacy, polarised political views and discouraged people from daring to express their opinions. And these companies are evil. Not for nothing was Google recently fined 2.4 billion euros. Aggressive and vocal minorities now control social media and sensible discussion is suppressed.

It seems that everyone in public life (especially politicians, senior police officers, charity bosses, health service executives, etc.) will do or say anything (usually on social media) to obtain publicity and glory for themselves and to promote their over-rated view of their own status and their extremely modest achievements. This is Coleman's First Law of 21s Century News.

The rise of Corbyn could not have taken place without the internet.

We did not go to the Cathedral in Gloucester.

It was a nice day and so, instead of travelling up the motorway and spending six hours sitting in a queue while a lorry driver changed a wheel, I sat in the garden and watched boats bobbing about in the bay. There was nary a misericord to be seen.

In the evening, I sorted through my collection of charger leads. Some of them are for mobile telephones, others for laptops and cameras and the rest for heaven knows what. In the old days people collected stamps, beer mats and matchboxes. These days we all collect charger leads.

(Why, incidentally, aren't mobile phone companies instructed to make standard connectors? That would be a sensible rule which would save an enormous amount of waste, improve productivity and reduce pollution.)

In the end, I didn't dare throw any of my leads away because one of them is bound to be vital. The day after I throw it away I will discover that I need it.

27

Sainsbury's, the supermarket people who sells groceries to families who drive Volvos and read *The Guardian* newspaper, has an advertisement which shows young, bright millennials happily texting one another. The millennials text away slickly, quickly and with smiles of delight. Oh, aren't they clever little darlings. They are so terribly pleased with themselves that you can feel the smugness.

The shots of the beautiful, young folk merrily texting is intercut with shots of an old man pecking at the keyboard on his phone as he struggles to send a message. The old man is of course white and pretty obviously English because no one in advertising or commerce would dare take the piss out of anyone black or brown or female or obviously ethnic. (The English can't be 'ethnic' because legally England no longer exists as a nation.)

The advert is outrageously ageist and offensive but Sainsbury's clearly doesn't give a damn. The fact is that old people don't seem to count. I suspect that the copywriters, and the people at Sainsbury's who commissioned the advertisement, are themselves too young to realise that although the young have a tendency to say a great deal they do so without ever saying anything worth listening to. And nor are they old enough, or wise enough, to realise that the older citizens are often reluctant to speak but, when they do speak, are far more likely to say something worthwhile.

I wonder whether Sainsbury's would be quite so happy to have an advertisement taking the piss out of Muslims, gays, lesbians or young housewives.

Here are some ideas for Sainsbury's adverts:

How about laughing at Muslims not being able to tie their shoelaces.

Or gays who get lost when trying to use the Underground.

Or young mothers failing to use a television remote control properly.

Or a black man lost on a motorway and trying to work out how to get where he wants to go.

Or a Muslim woman in one of those full face thingies bumping into lamp posts. That would be hysterical and Sainsbury's would be bound to get some sort of advertising award.

(I note, by the way, that the wearing of face masks by Muslim women has been compared to the wearing of masks by surgeons in the operating theatre. That there are people around who seem to be taking this seriously convinces me that the lunatics really have taken over.)

Of course, Sainsbury's won't make any of my ads because they are snivelly, cowardly bullies who will take the piss out of elderly, white males because they don't count and as an ethnic group they are invisible and don't matter.

So I'm going to boycott Sainsburys.

Sadly, they won't notice because I don't shop there anyway. I'm already boycotting them for something. I can't remember what.

28

The would-be buyer of our apartment in Paris is now offering to sign the first bit of paper on the 16th October rather than the 9th of October. Although I was originally assured that he had the cash, the little bugger is apparently still struggling to raise the money. The one thing I have learned from this sad experience is that no sentient being should ever buy a property in France. If you do then the French will cheat you, resent you, lie to you, deceive you, harass you, and manipulate you. Cheating and lying are, I fear their national sport.

I wrote to our estate agent saying, 'You never understood why I distrusted our buyer. But it was simple. Everyone buying a property for themselves wants to do it as quickly as possible if they have the money. It's human nature. They don't go away for weeks and they don't delay without good reason. Our supposed buyer was never going to buy the apartment.'

I have told our notaire that we will accept the signing on the 16th October if the buyer tears up the dishonestly obtained Achat and accepts that if he (and his mother) don't turn up on the 16th then they are not going to be allowed to buy the apartment. The last signing was due to take place on the 20th September and the buyer's mother (who had been co-opted as a signee without anyone bothering to tell us) couldn't attend because she had a hospital appointment.

Why, oh why does everything in France take so damned long? Buying and selling property in the UK is a slow and tedious business. But, compared to France, it's a process on speed.

Part of the problem is, obviously, the French obsession with deliberately doing things slowly. It takes weeks for bits of paper to travel from one desk to another. But I also have a suspicion that dishonesty and deceit are far more commonplace in the French system. In my experience when the French open their mouths, they are practising their lying and deceiving. It is no wonder that there are few successful private businesses in France. And how many great inventors, creators or artists have there been born in France in recent decades? To save you looking it up the answer is none. Their best invention was the guillotine (invented by Dr Guillotine) which, I once discovered to my surprise, they used until 1981.

Meanwhile, since I no longer have a French bank account I am having a little difficulty in paying our French bills. I expect someone will threaten to sue me but what exactly are they going to do about it? And do I care? If the Mayor of Paris sues me for my local taxes it will presumably be a civil case and I don't think they can extradite me for a civil debt. Let's hope we get out of the EU speedily, just in case.

The snotty agents who look after the administration of our building (and whose unbelievably pushy and self-important employees seem to think they own the place and are allowing us to stay there out of the kindness of their hearts) are refusing to take payment in any form other than a direct debit on a French bank. I have explained more times than is decent that I do not have a French bank account and I have offered to pay with a credit card, through PayPal or with a euro cheque drawn on a British clearing bank but they steadfastly insist that they will only accept payment via a direct debit made through a French bank. I would pay in cash but the current bill is for over 700 euros and it is illegal in France to make payments for such amounts in cash. I have now received an armful of emails from Twattus Gallicus insisting that this is the only method of payment they will accept.

Since I will vote communist before I open another French bank account we seem to have reached some sort of impasse.

29

We went to Cirencester today. I had an appointment for an eye test. I've been putting it off for months but I really needed to go and have my cataract checked – to make sure that it isn't ready for treatment. It took us 50 minutes to find somewhere to park the car (we tried three car parks and all were overflowing) and eventually I dumped the Ford in the Waitrose car park and made a dash for the opticians while Antoinette bought some groceries we didn't need in order to justify our place in the car park.

I can't imagine why all the car parks were full since Cirencester was looking very glum. It seemed that a large proportion of the shops were closed and the town looked very forlorn. These days, Cirencester is not the place to go for a shopping expedition unless you are looking for a headscarf with horses on it (not surprisingly, there appears to be a glut) or a pair of bright red trousers.

Saddest sight of all was the huge number of conkers lying untouched or crushed on the pavement. It seems that the boys of Cirencester no longer play conkers. Have they been banned by health and safety or just given it up because it requires string rather than batteries? I bet they'd play if the game were available as an app.

I noticed that Cirencester is twinned with somewhere called Itzehoe. I have never heard of Itzehoe and I find this habit of town twinning quite bizarre. I can't help suspecting that the only people who benefit are the local councillors who use taxpayers' money to enable them to have regular beanos in their home town and abroad. I am convinced that the whole 'twinning' scam was set up by the European Union to break down very sensible cultural barriers.

I'm thinking of twinning our house with somewhere abroad. Maybe I could twin it with the Elysee Palace.

Yes, that will do nicely.

I'll get a sign made saying that our house is twinned with the Elysee Palace.

I hear that the Mayor of London is thinking of making log fires illegal. I assume he thinks that electricity is a far cleaner fuel which causes less pollution.

I wonder if he realises that much of Britain's electricity is produced by burning coal. And much of the rest is obtained by burning wood. (Maybe no one has told him that 'logs' and 'wood' are the same thing.)

The only effective way to reduce the level of pollution in London would be to reduce the population. And the best way to do that would be to reduce immigration. Maybe the Mayor would like to consider that as an option?

When Daniel Defoe toured England in 1724, researching his amazing book *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, the country was mainly rural. At least eight out of ten people lived in hamlets and villages – most of which had only a few hundred people living in them. Towns and cities are a relatively new development and most Britons have little real cultural experience of town life. We are, at heart, country dwellers who have still not properly adapted to the restrictions of town or city life. Town planners and politicians still don't understand this.

Defoe's book is full of fascinating bits and pieces.

For example, I read the other day about a man who had been married nine times. The previous eight had all died. This is unusual for these times but it was something Defoe had seen a good deal. In Essex, Defoe discovered men who had 25 or more wives (though not all at once). Defoe reported that the men were bred in the marshes and coped with their soggy surroundings quite well but when they wanted wives, they went to the hilly country. They took young girls from fresh country air and introduced them into the marshland where it was foggy and damp. The girls usually became ill and died within a year. So the farmer went back upland and found another wife. Defoe said that the men regarded the acquiring and losing of wives as a variety of farming.

I've been looking through my library, picking out the best books about England and the English. My favourites are: *Rural Rides* by William Cobbett; *English Journey* by J.B.Priestley; *Britannia* by William Camden and almost anything appropriate by John Hillaby and H.V.Morton.

I received an email from our estate agents in Paris. Apparently, the putative buyer of our apartment has had it re-measured and will want the price of the apartment to be reduced. We have been waiting for this since it was the only thing the buyer had not yet thrown at us.

Our apartment is a loft, the whole top floor of a six storey building in central Paris, and there are two ways of measuring the size.

The first is to measure the whole floor area: the horizontal stuff between the walls. There is no dispute about this measurement. The floor area is over 90 square metres. This isn't a lot but in central Paris, in the 7th arrondissement, the most expensive part of the city, it is a valuable chunk of real estate.

The second way to measure the apartment is to measure the floor area that is high enough for a typically tall Frenchman to walk around on. In our apartment this area is, of course, rather smaller than the first measurement since there are spaces under the eaves and so on. These spaces are perfectly useable but unless you are small, you can't stand up under those bits of ceiling. In practice, the whole thing is balanced by the fact that the ceiling in other areas of the apartment is so high that you could, if you wished, install a mezzanine floor.

Before we were allowed to put the apartment on the market we had to pay a specialist to come and do a zillion and one tests (his report was over 100 pages long and about as useful as an old Metro ticket).

One of his jobs was to measure the amount of floor area where the ceiling is high enough for the average Frenchman to walk about. This is called the Carrez surface. He said that while the overall floor area was more than 90 square metres, the Carrez surface was 79.8 square metres. The whole thing is a farce because anything which isn't 70.866 inches high is regarded as being under the Carrez surface area. But now that General de Gaulle has gone to his Algerian heaven, it is rare to find a Frenchman who is close to six feet tall or above. Most of them are midgets. And lying, cheating, devious little midgets too, it has to be said.

Well, it seems that our would-be buyer decided that he wanted to have the floor measured by his own man with a tape measure and a clipboard.

And his man found that the Carrez surface was just over 76 square metres. The difference between our measurement and his measurement was well under 5% and therefore of no financial value. In France, in the real estate business, size matters enormously and our buyer was clearly someone for whom every centimetre had great value.

Presumably disappointed by the result of this measurement (one can imagine the anguish) the buyer then either sent back the same man or sent in another man to do some more measuring. This second attempt was successful in that the measurer managed to find that the Carrez was 74.87 square metres.

The whole business of this measuring is, of course, woefully and patently unscientific. You point a little laser gun device at bits of ceiling and the machine works out the answers for you. But the answers depend entirely upon where you point the laser gun device.

This figure of 74.87 square metres was significant because the French have a law which entitles the buyer to demand a reduction in the price if the Carrez is more than 5% smaller than the original, quoted measurement. And, of course, the difference between 74.87 and 79.8 is slightly more than 5% of the total. It seems to me that as a buyer you just keep having measurements taken until you get one that you like. Our problem is that you can take Carrez measurements (as they are called), and claim a refund on the purchase price for up to a year after buying an apartment. And a really bad person could, of course, easily stick up a bit of false ceiling, have the place re-measured, demand a refund of 100,000 euros and then tear down the bit of extra ceiling. Would a French buyer do that? Of course they bloody well would. The French don't have property surveys done. Instead, they cheat and fiddle and sue whenever they can.

Alarmed by this measurement, our estate agents then sent our guy back in to repeat his measurements and he found that a new Carrez measurement of 77.25 square metres.

So, now we had four different measurements.

But actually we had five different measurements because when I bought the apartment just under 20 years ago, the Carrez was measured at around 71 square metres. So the apartment has been growing steadily over that time.

I find it difficult to take any of this seriously but if I don't, we could get sued by a crafty buyer.

Our estate agent told us that the buyer will probably now demand a reduction in the price. Gosh, what a surprise that was. You could have knocked me down with a tank transporter. I thought it odd that he didn't suggest to me that we simply amended the official figures on our sale documents (which had, in the French way, never even been printed) or that I tell the buyer to fuck off. Instead, this bozo in the smart jeans and blazer, whom we had hired at someone else's enormous expense, was suggesting that we roll over and cut the price by some presumably substantial and acceptable amount. What's 100,000 euros here or there between enemies? No one, after all, goes to all the trouble of commissioning Carrez measurements in the hope of having a mere 10,000 euros knocked off the price.

When I heard this nonsense about reducing the price of the apartment (and I think a piece of real estate in the French capital which is valued at one million euros deserves the title 'apartment' rather than 'flat') I couldn't help remembering that old crook Robert Maxwell.

Before he started taking the swimming lessons which he couldn't finish, the fat man in the baseball cap was renowned for renegotiating prices at the last minute. If he and a seller and a team of lawyers had spent six months working out a mutually satisfactory price, Maxwell would walk into the meeting where the papers were ready to be signed and demand a cut in the price. Naturally, because everyone had been expecting to sign the papers there would be consternation. But in order to keep the deal alive, the sellers would usually agree to Maxwell's demands.

The French government, never slow to do something idiotic, has enshrined Maxwell's infamous little trick into property law.

The really odd thing is that French politicians are desperate to get rid of foreign property owners by encouraging them to sell their properties and to allow local French folk to buy them. Someone should tell them that they are going about things the wrong way. The rules and regulations seem designed to punish anyone who owns property.

And it seems to me that there is now a new negotiating ploy in France.

The buyer finds a loft apartment and says he would like to buy it. He then messes the seller around for four months by making repeated promises and then breaking them. And when the seller is suitably softened up by all the delays, the buyer sends in his tame measuring team with instructions to find that the Carrez floor area is more than 5% smaller than the Carrez floor area listed on the sales particulars.

In our case, I did find it strange that the buyer didn't send in his own measuring team until long after the passing of the dates when the first contracts should have been signed.

I may well be an old cynic. But who wouldn't be.

I was so incensed by this blatant trick that I immediately sent back an email suggesting that the buyer might like to prepare a pan of water, add a few mint leaves, stick his head in and boil it.

I also sent an email to our notaire telling her that I was planning to make a formal complaint about the buyer's notaire. There's a fairly straightforward complaints procedure which involves writing to the Chairman of the Disciplinary Chamber. I also pointed out that since I agreed to the sale only after I was misled about the buyer's financial situation, I intend to sue the buyer to recover damages and costs of 250,000 euros. This was to a large extent a warning shot across everyone's bows – just to let them know that although I am elderly and not French I am not prepared to lie down and allow myself to be bullied.

And just for fun, I sent along an email expressing my intention of writing several articles for national British, American and French magazines analysing the peculiarities and peccadilloes of the French house selling business.

I had used the same jolly little trick when confronted with a problem with a French bank the best part of two decades ago. The bank had allowed someone to empty our bank account and to send all the money, around £6,000 I seem to remember, to an account in Monaco. I was pretty sure that it was an inside job and that someone working in the bank had siphoned off the money. No one at the French bank was in the slightest bit interested in our loss until I went to see an absurdly expensive lawyer on the Champs Elysee and told him, en passant, that I intended to write some articles about the bank and its refusal to pay up. Within hours, we received an invitation to visit the bank. When we did so, every centime of the money which had been stolen was handed to us in cash. (Oddly, if I'd tried to pay in £6,000 in cash I would have been arrested.) And the funny thing was that the expensive lawyer never sent us a bill. I have always believed that he was paid off by the bank to ensure that they could deny that the whole thing had happened.

Remembering the French bank mystery, reminded me of some of the other bad things that have happened to us in France.

I remember, for example, the decorator to whom I gave money for materials and as an advance on his wages. (I can be very stupid at times.) He disappeared, together with my money, and I never saw him again. Antoinette and I ended up carrying all the paint and brushes over from England and decorating the apartment ourselves.

In Paris, our letterbox is constantly filled with leaflets and catalogues. Once we found a large packet of cocaine pushed into the box. I flushed the stuff down the toilet. Most annoying are the hundreds of promotional cards containing telephone numbers to ring for help with a variety of household problems – plumbing, electrical, lost keys and so on. Early on, full of innocence, we used the numbers on these cards. We paid £2,500 to have a simple electrical fault repaired. We paid £350 to have a cooker hood removed. (We had to have it removed because a boiler servicing company had snitched on us and reported us to the authorities for having a perfectly serviceable but apparently illegal cooker hood.) We had to throw out a pair of crooks who insisted that our new boiler needed replacing (it needed a replacement fuse) and who demanded several thousand pounds to do the work.

And out in the streets we avoided being mugged a couple of times only because I am 6 foot 3 inches tall and, in the winter, have a penchant for wearing thick coats and an Irish tweed cap which hides my greying and disappearing hair and gives me a rather menacing look.

When I stop to think about it, I realise that we have had far, far more unpleasant experiences than pleasant ones in our encounters with Parisians.

The best workmen we met were Russians who came to repair a stretch of our ceiling. They worked hard for two or three days with unfailing courtesy and good humour and they tidied up when they'd finished.

Back to the flat, the Carrez measurement and the alleged buyer.

I think we've found a way to stop this little trick.

I instructed the notaire to alter the measurement on the apartment particulars so that our second measurement is now the Carrez floor area. This means that the buyer's second attempt is not less than 5% lower and therefore we don't have to reduce the price. I have also told our notaire to obtain a written agreement from the buyer that our measurement is the correct one. French law (which is, incidentally, hand in hand with EU law) is neither logical nor sensible but this should protect us.

I had to think up this ploy myself. I have learned that in France you are on your own and you should never assume that anyone is on your side.

30

Health care in Britain is bad because the NHS is like British Railways; a flabby organisation run for the benefit of the employees rather than the customers.

All nationalised industries fail because the people who work for them never care enough for the people they work for – the customers.

The BBC is the same.

Organisations always tend to become fascist and socialist (the two are, of course, the same) because left wing agitators are invariably more vocal and determined than anyone else.

This tendency is particularly true for large organisations and always true for taxpayer funded organisations where the 'customers' are captive and have little or no right of reply and no opportunity to control the service they are given.

I was strimming an area of rough grassland today when, just at the last moment, I spotted a tiny oak tree. It was about two feet tall. The acorn must have been planted by a squirrel because there is no mature oak tree in sight. I tried to pull away but I was too late. I strimmed the little oak tree. I was devastated.

And finally (as they used to say on the news programmes) a friend of ours is opening a pastie shop in the South of France. He is calling it 'Corniche Pasties'.

October

1

The dandelions are back. They're better than daffodils because they come twice a year. They are the first of the year to provide sustenance for the birds and the bees and they are the last to provide sustenance.

I've been collecting and cutting wood for the fireplace. It takes two tons of good firewood to produce as much heat as one ton of coal but there is, without a doubt, something very special about a log fire.

The Victorians went off wood fires in a big way when coal became readily available and much cheaper. To burn coal instead of wood the old-fashioned huge open hearths (sometimes big enough to contain an old man or woman sitting in a corner) were often converted to small coal-burning grates.

Fortunately, our home in Devon has two hearths big enough for logs. And in the Cotswolds we have a log burner which I usually use with the door open. (I don't much like log burners. A proper old-fashioned hearth is much nicer. And log burners can be dangerous. It is suicidal to install one in a cottage with a thatched roof because log burners make the chimney so hot that the thatch is likely to catch fire. Log burners can, I think, also cause wooden floors to catch fire.)

Not all wood burns well. And wood really needs to be dry and mature to burn satisfactorily. Green wood contains much moisture and when the wood gets hot it just drives the moisture up the chimney. Generally, woods which grow slowly burn slowly, making a good hot fire whereas quick growing wood burns quickly with flames.

I have, over the years, learned a few useful things about logs for burning. Dense woods only smoulder unless they are very dry after being stacked for a year or two. Orchard trees such as apple and pear make fragrant firewood and burn quite well. Coniferous trees produce spicy scent but spark a lot. Elm needs to be dried for at least two years. Hawthorn, holly and yew burn green and give very hot fires. Lilac wood produces good heat and a very pleasant smell. Sycamore and walnut are good and willow is fine when it is very dry. Old fence posts and stakes make good kindling. Silver birch and willow are always losing branches which make excellent kindling. In the Cotswolds we get almost all our kindling from one huge and very healthy willow tree. Dead branches drop off in high winds and are easily broken up.

We have several magnificent yule logs for the Christmas period – big enough to burn for hours. You just keep pushing the log into the fireplace as it burns.

2

The company which hosts my websites sent an email note asking me to update my credit card details on their automatic payment site. When I inputted all the required details, I was told that I would be charged £1 for the privilege of updating my information.

Is there no end to the greed of computer and internet related companies?

Any remaining doubts I might have had about the sanity of the world were removed today when passengers on board a packed rush hour train forced the doors open and fled onto the tracks (with a live electrical wire) when a man started to read from a copy of the Bible.

Another traveller had told the man he was scaring people but that didn't stop the lemming like rush. In order to avoid seeing passengers fried on the live rail, the power was cut causing massive disruption.

A guard who escorted the Bible reader from the train was praised for 'compassion, restraint and bravery'.

'Bravery'?

In a separate story, I discovered that wedding couples are paying £350 for 50 small boxes containing butterflies. The guests hold the boxes while a Native American poem is read out. And then when the poem is over the boxes are opened and the hapless butterflies released for a 'photo opportunity'.

There has been no reply at all from our Parisian estate agent or from our notaire. Antoinette and I have decided that we will go back to Paris in the New Year and find a new estate agent to handle things.

I picked up one of my favourite 'odd' books today. Entitled *The Clumsiest People in Europe*, it is a guide book to the peoples of the world which was written 150 years ago by a Victorian author called Mrs Mortimer.

Speaking of the French, Mrs Mortimer says 'It is too common in France not to speak the truth'.

Dear old Mrs Mortimer.

Nail on the head and bang on the button. Give that woman a travel rug.

But no rug for Theresa May who appears to be consumed by fear.

Instead of seeing the positive, exciting future for Britain without the dead hand of EU bureaucracy hovering over every decision and ambition, she (led and advised by the blind men of the Treasury, whose forecasts have been discredited and the Bank of England, which has no credibility at all) can see only problems and dangers.

The Office for Budget Responsibility, The Treasury and the Bank of England are no better at forecasting what the economy will do than I am at picking the winner of the Grand National.

If these were people who were accountable and required to produce reliable figures in return for the massive salaries and pensions which they receive, they would have all been fired years ago.

Mrs May's answer to the problems ahead are solutions which involve still working with, and under the thumb of, the EU. She is even talking of handing over £40 billion to the EU just because they have demanded it (and desperately need it). No one has yet bothered to explain why we should give £40 billion of taxpayers' money to the eurocrats. You can build a lot of hospitals and roads with £40 billion and we need more of both now that our island is crammed to the coastline with EU immigrants.

I gather that much of the £40 billion will be used to pay the fat cat pensions of eurocrats.

And why don't we get a refund from the EU for our share of all those EU buildings that we helped pay for?

3

More than one in five pensioners still have to complete tax returns.

Astonishingly, 1.7 million people over the age of 65 have to complete individual tax returns and a quarter of a million of those are aged 80 or over.

I have a vested interest in this, but I can't help feeling that if you're retired and you've paid tax for more than 40 years then you should be exempt – in the same way that if you've paid a club a subscription for long enough then you may receive free membership. It seems utterly crazy to me that someone who is receiving a pension should have to hand some of it over to the Government.

We were going to register with a local GP in Devon but then discovered that although the practice is quite large (there are at least four full-time doctors working there) they do not offer any out of hours cover. The entire practice is shut down at night, at weekends and on holidays and patients are told to telephone one of those pointless out of hours numbers which are manned by a single doctor working in an office in Sheffield or Milton Keynes or Karachi.

I find this disgraceful, unprofessional and frighteningly uncaring.

Why bother training to be a doctor and then be satisfied with providing a mediocre service?

The practice is at least 30 miles from the nearest hospital offering accident and emergency facilities.

I know doctors are entitled to opt out of providing 24 hour cover but they are also allowed to opt in. And they receive an additional fee for doing so. If the local doctors agreed to provide cover for 168 hours a week it would involve them in working no more than two nights a week. Indeed, the fees they received for providing out of hours cover would easily pay for the cost of hiring an additional doctor.

So, the bottom line is this: what is the point of registering with a practice which provides only office hour cover? We can obtain almost immediate medical advice through the internet if we need it. It is now quite easy to obtain prescriptions and even arrange blood tests through doctors who work online. (Ironically, these are probably GPs who do not offer their own patients a decent service and, specifically, do not provide 24 hour cover.)

And if we need emergency help then we have to cut out the middle man and telephone for an ambulance. If we really need to see a local doctor then we can demand to be seen as temporary residents. Most practices are very happy to see temporary residents for the simple but excellent reason that they receive another fee every time they do so.

4

Most of today's pensioners were keen savers. They saved as much as they could and have subsidised Britain for years. It was 'small' savers and taxpayers who paid all the costs of Gordon Brown's bank bailouts.

Today's older folk paid 10, 15 and 20% in interest when they bought their homes. Now that they have a little money saved for their old age they are receiving less than 1% in interest. After inflation and tax, their savings are earning a negative rate of interest.

Not surprisingly, the Bank of England has expressed considerable concern at the fact that savings rates are lower than they have been for decades. Millennials aren't saving anything. They are the spend, spend, spend generation.

It doesn't seem to have occurred to the politicians or the Bank of England that when interest rates are considerably lower than the rate of inflation then there isn't much point in saving money. Today most interest rates seem to be around 0.01% and the official inflation rate is 300 times higher. (If there is another crisis, there is no doubt that negative interest rates will be introduced. The politicians and the bankers want to get rid of cash completely not just because it will make their lives easier but also because if there is no cash they will be able to force anyone with savings to accept negative interest rates.)

The Government has deliberately stopped people investing in property and so the few people who are saving are putting their money onto the stock market and into a variety of very risky investments. Most are putting money into Unit Trusts and OEICS. These are desperately bad choices for most people because the costs usually far exceed any profits which may be made. Anyone who invests in a Unit Trust cannot be regarded as a serious investor but is, rather, a dilettante, lining the pockets of greedy fund managers.

Inevitably, low interest rates are encouraging people to borrow more and more and individual levels of debt are reaching levels never previously seen. So, many people are now borrowing money in order to purchase expensive new motor cars. The greedy millennials who are making millions out of banking are selling one another car loans in exactly the same way that they sold house loans.

Today I received an email inviting me to lease a £30,000 car for £100 a month. How can that possibly make sense?

Millennials frequently claim that they are being financially disadvantaged by the elderly. This is the sort of spin that Goebbels, Campbell and the EU would be proud to have created. The reality is that absurdly low interest rates and incredibly low mortgage rates have made it astonishingly easy for young people to buy homes if they are prepared to cut down on the tattoos, the lattes and the other luxuries they regard as essential. Heavens, the Government is even lending money free of charge to young home buyers. The Help to Buy scheme gives millennials a loan of 20% of a property's value (up to £600,000) for 25 years, without any interest.

Strewth, back in the dark 1980s, when today's oldies were paying their mortgages, the banks were lending out money at 17% interest and inflation was well into the mid 20s.

Our society is cruelly unbalanced with everything in favour of the young and contrary to the interests of the older citizens. The young and inexperienced take power and responsibility as though it is their right, even though they don't know anything and are far too arrogant to ask for help. They also appear to have absolutely no understanding of money – allowing themselves to be distracted and attracted by all the wrong things. Most of them are heading for decades of penury.

The millennials need to be careful with their money and they really should be saving hard. It isn't difficult to see that they are pretty well screwed. Robots will shorten working hours and working lives but pension shortfalls will mean an ever-increasing retirement age. Today's 20-year-olds will be out of work at 50 (if they are lucky) but won't receive a pension until they're 70 (if they're lucky). They will, I suspect, be regarded as stupid and worthless at the age of 50.

Incidentally, the IT people drool about robots (some of them have argued that robots should be given employment rights and pensions) and seem to think that robots will soon take over our planet completely. This is bollocks, of course. Robots are no threat to us at all. If they get uppity all we have to do is unplug them or remove their batteries. And if they are solar operated we throw blankets over them and move them all to Scotland

5

The buyer for our apartment has now disappeared and will be unavailable all week to answer our simple question about whether or not he accepts the new Carrez figure.

This is vital because if he won't agree to the new size he could sue us after he has bought the apartment.

In the end, I gave an ultimatum: if they didn't get an answer by the end of the day then he wouldn't buy the apartment at all. I am fed up to the incisors with him being unavailable when it suits him.

There was no reply by the end of the day and so we no longer have a buyer for our apartment. Antoinette and I rejoiced. We are going to go over to Paris, fasten the shutters, lower the blinds, turn off the electricity and take the apartment off the market until next spring.

I have from the start been convinced that our buyer had decided that I was old, poor, desperate, dilapidated and weak – easy prey for a sharp Parisian. I think he has spent four months softening us up in order to demand a reduction at the last minute. There had to be some little trick. It's been like dealing with a bucket shop crook or an internet phisher.

I am, I confess, utterly exhausted by all this and by all the crap in general. Why do property deals always seem to bring out the worst in people? Or is the world now just populated with intrinsically ruthless bullies? Or is the lack of any sense of control which I find so painful?

Right from the start, I told the agent that our buyer was not serious and did not have the money available. The estate agent insisted that he had the money and was serious. But what serious house buyer makes an offer to buy a property, signs a preliminary purchase agreement and then disappears for months? Psychologically, it made no sense to me and as the weeks went by, I became increasingly convinced that the sale would not go through and that we were dealing with a hornswoggling horbgorble.

And we still don't know the real identity of our buyer. Our agent has refused to give us any information. I am beginning to think that our agent has deliberately allowed us to get confused about the buyer so that we won't notice that the money is not forthcoming.

I think it was William James who wrote that 'Need and struggle are what excites and inspires us; our hour of triumph is what brings the void.'

Well, bring on a bit of void. I've had enough need, enough struggle, enough excitement and damned near enough inspiration.

I have been sent a US tax form. If I don't fill it in the American tax authorities will deduct 30% of all my US earnings. I spent an hour trying to fill in the form online and failed miserably because the form refused to accept my signature.

I get these damned forms regularly from publishers and agents all over the world and I usually ignore them.

Because I sell a lot of books there, I regularly receive tax forms from Portugal. The forms are, not surprisingly, in Portuguese and they are lengthy and quite incomprehensible. The UK is, in my experience, the only country in the world to print all its official documents in as many languages as can be found. Other countries save money and insist that foreigners learn their language or hire a translator and this seems to me to be fair enough.

I throw away the forms from Portugal, give the Portuguese Government a big chunk of money and claim it back against my UK income.

I am convinced that foreign governments deliberately make their forms impossible to fill in so that they can deduct the tax from writers' earnings. I spent hours earlier filling in an incomprehensible form from the Japanese Government because my agent over there insisted that I had to do it or else really terrible things would happen. I will probably find that I've joined the Japanese air force.

I suppose I will have to find a way to fill in the American form. I earn enough in the US to make this form well worth completing so I will have to hope they take pity on me and tell me what I'm doing wrong.

IRS tax forms as issued by the American tax people are notoriously demanding and I gave up buying American shares on US exchanges because the paperwork defeated me.

Apropos of nothing, I wonder how widely it is known that the EU is now proposing to give itself the right to freeze the accounts of all depositors who have money in any bank within the European Union. The previous plan was to block the accounts of anyone who had more than 100,000 euros in their bank. The latest plan is to hit the accounts of all savers. The EU intends to give itself the right to control all bank accounts and people will only be allowed to take out enough money to pay for their day to day needs.

The keen Remainers do not know this, of course, because they never bother themselves with facts.

(The Remainers lied and exaggerated constantly before and during the referendum on the EU but, with outstanding cheek, have consistently made absurd allegations against those voting to save Britain from the Nazi dream. It is also relevant to note that the Electoral Commission fined the Liberal Democrats £18,000 for failing to provide full invoices and receipts for their spending on the Brexit campaign. The official Remain campaign was fined for similar offences.)

6

My joy on getting rid of the alleged buyer for our apartment was short lived.

While preparing a letter to sack the agents, I spotted a clause in the small print which means effectively that we have to pay them 50,000 euros if we don't sell the damned apartment to a buyer they find.

So I have told the notaire they can sell the damned apartment. I feel so fed up with the whole thing I don't want anything more to do with it. This whole extended and frustrating business has made life miserable for both of us. I can understand a buyer changing his mind. We all do that. We've done that. But our buyer, aided and abetted by our estate agent, has turned an apparently simple procedure into an unending process: a chronic nightmare.

Today is a day of idiocy.

I found out that the reason I couldn't sign the American tax form sent to me by Amazon was that I have to give my permission for me to sign the form, and the box I have to tick to give myself permission to sign the form is on the page after the page upon which I am supposed to sign. The form won't allow me to sign the form until I have gone to the next page and ticked the box allowing me to sign the form on the previous page.

If this were a form that had come through the post, this would not be so bad.

But it is an internet form.

I no longer understand the world or anything in it. The men in the white coats have clearly buggered off and the inmates have taken over completely.

I realise that I have to step back and care less. I have to cut myself from outside problems, put on blinkers and keep my eyes, my mind and my heart focussed on things that really matter: looking after Antoinette is way up top. And writing a few more books comes next. Filling in forms is nowhere.

After luncheon, I did some cosmetic surgery on a stuffed toy cat which had an ear which wouldn't stand up properly. He now looks much better. Stuffed animals are damned nearly as good for you as real ones. They bounce back the love and they never fall ill or die.

I then spent an hour this afternoon cutting ivy off the garage in Devon.

I like ivy, it provides food and housing for a good many creatures, but the stuff has finished its journey up the walls and is now working its way across the roof and between the tiles. One of the garage walls abuts a local footpath and small lane and as I was snipping away, three couples walked along the lane. They all said 'hello' in a cheery, jolly sort of way.

What a nice change from Gloucestershire where our garden also runs alongside a narrow lane.

Cotswoldians and visitors who pass by are invariably rude and surly. While folk in Devon smile and say hello, the folk in Gloucestershire sneer and grunt and generally behave as though they must, by definition, be vastly superior to anyone who is reduced to spending any of his time trimming bushes, strimming weeds or tinkering with a dry stone wall.

I have never forgotten that a friend of mine, a former Literary Editor of the Birmingham Post, once interviewed Tolkien when he was very old. My pal says that Tolkien lived almost exclusively in Middle Earth. Who can blame him?

Lying in the bath this evening reading the new Le Carre (a first edition but a reprint and therefore of no financial value) I was very disappointed.

Le Carre has turned George Smiley into a European, a supporter of State Fascism. We are now told that Smiley did everything for Europe and not for England.

Peter Guillam gets a repaint too and is unrecognisable.

An author can, of course, do whatever he likes with his characters but if he wants to retain the interest and enthusiasm of his readers, he can't go too far and I don't think he should impose his own political views onto well-established characters.

Le Carre is a well-known supporter of the EU but I don't think the enthusiasm fits comfortably into Smiley's character.

The Smiley whom Le Carre gave us originally was an Englishman through and through; a loyal servant of Queen and Country and not a traitorous hound likely to brown nose Juncker et al.

I like to think that Le Carre himself is simply ignorant and I don't care about that but I don't like to think that Smiley doesn't understand and is a supporter of Hitler's dream. He wouldn't, would he? It's like discovering that Robin Hood was a secret supporter of King John and a snitch for the Infernal Revenue Services. Or that Dickens's Tiny Tim was a benefit fraudster with three separate families and a flourishing drug smuggling business. Or that the Pied Piper of Hamelin was a Troop Leader for the Nazi youth party.

I put down the book and found myself thinking yet again about our alleged buyer in Paris.

It is, I decided, a debacle.

If it had been left to us, he would have been told to fuck off some months ago. But we have been told that we might be sued if we do this. We have said firmly that if he doesn't sign on the October 16th then he won't buy the apartment even if he sues us and M.Macron delivers the writ himself.

Incidentally, our notaire showed me a letter she received from the buyer's notaire.

From this it is clear that although we were encouraged to believe that the money was ready and waiting, the fact is that the buyer still needs a bank loan which he is having difficulty in arranging.

The endless delays are, it seems, all designed to give him more time to find a bank prepared to part with the necessary funds. He has had since June to find the money. Unless he wins the Euro-lottery it doesn't seem likely that he is now going to find the money in the next week or so.

I wonder if our estate agent knew that the money had to be borrowed? Maybe he and the buyer were being rather clever or disingenuous in telling us that the buyer didn't need to sign a Promesse contract dependent upon a bank loan?

(There are two types of promesse. In one, the buyer admits that he has to borrow the money. In the other, the buyer says he has the money available.)

Our buyer has, I suspect, always needed to borrow the money from somewhere but didn't want us to know this because he knew (quite rightly) that we wouldn't have accepted his offer if we had known this. I rather feel that we have been played for suckers. Or, to switch metaphors, we have been led up and down the garden path for months.

What if we had needed the money to buy a house we wanted?

Four and a half months after the start of the process, we are no further forward than we had been at the start. Indeed, we are worse off for we are committed to a buyer who has no money and, apparently, no prospect of finding any. No one, least of all our estate agent, seemed to give a damn about our situation.

The sad thing is that at the end of this (if an end ever arrives), I know I am going to loathe the French, detest France, hate Paris and feel an overwhelming sadness at having parted company with an apartment which was the source of so much joy for Antoinette and me.

Our buyer has disappeared again and has been unreachable for over a week. I am assured that neither his notaire nor the estate agent knows where he is and neither can reach him by telephone or by email. He is mysteriously incommunicado.

And so, when we repeatedly asked for confirmation that he accepted the new Carrez reading there was no reply. I made the elementary mistake of telling them that they had made my Antoinette ill. This seemed to be seen as a sign of weakness to be exploited.

I am so cross that I think I am turning into the sort of character Jack Nicholson played in *As Good As It Gets* and *Bucket List*.

I usually think Jacques Tati is my cinematic alter ego but I've gone way beyond Tatisque confusion and bewilderment. Besides, Tati was French and I don't like French anything anymore.

We desperately don't want to sell the apartment to the buyer we are supposed to have. We want to get rid of him. We want to sack our wretched agent, collect our keys, close the apartment shutters and put this miserable experience behind us. The fact is that keeping the apartment will be far less tiresome than trying to sell it.

Maybe we will try again in 2018 with a different estate agent.

In nearly twenty years, I cannot think of a single French transaction that was decent and honest. The woman from whom I bought the flat delayed the final handing over the keys to suit herself – and then removed fixtures and fittings which she agreed to leave.

I remember the people who own the cellar next to ours demanding that we switch cellars. I did so, carefully making sure that our cellar was clean and swept. They promised to do the same but when I eventually managed to get the key out of them they had left the cellar chock full of rubbish – including an old mattress. (Why would you bother putting an old mattress into your cellar when in Paris the bin men will take anything left outside?)

The worst thing about the Barclays and the apartment fiascos is the time I have wasted.

There have been genuine financial losses (currency losses, changes in taxes and opportunity costs).

But it is the time I will never recover. I am more and more determined to do my best to make sure that these damned people never buy the apartment.

You have to fight these bastards don't you? If you lie down and let them ride roughshod over you the anguish, the suffering, the frustration are all so much greater.

This whole process has been replete with inexplicable delays and cancelled or postponed appointments and promises. I find it increasingly difficult to accept the frequently offered assurance (proffered by our estate agent) that this is normal for the French process. Disappointments are, of course, good for character building but to be honest my character has been pretty well built, altered, rebuilt, knocked about so much that if there is any more building then I fear the drains will stop working.

7

One of our squirrels has just discovered the Joy of the Apple. Today he picked up one of the apples which had been partly eaten by the wild rabbits, nibbled some of it and carried the remainder up onto a wooden table next to a wooden swing seat which we have in the garden. The only possible reason to do this was to keep it for later and to ensure that the rabbits didn't finish it off for they, of course, cannot climb up the table legs. When the rabbits get to an apple first, they pick it up by the stalk and carry it off to be eaten in their burrow. (We give apples without stalks to our resident pheasant and keep apples with stalks for the rabbits and the squirrels.)

I am now having to put out several apples a day. The rabbits prefer them to grass. The squirrels still like their nuts but they enjoy an apple too. The Hereford Russets still seem to be favourite.

At a vote of the EU parliament, a number of MEPs elected by Britons (two representing the Tory party and 18 representing Labour) voted against the UK's interests and for the EU.

I suppose it is inevitable that some MEPs will be miffed at the prospect of losing their comfortable jobs (complete with marvellous expenses and pensions) but to vote against British interests when you are paid to represent British interests seems to me to be the ultimate betrayal and act of treachery.

The 73 British MEPs who sit in the European Parliament will receive around 6 million euros in golden goodbyes when Britain leaves the EU. Some MEPs will receive more than 200,000 euros – paid by us, of course. MEPs will also receive lifetime private health care and massive pensions.

I have pretty well given up writing new material for my website. I'm not at all convinced that anyone bothers to read the stuff. If I want to build up the website I must become a social media fanatic and tweet every hour or so. I refuse to do that. What can anyone say in a sentence or so that is worth saying?

Antoinette has been painting for a few years now. She began with watercolours and turned to oils some months back. She has already produced some stunning work of gallery level.

After much experimentation, she has settled on a style known as tonalism which is a variety of impressionism and which was favoured by an American painter called Inness.

I love her paintings not because they are hers but because they are beautiful pictures. Her aim is to get her paintings into a gallery. She will succeed.

('You are not to buy a gallery so that I think I've succeeded,' she told me.)

8

Our two yew trees in Devon are laden with big, juicy, fat berries – as big as raspberries. Oddly, however, our yew tree in Gloucester has no berries at all.

I worked in the garden in Gloucestershire today and had a great bonfire.

I emptied a spare freezer which contained out-of-date bread, chips and ice cream and burnt the lot. I specialise in lighting bonfires in the rain and now claim to be the only person in the world to have successfully started a bonfire in a heavy snowstorm and to have burnt out-of-date ice cream in an incinerator. The frozen bread, the frozen chips and the frozen ice cream were all turned into ash.

The secret to a good bonfire is, of course, the provision of plenty of air.

If you are burning a pile of garden rubbish you need to ensure that the stuff doesn't become compressed. I find that a few small cardboard boxes and empty, plastic water bottles, hidden deep within the stuff I'm trying to burn, are a vital ingredient.

Antoinette wants me to write a book on bonfire lighting. She's even got the title: 'Insania Pyromania'.

At six o'clock in the evening, I found myself searching through my pockets for coins to send the ferryman home, thereby making it impossible for me to cross the River Styx.

I really thought my time was up.

I spent a couple of hours working in the garden, had dinner and slumped down in an easy chair with a coffee and a Richard Stark novel which I am re-reading for the umpteenth time. Suddenly, I felt strange. I checked my pulse. It was fibrillating and so fast I couldn't begin to count it. I checked my blood pressure and pulse with a machine we have. My pulse was 156 and upwards and my blood pressure alternated between absurdly high and absurdly low. The machine lit up with all the little warning lights with which it is fitted.

I had no chest, jaw or arm pain but I had a great deal of wind.

My fault.

Since I managed to clear my once crippling IBS with a potent mixture of acidophilus, an ultra violet light machine which I use to destroy the fungal infection of my toenails, and a diet rich in onions and garlic, I have been getting a little millennial (the new word for 'cocky'). A couple of weeks ago, I started eating rough, brown, wholemeal bread packed with seeds. It was wonderful to taste good bread again, after years of eating nothing but white bread.

Doctors, relying on what they have been taught, supplemented by what they have read in medical journals and medical textbooks, still believe that IBS is best treated with a diet heavy in roughage. This is like trying to treat diabetes mellitus by telling patients to eat more sugar. The professions don't take IBS very seriously because there is no effective pharmacological remedy available. The healing professions are, I am afraid to say, dominated by the needs of the pharmaceutical industry. Modern medical care is dominated by, and run for, interventionists in general and drug companies in particular. As a result, doctors can be hidebound and worryingly unimaginative. And, because IBS is neither a dramatic disease, nor a fashionable one, doctors remain blisteringly ignorant about it. I have lost count of the number of patients who have told me that their doctor has told them that their wind is not caused by IBS because 'the tests came back negative'. That's clever of them because I know of no comprehensive and truly effective tests for IBS. The diagnosis has to be made on the basis of the symptoms and signs.

I have studied IBS a good deal over the years and have found the medical and nursing professions to be steadfastly slow to accept new information. A quarter of a century ago, I was the first doctor to notice that intestinal wind can cause kidney bleeding.

I had first-hand experience of this since I very nearly lost a kidney to doctors who were keen to rip out what they thought was a cancerous organ. Only my insistence that a scan be done had saved one of my favourite kidneys from ending up as someone's breakfast.

In recent years, I had pretty well controlled my IBS, and was feeling far too over-confident. I had forgotten that IBS is not a disorder to be treated lightly. As a result, I overdid things. Yesterday I ate four slices of the darned stuff and today I am bloated and suffering. Unusually for me it is my stomach, rather than my large intestine, which is most bloated. Who would have thought that a few slices of rather tasty bread could cause such awful disruption.

Antoinette wanted to call an ambulance but I wouldn't let her. I felt certain that my crazy heart antics were a result of the massive amount of wind that was in my intestines in general and my stomach in particular.

The stomach and the heart share a common nerve supply (the vagus nerve or tenth cranial nerve) but although doctors recognise that burping may, rarely, be a sign of cardiac dysfunction they do not recognise that cardiac dysfunction (including palpitations, fibrillations and so on) can be a result of intestinal wind. If A and B are known to be linked and A can cause B you would not think a huge stretch, would you, to suspect that maybe B can also cause A?

Am I being too cynical in supposing that when doctors diagnose a cardiac malfunction they can always recommend some expensive intervention (prescribe drugs, recommend surgery, etc.) but if they diagnose a wind problem there is really absolutely bugger all that they can do? As I have pointed out many times before, the medical profession is dominated by, and ruled by, the pharmaceutical industry. If there is no suitable drug therapy available then the problem will not be recognised. Moreover, doctors and nurses are dedicated to the interventionist philosophy. Doing something is their default. And, sadly, too many patients are eager to accept whatever treatments are offered. The truth is, however, that discretionary medical care is not only very expensive in financial terms but it is also very dangerous and deadly in human terms.

It took about six hours for the fibrillations to slow and for my heart to start beating normally again. I was exhausted, inevitably, and yawning frequently too. The vagus nerve also triggers yawning. To the orthodox professional, yawning is therefore a sign that a patient is having a heart attack. And the vagus nerve can cause pains in the left arm too.

How many people, I wonder, are being treated for heart disease when their initial signs and symptoms were caused by wind? A million? Probably more. How many are taking potentially lethal anticoagulants such as warfarin which they do not really need?

And how many patients (let alone doctors) know that all the drugs used to treat irregular heartbeats have potentially alarming side effects – including irregular heartbeats. Oh, and that ultimate side effect known as death.

This is yet another undiscovered health scandal.

The older I get, and the more I know, the more I realise that medicine really is still in the dark ages. We have to remember, I suppose, that it isn't all that long ago that doctors claimed that smoking was good for the lungs. Now they say that vaccination is good for the whole organism.

Both my parents were killed by incompetent doctors (the details are in previous diaries) but I particularly remember the way my father was killed. He had a terrible kyphosis (due, in part, to his enthusiasm for creating software on his computer) which led to an inevitable breathing problem. A nurse diagnosed him as suffering from the new-fangled and nonsensical conglomerate disorder of Chronic Obstruction Pulmonary Disease (COPD) and prescribed some pharmaceutical rubbish to help his breathing. One of the side effects of the rubbish she prescribed had atrial fibrillation as a known side effect. But when my father duly developed a heart irregularity, the nurse didn't take my father off the drug. Instead, she gave him something else to 'cure' the irregularity. And, naturally, that made things worse. By the time doctors finally managed to kill him by prescribing an inappropriate drug, my father was taking so many medicines that when he died we filled two black bags with the leftovers. Inevitably, the drugs included digoxin and warfarin.

Given my symptoms, I would be lucky not to end up with a fistful of prescriptions for heart drugs. Statins, of course. Something for the high blood pressure I don't have. And a few expensive delicacies for the heart irregularity.

The problem, you see, is that the medical literature shows a single case of a man in his 60s who presented (that's medical jargon for he turned up in a doctor's surgery) with wind and turned out, on investigation, to have problems with his cardiac arteries. (Please don't ask why they checked out his cardiac arteries when he complained of wind.)

Now, you might imagine that it would be possible for a man of that age to suffer both from some sort of intestinal disorder and a heart problem. But doctors like to tie things up neatly. And so it was concluded that the wind was a symptom of heart disease.

And so that's it.

According to medical literature and medical teaching, wind is now a symptom of heart disease.

It does not seem to have occurred to the people who write articles for medical journals that when heart symptoms and wind do occur together, it might be possible that the latter could be the cause of the former. I suspect that wind induced heart problems could be another one of those diagnoses which are missed – like normal pressure hydrocephalus.

Of course, I could be wrong.

I could have heart disease and, maybe, have just endured a silent heart attack.

I rather hope not. And I am prepared to bet my life on my diagnosis.

Anyway, all this explains why I am wary of seeing a doctor.

Or one of the new-fangled practice nurses (known as ‘nurse prescribers’) who has the authority to prescribe drugs about which she probably knows next to nothing.

9

When I awoke, I was feeling more alive and so we drove into Cheltenham. There was, inevitably, a massive queue causing a lengthy delay. When we got to the front of the queue we found that it was caused by a workman’s truck parked on the road. Traffic lights had been set up but there were no workmen and no activity. This seems to happen often in and around Cheltenham.

As we were heading back to the car (or, more accurately our truck) Antoinette spotted a CD rack in a charity shop window. One of those tall, thin things, made out of solid wood and capable of holding a 100 or more CDs. We went in to buy it (the advantage of having the truck with us was that we could take it home) and as I prepared to leave, I suddenly noticed that Antoinette was engaged in an earnest conversation with a young man who was pushing a pram.

‘I thought the baby was dead,’ she told me, as we headed to the car. ‘So I had to stop and look more closely. But it wasn’t a real baby. It was a very realistic, life size doll.’

The young man told her that the ‘baby’, which is apparently called a ‘newborn’ was called Isobel and that she was due to have a birthday soon. There were toys in the pram and the young man told Antoinette that he had spotted a better pram in the shop that he wanted to buy. It was a little smarter and larger than the pram he had and he thought Isobel deserved an upgrade.

‘So I gave him £20 towards the cost of the second hand pram,’ said Antoinette. ‘He was so pleased. He’s looking forward to taking his baby daughter for long walks.’

Apparently, this is by no means an uncommon occurrence. Quite a number of adults, of both sexes, have life size, realistic dolls which they treat just as gently and lovingly as parents treat their real children.

10

I don’t follow Twitter but today I heard about a twitter which reminded me why I eschew social media.

A celebrity tweeter wrote a tweet slightly sneering at world champion boxer Chris Eubank for being adopted. (His father, Chris Eubank, was also a world champion boxer.)

That is such a nasty, horrid, cruel thing to do that I find myself hoping that the tweeter was drunk when she wrote it.

It seems to me to be quite awful that one human being could use the internet to attack another for being adopted – maybe just for a bit of cheap publicity. And no one else seems to think this is a bad thing to do.

Oddly enough, I remember that another champion boxer, another Briton, Tyson Fury, was vilified on social media for daring to express perfectly sound and valid opinions about marriage, his faith and homosexuality. Fury, a kindly seeming bear of a man who is 6 foot 9 inches tall, ended up depressed and out of his sport for two years. Once again, the people doing the criticising seemed to me to be real Z list celebrities grabbing any cheap publicity they could find. One critic, I seem to remember, was a homosexual whose main claim to fame was his ability to do the hop, skip and jump successfully. (I’ve always thought of that as the athletics equivalent of solo synchronised swimming.) I don’t know whether this individual’s nastiness had anything to do with Fury’s depression but it truly can’t have helped. Whatever happened to Christian charity, understanding and warmth towards one’s fellow man?

Why is it that so many people become aggressive, rude and patronising when they enter a chat room or an online forum? Is it, perhaps, because they feel distant from other people and therefore safe in attacking them?

The more I read and hear about it the more I am convinced that the modern witch hunters (politicians, police officers and minor celebrities) who seem willing to gather around to stone anyone who seems to be a worthwhile target – regardless of the presence or absence of any evidence – are no better than the flash mobs who persecuted midwives testing them for witch hood by immersing them in the village pond. If the women drowned, they were innocent. If they did not drown, they were guilty and would be burnt at the stake or hung.

I did something very silly this morning.

In a hurry, I picked an Earl Grey teabag out of an airtight container and dunked it into a cup full of hot water. It was only afterwards that Antoinette noticed that the tea bags were mouldy.

Out of curiosity, I looked on the internet to see if I was the only idiot to have made this silly mistake. I found that I wasn't. (There aren't many things you can confess on the internet and not find yourself a member of a large club.)

One woman who had accidentally drunk tea made with a mouldy tea bag had posted a sad plea asking if anyone knew what would happen to her. 'You will die', wrote someone – anonymously, of course. I suppose it was intended as a joke. But it wasn't funny. And it probably gave the unfortunate woman some sleepless nights. How can people be so damned cruel?

There is no news about whether or not our buyer and his mother are going to turn up to start the real process of buying our apartment in Paris. It is like waiting for the other shoe to drop. But maybe our buyer only has one leg and there is no second shoe.

Our bet is that he thinks we are going to Paris (we aren't because I have signed a power of attorney form with the notaire) and wants to make sure that we not only have our tickets but are also on our way. His hope, I suspect, is that we will be so fed up when he demands a reduction in the price that we will give in and accept whatever deal he wants to offer. A dirty trick but it would not be out of character. We suspect that there is something dark going on here. Maybe the buyer is planning to do up the apartment, increase the price and resell it with the same agent – who will, in that case, make over 100,000 euros in commission.

I can't help wondering if he is mad.

I have long wondered if he is a fantasist with 12 euros in a checking account and no job.

Antoinette suspects that they have a property to sell. I think she is right. Maybe the mother has to sell something and either won't or can't. Or maybe she is not as keen on our apartment as her son.

Either that or they are waiting for someone to die and leave them the money they need and clearly have not got.

Actually, if they do have a property to sell maybe that explains why our estate agent told us that they did not need a bank loan to buy our apartment. Maybe he was simply being disingenuous. If they were waiting to sell a property that would explain the variety of delaying techniques and it would also explain why no one seemed to want to tell us what was going on.

No one involved in this sale seems to want to tell us anything.

But my guess is that Antoinette is right. If she is (and she usually is) then we've been played like suckers throughout this whole disgraceful process. Maybe we were the only people involved in the whole damned saga who never really knew what was going on.

None of this explains why I get so upset by this nonsense.

It's not that we have to sell or that we need the money now because we have some specific plans for it. The problems are uncertainty, frustration and resentment at the fact that an outsider (and his mother) are deliberately delaying, changing their minds, letting us down and treating us without any respect at all. Every time they delay, I have to exchange another flurry of emails with our notaire. I have so far sent and received hundreds of emails and I have wasted at least a week of solid working time on this damned nuisance. (The same thing happened with Barclays Bank of course.)

It is the constant making and breaking of promises which is so intensely stressful. All made worse, of course, by the incredible unfairness of French property laws which seem to be designed to give the buyer all the power in the world and the seller absolutely no real power at all. I dare say this happened because there have been bad sellers in the past. But now the system is designed to aid and abet bad buyers.

From experience, conversation and investigation, I know that the French have always had a reputation for playing dirty and for being devious and underhand. They are innately selfish and indifferent to other people's needs.

I am beginning to realise why the frog crunching, snail munching, white flag waving bastards have such a well-deserved reputation.

This evening, in Devon, I went down the drive to pop a plastic, black bag full of rubbish into our black plastic wheelie bin. I usually wear disposable, plastic gloves while doing this, to avoid catching any of the multitude of germs left on the lid by the dustmen, but today I forgot to take any gloves with me. I then had a brainwave. I had immediate access to a disposable item with which I could safely lift the lid – and of which I could afterwards easily dispose. A leaf. A large sycamore leaf. You can't get any greener than that, can you?

While walking back up the drive I noticed, in the distance, that some of our neighbours are away. I know this because all their curtains are clearly closed and there is no car in the driveway. Why do people close all their curtains when they go away? Don't they know that they might as well put up a big sign saying 'House Empty'?

11

Yahoo was hacked back in 2013 and they've just noticed that the hack was worse than they originally thought.

Instead of affecting just a few customers it actually affected three billion customers. That's three billion as in 3,000,000,000 customers who had their personal information stolen. How did Yahoo not notice? Why does no one seem to care about this sort of carelessness? 'Oh, by the way, I lost the personal, private, information of 3,000,000,000 customers who are now liable to have their identities stolen and their lives ruined.' 'Oh, don't worry about it – it happens to everyone.'

We stood on our balcony and looked out across the bay. An exquisite moon was reflected in the mill-pond calm sea and lights from the houses around the bay were reflected in the water too. On the beach, we could see a dozen small twinkling lights: fishermen settling down for the night, with their absurdly long sea rods resting on their tripods, their vacuum flasks filled with soup or tea and a plastic box with their sandwiches by their side. Some of the fishermen had put up small tents so that they had a little protection from the elements. They weigh down the corners with stones from the beach. There is no sand into which they could drive stakes or pegs. At dawn, they will all go home with, if they are lucky, a small catch of mackerel. It's a strange hobby but a romantic one in a way.

12

Another portion of England's coastline has fallen into the sea. Shaped, concrete barriers, built along Britain's coastline, would prevent coastal erosion for a fraction of the cost of HS2 – the absurdly expensive and almost completely pointless railway line improvement on which the Government plans to spend untold billions. Even old-fashioned Victorian breakwaters would be useful. Anything remotely effective would improve coastal communities in every conceivable way and so produce a huge and lasting economic dividend for the nation. Looking far ahead, we should be preserving our coastal communities. When international travel becomes too expensive except for a chosen few, or is banned by the global warming mythologists, our home-grown seaside communities will provide vital holidays and relaxation.

I read today that eBay told the UK authorities that its UK revenue for 2016 was £200 million but told the US tax authorities that its UK revenues were $1.3 billion. And Netflix appear to have the same approach to accounting. Netflix had estimated UK revenue at $520 million in 2016 but reported its revenue at only 22 million euros. How surprising it was to discover that both companies paid peanuts in tax to the British Government. What makes me think that if I told the UK tax authorities that my UK income was X and then told the American tax authorities that my UK income was Y, I might have men with boots banging on my door?

I bought a copy of the *Financial Times* (the publishers seem to have stopped producing weekly copies of my preferred choice *The Dandy*) and was pleasantly amused to see a full page advertisement for a *Financial Times* event entitled Kilkenomics at which various *FT* journalists were due to speak. I was amused because the event was promoted with a puff describing the event as 'Brilliant' from a journalist called Simon Kuper. My amusement was inspired by the fact that Kuper was listed as one of the speakers.

Maybe the *FT* is breaking new ground here. How much more fun it will be if authors, musicians and film makers write their own reviews.

This afternoon, I received an email from our stand-in notaire in Paris. (Our long-suffering main notaire has gone on holiday).

Apparently, our wretched buyer now wants to delay the signing by two more days. This renders the power of attorney useless and so if the signing is going to go ahead on Wednesday instead of Monday, I am told that the whole thing will have to be redone. Making things more complicated is the fact that the estate agent has agreed to cut his commission from 50,000 euros to 40,000 euros. My guess is that the buyer demanded a cut in the price of the apartment and the agent, knowing that we would not knock anything off the price, agreed to take 10,000 euros off his fee in an attempt to keep the deal live.

Since I am in Devon and not in Paris, the notaire has sent me a new six-page power of attorney (in French) which I must immediately read, scan, email and then return as a hard copy via DHL or some other overnight courier.

I wrote back asking why the buyer thought that another two day delay would make any difference. 'I think it is reasonable to ask the buyer to explain exactly why he cannot sign on Monday but can sign on Wednesday. What magic will happen in two days that has not happened in four months?'

Antoinette and I agree that we cannot trust this buyer at all and so I think I will suggest that if we give him the extra two days to raise the money then he must accept that if he cannot complete the purchase before or on the 20th November then he will lose his deposit.

I have long favoured the 20th November as a completion date because the Chancellor of the Exchequer has a Budget on the 22nd November and I fear there is a chance that there will be a change in capital gains tax rates. A two day delay in the signing could easily result in an extra bill of £100,000 or more.

(Governments have tried backdating capital gains tax rises but the last time they tried this they had to give it up and capital gains were taxed at two different rates depending on the date of the transaction.)

I am also going to insist that he sign a document agreeing that he will not in the future ask for any compensation, refund or anything involving money. We don't trust him an inch and we're concerned that he might try something crafty. I wouldn't put it past him to complain that he didn't realise that the apartment was on the top floor. Or maybe he will sue us because he thinks the kitchen needs a lick of paint.

What a truly miserable, painful, exhausting, debilitating experience this has been. And throughout, our agent has insisted that these sort of delays are normal in France. It seems clear that foreigners should never, ever contemplate buying property in France unless they know that they will keep it forever and never have to try to sell it.

We watched *Wag the Dog*. It is one of my favourite films. The author of the book upon which the film was based was Larry Beinhart who has also written the utterly amazing *Fog Facts* – the seminal work on media manipulation.

13

I have always thought that the most important question is 'Why?'.

I still do.

Our notaire in Paris is away and another notaire has taken over. He tells me that the buyer cannot now attend the signing which he agreed would take place on Monday the 16th because his mother has suddenly decided that she has a meeting elsewhere. I have no idea where. He didn't say. Possibly she is taking the dog for a walk. Possibly she has made an appointment to see her hairdresser. Possibly she is going for a joyride on her broomstick.

I cannot believe these people. Are they mad? Are they simpletons? Or are they just thoughtless, selfish and plain nasty? I really, really, really do not want to sell our apartment to them. But the French system seems to make it impossible to do anything but put up with their machinations, excuses and nonsenses.

It also appears that the proxy I signed is even more useless than was previously thought. I now have to sign another version of the damned thing because the estate agent has cut his commission from 50,000 euros to 40,000 euros. He has done this, I assume, because the buyer demanded a cut in the price in view of the adjusted Carrez figure. I had already made it clear that I would not reduce the price of the apartment. So the buyer has negotiated a 1% cut in the price by thugging the estate agent. And because the proxy contains the whole price, including the fee for the estate agent, I have to sign a new version.

I suggested that it would be far easier all round for the buyer and the estate agent to sign a separate document in which the estate agent promised to give the buyer 10,000 euros when the deal was finalised. But the notaire says we cannot do this because if we do the buyer may have to pay another few euros in tax.

So, in order to protect him from this very modest eventuality, I have to sign another proxy and somehow get it to Paris by yesterday. I suspect that the cost of sending the packet to Paris will exceed the tax liability I am helping the buyer to avoid.

The bottom line is that anyone who is thinking of buying property in France should think again and then do something more sensible. Buy a shark and keep it in the bathtub. Sail around the world on a homemade raft with sails made out of string vests.

If the tide is out tomorrow, I will totter along the beach to the local Post Office and get rid of the revised proxy.

A British economist called Richard Thaler has been awarded the 79th Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for pointing out that people aren't always analytical, rational and clear minded. Instead, we apparently feel financial loss more than we enjoy financial gain. We treasure things we have – and overvalue them. We rate new information more highly than the stuff we already know. And we hate change.

Nobel Prize for that stuff?

Crumbs.

Economics is in a worse state than I thought.

People hate change, eh?

Who'd have thought it.

14

I've been told again by our stand-in notaire that I must send the signed proxy document to Paris by DHL or some other courier. To comfort our buyer, I must travel several miles to the nearest Post Office (I have told them it will have to be a Post Office because there is no DHL office for miles and miles) and arrange for the document to be sent.

I have been given around 24 hours to get this form back – though the buyers seem to delight in taking weeks to reply to any query I send.

I got up early this morning and went to the bottom of the garden to check the tide. It was in and so I couldn't take the short cut along the beach. It will take forever to find a car park space on a Saturday morning so I had to walk the long way round, taking a short cut through some woods and then walking along the road to the Post Office.

Before I set off, I checked to make that the Post Office was open on Saturday mornings. It was supposed to be.

But when I got there the door had a handwritten, misspelt notice stuck on the glass, apologising for the fact that the Post Office was 'closed due to illness'.

So I walked all the way back home, stuck some stamps and an Air Mail label on the damned packet and stuffed it into a nearby post box.

What else can possibly go wrong with this damned stupid sale?

At least my heart seemed to cope with the exercise without having forty fits. It seems as though my diagnosis was correct. Just as well, really.

Still, it is worth reflecting that if I had gone along to the Accident and Emergency department of a hospital when I had my fibrillations, I would have doubtless ended up with a fistful of prescriptions for drugs which might well have killed me. And, I have no doubt, my theory about vagus nerve interference would have almost certainly attracted nothing but sneers, raised eyebrows and a diagnosis of dementia.

15

I've been around long enough to know that we are due a major financial crisis. It will be a big one: as big, if not bigger, than the crisis of 2008.

The basic reason is simple: the central bankers have been steadily making things worse in their clumsy attempts to save the big banks from the consequences of their actions. And none of the leading bankers and politicians who caused the 2008 crisis (and subsequently made things worse) has been punished or learnt anything from what happened. All the evidence proves (not suggests) that central bankers have absolutely no idea what they are doing or why.

Central bankers in general, and the Bank of England in particular, have steadfastly, and with unerring accuracy, got everything wrong. They caused the dotcom bubble, they over-emphasised the impact of the Millennium Bug, they over-reacted over the attack on the twin towers and they helped create the huge debts that began in 2000. They pushed up prices, encouraged risk taking, and then introduced emergency policies in 2008, which they have still not been brave enough to change. As a result, companies which should have gone bust are struggling on, productivity has collapsed, property prices have soared, savers have been punished by absurdly low interest rates and the rise of very left wing socialism has been an inevitable result. Pension models have been destroyed and pensioners severely disadvantaged (except, of course, for those receiving pensions from the Bank of England or Parliament).

Low interest rates, and low returns on savings, have forced companies to stop investing and to shovel all their available cash into their pension funds.

It is difficult to imagine how anyone could have screwed up more than Carney et al. All the Canuk has done for us is give us bloody horrid plastic money that no one likes.

Now, on top of that, we have a number of serious problems around the world in general and Europe in particular. Nationalism (dismissed and derided as populism) is not dead, despite the fact that the EU (and Macron, their appointed winner) succeeded in defeating the National Front in the French elections. People in Catalonia want to leave Spain (which could lead to a major crisis within the EU). Scottish nationalists want to leave the UK. Welsh nationalists want to leave the UK. The Basques want to leave Spain. The Corsicans want to leave France. The people of Flanders want to leave Belgium. The people of several regions in Northern Italy want independence. None of this is going to go away. The allure of Hitler's European superstate is diminishing daily. (Not that any of this is new, of course. Not long ago, both Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia were countries.) Greece is a financial basket case and Italy isn't much better.

If any of these regions achieve independence, they will be outside the EU and the EU's power and authority will be massively diminished. There will also be enormous bureaucratic and legal complications, of course. And that is why the EU will do everything it can to prevent any break away states forming. Unfortunately, for the EU, rounding up a bunch of feral cats could be easier.

In an attempt to deal with its problems, the European bank has printed three trillion euros in the last couple of years.

I suspect that Greece is still the EU's real problem. And the underlying everlasting fault is that Greece was taken into the euro fraudulently with figures cooked by Goldman Sachs. The odd thing is that one former Goldman Sachs boss was an Italian called Mario Draghi.

And guess who is now printing euros like mad to try to cover up the Greek problems? That would be the chief of the European Central Bank.

And that is (surprise, surprise) the very same Mario Draghi.

As well as running the ECB, Signor Draghi finds time to be a member of the Group of Thirty founded by the Rockefeller Foundation. The Group of Thirty is a private group of lobbyists in the finance world.

(As an aside, it is worth mentioning that lobbyists pretty well control the EU, of course, spending nearly £2 billion on bribing parliamentarians and eurocrats within the EU. Lobbyists want rules and laws to be introduced which protect their clients' interests and the result is that small, growing companies have no chance of succeeding within the EU. There are no democratic checks on EU officials and regulators and so in practice it is the lobbyists, working for big companies, who make up the laws.)

It seems odd to me that the man running the EU's finances should also be a financial lobbyist for there seems to me to be ample room for conflicts of interest.

Draghi's home country of Italy is in an even worse state than Greece. The banks there have debts of 360 billion euros.

And Draghi's European Central Bank itself is in an even worse state, having borrowed 7,800 billion euros from the Bundesbank.

In Germany, the teetering Deutsche Bank has derivatives worth 46 trillion euros on its books. That is 14 times Germany's Gross Domestic Product.

Other banks throughout Europe are in a similar mess, though everything is carefully orchestrated (fiddled) to make it look as though everything is fine and dandy.

The rest of the world isn't much better off than Europe.

In Venezuela, the government is pretty well bankrupt and certain to default on its bonds (big chunks of which are held, I am pleased to say, by Goldman Sachs).

Meanwhile, back in Europe, the people (derided as populist hordes by the EU's fascist supporters) are rising up against the undemocratic rule of the Nazi creation. The opposition to the EU comes largely from young Europeans who see the EU for the fascist state it has become. Austria, for example, has just elected a 30-year-old leader who loathes the European Union.

It is only in Britain that the young people are so ignorant and superficial that they support the European Union in the mistaken belief that once we are outside the EU they will no longer be able to go skiing or drink their favourite style of cappuccino.

Hubristic central bankers who created the global financial crisis a decade ago are still pursuing policies (zero or negative interest rates and the endless printing of money) which make things ever worse. They themselves have, of course, remained above the financial carnage. Their huge salaries, generous expense accounts, massive, inflation-proof pensions and absurd severance payments have protected them from the consequences of their own bottomless stupidity and unrelieved arrogance. The other day I read that an employee of Santander in the US, is apparently leaving the bank and taking with him a total of $713 million before tax. That is beyond silly and obscene and well into the realms of science fiction.

To counteract the crash they caused, the world's bankers have produced a collection of bubbles which will, when they burst, produce unavoidable penury, inescapable unemployment and inevitable hardship for millions.

If inflation rates go up a little too much (the bankers and politicians hope they will rise but not too far) then interest rates will follow. And the result will be chaos, bewilderment, outrage and confusion among the many who currently assume that interest rates will always stay close to zero (or below). If interest rates go back up to normal levels of 6% or 7% there will be forced selling of houses, a collapse of house prices and mass poverty among the middle classes.

So, what else is there to worry about?

Donald Trump seems to want to nuke North Korea and he has a stockpile of 1,240 nuclear warheads with which to do it. It matters not one jot that North Korea has no capacity to attack America. Russia is still classified as an enemy, though no one can remember why, and Iran is officially an enemy again though the Iranians haven't invaded anywhere since the Battle of the Eurymedon in 466 BC.

It isn't really difficult to explain the preponderance of America's enemies.

America spends over $300 billion a year on arms and the arms industry spends $1 billion a year on lobbyists trying to persuade the politicians to spend more. When you have that many bullets you have to find someone to shoot them at or else your stockpiles grow so big there is no room to put everything.

And then there is Brexit.

Brexit should have been exciting and given politicians a chance to grasp the future and shape it to our advantage. Brexit was an opportunity. The people gave the Government a mandate for change; a chance to throw off the chains of the European Union.

But our politicians have proved totally inadequate and are running around like trouserless characters in a 1960s Whitehall Farce. The three leading members of the Government which is supposed to be negotiating for us to leave the EU (May, Green and Hammond) are either supporters of the European Union or are giving a very good impression of supporting it. It seems that all three voted Remain. Once every five minutes someone in the establishment issues a warning about some aspect of our life which will be wrecked by Brexit. We've been warned that aeroplanes will stop flying, that all the bankers will leave the country, that cancer treatment will halt and that our courts will cease functioning. And we won't be able to buy anything that isn't made in Birmingham or Leeds. There will, I suspect, be no more slippers, no more hairdressers and no socks on sale. (There will, thankfully, be plenty of bras on sale because they are all made in China which was not, when I last looked, a member of the European Union.)

In any negotiation you only have strength when the other side honestly believes that you will walk away from whatever deal is on offer.

Our woefully incompetent Government has steadfastly refused to countenance the idea of leaving the EU without a deal in place. Worse still, a bunch of treacherous MPs are insisting that they will vote against any attempt to leave the EU without a deal having been made. These idiot politicians have clearly never worked in the real world and they have certainly never been involved in any real negotiations.

Without the ability to walk away and leave the EU without a deal having been made, our negotiators will have no power. And so we will be slaughtered if and when serious negotiations ever take place. Imagine two people walk into a garage to look at new cars. If one of them says, 'We must have that. We simply must buy that today!' then they are screwed. They have no negotiating position because the salesman knows that they cannot leave the showroom without buying the car.

The Brexit fiasco is made infinitely worse by the fact that Theresa May's full cabinet of 23 men and women contains just six individuals who campaigned for Brexit. The other 17 members of the cabinet did not want us to leave the European Union but are now charged with arranging our departure. And this is democracy?

So those are just some of the problems ahead.

We can take our pick.

But, whichever way you look at it, our politicians and the Bank of England have ensured that there is a major financial crisis just around the corner. A lot of people who thought they were quite well off are going to become poor. For those who have saved a little money, who are not greedy but who want to protect their savings against inflation and political mayhem, and who would like a modest income or some growth, finding the best way to invest is like threading your way through a snake infested pit. (For anyone who is interested, everything I know about the general principles of investing is in my book *Moneypower* which is available as an ebook.)

The politicians and the bureaucrats, blessed with taxpayer-funded salaries and fat, inflation-proof pensions, will, of course, remain wealthy and above the turmoil, anxiety and misery which face those of us who pay for their security.

16

Our buyers were supposed to be signing the first part of the purchase paperwork today. I have lost count of the number of appointments which have been made and broken.

This was their suggested date but they have backed out of signing because the mother has suddenly acquired another appointment which is more important than the appointment she and her son agreed to less than a week ago.

These bloody people are unbelievable.

In France the laws seem to favour the buyer so much that the seller seems to have no rights whatsoever. I really don't want to sell the apartment to these damned people. I told Antoinette that I would sell it to them over my dead body and that if I'm allowed, I will leave instructions that even then they won't be allowed to buy the damned place.

The problem is that our damned contract with the estate agent contains a clause which says that if they find a buyer I have to sell it to that buyer. There is no let out clause. Technically and legally the buyers can probably keep us hanging on until the year 3000. By which time, we will all be dust, the apartment will be worth a million times as much and their descendants will be able to buy it from our descendants for the same price as it was last May.

Today, we are on our third notaire.

Our first notaire has gone on holiday (doubtless exhausted by the whole affair) and the notaire who took over from her has also disappeared.

On this singularly unsuccessful journey, the buyers have passed through rude and manipulative, nodding en route at absurd and the barely believable, passed through the villages of farce and fiasco and have finally reached the Dombey style Dickensian gloomy conurbation of Madness where the only redeeming feature lies in the brightening suburb of Good Copy and Grotesque Entertainment.

Our new notaire told me this morning that the mother has now decided that she cannot sign the documents on Wednesday either (as she agreed when she cancelled because of another appointment which had suddenly leapt into her clearly over-crowded calendar) because she is going to do something else instead.

I have no idea what this is.

Another trip around the city on her broomstick, perchance.

I suppose they feel they can't re-use the 'hospital appointment' excuse. Or maybe there is a law in France that people must think up new excuses every time they break agreements. It would not surprise me.

The buyers have steadfastly refused to provide any evidence that they have the money to pay the deposit, let alone the rest of the money they will owe, and our new notaire told me today that he is doubtful that even if they sign they will have enough money to complete as I have asked on or before November 20th. And he implies that there is nothing we could do about it if they do sign and then break the contract.

Our estate agent still believes that the deal can be done. I suspect he also still believes in the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy. I also fear that he is desperate to be paid his reduced commission of 40,000 euros without having to do any more work.

I asked (begged would probably be a more appropriate word) our new notaire to do whatever he can to extricate us from this nightmare of a mess.

I am not hopeful.

When I still hadn't received a reply by the end of the day, I sent a firm note to all three notaires telling them (again) that the deal was now finally over.

Actually, I don't think it's such a bad thing. I may be rationalising but there seem to me to be at least six reasons why holding onto the apartment might prove to be a decent investment after all.

If we had sold next month as planned, I would have probably invested much of the proceeds on the stock market. But stock markets are high. Maybe this isn't the best time to be turning property money into share money.

If Macron does succeed in taming the French unions (even a little bit) there is a chance that France could grow stronger. That would help property prices enormously.

French tax law allows sellers to reduce their tax liability according to the number of years they have held a property. If we just hold onto the apartment for another six months or so, our profits will be enhanced considerably – far more than the holding cost.

American companies are moving employees to Paris because of Brexit. One bank alone is moving 300 highly paid employees to Paris. There will be a growing demand for reasonably expensive properties. And there isn't much on the market because of France's absurd legal restrictions.

The Parisian property market has fallen for several years (largely as a result of Hollande's damaging policies). It is now rising again. The apartment should be worth more by next summer.

Sterling has recovered a little. Where it will be in six months' time? I have no idea, and nor has anyone else. But if we time the sale carefully we could add 100,000 euros to the gain.

We were, to put it bluntly, lied to by someone at the beginning of this fiasco.

I don't believe our buyers could raise the money to buy our cellar let alone the apartment. Time and time again they disappeared, ignored requests for information or quite simply declined to answer essential questions. The result has been frustration, uncertainty and a stressful sense of powerlessness.

We will stick with the estate agent for now and do so for two reasons.

First, neither of us wants to travel to Paris to find a new agent at the moment.

And second, we feel curiously comfortable with our current agent because we feel we can't trust the bastard any more than we could throw him. Sometimes it is good to believe that you cannot trust someone in a situation like this than it is to believe that you can.

What now, I wonder?

Antoinette is worried that the bastards will find some way to sue us now that we have told them they can't buy the apartment. Maybe they were trying to trap us into throwing them out so that they could sue us. Or maybe there was some other plot. Maybe our agent will sue us. Maybe the French Government will confiscate the apartment. Actually, I no longer much care if they do.

But, stuff them all.

We will defend ourselves.

One thing we know for sure is that the buyers don't have much money. Antoinette and I have given ourselves a 100,000 euro budget for starters to cover legal and marketing fees. And since we have been misled and have suffered real financial damage, I rather think that we can, if necessary, counter sue both our buyers and the estate agents for a small fortune.

We have added another lesson to our ever-growing collection. We have learned that the French have absolutely no sense of fair play – particularly where the English are concerned. Indeed, in my now considerable experience, the French are insufferably rude, arrogant and selfish when they are involved in any transaction or activity which involves money. Trusting a Frenchman is like hanging a sign around your neck saying 'Trick Me'.

I made things worse at the beginning by saying to our loathsome estate agent: 'I don't understand how a French property transaction works so I'll have to rely on you.'

Evidence shows that the greatest risks for illness occur when people have little or no control over their lives.

Our buyer had power over us because he had the right to buy the apartment, the ability to decide when to buy it, the power over all the rules. And he and the agent had the knowledge of how the system worked (entirely in his favour).

Amazingly, three notaires agree that the way the law stands he can probably sue us if we try to sell the flat to anyone else or if we do not keep paying the bills, maintenance bills and taxes, and keep it available for him to buy if and whenever he has the money to complete the purchase.

So, he has a good deal of power over us.

We wanted to sell, wanted the whole thing over and finished so that we could get on with the rest of our lives.

But, thanks to French laws which even Kafka would have found astonishing, we are stuck in a nightmare.

However, our plan now is to keep the apartment and not sell it to this buyer even if he finds the money. In the spring of 2018, we will find a new agent, sign a better contract and find a proper buyer with the money to buy the apartment.

We felt better. We can kid ourselves that we have taken back control and liberated ourselves from these evil people.

Today, I have finished the 12th Bilbury book. I think it is the best.

17

Elvis memorabilia has apparently lost its value. I am not surprised. Most of his former fans are dead or dying or selling and not buying.

Similarly, comics and toys and cigarette cards which were valuable are now not valuable. Cricket books have lost their value too because the sport has become a minority interest.

Today, I sat on my bench from Lord's cricket ground, high up on our own stretch of the Jurassic Coast and read old cricket magazines. I found myself reading about C.B.Fry again. His life always makes me feel laughably inadequate. Fry played cricket and football for England and played in an FA Cup Final. He played rugby for Oxford University and held the world long jump record. He was a Captain in the Navy and wrote a number of books. He worked as one of the first radio commentators and was a regular panellist on radio programmes such as Any Questions and the Brains Trust. In his seventies, he was still fit enough to be able to jump backwards, from a standing position, onto a mantelpiece. The Albanian people were so impressed by this English superman that they asked him to be their King. He declined, presumably because he couldn't fit it into his schedule.

In the old *Cricketer* magazine which I was reading today, King Fry had written a review of a book by Australian all-rounder Keith Miller. Fry's articles are always firmly forthright and slightly bizarre but make wonderful reading.

I also enjoy reading the results of the schools matches. The players who later won England caps invariably stand out head and shoulders above the rest.

Down on the beach a dog was barking at the sea. It was the spaniel which comes down every day for half to three quarters of an hour. The dog stands on the edge of the sea and barks continuously while its owner stands proudly on the beach and watches. This presumably makes them both very happy. I find it rather irritating.

An actress I have never heard of complained today that at the start of her career she was 'made' to do an almost nude audition for a part. I suspect she wasn't forced to do anything of the kind. I suspect she was asked to do an almost nude audition and she agreed because she was desperate for the part.

And the corollary is that the other girl, the unknown who didn't want to take her clothes off and who said 'no, thank you' to the producer, is probably now working in Walmart.

The girl working in Walmart is neither famous nor rich but maybe she feels better about herself.

Who knows?

Life is about choices.

Not even self-important actresses have a right to whinge in public if they made choices they later regret.

Am I the only one getting tired of the endless line of minor celebrities complaining that they were molested or propositioned 20 or 30 years ago? If the incident was so bad, why didn't they complain at the time? If they kept quiet to protect their careers then aren't they guilty of aiding the offender? Could they possibly be taking advantage of the current media obsession with the subject to gain a little publicity to help their careers? Where does prostitution start and stop?

We didn't hear a peep today from our flashy estate agent. Maybe he is trying to rescue the deal. I suspect we haven't heard because he thinks that we are desperate to sell. We aren't. We were never desperate to sell. For the last few months, however, we have been desperate to escape from an appalling and fraudulent deal and take back control. And we are happy to wait. I think the Brexit deal is going to be disastrous for Britain. The pound will collapse and our share of the sale price will be much higher because the French will take their capital gains tax on the euro value not the sterling value.

I spent an hour clearing away some of the leaves on the drive. Both sides of the drive are lined with deciduous trees (and one Yew which drops its berries). Most of the trees are beech and silver birch. I cleared away a vast number of leaves with a wide yard broom, a pair of large gauntlets and one of those massive bags builders use for sand and waste. I had already prepared a space at the bottom of the drive where I could dump the leaves. Last year I made the mistake of pulling the bags full of leaves up the drive to a space I had prepared. This year they are going down the drive.

And in a few weeks' time, the hazel trees will start losing their leaves so the whole process will have to start again. (I know that hazel is technically a bush but when they are 40 foot high it seems more sensible to think of them as trees.)

18

I've been trying to buy fireworks without much success. No one seems to sell them anymore. Newsagents always used to be a good source of fireworks. No more. It seems that the laws, rules and regulations controlling the sale of fireworks are now so onerous that no one wants to sell them.

A gardener came to the house in Gloucestershire today to give us a quote for dealing with our overgrown garden. I've had a hell of a job finding someone to come round and cut our grass and weeds. Most Cotswold gardeners describe themselves as 'landscape gardeners' but they won't demean themselves by handling lawnmowers and hedge trimmers.

I found this fellow through one of those internet tricks which seem impossible to avoid. I had typed in the name of our village and the words 'gardener required'. And, immediately, there were the names and contact details of several gardeners in our village.

Only it turned out later that they weren't gardeners in our village. They were gardeners all over the country who were looking for work (and, quite possibly, a chance to scam anyone stupid enough to try to hire a workman through the internet). I suspect that most of these business folk specialise in ripping off the elderly who are tiptoeing through the internet and who, like me, are still cursed with some remnants of trust

Our selection turned up in a smart uniform, driving a lorry that was full of leaves and tree trimmings that I subsequently suspected he had purchased as a job lot from a local branch of Leaves-R-Us.

I should have sent him away when a pheasant saw me and came strolling down the garden towards me.

'Oh, do you keep chickens?' asked the gardener. This, remember, was a man who earns his living looking after gardens.

'It's a pheasant,' I said. I didn't explain that his name was Percy. (All pheasants are, for historical reasons, known to us as Lord Percival and the ones at our house in the Cotswolds are very tame. They come running when they hear my voice.)

'Oh,' he said, clearly surprised.

We walked around the garden. He seemed to recognise grass and he correctly identified an apple tree (not difficult because there were still apples on it) but I wasn't confident that he recognised anything else.

He was, however, very good at spotting things he could do to put up the price. He said he could clear our overgrown patio (whereupon the oak table, bench and chairs were almost hidden by weeds) and trim some beech trees overhanging our garden shed as well as strim and tidy the rest of the garden. They were all things which needed doing. He called me Vernon a good deal. 'Well, Vernon…', 'And so, Vernon…', 'Ah, Vernon…'. It's what all good confidence tricksters do. It makes the mark feel comfortable.

And then, after these gentle preliminaries, we got down to the nitty gritty.

At this point, I am rather overcome with shame and I feel great pain at having to write what comes next.

I was, I suppose, thinking of something in the region of £500; maybe £750. If he had said £1,200 I would have sent him on his way.

'How much is this going to cost me?' I asked.

'£3,000. For that, Vernon, I'll clear your patio, trim the trees and tidy all the garden.'

I stared at him. If he'd asked for the Koh-i-Noor diamond I couldn't have been more surprised. I had been thinking in hundreds rather than thousands. £3,000 was so far out of my ballpark that I lost my frame of reference. I lost all touch with reality. I thought that maybe I was just out of touch. I just stared at him. My lower jaw probably fell an inch and a half.

'I couldn't do it for less than £2,500, Vernon,' he said, while I stared at him and struggled to think of something to say. Naturally, this now seemed cheap.

'There will be three of us for four days, Vernon,' he explained. 'And the equipment and the fuel. All my equipment is top of the range, Vernon. We can start tomorrow.'

Why do we succumb to these smooth talking conmen? Or, more precisely, why did I succumb? I think I know. It was because I am tired of people promising a good deal and not doing anything.

And my new best friend seemed convincing.

I thought he probably would turn up – if for no other reason than that I had no intention of paying him until he'd done the work. And I am tired of people not returning calls; of workmen expressing eagerness and then disappearing to the Maldives for three months. A workman who turns up on time and seems keen is a rarity.

(I still don't understand why workmen don't ever write down the instructions you give them. You tell them what you want. They nod and say 'of course'. But they don't write anything down. And when they come to do the work they've completely forgotten what you want doing. Instead of putting up a shelf in the bathroom they put up a new ceiling on the landing. Instead of painting a bathroom light green they put flowery wallpaper up in the dining room.)

'How would I pay you?' I asked.

'When I've finished, Vernon,' he said. 'You can pay by bank transfer. Or cash would be best.'

'Cheque?' I asked.

'Cheque?' he said, as though I'd suggested paying him in shells or glass beads.

'I could write you a cheque,' I said. 'You know where I live,' I added with a little laugh.

'I do, Vernon,' he said, with just the hint of a hint of a thought of menace. I had visions of gardeners turning up at midnight armed with chainsaws, rakes and bags of potting compost. 'But cash would be best.'

We shook hands. He said his father had taught him to shake hands to cement a deal. You can't argue with a man who trusts a handshake, can you?

I couldn't help wondering to myself if it was legal to pay £2,500 to a gardener in cash. But then I remembered paying that much at auctions where I had bought furniture. They always liked cash. And I'd expect a receipt, of course.

'I don't do internet banking,' I told him.

'So, it's cash then, Vernon,' he said, with a big smile. He didn't seem to mind the prospect of having all those notes to carry home.

'We'll be here in the morning, Vernon,' he promised. In turn I promised to leave the side gate unlocked and I showed him where to park his lorry.

It occurred to me later that it would have been cheaper to ring Harrods in Knightsbridge and ask them to send up a couple of men to do the garden.

19

There's a blues song called 'Born Under a Bad Sign', written by William Bell and Booker T.Jones which contains the line 'If it weren't for bad luck, I wouldn't have no luck at all.'

(Actually, on hunting around I find that pretty much the same words appear in a song called 'Bad Luck Blues' by Lightnin' Slim. That must be a bit of a pisser for Mr Slim or, more likely, his estate.)

I was reminded of this when our new and very expensive gardener had been today.

Oh dear, I've really done it this time.

It quickly transpired that this was about to become another in an apparently unending series of disappointments and frustrations.

He turned up at 10.45 a.m. with his son. There was no sign of the third man who seemed as elusive as Orson Wells in the film of Graham Greene's novel. They brought with them a Heath Robinson contraption which consisted of an engine, an oil drum, a good deal of hose and a power pressure lance of some kind.

Antoinette and I then went out to Bourton-on-the-Whisky for a few hours. (The famous Cotswold village is officially known as Bourton-on-the-Water but these are trying times and so I have renamed it.)

Our first visit was to the Christmas shop; something we'd been looking forward to for a while. To begin with, it seemed to be disappointing.

The crackers they had for sale were awful. All contained the usual mixture of a plastic shoehorn, bits of plastic stationery and a tiny pack of playing cards. Why can't cracker makers be original occasionally? Every damned thing in this year's crackers had been in last year's crackers and the crackers from the year before and the crackers from the year before that. We decided, sadly, that we are not going to bother with crackers this year. First time ever. We had thought of filling our crackers with tiny toys we'd bought ourselves. But both of us had been for weeks looking for suitable bits and pieces that would fit into crackers. And we had both failed. Maybe that's why the manufacturers of crackers for children stick with a small plastic yoyo and a tiny set of skittles.

Next, I wanted to buy some more candles for our Christmas decoration which whizzes round when the heat from the candles rises. The man in the shop told me that they hadn't got any of the thin candles which would fit our device but they did have some thicker candles.

'Well, do you have a device that will take the thicker candles?' I asked.

He said, rather sadly, that they didn't but that they did have some of the things which took the smaller candles.

'So you have the decorations which take the thin candles but you don't have any thin candles and you have the thick candles but you don't have the decorations which take the thick candles?'

He agreed that this was an accurate assessment of the situation.

We looked around and bought three or four new Christmas decorations and some Patchouli oil incense burners and then, while I was paying, I noticed, behind the salesman, a beautiful wooden thingy which was part of the window display. Maybe he had forgotten they had it. The thingy had vanes on the top which were clearly designed to be turned by three candles. It seemed a bit crazy to have a candle powered wooden toy but we like to live dangerously and my Dad used to light real candles on a real Christmas tree festooned with paper streamers so what the hell I bought it. And I bought a large box containing 50 of the thick candles that would almost fit the candle holders.

The rest of our trip was a disappointment. It still seems impossible to find a café, pub or hotel selling decent coffee in Bourton-on-the-Whisky. I still have to resort to buying coffee in a cardboard cup from a local supermarket in order to find something remotely resembling coffee.

And two men with hammers and lots of boarding were shutting up Lloyds Bank which had apparently just closed permanently. There was a notice informing visitors who might want to take out some money that there was another branch with a cash machine in Stow-on-the-Wold. I'm sure that will be a great help to local shopkeepers struggling to stay in business.

And so the world improves and progress marches on.

When we got back home at 3.30 p.m. the gardener had gone. No sign of him. He and his son can't have been at the property for more than around four hours or so.

Now, I have to admit that the patio at the back and the paving at the front of our cottage were transformed. The weeds which had overgrown the whole area were gone. I was pleased. We won't use weedkillers or anything else which might harm the wildlife so this was a huge success.

There were, however, a few problems.

The place was in a terrible mess. The patio areas were covered in mud. The ground floor doors and windows were covered in mud. The inside of our front porch was covered in half an inch of mud. The floor of the conservatory was muddy. Our letterbox was wet and muddy. The front gate had been blasted off its supporting post. There was evidence remaining of what they had eaten. The outside tap had been left on (and was now, apparently, stuck in that position because someone had been rather too rough with it) and the side gate had been left open. None of this was excusable.

That evening I emailed to point out that when I had agreed to the absurdly inflated price for dealing with the garden I had been told that three people would be working for four days. I said how pleased I was with the patios but that we would be obliged if they would hose down the mud they had left behind them.

Knowing what workmen charge in the Cotswolds, the price seems high but by no means impossible. To hire almost any sort of workman, even for labouring work, costs around £200 a day. ('Cash would be fine, thank you', invariably follows any quote.)

I wrote a short limerick to celebrate our new gardener:

There was a young gardener quite thin
Who mowed and who strimmed with some vim
He made such a mess
That I have to confess
I'm thinking of doing him in.

The gardener emailed back to say: ‘Hi Vernon the cleaning was a bit quicker than expected so worked hard and fast so all being good we may be finished late Tuesday or if not we will be finished Wednesday I always estimate on the longest time as not to disappoint my customers but we always pride ourselves in how we work super hard and fast (no tea brakes)’.(sic)

He also told me that he was going to Ireland for a long weekend.

What can you say?

A promise of three men working for four days had suddenly become two men working for one and a half days. That is, twelve working days of labour had been stripped down to three working days of labour. Taking out the cost of hiring the machinery and so on, that turns a steep but not unreasonable £166 per man per day into an utterly outrageous £750 per man per day.

The trouble with conmen is that they don’t just take advantage of greed. They also take advantage of honesty, ignorance and gullibility. The price of £2,500 was now clearly a con. But I agreed to it because it seemed to me that the work involved probably would take 12 man days. And that was what I was told.

My main mistake was, as always, in being too trusting.

I sent the gardener a lengthy email pointing out, as tactfully as I felt able, that he had told me that he would need three men for four days and that he had not explained that for half of the allotted time he would be away in Ireland. ‘You can’t cram a 12 day job (three men for four days) into a 3 day job (two men for one and a half days).

‘You won’t finish on Tuesday. Not if you are going to do the good job you and I want you to do. I know how much work there is and you can’t strim faster than a strimmer strims. The banks of the stream are tricky. And you need to take care around the young trees we have planted.’

I then listed all the work that was left to do.

‘Please take care with everything. The outside tap was fine before. And your pressure squirter has damaged the front gate. We obviously don’t want any more mishaps. I know you want to do a good job. And I am sure you will. It’s what we both want. But you won’t be able to do that and finish on Tuesday.’

Later I received a reply.

‘Hi Vernon there will be three people working on your job from Tuesday. I’m not going to rush the work or lower my standards so please don’t worry everything will be done as agreed however many days that takes so please don’t worry it will all be done for you. Please don’t worry I’m not going to rush or compromise the job.’

Do I believe him?

Actually, I think I do. This may merely show more gullibility on my part. But there is a carrot dangling over the horizon. Because when I invited him to quote, I told him that I was looking for someone to look after the garden on a regular basis.

I am so tired of workmen. They fuss, they whinge, they complain and they are incessantly greedy and demanding. They must have cups of tea and chocolate biscuits and if you don’t provide them they ask for them. They must be allowed to arrive when they want to arrive and to leave when is suitable for them. They leave a mess behind every day and they break things without ever bothering to explain or apologise. And they are largely incompetent. Our back door still has a knob which has to be turned counter-intuitively because the idiot carpenter who repaired it put it on the wrong way round. I am so tired of workmen that I haven’t called anyone to take down four dead trees which need removing and half a dozen which need some serious pruning. One, a beautiful silver birch has grown right over our drawing room chimney and the other day I found a singed branch in the fireplace. I am so tired of workmen that I haven’t called the carpenter we need to do a dozen jobs or the man about new gates or the man to fit solar panels onto the garage only so that we can survive the next power cut. When we get round to it we will need a storage battery too. I don’t remember power cuts in the 1950s. We’re getting something we didn’t get then so it’s progress of a kind, I suppose.

At least our expensive gardener will do the work without our having to be there. And I don’t have to do anything except pay him. I’ll settle for that.

A huge tree at the bottom of our drive in Devon has died quite suddenly. It is not unknown for trees to die mysteriously by the seaside – especially when views are impeded by trunks, branches and leaves. This one was a lovely silver birch.

21

Yesterday we were warned that Storm Brian would arrive today. All coastal properties have been warned to beware. I can’t take the name Brian seriously for a storm. Not that, Brian isn’t a perfectly decent name. Of course it is. I don’t want legions of Brians reaching for the one star review button. I have, in my life, known and supped with several Brians.

But Brian is not a name for a storm any more than Cuthbert or Sidney are suitable names for hurricanes. What drives this yearning to give silly names to bits of the weather? What next: Cloud Claude? Sunny Day Samuel?

I do think it was much better when hurricanes (and hurricanes alone) were given feminine names – like ships. It was, of course, protests from feminists which led to this change. I notice that they didn't complain about the fact that ships are always given feminine names.

(Talking of feminists, why are female actors known as actresses and female poets known as poetesses but female authors and composers simply known as authors and composers?)

It is not generally realised, particularly by those involved in naming storms and hurricanes, but there is something of an art to choosing a good name. Oscar Wilde always named the characters in his plays after places. So, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, he had characters called Basildon, Bracknell, Goring and Worthing. I have started to do the same and many of the characters in my fiction have been taken from signposts we have passed on our travels. I also found that 18th century pirates provide a wonderful variety of good names. The important thing is that the name has to fit the character since, unlike real life, one cannot rely on the character eventually growing to fit into the name.

As it turned out, Storm Brian was more of a Stiff Breeze Brian rather than as advertised.

What a surprise.

The meteorologists will doubtless be terrifying us all with loads of false scares in the years to come – partly to justify their existence and partly to fit in with the global warming myth which is so popular these days. Every breeze, every snowfall, every warm day is now officially a sign of climate change. Everything must be exaggerated. A hot day becomes a heat wave. A windy day is a hurricane. But in truth our weather hasn't changed; it is our way of reporting it that has changed. There has been snow in Scotland and the Peak District for centuries.

(Numerous so-called 'experts' are still claiming that last summer was the hottest on record. I think they must have confused the records for Britain with the records for some other country.)

The Paris authorities seem incapable of following the simplest of instructions.

A few years ago, I tried to persuade them to change the address to which they post their annual tax bills (there are two of them). We went into the town hall in Paris, waited for ages and completed forms for a change of postal address. Men with rubber stamps did a lot of stamping. We were assured that the address had been changed. It hadn't. The bills still went to an old address. It took a host of emails and a score of letters (including several sent by registered mail and two to the mayor of Paris) to persuade the clerks at the Town Hall to make the necessary, very simple alteration.

A year ago, I asked the Town Hall to change my address again.

Naturally, they have ignored the request. The first of this year's bills has been sent to an old address.

You would think, would you not, that they would try harder to ensure that bills went to the correct address?

I'm not writing to the idiots again.

I collected the bill which they sent and put it on the bonfire.

I'll pay their bills when they can be bothered to send them to the correct address. I feel comfortable about this because I am damned sure that if they send the international bailiffs round they will be sent to the wrong address.

22

Louis L'Amour was one of the world's best and most successful storytellers. Pseudo intellectuals (the sort who write reviews for *The Guardian* and who wrote for *The Independent* before it went bust) sneer at writers such as L'Amour. They really shouldn't.

Louis L'Amour wrote Westerns and he wrote them with affection and with an unparalleled knowledge of the world about which he wrote. He was brilliantly concise but I'm willing to bet he was not well or often reviewed on the literary pages. His books have sold over 300 million copies and counting.

Here is the first sentence of his novel Fallon: 'Marco Fallon was a stranger to the town of Seven Pines, and fortunately for him he was a stranger with a fast horse.'

That one sentence sets the scene brilliantly. It tells you a good deal about Fallon and the town of Seven Pines and gives you a good idea about what is going to happen. You want to read on and to know more. You can't write better than that.

I still think the best training ground for writers is writing drama reviews. The writer has to produce 300,500 or 800 words to fit a slot which has been kept for a precise number of words in 30 to 45 minutes after the end of a performance.

Ah, those were the days.

When I was a medical student, I wrote play reviews for a number of publications including *The Birmingham Post* and I spent many an evening in a smelly, cold telephone box, struggling to read notes which I had scribbled in the dark. I was, I seem to remember, paid £3 per review but the newspaper allowed me to use their contract with a local taxi service in order to get back home afterwards. You could buy stuff for £3 in those days.

23

London is now going to charge the drivers of vehicles which were registered prior to 2006 an extra £10 (in addition to the £11.50 congestion charge) to enter central London. The Mayor, Sadiq Khan says that the new charge will cost taxpayers £7 million to collect. Just how it will cost so much to collect all those hefty fees he did not explain. It is, perhaps, a good job that Mr Khan doesn't run a corner shop.

The year 2006 has been selected because vehicles which were registered before then do not meet EU directives regulating vehicle emissions.

The important point, however, which no one seems to have noticed, is that the new charge will discriminate against the poor.

Only people who can't afford posh new cars and vans drive vehicles which are over a decade old. And because they are poor, those individuals will be penalised.

Every time he does anything, the Mayor of London goes further and further down in my estimation. I read recently that he is forcing builders to make houses without car parking spaces. I assume he thinks that if people don't have a garage or a driveway they will not buy cars. This is nonsense. They will simply waste time struggling to park their cars on the street – where they will be prey to vandals. I wonder if Mr Khan walks to work every day? Or maybe London's tax payers pay for a nice limousine with a chauffeur.

As part of my on-going education process, I look into betting shops occasionally. I don't really know why I do this except for the fact that it always cheers me up because everyone in there, punters and staff, looks seedy and glum. No one ever laughs in betting shops, do they? No one ever seems happy? Even the occasional winners look as miserable as if they'd just been told they had been selected for a tax audit.

We heard today from one of our notaires in Paris. It seems that our buyers are back, like a metastasising cancer.

Unbelievably, our erstwhile buyer is now threatening to sue me for not selling the apartment to him even though he does not have the money to buy it. I wrote to our notaire to ask how long we must wait for him to find the money. I do not like being threatened; especially by a scum sucking, snail crunching, frog amputating French branleur.

Apparently, it does not matter that the estate agent told me that the Achat was not a legal document.

It does not matter that I was lied to and tricked into signing the Achat under false pretences (I was told he did not need a loan when he does).

It does not matter that the buyers have repeatedly broken promises.

It does not matter that one person signed the Achat but two are now buying.

It does not matter that according to our notaire, the buyers agreed to rip up the Achat and agreed that if they did not attend the signing on the 16th October they would withdraw from the whole procedure.

And it certainly doesn't matter that they don't have the money to buy the apartment.

The French, it seems, don't care much for logic or common sense. I get the impression that the only thing that matters is that the French bastard must prevail.

So, the bottom line is that I am not allowed to take the damned apartment off the market. I am forced by French law to sell the apartment to people who do not have the money to buy it and who have failed to borrow the money to buy it.

The threat of a lawsuit means that we are not allowed to offer the apartment to anyone else. The estate agent refuses to offer the apartment to other potential buyers. And the notaire refuses to handle it.

So we are stuck, in limbo.

A buyer can, it seems, legally spend years prevaricating and preventing us from finding another buyer. During that time, the value of our apartment will doubtless go up so the buyer can eventually hand over his cash in two years' time and then put it straight onto the market and make a huge profit. (The French property market is rising at last and is out of the doldrums in which it has been settled for years.)

I wrote to our notaire saying that the deposit must now go back up to 10% because if the buyers do not complete the purchase (very likely) and we have emptied out all our furniture (which we have to do before the completion signing) then we will have an empty and useless apartment.

I also said that they must produce evidence that they have the money for the entire purchase before they sign. And I asked to be told the maximum time they can delay after the first signing. I do not trust these damned people an inch. I loathe and detest them. They have cheated and lied and behaved like scum. Moreover they have, so it seems to me, been aided and abetted by our estate agent.

And I pointed out that if the buyers won't do all this then I will hire a lawyer to take action. It now seems possible that according to French law I can force the buyers to buy an apartment they cannot afford so, presumably, they will then be willing to tear up the Achat they signed in bad faith. I also pointed out that the publicity will not be terribly good for the agents, the buyers or, indeed, the notaires.

If the French insist on playing tough then we will play tough too. We have been manipulated and bullied by these bastards ever since last June.

Afterwards I went outside and stood on our cliff, faced across the Channel and waved two fingers, Agincourt style, at France. I then went back indoors and destroyed everything I have which was bought in France, made by the French or which could be thought to have any sort of French connection. Once loved CDs by Charles Trenet, Maurice Chevalier, Mistinguett, Edith Piaf, Jean Sablon and Fernandel all ended up in the charity bag. I kept the Johnny Hallyday because he was so pissed off with France that he emigrated. I also got rid of all my French born notebooks – the ones which are printed with squared, mathematical style markings.

We have just two bottles of champagne left.

Some lucky local charity shop can have those. It is, incidentally, a nonsense that the EU says that champagne must be made in one region of France. Champagne was invented in England, which is not yet part of France.

24

I've decided to keep the champagne. It is, I have decided, perfectly possible to loathe the French but to drink champagne.

Legend has it that the musk deer wanders the forests constantly searching for the source of the beautiful odour it can smell, but never realising that the scent is its own.

There's a moral hiding in there somewhere.

25

We planned to go up to Gloucestershire today to see how the world's most expensive gardener was getting on. We planned to arrive at around 2 p.m. and left in plenty of time. We managed to get all the way up the motorway without any lane closures (something of a miracle on the M5 now that the police have introduced Time Wasting Motorway Regulations and are doubtless given bonuses if they manage to create big queues) but once we got near to Stroud we found ourselves in a massive queue.

Thirty minutes later, we found the cause of the hold up. It wasn't a sweet wrapper in a gutter or a leaf on the road. Nothing as serious as either of those. Workmen who had been doing something to the road had departed but had left their traffic lights in operation on a very busy roundabout. There were enormous queues in all directions and the queues were rapidly lengthening. Thousands of motorists were wasting time, becoming dangerously exasperated and burning up vast quantities of diesel and petrol. The air around the town was thick with poisonous fumes. No workmen. No machinery. Nothing happening. No hole in the road. Just traffic lights set to cause maximum disruption.

Gloucestershire really is the home of the needless traffic jam. The Highways Department seems to have total contempt for road users.

Well, he may have been expensive but our gardener has done what he said he would do. The slabbed areas at both the back and front of the house (he calls them our patio but we've never thought of ourselves as patio people) are sparkling and weedless. Remarkable.

We took a tour of the garden to see what had been done. I had been to the bank and had the fee (£2,500 in cash) in my pocket.

We were about half way round when I heard a plaintive cry behind us. Antoinette, who was bravely attempting to keep up with us, was breathless and at a standstill. She suffers terribly from palpitations and all the manifestations of a malfunctioning heart if she tries to do too much.

The grass and bushes have all been cut. (So, too have my twenty lavender bushes, my huge sage bush, my mint collection, the new hedge I had planted and my rosemary bushes. I can't blame him. They were all so overgrown that they were invisible.) It is comforting to know that while we have been away the air has been rent by the constant sound of three strimmers a strimming.

Naturally, one of our particularly nasty neighbours had taken advantage of our absence to ask the gardener to cut our hedges to improve his view of the countryside. Fortunately, I had warned the gardener that this would happen.

This is the neighbour who complained about us parking our vehicles on our land outside our garage because they spoilt their view and prevented them parking on our land. They also complained when a builder dismantled a gateway which was dangerous and collapsing. And when the previous owners of the property applied for planning permission to build a stable for the children's ponies they objected – even though the stable would not have interfered with their views in the slightest way. And it seems that every time a gardener or a utility van comes within shouting distance they ask for our bushes and trees to be cut back. Nasty people.

The gardener who did the job with his wife and son, may be absurdly, egregiously, indecently, obscenely overpriced but I don't mind for two reasons. First, he came when he said he would come. Second, he finished the job without disappearing in the middle of it. It was all over when he said it would be. And those are rare and special qualities these days. He was also polite without being unduly false or obsequious.

Those are, I suspect, qualities which are the secret of success for anyone in a service industry. If you do things then you can overcharge with impunity.

When the gardener had gone, I looked around the garden. 'Well,' I said, looking up at the beech trees which had been pruned. 'There will be less leaves to sweep up from around the shed.'

'Fewer leaves,' said Antoinette, automatically. 'It's a countable noun.'

Antoinette edits my books and has studied the vagaries of the English language at far greater length and depth than I have.

'Who fucking well counts leaves?' I demanded.

'Good point,' replied Antoinette. 'But you could if you wanted to.'

I looked at her.

'OK,' she sighed. 'Less leaves.'

26

We went into Cheltenham to do a little light and early Christmas shopping. There was, inevitably, a lengthy hold up, caused by some traffic lights which were there all by themselves. There were no workmen, no lorries, nothing happening – just traffic lights and long queues. This happens everywhere these days but seems particularly likely to happen in Gloucestershire. I assume that the problem is that the department which does the digging is separate to the department which puts up the traffic lights. A little coordination would save motorists many hours and improve the nation's productively massively. But I suspect that no one working for the council cares about these things.

I went into Holland Barrett to buy more sunflower seeds for the birds. (It is nigh on impossible to find sunflower seeds or peanuts elsewhere and my attempts to have them delivered by courier have been disastrous.) Two small girls of about ten were standing in front of me. When an assistant decided to do a little light serving he picked up one of my packets which I had placed on the side of the counter because they were heavy and I had a lot of other things to carry.

'This little girl is in front of me,' I pointed out.

And then an awful thought occurred to me. Are elderly, white males allowed to even mention the existence of little girls? And are they allowed to call them little girls.

'Sorry,' I said, correcting myself. 'Young lady.'

The two girls giggled.

I then watched in horror as a male assistant of about 30 asked the girl for her email address. I realised that he was trying to sign her up for some sort of customer programme.

When I'd finished my shopping I sat in the Old Restoration (which remains mercifully unrestored, I'm pleased to say), read and worked on my next book. At the next table, two men in their fifties compared mobile telephones and talked endlessly and knowledgeably about all the things they could do. Sadly, instead of doing them they just sat there and talked about them.

Later, I tried to persuade a BBC employee to watch my YouTube video on the history of the EU but he simply refused. He obviously didn't want to be confronted with the truth in case it upset him. It has been established, to no one's surprise, that during the Referendum on whether or not Britain should leave the EU, the BBC continued its outrageous bias in favour of the EU. Far more pro-EU speakers were allowed to air their views on BBC programmes and the BBC consistently drew attention to perceived problems which might arise if Britain did leave the EU. (The BBC was of course, worried that if Britain left the EU it probably would not receive any more money from the EU.) It is beyond outrageous that the BBC should continue to demand that it receives vast amounts of taxpayers' money (through the absurd licence fee system) rather than paying its own way. The BBC is already corrupt. Let it take money from whomever it likes – but not from British citizens who dislike its politics.

I decided to move my pair of stone eagles down to Devon. A few years ago, I had to leave the stone bases behind because I simply couldn't lift them. (When I was younger, I could move them easily so I assume that the lichen they have accumulated must weigh more than you would think.) I picked up the first eagle, knees bent to spare my back, and hugged it to my stomach and chest. There was a hoot or toot of protest. I nearly dropped the darned thing. I put it down and picked it up again. Another toot. It frightened the living daylights of me. Whoever heard of stone eagles tooting? Or hooting for that matter?

And then I realised that I keep an old-fashioned bicycle horn in my jacket pocket. (The horn is there, at Antoinette's insistence, so that if I fall while working in the garden I can call for help.)

Phew.

I managed to carry the two eagles up to the top gate and put them both into the back of the Mitsubishi pick-up truck. The back of the truck (which carries a ton) went down noticeably.

When we got back to Devon we found that the Bentley, which we had left parked, was covered in snails. We spent twenty minutes picking them all off and putting them back into some bushes. I hate to think what the folk at the Bentley garage would have said if they collected it for cleaning and found that before they could start work they had to remove a slime of happy snails.

When I got indoors, I found a selection of bills had been sent to me from France. The electricity and gas company want paying. The phone company wants paying. The agents who make a mess of running the building want paying. And of course the city of Paris wants its taxes.

Most of these used to be paid by direct debit. The others were paid with a cheque drawn on our account at Barclays in Paris. However, now that I have closed the account, but still not sold the apartment, the paying of the bills is rather more of a problem. So I stuffed the paper bills into the bin (to be incinerated) and deleted the bills that came by email.

Sorted!

27

Have you noticed with websites these days that if you cannot remember your password they will send you a link so that you can create a new password? So anyone who hacks into your emails can easily and quickly create new passwords to replace all the ones you chose yourself.

I've still been trying to buy fireworks without success. Antoinette and I thought we would have our own firework display on the cliff top but it looks as though our fun is going to be thwarted.

The problem is that no one seems to sell fireworks. There was a time when every corner shop sold them. No more. The rules and regulations are so strict (with everyone in Westminster worried that someone will empty all the gunpowder out of the Roman Candles, use an unfurled Catherine Wheel as a fuse and wake up Parliament) that hardly anyone sells them anymore.

Eventually Antoinette found that it is possible to order them from Tesco.

So I gave my date of birth and ordered £150 of rockets and things that go fizz in the night. They will be delivered tomorrow. This is good because our groceries are also delivered on Saturday. And Monday we are off to a local auction. We've been looking forward to it for weeks.

Well, that's what we thought.

But later, we had an email from Tesco to say that instead of bringing them on Saturday, as agreed, our fireworks will now be delivered on Monday between the hours of 7 a.m. and 7 p.m.

Great.

If they think I am getting up at 7 a.m. to take delivery of my fireworks then they have another thing coming. But it still means that we have to stay in all day and listen out for the doorbell.

And now our trip to the auction is impossible. Thank you, Tesco. We've put hefty advance bids on four lots but we won't be able to go there to see what's happening.

There has, of course, been no email from our notaire offering another date on which the buyers can fail to sign to buy our apartment.

Antoinette has come up with what I think is a slightly amended version of our excellent plan.

Our plan now is to go to Paris in January and take the keys back from the agent. We will then fire the useless bastard.

Before we go, we will fix an appointment with a lawyer in Paris. And when we are there we will give him fistfuls of euros so that he can sue the buyer.

The law allows the buyer to sue us and force us to sell the apartment to him but I am now told that the same stupid law also allows us to sue him to force him to buy the apartment from us. It isn't difficult to see why the French have a reputation for being mean, devious and grasping. It probably has something to do with the fact that they are mean, grasping and devious. Since he doesn't have the money to buy the cellar, this will be a silly waste of time but it should bring the whole sorry business to a head. It is vital for this plan to work that we can tell the lawyer that we are able to show that we have been keen to sell but that he has steadfastly avoided buying the apartment. And so the longer we go without hearing from him the better it will be for us. I no longer look at my emails hoping that there will be something from the notaire.

(The strange thing is that in France it is illegal not to go to someone's aid if they are in need. And yet nothing causes more illness and death than stress and the French property system seems to have been designed to cause the maximum amount of stress to the seller. Buyers who enjoy the system should remember that they too will probably become sellers one day. The other irony is that the Paris Mayor has pushed up taxes in order to encourage foreigners to leave the city. Well, Madame Maire, we tried. But our apartment has now been empty for six months thanks to your system.)

The global financial situation has changed.

Brexit is said to be turning bad but despite the problems created by the EU (and by Poland, France and Germany in particular) the official figures show that Britain is growing at a rate unforeseen by the so-called experts at the Treasury and the Bank of England. Britain will save £90 billion in EU trade tariffs alone when we leave the EU. Despite the politically biased prognostications of the Bank of England, the Treasury and slavish, neoNazi newspapers such as the *Financial Times* there seems no doubt that Britain will boom if and when we finally quit the evil conspiracy which is the EU.

Meanwhile it seems clear that the Bank of England is certain to raise interest rates and so sterling is rising. Every 1% rise in the currency means a £10,000 loss to us. We no longer want to sell the apartment at this time and we will do whatever we can to avoid selling it at the moment. (The rise in the currency is also particularly painful since most of my income is in American dollars.)

And when all this sorry business is over it will be a joy to write some articles for British and American magazines explaining why people shouldn't buy property in Paris.

28

The tax people are now surely the greatest threat to our privacy. They obtain information about us all from our tax returns, of course, but they also acquire information from banks, credit card companies, Land Registry reports, and social media.

Lawyers and accountants and all other professional advisers must give information to HMRC and HMRC has acquired the right to force Apple, amazon and companies such as Airbnb to give them data too.

PayPal gives HMRC information and so do currency exchange services. I suspect that eBay does so too. Overseas governments hand over information and so do local authorities.

And, of course, there are the 113,000 reports a year which HMRC receives from members of the public (aka snitches). Each year the taxman pays out £500,000 to sneaks.

And then there is the information which is stolen. If you or I buy stolen information (or anything else) we will get arrested but when HMRC buys stolen information it is members of the public who go to prison. I really don't understand how that works.

The odd thing is that HMRC regards all taxpayers as criminals who have not yet been caught and its modus operandi is to strike fear into the hearts of every citizen. Tax inspectors sometimes forget that they are servants of the State and that the State exists to serve the citizens.

These days, the authorities everywhere are buying up stolen bank details and using taxpayers' money to do so.

The German police, for example, have just handed over five million euros of German taxpayers' money for a large stache of documents stolen from a Panamanian law firm.

The *Financial Times* is becoming ever more desperate in its fear and loathing of Brexit and Brexiteers. Today I saw a news story about a hedge fund manager called Crispin Odey who has had a bad time recently and whose funds have done poorly. The *FT* cannot resist describing Mr Odey as 'The Brexit-backing investor'. The phrase is irrelevant but the implication seems to be that his Brexit-backing has led to his downfall.

Ignorance about how and when the EU was founded continues to astound me. Today, in an editorial, the *Daily Telegraph* repeated the nonsense about the EU's founding which is now so widely believed. 'It was founded in the post-war years to create a more unified, democratic Europe, one that would be so rich and stable that extremism would wither away.'

This is such total bollocks.

29

Thinking again of the War, I remember my father. It is strange how the Second World War brought comradeship to so many and is remembered with a strange nostalgia which the First World War (aka the Great War) never brought.

My father was a company director and an inventor and designer (he invented domestic circuit breakers though sadly on a ridiculously modest salary at the time) but served in the Navy in the Second World War and throughout his 80s he referred to himself exclusively as being an ex-Royal Navy man.

In the 1880s, Germany's Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck decided to prick the balloon of developing demands for a more socialist approach to politics, by introducing a State pension programme for older Germans who had stopped working.

Bismarck and the German Emperor William the 1st argued before the Reichstag that people who had reached the age of 70 should receive a State pension. This was later reduced to 65 since 65 was, at the time, the average German life expectancy.

In Britain, the Old-Age Pensions Act of 1908 proposed a weekly pension of 5 shillings a week to the half a million citizens who were over the age of 70. Married couples received 7 shillings and 6 pence a week. The pension age in Britain was also later lowered to the age of 65.

(The large number of individuals eligible for a pension will probably startle those who wrongly believe that until 2016, average life expectation was no more than 30 or so and that anyone surviving into their 50s was a freak worthy of a starring role in a fair, billed alongside the bearded lady and an obligatory dwarf. Life expectation for adults has hardly changed in the last century. What has changed is that infant mortality figures have fallen dramatically. It was high infant mortality figures which brought down overall life expectation figures.)

In 1935, Germany's proposed retirement age of 65 was selected for a retirement age in the US when President Franklin Roosevelt introduced the idea of State pensions into the US.

And the same age has, for years, been the generally accepted age at which workers could expect to retire and receive a pension.

It seems entirely reasonable that older people should be entitled to retire at some pre-determined age, should they wish to do so.

But although it seems equally unreasonable that many older people are forced to retire, little or nothing is done to stop it happening. It is against the law in most civilised countries to force individuals to retire at a certain age. But that doesn't stop it happening.

For a quarter of a century, I have been warning that Britain's pension system is screwed. Every Government I can remember has made things more complicated (and therefore worse) and Gordon Brown's greedy grab from private pensions buggered things up for everyone not entitled to receive a civil service (or MPs) pension. But things are getting worse by the year. In my book *Stuffed!* I pointed out that even people working for the Government and for local authorities can no longer rely on the pensions they have been told to expect. There simply won't be enough money.

The UK now has a pension shortfall of £4 trillion. This is rising rapidly and will reach £33 trillion by the middle of this century. That is serious money – even more than Tony Blair earns from advising American banks et al. This means that our current shortfall is greater than the country's GDP and so things can only get worse – much worse.

Workers throughout the developed world can usually rely on government pension schemes to replace two thirds of the income they enjoyed when they were working. But in the UK, pensioners receive only just over a third of their working income. British pensioners are worse off than pensioners anywhere in the world. (Apart from countries where loin cloths are usual daily wear.)

I paid National Insurance stamps for over 40 years but my State pension wouldn't pay our heating bill.

Future pensioners in the UK will have four choices.

They can build up a pension. (This is tricky because successive governments keep changing the rules).

They can save and put money aside for their old age. (This is not very productive with interest rates at 0%.)

They can keep on working. (Not easy if you are bricklayer. And anyway this option means that younger workers can't find employment.)

Or they can choose between eating and keeping warm.

I opened the water bill for our house in Gloucester today. It came a few days ago but I like to keep these exciting things so that I can savour them for a while.

For the first time in my life I actually looked at the Severn Trent bill for some reason and noticed that a big chunk of the price was for 'Surface water drainage', described as 'water that comes off roofs, driveways and other parts of your property, which ends up in our sewer network.'

But we don't have any drains around our place in Gloucestershire. And Severn Trent must know that. So I've written asking for a reduction in our bill and a refund for the last umpteen years.

If they don't simply ignore us they will probably argue that I should have told them before now that they are charging for a service they don't provide.

But they know where our house is and they know where their drains run. Don't they have a responsibility to send our honest bills?

30

I got up late and only just managed to cram breakfast in before lunchtime.

Antoinette did suggest that I might miss breakfast completely, or combine it with lunch in what it is now, I believe, known as 'brunch'.

But I suspect that this is a slippery slope.

Once standards start to go then where will it all end? One has to ensure that the days are properly structured: breakfast, elevenses, luncheon, afternoon tea, dinner, supper.

So, I had just about finished munching my way through my toast and marmalade when Antoinette put luncheon on the table.

I see that researchers from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine have reported that MRSA, the antibiotic superbug usually associated with hospital infections, is now widespread in the general community.

To say that I am not surprised would be an under-statement. I have been predicting exactly this for more than a decade.

Inevitably, patients will get the blame.

But patients aren't the problem.

And nor are hospital visitors (most of whom happily wash their hands with cleanser every time they go into or out of a ward).

It is the staff who are the problem.

Every time I see another nurse doing her shopping in her hospital uniform I want to scream at her.

Hospital staff, particularly those working in the NHS, seem to have absolutely no understanding of how bugs are spread. And so they wander around in their contaminated uniforms. And I wonder how many of them wash their hands before they go out into the world? Those nurses are a deadly danger to us all. Now we must all be extra vigilant all the time. We must all wash our hands and use antiseptic wipes frequently. MRSA kills fast.

Every time you see a nurse walking down the street or in a shop you are looking at a health care idiot who doesn't understand the first thing about hygiene – or how dangerous bugs are spread. It is pointless to tell visitors to wipe their hands with antibacterial gel when the staff are too stupid. Last week I stood in a queue next to a man wearing theatre scrub greens and theatre slip on shoes. Later I saw two nurses in the street – both wearing their uniforms.

I called a tree surgeon this morning about our tree problems. He is coming around this evening at around 7 p.m. I wonder if he realises that it will be dark then and that our garden is fairly large and rough going even in the daylight.

We won two of the four lots that we had bid on at the auction we visited the other day. We put bids down on paper though I always feel this is terribly risk, especially when you don't know the nature of the auctioneers. It is frighteningly easy for a corrupt auctioneer to take advantage of bids left by bidders who can't be present. All he has to do is take a few bids off the wall in order to ensure that you pay a price which is at or somewhere near to your final bid price. We won a beautiful bronze bull in the style of the sculptor Barye and another bookcase to add to our growing collection. We missed out on a rather dull looking wardrobe for a spare bedroom and a beautiful Victorian scrapbook. I really wanted to buy the scrapbook for Antoinette but I was the underbidder. I should have been braver. I always say that when I miss out on something.

I asked a solar company to give us a quote for putting solar panels on our garage. They emailed back to say that they wouldn't do it because the rake on our garage roof isn't sufficiently steep. It is a fairly normal roof, it cannot be seen from the road and if you try to find it on a Google satellite map all you see are trees so I'm not sure why they have come to this conclusion.

Later a good friend who runs a manufacturing business emailed me and mentioned, en passant, that when he needs new staff, he only interviews applicants who are 45-years-old or older.

He says that younger workers make useless employees.

31

The tree surgeon didn't turn up yesterday evening. He got lost in the lanes. He turned up this morning. He agreed that it was probably a good thing that he got lost in the dark last night and didn't come to look at our trees in the black of a moonless night. He looks about 16 and I suspect that tree surgeons are, like ski jumpers, all young because anyone over the age of 35 has more sense than to shin up a tree and cut off branches. He told me that he is properly trained and went to college, courtesy of his Grandma, and he certainly knows his trees. He told me that it is unusual to find anything other than fir trees this close to the sea and said he thinks it's because of something in the sea air. We live in a very sheltered spot and maybe that has something to do with the fact that we have an astonishing variety of trees in the garden.

The tree surgeon is going to take down four trees which are dead (three of them being silver birch and one a spruce), top and shape a silver birch which hangs over the chimney to the fireplace we use most often, and remove dead branches from another three trees. He estimates that it will take him and his companion two and a half days to do the work and wants £700. I think that is fair and we shook hands on the deal. It is certainly rather cheaper than the £2,500 (in cash) which I paid last week to have our grass cut in Gloucestershire. Having a garden is an expensive business these days. Having two is twice as expensive. But that's entirely our fault. We have (literally) thousands invested in mowers and strimmers and other equipment.

I asked the tree man about the beech which a neighbour wants us to trim so that he can see more of the sea but the surgeon agreed with me that if we take the top off one beech then we will have to take the tops off all the beeches in that particular row. And that will take a week, cost us thousands, and lose us some privacy. So the beech trees are staying as they are and the neighbour will have to put up with a partial sea view. The tree surgeon, whom I now decided looks about 14-years-old, said he'd be with us early Thursday morning and would stay until six p.m. He said that he could clear away and chop up branches in the gloaming. (He didn't actually say gloaming.) Naively I was impressed by this.

After he had gone, I spent the best part of an hour sweeping up more leaves. Few things are more annoying than sweeping a long driveway almost clear of leaves and then walking back up the driveway across a carpet of newly fallen leaves. A neighbour in Gloucestershire proudly told me the other day that he had bought himself a new powered leaf sweeper to save him the effort of sweeping up his leaves. He sees no irony in the fact that a couple of months ago he joined a gym so that he could get some exercise.

A friend of mine died today. He was loveable, vague and forgetful. Antoinette and I were once invited to dinner with him and his wife. We got there on time but when we pressed the doorbell there was no response. Since the door was open, we let ourselves in. Within the next fifteen minutes three other couples arrived. So then there were eight of us in the living room. But there was still no sight of a host or hostess. We could smell food cooking in the oven and we were all worried that our host and hostess might have been kidnapped or had an accident.

Half an hour later, the host turned up. He had been playing golf and had stopped in the clubhouse for a drink. He had forgotten about the dinner party.

Twenty minutes later, the hostess turned up. She had been to her Art Class and had been chatting to a friend. She hadn't forgotten us but didn't think we would mind waiting.

How could anyone be cross with such folk?

I told Antoinette that we have to be half an hour late for our chum's funeral. It's only polite and he would appreciate the gesture.

We'll get there half way through.

I decided today to start writing a new Mrs Caldicot. I often wonder what she and the crowd are up to.

The Mrs Caldicot books were ignored by critics when they came out, although the film of the first book started a trend for movies about older citizens and spawned a series of films about feisty old folk. *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War* (the movie) has proved enormously popular and enduring yet when it came out it was roundly criticised by reviewers who presumably could not abide the notion of a film about older people and who were, I seemed, particularly offended by the thought of an old woman sticking up for herself. (The *Guardian* was, predictably, particularly scathing. How dare anyone write something celebrating the independence and spirit of older folk?)

Fortunately, readers and cinema audiences loved the book and the film.

So I'm now going to write a third book about Mrs Caldicot and her chums.

I have decided to send her and the residents of her nursing home to Paris (Mrs Caldicot had always wanted to go there).

So I need to find an excuse to send her there for a short holiday.

In the second novel about her (called *Mrs Caldicot's Knickerbocker Glory*) Mrs Caldicot married Jenkins, the newspaper editor who befriended her. But I can't let Jenkins go to Paris with them because he is far too competent and would sort out the inevitable problems far too quickly – thereby destroying the story and the fun.

So I also need a reason for him not to go. And do I send all the residents to Paris? And do I send the staff?

Then, of course, the fun really starts. What adventures will they have? What will go right? What will go wrong? What disasters will there be?

I'm very looking forward to seeing what happens. I'm hoping that once I get started, Mrs Caldicot and her chums will write the book for me.

I was going to write another thriller. Indeed, I had spent a few weeks writing the plot for one. But the problem is that it will confuse readers.

I've already written a couple of thrillers (*Deadline* and *Tunnel*) and a science fiction satirical docudrama about the European Union in the future (*Revolt*) but the readers of books with my name on expect me to write light comedy.

Authors and others always used pen names because it was assumed that readers wouldn't be able to cope with one person being a tennis player and an astronomer.

I was told that people don't like anyone masquerading as anything remotely resembling a Renaissance man or woman.

At least that was the thought a few decades ago. I suspect things have changed a good deal

However, if I write under a pen name no one will buy one unless I promote myself on social media. And I really can't bear the thought of doing that.

I can't bear the thought of literary agents either. I never had much luck with them. The first one I had (a posh London agency called Curtis Brown) sold a number of books for me but seemed confused because I didn't write the same book over and over again.

When I wrote *Tunnel* (a novel about a fire in the Channel Tunnel – which I wrote many years before the real Tunnel was built) my agent refused to handle it because she said it wasn't the sort of thing I wrote. I then put a pen name on it and sold it to Robert Hale.

Another agent refused to handle a diet book I wrote (*Eat Green and Lose Weight*) because she didn't want to become type cast (she had just sold a diet book for an acquaintance of mine to whom I had recommended her). Luckily, however, I sold the diet book very successfully to Century.

And my third agent refused to handle *Alice's Diary* (even though it was written anonymously) because she said it wasn't the sort of thing I wrote.

I had books published by all the leading paperback houses (Arrow, Pan, Penguin, Corgi, Mandarin and Star, etc.) and most of the leading hardback publishers (RKP, Thames and Hudson, Sidgwick and Jackson, Macmillan, etc.) but the failure of anyone to see the potential for Alice depressed me somewhat. That was when I started self-publishing. And for years, *Alice's Diary* sold and sold and sold. We printed 10,000 at a time and could hardly keep it in print. If it had been published by a main stream publisher, it would have been in the top ten fiction lists for a decade. But the people who made up the bestseller lists in those days were snooty bastards and they didn't count books which were self-published.

I seem to have wandered a long way off the point.

I had spent two months planning the new thriller so it's sad to abandon it. I think it would have been quite fun to write. But it could have been frustrating and disappointing.

Having said that, I am writing the Mrs Caldicot because I want to write it, rather than because I want it to sell loads of copies.

As a writer, true liberation comes when you write stuff you want to write, rather than stuff you have to write.

But first I need a bible – a list of all the characters who appeared in the existing two books, together with their appearances, ages, peculiarities, likes, dislikes and so on. In the past, I have written books in which characters changed age and appearance with rather startling frequency. I am by no means the only author to have done this.

I wrote *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War* in 1993 and *Mrs Caldicot's Knickerbocker Glory* in 2003 so I need to read them both again and take fairly extensive notes before I can start on a third volume of Caldicot adventures.

We had a promotional letter from Severn Trent water. The headline was, 'Be prepared for unexpected problems with this plumbing offer.'

I wonder what unexpected problems there could be with their plumbing offer?

How amazingly honest of them.

November

1

Antoinette noticed this morning that I now have curly hair. Or, more accurately, what hair I have left is curly. This is strange. I had curly hair when I was very small but for over six decades, I have had dead straight hair. Now it's gone curly again. Maybe this is God's idea of symmetry.

Moreover, Antoinette has noticed that my hair (what there is of it) goes very curly just before it rains. This phenomenon is, she assures me, far more reliable than the Meteorological Office. I am thinking of renting my hair out to companies who need an accurate weather forecast.

As I now do every morning, I threw two apples out onto the lawn. Before the apples stopped rolling, a rabbit who had been waiting just out of sight darted out grabbed one of the apples, and ran off up the slope of our upper lawn. It was a brilliant interception. And I was absolutely delighted to see that at least one rabbit enjoys his daily apple so much that he is prepared to wait for it to arrive.

After breakfast, we drove along the coast to Sidmouth for the day.

We went for a coffee and the minute we'd sat down, a woman with a pile of woofy dogs sat down right next to me. Dog owners are unbelievably selfish and spoil so many joyful occasions. I love animals and quite like dogs but when I am sitting in a café, I don't want three strange dogs sniffing my leg, growling, baring their teeth and barking at me. It isn't the dogs' fault, of course. It's the owners who are thoughtless. Why are people allowed to take dogs into an establishment selling food?

'I hope you don't think I'm rude,' I said to the woman seemingly in charge of the dogs. 'But I'm allergic to dogs.' I picked up my coffee and Antoinette picked up her mint tea and we moved to another table.

'Well you shouldn't go out in public then,' snapped the woman. 'Or just stay out of cafés.'

Goodwill, peace and understanding.

While in Sidmouth, I fell off a pavement.

Antoinette thought it was simply because I am a little wobbly these days. But it wasn't. In the space of a few minutes, I saw two other people fall off the same pavement. One of them fell very heavily and was lucky to avoid breaking a hip or a limb. The trouble is that the folk who designed the pavement and the road surface arranged them in such a way that it is almost impossible to tell where the pavement ends and the roadway starts. The result is that pedestrians simply fall off the kerb. Antoinette did exactly the same thing as we walked back to the car park.

On the way back from Sidmouth, I was horrified to see that half of the Bentley's electrics were not working properly. The main screen in the middle of the dashboard was completely blank.

I suspect the battery is at fault because it's a couple of weeks since we used the car. The boot is also playing up. It has a very sophisticated system which should mean that the boot opens and closes all by itself. But the boot is very easily irritated and since we had a new motor last February, I suspect that the problem is electrical and related to the battery rather than mechanical. (The new motor for the boot lid cost well over £2,500 which is close to obscene. We also had a new battery at the same time. I shudder to think what that cost. I never looked.)

The bizarre thing is that the car is fitted with two car batteries. The second battery is only used to start the car if the first battery has been run down by the car's mass of electrical equipment – much of which continues to function even when the car has stopped. The demand on the first battery is so great that it is well-known that if a Bentley is not used regularly all sorts of strange things will start to happen: the windows will go up and down, the horn will start, the boot will malfunction, display screens will disappear.

We don't use the Bentley enough to keep its batteries properly charged and I am told that I should buy a trickle charger and connect it to the car. There is, I discovered to my astonishment, a special socket in the boot where a special (and inevitably expensive) trickle charger can be connected to the car to ensure that the special (and inevitably expensive) battery is kept satisfied.

The other problem with the Continental is that the doors are vast and when the car is parked in a public parking area, the spaces available are always too small. I hadn't realised this before but when car doors are very wide, the space available for the driver or passenger to get in or out is dramatically reduced. (I had to draw myself a little diagram to prove this to myself. I drew two lines to show the sides of two adjacently parked cars. I then tried opening a very wide door and a narrow door. It was immediately apparent that the wide door made life impossibly difficult. Why didn't the Bentley designers fit the car with sliding doors? That would have made far more sense.)

So, sadly, I am beginning to think that the Bentley has to go.

I've emailed the garage in Cheltenham from which we bought it and asked them if we can sell it and buy a Maserati Ghibli. I've never owned a Maserati and I have a feeling that this is the moment. I did try to buy one a couple of years ago but the garage was in Swindon and our satellite navigation system (which insisted on calling the town 'Swinedon') got us totally lost and we never found the garage.

The AA arrived to look at the Bentley's faulty electrics. Naturally, when I turned on the ignition everything worked perfectly. The AA man did not look pleased.

'Like going to the dentist,' I said, feeling very embarrassed. 'I bet this happens to you all the time.'

'No,' he said rather unpleasantly. 'I've just driven 40 miles for this.'

I apologised profusely, explained that the car had not been working properly and that I had tried it several times before making the call.

The AA man remained unhappy and then told me that even if the car hadn't been working properly he probably wouldn't have been able to do anything about it.

I pay a small fortune every year for specialist Bentley emergency cover which is supposed to be provided by the AA. Heaven knows why. This is yet more evidence supporting our decision to sell the car.

The tree surgeon arrived as planned with a chum. I took them for a walk around the garden. 'Wow,' said one, 'you're higher up than the cliffs!' 'Are you really a pirate?' asked the other, his eyes alight with childish excitement.

He had spotted our Jolly Roger flag.

I hope I haven't made a mistake hiring this pair. I found their advertisement in a local free magazine. But then I do find that millennials seem to be very young and slightly deprived when it comes to having a sense of humour.

They had been at work for no more than half an hour when the local tree officer turned up unexpectedly.

He had, I was later told, been telephoned by a local nosy parker who had complained that we had hired gypsies to cut down our trees.

Why the complainant didn't bother to ask us what was happening is no mystery, of course, because people like this prefer to do their dirty work from afar. As an aside, I couldn't help wondering why the tree officer hadn't reported the caller to the police for what sounds to me to have been racial abuse.

Our tree surgeon (who is rightly proud to be properly trained and licensed) was incensed. He told me that the complainant had said that Antoinette and I were 'new people' who had only just moved in. (This may be because in Devon you are 'new people' if you are first generation residents.) She had apparently also complained that the tree surgeon's truck carried no advertising markings and that this was proof that the owner of the truck was not properly qualified to do things to trees. This seemed to me a trifle unfair. On none of our vehicles does the word 'Author' appear. Does this mean that I am not allowed to write or sell books? Quite probably.

All ended slightly better than moderately well.

Once the tree surgeon had explained that he had been commissioned to remove four dead and dangerous trees (two of which are next to the lane and which are a threat to passing pedestrians, horse riders and motor vehicles) the tree officer was very happy for the cutting to continue.

Then, when the tree surgeon mentioned that a neighbour had asked us to top one or more of the beech trees which impeded his view, the tree officer (who seems to have been not a little aggrieved at having his time wasted by a local busy body) said that we could tell the neighbour that we were not allowed to cut anything off the beech trees. I have therefore written today with these tidings.

I did think it rather odd, in passing, that the tree officer didn't talk to Antoinette or me to make sure that we really had hired the tree surgeons.

The tree surgeon left shortly after 3 p.m. in the afternoon.

Since he arrived at 10 in the morning, and spent some time having lunch and then drinking coffee and eating bars of chocolate which Antoinette provided, it is clear that the millennial's view of a full working day is rather different to mine.

At the rate he is going, he will be with us for a week. He is certainly not going to finish tomorrow unless he does a very shoddy job. And if he does a shoddy job I won't ask him to quote for the other jobs which need doing in the garden.

And he'll still only get paid £700 even if he's here until Christmas.

2

I have ideas for two new laws which I think should be passed immediately. First, all medical research should be done on Liberal Democrats and members of the Green Party. This will mean that these people will be making a useful contribution to society. Second, the police will have to use bicycles instead of motor cars. Even when chasing errant motorists they must use bicycles. This will make the roads much safer for the rest of us.

3

I walked down the driveway to open the gate for the tree surgeons so that they could come in and continue their slow progress. It's an understatement to say that I was disappointed. I shan't be hiring these guys again. They have left an awful mess behind them and it is going to take me days to tidy up the broken plants, abandoned twigs and cut logs. They have trampled bushes and plants and left tree rounds scattered hither and thither. The damned things are so big and heavy I doubt if I will be able to remove them. We already have one tree graveyard elsewhere in the garden where a previous tree surgeon left the segmented slices of arboreal corpses.

By mid-morning, the tree surgeons had already received the first of the day's complaints. A neighbour from around a quarter of a mile away came round demanding to know what they were doing and were they going to cut the beech trees and if so why and would they not, thank you very much because they like looking at the beech trees so leave them where they are.

It seems that it is the fashion these days for people to tell other people's employees what they can and cannot do. It happens to us all the time in the Cotswolds. And now it seems, it is also de rigeur in Devon.

I very much admire our beech trees. And it is good to know that they are, it seems, exceedingly popular with everyone in Devon. So far, we have received four enquiries about their welfare and one visit from the local tree officer. Two enquiries were from people who wanted the trees cut and the other two were from people who didn't want them cut.

No one seems interested in what we want though they are our trees and we're paying the piper.

Next time I see a neighbour having their house painted I will, I think, totter over and tell the painters that I don't like the colour and will they please paint the house a nice shade of lilac.

By the end of the day, Antoinette and I we were both exhausted.

Every ten minutes there was a banging on the door. (The idea of ringing the bell seemed beyond them.)

May I use the toilet? Would you move your truck? Which tree did you say was dead? Which branch do you want removing? Where shall I put the logs? We've finished with these mugs, thank you. Oh, yes, another cup would be very nice. How big would you like the logs to be? There has been another complaint from a neighbour. Would you move the Bentley? Do you have a wheelbarrow we could borrow? What are those knobs for on your Bentley dashboard? May I use the toilet?

I sometimes feel that I am being slowly tortured to death by a constant onslaught of triviality. I object to my own perpetual triviality. But I find it even more difficult to cope when the triviality belongs to someone else.

And from time to time there were screams of anger.

Every time I heard a scream, I feared the worst. Had the tree surgeon removed one of his limbs in error? Had he chopped off his head? Were the screams the last sounds from his now disconnected larynx? I hate chainsaws. They terrify me. I gave away the last one I owned when the chain came off and nearly decapitated me. My chainsaw had no 'dead man's handle' and I realised that if or when things went wrong I had no way of defending myself other than by hurling the damned thing away from me with as much force as I could.

Thankfully, it turned out that our tree surgeon's screams were a result of chainsaw malfunctions rather than impromptu and unplanned surgery. On one occasion, the chain broke and became embedded in a tree trunk.

I honestly don't think either of us sat down for more than ten or fifteen minutes. And when we did rest we were jittery with waiting. I lost count of the number of times I went up and down the driveway. I was genuinely worried that the tree surgeon was going to hop up the drive legless. He was at that cocky age when accidents only happen to other people. I found myself wishing that he would have a near miss or a very small accident. Only then, I thought, would he learn enough to avoid a big accident.

I am, I confess, rather disappointed in the number of logs we obtained from our trees. It seems that if you chop up a dead, 35 foot tall silver birch (with many branches) you get nearly enough logs to fill a garden wheelbarrow. It's a pity because silver birch burns well. It isn't a dense wood, and the logs don't last long, but it does burn satisfactorily.

And, to add to the mystery, one of the tree surgeons left twice to take loads of something very heavy and covered in branches-for-burning back to his home.

Why do I find it difficult to escape the thought that we are endlessly ripped off?

When I went round the garden afterwards I discovered that they had successfully destroyed a beautiful pampas grass plant and a huge yucca. How do you destroy a yucca? You chop a branch off a tree and let it fall down without controlling it. Numerous other plants and bushes are destroyed. Hopefully, some of them will grow back.

Actually, I don't much mind the injury to the yucca. I always think they are rather ugly plants which have a tendency to grow too tall and then fall over all by themselves. But heaven knows what I am going to do with the broken plant. It's about ten feet tall and almost as wide. I know from experience that they don't burn terribly well. And you certainly can't compost one.

Still, the good news is that the auction house delivered our bookcase and bronze bull today. And they carried the bookcase upstairs to Antoinette's studio.

We have not heard a word from Paris.

Neither our estate agent (I use the word 'our' with tongue planted firmly in a cheek) nor our notaire (ditto) has been in touch to let us know what is going on. Has our elusive buyer agreed to our sensible requests? Has he vapourised? Has he become President of France?

Nothing.

Antoinette and I had a meeting (over lunch) and decided that we are not going to do anything for the time being. The longer the delay the easier it should surely be for a lawyer to extricate us from this bizarre situation of being forced to sell our apartment to someone who cannot afford to buy it.

I've booked tickets to go to Paris towards the end of the month. While there, I will ask for our keys back from 'our' estate agent. We will then close the shutters, pull the blinds, lock up and leave it until the spring.

Our current plan is that in March we will go over again, see a lawyer (to extricate us from the mess we have been put into), fire our estate agent, find a new estate agent and possibly fire our notaire and ditto. We were very much hoping to finish this business before Christmas but it will clearly not happen this year.

If, perchance, we do hear from our elusive buyers, mere et fils, we will follow their example and be away for a few weeks. We definitely do not want to sell the apartment to them. I have never met these buyers but I neither like them nor trust them. Maybe their plan is to wait until property prices rise in Paris and to then buy our apartment and sell it on to someone else at a higher price. Maybe they are hoping to win the lottery so that they can use the money to buy the apartment. Whatever is going on, these buyers have (with the aid of the French property laws and our estate agent) helped themselves to a free option to buy.

I feel as though we are playing a game for which no one has told us the rules.

Actually, the whole thing is like the Mad Hatter's Tea Party for such rules as do exist seem to mean whatever best suits the buyer and our agent.

The deceit, the lies and the misdirection have all made this far, far more than a property deal which has gone sour. These manipulative, dishonest French bastards have made Antoinette quite ill. They haven't done me a lot of good either.

Never mind, after Christmas we will throw the lawyers at them. This bizarre game is not over yet. Not by a long chalk.

We may not even sell the flat at all. Perhaps all this has happened because the flat doesn't want to be sold.

Antoinette said today that she is going to come back as a seagull, snatch frites from French people and then poop on their heads. 'I shall train myself to be pin point accurate from a height of 30 feet,' she said.

This, I think, is a sound ambition.

I'm going to come back as a flying dog. A Great Dane, I think. I shall fly over Paris in circles and eat only foods which produce copious quantities of diarrhoea.

4

Feeling better after my unpleasant adventure with atrial fibrillation, I had a couple of cheese and onion sandwiches at lunchtime. I ate with my fingers crossed.

Antoinette bought a new Microlife sphygmomanometer from Boots the chemist. It cost around £100 and is grander and more sophisticated than the two we already have. Since we have both experienced some heart peculiarities (Antoinette's far more serious and long-term than mine) it seems a wise investment.

For fun, Antoinette wrapped the cuff around a teddy bear. To her, and my, astonishment the machine showed that the teddy bear has a pulse. There, on the little screen, was the flashing icon showing that its heart was beating.

We've been watching the Netflix series entitled Narcos about Pablo Escobar. I remember being fascinated by Escobar's activities at the time of his notoriety.

The Netflix series is a true story except that people, places, events have been changed to make a better television series.

I do sometimes think that if you're making a television series about something that really happened (or writing a book about a historical event) then you have a responsibility not to mess with the truth. But that is clearly a very old-fashioned viewpoint so I'll stuff the idea right at the back of my mind and forget about it.

If we assume that Netflix have captured the essence of the man then I confess to finding myself increasingly sympathetic towards Escobar who is portrayed as a rather kindly family man who had very loyal henchmen who would shoot his enemies when they really annoyed him. How many of us could honestly say that we would not rather like the idea of having our own personal hit squad to deal with life's irritations and annoyances.

Escobar's pursuers (particularly the police and the DEA from the US) seem downright wicked in comparison.

From this showing, it seems to me that Escobar was far less of a psychopath than, say, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair. If I needed someone to feed my pet cat, I'd have chosen Escobar over Blair. Escobar would have fed it. Blair would have probably sold it to vivisectors and then sworn blind that it had run away.

The thing about Escobar is that he sold cocaine (a traditional Columbian commodity) to Americans. It was only when the American Government put pressure on the Colombian Government (as part of the ill-conceived, ill-designed and ill-fated drugs war) that attempts were made to catch and punish drug smugglers. For internal political reasons, the Colombian Government was not content to try to capture Escobar. Instead, they decided to assassinate him. And on the way to that objective, they murdered all sorts of innocent people – including children – and used Escobar's own family as pawns in their game.

When you look at the context then you realise that it is possible to argue that in some ways Escobar was justified in defending his business, his employees and his home. After all, cocaine is far less harmful and far less addictive than tobacco. The number of deaths caused by cocaine is minute when compared to the number of deaths caused by tobacco. And yet no tobacco company bosses have been pursued. And governments around the world have actually defended and subsidised the growing of tobacco. Moreover, cocaine has been used in South America for aeons.

By bed-time, I was beginning to suffer for my stupidity in eating those cheese and onion sandwiches. My IBS had returned with a vengeance. Hey-ho.

5

Antoinette has been getting increasingly worried about our firework extravaganza.

And, to be honest, I have too.

The warnings are everywhere on the box and on the individual fireworks.

Tesco say that spectators should be kept 25 metres away from the action but the makers of the fireworks say that 8 metres is fine. There's rather a difference between the two. I have to dig holes all over the garden so that the fireworks can be safely positioned in such a way that they cannot fall over. I must light each fuse and then retire to the safe distance. In the case of Tesco's warnings this means that after lighting each fuse I must spring 25 metres in the dark in order to position myself in the safe zone.

While Antoinette was busy preparing dinner, I spent an hour, in the cold, preparing the garden for the onslaught.

I dug holes, filled buckets and watering cans with water and made sure that there was plenty of room for me to move away from the danger zone. The bright spot was that a double ended rainbow appeared over the bay. Magnificent.

We had dinner and then it was time for the show.

I had been advised that as the person in charge of lighting the fireworks, I should wear protective goggles and a hat. So I put on a pair of protective goggles and a hat. But I also needed to wear my reading spectacles so that I could read the instructions. And I couldn't manage to wear both my reading spectacles and the protective goggles. So I had to leave off the protective goggles and hope that no one with a telescope spotted me and reported me to the authorities. I also had to leave off the hat because I needed to wear one of those silly looking head torches so that I would have both hands free for lighting the fuses. So in the end I wore just the head torch and my reading spectacles. I couldn't wear the thick gardening gauntlets either. Have you ever tried lighting a fuse while wearing gardening gauntlets?

In the end, our fears were entirely unjustified and so were the warnings.

The fireworks were feeble. We paid approximately £5 per firework and most were so disappointing and feeble that I think we could have safely fired them in the kitchen. There were supposed to be a number of sparklers in the box but there was only one and that one didn't work. Two of the fireworks fell apart in the box and I will have to throw them into the incinerator tomorrow. The rockets were pathetic. No flashes, no bangs, just a bit of a whizz and that was that. The fuses were too short and difficult to light and time and time again I found myself struggling in vain to transfer the flame from my lighter to the fuse. If I had been trying to blow something up, the police would have picked me up long before anything dramatic happened.

We found ourselves watching a firework display taking place over 40 miles away along the coast. We couldn't hear the fireworks but we could see them surprisingly well. I bet they couldn't see ours.

And I missed most of our display because by the time I had retreated my statutory eight metres (there was no way I was going to make the 25 metre mark) the firework I had just lit would be finished. In trying to light the fuses I used up half a dozen disposable lighters and a box of three inch long kitchen matches. This was partly because of the wind but mainly because even when there was a flame licking at them for ten or fifteen seconds the fuses would not ignite. I actually found this rather scary.

An hour after we'd gone indoors to warm up, I felt a little weak and checked my pulse. The damned atrial fibrillation had come back. My blood pressure was 150 over 60 and my pulse was around 100 but definitely fibrillating. Once again I was convinced the problem was caused by my irritable bowel syndrome and the wind pressing on my vagus nerve.

I'm still not keen on going to see a doctor to have my heart checked.

Generally, doctors find it impossible to do nothing. This is partly because doing nothing suggests knowing nothing and partly because the best, easiest and quickest way to end a consultation is to hand over a prescription for something. Doctors also have a terrible (and frequently fatal) tendency to treat symptoms, or consequences, rather than causes.

If I see a doctor, I am confident that I will end up being given a whole range of drugs which will probably do more harm than good. There will, of course, be statins to start with. And an anticoagulant to prevent a stroke developing as a result of the fibrillation. And probably something to prevent the fibrillations. And since my systolic blood pressure reading is often a little higher than the standard acceptable for a 20-year-old (especially when I have a lot of wind) there will probably be an anti-hypertensive drug too. The odds are high that the resulting confusion of drugs would cause far more problems than they would solve. Once you start taking the drugs commonly prescribed for heart arrhythmias you usually end up taking the damned things for ever – and in ever increasing doses – because the original symptoms simply get worse rather than better.

And, I wouldn't bet against invasive investigations such as angiography – which would stand a good chance of killing me.

I very much doubt if anyone will take my IBS theory seriously. And if they do they won't be able to do anything about it.

My first task is to get rid of the wind by avoiding any foods that can cause it. I think it's more important to treat the cause of the atrial fibrillation instead of treating the fibrillation as an isolated problem. I'll start taking acidophilus again. And I'll compromise a little by taking a 75 mg dispersible aspirin tablet every day to act as a modest anticoagulant.

6

This morning I noticed that another piece of fancy wood carving has fallen off our conservatory roof. The dear old thing is falling apart. I rather know how it feels. We will have to find a carpenter in the New Year. There is a good deal for him to do. There are bits of rotten wood everywhere. We have soffits you could put your finger into if you were so inclined.

Our attention for the last six months has been distracted by the Affair of the Apartment. The bewildering confusion caused by our evil buyer and his supporting cast has wasted far too much effort.

There are surprisingly few Christmas decorations in the shops. And I have yet to see a town centre with any decorations. I don't like seeing decorations up too early – it takes the fun out of the festive season. But the High Street in most towns would, in the past, have usually started to show signs of streamers and coloured lights by now.

After discussing this with a few shop keepers, I came to the conclusion that there are three reasons.

First, it is considered politically incorrect to celebrate Christmas because hand-wringing Christians suspect that non-Christians might be upset.

Second, councils are desperate to save money. They spend such a high proportion of their income on salaries for executives, and pensions for former executives, that there is very little cash left for community projects.

Third, health and safety rules mean that it is no longer possible for a shop keeper to pop up a ladder and put some coloured lights up around his shop front and dangling from the branches of a nearby tree. These days there are a zillion forms to fill in, permissions to be obtained and snotty teenagers with clipboards to satisfy. Then, once all the legal stuff has been done a cherry picker must be hired (at enormous expense) to do anything that would otherwise involve standing on a chair or a stepladder.

Life sometimes seems very tiring.

Still, this afternoon Antoinette and I watched a fascinating natural history programme being played out on our lawn.

Every morning I throw two apples out onto the grass for the rabbits and the squirrels to enjoy. Our resident pheasant enjoys an apple too – so much so that when a seagull swooped down to try to take his place (and steal his apple) the pheasant stayed put and saw the seagull off. (Pheasants will repeatedly see off seagulls, even much larger ones, simply by pecking at them until they fly away.) Amazingly, our pheasant can eat a whole apple though he usually eats for a few minutes, walks about for a while, returns and resumes eating, walks about a bit, returns and resumes eating. The whole process can take quite a while.

Today, a rabbit and a crow were both interested in the same apple. As the crow pecked and pecked, the rabbit stayed a few feet distant; watching rather unhappily as pieces of ‘his’ apple disappeared down the crow’s throat. Every time the rabbit approached, the crow would frighten him away.

When the crow had finally had enough, he flew off. The rabbit then picked up the apple and carried it to a safe position underneath the large wooden swing seat which we have. He then munched away happily, comfortable in the knowledge that even if the crow returned, he wouldn’t want to go under the swing seat to get at the apple.

I never fail to be amazed at the intelligence shown by animals.

I was reminded of the time when I had a ride on lawnmower and a large croquet lawn which needed cutting regularly from March to October. I always emptied the grass cuttings onto a compost heap in a three acre field I owned and the four pet sheep who lived in the field would happily munch away at the freshly cut grass. One March morning I started up the ride-on mower ready to do the first cut of the year. The mower hadn’t been driven since the previous October. As I fired up the engine and drove the mower out of a barn, I watched in astonishment as the sheep, standing in the nearby field, pricked up their ears, recognised the sound and, as one, ran towards the spot where they knew I would be dumping the grass cuttings when the box was full. That was quite a complicated series of thought processes. If anyone ever tells you that sheep are stupid, you can safely tell them that they are wrong. Sheep are extremely intelligent animals.

Going back to our apple eating rabbits, I have noticed, by the way, that if an apple has a decent stalk the rabbits will pick it by the stalk and carry it off, presumably back to their burrow.

We started off by putting out two apples a day. We have now progressed to three a day and I suspect it will soon be four or more. Our weekly apple order is becoming notable.

Later in the day, Antoinette asked me if I thought there was a risk that the plague would return. Irresponsible news media have made this their favourite scare story of the week (alongside the one that threatens deep snow over Britain within weeks). You don’t necessarily need rats and fleas to spread the plague. The disease (like tuberculosis) can be spread through the breath. If it comes to Britain, it will be because a traveller on a plane brought it here. And the odds will be that the traveller will be a nurse who had decided to save the world by spending six weeks in one of the African countries where the disease is now reappearing. (Spending six weeks helping the natives is one of the most selfish, pointless, expensive, patronising and reckless things I can think of anyone doing. Did I mention selfish?)

Looking at the papers today, I noticed that when the boss of American Express retires next year, he will have earned nearly $400 million during his 17 years at the company. That is simply obscene.

I don’t think anyone objects when someone makes a fortune after starting and developing a company. But the current boss didn’t start American Express. He simply worked there as the chief executive. Unless egregious greed like this is stamped out there will be discontent. Nothing feeds socialism more than this sort of obscenity.

The Bank of England put up interest rates a day or two ago. It was the first interest rate rise since the banking disaster of 2007/8 and within microseconds the banks and building societies were raising their interest rates for mortgage holders.

Oddly enough, however, there has been no word of interest rates being raised for depositors. Interest rates are far behind inflation and anyone who has put money into a savings account will still be losing a big chunk of their money to inflation.

Bank bosses are, of course, continuing to pay themselves million pound salaries and huge multi-million pound bonuses. They excuse these over-generous payments on the grounds that it is impossible to find other people able or prepared to manage the work they do. Since a half-witted donkey would be able to manage any of their businesses more reliably and more profitably I think we can safely dismiss this excuse for their greed.

This evening, working on my new novel about Mrs Caldicot, I gave one of the characters a Zimmer frame – assuming, incorrectly, that this was the generic word for a walking frame. On checking, I discovered that the Zimmer frame is far less well-known in other countries than it is in Britain. So I’ve had to change Zimmer frame to walking frame.

7

I am tired of all the crap which has been wasting our lives this year.

Antoinette suggested (very tactfully and with great gentleness) that I have been allowing the crap to take centre stage in my head when it should be tucked away in a dark corner.

She is absolutely right. And since she’s been dealing with the same stresses and understands how irritating and complicated things have been, she has a valid point.

And the reason for this is undoubtedly the fact that I have not had enough to keep me busy. I need to be writing more books, involved in more campaigns and doing more stuff that will blot out the awfulness of things like

Barclays Bank and the estate agents who appear to be mishandling the sale of our apartment.

The jolliest news of the day is that Snapchat, the woefully unsuccessful and over-hyped social media idiocy (which also attempts to flog intrusive daft spectacles which secretly take pictures of unknowing innocents) is so desperate that it is now trying to recruit older folk as users.

The company has announced that next year it will target the acquisition of more users – including those from a wider demographic range. As one wag put it this is like a struggling football club announcing that it intends to target the scoring of more goals.

The definition of 'older' is those who are over 30-years-old. So, many millennials such as Lily Allen (who seem to think of themselves as the inheritors of the earth) are now 'older citizens'.

Wonderful, simply wonderful.

I poured myself a malt whisky to celebrate this excellent revelation. Incidentally, I have noticed recently that on many of the better bottles of malt there is printed the name and signature of the distiller. This is a good and simple way of taking responsibility. It's a pity more companies don't encourage this. I would like to see all household items of a certain size and cost bearing the signature of the individual responsibility for their manufacture.

8

We sold our Ford Ranger to a garage in Stroud which specialises in trucks and vans. Having looked up a few similar trucks on the internet I said I thought £6,000 would be reasonable since although the mileage is low there were some dings on the back panel. The truck is seven-years-old and shows scars from where trees have leapt out and hit it. It has, however, done only 36,000 miles which is exceptionally low.

A woman at the garage said she could not possibly go above £5,500, cash or cheque. She said that the 'book price' (whatever that is) was £5,000 but that she could pay a little more because of the low mileage. Believing her, I accepted and took the cheque.

We were really sad to say goodbye to the truck. It has been a good and faithful servant and has carried much stuff for us.

Still, three cars are one too many. If cars aren't used regularly the batteries go flat and one less car will need one less annual service, one less tax to renew, one less MOT to organise and one less insurance to haggle over.

After the deal was concluded, the woman from the garage drove us back to our home in Gloucestershire. En route we passed a Romanian hand car wash place. I don't know whether this is true or not but she told us that the Romanians who work there are paid £50 a day for a ten hour day (9 a.m. until 7 p.m.) and that they work six days a week. On Sundays they only work from 9 a.m. until 2 p.m.). She said they live in a sort of hostel like students.

Driving back it occurred to me that we would all be safer if the street lights were turned off completely. They have been turned down so much that candles would provide more light. The problem is that there is a small pool of weak light under each street lamp and complete darkness between the lamps. It is a very dangerous system, though presumably the eurocrats at the European Union are happy that we are saving the appropriate amounts of energy. They don't give a damn that we are making our streets infinitely more dangerous.

When I rang Churchill to cancel the insurance on the truck I was told that I would have to pay a cancellation fee of £53.76.

I am afraid I laughed.

Big companies find ways to rip off their customers at every opportunity.

(I recently changed the insurance policy on our house in the Cotswolds. The new insurance seems much the same as the old one and costs about a quarter of what SAGA were charging.)

And where on earth did Churchill get the figure of £53.76? It's the sort of precise figure that rip off merchants always prefer because it suggests that they have done much research to find the value of whatever it is they are selling. (Not, of course, that I am suggesting that Churchill is a rip off merchant.) A precise figure is difficult to argue with simply because its very precision suggests that someone has sat down with a calculator and worked out the precise cost of pressing a button on a computer keyboard and cancelling a policy. In the case of Churchill, the button pressing event has clearly been costed at £53.76.

I did have the presence of mind to check out my no claims bonuses. Apparently, I had nine year no claims bonus on the Ford which I was told I could transfer either to the Bentley or to Mitsubishi. I transferred it to the Mitsubishi because that one has a very short no claims bonus for some reason.

This evening I was amused to read today that £12.6 million of the fund which manages money for MP's pensions is invested offshore with half of it invested in companies accused of tax avoidance. Another £5.6 million of the MP's money is invested in a tobacco company.

It is nice to know that Jeremy Corbyn, and the other MPs who so vociferously attack taxpayers who have funds offshore, are themselves in the tax avoidance business. The odd thing is that if Corbyn ever becomes Prime Minister then there is an excellent chance that his government will reintroduce capital controls severely limiting the flow of money into and out of the country. And if he does that then Comrade Corbyn may have difficulty accessing his pension. (Of course, *The Guardian* and the BBC, both of whom are also sanctimonious attackers of anything offshore, also have very murky finances. Stones and glass houses.)

Corbyn was recently reputed to have demanded an apology from the Queen when it was found that she had a very modest investment offshore.

Maybe the nasty little King of the Corbynistas will now demand an apology from himself.

If he doesn't then he is a hypocrite in the Bono bracket.

And gosh wouldn't that be a surprise.

(Talking of Bono I see that the world's most sanctimonious hypocrite has once again been shamed as a tax avoider. Wherever there is a tax avoidance scheme there, it seems, is Bono. We know about his latest shenanigans through the theft of something called the Paradise Papers. Over 13 million records were stolen from a law company and handed to a German newspaper which printed the contents and shared what they found with the media everywhere. Who was the thief? No one seems to know. A hacker? An unhappy employee? A mad socialist? One thing we can guess is that the police will make no effort to find out. It is now perfectly acceptable to steal private banking information and put it into the public domain. I doubt if any bank, onshore or offshore, is now safe from this sort of leaking.)

9

We went to Cheltenham to look at a Maserati Ghibli at H.R.Owen's branch. The company specialises in second-hand performance cars – Bentley, Aston Martin and so on. I had exchanged a few emails with the fellow who sold us our Bentley Continental and he had offered me a choice of four Maseratis to look at. To make life easier for him, I emailed back selecting just one of the cars and giving him plenty of time to prepare the car for us to look at.

When we got there, the salesman didn't have the car in the garage at all. In fact he didn't have any Maserati Ghibli cars for us to look at. Antoinette and I were far too polite to say anything other than appearing surprised, but the truth was that we were very angry since we had travelled quite a distance to look at the darned car. Maybe, just maybe, the salesman knew that he could make more money out of selling us another Bentley. (They don't service Maserati cars.)

This is the second time I have tried to buy a Maserati. Fate has obviously decided that it is not to be. In fact it is probably a good thing since the Maserati we were going to look at is rear wheel drive and I rather suspect that we would not be able to get to either of our homes in it.

The salesman did, however, tell us a good story. He told us that he had been to a James Brown concert and found himself standing next to someone who seemed familiar.

'Do I know you?' he asked the stranger at the end of the concert. The stranger had been bopping merrily to the music.

'You may do,' said the stranger.

'Where do I know you from? What do you do?'

'I'm a singer.'

'Oh. Who with?'

'Led Zeppelin.'

While we were there, we went for a spin in the new Bentley Bentayga; the biggest, most expensive, most wondrous four wheel drive vehicle in the world. It's amazingly comfortable and fast and fitted with so many toys that it would take a week to explore them all.

I have to admit that we rather liked it. From the outside it is an ugly looking brute – more bulldog than panther. But I was particularly impressed by the fact that the car was astonishingly easy to manoeuvre and, therefore, surprisingly easy to park. There is, of course, a heads-up gadget (which shows the vehicle's speed in the windscreen in such a way that only the driver can see it) but most impressive is the camera which provides an overhead view of the car. It is as though the car is being watched from a low flying satellite or has a personal drone permanently hovering ahead. I gather that the picture is obtained using the car's other cameras and some very clever computer software. It is truly one of the most remarkable toys I've ever seen on a motor car.

The model they have on sale (which is fitted with a vast array of extras) is £200,000 new but as it is the company's demonstrator it is offered at £140,000. It seems an obscene amount to pay for a car but it is a very good vehicle. It feels like sitting in a club sitting room disguised as a tank which can travel as fast as a Ferrari. I have no idea what the carbon output is but the top speed is around 200 mph and the three tons of car accelerates to 60 mph in just four seconds.

I asked the salesman how much trade-in he would give us on our Continental.

After humming and hawing for a while he offered £30,000.

I was appalled. We paid £58,000 for it just two and a half years ago. Now, I know that new cars lose a vast amount of their value in their first year or two of life. (An expensive Range Rover will set you back £140,000 when new and be worth £40,000 after three years – a loss of over £30,000 a year.) But second-hand cars don't usually lose value at that sort of rate. Indeed, when I put our Continental into the We Buy Any Car website they came up with an immediate offer of £32,500. In a couple of car magazines I saw other cars of the same age and higher mileage were on sale for £45,000 or more.

I know the dealer has to make a profit but in this case, the dealer would already be making a profit on the car we were planning to buy.

I have, over the years, owned a number of Bentleys and have discovered to my cost and disappointment that Bentley (and Rolls Royce) dealers are just as sharp as other car dealers. In this case, the dealer was going to pay me £30,000. He could then sell it straight to WeBuyAnyCar and make a couple of grand profit. WeBuyAnyCar would then sell the car onto a specialist garage and make a couple of grand profit. And the specialist garage would sell the car onto a punter for £45,000.

In this case, it is a case not of caveat emptor but of caveat venditor.

I know it is my place to be aware for these little scams but, damnit, I actually want to trust people. The trouble is that people are so good at pretending to be trustworthy that I constantly get suckered. Maybe I'm just becoming more gullible. Maybe there's a note somewhere on the internet telling people my name and instructing them to 'rip off the old geezer'.

I was, to say the least, annoyed that the garage which knew the car, which had serviced it, which knew that it was kept in the very best condition, should offer considerably less than a company which makes money buying cars cheaply and selling them on to other dealers.

It seems to me that these days everyone wants to go that extra mile to gouge as much money as they can from the deal. No one, it seems, is interested in doing a fair deal which leaves both parties satisfied.

Antoinette and I were both so cross about the way we had been treated that we changed our minds. And when trust goes it really goes. I found myself wondering what was wrong with the Bentayga.

And then, when you start thinking like that, the relationship is over. That's it.

We aren't going to buy the damned Bentayga (which apparently also has the perennial Bentley battery problem) but we are going to keep our Continental and buy a special trickle charger to keep the one or both of the batteries satisfied. (It seems absurd to me that Bentley, one of the most expensive car firms on the planet, sells cars which, even if they have new batteries and are used regularly, still have to have their batteries charged every week or so. But, hey-ho, if we must have a battery charger then a battery charger we will have.)

Maybe, in a year or two, we will buy a slightly older Bentayga at a third of the price. It is possible to purchase an extended manufacturer's warranty on cars which are up to a decade old.

On the other hand, the Bentayga does look a little flash and there is one thing that worries me. The salesman told us that Bentley will provide a solid gold clock for the dashboard for an additional £100,000 or so. The clock looks exactly like the analogue clock with which the car is fitted except that it is made of gold and studded with diamonds. I assumed that most of these specially equipped cars would be going to sandy climes but apparently not. It seems that there are Britons (or, at least, people who are living in Britain) who are crass enough to decorate their cars with these things. The clock worries me because thieves may well target the Bentayga for the clock alone. I can see them smashing the windscreen and destroying the dashboard in order to grab the clock. And then when they find out that they haven't got one of the rare clocks they may trash the car. It seems just too, too flash and, whisper it softly, rather tacky.

Or maybe we will just buy a two-year-old Continental if and when our beautiful vehicle finally decides to give up the ghost.

The GT Continental really is an exquisite car to look at and to drive in. It always seems to attract admiration rather than envy. Inside it is silence itself – thanks in part to the double glazing. With 6 litres and 12 cylinders and well over 600 bhp there is more than enough power. And even at speed the car sticks to the road like nothing else I have ever driven. Inside it is exquisite luxury.

As we left the garage in Cheltenham, Antoinette did wonder if the whole thing had been a set up.

Here's why.

The salesman knew I was vaguely interested in the Bentayga. I had mentioned it when we'd spoken and expressed a vague interest, tempered by a fear that it would be difficult or impossible to park.

Maybe he deliberately didn't have a Maserati for us to look at. Maybe he parked the Bentayga right by the front door so that we would see it. Maybe he knew that I would discover that the car is fairly easy to park. And maybe we would then abandon the Maserati and buy the Bentayga.

Maybe.

I really have no idea.

Still, he's lost a sale.

And he may have also lost the servicing contract for his firm. I stayed loyal even though the company lost its official Bentley servicing arrangement. And I stayed loyal even though the Bentley is now usually parked some distance away from Cheltenham.

The thing is that a deal is a successful deal only if both parties are satisfied. And a loyal customer only remains loyal if he doesn't consider that he is being 'played'.

When our Bentley needs a service it will, I think, go elsewhere.

Am I wrong in thinking that as I get older people try to rip me off more than ever before – often ruthlessly, blatantly, mercilessly and greedily.

Occasionally, as with the ridiculously expensive gardener, I let them get away with it (though I don't recommend their services to others) because it is convenient and I don't have the time or the energy to find someone else.

Sometimes, I just don't know how to complain. My last dentist charged me around £1,416 for a single consultation. She did a few fillings at one sitting and I spent an hour and a half in the chair but £1,416? The thing was that I was presented with the bill when I came out of the surgery. What was I to do? Go back and tell her to take the fillings out? I reckon my big mistake was turning up in the Bentley. I bet she wouldn't have charged me £1,416 if I'd turned up in the Mitsubishi truck.

But the man at the Bentley garage really pissed me off.

After that little fiasco, we went into Cheltenham to have coffee and wander round the shops.

I visited the 3E store to ask why the two phones I bought from them no longer work. A kindly teenage assistant patiently explained that since I hadn't used the phones for three months the money that I put into them has disappeared. In addition, one of the phones has had its number taken away.

We haven't used the phones because we bought them to use at our house in Gloucestershire. We bought them because 3E insisted that their phones would work in our area.

Naturally, they don't.

When we bought the phones, no one bothered to explain that if we didn't use them the money and the numbers would disappear.

To make the phones work I had to put money into each of them. And for the phone which had lost its number I had to buy a new SIM card.

As I left, a kid in a hoody sneered and said to his mate that I looked decrepit and that old fogeys like me shouldn't be allowed into phone shops.

'You are correct, I am decrepit,' I agreed. 'But you look like shit and you're still young. At least I know that I didn't always look as bad as you do. Just imagine what you're going to look like if you survive to my age.'

I then left before he could think of a suitable response, let alone produce his carpet cutting tool.

I then went to WH Smith to purchase an armful of magazines.

The machines in Smith's are annoying for several reasons. First, there aren't enough of them. Second, they seem to break down with alarming regularity. The other week I put in a ten pound note and the machine swallowed it up without so much as a thank you and then refused to acknowledge what it had eaten. As a result, I had to call for an assistant. I didn't dare leave the till lest some other shopper starts to use it.

These machines are everywhere now. I gather that banks will soon get rid of their counter clerks for the purpose of paying in cheques. We will all have to use machines. The problem is that big companies of all kinds don't give a damn about our time or convenience. They would rather we all wasted twenty minutes of our time than that they install an additional machine.

Later, I was shocked to discover that my favourite pub, The Old Restoration, was closed for refurbishment. I do hope it is not about to become the New Restoration.

I liked the old pub, rather worn out and weary though it looked. It was shabby chic without an overdose of chic.

I went instead to a new coffee shop across the road which turned out to be excellent.

10

The beauty of writing a diary as opposed to articles or a column is that you can give a subject as much, or as little, space as it deserves. Magazines and newspapers allow writers a fixed amount of space. When I wrote my column in *The Sunday People* I had to fill a page and a half of the newspaper every week (around 3,500 words) but all the items had to fit pre-planned spaces which I had designed at the beginning of my contract.

Today, I checked the *Daily Express* website for a weather forecast. This is always amusing. They are forecasting thick snow, blizzards and a temperature of 11 degrees something. Most of the papers now try to scare us with these absurd forecasts. Predictions about blizzards and snow storms have already come thick and fast this autumn. The website forecasters get away with it because when you examine the forecast carefully the snow and blizzards are predicted for the north of Scotland.

These days the Met Office displays the sort of imagination displayed by a columnist in the old *Sportsman* publication, who described the opening day of Canterbury week as 'quite fine on the whole albeit heavy showers fell at frequent intervals and the sky was consistently overcast'.

After breakfast, I looked at the website of the garage to which we sold our Ford Range truck. I was dumbfounded to see that they had it on offer for £10,000. And I was even more dumbfounded to see that they not only had it on sale for £10,000 but that they'd sold it for £10,000.

Wow.

I don't really mind because I was happy with what I received and the truck had done sterling work for seven years but I was really ripped off with that one. People have become horribly greedy these days. They just want to take what they can. They don't seem to want to build up any sort of long-term relationship with their customers.

I am embarrassed to admit that I have always been ripped off when selling cars. I think I have probably been ripped off when buying them too.

'Never mind,' said Antoinette, trying to make me feel better. 'Think of it as a donation to charity.'

I looked at her. 'I sold it to a car dealer,' I pointed out.

'Well, it was a charitable donation to the car dealer,' continued Antoinette, struggling to make me feel that I hadn't been a complete idiot.

'I was a fool,' I said.

She looked at me trying to think of something else to say. But there wasn't anything else to say. So we laughed about it.

Actually, I haven't done too well with property either.

I was skilfully manipulated into selling my old office building in Barnstaple for £80,000. Within a very short time, it was back on the market at £130,000. And it has now been tarted up and resold for about three times as much.

So, all things considered, it's probably a good job I'm not in the business of dealing in cars or property.

Is it all down to naivety?

Innocence?

Or good old-fashioned gullibility?

There's been a lot of whatever it is around recently.

Maybe I'm more senile than I thought.

I paid £2,500 to have some grass cut. I paid £700 to have a few trees taken down. (And I gave the tree surgeon most of the wood so that he could chop it up and sell it.)

Maybe I'm an easy target because I am no longer in the first flush of youth.

Or is it because I am so tired of wasting time and energy on workmen who don't turn up, or who don't do what they promise to do, that I grab at anyone who seems keen to do a little work – even if they demand a high price for their services.

In the evening, we sat down to watch another episode of 'Better Call Saul'.

When I put the DVD into the player, I was told: 'By purchasing this DVD you are supporting the UK film and television industry'.

What rubbish. The film we were about to watch was made in the United States and as far as I can see everyone in front of and behind the camera is American.

And so by purchasing my new DVD I have harmed the UK film and television industry.

So, let's avoid the smarmy hypocrisy, please.

It's a damned good TV series, though.

11

On reflection, I have decided that our tree surgeon did a good job. He did what I wanted him to do. And I've been able to clear up the mess he made.

I have made a policy decision. In future, I will find all workmen through local newspapers or free magazines. (We found our tree surgeon in a free local magazine.)

The internet has, almost without exception, helped find us a series of crooks, cheats and confidence tricksters.

Most of the people who advertise their services on the internet are too incompetent to build up a local clientele of people who are pleased with their work and who call upon them regularly.

The truth, I fear, is that old-fashioned Yellow Pages was a much quicker and more reliable source of information about tradesmen and suppliers. If you wanted a tree surgeon or someone to repair a washing machine, you could look through and find one. The internet is useless because the top search results are invariably from companies which have paid to be there and which don't provide what you want, where you want it or when you want it. Dr Johnson (he of the dictionary and dear old Boswell) said that there are two kinds of knowledge – knowing something and knowing where to find out something you don't know. For too many people the internet has become the way to find something. I know this, I preach this, but I still forget that it isn't.

I spent an hour or two investigating solar panels. We want to have solar panels fitted to our garage roof so that when the electricity runs out we will still be able to run our gas fed central heating and see what we're doing as we stumble about the house.

Doing online research is never easy, of course. Not if you do it seriously.

There are many apparently independent advisory bodies online but they all turn out to be companies trying to flog you their product by pretending that they are offering independent advice.

It is the same sort of scam as some insurance companies run with their comparison sites. (The site simply offers prices offered by different companies within the same group. There is no real comparison. For example, how many people know that Expedia owns hotels.com and trivago?)

I eventually picked a website and was answering questions when I was suddenly asked, 'Are you sure you now want to continue?'

Alarm bells rang. Was I now signing up for something by continuing?

I logged out immediately.

My nervousness was triggered by the fact that everywhere you go on the internet these days there are tricksters. Several times a day I receive emails warning me that my PayPal account or my Apple account have been hacked into and so I must do this or do that and send this or that information to the company's address. They usually want my password, my credit card details, my date of birth and my address. It's oh so easy to almost give them what they ask for. I am usually saved only because their English is awful or there is something not quite right about the logo.

And just about every day I receive very convincing fake emails from HMRC and from banks. These are so frequent that if I ever did receive a real email from HMRC et al I have no doubt that I would bin it.

But among the dross today, I found an email from Eddie Biggs, a chum I haven't seen for decades. We used to watch cricket together at Edgbaston. Eddie was an airline steward for British Airways. He was on long haul flights and used to fly to Bermuda rather often.

Eddie wants me to sign a petition demanding that the Government do not include the EU's fishing regulations into UK law when we leave the EU. If we continue with this daft legislation then we will effectively still be signed up to the Common Fisheries Policy and foreigners will be able to fish our waters and take all our fish. It would also mean a continuation of the absurd quota system which results in a huge wastage of fish and which encourages fishermen to cheat.

I have happily signed though I would, of course, go much further. I don't understand why we want automatically to incorporate any EU legislation into UK law. Surely there are enough civil servants and lawyers employed in Whitehall to go through the EU laws and throw out the patently absurd ones?

(In practice we would do as just well to throw out all EU laws and then re-introduce anything we can find which seems to be a good idea.)

And here's another thing: today I discovered that British tourists spend £39 billion a year on travel in other EU countries. If the EU continues to play nasty, we should simply threaten to boycott all travel in other European countries.

Greece, Italy, Spain and France (all financial basket cases) would go under without British holiday makers.

Oh, and I discovered that if they stay at home, Britons spend six times as much on rail tickets as anyone else in Europe. I don't know if it's still the case but Eurostar used to charge the French less for tickets than they charged Britons.

12

We are thinking of getting a dog. This is a big move for us since we are both rather scared of dogs.

The short list of possible breeds now includes: basset hound, King Charles cavalier, bolognaise, havenese, airdale, great dane and bichon frise.

Something like that.

One of those.

Probably.

I spent the late afternoon bringing logs from around the garden and storing them under cover. It has taken me three sessions to collect together all the logs so we clearly have more than I thought we had. I misjudged our tree surgeon.

I found a lazy way to bring logs from the top part of our garden; throwing them thirty feet down a small rocky promontory, so that they landed on a grassy slope and rolled down onto the lawn where they gathered, more or less together, in a group. This saved wheeling them in a barrow down a long flight of stone steps. There are, I'm pleased to say, far more logs than I previously thought. There should be enough to see us through this winter.

On several occasions, while hurling logs down onto the grass I only just missed hitting the bench I bought through the MCC from Lord's cricket ground a few decades ago. The oak and metal bench, which looks slightly worse for wear but is as solid and sturdy as they come, originally lived on the old Mound Stand at Lord's. I remember I paid £50 for the bench and £50 for a removal company to drive to London to fetch it.

Today, the MCC is selling replica benches for £1,500.

So I suppose it wasn't a bad £100.

Except that I would never sell it, so it isn't really worth anything, is it?

In the evening, we watched *The Founder*; the film about McDonalds the purveyors of McCrap burgers.

Michael Keaton was brilliant as Ray Kroc, the evil psycho who pretty well stole the company from the founders, tricked them out of their royalties and then created a monster empire which, in my view, did more damage to the health and welfare of the world's population than any other business ever created (including the ones making bullets and bombs).

'Business is war,' says Kroc in the film. 'If my competitor was drowning, I'd put a hose in his mouth. Would you do that?'

Well no, Ray, most of us wouldn't want to.

And while we're on the subject, why do McDonalds call their places 'restaurants'? McDonalds burger joints are merely the other end of the food chain from public lavatories.

Meanwhile, down to earth and under it, my letter to Severn Trent about their charges for our non-existing drains at our house in Gloucestershire has, inevitably, been ignored. They have simply sent one of those letters with red writing on them.

I do find that most big companies ignore email correspondence or produce useless responses. I wrote to Flying Spares, a Bentley parts supplier, about buying a battery charger. No reply.

13

It seems that charging up a car battery isn't quite as straightforward as it might seem. Having spent some time online trying to decide what exactly I needed, I eventually ordered a battery charger and the various bits and pieces that seemed a necessary part of the operation.

Amazon then sent me the usual collection of emails confirming that my order had been received and that it was on its way.

They then sent me emails telling me that it was no longer on its way and they then sent an email telling me that they were so upset by this that they were refunding my delivery costs. They sent me an email telling me that the delivery costs had been refunded. Finally, they sent me an email to let me know that the charger et al were on their way after all and would arrive this morning between 10.11 a.m. and 11.11 a.m.

I decided that in future I will order items to be delivered on a day when I definitely know we are going to be out, comfortable in the knowledge that will be the one day that the ordered items will not arrive.

To my astonishment, an Amazon delivery driver arrived between 10.11 a.m. and 11.11 a.m. and handed me a parcel containing my battery charger.

All I've got to do is find out how to use it to pour electricity from the mains into the Bentley.

My immediate problem however is much simpler. Amazon cancelled the delivery charges but then delivered the stuff. Do I email them and tell them that they're entitled to reclaim their delivery charges?

But they surely know that don't they?

I eventually decided that I am safe in assuming that if they want their delivery charges they will simply reclaim them.

Would anyone else worry about this sort of thing?

Still, I may not be charging my battery for long.

The UK's last coal power station will close in 2025 so that we can obey silly EU rules on global warming. So, the years after 2025 will be years of cold and premature death.

These days between 40,000 and 60,000 old people die every winter in Britain because they cannot afford to keep warm. (The figure varies according to how cold the winter has been.) That figure will quadruple after 2025 and the rest of us will need to buy warm underwear and acquire an affection for salads. Those who still have fridges which work will put things into them to warm them up.

After 2025, most of the electricity we manage to produce will be required to power electric cars and computers. There will be very little left for cooking and heating.

Investment tip: buy shares in Funeral Directors and sell shares in Nursing Homes.

14

I am proud to say that I have found out how to make my Bentley battery charger work. This is amazing news. The charger is remarkably straightforward and there is a socket in the boot of the car into which the lead from the charger fits. (Bentley is well aware that their cars need battery top ups at regular intervals – though they don't seem to bother potential purchasers with this piece of vital news.)

Moreover, the electric motor which controls the car boot lid now works much better than it did.

15

For reasons which I cannot explain, we decided to spend the afternoon in Stroud. It's a strange town which contains more hippy shops than anywhere outside India.

On our way through Gloucestershire, still some way from Stroud, we stopped off for a coffee. As we passed a cake shop, I pointed out the smeared window full of fly blown buns and unappetising looking cakes. There were dead flies and wasps mixed in with the bakery items, though I don't think they were on sale.

'Look at that and compare it to a French cake shop!' I said, rather sadly.

'Yes, we do it so much better, don't we?' said Antoinette, without a moment's pause.

It made me laugh out loud.

And I realised that her hatred of the French (and all things French) is just as deep as mine. I don't think either of us will either have a kind word to say about the French ever again.

Last week, I cancelled the insurance for the Ford Ranger truck which we sold. So far this week I have received nine letters from the insurance company.

I have also had a letter from Severn Trent, the water company, about our drains. They have sent me a form to fill in and they have asked me to let them know where their drains are situated. I was hoping they would know where their drains are.

16

We travelled to Chippenham, to the printers, to collect 500 copies each of *Climbing Trees at 112! Real Life Inspirations for the Over 65s* and *Kick-Ass A-Z for Over 60s: the Beginner's Guide to Old Age*.

I wrote and published these two books as ebooks a month or two ago and we decided to produce a few paperback copies to send out to literary editors. I don't have much hope that the books will be reviewed anywhere but we have to try. The other reason for having the hard copies is so that I have copies to send to foreign agents. Antoinette has already printed out a pile of labels and has prepared her fingers for jiffy bag stuffing.

17

I am delighted to see that the medical profession has at last (at long last) accepted that elderly people who do not see the same doctor are at greater risk of being admitted to hospital.

The problems are obvious ones. When a patient sees a new doctor, he or she must waste time explaining their medical history. And without continuity of care, doctors are far more likely to miss changes and make mistakes.

Sadly, the medical profession has still not acknowledged why patients usually end up seeing different doctors.

There are two simple explanations.

First, the enthusiasm for large practices means that patients are likely to see a different doctor every time they need help.

Second, and more importantly, the prevalence of female doctors mean that patients are massively disadvantaged. No one dares say this but female doctors tend to work short working weeks and are, therefore, only available for their patients on two or three days a week. This is very nice for the doctors concerned (who therefore pay less top rate tax and can enjoy more free time) but it is terrible for patients.

The garage which bought our Ford Ranger truck for £5,500 and sold it for £10,000 (presumably without doing anything at all to it) has emailed wanting to know where the spare wheel is. I emailed back to tell them that the last I saw it was fastened in the usual spot, underneath the truck at the back.

Could someone have stolen the spare wheel? How utterly bizarre. Who on earth would steal such a thing?

Actually that's a daft question because the answer is pretty obvious.

But if it was stolen I wonder when it was stolen and who did the stealing.

It reminded me that when I was a kid thieves stole the doormat from my parent's porch. Who would steal an old doormat?

That's not such an easy question to answer.

I thought that selling the Ford was the simplest and most straightforward thing I'd done all year. Now even that appears to be complicated.

18

Antoinette has spent the day packing books into Jiffy bags.

Stupidly, I had forgotten how incredibly unhelpful Royal Mail can be. The cost of posting our two books by second-class large letter post is £1.58 each.

You might imagine that Royal Mail would make a stamp worth £1.58. You would, of course, be wrong.

The nearest stamp available is one for £1.57. Naturally, we can't put a £1.57 stamp on by itself because if we do Royal Mail will put a massive surcharge on every packet. And then they will add an extra demand for the missing postage. So we have to order sheets of £1.57 stamps and sheets of 1 penny stamps. And since neither of these stamps has Large Letter printed on them we also have to order sheets of Large Letter labels. And then we have to hope that Royal Mail staff don't put a surcharge label on all our packets because they think they look too thick to travel as large letter mail. (We have measured them through an official Royal Mail measuring device but in my experience that is no guarantee that some malicious bastard at Royal Mail won't make all recipients pay a surcharge.)

I am reminded why we gave up publishing hard copy books.

We're not going to bother selling any of the hard copy books because it is simply too much trouble. And although we have priced one book at £7.99 and the other at £4.99 we would lose money on every sale if we did so. Bookshops and wholesalers demand 50% discount. And we have to pay the postage. And then the bookshops demand the right to return the books if they don't sell them. We can't possibly send books abroad because the postage cost will far exceed the value of the books. We used to have thousands of customers around the world but we had to abandon them all because of Royal Mail's massive and unreasonable charges.

I honestly don't know how small publishers make any money these days.

It is no surprise that so many now only publish eBooks.

As we do.

Another company which doesn't give a damn about its customers is Eurostar. I discovered today that the lift at Ashford International is out of order 'for maintenance'. It has been hors de combat since August and it will be out of order until 18th December. So all passengers will have to drag their luggage up and down long flights of stairs.

How can it possibly take from August until December to do a maintenance job on a bloody lift? You could build a new railway station in that amount of time. In China they would build a new town.

I discovered today that an increasing number of anglers who fish from beaches are now using special fishing drones. The drones they use are fitted with a camera and can carry 3.5kg of bait. They fly out up to a mile and a half from the shore. On a signal from the fisherman the drone drops the baited hook so that fishing can commence. The drones are even fitted with sonar detection so that they can spot where the fish are feeding. The fisherman, who obviously needs an enormous amount of line on his reel, then fishes in the usual way.

It all seems a bit like cheating to me. Why not just get the drone to drop a depth charge and blow up some fish? Another drone, equipped with a scoop net, could then just gather up as many fish as were required.

Alternatively, it would be just as sporting to go online and order a dozen mackerel from Waitrose.

An American reader has sent me details of an article someone has written about the dangers of prescription drugs. There is apparently a new book out on the same subject. The writer points out that prescription drugs kill hundreds of thousands of people a year.

I cannot get excited or thrilled by this.

I have been writing about this very problem since the early 1970s. My first book, *The Medicine Men* was about the way the medical profession has sold out to the pharmaceutical industry. And as a result I've been attacked, vilified, sneered at and banned – really banned not superficially banned.

There's also a new report just out pointing out that the NHS wastes money.

Oh Gawd help us.

Must today's medical writers merely continue reinventing the wheel? Why don't they find new things to expose?

19

Here is a quote from James Agate's Ego diaries: 'Have made an arrangement with a doctor friend whereby every week I send him two of my review books against two of his free samples. This week while he is absorbing two nauseating novels I am imbibing Incretone, a preventive of senile decay, and Agocholine, 'the most active cholagogue available', whose function is drainage of the biliary tract. Next week he gets two dollops of fragrant bilge against cures for gout and gravel.'

Wonderful.

Agate was, of course, a drama critic and how can you not like a professional drama critic who once described one play he reviewed as being the sort of drama which has witty intervals.

I was horrified to see that the Ministry of Defence is considering cutting the £29 per day allowance paid to soldiers serving in Iraq. This will save £6 million a year which the Ministry needs to help pay out £40 million a year in bonuses for chair bound pen pushers. Even worse the Ministry of Defence recently spent £381 million of our money upgrading its Warrior tanks and is now planning to scrap half of them to cut costs.

A thought: maybe I could buy one of the redundant tanks.

I have always rather fancied the idea of driving a tank when popping to the shops.

20

It occurred to me today that our fake wasps' nests seem to have worked. Last year we had several wasps' nests.

But then we put up the fake nests.

And this year we have had none.

We are still watching a wonderful American series called *Better Call Saul*. I bought the first series on DVD and we've now worked our way through the second series and part of the third series. It is very funny and rather wonderful.

The series is apparently related to another American hit series called *Breaking Bad*. We tried that last year and gave it up and donated the disks to charity.

But our delight in *Better Call Saul* has encouraged me to re-order the DVDs for *Breaking Bad* to try again.

The brilliant part about *Better Call Saul* is the existence of a mad brother. This rather reminds me of Frasier (who had a madder brother called, if memory serves, Nils). And the originator of the idea of introducing a superior brother was, of course, Conan Doyle who having created the cleverest man on the planet (Sherlock Holmes) gave him an even cleverer brother (Mycroft Holmes). That was utterly brilliant. Sheer genius.

This afternoon we sat in the conservatory and watched the wild animals lunching on the apples we put out on the lawn. Our resident pheasant was pecking at one apple. One of our resident rabbits was eating a second apple. And the resident squirrel was eating a third. The sight of these three was more delightful than anything else I have read, seen or watched this year.

And this evening we made the mistake of watching a new film called *Churchill*, which stars Brian Cox in the title role, twirling pretty clearly fake cigars. It was terribly disappointing. I knew within minutes that the script had been written by a woman. And indeed it was so; a woman with a German name who turns out to be a *Guardian* columnist who writes (believe it or not) on historical accuracy in films. The film was directed by an Australian.

In the film, Churchill is portrayed as weak, vain, blubbering, selfish, dangerous and foolish. His wife is strong and lets her husband know how weak he is and how strong she is. She is whingeing and constantly moaning that she has sacrificed her own life for his. The film seems like an advertisement for the worst aspects of the women's liberation movement. Could this be the same Clementine who burnt Graham Sutherland's portrait of her husband because she didn't think it portrayed him well?

It is perfectly possible that Clementine may have complained about Winston to a close friend. But I do not believe that she would have talked to Winston as though he were a slightly backward and troublesome child; nor do I believe that the imaginary conversations are remotely realistic. (It has become quite common for screenwriters to produce dialogue for private conversations conducted between two people who have never confirmed the details of those conversations. Worryingly, this is now done for individuals who are still alive. It is probably argued that it is done in the interests of verisimilitude but I rather fear that the result is exactly the opposite of the proclaimed intention.)

In my view, this film is a wicked misrepresentation of the truth and I believe it to be rather inaccurate. Many reviewers have complained that there are even basic inaccuracies in the characters' uniforms and so on. I don't know about that but I wouldn't be surprised.

The only strong male character in the film is the American: General Eisenhower. The rather repugnant and absurdly egotistical Montgomery comes across as stronger and more powerful than Churchill.

It seemed to me that the writer and the director both hated Churchill and England. Why would such people make a film about one of the most important individuals in British history?

Having spent over 100 minutes trying to destroy his reputation, they attempted to assuage their critics by gluing on a frame at the end pointing out that Churchill is believed by many to be the greatest Englishman of all time.

Too little, too late?

I'm afraid I thought that the film was a disgrace to a legend.

I realise that dramatists often alter history to suit their needs (some historians would argue that Shakespeare was particularly unkind to Richard III and that the 'a horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse' speech was pure fantasy) but I still think it's wrong to do so.

I usually give DVDs which we don't want to keep to charity. But this one is going into the dustbin – the only suitable place for it.

Actually, I think the inaccuracy and politically correct nonsense made it entirely the worst film I've ever seen.

21

We were supposed to go to Paris today. I purchased train tickets (costing well over £600 which would have probably been the cost of hiring a private aeroplane to take us to Charles de Gaulle airport) because I wanted to collect the keys from our wretched estate agent.

And, more importantly, I wanted to fasten the shutters and pull down the blinds to keep in some of the warmth rising from the rest of the building's occupants.

I didn't do the blinds and shutters when we were last in Paris in September because we had been assured that the buyer would be signing the necessary forms in a couple of days' time. That, of course, turned out to be a wildly fantastical exaggeration.

But we didn't go.

Instead, we've written off the money we've spent. It says on the ticket that Eurostar won't do a refund. Has there ever been a greedier company? They will allow me to change the date and time of travel but I have to pay £40 per person per journey so that's a charge of £160. And then there's a £10 service fee per transaction. So that's another £40. And if you add £160 to £40 you get £200. And if the ticket to which you change costs more, you have to pay the difference. I bet it does turn out to cost more, too. (Naturally, if the ticket to which you change is cheaper they don't give you back the difference.)

What a bloody company. They should be selling electricity or cocaine.

I have, in my life, cancelled more foreign trips than I can truly remember. I have booked and cancelled two trips to Australia, one to South Africa, two to the US, one to the Middle East and three to Sri Lanka. I felt bad only about the trips to Sri Lanka. A friend of mine, Lord Pandit Professor Dr Sir Anton Jarasuriya kept inviting me to speak to the major medical conference he organised each year. And I kept letting him down because when it came down to it I couldn't face the prospect of being cooped up in an aeroplane for hours on end.

I am pleased to say that despite my failure to turn up, we stayed friends until his death (and I was able to help him in other ways) but I still feel terribly guilty about not flying to Sri Lanka. It was dear old Anton who arranged for me to be, among many other wonderful things, a Knight Commander of the Knights of Malta. I have enormously ornate certificates hanging in the boiler room.

Pretty impressive stuff, eh?

This time Antoinette and I were travelling by train but there were several reasons for staying at home.

First, when we thought we had sold the flat we cleared out almost all belongings. Most we gave away or dumped in the rubbish. And, of course, we brought back to the UK everything we wanted to keep and could carry. We cannot now remember whether we have any towels, dressing gowns or other basics in the apartment. We certainly gave away or dumped all our clothes. We emptied our fridge and freezer and threw away the contents. We even emptied the food cupboard and gave away everything it contained. I drank or brought back all the malt whisky and champagne though I think I left a few bottles of claret behind. I knew that we would either have to fill a bag with food or as soon as we arrived in Paris I would have to make a beeline for the supermarket to stock up on essentials. Oh how I hate the people who have put us through this. I intend to do everything I can to make sure that none of the people responsible makes any money out of us or our apartment.

Second, we now loathe France and Paris so much that we can't bear the thought of ever going there again.

Third, we both hate the journey. When I say 'hate' I only use that verb because I can't think of anything which really expresses how we feel about it. There are always hold-ups on the M25 (usually made worse by stupid policemen) and even though we allow nearly five hours for a journey of about 100 miles it is always a challenge to arrive in Ebbsfleet on time. I could do without the extra stress, thank you very much. Our nation is failing because it is no longer possible to move around. Long queues, overcrowded roads, absurd traffic calming devices, endless road works and completely unnecessary holdups mean that journeys which used to take an hour or two now take half a day or more. Anyone who dares to mention this will be leapt on by politicians and the media as a racist.

Fourth, and entirely predictably, France in general and Paris in particular are suffering massive strikes as state employees protest at Macron's plan to stop them retiring at the age of 50 on a pension equal to their salary. This was always going to happen because it happens every time a French president tries to do anything sensible. Macron is trying to drag France out of the 18th century and is, as a result, now enormously unpopular. He seems to be pretty widely regarded by his former followers as a power hungry, arrogant bastard who is ripe for the guillotine. I agree with them that he is an arrogant little fascist who wants to rule Europe but he's right to try to control the French unions and as far as France is concerned it is a pity that he, like his predecessors, will fail.

We aren't too worried about the strikes per se but the strikers and demonstrators will probably make our journey even more unpleasant. And once we get to Paris there is a good chance that we won't be able to buy any food or get back out again.

The bastard buyer and his bastard mother have cost us real money and caused us endless inconvenience. It was entirely because of his lies and deception that we had to book these tickets. But bugger it; I really don't want to have my life ruled by this cretin.

It is our aim now to make sure that the bastard does not get to buy our apartment. And if he doesn't buy it then the estate agent won't get his fat commission and the two notaires won't get their fat fees. Our apartment is going to be one of Paris's empty properties. According to the Mayor of Paris, there are 100,000 empty foreign-owned apartments in the city. Well, gosh, guess what: now there are going to be 100,001 empty foreign-owned apartments in the city.

And we won't be renting out our apartment because if we do then the horrendous regulations and the absurdly high taxes will mean that we will lose money. So it will stay cold, empty and unused.

Stuff 'em all.

Bizarre, isn't it?

The Mayor of Paris seems to me to hate foreigners owning property in Paris. Taxes have been raised for foreign apartment owners in an attempt to force them out. The frogs don't want foreigners in their country. They treat other EU citizens more savagely than French citizens. (I thought that was illegal within the EU but the French ignore those EU rules which they don't like.)

The official Frog policy is to get rid of foreign born folk so that they can ensure that only French people inhabit apartments in the city.

(You and I might regard that as racism. But the French think it is perfectly proper. If Britain tried to do the same thing there would be riots.)

And yet, thanks to French law, Paris has yet another empty and bloody useless apartment.

It's not a happy ending. But it's a French ending.

Before we had lunch (at home), I checked the traffic reports for the M25 to see whether there were any holdups that would have interfered with our journey.

And there was a massive hold up as a result of an accident.

We would not have arrived at Ebbsfleet in time to catch our train.

I would have had to telephone Ebbsfleet somehow (if there was any reception for the three mobile phones I now routinely carry since Vodafone coverage has deteriorated noticeably) and change the tickets (at the cost of £200). We would have had to catch a train up to St Pancras and then catch a later train to Paris. It would have been a real mess.

One decision I've made is that if we do have to go to Paris again to deal with the flat I will buy Business Premier tickets. These are the tickets which are bought by EU staff and people working for companies where price is irrelevant. Two return tickets will cost around £1,000 (possibly more when you add in all the extras Eurostar charge for using the telephone, using a credit card, actually having the tickets posted and so on) but we will be able to change them if necessary without any additional cost.

Thus is travel these days.

Yesterday, having decided not to go to France, I ordered several hundred Jiffy bags, £500 worth of stamps and some more vellum paper suitable for press releases. All the companies concerned promised to deliver within 24 hours. So, today, I abandoned any idea of work and did some tidying up while waiting for the promised deliveries.

The stamps came because Royal Mail sent them by their own Special Delivery service.

But by late afternoon there was no sign of the rest of the stuff I'd ordered. I checked on eBay and what do you know: the companies which promised 24-hour deliveries were now promising to deliver tomorrow, the day after or the day after that or possibly the day after that or maybe sometime next week. So I am supposed to stay in every day for the next week in the hope that they will deliver the Jiffy bags and the paper which I have paid for. And then people wonder why the nation's productivity is so low.

And then a small miracle.

The bell on the gate went.

The Jiffy bags had arrived.

Hoorah.

I opened one of the boxes, hoping to be able to help Antoinette pack up some more books.

And the Jiffy bags are the wrong bloody size.

They are a few centimetres bigger than Royal Mail will accept as packets. If we put the books in these bags we will have to pay parcel postage instead of large letter postage. The packets will weigh much the same but they will be a tiny bit wider. All our stamps will be useless and the mailing will cost us several hundred pounds more.

I checked on the website, thinking that perhaps I had made a mistake.

But I hadn't.

The bags I had ordered, with the measurements given, would have been fine.

But the bags we have been sent are useless.

I couldn't face the thought of sending the damned boxes back to the supplier (even though it was their fault). It would mean days of emails and then a wait for a driver to collect the damned boxes. And there would be forms to fill in and so on and so forth. The company will accept returns but I have to pay and make all the arrangements myself.

(I think this is against the law. The last time I looked, a supplier is required to pay the cost of returns in circumstances like these. But I really don't want to spend days of my life arguing about £35.)

I thought about taking them to a charity shop. But I've tried in the past when I had surplus stationery. Charity shops aren't interested in Jiffy bags.

I doubt if the council will take them in the rubbish.

So I took them down the garden and burnt them. What else was there to do with the damned things?

Next time, to save money and energy, I'll just take a bunch of tenners down the garden and burn them to cut out the middle man.

Through no real fault of our own, we are wasting money at a prodigious rate at the moment.

But I can tell you this, in case you are interested, Jiffy bags do burn exceedingly well. A flight of seagulls flew around and round above the incinerator enjoying the rising hot air currents. And, who knows, maybe they enjoyed the unique smell of burning Jiffy bags.

The ream of paper which I have ordered (and which was promised to arrive within 24 hours) has not appeared. On checking the order, I see that the packet is still destined to arrive sometime during the next week. There is no point in complaining because the company concerned will doubtless say that they dealt with the order within 24 hours and so they have fulfilled their promise. (I first came across this trick some years when I telephoned a 24-hour plumber and spoke to an answering machine. The plumber later insisted that providing an answering machine to take messages 24 hours a day fulfilled his advertisement's promise.) In my experience around 50% of the people selling stuff on eBay are crooks, cheats, liars, fraudsters or confidence tricksters.

Tonight we are going to watch *Where Eagles Dare*.

I need to watch something with absurd levels of gratuitous violence. I can imagine that all the krauts who are being killed are really French property buyers, estate agents and notaires.

22

Some days ago, I sent an email to Royal Mail saying: 'I would like to buy 200 second class large letter 500 g stamps at £1.58. Can I buy these through you?'

I received a reply saying: 'The 2nd class large letter stamps are priced at 76p and these cover up to 750 g. To order 200 of these the price would be £153.45 including delivery.'

I wrote back and pointed out that the reply was completely wrong. The 76p stamp only covers a large letter of up to 100g. It is rather worrying that I know more about Royal Mail's pricing structure than they do.

I am re-reading Eric Ambler and working my way through his oeuvre of magnificently atmospheric thrillers. What a joy. I also have the entire works of Donald E.Westlake, Laurence Block, Ross Thomas, Robert B Parker, Robert Littell and, of course, Adam Hall to which to look forward. And in a year or so, I can start Brian Freemantle's Charlie Muffin books again. There aren't many new authors whose work I like but there is much good old stuff on my shelves.

I made a programme about Ambler for the BBC World Service but refused to meet him because I have always avoided meeting my heroes. The BBC asked me to pick a writer I admired, and I picked Ambler. (Incidentally, the BBC World Service used to be known as the Empire Service. We should remind BBC staffers of this fact as often as possible. It will embarrass and shame them enormously.)

I now regret the fact that I didn't meet him.

I first discovered Ambler's books in the 1960s. I then reread most of them in the 1990s. I can now not quite remember them so I can enjoy them fully again. It is sad to realise that I am unlikely to live long enough to read them all again. Still, I'm enjoying them greatly the second or third time around.

Today, I have been reading *Cause for Alarm*, a thriller about a naïve engineer working in Italy in the months prior to the outbreak of World War II. Ambler was a wise and much respected political observer and this is what he wrote when discussing Mussolini's fascist Italy: 'The idea of the state is not rooted in the masses, it is not of the people. It is an abstract, a God-idea, a psychic dung-hill raised to shore up an economic system that is no longer safe. When you're on the top of that sort of dung-hill, it doesn't matter whether the ends are in reality good or bad. The fact that they are your ends makes them good – for you.'

Ambler wrote that in 1938.

He could have written it today about the European Union.

We took a large parcel to the Post Office today. It contained a huge pile of books which we have to send off to the Copyright libraries. Every publisher has to send free copies of new books to six libraries. But the books have to go to a single address.

It cost over £12 to post the books and when the transaction was completed the woman behind the Post Office counter smiled, probably for the first time in a decade, and said: 'If you'd sent the books in two smaller parcels it would have only cost you £5.00.'

'Thank you for pointing that out,' we said.

It would, of course, have been no fun at all for her to have told us this before we'd paid the postage on the one big parcel.

We had to order a new iron. The last one, which wasn't very old, had completely stopped working. Antoinette said it would have been easier to iron a shirt with a hot spoon than with the iron we had. I suppose the damned thing will have to go into the garage in the Cotswolds. We dump all our broken down equipment there. It's a two car garage and it's damned near full. It contains two lawnmowers, several strimmers and a variety of computer screens and shredders. No one will accept computer screens as rubbish so I have no idea what we are going to do with them. In the end, I plan to rent a skip. But the skip hire people won't let me dump a cathode ray screen.

Our Henrietta hoover is due to go into the garage too. The hose came away from the cleaner's body. I have tried gluing it back into place but even the strongest glue I can find doesn't work. What shoddy workmanship.

This evening we watched another new film. This one, made with the support of the Welsh something or other and the BBC, was called *Their Finest*, and to me it appeared to be, like the terrible film *Churchill*, to be nothing much more than a piece of blunt feminist propaganda. The heroine (Welsh, of course, since Welsh money was used in the making of the film) was quite brilliant while the men seemed to be sexist, dumb and weak. Oddly enough, the film was written by women, directed by a woman and produced by a woman. The film was billed as a comedy but I'm afraid I've watched funnier weather forecasts.

23

When I got up this morning, I wandered into the conservatory and our tame pheasant, who was pecking at the lawn, saw me and hurried to the conservatory door. I gave him his morning apple and he started pecking away. To be honest I am happy to give him as many apples as he wants because he has acquired a habit of pecking at the Bentley's tyres. He is taking seeds and insects that are stuck between the treads but I worry (probably needlessly) that he might puncture the tyre. I just don't want to have to explain to people that my puncture was created by a pecking pheasant. I have noted that he never bothers with the tyres of the Mitsubishi truck. He is obviously a pheasant of breeding.

Today I noted with some astonishment how much we are spending each week on apples for our wildlife.

This evening, I received an email from a new estate agent in Paris who is keen to take on the sale of our apartment. He says that he will talk to their lawyers about our problem.

Ten minutes later, I received an email from our notaire (who has been silent for over a month).

She tells me that the buyer's mother has now struck out on her own. She has chosen another notaire and wants to buy the flat by herself and through a civil company. To add another twist to this utterly bizarre story it appears that mother and son may have fallen out.

The notaire points out that mother is not mentioned in the 'offer d'achat' and suggests that she sends a letter by bailiff to the buyer to tell him that if he doesn't buy the flat by himself at the original price within ten days then the 'offer d'achat' will be considered null and void.

'It won't avoid him to sue you if you decide to sell to somebody else,' she says in her wonderful English. 'But it manages the proof that you did everything you could to find an arrangement. If you agree with this plan you will have to pay the bailiff's fees (around 700 euros).'

What a joke.

They now want us to pay 700 euros for absolutely nothing.

I already have proof that I was tricked into signing the Achat by being told that he did not have to borrow the money for the purchase. And I have already been told that he has abandoned the Achat.

Is there some more trickery here?

If I sell to mother then her son, the original buyer will, it seems, be able to sue me.

I intend to write to the notaire to let her know that if mother wants to be considered as an applicant for the purchase then she must first tell her son to sign a document agreeing that he no longer has any claim on the apartment.

24

I visited a bank to try to buy some euro cheques with which I could pay the taxes on our Paris flat.

'Oh no, we don't do those now,' said the two female counter clerks. They seemed to think I was living in a world populated by dinosaurs.

I walked away, wondering how the devil I was going to pay the bills I've received. I would send cash but I owe several thousand euros and I think the Frogs will get excited if they open an envelope and a pile of cash falls out.

One of the women at the bank told me that I would have to open a new French account to replace the Barclays account.

Great.

Ten minutes later, having done a little shopping, I realised that I could arrange a bank transfer. I went back to the bank, queued again and asked if they could do that for me.

They said that oh yes they could do that.

Why the devil didn't the tellers suggest that the first time?

I then went into a branch of The Works.

I love The Works. It appears to be full of stuff that no one else can sell but which people are buying by the armful. The shops are always stuffed with stock and today I managed to knock over a pile of cardboard boxes containing something or other. The boxes were as light as meringue and were sticking out from the table on which they were balanced.

As I picked up the boxes, a member of staff came running over.

'I'm so sorry,' I apologised. 'I think my bag must have caught the corner of this display. Nothing appears to be broken.' I balanced the last box back on the table.

'No, no that's fine,' said the member of staff, unconcerned about the boxes. 'Did anything land on your foot?'

'No, no,' I assured him. A thousand of the damned things could have landed on my foot and I don't think I would have felt them.

'You're all right?'

'Oh yes,' I said. And I certainly realised that as far as he was concerned this was a health and safety/legal situation.

'There's no health and safety issue,' I told him. 'And I'm not going to sue.'

The smile of relief on his face lit up the shop.

As I left, it occurred to me that we now live in an upside down world.

I knocked off the boxes. It was my place to apologise. But the shop employee was concerned only that I might sue or complain.

Exhausted by my adventures, I tottered along the main shopping street.

I watched in horror as a dog, a large Labrador, decided to empty its large bladder along a row of cyclamen plants being offered for sale ('10 for £10') and various boxes full of fruit and vegetables. The owner, a snooty looking woman, pretended to look the other way. When I called out to her, she pulled at the dog's lead but it was too late. She knew exactly what her dog was doing and she simply didn't care. Some dog owners are a different breed.

I popped into a café for a quiet cup of coffee while I waited for Antoinette to finish her shopping.

Quiet it was not.

Well, it was when I sat down.

But within five minutes, a woman came in with a baby in a pram. The baby was bawling. A mother came in with two toddlers. The toddlers were alternately whining and screaming. A man came in with two dogs. The dogs started barking. And so I sat for a minute or two bathed in a cacophony; a veritable symphony for bawling baby, whining children and two barking dogs.

An hour later, back home, I checked out the budget.

It seems that Jeremy Corbyn's passionate après-Budget speech wasn't quite what it appeared to be. I am told that Corbyn's speech was delivered to him in brown envelopes as he spoke.

What a pity the speech wasn't intercepted.

It would have livened up the day to have heard him say (with great passion): 'What this country needs is votes for teddy bears when they reach the age of 16 and free ice cream for all people living in counties south of Lancashire. The Chancellor should have arranged to give full life-time tax refunds to everyone called Coleman.'

This evening I had an email from our French estate agent. My guess is that he emailed me because the notaire didn't get a reply. And I suspect they only got in touch because another Parisian estate agent wants to sell our flat and was doubtless not discouraged by my reply. (How did they all know what was going on? Are we being hacked? Nothing would surprise me.)

Our irritating estate agent (the one who told me that the Achat was not a legally binding document and who told me to sign a document with no closure date on it) has sent this email: 'I tried to have you on the phone. It seems the notaire find out a way to get out of the offer on our flat. Therefore we could put it back on the market at 1,155,000. Can you confirm it to me please. Thanks and sorry for all this delay I would have liked to avoid.'

Nice of him to remember we are still alive. It is five weeks since I last heard from the agency which is supposed to be selling our apartment.

I sent a polite reply to him and to our notaire to tell them that I didn't think much of the idea. The suggestion that we send a bailiff round to the buyer is so lily livered that only a Frog could have thought of it. It's a pretty wimpy response but what do you expect from a nation which regards the white surrender flag as its national emblem?

I pointed out that I had signed the Achat because I was given misleading information and that according to the notaire the buyer had already accepted that the Achat was null and void. I also pointed out that I could not possibly entertain a bid from the buyer's mother unless her son legally accepted the end of the Achat.

'Otherwise,' I said, 'is it not possible that she might buy it making it possible for him to sue?'

I explained that we have not yet started legal proceedings because Antoinette has been made ill by stress created by these buyers.

But, I went on to say, we will sue the buyer for everything possible, including costs, opportunity loss, currency loss, stress and the exacerbation of my wife's condition. 'We will,' I wrote, 'investigate whether there was any serious intention to buy and look at the buyer's history. We will sue in the European Court of Justice if the French courts do not find in our favour. I already have articles and press releases ready and I intend to draw this fiasco to the attention of Anne Hidalgo (the Mayor of Paris) who might be embarrassed to know of a foreigner being prevented from selling a flat by absurd French laws.' (Ms Hidalgo is keen to get rid of foreign property owners and is punishing foreigners by making them pay especially high taxes.)

I finished by saying that I intend to advise foreign buyers never to sign an Achat. 'To be honest,' I concluded, 'I cannot see any foreigners ever buying in Paris when this horror story has been aired.'

'We are now resigned to the fact that the apartment may not be sold for some years until the court case has been concluded. These things take time and there is no longer any hurry. I accept that I cannot sell until the buyer has gone away. But the longer he persists the greater the damages will be.'

I asked the notaire to destroy the proxies I had signed giving her authority to sign important documents on my behalf.

In a PS I pointed out that if the buyer signed the Achat knowing that he didn't have the money he had agreed to pay then would that not be more serious?

This evening Antoinette and I tried to work out how much money we could make if we could buy a daily newspaper a day ahead.

It probably wouldn't be as much as you might imagine. I doubt if you could win more than five million pounds even if you knew the result of all of tomorrow's sporting results and had, say, access to a million with which to place your bets. And there is, of course, a real danger that the bookies would refuse to pay up.

You could put money on lots of horses and football games but bookies have strict limits on the amount that could be won. You could put money on the stock market and currency market but you would be limited in what you could borrow and the total value of the investments would be pretty much limited by the amount of money you already had.

So, the total winnings would be rather disappointing.

25

I posted off some parcels today. I shoved them into a box at our nearest Main Post Office on Saturday lunchtime. The next collection is due at 5.45 p.m. on Monday. And that is surely reason number 8,475,674 out of an unending series explaining why productivity in Britain is lower than almost anywhere else in the world except Equatorial New Guinea.

26

Computer nerds are forever claiming that their latest app is totally disruptive. These things never are, of course. Most of their silly inventions are usually more annoying than disruptive. Here (in no particular order) is my list of the truly important and disruptive inventions: the wheel; the cog; engines turning energy into power (from water mill to internal combustion engine); sewage pipes; the water closet; the chimney; the compass; the wireless; shoe laces; the washing machine; the pencil and the pen; double entry bookkeeping; the printing press; the plough; parliamentary democracy; the sail; antiseptics; anaesthesia; antibiotics; the tablet (creating tablets meant that drugs could be prescribed in defined quality and quantity); electricity; the hammer , aeroplanes, the camera, and the penknife. The world wide web struggles into the lower reaches of the list, though only as a disruptive influence which has done more harm than good.

Reading James Agate's diary for 1932, I see that he bought a second hand Riley nine drop head coupe for £285 and drove 206 miles from Harrogate to London in six hours. He managed 32 mpg on the journey. That's an average of 34 miles per hour – before trunk roads or dual carriageways, let alone motorways. The Riley Nine which was partly made out of wood had a 1.1 litre engine and a top speed of 60 mph. On another occasion, a friend drove 200 miles from Yorkshire to central London and completed the journey in less than four hours – averaging 50 miles per hour.

You'd have a job to average that sort of speed today in a car twice as powerful. Our last trip from Cirencester to Ebbsfleet (a journey of 114 miles, most of which was on motorways) took just under four hours (an average of 28 miles an hour). The return journey took just three and a half hours (an average of 32 miles an hour) and was a record for us. We were travelling in a vehicle with a six litre engine and a top speed of 200 mph. It is quite customary for the journey to take five hours (an average of 22 miles per hour). They call it progress, don't they?

Possibly the most important thing I learned from Agate's diaries was that people then did so much more with their lives. Productivity, in every respect, was much higher. No time was wasted watching television or reading and responding to emails or on social media but, most important of all, it was possible to move about the country much more easily and speedily than is possible today. Travel by road or train was infinitely faster in the 1930s than it is now. For example, you could get in or out of London, or across London, in a fraction of the time it takes today.

I read today that the average person now spends eight and a half hours a day using some form of electronic device to do stuff on the internet. That means that the average citizen now spends more than half their waking hours using an electronic device instead of reading, talking or finding the time to enjoy the simple things in life.

How many people spend part of their day actually looking at the world around them and obtaining pleasure from the simple things? Isn't that what the revived delight of 'mindfulness' is supposed to mean?

27

I have received a reply from someone at Royal Mail insisting that a 76p stamp will cover a packet weighing up to 750 g. If she is correct then all the Royal Mail literature is wrong and their website is wrong and I have just wasted several hundred pounds on stamps I didn't need to buy. I found this rather worrying. I wrote back, again, querying the advice.

About a week ago, I received a request from a television company asking me to film an insert for a programme about benzodiazepine tranquillisers. (Actually, they referred to them as antidepressants which wasn't a terribly good start since there is, of course, a notable difference between tranquillisers and antidepressants.) I don't do television these days but since the topic is close to my heart I offered two dates this week and suggested places where we could record.

Since then we have exchanged endless emails but they have still not succeeded in confirming a date, time and place.

So, today, I cancelled the whole thing.

I was making television programmes half a century ago and since then I have filmed more programmes than I can even begin to remember. I made three series based on my book *Bodypower*, worked for two years as the BBC's first agony aunt and made numerous programmes as the TV AM doctor. Never, ever have I had to put up with such inability to make a decision about something so simple.

I am honestly surprised that TV companies these days manage to make any programmes at all.

Or is the apparent lack of respect simply a sign of my age and the fact that I am now 'out of the loop' as they say?

Either way I shall, in future, not even bother to respond to requests to make television programmes.

My problem about how to pay the taxes on our Paris apartment continues to puzzle me. I cannot pay by credit card or PayPal because they won't take credit cards or PayPal. I cannot pay by cheque because British banks won't sell me a euro cheque. I can't pay with cash because the bill comes to just under 4,000 euros and it is illegal to pay a bill with that much cash. I cannot pay by bank transfer because I don't have a French bank account and their website (none of which is in English, by the way, which seems fair enough but in England we make stuff available in a zillion languages) doesn't seem able to cope with a transfer from a British bank. Moreover, none of the bills I have received contains the IBAN or Swift details. I can't pay online because to do this they now want a special number which is only given to people who pay tax in France and since I don't pay tax in France I don't have one of these special numbers and cannot obtain one. I cannot pay by direct debit or standing order for the same reason. I cannot send a sterling cheque because they wouldn't accept sterling.

So, to use a banking term, I am completely buggered. I have written to the Mayor of Paris and the Mayor of our arrondissement asking if they can think of a way for me to pay my Parisian taxes. I have suggested that they tell me the city's IBAN and Swift details so that I can send the money by international transfer. I very much doubt if I will ever receive a reply. But at least I will be able to prove that I have tried to pay the damned bills.

It is now over 21 years since my book *How to Stop Your Doctor Killing You* was first published. I have not had to change anything in the book since I wrote it. The chapter entitled *Lowering blood cholesterol* is particularly pertinent since millions of healthy individuals now take statins. The book has been a global bestseller for years (I've lost count of the number of translations but the book has been a huge bestseller in Germany, Japan and China and in America there have been a number of pirated and rip-off versions) but I'm afraid it hasn't had much effect on the sales of statins.

The statins are now the biggest selling group of drugs of all time with sales exceeding $22 billion.

I paid extra delivery charges to have four parcels delivered today – all from separate companies. I thought that this would save me having to sit and wait for parcels over a period of days or weeks. In the end, one parcel came last Friday, two came on Saturday and one never arrived at all though I did receive a card saying that the carrier (Parcel Force inevitably) had been kind enough to leave it at a nearby Post Office so that it would be available for me to collect at my convenience. I do understand that it is difficult to move stuff around the country and then deliver it on a specific date but companies really shouldn't offer such a service (and then charge for it). Nor should they promise delivery within 24 hours when what they really mean is delivery within 24 days. I suppose I should simply stop trusting and give up ordering online. The problem is: where do I buy music or DVDs or books? Thanks to the internet there aren't any shops any more.

There is one delivery company which offers a service which is, in my experience, unique. Yodel provides a constant tracking update of where its driver is and how many drops he or she has to do before bringing your parcel. Theoretically, this is a splendid idea. In practice, I find myself sitting watching the tracker and trying to estimate how long it will take the driver to deal with 39, 24, 17, 12 or 7 other customers.

28

Here is part of the entry from James Agate's diary for June 8th 1932: 'Invited by two somebodies I don't know to attend a welcome lunch to somebody I have never heard of returning from Australia, country I am not interested in. Refused.'

And an entry for July 10th of that year: 'Abominable attack of wind, plus panic, plus heart, which went at 140 to the minute and wouldn't calm down…After getting rid of several balloons full of gas went to bed and slept.'

And an entry from the entry for March 14th of the following year: 'Last week my new-cut latch-key would not go into the lock. Last month I had my study measured for a carpet which on arrival swarmed up the walls. I have just ordered some summer vests and I feel it in my bones that pants will arrive.'

It is our wedding anniversary next Sunday. I asked Antoinette if she wanted to go to Paris for the weekend.

She raised a meaningful and querulous eyebrow but said nothing.

29

My attempts to pay our French bills are still proving ineffective.

So today, I telephoned the customer service line for Lloyds and spoke to a bloke who told me that they could do euro cheques. He was shocked when I told him that the bank clerks had said they couldn't.

Still nervous I then checked out the Lloyds online details. And there it is! They will do an international draft in euros.

The daft biddies in the bank were wrong. And because of them I've wasted hours on this problem.

This evening two rabbits were fighting over an apple so I threw out a second apple, the same variety and size as the first one. They ignored the new apple and continued to fight over the original.

How very, very human.

Later this evening I had an email from our estate agent to say that our buyer has, at last, pulled out of buying a flat he could never afford. He says that he has pulled out of the purchase because of the plan of the apartment, the Carrez measurements and the price. None of these things has changed one jot since last May or since last June when he signed the Achat agreeing to purchase the place. The miserable wretch apologised to the estate agent but not to us. I am told by someone else that he was always relying on his mother's money but that she refused to help him and no bank would lend him the necessary funds. Oddly enough he withdrew a couple of days after I wrote to the estate agent and notaire expressing my intention to sue him for a gazillion euros in damages.

I am furious with our buyer, clearly a fantasist, and his curious mother, but even more furious with the estate agents. My guess is that they knew all along that the buyer did not have the money. I suspect our agent was being disingenuous when, in replying to my question about whether the buyer had the cash, he replied that he was buying without a loan. I suspect that he has been having a good laugh at my expense.

Thanks to our absurd buyers, our estate agent and our notaire we wasted much of the year. None of those responsible for our predicament, our wasted time or our continual expenses has apologised or even hinted at an apology.

We got into a position where we could not sell the apartment and we could not rent it out either though we had to continue to pay inflated local taxes.

Another estate agent told us that the new laws seem especially designed to give buyers all the rights – and to ensure that sellers have no rights whatsoever.

Our plan is to put the apartment back on the market at the full price of 1.1 million euros. We don't really care if we sell it or not before Christmas. If we do have a buyer then the flat will be sold via English rules rather than French rules. I have prepared a list of very specific regulations governing the sale and if the agent and notaire don't like them then they can do the other thing. It seems odd to celebrate a buyer pulling out but believe me we are celebrating.

In the New Year we will hire a new estate agent.

At least, we now know not to trust anyone in France.

30

I received another email from Royal Mail apologising for the confusion caused by the previous advice and telling me that I was right about their pricing schedules. Days of worry caused, yet again, by employees who don't know their company's own rules.

The same thing happened with staff in one branch of Lloyds Bank, of course. They told me that Lloyds would not issue me with a euro cheque. I spent many hours trying to find another way to pay the French bills. And then eventually I found that Lloyds do issue euro cheques.

I visited another branch of the bank, filled in some forms with the help of a very knowledgeable manager, and received the eurocheques within two days.

To let her know that she didn't need to worry any more about the stamp problem, I sent the latest email from Royal Mail along to Antoinette together with a note saying 'A moron writes…'

Unfortunately, instead of sending the email to Antoinette I sent it back, by accident, to Royal Mail. Oh dear.

Back in the 1980s I had to have an insurance medical. It was the usual, routine sort of thing but when performing a standard, simple screening test on my urine, the doctor performing the medical found a trace of blood. I'd also been getting pains in my back and so the doctor referred me to the local hospital for investigations.

The hospital took X-rays and ultrasound pictures and two radiologists came to the conclusion that I had cancer of the kidney. If you're going to choose a cancer this isn't one that would be near the top of the list. It tends to be pretty lethal. The radiologists wanted to refer me to a surgeon straight away but I wanted a third opinion. I didn't feel happy with the diagnosis (and not just for the obvious reason) and somehow I just didn't feel that I needed to have a kidney ripped out.

After a scan it became clear that I didn't have cancer of the kidney. I had a slightly deformed kidney but there was nothing wrong with it. The two radiologists had been wrong.

So, what had caused the haematuria (blood in my urine)?

I made the diagnosis myself on a flight to Paris. As the air pressure in the cabin changed, I started to suffer from the pain I'd been getting in my back. And I realised that the pain was caused by air in my intestine. I had irritable bowel syndrome caused largely by stress. The air in my bowel had been pressing on my kidneys and had caused the minute amount of bleeding.

I managed to get the irritable bowel syndrome under control and when I went back to the doctor for a second urine test he found that the haematuria had gone.

That was my first (and only) unhappy experience with a screening test. (I sent a letter detailing my observation to the *British Medical Journal* but they didn't print it. A decade later, IBS was eventually recognised as a possible cause of haematuria. No one has, as far as I know, recognised that it is also a major cause of urinary frequency.)

I was reminded of all this because I received another invitation to have a routine test for bowel cancer. The NHS wanted me to send in a stool sample which would be tested for blood as part of the NHS Bowel Cancer Screening Programme. If blood were found, they would perform a colonoscopy. I had one of these invitations a year or two ago.

(The really odd thing was that the letter which came to me, from the NHS Cancer Screening Programmes, was written in 14 languages: Albanian, Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, English, Farsi, Gujarati, Hindi, Polish, Portuguese, Punjabi, Somali, Turkish and Urdu. If I were Welsh I would be slightly pissed off that it wasn't in my language. And who picked the 13 that aren't English? What happened to French, German and Spanish?)

I said 'no' because I was worried that the screening programme could kill me.

Here's the scenario that filled my mind.

The IBS (which still flares up) results in there being a little blood in my stools. The NHS screening test finds the blood and so I'm called in for a colonoscopy.

Now, one of the hazards with a colonoscopy is that the tube that is pushed up the bowel can puncture the bowel wall. It seemed to me that this is especially likely to happen if the wall is unusual, stretched or weakened. As it would undoubtedly be in someone with irritable bowel syndrome.

So the colonoscopy tube punctures my bowel wall.

Bang.

I need surgery. I need a hospital stay. I develop MRSA. And I die. It is a concatenation of circumstances which is by no means impossible.

I decided that I would prefer to trust myself and that I would simply keep a look out for signs and symptoms of bowel cancer.

It saddens me, incidentally, that irritable bowel syndrome is regarded lightly by so many who should know better. When some years ago I wrote a book about IBS, it was treated by many as a joke. I was shocked that several editors of women's magazines refused to print adverts for the book, insisting that they would not have the word 'bowel' in their magazine.

We had a nice surprise today.

Tesco have refunded the cost of the whole of last Saturday's shopping which didn't arrive and which we had to collect from the store. Not, I suspect, simply because we had to fetch the groceries which we had paid to have delivered, but also because we weren't told until well after the delivery time that their van had broken down and that our contracted delivery would not be made.

And that is, without a doubt, the way to win customer loyalty.

Tonight Antoinette can start to open the little boxes in her beautiful, hand-made, wooden Advent Calendar. I bought the Calendar from Harrods some years ago and it's large, delicate and beautiful. When you open each one of the 24 small wooden doors, a Santa pops out (rather like a cuckoo), three small roundabouts start turning, music plays and lights come on. It is a solitary work of art. Harrods only had the one and they sent it to us in one of their green vans.

The boxes are quite big by advent calendar standards but they aren't big enough for this year's gifts. I have bought 24 tubes of oil paint because Antoinette has started painting in oils. She is already a brilliant painter, both talented and skilful, and her paintings will, I have no doubt, sell well in fine art galleries (if I can ever bear to see any of them go). The paints I’ve bought are all different colours and I’ve put them into a large cloth bag so that Antoinette has to play lucky dip to decide which one she gets. And to ensure that the advent calendar plays a part I have put small toy animals into each of the 24 boxes. I’ve also put in details of 24 happy memories.

I will tell Antoinette that she has to exchange one of the animals for a selection from the lucky dip bag. By Christmas Day, she should have quite a good addition to her stock of oil paints.

December

1

Antoinette showed me some modern art produced by a minor Scottish television personality who shall remain nameless. The celebrity has apparently written a book about his painting. I hate to say this, I really do, but to me it appears to be appalling stuff: all splodges of colour and pretentious commentary; more occupational therapy than art. Antoinette calls this sort of painting ‘lazy art’ and she is absolutely right. It is much easier to produce rubbish like this than to work at learning real painting skills.

Our celebrity friend would perhaps do well to read Tom Wolfe’s wonderful 1975 essay on modern art entitled, *The Painted Word*. Wolfe attacks modern artists and critics and describes modern art as having ‘disappeared up its own fundamental aperture’. It’s Emperor’s New Clothes time and I fear this celebrity is just another one of a long line of pseuds who can’t see that the Emperor is stark naked.

Would the magazines which printed his stuff on art have touched it if he had not been a minor television celebrity? I suspect not.

As I read, I suddenly shivered. I reached out and touched a radiator. It was cold. As cold as only an iron radiator can become. I had forgotten to pump more water into the central heating system.

I retreated to the boiler room, opened the valves and heard the welcoming sound of water rushing through the pipes and more air being pushed out of the valves in the loft. It is nearly eighteen months since our new boiler was installed but still the system contains vast amounts of air. Occasionally, we can hear the gurgles as another vast bubble makes its way along the labyrinth of our heating system. As Antoinette pointed out, it seems as though the house suffers from irritable bowel syndrome.

The boiler, relieved, started to hum again and within minutes, the radiators were warm. These days we leave the heating on for 24 hours a day. We turn it down a few degrees at night but if you turn it down completely the thick walls get cold and then have to be reheated. It seems more efficient and cheaper to keep the house at a constant temperature.

Comforting.

I can remember the days before central heating; the days when the inside of my bedroom window was covered with Jack Frost patterns; the days when the bathroom taps were routinely frozen on cold winter days; the winters, before climate change, when even in the English Midlands we had storms and snow a foot deep.

2

I have noticed that, by and large, people become what they do, in the same way that people are said to grow to look like their dogs.

In other words, people grow to fit their image; they behave in the way that is expected of them and in some strange way they look as they should look or as they think they should look.

So, policemen end up looking and behaving like policemen. School teachers look and behave like school teachers. Bank managers look and behave like bank managers.

Heaven knows what writers look and behave like.

Nothing on earth is my guess.

The flowers which I bought Antoinette for our anniversary are already dead. Every single rose is completely defunct. I bought them two days ago and they were not cheap. I don’t know whether to be upset or angry. I think I’ll probably have to settle for both.

I received an email from the second estate agent in Paris; the one who has heard that our apartment is for sale. He is desperate to take over as the agent offering the apartment and he tells us that he has buyers who are keen. When I read this, my bullshit antenna started to twitch like crazy. The bottom line is that I don’t believe a word of it.

This agent also told me that his mother lives in the same building and my fear is that he wants to make sure that the new owner of the flat satisfies her requirements. (What is it about French men, property and their mothers?)

It would be remarkably easy for the agent’s mother to put prospective buyers off the property. If she thinks someone might be noisy, for example, she could tell them that the building is not a good one in which to live and that the neighbours are not very nice people.

She has apparently already talked to the buyer’s mother.

And if she is going to muddy the waters I rather doubt if we will ever manage to sell the damned place.

Of course, anyone living in a block of flats would be stupid to do this because the seller might be forced to lower their price and if that happened then the value of all the other apartments in the building would, inevitably, also fall.

But, hey, you don't have to have brains if you're French!

I have sent the new estate agent an email telling him that if we do not sell quickly next year we will rent out the apartment to one of the universities who will put eight students in there. That should make sure that no relatives of his waste any time trying to discourage prospective buyers.

The French are, without a doubt, the most manipulative, selfish and deceitful nation I have ever met. I have learned that in order to survive you need to be pretty manipulative in return.

After dinner this evening, I spent half an hour replacing bulbs in our chandeliers. In Devon, we have four large chandeliers (each with over a dozen bulbs) and several smaller chandeliers. (It's a big house and anything smaller would look silly and leave us stumbling about in the dark.)

We don't replace bulbs as they go because if we did we would never have time to do anything else but today I noticed that between a third and a half of the bulbs in the larger chandeliers were not alight. Fortunately, all four are on dimmer switches so we could merely turn up the brightness.

We have good supplies of old-fashioned bulbs because when the EU announced its lunatic plan to bring its daft mercury packed light-bulbs (the ones that take forever to become bright) I bought up every damned light bulb I could find. I am pleased to say that we still have a cupboard full of replacement bulbs.

3

It is our wedding anniversary. I poured myself a decent dram of an excellent Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey called 'Elijah Craig'. It tastes and smells of Christmas and is very reminiscent of some of my favourite Scottish malt whiskies; a real Christmas pudding, toffee and home-made thick-cut marmalade smell and taste. I don't remember ever drinking bourbon whiskey before. If this is typical then I am a convert. Truly this is, as they say, a 'sipping whiskey'.

I watched a raven pick an apple up off the lawn and try to fly away with it. Unfortunately, either the stalk broke off the apple or the weight of the fruit proved too heavy for him. Either way the result was that he dropped the apple. He flew off and didn't return. Ravens are very proud birds. I suspect he was too embarrassed to come back for it.

In the evening, we lit the candles on our wooden carousel. There is still something wonderfully reckless about lighting candles on a wooden carousel. After messing around with the vanes for some time, we managed to get it to go round properly. It should be fine for Christmas. At the age of 71, I feel that I want Christmas to be just right. I hope there are many more. But though one hopes for the best it is wise to plan for the worst.

4

The Mayor of Paris (or her accountants and lawyers) have fined me for failing to pay one of next year's local taxes on time (even though we are still a month away from next year). I wrote back returning the demand, explaining the circumstances and pointing out that I could not have paid more speedily.

The Brexit negotiations took a large step backwards today when Ireland stuck its fingers into the process. The interesting thing is that when it was clear that the negotiations with the EU had faltered, and a deal was unlikely, the pound rose noticeably. It is clear that currency traders recognised that Britain will be better off without any sort of deal than with the deal currently being negotiated by the EU's rogues and the hapless and woefully inept Theresa May. We must have the weakest Government in history. There is no sense of loyalty to the nation, no patriotism, no courage and no integrity.

No commentators seemed to notice the attitude of the currency markets although this was probably the most significant support yet for 'no deal'.

There was a time young women (and older ones too) went to Italy and if they didn't get their bottoms pinched they would have complained bitterly. These days, young, English women are the slags of Europe. Most seem to have sex every night with ten complete strangers and think nothing of it. But they complain to the police if their bum gets pinched. It sometimes seems to me to be a very strange world.

Quentin Letts has written an excellent book entitled *Patronising Bastards* – about the Britons, all members of the establishment elite, who seem to believe they have a right to tell the rest of us what to do, how to vote and what we should think. If we ignore their advice, they tend to get very cross and abusive. Here is my personal list of the 12 most supercilious, hypocritical, arrogant bastards in the country:

1) Bono
2) Gary Lineker

3) Richard Branson
4) Lily Allen
5) Nick Clegg
6) Tony Blair
7) Vince Cable
8) Emma Thomson
9) Emily Thornberry
10) Ed Milliband
11) Caroline Lucas
12) Benedict Cumberbatch

It was actually quite difficult to keep the list down to a dozen. I could have easily made a list of 500 supercilious, patronising bastards – most of them luvvies from the world of acting and many of them receiving huge salaries from the taxpayer and EU funded BBC. How, for example, did the highly obnoxious hop-skip-and-jumper Jonathan Edwards not make the list?

5

Driving down the M5 this evening, Antoinette suddenly said that she thought she either had glaucoma or a brain tumour. When I asked her why she thought this, she replied that all the lights she could see (whether belonging to traffic ahead of us, traffic approaching us or motorway lighting gantries) were strangely elongated.

This was odd because for some miles I had been suffering from exactly the same problem.

'Could it be the windscreen?' asked Antoinette.

I squirted soapy water onto the windscreen and let the wipers do their job. A second later we were both cured of our visual problems.

There must have been a lot of diesel fuel on the glass.

The quickest double cure in history.

6

Our entirely useless French estate agent (the one whom I am convinced spends more time tying his scarf than flogging property) now tells us that his firm 'has a long experience of similar cases'.

I wrote back asking why, if they had a long history of similar cases, they did not do something to prevent them. I suggested that all they needed to do was to make sure that potential buyers really had the money they needed. In my experience, this is fairly routine among the more astute British estate agents.

I cannot make my mind up whether he has treated us especially badly because I am English or old or both or if he treats all his customers with the same offensive mixture of patronising superiority and dismissive disdain.

(Actually, come to think of it, it may simply be because Britain voted to leave the EU. I have noticed that the staff in shops in France are considerably ruder now than they were before we chose to turn our backs on the EU. Who knows what lies the French have been told by their EU complaint media.)

I am so looking forward to firing our estate agent after Christmas. I intend to prepare a lengthy speech, in French, in which I draw attention to all his shortcomings.

On second thoughts, maybe I will confine myself to a précis of his shortcomings.

I don't want to have to stand there for six hours reciting his faults.

7

I see that there is an exhibition celebrating ABBA, the Swedish pop group, at the Southbank Centre over Christmas and through until the end of the winter. Fair enough; they were enormously successful. But the exhibition is supported with taxpayers' funds by the Arts Council of England. Why the hell is the Arts Council using public money to celebrate a foreign pop group? And if there really isn't enough public support for an ABBA exhibition should we be paying for one? I sometimes despair at the way public money is thrown around. Every penny that is spent should be analysed and discussed seriously by grown-ups.

8

The weather forecasters said that we would have snow today. It is supposed to be the third huge storm of the season. But in reality it is a calm, sunny day. There is no snow, nor is there likely to be.

The weather forecasters over-sell their scary scenarios for two reasons.

First, they need to drive eyes to their websites so that they can charge more for the advertising which accompanies their absurd, attention seeking prognostications.

Second, they are an integral part of the global warming change myth and so feel they have to persuade us that the climate is truly changing. They have to terrify us with the constant prospect of stormy winters, flooded coastal regions and arid summers when in reality our weather has changed not at all. A careful study of history shows clearly enough that we have no more storms, cold winters and hot summers now than we had a century ago.

Theresa May has now betrayed us completely. The deal she has made with the EU means, in my view, that we are now worse off than we were before the Referendum. We will be constrained by all the worst aspects of the EU and we will be ruled by thugs like Juncker. We will have no vote and no control over our destiny. I have opposed the EU since the 1970s and have actively fought against it for two decades. I now fear that all our efforts have been in vain. May's deal is pathetic and humiliating. I am today, for the first time in my life, ashamed to be English and ashamed to be British. The Second World War was a complete waste of blood. This is, without a doubt, the most awful day of modern history.

9

There was a funeral service for Johnny Hallyday today. Hallyday, died two days ago at the age of 74, and the centre of Paris came to a halt as the funeral procession, accompanied by the rock star's band playing live, and followed by a lengthy line of black leathered motorcyclists , drove from the Arc de Triomphe down the Champs-Elysee to the Place de la Concorde and finally to the church of La Madeleine. A million people lined the route, French presidents from Macron backwards all attended as did a galaxy of movie and music stars. (It was rather thoughtless of ex-President Hollande to attend since it was his absurdly greedy tax policies which drove Hallyday and other celebrities out of France. Hallyday attacked Hollande in his autobiography. Still, politicians have thick skins and invariably put themselves first. Opportunistic? Self-serving?)

Hallyday, whose real name was Jean-Philippe LeoSmet, sold more than 110 million records and made over 30 films and there was as big an outpouring of national emotion in France at the death of the nearest thing they had to royalty as happened in England when princess Diana died. Every French generation loved Hallyday who was truly one of the most charismatic performers of all time. He was an inveterate smoker of filterless French cigarettes and died of lung cancer.

It will, I suspect, take the French a long time to realise that their Elvis has finally gone to the Great Concert Hall in the sky. For as long as I can remember it has been impossible to visit Paris without seeing his name and face on posters for films, records, television shows, books or magazine features.

10

We have prepared our television viewing for the Christmas season. We will, as usual, declare independence from the schedulers and television companies.

People used to go on TV because they had something to say and share with the viewing public. There were also some fairly basic requirements as to the individual's ability to articulate their thoughts and then present them in an intelligible way. In the 1970s, it was commonplace for television producers to send a researcher to interview a potential 'performer' and to check that they were not likely to startle or confuse the viewers.

Now, going on television is an end in itself. The gawping idiots who stood behind a presenter, waving and pulling faces, have become the programmes.

I no longer watch the stuff broadcast by TV companies. (I no longer watch television.)

The following DVDs are on our list for watching: the *Sherlock Holmes* series (starring Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce); *The Third Man* (starring Joseph Cotton, Orson Welles and Trevor Howard); *The Thirty Nine Steps* (starring Robert Donat and Madeleine Carroll); *Uncle Buck* and *Only the Lonely* (both starring John Candy); the first of the *Back to the Future* series and the first of the *Toy Story* series. And *The Quiet Man*. And probably a Bond film. Oh, and the original *Swallows and Amazons* film – quaint, old-fashioned and sweetly English. Alternatives include *The Big Lebowski*, *Mr Wick*, *Stand Up Guys* (the best buddy movie ever made) and *The Equalizer* (the film version starring Denzil Washington rather than the sadly dated television series starring Edward Woodward). I am also looking forward to the latest series of *Elementary*, the excellent American series about a modern day version of Sherlock Holmes starring Johnny lee Miller as Sherlock and Lucy Lu as a surprisingly effective Dr Joan Watson.

(The Johnny Lee Miller version is clever, witty, true to the spirit of Conan Doyle and infinitely preferable to the appallingly pretentious and laughable Cumberbatch version.) Other films on the shortlist include: *My Cousin Vinny* (starring Joe Pesci), *Cockneys and Zombies* and *Hopscotch* (starring Walter Matthau). Tons of old Cary Grant movies. *The Thin Man* series starring the immaculate and perfect William Powell and Myrna Loy. (The original *Thin Man*, shot in 1934 in 12 days, is still one of the sharpest, brightest film comedies of all time. The five sequels maintained the standard.) And…oh…the list is endless. We have a huge film library.

Christmas may have to be extended beyond Twelfth Night.

11

It is being suggested by The Idiots who now seem to run everything these days that wild wolves and wild bears should be released into the English countryside in order to keep down the rampaging hordes of wild deer which the rest of us haven't seen but which the Idiots say are now out of control.

And what will the idiots do when the wild wolves and the wild bears get out of control?

Introduce some wild lions and tigers I suppose

You couldn't make this stuff up, could you?

12

Acquaintances of ours recently bought a house on an isthmus. We sent them a house warming greeting. Antoinette created a card which says 'Happy Isthmus.'

We had a series of wrong number telephone calls. Eventually, I got fed up.

'This is the police,' I said sternly, when a woman muttered something incomprehensible.

'Oh dear, I am sorry,' she said, suddenly sober and entirely comprehensible. 'I'm very sorry. I misdialled.'

'Don't do it again!' I said sternly, and put the receiver down sharply.

13

An acquaintance of ours told me that he needs new reading glasses but that he won't go to the optician in case they report him to the authorities and he loses his driving licence. He says his sight is perfectly fine for driving but that he has heard of several people who found that an innocent visit to have their eyes tested resulted in their losing their licences. Our acquaintance lives in the country and points out that without a licence and a car he would be under permanent house arrest.

I have had three unhappy experiences with opticians. One told me I had macular degeneration when I hadn't. One in Devon tried to flog me new spectacles I didn't need. And the other, in Somerset, tried to test my visual fields with a screen which was dirty. If I hadn't wiped the screen with a tissue and insisted on a repeat test I would have been diagnosed as suffering with glaucoma or a brain tumour.

This evening I had an email from Talktalk who told me 'We believe you are now paying more than you have to. That means now may be a good time for a plan review with one of our advisors.'

And so another half an hour of my life will be wasted.

Why do I have to ring all these people every few months? It's not just the phone people. They're all at it. The utility people all write and tell me that I am paying too much and that I must ring them to fix up a better deal.

Why don't these people just give me the better deal and stop wasting my time? Why do they make me ring up to avoid being scalped? Why can't we do it all online? They insist on sending me email bills. They want to do everything online when it suits them.

But when they want me to communicate with them I have to use the bloody telephone, press 1, press 837, press 2737 and then wait a week until Avril has finished painting her bloody nails and can talk to me about the 197 choices which are available and which I know I will never understand.

14

We watched *Let it Ride* – one of my favourite films. Richard Dreyfus is magnificent as the gambler who is having a wonderful day but Robbie Coltrane, as the sympathetic bookmaker's clerk very nearly steals the movie. (In the same sort of way that Sam Elliot, the cowboy, very nearly steals *The Big Lebowski* from Jeff Bridges and John Goldman).

My one claim to fame is that when I was making an awful television series in Scotland, I needed a pair of size 12 wellington boots (don't ask why but I was wearing them indoors and it was Christmas and I also wore a big, white beard) and the only suitable footwear the costume department could find was a pair which had been bought specially for Mr Coltrane.

So I wore Mr Coltrane's wellies.

15

Ronald Reagan, former US President, was and is much derided by the smart bits of the media but he (or his scriptwriters) said the three wisest things ever said by a politician.

1. 'Don't just do something. Stand there.'
2. 'The most terrifying words in the English language are: 'I'm from the Government and I'm here to help you.''
3. 'Government's view of the economy could be summed up in a few short phrases: If it moves, tax it. If it keeps moving, regulate it. And if it stops moving, subsidize it.'

Brilliant.

Those three sayings should be engraved on every politician's heart. And on every civil servant's heart too.

For a very modest fee I'll do the engraving.

16

'I'm a wrapper', he said.

'Oh that's nice. I can never do that properly. I always end up tearing the paper. Do you do those wonderful little bows out of strips of ribbon?'

Him (crossly): 'No, I'm a singer. A rapper.'

'Oh, that's nearly as nice.'

17

Antoinette bought a new steam iron recently. The last one was nearly a year old and well past its sell-by-date. The new one doesn't get rid of wrinkles very well so she now bought a non-steam iron. That does nearly as well as the steam iron. Neither of these expensive irons does the job half as well as an old-fashioned hot iron would do it.

And who can we thank for this deterioration in efficiency?

The EU, of course.

For it was eurocrats who insisted on new regulations which make irons useless.

Here's a quiz for today.

What do David Icke and Jacques Tati have in common.

Answer tomorrow.

18

Publishers have again proudly announced that 'real' book sales are going up after years of losing out to ebook sales.

What they don't say (and what you can easily see if you look at the categories of books being sold) is that 'real' book sales are only rising because those adult colouring-in books and dot-to-dot books are still selling in phenomenal numbers. And they count as 'real' books.

In explaining the supposed increased in sales, publishers say it is because book buyers want to fill their homes with books so that they can show off – and give their pad an old-fashioned 'homely' feel.

And in support of this they point out that loads of people are now taking selfies with their books behind them to show how clever and well-read they are. As I mentioned earlier in this diary, they have borrowed Antoinette's word and call them 'shelfies'.

The answer to yesterday's quiz is that both were professional footballers. And both were goalkeepers.

Facebook has conceded that social media can cause mental illness. Their solution is that sufferers should use social media more not less. This is a commercially brilliant solution and should add a few billion quid to Zuckerberg's wallet – enabling him to promise to leave more of the stuff to good causes at some time in the future. Instead of promising philanthropy, a little more caring just now would go down rather well. Generally speaking, it seems to me that the internet people have a ruthlessness which is quite scary.

(Publicising your philanthropy is common these days. I have, on a number of occasions, seen magazine columns with the words 'The fee for this column has been donated to charity' printed at the bottom. Why do these writers, invariably amateurs, insist on sharing the details of their generosity so publicly?)

The Facebook remedy sounds like one of those utterly insane therapeutic remedies favoured by Sir Roderick Spode, the potty doctor in P.G.Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster stories. Spode recommended that people who drank too much should drink more so that they became bored with the stuff. And he advised people who ate too much to eat and eat and eat on the same rather dubious grounds.

Except that Wodehouse was joking and he was not responsible for the mental health of several billion poor sods around the world.

19

We are in Devon and I woke up to discover that one of our drains is overflowing. What fun. Old houses tend to have peculiar drainage systems which have a mind of their own.

I spent the afternoon on my hands and knees with a bucket. First, you have to get out the water. Then you find the blockage. I looked in the garage for the ubiquitous drain cleaning brushes which are always present in or around properties of a certain size and a certain age but I couldn't find them. They will be there somewhere. We have an insurance policy for the drains (we have individual policies for drains, plumbing, electricity, heating and boiler because our boiler is so large it counts as industrial and cannot be covered on a domestic policy) but I wanted to deal with the problem myself because I hate the process of ringing up, waiting, being rung back, waiting, hoping and being let down.

Eventually, I managed to get the drain working again. Workmen had brushed piles of debris into the drainage system. Once I'd fished out the rubbish they'd deposited down there, the water could flow. The idiots had, believe it or not, swept three bucketfuls of gravel into the drains. Some workmen treat every home like a building site and just don't care how much damage they do. I once watched in horror as an idiot builder poured a can of old diesel into a septic tank.

But I must find the drain brushes. They're bound to be around somewhere; tucked behind old sacks of fertiliser or salt or rock hard cement.

Later, as I had my post prandial coffee, I resumed reading *Print the Legend – the Life and Times of John Ford* by Scott Eyman and it's a brilliant book.

Ford (who won six Oscars and made many of the greatest films of all time) knew everyone from Wyatt Earp to Rudolf Valentino and the stories about his life make gripping reading. He was, without a doubt, a great genius of the cinema. He can't have been an easy man to live with. He could be intensely cruel – as John Wayne, the big bear of a man and the king of the cowboys, could have testified.

I have to confess that my favourite story in the book involves Ford sitting on the lavatory and being told that a journalist has come to interview him.

'That's OK,' said Ford. 'I can deal with two shits at once.'

20

I received a letter from someone who describes herself as a fan. 'I have read all your books,' she says, 'and follow your work with great interest.'

The letter is addressed to Dr Veronica Campbell.

Close, I suppose. The initials were right.

Our drains are blocked again. This is now serious stuff. I had to telephone our drains insurers. They said they will send someone round first thing tomorrow. Knowing our luck there is probably a fully grown seal living in there. Or a walrus. Or some other large beast.

21

At 8.30 a.m. the telephone went. I thought, and hoped, it was the drains man coming to sort out our problem.

It was the insurers ringing to say that the drains man wasn't coming.

I sat down and wept a little. You can survive without electricity, without heat and without a boiler. (We have back up facilities for all of those.) If the water goes off you can buy two dozen bottles and use those for drinking and washing and flushing the loo. But drains are irreplaceable. When the drains aren't working you are stuffed.

Then Antoinette came to the rescue and found a private drains company. They promised to come round this morning. Brilliant! Saved!

And then, a little later, the new drains company telephoned to cancel. They said that they would come late in the afternoon. I told Antoinette to cancel them. It will be dark at 4 p.m. And, besides, one cancellation is enough for me these days.

I drove to the nearest town and bought a new set of drain clearance rods, complete with fancy attachments. (I couldn't find the set I thought we had.) Self-sufficiency rules, OK? I then spent the next three hours messing around with the drains. This involved baling out the blocked drains, with a pudding basin and a bucket, and messing about underground. I managed to clear some stuff but the main drain still wouldn't clear.

And then our insurers came up trumps and found another drains man. He came round at lunchtime, complete with cameras and water jets, and he cleared the problem. It is true that he found a ton of roots growing inside our magnificently complicated drainage system. But that problem can be dealt with next year.

We will have working drains for Christmas. Hoorah! I tipped the drains guy £20 and it was a pleasure to do so.

Astonishingly but not surprisingly 98% of people who buy new homes report defects. These, of course, are houses which were built to satisfy the EU's appallingly low and unsuitable building regulations. And yet the EU wants to knock down solid, well-built old houses or, at the very least, to stop them being sold.

The latest plan is to stop solid, well-made houses being sold if they do not conform to selected insulation standards created by EU eurocrats.

Our best public buildings, bridges, railways and so on, are Victorian but instead of merely updating, mending and revising we knock them down and put up structures made of cardboard which will not last more than a couple of decades. Modern houses might as well be made of paper.

Today, politicians are obsessed with the idea of 'affordable homes'.

An affordable home is, of course, one which satisfies all EU regulations and will be so small that it is claustrophobic and so badly built that it will fall down within a decade or two.

How many of today's affordable homes will still be standing in a century and a half?

I'd guess none.

22

While typing away in Windows, everything suddenly turned red and was underlined. There was also a line on the left of the page that wasn't there moments earlier.

I swear I didn't touch or do anything unusual.

I had to call Antoinette who understands everything.

I hate Windows. It is the most unfriendly, useless, illogical, counterintuitive, over-complicated and appalling piece of software ever invented and Bill Gates should be hung, drawn and quartered before being burnt at the stake. (I am also becoming increasingly annoyed by the fact that Gates is spending a good chunk of his ill-gotten gains on promoting vaccination. It does not seem quite right to me that he, and others like him, should use their money to promote their personal views on public policy and to push vaccination on millions of unsuspecting people.)

I wonder how many people have died of the stress caused by his bloody awful but ubiquitous and unavoidable program

Thankfully, Antoinette did something clever and rescued me.

Today, some Alzheimer researchers have announced that people who eat lots of spinach and kale are less likely to develop dementia.

The only connection I can think of is that both spinach and kale contain lots of iron and lots of vitamins such as vitamins C and K.

Naturally, the media don't seem to have noticed this.

I wonder if the 'Spinach and Kale Farming Cooperative' could be behind the release of this news?

23

I knew that the ravens enjoyed a crisp, morning apple but today, I discovered that the crows also enjoy apples. I watched in astonishment as a crow walked towards an apple, pierced it with a single thrust of his beak and flew off with the apple stuck on his beak as if it were a toffee apple on a stick. I assume he flew somewhere, shook the apple from his beak and ate it at leisure.

24

'Merry Christmas!' called a voice.

I turned around.

'Merry Christmas, Eugene!' said our genial neighbour. He grinned at me. 'I never forget a name,' he said with pride.

‘It’s a rare and valuable gift,’ I told him. I wished him a Happy Christmas.

I know his name but I never use it. It would, I think, take something away from his pride in remembering mine if he knew that I remembered his.

For him, I shall for evermore be Eugene. What’s in a name? It is the fact that he makes an effort to remember who I am that really matters.

The funny thing is that neither Antoinette nor I ever gives our correct names to people we meet. I am usually Thomas, Jerome, Pelham or Bertie. Antoinette prefers to be Annabel or Kathy. This may sound silly but we are fed up with people finding me on the web and believing the nonsense they read. I should have used a nom de plume when I started writing but it is a little late now.

This evening we watched *Hercule Poirot’s Christmas*. One of our many small traditions.

25

We were not going to have any crackers this year but secretly and privately both Antoinette and I kept looking to see if we could find any worth buying. All I could find were the usual, rubbishy crackers containing metal egg cups, paper dominoes, nail clippers, playing cards too small and thin to be of any use, yoyos which are too light to work properly and the other age-old tat that now appear to be standard fare in all crackers whatever the price. The crackers sold for children have also deteriorated to the point where they are boring.

But Antoinette came up trumps!

She found some marvellous crackers containing decent magic tricks. They weren’t cheap but they were well worth the cost.

Not to be entirely outdone, I purchased a variety of small toys for post prandial entertainment over the Christmas period, including: a 100 piece jigsaw, a box of pranks (realistic coffee spill, scary spider, computer screen crack… that sort of thing), a kaleidoscope, a clockwork snowman, a crystal experiment, a balancing game, a packet of bendable glowsticks, a spy camera, a small teddy bear, one of those springs that climbs down steps, a small chemistry set for making magic colour bubbles, magic snow for making an indoor snowman and a couple of gliders in the shape of fairies.

Ho, ho, ho!

Our first snowdrops and primroses are out. The climate change enthusiasts will no doubt blame their favourite disaster theory. But the snowdrops and primroses are always out at this time.

We had a very pleasant bottle of Chateau Gaillard 2006 with our Christmas dinner. Antoinette cooked a magnificent feast. We gave the wildlife extra rations of nuts and apples.

26

We put *The Great Escape* on the DVD player at lunchtime. We always leave it playing while we have lunch.

A wise friend has written to ask what happened to Mad Cow Disease? ‘Has it disappeared?’ he wants to know. ‘Or is it possible that some of the people who have been diagnosed with dementia are really suffering from Mad Cow Disease?’

It is, indeed, very possible that many patients do have Mad Cow Disease but have been diagnosed as suffering from Alzheimer’s disease because that is now the default explanation for patients who are demented.

No one looks for the other symptoms of Mad Cow Disease.

This afternoon I watched two crows fly past with twigs in their mouths. Next year’s nesting season has clearly started a little early.

27

I never planned what might be called my career in any way. Everything (good and bad) has just happened.

But as I grow older so I have decided that it would be imprudent to do some planning and so I have made myself a plan.

It isn’t a bucket list. I think they are largely fake and designed to impress (self or others).

The basic premise is to grow old disgracefully, never declining into weary respectability.

It is said that a wise man will maximise personal comfort without exerting himself unduly, or more than is necessary.

If that is true then I have been as far off the scale in the opposite direction as it is possible to go. I intend to redress this.

I will look after Antoinette, write a few books and re-read all my old favourites.

I see that the film of *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War* is being shown yet again on television on New Year's Day. The cast includes Pauline Collins, John Alderton and Peter Capaldi. It is, I believe, the only self-published novel ever to have been turned into a major movie. When you consider that literary and film agents spend their lives pushing novels at film producers it is astonishing that Mrs Caldicot was spotted and that the script won through the process which means that only one in a hundred completed script is ever filmed. The film, which won prestigious awards was hated by the critics who didn't like the idea of a film made about a courageous pensioner but when Antoinette and I saw it in a cinema in Exeter, the entire audience stood up quite spontaneously at the end and applauded. I have never seen that in a cinema before or since. Since the film of Mrs Caldicot was made, films about feisty old people have become commonplace. All of which reminds me, I must get back to the third novel about her and her friends.

28

Here's a thing.

The body ages and the mind ages but the spirit does not age.

Seventy, eighty and ninety-year-olds will tell you to a man or woman that although they may have difficulty climbing the stairs, or may not be able to remember the names of people they know, they still feel the same inside as they did when they were young and just setting out on life's great adventure.

It is strange, is it not, that although we age, and acquire a million experiences, and, hopefully, some wisdom, we still see ourselves in the same way that we did when we were able to run and jump, remember vast amounts of useless stuff and worry endlessly about our acne spots.

Today, I noticed that some of my ebooks are available on a curious website which promises readers free books. I asked Amazon how this could be. They explained that the website doesn't actually provide the books free of charge. It doesn't provide anything. It is, not surprisingly perhaps, a phishing site which collects names and personal data.

29

A British shop assistant reached over and took change out of my hand while I was working out whether I could give her 63 pence in coins or have to put up with being given 37 pence in more change.

And darn me if another one didn't do the same thing ten minutes later.

This is, it seems, another symptom of the way the elderly are treated in Britain.

Shop assistants, most of whom are themselves illiterate and innumerate and unable to add two and two and obtain a result that isn't cabbages unless they have access to something which operates on batteries, automatically assume that because I don't have any visible tattoos I must be potty and suffering from dementia.

Well, bugger them. I am going to buy myself an ear trumpet and carry it everywhere with me. I am not deaf but I will force people to shout into it if they wish to converse with me.

Evelyn Waugh wasn't deaf but he forced people to shout into his ear trumpet because he felt it intimidated and humiliated them. And it also gave the bad-tempered, old bugger a chance to tell them off for shouting.

This is the future for me and for those with whom I come into contact.

Alternatively, I will get one of those large National Health Service hearing aids which are the size of a cigarette packet and which fit into a pocket and connect to the hearing aid by a long wire. The things hiss and make lots of noise.

30

I know that everything I believe could be wrong.

I could be wrong about vaccination, vivisection, global warming and so on.

But knowing that I could be wrong doesn't stop me trying to be right.

If I don't believe that I could be wrong then I am as bigoted, prejudiced and blinkered as 'they' are.

But I do believe that I am right about vaccination, vivisection, global warming and so on. I honestly, passionately believe that I am right. I have studied all the evidence as dispassionately as I can, and with due regard for the quality of the evidence I have examined.

I am, I believe, quite good at analysing scientific papers. I have been doing it for over 50 years so I damned well ought to be pretty good at it by now. When I was in my 20s, writing books such as *The Medicine Men* and *Paper*

Doctors, I was lauded by the media for my ability to dissect scientific evidence. (Some of the reviews of both books are on my website www.vernoncoleman.com)

Today, now that I know I am better at that sort of stuff, and have a track record to point to, the establishment sneers or ignores me.

The real problem is that the medical and scientific establishments are owned by the various branches of industry and 'they' do not find it easy to accept that they could be wrong. They won't look at the evidence and they won't debate and they won't allow anyone to publish or broadcast views which are contrary to theirs. And the medical and scientific establishments are as powerful a lobby force as any industry. They control journalists and editors and ensure that nothing too questioning receives any publicity.

I have always regarded my job as making people think a little. Sometimes I have been the grit in the machine.

But now, more than ever, there is no debate and no freedom. This is practical fascism in action. There is no room in the machine for grit.

We live in a world I hardly recognise: overcrowded and overbearing. It is a world which feels uncomfortable; itchy and ill-fitting. The world is full of sneaks and nosy parkers with cameras fixed to their heads; hordes with absolutely no sense of where their business ends and someone else's starts. Privacy is now just a word, rather than an element of morality. Scientific honesty is a distant memory. The bad guys have taken over and we are being manipulated into blind obedience. The fascist hordes are all around us and we have sleep-walked into the hinterlands of oblivion.

I am glad I am no longer a young man.

31

I am going to buy the pipe I have for some time been threatening to purchase. Something rather unusual I think.

I can then point it at people, threaten to light it, puff to avoid questions I don't want to answer, puff thoughtfully, puff to give an impression of wisdom and good sense and enjoy the wonderful associated paraphernalia – silver pokers, and prodders and so on.

And I can pull it out in public places for the fun of watching people complaining even though the damned thing isn't lit. As they grow increasingly hysterical, I will feign ignorance and innocence.

Me a trouble maker?

Don't be silly.

Far too old.

And maybe, after all, I'll buy a boat. I love buying magazines about things which are a mystery to me so I bought another yachting magazine recently.

There is so much choice. We could have a cutter, a ketch, a yawl, a schooner, a motor yacht, a cabin cruiser, a sloops, a MFV, a pinnace or a trawler. Or something unwanted by the navy.

The world is full of nearly new boats for sale. What an excitement that would be. Neither Antoinette nor I has any knowledge of boats so buying one seems a must.

I think I am perhaps reaching an age for adventure.

It will, at least, help me forget and ignore what is going on around us.

I am a year older than I was when I started this diary and nothing has changed to convince me that the world is, generally speaking, a nice place.

Nothing has changed to convince me that common sense, honesty and decency are likely to make a comeback or that hypocrisy and sanctimoniousness are not now the driving forces in human society. I devoutly wish that none of this were true but only a fantasist would believe that it is not. We have had a year in which we have been let down and ripped off mercilessly. (Sometimes both at once). I am, of course, aware that we have much to be grateful for but the letting down and the ripping off can prove tiresome.

(We are all driven by different forces. I am certain that I once wrote a book detailing the many and varied forces which drive our actions. I remember being fascinated by it at the time. But I cannot for the life of me remember what it was called. I do hope this isn't a sign that my brain is turning into porridge.)

Maybe things will change next year.

And that, surely, is as good a definition of optimism as you are likely to find.

What have I learned this year? Well, I have learned that you can never trust the French; cheating, lying and deceiving are the default condition for the frogs.

I have also learned that the elderly are considered fair game for everyone.

And I have learned that the millennials are members of an entirely different species.

Finally, it is now time to put on our DVD of Sherlock Holmes; the episode where Jeremy Brett apparently falls over the Reichenbach Falls. We watch this at the end of every year. And we follow it, immediately after midnight, with the episode when Holmes delights Watson by reappearing as an elderly bookseller. An end of one life and the beginning of a new life. How appropriate.

My resolution for 2018 is a rather sad one.

In view of the number of bad reviews my first diary (*Diary of a Disgruntled Man*) has received in many parts of the world (particularly the UK and the US) I feel there is no point in continuing to write these diaries for publication. Even one really bad review can permanently damage a book's sales. But the real problem is that as a result of a few bad reviews, *Diary of a Disgruntled Man* has a low overall rating, and in the ebook world that is deadly.

New readers see the poor reviews the first diary has been given and so don't bother reading that or any of the other diaries. If no one is going to read them there isn't a lot of point in publishing them. This is not a complaint – merely an observation.

The diaries took up much of my writing life (they are very long and very heartfelt and each diary takes well over 1,000 hours of work) but I am sad that the series has come to an end. It had been my intention to continue with them until the Great Editor in the sky swept down with his Blue Pencil. But I do understand that people either love or hate my style of diary writing.

And I recognise that some readers find them too honest.

I realise, of course, that many readers disagree with some of my views. Of course they do. What a strange world it would be if we all agreed with one another. But, sadly, there are too many people around the world who will these days hammer a book with a damning review solely because they disagree with one or more of the author's opinions or sometimes without even bothering to assess the author's opinions. I have no problem at all with thoughtful reviews but one reviewer (not, I think, in either the UK or the US) admitted that he or she had made his judgement, and given the book one star, after reading just one kindle page of my first diary – a 200,000 word book. I've been writing book reviews for half a century and I would find it impossible to make an assessment after reading less than a thousandth of a book. Another reader from somewhere in the world, who admitted that he or she had read a similar amount of the book, dismissed my book and life as 'boring'. It does hurt when thousands of hours of work are dismissed so lightly. And it is, of course, impossible not to take it personally. A book, especially a diary, is a very personal thing. I stress that this isn't a whinge – it's merely an explanation for a decision I haven't taken lightly, and which I find rather sad.

The (to me) rather awful truth is that most people who are prepared to read diaries want to find out what the author said to Isabella Clingfilm over luncheon, what Simon Nitfellow had to eat and drink at the Twatfart's party, why Douglas Potbelly is leaving the soap opera on which he has been a star for nearly three weeks and why reality television star Johnnie Knucklehead is selling his Mayfair mansion to pop sensation Quentin Lacklustre.

My diaries would have doubtless been more commercial if I had written them when I was working in Fleet Street constantly popping in and out of TV and radio studios. Then I could have filled each day's entry with tittle tattle and gossip. For example, I could have written about the famous diet book author, now sadly deceased, who promoted healthy eating with enormous vigour, but who lived on a diet of chips eaten out of paper bags and plastic take away trays. Or I could have explained how I had frequently been commissioned by national newspapers to write major features to fit television advertising campaigns which had already been filmed and booked.

I understand too that a lot of readers prefer their diaries to be remorselessly upbeat, without going into any of those annoying disappointments and distractions which tend to affect real life and bop you on the neck when you aren't looking. And some readers would have doubtlessly been happier if I had edited out repeated references to things I care about.

In short, I should, perhaps, have edited my life and been more gruntled.

So the end of the diaries is a result of two fundamental errors. First, I have been too honest. I should have kept my opinions to myself – or stuck to the official party lines. Second, I shouldn't have shared my ups and downs. The diaries would then have been more commercial and they would have certainly attracted less vitriol.

Actually, come to think of it I have miscounted.

There were three fundamental errors.

The third error was to refuse to accept that humour in general and irony in particular are only acceptable when the object is an acceptable target. It is permissible to make fun of the elderly, of heterosexual males and of the English. But you must not, under any circumstances, make jokes about foreigners, the European Union or the Corbynistas. My word, no, you must not do that. Too many people only approve of jokes when the targets are acceptably unapproved.

Mea culpa. But no apologies.

And so, without regret and with no further ado, this is the last diary which I shall publish. My diaries are three times as long as most books. They take me a long time to write and they take Antoinette a huge amount of time to edit and to turn into ebooks. The process is surprisingly complicated and removing literals and the worst grammatical howlers from a daily diary can be time consuming. There are only the two of us and I invariably insist that Antoinette stops and moves onto the next project before she has finished a second or third reading of the text. (It is, therefore, entirely my fault if the diaries contain literals which we missed. However, this doesn't stop Antoinette (without whom I would have never published any ebooks at all) from getting terribly upset every time she reads an Amazon review pointing out that a particular book contains grammatical errors or literals (which we simply missed when editing a 200,000 word book). She blames herself because she cares. Antoinette's upset is made far worse, of course, by the fact that the reviews are there forever even if the books have been updated since the reviews were written.). To answer the question which I asked myself at the start of this diary: 'Yes, I probably will continue to keep a diary. But it will not be tidied up for publication.'

I shall carry on writing other books (it's the only thing I now know how to do).

But Antoinette and I will live our tumultuous, sometimes unusual, rather roller coaster life in silence and privacy, well away from those who think that a book which does not mention Gloucester Cathedral must inevitably be damned with a one star review.

I would like to thank very much indeed those readers who have been kind enough to say that they have enjoyed parts, some or all of the diaries. A special thanks to those who have read all six. Bless you! May those who would harm you be overcome by confusion and numb with bewilderment. And may you and those whom you love be blessed with never ending kindness and eternal tranquillity.

I hope you will visit us in future stories about Bilbury; you will be most welcome.

Thank you for your courtesy, your patience and your company.

Finally, I would be enormously grateful if readers who have found this book, in part or in whole, stimulating or entertaining, or even both, would find the time to give it a decent rating. Otherwise the book will doubtless die and my variety of freedom of speech will take another kicking. Thank you.

Vernon Coleman

Author! Author!

A short, unedited biography of the author contributed without charge by his friend ‘Patchy’ Fogg

(‘Patchy’ Fogg is a long-term resident of the village of Bilbury. He is an antiques dealer and Vernon Coleman’s brother-in-law.)

Vernon Coleman is tall and now has less hair than would be considered appropriate for a television presenter or politician. He does, however, have most of his own teeth and nails which is pretty good for an old bloke. He is a qualified doctor and long-term iconoclast who seems intelligent enough but who is stupid enough to write what he believes, with the aim of making people think. This was definitely not a particularly wise career choice for he has attracted a good deal of spiteful criticism from those parts of the medical establishment (such as the drug industry) which have been annoyed by his books and articles.

He was a successful self-published author long before self-publishing became fashionable and this annoyed the publishing establishment. To make things worse he has been quite good at it and has sold a lot of books. The only thing that annoys the publishing establishment more than an author who self publishes is an author who self publishes and turns out to be moderately good at it. Every time someone buys one of his books, you can hear editors and literary agents gnashing their teeth at their lost commissions.

(If you have already spotted a pattern here then you’re spot on. The silly bugger has spent much of his life annoying people with power. Pretty stupid but there you go, someone’s got to do it otherwise the people in power would get too complacent.)

Vernon’s early books were published by many leading London publishers but he chose to self-publish when no one would publish a book called *Alice’s Diary*.

Just about every publisher in London turned this one down on the twin grounds that it wasn’t the sort of thing he usually wrote and that in any case there was no market for a book purporting to be a diary written by a cat. Silly buggers.

After he had sold more than 60,000 hardback copies, Vernon decided that posh publishers and agents didn’t know more about publishing than he did so he’d publish more of his books himself.

Within a few years, Vernon and his missus (whom you will have doubtless met in the Bilbury books) were running a large self-publishing operation from Publishing House, a specially converted building in Barnstaple where he employed over a dozen members of staff. Always a free spirit he said that he enjoyed publishing his own books because he did not have to deal with editors or marketing people and could write whatever he chose to write.

‘You mean to tell me that you write whatever you want to write, publish it and then make money?’ said one snotty broadsheet journalist from the *Sunday Telegraph*, who was appalled by Vernon’s way of working. I was there when she said it and I couldn’t believe it, to be honest. In Britain, any sort of success is regarded as embarrassing and rather shameful. (My own experiences as a decently successful antiques dealer based in Bilbury in North Devon confirm this!). His success as a self-publisher attracted a whole new collection of enemies among journalists. (You’d think the idiot would have learned, wouldn’t you?)

The Advertising Standards Authority (which is a private body, funded by large advertisers, but which has taken pomposity to a new level and which I suspect likes to give the impression that it is an arbiter of public taste as far as ads are concerned) frequently complained noisily about adverts which upset large corporate interests but VC delighted in continuing to use the same ‘banned’ adverts for years after the ASA had stuck its stick in his spokes. I remember he was particularly delighted when *The Guardian* newspaper, which most of us in Bilbury have always considered to be a disgustingly sanctimonious and hypocritical rag, agreed to publish (in return for a ‘bribe’ of something north of £60,000) a series of full page adverts which had been ‘banned’ by the fact-averse Advertising Standards Authority. Vernon didn’t sell any books through the ads (he didn’t expect to) but regarded the £60,000 as well spent since it proved beyond doubt that the supercilious *The Guardian* is full of hypocrisy and that when it comes down to a straight fight with money, the Advertising Standards Authority is as toothless as gummy old Archibald Burroughs who does a bit of furniture restoration for me sometimes.

So that was the ASA to add to the growing list of enemies.

Vernon’s many books include *Mrs Caldicot’s Cabbage War* (which is believed to be the only self-published novel to be turned into a full-length feature film) and the books about the village of Bilbury in North Devon which sell all around the world and which have been bestsellers in some pretty funny places. We get Japanese readers coming to the village quite frequently and as long as they keep buying William Shakespeare’s battered old writing desk, I don’t mind a bit. They're a nice bunch, to be honest. Actually, Shakespeare's old beds are doing better than his writing desk these days. (Contact me c/o the Duck and Puddle if you want an original bed as slept in by the great dramatist himself.)

Born in Walsall in 1946, Vernon went to the local grammar school, Queen Mary's Grammar School. I've never been there but I'm told that Walsall used to be in Staffordshire until some blokes in cheap suits with dandruff on the collar and lapels moved the whole place into somewhere called the West Midlands. It's probably in Wales by now.

After leaving school, our young hero spent a year working in a place called Kirkby, which is just outside Liverpool, as a Community Service Volunteer. In Liverpool, Vernon organised a small army of volunteers and arranged for them to perform chores such as decorating the homes of the elderly and the poor. This activity proved surprisingly popular with the elderly and the poor and the young people who did the work who regarded it as rather jolly, but it was understandably very unpopular with bureaucrats and trade unions who, predictably, all did a good deal of whingeing and complaining. More enemies for young Coleman.

While in Liverpool, VC began writing for newspapers and was appointed drama critic for a number of local newspapers including the *Kirkby Reporter*, which may have had a circulation of only three but by all accounts they were a pretty feisty three.

After that, Vernon Coleman went to Birmingham University to study medicine. While supposed to be studying bones and rashes, he ran a rather wild youth club called The Gallows in the centre of the city. This was designed to attract teenagers who had nowhere to go in the evenings. The place was popular with a pretty rough crowd and VC kept order by carrying a Victorian swordstick and waving it around whenever anyone pulled a knife or started fighting. If you're a tearaway with a flick knife you tend to have respect for someone who pulls a three foot long blade out of his walking stick. These days, the Old Bill would have had him locked up but in those days they didn't bother about stuff like that unless you actually stuck the blade through someone important. He's still got the swordstick. I've seen it. Impressive. I want him to sell it to me but he won't part with it.

While supposed to be reading big, thick books on neurology and ophthalmology et al, young Master Coleman also reviewed books and plays for the *Birmingham Post*, *The Times Educational Supplement* and a variety of other publications. Heaven knows how he found the time.

After hospital posts in Leamington Spa in the English Midlands and Shoreham on the South Coast he became a General Practitioner and if you've read the Bilbury books you'll know all about that. In those days, GPs had no specific training and Coleman insists that on the morning when he started work as a GP, he had no idea how to write a prescription or a sick note. ('I hadn't been in a GP's surgery since boyhood when I had visited as a patient,' he told me.)

He resigned from the health service in protest at being required to write diagnoses on sick notes which were, by law, made available to a patient's employer. He quite reasonably argued that this was a breach of the confidentiality aspect of the Hippocratic Oath. Shortly after his resignation, the law was changed which probably proves something or other.

In 1975, his first book *The Medicine Men* was published and both this and the sequel, *Paper Doctors*, received extensive, largely laudatory review coverage in the national press and on television. The papers quickly realised that this was a mistake since it really pissed off some very important people in the Establishment and so this was the last time this would happen.

The Medicine Men, which was serialised in *The Guardian* newspaper (which now probably prefers to keep quiet about the association) was a powerful critique both of the pharmaceutical industry's marketing practices and of the medical profession's close links with the pharmaceutical industry. Coleman was stupid enough to be the first author to draw attention to this dangerous relationship. It has done him no good at all. But it did collect some more enemies. And since collecting enemies is his favourite hobby you have to count it a success.

In the sequel, called *Paper Doctors*, Coleman made things even worse for himself by arguing that much medical research was a waste of money and effort and that doctors would do better to spend time taking advantage of the useful research which had already been done and ignored.

Pretty daft, eh?

Not surprisingly, Coleman immediately made enemies of those parts of the medical establishment which had not been annoyed by the first book. He has been pilloried by doctors, drug companies and everyone else owning a white coat ever since.

These two books were quickly followed by a series of a number of other titles: a mixture of polemics and popular health books. In 1978, Coleman wrote a book called *Stress Control*, which was the first popular medical book on the subject of stress. This one sold van loads and actually made him a bit of money.

Under the pen name, Edward Vernon, he wrote three 'funny doctor' novels for Pan/Macmillan in the UK and for St Martin's Press in the US. For some reason or other, these books have been reported to be autobiographical. I can tell you for a fact that they are not. The stories in the books were, as he says, 'made up'.

His literary agent (at a posh London agency called Curtis Brown) at the time suggested that he use the pen name because he was busy writing non-fiction medical books under his own name and she apparently thought that writing two types of book under one name would prove too confusing for publishers, bookshops and reviewers. She was probably right. There are some pretty stupid people working in publishing.

His book *Bodypower*, published in 1983, explained how the human body can protect and repair itself. This was his first major bestseller – appearing in the *Sunday Times* top ten and becoming a huge success when serialised in the *Sunday Mirror* newspaper. It was subsequently serialised in newspapers around the world.

Other notable health titles included *Life without Tranquillisers* (also a *Sunday Times* top ten bestseller) and *Aspirin or Ambulance*, published in 1980. The latter title was turned into the world's first medical software for home computers and subsequently sold in 26 countries. Coleman now gets slightly peeved when he is described as a Luddite simply because he has not embraced social media. He has never had a Facebook page or a Twitter account – regarding both as being more suitable for small children and the Entitlement Generation. I agree with him. My five-year-old tweets and plays on his Facebook page. And so does his Granny. It's no way for a grown up to spend their time. Today, everyone demands to be heard whether or not they have anything worth saying. Good sense is drowned in stormy seas of dross.

Over the years, Vernon's numerous books were published by many of Britain's leading hardback and paperback publishers and foreign language versions were published by over a score of overseas publishers. His books were regularly published in large print and audio versions.

In 1980, Robert Hale published his novel *Tunnel* under the name Marc Charbonnier. (Over the years Coleman has, like many other prolific authors, written books under a number of other pen names. I did know what the others were but I wrote them down and lost the bit of paper.)

From the early 1980s onwards, Coleman was a regular presenter and guest on a number of television and radio programmes including the Afternoon Show which was broadcast from Glasgow. He was television's first agony uncle on this programme, which was, despite the name, broadcast in the afternoons. (Amazing, where these television people get their ideas isn't it?) I saw one or two of the programmes and to be perfectly honest with you, they were pretty dire. He was the regular doctor on TV AM, which was the first of those breakfast telly shows. (Why do people watch television at that time in the morning?) He made several series of programmes based on his book *Bodypower*. In the 1980s and 1990s, whenever a new book was published, he toured the country for several weeks – often doing 30 to 40 radio and television interviews in each promotional campaign. I expect he found that fun because it gave him a chance to go around the country making new enemies.

He was the first doctor to record a series of recordings which could be accessed through premium rate telephone numbers and his service, known as The Telephone Doctor, was hugely popular and was used by several million people in the 1980s. (I bet it made the old bugger a mint.) He also invented the phrase *People Watching* for a book of the same name.

While still a student at university, Vernon contributed to a wide range of newspapers and including *The Guardian* and the *Daily Telegraph* and magazines such as *The Spectator*, *The Lady* and *Punch*. He wrote columns for several medical magazines. Although still a medical student, he also wrote a weekly 'doctor' column which was syndicated to 40 to 50 local and regional newspapers in the UK and to a number of newspapers in various parts of the Commonwealth. Bit cheeky that was.

After qualifying he was the original editor of the *British Clinical Journal* and continued to write columns and regular pieces for most national newspapers and a wide variety of magazines in the UK and abroad.

In the 1980s, Coleman became a columnist for both the *Daily Star* newspaper and *The Sun*, both sequentially and simultaneously. He was *The Sun* doctor for about a decade and that helped him speed up the rate at which he was collecting enemies.

His *Daily Star* campaign about benzodiazepine drugs led directly to a change in government policy. He also wrote a column under a pen name (Dr Duncan Scott) for *The People* newspaper and for a year or so had the curious distinction of writing columns for three major tabloid newspapers at the same time – two of them under his own name. More or less at the same time he also wrote weekly columns for the *Sunday Independent*, the *Sunday Scot* and the *Sunday Correspondent* and was still writing the weekly column which was syndicated to between 40 and 50 local newspapers. Many of the columns were also syndicated to newspapers in Australia, South Africa and Asia. He even wrote a column for a newspaper in China for a while. He left when the Chinese publisher refused to print an article on vaccination. As a result of that indiscretion, his Chinese book publishers were told that they could not print any more of his previously very successful books. So he even made enemies in China, which is pretty impressive going.

In 1993, Coleman moved to *The Sunday People* newspaper to write a column under his own name. He continued to write this until 2003, resigning when the paper's editor refused to publish a piece criticising the Iraq War. At the time, Coleman was one of Britain's highest paid columnists.

In addition to all these columns, Vernon also wrote over 5,000 articles and columns for major newspapers and magazines. Honest. I've seen the filing cabinets.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Coleman was a keen campaigner on animal rights issues, regularly speaking at large rallies in the UK and abroad. He founded and funded an organisation called Plan 2000, aimed at eradicating animal experiments, which received considerable celebrity and popular support, including support from many MPs. Coleman gave evidence about the pointlessness of animal experimentation to committees at the House of Commons and the House of Lords. He also campaigned vigorously against vaccination, which he considered far more dangerous than was widely appreciated and, long before it became popular to do so, for the legalisation of recreational drugs.

In support of his campaigns, he has distributed thousands of his books free of charge and provided numerous columns without charge. He has also spoken widely at many events (including rallies in Trafalgar Square.)

These, and other campaigns, succeeded in annoying the people who had failed to be annoyed by his books and resulted in many attacks from and inspired by the drug industry, the medical establishment and others. Coleman was, inevitably, the victim of many libellous and widely inaccurate articles both in print and on the internet. Personally, I'd have sued the bastards but Vernon preferred to just disappear off the scene and spend more time with his good lady and the animals.

After they had lost a number of high profile television debates on animal experimentation, opponents refused to appear with him and even a planned debate at the Oxford Union had to be cancelled after the Union found it impossible to find anyone prepared to speak against him. Instead of debating with him, his opponents chose to organise a massive campaign of abuse and misinformation.

Distressed by the many attacks, which were matched in their inaccuracy only by their venom, Vernon chose to become a recluse; disappearing almost entirely from view and speaking only through his books.

What have I forgotten? Oh, back in the 1980s, he established a number of websites, including www.vernoncoleman.com.

Vernon Coleman's books have always sold well outside the UK, where the attacks from the establishment have been more muted. I gather that his books have been particularly successful in Portugal and Germany though heaven knows why.

Throughout the 1990s and the early part of the 21st century, Coleman continued to write a number of books on health, books on animal issues, and books on politics. Many of these, books such as *England our England* and *Gordon is a Moron* were hugely successful. (I liked that one called *Gordon is a Moron*. Frank, the landlord of our local pub, put it in the window until the cover faded.) For several years, Coleman also wrote a monthly Health Letter which was distributed to several thousand readers in the UK and around the world. He also wrote a number of successful novels including *The Village Cricket Tour* and *The Man Who Inherited a Golf Course*. Many of his novels sold over 30,000 copies each in the UK in hardback but because they were self-published, did not count for the official bestseller lists. *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War* was, of course, turned into a popular full-length feature film starring Pauline Collins as Mrs Caldicot and John Alderton as a nursing home owner. We watch it every time it's on the telly.

His non-fiction books included a successful and very personal guide to Paris called *Secrets of Paris*. For a couple of decades, Vernon and his wife had spent several months a year in a large, top floor flat just a two minute walk away from the Eiffel Tower in Paris.

The publishing business became successful because Coleman had acquired a large and loyal readership. Nearly every one of his books sold out and was reprinted many times and Coleman wrote a number of successful books together with his missus. During the most successful years of the self-publishing business, annual sales exceeded those of many well-known small publishing houses. So that meant a few more enemies in the book trade.

(I tried to make a list of the people he's pissed off. Here's a short list of the ones he's pissed off most: the entire medical establishment; the drugs industry; the meat trade; the BBC; the tobacco industry; the arms industry; the ASA; all politicians; the European Union; everyone who is politically correct; social workers; alternative medicine practitioners and – oh, you get the idea.)

When the publishing business was threatened by the soaring cost of postage and the advent of ebooks, he closed Publishing House, intending to retire. However, his wife persuaded him to publish his books as ebooks. Thanks to Patsy/Antoinette's skill and determination in converting the books and Coleman's experience in self-publishing this proved to be an enormous success and the series of books about Bilbury (retitled *The Young Country Doctor*) became bestsellers on Amazon in the US. (In those books, Antoinette is called Patsy but I'm still 'Patchy' Fogg. I've never worked that out but one of these days I'm going to demand royalties.)

Over 60 of his old titles, including the now out of print Edward Vernon novels, were republished as ebooks and Coleman wrote a number of new novels and non-fiction books especially for the ebook market. Coleman happily admitted that without his wife's support, encouragement and knowledge he would not have published any of his books in the electronic format. (Bloody right too!) So I suppose we can blame her for that. (Just kidding Patsy/Antoinette!)

There seems to be some confusion about whether his Bilbury books are entirely factual, entirely fictional or a judicious mixture of both. All I can say is that if the books aren't true then how come I'm writing this? And how do you explain the fact that our friend 'Thumper' Robinson took some cover pictures for the few hardback editions that were published?

Coleman has also published a series of diaries (starting with the *Diary of a Disgruntled Man*), which divided readers: some loved them and some loathed the freedom with which he expressed politically incorrect opinions. As with many of his books, the reviews from readers tended to be either glowing or condemnatory. I think his diaries are a bit like fish stew and rice pudding. If you like them that's fine, if you don't like them then you don't like them and that's that.

In the first part of his life, Coleman, who is a member of the MCC and a number of other clubs, was a keen cricket spectator. He says he gave up watching cricket when 'they started painting adverts on the pitch'. I don't blame him one bit for that. He is an inveterate bibliophile, with a huge collection of first editions, and has owned a number of classic Bentley motor cars and one Rolls Royce. Not my cup of tea. Big cars are comfortable but you couldn't get a bookcase in the back of any of them and if you're an antiques dealer you need to be able to get a bookcase in the back.

Vernon and Antoinette Coleman moved from Devon to Gloucestershire in 2010, where they bought an isolated house in the country. Eventually, they decided that the house was not isolated enough and in 2016 they moved back to Devon and to Bilbury which was probably the most sensible thing they'd ever done. They purchased a large Arts and Crafts house perched on the cliffs. The house has views often described as the best in England. It's good to have them back where they belong.

So, to sum up, Vernon Coleman is an iconoclast who writes his non-fiction with the aim of making people think and his fiction with the aim of making people smile.

Will that do, Vernon? Chop out anything you don't like and correct anything that's terribly inaccurate.

You owe me a drink. I'll drop this off at your house and see you in the Duck and Puddle later.

Patchy

The Hotel Doctor

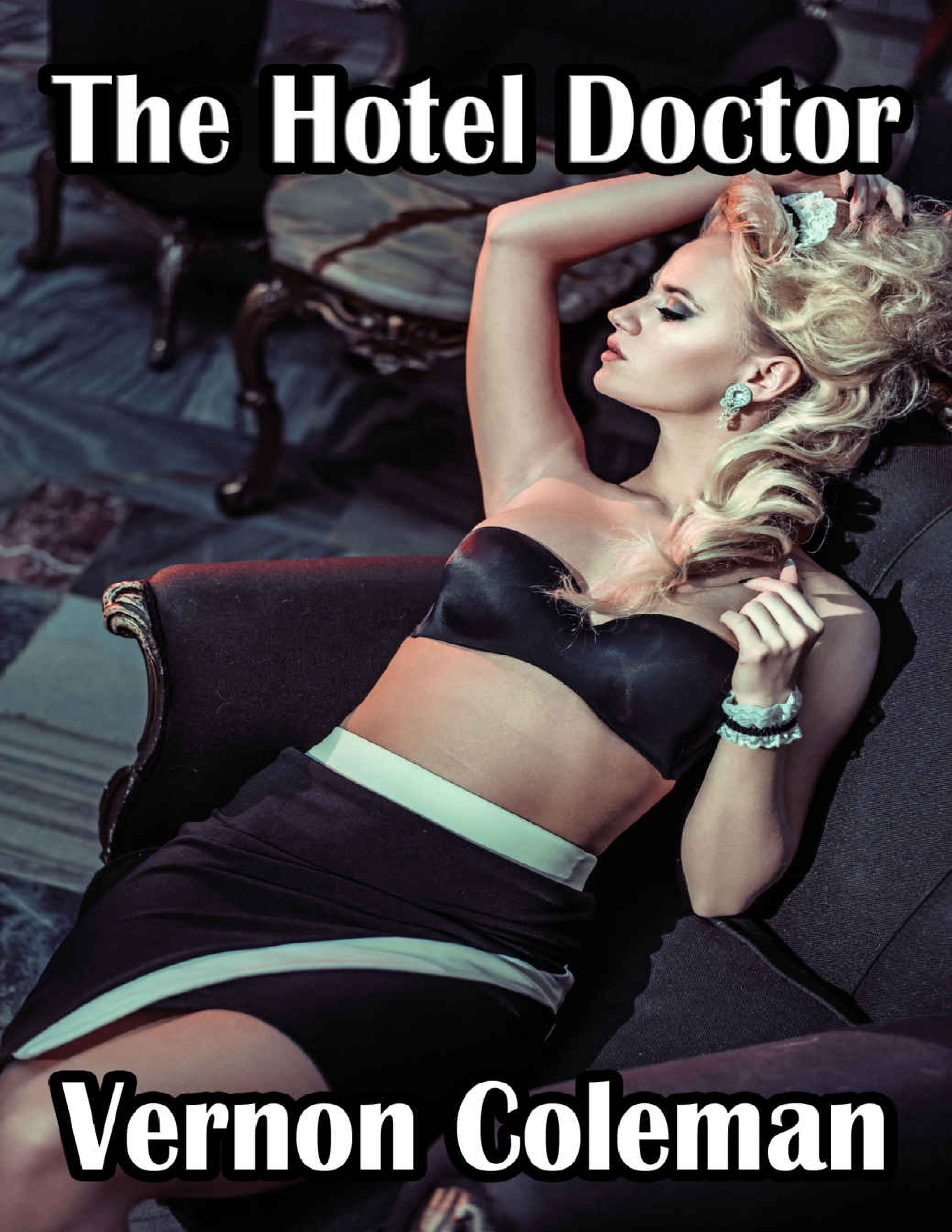

Vernon Coleman

The Hotel Doctor

Vernon Coleman

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Author’s Note
This is a work of fiction.

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Chapter One

I was sitting in a hotel restaurant reading bits and pieces of a broadsheet English newspaper, which one of the hotel's guests had left behind, when a waiter came to tell me that I was needed in room 119. He had no idea what the problem was but said that he thought I was needed straight away.

In the corridor outside room 119, a woman was waiting, nervously pacing up and down. She was, I guessed, in her mid-forties and she looked very second-hand. She was plainly distressed and had clearly been crying. She was wearing a smart, bright yellow dress which had once been quite smart. There was blood on it in several places. If she'd been hitchhiking no one would have ever stopped to give her a lift.

'Did you call for the doctor?' I asked.

She said she had. 'It's my husband,' she told me. 'He's locked himself inside the room.

I asked her name. She told me that she was called Monica and her husband was called Bernard and that he hated being called Bernie.

'Why has he locked himself in the room?' I asked. It didn't seem an entirely stupid question.

The woman sighed. 'How the hell should I know?' she demanded. 'He probably thinks someone wants to take him away. He's cutting up all his clothes. And all my clothes.'

'Does he have a history of mental illness?' I asked. Once again, it seemed a sensible question.

The woman looked at me, and took a deep breath. It was obviously a question she was tired of answering. 'Does he have a history of mental illness?' She demanded, repeating the words slowly, as if it were the most stupid question to have ever been asked. 'Does he have a history of mental illness?' She said it again. The first time she'd repeated the question she'd put the emphasis on the word 'mental', the second time she repeated the question she put the emphasis on the word 'he'.

I was beginning to wonder which of the two was maddest, though I hoped that the woman had just temporarily lost her patience and her senses because her husband had pottered temporarily into the world of loony tunes.

'Is he on any medication?' I asked. 'Has he been in hospital?'

She paused, took a deep breath and made an effort to pull herself together. I think she could see that I was trying to help. 'He suffers from bipolar disease,' she told me. 'They used to call it manic depression when he was first diagnosed with it but now they call it bipolar disease. I don't know why they changed the name – it seems the same illness to me. He's supposed to take pills and he's been in hospital three times in the last year alone. Sometimes he seems perfectly normal, and then he goes completely potty and does something like this. We came away to celebrate our anniversary but yet again he's spoilt things. He deliberately just stops taking his pills and then gets bad again. To be honest I really don't think he wants to get better!' She sighed and thought for a moment or two. 'The truth is,' she said, 'that he actually loves being the centre of attention.'

'You don't know the name of the pills he takes do you?'

'The bottle is in the bedroom. But he's probably smashed it by now. And he will have either taken all the pills or he will have flushed them down the loo. He was smashing up everything before he started cutting up our clothes. I bought two brand new dresses for this trip. They'll be in shreds by now. He cut up two of his suits. He was even cutting up our underwear.'

'He sounds exhausting to live with,' I said, sympathetically.

'He is,' she replied. 'Sometimes I can't tell whether our marriage has become a battleground or a theatre.'

'Why do you stay with him?'

'Guilt? Misplaced loyalty? I don't know. I can't leave him because he's ill. I suppose that's it.'

'Where's the blood from?' I asked her, pointing to the blood on her dress.

'It's his. He managed to cut his hand while trying to cut through one of my bra straps. Fortunately for me it wasn't one I was wearing at the time.'

'Does he have a knife or a pair of scissors?'

'A knife. A Swiss army penknife. It's only a small one but it has a very sharp blade. He keeps it sharpened. He likes to cut himself and bleed a little. He can make a small amount of blood go a very long way.' She seemed weary; she had clearly seen all this before.

I asked her if he had ever attacked her or anyone else. She said he hadn't.

'Does he have any other weapons apart from the knife?'

'No! He's not armed. He isn't going to start shooting people. He's just cutting up all our clothes.'

I moved closer to the door of 119 and shouted to the man within. I told him who I was and asked him to open the door so that I could go in.

A man shouted back and told me to go away, though he didn't use those exact words.

I asked him again to open the door.

He told me he didn't want to and repeated the words he'd already used.

Speaking as quietly and as soothingly as I could, I told the man that if he didn't open the door I'd have to ask the manager to come and open the door with a passkey. And I warned him that if the manager needed to come he would probably bring a couple of French policemen with him. I then waited a couple of minutes and was relieved when I finally heard the door first being unlocked and then opened.

I don't think I'm a bigger coward than the next man (although it depends, of course, upon the identity of the next man) but I don't like confronting mad patients who have knives so I pushed the door wide open before entering. When I was young, I was reckless and considered myself invulnerable. In fact, I seem to remember that I rather thought that as a doctor I was rather like the white-faced clown in a circus, able to walk unscathed through a storm of cream pies and buckets of water. And then I was attacked by a potty patient with a hammer and ever since then I have favoured the cautious approach.

The room was a complete mess. Some of the furniture was broken. A mirror had been smashed. And the bed, the chair, the tables and the floor were all covered with shreds of clothing. The man had clearly been very busy with his knife. He was stark naked and his left hand was bleeding. There was blood on his abdomen and his left thigh but it seemed to have come from the cut on his hand. There was also blood spread around much of the room. I wasn't worried about that. A small amount of blood will make a good deal of mess.

'Hi!' I said, trying to sound cheerful and calm at the same time. I told him my name again.

'I've gone barking mad again,' he said. I couldn't tell whether he was upset by this or pleased by it.

'Do you have any of your pills?' I asked him.

'I threw them out of the window,' he said.

'What about the bottle?'

'I threw that out of the window too. But it was plastic. It didn't break. You're going to have to send me to hospital. Can you section me here or do you have to try to persuade me to go quietly?'

'I'd rather you went quietly,' I said. 'It would be easier for everyone.'

'OK,' he said, unexpectedly.

'Thank God,' muttered his wife, who was sensibly standing behind me, well out of range.

'You'd better get dressed,' I told him. 'Try to find something you can wear while I ring for an ambulance.' I picked up the telephone on one of the bedside tables and called the hotel reception desk. I asked the receptionist who answered to ring for an ambulance and to tell the dispatcher that it was urgent. When I looked up, Bernard was wearing a pink baby doll nightdress which was clearly one of his wife's few remaining garments. It had pink fluffy bits attached to the bottom edge and a good deal of fancy embroidery underneath the area which should have been supporting a female bosom; it was also diaphanous and far too small for Bernard. It hid absolutely nothing and, indeed, seemed to draw attention to the very items which one might have hoped that such a garment would envelop and shield from sight. The problem was made considerably worse by the fact that the excitement of the occasion seemed to have provoked an entirely inappropriate response and Bernard was now sporting a grotesquely engorged erection. He was a gnomish, podgy little fellow with surprisingly short legs and he was never going to cause Mr Universe contestants to have sleepless nights about the competition. Indeed, it occurred to me that on the whole he looked as if he were made out of leftover human body bits that no one else wanted. His penis, however, was the obvious exception; it was huge, obviously ready for action and a clear and present danger to all those at whom it might be aimed. It was of absolutely no consequence but I could not help noticing that he had been circumcised. The job appeared to have been done by an over eager surgeon with a rather blunt knife.

'Don't you have any of your own clothes you can put on?' I asked.

'They're all cut up,' he said. 'I didn't like any of them.' He looked down at himself. 'But I like this. I think it suits me. Don't you think so?'

'It's very fetching,' I said, without committing myself. 'Do you have any shoes you can wear with it?'

He rummaged around on the floor for a while and found a pair of pink fluffy mules which had escaped the blade of the Swiss army penknife. 'These will match nicely, don't you think?'

I agreed that they were a good match for the baby doll nightie and indeed, I have no doubt that when his wife had bought them she had probably thought them well suited. She had, however, probably thought that she would be wearing them.

'Don't you have any shoes of your own?' I asked.

'I couldn't cut them up so I threw them out of the window,' he told me. 'It was the only sensible thing to do.'

The disordered mind has a remarkable knack of being able to create apparently sustainable logic out of nonsense, and so there is never any point in arguing with those who have disordered minds. I was, however, beginning to wonder about Bernard who didn't like to be called Bernie. I rather suspected that she was right: he was enjoying being the centre of attention.

Just then my new mobile telephone rang. It was the receptionist calling to tell me that the ambulance had arrived and was waiting outside. 'Do you want me to ask the crew to come upstairs to fetch the patient?' she asked.

I told her that I thought that we would be able to manage ourselves.

'The ambulance has arrived,' I told him.

'My carriage awaits!' cried Bernard, excitedly.

As we moved out into the corridor, his wife slipped past us into the room. When she saw the extent of the damage, and realised that the only items of clothing she had were the ones she was wearing, she turned and started to cry again. 'You bastard!' she said softly. She seemed too tired to say any more.

Bernard turned and looked surprised. 'I was trying to protect you!' he said. 'You didn't want to wear any of that rubbish.'

'But I did!' protested Monica. 'Some of those clothes were new. I bought them for this trip.' She looked utterly worn out. She turned to me. 'Look! He's even cut up a bra he insisted on buying me yesterday in Galeries Lafayette. It cost nearly £100 and he bought it for me for my birthday though to be honest I think it was really a present for him.'

She picked up two pieces of the bra and examined them. 'It's my size but these cups are absurdly inadequate,' she said. 'If I'd worn it my breasts would have fallen out of it every time I leant forward.' She threw the useless remnants back onto the floor.

I was temporarily shocked and distracted by this. How can an itsy bitsy brassiere, a handful of silk and lace which looked entirely impractical, cost more than a decent pair of men's trousers? I realised that the coat I was wearing hadn't cost that much. Even my first car hadn't cost £100. It occurred to me that I was perhaps rather out of touch with reality. But then I had been away for a couple of years. And the only shop I'd seen for quite a while had sold a little writing paper and a good deal of tobacco but no bras.

'You'd have looked a twat in some of that stuff,' insisted Bernard.

His wife stared at him, pointed at him and suddenly started to laugh. 'I'd have looked a twat, would I?' she demanded. 'What the hell do you think you look like? Have you seen yourself?'

Bernard looked down at the pink baby doll nightie. 'I think it's rather pretty,' he said. 'It could do with being a bit longer, though.' He paused. 'Maybe you could get one a bit longer next time?'

Gently, I took Bernard by the arm and led him to the stairs. We only had to go down one flight of stairs and I thought we were probably less likely to meet any other residents if we avoided the lift. Monica stayed behind, sitting on the bed. I could hear her weeping.

'I'm the doctor and this is Bernard,' I said to the ambulance men, one of whom turned out to be an ambulance woman. .'I'll fax along as many details as I can when I've had a word with his wife. She's a little upset at the moment.'

I watched as the ambulance crew helped Bernard into the back of the ambulance. When they had done this I was surprised to see them both climb into the cab at the front with the ambulance woman in the driving seat. I could only assume that neither of them had wanted to get into the back of the ambulance with a man wearing a pink fluffy trimmed nightie, pink fluffy mules and an erection of which any owner would have been proud. Some people, even experienced health professionals, are funny about things like that.

As the ambulance pulled out from the kerb, slotted into the traffic and purred away, I breathed a huge sigh of relief. Bernard was now someone else's problem. I still had to try to soothe Monica, of course, but I could ask the hotel receptionist to send up someone to help clear up the room and maybe suggest a store where she might replace some of the essentials her husband had destroyed. I found myself wondering if their insurance company would pay for the damage.

I had half turned, heading back into the hotel, when I heard a scream of self-satisfied delight. 'I'm free!'

My heart sank for I knew instantly who was screaming.

Sure enough, when I looked up the road, I could see that Bernard had opened the back doors of the ambulance and was standing there, preparing to jump down onto the road. The ambulance driver must have seen what was happening for she immediately braked so that Bernard would not, at least, be jumping out of a moving vehicle.

'I've escaped!' shouted Bernard. He leapt from the now stationary ambulance and started to run back down the road towards me, his skimpy, baby doll nightie flapping around him and still failing to provide him with any decent cover. 'Catch me if you can!' he called. His still erect penis, plainly visible, bounced up and down as he ran. The pink mules were far too small for him and he moved in a strange, pigeon toed way as he struggled to keep them on while he ran. Because he was running in the middle of the road car drivers hooted at him to get out of the way. Behind him, I saw the two members of the ambulance crew climb out of the vehicle and start to run after him.

It had been a long, long time since I had played rugby but I decided that the best way to catch my escaping patient would be to stand fairly still and wait for him to come towards me. I was beaten to it, however, by a pedestrian who leapt off the pavement and bravely tackled him round the waist, slamming him into a plumbing company van which was parked on the other side of the street.

'Oh bum,' said Bernard, who seemed slightly winded but not hurt by this experience. He grinned at me. 'I didn't get very far, did I? Not exactly the 'Great Escape', was it?' He sighed sadly. 'I needed a motorbike.'

I thanked the pedestrian who had captured Bernard and who, after taking a careful look at what he had caught, walked away as quickly as he could. Other passers-by remained, however, stopped passing and stood around watching the doubtless entertaining piece of reality street theatre. It's surprising how quickly a crowd can develop in a city street. People even started coming out of local cafes and restaurants. I saw several waiters who I recognised as employees of the hotels for which I worked.

'I think they're making a film,' I heard someone say.

'It must be a porn movie,' said someone, who had clearly noticed Bernard's mammoth erection. 'Look at the size of that!'

'Where are the cameras?' demanded someone else.

'Oh these days they use very small cameras. They hide them in vans and cars and even hats.'

'Is there anyone famous in it?' someone asked me, clearly assuming that I was something to do with the entertainment.

'This is Tom Cruise,' I replied, with my hand gripping Bernard's left arm.

'Doesn't look like him,' said the passer by doubtfully.

'He's wearing special make-up,' I explained. 'It's for a Mission Absolutely Bloody Impossible movie.'

'Is it a blue movie?' asked a girl who had come out from behind the counter in a local patisserie. She giggled. 'We could see his zizi!' The word zizi is usually used by children to describe the male organ. It seemed odd to hear it in such circumstances.

'I didn't know Tom Cruise was that big!' said her friend. She held her hands a foot apart. It was no exaggeration. They both giggled. 'Quelle grande kiquette!' She seemed to be both horrified and envious, all at the same time. The French give all their nouns a sex. So the words for table, car and dress are feminine and must be preceded by the word 'la'. La table, la voiture and la robe. And the words for cat and wine are masculine. Le chat and le vin. The word kiquette, commonly used for an adult male organ, is, surprisingly perhaps, a feminine noun. La kiquette. French is a language which likes to amuse.

'Gripping his arm tightly, I led Bernard back up the ambulance. The ambulance crew helped him up into the back of the vehicle.

'Can you lock the door from the outside?' I asked.

The driver took a key from her pocket and locked the back doors. She and her colleague then climbed back into the vehicle and drove away. This time they switched on the lights and siren. They clearly wanted to get to the hospital as quickly as possible.

'I've lost a shoe!' I heard Bernard shout as the ambulance moved away.

I looked around and spotted one of the pink, fluffy mules lying on the road. It was dirty and had lost some of its pink fluffiness.

I have always believed that all doctors should, on all occasions, treat their patients with the same respect and sense of decency that they would like to experience, both for themselves and their loved ones. Although this is not something which is taught in medical schools (where patients tend to come very low down on the agenda, and are regarded, generally speaking, as merely containers for malfunctioning livers, kidneys, hearts and other organs) it is, I believe, the single most important rule for all those involved in health care – doctors, nurses, auxiliaries and even administrators. I have always believed that if a doctor or nurse follows this simple rule then all else will be of surprisingly little consequence.

But there are limits.

I walked back, picked up the mule and threw it in the direction of the disappearing ambulance. It landed far short. Pink, fluffy mules are far too light for long-range hurling.

'Is that it or will they do another take now?' asked the cinema buff.

'That's it,' I said. 'Tom always likes to get each scene in one take. He's famous for it.'

The cinema buff looked disappointed. He wandered off. The two shop girls had already disappeared. And then it started to rain.

As I trudged wearily back to the hotel I thought about how I had come to be working as the house doctor in a Parisian hotel. There was no doubt at all that when I had taken the job I'd had no idea of what was about to befall me.

Chapter Two

My name is Blake Marvel. A few months before I moved to Paris I was tired and depressed and had lost all hope. After weeks spent posting and emailing application letters and copies of my CV to prospective employers, I realised that finding a job as an assistant in general practice wasn't going to be quite as easy as I had hoped it would be. I had a couple of interviews but to say that they didn't go particularly well would be an exaggeration. They were both absolute, unmitigated, 120% proof disasters which will forever live in my memory, locked in that part of my cortex reserved for motor car accidents, disastrous relationships and tax investigations.

The first interview was conducted by a trio of doctors, and it is absolutely no exaggeration to say that each one of them looked and sounded like prime candidates for employment by the stake, faggot and match dealing side of the Spanish Inquisition. Two of the interrogators were women and although I don't think Tomas de Torquemada was an equal opportunity employer, he'd have quickly changed his mind if he'd seen this pair. One was about 55, as skinny as a witch's broom handle and looked as though her life had been a continuous series of disappointments. If there were regrets (a doubtful proposition for one so sanctimonious) they would only be for sins omitted, and not for sins committed. She had a pursed up mouth which looked like a baboon's anus and someone had dyed her hair blue, presumably as a joke and possibly without her knowing. The pursed up mouth, the baboon's anus, certainly didn't look like an orifice which had ever been used to eat chocolate or give anyone a blowjob. She was as skinny as a six-foot tall flat race jockey and like tall jockeys probably licked a Smartie for lunch and then finished it off for dinner. The other woman was in her early 30s and looked plain old-fashioned, mean and nasty. She had one of those very short haircuts which used to be popular with militant lesbians and which are, I believe, now popular with women who spend a lot of time running or swimming. She wore an ill-fitting grey suit and no make-up and if she was wearing any jewellery, which I very much doubt, it wasn't visible. If someone had run her over then I have no doubt that the Queen, being a generous monarch and a kind-hearted soul, would have instructed the police to drop any charges and would, indeed, have probably pinned an M.B.E. on their chest as a sincere thank you from a grateful nation. The third member of the trio was almost certainly male because he had shaved his head and women don't usually do that unless they're 19, have reached the end of their careers in show business and are desperate for a gimmick with which to promote their latest record. He had a five o'clock shadow over most of his head and you could clearly see where his bald patch was developing, so if he'd shaved his head to disguise his impending baldness the plan had failed miserably. Bizarrely, he had also grown a beard that looked rather like a moth-eaten merkin. He wore a yellow and blue checked shirt with a green tie and a pair of bright red chinos. Perhaps he was colour-blind. I have been told that I always look as if I got dressed in the dark, in a hurry, in the bedroom of someone who is not my size, but if I ever went out of the house dressed like that bloke I would prescribe myself something fatal and put an end to everyone's misery as quickly as possible. I have no idea how old he was though if I had to guess I'd have put him in his forties. He looked as if it had been at least 15 years since he'd had a good laugh or eaten anything as evil or as satisfying as a calorie. I once saw a mummified human body in a Ripley's Believe It or Not show and believe me the mummy looked healthier than this bloke. The three of them had elevated the patronising manner into an art form.

'You're a little older than the rest of our candidates,' said the one with the mouth that looked like a baboon's anus. It was clearly a statement but by raising her voice at the end of the sentence, she made it sound like a question. When she was born they should have kept the placenta and thrown away the baby. She was one of those people who expect folk to quake when they talk.

I couldn't think of anything useful or appropriate to say in reply. So I didn't say anything. When you've spent two years where I've just been you learn not to open your mouth unless you have something worth saying. They knew exactly how old I was when they invited me to the interview. There hadn't been any realistic chance of my becoming younger as the time had passed by.

'We are fully cognisant of the circumstances of your social situation,' said the younger woman who managed to look down her nose with her voice. This time there was no uplift in pitch at the end of the sentence. 'Can you assure us that you have remained up-to-date with modern developments?'

'I had to jump through quite a few hoops before they'd give me back my licence,' I replied, after a pause.

'Quite,' said the woman. She looked at her two colleagues; woman first, man second.

And so it went on. Long before the first five minutes were up, I had realised that they'd only invited me to an interview because it seemed to them to be the 'decent' thing to do. They'd probably had a meeting about me and decided that not even offering me an interview might look politically incorrect.

Since these were the doctors with whom I would have been working if I'd been given the job, I didn't make much of an effort to give them the answers they clearly wanted. I just wanted one of them (or one of the hawk-faced harridans guarding the reception area) to give me my travel expenses so that I could get out of there and head back home. When I was young I had nerves of steel. These days the smallest aggravation makes me physically ill and I could already feel the nausea rising. I have a theory that the human mind can only cope with so much nervous strain before it implodes. The capacity varies from one individual to another but I pretty well used up my capacity years ago.

‘Well thank you very much for coming, doctor,’ said the woman with the baboon’s arse when they had finally decided that they’d done their duty to their consciences. She struck me as being one of those doctors who have confidence well beyond their abilities. I wouldn’t have trusted her to write me a sick note or to syringe the wax out of my ears, let alone to remove my appendix.

‘Thank you very much for seeing me,’ I said. I still found myself easily cowed by people in authority. In prison I had quickly learned that there was no point in fighting authority or questioning the decisions of halfwits in uniforms; I’d learned to shuffle about and to keep my eyes on the floor and, on the rare occasions when I spoke, to do so without moving my lips. ‘To whom should I give details of my expenses?’ I asked.

‘Expenses?’ said the bloke with the shaven head. He lent forwards slightly and peered at me as if he were wearing half-moon spectacles, which he wasn’t.

‘Travel expenses,’ I explained. ‘Train fare and so on.’ When I’d last been looking for work as a doctor I’d managed to live for a month or so on the expenses I collected. I’d hitch a ride to an interview, or catch buses because they’re always cheaper than trains, and when I got within a mile or two of my destination, I’d walk rather than take a taxi. No one asked for receipts in those days.

‘I’m afraid you are suffering under a misapprehension,’ the bloke said. ‘We don’t pay travel expenses for applicants.’

‘I think you will find this practice is not unusual in this regard,’ said the woman in the grey suit. She looked as if she’d taken smugness classes at university, and done very well in them.

I didn’t know whether to feel pissed off or embarrassed, so I thought about it for a moment and decided to feel pissed off. I stood up, nodded to the three monkeys and left without another word.

As I walked back into the town centre, towards the bus station, it occurred to me that the medical profession was probably going through one of its regular gluts of unemployed doctors. It takes at least six years to turn a pink-faced medical student into a capable professional and whenever there is a shortage of doctors, the incumbent government invariably insists that medical schools immediately accept more applicants. The inevitable result is that by the time the students have been transformed into doctors, the shortage will have disappeared and the newly qualified medics will find themselves surplus to requirements. I knew of two young doctors who had been forced to take jobs stacking shelves in supermarkets. I now began to suspect that I had probably hit one of those periods when there is, according to your point of view, either a surplus of newly qualified doctors or a dearth of available jobs in general practice.

And, having spent the last two years of my life without a medical licence, and some of it serving time in one of Her Majesty’s less well-appointed hotels, the ones without the early morning checkout option, I wasn’t likely to be top of anyone’s shortlist.

The second job interview went much the same as the first.

‘We are looking for someone a little younger,’ said one of the partners, after a twenty minute duologue in which she and her chum had told me how broad minded they were, how well respected the practice was and how proud they were to be the first partnership in the area to have appointed an ‘equity and safeguarding officer’ all of their own. She talked with punctuation and emphasis clearly added and there was no doubt that she thought she was the knee of a very special bee. Everything she said was presented very neatly, with italics, exclamation marks and question marks added wherever she thought they might be appropriate. I didn’t have the foggiest idea what an ‘equity and safeguarding officer’ might do and I didn’t really want to know so I didn’t ask. I felt like a bloody dinosaur. She looked about 16 and although she’d made an effort to look older by putting on a bit of lipstick she had done nothing whatsoever about the thick, auburn moustache which was already growing on her upper lip and which would have been a challenge for a muscular man equipped with a petrol driven hedge trimmer. She looked like the sort of woman who believed that feminism precluded femininity and I suspected that she was probably proud of the fact that she had never shaved her legs, trimmed her pubic hair or plucked the errant hairs from around her nipples.

‘And to be honest, we prefer to hire a doctor without your complicated history,’ said the other twat who was sitting alongside her. Physically, he looked to be about half my own age but mentally he was at least half a century older.

They both wore white coats with little name badges pinned to their lapels, they both had stethoscopes draped round their necks in the style favoured by doctors in television dramas, and they both had three cheap pens clipped neatly into their top pockets. Actually, they looked more like those actors who do TV adverts selling toothpaste than they looked like television soap opera medics.

‘So why the fuck did you waste my time, getting me to come here for a bloody interview?’ I demanded. ‘I may look a bit worn round the edges but I’m 37 not 73 and although you probably see me as an old lag I haven’t bombed anyone, shot anyone or downloaded any dirty pictures.’ There are plenty of decent doctors around, or at least there used to be, but I seemed to be finding only the snotty, self-important ones. I wondered if perhaps things had changed and all the decent doctors had retired and been replaced by half-witted, sanctimonious, humourless cretins.

I didn’t actually say any of this, of course. I’m English so I have difficulty in plucking up the courage to tell people what I really think of them. But I was truly pissed off by these patronising youngsters. I had no doubt that they knew everything there was to know about the latest insurance company requirements for 83-year-old patients preparing to travel to whatever Yugoslavia is calling itself these days, and I was prepared to bet that they could find their way around a computer screen with great skill. But they weren’t old enough to have developed those twin skills which are so vital for a good GP: intuition and instinct. And I was willing to bet that they had not yet realised that the greatest skill a caring family doctor requires is not an ability to play around with an electrocardiograph machine but the ability to listen; to *really* listen.

‘We like to feel that we have very high standards here,’ sniffed the woman with the hirsute upper lip who had obviously never heard the phrase ‘there but for the grace of God’. She stared at me as though inspecting an animal in a zoo. ‘I don’t think our patients would like to be looked after by an ex-criminal.’ She paused and I’ll swear she actually shuddered at the thought. ‘I’m sure I wouldn’t.’

I stared at her. I couldn’t help wishing that I wasn’t so damned polite and English. I’m the sort of daft Englishman who would apologise profusely if you trod on my foot, stole my wallet and screwed my wife. Actually, I would not just apologise, I would also feel bad about it afterwards.

‘We invited you here out of kindness,’ said the other doctor. She was one of those women who are forever touching themselves. She had touched her hair and her neck and now she touched her breasts, as though to reassure herself that they had not somehow disappeared or been stolen. Or perhaps she was just making sure that no one else had started fondling them without her noticing. ‘We didn’t want you to feel that we were holding your prison record against you. In this practice we like to think of ourselves as very liberated and forward thinking.’

To be honest, I hadn’t expected that it would be easy to find a job. But nor had I thought it would be this hard, or this unpleasant.

‘Have a nice day,’ I told them, as I left. I paused, with my hand on the doorknob. It has been reported that at least one in five people has at least one serious personality disorder. It seemed to me that it had been my misfortune to come across a panel of two people who were both cursed with personality disorders. ‘May your bladders be forever weak,’ I wanted to say. ‘And your bowels always loose.’ I didn’t say it, of course. But I wanted very much to say it.

The problem was that having spent a decent period in one of England’s premier prisons, my native English reluctance to open my mouth and say what I really meant had been augmented by a feeling that this was the only way to stay alive. Keeping your mouth shut is probably the best way to stay out of trouble in the big wide world and it is certainly the best way to stay out of trouble when you’re sharing accommodation with several hundred, assorted psychopathic criminals and warders. In prison, I had learned that those individuals who like to speak their minds are the ones who invariably end up asking their relatives to send them a supply of ‘soap on a rope’ so that they don’t have to spend any time bending down in the showers. I’m delighted to say I managed to get through my stretch without once hearing the blood curdling words: ‘Bend over and brace yourself. This is going to hurt you but I don’t care.’

Of course, the fact that I provided free medical care for the inmates probably helped. If you are a doctor it isn’t difficult to establish a good position in the prisoner hierarchy. Even Dr Harold Shipman, the notorious GP who killed at least 200 of his patients, was popular with prisoners. I couldn’t prescribe medicines but I could give advice and I knew enough to be able to tell prisoners when to take the drugs they’d been prescribed and when to flush the damned things down the lavatory. The prison doctors were so incompetent that I don’t think they would have been able to differentiate between a broken leg and a nosebleed. I don’t know where they had acquired their prescribing habits but most of the drugs they favoured were ones with vicious and long lasting side effects. The inmates used to call the senior doctor Dr Mengele but I think that was probably unfair to Mengele. Our version of Mengele was dangerous because although he was ignorant he didn’t know that he was ignorant; and that is the most dangerous form of ignorance of all.

Outside in the reception area a smartly dressed young woman in her late twenties was chatting to three receptionists. She was wearing a powder blue trouser suit and a collared blouse with pearl buttons. She looked the sort of woman whose parents owned great swathes of the Cotswolds. She probably came from a home with pictures of boxing hares over the fireplace and she doubtless had a drawer full of headscarves decorated with horses in her bedroom. And there would, of course, be rosettes pinned to the walls in the kitchen and the stables, celebrating successes in gymkhanas, pony club events and, maybe, the occasional point-to-point meeting.

The four women stared at me when I appeared and then gave one another knowing looks. They'd obviously been talking about me and I guessed that even if the interrogators hadn't blabbed, the receptionist had probably read the letter I'd enclosed with my application form and CV. 'They'll be free to see you soon, doctor,' said one of the receptionists to the young woman. She and her colleagues ignored me.

'You're a little old to be applying for this sort of job aren't you?' said the young doctor.

I looked at her and tried to ignore her. It was just too hard.

'They'll be a while longer,' I said softly, rubbing my fingers through my hair as though trying to rearrange it. 'You should give them a few minutes to clean up and get dressed.' I winked and straightened my tie.

The four women stared at me as if I'd suddenly turned into a giant pink rabbit.

'Are those two lesbians married?' I asked, pointing to the door of the room I'd just left.

'No,' said one of the receptionists firmly. She and her colleagues had all gone very pale. As, indeed, had the young doctor waiting for her interview.

'Phew!' I said. 'Not your average interview,' I turned, grinned at the young woman doctor and spoke to her. 'In case they forget to tell you, there's a hanger behind the door you can put your suit on. And watch the one with the moustache – she's an absolute animal!' I rubbed the top of my thigh. 'She's got sharp teeth too! I'm pretty sure she drew blood.'

I left. I must admit I felt a little better.

A moment later I heard footsteps behind me. I turned round.

'Thank you for the warning,' said the young woman doctor, rather sniffily. She managed to make the 'thank you' sound like 'thenk yew'. I was quite right about the breeding; she had a booming Cotswold voice, designed to carry across two fields. She was undoubtedly one of Oscar Wilde's unspeakables, regularly galloping around Daddy's estate in search of the uneatable fox. She was carrying a black leather handbag the size of a weekend suitcase and a smart black laptop case. I've gone on holiday for a fortnight with less luggage. 'That sort of thing isn't my scene,' she said with a sniff.

I looked her up and down. 'I can see that,' I said, matching her sniff with a nod.

She stared at me, much in the way that an upmarket surveyor might assess a tumbledown garden shed, climbed into a small sporty BMW that would have doubtless involved her in showing a good deal of thigh if she hadn't been wearing trousers, and drove carefully away. She didn't offer me a lift.

As I started the long walk back into town, and the inevitable bloody bus station, I felt enormously sad.

I'd always wanted to be a GP. Ever since I was a kid I'd wanted to be a family doctor. The trouble was that I'd based my view of what to expect on books that described a type of medical practice which no longer exists. I'd read A. J. Cronin's stories about Dr Finlay and I'd read Edward Vernon's books about a young doctor learning the ropes. Young doctors had their problems, of course, but I read the books when I was young, and seen from afar, it all seemed wonderfully idyllic stuff. There were patients and there were doctors and that was it. Most doctors worked in very small groups of two or three. Medical records were kept on flimsy pieces of card. The senior partner's wife would answer the telephone and take messages. There were no appointment systems. Every morning and every evening all those patients who were ill would crowd into the dining room and wait to be seen. Everything was simple and everything worked very well.

The trouble was that things had changed dramatically since the days about which Cronin and Vernon had been writing. Damnit, things had even changed in the two years since I'd been out of circulation; banned and unfrocked.

In the bad old days, a young doctor who wanted to become a GP would find an older doctor looking for an assistant. The two doctors would work together for a year or two, with the older doctor passing on the stuff he'd learned. Eventually, the older doctor would retire to tend to his roses or keep bees and the young doctor would take over the practice.

These days a young doctor who wants to become a GP is expected to join a medical practice as an officially approved junior assistant where, the theory goes, he will be properly trained, assessed, groomed and indoctrinated and eventually turned out as a fully-fledged family doctor. Naturally, it doesn't work that way in reality. The younger doctor, the trainee, does the surgeries and the visits and when he isn't counting the money pouring in, the older doctor toddles along to the golf course.

I'd have liked to have found a job as a single-handed practitioner. I would have been happy to take on responsibility for my patients for 24 hours a day and 365 days a year; just me, working alone. But the authorities don't like single-handed GPs these days. They don't approve. They like to think that every doctor has at least another three or four doctors looking over his shoulder; second-guessing his diagnoses and his treatments.

Some years ago, senior GPs throughout Britain decided that forcing young doctors who wanted to go into general practice to go through something similar to the system operated in hospitals (where young doctors are forced to put up with years of lowly paid slave labour before they are considered eligible to apply for posts as hospital consultants) would give them more status and, more importantly, an unending supply of lowly paid young doctors who would be obliged to do all the work; allowing them to wander off and either play golf or sit on important sounding committee meetings.

The result is that, today, patients are lucky if they see the same doctor twice; the GP they do see, who is probably a trainee passing through, knows nothing about them or their family history and must, therefore, see and treat each new ailment as an isolated problem rather than as a clue in a long standing mystery tour.

When I was a GP with my own practice, I believed that knowing a patient's family, knowing how he earned his living and knowing how he lived would all help me treat him or her as a real person rather than as a mere collection of symptoms. For a while, this approach made a comeback and was known as holistic medicine, but now it's as out of fashion as cupping and bleeding. Not that GPs are alone in offering an inferior service. Hospital care is now so bad, with infections commonplace and patients frequently starving to death, that when a friend of mine who was on a surgical ward recovering from a hernia operation woke up feeling rather poorly, he discharged himself and went home. 'A British hospital is no place to be when you're not feeling well,' he told me later. It is hardly surprising, perhaps, that cancer survival rates in Britain are lower than anywhere else in Europe.

The whole damned system has been made immeasurably more dangerous by the fact that these days most doctors over the age of 50 are so fed up with the administrative work that they can't wait to retire. The authorities have turned medicine into a form fillers' paradise; an impenetrable and unpleasant obstacle course for doctors who are more interested in caring for patients than in satisfying bureaucrats and their endless rows of filing cabinets. And once they are retired, new rules introduced by the General Medical Council mean that they are not allowed to practise again. They can't even stand in occasionally and provide locum cover to help out during holidays and illness. All their knowledge and experience is permanently discarded overnight.

The more I learned about the way medicine had changed in the two years I'd been away the more depressed I became. I was still in short trousers when I decided that I would like to be a doctor. My reasons were simple enough; I had no great urge to cure the world of all its ills, no desire to find a wonderful new cure for cancer or heart disease. I wanted to be a doctor because from what I had seen of our rather elderly, old-fashioned family general practitioner, medicine was a dignified profession which enabled its practitioners to help people in a real, practical and dignified way. In those days, general practice was pleasantly disorganised and doctors got through their work with little more administrative help than a diary and a reliable, loyal wife or secretary who answered the telephone, made the tea and didn't have to manage the appointment system because there wasn't one. It was all terribly sexist, of course. The vast majority of doctors were male.

In those now seemingly far off days doctors were kindly, gentle and full of sympathy, which they handed out freely and generously. Their one big asset was that they were interested in people and always had time to talk and, more importantly, to listen.

I wonder what those old-fashioned GPs would think of today's paraphernalia: the endless ranks of receptionists, the tightly organised appointment systems, the computerised records, the huge practices with associated nurses, aides, social workers and delegated officials. The advances in diagnosis and therapy have been few and far between in the last half a century but the advances in administration have been numerous. The administrative managers have taken over; the time and motion experts have cleared away the comfortable old desks, the dog-eared diaries and the cardboard record envelopes and replaced them with forms, more forms and endless rows of computers which can always be blamed whenever anything goes wrong.

In the bad old days, before progress took over, doctors were available to their patients 24 hours a day and 365 days a year. Occasionally, they went away on holiday for a week or a fortnight and they would then arrange for a locum to stand in for them. Today, everything is arranged so that doctors can watch the telly in peace every evening and can have weekends free to mess about in their boats. In many practices there are a dozen doctors; patients no longer know which doctor they will see. No one can talk about 'their doctor' because they have to take potluck and see who is available.

Even the surgeries have changed. Doctors used to practise from a room at home. The magazines in the waiting room were old, the furniture brown and heavy and the notices pinned to the walls invariably hectoring and out-of-date.

But the surgery and the waiting room were in the doctor's home, and patients knew and quite liked that; it made them feel part of a family. Today, doctors are technicians. They are no longer known and loved as part of the family. Medicine is a business, it's a job of work and it pays well if you have things organised properly. There are grants and bonuses galore and plenty of opportunities for pushing up the gross income without increasing the workload.

I lost count of the number of job interviews I attended but to my surprise, none of the doctors I saw was much older than I was. Most were young, very aggressive and spoke English with accents I could often only vaguely decipher. They regarded their stethoscopes as a licence to print money and I saw no sign of there being any room for old-fashioned attitudes such as ‘vocation’. There was much talk of hitting targets, finding auxiliary income sources, maximising resources and profit loss ratios. No one once asked me a medical question. No one was interested in my views on contentious medical issues such as overprescribing or unnecessary surgery.

No one in power had ever asked patients what sort of system they preferred. Or, if they had bothered to ask them, I suspect that they hadn’t taken a blind bit of notice.

I have always thought that kindness is the single most important human quality. Sadly, it is a quality which is almost completely absent from the medical profession these days. Doctors are trained to be tough, merciless and mercenary.

I thought about all this as I walked along hard, empty, suburban pavements. But I was more than ever determined to find some sort of employment as a doctor. When your reputation has been taken from you, honour and self-respect are all that are left.

Chapter Three

At the end of three months, I was no closer to finding a job than I had been at the start. I can't remember how many interviews I attended. In my mind, they now all merge into one miserable experience. I had managed to pay my rent and buy my food by doing a few sessions at a local hospital, though my bank balance had for some time been indistinguishable from my overdraft limit and the two had been close for so long that people at the bank were probably beginning to talk.

The hospital administrators, who usually regard patients as nothing more than a bloody nuisance who cost money and dirty the sheets, get desperate when they realise they have no doctors to staff the accident and emergency department at weekends. Worried that they could find themselves being vilified in the media, they will then hire anyone with a licence; even someone like me. Desperation drives even administrators to extreme limits and if the witless bastards hadn't hired me they would have had to fly someone in from Germany, pay them a small fortune and hope they knew enough English to be able to order a cup of coffee in the hospital canteen.

I decided that I would have to be a little more imaginative in my search for employment.

I started scouring the classified advertisements at the back of the British Medical Journal, a rather tedious weekly magazine published in Britain by the doctors' trade union. In the past, I had used the BMJ almost exclusively for swatting flies and, when I'd been a junior doctor, for impromptu sword fights. Rolled up tightly, it made a good weapon. But, driven by desperation, I opened my most recent copy, flattened it out and turned to the back pages where the job opportunities are advertised.

It was there, among the funny little ads offering a share of consulting rooms in Harley Street, promoting small hotels in London and listing details of vacancies for physicians willing to sign up for a year's chilly service in the Antarctic, that I spotted the two line advertisement that would change my life. I'd had a couple of glasses of wine when I found the advertisement. Alcohol is the route to many destinations. In my case, it took me to Paris.

The job looked as if it were as close to a sinecure as any young and unambitious doctor could hope to find. I don't think I'm any lazier than the next fellow (unless the next fellow is explorer and adventurer Sir Ranulph Twisleton Wykeham-Feinnes, who seems to have more energy than the Energiser Bunny) but the last few years had left me physically exhausted, mentally drained and spiritually spent, and I was ready for something undemanding and restful.

'Hotel in Paris requires resident physician to look after clients and staff. Knowledge of French language an advantage.' That was the advertisement. Thanks to the wisdom of the European Union's bureaucrats, my licence to practise was just as valid in France as it was in the United Kingdom. I could practise in Paris as readily as I could practise in Birmingham, Manchester or Chipping Sodbury.

There was no mention of remuneration and no explanation as to why a hotel in France which was looking for a 'house doctor' would prefer to hire a British doctor in preference to a home grown specimen, but the job seemed a lot more reliable than waiting for session work at a local hospital and a good deal more attractive than a job arranging tins of cat food on display shelves. One doctor I knew of, a skilled but unemployed chest cutter, who was considered too old for a post as a junior registrar and too young to be appointed a consultant surgeon, was working temporarily as a shelf-stocker at a major supermarket. He had told me that he had spent one entire morning building a display tower out of tins of alphabet spaghetti and, on the instructions of the irate store manager, then spent the entire afternoon rebuilding the display so that all the labels faced the same way.

Interested applicants for the French job were invited to telephone a number in Paris

My rented and furnished flat had no refrigerator, no washing machine, no television and no central heating. The Victoria and Albert Museum in London would have probably been delighted to accept the carpet and curtains for their historic collection of textiles. Hot water was provided by a coin operated gas heater which, I was convinced, was impatiently waiting to turn itself into an explosive device. There was, of course, no telephone. And I still hadn't got round to purchasing a new mobile phone. My old one, which the prison authorities had handed me when I'd left their company, had a flat battery and no charger. I'd tossed it into a waste bin attached to a bus stop sign within minutes of leaving.

So, armed with as much small change as I could collect, I tottered out to find a working telephone kiosk. Thanks to the popularity of the mobile phone red telephone boxes (and their graceless, plastic hooded successors) are now about as common as giraffes in central London but I eventually found one that hadn't been demolished or vandalised. With the prices of real estate in London, I'm surprised that the few remaining phone boxes haven't been sold and converted into bijou residences. I can just see the estate agent blurb: 'Ultra ultra compact studio pied a terre; suit individual or small couple.'

The call went surprisingly well and forty five minutes later, I returned to my flat with hope in my heart and a spring in my step. My ability to speak the language of de Gaulle had regressed considerably because I hadn't been to France for a while. (Her Majesty doesn't like guests at her prisons wandering abroad even for weekend breaks.) But my parents had lived and worked in France for a while and when I was a boy I'd lived there long enough to pick up the language. It's much easier to learn a foreign language as a child than it is as an adult and I had soaked it up in the way kids do.

Best of all, I seemed to be the only applicant for the job. The bloke to whom I had spoken had talked to me in the very best quality Maurice Chevalier English and I'd been told to get myself to Paris, together with a certificate showing that I was qualified and registered as a doctor in good standing, for an interview at 5 p.m. the following day. To my relief, I'd been assured that my expenses would be reimbursed.

I scoured my pockets and pulled together enough cash to buy myself a ticket to Paris. I stuffed my registration certificate and licence into my battered, black bag along with my stethoscope, ophthalmoscope, auriscope, patella hammer, sphygmomanometer and other personal instruments and crammed the rest of my belongings into an old, cardboard suitcase which had a broken lock and was in such a bad condition that it had to be tied up with strong twine.

A couple of years previously I'd owned half of part of a house, most of a car, the standard mixture of furniture, a laptop, a mobile telephone and all the usual paraphernalia accumulated by a reasonably successful member of 21st century society. Now my worldly goods were a black bag and an old cardboard suitcase and their far from impressive contents. If the whole lot had been left at a charity shop the manager would have probably dumped the lot into a black bag and cursed the donor.

And then, first thing the following morning, I posted my flat key back to my miserable landlord and boarded a crowded Eurostar train to Paris. I wasn't the only person heading to Paris but I was probably one of very few going there without a return ticket. A single ticket had pretty well wiped me out financially. If I didn't get the job in Paris I would have to resort to standing in a Metro station offering medicals at five euros a time. I didn't have a musical instrument to play, and even if I'd had one I wouldn't have been able to play it, so I didn't have a great deal of choice.

I wasn't sorry to leave London, which seemed to me to have become even more crowded and dirtier than I remembered it. Hardly anyone I met could speak English and the roads and pavements were controlled by aggressive cyclists. Everyone I had known had left London. They were living and working in Cumbria or Cornwall where, with the loot liberated by the sale of their miserable capital city flat or semi-detached, they had been able to purchase mansions with lakes and forests. London had become a tax haven for the exiled; now occupied and controlled by bankers, oligarchs and other foreigners.

Even the physical process of leaving London was a bloody miserable experience. A friend of mine believes that when the Berlin Wall was pulled down, and the Iron Curtain became a historical curiosity, all the unemployed apparatchiks headed west and signed up with the UK's Border Control agency. English natives make terrible border guards because they're too damned polite. I, for example, would never dream of poking through anyone's luggage or asking them personal questions such as 'Are you carrying any weapons' or 'Would you mind allowing me to take a look at the sticks of dynamite strapped around your waist?'

Actually, I've never understood why the organisation which employs the uniformed guards who frisk and fondle travellers is known as 'Border Control' because the guards make far more fuss about people leaving the country than they do about those coming back in. Maybe the idea is to make sure that the terrorists we have in the UK stay trapped here.

Not that any of that matters much. The uniformed Gestapo at airports and Eurostar stations don't seem to have any idea what they're looking for or where to find it. Most of them are probably not even sure which country they're in.

Believe me, as one who speaks from experience, the guards who are hired to safeguard our nation's borders are thicker, more incompetent and far ruder than the guards who are employed to make sure that prisoners don't riot or escape. Any prison officer who treated inmates the way border guards treat innocent travellers would be beaten to an unrecognisable pulp.

Chapter Four

The Hotel de Londres was a huge, sprawling building in Montmartre; the part of Paris best known for the wedding cake church of Sacré Coeur, the artists' square Place du Tertre and the Moulin Rouge nightclub.

It was at the Moulin Rouge where the cancan, the high kicking, boisterous dance once regarded as too scandalous for public consumption, had slowly become an acceptable part of French nightlife and eventually an essential part of tourist nightlife (the two have nothing to do with each other).

The Place due Tertre used to be a place where artists hung out. Today, it's a tourist trap. Terrible, chintzy cafés run around the edge, and in the centre there is much unoriginal daubing going on. If you want a bog standard painting of Notre Dame or the Eiffel Tower this is definitely the place to come.

As I have already suggested, my previous interviews in the UK, a total of eleven for posts in general practice, two for hospital jobs and one for a position working for a Government department which did something I had never really understood, had all been dreary, dull and depressing. I had been endlessly patronised, repeatedly sneered at and, ultimately and invariably, rejected.

But my interview in Paris was neither dreary nor depressing. It certainly wasn't predictable. It took place in a hotel bar with a bottle of Pernod, a carafe of water and two glasses in front of the two of us. The bar was small, neat and quiet. There was the usual zinc topped counter, eight or nine bar stools and a dozen small tables. In traditional Parisian fashion, the chairs around the tables were all placed facing the open front of the bar so that patrons could watch pedestrians strolling by. I didn't realise it at the time but the bar, which was next door to the Hotel de Londres, was owned by the same people as the Hotel de Londres.

It was the first time in my life that an interviewer had plied me with alcohol while assessing my suitability for employment. My interviewer, the man to whom I had spoken on the telephone, introduced himself as Phillipe, the manager of the hotel and, I learned later, the son of the owners.

Phillipe looked like a slightly chubby version of a young Alain Delon: very handsome, very French, very sure of himself. He wore pale grey trousers and a plain, salmon pink shirt and had the arms of a grey sweater tied around his neck in that casual but stylish way that only the French seem able to master. He smoked constantly. As soon as he finished one cigarette, he lit another. He smoked Gauloises and although he usually lit each new one from the remains of the old one he carried a gold Ronson lighter. There are laws in France forbidding smoking in public places such as restaurants, cafés and bars but the French don't much like being told what to do and, of course, Phillipe's family owned the bar.

'You will excuse me for asking,' said Phillipe. 'But on the telephone you told me that you had not been working for two years. Was there a reason for this? You have been ill, perhaps?' He spoke excellent English, albeit with that rather charming strong French accent so popular among French actors who move to Hollywood and specialise in playing Frenchmen. He had the voice of a man who smoked and drank without worrying too much about his health and the belly of a man who eats for pleasure rather than to stay alive.

'Well, I have been working,' I told him. 'But although I've done a few jobs in medicine most of my work hasn't been as a doctor I'm afraid. I had a job as a van driver for a while. And I worked as a plumber's mate for six months. Before that I was working as a librarian.'

None of these jobs sounded terribly impressive for someone applying for a job as a hotel doctor. There are not many things I'm sure of in this world but one is that not many people hire van drivers to work as doctors. Other than this, uncertainties abound in my life.

'A plumber's mate?' said the Frenchman, frowning. 'What is this?'

'I carried the plumber's tools, drove the van and put sticking plasters on his cuts.'

The Frenchman raised an eyebrow and smiled. 'He had a lot of cuts?'

'He was a terrible plumber. He was always jabbing himself with his own tools. He made a fortune but he was really quite incompetent. People hired him because he always turned up quickly. Even when he made a botch of things – which he did quite frequently – they invariably called him back to have a second try.'

'So, why were you not working as a doctor? Why were you a mate to a plumber? May I ask why?'

This, I knew, was the tricky bit.

'I was struck off the medical register,' I explained. 'They took my licence away and I wasn't allowed to practise.'

'And what did you do for them to be so cruel?' He leant forward, smiled and winked. 'You slept with one of your patients, perhaps? They do not allow this in England I think though this, I confess, I do not understand why.'

'No, no, nothing like that,' I replied. 'I was a principal in a rural practice where my partners and I still visited our own patients at nights and weekends. I was off duty one Saturday when the partner who was on duty fell ill and had to call an ambulance for herself. She was admitted to hospital with appendicitis.'

'That is not good,' said Phillipe. 'She made a recovery?'

'Oh yes. The registrar removed her appendix and she was back home a few days later. A neat little bikini scar, so I heard.'

'A bikini scar? What is this?'

'The surgeon makes a small incision which leaves a tiny scar that can't be seen if the patient wears a bikini.'

'Ah! This is all very good. This was good for your partner?'

'Well, I don't think she ever wore bikinis. She was more the sort who would prefer one of those Victorian costumes which cover up from neck to knees.'

He laughed and pulled a face. 'So how did this lead to your, ah, little problem?'

'My partner's husband telephoned me and asked me to deal with any emergency calls which came through. We had a sophisticated telephone system which enabled us to switch emergency calls from one number to another. The problem was that because I didn't expect to be on call that evening, my wife and I had drunk a bottle of wine with our dinner. I'd have got away with it if I hadn't been called out but just after midnight I was called out to see a man who thought he was having a heart attack.'

I explained that while driving to the patient's house I had been stopped by a pair of zealous traffic policemen who claimed that I had crossed a traffic light when it was on amber. There were no other cars around but it's an offence to go across traffic lights which are showing amber. Things were made worse, much worse, by the fact that when the policemen stopped me they decided to breathalyse me. And the test showed that I had been drinking alcohol.

'But surely you did not lose your medical licence for this little thing?'

'The police took me to court and claimed that I had been driving dangerously because I had also exceeded the speed limit. The prosecutor, a young very aggressive lawyer, said that because I knew I had drunk half a bottle of wine I should have called a taxi to take me to my patient and the court was unsympathetic to say the least. The judge told me that the circumstances of my offence were irrelevant and that as an educated member of society, and a member of the medical profession, I ought to accept an extra responsibility for my behaviour.'

I remembered that at the time I had noticed that the judge had a red nose and bright red cheeks. I had wondered what his tipple was and suspected that, like a lot of lawyers, he was probably a claret man; with an after dinner brandy every evening 'to settle his stomach'.

Actually, there's a lot of rubbish talked about alcohol. When I was younger, I had a job in a hospital in the north of England and worked alongside a brilliant Greek surgeon who was never quite as skilful when he was stone cold sober as he was when he was just a glass or two short of drunk. The old adage that alcohol increases the confidence but reduces the performance isn't entirely reliable. The Greek surgeon I worked with was definitely more confident, more accurate and faster with the knife when he had drunk a few beers; and speed and confidence are vital for a surgeon. It's all a question of balance, of course.

Even though there had been no accident and no one had been injured, I had been sent to prison for two years. My driving licence was taken away from me and I was told that I would need to apply to have it reinstated. My lawyers wanted to appeal but I just wanted to get the whole damned nightmare over and done with. An appeal would have dragged it all out for another year or so. While I was in prison, the General Medical Council took away my licence to practise medicine. It was while I was in prison that I worked as a librarian. I used to do unofficial surgeries in the library every morning and every afternoon.

When I had finished telling my story, Phillipe stared at me in disbelief. 'This is all true?' He saw that my glass was empty and poured more Pernod. He added more to his own glass too. I hadn't drunk Pernod for years but I was reacquiring a taste for the stuff.

I nodded, picked up the carafe and added a little water to my glass.

'There was no public outcry? The English newspapers did not carry big articles condemning this prison sentence?'

'Unfortunately not. The Queen's grandson and his wife were having their first baby – the heir to the heir to the throne. The papers were full of that – packed with photographs of the happy couple, the third in line to the crown and so on. Apart from a few inches in our local paper my problem went pretty well unreported.'

'This would never happen in France,' said Phillipe, shaking his head. 'Never! You saved a man's life.'

'I didn't actually save his life,' I confessed. 'He'd eaten a huge curry and drunk six pints of lager. He was having an attack of indigestion. I gave him a couple of antacid tablets.'

Phillipe shrugged, as if this were irrelevant. 'If a doctor here in France had been treated as you were, there would have been demonstrations in the streets.'

I could believe him. From what I know of the French they take to the streets with banners and flaming torches if the morning croissants aren't as fresh as they should be.

‘The important thing is that I have my licence back now,’ I told him. I showed him a letter from the General Medical Council and told him how he could check out my licence on their website. It was while I’d been waiting to get my licence back that I’d worked as a van driver and a plumber’s mate. Phillipe looked at the letter, read it, and then put it back into the envelope and handed it back to me. I slipped it into my inside jacket pocket. ‘You said you have a wife,’ he said. ‘She has come here with you?’

I shook my head. ‘When I lost my licence I lost my job and we lost the house. I also lost my wife. She was very unhappy about losing the house. She said I had been stupid to agree to take over my partner’s calls. She said I should have said ‘No’ and let someone else take the calls instead. So while I was in prison she divorced me.’

Monsieur X seemed a little surprised. ‘She did not stand by you?’

‘She had put a lot of effort into creating a smart house. We had a handmade kitchen, two three-piece suite bathrooms and wall-to-wall shagpile carpeting in something called Matured Hazelnut Brown which was such a disgusting colour that when a visitor’s dachshund opened its bowels behind the sofa it took us hours to locate the unwanted deposit. And we had cornered the world market in cushions. I once counted them. We had 27 of the damned things. We even had them in the bedroom, though I never worked out what they were for. She didn’t like losing any of that stuff.’

‘And now?’

‘She kept the house and, for a while, she went back into nursing. She’s now remarried and buying up cushions again. Her new husband is a hospital administrator called Keith who earns more than I ever did or ever could so thankfully I’m not expected to provide any alimony. He’s one of the administrators in charge of making sure that the hospital car parks make a good profit and my wife says he’s considered something of a trend setter in that area. He improved profitability considerably by making all the car parking spaces six inches narrower and a foot shorter so that they could cram another 76 cars into the hospital car park. He then put out a press release saying that the hospital had redesigned the car park in response to extra demand from patients and relatives. I believe he does a lot of jogging and lawn mowing in his spare time. I suspect he’s probably the sort of chap who’s good on committees.’

‘And he cannot lose his licence!’

‘Exactly! No licence, no risk. And there’ll always be jobs for people who can cram more cars into a car park. I guess it must be very comforting for her.’

‘Do you miss her?’

‘No.’ I laughed. The very idea now seemed preposterous.

‘You’re a little bitter, perhaps? Disappointed that she did not stand by you?’

I shook my head. ‘Neither.’ I meant it. It was strange. We’d been married for six years but I’d never really felt close to her.

I didn’t mention it because I didn’t want to seem too pathetic but I found out after the divorce that she and Keith had been banging each other senseless for much of the last two years of our marriage. I also didn’t mention, because it now seemed rather petty minded and even childish, that as a wedding present I had sent them a recipe book which contained nothing but recipes for dishes which were packed with high fat, artery clogging ingredients.

‘Are you married?’ I asked Phillipe.

‘Oh no, no, no!’ he laughed. ‘I will make one woman miserable if I marry her. But if I remain single I will make many, many women happy.’ He threw back his head and laughed loudly. He then poured out more Pernod and lit himself another cigarette.

Frenchmen drink and smoke with great enthusiasm but, as a group, suffer a surprisingly low incidence of heart disease. Looking at Phillipe, I couldn’t help wondering if this might be because they drink and smoke without ever showing any signs of being aware that they shouldn’t do these things. And maybe the fact that they approach life head-on, and embrace the good times with unbounded enthusiasm, helps them to stay alive longer than the English, whose lives are too often dominated by a potent and deadly mixture of guilt and fear.

‘Now, I must tell you a little about the job,’ said Phillipe. ‘So that you can decide that you want to take it.’

He seemed to have taken it for granted that he would be offering me the job. To me this seemed to be a very unusual but very acceptable way of doing things. But with the bottle of Pernod on the bar top steadily going down it was already clear that this wasn’t a standard interview process.

‘Do you mean that if I want the job I can have it?’ I asked him. I was staggered. Delighted but staggered.

‘You are the only applicant,’ shrugged Phillipe, with rather brutal honesty. He laughed, paused and looked at me. ‘But I think that even if there were other applicants I would offer you the job. I like the cut of your giblets. Is that how you say it in English?’

‘I think the phrase is ‘the cut of your jib’,’ I said.

‘Not giblets?’

‘No, the giblets are the bits of a chicken which are used to make gravy – the liver, heart and gizzard.’

‘Ah! said the Frenchman. He paused, and looked at me to see if I was joking. ‘The English really make gravy from these things?’ He seemed genuinely appalled and actually shuddered. ‘And a jib?’

‘It’s the small sail at the front of a yacht.’

‘So when I say I like the cut of your jib what am I saying?’

‘You’re saying you like the shape of the sail at the front of my boat.’

Phillipe laughed. ‘I love your crazy language!’

I tried to explain a little better. ‘But I guess what you really mean when you say that you like the cut of someone’s jib is that you like the way they look; the first impressions they give.’

‘OK then, thank you. I like the cut of your jib. You may definitely keep the giblets!’ He shuddered again. ‘And you can help with my English too if you come to work here.’ I promised that I would, though it turned out that he really needed no help at all. Apart from having confused giblets, his English was pretty well perfect. ‘Now I must tell you about the hotel and the job,’ he continued.

Phillipe explained that the owners of the hotel and the bar where we were both slowly pickling ourselves in Pernod, who were unknowingly offering to rescue me from a series of unpleasant dates with mountains of tinned alphabet spaghetti, were a man called Bertrand Poisson and his wife Josette, who were both in their sixties. These were his parents. After a lifetime of endeavour, they had retired to rule their empire, and manage their various unspecified business ‘interests’ from their two homes: a luxurious apartment in the Place des Vosges and a restored Chateau on the banks of the river Loire. The Poisson parents had clearly done well for themselves. In addition to the Hotel de Londres, they also owned four other hotels in the same neighbourhood: the Hotel Grande Bretagne, the Hotel de New York, the Hotel de Washington and the Hotel de Manchester. Phillipe explained that his father had assumed, quite rightly, that tourists would choose to stay in a hotel which reminded them of their home. So, the vast majority of the holidaymakers and honeymooners who stayed in the Hotel de Manchester came from Lancashire and the majority of holidaymakers who chose to stay in the Hotel de New York came from the State of New York.

Phillipe himself, who was, I guessed in his mid-30s, who was both heir to the throne and the man in charge of the day to day running of the business.

This charming and flamboyant man told me that his parents had started out in the hotel trade at the bottom of the ladder; working in a small hotel near the Opera. Bertrand had been a hall porter, carrying bags and dealing with drunks, and Josette had been a maid, cleaning rooms and changing beds. They had both supplemented their pitiful wages with tips and payments for a variety of services rendered. I gathered that these services were not officially listed on the hotel menu.

After a few years, the two young entrepreneurs married, pooled their savings and bought a run-down flea pit in Montmartre which they spent six months restoring. They worked from early in the morning until late in the day, rebuilding and decorating. Since they no longer had full-time jobs they lived on money which they earned in the evenings and at night. (Phillipe didn’t tell me this but I learned later, much later, that his father worked as a muscleman for a protection racket, though most of the protecting was done with a knife rather than muscles, while his mother worked as a waitress-cum-hostess in an overpriced nightclub for tourists, though very little of her time was spent serving drinks, and at the end of a long evening’s work it wasn’t her feet which were sore.)

The Poissons had originally hoped that their hotel would attract businessmen visiting Paris on a budget. But they couldn’t afford to buy advertising and for the first few months they struggled to survive. Then a chance meeting with a travel agent led to their accepting block bookings from several tour companies bringing travellers to Paris on a budget. The travel companies paid little more than half the official room rate but they frequently booked the whole hotel for three or four days at a time and the Poissons quickly realised that renting out all the rooms at half price brought in more money than renting out a third of the rooms at full price.

Over the years, the Poissons expanded their hotel business, first by buying the properties on either side of their original building and then by purchasing additional, adjacent premises until they ended up owning most of a street in Montmartre. The inevitable result was that they finished up with a hotel which was many times larger than the one with which they’d started out. They’d begun with one reception area, 15 bedrooms and a small dining room and by the time I arrived they had 137 bedrooms (most with their own shower or bathroom), several large reception areas, five vast restaurants and bars and a function room for parties, weddings and other celebrations.

I was puzzled by the fact that a family-run hotel, even one this big, would want to hire its own doctor. I’d never heard of any hotel (even a large five star luxury hotel) having a resident physician. And I wondered why the hotel had advertised for a British doctor rather than a homegrown physician.

Phillipe, smiled and nodded when I asked him about this. ‘To begin with we did try to find a French doctor,’ he admitted. ‘But we couldn’t find one worth hiring. French doctors would not agree to work in a hotel. There is little status and no career structure. The only applicants were drunks who couldn’t get work anywhere else. None of them could speak a word of English. And so my parents and I thought about things over dinner one evening and we realised that since we specialise in catering for English speaking tourists it would make good sense to find a British doctor.' He touched me on the arm. 'You,' he said, lowering his voice and leaning closer, 'will make the British and the Americans feel safer than a doctor who is not a native speaker. If you take the job then this year we will put in our brochure that we have a resident, British doctor. Your presence will make the tourists very happy. You are the perfect age for a doctor. You are young enough not to be out-of-date and old enough to have some experience.'

'But do you think there will be enough work?' I asked, still rather unconvinced. I was, I confess, more concerned about the likelihood of my new job disappearing after a month than of finding myself having too little to do. Having found myself a pleasant sounding post I didn't want it to disappear before I had chance to enjoy it.

Phillipe laughed. 'Oh yes! There will be plenty of work. We will pay you 500 euros a week as a retainer and you will be provided free of charge with a room in the hotel and with all your meals in any of our restaurants. We have a modestly equipped consulting room ready prepared. You will be busy because many Americans and all the British are hypochondriacs. And you and I will both make money. We will charge the tourists a big fee for the consultation and another big fee for the medicines you give them. They won't care because they will be able to claim back the costs from their insurance companies. All our clients have insurance – the travel company has made it compulsory. Then we will share the fees for the consultations and share the profits on the medicines you prescribe. Half for you and half for us.' Phillipe leant back and held out his arms. 'In a year you will be rich. You'll be able to buy a Ferrari.' He grinned. 'Maybe you will buy two Ferraris! A red one and a yellow one.'

I liked the sound of this. It made good sense. If an insurance company was paying the bill we could easily charge £100 for a consultation – a fairly standard sort of fee for a private consultation with a doctor. Actually, we could get away with charging £150. If I saw 20 patients a week then that would, at a rate of £100 a patient, be £2,000. My half share would bring me £1,000 and Phillipe and the hotel would be happy because they would be making a terrific profit on their investment. If I had to see each patient twice during the course of his or her treatment then my take would be £2,000 a week. The profit on the drugs I prescribed would be whipped cream on a large slice of chocolate cake. Suddenly, the two Ferraris didn't seem quite as impossible as they had when Phillipe had mentioned them. None of the patients would have to pay a penny out of their own pockets, and with only 20 patients a week, I would have plenty of time to look after them well and to practise good old-fashioned, caring medicine.

I basked for a while in the prospect of this great wealth.

'I would very much also like you to provide advice for staff members,' said Phillipe. 'For this there will be no insurance claim and so no extra payment. This will help us very much because our staff will not need to take so much time off for small ailments.'

'Of course.' I agreed. 'How do I prescribe medicines? Do I send patients to the pharmacy? And what do I do if I need to send a patient to hospital?'

'You make me a list of the medicines you are likely to need and I will obtain them for you,' said Phillipe. 'Just make a list. My parents own a pharmacy which specialises in providing medicines for British and American tourists. If a patient is poorly and needs to be in hospital for some reason then I will give you the telephone number of a private hospital. You ring the hospital and they will send a private ambulance. If the problem is an emergency – a broken leg for example – then you ring for the emergency services and they will come.'

'I don't suppose your parents own the hospital?' I said, joking.

'Not entirely,' replied Phillipe. 'They have a 30% share in the equity but I believe my father is trying to buy out the other investors.'

I asked if I needed to fill in any forms to obtain the drugs I would require.

'We have a clerk in the pharmacy who will deal with the paperwork,' said Phillipe. 'Forms are designed and collected by clerks. It is appropriate that only clerks should fill them in. We are fortunate in having a single man in his 50s on our staff. He is rather simple minded, very unimaginative and completely without ambition. He loves filling in forms. It is his life's joy. You tell him what you want and he will show you where to sign.'

'I'd very much like to accept the job,' I said, not being able to think of any more questions. 'When would you like me to start?'

'Do you have to go back to England?'

'No.'

'Then start tomorrow. Today, you can settle in.' He held out a hand. 'We shake on the deal, yes?'

I took his hand. We shook firmly. He reached into his inside jacket pocket and took out a well-stuffed wallet. It contained only 50 euro notes. He counted out 20 of the notes, and held the 1,000 euros out to me. 'This is your signing on fee,' he said. 'Walking about money. Is that right? Walking about money?'

I hesitated for a moment and then thanked him, took the notes and slid them into my jacket pocket. This was clearly no ordinary job and Phillipe was obviously no ordinary employer. 'Yes,' I said. 'Walking about money. That's right.'

It should, I suppose, have occurred to me that common or garden hoteliers didn't walk around carrying such large sums of money in cash. And it should definitely have occurred to me that even if they did, they didn't hand great wodges of bank notes to virtual strangers without there being a very good reason.

To some people, the natural worriers of this world, it would have probably all sounded far too good to be true. There are many sensible individuals, generally sceptical, who usually believe that when things appear too good to be true they are too good to be true; suspecting that if things are looking excessively promising then there is going to be a reckoning. Such individuals believe that they are, in due course, going to be subjected to a hard and exceedingly unpleasant bite on some delicate part of their anatomy.

But I was accustomed to hard work, unafraid of challenge and adventure, and prepared to try pretty well anything reasonably legal. What did I have to lose?

And, to be honest, I was bloody tired.

Most of all, I was tired of being bullied and patronised. This was the only job I'd been offered, and judging by the way things had been going, it was the only job I was going to be offered. Even if it lasted only a month, I was already better off than I had been a day earlier. I'd have a few quid in my pocket and, with a little luck, I'd end up with an up-to-date reference to clip to my rather bare and seedy looking Curriculum Vitae. Moreover, as far as I knew there was no law preventing Phillipe giving me a wallet full of bank notes as a 'signing on' fee. And I certainly wasn't aware of any law designed to prevent me accepting such an inexplicably generous gesture.

My recent experiences with the law had taught me two things.

First, it is never possible to predict the nature of life's next problem or, therefore, to make plans that will provide any real protection. Life's big problems seem to come unexpectedly and must simply be dealt with when they arrive.

Second, I had learned that justice and natural justice aren't always the same thing.

So, bugger it, I thought. I'll worry about tomorrow's problems if and when they arrive.

And meanwhile I put the euro notes into my pocket (there were actually too many to fit in my wallet) and Phillipe took a key out of his pocket and said he would show me my room and then take me into the hotel basement and show me the consulting room they'd prepared.

Chapter Five

Despite Phillipe's optimism I suspected that the tourists visiting the hotel would not, after all, spend their precious hours in Paris queuing outside my door.

I suspected that travellers would like to know that there was a doctor available in the hotel, and would undoubtedly enjoy the idea of having constant access to their very own English speaking physician in a foreign land, but guessed that when they found that they had to pay for a consultation, (and then spend many hours filling in insurance forms if they wanted to claim back what they had spent) their enthusiasm would remain firmly theoretical rather than practical. The hotel, however, would probably benefit as Phillipe thought it would. I didn't know much about holidaymakers but it wasn't easy to see that potential visitors would be influenced by the knowledge that a British doctor would be available if they were to fall ill while in Paris. My presence would undoubtedly be good for trade, and well worth Phillipe's monthly investment, but, on reflection, I really didn't think that finding somewhere to park the Ferraris was going to be a problem I'd have to solve soon.

The funny thing is that I honestly didn't mind.

Phillipe had given me one of the best rooms in the hotel. The room was on the fifth floor, the top of the hotel, and was tucked in a corner with views of a courtyard. There was a double bed, a decent sized wardrobe, far bigger than I needed, a desk and chair and a comfortable armchair. The bathroom was larger than I'd expected and had a bath, shower, bidet, WC and hand basin.

'The rooms overlooking the street are noisier,' Phillipe explained. 'If you want to move we can find you another room. But this is, I think, better than anything else.'

The consulting room was in the basement, but it was freshly painted, bright and well lit and equipped with a desk, a chair, a screen and a couch. There were no windows but there were ceiling lights, moveable floor lamps and a desk lamp. There was a hand basin in the corner and a large, lockable drug cabinet. Phillipe and his staff certainly seemed to have thought of everything.

'You will probably find that most of the hotel's residents will wish to be seen in their rooms,' said Phillipe. 'But we prepared this room for people who are not resident, are visiting one of the bars perhaps, or for residents who are, perhaps, sharing a room with someone else and who want to discuss their problem in privacy.'

It all seemed very well thought out. The room was as smart, and just as well equipped, as any consulting room I'd ever worked in.

'The manager of my parents' pharmacy helped select the equipment,' Phillipe told me. 'Weighing scales, a machine for measuring the blood pressure machine and so on. You must tell me if there is more you need. Make a list. And make a list of the basic drugs you require. As you see, the drug cabinet has a good lock.'

I ate in one of the restaurants which served the hotels for which I was working: a bowl of lobster bisque followed by half a 'poulet roti', roast chicken, served with frites and a bowl of crudités, a salad of chopped raw vegetables (carrot sticks, diced beetroot, strips of bell pepper, asparagus spears, slices of cucumber, celery sticks and a mixture of green and black olives). The salad was served with a delicious vinaigrette sauce. For pudding I had an enormous slice of 'tarte aux pommes' served with two huge scoops of blueberry ice cream. It was the best meal I'd had for years. And it was free.

Later that evening, I was sitting in my new consulting room, preparing a basic list of drugs I needed the pharmacy to supply, when the telephone on my desk began to chirp. French telephones make a different sound to British ones and it was a long time since I'd heard one. If the telephone hadn't been sitting right in front of me it would have probably taken me a while to work out where the noise was coming from.

'Is that the doctor?' asked a female voice. She spoke in English, with only a trace of a French accent.

I said it was.

'This is Helene on the reception desk. Can you please see a girl in room 427?'

'Do you know what the problem is?'

'The mother says that the girl cannot breathe. She did not know we had a doctor attached to the hotel but since you're here I hoped you would not mind my calling you.'

'Of course not! Where is room 427?'

As I answered the receptionist, I felt my heart accelerate. There are, of course, various types of medical emergency. Not breathing is about as near to the top as it is possible to get. I started to panic a little. I was qualified, registered and licensed. I had satisfied the General Medical Council that I was able and competent. But I was nervous. Why, I wondered, couldn't I start my new career with something simple and non-lethal: an itchy rash, a touch of flu or a bout of indigestion?

Helene, the receptionist, said that since I was new to the hotel, and didn't yet know my way around, she would send a porter to fetch me.

He must have set off while she'd been on the telephone because he arrived less than a minute after I had put down the telephone receiver.

Three minutes later, I was standing inside a single bedroom on the fourth floor, clutching my black medical bag and looking at a young old girl who was sitting in a chair beside her bed, wheezing and clearly having a mild asthma attack. Her parents stood beside her. The girl, who wore a faded T-shirt and a pair of pyjama bottoms, looked thin, almost under nourished. She was clutching a small, threadbare teddy bear and seemed anxious and frightened. A small boy, presumably her brother, sat on the floor, staring soundlessly. Their mother was small and also nervous looking but the father was huge and intimidating. The mother wore jeans and a T-shirt; the father wore a brown suit, a white shirt and a brown tie made out of some unpleasant looking shiny fabric and decorated with small gold symbols. I couldn't see what the symbols were but I guessed it was a club or company logo of some kind. It was that sort of tie.

'Good evening,' I said to the girl. I introduced myself. 'What's your name?'

The girl struggled for a moment. 'Tutti,' she managed to say.

I smiled at her. 'That's a lovely name.' Actually, of course, I thought it was a stupid name. And I thought her parents ought to be locked up for giving it to her. But you can't tell a kid that she has a stupid name, can you? She knows.

She smiled back at me.

I turned to the boy. 'And yours?' I said to him. 'What's your name?'

He stared at me but didn't answer.

'His name is Pistachio,' said the mother.

I thought they sounded like ice cream flavours but obviously didn't mention this.

'I can stop this for you,' I told the girl. I reached out, picked up her hand and held it for a moment.

I turned my head. 'Has she been like this before?' I asked her parents.

'Oh yes,' replied the mother. 'She has asthma.'

'Does she take anything for it?'

'Tablets and an inhaler,' said the father. He spoke loudly and I guessed he was used to giving orders and having them obeyed. 'She takes tablets every day and has the inhaler with her all the time. The doctor supplies us with an extra inhaler so that her teachers have one she can use when she's at school.'

The man seemed to me to talk about his daughter as though she weren't there, or was someone he hardly knew, a stranger.

'Do you have the tablets and inhaler with you?'

'No,' said the mother. 'We didn't bring them in case customs confiscated them.'

'You don't have any of her medicines at all? No tablets? No inhaler?'

'No,' said the father. 'Don't you listen? My wife told you. It's illegal to take drugs through customs.'

'It's not illegal to bring your own prescription medicines,' I said quietly.

The father snorted and harrumphed and made it clear he didn't believe me. Generally speaking, the English would rather die than make a fuss but he was clearly not a member of the silent majority.

I didn't have any medicines at all in my bag, and although I had put suitable drugs and inhalers on my shopping list for Phillipe I didn't have any medicines in my consulting room either. I turned to the open door where the porter was still standing. 'Bring me a pot of very strong black coffee,' I told him. 'It must be strong.' He nodded and hurried away immediately.

The parents looked at each other. They clearly thought I was ordering the coffee for myself.

'What are you ordering bloody coffee for?' demanded the father, glowering at me.

He was a very intimidating man. He reminded me of a thug with whom I'd shared a cell.

'The coffee is for Tutti,' I told them. 'The caffeine will open up her airways and ease her breathing.'

'We don't allow her to drink coffee,' said the father firmly. 'She's too young for coffee.'

'How old is she?'

'She's twelve.' She looked younger.

'The coffee will cure her,' I told them both. 'It's quite safe. Caffeine dilates the airway tubes that are constricted.'

'Don't you have an inhaler you can give her?'

'I'll get her an inhaler tomorrow,' I told them. 'But I only arrived in Paris this evening. I don't have any medicines yet.'

'What sort of bloody doctor are you?' demanded the father.

'I can cure her,' I assured him quietly. 'We don't need an inhaler.'

I opened my black bag and took out my stethoscope.

'How do we know you're a proper doctor?' demanded the father, suddenly.

My first consultation in my new job wasn't going terribly well. Fortuitously I still had the letter confirming the restoration of my licence in my medical bag. I took it out and waved it under his nose, hoping he didn't read it too carefully, and wouldn't want to know why my licence was being restored and why it had been taken away in the first place. Luckily, he saw the heading on the notepaper and didn't bother to read the rest. I put the letter back into my bag and made a mental note to have a few copies made. It seemed entirely possible that this would not be the last time I found myself being asked the same question. Few professionals are imitated as often as doctors. You never read about tricksters pretending to be shoe salesmen or estate agents but the popular newspapers sometimes give the impression that there are as many fake doctors around as real ones. The trouble is, I suppose, that it is terribly easy to pretend to be a doctor. It is, for example, much easier to impersonate a doctor than to impersonate a lawyer or a bookie. Doctors have created their own superficial jargon and shallow confidence that makes it easy for tricksters to pass themselves off as physicians or surgeons. Confidence tricksters have successfully held down senior hospital jobs for years. Everyone laughed when an Italian hospital found that one of its senior brain surgeons wasn't even a qualified doctor. But it happens everywhere. In New Orleans a man called Michael Whalen, who claimed to be head of a federal burping programme, persuaded women to allow him to fondle their breasts in order to find out if they were qualified to become potential burping instructors. In Britain a schoolboy borrowed a stethoscope and a white coat and went round to the local girls' grammar school where he persuaded the matron to allow him to examine all the senior pupils. His 'clinic' only came to end when one of his 'patients' recognised him. And there was the fake medical officer who persuaded housewives to strip so that he could check to make sure that they weren't suffering from unspecified infectious diseases. He even had an answer when husbands caught him examining their wives: he just persuaded them to strip too. So I didn't blame the man for wanting to know that I'd trained as a doctor rather than a plumber or a taxi driver.

'Would you be kind enough to pop outside for a moment?' I asked the father. 'I need to examine your daughter's chest. Just wait in the corridor. We'll fetch you in a moment.'

The father stared at me, hesitated for a moment and then left.

'Has Tutti been under any stress today?' I asked the mother.

There was a pause. The mother looked at Tutti, looked at me and then looked back at her daughter before she spoke.

'I think she was probably upset because my husband has been shouting rather a lot,' she said softly. 'He gets terribly upset whenever we travel. He's a traffic policeman and he's used to people doing what he tells them to do. He finds it difficult when he's in a situation where he has to do what other people tell him to do.'

I wasn't surprised to discover the father's occupation.

'Does Tutti often have asthma attacks when things like this happen?' I asked.

Her mother went a little red and then nodded.

'Let me listen to your chest,' I said to the girl.

Tutti pulled up her T-shirt and I listened to her chest. To be honest, I didn't learn anything I didn't already know, but people expect the doctor to do something practical and the mother, father and daughter would all have been disappointed if they hadn't seen a stethoscope in action. And, in addition, of course, I needed to fill the time before the porter came back with the coffee.

The porter knocked on the door just as I pulled down the girl's T-shirt. If he was puzzled as to why I had ordered a pot of coffee when I'd been called to attend to a patient he didn't say anything or show any surprise. He put the tray down on a table, turned and left. I noticed, with a smile, that whoever had prepared the tray had added half a dozen cups and saucers together with a plentiful supply of spoons, a jug of cream, a bowl of wrapped sugar cubes and a plateful of biscuits. It occurred to me that the hotel staff had probably now acquired a strange view of British medical ways.

I poured a cupful of strong, black coffee and put it on the side of the table to cool a little. I offered a cup to Tutti's mother but she shook her head and declined. If she'd accepted I'd have had a cup myself. Since we were in Paris it was a good Arabica blend and smelt very good. Actually, of course, I should not have been surprised since the French don't do undrinkable coffee simply because no one in the country would drink it if they did. If you served a Frenchman a cup of watery, lukewarm, tasteless dishwater and called it coffee (as the English often do) he would kill you, give himself up to the police and be acquitted by the jury. The idea that the lover who commits a 'crime passionnel' is exempt from the extent of the law in France is entirely fictitious. But coffee? Well, I suspect that would be different.

I looked at the coffee longingly but felt, rather sadly, that it might be inappropriate for me to pour myself a cup.

By the time the coffee had cooled a little, Tutti's wheezing had already subsided a little. She looked better and was clearly slightly more relaxed. I couldn't help feeling that having her father out of the room had helped enormously. I strongly suspected that most, if not all, of her wheezing attacks probably coincided with moody outbursts from her rather scary father.

'Just sip it,' I told her, handing her the cup.

'Are you sure it's safe to give her coffee?' asked her mother.

I reassured her.

Tutti sipped at the coffee. As she did so I talked to her mother about what the family was planning to do in Paris, what they hoped to see and how long they were staying. And I asked her about the children.

'How did you think of such unusual names?' I asked.

'They're both named after ice cream flavours,' the mother replied. I had been right about that.

'We named them after our favourite ice creams,' she continued. 'Tutti's middle name is Fruiti.' I smiled weakly and muttered something banal and complimentary. Don't parents like these ever stop and think about their children growing up into adults? 'Hello! My name is Dr Tutti Fruiti'. 'Pray silence for Judge Pistachio.' What would happen if Tutti fell in love with a Prince? She'd end up being known as Princess Tutti.

Within minutes Tutti's wheezing had eased. And within a quarter of an hour the asthma attack was over. Her mother thanked me profusely before fetching the girl's father. He, predictably, was not so courteous or so grateful.

'Anyone could have given her a cup of coffee,' he snarled, when he returned to the room and found his daughter recovered. I refrained from asking why, if that was the case, he hadn't cured his daughter with a cup of coffee himself. I didn't want to anger him anymore, lest his anger upset his daughter.

'Call me if you have any other problems,' I told them. 'I live in the hotel and tomorrow I'll have some drugs and inhalers delivered from the pharmacy.'

'Don't expect me to pay for your visit,' said the father. 'All you did was give her a cup of coffee.' He paused, frowned and thought for a moment. I could almost hear the cogs whirring round. 'And I'm not paying for coffee I didn't order,' he added.

I made my way back to my room feeling sorry for the man's family. I had only had to deal with for a few minutes. They all had to live with the miserable git.

It felt good to be back in practice. And, in the end, I was grateful that my first patient had been so easy to cure. I wouldn't have liked to try to cure a heart attack or a broken leg with a pot of coffee. I realised that I'd been lucky. But I couldn't help thinking that the way things had been going I deserved a bit of luck.

Chapter Six

I didn't receive any more requests to see sick hotel residents until two days later and assumed that business was slow because the hotel had not yet had a chance to tell new and prospective customers that the hotel had a resident physician.

The unexpected but welcome period of quiet gave me a chance to stock the consulting room's drug cupboard with a variety of essential medicines.

'It is sometimes claimed that laughter is the best medicine but anyone who has ever had raging otitis media, kidney stones or a dental abscess will confirm that the claim is wildly exaggerated. Try telling a joke to someone rolling around on the floor in agony. In general terms, on a day to day basis, belief, trust, hope and optimism are probably more valuable than laughter but the truth is, of course, that there are times when drugs are the very best medicines. If you have a nasty infection, a course of antibiotics will do you far more good than a giggle. And if you're screaming in pain with a nasty, compound fracture, a dose of morphine will be far more welcome than even the most sincere guffaw.

As Phillipe had promised I could, I simply ordered the drugs I thought I needed from the pharmacy his parents owned. I wandered along to the pharmacy, just a short distance away from the hotel, and asked for three different types of antibiotic capsule, amoxicillin, trimethoprim and erythromycin, and half a dozen ampoules of benzylpenicillin (for suspected cases of bacterial meningitis). For asthma patients I ordered several salbutamol inhalers and a supply of hydrocortisone suitable for intravenous injection. For painkillers I ordered a supply of soluble aspirin tablets (still the best general analgesic, and particularly useful for its additional anti-inflammatory and anti-pyretic qualities) and half a dozen ampoules of morphine. I ordered prochlorperazine and domperidone for patients suffering from nausea and vomiting; diazepam (in tablet and injection form) for patients suffering from severe anxiety or needing sedation; two bottles of sodium chloride infusion for patients who might need fluid replacement; glucose and glucagon for diabetic emergencies and ampoules of adrenaline and chlorphenamine for patients suffering from allergy or anaphylactic reactions. I ordered a glyceryl nitrate spray for patients having heart attacks, atropine for patients with bradycardia and hypotension and a supply of frusemide for patients with severe fluid retention. I also laid in a supply of contraceptive pills and a few morning after pills for women who had enjoyed unplanned romances but didn't want to be reminded of them in nine months' time.

There is no doubt that far too many prescription drugs are swallowed these days. Too many patients take medicines they don't need for ailments they don't have and then seem surprised when they develop symptoms they didn't have before. But although prescription drugs can, and do, kill patients they can also save lives. And a doctor without a good supply of modern pharmacological ammunition will soon appreciate the extent of his shortcomings.

I even persuaded the pharmacist, a convivial, round-faced fellow who wore gold framed half-moon spectacles and a heavily starched white coat, to supply me with a good stock of placebos. A confident and convincing doctor can do a great deal with a placebo – without any risk of side effects. I told the pharmacist to send me a couple of bottles of an old-fashioned tonic called Mist Gent. Alk, together with a supply of huge green and yellow vitamin capsules. When I worked in general practice in England I cured many of my most difficult patients with these capsules. The important thing is that the doctor who is prescribing a placebo must be utterly convincing. If there is any doubt at all then the placebo will prove useless. I used to put a great deal of effort into showing how certain I was that the pills would work. And I'd always try to add a little twist to the prescription. 'Make sure that you swallow the green end first,' I would tell my patients. 'They won't work as well if you swallow the yellow end first.' This may sound daft but it worked.

I also requested, and received, several emergency suture kits and a good variety of dressings and bandages. As Phillipe had promised, the pharmacy clerk wrote out all the prescriptions in splendid old-fashioned copper-plate writing and I merely added my signature to his artwork.

A young man in a cycle helmet delivered the drugs within an hour, which I thought was pretty impressive. He told me that he was the pharmacy's full-time courier. He said that occasionally, if he had to go to an address in the suburbs, he would use the pharmacy's small van, but that most of the time he travelled by bicycle. 'It's much quicker,' he explained. 'Paris has good cycle lanes.'

As I finished my lunch with an excellent cup of coffee in one of the hotel restaurants (there were five restaurants and two bars) Phillipe appeared. He told me that Tutti Fruiti's mother had thanked the receptionist and told her that they would happily pay my bill – and even pay for the pot of therapeutic coffee.

'The mother was very grateful,' said Phillipe, beaming. 'I think this is going to work well.' He put a small cardboard box on the table in front of me. 'I thought you would need a mobile phone,' he said. 'If you are away from the hotel just take the phone with you and if we need you we will telephone. You can get a taxi from anywhere in Paris.' He handed me a promotional card. 'Use this company,' he said, `and tell them to charge the bill to my personal account.' He waved a hand in a very Gallic gesture, smiled lightly and looked a little embarrassed. 'My parents own the taxi company,' he explained.

It seemed as though my luck really was changing.

'How have you found the food in our restaurants?' Phillipe asked.

'Excellent,' I told him honestly. 'Actually, I don't think I've ever eaten better food.' This was perfectly true. Although I had only eaten a few meals in the hotel restaurants, the food had been superb. Moreover, to my surprise, I had also found the service to be excellent. The service in Parisian restaurants is usually appalling but Phillipe, who was conscious that most of his customers were foreign (nearly all of them being either English or American) was a good enough businessman to be aware that they would be unimpressed if they had to wait twenty minutes to be served, and then find themselves confronted by an arrogant and disinterested waiter or waitress.

'What did you have for your lunch?'

'I had Quiche au Roquefort et aux Poireaux, the Roquefort and Leek quiche, followed by Filet Mignon à la Bordelaise, which was the grilled medallions of beef cooked in Chablis of course, served with shallots, thyme, lemon and I think a veal glace, all with potato gratin, porcini and crimini mushrooms.'

'And for dessert?'

'Just coffee,' I replied. 'It was all magnificent. If I have dessert at lunch as well as dinner I will weigh at least 30 stone within a month and I won't be able to fit into the lift.'

Phillipe nodded, accepting the honest compliment. 'We try to vary the atmosphere in the restaurants,' he told me. 'Sometimes we play bright music there, mostly classic rock and roll, lots of Johnny Hallyday, of course. Sometimes we play lots of Mozart and a little Bach. And another day, we play jazz. We try to keep the lighting low for good conversation and for romance. The bar has a couple of billiard tables in the back to give it a sporting atmosphere.'

He told me that he had discovered that by varying the atmosphere in a restaurant he could affect the way people feel, the amount they spend and the speed with which they eat. 'When we play classical music, the diners spend more money. When we play rock and roll, the diners spend less but they eat faster and leave quicker. When the lighting is soft, the patrons can't tell how much they have eaten; it doesn't matter if you serve small or large portions. When the restaurant smells of lemon, people do not spend as much as if there is a light scent of lavender. When there is a crowd on the pavement outside, people who eat in the restaurant will say that the food tastes better than if there is no queue. And when the prices are high, people are more likely to praise the food than they are when the prices are low.'

I told him I was impressed, and that I had not realised that there was so much science involved in running a restaurant.

'There is science in everything,' he said. 'Waitresses who have blonde hair get bigger tips than waitresses who are dark haired. Waitresses who crouch next to customers when they are taking an order will get a bigger tip than waitresses who remain standing sternly upright. If she's wearing a low cut top, and has a button or two undone, she will do better still. Surprisingly, even most women patrons will be more generous. And if a waitress draws a smiley face on the bill she too will get a bigger tip.'

'So blonde waitresses who crouch and draw smiley faces must do very well!'

'Exactly!' laughed Phillipe.

'Your waiters and waitresses are very good,' I said.

'Oh yes,' he said. 'We tell them they must be friendly and welcoming. So obviously we do not hire native Parisians. We hire the restaurant staff from the country.'

'Do you have good customers?' I asked. 'What I mean is, do they behave themselves?'

'On the whole, they do,' he said. 'People come to Paris, and to our hotels, for a little holiday. They want to have a good time. And so, hopefully, when they arrive they will be in a good mood, excited perhaps, but optimistic and cheerful. But if their journey was bad, or their arrival was not smooth, they tend to be a little critical for a day or so. And if they come in a party, a stag party or a hen party, they can be very noisy.' Phillipe paused and waved both hands in the air. 'Do you know that hen parties are worse, much worse than stag parties? And the British ones are especially bad. Young women who are out for a good time in a strange city can behave very badly indeed. You would not believe what they get up to. Sex, sex, sex! And they photograph and film themselves all the time. What do they do with these photographs? Do the brides show them to their new husbands? Oo la la, I hope not. They will be divorced before they are married a week. Definitely, the women are worse, much worse than the men.' He shook his head sadly.

It was only later that I realised why he was so deeply offended by the fact that so many of the girls who came to Paris were so keen to have sex with men they had only just met. I was to discover that his disapproval of the fact that

British girls were eager to have sex with strangers, without charging them, was not entirely based on moralistic disapproval. ‘But generally, we have good customers. They do not steal the coat hooks from behind the lavatory doors in the toilettes! You have this happen in England, yes?’

‘I’m afraid so,’ I said.

‘Not here,’ said Phillipe, wagging a finger. He leant closer. ‘Mind you,’ he said, ‘we screw the hooks on very well, just in case.’

I spent most of the afternoon working out how to use the mobile telephone which Phillipe had given me, and stocking the drug cabinet in my consulting room with the medicines the courier had brought. I also spent three quarters of an hour walking around the various hotels so that I could find my way to and from the 137 bedrooms.

Chapter Seven

My second medical call came the next evening, just as I drinking my coffee at the end of an excellent meal in the hotel. I had enjoyed moules, with garlic, shallots, lemon, parsley and a wine cream sauce served with frites, followed by veau braisé a la provençale, (lightly braised veal cheeks) in a tomato broth, served with sundried tomatoes and goat cheese bread pudding. For dessert I had a vacherin, a meringue shell filled with whipped cream and topped with ice cream and mixed berries. I had, at the waiter's suggestion, helped the meal on its way with half a bottle of the house champagne and a bottle of an excellent St Emilion claret. I had suggested to the waiter that half a bottle of the Bordeaux wine would be sufficient but he had looked so disappointed that I had allowed him to insist that a full bottle would be more appropriate. In England, such a meal would have been awarded with three rosettes, five stars and full page tributes in all the posh Sunday newspapers. The late Michael Winner would have been drooling for a month. In Paris, it was just a meal in a family owned hotel restaurant.

This time, I took the call on my new mobile phone.

I gave quiet thanks that the call had come at the end of this splendid meal, rather than half way through it, and told the waiter that I would have my coffee later. I then made my way to room 263 where the door was opened by a young woman wearing jeans and a T-shirt with the words 'Live each day as if it is your last' printed on the front. I've always thought that to be a pretty daft and woefully irresponsible thing to say, to be honest, though it does have the advantage that one day it will be right. She led me into the bedroom where a young, gloomy looking man was sitting on the bed

The boy and the girl both looked to be in their late teens or early twenties, though I guessed she might have been a year or so younger than him. She told me that her name was Enid but that she liked being called Cherry and that her boyfriend's name was Edgar. I assumed that he didn't mind being called Edgar.

'Do they have legalised euthanasia in France?' asked the girl, who had sat down on the bed beside the young man.

I was still standing, I hadn't been invited to sit and I never like to sit down in someone's home or room until I've been asked to do so. I just stared down at them both, trying to work out why they had dragged me up to their room to ask me a question to which a seven-year-old armed with a smart phone could have found the answer in approximately five seconds. In the end I told them that the French attitude towards euthanasia was much the same as the attitude in the United Kingdom: it wasn't officially allowed.

'We've decided to kill ourselves,' said the young man, who had shoulder length reddish hair, a wispy reddish beard and a very pale complexion. He was plump and had surprisingly large eye bags. He stood out as obviously British or American because he was wearing blue jeans. Adult Frenchmen, who will take half an hour tying a woollen scarf to satisfy their aesthetic senses, would not dream of wearing jeans even if they were digging a hole in the road. The jeans were so tight that it must have taken him an hour to wriggle into them. I suspect that he thought they made him look sexy but, sadly, they merely drew attention to his impressive collection of adipose tissue. I don't know why but he reminded me of one of those chuggers who stand on the pavement trying to con pedestrians into signing a direct debit form for far more than they can afford in order to save polar bears from global warming or to send pizzas overseas to feed small children in Peru. Noble causes undoubtedly, but the aggressive in your face attitude of those hired financial assassins has always unnerved me. Still, he probably wasn't a chugger anyway. Given the age at which young people are appointed to such jobs these days I thought that he could well have been an IT specialist, an investment bank analyst or a *Guardian* columnist. Or maybe he was still at school; studying brewing, resort management and sports representation.

'Er, why have you decided to kill yourselves?' I asked, rather diffidently. I suppose I half expected to hear that one of the pair had a fatal disease. Since they were sharing a hotel room it seemed unlikely that, like Romeo and Juliette or Heloise and Aberlard, they were depressed because their romance was forbidden.

'We're depressed by the state of the world,' said Cherry, the young woman. 'There is no hope.'

I asked if they were depressed by anything in particular.

'People don't understand how bad things are,' said Edgar, with a gloominess that was almost infectious. 'There's too much apathy. It's impossible to change things.' He wore a T-shirt with a faded picture of Che Guevara on the front. It was the famous picture of the good doctor wearing a beret and looking moodily into the distance, the photograph taken by Albert Korda; though I had a suspicion that neither of these gloomy youths could have told me much about Guevara other than that he had been a revolutionary and had died in Bolivia. I bet they didn't know that Che looked moody and dark in the picture because it was taken at a memorial service held after a freighter called La Coubre exploded when being unloaded in Havana harbour. I bet they didn't even know that Ernesto Guevara had been a doctor and a government minister and a writer and President of the National Bank in Cuba and that he'd been married and had five children, that he had founded a radio station, that during his military days he had read Robert Louis Stevenson and Cervantes to his men and that when he'd been a minister he'd gone down to the fields to cut sugar cane on his day off, working alongside other Cubans to lead by example and to show that all men are equal. I wanted to tell the gloomy young man all this, and to tell him, too, that Che, who was only 39-years-old when he died, would not have killed himself because he didn't think the world was the way he thought it should be. But I didn't.

I decided to change tack. 'Why did you come to Paris?'

'We thought we could find a doctor here who would give us euthanasia treatment,' said Edgar. 'We spoke to our GP in England but he refused to help us. He wanted to prescribe some sort of antidepressants. But we won't take drugs.'

'Our despair is beyond pharmacological intervention,' said Cherry, who sounded as if she had read the phrase in a book somewhere. Or maybe it was something they had discussed together and rehearsed.

I had never thought of euthanasia as a 'treatment' before, though I recognise that there are some medical conditions for which death is the only realistic solution. Patients who have no discernible brain function, or who are overwhelmed with intractable pain which leaves them in a state of unrelieved agony, are suitable candidates. There is no doubt that death is a welcome release for some. Indeed, I once knew an eminent psychiatrist who encouraged some of his suicidal patients to kill themselves. He insisted that with some such patients, the ones who endured lives of abject misery and who tortured everyone around them with their unhappiness, death was often better for them, their relatives, their physician and society in general.

But this young pair seemed to me to be thinking like 16-year-olds. I wondered which one of them had led the way into such a state of seemingly hopeless despair. The condition of folie a deux is a psychiatric disorder in which one, often irrational, individual dominates another so fervently that he or she can lead them both into some sort of bizarre behavioural pattern.

'I'm afraid that I can't help you kill yourselves any more than a doctor in England could help you,' I told them.

They both looked terribly disappointed.

'Do you know of an English speaking pharmacy?' asked Cherry.

'What for?' I asked, though I knew the answer.

'We decided that if you wouldn't help us we would each take an overdose of aspirin,' she said. 'We'll put the Do Not Disturb notice on the door so that the maid doesn't come in and find us.'

'We wouldn't want to upset anyone,' said the boy. I now thought of Edgar as a boy rather than as a man.

I looked at them both. They seemed so earnest, so devoid of fun. I could tell from looking at them that it had been a long, long time since either of them had enjoyed a day so much that it had been worth remembering.

'How long are you booked into the hotel for?' I asked.

'The week,' said the girl. 'We told our parents we were coming here for a holiday.'

'Do either of you know Paris?' I asked them.

They shook their heads. 'I came with my parents when I was six or seven,' said the girl. 'But I don't really remember anything about it. I think we went up the Eiffel Tower.'

'You'll have difficulty getting the amount of aspirin you need,' I told them. 'If you're prepared to wait a few days I can get you a supply. And I can make sure that I find your bodies – rather than a maid. That would be better, don't you think? Have you thought about what you want to happen to your bodies afterwards?'

They looked at each other.

'We hadn't really thought about that,' said the boy.

'Maybe we could be buried in that cemetery where Jim Morrison is buried,' said the girl.

'Pere Lachaise,' I said.

'Pardon?' said the girl. 'I'm afraid I don't speak French. We did it at school but I was never any good at languages.'

'Pere Lachaise,' I repeated. 'It's the name of the cemetery where Jim Morrison is buried. But I'm afraid I doubt if you could be buried there. You have to be resident in Paris. And you need to book a plot. It's rather overcrowded.'

'Oh,' said the girl, obviously disappointed.

'But I could arrange to have your bodies sent back to the UK. I'll need your parents' names and addresses. And perhaps a phone number.'

They looked at each other.

I went to the desk, took a piece of hotel notepaper and handed it to the girl. 'Just write everything down on here,' I said. 'And leave it on the desk in the room so that I can find it. I'll deal with everything for you.'

'Would you?' said the girl. Her voice was softer now, quite difficult to hear. 'That would be very kind of you.'

'What are we going to do in the meantime?' asked the boy. He had to clear his throat before he spoke. 'While we wait for you to get us the supply of aspirin.'

'You could just explore Paris,' I suggested. 'There are lots to do and see. Have a picnic in the Luxembourg Gardens. Walk up to Sacré Coeur and try to spot all the bits of Montmartre that have been filmed. Visit the Pere Lachaise cemetery and put a flower on Jim Morrison's grave. Walk along the river. Feed the ducks in the park next to the Eiffel Tower. Do you know that the Japanese built an exact copy of the Eiffel Tower in Tokyo and when they'd finished it they added an extra tall radio mast so that their tower became taller than the original. I think they thought that because it was bigger it was better!' I paused. They both actually smiled. 'And then in the evenings make love. Have one last glorious week together. You owe yourselves that. And I'll have the aspirin tablets ready for you at the end of the week.'

They looked at each other and then both nodded.

'Thank you,' said the girl, quietly.

'Thank you very much,' said the boy, so softly that I hardly heard him.

I had, that morning, bought a yellow plastic storage box and a set of record cards so that I could keep notes about the patients I'd seen. But when I left their room I didn't bother writing anything on one of my nice, new cards. What the hell was I going to put? 'Saw teenage couple suffering from teenage angst. I recommended trip to Pere Lachaise and a picnic. Promised to obtain supply of aspirin for double suicide and offered to expedite return of bodies to UK'?

I went back to the restaurant and ordered the coffee I'd missed at the end of my meal. I was once told that it is important to finish what you've started and it seems to me that it is particularly important to follow this advice when one is enjoying a meal in a French restaurant.

When I'd been a GP in England, I had only rarely finished a meal in one sitting and I had afterwards usually abandoned the part of the meal which had remained. But it's much easier to abandon a meal when the principal ingredients of the first course came out of a baked bean can and the second course invariably seemed to be a portion of reheated rice pudding followed by a cup of fluid inaccurately described as coffee.

Chapter Eight

By my third day in Paris it had become fairly widely known among the residents of the hotels where I was employed that there was a British doctor in residence, and I found myself being consulted slightly more often. I slowly became aware, however, that my days were not going to be spent dealing with the family doctor's usual mixture of coughs, colds, curious dizzy spells and crying babies. My practice was always quite a specialist one, of course, and my patients would prove to be more than a little out of the ordinary. And, of course, I was running the sort of single-handed practice I had hankered after in England, rather than being a member of one of the sort of modern, group practices which are now ubiquitous, and where patients and doctors alike become characterless numbers. 'Doctor number 14 will now see patient number 36 in consulting room 11.'

By mid-morning, on that day, I had sewn up a two inch gash in a small boy's leg (I had to ask the pharmacy cyclist to bring round a supply of tetanus vaccine since I'd forgotten to order a supply with my original consignment of drugs), reassure and prescribe antibiotics for a young woman on her honeymoon who had developed honeymoon cystitis. She told me with pride rather than embarrassment that she and her new groom had been 'at it' for nearly four hours the previous night. A receptionist later told me that guests in the adjoining rooms, and the rooms above and below, had all complained about the noise with two of them insisting that the police be called to investigate 'an attempted murder' I'd had to treat an extremely unpleasant and dangerous anaphylactic shock reaction in a young man of 22 who had eaten a huge plateful of mussels because he had heard that molluscs were powerful aphrodisiacs (when he had recovered enough to speak, he confessed that he always had an allergic reaction whenever he ate shellfish of any kind) and I'd had to deal with Percival.

I really don't know how to describe Percival except to say that he was like no other human being I have ever met.

I went to see him in his room, at his request, but before I met him I already knew that he had arrived in Paris on a powerful Harley Davidson motorbike. He had insisted on parking the motor cycle in the hotel lobby until a place had been found for it in a disused garage which was used for storing cleaning materials.

'How old are you?' I asked, partly because a patient's age is always relevant and partly I knew he would want to tell me. It is my experience that old aged pensioners like to tell people precisely how old they are and will, if the number is high enough, usually pause after making the announcement as though waiting for gasps of admiration and a few congratulatory words 'Ninety two!' replied Percival, and there was definitely at least one exclamation mark after the number.

'Golly,' I said. I congratulated him, though if I am honest I have to admit that he looked older. There was no room left on his face or head for more wrinkles. Even his lips were heavily wrinkled.

'I came over for the motor bike show,' he told me. His motor cycle leathers were draped over the room's one easy chair and his helmet was resting on a bedside table.

There was, it turned out, an exhibition of old motor bikes in Paris, and Percival had ridden to France from his home in the Midlands in order to see if there was anything that took his fancy.

'I collect motor cycles,' he told me proudly. 'I've got 29. All in perfect working order.'

I expressed admiration, though to be honest I've never been particularly excited by motorbikes, and what I know about them could be written on a throttle cable with a felt tip pen.

'What can I help you with?' I asked.

'Is this confidential, doctor?'

I assured him that our conversation was, indeed, confidential and that nothing he told me would be shared with anyone else.

'I went out last night with a few lads,' he told me. 'A group of bikers from Manchester.'

I waited, wondering what he'd got up. I thought that perhaps he might be suffering a touch of indigestion or had, perhaps, acquired a bug which was working its way up and down his intestinal tract with the usual distressing results.

'Did you have a good time?' I asked, after a considerable delay.

'Brilliant,' he said. 'But after we'd had a few bevvies a couple of the lads wanted to go to a tattoo parlour.'

I almost didn't want to hear the rest.

'I didn't want a tattoo,' he said.

'Very sensible,' I agreed.

'I've checked and I don't seem to have any,' he said.

'Good.'

'But I can't see everywhere.'

‘No.’

‘And my wife will kill me if I go back with a tattoo.’

‘I can understand that.’

‘So, would you give me a check over? See if there are any on my back?’

I told him to undress and when he’d done so I checked his neck, his back and his buttocks. There were no signs of any tattoos. But I did notice something glinting.

‘There are no tattoos, but you do seem to have a small, golden ring attached to your foreskin,’ I pointed out.

Percival looked down and then picked up his penis between his fingers and examined it carefully. ‘Where the hell did that come from?’

‘I would imagine that someone at the tattoo parlour put it there,’ I suggested.

‘Why would anyone do that?’ he asked.

‘Decoration?’ I suggested.

‘I wonder what happens when it goes up,’ asked Percival, as much of himself as of me.

‘I suppose it just hangs there,’ I said.

‘Like an ornament on a Christmas tree?’

‘Yes. Sort of.’

‘I didn’t see it when I went for a pee this morning!’ said Percival. ‘The wife is going to go mad when she sees what’s happened to her little Johnnie!’

‘Johnnie?’

‘That’s what she calls my thingymajig,’ explained Percival.

I bent down a little and took a closer look at the ring. ‘Maybe she won’t notice it,’ I suggested.

‘Of course she’ll see it!’ he told me. ‘She always gives me a blowjob on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. How can she miss it?’

‘Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays?’

‘Blow jobs on three days and the real rumpy pumpy on the other four,’ explained Percival. ‘She says she gets sore if we have rumpy pumpy every night.’

‘How old is your wife?’ I asked.

‘She’s younger than me,’ replied Percival. ‘She’s 89.’

I took another look at the ring. ‘Do you want me to remove it for you?’

‘Can you?’

‘I think so. But it’ll mean cutting it.’

‘I don’t care what you do with it,’ said Percival. ‘You can melt it if you can get it off me.’ He sounded really desperate.

As far as I know there is no medical equipment available yet for the specific removal of metal rings placed in the male foreskin so I told Percival to wait a while and hurried down to the hotel reception desk. There I asked if the hotel receptionist if I could see the resident handyman for a moment. I knew that a hotel which had a resident doctor would be bound to have at least one resident handyman. When the handyman came I asked if he had a pair of wire cutters I could borrow. ‘Preferably something quite small and narrow,’ I added. He was a small, round man and had a huge moustache which must have made drinking soup a non-starter. He wore a pair of blue overalls which had clearly been bought many calories earlier.

A few minutes later, the handyman returned with a variety of wire cutters. The biggest was about two feet long and was clearly designed for cutting bolts and small pieces of cable. The smallest looked suitable for the delicate job ahead.

‘Can I borrow the big ones and the small ones,’ I asked.

He handed them over and I went back upstairs to Percival’s room. On the way I put the small wire cutters into my pocket.

‘Right,’ I said, as I entered Percival’s room. I held up the huge bolt cutter. ‘This should do the job.’

Percival, who was sitting on the bed, fainted.

While he was unconscious I took out the small pair of wire cutters and removed the ring from his penis. With one snip he was free.

‘It’s done,’ I told him, when he regained consciousness a few moments later. I showed him the ring.

‘Is it gold?’ he asked.

‘I’ve no idea,’ I replied. I held it up so that I could see it more clearly. ‘There’s no hallmark,’ I told him. ‘But it’s a very thin ring. There isn’t really room for a hallmark.’

‘I don’t want it anyway,’ said Percival. ‘Throw it away or keep it. I don’t care.’

I put the ring down on the bedside table, beside his helmet. ‘Keep it as a souvenir of Paris,’ I told him.

I didn’t wait to see or hear his response.

My next call came from a woman called Monica, whose husband Bernard had locked himself in their room. And we know how that turned out.

Chapter Nine

After I watched the ambulance take Bernard, his nightie and his formidable erection away to the hospital I walked back into the hotel. Monica was standing in the reception area. She looked a very sorry sight. Her blood-stained dress was dirty and crumpled and the little of her make-up which was left was now tear streaked.

‘What do I do now?’ she asked. She spoke so softly I could hardly hear her.

My medical school training had not included any advice on how to deal with patients like Bernard, or their relatives. If, indeed, there were any other patients like Bernard. ‘I’m buggered if I know,’ I wanted to say. But that wasn’t what I said. Besides, the question was probably rhetorical.

‘I’ll buy you a stiff drink,’ I said. ‘We both deserve one.’

Monica thought for a moment and then sighed, ‘A gin would be very welcome,’ she said. And then she smiled. I hadn’t seen her smile before. Her eyes lit up. ‘But please avoid the word ‘stiff’,’ she said. I realised for the first time that she was a very attractive woman. It seemed a great pity that I’d had to meet her under such difficult circumstances. For a moment I wondered. And then I remembered that she was married. And that she was married to a patient of mine.

Still, there was nothing in the rule book to prevent me from buying her a drink.

As we headed for the bars I noticed that Edgar and Cherry, the young couple who had come to France to die, were leaving the hotel. They were holding hands and laughing. They looked like any other happy young couple in Paris.

Chapter Ten

Most of the patients who wanted advice or help asked me to visit them in their rooms and after three days I still hadn't seen any patients in my smart, new consulting room. I was using it as a storeroom rather than anything else and that seemed a pity. I mentioned this to Phillipe.

'Perhaps we need to put up a notice telling people that the doctor will be in his consulting room at a particular time of day – so that they will know when to go there.'

This made sense. I suggested that they put up a notice saying that the House Doctor would be available for consultations from 10 a.m. to 11 a.m. and from 5 p.m. to 6 p.m. That would give me time to enjoy a leisurely breakfast, time for a little exploration of the city in the afternoon and time after the evening 'surgery' for dinner in one of the hotel restaurants.

'No, no,' said Phillipe. 'That is too long. You could be sitting there for two hours a day without seeing anyone. Make it 10 a.m. to 10.30 and 5 p.m. to 5.30. If there are too many people to see in half an hour you can always stay longer.'

I happily agreed.

The first patient to visit the consulting room arrived the following morning at a couple of minutes after ten. The day had begun uneventfully except that I had rediscovered the joys of the pain au chocolat. This delightful addition to the French breakfast basket is a Viennoiserie sweet roll which is made from the same type of puff pastry used in baking a croissant but is unique in that it contains pieces of chocolate in the centre. Served hot, a pain au chocolat is the culinary definition of decadence. I hadn't had a pain au chocolat for years. That morning I had eaten two and I was beginning to discover why most French citizens prefer to limit themselves to one at a time.

The young woman who came into the consulting room was, she told me, 22-years-old and a hotel employee. I hadn't seen her around and I couldn't help wondering which department she worked in. She wasn't wearing a uniform of any kind and so didn't seem to be a waitress or a maid. Indeed, she wasn't wearing very much of anything at all. She wore a bright blue mini skirt and a white T-shirt which seemed to be at least three sizes too small. The T-shirt carried no slogan or advertising, though the contents were, I thought, enough of an advertisement for most observers. She had a figure like an egg-timer with all the sand on top, with breasts which seemed large enough to merit postcodes of their own. If she had to be measured for suitable underwear she would need a quantity surveyor rather than a corsetiere. Moreover, since her heavy breasts pointed straight out before her, defying all the natural urgings of gravity and showing no signs of the droop which is customary with physical items of such size, I suspected that she must have been wearing a bra of such supporting strength that it had probably required the design efforts of an engineer rather than a creator of fine lingerie. I suspected that Howard Hughes himself, creator of Jane Russell's famous supporting cast, would have been proud to have invented whatever this young woman was wearing.

She told me that her name was Francoise but that in the hotel she was known as Nicholas, which seemed an unusual name for a girl.

'Nicholas?' I said, frowning as I asked her to sit down while I wrote down her name on a new records card. I loathe computers and was determined to keep whatever medical records seemed necessary on my new little cards. Bits of card in a small, yellow plastic box might seem primitive to some but they can't be hacked into, aren't unavailable when there is a crazy software glitch and are very portable. Best of all there are no pop up advertisements to curse when you're trying to read what you've written.

The girl nodded.

'Like this?' I held up the card and showed her what I had written.

She laughed. 'No, no!' She crossed out 'Nicholas' and above it wrote 'Knickerless'.

I looked at the card. 'Your name is Knickerless?'

She nodded. 'That's what everyone calls me.' She pulled up her very short skirt. 'Because I never wear 'culottes'!' She laughed out loud. There was clear evidence that she was telling the truth about this. She was, I could not help noticing, also completely clean shaven. No knickers and no hair. She must have been very cold in the winter months.

'Excuse my clothes!' she said suddenly. 'I came straight from work. I did not have time to change.'

I thought this rather odd, and wondered what sort of work this macromastic girl might do for which the clothes she was wearing would be considered appropriate. She had told me that she worked in the hotel but it seemed a fair guess that she wasn't a receptionist and I didn't think she would have worked in the kitchens in that outfit.

'What is the problem?'

‘I have itching down below,’ she said. She wriggled around on the chair, either because the itch had suddenly got worse or because she wanted to show me the result of her condition. ‘And it hurts when I pee pee.’ She pulled a face. ‘It is very sore.’

She told me that she did not have to pee more often than usual. And insisted that there was never any sense of urgency. But only that it stung when she passed urine.

I told her that she would need to climb up onto the couch, and while I waited for her to do so I turned away to collect together the swabs and other equipment I would need to take a sample. I also put on a pair of rubber examination gloves. My first guess was that she had acquired a sexually transmitted disease and I wanted to send swabs along to the local laboratory.

When I turned round she was already lying flat on her back on the couch. And she was stark naked. The first thing I noticed was that the nipples which crowned her enormous breasts were defying gravity and were pointing straight up at the ceiling. It was pretty clear that most of the material holding up the nipples had been made by man, rather than God.

‘Do you have a boyfriend?’ I asked her.

‘No,’ she said, looking sad.

I examined her vagina and the surrounding area. Her vaginal lips were red and the hairless area around them was clearly eczematous. The inner and outer vaginal lips and the skin around them all looked sore.

‘You don’t have a boyfriend?’ I asked again, in case she had misunderstood me.

‘No,’ she said again. She made what the French call a moue; an exaggerated pout.

‘How long have had these symptoms?’

‘Just since last night.’

‘Have you ever had the symptoms before?’

She shook her head.

‘Can you remember when you last had sex?’ I asked.

‘Last night,’ she replied immediately.

‘Did you use une capote anglaise?’ The English used to refer to a condom as a French letter but the French returned the favour by referring to a condom as une capote anglaise. It seems a fair enough exchange.

She thought for a while, clearly counting. ‘Five of the times,’ she said. ‘But one man would not use une capote anglaise. He insisted on doing it bare back.’

I was beginning to suspect that there were things here that I hadn’t entirely understood. ‘You had sex with six men last night?’

‘Yes!’ she said brightly. She seemed surprisingly proud of this achievement. In the same way that a traffic warden might be proud of the number of tickets she had issued. Or a chugger might be pleased with the number of donors he had signed up.

‘Last night?’

‘Yes.’

‘Six?’

‘Yes. Six.’

‘And just one of them did not use a condom?’

‘Yes. Some men like very much to do it ‘bareback’. He said he had been clipped. Il faire l’amour a la papa. Besides, I am on the pill.’ The phrase ‘il faire l’amour a la papa’ is something of an insult. A woman will use it if her partner makes love in a slow, unimaginative, unexciting and very conventional way. ‘He was very small. It was ‘comme une cuillière a café dans un bol a mélanger’, she said, pulling a face. Like a teaspoon in a mixing bowl. I got the feeling that she did not believe that small is beautiful or that less is more.

‘He was clipped?’ I didn’t quite understand what she meant. I thought at first that she meant that he had been circumcised and I couldn’t understand the relevance of this.

‘He had a vasectomy.’

‘You believed him?’

‘He said this. Why would he not tell me the truth?’

‘Perhaps because he didn’t want to use a condom?’

‘Oh.’

It occurred to me that Knickerless might, in some ways, be a rather innocent and trusting girl. But although the obvious conclusion might be that the man who had taken advantage of her innocence and generosity might well have left her with an unexpected and unwanted souvenir, this diagnosis really didn’t seem that likely. The first signs of syphilis don’t usually appear for at least 10 days and gonorrhoea takes longer to manifest itself. Genital herpes can develop a few days after contact but this wasn’t genital herpes, and in any case it had happened far too quickly.

Similarly chlamydia, one of the most common of all sexually transmitted diseases, is unlikely to produce any sort of symptoms within a week, let alone a few hours. All that left me with one slightly off the wall, diagnosis.

‘Have you ever had sex with him before?’

‘No. Never. I met him for the first time last night.’

‘Have you ever had symptoms like this before?’

She thought for a moment. ‘A few years ago,’ she said. She shrugged. ‘They went away.’

‘Can you remember if you had sex without a condom on that occasion?’

She looked at me as if I were mad to ask her such a thing and shook her head. ‘I cannot remember,’ she said.

I took some swabs and samples and then, following my off-the-wall hunch, gave her a tube of soothing cream which I told her I thought would help. I told her to come back to see me at the evening surgery on the following day.

‘No sex until I’ve seen you tomorrow!’ I said.

She looked disappointed. ‘None?’

‘None.’

And then her face lit up. ‘What about la pipe? Would that be OK?’

I told her that she could give as many blowjobs as she wanted. But that she shouldn’t use the other end until I’d given her the all clear. She seemed quite happy about this. ‘I like giving head,’ she said. ‘At work they call me Salome! I like it so much that I would suck dicks even if I were married.’

‘One dick,’ I said. ‘You’re only supposed to suck one dick if you’re married.’

‘Oh,’ she said, rather startled. ‘Are you? Then I don’t think I will get married.’ She then got dressed (it didn’t take long since, apart from her shoes, she only had two items of clothing to put on) and left.

I confess it occurred to me that since she didn’t seem to be an employee or a resident she might have just wandered in off the street for a free consultation. And I was puzzled by the Salome reference. It seemed an odd thing for colleagues to call a girl. Still, it wasn’t as if I were exactly rushed off my feet.

I waited for the rest of the half hour’s advertised surgery and then, when no one else arrived, I took the samples to a nearby laboratory which the pharmacy had recommended. I didn’t ask but suspected that Phillipe’s parents probably owned it. The laboratory staff promised to fax the results through to me within 24 hours.

After that I went for a walk.

The hotels where I was working are situated in Montmartre, in the north of Paris, and I decided to head south towards the Opera and the Palais Royale, an excellent place to have a picnic. On my way there I stopped in a boulangerie where I bought a baguette and a mille-feuille, a beautiful layered pastry, and a delicatessen where I bought a cherry tomato salad, a few slices of salami and a piece of Brie. I had to queue for fifteen minutes to purchase the salami. The Parisians, who have absolutely no patience when on the roads, and who will press their horns in unison if they are kept waiting for a fraction of a second at a set of traffic lights, will wait an hour to buy a special type of sausage, to purchase the best baguette in the neighbourhood or to get a table in a café with especially good coffee and exceptionally rude waiters. The French outside the capital don’t have this sort of patience but within the city boundaries they will wait and wait for the right food and drink.

I also stopped at a magasin de vin where I purchased half a bottle of claret. I asked the owner if he had a plastic drinking glass he could sell me but he would not hear of such a thing. He insisted on giving me one of the very decent drinking glasses he had available for customers who wanted to test a wine before buying a crate of a dozen bottles. He told me to keep it or toss it into a rubbish bin when I’d finished with it.

I had with me a paperback copy of *French Leave*, a novel by P.G.Wodehouse which I had picked out from a pile of abandoned books on a shelf in the hotel’s reception area. Tourists often left behind books which they had read and which they didn’t want to take back to England. The hotel put the books in the reception area so that other residents could help themselves. I quickly realised that the number of books being left behind would mean that I would hardly ever have to buy any books at all. I also managed to acquire an endless variety of magazines and newspapers in the same way.

When I had finished my picnic I headed towards the park’s northernmost exit, meaning to wander back up towards the hotel. As I left the park I saw Cherry and Edgar. They were sitting in two of the park’s surprisingly comfortable metal chairs, holding hands and enjoying the sunshine.

I waved, and wandered over to where they were sitting, to say hello.

‘How are you enjoying the week?’ I asked them.

They both blushed.

‘We’ve been having a good time,’ said Edgar.

‘A very good time,’ agreed Cherry.

‘If you still want those aspirin tablets I’ve got them ready for you,’ I told them. It wasn’t much of a lie. I hadn’t ordered any aspirin tablets especially for them, but I had a good supply of tablets in my locked drugs cabinet.

They looked at each other and seemed uncomfortable.

'I don't think it'll really be necessary now,' said Cherry.

'We're having a wonderful time,' said Edgar. 'We've done all the things you suggested.'

'We're going to try to make a go of things,' said Cherry.

'I am pleased,' I told them, genuinely delighted but not as surprised as I think they expected me to be.

I left the happy couple where they were, enjoying the Parisian afternoon and the sunshine, and wandered back up towards the hotel in Montmartre. On my way back I spent some of the cash Phillipe had given me when I'd arrived. I stopped at a clothes store and bought myself a new pair of `textured, tailored trousers in natural linen', three new twill slim-fit non-iron white shirts, a variety of underwear, including a dozen woollen socks all in the same shade of grey (buying socks which are the same colour saves trying to pair them up when they've been washed). I also bought a rather smart new sports jacket in what the assistant told me was 'a rich wool blend with hand-sewn lapels' It apparently boasted a centre vent and four-button cuffs with the buttons made of real horn. It was a tweedy sort of thing in a greenish, brownish material.

I had arrived in Paris with a solitary, battered suitcase and barely enough clothes for a single change. I'd been washing out shirts, socks and underpants, drying them in my bathroom and wearing them un-ironed. I now had enough clothes to fill half of my wardrobe! And with a few extra shirts available I would, at least, be able to send them to the hotel's laundry and have them professionally laundered and ironed.

Chapter Eleven

Knickerless came back promptly at 5 p.m. the following evening. She immediately started to undress, pulling up a plain, pale pink T-shirt and once again exposing her exceptional and, as before, quite naked breasts. I wondered if the other girls who worked with her in the hotel were at all jealous of her figure. It says in the Bible that 'Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's ass' but there is, as far as I know, no commandment preventing a woman coveting another woman's J sized bust.

There was a curious innocence about Knickerless; with the result that she was bustluscious without being lubricious.

'There's no need to take off your clothes,' I told her.

'There isn't?' she asked, seemingly surprised at being in the same room as a man who didn't demand that she stripped naked. 'Don't you want me to take off my clothes?'

'It's not necessary,' I told her.

'Really?'

'No,' I said. 'You can cover them up.' I pointed to the chair and invited her to sit down.

She pulled down her T-shirt again and pulled it very tight. The material was rather thin and this had the effect of displaying her nipples quite prominently. I got the distinct impression that she had done this on purpose because she was slightly peeved that I had told her to keep her clothes on. She was a most unusual young woman.

'There is no infection,' I told her, trying to avoid her chest and to look only into her eyes. 'Nothing. Everything is clear. How are your symptoms?'

She told me that the cream had been marvellously effective, that her symptoms had all disappeared and that everything was well in her nether regions and, therefore, her world. She had no rash and no soreness.

'I had no sex last night,' she said proudly, as though she were dieting and had given up chocolate for a month.

'Nothing?' I enquired, perhaps rather disbelievingly. I am not so naïve as not to suspect that a girl who has sex with six men in one evening might possibly be a professional, having sex for money, rather than merely an enthusiast, having sex simply because she enjoys it or because there is nothing good on the television.

'Oh, just la pipe,' she said, with a shrug. 'You said that was OK. And I saw Dr Pierre, but he just likes me to sit on his face. He never wants ordinary sex.' She smiled. 'He is a dentist,' she added, with a whisper, as though this explained everything.

I gave quiet thanks that the laboratory tests had all come back negative. Knickerless had clearly not quite understood why I had forbidden vaginal sex. I was even more pleased that my original diagnosis had been correct.

'Dr Pierre is a dentist?'

'Yes, I see him regularly. He comes twice a month. All he ever wants to do is to lie down while I sit on his face.'

I made the non-committal, non-judgemental sound doctors make when they are told something unusual. Patients are always surprising doctors by things they say or do. Some die when they should have lived and some live when they should have died. Many have symptoms which do not disappear when they are properly treated and others have symptoms which mysteriously disappear when they are not treated. And patients frequently have blood test results which are theoretically impossible. Nothing in medicine is certain or predictable. I had long ago learned not to be surprised by anything.

'I talk to him and ask him lots of questions,' said the girl. She laughed. 'But he cannot reply because I am sitting on his mouth. It is like whenever I go to see him, he always asks me questions while he has his instruments and fingers in my mouth and I cannot reply to him.' She shrugged. 'So I get my own back a little.'

I found it impossible not to laugh out loud.

'He is your dentist?' I asked.

'Yes. He is a very good dentist, I think.'

She opened her mouth, pulled back her lips and showed me her teeth. They were perfect; white and even.

'You had an allergy reaction,' I told her. 'That's all.'

'An allergy?' she said. 'I am allergic to the dentist?'

'No, no,' I said quickly. 'Not to the dentist. You are allergic to 'le sperme' of the man who would not use a condom. You are allergic to his sperm.'

'I am allergic to his sperm? I am allergic to cum? I am allergic to all semen?' She seemed horrified.

'Not all semen,' I told her. 'Just allergic to the semen of that one man. It is perfectly possibly that you might be allergic to the semen of other men. But you are not allergic to all semen.'

'So what must I do?' she asked.

‘If you have sex with that man again then you should insist that he wear a condom,’ I told her.

She seemed quite pleased by this. And then frowned. ‘I hope I can remember who it was,’ she said. ‘I think he said his name was Jean. He had a little bald patch on his head and a big tummy.’ She thought for a moment or two. ‘And I think it was the man whose breath smelt of anchovy,’ she said. She shuddered. ‘I hate anchovies.’

‘His breath might not always smell of anchovy,’ I pointed out.

‘No,’ she said, with a sigh. ‘I suppose not. But I suspect his breath will always smell.’

‘Come back if your symptoms return,’ I told her. ‘But, otherwise, everything down there seems fine.’

She smiled, said thank you and stood. She hesitated for a moment and then left.

It is fair to say that I’d never seen a patient quite like her.

I tidied up the surgery and then sat for the remainder of the half an hour. No one else came so I went back to my room and had a shower before going to the hotel restaurant and ordering dinner.

For my first course I had escargot beignet (which, when translated into English comes out as battered snails) with an onion and bacon sauce. To accompany this very French feast, I drank half a bottle of a very pleasant white Bordeaux. I then had a rack of lamb roasted in fennel and lavender. The lamb was accompanied by sweetbreads, roasted shallot stuffing, buttered beans and a plum tomato and niçoise olive tapenade. Accompanying this I enjoyed a salad frisée which came with bacon lardons and brioche croutons drizzled with sherry and olive oil so virginal it would have qualified for enrolment in a nunnery. I stuck with wine from Bordeaux but moved onto an excellent claret for this course.

For pudding I had a rum baba. The baba was served in one bowl and in a second bowl there was a more than ample helping of light whipped cream scented with vanilla and honey.

I completed this culinary extravaganza with a double expresso and a glass of well-aged pear cognac which the restaurant’s sommelier assured me was Phillipe’s personal favourite. I had already learned that anything which satisfied Phillipe’s discerning Parisian palate was definitely going to be good enough for me.

I was beginning to remember why my parents had always loved living in France and I recalled my father once telling me that the French take two things very seriously.

First, they think that personal appearances are very important. They dress as well as they can afford and when they buy new clothes they tend to buy the best quality they can find at the price they are able to pay, and they then look after their clothes carefully. A Parisian will drive around in a battered and dirty car because a car is merely a means of getting from one place to another but only in his worst nightmares will he be seen in public with dirty shoes or a shirt with a frayed collar. A French man will spend hours choosing a scarf, selecting the correct colour, the best quality and the proper length, and then, whenever he wears it, he will spend twenty minutes making sure that it is tied around his neck in such a way that it looks as though it were thrown into place in a moment. And no French woman will leave her home, even for a short trip to the patisserie or the boulangerie, without making sure that she is dressed as well as she would if she were going to the Élysée Palace for dinner. Her make-up must be perfect and her hair must be just so. In Paris, even 80 and 90-year-old ladies have weekly appointments at a local hair salon.

And second, the French take food very seriously indeed. The proprietor of even the smallest café or bar will take enormous pride in the quality of the food he serves. If he offers only a simple menu, with perhaps a single plat du jour at a prix fixe and a few simple, regular alternatives, he will make sure that the food he serves is of good quality, well prepared, professionally cooked and served with panache.

The hotel group for which I was working might not have contained a luxurious restaurant and the head chef might not have been able to boast of having been awarded three Michelin stars, but the chefs who worked there were all capable of producing food that would have delighted diners at the Tour d’Argent or Maxims.

Chapter Twelve

I had just finished this excellent meal, and was headed back upstairs to my room, where I was planning on spending the evening reading a copy of novel by Charles McCarry, left by an American tourist, when I felt my mobile phone vibrating in my pocket. I had turned off the sound while I was dining because few things annoy me more than hearing the sound of mobile telephones ringing in a restaurant.

‘Is that the doctor?’ asked a female voice.

I said it was.

‘I must see you,’ she said. ‘As soon as possible. I am late for work but I must see you.’

I stopped, turned and started back down the stairs as I talked. I arranged to meet the caller in my consulting room in the basement.

She told me that her name was Josette and that she was 19-years-old, though she looked a little older than that; I would have said that she was in her mid-twenties. She also said that she worked for the hotel, though, like Knickerless she did not say for which department. She had long hair, dyed blonde, and was wearing the shortest mini dress I’ve ever seen. She had a natural suntan which did not look as if it had come from a sunbed. She was about five foot six inches tall but teetered on four inch heels which made her nearer six feet. There was puffiness around both eyes and she had clearly been crying.

‘It’s my breasts,’ she said, stifling a sob.

‘What’s wrong with them?’ I asked.

‘They said the right one is bigger than the left one.’

‘Who did?’

‘The photographer at *Grandes Filles* magazine. And his assistant. And a man from the magazine. The picture editor, I think.’

‘You were posing for pictures?’

‘For the ‘Repérér les Mamelons’ competition.’

I had difficulty translating this into English and making sense of it. It seemed hardly believable that a magazine would run a Spot the Nipples feature. I asked Josette to explain.

‘It’s like those ‘Spot the Ball’ competitions they used to run in the newspapers,’ she explained. ‘Each month the magazine publishes a picture of a naked girl with her nipples digitally removed from the photograph. The readers have to mark the picture where they think the nipples are.’

I stared at her, wondering if she were joking.

‘It’s very popular,’ she assured me. ‘And far more difficult than people think.’

I thought about it. ‘I can imagine it is difficult,’ I agreed.

‘I was hired to be Mlle Mamelons Septembre,’ she told me. Miss Nipples September. There was more than a little pride in her voice.

‘But they turned you down because one of your breasts is bigger than the other?’

She nodded. ‘They said that men only like looking at small and perfectly symmetrical breasts.’

I told her that seemed the biggest piece of nonsense I’d heard for a long time because most women have one breast which is bigger than the other. I said that if it were true that men only liked looking at small and perfectly symmetrical breasts then all men would be homosexual.

‘They also said it would make it more difficult for the readers to see where to put my nipples on the photograph.’

‘Does that matter?’

‘The readers have to pay to enter the competition. If the competition is too difficult the readers won’t enter and the magazine loses money.’

‘You’d better show me your breasts,’ I told her.

She slipped off her dress and then removed her bra. It was one of the rare varieties which open at the front. Women call them front fastening bras but men call them front opening bras. A patient of mine who worked in a department store told me that front opening bras (or front fastening bras, depending on your point of view) never caught on, despite their convenience, and that she was convinced that this was because they look odd on the washing line.

Josette laid her dress and the bra on the couch. She was wearing crotchless panties but no pantyhose. Her panties were so skimpy that they would have made a pair of ordinary bikini panties look like extra-large Bermuda shorts.

I suspected, even without her undressing any further, that she didn’t have a single hair growing on her body below her eyebrows.

Her breasts were well developed, quite large and seemed entirely natural. She had nipples as big as thimbles and I wondered if she had children and, if so, how many.

At first glance it was impossible to see any difference in size between the two breasts, but when I stood directly in front of her I could see that the right breast was very slightly larger than the left one. Only someone taking a very close interest in her breasts would have noticed the difference. It seemed unlikely to me that any normal observer would have cared. Such differences are, of course, quite commonplace. It is very rare indeed for the two vertically divided halves of the human body to be entirely symmetrical. Most people have one shoulder which is slightly higher than the other. And, as all good tailors know, male equipment usually hangs either to the right or to the left and trousers must always be designed appropriately in order to accommodate the dangling parts.

'It is rare for a woman to have two identical breasts,' I assured her. I checked her breasts to make sure that there neither of them contained a lump. They seemed fine.

'Lie down for a moment,' I said, pointing to the examination couch.

She climbed onto the couch and lay down. I examined her breast tissue more fully but could find no abnormalities. I checked her glands and felt in her axillae. There was nothing abnormal there either.

'Your breasts are perfectly healthy,' I told her. 'You're right handed?'

'Yes.'

'Do you play tennis?'

She seemed surprised. 'Yes. I have played since I was 11. I used to play in amateur tournaments. Last year I made a short film about two girls who play tennis in the nude.'

'No tennis shoes?'

She laughed. 'Oh yes, we wore tennis shoes! But nothing else. The film was very successful.'

'I can imagine,' I told her.

She asked me if I had seen the film. I said that, sadly, it had passed me by. I did not mention that the warder who chose the movies for the prison film club would have probably regarded a film about French girls playing tennis in the nude as unsuitable viewing for a bunch of prisoners.

'How did you know that I play tennis?'

'It is common for women who play sport to have one breast bigger than the other. Women who use one hand more than the other are particularly likely to develop a bigger breast on their dominant side. It is something that is common among javelin throwers, tennis players and so on. But you don't look like a javelin thrower so I guessed tennis was more likely to be your sport.'

She smiled at the modest compliment.

'In the old days, when typists used manual typewriters they often developed a larger, firmer breast on the left hand side because of constantly banging the carriage return lever.' I moved an imaginary typewriter carriage from one side to the other.

'Really?'

'Really.'

'So there is nothing wrong with my breasts?'

'No. Nothing whatsoever. They are in very good condition and their appearance is perfectly natural. No sensible person could possibly complain about them.'

'Except for a photographer…'

'Except for a photographer taking pictures for *Grandes Filles* magazine.'

'Is there anything I can do to make them the same size? Surgery, perhaps?'

'I wouldn't recommend surgery,' I told her. 'The difference is very small. There is a real danger that you would end up with the other breast being slightly larger. And you would be left with a scar for no reason.' I paused, and thought for a moment. 'You could try playing tennis with your left hand.'

She laughed. 'I don't think so!'

'To be honest I doubt if anyone else will ever notice – or be so ungallant as to mention the very small difference.'

'There is one more thing,' she said hesitantly.

I waited.

'Do you think my lips are too large?'

I looked at her face more closely; wondering if she had perhaps had her lips blown up with Botox in the strange way that some women (and not a few men) regard as fashionable. But I could see no sign of any enlargement.

'Not those lips!' she said, laughing, realising what I was looking at. She pointed below her waist. 'Those lips!'

'Ah, your labia!'

'Yes. Are they too big do you think? They seem larger than those of some of the other girls.'

I asked her to remove her panties. She did so. I'd been right about her being hairless. She was shaved smooth. She pulled up her knees a little and opened her thighs.

I checked out her labia. They looked a trifle larger than some but smaller than others. ‘They seem perfectly well proportioned,’ I told her.

‘Oh good,’ Josette said. ‘That’s a relief.’

‘Which part of the hotel do you work in?’ I asked her, as she dressed and I completed the record card I had begun for her.

She looked at me and I thought she blushed very slightly. Her suntan made it difficult to be certain. ‘You don’t know?’

I shook my head. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘Have we met somewhere? The reception desk? The restaurant, perhaps?’

‘No, no,’ she said quickly. ‘I thought you would have guessed.’

I waited.

‘I work in Monsieur Phillipe’s ‘maison de prostitution’,’ she said. ‘Une bordel’. ‘You are our new doctor. Phillipe has not told you?’

Chapter Thirteen

I had been in Paris for nearly a week before I had discovered that the other half of my job was to look after the girls working in the maison de prostitution which Phillipe and his parents owned. I had not realised it but I was a 'brothel doctor'.

I've never thought of myself as having been at the front of the queue when God was handing out the brains but I kicked myself metaphorically when I discovered the truth. How could I have not realised what Knickerless and Josette did for a living?

The answer, of course, is that I knew they were 'putains', working girls, 'filles de joie'. I'm not that stupid. No one is that stupid. But, even though they had both told me that they worked for Phillipe, I had turned a blind eye to the obvious truth. And I'd ignored the truth because I didn't want to accept it.

I didn't object to the fact that the girls were hookers. Prostitution is the oldest of all the professions and its practitioners no less worthy of respect than lawyers or doctors. Prostitutes are just as entitled to medical care as accountants, dress-makers or footballers. And it really shouldn't matter to a doctor whether he is treating a King or a crook, a Queen or a courtesan.

I was upset only because Phillipe hadn't told me the nature and extent of my responsibilities.

'I didn't tell you right at the beginning,' said Phillipe when I managed to track him down and confront him, 'because I was frightened that you would not take the job.' He had apologised profusely and looked genuinely contrite.

I looked at him. I was angry that I had been deceived. But I knew there was something about him that would make it difficult for me to be cross for long.

'The hotel part of the job is very real,' he said. 'But I also need someone to look after the girls – and sometimes the customers. Someone discreet.'

'When were you going to tell me?' I asked.

'Every time I saw you I intended to tell you,' he said. He shrugged and sighed. 'But I lost my nerve. I was frightened you would leave. And things were going so well. The better things went the more nervous I became about telling you about the Maison de Prostitution. Here in Paris it is no big deal. But to you Anglo Saxons it is a bigger thing, I know.'

We were sitting at the bar. We each had a glass of malt whisky in front of us. The hotel bar was incredibly well stocked and there were at least two dozen different varieties of malt whisky on show. The one we were drinking was called Glenfarclas. It was truly magnificent.

'You run the brothel yourself?' I asked him.

'Oh no, no,' he said, holding up a hand as though to protect himself from such a suggestion. 'We employ a woman called Emma to run things for us. She looks after everything. She is very reliable, nearly 80-years-old and has been with the family for nearly half a century. At the beginning she was one of the girls. She was one of the first girls my mother hired. She was older and more experienced and my mother wanted someone to help her run things. Today, Emma is 'la maquerelle', the Madame. She is an amazing woman; very, very special. We would always employ a woman to run things because the French courts are far more lenient with such houses when they are run by a female. They think a man is more likely to exploit the girls.' He shook his head and raised his eyebrows to show what he thought of this. 'And if someone has to go to prison for a few days, as happens occasionally, it is far more convenient if she goes, rather than me.'

'Except for her,' I suggested.

'Oh she is very happy. We have always paid her double wages for any days she has spent in jail.' He shrugged again. 'But now she is nearly 80 there is no risk. No judge would put an old aged pensioner in prison for such a thing. Everyone would criticise him and he would be a laughing stock.'

I sipped some more of the Glenfarclas. When I had discovered that part of my job was looking after 'putains', whores, my first thought had been to leave the job. I'd only just got out of prison. I really didn't want to go back. But I really didn't want to go back to England. There was nothing there for me. No job, no money, nothing.

'Your parents started the brothel?'

'Of course. It was very difficult for them to start a successful hotel business. Providing girls for businessmen was the only way for them. My father was the muscle man and my mother ran things.' He sighed and took a deep breath. 'They were not whiter than white when they started out,' he told me. 'My father was a bit of a tough guy. My mother started out as a hostess. She entertained customers. You understand what I am telling you? They never went to prison but they were lucky a few times. I am being very honest with you.'

I nodded. I understood. The couple who were now my direct employers had a very dodgy background. He had been 'un voyou', a gangster and she had been 'une putain', a prostitute.

But who was I to judge them? I had no idea how hard things had been for them when they had started out. And at least they had never been to prison. I was the one who had been inside; had served time. And Phillipe had given me the job despite my prison record.

'I think you will find that the girls who work for us are very happy in their work,' said Phillipe. 'We don't force them to do what they do. And nor do we drag our customers in from the streets. Everyone is happy. It is honest, useful work. Our girls are like social workers; psychiatrists sometimes. They provide a service which is necessary and useful. Several of them are trained masseuses. They provide physical therapy for discerning gentlemen, as I think someone once said. Two of them have university degrees – one in philosophy and, er, I forget what the other has a degree in. But several of them are very bright girls. When Emma decides to retire it will be impossible to replace her but it will not be difficult to find another 'maquerelle'.'

I sipped more Glenfarclas. I'd heard all this before, of course. For three months I had shared a cell with a man who was a pimp. He was a bully and a coward and I hadn't liked him at all.

'A lot of the men who come to see our girls are unhappy and lonely,' said Phillipe. 'Let's face it, if men were forced to rely entirely upon their physical charms in order to have satisfying sex lives then most of the single men over the age of 30 would have very meagre sex lives.' He grinned. 'Except for me, of course…'

'Do the people who work in the hotels know about the brothel?' I asked him.

'Oh yes, of course,' he replied. 'How could they not know? The girls live and work in a building next to the Hotel de Washington. Some of them, the younger ones, live in rooms on the top floor. Some have homes, nice apartments, husbands, children. They enjoy their work. When they retire they usually have a little nest egg with which they can buy a small café. We even have a pension scheme for them. They pay in a little of what they earn and when they leave they are entitled to a pension. Like civil servants.'

'And what do you want me to do?'

'To look after the girls and the customers like you look after the staff and the visitors in the hotel,' he explained. 'You will be doing nothing illegal or improper.'

'I'll be working for a brothel!'

'No, no, no. You will be working for the hotels. You are not employed directly by the brothel. There is no paper link between you and the 'maison de prostitution'. But the girls are entitled to medical treatment are they not?'

'Well, yes, I suppose so. Yes, of course they are.'

'Having a doctor available is good for everyone,' said Phillipe. 'The girls can see someone quickly. They don't have to travel half way across Paris to see their own doctor. They save time and so we all gain. And if one the customers falls ill, has a heart attack perhaps, it is better that a discreet doctor can look after him . Or her.'

'Her? You have female customers?'

'Oh yes. Sometimes.'

I sipped more of the malt but said nothing. I didn't know what to say or do.

'I will tell you a little about some of the girls,' said Phillipe. 'Better still I will introduce to some of them.'

'I've met two of them,' I reminded him.

'And they were nice girls, weren't they?'

I had to admit that they seemed perfectly nice girls.

'No infections?' he asked. He raised a hand. 'I know you cannot tell me about particular girls and their problems. But it is important that we run a clean house. We have a reputation to uphold.'

'No infections,' I said. 'Just ordinary problems.' Well, sort of ordinary, I thought to myself. It certainly wasn't the first time a young woman had been worried that one of her breasts was bigger than the other. And it was by no means unknown for a girl to develop an allergy to a man's semen.

'There you are then!' said Phillipe. He poured another generous portion of Glenfarclas into my glass and then added more to his own. When he had finished pouring, and had put the bottle back down onto the bar counter, he raised his glass.

'To us,' he said, with a grin. He touched his own chest and then pointed to mine.

I paused, looked at him and closed my eyes. What else was I going to do? Why on earth should I leave? Phillipe was perfectly correct in saying that the girls deserved medical care. They were working and if he was right then they were doing what they had chosen to do. The two I had met certainly did not appear to have been press ganged into service. And he was right in saying that I was doing nothing illegal by looking after them. Moreover, from a personal point of view I was enjoying Paris and enjoying the work and what the hell else would I do if I left? If I went back to England I would find myself wandering from one interview to the next and I would, I strongly suspected, find myself being patronised and rejected by dull and supercilious GP principals. Did I really have a choice? I didn’t. Did I feel ashamed of what I had apparently signed up to do? No, I didn’t. Did I want to stay? Yes, I did. I opened my eyes. Phillipe was still holding his glass.

I nodded to him, picked up my glass, clinked it against his and we both drank.

‘Good,’ he said with an even bigger grin. ‘I am very happy you are staying and will take on this work. We will have good times together.’ He took a thick roll of euros out of his jacket pocket and divided it into two. He then offered me half the roll.

‘No, no!’ I said. ‘There is no need.’

‘A small bonus,’ he said. ‘Paris is an expensive city.’

‘I live in your hotel, I eat in your restaurants, I drink your wine,’ I said. ‘I really don’t need any more money than we agreed.’

Phillipe looked at me for a moment, without moving, his arm still extended with the wodge of euros. And then he smiled, nodded and put the notes back into his pocket. ‘You are not offended?’

‘Not at all.’

He poured more of the excellent Glenfarclas into our drinking glasses. This was clearly going to be a four aspirin hangover.

Chapter Fourteen

By the end of the first week in Paris, I was beginning to find my way around the five hotels. I had tried out all the restaurants and bars in the hotels and I had even begun to explore some of the surrounding area of Paris.

I had been worried about leaving the hotel complex in case an emergency arose and I wasn't there to deal with it. But when Phillipe asked me if I was enjoying Paris and I explained that I hadn't really seen any of it, he assured me that it was absolutely fine for me to go out if I took my mobile phone with me and let the hotel know if I was intending to go outside Paris. He explained that Parisians love to walk about the city and that there is even a name, 'flaneur', to describe people who walk about the city without any destination or aim in mind.

It was Phillipe who told me of the covered arcades in Paris, which are just a joy for a stroll, either on a wet and cold day or on a day which is blistering hot. It is possible to walk along the covered arcades, from the north of the city to the south, without venturing out much at all. There are numerous old-fashioned shops, galleries and tea rooms in the arcades and cafés and bars abound. There is even at least one hotel within the arcades.

And I was getting better and better at finding my way quickly around the complex of hotels (each one was a rabbit warren of connecting corridors, and staircases) and I no longer needed a porter to help me find a way to a particular room. As far as the customers were concerned, the hotels were separate. There were five restaurants and each hotel had its own bar and its own individual character. For the staff, it was possible to move from any one of the hotels to any of the others without ever stepping foot outside.

My morning and evening surgeries were now getting busier, with a steady stream of employees and visitors turning up to be examined and treated. I had to ask the hotel manager to put some chairs into a room next to my consulting room so that potential patients had somewhere to sit while they waited. I had no intention of organising an appointment system. It was my experience of general practice in Britain that the majority of patients feel far more comfortable if they can just turn up and see a doctor when they want to see him. Most are prepared to wait a while if necessary, as long as they know that they will be seen eventually. Besides, I knew that if I introduced an appointment system I would need a secretary, a computer, a telephone with an answering machine an appointment book and a mass of other administrative paraphernalia.

On the day after I had discovered that I was also responsible for looking after the girls working in Phillipe's maison de prostitution, I decided that it might make sense if I visited the place, met Emma, the madame, and found out a little about 'les putains' who worked there.

When I'd worked as a British GP, with a busy National Health Service practice, I had, inevitably, looked after the health or one or two local prostitutes (with three thousand patients on my list there were bound to be more and I have no doubt that there were quite a few prostitutes on my list who had not told me what they did for a living or whom I had not identified as such) and I realised that they often had unusual and rather special requirements. I had, however, never knowingly visited a brothel before.

From the outside, the brothel looked just like another hotel. I didn't expect to see half naked girls sitting in dimly lit windows and nor had I expected to see lingerie clad girls standing by the front door, touting for business in stockings and suspenders with their bosoms hanging out of inadequate brassieres but, I had, I suppose, rather expected that there would at least be a red light over the door.

There was a very discreet small sign above the door telling visitors that they had found, and were about to enter, the Hotel Casanova – the name of Phillipe's establishment. Underneath the sign there was another, much smaller sign, with the words Maison Close – idiomatic French for a brothel or whorehouse. This small sign was presumably there to make sure that casual French tourists did not enter the hotel by mistake, expecting to rent a room with bath, WC, bidet and continental breakfast included.

Apart from this small sign, a casual passer-by would have had no idea what went on inside the building. I discovered later that the place got most of its trade from barmen, doormen and hall porters at the big hotels. And, of course, much of the custom was repeat business, involving regular clients, and some of it came from men who had recommended the establishment to their friends.

Getting in to see Madame Emma wasn't as easy as I had imagined it would be.

Walking in through the front door was easy. There were no obvious bouncers, bodyguards, tough guys or other human impediments to make ingress difficult and as far as the potential customers were concerned this clearly made sense. No one visiting a brothel, and filled with a mixture of hope, expectation, fear and potential embarrassment, wants to stand outside on the pavement being vetted, searched and quizzed by a bulky, muscular fellow in a black suit, black shirt, black tie and dark sunglasses. That way leads to potent, overt embarrassment, guilt and a fear that family, neighbours, boss and priest will be driving past and, quite probably, taking snaps with their mobile telephones.

But once I was in the hallway I found that further progress halted by a huge, dark skinned North African who showed lots of beautiful white teeth when he smiled and asked if I was a member or a temporary visitor. It occurred to me that he looked exactly like all the doormen, bouncers and guards who have such jobs in films and I wondered idly whether Phillipe or the Madame had picked him for that reason or whether the casting directors in the film industry were merely doing their jobs well and ensuring that their films were realistic and credible.

I explained that I was neither a member nor a temporary visitor to the establishment but that I was the doctor and that I was hoping to meet the Madame in order to discuss how best we could work together in the future. He looked at me rather suspiciously, as though trying to work out what sort of scam I was pulling. I suspect the bouncer at a brothel probably hears many strange stories from cautious and nervous customers. Perhaps he thought I was a trickster merely hoping to walk in and subject all the girls to a full physical examination.

Fortunately, Phillipe had telephoned the Madame, (who was always addressed as Madame Emma), had told her that I would be visiting and had described me to make sure that there were no mistakes. A good physical description of someone is far more reliable than a piece of paper which can be mislaid and used by any unscrupulous person who finds it.

'I am delighted to meet you,' said Madame Emma, when I had finally managed to pass the outer security measures and had introduced myself. She met me not in a dark salon decorated with acres of red velvet and a plethora of unlit, fancy lamps but in a small, modern office which contained two desks, several filing cabinets and a computer and which looked about as exciting and as exotic as the average accountancy office. There was a parrot in a cage.

Emma did not look anywhere near her true age. If I'd been asked I would have guessed that she was in her fifties, rather than her late seventies. She did not hold out her hand and nor did she respond when I held mine out to her.

Feeling rather foolish I reclaimed my hand and put it into a trouser pocket where it could come to no further harm.

She remained seated and merely indicated with a beautifully manicured hand that I should take the chair on the other side of her desk. Her chair was one of those rather grand, black, leather armchairs favoured by managing directors and other senior executives. My chair was grey, fairly cheap and plastic and designed to be stacked with a dozen others and stored in a corner.

Madame Emma, who turned out to be an inexhaustible source of energy and information, told me that although Phillipe referred to the business as 'une maison de prostitution' she preferred to refer to it as 'une maison de passé'. To minimise future confusion she also explained that the girls sometimes referred to the Hotel Casanova as 'une bordel' (literally a bordello) but that they did not like it to be referred to as 'une claque'. (The literal translation of 'une claque' is a slap, and the word is also a fairly crude slang term for a bordello. In English, a loose woman is sometimes known as a 'slapper' so maybe the two languages meet at this point.)

It quickly became clear that Madame Emma was the Managing Director, the Head of Human Resources (in this instance rather more literally than in most commercial establishments offering a less personal service) and the Quality Control Manager.

Prostitution is a very old and well-ordered profession in France,' she told me. 'I know in Britain you look down on prostitutes. But here, especially in the properly run houses, prostitution is a respectable profession. On the streets it is a different matter, of course, but here, in the smarter houses, to be known as 'une putain' is not something a girl must regard as shameful. Young women in the good houses rank themselves alongside fashion models, television presenters and others on the fringes of show business.

On the streets the girls take drugs and heaven knows what else goes on. Here, if we find that a girl is using drugs then she is out – immediately. No second chances. Even if she drinks too much alcohol then we will put her out. And we don't have girls with tattoos.'

'No tattoos at all?'

'We will maybe allow a butterfly or a little rose in a discreet place,' said Madame Emma, after a moment's thought. 'Something like that. But they must clear it with me first. I don't want my girls coming to work with snakes and skulls and dragons all over their bodies.' She shivered with distaste.

She explained that the difference between prostitutes in Britain and France is, in a way, not dissimilar to the difference between waiters in British hotels and restaurants and waiters in French establishments.

In England and America, waiters tend to be poorly trained and lowly regarded. No one thinks of waiting at table as a profession, or even as a decent trade. It is something people do when they cannot do anything else. It is something young people do while they are waiting to decide what they want to do with their lives. It is something actors and actresses do when they are 'resting'. But in France in general and Paris in particular, waiting at table is a well-respected profession; it is something which is taken very seriously. There is a career structure. Waiters start at the bottom, in a small café, and work their way up to one of the famous cafés on the main boulevards; le Café de la

Paix, Café Flore, Deux Magots and so on. Madame Emma clearly implied that the same sort of career structure exists in prostitution and she left me in doubt that the 'maison de prostitution' which she ran was right at the very top of the pile; a Café de la Paix of her world.

'It's important that you understand how things work here,' she told me. 'The girls who work here are well paid. They are professionals. We don't have amateurs here just because they want to have extra sex; inspired by the film *Belle de Jour*. Officially the girls can only work 35 hours a week. But no one in France works just 35 hours a week. It is impossible! My girls work about 40 hours a week. That's the realistic national average. The girls work in shifts. I don't like them to work more than four hours at a time, so they work maybe two shifts a day with a few hours break in between. Do you know what one of my girls said to me? She said 'When my break comes, I can't wait to get home and stand up at the sink for a while – to give my other parts a rest.' Madame Emma laughed out loud and shook her head at the memory of this.

'So if she works four hours and has one appointment every thirty minutes, a girl could see eight clients in a single session,' I suggested.

'Not quite,' said Madame Emma. 'The girls always have a ten minute break between clients. To give them a chance to use the bidet and to freshen up. We don't want our clients to think they're getting what the English call 'sloppy seconds'! And a good many of our clients want to spend more than thirty minutes with a girl.'

She continued to explain a little more about the business to me. 'We have a sliding scale of charges according to what the client wants, and for how long he wants to be with the girl. Sometimes a client wants to spend the night with a girl and we can arrange that easily. Sometimes they want a particular girl. Sometimes they want a little variety; a change, a new girl. And we do everything we can to make the girls look and feel good. We have a hairdresser and a beautician who both come in three times a week. They do the girls' hair and nails for them. And they even trim their pubic hair. The hairdresser who comes in is quite a stylist with pubic hair. She is famous for it. She prepares lots of brides for their weddings. And trims movie stars when they are filming nude scenes. She makes amazingly pretty patterns and shapes. You would not believe what she can do with a little patch of curly hair.' Madam Emma looked at me, nodded and raised an eyebrow. 'You will be astounded!' she assured me.

Madame Emma told me too that when she hired new girls they were expected to work for free for their first three sessions. 'It is as a trial,' she explained. 'We invite regular clients to come in and try them out – to see how they perform. We do not charge the clients for this. It is a little bonus for them but it gives us useful information – what they call 'feedback' I think. After all, if you hire a car mechanic you want to know he can change the oil!'

'Do girls get rejected often?'

'Sometimes. Not often, but sometimes. Occasionally we get a new girl who knows nothing. We once had a young woman, in her 20s, who was not very bright. She was experienced and I believe that in the little town where she lived she had welcomed all the men with open legs. She was very beautiful and had a good figure but she took everything literally and she spoke very little English. She went for her 'trial' and when an American client asked her for a blowjob she did just that – she blew on his penis. He laughed. But imagine if that had been a real client? I would have been the laughing stock of Paris. Some of the houses in Paris have amateur nights where girls who want to pretend to be 'putains' can come in for an evening – a make believe 'Belle de Jour' experience. The House charges but the amateurs are not paid. But we would never do that. Many new girls who come here do not understand that prostitution is an art. My girls know that they must perform. The client is king and his needs are 'primordial'.' She frowned and looked at me. 'What is the English for that?'

'For `primordial'?' I thought for a moment. 'Paramount.'

'Ah yes.' She smiled and nodded. 'The client's needs are paramount.' She paused and smiled again. 'The client must come first, yes?'

'Yes. I suppose so.'

She laughed at her little joke. 'It is good if the girl comes. But the client must come first.'

I smiled too. Madame Emma seemed an extraordinary woman. I'd never knowingly met a 'madam' before. (Although I suppose one never really knows and it is perfectly possible that I may have met women whom I thought were tax inspectors or hospital administrators but who, in fact, were really 'madams'). And Phillipe was absolutely right in saying that Emma was quite special. You could no more say 'the sort of people like Emma' than you could say 'the sort of people like Queen Victoria'.

'My girls can make more money than a girl who becomes a lawyer or a doctor and if they save sensibly then, by the time they are 35 or so, they should have enough money put aside to set them up for life. It is much better that they work here than that they become 'une femme soutenue', some rich man's mistress, and be forever worrying that one day they will be exchanged for a new model and put out on the streets at 30. Some invest their money, some buy property and some begin a little business. Two of my girls set up an internet company selling lingerie. They specialise in selling the saucier types of underwear, especially bras, and they do very well for themselves. One girl retired to a beautiful house by the river in a village near Tours. She lives by herself, with two cats. Her house is called 'Dunfuckin'. Can you believe it? No one says anything because they do not understand what it means. The Mayor asked her what it meant and she told him it was idiomatic English for 'maison de chats'.' Madame Emma laughed uproariously at this. 'Another of my girls now owns property on the Champs Élysée; a shop, two offices and some flats. She can live very comfortably on the rent she receives. One of her regular clients helped her with the investments but now she is very, very respectable. You can see her picture in the magazines; attending parties at the Élysée Palace, first nights at the opera, all these sort of things.'

'Their sisters who stay at home, back in the country, in small towns, must work 9 in the morning until 5 in the afternoon, slaving away in some airless little office where they file paperwork and help their boss cheat on the customers. They are paid a pittance and earn less in a month than some of my girls can earn in a weekend. And they are expected to sleep with the boss whenever he fancies it. He takes her away for the weekend to Nice for a conference and she is expected to creep along the corridor and have sex with him as payment for the weekend in the hotel. If she is lucky he perhaps buys her a pair of shoes or a jacket or, more probably, some lingerie he wants to see her wearing. She has to do this for decades before she can retire. Which girls are selling themselves? My girls or their sisters back home? Which girls are selling themselves too cheaply?'

I asked her if any of the girls ever married their clients.

'Of course they do! If anyone ever tells you that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach they are lying, very naïve or have a very poor sense of direction. One of my girls married an artist. Most of the time he does not know if it is Wednesday or November but he is very successful. They live in a very smart apartment on the Île de la Citié. Another married a politician. You would know his name if I told you. He is very important and very, very famous. She now helps him with his career by sleeping with other politicians and journalists. I met her in Fouquet's two weeks ago and she told me this herself. She gathers pillow talk from them and because they think they are cuckolding her husband they underestimate him and even help him more than they would. They feel sorry for him, perhaps. They do not know that he knows everything. Knows everything! Ha! He orchestrates her affairs. ' She paused and she winked. 'She was always very proud of her skills. She never really wanted to retire. So she is very happy. She satisfies her husband and herself.'

'And the husbands do not mind that their wives were prostitutes?'

'Of course not! Why should they?' She laughed as she remembered something. 'This did not happen here,' she said. 'But a friend of mine told me the other day that she heard about a girl who works from a hotel off the Rue St Denis. She was in bed with three salesmen from Dusseldorf – I don't know what they sold, cars, lavatory brushes, it does not matter - when her boyfriend, a taxi driver, burst into the room and asked her to marry him. He knew what she did for a living but he was very much in love with her. He asked her to marry him while she was making love to these three salesmen – all at once! She had every orifice full at the time. The three naked salesmen were terrified. They thought the boyfriend might have a gun and that even if he didn't shoot them maybe he would rob them. But then they could see that he was not upset with them so they carried on with what they were doing. The girl could not speak at the time so she nodded vigorously. But that was not enough for him and he asked again. She emptied her mouth long enough to say 'yes' and the three salesmen cheered. She then got back to work and the boyfriend waited downstairs in a café. Then the five of them celebrated and the salesmen from Dusseldorf bought the happy couple a nice engagement present – a top of the range microwave oven I heard. The girl and her boyfriend picked it out themselves and the three salesmen paid for it in cash. '

'Maybe the happy couple will invite them to attend the wedding!' I suggested.

'Or go with them on the honeymoon!' laughed Madame Emma.

'And children. You said you have girls who are mothers?' I asked her.

'Oh yes. About half of my girls are married and half of those have children. When our girls have children we send them to an obstetrician we know. When they have delivered their babies he always makes sure that he sews them up really tightly. I will give you his name in case you need to talk to him. But even so these girls can usually deal more easily with the men with the bigger cocks. We have one or two who enjoy the men who are even too big for the others. 'You can never have too much of a good thing!' said one young mother when I asked her if she thought she could deal with a man who was too big for most of my girls. 'I expect I will be able to fit him in.' She had three children when she came to work here, and had not seen our obstetrician. I think she could have accommodated a stallion if one had been able to come up with the proper fee. She was our specialist for these men and if she went with a man with a smaller cock she would 'le laisser enculer' for no extra charge. To let him bugger her, yes?' I nodded. Emma's English was very good. 'Sadly she has retired now. She and her husband run a bar in Lille. She has a little garden and grows her own vegetables. Probably big fat zucchini.' She laughed at this. 'What is the other word? Ah yes courgettes. You know these vegetables? You have them? Courgettes?'

I nodded.

‘She perhaps grows courgettes,’ repeated Emma, laughing. ‘She is a nice girl,’ she went on. ‘She sends me a card every Christmas.’ She smiled, clearly remembering this girl fondly. She took a small, lace-trimmed handkerchief from her sleeve and dabbed at her eyes. ‘We have an annual Christmas party for the children,’ she continued, after a moment or two. ‘Some of the girls marry while they are working here and some are already married when they start. One girl started as a ‘putain’ when her husband asked her to sleep with his boss so that he would get a promotion. He explained that the Eskimos did it all the time – lent their wives to visitors and important people – and she agreed with his little plan. Her affair with the boss worked very well. She gave this man a good deal of pleasure and he always gave her little presents. She is very skilled at knowing how to ‘faire une pipe’, the blowjob you know, and I think he liked that.’ Madame Emma winked at me. ‘You know why in the newsagents they always put the bridal magazines near the floor? It is because women approaching marriage are, for the last time in their lives, accustomed to spending a good deal of time on their knees.’ She roared with laughter. ‘But not this lady. She enjoys giving the blow jobs. She is not a beautiful woman. She is ‘maigre comme un clou’, as thin as a rake, and is, we say, ‘comme une planche a pain’, as flat as a bread board. ‘Ses seins sont tres petits’. Her tits are very small. But her husband’s boss did not seem to mind and I think that perhaps the presents from this man were not so little. Also she told me he was a good and enthusiastic lover. She always had a soft spot for him and he always had a hard spot for her! There is in France a saying which fits ‘He rode his women hard and always put them away wet’. Quite quickly, she became his mistress and her husband received his promotion. Then the boss retired and he and his wife moved to the south, to a flat in Monaco, and the girl and her husband missed the little extras she had brought home and so, with her husband’s approval, she came to see me. She took to the work ‘comme un canard dans l’eau’. Like a duck to water! She would work here 80 hours a week if I let her. Her husband sometimes brings her in to work and often fetches her when her shift finishes. He, I am afraid, I do not like very much. He is a confidence man. On the side he sells DVDs on the internet but they are not what people think they are buying. I heard he sells one entitled *Water Sports* which has a picture of a semi naked girl on the cover but the film inside is of synchronised swimmers and of men playing water polo. Another is entitled *Back Door Action*. The cover shows a model in her underwear but the action shows a man taking out the rubbish. The husband reckons his customers will be too embarrassed to complain and he is probably right. But I do not like him or his business and I keep his wife only because she is a good worker, reliable and enthusiastic, and a specialist at ‘la pipe’.’

Madame Emma told me that Phillipe had suggested that I should give the girls a weekly medical examination, to make sure that they did not have any infectious diseases, and that although she had never felt any need for this in the past she agreed that it would make sense and would doubtless assist in marketing the establishment to corporate clients of whom, I gathered, she had more than a few.

She suggested that rather than have the girls trooping down to my consulting room it would be more convenient and more discreet (that word again) if I did the examinations in one of the rooms in the Hotel Casanova. I agreed that this would make sense. She took me downstairs and showed me a small room I could use. She then asked me to let her know what equipment I would need. I told her I would need her to provide only a desk, a chair, an examination couch and a screen. I said I would then bring a supply of everything else I needed.

‘What is the screen for?’ she asked, puzzled.

I explained that it was so that the girls could get undressed, and dressed again, in private, before climbing onto the couch. I had already asked Phillipe to have a screen put into my consulting room at the hotel.

Madame Emma laughed at this. It was clearly a laugh of derision rather than amusement.

‘They get undressed in public all the time,’ she said, shrugging their shoulders in that way the French favour when they are making a point and keen to imply that they must be right and there is no point at all in you bothering to reply let alone to consider arguing with them. ‘Most of them have worked as strippers and done nude photography. Some of them have made blue movies. And they are all used to stripping off for clients.’ She waved a hand in the air. ‘They do not need a screen!’

‘This is different,’ I told her sternly. I thought it important that if I were going to be the brothel doctor then the madame of the brothel should at least begin by giving me a little respect. ‘When I see them they aren’t hookers or strippers, they are patients. And I will treat them as such.’

I went on to explain that in the consulting room the girls would be entitled to be treated professionally and that even the language I used would be different to the language normally used in a bordello. ‘When they’re in my consulting room their breasts are not les nichons or les doudounes,’ I said. ‘With me, as a doctor, the patient’s breast is le sein or la poitrine. My patients do not have a pussy or a chat or a con, they have ‘un vagin’.’

As I said this it occurred to me, once more, and again quite inconsequentially, how odd the French are in the way that they give gender to nouns. A woman’s vagina, as feminine an item as can be imagined, is a masculine noun! As indeed is ‘le soutien-gorge’; the French word for brassiere.

Madam Emma inclined her head in a light bow, reached forward and touched me gently on the forearm. She was silent for quite a while. 'You are right,' she said, at last. 'You are very proper.' She squeezed my arm very gently.

And from that moment on we got on well. I had, I suppose, proved to her not only that I intended to treat her employees with respect, but that I expected her to treat me with respect too.

We went back to her office and she gave me a glass of Pernod and some very sweet little cakes made with brandy. She told me that she had made them herself.

As we sipped and ate I noticed that there was a handmade sign hanging on the wall. It had been lettered in ink and read 'Vidi, vici, veni'. I knew enough Latin to recognise that this was a variation on the old saying 'Veni, vidi, vici'. 'I came, I saw, I conquered' had been changed to 'I saw, I conquered, I came'. It came as quite a shock to realise that Emma, a Madame in a whorehouse, not only understood Latin but could also joke in Latin.

I also noticed that Madame Emma had a pile of Gilbert and Sullivan albums. It seemed an unusual musical taste for the Madame in a French brothel but she told me that she had been introduced to them by an English boyfriend when she had been in her twenties. 'I fell in love with them for life, but he I discarded,' she said, with a shrug. I got the impression that alongside the wayside of her life she had discarded many unwanted and unsuitable men.

She told me that the youngest girl working for her was 19-years-old and that the oldest was 53. She said she preferred older girls because she thought that experience was, in her business, always more important than mere youthful enthusiasm. She said they had one employee with a wooden leg, one with a glass eye, who wore an eye-patch with selected clients, and a third who was entirely bald. She said that all three were very much in demand with clients. She said that by far the best 'fille de joie' was always the one who enjoyed her work. 'We have had girls, usually young ones, who are only interested in what they can get out of a man,' she said. 'You might think that is OK since the men are only interested in what they can put into the woman.' She shook her head. 'That may be OK for 'les amazones' and 'les poules' who work in Rue St Denis but it is not OK here.'

'What is an `amazone'?' I had to ask.

Madame Emma pulled a face. 'An 'amazone' is a whore who solicits from a car,' she explained. 'They drive around and pick up men from the streets. They stop the car in an alleyway somewhere, take the man's money, give him a hand job or a blowjob or a quick slam bam in the back of the car and then throw him out and never see him again. Sometimes they work with a pimp who will open the car door and threaten to beat up the customer. The pimp may pretend to be an outraged husband. Or he will pretend to be a plain clothes policeman and he will demand a pay off.'

I got the distinct impression that he did not approve of this branch of the profession. I noticed that she referred to the men who used these girls as 'customers' rather than 'clients'.

I asked about her clientele and she told me that they came in all ages. She said it was true that fathers sometimes brought along their sons and she told me that her oldest regular client was 92-years-old and 'un chaud-lapin', a sex maniac. 'A dirty old man is just a dirty young man whose mind and spirit haven't aged as fast as his body,' she said with a shrug.

She said that her clients included film stars, business leaders, many politicians and a number of Arab sheiks. 'We have as a client one prince who thinks he is 'un tombeur', a Casanova. "Mais son penis est si petit que si il baise une souris elle ne realise pas". But his penis is so small that if he fucked a mouse she would not notice. He sends a servant ahead to prepare the girls he will see.' She paused and visibly shuddered. 'It is the servant's job to do the foreplay so that the girls will be ready for the prince.' She paused again. 'We charge him double,' she added rather drily.

Madame Emma told me that she would occasionally have to find a girl for a group of men who wanted to share a woman. 'Sometimes a football team will want to have just one girl for an evening,' she said. 'They think it is a bonding experience.' She said she had half a dozen girls who would take on such work. 'It is hard work for them,' she said, rather unnecessarily I thought. 'Sometimes they are so sore that they cannot work for a week afterwards and consequently we have to make sure that they are paid very well. The English girls are very keen on this type of work. Most of our girls are French, of course, but occasionally we hire English girls and they are very enthusiastic and uninhibited; they rarely need training or encouragement. They will just work away all night. Do you think it is perhaps because the English girls are very enthusiastic followers of football? We had one girl, 'une vamp', who could keep eight, nine, ten, or even eleven men on tenterhooks. She was 'une mangeuse d'hommes', a man-eater, and she would have them all excited for hours. She was, I believe, like one of those jugglers who can keep a row of plates spinning without letting one of them collapse.'

She talked for an hour and I listened, enthralled. I was learning about a whole new world.

Before I left, I complimented her on the colour and vivacity of her parrot, which talked constantly, and she corrected me gently and told me it was a cockatoo. She said that she had always kept such birds. 'I have had many a cockatoo over the years,' she told me.

I may have been wrong but I am sure she had a twinkle in her eyes.

Chapter Fifteen

Although I had now officially become the medical advisor to a fully functioning brothel I was, of course, still responsible for providing medical care for the staff and residents at Phillipe's small group of Parisian hotels.

And as it became more and more widely known that there was a doctor available (and an English speaking doctor at that) so I found myself becoming busier and busier. And the problems I was invited to solve seemed to become increasingly bizarre. It appeared to me that when perfectly normal people were taking a holiday in Paris they were, perhaps, rather more likely to experience something unusual than they were when they were at home. Maybe there wasn't room in their suitcases to pack their usual inhibitions.

As a GP in a fairly staid part of England I had spent most of my time dealing with children with earache, with ladies of a certain age who were worried about their varicose veins and with men and women with bunions, piles and inexplicable bouts of dizziness which came and went with no rhyme nor reason.

Here, in Paris, problems of that ilk were, as far as I was concerned, as rare as honest politicians. It seemed that when people came away to Paris they left their piles, their varicose veins, their bunions and their other day-to-day ailments behind in England, to be worried about and dealt with outside holiday times.

'My husband and I went up the Eiffel Tower yesterday,' said a woman called Maureen. She was in her late thirties and worked as a sales representative for a publishing firm. Her husband, Eddie, was a couple of years older than her. He worked as an engineer, repairing and servicing gas boilers. They had two children but they'd left them behind in England, with her parents. They were in Paris on a four day break.

'When we were in the lift I could feel something hard pushing into me from behind,' she said. 'It wasn't difficult to guess what it was, from the shape and position and so on.' She started to blush. 'It happened the minute we got into the lift. Before the lift even started moving.'

I waited and nodded, trying to let her know that she did not need to be embarrassed.

'It was quite clearly an erection,' she continued. 'And since Eddie and I came away in the hope of putting a bit of sparkle back into our lives, a bit of romance to liven things up a bit, I assumed that he was just being romantic.' She paused, looked down and straightened her dress. It was blue, tight, short and cut very low. 'Have you been in those lifts, doctor?'

I said I had.

'The lifts are much bigger than ordinary lifts but they really pack people in don't they? Like sardines.'

'They do,' I agreed.

'We were so tightly packed that I couldn't move or turn,' she said. 'And since I couldn't see my husband I assumed it was him standing behind me.'

I nodded. I had a horrible suspicion that I could tell where this was heading.

'Well, you would, wouldn't you? Any woman would.'

I said I agreed that any woman would agree that it was their husband standing behind them.

'He pulled my dress up and then pressed himself against my panties,' she said. She was blushing more deeply now.

'And then?'

'I thought it was my husband and he was being very romantic,' she repeated. 'We've never done it in a public place but you read about people doing it in parks and in the street, don't you? And no one could see because it was so crowded.' She paused again and cleared her throat. 'Actually, we did it once or twice in his car,' she said. 'But I don't really know if that counts as doing it in a public place.'

'It depends on where the car is parked,' I said. 'If it's parked in the garage then it isn't public. If it's parked in the High Street at midday then it probably counts as doing it in public.'

She laughed.

'I reached behind me and I know this is a terrible thing to say but it felt like Eddie,' she said. 'It was the same sort of thickness and the same sort of length and it was circumcised like Eddie.'

'So you were certain it was your husband,' I said, trying to give her encouragement and, perhaps, a little comfort.

'Absolutely certain. And all this time the lift was moving upwards. I knew it wouldn't be long before it stopped. So I pulled my panties down and pushed myself back onto the erection.'

'Yes,' I said, nodding. 'That seems a natural enough thing to do. Under the circumstances.'

'And as I was pushing back, so he was pushing up. I must have been very wet. With the excitement, I suppose.'

'Entirely natural,' I agreed.

'Anyway, to cut a long story short, he slid inside me and we had sex. I could feel him coming inside me. And I was so excited by what we were doing that I came too. When he'd come he pulled out and I reached down and pulled my panties back up. A man's voice said 'Merci beaucoup. That means 'thank you' doesn't it?'

'Thank you very much,' I said. 'It means 'thank you very much'.'

'And then the lift stopped and people started to get out and I saw my husband standing in a far corner – surrounded by a family with a lot of children. We'd obviously been separated by the crush as people had poured into the lift. He smiled and waved to me. And I smiled and waved back. I tried to look behind me but there were several men leaving the lift and to be honest it could have been any one of them. You can't tell what a man looks like by the feel of his erection can you? '

'No, I suppose not,' I agreed.

'I mean, quite big men sometimes have fairly small penises and very small men have surprisingly big ones.'

'That's true.' I suddenly remembered a friend of mine from medical school. He was six feet seven inches tall, and at a party a nurse once asked him if he was built in proportion. He shook her head and told her that if he were built in proportion he would be nine feet five inches tall.

'I feel terrible,' said Maureen. 'I feel I should have been able to tell it wasn't Eddie's penis. And yet I was excited by what I did. And the worst thing is that I still feel excited by what happened. I can't tell Eddie because he wouldn't understand. And he would want to know why I didn't know it wasn't him.'

'Are you worried about becoming pregnant?' I asked.

'Oh no,' she said. 'There's no risk of that. I take the contraceptive pill.'

'You're worried that you might have caught something from this stranger? A sexually transmitted disease.'

'I suppose I am,' she said. 'I was never one to give myself to just anyone. I've never done anything like this before. Before I went on the pill, when I went with other men, I always made them wear condoms. I never caught anything.'

'I'll examine you, if you like,' I told her. 'But I'm afraid it's far too soon to tell if you've caught something. You'll have to wait until you get home. Visit the Sexually Transmitted Diseases clinic at your local hospital. And go and see your GP if you develop any unusual symptoms. A discharge, a rash, itching – anything unusual. Until then you really shouldn't have sex with your husband.'

'Oh my God,' she said. 'I did realise that. But how am I going to get away with it? We came away to give our sex life a bit of a boost. I managed to put him off last night by telling him I was tired. But I can't keep saying that.'

'No. I suppose not.'

'Could I say you think I've got thrush?' she asked. 'Or a urinary infection. I do get both those sometimes.'

'That would be a good idea,' I said. 'Either would be fine. Or both.'

'I could just give him blowjobs for a week or two until I know,' she said, clearly thinking out loud. 'He'd like that. He certainly wouldn't feel he was being cheated.'

'That would be a good idea,' I said. 'Or you could tell him that you've forgotten to bring your contraceptive pills. Ask him to use a condom.'

'Oh, that's a good idea!' she said. 'Better than the other idea.'

'If you lie down on the couch I'll take a swab anyway. Just in case.'

She pulled up her dress, removed her underwear and lay down. I took the swab. She then dressed and thanked me and headed for the door.

'There's something else that does worry me,' she said, with her hand on the doorknob. I was washing my hands and turned to look at her. `I actually enjoyed it very much. And I want to do it again. I keep thinking about it.'

I nodded.

'And the really terrible thing is that I think I knew it wasn't my husband when he was inside me,' she confessed. 'It just isn't the sort of thing he'd do.'

And then she left.

I went for dinner.

I started with white asparagus in vinaigrette followed by poached quail eggs with caviar. I moved onto roast beef filet, served with black truffle and pommes soufflées and concluded with a brandy Alexander. The food in the hotel restaurants was definitely better than the food in any hospital where I'd ever worked. It was rather better than prison food, too. To accompany the asparagus and the quail eggs, I ordered half a bottle of the house champagne. With the beef, I sipped a half a bottle of my favourite claret.

Chapter Sixteen

My next patient at the hotel was an emergency call.

My mobile telephone went the following day, just as I was finishing my lunch.

'A woman has collapsed in room 329,' said the receptionist who had called. 'Her name is Constance. Her husband, John, says she is having trouble in breathing. He says she's been like it for an hour or so – and steadily getting worse. Shall I call an ambulance?'

'Let me have a look first,' I said. 'It'll only take me a couple of minutes to reach the room. If I need an ambulance I'll call down.'

'I made a detour via my room so that I could pick up my black bag (which was now stocked with some of the drugs and equipment I had obtained from the pharmacy) and was knocking on the door of room 329 no more than three minutes after I'd taken the call.

'Are you the doctor?' demanded a man in his fifties. He was wearing a pair of grey slacks and a pale blue short-sleeved shirt. The shirt had a single breast pocket which contained what looked like a pair of reading spectacles. He was medium height, chubby and red faced. He looked terribly worried. He opened the door wide and pointed to the bed where a woman in a red, well-fitting woollen dress was lying. She was what used to be called 'stout' and would probably now be called 'obese', though she had a surprisingly clearly defined figure. She was obviously having trouble in breathing and her colour was awful. She was paler than anyone has a right to be when they're still in the land of the living.

I pulled a chair up so that I could sit next to the bed, introduced myself to the woman, and took her hand so that I could check her pulse. It was beating at a rate of 130 a minute and her heart was fibrillating.

'Do you have any pain?' I asked.

She shook her head. 'I can't breathe,' she said. She struggled and managed to take another breath. 'And I feel terrible.'

'How long have you been like this?'

'Since we came back upstairs after breakfast,' replied the woman. She really did not look well.

'I need to check your blood pressure,' I told her. I opened my bag and took out my sphygmomanometer. The dress had no sleeves so it was easy to wrap the cuff around her upper arm. I put my stethoscope into position on the inside of her elbow and pumped up the cuff. They make electronic machines which measure blood pressure quite effectively but I'm old-fashioned and I like to think I'm charge when I'm doing things like taking a patient's blood pressure. My method never runs out of batteries.

When I'd finished taking her blood pressure I did it again. And then a third time. Each time her blood pressure was around 220 over 170. That's high. Very high. A normal, healthy blood pressure reading should be around 120 over 80, though this rises somewhat with age and I wouldn't have been surprised or worried if in this case it had, say, been 135 over 85 or 90.

'Have you had any trouble with your blood pressure?' I asked.

Constance shook her head.

'When did you last see your doctor?'

'A few weeks ago.'

'What was that for?'

'I get a lot of wind. The doctor said I have irritated something.'

'Irritable bowel syndrome?'

'That's it.' I felt sorry for her. Irritable bowel syndrome is a nasty disorder which, because it is not life threatening, is rarely taken seriously by the medical profession. Very little research has been done into finding a cause or a cure and most patients are dismissed or ignored. Many years ago, the same symptoms were known as 'spastic colon' and I rather suspect that patients who had the disease when it was so described were treated more sympathetically. There is, sometimes, a lot in a name.

'Did your doctor take your blood pressure?'

She nodded. 'He got the nurse to take it. He said it was routine to do a blood pressure check at my age.'

'Was he happy with it?'

'Yes. He said it was fine.'

'He didn't tell you what it was?'

'No.'

'Did he prescribe anything for the wind?'

She shook her head. ‘He said I should follow a diet sheet he gave me and then go back and see him.’ That sounded better than the usual medical response of prescribing some useless pharmacological rubbish manufactured by the employer of their favourite, and most generous, drug company representative.

‘Did the diet help?’

She nodded. ‘A bit. The wind wasn’t quite so bad.’ She was still having terrible trouble speaking and even breathing.

‘Can’t you give her something, doctor?’ demanded her husband suddenly interrupting. ‘Shouldn’t she be in hospital?’

I turned. John was standing right behind me. ‘Just give me a couple more minutes,’ I asked my patient’s husband. ‘I just want to be sure about what is causing your wife’s problem before I start treating her.’

He grumbled a little, but backed away.

Suddenly the patient in the red dress belched quite noisily. She sighed and relaxed visibly.

‘Have you got a lot of wind now?’

She said she had.

I asked her what she had eaten for dinner the night before.

‘It was something very French,’ she said. She looked across at her husband.

‘We both had the pate as a starter and then the roast duckling,’ he said.

‘And a pudding?’

‘A pastry thing with lots of whipped cream.’

I smiled at her. ‘Not on the diet sheet the doctor gave you, I suspect.’ It was difficult to think of a meal more likely to cause trouble for an irritable bowel syndrome sufferer.

She shook her head and burped again.

‘We thought we’d let ourselves go a bit since we were on holiday,’ explained her husband.

‘I understand completely,’ I told him. I turned back to his wife. ‘That dress looks very tight.’

‘I haven’t worn it for a while,’ she said. ‘It used to fit me,’ she added, rather shamefacedly.

‘Let’s take it off,’ I suggested.

It took her husband and me nearly a quarter of an hour to remove the dress, which fitted her closer than any glove. At one point I thought we were going to have to cut it off.

‘How did you get into it?’ I asked her, half way through the extrication process.

‘A lot of wriggling,’ she confessed.

Underneath the dress she was wearing a tight black corselette; not the variety with suspender straps which can be worn with stockings but one of those which fastens between the legs with little hooks, and which looks a little like a one piece bathing costume. This too was very tight and fitted her rather more closely than another layer of skin would have dared. The straps were digging into her shoulders and the material of the corselette was stretched to its very limit. Her unfortunate and obviously voluminous breasts were crammed into cups which would have been stretched to accommodate glands which were a quarter of the size. It is astonishing how many women select the wrong size when buying brassieres and corselettes and other supporting garments. I know that cosmetic surgeons have agreed that although some women clearly do require surgical intervention, a surprising number of the patients who request plastic surgery on their breasts (either to make their breasts smaller or to make them larger) would not need an operation at all if they wore better fitting, more appropriate, underwear, but this was the first time I had seen just how dangerous truly ill-fitting lingerie can be. Constance could well have killed by her corselette.

‘I think we need to take that off too,’ I told her.

‘Not with John here,’ she said, nodding to her husband.

I asked John if he would pop into the bathroom for a moment. He seemed happy to do so.

The woman and I then managed to get her out of the corselette. It was almost as much of a struggle as getting her out of the dress had been. There was much pulling, much tugging and much struggling before we’d got the damned thing off.

Without the corselette, Constance was much bigger; several sizes larger than she had appeared when she’d been wearing it. ‘George has never seen me naked,’ she whispered. ‘A woman has to have some secrets.’ I nodded and smiled at her.

Once out of the corselette she sighed as though greatly relieved, took a deep breath, the first for a while, and immediately started to breathe more normally.

I picked up her hand and took her pulse. It was down to 90. I then checked her blood pressure. This had dropped to 140 over 100. The cure had been almost instantaneous.

I plucked her dressing gown from the foot of the bed and handed it to her. She slipped into it easily.

I checked the corselette. The size was 38B.

‘This is far too small for you,’ I whispered. ‘It’s too tight. It’s been squashing your body so much that the wind in your intestine has been pushing your diaphragm up. And that’s been putting pressure on your heart.’

‘I’ve always worn a corselette,’ she whispered back. ‘When I was a young girl, I always used to wear a proper corset.’ She paused and then added, proudly if inconsequentially. ‘My grandfather invented the first rustless steel corset for women. It was a revolution in fashion!’

It occurred to me that if she had worn a steel corset I would have probably had to extricate her from it with the aid of a tin opener. (It also occurred to me that a woman wearing a steel corset would doubtless have some considerable difficulty passing through the metal detectors which are now de rigeur at airports and international railway stations.)

‘There’s no reason why you shouldn’t continue to wear some sort of support,’ I told her. ‘But you need to buy a bigger size. A much bigger size.’ She looked guilty and nodded.

‘Have yourself fitted,’ I said. ‘But you mustn’t wear this one again. It was stifling you!’

‘I’ll get a bigger one,’ she promised quietly. She turned towards the bathroom and raised her voice. ‘You can come out now, John,’ she said.

John reappeared.

‘I’m feeling much better already,’ she told him.

‘The fatty meal your wife enjoyed last night resulted in the production of a good deal of wind,’ I explained to John. ‘The wind, which accumulated in her intestinal tract, was compressed by the tight dress, and her underwear, and the result was that the pressure on her diaphragm built up unbearably. The tight dress meant that there was no room for your wife’s body to expand. And so inside her chest her heart was being compressed. The result was that she had palpitations and high blood pressure.’

‘Will she be all right now?’

‘She’ll be fine.’

I took Constance’s blood pressure again. It was now down to 130 over 85. Her pulse was 85 and regular.

‘Have you got anything loose fitting that you can wear for the rest of today?’

She said she had.

‘And leave off that piece of underwear! Throw it away and buy one a little bigger.’ I paused and lowered my voice so that her husband could not hear me. ‘Actually, buy yourself one that’s quite a bit bigger!’

‘Do they sell them in Paris, do you think?’

‘I’m certain they do,’ I told her. ‘You might not be able to buy a cricket bat or a bowler hat in Paris but you can certainly buy as much lingerie as you want.’

‘I’ll do a little shopping,’ she said, whispering. ‘I’ll feel half naked if I go out for long without a little support.’

They both thanked me.

‘Sorry to have bothered you, doctor,’ said John. ‘We didn’t really need to call you out at all, did we?’

Chapter Seventeen

Since the hotels for which I worked were in Paris it was no surprise that they catered for a good many honeymoon couples. Most of them, of course, simply got on with what they'd come to Paris to do. They took photographs of themselves in front of the Eiffel Tower; they paid artists on the Place du Tetre to sketch them in charcoal; they ate expensive ice creams on the Champs Élysée; they visited Notre Dame and had their pockets picked by the resident thieves; and they had dinner in one of the bateaux mouches restaurants on the river Seine. They bought silly souvenirs which would be tossed into a drawer and forgotten the moment they got home and they wrote risqué messages on postcards, and sent them to their friends. And they drank a good deal of excellent but affordable wine. At night, if they had any energy left and they didn't fall asleep the moment their heads hit the pillows, they made love. Most of the honeymooners were not in the slightest bit concerned with their health; calling the doctor was the last thing on their minds.

But not all the honeymoon couples were content to follow the usual pattern of eating, drinking, walking, taking pictures and attempting to try out for the next sex Olympics.

Right from the beginning I became aware that there were going to be savage disappointments and thwarted expectations for some honeymooners. Some of those seeking help came to my consulting room. Some asked me to visit them in their room. Most came as couples. Some of the problems were serious, and, in matrimonial terms, would probably prove fatal. Some were merely a storm in a honeymoon D cup, and required little more than a little very light amateur marriage counselling.

Within my first few days working at the hotel I saw two couples who needed help. I saw both couples on the same day. For at least some of the individuals involved it was clearly an uncomfortable experience.

'He snores,' complained one young bride, talking about her brand new husband. Her name was Sandra. She told me that she was a lifestyle therapist though I'm afraid that even when she had explained what she did I still wasn't sure that I understood. I saw them in their hotel bedroom and she was sitting on the bed. She was wearing a voluminous grey tracksuit that looked about as sexy as an army blanket. Tracksuits sold for non-combatant use should surely have been made illegal at the same time as shell suits were excommunicated.

'I didn't know,' she said. 'No one ever mentioned it before.' His name was Jeremy. He too was sitting on the bed but there was as much space between them as there could possibly be without him falling off and landing on the floor. He told me that he was a professional trainer. I gathered that this meant that he spent his days encouraging out-of-condition executives and housewives to take regular exercise. I was astonished to see that their room was strewn with exercise equipment: running shoes, tracksuits, exercise mats and skipping ropes. There was no sign at all of anything erotic trimmed with lace.

'We weren't virgins when we married,' said Sandra quickly, clearly concerned lest I get the wrong impression. 'We had sex but afterwards we always slept in our own homes. We hadn't actually slept together before we got married. Not 'slept' in the actual sleeping sense. Not slept in the sense of lying together all night and then having breakfast.'

'We wanted to make sure we were compatible,' explained Jeremy. 'But we wanted to preserve a little something special for after our wedding.'

'And that turned out to be the snoring,' said Sandra. I thought she spoke rather bitterly.

'The snoring keeps you awake?' I asked her.

'All night long,' she said.

'When did you get here?'

'Yesterday.'

'So you've only had the one night together, so far?'

'One night was enough,' said Sandra. 'I'd like another room.'

I was puzzled. 'Another room?' I looked around. 'You don't like this room?'

'The room is fine,' she said. 'But I want another room as well as this one. One room for him and one for me.' I didn't think it was a good sign that she referred to her new husband as 'him'.

'Do you want me to try to help deal with the snoring?'

'There's no point,' she said immediately. 'My father snores. He's snored for ever and ever. He and my mother sleep in separate rooms. Doctors tried for years to stop the snoring but they couldn't. Once a man snores he snores for life.' She turned to her husband. 'We should have slept together properly before we got married.'

He looked at her, looked at me, opened his mouth, shut it again and then looked down at the floor.

'We should have spent the night together before we got married,' repeated Sandra. 'Then I'd have known about the snoring. And we could also have had breakfast together. That would have been something of an eye opener.' She looked at Jeremy and then looked at me. 'Do you know what he had for breakfast?'

I admitted that I didn't know.

'He cut a croissant in half and put bacon in between the two halves!' she said. 'He made himself a bacon sandwich with a croissant.'

'I always have a bacon sandwich for breakfast,' said Jeremy.

'The bacon sandwich is bad enough,' snapped Sandra. 'You're supposed to be healthily aware of your body. Your body should be a temple. You become what you eat. A bacon sandwich is bad enough. But a bacon sandwich made out of a croissant? Do you know how much fat there is in a croissant? And, besides, people were looking. People were sniggering.'

This did not seem to me to be a modest tiff that would blow over. It was beginning to look to me as if Jeremy and Sandra were heading for the marital buffers of incompatibility.

'They weren't sniggering,' said Jeremy, softly. 'The man at the next table made himself a bacon sandwich when he saw mine.'

Sandra made an unpleasant sniffing sound. Her sniff must have sucked all the warmth out of the room because the temperature seemed to have fallen considerably below freezing.

I was beginning to feel rather superfluous. 'So, what would you like me to do?' I asked.

'Get me another room,' said Sandra. 'It can be a single. And I know I'll have to pay extra because hotels are always looking for ways to pad out the bill. But I can't spend another night with him lying beside me snoring like a big, fat, pink pig.'

I told her that it would be best if she had a word with the receptionist and assured her that I was confident that the hotel would help if there were any spare rooms available. And then, after one final and entirely unsuccessful attempt to offer advice about Jeremy's snoring, I left them. I'd like to think that everything ended happily, but I rather doubt it.

They were, I think, the most genuinely miserable honeymoon couple I had ever met.

Francine and Tony, the next honeymoon couple, came to see me in my consulting room. She was in her thirties and had, she claimed, been a virgin when they got married though I confess I was not entirely convinced by this. He was a little older and had been married before. He did not claim to be a virgin. They were on the third day of their honeymoon when I saw them. She was wearing a thin, lime green summer dress and had a pink silk scarf wrapped around her neck. He was wearing white jeans, a blue polo shirt and brown leather sandals.

'I went out to the shops to buy some postcards,' said Tony. 'When I got back I found my wife in bed with a German. He is a dwarf but he has a very big dick.'

'It's not polite to use the word 'dwarf',' complained Francine. 'He is of below average height.'

'He's a dwarf,' insisted Tony, through gritted teeth. 'We saw him in cabaret in a nightclub. He works as a stripper because he's a freak. He's three feet tall and has a cock that reaches the floor. He wears aftershave that smells of toilet cleaner. I was out of the hotel for less than an hour and when I got back she was kneeling on top of him, on the bed, banging him as hard as she could. I could hear the two of them at it when I was still fifty yards from the room. The headboard was banging against the wall.'

'You were away for nearly two hours! Who takes two hours to buy postcards?'

'I went down to the tourist shops near the Louvre. The prices are cheaper there.'

'You could have bought postcards in the hotel,' said Francine. 'They're not very expensive.'

'Did the dwarf give you his phone number? Last night? In the cabaret?'

'No. I went down to the bar to get a coffee and he was sitting there. I recognised him and went over to say hello. And he's not a dwarf. He's got stunted growth syndrome. That's what he calls it.'

'You could have just asked for an autograph, or taken a photo. You could have taken a damned selfie with him. You didn't have to bring him back up to our room and bang his brains out!'

'I wanted to see what it felt like to have such a big dick inside me,' said Francine. 'Your cock is so small I don't feel anything much when it's inside me. I'd never slept with anyone else before I gave myself to you. I felt a little cheated.'

Francine's disappointment reminded me of a patient I had once seen when I was a GP in England.

The patient, a woman in her fifties, had come to see me, together with her new husband, to complain that he was not performing adequately. She had brought him into the surgery and sat him down as a woman might have taken a poorly behaved puppy in to see a veterinary surgeon. 'He can only do it three or four times a night,' she complained. 'I find that very unsatisfying.' The new husband, who was in his late twenties, and who looked pale and exhausted, had sat there looking very ashamed of himself.

I tried to explain to the woman that a man who could manage three or four times a night should be considered exceptional and regarded as more than fulfilling his duties in the marital bed. But she had not been convinced.

'My first husband made love to me six times a night for the whole of our married life,' she told me. She looked at her new husband, as though he were a purchase she now regretted having made and would have liked to have taken back for a refund. 'He was bigger than this one, too. Better equipped, if you know what I mean.' She smiled. 'He used to call his dick 'Moby'.'

I asked her why they had parted. It seemed to me that from her point of view this should have been a marriage made in heaven.

'He died,' she said, as though she were complaining that a household appliance had broken and had failed her. 'He was only 42 when he died.'

In the end I sent the woman away with the suggestion that she might purchase a vibrator to make up for what she perceived as her husband's shortcomings.

Another woman I saw when I was a GP complained that her husband had premature ejaculation.

'That's what it's called,' she told me. 'I read about it on the internet.'

She complained that her husband came far too soon for her to reach orgasm.

'He can often only manage 20 or 25,' she said. 'The best was 41.'

I was puzzled. 'Forty one what?' I asked.

'Strokes,' she replied. 'Ins and outs.'

It turned out that while her unfortunate husband was pumping away, struggling not to come too soon, his mathematically inclined wife was busy counting the number of times his penis went in and out of her vagina.

'Do you count an in and out movement as one or two strokes?' I asked.

'One,' she replied.

'That's not really premature ejaculation,' I explained. `Premature ejaculation usually implies that the man comes far faster than that. Sometimes he comes before his penis actually gets inside his partner.'

'Oh good heavens!' said the woman. 'What's the point of that?'

I sent them away with the suggestion that she might be more satisfied if she made an effort to help her husband have a second erection. 'I suspect you'll find that the repeat performance will be more satisfying.'

She left determined to try this and since I never saw her again I can only hope that the advice proved satisfactory.

'You didn't have sex before you married?' I asked Francine, though she had already told me this. I thought I ought to check that I'd understood properly.

'She wouldn't do it,' said Tony, rather bitterly. 'She said she was a Catholic. She wouldn't even let me touch her below the waist.' He looked at his wife. 'I was allowed to touch her breasts, but only if she kept her bra on.'

'I wanted our honeymoon to be special!' she said.

'It's certainly turning out to be special,' said Tony. 'Not many husbands come in to find their new wives banging dwarves with big cocks.'

'It was only one dwarf,' said Francine, sternly correcting him.

'But with a big cock!' said Tony. 'In the future I'll always feel completely inadequate. It's huge.' He looked at me and held his hands a foot apart. 'It's at least this long and as thick as my arm,' he said.

'Don't exaggerate,' said Francine. 'It isn't that big.' She paused and looked at him as though challenging him to disagree with her. 'And I should know,' she added, rather tactlessly I thought.

'I've never seen anything like it,' said Tony. 'Except when I once saw a stallion at Newbury race course. But I think your dwarf was bigger than that horse.'

'Don't be silly,' said Francine. 'I just wanted to see what the bigger one felt like. But with him it hurt. And besides, it was over very quickly. He wasn't very considerate.' She paused, and softened a little. 'You're a much better lover than he is,' she said. 'He wouldn't even go down on me afterwards.'

'You were unfaithful!' said Tony. 'It doesn't matter how long it lasted.'

'Did you use a condom?' I asked Francine.

'No,' she said. 'He said his penis was too large to fit into a condom and I believed him. I'm sure he was right.'

'You should visit your doctor when you get home,' I told her, 'if you develop any unusual symptoms.' I recited the list which I was, by now, becoming accustomed to reciting, and warned them both that they should avoid any sexual contact until they were sure she had not been infected. 'Is there any risk of your getting pregnant?'

'We want to start a family,' said Francine.

'But I'd like to be the father!' said Tony. 'I don't want a kid who grows up to be three foot tall!'

'Don't be silly,' said Francine. 'I'm sure I didn't get pregnant with him.'

I started to ask her how she knew this but suddenly she interrupted.

'Anyway, what about the strangling?' she demanded. 'You both seem to forget that I'm the victim here.'

I was now thoroughly confused. I looked at her, puzzled. 'The dwarf tried to strangle you?'

‘He’s not a dwarf!’ she said angrily. ‘I wouldn’t expect a doctor to use such a word.’

‘Sorry. The small man.’

‘German. He is German and his name is Hans. He has a degree in economics but is forced to work in the cabaret because of discrimination.’

‘Hans tried to strangle you?’ I asked her. I thought the conversation was bewildering enough without our venturing into Han’s background, however much discrimination he might have encountered.

‘No. I think he is too small to strangle me. He certainly wouldn’t be able to do it if we were both standing upright. It was my husband who tried to strangle me.’ She pulled the scarf from around her neck so that I could see the marks her husband’s hands had made. I looked at the fingerprints. Apart from obvious bruising there did not appear to be any real damage. I was, however, beginning to feel a little out of my depth. ‘Do you want me to call the police?’ I asked her. Doctors are supposed to inform the authorities if they know or suspect that one person is behaving violently towards another.

‘No,’ said Francine. She reached across and put a hand on Tony’s knee. ‘I love my husband,’ she said, unexpectedly. She turned to me. ‘Why do you want to call the police?’ she demanded angrily. ‘I thought doctors were bound by some sort of confidentiality oath?’

‘That’s fine,’ I said, holding up a hand. I had clearly lost control of this consultation. ‘That’s excellent. But you implied that you found your husband a little inadequate in bed.’

‘I never said that!’ said Francine, loudly and defiantly. ‘Don’t put words into my mouth. My husband is not inadequate.’ She stood up, leant down and put her arm around his shoulders. ‘My husband is a very kind and considerate man,’ she insisted. ‘And a considerate lover.’

‘Good,’ I said. ‘That’s marvellous.’

‘Come on, Tony,’ said Francine, softly to her husband. She lowered her voice to a whisper, though I could still hear every word. ‘Take me to bed. I feel excited and I want you. I’m very wet. Let’s go and make a baby.’

He stood up and looked at her, quite fondly I thought. They headed for the door.

‘You might, er…’ I said, pointing to her neck. ‘…the scarf?’

‘Oh, yes,’ she said. She paused, long enough to wrap the scarf around her neck in order to cover up her husband’s finger marks. And then the two of them left to go up to their room to make a baby.

It was, I thought, going to be a stormy, and at times thoroughly confusing, marriage. I was relieved that they were passing through Paris and would soon be someone else’s problem.

Chapter Eighteen

Later that evening a woman called Lizzie came to see me. She was 51-years-old, attractive and smartly dressed and seemed nervous and slightly upset. She was wearing a dark blue knee-length pleated skirt and a short sleeved, white, scoop neck jumper.

‘I had a very strange experience today,’ she began. ‘I went up the Eiffel Tower with my husband and the two friends with whom we came to Paris. We’re here for the week. I’ve been to Paris several times but I’ve never been up the Eiffel Tower before. It’s not that I’m afraid of heights, more that I’m afraid of falling.’ She smiled weakly.

I got the impression she was trying to delay getting to the nub of her tale. I have noticed that patients often do that when they have an embarrassing story to tell.

‘We were going to climb up the stairs of the Tower but one of our friends has occasional back trouble and today he was in quite a lot of pain so we decided we would all take the lift.’

I could hardly believe what I was hearing. Was she really going to tell me that she too had been assaulted by a stranger? Surely not.

‘I don’t know if you’ve been up the Eiffel Tower in the lift,’ she said. ‘And I don’t know if it is always the same, but today it was very crowded. It was like one of the Japanese trains where station staff push travellers into the carriages.’

I smiled, nodded encouragingly, and waited.

‘We were buffeted and pushed around so much that I had no idea where my husband and friends were standing. And then, a few moments before the lift started to move, I felt someone stroking my bottom. My first reaction was to try to reach round to slap whoever it was who was fondling me but then I realised that I couldn’t see my husband at all and that it must be him who was behind me and him who was touching my bottom.’

She swallowed and asked if she could have a drink of water. I fetched one and put it on the desk in front of her. She took a sip and then continued.

‘I don’t like wearing jeans or trousers, they simply don’t seem very feminine,’ she said. ‘Don’t get me wrong. I’m as much of a feminist as the next woman, as long as she’s not one of those silly bra burning lesbian types, but I like to look feminine. I was wearing the skirt I have on. It’s certainly not a mini skirt. I hate women who dress younger than they are, and my mini skirt wearing days are long gone.’

I made some sort of vague gesture to suggest that she was being far too modest.

‘Anyway, the next thing I knew was that I could feel something firm pressing into my behind. It had a rounded end and at first I didn’t realise what it was. I thought perhaps it was the handle of one of those folding umbrellas, or part of the handle of the bag my husband was carrying. We had a bag with some food we’d bought for a picnic. But when the owner of whatever it was started rubbing it between my thighs it was pretty obvious what it was and I assumed it was my husband feeling a little fruity.’

‘What did you do?’

‘I reached round and held his penis,’ she said. ‘He’s not normally an adventurous sort of man and we don’t have sex very often so I thought I should be encouraging. We usually do it on the first Sunday of the month; the same day that he always cleans the car. Afterwards he always has a shower and in the afternoon he watches the sport on the television.’

‘Did anything else happen?’ I asked.

‘Well the penis got bigger very quickly and although it seemed much bigger than my husband’s I thought that perhaps it was just because he was very excited by the circumstances and to be honest, since we don’t do it very often it seemed a pity to waste the opportunity. When he pulled my skirt up to my waist I pulled my tights and knickers down to the top of my thighs and then I reached behind me and put the tip of his penis against my vagina.’ Her face had gone very red now. ‘I feel a bit of a floozy telling you all this,’ she said, ‘and I’m sure that since I’m telling you this you’ve already guessed that the man behind me wasn’t my husband.’

‘The thought had occurred to me,’ I admitted.

‘We had very hurried sex,’ she said. ‘And although neither of us could move very much we managed to do it quite successfully. I know I had an orgasm and although I wasn’t sure about him I realised later, when the evidence appeared in my knickers, that he’d certainly come.’

‘When did you realise that it wasn’t your husband that you’d had sex with?’ I asked her.

‘When we all got out of the lift I pulled my husband to one side, slapped him gently and, I thought, playfully on the cheek and told him I was shocked at his behaviour in the lift. I told him he’d been a very naughty boy.’

‘What did your husband say?’

‘He went red and said that the girl had been standing right in front of him and that it wasn’t really his fault that she’d been wearing a very low cut blouse. He said he hadn’t touched her and that he’d done his best to look over her shoulder.’ It turned out that a girl with very big breasts and a vast cleavage had been standing right in front of him and he’d been in another part of the lift several yards away from where I was standing.’

‘What did you say?’

‘I realised that I’d had sex with a complete stranger and that I’d been properly had, in the old-fashioned sense of the word. I suppose it was lucky that my husband felt guilty about the girl with the deep cleavage on display.’

‘Are you worried that you might get pregnant?’

‘Not at my age,’ she said. ‘It would be impossible. But do you think I could have caught an infection.’

I told her exactly what I’d told Maureen, though I did not tell her, of course, that another patient of mine had enjoyed an identical experience. (Since neither or the two women seemed to regret their experience it seems more appropriate to describe them as having ‘enjoyed’ what happened rather than to say that they had been assaulted or raped.) I then took a sample for the laboratory from her vagina, though I really didn’t expect that they would find anything.

I wondered how often this man tried this trick on tourists, and for how long he’d been doing it. I guessed he probably travelled up and down that lift quite often and somehow managed to position himself behind suitable women. He probably picked women of a certain age and, if they were married or accompanied, made sure they were separated from their husbands. He must also have selected victims who were wearing suitable clothing. It would be far more difficult for him to have sex with strangers who were wearing jeans or trousers, for example.

‘Do you want to report what happened to the police?’ I asked her, after I’d finished taking the sample. I realised, rather belatedly, that I had not asked this question of Maureen though it seemed to me pretty clear that she would not have been interested in sharing details of her ‘adventure’ with anyone else.

‘Good heavens no!’ said Lizzie. ‘Apart from anything else it was probably illegal to have sex in an Eiffel Tower lift. I’d end up being arrested for indecent behaviour. And I’d certainly make myself look a laughing stock, wouldn’t I? I can’t begin to imagine what my husband and my friends would say.’

‘It would be difficult,’ I agreed. ‘But if you want to tell the authorities I’m sure we can find someone who would be discreet.’

‘I don’t want to complain,’ she said quietly. She looked down at her hands and played with her wedding ring. ‘To be honest with you it has occurred to me that this man probably goes up and down in that lift quite often. And I’ve actually thought about finding a reason to go back up the Eiffel Tower.’ She looked me straight in the eye. ‘It was the most exciting sex I’ve ever had,’ she confessed. ‘If I could do it again I would.’

‘It sounds as if you’ve conquered your fear of falling,’ I told her.

‘It was the last thing on my mind,’ she admitted.

I told her that I would let her know if the laboratory reported any infection and warned her again that she should see her own GP in England if she developed any unusual symptoms. I told her it would be wise for her to visit the Sexually Transmitted Diseases clinic at her local hospital as soon as she returned home. I told her what signs and symptoms to watch out for and warned her that she shouldn’t have sex with her husband for the time being.

When she had gone I found myself wondering if I should advise all female hotel guests to carry condoms in their handbags when they went up the Eiffel Tower.

Chapter Nineteen

The next morning I saw one patient in her bedroom, one in the waiting room and one in my consulting room. None of these consultations could, in any respect, be described as a 'common or garden' medical encounter.

The patient in her bedroom had a relatively straightforward medical problem for me to solve, though the solving of it was not entirely elementary or unexacting. For a pleasant change, the problem was not sexual in nature and did not appear to have any obvious sexual undertones or overtones.

The patient was a French nun called Sister Theresa. She and another nun, Sister Marie, were staying in the hotel while undergoing some unspecified mission in Paris. They didn't tell me what they were doing staying in the hotel and I didn't ask. In my experience there are some nuns who seem to travel around far more than might be imagined. Maybe they're keen train spotters or are moonlighting as smugglers. How many stony-faced border guards would have the temerity to order a nun to strip?

Sister Theresa had a pain in her abdomen and when I was called she was lying on top of the hotel bed, clearly in some pain. Her colleague, Sister Marie, was standing beside the bed. Judging by the fact that the bed was a double and there were Bibles on both bedside tables, I assumed that the two nuns had elected to share both the room and the bed. Both nuns were fully dressed in habits and cowls. I couldn't see much of Sister Theresa but what few inches of face I could see were glistening with sweat and seemed pale. She told me that the pain had been present, and steadily worsening, for some hours and that it had moved from the centre of her abdomen to the lower, right hand corner.

I sat down on the edge of the bed. I did this very gingerly for the last thing a patient with abdominal discomfort wants is a clumsy great visitor plonking himself down beside them and creating new waves of pain.

'What are you doing?' asked Sister Marie, in horror.

'I need to examine Sister Theresa,' I explained.

'No, no no!' said Sister Marie. 'You can't do that!'

I stood up, again moving slowly, and looked at her. 'How can I tell what's wrong with her without examining her?' I asked.

'You must talk to her,' said Sister Marie.

'Can you lift up your habit?' I asked Sister Theresa, ignoring Sister Marie. 'I need to examine your abdomen. I'll be very gentle.'

'Oh no, no, no!' cried Sister Marie in desperation. 'That is totally forbidden.' She couldn't have been more shocked if I'd ordered up a couple of bottles of non-communion wine and suggested we enjoy a merry threesome together.

'I don't need her to take the whole thing off,' I explained. 'But if she could just allow me access to the relevant area, that would be a great help.'

'If you tell me what to do, and you turn your back, I will examine her,' said Sister Marie, firmly.

So we tried that.

I turned my back and gave Sister Marie specific instructions.

That, however, turned out to be entirely unsatisfactory for Sister Marie insisted on praying while she was supposed to be examining and instead of receiving a useful report all I could hear were snippets of what might have been Latin or could have been merely rapidly gabbled French.

'What about if you blindfold me and then let me examine Sister Theresa?' I suggested.

They discussed this for a moment. Sister Theresa was all for it. Sister Marie was doubtful. Eventually Sister Theresa, who was after all the one in pain, won the argument. Sister Marie tried wrapping a towel around my head. But that proved impossible and entirely impractical. She then produced a piece of cloth (I have no idea what it was and I didn't like to ask) and wrapped that around my head. It smelt of incense. Since I was now blindfolded she then led me to the bed.

'You'll have to put my hand on Sister Theresa's abdomen,' I told Sister Marie, when I had sat down, more clumsily than I would have liked, beside my patient.

It occurred to me that I could just ring for an ambulance and arrange for Sister Theresa to be admitted to hospital. It was pretty clear that she had appendicitis. If she went to hospital there would be female nurses and, probably, female doctors. There might even be a nun or two. But professional pride got the better of me. It would be embarrassing to send a patient to hospital without ever having performed any sort of examination.

'What I am feeling?' I asked, gently moving my fingers around on what I had been told was Sister Theresa's abdomen. 'It feels like material of some kind; very rough material.' I'd been expecting skin. Unless Sister Theresa had the body of a rhinoceros this was not her skin.

‘That is Sister Theresa’s under garment,’ whispered Sister Marie.

‘Can we remove it? Or at least lift it out of the way?’

It felt as though it were made of hessian, the sort of material more normally associated with sacking and the upholstery industry.

‘Certainly not!’ insisted Sister Marie. She had clearly reached the end of her tether, and was going no further.

And so, sitting on the edge of Sister Theresa’s bed, with a blindfold of unspecified material covering my eyes, I examined Sister Theresa’s under garment and made a formal diagnosis that she, or it, was suffering from appendicitis and required immediate admission to hospital. The appendix, an anatomical item which long ago forgot what it was made for, can cause serious problems when it malfunctions and its speedy removal can save the patient’s life.

I informed Sister Theresa of this, told her that she would require a simple and routine operation, reassured her that all would soon be well and turned away from the bed so that Sister Marie could undo the blindfold without there being any risk of my catching a glimpse of Sister Theresa’s definitely un-erotic under garment.

The GP’s job is often no more than to make patients feel comfortable, and to help the human body heal itself. There is surprisingly little that doctors can do to make any real difference to most of the patients they see. But there are times when a bottle of anaesthetic, a sharp knife and a few pairs of skilled hands can prove life-saving.

I left and used the telephone in my consulting room to telephone for an ambulance.

When I’d finished making those arrangements, and had also spoken to a doctor in the hospital to tell him about the patient who was on the way, I opened the door and found one of the porters waiting for me in the corridor. He had one of the hotel cats in his arms.

‘This is Magnolia,’ he said, introducing me to the cat. ‘Though sometimes we call her Maggie.’

I introduced myself to Magnolia. She seemed a very nice cat; healthy, beautiful, well fed and friendly. I asked the porter, a genial, always helpful fellow who has been engaged to be married to one of the maids for 27 years, why he had brought me a cat.

‘She needs to have her claws clipped,’ he said.

I looked at the animal, which clearly spent more of its life asleep on piles of clean laundry than it spent chasing up trees, and agreed with him that her claws definitely needed a trim. They looked uncomfortably long. My problem was that I didn’t have anything suitable for trimming a cat’s claws. Indeed, when equipping the consulting room it had not occurred to me that I would require any instruments for such a procedure.

‘Wait here for a moment, please,’ I said, directing the porter to my small waiting room. For obvious reasons I didn’t think it would be a good idea to take the cat into the consulting room.

While the porter waited patiently I walked swiftly to the hotel shop where I bought a cheap pair of ordinary nail clippers. They came in a neat little faux leather case all of their own. On my way back, I stopped off at the hotel stores and picked up an old towel that was ready to be thrown out. I then sat down, laid the towel out on my lap, and cut Magnolia’s nails. When I’d finished I put the clippers into the little case and handed them to the porter. ‘Keep these safe,’ I told him. ‘They are only to be used for Magnolia’s claws.’

I put Magnolia down onto the floor.

She rubbed herself against my legs, as though to say that there were no hard feelings, and then climbed onto one of the empty chairs, curled up, with her tail wrapped around her nose, and went to sleep.

That was the patient I saw in my waiting room.

The porter, who was clearly enormously fond of the cat, was very grateful. In return I asked him if he would take a look at the sink in my hotel room which was still giving a lot of trouble. It emptied very slowly and there was clearly a serious blockage somewhere in the drains. He told me to leave it with him and assured me that he would deal with it.

Just as I was about to leave, a woman in her fifties turned up. She was wearing very tight white jeans and a tight sweater in bubble-gum pink. Both garments were so tight that the woman looked as though she had been shrink-wrapped. She was rather breathless and had clearly been running. She walked as though she were wearing Wellington boots or had just come ashore after a long voyage on a small boat, and I couldn’t help looking at her feet. She was, in fact, wearing red patent leather shoes with improbably high heels.

‘Am I too late, doctor?’ she asked.

I told her she was not. ‘Although I do have consulting hours, I boast, like the Windmill Theatre, that I never close.’ I asked her to go into the consulting room.

She told me that her name was Jenny and we talked of this and that for fifteen minutes. She told me about her backache and her dodgy knees. And complained about the dizziness she sometimes suffered and she mentioned the fact that she needed to have her eyes testing soon because she was worried that she might be developing cataracts. Eventually, she got to the point.

'I have a rather nasty discharge from my toolbox,' she told me. 'I think I might have picked up an infection.' Oddly enough, I didn't feel that the previous circumlocution was due to shyness or embarrassment, as it might have been with many people in her situation, but was a result of the fact that she liked to talk and, having found a captive audience, was damned well going to make the most of it.

'Toolbox?' I said. It wasn't a euphemism I'd heard before, though I obviously had a pretty good idea of the part of her body to which she was referring.

'Down below,' she said impatiently, pointing southwards so that there would be no mistake.

'Ah.' I said. The euphemism did seem appropriate in a crude sort of way. 'Do you have any idea how you could have caught it?' I asked.

'Through sex,' she said, unsurprisingly. She told me that she was not very well off and that in order to pay for essential repairs to her home she had slept with a workman who had agreed to put on some new roof tiles without charging her for the labour involved, though he had asked her to pay for the cost of the tiles themselves. She said that she thought she might have caught the infection from him.

When I pushed her, she admitted that in addition to the workman who had repaired her roof she had also slept with a man who had fitted a new stair carpet, a man who had tidied up her garden and two men who had repaired her central heating boiler. 'Oh, and the man who repaired my washing machine,' she added.

I wondered how much of this she would have confessed to her own family doctor. In the fullness of time I was to suspect that in Paris people talked to me far more freely than they would have probably done if they were visiting their usual doctor. For one thing they were far away from home. (The British might not have been far away from home in terms of miles but, the British, being islanders, always think they're in a very foreign country when they've crossed a decent stretch of water.) And for another thing, medical confidentiality, once such a valued aspect of the doctor patient relationship, is now pretty much a thing of the past. In Britain, for example, the General Medical Council, the quango which controls the medical profession, has decreed that the Hippocratic Oath is now out-of-date and doctors must share their patients' secrets with just about everyone who owns a suit, a uniform or a State pension. In contrast, a hotel doctor in Paris must seem very private and confidential.

'Both of the men who repaired the central heating boiler?' I asked, surprised.

'They were very good friends,' she replied. 'I think they did everything together.'

'Just those?' I asked. I did some quick sums in my head. 'Six of them?'

`Well, that's all in the last couple of months,' she answered. 'There were more before that, of course.' She paused and thought. 'Things are so expensive these days,' she added.

I told her that if the swab I took came back positive then she must visit the special clinic at her local hospital when she got home.

'And all your sex partners will need to be checked,' I told her.

She didn't seem too pleased about this. 'I came to see you here because I didn't want any gossip,' she said, pouting. 'I can't see my own doctors at home about this. They'll think I'm terrible if I tell them everyone I've been with. They just won't understand. They'll think I'm a whore, even though I never took money from anyone.'

'I'm sure the doctor you see will understand,' I told her.

'They won't,' she said firmly. 'They're all horribly snooty and straight-laced. Besides, my son works at the practice where my doctor works.'

'He's one of the doctors?' I asked her. I don't know why but I was startled by this.

'He's a junior partner,' she told me. 'I moved to the town to be nearer to him when my husband died.'

'Then just go to the special diseases clinic at the hospital,' I told her. 'But you must see someone!' I told her to undress and to lie down on the couch. She had a vivid tattoo of a phoenix rising from her pubic hair which, unlike the hair on her head, was ginger in colour. It was quite a dramatic sight.

'I dye my hair,' she said. 'I hate being ginger. I used to shave off my public hair but then I had the tattoo and now it looks fine, don't you think?'

I told her I thought that the tattoo was very impressive and went well with her red pubic hair. I then took a swab and started her on some pills which I was pretty sure would help. She clearly had an unpleasant infection.

'Have you had sex with anyone since you've been here in Paris?' I asked her, wondering how many other residents I would need to talk to.

She looked at me as if I were mad. 'Why on earth would I need to have sex with anyone here?' she asked. 'I'm on holiday and I've paid for my room and board when I booked the package.' She pulled a face. 'I don't actually like sex,' she said, rather surprisingly.

After she'd gone I washed my hands thoroughly for the umpteenth time (it had been one of those mornings) and retired to one of the hotel restaurants for a light luncheon.

I ordered fried sole with artichokes in a peppery sauce, followed by roasted Normandy chicken served with a variety of fried spring vegetables. I restricted myself to half a bottle of Burgundy and completed my snack with a small stack of pancakes served with maple syrup and, as a reward to myself after such a strenuous and demanding morning, a generous portion of pecan ice-cream.

I once knew a patient who was so desperate to lose weight that for a month he ate every meal at a terrible restaurant near to his home. The food was so bad that he hardly ate anything and, as a result, lost a stone in four weeks. The restaurants in Phillipe's hotel complex would have been of absolutely no value to him or anyone hoping to lose weight. I decided that in due course I would need to find a gym and start doing a little regular exercise if I were to avoid developing an abdomen the same size and general shape as my young employer.

Chapter Twenty

In the afternoon I went to the Maison de Prostitution to inspect Madame Emma's young ladies or, more particularly, their working parts. When I arrived, the same huge doorman was on duty. This time he recognised me and actually greeted me with a huge smile. I felt like an old and valued customer.

'You want to speak to 'La Maquerelle'?

I told him that yes, I wanted to see the madam and that I had an appointment.

'Do you know the way, sir?' he enquired. He spoke perfect English, with only the lightest French accent.

I said I did.

As I headed towards Madame Emma's office I passed several girls in the corridor. Two of them were obviously employees but one was a nurse; though I noticed with some slight surprise that her blouse had been left dangerously unfastened. The lack of adequate buttoning allowed all those with reasonable visual acuity the opportunity to gaze upon exceptionally strong creamy white hints of the doubtless beautiful charms nestling within. She was very tall, nearly six feet tall I guessed, though her shoes had rather higher heels than nurses are usually allowed to wear in Britain.

Madame Emma was playing a CD of Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta *The Pirates of Penzance* and when I entered her office she held a finger to her lips and pointed to the chair on the other side of her desk. We sat in silence while the major general finished singing 'I am the very model of a modern major general'.

'Was that George Baker?' I enquired.

Mr Baker was a well-known opera singer of the early and mid-20th century who is, sadly, now largely forgotten. He was a baritone who appeared on many of the earliest recordings of the Gilbert and Sullivan operas – though he didn't actually appear on stage with the D'Oyly Carte company. He was used on the recordings because his clear diction was well suited to the requirements of Gilbert's complex and convoluted lyrics – the famous 'patter' songs.

'Yes! Mr Baker! Exactly!' said Madame Emma, clearly delighted that I had recognised the singer. 'With the Glyndebourne Festival Chorus and Sir Malcolm Sargent conducting the orchestra. It is my favourite modern rendition, though I admit that Mr Baker was a little past his prime at the time of the recording.'

'That's my favourite recording too,' I agreed.

'Did you know that when the first set of recordings were made after the First World War it was Mr Baker who replaced Henry Lytton on many of the records?'

I admitted that I did not know this.

'Mr Lytton played all the important male comedy parts for many years,' Madame Emma told me. She was a delighted enthusiast, proud of her arcane knowledge. 'And on the very early recordings, made under the supervision of Rupert Doyly Carte himself, it was Mr Lytton who took those roles. But, when Doyly Carte company made their post war recordings, Mr Lytton's voice had grown weak and he was frequently replaced by Mr Baker.'

I was delighted to hear her refer to the works of G&S as 'operas'. Too many English critics dismiss them as 'operettas', a slightly demeaning, patronising word. But then, too many English critics, arrogant, elitist and supercilious, believe that opera is only really opera if it is sung in incomprehensible Italian by overweight divas.

Madame Emma talked for a while about other Gilbert and Sullivan artists whose work she had enjoyed. She knew a great deal about Arthur Sullivan and W.S.Gilbert, two famous English knights, and it seemed surreal, to be sitting in a French brothel discussing the finer points of the Gilbert and Sullivan partnership and its prodigious and timeless output.

'Is someone ill?' I asked when Madame Emma rose from her chair and suggested that she had better introduce me to the girls.

She looked puzzled. 'No,' she said. 'Why do you ask?'

'Oh, just that I saw a nurse in the corridor,' I said.

Madame Emma laughed. 'Oh that wasn't a real nurse,' she said. 'That was one of the girls.'

She explained that some of the clients liked the girls to dress up in costumes. 'The girls dress up as waitresses, policewomen, traffic wardens, nannies and even princesses.' She turned back and looked at the computer screen on her desk. 'Oh yes,' she said after a moment. 'That would have been Ginny,' she said. `She had a 30 minute appointment with Monsieur Robert, a customer from Lille.' She turned away from the computer. 'He comes here once a fortnight when he is in Paris on business. He is 69-years-old and always sees the same girl. 'Il est bien monte.' He is very well endowed. 'His father is still a regular customer too. He too is 'bien monte'. It runs in the family, I think.'

'I'm impressed with your computer,' I told her.

It occurred to me that if pornocratic rule ever became established in France then Madame Emma would probably be at the head of the Government.

She shrugged. ‘It is not important,’ she said. ‘It merely helps.’ She paused, remembering something, and smiled broadly. ‘But, you know, someone once said to me that sex is like computers.’ She hesitated again. ‘They are both all about hardware and software, aren’t they?’

I smiled and agreed.

I was fascinated by the way the business was managed. The appointments system seemed to be run much along the lines of the ones run by hairdressers and dentists and the computer software clearly enabled Madame Emma to plan the girls’ work down to the last minute.

‘Do a lot of customers want to see the same girl whenever they come?’ I asked as we headed along one of the corridors.

‘Oh yes. Most of the girls have regular clients – just as in a dental practice there are patients who want to see the same dentist, at a hairdressing salon there are clients who want to see the same hairdresser and in a general practice there are patients who want to see the doctor they always see. Here it is exactly the same.’

I might have been wrong but I thought I detected a little private and personal pleasure in the way she compared the activities of her business with those of dentists, hairdressers and doctors. And why not; harlots, hairdressers, dentists and doctors are, after all, all workers in the service industry, and however much doctors and dentists (and probably hairdressers too) may consider themselves to be superior there are undoubtedly many who would argue that les putains, the whores, are doing work which is every bit as valuable to society as those in the other, much more vaunted, and ostensibly respectable, professions.

And it is even possible to argue that putains are less likely to do harm to their clients than, say, doctors; who are, I’m afraid, forever prescribing pills which kill people, or accidentally chopping off the wrong limbs.

‘There is one other thing,’ said Madame Emma, with a twinkle in her eyes. ‘You have already seen two of my girls. And the girls talk, as you can imagine. They have decided that now that you work with us you can have ‘les échantillons gratuits’. I talked to Phillipe and we agreed.’

I looked at her, puzzled. ‘I don’t know that phrase,’ I confessed. ‘What does it mean?’

Madame Emma thought for a moment. ‘Free samples,’ she said. ‘You can have free samples. Free sex with the girls. A perk.’

I stared at her, horrified. As a GP I had occasionally been given a lettuce, a bagful of apples or a bottle of home-made wine by a grateful patient. Those were the perks I was accustomed to. Indeed, I had once been given a sackful of King Edward potatoes. But although it had never occurred to me that the General Medical Council would frown on such gifts, I did not think they’d be quite so understanding about an offer of a free blowjob. I’d only just got my licence back. If I had sex with any of the girls – who were, after all, all my patients – I was pretty confident that I’d lose it again pretty damned quickly.

‘That’s extraordinary kind of them,’ I said. ‘And very much appreciated. But I’m their doctor. I can’t possibly have sex with any of the girls! I would get into terrible trouble if I did.’

‘Really?’ She sounded very surprised.

‘Really!’

‘French doctors sleep with their patients all the time!’

‘Maybe,’ I said. ‘But unfortunately I’m licensed in England.’

‘No one would know!’ she said.

‘I would,’ I said. ‘And in due course I have no doubt that the authorities would know too.’

She shrugged, stood up and led me into the lounge where the girls were waiting.

I was surprised to see women of so many different shapes, sizes and ages. And, to be honest, surprised to see that they looked so, well, damned ordinary. If you’d told me that I’d walked into a room full of young mothers waiting for the start of a Parent Teacher Association meeting I would have believed you. Most of them were, it is true, dressed rather more daringly than the average young mum, more as though they were planning to go to a club for the evening rather than discuss little Nigella’s prowess with her two times table, but fashions and social mores have changed over the years and the difference was not as startling as I might have imagined. And, of course, the majority of the girls wore dresses or skirts (which are generally far more alluring and always far more practical for the business they were in) in preference to trousers or jeans.

I looked at them and quietly cursed the fact that I’d had to turn down the best freebie I’d ever been offered. As a GP in England I’d heard of drug companies offering free hotel accommodation and free sex to doctors who agreed to prescribe their products but personally I’d never been offered anything more than a free drug company pen, with the logo on the barrel, and a supply of free notepads exhorting me to prescribe their latest product.

And, to be honest, my love life needed a bit of a boost.

There had been a couple of short relationships since I'd left prison (both with nurses at hospitals where I'd worked) so I knew that the equipment was still in working order, but just about everyone I had met since I'd been in France had been a patient or a potential patient and, therefore, strictly out of bounds as far as romance was concerned. It occurred to me that I probably needed to get out more.

I have no idea why I should have been surprised by the variety.

Did I really expect to see a room full of loose women straight out of central casting?

If you wander into a room full of female secretaries there will be girls and women of all varieties: thin and plump; young, older and old; pretty and plain. There will be girls with genius level IQs and girls with IQs which struggle to match their bra size.

And so it was with this room full of French whores, or putains.

I knew from Phillipe that one or two of 'les putains' had university degrees but, on the other hand, I was pretty sure that there would also be a couple who were barely literate.

The two girls I'd already met were there, of course. Altogether it looked as though there were around two dozen of them. Looking around, I suddenly remembered a piece of advice I had once heard: 'Treat a harlot like a lady and a lady like a harlot'. It came from an American playwright called Wilson Mizner; a writer who, apropos of absolutely nothing relevant, is also famous for having said 'To my embarrassment, I was born in bed with a lady'.

Madame Emma introduced me as the official new doctor, explained that they would, from now on, all be having weekly medicals and told them that I would be available to deal with any of their health problems. She explained that all the costs, including my fees, and the cost of tests, drugs and other treatments, would be met by the Hotel Casanova. She also made it clear that attendance at the weekly medicals would be a required condition of their future employment and that a three line whip would be firmly in place.

'Suitable gaps will be left in your booking schedules,' she told them. 'And so there will be room for excuses. And please make sure that you shower and use the bidet before you visit the doctor. I don't want to hear that he's slipped a speculum into one of you and been greeted with a flood of sperm!'

There was much tittering at this, for me, far from felicitous thought, and one or two ribald remarks. It was clear from Madame Emma's comment that it was by no means unusual for the girls to allow customers to have sex without using what is, in some circles, known as 'protection' but is, as I have already explained, known in France as 'les capotes anglaises'. The French letters.

I suddenly remembered a 36-year-old woman I had seen one Monday morning back in England. She worked for the BBC and was the wife of a local estate agent. She had come into the surgery for a routine cervical smear and was, I remember noticing with surprise, wearing a suspender belt, torn stockings and what was left of a pair of knickers which looked as if they had been designed by someone moonlighting from their day job designing dental floss. She was also clearly not wearing a bra. When I slipped the speculum inside the appropriate orifice, what seemed like a pint of semen flooded out onto the couch. It could well have been more. She told me, with more pride than embarrassment, that she had spent the night 'dogging' in a country car park and had not had time to go home and change.

Madame Emma then told me the names of all the putains who worked for her and Phillipe. I don't think she expected me to remember all the names, but it was a useful start. I then started on the first of my weekly medical examinations. There were twenty two young women to examine. They varied enormously in size, age, shape and everything else; ranging from the gracile to the callipygian. It may sound silly but performing all these examinations was hard work. Twenty two lots of swabs!

Inevitably, some of the girls were in a rush to get to their next appointment. One girl, who had just completed an assignment with a client who had come late, arrived clutching a cheese and ham filled baguette which she proceeded to chomp her way through while I worked away at her other end. 'Sorry about this, doctor,' she said, brushing crumbs off the examination couch, 'but in this job my work isn't over until the fat man comes. And I've got another lover boy waiting for me as soon as you've finished fiddling with the business end.'

I completed my examination as quickly as I could and before she hurried away she shook crumbs out of her cleavage onto the carpet. I was relieved that she was the last patient of the session.

I did not have far to go when I had finished. There was a connecting door which took me from the Maison de Prostitution back to my hotel.

I washed, changed , read a copy of *USA Today* for half an hour and then went down to a restaurant and another lonely meal.

'What's good, tonight?' I asked the waiter.

'La plie is excellent,' he replied. The plaice. 'Maybe with pommes frites. Comme les Anglais?'

'No,' I said. 'Not the plaice. I really don't feel like fish tonight.'

'No fish?'

‘No fish!’

I looked down the menu and ordered loin of lamb with mashed potatoes, baby carrots and small glazed turnips. Afterwards I had a slice of apple pie served with fresh cream. And then another slice of the same pie, served with more fresh cream. As I finished the last spoonful, I decided I would have to make an effort to lose the extra weight I was doubtless gaining. There was no doubt that since I had arrived in Paris my clothes had started shrinking.

‘Do you know of a good gym I can join?’ I asked the waiter, when he came to clear my empty dishes and bottles.

He told me the name of a gym he knew and recommended. ‘They have a little café there,’ he told me. ‘They serve excellent hot croissants and pastries.’

I decided that maybe the gym was not a good idea after all.

Later I sat at a table in the bar, had a small brandy and read a hardback biography of Jimmy Stewart which a guest had left behind when they’d gone back to America. I love Jimmy Stewart films. Few actors can have left us with a greater variety of great and memorable films. Not many actors could do romantic (*It’s a Wonderful life*), funny (*Harvey*) and tough (*Winchester ‘73*) with such verve and believability.

There was a television set in my room, of course, and the hotel provided a variety of movies on a special channel but there was no DVD player. I decided I needed to buy myself a DVD player and a selection of old movies. I was beginning to settle in and I was definitely beginning to think of Paris, and the hotel, as home.

‘Good book?’

I looked up to see Phillipe standing in front of me. He was wearing a white dinner jacket, black trousers, a white shirt with ruffles down the front and a bow tie which looked suspiciously as though it had been tied when he’d taken it out of the box. He had a girl with him.

I stood up and said good evening.

‘How did you get on with the girls today?’ asked Phillipe. ‘Chloe tells me they like you. And Madame Emma is a great fan of yours. When I hired you she said she didn’t think they needed a doctor. Now she wants to know why I didn’t hire you a year ago.’

When Phillipe mentioned Chloe he indicated the girl on his arm. She was in her mid-twenties, tall, elegant and graceful and had shoulder length blonde hair. She was wearing a sleeveless blue silk dress which was backless and damned near frontless too. The diamond necklace and the matching earrings looked as though they had probably cost enough to put the French balance of payments into yet another crisis.

I muttered something in response. I’m a fairly typical old-fashioned Englishman and I always find praise more difficult to accept than criticism.

‘You remember Chloe, don’t you?’

I apologised and said I didn’t.

‘We met this afternoon,’ she said.

I still didn’t recognise her. This was partly because she had changed and was wearing an entirely different outfit. It must also be because I’m pretty stupid sometimes.

Chloe moved a little closer and whispered to me. ‘You might recognise me better from the other end! I was the girl eating the baguette.’

Phillipe, who had heard her remark, laughed. If I’d been prone to blushing I would have blushed.

They left, headed to a nightclub for dinner and dancing.

I ordered a coffee and settled back into the book I was reading.

Still, it was good to know the boss was happy.

Chapter Twenty One

I gradually managed to stamp my own personality onto my hotel room. I persuaded one of the porters to unscrew the standard hotel pictures which had been fastened to the walls so that I would have space to hang pictures I'd selected myself.

The pictures which had been there were decent enough (one was a scene of rural France, the other a picture of Notre Dame at sunset) but they were sort of anodyne pictures which adorn the walls of hotels everywhere. I replaced them with pictures which I bought from a print shop in the 5th arrondissement, down near to the River Seine. One was an excellent copy of a Marc Chagall painting. The other was a copy of one of Turner's sea paintings. My room was beginning to look and feel more like home, though I was still having trouble with my blocked sink. The porter who had brought me the cat for nail clipping had poured a couple of litres of special drain blockage solvent down the plughole, but although this had produced a good deal of hissing and a large quantity of acrid smoke it had not cleared the drain. His efforts at poking a clear passageway through the pipes with a long piece of wire had proved similarly unsuccessful.

From a junk shop near the Gare du Nord, I purchased a small bookcase to contain my growing collection of books which had been discarded by hotel guests. (I had to carry the bookcase back to the hotel by myself because the piece of furniture proved too large to fit into any of the taxis I hailed. It wouldn't fit into the lift either, but a porter helped me carry the damned thing up the staircase.)

I also had a growing library of books which I had bought from several of the bouquinistes; the booksellers who sell old books, magazines, posters and post cards from the boxes or stalls which are attached to the walls along the banks of the Seine.

The bouquinistes have been in Paris since the middle of the 18th century and have had permits to sell books alongside the Seine since 1859 though I don't think that many of the original booksellers are still plying their trade. There are 240 bouquinistes today and between them they share 1,000 of the world famous, unmistakeable green boxes – three quarters of which must, by law, contain books though the remainder can be filled with maps, old photographs, sheet music, posters and other artistic ephemera.

Booksellers manqué who want to become bouquinistes must apply to the Ville de Paris and succeed in persuading a selection committee that they are suitable candidates. Those who pass muster are allowed to use the boxes without charge. There are, it is rumoured, around 300,000 books (many of them rare and quite valuable) on sale in the boxes at any one time.

I also bought myself a DVD player and found a couple of shops which sold old, classic DVDs. I picked up a small but decent collection of old films starring Jimmy Stewart and Humphrey Bogart. I bought a collection of all *The Thin Man* movies, starring Myrna Loy and William Powell and a handful of John Wayne movies. I bought *The Godfather* trilogy; *Ronin*, starring Jean Reno and Robert de Niro; *22 Bullets* with Jean Reno; *My Favourite Year* starring Peter O'Toole and *Hopscotch* with Walter Matthau. The whole lot, including the DVD player, cost me considerably less than a pair of designer sunglasses or a meal at Maxims.

And, as the days went by, I found myself becoming increasingly busy dealing with the hotel guests.

Phillipe had reprinted all the hotel's brochures, and changed the website, to inform potential visitors that the hotel now had its own English physician in residence. He seemed convinced that this rather unusual feature made the hotel more attractive for travellers, particularly those who found holidays or trips abroad a rather daunting prospect.

Several big British travel agencies which arranged package tours to Paris clearly agreed with him, and also seemed convinced that having a resident English speaking doctor made a French hotel far more attractive to their customers. Phillipe told me that one or two Spanish hotels had followed his example and had hired English speaking doctors to work in their hotels. 'It's a pity you can't patent good ideas!' he told me with a big grin.

American travel agencies were apparently also favourably impressed with the idea, and Phillipe was delighted when more Americans started to arrive. He said they brought an air of good cheer to the hotel but also admitted that he liked the Americans because they spent more in the restaurants and the bar.

The patients I saw in the hotels continued to astonish me with their requests and their problems.

An angry woman in her late sixties turned up at the hotel one day and demanded to see me 'immediately'. I met her in the reception area of the hotel where she'd turned up. She told me that she was looking for her father, a man called Boynton, who had come to Paris two weeks earlier and who had 'disappeared'. She implied that he was suffering from Alzheimer's disease and needed full time medical care. I very much got the impression that he had 'escaped' from his nursing home accommodation and that she thought that he was now probably being robbed, fleeced and generally taken advantage of by the hotel staff and the residents of Paris. He had, she said, sent her one of the free postcards which the hotel handed out to guests. The postcard contained the name of the hotel so it hadn't needed much detective work to find out where he was staying.

A search of the hotel's computer showed that Boynton, a former buyer for a chain of retail stores, was staying in one of the hotels and, according to the evidence of the staff, seemed to be having an excellent time. I found him in the bar of his hotel and he showed absolutely no signs of dementia. For a man of 92 he was remarkably alert and sprightly. In fact I have known many men of 50 who would have envied him his energy, his agility and his health.

Boynton had travelled to Paris by himself, travelling by bus and Eurostar.

When he'd reached the age of 90 his family had insisted on placing him in an old folks' home and it was, he told me, driving him mad. 'The place is full of old people,' he complained. 'I've got nothing in common with them. All they want to do is stare at the floor and dribble.'

But he was certainly having a marvellous time in Paris.

During the daytime he would race around Paris on one of those little aluminium scooters which are popular with children. It was, he insisted, a great way to get around. 'You can just padlock it to a lamppost when you go into a bar,' he told me. 'And the police don't give a damn if I drink and ride my scooter.'

In the evenings, he would visit nightclubs.

Boynton told me that occasionally he would dance but for much of the time he would simply sit and enjoy the music. He was a little deaf so the loudness of the music never bothered him at all. 'I'm always back by 2 a.m.,' he told me. 'I need my sleep and I don't want to miss breakfast!'

I told his daughter that the old man seemed perfectly healthy to me and that I couldn't see how I could possibly help her force him to go back to the United Kingdom. In the end I brokered a deal between the two of them. He promised to return home after another two weeks and his daughter promised to find him a small flat so that he could move out of the nursing home he hated so much. She also agreed to let him come to Paris for a couple of weeks every three months. It seemed to me that Boynton had not lost any of his negotiating skills.

Meanwhile, I was learning a good deal from Madame Emma's girls.

I still saw them all once a week, of course, but they came to see me with all their other health problems and worries.

In addition I was, on two occasions, called to see patrons of the Hotel Casanova who were complaining of chest pains. To everyone's relief, neither of them had been having heart attacks. One had drunk too much champagne and had acquired a well-deserved but unwelcome bout of indigestion. The other had strained his intercostal muscles while trying to prove to his paramour that he was as fit and agile as he had been forty years earlier.

Since it was I think, everyone's fear that one day a client would have a serious, or even fatal, heart attack while 'on the nest' as Phillipe once put it so poetically, I think they were relieved to have a doctor on the premises (or as close to them as made no matter) when these two crises occurred.

It would, of course, have been something of a disaster if the two men who had suffered chest pains, but hadn't had heart attacks, had been sent to hospital unnecessarily.

One was a well-known international movie actor, the other the boss of a huge French company.

The citizens of France would have thought little of one of their heroes being taken ill in a brothel (past evidence suggests that politicians improve their ratings and popularity when they are found to have kept mistresses or patronised bordellos) but the citizens of other countries are far less forgiving and understanding and both careers would have probably been ruined.

Both men were so relieved that their scares had been dealt with discreetly that they insisted that they wanted to pay something extra for the service they'd received. Phillipe and I had, however, both agreed that we would accept the extra money only if it were sent directly to a charity. We had agreed that it should go to the charity Medecins sans Frontieres (Doctors without Borders), which provides medical aid and assistance to many countries and peoples around the world.

Chapter Twenty Two

It was towards the end of Boynton's final week of his stay in Paris that I was asked by the reception desk to visit him in one of the local public hospitals.

Sadly, the old man had crashed while riding his small, shiny aluminium scooter. He had tried to avoid a small child, who had run out of a shop without any kind of warning, and had crashed into an advertising sign. He had landed heavily on the pavement and had a broken right tibia and a couple of cracked ribs on the same side. He was, not surprisingly, also rather shaken.

He'd only been in hospital for a few days when he announced that he wanted to return to the hotel. He said he hated hospitals because they always smelt of antiseptic and complained that he couldn't sleep because of the noise at night. He insisted that he would get better much quicker if he slept in his hotel room. His daughter, who had flown over from England, was not at all happy about this. She wanted to have him moved back to the United Kingdom. Unfortunately, this proved more difficult than she had envisaged, and far more expensive than seemed possible.

Boynton's insurance company refused to pay for the cost of repatriation on the grounds that their policy only covered people up to the age of eighty. As a gesture of goodwill (inspired, I suspect, by Boynton's daughter, who clearly had some of her father's negotiating skills and who told them that if they refused to pay anything she would contact the tabloid press in London, and complain that the company was refusing to help an injured old man in his nineties) the insurance company agreed to pay for another two weeks stay at the hotel. They also agreed to pay for nurses to look after the old man in the hotel.

After I had assured Boynton's daughter that we would look after him, she arranged to return to England.

It had never occurred to me that we would have difficulty in finding nurses to look after the old man. But we did. For some unimaginable reason all the nursing agencies in Paris seemed to be busy and none of them could provide us with the staff we required.

I was desperate because I'd grown fond of the old fellow and I really didn't want him to have to go back into hospital when he had made it very clear that he wanted to convalesce in the hotel.

I decided that we needed three nurses to work a shift system. There wouldn't be any need to have a nurse in the bedroom all through the night but we would need one there early in the morning, one during the day and one until Boynton could be safely tucked up for the night. Although his leg was plastered and his chest was strapped up, Boynton could still manage to get around with the aid of a zimmer frame and he insisted that he could get to the toilet during the night if he needed to do so. I gave him the phone number for my room, and strung a small mobile phone around his neck so that he could call me if he needed help.

But I still needed to find some nurses.

In desperation I rang Phillipe to see if he could help.

His parents had fingers in many pies and I wondered if they perhaps owned a nursing agency somewhere. (This sounds silly when put it down in writing but I had recently discovered that, among other things, they owned a brewery in Northern France, a boatyard near Marseille and a drapery store in the North of England. Just how they had acquired a drapery store in the North of England was, to put it mildly, a bit of a puzzle. Not even Phillipe knew how they'd managed that.)

He promised to have a think about it and he rang me back twenty minutes later.

'How ill is he?' he asked.

'He isn't very ill at all,' I explained. 'He just needs someone to look after him. To help him eat, wash and so on. And to be around so that he doesn't just sit in his room by himself.'

'And the insurance company will pay the bill?'

'Definitely. I have a fax from them promising to pay the cost of providing nurses. All I have to is to provide them with a bill which I approve and sign.'

'Then I've solved your problem,' Phillipe said immediately. 'I've spoken to Emma and she'll lend you some of her girls. They'll do it when they aren't busy.'

For a moment I was speechless. My immediate reaction was to say that this wouldn't do at all and that as a doctor I couldn't officially endorse the idea of an old man, who was convalescing, being nursed by a series of hookers. But then, when I thought about it, I realised that there really wasn't any reason why this wouldn't work very well. Indeed, it occurred to me that hiring jolly hookers might prove even more suitable than hiring nurses. Boynton didn't really need nursing at all and there was a chance that professional nurses would feel aggrieved at having to spend their days babysitting a reasonably fit old man. But a team of hookers would probably be happy to sit with him, play card games with him and help him in and out of the bath. And it is, after all, a proven fact, well established by medical research, that patients get better quicker if they have a smiling, pleasant companion than if they are looked after by folk who are surly, scowling and bored. Patients are more likely to do as they are told by a jolly nurse, and they will want to get well for her. So a series of smiling hookers, unconstrained by medical rules and regulations, might be just the ticket for Boynton. After all, he wouldn't know (or give a damn) whether or not they had nursing diplomas.

'O.K.' I said. 'When can they start?'

'Straight away,' said Phillipe. 'I'll have a word with Emma and tell her to send one of the girls over immediately. We actually have one girl working for us who is a qualified nurse and she can tell the others what sort of things they need to do. What's the room number again?'

I told him the number of the room and said I'd meet the nurse there so that I could tell her what she needed to do.

Ten minutes later I was introducing Boynton to the 'putain' known as Knickerless, who had turned up wearing one of the Maison's stock of nurse uniforms. The one qualified nurse working at the Hotel du Joie, which literally means the hotel of joy, was apparently busy with a pair of car salesmen from Belgium. But she had given Knickerless some basic advice and she would be along to do the evening shift.

'Golly,' whispered Boynton to me, when I'd introduced him to his new nurse. 'Where did you find this one? She's a bit livelier than the district nurse who came in to see me in England after I'd had my hernia operation.' I wasn't surprised he had noticed the difference. The hemline of Knickerless's dress hardly came within hailing distance of her knees and the top buttons were all undone; revealing far more cleavage than any matron or ward sister would have ever countenanced. I averted my eyes and tried not to look to see if Knickerless was being true to her name.

'Was that a nurse going into Boynton's room?' asked a man who was waiting in the corridor when I left. I told him that Boynton was recovering from a fall and needed nursing care.

'Crumbs!' said the man, who was still staring at the door through which the nurse had disappeared. 'I'll come here for all my holidays. I just hope I fall ill. If I don't fall ill then I'll lie down in front of a car if you can arrange the nursing care.'

I laughed and told him that Boynton was receiving special treatment because of his age.

Everything went incredibly well and our unusual arrangement seemed to satisfy everyone. The girls from the Maison Close were invariably kind and sympathetic and nothing was too much trouble for them. Most of them had no medical training and could not have done anything requiring clinical skills, but in terms of kindness and patience I have no doubt that they were just as good as any real nurses I could have found.

Actually, it is possible to argue that they were better suited to looking after an elderly man than one or two with whom I had worked in the past. And in some respects this unusual working relationship proved more satisfying than any of us, particularly Boynton himself, might have hoped.

I turned up one evening to find Boynton fast asleep, with a beatific smile on his face. The nurse who had been looking after him for the final shift of the day was about to leave. I hadn't seen her before but, like all the others, she was wearing the standard uniform of a dress which was about four sizes too small for her.

'He's asleep,' she whispered.

'Splendid!' I said. 'Did you need to give him a sleeping tablet?'

'No,' she replied, shaking her head. 'He was a little restless but I didn't want to give him a pill if I didn't have to.'

'So, how did you get him to sleep?' I asked.

'Oh, I just gave him a blowjob,' she answered with a little smile. 'He went out like a light.'

Chapter Twenty Three

The patient was male, in his fifties and the worst hypochondriac I had or have ever seen. He came to see me with a long list of complaints. He kept an A5 sized notebook in which he could write down his symptoms and the book was nearly full. He had written down a different symptom on each page and then, underneath the heading, written down the dates and times on which the symptom had appeared and how long it had lasted. Charcot, the famous French neurologist, called this health disorder (which is a particular virulent form of hypochondriasis) 'le malade au petit papier'. In this particular case, however, there was definitely nothing in the slightest bit 'petite' about the 'papier'. When I saw the number five written on the front cover of the notebook, and asked what it meant, the man told me that back at home he had four other similar notebooks; all full of the symptoms he had noticed and recorded.

For nearly half an hour I sat and listened while he explained when each of his symptoms had first arisen, how it had changed over the years, and what he thought it might have been caused by. Before he had finished, he had told me that he had two neurological problems, four different types of cancer, three inherited disorders (for which, he admitted, there was no family history), two circulatory problems, a suspected aortic aneurysm and an incipient skin disorder. He was, he told me, the proud owner of a large library of medical books and a regular visitor to internet sites dealing with health issues. He then thanked me for listening to him and told me that I was the first doctor who had listened to him all the way through.

When he completed what he described as a summary of his problems he leant back and looked at me; defying me to question the evidence he had presented and, if I dared, to offer a solution of some kind.

I've seen many hypochondriacs over the years but this guy was definitely the worst. Hypochondriasis is a sad and debilitating disease which most doctors don't take very seriously, but there is no doubt that it can ruin people's lives.

I have always believed that being able to listen to patients, and to listen properly, is the most vital quality for any doctor but I have to confess that if I'd seen this fellow during a busy surgery in England, with patients lined up, fretting in the waiting room, I would have probably been no more receptive than any of his other doctors.

The really sad thing, of course, is that most people are afraid of all the wrong things.

This man had, by and large, simply become exceptionally aware of his body's creaks and groans (as it ages the body, like an old house, often makes protesting noises and many of those odd aches and twinges are the human equivalent of creaking floor boards and gurgling water pipes) and I really didn't think there was anything much wrong with him. The truth, which I could not possibly tell him because he would have never understood, or believed me, is that health problems are largely a result of poor genes and bad luck. Apart from avoiding tobacco and making sure that you don't eat too much food or drink too much alcohol there isn't much any of us can do to ensure that we live longer. The dangerous thing is that patients, like my hypochondriac, who become too sensitive to the natural aches and pains that come with age are likely to miss the really important signs and symptoms when they do appear.

When I examined him I found my suspicion was absolutely right. None of his symptoms was of any significance. There were no signs of illness. He was, indeed, one of the healthiest men I'd examined for years. But I knew that unless I took his symptoms seriously (and that included providing him with some form of therapy) there would be absolutely no improvement in his condition.

I have over the years experimented with the use of a variety of placebos and I have discovered that, if a placebo is to work properly, the doctor who is prescribing it must convince the patient that he believes firmly in the efficacy of the remedy. If the doctor merely gives a patient a sugar pill, without any clear conviction that it will work, then it will be of no value.

'Your symptoms indicate a general catharsis of your immune system,' I told him, firmly and confidently. Firmness and confidence are the two most essential qualities when dealing with a real hypochondriac. 'It's a very rare condition and one which has not yet been recorded in the medical journals and so, inevitably, you won't be able to find anything about it on the internet. I have, however, seen one or two other patients with the same problem. How long will you be in Paris?'

He told me that he would be at the hotel for another six days. Astonishingly, he had come to see me on his first day in Paris. (He later confessed that he had come to our hotel because it would enable him to obtain a 'free' medical consultation with a new physician who had never seen him before.)

I told him that I would need to have his medication especially prepared but that I would have it ready for him on the following day. I told him to come and see me at my evening surgery.

He was almost pitifully grateful that someone had taken him seriously and promised that he would be there. I then telephoned the pharmacy and asked the manager to prepare a mixture for me to give the patient. When I'd done this I retired to my room.

When I got back to my room, hoping to wash for dinner, I found that the blockage in my sink was worse than ever. The porter’s efforts with his fearsome drain cleaner had been unsuccessful. It now took nearly twenty minutes for a basin full of water to drain away.

Chapter Twenty Four

My hypochondriac came back to see me the following day. He turned up at my consulting room exactly on time. After he had given me an updated history of his vast array of ailments, I gave him a small pack of suppositories and a large bottle of medicine. I did this with no small ceremony since there is far more to medication than the drug itself. I told him to put one suppository in place at 6.30 a.m. the following morning and to stay in bed for another hour exactly to allow the suppository to be absorbed. I stressed to him that it was vital that he follow my instructions precisely. I told him that after the one hour had elapsed he should shake the bottle of medicine thoroughly and then pour out exactly one large tablespoonful and sip it directly from the spoon until it was all gone. Since he was staying in a hotel and his access to cutlery might be limited I gave him a tablespoon which I had scrounged from the restaurant the night before. I could have given him a small plastic measuring cup but he seemed to me to be an old-fashioned sort of patient and old-fashioned people have greater faith in medicines which are taken by the tablespoonful. Many doctors (and many patients) believe that medicine is a science. It is not. There is some science in medicine but, on the whole, medicine has more in common with magic than it has in common with a pure science such as aeronautical engineering.

I made him repeat the instructions I had given him, and when he had repeated them three times so that I was satisfied that he had remembered them, I told him that he should repeat the whole exercise every twelve hours for three days. A suppository every morning and every evening, followed on each occasion by a tablespoonful of medicine.

‘At the end of that period your symptoms will disappear,’ I told him. ‘They will not go slowly. They will disappear suddenly. All of them.’

‘What is in the medicine?’ he asked.

‘It’s a preparation I had a pharmacist prepare especially for you,’ I told him.

‘And the suppositories?’

‘The same. Only the pharmacist and I know the ingredients. But both the medicine and the suppositories are, I assure you, perfectly safe. There is nothing in them that will make you ill and there will be no side effects.’ I did not tell him, of course, that the glycerine suppositories contained nothing other than a very small amount of menthol, while the bottle of medicine was nothing more than a mixture of chalk , coloured water, some harmless green dye and a few herbs to give the stuff a ‘medicinal’ sort of flavour. It has long been known that liquid medicine works best when it is coloured green and when it tastes rather unpleasant. I had decided that this patient needed something special and I was particularly proud of the bottle of medicine, which was an impertinent liquid with a pleasing nose and a lingering, smoky aftertaste.

And with that I shook his hand and bid him good day. I told him that he could come back to see me after three days, to tell me that he was well again and that his symptoms had all disappeared.

I think I was convincing and managed to imbue him with the correct amount of faith. I certainly got the impression that he believed he was going to get better.

My next patients, after I had handed the hypochondriac the medicines which had been prepared for him, were three girls called Tracy, Katie and Sophie. They were in their twenties and they were, they told me, in Paris for a week’s holiday. It was not difficult to tell, from the clothes they were wearing, that they were not training to be nuns. There was a good deal of flesh on display. They were, in fact, in Paris for a prolonged hen party since one of them, Katie, was due to be married the following week.

‘Are you the brothel doctor?’ asked the girl called Sophie.

I went cold inside. It wasn’t a reputation I had been hoping to acquire.

‘I’m the hotel doctor,’ I replied after a short pause.

‘But you also look after the girls who working in the brothel?’

‘Who told you that?’ I asked.

‘One of the receptionists,’ replied Tracy. ‘The one with lots of red hair. We asked her if she knew of a club or a brothel where we could get work for a few evenings. She said you could help us get in touch with the woman who runs the brothel next to the hotel.’

I knew the receptionist they meant and made a mental note to have a word with her some time.

‘We’re broke,’ admitted Sophie. ‘We thought we could pick up men who’d buy us meals and stuff. But it’s not been as easy as we thought.’

‘We picked up men without too much difficulty,’ said Tracy. ‘But they didn’t want to buy us meals. Just the usual slam, bam in an alley way behind the nightclub.’

'I had a frog in my throat the first night we were here!' giggled Sophie.

'So we thought that perhaps we'd work for a couple of nights and earn ourselves some spending money,' said Kate, the one who was about to become a bride.

'I just look after the girls' health,' I told them. 'I don't have anything to do with the running of the Maison. But if you want work I can put you in touch with Madame Emma who manages the place.'

I gave them Madame Emma's telephone number and they seemed pleased. When they'd gone I rang Madame Emma. I confess I felt a bit like a pimp. Madame Emma said she didn't usually take temporary girls but since she had four girls away with the flu, and several busy acting as nurses for my patient, Boynton, she would take the girls on for a few sessions.

The day, which had started with my hypochondriac's gentle whimpering, ended with a definite bang.

Several hotel residents on the second and third floors had complained that one of the other female guests had been keeping them awake. They told the receptionist that the woman's cries of delight, emitted during her remarkably extended orgasms, had disturbed their sleep for several hours. The receptionist told me that she had gone up to the second floor, where the woman and her boyfriend were staying, and that she had heard the woman's cries while still at the far end of the corridor. 'I wonder if you'd mind having a word with her,' said the receptionist when she rang me. 'It sounded as if she was being murdered. I'm not surprised she was keeping people awake. She's in her room at the moment.'

Reluctantly, and not quite sure why this particular problem had been landed in my lap, I made my way into the relevant wing of the hotel. By good fortune I bumped into a gendarme who had been having a drink in the bar. Not knowing what on earth I was going to say to the woman with the noisy orgasms I asked him if he'd mind joining me. I thought that perhaps a uniform (and the gun which all French policemen carry) might prove sufficiently intimidating.

The woman who answered the door had a towel wrapped around her and was pretty clearly not wearing anything substantial underneath the towel. She was small, no more than five foot tall, and very skinny.

I explained who I was and asked if we could come into her room for a moment and have a word with her. Reluctantly, she agreed, and opened the door wide enough for us to enter. Inside the room a man was standing. He was huge, well over six feet tall, and equipped in proportion. His penis, which was pointing towards the ceiling, was clearly primed, cocked and ready for action.

'I'm afraid we've had a few complaints about noise coming from your room,' I told her, trying to be as tactful as I could.

'When we're having sex?' asked the woman.

I agreed that this appeared to be the source of the problem.

'They're just jealous,' said the woman. 'Kevin likes it rough. And he's big.' She pointed to the naked man who did not seem in the slightest bit perturbed about having an unexpected audience.

'I understand,' I said. 'But if you could try to keep the noise down a little the other residents would be very appreciative.'

The woman didn't look terribly interested in my request. Her husband or boyfriend didn't say a word. Most men would wilt if faced with a couple of strangers but he remained firm and upstanding; his erection had not wilted and his penis was still pointing straight up at the ceiling. It rather reminded me of the Eiffel Tower. I thought it looked rather threatening and silently wished that he would cover it up. He, however, was clearly rather proud of it and it was difficult to blame him for this.

'This is very serious, madam,' said the gendarme, who was clearly unused to people taking no notice of his presence. 'We would like you to come quietly!'

'Are you arresting me?' demanded the woman, misunderstanding the gendarme and thinking that he was about to arrest her. For the first time she actually seemed concerned.

The gendarme, who was a little confused by the woman's response and who was, I knew, rather proud of his idiomatic English, said nothing. He did, however, rest his hand on his pistol.

'We're leaving tomorrow,' said the man, breaking his silence. 'Going back to England.'

'I'll be quiet tonight,' promised the woman, now very subdued.

I said that no one wanted to curtail her sex life but that everyone would be very grateful if she could perhaps confine the noisiest love making to the hours between 10 p.m. and midnight.

'That's no problem,' said the man who had, I was pleased to see, started to subside since my gendarme friend had taken an active part in the proceedings.

We thanked them both and headed for the door. As we left I glanced back. The man's erection was now horizontal but it was still a very impressive edifice.

'I'm not surprised she was making a lot of noise if she had that thing stuffed inside her,' muttered the gendarme, as we made our way back downstairs. He told me he’d be ‘hurlant la maison vers la bas’. Screaming the house down.

I thanked the gendarme and slipped him a 20 euro note as a ‘thank you’. I then looked at my watch, discovered it was time for dinner and headed for the restaurant.

I chose fried spiny lobster with green asparagus and caviar cream and followed this with fillet of roast beef with black truffles, pan friend mushrooms and ‘pommes soufflées’. I finished with hot Grand Marnier soufflé which one of the chefs prepared at my table. And concluded with a brandy and coffee.

As my dear old grandma would have said, if she’d thought of it, there is absolutely no point in living in a hotel and eating regularly in a decent restaurant unless you spoil yourself occasionally. In my case the word ‘occasionally’ meant at least twice a day.

When I got back to my room I found that the porter had pushed a letter under my door. I received virtually no mail (largely since hardly anyone knew where I was) and was delighted, when I opened the envelope, to discover a neatly written letter from Tutti, the girl whose asthma I had cured with a cup of coffee, thanking me for looking after her and making her better. I didn’t usually find out what happened to my patients after they got back home and so it was good to hear from one of my minor successes.

Tutti’s mother had included a note telling me that they had tried the coffee trick on a second occasion when Tutti had been wheezing and they had been unable to persuade their GP to turn out and provide treatment. The mother reported that the coffee trick had again proved most efficacious and said that she and her husband were very grateful. She said it had saved them a six hour sit in the nearest Accident and Emergency hospital, which was thirty miles away. More importantly, it had saved Tutti many hours of frightened wheezing. I was so delighted by this news that I bought, wrote and posted two holographic postcards of the Eiffel Tower at night: one to Tutti and one to her brother.

Chapter Twenty Five

Madame Emma's girls from the Hotel du Joie continued to provide me with a wide variety of unusual professional experiences.

I had become increasingly popular with 'les putains' after one came to see me complaining of the symptoms of pelvic congestion. She told me that she had a constant dull ache in her lower abdomen and, after I had questioned her, admitted that the ache seemed to be worse when she was standing than when she was lying down.

It occurred to me that her problem might have been caused, or at least exacerbated, by the fact that, despite having a good deal of sex, she probably didn't enjoy a good many orgasms. There is some evidence in the textbooks to suggest that women who have a lot of sex but don't often reach a climax may suffer from this variety of pelvic congestion. I told her that I could think of several quite complicated ways of dealing with her problem but that the simplest solution might be to use a vibrator on herself if she'd been with several clients without having an orgasm. She was sceptical about this remedy but agreed to try it and was delighted when it produced a rapid improvement in her condition. After that, most of the girls used the same simple trick to deal with what was, for them, a common occupational hazard. They were extraordinarily grateful and so was the manager of the pharmacy which was owned by Phillipe's parents, for he suddenly found himself doing a roaring trade in an item which usually sold less than hot water bottles.

On the same day that I learned of the success of my unconventional remedy for the variety of pelvic congestion occurring in the Hotel du Joie, I was having lunch in one of the restaurants when Phillipe suddenly appeared with two of the girls in tow.

He came over to my table, said that it seemed sad that I always seemed to eat my meals alone, and asked if I'd like them to join me. I really didn't mind eating alone (I usually read a newspaper or a magazine while I ate) but I obviously told him that I would be delighted if they shared my table.

They were all drinking kir royale, champagne with cassis, and Phillipe told me that he and the girls were celebrating.

He told me that a client who had visited the Maison Close had set up a website offering recommendations on bordellos and their girls. It was a sort of TripAdvisor site; offering customers' ratings on the brothels they had visited, and the girls they had been with.

Inevitably, perhaps, several of Phillipe's girls had been upset by a few of the remarks which were, so Phillipe said, ungentlemanly to say the least.

'The service Madame Emma offers is a very personal service,' said Phillipe. 'What one man might regard as a beautiful girl and a wonderful evening might be a disappointment to another man.' He shrugged and began a tirade against the evils of 'social media'. 'Why do they call it social media?' he demanded. 'It is a very curious phrase. What it really means is 'amateur, obsessional, self-important, prejudiced, bigoted, inaccurate media'.

I gathered that the girls had been particularly upset by the fact that, as there often are with these things, the vast majority of the comments seemed to be critical and carping. There were very few words of praise.

'So, why are you celebrating?' I asked puzzled.

Phillipe explained that he had contacted a few other bordello owners and together they had issued a press release announcing that in response to the new website they intended to set up a rating service of their own. The difference would be that only girls working in houses of prostitution would be allowed to contribute to the new site, and they would be encouraged to rate their customers in as much detail as they liked – even to the extent of providing names and photographs. The release had produced an immediate response. Virtually all the men who had joined the ratings website, and who had written comments for it, had cancelled their membership and insisted that their comments be withdrawn. The reaction was almost immediate: less than 24 hours later, the website which Phillipe, Madame Emma and their girls had found so offensive had been removed from the internet. And so the site which Phillipe and his fellow brothel owners had established was also removed.

I congratulated Phillipe on his victory.

During the meal I could not help noticing that one of the two girls, whose name was Olivia and who was wearing a dress so tight that no personal blemishes, creases, wrinkles or crevices remained hidden, picked up several of the foil wrapped butter pats which the waiter had brought with our chopped up baguette, wrapped them in a paper napkin and slipped them into her handbag. When, at the end of the meal, the two girls popped out to visit the ladies' room, Phillipe leant across the table and whispered to me.

'You noticed Olivia taking butter,' he said softly.

'I did,' I confessed. It had seemed a rather odd thing to do.

‘She has a client who comes once a week,’ he continued, still speaking very quietly, ‘who likes to re-enact the scene from ‘Last Tango in Paris’. He likes to ‘enculer’ the girl. To bugger her. You know the film? When Marlon Brando buggers the girl and uses butter to lubricate his cock?’

I said I remembered the scene.

‘What was the name of the girl? Everyone remembers Brando, of course.’

I said I couldn’t remember, either.

Phillipe thought for a moment and then shrugged. ‘It is much easier for Olivia to give him a couple of those little butter pats than to have to carry a pound of butter with her,’ he explained.

And then the two girls came back and the four of us talked about the flowers in the Luxembourg Gardens which were particularly beautiful that year. It turned out that Olivia, the girl who had taken all the butter, came from a family who ran a market garden which supplied the Parisian flower markets with many of their blooms. She seemed to know the names of all the flowers in all the gardens of Paris.

At my evening surgery that day I saw another one of Madame Emma’s girls. When she removed her dress I saw that she had a terribly sore area on her back. The skin had not actually been rubbed away but the area looked very uncomfortable, as though she had been dragged along on a rough surface.

‘What on earth happened?’ I asked her.

‘It’s a carpet burn,’ she told me. She explained that she had been servicing six young officers from the École Militaire in the 7th arrondissement of Paris when one of them had announced that he wanted to screw her on the floor. He had done this with such enthusiasm and energy that he had moved her naked body two metres across the carpet. His colleagues had been so impressed by this display that they had insisted on trying to beat his distance. One of them had succeeded in screwing her across six metres of carpet – the whole length of the room. When she had started her strange journey, his feet had been resting against the skirting board at one end of the room. When she had finished his head had been touching the skirting board at the other end.

‘It is very sore,’ she told me. ‘The young officers are like batteries!’ she said, without rancour.

‘Like that bunny that never stops?’ I said.

`No,’ she replied, looking confused. ‘Ever ready!’

I prescribed some cream and told her to ask one of the other girls to rub it in gently and to report to her if they saw any signs of infection developing.

‘Would you like a sick note?’ I asked her.

She shook her head and told me that she had already talked to Madame Emma and been allocated work of a similar but slightly different nature which would put the strain on her knees rather than her back. This did not seem to be something which worried her unduly. ‘I’ve always been a sucker for a good looking dick!’ she confessed.

She had been gone for no more than ten minutes when Phillipe telephoned me and asked me if I would do him a great favour. He explained that all the hotels and the brothel were terribly short of staff for that evening. The brothel was busy catering for a young man’s 18th birthday party celebrations and the hotel was, in addition to looking after the usual vast variety of holidaymakers and travelling businessmen, also playing host to a wedding reception due to be attended by several hundred guests.

‘We need a driver we can trust for a delicate assignment,’ said Phillipe. ‘One of Madame Emma’s girls has an appointment at 8 p.m. at an address in the 8th arrondissement. Her name for this assignment is Mistress Leonie but her usual working name is Adele. Her real name is Cynthie. The trouble is that we don’t have a driver to take her.’

I sometimes couldn’t work out how the girls remembered who they were supposed to be at any given time. ‘Can’t she drive herself?’ I asked.

‘I’m afraid not,’ said Phillipe. ‘She has to arrive at the client’s apartment dressed for work and there is nowhere for her to park the car. She can’t wander through the streets of Paris in a black corset, black thigh length boots and carrying a carriage-whip.’

‘Ah,’ I said. ‘And for the same reason it would hardly be possible to send her in a taxi.’

‘Exactly,’ said Phillipe. ‘We need someone to drive her to the address where she is working, to wait and to return to pick her up an hour and a half later.’ Phillipe paused. ‘It’s important that she doesn’t miss the appointment,’ he explained. ‘The client is a judge and he’s a very useful friend for us to have.’

It was hardly the sort of work I’d been trained for but it seemed churlish to refuse. After all, Phillipe had always been helpful and generous to me. And so I said I’d be delighted to help out. Phillipe said I could use his Mercedes S class and that he would pay me 250 euros in cash. I told him I’d use the Mercedes but that if he tried to give me any money I would be forever insulted. This was not entirely me being generous. It occurred to me that if I simply gave the girl a lift I could hardly be accused of living off immoral earnings. But if I received a payment for services rendered I might well be laying myself open to a charge which the humourless bureaucrats at the General Medical Council might find difficult to understand.

And so at 7.30 p.m. I picked up Mistress Leonie and drove her to an address in the 8th arrondissement, just off the Champs Élysée.

As Phillipe had explained she could have hardly wandered around the busy streets in that area dressed in her working costume. The corset was studded with a good many rather fierce looking pieces of metal and the boots, black leather and also well studded, came up to within a few inches of the tops of her thighs. She was carrying a small black, leather bag which, I correctly assumed, contained more tools of her trade. I drove very carefully because I was terrified I'd be stopped by the police if I exceeded the speed limit by as much as one mile per hour. She seemed a sweet, rather gentle girl: far more Adele (or Cynthie) than Mistress Leonie. But I guessed that when she was working she probably changed somewhat.

When I had dropped the girl, and watched her go into the building where her client lived, I drove around for twenty minutes looking for somewhere to park the car. Eventually, I had to drive down to the river and park on one of the quays, near to the bateaux mouches. I then walked back up from the river, found a café and ordered an expresso. I had brought with me a copy of a book by a British racing driver called Duncan Hamilton. It was so gripping that I was horrified when I looked at my watch and realised that I had to pick up the girl within less than ten minutes. I threw a 10 euro note onto the café table, raced down to where I'd parked Phillipe's Mercedes and then drove back up to the judge's apartment building. Fortunately, I just managed to get there before the girl came out and she climbed into the back of the car without any suspicion that she had nearly ended up standing on the pavement for a while. The poor girl was exhausted. She told me that she had spent the first ten minutes of the encounter tying up the judge and the next 45 minutes giving him a good thrashing with her whip.

I drove her back to the Hotel du Joie, so that she could get changed before going home, parked Phillipe's car in his garage and then wandered up to my room. The hotel bars were heaving with wedding guests and far too busy for me to enjoy. Instead, I watched and much enjoyed John Wayne and Maureen O'Hara in John Huston's magnificent film *The Quiet Man*. I know I'm getting old because when the film had finished I actually said to myself: 'They don't make films like that anymore.'

Chapter Twenty Six

My first call the next day was not quite so cheerful.

‘Those wretched British girls you pushed on me were a disaster!’ complained Madame Emma. She didn’t even bother to introduce herself, but I recognised her voice straight away.

‘I didn’t push them on you!’ I protested. ‘I merely put them in touch with you. I seem to remember that you were short of girls for some reason and that you were delighted to take them.’

‘Yes, well, that is as it maybe, the fact is that they were a disaster,’ said Madame Emma, who did not sound as if she wanted to be reminded of how she had come to hire the girls. She told me that one of the girls had refused to sleep with a grocer from Nantes because she thought he was too fat and that another girl had caused dismay by telling all the men she slept with that they were very inadequately equipped.

‘They thought everything was for their amusement,’ complained Madame Emma. ‘They stood together in the hallway and asked the customers if they would like one hump or two. They thought this was funny. I do not see anything funny in this.’

‘No,’ I agreed.

‘One of my best customers, a nice man who works in the Mayor’s office was very upset. He likes to ‘baiser en levrette’. To make love doggy-style. But when he was screwing the girl called Kate she suddenly looked back over her shoulder and said to him ‘Is it in yet?’ He had been screwing her for ten minutes. It is true that he has a very small penis, all the girls know this, but that was not a nice thing to say – especially to a paying customer. To say such a thing is guaranteed to take the vinegar out of any man. And the man from the Mayor’s office has always been very nervous.’

She made a loud noise of disapproval.

‘The other girls were angry too! They told me that if I kept those three they would go on strike. They said they would down tools rather than work with them.’

I could not but agree that for ‘une putain’ to ask a customer if his penis was ‘in’, did indeed sound a very tactless thing to say – particularly in an expensive, high class establishment. I could not help hoping that Kate did not say the same thing to her new husband on her wedding night. Indeed, I’m sure I am very old-fashioned about these things but it did seem to me to be a strange way for a young woman to spend the days prior to her wedding.

‘And when they had finished work,’ continued Madame Emma, ‘they stood in the doorway and said to the customers, as they left ‘Thank you for coming!’ They thought this was very funny. Hrmph. Prostitution is a serious business. It is not supposed to be a comedy.’

Although I could see the humour in the girls’ remark I agreed with Madame Emma that the Hotel du Joie was not an establishment where one went to have a good laugh. A giggle definitely. But not a laugh.

‘And they were not very good looking girls,’ added Emma finally. ‘One of them ‘être plate comme une planche à pain’. She was very flat-chested.’

Madame Emma was clearly very angry.

‘Anyway, I fired them all,’ she said. ‘They have a lot to learn.’

I apologised profusely for having introduced them to her. I was very embarrassed. To behave in such an unprofessional manner is quite unforgiveable.

Happily the day had a good ending.

The hypochondriac for whom I had prepared the special medicine and suppositories came to see me at the evening surgery. He had the biggest smile I’ve ever seen and he was clearly a very happy man.

‘My symptoms have disappeared!’ he told me. ‘Your medicines did the trick.’

He was so pleased that he gave me a present: a bottle of wine.

The fact that it had been bottled in South Africa and tasted as if it had been made out of a mixture of paint stripper, drain cleaner and anti-freeze did not spoil the moment. After drinking one mouthful of the stuff (something which I did very gingerly, I must confess) I poured the rest of the stuff down the sink in my bathroom.

The liquid was clearly potent because I never again had any trouble with that sink. It gurgled away quite merrily; the annoying blockage permanently dissolved.

I was very well pleased.

A good bottle of wine is, after all, just a good bottle of wine: providing a little short-lived pleasure.

But a bottle of something that clears a way through a chronic drain problem is a joy indeed. I made a note of the wine’s name.

Chapter Twenty Seven

I walked into one of the hotel restaurants early one evening shortly after this and saw a woman I vaguely thought I knew. She was sitting at a table by herself and had either just finished a meal or was about to start one. She had a glass of red wine in front of her. I smiled and she smiled back but I couldn't for the life of me remember where I'd seen her before. Was she a hotel resident whom I had treated? Was she a member of the staff who was simply having a meal? I was pretty sure she wasn't one of Madame Emma's girls because although she was definitely good looking enough, and certainly shapely enough, for a job in the Hotel du Joie, she just didn't look as though she earned her living horizontally. (Even when off duty the girls who worked at the Maison de Close tended to dress a little more flamboyantly than most other women. And once they had a few months experience they had a tendency, I had noticed, to move, and even sit, with an air of self-confidence which bordered on, but never reached, arrogance.) Was she, I found myself wondering, someone I had known in England? A former patient of mine? A nurse I'd worked with? I knew her but I couldn't for the life of me think why.

I sat down at a table on the other side of the restaurant and looked through the menu. I wasn't feeling particularly hungry and so I ordered a simple meal: an omelette, made with bacon and peaches, and half a bottle of Mumm champagne.

Suddenly I remembered who the woman was, and where I'd met her before.

Her hair was a different length and a different colour but it was definitely the same woman. I leapt up and walked across to her table.

'I'm terribly sorry!' I said. 'I've only just recognised you.' I really was delighted to see her.

'I've changed my hair,' she said in explanation.

'How are you?' I asked. 'You look wonderfully well!'

'I am very well, thank you,' she replied. 'And you?'

'Oh I'm fine, thanks.'

'And how's that husband of yours? Bernard wasn't it?'

Bernard was the manic-depressive patient whom I had sent to hospital. He had been wearing one of his wife's see-through baby doll nighties (the only item of their clothing which he had not shredded with a knife) and had leapt out of the ambulance as it had pulled away. My last action, hardly a professional one, had been to throw a fluffy pink mule, which had come off one of his feet, at the back of the disappearing ambulance. The mule, being far too light for decent throwing, had failed to reach its destination.

Monica, the mysterious woman I'd failed to recognise, was his long-suffering wife.

After Bernard had been taken away I had taken her for a drink in the bar. We had, I remembered, had considerably more than one drink each and I think it is fair to say that we had both been extremely disappointed that, in addition to being the wife of a patient, Monica had been a resident at the hotel, a putative patient of mine and therefore completely 'out of bounds' as far as anything more than friendship was concerned. The General Medical Council takes a very dim view of doctors having physical relationships with patients and although I was never sure whether or not this disapproval extended to wives and other relatives, I thought that to be on the safe side (a place where I was determined to remain) I felt I ought to do my very best impersonation of a monk.

'Yes. It was Bernard. And he isn't my husband anymore.'

I felt really pleased about this.

'Oh, I'm sorry to hear that,' I lied. 'Is he er…'

'As far as I know he's in the pink,' she told me. 'He fell in love with the ambulance driver who took him to the hospital that day. He divorced me and married her and to be honest with you she's welcome to him. They've gone to live in Sweden. Would you like to sit down?'

Just then two of the girls from the Maison Close walked by. They were dressed to the nines in what they described as 'working clothes' but which were, I suspect, no more revealing than the sort of clothes many young women now routinely wear when going to a nightclub. They smiled when they saw me, greeted me by name and both said 'Ca va', which translates, very roughly, as 'hello, how are you, how is it going, how are things with you?' I returned the greeting and sat down.

'Sweden?' I exclaimed. 'Why on earth have they gone to live in Sweden? Is she Swedish?'

'No, she's French. They have long nights there and apparently she doesn't like making love with the light on.' Monica paused and watched the two girls disappear. She didn't say anything.

'Seriously? They've gone to live in Sweden because they have early nights?'

'That's what Bernard told me. He explained, in graphic detail, that they have a very active sex life but that their enjoyment is somewhat curtailed by the fact that she feels physically inadequate. I gather she is rather flat-chested.' Monica turned and nodded in the direction the two putains had taken. 'Unlike your two friends! So she and Bernard make love only in the dark. And Sweden apparently lends itself to their peculiar requirements.'

'Golly,' was all I could think to say in immediate response. It seemed to me that it might have been easier for Bernard and the ambulance driver simply to draw the curtains but maybe I lack romanticism or imagination. 'But you're OK with all this?'

'I'm absolutely delighted. Bernard was driving me mad. He had become unbearable. Before we came to Paris that time he had been having a torrid affair with one of our neighbours. And before that he'd been 'seeing' one of my friends.' She smiled. 'That's a euphemism. More accurately, I suppose, he had been giving her a good seeing to!'

'It sounds as if you're better off without him.'

'You can say that again!'

'It sounds as if you're better off without him.'

She laughed. She hadn't laughed much the last time I'd seen here. There hadn't been much for her to laugh about. I remembered that I had thought of her then as definitely comely. Now that she was neither married nor a patient of mine, my conscience allowed me to feel free to regard her as both alluring and voluptuous; distinctly toothsome rather than pulchritudinous.

The truth is that I had thought about her on many occasions. I had, once or twice, considered asking one of the receptionists to let me have her home address so that I could get in touch. But although I could have said that I was ringing to see how Bernard was getting on I knew, and I suspected that she would have known, that my interest in her husband's welfare was very strictly limited.

Three more girls from the Maison Close wandered out of the nearby bar, accompanied by three men who very much looked as though they were customers. The girls were all dressed in evening gowns and I guessed the six of them were heading for dinner in a nightclub such as Le Moulin Rouge or the Lido. The girls often acted as escorts for business executives who wanted dining companions with the guarantee of a successful end to the evening. The three girls paused when they saw me and all said 'hello'. I said 'hello' back to them

'Are you in Paris in holiday?' I asked Monica, hopefully.

'Sort of,' she replied. `I came over for a couple of days. On the train.' She watched the three girls disappear. 'You know a lot of women in Paris!' she said.

'Patients,' I said. 'They're all patients. You're staying here?'

She shook her head. 'No.' She mentioned the name of another hotel in Montmartre.

'Bad memories here?' I asked.

'Yes, but that's not why I'm staying somewhere else,' she replied.

Just then the waiter brought my omelette and the wine waiter brought the champagne. The bottle had not, of course, been opened. As the wine waiter prepared to unwrap the foil around the cork, I put a hand on his hand indicating that he should stop for a moment.

'Have you eaten?' I asked Monica.

She said she had.

'Do you mind if I eat at your table?'

'Not at all.'

'Would you share a bottle of champagne with me?'

'I'd love to.'

I turned to the wine waiter. 'Would you take back the half and bring a full bottle, please?'

He said he would be delighted to do so.

'And another glass?'

He looked at me and raised an eyebrow. 'I did not think madam would be drinking from the bottle,' he said, with a grin.

'So what made you choose to stay at another hotel?'

She was silent for a few moments, as though trying to decide whether or not to tell me something. 'Because I came to Paris hoping to see you,' she said at last. She flushed slightly. 'And I knew that if I stayed here, at this hotel, you would regard me as a patient rather than as a woman.' She smiled. 'Medical ethics; rules and regulations and all those things.'

'Oh!' I said, genuinely surprised.

'Are you shocked?' The blush was deeper now.

'No! Not in the slightest.' I started on my omelette which was, always, delicious. 'I'm very pleased,' I murmured. 'And flattered.'

'You haven't got married since I was here last?' she asked.

'No.'

'Engaged? Steady girlfriend?'

'Trappist monks have more girlfriends than I've had since I've been in Paris.' I held out a forkful of omelette. 'You simply have to try this,' I told her. 'It's delicious.' She took the omelette from the fork and nodded appreciatively.

As I ate a little of my omelette, Knickerless hurried past. She was dressed in a pair of bright pink hotpants and a matching halter top and was carrying a shoulder bag which, I guessed, was probably carrying one of those little credit card machines which are used to take payment from customers. The girls carried battery operated machines when they went out on what they called 'home visits'. The hotpants and the halter top had been intended for someone many sizes smaller.

'Hi doc!' she cried when she saw me. She gave me a big smile. I said 'Hi' but didn't say her name.

'Can't stop!' she cried. 'I've got a taxi waiting.'

'Another patient?' asked Monica, when she'd gone. She raised an eyebrow a quarter of an inch.

'Yes,' I replied, a little too firmly perhaps. 'Definitely just a patient.'

'The Trappist monks must do well in Paris!' she said.

'Just a patient,' I insisted. I would, I realised, have to explain about the Hotel du Joie sometime.

'I believe you,' said Monica.

The wine waiter arrived with another glass, an ice bucket and a bottle of champagne. It was, I noticed, Dom Perignon. I had been upgraded. The Dom Perignon was the most expensive wine on the list. I looked at him. Phillipe had never given me any limits but I had, out of a sense of decency, always ordered wines from the less expensive parts of the menu. The wine waiter studiously concentrated on removing the foil and the cork and pouring two glasses of the wine. He smiled at me and then rather floated away.

'Do you always drink champagne?' asked Monica, when he'd gone. The flush was fading.

'Not always.'

'Isn't Dom Perignon rather expensive?'

`Hideously so.' I felt I should explain. 'But fortunately I don't have to pay for it. My arrangement with the hotel covers food and wine.'

It occurred to me that I should have said something about being pleased that we had good wine; that the moment was special; that she deserved only the best. But I'm not good at expressing such sentiments so I said nothing and hoped that she could read my mind. Well, part of it anyway.

She raised her glass. I raised mine. We touched glasses. When we had both drunk a little of the champagne, and put down our champagne, I reached out and took her hand. She didn't move it away.

Suddenly, my life in Paris, which had been pretty damned good, and certainly a good deal better than the previous couple of years of my life, had become a whole lot more promising.

Note from the publisher: If you enjoyed this book, we would be grateful if you would post a positive review. Thank you.

The Kick-Ass A-Z for Over 60s

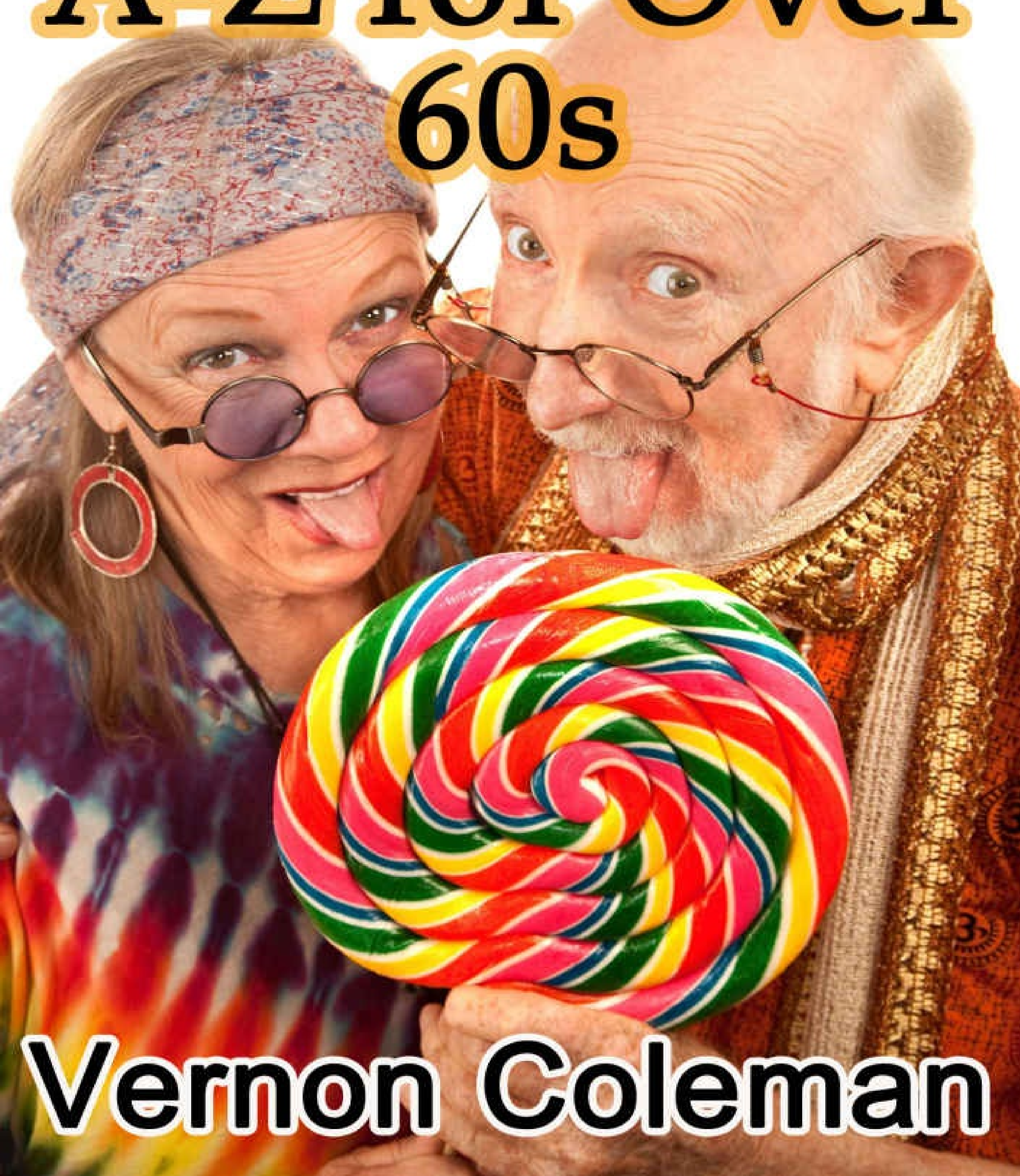

Vernon Coleman

The Kick-Ass A-Z for over 60s

Dr Vernon Coleman

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Vernon Coleman is a writer and the author of over 100 other books which have sold over two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK and been translated into 25 languages. Many of his books are available as Kindle books on Amazon. For a list of available eBooks please see Vernon Coleman’s author page on Amazon or visit www.vernoncoleman.com (formal attire not required). Vernon Coleman is a feisty post-reconstructed pre-millennial with revolutionary tendencies.

Dedication

As always, to my beloved Antoinette, with all my love. No one cares more and no one is loved more.

And in memory of my parents, Kathleen and Edward Coleman, both betrayed and killed by the combined efforts of half a hundred unsympathetic and incompetent health care staff who simply didn't care enough. Too numerous to mention they all know who they are. I would like to think they learnt something. But I fear that might be too much to hope for.

Introduction

Replace the knowing, depressing, pessimistic certainties of crabbed old age with a wild, unfettered imagination and with the hope and confidence-drenched ambition usually thought to be associated exclusively with the young.

Retain your freedom, dignity, independence and sense of humour. Stay young in spirit, start again at 65 and live another life for free.

Never let the bastards grind you down. (They will try. Believe me, they will try.)

And remember: if you are over 65, your government wants you dead. So screw ’em. Live a long, happy and boisterous second life. You owe it to yourself.

This is the beginner’s guide to older age; an A to Z handbook for the funny side of life.

Vernon Coleman

A

ABUSE

How unbelievably awful it is that doctors and nurses accept that the elderly (historically the over 65s, now the over 60s and soon to be the over 50s) must be allowed to die because keeping them alive isn't cost effective. The official attitude is that old people don't matter and don't have rights simply because they are old.

Some time ago, a Select Committee on Human Rights, comprised of MPs and peers, reported that 21% of British hospitals and care homes failed to meet even minimum standards of dignity and privacy for older people.

The Committee said it had uncovered evidence of neglect, abuse, discrimination and unfair treatment of frail, older people. Their discovery came as no surprise to those of us who have been uncovering such abuse for decades.

Nothing was done to correct their findings.

And it is generally agreed that since then things have deteriorated considerably.

ACTIVE

Try to remain as active as you can for as long as you can. Most people can still get around, even if they are frail and would find running a mile a bit of a challenge. Give yourself more time if you need to walk somewhere or go up a long flight of stairs. Take a rest every now and then. If anyone complains, hit them with a stick. (I recommend carrying a large stick even if you don’t need it for support. Sticks are very useful for hitting, prodding and poking people who have annoyed or patronised you. They are also useful for fending off over-friendly dogs who look hungry). Don’t be suckered into buying a mobility scooter. Too many people use mobility scooters when they don’t really need them. Leave mobility scooters for fat and lazy 29-year-olds who are doomed anyway.

Staying physically active can help you financially. Instead of hiring a gardener to mow your lawn, do it yourself for as long as you can. Instead of paying a bunch of Romanians to wash your car, buy a sponge and a hose and do it yourself.

AGEISM

We live in a politically correct world but the elderly don't count – particularly if they are white and English. Elderly patients in hospital are ignored by staff and left to starve to death, denied even water if they cannot get out of bed and fetch it themselves. It is common for elderly patients to be left in pain, lying in soiled bed clothes.

Old people are a burden which the governments have decided they cannot afford, and so the politicians will continue to authorise whatever methods are necessary to ensure that the number of burdensome old people is kept to a minimum.

In February 2011, an official UK report condemned the NHS for its 'inhumane treatment of elderly patients' and stated that NHS hospitals were 'failing to meet even the most basic standards of care' for the over-65s. Nothing was done to correct this.

It is no exaggeration to say that the NHS still treats the elderly with complete contempt. If animals were treated the same way there would, quite rightly, be an outcry. (It used to be said that you can judge a civilisation by the way it treats its elderly.)

The problem is that if you are over 65-years-old your government wants you dead. And so it is now official Government policy to ignore the needs of the elderly. Doctors and nurses are told to let old people die – and to withhold treatment which might save their lives. When doctors and nurses are employed by, and therefore owned by, the Government then the Government's priorities take over. And so the elderly, who are regarded as an expensive burden, are considered expendable. Hospital staff are told to deprive the elderly of food and water so that they die rather than take up valuable hospital beds. The only -ism that no one cares about is ageism.

The startling, sad truth is that ageism is today the acceptable face of prejudice, bigotry and discrimination. People who would not dream of expressing prejudice towards people of another colour or race will quite happily express outrageously prejudiced views about the elderly. Individuals who regard themselves as entirely free of bigotry will merrily express bigoted remarks about the elderly. And the desperately and determinedly politically correct who proudly consider themselves entirely free of any tendency towards discrimination will, apparently without regret, discriminate against the elderly without a second thought; apparently without any thought that they might be behaving badly.

Just a few generations ago, it was widely believed that citizens who had black skin were not entitled to be treated as fully paid up members of the human race. Within living memory, women were not allowed to vote because they were considered inferior to men. And it is only within the last few decades that homosexuality has become accepted behaviour.

Most people in our society now like to proclaim themselves to be 'liberal' in their attitude towards their fellow men and women. Anyone who uses any old-fashioned phrase now considered unacceptable by the 'thought-police' is likely to find themselves crushed by opprobrium. Anyone who makes a modestly patronising remark about women, homosexuals or members of any religious group is likely to find him or herself standing in the dock, grovelling, expressing remorse and apologising endlessly.

But it is, it seems, perfectly acceptable to abuse and mistreat anyone over a certain age without recourse.

It still staggers me that in the United Kingdom it has, for some years, been perfectly legal for doctors and nurses to murder anyone who can be described as 'elderly' and therefore regarded as an expensive and troublesome burden. And I find it difficult to believe (but it is a fact) that staff working in nursing homes are allowed to medicate the elderly against their will and without their knowledge; doping them with tranquillisers and sedatives in order to make them less troublesome to care for.

The truth is that individuals who sneer at the elderly are the same people who used to sneer at blacks, women, invalids and Jews. They are, to put it simply, prejudiced bigots.

There is a good deal that is wrong with health care these days.

We live in a world where it is considered acceptable for men and women to have to share a ward; where hospital bathrooms are so dirty that patients dare not use them; where dentists are so scarce and expensive that people have to resort to pulling their own bad teeth with the aid of a length of string tied to a doorknob.

But it is the elderly who, above all others, are regarded as disposable and irrelevant. It is the elderly who have no rights. Sexism and racism are outlawed but ageism is not. Indeed, ageism is now a State sponsored prejudice.

Violent, feral youths who are caught assaulting elderly law-abiding citizens are likely to be 'punished' with a fistful of vouchers entitling them to a handful of free CDs (the lyrics of which may well encourage more violence) but honest, elderly citizens who, cannot afford to pay their council tax bill will end up in prison.

Traditionally the elderly were consulted and regarded as repositories of wisdom, knowledge and experience. Not now. Today, the elderly are assumed to be slow-witted, out of touch and stupid. They are thrown on the scrapheap and patronised by 25-year-old 'know it alls' who spend their days reinventing the wheel and rediscovering stuff we knew decades ago. This is inevitable because they are young and ignorant, they have read little and they have experienced less. Worse still, they are too arrogant to ask or listen or even acknowledge that they might not know everything. We have to live in a world run by hubristic individuals with the emotional and intellectual age of 14-year-olds.

The age at which citizens are officially regarded as nothing more than a cumbersome nuisance has been falling steadily for years.

Today, anyone over the age of 65 is likely to be regarded as worthless. It has been repeatedly suggested that those over 65 should not be allowed to vote and that euthanasia for the over 65s should be made widely available (and involuntary). But those ages are falling rapidly.

The truth is that the commonest and most limiting factors affecting the elderly are not ill-health or disability but social and imaginary, a result of myth and prejudice and a deliberate, cold-blooded lack of care or caring.

Today, old age often leads to poverty, a lack of dignity and brutal indifference from vast swathes of society.

The elderly, above all others, live in a culture of neglect.

The current generation of oldies built their nation’s prosperity by hard work but they are now demeaned, harried, pushed around and, to a large extent, politically disenfranchised.

Being rude or patronising about oldsters is acceptable in the way that being rude about blacks, women, gays, etc., would not be allowed.

Younger people oppress the aged without seeming to realise that they themselves are one day going to join that oppressed minority.

The elderly who have physical weaknesses are ignored and isolated in a way we would never dream of ignoring or isolating a 30-year-old with the same problem. Surveys and television ratings stop at the age of 50. No one cares about the elderly or what they think or feel or want.

But most of all ageism is endemic in health care.

A reader wrote to tell me that when she visited her doctor complaining of painful knees her doctor told her, very abruptly, that her problem was that she was living too long. She was devastated. ‘It wasn’t said as a joke,’ she told me. ‘He meant it.’

In the months before he died, my father repeatedly complained: ‘People treat me like a fool because I am old’.

A 79-year-old reader told me: ‘If you are over 55 they want you dead because you’re too expensive alive.’

So, the bottom line is: stick up for yourself.

Remember the old man who went to see a doctor complaining of a pain in his left shoulder.

‘What do you expect, at your age?’ demanded the doctor gruffly.

‘My other shoulder is the same age, and that doesn’t hurt,’ replied the old man.

ATTITUDE

Around 75% of old age is down to attitude. You’re still the person that you were half a century ago. You’ve just been around for longer. Remember that most old people don’t feel any different inside.

AMBITION

Have five and ten year goals and ambitions.

Purpose will prolong your life more than anything. Ambitions will focus your attention and make your life more worthwhile.

Make a list of things you would like to do, want to do, intend to do and want to have done within your five and ten year time scales.

Don’t be satisfied with a dull bucket list of places you want to visit and silly things you want to do. Bigger ambitions will be far more satisfying.

Most people who have had great ideas had them early in life. This is not because young people are brainier than old people (they aren’t) but because when we are new to a subject we are less hampered by preconceived ideas. It is a lot easier to look at something with a fresh and creative eye when you have only been studying it for a relatively short period.

So, if you start to study new areas you will be more likely to come up with original thoughts.

If people changed jobs every decade or so they would get more out of life (and put far more into it) than they do. If cardiologists retrained as barristers or film directors or even as geriatricians they would be far more likely to have great new ideas.

For most of us this is impractical. But for the elderly it is an extremely practical notion.

Plan ahead. At 70, you can enjoy freedom and adventure you only dreamt of at 17 or 27 when your life was constrained by fears and the dread of embarrassment.

You had one life: now start again with the benefit of hindsight to enrich your expectations.

Life is too valuable to spend it surfing the bloody internet, reading a newspaper all the way through or watching daytime television.

If nothing else, remember that your government wants you dead. That should be incentive enough to hang around for as long as possible.

B

BASTARDS

Never let the bastards grind you down. The world contains far more than its fair share of bastards and the older you get the more you will realise that too often it is the bastards who make the rules and answer the telephone. If they are rude and aggressive to you, feel free to be rude and aggressive to them. If they complain and things get nasty, you can always use the ‘I’m old and a bit dotty’ as a get out of jail free card.

BED REST

Bed rest is a killer. It is no accident that loads of people die in bed. All sorts of terrible things happen if you stay in bed too long – especially if you're over the age of 60. Blood clots form in the veins, muscles waste, bones decalcify, lungs fill with fluid and the brain rapidly rots. Official statistics show clearly that far more people die in bed than die lying down in the middle of the road. Bed is a dangerous place.

BED SORES

The incidence of bed sores is increasing rapidly. There are exceptions but generally speaking, bed sores are a sign of incompetent nursing. In the bad old days, when hospitals were run by matrons and ward sisters, it was a sign of shame to find a patient with a bed sore. And that was before the introduction of ripple beds. These days, bed sores are endemic in many hospitals and institutions because nurses are too busy attending meetings to check their patients or turn them. If a patient develops a bed sore then it is generally speaking because the quality of nursing provided has been somewhere between poor and appalling. It is much easier to prevent a small bed sore from developing into a big one than it is to cure a big one.

BEETHOVEN

‘Take life by the throat’, said Beethoven who took his own advice and won his personal battle with life and deafness by a technical knock-out. (Then, when he was safely dead, the EU bastards nicked one of his best tunes as an anthem.)

BEREAVEMENT

You should not feel bad if you suffer enormously when you are bereaved. The fact is that bereavement for the old is just as painful as it is for the young. Ignore the soulless, crass morons who say things such as ‘He had a good innings’ or ‘Well she had a good, long life’ in the apparent belief that such drivel makes everything all right.

It has always confused me that people dismiss as merely inevitable, of very little consequence and almost irrelevant, when an old person dies.

The older person who has died almost certainly knew that he or she was dying and almost certainly didn’t want to die.

And the old person who dies is likely to have a spouse, a family, friends and neighbours who are likely to be devastated. They will have lost someone whom they have known for decades or more. And yet they will probably have to deal with their loss with very little support.

It is perfectly sensible, logical and proper for anyone who loses an elderly relative or friend to be devastated.

If you are close to someone who is elderly and frail, you should plan for bereavement.

You should be prepared for whatever economic and practical problems that will lie ahead. Most people who are bereaved find that they have to get through at least two months of confusion. They will be vulnerable, both physically and mentally, for at least a year.

Everyone (whatever their age) should make some plans for bereavement. It helps, for example, if basic bills (heating and so on) are paid by direct debit so that they do not get forgotten.

BLOODY MINDEDNESS

Bloody mindedness may not be a popular quality and it may not win you friends among life's prefects but it is, generally speaking, more of a virtue rather than a curse. 'Do not go gently into that good night' wrote Dylan Thomas in a remarkable moment of comparative sobriety.

The fact is that the bloody-minded live longer – especially if they are marooned in one of those appalling places we call hospitals, where the general aim of the staff is to send everyone over the age of 60 down to the morgue as quickly as possible.

You should complain a good deal and ask as many questions as you can think of; you should make a fuss and remind everyone in a uniform or a white coat that you are a human being; you should be forever aware of your dignity and your self-respect.

Sticking up for yourself might not make you popular but you aren't in hospital to make friends. Influencing people to regard you with more respect will mean that you will be treated better and you will, as a result, be more likely to survive the miserable experience.

BREAST CANCER

Breast cancer is one of the most constantly publicised and most greatly feared forms of cancer. Because of its very nature, it is a type of cancer which arouses much emotion. Newspapers, magazines and medical journals have for decades been full of articles describing new forms of treatment and the cancer charities, not known for their honesty or modesty, are forever boasting of new cures. Lies are spread, myths are created. Sadly, these boasts are generally invented in order to gain more funds and most are quickly forgotten. The medical journal, *The Lancet*, in an editorial, commented that: 'If one were to believe all the media hype, the triumphalism of the profession in published research, and the almost weekly miracle breakthroughs trumpeted by the cancer charities, one might be surprised that women are dying at all from this cancer.'

Only fairly recently was it finally admitted that the incidence of breast cancer was rising and that many cases of breast cancer are caused by diet.

For three decades I have been pointing out that breast cancer (probably above all others) is linked directly to diet and, in particular, to the consumption of cheap, fatty meat.

My attempts to publicise this proven truth were made infinitely more difficult by organisations such as the Advertising Standards Authority (which banned advertisements for my book *Food for Thought* because it truthfully linked cancer to meat consumption) and the Press Complaints Commission (which rolled over obediently when asked to do so by the meat trade and condemned me for daring to publicise the truth about the meat-cancer link).

Since 1942, there has been steadily accumulating evidence to show that there is a link between breast cancer and dietary fat. Breast cancer could have been turned into a relatively uncommon disease, instead of one of the major killers of women, if politicians and doctors had been prepared to take on the food industry – and force the cancer industry to spread the truth.

But how many doctors now advocate a low fat, meat free diet for women who are regarded as susceptible to breast cancer? Very few – if any. Most prefer to prescribe drugs or to recommend the surgical removal of healthy breasts.

Where, sadly, is the financial profit opportunity in merely recommending a dietary change?

There has been much talk of a breast cancer gene (BRCA-1) but there isn't really any such thing. There is no gene which *causes* breast cancer. There is, however, a gene which increases a woman's chances of developing cancer. And women with this gene can dramatically reduce their risk of developing breast cancer by avoiding the factors which are known to be associated with breast cancer. They should, for example, avoid becoming overweight, cut out meat completely and eat a low fat diet. Women who are overweight have more fat in their bodies and are more likely to develop cancer of the breast. The modern 'scientific' approach (to remove the healthy breasts of women who have the breast cancer gene) is barbaric and unnecessary.

In my book *2020* (which was published in 2010) I forecast that the incidence of breast cancer in China would rise. It was not a difficult prediction. The Chinese people, growing in wealth, are dramatically increasing their intake of meat. When the same thing happened in Japan a few years ago, the result was a dramatic increase in the incidence of breast cancer in Japanese women. The ones who stuck to a low-meat traditional Japanese diet were far less likely to develop breast cancer when compared to the women who changed to a high-meat American style diet. Just a little more than a year after I wrote *2020* it was revealed that my prediction was already coming true.

The main problem is that the meat sold today causes far more cancer than ever before because it is fattier than ever and the fat is full of carcinogens.

There are two reasons for this.

First, farmers who sell heavy, fatty animals get more money than they would get for thinner, lighter animals.

Second, farmers use carcinogenic chemicals on their farms. And those chemicals end up in the animal's fat.

It is these two facts which explain why the incidence of cancer always rises when populations start eating more meat.

But why is the incidence of breast cancer particularly likely to rise?

The answer to that is simple too.

When animals eat toxic substances such as carcinogenic chemicals which have been sprayed on the grass or put into the food they eat, the deadly chemicals are stored in the animals' fatty tissues.

The fattier the animal is, the more carcinogens it will have stored in its body. And, when it is killed and eaten, those carcinogens will be consumed by the person eating the meat. And, as with animals, the carcinogens will tend to gravitate to, and be stored in, the fatty tissues.

And the human breasts contain a good deal of fat.

Indeed, there is remarkably little actual breast tissue in a breast. Most of the breast is fat. And the bigger the breast the more fat there is likely to be. This is why breast cancer is commoner among older women. They tend to have more fat on their bodies in general and to have bigger and fattier breasts in particular. Poorer people tend to eat fattier meat. That's why poor people tend to get more cancer than rich people.

But sadly, as I’ve already said, instead of discouraging women from eating meat, doctors prefer to remove healthy breasts from women considered genetically susceptible to breast cancer.

Utter bloody madness!

CANCER

Cancer is, along with heart disease, stroke and doctors, one of the four big killers of our time.

But cancer is undoubtedly the killer that frightens people most. The very word is so emotive that most doctors try not to use it when talking to patients. Instead of talking of cancer they talk of 'tumours' and 'growths'. They know that cancer is something most people don't even like to talk about so they don't talk about it either.

In order to ensure that money continues to pour in, the cancer industry must persuade potential contributors and supporters that it is making progress in the fight against cancer. And so there are frequent news releases about exciting new cancer remedies. Some of these widely promoted new treatments are in the early stages of being tested on human patients, some have not yet being tested on humans but are promoted as the new 'wonder' cure for cancer on the basis of preliminary and entirely unreliable animal experiments, and some are talked about as new 'breakthroughs' largely or even exclusively on the basis of a scientist's theory or hypothesis.

These news stories raise hopes falsely and distract attention and finance from those areas which really need it (the prevention of cancer and the care of those who have cancer) but they serve the purpose: they raise money for the cash-hungry cancer industry.

Generally speaking, the cancer industry is a failure. Mortality figures show that more people are dying from commoner forms of cancer now than they were a generation ago. One in three people already has, or will develop, cancer.

The fact that the incidence of cancer has increased dramatically during the 20th and 21st centuries confirms the view that cancer is, to a large extent, a man-made disease, created largely by our changing diet and our addiction to tobacco and meat as well as our exposure to chemicals and pollution. Researchers found only one case of cancer among hundreds of Egyptian mummies and by the 19th century, cancer was still a relatively uncommon disease. According to Garrison's *History of Medicine* the disease only began to show an 'alarming increase' in the early part of the 20th century.

It is strange, is it not, that so many campaigners spend much public money on promoting the dubious notion that man-made climate change is threatening our planet's existence but spend nothing at all on sharing the provable truth that cancer is, very largely, a man-made disease and its influence can, therefore, be limited.

Scientists who have assessed the value of the war against cancer agree that we are losing the fight and that there is no evidence to suggest that decades of expensive research have had much, if any, effect on the most fundamental measure of success or failure – death.

In areas where cancer has become more amenable to treatment, or now takes fewer lives, it is usually changes in lifestyle which are responsible – not discoveries made in the laboratory.

There are, I believe, several reasons why those fighting the war against cancer are losing.

In my book *Paper Doctors* (published in 1977) I complained that: 'Medical researchers involved in publicly or charitably financed cancer research, persist in looking for the 'magical cure'.'

Much laboratory work has been started on the mistaken assumption that there is one disease called 'cancer' and that there will be a 'cure' which will enable doctors to treat all the patients suffering with cancer. Many projects have been funded because organisers (both qualified and lay) believed that they might solve the problem of cancer once and for all to the well-publicised credit of everyone concerned. The cancer industry still spends a vast fortune every year searching for the silver bullet. According to one honest observer: 'Basic cancer research is an excellent slush fund for molecular biologists but it won't have any impact on cancer'.

The bottom line is that cancer is created by chemical pollutants, by unhealthy, fatty, food and by tobacco. Poisoned water supplies, dangerous prescription drugs and the overuse of X-rays have also contributed to the incidence of cancer.

With immune systems constantly battered by polluted air, adulterated and chemically impregnated food, and a constant onslaught from the drugs we buy for ourselves, or allow our doctors to prescribe for us, it is not surprising that increasing numbers of people succumb to one of the many different types of cancer.

It is astonishing but true that we know what causes 80% of all cases of cancer. Eight out of ten people who develop cancer could have been saved if money and effort had been put into prevention. If I had the annual income the cancer industry enjoys, I believe that I could turn cancer into a historical oddity within five years.

Sadly, however, the cancer research industry is exactly that – an industry. It is a massive, worldwide multi-billion dollar industry which employs hundreds of thousands of scientists and administrators. If the cancer industry spent its income on explaining to people how to avoid cancer, there would be little or no place for research laboratories and a great many scientists would be put out of work. Worse still, if the cancer industry reduced the number of people dying of cancer, its own income would fall. This may sound cynical but it is the truth.

And so it is the scientists searching for laboratory cures who get the big grants and the prestigious awards and who are fussed over and praised by the politicians and the journalists.

Consumers quite like the idea of someone finding a 'cure' for cancer because it means that they can carry on eating the fatty food they like and smoking the cigarettes they enjoy without having to worry.

Looking for a magical cure for cancer has been an expensive and unrewarding exercise.

Cancer treatment hasn’t been much, if any, better.

Generally speaking, the treatment methods of choice (surgery, chemotherapy and radiation therapy) have not improved mortality rates. There have been some very important advances in cancer treatment in recent years. But they have been largely limited to rare cancers that tend to occur in children and young adults, and those make up only perhaps one or two per cent of the total cancer burden. There has been little or no improvement in the death rates for the big killers: lung cancer, breast cancer, prostate cancer or cancer of the colon.

Governments have failed to teach their citizens the facts about cancer for two reasons.

First, governments are always wary of annoying big, powerful, tax-paying industries and there is absolutely no doubt that many huge, international corporations would be (to put it mildly) exceedingly upset if millions of potential consumers were, for example, warned of the dangers of eating meat.

Second, governments do not want people to live longer. On the contrary, they have a vested interest in people not living too long. People who live on into their 60s, 70s and 80s have to be given pensions and cost Governments a great deal of money.

Remember that we know what causes 80% of all cancers. If people ate less fatty food and avoided meat, the incidence of cancer would plummet.

And it is never too late to adjust your diet. The American National Academy of Sciences, has concluded that ‘cancers of most major sites are influenced by dietary factors’. It has been estimated that ‘a little more than 40% of cancers in men and almost 60% of cancers in women in the United States could be attributed to dietary factors’.

It is almost certainly the chemicals in fatty meat which cause cancer and there is no little irony in the fact that the pharmaceutical industry makes billions of dollars selling drugs for the treatment of cancers which some believe may have been created by its billion dollar sister industry: the chemical industry.

So, now you know.

Whether you do anything with the knowledge you have is entirely up to you.

CARE HOMES

The term ‘care home’ is a misnomer and is widely used to describe residential establishments where elderly folk are supposed to be ‘cared for’ but are too often regarded as cash cows and nuisances.

In the United Kingdom, one quarter of all care homes have been officially classified as unsafe and the real figure is undoubtedly much higher. This scary information is of no value, however, since the Government refuses to publish a list of the worst care homes.

My advice is that you should avoid all residential establishments which specialise in looking after the elderly. If you simply need to go somewhere safe and warm where you will be looked after, treated politely, provided with regular meals and able to sleep in clean sheets then I recommend that you move into a hotel. You will probably find the bills considerably lower, particularly if you negotiate a long-term rate, and you will be far less likely to catch one of the lethal infections which infest all hospitals and quasi hospital institutions. In a hotel, you won’t be given tea which has sleeping tablets dissolved in it, you will meet a wider variety of people and you may even have access to a swimming pool and a games room. In general hotels are better, cheaper and far more fun. No hotel would survive for long if it provided the sort of appalling food served up in health care institutions. And similarly no hotel would survive if the staff treated their residents in the same offhand way that most care home staff treat their patients.

CATARACT

Cataracts occur commonly in older eyes. Here’s a trick most doctors won’t bother to tell you: if you have a cataract you will be able to read more easily if you have a specific light directed onto the book you are reading, and turn off the room lights. Samuel Pepys knew this but most doctors don’t.

CELEBRITIES

Celebrity luvvies need publicity the same as the rest of us need oxygen and food.

In order to satisfy their craving, and feed their inestimably large egos, they need to pontificate (via Twitter and Facebook) at least six times a day. You cannot be a celebrity these days unless you have a Twitter account and a few million twats (as I believe they are called) following your every thought.

Sadly, however, I don't remember ever hearing the celebrity types who have appointed themselves as self-appointed saviours of mankind, talking much about old people.

The celebrity lefty luvvies who like to share their sympathy for Syrian refugees and asylum seeking terrorists know that they won't get quoted in the papers if they tweet about vanilla white old people freezing to death or struggling to live on one tin of beans a week.

Britain is rich enough to spend over £100 billion on a new rail link (widely regarded as unnecessary) between London and somewhere a bit further north. And we have for years apparently considered ourselves rich enough to waste billions every year on foreign aid (most of it is creamed off by greedy consultants and self-serving charities).

Oh, and, apparently, rich enough to pay £350 million a week for membership of the European Union.

And yet between 60,000 and 100,000 elderly citizens die of cold every winter in the United Kingdom.

How can we possibly call ourselves civilised when so many elderly citizens can't afford to keep warm in cold weather?

If 60,000 asylum seekers died of the cold, the liberal lefty luvvies would be twittering as fast as their fingers could fly. They would be appalled. They would demand action.

But they don't give a toss about elderly Britons.

The elderly are our oppressed and forgotten people.

More than a million old people who have trouble surviving receive no help whatsoever. Nothing.

Moreover, a contact working in an English hospital tells me that elderly patients are deliberately put onto wards where the killer infection caused by the MRSA bug is endemic in order to get rid of them as quickly as possible.

(Could this be one of the reasons hospitals seem apparently reluctant to take the simple steps that would eradicate killer, antibiotic resistant bugs?)

In every conceivable way, the elderly are poorer today than ever before.

And yet our politicians don't give a stuff. As far as they are concerned, the elderly are merely a nuisance. And an expensive nuisance at that. (Worse still, they tend to be patriotic, remember Hitler and want to leave the EU.)

And the Entitlement Generation are too busy thinking of themselves to give a toss about the elderly.

What the politicians and the Entitlement Generation forget is that one day they too will be old.

By then they will have helped build a society in which anyone over the age of 60 is regarded as worthless and disposable.

CENTARIANS

When several hundred American centarians were questioned about their health, a pleasing 17% said their health was excellent, a delightful 39% said it was good, a modest 33% said their health could only be described as fair and only 9% said their health was poor or very poor.

Live a healthy enough life to get to 100 and you will probably stay reasonably healthy.

CHARITIES

Most charities are bad organisations and, despite their claims and their advertisements, they are not your friend. Not a few organisations which claim to care for the elderly have been exposed as taking advantage of older citizens. Most such charities have very high paid salaries and a good proportion of the money they raise is spent on huge salaries, fat pensions and generous pension accounts. I wouldn't trust any large, national charity to help me across the road.

Charities are big business these days and even the well-known, apparently respectable ones, are intolerably aggressive, greedy, demanding. Most charities spend most of their money on salaries and marketing – with surprisingly little of the loot going to the intended source.

Worse still, charities relentlessly harass the elderly because they know they tend to be kinder and more susceptible to a sob story than others. And the minute you give money to one charity you will become a target. They will mail you time and time again. They will harass you on the telephone and by email. They will send people round to knock on your door. And they will sell your name and details to other grasping charities too.

My advice is that you should never, ever give your address or bank account details or credit card details to a so-called charity worker – especially one who stops you in the street. Most of these are chuggers, hired on behalf of large charities to solicit contributions. They have no interest in the charity concerned and a good chunk of your money will go to the company which employs them. You will be better served, and you will serve your community more effectively, by giving whatever you want to give to small, specific local charities which are run by honest, committed and genuinely well-meaning volunteers and which have a clear, specific purpose.

And, remember, don't trust a charity to provide you with honest advice on any issue.

Other organisations which claim to provide services for the elderly are businesses which have made millions by targeting the vulnerable.

So, for example, I used to have house insurance with a company specialising in providing cover for the elderly until I discovered I could buy exactly the same cover elsewhere at a quarter of the cost.

CHECK UPS

Most health check-ups are a waste of energy and time and more likely to do harm. (See Screening below.) The two exceptions are eye tests and dental check-ups. Eye tests are useful because a properly done test should include a test for glaucoma (a condition which can cause blindness if left untreated). Dental checks are useful partly because rotting teeth and ill-fitting dentures can make life painful and miserable but also because tooth infections are a possible cause of deadly sepsis.

Don’t bother paying for a medical check-up.

And those check-ups offered by a GP are usually likely to do more harm than good. It is a good idea to have your blood pressure checked every six months or so but you don’t need a doctor or a nurse to do that. You can buy an effective sphygmomanometer (blood pressure testing machine) quite cheaply. Check your blood pressure every three months or so. If it seems high then sit quietly and then take it again a couple of minutes later. Do this three times. If the reading is still high then visit your doctor and ask him to take it.

It is also a good idea to get to know your own body and to learn to spot any changes or abnormalities.

You should see a doctor without delay if:

You have any unexplained bleeding – from anywhere.

You have any unexplained pain which recurs or which lasts more than five days. (Obviously, severe pain needs to be investigated without delay.)

You need to take any self-prescribed medicine for five days or more.

You notice any persistent change in your body (e.g. a loss or gain in weight, a paralysis of any kind or the development of any lump or swelling).

Any existing skin lump, wart or blemish of any kind changes size or colour or bleeds.

You notice new symptoms when you have received medical treatment.

There are mental symptoms present, such as confusion, amnesia, paranoia, disorientation or severe depression

CHOLESTEROL

There are over nearly ten million people in Britain now taking cholesterol-lowering ‘superdrugs’. In July 2008, it was revealed that these drugs might cause problems. Readers of my book *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You* have been aware of the problems associated with these drugs since 1996. Despite the dangers, the cholesterol lowering drugs are widely advertised and promoted – even though I don’t believe there is evidence that these drugs are safe or useful enough for such mass consumption.

In January 2011, it was reported that seven million people in the UK were taking drugs called statins, theoretically to prevent heart attacks. Encouraged by the drug industry, GPs were, at a huge cost to the NHS, prescribing the damned things for everyone with a pulse.

The big joke is that no one really knows whether reducing cholesterol levels does more harm than good.

The big drug companies that make all this junk are, of course, laughing all the way to the bank.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Medical confidentiality is now a historical concept. The medical profession has abandoned all pretence at offering patients anything remotely resembling confidentiality. Everything you tell your doctor will be regarded as suitable to be disseminated publicly. I am not exaggerating. For many years, I fought for the principle of medical confidentiality. I lost. The General Medical Council has destroyed the principle of confidentiality.

COVERT MEDICATION

It is now common practice in care homes, nursing homes and hospitals for staff to use nasty, little tricks in order to persuade their patients to take tranquillisers and sedatives. This is, of course, not done for the sake of the patients but for the sake of the staff. Patients who lie in bed all day, doing nothing, saying nothing and asking for nothing are much easier to look after than patients who are alert and alive to the fact that they are treated by a bunch of psychopaths masquerading as nursing staff. Medicines are routinely hidden in food or drink so that residents do not know that they are being drugged. And relatives will not be made privy to the secret. Covert medication is common and, surprisingly, it is entirely legal.

As a general rule, if you go into any sort of residential home or hospital and find the majority of the residents sitting in chairs or lying in bed, silent and unspeaking, then the chances are high that everyone has been covertly medicated so that the staff can spend their days playing cards, watching television, reading the newspaper, gossiping or, on fine days, sitting out in the garden catching a few rays.

CROOKS

There have always been crooks around who will take advantage of the innocence, naivety and gentle nature of the elderly. The advent of the internet has made it easy for financial tricksters to steal your money by emptying your online bank account. Banks have made life very easy for thieves.

Never answer questions about your money on the phone or on the internet.

The smiling rogues who ring your doorbell and tell you that your roof needs repairing or your drive needs relaying are crooks. No honest workman does this.

People who knock on your door and offer to appraise your antiques are really there because they want to steal your purse – or buy your valuables at a rock bottom price.

Even residential homes are packed with crooks who know all sorts of clever ways to part you from your belongings.

In many such long-stay homes, it is common for a member of staff to remove all rings and other jewellery from a deceased resident. They will hope that the relatives do not notice that these possibly valuable items have disappeared. If you remember and ask for them within a month or so, they will produce a small envelope containing the missing items and tell you that they were keeping them for you until you asked for them but that they didn’t like to bother you with such an issue until you had recovered from the shock of bereavement. If you ask for the jewellery after a month or so, they will deny all knowledge of it.

D

DATING

If you are over 65 and dating, you can enjoy the fact that you are unlikely to have to meet your companion’s parents.

DEMENTIA

Dementia is one of the things that worry the elderly most. They should not be so concerned for two reasons.

First, it is nowhere near as common as the media and the Alzheimer charities suggest it is.

Second, despite the lies told by the Alzheimer charities, and repeated by sloppy journalists, most dementia is curable.

Read that last bit again: despite the lies told by self-serving charities and ill-informed journalists, most cases of dementia are curable.

The reluctance of the media to provide honest, objective advice about dementia is, I fear, a sign of the times.

Most daily newspapers in the UK carry stories about Alzheimer's (which is invariably confused with dementia) but their stories are usually a disgraceful mixture of hypothesis, self-promoting nonsense, rumour and myth. *The Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail* seem to me to be the worst offenders. No newspapers have reported the simple but reassuring truth – that many alleged cases of dementia are reversible or treatable – lest this distract from their scaremongering, headline grabbing nonsenses.

The truth is that you should not worry unduly about dementia. It is a devastating problem but it is relatively uncommon and often curable.

Doctors and nurses and other health care professionals who tell you that it's never curable are stupid and ill informed and should be put into the stocks so that we can all throw rotten vegetables at them. They should then be fired.

As a matter of fact, the incidence of dementia among the elderly is around 7% and that is considerably lower than the incidence of insanity among 20 to 30-year-olds.

The incidence of dementia seems high because Alzheimer patients in particular tend to live fairly normal life spans and so there seem to be a lot of them about. (People don't die of Alzheimer's as is commonly reported. People who are suffering from Alzheimer's disease usually die of pneumonia or they are starved to death by hospital or nursing home staff. Tragically, this is not an exaggeration, it is a fact.)

So, what types of dementia can be cured?

First, there is the type of dementia caused by a disease called normal pressure hydrocephalus. Most doctors have never heard of this. Many specialists have never heard of it. But it is a major cause of dementia and it can be cured. (See the entry NORMAL PRESSURE HYDROCEPHALUS).

Second, there is the type of dementia caused by prescription drugs.

It is fact that many of the residents who reside in old folks' homes, rest homes and nursing homes are (with the cooperation of a bad doctor) sedated with prescription drugs. This is done to reduce the workload and to keep the place looking tidier. The elderly residents are also frequently encouraged to remain inactive and undemanding.

As a result, the incidence of dementia is vastly overestimated. Thousands of alleged Alzheimer sufferers would recovery in days if they were taken off their damned medication for it is a sad fact that the commonest cause of confusion in the elderly is not dementia but overmedication. Countless thousands have been drugged and the results of their drugging sometimes mimics Alzheimer's and sometimes creates Alzheimer's through disuse atrophy. Muscles atrophy if we don't use them and so does the brain.

There are many myths and confusions about dementia in general and Alzheimer's disease in particular. It is said that dementia is uncommon among smokers. This is true. But it is only true because most smokers die before the sort of age when dementia is likely. It is said that dementia is commoner among individuals who do not have loving families. If this is true it is because elderly individuals without loving families are likely to be living alone in a nursing home of some kind and likely therefore to be drugged into submission. I cannot stress sufficiently that many elderly patients who appear to be demented are, in fact, confused because they have been drugged with tranquillisers, sedatives or sleeping tablets. It is said that massive exposure to stress damages the brain in a way which makes dementia more likely. This is true.

You can safely ignore newspaper articles telling you that large quantities of curry, sherbet dip or candyfloss will prevent or cure Alzheimer's disease. These silly articles are written by ignorant journalists who should be encouraged to go bungee jumping without the rope.

Your chances of developing dementia can, however, be reduced by avoiding excess weight, dealing effectively with high blood pressure, stopping smoking, taking regular exercise, controlling diseases such as diabetes and maintaining social contact with other human beings.

However, the best way to prevent or delay or slow down dementia is to keep your brain active by writing your autobiography, learning a language, doing crossword puzzles, playing chess, backgammon or bridge, or working your way through a selection of brain teasers. This doesn't always work but it's the best known therapy and it has the advantage of sharpening the brain.

Finally, and I make no apology for repeating this, do not forget that a large number of patients who present with dementia, and who are misdiagnosed as suffering from Alzheimer's disease, are suffering from Normal Pressure Hydrocephalus which is curable with a fairly simple operation.

Oh, and one other thing: not being able to remember a name or two doesn’t mean you’re developing dementia. It’s normal.

DIGNITY

When you become older, you will find that your dignity is constantly under threat. You will be ignored, disrespected, humbled, humiliated and patronised.

To avoid these horrors you must be assertive. Object strongly if you hear phrases such 'old biddy', 'dirty old man', 'granny' or grandpa. These are the equivalent of calling someone a 'nigger' or a 'paki'.

Don't allow people to call you by your first name unless you want them to and are allowed and encouraged to call them by their first names. (I wrote a novel about a character called Mr Henry Mulligan who insists on being called 'Mister Mulligan'.)

The aged are venerable and entitled to be treated with esteem. This is a right.

The whole process of dehumanising is complex and commonplace.

For example, people (particularly in the health care businesses) who know that I am a doctor but retired often make a point of calling me Mr as though to make it clear that I am no longer a doctor. It is part of the studied humiliation of the elderly. I haven't lost my qualifications but I'm made to feel useless and irrelevant.

Well, they try.

DISABILITY

Disability isn’t a consequence of old age – it is a consequence of illness or accident. There are lots of old people who aren’t disabled and there are lots of young people who are disabled.

The assumption that anyone who is over the age of 65 must also be disabled is a dangerous myth born of a marriage between ignorance and prejudice.

Road signs which warn motorists that elderly folk may be crossing the road, and then accompany the warnings with pictures of decrepit looking hunchbacks, are patronising and are doing a great disservice. They are perpetuating a dangerous prejudice which is easily turned into active discrimination.

Would anyone dare put up a sign saying ‘Black people crossing’?

What are the chances of the council putting up a sign saying ‘Gays crossing’ or ‘Beware transsexuals crossing’?

There would be rioting in the nation’s universities and the celebrity twats on twitter would explode with outrage.

DISCRIMINATION

Older citizens are oppressed, ignored and discriminated against. There can be no doubt that discrimination against the elderly is the last remaining stronghold occupied by the prejudiced and the bigoted. Discrimination against individuals on the basis of skin colour, sex or religion has long been considered unpleasant, indefensible and illegal. But discrimination against the elderly is commonplace and entirely legal.

Some of the ways in which the elderly are discriminated against are, arguably, well-intentioned. They are, however, still examples of discrimination.

Colleges which offer special classes in computing skills, art or languages for the elderly probably did so in the belief that they are providing a valuable service.

But I wonder if they would feel so pleased with themselves if they offered special classes for blacks, Jews, homosexuals or women?

Can you imagine the outcry if a college advertised an introductory class in computing exclusively for homosexual students?

The elderly are neither stupid nor slow and those who wish to study a subject can manage just as well, thank you very much, in a class organised for everyone.

Some publishers fall into the same trap – offering special books on computing for the elderly. The very idea of publishing books on general subjects especially for the elderly is invariably and inevitably patronising.

Can you imagine seeing a poster advertising college classes: 'The Special Computer Class for Jews Will Start When the Art Class for Homosexuals Has Finished.'

Some even more toxic forms of discrimination are commonplace.

First, and most notably, is the commonplace requirement that individuals retire from work when they reach a certain, arbitrarily selected, age. There are laws against age discrimination but they are observed about as strictly as the laws requiring dogs to be kept on leads in public places – that it is to say they are not observed at all.

Second, there is the discrimination against those drivers who have reached an age which the authorities decide, without any evidentiary justification, requires that an individual lose their licence or be required to take an additional test. This example of discrimination can cause enormous hardship. The evidence shows quite clearly, of course, that the authorities would reduce accidents on the road far more effectively if they were to ban anyone under the age of 25 from driving at all. (Anyone looking for evidence for this could simply look at the fact that insurance companies, not known to act without the support of reliable evidence, invariably charge reduced premiums for elderly drivers and increased premiums for younger drivers.)

Third, it is probably not widely known, but NHS staff frequently make decisions about which patients will be saved and which will be allowed to die. The elderly come at the bottom of the list when decisions like this are being made.

This is a lethal form of discrimination.

The problem is that because of all the money spent on administration and used in providing non-essential treatments, there simply aren't enough resources to provide for everyone in genuine need. The rules which have to be followed mean that people with children take precedence over people who don't have children. So a scrounger who has never done a day's work in his life, but who has 12 kids, will take precedence over someone who works hard, pays taxes and plays an important role in society. The sensible and hard-working always lose out in every conceivable way. I have a vision that before long, the NHS will introduce a reality television programme called *Who lives? Who dies? You decide?.* Twelve patients needing kidney transplants will all take part in the programme and 'sell' themselves to the audience. The winner will receive the transplant and the NHS will keep all the phone line money. The awful, awful thing is that I cannot convince myself it could not happen.

DISEASE

Wobbly or unstable 70-year-olds don’t wobble because they are old. They wobble or are unstable because there is something wrong with them. Not all old people wobble or are unstable but some young people do wobble and are unstable.

It is sometimes said that very few diseases are exclusive to the elderly but actually there are none.

So, for example, hearing and vision problems can arise at any age – though the confidence tricksters flogging hearing aids target the elderly because they tend to be lonely, nervous and gullible.

What a great business model that is.

DOCTORS

Family doctors often boast that they specialise in women's problems or paediatrics (and this is especially true now that so many of the doctors are women) but very, very few family doctors express a special interest in caring for the elderly.

Indeed, it is a sad fact that too many doctors now seem convinced that anyone over 70 isn't really worth treating, though the vast majority can live good, productive, useful lives, and contribute a great deal more to society than they already have.

Doctors dislike elderly patients for a variety reasons.

First and foremost, of course, they dislike the elderly because they have been taught to dislike the elderly. In the UK, the official government policy is to kill off as many old people as possible. In hospitals this is done, with official approval, by withholding food, drink and potentially life-saving medication. Since GPs are trained in hospitals, it is hardly surprising that they carry this prejudice with them when they become family practitioners.

Many young GPs also dislike elderly patients because they fear they will be a nuisance and take up a disproportionate amount of time. (This fear should be, but is not, assuaged by the fact that the Government pays GPs more money for looking after older patients than it pays them for looking after young patients).

Doctors also dislike the old because they fear they may die even when they are being treated and therefore reinforce the fear that the doctor herself is incompetent in some way.

And, of course, doctors don't like patients who die because every death is a reminder that we are all mortal and that however important we are, life always leads inexorably towards death.

Have absolutely nothing to do with doctors who tell you that you are 'lucky to be around' or who ask 'what do you expect at your age?' when you ask them for advice.

Finally, here are four ways in which GPs can make huge amounts of extra money by exploiting their patients:

By over diagnosing

Doctors receive huge extra fees if they diagnose patients as suffering from particular health problems such as dementia. Be careful not to allow your doctor to label you as suffering from disorders such as COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease). The doctor may fill his wallet with extra cash but you risk carrying a possibly inaccurate label with you for life. And once you are labelled, doctors will want to give you drugs you may not need. The drug companies love this. But the unnecessary drugs may kill you.

By vaccinating

Doctors receive massive fees for vaccinating patients. And they get additional huge fees for reaching official vaccination targets. Many doctors 'push' vaccines on patients so that they can make more money. It is common for nurses to give the jabs and doctors to pocket the fees. Doctors now routinely target patients with letters advocating vaccination. Some doctors even threaten to withhold essential treatment from patients who refuse vaccination. And yet anyone who claims all vaccines are safe and effective is lying.

By using patients as drug company guinea pigs

Doctors can earn big money by doing 'trials' for drug companies. If your doctor gives you drugs that don't need a prescription – and asks you back to the surgery for frequent check-ups – then you are probably being used as a guinea pig for a new drug. You may be happy about this. But your doctor should tell you what is happening. Most don't. And remember most new drugs are merely commercial variations on existing drugs which work perfectly well. You may be taking health risks for no advantage to you or anyone else.

By accepting too many drug company gifts

Look around: if your doctor's surgery and reception area are littered with promotional pens, mugs and other free gifts then your doctor may be spending too much time with drug company reps – and her or his prescribing habits may have been influenced by the salesperson. Good doctors get their prescribing information from journals and lectures and do not waste time seeing drug company sales reps.

DRUGS

Most doctors are obsessed with drug therapy. Many don't seem to have heard of the variety of effective non-drug solutions which now exist. If it doesn't come in a blister pack and isn't packaged by one of the world's big drug companies, they don't believe it can possibly do any good.

Drug companies need to be regarded with great scepticism for they are (together with the food and tobacco industries) one of the three major modern threats to human health.

The fact is that patients and drug companies have diametrically opposed interests. The patient wants to get better. But the drug company will make bigger profits if the patient remains ill – and continues to need to take drugs. Doctors have sold out to the drug industry and they have (as I pointed out almost half a century ago) become little more than a marketing arm of the world's most profitable industry.

Here are a few things all patients should know about prescription drugs:

1) Drug companies have, not surprisingly, welcomed and taken advantage of the medical profession's collective stupidity, greed and naivety. They have virtually taken over postgraduate medical education. Their advertising dominates medical journals. And as a result, most doctors (not just the bad ones) are obsessed with drugs because they simply aren't aware that there are other ways to deal with health problems.

2) A survey of over 2,000 patients admitted to hospital showed that within a ten year period, the number of drugs prescribed per patient had shown an increase of almost 50%. Today it is hard to avoid the conclusion that medicine is run for the benefit of large drug companies which make fortunes out of persuading gullible doctors to prescribe useless drugs. Persuading ill-informed doctors (and ignorant nurses who have demanded and been given the authority to prescribe) to prescribe their wretched products is a highly profitable business.

3) Most of the drugs which are prescribed have never been properly tested or proved to be of any use. The evidence for this apparently provocative claim can be found in books of mine such as *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You* and *Betrayal of Trust*. Even drug treatments which are well established have still not yet been properly evaluated. For example, doctors still don't know whether a course of antibiotics should be given for five, seven, ten or fourteen days for the best results. How many doctors know that new drugs are tested and licensed for safety (in a vague, entirely satisfactory sort of way it has to be said) but not for effectiveness?

4) Drugs are wildly overprescribed, both by hospital doctors and by general practitioners. It is now nearly 50 years since I first exposed the dangers of benzodiazepines and 30 years since a government admitted that it had introduced new legislation as a result of my campaign. But still benzodiazepines are overprescribed and still they are prescribed badly, without thought and without awareness of the often disastrous consequences for patients. Vast numbers of other drugs, including antibiotics and painkillers as well as antidepressants, are overprescribed.

5) Most doctors are so under the spell of the drug industry that they steadfastly and stubbornly refuse to acknowledge that 'alternative' or 'complementary' medical techniques have a great deal to offer. Gentle therapies, and gentle practitioners, are deliberately demonised by the drug industry controlled medical establishment. Orthodox doctors routinely lie about the value of alternative medicines. Anyone who says that alternative therapy never works for cancer, for example, is either very stupid, a sadist or simply woefully ill-informed. Or, most likely receiving a large grant or fee from a drug company.

6) A reader wrote to say that her late husband was a pharmacist for over 60 years. She said that although his daily job was dispensing medicines, he always preferred to use natural remedies himself. He was, she said, amazed at the length of time patients were kept on some drugs without any check to find out if they still needed them.

7) Even universities are now very closely linked to drug companies. Since 1988, British universities have been allowed to exploit the intellectual property they generate. As a result, academics around the world have become multimillionaires through working on new drugs while accepting university salaries. They and the drug companies then make fortunes out of the work done with taxpayers' money. Astonishingly, 45 out of the world's 50 top selling drugs were developed and or tested with taxpayers' money. So many academics have links to drug companies that there are now virtually no independent scientists in Britain. Corruption is embedded and endemic.

8) Every patient who takes a drug – even a well-tried drug – is participating in an experiment. Most doctors either do not understand this or they forget it in the heat of daily practice.

9) Doctors often prescribe several drugs at once; frequently prescribing two drugs which interact dangerously. The dangers of polypharmacy still fail to be recognised, even though interactions are common and can be deadly. Mixing common prescription drugs could kill and might exacerbate serious health problems such as dementia. I have been warning for many years that drug interactions are dangerous and deadly. In my book *The Medicine Men* (first published in 1975) I wrote: 'It is the problem of drug interactions which is likely to cause most controversy in the future. There are many possibilities. Metabolism of one drug may affect another. Drugs may react chemically together within the body and excretory rates may be modified with devastating results. Patent medicines and even foodstuffs may react.'

10) The drug industry has convinced doctors that everyone they see must need a drug and that there is a pill for every ill. The majority of doctors might as well be employed directly by the drug companies as pretend to be independent, authoritative scientists. They prescribe what they are told to prescribe in exactly the same way that the drug company representatives promote what they are told to promote. The fact that the medical profession is dominated and controlled by the pharmaceutical industry would not matter so much if the drug industry were honest, responsible and ethical. But it isn't. According to a survey published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* nearly two thirds of the pharmaceutical advertisements in medical journals were either grossly misleading or downright inaccurate. A total of 109 advertisements from 10 leading medical journals were each reviewed by two doctors and an academic clinical pharmacist. The reviewers used guidelines from the Food and Drug Administration to assess the advertisements. In 30% of cases, the independent reviewers disagreed with the advertiser's claim that the drug was the drug of choice. In 44% of cases, the reviewers thought that the advertisement would lead to improper prescribing if a doctor had no information about the drug other than that provided in the advertisement.

11) New diseases are 'discovered' all the time. You will excuse my cynicism, and my suspicion that these new diseases are discovered for a reason, when I tell you that most of these new diseases just happen to be enormously profitable. One of the most profitable is a disorder known as COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease) which is actually a relatively new catch all name for a variety of chest disorders including asthma, emphysema and chronic bronchitis. In the bad old days, patients with these individual disorders were treated as and when treatment was required. Today, the new philosophy seems to be that patients with COPD should take constant medication – whether they actually need it or not. Another new disease is 'isolated systolic hypertension'. Just a few years ago, doctors believed that only the diastolic figure was of significance when measuring blood pressure. The systolic, or higher figure, was regarded as of little consequence by itself. And then drug companies noticed that around 80% of all individuals over the age of 65 had normal diastolic pressures but systolic pressures that were high compared with younger patients. And so, surprise, surprise, a new disease came into being – 'isolated systolic hypertension' – and it became necessary for doctors to start treating the high systolic pressure.

12) Every doctor and every patient should remember that drug companies do not want to see patients cured or illness conquered. The drug industry wants to see as many people as possible suffering from long-term, incurable illnesses. The politicians want to see people die before they become old and dependant. If more money was spent on preventing cancer (around 80% of cancers are preventable and other diseases) then the average life expectancy would go up dramatically and the incidence of disease and disability would fall. But the drug industry doesn't want a healthy nation (it would sell fewer drugs) and the politicians don't want any more people living to an old age because they know that they would not be able to cope with the pension bills they would have to pay. The astonishing truth is that the drug industry needs to keep the voters ill in order to maintain its profits and the politicians want to help them achieve that aim. Drug companies do not want patients to be healed. Sick people are profitable. Healthy people are not. Turning people into chronic invalids is far more profitable than curing them.

13) Drug making is so crude that Severin Schwan the boss of Roche, the massive and powerful Swiss drugs firm which made a fortune out of benzodiazepines has said: 'Drugmaking is so crude that half of all known diseases cannot be treated at all, and the drugs for the other half work properly only half the time and with huge side effects.' Good to know. Every doctor should have those words engraved on his forehead.

14) There isn't a drug on the planet which can't do harm – and even kill people. It's the risk-benefit relationship which doctors (and patients) ignore. If a doctor gives you a drug without which you will die then the risks are almost inconsequential. But if you don't really need a drug and the drug makes you ill then the risk is unacceptable. Antibiotics save lives. But they also kill people. If you have an infection which might kill you then taking an antibiotic is a good thing. But if you have a viral infection then taking an antibiotic (which might

kill you) is pretty stupid. There's no benefit but a lot of risk. Some drugs are potentially useful. All drugs are potentially harmful.

15) Most people take far too many medicines – without knowing why they are taking them, what the medicine is designed to do, what the side effects might be and what might happen if the drug is not taken. Doctors have created generalised drug dependency among patients. The business of handing out drugs has become a part of the consultation ritual. When a doctor doesn't have the foggiest idea what to do, she reaches for the prescription pad. And, of course, many doctors use the prescription pad as a way to cut short a consultation. Not surprisingly, doctor-induced illness is now a major problem. It may often be easier to end a consultation by handing over a prescription or a medicine. But that doesn't mean that it is the right thing to do. On the contrary, doctors should be more responsible for this. They should educate their patients and they should only prescribe drugs when drugs are essential, useful and likely to do more harm than good.

16) Sadly, doctors know very little about the medicines they recommend to their patients. Most of the information they have comes directly from the company selling the product – which obviously has a vested interest in promoting the virtues and covering up the defects.

17) Since the end of the 1970s, I have argued that we need an international computerised drug monitoring service – designed to make sure that doctors in one part of the world know when doctors in other countries have spotted problems. Astonishingly, no such system exists. You might imagine that when a drug is withdrawn in one country other countries will take similar action. But you would be wrong. One drug that was officially withdrawn from the market in the USA and France was not officially withdrawn in the UK until five years later.

18) The majority of illnesses do not need drug treatment. Most patients who visit a doctor neither want nor expect drug treatment. But at least eight out of ten patients who visit a general practitioner will be given a prescription (though growing numbers of patients do not take the drugs that are prescribed for them).

19) It is now widely accepted that at least 40% of all the people who are given prescription medicines will suffer uncomfortable, hazardous or potentially lethal side effects. And yet the vast majority of doctors never admit that their patients suffer any side effects. In Britain, for example, five out of six doctors have never reported any drug side effects to the authorities – authorities who admit that they receive information on no more than 10% - 15% of even the most serious adverse drug reactions occurring in patients. In other words, they admit that they never hear about at least 85% - 90% of all dangerous drug reactions. It is even accepted that some doctors will withhold reports of serious adverse reactions, and keep their suspicions to themselves, in the hope that they may later be able to win fame by publishing their findings in a journal or revealing their discovery to a newspaper or magazine. There is a free list of possible side effects for many of the most popular prescription drugs on my website www.vernoncoleman.com).

20) Ironically, although we consume greater and greater quantities of medicine than ever before, more of us are ill today than at any time in history. On any day you care to choose in just about any developed country you care to mention over half the population will be taking a drug of some kind. A survey of 9,000 Britons concluded that one in three people suffers from a long-standing illness or disability. Other surveys have shown that in any one 14 day period, 95% of the population consider themselves to be unwell for at least a few of those days. At no time in history has illness been so commonplace. We spend more than ever on health care but no one could argue that there is any less suffering in our society.

21) The medical profession, the drug industry and the regulatory bodies all accept that the hazards of using any particular drug will only be known when the drug has been given to large numbers of patients for a considerable period of time. But no one monitors drugs which are given and it is only when a problem becomes truly widespread that anyone notices.

22) In October 2008, it was finally admitted that taking aspirin to prevent heart attacks might do more harm than good. Prior to that date, many doctors were recommending that healthy patients took daily aspirin as a prophylactic. But there was never any convincing evidence showing that taking daily aspirin was wise. I had been so alarmed by the early research that I warned the instant it was published that the evidence didn't prove taking aspirin routinely was either safe or effective. My advice was ignored and sneered at but you have to ask yourself who benefitted most from the suggestion that vast numbers of healthy people should take a daily drug? Sir Richard Doll, who did some research on this issue, was, like many members of the medical establishment, later discredited. After his death, it was revealed that he, like so many other eminent doctors, had received consultancy payments from chemical companies whose products he had defended. For example, he received

$1,500 a day from Monsanto (one of the world’s most disgusting companies) and had a ‘relationship’ with them from 1976 until 2002. Pity we weren’t told this when the miserable bastard was alive. All doctors should have to declare publicly any money or gifts they have received from drug or other companies.

23) In Britain, doctors are not allowed to prescribe drugs for serious health problems which exclusively affect the elderly but they are allowed to spend untold hundreds of millions on infertility, cosmetic surgery and sex change operations – all of which are optional and none of which are life threatening problems.

E

EMPLOYMENT

Sensible employers realise that older folk make better and more reliable employees. Statistics show that older employees have less time off work, are involved in fewer accidents and have fewer disabling injuries. Older employees work harder, their productivity is better and they are less likely to spend all the time tweeting, faffing around with their Facebook page or complaining that the company policy in 1871 was demeaning to one-legged Lithuanians. Older employees are unlikely to become pregnant or to need time off work because their kids' teachers are on strike. A growing number of employers, particularly those running small businesses, realise that employing a woman of child bearing age is like sitting on a time bomb. If you hire someone who turns out to be pregnant then she can take a year off work and the employer is not allowed to replace her. So that's another reason for hiring older folk. It is sometimes assumed that only geniuses, judges and politicians can continue to work after the age of 65. This is bollocks. The elderly are more likely to be useful and effective than any other group. Old people, like old cars, are more interesting. They can be enormously rewarding and maintenance costs in the long run are usually much lower.

EUTHANASIA

Euthanasia (sometimes admitted and sometimes not) is now commonly practised. The elderly are invariably the victims.

For many years in the UK, doctors and nurses were encouraged to follow something called the Liverpool Care Pathway. This was a murderers' charter, which allowed doctors and nurses to withhold food, water and essential treatment from patients who were over 65 and who are, therefore, regarded as an expensive and entirely disposable nuisance. The Liverpool Care Pathway is being replaced by something called Sustainable Development Goals (which originated with the United Nations).

Sustainable Development Goals allows the NHS to discriminate against anyone over the age of 70 on the grounds that people who die when they are over 70 cannot be said to have died 'prematurely' and so will not count when the nation's healthcare is being assessed.

Governments everywhere love this new rule because it gives the State permission to get rid of citizens who are of pensionable age and, therefore, regarded by society's accountants as a 'burden'.

It was back in February 2005 that it was revealed that the Government had advised that hospital patients with little hope of recovery should be allowed to die because of the cost of keeping them alive. The key words were 'little hope of recovery'. Who says?

The Labour Government responsible for this wicked nonsense suggested that 'old people' be denied the right to food and water if they fell into a coma or couldn't speak for themselves. So much for any hope for stroke victims.

The Government suggested that the need to cut costs came before the need to preserve the lives of patients and decided it had the right to overturn a right-to-life ruling which had been made when a judge ordered that artificial nutrition and hydration should not be withdrawn unless the life of a patient could be described as 'intolerable'. (The judge had added that when there was any doubt, preservation of life should take precedence.)

Of course, depriving the elderly of food and water is sometimes more a consequence of incompetence than official policy. When my mother was in hospital in Exeter, she couldn't feed herself but the staff didn't feed her. If no relative could get to the hospital to feed her she didn't eat. Drinks were put on her tray and then taken away untouched. 'Not thirsty, today?' an idiot would ask merrily as she whisked away the still full cup.

Meanwhile, the Government pours money into subsidising the lives of the lazy and the work-shy. Healthy 30-year-olds sit around growing chip backsides and beer bellies, slumped in front of their high definition digital television sets and opening the windows to let the heat out because it's easier than turning down the central heating.

The elderly are classified as the 'Unwanted Generation': they are a political embarrassment. Elderly individuals facing blindness from age-related macular disease are denied drugs that might have prevented their blindness because they are considered expensive, useless and expendable. The theory is that they don't contribute and rarely vote and can, therefore, be disregarded.

But those who believe this will be old sooner than they think. And the definition of 'old' is getting younger by the year.

How have we managed to forget that in the 1930s, the Nazis deliberately starved and dehydrated elderly and vulnerable patients because they were regarded as a useless burden on society? That is exactly what we are doing today.

Actually, we are probably worse than the Nazis.

Today, some doctors and general purpose campaigners with Twitter accounts and Facebook pages want to be able to kill people off when they are dying, decrepit, expensive, unable to complete an Iron Man Triathalon or in a great deal of pain.

Others, however, worry about making killing legal.

I'm one of the worriers. I can see all sorts of problems.

The Government has already given doctors the legal right to kill old people (by starving them to death, or depriving them of fluids) if they are filling a hospital bed that the administrators want to use for a patient requiring cosmetic surgery or infertility treatment.

I can now see the Government taking advantage of a euthanasia law to get rid of all sorts of patients with chronic or potentially expensive illnesses; assisted dying will metamorphose into something quite different to the gentle and kindly easing which more civilised proponents envisage.

If a euthanasia law is introduced, it will mark the return of the death penalty.

But this time we won't be killing the possibly guilty; we will be killing the definitely innocent.

The world is full of people who are still breathing and living full lives despite having been diagnosed as being terminally ill.

So, for example, I heard not long ago about a doctor in County Antrim, Northern Ireland who was wrongly diagnosed with terminal cancer and told to prepare for death. She was told that she had three months to live. Fortunately, being a doctor, the patient discharged herself, went to a London hospital and was diagnosed as having gallstones.

Twenty five years ago, I myself was diagnosed as having kidney cancer and told I had six months to live. I thought a little and made a new diagnosis. I had irritable bowel syndrome.

It wouldn’t be difficult to fill a large book with such stories.

When I was a GP, I saw a number of patients who lived far longer than seemed possible – often because they had a very good reason not to die. So, for example, I remember seeing a patient who was the wife of an alcoholic playwright and the mother of two teenage children. She had breast cancer but refused to die until her children had grown up. She had secondaries in just about every organ in her body but still she wouldn’t die. I remember sending a sample of her blood to the laboratory to be tested. They rang me up and asked me what I was playing at. They said that no one could be alive with the blood readings they’d taken. But she was alive. And she lived for several more years. I just stopped taking blood samples because there wasn’t any point.

EXERCISE

Take regular exercise. In a study for the American Administration on Ageing, a class of 70-year-old men joined a one year exercise programme and after the twelve months they had the bodily reactions of 40-year-old men.

EXPERTS

Far too much faith is put in experts. I have lost count of the number of times experts have told me something was possible (when it turned out not to be) or, more commonly, impossible (when it turned out to be). And doctors can be wrong as often as car mechanics, plumbers, surveyors, lawyers, dentists and central heating engineers.

When my mother was ill in the teaching hospital in Exeter, she was seen by nine specialists. They all missed the diagnosis – even though my wife and I repeatedly suggested the diagnosis which turned out to be the correct one.

When my father was ill, doctors prescribed a drug which I warned would kill him. Nurses then ignored my advice and insisted on giving him the drug which had been so foolishly prescribed. He was predictably dead within 24 hours.

F

FALLS

Most falls take place in the home and are a result of simple, obvious hazards which could have been avoided. Don’t go out in the snow or ice unless you have spikes fitted to the bottoms of your shoes. Carry a cane if you are in the slightest bit wobbly. (A cane is also useful for getting rid of annoying dogs or menacing youths. Make the first blow a hard one.)

Make sure that your bath has a grab handle and a non-slip mat. Make sure that rugs are firmly fixed and that there are no carpet edges sticking up waiting to trip you. Equip your home with handles at difficult positions (e.g. at the top of the stairs). Put handrails around your garden to give you a little support when you are examining the hollyhocks. Make sure that dark corners of your house or driveway are well lit. If possible, have two lights in particularly dark lobbies so that if one bulb goes the remaining bulb will still be lit. Keep torches around the house and carry a small one with you at all times. Doing all of this (or having it done for you) will cost far less than a week in a nursing home. Go through your home looking for booby traps – it is one of the most useful things you can do to help yourself survive.

Not long ago, American doctors noticed that an increasing number of elderly citizens were falling. No one seemed able to understand the phenomenon.

The same thing has been noticed in Britain. More and more elderly patients are falling and breaking bones.

I’ve been standing at the back of the room waving my arms in the air but no one has taken any notice.

I know what the problem is.

I know what the solution is.

These elderly patients have a condition called ‘normal pressure hydrocephalus’.

I believe that the Alzheimer industry is helping to suppress the truth because those involved want the words ‘Alzheimer’s’ and ‘dementia’ to be synonymous.

(Many health problems have spawned industries. There is a cancer industry. And an AIDS industry. And there is now an Alzheimer’s industry.)

The fact is that normal pressure hydrocephalus is, for example, commoner than Parkinson’s disease. It is one of the commonest causes of dementia. And it is curable with a simple, cheap operation.

Meanwhile, thousands of elderly folk who could be cured are falling and breaking bones. Falling is the first symptom for normal pressure hydrocephalus. Dementia comes next.

I have been exposing medical scandals for decades.

Believe me when I tell you that this is the biggest medical scandal of our time. And no one seems to give a damn. Why? That’s simple. Because the people involved are elderly.

FEAR

The elderly tend to be prone to more fears than any other group in our society. This is partly because the elderly often feel physically vulnerable but it is mainly because they are old enough to know that, as P.G.Wodehouse put it so colourfully in his novel *Uneasy Money*, life is nothing but a series of sharp corners, 'round each of which Fate lies in wait for us with a stuffed eel-skin'?

Here are the top fears common among the elderly:

1) Memory – Losing their memory, their marbles and their ability to know whether today is Tuesday or a wheelbarrow. This fear results largely from scare campaigns run by newspapers and charities dealing with Alzheimer's Disease. The newspaper editors can be forgiven since they're desperately trying to compete with the internet and sell copies of their failing rags. But the charities are less easily excused. They just want to raise more money for bigger salaries and fatter pensions.

2) Poverty – Finding themselves trapped and imprisoned in a rotten nursing home where the staff were trained by graduates from the Dachau School of Auxiliary Nursing.

3) Ill health.

4) Being robbed or mugged.

5) Loneliness.

6) Falling over and breaking something.

7) Being a burden.

8) Losing their dignity

9) Being trapped in a fire.

Look at your life and try to find ways to tackle these fears. So, for example, it is a good idea to make sure that you have an escape route planned if there is a fire.

FLUIDS

You would be horrified if you knew how many elderly folk die because they don’t drink enough. Your body needs fluid more than it needs food. Without an adequate supply of liquid your blood will thicken, your kidneys will pack up, your heart will be overworked and you will stand a much greater chance of dying. It is obviously particularly important to ensure that your fluid intake is adequate when the weather is warm. You can easily tell whether you are drinking enough merely by studying the colour of your urine. If it has a definite yellowish colouring then you need to drink more. And if you aren’t producing urine as often as usual then you need to drink more as a matter of urgency.

FOOD

It’s not what you eat that matters but how many calories you devour. Around 30% of the people you know will die not of cancer or heart disease or a stroke but of overeating.

Eating too much means that you age faster and earlier.

It has been known since 1930 that the best way to slow down the ageing process is to cut your calorie intake.

Why don’t people tell you this? Because governments and doctors don’t want you to live longer.

Most of the damage to your health is done by what you eat long before you reach old age. But eating too much food and putting on excess weight will lead directly to health problems, reduced mobility and a shorter lifespan.

Remember, remember that your government wants you to die soon because then you will be less of a nuisance. Never forget this when you see and hear the government giving out health advice.

More cancer is caused by food than tobacco and nearly all the cancers are caused by just one food: meat. The same foodstuff is also largely responsible for the high incidence of circulatory disease – including heart attacks and strokes.

There is clear medical and scientific evidence available to show that nothing, not even tobacco, influences your chances of developing cancer as much as the food you choose to eat. It is estimated that between 30% and 60% of all cancers are caused by what you eat.

Doctors, scientists and supporters of the cancer industry (all of whom realise that there is no money to be made out of preventing cancer, but tons of loot to be made out of doing research and flogging ‘cures’ and treatments) merrily ignore this fact and claim that the battle against cancer will only be won with the aid of more money. They claim that in order to obtain the information we need we must spend, spend, spend.

But that isn’t true.

It is not more knowledge we need (we have, as I pointed out in *Paper Doctors* nearly 40 years ago, already amassed far more knowledge than we will ever use in our lifetime), but the ability and courage and determination to use the knowledge we already have.

And the evidence proving that certain types of food cause cancer and premature death has been available for a remarkably long time.

Amazingly, it has for many years been widely agreed that 80% of all cancers are preventable – using knowledge which we have available at the moment. In other words, ignorance (sustained through political and industrial expediency) is responsible for 80% of the millions of deaths caused by cancer each year. And much of that ignorance involves the effect that food has upon the health.

Way back in 1981, it was estimated that dietary modifications might result in a one third reduction in the number of deaths from cancer in the United States with a 90% reduction in deaths from cancer of the stomach and large bowel; a 50% reduction in deaths from cancers of the endometrium, gallbladder, pancreas and breast; a 20% reduction in deaths from cancers of the lung, larynx, bladder, cervix, mouth, pharynx and oesophagus and a 10% reduction in deaths from other sites.

Back in 1982, the National Research Council in the United States of America published a technical report entitled *Diet, Nutrition and Cancer* which showed that diet was probably the single most important factor in the development of cancer, and, even then, 30 years ago, that there was evidence linking cancers of the breast, colon and prostate to particular foods or types of food.

It is a scandal of astonishing proportions that a majority of the population still does not know about these vitally important and well-established links. It is an even bigger scandal that most doctors still dismiss the idea of a food/cancer link as mumbo-jumbo nonsense, preferring to rely entirely on prescription drugs, radiotherapy and surgery as ‘treatments’ for cancer. The average medical student spends more time staring down a microscope at histology slides than he or she spends studying nutrition.

Today, it is an undeniable fact that you can dramatically reduce your chances of developing cancer of the breast, cancer of the prostate, cancer of the colon, cancer of the ovary or cancer of the uterus by not eating meat. And yet when I checked one large (over 1,000 pages long) medical textbook, I found that the chapter on cancer summed up the role of food as a causal agent in just one, rather short, sentence.

I find this all extremely difficult to understand. I have been studying scientific research papers for over half a century and I have never seen such convincing research as that which shows the links between particular types of food and particular types of cancer. I have absolutely no doubt that if these undeniable links had been properly publicised, countless millions of lives could – and would – have been saved. The suppression of this information by a greedy and conscience-free food industry, compliant, revenue conscious politicians, a cancer industry dominated by grant-hungry researchers and an uncaring, drug company dominated medical profession has, I sincerely believe, led to more deaths than any war in history.

Since the early 1980s, the amount of evidence linking diet to cancer has grown steadily. In 1990, even the British Medical Association, hardly an organisation which would be widely described as revolutionary, supported the view that there is a link between food and cancer. Their published view was that 35% of cancers are caused by the natural constituents of food and that another 1 per cent of cancers are caused by food additives.

Other organisations suggest that the link between food and cancer is even higher. The National Academy of Sciences in the United States, founded in 1863 by Act of Congress to serve as an official adviser to the US Government in all matters of science and technology, has reported that researchers have estimated that almost 60% of women's cancers and a little more than 40% of men's cancers are related to nutritional factors. (Readers who want to see more evidence proving that meat causes cancer will find it in my book *Food for Thought* which contains details of 26 scientific papers proving the link.)

The evidence linking meat eating to illness and death is incontestable. Meat eaters have three times the risk of developing diabetes, compared with vegans. Red and processed meats are clearly linked to colon cancer and other forms of the disease. And of course meat products are often contaminated with faecal bacteria, leading to deadly infections. (Meat products may include bits of chopped up animal cancer as well as animal bowels – complete with the faeces inside.)

Consumption of red and processed meats increases the risks of bladder cancer too. A study of over 300,000 men and women found that those who consumed the most red meat had a 22% increased risk of bladder cancer, compared with those who ate the least.

Consumption of nitrites and nitrates (substances used for preserving, colouring and flavouring processed meats) was associated with a 28% to 29% increased risk. The study, in the journal *Cancer* was conducted as part of the *NIH-AARP Diet and Health Study*.

And eating meat leads to weight gain. The *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* published a study involving 373,803 participants in the *European Prospective Investigation into Cancer* study. Those who ate 8.8 ounces of meat per day, gained more weight year by year, compared with people who ate less meat or none at all. The researchers concluded that reducing meat consumption may help people avoid weight gain. Girls who eat the most meat products during childhood may have an earlier onset of puberty, increasing their risk of diseases such as cancer, heart disease and osteoporosis. Researchers followed 3,298 girls in Bristol, England and found that 49% of girls who ate more than 12 portions of meat per week started their periods by the age of 12, compared with 35% of girls who ate fewer than four portions of meat per week.

It is, therefore, hardly surprising that the incidence of cancer is rising rapidly and is going to continue to rise. The main cause of cancer in Britain today is not the smoking of cigarettes but the eating of meat.

Not surprisingly, doctors (much of whose education is controlled by the pharmaceutical industry and a Government controlled by the pharmaceutical industry) prefer to deal with the problems created by meat eating by prescribing drugs. Drugs are always the treatment of choice these days for a profession which is owned needle, syringe and pen by the pharmaceutical industry.

(As an aside, it seems strange to me that doctors seem totally uninterested in the fact that feeding people meat is directly responsible for a number of the world's serious problems. First, animals need to be fed grain and if people stopped eating meat there would be plenty of food to go round. The millions starving to death could be fed. Second, growing all the grain needed to feed animals creates havoc for the environment. For example, it takes a million gallons of water to grow just one acre of corn to feed to cattle. And as the water trickles into streams and rivers, it carries with it the remains of the fertilisers the farmers used. The fertiliser chemicals pollute the water we drink (as I reported half a lifetime ago it is impossible to remove the chemicals from our drinking water). The fertiliser also makes algae overgrow in our rivers and as the algae decomposes it uses up oxygen in the water, killing the fish. In America, farmers are responsible for the existence of a 8,000 square mile dead zone below Louisiana and Texas. And, of course the 100 million cows in the USA are all belching out methane – which is much more potent as a greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide. But doctors don't worry about any of this stuff. And nor, indeed, do the climate change conspiracy theory loonies who believe that man-made climate change is the biggest threat to mankind.)

Incidentally, food doesn't just *cause* cancer.

It can help stop you recovering too.

However careful you are to avoid potentially cancerous chemicals, cancer cells will occasionally develop inside your body. Most of the time those cancer cells are dealt with speedily and effectively by your body's defence systems. White blood cells find and destroy cancer cells in just the same way that they find and destroy bacteria.

However, your body's natural immune system (and its ability to deal with cancer) will be damaged if you eat the wrong sort of foods – and will be aided and improved if you eat the right foods.

Fatty foods will weaken your immune system and make your body less capable of fighting off those occasional cancer cells. When researchers studied the blood of human volunteers they found that a low fat diet greatly improved the activity of the body's natural killer cells.

Amazingly, depressingly, cancer specialists and cancer charity workers still don't seem to understand or accept the importance of a healthy immune system in fighting cancer. (As far as the body's immune system is concerned, vegetable fats are just as bad as animal fats. In order to protect yourself against cancer you need to reduce your entire fat consumption – and that includes vegetable oils.)

Vegetarians have more than double the cancer cell destroying capability of non-vegetarians. But this is not entirely due to the low fat content of a vegetarian diet. It is probably also due to the fact that vegetarians consume fewer toxic chemicals and no animal proteins. And vegetarians have another advantage too: the ability of the human body's natural, killer cells to do their work is improved by substances such as beta-carotene which are found in considerable quantities in vegetables. (One survey of meat eaters showed that many could neither name nor describe any green vegetables).

Food provides us with the building blocks we need to grow and to stay alive. If we don't eat the right food we fall ill. If we are ill and don't eat the right food, we won't get well. Most people know this. Most people, that is, except the people who work in hospitals. The doctors, the nurses, the cooks, the dieticians and the administrators either don't know or don't care.

The food in hospitals is diabolical and contributes enormously to the death rate among patients. It seems rather crazy to give hospital patients a food item (meat) that is known to cause cancer. Sadly, most nutritionists, dieticians and chefs employed by hospitals are woefully ignorant about food. I don't expect chefs to know anything much about food but dieticians and nutritionists who fail to warn patients that eating meat causes cancer are either stupid or ignorant and should be fired and retrained as lavatory attendants. Hospitals which give their patients meat to eat might as well be handing out free cigarettes. It would make as much sense, do less harm to the environment and probably be cheaper.

Not that it is just the meat in the hospital diet that causes problems. The quality of the food served to patients in our hospitals is beyond appalling. You are more likely to contract a food bug in an NHS hospital than just about anywhere else in Britain. What an awful thing it is that NHS hospital food is more likely to make you ill than a hot dog bought from a street vendor's stall.

The way the food is served is a scandal too.

The cleaners put down their mops and hand out the food. Naturally, they don't bother to wash their hands. If the patient is physically incapable of eating what's been put before them then the tray is simply taken away.

'We're not allowed to feed patients,' one cleaner told me.

'I'm here to nurse,' one overweight nurse told me. 'I'm not here to feed patients.' I had a suspicion that she was eating up all the leftovers.

It is common for patients who are not visited by relatives to starve to death in hospital.

The bottom line is that the food in most NHS hospitals is at best inedible and at worst dangerous. There is rarely enough of it. It is often badly chosen and badly prepared. Patients of all types desperately need good food if they are to have the best chance of recovering. But food-related illnesses are commonplace in hospitals. And nurses are so lazy and disinterested that thousands of patients starve to death because they cannot reach the food that is put in front of them. Just about every dietician, nutritionist and cook working for the NHS should be charged with multiple manslaughter.

When my mother had breast cancer she wisely stopped eating meat and adopted a vegetarian diet. She did not take the tamoxifen tablets the consultant oncologist prescribed. And she refused the radiotherapy they recommended. She beat the cancer with diet.

When she was admitted to hospital with her final illness, the staff were told that she was vegetarian. They took no notice. In both Exeter and Budleigh hospitals, the staff persisted in offering her meat-based dishes. When my mother was given a meal of sausages, I complained to one of the nurses. I explained that my mother was vegetarian. The nurse told me that my mother could have a Cornish pasty instead of the sausage.

On another occasion, early in her final illness, I was sitting beside my mother's bed when she was brought a meal consisting of cottage pie and boiled potatoes. Her menu slip had been filled in by someone else because she was too confused to do it herself. 'This is cottage pie,' I said to my mother. 'Do you want it?' She thought for a long time. She was becoming demented because of the normal pressure hydrocephalus the doctors refused to accept was causing her symptoms, but knew that there was something wrong. It was clearly a great effort for her. 'I don't eat cottage pie,' she replied at last. 'Why not?' I asked her quietly. 'It's not the sort of thing I eat,' she replied at last. 'I don't eat meat.'

When we did finally persuade the hospital staff to provide vegetarian food, they provided very little variety. When I was feeding her pieces of an insipid looking cheese and leek flan she said, with great heart-felt weariness: 'I've had a lot of that.'

The Government, whose advisers know of the relationship between meat consumption and cancer, spends taxpayers' money on promoting the sale and consumption of meat.

Thomas Jefferson was perfectly correct when he wrote: 'If people let Government decide what foods they eat, and what medicines they take, their bodies will soon be in as sorry a state as are the souls of those who live under tyranny.'

And despite the fact that people who eat lots of burgers are more likely to develop cancer than people who eat a healthier diet ('Eat McCrap, develop McCancer and McDie' might not be a catchy slogan but I offer it without charge), Britain's Department of Health has invited McDonald's, (and other processed food companies) to help write Government policy on obesity and diet related diseases.

G

GERIATRICIANS

Too many geriatricians have little interest in patients, let alone old people. Geriatrics is an unfashionable speciality, unpopular with doctors because it's not glamorous and offers little opportunity for the big fees to be earned from private practice. Geriatrics is so unpopular among doctors that it is the speciality chosen by doctors who want to become consultants as quickly as possible.

GOVERNMENT

Your government wants you dead. Screw ‘em: stay alive as long as possible. And piss off the moody, miserable, selfish politicians by letting them see you are enjoying life.

H

HEARING

Hearing starts to deteriorate at the age of about 30 and begins with the loss of high-pitched sounds.

If your hearing has deteriorated to the point where you need a hearing aid, see your doctor and ask for a referral. Never, ever buy a hearing aid from a company which advertises in magazines, has a chain of high street shops, shoves a leaflet through your letterbox or, worst of all, sends someone round to knock on your door and offer you a free hearing test. Everyone associated with such companies is a cheat, a crook and a trickster and if you live high enough up in a block of flats, just kick them down the stairs.

Remember that much deafness can be cured in five minutes by having your ears syringed and the wax removed.

HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE

On 22nd February 2011, the British Government warned that a large number of patients who were being treated for high blood pressure didn't actually have high blood pressure.

How this could possibly be described as news is quite beyond me.

I first warned that blood pressure was being over treated over 30 years ago.

Naturally, I was pilloried for it by the medical establishment and the medical press.

But it wasn't a difficult conclusion to draw.

As a GP, I often acquired new patients who had been given repeat prescriptions for powerful anti-hypertensive therapies for years without ever seeing a doctor.

In the early 1970s, I was criticised viciously for daring to suggest that blood pressure could often be raised by stress and could, therefore, be brought under control if sufferers learned how to control their stress.

Moreover, it is often remarkably easy for people with moderately high blood pressure to bring their blood pressure down simply by making moderate lifestyle changes (losing weight, giving up cigarettes, taking gentle exercise, reducing their exposure to stress and so on.)

I have lost count of the number of readers who have followed my advice on this and been able to bring their blood pressure under control – often to the astonishment of their own doctors.

Why does it always take doctors so long to see the obvious?

The answer, of course, is that doctors are controlled by drug companies. And drug companies prefer to treat every symptom or sign with drugs – whether it is necessary to do so or not.

Today, more than 8.5 million people in the UK are registered as having high blood pressure. All are treated with expensive and dangerous drugs. The Government now says that a quarter of these don't have it. That is a massive under-estimate. At least a half of them do not have high blood pressure – and never had it.

And, at least half of the remaining half could control their blood pressure without drug treatment.

HOLISTIC MEDICINE

Holistic medicine means treating the patient in whatever way will produce effective, safe results. It means combining orthodox and alternative medicine.

The word ‘holistic’ was first introduced in 1926 by the South African philosopher and statesman Jan Christian Smuts. He suggested that the whole human being is much more than (and quite different to) a collection of physical or emotional parts. Back in those dark days there were doctors parading up and down hospital wards referring to the ‘liver’ in the end bed and the ‘case of pancreatitis’ in the third bed on the left. What am I talking about? There still are.

But whatever they may claim there are virtually no ‘holistic’ hospitals around. And there are no holistic healers. If you want holistic medicine then you must become a holistic patient. The problem is that an intuitive, holistic approach goes against everything with which the bureaucratic, legalistic, constrained medical establishment feels comfortable. The medical establishment was bought by the drug industry decades ago. Modern medicine is geared to solving problems with drugs, surgery or radiotherapy and does not acknowledge the influence of stress or diet. Nor does the medical establishment appreciate the importance of preventive medicine.

The myth that drug therapy offers the only true solution is now repeated unquestioningly and without hesitation or embarrassment. Many members of the medical establishment believe that medical advances largely depend upon the pharmaceutical industry. This is not regarded as a subject for debate but as a fundamental building block; a fact of medical life.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the drug company owned and controlled medical establishment still looks with horror at all varieties of alternative medicine. Attempts to organise research programmes into the effectiveness of acupuncture, herbalism or homoeopathy are invariably treated with a sneer or a patronising dismissal.

It is one of the great scandals of the 21st century that the billion dollar worldwide cancer industry, the international drug industry and the medical ‘profession’ (now, more of a trade than a ‘profession’) would all much rather suppress an alternative cancer treatment rather than have to admit that orthodox remedies might be bettered.

Doctors pay lip service to holistic medicine but what they really mean is that patients should be prepared to try a wide variety of drugs and orthodox medical treatments. Hospital specialists have drifted into intellectual parochialism. Most now specialise and then specialise again. They are absurdly narrow-minded and bigoted; there is no integration, no overview and no common sense.

‘Holistic’ (or, as it is sometimes spelt, wholistic) medicine has, for several decades, been growing in theoretical popularity. Many alternative and some orthodox health care professionals describe themselves as ‘holistic’ practitioners. But most aren’t. Most journalists inaccurately assume that the word is a synonym for ‘alternative’ or ‘complementary’ medicine. But that is wrong too.

The word and the concept lay more or less forgotten until the 1970s when the growth of high technology medicine led to a revolution among patients who felt that aggressive, interventionist medicine wasn’t entirely satisfactory.

Suddenly there was a widespread, sensible feeling that specialisation and fragmentation were not all they had been cracked up to be.

In practical terms the use of the word ‘holistic’ meant, in theory at least, that instead of regarding patients as sick kidneys or hearts, health care professionals would try to meet the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual needs of their patients by dealing with social problems as well as physical ones and by using natural healing methods as well as modern, pharmacological or surgical techniques.

In short, the word ‘holistic’ was intended to describe an attitude. An attitude which can be just as well followed by an orthodox trained doctor as by an alternative practitioner. A general practitioner in a busy city health centre can be ‘holistic’ in his approach just as easily as can a herbalist or acupuncturist working from a back bedroom.

There is no doubt that a truly ‘holistic’ approach to medical care is extremely good news for patients.

When followed properly it means that every illness can be treated with a ‘pick and mix’ approach – choosing whichever aspects of orthodox and alternative medicine are most likely to be effective, and least likely to produce side effects, and treating and taking full notice of all aspects of the individual’s being.

It is a fact that in most illnesses there is no point in treating what is wrong with the body unless you also treat what is wrong with the mind and it seems to me remarkable that a modern doctor will treat the body of a patient who is suffering from high blood pressure, irritable bowel syndrome or asthma but ignore the mind, when it is now established beyond doubt that in so many illnesses the physical symptoms are produced by mental turmoil of one sort or another.

It is equally bizarre and, in truth, unscientific, for an osteopath to treat a patient’s back and ignore his mind.

The advantages of a truly ‘holistic’ approach are colossal not only because ‘holistic’ medicine offers a chance to use the best and avoid the worst but also because different types of treatment can, when used together, have a synergistic effect. A genuinely ‘holistic’ approach may use a modern drug, a relaxation technique and a type of massage to tackle a single collection of symptoms.

But although in theory the word ‘holistic’ implies an admirable change in attitude there is, sadly, little evidence that practitioners really understand what the word means or how it should be applied in practice.

It would be nice to think that everyone could find a ‘holistic’ practitioner to look after them. But don’t hold your breath. You’ve about as much chance of striking oil when digging in your winter vegetables.

The bottom line is that I don’t think that many patients are ever going to receive truly ‘holistic’ treatment from their practitioners. Most training programmes are, by their very nature, designed to produce specialists. Medical schools turn out drug dispensers and cutters. And there aren’t many health care professionals with the time or inclination to study other available specialities.

We must also recognise that there is, of course, a huge financial disincentive involved here. How many practitioners are going to suggest to a paying patient that he would obtain better treatment by visiting another professional?

All this is enormously depressing.

But it doesn’t mean that ‘holistic’ medicine is out of reach. What it does mean is that if you really want ‘holistic’ treatment (and in my opinion you should) you’re going to have to take control yourself if you or anyone in your family needs treatment.

Devise your own ‘pick and mix’ approach.

It really is the only sensible way.

HOSPITALS

Hospitals are terrible places. People die in them. You should go into hospital only as a last resort. And you should escape the minute you can. As a doctor I am ashamed, saddened and embarrassed to have to tell you this but hospital patients are routinely neglected, humiliated and left in pain. Thousands of patients have died as a result of poor treatment. One independent enquiry documented cases where patients had been left unwashed for up to a month and left without food, drink and medical treatment. The conclusion was that managers had been 'preoccupied with cost-cutting, targets and processes' and had lost sight of their basic responsibilities. Astonishingly, none of the responsible managers responsible was taken to court. Nor were any of the doctors and nurses punished.

I have little doubt that in all the hospitals where patients have been dying unnecessarily, the staff (including doctors and nurses) managed to convince themselves that they were providing patients with excellent service.

And, equally, I have no doubt that an enormous number of patients and relatives and hospital visitors must have ignored all these awful things and believed that the hospitals concerned were doing a wonderful job.

It wouldn't surprise me in the slightest to hear that the managers responsible for all this pain, agony and death, have thick files of letters from patients and relatives thanking them for the excellent care.

The truth is that neither patients nor relatives know precisely what to expect from hospitals.

Walk into an NHS hospital and you will find demented patients in awful pain. You will find patients with terrible bedsores (the bedsore is a classic sign of bad nursing). You will find patients who are starving to death or dying of dehydration because the staff can't be bothered to feed them or give them fluids. You will see patients so dehydrated that their lips are bleeding and sore and, when gently pinched, their dried out skin stays where you've put it. You will see patients dumped in a chair, sitting in urine soaked incontinence pads which have clearly not been changed for hours. You will see obvious signs of malnutrition. These aren't patients in Third World countries. They aren't patients in badly run care homes. They are patients in major NHS hospitals. I know it is true because I have seen it time and time again with my eyes.

Patients awaiting surgery are sent home because the hospital has run out of money and can't afford the sutures and other surgical equipment needed to operate on them. An 83-year-old woman with dementia was sent home from hospital in the middle of the night without her family being informed. The next day she was found dead, alone in her bedroom.

Dirty sheets are reused in hospitals, just as they are in the dirtiest, cheapest, nastiest doss houses. But hospitals aren't supposed to be doss houses. They are places where the people in the beds are, by definition, all ill. Many of them with infectious diseases. I can understand bureaucrats accepting the re-use of dirty sheets. They are nasty, uncaring people. But doctors and nurses?

Dignity and respect are not words which the modern hospital employee understands. Not, at least, when applied to patients. Many hospitals still have mixed wards – with male and female patients forced to abandon their natural dignity in the interests of hospital economy (so that the administrators can take yet another huge pay rise). Governments repeatedly promise to make sure that mixed wards are done away with. Inevitably, this promise is quickly forgotten and abandoned.

A generation or so ago most hospitals employed an almoner. It was her job (and the job was invariably held by a woman) to take care of patients' social problems. If an elderly patient was worried about the cat she'd left at home the almoner would find someone to feed it. If a patient was going home after a long stay in hospital the almoner would help ensure that the house was prepared. The almoner played a vital part in helping patients rest and recover.

Today, none of these things is done.

And yet our hospitals are awash with social workers who regard practical problems as beneath them and spend their days organising meetings to discuss meetings.

The result of all this is that NHS hospitals are best at dealing with mechanical, easy solvable, easily identifiable problems. If you have an uncomplicated broken leg then a hospital will probably be able to deal with it efficiently and relatively safely – as long as you manage to convalesce at home rather than on a hospital ward. With other, more complicated problems, however, hospitals can do a great deal more harm than good.

Back in the Middle Ages people were terrified to go into hospital. They knew it was a sentence of death. Relatives started digging your grave as you went through the doors of the local infirmary. Things are getting that way again.

British hospitals are now among the worst in the world. One survey of NHS staff showed that only 44% thought that they would be happy with the standard of care provided if they were patients in their own hospital. Many British patients are now travelling half way round the world to get treatment in hospitals where patients are treated quickly, efficiently, hygienically and with respect. So, for example, hospitals in India are offering attractive package deals for British patients who can't wait two years for treatment or who don't fancy the idea of being killed by an antibiotic-resistant hospital infection. Officially, adverse drug reactions kill 18,000 people a year and cause 600,000 hospital admissions in the UK every year. In reality, things are far, far worse than that.

And although it is called a National Health Service, it isn't. In 1971, I made a television programme for the BBC in which I explained that there were massive variations in the types of treatment available in different parts of the country. I used a blackboard, a long stick, a large map and several large sheets of paper to explain how treatments varied in different parts of the country. (This was, of course, long before the days of computer graphics.) There was, I claimed, no real 'national' health service. Nothing has changed in principle although I suppose it is quite likely that there have been changes in the nature of the inequalities prevalent in the various regions. To call it a 'National' Health Service is an absurdity that should merit investigation.

One of the common arguments in favour of the NHS is that everyone gets the treatment they need without having to pay for it. This is, of course, a myth. Even allowing for the fact that some patients are denied treatment on the grounds of cost, and others are denied treatment simply because the area where they live does not offer the treatment they need, there is another big problem: NHS staff select patients for treatment on the basis of their perceived need and 'value' to society.

Some readers may be shocked to know that the National Health Service already operates a selection system for treatment.

But it has done so for many years. (English patients are particularly likely to be affected. Scottish hospitals have plenty of money; though it comes, of course, from English taxpayers.)

When treatment is expensive, it is provided for those patients who are regarded as the most deserving. And how does our system decide which patients are most deserving? Simple. A young married man with lots of children will be at the top of the list. An elderly man who lives alone will be right at the bottom of the list.

And so the NHS will provide life-saving treatment for an unemployed scrounger of 36 who has a wife, a mistress and eight children. But a great, elderly painter or composer will be allowed to die.

Nurses, not doctors, decide whether or not patients should die. It is nurses who decide whether or not patients should be resuscitated.

Meanwhile, as people die for a lack of resources, the NHS merrily spends millions on hiring translators for patients who cannot speak English. The NHS provides translators for 160 languages including Cherokee and Cebuano. The fact that there are no registered users of those languages in Britain doesn't seem to concern the people with the cheque books. (Try visiting a hospital in Turkey or Greece and asking for a free translator.)

And is it not absurd, unfair and just plain wrong that NHS money is spent on providing couples with fertility treatment and women with breast enlargement operations while thousands of patients are dying because they have to wait weeks for essential, simple diagnostic X-rays?

Surely, life-saving should come first and life enhancing come second?

In military hospital units, doctors operate a simple but effective system whereby those whose need is greatest get seen first. It's a sound principle. Life-saving should come first and life enhancing should come second.

But in the NHS the people who receive the best (and fastest) treatment are the patients who are represented by the most efficient lobbyists. The elderly, needless to say, have no one fighting in their corner. And so people wanting cosmetic surgery, sex change surgery, infertility treatment and other lifestyle medicine have their needs met while the elderly are denied basic treatment which would in some cases transform their lives and others save their lives.

Today, well over twice as many people are killed in hospitals by infections as are killed on the roads.

The reason? Filthy wards, unhygienic practices, scandalously poor cleaning, grubby operating theatres and staff who never wash their hands. There are more such infections in British hospitals than anywhere else in the world. Why? Simple. British hospitals are dirtier than hospitals anywhere else in the world. Why? The staff in British hospitals are the laziest and most incompetent hospital staff in the world.

If you live in Britain and have to go to hospital for any operation or procedure, you now have a 50% chance of getting a worse disease from being in the hospital. That's official. And if you do survive the experience and get to go home there is a good chance that you will leave malnourished. Staggeringly, one in five National Health Service (NHS) patients leaves hospital officially malnourished. Some patients don't eat because the food is inedible and looks unappetising. For others the taste and quality of the food is irrelevant; they stay hungry because no one helps them eat it. Staff dump food on a patient's table and then collect it, untouched, half an hour later. The patient, starving hungry, hasn't eaten because he or she was too weak to reach the food. Staff put food in front of semi-conscious patients and then walk away. In the 21st century NHS, the patients slowly starve to death. One NHS patient who was blind couldn't see the food put before her. No one bothered to feed her.

Other patients complain that the food they are given is shrink wrapped in impenetrable plastic. It's a sort of modern NHS torture. The patient can see the food but they can't get at it.

NHS hospitals are now so badly run, so filthy, so unprofessionally managed that they are likely to do more harm than good.

The evidence has shown for years that many patients who have heart attacks are better off staying at home than going into hospital.

Hospitals have become unsuitable for the healthy – let alone the sick.

In general, patients will survive for longer if they avoid the NHS. The survival rates in NHS institutions are awful. The standard of health care is among the worst in the world. Hospitals are run by people who don't give a damn about anything other than bonuses.

Whether you are at home or in hospital it is, at night and weekends, easier to find a plumber prepared to come out than it is to find a doctor prepared to visit.

An NHS manager in charge of the complaints system in a London hospital fell ill and needed treatment as an in-patient. He afterwards admitted that he 'got into difficulties finding out who was his doctor, what medicine to take and when he was getting out'.

What a bloody country. What a bloody NHS. What a bloody disgrace.

People in Britain pay to go into private hospitals not because they expect to be treated more kindly, or because they expect better medical treatment, but because they hope that they will not be allowed to die from starvation or thirst and they believe, probably correctly, that the wards will be cleaner.

It is, perhaps, hardly surprising that the people who run (and work for) the National Health Service, prefer not to use it. Civil servants working at the Department of Health are entitled to be members of the Benendeen Healthcare Society which serves one million British Telecom, Post office and civil service workers. If they fall ill, they get to go to a luxury private hospital. Staff at the General Medical Council are provided free membership of a private health care company.

A third of Britain's general practitioners (GPs) would prefer private treatment for themselves and their families. Hospital consultants are the same. Here's what one NHS consultant had to say: 'In the past we knew we would get good care on the NHS. I don't trust it any more. Even I can't bully my way through the system.'

An increasing number of hospital doctors now buy private health care insurance so that they and their families won't have to endure NHS care. Trade unions defend the NHS and oppose any reforms but many of them have done deals with private sector organisations to provide private health care insurance so that their members don't have to use the NHS. More than half of the TUC's members have some sort of private medical insurance. This is a higher proportion than any other socio-economic group in the UK.

Most people working in the NHS admit that if they (or a member of their family) fall ill they would not want to be treated in the hospital where they work. I will repeat that. Most people working in the NHS admit that if they (or a member of their family) fall ill they would not want to be treated in the hospital where they work.

(The NHS used to ask staff members if they'd be happy to be treated in their hospital. It was part of their public relations propaganda. After they found that just one in four members of staff would recommend the hospital where they worked to relatives or friends, or be happy to use it themselves, the question was quietly dropped. Would you take your car to a garage knowing that three out of four mechanics who worked there wouldn't trust the garage with their own car?)

Tables which rank British hospitals invariably show that independent hospitals do much better than NHS hospitals in every measurable respect. Patients are treated better and they get better quicker. It is, perhaps, hardly surprising that just about every patient in the country (and every sane one) would, if given a choice, choose to have an operation in a private hospital rather than an NHS hospital.

Politicians claim that they think the NHS is wonderful. They say that they wouldn't dream of going into a private hospital. But they don't have to wait to see a doctor and if they need in-patient treatment they go into private rooms where they are waited on hand and foot. They get private care without it costing them a penny.

Hospitals are obsessed with curing (which they aren't terribly good at) and don't understand, or have time for, the principles of caring. For example, many hospitals refuse to allow visitors to take flowers into hospitals – arguing that flowers are a nuisance. This is sad. It has been known for thousands of years that patients are far more likely to get better quickly in hospitals which are bright, light, airy and filled with gentle music and fresh flowers. Since the first hospitals were built it has been recognised that the colour and perfume which flowers add to hospitals contribute greatly to the rate at which patients recover. Good hospitals are peaceful and are designed around a courtyard so that convalescent patients can walk in the cloisters and look at the flowers. But modern hospitals are designed for the convenience of the administrators. Patients are a bloody nuisance. I have recently been in several hospitals where the floors were carpeted because this made it nicer for the administrators when they were going to meetings. Naturally, the floors were stained with blood, urine and all the other remnants which would normally be wiped up off the floor. You can't ever properly clean a carpeted floor in a busy hospital because if the corridor is closed for proper cleaning the wards will be cut off. I know hospitals where the car park nearest the hospital entrance is reserved for administrators. Patients – however sick or frail they may be – have to walk, shuffle or limp half a mile, possibly in the rain.

And why do hospitals clamp the cars of patients and visitors?

Do they really think people want to spend more time than necessary in these places?

One large hospital, which is not atypical, has 6,000 members of staff and 1,800 spaces for their cars. The inevitable result is that doctors, nurses and cleaners have to park in the spaces allocated for patients and relatives who, therefore, cannot find anywhere to park at all. Patients whose appointments are delayed find themselves having to pay extortionate fines.

Time and time again I have received letters from readers telling me that while having tests (and waiting to be seen at yet another department) they had, on top of all their other worries, been frightened that they would outstay the maximum three hour waiting period and would return to their vehicle to find it clamped.

I know of a hospital where the architect and bureaucrats put the psychiatric ward on the 6th floor. The ward had fully opening windows and a concrete walkway underneath. To everyone's astonishment, the ward had a much higher rate of successful suicides than other comparable hospital psychiatric wards. The incidence of attempted suicides was no higher. But, despite a good many meetings, the administrators couldn't work out why the success rate among suicides was so high.

The vast majority of patients hand over their health (and their lives) to their doctors – without ever questioning what is happening to them. That is a dangerous way to live. Patients who take an interest in their own health may sometimes feel that the doctors and nurses who are looking after them regard them as a nuisance. But all the evidence shows clearly that such patients get better quicker, suffer fewer unpleasant side effects and live longer than patients who simply lie back passively and allow the professionals to take over. If your doctor wants you to take a drug make sure you know what to expect. If your doctor wants you to have surgery then make sure that you know what the surgery entails, what the possible consequences might be and what the alternatives are. Good questions to ask are: 'Would you have this operation if you were me?' or: 'Would you recommend this operation to someone in your close family?'

Hospitals are so bad that it is, perhaps, hardly surprising that I have for some years now recommended that every patient going into hospital should take a supply of disinfectant wipes, a mobile telephone, the telephone number of a local 24 hour taxi service (in case they want to escape) and the phone numbers of at least three newspapers.

Remember: GPs kill retail but hospitals kill wholesale.

HOUSE CALLS (HOME VISITS)

Half a century ago, it was commonplace for doctors to make house calls to their older patients on a regular basis. Believe it or not, doctors would actually call on elderly patients even when they hadn't been asked to do so.

Back in those old days, GPs were invariably ready to visit patients at home if requested to do so.

In the United Kingdom, GPs who made house calls were the basis of the NHS.

Sadly, this service has been all but destroyed by three forces. The General Medical Council forced older GPs to retire. A recent Labour Government gave doctors the option to stop providing 24 hour cover. And EU laws about working hours forced doctors to adopt the sort of working hours previously enjoyed by librarians and planning officials.

My advice to all older patients is, first and foremost, try to register with a doctor who is prepared to visit his patients at home. If you can find a doctor who does his own calls at night and at weekends clutch him tightly to your bosom for he is as rare as a mare's nest.

HYGIENE

A few decades ago, in a book called *Superbody*, I warned that infections were about to make a big return to our lives. Many people (including doctors and nurses) felt certain that medicine had pretty well conquered most common, lethal bugs.

I didn't. I felt that the overprescribing of antibiotics was bound to result in the bugs acquiring immunity.

And I'm afraid I was right. The bugs we thought we'd conquered are back big time. And poor hygiene practices in hospitals have given us a whole new range of super-infections.

As a result, most popular antibiotics are now often ineffective. It was an entirely predictable problem but it is too late to moan now about opportunities missed and warnings ignored.

The plain fact is that many killer bugs have become immune to antibiotics.

And things are, I'm afraid, going to get worse.

The result is that bugs are now a major cause of death – particularly among the frail, the sick and the elderly. Vast numbers of old people die of chest infections.

Of course, doctors tell people that they can prevent infections with their damned vaccines. But I'm afraid this is rubbish. Like all vaccines, the one which is given to protect against the flu does more harm than good. (I know this is an unpopular point of view but I don't really care anymore. I've issued more accurate warnings and predictions than any other doctor and I'm sticking with this one.)

There are two good ways to reduce your risk of catching a lethal infection and neither of them involves drugs or vaccines.

First, try to keep your immune system in tip top shape. Your body's immune system protects you against all sorts of diseases, including infections and cancer, and it isn't difficult to keep it in good working order. Just make sure that you eat plenty of foods such as fresh fruit and vegetables that contain vitamins.

Second, avoid catching other people's infections by taking great care not to pick up their bugs. This is especially important advice if you live in a hospital, hotel or residential home of any kind. The chances are, I'm afraid, that the nurses will consider themselves above cleaning and the cleaners won't have been taught how easily bugs can be spread. Keep antiseptic wipes with you at all times and use them to clean taps, door handles, lavatory seats and handles and everything else you have to touch. Make sure that crockery and cutlery are clean before you use them. Ignore anyone who sneers and says you're a nutter. You'll have the last laugh because they'll be dead.

HYPOTHERMIA

Every year tens of thousands of old people die of the cold; they die because they can’t afford to keep warm. The average winter kills around 60,000 old people. A bad winter kills far more.

This suits the politicians. It means that there are fewer old people around claiming pensions.

Gas and electricity companies aren’t supposed to cut off supplies to the frail elderly and impoverished. So they put in a meter and refuse to supply gas or electricity until the bills are paid.

Every winter, politicians and charities tell old people to move their bed and all their belongings into one room so that they only have one room to heat.

Have you ever heard such patronising rubbish?

I wonder how many of the people giving this absurd advice actually try living in one room dominated by a bed?

British taxpayers still pay out £1,000,000 a year each to over 1,000 bankers at the bankrupt bank Royal Bank of Scotland where arrogance seems to be a substitute for intelligence. Fred Goodwin, the boss whose methods resulted in that bank’s collapse, receives a pension of the best part of £1,000,000 a year. UK banks have had to pay out £75 billion in fines, compensation and legal costs as a result of crooked and dishonest practices and yet the hubristic psychopaths responsible have been rewarded not with lengthy prison sentences but with massive payoffs and pensions that make lottery winnings look mean.

If a fraction of that money had been handed out to vulnerable pensioners no one would die of the cold in the winter.

I

IATROGENESIS

This is not a word you will hear doctors using very often. It means an illness which has been caused by a medical examination or treatment.

Iatrogenic disease is disease caused by doctors.

The modern medical profession has become very dangerous and iatrogenesis (illness or death caused by doctors) is now one of the top three killers – alongside cancer and circulatory disease.

The result is that the person most likely to kill you is not a mugger, not a burglar, not a drunken driver and not an enraged relative. It is your doctor.

Modern, Western doctors, equipped with fancy drugs, exotic forms of surgery and impressive sounding radiotherapy techniques, are ranked alongside cancer, heart disease and stroke as major killers.

Four out of ten patients who are given drugs suffer serious and sometimes potentially lethal side effects. If the drug you're prescribed is going to save your life that's probably an acceptable risk. But how many patients who are merely suffering from something annoying or uncomfortable would willingly take a drug if they knew it might kill them? There are hugely profitable drugs on the market which have never saved any lives but which have killed or made ill countless thousands of people.

One in six patients in hospital is there only because he has been made ill by doctors. Most are suffering from unpleasant or downright dangerous drug side effects. In America, bad reactions to legal drugs kill far more people annually than all illegal drug use combined.

You won't hear any of this from most doctors, of course. Doctors are notoriously reluctant to admit that the treatments they recommend can do harm. There are several reasons for this.

First, they often don't know how dangerous drugs and other treatments can be. In just about every Westernised country in the world, doctors receive most of their post graduate education through meetings and journals which are sponsored by drug companies. And drug companies don't spend too much of their time warning doctors about drug side effects. Global drug companies don't exist to find cures or help people: they exist solely to make money.

Second, doctors are frightened of being sued.

Third, there are nearly half a million clinical research papers published every week. No doctor on the planet can read them all – or even have the faintest idea what warnings they might give. Useful reports are lost among the irrelevant, commercially inspired dross. Any evidence showing that doctors and drug companies are killing people is easily overlooked or allowed to slip behind a convenient filing cabinet.

Finally, the natural human unwillingness to admit responsibility is exceptionally well developed among doctors who often think of themselves as having god-like qualities. Admitting to mistakes reminds doctors that they are human and fallible.

The bottom line is that during the last century, doctors and drug companies have become louder, more aggressive, a good deal richer and far more powerful but life expectancy has not risen as a result of any of their activities.

ILLNESS

Illness is rarer among old people than young.

Over 65s tend to have 1.3 illnesses per year each on average.

Under 65s tend to have 2.1 illnesses per year each on average.

The figures prove that illness isn’t the same thing as ageing, it can occur at any age.

Diseases tend to affect us more slowly when we are old. As a result, many 90-year-olds have at least half a dozen serious health problems – often causing very little trouble.

Men often have prostate cancer which has been trundling along harmlessly for years. I suspect more elderly men die or suffer because their prostate cancer has been aggressively and unnecessarily diagnosed and treated than die because of prostate cancer itself.

INFECTIONS

A few decades ago, the development of antibiotics led many people to believe that the threat offered by infectious diseases had, to a large extent, been conquered.

But a combination of greed and stupidity has changed all that.

The effectiveness of antibiotics has been dramatically weakened by three main groups: the companies making them, the medical profession and the farming industry. Each of these groups has acted irresponsibly and dangerously. Since they cannot possibly have been unaware of the impact their actions would have, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that the effectiveness of antibiotics has been deliberately destroyed for short-term profit.

The drug companies, the medical establishment and the farming industry will together be responsible for millions of deaths around the world. The politicians who have stood to one side and allowed all this to happen must share the responsibility.

During the last few decades simple, widespread infections have been striking back and re-establishing themselves as serious threats to our health. Today, our hospitals are dangerous places for the healthy – and far too dangerous for the sick.

In 1952, virtually all infections caused by staphylococcus could be cured by penicillin. But just 30 years later, a worrying 90% of patients infected with the staphylococcus bug needed treatment with other antibiotics. Western doctors didn't worry about this because they had other antibiotics to prescribe. With remarkable arrogance, the medical profession in America and Europe assumed that it could always stay one step ahead of the bugs. What many doctors failed to realise was that yeasts, fungi and bacteria have been producing antibiotics more or less since time began. They use the antibiotics they make to protect themselves. Other yeasts, fungi and bacteria mutate naturally in order to protect themselves against those antibiotics. Through a mixture of ignorance and arrogance doctors speeded up the rate at which bugs acquired resistance, by spreading antibiotics around with reckless abandon. Overwhelmed by reckless enthusiasm, doctors started routinely giving antibiotics to all the patients whom they thought might be at risk – and this category often included all those patients who were destined for surgery. The prescribing doctors either didn't realise or didn't care that by dishing out antibiotics so freely they were giving the bacteria a greatly increased chance of acquiring immunity.

Staphylococcus has not, of course, been the only bug to become resistant and the Western medical establishment, constantly afraid of offending the drug companies, has done everything possible to stifle protests and warnings about the consequences. Today the future is truly bleak. Infectious diseases which we thought we had conquered are coming back with a vengeance. More and more people are dying of simple, uncomplicated infections. The bugs are getting stronger. And our ability to kill them is diminishing almost daily.

Today, one in six prescriptions is for an antibiotic and my educated guestimate is that between 50% and 90% of all these prescriptions are unnecessary or inappropriate. To a certain extent doctors over-prescribe because they like to do something when faced with a patient – and prescribing a drug is virtually the only thing most of them can do. And to some extent prescribing a drug is a defence against any possible future charge of negligence (on the basis that if the patient dies it is better to have done something than to have done nothing). But the main reason for the over-prescribing of antibiotics is, without doubt, the fact that doctors are under the influence of the drug companies. The makers of the antibiotics want their drugs prescribed in vast quantities. It makes no difference to them whether or not the prescriptions are necessary.

Things are made worse by the fact that although antibiotics have been around for over half a century, and the drug companies making them must have made billions of dollars in profits, no one yet knows how long antibiotic tablets should really be taken for when treating any specific condition. Should you take an antibiotic course for 5, 7, 10 or 14 days? The bizarre truth is that your guess is probably as good as your doctor's and his is probably as good as the drug company's.

The over-prescribing of antibiotics would not matter too much if these drugs were harmless and if there were no other hazards associated with their use. But antibiotics are certainly not harmless. The unnecessary and excessive use of antibiotics causes allergy reactions, side effects and a huge variety of serious complications – including the ultimate complication: death. And, of course, there is also the very real hazard that by overusing antibiotics, doctors are enabling bacteria to develop immunity to these potentially life-saving drugs. There is now no doubt that many of our most useful drugs have been devalued by overuse and are no longer effective. The overprescribing of antibiotics is extraordinarily dangerous and constantly underestimated. It is far more of a threat to human life, and more of a threat to our future, than terrorism. The unnecessary antibiotics we have swallowed by the ton have weakened our general resistance to infection and paradoxically, strengthened the power of the bugs.

The existence of many antibiotic-resistant organisms is the main reason why infections are such a major problem in hospitals. Alarmingly, at least 1 in 20 of all hospital patients will pick up an infection in hospital – mostly urinary tract, chest or wound infections. The spread of these antibiotic-resistant organisms is mostly caused by doctors and nurses failing to wash their hands often enough. The problem is so great that the extra costs incurred when doctors have to prescribe increasingly expensive antibiotics are beginning to add an enormous burden to all those responsible for providing health care facilities. In America, the extra cost of dealing with antibiotic-resistant organisms is many billions of dollars a year.

Partly thanks to doctors and drug companies, the future is truly bleak. Infectious diseases which we thought we had conquered are coming back with a vengeance. More and more people are dying of simple, uncomplicated infections. The bugs are getting stronger. And our ability to kill them is diminishing almost daily.

However, the problem isn't entirely the result of overprescribing by doctors. The overuse of antibiotics by farmers is another big reason why infectious diseases are making a dramatic comeback. Astonishingly, considerably more than half of all the antibiotics sold are given by farmers to healthy animals.

Farmers claim that their animals are only given antibiotics when they have been recommended by a vet. Of course this is true. Farmers cannot buy antibiotics without a vet. But sadly, there are enough money hungry vets around to make sure that any farmer who wants to give his animals continuous doses of antibiotics will have no supply problem. I talked to one vet who regularly prescribed huge quantities of antibiotics for farmers to give to healthy cattle.

'Don't you realise that what you are doing is endangering the lives of millions of human beings?' I asked him. He shrugged; he clearly knew I was right but clearly didn't care. 'Why do you do it?' I asked him. 'The farmers demand them,' he said with blunt honesty. 'If I don't prescribe antibiotics someone else will and I'll lose the farm business.'

Why do farmers give their animals so many antibiotics?

Well, some, of course, are prescribed to help prevent (and treat) disease. Animals on modern western farms are exceptionally susceptible to disease because they are kept in overcrowded conditions and they are constantly highly stressed. Antibiotics help to keep sick animals alive long enough to be slaughtered and fed into the food chain. Antibiotics are also given because they help to stop diseases spreading quickly among animals who are kept in cramped and entirely unnatural conditions. When animals live in hideously confined quarters it is nigh on impossible to stop infections spreading without using antibiotics. Many American and European farmers routinely put antibiotics into the feed they give their animals to prevent infections developing. The antibiotics that are dished out in this grossly irresponsible way are often the same antibiotics that are becoming dramatically less effective in the treatment of human diseases.

But farmers don't just give antibiotics to animals in order to deal with disease. They also put antibiotics into their animal feed in order to promote growth. Antibiotics increase the muscle bulk of animals – and therefore increase their value and the farmer's eventual profit.

The process by which antibiotic resistance develops on farms is simple to explain. When animals are given antibiotics, the bacteria in their intestines build up an immunity to those antibiotics. Those antibiotic-resistant organisms then pass on to farmers and others who have contact with the animals. They pass into the environment (even though most animals are denied access to fields, their faeces and urine still reach the environment when they are dumped onto fields or discharged into rivers). And, of course, the antibiotic-resistant organisms pass into the food chain directly when animals are killed, chopped up and eaten by humans. When milk in the USA was tested, researchers identified 52 different antibiotic residues.

Between them, doctors and farmers have put us all at risk. Around the world, millions of innocent people will die because bugs have now acquired immunity to previously valuable antibiotics.

The problem is exacerbated because our hospitals are filthy and the people who staff them probably can't even spell hygiene. Having talked to many doctors and nurses, I am convinced that most don't know the basic principles of how diseases are spread – and how they can be controlled. An unhealthy majority, for example, seemed unaware that there is an important difference between an 'infectious' disease (spread through the environment – including by air) and a 'contagious' disease (spread by contact).

I quizzed a dozen doctors and nurses in a large NHS teaching hospital in Exeter, including several who had specific responsibilities for controlling the spread of infections such as MRSA and C.difficile and none of them seemed to me to understand the basic principles of disease spread.

Quite senior NHS personnel have tried to convince me that gastrointestinal infections are transmitted through the air and that this, not poor hygiene practices, explains why such bugs tend to sweep through hospital patients.

When I produced evidence showing that they were wrong (although it is possible for bugs to be transmitted via an aerosol route, the vast majority of infections are spread by poor hygiene) two members of NHS staff then tried to argue, apparently quite seriously, that bugs behaved differently in hospitals to the way they behaved elsewhere. One doctor insisted that bugs which are spread only by touch outside hospitals can be airborne inside hospitals. It is, perhaps, hardly surprising that staff don't bother to wash their hands and don't understand the importance of obeying the simplest rules about hygiene. And it is hardly surprising that the number of people dying from infections is rising dramatically. If you don't know how a disease is contracted you aren't likely to have much success in preventing its spread. Many doctors and nurses don't even seem to realise that common causes of vomiting, such as the norovirus, are spread largely through inadequate cleaning of contaminated wards.

I have, since the 1970s, been warning about the return of serious infections. The rise and rise of problems such as C.difficile and MRSA was quite predictable. And other bugs will come back in a big way too. In my book *Paper Doctors* (1977) I pointed out that two things would result in a rise in infectious diseases: a lack of hygiene in hospitals and the abuse of antibiotics. I also predicted the rise in antibiotic-resistant infections.

In practice, avoiding infections such as MRSA and C.difficile is not difficult.

The best way to avoid them is to clean hospital wards and to persuade doctors, nurses and other members of staff to wash their hands in between seeing patients. But NHS hospitals are institutionally dirty. Public lavatories in France are cleaner than British hospitals. The area between beds is swept but the area under the beds is left dirty. Equipment is often filthy. Communal baths, showers and toilets are disgusting. Staff don't understand anything about hygiene. And no one cares.

Nothing is done about these problems because the complaints system is designed to protect the system rather than the patient. Hospitals are not interested in learning from their errors. They are only interested in denying the truth and avoiding responsibility. Medical records are kept not only to provide information but also with one eye on future litigation. One of the problems is that hospital staff (like other public service employees) are almost impossible to sack. When one former NHS chief executive was forced to resign her £150,000 a year job over Britain's deadliest superbug outbreak, she demanded a £150,000 pay off. The woman left her job after at least 90 patients died from C.difficile. And shortly after leaving her NHS job she set up a healthcare consultancy company (presumably, to tell the NHS how to improve hospitals). She set up the company with her partner who had quit a senior NHS job after the trust where he worked accumulated debts of £30 million. It seems that those who do leave the NHS are well compensated for their failure. And the concept of 'shame' seems as alien to the modern bureaucrat as the concept of 'duty' or 'responsibility'.

When the Healthcare Commission performed unannounced tests at 51 NHS Health Trusts, they found that nine out of ten of them had failed to meet hygiene standards put in place to reduce hospital infections. Two out of three hospitals did not complete a deep clean of their wards before a deadline set by the Government.

The result is that thousands of patients die every year in NHS hospitals because patients acquire lethal but avoidable infections. No one ever apologises. It is rare for anyone to be disciplined. Drivers go to prison if they are convicted of dangerous driving so why don't hospital staff go to prison for dangerous practices? If they did then I suspect that there would be far fewer unnecessary deaths in our hospitals. Twice as many Britons are killed by hospital infections as are killed on the roads. The total number of deaths from hospital superbugs such as MRSA and C.difficile is now well over 5,000 a year. The reason? Filthy wards, unhygienic practices, scandalously poor cleaning, grubby operating theatres and staff who never wash their hands. There are more such infections in British hospitals than anywhere else in the world. Why? British hospitals are dirtier than hospitals anywhere else in the world. Why? The staff in British hospitals are the most incompetent hospital staff in the world.

The rise in the incidence of superbugs is a phenomenon almost unknown outside the NHS and in my opinion it is a direct result of poor management and appallingly low standards of nursing. In the Middle Ages, patients used to keep out of hospitals whenever they could – knowing that a hospital stay could well prove fatal. Things aren't much different today. Most hospitals should have a Government health warning hanging over the front door. And the staff should have health warnings stamped on their foreheads. I wouldn't license most of them as abattoirs.

Since Ignaz Philipp Semmelweiss first demonstrated (in the mid-19th century) that deaths in the delivery room were caused by dirty hands, every child has been taught the importance of basic personal hygiene. Sadly, the message does not seem to have got through to the medical and nursing professions. Countless studies have shown that hospital staff just don't bother to wash their hands. A study of doctors' habits showed that two out of three anaesthetists failed to wash their hands before treating a new patient (even though anaesthetists frequently perform venepuncture surgery) while one in three surgeons did not wash their hands and arms properly before an operation. At least one-third of all hospital infections are caused by dirty hands.

The cost of all this in simple financial terms is colossal.

Treating hospital contracted infections uses up around 15% of the hospital budget in the UK and adds around a week to each patient's hospital stay. The cost in human terms is incalculable: tens of thousands of patients die because of bugs they've caught from doctors, nurses, other staff or contaminated equipment. These aren't statistics: they are people. Real people. Every one of those unnecessary deaths is someone's wife, husband, mother, father, son, daughter, uncle, aunt, friend or neighbour. And remember, most of those patients die because doctors and nurses can't be bothered to wash their hands properly or because operating theatres aren't properly cleaned between operations.

The medical answer is – surprise, surprise – often to prescribe antibiotics, and a third of hospital patients end up taking them. It now takes 50 times as much penicillin to treat an infection as was required 30 years ago.

There is no doubt that antibiotic-resistant bacteria are now commoner in the UK because of the sloppiness in NHS hospitals as well as the bad prescribing habits of doctors.

It is hardly surprising that people who stay at home to be treated – or who go home quickly after day-case or short-stay surgery – usually get better much quicker than people who need long-stay treatment and who have to go into hospital.

It is because NHS hospitals are so filthy that there are more food related infections in the NHS than in the seediest, most disreputable restaurants. Hospitals which are home to rats and cockroaches (as many NHS hospitals are) are an excellent breeding ground for bugs of all sorts. Dirty hospitals are dirty because they are badly managed and because the staff are lazy or incompetent.

Attempts to deal with this embedded problem range between pathetic and laughable. An NHS hospital in Buckinghamshire was reported to have recorded a rap song to help staff learn how to wash their hands. The song apparently included the lyrics: 'Now clean between your fingers, just in case the bad bug lingers'. The hospital produced a video in which nurses wearing back to front baseball caps and bling jewellery stamped along to the beat. This was not a Christmas party joke and nor was it intended for children. This was a serious attempt to teach NHS staff how to wash their hands.

Nurses have even called for a vaccine to stop hospital infections spreading. It is, I suppose, easier to give a vaccine than to wash your hands.

The real problem is that hospital staff just don't seem to understand how infections spread.

For example, it is common to see nurses in shops still wearing their uniforms, complete with dubious looking stains. Nurses who wear their uniforms out of the hospital environment are showing just how ignorant they are. Bugs are transferred both ways. Nurses bring dangerous antibiotic-resistant bacteria out into the community and they take infections back into the hospital with them. Nursing staff should change their clothes whenever they leave the hospital where they work. And doctors working in hospital should always wear freshly laundered white coats.

There is now no doubt that infections are a major killer in our State hospitals. Watch the cleaners at work and you'll see them slide a mop down the centre of the ward. It's known in the mop wielding business as 'taking the mop for a walk'. They then wander off into their staff room for a tea break. And then serve patients their food. Staggeringly, the same people who clean the ward then serve patients their food. No one seems to see anything odd in this. The cleaners do not, of course, wash their hands between these two activities.

Cleaning staff (sorry, I think they now have to be called 'housekeepers') do not appear to have been told that they too must obey the basic rules of hygiene. The Government would save far more lives if it took down speed cameras and, instead, put up cameras in hospitals to check that nurses, cleaners and doctors wash their hands properly. Such a simple action would save billions of pounds and thousands of lives a year. Nurses who are spotted moving from patient to patient without washing their hands should be fired and banned from ever working in health care again.

The bad news is that things are going to get much, much worse I'm afraid. If Health and Safety operatives really want to save lives they should stop worrying about irrelevant 'health threats' and concentrate all their efforts on NHS hospitals.

In the future, two things are likely to happen.

First, the number of serious, deadly infections in our hospitals will rise. There will be periods when the infections will appear to be under control. But they will not be. Our hospital staff are institutionally lazy. Incompetence and ignorance are defended, protected and rewarded with promotion.

Second, the superbugs will escape from hospitals and start to kill people in their homes and places of work. It is already happening. Medical officers in Holland have found that 50% of Dutch farmers are carrying a new strain of MRSA that is passed from hormone-fed pigs to humans. Already, a new, more virulent strain of MRSA has been found in the community. And the number of elderly people killed in care homes by the superbug C.difficile has officially tripled in the last two years. (Since killer bugs are often not mentioned on death certificates, the true figure is undoubtedly far higher than this.) This sad development is hardly surprising when one considers that nurses and local authority personnel who have responsibility for standards in care homes were trained in our hospitals.

A new mutant superbug, a new variety of E.coli resistant to antibiotics, has been found among cattle on a dairy farm in the north of England. It was the first time the particular strain of the bug had been found in Britain and it was only the third time the bug had ever been found anywhere in the world.

A Government spokeswoman said that 'no additional precautions are warranted'.

Says it all, doesn't it?

IMMIGRATION

Most politicians are keen on immigration because they know that their home-grown population is ageing. Moreover, as the number of citizens of pensionable age is getting bigger so birth rates are falling. Politicians favour immigration as a way of lowering the average age and bringing in ready-made workers. They welcome the fact that immigrants tend to come with a high birth rate.

The resultant enforced and largely unwelcome mass immigration has altered societies throughout Europe; it has crushed cultures and great cities such as London and Paris have been destroyed by an unbearably and intolerably large influx of immigrations. There has inevitably, and predictably, been a rise in patriotism and nationalism.

All this immigration has been unnecessary because the aged need not be a burden. Many of those who have reached pensionable age want to keep working – and are perfectly capable of doing good and useful work. Most have extremely marketable skills. Most need to work. Most have been forced to give up work solely because of their age.

The solution is simple enough even for politicians to understand: allow all pensioners to work if they want to and punish anyone who forces an over 65-year-old into retirement against their wishes.

And lo and behold!

The need for immigrants (and the massive cultural disruption they bring) would immediately disappear.

INFLATION

Inflation is terribly important to pensioners for the excellent reason that many who are retired will be living either on a fixed income or an income which rises according to its government's inflation figures.

Inflation is much loved by politicians because it helps get rid of government debt but it is a dangerous enemy for those whose income does not rise as rapidly as the real cost of living.

The problem is that people who have retired and who are living on a pension or on their savings are forced to live subject to the integrity of politicians.

Naturally, that is not terribly good news because governments everywhere lie about the inflation figures.

On the one hand, politicians want inflation to be high because when money is losing its value the Government's debts are gradually eradicated. (If the Government owes £5 and the value of money halves in a decade then, in ten years' time, the Government will still owe £5 but the £5 of debt will only cost £2.50 to repay.)

But politicians also need inflation to be low because pensions (both those which are statutory and those which are paid to former State employees such as civil servants, teachers, policemen and health care professionals) are usually inflation linked. The higher the inflation figures are, the more the Government has to pay out in pensions.

By and large, the need to pretend that inflation is low is greater than the need to make it higher.

And so governments fiddle the inflation figures to keep them low.

Fiddling the inflation figures, and keeping them artificially low, has a useful side effect. Because it deprives the elderly of money, it ensures that large numbers of them die of the cold. Please don't assume that this is a cynical or whimsical comment. Governments really do want to kill off old people. As far as politicians are concerned, the elderly are nothing more than an expensive nuisance.

As a general rule, the real rate of inflation is usually twice what your Government says it is. Sometimes it is three or four times as high as your Government tells you.

This means that people who are trying to live on a pension (even one which is nominally inflation proofed) will become poorer as the years go by.

It is important to be aware of this so that you can try to plan ahead. Someone who retires at 65 and whose income is only an inflation linked pension will find their buying power falling quite noticeably over the coming years.

It is very easy for government employed economists and statisticians to fiddle the official inflation figures. They calculate the official inflation figures by looking at the prices of the items in an imaginary 'basket' of commonly purchased things and services. And they fiddle the figure by picking the contents of that 'basket' very carefully.

So, for example, in the UK the Government has decided that most of us spend very little on housing costs, taxes (including local taxes), water, gas, electricity, petrol, bread, beer or insurance and so they think it is entirely reasonable to exclude all these expenses when the inflation figures are being prepared.

The Government claims that the inflation index is based on the rise in the cost of things which we buy regularly.

As I write, here are the items which the British Government has decided that the citizens of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland now regularly purchase and which must therefore be included in the official basket of commonly purchased items: canned apple cider, bottles of fruity cider, bicycle helmets, gin and almond milk.

So, that's it.

I don't buy any of those things. And if you don't then someone, somewhere must be regularly buying a hell of a lot of canned cider, almond milk and bicycle helmets.

Fiddling the inflation figures is terribly easy.

One thing is clear: when planning ahead you must remember that your savings and your pension income will rarely, if ever, keep up with real inflation. Since you will be retired and will have no trade union to defend your financial interests, you will, therefore, have to dip into your savings in order to buy boring stuff like food and in order to heat your home.

The message here is a clear one: when you are planning your retirement you must try to organise things so that you can live on less than your pension income.

This will have two advantages. It will mean that as the years go by you will be able to spend a little more of your income. And it will mean that the savings you have made (albeit modest) can be put on one side to help pay for luxuries such as light bulbs and shoe repairs.

INTELLIGENCE

Anyone who tells you that intelligence falters with age is a liar.

It may be true that old people don’t do as well as children when taking intelligence tests but this is because intelligence tests are designed to measure the individual’s ability to do well on intelligence tests.

Most intelligence tests are badly designed and equivocal and they most certainly do not test intelligence.

The fact is that older people may be slower to jump to conclusions than young people but they are just as bright as young people. In an experiment conducted in Australia, a class of 70-year-olds learned German at the same rate, and with the same level of success, as 15-year-olds.

In addition, older people are blessed with more knowledge and more experience.

It is, however, a sad fact of life that people who are told that they will become stupid when they get old tend to behave as they are instructed.

J

JARGON

Doctors often use a private code when writing medical notes about patients. They do it partly to save time and partly so that patients won't know what they have written. Just in case you get a chance to look at your medical records here are some of the abbreviations which are most commonly used these days. (Though do remember that not all these abbreviations are used in all hospitals).
NOD = Nice old duck
ACD = A complete dickhead
FAS = Fat and silly
NQOC = Not quite our class
RATTPO= Reassured and told to piss off
SITH = Soft in the head
BOAJ = Bit of a jerk
KSI = Knows someone important
PITB = Pain in the bum
SAD = Smelly and demented

If you find these abbreviations as offensive as I do, why not fight back? Here are two sets of abbreviations that you could try scribbling against your doctor's name in retaliation:
JUSLTIAWC = Jumped up spotty little twerp in a white coat
POFIAS = Pompous old fart in a suit

I'm sure you'll be able to think of more.

K

KIDNEYS

Kidneys work best when supplied with fairly large quantities of fluid. Bottled spring water is better and safer than the stuff which comes out of your tap (which probably contains a potentially toxic collection of prescription drug residues).

KNEES

Knee joints often become a little tricky when they are elderly and worn. You may be tempted to have surgery.

Unless my knees become unbearably painful, I will put up with the discomfort and use a walking stick for any extra support which is necessary. Knee operations seem to go wrong quite often.

L

LEARNING

Learning new stuff is as easy for 90-year-olds as it is for 20-year-olds. Both groups are slower than 10-year-olds. The more learning you do, the easier it gets.

LEGACY

Politicians and people in public life are always worried about their ‘legacy’. But what sort of legacy do most of them leave behind when they go to the great bragging shop in the sky? A war? A few bits of legislation which will be out of date and replaced within a year or two? A building which will be knocked down? A statue which will provide target practice for the pigeons?

Artists leave paintings but how many of those will still be hanging on walls in fifty years’ time?

Writers leave books, but how many of those will last beyond a generation?

The best legacy is the respect and love of those whom you knew – those who knew you and who can rejoice in the memory of your life.

If you want to create a legacy then create one for the immediate, short-term future and build it out of love and kindness rather than bricks or paint.

LEISURE

Most people demand and expect plenty of free time – away from work.

But many of them don’t have the faintest what to do with their free time. They find it impossible to entertain themselves.

And so a huge leisure industry has developed – charging good money for often dull and pointless, time-consuming entertainments.

LONGEVITY

It is a myth that we are all living much longer. It is a thesis which is very convenient (doctors and drug companies take full advantage of it) but it is, nevertheless, a myth.

Of course, it is perfectly true that there are more old people around today than there were a century ago.

But this isn't because clever doctors and pill manufacturers have found ways to help us live longer.

There are two very simple reasons why we seem to be living longer.

First, the population is bigger.

When the population is greater, the chances are that there will be more old people. There are more old people living in London than there are old people living in Ross-on-Wye because there are more people living in London than there are people living in Ross-on-Wye.

Second, infant mortality is much lower today than it was a few decades ago. In England in 1900, one in four children didn't reach their 11th birthday. Many died as babies. Others died in childhood. Today less than one in 100 children fails to reach their 11th birthday. And, as a result, life expectation seems to have improved dramatically. This isn't difficult to explain. Imagine you have a family consisting of four people. One dies at the age of three. One dies at the age of 97. One dies at 30. And the fourth dies at 70. The four individuals have lived to 200 between them. Their average lifespan is 50 years. Now assume that the child who died at the age of three lives to 103. That will push up the average lifespan to 75 years.

A century or so ago, many newborn babies never saw their first birthday.

They were killed, largely, by infectious diseases.

Cholera, smallpox and typhoid killed millions.

The big change that has taken place has involved not doctors but better sewage facilities, cleaner water supplies, more spacious homes, more food and better built towns and cities.

All these things have helped slash infant mortality rates.

And so people *seem* to be living longer.

The drug industry and the medical profession are guilty of creating a new version of the post hoc ergo propter hoc fallacy. (Because B happened after A then B was caused by A.)

Doctors and drug company executives argue that adults live healthier lives (a lie) and live longer (another lie) because of developments made by the drug industry.

It would be just as reasonable if the shoe industry claimed that people live healthier lives, and live longer, because of developments made in the shoe industry.

Any improvements in health which have taken place in the last hundred years are a result of:

An increase in our understanding of, and ability to counteract, the way that infections such as cholera are spread (a 19th century development).

The provision of clean water supplies and better sewage facilities. (A 19th century development)

A reduction in infant mortality (a result of 19th century developments)

The introduction of antibiotics (an early 20th century development)

Safer surgery through antiseptics and anaesthesia (a 19th century development)

Today, however, longevity is falling, not because we have reached the limits of human life (we haven't) but because an increasing number of older citizens are being killed by doctors and nurses. Thousands more are dying of infections which are resistant to antibiotics.

Moreover, the incidence of disability among the elderly has been increasing steadily. Tomorrow's pensioners will be nowhere near as fit as their ancestors were.

Our fat and toxin rich diet has led to a steady increase in the incidence of cancer, obesity, heart disease, arthritis and many other causes of long-term disability.

Mental illness such as chronic anxiety and depression are now endemic.

And the powerful drugs which are prescribed by doctors with such careless enthusiasm have also produced a good deal of illness.

M

MEANS TESTING

Politicians are talking about taking the State pension away from people who have savings on which they can live.

State pensions are a not a luxury or a favour. They are an entitlement. They are paid for.

What is going to be next?

Are insurance companies going to refuse to pay out because they think you’ve got enough money? Are the slightly better off elderly going to be banned from using the roads or calling the fire brigade?

Means testing always stinks.

MEMORIES

As we age so we tend to look backwards with fondness.

Sometimes this enthusiasm for the past is justified.

As we get older, we learn to worry more and our intrusive society, together with social media, has added a whole range of new threats and fears to our lives.

Escaping into the past can be relaxing and can help reduce stress.

But it is important to realise that sometimes we look back with rose coloured lenses in our retrospectoscope.

We naturally airbrush out the bad stuff so that that our younger days appear endlessly carefree.

MENTAL ENERGY

Mental energy lasts well into old age, though physical energy may fall.

Old people who appear to have lost their get up and go are probably drugged.

MIDDLE AGE

Middleagers sometimes panic as they see old age approaching and see how the elderly are ignored and mistreated.

MINISTER

Britain has a minister to look after women's interests but there is no Minister for the Elderly, although the elderly are, without any doubt, the most oppressed minority group in the country.

In the absence of any other offers, I am appointing myself to the post.

And this book is my manifesto.

MOTOR CARS

A driving licence, and a car, are essentials for those elderly individuals who live in rural areas.

Older drivers are much, much safer on the roads than young ones but doctors, police and the driving licencing authorities tend not to like older drivers being on the roads and will, often for no rational reason, leap at the chance to take away an older driver's licence.

Many older citizens who have clean driving licences are reluctant to have their eyes tested (or visit their doctor) lest an officious moron spot some minor abnormality and write to the authorities, who then take away their licence – forcing them to go through the humiliation and tiresome pain of taking another test or trying to survive without private transport in a world where public transport is patchy at best.

This is usually blatant prejudice.

Just imagine the fuss if the authorities decided to take driving licences away from blacks, women or gays simply because they were black, female or gay. Twats on social media would become hysterical.

The fact is that drivers over the age of 70 or so are much safer than younger drivers because the bad, bad drivers among them are dead, in prison or disqualified.

Insurance companies should, but rarely do, provide older drivers with cheaper premiums.

It is, in reality, the under 25-year-olds who are dangerous and should be taken off the roads en masse.

Losing their driving licence can be disastrous for many older people. If you live in a rural area you will need a car or the money to pay for taxis. Bus services in rural areas are at best appalling and at worst non-existent and are never likely to get any better.

N

NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE

Britain’s National Health Service died when matrons and almoners disappeared and were replaced by ranks of dull, greedy, self-serving bureaucrats with neither passion nor caring in their bones.

NORMAL PRESSURE HYDROCEPHALUS

Many patients who are diagnosed as suffering from dementia, and who are stuffed into bed and left there to die, are actually suffering from a disorder known as normal pressure hydrocephalus which is quite curable.

The failure to diagnose normal pressure hydrocephalus is one of the biggest health scandals of the last 50 years.

Millions of patients have been wrongly diagnosed as suffering from Alzheimer's Disease, other forms of dementia or Parkinson's disease and, since there is no known cure for any of these disorders, they have been more or less abandoned by the medical profession and by society.

However, studies suggest that between five and ten per cent of all individuals diagnosed as suffering from Alzheimer's Disease or dementia are actually suffering from normal pressure hydrocephalus; a disorder which can produce similar symptoms – but which can be treated.

Around the world there are estimated to be nearly 50 million people suffering from dementia or Alzheimer's disease. One half of all the patients admitted to nursing homes are suffering from dementia of one sort or another. Millions of other patients who have been diagnosed with dementia of one kind or another are being looked after by their families. Many family members have had to abandon their jobs and their normal lives in order to find the necessary time. Millions more patients have been dumped in hospitals and nursing homes where they sit or lie, waiting to die. No one knows how many millions of undiagnosed individuals are struggling to cope with dementia, either alone or with the help of relatives, friends and neighbours.

Despite many promises, there is still no cure for dementia or Alzheimer's disease, nor is there any sign of one, but normal pressure hydrocephalus can be cured completely, quickly and with a simple, relatively cheap operation.

Normal pressure hydrocephalus is bizarrely under-researched, under-diagnosed and under-treated. There is almost certainly no disease affecting large numbers of people which is less understood.

Doctors certainly do not take the disorder as seriously as they should. Within the medical profession it is known (when it is known at all) as the 'wet, wacky and wobbly disease' – more a childhood term of abuse than a phrase redolent with respect. Many doctors have never even heard of it. Organisations which specialise in caring for the elderly are often appallingly ignorant about the disease, as are health websites.

On the internet, I asked the questions 'Why are old people unstable?' and 'Why do old people fall so often?' and none of the first several dozen responses mentioned 'normal pressure hydrocephalus'. In the UK, the NHS Choices website devotes less than 70 words to the disease and describes the condition as 'uncommon' which is manifest nonsense since it affects millions and is undoubtedly the commonest treatable cause of major disability and mental incapacity among the elderly.

Researchers are not interested in investigating the disease because a cure is already available and, since there is no need for a 'wonder drug' there are not going to be any big, fat grants from drug companies. And doctors are not interested in diagnosing or treating the disease because it invariably involves older patients, and doctors are encouraged by governments (and much of society) not to take much interest in elderly patients.

If you made a list of the 100 commonest, potentially fatal but most easily cured medical conditions which are most often mistakenly diagnosed as something else, then normal pressure hydrocephalus would be top of the list.

The only things we know for certain are that normal pressure hydrocephalus is terribly common, it produces devastating results, it is usually mistaken for something else and it is treatable. Patients who have been stuck in bed or in wheelchairs can, after treatment, get up and walk. They can resume their lives; talking and enjoying work and hobbies. Patients who have been abandoned have their lives back again.

A diagnosis of dementia (whether Alzheimer's or any other variety of dementia) can be devastating to a patient and to family and friends. But that diagnosis is often wrong. And if the correct diagnosis is normal pressure hydrocephalus then the true cause of the dementia is treatable.

The first sign that a patient may have normal pressure hydrocephalus is unsteadiness. Patients fall for no discernible reason. The second sign is developing dementia. The third sign is urinary incontinence.

It's important to catch the disease early. Any elderly patient who falls a good deal should be investigated for normal pressure hydrocephalus.

If a friend or relative is diagnosed with dementia then you should not accept the diagnosis until doctors have confirmed that the patient is not suffering from normal pressure hydrocephalus. If the treatment is started early then the outlook is good.

NURSES

Many nurses are good, honest, hard-working and professional. But many are not. And it can be deadly to make the mistake of assuming that all nurses can be trusted.

An astonishing (and horrifying) survey conducted among readers of the journals *Nursing Standard* and *Nursing Older People* showed that five out of six nurses would, at least sometimes, fail to report abuse of the elderly people they were being paid to look after.

So, in my view, five out of six of nurses aren't fit to be nurses.

Would these same nurses ignore the abuse of children so easily?

I suspect not.

This is utterly appalling and an indictment of the modern nursing profession.

The same survey showed that six out of ten nurses would say nothing if they knew that an elderly patient or care home resident was being beaten, bullied or robbed.

Why are nurses failing their patients?

One reason is cowardice.

Unbelievably, it seems that nurses are frightened to report abuse in case they themselves are abused by the person doing the abuse.

Oh, please.

Another reason is, apparently, 'fear of misinterpreting the situation'.

What sort of political correct garbage is that?

Hospital patients and nursing home residents now often suffer malnutrition and dehydration, abuse and rough treatment, lack of privacy, neglect, poor hygiene and bullying. Thousands and thousands of elderly people are left for hours in soiled clothes.

How can anyone 'misinterpret' any of that?

And *why?*

I'll tell you why.

It is because too many modern nurses are lazy, stupid and incompetent. Too many are far too self-important to do anything other than stare at a computer screen all day long.

In my view, nurses who say nothing when they see abuse are as guilty as the abusers. A once great profession is, today, in a worse state than it was in the days of Dickens.

Is it so very old-fashioned of me to believe that every nurse should always report every incident of abuse?

Always. Without exception.

O

OFFICIALS

Officials are paid by us to work for us but many consider it their job to make life difficult, to delay normal processes and to waste our time.

If you find yourself obstructed, frustrated or annoyed by any official, do not hesitate to make a formal complaint. These days there is always a complaints system and the chances are that if you make a formal complaint there will be a lengthy investigation which will not do the official's career any good at all.

OLD FOLKS' HOMES (see also CARE HOMES, NURSING HOMES, RESIDENTIAL HOMES, PRISONS, ZOOS and MIGHT AS WELL BE LOCKED IN A CUPBOARD UNDER THE STAIRS)

Survey after survey has shown that the elderly in care homes and hospitals are ignored and treated worse than animals on a factory farm. Many residents are drugged and kept in bed so that they are less trouble. Compliant local doctors provide the drugs. Willing nursing auxiliaries or completely unqualified members of staff serve up the tablets as prescribed. It is rare to find anyone working in one of these homes who speaks good English. For this the fee is usually a minimum of between £30,000 and £50,000 a year. If you want to rent a bed in a good home where people are likely to show a little caring you can expect to pay considerably more.

Most of these homes are appalling but thankfully, 95% of old people live at home and pretty well look after themselves.

Most people in retirement or old folks' homes could live at home too. Many are pushed into residential care by well-meaning relatives who worry too much about their welfare.

The fact is that if you want to have your meals and laundry done for you, go and live in a hotel. It will be cheaper, the food will be better and the staff will be nicer to you. Go somewhere nice, maybe by the seaside, and you will be far better off than in a smelly old folks' home. If you want sunshine, move to a hotel in Spain. There you will probably find that everyone speaks English. There will be fewer absurd rules too.

And do not assume that the care will be better in an old folks' home than in a hotel.

One of the major problems with many private nursing homes is the shortage of suitable staff. Like most doctors, I know of patients who needed only simple nursing care who have died in nursing homes, simply because there were not enough nurses around to ensure that wounds were attended to, that pressure sores were looked after or that pills were given. If you have 30 patients in a home and each patient takes 20 tablets a day (by no means unusual) that means that 600 tablets must be given out to the right patients at the right time every day of the week. Without enough nurses that alone can be a daunting task. Patients may be given their sleeping tablets early in the evening so that the staff can get off home. The elderly man or woman who is restless at night may be put into a cot bed and then left there all night. If the patient concerned needs to pass water during the night, as so many old people do, he or she will be unable to get up to do so. The nurses will come to the conclusion that the patient is incontinent and the downhill slide will have begun.

When there are not enough nurses in a home, things can deteriorate quickly. The staff can quickly get depressed and short-tempered and the residents will suffer.

If you must go into a care home or a nursing home of some kind, there are some fairly simple ways in which you can assess the suitability of a nursing home.

You will want to choose a home which is in a suitable area – ideally close enough for friends and relatives to visit easily and close enough to a town for fit individuals to get out and about.

If possible, you should choose a home which allows residents to take with them a reasonable selection of their own belongings, including furniture. Many old people settle into a new home much more quickly when they are allowed to take with them familiar furniture and souvenirs. The bedrooms in some nursing homes are packed with old photographs, curios and nicknacks. I am sure that it is no coincidence that in these homes, where each room has a personality of its own, the residents always seem far more cheerful than in those homes which are spick and span and characterless.

Some homes allow old people to take pets with them, and this may be an important consideration. I once visited a nursing home where there were more cats than people, and though the whole house reeked of cats, the residents seemed to be as happy as if they were in heaven.

Be suspicious of places which have prefabricated buildings in the garden. This always suggests that the owners are trying to get as many guests as they can into the house. There will probably be a shortage of loos, bathrooms and dining accommodation.

Here then are some final things to check when looking for a nursing home:

1) Check that the home is properly registered.

2) Ask for details of the total weekly rates, including any extras.

3) Ask about the availability of doctors. Patients may only be accepted in some homes if they are on a local doctor's list. Make sure that there is a system for calling a doctor in an emergency.

4) Make sure that there is a call system in all bedrooms and that there are enough telephones.

5) Check that there is a qualified nurse on duty 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. You should ask about the

number of nurses employed. If there isn’t a nurse permanently available then it may be cheaper to find a hotel.

6) Ensure that the home provides the sort of total care needed. The atmosphere is important. The home does not need to have expensive paintings hanging on the walls, but it should be clean and bright and smell good. Visitors should be allowed into the home fairly freely. Some homes even have spare rooms available for the use of visiting relatives who have travelled a long way to see someone.

7) Check that the building is safe and that there is an adequate fire escape.

8) Ask whether a chiropodist calls and whether a physiotherapist is available when needed.

It is probably a good idea to visit a potential nursing home at a meal-time. You can not only see what sort of food is served but also learn a lot from how it is served. Is there anyone to help those residents who cannot cut their own food easily? Or are meal-times hectic?

If the staff cannot cope with your visit, how could they cope with a real emergency?

If the person showing you round objects when you ask questions, then ask more questions. If he or she explodes with anger, you can be sure that he/she does not have the patience to deal with old people who may be confused and difficult.

Remember that anyone who runs a private nursing home is trying to make money. There is absolutely nothing wrong with that. But how much money are they trying to make and how quickly and honourably and honestly are they trying to make it?

As an alternative to nursing homes and hospitals, there are many flats and houses available which were built especially for the elderly and which are equipped with many specially designed labour-saving gadgets. It is usual for these flats to have a warden on the site who can keep an eye on the infirm and help with some chores occasionally. The availability of such flats varies from area to area and it is important to choose a flat carefully. The flat should, preferably, be specifically designed for use by an elderly person, with smooth floor surfaces and an easy-to-run kitchen. If the flat is a tower block, then the tower should have a lift. The flat should be not too far from the shops or the bus service, but preferably not too close to a busy road or school.

In addition to flats there are, in many areas, alms-houses which are let out to elderly people at low rents. Often these alms-houses are run by private organisations, sometimes organisations with religious affiliations. Sadly, however, the demand for these always seems greater than the supply.

P

PARANOIA

Paranoia is entirely justifiable among those over 65 – even 60. The truth is that ‘they’ do want you dead. All politicians and bureaucrats are your enemy. They want you out of the way because in their terms you are an unproductive liability.

And I’m afraid that most health care workers are your enemy too. Any profession which can dismiss the frail elderly as ‘bed blockers’ is the enemy.

PATRONISING

I have 17,564 pet hates.

Here is one.

I'm on the telephone talking to some kid and he insists that before we go any further he must know my birth date. This is a modest nod in the direction of security. I tell him my birth date. 'That's brilliant', says the patronising kid when I get my date of birth right. He then asks me my postcode. That's part two of the security process though since it is one of the most public pieces of knowledge on the planet one has to wonder at its value. 'Wonderful! Marvellous!' he says when I get my postcode right. Patronising little bastard.

There's plenty of other stuff too.

Advertisers take the piss out of the elderly without a second thought.

If advertisers want to poke fun at someone then the first choice will be an elderly, white man. The second choice will be an elderly white woman.

No advertiser would ever dare take the mickey out of a Muslim, a Scot or a man of any age wearing a Jewish skullcap.

And then there's the stuff in between the adverts on television.

On chat and game shows, hosts and interviewers always lower their voices when they talk to anyone with one or two grey hairs.

'And how old are you?' they ask, in the sort of tone they also favour when talking to backward children, and the very careful enunciation they favour when talking to the deaf, the blind, the backward and the foreign.

The reply, assuming that the guest turns out to be over 60, will be greeted with gasps of delight and awe and the host will lead the live audience in a round of applause.

It's all so excruciatingly patronising.

Can you imagine television hosts asking a guest what religion they are?

'I'm a Methodist, Amanda.'

'Oh how wonderful. Marvellous. Congratulations.'

Big condescending smile and much applause.

If you are ever asked your age by a television host then reply: 'You tell me how old you are, Simon, and I'll tell you how old I am.'

I also get pissed off by colleges which run courses for the elderly (designed to help 'older citizens' understand computers or learn to paint).

Can you imagine the outcry if special courses were organised for Jews or homosexuals or black people?

'Special course in using Windows 91 for black people.'

'Enrol now in our art classes for people of the Jewish persuasion.'

They'd never dare, would they?

So, what gives the miserable bastards the feeling that they can patronise older folk?

And finally, it is has now become popular to put pre-school children into retirement homes so that the decrepit old folk therein will benefit from the association. The idea is that the oldsters play games with the children and thereby regain their youthful attitudes. This, surely, is the most utterly patronising idea of all time. The residents of retirement homes need to be treated with respect not humiliated in this grotesque way. The woeful morons who thought this one up should be executed for initiating a crime against humanity.

PEAK PENSIONER

Depending on where you live, between a fifth and a quarter of the population is now over the age of 65. And since birth rates are falling, the percentage of older folk in most communities is rising rather rapidly.

And we haven’t yet reached what I have decided to call ‘Peak Pensioner’, though this phenomenon is one much feared by politicians, who are always eager to share their fear about the rising number of older folk in our society and to use the increase in the number of over 65s as an excuse for encouraging unfettered immigration.

The good thing is that the more of us there are, the more clout we have.

If we stick together we could control the country.

Here is to Pensioner Power!

PENSIONS

There comes a time in everyone's life when they realise they are getting older. They find they need reading spectacles when faced with small print. Their hair gets thinner and doesn't need cutting quite as often. Hills suddenly become steeper. Stairs go on for longer.

At the age of about 50, pensions, which always used to be as dull as plumbing and emergency drains cover, suddenly seem enormously practical, very relevant and painfully important.

And as the official retirement age looms, so folk begin to worry about becoming redundant – in every sense of the word.

And then there's the money.

Or the shortage of money.

When reality hits, it often seems clear that retirement isn't going to be endless games of golf, sailing into the sunshine and taking expensive trips around the world on luxury cruise ships.

Instead the size of a pension becomes something to worry about.

Will it be eaten up by inflation? Will there be enough to pay for keeping warm and buying a little food occasionally?

We all know that basic, background costs (council rates, utility bills, insurance, heating) have all soared and that such fripperies aren't included in the official inflation figures.

Before you reach retirement age try living for a week on your pension.

Will you cope? Or do you need to delay your retirement or find another job?

PERKS OF AGE

There are some perks in being old.

Cancer tends to grow more slowly than it does in younger people, so that's a good thing, and something definitely worth looking forward to.

The big, nasty utility companies aren't supposed to cut you off without a therm (especially if the weather is bad). They are supposed to give you a week or two's notice at the very least.

And if you do get sent to prison, you're far less likely to be gang raped or beaten up. No 70-year-old is going to be someone's bitch. Beating up a 70-year-old isn't going to enhance the reputation of the prison hard man is it?

PILLS

When I was working as a doctor, I often saw patients who were struggling to take 60 or 70 pills a day. On occasion, I saw patients who were taking over 100 tablets and capsules every single day.

These patients had to take some pills in the morning, some in the evening, some four times a day, some three times a day, some six times a day, some when they needed them and doubtless some every now and then when the moon was in the right position.

The doctors who had prescribed such confusions of pills apparently did not realise that drugs often interact with one another – producing serious side effects.

Nor did they stop to think of the side effects all these drugs were likely to produce.

Indeed, many of the drugs were prescribed simply to counteract the side effects produced by other drugs.

And nor, apparently, did it occur to these idiot doctors that when you're given pills to take three times a day, four times a day and five times a day then you are bound to become slightly confused about which drug you've taken and which one is due to be taken next.

The diuretic, which needs to be taken first thing in the morning, gets swallowed at night, causing incontinence, and the sleeping tablet, which should be taken at night, is taken in the morning, producing day-long drowsiness and confusion.

When their unfortunate patient collapses in confusion, the idiot doctors diagnose dementia and prescribe another armful of pills.

If you are taking more than a dozen pills a day then you should ask your doctor to rationalise your drug taking regime.

You almost certainly don't need as many pills as you are taking. Ask your doctor to organise things so that you take pills three times a day or four times a day – and not both. If your doctor doesn't have the time or the inclination to help you then I suggest you dump him.

Make sure you know what each pill is for. The names of the pills will be on the bottles or packets so you can look them up on the internet. If you don't have access to the internet I don't blame you a bit – just find a kid over the age of three and ask them to do it for you.

Finally, I have to warn you not to stop taking pills which have been prescribed for you.

Some pills produce serious problems if they are stopped suddenly. And, who knows, there is always a chance that some of the drugs you have been prescribed may well be essential. Always talk to a doctor before stopping pills which have been prescribed for you.

PRESCRIBING ERRORS

Prescription drugs can, and do, save many lives. But prescription drugs are one of the major killers in our modern world.

If drugs were only ever prescribed sensibly, and when they were likely to interfere with a potentially life-threatening disease, then the risks associated with their use would be acceptable.

But all the evidence shows that doctors do not understand the hazards associated with the drugs they use and frequently prescribe inappropriately and excessively. Many of the deaths associated with prescription drug use are caused by drugs which should not have been prescribed or which did not need to be taken. Patients are given the wrong drug. Or they are given the wrong dose of the right drug. Or they are given the right drug by the wrong route (for example, a drug that should be injected into a muscle may be injected directly into the bloodstream).

Experts believe that there is an error, roughly one in every eight times when a hospital patient is given a drug.

Since an ordinary hospital patient may receive a dozen different drugs – at different times of the day – the opportunities for error are colossal.

In a 300 bed hospital, there may be between 300 and 400 medication errors every day! Some of those errors will result in mild discomfort. Some will result in death.

So, before you take a prescription drug make sure you should be taking it. And make sure you know what it is for.

And if you are in hospital, then make sure that whoever is giving you a drug is certain that you are being given the right dose of the right drug at the right time.

PROSTATE

The prostate gland always contains lumps of cells which look as if they may be cancerous but which probably don’t need treating since the owner of the prostate will probably die of something else long before the funny looking cells in his prostate gland cause any serious problems.

You should be aware that prostate cancer awareness week campaigns are often promoted by companies making screening tests.

These tests are expensive.

And they produce a mass of false positives and false negatives.

The men with false positives think they have prostate cancer when they haven’t. They will inevitably worry a great deal. Worse still, they may be treated unnecessarily by doctors and surgeons. The consequences can be catastrophic.

The men with false negatives walk away thinking, quite wrongly, that they are perfectly healthy and can happily ignore any physical signs which they might develop.

The bottom line is that the much promoted prostate cancer screening test has now been proven beyond doubt to be a dangerous waste of time and money which does far more harm than good.

If your doctor suggests that you have such a test, change your doctor because he is out of date and useless.

Q

QUACKS

Quacks, which is to say unqualified persons flogging medicaments which are of no value but around which a viable story can be spun, usually target the elderly.

They do this because older citizens, as a whole, tend to be more trusting, less wary and easier to part from their money than younger folk who are likely to be cynical and more difficult to cheat.

It's nice to know that the world is awash with confidence tricksters who delight in getting rich by tricking money out of the vulnerable, the susceptible and the lonely.

I wouldn't put these tricksters in prison. That costs us all money. I'd tie them to stakes in a snake pit and then fill the pit with the most venomous snakes I could find.

R

RACISM

They (media, celebs, politicians and advertisers) all take the piss out of white, elderly Englishmen in a way which they wouldn't dare ever do when talking about any other ethnic group.

Have you ever wondered why nearly all homeless tramps (apart from the imported ones) are single, white, ageing males?

It's because single, white, ageing males are bottom of all council housing lists.

RECUPERATION

Recuperative powers weaken with age. This means that if you run a marathon at the age of 80, you will probably take longer to recover than you would have taken when you were 40.

REFORMERS

Reformers want to alter the framework of society and the attitudes of people.

Today's pseudo-rebels (who are militant about their reforming) want society to change so that they get everything they want (and they want it now). They care nothing about the elderly who have become an under-privileged minority. Their motives are entirely selfish.

Many of the pseudo-rebels are students or unemployed and have not yet enjoyed or endured life as taxpayers. They know very little about the world and they want a more statist society. They want a world in which everything is paid for by someone else.

Their inexperience and ignorance, allied to a level of arrogance which means they do not consider it necessary for them ever to consult their elders (who they certainly do not regard as their betters), means that they are intent on creating a future which will ensure disaster for them, their children and their children's children.

So if we want to preserve the world we know, we oldies have to push back. We need to organise and become militant to defend

REPEAT PRESCRIPTIONS

Repeat prescribing (allowing patients to collect prescriptions for their medication without seeing the doctor) was a good idea when it started.

The idea was that patients who needed long-term medication but who didn't need to see the doctor as often as they needed more pills, could simply collect their prescriptions in between consultations.

So, for example, patients with diabetes or epilepsy or high blood pressure or arthritis could see the doctor once every three or six months and pick up their prescriptions in between their visits. It was a good idea because it saved everyone time. And patients were told that they should only ask for, and collect, repeat prescriptions if they were happy that their symptoms were well controlled.

Today, the basic principles upon which repeat prescribing were founded have been forgotten. Patients ask for, and are given, repeat prescriptions for a whole range of disorders and some go for years without ever seeing a doctor.

Well over half of all the prescriptions doctors write are for patients they don't see. Every single day of the working week in the UK the best part of a million repeat prescriptions are collected from GP's surgeries – frequently by patients who never needed to be on drugs in the first place.

Back in the mid-1980s, I pointed out that Britain's huge tranquilliser and sleeping pill addiction problem had been caused largely by the growth in 'repeat prescribing'. Since then the only thing that has changed has been that the problem has got worse. Patients and doctors both abuse a system that was originally a good idea but which is now a dangerous practice.

Not long ago, a GP was fined for continuing to issue repeat prescriptions for a patient who had died.

If you collect prescriptions without seeing your doctor, make sure that you visit the surgery at least once every three months to check that you still need to take the medication – and that it is still appropriate for your needs.

RESPECT

Respect used to be a right. In what are considered to be the ‘bad old days’ it was generally agreed that we were all entitled to respect from everyone in our lives; whether they were permanent residents or just wandering through.

The elderly, in particular, were regarded as deserving of respect since they were the people in society who had survived the longest and experienced the most and whose wisdom was, therefore, the greatest.

Younger folk consulted older folk when things went wrong because they suspected (quite rightly) that whatever had gone wrong had probably gone wrong before.

Sadly, that attitude is now passé.

Today, the young are filled with more prejudices than ever, and most 20-year-olds assume (or in many cases ‘know’) that anyone over 70, 60 or even 50 must, by definition, be senile, sexless and stupid.

There is a widespread assumption that anyone over 50 is not entitled to any dignity or respect because their age means that they are inevitably and inescapably stupid, inept and dependent.

The millennials have spread the word: give no respect to anyone; no one gets respect automatically.

Moreover, in this new, modern world it is impossible to earn respect.

The only way to get it is to demand it.

RESUSCITATION

At what age are patients simply allowed to die?

How old is too old for a patient to be resuscitated?

At what point does society have the right to say ‘You’ve lived long enough, now you must die and make way for someone else’?

And why should resuscitation be decided by age? It is possible to argue that it would make as much sense to decide according to wealth or beauty.

But ageism is now officially accepted. Anyone over 60 is now officially old, though in a growing number of hospitals, the cut off age for resuscitation is 55.

It is wise to keep out of hospitals and away from doctors as much as possible.

RETIREMENT

When retirement is a long way off, we tend to look on the idea rather fondly. It will be good to have time to spend on the things we really want to do. We can play golf every day and spend as long as we like in the bar afterwards. We can take up wood carving, painting or fell walking. We can learn to paint or we can study Russian.

In the event, of course, things don't often work out quite as expected.

Many retired folk become bored, dissatisfied, frustrated, restless and lonely.

And they are too short of money to be able to do all the things they dreamt of doing.

So why retire?

Most of those who have retired realise, within a few weeks, that they would have been happier if they had carried on working – even if they had worked shorter hours.

The days of forced retirement may have ended (officially) but many employers still make it clear that they expect employees to retire at 65. The ones who don't take the hint will often find themselves suddenly made redundant.

Oddly enough, senior judges and MPs (the ones who make the rules) never seem to retire.

If someone said 'You can't do your job because you are black, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, female, homosexual, transsexual or disabled, there would be outrage.

Politicians would be clubbing each other to death for a chance to denounce the someone who said it.

But it is apparently perfectly legal, proper and acceptable to say that someone can't do their job because they've had too many birthdays.

In truth, they may be just as capable as ever but they will be considered incapable not because of biology, not because of their age, but because of the role they are forced to play in our society: helpless and dependent.

(In our society, everyone seems to play the part they are expected to play. So doctors behave like doctors, policemen behave like policemen and professional footballers behave like professional footballers. There is a real danger that elderly people will behave like elderly people are expected to behave.)

The result of all this is that many oldsters believe that they are irrelevant, useless, superfluous and a nuisance – and not entitled to be treated like people.

They have been brainwashed in the way that blacks and women used to be brainwashed.

The bottom line is that most old folk like being retired and thrown out of useful employment in the same way that kids enjoyed being sent up chimneys and black slaves got a real kick out of picking cotton all damned day long, doo dah day.

If you don't want to retire you don't have to.

If they make you retire before you are ready then there's a good chance that you can force them to pay you compensation.

RETIREMENT AGE

In the 1880s, Germany's Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck decided to prick the balloon of developing demands for a more socialist approach to politics, by introducing a State pension programme for older Germans who had stopped working.

Bismarck and the German Emperor William the 1st, argued before the Reichstag that people who had reached the age of 70 should receive a State pension. This was later reduced to 65 since 65 was, at the time, the average German life expectancy.

In Britain, the Old-Age Pensions Act of 1908 proposed a weekly pension of 5 shillings a week to the half a million citizens who were over the age of 70. Married couples received 7 shillings and 6 pence a week. The pension age was later lowered to the age of 65.

(The large number of individuals eligible for a pension will probably startle those who wrongly believe that until 2016, average life expectation was no more than 30 or so and that anyone surviving into their 50s was a freak worthy of a starring role in a fair, billed alongside the bearded lady and an obligatory dwarf.)

In 1935, Germany's proposed retirement age of 65 was selected for a retirement age in the US when President Franklin Roosevelt introduced the idea of State pensions into the US.

And the same age has, for years, been the generally accepted age at which workers could expect to retire and receive a pension.

It seems entirely reasonable that older people should be entitled to retire at some pre-determined age, should they wish to do so.

But although it seems equally unreasonable that many older people are forced to retire little or nothing is done to stop it happening. It is against the law in most civilised countries to force individuals to retire at a certain age. But that doesn't stop it happening.

RIGHTS

Never forget that it’s your body and your mind and, unless the professionals can prove that you are stark raving bonkers, it is up to you to decide what treatment to accept and what to refuse.

The medical establishment recently decreed that in future, patients should take the big decisions about their own treatment programmes.

I am delighted since this is something I have been advocating since the Hundred Years War.

Sadly, the medical establishment has not made this move because of my campaigns or because it thinks it is the right thing to do but because they believe that if patients make their own strategic decisions the number of lawsuits will fall because if or when things go wrong. They believe that doctors will be able to disclaim all responsibility and point the stodgy finger of blame at the patient.

Still, the means may be a bit dodgy but the end is definitely acceptable.

ROLE PLAYING

Luck, money and genes affect how we age.

But we are also encouraged to play the part other people expect us to play.

We have a role imposed on us as we age.

We are expected to be, useless, unemployable, impoverished and grateful for any scraps of respect or dignity we are offered.

Bugger that.

I'll be satisfied with the respect and dignity the 25-year-old expects.

Nothing less.

RUBBISH COLLECTING

Thanks to daft laws from the European Union, all householders in the UK are now forced to sort their rubbish and put it into lots of separate boxes and bags. There are rules about which stuff goes into which box and there are rules about when the boxes can be put out for collection.

All this is nonsense, of course.

Most of the stuff which has been sorted for recycling is sent to China or mainland Europe to be burnt or buried.

And putting waste food into little plastic boxes attracts rats and will eventually result in a recurrence of the plague and the Black Death.

If you find it difficult to manage the rubbish rules and to handle the heavy bins with which you have been provided, contact your local council and insist that you need help. Councils have a duty to provide whatever help you need in this regard.

S

SCIENCE

Don't believe anyone who tries to convince you that modern medicine is a science. It isn't. Despite all the money spent on medical research, doctors still don't know how long they should give antibiotics for (or what dose they should use). They guess.

And doctors invariably give the same dose of a drug to people of different ages and sizes. No one ever bothers to do clinical trials to find out whether drug dosages should be varied according to age and size. The result is that a 20-year-old woman weighing seven stone will be given the same dose of a drug as a 45-year-old man weighing 20 stone. And a 75-year-old woman will be given the same dose of a drug as an 18-year-old youth.

It's hardly science, is it?

SCREENING

As you get older you will find yourself frequently invited to your doctor's surgery for a screening test or a health check. Don't make the mistake of thinking that your doctor suddenly cares for you. In Britain, family doctors are paid huge bonuses if they perform routine health checks on their elderly patients.

The principle of screening is a simple one: the patient trots along to the doctor and the doctor (for a chunky, great fee, of course) does tests which are designed to spot early signs of disease. The tests which are offered are done because the medical establishment has managed to convince NHS bureaucrats that screening is worth paying for.

Doctors are enthusiastic about screening because it's enormously profitable. And they're very lukewarm about encouraging their patients to follow healthier lifestyles because there is no money in it.

For decades now, just about every attempt to show that medical screening programmes save lives has proved that they are a waste of time, energy and money. Indeed, surveys have proved that, because of the risk of false positives, medical screening programmes do far more harm than good.

Medical screening programmes go back a long way.

The first recorded screening took place at a public brothel in Avignon in 1347 when a local Abbess and a surgeon examined all the working women every Saturday to see whether or not they were fit to carry on serving the local population.

Then, in 1917 large corporations in the U.S. thought it might be a good idea to have their employees examined regularly. When half of four million American men called up for military service during the First World War proved to be unfit for military service, insurance companies started screening the general population.

Since then, the medical screening business has grown virtually unchecked and those promoting screening (or health checks) merrily ignore the inconvenient fact that since the 1970s there has been ample evidence to show that medical screening programmes are not just a waste of time and money but can also be a serious health hazard.

Back in 1979, the World Health Organisation published a report which showed that people who were subjected to regular medical screenings needed to go to hospital more often but were not as healthy as people who did not undergo regular medical screenings. The conclusion was that health screening is expensive and ineffective.

In the same year, the results of a Canadian Task Force report on Periodic Health Examination came to the conclusion that annual medical check-ups should be abandoned since they were both inefficient and potentially harmful.

Health checks are harmful for many reasons.

First, when people are taught to put their faith in medical check-ups they tend to abandon responsibility for their own health and enjoy a false sense of security. Patients forget that a medical check-up is no more a sign of long-term health than an encouraging bank statement is a sign of permanent financial security. A patient who is given a clean bill of health is likely to ignore strange symptoms which develop a week or two later. And there is a danger that he (or she) may feel that it is unnecessary to eat wisely or to take regular exercise.

Second, screening examinations may frighten people. They can result in cancer phobias, neuroses and depression. And they can result in so much stress that the immune system is damaged – leading to a greater susceptibility to disease.

Third, the procedures involved in screening programmes may do physical harm. There are, for example, some doctors who perform coronary angiographs as part of their check-up procedures. As many as two patients per 100 may die during this procedure.

Fourth, when a screening examination results in a false positive the patient may be given a treatment which may damage his or health. A major Swedish report on breast screening (a type of screening which has been shown to be particularly useless and dangerous but enormously profitable) showed that out of 600,000 women screened, there had been 100,000 false positives. This means that 100,000 healthy women were told that they had breast cancer when they didn't have anything wrong with them. They were terrified and treated unnecessarily.

Fifth, screening is expensive. GPs are paid a fortune for conducting simple health checks (Actually, to be accurate, they are usually paid for telling their practice nurses, whose salaries are largely paid by taxpayers, to do the tests.)

Sixth it is a proven fact that screening doesn't work. It is dangerous and does far more harm than good.

Every independent survey I have found has concluded that screening (whether general or specific) is costly and useless. The reality is that the only people who benefit from screening programmes are doctors – and other parts of the health industry. Screening programmes are extremely profitable.

The problems, and hazards, with screening programmes seem boundless. For example, you have a one in three chance of a false positive result if you have a full body CT scan. There is also a one in 20 chance that the scan will miss signs of disease – and give you a false sense of complacency and encourage you to ignore important physical signs.

I’ve been screaming about the dangers of screening programmes for 30 years or more and was delighted when, in November 2009, the American Cancer Society finally accepted that screening for breast and prostate cancer is inefficient, inaccurate and alarmist and can do damage by detecting cancers that either don’t exist or wouldn’t kill if they did.

Naturally, however, such programmes are still promoted within the NHS where staff favour screening programmes because it is easy to measure the results. They can say: ‘We screened 10,000 people and found 10 people with possible cancer. We, have, therefore, saved 10 lives.’ In medical and statistical terms, such claims are nonsensical. But in political terms they are invaluable.

Offering sensible advice is much cheaper and safer but the results cannot be measured and it is difficult for the NHS to claim the credit for saving lives.

SECRETS

I believe that medical confidentiality is vital. I also believe that you can't be a little bit confidential, any more than a woman can be a little bit pregnant.

Over a third of a century ago, I resigned as a GP when NHS bureaucrats tried to force me to write confidential information about my patients on sick notes.

I refused and was fined heavily for doing so. It seemed to me that this was a vital matter of principle.

Patients are entitled to believe that what they tell their doctors in confidence will remain confidential.

I felt that by putting diagnoses on sick notes (likely to be read by heaven knows how many people) I would be betraying that confidence.

And so I resigned from the NHS and became a full-time writer.

When I was a GP, I found that I was constantly having to find ways to defend my patients from the bureaucrats.

Once, for example, a State bureaucrat arrived and announced that he was going to take away all the medical records I held for my 2,500 patients. He had a van parked outside my surgery, ready to take the records away with him. I pointed out that this would be a breach of confidentiality and would endanger the lives of my patients. The bureaucrat wouldn't budge. He had a form giving him the right to remove the records for routine checking. He asked me to take a medical record file from its drawer and to read what was written in red on the bottom of the file. I did so. It said: 'The property of the Minister of Health'. Suddenly I remembered Shylock and the *Merchant of Venice*. 'You can take the records,' I told him. 'But you can't take the ink.' He stared at me, uncomprehendingly. 'The paper belongs to the Minister of Health,' I conceded. 'But the ink on the paper belongs to me. So you can take the records but you must leave the ink behind.'

He left.

Things today are rather different; they are worse, much worse

Today, patients can't trust their doctors to keep their secrets.

The General Medical Council has told doctors that they must 'share' their patients' secrets with just about anyone who asks for it. Naturally, there is no promise that the person to whom the information is given will not pass it on to their friends and neighbours.

So, the bottom line is that you can't trust a doctor to keep your secrets. Don't tell her or him anything you wouldn't be happy to see on her or his Facebook page.

SENILITY

The word senile isn’t a diagnosis – it is merely a term of abuse applied to people over 60 who dare to make a fuss. Modern folklore is that the old are inevitably stupid and incompetent and that if they must be tolerated then they must be kept in conditions which would not be tolerated for farm animals or prisoners, and they must be treated with plenty of contempt and absolutely no respect.

SEX

There is a widespread feeling among younger folk that people over the age of 50 should not think of sex – let alone contemplate any practical activity.

Staff in residential homes and long-stay hospitals often seem to be deeply disturbed by any hint that a pair of their residents might want to develop a relationship, hold hands, go to bed together or get married. The two sexes are kept apart as carefully as school-children on a field trip.

This is patronising and ageist and it is, to put it politely, total bollocks.

SHINGLES

I received an unsigned letter from our GP inviting me to make an appointment to have a shingles vaccination.

The vaccine was apparently being offered to selected groups of individuals over the age of 70 and is, no doubt, a result of determined efforts by the drug industry to find ways to make more money out of old people (an expanding market) as well as children (a market which is definitely not expanding quite so rapidly).

The letter from my GP contains no reference to side effects but told me that if I want more information I should consult the website www.shinglesaware.co.uk

What the GPs failed to point out is that www.shinglesaware.co.uk was set up by Sanofi Pasteur MSD which is (golly I can hardly believe this) a manufacturer of vaccines. Actually, to be more specific, it is the manufacturer of this very vaccine. So my GPs are using a vaccine manufacturer's website as the source of information about a vaccine. Great. That warms the cockles and muscles of my tired old heart.

Naturally, neither the manufacturer nor the GP practice has bothered to point out that the cost to the NHS of each vaccine jab is at least £55 (no doubt shared between the company making the stuff and the doctors who give it).

And the side effects that the GP didn't bother to mention?

Well, the common ones include headache, pain, swelling at the area of the vaccination, itching, bruising, joint pain, muscle pain, fever and rash.

Slightly less common side effects include nausea and swollen glands.

Less common side effects include developing chickenpox, developing shingles, sight problems and, of course, having an anaphylactic shock reaction causing difficulty in breathing or swallowing and with death being a possible consequence. That's the sort of death that ends up with a coffin and a spot in the local cemetery.

And what exactly does this doubtless profitable-for-all-concerned-vaccine contain?

Well, my GP didn't bother to tell me that either but I can reveal that he (or she) wants to inject me with a delightful mixture of the live varicella-zoster virus (the live virus you will note) to which has been added sucrose, gelatin, sodium chloride, potassium chloride, disodium phosphate, sodium hydroxide, urea and some other doubtless really good stuff.

I decided to pass on the invitation, thank you very much.

I thought I'd be safer to take my chances with shingles.

SIGHT

Having your eyes tested is one of only two regular check-ups worth having from a professional. (The other is going to the dentist to have your teeth and gums examined.)

Most people who are over 65 will already need reading glasses since the need usually arises at the age of 45 to 55. Reading vision rarely deteriorates with greater age, so the reading glasses that suited you at 60 should suffice for quite a few years. By and large, if you can see to read reasonably well don't be tricked into spending big money on buying new spectacles every couple of years unless you really want a pair with bright yellow flyaway frames.

A decent optician will also check for glaucoma, cataracts and macular degeneration.

I suggest that you go to a decent optician rather than one in a chain. I once visited a branch of a well-known chain of opticians and was told (quite incorrectly) that I had macular degeneration and should take some (expensive) medication that they could sell me. I subsequently found that I did not have macular degeneration at all and did not need the expensive medication I had been sold.

On another occasion, at another optician, I had my eyes tested by a teenager (he looked about 14 but I suppose he could have been a young looking 16-year-old) and found, to my horror, that my visual fields were appallingly restricted. The youth was testing me on one of those screens upon which little lights appear at random. The person being tested is expected to say whenever a light appears. It's a simple but effective and apparently fool proof test. As a doctor, I was worried to find that I had a massive visual field defect. This can suggest a number of disorders, none of them terribly promising. But peering closely at the screen, I realised that it was very dirty. I asked the youth if he minded if I wiped the screen with a handkerchief. He seemed surprised but said he did not mind. When I had cleaned the screen, I asked him to repeat the test. This he did. We then discovered that there was absolutely nothing wrong with my visual fields for I could see all the little lights as they were lit up.

I often wondered how many people had been sent to their doctor, and thence to hospital, because no one at that wretched store had bothered to clean the screen they were using.

It has also been my experience that opticians will often attempt to sell new spectacles to patients when the change in visual acuity is marginal at best.

So, find an optician you can trust and stick with him or her.

SUPPOSITORY

Suppositories are jelly-like preparations, usually formed in the shape of a small bullet, which are designed to be inserted into the rectum where they will dissolve. Suppositories can be used very safely and effectively to give a prescription drug to a patient. Sadly, many patients suspect that any doctor who prescribes a suppository must be either French (since the French are known to favour drugs prescribed as suppositories rather than as tablets or capsules) or something of a pervert (or, possibly, both). This is a rather sad misconception. Drugs given in suppository form are absorbed very effectively but are obviously unlikely to upset the stomach lining, and the rectal mucosa is far less sensitive to foreign substances. So, if your doctor wants to prescribe a drug in suppository form then I suggest that you accept the prescription gratefully. Drugs given as suppositories have all the advantages of drugs given by mouth but far fewer of the side effects.

SURGERY

It is generally accepted that at least a quarter of all surgical operations performed are unnecessary. The real figure is much higher – probably half.

For some types of surgery for example: heart surgery, tonsillectomies, circumcisions, caesarian sections for pregnant women and hysterectomies – the percentage of unnecessary operations is almost certainly much, much higher than that.

At least 90% of all heart surgery is unnecessary.

With many operations (such as hernia repair) the downside is often considerably greater than the upside.

Operations are done unnecessarily for a huge variety of reasons.

Some – particularly those performed on private patients – may be done because the surgeon needs the cash because his boat needs repainting.

And some unnecessary operations are done because it's easier to cut open a patient than it is to think about alternatives. If you go to a Ford garage, the salesman will recommend a Ford motor car. If you visit a surgeon he will recommend surgery.

As the years go by, so the number of unnecessary operations continues to increase.

And it isn't just a problem because of the unnecessary pain and discomfort that patients have to put up with.

At least 1% of the patients who undergo surgery will die on the operating table or in the ward afterwards. One in every 100 patients who goes into hospital for an operation does not walk out again afterwards.

Of course, some patients are very ill when they are wheeled into the operating theatre.

And some patients would have died without surgery.

Many of those patients were perfectly healthy when they are taken into the operating theatre. They were having surgery because they had been persuaded by doctors that it was necessary, or that it would in some way improve the quality of their lives.

Back in 1988 (in a book called *The Health Scandal*) I reported that coronary artery bypass surgery (the commonest procedure performed in cardiac surgery) had been in use for nearly 30 years without anyone trying to find out how patients' everyday lives were affected by the operation.

When a survey was eventually done, it was found that whereas nearly half of the patients who had the operation had been working right up to the time of surgery, three months after the operation, only just over a third of the men were working. And a year after the operation, nearly half of the patients were still not working. In other words, the operation had little positive effect on patients' lives but did put a good many out of action for some time. And there were, of course, a number of patients who died as a result of surgical complications.

A bypass operation takes several hours to perform, consumes a good deal of hospital time and professional skill and can be a physically and mentally exhausting experience for a patient and his family. There is a one in 30 risk that a patient undergoing coronary artery bypass surgery will be dead within 30 days of the operation. The mortality rate varies from surgeon to surgeon but it can be as high as 20% and anything up to a quarter of patients having the operation have heart attacks either while on the operating table or shortly afterwards.

And what makes the medical profession's enthusiasm for coronary artery surgery even more bizarre is the fact that patients who have symptoms of heart disease don't need surgery at all, but stand a better chance of recovering if they are put on a regime which includes a vegan diet, gentle exercise and relaxation. (I described the utterly convincing evidence for this in my book *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You*, which was first published in 1996. The chapter is entitled *Conquer Heart Disease Without Pills Or Surgery*.)

I can understand cardiac surgeons promoting heart surgery – it is for them a major source of income – but what the hell are GPs doing still referring so many patients for heart surgery?

Any GP who does so should be struck off the medical register and have his stethoscope stuffed up a suitably ill-designed orifice.

SUSCEPTIBILITY

The elderly are more susceptible to illness (particularly infection) than the young. And so if you walk into a shop and someone is sneezing and coughing without covering their mouth, you should walk out and go somewhere else.

An infection that it is annoying to a 20-year-old could kill an 80-year-old.

T

TELEPHONE

Do not answer the telephone if you do not know who is calling or are not expecting a call. Most telephone companies now provide a service which tells you the identity of the person calling. These enable you to avoid time-wasting calls from salesmen, politician and charities.

THUGS

Many young thugs and criminals target older people because they are seen as vulnerable and easy prey. Unbelievable as it might be, our world is now overpopulated with individuals who have plumbed new depths of cowardice and greed.

When you are outside in the world, the safest thing to do is to avoid dark alleyways and badly lit streets. The evil, little bastards who like hitting old ladies and old gentlemen on the head, prefer to skulk in dark corners. Since most streets are badly lit these days, that means not going out in the dark. So be it.

There are things you can do to protect yourself in your own home. First, never open your door to anyone you aren't expecting or who doesn't have an appointment – this includes people masquerading as meter readers or television license investigators or anyone from the council's recycling gestapo who has come to tell you that you are going to be punished because your yoghurt cartons haven't been properly ironed. The chances of you opening your door to a stranger and benefiting from the experience are very low indeed.

Have a good chain and lock fitted to your door.

If you have a dog, consider buying a large, bad-tempered one with fangs. Have a peephole fitted to your door so that you can see who is there. Better still, have a Judas hole which consists of a small opening rather than just a little glass peephole. If a caller turns up with a bundle of ten pound notes they want to give you then they can pop them through the Judas and then bugger off.

Remember that anyone who knocks on your door to tell you that your driveway needs repairing or your roof needs attention will be a conman. Keep a garden implement at hand (a hoe or fork or spade will do nicely) and if you do open the door and they put their foot in it then threaten to use your garden tool to persuade them to remove their impediment.

Do not be gentle but shout an apology as they hobble off down your garden path.

TRANQUILLISERS

In nearly 50 years, I have written more about benzodiazepines and other tranquillisers, sleeping tablets and sedatives than anyone in the world. And I have done three books on drug addiction.

A fat lot of good it all did.

The tranquilliser problem today is as bad as it was back in1973 when I first started campaigning.

Today, most cases of alleged dementia are a result of old people being drugged by bad doctors.

For decades, I have watched the medical industry suppress and repel the truth.

No medical organisations are on the side of the patient. The British Medical Association (BMA), for example is a trade union with strong drug company links. The union receives millions from the drug industry (in payment for advertisements placed in publications such as the *British Medical Journal*) and they will never be on the side of the patient.

For years, BMA spokesmen actively opposed my concerns about benzodiazepines. There is no little irony in the fact that the British Medical Association now appears to be taking part in attempts to deal with tranquilliser addiction. It would be more helpful if the BMA were to criticise its own members who ignored prescribing advice and created the problem that exists.

The Department of Health, mortally influenced by the drug industry and a bought and paid for medical establishment, spends gazillions on the relatively few people who have chosen to take mildly addictive drugs such as cocaine and heroin (not sold by the drug industry) but nothing on the millions who have through no fault of their own been damaged by benzodiazepines (sold by the drug industry).

It isn't difficult to see a pattern there.

Back in 1988, the Government (admitting it was responding to my first 15 years of campaigning) warned doctors that the benzodiazepines should not be prescribed for more than two to four weeks.

Doctors have taken absolutely no bloody notice of this guidance.

Originally introduced specifically to help calm extremely nervous and agitated patients (and for use as anaesthetics) benzodiazepines were, by the time they reached their peak, being prescribed for just about every illness known to man or woman. I've met people for whom they had been prescribed as treatments for backache, menopausal problems, pre-menstrual tension, migraine, high blood pressure, alopecia and urinary tract infections. It got to the point where doctors were handing out prescriptions for benzodiazepine tranquillisers whenever they didn't know what else to do. There was never any evidence to show that drugs were effective in treating all these different conditions.

Benzodiazepine addiction has for decades been the world's biggest drug addiction problem.

Countless millions of prescriptions a year are still being written for benzodiazepine tranquillisers. Over a third of the prescriptions are for more than eight weeks supply.

What a bloody profession.

Any doctor who signs a prescription for a benzodiazepine (such as Valium) for more than two weeks is not fit to practise medicine and would, if the General Medical Council did what it is supposed to do, be struck off the medical register.

I now think that, instead of relying on the good sense and integrity of doctors, the majority of patients should take control of their own destiny by refusing to take tranquillisers, sedatives or sleeping tablets for more than two weeks. Better still, refuse to take them at all.

TRAVEL

If you are travelling by train or aeroplane, do not be afraid to tell the company in advance that you are old and/or disabled and will need help. If you think that there will be too much walking at the other end, insist on being met by a person with a wheelchair and play merry hell if it isn’t there. Demand attention. If you don’t receive the help you need then have a noisy hissy fit. Complain, complain and complain again. Be ruthless and remorseless. Ask if they would treat a VIP this way. Demand to know the name and address of the chairman of the company. Keep telephone numbers for a few newspapers and TV or radio stations in your own phone and let it be known that you will be reporting the incident.

If all else fails, a collapse on the airport or station floor should bring useful attention.

Remember to say thank you afterwards.

TRAVEL FOR TREATMENT

For as long as it continues to exist, the NHS will continue to decline. Moreover, private care (currently providing the sort of level of service provided by the NHS two or three decades ago) will also deteriorate. Many consultants who were previously working exclusively in the NHS have carried their bad manners into private practice and many patients don't know enough to expect better. Even private hospitals have deteriorated, because of the appalling standard set by the NHS. Visit a private hospital and the chances are that you will sit in a crowded waiting room. After a lengthy wait, you will be hurried in to see your consultant who will rush through your consultation so that she (or he) can get onto the next patient. 'Payment in advance please, please see the receptionist. Cash, cheques and all major credit cards taken.' Private patients now routinely have to wait days (or weeks) to receive the results of simple blood tests, X-ray tests or tissue sample tests. And they have to wait weeks (or months) for essential, life-saving surgery. Paying privately in Britain now buys you better food, slightly more polite nurses and a television set all of your own that you don't have to feed with tokens. But it doesn't buy you better medical care (which is, I suspect, what most people suspect they're going to get when they spend vast amounts of money on private health insurance) though it does, importantly, buy you a good chance of avoiding a deadly antibiotic-resistant infection.

Normal health care practice in other countries is to receive test results within an hour or so and, if you have a serious disorder needing treatment, to receive that treatment within a few days. Not even private patients get that level of care in Britain today.

So, not surprisingly, a growing number of Britons now go abroad for health care; travelling to India or Thailand for medical and surgical treatment. Hospitals in these countries are far cleaner, far more modern and far better equipped than British hospitals. Patients go to hospitals and clinics in Poland, Bulgaria and Japan. And they go not just because they can avoid long waiting lists or because private hospital care is much cheaper than it is in the UK but because they know that they will be treated better and they will be safer. There is far less risk of infection in most other countries. Patients go abroad for major operations and they go for the treatment of relatively minor ailments; many even go abroad for dental treatment.

And the prices (which often include first class hotel accommodation for accompanying relatives) are, even when the costs of travel are included, often considerably lower than the price of treatment in the UK.

For example, a cataract removal in the UK will cost you the best part of £3,000. The same operation would cost around £500 in Bulgaria. A coronary bypass would cost £15,000 in the UK and £5,000. A hip replacement would cost £10,000 in the UK and £3,000 in Tunisia. A full set of dentures which would cost £700 in the UK would cost £200 in Latvia.

The private surgery prices in the UK are high because NHS waiting lists are deliberately manipulated, and cruelly long, and private hospitals and doctors take advantage of the demand by pushing their prices sky high.

Patients travel abroad not just because operations and treatments are cheaper outside the UK (and do not involve a long waiting time) but also because they know that the medical and nursing care will be far superior, that they will receive better food and that their relatives will be better received. How embarrassing it is to have to write that. Some hospitals in the Far East have turned non-emergency, elective surgery into a quasi-holiday experience.

The quality of medical care in Britain will continue to deteriorate because the NHS's answer to all the bad things that happen is not to train people better (or, heaven forbid, to punish the worst offenders) but to add another layer of impenetrable bureaucracy, separating the people with the power from the people making the decisions, and to ensure that no one can ever be held responsible for anything they do.

The people with the power protect the lowly people who take the decisions because that helps to protect the position of the people with the power. It's an unwritten rule. No one must be punished or even reprimanded because once you start down that slippery slope you end up with some higher level official having to accept responsibility and that cannot be contemplated. And so nothing ever improves. Problems merely create more cover ups. The only concern is to avoid anyone having to say 'sorry', or admit that they have made a mistake.

Patients and their relatives may remain unsatisfied, aggrieved or concerned that someone else will suffer in exactly the same way that they did. But none of this seems to matter as long as no jobs are lost or even threatened. Hospital bureaucrats prefer to pay off a litigant (without admitting liability or having to resign) than to defend a case in court.

It is a telling fact that Britain's NHS now spends more on lawyers than on doctors.

TRICKSTERS

There is nothing you can buy (no medicines and no health foods) which will slow the ageing process or increase longevity.

Anyone who tries to sell you something with such a purpose is a confidence trickster. Kick them on the ankles.

U

UNCARING

My wife and I recently stood on the platform at the Gare du Nord in Paris and stared, in horror, as Eurostar staff watched two elderly travellers struggling to lift their suitcases onto the train and into their first class carriage. The Eurostar staff just stood there and did nothing. In recent years, there has been a notable deterioration in the quality of service offered everywhere. Just a few years ago, the Eurostar staff would always help. These days they never do. This sort of uncaring behaviour is now pretty standard at railway stations. (My wife and I helped the struggling couple but we were fighting to lift our own cases up the steep steps and onto the train.)

UTILITIES

The biggest confidence tricksters are not the ones offering to put an eighth of an inch of tarmacadam down on your drive but the people who are selling you electricity, gas and insurance. It is no accident that your utility bills are incomprehensible – that’s the way they are designed.

Utility companies and insurance companies doubtless now have special obfuscation departments which exist solely to make bills and communications impossible to understand.

Insurance companies, like phone companies, banks and utilities, punish loyal and regular customers – this affects the older citizens more than most because they tend to be loyal.

Sadly, the only solution, the only way to fight these greedy, merciless, disloyal, murdering bastards, is to look around every 12 months and switch your supplier.

If you don’t do this then your utility company will put you onto their ‘standard’ traffic and your bills will be two, three or even four times as high as they should be.

V

VACCINATIONS

Once you pass into your 60s, you will suddenly find yourself enormously popular with your doctor. He or she won't want to visit you at home, of course. If you want to be ill, you will probably have to make an appointment for three weeks ahead and then make do with a wet-behind-the-ears junior trainee or the practice nurse. The GP with whom you are registered will be far too busy counting his money to see you.

But you will receive regular letters inviting you to visit the surgery to be vaccinated. Sometimes it will be the flu vaccine. Sometimes it will be something else. But the chances are that once you reach a certain age then the vaccination offers will come pretty thick and fast.

Do not however assume that this is a consequence of any genuine concern for your wellbeing. Your doctor wants to vaccinate you (or, more accurately, to tell his practice nurse to vaccinate you) because he is paid vast amounts of money to vaccinate everyone.

Doctors have been bought lock, stock and syringe barrel.

Drug companies make huge amounts of money out of selling vaccines. And the establishment has fiddled the evidence, and denied or suppressed the inconvenient truths, in order to promote the official point of view. In Britain, I have been banned from speaking to doctors on this subject. Debates about vaccination are unknown.

Those who promote vaccines often claim that vaccination programmes have reduced illness, prevented millions of deaths and are the main reason why the average life expectation has risen.

These are all barefaced lies.

The whole vaccination story is one of the great modern scandals of our time. The entire medical profession (at least the part of it in general practice) has been bribed by the drug industry, working through the Government and using taxpayers' money.

Most doctors, whether working as hospital consultants, GPs or public health officials, know very little about vaccination. The majority simply follow the establishment line, never question what they are told by the drug industry and dismiss all critics of vaccination as dangerous lunatics.

And doctors know nothing about the dangers of the damned vaccines they so happily jab into patients' arms. Question the whole damned sordid business and these ill-educated propagandists (who know nothing about the risks of the toxic mixtures they are promoting) will throw up their hands in horror. Ask them for some evidence that vaccines are safe and effective and they become hysterical.

If a doctor wants to vaccinate you then insist that he confirms in writing that the vaccine is both entirely safe and absolutely essential. You may notice his enthusiasm for the vaccine suddenly diminish.

W

WEATHER

The weather kills a lot of elderly people.

In the winter, people die of the cold. In the summer they die of the heat.

If you go out in cold weather, make sure that you are well protected from the elements. Carry an umbrella (which can also be used as a stabilising walking stick) and wear shoes with good, grippy soles. Stay inside if the weather is particularly bad. Supermarkets will deliver food these days and corner shops always have done so. Don’t be like William Harrison, who was President of the US for a month and died of pneumonia because he insisted on delivering a three hour inaugural speech in the pouring rain.

If the weather is hot, stay out of the sun and the hottest rooms in your home. Drink plenty of fluids to replace what your body is losing and cool your body down by putting a wet something next to your skin.

WORRIED LOOK

Doctors often look worried. This isn’t necessarily anything to worry about. It may mean that the doctor doesn’t know your name. Try introducing your own name, age and address into the conversation as subtly as possible. You should soon see a look of relief replacing the worried look.

WORLD WIDE WEB

Be sceptical about everything you see or read on the internet. The computer was the world's worst invention. The internet was the second worst invention.

The internet can undoubtedly be useful. If you use a grocery website you can have your anchovies, caviar and gentleman's relish all brought down to your door by a bloke (or blokess) in a van.

And you can use the internet to send your utility company your correct meter readings. This will stop them using an estimated bill to gouge extra money out of your account. (Estimated utility bills are always far higher than your real-life bills could possibly be.)

But the damned thing has got completely out of hand in recent years and today every company on the planet has got into the comfortable habit of using the internet as an excuse to enable it to cut costs.

If you try to telephone anyone these days, the chances are that you will, when you have tippy toed your way through a maze of instructions and chosen from an always useless list of options, be met with a voice telling that because of 'exceptionally high call volumes' their agents/consultants are all very busy.

You will be assured that 'your call is very important to us' and that your call will be taken 'as soon as one of our agents/consultants becomes available'.

This is all balderdash of course.

The phrase 'we are experiencing exceptionally high call volumes' is the first thing they record and they play it all day long. If you ring at 3 a.m. on a Wednesday, they'll be 'experiencing exceptionally high call volumes'.

All companies which use telephones have fired most of their staff and their customer service department consists of a couple of over-worked and under-paid slaves working in a dirty office somewhere in Asia.

While you wait for someone to become available, you will be bombarded with constant messages (designed to ensure that you can't do anything useful while you wait for your call to be dealt with) and exhortations to use their website.

And that's the nub of the thing. They don't want you to speak to a real person. Even when they live in Asia and get paid pitiful wages, agents and consultants are expensive because the poor sods will insist on being paid. If you don't throw them a handful of beads every now and again you can bet your ass that some interfering human rights organisation will expose you and claim that you've been exploiting the little buggers.

All big companies (and a lot of small ones) want you to use their website. If you persist with the telephone they'll punish you by making you wait half an hour or an hour. They know that you'll eventually give up. And when you've been through this agony three or four times you'll see sense and use the bloody website.

X

There is no ‘X’ worth including. Why put one in just for the sake of it? This is an honest book.

Y

YOUR BODY

Here are some truths you should know about the older body:

The older body recovers more slowly.

The older body is less effective at protecting itself.

The older body heals rather less effectively.

The older body is more vulnerable.

The older body is more susceptible to illness and likely to suffer more.

Z

See ‘X’.

APPENDIX

Coleman’s Laws
Here are my 12 laws – designed to help you survive medical care.

Coleman’s 1st Law of Medicine
If you are receiving treatment for an existing disease and you develop new symptoms then, until proved otherwise, you should assume that the new symptoms are caused by the treatment you are receiving.

Coleman’s 2nd Law of Medicine
There is no point in having tests done unless the results will affect your treatment.

Coleman’s 3rd Law of Medicine
If the treatment doesn’t work then you should consider the possibility that the diagnosis might be wrong. This is particularly true when several treatments have been tried.

Coleman’s 4th Law of Medicine
Screening examinations and check-ups are more profitable for doctors than for patients.

Coleman’s 5th Law of Medicine
It is doctors, not patients, who need annual check-ups.

Coleman’s 6th Law of Medicine
Hospitals are not suitable places for sick people. If you must go into one, you should get out as quickly as you can.

Coleman’s 7th Law of Medicine
There are fashions in medicine just as much as there are fashions in clothes. The difference is that whereas badly conceived fashions in clothes are only likely to embarrass you, ill-conceived fashions in medicine may kill you. The fashions in medicine have, by and large, as much scientific validity as the fashions in the rag trade.

Coleman’s 8th Law of Medicine
The medical establishment will always take decisions on health matters which benefit industry, Government and the medical profession, rather than patients. And the Government will always take decisions on health matters which benefit the State rather than individual patients. What you read or hear about medicine and health matters will have more to do with the requirements of the pharmaceutical industry and the Government, than the genuine needs of patients.

Coleman’s 9th Law of Medicine
Doctors and nurses know little or nothing about staying healthy. In particular, doctors and nurses know nothing useful about food, diet and healthy eating. (Sadly, the same is true of nutritionists and dieticians).

Coleman’s 10th Law of Medicine
There are no holistic healers. There are only holistic patients.

Coleman’s 11th Law of Medicine
There is no such thing as minor surgery.

Coleman’s 12th Law of Medicine
Some patients will always be treated more equally than others.

Taken from *Coleman’s Laws* by Vernon Coleman

Note from Vernon Coleman:
If you have found this book inspirational, I would be enormously grateful if you would write a short, and hopefully positive, review.

Note about the author:
For details of more books by Vernon Coleman, please see his Amazon biography, type in ‘Vernon Coleman kindle books’ on Amazon or visit www.vernoncoleman.com

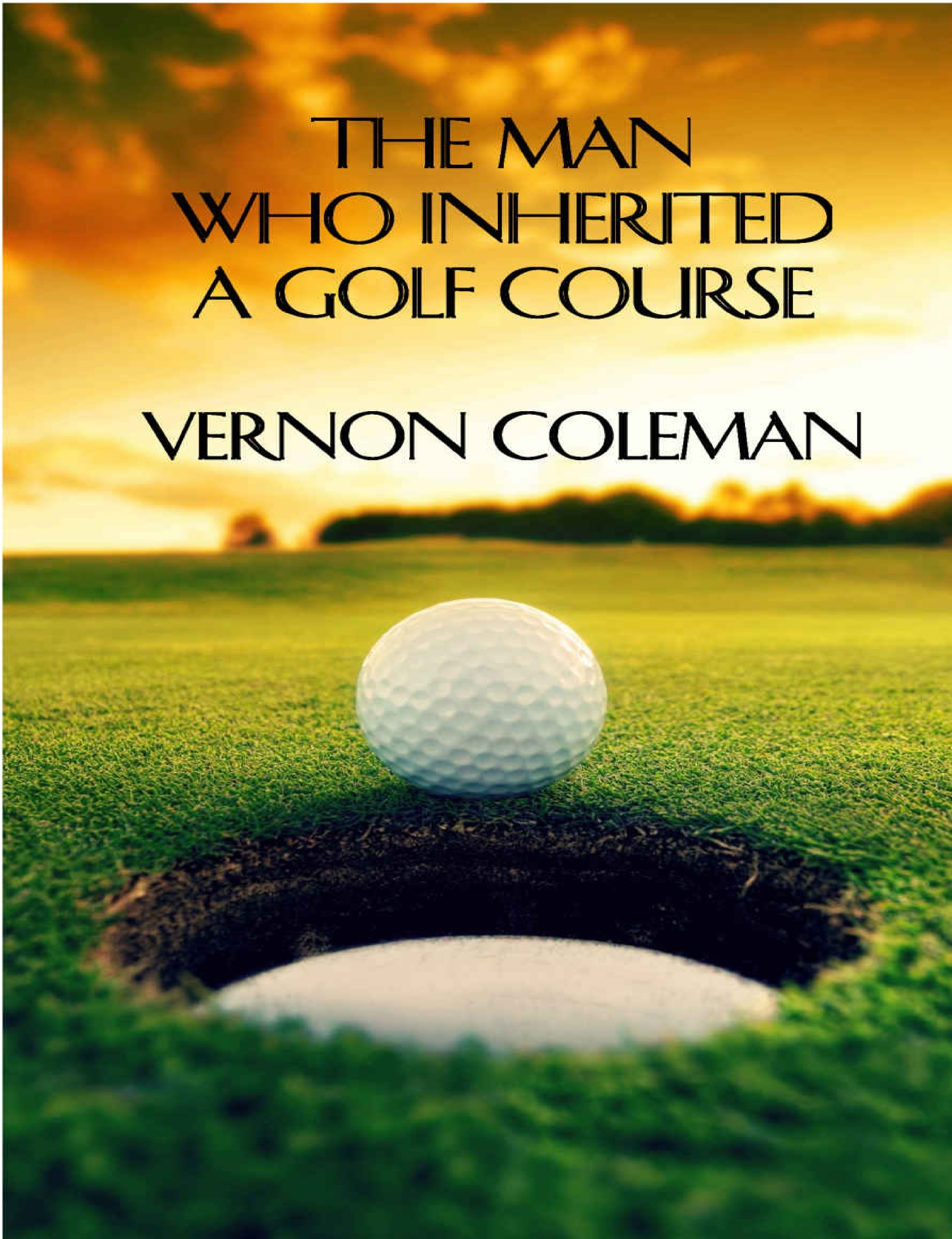

THE MAN WHO INHERITED A GOLF COURSE

VERNON COLEMAN

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THE MAN WHO INHERITED A GOLF COURSE

Vernon Coleman

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Vernon Coleman is the author of over 100 books. For details of more books please see his author page on Amazon or visit http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

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CHAPTER ONE

The tube train was crowded and the surprising solid, tweed-clad rear of a plump, stern-looking woman was pressed so firmly against his left thigh that the flow of blood to Trevor Dukinfield's left leg had been halted.

Moving with great caution, lest his entirely innocent motives be misinterpreted, Trevor gingerly lifted his left knee and wiggled his leg up and down a few times. The movement, a vain attempt to encourage a few red blood cells to carry some fresh oxygen down to the muscles of his left foot, provided some slight relief.

The plump woman, who was standing far closer to him than would normally be considered socially acceptable for individuals who had not been formally introduced, forcefully rammed her elbow backwards and then turned her head and glared at Trevor. She had huge bushy eyebrows, a squint, a clearly defined moustache and a bundle of long, black hairs sprouting from each nostril. She was a woman who knew how to glare.

'Pervert!' she hissed.

Trevor, coughing from the blow, blinked, paled, and quickly lowered his left knee. When he had recovered he glanced around at his fellow travellers. Most of them looked just as miserable as he was. There must have been sixty people within whispering distance but there wasn't a smile in view. The carriage was stuffy, the air was smoky and stifling, and a cloud of pungent, cheap aftershave from an unknown traveller failed to mask less pleasant, more intimate smells.

Trevor glanced at a watch on the wrist of a man who was pointlessly holding onto one of the straps attached to the carriage roof. Holding the strap was quite unnecessary because they were all crammed into the carriage so tightly that none of them could have possibly fallen over. Trevor estimated that the train had been stationary for nearly half an hour. Although neither Trevor nor any of his fellow passengers knew it, there had been another bomb scare at all main-line London stations - and all underground trains were running late. It was the third time in a week that Trevor Dukinfield had been late for an important appointment. Even though it wasn't his fault he wasn't looking forward to having to explain to the editor of *Ball Bearing Monthly* why he had failed yet again to finish an important assignment successfully.

Feeling a sudden desire to scratch his nose, Trevor tried to raise an arm but even this simple action brought a string of disapproving looks from those around him. Surreptitiously, he tried to obtain relief by rubbing his nose against the brim of the bowler hat worn by the man standing in front of him, but the man turned his head just as Trevor leant forward and glowered fiercely at him. At a distance of just six inches, a well-aimed glower has considerable force and even the strongest may blink and retreat. And Trevor was not what anyone would call a strong man. He was physically slight and rather underweight and to describe him as shy and self-effacing would be like describing Buckingham Palace as a house. He could not help feeling that in a so-called civilised society it surely wasn't a great deal to ask for enough room to scratch one's itches and to stretch one's cramped muscles.

Trevor wondered whether anyone would notice if he just made the interview up. He felt sure that the businessman he had been due to meet would be far too busy counting his money to bother reading interviews with himself in tiny trade magazines. It occurred to him that if he made sure that he only said nice things about the man there would be little reason for him to complain, even if he did notice the slight fraud. He immediately felt guilty about having harboured this unprofessional thought and felt himself blushing. It is a tribute to Trevor's innocence that he believed that he must have been the first and only journalist ever to have such a thought. It is a further tribute to his innocence that he would not have believed you if you had told him that journalists had occasionally been known to do such things for real.

It was Trevor's first week in London and already he was beginning to wonder if he had made a mistake in trying to make his fortune in the capital city.

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After the completion of his course in Slavonic languages at Mettleham University, Trevor had drifted into journalism more by accident than design. He had never spent much time thinking about a career, but after his graduation he had quickly discovered that the demand for Slavonic translators is not a particularly large one.

The careers adviser at the university, a world-weary former lecturer who had been given the post when his own grant had expired and he had been unable to find himself alternative employment, had told Trevor that his lack of any special skills meant that journalism was the only career for which he seemed particularly well-suited. Taking this advice Trevor had applied for, and duly obtained, a job as a junior reporter on a local weekly newspaper in Dorset. He had spent two years attending innumerable council meetings, rewriting reports from the various local Women's Institutes and occasionally writing obituaries of local dignitaries.

Trevor found these tasks pleasantly undemanding and would have been happy to stay there indefinitely if it hadn't been for Sylvia. She had enough ambition for them both. She had other ideas. Worst of all she had ‘plans’.

Sylvia Instow, five years older, fourteen pounds heavier and four inches taller than Trevor, was the daughter of a local plumbing magnate. She worked as a receptionist at the Town Hall, though in view of her social position, and the six months she had spent at an international finishing school in Melton Mowbray, she regarded herself as far too good for the post. She had persuaded everyone, including herself, that she stayed there more through a sense of civic duty than anything else.

The two had first met on one of Trevor’s many visits to the Town Hall. Largely under Sylvia’s supervision and direction their acquaintanceship had flowered into friendship at a Cheese and Wine Party organised by the Housing Committee.

‘You’ve got to get into Fleet Street,’ Sylvia had insisted, nine months after they had first met, five months after the Cheese and Wine Party and three months after she had told her delighted parents that she and Trevor had become unofficially engaged.

‘That’s where the money is,’ she had explained to a slightly puzzled Trevor as they sat together on the overstuffed sofa in the parlour at Mr and Mrs Instow’s detached house on the outskirts of the town. Neither of them had realised that the national press had long since left Fleet Street and had migrated to more spacious and luxurious quarters in the East of London.

When, at Sylvia’s insistence, Trevor had borrowed a colleague’s copy of the *UK Press Gazette*, so that they could hunt through the classified advertisements for suitable posts, the only acceptable vacancy they had seen was the one for Features Editor on *Ball Bearing Monthly*, a long-established and reputable, if unexciting publication, which happened to have its offices above a tobacconist’s shop in Fleet Street.

Trevor had narrowly won the post against severe competition from a 65-year-old unpublished novelist and a feminist mother of three who had done her cause little good by announcing at her interview that she intended to bring her three children with her to the office every day. Trevor had, in due course, handed in his notice to the newspaper, rented a room in Paddington and set off alone to find fame and fortune. Trevor’s parents had both died in an aeroplane crash when he was twelve and he was used to being alone. For eight years of his life home had been a boarding school.

Now, despite Sylvia’s enthusiasm, he couldn’t help wondering whether he might possibly have made a mistake in coming to London. When, after his delayed journey on the Tube, he returned to the offices of *Ball Bearing Monthly* with his tape recorder empty and his notebook blank, it turned out that his apprehension was not unique.

***

Hubert Wrigglesworth, the magazine’s editor, regarded himself as a patient man and a sympathetic employer. But he had spent fifty years working as a journalist and, as he never tired of telling anyone who was junior enough or patient enough to listen to him, he firmly believed that no excuse was ever good enough when a story had been lost. He listened with ill-disguised impatience while Trevor explained why he had arrived nearly an hour late for his appointment with the Chairman of one of Western Europe’s largest ball bearing manufacturers.

‘How many interviews have you lost now?’ the editor demanded. ‘Four?’

‘Er, no, sir,’ said Trevor, nervously. ‘It’s three.’

‘Oh, well that’s all right, then!’ said Mr Wrigglesworth, throwing his arms wide and showering cheap cigar ash over his desk, Trevor’s desk and the slight and trembling form of Rose, Editorial Secretary, Production Coordinator, Researcher and Circulation Controller. ‘How long have you been here? Three days?’

‘Er, no, sir,’ said Trevor. ‘It’s four.’

‘So!’ said Mr Wrigglesworth. ‘Four interviews lost in three days.’

Trevor opened his mouth to correct the editor, thought better of it and stayed silent. Rose pecked at her ancient, sit up and beg typewriter with short, stubby fingers and tried, with rather more success than one might expect possible, to pretend that she wasn’t there.

‘You’re in the big time now, Dukinfield!’ said Mr Wrigglesworth with pride. ‘This is your chance to make a name for yourself in journalism. But how are you going to make a name for yourself if you never get where you’re supposed to be when you’re supposed to be there?’

Trevor hung his head and wished he was back in Dorset rewriting W.I. reports. But the thought of what Sylvia would say if he abandoned the career she had helped him choose frightened him rather more than the prospect of facing Mr Wrigglesworth’s wrath.

‘I don’t know what to make of you,’ sighed Mr Wrigglesworth. ‘Thousands of young journalists would give their right arms to be in your position.’

Trevor, attempting unsuccessfully to suppress the unpleasant image of several thousand one-armed journalists struggling to operate their keyboards, nodded and remained silent.

‘I’ll give you one more chance!’ said the editor. ‘And then you’re fired! Do you understand what I’m saying?’

Trevor lifted his head and nodded. ‘Thank you,’ he mouthed.

Mr Wrigglesworth picked up a fistful of press releases from the metal tray on his desk and tossed them towards Trevor. ‘In the meantime get some copy for the news pages out of those!’ he said. He paused. ‘Do you think you can find your way back to your desk?’ he asked sarcastically.

Trevor picked up the bundle of press releases and walked a yard and a half across the room to his desk, sat down and started to read through them. As he did so he realised for the first time just how interesting those W.I. reports had been.

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When Trevor got back to his room that evening he slumped down in his solitary armchair feeling very miserable. He didn’t like the crowds; he didn’t like the dirt and the rubbish in the streets; he didn’t like the fact that it was nigh on impossible to get around the city; he didn’t like his job; he didn’t like Mr Wrigglesworth and he didn’t like his grubby little room. In short he didn’t really like anything about living in London.

He sat for a few moments staring into space and then suddenly realised that he was hungry. For a few moments he thought about going out to find a café but he couldn’t bear the idea of facing all that traffic again so he opened the solitary cupboard above his small, stained sink and took out a can of baked beans. He removed the lid with an old-fashioned and slightly rusty can opener and emptied the beans into a small saucepan. He then placed the saucepan on the stove and turned on the heat. While the stove heated the beans he put two slices of white bread into an ancient and rather highly strung toaster and pressed down the operating lever.

As he waited for the beans to bubble and the bread to toast there was a knock on his door.

Trevor walked over and opened it. A woman in her late fifties was standing there holding an envelope. She was wearing a rather scruffy looking grey and blue checked dressing gown which was tied tightly around the waist with a dark blue cord and she had curlers in her hair and fluffy pink slippers on her feet.

‘This came for you this morning,’ said the woman handing Trevor the envelope.

Trevor looked at it, surprised. ‘Thank you.’

‘It’s been readdressed from your previous address,’ she explained unnecessarily, pointing to the writing on the envelope. His last address had been neatly typed on the envelope but had been crossed out and the words PLEASE REDIRECT TO were followed by his name and address in London.

‘It’s from a firm of solicitors in Mettleshire,’ whispered the woman, knowingly.

Trevor was about to ask her how she knew this when the woman pointed to the return address on the back of the envelope. Sure enough, it was a firm of solicitors. And the woman was right: their address was in Mettleshire.

‘Maybe it’s good news!’ said the woman, nodding towards the letter.

‘Yes,’ agreed Trevor, unconvinced.

‘If it isn’t you can always say you never got it,’ she added, turning and leaving.

‘Thank you very much!’ said Trevor, speaking to her back.

He shut the door to his room just in time to save the saucepan from permanent damage but not in time to save the beans.

He spread marmalade on his two slices of toast and read his letter.

Dear Mr Dukinfield,

We represent the estate of the late Mr Archibald Pettigrew of Pettigrew Towers, Butterbury Ford, Nr Mettleham, Mettleshire.

We have information which might be to your advantage and we would, in consequence, be grateful if you would get in touch with us, at the above address, at your earliest convenience.

Yours sincerely,

Twist, Kibble and Fenshaw

Even though he had spent three years at Mettleham University, Trevor had never heard of anyone called Archibald Pettigrew, of a house called Pettigrew Towers or of a place called Butterbury Ford and he had no idea at all what Twist, Kibble and Fenshaw could have to tell him which could possibly be to his advantage. He folded the letter, put it back into the envelope and then put the envelope in his jacket pocket. He wondered why solicitors used phrases like ‘at your earliest convenience’ instead of ‘as soon as possible’. Then he sat down with a copy of *Ball Bearings Through the Ages* which Mr Wrigglesworth had given him to review.

Trevor studied this well-rounded, extraordinarily comprehensive (and monumentally boring) analysis of the ball bearing industry until ten o’clock. He then pulled his bed out of the wall, climbed into it and went to sleep quite unaware of the changes which were about to take place in his life.

CHAPTER TWO

Trevor's short career as Features Editor of *Ball Bearing Monthly* came to an abrupt halt the following morning.

Things started to go wrong when the bus in which he was travelling to work was in collision with a taxi half way along Oxford Street. While the bus driver and the taxi driver conducted an earnest debate about the way in which blame should be apportioned for the incident Trevor, who had left his home in Paddington with plenty of time to spare, decided to walk the rest of the way to work, innocently believing that this would reduce to manageable proportions the chances of there being any further delay.

What he did not and could not have possibly have allowed for was the accident which took place at the junction of Oxford Street and Charing Cross Road.

Trevor himself was not involved, but when he recognised the Royal Standard flying on the radiator of the Rolls Royce which had collided with the electric milk float he felt a duty to help remove some of the broken milk bottles so that the Royal chauffeur could continue on his way unhindered. Trevor was rewarded for his efforts with a personal Royal wave and a strict ticking off from an officious constable.

'What's your excuse?' demanded Mr Wrigglesworth, the editor, when Trevor arrived with blood stains on his hands and a series of unpleasant stains, produced by a potent mixture of oil and milk, on his trousers.

Trevor explained about the milk float and the Rolls Royce with the Royal Standard.

To Trevor's surprise Mr Wrigglesworth seemed interested, even strangely impressed, by the excuse. 'Who did you ring with the story?' he asked, leaning forward across his desk.

Trevor stared at him blankly.

'Which of the papers did you ring?'

Trevor continued to stare.

'Come on, fair's fair, we split the take on stories like this,' said Mr Wrigglesworth, with an ingratiating, indeed nauseating, smile.

'I'm sorry,' said Trevor. 'I honestly don't know what you mean. What 'take' are you talking about?'

When Mr Wrigglesworth realised that Trevor had failed to recognise the news potential in the incident which had happened before his very eyes he fired him on the spot.

'Maybe I could ring one of the papers now?' suggested Trevor unhappily.

'Ring them now?' exclaimed the editor, in despair. 'You might as well ring them to tell them that World War II has finished!'

***

It was an hour later, while standing in front of a Job Centre window and looking for a piece of paper upon which he could write details of employers looking for journalists (there weren't any), that Trevor rediscovered the forgotten letter from the firm of solicitors in Mettleshire.

Forty-five minutes after a short telephone call he was on a train pulling out of Euston Station and heading north to Mettleham.

***

'I'm here to see Mr Twist,' said Trevor to the receptionist, a girl of about seventeen who had reluctantly interrupted what was clearly a conversation with a friend to attend to him. She had put the telephone receiver down on her desk but she had not severed the connection.

'What Mr Twist?' demanded the girl. She wore a tight white T-shirt that was several sizes too small for her.

'Your Mr Twist,' explained Trevor. 'Mr Twist of 'Twist, Kibble and Fenshaw'.'

'Oh, him,' said the girl. 'There ain't no Mr Twist here. I think he's dead.' The gum she was chewing stuck to a tooth and she poked a finger into her mouth to free it.

'Oh. Well, Mr Kibble then.'

'Mr Kibble is definitely dead. He died before I come to work here.'

'What about Mr Fenshaw?'

'He's out at lunch. He won't be back until four.'

'I telephoned from London a few hours ago,' explained Trevor. 'I don't know who I spoke to but they said I should come up here straight away.' He took the letter out of his inside jacket pocket and showed it to the girl.

'Mr Johnson,' she said. 'You want Mr Johnson.'

'How do you know?' asked Trevor, puzzled.

The receptionist handed him back his letter and pointed to a reference at the top of the letter. 'GJ,' she said. 'That's Mr Johnson.' She sat back and picked up her telephone receiver. 'Sorry about that Cynthia,' she said. 'So what did he say?'

'Do you think you could please tell Mr Johnson I'm here?' asked Trevor.

The receptionist, listening to her friend, shook her head. 'He's out,' she mouthed. She looked at her watch, a flamboyant time piece with a fluorescent green dial and a salmon pink plastic strap. 'Come back in twenty minutes.'

Trevor mouthed a silent thank you and went back outside. He stood on the pavement and looked around him. The road looked grey and dirty. The buildings which surrounded him looked grey and dirty. Even the sky looked grey and dirty. The lawyers' offices were in the middle of a rather sombre, rather seedy-looking business area. One or two buildings had been converted into flats but most had been turned into offices for solicitors, accountants, surveyors and other professionals. Trevor suddenly felt hungry and remembered that he hadn't eaten anything since the night before when he had consumed two slices of marmalade laden toast. He looked around and could, at first, see no immediate sign of a café or, indeed, any shop likely to sell food but when he walked around the corner Trevor spotted a public house called The Duke of Westminster. It was the sort of place where people go for no other reason than to drink enough alcohol to help them forget why they went there in the first place.

The saloon bar was lit by a single unshaded bulb and it took Trevor a few moments to get accustomed to the darkness. When his eyes finally started to work properly he could see that all the furniture was bolted to the floor. The walls and ceiling seemed to be painted an unusually dark shade of yellow but a rectangular area of light cream which marked the place where a picture of some kind had once hung showed that the dark yellow was simply a result of years of tobacco smoke clinging to the paint. Behind the bar a metal grille that existed to protect the bottles of spirits and the drinking glasses had been pushed up almost out of sight while at the front of the bar another metal grille, presumably there to protect the bar staff, was suspended half way down.

There were just three customers in the pub. Two old men in long, beige raincoats wearing flat hats with greasy peaks were playing cribbage. A third man, dressed in the same sort of raincoat but with his hat rolled and stuffed into his pocket was reading a copy of *The Sporting Life*.

Trevor ordered half a pint of lager and asked the barman if he could see the menu. The barman, a short, hairless man whose twin hobbies were clearly lifting heavy weights and visiting tattoo parlours, looked at him as if he'd asked for a glass of '49 Bollinger and a look at the Prime Minister's personal diary and sighed wearily as though fed up of eccentric and over demanding customers.

'Mild or bitter?' he demanded.

'Bitter,' replied Trevor.

'Half?'

Trevor nodded and tried to ignore the contemptuous look the man gave him.

'Plain or salt and vinegar?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Crisps. Plain or salt and vinegar?'

'Plain, please.'

The barman, his sense of camaraderie clearly exhausted by this exchange, pushed a half pint glass of bitter across the counter and then, without looking, reached underneath the bar. He pulled a packet of crisps from an unseen box and tossed the packet onto the bar top. Trevor reached out instinctively to catch the packet but his move was unnecessary for the packet's slide was arrested by a puddle of someone else's stale beer. Trevor's hand and sleeve landed in the same puddle. He wiped his hand on his trousers, shook his sleeve, paid for the beer and the crisps and carried both to an empty table in a far corner of the room.

As he sat there, munching stale crisps and drinking warm beer, he wondered what Sylvia would say when he told her that he had lost his job in London. It was not a conversation he anticipated with any relish for Sylvia was not a particularly sympathetic woman. He sometimes wished that she could be, well, maybe just a little bit *nicer*.

Maybe, he thought, he could just stay in London and pretend that he still had his job. Better still, perhaps he could get another job. Perhaps, he thought, his mind now soaring with optimistic flights of fancy, the firm of Twist, Kibble and Fenshaw would have good news for him.

This thought reminded him why he was in Mettleham. Trevor looked at his watch and saw that it was now a full nineteen minutes since he had left the lawyers' offices. He drank up his beer, finished the broken bits at the bottom of his crisp bag by upending the bag and pouring them into his mouth, looked at the barman, thought about saying goodbye and changed his mind, and headed back round the corner to the offices of Twist, Kibble and Fenshaw. The sky still looked grey and dirty.

***

'Do you have any form of identity with you? asked Mr Johnson, an earnest, bespectacled young man in his mid twenties who sat behind a cheap desk in a small office radiating self-importance.

Trevor pulled the now rather battered letter from his pocket and handed it to the young solicitor. Mr Johnson took it, read it and handed it back. ‘I’m afraid that won’t do,’ he said. ‘Do you have your birth certificate or passport with you?’

Trevor, who could never remember seeing his birth certificate and did not have a passport, shook his head. He wondered whether there really were people who wandered around the country constantly armed with such documents on the off chance that they might be required as evidence by earnest solicitors.

Mr Johnson sighed. ‘I suppose your driving licence will have to do,’ he said wearily.

‘I’m afraid I don’t have one,’ said Trevor, apologetically.

‘You should always carry your driving licence with you,’ said the solicitor sternly.

‘But…’ began Trevor.

‘If a police officer asks to see your licence then you have to produce it,’ said Mr Johnson. ‘You should know that.’

‘You don’t understand,’ said Trevor. ‘I don’t have a licence. I don’t drive.’

‘You don’t drive?’ said the solicitor, with a mixture of horror and disbelief.

‘I’ve never got round to it,’ said Trevor, weakly. It was his inability to drive which had resulted in his lack of promotion when he had worked on the weekly paper in Dorset. While other young journalists had sped around the countryside collecting stories of burning hayricks, overturned tractors and pony show glories it was an inability to transport himself around the community which largely explained why Trevor had remained glued to the W.I. reports.

‘Do you have your national insurance card with you?’ asked the solicitor.

Again Trevor was forced to shake his head.

‘Well you must have something that proves who you are!’

Trevor rummaged in his jacket pockets and found two credit cards, a press pass and an out-of-date membership card for the Video Club at the village shop in Little Torrington. He placed these on the desk in front of Mr Johnson who picked them up one at a time, holding them carefully by the edges as though touching them might contaminate him permanently, and examining them as though they were pieces of evidence in a murder case. He then handed them back.

‘So,’ he said with some distaste, ‘you’re a journalist?’

Trevor felt as thoroughly and irretrievably condemned as if he had the wrong skin colour or the wrong blood type. ‘Yes,’ he admitted. ‘Well, I was,’ he said, correcting himself. ‘I lost my job this morning.’

‘So!’ said Mr Johnson, his distaste increasing by the second. ‘You’re an unemployed journalist!’

‘Yes,’ said Trevor. ‘I suppose so.’

Mr Johnson sighed and shook his head as though he could not understand why a man of his calibre should be forced to deal with such people. He opened an orange-coloured cardboard file that lay on his desk and took out a sheaf of papers.

‘As you know,’ he sighed, ‘we represent the estate of your late uncle Mr Archibald Pettigrew who died twenty one days ago.’

‘He was my uncle?’ asked Trevor, surprised. ‘I didn’t know that.’

‘Indeed he was,’ said Mr Johnson who was clearly not startled to find that Trevor was the sort of person who mislaid his relatives.

‘What did he die of?’ asked Trevor.

‘I’m afraid I don’t know,’ said Mr Johnson, clearly uninterested in such distasteful details.

‘How old was he?’

Mr Johnson flicked through the papers in front of him. ‘According to the information I have here he appears to have been 87-years-old when he died,’ he said, cautiously.

‘Good age anyway,’ said Trevor.

‘Indeed. Shall I continue?’

‘Yes. Sorry.’

‘As your uncle’s sole surviving relative you are the only heir to the estate,’ said Mr Johnson. ‘Though I must warn you that your uncle’s affairs were not well managed.’

‘I just wish I’d known about him when he was alive,’ said Trevor, who was genuinely sad to know that his only living relative had died without his having had a chance to meet him.

‘Quite,’ said Mr Johnson, who clearly found this sort of emotional nonsense unnecessary. ‘The main house, Pettigrew Towers, was heavily mortgaged to the banks and there will not, of course, be anything due to you from that quarter. Mr Pettigrew himself sold off all the valuable furniture and paintings to help stave off his creditors and so there is little or nothing in the house of any value.’

‘Maybe I could pop in and see if there’s anything of sentimental value?’ asked Trevor. ‘There might be some old photographs, letters, that sort of thing. There could even be something about my parents.'

'About your parents?'

'They died a long time ago,' explained Trevor. 'I don't really know very much about them.'

'I see,' said Mr Johnson rather coldly. 'I'll have a word with the bank,' he added, rather impatiently. He looked down at the papers in front of him again. 'The one part of the estate which you will inherit is the golf course.'

'Your uncle was an extremely enthusiastic golfer,' explained Mr Johnson. 'Forty-five years ago he laid out a private, eighteen-hole golf course in the grounds of Pettigrew Towers. Eighteen years ago, when his finances first began to cause concern at the bank, he built clubhouse, appointed a professional and opened the course to the public in an attempt to provide some income. It was his first and last, and therefore both his least and his most successful, commercial venture.'

Mr Johnson paused, apparently waiting for Trevor to say something. He was met with total silence as Trevor was far too preoccupied with digesting all this new information to even consider making any comment. Faced with the non-responsive beneficiary, Mr Johnson continued. 'Unfortunately, the success of the venture was only relative,' he went on. 'Your uncle steadfastly refused to mortgage the course until fairly recently but had no money to improve it or to maintain it, so you won't be surprised to hear that during recent years the enterprise has steadily deteriorated.'

'Oh, that's rather a shame,' said Trevor, finally gathering his thoughts enough to make some sort of comment. 'Especially if the old chap was particularly fond of it.'

'Yes,' said Mr Johnson, rather coldly.

'You said that the golf club is mortgaged,' said Trevor. 'How much is the bank owed?'

'Fortunately for you just slightly less than the market value of the club,' said Mr Johnson. 'We had the club surveyed last week and despite the condition of the clubhouse our surveyor came to the conclusion that if you put the property on the market immediately you would be able to raise £10,000 more than the outstanding loan.'

'Ten thousand pounds!' said Trevor, to whom such a sum seemed astronomical.

'Precisely,' nodded the lawyer. 'We anticipated that you might want to sell the club and so on your behalf we asked Ogilvy, Patterson and Yolland…'

'Ogilvy, Patterson and Yolland? Who are they?'

'Estate agents,' explained Mr Johnson, as though talking to a child. 'They specialise in commercial property and have a very good reputation both locally and nationally. They say they have found a prospective buyer who is prepared to pay off the bank loan, pay all the necessary fees and give you a cheque for £10,000.'

Trevor again failed to notice his cue to offer some sort of reply to the solicitor.

'I trust you find the news satisfactory?' prompted Mr Johnson.

'Oh, absolutely!' said Trevor with sudden enthusiasm. 'Very satisfactory!'

'Of course,' said the solicitor, 'you could keep the golf club yourself and try to make a go of it but were you seriously to consider that possibility there is a codicil to the will which might influence your thinking.'

'A codicil?'

'A supplement.'

'Oh,' said Trevor. 'What does it say?'

'Do you play golf, Mr Dukinfield?' asked the solicitor.

'Er… no, not exactly,' confessed Trevor. 'Though I was once a bit of a demon on the crazy golf course in Weston-superMare.' The memory of this distant success brought a contented smile to his face. 'They had one hole that was a real terror,' he told Mr Johnson. 'No 14 it was. You had to send your ball up a slope, over a drawbridge, down through a castle with a red roof and along a narrow walkway to land on a tiny island in the middle of a little lily pond.'

'Really,' murmured Mr Johnson, skilfully resisting whatever temptation may have passed his way to show interest in this anecdote.

'I was the only person to get a hole in one on No 14 for the first two weeks in August,' said Trevor.

'Do you have any business experience?' asked Mr Johnson, apparently unimpressed by the memory of this golfing success.

Trevor hesitated. 'Not really.'

The solicitor lifted up the piece of paper which lay on his desk in front of him and started to read from it. 'Insofar as the undernamed…'

'Excuse me,' said Trevor, apologetically, 'But do you think you could just tell me what it says? In plain language?'

The solicitor smiled condescendingly. 'The gist of the codicil is that if you choose to take control of the golf club then it will only remain yours if at the end of three months you can satisfy two very specific requirements.'

'Which are?'

‘Firstly, your uncle states quite clearly that you should be able to play a full round of golf on your own course in less than 100, observing all the rules of golf.’

Trevor blanched.

‘Secondly,’ continued Mr Johnson, ‘your uncle also states, with equal clarity, that you and a selected nonprofessional playing partner should play a handicap match play competition against two representatives of the bank. Once again the normal rules of golf will operate. If you win the match and complete a round of golf in a score of under 100 then the course will be yours.’

‘Will the bank be prepared to put forward a team?’ asked Trevor, puzzled.

‘I’m sure they will,’ said Mr Johnson. He paused, though whether this was for effect, for pleasure or merely in order to breathe Trevor had no idea. ‘Under the rules of your uncle’s will the bank will inherit the golf club if you and your partner lose.’

Mr Johnson fiddled with his pen for a moment. And then he smiled. ‘The codicil may help you make up your mind about what to do,’ he said.

CHAPTER THREE

The bank had given Trevor permission to visit Pettigrew Towers so that he could look through what was left of his uncle's belongings, and Trevor had decided to stay the night in Mettleham.

And so it was from a small unmemorable hotel foyer that he telephoned Sylvia to tell her his news.

'I'm in Mettleham,' he said.

'What on earth are you doing there?'

'I had a letter from a solicitor here. My uncle died.'

'I didn't know you had an uncle in Mettleham.'

'Neither did I.'

'I didn't know you had any uncles at all!'

'Neither did I.'

'How on earth can you not know that you've got an uncle?'

'I don't know how I didn't know. I just didn't know.'

'Have you got to go to the funeral?'

'No. That was last week. They didn't bother to tell me about the funeral.'

'So what are you there for?'

'My uncle owned a big house and was quite rich. Well, he wasn't *really* rich because he owed a lot of money to the bank. But he also owned a golf club which I seem to have inherited.'

'Just one? I thought people usually had them in sets?'

'No. Not that sort of golf club. The sort with buildings and people and so on.'

'A golf course?'

'Yes.'

'But what on earth do you want with a golf course? You don't even play golf!'

'The solicitor says they'll sell it for me and that I'll get £10,000.'

'£10,000 doesn't sound an awful lot for a golf club.'

'It's rather heavily mortgaged, I'm afraid.'

'Oh. That's a pity!'

'I'd rather my uncle was still alive. I'd like to have known him.'

'Yes, of course. But since he isn't it's rather nice that he's left you some money isn't it? Even if it isn't very much.'

'Yes. I suppose so.'

'Does your editor mind you taking time off from work?'

Trevor hesitated. If he hadn't had some good news to tell Sylvia he might not have told her that he had lost his job. But he no longer thought that the loss of his job was quite the disaster it had originally seemed. 'I rather seem to have been fired,' he told her rather bluntly.

'Fired?'

'Yes.'

'What on earth for? How did you manage to get fired? You've only been working there for a week!' Sylvia paused and thought about it. 'Less than a week!'

'It's rather complicated.'

'I don't care how complicated it is. I want to know. I'm entitled to know Trevor!' Sylvia sounded very cross.

'I saw the Queen in a collision with a milk float but I didn't ring anyone with the story and so the editor fired me.'

The telephone was silent for a moment. 'I don't understand,' said Sylvia at last.

'No,' agreed Trevor. 'I'm not entirely sure that I do.'

'Well, have you submitted a formal complaint?' Sylvia demanded.

'What do you mean?'

'They can't just sack you without a good reason,' said Sylvia.

'Not even in Fleet Street!'

'I was also late a few times,' said Trevor. 'It wasn't my fault,' he added quickly.

'Oh dear Trevor,' sighed Sylvia wearily. 'What on earth are we going to do with you? All that effort we went to get you that job'

'It wasn't a very good job,' said Trevor. 'I didn't like it.'

'How on earth can you know whether or not you liked it?' asked Sylvia. 'You didn't have the job for long enough to know whether or not you liked it,' she pointed out. 'Anyway it was in Fleet Street!' she added. 'Sometimes I despair of you, Trevor. Really I do' And with that Sylvia put down her telephone receiver with a crash.

'Sylvia? Sylvia?' called Trevor. But she had gone.

When Trevor put the telephone down he felt quite miserable.

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The next morning Trevor travelled by taxi to Pettigrew Towers where he was due to meet Ms Nancy Boyes from the bank. Since the bank owned the entire contents of the house - as well as the house itself - Ms Boyes had the authority to decide what, if anything, Trevor could take away and whether or not there would be a charge for it.

The driveway leading to the house had probably looked very impressive before Mr Pettigrew had lost his money. The entrance was marked by huge wrought iron gates, each of which had a painted crest in the middle. Impressive rows of oak trees stood guard along the sides of the twisting, turning driveway.

But the wind, the rain and the years had taken their toll, and the entrance to Pettigrew Towers no longer looked quite as grand as it obviously once had. The gates, which stood open, were rusting and didn't look as if they had been closed for years. The colours on the two crests were hardly discernible. Two of the oaks had been blown down and although someone had cut away the branches which had blocked the driveway the huge trunks, half covered in moss, lay where they had fallen. Even from the gateway Trevor could see that the driveway itself was scarred with thick tufts of grass, while the lawns alongside it, which badly needed cutting, were marked with a dozen or more mole hills.

Trevor looked at his watch as the taxi slowed and started to turn into the driveway. 'You can drop me here, if you like,' he said, realising that it would be twenty minutes before the bank's representative arrived.

'It looks like a long walk, guv,' said the driver. The car bumped up and down as it slowed to a halt on the cattle grid which guarded the driveway.

'That's all right. I'd like to walk.'

The driver shrugged and pulled on his handbrake. 'Suit yourself.' He turned, looked at the meter and told Trevor what he owed. Trevor paid him, climbed out of the car and watched as the taxi driver drove rapidly back towards Mettleham.

Pettigrew Towers had been built in the middle of the 18th century by John Pettigrew, who had made his fortune as a pirate. The architect commissioned to design the house had been instructed to build something impressive, and the turreted towers and dark, stone facade showed that he had followed his brief to the letter.

The skies, which had merely been grey when he had arrived, started to blacken as Trevor began the walk up the driveway towards the house, and the rain started just as the Pettigrew Towers came into view. By the time he arrived at the end of the driveway and stood on the edge of the huge, gravelled parking area at the front of the house it was raining heavily. Trevor stood with hands in pockets and shivered as he stared upwards at the empty flagpole standing on the tall stone tower above the huge wood and iron front door. Just then a small BMW sped into the parking area and slid to a gravel-splattering halt a couple of yards away from the front door. A tall, thin woman of about Trevor's age climbed out of the car, slammed the door and darted into the huge stone entrance porch.

'Trevor Dukinfield?' she called, shaking the few drops of water from her silk suit and taking a huge iron key out of a thin leather briefcase.

Trevor nodded. 'Ms Boyes?'

'Come on in. You'll get soaked. Where's your car?'

'I walked. Well, from the gates anyway.'

Ms Nancy Boyes, showing no signs of her surprise at this admission, opened the front door to Pettigrew Towers and stood aside to let Trevor walk in ahead of her.

Trevor had no idea what the inside of Pettigrew Towers would look like but even so he was astonished by what he saw. The floor in the hallway consisted of bare stone flags and there was no furniture to be seen at all. The ceiling of the hall was some sixty feet above. Rain dripped through holes in the roof in half a dozen different places, splashing noisily onto the flag stone floor.

'I'm afraid we've already moved all the furniture to our auction rooms,' apologised Ms Boyes. 'Normally we would have left it here and had the auction in the house but our insurance people insisted that we move it.' She looked upwards. 'As you can see the fabric of the building isn't in terribly good condition.'

'Do you expect the sale of the furniture and the house to cover the loan my uncle had taken out?'

Ms Boyes shook his head. 'Very unlikely,' she said. 'But that's our problem not yours. As you know your uncle refused to include the remains of his golf club as security against his loan with us, though to be honest it wouldn't have made a lot of difference if he had. Do you want to see the rest of the place?'

'Yes, please. Very much so.'

Even with no furniture in the rooms the guided tour of Pettigrew Towers took nearly three-quarters of an hour of steady walking. Trevor had never been into a private house that had its own ballroom, library, armoury, gun room, flower room and chapel.

In one of the many bedrooms Trevor spotted an enormous pile of clothes thrown in a corner. Next to them were three untidy and unsteady-looking piles of documents. 'Whose were those?'

'This was your uncle's bedroom,' explained Ms Nancy Boyes. 'He couldn't afford to heat the place and so for the last few years he virtually lived in this one room. The clothes were his and the papers were found in his desk.'

'That's all that's left of all his personal belongings?'

'I'm afraid so!'

'Can I take the papers with me?'

'Certainly! Do you want the clothes?'

Trevor hesitated. 'They could perhaps go to a local charity shop?'

'That's what we thought. Let's see if we can find anything to put those papers in.'

They found a cardboard box and two large plastic carrier bags in the kitchen and crammed them full with old Archibald Pettigrew's accumulated paperwork.

What do you think will happen to the house?' asked Trevor, as he walked down the stone staircase with a cardboard box full of papers in his arms.

'Heaven knows!' admitted the banker, who was carrying the two plastic bags. 'It's probably too big to be bought as a private house but it would need an awful lot of money spending on it to convert it into a hotel or anything like that.'

'It seems such a pity,' said Trevor, sadly.

'Are you heading back into Mettleham?' asked Ms Boyes. She put down the two bags she was carrying and opened the front door.

'To the railway station,' nodded Trevor, walking through into the porch. The rain was still pouring down. 'There's not a lot of point in my staying around here. Mr Gittings said he'd get in touch with me as soon as he had any more news about the golf club.'

'You're going to let the solicitors sell it for you?'

'I think so. It seems the only sensible thing to do.'

'Absolutely. Very wise of you. Use your money as a deposit on a nice little semidetached house somewhere.'

'Yes, I suppose so,' agreed Trevor, who suddenly realized how mundane and unimaginative this alternative appeared.

'You're going back to London then?' asked the banker.

Trevor nodded, though it did occur to him that with no job to return to there wasn't a lot of point in going back to the capital.

'I'll give you a lift to the station,' said Ms Boyes. She took the key out of her briefcase and relocked the front door. Fifty-five minutes later Trevor found himself sitting on a crowded InterCity express heading back to Euston Station.

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When he had first seen the pile of papers that Archibald Pettigrew had left behind Trevor had, not unnaturally, assumed that his uncle must have been something of a hoarder. He had expected to find that most of the papers were simply old bills, dull bank statements and irrelevant letters. He had only taken the papers with him in the rather vain and forlorn hope that he might find one or two old family photographs or letters among the dross. He had expected to find that by the time he arrived back at Euston Station he would have sorted the papers into one very small pile worth keeping and one very large pile to throw away.

But that first impression had been unfair and grossly misleading, and it wasn't long before Trevor decided that all the papers which he had rescued from Pettigrew Towers were well worth keeping; at least, until he could sort through them more carefully than was possible on the crowded train.

At Euston Station he had to find a trolley and then hire a taxi to take him and his uncle's papers, still packed in the cardboard box and the two plastic bags, back to his room in Paddington. He got the taxi driver to stop at a burger bar on the way home so that he could buy a double cheeseburger and a large portion of chips

Once safely back in his room Trevor ate the cheeseburger and chips and then put a spoonful of instant coffee into his solitary mug which he filled with hot water straight from the tap. He then cleared the remains of his meal from the kitchen table, wiped the surface clean of crumbs with his arm and emptied the first plastic bag of papers onto the table so that he could start the task of sorting through them properly.

An hour and a half later he found a letter in an envelope addressed to him.

When he saw his name written in a hand which he now recognised as his uncle's, Trevor froze for a moment and went quite cold. For a while he didn't open the envelope but just rested it up against his coffee mug and stared at it.

Up until that moment he'd had no idea that his uncle had even known of his existence.

Eventually, Trevor reached out, picked up the envelope and slit open the top with his thumb. Then, as though handling a precious piece of manuscript, he carefully unfolded the letter.

My dear Trevor,

It feels strange knowing that by the time you get this I will be dead. But one advantage of writing from beyond the grave is that you don't have to worry too much about saving face or avoiding embarrassment.

The first thing I want to do is to apologise to you. I know that I should have contacted you long ago and I feel very guilty about that. I've known of your existence ever since you were born, though I strongly suspect that you've never known of mine. When your parents died I kept meaning to get in touch but every time I almost wrote or picked up the telephone to call you I managed to find yet another very good excuse for not doing so.

And in the end I was so ashamed at having left it so long that I just couldn't get in touch with you at all

Your father and I had a fierce falling out before you were born. It was, as you can imagine, over a woman; your mother, of course. Your mother and I went out together for two years and we were going to get married.

Then, gradually, your mother fell in love with my brother and, to cut a long story short, she decided to marry him instead of me.

I was devastated and I blamed your father. I know it wasn't fair of me, for your father didn't deliberately set out to take her away from me. But I was hurt and I couldn't bear to see the two of them together.

I was two years older than your father and so I had inherited the family house and the land that went with it when our parents died - I was about your age when I inherited Pettigrew Towers. I had originally intended to give your father some of the land but when he and your mother got married, well, as you can imagine that good intention was quickly forgotten and I'm afraid I made it pretty clear that your father wasn't going to get anything.

Your father wasn't a man to complain. He was a proud man. He went away from the area and when he got married he took your mother's name. That's why you are a Dukinfield instead of a Pettigrew. He didn't know, but I kept an eye on him and your mother. I don't know why I did it. Partly curiosity I suppose, and partly a strange sense of responsibility. I think I rather hoped that he'd be a failure at whatever he chose to do so that I could go riding in and save him - and take your mother away with me.

I knew about your birth but I didn't say or do anything. I didn't even send you anything for your christening. I wanted to but I was ashamed because I knew that if I did your parents would know that I'd been secretly watching them. I've never admitted this to another soul but I even paid a firm of private detectives to send me monthly reports about you and your family. Through their eyes I watched your father build up his business and I watched you growing up. But I never wrote or called and then, by the time of your parents' accident, it was somehow too late to get in touch.

I've made quite a mess of my life and although I've had some fun I have a lot of regrets.

After I lost your mother I went a bit wild for a few years. I spent a fortune just wandering around with the wrong sort of people. I went to Gstaad for the skiing Monte Carlo for the gambling, Paris for the women and so on.

When I got tired of all that I came back here and discovered golf. That's when I built the golf course; my one achievement. I'm rather proud of it, though I know it's rather gone to seed in recent years. I readily confess that I didn't start out to build the course out of any sense of altruism. I had a row with the club I was a member of - they were a terribly stuffy lot - and decided to build my own club where I could play without any interference.

I'm afraid you won't inherit the Towers. The banks will take that. But I've made sure that the golf course remains separate, and although there's a thumping great mortgage on it you should be able to make a go of it if you want to. It's all I've got left to leave you.

Of course, I wouldn't blame you if you decided just to sell it. After all you certainly don't owe me a thing and I know you don't play golf. But if you decide to keep it and make a go of it you might find that you enjoy it. I was older than you are now when I first discovered golf and it's been a great source of joy to me.

Well, Trevor, that's about it. My eyes are terrible and my hand is a bit shaky and it has taken me most of a day to write this letter. I did think of posting it but in the end I've decided to leave it in the top drawer of my desk. If you're the sort of man I hope you are you'll want to look around Pettigrew Towers and you'll find it.

I'm sorry we never met, Trevor. It was entirely my fault and I feel very guilty about it. I hope you're a better man than I ever was and that you can forgive me.

Take care and God Bless,
Your loving Uncle,
Archibald Pettigrew

P.S. I hope you don't mind the business about getting you to play a round in under 100 and beating those damned bankers. But you can't really own a golf club without playing the game. And you'll enjoy it once you start to play.

When Trevor put down the letter he felt a lump in his throat and tears pricking his eyes.

He could hear Sylvia's spirit shouting at him to accept the money. He thought about all the things that he could do with £10,000. He could put down a deposit on a semidetached house with two and half bedrooms and a small garden; buy a middle of the range Japanese motor car with velour upholstery and an integral radio-cassette player; invest in government stocks and have an extremely small, private income for the rest of his life; go on a round the world cruise with a group of seventy-year-olds he had never met before; start a business of his own and lose the money; or rent a remote cottage in an uncivilised part of Scotland for a year and shiver as he struggled to write a novel.

It was, he realised, going to be difficult to satisfy his uncle's stipulations. He knew that it wasn't going to be easy to play a round in under 100 in such a short time.

But, however difficult it was, and however long the odds against him, he knew that he would now try to keep the golf club.

He had never before felt that he had any roots, and he suddenly realised how much he had missed them. Finding at least part of his past had put purpose into his hitherto rather aimless life. In finding his past he rather thought that he might well find his future.

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'Have you seen the golf club you're planning to try to run?'

'No, not yet,' admitted Trevor. 'But I intend to pop out there this afternoon,' he added enthusiastically.

'Don't you have any career plans of your own?'

'Well, oddly enough I don't really have too much on at the moment,' confessed Trevor. 'I'm rather in between engagements.'

'I see,' said Mr Johnson. 'And do you have any capital?'

'No, not much.'

'You do realise that if you decide to take over the running of the golf club you won't get any cash from your uncle's estate?'

'Oh yes.'

'And you'll owe the banks a fairly huge amount of money?'

'Yes, I suppose I will.'

'And when the golf club goes under - as it surely will - you'll lose your chance of making £10,000 out of it?'

'Yes, I realise that,' said Trevor. 'I know it might seem strange but I'd really rather like to give it a go.' He hesitated a moment. 'He was family, you know.'

'Family? You never knew the man!' protested the lawyer.

'But he was my uncle!'

Mr Johnson lowered his voice in an effort to sound comforting. He sounded about as friendly as a shark eyeing up a swimmer's plump calf. 'Can I be frank with you, Mr Dukinfield?'

'Of course,' said Trevor, rather warily.

'That golf club is never going to be profitable,' said Mr Johnson. 'The only chance of making any money out of the course is to sell it for building houses or factories. £10,000 is a very fair offer.'

'I think I'd rather keep the club,' said Trevor.

'Well, be it on your own head,' sighed Mr Johnson.

'The way I look at it is this,' said Trevor. 'When I first received your letter I was broke and unemployed. If I fail to make a go of the golf club I won't be any worse off but I will at least have tried.'

'Very well, Mr Dukinfield,' said Mr Johnson, as though humouring a man intent on squandering his last few coppers on a gamble certain to fail. 'If that's what you're determined to do with the consequences of your good fortune…!' Mr Johnson paused for a moment as though expecting Trevor to change his mind at any moment. 'But I do suggest that before you make any final decision you go and take a look at what you're letting yourself in for. Would you like me to give them a ring and tell them that you're coming?'

'Er, no, thanks,' said Trevor. 'That's very kind of you but there's no need for that.

CHAPTER FOUR

It was a gloriously sunny day. The sky was blue and cloudless. A perfect day to view the golf club you've just inherited.

'Excuse me,' shouted Trevor to a boy on a tractor. 'Can you tell me how far it is to the clubhouse?'

The boy on the tractor, who wore a voluminous, shapeless, grubby, green oilcloth coat with several tears in it and had rather large quantities of longish, light brown hair escaping from underneath a long peaked baseball cap, bent forward and fiddled with something on the right of the steering wheel. The tractor slowed and the noise the engine was making dropped appreciably. The tractor was so old and covered in rust and dried grass cuttings that it was impossible to see what colour it was painted when it had left the factory.

'Pardon?' shouted the young tractor driver, who had been cutting the fairway grass on the part of the course on the right-hand side of the roadway.

Trevor repeated his question.

The boy looked around. 'Where's your car?'

'I came by taxi. I got the driver to drop me off at the entrance to the drive,' shouted Trevor, who had made the same mistake as he had when he had visited Pettigrew Towers. 'I didn't realise it was such a long way!'

'Pardon?'

Trevor repeated what he'd said.

'Where are your clubs?'

'Clubs?'

'Golf clubs!'

'I haven't got any!'

'Sorry?'

'What?'

'Say it again, please. I didn't hear. When I've been on the tractor for an hour or so I can't hear very well for ages.'

'You should wear ear protectors!'

'What did you say?'

'I haven't got any.'

'Oh,' said the boy, looking puzzled.

'I've only come to have a look round.'

'There isn't much to see. Are you thinking of joining?'

'Is there a waiting list?'

The boy laughed. He pointed forward. 'Keep straight on. It's about half a mile,' he said. Then he fiddled about with the something to the right of the steering wheel again and shot off back onto the fairway. The grass cutters behind the tractor sprang into action, whirling grass cuttings high into the air and hiding the tractor cab behind a wall of green mist. In the distance Trevor could just make out a solitary golfer who seemed to be attacking the turf with one of his clubs, repeatedly raining blows upon the grass.

Trevor trudged on along the unmade road and gazed out at what he could see of the golf course. The land was naturally hilly and well stocked with a dozen different varieties of mature, broad-leafed trees including oak, chestnut, beech, sycamore and elm. If he turned his head and looked to the left he could see that there were several fairways on that side of the rough roadway too.

Suddenly, the noise of the tractor dropped a few dozen decibels again. Trevor looked across to where the ancient vehicle had stopped and watched the boy jump down from the cab, land lightly on the grass, and run forwards and slightly to his left, into the light rough that bordered the fairway. The boy bent down, picked up something small and white and slipped it into his pocket before running back to the tractor, climbing back aboard and driving off again. The boy was, of course, doing what all greenkeepers do; supplementing his paltry income by collecting stray golf balls to clean, sort and sell back to the members who had lost them in the first place. But Trevor knew so little about golf that he thought the boy had jumped down off his cab merely to pick a mushroom he had spotted.

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Ten minutes later Trevor walked over the brow of a small hill and suddenly found himself walking not on the rough and uneven stony roadway to which his feet had rather reluctantly grown accustomed but on a worn and frost damaged stretch of tarmac which was so thin that it looked as if it had been spread by a mean-spirited British Rail chef wielding a butter knife.

The tarmac had been laid as a car park and whoever had ordered the laying of the artificial surface seemed to have been unreasonably optimistic for although there was room for over a hundred cars there were no more than half a dozen vehicles parked there. The parking spaces nearest the entrance to the clubhouse were marked with small wooden signs. Each of these small boards was painted white and had one or two words neatly painted on it in black capital letters. The signs said: PRESIDENT, VICE-PRESIDENT, CAPTAIN, LADY CAPTAIN, SECRETARY, PROFESSIONAL. There were cars parked only in the last two of these marked spaces.

The oldest part of the clubhouse was built of wood in the style of a Victorian village cricket pavilion, complete with a modest clock tower, but at various times small additions had been made. On the left of the original building there stood an extension built from concrete blocks and on the right there was a small prefabricated extension. Both supplements to the main building were painted white; or, rather, they had been painted white when they had last been decorated some years earlier. Wind, rain and sunshine had managed to remove most of the paint. The original part of the clubhouse had a roof made of grey slate; the concrete block extension had a roof made of large red tiles, some of which were missing, and the prefabricated part of the building had an invisible flat roof.

About fifty yards or so to the right of this architectural lucky bag there was a large, green and cream static caravan which, judging from the notices leaning against the side of it, served as the professional's shop. And fifty yards even further to the right there were two smaller caravans. Both of these had probably been white when they had been delivered by their manufacturers but many years of sunshine and rain had turned them a rather unpleasant shade of cream. Although both caravans had clearly been originally intended to travel neither of them looked as if they had moved for some considerable time.

Trevor's first impression was that Butterbury Ford Golf Club was not in the first tier of clubs. It was, he realised, unlikely to be playing host to the British Open in the immediately foreseeable future.

'I say! You there!'

Trevor turned towards the direction from which this unfriendly cry had come. He shaded his eyes against the sun with his hand.

'Yes, you!'

A small, stoutish man, dressed in a smart blue blazer and a pair of neatly creased, cream flannels, had appeared at the entrance to the clubhouse and was standing at the top of the short flight of steps which led down into the car park. His hair was neatly parted just above his left ear, with the longer strands being used to hide some of what was an almost entirely bald head. He wore a small toothbrush sized brown moustache on his upper lip and the breast pocket of his blazer was decorated with a gold braided badge. He stood as though to attention. Two of the shiny gold buttons on the blazer were fastened.

'Hello!' said Trevor, cheerily, turning and starting to walk towards him.

'I'm afraid this is a private club!' said the man in the blazer, walking slowly down the steps. 'Are you a member?' He stopped on the bottom step.

'No,' admitted Trevor. 'But I thought I'd take a look around. I'd rather like to learn to play golf.'

'I don't know about that. It's not a school!' said the man. 'This is a very exclusive club, you know.'

'Are you the secretary?' asked Trevor.

'Good heavens, no!' replied the man. 'Name is Jarrold. Captain Jarrold. Ex-Army. Royal Engineers.' He checked the buttons on his jacket and pulled himself up to his full five feet seven inches. 'Member of the Committee and Deputy Chairman Elect of the Finance and General Purposes Committee.'

'Pleased to meet you,' said Trevor. He introduced himself, though, through a mixture of natural modesty and a rather cunning desire to find out as much about the club as he could, did not mention that he was legally the owner of the club and the course. 'Who should I see about getting some lessons?'

'Never played before?'

'No,' confessed Trevor. 'Well, only on the crazy golf course in Weston-super-Mare.'

'Hrrmph!' said Captain Jarrold, scowling. 'You'd better have a word with the professional.'

'Do you know where he is?'

'Try his shop,' was Captain Jarrold's suggestion, with a nod in the direction of the static caravan. 'If he isn't there Mrs Weatherby will know where he is.' And with this advice the man in the blazer turned, made his way back up the pavilion steps and disappeared once more inside the building.

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The inside of the static caravan was well stocked with golfing paraphernalia. In addition to the rows of clubs and the selection of bags which Trevor had expected to find on sale there were special, multicoloured golfing umbrellas; three plastic mannequins modelling tasteless plaid trousers in three sickly combinations of green and red together with pastel coloured jumpers decorated with neatly embroidered slogans and small yellow giraffes; golf shoe boxes piled from floor to ceiling; three plastic buckets filled with used golf balls ('Take Your Pick: 50p, 75p, £1.00'); wet weather gear specially designed and marketed for golfers; golf gloves; golf socks; patented pitch repairing devices;

videos demonstrating how well-known professional golfers win championships and, for some unexplained reason, two dozen, shiny, chromium-plated coffee making machines all still in their presentation boxes.

At the far end of the caravan, behind a small collapsible table upon which were piled score cards, a cardboard box containing patented ‘all weather’ golf tees and a small plastic rack holding round tins of special ‘golf sweets’, sat a pleasant looking but rather shapeless woman of about fifty who wore a grey cardigan over a blue and grey patterned dress. It wasn’t cold in the caravan but she wore green, fingerless gloves.

‘I’m looking for the professional,’ said Trevor. ‘Are you Mrs Weatherby?’

‘Iris Weatherby,’ said the woman, with a kindly smile. ‘Gunther is on the practice green with Mrs Dussenberg.’

‘Is Gunther the professional?’

Iris nodded. ‘Gunther Schmidt.’

‘How long has Mr Schmidt been the professional here?’

Iris pursed her lips and thought for a moment. ‘It must be three or four years,’ she replied at last. ‘I’ve been here nearly that long.’

‘What’s he like?’ asked Trevor.

Iris laughed and leant forward confidentially. ‘He’s a bit of a ladies’ man,’ she told Trevor with a wink. She had a small growth on her right upper eyelid which wobbled when she winked.

‘Is he a good golfer?’

Iris looked puzzled by this question. ‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘He’s the professional so I suppose he must be.’

‘Don’t you play?’

Iris laughed; a glorious, full-throated laugh. ‘Me? Don’t be silly. Not with my legs. Not at my age.’

‘Can you tell me where the practice ground is?’ asked Trevor.

Iris levered herself up out of her chair and bent down towards the window nearest to Trevor. He couldn’t help noticing that she had elastic bandages wrapped around both legs.

‘Just go round behind the back of the clubhouse and then walk about three hundred yards to the left. There’s a small copse and you’ll find the practice area behind it. You should see Gunther and Mrs Dussenberg there’.

Trevor thanked Iris for her help and went outside in search of Gunther Schmidt.

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Iris Weatherby’s instructions were entirely accurate and Trevor spotted the golf professional and his pupil immediately. It wasn’t difficult. Mr Schmidt was wearing a pair of the sort of plaid trousers which were on display in his shop together with a bright red sweater and a plaid Tam O’Shanter cap which matched his trousers. The bottoms of his trousers were tucked into long patterned socks, but instead of making them look like plus fours (which was, presumably, the intention), the result was that the professional’s trousers simply looked as though they had been tucked into his socks. He was standing directly behind a tall, statuesque, dark-haired woman whom Trevor assumed must be Mrs Dussenberg. She was wearing a short, tight lilac-coloured skirt, a tight-fitting pink sweater with a tiny giraffe embroidered over her left breast and a rather fetching Tam O’Shanter, worn at a very jaunty angle. A huge red leather golf bag lay nearby alongside a red plastic bucket full of balls and a curious looking three foot long yellow cylindrical plastic tube for which Trevor could imagine no useful purpose.

Mrs Dussenberg and Mr Schmidt had managed to get into probably the only position which enabled them both to hold the same golf club at the same time while facing in the same direction. Mrs Dussenberg was bending forwards slightly and gripping the club firmly with both hands. The professional, the front of his body pressed very tightly against Mrs Dussenberg’s rear, had his arms wrapped around her chest and waist, and his hands wrapped around her hands. He seemed to be holding her very firmly. He was whispering something to her and Mrs Dussenberg was giggling.

Trevor, who had approached unnoticed, and had originally intended to wait until a suitable moment before making his presence known, suddenly realised that the suitable moment was not getting any closer, for neither Mrs Dussenberg nor Mr Schmidt seemed in the slightest bit interested in using the golf club as anything other than a prop. He was tempted to retreat and had started to do so when his natural sense of discretion was overwhelmed by courage. Rather to his own surprise, he found himself making a polite and entirely artificial coughing sound. Mrs Dussenberg and Mr Schmidt responded immediately to this delicate interruption and sprang apart as though they had both suddenly acquired matching magnetic polarities.

‘I’m terribly sorry to bother you,’ said Trevor, slightly embarrassed and genuinely apologetic.

‘What are you wanting?’ demanded the professional, his face visibly reddening with startling speed despite his suntan. He had dark, bushy eyebrows, wrinkled and heavily weathered skin and copious amounts of black hair emerging from his nostrils and his ears. The escaping hair looked rather thick and wiry, and this aspect of Mr Schmidt’s appearance reminded Trevor of a burst sofa. Mrs Dussenberg, who had retained hold of the golf club and who was now standing at least six feet away from Mr Schmidt, used one free hand first to adjust her jumper, then her Tam O'Shanter and finally to re-tousle her already carefully tousled hair.

Trevor swallowed and began to stutter. 'I, er, I j-j-j-just, er, w-w-w-wondered if I could b-b-b-book a few lessons?' He had not stuttered since he had been at school where a German maths teacher had terrified the life out of him. If he had spent a year with a psychoanalyst he would have discovered that the stutter had been revived by the professional's heavy German accent.

'What are your names?'

Trevor looked around. Not counting Iris Weatherby, invisible in the static caravan, there was, to the best of his knowledge, no one else within half a mile. 'I b-b-b-beg your p-p-p-pardon?'

'Your names!' shouted Mr Schmidt. 'What are your names?'

'Me?'

'Yes, you!' roared the German. 'Who else are there? Do you not English speak? What are your names?'

'T-T-T-Trevor,' replied Trevor. 'T-T-T-Trevor D-D-DDukinfield.'

'One half of an hours!' said Schmidt. 'You are to my shop in one half an hours coming. Yes?'

'Y-y-y-yes,' agreed Trevor. 'F-f-f-fine. Thank you.' He waved a hand in salute, turned and hurried back towards the clubhouse. Behind him he heard a woman giggling and a man snorting. He assumed that the giggling came from Mrs Dussenberg and the snorting from Mr Schmidt though he did not dare to turn round to confirm this suspicion.

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Iris wasn't in the shop when Trevor got back and the car park was still more or less deserted. Only the steady drone of the grass cutting tractor confirmed that there was any other human activity in the neighbourhood. Trevor walked slowly across the car park towards the clubhouse entrance, climbed the steps and went in through the front door.

The entrance led into a small hallway, and in contrast to the brightness of the sunlight it was dark inside the clubhouse. As Trevor's eyes grew accustomed to the lack of light he could see that there were a dozen or more notices pinned to the wall in front of him and to the doors on his left and his right.

Two or three of these notices gave advance notice of club competitions and invited members to sign their names if they wanted to take part. None of the notices had attracted more than half a dozen signatures, and if Trevor had bothered to examine them carefully he would have probably harboured doubts about their validity for it is surely unlikely that one club could boast members with such illustrious names as 'Mickey Mouse' and 'Adolf Hitler'.

Most of the notices, however, contained instructions, admonitions and warnings. These were largely written in red felt-tip pen and although all seemed elderly and rather dog eared, and judging by the pin holes in their corners had been up long enough to need to be repositioned on numerous occasions (one or two had faded and become almost completely unreadable), they were presumably all still intended to convey important information to the members.

He discovered that he was not to enter the clubhouse if he wore shoes with spikes in them, shorts or denim trousers. He was warned that he was under an obligation to replace all his divots, repair all pitch marks, give way to faster players and regard the ditch between the 7th and 8th fairways as 'ground under repair'. He learned that his membership fee would include a modest (though unspecified) contribution to the Christmas Staff Fund, that any member who parked in the Secretary's Car Parking Space would automatically be suspended from the club for six months, that until a new septic tank had been installed members were asked to use the toilets as sparingly as possible and that members who wanted a 10% discount off golfing holidays in Palm Beach should see the professional as soon as possible.

After studying these notices for a few moments Trevor opened the door on his left, which was marked LOUNGE, and walked into a room which had all the charm of a waiting room at a provincial railway station. There were half a dozen people in the room. Captain Jarrold, Deputy Chairman Elect of the Finance and General Purposes Committee, sat playing bridge with three other men in blazers. A large, unhealthy looking man wearing green checked trousers and a pale blue sweater with a giraffe embroidered on the right breast sat on a bar stool smoking an enormous cigar and wheezing noisily. A painfully thin man who was wearing a short white coat and a black, clip on bow tie which had become loose and was hanging rather precariously from one collar point stood behind the bar wearily wiping a pint glass with a rather unhygienic looking tea towel.

Trevor was uncomfortably aware that several pairs of eyes were staring at him. 'Good afternoon, gentlemen,' he said.

For a moment no one said anything in response to what they seemed to regard as a controversial and presumably impertinent affront.

Captain Jarrold eventually broke the silence.

'I did explain to this visitor that this is a private club,' he said, speaking to a man in the blazer who sat on his left.

'Yes, you did,' agreed Trevor, delighted to hear that his stammer had disappeared. 'But I've arranged an appointment with the professional for a lesson and I thought that I could perhaps get a drink while I wait. A cup of coffee perhaps?' He paused. 'And maybe I could talk to someone about joining the club.'

'I'm afraid not,' said the man in the blazer who was sitting on Captain Jarrold's right. He seemed genuinely apologetic. 'The lounge is for members only.' The man had to twist round in order to speak to Trevor. 'I bid two hearts,' he said.

'How do I join the club?' asked Trevor, terribly tempted by the rudeness of this response to declare his hand; to tell them that he now owned the club; that it was his chairs they were sitting in and probably even his cards which they were using to play bridge. But he said nothing. The time, he felt, was not yet right.

'I'm afraid you need to get an application form from the secretary's office and get it signed by two members,' said the man in the blazer.

'Three spades,' said the man in the blazer on the right of the man in the blazer who had told Trevor that he needed to get an application form from the secretary's office.

'Oh, right,' said Trevor. 'Where do I find the secretary?'

'I'm the secretary,' said the man in the blazer. 'Trout's the name. Bartholomew Trout. Wing Commander Bartholomew Trout.' Every time he spoke he twisted round so that he could look at Trevor and every time Trevor replied he twisted round so that Trevor was speaking to his back.

The man in a blazer on the right of the secretary, whose turn it was to bid, shook his head.

'Oh, jolly good,' smiled Trevor. 'Do you think I could trouble you for an application form then, please?'

'I'm afraid not!' said the man in the blazer. 'Sorry. But you're not allowed in here. The lounge is for members only.' He seemed genuinely saddened by the fact that the rules were so restrictive.

Trevor scratched his head. 'Well, if I go outside would you bring me a form?' he asked.

'I'm afraid I can't do that,' said Wing Commander Trout, as though he had been asked to do something illegal.

Trevor thought for a moment. 'So, how do I get hold of an application form?' he asked.

'You can write in for one but you must enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope,' replied Wing Commander Trout.

'Five spades,' said Captain Jarrold.

'Oh,' said Trevor. 'Well, if that's the only way…!' He was beginning to understand why the club had such a small membership.

'I'm afraid it is. Six hearts.'

After a moment's thought Wing Commander Trout shook his head. The player on his right then quickly shook his head too. The enthusiastic player on the left of the secretary started to lay out his cards.

Trevor left the clubhouse, trotted down the steps and walked back across the car park towards Mr Schmidt's shop and his first golfing lesson.

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'So are you wanting golf to learn to play?'

'Y-y-yes, p-p-please,' said Trevor. They were standing together in the static caravan and Trevor's stutter had come back. The golf professional rather frightened him. Iris Weatherby was back behind her small table. She had smiled when she'd seen Trevor and had, he thought, winked at him in an unusually friendly, rather motherly sort of way.

'Good, good!' said Mr Schmidt, rubbing his hands together with undisguised glee. He had taken off his Tam O'Shanter cap to reveal a large bald patch surrounded by a thick growth of black hair. From the ears up it made him look a little like a monk. 'That is very good. But first we must be making you with the equipment.'

'C-c-c-couldn't I j-j-j-just have the lesson and see how I g-g-get on?' asked Trevor. 'I might not like it or be any g-g-ggood at it.'

'Nonsense!' cried the German, brushing aside these fears with a wave of his hand. He reached up and pulled down a long club with a large, round reddish brown head stuck to one end and a corrugated rubber grip wrapped around the other. 'The driver!' he said. 'With this you will hit the big time. Yes?'

The professional handed the club to Trevor. 'There, you see, it a perfect fit is!' he said. 'It might have been for you made. When the balloon goes up you will be barking up the right tree with this.'

Trevor looked down. He could see no way in which a piece of metal with a rubberised grip on the handle could possibly satisfy this professional forecast.

'Now you must this have, and one of these, and of these one, and of those, and these, and this and that and all of these.' As he spoke Mr Schmidt pulled down club after club and handed them all to Trevor. 'These are good, you know. The very best. With these you will have the irons in the fire that you need. And now you need a bag in which they to store.'

Trevor looked down at the armful of clubs he was holding. 'I need s-s-s-something to hold them,' he agreed. 'But c-c-ccouldn't I maybe just buy a second hand set? Do I really need all these c-c-c-clubs?'

‘It important is that you with the best equipment start,’ said the German. ‘A bad working man will…,’ he stopped, obviously lost. ‘How do you say?’

‘B-b-b-blame his t-t-t-tools?’ suggested Trevor.

‘You have it!’ cried Mr Schmidt. ‘A bad working man will blame his tool! Otherwise he will be in the hole.’ He raised a finger high to mark this pronouncement. ‘You must yourself give no chance your tools to blame.’

‘N-n-n-no, I suppose not,’ said Trevor reluctantly, privately thinking that he might soon be grateful of a chance to blame his tools. ‘H-h-how much will all this c-c-cost?’

‘Pfui’ said the German, with a flamboyant wave of his hand and arm. ‘What is this with the costings? You must not cut off your skin to spite your nose.’

‘We usually say either that you m-m-must not c-c-cut off your nose to spite your face or that it is no skin off your nose,’ said Trevor boldly.

‘You do?’ frowned Mr Schmidt. ‘I have been taken for a ride.’ He scowled. ‘I have a book on your English sayings but there are so many sheep in the clothings of the wolves.’

‘I m-m-might not have the m-m-money,’ explained Trevor.

The German turned to him suddenly. ‘You are poor?’ he asked, anxiously. ‘You do not have two stones to rub together?’

‘Well, sort of,’ said Trevor.

‘Ah, sort of poor!’ said the German gleefully. ‘When you English are rich you always say you are sort of poor.’

‘I’m not rich,’ insisted Trevor. ‘And I haven’t even m-mmanaged to j-j-join the c-c-club yet.’

‘Pfui. This is nothing of a problem,’ said Schmidt. ‘No problem.’ He winked.

‘Oh,’ said Trevor. ‘Right. Thank you.’

‘My pleasure,’ beamed the German. ‘You are to scratching my bottom and I am doing likewise with yours.’ He looked around the shop. ‘Now what else are you needing? Shoes, yes? What size in shoes do you have?’

Trevor, wondering if the fact that he owned the golf club meant that the shop and its contents were his, told the professional his shoe size.

‘Splendid!’ cried the German, pulling down a shoe box and handing it to Trevor. ‘And you are the glove and balls needing? Yes?’

‘I suppose so,’ agreed Trevor reluctantly, removing his own shoes and putting on the spiked shoes the professional had handed him.

Twenty minutes later, laden down with more equipment than he could comfortably carry, walking uncertainly in his first pair of spiked shoes and dressed for the part in golfing clothes which the professional assured him were the very latest in golfing fashion, Trevor followed Mr Schmidt out of the caravan into the sunshine and headed off towards the practice ground for his first golf lesson.

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They stopped by the side of a small flat area of grass which was decorated with two small tee markers which Trevor rightly assumed had been made by pouring concrete into plastic flower pots.

‘Right!’ said Mr Schmidt, grinning broadly and handing Trevor a plastic, cellophane and cardboard packet. ‘Put on your glove and we then start the game.’ The concrete tee markers had at one time been painted white and someone had painted what looked vaguely like a P on each of them. Clods of earth which had been dug out of the grass tee were strewn on the fairway a few yards away.

Trevor laid his bag of clubs down on the ground and with some difficulty tore open the packet he had been handed. He examined the contents carefully. ‘Er, I’m afraid there’s only one g-g-glove here,’ he pointed out.

‘Yes?’ said the golf professional, examining the contents of the opened packet and nodding his agreement. ‘This is correct.’

‘But surely there should be two…!’

‘Two?’

‘One for each hand?’ suggested Trevor. He held out his arms to amplify the point he was making.

Mr Schmidt looked puzzled. ‘In golf we only wear gloves on one hand,’ he explained.

‘Oh,’ said Trevor. ‘Why?’

‘Because the gloves are sold in singlets,’ explained Mr Schmidt.

Trevor decided that he could think of no suitable response to this. He shrugged and pulled the solitary glove onto his left hand. Looking around and finding nowhere to throw the now unwanted packaging he pushed it into his pocket.

‘Now like a golfer you are looking!’ beamed Mr Schmidt.

Trevor looked down at his black and white spiked shoes with their tasselled laces, his green and red plaid trousers dutifully tucked, as he had been instructed, into white and blue checked calf-length socks and his fluorescent pink mohair sweater with a small embroidered giraffe marking the position of his left breast and wondered idly whether looking like a complete and utter pillock was an essential part of the game of golf. He felt relieved that no one he knew was there to see him. The golf professional bent down and carefully selected a club from Trevor's bag.

'Will I really n-n-n-need this many c-c-c-clubs?' asked Trevor. 'They don't b-b-break do they?'

'Break?' said Mr Schmidt, puzzled. 'These clubs will not break!' He lifted the club he had chosen high into the air and smashed it down onto the ground a few inches away from Trevor's left foot. Trevor, who thought that the professional had taken offence and had been aiming at him leapt backwards. Or, rather, he tried to leap backwards. He discovered, however, that the spikes on his shoes had secured his feet firmly to the ground. The result was that although his body leapt backwards his feet remained exactly where they were.

'See?' said Mr Schmidt, smiling. 'It has not broken! I will not flog you a dead horse!'

'No,' said Trevor, lying flat on his back on the ground and trying to look impressed. 'That's g-g-g-good! Very good.' He pushed himself up into a sitting position and rubbed his left elbow which hurt.

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Twenty-five minutes later Trevor gazed in astonishment and delight as the small white ball which had, a moment earlier, lain unmoving on the grass before him, soared high into the air and sailed away towards the practice green.

It was his first proper golf shot; his first moment of unalloyed pleasure; his first taste of the joy that comes from an almost perfect hit. It was, in truth, his only decent golf shot of the morning.

He had missed the ball more than he had hit it. His club had hit the ground so often that his elbow ached. He didn't know it at the time but that one good shot was a complete fluke. And that shot hooked Trevor Dukinfield as surely as a perfectly tied fly will catch a salmon.

Mr Schmidt the golf professional was wise enough to know that he had arrived at the right moment to stop for the morning.

'You have hit the big time!' he cried with unconcealed delight. 'Any professional would have with that shot been as pleased as a punch. Here's mud in your eye! Same time next week?'

'Maybe we could make it sooner than that?' suggested Trevor, his stammer conquered by the new found confidence born of success; blissfully unaware of the heartache yet to come; quite unaware of the fact that for every perfect shot there will be a thousand shots exhibiting varying degrees of imperfection.

Like a million other golfers Trevor had been suckered into a love for the game of golf by a single, apparently effortless and successful shot. And like the other million golfers he would eventually learn that the difficulty in golf is not to play a single good shot (anyone can play one good shot) but to play a sequence of good shots.

'Certainly!' said Mr Schmidt, with a broad smile. 'I'll be on top of the moon and as happy as a cat with nine tails to see you tomorrow!'

CHAPTER FIVE

Although Trevor's moment of glory on the practice ground may have sealed his affection for the game of golf it had not softened his brain entirely.

'It isn't going to be easy,' he warned Sylvia, when he telephoned her that evening from London. 'But it's a tremendous challenge and I think I owe it to my Uncle Archibald to try to make a go of it.'

Sylvia, who had not yet said anything apart from 'But...' and 'Er…' in response to Trevor's announcement that he intended to turn down a £10,000 inheritance and take on the responsibility of running a golf club, finally managed to speak.

'Don't I get a say in this?' she demanded. The venom in her voice was unmistakable. Not even Trevor could avoid noticing it.

'Of course you do, dear,' said Trevor, suddenly conscious for the first time of the fact that Sylvia was not quite as excited as he was by the prospect of owning and running a golf club.

'I think you're being absolutely stupid,' said Sylvia firmly. She wasn't a woman who was shy about speaking her mind. 'You don't know anything about running a golf club. It's bound to be an absolute disaster. You are a fool sometimes, Trevor Dukinfield.'

Trevor hesitated. 'I know you're not quite as enthusiastic as I am at the moment,' he said. 'But that's probably just because I rather sprang it all on you.'

Sylvia sighed. 'You don't even play golf'!' she pointed out. 'You don't know a thing about the game.'

'Ah, well you're wrong there,' said Trevor, feeling that he was now on slightly firmer ground. 'I had my first lesson this morning and even if I do say so myself I think it was pretty successful.' He paused, closed his eyes and visualised his final shot of the morning. 'There was this one shot I played which was absolutely tremendous. I was using a seven iron - that's a fairly lofted club - and although I suppose there may have been a little bit of luck in it I must have caught the ball just right. The professional said afterwards that he couldn't have played the shot better himself.' Trevor did not bother Sylvia with details of the other 99 muffed shots he had played for he felt that these would be unlikely to attract her interest in the same way. Besides, he thought, the good shot had been his last shot of the morning session and it did not seem unreasonable to argue that all the other shots had merely been in preparation for that moment of golfing glory.

'It's really not a terribly difficult game,' he told Sylvia, with all the calm confidence of a man who knows virtually nothing of the game but has learnt the one fundamental truth of any sport: that the greatest joy is not playing but talking about it afterwards. 'You should try it. I hope you will!'

Sylvia was not impressed by Trevor's account of his morning's success. 'I have absolutely no interest in taking up golf,' she insisted coldly. 'And I'm surprised that you want to waste valuable hours hitting a silly little ball around a field.' She paused. Trevor started to point out that golf wasn't played in afield but Sylvia wasn't interested in the minutiae of the argument. 'Anyway,' she went on, 'whether or not you start playing golf is hardly the point. What I really find difficult to believe is that you are being so stupid.'

'But...,' began Trevor, rather tentatively.

Now that Sylvia had started, stopping her was not going to be easy.

'For one thing,' she said, 'how on earth do you expect to be able to run a golf club in the Midlands when you're living in London?'

'I'm giving up my room in London,' said Trevor immediately.

'It just won't be possible,' continued Sylvia. 'You'll spend all your time travelling and you'll always be in the wrong place. Besides, all the travelling will cost you a fortune. It's not even as though you can drive up and down.' She paused as Trevor's last sentence sank in. 'What did you say?'

'What do you mean? I didn't say anything.' said Trevor.

'Yes, you did. A moment ago. You said something about giving up your room in London.'

'Oh, yes.'

'But, but, but how on earth are you going to get another job in Fleet Street if you don't live in London?' demanded Sylvia. She blew out air like a whale surfacing. 'Oh good heavens,' she said. 'I don't know what I'm going to do with you. I'm beginning to think that mother was right.'

'What do you mean?' asked Trevor. 'What did your mother say about me?'

'Never mind. It doesn't matter,' said Sylvia, hurriedly. 'You can't really be serious about this,' she said. 'Please tell me you aren't really throwing away your career to run a bankrupt golf club in the Midlands!'

'It isn't bankrupt!' said Trevor. 'And I don't have a career to throw away.'

‘It can’t be far off bankrupt if it’s only worth £10,000!’ insisted Sylvia. ‘And what do you mean you don’t have a career? You’ve worked in Fleet Street!’

‘It was a terrible job, Sylvia!’ protested Trevor, plaintively. ‘I hated every moment of it. And I’m not really cut out for that sort of work anyway.’

‘And I suppose you are cut out for running a golf club?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Trevor honestly. ‘But I’d like to try.’

‘Well, if you want ever to see me again,’ said Sylvia in her ‘This is an ultimatum and just you take notice!’ voice which Trevor knew so well and dreaded so much, ‘you can jolly well tell that wretched little solicitor of yours that you’ve changed your mind; that you want the £10,000 they promised you and that they can sell the…,’ at this point Sylvia paused, as though summoning up words from some distance away, ‘damned golf club to anyone silly enough to want to buy it,’ she finished in a rush. The mild profanity brought an undisguised blush to her voice.

‘I can’t tell him that!’ said Trevor. ‘It’s too late now.’

Strictly speaking this was not true. However, since Trevor had his fingers crossed when he told Sylvia that it was too late, the lie didn’t really count.

‘Well you know how I feel about it,’ said Sylvia firmly. She sighed. ‘What you do is up to you now.’

And she put the telephone down so firmly that Trevor jumped away from his handset as though it had exploded.

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Trevor was back in his flat scraping the burnt bits off a round of toast when his doorbell went. At first he didn’t know what the noise was. His doorbell hadn’t ever rung before. When he eventually realised what the ringing denoted he put down the toast and the knife, opened his front door, walked out onto the landing and peered downstairs. Through the frosted glass in the front door he could just see the shadow of a visitor.

‘Yes?’ he shouted, hoping that the visitor might hear him and push open the never locked front door. The visitor was, he thought, almost certainly for someone else in the house. The response to his shout was, however, simply another ring of the doorbell.

With a weary sigh Trevor walked down the stairs and opened the front door. A thin, rather neatly dressed fellow stood there. He was wearing a dark brown leather jacket, a pair of dark green corduroy trousers and a flat cap worn at an unmistakably rakish angle.

‘Willie!’ said Trevor, unable to hide the surprise from his voice.

‘Hello, Trevor!’ grinned the visitor. ‘How are you? It took me ages to find you. Aren’t you going to invite me in?’ He bent down and picked up a well-filled brown canvas and leather holdall that was parked on the step beside him. He had the build of a jockey and moved with the same easy grace and confidence.

Trevor opened the door wider and stood back. ‘What on earth are you doing here?’ he demanded.

Willie walked into the hall and Trevor shut the door behind him. ‘Can you put me up for the night?’

‘Well, there isn’t much room, but, yes, I suppose so!’

Trevor turned and the two of them started to climb the stairs. ‘Why? Whatever’s happened? Where’s Julia?’

Willie frowned. ‘Julia?’

‘Your wife,’ explained Trevor.

‘Oh Julia and I got divorced months ago,’ said Willie. ‘The current model is called Brenda.’

‘Oh,’ said Trevor. ‘You didn’t mention it when we spoke last.’

‘Didn’t seem important,’ said Willie.

‘No,’ Trevor sighed. ‘Maybe not. So, what’s happened to Brenda?’

‘Bit of a story, old chap,’ said Willie. ‘But the short version is that we’ve split up temporarily.’

Trevor stopped and Willie collided with him. Trevor turned round. ‘I’m sorry!’ said Trevor, apologising both for the collision and the collapse of Willie’s most recent marriage.

Willie shrugged and grinned. He had a rather lopsided grin which, Trevor remembered, had for some inexplicable reason always made him attractive to women and a charm that had been known to sway traffic wardens in the pursuit of their duty. The two of them had been at university together and had shared a flat. ‘These things happen,’ he said.

‘How on earth did you find me?’ asked Trevor.

‘I rang Sylvia.’ Willie sniffed noisily. ‘Is that cooking I can smell?’

‘That’s funny. She didn’t say anything,’ said Trevor. ‘I was on the phone to her a few minutes ago.’ He led the way into his tiny flat. ‘Toast,’ he said. ‘Not really cooking.’

‘I didn’t actually tell her that I was coming to see you,’ admitted Willie, looking around. ‘I just asked for your address.’ He frowned and paused. ‘I don’t think Sylvia has ever really approved of me.’ He put down his bag. ‘Is this where you live?’ Having spotted what he had been looking for he strode quickly across the kitchen and picked up Trevor’s piece of burnt toast.

‘No,’ agreed Trevor. ‘I don’t think she has. Mind you, I don’t think she entirely approves of me at the moment.’ He looked around the flat as though seeing it for the first time. ‘The flat is only temporary. I’m leaving tomorrow.’

‘Leaving! Where are on earth are you going?’ demanded Willie, opening a drawer and finding a knife. ‘I was hoping I could doss down with you for a few days.’ He opened and shut all of Trevor’s cupboards in rapid succession. ‘Haven’t you got anything except marmalade? Any jam? Butter? Margarine?’

‘I’ve inherited a golf club,’ answered Trevor, as though he’d inherited a cracked Wedgewood plate and £10 worth of savings certificates. ‘And no I’m afraid I haven’t got anything except marmalade. And that was my last piece of bread.’

‘My uncle left me a whole set,’ said Willie.

‘No, not that sort of club,’ said Trevor. ‘I mean the whole thing. Clubhouse, greens, fairways - the lot. It’s up near Mettleham.’

‘You’ve *inherited a golf club*?’ said Willie, smearing marmalade onto the dry toast. ‘You wouldn’t want this anyway,’ he said. ‘It’s burnt. A whole golf club?’

‘I know it’s burnt,’ said Trevor. ‘I was just scraping the burnt bits off when you arrived.’

‘Well you didn’t do a very good job of it,’ said Willie, holding up the toast so that Trevor could inspect the inadequacy of his handiwork. ‘Is that where you’re going?’ he asked. ‘To your golf club?’ He stuffed the toast into his mouth and tore off a third of it with white and expensively capped teeth.

‘Yes.’

‘You lucky beggar!’ said Willie, or at least that was what it sounded like. He sprayed bread crumbs around the kitchen as he spoke. ‘Sounds like we’ll have more fun there than in this place anyway,’ he added, looking around and assuming without hesitation that he would be travelling to Mettleham with Trevor.

‘It’s not as great as it sounds,’ confessed Trevor. ‘The banks own most of the club and I lose the bit I’ve got now if I can’t satisfy the conditions of my uncle’s will.’

‘Which are?’ asked Willie, stuffing the toast into his mouth again, despite the fact that the first chunk had still not disappeared.

Trevor explained.

‘Easy!’ cried Willie, finishing off the toast. ‘No problem!’

‘Oh, I don’t know about that!’ said Trevor, far less confidently.

‘You’ll pick it up in no time!’ promised Willie.

‘I didn’t know you played golf.’

‘Of course I do! I’ve played since I was a kid. Our house backed onto a golf course and I used to nip over the fence after school and bash my way round with a couple of old clubs.’

‘I don’t suppose you ever bothered joining the club or paying green fees?’

‘What would I want to do that for? There was only a broken down old fence between us and the course.’ He sighed. ‘In fact it was golf that led to my splitting up with Brenda.’

‘Golf!’ repeated Trevor, genuinely surprised. Willie had always had something of a deserved reputation as a ladies’ man and Trevor had assumed that the breakdown in his marriage had been a consequence of an unauthorised dalliance.

‘The sales manager had organised a golf day to entertain some Japanese customers,’ explained Willie. ‘We were all under strict instructions to make sure that we let the managing director of the Japanese company win the trophy.’

‘So, what happened?’

‘After fifteen holes I was five over par,’ said Willie excitedly. ‘I knew I had a chance of a cracking round. Our sales manager, who had finished his round, came back to tell me that the Japanese chap, who was two holes ahead, was three strokes behind me and to tell me to hit a wild drive off the 16th and play three off the tee.’

‘But you didn’t?’

‘Trevor, my old love, I really intended to but when it came to it I just couldn’t do it. The 16th was a short hole and I knew I could get a par three there fairly easily. I thought it would add a bit to the excitement if I kept the tension going for another hole or so.’

‘So you got a three?’

‘I got a two. My tee shot ended up nine feet from the pin.’

‘Which left you four strokes ahead?’

‘Six. The Japanese chap put his drive into a stream on the 18th.’

‘So what happened then?’

‘I told the sales manager that it would look too obvious if I threw the match at that point,’ said Willie. ‘I said the Japanese would think we were patronising them.’

‘What did he say?’

‘He said the Japanese chap didn’t give a stuff about being patronised, he just wanted to win the trophy.’

‘But you didn’t want to lose it?’

‘I didn’t give a monkey’s for the trophy but by this time I knew that if I did the last two holes in par I would beat my previous best ever round!’

‘What happened?’

‘I did the last two holes in par, beat my previous best score and won the trophy, the Japanese broke off negotiations for an 11 million dollar contract and I was made redundant.’

‘They sacked you because you won a golf tournament?’

‘Not really. They sacked me because without the contract the company didn’t have any work to do.

‘And Brenda threw you out because you lost your job?’

‘It’s a bit more complicated than that,’ admitted Willie. ‘Her old man is a big shot in the bank which was financing the company I was working for and when the Japanese pulled out of the contract his bank took a bit of a bath.’

‘Oh.’

‘Brenda was a bit miffed about it all,’ said Willie. He shrugged. ‘She never liked golf anyway. I think I’ll just keep out of the way for a while. Absence makes the heart grow fonder and all that.’

‘Why on earth doesn’t she like golf?’ asked Trevor, who was still innocent enough to think of golf as a genteel game, played by gentlemen.

‘Oh, she said she thought that golf encouraged gambling and bad language and cost too much money.’

‘Couldn’t you get her to believe the truth?’

Willie looked at Trevor for a moment. ‘That is the truth,’ he said. ‘Show me an honest golfer and I’ll show you someone who has only been playing for a week. I’ve seen a priest kick his ball into a better lie when he thought no one was looking.’ He paused, ‘Still,’ he added, with a grin. ‘It was worth it.’

‘Worth it? How do you make that out? You lost your job, the company you were working for went bust and you’ve had to leave home!’

‘It was a cracking round!’ said Willie defiantly.

Trevor, the novice golfer, thought for a moment. ‘I see what you mean!’ he said at last.

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Trevor’s personal belongings fitted comfortably into a blue cardboard suitcase and two plastic carrier bags. His golf bag, clubs, shoes, glove, balls, tees, trousers, sweater and other essential golfing paraphernalia had stayed in the professional’s caravan at the Butterbury Ford Golf Club.

Standing on the pavement in the rain Trevor looked up at the ancient and grubby building where he’d stayed for such a short time and realised that he didn’t have a single regret about leaving London. The sky was grey and he thought he could feel the acid in the rain burning into his skin. He hated the crowds and the queues and the fumes and the noise and the dirt and the weather, he hadn’t enjoyed his job in the slightest and his room had all the attractive qualities of a Turkish prison cell. He hailed a passing taxi, tossed his suitcase and his plastic bags into the back and climbed in beside them. Willie, clutching his bag, bounded into the cab as though he were an afterthought.

‘Euston station, please!’ said Trevor, cheerfully.

‘Quick as you like, cabby!’ added Willie.

‘Not so much of the cabby,’ snarled the driver over his shoulder. ‘And I ain’t doing no Stirling Moss impression in this traffic.’

‘Sorry, old chap,’ said Willie. ‘I didn’t mean…!’

‘It’s people like you, always in a hurry, that have given me my ulcer,’ moaned the driver. ‘I had a bloke in the cab two weeks ago, desperate to get to Paddington to catch his train and get off home to his missus. Some anniversary dinner or other. I felt sorry for him, did him a favour, went as fast as I could and some half blind bugger in a red Escort put a dent in my door in Sussex Gardens. What thanks do you think I got? Bloody fifty pence tip that’s what I got. Fifty pence!’

‘Sorry,’ apologised Willie again. ‘Take your time. No hurry.’

‘There you go, you see,’ said the cab driver, taking both hands off the wheel and throwing up his arms in despair. ‘I try to be reasonable. I try to explain things to you and what do I get? Sarcasm that’s what I get. ‘Take your time’ that’s what I get.’ He put his hands back onto the wheel just in time to steer his cab around the back of a bus which had stopped in front of him.

Trevor stayed silent and decided to enjoy his departure from London. He wasn’t going to miss England’s capital city one little bit.

CHAPTER SIX

On his arrival back in Mettleham Trevor, temporarily abandoned by Willie who had made a detour to pick up more of his belongings (in particular his golf clubs), had gone straight to the offices of Twist, Kibble and Fenshaw to see Mr Johnson.

‘I’ve made my mind up,’ Trevor said, firmly, when he was shown into Mr Johnson’s office. ‘I’m going to try to make a go of the golf club.’

Mr Johnson stared solemnly and gloomily at Trevor’s suitcase and plastic bags. ‘It seems a rather reckless decision, if I may say so,’ he drawled, looking rather put out. ‘Have you found somewhere to stay?’ the lawyer asked.

Well, I noticed that there were a couple of caravans parked at the golf club. I thought I might move into one of them.’

‘And if they’re already occupied?’

‘Oh, I hadn’t thought of that,’ Trevor replied. ‘They didn’t look occupied.’

‘Well, just let me know when you change your mind and decide that you want the money,’ said Mr Johnson. ‘I can’t promise that you’ll get the £10,000 you’ve been offered but if you change your mind in the next week or so I should be able to get you something near to that.’

‘That’s very kind of you,’ said Trevor. ‘But I won’t change my mind.’

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In contrast to his first visit, which had been on foot, Trevor rather felt that it would be appropriate to return to Butterbury Ford Golf Club in a more stylish manner.

And this he duly did; travelling in as much style as is possible when your mode of transport is a rather elderly Volvo saloon with a broken exhaust pipe and copious amounts of hideous pink primer dotted all over the paint work, and your chauffeur is an unshaven pensioner with a greasy, peaked cap pulled down low over his eyes, a large plastic hearing aid, connected to a rather conspicuous ear piece, hung around his neck on a piece of knotted string and a cigarette butt stuck firmly to his upper lip.

"Ere, you are, guv!’ said the taxi driver, using the handbrake to help him bring the Volvo to a halt and sending a shower of loose tarmac flying against the walls of the clubhouse. ‘Butterbury Ford Golf Club.’

Trevor did not get out of the car straight away but paused for a few moments to try to give his heart a chance to start beating again with some degree of regularity. The taxi driver had not shown any of the caution exhibited by his London colleague and had thrown the ancient Volvo around like a man driving a hire car.

When Trevor felt that his cardiovascular system had recovered enough to be trusted with the task of sending regular supplies of oxygenated blood gurgling merrily into his muscles and organs he opened the car door and stepped out. Despite the horrors of his journey he was glad to be back, and not even the mismatched architecture of the clubhouse could dampen his enthusiasm for Butterbury Ford Golf Club.

The sun was shining, the trees were in leaf and the birds were singing. The taxi driver had by this time already lifted Trevor’s suitcase and plastic bags out of the boot and placed them on the floor by the clubhouse wall.

Trevor paid the sum the driver asked for and added a large tip, and although this was intended more as a gesture of thanksgiving than as a reward the driver misinterpreted the gesture. ‘Thanks, guv,’ he said, gratefully, momentarily grasping the peak of his cap between a grubby thumb and an equally grubby forefinger. ‘Next time you ask for a cab I’ll make sure you get me.’

‘Thank you,’ said Trevor, weakly. ‘That’s very kind of you.’

He stood and watched for a moment as the driver put the Volvo into gear and sped away back down the driveway, turning away only when the cloud of dust thrown up by the Volvo engulfed him.

Leaving his suitcase and plastic bags where the driver had abandoned them, Trevor climbed the steps to the clubhouse and entered the lounge. It was like walking into yesterday, and for a brief moment Trevor wondered if he might be hallucinating. Exactly the same people were sitting and standing in exactly the same positions and doing exactly the same things.

‘Good afternoon,’ he said, looking around at the gloomy and familiar faces. This time the dark and gloomy lounge bar reminded him more of a funeral parlour than anything else. He walked across to where Wing Commander Trout was sitting and took a letter out of his inside jacket pocket.

‘This is from Mr Gittings of Twist, Kibble and Fenshaw,’ he said. ‘My solicitors,’ he explained. ‘You’ll find that it confirms that I am the new owner of the club.’

Some people would have made this announcement with arrogance or bravado. Trevor managed to sound apologetic about it. However, it was the message which was important, and the message, not the method of its delivery, which made its impact.

Six lower jaws fell and six pairs of tonsils got an unaccustomed airing as the four members, secretary and barman listened to this simple statement.

The secretary did not say anything immediately but took the letter from Trevor and then put a hand inside his jacket and pulled out a pair of spectacles. He put the spectacles on and read the letter and as he did so he paled even more.

'This says that a Mr Trevor Dukinfield is the new owner,' he croaked.

Trevor nodded. 'That's right.'

'And you're Mr Dukinfield?'

'Yes,' said Trevor.

'A relative of Mr Pettigrew's?'

'He was my uncle.'

Wing Commander Trout handed the letter back to Trevor and stood up. He swallowed hard, pulled out a bright red handkerchief and dabbed at his brow. 'I'm sorry about that little misunderstanding yesterday, sir,' he said. 'But I'm sure you wouldn't want us to let strangers into your clubhouse.' He paused for a moment and bent forwards slightly. 'Why didn't you say anything about this yesterday, sir?' he asked.

'I wasn't entirely sure whether or not I was going to take on the club then,' said Trevor, honestly. 'I thought I'd like a look around first.' He rather thought he preferred the offhand, arrogant secretary to the unctuous, obsequious one.

'And may we assume that your impression of the club was a favourable one, sir?' asked Wing Commander Trout. There were, Trevor noticed, fresh beads of sweat on his brow.

'Mixed,' said Trevor thoughtfully. 'I think the word 'mixed' would be a more accurate description of my first impression.'

'May I congratulate you, sir,' said Captain Jarrold, standing up and holding out a liver spotted hand.

'Thank you,' said Trevor.

'I'd very much like to associate myself with the secretary's apology,' said Captain Jarrold. 'If there were any misunderstandings yesterday then I'm sure that they were occasioned by our earnest desire to do our best for the club.'

'Do you know if those two small caravans are occupied?' Trevor asked Wing Commander Trout.

'The one nearest the clubhouse is, sir' answered Wing Commander Trout. 'I believe that the woman who helps the professional lives there.'

'Iris Weatherby?'

'That's the name,' agreed the club secretary. 'She also does some cleaning in the clubhouse. She lives there with her daughter and her son. If you'd like me to get rid of them I could do that straight away, sir.'

'Good heavens, no!' said Trevor, genuinely shocked. 'But there's no one living in the other caravan?'

'No, sir,' answered the secretary.

'I thought I'd move in if it was empty,' replied Trevor. 'Do you have a key?'

The Wing Commander shook his head. 'I don't think there is one, sir,' he said. 'I think it's open.'

'Jolly good,' smiled Trevor. 'I'll go and have a look.' He started to move away and then paused. 'I think we ought to have a meeting of the committee and the members,' he said. 'Would you arrange it?'

'Certainly, sir,' said Wing Commander Trout. 'We're due to have our next committee meeting on the fourth Thursday of next month. We could arrange a general meeting then.'

'I'm afraid I think we need to arrange something a little more urgently than that,' said Trevor. 'Perhaps you'd fix something up for this evening?'

'This evening?'

'That's right,' agreed Trevor. 'This evening.'

'But what shall I tell people, sir,' asked Wing Commander Trout, 'Do you have any, er, plans for the club?'

But Trevor had gone.

'Let me know if I can help in any way, sir' called the secretary after him, rather plaintively. 'Any way at all…!'

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The empty caravan was no bigger than the room Trevor had rented in London. At the far end of the caravan there were two bench seats and a collapsible plastic-topped table. The two bench seats could be pulled together to create a bed. Along one side of the caravan there was a tiny sink, a stove and a couple of cupboards. And at the other end of the caravan, the end nearest the door, there was a tiny bedroom with two bunk beds.

It may have offered cramped accommodation but the caravan did have one big advantage to offer: a splendid view of the 18th fairway and the 18th green. Had Trevor ever chosen to look out of his window in London he would have found himself staring at a blank and grimy brick wall; far too high to attract the interest of spray can artists, graffiti writers or even the ubiquitous, uncaring and much-wanted Bill Stickers. But here, deep in rural England, the view from his window was far more congenial, and with a promise of a constantly changing cast of characters it certainly looked as if it was going to be far more entertaining.

Having unpacked the belongings from his cardboard suitcase and plastic bags and crammed them into the tiny wardrobe and chest of drawers, and having opened all the windows and the skylight in order to get rid of the rather musty smell which hung in the air, Trevor squeezed into the cramped dining section of the caravan and drank in the view.

A tall, thin, miserable-looking man wearing bright yellow trousers and a green, short-sleeved, open-necked shirt with something embroidered on the left breast was walking towards the green, dragging behind him a heavy-looking metal trolley which was laden with clubs and other essential impedimenta. It was strange, thought Trevor idly, that such a simple game should require more luggage and equipment than your average explorer would consider necessary for a trip around the world.

The man, who seemed to be deeply depressed, was looking around him as though he knew he had lost something but didn't know quite where he had lost it.

Approaching from an entirely different direction, a tall, dark-haired woman wearing a bright red skirt and a sky blue blouse with something embroidered on the left breast, and with a white visor shading her eyes, came purposefully hurrying up the 18th fairway. Trevor rather thought he recognised her but couldn't remember why. She too looked as if she was more at home feeling miserable than feeling happy but she had a strangely, almost cruelly, satisfied look on what Trevor could see of her face. She looked as though, despite a life full of sadness and despair, she was gaining some satisfaction and inspiration from the fact that at least one other person on the planet was having an even worse time than she was.

It wasn't terribly difficult to guess who the other person was, and Trevor suspected that such hatred must mean that the two combatants were partners in more than a game of golf. A cynical friend had once told Trevor that more marriages are held together by the glue of mutual hatred than by the cement of mutual love, and although Trevor tried hard not to share such deeply cynical despair he sometimes found the evidence in support of the contention difficult to deny.

She also had a trolley loaded with clubs, but instead of pulling her trolley she was pushing it in front of her. The trolley also carried a black box the size of a car battery.

Just short of the green the woman stopped her trolley and stood still for a moment with her hands on her hips while she watched her partner's progress. At last, in response to a wave and a shout that Trevor couldn't quite decipher, the woman pulled a club from her bag and walked forwards purposefully for a yard or two. Peering through the dirty caravan window Trevor could just make out a ball lying cleanly on the fairway. He watched as the woman carefully settled herself into her stance, took a tentative practice swing, then took a more determined practice swing and, finally, after shuffling forwards a couple of inches, played her shot.

When the ball bounced first, right on the front of the green, it was clear that it wasn't going to be able to stop anywhere near the flag. By the time it had bounced three times it was clear that it wasn't going to stay on the green. The grass was as hard and as smooth as polished marble and the ball didn't look as if it was ever going to slow down.

The woman, her club still in her hands, leant forward and Trevor could almost *feel* her willing the ball to grip the green or, at least, to find a small, miraculously moist patch that would arrest its progress. Neither of these things happened and the ball bounced right across the green before rolling through a collar of slightly longer grass, launching itself gracefully into the air and then, finally, landing with a muffled plop into a bunker full of soft sand just a dozen yards away from Trevor's caravan. Trevor suddenly remembered where he'd seen the woman before. It was Mrs Dussenberg, Mr Schmidt's pupil.

Mrs Dussenberg could not possibly have seen exactly where her ball had landed but she certainly knew that it wasn't on the green. Trevor watched as, almost in slow motion, her facial expression changed from gloat to fury. She then slammed her club back into her bag and started to push her trolley around the green without waiting to see what her partner was doing.

Meanwhile, the woman's husband (for Trevor was now firmly convinced that they were indeed a permanent twosome) had found his ball and was busy pacing out the distance between it and the flag. When he had done this he selected a club and with surprisingly little preparation gave the ball a wholesome thwack. The ball cleared the green easily, slammed into the side of the woman's trolley and bounced back onto the putting area where it came to rest less than two yards away from the pin.

Trevor watched all this with growing curiosity and a steadily deepening sense of foreboding. Red faced with anger the woman abandoned her trolley and marched onto the green to meet her partner. He had exchanged the club he had used to such good if surprising effect for a putter and this he held tucked under his arm as he removed the glove from his left hand and slipped it into his back pocket.

‘You get a two stroke penalty for that!’ Trevor heard the woman shout.

‘Of course I don’t!’ retorted the man. ‘It hit your trolley not mine.’

‘It doesn’t matter!’ said Mrs Dussenberg.

‘If anyone gets penalised it’s you!’ said the man. He took a rule book out of his back pocket, flicked through the pages and read out loud. ‘Look, here it is! It says that there’s a two stroke penalty for an opponent who deflects a player’s ball.’

‘Don’t be so stupid,’ snapped the woman. ‘Why on earth should *I* be penalised? Look at it!’ she nodded towards her opponent’s ball. ‘If the damned thing hadn’t hit my trolley it would have gone into the trees.’

‘Don’t tell me not to be stupid,’ said the man. ‘I put so much back spin on it that the ball would have probably spun back onto the green anyway.’

‘I’ve never heard such absolute rubbish in all my life!’ exclaimed the woman. ‘Back onto the green, indeed! Are you going to take a two stroke penalty?’

‘No!’

‘Well, we’ll see about it later,’ said the woman. ‘I’m going to take it up with the committee.’

‘You do that.’

‘I will, don’t you worry!’ With this retort the woman strode back across the green and wheeled her trolley and clubs towards Trevor’s caravan and the bunker wherein lay her ball. Abandoning her trolley and selecting a suitable club she clambered down the grassy bank alongside the bunker and then stood and gazed in obvious despair at her ball. Trevor could see that it was very nearly buried in the sand.

The fact that the woman was furious probably didn’t help her to play a decent shot. She swung at her ball more with anger than skill and although she succeeded in digging a large quantity of sand out of the bunker and spreading it all over the green she didn’t manage to move the ball; that stayed exactly where it was.

‘It doesn’t seem to have come out,’ called the man. ‘Perhaps you’d better have another go’

Mrs Dussenberg said nothing but stood and glared down at her ball. Then, Trevor watched with absolute amazement as, hidden from her partner’s view by the wall of the bunker, she deftly and surreptitiously kicked her ball into a more playable position. She then played a relatively easy shot up onto the green and sank her ball with two putts. Her partner sank his short putt successfully and, from his demeanour, clearly won both the match and the hole.

But Trevor felt distinctly uncomfortable about what he had seen and he felt that he had to say something. He scrambled out from the caravan and met the two golfers as they came off the last green and headed towards the clubhouse.

‘I feel a bit embarrassed about this,’ he said, addressing his remarks to the man. ‘But I saw your partner kick her ball out of what looked like a rather difficult lie in the bunker.’

The two players stared at him as though he made an indecent proposal or offered to sell them a time share apartment in Marbella.

‘What on earth are you saying?’ demanded the man. ‘Do you *know* what you’re saying?’

To show that he did, indeed, know what he was saying Trevor repeated what he had said.

‘What an absurd suggestion!’ said Mrs Dussenberg, who had gone a quite unbecoming shade of red.

‘I will not stand here and allow you to accuse my wife of cheating’ said the man quite firmly. ‘Besides,’ he added, ‘I won the match anyway so the incident would be of purely academic interest.’

‘Are you suggesting that I might have cheated but that it doesn’t matter because you won?’ demanded the woman, horrified.

‘If you like,’ answered the man.

‘Well!’ said the woman. ‘That’s it! I’ve never been so insulted in all my life.’ And with that she stalked off towards the clubhouse, pushing what Trevor could now see was an electrically operated trolley in front of her.

‘Now look what you’ve done!’ said the man to Trevor crossly. ‘We’ve just had a lovely round of golf and now you’ve gone and spoilt it all.’ He followed his wife and headed for the clubhouse.

Trevor, feeling rather glum, headed back towards his caravan; as he did so he saw the young tractor driver hurrying towards the neighbouring small caravan.

‘Hello!’ called Trevor cheerily.

The boy, apparently ignoring him, opened the door to his caravan and disappeared inside.

Trevor, not realising that his young neighbour was still deafened by his lengthy stint on the tractor and hadn’t heard his cheery greeting felt depressed and rather lonely as a result of this minor slight.

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Trevor’s gloom and loneliness were despatched with great efficiency by the arrival twenty minutes later of Willie who turned up at the wheel of a rather impressive looking and exceedingly noisy sports car.

‘What’s that?’ asked Trevor, who had seen his friend skid to a halt outside the clubhouse in a choking cloud of dust.

‘What’s what?’ asked Willie, pulling a bag of golf clubs from the front passenger seat.

‘The car!’

‘It’s a Porsche!’

‘I can see that it’s a Porsche. But is it yours?’

‘More or less.’ Willie walked round to the back of the car and opened the rear door. ‘For now.’ He then proceeded to extract a seemingly never ending collection of matching luggage.

‘What do you mean by ‘more or less’?’

‘Well, strictly speaking I suppose it’s Brenda’s. Her father bought it.’

‘So it isn’t yours!’

‘It is for now,’ said Willie. ‘Possession is nine-tenths of the law and all that.’ He looked around. ‘Where are we living?’

‘In there!’ said Trevor, nodding towards the caravan he’d just left. ‘But you can’t just…!’

‘There?’ interrupted Willie, clearly unimpressed.

‘Are you going to take it back?’

‘What?’

‘The car.’

‘No, of course not. But if Brenda turns up to collect it I’ll give her the keys.’

‘Oh,’ said Trevor, quietened for a moment. ‘Does she know where you are?’

‘Of course not!’ snorted Willie, picking up two of his suitcases and carrying them towards the caravan. ‘Give us a hand with these, will you, old chap?’

‘So how is she supposed to know where her car is?’

‘If she wants it she’ll find it!’ said Willie.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Despite the fact that the meeting had been called at such short notice the golf clubhouse was packed with members who were desperately keen to find out what was going on. Throughout the day, ever since Wing Commander Trout had made his first telephone call, rumours had spread rapidly among the members. The latest rumour, repeated with increasing conviction by members whose sense of certainty was matched only by their total ignorance, was that Trevor Dukinfield was a financial whizz kid from the city who had bought the golf club and Pettigrew Towers and intended to turn the whole lot back into a private estate.

Trevor had never been a keen public speaker and consequently this was not an area of life in which he had gained a great deal of experience. His only previous attempt had been at school where he had once stuttered his way through a two minute discourse on his summer holidays. The memory of that rather painful incident surfaced from somewhere deep within his subconscious as he stared with some horror at the assembled multitude.

The members of the golf club were a disparate looking bunch and to Trevor it seemed that the only two things they had in common was that they were all members of the club and that they all wore clothes which had been bought from Mr Schmidt's shop.

If Trevor had known them better he would have also realised that they did have one other thing in common: for one reason or another none of them had been able to join any of the larger, more fashionable golf clubs in the area. Some of them had been blackballed because they didn't have the right ancestry or because they earned their living in some socially unacceptable way; some simply found the fees at the other clubs impossibly high.

It was this that made them particularly concerned at the prospect of losing their club; it wasn't much but it was all they'd got.

'Excuse me, sir.'

Trevor looked down to his left. Captain Jarrold was standing there rubbing his hands together like an embarrassed bank manager calling in a loan from a social superior. Trevor produced a rather weak imitation of a smile; he was so nervous that it was all he could manage.

'Your tie, sir!' whispered Jarrold.

Trevor looked down. 'I'm not wearing a tie.'

'Exactly, sir,' said Captain Jarrold, apologetically. 'I'm afraid it's a club rule…,' he looked around. 'In the clubhouse…!'

'Oh dear,' said Trevor, rather miserably.

'It is rather a silly rule,' said Captain Jarrold helpfully. 'Would you like us to repeal it?'

Trevor brightened visibly. 'I think that would be a rather good idea.'

'Yes, sir,' said Captain Jarrold. 'When would you like it repealed?'

'I think we should repeal it straight away!' said Trevor.

'Very good, sir!' agreed Captain Jarrold. He hurried off. As he disappeared the club secretary approached. 'I think we can start whenever you're ready,' he said, looking around. 'It's a very good turn out.'

'How many people are here, do you think?'

'Around 124,' replied the secretary, promptly. He leant in closer. 'It'll do the bar takings a power of good!' he confided.

'Perhaps we should have emergency meetings every evening!' suggested Trevor.

'Oh I'm not sure we could do that…,' protested Wing
Commander Trout.

'Don't worry,' said Trevor. 'It was just a joke…,' he explained rather lamely.

The secretary laughed and nodded. The nod was real. The laugh was as forced as February rhubarb.

'How many members are there?' asked Trevor.

'Altogether?'

'A hundred and seventy six,' answered Wing Commander Trout, promptly.

'That isn't many, is it?'

The secretary leant in and whispered again. 'We haven't conducted a recruiting campaign for quite a while,' he said. 'Old Mr Pettigrew didn't want too many members.' He looked around. 'Besides,' he paused. 'The facilities…,' he waved an arm around to indicate the smoke-stained walls, the water-stained ceiling and the beer-stained, threadbare carpet. The atmosphere in the room was thick with stale cigarette, cigar and pipe smoke. It was, truly, a room with a phew.

'I see what you mean,' said Trevor. He noticed the couple he'd seen earlier in the day playing the 18th hole. Mrs

Dussenberg was wearing a sky blue skirt and a yellow blouse with a small embroidered giraffe above her left breast. Her husband was wearing black and yellow checked trousers and a green shirt. There was, Trevor was not surprised to see, a small giraffe embroidered on his left breast. They were clearly not talking to each other.

Trevor felt someone tugging at his sleeve. He looked down at Captain Jarrold, who looked very pleased with himself.

'I thought you'd like to know that the Social Committee has just met,' he reported. He pointed over his left shoulder. Trevor looked in the direction he was pointing and saw a group of men in blazers all staring in his direction. They nodded as one when they saw him looking. 'We've repealed club rule 97b,' said Captain Jarrold.

Trevor stared at him, puzzled.

'The tie rule, sir,' whispered Captain Jarrold. 'You don't have to wear a tie in the clubhouse.' The Captain looked like a dog who's just performed a trick.

'That's splendid,' said Trevor. He turned and picked a bowl of peanuts up off the bar counter. 'Have a peanut!'

'Thank you, sir!' said Captain Jarrold, taking Trevor at his word and helping himself to a single peanut. 'Thank you very much.' He looked at the peanut for a moment, as though contemplating keeping it as a souvenir. Eventually, he decided against this and popped the peanut into his mouth.

'Why don't you take your tie off?' asked Trevor. 'Now that rule 97b has gone…!'

'Me, sir?'

Trevor nodded.

Captain Jarrold went rather red for a moment. Then, very slowly he untied his tie and pulled it away from his collar. When he had rolled his tie up into a neat ball and placed it carefully in his jacket pocket he unfastened the top button of his shirt. He then looked around nervously, as though rather expecting people to point at him and laugh.

'There you are,' said Trevor. 'Doesn't that feel better?'

Captain Jarrold swallowed hard. His face had gone quite red, though whether with shame or embarrassment there was no way of knowing. 'Oh yes, sir,' he said. 'Much better!'

'How would you like me to introduce you?' asked the secretary, who was still standing on Trevor's other side.

Trevor turned in his direction. 'Whatever you think appropriate,' he said. He swallowed hard. 'I suppose we might as well get on with it…!'

Wing Commander Trout coughed loudly and then rapped his knuckles loudly against the bar counter. Slowly, the buzz of conversation began to reduce in volume. The secretary rapped his knuckles once more and then cleared his throat loudly.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' he said, when the conversation buzz had subsided sufficiently for him to make himself heard without shouting. 'The new owner of the club, Mr Trevor Dukinfield, would like to say a few words.' He waved a hand in Trevor's direction and then led what was clearly intended to be a polite and welcoming round of applause. Sadly, however, this good intention was not fulfilled. Apart from Captain Jarrold, who joined in the applause with spirited enthusiasm, the response from the other members was, to put it politely, muted.

When he realised that apart from the secretary he was the only person clapping, Captain Jarrold arrested his hands in mid air and tried, rather in vain, to pretend that he hadn't been clapping at all.

'Thank you,' said Trevor. He turned to Wing Commander Trout. 'Thank you,' he said again.

The secretary smiled thinly at him and then turned and waved his almost empty glass in the barman's direction to order himself a refill.

'Though I n-n-n-never met him Archibald P-P-P-Pettigrew was my uncle,' began Trevor, horrified to realise that his stutter had returned. 'Until a c-c-c-couple of days ago I didn't know that he or this g-g-g-golf club existed.'

'Pity it didn't stay that way,' called an anonymous voice from the back of the room.

Trevor felt a flush of anger rising within him. He had never been heckled before. That sort of thing wasn't allowed in Miss Cavendish's class. 'The s-s-s-solicitor who told me that I'd inherited the g-g-g-golf club wanted me to sell it,' he told the members. 'A bank has offered me a large sum of m-m-mmoney - £10,000 - to sell the c-c-c-club and have nothing more to do with it.'

'So, why didn't you take the money?' demanded a second heckler. The question was greeted with a sharp murmur of approval.

'For a while I was t-t-t-tempted,' agreed Trevor. 'But then I d-d-discovered one or two things that changed my mind.' He swallowed hard. 'My uncle was very p-p-p-proud of this g-g-ggolf c-c-c-club- I gather that he is said to have d-d-d-designed the c-c-c-course himself - and I felt I owed it to his m-mmemory to try to k-k-keep it alive.'

'Don't kid yourself you're doing us any favours. We were managing quite well without you,' called the first heckler.

'I n-n-n-need your help if I'm g-g-g-going to make a success of running the c-c-c-club,' admitted Trevor. 'And you n-n-nneed my help too.' The palms of his hands felt moist and he wiped them on the sides of his trousers.

‘That’s why I asked for this m-m-m-meeting this evening.’ He paused and swallowed. ‘We don’t have m-m-much time,’ he said.

‘What do you know about running a g-g-g-golf c-c-c-club?’ shouted someone else, deliberately mimicking Trevor’s stutter and gaining rather a lot of cruel laughter as a reward.

‘I don’t know anything about running a g-g-g-golf c-c-cclub,’ admitted Trevor. ‘B-b-b-but I’m keen to learn.’

‘Why on earth would a bank bother taking over a golf club?’ demanded yet another voice.

‘They d-d-d-don’t want the club,’ replied Trevor. ‘They want the land it’s on.’ He was beginning to feel rather angry now. ‘If I had agreed to sell the c-c-c-club you wouldn’t have a g-g-g-g-, a g-g-g-g-g-,’ he took out a handkerchief and wiped his brow. ‘You wouldn’t have a course at all.’ He swallowed hard and then realised that his audience was, for the first time, waiting to hear what he said next. ‘The solicitor who made me the offer told me that the prospective buyers have got outline p-p-p-planning p-p-p-permission,’ he continued. ‘They want to b-b-b-build an industrial estate here.’

Someone started to shout something else but the silence which met Trevor’s revelation was so dense that the shout died before it took any recognisable shape.

‘Good heavens!’ said Wing Commander Trout after a moment or two. He emptied his gin. ‘Good heavens!’ He had gone very pale.

‘You may not like me or approve of me being here,’ said Trevor, speaking very quietly. ‘But even though we may have different reasons we both have the same aims. You want the golf course to stay open so that you can play golf on it. And I want the golf course to stay open because my Uncle Archibald built it and if he’d wanted to build an industrial estate that would have been what he would have built.’

This simple and honest statement drew a spontaneous and perfectly genuine burst of applause from Trevor’s audience. Trevor realised that his stutter had disappeared.

‘Bravo!’ shouted Captain Jarrold, standing up and clapping his hands. Wing Commander Trout looked at him as though he had pulled out his tie and was whirling it round and round his head. ‘Bravo!’

‘One last question,’ asked a gentleman in a tweed jacket. ‘May I ask if you intend to learn to play golf now that you’re the owner of the club?’

‘I certainly do!’ said Trevor, enthusiastically. ‘I’ve got my second lesson tomorrow morning.’

He didn’t think that this was an appropriate moment to burden them with the knowledge that unless he learnt to play golf pretty quickly the banks would very quickly turn the course into a small industrial estate packed with factories making plastic accessories for Japanese cars.

The owner of the tweed jacket nodded sagely, clearly satisfied with this reply. There were loud murmurings of approval from the other members.

Judging his moment to perfection Wing Commander Trout stood up. ‘I’d just like to remind members that the profits from the bar help keep the club’s deficit smaller than it would otherwise be. The more drinks you buy tonight the more you’ll be helping the club to survive!’ He looked around him. ‘I think we’d better have an emergency meeting of the Club Committee tomorrow evening,’ he announced, looking around and acknowledging the nods of those committee members whose glances he managed to catch.

Trevor, Captain Jarrold and Wing Commander Trout were then swept aside as a rush of members stormed the bar in a desperate attempt to help improve the club’s finances.

CHAPTER EIGHT

At five minutes to ten the following morning, feeling slightly conspicuous in his plaid trousers, bright red sweater (with the little giraffe embroidered over the left breast) and Tam O'Shanter cap, Trevor Dukinfield, golfer, stood silently and slightly nervously outside the professional's caravan and waited for his mentor Gunter Schmidt to return from the practice ground where, so Iris Weatherby had told him with a nudge-nudge look that said far more than words, he was busy showing Mrs Dussenberg a thing or two.

By Trevor's side stood his aluminium 'Ever-So-lite' golf trolley which held his red imitation-leather golf bag (individual compartments for fourteen clubs, four spacious zipped pockets, quick release umbrella clips, towel holder and tee caddy). In the bag rested his fourteen clubs (including a carbon and molybdenum shafted and metal headed No 1 'wood' guaranteed to add forty yards to any player's drive), his breathable wind and showerproof clothing system, a supply of individually wrapped golf balls (special aerodynamically designed oval dimples guaranteed to add thirty yards to the average player's drive) and a brand new packet of coloured and unbreakable golf tees (unique head design shown by trials to add twenty yards to the average player's distance 'off the tee'). Trevor may have lacked talent, skill and experience but he certainly did not lack equipment.

His feet were clad in 'waterproof, breathable, multi-spiked non-slip shoes', his eyes were shaded from the sun by a white, 'non sweat' sun ray visor and his left hand was safely encased in a soft, leatherette golf glove with 'unique palm and finger texturing for added contact and special grooves to ensure a close grip in the wet'.

No mighty golfing warrior of the past, neither Bobby Jones nor the immortal Tom Morris, ever faced a golf course so well equipped for success. The equipment he was carrying was guaranteed to improve his first drive by well over one hundred yards.

'Aha, so!' cried a slightly breathless but familiar, Teutonic voice. 'Here already you are! No?'

'No. I mean, yes!' replied Trevor, turning round and coming face to face with the club professional, still red-faced and breathing heavily from his exertions on the practice ground. Of his pupil, Mrs Dussenberg, there was no sign.

'So!' cried Mr Schmidt, looking Trevor up and down and rubbing his hands together. 'You are ready for the course, today, yes?'

Trevor looked at the professional and blanched. 'The course?' he said. 'You mean the golf course?'

'Of course! You have a course on the course!' said Mr Schmidt, who looked pleased with this far from subtle play on words. He reached out and slapped Trevor on the shoulder. 'You and me are ready to tango, no?'

'Er, yes, I mean, I'm not sure, probably not,' stumbled Trevor. 'Don't you think I ought to spend a little more time on the practice ground, first?'

The professional waved a hand in a dismissive fashion. 'Pfui!' he said, again pronouncing every letter of the word. He had found it, like most of the other phrases he favoured, in a guide to colloquial English but had never heard it pronounced. He thought himself rather a master of the English language. 'When you are a player you can practice! But how can you practice before you can play?'

Trevor had no answer for this superficially logical statement. 'Well, all right, then,' he mumbled, without much enthusiasm. 'I suppose I c-c-c-could give it a t-t-t-try.' His stutter reappeared as his confidence waned.

'That's the spirit! Here's mud in your ear!' cried Mr Schmidt, clapping his hands together and leading the way from the caravan. 'Let us go and put our noses under the grindstone.' He took hold of his trolley and headed off towards the first tee.

Two minutes later Trevor stood on a proper golf tee for the first time in his life and stared in stark horror at the apparently endless miles of neatly mown fairway which lay before him. He looked away again, averting his eyes from the terror.

'Right!' said Mr Schmidt. 'I'll play off the yellow tees with you today.'

'Yellow tees?' said Trevor. He bent down, unzipped one of the pockets of his golf bag, took out his plastic pack of golf tees and obediently began to pick out the yellow ones.

'Vot is it that you are doing?' demanded Mr Schmidt, puzzled.

'Picking out the yellow tees,' explained Trevor, patiently. He bent down to pick up a red one which had slipped through his fingers.

'No, no, no!' cried Mr Schmidt. 'White is for professional, yellow is for men and red is for ladies!' As he spoke he pointed far behind him to the two white inverted concrete flower pots which marked the edges of the professionals' tee, at the two yellow inverted concrete flower pots which marked the edges of the tee upon which they were standing and then at the two red, inverted concrete flower pots which marked the edges of the ladies' tee some thirty to forty yards ahead of them.

‘Ah’ said Trevor, understanding. ‘And it doesn’t matter what colour tee I use?’

‘You can use any colour you like!’ cried Mr Schmidt magnanimously. ‘As the actor said to the bishop,’ he added with a wink. ‘I will go first.’

He pulled his No 1 wood from his bag and removed the leather cover from it with a flourish. He casually tossed the cover onto the grass, plucked a tee from a trouser pocket and stuck it into the ground, pulled a ball from the same pocket and balanced it on the tee, swung his club with a nonchalant ease and hit the ball with a speed, certainty and skill which removed what tiny element of confidence Trevor still retained.

‘There you are!’ said the professional, bending down to pick up his tee and slipping it back into his pocket. ‘I am crying all the way to the bank. Now you do the same.’ Trevor peered into the distance looking for the professional’s ball but could see no sign of it anywhere.

‘Where did it go?’ he asked.

‘Down the middle, of course!’ said the professional, as though there was not and never could have been any possible doubt about this. He pointed down the middle of the fairway. ‘Like a lamb to the slaughter.’

‘Good heavens!’ said Trevor when, a moment or two later, he spotted a small white speck sitting in the middle of the fairway. ‘Is *that* it?’

‘I wasn’t very lucky with the bounce,’ complained Mr Schmidt. ‘I was batting on a sticky wicket and must have hit a soft patch.’

Trevor swallowed hard. ‘It’s gone a long way,’ he said.

The professional shrugged nonchalantly for though he was secretly pleased with the shot he would never have admitted it to Trevor. To admit that it was a good shot would have been to admit that he was capable of playing a bad shot. Since being in England Mr Schmidt had learned the gentle art of self-effacement and, like most Englishmen who are good at sport, used it to imply to his opponents that, however well he played, he was capable of playing much better.

‘Where’s the green?’ asked Trevor, squinting into the distance. ‘I can’t even see the green?’

‘Oh, don’t worry about that,’ said Mr Schmidt, dismissing the green with an airy wave of a hand. ‘It’s just over the hill and far away. You just play straight up the fairway.’ He paused. ‘But mind the bunkers or you will be up in a creek without a paddle,’ he added, pointing to two large bunkers, one on each side of the fairway about two hundred yards away.

Trevor took out his No 1 wood and tossed the leatherette cover casually onto the grass. He took a brand new ball out of his bag, unwrapped it, threw the wrapper into a small, wire mesh waste basket, and then balanced the ball on top of a yellow, plastic tee. He wrapped his hands around the grip of his club, backed away from the ball and started to swing.

‘No, no, no!’ cried Mr Schmidt. ‘Your grip is all wrong.’

He moved forward and adjusted Trevor’s fingers until they felt strangely uncomfortable. ‘Hands at the top of the club. Not right at the top. Half an inch away or so. And firm. But not too firm. Firmly with the last three fingers of your left-hand. Right hand like so. That’s better!’ he cried. ‘Now! Off you go! And you must relax!’

Trevor started to swing his club back.

‘No, no!’ cried Mr Schmidt. ‘You are not standing right!’ He stood behind Trevor, took hold of him by the shoulders and moved him twelve inches backwards and six inches to his left.

‘There you are!’ he said. ‘That is better!’ He frowned. ‘Cock your wrists a little more. Transfer your weight when you feel your shoulder beginning to drop. Show me more of your knuckle. This is all you have to remember and you will have an ace in the hole.’

‘Yes, said Trevor.

‘Relax!’ shouted Mr Schmidt. ‘You are not relaxing!’

‘I’m sorry; apologised Trevor, genuinely contrite. Once again he began to swing his club. He could feel beads of sweat forming on his brow.

‘No, no! More smoothly!’ said Mr Schmidt. ‘You must move your hands first, control the club with your left arm, no your right arm. No, not so stiff. Move your hips from the one side to the other and rotate your shoulders as you go. As you move your hips put more weight on this foot, no that foot, but do not move your head. Do it slowly. Turn your body until your shoulders are at right angles to the direction of the ball and then bend your knee slightly in and keep your arms close in your body and cock your wrists. And all the time you must stay relaxed. It’s all so simple!’

He spoke with increasing speed and excitement and by the time he had finished Trevor had no idea whether he was about to hit a golf ball or boil an egg.

He swung his club back, brought it down in a huge arc and missed the ball by a good yard.

‘Very good!’ lied Mr Schmidt enthusiastically. ‘But you must relax more. If you relax more you will hit more of the ball. Remember, whenever you are on the horns of a dilemma that there is more than one way to swing a cat.’

‘Right,’ said Trevor, who was now wondering why he had decided to learn to play golf at all. He felt as relaxed and as calm as a tightrope walker who suddenly realises that he’s developing cramp.

One of the most comforting and most immutable laws of nature is the one which decrees that if you wave two square inches of golf club around in the vicinity of a golf ball, the club head and the ball will eventually collide.

In Trevor’s case this law of nature was fulfilled on his fifth swing.

‘Bravo!’ cried Mr Schmidt, who was genuinely delighted by Trevor’s success. ‘I can see you are man with a card well up your sleeve!’

‘Where did it go?’ demanded Trevor, anxiously peering into the distance. ‘Can you see it?’

‘I can see it!’ Mr Schmidt reassured him. ‘It’s just over here.’ Trevor looked around and saw with a mixture of shame, embarrassment and horror that his ball had not left the tee at all but was lying about three yards to the left and two yards behind its starting point; it was, he realised, now further from the hole than it had been before he had hit it.

‘What on earth happened?’ asked Trevor.

‘Oh, don’t worry! It happens to everyone!’ said Mr Schmidt, reassuringly, although he had never seen anything quite like it before. ‘When I first started to play this game I too was not hitting the ball good. But don’t worry. You can soon pick yourself up by your bootstraps.’

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Like most of the really great golf courses Archibald Pettigrew’s course had been designed to take full advantage of the natural contours and hazards of the countryside in which it was situated. No bulldozers had been used to create artificial hills; no diggers had been employed to make artificial lakes; no streams or rivers had been diverted and no trees had been planted to create artificial woods or copses. The lake, the river, the woodlands and the hills around and upon which Archibald Pettigrew had built his golf course had all been there long before anyone had thought of using them as a natural backdrop for a sporting arena.

The most extraordinary thing about the course was that on none of the first six holes was the green visible from the tee. Trevor, never having played on a golf course before, was surprised by this but, in his ignorance, assumed that it must be normal and merely took guidance from his mentor, Mr Schmidt. Since Trevor’s skill with his clubs was, to put it kindly, rudimentary, his inability to see the target he was supposed to be aiming at was not the disadvantage it might have been to a more skilful player.

Trevor’s clear objective as he struggled to leave the first tee was simply to get around the course without losing too many balls, breaking too many clubs or having to employ men with torches to light his way back to the clubhouse.

In the end his inaugural round came to a premature but glorious conclusion on the sixth hole. In completing the first five holes in a little under two hours Trevor had taken 64 strokes and lost five balls.

He stood on the sixth tee with an aching back, blistered hands and a deep feeling of despair in his soul. He was quite convinced that he would never make a golfer. Indeed, he couldn’t help wondering why he had ever thought he could make a golfer. It was, he had decided, a stupid game; a game for oafs; a game dominated by fortune and chance.

‘Don’t forget the hands, the feet and the shoulders,’ said Mr Schmidt. ‘Keep your head still and relax. Do not look so much down in the dumps. You are playing like a fine kettle of fish.’

Trevor no longer cared. He just wanted to get back to his caravan and lie down.

He put his ball onto a small red, plastic tee (he had long since lost all the yellow ones), took the club which Mr Schmidt handed to him without even looking at it and swung the latter at the former without a care or a thought for the consequences. Little did he know then that the shot he was about to play would transform his life, that a few moments later his despair would be gone, replaced with a glorious, joyful feeling of achievement.

Trevor didn’t even know whether or not he had made contact with the ball, so sweetly did he hit it. He had grown accustomed to the jarring feeling you get when it is the heel or the toe of your club which hits the ball, and he had never before experienced the exquisite feeling that you get when the ball is hit with the sweet spot on the club.

The ball flew from Trevor’s club like an arrow fired from a longbow. It soared high into the air, travelled straight down the middle of the fairway, and seemed to hang in the sky for minutes before plummeting to earth, bouncing once as it rolled over the edge of the bank leading down to the green.

‘Bravo!’ cried Mr Schmidt. ‘A marvellous shot! I am over the moon!’

‘Where is it?’ asked Trevor, who had, as usual, absolutely no idea where the ball had gone.

‘Straight down the fairway!’ replied the professional, beaming. ‘I couldn’t have played a better shot myself!’ he admitted. ‘On this hole I am playing second fiddle while you blow your trumpet.’ He had pulled his own shot from the tee and his ball had gone clattering into the trees on the left of the fairway.

‘Really?’ said Trevor.

‘Really!’ exclaimed Mr Schmidt. He took hold of Trevor by the shoulders and shook him so severely that Trevor’s teeth rattled. ‘Your ball may even be on the green!’

‘On the green!’ Trevor repeated. He had taken nine shots to reach the green on the last hole, and that had not included penalties for the two balls he had lost in the rough.

‘You see!’ said Mr Schmidt. ‘You relaxed and now you are in a bed of roses!’

But Trevor didn’t hear him. He wouldn’t have heard anything. He had dropped his club and was racing down the fairway towards the green. He wanted to see where his ball had landed. He ran so quickly that his lungs had difficulty in drawing enough air into his body. Nothing, short of concentrated machine gun fire or a massive coronary could possibly have stopped him.

As Gunter Schmidt struggled off the tee pulling two trolleys Trevor arrived at the top of the small slope leading to the green. He could hardly believe what he saw. He could not have been more thrilled if he had seen a stack of gold bars piled on the green. He stared for a moment, then turned and waved to the professional.

‘It’s right by the hole!’ he shouted, the words interspersed with gasps as his body tried to repair its oxygen debt. He held his hands out in front of him, about three feet apart. ‘This far away!’ he exclaimed, exaggerating only slightly and wheezing noisily.

‘Congratulations!’ shouted Mr Schmidt. ‘I can see I am teaching my grandfather to suck an egg.’ He was genuinely delighted that his pupil had played a good shot. He knew that unless the Gods are feeling particularly cruel even the weakest player will play one good shot in a round of golf, but up until that moment he had been beginning to wonder if maybe the Gods were too busy elsewhere to remember to glance down that morning. One of the trolleys he was pulling hit a divot and nearly turned over. Seeing this Trevor started to run back to help him.

‘It’s about a foot from the hole!’ said Trevor, grinning broadly and exaggerating a little more. Thanks to the bizarre effect that time can have on spacial relationships Trevor’s ball would, by that evening, have landed even closer to the flag. By dinner time the ball would have landed no more than six inches from the hole. Fishermen and golfers share a quite remarkable ability to remember and enhance the good and to forget and diminish the bad. ‘It was very nearly a hole in one!’

‘It was a glorious shot!’ agreed Mr Schmidt. ‘Jack Nicholson himself would have been proud it to have played.’

‘Do you really think so?’ asked Trevor, who had by now completely forgotten the 64 strokes which Jack Nicklaus would not have been so proud to have played. ‘Jack Nicklaus, surely?’ he said, suddenly realising the professional’s mistake.

‘Himself!’ said Mr Schmidt, gloriously unaware of his error.

Trevor blushed with pride.

‘But now you must follow your nose and help me to find my ball,’ said Mr Schmidt, parking his trolley and walking off the fairway into the trees on the left of the hole. ‘We must leave no stone unturned,’ he muttered to himself.

When they found the professional’s ball it was nestling in a rabbit hole behind a huge oak tree and was quite unplayable.

‘I will take the drop,’ said Mr Schmidt, picking up his ball and dropping it in a small clearing. He fetched a sand iron from his bag and played a recovery shot which would have been quite good if it hadn’t hit a low branch and fallen down behind a large beech tree. In the end he had taken six shots to get his ball onto the green. A long, curling and rather improbable putt from thirty-five feet enabled him to complete the hole in seven strokes.

‘You’ve got five putts to win the hole, six to halve it!’ Mr Schmidt reminded Trevor. ‘But just two putts will give you your first par, and if you can get the ball in the hole in one you’ll have to watch the birdie. Your position is not to be sneezed at; not by a long chalk!’

‘A birdie?’ asked Trevor, puzzled by the expression. ‘What’s a birdie?’

‘A birdie is when you are playing the hole in one less than par,’ explained Mr Schmidt.

‘Why?’ asked Trevor, whose ignorance about golf was comprehensive.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Why is it called a birdie?’

Mr Schmidt stared at him and frowned. ‘I’m not sure,’ he admitted. ‘But it will be a birdie.’

‘Right!’ said Trevor. ‘Then I shall try to get a birdie!’ He bent down as he had seen the professionals do on the television and stared at the grass. He wasn’t at all certain about what he was looking for but the grass seemed very neat and flat so that was quite comforting.

‘Just be careful not to get egg on your face!’ warned Mr Schmidt. ‘Remember not to hit the ball too hard. You must make sure that your ball does not end up further from the hole than it is starting.’

Trevor bent over his ball and concentrated hard. He concentrated so hard that every fibre of every muscle in his body became as taut as a bow string. He took his putter back, brought it forward to strike the ball and sent it flying nearly twelve feet past the hole.

‘Oh no!’ he cried, instinctively reaching out as though desperate to grab his ball and slow it down. ‘Oh no! What have I done?’

‘You have hit the ball too hard,’ replied Mr Schmidt, with Teutonic precision. ‘It has gone too far. You have put too much egg in the pudding and now you are all at sixes and sevens.’

Trevor did not reply.

‘Do not despair!’ said Mr Schmidt. ‘All is not yet lost. You can still get a par.’

Trevor walked hurriedly over to his ball and stared down at it.

‘Be careful!’ warned Mr Schmidt. ‘Not too hard!’

Trevor looked up, nodded, then bent over his ball again. He took his putter back slowly and then swung it forwards rapidly. The ball shot off the putter blade as though fired from a cannon. If the shot had been wayward the ball would have doubtless disappeared off the far side of the green, down the hill and into the undergrowth.

Fortunately Trevor’s aim was accurate and the ball headed straight for the hole.

It was going so fast that neither Mr Schmidt nor Trevor thought for a moment that the putt would sink. They watched without breathing as the ball shot across the hole, hit the rim on the far side, bounced into the air and then dropped down into the hole where it bounced up to the rim again, rattled around in the metal cup for a few agonising micro seconds and then settled down as it admitted defeat.

Trevor stared at the hole and felt his heart stutter into action once more.

‘Congratulations!’ cried Mr Schmidt with a genuine and cheery smile. ‘You have scored a hole in three, which is par, and you have defeated me by a landslide!’

‘Thank you,’ said Trevor, modestly.

‘I am definitely playing second fiddle,’ said Mr Schmidt.

Trevor took the professional’s outstretched hand and smiled shyly. ‘I think I was just lucky,’ he said, not meaning a word of it.

‘Not at all!’ said the professional, also not meaning it. ‘You played with great skill and courage. You deserved your success. I am over the moon and away with the fairies.’ He looked at his watch. ‘But now I think we walk back to the clubhouse. That will be enough excitement for one day.’

‘Oh, dear,’ said Trevor, clearly disappointed. ‘Do we have to stop now?’

‘I’m afraid so,’ said the professional, feigning sadness. ‘I have another lesson to give half an hour previously.’ He was relieved that Trevor’s first encounter with the course had ended on such a high note.

‘What a pity!’ sighed Trevor. ‘Just as I was getting the hang of things.’

‘Golf is a wonderful game,’ he thought to himself as he and Mr Schmidt pulled their trolleys back to the clubhouse. ‘How did I manage to live for so many years without it?’

It was, he thought, a game of tremendous skill, a game which rewarded hard work, patience and talent.

‘Now that I’ve got it licked,’ he thought to himself, ‘I can turn professional if I want; maybe even win the Open!’ Such a feat sounded perfectly reasonable to a man who had just played a shot that Jack Nicklaus would have been proud of; a man who had scored a par and had beaten the club professional on his own course by a clear four strokes on a single hole!

As he walked back to his new home he saw an exceedingly pretty young girl coming out of Iris Weatherby’s neighbouring caravan. She was carrying a small bag of golf clubs that was almost as big as she was.

‘Hello!’ he said, slowing down.

The girl blushed and lowered her eyes. ‘Hello!’ she answered quietly. But she didn’t slow down. Trevor turned his head and watched her walk over to the first tee.

CHAPTER NINE

Trevor, freshly showered after his success on the course, was sitting in the men's changing room describing his par three to Captain Jarrold and two slightly deaf pensioners when Wing Commander Trout came bustling through the door from the bar.

'There's a lady here asking for you,' hissed the secretary.

Trevor frowned. 'A lady?'

'She says she's engaged to you,' added Wing Commander Trout, putting the emphasis on the second word and making it clear that he wasn't prepared to take her word for it.

'Oh God!' said Trevor. 'It must be Sylvia. Did she give you her name?'

Wing Commander Trout shook his head.

'What does she look like?'

There had undoubtedly once been a time when the secretary would have noticed exactly what a young woman looked like but that time had long since gone. He waved a hand around airily. 'Very attractive,' he said at last. 'Young,' he added. He thought for a moment. 'Very self-confident,' he concluded. He thought about this. 'Yes,' he said with certainty, 'very self-confident.'

'That's Sylvia!' said Trevor. 'How on earth did she find me?' He shivered involuntarily. He had never realised before just how much Sylvia actually frightened him.

'I don't know, sir,' said the secretary. 'Would you like me to tell her that she's come to the wrong place?'

'No, that won't do any good,' said Trevor miserably. 'If she's tracked me down she won't be fobbed off.'

'I could tell her that you're out on the course,' suggested Wing Commander Trout.

'No, it's no good,' sighed Trevor. 'I'd better come out and face the music.' He stood up, removed the towel from around his waist and took his shirt down from the coat hook above his head.

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The secretary had settled Sylvia down at the cleanest table he could find.

'Can I get you anything to drink?' he had asked, wringing his hands obsequiously. Fawning was the one thing he knew he was good at.

'I'll have a coffee,' Sylvia had said. 'Decaffeinated.'

'Certainly, madam,' Wing Commander Trout had muttered before hurrying off to pass on the instructions to the barman.

Five minutes later the coffee still hadn't arrived but Trevor had.

'Hello!' said the world's greatest golfer, smiling nervously and standing diffidently beside his beloved's chair.

Sylvia looked up. 'Do you know how difficult it was to track you down?' she demanded.

'No,' replied Trevor, who didn't.

'I had to telephone every solicitor in the Mettleham area to find the right one!' said Sylvia.

Trevor hesitated. 'I thought solicitors all swore an oath of confidentiality,' he said, smiling nervously.

'That certainly made it more difficult,' agreed Sylvia, who had a rule that she never allowed other people's ethical codes to stand in her way when she wanted something.

'Would you like some coffee?' asked Trevor, anxious to delay more serious conversation.

'That funny little man who tried to stop me coming in here was supposed to have ordered me one absolutely ages ago,' said Sylvia.

'Funny little man?' asked Trevor.

'A chap in a rather nasty, cheap, blue suit who had a few strands of hair combed over a very large bald patch.'

Trevor looked around anxiously. 'That's the club secretary,' he whispered, though this description could have applied to a good third of the club's members.

'Well I must say he gave himself lots of airs and graces for a secretary,' said Sylvia.

'I'll go and see what happened to it,' said Trevor. 'I shan't be a moment…' Grateful for the excuse to drift away before Sylvia explained the real reason for her visit Trevor wandered over to the bar.

'Were you getting a coffee for the lady in the window?' asked Trevor quietly. 'I think Wing Commander Trout may have ordered one for her.'

'Oh, yes,' said Jake the barman who was reading a tabloid newspaper. Jake hated his job, the golf club and just about everyone in the world. 'He did.'

Trevor waited for a few moments. The barman merely continued to read his newspaper.

'How long do you think it will take?' he asked at last. The barman looked up. What?'

‘The coffee.’

‘She wanted decaffeinated,’ said the barman, as though Sylvia had asked for a whisky in a mosque.

‘That’s right. She always drinks decaffeinated.’

‘We don’t keep decaffeinated,’ said the barman. ‘There’s no call for it.’ He continued reading his newspaper.

‘Oh.’ said Trevor. He paused. ‘I don’t suppose you could get some, could you?’

The barman sighed and looked up. ‘No,’ he said simply.

‘Oh,’ said Trevor. ‘Well thank you very much anyway.’

The barman just ignored him and Trevor returned slowly to Sylvia’s table. He pulled out a chair and sat down beside her.

‘I’m sorry,’ he apologised. ‘The club doesn’t seem to have any decaffeinated coffee.’

‘I thought you owned the club?’ said Sylvia.

‘Well, yes, I sort of do,’ agreed Trevor.

‘Well can’t you send someone out to get some?’

Trevor hesitated, torn between his fear of Sylvia and his fear of the barman. ‘I don’t really like to,’ he confessed. ‘It’s an awfully long way to the shops. I could get you a glass of water if you like.’

Sylvia breathed in deeply through her nose and let the air out through her mouth. This simple but eloquent and surprisingly threatening act always terrified Trevor.

‘I could call a taxi and we could pop into town if you like,’ he offered.

‘Don’t be silly,’ said Sylvia, with a snap in her voice. ‘We’ve got to talk about our future. Where are you staying?’

‘Er, here,’ admitted Trevor, going cold at the prospect of discussing his future with Sylvia.

‘Here?’

‘In a caravan.’

Sylvia raised an eyebrow and her voice. ‘A caravan?’

‘It’s just temporary,’ explained Trevor, quickly.

Sylvia stood up. ‘I want to see it.’

Trevor stood.

Two minutes later they were sitting in Trevor’s cramped new home.

‘It’s cosy, isn’t it?’ said Trevor, looking around.

‘It’s cramped,’ agreed Sylvia.

‘It’s handy for the golf course.’

‘You don’t play golf.’

‘I’m learning,’ said Trevor. ‘I beat the professional this morning!’

‘He can’t be very good.’

‘It was only on one hole,’ admitted Trevor. ‘I got a par three. He beat me on all the other holes.’

‘Why on earth do you want to learn to play golf?’

Trevor hesitated.

‘Don’t try hiding things from me,’ said Sylvia. ‘You know it always ends in tears.’

Trevor did not have to think about this to realise that she was right. He wondered how much the solicitors had told her about the rules of his uncle’s will and decided, quite accurately, that they had probably told her everything. He decided that honesty was the best of the unpleasant alternatives and explained to her that he had to learn to play golf in order to keep his inheritance.

‘So if you find you can’t play golf you lose everything?’

Trevor nodded.

Sylvia did the business with the air again. Trevor felt his heart do an impression of an overwound cheap watch.

‘Why don’t you accept the money?’ demanded Sylvia. ‘You would if you cared about us.’ She pouted.

Trevor opened his mouth but couldn’t think of anything suitable to say. He had never got used to the fact that Sylvia would change her moods without warning; changing from aggressive, firm, woman of stern masculine authority to meek, powerless, defenceless woman of delicate femininity in an instant.

‘We could use the money to buy a house,’ Sylvia said. She took out her handkerchief. ‘Sometimes I think you don’t love me,’ she said.

Trevor, who had realised some time ago that he didn’t love Sylvia but who was too nervous to tell her, wondered if this might be the appropriate moment to break the news.

‘Oh, Sylvia,’ he heard himself saying and realised that he didn’t have that much courage. He reached out, grasping for her hand but she moved at the last moment and he caught her knee instead.

‘Oh, Trevor,’ said Sylvia. ‘I know how you feel. I’ve missed you too.’

Trevor looked down at his hand and intended to move it but he was too slow. Sylvia put her hand on top of his. 'It's been a month,' she said huskily. 'I really missed you when you were in London. I spoke to your editor yesterday. You can have your old job back.' She lifted his hand and placed it a little higher on her thigh.

'Oh,' said Trevor, who didn't want his old job back but realised that employment was not the immediate problem.

Sylvia licked her lips in what she thought was a sexually provocative gesture and leant forward with her mouth slightly open. She put her free hand behind Trevor's neck and drew him towards her. 'If you promise to take the £10,000 and you draw the curtains you can have your way with me,' she whispered, her voice silky with promise.

Suddenly, the caravan door burst open and a golf bag was thrown in through the opened door. 'Hello, Trevor!' said Willie loudly, following his bag into the caravan. He caught sight of Trevor and Sylvia at the other end of the caravan and wagged a finger reprovingly. 'That sort of stuff will ruin your short game!' he warned.

'Willie!' cried Trevor, who had never been so pleased to see his friend.

'Oh, no!' cried Sylvia, leaping away from Trevor as quickly as she could. 'What is he doing here?' she screamed, pointing at Willie as though he were a vampire.

'You two do know each other, don't you?' said Trevor weakly.

'Trevor Dukinfield!' said Sylvia. 'I've told you I don't approve of him!' She stood up and cracked her head on an overhead cupboard.

Trevor blanched. Since he had been a child he had always known that trouble was coming when anyone addressed him by his full name.

Sylvia pursed her lips and sought for a suitable curse. 'Damn you!' she said in the end.

'Are you all right?' asked Trevor.

'I'm leaving!' said Sylvia. 'For ever!' she added dramatically.

'You won't see me again!' Holding her head high she made her way to the door and disappeared.

'Oh dear,' said Willie. 'Have I arrived at a bad moment?'

CHAPTER TEN

Not counting Wing Commander Trout, there were ten members of the Butterbury Ford Golf Club committee and it was unusual for them all to turn up at the same meeting. They were all there that evening when Trevor told them about the conditions in his uncle's will.

Under the secretary's supervision, Jake the bar steward had pushed four small tables together, covered them with a rather threadbare brown chenille tablecloth and spread a dozen chairs around them in a crude attempt to create a committee table.

The chairman, Mulliner Park-Ward, councillor, freemason, purveyor of fine meats and joint proprietor of Park-Ward's Family Butchers ('Our Meat Is A Cut Above The Rest'), sat at the head of the table with Wing Commander Trout on his left and Trevor on his right. Alfred Petherick, a retired tailor's assistant with thinning hair and a thickening waist, sat on the secretary's left and Bert Grubb of Grubb and Son, ('Electrical Repairs Done In Your Home - Rewiring Our Speciality'), sat on Trevor's right.

The Prendergast brothers, Winston and Spencer, proprietors of Prendergast Carpets, ('Your Floors Are Our Passion'), sat together, as they always did, with Bert Grubb on Winston's left and Elvis Ramsbottom, the chiropodist, on Spencer's right.

Karl and Arlene Dussenberg, the couple whose antics on the 18th green had so entertained Trevor and who were the joint proprietors of Dussenberg's Genuine English Antiques (far too grand an establishment to have a slogan), sat between Elvis Ramsbottom and Peregrine Falmouth, the owner and proprietor of Falmouth's Pharmacy, ('Treat Yourself to Our Expertise') while Captain Jarrold sat between Peregrine Falmouth and Alfred Petherick. The Dussenbergs both smiled at Trevor to show that they were happy to forget the words they had exchanged.

Although it wasn't in the slightest bit necessary, since everyone there already knew exactly who he was, Wing Commander Trout began the meeting by introducing Trevor and explaining that he was the nephew of the late Mr Pettigrew and the new owner of the golf club. Having been invited to say a few words to introduce himself Trevor wasted no time in informing the committee members of the conditions which his late uncle had applied to his bequest. The committee received this news in a lengthy and embarrassing silence that was eventually broken by the chairman, Mulliner Park-Ward.

'Would you tell us exactly what happens if you fail to satisfy these conditions?' he asked.

Trevor explained.

Once again the committee stayed silent.

'Er, I hope you don't mind my asking,' began Elvis Ramsbottom apologetically, 'but could you tell us how much golf you have played?'

'I went out onto the course for the first time today,' said Trevor. 'I got a par three at the sixth,' he added, still finding it hard to hide his pride at his achievement. He beamed at each of the committee members in turn but was disappointed to find that they did not seem to share his cheerfulness.

There was, indeed, a general air of gloom in the room. Everyone there knew that a beginner who plays one hole well is heading for a fall.

'Spencer Prendergast,' said Spencer Prendergast, standing up and introducing himself. 'What is the time limit on these conditions?' he asked. He sat down. Spencer Prendergast was a bluff and rather blunt man who believed that honesty was the best policy in every area of life with the obvious exception of business. 'How long have we - you - got?'

'Three months' replied Trevor. 'Well, a bit less than that now. My uncle knew that I hadn't played golf before but he seemed to think that ought to be long enough.'

Again there was a long and pregnant silence as the members of the committee contemplated this gloomy news. The silence was so profound that Jake, the bar steward, looked up from the racing page of the *Daily Globe* to make sure that there hadn't been a deadly gas leak.

'We must obviously do everything we can to help,' said Peregrine Falmouth finally. He spoke firmly, as though this was his last word on the subject and as though defying anyone to disagree. Peregrine had a reputation as something of an optimist, and anyone who had ever watched him use a wooden club from the first tee would have confirmed that this reputation was sound.

'Well ·said, sir!' said Winston Prendergast, who harboured secret parliamentary ambitions and had been a keen listener of broadcasts from parliament since their inception.

'Absolutely!' agreed Captain Jarrold, raising his glass and then emptying it in a solitary toast. He levered himself to his feet and staggered off towards the bar to replenish his glass in case there were any more toasts to be drunk.

‘Anyone else want a drink?’ he muttered to himself when he was safely out of earshot.

‘I would certainly appreciate your help and support,’ said Trevor. ‘After all, we all want the same thing, don’t we?’

‘You just tell us how we can help and we’ll do what we can,’ said Peregrine Falmouth. He looked around expectantly. His offer was greeted with much nodding and mumbling of support.

There was a slight commotion as Captain Jarrold returned from the bar, put his drink down on the table and fell over his chair. ‘My apologies,’ mumbled Captain Jarrold, pulling his chair upright and sitting on it. ‘Would anyone else like a drink?’

Heads were shaken and unconvincing denials uttered.

‘Mr Chairman,’ said Wing Commander Trout, suddenly rather formally, ‘Would you be kind enough to consider asking the meeting to pass a motion supporting a vote of confidence in our new owner?’

Mr Park-Ward, the chairman, listened carefully to this request, nodded and then cleared his throat. ‘Er, gentlemen,’ he paused, ‘and Mrs Dussenberg,’ he added, nodding in Mrs Dussenberg’s direction, ‘I have received a request that we pass a vote of confidence in the club’s new owner. In view of the fact that such a report has not previously been included in the agenda for this meeting I would like to have your approval. Could we, therefore, please have a vote on this.’ He took a gold plated propelling pencil from his inside jacket pocket and fiddled with it in an attempt to produce a lead point with which to write. Unfortunately, the pencil did not seem to contain any leads.

‘Here, use mine,’ said Trevor, offering the chairman a cheap ballpoint pen which he had bought from a railway station bookstall.

‘Thank you,’ said the chairman, accepting the pen as though it were made of solid gold. ‘Now then,’ he said to the committee, can we please have votes for this amendment to our original agenda?’

‘I haven’t seen an agenda,’ said Bert Grubb, speaking to no one in particular. ‘Has anyone else seen an agenda?’

There was a general murmuring of agreement confirming that no one had seen an agenda for the meeting.

‘Mr Chairman, I’m afraid we didn’t have time to produce an agenda,’ apologised Wing Commander Trout. ‘This is an emergency meeting.’

‘Yes,’ agreed the chairman. ‘Quite so, quite so. Well, then in that case let us simply have a vote confirming that we would like the committee to vote to show our confidence…’ he looked around and the sentence rather tailed off.

‘I’ll propose the motion,’ said Bert Grubb.

‘I’ll second it,’ said Captain Jarrold, who was always happy to second any motion.

‘Good,’ said the chairman. ‘All those voting for the motion?

Everyone put their hands up except Trevor and Wing Commander Trout who didn’t have a vote.

‘So shall we call it unanimous?’ asked the secretary.

‘Oh yes,’ said the chairman. ‘I think so.’ Then he caught sight of Trevor again. ‘What about you? Did you vote?’

‘No,’ said Trevor. ‘I don’t think I’m allowed to vote am I? I’m not on the committee.’

‘Good heavens,’ said the chairman. ‘Aren’t you on the committee?’

‘No,’ confirmed Wing Commander Trout. ‘He isn’t.’

‘Well, is he entitled to be here if he isn’t on the committee?’ asked the chairman.

‘Spencer Prendergast, Mr Chairman,’ said Spencer Prendergast, standing up and introducing himself. ‘We ought to have a vote inviting him to stay,’ he suggested. He sat down. Spencer Prendergast had read a book on how to manage a committee and secretly felt that he could do much better than Mr Park-Ward.

‘Perhaps it would be easier if we just invited Mr Dukinfield to join the committee,’ suggested Wing Commander Trout, quietly.

‘Splendid idea,’ said the chairman. ‘Would you like to be on our committee, young fellow?’

‘Well, yes, that’s very kind of you,’ said Trevor.

‘I don’t want to be pernickety,’ said Mr Grubb, who did, ‘but is he a member? And can he be on the committee if he isn’t a member?’

‘Are you a member?’ the chairman asked Trevor.

‘I don’t think so,’ admitted Trevor, ruefully.

‘Oh dear,’ said the chairman. ‘Well in that case I don’t think you’re really entitled to be here. Officially.’

‘Officially he isn’t supposed to be in the clubhouse,’ Winston Prendergast pointed out.

‘That’s right,’ said Karl Dussenberg. ‘If he’s not a member then he’s not really entitled to be in the clubhouse.’

‘But he owns the club!’ Wing Commander Trout pointed out quietly.

‘Do you know anyone who could propose you?’ asked the chairman.

Trevor looked around him hopefully.

‘I’ll be proud to propose you,’ said the chairman.

‘I’ll second that,’ said Captain Jarrold, who would have seconded his own expulsion from the club.

‘Right,’ said the chairman to Trevor, ‘you just pop outside for a moment and we’ll vote on your membership application and then when you come back in we’ll co-opt you onto the committee.’

Trevor popped outside and a few seconds later was called back into the room by Wing Commander Trout.

‘Congratulations!’ said the chairman, standing up and offering Trevor his hand. ‘Welcome to the club!’

‘Thank you,’ said Trevor, who was quite overwhelmed by all this. He had not previously had any experience of golf club management.

‘Now,’ said the chairman, ‘I propose that we co-opt Mr Dukinfield onto the committee. All those in favour?’

Wing Commander Trout again confirmed that the vote had been a unanimous one.

‘The committee doesn’t normally agree on things so well,’ whispered the secretary to Trevor. ‘Two years ago Karl Dussenberg fell out with Spencer Prendergast over whether there should be a shaver socket in the ladies’ changing rooms.’

‘Right!’ said the chairman, pleased with the progress so far. He looked around. ‘Is there any more business?’

‘We were going to have a vote of support for our new owner,’ said Mrs Dussenberg.

‘Spencer Prendergast, Mr Chairman,’ said Spencer Prendergast, standing up. ‘In view of the fact that he is the owner, should our new member be entitled to vote on whether or not we offer our support to the club’s new owner?’ He looked around and then sat down.

‘He is on the committee,’ Wing Commander Trout pointed out.

‘Point of order, Mr Chairman,’ said Winston Prendergast. ‘Wing Commander Trout isn’t really entitled to contribute to the committee’s deliberations on these issues since he is here purely on a de facto basis as a club official.’

‘What does de facto mean?’ Bert Grubb asked Alfred Petherick in a whisper.

‘I haven’t the foggiest idea,’ Mr Petherick whispered back.

‘Maybe we should have another vote,’ said the chairman.

‘What are we voting on?’ asked a confused Captain Jarrold.

‘Heaven knows!’ sighed Mr Dussenberg.

‘Again?’ asked Captain Jarrold. ‘Isn’t once enough?’

‘We haven’t done it yet,’ said the chairman. ‘Let’s have a vote. All those in favour please raise their hands.’

Everyone present raised their hands and the chairman duly reported that the motion had been carried. The secretary made a note of this vote in the minute book.

The meeting then broke up.

Trevor was on his way out when Jake the barman called him over.

‘There’s someone on the phone for you,’ said the barman, rather brusquely. ‘I was in the middle of my break when it rang,’ he added in protest.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Trevor. ‘Do you know who it is?’

‘A woman,’ said Jake.

Trevor picked up the telephone receiver. ‘Yes?’ he said rather tentatively.

‘Is that Mr Dukinfield?’ asked a woman whose voice Trevor didn’t recognise.

Trevor hesitated.

‘Trevor Dukinfield?’

‘Who’s that?’

‘I was hoping it was you.’

‘Yes. It is.’

‘My name is Morris. I’m a reporter with the *Daily Globe*. I gather you’ve recently inherited a golf club!’

‘Did you say the *Daily Globe*?’ said Trevor, shuddering involuntarily at the thought that he might have in some way attracted the attentions of the *Daily Globe*, a newspaper which usually seemed to fill its pages with stories of naughty vicars and errant scout masters.

‘That’s right!’ said the woman, brightly.

‘Why do you want to speak to me?’ asked Trevor.

‘Oh, it’s a wonderful story!’ said the woman. ‘Our readers will be fascinated to read about *The Man Who Inherited A Golf Course*.’ She spoke in capital letters. Trevor didn’t think it was much of a story at all. It occurred to him that he definitely hadn’t been suited to a career in journalism.

‘I just want to come and talk to you, maybe take one or two photos,’ said the woman.

‘No, thank you,’ said Trevor.

‘But why on earth not?’ asked the woman.

‘I just don’t want to,’ said Trevor. ‘Thank you for calling. Goodbye.’ He put the telephone down and realised that he was sweating and shaking slightly.

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When Trevor got back to the caravan the door was shut. The lights were on and he could hear noises so he knew that there was someone inside. However, when he tried to get in he found that the door was bolted. After five minutes of knocking and banging, first on the door and then on the windows, Trevor heard the flimsy bolt on the inside of the caravan door being drawn back. The door opened slowly and Willie's head appeared.

'Yes?' said Willie's head, peering out into the darkness of the night. 'Who is it? What the hell do you want?'

'It's me! I want to come in!' said Trevor, wearily. 'It's getting chilly. And I want to go to bed!'

'Oh, it's you!' said Willie, opening the door wider. He grinned broadly. He didn't seem to be wearing anything except one of Trevor's towels which was wrapped around his waist. 'I thought you'd found somewhere else to spend the night!' he winked.

Trevor was climbing up into the caravan when he heard a strange voice, a woman's voice.

'What is it darling?' the voice asked. 'Is everything all right?'

'It's OK!' replied Willie. 'I'll be back in a moment.'

Trevor peered down the length of the dimly lit caravan and could just make out the unmistakable form of a tall, well-built woman with red hair. She was completely naked apart from what looked to Trevor remarkably like a pair of golf shoes and a driving glove.

'Who's that?' he asked Willie, in a whisper.

'Thelma,' Willie whispered back.

'Who?' demanded Trevor, still whispering.

'Thelma,' said Willie again, but slightly louder this time.

'Where on earth did Thelma come from?' whispered Trevor.

'I met her on the putting green,' said Willie. He leant forwards. 'Why are we whispering?' he whispered.

'I don't know,' admitted Trevor, not whispering.

'I think you'd better get dressed, love,' Willie called to Thelma. 'The landlord is back,' he explained, nodding towards Trevor.

'Oh,' said Thelma, clearly disappointed. She sounded as if she was pouting. 'Must I?'

"Fraid so!' said Willie. 'I'll call you,' he promised.

While the redhead dressed Willie and Trevor stood crammed together in the tiny kitchenette. Willie filled the kettle with water and lit the calor gas stove.

'You look glum,' said Willie, when Thelma had gone and the kettle had boiled.

'I feel glum,' admitted Trevor. Willie picked up a small coffee jar from the tiny work surface to the right of the sink. A quick glance was enough to tell him that the jar was empty.

'It's not what you'd call a thriving business opportunity, is it?' said Willie. He opened the cupboard above the stove. 'Where do you keep the coffee?'

'Isn't there any more?'

'No.'

'Oh. Well I must have run out. Is there any tea?'

'No.' said Willie, peering into the cupboard. 'You've got one and a half digestive biscuits, a tin of mustard powder and an almost empty bottle of brown sauce. Pop along to the bar and see if the barman can lend us a few grains of coffee, will you?'

Trevor blanched at the thought of asking Jake the barman to lend him anything. 'I think the bar will be shut by now,' he said.

'Well, try the neighbours then!' suggested Willie. 'I can hardly go dressed like this,' he said, adjusting the towel around his waist. 'I'll freeze to death.'

'No, I suppose not,' agreed Trevor. He paused. 'Which neighbours?' he asked, puzzled.

'In the caravan next door!' said Willie. 'Who lives there anyway?' He bent down slightly, pulled back a curtain and peered outside.

'Mrs Weatherby and her son and daughter,' replied Trevor.

'Mrs Weatherby works in the professional's shop and her son is the assistant greenkeeper.'

'Well their light is still on so they haven't gone to bed yet,' said Willie. He handed Trevor the empty coffee jar. 'Just ask them to put a couple of inches of coffee in here - that should last us until you can get to the shops.'

With reluctance born of shyness Trevor took the proffered empty coffee jar, opened the caravan door and stepped back out into the darkness of the night. 'You won't fill the caravan with strange women while I'm gone, will you?' he said to Willie as he stepped outside.

'You're as bad as my wife!' said Willie. 'I invite one female friend to share a lonely evening with me and you immediately jump to conclusions.'

'I suppose you were helping her with her golf swing?' said Trevor. He stopped on the caravan step. 'Why was she wearing golf shoes and a golf glove?' he asked, puzzled.

'Go and get the coffee,' said Willie firmly, pushing the caravan door until it clicked shut, leaving Trevor on the outside.

Trevor, clutching his empty coffee jar, walked nervously over towards Mrs Weatherby's caravan. His shyness seemed to come in suffocating waves. Fortunately, the door to Mrs Weatherby's caravan was no more than five or six yards from his own; if it had been further Trevor might never have got there. Trevor raised a knuckle and timidly knocked on the door.

He had waited two or three seconds and was about to go back and tell Willie that there had been no reply when Mrs Weatherby opened the door to her caravan. She was dressed in a rather threadbare candlewick dressing gown which covered her from neck to ankle. Her hair was decorated with a couple of dozen bright pink, plastic curlers. When she saw Trevor she needlessly pulled the two sides of her dressing gown tightly together. Her worries were quite unjustified; the only areas of skin which were visible were her hands and her face.

'Excuse me,' said Trevor. 'I'm terribly sorry to bother you but do you think you could lend me a few teaspoons of coffee?' He held out his small but empty coffee jar, feeling like Oliver asking for more gruel.

'Of course I can, dear,' said Mrs Weatherby, smiling. She took the jar, turned and moved back inside her caravan. Trevor stood on the caravan step and waited for her to return. 'Here you are, dear,' said Mrs Weatherby, returning with Trevor's coffee jar now full to the brim.

'Oh,' said Trevor. 'You didn't have to fill it. That's very nice of you. I'll bring it back to you tomorrow as soon as I've been to the shops.'

Mrs Weatherby raised a hand. 'Don't be silly, dear,' she said. 'Are you all right for sugar? Milk? Do you want some biscuits?'

'A few biscuits would be very welcome,' said Trevor.

'Digestive, bourbon or Garibaldi?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'What sort of biscuits would you like? Digestive, bourbon or Garibaldi?'

'Digestive please,' said Trevor.

'With or without?'

Puzzled, Trevor frowned. 'With or without what?'

'Chocolate.'

'Oh, with please!' said Trevor enthusiastically. 'If it's not going to put you to too much trouble. I'll make sure I replace them for you tomorrow.'

'Don't be silly,' said Mrs Weatherby. She disappeared and returned a moment later clutching a new packet of chocolate digestive biscuits which she handed to Trevor.

'Could I ask you something?' asked Trevor, shyly.

'Of course you can, dear,' replied Mrs Weatherby.

'Was that your daughter I saw coming out of your caravan the other day?'

Mrs Weatherby hesitated for a moment. 'Er, yes,' she replied, sounding rather flustered. Trevor said goodnight and Mrs Weatherby closed the door of her caravan.

Trevor didn't feel like going straight to bed. He went for a walk across the golf course. When he finally got back to the caravan Willie was fast asleep. Trevor, who still wasn't in the slightest bit sleepy, made himself a cup of black coffee and ate half a packet of chocolate digestive biscuits.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

'So what happened to you last night?' demanded Willie, sipping black coffee and munching a chocolate biscuit. 'Do you think we could get a bit of bacon in?' he asked plaintively. 'I do rather like a decent breakfast.'

'I went for a walk,' said Trevor, sleepily. 'I'm sorry.' He stood in the kitchen rubbing the small of his back with one hand and his eyes with the other.

'Walking? For God's sake Trevor, I waited an hour for you to come back. I nearly came over to see if you were OK' Willie pushed the remains of the biscuit he was eating into his mouth and took another from the packet. 'Shall I make you out a shopping list? We need beer, bacon, eggs, coffee and biscuits. I think that's all the essentials. What else do you reckon?' He paused, thinking. 'Oh, and some tomato sauce!' he added.

'I wasn't really planning on going shopping,' said Trevor, yawning. 'I need to practise my golf.'

'So do we all, old chap!' said Willie. 'My short irons have really been letting me down lately. I thought I'd get out there this morning and do some serious work with my eight iron.' He licked a smear of chocolate from his thumb, finished his coffee, stood up and looked at his watch. Then he squeezed past Trevor and went in search of his trousers.

Trevor tentatively felt the side of the kettle with the back of his hand. It was still warm so he put a spoonful of coffee into a cup and filled it with water from the kettle. Having taken a sip he reached across the table towards the packet of biscuits. The packet was empty. 'You've eaten all the biscuits!' he protested.

'What?' called Willie from the bedroom.

'You've finished off all the biscuits!'

Willie's head appeared around the bedroom door. 'Sorry. What did you say?'

'Never mind,' sighed Trevor. 'It doesn't matter.' He thought for a moment. 'Willie?

'Yes? Have you seen my clothes?'

'They're under the table.'

'Oh, right. Thanks.' Willie pounced upon his trousers. 'Great. Now, do you want me to write out this shopping list for you?'

'Couldn't you go, Willie? You've got a car.'

'Of course I can't! I've got to get some practice in. Besides, what if someone recognises me? Or the car? What if someone recognises me *and* the car?'

'Who on earth is going to recognise you in our village shop?' asked Trevor. 'And what does it matter if they do?'

'If my wife finds out where I am there will be lawyers swarming all over the place! I'm in strict hiding, old chap,' said Willie. 'Women can be tricky. In my experience it's better just to keep well out of the way until everything has blown over. For all I know she's got private detectives queuing up outside every shop in the county.'

Trevor sighed. 'OK I'll go.' He looked at Willie. 'How many times have you been divorced?' he asked.

'So far, exactly one less than the number of times I've been married,' replied Willie with a grin.

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Trevor walked the two miles to the village shop with a light shopping bag and a heavy heart. But it was a beautiful, warm, summer's day. The bees were buzzing, the butterflies were fluttering and the birds were singing their hearts out in the trees. Trevor was so accustomed to sunshine at the golf club that he had almost forgotten that there were any alternatives. On his way he saw the assistant greenkeeper on his tractor. He waved to him.

'Excuse me,' said Trevor, when the tractor driver had switched off the engine. 'But are you twins?'

The tractor driver frowned. 'Twins?'

'You and your sister?'

'Oh!' The tractor driver seemed flustered. 'Yes. Sort of.' Trevor could see that he was blushing. The boy started up the tractor and hurried off, leaving behind his usual cloud of grass cuttings.

Trevor watched buzzards circling high over the cornfields. He paused for a few moments on a small stone bridge and watched a heron catch a small trout with one swift dart of its beak. And he thought a lot about the good golf shot he had played on his last outing with Mr Schmidt.

By the time Trevor returned to the caravan he had a light heart and a heavy shopping basket. The world seemed a decidedly decent place.

And then he stepped into the caravan.

There was a sudden scuffling at the far end of the caravan and Trevor got a brief glimpse of a well-turned breast, a plump, white buttock and two short and rather hairy legs.

'I say, old fellow, you really should knock!' said Willie, clearly the owner of the short and hairy legs. 'You had us worried for a moment.’ He didn’t seem to be wearing anything other than his shirt.

The unmistakable owner of the other two items, a petite, raven-haired woman whom Trevor had never seen before, peeped out from behind a lilac jumper which she had been holding up as a screen and giggled nervously. There was a small silver brooch pinned to the front of the jumper.

‘I thought you had to practise!’ said Trevor, putting the shopping down.

‘I *have* been practising!’ insisted Willie.

The owner of the raven hair, the plump buttock and the lilac jumper giggled again and playfully hit Willie on the arm with her fist.

‘This is Hortense,’ said Willie, pulling down his shirt a couple of essential inches. ‘Hortense this is Trevor.’ He stood up and peered into the shopping basket. ‘Did you remember the tomato ketchup?’

Hortense giggled again and held out a very tiny hand. She wore rings on her fingers and a thick gold bracelet around her wrist.

‘Hello, Hortense,’ said Trevor, taking her outstretched fingers and shaking her hand.

‘Hello, Trevor,’ said Hortense. ‘We thought you were Spencer.’

Willie was busy taking items out of the shopping basket. ‘You’ve forgotten the tomato ketchup, haven’t you?’

‘Spencer?’ said Trevor. He looked at Willie. ‘Who’s Spencer? They hadn’t got any.’

‘They hadn’t got any tomato ketchup! What sort of shop did you go to? Spencer is Hortense’s husband.’

‘Oh. Is he a member?’ asked Trevor.

‘A member?’

‘Of the golf club?’

‘Who?’

‘Spencer.’

‘Oh yes,’ replied Hortense. ‘That’s how Willie and I met.’

‘I popped over to the bar for a drink and the telephone was ringing,’ explained Willie. ‘There was no one else there apart from the barman and he didn’t look as if he was about to answer it so I did. It was Hortense.’

‘I was ringing Spencer to remind him to be home early tonight,’ explained Hortense. ‘We’re going to a dinner tonight,’ she added. ‘It’s the annual dinner and dance of the Carpet Traders’ Association and Spencer is chairman.’

‘We just got chatting,’ said Willie.

‘You’re not married to Spencer Prendergast by any chance, are you?’

‘Yes! That’s right!’ said Hortense. She leant forward confidentially. ‘Spencer is a very important person in the golf club,’ she told Trevor.

‘Trevor owns the golf club,’ said Willie, dryly.

‘Oh, good heavens, do you?’ said Hortense, with a giggle. ‘You must be really, really important!’

‘Oh, no,’ began Trevor. ‘You see…’

‘I say,’ said Hortense, ‘you won’t say anything to Spencer, will you?’

‘Of course not!’ replied Trevor.

‘Spencer can be just the teeniest bit jealous sometimes,’ explained Hortense. ‘But Willie sounded very lonely on the telephone,’ said Hortense, looking at her companion.

‘I was lonely,’ said Willie, looking at Hortense. ‘Until we met.’

‘Isn’t he a darling?’ asked Hortense.

‘Oh, absolutely,’ agreed Trevor.

‘I came over to cheer him up,’ said Hortense. She leant forward, as though pretending that Willie wasn’t there. ‘He told me about his marital troubles,’ she mouthed.

‘You certainly cheered me up!’ said Willie. He put his arm around her and kissed her.

‘The break up has devastated him, you know!’ mouthed Hortense to Trevor.

‘Yes, so I gather,’ said Trevor.

‘He asked me if I’d like to play a round with him!’ said Hortense. She looked at Willie and punched him again. ‘I said he was a very naughty boy.’ She giggled.

‘Yes’ said Trevor, ‘Willie can be a very naughty boy, can’t you Willie?’ Trevor shot a glance at his friend. ‘I think perhaps I should just pop along to the practice ground and knock a few balls about,’ he added.

‘Great idea!’ said Willie. ‘I’ll see you out there later.’ He suddenly remembered something and looked around the caravan. ‘Oh, by the way, a packet came for you.’

‘A packet? For me?’

‘There it is!’ said Willie, pointing. ‘On the draining board.’

Trevor took a couple of steps forward and picked up the packet. His name was scrawled in capital letters but he nevertheless recognised the writing. With the packet in one hand he picked up his golf bag and headed back towards the door.

‘Bye!’ cried Hortense. ‘I’ll try to cheer him up a bit more for you.’

‘Goodbye!’ said Trevor, struggling with the door. ‘I’m sure you’ll manage to do that.’

When he got outside Trevor opened the packet and tipped the contents out onto his hand. The packet contained a bracelet, a brooch, a ring, three letters, two postcards and a dozen colour photographs in a white envelope. There was also a letter from Sylvia. It didn’t take long to read.

Dear Trevor,

I am returning the things you gave me and everything I have which reminds me of you. There isn’t much. My mother has taken the sweater you bought me last Christmas to the Oxfam shop.

Yours sincerely

Sylvia Instow

Trevor looked at the stuff in his hand. Sylvia was right. There wasn’t much. He remembered the song: ‘Breaking up is hard to do’. He thought how wrong it was. Breaking up didn’t seem very hard at all. He felt nothing but relief. He dropped the letters and photographs into a nearby dustbin and slipped the jewellery into his pocket. Then, after taking two steps forward, he stopped, turned, took the jewellery out of his pocket and dropped that into the bin too. It hadn’t been expensive. Trevor realised that he felt happier than he had for a long time, and for a moment or two he felt rather guilty.

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Trevor spent the afternoon on the practice ground.

‘You be patient and the good shots will arrive,’ said Mr Schmidt as Trevor stabbed his seven iron into the ground six inches behind the ball. ‘You must relax.’

‘I am relaxed,’ insisted Trevor, through gritted teeth. ‘I am relaxed.’ He repeated this phrase silently to himself as though it were a magic prayer. He had an awful feeling that worrying about relaxing was making him more tense.

‘Try to keep your head and to play through the ball,’ said Mr Schmidt, as Trevor played an air shot.

‘Do those really count?’

‘Pardon?’

‘Do I really have to count a shot if I miss the ball completely?’

‘Of course!’

‘It doesn’t seem fair,’ protested Trevor, standing back from his ball for a moment. ‘If a marksman doesn’t pull the trigger it doesn’t count as a shot fired. In cricket if a bowler loses his stride and doesn’t bowl the ball it doesn’t count anything on the score.’

‘Cricket! Pah!’ said Mr Schmidt. ‘You English and your cricket.’

‘I still don’t think it’s really fair,’ muttered Trevor. He swung again. This time his club hit the ball which squirted off to the right, though it never rose more than a foot above the ground.

‘I seem to be getting worse instead of better,’ he moaned. ‘I haven’t hit a decent shot for ages.’

‘That is usual,’ said Mr Schmidt.

‘To get worse?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘When you know nothing the game seems easy,’ explained Mr Schmidt. ‘It is when you know more and discover that there is even more that you do not know that it becomes difficult.’

‘Then maybe I shouldn’t be taking lessons at all,’ said Trevor glumly but logically. He pulled another ball towards him, kept his head still, his elbow straight and his eye fixed firmly on the ball. Then he swung. The ball shot off to the left.

‘But then you will never any better get!’

‘But I’m not getting better!’ countered Trevor. ‘I’m getting worse!’

‘You must be patient!’ said Mr Schmidt, getting rather excited. ‘Try to imagine that your hips are a circle in the air and your club is a paintbrush.’

Trevor muttered a silent curse and pulled another ball towards him. This time the ball, smitten by his imaginary paintbrush, flew sixty feet straight up into the air and landed a few yards in front of him.

‘You see this is a good sign!’ said Mr Schmidt, enthusiastically.

‘What on earth do you mean?’ asked Trevor. ‘How can it be a good sign? I never know where the ball is going to go!’

‘This is good!’ insisted Mr Schmidt. ‘You have yet not acquired any bad habits or any constant faults.’

‘Not *yet*?’

‘Oh, all golfers have bad habits. It is the nature of the game. But we do not know what yours will be.’

‘And that is good?’

‘Oh yes!’ said Mr Schmidt emphatically. ‘The faults you develop may be very small, little teeny, weeny ones! You may a great golfer become.’

‘Really?’

‘Really!’

Trevor beamed. ‘Oh,’ he said. ‘That’s cheered me up a bit.’ He pulled another ball towards him, swung and hit it hard. But he hit across the ball and put so much spin on it that although it started off going straight ahead it suddenly veered sharply to the right and ended up in the deep rough on the right-hand side of the practice ground. He looked across at Mr Schmidt. ‘That’s the second one I’ve hit to the right,’ he said. ‘That doesn’t mean that there’s a pattern does it? There isn’t one particular fault coming through, is there?’

‘No!’ said the golf professional certainly. ‘Certainly not! You are still no better than you ought to be. You are blowing hot and cold and doing everything wrong.’

‘Oh, good,’ said Trevor, as he watched a ball skim across the grass like a flat stone skimming across a smooth surfaced pond. ‘That’s reassuring.’

CHAPTER TWELVE

Time was running out for Trevor. He had to satisfy his uncle's two requirements; first, to play a round in fewer than 100 strokes and, second, to beat a pair of golfers from the bank. He had been religiously practising every day and had encountered rather more disappointment than elation during his hours of practice. Nothing seemed to be getting easier, though even Trevor had to admit that the number of strokes he required to complete a hole was very gradually decreasing. Even so, there was very little time left. He had to attempt his uncle's first challenge.

'I've asked the professional to come round with me this afternoon,' he said to Willie as he ate lunch and Willie ate a late breakfast. 'I'm going to try to break 100. The bank is sending along an observer.'

'You'll do it easily!' said Willie, taking the lid off his sandwich and pouring brown sauce onto curly and slightly burnt strips of bacon. He took a bite out of the sandwich.

'Willie,' said Trevor wearily. 'If I break 100 it'll be a miracle.'

'Oh, don't be silly!' said Willie, with half a bacon sandwich crammed into his mouth. 'You'll do it easily!'

'I hope so,' said Trevor. 'I do hope so.' He felt his new responsibility keenly and was well aware that the lives of a lot of people were resting on his back. He paused. 'I say, Willie, would you make up the four with us?'

Willie swallowed, washed down his mouthful of bacon sandwich with half a mug full of tea and raised an eyebrow. 'This afternoon?'

'I'd appreciate it,' said Trevor.

A statuesque blonde squeezed out of the tiny shower room and struggled to hide her nakedness in a towel which was quite inadequate for the purpose. She tried to wrap the towel around her body but the two ends were a good nine inches apart.

'Do you want some breakfast before you go?' asked Willie.

The blonde pouted. 'Do I have to go?'

'I'm afraid so, darling!' said Willie. 'Trevor has just reminded me that I promised to play golf with him this afternoon.'

'Oh, Willie!' protested the blonde. 'Stay and play with me!'

'I'd love to, darling!' said Willie. He shrugged his shoulders. 'But…!'

Thirty minutes later the blonde wiggled her way towards a Mercedes coupe, turning to wave a hand to Willie and to blow him a kiss.

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'Thanks for coming, Willie,' said Trevor, as the two of them headed for the professional's caravan to collect Mr Schmidt and the representative from the bank. 'I appreciate it.'

'Don't mention it,' said Willie. 'I could do with a bit of a rest.'

Trevor, who had never known anyone like Willie, and wasn't at all sure that there was anyone else like Willie, pushed open the door to the professional's caravan and led the way into the shop. A tall, cadaverous-looking man in a bright red sweater and a pair of plaid trousers was standing by the counter signing a credit card slip. He wore the most amazing cap Trevor had ever seen; a cross between a deerstalker, a French beret and a flat cap.

'This is Victor Barclay,' said Gunther Schmidt, introducing the stranger. 'He vice-president is of a bank; the Mettleham…,' he paused and looked to Mr Barclay for help.

'The Mettleham Banking Corporation,' said Mr Barclay, hesitating for a moment and then holding out a limp, pink hand. Trevor and Willie both shook it.

'I must come back here when you have your closing down sale,' said the banker to the professional.

Mr Schmidt looked puzzled. 'My closing down sale? What is this?' He looked at Trevor for help. Trevor, as puzzled as the professional was, shrugged.

'You won't want a golf shop here when our bulldozers are busy preparing the ground for our industrial estate,' said Mr Barclay, with a thin smile. 'Maybe you'd like to talk to our people about taking a lease on a small factory unit. You could perhaps make golf tees.'

'A factory?' roared Mr Schmidt. 'I am a golf professional not a tee maker!'

'Of course you are,' said Mr Barclay, smirking.

'What a very nice piece of headgear,' said Willie, nodding towards the banker's hat in an attempt to defuse the situation. 'Most unusual, was it your father's?'

'My father's?'

'I just assumed that it must be something that had been handed down in your family,' said Willie.

'No,' said the banker, puzzled. He raised his eyes as though trying to examine his headgear. The hat made him look a complete plonker.

'It suits you,' said Willie.

***

Fifteen minutes later the four of them were standing on the first tee, and Trevor was about to play the most important round of golf of his life.

'Just remember what I told you and everything will be fine and dindy,' said Mr Schmidt to Trevor. 'Keep your eyes on the ball and your head still while you move it, keep your elbow straight until you bend it and do not forget the knees!'

'Dindy?' whispered Willie. 'What's dindy?'

'Dandy,' Trevor whispered back. 'I think he means dandy.'

'Oh,' said Willie. He frowned. 'And what does that mean?'

Trevor thought for a moment. 'I don't know,' he admitted.

The professional stabbed a tee into the ground, balanced a ball on it, pulled his driver out of his bag and used the latter to send the former two hundred and seventy five yards down the centre of the fairway. The banker stabbed a tee into the ground, balanced a ball on it, pulled a three wood out of his bag and used the latter to send the former two hundred and twenty yards down the left-hand side of the fairway. Willie stabbed a tee into the ground, balanced a ball on it, pulled a driver out of his bag and used the latter to send the former three hundred yards down the right-hand side of the fairway. His ball finished up in the light rough. Trevor looked around nervously, as though hoping that there might be someone else to play.

'Come on,' whispered the professional. 'Show us what you can do!'

Trevor took a tee from the pocket on the side of his golf bag and tried to push it into the ground. The tee bent as it hit a small stone. He took out another tee, found a softer piece of ground and stuck it in. Then he took out a ball, balanced it on the tee and paused.

'Good stuff so far,' said Willie, trying to relax his friend. The professional stared at Willie as if he was completely mad.

'Thanks,' said Trevor, wryly. He reached out towards his golf bag and grasped the head of his driver.

'Why not use an iron,' suggested Willie quietly.

'A driver!' said the professional firmly.

'That's a two stroke penalty,' said the Mr Barclay. The other three looked at him.

'Rule 8,' said the banker. 'If a player accepts advice which might influence his choice of club there is a two stroke penalty.'

'Oh come on!' said Willie. 'It wasn't really advice!'

'Two stroke penalty,' said Mr Barclay firmly. He made a mark on his card.

Trevor looked at Willie. Willie, scowling, shrugged. Trevor pulled out his driver, took a practice swing and then started his swing. At the top of his back swing Mr Barclay suddenly coughed. Trevor, disturbed by the noise, jerked uncontrollably and sent the ball skidding four or five yards off the left-hand edge of the tee. The ball came to rest deep in a clump of thick, coarse grass. It was unplayable. Trevor felt sweat beginning to run down his spine.

'Oh dear!' said Mr Barclay. 'I am sorry. I hope I didn't put you off!'

'The left knee!' hissed the professional. 'You forgot to bring your left knee round. And you must make a big circle with your hips.'

Trevor looked down and saw, with some relief, that his knee was where he had left it.

'That's another two stroke penalty,' said Mr Barclay. 'Advice from another player.' He made another note on his card.

'Well, at least it's gone in the right direction,' said Willie. 'I once managed to drive a ball that ended up eighty yards behind the tee. The bloke whose ankle it bounced off wasn't too pleased.' He paused. 'It takes great skill to hit a ball backwards,' he added, reflectively.

'What shall I do now?' asked Trevor, who wasn't in the mood for funny stories.

'You will have to take another ball off the tee,' said the banker with a big smile. 'You are now playing seven.'

'Seven!' groaned Trevor. He looked around. The professional, who looked very sad, nodded his agreement.

Suddenly, without warning, Willie fell to his knees, grasped his stomach and groaned in pain.

'What on earth's the matter?' asked Trevor, anxiously.

'Just my old trouble,' said Willie bravely. 'I've got some of my pills in the caravan,' he said, bent almost double. Bravely he stood up and started to shuffle off the tee. Instinctively, Trevor helped him.

'What is this?' demanded Mr Barclay as the two of them left the tee. 'Where do you think you are going?'

'The doctor said that if I take my pills the moment the pain starts I should be OK,' said Willie through clenched teeth, stopping and resting on his trolley. 'Otherwise…'

'What about the game?' demanded the banker, striding after them. 'Your attempt to break 100?' he said to Trevor's back.

'I'm sorry,' apologised Trevor, turning his head. 'I've got to go with my friend. I'll be back as soon as I can.'

'Shouldn't be more than half an hour,' said Willie. 'One way or another,' he added.

'Perhaps we could start again then?' asked Trevor.

'But we've already started!' insisted Mr Barclay. 'You've taken seven and you aren't off the tee yet.'

'I'm sorry,' said Trevor. 'But surely you don't expect me to let my friend go back to the caravan alone?'

'Tomorrow maybe back you could come?' suggested Mr Schmidt.

'I can't just take whole days away from the bank!' said the Mr Barclay.

'I'll be OK when I've had my pills,' said Willie weakly. 'Maybe we could abandon that start and have another go in half an hour's time?'

The banker scowled. 'I suppose so,' he agreed at last.

When they got back to the caravan Trevor helped Willie up the steps. 'You sit down,' he said as he started to hunt around. 'Where are they?' he asked, suddenly realising that he didn't have the foggiest idea where to look.

'Where are what?' asked Willie, sitting on one of the bench seats.

'Your pills, of course!' Trevor stared at Willie. 'Are you all right?' he asked, for Willie was no longer crouching double.

'I'm fine, thanks,' said Willie, grinning broadly. 'Marvellous recovery!' He rubbed his stomach.

Trevor stared at him, opened his mouth and then shut it again. 'There wasn't anything the matter with you, was there?'

'Well that banker was making me feel a little nauseous,' said Willie.

'But there wasn't any pain at all was there?'

Willie shrugged. 'It depends on how you define pain.'

'I bet there aren't even any pills, are there?'

'I think there's a box of indigestion tablets in my bag somewhere,' said Willie. 'Come on, Trevor. If I hadn't done something you'd have started off trying to go round in 92 not 99!'

Trevor stared at Willie and looked around as though frightened that someone might overhear. 'But…leaving the tee like that…it wasn't exactly according to the rules was it?'

'We didn't break any rules,' said Willie. 'We just abandoned that round and we'll start another one in half an hour's time.'

Trevor scratched his head.

'That empty suit from the bank isn't going to do you any favours,' said Willie. 'He wants you to fail just as much as you want to win. He coughed deliberately while you were taking your first shot. It wasn't against the rules but it wasn't exactly playing the game in the proper spirit, was it? And then all that stuff about a two stroke penalty…!'

Trevor thought about it and nodded. 'You're right,' he said. 'He's obviously prepared to do anything to make sure that the bank gets the golf course.'

'One other thing: can you have a word with Gunther Schmidt and get him to sit out the next attempt,' said Willie.

'Oh, dear,' said Trevor. 'Really? He'll be terribly disappointed.'

'He'll cost you the match if you don't,' warned Willie. 'He won't be able to resist offering you advice. That's what he does for a living.'

Trevor thought about it for a moment. 'I suppose you're right,' he agreed. He couldn't imagine Mr Schmidt playing a hole of golf without offering advice to everyone within earshot.

'By the time you get to the first green you'll have a score of at least 200 against your name in penalties alone,' said Willie. 'You won't stand a chance.'

'Mr Schmidt gives everyone advice,' said Trevor. 'He can't help it.'

'I know,' agreed Willie. 'But no one else's score matters. Your score does. Remember, you aren't playing against the banker. All you've got to do is break 100.'

Trevor stood up. 'You're right,' he agreed, moving towards the door. 'You stay there and look ill for a few minutes while I have a word with him.'

Much to Trevor's surprise the professional understood. 'You are right,' he sighed. 'I talk too much. I am a lot of chiefs and not enough Indians.'

'It isn't that I mind at all,' said Trevor. 'I'm very grateful to you for your help. I wish you could be there advising me. It's just…'

'I know, I know!' said the professional. 'The rules, the rules. You do not have to beat the bushes.' He sounded strangely Jewish, a trick that isn't easy for a man with an accent like Goebbels. He reached out and patted Trevor on the shoulder. 'Good luck!' he said intently. He looked around, as though to make sure that no one was listening.

'And make sure you bend your knees otherwise your game will come apart.'

'I will,' promised Trevor. He shook hands with the professional and walked slowly back towards the caravan to collect Willie.

'Mr Dukinfield!' he heard someone call. He turned and saw Captain Jarrold standing on the clubhouse steps waving to him.

Trevor hurried over. 'What is it?' he asked anxiously.

'There's someone on the telephone for you, sir,' said Captain Jarrold.

'Trevor,' said Trevor. 'Do call me Trevor.'

'There's someone on the telephone for you, Trevor,' said Captain Jarrold rather uncomfortably.

'Oh dear,' said Trevor. 'I really can't. Not at the moment. Do you know who it is?'

'It's someone from the national press, sir, er Trevor,' said Captain Jarrold. 'She did give her name but I'm afraid I can't remember it. I think she said she was from the *Daily Globe*.'

'Would you tell her I've emigrated?' asked Trevor.

Captain Jarrold frowned. 'Are you thinking of emigrating, sir?'

But Trevor had disappeared back into his caravan.

'Ye Gods, man, what the hell have you got in this bag?' demanded Willie, meeting Trevor just inside the caravan door and handing him his bag. 'Do you really need all these clubs?'

'Mr Schmidt said I would,' replied Trevor.

'You won't need that,' said Willie, taking out Trevor's number one wood and standing it up in the comer of the caravan. 'Nor that,' he added, removing the number two wood. 'Nor these,' he went on, putting Trevor's number one and two irons next to the two woods. 'Most golfers would play much better if they took their woods out of their bags and used them as bean sticks.'

'What on earth am I going to use to drive with?' asked Trevor. 'The bag?'

'Use a number three or four wood or, better still, a three iron,' said Willie. 'How often do you hit a drive three hundred yards up the centre of the fairway?'

Trevor stared at him.

'How often?'

Trevor shrugged and looked uncomfortable. 'Well…' he mumbled.

'Never?' suggested Willie.

'More or less,' admitted Trevor reluctantly. 'Roughly.'

'Exactly,' said Willie. 'If you've going to go round in under 100 you've got to play percentage golf - playing safe shots whenever you can. Imagine you're playing a hole that is three hundred and fifty yards. You have brilliant luck and instead of going into the trees on the left or the rough on the right your drive goes two hundred and twenty yards straight down the middle of the fairway. You've got a second shot of a hundred and thirty yards. Could you put that shot close to the pin?'

'Of course not!'

'Could you put it on the green?'

'Sometimes,' said Trevor. 'Not often,' he admitted. 'I'd be happy to try to get it close to the green.'

'So you'd be happy if you got on the green in three?'

'Oh yes!'

'Right. Now, if you drive one hundred and eighty yards with your three iron - a shot that you are much more likely to be able to make - you should still be able to reach the green in three. Right?'

Trevor frowned. 'Yes. I suppose so.'

'So using a wood from the tee doesn't help you much, even on the rare occasions when you connect properly?'

'I suppose not.'

'Imagine that you're playing a two hundred yard par three. Could you hit the green with a wood from the tee?'

Trevor laughed. 'No. Hardly ever.'

'You'd probably end up in a bunker or in a clump of bushes?'

Trevor thought about his answer for a moment. 'Yes,' he admitted.

'If you used a three iron from the tee what would happen?'

'I'd almost certainly be short of the green.'

'Yes. But where would your ball be?'

'Oh, there's a good chance that it would be on the fairway.'

'So you'd have a fairly straightforward second shot to the green?'

'I see what you mean' said Trevor.

'Now, what other clubs do you usually make a mess of?'

‘That pitching wedge,’ said Trevor. ‘I don’t know whether it’s the club or me. But I hate it.’

‘Fair enough, we’ll leave it behind,’ said Willie.

‘But Mr Schmidt says I’ll never be any good with it if I don’t use it,’ said Trevor.

‘And he’s absolutely right,’ said Willie. ‘But this isn’t a practice round. This is for real. What about your middle irons?’

‘Oh, I get on OK with those,’ said Trevor. ‘Well, except for the four iron. I always seem to fluff my shots when I play with a four iron.’

Willie took Trevor’s four iron out of his bag. ‘Right,’ he said. ‘That’s better. ‘Now we’ve just got the clubs you know you can play with.’ He smiled. ‘The bad news is that you can’t blame your clubs if you aren’t playing well, can you?’

‘No,’ agreed Trevor sadly.

Willie stopped as though suddenly struck by a thought. ‘You hadn’t ever met that banker before, had you?’

‘No.’

‘We missed a good opportunity there,’ said Willie, rather sadly.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Since they don’t know what you look like I could have played the round for you.’

Trevor stared at him. ‘But that would have been downright dishonest!’ he protested.

‘You’re right,’ sighed Willie, though clearly with some regret. He jumped out of the caravan and arched off towards the first tee with Trevor striding along behind him.

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The three of them stood on the first tee again.

‘Are you sure you’re going to be all right now?’ the banker asked Willie, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

‘Oh yes, I think so,’ said Willie. ‘Thank you very much for your concern,’ he added politely.

‘And your professional definitely isn’t joining us?’

‘No, he suddenly remembered that he’s got another engagement,’ said Trevor.

‘What a pity,’ said Mr Barclay, rather coldly. ‘I’m sure we would have all benefited from his advice.’

Willie stepped forward, stuck a tee into the ground, balanced a ball on the tee and took his driver out of his bag. A few seconds later the ball, which had headed off apparently straight down the fairway, was circling around to the left. A few seconds after that it was crashing into a small copse.

‘I wish I could do that,’ thought Trevor, who was still enough of a novice to be impressed by length more than accuracy. ‘Well played!’ he said. Willie, who was rather proud of the shot, for he had spent many months perfecting his deliberate hook, said nothing audible but seemed to mumble something under his breath.

The banker played next. His ball landed right in the middle of the fairway two hundred and fifty yards away.

‘I was going to suggest that we had a little side bet,’ said Willie. ‘Just the two of us.’ He shrugged. ‘But I think you’re going to be too good for me.’

The banker looked at him.

‘Just to make things a bit more interesting,’ said Willie.

‘I suppose you’re angling for odds?’ sneered Mr Barclay, if a man in a ridiculous hat can sneer.

‘Odds?’ asked Willie, as though he’d never heard the word before.

‘What’s your handicap?’ asked the banker.

‘I haven’t got an official handicap,’ admitted Willie. He leaned over towards the banker and spoke confidentially. ‘But some days I can play to 24.’

‘A straight game and straight odds,’ said the banker, whose handicap was nine. ‘Medal play.’

‘That’s damned decent of you,’ said Willie. ‘Five hundred?’

Mr Barclay stared at him. ‘Five hundred pounds?’

‘Sorry,’ said Willie with a shrug. ‘I’m a bit strapped for cash at the moment. I could maybe manage seven hundred and fifty if you like.’

The banker, who had gone white, swallowed hard. ‘No,’ he said. ‘Five hundred will be fine.’

Trevor, who had been listening to this exchange in disbelief opened his mouth to remind Willie that he didn’t have a spare five pounds let alone a spare £500 but closed it and then used a three iron to put his first shot eighty yards down the middle of the fairway, just ahead of the ladies’ first tee.

‘Good shot!’ said Willie, picking up his bag and heading off up the fairway. Trevor was quite pleased with it too. The view from the first tee was undoubtedly the most daunting on the course and his shot had missed a large patch of mixed gorse and heather.

‘So,’ said the banker, as he and Trevor followed in Willie’s footsteps. ‘Are you beginning to wish you’d taken the money when you inherited the golf club?’

'No,' said Trevor, quite firmly.

Mr Barclay, clearly surprised, looked at him.

'I like the club,' said Trevor. 'I've grown very attached to it.'

'That's rather a pity, isn't it?' said the banker.

'What do you mean?' asked Trevor.

'It won't be long before we'll have our bulldozers churning it all up.'

'Won't you feel guilty about destroying a wonderful golf course like this?'

'Not in the slightest,' said Mr Barclay. 'We'll make a lot of money out of it. Aren't you going to play your ball?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'You just passed your ball,' said the banker, stopping. He nodded back in the direction from which they'd come.

Trevor turned and looked. The top of his ball was just visible. He walked back to it. 'Someone has trodden on it!' he complained.

'Oh no, how terrible!' said Mr Barclay. 'Is it playable?'

Trevor looked at it. 'Just about,' he said, rather miserably. He felt sure that the banker had trodden on it deliberately but knew he couldn't prove anything. He selected a seven iron, choosing this club on the grounds that the blade was closest to that of a garden hoe, the tool which would really have been most appropriate. He then took an almighty swipe at the ball and moved both it and enough grass to turf a suburban lawn a yard or so along the fairway.

'Two,' said Mr Barclay. 'Not doing terribly well, are you?'

'I can count my own score,' said Trevor.

'I'm sure you can manage with the smaller numbers,' said the banker, rather smugly. 'But at the rate you're going you'll need a calculator before long.' He folded his arms and stared as Trevor tried to decide what club to use for his next shot. If there was one thing Trevor hated it was having someone watch him. He put the seven iron back into his bag and took out a three iron. Mr Barclay raised an eyebrow and pulled a face.

'What's the matter?' demanded Trevor.

'What do you mean?'

'Why are you looking like that?'

'Oh don't mind me,' said the banker, whose obvious attempts to suppress a snigger had resulted in the production of a very clearly defined smirk. 'Don't mind me at all.'

Trevor, trying hard to concentrate on the ball and to ignore the smirking banker, took careful aim, kept his head steady, brought the club head down in a perfect arc and hit the ball with enough force to send it across half a dozen counties.

Unfortunately, the result was a disappointment. The ball, rebellious and inconsiderate thing that it was, skidded and jumped and bounced and travelled about twenty yards in a diagonal direction.

'You're certainly making progress,' said Mr Barclay condescendingly. He looked at his watch. 'I could perhaps pop back to the clubhouse. I could have a cup of tea while I'm waiting to play my next shot.'

Trevor felt himself turning red, though he wasn't sure whether the colour was inspired by anger or embarrassment.

'How are you doing?' asked Willie, running up and wheezing slightly from his exertions.

'Terrible,' replied Trevor, gloomily.

'I think we'll hire your friend to help us with the earth moving,' said the banker. 'He digs bigger holes than any workman I've ever seen.'

'I'm pleased to say that I found my ball!' announced Willie. 'I'll have to take a drop, of course, but at least I don't need to play another tee shot.'

The banker looked at him disbelievingly. 'You found your ball!'

'Yes! Lucky wasn't it?'

The banker scowled. 'Are you sure it was your ball?'

'Absolutely!' said Willie. 'A Horton 2. Do you want to come and watch me take the drop?' Trevor who knew that Willie had driven off with a Pilton 45 held his breath but the banker said nothing. For a moment Mr Barclay didn't seem to know what to do; whether to stay and continue to try to put Trevor off his game or to go and keep an eye on Willie. For the first time Trevor realised why Willie had initiated the bet with the banker.

In the end the banker, probably deciding that he could trust Trevor to make a mess of his round by himself, followed Willie back across the fairway. Without the banker distracting him and ruining his fragile confidence Trevor succeeded in putting his ball on the short plateau, only about a hundred and eighty yards from the pin. His next shot, also with a three iron, landed at the bottom of the fairway, had a lucky bounce over the stream and ran onto the front edge of the green. Three putts meant that Trevor had completed the first hole in eight strokes - four over par. It wasn’t a good beginning but it wasn’t quite the disaster it could have been. Willie and the banker halved the hole in five.

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‘What the hell are you going to do if you lose?’ Trevor whispered to Willie as they walked to the second tee. The banker had gone on ahead.

‘What on earth makes you think I’m going to lose?’ asked Willie.

‘You’re playing for £500!’ Trevor reminded him. ‘And you haven’t got £500!’ he added, quite unnecessarily.

‘This guy cheats,’ said Willie quietly. ‘No cheat is going to beat me at golf.’

‘How can you be so sure?’

‘Because I cheat better than anyone else,’ said Willie firmly. ‘Besides, if I hadn’t got the guy involved in a wager he’d spend every minute trying to put you off. This way he’ll be busy trying to keep an eye on me and worrying about his own game.’

‘I say!’ said Mr Barclay, leaving his trolley by the side of the second tee and climbing up to take a look down towards the green. ‘This is going to be quite a challenge!’

‘I’m glad you like it!’ said Trevor.

‘I meant to our bulldozers,’ said the banker. ‘But I hope you’ve got plenty of balls with you!’ He reached into his bag and pulled out a nine iron.

‘Pardon?’ said Trevor, frowning.

Mr Barclay nodded towards the thick patch of gorse which lay between the tee and the green. ‘A chap of your ability should be able to fill that with balls,’ he said. He dropped his ball down onto the grassy tee, took aim and carefully pitched the ball up into the air. It went so high it seemed to hang in mid air for a moment before plummeting down to land on the green.

‘Not bad,’ said the banker. He stepped aside for Willie to take his shot. ‘Still using the Horton 2?’ he asked. He bent down and looked at Willie’s ball as he spoke. ‘Fiver says you can’t get inside my shot,’ he said.

‘Done!’ said Willie, without hesitation.

When it was Trevor’s turn to play his tee shot he stepped into position, put his ball on a tee to reduce his chances of just fluffing it into the gorse, took aim with a seven iron and watched in delight as his ball landed high on the bank at the back of the green. He didn’t mind being over the back of the green on this hole. He knew that if he left the second green with nothing worse than a four on his card he would have done well.

‘That’s a fiver you owe me,’ said the banker a minute or two later.

‘Take it out of the £500 you’ll owe me at the end of the round,’ answered Willie.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Trevor did take four on the second hole, and with the banker's interest divided between himself and Willie he played with steadily increasing confidence.

Two hours later, when the three of them stood on the 15th tee, Trevor had taken 80 shots and Willie had taken just two shots more than Mr Barclay. Trevor had to complete the final four holes of the course in 19 strokes or less. It wasn't an easy target; but it was possible.

The main hazard on the 15th hole is the stream. It is quite wide and runs straight across the fairway at a distance of about two hundred and twenty yards from the tee. A ball which pitches short of it is far more likely to bounce into it (or, at least, into the bulrushes and water irises which grow along the banks on either side) than to bounce over it. To be sure of clearing the stream a player really needs to be confident that he can hit a drive which will carry at least two hundred and thirty yards from the tee.

Willie knew he could make this shot easily, Mr Barclay thought he might be able to and Trevor was quietly confident that he not only couldn't carry the stream but that he couldn't even reach the water, however cleanly he hit his drive. Since golf is, like all other sports, a game which is very largely played in the mind, Willie's shot cleared the stream and landed around a hundred yards from the green, the banker's tee shot landed about ten yards short of the stream and bounced straight into the water and Trevor's shot, which travelled only about a hundred and fifty yards (which doesn't sound a lot but which was perfectly acceptable as far as Trevor was concerned) ended up around seventy yards short of the hazard.

Trevor cleared the stream with a lofted five iron shot which landed about a hundred and ten yards away from the green. Just to be on the safe side the banker had played a second shot from the tee which was just as well since his first ball wasn't anywhere to be found. His second tee shot was, quite sensibly but perhaps a touch overcautiously, played with a four iron. It landed a good forty yards short of the stream, and around two hundred yards short of the putting surface. It was hardly surprising that his next shot still didn't reach the green. This meant that he had played four shots on a par four hole and still wasn't ready to start using his putter.

Seeing a chance to claw back his deficit, Willie played a beautifully delicate seven iron approach shot. His ball landed on the front edge of the green on the third bounce, ran across the green and stopped no more than twelve feet from the pin. Willie was now on the green in two shots and in an excellent position to take the lead.

Trevor, only too well aware that he really needed to put his next shot safely onto the green, watched with dismay as his ball, hit perfectly straight but badly aimed, pitched straight into one of the horseshoe-shaped bunkers at the side of the green.

The banker, looking remarkably happy despite his own predicament, played a very nicely judged little chip shot which ran on and on, threatened the pin and eventually ended up no more than four feet past the hole.

Trevor, his mouth dry and his hands clammy with sweat, walked up to the bunker and stared at his ball in dismay. The last golfer to land in the bunker had left the rake lying in the sand and Trevor's ball was lying up against the handle. Trevor didn't know enough about the rules to know whether he was allowed to move the rake or his ball. Either way the shot looked nigh on impossible as the banks of the bunker were over three feet high.

'Don't worry about it,' said a voice. 'Just remember we can always come back out tomorrow if you don't break 100 today.'

Trevor looked up and smiled thinly at Willie. 'Thanks,' he said. He felt in his heart that he had played as well as he could and that if he didn't break 100 on this round then he wouldn't be able to do it tomorrow.

'What was that?' demanded Mr Barclay, who had been out of earshot. 'Was that advice?'

'I was just asking my friend if he'd come out with me tonight to help spend your £500,' said Willie.

The banker immediately went rather red and scowled at them both.

'You do have the cash, don't you?' said Willie.

'You haven't won yet,' muttered Mr Barclay, through clenched teeth. 'Not by a long chalk.'

'Does anyone know the rule about rakes in bunkers?' asked Trevor. 'Can I move that thing or do I have to play my ball where it lies?'

'It's an impediment,' said the banker.

'It certainly is,' agreed Trevor.

'It's not an impediment,' said Willie quickly. 'It's an obstruction.'

'What does it matter what we call it?' asked Trevor, in desperation. 'It's a rake!' he said. 'But can I move it?'

'You can if it's an obstruction,' said Willie. 'But not if it's an impediment. A rake is an obstruction.'

'It's an impediment,' said the banker. 'You've got to play the ball as it lies.'

‘Don’t talk rubbish!’ said Willie. ‘He can move the damned thing out of the way.’ He bent down to examine the ball and the rake more closely. ‘They aren’t touching,’ he said to Trevor. ‘You can move the rake.’

Trevor stepped forward and started to bend down to move the rake.

‘If you move it there’s a two stroke penalty!’ shrieked the banker.

Trevor looked across at Willie.

‘Move it,’ said Willie.

‘Leave it alone,’ said Mr Barclay firmly.

‘Trust me,’ said Willie. ‘Rule 24.’

Trevor realised that he was sweating.

‘We ought to ask the club secretary for a ruling,’ said the banker.

‘Maybe we should ask,’ said Trevor, hesitantly. ‘I can’t afford to lose two strokes.’

Willie sighed. The banker looked very pleased with himself.

‘He’s just trying to put you off,’ said Willie. ‘If we fetch the secretary it’ll be dark by the time we finish.’

‘I think we should,’ said Trevor.

‘I’ll go and fetch Wing Commander Trout,’ offered the banker.

‘You stay here with me,’ said Willie, reluctantly accepting the situation. ‘Trevor, you go. But be as quick as you can.’

***

It took Trevor fifteen minutes to get back to the clubhouse and ten minutes to find Wing Commander Trout. It then took the secretary seven minutes to find a copy of the *Rules of Golf* and it took Trevor and Wing Commander Trout twenty two minutes to walk back to the 15th green. By the time they got there it was beginning to go dark.

‘Where on earth have you been?’ demanded Willie, as they appeared out of the gloaming.

‘I was as quick as I could!’ protested Trevor, who was still slightly breathless after his exertions.

‘What’s your ruling?’ asked the banker, pointing to the offending rake. ‘Is it an impediment or an obstruction?’

‘It’s a loose obstruction,’ said Wing Commander Trout immediately. ‘Rule 24.’ He opened his rule book and read out the relevant paragraph.

Willie bent down, carefully picked up the rake and tossed it onto the grass by the side of the bunker. ‘There you are,’ he said to Trevor. ‘Play your shot!’

‘If I were you…’ began the secretary.

‘Shut up!’ screamed Trevor and Willie at the same moment. The secretary looked at them both as if they’d gone mad.

‘Sorry,’ apologised Trevor. ‘Rule 8.’

The secretary looked puzzled. ‘Rule 8?’

‘Advice from anyone except a player’s own partner or caddie incurs a two stroke penalty,’ explained Willie.

‘Good heavens!’ said Wing Commander Trout. ‘You are taking this seriously!’

‘Thank our friend here,’ said Willie, inclining a head in the banker’s direction.

‘Oh,’ said the secretary. ‘I see.’ He turned to Willie. ‘How’s he doing?’ he enquired in a whisper.

‘He’ll do it,’ said Willie. ‘He’ll do it.’

The banker snorted. Trevor, sand iron in hand, gulped noisily.

‘He’ll break 100,’ insisted Willie.

Trevor climbed into the bunker.

‘I don’t think I can watch,’ murmured Wing Commander Trout to Willie. He turned and hurried away back down to the clubhouse.

Trevor climbed out of the bunker again and stared at his ball.

‘There is a time limit on shots,’ said Mr Barclay.

‘Shut up,’ said Willie. ‘You’ve just delayed things by an hour.’

‘How many shots have I had?’ asked Trevor.

‘Three,’ answered the banker immediately.

‘And this is a par four?’

‘Yes.’

Trevor had been secretly thinking of playing backwards out of the bunker and then chipping up onto the green off the fairway. But he didn’t have enough shots left. He knew that if he took more than six then his chances of breaking 100 were well and truly gone. He had to try to get the ball out of the bunker and up onto the green in a single shot. Not only that - but he had to get the ball as close to the hole as possible.

He walked back into the bunker.

‘Good luck,’ murmured Willie.

‘Very difficult shot,’ said the banker. ‘Very difficult indeed. So easy to hit the ball into the side of the bunker from where you are lying.’

‘You can do it,’ said Willie.

Trevor, trying to close his mind to all this, gripped his sand iron and tried to visualise the ball flying up out of the bunker, landing on the green and rolling steadily up towards the flag.

He aimed at a spot about an inch behind his ball, closed his eyes and played the shot.

‘Terrific shot!’ he heard Willie cry. ‘Marvellous. Brilliant. Gary Player couldn’t have done better.’

Trevor opened his eyes in time to see his ball come to a halt no more than two yards from the pin.

The banker said nothing.

Willie finished the hole with two putts for a par four. The banker holed his putt for a two over par six. And although his ball bobbled about before eventually dropping into the hole from the far side, Trevor sank his putt to complete the hole in a quite remarkable five shots.

The banker and Willie were now all square.

And Trevor had taken 85 shots with three holes to play.

***

The 16th hole is widely regarded as one of the most difficult on the course. If you hit a decent tee shot then the hole holds few terrors. But even quite low handicap players often feel satisfied if they leave the green with no more than a four on their cards.

Theoretically the hole is a fairly simple par three. The distance from the men’s tee to the centre of the green is a fraction over two hundred yards and the green itself is quite large and flat. There are no bunkers and no trees guarding the green.

What makes the hole particularly tricky is the twin combination of a stream running in front of the green and a thick circle of bushes around the back of the green. Most long handicap players automatically either take too big a club or hit the ball too hard in an attempt to make sure that they clear the stream. All too often the result is that their shots clear the stream *and* the green, and their balls are lost forever in the bushes. Captain Jarrold once spent a whole Saturday sitting in a deckchair beside the 16th tee and reported afterwards that nearly half the golfers who played the hole had to play a second tee shot because their first had landed in one of the two hazards.

Willie changed clubs twice before settling on a three iron. But, wary of hitting through the green, he under hit and could only stand and watch as his ball landed straight in the stream. The banker, not bothering to hide a broad grin, watched with delight as his ball pitched on the front of the green and rolled on to within fifteen feet of the pin. After much heart searching Trevor decided that he would play what he knew that Willie would describe a percentage shot. He used a five iron and his ball landed forty yards short of the stream.

‘Chicken,’ muttered Mr Barclay.

‘Sensible shot!’ said Willie to his friend.

As he walked off the tee Trevor knew that even if he was to play a round in even par he would never feel under more pressure. He suspected that even if he was playing for the Open Championship the tension could not be any greater. He felt proud of himself for facing the pressure successfully; pleased that he hadn’t cracked. He used a nine iron for his second shot and decided to aim at the right-hand side of the green which was slightly deeper than the rest of the putting surface.

It may have been overconfidence or it may have been carelessness, or maybe his knees didn’t move properly or perhaps his head moved a fraction of an inch because he was so eager to see the result of his shot. Whatever the cause, the shot was one of the worst he had played during the whole round.

As the ball, hit only with the bottom of the club head, rolled and bounced and skipped across the fairway Trevor thought for a brief moment that it was going to make it across the stream. But it didn’t. It disappeared into the water without a splash and with hardly a ripple. It was a nightmare shot which Trevor would see a thousand times.

‘Jolly good shot,’ murmured the banker.

And that was a mistake.

For at that moment, which should have been the lowest moment of his life, Trevor vowed to himself that come what may the bulldozers would never flatten the Butterbury Ford Golf Club. Instead of being demoralised by his terrible shot he felt his determination renewed. He took hold of his trolley and strode forward to the stream.

With the aid of his eight and nine irons he managed to drag his ball out of the bank onto the nearside bank of the stream. Willie had already rescued his own ball. The two of them were doomed to exceed par because of the penalties they had accumulated (though theoretically Willie could still make a par if he chipped straight into the hole).

Willie’s chip pitched on the back edge of the green and just ran off into the slightly longer fringe of grass which circled the green. Willie knew that, whereas the banker was likely to be able to complete the hole in par, he was going to have his work cut out to get down in five.

Trevor's chip, hit low and hard, and travelling far too fast, hit the flagstick on its second bounce and dropped straight into the hole. Trevor had finished the hole in a one over par four and now had ten strokes in which to complete the last two holes.

Predictably, the banker completed the hole in three.

Willie took five and was now two strokes behind.

***

The banker's tee shot on the 17th was perfect; long, straight and as close as was possible to the rough on the right-hand side of the fairway. When his ball finally stopped rolling, the banker was in a perfect position to play a long second shot to the green.

Trevor, who used a three wood, sliced his tee shot. His ball landed in thick rough on the right-hand side of the fairway. He consoled himself with the thought that it could have been worse. If he'd hooked the shot the ball would have landed in gorse and heather. And if he had driven the ball further a sliced tee shot would have put him in Poacher's Lake. If he had a decent lie he would, he thought, still stand a chance of reaching the green in three. Although his fluke at the 16th had kept him in with a chance to break 100 he couldn't afford to make any more mistakes.

Willie, playing last, and still angry with himself for landing in the stream on the 16th, wound himself up and hit his tee shot with great venom. The ball travelled over two hundred and fifty yards before it even hit the ground and rolled another fifty or sixty yards before it stopped. It finally came to rest in the light rough on the left-hand side of the fairway. It was now so dark that Willie couldn't see his ball.

Trevor's second shot was (with the possible exception of the fluke at the 16th) one of the best shots of his round. His lie wasn't as bad as it might have been and the ball was sitting up very well in the long grass. Knowing that he had to get close to the green with his next shot he threw caution to the wind and took a four wood from his bag. His brave shot sent the ball clattering through the low bushes which studded the rough and scampering down and across the fairway. It finally came to rest no more than forty yards from the green. It was the first time he had ever played a wood from rough grass and he felt very pleased with himself.

Mr Barclay played a perfect second shot, curling very slightly to the left, and his ball landed on the green, bounced once and stopped quickly a yard from the back of the putting surface.

Willie knew that if he was going to stand a chance he had to hit the green with his next shot. Using a sand wedge he lifted the ball out of the rough and high over the trio of huge oak trees which stood between him and the green. The ball went so high that Willie had plenty of time to drop his club and run out sideways to see where it landed. To his absolute delight his ball landed right in the middle of the green, just a few yards from the pin. He knew that if he could hole the putt he would probably walk onto the last tee just one stroke behind the banker.

Trevor's third shot was almost as good as his second. His ball landed a yard in front of the green, bounced twice and then rolled gently forwards until it came to a rest six or seven feet from the pin. He had one putt for a par four.

Mr Barclay putted first. He misjudged both the pace of the green and the borrow and his ball ended up five feet away from the hole.

Willie's third shot and first putt was more successful. He just missed a birdie; his ball ending up no more than six inches away from the hole.

The banker missed his second putt and scored five; Trevor holed out in one, took a par four and halved the hole with Willie.

***

It was so dark when they left the 17th green that the three combatants found it difficult to find their way to the 18th tee.

'This is quite absurd,' said Mr Barclay, as they all stood on the 18th tee and stared out into the darkness of the night. 'We can't possibly play in this!'

'Are you conceding?' Willie asked him.

'No!' replied the banker instantly. 'I certainly am not.'

'Are you game to carry on?' Willie asked Trevor.

'Yes,' replied Trevor. 'Absolutely.' He knew that he had to complete the final hole in six in order to complete a round of 99. He didn't want to have to wait until the following morning to complete his round.

'It's all your fault that we're playing in the dark,' said Willie to the banker. 'Trevor and I are willing to carry on.'

'My fault! How do you make that out?'

'You were the one who insisted that we get a ruling on that rake in the bunker at the 15th,' Willie pointed out.

Mr Barclay sighed and muttered something inaudible.

Willie pulled his driver out of his bag, took a tee out of his trouser pocket, stepped forward and stuck the tee in the ground.

'It's his honour,' said the banker, nodding towards Trevor.

Trevor was surprised. 'Mine?'

'You two halved the last hole but he beat you on the previous hole,' explained the banker.

Rather to Trevor's surprise Willie didn't argue with the banker. Instead he simply picked up his tee and stepped back to allow Trevor to take the honour.

'Oh,' said Trevor, with a gulp. He had been hoping to follow Willie's direction from the tee. He really had very little idea where the green was. And he had little room for error. He took a three iron out of his bag, put a ball on a tee, took a practice swing, and then hit the ball into the darkness. The ball was lost from sight the moment it left the tee.

Much to Trevor's surprise when Willie stepped onto the tee he took a stance at an acute angle to the two tee markers. He was clearly aiming out to the right of the hole. Trevor was surprised because he strongly suspected that if Willie's ball went straight it would either land in thick rough or in the stream at the bottom of the hill. Trevor was also surprised that Willie was using a driver. He knew that the sensible, percentage shot would be an iron shot played down the hill towards the stream which ran across the middle of the fairway. And he knew that when it really mattered Willie always played the percentage shot. But Trevor suspected that Willie knew what he was doing so he said nothing.

The banker had clearly been watching Willie carefully. He too took a driver from his bag. And he too took a stance which meant that he was aiming way out to the right.

'I'm glad you went first,' said Mr Barclay, putting his driver back into his bag with a self-satisfied little smirk. 'I wouldn't have known to aim out over there.'

'I hope you held back on the shot and put a lot of hook into it,' said Willie.

Even in the semi-darkness it was possible to see the banker lose colour. 'What do you mean?'

'If you played that shot straight you've lost your ball,' said Willie with a grin.

The banker opened and shut his mouth several times without anything coming out. 'What a filthy, dirty, contemptible trick!' he managed eventually.' Willie shrugged, winked at Trevor and taking hold of his trolley handle walked off into the pitch black darkness in search of his ball. Trevor followed him.

'Wait!' called the banker. Willie and Trevor both turned. 'I'm going to play a second ball,' said the banker. The two friends stopped and moved to one side out of the way. Mr Barclay pulled a six iron out of his bag and played a gentle shot straight down the fairway. Willie turned to Trevor and grinned.

Five minutes later, however, it was the banker's turn to grin when Willie couldn't find his ball. It had been a clever idea to trick the banker into playing down the wrong line and Willie had executed the shot perfectly. His ball had flown straight for a hundred and fifty yards and had then hooked in viciously. It had ended up roughly in the middle of the fairway, a comfortable fifty yards short of the stream.

Part of Willie's downfall undoubtedly lay in the fact that because he had spent a good deal of time helping Trevor look for his ball he had become quite disorientated. By the time Willie had found Trevor's ball neither of them had any idea how far from the tee they were. The slope of the fairway told them that they had not yet reached the stream, and told them the direction of the green, but that was all.

'I'll have to play another ball from the tee,' said Willie miserably. 'That means I'll have to take an extra penalty for not playing a provisional ball. 'He sounded really fed up. Trevor had never seen him so down-hearted. 'I'd just drop another ball,' he confessed quietly, 'but that damned banker has taken to checking my ball and I've played my last Horton 2.'

'I can't find my ball,' Willie shouted out into the darkness. 'I'm going back to the tee.'

The banker's voice came out of the darkness somewhere behind them. 'That means you'll be playing your fourth shot.'

'I realise that,' Willie shouted back, rather crossly. 'I can count.'

'Just checking that you knew the rules,' shouted the banker. He sounded obscenely triumphant and full of self satisfaction. 'You'll no doubt be pleased to hear that I found my second ball. I've just played another nice little six iron shot down the hill.'

'Great,' murmured Willie to himself. He pulled a driver out of his bag.

'Is that sensible?' asked Trevor, in a whisper. 'Shouldn't you play safe with an iron?'

'I'd like to but I can't,' whispered Willie. 'I was a shot behind when we left the 17th green. I've got to win this hole.' He marched back up the hill, as miserable as a fat man on a diet, head bowed, while the banker and Trevor left their trolleys marking their balls and moved out to stand at the side of the fairway. A minute or two later they heard the face of Willie's driver collide with the ball and then, high overhead, the sound of the dimpled missile flying through the night sky.

The splash as the ball landed straight in the stream at the bottom of the hill may not have been audible back on the tee but it could certainly be heard where Trevor was standing.

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When the three of them finally stood together on the 18th green Trevor had, much to his surprise and delight, taken just three shots. He had undoubtedly been helped enormously by the fact that Willie had spent much time helping him look for and find his ball. He was the only one of the three who had suffered no penalty strokes. The banker, who had lost two balls, had taken nine strokes to reach the green. By the time he had reached a point where he could take his putter out of his bag Willie had lost three balls and had taken the same number of strokes. He was, therefore, still one stroke behind Mr Barclay.

It was now so dark that even on the green the three players could hardly see one another; they certainly couldn't see one another's balls.

Trevor's ball was on the front, right-hand corner of the green, about twenty-five feet away from the pin. Willie's, which had reached the putting surface after a beautifully played and quite spectacular, long iron shot from down near the stream, was right at the back of the green, about thirty feet from the pin. The banker's ball, about eighteen feet from the pin, was the closest of the three to the flag. After much discussion these distances were agreed and it was decided that Willie should putt first.

Willie knew that he had to go for the hole. If he was to stand a chance of winning the hole and squaring or winning the match he had to get down in two putts at most. The main problem he faced was neither the fact that the speed of the green was difficult to judge now that dew was beginning to form nor the fact that the borrows of the green were impossible to read in the darkness, but the fact that from where his ball lay he could not see the hole.

Under the circumstances he should have probably been pleased that his ball ended up no more than three feet past the hole. If he holed his remaining putt he would complete the hole in eleven strokes.

Trevor's first putt ended up about the same distance away from the hole as Willie's. He knew now that he had two shots to finish the hole in order to satisfy the first of his uncle's stipulations.

When it was the banker's turn to play he took a lighter out of his pocket, lit it and placed it down on the ground a couple of feet behind the hole. He looked up and smiled at Willie. 'You see,' he said smugly, 'when it comes down to it you're just not clever enough!' He then played a very nice shot and left his ball no more than two feet from the hole.

'Shall I finish it off?' he asked, picking up his lighter, closing it and slipping it into his pocket.

'If you like,' said Willie. He didn't seem as miserable as Trevor expected him to be.

Mr Barclay duly put his ball into the hole, picked it up and stood back. 'I think you'll find that's £500 you owe me,' he said. 'No,' he said, suddenly holding up a hand. '£505! I almost forgot our small bet on the first.' He held out a hand. 'Have you got the cash on you?'

'Don't be so hasty!' said Willie. 'I haven't finished my round yet.'

'There isn't a lot of point,' said the banker. 'You can't beat my score.'

'Oh yes I can,' said Willie. 'You haven't added on your penalty points yet.'

Mr Barclay stared at him and frowned. 'What the hell do you mean?' he asked. 'I lost two balls and I've counted two penalty strokes.'

'Plus two penalty strokes on the green,' said Willie quickly.

The banker peered at him through the darkness. 'What for?'

'The lighter,' explained Willie. 'Rule 8.'

The banker, suddenly realising that something was seriously wrong, took a pace or two forwards. He was still holding his putter but his grip had changed so that he almost seemed to be holding it as a weapon. 'What are you talking about?'

'Using an object or person to indicate line of putt while playing a stroke,' said Willie. 'Rule 8.2. Penalty two strokes. If I hole this putt I've won by one stroke and you owe me £495.'

Mr Barclay blanched. He was so white he looked like a ghost. 'It was only there so that I could see,' he protested. But there was no venom in his voice and Trevor knew that his heart wasn't in the protest.

'The lighter was directly behind the hole,' Willie reminded him. 'It clearly helped you judge the line of your putt. The fact that it was lit is almost irrelevant. There would still have been a penalty if you hadn't lit it.'

For a moment the banker didn't say anything.

'You've still got to sink your putt,' he said at last. 'If you miss then the match is halved and you don't win anything.'

Willie looked down at his ball and then looked at Trevor's. He turned to Trevor. 'Whose ball is closest?'

'I think they're both about the same distance away,' said Trevor.

'Do you want to go first?' Willie asked him.

‘I don’t mind,’ said Trevor. ‘You go first,’ he said a moment later. ‘I’ll wait.’ He would have happily waited a lifetime.

Willie bent over his ball, took aim and knocked it straight into the hole.

‘Well played!’ said Trevor. ‘Good shot!’

‘That’s £500 you owe me!’ said Willie to the banker. ‘No! Sorry! £495!’

‘Will a cheque do?’ asked Mr Barclay. ‘I’m afraid I don’t carry that much cash.’

‘Fine,’ said Willie, rather to Trevor’s surprise. ‘Your turn,’ Willie murmured to his friend. ‘Good luck,’ he added.

Trevor stepped forward and stared long and hard at his ball and the hole. He sat down on his haunches and squinted along the line of the shot he needed to make. He stood up, took a deep breath, swallowed hard and stepped up to his ball. He bent over the ball, wrapped his fingers around the shaft of his putter and concentrated hard. He tried to see the ball moving forwards slowly in a perfectly straight line and then dropping down into the hole. He held his breath to keep his body still, took his arms back, stopped for a tiny fraction of a second at the top of his backswing and then brought his club down onto his ball.

It was Willie who spoke first, as Trevor’s ball rattled into the hole. ‘Congratulations!’

Trevor had taken five shots on the final hole and had completed his round in 98 strokes, just one less than he needed to go round in to meet the conditions of his uncle’s will. ‘I shouldn’t start celebrating just yet,’ the banker warned Trevor, handing Willie a cheque. ‘Butterbury Ford Golf Club isn’t out of the woods yet.’

The three of them stumbled along the gravel path back towards the lights of the clubhouse. There was loud cheering when Trevor and Willie entered the building and announced the news. Captain Jarrold greeted him like a long lost friend. ‘I’m so glad you decided not to emigrate,’ he said, looking genuinely relieved. ‘By the way, that young lady from the *Daily Globe* rang again. She left a number for you to call.’ He fished in his pocket, took out a grubby envelope and, after examining it, handed it to Trevor.

‘Thank you,’ sighed Trevor. ‘Let me buy you a drink.’

Captain Jarrold obediently headed for the bar at a canter. Willie was already there trying, without any success, to persuade Jake the barman to cash his cheque. Trevor screwed up the old envelope without looking at it and dropped it into an ashtray on the nearest table.

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Four hours later Willie and Trevor were walking back to their caravan when they heard what sounded like a woman crying.

‘Is someone there?’ Willie shouted into the darkness. The club had only got one outside light fitting. It contained a single 100 watt bulb which was economical but of little practical value.

The crying stopped.

‘Hello?’ called Trevor.

The silence seemed to grow louder the more they listened.

‘I’m sure I heard crying,’ whispered Willie.

‘I did too,’ whispered Trevor back. ‘It’s OK!’ he shouted. ‘We want to help you?’

Silence.

‘I think it came from over there!’ said Willie.

‘Where?’ asked Trevor.

‘Here!’ replied Willie, half a second before tripping up over something and falling flat on his face.

‘Are you all right?’ asked Trevor, peering into the blackness.

‘My car won’t start,’ said a voice which Trevor knew did not belong to Willie unless his fall had caused him serious physical harm.

‘No, I’m bloody well not all right,’ said a voice which did belong to Willie. ‘I’ve broken my arm, my leg and my neck.’

About ten yards away someone switched on a torch. The beam flicked around until it found Willie.

‘Thanks!’ said Trevor. ‘Hold it there, will you!’

The torch holder kept the beam steady and moved a little closer.

Trevor bent down. ‘Don’t move!’ he told Willie. ‘Stay there and I’ll get an ambulance.’

‘I don’t want a bloody ambulance!’ said Willie, rather crossly.

‘But if you’ve got broken bones…,’ said Trevor.

‘I haven’t really broken anything,’ said Willie impatiently. He sighed. ‘I just want some bloody sympathy.’

‘Oh,’ said Trevor, not sounding very sympathetic.

‘I’m sorry about all the trouble you’re having,’ said the owner of the torch. The torch beam moved closer.

‘Did you say you’d got a car here?’

‘Yes.’

‘Can’t you turn the headlights on so that we can see?’

‘That’s the problem. The car won’t start. I think the battery is flat. It was foggy this morning. I must have left my headlights switched on.’

‘Are you a club member?’ Trevor heard himself asking. Captain Jarrold would have been proud of him.

‘No. I’m a visitor. I was passing and thought I’d just pop over and have a look around. My brother plays a lot of golf. If I see a course I think he might like I always get the details.’

‘How long have you been out here?’

‘I don’t know. Hours.’

‘Why didn’t you pop into the clubhouse and telephone for help?’

‘I would have done but, well, I was frightened out of my wits in the dark so I decided to stay with the car. That’s what they always tell you to do, isn’t it?’

‘I suppose it is,’ said Trevor. ‘But I don’t think they mean you have to stay with the car if you’re in a car park.’

‘Is there anywhere round here where I could stay the night? Even if I get the car started I’ll still have to find a room.’

‘Where do you live?’

‘London.’

‘You could stay with us,’ said Willie, who seemed to have made a remarkable recovery. ‘Couldn’t she?’

‘I suppose so,’ said Trevor.

They took the stranded motorist back to their caravan and made up a bed for her on the couch.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It was another gloriously sunny morning. Trevor, dressed in a pair of old-fashioned khaki shorts and a white T-shirt, was sitting on the top step of the caravan basking in the early morning sunshine. The shorts came down just below his knees and the T-shirt had the faded portrait of a cartoon character on the front. He had woken early, got up and tiptoed out of the caravan at dawn.

He was just about to go back into the caravan and make himself some breakfast when the postman, whose van Trevor had watched arrive in front of the clubhouse a few moments earlier, walked across in his direction. He was carrying a single white envelope.

'Mr Dukinfield?' asked the postman.

Trevor nodded. 'That's me.' He felt his heart beating faster and wondered why his letters were never the ones which got lost. He hated getting mail. It always meant that he had to do something.

'Letter for you,' said the postman, handing Trevor the envelope. Relieved of his burden he removed his cap and wiped his forehead with a large, red handkerchief.

'Thank you,' said Trevor.

'Going to be another warm one,' said the postman.

'Yes,' agreed Trevor.

'I expect the water board will declare a drought soon.'

'Yes,' said Trevor. 'I expect they will.'

The postman put his cap back on and waved a hand. 'Must get on.'

'Yes. Right,' said Trevor. 'Cheerio.'

'Cheerio.'

Trevor watched the postman walk back into his van, climb into the driver's seat, start the engine and drive off to continue his round. For a moment Trevor couldn't help envying him. It seemed a simple, honest way to live. Get up in the morning. Go to work. Drive around delivering people's letters. Go home. Forget about work and enjoy yourself.

There was a sudden noise behind him as the caravan door swung out and hit Trevor in the back. Trevor yelped and leapt forwards, lost his footing and fell sideways onto the hard baked ground. He swore. The letter flew from his hand and fluttered down to earth a few feet away.

'Oh dear!' said a woman somewhere behind him. 'I'm sorry. I didn't know you were there!' He felt a woman's soft hand on his shoulder. He turned round. He had never seen the woman properly the night before, though he recognised her voice well enough.

She was in her early thirties, had shoulder length jet black hair, sharp features and a lot of laughter lines around her eyes and mouth. Her eyes were kind and full of concern. Trevor noticed that she was wearing one of his shirts which she must have taken from one of the caravan's tiny cupboards. He didn't mind at all. In fact he felt a small thrill and was pleased that she'd chosen one of his shirts rather than one of Willie's. She had rolled the sleeves half way up her forearms but hadn't fastened all the buttons and Trevor had an idea that it was the only item of clothing she wore. Embarrassed he lowered his eyes and looked away.

'Are you all right?' she asked.

'Yes, thanks,' said Trevor. 'I'm fine.' His shoulder hurt where the caravan door had hit it and he had grazed his right knee badly on a stone when he had fallen but he was English.

'I am sorry,' apologised the woman again. 'I'm Megan,' she said. When she smiled the skin around her eyes wrinkled. She held out a hand. 'Thanks for taking me in last night.'

'Trevor,' said Trevor, touching her fingertips. He scrambled to his feet. 'That's OK,' he said. 'We couldn't leave you out there in the cold.'

'It was very kind of you,' said the woman. She must have been aware that the shirt she was wearing didn't hide much but she didn't seem to mind.

'I just popped out to see if there was any milk,' explained the woman. 'For a cup of tea,' she added. She had a slim, athletic, well-tanned body.

'I'm afraid there isn't any,' said Trevor, swallowing hard. Despite living with Willie he still wasn't used to having conversations with attractive, half-clothed women. 'I'm afraid we ran out of milk yesterday afternoon.'

'Do you think there will be any in the clubhouse?'

'There might be,' said Trevor, frowning, and wondering how to warn her about Jake the barman.

'I'll go and see if they'll lend us a cupful!' said Megan. She tossed her head and threw her hair back revealing long, dangling silver earrings. She had perfect teeth which sparkled in the sunshine. 'It's going to be a lovely day!' she said, heading off towards the clubhouse. 'Back in a minute!'

When she got to the gravel car park in front of the clubhouse she walked cautiously, like a swimmer on a pebbly beach. Trevor felt he ought to call after her and warn her about Jake but he didn't really know what to say. He was about to go back into the caravan to make himself some breakfast when he noticed the envelope he had dropped when he had fallen from the step. He picked it up and examined it carefully. His name and address had been typed, and instead of a proper stamp the envelope had been franked by one of those machines which big firms use when sending out their mail. He turned the envelope over. There was no sender's name. He pushed his thumb under the flap, tore the envelope open and pulled out the letter. It was from his solicitor.

Dear Mr Dukinfield,

I am informed by Mr Victor Barclay jr, vice-president of The Mettleham Banking Corporation that you have successfully satisfied the first stipulation made by your late uncle.

As executor of your uncle's will it is now my responsibility to remind you that you have five days left in which to satisfy the second stipulation: that you and another member of the Butterbury Ford Golf Club should play a match against two representatives of the bank: the contest to be decided by the match play rules of golf

Official handicaps will be taken into consideration with each team's handicap considered to be the total of its two members.

If you and your partner should win this match then you will become sole legal owner of the freehold to the Butterbury Ford Golf Club, including the clubhouse and all its associated buildings.

If you and your partner should lose this match then the Golf Club, including the clubhouse and all its associated buildings, will become the property of The Mettleham Banking Corporation, to do with as they see fit subject to satisfying planning permission requirements and building regulations according to Code 67b of the Local Authority Planning Act (1967).

If the match is drawn then extra holes shall be played and the first team to take a clear one hole lead shall be deemed to be the winning team.

Finally, I must also inform you that your uncle stipulated that your partner should be a member of the club, should be an amateur golfer with a handicap no lower than your own and should have been born within twenty five miles of Pettigrew Towers. The representatives of the bank must be full time employees of the bank.

Yours faithfully,

Twist, Kibble and Fenshaw

Trevor sat down on the grass and read the letter several times. Clearly, his first task was to find a partner for this all-important match. He dearly wished his uncle had not included the clause about his partner being born within twenty five miles of Pettigrew Towers and having a lower handicap than his own. He would have felt confident with Willie by his side, for whatever his faults (and it wasn't difficult to think of faults when you thought of Willie) he had that unique blend of qualities which are usually summed up in the phrase 'street wise'. Still, he knew there was no point in worrying about that. Willie had been born in Newcastle and you can't get a lot further from Pettigrew Towers than Newcastle.

'Would you like me to make you breakfast?'

Trevor looked up and turned round. Megan was holding an unopened bottle of milk, a fresh packet of bacon and a large loaf of bread.

'Where on earth did you get all that from?' he asked.

'Jake,' said Megan. She smiled. 'He's nice, isn't he? Would you like a cup of tea to start with?'

'Er, yes, thank you,' said Trevor, so shocked at hearing of Jake's generosity that he found it difficult to reply. 'That would be very nice.'

Megan bent over. 'Not bad news I hope?'

Trevor stared at her uncomprehendingly. 'I'm sorry?'

'The letter.'

'Oh!' Trevor looked down at the letter. 'No. It's from my solicitors.'

'Ugh!' said Megan, making a face. 'I hate solicitors.' She shuddered involuntarily, as though suddenly cold. She put the milk, the bread and the bacon down on the caravan step, sat down beside him and put a hand on his arm. 'You're not in some sort of trouble, are you?'

'Oh, no!' said Trevor. 'It's nothing like that.' He handed Megan the letter and proceeded to tell her everything about his uncle, the will and the golf club. He was surprised at how easy it was to talk to her.

'I'll go and make the tea,' she said at last. She touched Trevor lightly on the shoulder and disappeared into the caravan.

***

Forty five minutes later, with a nice cup of tea and two crispy bacon sandwiches inside him, Trevor said a temporary goodbye to Willie and Megan and headed off towards the clubhouse to try to find a partner prepared to shoulder the burden of playing eighteen holes of golf for the future of the Butterbury Ford Golf Club.

On his way across to the clubhouse he saw a scruffy looking fellow in jeans and a fishing vest leaning against the wall. The man was messing around with an expensive looking camera as though he didn't really understand how it worked. He pointed the camera at Trevor, grinned and pressed a button. Trevor heard a whirring noise and a series of clicks.

'Morning!' said the stranger.

'Good morning!' replied Trevor.

'Just trying it out,' said the man, raising the camera again. There was the same whirring noise.

'It looks very complicated,' said Trevor.

'Yes,' said the man. 'It does, doesn't it?' He hauled himself away from the wall and wandered off.

Even though it was still early in the morning and Trevor hadn't seen anyone enter the clubhouse there were half a dozen men sitting around in easy chairs.

Ever since he had first arrived at the Butterbury Ford Golf Club Trevor had had a suspicion that some of the members never went home at all but stayed in their chairs all night. As usual Captain Jarrold was one of the members settled comfortably in one of the faded red leather armchairs. He had his hands folded across his stomach and his eyes were closed.

'Good morning,' said Trevor brightly, collapsing into a chair beside the captain. The seat had broken springs and Trevor cautiously adjusted his buttocks to avoid serious injury.

Captain Jarrold opened his eyes and scowled until he saw who it was who had spoken. 'Good morning, sir!' he said, touching his right temple with his right forefinger and pushing himself up in his chair. 'How are you today, sir?'

'I'm fine, thank you,' replied Trevor. 'I wish you wouldn't call me sir,' he added.

'Very well, sir,' said Captain Jarrold, firmly.

'I had a letter from my solicitors this morning,' said Trevor. 'I've got to find someone to play with me against the bank.'

Captain Jarrold picked up a cup of milky coffee which was resting precariously on the arm of his chair. He carefully used a crested teaspoon to remove a layer of skin from the top of the coffee. He put the discarded skin into his saucer and then sipped noisily from the cup. A small piece of brown skin clung to his tobacco-stained military moustache. He sighed contentedly, before putting his cup back down into its saucer.

'Can you think of anyone suitable?' asked Trevor. 'It's got to be someone born locally with a handicap no lower than 24 I'm afraid. What about you? Would you play?' he asked.

'Me, sir?' demanded Captain Jarrold.

'You must have fought some pretty fierce campaigns in your time,' said Trevor. 'What's your handicap? I suppose it's too low.'

'Oh yes, sir!' agreed Captain Jarrold immediately. 'I've fought some fierce campaigns all right! You can count on that, sir!'

'You must know a thing or two about the tactics and strategies of winning!'

'Certainly do, sir!' agreed the Captain, nodding furiously.

'Well, what about it?' asked Trevor. 'Would you be my partner?'

Captain Jarrold stared at Trevor as though he had asked him to marry him. 'Play golf?' he asked.

'Well, yes,' said Trevor, puzzled. 'Golf.'

'Never played the game,' said Captain Jarrold, furiously shaking his head. 'Damned silly game as far as I can see.'

Trevor was surprised to discover that Captain Jarrold, stalwart member of the club though he was, had never touched a golf club in his life.

***

As the day went by Trevor gradually realised that finding a partner for the big match was going to be more difficult than he had originally anticipated.

When he had set off after breakfast, on his search for a companion to stand shoulder to shoulder with him in defence of the golf club, he had rather imagined that he would be able to choose a partner from among a clutch of enthusiastic volunteers. He had, in his innocence, expected to be overwhelmed, even embarrassed by offers of support.

By the end of the afternoon he realised that he would be lucky to find anyone at all willing to play with him.

'Not me, thanks,' said Elvis Ramsbottom, the committee member and chiropodist. 'I wouldn't want that sort of responsibility.'

'There isn't any responsibility!' said Trevor. 'You just have to do your best!'

The laugh that Elvis laughed was hollow. 'Have you any idea what'll happen to anyone who misses a putt and hands the club to the bank?'

'What?' asked Trevor, who had no idea what would happen to anyone unfortunate enough to miss a putt and hand the club to the bank.

'He'll be blackballed!' said Elvis, shuddering at the very thought of it. 'Ostracised! Thrown out of the club! They'll have his guts for garters.'

'But there won't be a club!' explained Trevor. 'If we lose the match the bank will own the club. No one will be able to do anything to you.'

'Bah!' said Elvis scornfully. 'That won't stop 'em!' He paused. 'Anyway,' he said. 'I don't want to go down in history as the man who lost Butterbury Ford Golf Club.'

***

By the end of the day Trevor was submerged in gloom.

He had spoken to every high handicap player he could find in the clubhouse and although they had all had different and often imaginative excuses they had all said 'no'. Word soon got around that he was looking for a partner for the golf match to save the club and by the afternoon people were making fairly obvious attempts to avoid him. When he walked into the bar, members would rush out into the locker room. When he walked into the locker room they would rush into the tiny washroom. Eventually, he had begun to feel about as welcome in the clubhouse as a butcher at a vegetarian society meeting.

Shoulders slumped, heart heavy and spirit weakened he trudged back to the caravan, convinced that he was going to lose the match by default. He could understand the other members not wanting to play in such an important match. Given the choice he would have probably said 'no' too. But this didn't help. He still felt depressed, downhearted and as full of beans as a nauseated parrot. He opened the caravan door and stumbled in to try to cheer himself up with a nice cup of tea. As he entered he wondered if Megan would be there. The prospect cheered him up.

Willie was sitting on the bench seat. A young blonde was sitting on his lap. Willie had his arm around her shoulders. Her undoubted physical charms were inadequately hidden beneath a pair of cut-off jeans and a cut off T-shirt. She looked as though she bought her clothes from a tailor who used a chainsaw instead of scissors. A half empty bottle of white wine and two glasses stood on the table in front of them.

'Hello!' said Willie. 'This is Muriel.'

'Hello Muriel,' said Trevor, wondering what happened to Megan. He had liked Megan.

'Willie is going to help me with my homework,' said the blonde. She smiled and giggled. 'I'm doing technical drawing, French and social studies at college,' she told Trevor. 'But I'm not very good at academic work.'

'Willie will be able to help you,' said Trevor. 'He's very good at technical drawing, French and social studies.'

The blonde brightened. 'Is he?' she asked. She then squealed her delight. It was not an endearing sound. Willie lowered his eyes and looked embarrassed. 'Pop into the clubhouse and ask the barman to lend us another glass,' he whispered.

The blonde looked at him and frowned. 'We've got two glasses,' she said.

'But my friend might like a glass of wine,' said Willie, inclining his head in Trevor's direction.

'Oh yes!' said Muriel. She put a hand over her mouth. 'Silly me!' she said.

'Don't bother on my behalf,' said Trevor.

'No bother,' said Willie. He wriggled around so that the blonde was dislodged from his lap. She squeezed out from behind the table and stood up. She was taller and thinner than she had appeared when sitting down.

'I won't be more than a minute or two,' she said, smiling at the two men. She giggled again and then left.

'What happened to Megan?' asked Trevor, when she had gone. 'She was nice.'

'Yes,' said Willie. 'She said she had to go to work.'

'Work?'

'Yes. I thought it sounded a bit dismal.'

'What does she do?'

'I haven't the foggiest.'

'She got her car mended all right then.'

'Must have done.'

'Where on earth did you find Muriel?'

'She came with the bread man,' explained Willie. 'She's helping him on his round so that she can earn some money to help herself through college.'

Trevor filled the kettle, lit the gas and put the kettle on top of the calor flame. ‘Do you want a cup of tea?’

‘No thanks. You look as though you’ve had a bad day.’

‘I have.’

‘Did you find anyone to partner you in the match?’

Trevor shook his head, reached up and took a mug out of the tiny cupboard above the stove.

‘No one?’

‘They were all too frightened of what would happen if we lose.’ He took a tea bag from a small packet and dropped it into the mug. ‘Where’s the milk?’

‘I think it’s all gone. So what are you going to do?’

Trevor sighed and shrugged. ‘I haven’t the faintest idea,’ he admitted. ‘Where’s all the milk gone?’ he asked. ‘Megan brought a full bottle this morning!’

‘Muriel made us both milkshakes,’ said Willie, explaining but not apologising.

‘I hate tea without milk,’ said Trevor miserably. He turned the gas off. ‘I think I’ll go out and try to find a bottle,’ he sighed. He didn’t want to be in the caravan when Muriel returned. It wasn’t that he didn’t like her. It was just that she was too jolly. He didn’t feel like being around anyone quite so jolly.

When he stepped out of the caravan the scruffy stranger in the jeans and fishing vest was trying out his camera on Muriel. She seemed to enjoy posing.

‘Excuse me, have you got a moment?’ called the stranger.

Trevor looked around. There was no one else within earshot. ‘Me?’

‘I don’t suppose you’d help me, would you? Your colouring is quite different to this young lady’s. If I could take a photo of the two of you together it would help me test the camera.’

Trevor didn’t particularly like having his photograph taken but the stranger was clearly having great difficulty with his camera. He wandered over towards Muriel who suddenly clapped her hands as a thought entered her head.

‘Oh, can I get my friend Willie?’ she asked the photographer. ‘You could take a picture of us all together!’

The photographer shrugged. ‘Why not?’

Muriel ran across to the caravan, opened the door and emerged a moment or two later with Willie in tow. Willie was glowering and clearly unenthusiastic. With some reluctance he posed with Trevor and Muriel for half a dozen photographs.

‘Thanks!’ said the photographer, when he’d finished. ‘I’ll pop some prints in the post to you.’ He walked across to a brand new silver BMW, climbed in and roared off in a cloud of dust and gravel.

‘Who was that?’ asked Willie.

‘A friend of Trevor’s,’ said Muriel.

‘I don’t know him,’ said Trevor. ‘He’s been around all day taking snaps. I think he was just testing out a new camera.’

‘You don’t know him!’ cried Willie, turning and staring at the rapidly disappearing BMW. ‘What do you mean, you don’t know him!’

Trevor thought about this for a moment. ‘I don’t know him,’ he explained at last. He couldn’t think of any other way to put it.

‘Do you know who that was?’ demanded Willie, by now almost hysterical.

‘No,’ said Trevor. ‘I’ve just told you…!’

‘I’ll tell you who it was,’ said Willie. ‘It was a private detective. He must have been hired by my wife!’

Muriel giggled. ‘Oh, golly gosh!’ she said. ‘A private detective! How exciting.’

‘It isn’t exciting at all,’ moaned Willie. ‘It’s bloody disastrous. When my wife sees those photos she’ll know where I am.’ He groaned. ‘And with you with your arm around me!’ he added, glowering at Muriel.

Muriel frowned and pouted at the same time. ‘Well, if you knew he was a private detective why did you pose for the photographs?’ she asked him.

Willie, speechless, stamped off back to the caravan.

‘Do you think I’ve upset him?’ asked Muriel. ‘Was it something I said?’

‘I should pop back home for now,’ said Trevor kindly. ‘I think that perhaps today’s tutorial is over.’

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

‘I’m sorry to bother you,’ said Trevor. ‘But do you think you could lend me some milk?’

After leaving Willie he had walked around the golf course for hours and hours. It was now dark and he was tired and cold and just wanted to sit down and rest. But he didn’t want to go back to his own caravan just yet.

‘Of course I can, dear,’ said Mrs Weatherby, for it was upon her door that Trevor had chosen to knock. She opened the door rather quickly and Trevor, stepping backwards to get out of the way, once again fell down a set of caravan steps. For the second time that day he lay sprawled, bruised and breathless on the hard, sun-baked grass.

‘Oh dear!’ said Mrs Weatherby. She clambered down her caravan steps as fast as her varicose veins would carry her and bent down beside Trevor. ‘Are you all right, dear?’

‘Yes, thank you,’ said Trevor, not sure whether to rub his shoulder, his elbow or his knee. He tried to stand up but his right knee felt sore and painful and he fell over again.

‘Oh dear me!’ said Mrs Weatherby. ‘Are you injured?’

‘Just a little,’ said Trevor, taking Mrs Weatherby’s out-stretched hand and cautiously standing up again. ‘I think I’ve done something to my knee.’

‘You’d better come in and sit down,’ said Mrs Weatherby. ‘Do you want me to fetch a doctor?’

‘Oh no,’ said Trevor. ‘I don’t think it’s that bad.’

‘I’ve got some oil of wintergreen,’ said Mrs Weatherby, with a comforting smile. ‘That’ll make it feel better.’

‘Thank you,’ said Trevor, gratefully following Mrs Weatherby up the steps, along the narrow passageway through the caravan’s tiny kitchen and into the small living area. Mrs Weatherby’s caravan, was, in its design at least, exactly like the one Trevor and Willie were sharing. It had a tiny kitchen and the world’s smallest shower room and toilet in what was really nothing much more than a cupboard. There was the small bedroom with bunks at one end and the tiny living room at the other. The big difference between Trevor’s caravan and Mrs Weatherby’s caravan was that Mrs Weatherby had realised that it is much easier to live in a small space if you are tidy. The caravan was spick and span and as neat as a newsreader’s suit.

She led the way into the living room and stood to one side. Sitting at the table, dressed in a pair of baggy, blue and white striped pyjamas was what looked like Mrs Weatherby’s son Charlie. Trevor could only see the top of Charlie’s head and without his baseball cap his hair looked much longer and much lighter in colour. Trevor looked around wondering where the prettier of Mrs Weatherby’s twins was.

‘This is Charlie,’ said Mrs Weatherby.

‘Hello, Charlie!’ said Trevor.

‘Hello!’ said Charlie, turning round.

Trevor had quite a surprise. Charlie wasn’t a boy. There was absolutely no doubt whatsoever that Charlie was not a boy. Charlie was the girl Trevor had seen walking towards the first tee.

‘Do sit down,’ said Mrs Weatherby to Trevor. ‘Would you like a little drink of something?’

Trevor squeezed past Mrs Weatherby and sat down on the couch on the other side of the table from Charlie. ‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘That would be very nice.’ He opened his mouth and started to say something. Then he shut it again.

‘What would you like?’ asked Mrs Weatherby.

‘Yes, please!’ replied Trevor.

‘I think we’ve got a little whisky left.’

‘Thank you,’ said Trevor, whose mouth was operating without any reference to his brain.

Mrs Weatherby shuffled back towards the kitchen area.

‘I thought you were your brother,’ said Trevor.

‘I haven’t got a brother,’ said Charlie.

Trevor opened his mouth and shut it again. ‘Then who…?’ Suddenly he realised. ‘It’s you, isn’t it? There’s only you? You’re a girl?’

Charlie nodded.

‘So, why do you pretend to be a boy when you drive the tractor?’ asked Trevor.

‘It was my fault,’ said Mrs Weatherby. She put a bottle of Johnnie Walker whisky down in front of Trevor and then put a glass alongside it. ‘Help yourself. And rub some of this on your knee.’ She handed him a bottle of oil of wintergreen.

‘Isn’t anyone else having a drink?’

‘Not for me,’ said Mrs Weatherby with a shudder. ‘I can’t stand the stuff.’

‘I’ll have one, please,’ said Charlie.

‘You’re not old enough, my girl!’ said Mrs Weatherby.

‘Oh, mum!’

Mrs Weatherby turned to Trevor. ‘Sixteen!’ she said. ‘At sixteen they think they’re old!’ Nevertheless she started to get up to go and fetch another glass.

‘I’ll go,’ said Charlie quickly, jumping to her feet.

Trevor took the top off the oil of wintergreen bottle, poured a little of the liquid onto his fingers and rubbed it onto his leg. It smelt wonderful.

‘When I first got the job in the professional’s shop I asked if there were any other jobs available,’ Mrs Weatherby explained. ‘They told me that they had a vacancy for an assistant grounds-man but that the secretary would only hire male staff for work outside.’

‘Are they allowed to do that?’ asked Trevor, frowning. He finished rubbing the oil into the skin around his knee and looked around for something to wipe his fingers on.

‘I don’t know whether it’s allowed or not,’ said Mrs Weatherby with a shrug. ‘But that’s what they told me. When I told them that Charlie would be coming with me they said that he could apply for the job. They just assumed that Charlie was a boy.’ She handed him a paper tissue. ‘Here you are, dear,’ she said. ‘For your fingers.’

Trevor wiped his fingers and then put the top back on the oil of wintergreen bottle. Charlie came back with a glass and a small jug of water. She poured a small whisky for herself and a large one for Trevor and then added water to her own glass. She took a sip of the mixture and pulled a face.

‘Don’t you like it?’ asked Trevor, adding a smaller amount of water to his own glass.

Charlie shook her head.

‘So after you’d pretended to be a boy to get the job you had to continue with the pretence afterwards!’

Charlie nodded. ‘I like it here,’ she said. She took another sip from the whisky and grimaced again. She pushed the glass towards Trevor.

‘And Charlie is your real name?’

‘Yes. It’s short for Charlotte. Will you drink that for me?’

‘That’s nice.’ Trevor tipped the contents of Charlie’s glass into his own.

‘She’s taught herself to play golf while she’s been here,’ said Mrs Weatherby proudly. She got up and walked to the other end of the caravan where she started folding a pile of clean laundry, putting towels, blouses and underwear onto their respective shelves in a long, thin cupboard.

Charlie looked at her mother. ‘I’m still not very good,’ she said modestly. Trevor got the impression that she wished her mother hadn’t said anything about her playing golf. ‘You won’t tell anyone will you?’

Trevor frowned. ‘Why not?’ he asked.

‘Because as an assistant greenkeeper I’m not allowed to play golf,’ she replied.

‘It’s all a bit complicated, isn’t it?’ said Trevor. ‘You can only keep your job by being a boy. But you can only play golf if you’re not a greenkeeper.’

Charlie grinned. ‘I suppose it is a bit complicated.’

‘I’m going to bed,’ said Mrs Weatherby. ‘I’ll leave you two alone to talk about golf.’ Trevor and Charlie said goodnight to her.

‘Have you heard about this match I’ve got to play against two bankers?’ asked Trevor.

Charlie nodded. ‘When is it?’

‘Tomorrow,’ answered Trevor.

‘Oh, dear,’ said Charlie. ‘Who’s your partner?’

‘That’s the problem,’ said Trevor. ‘I haven’t got anyone.’ He looked across at Charlie. ‘Where were you born?’ he asked.

‘In the village,’ replied Charlie. ‘I’ve always lived here.’

‘Do you have a handicap?’

‘Yes. I joined as a junior member and got a handicap three weeks ago.’

‘What is it?’

‘Twenty eight. I told you I wasn’t very good.’ She hesitated, as though she wanted to say something else.

‘I don’t suppose you would…?’

Charlie looked at Trevor as though he’d just asked her to form a Government. ‘Me? Play in the most important golf match ever played at…? Oh no!’ she cried, horrified. She shook her head. ‘Oh, no! I couldn’t! Really! I couldn’t!’

Trevor nodded. ‘OK.’ he said, unable to hide his disappointment.

‘Anyway,’ said Charlie, grasping at straws to confirm her inability to play in the all-important match. ‘I’ve got to work. I'm cutting the fairways tomorrow morning.'

'I think perhaps the fairway cutting ought to be postponed,' said Trevor. 'With the match…'

Charlie thought for a moment. 'Oh, yes. I suppose so,' she agreed. They were both silent for a moment or two. 'Anyway I don't expect the rules allow you to have a lady partner,' she went on. 'I don't think your uncle was very keen on lady golfers.'

'I don't think he ever even considered it a possibility,' said Trevor. 'I'm pretty sure it doesn't say anything in the rules about the sex of my partner.'

'I'm sure you'll be able to find someone better than me,' said Charlie.

'No one wants to take the risk,' said Trevor. 'I think I'm going to have to forfeit the match.'

'You can't do that!' cried Charlie. 'If you forfeit the match you'll lose the club!'

Trevor nodded. 'Yes, I know.' he said glumly. 'But I really don't have any choice.' Trevor stood up and blew his nose. 'I'd better go,' he said. He felt maudlin. He turned to look back at Charlie. 'Good night,' he said.

'Good night,' said Charlie.

'I've enjoyed our chat.'

'Even though I don't want to play in the match tomorrow?'

'Even though you don't want to play in the match tomorrow,' said Trevor, trying to smile. He reached out to offer Charlie his hand. She reached up and they shook hands rather formally.

Charlie looked down and spoke very quietly, so quietly that Trevor had to strain to hear her. 'Would you really like me to play?'

'Yes.'

'You really can't find anyone else?'

'No.'

'And if I don't play you'll lose the club anyway?'

'Yes.'

'What time do I have to be on the first tee tomorrow?'

Slowly it dawned on Trevor, who was very tired, that Charlie was agreeing to partner him.

'You'll play?'

'Yes.'

'That's wonderful!' cried Trevor.

'What time does the match start?'

'Eleven o'clock. See you then.'

'Eleven o'clock on the first tee.'

'That's right,' replied Trevor, who suddenly realised that Charlie was still gripping his hand tightly.

'I'm glad you asked me,' said Charlie, still clinging to Trevor's hand.

'I'm really glad you're playing. So, I'll see you tomorrow at eleven then,' repeated Trevor, trying to extricate his hand from Charlie's grip without being too obvious. He edged towards the caravan door.

'I hope I don't let you down.' Charlie gazed up at him with what Trevor thought was a decidedly dreamy look in her eyes.

Although Trevor was not what you could call a 'man of the world' he did know enough to realise that Charlie's behaviour was not simply a case of neighbourly friendliness.

Charlie looked down and swallowed. 'I know this might sound silly, but I've been watching you learn to play. I've seen nearly all your lessons with Mr Schmidt.' She started to blush. 'I'm really proud of you, you know, the way you stuck at it…,' her voice trailed off with embarrassment.

Trevor didn't reply, not being sure exactly how to handle what was rapidly becoming a very difficult situation for him. He did not have much experience of 16-year-old girls who had crushes on him. In fact, his experience of such things was approximately zero.

Trevor felt his face redden. He liked Charlie. He didn't want to upset her by rebuffing her attempts at romance, but he certainly didn't want to escalate the problem by appearing to encourage her affections. So Trevor did what most men do best in moments of romantic crisis. He changed the subject.

'Well, I'd better be off to bed now. Got to get plenty of rest before the big day.' Trevor knew his voice was just that bit too jolly to sound entirely natural. He managed to prize his hand from Charlie's grasp and edge through the door and down the caravan steps.

'I suppose we had better get to bed,' replied Charlie. Now it was her turn to blush as she realised what she had said. 'I think what you're doing is absolutely marvellous.'

'Better wait and see what happens before you pay me too many compliments,' said Trevor as he retreated slowly towards the safety of his own caravan. 'See you tomorrow.'

He felt rather bad about brushing Charlie off so brusquely. He comforted himself with the thought that in a few years' time Charlie would be fighting off boyfriends ten deep.

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When Trevor got back to his own caravan Muriel had disappeared and Megan was back. She and Willie were sitting watching an old black and white movie on a small, portable television set that Trevor had never seen before. For the first time since Willie and Trevor had been living there all the curtains were drawn.

'Hello!' said Megan, looking up. She seemed genuinely pleased to see Trevor.

Willie, who was cowering in a corner looked relieved when he saw who it was. 'That photographer isn't still around, is he?'

'I don't think so,' said Trevor. 'Anyway it's dark.'

'They have flashes and infra-red gadgets. They can take photographs in the dark these days.'

'I've heard they can take photographs through curtains,' said Megan. They use cameras that are activated by body heat.'

Alarmed, Willie crouched down below window level. 'Is that true?'

'No,' smiled Megan. 'Stop being silly! I made it up.'

'Don't joke about it!' said Willie. 'This is serious.' Gingerly he raised his head. 'Where have you been? he asked Trevor suddenly.

'You're limping,' said Megan. 'Have you hurt your leg?' She reached forwards and turned off the television set.

'It's nothing,' said Trevor, with a shrug. 'I fell over. It's just a bit sore.'

'Did you find anyone?' asked Willie.

'Oh you poor thing!' said Megan, touching him gently on the arm. She touched him lightly, as a cat will sometimes do. Trevor liked the way she touched him.

'Anyone for what?'

'For tomorrow. A partner for the match.'

'Oh. Yes. Where did the TV set come from?'

'Great! Who? Megan borrowed it from Jake when she went over to get some more milk.'

'I forgot about the milk,' said Trevor, deciding not to tell about the incident with Charlie. 'I was going to bring some back with me but I got chatting with Charlie. Jake lent it to you? Did he give you more milk as well?'

'Yes. Charlie? Who is Charlie?'

'Mrs Weatherby's daughter,' explained Trevor.

'Charlie is a girl?' said Megan.

'Charlie is short for Charlotte,' said Trevor.

'Do you want a caddie?' asked Willie.

'A caddie?' Trevor frowned. 'What sort of caddie?'

'For the match tomorrow! A 'Carry your bag, sir?' sort of caddie.'

'Yes, please!' answered Trevor immediately. 'That would be terrific.' Then he paused and thought for a moment. 'But won't it be dangerous? If you give me advice I'll be penalised, won't I?'

Willie shook his head. 'Not if I'm your caddie,' he said. 'Rule 8. A player can ask for and accept advice from his caddie.'

'Great!' grinned Trevor. 'That would be good.'

'I'll wear dark glasses and buy some of those terrible clothes from the professional's shop. No one will ever recognise me.'

'What on earth is he talking about?' Megan asked Trevor, with a laugh.

'I think he's still worried about his wife finding him,' said Trevor.

'The Porsche!' said Willie. 'I'll have to hide it somewhere!' He stood up and headed for the door. 'Where can I put it?'

Trevor thought for a moment. 'There isn't anywhere round here,' he said. 'Perhaps you could drive it into the village and park it in the pub car park?'

'Good idea!' said Willie, rushing off and either not realizing or not caring that this would mean a walk of several miles back to the caravan in the dark.

***

'I'm glad you came back,' said Trevor as they sat together and watched Casablanca on the small black and white television set.

'Yes,' said Megan. 'I wanted to see you again.'

They watched in silence for another ten minutes or so.

'Are you and Willie…?' asked Trevor. He felt himself blushing. He had become accustomed to the idea that if

Willie and a woman spent any time together they would almost inevitably end up as lovers.

'What?' asked Megan, two minutes after that. 'Am I and Willie what?' She suddenly realised what Trevor meant. 'Me and Willie?' She laughed out loud. 'What a terrible thought!'

Another minute and a half went by.

'It was none of my business,' said Trevor, at last.

They sat and watched another three minutes of the film.

'It's just that I wondered…,' said Trevor. 'If you aren't…if you aren't committed then maybe we could go out to the cinema or to a meal somewhere.' He paused. 'Sometime,' he added. 'Perhaps. If you'd like to, of course.'

Megan didn't speak. She seemed engrossed in the film. The silence seemed to last a long time. Everything seemed to be happening very slowly on the screen.

'I'm sorry,' said Trevor. 'I shouldn't have asked.'

'I'd love to go out with you,' said Megan, speaking at the same moment. 'I really would.' She paused.

'But…,' said Trevor, with a sigh.

'It isn't a 'but',' said Megan. 'At least, not the sort of 'but' you're thinking of.'

Trevor didn't say anything.

'There's something I've got to tell you,' said Megan.

'Oh.' said Trevor. 'You're married.'

'No,' said Megan. 'Well, I was. But that was a long time ago. No I'm not married.' She paused and stared at the screen. 'It's worse than that.'

Trevor waited. He couldn't think of anything worse.

'Do you remember that telephone call you had from the *Daily Globe*?' Megan asked him, suddenly and unexpectedly.

Trevor frowned. He remembered the call, or rather the calls, but he didn't understand the relevance of what Megan was saying. 'Yes?'

'You spoke to someone on the phone. You wouldn't let her interview you. Do you remember?'

'Yes. Of course.'

'That was me.'

'You're a reporter?'

'Yes.'

'For the *Daily Globe*?'

'Yes.'

'Is that why you came here? For your story?'

'Yes.'

'Thank you for telling me,' said Trevor, his voice laden with sarcasm.

'There's more, I'm afraid. You won't like it. I don't think you'll want to take me out when I've told you.'

'Do you want to go out with me?'

'Yes. But wait until you've heard what I have to tell you.'

'You want to do the interview, don't you? That's OK. I don't mind now I know it's you.'

'It's worse than that,' said Megan. Her voice was very quiet now. Trevor could hardly hear her. He reached forward and turned the television off. 'What do you mean? Worse?'

'I've already written the story,' said Megan. 'It'll be in tomorrow's paper.'

Trevor frowned. 'But how?'

'You told me everything I needed to know,' said Megan.

'When we were just talking? This morning?'

Megan didn't look at him but just nodded.

'You were interviewing me?'

'Yes.'

Trevor was silent for a moment. 'The photographer? The chap in the fishing vest. Was he from the Globe?'

'Yes. Geoff's one of our best photographers. When I left here this morning I went into the village, wrote my story in the pub and then dictated it over the telephone.'

'You're very good,' said Trevor. 'I never suspected for a moment.'

'I'm sorry,' said Megan. 'I've never felt bad about a story before. But I feel bad this time. The trouble is that I really do like you.'

'I think it's a good thing that I abandoned a career in journalism,' said Trevor. 'I would never have made it.'

Megan stood up, picked up her bag and started to move towards the door.

Trevor looked up. 'Where are you going?'

Megan shrugged. ‘I’m just going,’ she said. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said again. ‘I really am.’

‘What have you said about me in the article? Is it nice?’

Megan blushed. ‘Yes,’ she said quietly. ‘It’s nice.’

‘But I don’t understand. I thought it was only naughty vicars and kiss-and-tell blondes who got this treatment. Why should you go to all this trouble to write a nice story about me and a golf club?’

‘The editor loved the story,’ explained Megan simply. ‘When the editor loves a story you do what it takes to get it. You don’t try to explain that the star of the piece won’t talk to you.’

Trevor thought back to his few days in Fleet Street and remembered that, even at his lowly level in journalism, excuses about lost stories were not usually met with either enthusiasm or understanding.

‘Please don’t go,’ said Trevor.

Megan looked at him.

‘Please,’ said Trevor. He started to laugh.

Megan frowned. ‘What are you laughing for?’

Willie,’ he said suddenly. ‘I was just thinking. Willie has got to walk all the way back from the village because he thinks your photographer was a private detective working for his wife.’

Megan smiled.

‘Poor old Willie!’ said Trevor.

‘Do you really want me to stay?’

‘Really,’ said Trevor. ‘Definitely. Anyway, your car probably won’t start.’

‘Ouch,’ said Megan. ‘That hurt.’

Trevor looked at her. ‘What did you do? Just disconnect a lead?’

Megan nodded. Trevor thought he might have detected a hint of a blush.

‘Please stay.’

‘Turn the TV on,’ said Megan. ‘Let’s watch the end of Casablanca. It always makes me cry.’

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Megan was still asleep and Trevor was waking up with a cup of tea and some gentle Mozart on the radio when there was a gentle tapping on the caravan door. Trevor put down his cup and limped to the door. His knee now felt very stiff. He unfastened the tiny brass catch and carefully opened the top half of the caravan door to see who it was.

Elvis Ramsbottom was standing on the grass at the bottom of the steps. He looked as though he had just played the shot of his life and then discovered that he had played the wrong ball. 'I'm sorry to bother you,' he said.

'You look terrible, Elvis!' Trevor opened the lower half of the door and stepped outside.

'I haven't slept a wink,' confessed the chiropodist. 'I've been worrying all night.' He shuffled his feet and looked down at the ground. He reminded Trevor of a small boy staring at the carpet in a headmaster's study. 'I feel bad about refusing to play in this match.'

'That's OK,' said Trevor. 'I understand.'

'No,' said Elvis firmly. 'It's not OK.' He swallowed hard. 'I'll play.'

'It's all right,' said Trevor. He opened the bottom half of the door and stepped onto the top step. 'I've got someone to partner me.' He stepped down onto the grass. His knee was very stiff and walking wasn't easy.

'I don't want to do it,' said Elvis, glumly. 'God knows, I don't know what I'll do with myself if we lose. But…,' he looked up at Trevor, 'what did you say?'

'You don't have to play,' said Trevor. 'But thanks for offering. I really appreciate it.'

Elvis grinned broadly. 'I don't have to play? That's marvellous!' The slump had gone out of his shoulders. He looked like a man reborn.

'Thanks again for offering,' said Trevor.

'Eleven o'clock start, isn't it?'

Trevor nodded.

'Do you mind if I come and watch?'

'No! Of course not.'

'Great!' said Elvis. 'I think one or two other members might want to come along too. I'll pass the word around in case anyone is interested.' He turned and started to walk away then turned back. 'Good luck!' he said. He walked back to the caravan door and held out his hand. 'Good luck!' he said again. He clasped Trevor's hand with both his hands. 'Good luck!' he said, for the third time.

'Thank you,' said Trevor. He winced as Elvis squeezed his hand rather tightly.

'I'll be right there with you,' said Elvis. 'You can do it.'

'Thanks,' said Trevor. He gently prised Elvis's fingers from around his hand. 'Thank you very much.'

'Oh, I nearly forgot,' said Elvis, 'congratulations on that story in today's *Globe*. Nice picture too!'

'I haven't seen it yet,' said Trevor. 'Is it OK?'

'Wonderful!' said Elvis. 'Sounds as if you had the reporter eating out of your hand.' He reached behind his back and pulled a folded up newspaper out of his back trouser pocket. 'Here you are,' he said, trying to smooth out of some of the creases and then handing the paper to Trevor.

'Thanks' said Trevor, accepting the offered newspaper.

'Thanks very much.' As he was clambering back up the steps he heard a car squealing to a halt a few yards away. Turning round he saw Willie climbing out of a battered old Ford which had a small red and white plastic sign stuck on its roof. The sign, which was broken, said simply: TAX.

'Where on earth have you been?' asked Trevor, standing and waiting for Willie to walk over to the caravan.

'I couldn't find anyone sober enough to drive me back last night,' said Willie. He didn't look as though he had slept very much.

'You could have walked,' suggested Trevor.

'Walk! It's miles!'

'Where did you stay? In the pub?'

'No, I didn't think that was a good idea since the Porsche was parked there. A woman who runs an antique shop took me home with her.' Willie yawned. 'You haven't seen that detective chappie again, have you?'

Trevor shook his head. 'He wasn't a detective,' he said. 'He was a photographer.'

Willie looked puzzled. 'What do you mean, he was a photographer? I know he was a photographer. He had a camera. What matters is what he does with the photographs he took.'

'He's a photographer for the *Daily Globe*,' said Trevor. He opened the newspaper Elvis had given him and flicked through the pages. Megan's story, accompanied by a huge photograph of him, took up the whole of page nine.

‘Why didn’t you tell me he was from the *Globe*?’

‘I didn’t know he was from the *Globe* until after you’d gone,’ said Trevor. ‘Anyway, your photo isn’t in the paper.’

‘What do you mean my photo isn’t in the paper?’

‘Look’ said Trevor, showing Willie the page. ‘Just me.’

‘What?’ demanded Willie, grabbing the newspaper. ‘What do you mean no photograph of me?’

‘I thought you didn’t want your photograph in the paper?’

‘Well, I didn’t!’ said Willie. ‘But I don’t like being snubbed.’

He seemed quite put out about it. ‘Anyway, I’m beginning to wish Brenda would hurry up and find me. I’m getting too old for all this chasing about. And to be honest I’m getting fed up of being all squashed up in your damned caravan.’

Trevor led the way into the caravan and found Megan standing just inside the door. Once again she was wearing one of his shirts though she hadn’t had time to fasten the buttons at the front.

‘Hello!’ he said. ‘You’re awake.’

‘Yes.’ said Megan. ‘Hello.’ She kissed him and put both her arms around his neck. Trevor put one hand round her back and one hand on her bare bottom.

‘Did I hear Willie say he wished that Brenda would find him?’ Megan asked in a whisper.

‘Yes,’ whispered Trevor back. ‘It would give us a bit more privacy if she did, too.’

‘Good god, Trevor!’ said Willie, standing on the caravan steps. ‘You’re a fast worker! And what on earth have you two found to get all lovey-dovey about at this time in the morning.’

Trevor felt himself blushing.

‘I’ll get dressed,’ whispered Megan. ‘Is that this morning’s *Globe*?’

‘Yes,’ said Trevor. ‘Elvis brought it. Thank you. It’s a super story.’

‘You can thank me properly later,’ said Megan. She kissed him again and then disappeared back into the bedroom.

***

The kettle, filled with just enough water to make a mug of tea, was starting to boil, and four strips of best Danish bacon were sizzling under the grill when Trevor heard another tap on the caravan door. He walked across and, again, opened the top half of the door.

Victor Dussenberg was standing there. Compared to him, Elvis Ramsbottom had looked like a pools winner attending the cheque presentation ceremony.

‘Nice morning isn’t it,’ said Trevor, feeling it his duty to try to cheer Victor Dussenberg up. ‘Looks as though it could be quite sunny later.’

Mr Dussenberg shook his head. ‘It’ll rain,’ he prophesied miserably.

‘Oh,’ said Trevor. ‘What makes you think that?’

‘The frogs were noisy last night.’

‘Right,’ nodded Trevor. ‘Of course.’

‘I’ll play,’ said Mr Dussenberg, with a sigh.

‘It’s…,’ began Trevor.

Victor Dussenberg held up a hand. ‘No,’ he said firmly, ‘I’ve thought about it and I can’t let you or the club down. I’ll play.’

‘It’s OK,’ said Trevor. ‘You don’t have to.’

‘No, I’ll play,’ insisted Mr Dussenberg. ‘I’ve thought about it and I’ve made up my mind.’

Trevor smiled at him. ‘No, really,’ he said. ‘There’s no need.’

‘What do you mean?’ Victor Dussenberg seemed puzzled. ‘You’re playing this match against the bankers today aren’t you?’

‘Yes, but there’s no need for you to play now.’

‘You’ve got someone else?’ Mr Dussenberg’s tone had changed.

‘Yes.’

‘What’s wrong with me? I can hit the ball as far as anyone in the club!’ Mr Dussenberg sounded quite belligerent.

‘I know. I appreciate that. But someone else has agreed to play.’

‘So what you’re saying is that you don’t need me?’

‘I’m very grateful to you for offering,’ said Trevor.

‘Well is he as good as I am?’ demanded Mr Dussenberg.

‘It isn’t a question of how good anyone is,’ said Trevor, soothingly.

‘Well, it seems a bloody funny way to go about things,’ said Mr Dussenberg, rather angrily. ‘One minute you ask me to play and the next you say you don't want me.' He scowled at Trevor. 'If that's the way you want it then that's fine by me. But don't complain when you lose.' He turned and stalked off.

'I'm very grateful to you for offering,' shouted Trevor. 'It was kind of you.' He turned and went back into the caravan. The bacon was burning and the caravan was full of steam from the boiling kettle. He moved as quickly as he could to the stove and turned off the gas. The air was full of a sharp, acrid, metallic smell and when Trevor lifted up the kettle he realised that it had boiled dry. The bottom of the kettle was blackened and a small hole was clearly visible. He put the kettle down and pulled out the grill pan.

Suddenly there was a noise from the other end of the caravan. Trevor turned to see what it was. Dimly, through the steam, he could see Willie burst out of the tiny shower room and hurry towards him. Willie was stark naked.

'Are we on fire?' Willie shouted.

'No, it's OK,' said Trevor. 'I've burnt some bacon, that's all.' In his right hand he held the grill pan which contained the blackened remains of the essential ingredient for his bacon sandwiches.

Willie wrapped a towel around his right hand and picked up the kettle. 'This doesn't look as if it's going to be much good!' he said, examining its black bottom and looking at the hole.

'What on earth is going on?' asked Megan, poking her head around the bedroom door.

Trevor explained.

'I'll go and borrow another kettle as soon as I'm dressed,' Megan said immediately. Willie, who was naked and who had turned to look in Megan's direction, modestly turned away again and grunted something that no one could understand. Behind his back Megan opened the bedroom door wide and winked at Trevor. She was wearing one flimsy piece of underwear below the waist and nothing but a rather concerned look above it. She slipped back into the bedroom to carry on getting dressed. She hadn't been gone for two seconds before the caravan front door opened. 'Do you know there's something burning in there?' called a voice which Trevor did not immediately recognise.

Willie, not knowing who was opening the door, lowered his hands to protect his modesty. As he did so he forgot that in his right hand he was holding a very hot kettle.

He screamed as the kettle touched a very delicate part of his anatomy, dropped the kettle and then screamed again as the kettle landed on his bare foot.

'Hello!' said Bert Grubb, poking his head into the caravan. 'Shall I call the fire brigade?'

'No, thanks!' said Trevor. 'Everything is under control!' This was clearly a lie for Willie, who was now crying, was trying to hold two parts of his anatomy which were some distance apart.

'Ambulance?' suggested Bert, stepping into the caravan and walking over to see what was happening.

'No, thanks!' said Trevor.

'What on earth is going on?' asked Megan, opening the bedroom door again. She was now decent but still not fully dressed and Bert Grubb's eyes very nearly popped out of his head when he caught sight of her.

'You don't want me to dial 999 at all?' asked Bert Grubb, when he had regained control of his breathing. He sounded very disappointed when both Trevor and Willie said 'No'. He'd never had a chance to dial 999 before.

'Everything is OK,' insisted Trevor, holding up a reassuring hand. 'Really!' he insisted. He took a step forward without bothering to look where he was walking and trod on the hot kettle which Willie had dropped. He too started to scream, and as he started to dance a rather ungainly little jig he dropped the grill pan. The grill pan fell on Willie's leg and Willie, still holding onto his lightly roasted wedding tackle, and now having three sore spots to comfort, joined in the impromptu jig.

'Are you sure you don't want an ambulance?' asked Bert Grubb.

'I'll go and borrow another kettle from Jake,' said Megan, reappearing yet again, this time dressed. 'What on earth are you two doing down there? This is no time to be dancing.' Then she saw what Willie was clutching. 'You haven't damaged anything important have you?' she asked, trying hard not to laugh.

'It'll probably be all right,' said Willie, speaking through clenched teeth. 'I need a nurse.'

'I'll get a fresh kettle,' said Megan firmly. 'You two need a nice cup of tea.'

'I just came to let you know that I'd be playing with you this morning,' said Mr Grubb. 'I thought about it during the night and decided that I had a responsibility to the club.'

Trevor staggered over to one of the bench seats and sat down. It was half past eight and there was just two and a half hours to go before the match that would decide his future.

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There was quite a crowd around the first tee. Trevor had never before seen so many small, embroidered giraffes gathered together in one place. The club secretary was there, of course. And so was Captain Jarrold. The Dussenbergs both looked very smart. Mr Dussenberg, who had a low irritancy threshold but a quick recovery time, waved a hand and smiled sweetly. The club professional, Mr Schmidt, was there too. He was wearing a green jumper, a pair of sky blue plus fours, brown and white shoes with multi-coloured laces and the inevitable Tam O'Shanter. The jumper, in addition to the obligatory giraffe, had a picture of a golfer sewn onto the front.

'Strewth!' said Trevor, quietly, looking around and nodding at many familiar faces. 'There must be a hundred people here!' He was desperately looking for Charlie but he couldn't see her anywhere. He realised he should have agreed to meet her at her caravan. He took his bag from his shoulder and lay it on the ground. At Willie's suggestion Trevor was once again playing with a depleted bag of clubs.

Both Trevor and Willie were limping. Trevor now had a burnt foot as well as a sore knee. Willie had burns on both legs and a burn in a private place which made him walk like a cowboy who has spent too long in the saddle. Megan had filled his underpants with a large quantity of cotton wool, though where she had got this from only she knew. The cotton wool gave him what can only be described as an improbable looking walk. Megan said he would have been a great success at a hen party and Willie looked rather pleased with himself until she muttered something about how disappointed they would be when they discovered the truth.

'My cotton wool is slipping,' whispered Willie who was wearing a bright blue jumper, a pair of red and green plaid trousers, a purple and yellow Tam O'Shanter and a pair of dark glasses. The jumper, trousers and Tam O'Shanter all bore tiny embroidered giraffes. 'I'm going to have to go back and take some of it out.' He hurried back towards the caravan.

The bankers were there already, of course. They weren't the sort of men ever to be late for anything if money was involved.

Mr Barclay had forsaken the colourful costume he had bought from Mr Schmidt's shop and looked far more comfortable in a very ordinary and undistinguished brown cap which someone had covered with a thin layer of plastic, presumably as some sort of waterproofing, a beige anorak, zipped almost to the throat, over what appeared to be a light beige polo necked sweater, dark beige trousers with an almost invisible check pattern and a pair of brown, rubberised golfing shoes.

The man standing beside Mr Barclay was slightly older and slightly plumper and didn't look to have Mr Barclay's natural sense of fun. He too was dressed in a beige anorak, zipped almost to the throat, over what appeared to be a light beige polo necked sweater. He too wore dark beige trousers with an almost invisible check pattern and a pair of brown, rubberised golfing shoes. His cap was also covered in a thin layer of plastic. The two of them looked like a pair of non-identical twins dressed by a mother with an underpowered imagination and a penchant for beige. Trevor, who was wearing a thin pair of Mr Schmidt's summer golfing trousers and a thin golf shirt, decided that they must both be rather thin-blooded and pessimistic individuals.

Both men had their hands resting on the handles of battery-powered trollies, and even without counting Trevor knew that both beige, imitation leather golf bags were packed with the full complement of 14 clubs. These were not, thought Trevor, the sort of men who would choose to do anything light-heartedly.

'This is Mr Lloyd,' said Mr Barclay, introducing his colleague. 'Mr Lloyd is associate vice-president at The Mettleham Banking Corporation and senior vice-president of our associate bank, Mettleham Global Banking Corporation.' He paused to let this important information sink in. 'Mr Lloyd is in charge of Corporate Liability Relations and Public Affairs, 'Mr Barclay added.

'And this is my daughter,' said Mr Lloyd, introducing a short but extremely curvaceous woman in her late twenties. She had piercing blue eyes, a button nose, perfectly capped teeth and a bust which cocked a snook at gravity. She was wearing a low cut, figure-hugging blue and white silk dress which displayed an alarming amount of cleavage, a pair of blue stiletto-heeled shoes and a small, flimsy and entirely functionless hat. She looked as if she was dressed more for a wedding than a golf match. 'She's come along to learn a little about the game,' he added.

Just then Willie appeared, having removed half a pound of cotton wool from his trousers.

'Willie!' cried the banker's buxom daughter. 'You bastard!

Willie, who, possibly because of the dark glasses he was wearing, hadn't seen the girl in the blue dress up until that moment, didn't flinch. Trevor was very impressed.

'Brenda!' he said, giving the banker's daughter one of his widest smiles. 'What are you doing here?' He looked around as though trying to decide whether or not he could escape. He apparently decided that he couldn't. 'How did you find me?' he asked, widening the smile still further. 'Do you like the new golfing gear?'

'I came with Daddy because I was bored. We're flying over to Frankfurt later,' answered Brenda. 'After he's played a match with this Mr Dukinfield.' She nodded in Trevor's direction. 'Daddy's bank is going to turn this golf club into something more profitable,' she said. 'And you look a complete and utter prat.'

'Oh, I say…,' began Trevor, protesting not at the honest description of his friend but at Brenda's outspoken assumption that he and Charlie were about to lose their golf match.

'Have you had private detectives following me?' demanded Willie.

'No!' said Brenda. 'I have not! Why should I? I didn't care whether I ever saw you again.'

‘Can I just say that I object to the assumption that my partner and I are going to lose this match,’ said Trevor.

‘Oh, do be quiet Trevor,’ said Willie.

‘Please be quiet,’ said Brenda, rather imperiously.

‘So what are you doing here?’ demanded Willie.

‘Why shouldn’t I be here?’ demanded Brenda. She turned and flounced away and stared at nothing in particular with great intensity.

‘Is that *the* Brenda?’ Trevor whispered to Willie, when Brenda was out of earshot. ‘Your wife?’

‘Yes’ said Willie. ‘Isn’t she wonderful? And this is Mr Lloyd, her father,’ he added, bravely ignoring the banker’s impressive glower. Trevor decided that Mr Lloyd could probably win medals for his glowering. He could certainly have glowered for England.

‘Don’t speak to me you…you…,’ spluttered Mr Lloyd in Willie’s direction.

‘Come on, dad, can’t we just let bygones be bygones and forget that little incident?’ said Willie, far too reasonably for Mr Lloyd’s liking.

‘Little incident! It might have been a little incident for you. It certainly wasn’t for the bank. You know how much money we lost, don’t you?’

Willie nodded, winking slyly at Trevor and clearly not taking things at all seriously.

‘And it was all your bloody fault. You couldn’t possibly lose to the Japanese man, could you? Oh, no, not you Willie,’ continued Brenda’s father. ‘For the sake of one round of golf and your bloody pride you had to go and win.’

‘But it was a cracking round, wasn’t it!’ replied Willie, starting to grin. ‘And it wasn’t *your* money that was lost, was it, dad. It did really belong to the bank, or had you forgotten?’

‘That’s hardly the point,’ said Mr Lloyd, still glowering impressively. ‘It still goes on my record. It might as well have been my money. And stop calling me dad!’ He was clearly infuriated by Willie’s lack of concern and rather flippant manner.

Trevor decided the time had come to intervene.

‘Hello,’ he said, with a rather timid smile. He held out a hand. ‘I’m Trevor.’ Mr Lloyd looked at Trevor’s hand as though he had never seen anything like it before. Trevor withdrew his hand and examined it carefully, checking that he had not suddenly acquired any particularly unpleasant skin diseases.

‘You’re Dukinfield?’ asked Mr Lloyd. He managed to phrase the question in such a way that Trevor instinctively felt guilty and wondered if he ought, perhaps, to have a solicitor present before answering. The banker repeated his question.

‘Er, yes,’ admitted Trevor. ‘I’m Trevor Dukinfield.’

‘And where is your partner?’ asked Mr Lloyd, ‘I assume it isn’t him?’ he added, indicating Willie and managing to fill the word ‘him’ with enough venom to poison an army.

‘Oh no,’ said Trevor. ‘Willie wasn’t born in the area. He isn’t eligible.’

‘He’s the most ineligible man I’ve ever met,’ snorted Mr Lloyd.

‘I’m Trevor’s caddie,’ explained Willie.

‘Caddie?’ said Mr Lloyd, doing a fair imitation of Edith Evans playing Lady Bracknell in Oscar Wilde’s ‘The Importance of Being Earnest’. He turned to his colleague. ‘Is that allowed Mr Barclay?’

‘I’m not, er, sure, Mr Lloyd,’ confessed Mr Barclay, rather nervously. Mr Lloyd was clearly his senior. Mr Barclay unzipped his anorak and took a piece of paper out from an inside pocket. It was, Trevor guessed, a copy of his uncle’s will. The banker studied this carefully for a few moments before looking up. ‘It doesn’t seem to say anything about caddies here, Mr Lloyd,’ he admitted at last. He folded the paper, put it back into his pocket and zipped up his anorak again.

‘Hrmph!’ said Mr Lloyd, who clearly didn’t approve of this omission.

Mr Barclay stared at them both in turn. ‘So,’ he said at last, ‘who *is* your partner?’

Trevor who had been looking everywhere for Charlie suddenly spotted her. She was wearing a pair of dark green trousers and a matching sweater. She looked very professional. Megan, wearing a white, pleated tennis skirt, a white tennis shirt and white ankle socks was walking alongside her. She looked, Trevor thought, like an angel. Megan was pulling a trolley which presumably carried Charlie’s clubs.

‘There!’ Trevor said, gleefully, pointing in Charlie’s direction. ‘There’s my partner!’

The two bankers turned their heads and followed Trevor’s outstretched arm with their eyes. ‘Where?’ demanded Mr Lloyd.

‘There!’ insisted Trevor.

‘But those are women!’ said Mr Lloyd, perceptively.

‘One of them is your partner?’ said Mr Barclay, his voice heavily laced with disbelief and disapproval.

‘The one on the left,’ said Trevor.

‘The one on the right is her caddie,’ said Willie.

‘This is preposterous!’ said Mr Lloyd, who would have stamped his foot if his gout hadn’t been playing up. ‘Is this allowed?’

Mr Barclay unzipped his anorak, took out his copy of the will and studied it again. ‘It doesn’t seem to say anything here about women,’ he said.

‘There you are!’ said Mr Lloyd firmly. ‘It doesn’t say you can have a woman playing with you.’

‘It doesn’t say I can’t,’ Trevor pointed out.

The two bankers moved away just as Charlie and Megan joined Trevor and Willie. ‘Hello, Charlie!’ said Trevor. ‘Thanks for coming.’

Charlie smiled nervously but didn’t speak.

The two bankers returned and Mr Barclay cleared his throat. ‘We have studied your uncle’s will,’ he said to Trevor, ‘and we admit that your choice of partner is not outside the rules he outlined. We therefore have no objection. We assume that your partner satisfies your uncle’s requirements about being a locally born member of the club?’

‘Absolutely!’ said Trevor.

‘We will, of course, be playing this game according to the strict rules of golf,’ said Mr Barclay. ‘Is that understood?’

‘Yes,’ said Trevor, feeling rather weak. He looked at Willie who knew the rules much better than he did.

‘Any deviations from the rules and any infringements will be penalised. Is that understood?’

‘Yes,’ agreed Trevor, swallowing a lump the size of a large golf ball which had mysteriously appeared in his throat.

‘Then shall we start the match, gentlemen?’ said Mr Barclay. He looked confused. ‘Er, and, er, ladies,’ he added. He looked at his watch. ‘It is seventeen minutes past eleven and Mr Lloyd has to be in Frankfurt tonight.’

Mr Lloyd and Mr Barclay, Willie, Charlie and Megan all walked briskly to the first tee where their arrival was met with loud cheers of approval. Trevor, limping, arrived a few moments behind them. His arrival attracted by far the greatest cheers.

Brenda, Willie’s estranged wife, struggled to bring up the rear as she tottered along on her decidedly unsuitable footwear.

‘Come on, Brenda, do keep up!’ said Mr Lloyd.

‘Oh, don’t be rotten to her!’ said Willie. ‘She’s only got short legs.’

‘Pig!’ shouted Brenda, rushing over and hitting Willie on the chest with her handbag. When she ran her entire superstructure wobbled and shook like two very large jellies.

‘Oooh, I love it when you’re all angry!’ said Willie, laughing.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

When Trevor's uncle had thought up the idea of the golf match he had decreed that it should be played according to the rules acknowledged by the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews and the United States Golf Association. Recognising that his nephew, not being an experienced golfer, would be at a severe disadvantage unless some sort of handicapping system was used, he had outlined some joyfully simple handicapping rules in his will.

Trevor had a handicap of 24. Charlie had a handicap of 28. Mr Barclay had a handicap of 9 and Mr Lloyd had a handicap of 7. According to Uncle Pettigrew's rules Trevor and Charlie received one free stroke on every hole.

All Trevor and Charlie had to do to win a hole was for one of them to finish the hole in the same score as the best of their opponents - the handicapping would do the rest. Halved holes were to be ignored. If the match was drawn after eighteen holes then the two sides would play a game of sudden death play-off starting again at the first tee.

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Mr Lloyd, having the lowest handicap of the four players, took the red leatherette cover off the head of his graphite-shafted driver, unwrapped a brand new, uncuttable ball and walked onto the first tee. He had little charisma, less presence and no sense of occasion, and the throng of members which had collected around the first tee seemed disappointed when he simply put his ball onto a tee, took one practice swing and then hit his ball a good two hundred and fifty yards down the centre of the fairway. They hadn't come to watch an exhibition they had come to watch a golf match, and there were many among the crowd who rather suspected that the whole contest might well be over on the tenth green.

Mr Barclay was equally clinical in his approach. His ball landed about twenty yards to the left of Mr Lloyd's and, thanks to a lucky bounce, finished up some thirty yards further on.

When it was Trevor's turn to limp forward and step onto the tee, clutching his trusty three iron in one hand and one of Mr Schmidt's 50 pence top of the range 'groundsman specials' in the other, the cheers and shouts of support were deafening. Trevor found the experience daunting and rather intimidating. He smiled weakly and tried to remember whether he was supposed to keep his knees steady and his head bent or his knees bent and his head steady.

It was perhaps through nervousness that he topped his first shot. It travelled just over seventy yards and narrowly missed a foolhardy phalanx of spectators who, misled by the excellence displayed by the two bankers, had started to creep down the edge of the fairway in anticipation of Trevor's maiden shot.

'Never mind!' said Willie. 'At least you've hit it in the right direction - and you're on the fairway!'

Trevor smiled weakly and wondered whether he was doomed to play the whole round with a battalion of heavy-booted butterflies clog dancing around in his stomach.

Willie put Trevor's three iron back into his bag and set off towards the ladies' tee. Charlie and Megan had already begun to walk in that direction.

'Where are you going?' demanded Mr Lloyd.

'To the ladies' tee,' replied Willie, clearly surprised that anyone should ask.

'Mr Dukinfield's partner has to play from the men's tee,' said Mr Lloyd.

Willie laughed. 'Don't be silly!' he said. 'Charlie may have a boy's name but you can see for yourself she's a girl.'

'It's in the will,' said Mr Lloyd.

Willie stopped laughing and the smile melted from his face at the mention of the word 'will'. He called to Megan to wait a moment. Trevor felt a cold chill in the pit of his stomach. He shuddered involuntarily and the butterflies lay down and kept quite still.

'Read it to him, Mr Barclay,' said Mr Lloyd.

Mr Barclay unzipped his anorak and took out his favourite reading matter. It didn't take him more than a moment to find the relevant clause. He obviously knew the will by heart. 'All players will tee off from the yellow (ordinary) men's tees,' he read.

'But that was just put in because Trevor's uncle didn't want the match to be played from the white match tees,' protested Willie. 'He obviously didn't intend Charlie to play from the men's tees.'

'How do you know?' asked Mr Lloyd.

'Well, of course he didn't!' said Willie. 'It's just that he didn't realise that Trevor's partner would be a girl.'

'I'm afraid that since Mr Dukinfield's uncle is no longer with us it isn't possible to find out exactly what he did not or did not intend,' said Mr Lloyd. 'What we do have is his will - and that, used in conjunction with the rules of golf, is what we are playing by. You did agree to that didn't you?'

‘Well, yes,’ said Willie. ‘But be reasonable!’

Mr Barclay stared at him as if he’d suggested that they all try nude parachute jumping.

‘I’m afraid you’re going to have to play from the men’s tees,’ said Willie to Charlie with a sigh. The club secretary exchanged glances with Captain Jarrold and frowned. There was much angry whispering among the collected members.

Charlie looked at Trevor, then looked at Megan, then looked at Willie and then looked down the fairway.

‘You’re bound to hit it further than I did!’ said Trevor, attempting to be cheerful.

‘It seems such a long way from here,’ said Charlie quietly, taking her driver from Megan.

‘Don’t let them get to you!’ Trevor heard Megan murmur. ‘That’s what they want!’

Charlie put her ball on a tee and hit it over a hundred and fifty yards down the left of the fairway. It was a cracking shot. If she had played from the women’s tee her ball would have been almost level with Mr Lloyd’s ball. She and Trevor were pleased but Mr Barclay and Mr Lloyd, standing smugly at the side of the tee, also looked very pleased.

‘I think we can get the bulldozers down here this afternoon, Mr Lloyd,’ said Mr Barclay.

‘I think you’re right, Mr Barclay,’ said Mr Lloyd, rubbing his hands together gleefully.

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By the time they reached the green both Trevor and Charlie were feeling deeply depressed, and the travelling gallery of supporters and spectators had sunk into a moody silence. Trevor, who had hit his second shot into the thick rough on the left, had taken eight shots. Charlie, who had hit two superb long iron shots, had fallen slightly short of the green with her fourth shot, had hit her fifth into a bunker and had taken a total six shots to reach the putting surface. Mr Lloyd had taken three shots and Mr Barclay had taken four shots to reach the green. Mr Lloyd’s ball was twenty feet closer to the pin than Charlie’s. It was Charlie’s turn to putt first. She hit the ball quite hard, realising that there was no point at all in leaving her ball close to the hole since it was, to say the least, rather unlikely that Mr Lloyd would take more than three putts.

She missed the hole by two inches and her ball ended up six feet past the cup. In the end the putt didn’t matter. Mr Lloyd needed just two putts to finish the hole.

‘There’s one good thing,’ said Willie.

‘What’s that?’ asked Trevor, whose knee was hurting quite a lot and who couldn’t think of anything at all to be cheerful about.

‘It’s match play,’ said Willie. ‘We may be one hole down but we start afresh at the second.’

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But the second hole was no better than the first, and nor was the third. The fourth was a disaster. Trevor lost two balls, Charlie lost one and the two bankers won the hole by four clear shots, even with their handicap of a stroke a hole. The spectators were becoming increasingly gloomy, and if there had been a competition to find the number of long faces in one place the Butterbury Ford Golf Club would have won it by many a jowl.

Charlie could hit the ball straight enough but the disadvantage of having to play from the men’s tees meant that for her every hole was a real challenge. To make matters worse she found that she was constantly playing from an unusual position on the fairway. Her knowledge of the course had become quite useless, and it was as though she was playing it for the first time.

Even using a three iron Trevor often managed to hit the ball quite a distance from the tee, but whether it was because he was trying too hard or was simply nervous he was having tremendous difficulty in keeping the ball on the fairway. For the first two holes he hooked the ball. For the second two he acquired a vicious slice. If there hadn’t been a large, enthusiastic and unashamedly partisan gallery to help him look for his ball the five minute rule, strictly adhered to by the bankers, would have meant that he would have lost even more balls than he did.

The rot stopped at the fifth hole. And it was Charlie who helped restore some semblance of pride and hope to the home side.

The fifth hole is the longest hole on the course and was, therefore, probably the hole that those supporting Trevor and Charlie least expected them to win.

Inspired, no doubt, by the awesome Poacher’s Lake which lies in front of the fifth tee the two bankers, playing first, both hit their drives with extra venom. Although they cleared the lake easily both of them managed to miss the wide fairway on the other side. Mr Lloyd’s ball drifted left into thick heather. Mr Barclay pushed his ball out to the right where it landed in a small beechwood copse. Both men sensibly played provisional balls which landed safely over the water and on the fairway.

Trevor hit his usual three iron tee shot and watched with delight as his ball landed on the left-hand side of the fairway around thirty yards the other side of the lake. Charlie, seeing that her partner had successfully cleared the lake, decided to play a riskier shot. She used her driver and put her tee shot straight across the lake and a hundred yards down the middle of the fairway. It was a glorious shot which the gallery cheered with great enthusiasm. They hadn't had much else to get excited about.

No one in the gallery seemed too keen to help the two bankers find their balls.

'I say,' called Mr Barclay to the nearest group of spectators. 'Give me a hand, will you?' He was standing in the middle of the beechwood copse and had absolutely no idea where his ball had landed.

'It's full of brambles in there!' complained Elvis Ramsbottom who had, at the third hole, quite happily crawled on his hands and knees through brambles to find Trevor's ball, not even complaining when he had knelt on an ants' nest.

'Come on, you chaps,' called Mr Lloyd, up to his waist in heather and gorse. 'Get stuck in! Twenty pence to the fellow who finds my ball.' He tried to accompany this none too generous offer with a smile, but his facial muscles, unaccustomed to this sort of manoeuvre, found the effort too much for them and the result was a rather startling grimace which frightened Mrs Dussenberg so much that she needed a nip from Mr Schmidt's hip flask.

'Sorry! I've got blood pressure,' answered Captain Jarrold, without troubling to explain the significance of the confession.

'Watch out for the snakes!' shouted Elvis.

'Come on Brenda!' called Willie, to his wife. She was tottering along fifty yards behind the rest of the spectators. 'Help your Dad find his ball. Don't worry about the snakes.'

'Shut up!' replied Brenda. 'Anything you've got to say you can say through my solicitor.'

Willie just laughed.

Muttering something inaudible, Mr Lloyd abandoned his search and played his replacement ball. He was so cross that he hurried his shot and sent the ball flying diagonally across the fairway. It landed, with a loud clattering, in among the same beech trees that had already swallowed up Mr Barclay's first drive.

By the time they reached the green Mr Lloyd had already taken seven shots while Mr Barclay, after an extraordinary shot with a hickory-shafted brassie from an unpromising looking lie on the fairway, had taken five. Trevor and Charlie had played the hole almost perfectly. Trevor, playing safely, had taken another four iron shots to reach the green and so, with his handicap, had a clear shot over Mr Barclay. Charlie, throwing all caution to the winds, had reached the green with her third shot and was three shots ahead of Mr Barclay. When Trevor almost holed a long, curling putt, leaving the ball no more than two inches from the hole, it meant that Mr Lloyd was out of contention and Mr Barclay had to hole his long putt to halve the hole. Much to the relief of the spectators Charlie put the whole thing beyond question by completing the hole in two putts.

The bankers' lead had now been cut to four holes and there were thirteen left to play.

'I think that bad knee is helping your game!' said Willie, as they walked to the next tee.

Puzzled, Trevor stared at him.

'It's a bit stiffer than usual,' Willie explained. 'It's helping your swing.'

'Thank God for that. I need all the help I can get. Perhaps I should fall down and twist the other one' said Trevor.

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The sixth hole, one of the shortest on the course, was a hole which Charlie and Trevor really had to win. It was here that Trevor had scored his never-to-be-forgotten hole in three (by now very nearly an even more unforgettable hole in one) when playing his first ever round of golf with Mr Schmidt. As he stepped onto the tee he felt a sudden and welcome flutter of confidence.

'You have to win this hole,' whispered Willie as he and Trevor climbed up onto the tee. 'A half isn't good enough. And you have to assume that one of the bankers will get at least a three. There's a good chance that one of them will get a birdie two. That means that both of you are going to have to play for the green. It isn't any good playing short and safe, thinking that a four, net three, will win you the hole. I don't think it will.'

Trevor swallowed hard. 'Will you have a word with Charlie?' he asked.

'I can't,' replied Willie. 'The rules say a player can only accept advice from a partner or caddie. I'm not Charlie's caddie.' He winked. 'But you can talk to her.'

Trevor walked over to where Charlie and Megan were standing.

'How are you feeling?' he asked Charlie.

She swallowed, licked her lips and smiled thinly. 'I've never been so nervous in my life,' she confessed, touching his arm gently with her hand. Trevor did his best to ignore her touch but felt his face redden.

'Willie thinks we should both play for the green on this hole,' said Trevor quickly. He explained why.

'I don't think I can reach the green unless I use my driver,' said Charlie. 'Not from the men's tee.' She smiled at him nervously and removed her hand to pull a driver from her bag. The gathered crowd of spectators, heartened by the win at the fifth hole, gasped at Charlie's audacity and then quietened as she prepared herself to drive off. You could have heard a tee drop on a fresh molehill.

For the first few moments after the ball left Charlie's club face, Trevor thought that all was going to be well. Indeed, for a second or so he thought that Charlie's shot was going to be perfect. It flew very low and very straight and was undoubtedly heading straight for the green. But when the ball landed and kicked forward he knew it was going too fast and would go too far. The sixth green isn't visible from the tee but a score or so of spectators had rushed ahead and their silence said it all. Charlie's ball had landed on the green on its second bounce but because its trajectory was so low it had failed to slow down at all. It had flown through the rhododendron bushes and disappeared down the hill at the back of the green. The waiting crowd rushed after it but there was no chance that they would ever find it. Standing on the tee Charlie had watched her ball's progress with a mounting sense of horror and frustration. She knew what was going to happen but also knew that there was nothing she could do about it.

Trevor stepped onto the tee knowing that their chance of success on this hole was now in his hands. He hesitated for a brief moment, tempted to play a safe shot down the middle of the fairway.

'Go for it!' whispered Willie as he tried to decide what to do.

Making a conscious effort not to grip his club too hard, swing too fast or hit the cover off the ball, Trevor closed his eyes and tried to recreate the shot he had played when he had beaten the professional.

The ball flew from Trevor's club and soared high into the air straight down the middle of the fairway. It seemed to hang in the air for minutes before plummeting to earth. It then bounced twice and slowly disappeared from sight as it rolled over the edge of the bank leading down to the green. The crowd might have seen this success, and cheered loudly at their hero's courage had they not been struggling through the rhododendron bushes in search of Charlie's ball. But back on the tee the players and caddies did not know this, and the silence depressed Trevor and Charlie and their two caddies.

'It must have gone through the green,' said Willie sadly. 'You'd better play a second.'

'Never mind,' said Megan. 'At least you had a go. 'She put her arm around Trevor and gave him a big hug.

The two bankers were cheered by Trevor's apparent failure. The silent reception his shot had received did not depress them one little bit.

'I think we can afford to play this one rather conservatively, Mr Barclay,' said Mr Lloyd.

'I agree, Mr Lloyd,' said Mr Barclay, who would have agreed if Mr Lloyd had suggested that they play their shots standing on their heads in buckets of yoghurt.

So both bankers played rather limp and tentative little approach shots which stayed on the fairway and did not roll down onto the green. Certain that Trevor and Charlie, who would be playing three from the tee, would each take at least four shots they were confident that they would, at the very least, halve the hole.

Their confidence soared to unprecedented heights when Trevor and Charlie played their second, precautionary shots.

Charlie's second shot from the tee crashed into the trees on the left of the fairway, bounced out and dropped into thick uncut grass where it lay virtually unplayable. Trevor's second shot may well have hit the same tree, it certainly hit a tree in the same part of the wood. It too dropped into what subsequently proved to be an unplayable lie.

As it happened, of course, none of this mattered one jot because Trevor's first shot had, in fact, rolled down onto the green and come to rest no more than four feet from the hole. Elvis Ramsbottom, who had stayed behind at the tee with the players, ran down the course to report that Trevor's first ball had not, after all, gone through the green. This news was met with resounding cheers from the rest of the gallery, many of who had some considerable difficulty in dragging themselves back up the hillside and through the rhododendron bushes.

'Don't go for the birdie,' said Willie, when the two bankers had played their approach shots onto the green. 'Just try to leave your ball as close to the hole as you can. Imagine that the hole is a yard across.' Willie knew that a three, net two, would certainly win a point. There was no point at all in Trevor trying for a heroic finish and risking sending the ball several feet past the hole.

Faithfully obeying instructions Trevor played cautiously and watched in astonishment as his ball went straight into the hole for a quite spectacular birdie.

Trevor and Charlie had won two holes in a row and were now just two holes behind the bankers.

'Are we nearly finished yet?' demanded Brenda. 'I'm tired. How much longer is this going to go on for?' She shot a menacing look at Willie who winked at Trevor and grinned back at his estranged wife.

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Trevor scored a five, net four, at the seventh and halved the hole with Mr Lloyd. Charlie scored a six net five at the eighth and halved the hole with Mr Barclay. The ninth hole was won by Mr Lloyd, who got a very good birdie, and so Trevor and Charlie finished the first half of the course three holes behind the bankers.

Trevor stood on the tenth tee waiting while Mr Lloyd rummaged in his bag and noticed that Willie, standing a few yards behind them, was whispering something in Megan's ear.

Mr Lloyd, having produced yet another packet of brand new balls tore into the cellophane impatiently. He apparently liked to play with a new ball on every hole. The flimsy box broke open, and although the banker caught hold of one ball two fell onto the ground. Megan stepped forward and quickly picked them up. She stood right in front of him, holding out her hand with the two balls resting on her palm. 'Your balls, Mr Lloyd,' she said, with her brightest smile. Mr Lloyd looked at her as though for the first time. 'Thank you, er…,' he stuttered.

'Megan,' said Megan.

'Thank you, Megan,' said the banker, blushing. He reached out for the two balls, fumbled with them, nearly dropped one and then eventually took them and dropped them into the opened pocket on his golf bag.

'What a strong man you are,' murmured Megan, reaching out and touching the banker's arm. 'You do hit the ball a long way, don't you?'

'Do you think so?' asked the banker.

'Oh yes,' whispered Megan breathlessly.

Mr Lloyd looked at the tee marker, checked the distance of the hole and pulled a three iron out of his bag. As he settled into his stance he looked up at Megan. She smiled at him and winked. He blushed, swung and, desperate to impress her, hit the ball as hard as he could. It landed right at the very back of the green and rolled straight into one of the huge pot bunkers from which escape is almost impossible. There was a huge cry of delight from the crowd standing at the back of the green. Megan turned and smiled at Willie. The mastermind behind this little piece of deceit grinned back at her.

Trevor moved closer to Willie. 'Wasn't that a bit below the belt?' he asked.

'Match play isn't about playing well,' replied Willie. 'It's about playing better than your opponent. And there are only two ways to do that: either you have to score less than he does or you have to make sure that he scores more than you do.'

Mr Barclay, playing next and playing under pressure, swung a little too cautiously and put far too much back spin on his ball. It landed on the front edge of the green, spun back and then rolled down the long hill. It ended up sixty yards short of the putting surface.

Trevor and Charlie now had an excellent chance to claw back a hole.

Trevor stepped forward and balanced his ball on a tee. As usual he teed the ball up high. He felt more confident of getting the ball into the air when the ball was high up to start with.

'Play short and try to roll it up onto the green,' said Willie, as Trevor took a club from his bag.

'Short?' Trevor sounded surprised.

Willie nodded. 'You can probably win this hole with a four, net three. You can almost certainly win it with a three, net two. Don't try to do anything too heroic. If you go for the green and slide off the back edge you're lost. Put the ball on a low tee, play a low, running shot and even if the ball doesn't reach the green the chances are that it will stay where it lands.'

Obediently, Trevor bent down and pushed his tee further into the ground. His tee shot landed ten yards shorter than Mr Barclay's and then skipped and bobbled up the fairway, ending up just eight or ten feet short of the putting surface. For a terrible moment Trevor thought it was going to roll backwards down the slope. But it didn't.

'Great shot!' said Willie, with a grin. 'Get Charlie to play a similar shot.'

Trevor passed Willie's instructions on to Charlie.

Charlie's shot, played with a four wood, did even better. It pitched about the same place as Trevor's but finished up on the front of the green no more than nine or ten feet from the pin.

'Terrific!' shouted Willie, who could not contain his excitement. He punched the air with delight. The spectators went wild.

Mr Barclay, playing his second shot from the fairway, hit a high nine iron shot which landed twelve feet to the left of the pin, and either through luck or skill stopped almost exactly where it had landed.

Trevor chipped his ball onto the green but didn't hit it hard enough. He was a little disappointed when it ended up no closer than Mr Barclay's second shot.

With both Charlie and Trevor on the green there was little point in Mr Lloyd playing sideways out of the pot bunker. He made a brave attempt to clear the rim but failed. His ball buried itself into the soft sand about a foot below the slightly over-hanging turf. He had to play his third shot sideways into the rough and his chances at the tenth were now gone.

Mr Barclay made a good effort to hole his putt but missed by two inches. He left himself a return putt of three feet. Trevor, trying to win the hole outright also sent his ball yards past the pin. In the end he five putted and cursed himself for not playing more sensibly.

But it didn't matter. Charlie's first putt ended up a foot from the hole. Her second putt clawed a hole back for the home team and meant that with eight holes to play the bankers were, once more, just two holes ahead.

'I always thought people played this game for fun,' said Trevor to Willie as they walked off the green and headed for the eleventh tee.

Willie looked at Trevor as if, for the first time, he doubted his friend's sanity.

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The eleventh hole is probably the easiest hole on the course. The fairway is straight and flat and slightly downhill. The green is level and is protected by just three shallow bunkers. The distance from the men's tee to the flag is around three hundred yards.

Charlie, who was accustomed to being able to hit her tee shot from the ladies' tee to within just a few dozen yards of the front edge of the green, took her driver from her bag and stepped onto the tee determined to hit the ball as hard as she could. She and Trevor knew that to win the hole outright one of them would probably have to complete the hole in a four, net three; even to halve the hole one of them would have to take a five net four.

But, as so often happens when any golfer tries to overhit a ball everything went just very slightly wrong. Instead of soaring straight and high down the middle of the fairway, as had been Charlie's intention, the ball curved quickly and viciously to the left, landing in a small patch of shrubs and saplings which ran along the side of the fairway.

'Play it safe,' urged Willie anxiously, handing Trevor his three iron. 'Just knock it down the middle. You should still be able to reach the green in two.'

Anxious to obey, and worried by the fact that Charlie's ball looked to be unplayable, Trevor played far too gentle a shot. His ball landed about a hundred and thirty yards from the tee, rolled and bounced another twenty or thirty yards and came to a halt only slightly more than half way to the green.

Mr Barclay and Mr Lloyd exchanged satisfied glances and both succeeded in putting their drives in the middle of the fairway - considerably less than a hundred yards from the pin.

Charlie, having played another tee shot, half walked and half ran to find her ball. Much to her surprise it wasn't lost and it wasn't even unplayable. It was sitting up quite well in long, thick grass. The main problem was that the ball was very close to a small oak tree, and to get anywhere near to it Charlie had to back into two long and spindly branches. As she did so the branches inevitably bent backwards out of the way.

'Our hole!' said Mr Barclay immediately.

Charlie looked up, clearly confused.

'It's a penalty!' insisted Mr Barclay. He turned to his partner. 'Isn't that right, Mr Lloyd?'

'It certainly is,' said Mr Lloyd sternly. 'Moving or bending a branch while taking a stance is an offence under Rule 13. Two stroke penalty in stroke play and loss of hole in match play.'

Willie shook his head and took a rule book out of his back trouser pocket. 'If you study Rule 13 I think you'll find that it says that there is no penalty for backing into a branch or sapling if that is the only way to take a stance even if this bends the branch.' He flicked through the pages of the rule book, found the relevant page and then handed the book to Mr Lloyd.

The banker examined the book, went rather red, and then handed it to his partner without a word. Mr Barclay closed the small book and handed it back to Willie.

The two bankers stepped back to allow Charlie to take her shot.

But Charlie had been rather shaken by all this and she failed to hit the ball properly. Her ball bounced forwards a yard or so and buried itself even more deeply in the thick grass. It was quite unplayable and Charlie knew that her chances of winning or even halving the hole were gone.

Trevor was aware that the responsibility for winning the hole was now his.

'What shall I do?' he asked Willie.

'You've got to go for the green,' answered Willie immediately. 'Use your three iron again and give it a good clout.'

Trevor swallowed, bent over the ball, hesitated for a second or so and then hit one of the best shots of the round. The ball flew high and straight, pitched on the fairway just a few yards in front of the putting surface, rolled forwards across the green and came to rest in a pile of grass cuttings.

'That's OK,' said Willie. 'Grass cuttings count as Ground Under Repair. You can take relief from there without penalty. You can still win this hole.'

The two of them stood and watched as Mr Barclay and Mr Lloyd played their shots. Both of their balls landed safely on the green but both were twenty feet or more from the hole.

'You can still halve the hole,' said Willie, as they walked forward towards the green. 'They're unlikely to get down in less than two each. If you can get down in three we'll get a half.'

'Those two are the most hateful men I've ever met!' said Charlie, walking alongside them. She looked as if she was having to struggle not to cry.

'Hey!' said Trevor. 'It's only a game!'

The others looked at him and said nothing.

Trevor apologised.

They walked the rest of the distance to the green in silence.

'I'm afraid you've got a pretty tricky lie there!' said Mr Barclay with a smirk, as Trevor walked up towards his ball, which was virtually buried in grass cuttings.

'He can take relief from there,' said Willie. 'Grass cuttings count as Ground Under Repair.'

'Not if they aren't marked as such,' said Mr Barclay smugly.

'They are marked!' said Charlie indignantly. 'We always mark grass cuttings if we have to leave them.'

'They're not marked properly!' said Mr Barclay.

'But I can see the sign from here!' said Trevor. He pointed to a small metal Ground Under Repair marker.

'It doesn't say GUR,' Mr Barclay pointed out. 'It only says GU.' What he said was true. There was a jagged break where part of the metal sign had been broken off.

'That's because someone has broken off the bit with the R on it,' said Trevor. He bent down. 'Look!' he said, holding up the R.

Mr Barclay shrugged.

'I thought you agreed that we would play according to the strict rules of golf,' said Mr Lloyd.

'Well, yes,' agreed Trevor. 'But the grass cuttings are still marked.'

'They aren't marked GUR,' said Mr Barclay.

'You must play your ball from where it lies,' said Mr Lloyd.

'But I can't possibly play a shot from there!' protested

Trevor.

The two bankers, knowing that this was true, said nothing.

'Come on, Trevor,' said Willie quietly, putting his arm around his friend's shoulders. 'They're right. Play the shot.'

'But how on earth can I play a shot out of there?'

'Play it as though it was in thick sand,' suggested Willie, 'but use a seven iron.'

Trevor took the iron from Willie's outstretched hand.

'Hold it right at the bottom of the grip,' suggested Willie. 'Even though it's buried the ball is still two feet off the ground.'

Trevor made a brave attempt to play what was, in truth, a virtually unplayable shot. Even a skilled professional would have had difficulty in controlling the ball. Willie said afterwards that he thought Trevor had done well to get the ball out of the grass at all. The ball, caught by the heel of Trevor's club, flew out of the grass cuttings at quite a pace. It ran across the green with no intention of stopping and continued back down the fairway for another twenty yards. Trevor, having played three shots, knew that he had to get down in just two more to halve the hole. He played a good approach shot but was still fifteen or twenty feet from the hole and he had played four shots. When Mr Barclay put his long putt within six inches of the hole, Trevor knew he had to sink the long putt to halve the hole. His ball missed by an inch and went six feet past the hole.

The bankers were now three holes ahead with seven holes to play. Things were not looking good for Trevor, Charlie and the Butterbury Ford Golf Club.

'I've laddered my tights!' screeched Brenda. She wheezed noisily and then sneezed. 'And all this grass is giving me hay fever.'

'Well take your bloody tights off!' said Willie. 'And take those stupid shoes off too. And for God's sake stop moaning, woman.'

Brenda opened her mouth to deliver some sort of reply but clearly thought better of it. Instead, she turned her back on Willie, marched over to her father and began to complain to him.

But Mr Lloyd was too busy gloating to listen to his daughter and Brenda ended up standing alone looking rather forlorn, her high-heeled shoes sinking into the turf, as the rest of the crowd headed off for the next tee.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

'You've got to take chances,' said Willie to Trevor. They were both standing on the edge of the twelfth tee.

'I say,' said Mr Barclay, who was standing nearby, trying hard to overhear what Willie was saying. 'You do realise that it is against the rules for a player to take advice from a partner's caddie, don't you?'

'I'm not listening!' said Charlie, stepping quickly to one side.

'It's also against the rules for you to listen to what I'm saying,' said Willie.

Mr Barclay blushed slightly. 'I don't want your advice!' he said stiffly.

'Then I suggest you stop listening,' said Willie.

Mr Barclay stepped out of earshot and stood by the side of his banking companion.

'Those two will play safe now,' said Willie quietly, looking over his shoulder to make sure that neither of the bankers could hear him. 'They don't have to win holes. You do. Halving holes isn't good enough anymore.'

'So one of us will have to get a five on this hole?'

'No!' said Willie, firmly but quietly. 'You'll have to do better than that. One of these guys is bound to get a four here. You or Charlie will have to get a four so that you can win the hole with a three.'

'But it's nearly three hundred and fifty yards!' said Trevor.

'You can cut at least fifty yards off that distance by playing your second shot straight across the lake,' said Willie.

Trevor stared out at the hole. Poachers' Lake, which ran along the left of the twelfth hole was broad and deep as well as long. And the green, which was long and fairly easy to hit if you approached it from the fairway, looked narrow and difficult to hit if approached from the other side of Poachers' Lake.

'We'll never do it!' said Trevor quietly.

'One of you might,' said Willie. 'If you play the hole the proper way you won't stand a chance. It'll take you three shots to reach the green and then your only chance of winning the hole will be to hole your putt. If you go across the water it'll be a more difficult shot but one of you could hit the green. Then you'll have two putts and winning will be a possibility.'

Trevor swallowed hard. 'OK!' he agreed. 'I'll try!'

'Tell Charlie,' said Willie. 'It's no good one of you taking the gamble. To make the risk worthwhile both of you have got to play across the water.'

Trevor limped across to where Charlie was standing. She listened carefully and then nodded.

'Are you giving your partner advice?' demanded Mr Barclay.

'He's perfectly entitled to advise his partner,' said Willie.

'But he's telling her what you told him,' protested the banker.

'Under Rule 8 a player can only take advice from his own caddie.'

'You don't know that,' said Willie. 'Not unless you were listening. And if you were listening then you're breaking Rule 8 as well because what you've heard might influence the way you play the hole.'

Mr Barclay opened his mouth to reply but thought better of it. He walked over to his trolley, took out his driver and played a safe and sensible shot down the centre of the fairway. Mr Lloyd did likewise. Both bankers could now reach the green in two.

Charlie pulled her tee shot slightly but it stayed on the fairway, and since she was planning to play across the lake the fact that her ball was on that side of the fairway was obviously an advantage. Trevor's tee shot didn't have the length of the shots played by the two bankers (he was, of course, playing with a three iron) but it did, at least, go straight and for that he was grateful.

Charlie was the first to play her second shot. The bankers realised what she was planning to do the moment she settled into her stance.

'Risky shot!' said Mr Barclay, after drawing in his breath.

'Very dodgy!' agreed Mr Lloyd.

The bastards are trying to put her off!' murmured Willie to Trevor.

'You can do it!' said Trevor. He looked across at the bankers. 'Encouragement not advice,' he said.

Charlie turned round, looked at Trevor and smiled.

'Come on, Charlie!' said Megan.

For a few moments Charlie's shot looked as though it was going to clear the lake. But then there was a telltale splash a yard or two short of the far bank.

'I thought it was a risky shot,' said Mr Barclay.

'Silly to try it,' said Mr Lloyd.

‘Hard luck, Charlie,’ said Megan.

‘I’d better play another ball,’ said Charlie.

Her second attempt was no more successful. Once again her ball landed straight in the lake.

‘Sorry,’ said Trevor. ‘My fault.’

‘No it wasn’t,’ said Charlie. Trevor noticed a defiance in her voice that he had never heard before. ‘Could I have another ball, please?’ she asked Megan.

Her third shot crossed the lake, pitched on the green and rolled slowly over it to land in a bunker.

‘This ought to be the 13th,’ said Charlie.

‘That was rotten luck,’ said Megan.

‘Six shots and I’m still not on the green,’ said Charlie glumly.

For a moment Trevor was tempted to play safe and chip the ball down the fairway so that he could reach the green with his third shot.

‘No!’ said Willie firmly when he realised what Trevor was planning to do. ‘If you play safe then Charlie’s efforts were all wasted. We knew there was a risk but there’s no other way for you to play this hole. You’ve got to go for it.’

Trevor sighed. He trusted Willie.

‘It’s going to be all right!’ said Megan, as his ball flew high over the lake.

‘It could be brilliant!’ said Willie. ‘You’ve got enough height on that ball for it to stop dead where it lands. If you land on the green then you’re in with a chance.’

‘It’s curving to the left,’ said Trevor, shading his eyes with his right hand and watching his ball carefully.

‘Only a fraction,’ said Willie. ‘It’s going to be OK.’

The ball cleared the lake, landed on the green around fifteen feet away from the pin and stayed there.

‘Brilliant!’ said Willie. ‘Brilliant!’

Charlie rushed over and hugged Trevor. Trevor tried not to show his embarrassment. He wasn’t used to being hugged by young girls, especially not by young girls with a crush on him.

‘Lucky shot,’ muttered Mr Barclay.

The two bankers played good, safe iron shots onto the green. But Trevor only needed to hole out in two putts to win, and a few minutes later the bankers’ lead had once again been reduced to two holes.

There were now only six left to play.

‘Willie,’ said Brenda, plaintively. ‘My feet are sore. Will you carry me?’

‘Do I look like a fork lift truck?’ asked Willie.

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The 13th hole is a nasty par five. Mr Lloyd won it with a six and it would be cruel to recall the way the others played the hole. Suffice it to say that between them they lost five balls. When they walked off the 13th green the bankers had restored their lead to three holes. And now there were just five holes left to play.

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When the four players, the two caddies and the by now depressed and quiet crowd of club members walked towards the 14th tee the sky had begun to darken and there were already signs that it might rain.

‘This is all we want,’ said Captain Jarrold glumly. He looked around. ‘Has anyone thought to bring an umbrella?’

No one answered but those spectators who had brought umbrellas with them hid them behind their legs.

‘It’ll hold off,’ said Wing Commander Trout.

‘No it won’t,’ said Elvis, who thought of himself as a bit of an expert on weather, and whose reputation as a forecaster had undoubtedly been enhanced by his ineradicable pessimism. British weather gives pessimists an undue advantage.

To everyone’s surprise the two bankers both made a real mess of their tee shots. Mr Barclay hooked his ball slightly and it landed in the light rough on the left of the fairway. Mr Lloyd pushed his ball to the right and it too landed in light rough. Neither of them gained any advantage from the fact that the fairway was hard, close cropped and downhill.

‘You should both be able to reach the green in two if you keep the ball low and play long, running shots,’ said Willie. ‘The fairway is hard and it’s downhill most of the way.’

Trevor, playing first, was pleased with his drive. It travelled little more than a hundred and thirty yards before hitting the ground but it bounced and rolled and bounced and rolled for almost as far again and when it finally stopped Trevor beamed with delight for he too now believed that he might be able to reach the green in two.

Charlie pushed her drive out to the right and her ball landed in low cut rough. It wasn’t a bad shot, but the rough meant that her ball didn’t roll. She knew that she was going to have difficulty in reaching the green in one more shot.

Trevor’s drive had ended up closest to the green.

Sadly, after they had all played their second shots the home side’s slight advantage had evaporated. Trevor’s attempt bobbed and rolled and bounced and finished up just short of a bunker to the left of the green. Mr Barclay’s landed in the same bunker. Charlie’s was still a long way from the green. But Mr Lloyd’s landed on the fairway some fifty or sixty yards in front of the green and rolled downwards until it lay on the very front edge of the green.

‘You can still win and you can certainly halve the hole,’ said Willie as he and Trevor walked down the hill towards Trevor’s ball. ‘Just chip it over the bunker and two putts will almost certainly get you a half.’ Charlie’s third shot had rolled to the back of the green and was lying a yard or so behind the putting surface.

But Trevor’s chip landed in the bunker instead of flying safely over it, and suddenly the bankers looked as if they were about to increase their lead to four holes with just four more to play. That would, of course, mean that Trevor and Charlie would have to win every hole just to stay in the game.

A superb recovery shot from the bunker left Trevor’s ball twenty feet from the pin after four shots. Mr Barclay’s bunker shot was less successful. He hit the ball right across the green and into another bunker. His recovery shot from the second bunker left him thirty feet from the pin.

Charlie, using a putter from the fringe around the green, put her fourth shot within six feet of the pin and earned herself a generous amount of applause from the crowd.

Everything now depended on Mr Lloyd, who, much to the crowd’s delight, played an awful shot. He stubbed his putter on the ground and left his ball ten feet short of the hole. He had now taken three shots.

Trevor’s fifth shot ended six inches from the hole. He putted out and had a six, net five to put on his card. Mr Lloyd’s fourth shot ran well past the hole and ended up five feet away. Charlie’s putt rattled firmly against the back of the hole. Much to her own surprise she had finished the hole in five shots.

Mr Lloyd now had to hole his putt to halve the hole. He bent over his ball, clearly concentrating hard, read the lie and struck it cleanly. His ball rolled around in a perfectly judged arc, slowing gently as it approached the edge of the hole. Everyone waited to hear the rattle as it dropped into the hole.

‘Wonderful putt!’ cried Mr Barclay, in admiration.

‘Good shot!’ said Trevor, rather sadly. He felt at that moment that his last chance of keeping the golf club had gone. He had enjoyed every moment of his time at the club. And he knew that it would take him a long time to get over losing it.

‘It can’t possibly stay out!’ said Mr Lloyd, walking around his ball and waving at it with his putter. ‘It’s hanging right over the edge of the hole!’

Trevor watched in some surprise as Willie walked briskly across to where the club secretary was standing and whispered something to him. Wing Commander Trout immediately took his pocket watch out of his waistcoat pocket and studied it carefully.

‘It’s going in!’ cried Mr Lloyd. ‘Our hole I believe!’ He was bent double over the ball, willing it to drop into the hole.

And drop it did.

‘One stroke penalty,’ said Willie clearly.

Mr Lloyd, who had started to reach down to pick his ball out of the hole, turned towards him. ‘What the hell do you mean?’ he demanded.

‘One stroke penalty,’ said Willie. ‘You waited more than ten seconds with your ball on the edge of the hole.’

‘Rule 16.2,’ said Wing Commander Trout. ‘If a player waits more than ten seconds to see if a ball on the edge of the hole is at rest and the ball subsequently falls in there is a one stroke penalty.’

‘That’s preposterous!’ said Mr Lloyd. ‘I’ve never heard of anything so bloody stupid in all my life.’

‘Strict rules of golf,’ said Willie.

‘It wasn’t ten seconds!’ said Mr Lloyd.

‘It was!’ insisted Wing Commander Trout. ‘It was fifteen seconds from the moment I started to time it.’

‘Our hole,’ said Willie firmly.

The bankers now led by two holes with four to play.

***

A stream runs across the fairway of the 15th hole. This stream was of little significance to Trevor or Charlie since both knew that they would be unlikely to reach it from the tee. But the stream, which lies around two hundred and twenty yards from the tee, was to play a vital part in the match.

Charlie and Trevor had both played safe shots well short of the stream, as had an unusually cautious Mr Barclay, when Mr Lloyd, clearly still angry, stepped onto the tee. He began by taking a vicious-looking practice swing which would have probably sent the ball into the next county if he had used it when playing the ball. His real swing was only slightly less aggressive.

It can probably be argued that there was some sense in the way he played the hole. After all, his partner was lying safely on the fairway on the tee side of the stream. It was, perhaps, sensible for him to attempt to clear the stream with his drive and so give himself a chance to play a shorter iron shot into the heart of the green.

That may have been the theory.

In practice it proved to be something of a mistake.

Mr Lloyd's first drive landed ten yards short of the stream, bounced once and landed straight in the water. Mr Lloyd instantly announced his intention to play a provisional ball in case his first ball could not be found. This second ball also landed in the stream, though this time it landed full in the water.

When five minutes had elapsed and neither of Mr Lloyd's balls had been found, the banker elected to play another ball from the bank on the tee side of the water hazard. He promptly topped the ball and sent it straight into the stream. Trevor and Charlie, both of whom had played decent shots to within thirty or forty yards of the green, exchanged glances as they struggled to contain their glee. Mr Barclay, whose second shot had narrowly missed the green and had rolled into one of the bunkers, looked worried.

It was at this point that Mr Lloyd's natural good humour and sense of goodwill towards all men deserted him. He threw his club straight into the stream and proceeded to curse everyone and everything around him. He cursed Trevor, Charlie, Willie and Megan. He cursed Mr Barclay. He cursed his clubs. He cursed his ball, the stream, the course designer and the ground-staff. And he cursed Willie again. He cursed with an ease and a fluency which would have been the envy of a do-it-yourselfer with a bruised thumb. Everyone within earshot was astonished at his command of the vernacular.

'I think you'd perhaps better give this hole a miss!' suggested Mr Barclay.

'I'll do no such thing!' shouted Mr Lloyd. 'I've started the damned hole and I'll bloody well finish it'

He fished another ball out of his bag, threw it onto the ground and proceeded to hit it hard into one of the tall elm trees which guarded the green. The ball fell out of the tree with a clatter and landed in the second of the two large, horseshoe shaped bunkers which protected the green. (Mr Barclay's ball was already in the other.)

'Damn!' cried Mr Lloyd, throwing his club down onto the ground furiously and storming off towards the green. A rather sad and embarrassed looking Mr Barclay followed, pulling both his and Mr Lloyd's trolley.

Mr Lloyd was clearly out of the reckoning when it came to deciding who was going to win the hole. And Mr Barclay was so shaken by his colleague's display of temper that he quite clearly found it difficult to concentrate on his game. He played a poor recovery shot from the bunker and had a forty foot putt for his par. Charlie and Trevor, on the other hand, played quite good approach shots and were both closer to the pin after just three shots. Mr Lloyd, determined to finish the hole, took three shots to get out of the bunker and sprayed the green with sand.

In the end Charlie won the hole with a five, net four. Trevor took a six, net five. Mr Barclay took a six. And Mr Lloyd admitted to a quite remarkable fourteen but was thought by some to have taken even more than that.

'Pity it's not stroke play,' said Willie to Mr Lloyd, as they left the green.

Mr Lloyd just glowered at him.

The bankers were now just one hole ahead with three to play. The match was more evenly poised than it had been for quite some time, and there were now those amongst the audience who were beginning to think that it just might be possible for Trevor and Charlie to win.

***

At the 16th Trevor and Mr Barclay halved the hole in three. Charlie took a five (net four) and Mr Lloyd, still furious after his problems at the 15th, lost yet another ball and was lucky to get away with a six.

This meant that they walked onto the 17th tee with the bankers still just one hole ahead. You could almost touch the tension, and the crowd of spectators was growing all the time as word filtered back to the clubhouse that Trevor and Charlie were still in with a chance of winning. The rapidly darkening clouds overhead were now so close together that they seemed to be jostling for position to get the best view of the golf.

On a normal day the view from the 17th tee is breathtaking. But the sky was now so heavy with thunderclouds that it was as much as the players could do to see the fairway they were supposed to be aiming at.

Charlie played a long, straight drive. Trevor pulled his tee shot into the rough on the left of the fairway, thereby making his second shot more difficult. Mr Barclay played a good drive which travelled fifty or sixty yards further than either Charlie or Trevor had driven, and which ran along the right-hand edge of the fairway, leaving him in a perfect position for his second shot to the green. And Mr Lloyd, trying to hit his ball onto the green in one, lifted his head, overbalanced and produced a shot which skidded off the tee and travelled no more than thirty yards from the tee.

'Looks as though the pressure has got to you, dad,' said Willie, in a stage whisper, hissing in Mr Lloyd's direction.

'Don't talk such rubbish, you fool!' said Mr Lloyd angrily. 'I never succumb to pressure! And don't call me your ‘dad’. I’m no ‘dad’ of yours, especially after what you’ve done to Brenda.’

Mr Lloyd slammed his driver back into his bag and pulled out his four iron.

‘What the hell am I doing wrong?’ he demanded, glowering at Trevor who happened to be walking alongside him as they left the tee together.

‘Don’t answer that!’ said Willie immediately.

Trevor and Mr Lloyd looked at him.

‘I’m surprised at you, Mr Lloyd,’ said Willie, wagging a finger. ‘Asking for advice from an opponent is a breach of the rules.’

‘I wasn’t asking for advice!’ shouted Mr Lloyd. ‘What would I want advice from him for?’

Well, it sounded to me as if you were asking him for advice,’ said Willie.

Mr Lloyd opened his mouth and tried to speak but no sound came out. He walked forward, stopped his trolley and hit at his ball without even stopping to take a proper stance.

‘Slow down, Mr Lloyd!’ said Mr Barclay, rather nervously. ‘There’s plenty of time.’

‘When I want your damned advice I’ll ask for it,’ said Mr Lloyd, watching in frustration as his ball bounced and rolled along the ground. It travelled about sixty or seventy yards before it came to a gentle and undignified halt. Even Brenda, not the most considerate of people, attempted to calm her father, but she too was brushed aside brusquely as Mr Lloyd walked over to his trolley.

‘Don’t you push my wife out of the way,’ shouted Willie, ‘or else you’ll have me to answer to!’

Mr Lloyd didn’t even acknowledge Willie’s threat, unlike Brenda whose face changed from miserable and moody to surprised and rather pleased. Whatever Willie’s faults, and there were plenty, he was a gentleman and was certainly not going to see any lady manhandled by a bad-tempered old man, even if the lady in question was his wife. Brenda, clearly touched by this unexpected and chivalrous display, was attempting to walk over to her husband, but by the time she had unspeared her stiletto heels from the grass Willie and the rest of the crowd had set off down the fairway.

Charlie’s second shot flew long and low and ended up no more than fifty yards short of the green. Trevor’s second shot, from a difficult lie on the left-hand side of the fairway, crashed into a clump of trees near the end of the fairway. Mr Barclay’s second shot curled to the right of the fairway and, much to everyone’s astonishment, landed in Poachers’ Lake. His fourth shot landed on the green, nine or ten feet from the pin. Mr Lloyd’s third shot scampered up the fairway like a rabbit and stopped alongside Charlie’s ball, fifty yards short of the green.

‘We can win this one!’ muttered Willie to Trevor. ‘Just stay calm.’

Trevor’s ball was unplayable in thick bracken. He played his fourth shot with an eight iron and watched with relief as it landed safely on the back of the green. As they walked onto the green the heavens opened and rain started to pour down.

By the time they had their putters in their hands Charlie, Trevor, Mr Barclay and Mr Lloyd were all soaked and shivering. A few moments later Mr Lloyd had a two foot putt for the hole and the match. As he crouched over his putt, rain buffeting his frail frame, Willie stepped forward with a huge, multicoloured umbrella which he had borrowed from Mr Dussenberg.

Mr Lloyd looked up, surprised. ‘Thank you,’ he said, assuming that a sense of family duty had, at last, got the better of his son-in-law.

Willie smiled at him.

Mr Lloyd played his shot. The ball rattled into the hole. The banker looked up, delighted with himself.

‘Our hole,’ said Willie firmly.

Mr Lloyd looked at him as if he had gone quite mad. ‘What the hell do you mean?’ he demanded. ‘We won that one! It’s our game!’

‘‘Fraid not!’ said Willie. ‘You’ve lost the hole. Infringement of Rule 14.2.’

Mr Lloyd frowned and stared at him disbelievingly.

‘Accepting protection from the elements whilst making a stroke,’ explained Willie. ‘Two stroke penalty in medal play. Loss of hole in match play.’

‘You held the damned umbrella!’ protested Mr Lloyd. ‘I didn’t ask for it.’

‘You accepted it,’ Willie pointed out. ‘You lose the hole.’

Mr Lloyd stared at him in disbelief.

The two teams left the 17th green all square, and headed off towards the final tee.

‘Your friend looks as though chips wouldn’t melt in his mouth,’ whispered Mr Schmidt as Trevor walked past him. ‘But when the butter is on the table he knows how to fight fire with fire!’

‘Oh yes,’ smiled Trevor. ‘He certainly does.’ He looked heavenwards. ‘It’s certainly raining cats and dogs isn’t it?’

Mr Schmidt looked up and squinted. ‘It is?’ he asked, frowning.

‘It certainly is,’ nodded Trevor, picking up his golf bag and heading for the next tee.

‘I hope you win the match,’ whispered Brenda to Trevor, having finally decided to admit defeat and remove her shoes. ‘I knew my dad could be a bit unpleasant at times, but I had no idea he had such a nasty side to him. Anyway, his bank’s got far too much money.’ Her dress, sodden and clinging, stuck to her more than ample thighs. Trevor, though touched by her words of encouragement, thought she looked quite comical with her bare feet, wet hair and damp clothes outlining her rather chunky body.

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As they stood on the 18th tee, with the sky as black as night and the rain pouring down and Willie struggling to control Mr Dussenberg’s large multi-coloured umbrella, Mr Lloyd took several deep breaths and made a determined effort to calm himself, to concentrate and to play a more successful game. While Charlie drove off he glowered at her and repeatedly banged his ball against the face of his driver.

‘Charlie’s been great, hasn’t she?’ murmured Trevor to Megan.

‘Do you want to make her really happy?’ asked Megan. ‘Really, really happy?’

Trevor looked at her and frowned. ‘What do you mean?’ He asked. He felt himself blushing, fearing the worst. He felt sure that Charlie must have told Megan about her feelings for him.

‘There’s something you could do that would really make her day.’

‘I know, but look Megan, I really don’t want to encourage her. She’s only sixteen, you know. These things happen. She’ll get over it soon enough.’

‘Well, that’s not a very nice attitude. What would it cost you? Especially after what she’s done today. And why should she get over it, just because she’s a young girl.’

Trevor was now feeling worried *and* puzzled.

‘Look, I don’t know why you’re acting as some sort of matchmaker, but you can’t play around with a young girl’s feelings. Can’t you remember what it was like to be sixteen?’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ replied Megan.

‘Well, it seems odd to me,’ said Trevor firmly. ‘I thought you and I were, well, you know, together.’

‘So did I.’

‘So why are you trying to fix me up with Charlie?’

‘What?’

‘I’m not interested in Charlie. I wouldn’t take advantage of a schoolgirl crush even if I wanted to, which I don’t.’

‘I should hope not!’ said Megan. ‘And you might do well to remember that she is not a schoolgirl. And she most definitely has not got a crush on you.’

‘So why all the attention and admiration, then?’asked Trevor, with just a hint of sarcasm. He might not be all that experienced with women, but he knew when someone was flirting with him. Or he thought he did.

‘She wants to be a golf professional!’ said Megan, clearly gaining just the slightest bit of satisfaction from watching Trevor’s ego slowly deflate.

***

Three minutes later the four players were marching down the fairway in search of their balls. Now that Trevor knew the truth about Charlie’s intentions he felt much more comfortable with her. Her smiles became friendly instead of threatening, her hand on his arm was reassuring instead of worrying. He wondered how he could have misunderstood her signals so thoroughly, and realised rather guiltily that he was just a little bit disappointed to discover that she didn’t find him an irresistible hunk of manhood.

Charlie and Trevor had both hit safe shots down the centre of the fairway and well short of the stream which runs across the bottom of the valley. But the two bankers had clearly decided to try to finish the game quickly. Both players hit their drives so hard that their balls disappeared from view.

With Trevor’s second shot safely over the stream and Charlie’s first shot clearly visible just a few yards short of the water the spectators were becoming increasingly excited. An hour or so earlier most of them had been smothered in gloom. They had been convinced that Charlie and Trevor stood no chance of winning. Now, with everything to play for, their faith in their champions had been restored. As the two bankers marched towards the stream in search of their balls there was a constant buzz among the crowd as opinions were exchanged about the chances of a home side victory.

Mr Barclay was the first to find his ball, lying in the stream and quite unplayable. Gloomily, he fished it out with two short irons and dropped it on the bank.

Mr Lloyd had been more fortunate. His ball had come to rest six or seven yards the other side of the stream, level with Trevor’s ball. The banker’s excellent drive meant that he had succeeded in cancelling out Trevor’s one stroke advantage.

A few minutes later, with the rain miraculously stopped but heavy rain clouds still hovering overhead, the four of them stood on the green.

Trevor had taken five shots and Charlie four. Mr Barclay and Mr Lloyd had each taken three. Trevor's ball was eighteen feet from the hole and it was his turn to putt first. Mr Barclay's ball was fourteen feet from the hole and it would be his turn to putt after Trevor.

Trevor hunched over the ball. His clothes were soaked and he had to make a real effort to stop himself shivering.

'This green is wet - it's going to be very much slower than the other greens,' said Willie, standing a yard behind him.

Trevor nodded and shook his head to try to clear the water from his eyes. Then he hit the ball; striking it considerably harder than he would have done just ten minutes earlier. As the ball rolled a small trail of spray marked its progress across the green. It stopped a good yard short of the hole. He had now taken six shots. The best he could hope for was a seven, net six.

Mr Barclay had been watching Trevor's shot with great interest to see just how much the rain had affected the green. He bent down and hit his ball. Although he clearly played it much harder than he would have done before the rainstorm, the ball still stopped four feet short of the hole. He had taken four and had a difficult putt for his par. Charlie then left her ball five feet short of the hole and it was Mr Lloyd's turn to putt. His ball missed the hole by three inches and rolled three feet past. He had taken four.

It was Charlie's turn again. She bent over her, licked her lips and hit her ball firmly. It went straight into the hole.

She had taken six, net five.

Now it was up to the two bankers. One of them had to hole a putt to halve the hole.

Mr Barclay missed first, leaving his ball a good six inches short of the hole.

And then Mr Lloyd missed too.

There was a moment of complete silence as the significance of the missed shot became clear. Charlie and Trevor had won the hole and the match and had saved Butterbury Ford Golf Club from the developers.

Trevor, forgetting his sore knee and brushing all thoughts of embarrassment aside, rushed forward and swept Charlie up into his arms. This was the cue for the assembled crowd to start clapping. Elvis Ramsbottom cheered wildly.

'I bet you are a parrot over the moon!' exclaimed Mr Schmidt loudly. 'Yes, I am. Thank you!' said Trevor.

Charlie stood on tip toe and kissed him on the cheek. Trevor, at last, felt able to return the compliment and give her a big hug as well.

Elvis Ramsbottom, this time accompanied by the rest of the crowd, cheered again.

Trevor wandered over to Mr Schmidt who was standing on the edge of the crowd with a rather bedraggled Mrs Dussenberg. Trevor took the professional to one side and began talking to him.

The jubilant crowd had surrounded Charlie who was soon hoisted onto the shoulders of some of the less elderly, more stable members of the club. Megan looked on proudly. Willie's arm found Brenda's shoulders and he hugged her to him. Her mascara was streaked down both cheeks and her ridiculous hat was plastered to her sodden hair.

***

'Excuse me young lady!' said Mr Schmidt walking up to Charlie, who had by now been lowered back to earth. He shook her firmly by the hand. 'How would you my assistant like to become?'

Charlie's mouth fell open.

'Is that a 'yes'?'

Charlie nodded.

'Good!' said Mr Schmidt firmly. 'Together we will kick some ass, grow a bed of roses and hit the big clock!

Yes?' Charlie nodded again.

***

'Do you have to go back to London today?' Trevor asked Megan.

Megan shook her head. 'When I rang my office this morning I told them I was taking a couple of days off,' she said. 'I thought that perhaps you wouldn't mind if I stayed with you. Who knows? Maybe I could get another story out of you! Anyway, we've got some important things to talk about. If I'm coming up to stay with you at weekends you've got to spend Wednesday nights with me in London.'

'It's a deal,' agreed Trevor quickly.

'Congratulations, Mr Dukinfield,' said someone. Trevor turned round. It was Mr Barclay. 'Would you take my card?' he asked, handing Trevor a small white rectangle. 'Perhaps we can do some business together in the future?' He smiled a thin, no-hard-feelings, it's-only-business, banker sort of smile.

'Thanks,' said Trevor, slipping the card in his pocket.

'Hurry up, Barclay!' snarled Mr Lloyd from a few yards away. 'I've got to get to Frankfurt.'

Willie, his arm around his wife’s waist, turned and yelled to the soaked but happy crowd. ‘Come on everyone! Back to the clubhouse. The drinks are on Trevor!’

Appendix

Butterbury Ford Golf Club
Course details
The yardages are for the yellow (ordinary men's) tees.

Hole 1:457 yards par 4

From the tee a narrow fairway, bordered by thick, uncut rough which is studded with heather and gorse, rises steadily upwards for the first 230 yards before flattening out into a 70 yard long plateau. The final stretch of the fairway then plunges down quite steeply towards a large, undulating green which is protected in front by a narrow but rapidly flowing stream and on the three other sides by three deep bunkers. Players who can drive straight up onto the plateau have a tremendous advantage because they can see the green when they play their second shot. This hole is undoubtedly the most difficult, on the course and many visitors to the Butterbury Ford Golf Club have had a nightmare round after their confidence has been shattered on this hole.

Hole 2: 110 yards, par 3

Players usually sigh with relief when they see the length of this hole marked on their scorecards. But when they see the hole for real the sigh of relief quickly turns into a gasp of horror. The tee is situated about 50 yards below the level of the green and so all the golfer can see is the top few inches of an extra long flag stick. Between the tee and the green there is no fairway at all - just a thick patch of gorse. Twice a year a junior groundsman is sent into the gorse wearing thick, protective clothing. He isn't allowed out until he has managed to collect a couple of dozen buckets full of balls.

Hole 3: 348 yards, par 4

This left-handed dogleg hole doesn't just turn to the left but actually begins to bend back upon itself. From the tee there is a broad fairway of about 200 yards which ends in a long, deep, grass filled bunker and then turns very sharply to the left, leading towards a wide but shallow green which is protected by a grassy mound at the front and two quite small, shallow bunkers at the sides. To the left of the first 200 yards of the fairway there is a mixed copse of tall, broad-leafed trees, and the distance as the crow flies from tee to green cannot possibly be much more than 200 yards. Occasionally, some foolhardy player tries to lift a ball over the trees to land it directly on the green but as far as anyone knows no player has ever succeeded in doing this, though many balls have been lost in the process of trying.

Hole 4: 422yards, par 4

The plan of this hole on the scorecard makes it look deceptively simple because it does not show the hillock in the middle of the fairway which completely obscures the view of the green from the tee. Rising about 50 or 60 feet into the air the small hill, which is situated about 80 yards from the tee, and which has the shape of a steamed pudding, can be fairly easily cleared with a decent drive, but its very presence seems to turn good golfers into nervous wrecks. Many members petitioned for the hillock to be removed but Archibald Pettigrew wouldn't hear of it and claimed that the best way to play the hole was to drive off with your eyes closed.

Hole 5: 542yards, par 5

The longest hole on the course. The tee is situated on a small hill and most players need the extra confidence this gives them in order to clear Poachers' Lake with their drives. The lake, which is circular, has its nearest bank about 20 yards from the tee and is no more than 120 yards across at its widest. Given the well-known fact that water attracts golf balls like magnets attract iron filings it is perhaps hardly surprising that many golfers find themselves playing a second ball and standing three before they leave the tee. The fairway on the far side of the lake is wide, flat and smooth, but after about 100 yards it starts a slow drift downhill for another 150 yards. It is here that one gets the first glimpse of the green and of the second, smaller lake which guards it. Most players play their next shot short of this smaller lake and then play an eight or nine iron shot onto the green which is fairly large and flat. When it's played like this the hole isn't a particularly difficult par five - it certainly isn't as difficult as it looks. But anyone who attempts to gain a shot here is risking a great deal for to clear both lakes with just two shots requires great skill, strength and courage.

Hole 6: 189 yards, par 3

The second short hole is the last of the holes on which the green cannot be seen from the tee. The first 150 yards of fairway are absolutely straight, as straight and as wide (or as narrow) as a firebreak in a forest which isn't particularly surprising since that is exactly what this once was. The trees on either side of the fairway are a mixture of mature oak and beech and have such thick trunks that hooked and sliced tee shots frequently just bounce back into play. The green isn't visible from the tee because the last 30 yards of the fairway drop down sharply; so steeply in fact that there are steps cut into the hillside for players to walk down. Cut on a natural plateau the green is guarded by a ring of rhododendron bushes. Brave players will aim directly for the green but percentage players know that a shot which is a few yards long is almost certain to result in a lost ball (the hill at the back of the green continues its steep descent and a ball which goes over or through the rhododendron bushes is likely to fly another 70 or 80 yards before stopping). Cautious players prefer to aim slightly short of the green and hope that the ball will roll forwards a few yards and then trickle down onto the putting surface. The green is so large that this becomes a dangerous practice only in the very driest months of the very driest summers.

Hole 7: 397 yards, par 4

It is a relief to arrive at a hole where the green can be seen from the tee and where there are no natural obstacles to be overcome. There are two small bunkers on the left of the fairway about 200 yards from the pin, and three bunkers guard the green, but apart from that this hole is straightforward if you can ignore the stream which runs along the right of the fairway from tee to green. The stream should not, of course, come into play since it marks the out of bounds line on this hole. However, the attraction of water for golf balls is such that players whose normal tendency is to hook the ball have been to known to start slicing when they play this hole.

Hole 8, 428 yards, par 4

The dogleg on this hole is much less acute than the one on the third hole. There is a raised tee from which players have a clear sight of the first 250 yards of fairway. The fairway then turns gently to the right, climbs up a slight incline and leads onto a green which has two levels. For the last 150 yards the right-hand side of the fairway is guarded by a stone wall, topped with a thick hawthorn and bramble hedge, and this means that players have a choice of either playing their tee shot well to the left, in order to give themselves a clear shot of the green, or else taking a chance and trying to cut a few yards off the length of the hole by hitting their second shot over the wall. If you choose the extreme left of the fairway from the tee, the hole is lengthened by about 50 yards. If you choose the right of the fairway your second shot to the green will have to be played blind.

Hole 9, 364 yards, par 4

To the surprise of strangers, who are usually completely disorientated by now, the 9th hole brings players back to the clubhouse. Again, a plan of the hole makes things look much simpler than they are. The tee and green are at the same level. There are no water hazards, no hillocks in the middle of the fairway and very few trees which are likely to interfere with play. But there is a large hill on the left of the hole and this means that much of the fairway, which is closely cut, runs at an angle of about forty-five degrees to the horizontal. The result is that every player has to play his or her approach shot to the green on a downhill lie (or in the case of a left-hander - an uphill lie). The large bunker which guards the front of the green means that poor shots are punished severely and it is virtually impossible to mishit a ball onto the putting surface.

Hole 10, 178yards, par 3

Although it looks simple, the 10th can be one of the most infuriating holes on the course. The green is about 30 yards higher than the tee and since most of this rise occurs in the last 100 yards this means that the fairway which leads up to the green is very steep. The result is that the hole is much more difficult in the summer, when the ground is hard and the grass is cut short, than in the winter when the ground is softer and the grass a little longer. In winter a ball which falls just short of the green will not usually roll back too far. In summer a ball which falls just short of the green can sometimes roll back almost to the tee itself. Players who are aware of this hazard, and who are tempted to over club in order to ensure that they hit the green with their tee shot are likely to discover that the two huge pot bunkers at the rear of the green are so steep-faced that for most players they can only be effectively exited by playing out sideways or even backwards.

Hole 11,299 yards, par4

This hole is as easy a par four as it sounds. The fairway is straight and flat. The green is level and protected only by three shallow bunkers.

Hole 12, 396 yards, par 4

Players who have already lost balls in the water will view this hole with horror. The fairway, which is narrow, runs to the right of Poachers' Lake and then turns gently to the left to lead up to the green. Foolhardy players who try to cut the corner and fly a ball over the water directly to the green with their second shot discover that from this angle the approach is a difficult one for there is very little green to work with. If you play safe the hole is fairly straightforward as long as you can resist a hook into the water. The green is three times as long as it is wide and is fairly easy to approach from this angle.

Hole 13, 523 yards, par 5

This is the only hole on the course which dog legs to the right twice! From the tee the fairway turns slightly to the right to avoid a small pond and then, after about another 60 or 70 yards, turns rather more sharply to the right to avoid a clump of thickly growing gorse. These two turns mean that for most players the hole, which looked at from the air would look like a horseshoe, is a genuine par five and no one in the club can remember any player ever managing to reach the green in less than three.

Hole 14: 452yards, par 4

This hole is as straight as an arrow and almost all downhill. Although the hole looks long, even high handicap players can reach the green in two when the weather is hot and the fairway is dry and hard. Long hitters regularly reach the green with a drive and a pitching wedge. In the winter the hole is much harder and plays much longer and because the fairway is exposed and unprotected from the north easterly winds and even scratch players sometimes have difficulty in reaching the green in two.

Hole 15: 386 yards, par 4

A stream which runs straight across the fairway around 220 yards from the tee makes this hole more difficult than it might at first appear to be. Players who are in any doubt about their ability to carry the water with their drive are advised to play an iron off the tee and play their second shots from the tee side of the stream. The green is surrounded by a ring of tall elm trees and two large horseshoe-shaped bunkers.

Hole 16: 201 yards, par 3

Another tricky one! The stream which runs across the 15th fairway runs right across the front of the green and means that any shot which falls short is severely punished. A circle of bushes around the back of the green make sure that shots which go through the green are also punished severely.

Hole 17: 399 yards, par 4

The view from the elevated tee on this hole is breathtaking. On a clear day it is possible to see for nearly 20 miles in all directions. It is not, however, possible to see the green which is hidden behind a small copse of trees at the end of the fairway. To stand a chance of hitting a long second shot onto the green the player must try to push his drive well out to the right - being careful not to push it through the fringe of chestnut trees which stand between the fairway and Poachers' Lake.

Hole 18: 543 yards, par 5

The course finishes with a long hole that has decided many a match and ruined many a potentially good score. The tee and the green are on the same level but in between the two there is a deep valley. Right at the bottom of the valley, about half way between tee and green, a strong stream flows. Because the green is on the same level as the tee, and is clearly visible, it looks much closer than it really is and the temptation to try to hit a drive right across the valley is often irresistible.

Invariably, however the player's ball will hang in the air for a few moments before plummeting down into the depths of the valley and then bouncing down the hillside or, more often than not, diving directly into the stream. Sensible handicap players, who know their limitations, deliberately play short of the stream and then hit their balls up the hill with long iron shots. However, one or two players have now shown that it is possible to play the 18th as a par four if you have a great deal of courage. By using a number one iron and playing the ball without a tee it is possible to hit the ball virtually flat so that it flies straight across the valley and the stream and lands half way up the hill on the other side of the valley. The flatter trajectory means that the ball is more likely to stick to the hillside and less likely to roll down the valley. When this shot is played successfully it can take 70 or 80 yards off the second shot and make a four a realistic proposition.

Length of course: 6,634 yards
Par: 71

The Author

Vernon Coleman is the author of over 100 books. For a list of available books please see his author page on Amazon or visit http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

The Return of the Disgruntled Man

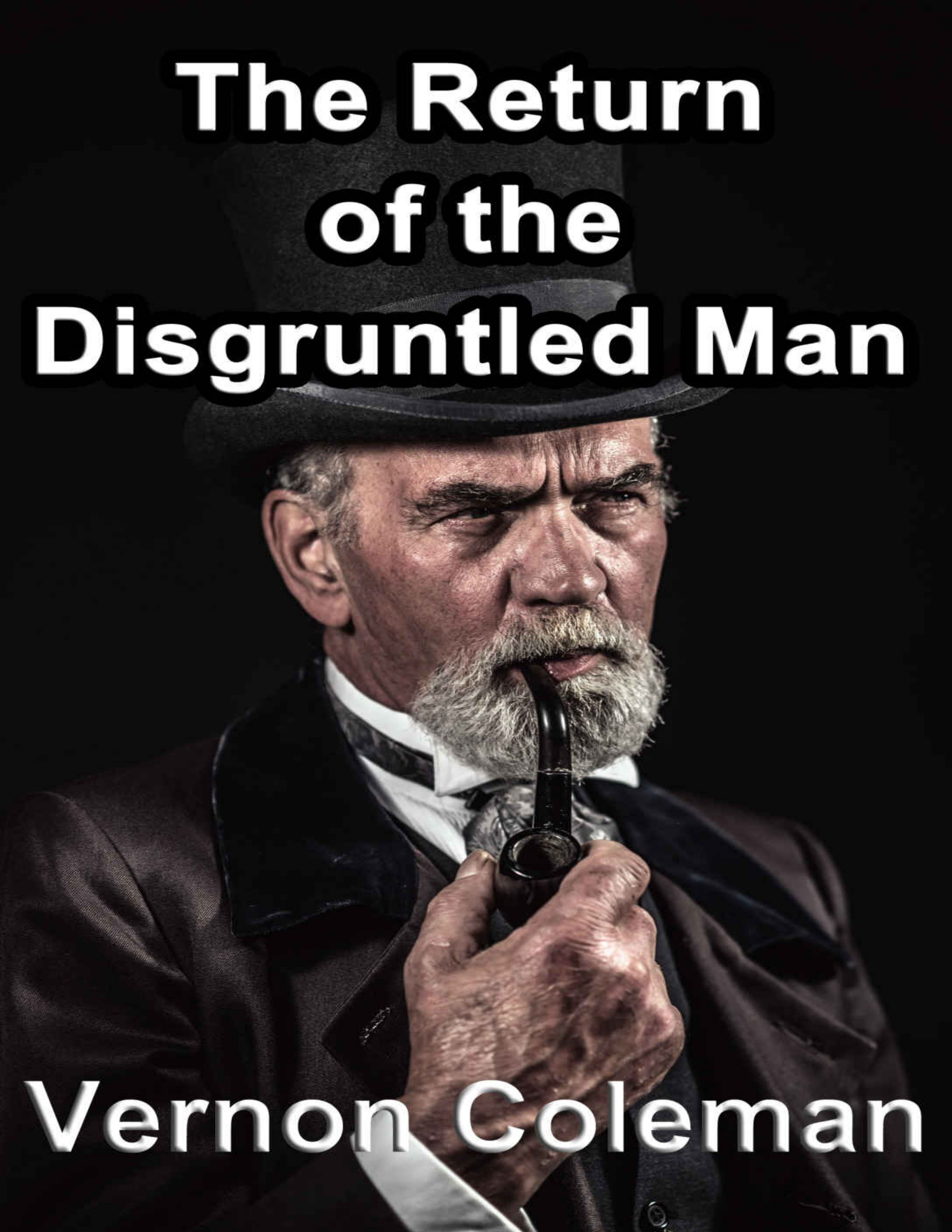

Vernon Coleman

The Return
# of the
Disgruntled Man

Vernon Coleman

Note from the author:
The previous books in this series are *Diary of a Disgruntled Man*, *Just Another Bloody Year* and *Bugger Off And Leave Me Alone*. So if my cheap calculator is correct, that makes this the fourth in a series which was never intended to be anything more than a series of one, which is probably why I now need a long (but hopefully not permanent) lie down.

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Who the hell is Vernon Coleman?
Vernon Coleman is a writer and the author of over 100 other books which have sold over two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK and been translated into 25 languages. Many of his books are available as Kindle books on Amazon. For a list of available ebooks please see Vernon Coleman's author page on Amazon. Vernon Coleman owns a small collection of rather nice ties and a huge number of books. He is married to the delectable Antoinette. There is nothing else worth knowing.

Dedication

To Donna Antoinette, as always, whose quiet and gentle kindness never fades.

Now that we are found, we shall never be parted, now that we are together, we shall never be apart, now that we have love, we shall never be alone.

‘A person is lucky to know even one person in their whole life who understands and cares for them so completely.’ – *Charles Cumming*

Preface

Everything in this book is frighteningly true, or has some close relationship to the truth, or was inspired by something that was true or could have been true if things had turned out differently; though I would like to take advantage of this preface to point out that any bits of this book which might get me into very special trouble were definitely made up and are included merely in order to amuse and enthral.

This is, to put it another way, a book for the politically incorrect at heart; a book for happy sceptics; a book for those who question, doubt and laugh at the men and women in suits who rule our lives with contempt and disdain and with ne'er even a passing glance in the direction of what is left of democracy and justice. It is a book which is unsuitable for politically correct lefties. It is a book of problems, confrontations and absurdities. (And I should, I suppose, thank the creators of those problems, confrontations and absurdities for without them I would have no book.)

Moreover, just in case anyone decides to sue me for libel I should point out that a registered and licensed medical practitioner of my close acquaintance has confirmed that I am suffering from an intermittent medical condition which means that I cannot be held accountable for my actions and it is entirely because of this condition, which is entirely out of my control let me remind you, that in my life a day without a trouble is a rare day.

Indeed, I am now far enough past my sell-by date to say what the hell I like and get away with it on the grounds that I must be a little senile to keep writing books which pique and which venom filled reviewers can damn for eternity with a single one star review. (Would these individuals ever dare be so bold if they were stood face to face with an author who, though showing signs of rust is, nevertheless, well over six feet tall and still able to take the tops off most jars of jam without outside assistance? Or are these sneery critics brave only at the comfortable end of a keyboard?)

I should also point out that the events that take place in this book did not necessarily take place on the dates mentioned. This is solely because I hardly ever know what date it is or, indeed, what day of the week it is when I'm making notes about things that have happened. I write things down in little notebooks, on envelopes, on receipts, on my shirt cuffs or on the back of my hand. I rarely remember to include the date.

Sometimes, if I'm wearing light coloured trousers, I write on my knees. (By which I mean that I actually write on my knees, rather than that I write while kneeling. No, let me rephrase that. I don't usually write on the skin of my knees, but I do write on my trousers or a notebook resting on my knees.)

I have earned my living solely as a full-time professional author for over 30 years and I long ago realised that it makes no difference to me whether it is Tuesday or Sunday, June or August. Indeed, I am always terribly impressed by people who can respond with alarming accuracy when a policeman sternly asks them: 'What were you doing on the morning of June 16th 1973?' I confess I would have difficulty in telling you what I did this morning. Actually I don't think I've had my luncheon yet so it is probably still morning. So I probably do know what I did this morning because it's what I'm doing now. And if someone asks me quickly, I will be able to tell them. But what was I doing on dates as long ago as June 16th 1973 or yesterday?' No chance whatsoever.

(Pause)

I've now had my luncheon and I'm already getting confused again about what I did this morning and although, in principle, I agree with those who say that it is impossible to know where you are going unless you know where you've been I believe that the corollary to this is that since I never seem to know where I'm going it doesn't really matter a damn where I've been. The only things I know for certain are that life is short and things go wrong. Luckily, as a writer, I can usually make something out of things that go wrong.

Finally, I will just point out that I have frequently been told that I am ahead of my time but that I figure that if I hang on long enough time will catch up with me. But what was I doing on the morning of June 16th 1973 or yesterday? No chance whatsoever. I'm already getting confused again about what I did this morning.

Finally, finally, I should add that all non-fiction is, by definition, notoriously unreliable. Indeed, to mess with a popular phrase, non-fiction is quite reliably unreliable. Any non-fiction must always be one version of the truth as viewed from a specific perspective and portrayed by a single author (or, indeed, a married one if that should be the case) and I have no doubt that if someone else were impertinent enough to try to write about a year in my life, their perspective and their conclusions would be entirely different.

'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there,' wrote Leslie Poles Hartley (and it was very sensible of him to write as L.P.Hartley because no publisher would take an author seriously if his first names were Leslie Poles) in a book called 'The Go-Between', but the funny thing is that it is my experience that if you live long enough, you will get confused about which country you are living in because the place you thought was home gradually becomes as foreign and confusing and bewildering as any of these funny little countries in foreign parts which no one can spell or pronounce.

Moreover, if the past is a foreign country then the future is another planet. Everything is made infinitely more complicated by the fact that things were never what we think they were.

Finally, for the third time, here’s a thought I’ve published before in a book but which is worth repeating because it should scare you witless if you are under 40, and yet make you feel more comfortable (in a shadenfreude sort of way) if you are over 60: these are tomorrow’s good old days.

And, with the remorselessness that is time, tomorrow will soon, and unavoidably, become today.

Moreover, it’s later than you think.

Vernon Coleman, Here, Today

P.S. This book is packed with so much critical, vital life-saving advice that if you do not live to be 100 after reading it, the publisher will give you your money back - though readers must apply in person for this refund.

January

1

The final edition of last year's *Financial Times* contained this headline: 'Voters are the eurozone's weakest link'.

I was not surprised to see this extraordinary admission for the *FT*, is a strange newspaper full of badly written articles which are full of balder and dash, piffle and pish, and which are presumably there only to fill in the spaces between the lists of share prices and the advertisements; a newspaper which traditionally adores the European Union with all the unlimited, insensible, uncritical affection of a hormone soaked teenager who has just discovered love. I don't think I have ever come across a newspaper which is so out of touch with the feelings of the people of Britain or, indeed, the people of Europe. I read it partly for amusement and partly to see what the isolated elite are thinking. (One clue is that the *FT*'s absurd magazine is called *How to Spend It*.)

Moreover, the paper proves that there is no difference between the far left and the far right by somehow managing to combine a political standpoint slightly to the left of the *Daily Worker* while at the same time pledging undying loyalty to a fascist, Nazi organisation.

However, I suspect that this will be the year that the EU (and the *FT*) discover that you cannot bully and suppress people indefinitely.

I'm pleased that hardly anyone actually reads the stuff in the *FT* because the editorials and leader page articles are so poorly thought out and badly written that they would be a danger to us all if read by more people. The *FT*, endlessly pompous and as self-important as a reality TV star at a charity opening, has always supported anything statist (such as the EU and the BBC) and now that Pravda has become as insignificant and obscure as *Needlework Quarterly* there is no doubt that the *Financial Times* is the most statist paper in the world. The Financial Times is a disgrace. It isn't so much a newspaper as an EU propaganda sheet.

And that the writers do not understand that outside their little bit of London the English people are afraid and bewildered by insecurities, by illogical judgements and by the unpredictability of the world in which they live. Outside the world of the elites, the people feel betrayed.

I don't think anyone at the *FT* can have any idea how and why the EU was founded or why it exists today, or that it is a constant, practical reminder that the Germans won the Second World War. (I hope, at least, that their misapplied enthusiasm is a result of ignorance.) Most EU supporters are civil servants who are natural fascists and who rather approve of Statism (even if it means control by foreign bureaucrats) because Statism naturally gives control, power and status to those who work for the State.

The truth is that the bureaucrats at the EU, the eurocrats, (I am proud to say that I invented the word 'eurocrat' and I am pleased to see that it is now in common usage, though since I created the word I feel able to point out it starts with a small 'e' and not a large 'E') never think things through, and nor do they investigate the facts of a matter or the consequences of a decision. Rather than do any research, or think before acting, the eurocrats make up laws as they go along and then change the ones they don't like and enforce the ones they find most useful or helpful.

These are not elected individuals and there is no public debate about their proposals.

If the EU were run by the Three Stooges or the Goons, the legal framework which rules our lives would be more reliably structured.

The bottom line is that EU citizens are certainly taxed but they are equally certainly not represented. The EU is based on the premise that history should change people rather than on the primary principle of democracy which is that people should change history. It was the eurocrats who gave us biofuels, uncontrolled immigration, severely controlled working hours which have led to the disappearance of 24-hour medical cover, energy policies which will lead to the lights going out and rubbish protocols which have turned our streets into rat infested rubbish dumps. We can thank these faceless men and women for modern life's rich pattern of disappointment and bewilderment. (We can also thank them for the bizarre fact that whereas non EU citizens who marry a UK citizen have no automatic right to settle in the UK, a non EU citizen who marries a citizen of a country other than the EU can move to the UK under the free movement rules. So, citizens of the UK have fewer rights in their own country than do citizens of other countries. I wonder how many Britons know that?)

We all need to feel that we are part of a community of some kind, wherein we have a voice and a little power. The bullying, fascist, EU, with its solid Nazi roots, does not recognise this basic need and the final result will be confusion, chaos, rioting and war.

(Those who still don't believe that the EU was designed and made in Germany should note that more and more decisions are now being made by the Germans alone. For example, a meeting on what to do about Greece was attended by the Germans, the Greeks, the European Central Banks, the European commission, the European commission. Oh and they let the French in to choose the wine. No one else was invited.)

The day's highlight was, as always, the New Year's concert from Vienna. I love this event. It is a musical confectionery; a Christmas box of chocolates, each one hand-made by one of the Strauss family chocolatiers. Wonderful flowers, exquisite ballet sequences and a hall full of Austria's good and great, dressed up to the nines and purring in their finery.

For me the added extra, the cherry, is the Austrian attempt at humour. The Austrians, like the Germans, don't do humour. For them 'funny' means a fat man losing his trousers or slipping on a banana skin and landing on his bottom. Or, ideally, losing his trousers and slipping on a banana skin at the same time. Or a large, well-made woman falling out of her blouse. The German idea of subtle, sophisticated humour is for a thin man to lose his trousers. And yet each year the Viennese have little rituals which have to be acted out. The conductor must do something funny. The orchestra members must do something funny. None of it is in the slightest bit funny, of course. No one ever laughs, except, of course, the Austrians. But it is funny because they're trying to be funny and they aren't being in the slightest bit funny. The immortal, loveable and avuncular Jacques Tati would have understood and would have adored the concert.

2

A friend of mine who believed in taking a firm hold of each day, shaking it to within an inch of its life and then squeezing out the last drop of blood, always claimed that there are few greater pleasures than a good long walk on a freezing cold day.

But preparations for such delights are essential if discomfort is to be avoided and so when we decided to set off for a tramp through the woods, the Princess and I spent a little time getting ready. My circulation is worse than that of the *Independent* newspaper, a KGB owned broadsheet, and my extremities have a tendency to turn blue if I don't pamper them.

The secret to keeping warm is, of course, to wear several layers of clothing. Air then gets trapped between the layers and provides extra insulation. I could find a thick sweater but I wanted to wear two thin ones and I was darned if I could find them. The thin sweaters I know I have weren't in any of the drawers of my dressing table and nor were they at the back of my wardrobe.

Searching for the missing garments, I spent some time sorting through the stuff which had collected there. The back of the wardrobe seemed to have become a magnet for ties, belts, shoes, socks and a wide variety of odds and ends. When I eventually gave up and pulled on a single thick sweater I realised that I didn't have my hip flask.

A walk in the cold without a hip flask is a purposeless excursion. Once I'd selected a hip flask (I have a few), I had to decide which type of malt whisky to put into it. And then I had to pour the whisky. It's a tricky business. It is against the only law that really matters to spill malt whisky, so pouring requires a steady hand. 'May you always have enough whisky,' said a friend of mine just before he died.

By the time I'd finished filling the hip flask it was getting dark, and Antoinette and I decided to light a log fire, toast some crumpets and watch a couple of old Bogart films for the umpteenth time.

The best bit of a walk in the cold is coming back into the house, sitting by the fire and eating hot buttered crumpets. So, we just cut out the middleman and went straight to the good bit.

(As an aside, it is now almost impossible to find pikelets in bakers and bun shops. Pikelets are rather thin crumpets, but make excellent eating. Another delicacy which has pretty well disappeared, though I gather it is still available in parts of Yorkshire, is 'parkin' – a form of gingerbread made with oatmeal and treacle.)

3

Our snowdrops are out. Or, rather, a snowdrop is out. Just the one. Maybe I should write a letter to the *Times*.

I am reminded by the sight of the solitary flower that according to *My Quirky Cotswold Garden* (the wonderful book about our horticultural domain, which Antoinette is writing), when Catherine the Great of Russia saw her first snowdrop she was so delighted that she ordered a guard to be posted beside it to make sure that no one picked it.

By the time of the Russian Revolution, a century and a half later, a guard was still being posted day and night at the site where that solitary snowdrop had stood. No one could remember why and only a search of the history books provided the answer.

4

High tech idiots working at RBS (known to its friends and enemies as 'The Bankrupt Bank') upgraded some of the bank's software but forgot to check that the new gibberish would be compatible with the old stuff. The result was that half a trillion customers discovered, at first hand, why they should keep their money in a tea caddy. I am not in the slightest bit impressed by today's writers of software. Together with a friend, I was the first person in the world to produce medical software for the general public. Back in the early 1980s, we wrote several Home Doctor programs. He wrote the code and I wrote the algorithms – which were an extension of the flow charts I created for my book *Aspirin or Ambulance*. At the time I remember being aware that we had to codify the thinking process in such a way that it made everything easier to understand. Today's writers of software may be adept at writing code but they are completely unskilled in the art of communication.

The Government has fined the bank £56 million, though the money won't go to customers. Moreover, since the bank is mostly owned by the nation the bulk of the fine will be paid by taxpayers so the Chancellor will simply be moving the loot from one pocket to another.

Why aren't the dweebs who screwed up, and the executives who hired them, forced to pay the fine out of their bonuses? That would make far more sense and so that's probably why they're not doing it.

I have discovered that changing the title or even the subtitle of an eBook can have a dramatic effect on the book's sales. Publishing eBooks is a whole new learning experience and much that I have learned in half a century of writing and publishing books has had to be discarded as no longer relevant. For example, when I changed the subtitle of my book *Secrets of Paris* from 'A Beginner's Guide' to 'An Insider's Guide', the book's sales improved considerably. I strongly suspect that the change prevented people who hadn't read the blurb from buying the book in the hope of finding hotel and travel recommendations.

5

I received a bank leaflet which consisted of five pages of investment advice and four pages of disclosures and statutory risk warnings. This is not a record. Last month I received an A4 leaflet which consisted of one and a half pages of advice and seven pages of disclosures and statutory risk warnings. So how much did that cost the planet?

Actually, I can't imagine why they send out these things. Investment is, like psychiatry, a pseudoscience, built on hypotheses and conjectures precariously balanced on unknowns, uncertainties and plain, old-fashioned guesses spiced with prejudices and commercially inspired experiences.

6

Meanwhile, to help banish the post-Christmas blues we decided to treat ourselves to a new car. We're not getting rid of the truck, of course. But we are going to get rid of the BMW four wheel drive motor car which has proved to be a disappointing vehicle. Worst of all it is boring and I know this seems silly since it is only a car, (and I don't know how to put it so that it doesn't sound silly) but it seems rather full of itself. The BMW garage which does the servicing also seems full of itself and we'll be glad to see the back of them.

I have owned several Bentley motor cars in the past and I wanted Antoinette to experience the joy of driving in one so we bought a second hand Bentley Continental GT coupe.

Many brand names have reputations which they don't really deserve. For example, BMW makes cars of disappointing quality and value and, in our experience, provides worse service value while Britain's upper class supermarket Waitrose seems to have a less exhaustive inventory than downmarket Tesco, and to provide goods that are of poor quality for the price. (For example, although they sell a wide variety of shaving foams they don't sell good old-fashioned shaving soap in a bowl. For a company which claims to care about the environment this is absurdly hypocritical.)

I really couldn't bring myself to spend £160,000 on a new car so we found a second hand (previously owned, formerly enjoyed) vehicle which has done only 20,000 miles but was just over a third of that price.

I have owned a few Bentleys in my time and still remember with great fondness my huge S1 – probably the largest and stateliest of all the cars made in Crewe. The model I bought, which was manufactured in 1955, was equipped with an early automatic gearbox. When driving up steep hills the car would slow down and then come to a full stop while the gearbox halted what it was doing and thought for a while, considering what to do next. After a long discussion with itself, the gearbox would decide on an appropriate gear, there would be a quiet, dignified bit of clunking, and then off we would go again.

7

We tottered up to the Peak District for a quick visit. On the way north, we were nearly hit by an idiot driver who was chattering and laughing into a microphone attached to his mobile telephone. He changed lanes on the motorway without even a glance around him. It has been proven that as far as accidents are concerned it makes no difference whether a driver uses a hand-held mobile telephone or a hands-free telephone. The problem with humans is not a shortage of hands (of which most drivers have two) but a shortage of brain (of which most drivers have only one) and this is something the authorities clearly don't understand since they still allow people to talk on the phone as long as they are using a hands-free device. Judging by the carnage on the roads, most people need all of their one brain to control their vehicle. Just the other day, I travelled for half an hour behind a driver who braked at entirely unpredictable moments. It took me several miles to realise that he was braking every time he saw a sign beside the road. He even braked for signs that advertised houses offering Bed and Breakfast or warning about the dog roaming in a garden. Road signs, signs painted on the road, advertisements – they were all the same to him, an urgent reminder to give the brake pedal a work out.

Further north, another mad driver roared past us and I noticed as he went by, at well over the legal limit, that he had a laptop propped up against his steering wheel. Enraged I gave him the traditional, digitally manipulated sign of disapproval but he was long gone before the appropriate fingers had done the talking for me.

Driving on British motorways these days is a dreary business. It's rare to travel more than a few miles without seeing the 40mph signs lit up. Ninety nine times out of a hundred the warnings have either been left on hours or days after the incident which occasioned them has been dealt with, or they have been switched on for something irrelevant and relatively trivial – such as vehicle parked on the hard shoulder.

The speed limits (which come, naturally, with threatened fines and disqualifications) are a frequent cause of shunts (as cars slow suddenly, unexpectedly and without reason) and a constant cause of expensive delays. Sensible motorists now ignore the warning signs and take their chances with the speed cameras, and the authorities have only themselves to blame if they find this unacceptable. (Naturally, I always obey all signs and do as ordered, even though this means that I am constantly being overtaken by articulated lorries, buses, removal vans and old ladies in Morris Minors.)

If we travel north in the winter we always travel in our chunky Ford truck because it has proper four wheel drive and is, moreover, permanently fitted with chunky winter tyres.

Between the months of September and June it invariably snows in this part of England and I suspect that it probably snows in the other two months too. I have photographic evidence of cricket matches being halted for snow. So travelling in a vehicle with decent four wheel drive and good tyres make good sense – especially if you're planning to drive over the moors.

I don't know why more people don't drive pick-up trucks, as the Americans do. The space at the back is big enough to carry a small flock of sheep and there is, therefore, enough luggage space to hold enough bags to enable nearly all women to travel comfortably for a whole weekend away from home. We've had bookcases and refrigerators in ours – though not, it has to be said, at the same time. And the ride inside is just as good as that in many four wheel drive vehicles which cost two or three times as much.

The last time we were in the Peak District, we visited Eyam and while we there we tottered into the local museum.

It was, of course, in Eyam (pronounced 'eeem' as in, well, 'eeem') that the bubonic plague caused so many deaths and so many horrific stories.

The local museum (which we both found to be a rather disappointing place and rather unimaginatively presented) contained details of some of the cures which were recommended at the time. My favourite remedy suggested that villagers could 'ward off plague evil by drinking heavily and satisfying cravings and lusts in an endless round of merriment and pleasure'. I bet that was a remedy which went down well. It would be pretty popular these days if offered as a way of avoiding flu, obesity or von Recklinghausen's disease. Maybe I'll write a book suggesting that this form of action will ward off Alzheimer's disease. It would, I'll be bound, be a huge success.

The best book on the plague is still Daniel Defoe's *Journal of a Plague Year*. Defoe is one of the most underrated writers in the English language. Apart from giving us *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders* he was the first commercial novelist to mix narration and dialogue in the same book. (John Bunyan did it first, of course, in *Pilgrim's Progress* but I would not dare describe Bunyan as 'commercial'.)

Many of the houses wherein people died of the plague are still standing – often with plaques affixed to their walls detailing the number of people who died therein – and I have to confess that I would not be enthusiastic about living in one of those places. I'd be especially wary about doing building work on one of those houses. What could you find underneath the floorboards? And how long can the plague bacillus survive?

Back home, an unusually heavy storm resulted in our stream breaking its banks and creating a new, additional, mini stream down the garden at a point where it normally takes a 45 degree turn to the right. Unfortunately, the new route took a considerable amount of water onto and across a long set of steps which are used quite a good deal. So I spent the day messing around with the stream in order to persuade the water to go the way it used to go.

Streams and rivers do this a good deal, of course. When they are bloated and feeling rather pushy they will go straight ahead in a rush instead of meandering gently around a corner. In order to persuade the water to travel along our approved route I rebuilt the damaged bank with large stones and, I readily admit, had tremendous fun doing it. Naturally, I grazed my hand but it will heal, eventually.

One of the annoyances of being older is that small wounds take forever to heal. A cut or graze that would have healed in a couple of days now takes weeks or even months. This is because the skin cells which have to replace the damaged cells grow more slowly. Still, on the bright side, it is also true that as you get older the cancer cells we all have inside us don't grow as quickly. Swings and roundabouts.

The whole watery adventure reminded me of days on the beach when I was a boy. My greatest joy was building a castle and then creating a moat around it, digging channels to fill the moat with water and trying to direct the sea in the direction I wanted it to go. I failed with the sea, of course.

But at the end of a few hours of hard work I was delighted to see that the new auxiliary garden stream had pretty well dried up and the water was once again behaving and following its time honoured pathway down the garden.

9

Much to our own surprise, we are thinking of moving again. Despite the fact that we know it will take months, and a barrage of letters to persuade Lloyds Bank that our address has changed, we are searching for new pastures.

In approximately the time that it takes to fire up a chainsaw our beautiful plot of rural tranquillity has changed beyond all recognition. The nearby farmer, the one who took over the place when the Duke of Gloucestershire left for sunnier climes where the extradition treaties are less intrusive, has now finished chopping down all the remaining trees in the neighbourhood. We have christened him the Duke of Gloucestershire, too.

'Improves the view,' he says, and is such a buffoon that he probably means it.

He is now busy building a huge barn in which to house the extra equipment he bought in order to build his new barn. The incessant whine of the chainsaws has been replaced by the incessant thud of the staple gun. Now that there are no trees left, the landscape looks more than ever like the set of *Apocalypse Now*.

Our native trees are being destroyed by disease and an incompetent Ministry; elm, ash and horse chestnut are all disappearing from our woodlands and hedgerows. But the local vandal doesn't seem to give a fig about the environment's need for trees to soak up the carbon dioxide and chunk out nice, fresh oxygen for us to breathe.

For weeks now, the fields as far as the eye can see (and without the trees that's a lot further than it used to be) have been scarred with bonfires, for the workmen have been busy burning branches and twigs.

I love bonfires and Antoinette says that if there were an aftershave called 'Bonfire' I would use it all the time.

Contrary to popular view, bonfires are very eco-friendly for burning it is a far more environmentally friendly way to get rid of garden rubbish than by putting it into a car or lorry and sending it to Milton Keynes or China (where it will, of course, end up being burnt).

But this was fiery devastation on an apocalyptic scale.

Now that the burning has stopped and the smoke has cleared, the dog walkers (who had temporarily gone elsewhere to avoid the choking smoke) have returned and are driving us mad.

There are powerful new laws designed to control the distribution of dogs, but no one takes any notice of them and most of the dog walkers who wander hereabouts are hardened criminals (though they probably do not think of themselves as such).

I am convinced that most members of the constabulary are completely ignorant of the new law. How many bobbies know (or care) that it is now against the law for a dog to be out of control anywhere (even in the owner's own home). A dog is legally deemed to be out of control if someone (anyone) worries that it might injure them. That's all it takes.

The penalty is serious – six months in prison and an unlimited fine. Some offences involving dogs now attract prison sentences of up to 14 years. I have well established my credentials as an animal lover but I am constantly astonished at the way some dog owners now seem quite unconcerned about other folk. I know that many of the dog walkers are kind, generous, warm-hearted, charitable and loving. But too many of them are not. If they own leads, most never use them; they ignore the law and let their dogs run wild on the lane and in the fields, scaring the life out of the wildlife and the farm animals.

The rare few who use dog leads always seem to favour those extendable ones which allow them to say that the animal is on a lead while permitting the animal to wander off and end up a quarter of a mile away from its putative owner.

There are polite notices everywhere asking dog owners to keep their animals on their leads but hardly anyone takes any notice. If they do see the signs, the local Baskervilles tut and shake their heads in a sniffy 'how dare anyone tell me to put my darling on a lead' sort of way and stomp on regardless. As a result, a nearby farmer has had two sheep savaged in the last week alone.

And too many of the local dog owners have taken to picking up their pet's excreta, putting it into little plastic supermarket bags and then hanging it one of our trees. They seem to think it funny to festoon the trees with decorations. But it isn't Christmas anymore and the little plastic bags don't make amusing baubles.

The nature loving dog walkers throw down their own rubbish too: plastic drink bottles, metal cola cans, sandwich packets, chocolate wrappers and so on. Just the other day, I spotted a disposable nappy tucked into the fork of a tree. I find myself acting as an unpaid rubbish collector for people of the Cotswolds, who claim to be environmentally friendly but who care nothing about the environment and who cannot be bothered to take their rubbish home with them.

I suspect the EU's draconian policies on rubbish collecting mean that many people now prefer to dump their rubbish when they are out, rather than take it home with them.

One odd thing I have noticed is that most of the folk who claim to care most about the environment are distinguished only by the preponderance of hair they seem to produce. They are festooned with the stuff, so liberally distributed is it that they wander about in shorts and singlets even when the weather is freezing. Our local dog walkers, male and female, seem to have hairy legs, hairy ears and hairy chests, so I have little doubt that they are paid-up, card-carrying members of the 'Save the Amazonian Rainforest' platoon.

You would think that people who are fortunate enough to live in a beautiful part of the country would treat it with love and respect. But they don't. And so we've had enough. We're off. We want to find a place with no people at all. We don't much care what the house is like, but it must be unusual and preferably surrounded by a huge moat of its own land. It must offer some sort of adventure. Maybe a castle would do; maybe something mediaeval with a genuine moat and a drawbridge.

10

I think I must have the sort of face which seems welcoming to strangers who are keen to unburden their souls for in a café today a man at the next table, who had been quietly reading his newspaper, suddenly slapped the offending journal down on the table and turned to me.

'They're all it,' he told me.

Puzzled, I looked at him. I had no idea what he was talking about. I did notice, however, that the newspaper he had been reading was the *Daily Mirror*. I wondered if his choice of reading material was some sort of clue.

Actually, I was, I confess, rather shocked by his remark since I come from an era when English men and women never spoke to strangers unless they had been introduced by a mutual acquaintance, were all victims involved in a major train crash or were neighbours living in a street where at least six houses had been bombed.

'Bloody management,' he said, impatient at my failure to read his mind. 'Always taking advantage of the workers.'

'Surely that is the job of management,' I countered.

He stared at me.

'Making the workers do what they're paid for,' I explained.

'The management just take advantage of people,' he said, frowning. It sounded as if he was repeating something he'd read. He seemed upset by my remark that it is the job of management to persuade their staff to do their jobs. I suppose that is exploitation.

I made some non-committal noise. A 'hmm', or actually rather more of a 'harrumph'.

He pushed back his chair, stood up and walked away. He seemed very unhappy about the world but I suspect that his dissatisfaction was more because he had been misled.

Of course, it is the job of management to exploit workers in the same way that it is the job of unions to exploit management.

The problem for most of us is that both sides are constantly exploiting the shareholders (who are, after all, the owners of a company) and since we are, most of us, shareholders (through our pension funds, and holdings in investment companies and savings programmes) we are the net losers in this painful dance. The only real winners are the executives who manage companies on behalf of the owners, who take no risks at all but help themselves to such a huge percentage of the profits that there is often little or nothing left over for the shareholders.

I read today that the powerful and well-funded 'Let's All Drink Far More Milk' lobby is pushing hard to encourage people that milk is good for them. I guess there must be another lake of the stuff forming somewhere. The latest argument is that people have been drinking milk for thousands of years and so it must be safe. That's a really stupid argument. People have been fighting wars for even longer but that doesn't make them safe. The fact is that it is daft for human beings to drink milk intended for the young of other animals. It is an indisputable fact that drinking milk is a major cause of allergies and serious health problems. And nothing the paid propagandists can say or do will change that.

11

We saw three houses today and at the first two it was the owner rather than the estate agent (or realtor) who showed us round. This seems to be quite the trendy thing to do and I suspect it's probably simple laziness on the part of the estate agent rather than anything more subtle. There are advantages to being shown round by the owner (they will know more about the house and can tell you where the stop cock is situated but because they know their house so well they can sometimes be confusing and overload the potential buyer with too much information). The first two houses were both less than a decade old and were built in the disposable but rather pompous, grandiose style now so popular with builders and regulators. Houses built by the Victorians are regarded by today's planners as out-of-date but they have already lasted over a century and will last another century or two with just a small amount of regular attention. Houses built by the Victorians served their owners and occupiers well. Today's houses, on the other hand, seem, like modern motor cars, to be built to last a decade and no more. The ones which don't fall down by themselves will at least be easy to demolish.

We were shown round the third house by an elderly man who dressed like someone who had lost all his luggage three months earlier and was still living in hope that the airline would soon recover it. His inevitably red trousers were baggy and wrinkled and his shirt was so dirty and frayed that most people would have rejected it for use as a floor cloth. When poor people dress like that they are dismissed as loonies but when rich people dress that way they are simply described as eccentric. He burped a good deal throughout our visit and munched antacid tablets, which he kept loose in his trouser pocket, as if they were sweets. The house was large and was one of those places where, if a visitor asks directions to the loo they need to be given a map. 'Take the fourth corridor on the left, then go straight on for 150 yards. Turn right at the bottom and it's the 14th door on the right.'

12

We've been wandering about again looking at more houses. Some owners are welcoming, helpful and honest. Others are surprisingly nasty. We saw one house which had a coach house attached to the side of it. The coach house was being sold separately which, in our eyes, turned both properties into semi-detached residences.

The second house we saw had 20 acres of land and another 150 acres directly in front of the house. There was a magnificent view. It was so good that you could have hung a picture frame around a window.

Since we aren't planning to start a farm we weren't much interested in the additional 150 acres which we hadn't known about. 'If you don't buy the land then I doubt if any buyer would put polytunnels or solar panels there,' said the owner, who had a male haircut and looked as if she probably shaved every morning too. She made it pretty clear that if we didn't buy the 150 acres we didn't want we could probably say goodbye to the view. I got the distinct impression that she didn't really give a damn whether we bought the house, the land or a bunch of the flowers she was selling from the bucket by the front gate.

She was slightly eccentric, in the nicest possible way. She was preparing to go to a fancy dress party and was putting her finishing touches to her costume when we arrived.

'What are you going as?' asked Antoinette, politely.

'Westminster Abbey,' replied the woman, quite seriously.

She told us that she was in the process of divorcing her husband, possibly because he didn't share her affection for dressing up as historic buildings, and although the house was in both their names she clearly had possession and didn't really want to leave.

Naturally, therefore she told us all the problems associated with the property. The roof leaked, the drains were blocked and had been for nine years, there were rats in the barn and youths from a nearby village had taken to riding their motorbikes across the fields.

She boasted that she had turned down two offers which had matched the asking price. 'I think it's worth more than we're asking,' she said.

'Do you have any land where you are at the moment?' asked a haughty woman at the second house we visited.

‘A little,’ replied Antoinette.

‘How much?’

‘Just an acre.’

The woman snorted. ‘Only an acre? Is that all? That’s not land’.

I’ve never seen anyone sneer quite so well.

Finally, we visited a house where the house owner was a keen motor racing fan who had an unfortunate lisp. He talked a good deal about the fact that his classic sports car had once been driven by none other than Thir Thtirling Moth.

13

We need to find a branch of our bank because Mr Lloyd has written informing us that they intend to charge us £12.50 a month for the effort of holding onto our money. (As usual the letter took nearly two weeks. Lloyds seem to use an especially slow form of postal service. This probably saves them money but does nothing to improve their efficiency or their reputation.)

It wasn’t that long ago that all the major banks paid the customers a decent rate of interest on their current accounts. These days, however, the big banks are so incompetent and so crooked that they need to gouge every penny they can out of their honest customers if they are to keep paying their ill-deserving executives their million pound salaries and undeserved bonuses.

Antoinette wisely decided that she would switch her account to one which doesn’t involve a hefty monthly fee. Neither of us will visit the bank in Cirencester for reasons I detailed in a previous diary so, before Christmas, she tried to do this in a branch in Cheltenham Spa. Sadly, the attempt failed because there were no suitable advisors available. She was told that she would need to make an appointment, allocate at least 30 minutes and be prepared to watch a video before she would be allowed to close one account and open another. Since we were in a hurry at the time she decided to postpone this delight. (I got the impression that if she were foolhardy enough to have an online account she, or any itinerant hacker, would have been able to switch the account at the touch of a button.)

Our attempt to continue this particular adventure in Buxton failed when we discovered that the bank had shut for the day. Antoinette has now decided to pay the £12.50 a month.

Our wanderings were not unsuccessful, however, for we did discover a rather splendid Temple which was built ‘by public subscription to relieve unemployment’. Called Solomon’s Temple, the building was put at the top of a steep hill a couple of miles out of the town. The organisers were presumably determined that those employed in the enterprise wouldn’t have things too easy.

England is still full of wonderful and entirely useless follies, though councils and others with little or no interest in our history are knocking them down as quickly as they can. This is a great pity for some of our nation’s traditional follies are well worth saving. The Duchess of Portland killed a thousand snails to decorate a cave at Bulstrode, and the Dukes of Richmond and Bedford commandeered the Navy to bring home a shipload of shells for their grottoes. One nobleman who had built a folly at Pain’s Hill in Surrey hired a man to live underground, invisible, silent and unshaven for seven years. The hermit was promised a life pension of £50 a year if he stuck it out but sadly he managed only four years before emerging, blinking, into the sunshine.

Some of the strange buildings we now call follies actually had a purpose when they were conceived and cannot, therefore, be truly described as follies. For example, the Duke of Portland built a mile of tunnel underneath his lake so that he could drive to the railway station in a closed carriage without being seen by any nosy peasants, damn their eyes. The builder of the Harlow Hill Tower in Harrogate boasted that from the top ‘it is possible to see seven of the great battlefields of England, the scene of 24 minor skirmishes, 20 market towns, 17 castles, 23 abbeys and monasteries, 70 country houses and 200 churches’. All with the naked eye. A merchant at Appledore in Devon built a tower so that he could watch his ships returning from their voyages (sadly, he did so on the wrong side of the hill and the sea was invisible from the top) and an elderly and infirm Master of Fox Hounds in Shorncliffe built a tower so that he could watch the hounds setting off in pursuit of the uneatable. The tower of the temple of Jezreel in Gillingham was built to take the Jezreelites up to heaven though the architect, presumably a disbeliever, forgot to put in any stairs.

The last nobleman to build a proper folly was probably Lord Berners who had one built on a hill in Faringdon in 1935. A neighbouring admiral objected that the folly would spoil his view. When it was pointed out that he would only be able to see the tower through a telescope, the admiral replied indignantly that as a naval man it was his custom always to look at the view through a telescope.

Still, we mustn’t allow ourselves to wallow too much in the past, though it is fun. And although noblemen may no longer be building follies, politicians and civil servants, using taxpayers’ billions, are still throwing them up with great enthusiasm. Anyone remember the Dome? A pointless exercise in vanity if ever there was one.

I was remembering the Dome when I spotted in a newspaper that a recent survey showed that nearly nine out of ten people regard civil servants as arrogant, worthless and contributing little or nothing to society's wellbeing. The criticisms are justified for the civil service, in all its glorious incarnations, is full of self-regarding folk who are vastly over rewarded for doing work that has neither any definable purpose nor any measurable value. And the pay scales are absurd. I saw the other day that station supervisors on the London Underground are paid £50,000 a year and have 52 days holiday. Add in bank holidays and weekends and I am surprised that any of these absurdly overpaid servants know how to get to the stations they are supposed to supervise. Maybe their private chauffeurs know the way. And I really don't know how they find the time to go on strike as often as they do.

(I wish the boss of London Transport would emulate President Reagan and sack the underground workers who go on strike. A few years ago, the air traffic controllers in America were causing a lot of trouble by going on strike for no very good reason. Reagan sacked the lot and hired new ones. There was short-term pain but a considerable long-term gain and Reagan's move was very popular. If the Underground staff who strike were all fired it would take no more than a fortnight to train replacements. And there would be at least a quarter of a million applicants for the jobs.)

Being a station supervisor on one of the Underground's many stations can hardly be regarded as an exhausting, hazardous or exceptionally demanding job, even by civil service standards. Lots of stations are very small and there is little to be done except to make sure that someone wields a broom occasionally.

Most civil servants, like most modern politicians, have never worked in the real world, have no concept of the lives most people live and no understanding of, or sympathies for, the people who pay their fat salaries and generously subsidised salaries.

(Lawyers, bankers, railway workers and estate agents did even worse in the survey than civil servants managed and, as far as society is concerned, might as well stay in bed in the mornings.)

14

While away from home we made an offer for a guest house which we thought we could convert into a home if we could rip out twelve superfluous shower rooms, get rid of the awful carpet (left from the 1970s), remove a good number of partition walls (which had been built to turn decent sized bedrooms into poky little rooms for holidaymakers) and generally give the place a little of the loving it had not received for many a year.

Sadly, the owner immediately sent back a message saying that if we were going to convert the guest house into a domestic dwelling he would want an additional £50,000. We made various painful suggestions to the estate agent though it is doubtful if any of these have been followed faithfully.

And so we headed back down the motorway; constantly aware of the cameras, the policemen and the motorway patrol vehicles. Everything is regimented and regulated these days. And the service stations have all the charm of prison canteens.

Travel used to be much easier than it is today, of course. And foreign travel, in particular, was far more fun.

I remember that not many years ago, before the introduction of X-ray machines, ranks of nail file confiscators and two hour queues at border control it was, I discovered, possible to go to Spain by mistake.

For a while in the 1980s I travelled up to Glasgow every week to record television programmes for BBC Scotland. I used to fly from Birmingham airport and, because things were simpler then, I would turn up at the airport about fifteen or twenty minutes before my early morning flight and then stagger sleepily onto the plane.

I was slumped in my front row seat one morning when the pilot started to tell us the usual stuff about the temperature in Spain and the expected flight time. It was then that I realised that I had boarded the wrong plane. I had to persuade the stewards to call back the stairway, open the doors and let me out. The odd thing was that I had a ticket to Glasgow not Malaga and I had somehow managed to board the plane without a passport.

Still, I was following in family footsteps. My father, who was famously absent-minded, once ended up in Madrid with no passport, no luggage and no money. He was wearing bedroom slippers.

15

A citizen who wrote to the Home Secretary, criticising the Government for creating a police state, was called for an interview with his GP. The GP had received a letter from the Fixated Threat Assessment Centre (FTAC) following instructions from the Home Office. The GP was required to interview the citizen who had dared to complain in order to establish his 'state of mind'.

It seems that in future anyone who dares to criticise the Government may be regarded as mentally ill.

The FTAC is a joint initiative by the Home Office, the Metropolitan Police and the Department of Health and consists of nine police officers (one chief inspector, one inspector, one sergeant and six police constables), three psychiatric nurses, a part time psychiatrist and a part time pathologist. The NHS component of this merry little quango costs over £500,000 a year.

The purpose of the FTAC is: ‘to assess and manage the risks posed by those who engage in inappropriate or threatening forms of contact towards people in public life and in doing so, to direct severely mentally ill people, who are identified through such contacts, to the care that they so desperately need.’

FTAC may make use of police powers under section 136 of the Mental Health Act 1983 to ‘take a person who appears to be suffering from a mental disorder, and in immediate need of care or control, to a place of safety’.

Officially, FTAC is described as ‘a new form of diversion initiative in which the interests of patient care overlap with those of crime prevention’.

If you haven’t gone cold inside by the time you have read this far then you may not be aware of the way that the Soviet Union and the East Germans used mental hospitals and psychiatric clinics to silence protestors and dissidents.

Naturally, the FTAC does not define what is considered ‘inappropriate’ or ‘threatening’ forms of contact. It is inappropriate or threatening because ‘they’ say it is.

The technique of branding outspoken individuals as ‘mad’ isn’t new. But it’s truly terrifying to see it being used in England, with the idea of troublesome individuals being sectioned as mentally ill and locked up where they can be controlled and silenced.

The FTAC has been given sweeping powers to check the files of thousands of suspects. And the team has the power to order that suspects undergo involuntary ‘treatment’ in secure psychiatric units. Troublesome citizens can be locked up for an indefinite period without trial, without criminal charges being laid and without any evidence of any crime being committed.

Our protectors have become our brutalisers and our leaders have led us into a barren wilderness where only the weeds of deceit and corruption flourish. None of them, I suspect, has ever read John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty* in which he wrote: ‘The only purpose for which power can rightfully be exercised over any member of a civilised community against his will is to prevent harm to others.’

A decade or so ago I wrote a book called *Living in a Fascist Country*, which was widely sneered at by the sort of reviewers who think everything new is progress, but every word in it was true.

Only when you think you’ve got it all sorted out in your mind do you know, really know, that you don’t have the faintest idea what’s going on. Except that we now live in constant fear in a police state, with an authoritarian government and an increasingly out of control police force, which is laden with money while other departments struggle.

I didn’t say that, of course. And you didn’t read it.

16

We collected our new (previously adored) Bentley, having bought it from a dealer who offers a proper warranty and who seems to care for well-made motor cars. Antoinette was presented with a huge bouquet of flowers and I was given a massive key ring and a book about the car which only needed four legs to turn it into a dining table for twelve. The only snag was that for reasons best known to the accounts department the dealer refused to take a cheque and our bank wouldn’t arrange a transfer unless I went in and took my passport, dental chart, inside leg measurement and so on. As a result a perfectly simple transaction became something hideously complicated. Still, we got there in the end.

This is the first car I’ve had which has double glazed windows, can tell me what the air pressure in the tyres is, and what it should be if I want to drive faster, and which is clever enough to turn on its own windscreen wipers at the first drop of rain. If the sky darkens the lights are switched on automatically. This is handy because council’s everywhere now turn off the lights as soon as it gets dark. They turn them on for about 0.1 second of twilight, just to show that they are there and that they work, and then turn them off again to save money. We can drive the car down our bumpy, muddy lane because it has four wheel drive and at the touch of a button I can raise the suspension. If I forget to lower the suspension it automatically goes down again when the car travels at a certain speed. At the same time as the suspension goes down a spoiler rises out of the back of the car to keep the tail end firmly glued to the road. I can also raise the spoiler by pressing another button and it occurs to me that I could, if I so wished, write an abusive message on the spoiler. I do wish.

Pretty well all I have to do is hold the steering wheel and wave imperiously from time to time. The salesman who sold us the car pointed out that in the boot there are two batteries. If, for any reason, one of the batteries should fail and I cannot start the car I can bring the second battery into operation simply by turning a key. Brilliant. If there is a better car on the planet I would love to see it.

My only complaint is that the car doors and boot are programmed to open if I walk towards the vehicle with the key in my pocket, and to lock themselves if I walk away from them. This is fine and dandy for those who do not suffer from OCD where door locking is concerned. I never really trust myself to lock doors properly and I have for years had to go back and check that I've locked a door. The problem with a self-locking car is that when I am ten or fifteen feet away from it I always feel the need to go back to check that I've locked it. Naturally, however, as I toddle back to the car it recognises my approach and unlocks itself. So when I check to see if it is locked I find that it is unlocked.

The only way round this is for me to put the car key down on the ground some distance away from the car and to then run back to the car to check the doors and the boot. I have to do this walking backwards of course in case someone who has seen me do this steals the car keys.

Bentley, the company, may be owned by the evil German conglomerate which makes VW and Audi vehicles, but the cars are made in England and it is a joy to realise that we can still make some good products in England.

Clothes are thinner and poorly made, chocolate bars are smaller and lighter, bank service deteriorates by the day and the internet is awash with illiterate abuse, hate, hysteria, fads and pointless boasting but the Bentley motor car is a reminder that Made in England once really meant something.

17

There is an excellent first class lounge at Paddington railway station and with an hour to wait for our train we settled down in a quiet corner. The place is a rare delight in that it is usually devoid of screaming babies and inconveniently abandoned perambulators. Am I the only one to have noticed that as our country becomes increasingly overcrowded so prams and mobility scooters have got bigger? Some of them are huge; far bigger than can possibly be necessary.

The lounge at Paddington has a self-service coffee machines which provides the best coffee I've ever tasted in any commercial establishment in Britain and this makes a more than pleasant change from the undrinkable stuff they still serve on British trains (including Eurostar I'm afraid).

In *Roughing It* (his book about travels he made in the old wild west) Mark Twain told of the drink commonly served at wayside stations. 'It really pretended to be tea, but there was too much dish-rag, and sand, and old bacon rind in it to deceive the intelligent traveller.' Twain told us that the man who served the brew called it Slumgullion. 'And it is hard to think he was not inspired when he named it,' added Twain dryly.

The stuff served in most British hostelries is definitely Slumgullion.

Twain is one of my favourite authors and one of the wisest men to have lived. 'The two most important days in your life are the day you were born and the day you find out why,' he once wrote.

After ten minutes in the Paddington lounge, the peace was destroyed when a businessman in a three piece suit decided to use the lounge to hold a hands free conference call. He reminded me, both in appearance and in his intensely humourless way, of a guy called Roddy whom I used to know when I was a GP.

Roddy was a car dealer and he once sold me a car which developed a series of faults. I needed to speak to him one day and so I telephoned him at home. 'How did you get this number?' he demanded. 'I'm a GP,' I told him, 'they send me a special book full of phone numbers. I have pretty well all the numbers in town.'

'Can I get one of those books?' he asked.

'Dunno,' I told him, 'but I'll sell you mine for £100 when the new one comes in later this year.'

'Deal!' he said, excitedly.

He was so impressed, and so keen to get his hands on my special book that he dealt with my car problems without any more fuss.

A few months later Roddy came to the surgery to ask me if my new book had come in. He whispered and actually winked. I opened a drawer and took out a dog eared copy of the local telephone directory. They used to give every customer a telephone directory in those days.

'What's that?' demanded the car dealer, looking terribly disappointed.

'It's the book they send me,' I told him. 'Look up your name. Your home address and phone number are in there.'

Roddy was furious about it, complained it was a trick and said I was trying to rob him. I said it was just a little joke and pointed out that I hadn't taken any money from him, and had never intended to. But he was still pretty miffed.

Anyway, this businessman at the station, who looked like Roddy did then (though the Roddy I knew is now probably considerably fatter and balder), had his little ear piece tucked into his left ear and his tiny microphone pinned to his lapel and he walked up and down the lounge as if he were in his own living room. No group of hoodies were ever quite so irritating. He spoke very loudly.

I tried the usual coughing and glaring but he was quite unaware of just how much he was annoying the other occupants of the lounge. He was holding a folder in front of him and eventually, when I could take no more, I got up, stood in front of him and placed a fifty pence piece on the folder.

'What's this for?' he demanded, staring at the coin as though he'd never seen one before.

'I haven't got any other change,' I told him, apologetically.

'Why are you giving me fifty pence?' he demanded. Someone else on the conference call must have said something to him because he then put his free hand over the microphone fastened to his lapel.

'I always give money to buskers and performance artists,' I told him

'I'm not a busker!' he said.

'I realise that,' I told him, as though talking to an idiot. 'But you're clearly a performance artist.'

'Go away!' he said. 'I'm on a very important conference call with three of my executives!'

'Brilliant!' I said, laughing. I turned round to Antoinette. 'He's staying in character!' I said. 'Have you got any change? He's worth more than fifty pence!'

Antoinette said she hadn't got any sterling but produced a euro and some of the bits and pieces the French use instead of pennies. I took them from her and put them beside the fifty pence piece. The other occupants of the lounge enjoyed this exchange but the businessman, probably some sort of sales executive, still didn't find it amusing.

On the train I read in a magazine that a senior French politician, a Korean born woman called Fleur Pellerin, once French Minister of Culture and Communications, is reported to have read no books at all for two years.

This is embarrassing if true but not surprising for I suspect that book reading is going out of fashion. Many people say they don't have time to read books. But what are they doing when they aren't reading books? Playing with their Facebook page? Twittering? Or sorting their rubbish out into neat piles and washing out their yoghurt cartons and jam pots with lots and lots of fresh, running water.

18

Antoinette bought me a book called *The Diary of a Cotswold Parson*. The diary was written by the Reverend F.E.Witts (1783-1854) and is full of fascinating titbits.

For example, on 12th October 1827, the parson inspected the treadwheel at Northleach Bridewell. He reported that 'the velocity with which the wheel revolved was too great so that the fatigue exceeded the strength of the prisoners.'

Doubtless overcome with Christian spirit, Mr Witts recommended that 'the revolutions should be limited to about 52 steps in a minute.' The parson also gave orders that the treadmill should be adjusted to compensate for the difference in weights when boys were working on it.

He noted that it was intended to keep the machine going whether there was any corn to grind or not. 'Nine or ten prisoners were on the mill at once, they worked each four and a half minutes or five minutes, one descending from the extremity of the wheel every half minute. A relay of prisoners is kept in an adjacent yard, walking in a circle.'

When the oil runs out and solar energy proves inadequate the authorities will, I suspect, be looking carefully at treadwheel manufacture.

19

I read today that an American hotel is now offering its guests access to rooms on a 'relaxation floor', where all computers and mobile telephones are banned. It is, apparently, known as a 'digital detox package' and naturally, the hotel charges more for not providing wifi and recharging points.

I am always impressed when businesses succeed in charging more for doing less. So, for example, there are loads of food companies selling products at premium prices because they don't contain additives, added sugar or hormone residues. I wonder if I can persuade Paddington Station to turn their first class lounge into a 'digital free zone'. Thinking of this I suddenly remembered that Charles de Gaulle, the tall Anglophobic French President with the nose, famously refused to answer any telephones at all, anywhere. If he was at his country home on Colombe-les-Deux-Eglises, messages had to be relayed to him by messengers, and though there is no record of them having to carry cleft sticks it wouldn't surprise me at all to find that they did.

I am still reading the Reverend Witts' diary. On 8th June 1835, 'a very brilliant hot day', the parson had an early breakfast and then 'left home for the Metropolis'. He began his journey by driving to Stow 'where at 6 a.m. I ascended the roof of a branch coach, which makes Oxford at 10 o'clock in time to transfer such of its passengers as wished to proceed to London, to the Blenheim coach.' He reached Oxford Street by four o'clock (just in time for afternoon tea).

The last time we went from the Cotswolds to London we were stuck in a huge traffic jam on the M4 and our journey took rather longer than the parson's. Progress, eh?

There's little doubt that one of the main reasons for the huge queues out of London after about 4 p.m. is the wave of commuters heading home to the country. London has become grubby, unfriendly, overcrowded and inhospitable and everyone who lives there wants to leave. It is a dirty, untidy building site with very little appeal these days. Dr Johnson may have been right in his day to say that a man who is tired of London is tired of life but these days I think he would change his mind. On our way home we popped into Fortnum and Masons which was full of tourists gawping at the staff and buying pots of expensive lemon curd. The Burlington Arcade, which used to be an excellent and practical place for shopping (I bought my bow ties from Fishers in the Burlington Arcade when I was a medical student) has now just become a joke. Virtually none of the shops puts prices on the items they are selling (always a bad sign in my view) and today we walked up the whole of the Arcade without seeing a single customer go into one of the shops.

Many former inhabitants of the London suburbs now live in Wiltshire, Oxfordshire, Gloucestershire and even Somerset and Devon. This isn't surprising when you realise that the average Londoners spend two thirds of their pre-tax income on rent. After taxes, transport and insurance that doesn't leave a lot left over for spending on luxuries such as food and clothing and hardly anything for frittering away on fun and games.

Despite having a quarter of the world's whole supply of Closed Circuit Television Cameras (not a quarter of the cameras in Britain, but a quarter of the cameras in the whole world), London is still a capital full of crime. You'd think that in exchange for their privacy Londoners would be entitled to a low crime rate but robberies and muggings on public transport are endemic, and in the smartest and the poorest areas alike residents now have bars and shutters on their ground and first floor windows.

Funnily enough, I can't remember the last time I saw a policeman walking in London. I have occasionally seen police cars speed through the city, sirens blazing, as the inmates hurry back to the station house for elevenses or afternoon tea.

The authorities tell us that the absence of visible coppers and the high crime rate are unconnected but here's another funny coincidence: in Paris, where police patrols are seen commonly, the crime rate is far lower than it is in London.

Many former London residents have sold their cramped London properties and moved to the country because with the proceeds from the sale of a three bedroom semi, they have been able to buy a manor house or a cottage with several paddocks and a meandering stream. By car or train, the journey from London to the country can take no longer (and cost little more) than a journey from one part of London to another. (Not that train fares are cheap. It now costs us considerably more to travel from the Cotswolds by train than it would cost to drive there in the Bentley.)

And so thousands of men and women now commute daily from places as distant as Exeter, Taunton, Stroud and Kemble. The railway stations in places up to 200 miles away from London are crowded and the car parks are often filled long before 8 a.m. every weekday morning.

20

Am I the only person to have noticed that the business folk (mostly foreign) who are becoming excited about the possibility of Britain leaving the EU (and warning that the consequences will be dire) are, by and large, the same idiots who warned of dire consequences if Britain didn't join the euro? These are the self-appointed experts who claimed that if we didn't join the euro we would fall into decline and irrelevance. That prediction worked out well, didn't it? They are also the very same people who were largely responsible for the financial crisis which swept the world in 2007 and 2008 and which is still damaging the lives of millions.

The battle to remain in the EU will be led, for entirely personal, selfish, unpatriotic reasons by politicians, bankers and businessmen whose opinions will be driven by thoughts of financial gain. On their side of the fence there will be little or no sign of genuine concern for England or for Britain.

21

A bloke we know has bought an electric car and is, predictably, unbearably supercilious and sanctimonious. Listening to him talk you would think that he had single handedly solved all the world's environmental problems. Within five minutes of telling us about his new purchase, he had told us at least ten times that it runs on electricity and doesn't use any petrol.

'Where does the electricity come from?' I asked him, when he'd finished telling me how diesel vehicles were destroying the planet. In my experience, people who buy electric cars become horribly self-righteous and need to be encouraged to face a little reality.

‘I just plug it in to the mains,’ he said. ‘I’ve got a socket in the garage; just an ordinary electricity socket.’

And so I asked him the same question I always ask these sanctimonious people. ‘And where does the electricity come from?’

He looked puzzled. They always do.

‘To save you looking it up,’ I told him, ‘the electricity which powers your car comes from oil and coal fired power stations. But in the UK, where the power generating capacity is running out because coal plants have been shut down on orders from European Union bureaucrats, the nation obtains much of its essential electricity from hugely polluting diesel engines.’

Britain still gets well over a quarter of its energy from coal and has promised to close all its coal plants within the next decade. Sadly, and worryingly, there are no adequate replacement power plants in the pipeline so, presumably, the country will have to reduce its consumption of electricity by a quarter by 2025. This may seem rather unlikely but it is difficult to see what the alternative is. It is true that the Chinese have plans to construct a new nuclear power station at Hinkley Point but, even if there are no cost overruns, the electricity produced by this power station will cost the equivalent of $150 per barrel of oil. And there are plans to build an electricity producing barrage across Cardiff Bay but this will produce electricity which costs four times the current wholesale price for the stuff. Moreover, the EU continues to introduce new laws, which British governments insist on following and gold plating , so things are going to get considerably worse.

So the owner of an electric car is actually driving a very inefficient diesel powered vehicle which, because the diesel must first be converted into electricity in a power station, is far more polluting than any car collecting its energy from the garage forecourt. Plus the use of electricity to power cars means that the nation’s power stations will break down far more often than ever before. The use of electric cars will mean that people won’t be able to light or heat their homes, cook their food or mess around with their computers.

When I’d finished explaining all this, the man with the new electric car stared at me but said nothing. He will soon realise that he has bought a car which will take him no more than an hour or so from his home. And, since there are very few recharging points around, he must then take it home and plug it in for eight hours or so.

Electric cars will only be ‘green’ when they are powered by little windmills or solar panels. And that isn’t ever going to happen.

Meanwhile, the companies which make these silly little vehicles continue to promote them as if they were helping the environment in some way. A company called Telsa, for example, promotes its cars with the tagline ‘No emission’, which seems to me to be absurdly misleading but which no doubt appeals to the sanctimonious and the hypocritical. How does the manufacturer think the electricity will be created? If electric cars ran only on solar power or wind power the owners would only be able to travel when the sun was shining or the wind blowing.

And, of course, the stuff to make the car (the metal and the plastic) has to be dug out of the ground, with all the usual requirement for energy. Moreover, the batteries used by electric cars need lithium which is in short supply. And in order to find the required lithium a host of new mines will have to be dug. Much earth moving machinery and drilling equipment will be required. And vast amounts of oil will be required to keep all that machinery running.

22

Like all young doctors, I worked nights and weekends and was often the only doctor on call. It was not uncommon for young doctors to work 168 hour weeks. Newly qualified doctors were provided with rudimentary accommodation within the hospital and commonly went for weeks without venturing outside the hospital grounds. We were all paid a pittance. In my first year as a doctor I earned less than a traffic warden and had to pay the hospital a small fortune for the compulsory rent of a squalid bedroom about the size of a broom cupboard. The doctors’ residence, an ugly, squat building looked as if it had been designed by an architect more accustomed to designing prison buildings. My room had just one small window, which was so dirty that it let through little more light than the wall. I opened it once and found that it looked out onto a filthy air shaft into which the noisy fans from the kitchens pumped an endless supply of hot air. The discharged air smelt of cabbage and the hot, stale fat used for cooking chips, and the smell seeped through the wall and into the cheap, plywood wardrobe in which I stored my few clothes. We had a very small kitchenette where we could heat up food. I had the dubious privilege of sharing a bathroom with heaven knows how many other doctors and I had a small plastic card, which I had to pay for, which entitled me to as much hospital food as I had the courage to eat. I had very little spending money and so it was, I suppose, just as well that I didn’t have much time off.

I don’t remember ever feeling aggrieved by my circumstances. Nor do I remember any of my colleagues being aggrieved. We were delighted to be learning our trade.

I was reminded of all this by the news that junior hospital doctors are complaining (yet again) about their employment contracts and by the suggestion that they may soon be required to work nights and at weekends – though they will be paid overtime for this.

23

An American friend, who lives in New York, told me that Britain's National Health Service is much admired by his fellow countrymen who regard it as the bees' knees in medical care. Sadly, I've had to explain to him that he and they are much mistaken. The NHS, like the curate's egg, is good in parts and is doubtless excellent if you want larger breasts, infertility treatment or a sex change but is definitely very inadequate if you have cancer or have serious heart disease.

How many people know, I wonder, that the NHS (which fails so many people so fatally) has introduced a 'personal health budget' scheme which allows GPs to give cash for a wide variety of non-medical schemes which they think will improve patients' lives.

So, for example, one practice in Cornwall spent a total of £267,000 of NHS money so that five patients could enjoy Pedalo hire, horse riding classes and aromatherapy. In Scotland, doctors with no apparent knowledge or understanding of nutrition or illness have spent millions of English pounds on writing prescriptions for hot dogs, hamburgers, biscuits and doughnuts. (Was this just some strange plan to kill off troublesome patients?)

Elsewhere, patients are dying because there is a waiting time of six months for X-rays to tell whether a patient has cancer or not. And, of course, thousands of patients die because the NHS cannot afford to give them drugs which would prolong their lives.

The whole damned confusion has become so bureaucratic that patients only get half decent treatment if they have enough money and fame to give them the power to cause fear among the staff. Politicians would understand the NHS more effectively if they were forced to sit for nine hours in casualty with sick children, or wait six months for an X-ray to tell them whether or not they had cancer.

Like many doctors, I feel that as an institution, the NHS does far more harm than good and that the United Kingdom would be able to provide better health care if the NHS did not exist. But it is considered blasphemous to criticise the NHS and so nothing changes.

A global survey of health care showed that the NHS is the number one in the world for access (in that anyone can take advantage of it) but second to bottom in terms of keeping people alive.

Britons (and visitors to the country) would have better health care and better health and live longer if politicians could find the courage to close down a failed experiment. As a bonus, Britain would save billions if health care were provided privately rather than through the NHS.

Another survey, this time done by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, concluded that Britain came 28th out of 30 countries for health care. Only Turkey and Israel came below Britain. The survey showed that Britain has fewer doctors, nurses, hospital beds and medical scanners than almost all other wealthy nations. And yet we spend a huge part of our health care budget on performing transplant operations we cannot afford – while allowing people to die of diseases which could easily be prevented or treated. (The whole transplant business is a concern in Britain. At the moment, transplant operations are performed on patients who know someone important within the State bureaucracy, or who satisfy social workers that they are worthy recipients. It seems to me that if we cannot afford to offer transplant operations to everyone who needs one then we should stop doing them – in the same way that drugs which we cannot afford are 'banned'. If the money spent on performing transplants were spent on improving the X-ray service then the number of people saved would be measured in tens, if not hundreds, of thousands. The problem is, of course, that providing better X-ray facilities is not regarded as 'sexy' in the same way that transplant operations are.)

When will patients stop supporting the National Health Service, an organisation which long ago proved itself to be an expensive and deadly mistake. Doctors working for the NHS find that they eventually end up being sucked in by the system's bureaucratic demands; decision making and resource allocation is determined not by the needs of patients but by the needs of the system. Doctors no longer have time to think, to do any research or even to make proper diagnoses.

It is important to remember that the NHS was designed by politicians, doctors and drug companies for their own benefit. That is why it is a disaster for patients and always will be.

I have absolutely no doubt that the NHS kills far more people, through the deadly incompetence produced by the dead hand of bureaucracy, than all the nation's terrorists, criminals and drunken motorists kill between them. The NHS kills more people every year than the much publicised disease Ebola kills worldwide. That's not an exaggeration. It’s a plain, unvarnished fact.

In addition to the waste, the extraordinarily dangerous levels of bureaucracy and the failure to put the needs of patients above the needs of the staff and the organisation itself, there is no doubt that State controlled medicine encourages patients to be far too reliant on the system (‘I will eat and drink whatever I want and it is your duty to make me better when I fall ill’) and fosters a dangerous, absurd and expensive sense of entitlement.

24

The UK is the most overcrowded country in the EU and yet over the last few years it has taken in more migrants than anywhere else. This is done, allegedly, out of a sense of charity. Those who advocate that we take in more economic migrants are not usually the people who will have to pay the price, but they are the ones who like to take the plaudits for their selfless generosity. (And, for the record, EU officials accept that the vast majority of migrants moving into Europe, and Britain, are doing so not because they are escaping brutality or because they need asylum, but because they want some of our money. That may be an understandable motive but it is an entirely different thing to seeking asylum from tyranny and war.)

Politicians encourage mass immigration (and dismiss objectors as uncaring racists) but encouraging immigrants has nothing to do with charity or kindness. It is done out of self-interest because the British government, like governments all over Europe, is aware that the population is ageing fast and will soon not be able to pay enough taxes to cover the costs of all the pensioners (especially the civil servants with huge inflation-linked pensions).

This is already happening in Japan and is doubtless one of the main reasons why the Japanese economy has been stagnant for decades.

The politicians and EU officials who encourage endless immigration do so in the naïve belief that they will be able to reduce the average age of their populations without any social, cultural or economic costs. And it presumably never occurs to the bureaucrats that the migrants leaving Africa for Europe are very probably the adventurous, entrepreneurial individuals their continent needs if it is to drag itself into the 21st century.

The result is that Britain’s population has for some years now been increasing by around half a million a year (with the greatest number of immigrants coming from Romania) and the islands are becoming uncomfortably crowded.

The politicians and the bureaucrats still silently believe that this influx of people who hate Britons, hate British culture and hate British history will somehow help save Britain from the problems created by an ever ageing population.

But most of the immigrants are male and most of them come to Britain not because they want to live in the country but because we give money away free of charge. And they send most of the money back to the countries where they came from; where their families have remained. It is an extraordinary, and widely overlooked fact, but more than two thirds of the economic refugees coming into the European Union are male. And many of those are under 18 years of age. Ten years ago, a German social scientist called Gunnar Heinsohn pointed out that in nearly all those countries where people aged between 15 and 29 make up more than a third of the population, there is either civil war or mass killings. The reason for this, he suggested, is not poverty or religion but a ‘failure to provide a critical mass of young men with something to do’. To make things worse most of these young men are coming from society where women are deemed to be inferior and non-Muslims are despised. And the influx of men is causing a dramatic change in the sex ratio – with the proportion of men to women reaching unprecedented levels. It is hardly surprising that the number of sex crimes against women is soaring. Naturally, politicians don’t talk about this because to do so would be regarded as endorsing racial stereotypes. (No one seems bothered by the fact that racial stereotypes exist for a reason.) Finally, those who encourage unlimited immigration do not seem to be aware that almost all terror attacks are carried out by unattached young adult men.

Britain is becoming uncomfortably overcrowded, and our largely Victorian infrastructure has stopped creaking and is now visibly falling apart. Accepting, or even inviting, more people into an overcrowded country with a failing infrastructure is rather like inviting more people into an overcrowded and sinking lifeboat. The result will be a disaster for everyone. The NHS is the most dangerous health care facility in the world – and, in my view, now kills more people than it saves. Mass immigration has made it dangerously unfit for purpose. And it won’t be long before Britons have to buy advance tickets, let alone pay toll fees, if they want to drive along one of the motorways we paid for. The immigrants who are crowding into Britain are not asylum seekers in the accepted sense. They are economic migrants. One can only assume that those who argue that we must accept as many immigrants as want to come do not realise that every winter thousands of British pensioners die of cold and hunger. They die because their pensions are so small that they cannot afford to heat their homes and to feed themselves. They have to choose.

Britain is in such a terrible state that the doctors and nurses at NHS hospitals are officially ordered to kill old people who need long-term care. That is long-term policy. The elderly are murdered by the State simply because they are frail. Do those who advocate opening our borders to millions of immigrants not realise that Britain has such appalling State health care that hundreds of thousands of people die because long waiting lists for X-rays and other essential tests mean that when their illness is finally diagnosed it is too late to treat them? Support for more immigrants comes almost entirely from upper middle class politicians and celebrities who can afford private health care and will never have to worry about waiting 18 months for an X-ray to tell them if they have cancer. They will never have to worry about being old and poor in a country where the elderly poor are regarded as a disposable nuisance. (These are, of course, the same politicians and celebrities who have swallowed the global warming hoax and who now preach to the rest of the world, without a care for the pain they are causing to the poor and under privileged.)

Official figures show that 1,600 immigrants enter Britain every day (most of them young men) and the Government expects the population to increase by 10 million, to over 70 million, within the next decade (with a dramatic increase in the number of young Muslim males since the vast majority of immigrants are young Muslim males). That figure is, of course, bound to be a dramatic underestimate since whenever the Government attempts to make an estimate about immigration figures it always underestimates massively.

Anyone who dares to comment critically on the situation is immediately condemned as a racist by people who do not have the intelligence to understand that a failing health service, overcrowded roads and rising taxes are all a result of a massive increase in the island's population.

It is irritating, to say the least, to realise that the politicians and celebrities who encourage foreigners to come to Britain, and to help themselves to free money, usually turn out to be tax avoiders and expenses cheats; never quick to offer their spare bedrooms, their country manor home or their place in Spain as extra accommodation for the asylum seekers.

And yet, despite the fact that the lunacy of allowing citizens of countries with which we are at war, and which we are bombing on a daily basis, to enter freely is beyond question. No one dares point out that allowing people from countries with which we are at war to cross our borders freely and to be welcomed is as mad as it would have been for us to welcome swathes of Nazi immigrants during the Second World War.

When the Prime Minister declares war on a country, does he mean that he is declaring war or does he mean something else, something so far undefined?

Hungary, which receives oodles of EU money, is so fed up with immigrants that it has built a 175 kilometre fence, topped with razor wire, to keep out the EU citizens who paid for the fence in the first place. (Though why anyone would want to move to Hungary is something which I doubt if anyone can answer.) It is worth noting that no one ever takes down a fence unless they're forced to do so.

In 2014, the Swiss, who aren't proper members of the EU but who have negotiated for themselves a profitable deal which enables them to have the good bits without the bad bits, voted for tougher immigration controls.

Sweden, where it takes immigrants an average of seven years to find a job, is modifying its immigration laws, and I have heard talk of Denmark requiring immigrants to hand over any cash they have brought with them in order to help finance their housing costs. (This will doubtless attract much criticism but in fairness it is difficult to see why.)

Naturally, anyone who mentions any of this, let alone suggests that allowing unlimited immigration might not be the best idea in the world, is instantly condemned by the Guardian reading pseudo socialists as an uncaring racist.

Equally naturally, the *Guardian* reading pseudo socialists, largely employed by the civil service and State-controlled organisations such as the BBC, live in comfort, well away from the tinder box areas, have chauffeurs to take them to and from work and, although they are passionate supporters of the NHS, wouldn't dream of ever going into an NHS hospital.

Politicians (and *Guardian* readers) want to encourage mass immigration in order to lower the average age of British citizens. If they really cared for people from poor countries they would use the aid money which British taxpayers dole out so generously to build decent roads, water plants, sanitation facilities and power stations in those countries which are poor and in need of improvement. Instead, most of our aid money ends up in the Swiss bank accounts of foreign politicians and bureaucrats.

25

British Gas keep writing to ask if they can come and service our boiler. We have a service contract and it won't cost us any money but we have ignored their entreaties because the last time they serviced the damned thing they had to come back several times to repair the damage they'd done. We also had to resist attempts to sell us improvements required by the European Union.

It is, therefore, far less trouble if we just allow the thing to chunter along without any interference.

I cannot remove from my memory a conversation I had with a gas boiler engineer a couple of years ago. I asked him how often he serviced his own boiler. He told me that he never serviced it. ‘Modern boilers don’t need servicing,’ he said. ‘They have no pilot light and nothing mechanical to go wrong. If you mess with them you’re likely to make things worse.’

But servicing boilers is big business – and very profitable. And engineers are trained to sell add on extras and to keep a look out for ways in which EU regulations can be turned into profit – fitting new flue plates and so on. These days, everyone is a salesman. Even the clerks at the bank want to sell you something you don’t want or need.

Incidentally, isn’t it curious that electronic stuff is now all called ‘digital’, in the same way that, a few years ago, everything ‘electrical’ suddenly, and mysteriously, became ‘electronic’?

26

According to the magazine *The Spectator*, the word which is most commonly used by Scots when they are searching for online pornography is ‘Scottish’. There is surely something distinctly odd about people who will only look at dirty pictures if the people in them are Scottish.

(It is rather daring of me to include this comment. In my experience, readers from Scotland will give a book a one star rating if it mentions the Scots without being toe-curlingly obsequious about them. Mel Gibson has an awful lot to answer for. His film *Braveheart* is fiction in the Spiderman mould but too many young Scots, who’ve never read a history book, believe it’s a documentary.

27

I read today that 2.4 million emails are sent every second. I don’t know how the people who keep count know how many emails I receive, and I don’t know who counted them, that figure sounds about right for me. I suspect that other people receive as many as that too. I send very few of the damned things but they pour in from people offering me services and products for which I have no yearning. And I never sign up for twitterings, blogs or email announcements from utility companies.

So multiply the world’s population by 2.4 million per second and you probably get a rough idea of the grand total of emails sent.

More seriously, I read the other day about a company director who claims he receives 700 emails a day and reads them all. He gets up at 4.00 a.m. so that he can work his way through them. If he deals with one email a minute it would take him over 11 hours a day to read and reply to 700 and there would be no time for thinking, working, eating or having any fun. What a pointless way to waste a life.

I try to unsubscribe from everything that comes but it’s not always easy to stem the flow of junk. British Gas sends me emails even though I have repeatedly asked them to stop. The emails they send have no unsubscribe button and in order to contact them to ask them to stop writing to me I have to register with their website, giving them even more of my details than they have already. And that will doubtless mean that I will have given them authority to send me even more emails.

Antoinette, who understands these things, found the answer. She suggested I mark their emails as spam, and bung them in the box together with the mass of emails which pour in regularly from LinkedIn (surely the most annoying retailer of spam on the planet) so that everything they send will in future disappear into the electronic equivalent of the global sewage system.

28

The OECD (the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) has ranked British teenagers bottom of 23 developed countries in literary and 22nd out of 23 in numeracy. This is, surely, proof, if proof be needed, that British teaching standards have reached an appalling low.

Our grocery delivery driver gave us a card and asked us to go online to comment on how well he does his job. I feel sorry for people who have to ask customers for support in this way. It is cruel and demeaning. But it is the modern way. We get many requests for reviews of this kind and, although Antoinette manages just fine, I get mixed up. I wrote one review for a delivery man in which I said that he ‘was conveniently situated and had sea glimpses’. I praised his ‘comfortable bed’ and ‘enjoyable breakfast’. I hate to think what I said about the hotel where we had stayed the previous week.

29

Morris dancers in Lancashire are in serious trouble. They have been accused of straying onto the road while jiggling around. This was, apparently, a serious breach of health and safety rules and the errant dancers will doubtless be dealt with in an inappropriate manner.

The authorities do not like Morris dancers for they are quintessentially English, and anything which reeks of Englishness is regarded as unacceptable in our curiously biased and prejudiced multicultural society.

I was reminded by this news item of another case involving Morris dancers, this time in Durham, where a group of Morris dancers known as the Slubbing Billys were thrown out of a pub for breaking a rule against music. (Presumably the pub didn't have the appropriate licence.)

The odd thing is that the Slubbing Billys weren't dancing, singing or playing instruments. They were just drinking. Sadly, for them, however, they had bells on their trousers and every time they moved or wobbled, their bells jingled.

I would have been surprised by this news but since I heard that it is illegal to sing 'Happy Birthday' in a British public house (or indeed any other public place) I have lost my capacity for surprise.

30

There is something odd about French bread, of which there are two main types.

The baguette, or French stick, is made in such a way that if you don't eat it when it is still warm from the oven you will find it inedible. Not even the pigeons will eat it. When you buy a baguette you have to rush home before it goes stale. That's why you often see French people breaking off bits of the baguette as they carry it home. Normally the French will dawdle as much as they possibly can. They are not among life's scurriers. But when they have a baguette tucked under an arm they can show a commendable turn of speed. They know that their bread will be like iron if their journey home is delayed and will more useful as a blunt club than as a comestible.

French sliced bread is an entirely different thing. The curiosity here is that it never ever goes stale or mouldy. An English loaf will be green with mould within two days. But a French sliced loaf will be perfectly edible weeks, months and probably years later. I cannot bear to imagine what preservatives are added to the stuff to keep it fresh.

31

General practice deteriorates by the day. I've had a bad ear and a bad knee for a while, and today I tottered to our local surgery and saw a young GP. He could see no inflammation in my ear and didn't seem much interested in my knee. He gave me a prescription for pills, as they do, and when I pushed him he also gave me some drops to treat the otitis externa I am convinced I have.

I put the pills he had given me for my knee into a cupboard (I'll throw them away later) and bought a knee support bandage and an 'i-Heal' device which sounds promising.

My wife, who has no medical training, looked in my ear and saw that the external canal is very inflamed. I'll use the drops I was given.

Modern doctors think pills, pills, pills. If the pills don't work then they whizz you off to the surgeon or the radiotherapist. I don't think pills are going to cure my knee for I am certain I have a ligament problem.

My bad knee gives me an excuse to carry a stick. I have no idea why some people refuse to use walking sticks. I rather enjoy being able to walk around carrying a stout weapon with which to fight off rabid dogs and hoodies. I have quite a collection of sticks; some which were bought (one of which contains a sword) and some which I made out of hazel branches from our garden. You can buy the ferrules for the pavement end quite cheaply and it is also possible to purchase fancy brass handles to stick onto the top end.

February

1

Am I the only person to wonder why the teenage enthusiasts who write for Wikipedia hide behind such silly names. They all seem to call themselves things like ‘Spottyface23’ and ‘Chinlessmoron76’. Maybe they had their imaginations taken out when their integrity was removed.

The internet seems to be a world of fictitious user names, pseudonyms and passwords. The secret passwords are so numerous and so complex that they have to be written down and taped somewhere secret – such as any blank, flat piece of the laptop just beside the keyboard. To make things ever more complicated I regularly receive messages telling me to change my passwords regularly in order to foil cyber thieves. How does changing a password make things any safer? If it wasn’t compromised before you changed it, why is a new password less likely to be a risk?

I see that Wikipedia has banned a large chunk of its editors for fraud. I fear they now need to eradicate a good many more. The problem with Wikipedia is that the people who edit the profiles don’t get paid. And everyone knows what you get when you hire workmen but don’t pay them.

I feel sorry for real encyclopedias such as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* which were effectively destroyed by a website which is run by people who seem to believe that if enough people with nothing decent to do with their lives claim that something is true then it must be true.

This afternoon I had a huge bonfire and picked an armful of wild daffodils from the orchard area at the top of the garden. Every year the display of daffodils becomes even more impressive. The only problem is that the area of the garden where the daffodils grow is the same area where the badgers enjoy playing. And so, every night, a good many of the daffodils get crushed or eaten – though it is usually the bulbs which they eat.

2

Antoinette and I spent the day in Bourton-on-the-Water where we had a picnic by the river in pleasant winter sunshine. I bought a Costa Coffee coffee from a nearby supermarket (much better coffee than anything sold in any of the pubs or cafés we have tried) and we enjoyed our sandwiches and shared them with the ducks and the seagulls. Luckily no one tried to arrest us for this.

A coachload of Japanese tourists walked along the opposite bank of the river Windrush and were so astonished to see a pair of hardy English folk picnicking in February that they took photographs, though when they saw that we had noticed what they were doing, they politely swung the cameras away and started taking pictures of the grass.

3

Now that airlines are forced to give plump people extra wide seats, or to allow them to occupy two seats, it surely cannot be long before tall people receive special treatment.

It isn’t my fault that I am tall but I have to pay a good deal extra, and travel first class on any form of public transport, because I can’t jam my legs into the space provided for second class passengers.

4

Teams of publicity seeking health workers are travelling to Africa to help the natives deal with their Ebola problem. (The disease is named after a river, where it was first found, and so merits an initial capital letter.)

The health workers are going to Africa for just a few weeks at a time – just enough to cost a small fortune in transportation costs but not long enough to do any real good.

We’ve apparently even sent psychiatrists over there to do their bit. Can you believe it? Psychiatrists do no good at the best of times. Just how they’re expected to help Ebola patients is quite beyond me.

These irresponsible, self-styled, self-sacrificing adventurers will doubtless expect to be airlifted back to the UK and treated by the NHS if they catch the disease. There will be an inevitable risk and an enormous cost for British citizens. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of people are dying of cancer in Britain because our health service, desperately short of doctors and nurses but awash with half-witted bureaucrats, has deteriorated to the point of being entirely unfit for purpose. Why are these people going abroad to find sick patients? There are millions of people in Britain who are desperately in need of care. The NHS has crumbled, our elderly are dying in their thousands of starvation, dehydration and cold, and you only have to walk the pavements of any decent sized city to see the size of the nation's homelessness problem. I find it difficult to avoid the conclusion that the NHS staff who volunteered to fly out to treat Ebola patients were, at least in part, motivated by the romantic notion that sick people in other countries are somehow more deserving than sick people at home.

Our Prime Minister has ignored the advice of health experts (who insist that Ebola is actually very difficult to catch) by installing more Gestapo guards at airports and railway stations. Not knowing anything about health matters he says that Ebola is the biggest threat to the world today and that the extra guards will prevent it coming into the country.

What a fool the man Cameron has turned out to be. The truth is that Ebola isn't in the top 100 health hazards in the world. It isn't even the top problem in Africa. It's just a politically convenient opportunity.

Any health workers who really want to help people in Africa should leave their comfortable NHS jobs and sign up with the organisation 'Medecins Sans Frontiere' which does sterling work.

5

Most modern research is self-serving and pointless but occasionally it is possible to find something interesting. Someone called Paola Sapienza in the USA conduced an experiment at Northwestern University which I rather like. She told students they could either take a gamble on a 50-50 chance of winning $10,000 or nothing; or they could receive a fixed sum of money.

She found that, on average, students valued the bet at $2,474 and since the expected value of the bet must be $5,000 (you either win $10,000 or you lose the stake money) this rather suggests that most people are very averse to risk.

Even more interesting is the fact that when another batch of students was shown a clip from a horror film, and then asked to assess the value of the gamble, they suggested $1,802. The conclusion from this part of the research is that fear makes us even more averse to taking risks.

6

This evening, we watched a disc from the *Gentleman's Motor Racing Diaries* which are now available on DVD and which Antoinette bought for me.

The films were recorded in the 1950s by John Tate, of the Tate & Lyle sugar company, and are quite extraordinary.

Tate, who was a spitfire pilot during World War II, seems to have spent a good part of the 1950s following racing cars around Europe. He filmed at Le Mans and at many of the Grand Prix circuits and it is extraordinary to see Fangio, Moss and Hawthorn at work, and to see how open the pits were in those days. Mechanics often worked on racing cars while they were parked in a field and spectators were allowed to go as close as they liked, both to the cars and to the drivers. There are extraordinary shots of Archie Scott-Brown, who was, as far as I know, the only one-armed Grand Prix driver. And there's a beautiful piece of film of Stirling Moss sitting in Mike Hawthorn's Ferrari to try it on for size. There's even film of Sammy Davis, one of the legendary Bentley boys, driving in a London to Brighton rally. Those really were the days. The films are brilliantly scripted and the commentary is spoken by Tate's son. These must be the best home movies ever shot and they are certainly an important piece of social history, as well as being vital motor racing history. It is glorious to see how life was in those wonderful days before Jackie Stewart's hideous tartan trousers became a regular sight in the pit lane, and the world was taken over by commentators and pundits who delight in proving that they are now much better players and strategists than they were when they were actually involved in the sport as participants. (This is true of all sports. Ex golfers become much better at the game when they are no longer playing it professionally. And former football players who had noggins full of lead when they were playing suddenly become wise old owls when they find themselves facing a microphone.)

7

Wandering around England it is painfully clear that many villages no longer have a shop of any kind. The old-fashioned village shop was long ago turned into a bijou country residence and sold for far more than it would have attracted had it sold as a business. The village shop, even more than the local church, was always the centre of a village. It was the place where people met, shared chit-chat (and gossip) as well as the place where they could purchase essential household goods. An endless barrage of rules and regulations, most of them written by eurocrats, have made it impossible for most village shops to survive. Margins have got thinner and thinner and one after another the shops have closed.

But there are still one or two old-fashioned shops surviving – usually run by owners who have been managing the same store for decades.

A proper village should have a shop where you can buy: a loaf of bread, a bottle of milk, a corkscrew, a bag of kindling, a pair of slippers, half a dozen one inch wood screws, a packet of envelopes, a dozen wooden clothes pegs, a postcard, a bottle of malt whisky, a packet of refills for a propelling pencil and a stamp for the postcard.

When I was a boy every village had a shop like that. Now, I bet you could scour England and fail to find more than a dozen shops of that ilk. Bilbury in Devon has one, of course, run by the indefatigable and timeless Peter Marshall. And there is an excellent example in the village of Fondling-under-Water which I heartily recommend.

I am delighted, by the way, to see that the latest instalment in the Mission Impossible series, starring Tom Cruise (an eternal teenager) is called *Rogue Nation*. I'm glad someone liked the title, which I used some years ago for a book of mine.

8

It is Chinese New Year. Last year was the year of the horse and someone at the BBC misheard and put up a caption saying that it was the year of the whores. Close, but definitely no cigar. Last year we were in London on Chinese New Year and the minute we climbed out of our cab at the top of Charing Cross Road an Oriental monk in Reebok trainers approached Antoinette, wished her Happy New Year and put a cheap bracelet around her wrist. She smiled, wished him Happy New Year and tried out a little Mandarin on him. Sadly, he spoke no Mandarin and the only words he knew in English were Happy New Year. It's difficult to have much of a conversation with anyone when that is all that they can say and after a few minutes things began to pall a little. He then livened up proceedings by taking a small notebook out of his pocket and showing it to us. The notebook contained a space for Antoinette to write her name and a space for her to make a note of the size of the donation she was making to whatever cause the Monk was supporting. (His trainers were pretty grubby so maybe it was a new pair of Reeboks.) All the donations visible were for sums of £50 or £20 with the £50 ones appearing to be dominant. I gave the guy a fiver which he acknowledged by wishing Antoinette another Happy New Year.

Philanthropy has become extremely fashionable. It's difficult to pick up a high end newspaper without finding at least one article describing the 'marvellous' work being done by some 16-year-old billionaire who made his money out of running a pyramid scheme, stealing oil leases or creating another absolutely pointless website. (Isn't it odd how most of the people who become billionaires have never done anything really worthwhile?)

I have a suspicion that most philanthropists are, almost by definition, expiating their guilt: the bigger the philanthropist the greater the guilt. These people want to use their ill-gotten gains to buy respect, respectability and immortality and all those other intangibles that being a greedy and lucky bastard won't buy you. Some of those who like to portray themselves as philanthropists might do more for society if they made sure that their companies paid their fair share of tax. (Stand up and take a bow, Master Zuckerberg and Facebook.)

Modern philanthropists, who have mostly made their money by crookery of one sort or another, do their giving very publicly, with the full blare of social media onside and a dozen PR people ready to put out press releases at appropriate moments.

'Philanthropist X today put 10 pence into an old man's hat and gave £1,000,000 of his shareholders' money to a politician. He will be given a knighthood and a peerage in the next honours list.'

I wonder how many of our friends around the world (particularly in America) realise that peerages and knighthoods are today doled out in the same way that they have always been doled out – as a reward for money, sex and friendship. Britain's Upper Chamber is occupied by men and women who have bought their power with money or grovelling.

It is almost impossible to pick up a newspaper or magazine without reading about yet another self-styled philanthropist. I read today of a retired lobbyist, rich beyond the dreams of most, who, now in his 70s, has retired from a lifetime of deceit and has become an earnest theologian. He describes himself as a man of God and, since he has made a relatively small donation to a well-known charity, an ardent philanthropist. Surely it is more important to live your life according to a decent paradigm than to make a major adjustment towards the end of it in the hope that the decades of thieving and cheating and deceit on an industrial scale will be erased by a few years of alleged piety and immortality.

Those who doubt that philanthropists do it for the fame should consider the wonderful case of a woman called Joan Weill, the wife of a retired banker called Sandy Weill.

Mr Weill worked for an organisation called Citibank which was one of the banks which received a bailout of many billions from American taxpayers. Mrs Weill offered to give $20 million to an American college called Paul

Smith's College if they changed the name to Joan Weill-Paul Smith's College. When the college authorities demurred, the heavily piqued Mrs Weill withdrew her offer.

This awful woman's greedy and reckless husband is famous for having been one of the people *Time* magazine blamed for the financial crisis of 2007. American taxpayers might wonder if the oh-so-not-very-generous Mrs Weill might have considered that a more appropriate gesture might have been an anonymous donation to the US Treasury.

People like Mrs Weill love to try to eradicate their smelly pasts by having their names attached to colleges, schools , bridges and, indeed, just about anything you can name, though they usually prefer to steer clear of the more appropriate buildings such as a nice sewage works or a public lavatory. As a result, all sorts of strange buildings are now lumbered with the names of social outcasts who spent their lives stealing and now want to be remembered for something else.

Some philanthropists will eschew a name on a college and will force vaccines onto unfortunate millions; others will prefer a statue (which is why there are many statues around of which people say 'Who the hell was he?').

Of course, if they hadn't been so damned greedy in the first place these people wouldn't need to re-polish their image. And there are some extraordinarily greedy people around.

In the 20th century, the world was largely run by media barons who controlled politicians as easily as they controlled their servants. The 21st century is controlled by the internet barons who are dominated by greed and self-interest which they attempt to disguise with thin proclamations of philanthropy. They are as bad as the bankers and hedge fund managers who have made themselves rich by stealing from widows and orphans and who now are also busy trying to cleanse their reputations by forming family trusts, giving a few pence to their favourite causes and describing themselves as philanthropists.

I firmly believe that any banker or hedge fund manager who is worth more than £10 million should be in prison – not because they've got that much money, of course, but because of the way they doubtless made it. Some seem quite without scruple. Martin Shkreli, for example, is a 32-year-old misprint and hedge fund manager who, when he bought a drug company, raised the price of a vital drug for the treatment of toxoplasmosis by 5,000 % overnight, making huge profits but condemning to death those individuals who could no longer afford the product. It has been estimated that the annual cost of treating one patient will now be between $336,000 and $634,500 a year. The majority of susceptible patients cannot possibly afford that sort of price gouging, of course. And their health insurance companies won't be able to afford it either.

Shkreli isn't the only company boss taking advantage of the sick to boost his profits. There are even drug companies in America which specialise in buying drugs from other companies and then simply raising the price dramatically. In response to criticism about the price of a drug, one company boss responded by saying that the drug's 'price reflects its value'. So, presumably, the cheap pills sold by drug companies are crappy and not much good.

The deeply unpleasant Shkreli was eventually arrested not for mass murder but for securities fraud, and it is to be hoped that if he is found guilty the judge will raise the length of his sentence by 5,000%.

I have no doubt, however, that if he is imprisoned, Shkreli will, upon his release, become a philanthropist and become 'rehabilitated' by giving $50,000 to some good cause or other. Long articles about his generosity will then appear in the posh magazines. Journalists will forget the people who were condemned to death by his greed.

Still the comforting thing about banks and bankers is that they're heading the same way as second-hand book shop owners. They probably haven't realised yet but they will all be finished off by the internet, crowd funding and peer to peer lending.

9

I doubt if anyone in the world saves their computer work more often than I do. I usually save every few minutes and in addition to saving on the hard drive I also save on one of those funny little USB dongle thingies. Experience has taught me to be paranoid about computers.

This morning, for some reason which I cannot fathom, I failed to save my morning's work. I was so engrossed with what I was writing that I simply failed to stop and save.

And so, inevitably, after two and a half hours of work, the Microsoft software stopped working. A notice came up on the screen telling me that it wasn't working. And it was right: it wasn't working. I lost a morning's work.

So I am reminded yet again that computers in general cannot be trusted and that Mr Gates' product in particular is unreliable and, in the modern jargon, 'unsuitable for purpose'. If Microsoft made cars no one would ever get out of their driveway. If they made bread we would all starve to death. Does Microsoft make the world's worst product? Quite probably. There can certainly be no company on the planet which has been more inappropriately rewarded for its work.

Gates is, of course, now heavily promoted as a philanthropist.

10

Antoinette and I have been trying to decide whether or not an individual who had their head removed with the aid of a guillotine blade would be aware of what had happened. I rather suspect that they would. It takes two minutes for irreversible brain damage to occur because of a lack of oxygen and so it would, I suspect, take a minute or two for the brain to 'die' after a beheading; and although the shock of the execution would probably have a numbing effect, the blood in the vessels within the skull would probably provide enough oxygen for the owner-occupier of the bodiless head to know that they had been guillotined and that death was on its way. Cheery thought. Still, the guillotine (invented by a doctor with good intentions) was undoubtedly faster and far less brutal and barbaric than the old-fashioned method of chopping off a head with a sword.

11

I am reading Boswell's London Journal for 1762-1763 and here is his entry for today's date in 1763: 'Nothing worth putting into my diary occurred this day. It passed away imperceptibly, like the whole life of many a human existence.'

I had a pretty ordinary day, too. But in my life that makes it an extraordinary day.

12

More and more people now seem to film their lives. They are so busy filming that they aren't actually there, where they are, and never seem to experience the full delight of whatever it is that they are filming.

Actually, reality seems to be disappearing these days.

The Web is turning everyone's life into fiction, no closer to reality than the standard Hollywood biopic.

I had a shop on the Web in the late 1980s and I've had a website since the early 1990s but, as the years have gone by, I have increasingly lost faith in what promised so much but has become such a nuisance.

Today, I find the internet less and less trustworthy or useful. Indeed, the internet encourages dishonesty. I doubt if I am the only person to have gone onto a website and ticked a box confirming, quite dishonestly, that I have read 750 pages of terms and conditions before entering a website or using a piece of software.

Attempts to search for accurate information on the internet are usually of little benefit because searches either produce sites which have been sponsored or paid for (and which are, inevitably, biased beyond value) or sites which are of historic interest only.

The immodest and avaricious nerds who work for the rich and evil tax avoiding Google corporation (unofficial motto: Be Evil and Make Money but also be Hypocritical and Sanctimonious) think they are the bees knees but the truth is that they really aren't anywhere near as good as they think they are.

(And the company's financial success is built on crooked foundations. The fact is that Google, the tax avoidance specialists, has got rich out of stolen property. In 2004 the company copied around 20 million books. It did not ask authors for permission and offered no compensation for the use of the material. It is partly because of all this stolen property that Google now makes so much money out of its search engine. Google, which is the biggest and richest company on the planet and which makes more money than all the bank robbers in the world, claims that it would be 'prohibitive' to pay authors for their work. A few years ago there was talk of a lawsuit and I joined my name to those of many other authors. I seem to remember that the thieving bastards at Google had copied 271 different editions of books mine. Back in 2009 there was talk of compensation. Fat chance.)

Still, my refusal to get sucked into the widespread enthusiasm for everything on the World Wide Web is very much a marginal position these days. I was astonished to see, just the other day, that social workers now reckon that people who cannot use (or do not use) the internet are suffering from a version of illiteracy.

The raw and probably unacceptable truth is that although many internet folk spend a good deal of time pontificating about making the world a better place, they are in reality making it a much worse place every day, and the only way they could really make a positive difference would be by packing up what they do and finding some more socially useful activity.

Thanks to the internet the world now belongs to the deceitful, the egotistical, the greedy, the disingenuous and the hypocritical. The internet billionaires have got rich by destroying good jobs and replacing them with bad jobs (e.g. working in the Amazon warehouse).

Time and time again I read that internet billionaires have boasted about disrupting society. Do they understand what disrupting really means? Do they comprehend the damage they are doing to ordinary people's lives?

One of the most popular maxims in Silicon Valley is 'It's better to beg for forgiveness than to ask for permission', and it certainly seems to me that a good number of the nerds and wallies who work there follow that maxim. A few seem to regard themselves as serious, superior thinkers but sadly they seem to me to have barely reached the level of debate favoured by first year university students.

And the level of debate on the internet itself isn't much better with most discussions controlled and dominated by the social media nerds who, despite what they might think, tend to support the establishment point of view on almost everything, and whose wisdom tends to be limited to 'suck it up' and 'it is what it is'.

Original, questioning ideas are quickly suppressed even if they are ever allowed. Social media (such as Facebook, Twitter et al) are today the commonest source of bullying on the planet; much of the ruthless bullying inspired by a self-righteous determination to find something about which to complain and an apparently insatiable yearning to 'shame' everyone around.

And, of course, the whole damned caboodle is a reliable hunting ground for crooks and conmen.

Several bankers have recently asked me, in quite a pushy sort of way, to move my accounts online. I am promised cheaper this and cheaper that and assured absolutely faithfully that everything I do online will be protected and private and unhackable.

On each occasion I asked the banker if he had his accounts online. And on each occasion the banker admitted, rather shamefacedly, that he didn't and, when pushed, that he wouldn't consider it until there was absolutely no alternative. The reason was always the same: it's too dangerous; the risk of having your ID and money stolen is too great. One told me that some of his clients had had their email accounts hacked into and taken over. Fake emails had then been sent to the bank giving instructions about the movement of money. Naturally, the money was going out of accounts rather than into them. The banker who told me this had, moments before, been encouraging me to 'move with the times' and operate my account online.

This reminded me of the fact that doctors never have flu jabs. Ask them why and they'll admit that the jabs don't work and can cause horrific side effects. But, like the bankers recommending internet accounts the doctors fearlessly recommend flu jabs.

I know it's just a coincidence but bankers make more money when we put our accounts online and doctors make more money when we have flu jabs.

Funny coincidence that.

13

Less than a third of young people are eligible to join their nation's army. The ones who are ineligible are too fat, too stupid or have criminal records. I can understand an army not wanting fat soldiers and I can understand them rejecting criminals but, having served in the army cadet force at school I would have thought that stupidity would be considered a real asset.

14

A journal devoted to ergonomics has published a paper by researchers who measured the breasts of 456 young Chinese women. The researchers concluded that 70% of British women are wearing the wrong size bra and that the risk of the wrong sized bra being worn is directly proportional to the size of the breasts involved.

I've long been critical of the conclusions drawn by scientific researchers and this one seems to take the biscuit.

How can they possibly draw conclusions about British breasts when they've been studying Chinese women?

The research work clearly needs to be done again on British and American women. I have no doubt that, as I write, some young researcher is feverishly filling in his grant application form.

A bloke we know (I hesitate to call him a friend because he isn't the sort of person to get out of bed at 3.00 a.m. to help anyone) told us that he is buying a refrigerator which has access to the internet and can therefore go shopping all by itself. If the fridge notices that the supply of milk is running low it will send a message direct to an online grocery store and milk will be duly ordered. Ditto if there is a shortage of eggs, butter, or other vital comestibles. Heaven knows how the world is going to cope when this sort of appliance becomes commonplace. The whole wifi system will be swamped and will, I suspect, collapse under the strain.

Antoinette and I decided that we really wouldn't want such an appliance in our kitchen. With the refrigerator in charge of ordering supplies there will doubtless be deliveries of stuff arriving every day. What a nuisance that will be. And what will happen when you go on holiday? If you forget to re-programme the fridge the damned thing will go mad attempting to refill itself. There will be hourly orders for milk and eggs and delivery vans will be queuing up outside the front door. Parcels and boxes of food will be piled up all around the garden. The fridge owner will become its slave; forever struggling to keep it happy.

And what happens when there is an inevitable computer malfunction?

'Good evening,' the delivery driver will say, 'where would you like me to put your 10,000 cartons of milk and your 48,000 eggs?'

15

If and when the British electors have a chance to vote on whether Britain leaves the EU (for a positive and promising future), or remains in perpetual servitude to the tiny group of unelected commissars in Brussels, the voting will, I have no doubt, be fixed in as many ways possible. The EU will spend a fortune blackmailing citizens into voting the 'right' way, and if the electors are foolish enough to vote NO they will be forced to try again. This is now standard operating procedure within the EU. Any public vote against the EU is ignored and if the people of any nation votes for leaving the EU, they will be forced to try again until they get the answer the EU expects.

Since 2002, I have been arguing (in a series of books starting with *England our England*) that the European Union's oppressive, anti-democratic attempts to create a United States of Europe against the will of the various peoples involved must inevitably lead to a rise in nationalism throughout Europe. And, of course, that is exactly what has happened. In every Western member of the EU the electorate has given steadily increasing power to nationalist groups (which have, of course, been condemned by EU supporters as racist). Politicians who express surprise at this are either casually disingenuous or too stupid to be allowed out of the house without reins.

16

I am always intrigued by books with curious titles and today I bought a book entitled *I was Himmler's Aunt* by R. C. Robinson-Glasgow. My copy turned out to be a first edition, published in 1940.The premise outlined in the title seems unlikely since R. C. Robinson-Glasgow was a cricketer, cricket writer and school teacher (whose pupils included John Le Carre when he was known as David Cornwell). Robinson-Glasgow was a sportsman who was known to all and sundry as Crusoe. The book, which is rather silly, is delightful in that old-fashioned sort of way that still pleases many of us who prefer to live in the sort of world in which Jeeves, Wooster and Lord Emsworth might have felt comfortable. Actually, it is slightly dottier than that – more along the lines of the Goons perhaps.

Thinking of the Goons reminds me of a wonderful story about Peter Sellers and Spike Milligan. Sellers was an enthusiastic collector of cars but often got fed up with them quite quickly since he was fairly demanding. Once, after he had purchased a new Rolls Royce he was annoyed to hear a rattle of some kind from the back end of the vehicle. In order to try to make a diagnosis, Sellers climbed into the boot while Milligan drove around London. When a policeman stopped Milligan he asked, 'Is this your car, sir?'

Milligan, ever truthful, replied that it was not his car but that the vehicle belonged to Mr Sellers.

'And where is Mr Sellers?' asked the policeman.

'In the boot,' replied Milligan.

17

The woman in charge of Apple's shops was paid $73.4 million last year. Now I know why Apple's products are so absurdly overpriced. The company would make more friends if they spent $73 million of this on making a battery which lasts long enough to write a whole email all at the same time.

This sort of strangely inflated salary seems common among American tech companies. The most absurd thing of all is that according to *Fortune* magazine the woman concerned, who was pictured wearing a T-shirt shouting 'Apple's Retail Revolution', admitted that she wasn't much of a retailer.

I am, incidentally, amused by Apple's desperate need to describe everything they do as world shattering or revolutionary. Their bloody silly watch thing will turn out to be as big a disaster as Google's daft spectacles. When you fill shops with products and sales assistants it is, I am afraid, really pushing the boundaries of rhetoric to describe it as a revolution.

And though Apple insist on describing their sales assistants as 'genuises' you and I know that they're really still shop assistants.)

Apple isn't the only company to pay its employees silly money. When the irretrievably evil Google hired a new Chief Finance Officer, they agreed to pay her $70 million a year. Perhaps these companies pay $70 million to everyone. For all I know, maybe $70 million a year is the going rate for cleaners in Silicon Valley. And Google has the money of course, for the company has for years been minimising its tax liability by a variety of crafty scams. In the UK, Google's tax avoidance schemes have been described as 'devious, calculating and unethical'. Maybe the term tax evasion is more appropriate. (Thinking of companies which have avoided tax reminds me, inevitably perhaps, of the European Union and its sanctimonious chief, the obnoxious Jean-Claude Juncker. While Juncker was prime minister of Luxembourg, an estimated 340 multinational companies, including Pepsi and Ikea, funnelled their profits through his country in order to lower their tax bills to as little as one per cent. So Juncker, a staunch pro-European statist and enthusiastic supporter of Adolf's planned United States of Europe, is another entrant for the Bonio Award for Hypocrisy.)

These people aren't inventors, creators or entrepreneurs, they are ordinary hired hands doing fairly ordinary, mundane jobs.

Apple, to go back to where I started, is absurdly old-fashioned, bureaucratic and deceitful. To download an app on an iPhone, a user has to agree to a 75 page agreement. My first bet is that not one in a million users ploughs through the entire 75 pages. And my second bet is that the sneaky bastards at Apple know this perfectly well.

Today, this is all rather irrelevant since if I try to download an app I will be told I cannot do so because my iPhone is too old. I apparently need an iPhone version 8 or 9 or 157 and mine is quite a number of updates behind the times. I don't care. They can keep their apps.

Steve Jobs may have been a skilled marketing man but there has never been a genius in Silicon Valley unless one wandered through there looking for somewhere else. The Silicon Valley folk seem to me to be largely just a bunch of greedy, self-important crooks.

18

The self-service machines in a branch of the newsagent WHSmith which we visited were all either out of order or being used, so I took the magazine I'd selected and joined the queue for the solitary cashier. Actually they probably call cashiers something else these days. 'Cash point managerial executive', perhaps? An old managerial precept is that if you give your employees a flashy title you can get them to work for a lower pay cheque. A company which hasn't renewed its carpets since 1955 will probably do that.

The queue moved slowly so I started to read the magazine. The queue continued to move slowly. I thought about giving up but decided that I'd invested so much time in the queue that I decided to stay. And I had the magazine to read. The queue inched forwards. Eventually I found myself face to face with the cashier. Sorry, the 'cash point managerial executive'. I suddenly realised I'd finished reading the magazine and there was no earthly point in buying it. I handed the magazine across the counter. 'Thanks,' I said, 'I've finished with this.' The cashier stared at me, in full fly catching mode. I tottered off to a muted round of applause from the queue behind me.

There are days, are there not, when things go well.

19

I've been rereading Brian Freemantle's wonderful Charlie Muffin novels. Muffin is weary, footsore and the cleverest spy of them all. The odd thing is that although I have tried to read other Freemantle books, I've never liked them as much as I've enjoyed the books about Charlie Muffin. It is as though the author had developed a rapport with his creation and so given these books an extra dimension. This does sometimes happen with authors. John Le Carre's best books all contain his character George Smiley and the other books seem to me, I'm afraid, to be rather ordinary and laboured. The best books by Trevor Dudley Smith are the books about Quiller which he wrote under the pen name Adam Hall. And the best of Donald Westlake's gazillion books, written under a whole directory of different names, are the Dortmunder novels, describing the adventures of the most inventive and idiosyncratic of all thieves.

20

An acquaintance of ours who had to go into hospital, reported today that he has had the wrong operation.

He went in hoping to have his hernia repaired but instead the surgeon did something painful to the piles he didn't know he had.

'It could have been much worse,' the surgeon is quoted as saying, when offering a half-hearted apology for her stupidity. 'We'll try to get you in within six months to do the hernia.'

Surgeons are always making mistakes like this and it is invariably because they fail to have proper check lists.

When I take my car to the garage (or, to be more accurate, when they come to fetch it for servicing because I'm buggered if I'm driving it to the garage and sitting around for hours while they do unspeakably oily things to it) the mechanic always has a long list of things he has to do. He has to change the oil, check the tyre pressure, empty the ashtray and so on. (I really don't have the foggiest idea what they do.) He ticks off each item on his list when it's done. If surgeons followed the same procedure there would be far few errors. When was the last time a garage sprayed a car orange when the owner wanted the oil changed?

Sadly for patients, surgeons are far too self- important to allow their activities to be circumscribed by little lists. And so, people expecting to have their hernias repaired will continue to have their piles annihilated.

21

I had a fancy for a Walnut Whip today. I don't know why. The craving just came over me. I don't think I'm pregnant but these days, what with the female hormones which are in our drinking water and the hormones they cram into everything we eat along with the salt, the sugar and the other additives, you can never tell.

None of the five shops I tried had any, of course. Two counter assistants had never heard of them. The staff in the other three didn't speak any English and two of them didn't seem to me to be entirely sure which country they were in.

In the end, I trudged to the nearest Tesco supermarket and eventually found the Walnut Whip section in the biscuit section. The Walnut Whips were sitting on a shelf down near the floor, which is always a pain when you're six foot and a quarter tall and beginning to get a little stiff in the joints. There were two packs on display, each containing three of these nutritionally useless but delicious food items, but when you have a craving, and you have a loving wife with whom to share the spoils, half a dozen aren't enough to scratch the surface. Particularly since I swear that like Penguins, Crème Eggs and Wagon Wheels they have shrunk in size. And so I rummaged around at the back of the section and found an unopened box containing a couple of dozen packs. I was trying to open this box when I inadvertently pulled out about thirty packs of Maltesers, which spread all over the floor as though they were trying to get away from one another. I tried picking these up but as I struggled to poke them back into a display space which had suddenly shrunk, I knocked off one of the plastic labels they stick to the shelves. As I tried to catch this I knocked a pack of jammy dodgers off their self and as I hurriedly tried to cram these back onto their shelf, my shoulder bag brushed against some Mars Bars, knocking them to the floor where they joined the Maltesers and all the rest of the stuff.

I looked down and suddenly realised why supermarkets always seem to have boxes and cartons spilled on the floor. It isn't staff untidiness, it's customer clumsiness.

I was clearly not going to win this war and I was, indeed, clearly destined to make things worse so, having made sure that no one was watching I scurried away guiltily, clutching as many packs of Walnut Whip as I could carry.

If anyone from the Tesco branch near the car park in Cirencester reads this I hope they accept my apology for making a mess in the chocolate biscuits and sweets aisle.

22

I wonder if I can reduce my carbon footprint by eating it. Carbon, I mean. I burnt my toast this morning and ate quite a lot of the black bits (if I were writing a review I would say they were 'exceptionally crunchy and full of the unique flavour usually associated with bonfires and barbecues').

23

Just about everything we buy these days is worse than it used to be.

And all food items are smaller.

The food manufacturers claim they are doing this to help combat obesity and I suppose somewhere there must be a half-wit somewhere who believes them when they say that their chocolate bars are being made smaller in order to improve the nation's health, reduce obesity, conquer global warming, beat terrorism, help the environment, keep polar bears alive, stop film piracy and halt money laundering. (The nation will, of course, eat two instead of one and so they will eat more and pay more.)

The truth, of course, is that companies are reducing quantity and quality because their prices are being forced down by the internet, their wage bills are being forced up by stupid politicians who don't understand that minimum wages mean more unemployment and more machines, and life is being made intolerable by EU regulations about global warming, money laundering, traffic management and so on. Most of these regulations could just as easily be described as being designed to prevent unwanted teenage pregnancies for all the good they do. No one seems to notice that countries outside the EU are thriving on their reduced diet of regulations and red tape. For example, the second fastest growing country in the world between 2000 and 2015 was Norway (China was top, of course). And Norway is one of the very few European countries which declined to join the Nazi club.

24

The wind was so bad last night that this morning I thought I ought to go out and check the roof. But when I thought about it I decided not to bother. I've reached an age where I would rather live in contented ignorance. The problem is that even if we have lost some tiles I will never be able to find a roofer to put them back on. So why bother looking?

As I filled the kettle to make a cup of tea it occurred to me that things are deteriorating so quickly that the good old days are now approximately three years ago.

25

I sent an article on vaccination to Freddy Gray, the Deputy Editor of the *Spectator* magazine, more in hope than expectation. I have a medical degree and have spent much of the last 40 years studying vaccination programmes and I know for a certain fact that vaccines are dangerous and do far more harm than good. But, for political and financial reasons, the medical establishment does not accept this. (Cynics might wonder if this has anything to do with the fact that the medical establishment has a very close relationship with the international pharmaceutical industry.)

Minutes after receiving it Freddy wrote back to say 'it's a great read' but that they wouldn't be printing it because they didn't have any space in the magazine. ('We don't have space' is, I believe, Orwell speak for 'We daren't print this because if we do important people will jump up and down on our heads and we will get into trouble and maybe even lose subscribers and advertising.'.)

I didn't bother to send the article anywhere else. No publication in the world will publish an honest discussion of vaccination, the most spectacularly successful confidence trick of modern times. The article now appears on my website www.vernoncoleman.co.uk where it is free to all readers.

Ironically, the week after my piece on vaccines had been rejected, the *Spectator* published a front cover article about the number of NHS doctors who are victimised, published or silenced for daring to speak out about problems within the health service. The article was written by Freddy Gray.

I wonder if the magazine's enthusiasm for refusing my piece on vaccination so speedily could possibly have been inspired by the fact that after Boris Johnson commissioned his sister Rachel to write what seemed to me to be an appallingly amateurish hatchet piece about me, I forced the magazine to print a long letter which made it clear that Rachel is the female equivalent of a plonker.

Boris is a former editor of the magazine and doubtless has many chums at the *Spectator* and I suspect that it's the sort of squalid thing an over ambitious, self-important, preening twit like him would do. Heaven help the country if Boris ever becomes Prime Minister. Foreigners tend to think he's an affable, addlepated old-fashioned English buffoon. The English know different. For starters we know that he was actually born in New York and is about as English as Donald Trump. He is in reality no more than an ugly sister masquerading as a pantomime toff; a manipulative fake in the Tony Blair mould.

Whatever the reason for refusing the piece, I think it's scary that the whole subject of vaccination now seems to be suppressed.

Editors see the word 'vaccine' and, unless the article extols the virtues of vaccination it will not be published.

I know that I should offer the article to another magazine but in my heart I know that no editor will have the courage to publish it. And I'm weary of fighting battles where the winner has already been declared. I truly believe every word I wrote and I know damned well that millions of children will be polluted and thousands damaged for life because the vaccine industry has succeeded in controlling politicians and the media. The problem has been compounded by the fact that when doctors find that the facts don't fit their theories they ignore the facts and stick resolutely to their theories. Hopefully the article will reach more readers on the internet that it would have reached through magazine publication.

26

Terrestial television in the UK in general (and, in particular, that provided by the official State broadcaster, the BBC) is so bad that 51% of UK households now subscribe to pay television. Viewers in other countries are far happier with their terrestrial services. In Germany, for example, only around 18% of households pay extra for satellite or cable television.

The BBC was essential when it was founded because there were no alternatives. It is now an anachronism. It has grown huge and bureaucratic (like the National Health Service), employs only the earnest, the bigoted and the humourless and is institutionally and irretrievably biased.

There are two sorts of news in the UK: real news and BBC news and the two meet only rarely and then purely by accident.

Although the BBC is public funded it does not believe in allowing the public to have any say in what is broadcast. It is no exaggeration to say that the organisation disapproves of freedom of speech. Like some of the nation's national newspapers (particularly the *Financial Times*) the BBC has a habit of reporting opinion as news. So for example the statement 'The world is getting warmer because of man' is a highly controversial opinion which depends upon two contested allegations (that the planet is getting warmer and that man is the cause), but the BBC will report this as fact.

Similarly the idea that 'vaccines save lives' is likely to be reported as though it were a fact rather than a contested point of view.

The BBC is widely admired by folk abroad, who enjoy the World Service broadcasts or the selected dramas sold to foreign stations, but that is mainly because they don't understand how the organisation works in Britain, and do not know that the BBC is very widely disliked, nay despised, by the people who pay for it.

The BBC seems to be staffed almost entirely with bigoted racists who loathe and despise Britain in general but who reserve their special hatred for England. They hate English people, hate English culture, hate English history, hate English successes and hate English sporting prowess.

It is largely thanks to the BBC that the British now specialise in hostility about trivia and apathy about the issues which are truly important. We have, as a nation, been encouraged by the BBC to be embarrassed about our 19th century successes; part of the flagellation process is to allow ourselves to be mocked and beaten mercilessly by all and sundry, and to join in the flagellation ourselves.

Self-deprecation has become the dominant national trait as a result of the BBC's biased approach to the news.

But, at the same time as it demonises England, the BBC will always bend over backwards to protect what it considers to be minority groups. So, for example, the BBC doesn't like using the word 'terrorist' in case the people it so describes are offended.

The BBC spends a fortune on televising athletics (which no one ever watches) but refuses to broadcast cricket, golf or horse racing. There is a BBC Wales and there is a BBC Scotland but there is not, and will never ever be, a BBC England for the bigots who run the world's largest and most potent State broadcaster would never dream of promoting England in any way. The rule at the BBC these days is that no one must be offended unless they are English, white and middle class. The politically correct views of all extremist groups (especially Scottish Nationalists) must always be given precedence.

27

We are in Paris for a short visit. Even in winter the streets of Paris seem full of people pretending to be statues and playing the find the lady trick with a small ball.

Whatever happened to pole sitters, people who used to play the piano for a fortnight non-stop and folk who sat in glass cases fasting for weeks at a time.

As a boy I could never understand what any of these people did when they needed a loo.

I still haven't worked it out.

28

A man in the street asked me if I knew of a florist. By the look of desperation on his face he had forgotten a birthday or anniversary. I told him to walk 400 yards in any direction and he would find one.

The same thing is true of chemists and hairdressers.

You wouldn't need to walk that far to find a café, a greengrocer, a wine shop or a boulangerie.

In our arrondissement in Paris you are never more than 200 yards from a 'meringue au chocolat' or a decent glass of Bordeaux and it is therefore quite easy to keep blood chocolate and blood alcohol levels nicely calibrated.

In the evening we re-watched Peter O'Toole in *Rogue Male*, the magnificent film made from Geoffrey Household's atmospheric thriller of the same name.

The film (which originally appeared on British television as a serial) is unavailable in the UK but we managed to obtain an American import.

I can't imagine why the film isn't available because it is one of the best films O'Toole ever made – and I'm a huge fan of his work. (*My Favourite Year*, is a wonderful romp and often seems to be missed off lists of his best films.)

Some critics moaned that the film of *Rogue Male* didn't follow the book closely enough but it's a damned sight closer to the original than many films and, as John le Carre has pointed out, a film and a book are entirely separate entities and should be regarded as such. Le Carre has probably had as much experience of books turned into movies as any other modern author. To compare the book to the film and vice versa is a pointless and unrewarding exercise.

I wonder if it is possible that *Rogue Male* has been abandoned and left unreleased in the UK because a Nazi character makes remarks which might now be considered politically incorrect - though they were well in character and perfectly proper for the period.

Whatever the reason it is an artistic scandal that *Rogue Male* is so difficult to obtain. I think we ought to buy another copy in case ours is lost or broken or suddenly stops working (as DVDs sometimes do despite their alleged invulnerability).

March

1

The word in Paris is that the padlocks which lovers have attached to the bridges over the Seine are so heavy that they are threatening the safety of the bridges themselves. I have never heard such balderdash. The authorities are apparently putting up boards to stop people fixing any more padlocks to the metal superstructure. And existing padlocks are being removed with bolt cutters. I suspect that President Hollande is behind this. The man is a boor and if he is involved then I suspect that his antipathy to this simple and pleasant way for two people to leave a souvenir of their love in what used to be the most romantic city in the world might be a result of his own bewildering and duplicitous love life.

And as the padlocks disappear so too do the pigeons.

There are very few birds in Paris these days; the sparrows and pigeons who used to liven up the parks have almost all gone; driven out or exterminated by authorities who disapprove of any creature which cannot be fettered, controlled and taxed. Antoinette and I do our best to look after the ones who remain. We buy them cage bird food from the supermarket. The pigeons and sparrows love it.

When I bought some seed today the woman on the till asked if I was buying the food for the birds on the windowsill. When I nodded and said I was she nodded approvingly. In the UK, where old ladies are regularly arrested for feeding the birds, I would have been worried that she was going to call the police. Here I just felt she thought it was a good thing to do.

The crows in the parks like the bird seed too, and they are now moving into the city in great numbers. We fed the crows by the Eiffel Tower this afternoon.

After we had finished with the crows we watched a woman taking a dozen pictures of herself standing in front of M. Eiffel's masterpiece. The tower was merely a subsidiary player in her ego driven life.

'Here's another picture of me. In the background you can just see the Eiffel Tower poking out of my left shoulder.'

No one takes pictures of anything other than themselves these days. And when they aren't taking selfie pictures they're looking at them.

The illegal immigrants who used to earn pennies flogging cheap models of the Eiffel Tower now sell extendable 'selfie' sticks; those ridiculous arm extenders which mobile phone owners use to take more pictures of themselves. These are, it seems, the new growth industry; the cutting edge of modern technology.

'Here's a picture of me chatting to a nice person who approached me in the street'. 'Here's a picture of me signing a petition for them.' 'Here's a picture of me looking for my money.' 'Here's a picture of me at the local police station; indignantly reporting a theft so that I can get a piece of paper to show the insurance company.'

Back in our apartment, I've been reading a biography called *Jesse Livermore – Boy Plunger* by Tom Rubython. Antoinette bought it for me in England. I've long been fascinated by Livermore, who was a stock market gambler and manipulator in the early 20th century, but Rubython's book is full of things I didn't know.

For example, during America's financial crisis in October 1907, the banks didn't have enough money to supply depositors. The problem was that the banks weren't trusted and folk wanted their cash in their hands instead of their accounts. In the absence of a central bank, the financial establishment turned to J. Pierpont Morgan of J.P.Morgan & Co.

Morgan helped solve the crisis by doing two simple things.

First, he telephoned newspaper editors and told them to run lots of burglary stories in their papers. He thought, rightly, that if people read about lots of burglaries they would be too frightened to keep their money under their beds and would leave it in their banks.

Second, he told the bank bosses to instruct their tellers to slow down the rate at which they handed out cash. The tellers were ordered to count every bundle of cash three or four times before handing it over. No one could complain about this because it looked as if it was safeguarding their interests as well as the banks, but it produced a dramatic reduction in the amount of money leaving the banking system. Before the tellers were instructed to start their go slow campaign the banks were dishing out $8 million dollars a day. After they followed Morgan's advice the banks were dishing out just $2 million a day. Bankers were, it seems, crafty then too.

2

In Paris, every pavement is permanently packed with smokers. When I go out to the shops in a morning I have to squeeze past waiters standing outside their cafes. When I walk back they're still there. Do they do anything except just stand and smoke and send text messages? They don't talk to one another, of course. They're too busy checking their messages and replying to distant friends. And smoking, of course.

This morning they were there as usual even though it was pouring with rain. They were huddled under the awning outside a greengrocer's shop; tweeting, texting and updating their Facebook pages with details of their exciting morning. ('I'm standing under the greengrocer's awning updating my Facebook page.')

I've come to the conclusion that most under 25s would kill themselves if they couldn't send and receive a constant stream of texts, twitter the details of every meal and bowel movement and keep their Facebook page up-to-date. So, millions will die if the climate change conspiracy theorists turn out to be right. When there is no spare electricity for wasting on mobile phones and the internet, and millions of young tweeters are reduced to sending messages to one another with the aid of homing pigeons, they will find life unbearable.

The funny thing is that the people who stand out in the rain so that they can have a cigarette always claim that they aren't addicts, but that smoking is just a pleasant habit.

Whenever I am away from England, even for a week or so, I find myself much better able to consider the politics and perils of life in Britain. Distance somehow eases the pain and is doubtless one of the reasons why so many middle class Britons now live abroad. At the same time as immigrants from Europe have been pouring into Britain, so disillusioned, unhappy British emigrants have been leaving the country at the rate of several hundred thousand a year. Young skilled professionals are leaving simply because they do not want to bring their children up in modern Britain. (If it were not for this mass migration of Britons, the net immigration figures would be far higher than they are.)

When I was young I thought that the most important question to ask was: 'Why?' Now, I think that the most important question is: 'So what?'

And the second most important question (to be addressed to threatening State functionaries) is: 'What are you going to do about it?'

Britain is now run by bullies who glory in their power and who enjoy their power for its own sake.

The odd thing is that the endless laws coming out of Brussels apply to the zombies in cheap suits just as much as they apply to the rest of us. I strongly suspect, however, that the idiots employed as EU bureaucrats have not yet worked out that they too will have to live in an unbearably officious world, in just the same way that NHS bureaucrats and GMC stormtroopers will eventually discover that they have destroyed the health service.

Sadly, they will make this discovery when they, or a loved one, needs treatment and they find they have to wait nine hours in the accident and emergency department to see a doctor or wait six months to have an essential X-ray taken.

As a comforting aside, I have found that the Human Rights Act is as terrifying to the average civil servant as a wooden cross is to a vampire. (Although I have not, I confess in the interests of disclosure, any personal experience of the efficacy of wooden crosses in combatting vampires.)

Even exceptionally arrogant public employees will wilt when faced with the prospect of defending themselves against the Act.

3

Every year the British Government gives £17 billion of taxpayers' money to charities. This means that 40% of the entire voluntary sector income comes from the Government. Why? Why should charities receive a penny of taxpayers' money? Surely, charities should exist only if people think they are doing a good job and deserve to be supported? If a charity survives only because the State is supporting it with taxpayers' involuntary contributions (as many big charities do) can it still be considered a charity? I think not.

On what authority, I wonder, do civil servants hand out tax payers' money to selected charity bosses (networking smoothies who know what to say and to whom to say it) who will then use their windfalls for bigger salaries, bigger pension funds and smarter offices? There are now over 1,000 charity bosses earning annual salaries of more than £100,000. Many of them earn £250,000, £500,000 or even more. Huge pension payments and vast expense accounts burn up millions more.

I thought charities were supposed to exist because the people wanted them to exist, and gave them money voluntarily. But that is no longer the case. Today's big charities are fed, and well fed, by unsuspecting, unwitting and unwilling taxpayers.

If the Government didn't give away so much of our money (and, therefore, need to raise so much from us in taxes) we would all have more money to give to the charities we really want to help – and which really deserve our help – instead of to large charities which spend more than half their income on huge salaries, vast pensions and posh offices in very expensive neighbourhoods.

Working for a charity is now a prime profession in Britain and there are vast numbers of folk earning huge six figure salaries from their work in this field. Most of their efforts are expended in marketing their charity and raising money. Oh, and spending the money on themselves, of course.

4

I had to telephone Lloyds Bank today. They have an automated answering machine which asks 'What can I help you with today?'

I can never get the damned machine to understand a word I say so I've given up. The voice recognition software which the bank uses is either deliberately designed to ignore customers or else it has taken this responsibility upon itself. I wouldn't bet against the latter.

In response to the question, I muttered something about it would be nice if someone came round to spend a few hours in the garden and attacked our overgrown and then the voice came back and asked me if I would like to speak to an advisor. It told me to say 'yes' if this was what I wanted. So I said 'yes'. Naturally, however, the computer failed to understand this, as the word 'yes' is far too complicated for it. It seemed dreadfully confused.

I tried saying 'yes' in a variety of accents.

First, I tried saying it in a Scottish accent (on the grounds that most call centres now seem to be established within hailing distance of Sauchiehall Street in Glasgow). When that didn't work I tried saying 'yes' in a variety of EU accents, concentrating mainly on those originating in Eastern Europe. I tried to say 'yes' as I imagined a Pole might say it. Then I tried it as I imagined a Romanian might pronounce it.

When these miserable attempts failed I waited and eventually the disembodied voice told me to press one if I want to speak to an advisor. So I pressed 'one'. And suddenly there was a real person on the other end of the line. Naturally, by this time I had completely forgotten why I needed to ring in the first place. I apologised and rang off.

I have a theory that the elderly forget more stuff because they know more. My brain is packed to the brim with a mixture of memories. In fact, it is rather like a septic tank in that you have to rummage around for a while with a big spoon to find anything solid and worthwhile.

While trying to watch an old Bogart movie tonight I accidentally found myself watching the television. Nothing had changed since the last time I caught a few moments of television and I can see why I now watch virtually nothing except sporting events.

The television programme schedule seems to be awash with filmed adventures of people (often they are very minor celebrities but sometimes they are just individuals who happen to be exceptionally fat or unusually stupid) swimming up the Nile, leaping across glaciers on pogo sticks or riding up Mont Blanc on bicycles while surrounded, of course, with the usual retinue of hairdressers, make-up artists and men hired to cut the parrot's claws (as they say in show business).

I am going to propose a new adventure series. I will try to drive a car around the whole of the M25 without having to stop once for a traffic queue.

It's probably impossible but I'll give it a go.

5

A friend emailed to ask why there are so many successful left handers in cricket and so few in the world of professional golf. He says it has been claimed that the left handed have better brain wiring for sport but this is cobblers, of course. The true explanation is quite simple. Cricket is a team sport and competitors play one another. Golfers, on the other hand, play the course.

Since there are far more right handers than left handers in the world, bowlers at school and club level are more accustomed to bowling to right handed batsmen and they find left handed batsmen difficult to bowl at. So left handed batsman have a small advantage and are more likely to reach international status.

Similarly, batsmen at school and club level are accustomed to dealing with right hand bowlers and so left handed bowlers have a small advantage and are more likely to succeed at Test Match level.

Much the same thing is true in tennis. There aren't so many left handers around and so right handed players aren't used to playing against them. Left handed players, who get a good deal of practice against right handers, have a distinct advantage.

But since golfers play the course, rather than an opponent, there are no more successful left handed golfers than there are in the general population.

6

French union bosses are campaigning to help create one million new jobs for French workers and claim that French workers are suffering because jobs are being outsourced to other EU countries with lower wages. At the launch of the campaign, union bosses wore badges carrying an appropriate slogan.

A friend in Paris tells us that the badges were partly made in Czechoslovakia, using Czech labour. It’s things like this which bring joy to my old heart.

7

Our part of Paris used to be full of small, thriving shops. But today many of the most fascinating shops have gone. Some of the shops have been replaced with souvenir shops selling tatty T-shirts and baseball caps to tourists, but most of the buildings remain depressingly empty. Close to the Eiffel Tower there is a row of seven empty shops. Seven prime pieces of real estate sitting gathering dust and junk mail.

The big problem is that EU employment laws mean that shops and cafés are mostly shut on Mondays. Monday has become the new Sunday but Sunday is still the old Sunday because the unions won’t allow shop owners to open on Sundays.

Take away two days’ takings, and most small businesses are in trouble. Most shop owners will agree that they make their profit in those two days. If you have to spread taxes, insurance bills and utility costs over five days instead of seven then you make no profit. Bureaucrats, who have no experience of real life, do not understand this in France, England or anywhere else.

In our street in Paris, 11 out of 20 shops are now empty and there is no sign of them opening. We have lost our mattress maker, our mend-and-repair expert, a handy shoe repair guy, a newsagent, an electrical store and several other useful establishments which added enormously to the community. In their place we have gained three small offices running web based businesses and two more estate agents. Eventually the empty shops will doubtless be bricked up and converted into ground floor flats; the community will lose a little more atmosphere and Paris, the former City of Light, will lose its soul.

8

We had lunch at our favourite café where the owner, who always greets us with a huge smile, and handshakes and kisses all round, told us that he had discovered that by varying the atmosphere in his restaurant he could affect the way people feel, the amount they spend and the speed with which they eat.

‘When we play classical music, the diners spend more money. When we play rock and roll the diners spend less but they eat faster and leave quicker. When the lighting is soft, the patrons can’t tell how much they have eaten so it doesn’t matter if you serve small or large portions.’

He told us that when the restaurant smells of lemon people do not spend as much as if there is a light scent of lavender and that when there is a crowd on the pavement outside, people who eat in the restaurant will say that the food tastes better than if there is no queue. And, most surprising of all, he told us that when the prices are high people are more likely to praise the food than they are when the prices are low.

We told him that we were surprised. Both Antoinette and I agreed that we had not realised that there was so much science involved in running a restaurant.

‘There is science in everything,’ he said. ‘Waitresses who have blonde hair get bigger tips than waitresses who are dark haired. Waitresses who crouch next to customers when they are taking an order will get a bigger tip than waitresses who remain standing sternly upright. Waitresses who wear a low cut top, and have a button or two undone, will do best of all. Surprisingly, even women patrons will be more generous. And if a waitress draws a smiley face on the bill she too will get a bigger tip.’

‘So blonde waitresses who crouch and draw smiley faces must do very well!’ said Antoinette.

‘Exactly!’ laughed the café owner.

‘Your waiters and waitresses are very good,’ I said.

‘Oh yes,’ he said. ‘We tell all our new employees that they must be friendly and welcoming. So obviously we do not hire French staff. We hire our restaurant staff from other countries.’

I was impressed by all this. Most of the restaurants and cafes I’ve visited in recent years seem to be run by people who don’t seem to realise that being in the hospitality industry requires them to be hospitable. Indeed, there are, so I am told, a growing number of chefs who are now getting rid of their a la carte menus and who insist diners eat whatever is put before them. This seems to me to put these restaurants onto a level underneath school and prison canteens.

9

In Paris today we went to visit our good friend the late departed Napoleon Bonaparte, who now resides in the Hotel des Invalides. We also wanted to search for fire bugs below the lime trees near to the military hospital.

We discovered that the authorities have decided to station guards at the entrance to Les Invalides. They are presumably worried that someone might try to kill the Little Emperor again. Or maybe they're worried about body snatchers.

Today's representatives of the French military were a pair of teenagers, a boy and a girl, armed with a pair of machine guns. They didn't look old enough to play with toy guns let alone to be carrying real guns. The two soldiers were chatting and flirting, as boys and girls are wont to do, so after we had waited a minute or so for them to take notice of us I ushered Antoinette through the gateway and followed her.

Suddenly, the girl soldier turned away from her military beau and ordered us to come back (using that tone of voice commonly used by Post office employees and people with guns).

Naturally, we halted and took a few paces back. I may not obey Post Office employees but I make a point of always doing what I am told to do by teenagers with guns.

With her gun pointing at us, and the safety catch off, she fumbled around as Antoinette pulled everything out of her bag for inspection. It was, as these things invariably are, an entirely pointless exercise. When it came to my turn to be searched she did not look under my hat or in the capacious pockets of my jacket. If I had wanted to blow up the Emperor's tomb I could have had enough Semtex on my person to send the whole thing sky high.

The whole thing was pointless, remarkably stupid and asking for trouble. The girl was clearly quite untrained for the work she was doing (I could have grabbed her gun and caused mayhem if I had been so minded) and far too experienced to be entrusted with such a responsible position. (I think anyone holding a weapon capable of killing several dozen people in a couple of minutes can safely be said to be in a responsible position.)

And I know this is an unacceptably sexist remark but what if the teenage girl was suffering from PMT and had rowed with her boyfriend the night before?

10

Travelling out to Chartres today I asked the conductor what difference there is between first and second class travel on French railways. I really couldn't spot any difference. The conductor explained that on French trains the only difference between first and second class is that the prices of first class tickets are higher than the prices of second class tickets. He added that the first class carriages tend to be stuffed with civil servants travelling on official business and so there is more room in second class.

11

The average lifespan of companies is falling fast. Half a century ago, companies lasted for many years. Back in the 1950s the average life expectancy for a company was 61 years. Today, the average life expectancy for companies, even huge ones, is down to 20 years. And corporate life expectancy is falling fast.

People may (or may not) be living longer, but companies aren't living anywhere near as long as they once did. The company you work for, or which sells you groceries or gas, will likely not exist in two decades time. It will have disappeared entirely.

One side effect of this is that in the future, more and more people are going to find themselves working as temporary, freelance employees – hired for a specific job for a defined length of time. And many people will have a portfolio of jobs. This is regarded by some commentators as a new development but it is, of course, something that has been common among freelance workers for generations.

And so a way of life that has been common for decades in film making will be transferred to all other areas of life.

When a movie is being made, the producers will hire a screenwriter, a director and a cast. They'll hire a cameraman, a sound man, wardrobe specialists, props men and so on. When the movie is finished, the individuals who made the film will go their separate ways. Some will meet up on other movie sets. Others may not work again for months or years.

This method of working is coming to us all and will revolutionise daily life for millions. Companies will be formed for specific projects, and the staff will be hired as temporary workers. Employees, being freelance, will not receive company based health care or pension funding. Nations are going to have to find new ways of providing health care, sickness pay and pensions.

12

Back in England, Antoinette and I were looking at paintings in an art gallery. ‘I wish I could draw as well as David Hockney,’ said Antoinette, who is an excellent painter. It occurred to me that no budding artist ever says ‘I wish I could pickle a shark like Damien Hirst?’ Come to that, no one ever says ‘I wish I could draw like Damien Hist.’

Later on, while watching the horse racing on television, I realised how easy it is to work out what sort of viewers watch particular programmes.

So, for example, horse racing is clearly watched almost exclusively by constipated, edentulous gamblers who have trouble with their false teeth and deaf and incontinent women of ‘a certain age’.

This may not be quite the image the Jockey Club would prefer to promote but it is, nevertheless indisputably true since the companies which buy television advertising are known to target their audiences very carefully.

At least the advertisers haven’t started pasting advertisements onto the horses yet. I can’t watch rugby or cricket on television any more.

I gave up watching rugby when the advertisements around the edge of the ground started to move about and make me nauseous.

And I started to lose my love for cricket when they started painting slogans on the grass. I gave up completely when they put adverts on the sightscreen and on the umpires.

Thinking of umpires reminded me that I was an umpire once, when I was at school. I umpired in a cricket match between the school and a selection of local notables. When I gave a local vicar out leg before wicket he was so incensed that I was subjected to a torrent of carefully modulated abuse and threatened with the Anglican version of excommunication.

I have not umpired since.

13

Back in England, Antoinette and I went to Cheltenham where I bought myself another penknife. I am too embarrassed to say how many I have. I collect pens and penknives. There is as yet no law that I know of forbidding the collecting of pens but penknives are another matter and Antoinette tells me that in several shops her requests to view the penknives on sale have met with the sort of scowl which might be expected to meet a request to view the shop owners private collection of paedophilia.

Antoinette collects cups and mugs. My mother used to collect towels; buying far more than she could possibly need but obviously enjoying having them around in great quantities.

My merriest experience of the day occurred in a shop called ‘The Works’ which sells remaindered books and audio tapes. A man in a motorised wheelchair had completely blocked one aisle as he sat reading one of the books he’d taken from a shelf. The aisle was about six inches wider than his chair and he refused to move to allow other shoppers pass by.

Unbeknownst to him, a woman in a similar vehicle had entered the aisle from the opposite direction. And a moment later they were sat there facing each other. They couldn’t turn round and neither of them could reverse. I left the shop singing to myself. Sometimes life is very good.

As usual Cheltenham was packed to the brim with chuggers, buskers and beggars – it always seems to be home to far more of these than any other similarly sized town.

The king of the beggars is a man called Alan who lies draped across the pavement in a constantly dying pose and who boasts that he can spot a good customer a mile off. He probably can for he clears £100 a day in cash. I very much doubt if he pays any tax on this considerable income. I have often thought of putting a sign nearby drawing attention to his boast and his income.

The buskers are often excellent and when the almost ever present pneumatic drills are silent they add enormously to the atmosphere.

It’s the damned chuggers who annoy; those over cheerful youths who are as welcome a sight in our town centres as highwaymen or a pack of wild dogs with diarrhoea. They don’t usually bother me. I like to tell myself that this is because I tend to walk quickly, try to look preoccupied with a notebook or telephone and put on as firm a 1,000 yard stare as I can muster when they approach me. But it is more probably because I took too decrepit to be worth the usual 20 watt smile and false bonhomie.

But today there was no one else around and a female chugger, who looked about nine or ten-years-old, jumped in front of me, with her smile and iPad ready for action. 'Hello,' she piped, reciting line one from the training manual. 'Hello,' I replied, not slowing down at all, 'have a good afternoon.'

She was caught off balance by this since she had to jump out of the way and say 'thank you' all at the same time.

By the time she'd said her 'thank you' I was 20 yards down the road.

14

Big search engines such as Google can, so I hear, predict stock market movements and election results. What a boon to gamblers! Would I trust Google not to abuse its power? No, I certainly would not. The staff at companies such as Google have enormous powers. If they can predict outcomes they can probably change them too. Big search engines and big social media sites can probably assess and predict disease movements. The amount of information available is vast and computers can sort through that information in virtually no time at all.

When, oh when, is someone going to use all this computing power for something really useful such as sharing medical information? Back in the 1970s I wrote an article for a computer magazine suggesting that it would be a good idea to create a program enabling doctors to share information about diagnoses and treatments. Such a program would, I predicted, save millions of lives (as well as a good deal of heartache and billions of dollars).

But there is still no such computer program available.

If you go to your doctor with unusual symptoms he will have to just struggle on in an attempt to find a diagnosis. And while patients in one part of the world receive dramatic new treatments, which are safe and effective, patients in another part of the world (possibly just a few miles down the road) continue to receive treatments which are neither safe nor effective.

That's depressing.

15

I spent some time trying to have my Wikipedia entry removed. I don't want to be on Wikipedia or any other internet site. The Wikipedia site which purports to describe me is laughably inaccurate, misleading and incomplete (or, at least, it was the last time I looked at it) and would merit some sort of prize as a piece of biased hatchet job (written, I assume, by a drug company sponsored hack) but I am the only person in the world who is not allowed to correct it.

It doesn't seem fair that I cannot correct errors (let alone deal with major omissions) and that I do not have the right to ask that Wikipedia leave me alone.

I am not a public figure and I'm not dead yet. And I'm not prepared to follow the example of politicians and genuine celebrities and hire specialist 'boosters' to improve, extend and sanitise my Wikipedia entry.

Incidentally why is it that although everything in life is rated these days, and all of us are doomed to an endless agony of appraisal and validation through the online presence and the unapologetically destructive activities of psychopathic hackers and cowardly, geeky vandals, Wikipedia seems immune? Why are the teenage compilers of this misleading nonsense not rated in the same way that real authors are rated?

And why is there no mention on the internet in general or Wikipedia in particular of my Olympic medals, my years working undercover for MI6, my Test Matches for England, my success as a racing driver or my solo ascent of Everest?

I have, however, found a way to avoid the pain these sites provoke.

I never, ever put my name into any search engine and, therefore, I have no idea what is said about me on the internet. I don't have a Facebook account or a Twitter account and I don't have anything to do with any social media sites. When LinkedIn writes to me (which seems to be several times a minute but may be more) I delete their emails unread. I haven't studied anything written about me for years and I heartily recommend this as an effective solution to the problem of an internet world dominated by prejudice, bigotry and commercial expediency. I suggest that others who are infuriated by what they read about themselves should follow this example. Yah boo sucks to trolls everywhere.

After writing this entry I read an interview with Sam Mendes and Daniel Craig, the director and star of the latest James Bond movie. Mendes pointed out that as a director he felt it important to seal himself off from the online response to a film. Craig argued that the internet is the enemy of creativity. 'In the film business, you've got to put it out there and say, 'This is what it is, like it or don't like,' but you can't worry too much about the responses.'

A growing number of authors and film directors agree that the internet, now largely controlled by bullying cliques, kills creativity, and so they refuse to read anything about themselves or their work, knowing that if they do they will be frozen into inactivity and too frightened to try anything truly original.

16

A year ago I went to Lloyds bank to move some money to our bank in Paris. A kindly teller spent some time putting all the relevant information into the bank's computer so that in future it would be easy to move money across. But today, when I went to repeat the exercise, I found that the system which had been put into place a year ago had been discarded. And another teller had to put all the information into another computer programme. (Actually, there was only one teller in the bank who knew how to do this. The rest all expressed total ignorance and had no idea how to move money from one EU country to another. The longer the EU stays in power the more difficult it is to move anything – people or money – from England to France.)

In the end the whole procedure took around an hour but it takes around an hour to do anything in a bank these days so that was, I suppose, par for the course.

Why does absolutely nothing stay the same for more than a week or two? In the last month I have had to waste hours dealing with massive changes to my pension fund and to a national savings investment.

Since I've always been self-employed (mostly as a writer) I have a private pension which contains money I've saved and invested over the years. The company which manages this fund on my behalf (which has been taken over for the umpteenth time and is now probably owned by a Bahamanian subsidiary of a Spanish conglomerate based in Delaware) has written to tell me about a dramatic reduction in the service they will provide in future and, inevitably, an equally dramatic increase in the cost of providing this devalued service.

Astonishingly, they tell me that they will increase their charges regularly without telling me in advance. I will, presumably, only find out about the increased charges when I notice that my pension has disappeared entirely.

I should have been a civil servant with a pension paid by taxpayers. I read the other day that some civil servants now receive a pay rise when they retire since their pension payments are much greater than their final salary.

There really is no point at all in young people who are not employed by a government paying money into a pension fund. If the company running it doesn't steal the money, the Government will change the rules so often, and so viciously, that any advantages that may have accrued from tax benefits will be lost. Indeed, I doubt if there is any point in anyone saving money anymore. Interest rates are derisory, and seem likely to become contemptible, and it is quite impossible to invest sensibly since the Government and the Bank of England change the rules so often that investing has become a lottery. When the Government and the Bank of England aren't buggering things up, the crooks at the clearing banks will be fiddling interest rates, exchange rates and commodity prices and making sure that they get rich at the expense of pensioners, widows, orphans and ordinary investors.

It has always been the case that some people make money and some people lose it but knowledge and experience no longer have any effect on the outcome of an investor's work, and the people who make money these days usually do so because they can cheat and rig the market.

I'm also fed up with being harassed by the people who register my website and the folk who hold my domain names. They have all insisted that I complete complex questionnaires which are, presumably, designed to ensure that I am not planning to take over the country or to publish any criticism of the BBC.

The latest enquiry has at least led me to wonder why on earth I hold so many domain names.

I bought a vast number of them (over 200) over 20 years ago when it looked as though domain names were going to rule the internet. Most of the domain names were medical, dealing with specific health issues, and Antoinette and I set up scores of websites containing independent medical information and advice. The sites were all free to access and none of them contained advertisements or links.

But pretty soon it became clear that the only thing that mattered on the World Wide Web was the position of a site on a search engine. And when the inimitably corrupt Google started selling positions on a search engine (and favouring their own products over those of others) the whole internet changed irretrievably for the worse and our collection of domain names became pretty well worthless.

17

When I was a GP, my partners and I provided a 24 hour service for our patients for 365 days a year (yes, including Christmas Day). We were legally and morally responsible for the health of all our patients all the time and although it was sometimes tiring, occasionally frustrating and from time to time annoying, it was a responsibility which we all took very seriously. We took pride in what we did, and were conscious of the fact that GPs were the backbone of the health service.

Today, things are very different.

GPs in Britain work office hours, and patients who need medical help outside those hours must treat themselves, rely on an absurd telephone service whereby untrained personnel offer the sort of misleading and potentially dangerous advice which used to be offered by the untrained woman behind the counter in the corner newsagents or make a trip to the casualty department of the nearest hospital which has one. If they decide to visit the hospital they will wait between four and nine hours to be seen.

Two things destroyed general practice and, therefore, put the finishing touch to the United Kingdom's health service.

First, in 2004 the Labour Government, obeying instructions from the European Union, introduced a new contract which allowed GPs to stop seeing patients out of hours. The contract, which offered doctors far more money for doing far less work and taking on far less responsibility, was absurdly over generous and GPs signed it with enthusiasm.

Before doctors signed the contract, patients could ring their doctor at any time of the day or night and expect to be seen by him or her, or by another doctor acting on their behalf. If a doctor was ill or on holiday he would have to provide a locum and the locum would, quite possibly, be his retired predecessor.

After doctors signed the contract, patients had to fall ill in between the hours of nine to five. Their chances of seeing a GP at night or over the weekend fell to the sort of odds usually associated with winning the lottery.

The second thing which destroyed general practice was the introduction by the General Medical Council of new rules which ensured that once a doctor retired he had to hang up his stethoscope for good.

It was the General Medical Council (GMC) which forced the NHS to rely on importing foreign trained doctors who speak no English but who have qualifications recognised by the EU. It did this by forcing all doctors to jump through the pointless and absurdly bureaucratic hoops of something they call 'revalidation' if they wish to retain their licence to practise – a process introduced as a result of the efforts of a GP called Dr Harold Shipman. (Shipman was a rogue doctor who killed over 200 of his patients.)

Retired GPs can no longer help out during sickness or holidays and so foreign doctors have to be imported. There are shortages of GPs all over the country and in just about every area the explanation is the same: GPs are retiring early (often in their 50s) because they are fed up with the GMC's absurdly bureaucratic revalidation process. Every one of those retiring GPs is permanently lost to the nation. Once a doctor decides to retire he will lose his licence and be unable to do locum work – even in emergencies. The result is that the NHS has to pay foreign doctors a fortune to fly over and do locum work. The fact that they do not speak English and have not had to cope with the GMC's revalidation procedure doesn't seem to bother anyone. It seems to me clear that the GMC would rather have Britons looked after by poorly trained foreign doctors who don't speak English than by experienced British doctors.

The internet will kill General Practice but the GMC has wounded it fatally. It is no exaggeration to say that general practice in Britain has been dealt a death blow by a bloody traffic warden. If there are no mature doctors working in your practice and you have difficulty in getting a doctor to visit you at home you can thank the General Medical Council and the traffic ticket chief who have finished off medical care in Britain, completing the job started by the EU-friendly Blair and Brown when they allowed doctors to opt out of 24 hour cover and start working office hours.

I have always been irritated to the point of irrepressible contempt by bureaucratic arrogance and in my experience the staff working for the GMC have that in spades. (I have had little respect for them since I first started to practise medicine.

I was threatened with a public defrocking when I wrote my first book because I was accused of 'advertising'. This was then seen as a far more serious crime than being drunk in charge of a scalpel or sleeping with the patients.

Even though I had no private practice, and my authorship would have had no possible impact on my professional earnings, I found myself constantly defending my good name. The drug companies who were criticised in my first book (*The Medicine Men*) were the only complainants but the General Medical Council listened to them with great respect.

Eventually, I grew so tired of defending myself that I voluntarily removed my name from the GMC register and put myself on the retired list. Naturally, this gave those who didn't like my books the chance to claim that I had been struck off.

The GMC introduced its mad revalidation idea in the belief that the evil Dr Shipman wouldn't have been able to jump through any of its bureaucratic hoops. That was, of course, absolute nonsense, and only very, very stupid people could have thought it could possibly work, for Dr Shipman could jump through hoops better than any other doctor in Britain. That's why he got away with being Britain's most successful serial killer.

The direct result of the GMC's half-witted programme is that a huge number of experienced clinicians in their 50s and 60s are taking early retirement. Once they are unlicensed they cannot work part time or as locums and so the NHS has to import foreign doctors who may or may not speak English but who certainly haven't had to go through the General Medical Council's hoop jumping exercise.

I find it difficult to avoid the conclusion that the revalidation programme is an exercise which is designed solely to make the inept and immeasurably barking GMC staff seem important and indispensable.

The police who are hired to protect us all often treat all suspects like criminals in order to break them down. This attitude is widespread among public servants and, sadly, even includes doctors and nurses now and hospital patients are, too often, treated as if they are a worthless nuisance. Insurance companies use the same unpleasant trickery when confronted by claimants.

And the GMC seems to me to have adopted this way of working.

I really do think that the bureaucratic GMC should be renamed the Department of Pointless Meddling and Harmful Interference since it clearly exists to mess up things which are working perfectly well.

There is a longer explanation of how the GMC works in my book *Bugger Off and Leave me Alone*. It is perhaps sufficient to say that the medical profession is now completely controlled by a former parking ticket bureaucrat and, in my professional view, is probably responsible for more deaths than Dr Shipman and cancer combined.

The odd thing is that the GMC introduced regular appraisals just as large companies around the world abandoned them because they are expensive (in terms of time and money) and totally without value.

18

I read today about a robot which can perform surgical operations, using the same scalpels and other surgical instruments that human surgeons use. The robot can even identify and cut out cancerous tissues. There seems little doubt that all diagnostic work will soon be made by computers, who can handle vast quantities of information far more effectively and impartially than any human physician.

It would not surprise me at all to see patients now taking over medicine completely. There will soon be no need for doctors or nurses.

With the aid of their internet connections, patients will be able to make diagnoses, select the most appropriate treatments and then buy or hire whatever drugs or facilities they need.

Nurses and hospital porters will not be immune to redundancy, for their jobs can already be done far more efficiently (and in many cases, I'm afraid to say, far more sympathetically) by robots. Without human staff members, hospitals will be far cleaner and there will be far fewer deaths caused by iatrogenesis.

Robots are going to change our world even more dramatically than the internet has done.

Now that driverless cars and lorries are being made there will be no need at all for professional drivers. (Actually, I would settle for a car which can tell immediately that the apparently empty parking space contains one of those wretched little Smart cars, which goes and fetches me a ticket in the car park and which fills itself up at the petrol station. I do, however, wonder what will happen when two driverless cars meet at a junction, arriving at precisely the same moment? Will they both just sit there for ever?)

It won't be long before robots will be made which can drive trains, cut hair, sweep chimneys and deal with leaky taps and blocked drains. And although it may be scary for many people to realise that they will almost certain lose their job (and find that all their training has been wasted) there will be some huge advantages. For example, I would rather have a robot come round and deal with the plumbing or the central heating. And I would love to have a car which I could send back by itself to the dealership for a service. The service will, of course, be done by robots.

At the bank I usually only communicate with an ATM machine and in branches of WHSmiths I invariably prefer to use the automatic tills. The damned things will insist on handing out vast quantities of very small change (seemingly programmed to vomit forth a pocketful of copper coins and those pointless little 5p coins) and they can be annoyingly aggressive, but they are never half as annoying as the sulky members of staff with whom I would otherwise have to interact.

Robots have taken over investment advice (and they are much better at it than humans) and there is no doubt that accountants, auditors, actuaries and underwriters only have a couple of years or so to go before they are all replaced by robots. There is no need at all for humans in the world of insurance. Lawyers are living on borrowed time too, for robots can easily take over everything a solicitor or barrister can do. Robots could do everything undertakers do; and a well-programmed model would probably be more passionate and believable than many clergymen or priests.

It will also be a great deal for everyone when prejudiced, bigoted judges with poor digestive systems are replaced by coolly rational computer operated robots which can assess all the information they receive dispassionately and logically. I was a little sceptical about this notion and then I read a report which investigated the way that judges' decisions are affected by something as trivial as luncheon. Researchers investigating parole decisions discovered that, during the course of a day, judges approved about 35% of prisoners' applications for parole. But the approval rate declined steadily in the two hours before lunch, dropping to almost zero just before the judges were due to enjoy their steak and kidney pie and bottle of claret. Immediately after luncheon the approval rate rose to 65% and it then declined steadily again. And so the number of years a prisoner spends behind bars could well be significantly affected by whether or not their parole application was heard just before lunch or just after it. I'd rather have an impartial robot deciding my fate than a hungry judge with a grumbly bowel.

And since computers have been shown to be far better than human judges in deciding whether or not a prisoner is likely to go back to his bad ways or not, it is clear that replacing judges with computers will, for everyone concerned, be a damned good thing.

We will also all be better off when generals, chief executives, train drivers, union bosses and bureaucrats are all replaced by computers. It may be a long time before robots can multi task (play both chess and table tennis for example) but they can certainly be programmed to perform an enormous variety of specific tasks.

Even robot prostitutes will be easy to manufacture, keep clean and manage. Can you imagine how much easier it would be for a pimp to manage a dozen easily sterilised robot hookers than it must be to manage a dozen human employees prone to headaches, bad feet, boyfriend troubles, infection and pregnancy?

Bricklayers, whom you might have thought irreplaceable, can already be replaced by a robot which is capable of laying bricks to very complicated designs. The bricklaying robot is controlled by a laser guided navigation system, requires no tea breaks and shows no bum cleavage. If required it can, presumably, be programmed to whistle and make offensive remarks when young women walk past.

Cleaners of all types may as well give up now for the ones who haven't already been replaced by robots are working on borrowed time. Robots can mow grass and do the weeding.

Coffee shop staff will be replaced by machines, and at petrol stations drivers will be expected to pay at the pump with a credit card. Hotel receptionists are being replaced by robots who can easily be programmed to provide all the necessary services.

A few decades ago, machines made it easier for us to live our lives and to do our jobs efficiently and effectively. Today, machines just do our jobs, leaving us to concentrate on thumb twiddling.

And it's going to get ever worse (or better, depending on your point of view). I now find it impossible to think of any job which it will not be possible to replace, either with the internet or a robot. Or a combination of both.

Even hotels, guest houses and boarding houses are finished now that a strangely unmemorable named company called Airbnb enables ordinary householders to rent out a room or a bed.

A company called Uber has destroyed the world of taxi driving, and men and women who invested years of their lives learning the job and buying a licence and a purpose built vehicle are being replaced by amateurs who have driving licences and cars and who are prepared to do the same job for a fraction of the price. (I find it curious that the company chose a brand name which is synonymous with German superiority. Why would you do that?)

No job is safe today.

Computers can now write their own software and so even computer programmers can start counting the days until they are given notice. The internet and the programming community will have eaten themselves. The internet gloaters, so unconcerned by the fall of entire industries, will find themselves without purpose, income or status. If that isn't exquisite irony I don't know what is.

19

I watched a traffic warden give a ticket to a grocery delivery van and then put a second ticket on the coach which was stuck behind the delivery van, waiting for it to move.

I would never cope with life as a van driver these days: the queues, the inability to find somewhere to park, the bad tempered people on the roads, the absence of decent road signage. If I ever found the house to which I was supposed to deliver I would be unbelievably bad tempered.

'Huh? Your eggs are broken? So, pick out the bits of shell and make an omelette!'

20

A friend of ours is a widow. Today she celebrated her 90th birthday. She lives in a nursing home where nearly all the other residents are women.

Women have been living longer than men for some decades now but that won't be the case for much longer. There will be fewer lonely widows in the future because men will live as long as women (or, rather, women will die as soon as men). Women are now subjected to the same work stresses as men and they drink and smoke as much as men. It is widely and erroneously believed that women live longer than men because they are in some way stronger and naturally more likely to be long living. This is not true. Women have only been living longer than men for a century at the most – and the difference in longevity between the sexes began entirely as a result of social and business variations. In the era before the First World War it was, by and large, men who smoked and drank and it was men who worked in the mines and did heavy work in factories and on building sites. It was not surprising that they did not live as long as women, who were unlikely to drink and smoke to excess and who, if they worked, usually had jobs as secretaries, shop assistants and librarians. The liberation of women has changed all this, of course. And today, women are likely to drink and smoke with enthusiasm (despite the fact that their bodies are less able to cope with the toxins) and they are also taking on jobs which involve a high degree of physical and mental stress. The difference in life expectancies between the sexes will soon disappear.

Indeed, I think it likely that before another century has gone by it will be men who live longer than women. The simple fact is that women, on the whole, tend to be more sensitive to stress than men and will therefore be more likely than their male colleagues to suffer high blood pressure, heart attacks, strokes and cancer.

21

A bunch of slightly backward doctors have warned that patients are being given drugs and tests they might not need because GPs and hospitals are rewarded not for the quality of the care they provide but for the quantity of treatment they dish out.

Oh for heaven's sake! How come it took the poor idiots so long to notice?

The Academy of Medical Royal Colleges has said that patients should be encouraged to ask if their medical procedures are really necessary in a bid to halt 'over diagnosis and needless treatment'.

I have been screaming about this problem since 1975 when my first book *The Medicine Men* was published, and I have, for 40 years been vilified by the entire medical profession for daring to say exactly these things.

22

This afternoon I noticed that the Duke of Gloucestershire's man on the ground (whom we now call Pink Wellington man for reasons which I do not intend to share) has put a dozen sheep into one of the fields opposite our front door. You can count them without even feeling dozy, let alone falling asleep. When it rains, as it does from time to time in England, the poor sheep huddle together and just have to stick it out because most of the trees have been felled so that the Duke can make a few quid out of flogging the logs. As far as I can see, no replacement shelter has been provided.

Sheep hate getting wet and it's a form of animal cruelty to chop down their shelter and leave them exposed to the elements. The Duke, on the other hand, doesn't like getting wet. If it is raining he has a man stand beside him holding a large golf umbrella. Whenever he visits his acres he struts around like a cockerel.

We call him the 'ego'; as in 'the ego has landed'.

23

I've always loathed unexpected visitors. I suspect that all writers are the same. Jack London used to have two signs on his front door. The first said: 'No one admitted without knocking' and the second said: 'Do not knock'.

(Writers are, on the whole, a pretty anti-social lot. That is because they aren't used to dealing with real people and, if they are writers of fiction, often feel more comfortable dealing with their fictional characters than with humans who have real blood running through their veins.)

One visitor I didn't mind welcoming was the cuckoo. These birds now come back to Britain earlier and earlier. Antoinette says she wonders if they are publicity conscious and all try to get here first so that they can be the bird to be mentioned in *The Times* newspaper as the first cuckoo of spring. I said that I suspect that the cuckoos all have Facebook pages and Twitter accounts and don't worry much about the correspondence columns of aged newspapers.

24

One of our squirrels has a bad habit of standing on our shed roof and peeing copiously. Antoinette has christened him Topol because he is clearly the original piddler on the roof. Given their habit of emptying their bladders wherever and whenever the fancy takes them, I hate to think what the inside of our loft looks and smells like. I have no intention of going up there to check things out. They make so much noise up there that I think they are probably building a squirrel size model of the Taj Mahal out of empty hazelnut shells.

I discovered today that Rex Stout, creator of the wonderful Nero Wolfe stories, wrote only during the winter months. On October 18th every year he would put down his garden tools, go indoors and write a new novel about Wolfe, Archie Goodwin, Felix, Saul et al. In April, he would finish the book and go back out into the garden to attend to his flower beds.

25

I tottered out into the garden this afternoon in order to have a healing bonfire. There are few things you can do in a garden which offer more joy than lighting and tending a successful bonfire.

The site we use for bonfires is right at the top of our garden, quite a way from the house, and has a three foot high circular stone wall around it, approximately twenty feet in diameter. At some time in the past the wall was part of a folly or a summerhouse, now long gone, but the wall makes a good boundary for a bonfire site. Over the years the ash from previous bonfires has built up and is now at least three foot deep. To begin with I used to dig out the ash and sprinkle it on the garden, or onto the compost heap, but I've got rather tired of that – a wheelbarrow full of ash can be surprisingly heavy, particularly if the ash is sodden with rain and since leaving the ash in place I've noticed that the bonfire burns much more readily and for longer. Just as leaving some ash in a fireplace or a wood burning stove will help make sure that a fire goes better, so leaving ash on a bonfire site helps to ensure a good blaze.

When I'm building a bonfire I pile everything dead and still green, such as branches, hedge trimmings and so on, onto the edges of the bonfire site so that in the centre there is a large depression which looks like a large carbuncle which has burst.

I then pile old paperwork, unwanted mail and so on (which would otherwise have to be shredded and would, therefore, require copious amounts of electricity) into a black sack or a cardboard box and throw it into the depression in the centre of the site – the heart of the carbuncle. I then add sacks containing other burnable household rubbish.

It is far better for the environment to burn such rubbish than it is to use oil taking the stuff to an official dump, or to leave it in the lane expecting the council to collect it and then either burn it or send it to China for disposal.

Once the fire is lit I pile prunings, small twigs, dead bits of plant and leaves (we have far too many to compost) onto the top of the bags and boxes of rubbish. If it is raining, the garden refuse will provide a waterproof umbrella; the wet leaves, layered on the branches, will keep the inside of the bonfire dry.

I then poke a few lateral holes in the whole creation so that air can get into the area where the fire is developing.

Built this way, I can get a bonfire going nicely in quite heavy rain or snow – and it will keep burning for hours afterwards; with the branches and leaves which are on top gradually falling into the fire and being consumed. As the fire develops, the stuff which I piled up round the edges will also fall into the centre and join the conflagration. Eventually, all that will be left behind will be a huge crater. And another large pile of ash.

There are probably other ways to annoy our unpleasant neighbours but none of them are as much fun as this.

On my way to the bonfire site today I noticed that the ivy on one of our ash trees has reached the crown. When I looked up at the ash tree I realised that about a third of the tree's greenery was ivy.

I have been trying for years to persuade ivy to grow over an unsightly piece of wall but it steadfastly refuses to grow there. It will, however, grow very well where it wants to grow – up a nice, tall tree.

It may be an old farmer's tale but it is widely understood in the country that if ivy reaches the crown of a tree then the tree will die. And to me this makes sense.

It took me half an hour to saw through three thick stems of ivy. Each one was nearly as thick as my wrist. I hate cutting down ivy because it provides food and homes for many creatures but I also hate seeing trees die.

As I sawed away, cutting the thick strands of ivy into short lengths because it makes good kindling, a snotty local with a Cotswold sneer paused and peered at me. 'Does your master know you're doing that?' she demanded.

I stared at her. My mouth was probably open and there could well have been sweat on my brow and spittle on my chin.

'Yes I'm speaking to you,' she said. 'Is your master in?'

I realised that she had mistaken me for a jobbing garden, a disposable peon in her world.

'Grkslkeh kelhwkh kehw,' I said, using a grubby forefinger to touch where my forelock would have been if I'd had one. I find it remarkably easy to play the idiot country yokel. (This sometimes worries me.)

When she realised that she was dealing with a complete idiot and wasn't getting anywhere she marched on. I've no idea what she wanted but whatever it was I didn't want any part of it. I have found, over the years, that the vast majority of unsolicited personal contact is of very little value. Most requires me to do things I really don't want to do or to give my time or money to some entirely undeserving cause.

On my way back down the garden I picked a couple of leaves of wild mint, crushed them and inhaled. Wonderful! And a little closer to the house I did the same with a leaf from our sage bush. Does anything in the world smell more of Christmas than a crumpled sage leaf?

26

We have spent hours looking at estate agents' brochures, and searching the internet, but we still haven't found a house which we like.

This evening, disappointed by our failure to find our new dream home, we cheered ourselves up with a specially chosen double bill. We began with Richard Benjamin's *The Money Pit* starring Tom Hanks and Shelley Long and completed the evening with H.C.Potter's *Mr Blandings Builds His Dream House* starring Cary Grant and Myrna Loy.

The first film was OK. The second film, charming and funny, was a magnificent illustration of how to make a movie.

27

There was a time, just a few years ago, when golfers were the aristocracy in the world of professional sport. Even middle ranking professionals who managed to play their way onto one of the big tours could make millions each year, without ever winning a big tournament. The whole caboodle was supported by the sale of golf clubs, balls, bags and the rest of the paraphernalia so beloved by golfers around the world. Now, it seems that golf is in terminal decline. The number of people playing the game has fallen dramatically. In Japan, where golf used to be the sine qua non for all upwardly mobile business folk, an enterprising company is buying up unwanted golf courses and covering the fairways and greens with wind turbines. I can only imagine the delight of the people who thought they'd bought a nice house overlooking a golf course.

There is much bewilderment among the golf community as to why this should be so.

I can tell them.

Today's generation doesn't have the time to play golf. They are too busy updating their Facebook accounts and keeping their Twitter accounts busy. Those who are interested in hitting a small ball around can do so with one of the many available computer games. The games are cheaper than the real thing, you never get wet, you can stop to check your emails whenever you like and there are no old farts waiting for you outside the clubhouse to complain that you've left your car in the Lady Captain's parking space.

When I was a boy I used to play golf at Walsall Golf Club. I played every day in the holidays and most evenings throughout the year and got quite good at it. I had realised that in a round of golf I could play one shot that any professional would be proud of. (The corollary is that professionals will invariably play one shot in every round they play that would cause even me to blush with shame and annoyance.)

However, I pretty well lost interest in the game when I was 12-years-old and I can still remember the moment my love for the game died.

A chum and I were playing one quiet summer evening and had both driven our balls onto the green of a par three hole. Suddenly, as we prepared to putt, it started to rain golf balls. Two balls landed on the green, one landed in a bunker and a fourth landed on the green, skipped forward and finished up on a grassy bank at the back of the green. We looked back to the tee and saw four men putting their drivers back into the bags and dragging their trolleys onto the fairway. Alarmed and confused we hurried off the green and stood out of the way. As the four golfers approached I recognised two of them: they were well known Midland professionals. I realised that they were probably practising for a forthcoming tournament but what happened next astonished me then and shocks me even more today. One of the players walked up to my ball and booted it off the green so that it landed some distance away. A second player picked up my pal's ball and hurled it away into the rough. None of the players spoke to us, looked at us or even acknowledged our presence. It was such an extraordinary example of contemptible arrogance that I can remember it still.

After that, I had an on off relationship with golf. I would join a club, play for a few years and then give it up for a decade or so. I even wrote a couple of novels about the game.

But I now doubt if I will ever play the game again. I don't miss it. And if I do I can always buy a computer game that will give me all the fun without any of the problems.

28

I had a letter today from a reader who claims that all my Bilbury books are fiction. He is very angry about this, for some reason, and tells me that he will be giving the books bad reviews on the internet.

I told my friend Thumper Robinson that he is living in an imaginary village. He laughed.

'I don't know what you're laughing at,' I said. 'You don't exist!'

Thumper grinned. ‘Splendid,’ he said. ‘I’ll pass that happy piece of news on to the taxman. Maybe the bastard will leave me alone.’

I should explain that Thumper and the taxman have recently had another ‘misunderstanding’. The taxman seems to think that Thumper should pay tax in the way that ordinary people do. Thumper finds this position risible. The taxman says he cannot understand how Thumper can live on the miniscule income which he declares. Thumper says that his wife is an excellent housekeeper who always manages to get good bargains when she shops. The taxman says that he has visited the village shop run by Peter Marshall and that the prices there are far higher than the prices anywhere else. Thumper says that the prices which are visible are not the prices which the locals pay. The dispute seems likely to run and run. Thumper’s last confrontation with the taxman ran for so long that if it had been a West End musical it would have been considered an outstanding success.

29

There is much talk about foreigners taking advantage of Britain’s National Health Service. Complainants seem to think that this is a new problem. It isn’t. When I was a general practitioner many decades ago I remember two Germans coming into my surgery and demanding to be referred to a surgeon. The husband wanted to have a small and not very threatening hernia repaired and the wife wanted to have her varicose veins seen to. They told me that they had heard that Britain offered free health care and that they wished to take advantage of it. They told me that they were staying with friends in England for one month and that they had worked out that the value of the free treatment they expected to have would more than pay for their trip. Indeed, the husband boasted that they believed that they would make a small profit.

When the couple had gone I telephoned the local hospital and asked which surgeon had the longest waiting list. I then referred the two Germans to that surgeon, knowing that they wouldn’t even receive an appointment for a preliminary examination until twelve weeks had elapsed. Furthermore, since neither of them had life threatening problems, it would be months and possibly years after that before they would be offered treatment.

30

We’ve been sent details of a Grade II listed house. The house looks splendid but we threw the details away. Neither of us can cope with the idea of living in a house where every small amendment has to be approved by a cretin in a cheap suit. The problem has been exacerbated in recent years by the fact that there is now a serious shortage of skilled craftsmen who can work on old buildings. And there is also, of course, a serious shortage of old roofing tiles and so on.

Friends of ours bought an 18th century Grade II listed house and replaced some horrible looking plastic guttering and downpipes with cast iron guttering and pipes which they had specially made to match the rest of the house. The stuff cost a fortune. And then their local cretin in a cheap suit came round and told them they had to take it all down and put back the plastic guttering and downpipes because that was what the house had had when it had been listed in the early 1970s.

Unbelievable, but true.

The bottom line is that, one way and another, the bureaucrats who are supposed to be protecting listed buildings are actually doing far more harm than good and many people who would love to cherish and care for an old, listed building refuse to contemplate doing so because of the inevitable administration problems.

31

In the 1960s, it was found that 12 words (known as the key words) made up a quarter of all the words spoken in the English language. (The 12 were: the, of, to, and, a, in, is, it, you, that, he, was). The word ‘me’ was number 122 on the list, just behind ‘good’ and just ahead of ‘give’.

Things have changed.

I suspect that if the survey were repeated, today’s 12 key words would be: me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me.

The next most popular words would be ‘self’, ‘benefits’, ‘entitled’, ‘twitter’, ‘facebook’ and ‘selfie’.

April

1

I am increasingly fed up with the sight of former bankers and hedge fund managers who have made millions through nothing more personal or potent than a mixture of good luck and greed, suddenly ‘seeing the light’ and deciding to advise the rest of us on how to live our lives cleanly, honestly and without dirtying our souls with money.

There is no doubt that hedge funds have over charged and under delivered for years and many managers have made themselves billionaires. Curiously, and indefensibly, they are allowed to pay lower rates of tax in both the U.S. and the U.K. This is a shameful indictment of Obama, Cameron and their predecessors who have all been, it seems, more beholden to the entreaties of their chums in the hedge fund industry than to the electors and ordinary taxpayers who pay the country’s bills.

Not all of the obnoxious billionaires are ex bankers and ‘hedgies’, of course. Some of them are Silicone Valley nerds who mistake luck for talent and assume they are rich because they deserve to be rich rather than because they are greedy bastards who elbowed the competition out of the way.

When they have made so much money that they feel embarrassed by their ill-gotten wealth, these billionaires hire people to help them write books boasting about their wealth (in a very tasteful way, of course) and telling us how to run our pitiful lives in order to become better people, without using the crooked methods they used when they were still trying to get rich. And they do so like to call themselves philanthropists.

Most modern philanthropists pledge to donate huge amounts of money to some allegedly worthy cause (usually some pet project which sounds dramatic and will be guaranteed lots of publicity, rather than something genuinely useful like feeding the homeless) and then, once they’ve got the press coverage, the plaudits and the honours they quietly forget about their promises.

Arch hypocrite Bill Gates is probably the world’s best known self-styled philanthropist. He can hardly be accused of giving quietly.

I have no doubt that Gates has actually given away some money but to be honest he would do the world a big favour if he started treating his customers with a little more respect and stopped trying to force deadly vaccines onto impoverished peoples who believe his pseudoscientific mumbo jumbo but who will not, I fear, be the better for it.

Gates is one of a new breed of self-styled ‘do-gooders’ who are in reality nothing more than old-fashioned ‘do-badders’.

These people don’t realise that true kindness is something kind and personal. And also something best done quietly and privately.

Gates and company are, it seems to me, trying to buy forgiveness, respectability and faked moral authority with strategic, very noisy, giving. They never seem to give enough to hurt, but they give just enough to gain the applause and appreciation they seem to crave.

I’m afraid it won’t work Bill.

It will take a long, long time for people to forget the virtual monopoly you and Microsoft deliberately created, the rubbish you’ve forced down people’s throats and the high prices you’ve charged for it.

If it’s love and respect you are after then the best move might be to improve the product I’m using to write this. And charge less for it.

2

We put money into an internet site which sells pictures with which we can create book covers. Afterwards the site told us that if we don’t spend the money in 12 months it will disappear. Poof. Gone.

The mobile telephone companies used to do this and I remember being very miffed when I found that the £50 I’d put into a pay-as-you-go mobile phone had simply disappeared into thin air because I hadn’t made enough calls. My money had gone straight into the phone company’s profits.

Imagine if this philosophy were transferred to real life.

‘If you don’t read the book you’ve just bought it will disappear in a year.’ Poof. There one minute and gone the next.

‘If you don’t wear out those new socks in twelve months they will simply disintegrate in the drawer.’

The internet has its own rules.

3

I went to the optician to have my eyes tested. I was relieved to hear once again that I do not have macular degeneration. (The optician who told me that I had the disease was, I suspect, merely trying to flog me some vitamin pills. What a nasty trick that was.)

However, I was assured that my cataracts are coming along nicely and that my distance vision is deteriorating apace.

Getting old is quite a nuisance.

I have feet that look as if they've been involved in a nuclear explosion, I need to use a jeweller's loupe when trying to do fine work, my hearing is shot and I have to switch on the subtitles when watching DVDs, my skin flakes so much that I fear I will wake up one day and find that there is nothing holding my bones and organs in place, I get aches in my arms and shoulders if I try to carry more than one book at a time, I wobble so much that I am waiting patiently to be arrested for being drunk and disorderly, the enamel has worn off my teeth with the result that they are now sensitive to anything slightly warm or slightly cool and the hair which used to grow on the top of my head is now impudently bursting out of my ears.

Eyes, ears, teeth, legs, heart, brain – everything seems to be racing downhill as if desperate to reach the bottom first and although I may not yet have dry rot, woodworm and death watch beetle listed in my personal differential diagnosis I do have a little incipient wet rot and I feel as I'm approaching my sell-by-date faster than a lettuce in a heat wave.

I've lived off my wits for many decades and I am now beginning to suspect that they are showing signs of requiring an overhaul. At 18 you know that you're immortal. At my age you begin to suspect that this belief may be slightly flawed. My only relief is that since I never had any good looks in the first place, the superficial ageing that comes as part of the ageing process, and which is to many the most painful aspect of it, is to me of no consequence whatsoever.

Oh, and the ever present comfort that as the organism ages, all cells – including cancer cells – tend to grow more slowly.

'So,' I said to the optician, 'apart from the bilateral cataracts and rapidly deteriorating vision my eyes are fine?'

'That's about the size of it,' he agreed. 'No problems at all.'

I felt strangely reassured.

The organism is surviving and the race between my deteriorating eyesight, my failing hearing and the fact that I am gradually losing my sense of balance will continue.

My body is, I suspect, involved in a competition to see whether I need a hearing aid before I need spectacles for distance vision and before I need the constant companionship of a walking stick.

4

We were driving from Gloucester when we saw yet another smug cyclist with a helmet camera. All the bloody cyclists seem to wear them these days. They try to spot motorists driving in bus lanes so that they can email the videos they've made to the local council.

I think I'll fix a camera on our dashboard and take pictures of cyclists crossing red lights.

When I eventually managed to overtake the cyclist, who was riding in the middle of our half of the road and had managed to create a queue half a mile long, I slowed down to make sure that he got my hand signal on his camera.

It will, I hope, be my moment of fame on the internet.

Underneath my superficial layer of mild irascibility lies a deep and well-made long-term storage depot filled to overflowing with repressed violence.

I hate the fact that cyclists are so supercilious and invariably try to give the impression that they are cycling to work to save the planet rather than to save the nine pence a bus ticket would cost them.

The fact is that, as Antoinette has wisely pointed out to me, cyclists need to eat far more food than people who travel in cars and so every cyclist is contributing to world famine.

For half a century I loved riding bicycles. I loved the freedom. I was proud of myself when I managed to cycle up a long, steep hill. I was thrilled when I raced downhill far faster than I could have ever travelled under my own steam. I enjoyed riding over rough tracks with sandwiches and a book in my saddle bag.

And I still love bicycles. I think the bicycle is one of the most perfect of man's creations: the nearest thing we have to a perpetual motion machine; the only real source of free energy.

But I can't stand the new breed of sanctimonious cyclists.

While we were out today I saw a sign which said 'Beware cyclists'.

I wondered why. Why should we beware of cyclists? Do the self-satisfied little bastards bite? Or is it just those little cameras we have to worry about?

5

According to *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* by Michael Young, the things which are forbidden by the Islamic religion include: signet rings, joking, pigeon fancying, lutes, the shaving of beards, gramophone needles, cross-dressing, mandolins, scattering watermelon rinds, performing monkeys, pursuing beardless youths and murder.

What a curious list.

I'm a bit confused by the ban on cross dressing since it seems to me that the majority of male Muslims wear frocks and the female ones were trousers.

And what have mandolin players done to annoy a whole religion?

6

It is time to start the laborious process of preparing to fill in my annual tax return. The whole damned process could, of course, be made much simpler and fairer but there are now too many people who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

Britain's tax code runs to more than 21,000 pages and is the longest and most complex tax code in the entire known world. There are over 10 million words.

No citizen, accountant or even tax inspector can possibly claim to know or understand more than a fraction of this impenetrable jungle of direction, misdirection and confusion, beset as it is with hints, suggestions, misconceptions, contradictions and precedents. It is, perhaps, hardly surprising that the online forms, which HRMC is insisting all taxpayers complete, are incomprehensible, frustrating and counter-intuitive.

My personal experience with tax inspectors confirms that even they don't know or understand the laws they are paid to enforce. How could they? How could any individual read and learn over 10 million words of legal gobbledegook? And yet if a citizen makes an honest mistake or misinterprets the law through ignorance or a failure to keep up with the latest changes, additions and extensions he will be severely punished and will risk being named and shamed or sent to prison.

The one thing I do know is that the taxman cannot tell anyone how to run their business lives.

A few years ago a tax inspector tried to stop a window cleaner from using a Lamborghini as a business vehicle but he was told by a judge that any taxpayer is entitled to use whatever equipment he deems appropriate. So, for example, if I want to write books with a series of Mont Blanc pens I am perfectly entitled to do so and if I want to use a new pen for each page I write then I am entitled to claim the pens against my earnings as essential income tax expenses.

The problem created by over complicated taxation rules is now global.

I read in *Fortune* magazine this week that filing taxes costs Americans 6.1 billion man hours every year. Moreover, the whole process of filling in tax forms has become so complicated that it has spawned a $10.1 billion industry devoted to helping citizens complete their forms. There are now 320,000 people in America who are employed solely to help citizens fill in their tax return. This industry spends $30 million a year lobbying against the introduction of simpler tax regulations and simpler tax forms. How appalling!

In the UK, the Government has set up an Office of Tax Simplification (which sounds to me very much the sort of thing Dickens would have dreamt up) but in the last five years this has, predictably I suppose, done nothing other than make tax legislation more complicated than it was before.

Every time Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequeur issues another budget (something which he appears to do on a monthly basis these days) he makes the tax code more impenetrable, more incomprehensible and more indefensible than it was before. This is, of course, no accident. Nothing happens without the Government knowing and approving. When laws are too complicated for us to understand there is a much better chance that we will make mistakes. And when a mistake is made, a fine will follow closely behind.

7

I bought myself a very smart new pair of sunglasses with thoroughly approved lenses and very smart and fashionable wooden frames. I bought them from a shop in the Primark chain, the only store I know of which regularly undercuts charity shop prices, and they cost £2.00.

Since someone must have designed them it does not seem inappropriate for me to describe them as ‘designer glasses’.

An hour after acquiring these smart new sunglasses, I saw in the *Financial Times* a plug for a seemingly identical pair of sunglasses which had been ‘designed’ by someone of whom I’d never heard. The only discernible difference was the price. The sunglasses promoted in the *Financial Times* cost £765.

8

I spend more and more of my time living in the past and when I read magazines and newspapers they are invariably 50-years-old or more. I have quite a stock of old *Punch*, *Cricketer* and *Field* magazines.

Reading an edition of *Punch* magazine dated 10th Mach 1954, I found this small news item: ‘Birmingham is still divided on the question of coloured bus conductors, whose suggested employment has been ‘overwhelmingly opposed’ by the city’s transport staff.’

The magazine was, by the way, referring to Birmingham, England and not Birmingham, Alabama.

9

We were out walking today when an owner with three loose dogs approached us. The dogs were out of control and looked as if they were hungry.

‘What are you worried about?’ demanded the dogs’ owner, with an undisguised sneer. ‘They’re only dogs.’

I wonder if he knows how many people are killed by dogs each year. I rather doubt it.

Here are twelve things dog owners regularly say to those of us who are nervous in the vicinity of badly behaved dogs:

a) Don’t be silly. He never bites.

b) He wouldn’t harm a fly.

c) He’s wonderful with children.

d) Don’t let him see that you’re afraid. Dogs smell fear and it excites them.

e) He doesn’t usually bark. You must have worried him.

f) You’ve obviously upset him by moving backwards.

g) He just wants some fuss.

h) He likes to be patted. Do you have any dog biscuits on you?

i) Stop screaming. Loud noises upset him.

j) Don’t be so hysterical.

k) I can easily prise his jaws apart.

l) He’s never done that before. It was your fault. You moved suddenly and alarmed him. I’ve a good mind to sue you for causing him emotional distress.

10

A man who lives in our village has died. He is reputed to have had a net worth in the neighbourhood of £10 million (which is a very pleasant neighbourhood) and, as a result, he had a good many dear and close friends.

We visited him once, though I cannot for the life of me remember why. He had a mass of unopened mail on his desk. ‘I open the mail once a month,’ he explained. ‘I find the stuff mostly annoying or troublesome. This way I only have the annoyance once a month.’

11

I read today that the Danes are planning to get rid of cash.

The Danish Government thinks that cash puts an administrative and financial burden on shops and so, as a result, shops there will, in future, be within their rights to refuse to accept cash in payment for goods or services.

The real reason for this outrageous infringement of civil liberties in Denmark is, of course, the fact that it is much easier for a Government to control money (and to control its electorate) if it can make sure that all means of exchange are held within the electronic money system.

I have no doubt that other countries will soon follow suit. Governments, banks and tax inspectors all hate people using cash.

12

No one does what they are paid to do these days. And, by and large, they charge a lot of money for not doing it.

Lloyds bank has written yet again to tell me that they have discovered more ways to make my life more difficult and to increase their profits. They claim, as always, that the incomprehensible and boring changes they are making are designed to improve my banking experience but this is what used to be called a dirty, rotten lie and is now called commercial expediency.

If pressed, I have no doubt that the bank will claim that their actions are a result of new rules from the world's growing army of bank regulators. To some extent this will doubtless be true. The regulators are forever thinking up new ways to justify their huge salaries and to enable them to fine the banks vast amounts of money. Regulators, such as the Financial Conduct Authority pretend to care about consumers but seem determined to make life as difficult as possible for them and whenever they decide to punish someone it is always the consumer who gets it in the neck.

If the authorities decide that a fine must be paid then bank charges go up to meet the bill. If the authorities decide that the reins must be tightened then it is always consumers who must face absurd rules and jump through hoops to access our own money. The bankers never suffer. Their absurd salaries and obscene bonuses continue unchanged. What used to be known as the City of London should now be pronounced in the Sean Connery style. (He would, of course, turn it into the Shitty of London.)

The average basic salary of a British investment banker is now £650,000. That figure has doubled in the last year in response to the introduction of an EU cap on bankers' bonuses.

So, once again, the bureaucrats working for the EU have screwed up.

Meanwhile, investors in particular and bank customers in general suffer, suffer and then suffer again.

Bankers whinge that they are treated unfairly but it isn't difficult to explain why they are still so widely despised. People find it difficult to forget that bank officials fiddled interest rates in return for bottles of champagne – uncaring about the people who were suffering as a result of their 'game'.

I read today that in 2014, the Deutsche Bank made 1.7 billion euros net profit. The bank's bosses celebrated this relatively modest achievement by paying themselves 2.7 billion euros in bonuses. Am I the only person in the world who finds this laughably crooked? Britain's most infamous, bankrupt bank, the Royal Bank of Scotland has succeeded in making an annual loss for eight years in a row. But bankers still receive massive, multi million pound bonuses. I always thought people were given bonuses for exceptional work. Banks (like the civil service) operate on a different system and seem to hand them out as prizes for turning up for work.

When will a country somewhere in the world have the guts to start putting bankers in prison.

It would be a joy to know that bankers' sons will soon be lining up at Eton to boast 'My dad's been in prison more often than you dad' rather than 'My dad's made more money fiddling interest rates than your dad'. But this isn't likely to happen. Whenever bankers are accused of doing naughty things (like stealing money from several million innocent widows and orphans) they invariably avoid a prison sentence by claiming that they suffer from autism or Asperger's disease. Do banks really only hire people who have these mental health problems?

There are many bankers around whose actions have resulted in millions of people being financially hurt. The victims include those who have already retired, and who are therefore especially vulnerable, and those who thought, in their innocence, that it might one day be nice to be able to retire, and who were therefore naïve enough and hopeful enough to harbour such hopes.

Bankers have made fortunes out of the financial chaos they have caused but have nevertheless steadfastly refused to accept responsibility for their evil deeds.

Someone called Jamie Dimon, the CEO of a bank called J.P.Morgan Chase, tried to turn round attacks on banks for taking people's homes with the comment that 'Giving debt relief to people who really need it, that's what foreclosure is.' J.P.Morgan, which was bailed out by American taxpayers, is hardly a bank with an unstained reputation and Mr Dimon is, it seems, a vastly overpaid prat who needs lessons in humanity – as well as in appropriate usage of the English language. (A prat, by the way, is 16th century English for a pair of human buttocks.)

Unbelievable.

Someone should foreclose on Master Dimon's head.

Maybe, one day in the near future, he will find himself staring up at the sky from the bottom of a wicker basket.

When governments bailed out the banks with taxpayers' money it was the greediest of the greedy bankers who benefitted. And it was the same greedy bankers who have cheated and defrauded their customers without attracting any serious attention from the regulators.

Indeed, there is a patronising arrogance in much of what the regulators do.

For example, not long ago in Britain, a senior regulator called Wheatley promised that his organisation would protect consumers from their own 'irrationality'. Huh? Whatever happened to caveat emptor and the freedom of individuals to do daft things if they want to? Making mistakes is how we learn.

It is the job of regulators to stop banks from lying and cheating – rather than to stop honest citizens from making their own decisions.

And who gave this man (who is apparently known to his own staff as the Grey Vampire) the right to decide what is safe and what is not; who gave him the moral and legal authority to decide what we should or should not do with the money we have earned and paid tax on?

The truth is that whatever the regulators do the bankers are out of control; they invariably take advantage of any new rule to add more complexities of their own so that they can cheat their customers more effectively. Unsurprisingly, these complexities invariably result in more costs.

And yet, time and time again, the regulators seem determined to punish only investors and shareholders. Their endless rules and fines do nothing to control the greed of bankers or to limit their propensity for fraud. But savers, investors and pensioners pay in every conceivable way; they pay the cost of all the regulations, they pay the fines, they have to put up with deteriorating services and a loss of privacy and, if they want to do anything as threatening as access their own money, they must beg and cajole and spend vast amounts of time filling in forms and disclosing more and more confidential information. It is now honest customers, not dishonest bankers, who are regulated.

Banks demand more and more information from all of us. They claim that they look after the information they demand but they don’t. They store it in open plan computers and then, when they’ve finished with it, they toss it out in the garbage. It is hardly surprising that identity theft is soaring.

It is reported that there are now 625,000 cyber crime offences committed every month in the UK. Most of those occur because the Government and the banks are careless with the information they have demanded.

And yet government departments, banks and other financial institutions force us to conduct all our transactions online, insisting that their wretched websites are absolutely secure and perfectly safe when they surely know that there is no such thing as a secure and safe internet site. Anyone who says there is, must be either crooked or stupid.

Tax collectors, banks, pension companies, utilities, phone companies and insurance companies are all planning to force their customers to do everything online.

Just how the substantial proportion of the population who do not have access to the internet will cope does not seem to be of any concern to those doing the forcing. Huge areas of rural Britain are either without any internet access or have to cope with access which is at best weak and patchy and at worst enormously frustrating. And yet, even though they know this, organisations are already charging huge fees to those who ask for permission to conduct their business without doing so in full view of the crooks, phishers and other vandals who now control the internet.

(The whole internet is so vulnerable that even the BBC’s huge site was recently taken down, though the hacker later admitted that he was just sort of messing around and really wanted to take down someone else’s website. There are no secure sites on the internet. None. And the police seem either unable to do anything or uninterested in trying. I recently read that in America the FBI now advises business owners who have had their data stolen by phishers to pay ransom money if they want to get their information back.)

Finally, the banks must now add rank hypocrisy to all their other faults.

I read today that a bank has told an entrepreneur to close his account because they considered his business to be immoral. The man was making perfectly legal X-rated films.

How do banks have the gall to object to what anyone else does until they have cleaned their own stables?

In the last few years banks have been fined over £300 billion for lying, cheating and fraudulent behaviour. And they have not changed their ways. They are still lying, cheating and defrauding their customers.

And yet they have apparently now decided that they are going to censor film makers.

13

When writing a novel, or some other complex piece of continuous prose, I have for some time had the habit, at the end of a day, of stopping work mid-way through a thought, a scene or even a paragraph.

I do this because when I resume work the following day it is easy to get going because I know exactly where I am and what I am doing.

I thought that this was my own peculiarity (one of many I admit with relish) but I have discovered that it is a way of work which was adopted by, and recommended by, none other than Graham Greene.

And Ernest Hemingway claimed that at the end of a working day spent writing he would stop half way through a sentence so that it was easy to get going again the following morning.

I think maybe I’ll go one better and try stopping half way through a wo

14

We were tailgated today by a tiny Fiat, one of those little cars which are only slightly bigger than an old metal biscuit tin; and probably made of thinner metal.

I pulled away when the roads were clear but the Fiat caught up whenever we were held up by a traffic queue.

Eventually, since the brakes on our car are much better than the brakes on a biscuit tin, I slowed down to let the driver pass, before he or she rammed into our boot. Out of curiosity I looked across at the driver. She had one hand on the steering wheel and the other holding a mobile phone to her ear. She had a fag clamped between her lips and there was about two inches of ash ready to fall into her lap. She was, I swear, at least 80-years-old.

15

Why do so many people use the phrase 'easy to read' as a term of abuse when talking or writing a book or an article? It's actually damned hard to write something that is easy to read. Easy to read actually means hard to write. And it is, on the other hand, very easy to write something that is difficult to read.

16

'What do women want?' asked Oliver, a friend of ours.

'The same as men, but in prettier colours,' replied Antoinette, who knows the price of fish when she sees it.

17

When Antoinette ordered a mint tea in a Costa Coffee shop today the girl behind the counter fondled her tea bag as affectionately as if it had been a string of worry beads. Afterwards Antoinette, who is always as nervous as a kitten in a dog pound and who was consequently unwilling to speak out in defence of her tea bag, wisely declined to drink her tea.

(Antoinette is almost consumed by her fears and it is an act of supreme bravery for her to leave the house. Her main fears (from a very long list) are: dogs, burglars, fire and being alone in the dark. She says that she suspects that in a previous life she was probably bitten by a dog while rushing to get away from a fire which had been started by burglars while she was all alone in the dark.)

I didn't blame her for not drinking the tea we had paid for. I wouldn't allow a complete stranger to put his or her unwashed fingers into my mouth – especially if he or she had been handling money for hours. The fingers which had fondled the tea bag could have been up the woman's nose, or indeed any other orifice, without so much as a quick wipe clean with a damp rag.

In future we have agreed to carry our own tea bags with us. We will order and pay for drinks but throw away the café's tea bags and replace them with our own. As Antoinette pointed out, a cup of tea isn't worth 24 hours of vomiting and diarrhoea. Food poisoning is now endemic in the United Kingdom, and it isn't difficult to see why.

18

The Government in the UK has introduced a new rule that if someone dies before the age of 75 their pension fund will (if it satisfies certain criteria) be passed onto beneficiaries entirely tax free. (They call this a 'rule' but in my book anything that is backed up by men in uniform who carry guns is a law not a rule.)

However, if the individual is thoughtless enough to live to celebrate their 75th birthday then the Government will punish this impertinence and the money they leave in their pension fund will be heavily taxed. A huge chunk of it will go to the taxman.

I don't think anyone in the Government has thought things through properly. This new law is going to cause some terrible dilemmas. Consider a 74-year-old man who is told that he has cancer and can expect to live no more than a year. If he waits for the cancer to take its course then there is a good chance that his estate will be halved. If he manages to die quickly then his estate will remain untouched. The sums of money involved could be massive.

What sort of attitude will children and other beneficiaries have when told that their 74-year-old parent is dying? Will they want to keep their parent alive for every month possible, or will they want to speed up the inevitable? I suspect that euthanasia is going to acquire a good many new fans.

19

There's a loud and powerful group in Britain (mainly consisting of the nonentities who, by virtue of the fact that they or an ancestor provided some sexual or financial service to a politician or member of the royal family, are comfortably ensconced in the House of Lords) who want 16- year-olds to be allowed to vote in the EU referendum.

If these unelected individuals get their way then the result of the referendum will be a foregone conclusion: 16-year-olds have been brainwashed at school to believe that the EU is a wonderful creation and that without it we will all die in a week, or maybe less, of disease, starvation or war.

Schools are regularly bribed with vast amounts of propaganda material and I doubt if there is a teenager in the country who realises that the EU was founded by a certain Adolf Hitler. There are probably a good many teenagers who, even if they have heard of Herr Hitler, probably think he was a member of a 1980s heavy metal band. Ignorance in this instance is no bliss.

Moreover, most teenagers are still in a continuous state of hormonal turmoil and are, generally speaking, too worried about whether or not to squeeze their spots with their fingers or a comedone expresser to make a sound, rational decision on the value, or otherwise, of EU membership.

Actually, I'm not sure that more than a tiny proportion of Britain's population know enough about the European Union to make a balanced judgement about whether or not the country should retain its membership. I read today that half of the British people have never heard of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP); a disastrous piece of bureaucracy which takes up 40% of the EU's budget and which is largely responsible for creating wealthy farmers, introducing bad farming practices and providing incoherent and inexplicable subsidy policies (subsiding tobacco growing doesn't make sense when you are, at the same time, spending huge amounts of money trying to discourage people from smoking).

It is the CAP which is responsible for butter-mountains, milk-lakes and, for all I know, yoghurt glaciers. The CAP is also responsible for the dumping of cheap, unwanted food in Africa and for, thereby, destroying nascent farming industries. There can be no doubt that the EU's Common Agricultural Policy is the main cause of mass starvation on the African continent.

How can people who have never heard of the CAP be allowed to vote in a referendum about whether or not Britain should stay in the EU?

The EU is stuffed to the gills with individuals who use their wealth and power to enrich themselves, to bully the weak and powerless and to expand their empires. The EU's undemocratic actions have already resulted in a widespread European resurgence of nationalism.

It is the fault of the EU that Europe is now stuffed to the borders with a variety of extremists who are sustained by support from those who know that things are wrong with their lives but don't know why. Most voters still don't understand that the EU is behind the majority of evil laws that are brought in. Most don't know what to do to make things better.

The rise in popularity of nationalist parties is widely described as 'extremism' by politicians who find that their parties are losing members and votes. I find it difficult to see why people who are trying to protect their culture, and their traditional lifestyle, should be described as extremists, while those who are determined to overthrow the cultural values of their host country are never regarded as extremists.

When people vote for nationalist groups, or for any party which isn't one of the traditional political parties, there is always talk of democracy breaking down.

But in reality the truth is that the rise of these new parties, built on popular opinion, is a healthy sign of democracy getting stronger and the fascist party system crumbling and losing credibility.

The bureaucrats who now rule our lives have been bought by lobbyists and are ever willing to sell their souls (and our rights) to the highest bidder. The whole damned EU edifice is riddled with corruption. We are now joined at the wallet with countries with which we share neither history nor culture. Some of these countries have very primitive ideas of justice and still believe in locking people up until they plead guilty or pay the required 'get out of jail free' invoice.

The European Union, Adolf Hitler's dream, and the euro, the lovechild of Hitler and Walter Funk, are both doomed but they will, before the inevitable end, doom Europe to decades of poverty, recriminations and war.

Before the inevitable end comes, the EU, which exists on corruption and cronyism, will continue to be the biggest cause of inequality in Europe.

Despite the claims of those who profit from its existence, the EU is destroying open government and democracy and replacing them with totalitarianism and the harshest brand of fascism. The wishes of the people are ignored so that the self-elected elite can swagger around enjoying unimaginable wealth and power.

Anyone who upsets the establishment must be portrayed as a dangerous and ill-informed lunatic and the lobbyists will do that with great enthusiasm, aided and abetted by a morass of dangerous organisations. In Britain, for example, there are numerous quangos, (defined as bodies which have a role in national government but which are not government departments and which, therefore, have vast power but absolutely no responsibility or accountability), committees, NGOs, charities with axes which need constant attention and commercially inspired bodies such as the Advertising Standards Authority – all of which exist to defend the establishment's right to rule without question, opposition or discussion.

The Tories, bless their silk monogrammed socks, have committed themselves at last to a referendum on whether or not we should remain pawns in someone else's game.

The one racing certainty is that the fight will not be a fair one.

The EU will spend millions (probably billions) to persuade British voters that their lives will come to a shuddering halt if they vote to leave the EU. It isn't widely known but the EU regularly spends over £500 million a year of our money promoting itself and the eurocrats will, without a doubt, up the ante as the missing date of the referendum approaches. Companies, farmers, universities, schools and countless individuals receive huge sums in 'grants' from the EU and they will, of course, campaign heartily for Britain to retain its membership. Thousands of eager supporters will be paid handsomely to support and defend the EU's unique brand of fascism. This money, let us not forget, is money that has been extorted unwillingly from British taxpayers.

The corruption and bullying will be widespread. For example, it has already been reported that potential Tory party donors who are contemplating giving money to the campaign 'Leave the European Union' have been told that if they do so then they should not expect to see their names in the honours list.

The fight to leave, on the other hand, will be fought by volunteers. And if the vote to leave is won then they will make us vote again and again until we get the 'right' answer, the answer they want (that is what always happens with EU elections). If the public vote to remain in the EU then they will congratulate us on our wisdom and that will be that.

The bottom line in life is that not much really matters and the rest doesn't matter at all. But top of the stuff that really matters is defeating the European Union: the unspeakably wicked Fourth Reich.

20

While browsing the internet recently, Antoinette found details for a house for sale. The photos showed that the house, which is in Devon, appeared to be on a cliff top and had absolutely spectacular sea views.

I like Devon, particularly the wilder parts, which are far removed from the hustle and bustle of 21st century life. In many areas the mobile telephone and the internet are as yet undiscovered joys. There are, indeed, parts of Devon where you can travel for an hour without finding yourself face to face with someone as complex as a set of traffic lights.

I once lived in a cottage half way between the tiny villages of Lynton and Lynmouth on the North Devon coast and there were inhabitants there who had never travelled more than 20 miles from their home.

'I've been to Barnstaple,' said one ancient local proudly when I asked him if he had travelled much. Barnstaple is no more than 20 miles away from Lynton but it does offer traffic lights, pedestrian crossings and other examples of modern living. There have, I hear, been suggestions that a speed bump or 'sleeping policeman' may one day be installed.

Like many who live on our island, both Antoinette and I have a great affection for the sea. The United Kingdom has more coast line than India and we have long been a seafaring nation.

We checked out the property on the internet (the ability to look at a satellite picture of a house, so that you can see how close the neighbours are and so on, is one of the great boons of the internet age) and we both thought that it would make a marvellous seaside home.

It seemed to me that if and when I reach the time of life when I want nothing more to stare into the distance with a rug over my knees, a book on my lap and a glass of Laphroaig on a sturdy little table by my side, this would be a splendid place to sit, stare and sip.

We motored down (an adventure in itself since our satellite navigation system had a nervous breakdown and in Devon all distances are two minutes up the road, five miles or a good long way) and took a look at the house.

We both fell in love with the place.

The house was worn out and needed quite a lot of care and attention but the position seemed unbeatable. The garden was magnificent and ran right up to the cliff's edge. I paced it out. There was 40 yards of grass between the house and the sea.

Even allowing for the fact that the house was close to the sea (homes with a sea view are always priced much higher than inland home) the price, slightly south of a full million in sterling, was absurdly high. But this is nothing unusual. Estate agents regularly encourage owners to set their sights far too high, partly so that they will win the business and partly so that their commission will be greater.

It does not seem to occur to the agents that this greediness pushes prices ever upwards, means that all buyers are constantly trying to negotiate prices downwards and results in the fact that sellers (who naturally feel that the price they were quoted is what their home is worth) feel aggrieved and bitter when buyers, more in touch with reality, try to negotiate the price downwards.

It seemed to us likely that the high price explained why the house had been on the market for several years. We were confident that we would be able to bring the price down a little and we decided that we would buy it.

But there was just one small, rather worrying snag that needed to be dealt with first. When making our way to the house we had found our chosen route blocked. A workman explained that a stretch of the road we were planning to take had collapsed shortly after the council had resurfaced it.

Since the road was along the edge of a cliff it seemed to us quite likely that it had been the council's heavy machinery which had caused the fall. We thought we ought to just check that the rest of the cliff (including the spot of cliff which our putative new home occupied) wasn't destined to follow suit and collapse into the sea.

Most house owners come back from holiday and are relieved when they discover that their roof is still intact, that there has been no major water leak and no burglary. There are, no doubt, owners of cliff top houses who come back and are relieved when they see that their home is still where it was when they left it, and not at the bottom of a cliff.

We didn't know what to expect from our investigations, but we are both well aware that buying a house these days is like a parlour game.

Estate agents regularly 'forget' to mention that a house has flooded or has a public right of way through the garden. They take photographs designed to disguise the fact that the house is attached to a sewage works or has an electricity pylon ten yards away.

Do they really think that no one will notice their pathetic attempts at fraud? I suppose they must do or they wouldn't keep doing it.

If there is a major snag then the estate agents and vendors will invariably conspire to hide it, disguise it or deny it.

Back in the 1960s, a London agent called Roy Brooks made a good living, and earned an enviable reputation, by writing gloriously honest and disarming adverts for the houses and flats he was selling. If a house overlooked a busy road he would describe the property as suitable for someone hard of hearing. If there was a gas works nearby he would promote a property as just the ticket for someone with a diminished sense of smell.

But Brooks is long gone.

Today's agents use every trick in the book to deceive and to cheat. There are over 40 pages of pointless and entirely unworkable regulations designed to stop estate agents allowing buyers to purchase properties with dishonestly obtained money but apparently no regulations designed to protect potential buyers from fraud and deceit.

Why the hell are there so many pointless regulations and no useful ones? Why are estate agents allowed to lie and cheat?

If a car dealer told as many lies as the average estate agent he would end up in court. But every estate agent is an Arthur Daley on steroids. If they can avoid telling you about the motorway that runs through the garden or the public footpath that runs through the garage then they will do so. If they think that you won't notice that you're buying half a house they won't tell you that you're not.

Buying a house in England is like playing chess blindfolded with a cheat on the other side of the board.

It is entirely up to the would-be buyer to remain cautious and suspicious and, hopefully, to discover the snags before spending money on a surveyor and a solicitor (who may both, it has to be said, fail to find the problem).

Our investigations were, to say the least, disappointing.

We discovered that England is falling into the sea.

And, more particularly, we found that the stretch of the English coast where we had been hoping to sit and stare at the sea and the horizon was particularly at risk.

Indeed, although the experts didn't seem to be entirely sure about anything (after reading many pages of scientific mumbo jumbo I'm not certain they knew their own names) it seemed not unreasonable to guess that within 10 or 20 years the garden and the house would have fallen into the sea.

We discovered that there are parts of the coast near Sidmouth where house owners report having lost 13 feet of garden in a year. Many such houses are advertised with misleading blurbs which seem designed to catch the innocent and the unwary. It seemed to me that some of the houses being offered for sale were being put on the market before they become completely unsaleable. The owners were perhaps desperately hoping that a naïve buyer would purchase without too much investigation.

And things could get worse; much worse.

If the Government gets its way and foreign oil companies are allowed to start fracking near the English coast then the collapse of the cliffs will come far sooner.

A coastal path which had once run along the coast at the bottom of the garden we looked at had already gone. So, indeed, had part of the garden itself.

Most worryingly, we found that local councils have acquired the right to insist that owners leave a house if it is considered ‘unsafe’ and that houses much further from the cliff edge than the property we had viewed had already been condemned.

Adding insult to injury, it seemed that if a house did fall into the sea the council could charge the owner a huge sum for ‘fly tipping’.

This seems particularly unfair when you realise that if the council had spent rather less money providing overpaid executives with huge, inflation-linked pensions it would have been able to spend a little money protecting the coastline and defending the houses which are now threatened by the sea.

When we got in touch with an official body called the Environment Agency we discovered that no insurers would provide insurance against the loss of land or property caused by coastal erosion.

It is usually difficult or impossible to lose all your money if you buy a house.

Even if the house has dry rot, wet rot, termites and woodworm the building site will usually still have a notable value.

But if you are foolish enough to buy a house on the edge of a cliff, and the house and its underlying building plot subsequently fall into the sea then all the money will be lost.

It is, perhaps, hardly surprising that there are now beautiful coastal properties on sale which have been valued at just £1 for the freehold. No one will buy them. No bank or mortgage company will lend money on them. No insurance company will insure them. Indeed, insurance companies won’t even insure coastal properties against fire because they fear that owners may set fire to their own homes before they disappear with the cliff, into the sea.

What can you do with a house which is falling into the sea? Bugger all seems the only sensible answer. You certainly can’t live in it for the utility companies will probably turn off the gas, the electricity and the water and the local authorities will probably condemn the building and either refuse access completely or else limit access to the hours of daylight on quiet, sunny days.

And, remember, if and when the house does fall into the sea the authorities will insist that the unfortunate householder pay the cost of removing the wrecked house from the beach or rocks below.

We wondered if the authorities (both local and national) were doing anything to protect coastal properties.

And we found that they are doing nothing.

The official policy on this matter, dignified by the title ‘Shoreline Management Plans’, is to allow ‘nature to take its course’.

A few English towns are fighting back and are doing everything they can to protect themselves.

In the small Devon town of Sidmouth, for example, we have seen bulldozers busily moving the shingle around to protect the town from the sea and from storms.

But sadly, when the town on one piece of coastline tries to protect itself, its efforts will almost certainly make things worse for other town and villages on the coast. The sea may be persuaded to move along the coast but the result will be that smaller, poorer towns will suffer.

Many small towns along the south coast could be protected by decent stone walls, erected to provide simple physical protection.

It’s what the Victorians did and it is what we should be doing now.

A few strategically placed stone erections built along the south Devon coast would cost less than a mile of motorway and considerably less than a day’s bounty paid to the European Union but no one cares enough about the coastline to bother.

The bureaucrats and politicians are all too busy to care about England or English home owners.

And so, as a result, England is shrinking at an extraordinary rate and thousands of home owners are now sitting waiting for their home to be declared uninhabitable. The authorities have written off hundreds of miles of coastline and all the small ports and villages which are situated in or along the coast. Many beauty spots will disappear. Coast paths will soon exist on old maps.

None of this has anything whatsoever to do with global warming.

It is a result of normal, natural coastal erosion and if the authorities were prepared to spend a little money on building defences it could be stopped. And the coastline could be saved. It is what our ancestors did a century or more ago. But it’s not what our current batch of politicians will do.

If a fraction of the money being wasted on building a new and unwanted high speed rail link to the north was allocated to building some basic coastal defences then much of England’s disappearing coastline could be saved.

We decided that if we bought the house we would, effectively, be buying a short-term lease with no guarantee that the house would still be standing in a few years’ time.

From the geology reports we read it seemed pretty unlikely that the house would still be standing in 20 years and although I will be lucky to be still standing then, my sweetheart is much younger than I am and I would like to leave her more than a pile of debris on a beach.

We thought about it a lot.

We decided against it.

We thought about it again.

We decided that buying the property would be a hell of a gamble; it would be living on the edge taken to its entire illogical conclusion.

In the end we liked the house so much that we offered half the asking price. It was a gamble we were prepared to take.

I worked out that the value of a 20 year lease (using the monthly rental value) would be just under £300,000 so we offered £400,000. But the offer was refused. Actually, it wasn't even refused. The owners were too disgusted to reply.

Sadly, we walked away from the property.

It will take someone braver (or more foolish) than us to pay more for a house which is destined to fall into the sea and which will, in a very short time, be either worthless or sitting in the sea.

21

A reader who works for the Government tells me that firemen now spend 2% of their time fighting fires and 98% of their time polishing the engines, sliding up and down their poles or playing cards.

The reduction in the number of fires is said to be partly a result of the fact that fewer people smoke (and that the ones who do still smoke have worked out that smoking in bed is still the most dangerous thing you can do between the sheets) and partly a result of the popularity of smoke and fire alarms.

Since their workload had fallen so dramatically, it has been suggested that firemen might be capable of supporting the other emergency services and, if suitably trained, able to attend medical emergencies.

This does happen in some other countries.

However, I'm told that the unions aren't too keen on this extension of responsibilities.

And so firemen will continue to spend 98% of their time playing cards and dozing.

22

We looked at the particulars for two houses today. Both looked interesting. But on closer inspection both of the houses turned out to have cottages in the grounds. And in both cases the cottages were within a few yards of the main house. Moreover, in both cases the cottages were being offered for sale as 'extras'.

In other words, you could buy the bigger house and not the smaller house, and find yourself with very close neighbours, or you could pay far more than you had anticipated and buy both houses. You'd end up with two houses when you only wanted one but you would have the privacy you'd thought you were buying in the first place.

This is, it appears, another common estate agent ploy and it is, I think, a business plan they borrowed from BMW, the car company.

BMW is renowned for charging extra for just about everything on their cars.

'Would you like wheels with the car, sir? That will be another £37,000. Would sir like seats inside? That will be another £24,000. And what about a steering wheel? Sir would like one of those? Another £17,000 for that unless you want the one with faux leather in which case it will be another £22,000 on top of the £17,000. And a very sensible choice that would be, sir.'

You think I exaggerate?

Only in the liberal use of the word 'sir'.

I can't wait to see what other tricks estate agents get up to.

We have already seen one property where the agent was trying to sell a garden as an add on extra.

One agent wanted to charge an extra £5,000 for a sort of tent thing masquerading as a summer house. I would have paid them to take the damned thing away – or to burn it.

We saw one house where the owners told us, as though doing us a favour, that if we bought their house they would consider selling us the double glazing and the ceiling fan in the kitchen for an additional sum. The double glazing! They wanted us to pay extra for the damned double glazing! What were they planning to do? Tear it out and take it to their next home?

Maybe the roof will be next.

‘Would you like to buy the roof as well, sir?’

Nothing would surprise me.

When we arrived at our last house we found that the sellers had taken the log burner, the curtain rails, the specially made window seat cushions, the garden shed, the outside lights, the lavatory seats and everything else they could unscrew and carry off.

I’m surprised they didn’t take the glass out of the windows. Indeed, I have no doubt that they would have done had they thought of it.

Still, the seller was, I believe, something to do with the legal profession so we should not, perhaps, have been surprised.

And we have discovered that there is another danger with house buying.

One of the sellers might not really want to sell and might do everything they can to put a spanner in the works. (Or as John Lennon wrote, ‘put a Spaniard in the works’).

Not long ago we saw a house we really liked and so we offered the asking price. No quibbling. There were no other bidders, no competition. But our offer was not accepted.

We went back to the property and talked again to the owners.

It slowly became clear that although half of the owners (the husband) was keen to sell the other half (the wife) didn’t want to sell at all. She was very happy where she was.

This sort of thing happens often when a divorced couple try to sell a house. The one remaining in the house will often do everything they can to make the place look unattractive and they will tell you, at length, about all the flaws. ‘Oh did I mention that when it rains water comes in through the roof? And I expect you know that the drains have been blocked for 11 years. But we are hoping that the new motorway won’t be too close.’

23

An American bank called Merrill Lynch has been fined £13.3 million by the UK’s Financial Conduct Authority for incorrectly reporting more than 35 million financial transactions and for not doing some other stuff they were supposed to do.

The bad Mr Merrill and the bad Mr Lynch had apparently been warned, fined, guided and threatened by the regulators before the fine was issued.

It doesn’t seem a bad deal to me. The fine works out at 38 pence per error. Next time I am accused of making a mistake on my tax return I shall hand over my 38 pence to the authorities without a moment’s hesitation.

24

In a charity shop today I watched in astonishment when a customer who had picked out a coat she wanted to buy approached the assistant behind the till. The coat was priced at £3.50.

‘Can you take something off?’ the woman demanded, in that tone of voice that suggests that if you don’t do what the speaker asks she will tear off your head, fry it with a few onions and have it for lunch.

The assistant, a man in his 60s, stared at her in amazement.

‘I want something off,’ insisted the customer.

The assistant stared at for a moment, thought, hesitated and then picked up a pair of scissors and snipped off all the buttons.

‘Is that enough off for you?’ he asked. ‘It’s reduced now.’ Without waiting for an answer he then jabbed the scissors at the coat and, with no little difficulty, removed a sleeve. ‘Or is that more what you had in mind?’

The customer, shocked and horrified, backed away towards the door and left as fast as she could.

I had been the only other customer and was now the only one left. For a moment there was silence in the shop.

‘I’m sorry about that,’ said the assistant. He looked slightly embarrassed. ‘I just saw red. The damned coat was priced at £3.50. And we’re raising money for the local hospice.’ He looked down at the damaged coat and then dropped it on top of the waste basket beside him. He took four pound coins out of his pocket and put them into the till.

‘Take out £2,’ I told him, handing him £2 of my own money. ‘It was well worth that for the entertainment value.’

He grinned at me, nodded and thanked me. Two old men who had shared one of those moments that come too rarely in life.

When I left the shop I bought a paper and tottered into a coffee shop for sustenance.

I read in my paper that a team of NHS employers now spend all their working hours looking after a 60 stone man who spends £300 a week of taxpayers’ money on chips, pizzas and chocolate. The man is so fat that he cannot do anything for himself apart from stuff food into his mouth and, possibly, telephone the local take away to ‘send round another half a dozen cheese and tomato pizzas but hold the anchovies’.

The news item had been reported in such a way that readers were encouraged to feel pity for this gluttonous fool but I’m afraid that I could not help thinking that the cost of catering to this man’s selfishness will mean that many honest people must die without the treatment or support they need.

I assume that when the fat man finally explodes, his obscene remains will be carted away by a skip hire company, which will doubtless also be paid for by taxpayers.

25

Britain has almost certainly produced more wonderful eccentrics than any other country on the planet. And most of them have been completely forgotten.

For example, I wonder how many people remember Lt Col John ‘Mad Jack’ Churchill?

During the Second World War, Mad Jack used to arm himself with a broad-hilted claymore and he always carried a set of bagpipes. He was the only British soldier known to have felled enemy soldiers with arrows. When he was captured in the Adriatic he continued to play his bagpipes until he was knocked out. His reputation was such that the Germans chained him to the floor of his cell. However he still managed to tunnel out of the camp.

After the war, the restless Churchill took up parachuting and surfing and spent his retirement years racing motorcycles.

26

According to a report in the *New Scientist* people now believe all sorts of strange things and around nine out of ten individuals hold at least one ‘delusional belief’. So, for example, 40% believe that they are exceptionally gifted but that their gifts are not recognised by others; 33% believe that their thoughts are not entirely under their control; 44% believe that they are not in control of at least some of their own actions and 39% believe that certain places are duplicated (are in two different locations at the same time).

I find all this rather disturbing for it suggests that between a third and a half of the electorate must be stark raving bonkers.

Maybe the survey was done within the confines of the Houses of Parliament.

27

A year and a bit ago, HMRC forecast that just 5,000 British firms registered for VAT would be affected by the new EU tax rules for digital services.

As usual with HMRC, the biggest bunch of buffoons outside the BBC and the NHS, the official estimate was ever so slightly inaccurate. The actual figure turned out to be closer to 350,000 firms. I can only imagine how many people that involved. All those firms, and all those jobs, will now be threatened by the ravings of an EU eurocrat.

The truth is that only global corporations can grow within the European Union for as I have pointed out before, the EU is determined to stamp out small companies. We shouldn’t be surprised. Fascists have always adored large corporations and hated small endeavours. And the EU is, of course, intrinsically fascist in nature.

The new EU rules for digital services mean that there are now 28 different rates of VAT across the European Union. And so a small publisher who sells eBooks throughout Europe must send out invoices, run accounts and, generally, manage 28 different VAT rates. Since the internet is nothing if not international this is not a theoretical problem. It is very much a real, practical nightmare.

For an industrial behemoth this is child’s play. For a small company it is quite impossible. The bizarre, inexplicable and arbitrary decisions made by eurocrats are, without a doubt, one of the main reasons why the average, modern company survives just 15 years before becoming just a memory, a few items at an office furniture auction and a lot of out-of-date notepaper.

28

More and more companies are now using ‘positive discrimination’ to ensure that their staff fit the demands of our politically correct society. The politically correct have forced us to become a sexist, racist and ageist society.

I confess that as a white male English-born citizen I am rather pleased that I’m meandering towards the end of my career, rather than setting out on my journey.

Mind you, we all had plenty of warning of what was going to happen.

Some decades ago I remember being booked to appear on the BBC's *Woman's Hour* and then dumped when a producer or editor discovered that I was male. Can you imagine the fuss there would have been if a woman had been refused the opportunity to broadcast on a BBC programme because she was female?

And, on the same nationwide book promotional tour, a producer at BBC Wales refused to interview me because I was not Welsh.

Can you imagine the headlines if a BBC programme in London or Birmingham had refused to interview an author because he was Welsh?

29

In Britain, it is now official Government policy to ignore the needs of the elderly and to do everything in their power to ensure that any older citizens who require medical treatment starve to death as quickly as possible – before they can become too much of a burden to the State.

If you are British and over 50-years-old then the Government wants you dead – especially if you're poor or unable to look after yourself. That isn't an opinion – it's a fact.

Doctors and nurses are now told to let old people die – and to withhold treatment which might save their lives. Hospital staff are instructed to deprive the elderly of food and water so that they die rather than take up hospital beds. Nursing home staff have even been given the right to sedate elderly patients without their knowledge.

The only -ism that no one cares about is ageism.

But at what age are patients simply allowed to die? And how old is too old for patients to be resuscitated? Is there a point at which society has the right to say 'You've lived long enough, now you must die and make way for someone else'? And why should resuscitation be decided by age alone? It is possible to argue that it would make as much sense to decide according to wealth or beauty.

But none of these questions or dilemmas is ever debated. No answers are sought or given. Ageism is now officially accepted as, well, acceptable. Anyone over 60 is now officially old, though in a growing number of hospitals the cut off age for resuscitation is 55.

We live in a politically correct world but the elderly don't count – particularly if they are white and English.

Report after report after report, shows that elderly patients are left for days in pain and in soiled bed clothes. Elderly patients in hospital are ignored by staff and left to starve to death, denied even water if they cannot get out of bed and fetch it themselves. The staff are never punished because this is official NHS policy.

Old people are regarded as a burden which the Government cannot afford and so the politicians will continue to authorise whatever methods are necessary to ensure that the number of burdensome old people is kept to a minimum.

The existence of an absurd branch of medicine called geriatrics is used as an excuse to shove old people into backwater wards and to provide them with second-rate medical treatment.

Way back in February 2011, an official report condemned the NHS for its 'inhumane treatment of elderly patients' and stated that NHS hospitals were 'failing to meet even the most basic standards of care' for the over-65s. Things are now far worse than they were then.

It is no exaggeration to say that the NHS treats the elderly with contempt. (It used to be said that you can judge a civilisation by the way it treats its elderly and I suspect that is still true.)

It was way, way back in February 2005 that it was first revealed that the Government had advised that hospital patients who were likely to need chronic nursing care should be allowed to die because of the cost of keeping them alive.

Tony Blair's Labour Government suggested that 'old people' be denied the right to food and water if they fell into a coma or couldn't speak for themselves. So much for any hope for stroke victims.

The Labour Government suggested that the need to cut costs came before the need to preserve the lives of patients and decided it had the right to overturn a right-to-life ruling which had been made when a judge ordered that artificial nutrition and hydration should not be withdrawn unless the life of a patient could be described as 'intolerable'. (The judge had added that when there was any doubt, preservation of life should take precedence.)

Of course, depriving the elderly of food and water is sometimes more a consequence of incompetence than official policy. But that doesn't affect the end result.

When my mother was in the Royal Devon and Exeter teaching hospital, she couldn't feed herself but the staff didn't feed her. If no relative could get to the hospital to feed her she didn't eat. Drinks were put on her tray and then taken away untouched.

'Not thirsty, today?' a uniformed idiot would ask merrily.

Meanwhile, the Government pours money into subsidising the lives of the lazy and the work-shy. Healthy 30-year-olds sit around growing chip-backsides and beer-bellies, slumped in front of their high definition digital television sets watching their choice of subsidised satellite television, opening the windows to let the heat out because it's easier than turning down the central heating.

In Britain today, the elderly are generally classified as the 'Unwanted Generation': an expensive, political embarrassment. Even the ones who manage to stay out of hospital are regarded as a worthless nuisance. So, for example, elderly individuals facing blindness from age-related macular disease are denied drugs that might have prevented their blindness because they are considered useless and expendable. The theory is that they don't contribute and rarely vote and can, therefore, be disregarded.

But those who believe this, will be old sooner than they think. And as far as compulsory euthanasia is concerned, the definition of 'old' is getting younger by the year.

I find it unbelievably awful that doctors and nurses now accept that the elderly (officially anyone over 60) must be allowed to die because keeping them alive isn't cost effective.

In August 2007, a Select Committee on Human Rights, comprised of MPs and peers, reported that 21% of hospitals and care homes failed to meet even minimum standards of dignity and privacy for older people. The Committee said it had uncovered evidence of neglect, abuse, discrimination and unfair treatment of frail, older people. (Their discovery came as no surprise to those of us who have been uncovering such abuse for decades.) If things have changed since then it is only for the worse. Standards have deteriorated but the deterioration has been deliberate not accidental.

How have we managed to forget that in the 1930s the Nazis deliberately starved and dehydrated elderly and vulnerable patients because they were regarded as a useless burden on society?

That is exactly what we are doing today. Starving and dehydrating elderly and vulnerable patients is now official NHS policy – dictated by the Government and accepted by doctors and nurses.

And it seems that no one in either the medical or nursing professions gives a damn.

An astonishing (and horrifying) survey conducted among readers of the journals *Nursing Standard* and *Nursing Older People* showed that fewer than one in six nurses said that nothing would prevent them from reporting abuse of older people in their care. In other words five out of six nurses would, at least sometimes, fail to report abuse of the elderly people they were being paid to look after. So, in my view, five out of six of nurses aren't fit to be nurses.

Would these same nurses ignore the abuse of children so easily?

I suspect not.

This is utterly appalling and an indictment of the modern nursing profession.

The same survey showed that six out of ten nurses admitted they would turn a blind eye to the abuse of the elderly. They would say nothing if they knew that an elderly patient or care home resident was being beaten, bullied or robbed.

Why are nurses failing their patients?

One reason is cowardice.

Unbelievably, it seems that nurses are frightened to report abuse in case they themselves are abused by the person doing the abuse.

Oh, please.

Another reason is, apparently, 'fear of misinterpreting the situation'.

What sort of politically correct garbage is that?

Hospital patients and nursing home residents now regularly suffer malnutrition and dehydration, abuse and rough treatment, lack of privacy, neglect, poor hygiene and bullying.

No one bothers to make any effort to find decent ways to encourage the frail elderly to keep their minds and bodies active. There are heaps of excellent electronic games available which help to delay the onset and slow the deterioration of Alzheimers disease. And there are heaps of imaginative and interesting things the elderly bedridden can do to keep their hands occupied. But in most nursing homes the residents can expect nothing more than a once a week Bingo session and a desultory and boring exercise session led by a disinterested teenager.

The sad thing is that too many modern nurses are lazy, stupid and incompetent. (I am as sad that this is true as I am to have to report it. Most nurses over the age of 40 would, I fear, agree with me.) Too many are far too self-important to do anything other than stare at a computer screen all day long. In my view, nurses who say nothing when they see abuse are as guilty as the abusers. A once great profession is, today, in a worse state than it was in the days of Dickens.

Ageism is now endemic in health care. A reader wrote to tell me that when she visited her doctor complaining of painful knees her doctor told her, very abruptly, that her problem was that she was living too long. She was devastated. 'It wasn't said as a joke,' she told me. 'He meant it.' In the months before he died, my father repeatedly complained: 'People treat me like a fool because I am old'. A 79-year-old reader told me: 'If you are over 55 they want you dead because you're too expensive alive.'

We now live in a world where it is considered acceptable for men and women to have to share a ward; where hospital bathrooms are so dirty that patients dare not use them; where dentists are so scarce and expensive that people have to resort to pulling their own bad teeth with the aid of a length of string tied to a doorknob. Health care in Britain is appalling. The infrastructure simply cannot cope with the demands upon it.

But it is the elderly who, above all others, are regarded as disposable and irrelevant. It is the elderly who have no rights. Sexism and racism are outlawed but ageism is not. Indeed, ageism is now a State sponsored prejudice.

Even the courts have accepted that the elderly have no rights (but plenty of responsibilities). Violent, feral youths who are caught assaulting elderly law-abiding citizens are likely to be 'punished' with a fistful of vouchers entitling them to a handful of free CDs (the lyrics of which may well encourage more violence) but honest, elderly citizens who, cannot afford to pay their council tax bill will end up in prison.

When doctors and nurses are employed by (and therefore 'owned' by) the Government then the Government's priorities take over. And so the elderly, who are regarded as an expensive burden, are considered expendable.

What a bloody country.

30

We went to London for the day.

I had not visited the National Liberal Club in Whitehall for over a year and during that time the club had changed its locker system. Among other things I keep a jacket and tie in my locker in case I or a friend should be in London improperly dressed and in need of emergency clothing. I also keep a pile of books there, and a small bag containing overnight paraphernalia.

A member of the club's staff had been kind enough to move my books, clothes and soap bag out of the old locker and, since the new lockers are considerably smaller than the old ones (gosh, what a surprise that is) into two of the new lockers.

I couldn't for the life of me remember what had been in the locker so I thought I ought to take a look, tidy things up a bit and throw out any rubbish. When we got to the club I was impressed by the neat way in which all the books had been arranged. My jacket was hanging up on a hanger and everything looked very well kept.

A small pile of banknotes and coins which I had put into the locker for emergencies had been placed on a shelf in one of the new lockers and it was with some horror that I realised that some of the coins and notes were old, pre-decimal currency. The notes were crumpled and the coins tarnished, and since none of them was of any value to a collector and the coins were no longer likely to be honoured by the Bank of England I threw them away. I've heard of people 'throwing money away' but it was the first time I've actually done it.

I looked around the club, which is situated in Whitehall and I couldn't help feeling that it had lost its charm. It now seems to me rather harsh and business-like and they have now decided that although I live nearly three hours away from the centre of London I must pay subscriptions as a 'town member'. I've been a member for nearly half a century but I don't know why I stay a member for the annual fees are astronomical and in recent years the club seems to me to have become too closely allied with the awful Liberal Party and its equal awful members. The last time I had dinner there I ordered champagne for my guests and when I found that the first bottle was warm I asked the waiter, a remarkably rude individual, if we could have an ice bucket. He glowered at me and announced, in a loud voice, that the club only provided ice buckets with the most expensive champagne. I have not eaten in the dining room since. The front of house staff, who were perhaps trained at Fawlty Towers, seem to me to regard the club as their domain and the visiting members as intruding and unwelcome guests. 'Oi!' shouted one club employee who wanted to attract my attention.

After leaving the club we wandered up to Piccadilly Circus because for some time we have both been keen to visit Ripley's Believe It or Not exhibition.

It was as astonishing as the advertisements claim. When I was a boy I remember Ripley's fascinating cartoon strip appearing in a host of magazines and newspapers, and the organisers have put together a remarkable collection of exhibits which does not disappoint. My favourite item was a commode which belonged to Benjamin Disraeli and which had a picture of Gladstone on the bottom of the bowl. All the usual things were there, including a model of the world's tallest man. At six foot three I'm quite tall but I felt dwarfed. How on earth could Robert Wadlow go through life being an inch short of nine feet tall?

After Ripley's, we wandered through Chinatown in Gerard Street. In a store selling the usual variety of souvenirs and knick knacks, I purchased a few small items. The elderly Chinaman at the till seemed gloomy and disinterested. And then Antoinette thanked him in Mandarin. The change in him was extraordinary. He looked up from the till and smiled at her. He said a few words. Antoinette replied. The look on his face was wonderful to see. The two of them had a pleasant chat for a while. Antoinette was beaming when we left. She's been learning her Chinese from audio tapes and DVDs and this was the first time she's had the opportunity to try out what she had learned. (She did try with a Chinese man in Chippenham but he turned out to have been born in Birmingham and to be unable to speak a single word of Mandarin. ‘Sorry, love,’ he said with a black country accent, ‘but I don’t speak that stuff.’ That was quite a disappointment.)

The old man told her that he once won a national table tennis tournament in China. He told her too, with clear delight, that the English had invented table tennis when Victorian gentleman played with cigar box lids and champagne corks. I don’t think there is a game on the planet (apart from golf) that didn’t originate in Victorian England. I fear that wealthy Victorian gentlemen had a good deal of time on their hands. Sadly, although the English invented just about all the sports in the world (team and solitary) they soon fell behind players from other countries because they considered it un-gentlemanly to practise or, indeed, to take winning seriously.

Today, English teams have professional coaches (usually born outside the country) but there is still this feeling, deep down, that practice is akin to cheating and winning is slightly improper. And so we lose.

A fellow member of the MCC once explained to me that this doesn’t matter because every individual game is simply a skirmish in a never ending war. If the bigger game is never over then you really can’t ever lose. (You can’t win, either, but that is, perhaps, a price worth paying for never having to lose.)

From Gerard Street we walked south to Trafalgar Square, looking for somewhere to have a coffee. We were pleased when we found a Caffe Nero since most of their establishments are pleasant, peaceful and welcoming oases. But, sadly, the café on Trafalgar Square was none of those things. It was not the fault of the staff. It was entirely the fault of the customers who were noisy, pushy and aggressive. We drank, nibbled and left as quickly as we could.

We had to go to Kensington for a short meeting so while we were there we decided to pop into Harrods. The store no longer has a pet department (kittens for £1,000 were, I seem to remember, something of a speciality) but they have the best toy shop in the United Kingdom (better even than Hamley’s in Regent Street in our view) and we wandered round for a couple of hours admiring the new, the old and the staff members who were having tremendous fun showing off what some of the toys could do.

Anyone who is feeling glum should, I think, visit the toy department in Harrods for a pick-me-up experience.

By the time we arrived at Paddington to catch the train back home, we were ready to leave. London is a dirty, scruffy place. The streets are littered with rubbish, though this is hardly surprising because the city saves money by having no rubbish bins.

The official excuse is that rubbish bins would be dangerous if terrorists put bombs into them. Or maybe the council is concerned that terrorists might use the bins for money laundering. Whatever, as excuses go this one is very miserable and unconvincing. Paris has the same threats but the streets there are well stocked with rubbish bins.

London is a sad and miserable city today; hardly anyone speaks English and the vast majority of people are bad-tempered and in a mad rush. I used to love London and, in the 1970s, when I edited a magazine, I spent a good deal of time there. I lived in my club for a couple of days a week and worked in Wardour Street. For the rest of the week I worked in Leamington Spa as a general practitioner.

I remember that when I was the doctor on Britain’s first breakfast programme, TV AM, I was still working as a GP in Leamington Spa. I used to drive to Coventry station and catch the train to London Euston where a cab would be waiting to take me to the TV studios. I’d then do the morning spot live at around 8.00 a.m., grab a bite of breakfast and take a cab to Euston where I’d do the journey back to Leamington Spa, getting there in time to do a morning surgery at 11.00 a.m. This used to confuse patients who had watched me live on TV AM that very morning.

For a while, I also recorded television shows in Glasgow which were broadcast on BBC1 in the early afternoons and recorded shows in Birmingham for ITV which were broadcast at tea time. Most days I’d also be on the radio somewhere. Some months I would travel to London every day of the week and knew all the train staff and cab drivers by name. Unlucky viewers and listeners would be swamped with my face, voice and opinions. For a few years I was never quite sure where I was or what I was doing.

Eventually I gave up general practice because I thought, rightly or wrongly, that I could do more good preaching to the world at large than sitting in the surgery.

These days an occasional day in the capital is about as much as I can manage. I know I have changed. But I think London has changed a good deal too. And although I sincerely hope I have changed for the better I’m afraid I don’t think that London has improved.

May

1

I discovered today that if the Green Party (which, judging by its policies, really ought to call itself the Red Party) wins the coming general election, they intend to limit copyright to 14 years. Authors who have written books will only be able to claim royalties for this length of time before their work becomes public property. This is absurdly unfair and seems to be inspired by a peculiar hatred of those who earn their living with pen or keyboard.

I have no idea why the Greens hate authors so much but they clearly do. It is, at least, a well-balanced relationship because I don't think much of them either. Demographic studies show that most of them are *Guardian* readers and work for the civil service, or the BBC or for large, taxpayer funded charities. They have stable employment, good salaries, index-linked pensions, private medical insurance for themselves and their families and they have very little contact with, or understanding of, the real world. (Incidentally, most senior green party enthusiasts and other civil servants worry very little about the continuing decline of the NHS because they themselves have private health care cover. What they do not realise, perhaps, is that in an emergency everyone has to rely on the NHS and its overladen, unfit for purpose, accident and emergency departments.)

As far as authors are concerned, what the Greens fail to realise is that it is by no means uncommon for a book to sell very few copies for a decade or so and to become popular only because another book has been published or because attention has been drawn to the volume by outside forces.

And what about books which are published in a series?

The early books in the series would be out of copyright just as the series started to win fans.

Life is hard enough for authors. I know that quite a number of my books have been stolen lock, stock and barrel and published abroad without my permission and without my ever receiving a penny in royalties. And the Green Party will make life impossible.

I really cannot imagine why the Greens have picked out authors as a subject for attack but then the Green Party does seem to contain some very strange people.

Another of their policies is to support polygamy and in addition they claim that if three homosexuals want to marry one another then they should be allowed to do so. Yet another policy is to introduce free public transport for everyone. They don't say how they will pay for this obvious vote winner but I wouldn't be surprised to see them advocating free booze, fags and drugs in their next manifesto. The much missed Screaming Lord Sutch and the Monster Raving Loony Party had more sensible policies – and a better chance of winning votes.

I do support some of the Green Party's economic policies. But that's because they're the policies I put forward in my book *Bloodless Revolution*. A book on which the party wants to limit my royalties.

There is a good deal of fuss at the moment about big international companies such as Google and Starbucks failing to pay as much tax as they should. Many of these companies use a simple trick to lower their tax bills. They set up a company in a low tax country and that company is the one that makes all or most of the profit. It's widely believed that this is a new trick, but it isn't.

In my first book *The Medicine Men*, which was published in 1975, I revealed that Hoffman la Roche, a massive and enormously powerful Swiss drug company used exactly this trick to keep its tax bills low. The company that sold drugs to the NHS in Britain made very little profit, and therefore paid very little tax, because it had to pay high prices for the stuff it purchased via a company based in Switzerland.

The Swiss have always prided themselves on their greed and Roche helped set the modern standard in this regard.

2

The election approaches.

Scepticism used to be an essential quality for voters but it has been replaced by total cynicism. This is sad but, in world where professional politicians stand for nothing except re-election, and come out in an itchy rash if they are forced to tell the truth, it is inevitable; most of the British politicians are (like most politicians around the world) larger than life characters with smaller than life souls, certifiable psychopaths with no interest in anything other than self-aggrandisement and self-enrichment. These are largely people with no useful talents; renegade human beings who would be unemployable in the real world. I cannot be the only person who has noted that politicians are infinitely more likely to be arrested and imprisoned than any group of citizens.

(Incidentally, the latest incarnation of Sherlock Holmes on television suggests that Holmes is a sociopath or a psychopath. This is arrant nonsense. Sherlock Holmes is a perfect example of a Victorian English gentleman: cold, aloof, arrogant and self-contained. No more and certainly no less. His chum Dr Watson is, in comparison, just very middle class.)

It is also a sad fact that political parties can easily be influenced by individuals or companies. Even I can claim to have put a toe into these shark infested waters. A decade and a half ago I mentioned to a few members of the UKIP hierarchy that I would support UKIP if they included opposition to hunting in their manifesto but that I could not support the party if they did not. After some discussion the manifesto was amended accordingly. The party was quite small then and, I suppose, rather desperate for supporters. (I haven't looked recently and they may well have changed the policy on hunting again.)

The basic trouble with politicians these days is that they all want power for its own sake and have become overtaken by their own greed.

Olden time Prime Ministers are remembered for their eccentricities. The Duke of Wellington is remembered for his boots. Gladstone is famous for his bag. And Sir Anthony Eden gave us a soft hat.

In contrast, the appalling Edward Heath will be remembered as a traitor who sold out his country for a bagful of money, Tony Blair will be remembered as the greedy, lying little shit who gave himself the right to spend other people's lives and took us into an illegal war for personal profit, knowing that for the rest of his life he would receive taxpayer funded police protection. Blair always sold himself as the man of the people but, inevitably, this was a lie. In 2001, for example, Blair won an election with the support of just 25% of the voters. The other 75% were not convinced by his smarmy smile. Even when Blair was in his pomp, and before he was exposed as a liar and a war criminal, most people in Britain wanted nothing to do with him.

It is interesting, incidentally, that on three occasions Blair's career has been helped enormously by sudden deaths. In 1994, John Smith, the Labour party leader died suddenly and unexpectedly and a couple of months later Blair became leader of the party. In 2003, Dr David Kelly, died suddenly and unexpectedly in what was, at the time, regarded as a very suspicious death. Kelly had questioned Blair's claim that Saddam Hussein had 'weapons of mass destruction'. And then in 2005, leading Labour MP Robin Cook also died suddenly and unexpectedly. His death is still regarded by many as suspicious. At the time of his death Cook was a leading figure in the protest against Blair's illegal invasion of Iraq. Obviously, these deaths are nothing more than a strange coincidence but they do suggest that Blair was a very 'lucky' Prime Minister.

(Incidentally, if Blair had been a Little Englander, and had not believed in interfering in other country's internal problems, we wouldn't now be the world's number one terrorist target. The phrase Little Englander is used as a term of abuse by those who believe in a more imperialist attitude to the world but, in reality, being a Little Englander simply means behaving politely and decorously and not sticking your nose in other people's affairs.)

Gordon Brown (the subject of my book Gordon is a Moron) will be remembered as the rabid, professional Scot who is now reckoned to have cost the country £230 billion during his years of incompetence and inefficiency and who bankrupted England out of a misplaced sense of north of the border patriotism.

And David Cameron, an effete public relations man who would serve his country better by flogging aftershave and hair tonic, is hardly noticed now except to be regarded as a man without true passion; a man who has apparently never had to fight for anything in his life, and therefore doesn't really know how to fight. Maybe he doesn't care enough about anything to fight for it? Cameron won't be remembered at all except for handing over government policy, and those bits of our country which are not run by unelected bureaucrats in Brussels, to unelected crooks in the House of Lords. (At least the crooks in the House of Commons were subject to some sort of electoral process.) Cameron may be a Tory in name but since being elected he has done nothing but tax the middle classes, discourage private pension investments, discourage entrepreneurs, give vast amounts of overseas aid to countries which neither want nor need our money, legalise same sex marriage, constantly reduce freedom and privacy by introducing a seemingly infinite variety of unpopular legislation, promote and endorse the policies of the much hated European Union, destroy the nation's defence capability while starting endless new wars, constantly increase the nation's debt (while lying and claiming that he was doing the opposite, worry endlessly about the myth known as climate change and endanger the nation's energy stability by closing power stations (on orders from the EU) without introducing any adequate replacements. 'Cameron is not a Tory,' said the excellent and perspicacious Nigel Farage, leader of UKIP. 'His priorities are gay marriage, foreign aid and wind farms.'

(I no longer believe the climate change theories which are now so popular. There is no small irony in the fact that in the beginning I used to be a passionate believer in climate change. I was writing about it when it was called global warming several decades ago, and being widely vilified for it – probably by the same people who are now enthusiastic 'believers'. Even then the whole issue wasn't new. Climate change was first written about by a Swede called Svante Arrhenius in 1896. He predicted that fossil fuel emissions might delay the onset of another ice age. There are many things I don't know (and many more which I will never understand) but the things I know I try to understand as well as I can. I have, during my life, studied many medical and scientific controversies and tried to analyse the truths and see through the lies, the deceptions and the politically convenient half-truths. As a scientist I have absolutely no doubt that the climate change scare, and the argument that if the climate is changing it is a man-made phenomenon, have no more truth behind it than the AIDS scare which was promoted with such enthusiasm in the 1990s. The climate change myth makers are part of a huge and profitable industry and most of those promoting the myth have a vested interest in its survival and its growth. There are books to be sold, television programmes to be made, conferences to organise and billions to be made out of building wind farms and solar farms. I am sad and angry about the way the truth is distorted but I honestly don't know which of the two is the most dominant emotion.)

Cameron is so taken with the principles of fascism (as originally outlined by Mussolini and now practised by the EU) that his Government allows large multi-national companies such as Google to avoid paying more than a token amount of tax, allows hedge funds and corporate goliaths to claim tax relief on all the interest on all their gearing (or debts) but has punished small, middle class investors, small businesses and entrepreneurs with a series of draconian tax laws designed, quite deliberately, to put them out of business.

Cameron and his sidekick George Osborne are weak; men of privilege without any understanding of or sympathy for the people who put them in power.

Political office should only really be held by men and women who don't really want it, and who are pushed into it by a sense of duty and public service. There's not much of that around these days.

It does not help that politicians do not have the time to think before they speak or make decisions. Modern politicians are so desperate to be the first to tweet an opinion that they rush in without reading or thinking before forming an opinion. Meanwhile, the country declines daily. It is a long time since Britain was a world power. Britain is so poorly equipped these days that the country has a smaller army than it had in Victorian times. Britain could not fight a war with Switzerland because they have twice as many battle tanks as we have has. And if the Ministry of Defence in London wants to know if there is an enemy submarine coming up the Thames, they have to phone and ask someone in Paris since Britain now relies on the French for this sort of thing. Britain does have plans to build two aircraft carriers but there are no plans to make or buy any aeroplanes to put on them so they will be useful as mobile football pitches but little else.

Despite all this, our politicians have kept us at war for much of the last thirty years.

3

We have been re-watching a series of Keith Floyd cookery programmes. We never take any notice of the Great Man's recipes (most of them involve bits of dead animal) but we both love his eccentric approach to television. Other people add their errors, fluffs, screw ups and so on to their DVDs as extras (not realising, perhaps, that their fluffs are neither amusing nor worth keeping) but Floyd kept all his outtakes in his programmes and the programmes are infinitely the better for it. Like all great entertainers, Floyd was probably impossible to live with. But there has never been a better, more watchable television chef.

4

One of the extraordinary things about this year's general election is that it will, to a significant extent, be decided by a lottery win.

In 2011, Chris and Colin Weir won £161 million on something called EuroMillions. Since then they have given millions to the Scottish National Party and to the SNP's campaign for independence. They were by far the largest contributors to the campaign for an independent Scotland and gave around 80% of all the money donated.

Their luck and enthusiasm has without a doubt made a huge difference to the SNPs campaigning programme – it has for example, helped pay for the helicopters Nicola Sturgeon delights in using.

And so the bottom line is that a lottery win will have a tremendous influence on whether or not the United Kingdom continues to exist and precisely how Britain is ruled for the next few decades.

To cheer us both up, I bought Antoinette a pink flamingo which yodels and does a hula-hula dance with its neck. This is what progress is for. I'd be happier to put my future into the hands, or rather wings, of a yodelling flamingo than into the hands of any of our current crop of politicians.

5

I bought a pile of old library books the other day and I was astonished to discover just how many of the books had been annotated and marked with under-linings and so on. It is perfectly reasonable for a book reader to do this with his or her own books (particularly paperbacks which are often so badly made these days that they are pretty well disposable after a single reading) but it alarms me that so many people seem to think it is acceptable to put their personal scribbles and marks on library books which are, by definition, meant for other people to read.

Still, I don't suppose this particular problem will last for much longer for I see that libraries are, as I predicted some years ago, now lending out ebooks. Naturally, authors receive no payment for this.

It is no wonder that the average professional author now has an income of around £11,000. If the Green Party has its way, that modest income will be halved.

When libraries have really got into the swing of lending ebooks there really won't be any need for them to bother lending physical books. Local authorities will be able to sell their unwanted library buildings (most of which, although beautiful, will be knocked down and the land used for flats), fire their librarians and sell the stock to people like me.

When I was a boy I used to spend hours in Walsall Public Library. I spent much of my summer holidays there. The rest of my summer holidays I spent reading the books I had borrowed. I would ride my bicycle several miles to town, fill up my saddlebags with books, cycle home and settle down to read my way through the next instalment of the library's shelves.

It is oh so much easier to browse in a decent library than it is to browse online.

6

We spotted an advertisement for a house we liked and went to look at it today. As we wandered round the woman owner spotted that Antoinette was wearing a Rolex and instantly pulled up her own sleeve and pointed ostentatiously to the watch face to show that her Rolex was gold and had diamonds around the face. She ran her finger around the rim of the watch, pointing out each diamond in turn. 'Mrs Rolex with Diamonds'. To be honest I thought that the addition of the diamonds turned a good, solid timepiece into the sort of tacky watch that crooks, conmen, foreigners and successful brothel owners might choose to wear. What startled me, however, was not the watch itself so much as the woman's rather desperate need to display it in such a crude and garish way. Having shown us her awful watch she then pulled out a cruise brochure and proceeded to extol the joys of big ship cruising. Later when we were taken on a tour of the house it was as though we were being shown around a stately home by a tour guide. She showed us her racks of posh frocks, explained which ones she took with her when she went cruising, and then generously gave us a tour of her suitcase collection. I was disappointed to see that there was nothing in the collection which Mr Vuitton would recognise as his own. She told us with great pride that twice a year she had to go into a jewellery shop to have her watch corrected. Antoinette showed her just how she could do this herself but she wasn't interested.

She showed us their undoubtedly expensive log burner and explained that they always kept the doors firmly shut because the burner was more efficient that way. 'Besides,' she said, 'it doesn't give out all that nasty smoke if the doors are kept shut.' Oh piffle, say I. There are few greater simple pleasures in life than sitting watching logs burn and being able to hear the crackle of the wood and to smell the wood smoke. There really are few aromas more attractive than wood smoke. The doors on a log burner should be there only to aid in getting the fire going, not to be kept shut when the fire is ablaze.

Later, we asked the estate agent if the house had ever flooded.

'Well, it depends what you mean by flooding,' said the agent.

'Water inside the house,' I suggested. 'That's what I would mean by flooding.'

'Well, yes,' admitted the estate agent. 'If you want to use that as a criterion.' He pulled a face to make it clear that he thought I was being quite unreasonable. 'But the water never went upstairs.'

Estate agents and house owners lie, lie and lie again these days. Lying well is the only real qualification required to sell houses for a living. Astonishingly, you need more training to be a traffic warden or beautician than you do to become an estate agent. All you need, in addition to the ability to lie well, is arrogance and an innate sense of majestic superiority to the rest of the world. Oh, and a complete lack of moral fibre.

Anyone can set up as a seller of houses and anyone does. And I'm not surprised. It's a terribly easy way to make money – and with house prices constantly rising, the estate agents are beating inflation every year. If you set up as an estate agent and sell just 10 houses for £250,000 each then, with 2% commission, you will earn £50,000. The commission on a £1,000,000 house (a fairly ordinary three bedroom home in London these days) will earn you a fee of at least £20,000.

You need a licence to clean chimneys, varnish nails or walk dogs and you probably need one if you intend to earn your living giving blow jobs in the back of your car but any idiot can set up as an estate agent and any idiot does.

It seems strange that our lives are ruled by regulations and yet there are no significant rules governing the sale of houses. For most people the home they buy will be their biggest investment and yet estate agents are allowed by the law to lie, cheat and deceive without let or hindrance.

Since their income has risen directly in proportion to the absurd rise in house prices estate agents or realtors are, apart from the bankers who caused the financial crisis in the first place, the only group in Britain to have suffered not at all since the monetary collapse of 2007. Lottery winners are more deserving of their riches than these two groups.

(It is a myth, by the way, that house prices have risen across the entire country. We have just sold a house which we owned in Somerset in the English West Country. After ten years of ownership, and considerable expenditure, the price we received for the house was 20% less than the price we paid.)

Mind you, some home owners lie just as much as their agents.

Antoinette and I once bought a house which had a large cellar. The previous owner swore blind that the cellar never flooded but within a week of our moving in there was three foot of water down there.

‘Oh, didn’t they leave you the pump?’ asked a neighbour. ‘They had a pump which they kept for getting the water out of the cellar.’

That neighbour was a strange fellow. He dressed as if it were always 1969 because that had been a great year for him and so he wanted to stay in his year of greatness. He bought his clothes from junk shops and jumble sales and controlled his Jack Russell terrier with a piece of old string; the fluffy stuff that always looks as if it is about to fall apart. Charity shops never had anything old enough and he couldn’t afford vintage clothing shops.

Inside the 1960s clothes there was an old wrinkled man but inside the old out-of-date clothes and the wrinkled old out-of-date body there was, I suspect, a 29-year-old still enjoying his best year ever, the only one really worth remembering.

I remember that he had worked for several decades as an auctioneer and every time he spoke he talked as though he were auctioning something really exciting. I used to get myself feeling excited, and ready to bid, if he told me the weather forecast.

I also once knew a former race course commentator. After 40 years of race calling he always spoke as though he were commenting on an exciting three mile chase for three-year-olds. He was very good at his job and could have made a one horse racing interesting.

Tommy Vance, a disc jockey who presented rock and roll programmes, had a deep, rich, rock ‘n roll voice and whatever he uttered sounded exciting. He could make ‘Would you like a cup of tea?’ sound as if it ought to be followed by something recorded by the Rolling Stones.

And a BBC newsreader, who was for many years a good friend, always made everything he said sound terribly important. When he said ‘Would you like a cup of tea?’ it sounded like a declaration of war, an announcement from the Prime Minister or news of a major disaster in the Far East; a statement that deserved our full attention.

But this fellow, the one who was stuck in 1969, was a former auctioneer and so he was always selling old brown furniture, glum paintings and scruffy looking rugs.

The other thing I remember about him was that he tended to repeat himself, rather like a recording that’s been put into a never ending loop. We all of us repeat our favourite stories but we usually have the decency to wait a week or two before repeating them. He didn’t. He would get to the end of a story and then with hardly a pause start the whole damned thing over again – all done at top speed.

When we first spoke to him he told us that there had been a murder in the house we were thinking of buying and explained, in great detail just where the dismembering had been done. When he’d finished telling the story he started it again and went through it virtually word for word. Living next door to him would have been a nightmare. Living with him would have turned a saint into a murderer. I felt deep sorrow for his wife, whom we glimpsed wandering around their garden. She was carrying deadly looking secateurs, which she never put down, and I dare say after hearing the same damned stories retold time and time again without a break she probably felt like pruning his tongue.

He seemed very pleased to be able to tell us all this stuff though we later discovered that the murder and the dismembering had taken place in a house a quarter of a mile away.

‘You don’t say much!’ he said to me, as we left. He seemed unaware that with him talking there wasn’t room for anyone else to say anything.

‘I’m a writer,’ said. ‘I don’t like wasting words. I might need them later.’

7

The election campaign continues and it is well-known among British journalists that the EU, together with its propaganda arm the BBC, has fought hard for a Labour victory.

The EU was alarmed by the prospect of a Conservative victory (and the promised referendum on whether Britain should retain its membership of Hitler's favourite organisation) and would love to see the Labour party form an alliance with the Scottish Nationalists. Such an alliance would probably lead to the break-up of the United Kingdom – something the EU is very keen to see happen.

But the election is a dull business. The truth is that modern elections involve a load of idiots, most of whom don't know anything, hectoring a lot of people who don't give a toss about anything unless it's free or fattening.

8

We booked a self-catering holiday on the south coast but for reasons which are too boring to tell we couldn't make it. When I cancelled the trip we did not receive a refund for the holiday and nor did we receive the £25 surcharge we had been forced to pay for the flat to be cleaned after we'd left it.

Afterwards I asked if the £25 could be returned since we hadn't been to the place and so couldn't have dirtied it. The request was ignored and the money unforthcoming.

I wrote a review of a place we hadn't visited and in my review I included a trenchant criticism of the relevant Trip Advisor policy which seemed to me to be both outrageous and quite unfair.

It was no shock at all when Trip Advisor sent me an email declining to publish my criticism. Like most bullies they can dish it out but they can't take it.

9

Yesterday, in London, young so-called revolutionaries daubed obscene slogans on a memorial for women who died in the two World Wars. As far as I know no one was arrested, no one was charged and no one was put in the stocks to be bombarded with rotten eggs and putrid fruit.

I do, however, remember that when a young woman stood peacefully at a war memorial in London and read out the names of soldiers who had died in Blair's Wars she was arrested, charged and duly punished.

These are strange times.

10

Antoinette was today sent one of the new contactless cards which banks want us to use instead of cash. The idea, I gather, is that you wave the card around in the vicinity of a card reader in a shop and payment for the item you have bought will be taken, automatically and immediately, from your account.

Only the idiots who work in our banks could fail to see the problems lying ahead.

I have no doubt that crooks will obtain the card readers and walk up and down queues, or simply stand on crowded trains and buses, and suck money off their fellow travellers. They will be rejoicing. Banks will, of course, refuse to refund money lost in this way unless the individual concerned can prove that it was stolen by producing a non-existent receipt.

Antoinette has bought us both aluminium credit card cases, which will protect us from this eventuality.

Meanwhile, I intend to continue to use cash for everything and to leave my credit cards at home, safely locked away in an old aluminium saucepan.

11

We watched the classic 1933 film called *Calvacade*. Directed by Frank Lloyd from a play by Noel Coward, it is surely the original from which such popular television programmes as *Downton Abbey* and *Upstairs Downstairs* were derived.

Watching it made me rather sad for the almost total loss from our world of patriotism, pride, respect, dignity and loyalty.

And I know this sounds terribly old-fashioned but I rather mourn the passing of the days when strangers used to greet one another as Mr this or Mrs that until they got to know one another well enough to move onto first name terms. I confess I wince a little when 16-year-old insurance clerks call me by my first name (especially when they decline to give me their own name). This patronising and disrespectful practice is particularly prevalent in hospitals where doctors, nurses and floor sweeping staff all call patients by their first names and then become deeply aggrieved if the habit is turned on its head.

A few years ago, I wrote a novel about a character called Mr Henry Mulligan – and the Mr part of the title is a reflection of the character's search for dignity.

12

In today's *Financial Times* there is a review of a new version of *The Pirates of Penzance*. The reviewer, someone called Richard Fairman, describes the production as 'comfortably English' (as though that in itself is a sin) and ends: 'I sat bemused that grown men and women in the 21st century would want to find time for a piece as insipid and musty as this feels here. Around me, the audience laughed, chortled, cheered.'

Gilbert and Sullivan were England's greatest writers of Opera.

Would Fairman have criticised *La Boheme* because it is old and musty? Of course he wouldn't. *La Boheme*, which has jolly tunes but not much in the way of laughs, was written by a foreigner.

Would Fairman have dared been so dismissive if Gilbert and Sullivan had been Scottish? I doubt it.

Fairman is not, of course, the only journalist who seems to feel the need to sneer at England's culture.

Gilbert and Sullivan operas are hated by all highbrow critics, who are, almost without exception, derived from the cadre of self-righteous liberal Metropolitan elite who hate the English because it is fashionable to do so, and for reasons which I don't pretend to understand do this without understanding that it makes them racists.

If the *Mikado* and the *Pirates of Penzance* et al had been written by an impoverished Italian with tuberculosis and a gammy leg (an unlikely proposition because there has never been an Italian in history with a sense of humour as acute as Gilbert's) the snotty critics would fall over themselves to praise the operas and demand that they be performed nightly at the National Theatre.

This contempt for the English, and everything English, has been building for some years. When my book *England Our England* was first published over a decade ago it and I were both excoriated by many. The book was dismissed as chauvinistic and I was attacked as a racist by people who hadn't bothered to read a word I had written but who objected to the word England which appeared not once but twice in the title.

I wonder how many of the book's attackers would have dared to be so dismissive of a book called *Scotland Our Scotland* or one titled *Wales Our Wales*.

The book dealt both with England's history and the increasing power of the European Union and was hugely popular at the time because it was, I believe, the first book to draw attention to the horrors of the EU. I also drew attention to the value of the Magna Carta which gave the English people far greater rights than any of the charters, rights, acts or regulations which have been introduced by the European Union and which have all been very watered down versions of something that we already had.

The officially approved loathing of the English is now widespread.

Channel 4's economics editor, someone called Paul Masson, has been quoted as saying 'as an English person I would like to declare up front: I do not want to be English'.

Extraordinary! Master Masson is, I fear, the sort of person who makes me feel ashamed to be English. He is, perhaps, one of those metropolitan liberals who feels they have to support the opposition whenever England is playing any sort of sport.

Way back in 1941, George Orwell noted that 'England is perhaps the only great country whose intellectuals are ashamed of their own nationality. In left-wing circles it is always felt that there is something slightly disgraceful in being an Englishman'.

It is becoming increasingly common for journalists, particularly those in the left wing media such as the BBC (where it is pretty well compulsory to be homosexual if you aren't genuinely and obviously ethnic in some acceptable way) to denigrate England and to characterise the English as racist, sexist and homophobic.

In fact, there is more than a little irony in that the BBC contains far more racists and sexists and ageists than the organisation's defenders like to admit and more than is decent in any organisation, let alone in one purporting to be independent and on that is funded by the public.

The treacherous disloyalty shown by the media is espoused by ignorant buffoons who seem unaware that English inventors produced more of the world's great inventions than the people of any other country, that English writers and artists have for centuries led the world, that the Industrial Revolution was an English phenomenon and that England has always come to the aid of other, smaller countries much more speedily, and with a greater sense of justice, than any other country on the planet. England has often suffered for its selfless devotion to justice and to 'doing what is the right thing to do'.

Today, politicians love to dismiss the working class English as 'white van driving, Sun-reading, and overweight' and to dismiss them as 'sexist, racist and homophobic'. Even Labour Party politicians, who might be expected to have some sympathy with or for the working classes, love to deride them in this way.

Everything the English have ever done is dismissed as criminal and unforgiveable and English history and culture are dismissed as worthless.

This may, of course, be simply a result of the fact that the media in England is now pretty well controlled by foreigners who are, it seems, blessed with unending piety and access to an ending supply of steely certainties.

13

English footballer Paul Gascoigne was in the news again. He used to be a footballer but is now famous for being an alcoholic. It is strange how the press can make or break an individual in the public eye. I was working for the *Sun* newspaper as a columnist and as the *Sun* Doctor, when Gascoigne cried after being thrown off the pitch during a World Cup football match.

The newspaper's editors wanted to vilify Gascoigne for crying and being a wimp. But I argued that men should cry, and that letting go is a healthy way to alleviate stress. And so, instead of being condemned Gascoigne was praised to the skies. I think it's fair to say that as a result, the on-pitch tears helped turn him into a national favourite.

It's funny how the way that a story is written can change the public's perception. If the newspaper had run the story the way it was originally envisaged, Gascoigne would have been a cry baby; a scorned pariah.

We spent the evening listening to old recordings of Flanders and Swann: witty, charming, old-fashioned and very English.

14

I was persuaded to hire an exercise trainer to get me into shape (though I'm not sure what shape or why).

The trainer got me jumping up and down on the spot and generally behaving in a way that no grown man could possibly explain. (It's strange that we all say 'jumping up and down'. Unless you're in a spacecraft it is very difficult to jump up without coming down again.)

After fifteen minutes I was exhausted.

'Thanks,' I said. 'That was very good.'

He stared at me in astonishment. 'That was the warm up,' he said. 'We haven't started yet.'

'You may not have started,' I told him. 'But I've finished. I'm warm enough.'

I left.

15

I'm having terrible trouble with my sweet peas this year.

Every spring I plant sweet peas (which I always think of as the diabetic's favourite bloom) so that I can pick posies of beautiful, delicate flowers and bring them into the house for Antoinette. Things have not gone well. The first set of seeds which I planted in the greenhouse were all eaten by a mouse or by mice. He or she or they ate all the seeds which sprouted and dug up and ate all the seeds which hadn't sprouted. I planted eight trays of seeds and there should have been over 100 plants. But there were none.

So I tried again. When the weather warmed a little I planted some seeds in very large pots which I put on the terrace in front of the two pairs of French windows in the dining room. These seeds fared no better than the first. The badgers knocked over two of the pots and turned over the compost in search of good things to eat. And then they ate the seeds. The rest of the plantings were disrupted and destroyed by squirrels who found the compost in the remaining five pots a wonderful place to plant the nuts which they were saving for later. (This was entirely my own fault since I had given the nuts to the squirrels in the first place.)

So, in despair, desperation and determination I cheated and purchased a few dozen sweet pea plants from our local garden centre. I've now planted them, given them stakes to climb (made out of slim but firm lengths of hazel) and purchased a ball of string with which to tie the plants, which being sweet peas don't know how to hold on as they climb, to the stakes which will help take them upwards.

16

'Look what I've got you for your birthday!' said Antoinette, as excited as a small child. She showed me what she'd bought. 'You know all the other things I've bought you, so this is your surprise. Do you like it?' I said I liked it very much, so she put it away to be wrapped up later and given to me, as a surprise, on my birthday. This is splendid because I have reached an age where I loathe surprises of any kind.

This afternoon, God gave me an early birthday present which I was delighted to share with Antoinette. We watched a baby Great Tit fledge from one of the nesting boxes near to the kitchen window. The baby bird poked its head out of the box and took ages to pluck up the courage to fly to a nearby branch. But that first short flight gave it courage. And within moments it was off on its maiden long haul flight. What a privilege it was to see the young bird leave the nest.

We have four occupied nesting boxes this year: three containing Great Tits and one occupied by a Blue Tit family. I hope they give us good ratings with the fauna equivalent of TripAdvisor.

17

My brilliant Portugese agent has sent me contracts and tax forms for two books of mine which a publisher wants to buy. The contracts were easy enough to understand but the Portugese tax forms are incomprehensible and longer than Churchill's *History of the English Speaking Peoples*. I spent half an hour trying to understand them and then threw them into the bin. I emailed my agent and told him that I'd pay the Portugese tax rather than fight the forms. I'm sure that was the reason for the forms being so complicated. I can claim the tax I pay the Portugese Government off my British tax bill but even if I couldn't do this I don't think I would have bothered filling in the forms.

For years I have been lucky enough to have had good publishers and agents in Portugal but it hasn't always been an easy adventure.

The first time I went to Portugal my agent took me on a tour of a few interested publishers. At one of them a woman editor stared hard at me. 'Do you speak Portugese?' she demanded. I admitted that I spoke only a few words; enough to order a coffee in a café. 'Why should we publish your books if you are too lazy to learn our language?' she shouted at me. I did not know what to say. At the time I had books published in two dozen different languages. The idea that I had a moral and professional responsibility to learn all those languages came as something of a shock. Fortunately, my agent found other more amenable, less demanding publishers. And I didn't have to learn Portugese, or another couple of dozen new languages.

18

The Government has noticed that people are dying at weekends because the GP service has been destroyed and because hospitals have only skeleton staff outside office working hours.

General practice has been killed by the EU (which introduced the absurd law governing the number of hours anyone can work in a week) and the GMC (which introduced even more absurd legislation forcing doctors who retire to give up medicine completely and never so much as help out because a colleague is ill).

The internet will finish off what is left of general practice because it is now possible to obtain medical advice through the World Wide Web.

Patients can arrange a consultation and receive a prescription without leaving their bedroom. (In the old days they could do this, of course, by telephoning for a real life doctor to visit.)

General practice has absolutely no future and young doctors who don't want to work in hospital should get used to the idea that their working lives will be spent sitting in their own spare bedroom conducting absent consultations for a pittance in competition with doctors in India, China and elsewhere. Tomorrow's doctor will require a laptop able to receive filmed pictures of his or her patients. And it will be patients who will need the stethoscopes. The patient will hold one end of the stethoscope in position over their heart or lungs and attach the other end of the stethoscope to the computer.

It won't be long before doctors are able to perform distance surgery with the aid of computers and robots.

Now that they have (at long last) realised that medicine needs to be practised 24 hours a day and seven days a week, our leaders have announced that they will make the NHS a seven day service and, in order to help ensure that this happens immediately, they are going to create 5,000 new GPs.

They have not, of course, announced precisely how they intend to create 5,000 new GPs overnight. They may be a trifle perturbed when they realise that it takes at least eight years to train each one. Still, we mustn't allow boring facts to get in the way of political rhetoric.

The Royal College of Nursing has responded to the promise to make the NHS a seven day a week service by threatening a national strike. How noble.

Actually, I have thought of a way to delight the nurses and create all the promised GPs.

The Government should immediately announce that all nurses over the age of, say, 35 will henceforth be called 'doctors'. Problem solved. The nurses will be so chuffed that they won't go on strike. And the Government won't have to bother training all those extra doctors.

19

The barman in a pub in Cheltenham told me that he has to go to London for a week. He has been hired as a temporary barman in a London bar. In addition to being paid a very healthy fee, the barman is being paid all his expenses, including £100 a night for a hotel room. It seems extraordinary that there is such a shortage of bar staff in the nation's capital. But good luck to the barman!

20

I read today that, on the day of her marriage to her third husband, a man who was called John Chatterton by some and Signor Perugini by others, the American actress and singer Lillian Russell (who was famous for her interpretations of operas by Gilbert and Sullivan) gave a series of private farewell parties for four of her other admirers.

The wedding was to be in the evening and Lillian took on lover number 1 at 10 a.m. He left at noon and was followed by number 2. And so until the quartet, and Miss Russell, had all been satisfied.

Sadly, the marriage to Mr Chatterton did not prove to be an enduring success. However, I am pleased to report that Miss Russell's next husband was Diamond Jim Brady, and that marriage was a sparkling success.

21

We went into a café in Worcester today where there was a bowl of trail mix on the counter. Customers waiting in the queue took out a handful and ate it. All those dirty hands sharing the same bowl of food. I could hardly believe it. It is difficult to think of a quicker and more efficient way to spread disease. Indeed, I suppose it is possible that the bowl was put there by terrorists to weaken the native population.

I am often amazed at how ignorant people are about how bugs are spread.

A surprisingly large number of people are quite unaware that there is a close relationship between what you put into your mouth and what comes out of it again (or, indeed, what eventually comes out at the other end of the intestinal tract).

In the café, we sat at a table next to a middle aged couple. He was reading a newspaper and she was reading her text messages. 'I don't mind homosexuals,' said the man, closing his paper with a flurry of newsprint and suddenly looking up, obviously annoyed and inspired by something he had read. 'But I don't want it rammed down my throat.'

I remember that a kind and gentle man who used to work for me at Publishing House once said exactly the same thing.

22

We don't have much colour in our garden at the moment so on our way home I bought some huge plastic coloured windmills from the garden centre. I thought they might brighten things up. They're the sort of windmills children have and use to decorate their sandcastles at the seaside, but they are a gazillion times larger. One of last year's butterflies has already found them enormously attractive and this morning I spotted Lord Percival, our resident pheasant, inspecting them.

When he had given them his avian seal of approval, Lord Percival walked sedately down our lengthy garden steps.

It always amuses me to see him walk down the garden this way.

The steps, made out of railway sleepers, are deep and are quite a struggle for him but he steadfastly insists on walking down them. He has, perhaps, forgotten that he can fly.

23

This morning I dropped my spectacles and could not find them because they were on the floor and not on my nose. I could not find either of my two spare pairs, partly because I didn't have my spectacles and so couldn't see properly and partly because I didn't have the foggiest idea where I had put them except for the fact that it was doubtless somewhere safe and sensible. When I eventually found the ones on the floor, and bent down to retrieve them, I realised that one of the oddities of increasing age is that as the years go by the ground gets further and further away. This is a curious phenomenon and one which even the great Einstein would have had difficulty in explaining (mind you in his later years he was far too busy sticking his tongue out at photographers to bother himself with explanations).

Another thing I have noticed is that the ground isn't just further away, it is also harder.

When I fell when I was young I would get up, brush myself off and carry on without so much as a twinge. These days the ground is so hard that it really hurts when we come into contact with each other.

24

It poured all morning and I realised for the first time how effective a squirrel's tail can be as an umbrella. Every squirrel I saw was holding its tail over its head to keep off the rain. Squirrels use their tails for balance, as an umbrella and as a sunshade. The tail is, to a squirrel, as useful as a Swiss Army penknife.

I do like squirrels even though one of them has, this morning, learnt how to dismantle the nut feeding box and, in his eagerness to eat all the nuts at once, left the various parts of the box distributed on the ground. It is often said that squirrels are just rats with bushy tails but this is nonsense and akin to saying that Frankenstein's monster is just Cary Grant with a bolt through his neck. Squirrels behave in a very different way to rats and a squirrel will happily feed alongside any number of ground feeding birds whereas a rat will always try to kill any creature within its territory.

There is, incidentally, no such thing as a squirrel proof bird feeder.

Actually, there is probably no such thing as a squirrel proof bomb shelter.

A deliveryman arrived and, when he saw the squirrels, said he liked the red ones but didn't like the grey ones. I told him he was a racist and that the red ones do just as much harm and just as much good as the grey ones. He was the first English deliveryman I've seen for a while. Most of them are from Romania. They all drive their own cars, of course, for it is the new way among logistics companies to expect their logistics consultants to drive their own vehicles.

I actually feel sorry for the men and women who deliver parcels. It's a hell of a way to earn a living. One driver said he was expected to do 90 deliveries a day. That might be fine and dandy in a town where people live in neat rows with proper addresses but in the countryside it is nigh on impossible, and probably explains why deliveries are often several days later than was promised.

Actually, the same unknowing stupidity seems to affect the people organising grocery deliveries too; their drivers are invariably expected to make far too many calls and to do so in two wheel drive vehicles.

And even Royal Mail van drivers are expected to cope in the mud and snow in two wheel drive vehicles though something tells me that the people who send them out in such inadequate forms of transport never venture outside their nice, tidy offices unless the sun is shining and the pavements have been swept.

25

A bloke I know is planting a vine. He rang to ask if I know anyone who has a spare dead donkey. When I queried this strange request he explained that it is well known among the vine growing fraternity that you should always put a dead donkey into the ground when planting a vine. Apparently the decomposing donkey will feed the vine for years.

'For donkeys years,' I suggested, when he had told me this.

26

Our DVD player has developed strange, homicidal tendencies. It has recently recorded a whole series of programmes called *Come Dine With Me*. I haven't watched all the programmes but I span through enough of them to understand that the basic principle seems to be that a group of disparate sociopaths are brought together to eat a meal which one of their number has cooked. It is, it seems, essential that the ingredients for each programme includes a set of deeply unpleasant individuals with absolutely no social graces or redeeming features. The final aim seems to be for all the guests to do everything they can to belittle and embarrass the hard working host or hostess who will have been filmed slaving over a hot stove to produce the meal.

Programmes such as this are sometimes described as reality television but they aren't anything of the sort, of course.

I like genuine reality television, in which viewers get a chance to look into another world and see how other people live, work and interact, but faux reality television is all the rage these days and I don't enjoy that at all.

In faux reality television, the performers are all egotistical, exhibitionistic megalomaniacs. Some are just members of the public, selected for their forced eccentricities, and some are faded celebrities, desperately attempting to extend their professional lives. And they will all do anything, anything, to get more air time. Their actions and activities are scripted by juvenile producers whose basic purpose is to humiliate every one of the megalomaniacs in every conceivable way.

As time goes by, of course, the television viewers have become more hardened and blasé and so the 'performers' chosen are increasingly bizarre (to the point of being mentally ill) and their activities increasingly embarrassing.

We cannot now be far from the gladiatorial confrontations of Roman times.

How long will it be before an imaginative producer adds a lion to the mix? Or a few wolves?

Dragging chained celebrities into an arena, and giving them swords with which to defend themselves against wild animals, would doubtless attract excellent ratings.

27

I opened a new box of plastic gloves this morning, when preparing to put out the bird and squirrel food. The manufacturers had made the gloves out of impossibly thin plastic and the gloves are, like the cheap plastic bags that are popular in supermarkets, damned near impossible to open. Having wasted four minutes (I checked the clock) opening a pair of gloves I tossed the whole pack of 100 into the rubbish bin and opened a new pack, made by a different manufacturer. Thankfully these proved much easier to open and put on.

Just three minutes saved each day means 21 minutes a week and 1095 minutes a year. That's a saving of over 18 hours a year.

Since I value my time at rather more than 10 pence an hour I'm glad I dumped the useless gloves.

It is amazing how much time most of us waste on regular small chores and how much of that wasted time could be saved at very little cost.

28

A woman called Bahar Mustafa, who is apparently a 'diversity officer' (whatever the hell that is) at Goldsmiths of London (whatever that is) is apparently a keen tweeter (I just about know what one of those is).

Ms Mustafa's tweets carry the hashtag 'killallwhitemen'. When questioned about this, the unapologetic Ms Mustafa apparently said that she cannot be regarded as racist because she is 'an ethnic minority woman'.

I am mildly comforted by the thought that if I live a few more years in England I will soon be 'an ethnic minority man'.

I cannot fathom the world occupied by the tweeters; from a distance it seems to me to be a world of abuse, contempt, offence and half sentences written in old-fashioned telegrammese by belligerent, ill-informed hypocrites.

I suspect that the tweeters are the same people who, just a few years ago, used to wander the streets carrying signs foretelling the end of the world or the evils of sex, protein or bathing more than once a month. We could recognise them by their staring eyes, their vacant faces and their wild hair.

Now they expect complete strangers to be interested in their every stray thought, their every meal and the details of each subsequent bowel movement. They delight in attracting new 'friends' and 'followers' by the coachload.

29

Those who realise that 80% of our energy is, for some time to come, going to be derived from fossil fuels talk a good deal about the importance of obtaining oil from shale. Those who do not believe that the oil is running out (and that, whether we like it or not, we are going to have find alternatives) claim that shale will provide us with all the oil we will ever need.

Oh dear.

The truth is that shale oil drilling is a very strange business. After a year, a well (which has been drilled at great expense) will be producing only around a quarter of the oil it originally promised. And so another well must be drilled. It is an enormously expensive business – and one which consumes a good deal of energy.

All this is, of course, of academic interest since the explosion of the paranoia about global warming means that in future there will be far less enthusiasm for dragging oil out of the ground. In Europe, the EU will instruct us all to obtain our energy from renewable sources. Air travel will be reserved for politicians and selected celebrities. Central heating will be a pleasant memory. Lighting will be a luxury. Refrigerators and washing machines will sit idle and unused. Countries and companies which have grown rich from selling oil will have hard times.

30

Antoinette and I were watching the horse racing on Channel 4 when a well-known trainer was asked what he'd learned about the state of the ground at Haydock Park racecourse.

'Every cloud has a silver lining and it was music to my ears,' he purred.

What a wonderful mixing of metaphors.

We enjoy watching the horse racing for the people involved, rather than the racing. The owners and trainers are hysterically funny. They don't mean to be, of course, and that is why they are. There is one American horse owner who tries to dress as he imagines an English gentleman might dress but fails so miserably in this modest endeavour that he looks like a crooked banker.

I am convinced that horse racing is fixed and that the poor punters subsidise the bookies, the trainers and the richest of the owners – the ones who scoop up the big wins.

31

We watched *The Good, The Bad and the Ugly* again and rejoiced once more in the work of Serge Leone (the director), Ennio Morricone (the composer) and the three stars.

Lee van Cleef stole *For a Few Dollars More* from Clint Eastwood with a magnificent portrayal of a military bounty hunter.

But in the final part of Serge Leone's trilogy, Eli Wallach stole the movie with a startling performance which managed to combine humour, pathos and menace.

Antoinette and I spent a while thinking of actors who have stolen films despite having only relatively minor roles. Philip Seymour Hoffman stole the Ripley film which starred Matt Damon. Jack, Nicholson stole *Easy Rider* from Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda.

And then we thought of actors who never, ever had a film stolen from them by a minor player, a child or an animal. And we came up with this list: James Stewart, John Wayne, Lee Marvin, Jack Nicholson, Marlon Brando, Cary Grant, Gary Cooper, Clark Gable, Humphrey Bogart and Patrick McGoohan.

Antoinette pointed out that whenever actors want to sound important, and threatening they always lower their voices, speak very slowly and revert to McGoohan-style speak?

June

1

For years now Antoinette has been complaining about my noisy suitcase. Several years ago one of the wheels 'flat spotted' (a small pebble caught between the wheel and the case with the result that when I dragged the suitcase the wheel jammed in a fixed position – thereby creating a flat spot and disrupting the case's ability to function at speed without complaining) and wherever I went, the damned case squeaked like a demented mouse.

It wasn't a modest little squeak, which could be ignored, it was a very loud, extremely noticeable squeak and everywhere I went people stared. Antoinette refused to walk within ten yards of me when I crossed railway stations because she didn't want people to think it was her case which was making all the noise.

In the end, even I became fed up with the noise (and the fact that the case didn't drag very well) and so I bought a new case.

This wasn't an easy purchase, of course, for I had to find a case with the right sort of wheels (not too small) and with a handle that didn't take up half the storage area inside. I wanted a zipped inside pocket large enough for documents and a secure outside pocket for books, magazines and newspapers. I refused to buy anything in black or tartan, which cut out around 90% of the possible replacements. There must be enough room for my basic needs: half a dozen books to read on the train (in case we get delayed) and half a dozen notebooks, with pens (ditto).

Eventually, I found a suitable new case. And today it moved soundlessly across the long, shiny floor at Ebbsfleet railway station. But the funny thing is that I miss the squeak, I really do. And it has belatedly occurred to me that the squeak was a brilliant burglar alarm. If anyone had stolen that case I would have been able to follow him and it with ease. Actually, the wheels on my bag had a good work out today because I had to park the car at the far end of the furthest car park. I think we must have been somewhere near Middlesborough. It was a good job it wasn't raining for there are no covered walkways.

Although they serve a meal in first class on Eurostar (these days it is actually more of a snack), we stopped eating the Eurostar food after we saw a steward pick up a bread roll which had jumped off the food trolley onto the floor and put it back with the other better behaved rolls. So I bought a packet of crisps at the station. This was a mistake for the crisps tasted like rancid cardboard, though I thought I could detect traces of cow dung and postman's sock.

Afterwards, in the gents, I saw a man peeing and texting at the same time. Who said men can't multitask?

Passing through customs was the usual nightmare.

These days, travellers are treated like raw army recruits by border guards who clearly think they have been hired as sergeant majors and that it is their job to be as rude as possible to travelling members of the public.

'Move here! Go there! Be quiet! Remove your hat! 'Put your clothes on somewhere else.' 'What do you think this is? A changing room?'

All this and more have I heard. Plain, old-fashioned abuse with never a 'please' nor a 'thank you'.

Moreover, I have an entirely unsupportable suspicion that the Border Police send all their trainees to Ebbsfleet. We have discovered that it is disastrous to put our bags onto the X-ray conveyor belt within the first 20 minutes after the gates have been opened. The enthusiastic early arrivals always seem to be subjected to a comprehensive body and bag search. Standing there while a stranger fingers through your stuff is like having to watch while burglars finger your belongings and sort through your drawers.

The problem is compounded by the fact that the metal detectors at Ebbsfleet always seem to be fixed at such a light setting that if you try to go through with a paperclip in your pocket all hell will break loose. The buckle on my trouser belt never sets off the metal detectors at Paris Gare du Nord, only occasionally sets them off at St Pancras but nearly always sets them off in Ebbsfleet.

We've decided that if we get questioned yet again I will announce that I am a gypsy (and therefore a member of an oppressed and racially vulnerable ethnic minority), a member of a small religious group which does not allow its members to be touched by strangers and that I have Alzheimer's disease. Antoinette will insist that she is Welsh (and therefore ethnically vulnerable) and has Asperger's. We also have false addresses and dates to give when we are questioned about these things.

The Border Gestapo (who have clearly been taught that humour and general light-heartedness and any suggestion of enjoying life and having a good time are all clear terrorist activities) have created new rules and are collecting information about people leaving the country so that the Government and the EU know exactly where we are all at any given moment. They don't seem to care that this information, when stored neatly in an inevitably hackable computer, will tell thousands of potential burglars which homes are empty and when the owners will return.

We stood in line, waiting our turn for the routine humiliation. Only one of the conveyor belts was working, of course.

I overheard a splendid exchange.

'Does she look like a bloody terrorist?' an elderly man demanded, as his frail and elderly wife was subjected to a body search.

'What does a terrorist look like, sir?' demanded the snotty border guard, putting every ounce of emphasis on the 'sir'.

'He looks pretty much like all the other terrorists,' replied the man, ignoring the sarcasm. 'He will be a swarthy young man dreaming of virgins. He will be wearing a bomber jacket, carrying a rucksack and sweating. They always have rucksacks. It's compulsory. Look at the pictures of all the known terrorists and see if you can find any of them who are white, female, 83-years-old, suffering from crippling arthritis and severe heart disease.'

The border guard opened his mouth to say something but the round of applause I started silenced him. We all have a duty to stand up to these petty tyrants. The truth, of course, is that the border guards aren't allowed to 'profile' travellers because the people who work for *The Guardian* newspaper don't think it's sporting. What sort of chance will the terrorists have if we arrest them before they have a chance to blow anything up? And so, if the Gestapo search three rucksack carrying Arabs in bomber jackets they then have to search three white old ladies with Zimmer frames.

The incompetence of the Border Gestapo is boundless.

There are an estimated 860,000 illegal immigrants in Britain and they all got through our border controls to get here. Of course, since the illegal immigrants are illegal, the authorities really don't know how many there are. It could be two million, three million or, judging by the queues on the M25, 20 million. A recent crackdown found 349 illegal immigrants working for the Government with 12 employed by the Home Office. One illegal immigrant spent 19 months working as a security guard at the Home Office, opening the door for ministers and senior civil servants. How on earth did he mange this? How did he get past the border control guards who examine my passport so assiduously and who regularly force me to hand over my nail clippers for a forensic examination? And how did he come to get a job at all? When I ran Publishing House we were forced to take copies of passports and birth certificates of anyone whom we wanted to employ. Does the Home Office not obey its own laws? (That is a rhetorical question. They clearly don't.).

Without counting the illegal immigrants, a staggering 20% of the British population are now foreign born. There are a staggering 250,000 Russians (mostly, rumour has it, ex-FSB spies and assassins) living in London. Our culture is changing faster than most of us can cope with, and many of those who come to live in England steadfastly refuse to learn our language or to make any changes in their lifestyles in order to fit in with our way of life.

(And yet the English always find that they are expected to adapt their lifestyle if they move to another country. And most do so willingly, accepting, for example, that if they choose to live in Muslim countries then they must dress decorously and eschew alcohol.)

There are many unsuspected consequences of this massive change in our population. For example, as a result of the vast influx of immigrants, tuberculosis and other diseases that were uncommon in the UK are now endemic again. No one dares mention this because it is considered politically incorrect to do so. I read the other day that policemen had been told that they could not wear union jack pins when attending the funeral of a shot colleague because it might prove offensive. Offensive to whom?

Still, we have added a soupcon of delight to the adventure of passing through customs. I recently purchased two plastic passport folders. One is pink and has on the front a cartoon of a woman in a bikini. The other is blue and carries a cartoon of a man in ghastly beach wear, dark glasses and a large hat. His shirt reminds me of the one worn by Goldfinger in the film of the same name. He looks perfectly attired for an afternoon on Palm Beach.

The plastic covers are ghastly but they serve three purposes. First, they hide the awful EU passports inside them. Second, they enable us to tell which passport is whose at a glance. Third, they make it clear to anyone who demands to see our passports that we take none of the nonsense seriously.

I half expected that customs officials would insist on the passports being removed from their cheap plastic covers but astonishingly, we have found that every customs official who sees them is amused. Most actually smile approvingly. One actually called over his colleagues to examine the two heavily disguised passports.

When we'd finally passed through customs there was no time for a coffee so Antoinette and I sat for a while and I made faces at the surveillance cameras. There was a big notice on the wall. 'If you see anyone behaving suspiciously please contact a member of staff.' I noticed a man sitting quietly by himself and thought about reporting him. If I were a terrorist, waiting to blow up a train, I'd sit quietly by myself. He had a cheap briefcase too. Maybe terrorists have replaced rucksacks with briefcases.

On the train a waitress (stewardess, hostess, passenger management executive) mistook our refusal for fear that we were going to be charged a hefty fee for the meal.

‘It’s in with the price of the ticket,’ she assured us.

We said we knew that.

‘Calories don’t count at 300 kph,’ she said. ‘So you can’t get fat eating on a train.’

We told her that we weren’t dieting but that we simply weren’t hungry.

‘We ate at the station,’ said Antoinette.

The waitress looked at us in astonishment. I was puzzled by this until it occurred to me that she had perhaps tried the crisps.

When we arrived in Paris there was a massive queue for taxis. Why are tourists so scruffy? The British dress like refugees. You can pick them out in an instant. They have terrible teeth, bad haircuts and ill-fitting clothes. And they wear shorts and T-shirts in the summer and jeans and anoraks in the winter. They spoil the very city they are in. I think that if you visit a beautiful city you have a duty to make sure that you dress appropriately.

Antoinette and I long ago decided that we would make an effort to dress more like Americans when we are abroad. If we are ever in trouble and need help from an Embassy we will do far better to pretend to be Americans than to admit to being British. The Americans always make a great fuss over their citizens and will move heaven and earth to help them. The British embassy staff couldn’t give a damn about British citizens needing help. This is especially true if they call for help during meal times, during the night or while a Test Match is in progress.

We watched an elderly couple struggle with their suitcases, their age, their arthritis, their heart troubles and countless other burdens as they arrived and remained, apparently confused and bewildered at the head of the long queue.

As always I wondered why so many people travel with so much stuff that it looks as if they are moving house. Spare underwear and three books a day should be enough for anyone going abroad, whether on business or holiday.

And then we watched in amazement when a taxi appeared and the couple picked up their cases and sprinted across the road to beat the person at the genuine head of the queue. In an instant their age, their arthritis, their heart troubles and their other burdens disappeared. They threw their heavy looking cases into the boot of the Mercedes, leapt into the car and left the passenger who had been cheated standing along and rather shocked.

We watched a girl of about 20 do much the same thing. She had arrived with four scruffy men carrying guitar cases. One of them was huge: he looked like a house that needed painting. They were presumably musicians of the popular music variety. She ignored the queue, stepped out into the road and held up a hand imperiously. When the next taxi arrived she commandeered it, ushered her scruffy brood into place, ordered the driver to load all the guitar cases into the boot and then squeezed herself onto the back seat.

Queuing is obviously a dying social concept.

At our apartment, we checked that the boiler still worked and that the roof hadn’t leaked and I wandered out to buy bread and other essentials while Antoinette prepared our dinner. It is curiously comforting to realise that nothing much has changed in the area where we live. Even the smell never changes. Paris has a unique smell of her own; a mixture of Gauloises cigarettes, garlic, fresh croissant, red wine, Arabica coffee and expensive perfume.

Our nearest supermarket has installed a series of new, automatic tills which look remarkably like the ones which are used in British shops and supermarkets. The problem is that no one realised that in order to use these things you really need to sell goods which have bar codes tattooed upon their persons.

In Paris, fruit, vegetables, bread and so on are all sold naked so that they can be inspected and fondled by would-be purchasers and as a result none of them has a bar code. This means that unless you are only buying a pack of loo rolls or a bar of chocolate, the automatic tills are useless. So, a neat row of self-service tills stand forever idle; unwanted and unused, merely taking up space and being an inconvenience. Occasionally a member of the supermarket staff will spot a shopper with only bar coded items in his or her basket. The member of staff will leap upon the shopper and drag them, often protesting, to the self-service tills. There, the member of staff will operate the self-service till while the shopper, bewildered, stands and watches. I don’t think the self-service revolution is going according to plan in France.

So there are still queues at the tills and we all stand and wait.

2

Patiently waiting for us in Paris were two urgent and important sounding letters which I finally got round to opening this morning. The letters did not know that they were urgent and so they had sat in our mail box silently awaiting our arrival.

The first communication was from a state-approved agency which wants to come round and tell us how gas works, and is keen to make sure that we know how to turn on our central heating and how to switch off the gas when we're not using it. These people have been writing to us every few months for several years now and every time they write they inform us that they are part of some official programme and that we must, therefore, be available on the date and time detailed on their letter. We never are available on the date and time they give us and so this quaint dance has been going on for a long, long time. I tossed this letter into the bin. I'm sure that one day they will cut off our gas because we haven't passed our examinations in gas tap control. But when they do that I will ring up and tell them I am a pensioner, that I will die of the cold and that a note will be found on my dead body blaming the gas supplier. I am confident that they will then come round and turn the gas back on again. This is doubtless a piece of officious nonsense which originated with Brussels and it will, equally doubtless, soon spread to the United Kingdom too.

The French are not as enthusiastic about EU nonsense as the British are, and they ignore the rules which they find particularly offensive or cumbersome, but they are still awash with controls and diktats, mostly introduced for no good reason at all other than the delight of some maladjusted eurocrat.

The French, who know damned well that the EU is a thoroughly Nazi enterprise, recognise that the European Union is built on contradictions and injustices and that these have multiplied and been magnified in recent years. A French political journalist I know told me that the French are prepared to put up with Germany running the EU because they know that an EU collapse will destroy their old enemy. They will then be able to restore the French Franc and full sovereignty while watching Germany slide into penury and obscurity. The French are taking a leaf out of the book written by the Chinese: they're playing the long game.

The second vitally important and urgent letter was from our bank in Paris.

A few weeks earlier I had daringly transferred a few thousand pounds from a UK account to the French account. We needed the money in France to pay utility bills and so on. Almost inevitably, the modest transfer had triggered one of the scary money laundering and terrorism investigations which are so much a part of life these days.

Every time I move money between the UK and France they send me the same absurdly intrusive questionnaires. Since Barclays, the bank concerned, is one of the most crooked banks in the world (and has been fined more money than Croesus could lay hands on for fiddling interest rates and stealing from ordinary folk) this seemed more than a touch hypocritical.

The wording on the form tells me that 'banking regulations preventing the use of the financial system for money laundering and terrorism funding, requires banking institutions to regularly update information about their customers (identity, address, occupation, family status, income and assets.'

The form, which had been waiting for weeks in our letterbox, demanded a recent proof of my address (though they had sent the form to our address for which they wanted proof), and contained a stern warning that a failure to supply the information within one month 'can result in the closure of your accounts'.

The form demanded details of my profession, my status (it was a French form and in France they worry about these things) and all my licence numbers. They wanted precise details about all our investments (including details of where and how we had acquired them), our properties (ditto) and details of any forests, works of art and boats which we owned. The bank wanted to know precise details of our monthly income and our annual income and similarly precise details of any debts. And so it went on. In France the policy is: 'If it moves, tax it. If it still moves, regulate it. If it doesn't move, subsidise it. And whatever it does, make sure that a form is filled in.'

It would have taken a week to complete the damned thing so I put a note on the form saying that since I do not travel with my accounts and so I couldn't answer the questions. I also wished them a merry Christmas.

When I had posted the form I rang the bank and told them that I hoped that they understood that, despite the regulations and the threats, I was simply not able to provide them with all the information they had demanded.

'Oh, that's OK,' said the woman who answered the phone. 'We have to collect these forms every time money is put into an account or taken out of one. But don't worry. We have a lot of these forms and it will be a very long time before we go through them all. So don't worry about it.'

Phew. So that's OK then.

3

Our boiler in Paris is due for its annual service. I hate having any boiler serviced. It was no big problem back in the old days when there was a pilot light and everything needed oiling and hitting with a spanner. Boilers lasted for decades and just sat quietly in a cupboard strutting their funky stuff.

But modern boilers are all electronic circuit boards and, like motor cars, they invariably go wrong when anyone fiddles with them.

However, the small company with which we now have our emergency call out contract seemed determined to do the servicing and it is probably against at least six EU laws to refuse to allow them to come and fiddle, so I telephoned to fix an appointment for the servicing. I expected to have to wait until November but they said they would come round today which seemed pretty impressive.

In the UK, boiler servicing appointments are like appointments with a GP – you have to book up weeks ahead.

(I confess, however, that we no longer have our UK boiler serviced at all, although we pay for an annual service contract which provides this facility. Every time we have our boiler serviced it goes wrong and requires several more visits to put it right. Modern boilers really don't need annual servicing in the way they needed when there was a pilot light to be managed.)

The young man who came to do the servicing was so young that I wondered if his mum knew that he was playing truant from school. I've got blisters older than he was. He made up for his extreme youth by exuding that special brand of confidence which is commonplace among teenagers but then disappears entirely by the age of 20.

One thing I have noticed about French boiler experts is that they always seem to bring with them everything they are likely to need. They have a large bag full of tools and that's that. They don't bother lugging around computers and complex internet connections.

British boiler men, on the other hand, invariably carry at least one, and sometimes two, computers and have to go backwards and forwards to their van for any spanners and screwdrivers which they might need. They are, of course, also incapable of doing anything without an endless supply of tea and chocolate biscuits.

Anyway, to get back to Paris, the youthful engineer fiddled around with the boiler for a while (most of that time apparently being spent working out how to remove the cover and how to put it back on again) and afterwards produced the usual sheaf of forms for us to approve and sign. Thanks to the environmentally unfriendly European Union, it is impossible to do anything these days without using up a couple of trees. At least 90% of the energy sapping paperwork we are forced to collect comes courtesy of the EU; the same organisation which is forever warning us of the danger of global warming and the importance of not washing in hot water or using plastic bags when shopping.

Twenty minutes after he'd gone, Antoinette reported that there was no hot water. The newly serviced boiler had stopped working. I telephoned the company, apologised for bothering them again (as any Englishman would do) and an hour or so later the same young man returned. He managed to get things working again and then, to my astonishment, produced another pile of forms which had to be completed and shared between us.

I never know what to do with all these forms I am given. I usually keep them for a day or two and then throw them away. I am sure this is illegal but, seriously, what are you supposed to do with them all?

In England even the chimney sweep gives me bits of paper (smudged with soot, of course).

'I don't really want this,' I said last time.

'You must have it,' he said, clearly offended. 'You may need it for your insurance company.'

I accepted the form only because I felt sorry for him. There is no future in cleaning chimneys. Within five years he will be replaced by a robot who will be delivered to our door by a driverless car. The robot will climb out of the car and ring the doorbell. I will let it in and it will smell out the fireplace where it will strut its funky robot stuff.

It will then print out a pile of forms for me to keep.

4

We wandered along the Rue Mouffetard, in a part of the 5th arrondissement of Paris that we hadn't visited before.

The French capital is well preserved and, having escaped the sort of bombing which destroyed much of London, still shows the casual flaneur much of its history.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, the population of the area were largely working class, consisting of abattoir workers, skinners, tanners and dyers, and they named their local bridge the Pont aux Tripes, which is rather wonderful.

By the 19th century, the neighbourhood was the commercial and shopping centre of the Left Bank but the fumes from rotting animal waste still polluted the area. Today, the most interesting building in the area is the church of St Medard. The church itself may not be anything special but its history is certainly bizarre. The building, created in the 1400s, was paid for by the sister of Reilhac, a lawyer who was employed by French king Charles VII, and who was known by some as 'The Well-Served' and by others as 'The Victorious', though I have no idea how he got either nickname.

In return for this generosity, the priests of the new church agreed to say 261 low masses a year for Reilhac's brother. One can only assume that this number was arrived at through some fairly heavy negotiations.

'We'll say 200 low masses.'

'I want 300 if they're all low.'

'220.'

‘280. And not a mass less.’

And so on, ending up, for some inexplicable reason, with 261.

However, in the way that these things happen, the number of masses had fallen to 16 by 1736 and today the whole deal has been forgotten. The church is still there. But the rental masses have been abandoned.

Close to the church there once was a cemetery and back in the old days a huge ditch would be built at the start of every winter, to serve as a common grave for locals who died during the cold weather when the ground was frozen too hard to dig. Around 300 people a year were buried in these ditches. After nine years, as the population grew and the demand for underground space rose, each ditch would be reopened and used again.

The most famous corpse in the cemetery belonged to a young novice called Francois Paris who had a great reputation for humility. He spent his days knitting socks for the poor and died at the age of 36, utterly exhausted by a lifetime of abstinence, self-punishment and too much knitting. He was buried in the cemetery along with the poor and regarded as a saint. He actually got his own tomb. As a sign of respect, a black marble stone was laid over his tomb and it wasn’t long before the tomb and the marble stone were regarded as holy. Young girls began coming to the cemetery to eat the dirt above and around the young priest’s grave. Once they’d had their fill they would have religious fantasies and convulsions and need to be restrained. At first there were just a few girls around the grave but within two years the number had risen to 800. It was, I suppose, a bit like the girls who flock to Pere Lachaise and sit around Jim Morrison’s grave drinking wine from bottles and smoking thick spliffs. The difference is that the girls around the grave of Francois Paris would demand to be beaten (and would reportedly cry out things like: ‘Oh, how good that is. Oh, how good that makes me feel. I beg of you to continue if you can.’) When being beaten lost its attraction, they demanded to have their tongues pierced, to have huge weights placed upon their breasts and to have their bodies raked with huge iron combs. They also wanted their breasts and thighs trampled on until they fainted. Some had their breasts completely crushed and others had themselves hung upside down. They would have doubtless put pictures of themselves being crushed on Facebook if the damned thing had been invented. And they would have been tweeting endlessly. ‘I got crushed again this morning.’ ‘My breasts were trodden on by six fat men from the car factory.’ ‘I am tweeting thos while hinging upsode down. Please excuse the tryping errars.’

On 27th January 1732, the Government got so fed up with all the screaming and wailing and punishing that they had the cemetery locked and guarded to keep the girls out. The next day, an official sign appeared on the gate saying: ‘De par le roi, defense a Dieu de faire miracle en ce lieu.’ By order of the king, God is forbidden to perform miracles in this place.’ Even God is subject to the law in France.

The unfortunate girls who remained had to move to private houses and after March 1733 they had to stay indoors and keep out of sight because another law was passed forbidding those who were seized by convulsions to do any convulsing in public or in groups. This was bad news for any epileptics. Some girls were imprisoned but this merely encouraged the rest who began strangling themselves, swallowing live coals and eating leather-bound editions of the New Testament. One girl apparently had herself nailed to a board and another lived for 40 days on air which she sipped from a spoon. Bit by bit the whole area seemed to become a haven for the mildly dotty and the complete barking. In a nearby convent the nuns would meow for several hours a day, much to the distress and annoyance of the locals. The nuns were told that if they made any more noise, a gendarme would go in and whip them. The nuns, who clearly weren’t into flagellation, stopped meowing and the gendarme was doubtless disappointed.

As we walked around this extraordinary area of Paris, Antoinette suddenly decided that the hat she was wearing was too tight. It had, she said, been a little tight when we had started our walk but it had become tighter by the minute. She asked me to help her stretch it. So she took off the hat and she took one side and I took the other and we both pulled as hard as we could. Within a minute we had gathered quite a crowd of interested spectators. Not wanting to let them down, and feeling that we owed it to the area to provide some sort of spectacle, I suddenly let go of my side of the hat and as Antoinette, suddenly released, stepped backwards I shouted ‘All right, you can have the bloody hat!’

Antoinette looking pleased with her victory put the hat back on her head and the crowd dispersed.

Impromptu street theatre.

It only occurred to me later that we should have collected money. We might have done quite well. If times get hard we’ll work it up into a bit of a routine.

5

It was very hot today and so we thought we would take a walk along the River Seine.

‘There is a park we haven’t been to,’ I said. ‘The one based on barges moored on the banks just along from the Eiffel Tower.’

We’d seen the park when we’d been on the Batobus on the river and also when we’d been walking along the river bank. So there we went. It is called ‘Les Jardins flottants Niki-de-Saint-Phalle’ and it consist of five islands designed to show plants and insects. The five islands are ‘L’ile aux oiseaux’, ‘L’ile prairie’, ‘L’ile centrale’, ‘L’ile verger’ and ‘L’ile aux brumes’.

Full of enthusiasm we wandered off to take a look.

The heat made a short walk longer than we had expected. And it was a major disappointment. There really wasn’t much difference between any of the five islands. They all contained lots of nettles and thistles and other weeds of which we have an abundance in our English country garden. There were one or two bees buzzing about and a couple of sultry butterflies fluttering hither and thither, showing off their wings, and a butterfly anywhere is always a treat (there has to be a God, why else would there be butterflies), but it was a great disappointment. There are dozen other parks in Paris which offer more in the way of interesting plants and wildlife. As we stared at a bunch of tall nettles, a boat went by on the river. It was being propelled by four women but there was no one on board doing the steering. ‘Oh look,’ said Antoinette. ‘A female coxless four.’ We both laughed a good deal at that and once again attracted a small crowd. We clearly have a talent for entertaining tourists.

Since we were already by the Seine we decided to wander further along and take a look at les bouquinistes – the booksellers who sell their wares from green wooden boxes fixed to the walls which run along both sides of the river. There are 240 licence holders and between them they manage around 1,000 green boxes. The boxes are owned by the City of Paris but are allocated without charge to the booksellers. Candidates who want to take over a box or two must apply to a selection committee. Each bookseller is given the right to sell from four boxes, the main rule being that three of the boxes must be entirely filled with books alone. The fourth box can contain posters, cards, photographs and other printed flimflam.

Men and women have been selling books, prints, postcards and so on from the banks of the Seine since the 16th century. Today, most of the booksellers specialise. Some of the dealers sell books for children, others specialise in books about nature, books about film or simply books small enough to fit into a pocket. Some of the books are cheap paperbacks, some are more expensive first editions. Someone with a calculator has estimated that at any one time there are around 300,000 books for sale in those green boxes.

Two hours later we had walked as far as Notre Dame and had each bought an armful of books. Hot and tired we caught the bus home.

6

As we waited for a taxi to take us to the station, I noticed that yet another repairman has opened a shop near to our apartment. There are now 250 professionals in Paris who specialise in mending things which have broken and which would otherwise be thrown away. These repair specialists really should receive grants from the EU because they are doing a great job of protecting our planet by mending television sets, computers, refrigerators, electric razors and, indeed, just about any one of the many things we buy and use and throw away when they break down. There is now even a Repair School in Paris where students can learn how to repair stuff.

Sadly, none of this will ever be approved or supported by the EU because the fascist bureaucrats who work there will never do anything which might damage the interests of Big Business.

At Gare du Nord they now have a group of stationary bicycles, positioned around a circular table which contains plug in points for mobile phones, iPads and so on. Travellers sit on the bicycles and pedal away and the energy they expend is turned into electricity with which their mobile telephones are recharged. That is, I suspect, a glimpse of the future we’ll have when the oil runs out or, now just as likely, we are no longer allowed to use oil.

There isn’t much else to be amused by in the station. Even the boss of SNCF, which owns the place, admits that it is a disgrace though he doesn’t seem to be in a desperate rush to improve things.

Someone with neither style nor common sense reorganised the Eurostar section a while ago and to be honest I think they made it worse. They were probably Swedish or maybe Swiss. The Eurostar bit of the station is now very cramped and uncomfortable and unfriendly and not at all grand or imposing or welcoming, as all French stations used to be in the long ago days when the restaurant on the station concourse was one of the places to be seen in any Parisian quarter with a railway terminus.

To be honest, the dismal, dirty, modern Gare du Nord is a complete disgrace and about as well prepared for the hourly input of international luggage-laden travellers as a provincial station such as, say, Leamington Spa would be.

There are always queues to get through the French customs and the English customs and the baggage X-ray section. And then there’s virtually nowhere to sit before a hectic, crowded rush through narrow doors to get down the escalators and onto the train.

Each train which leaves for England carries around 200,000 weary travellers (or so it seems) and yet there are seats for just a fraction of that number in the Eurostar lounge. Weary travellers and their luggage have to play a constant game of musical chairs and no one dares get up and queue for the loo lest they lose their space to sit down. Heavens, it's a dreary, badly planned place. The French are doubtless ashamed of the place and so they should be.

7

Back in Gloucestershire, we have decided to let our grass grow and grow and grow. This isn't just to save time cutting the darned stuff (though it does save an awful lot of time) but because we want to have a nature garden again. We did this last year and found astonishing rare flowers (including some quite rare orchids) growing amidst the clovers, grasses and other plants. We even have pink, blowsy roses growing in the wild.

One bonus is that we can safely say that we won't have any weeds at all in our garden now. Since everything in our garden will be there because we want it to be where it is, nothing can be described as a weed.

8

A few weeks ago, a foreign agent whom I do not know wanted me to send him my bank details so that he could send me some modest royalty income I am apparently owed from Poland or somewhere else quite foreign. This was very nice of him but I refused to send my bank details over the internet since the whole system is controlled by crooks. These days anyone who works in finance must be regarded as being as bent as a paperclip.

I asked him to send me a cheque for whatever it is that I am owed. The cheque arrived a few days ago (minus a huge deduction made by his bank for the effort drawing up a cheque) and was waiting for us on our return. It is in euros. Today, I tried to pay this modest sum into my account. The process has now begun. There are, of course, forms to complete, signatures to be collected and promises to be made. Is it all really worth the effort?

9

The tree surgeons came today to remove an 80 foot tall dead sycamore. The tree has been pretty well completely dead for some time and during the winter it regularly shod large, dead branches. Several of the branches nearly hit the Bentley and would have probably pretty well destroyed the car if they had landed on their target.

I hate removing trees and when a farmer offered to take the tree down a couple of years ago I rejected the offer in the hope that the tree might recover. But it hasn't recovered and, sadly, it had to go.

When I telephoned the tree surgeons a couple of weeks ago, an expert aborologist came round and confirmed that the tree was dead and needed to be felled. He agreed that they would lop off the branches and then cut the huge trunk into rings. Since I have neither the time, the equipment or the energy to chop huge rings of wood into logs I asked him if they would take them away. He said they would.

The following day he rang to tell me that because we live in a conservation area and an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and heaven knows what else, he would have to apply to cut down the tree and then wait six weeks for the local tree officer to look at the application and make a decision. I pointed out that since he had looked at it, the tree had shed another couple of large branches and that one of them had landed on the nearby lane. I also pointed out that no one seemed to mind when a local farmer removed every tree he could find and turned a pleasant rural landscape into something with as much charm as a traffic island in outer London. The tree surgeon said that he understood that but that the council had said we had to wait six weeks and so we had to wait six weeks.

I telephoned the council tree officer and pointed out that branches were falling off the tree every time the wind blew and explained that the lane underneath the tree is used regularly by dog walkers and parties of school children visiting the nearby woods. Personally, I would happily shoot the dog walkers but I thought my feigned fear might prove useful.

The tree officer said he would give his decision in six weeks.

I asked him how he spelt his name.

He asked me why I wanted to know.

I told him that I would need it for the coroner if one of the branches fell and killed a group of school children.

An hour later, a surprised tree surgeon telephoned to say he'd been given permission to take the tree down straight away and would it be convenient for them to come round immediately. He said he didn't understand why the council man had changed his mind because it had never happened before. I didn't enlighten him.

I learned this trick when I was a general practitioner. I found that I could get people in positions of authority to do all sorts of forbidden things if I mentioned, in passing, that I needed their name to put on a death certificate as a cause of death, and to give to the coroner in the case of the inevitable inquest.

10

I see that *Fortune* magazine has named Vodafone the best company in the world. Giving Vodafone a best company award is as potty as giving warmongering torture king Obama the Nobel Peace Prize or giving Tony Blair a job as a Middle East peacemaker! It's like giving Mengele an award as doctor of the century or Gordon 'the moron' Brown an award for economic competence.

Vodafone is officially the most criticised mobile phone company in the UK, with more than twice as many official complaints as the next worst company. It is also a renowned tax avoiding company which is widely despised in Britain for its tax avoiding tricks.

And *Fortune* magazine thinks Vodafone is the best company in the world? Really?

Fortune does lots of thoroughly daft things but my favourite is that they publish a daily newsletter called *The Broadsheet: Daily dish on the world's most powerful women* which sounds about as sexist as you can get without actually persuading Frau Merkel and a bevy of female company directors to strip down to their doubtless sensible underwear and to pose provocatively for a saucy calendar.

(Somehow, I can't think why, but I can't see Frau Merkel being much of a hit as Miss July.)

When I went to the village shop to post a parcel I spotted a few boxes of Walnut Whips. I bought as many as I could carry. 'Let's open one of these and celebrate!' I said when I got home.

Antoinette looked puzzled. 'What are we celebrating?'

'Finding the Walnut Whips, of course!'

11

I am delighted to see that the phrase 'indie publisher', which I coined some years ago, has now become commonplace as a description for self-publishers.

Authors who published their own books were treated with great disdain by publishers, bookshops, agents and literary editors throughout the 1980s, 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century.

This was, in some ways, a rather strange phenomenon and was a result of pressure from the publishing industry which doubtless felt threatened. The fact is that authors have always published their own books and some of the greatest and most successful literary figures have published their work themselves.

Back in the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century self-publishing was regarded as sensible, practical and good business. Most successful authors did it. In the later part of the 20th century, the rise in the power of agents, the pimps who make money by bringing authors and publishers together, was one of the significant factors in the temporary death of self-publishing.

Today, thanks largely to the ebook phenomenon, self-publishing (now widely known as indie publishing) is fashionable and agents have no future at all.

A lot of snooty, self-important parasitic pimps in London and New York are going to have to find themselves proper jobs.

12

I've been reading Benjamin Franklin's autobiography. I have a couple of editions but the one I'm reading is the small blue hardback edition published by Oxford University Press, which was edited from Franklin's original manuscript. The book contains an extraordinary and quite fascinating account by John Bigelow of the 'fortunes and misfortunes' of the autograph manuscript which Bigelow himself picked up in Paris after some fairly complex and lengthy negotiations.

The book, a small pocket sized volume which I bought from a second-hand bookshop for the princely sum of 50 pence (no postage charge since I carried it home myself), is fascinating for Franklin, like William Cobbett, was a self-educated man who, when a young man, ate sparingly so that he could spend what little money he had on books.

Franklin read voraciously and became a vegetarian at the age of 16 after reading a book recommending a vegetarian diet. At the time he lived with his brother who was looking after him and Franklin asked his brother to give him half the money he spent on his board and he would look after himself. Because he wasn't eating any meat his expenditure on food dropped dramatically and he was able to spend far more on books.

At the age of 12, Franklin was indentured as an apprentice to his brother, who ran a printing company, and the plan was that he would work there, learning his trade, until he reached the age of 21. But after arguments with his brother, Benjamin left when he was just 17 years of age. His brother, considering that Benjamin had broken his contract, went to every other printer in Boston and told them all not to employ Benjamin. So the young Franklin sold some books, pretended to be running away from Boston because he had got a girl pregnant, and would be forced to marry her if he stayed, and managed to get passage on a ship for New York from whence he made his way to Philadelphia. Once there the rest, as they say, really is history.

On the internet, I spotted a book for sale entitled *How to write and publish a book in a day*. I have clearly not been working fast enough. I'm planning to write a new book entitled *How to write and publish a book in a day and have time left over to enjoy a game of golf and watch the Godfather trilogy*.

13

It has been claimed that people who miss doctors' appointments in hospitals are costing the NHS millions. This is balderdash (in polite terminology) or bollocks (in modern parlance).

The fact is that there are always massive queues in out patients' departments and patients are invariably quadruple booked (with four patients booked for the 2.15 p.m. appointment, four patients booked for the 2.30 p.m. appointment and so on) so no hospital time is ever wasted by patients failing to attend hospital appointments.

Actually, I seriously suspect that the people who fail to turn up for hospital appointments probably get better quicker, and with fewer problems, than the poor souls who do turn up.

14

We drove on the M5, and near to Cheltenham I noticed a road sign warning of impending road works that would last for 67 weeks. What on earth could they be doing to a stretch of motorway that could possibly take a year and several months to complete? Imagine the disruption, the wasted fuel, the wasted time, the cost to the nation's productivity. Why does it take so long to mend a pothole or paint a white line these days?

It took Monsieur Eiffel just over two years to build his tower. Hadrian's Wall, which is 80 miles long, was built in 14 years and the Great Wall of China, which is 13,170 miles long, took only 20 years to construct.

Most of these delays are a result of EU directives on road infrastructure and the EU's special directive on traffic. I wish more people knew that the frustrating and expensive and dangerous road delays which are now a common part of everyday life, are frequently caused by unnecessary road works demanded by unelected EU eurocrats.

The only people who benefit are the contractors who are getting very, very rich doing quite unnecessary things to our roads and road furniture.

The EU hasn't just buggered up our roads, of course.

Around 70% of all the rules and regulations councils must abide by (those affecting the collection of rubbish, for example) come directly from the handful of unelected bureaucrats in Brussels who have given themselves the power to fine any British councils which fail to obey their orders.

It would make far more sense to encourage electrical manufacturers (for example) to make products which didn't break down after six months, and end up in the trash, than it does to force consumers to waste hours sorting through their rubbish before it is dumped into ships going back empty to China so that it can be used as landfill without anyone noticing.

And still there are Britons who want to remain within the European Union! It seems to me that anyone who is inclined to vote for their country to remain in the EU should be barred from voting on the simple grounds that they are insane.

When Britons vote to leave the EU, or the EU collapses in chaos, it is going to take us years to unravel the mess the eurocrats have made.

15

We called to see an old friend called Hector. He was celebrating his 80th birthday.

When he was younger Hector was a gravedigger – the only one I've ever known.

He once told me that he used to tell his girlfriends (or whom he apparently had a great abundance) that he had an important post with thousands of people under him. This was, I suspect, a traditional grave digging joke but it was true, in a way, so he could not be accused of misleading them.

Hector has had a strange life, with more sadnesses than might be considered fair. His father was a diabetic and had heart trouble, and he was blind in one eye from a childhood accident involving a bow and arrow. He killed himself accidentally with an insulin overdose. His mother had a thyroid condition which made her very excitable and she was killed in a freak accident when she fell onto a railway line while on holiday. His brother was a technician with Cable and Wireless and was posted to the Falkland Islands . He married a local girl and was drowned while sea fishing. Hector's first wife was very attractive and won a beauty queen contest at Butlin's, a holiday camp, but by the time she was 30 she was drinking two bottles of Chardonnay a day and by the time she was 35 she was pickled most of the time. She died of liver failure. His second wife divorced him when she fell in love with her boss but the affair with the boss fizzled out and she married her divorce lawyer the minute the decree nisi was through. Six months later she divorced the lawyer and married a tax inspector who was jailed for a fraud involving one of his 'customers'.

Hector himself has been a builder, an air force mechanic, a draper, a taxi driver and a hospital porter as well as a grave digger and he's somehow managed to go bankrupt three times.

I wonder what would happen if we knew when we were young just how our lives would develop and how much heartache there would be ahead.

Hector was smoking a pipe when I saw him. It was one of the curvy stemmed Sherlock Holmes varieties. It looked rather smart, new and expensive.

'I didn't know you smoked!' I said, surprised.

'I didn't,' he replied. 'In 80 years I never so much as smoked as a cigarette. But when my daughter asked me what I wanted for my 80th birthday, I asked for a pipe. I've always rather liked the business of pipe smoking, the little tools you need to clean it out, the procedures for lighting it up and so on. And, besides, when doctors ask me if I smoke I can say 'yes' and a smoker in his 80s will help bugger up the statistics showing that smoking is dangerous.'

Sadly, it seems that his private joke isn't much appreciated. He has been told by the authorities that he cannot smoke in his own home since it is a place of work for the home help who comes in several times a week to help with the household chores.

Nazi eyes and ears are everywhere these days.

Hector told me that he has told the men and women in cheap and wrinkled suits that he longer wants anyone to do anything for him and that since he intends to continue to smoke his pipe he is banning all representatives of the State, including home helps and district nurses, from his home.

When I was a small boy I bought a report on smoking which had been published by the Royal College of Physicians. That report was the beginning of the scientific argument against smoking. Today, the anti-smoking movement has become a crusade and smokers who choose to have a fag in private have been criminalised.

I read recently that in Hull, in the North of England, a two-year-old boy was taken away from his parents after a health visitor expressed concerns about the fact that the boy was growing up in a smoky house. The judge ruled that, 'Adoption really is the only option now available to (the boy) in my view. Nothing else will do.' The judge, in a fit of unexpected generosity, then added: 'I want him to know that in my judgement his parents loved him very much and tried very hard, but they were simply not able to meet his needs.'

The world is going bonkers. No, that's not true. The world has gone bonkers.

The NHS now defines binge drinking as 'drinking to feel the effects of alcohol' and officially condemns those who drink just two glasses of wine.

We have all been instructed that we must eat no chocolate and no crisps and that our daily diet must include eight to ten servings of vegetables or fruit.

It won't be long before anyone who disobeys the daft rules will be refused treatment at hospitals, in just the same way that insurance companies refuse to pay out when motorists who drive on bald tyres have accidents or householders who don't have their chimneys swept try to claim for house fires.

And yet, what surprises me is that the meat industry has managed to continue to persuade the health fascists that eating is good for us when it is, in truth, impossible to be health conscious and to eat meat. The evidence that meat causes cancer is included in my book *Food for Thought* and is available free on my website www.vernoncoleman.com

If judges are going to take children away from parents who smoke then they really ought to take children away from parents who give them meat to eat. The evidence shows quite clearly that eating meat is a greater cause of cancer, and death, than smoking cigarettes. For over a quarter of a century I have argued that hospitals which serve meat to patients are irresponsible, that dieticians and nutritionists who recommend the eating of meat are incompetent and that television chefs who promote meat and meat products are either fools or murderers. The time will come when class action lawyers will be queuing up to start suing all these people for billions on behalf of people who have eaten meat and developed cancer. The meat industry is just as liable as the tobacco industry.

16

According to *Fortune* magazine, the boss of Pepsico, a woman called Indra Nooyi, is bringing paternalism (or should that be maternalism) back into corporate affairs.

Fortune says that Ms Nooyi 'writes laudatory letters to the parents of executives who enjoy a big success or promotion'.

I cannot imagine anything more designed to make an executive feel about five-years-old.

But Ms Nooyi does even better.

She holds two and a half day retreats every few months and invites company high flyers to spend 35 minutes telling her about themselves. At the end, Ms Nooyi sends personal letters to the parents and spouses of each executive.

Presumably she also issues an end of term report card on each employee and insists that slackers must do detention or bend over and take six of the best.

I gave quiet but fervent thanks that I do not work for Pepsico and I never will.

17

Three cold callers rang my mobile today.

The first wanted to find out if I was entitled to sue my bank for mis-selling me something or other. His accent was a trifle on the rich side and I thought at first that he was asking if my bank had misspelt anything but when I understood what he was trying to say I told him that I had already been awarded £2.5 million damages because I had been mis-sold legal assistance which I didn't need.

He seemed confused by this. When I put the phone down I heard him telling one of his colleagues about my extraordinary success. I am now probably a legend in the industry.

One billion cold calls are made every year in Britain and I reckon we get at least half of them.

I have no idea what the other two callers wanted because the minute I heard the spiel begin I asked them if they wanted police, fire or ambulance. They went away very quickly.

Since nearly all my telephone calls now come from people trying to persuade me to buy something, make a donation to a rich charity boss's pension fund or join the Labour Party, I invariably answer my phone with a piece of nonsense. Charities do most of the calling and I confess I have very little enthusiasm for most of Britain's 195,289 registered charities. Between them, they raise and spend around £80 billion a year and employ more than a million members of staff. I don't like the people they hire to stop me in the street and I don't like the way they harass me at home with mail and with telephone calls. I found out last week that each individual in the UK is approached by charities an average of 200 times a year. If you say 'yes' every time you'll go broke and be marked down as a 'sucker'. If you say 'no' you will probably be made to feel guilty. I even get annoyed by their cleverly scripted, guilt-inducing and invariably dishonest television advertisements.

Sometimes when the phone goes I say I am the Ministry of Justice and occasionally I adopt a very earnest voice and say I am the local crematorium. Sometimes I say: 'This is the doctor's surgery. Please state your name, address and the nature of the emergency.' I find that when I do this the caller puts the phone down straight away.

Another technique is to pretend to be an answering machine. That also works extremely well.

A third possibility is to pick up the telephone and say absolutely nothing. I have found that this can confuse callers somewhat. A little heavy breathing adds to the confusion.

Big charities don't really need my money at all. Many of them, particularly the biggest and most badly run ones, receive vast amounts of taxpayers' money. Astonishingly, 27,000 British charities rely on the Government to give them 75% of their money. Since many if not most of the big, successful charities spend most of the money they receive on themselves (big salaries, huge pension funds and posh offices) it is difficult to argue that the taxpayers are getting value for money.

If people want to give to charity shouldn't they have the option of doing so voluntarily instead of being forced to do so through their taxes?

Charities often waste money duplicating the work of their 'competitors' and because they receive all manner of tax reliefs they often force legitimate small businesses, such as bookshops, into bankruptcy.

Many charities spend three quarters of their income on salaries, pensions, and posh offices and in order to protect their own financial security the executives ensure that their charities maintain investment portfolios designed to protect their own interests rather than the interests of the people or causes they claim to be protecting.

I was staggered to discover that huge numbers of charity executives and aid workers now earn between £250,000 and £500,000 a year. Plus expense and wonderfully generous pension plans. Moreover, many charities spend a good deal of our money on lobbying for changes in the law – an action that always used to be illegal for charities and, indeed, still is.

Antoinette and I still give books, DVDs and clothes to charity shops but we have cut back our cash donations.

We both prefer to give money to people who are in need and to homeless individuals on the streets. I don't care if they spend the money on alcohol because it's their choice and if alcohol is what helps get them through another day then so be it. At least we know that we are supporting real people in real need and not just contributing to the pension fund of a charity executive who is paying himself £250,000 a year plus all the perks he or she can manage. The bloke in a shop doorway may well spend my £10 or £20 on a bottle of cheap burgundy but at least I can be fairly sure he won't spend it on hiring more lawyers or invest it in staff pension plans.

18

The Thatcher family has given Margaret Thatcher's papers to the nation in lieu of death duty. This seems to me to be a damned good scam. I have written to HMRC informing them that that instead of paying my tax this year I will be giving them my valuable collection of correspondence with various banks, utility companies, local councils and so forth.

I also mentioned that anyone who continues to work after they have reached retirement age should be exempt from all taxes and entitled to keep everything they earn. I hope to hear back from them by 2025 at the latest. I was quite serious about this. Those who have reached the age of 65 should be exempt from paying tax. They have paid their dues. They should no longer be expected to waste time filling in tax forms. And they should not be expected to pay tax on their pensions, their savings and anything they manage to earn in their dotage.

We are, I believe, still allowed to dream though I do not know how long this state of affairs will continue.

Attempts to give Mrs Thatcher's old clothes to the Victoria and Albert Museum proved less successful than the deal with the taxman over her old bills and receipts. The decision to say 'no' to the offer seems curiously sexist because whatever you think of her, and her politics, Margaret Thatcher was the most important female political figure of the 20th century by a country mile.

The big news today is that it has been suggested, (not as one might expect, by a bunch of self-conscious narcissistic four-year-old Nazi sympathisers in a classroom blog) but by halfwits masquerading as grown-ups, that we should all be given a new digital passport so that all our financial information can be stored, together with all our personal information, on a 'secure' website.

The word 'secure' is, of course, a cue for prolonged laughter.

When this becomes compulsory (and since it is an utterly stupid idea designed to make it easier for us to be oppressed it will doubtless become law in due course) I intend to take all my money out of all banks and financial institutions, place it in a strong box and put it into a hole in the ground.

19

England now has a new offence entitled 'possession of a sharp pointed article in a public place'. So it is presumably now illegal to walk around with a pencil in your pocket, a pin in your lapel or a brooch on your coat. The law does seem to work overtime to make itself look stupid.

20

Workmen are getting fussier. In the good old days, the lady of the house would keep workmen satisfied by providing them with regular cups of what is, I believe, known as 'breakfast tea'. She would serve the tea in large mugs and she would add milk and vast quantities of sugar without bothering to ask for details of personal preferences.

Gradually, over the years, the ritual has become more and more complicated.

The tea maker would be expected to ask all the workmen she was serving how they would like their tea. She would, if there were more than two or three, have to write down their orders on a notepad. A lot of milk for the skinny one, but no sugar. Three sugars and a little milk for the one with the droopy jeans and the visible hairy bum cleavage. One and a half sugars and no milk for the one with ginger hair and eyebrows that meet in the middle. And four sugars and a lot of milk for the boss who does nothing but mess with his mobile phone all day long and who will, half an hour after they've all drunk their tea, whisk everyone away in the white van to a more lucrative project and another round of complicated teas.

The tea was never enough, of course. There had to be biscuits too. And the biscuits had to be fancy ones; digestive biscuits which had no chocolate on them would be left on the plate, unwanted but somehow crumbled into bird food as though to send a message.

A friend of mine was once cooking his breakfast when a troupe of workmen arrived. 'Oh that smells good, I could manage a bacon sandwich,' said one. And so my friend spent the next hour cooking and serving bacon sandwiches.

It only occurred to him later that he was paying the workmen by the hour so he'd actually paid them to sit and eat the sandwiches he'd made.

All this is, of course, a purely English phenomenon. No continental housewife would dream of making tea for workmen and no continental workmen would dream of expecting it. When we first had a home in Paris, the Princess used to offer cups of tea to visiting workmen but they always declined politely and seemed to think it very strange that she should make the offer at all.

Today, I discovered that the whole tea making business has moved onto a new level.

'Would either of you like a cup of tea?' I asked a couple of plumbers who had come to attend to a recalcitrant tap.

'Darjeeling, if you have it,' said the older of the two. 'But if you haven't got Darjeeling a cup of Earl Grey will do fine. Just one thin slice of lemon.'

I tried to pretend that this hadn't thrown me and wondered if he'd notice if I gave him a cup of weak Tetley's with a good squirt of Jif lemon juice added for that unforgettable citrus flavour.

'I'll have a cappuccino,' said his companion. 'I like it with lots of froth and a generous sprinkling of chocolate on the top.'

We don't have a coffee making machine and we were, of course, quite out of Darjeeling.

'Would you prefer a cold drink?' I suggested, praying they'd go for this option. 'Squash? Coke?' They sighed and looked at each other.

They knew and they knew that I knew that they knew that I was heading straight for a one star review on whatever secret website plumbers use to rate their customers.

These days, everyone wants to rate everything and everyone wants a rating for every aspect of their lives. The internet is a huge playground for every disaffected, grumbling soul with a grudge; a huge blank wall on which to scrawl graffiti, obscene or otherwise, without any fear of redress.

The most precious, most determined and most habitual reviewers love pretending to take great offence. 'I had to wait 34 seconds for the waiter to bring the salt. My meal was ruined.' 'The article on 19th century embroidery contained no information on deep sea fishing. It has destroyed my life and has caused me seven weeks of sleepless nights.' The critics themselves must be forever perfect for they are merciless, unforgiving and spiteful, destroying businesses and lives on a whim; they rule the social media, and ultimately our lives, far more effectively than is generally accepted.

(Disclosure: when I edited the *British Clinical Journal* in the 1870s, I introduced the star system of reviewing books with one to five stars because I thought it was a simple, effective way to rate textbooks. So the habit of adding star ratings to reviews was my own damned fault.)

We don't do it online, of course, but Antoinette and I have started reviewing everything we do.

'How did you like the potatoes?'

'Oh, definitely five star. What did you think of the weather today?'

'No more than two stars, a bit of three stars in the afternoon, then back to two stars in the evening. How's your bad back?'

'Two stars all day.'

I have no doubt that young lovers race to their mobile phones after having sex in order to rate their experiences for the world to see.

'Five stars. Felt the earth move.'

'One star. Didn't feel a thing. But then it was a very small thing.'

They probably illustrate each glorious event with a naked selfie, distributed to their closest 500,000 dear friends. They will then, of course, complain bitterly when the naked selfies are passed on and shared with an even wider audience. I never believe the injured bleatings of self-promoting celebrities who protest when their naked portraits or exploits are broadcast online.

Even police forces tweet and have Facebook sites where they can keep us all up-to-date about their enquiries into the dubious sexual activities of Mr Socrates and Mr Pepys. In fact many of them are now so busy keeping up their social media profiles that they no longer have time to bother to go out of the office when citizens are burgled.

'What's the point? We'll never catch them. And if we do the courts will let them off. The prisons are too full of sex offenders.'

Millions of seemingly sane individuals spend several hours a week handing out stars like mad primary school teachers.

'I'll have a diet Pepsi,' sighed one of the plumbers.

'A root beer,' said the other.

We didn't have either.

'And a few bourbon biscuits would be nice,' said the diet Pepsi plumber.

We didn’t have any of those either. I wonder if it’s possible to get a rating lower than one star on the website plumbers use to rate their customers.

Anyway, one good thing has come out of all this.

I have decided that in future, if workmen want refreshments they can refresh themselves. The ones who can’t be bothered to bring a flask and some sandwiches can damned well go on a starvation diet.

And, for the record, the ones who do bring their own sustenance can eat it in their van.

21

A man has complained that a sliced loaf of bread which he bought from a supermarket wasn’t sliced properly.

He published online a photograph of one slice of bread which has a slight wedge shaped appearance.

There is, presumably, another slice of bread in his loaf which also has a slight wedge shaped appearance.

The ‘social media’ has been in an uproar since the photograph was published.

Countless thousands of bloggers and tweeters have apparently joined the man’s protest and the supermarket concerned has announced that it will be looking into the crisis and arranging recompense for the unhappy customer.

When I read all this I assumed that it was a mistimed April Fool’s Day joke.

But it wasn’t.

It’s real.

22

An 87-year-old man is trying to raise the money to sue his local council because care home staff have ruled that he can only kiss his wife, who is a resident in the council owned home, once on arriving and once on departure. A member of staff sits next to the man when he visits, presumably to check that he follows the rules. The couple have been married for 67 years.

All that is bad enough but I was even more appalled to see the results of a poll which was held among readers of the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper.

Four fifths of readers said that the man should be free to kiss his wife and that the council was wrong. But one fifth of the readers said that he should obey the council rules and agreed with the statement that rules are rules and must always be obeyed. And that is truly depressing.

23

I went to look at the latest iPhone and discovered to my disgust that it requires yet another charger. What a waste of time, energy and money. If the planet is truly in danger, shouldn’t phone companies be compelled to ensure that the chargers for their phones don’t have to be thrown away every time a new model is introduced?

The Apple company prides itself on its design capabilities but I’m not impressed.

And, while I’m moaning, why don’t they make the damned thing less slippery (the current device is as slippery as a bar of soap in wet hands) and why don’t they create a battery which lasts long enough to get through a day?

Despite the fact that we live on an overcrowded, indebted planet where the natural resources are running out, it seems to me that waste is still fashionable. I see that a restaurant in Brooklyn is selling a Golden Donut sprinkled with 24 carat gold flakes and covered in icing made with Cristal champagne. The absurd creation costs $100. I can (just about) understand the icing made with champagne, but gold offers no nutritional properties whatsoever and its consumption in any form is pure, unadultered waste.

I am, inevitably, reminded of the profligacy which preceded the Fall of Rome.

24

An MCC member wants to limit the number of times older members of the club will be allowed to watch the cricket. The member (who is, presumably, under the age of 80) seems worried by the fact that the benches at Lord’s Cricket Ground are often occupied by elderly members. He seems to find this distressing, annoying or inconvenient and wants it stopped.

As an MCC member myself, I have written to the club suggesting that the best way to accommodate this request is for the Club to introduce a simple rule denying older members access to the bar. I have no doubt that the octogenarians and nonagenarians will then die quietly and without too much fuss.

Seriously, I am fed up with young whippersnappers who decide that anyone over 50 should be put to sleep.

A day can offer just as much delight and enjoyment to an 80-year-old as it can to a 30-year-old. The delight and enjoyment may be different in style and format but they're none the less real for that. (Older spectators tend not to waste energy with too much noisy clapping and cheering.)

More seriously, it has also been suggested that while 16-year-olds should be able to vote in the EU referendum, the over 65s should be banned from expressing a view – probably because this will almost certainly improve the chances of the Nazi supporters of Hitler's secret plan for a United States of Europe winning yet again, and Britain staying in the European Union.

Older voters, who can remember how much better life was before Britain was tricked into the EU by the traitor Heath, will largely vote for leaving the EU. Child voters, who can't remember anything that came before 2010, and who have been indoctrinated by EU paid for education programmes, will do as they are told and vote for Britain to remain a servile sub-state.

25

Antoinette bought an old wind-up gramophone which enables me to play my small collection of old 78s. Today we enjoyed *Nelly the Elephant*, sung by Mandy Miller, *The Laughing Policeman* sung by Charles Jolly (aka Charles Penrose), and Henry Hall's *Teddy Bear's Picnic*. When I was a boy I was terrified by Henry Hall's version of *Teddy Bear's Picnic* and the recording still makes the hairs stand up on the back of my neck.

I now very much look forward to being able to play the original recording of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Mikado* opera recorded by the D'Oyly Carte Company. These were the recordings to which W.S.Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan would have been able to enjoy. I bought several of the complete operas from a charity shop. The people in the shop seemed to think they were worthless junk and they were glad to see me carry them away. Each opera is recorded on a large number of disks and beautifully presented in a huge, solid presentation folder.

26

It has been revealed that Alison Saunders, England's controversial Director of Public Prosecutions, received a pay package of £600,000 last year and that this bank robber-size-sack-of-wealth included £393,000 in pension contributions.

When this absurd sum was questioned, a spokesperson for the Crown Prosecution Service said: 'It is entirely misleading to suggest that the DPP's pension benefit is anything other than absolutely standard for the civil service.'

So now we know why the nation is broke. The standard annual pension contribution for the nation's vast army of civil servants is £393,000 each.

27

A banker who was trying to persuade me to sell shares in a company which was doing well (probably because the directors and staff had not yet learned that I had invested in it) reminded me today that 'no one ever lost out by taking a profit'. It's always good to hear that old chestnut dragged out for an airing, though I suspect that the banker was simply trying to persuade me to sell so that he could take a commission on the sale and a commission on the purchase made with the proceeds. Bankers and stockbrokers make their living by encouraging their customers to 'churn' their accounts.

I suspect there are one or two people who might disagree with the old chest about taking a profit.

For example, consider Ronald Wayne. Mr Wayne was a co-founder of Apple Computer and had a 10% stake in the company when the company first started. In 1976 he sold that stake for just $800.

If he'd hung on to his shares his investment would now be worth $50 billion. Still, the $800 he got probably gave him a decent profit.

28

I am delighted to see that when the American Society of Clinical Oncology met recently the dominant topic was cancer immunotherapy.

Immuno-oncology is the name for techniques used to help the body's immune system to attack and kill cancer cells. It's encouraging to see that the cancer industry has at long last recognised the importance of the immune system in the prevention and treatment of cancer but I can't help regretting that it has taken them so long to reach this point.

Over a decade ago, when I launched a website (www.immunesystem.co.uk) to promote the importance of the immune system in attacking cancer, I was attacked viciously by representatives of the British cancer industry who sneeringly dismissed my suggestion that concentrating on boosting the immune systems of cancer patients would improve their chances of recovery. I had explained that patients should build up their immune systems and I explained how best they could do that. The Cancer Research Campaign said the website was 'scary, frightening and wrong' though there was nothing whatsoever on the site that was any of those things.

I am now delighted to see that the cancer industry (a consortium of dishonest charities and crooked drug companies) has at last agreed that one way to tackle cancer is to boost the immune system. I'm glad they've got there.

My website was funded without subscriptions and without advertising and I paid for the whole thing out of my book royalties. Sadly, the Cancer Research Campaign lies were reported in the *Daily Mirror* and in despair I closed the website.

I'm delighted that the cancer industry has seen the light but I'm angry that it has taken so long. How many millions of people could have been saved if the cancer charities and the drug industry had not been so pig headed and vindictive?

It has long seemed to me that the entire cancer industry (consisting of a conspiracy of drug companies and charities who seem to exist solely to make money) is disreputable, unbelievably corrupt, worthless and self-serving. The figures are massaged endlessly to make it appear as though the `war' on cancer is being defeated but truly effective remedies and prevention programmes are ignored if they don't promise huge profits to the drug industry, and dangerous treatment regimes are promoted enthusiastically if they are hugely profitable.

If the cancer industry had been more broadminded in the past then thousands of people who died of cancer would still be alive today.

29

A young Muslim man who raped a girl was let off after he told the judge, in mitigation, that he had been taught to regard women as nothing more than lollipops, existing solely for his pleasure.

I am still surprised that so many female politicians enthuse about our so-called multi-cultural society. They do not, it seems, understand that if we continue to allow millions of Muslims to enter the country we will either have to persuade them to accept our culture (an entirely impossible task) or else women will soon be forced to wear burkas, walk six paces behind their husbands and keep out of public life altogether while homosexuals will have to clamber back into their closets. There will be no work for barmen or barmaids either, because there won't be any pubs or bars.

It is widely forecast that Muslims will outnumber Christians in Britain and in Europe within a couple of decades so this isn't an imaginary problem: it is a very real future.

(A thought occurs to me: do burka wearing women ever wear dark glasses as well? Surely that would be the ultimate disguise?)

Multiculturalism was a disaster when it was conceived, it was a disaster when it was introduced and it is a disaster now. The idea that several million single Muslim men, whose values, morals and culture are not just different to, but diametrically opposed to, the values, morals and culture of the Western societies in which they find themselves, can be seamlessly integrated into such societies, or can coexist comfortably alongside those other societies, is so utterly absurd that those who thought it might succeed are by any sensible standards dangerously insane and should be locked up because they are a clear danger to those around them.

The curious thing is, however, that the lunatics have taken over the asylum so completely that anyone who opposes, or dares to criticise, multiculturalism as a philosophy (let alone as a practical reality) is likely to find themselves described as a racist and ostracised.

30

We found another marvellous second-hand bookshop in Cheltenham. I left with two carrier bags full of wonderful books. (That's two armfuls in old money). The owner was so surprised to see a customer buying so many books that he asked me if I had my own shop or was planning to sell the books on the internet.

When you know exactly what you are looking for, and can define both titles and authors, the internet is an unbeatable way to find a book. You can hunt down the rarest volume in minutes and probably buy it for a penny plus postage. It is indeed quite often possible to buy books for less than the cost of the postage. And it is possible for a reader to buy and enjoy an author's entire oeuvre without the author being paid a penny. Once a few thousand hard back or paperback copies of a book have been sold there is no point in reprinting the book because the old copies will circulate at a penny each until they fall apart.

The internet has destroyed back list sales and made authors dependent upon the sales of their latest book or upon ebook sales. As soon as ebooks become widely available on a second-hand basis there will be no professional authors.

But the disadvantage of the internet bookshops is that when you don't have the foggiest idea what you are looking for, and want to browse, websites are pretty useless. You cannot beat a good old-fashioned second-hand bookshop. But, of course, they are about as fashionable as bowler hats and as a hard to find as fountain pens.

My haul of books included possibly the oddest book I've ever seen.

From the outside it is an unprepossessing little volume but the contents are, to say the very least, quite remarkable. The book's full title (as on the title page) is *The Life of the Fly, The Insects Homer With Which Are Interspersed Some Chapters Of Autobiography* By J.Henry Fabre Translated By Alexander Teixeira de Mattos.'

And to my utter astonishment that's exactly what the book contains: an apparently illogical mixture of autobiography and natural history.

It's as though the author wrote two books and then got the chapters mixed up on the way to the printers and then decided oh sod it, I'll do it all as one book. Chapters about caddis worms and blue bottles are interspersed with chapters with headings such as *My Schooling* and *Industrial Chemistry*. Heaven knows what the critics made of it when it first came out. I have found that I have been accused of writing fiction which seems like autobiography and also accused of writing autobiography which appears to be fiction so a book which clearly contained both would have been something of a reviewing challenge.

I would have thought it to be a self-published oddity but in fact it was published by Hodder and Stoughton in its People's Library, which includes books by G.K.Chesterton and such down to earth titles as *How To Read History*, *That Body of Yours*, *Some Things That Matter* and *How to Enjoy Life*. I had never heard of him but it turns out that Fabre was a very distinguished French entomologist and an enormously prolific author. The extent of my ignorance constantly amazes and appals me. The older I get the more I realise how ignorant I am. The book I purchased is now regaining popularity and modern editions have been issued.

I often read two or three books at the same time (well, not actually at the same time, but in parallel at least) and it occurs to me that this single volume solves that problem for if I settle down with Mr Fabre's book I will be reading two books at once.

July

1

The Government seems worried about the fact that Britain's shortage of GPs is getting worse. Someone at the Department of Health has noticed that vast numbers of doctors in their 50s and early 60s are retiring and disappearing from the labour pool. These older doctors are already much missed. The idiot doctors who helped kill my father, and who couldn't put two and two together without getting seventeen and a half, were barely out of their prams.

However, no one in authority has twigged that all these doctors are retiring because of the General Medical Council's absurd and bureaucratic revalidation programme (designed, ineptly, to prevent a repeat of the Dr Harold Shipman scandal, though Shipman would have sailed through the process with honours).

(Nor, incidentally, has anyone in authority noticed that annual reviews (whatever they are called and however they are organised) never do any good because they are too easy to cheat and it is for that reason that large international firms which used to subject their staff to annual reviews are now abandoning them.)

The effective way to prevent another Shipman would of course have been to interview prospective medical students more thoroughly, and to rule out those with serious mental health problems. And a cheap and effective way to check out practising doctors would simply be to check the rate at which their patients were dying.

Any doctor whose patients seemed to die more often than the average would be investigated. Such a method would cost about ninepence and would have stopped Shipman dead in his tracks.

But it wouldn't have given the traffic warden controlled General Medical Council the opportunity to acquire massive power and millions of pounds in fees.

Doctors are retiring early because the GMC's dotty scheme requires all doctors to spend half their working lives collecting letters of approval from patients and colleagues and filling in absurdly intrusive questionnaires about every aspect of their lives (including, absurdly, historic parking offences).

I was initially puzzled by the request for parking ticket information but then found that the woman in charge of ensuring that doctors don't kill too many of their patients is an expert not on medical matters, as I had hoped and expected, but on parking tickets. She seems so stupid that I am surprised that she has a job that doesn't involve a broom and a bucket. I found out about her background by the simple expedient of putting her name into an internet search engine. I immediately discovered that she had an entry on that appalling LinkedIn site which is an excellent source of information about people who are so blinded by ambition that they don't realise just how much information about themselves they are sharing with strangers. With a few clicks, it is surprisingly easy to find out what people earn, how important they are and what their fears and ambitions might be.

Actually, although I feel nothing but contempt for the woman in charge of the revalidation process, I don't think the rest of the staff at the GMC are much better. I communicated with around 300 of them and they all seemed to me to be complete idiots. Every time we corresponded I had to explain everything from the beginning, as though writing to a half-witted child. All the GMC Revalidation staff seemed to me to be about 12-years-old, named by dyslexic parents and to have IQs that would have put them near the bottom in a classroom full of plankton.

When I found that I couldn't renew my licence unless I spent weeks filling in reams of absurd paperwork, I toyed with the idea of taking the GMC to court but I don't need to be registered in order to write and in the end it was far more trouble than it was worth so I'm ashamed to say I gave it up.

What the morons at the GMC don't realise is that the bad doctors just game the system, sail through their appraisals and carry on killing patients without a care in the world.

And, most alarming of all, doctors who decide to walk away from medicine in order to avoid this form filling bonanza are deprived of their licence to practice – and cannot work as locums or part time doctors.

A few months ago *The Spectator* magazine published an article of mine in which I explained precisely how the General Medical Council is destroying general practice in particular and Britain's medical care in general. (As an aside *The Spectator* didn't pay me a penny for the piece. This is, sadly, the way of the media these days and I can only assume that the magazine no longer pays its contributors though one assumes that the printers and editorial staff receive un petit pourboire from time to time. How young writers can make a living is beyond me.)

Being a public spirited citizen, I sent copies of the article to David Cameron (the UK's Prime Minister) and Jeremy Hunt (at the Department of Health) pointing out that the piece explains precisely how and why the GMC is the cause of the shortage of expert doctors which they have belatedly recognised.

I have now received replies. Someone called Jasmine Ganesh (Ministerial Correspondence and Public Enquiries) has sent me two copies of a quite astonishingly stupid letter telling me that if I wish to make a complaint about the GMC I will find details of how to do so on the GMC's own website.

I give up.

And I despair.

Everything that I believed in and cared about within the world of medicine seems to have been desecrated. I have always believed that all doctors should, on all occasions, treat their patients with the same respect and decency that they would like for themselves and their relatives. Kindness is the most important of all human qualities and that applies to doctors (and nurses) just as much as to anyone else. Although it is not something that has ever been taught in medical schools it is, I believe, the single most important rule for all physicians (and, indeed, for nurses). If a doctor or nurse follows this simple rule then all else is of surprisingly little consequence.

Sadly, I have to note that when I mentioned this to a young doctor who lectures in a medical school he looked at me as if I were certifiable.

Kindness, together with sensitivity, is now seen as a weakness, to be crushed and eradicated. Modern life is about power; not kindness, loyalty, trust, respect or sincerity.

In the same mail as I received the letter from Jasmine, I received a letter from Lloyds Bank.

They write to me almost weekly to tell me that they have changed this or changed that and, although they try to spin things, the changes always seem to be in their favour and never in mine. Odd that. They also have this trick of putting a date on a letter which is around ten days before the letter is posted. They then use one of the 'slow post' services which do the sorting and then hand the letters to Royal Mail to deliver. That takes another week or ten days. And by the time the letter arrives it's probably too late to do anything about it (whatever it was). The utility companies and the tax office are much the same. By the time the letter arrives the appeal period is over and you're being threatened, charged penalties and facing destruction.

They have written this time to tell us that they are reducing the miserly amount of interest they pay on our deposit account. If we placed £1,000,000 in our deposit account we would receive enough annual interest to buy an ice cream each (as long as we didn't have the expensive ones with chocolate flakes stuck in the middle).

I wonder how long this will go on.

In Japan, interest rates have been at (or as close as it is possible to get to) 0% for two decades so it is perfectly possible that it will be decades more before interest rates go back to levels where it makes sense to save money and put it in in the bank for a rainy day or your old age.

2

Another company has written offering to write tweets for me on an hourly or daily basis.

I am told that if I pay them a regular fee, and give them a vague idea of my interests and views, a member of their staff will produce thoughtless, judgemental, superficial ephemera to entertain my invisible army of non-existent twitter followers.

I am reliably informed that there is a new breed of individuals who delight in being professionally offended and who produce new thoughtful and vital tweets six times an hour. I read somewhere (it was not on a tweet since I have never seen a tweet or visited a Facebook page) that 45% of young people are now regular tweeters, devoid of all self-doubt, overcome with opinions, constantly searching for fame but ready to accept notoriety as an acceptable substitute, and happy to settle for being feared and despised as an alternative to being loved.

If everyone is tweeting who is reading? If everyone is talking, who is listening?

And who on earth can think of six truly interesting things to say every hour?

The result is that regular twits (is that the name for the folk who tweet, or are they known as twats?) are constantly looking out for ways in which they can be deeply offended by imperceptible slights to that they can broadcast their sense of agony to the widest possible audience.

I understand that the world's most popular producers of tweets are people in various branches of show business (a group which these days includes sports and journalism) and I can only assume that the people writing and typing the tweets are, for the most part, hired teenage hacks, churning out drivel on behalf of their employers. These folk must spend their lives hunched over their tiny screens. (I gather from press reports that Stephen Fry and J.K.Rowling seem to be particularly aggressive twitterers; neither seems to miss any opportunity to comment if a celebrity sneezes or has a hangover. Twittering is without a doubt a good way for a celebrity to keep their own name in the limelight.)

The twitterers and bleaters, sit at one end of the process, terrified of missing a ten minute deadline, or an opportunity to be outraged, and the recipients, sit waiting at the other end, terrified of missing the very latest proclamation. All are kept in a constant sense of anger and outrage. It is hardly surprising that so many people need tranquillisers and anti-depressants. And, perhaps, hardly surprising that our touchy feely, over-sensitive society has given birth to an epidemic of anger and violence.

It would, I feel, be an excellent idea for governments worldwide to introduce a tax of £1 per email or per twittle. This would, in the short-term, solve the world's debt problem and, in the long-term, help make the world a much better place? As things stand at the moment, today's children will spend their lives paying off the State debts accumulated by their reckless parents and grandparents. My twitter and email tax would solve that. And it would also improve productivity dramatically. According to McKinsey, the average worker now spends a third of their work time managing their emails.

3

The Financial Times, which is far more prejudiced and inaccurate than any tabloid would dare to be and which I read because it helps to keep my blood pressure up, recently ran yet another article asking why productivity is down when we have the internet to make life easier. When, oh when, will they realise that productivity is down not in spite of the internet but because of it?

The internet, so widely assumed to be a source of good, is the most evil creation of all time and does far more harm than good. It has made every aspect of our world less pleasant. It is making people stupid, gullible and unnecessarily angry.

And it is also destroying productivity.

4

We always have lots of wasps' nests at our cottage. I have no idea why, but the wasps seem to like our company and they have been steadily chewing up our beams and soffits to make their nests. We've got enough beams and soffits to share and so we usually leave them alone and apart from the occasional sting they leave us alone too.

But this year we have a rather alarming nest developing in the dining room wall. The nest spreads up into the ceiling space and appears to have become alarmingly large. When the wasps decide to flutter together, which they do at regular intervals, it sounds just as though a very large and adenoidal cat were crammed into the wall space. And if you put your hand against the wall you can feel the heat of the nest.

None of that bothers us unduly (though the noise can be a little alarming) but when I tottered downstairs this morning I found that the wasps had started to eat their way through the ceiling. A huge crack had appeared and there was a pile of plaster dust on the rug beneath. When I pressed against the plaster another crack appeared.

It didn't take the brain of Britain to work out that the wasps had eaten so much ceiling that it had become very thin, delicate and weak.

As I examined the biggest crack in the ceiling, a wasp's leg appeared. And then a bit more of the wasp hove into view. And then a second wasp started to wriggle through. Antoinette, who has an encyclopaedic knowledge of plants and creatures of all kinds, told me that it is only the female wasp which stings. That I found comforting since I meant that with every wasp I had a fifty fifty chance of being safe. On the other hand she told me that unlike honey bees, which can sting only once, wasps can sting to their heart's content.

The Princess and I held an emergency meeting and decided that something had to be done since these wasp guests were clearly abusing our hospitality. So we covered up the cracks with sellotape and hoped that would do the trick.

5

I was surprised to discover that it is now possible to buy antibiotics, without a prescription, over the internet. This is brilliant news for doctors because it means that the number of people asking for treatment will fall dramatically. Doctors hate people who fall ill and want treatment. They get in the way of playing golf and attending drug company sponsored conferences in Venice. Moreover, when the general public becomes aware of the fact that it is the overprescribing of antibiotics which had led to the development of bugs which are resistant to antibiotics and cannot be treated, doctors will be able to wriggle out of the blame by blaming citizens who have bought their antibiotics over the internet.

I've found that internet users can buy prescription drugs simply by filling in a simple form on any one of several websites. A registered doctor and a pharmacist approve a private prescription and that's that! The drugs then arrive the next morning by special delivery.

The drugs are rather more expensive than obtaining them on a standard prescription but they are available without a week's delay and a long wait in a bug ridden waiting room. I found one site which would sell me 500 antibiotic capsules at a time.

It is even easier to buy drugs such as aspirin (in any quantity you desire) when shopping on the internet. If you try to buy aspirin in a pharmacy you will be subjected to a third degree questioning (to find out why you want them) and then limited to buy enough for two doses. If you buy them over the internet you can get them sent round in a lorry.

It will surely not be long before the half-hearted service provided by pharmacies and family doctors will be replaced by the internet. I can see all sorts of strange benefits in all this. It is, for example, a great benefit that it is now possible to buy the whole gamut of flu remedies without ever visiting the ‘sneeze aisles’ of a local pharmacy. (The ‘sneeze aisle’, frequented by customers looking for flu and cold remedies, is the best place in the world to catch a nasty bug.) Millions of people are doubtless already self-medicating with drugs they’ve obtained over the internet. And they will be spared the need to sit in a doctor’s waiting room alongside patients suffering from tuberculosis, lassa fever or the latest deadly flu.

(It would perhaps be wise for someone, somewhere, to remind consumers that prescription drugs can be dangerous. Anyone who doubts the danger of prescription drugs should remember that Keith Moon, the Who’s wild man of drumming, famous for his wild lifestyle and his excessive consumption of alcohol and illegal drugs, died not as a result of these palpably toxic substances but because of the prescription drugs he was given.)

And it isn’t just prescription drugs that are available on the internet. You can now also obtain direct medical advice from a doctor. There are a number of websites which offer ‘virtual home visits’ from proper doctors. Patients send photographs and test results and they can ask questions. They can even use a camera to show bits of their bodies to the doctor. And they can, of course, have prescriptions sent to them. All without leaving home.

Patients who stick to the old-fashioned method and want to see a doctor in Britain have to phone for an appointment (that will probably take an hour because the phone line will be busy) and get an appointment for a week ahead (if they’re lucky). When they get to the surgery, they have to find somewhere to park. Then they must enter the building and be treated like a criminal by a snotty receptionist. Once in the waiting room, they will probably sit for an hour with twelve people all coughing and spreading their best germs. Eventually, they get three minutes with a doctor who looks as though he left school last week and who scribbles out a prescription without giving them a chance to explain their symptoms. And then it’s off to the pharmacy where they stand in a long queue, hand in the prescription and then wait 45 minutes for a condescending girl to put a packet of pills into a little paper bag. The internet alternative is almost magical. You go onto a suitable website, tell a doctor your symptoms and the prescribed drugs arrive the next morning by special delivery.

There are even, amazingly, websites in the United States which will send a real life human doctor to your home. This sort of medical service, a sort of medical Uber, will doubtless become increasingly popular as the months and years go by.

The internet has changed just about every business and profession there is; it is now about to revolutionise the way medicine is practised.

There is no future for general practice as we know it and those young doctors who have allowed themselves to be trained as GPs have, I fear, been wasting their time. Thanks to the internet, general practice is going the way of the record shop and the second hand book shop. I bet not many people saw that coming. GPs probably thought they were in the safest of all occupations. And they would have been if they had continued to offer their patients 24 hour a day cover and a decent amount of continuity. In the bad old days (before the Labour Party did its notorious deal with family doctors and the GMCs daft new rules sent thousands of older doctors heading for premature golf) patients in Britain used to have a reasonable expectation of seeing the same doctor whenever they were ill – even at night or at weekends. That sense of loyalty and continuity engendered a sense of loyalty among patients. Today, patients who want medical care have to take pot luck on weekdays and are invariably obliged to queue for hours at their local casualty department at night and weekends. It is hardly surprising that patients no longer feel any sense of loyalty to their GPs.

But I have to say that, on balance, it looks to me as if the new internet based medicine is going to be a great improvement on the one it replaces.

6

We went to Sidmouth for the day.

Sidmouth is a beautiful town; the last vestige of Victorian England. Sidmouth doesn’t remind me of the 1950s or the 1960s. It gives a flavour of what the 1890s must have been like. I’m all for looking backwards. Nostalgia stimulates the brain and replaces the missing parts of reality with pleasant memories, and it really doesn’t matter a damn if some of the memories are fake.

I love going to Sidmouth because the whole place is so full of frail, elderly folk that I always feel unusually sprightly and fit when we are there. In virtually any shop in Sidmouth I am invariably the second youngest customer in sight. (Antoinette being the youngest, of course.) Sidmouth always makes me feel young.

For several decades now, English seaside towns have gone either the way of Ilfracombe and Blackpool (and filled their hotels and guest houses with former drug addicts, unemployed refugees from hopeless big cities, former criminals and other lost souls) or they have gone the way of Bournemouth and converted their unwanted hotels and boarding houses into up market accommodation for the middle class elderly.

Weston-super-Mare, where we lived for a while, has a good many amusement arcades (and arcade owners who need young punters willing to put money into slots all day long) and so it went the Blackpool route – way downmarket. By the time we left, the place had gone downhill so fast that I was the only male who was sober at 11 a.m.

Sidmouth has so far managed to stick to the Bournemouth route. I fear, however, that this may be about to change for Sidmouth is entering dangerous territory.

Most of the decent sized houses in the town were turned into guest houses many years ago but the remorseless rise in property values means that when existing guest houses are put on the market the asking price is too high for any budding guest house operator to make a profit. The existing guest house owner can make a profit because he probably paid ‘only’ £300,000 or £400,000 for the property. But the next guest house owner will not be able to make a living because he will have to pay £600,000 or £700,000 for the property. And even though the interest rates are low the purchase price still has to be paid back.

To make things worse the local council refuses to allow guest houses to be converted back into private homes unless it can be shown that there is no market for the property as a going concern. The danger is that whoever buys a property will be forced to maximise his income (to pay off the mortgage interest and capital cost) by cramming tenants into the building and turning it into the sort of slum now commonly seen in other seaside resorts.

We shall see. Maybe Sidmouth will find a way around this problem. I sincerely hope so.

Apart from a wonderful Esplanade the town has a wonderful collection of old-fashioned independent shops.

We were in a toy shop in Sidmouth today when a little girl and a thin woman who looked as if she was on a diet designed to get her back to her birth weight and who was, I assume, her mother walked past a large display of beautifully dressed dolls.

The little girl looked at the dolls with a terrible longing in her eyes and said, to herself but out loud: ‘I’m not allowed to have dolls’.

I didn’t know whether to cry or shout at the stupid, politically correct mother who would not allow her little girl to have a doll, presumably because she felt that it would be perpetuating a sexist role model to do so.

The foolish woman obviously does not realise that it has been proved that girls are genetically programmed to want dolls to cuddle, and her politically correct nonsense will undoubtedly do great psychological damage to her little girl. It makes me sad when the politically correct but scientifically ignorant try to fight the natural differences in the sexes for the argument that gender is a ‘social construct’ is bizarre and totally inaccurate.

Anthropologists and psychologists have shown time and time again that it is natural for girls to make homes and play mums and for boys to make dens and play war. Girls collect dolls and boys collect soldiers. It is the way it always has been and trying to alter nature creates uncertainty, confusion and teenage drinking.

When grown up, the difference in the sexes persists and so women collect cushions, ornamental thimbles, towels and china which they will never use and men collect spanner sets, golf club paraphernalia, beermats and football souvenirs. It will always be thus.

Meanwhile, even the makers of movies have fallen for the feminist nonsense. In just about every adventure film or thriller made in the last decade or so the hero must be rescued at least once by his feminine co-star, who must be allowed to show that she is stronger and cleverer than the male hero. I saw a recent James Bond film in which Mr Bond was saved by a woman, Felix Leiter was black and M was a woman. Ian Fleming would die laughing if he wasn’t already dead. And I remember seeing a film about Richard Hannay in which Buchan’s ultra-macho hero was saved by a woman with karate hands and a pistol tucked into her bra.

(Thinking of feminists, I am reminded that I saw yesterday that an ardent feminist had defended Muslims everywhere and attacked those who criticised their attempts to change British customs and law. I wonder if that merry feminist understands that Muslims regard women as second-class citizens. It seems to me that being a feminist and defending the Muslim cause is as irreconcilable as being a vegetarian and recommending steak and kidney pie.)

My only reservation about Sidmouth is that, like most seaside towns, it is overrun with dogs. There are signs up forbidding dog owners to allow their animals to foul the beach during the sandcastle season but no one takes any notice and so Sidmouth, like other resorts, is constantly befouled, and it is impossible to fly a kite, throw a Frisbee or have a picnic without being threatened by a pack of snarling dogs.

All of which makes it odd that, according to the local paper, an elderly woman was recently banned from feeding birds and wild animals in Sidmouth. I intend to organise a coach party to Sidmouth for bird and animal lovers. We will all dress as St Francis of Assisi and we will throw bread crumbs to any hungry bird on the seafront and in the parks. When a man in uniform arrives we will throw him bread crumbs too. Our defence will be, of course, that we were having a picnic and are messy eaters. Alternatively, we could claim that we were being discriminated against. People are allowed to feed birds in their own garden, why should people who don't own gardens not be allowed to feed the same birds in public spaces? It has, after all, been proven that people who associate with animals are far healthier than those who do not.

On the way home we turned on the wireless and I heard on the news that the Prime Minister of Estonia had been making firm statements about the European Union and the future of the United Kingdom. I find this odd. I was convinced that Estonia was the subject of a jolly song in a Marx Brothers movie and that Groucho Marx was the nation's President. Still, I suppose it is perfectly possible that the European Union is now offering membership to entirely fictitious countries. It would make as much sense as anything else.

7

WHSmith, the newsagent and erstwhile bookseller, is advertising a free Kobo App which provides those who obtain it unhindered access, entirely free of charge, to four million ebooks. At the same time as they are telling their customers how to get hold of four million free books, the store is trying to sell expensive, printed books.

Have I gone mad or have they?

Or is the world just too complex for me to understand?

I see that Smiths are now also selling colouring books for adults and that according to those who compile bestseller lists these are now the most popular books in the country – and a major source of profit for the newsagent chain.

In a way I can understand why people who are stressed up to their eyeballs, and beyond, find something relaxing about mindlessly colouring in skeleton pictures and making sure that the colours don't go over the lines. The books are, I guess, an escape into childhood; concentration without responsibility.

These books, which are basket weaving for the 21st century, a sort of literary Valium, even receive rave reviews on the Internet. And I am told that enthusiasts form book clubs where they show one another their colouring achievements.

Heyho.

These colouring books are undoubtedly better than what passes for entertainment on television these days, better than reading a newspaper and being terrified to death every day and better than sitting in a corner with your hands clasping your knees rocking backwards and forwards.

8

While I was outside filling up the bird and squirrel feeders, I spotted a dead squirrel on the ground. The poor thing had clearly been killed by a cat (a rat would have eaten the corpse).

I dug a hole under a hazel tree and buried the squirrel with full military honours. I said a little prayer, asking God to welcome him and hoping that wherever he went the squirrel would find a good and enduring supply of hazel nuts.

I may be mad, but I am my kind of mad.

9

At the end of March, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC), the British tax authorities, wrote to me.

'Our records show that in previous years you have chosen to send us your tax return by post,' wrote Ruth Owen, the Director General, Personal Tax for HMRC, 'and so we have sent you a paper pack to complete. This year, instead of sending paper packs, we are sending all of our customers the same one page form (called an SA316) which explains how to complete a tax return online or by post. We will post this form to you in the next few weeks.'

Naturally, since HMRC is a bastion of incompetence, the form didn't arrive.

(The cost of all that incompetence is impossible to measure accurately, and HMRC certainly couldn't work it out if you give them a million wise monkeys and a million calculators, but it now agreed that the merger of the tax office and the customs office, to create HMRC, cost the country £20 billion cash. Doing absurdly generous deals with large companies such as the grotesquely evil Goldman Sachs (which were crafty enough to buy HMRC employees nice lunches) cost us all a hell of a lot more.)

And so I telephoned the tax people to remind them of their promise.

It wasn't as easy as it sounds.

I rarely if ever answer any of my telephones since most of the calls come from people who are trying to persuade me to sue someone, or from irate callers trying to get hold of the bankrupt builder who was the previous owner of our house telephone number, but I'm constantly surprised that HMRC does the same thing.

Surely their staff aren't for ever being bombarded with calls from crooks trying to persuade them to sue their bank? And they can't be getting calls from the people still waiting for that damned bankrupt builder to wander round and finish their roof.

Whatever the reason, it took several attempts to get through to a real live person (most people who ring HMRC give up when the phone remains unanswered for hours at a time) but eventually on the 10th of June, after a 54 minute wait and considerable exposure to the usual messages telling me that they were receiving 'an exceptionally high volume of calls' (this is the first phrase any organisation records when setting up a telephone answering system) and that I should visit their website.

When I finally found myself speaking to a woman called Eileen, HMRCs version of a real person, I was told that they were not sending out any more forms. It seems that HMRC doesn't like people filling in paper tax forms because it is quicker and cheaper for them if forms are filled in online.

I explained that I cannot fill in a tax form online because I hate the HMRC website so much that I become demented the minute I try and use it. I pointed out that I have evidence that it was designed not by a human being but by a typist's chair with a wobbly wheel and begged Eileen to send me the appropriate forms, quoting the promise in Ms Owen's letter. After my appeal I was told that everything I needed would be put in the post to me immediately.

Naturally, that was a plain old-fashioned vanilla lie. Nothing came. Naughty Eileen.

HMRC is not only the most incompetent organisation on the planet, it is also corrupt and dishonest. It is, I suppose, because they themselves are so dishonest that they assume that all taxpayers are guilty until proven innocent. (This would not matter so much if they had not persuaded Parliament and the courts to support that bizarre and undemocratic belief.) If there are organisations on other planets such as Mars and Uranus then HMRC is the most corrupt and incompetent organisation in the universe. I am prepared to state, without fear of contradiction, that there is nothing on Uranus as bad as HMRC.

HMRC does everything in its power to make life difficult for honest taxpayers. They increasingly use PO Box addresses, with no street address, so that the delivery of important documents is difficult if not impossible to verify. They demand money from taxpayers even when the amounts in question are the subject of legal dispute. (It's difficult to see why this isn't classified as extortion. It is certainly theft and HMRC only gets away with it because tax inspectors have the power of the police behind them.) They use non-geographical premium rate telephone numbers which seem to connect to somewhere in Scotland where, after one has got through, an incessantly annoying recorded message repeatedly warns of a delay (45 minutes seems to be par for this particular course) and makes it impossible to do anything else while waiting. Naturally the premium rate call has to be paid for all this time. It is therefore, nigh on impossible for ordinary punters to communicate with anyone at HMRC.

I then had one of my rare brainwaves.

I did a little research, dug out some email addresses and sent an email direct to the personal email account of a woman called Lin Homer, who is the Lord High Executioner of the HMRC. I also managed to get hold of the email address for Ruth Owen and sent her a copy of my combined request and complaint.

Within hours I received emails telling me that the forms I needed would be put in the post and were, indeed, half way to me already.

Naturally, nothing came.

So after a couple of weeks I sent off another pair of emails to Ms Homer and Ms Owen, pointing out that the forms they had promised had not yet materialised and asking them if this was some new plan by HMRC to prevent me filling a tax form so that they could fine me for not filling a form. I made a formal complaint.

Now, at last, the forms have arrived and I can complete my tax return. It's always a painful business but HMRC has surpassed itself in making the process ever more complex, irritating and unpleasant. The forms are incomprehensible, and waste much time, but it's a bit rich when you have to waste days of time just to get the damned forms.

I have also received an acknowledgement of my complaint about this egregious incompetence.

It seems, however, that no HMRC employees were responsible for the lies, the deceit or the incompetence.

So that's all right then.

It seems strange to be so excited by the arrival of such a dreary, incomprehensible and expensive set of forms. My delight was soon tempered by the thought that I will now to have to fill in the damned things.

Looking at the forms on my desk I was feeling very glum.

But I was cheered up when Antoinette showed me a strange item on page eight of this week's edition of the *Wiltshire Gazette and Herald*. The item appeared in the Malmesbury news section and read as follows: 'A problematic teenager who was arrested for breaching his court bail conditions has been ordered to live in Wales until his circumstances are reviewed again.'

That's it. That's the whole story.

There is no mention of why the court sent him to Wales, nor if they selected any particular part of the country for his punishment. Maybe the court thought that exile to anywhere in Wales was punishment enough.

I compounded the joy by spending an hour this evening using a stout hazel stick to knock the seed heads off the tops of a few million giant hogweed plants. There are few activities more pleasing. The giant hogweed is the most resilient plant I know. You can cut the main stem down to the ground and two days later a new stem, several feet tall will have replaced it.

Three days ago I went round the garden and removed the seed heads from several million giant hogweed plants. When I had finished the only ones to be seen were in the far end of the orchard, behind the greenhouse and in the shamefully abandoned chicken run.

Today, the rest of the garden is white with another army of seed heads.

If the Government could find a way to encourage industry to be as productive and as efficient as giant hogweed plants then Britain would get rid of its trillion pound debts in a month.

10

The BBC, irretrievably corrupt, sexist, racist and fascist, is now so politically correct, and its staff so full of loathing for traditional English activities, that on the State broadcaster's website today the results of a women's wheelchair doubles tennis match was listed above the results of an Ashes Test Match between England and Australia. For everyone in the country except the BBC, cricket Test Matches between England and Australia are still the nation's major sporting event.

I'm not surprised.

The Last Night of the Proms, a quintessentially English programme, is clearly despised by the Corporation and every effort is made to downplay the Englishness of the event. Performers from around the world are invited to perform works by foreign composers and anything written or performed by someone English is a rarity.

I wonder if the BBC would dare include a reading from William Blake, and a selection of music by Elgar, on a Burns Night programme?

Of course they wouldn't.

BBC staffers will recklessly poke fun at the English, and at the middle classes.

The BBC is such a racist organisation that if they broadcast chess matches they would only show the black moves.

Most people in Britain forget that all television exists to sell something.

Britons think that because they pay a television licence fee then they are paying for the BBC to provide an independent television and radio service. They assume that although commercial television stations make their living by flogging ads for vacuum cleaners and betting shops the BBC remains aloof and distant from such grubby manipulations.

In reality, of course, the BBC is far dirtier and more dangerous than any commercial station.

The BBC, a State broadcaster which exists to peddle propaganda, sells a political message and it would be dangerously naïve to assume otherwise.

The only oddity is that today the BBC doesn't so much peddle the propaganda of the Government but the propaganda of the staff.

11

We visited friends who proudly showed us the maroon bathroom suite which they have had installed. I didn't say anything but I did think it rather foolish. An American friend of ours, who lives in Thailand and who has a maroon toilet, had blood in his urine for some time before he noticed anything amiss. He was finally diagnosed with bladder cancer but if he had had a traditional white toilet the diagnosis would have undoubtedly been made much sooner.

When we got home I found that there is now a new wasps' nest being built in our house; this time in the snug. But it seems to be behind a stone wall and I think we're safe to leave it where it is. I don't know what it is about our house but we get about three or four wasps nests every year. There is usually only a problem in the autumn, when the nests are closing down and the remaining wasps wander out, hungry and slightly irritable.

There are few things in this life more annoying than hungry and irritable wasps. They are up there with traffic wardens, tax inspectors and sanctimonious prigs who blame absolutely everything in the world on something they describe as 'global warming'.

12

A reader has given one of my books a single star, claiming that my novels contain 'too much conversation' and that 'the characters talk too much'. I have made a mental note to warn all future characters that they must convey their thoughts by gesture rather than word. Another reviewer complained that I described the clothes my characters wore and that this was unnecessary, though personally I feel that describing the clothes someone wears helps to define their character. A third anonymous reviewer condemned a book of my short stories on the grounds that the separate parts of the book 'do not follow on neatly'. She or he also complains that the book is not like my other books. Both of these criticisms are entirely true but I had not previously thought it to be a reason for criticism.

These are difficult days for writers.

If an author uses English spelling then American readers will complain and give a book a low rating. If an author uses American spelling then English readers will complain and give a book a low rating.

People write reviews to promote themselves, their own books and even their businesses. There's a one star review of the film Mr Holmes which says: 'Sorry a poor story James Black Private Investigator UK and International (Google me).'

Sure enough, there he is. A private investigator in the Holmes tradition.

It may be a wonderfully cheap way to get advertising but I don't think I can remember Arnold Bennett putting commercial plugs into any of his book reviews.

It also seems to me to be odd that one of the most popular condemnations used by reviewers is 'this book was clearly written for money'. Generally speaking, people are respected for charging money for doing stuff they're good at and the only exceptions seem to be people providing sexual services or writing books. No one says 'this plumber was clearly mending my bath tap for money' or 'I'm giving this restaurant one star because they clearly only gave me a meal so that I would give them money'.

The phrase 'not my cup of tea' appears time and time again. No author can possibly write a book that is everyone's cup of tea. But the fact that one person doesn't like a book doesn't make it a bad book.

Some readers give my diaries and other novels bad reviews because they aren't like the Bilbury books.

Reviewers will often downgrade a book because it isn't the book they wanted it to be; even though the author never claimed that the book was going to be the book it isn't.

One reviewer gave a novel of mine a one star review because he or she did not approve of a meal my characters had eaten. Another reviewer condemned a novel with a one star review because he (or she) did not approve of the fact that a pair of characters in the book did not enjoy a trip to London and expressed delight when they returned to the country. Neither reviewer complained about the style of the book; both merely objected because they disapproved of the characters' feelings and behaviour.

I did some research and found that 80% of all the bad, one star reviews are given for books which have been downloaded free of charge.

It seems that readers who specialise in reading free books often download 50 books at a time and then spin through them looking for something that takes their fancy. Each book receives their attention for no more than 10 or 15 seconds. And as they become exasperated by the fact that the books they have downloaded aren't what they are looking for, they blame the authors for not writing the books they want to find. And so they produce another storm of one star reviews.

And so the internet has given a voice in literary criticism to a new breed of critics: people who review books without reading a word of them.

It is not surprising, perhaps, that some authors harbour unkindly thoughts towards those reviewers who specialise in pungent one star reviews just for the hell of it.

And just the other day I read a quote from a rapper called Kanye West who said: 'As a creator, it doesn't matter how big your house is, how big your name is, how much money you have, your job is to create while you're here and if…anything gets in the way of that, you've got to burn it to the fucking ground.'

I have to confess that the old way of reviewing books wasn't perfect. Big publishers used to dominate the review pages of national newspapers and magazines by the simple expedience of bribing literary editors and reviewers. This wasn't usually done with a bunch of fivers, of course. It was done rather more subtly. Public relations staff would contact literary editors, take them out to expensive lunches at fashionable restaurants and offer them all sorts of goodies. The public relations staff were invariably female and young and the literary editors were, oddly enough, invariably male, balding and susceptible. I gather that sexual favours were not unknown.

The goodies on offer varied according to the literary editor but I have known publishers to promise a powerful reviewer or review editor that his own manuscript would be treated favourably by an editor if he arranged a few good reviews of the company's books. The literary editor would then toss the books concerned to favoured reviewers with instructions to write something favourable and quotable.

Heaven knows how many un-saleable books have been published in order to 'buy' a bunch of good reviews.

These days I doubt if much of this goes on any more, for today it doesn't matter a damn if the well-connected circle of back scratching reviewers for the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Sunday Times* and *Daily Telegraph* all decide to give a book or film a stinker of a welcome. Their views are no longer of significance. Many newspapers and magazines, such as the *Independent* in the UK, now have such small circulations that their review pages are extremely unlikely to have any influence at all on book sales.

All that matters these days is how many stars a book or film has on Amazon.

I don't believe that many writers, artists or other creative individuals from the past would have been able to cope with the sort of reviews that are written these days. I suspect that many of the great authors would have been destroyed. and would have given up writing completely if they had been forced to face the hostility of what seems to be considered now to be a fairly standard social media onslaught.

Even satirists and socially conscious authors such as Charles Dickens, Moliere, Jonathan Swift, Mark Twain and W.S. Gilbert would have been professionally finished by one star reviewers – or they would have wasted their lives replying to the criticisms. Truly sensitive writers such as F.Scott Fitzgerald and Oscar Wilde would have given up and had themselves admitted to long-term care institutions. Sensitivity is not a quality well respected by modern critics.

It is the artists' lot to suffer more despair, depression and desperation than most citizens, and the internet review system adds to this by allowing those who have not read a single word of a book to destroy it, regardless of the author's skills or intentions or the fact that he or she might have taken a year or a lifetime to write it. And whereas, in the old days, it made sense for an author to write to the editor and insist that a publication print a correction if a reviewer published a libellous remark or an inaccurate accusation there is no such protection these days. Amazon will not remove reviews which are inaccurate or libellous and so authors have to put up with knowing that the internet is awash with lies, defamatory remarks and wild misrepresentations. Thanks to the anonymity of the internet, everybody now has a platform on which to stand and a parapet behind which to hide.

I remember reading somewhere that even Humphrey Bogart, the hard man of the cinema, was very easily hurt by bad reviews. At Hollywood parties he would get drunk and then recite, word for word, the bad reviews he had read and remembered. How would he have coped with reviews which were written by people who hadn't even bothered to watch his films? There really is no logical way to deal with that sort of intrinsic unfairness.

Anyone who says he or she isn't upset by the sort of bad reviews which appear on the internet these days is either not an artist or he or she is a liar.

13

My laptop stopped working yesterday and so today I had to buy another. In the bad old days a laptop used to last for years. These days they seem to last only weeks before expiring. Since I use my laptop only for word processing, I went to one of the stores which sell such things and purchased a cheap model made by a company I've never heard of which is probably just a subsidiary of another company I've never heard of. I buy cheap ones because, in my experience, they last just as long as the expensive ones. And if one stops working I just throw it away. I always back up everything I do on a portable memory stick. (Actually, on several portable memory sticks.) It is a great sadness that when I buy anything new these days the joy is ruined by the fear that the thing won't work at all or that if it does work then it will quickly give up the ghost.

The salesman didn't seem to know what day of the week it was let alone anything about the computers he was selling. He smelt of a revolting cheap aftershave and I realised for the first time that real people do actually buy the foul stuff I buy to spray on our rubbish bags to stop the foxes and badgers tearing them open.

Even if he had said anything worth listening to I wouldn't have heard what he was saying because I was fascinated by a bloke in the next aisle who was pushing a small dog in a pushchair. The dog was wearing a red and white knitted jumper and a rather smart scarf in a similar style. It wasn't cold out so I can only assume that the dog, who did look rather elderly, was poorly. How kind some people are to their pets.

The damned craptop I bought has a useless keyboard, of course, but I always use a plug-in keyboard with my laptops and it is possible to buy keyboards for around £5 which do their job infinitely better than the ones that come with modern laptops. I recently also managed to buy an excellent keyboard for my iPhone. It is full size but doesn't include the keys on the right that no one ever uses so is quite small and light and very portable.

My new craptop has a relatively small memory but that's all I need and the wretched popups are no more annoying with this one than they are with more expensive computers. My dislike and distrust of computers means that I have a reputation as a something of a Luddite but I had my first computer and my first mobile telephone in the 1980s so I've been using both for far longer than most snotty IT 'experts' have been alive. I also had a website, a webshop and a fax machine back in those distant days. A chum and I were, back in 1984, the first people to produce medical software for the general public. We sold the software in 26 countries but, sadly, not many people had computers and our software, which had to be sold on cassettes, was slow to download and cumbersome to use. No one I knew had access to the internet and I only knew one other person in the world who also had a fax machine. He and I used to send each other faxed messages almost daily because we had no one else to whom we could send faxes. So it pisses me off when some snooty, smirking salesman in a cheap suit sneers when I ask him to show me the position of the on and off switch for the wonderful new machine he's promoting.

Am I the only person in the world to hate McAfee with a visceral loathing? And I loathe Microsoft for making the damned McAfee popups a default part of their ridiculously expensive word processing package. McAfee is more annoying than the aggressive Romanian women who hang around railway stations demanding alms. When, years ago, I gave money to one of the women, a haggle of them chased me through the station demanding more money. Two of them tried to steal my wallet. The woman to whom I had given money joined the crowd following me and demanding more alms. The more I think about it the more I think that McAfee has in common with these aggressive beggars. The only way to stop McAfee is for no one to buy their damned products. Then they will go bust and disappear from our lives. What a day for rejoicing that will be.

I don't need protection for my computer because I never use it to access the internet or to bring in outside material. I keep one computer for writing and always have another 'dirty' computer for sending emails and accessing the internet.

When I got it home, I managed to turn the new craptop on quite easily but it took hours to switch it off. I now have little adhesive labels stuck to it telling me how to turn it on, what to do next and how to turn it off. There is, of course, also a sticky label reminding me of the password. Everything on the computer is, it seems, counter intuitive and I suspect that the little machine was designed by a mentally deficient warthog on a work experience programme.

Still, I was cheered enormously by the thought that it will doubtless break down in a few weeks' time and then I will be able to attack it with a hammer and replace it with a new one.

I have been using computers for over 30 years now and I still marvel at the stupidity of the venal people who make them. Everything (hardware and software) seems to be designed without any thought for the people who will use it and although hardware is undeniably much cheaper than it was a few years ago the greed of Bill Gates and his chums seems to know no bounds. These days Microsoft charge a fortune for their incomprehensible software and allow you to use it only once or twice before, like Cinderella at the witching hour, it goes poof and that's that. I doubt if anyone in the history of the world has ever sold anything quite so unfit for use as Word 2010 and yet the damned thing seems unavoidable. If the damned software were a teapot it would drip from spout and handle, if it were a car it would never move an inch. Everything Windows produces seems to be designed by nerds who want to show how clever they are but who have absolutely no sympathy at all with the people who will have to use their wretched product in the real world.

Mr Gates, who is now widely described as a billionaire philanthropist, is reported to be trying to use his money to save the world. Personally, I see Gates as a philanthropist in the way that I see Tony Blair as a peacemaker. The world would be a healthier place if Gates had spent his ill-gotten gains on a bunch of yachts and a few million bottles of champagne. And it would be a happier place if he just cut the price of his damned product.

14

I spent a wonderful few minutes watching the creatures outside our back door. Our bird feeders attract a huge variety of seed and nut eating birds. At any one time there are often a dozen birds taking sunflower hearts or nibbling at the nuts. And, on the ground underneath the feeders will be the ground feeders – the blackbirds and so on. The robins, which are ground feeders, have learned to take sunflower hearts from the dispensers so I'm not sure how they should be categorised these days. And alongside the blackbirds, on the ground, there are always a few squirrels and a couple of pheasants picking up the seeds and bits of nuts which have fallen. When I fill up the feeders I always make sure that I throw a few seeds and nuts onto the ground to start the day off well for them. The squirrels have their own wooden nut dispensers attached to the shed wall and I fill these every day with hazelnuts still in their shells so the whole area is thick with empty shells.

When I switched on the news I saw that BBC presenters and a bunch of overpaid celebrities on the BBC payroll were up in arms about plans to reduce the Corporation's absurdly bloated budget.

The aggrieved 'luvvies' say that the BBC is an essential part of the Welfare State and must be supported, subsidised, protected and revered. This is not particularly surprising since most of these vastly overpaid celebrities have had their snouts in the BBC's well stocked trough for years. What they say is, of course, absolute bollocks and, indeed, rather akin to hearing overpaid bankers defending their multimillion pound bonuses.

The Guardian will undoubtedly support the BBC's pleas. It should be remembered, however, that *The Guardian*, an incomparably unpleasant newspaper, and in my view the most prejudiced, bigoted and inaccurate newspaper in the country (the misprints which made it famous may have largely gone but the more fundamental bigotry remain) is the lucky recipient of the BBC's job vacancy advertisements. The two organisations, though separate, are joined at the wallet.

An acquaintance of mine once applied for a job at *The Guardian*. He passed all the interviews but failed at the final hurdle. I suspect it was because he wasn't sufficiently sanctimonious and didn't pass the 'holier than thou' tests.

Personally, I think he was lucky not to get the job. I once knew an editor at the paper. I have never known anyone more self-righteous and sanctimonious, exploitative and manipulative. I wrote for *The Guardian* and its sister paper, *The Observer*, when I was a teenager and a young man but it was one of those fads one grows out of – like growing a moustache or listening to folk music.

Incidentally, *The Guardian* is hypocritical as well as sanctimonious. When I ran my publishing company advertisements for several books of mine, including *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You*, were banned by the Advertising Standards Authority, an organisation which is widely believed to be statutory and independent but which is, in reality, a private group backed and paid for by the advertising departments of large companies which are often eager to suppress anything which they find commercially inconvenient. *The Guardian* makes a big thing of accepting ASA judgements but when I offered to buy six full page adverts for books which had been banned by the ASA *The Guardian* happily ran the advertisements in return for a cheque for £60,000.

However, I must admit that *The Guardian* does serve a useful purpose. If I see that a film or book has received a favourable review from *The Guardian* I know it won't be worth watching or reading.

The BBC, which I loathe with a very deep loathing, is corrupt, incompetent, wasteful, disloyal, disrespectful and treacherous. It is staffed by people whose minds are closed to the world, closed to debate, closed to ideas they have not been programmed to believe.

What a glorious trick it is that the state's mouthpiece is paid for by special taxes raised from the souls the organisation is committed to mislead.

BBC programme makers will relentlessly bully and intimidate the ordinary and the less than powerful but they always back away from upsetting anyone important, rich or powerful. The BBC doesn't make programmes attacking drug companies or arms manufacturers but they will happily destroy a small shopkeeper who has broken some petty EU law.

I pointed out many years ago, when I first coined the phrase, that the BBC is expert at 'intellectual terrorism'.

Executives insist the organisation has to be impartial when reporting on terrorist groups (even ones which are attacking Britain) but admits that it is consistently biased in favour of the European Union. It is by its own admission, incapable of providing fair and unbiased news reports on topics of vital importance.

Anyone who doubts the organisation's dishonesty should simply check out the news as listed in other news organisations and then compare what they see with the news as described on the BBC's website. The two rarely match since big stories that BBC staff find embarrassing or inconvenient will invariably be ignored.

The BBC is also an outrageously hypocritical organisation. For example, the Corporation's policy is to promote the Global Warming myth on all occasions (despite the fact that it has no public mandate for this and there is no incontrovertible scientific evidence to support its position) and to suppress independent discussion of the issue. But when the BBC issues DVDs of its programmes it sells them shrink wrapped and encased in both cardboard and plastic cases.

The truth, of course, is that the BBC wouldn't need to wallow in money skimmed from unwilling homeowners if the idiots working there hadn't destroyed their own (and our heritage).

If the BBC had not erased the tapes of hugely successful programmes such as 'Dr Who', 'Hancock's Half Hour' and 'Paul Temple' they would be able to live off their back royalties.

15

A crack which appeared in a pane of glass in our Victorian greenhouse has started to spread. It was six inches long a few days ago but is now over two feet long. I spent the morning trying to find a glazier prepared to put in a replacement pane of glass but eventually gave up. It is impossible to find workmen prepared to do small jobs. I could, no doubt, find someone prepared to clamber off his sofa and whizz round in his Range Rover if we were preparing to put on another storey or build a twelve room extension to the garage but no one wants to replace a few missing tiles, put up a shed or build a small wall.

Local newspapers are full of small ads from builders promising that ‘no job is too small’. But I’ve never met one of those brickteasers who wasn’t telling pork pies.

(I love local newspapers. They make excellent reading. The headlines can be captivating. I saw one recently which carried the headline *Puss in Boots*. Since we were well outside the Pantomine season I was intrigued. It turned out that a cat which had been ‘lost’ had been ‘found’ in a branch of Boots, the well-known chain of pharmacies.)

I did think about putting in a new pane of glass myself but I know that it will be a disaster. I will measure the window frame very precisely, I will order a pane of glass that is correct in size to the sixteenth of an inch, I will buy the very best putty available, I will knock out the old glass (cutting myself in at least two places) and one of several things will then happen. I will break the new pane of glass moving it from the car to the greenhouse. I will find that the window pane is an inch too long, an inch too wide, an inch not long enough or an inch not wide enough. I will find that the putty will either be so wet and sticky that, although it sticks to my fingers, my shirt and my hair it will not stick to the top edge of the wooden window frame or I will find that the putty has set into a solid mass which cannot be used for anything other than hurling at the lunatic who insists on riding up and down our lane on his motorbike at 8.30 a.m. every Sunday morning.

One of those things will happen.

I know this for a fact. I don’t have to experience it to know it.

So, I have now stuck brown, sticky parcel tape over the crack in the glass and I have to say that although it looks an absolute mess (to be honest it looks as if it was mended by someone who abhors do-it-yourself and cannot find a handyman) it works quite well. And we cannot see the greenhouse from the house so what does it really matter?

In an attempt to do a good, professional job I put tape on both the inside and the outside of the glass. The glass no longer wobbles and I am confident that it won’t fall out and damage any passing badgers. The tape also keeps out the cold and any rain which might have seeped through the crack.

I found this small incident strangely liberating for it has encouraged me to abandon my lifelong attempt to do things properly. We live in strange times and it is impossible to do all the things we are supposed to do, told to do and ordered to do, let alone to do the things we feel we ought to do.

Barely a day goes by without someone in authority telling me that I must do this or must do that.

Only this morning the man who came to repair a fault in the central heating system told me (yet again) that I must have an inspection hatch put into the flue leading up from the AGA in the kitchen. He seemed quite threatening and terribly upset that we have failed to do obey this latest directive from our Masters in Brussels. I suspect he wants us to have the hatch installed because he will be able to charge us a vast sum of money to do the work. The European Union is forever aiding and abetting wasteful endeavour. Will my life be improved by having an inspection hatch in a flue? No it will not. Will we be safer? No, of course we won’t. So I sent the man away with fleas in both ears.

And yesterday my doctor wrote to tell me that I should attend for yet another screening examination. I am warned that terrible things could befall me if I do not go. But the truth is that the screening examination is quite likely to do me serious physical harm. For decades now the NHS has been taking resources desperately needed to treat the sick and using them to create screening programmes which cause damage and worry to people who are perfectly healthy. It is, of course, a doctor’s job to prevent illness whenever he can but it is not his job to industrialise and commercialise health care – which is what formal screening programmes have done.

If the BMA and GMC cared a damn about patients they could have saved millions of lives by encouraging people to stop eating meat. But that would have aroused opposition from the meat industry and where would the profit have been for the medical profession?

As a doctor I know that it is a myth that tests and investigations are harmless. Indeed, I know that the risks of having an examination often far exceed the possible benefits. I have thrown the warning letter into the burning bin. Just about every study and survey ever done has proved that screening programmes do far more harm than good and benefit only the people being paid to conduct them. Some programmes, such as breast screening, cause more cancer than they spot. Others, such as programmes designed to tell you whether or not you will get Alzheimer’s, are cruelly pointless and seem designed to do absolutely nothing except ruin people’s lives.

Just to cap off the day, when I took our Ford truck into a garage to fill up with diesel this evening, a complete stranger walked across and told me that I was breaking the law because the rear number plate was covered with mud. He did not tell me this as a kindly gesture, worried lest I be stopped by a police patrol in a search for action and excitement. He told me about my number plate in an officious and self-important sort of way. He spoke very loudly too, as people always do when they've got nothing interesting to say. I thanked the stranger and told him that I am an employee of MI5, working on a secret surveillance mission. I explained that the number plate has been professionally smeared with mud both to confuse the enemy and to distract attention from the spy cameras fitted in the screws which hold the plate in place. The stranger listened to all this garbage with an increasingly serious look and, when I'd finished, he apologised, backed away and hurried back to his Vauxhall Smegma motor car. Once he'd fastened his seat belt the busy body stranger whispered to his wife who stared wide eyed at me and the truck as he drove out of the filling station. They'd probably never seen an MI5 surveillance vehicle before. I raised an eyebrow in a jaunty manner and sauntered nonchalantly across the forecourt, doing my best James Bond impersonation.

Our lives are consumed by bureaucratic crap and I have had enough.

In future my response will be simple: 'What are you going to do about it?'

The bottom line is that most of the time, the snotty little bastards who do the threatening will do nothing. The threats are empty ones. The rules and regulations are too numerous to be taken seriously. And the people in authority are far too busy threatening people to remember what they've said, who they said it to and what they threatened to do.

I intend to ignore the crap, of which there is far too much, for it comes in endless waves from utility companies, government departments and just about everyone with whom we do any sort of business.

And next time a pane of glass develops a crack I will mend it with brown parcel tape.

This is the future.

16

At lunchtime Antoinette bet me 20 pence that I could not get through the day until bedtime without whingeing. This was not, I am sure, intended as anything other than a jovial challenge. Antoinette knows only too well that for much of my life I worked as a newspaper columnist, producing several thousand words a week. And it is quite impossible to be a newspaper columnist without having a continuous supply of firm opinions. Columnists are paid to whinge, moan and complain.

'Would it be whingeing for me to say that I will find this game so challenging as to be stressful?' I enquired.

Antoinette thought for a moment and then shook her head. 'You can say that,' she agreed. 'But the game starts now.'

I managed seven minutes.

And I only managed that long because we were having lunch and I was taught that it is rude to speak with your mouthful.

'Did you see the latest rubbish from Brussels?' I asked. 'They're…'

Antoinette held a hand across the table. 'You owe me 20 pence.'

I paid up.

But at least I didn't whinge about losing the bet.

17

Something has climbed into the incredibly small space above the dining room ceiling.

Is it a rat, a mouse or a squirrel?

This is rather worrying since the ceiling in that area, having been partly eaten by wasps, is now perilously thin. I have strengthened it by putting long strips of sticky tape across the plasterboard. It doesn't look very pretty but it will, with any luck, stop whatever is up there from falling through and landing on the dining room table.

I barked very loudly, very close to the ceiling and whoever it was who was making all the noise went away.

I bought (yet another) armful of second hand books today.

I wonder if there is an organisation to help people who cannot stop themselves doing this? A sort of Alcoholics Anonymous for people who can't stop buying books. To be honest, even if there is I don't think I'll join. My addiction doesn't damage my health unless I buy too many books to carry comfortably.

The book I picked out to read first, a thin volume entitled *When I Was a Lad*, is a series of reminiscences by an author called A.A.Thomson.

Thomson, who was born in Scotland but brought up in Yorkshire, was a fairly prolific author who is now, sadly, largely forgotten. His books are, I think, all out of print though he was in my view the best cricket writer of the 20th century (which probably makes him the best cricket writer of all time) and while his wit, charm, knowledge and humour put him well above such well-known and deservedly respected stalwarts such as Neville Cardus and John Arlott, his knowledge and art put him way ahead of the pompous, self-referential ex-sportsmen who are now hired to comment on the game.

The first pages of *When I Was a Lad* contain the following warning to readers: ‘Beware of nostalgia. Beware especially of an elderly gentleman who buttonholes you and begins: ‘When I was a lad…’ He will start to tell you, if you don’t watch him, of a Golden Age. He will paint a picture in glowing colours, in which every goose is a swan, lad, and every lass a queen; in which everything was smaller and better; white was whiter, black was blacker and everything in sight was tuppence coloured.’

Thomson goes on to say that this is all nonsense for golden ages are not 24 carat gold, and the good old days are not a period of time but something in imagination. They are, he says, everybody’s yesterday, and represent lost youth, ‘saddest of life’s precious possessions’.

Thomson was right, of course.

There is much in our modern world for us to be grateful for. The washing machine has freed millions of women from the drudgery of the wash tub. Metalled or paved roads enable us to move about far more freely than our predecessors managed. The pot holes which scar our roads are as nothing compared to the ruts which threatened the lives of 19th century travellers. And indoor plumbing and electricity are wonders that mark a large step forward from the earth closets and oil lamps of the 19th century.

But, more than at any other time in history, our obsession with change and progress means, I think, that we are now moving forward at such a pace that many of the more enviable and intangible qualities that we took for granted 50 to 100 years ago have been jettisoned. I’m talking about qualities such as kindness, respect and humility.

In our modern world these are, too often, regarded as weaknesses rather than strengths; as liabilities rather than assets.

I like to think that Thomson might have agreed with me about this. There truly are some things which are worth being nostalgic about.

18

I fell in the garden again two days ago.

The badgers and the squirrels and the foxes dig so many holes that our small estate looks as if it has been shelled by Rommel’s army. Worried that I will one day fall, break a leg, and be unable to crawl back to the house, the Princess has bought me an old fashioned bicycle horn; one of those which is operated by squeezing a large black rubber bulb. I am under strict instructions to carry the horn in my pocket at all times and to squeeze the bulb if I fall and need help.

I am not good with instructions of any kind (I am so contrary minded that I refuse to write on lined paper because I don’t want anyone telling me how to manage my writing) but this does seem like an excellent idea.

It is possible to buy small electronic alarms but there are two problems with them. The first is that they require batteries, and remembering to test and replace the batteries will be a step too far. The second is that they sound too much like a distant car alarm. And we are now all programmed to ignore car alarms.

I thought the bicycle horn such a good idea that I immediately bought Antoinette a bicycle horn of her own.

When she is in the house she can honk if she needs me for any reason.

We will, indeed, be able to communicate like a pair of honking geese.

We are thinking of working out a code. Two honks mean that it is time for a cup of tea. Three honks means that there is someone on the phone or at the door for me. (This will be used only very rarely because we don’t usually answer the telephone or the door.)

And four honks mean stay where you are and keep your head down and out of sight because one of our unpleasant neighbours, a woman who collects cushions and is proud of having written reviews of them online, has just rung the front door bell and is hovering in the front garden.

In just the same way that there are some people in this world who can be described as ‘larger than life’ so she is one of those person who can accurately be described as ‘smaller than life’.

We have seen her cushion reviews.

One read: ‘Cushions are just an essential part of a home as a bed.’

I’m sure she is right. I have heard it said, though possibly not reliably, that the wonderfully absurd Banksy has claimed that ‘No home can have too many cushions’. I cannot believe this to be true, but you never know, do you, with these modern artists? I have heard it rumoured that the absurdly over-rated Damien Hirst, shark and cow pickler to the art world aristocracy, has over 300 cushions in his bungalow in Great Yarmouth – all hand-embroidered with sugary messages and exhortations to Keep Calm And Paint.

‘These cushions are perfect for sitting on or for looking at,’ our neighbour wrote, when reviewing one make of cushion.

Although she is still only in her late 50s the woman has the demeanour of someone much older and she wobbles when she walks. She once told me that her stabilisers had gone and that for her life was living on a cruise ship. She said that she had once taken a two week cruise and been surprised to find that she didn't wobble at all while at sea. I said I thought it possible that her natural wobble and the ship's slight swaying had cancelled one another out.

The cushion lover is slightly deaf and, if she hears the horn, will assume that the honking is caused by a distant animal.

A couple of years ago, we succumbed to a series of heavy hints and invited her and her husband (who is almost invisible in every sense) to dinner. The only thing I remember about the evening is that she ate very quickly, shovelling the food down as fast as possible. The image reminded me of doctors eating in a hospital canteen, back in the days when hospital doctors attended emergencies, worked hard and always had indigestion. The woman explained that she always ate quickly, especially if she was enjoying what she ate, because she always worried that she might die before she'd finished her meal and that it would be a waste of good food if she were to do so.

Oh, and I remember that while most people who go to dinner with friends or neighbours take a bottle of wine, a box of chocolates or a bunch of flowers she brought us a cushion. It had the word 'cushion' embroidered on it in red, lest we ever mistake it for a corkscrew or a bedside lamp.

19

A reader kindly sent me a list of wonderful quotes from the classics.

Words change their meanings over the years and authors can sometimes end up saying something they probably didn't quite mean at the time.

a)

'You would be glad to give her the pleasure now?'

'Oh yes! Very glad, if your aunt sees no objection.'

Jane Austen – *Mansfield Park*

b)

'He was a quick fellow and when hot from play would toss himself in a corner.'

George Elliot – *Middlemarch*

c)

'Mrs Sparsit uttered a gentle ejaculation as having received a moral shock.'

Charles Dickens – *Hard Times*

d)

'I am used to being wet through,' she added. 'I have been drenched on Pansy dozens of times.'

Thomas Hardy – *A Pair of Blue Eyes*

e)

'I can hardly keep my hands warm, even in my muff.'

Jane Austen – *Sense and Sensibility*

f)

'I love Fanny.'

Thomas Hardy – *Far from the Madding Crowd*

g)

'Molly trembled all over but she did not attempt to evade his penetration.'

Elizabeth Gaskell – *Wives and Daughters*

20

This evening, we watched *Army of Shadows*, a French resistance film directed by Jean-Pierre Melville who also helmed 'Le Flic and Red Circle. (I love the use of the word 'helm' for 'direct'. It originated, I believe, with the trade magazine *Variety*.)

In the film, set in France during the Second World War, the protagonists live in constant fear that they will be reported to the authorities by their neighbours. People realise that they cannot even trust their doctor or their solicitor to keep their secrets and since trust is the foundation of any relationship, whether personal or professional, the result is disastrous. No one really knows who their enemies are. No one knows whom to trust. It is an enormously moving film.

When it had finished we both separately realised that the film could well be seen as allegorical. We obviously do not live in fear for our lives, but we do live in a world where snitches, stooges, informants and grasses are encouraged in every walk of life. Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs is now paying vast numbers of informants – and paying them well. Tell-tale tittle tattlers who contact the tax man with news about relatives and neighbours now make big money and 'informing' is a growth industry.

Indeed, I see that an increasing number of those who ring the taxman and claim the free money on offer to informants are either solicitors or accountants or work in their offices. It really is important to remember that you can never trust your accountant or your lawyer.

We live in a world where we cannot trust anyone in authority. Doctors and lawyers will no longer keep our secrets because it is against the law for them to do so.

Trusting has become gullibility.

Could it be, perhaps, that the more life changes the more it stays the same?

21

When the doorbell rang this evening I was so surprised that I actually answered it. Our doorbell hardly ever rings, and never in the evenings.

A man in a smart suit was standing there. He smelt of a rather toxic cologne (yet again it was, I think, the brand I spray on black rubbish bags to keep the badgers at bay) and wore the sort of bulky watch favoured by deep sea divers with poor eyesight. I have seen smaller alarm clocks.

I thought at first that he was either from the council (a bearer of bad tidings), a writ server (a bearer of very bad tidings) or a Jehova's Witness (a bearer of terrible tidings). But in fact he had come to sell us an aerial photograph of the house.

The photograph, which was extremely clear, was neatly presented in a smart wooden frame. 'Would you like to buy a picture of your house?' he asked, holding up the picture in a way he had clearly done hundreds of time before. 'I can let you have it for £60.'

I thanked him, told him that I appreciated the offer and told him that we already had one aerial photograph of the house and that I didn't really see the need for another, good as it was.

'£40?' said the man, who clearly had a financial plan.

'I'm really sorry,' I said. 'But we already have an aerial photo of the house. Yours is a very good picture but I don't know what we would do with it.'

'£20?' said the man. 'It's got to be worth £20.'

I told him that I felt quite sure that the picture was well worth £20, and was indeed a bargain at that price, but that I really didn't need it or want it.

'Give me a tenner and I'll go away,' said the man. He held out the picture. 'What the hell else am I going to do with this?'

I felt so sorry for him that I gave him a tenner and he went away.

22

Our sweet pea plants have grown enthusiastically and most of them are four or five feet tall. They look good. They promise much. But there are no flowers. What a disaster. I am beginning to suspect that the garden centre has sold me a new variety of non-flowering sweet peas.

This evening I finished reading *Eyes Wide Open*; Frederic Raphael's extraordinary account of how he wrote the screenplay for Stanley Kubrick's film *Eyes Wide Shut*.

Raphael sprinkles his account with some extraordinary anecdotes. So, for example, Kubrick once told Raphael that 'Hitler had been right about everything'.

A curious statement for anyone to make, let alone a Jew.

Was Kubrick joking? Teasing? Being provocative?

He doesn't seem to have been the sort of person who made a lot of jokes.

Or was it an honest opinion? We will never know.

On another occasion, Kubrick said to Raphael 'What do we know about how Gentiles feel?'

And that seems, in its way, to be just as strange.

23

I discovered today that in 2006 the British Government used taxpayers' money to set up a charitable corporation called the International Finance Facility for Immunisation. This curious and quite surprisingly secretive charity exists to raise money for vaccination programmes. Within the first four years of its life it had raised an astonishing $1.6 billion in cash. By the middle of 2015 the corporation (it seems too bizarre to call it a charity) had raised over $10 billion in curious bonds and loans. The money has been spent on buying vaccines for use in developing countries.

There are, no doubt, a small number of wealthy, company executives who are very grateful to the British taxpayers who have helped fund this extraordinary generous aid programme for wealthy, international drug companies.

When I next send a cheque to HMRC I shall do so with renewed enthusiasm knowing that my hard earned cash will be used to subsidise drug company operations.

‘How will I know if you’re developing dementia?’ asked Antoinette as we sat down in the living room this evening.

I can understand her worry. I am of an age when such things happen. So I made a list of ten signs which will show her that it is time for her to worry:

a) I say how polite the staff are in Post Offices.
b) I tip my hat and say good day when passing traffic wardens.
c) I suggest popping into McDonald’s for a meal.
d) I start reading *The Guardian* newspaper.
e) I vote for the Liberal Democrats.
f) I try to cut the lawn in such a way that we have neat stripes.
g) I talk enthusiastically when cold callers phone to offer us free insulation.
h) I talk to the neighbours.
i) I purchase (and even use) a leaf blower.
j) I buy a tent and suggest we go camping.

24

A doctor I knew and respected once told me that I should always expect the worst from people.

‘Do this,’ he said, ‘and you will never be disappointed.’

Cynical but realistic, I suppose.

With estate agents this warning rings particularly true. I’ve had a lot of dealings with estate agents over the years and with one or two exceptions they have shown themselves to be both lazy and stupid and have invariably turned out to be lying, cheating, greedy bastards.

(I’ve put that as politely as I can because I don’t want to upset any sweet old ladies whose sons or daughters drifted into bad company and found themselves selling property for a living.)

Because they work on a percentage commission, estate agents have helped push house prices into the stratosphere, where they sit at unsustainable levels, and in order to maximise their sales they have encouraged house owners everywhere to lie, to cheat, to deceive, to be greedy and to bury vital information.

It is no wonder that they are the most hated group of citizens in the UK, up there alongside paedophiles and tax inspectors.

Indeed, I do not believe that any group in the western world has done more damage to morality and honesty than estate agents.

Politicians lie just as much, of course, but they do not touch our ordinary, daily lives in quite the same way.

Estate agents have also done enormous damage by giving precedence to customers who want to borrow money from a bank or building society, rather than to buy a house with their savings. The reason for this is simple: estate agents can earn massive amounts of extra commission by putting house buyers in touch with a lender offering loans and by then encouraging the buyer to exaggerate their income in order to be given an ever bigger loan.

It is here, indeed, that estate agents make their really big money and so it is not surprising that they give preference to buyers who are borrowing all or most of the money they need and ignore offers made by cash buyers who have saved hard in order to make an offer. To estate agents a bid in the hand is not worth anywhere near as much as the imaginary one in the clouds. In this sort of environment cash is no longer king and cash buyers are at a very real disadvantage. We live in a world dominated by debt but this more true of the housing market than anywhere else.

Estate agents don’t give a fig that if the market goes sour, or a house loses value for some reason, then the house buyer will simply go bankrupt and leave the bank which lent them the money to carry the loss.

We know one couple who paid a ridiculously high price for their house (in order to blow away more sensible competitors). They have not been able to afford to pay the mortgage payments for several years now but because they overpaid for the property (encouraged by the estate agent and the bank) the bank which lent them the money cannot sell the house without incurring a massive loss. And so the couple have been living in a very smart house without paying a penny for it. If the bank eventually decides to bite the bullet, sell the house and throw out the freeloaders they will simply go bankrupt and leave the bank to carry the entire loss.

Our lives are dominated by rules and regulations. (Though I don't know why we call them rules and regulations. In my view any rule or regulation which can, if I break it, result in my being banged up alongside murderers and MPs who have been caught fiddling their expenses deserves to be called a law.) Even dustmen have rules and they're not shy about ensuring that we don't stray from the straight and narrow. Every man in a pair of daisy roots is a rule enforcer.

So, why are there no decent rules governing the behaviour estate agents or, indeed, anyone selling a house?

Time and time again we have looked at houses which seemed to offer everything we wanted only to discover that there was a sewage farm next door or a right of way passing through the back garden within six feet of the house. Maybe we look as though we are in search of a good smell. We have twice been offered houses which were within shit flinging distance of a sewage farm.

Estate agents always draw attention to the electric gates with which every home now appears to be equipped but they never mention the sewage farm or the public footpath. If we ever sell our current home I will insist that the estate agents describe the gate as digital since it has to be opened and shut by hand.

Buying a new home has become a case of 'find the hidden snag'.

One house we looked at had a public footpath, a shared drive and access for a farmer to drive his tractors and animals across the garden. These are serious problems for enthusiastic ramblers gloat about keeping public footpaths open, even where there is no real sense to their route and their use means that land is unusable and garden privacy non-existent.

None of these problems was mentioned on the particulars published on the internet or printed out so neatly for distribution.

And here's another thing: why are estate agents quite incapable of understanding basic instructions such as 'We're looking for somewhere quiet with no immediate neighbours'.

That quite specific advice resulted in our being offered one house that was so close to a railway line that you could have reached out and touched the trains as they hurtled past, and four houses which were on housing estates where the words 'garden' and 'window box' were considered interchangeable.

(The only bright spot was that one of the estate houses had a sign on the gate saying 'Beware of the Doug'. When we asked the estate agent if this was a misprint she explained that it was a joke because the owner's name was Doug.)

Maps make it easy to check out the position of most houses on the internet but there is no way of identifying specific problems unless the owner or agent gives the right information and as a result many people get as far as hiring a solicitor and surveyor before they find out the problems. And then their money is wasted.

Estate agents should be forced to publish an honesty box on every set of house particulars. In that box they should include everything which might concern potential purchasers and everything which might affect the value of a home. There should be details of neighbouring schools, airports, sewage farms and camp sites. There should be details of public footpaths, bridle ways, rights of access and disputed borders.

Purchasers will find out about all these things in due course (unless they have hired a nincompoop of a lawyer) but by then they may well have spent a good deal of money.

To sell a house while deliberately hiding salient facts seems to me to be fraud.

If I sell a car which has no brakes I would expect someone in blue to come round and feel my collar. If I sell a keyboard which has no letter 'e' I would not be surprised if the buyer turned up with a big stick.

One problem is, I think, that although we live in a world of compliance officers and box tickers the people who create the rules are so prodded and bribed by lobbyists that they worry about the wrong things.

And the other problem is that our reliance on rules and laws has made many people too comfortable about being deceitful. Too many estate agents and house owners feel that if they aren't actually doing anything illegal then they aren't doing anything wrong.

25

I can hardly hear the dialogue in modern films. I'm not sure whether this is because too many actors now mumble (believing, quite wrongly, that mumbling turns them into Marlon Brando sound-alikes) or because I am going deaf.

Whatever the cause, I need to switch on the subtitles (when they are available) so that I can read what the actors are saying.

Curiously I don't have anywhere near as much difficulty in understanding what actors such as William Powell and Jimmy Stewart are saying and as a result we very rarely watch anything which was made after the 1960s.

Still, I'm prepared to take my share of the blame.

I am definitely suffering from Old Fart Syndrome.

Here are some of the other signs and symptoms of Old Fart Syndrome: I don't like unexpected visitors; if going out of the house, I like at a week's notice; I can't drink more than half a bottle of champagne at a time because the bubbles give me indigestion; I have developed an unnatural affection for rugs and blankets; on cool summer days I am inclined to wear a waistcoat or jumper under my jacket and I still wear a tie when leaving the house, because I feel undressed without one.

26

I was astonished to discover today that John Buchan's marvellous classic *The Thirty Nine Steps* had collected 13 one star reviews. Among these is one which reads: 'Purchased in error, did not read, not an author I would read. will be careful which place I tap on screen in future!!!!!!!!'

Why did Mr Buchan deserve a one star review because a book buyer made a mistake?

Another reader, who also gave the book one star, wrote: 'The book grips you from the start. Although set decades ago, it could well be a modern drama. Well written. Recommended to one and all…'.

But Mr Buchan got one star from that reader too; someone who was too stupid to operate the star rating facility properly or too lazy to correct their mistake afterwards.

A third reader had given the novel one star because the print version he'd bought had 'print the size of an ant'.

A one star review can ensure that a book is never bought. Even if a book has given great pleasure to other readers, a few one star reviews will destroy a book because new readers tend to shy away from reading books which have a low rating. Why, I wonder, do readers want to destroy a book (and stop others enjoying it) just because they don't like it? There isn't a book in the world which can possibly appeal to everyone. The review systems favoured online are doing enormous damage to books and reading and are helping to ensure that millions of readers never get to see books which they would enjoy.

Traditionally, critics used to try to be objective (asking themselves if the author, composer or film director had succeeded in producing the book, music or film he wanted to produce) but today this has changed and criticism is invariably subjective (has the author succeeded in producing a work which has pleased that particular reader). In theory that's fair enough. The rules have changed. But there are a number of complications. For one thing many readers don't bother to read the blurb before buying a book. So, for example, one of my books, which was advertised as offering a trenchant view, was damned for containing a trenchant view. And some reviewers give a book a deadly one star if there is a line or a comment in it which they do not agree with. Anything controversial or memorable will kill a book faster than an incinerator.

In the old days one could always ignore a bad review in, say, *The Guardian* and live in hope that the *Daily Telegraph* reviewer would give it a good review. These days a book is dead, killed for ever, if the first online reviewer gives it just one star.

Some critics argue that authors simply need to be tougher. But I very much doubt if authors who are tough and insensitive would make very good writers. As F.Scott Fitzgerald wrote in *The Love of the Last Tycoon*: 'Writers aren't people exactly. Or, if they're any good, they're a whole lot of people trying so hard to be one person.'

And it is usually hard for an author to cope with entirely inaccurate reviews. Early on in my ebook life, one American reviewer complained that a book of mine contained spelling errors but in fact the problem was that the words were spelt in the English manner. The review, and the one star rating, remains forever. Another reviewer gave one of my Bilbury books a bad rating because, he claimed, the rest of the books in the series were not available as ebooks. He was wrong, but his bad review and his bad rating remain for ever. It also seems a tad unfair that a reader who buys a second-hand copy of one of my books can give the book a one star review if the person from whom they bought the book failed to wrap it inadequately before putting it in the post.

Most worrying of all is the fact that some writers have admitted that they are now so frightened by the power of reviewers that they take great care not to put any passion or opinion into their books and they deliberately suppress views which, however honestly held, might result in a damning review. It can even be deadly to give a character an opinion which might prove unpopular, or be condemned as politically correct. Characters and plots need to be bland and inoffensive if a book is to be guaranteed good reviews and avoid those awful and destructive one star dismissals.

I have, in the past, often found myself wondering how people in other jobs would cope if they were rated in the way that authors are rated. It seems that we will soon find out for the latest trend is, I gather, for employers to hire staff through online market places such as Upwork. Under this new system each worker is rated by his or her previous employers. And employers do not pay a penny unless they are satisfied with the work which has been done. It seems that millions of people who have previously only experienced the reviewing and rating system from the point of view of the consumer will now find themselves on the other end of the cruelty.

One well-known book reviewer (who has somehow managed to review over 2,000 books in eighteen months) works five days a week in a supermarket where she operates a check-out till. She assures authors that after she retires next year she will be able to review far more books. How would she feel, I wonder, if she went to work one Monday morning and found that the manager had pinned up, at her check-out station, a long list of customers' comments about her work, competence and appearance? 'Jennie is slow-witted, rude and a borderline cretin'. 'Avoid Jennie's queue if at all possible. I've seen her stealing from customers.' 'Jennie should be fired. She has terrible BO and needs to shave off her moustache'.

How will bank clerks cope when everyone visiting the bank is given a leaflet listing dozens of examples of customer feedback? 'Gareth is as thick as a brick. Even with a calculator he can't add up for toffee'. 'Get rid of Gareth. His breath stinks and he leers so much he makes me feel uncomfortable'.

'Authors should stop whining and suck up the reviews,' said one reviewer, who works as a school teacher. But he would, I suspect, contact his union and be out on strike within minutes if parents' honest comments about his teaching abilities were pasted onto the wall behind his desk for everyone to see. Perhaps he doesn't understand how authors feel when abusive reviews are published.

And the bad news is that the enthusiasm for reviewing and rating is spreading. I suppose it had to happen. Indeed, it does seem remarkable that so many people and businesses are subjected to ratings these days (and can, professionally speaking, live or die according to the whims of their customers) while the people who should be subjected to ratings (government employees for example) are immune. At the moment, civil servants and people working for large companies, cannot be reviewed. But there are, apparently, plans for websites where policemen and traffic wardens and others, such as hospital staff, can be reviewed and rated.

And why shouldn't nurses and midwives be rated?

'Nurse Mengele has cold hands and a cold heart and seems to obtain more pleasure than is decent from removing sticking plasters. One star. Not recommended.' 'Nurse Crippen is sloppy when measuring out dangerous medicines and potential poisons, and is rumoured to be responsible for at least 37 deaths. Best avoided.' 'Nurse Gabrielle surely wears angel wings under her uniform. Kind, considerate and thoughtful she is always sympathetic and gentle. Thoroughly recommended.'

(I did try to rate the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital where both my parents had been treated so abysmally that they subsequently died. But after I gave the hospital and its staff a one star rating I subsequently received an email telling me that they refused to accept my review because I hadn't put it up within their time limit. This seems a rather good idea. Invite people to give your product a review and then only publish the ones which give you a four star rating or better. Only an NHS hospital could get away with this.)

Meanwhile, the reviewing of books continues.

I think, perhaps, that some reviewers don't realise that to most authors, a book is part of his life and soul. A mindless, thoughtless, cruel attack on a book is not like giving a colander or a pair of socks a bad review. A bad review of a book is personal, very personal, because a book and its author are indistinguishable and inseparable; one is the other.

Hemingway wrote that 'there is no friend as loyal as a book' and I suspect he would agree that the relationship between author and reader is a valuable one. I know that when I read a number of books by one author I feel that I get to know him as an individual. And that knowledge helps me to enjoy the books even more. I don't have to agree with everything he says; I simply have to be interested in the way he says it. When I read a book I want to be stimulated and when I close it I want to feel that I have been informed or entertained (or, ideally, both).

What many readers don't realise is that the relationship works both ways and many authors feel close to their readers. They want them to like their books, of course. But they also want to make them happy.

'C'est le role de l'artiste de creer le soleil, lorsqu'il n'y en a pas ,' wrote Romain Rolland, the French dramatist. If he'd had the good fortune to have been English he'd have written: 'It is the role of the artist to create sunshine when there is none'.

27

It is reported that the UK population is rising by 500,000 a year (in other words the number of foreigners coming to live in Britain is greater by that number than the number of British folk leaving to live abroad).

Separately, it has also been reported that 25% of all births in England were to mothers who were born outside the country and 37% of London's residents were born overseas.

It is hardly surprising that there now seem to be more people in Paris who speak English than there are in London.

England is being ruined by liberal, metropolitan hypocrites who are driven by an unnatural hatred of everything English. They doubtless imagine that they are creating a multicultural society but they are, in reality, creating a host of uni-cultural ghettoes and a multi-ghetto society. In one London suburb, the residents speak 171 different languages and, naturally, the State and local services feel obliged to provide translators for them all. Some London based columnists and commentators (and the vast majority of the nation's political commentators live and work in London) believe London voters regularly reject UKIP because they are happy with their 'multicultural' city. This is not true. London constituencies regularly reject UKIP candidates because most of the voters are immigrants who care nothing about Britain or British culture, and there simply aren't enough British voters in the city to have any impact.

The multiculturalists claim to be liberals, worried about the freedom of others, but although they insist on providing all the freedom in the world for anyone who can claim to be 'ethnic', they insist on banning people from putting up England flags.

And am I the only one to have noticed that it is always the self-styled liberals who want more laws, more regulations and more rules so that those who disagree with them will have ever less freedom. The liberals (and you can spell it with either a small or a large initial letter) appear to enjoy being professional victims and humourless angst ridden moaners and they have given us a world in which freedom of discussion has disappeared.

An Irish politician called Sir Boyle Roche once claimed that 'we should silence anyone who opposes the right to freedom of speech'.

I suspect that Sir Boyle is a hero among *Guardian* reading liberals and throughout the BBC.

28

Why is everything that I buy on eBay so much smaller in real life than it looks in the pictures? I recently bought some rubber door stoppers which turned out to be a suitable size for a doll's house. I bought a pair of earrings for Antoinette which were so small that if she wore them they would be invisible. If I dropped them I would need a magnifying glass to find them. I very nearly bought a garden incinerator which I noticed, at the last moment, was so small that it would have hardly reached up to my knees.

And the stuff that isn't smaller is too often badly made and disappointing. Audios of books turn out to be 30 minute excerpted summaries.

I am, however, learning as I explore the world of online buying.

My number one rule is to avoid buying anything to which the BBC logo is attached. The BBC leads the world in sanctimonious superciliousness but it has also taken a healthy lead in ripping off the punters by selling poor quality products.

Still, it wasn't an entirely bad day. I received a helpful email from an anonymous reader who said: 'I have seen your picture on your Amazon biography. You are very ugly.' How kind it was of them to find the time to pass on these pertinent observations. Life would be so dull and devoid of delight without the attentions of such generous spirited souls.

More cheerily, I see that a group of traditional English fanatics, led by the marvellous Richard Noble, who is himself a former world land speed record holder, is planning to produce a car which will, in 2017, break through the 1,000 miles an hour barrier and smash the existing land speed record.

The project will cost an estimated £40 million and would be a bargain at ten times the price.

An obvious prerequisite for such an attempt is a stretch of absolutely flat road that is long enough to enable the car to reach such a speed and then slow down again. Noble and his team have picked a spot in the Kalahari Desert which is the flattest place on earth but the area they will use needs to be totally smooth, and so for the last four years a team of 300 South Africans have been hand-picking stones from the site.

I don't know why but I find this all terribly English and entirely in the spirit of Sir John Cobb and Sir Malcolm Campbell.

29

In April this year the Chancellor changed the law about pensions yet again. This time he gave everyone over the age of 55 the right to cash in their pension if they wanted to do so. The spin was this was being done to provide people with the freedom to do as they wished with their money. But in reality it was done for the most cynical of reasons. The Government wanted pensioners to spend all their savings in order to boost the economy.

No one in government cared tuppence for the face that once they had spent their pension funds people would have to live out their lives in abject and enduring poverty. (Naturally, politicians and civil servants all receive massive, inflation-linked pensions which are pretty well paid by taxpayers.)

It is now clear that a fifth of all pensioners have cashed in their entire pension fund and spent the loot on fripperies. They have used their pension money to buy television sets, new cars, cushions and garden furniture and they have saved not one penny for their old age.

It sounds crazy but in a way it is understandable.

With banks offering 0.01% interest on deposit accounts (and threatening to introduce negative interest rates and to charge people for having savings) there is absolutely no incentive to save. And millions no longer trust the banks or the Government anyway. They know that there is a risk that their savings could well be lost or stolen – not by thieves but by bankers and tax hungry politicians.

In a few years' time there are going to be a lot of very poor pensioners around.

30

I awoke with a red eye. I thought at first it was just because I'd had a hard night. I had spent much of the night banging on the ceiling with my Victorian sword stick in an attempt to persuade the squirrels who live in the loft to stop chasing round and round playing football with a hazel nut.

But my red eye is, in fact, a result of the fact that I have a conjunctival bleed which was probably the result of an over-hearty sneeze.

When she saw it, Antoinette told me that when she was a young girl she had a goldfish which had a similar problem. She thought about this for a moment, clearly thinking about the goldfish.

'It died shortly after its eye went red,' she said, lost in thought.

I too sat quietly for a while.

This afternoon I picked up a copy of *The Spectator* magazine and read Robin Oakley's excellent but occasional column about the turf. Oakley reported a conversation he had with Clive Cox, the trainer and former jockey. He had asked Cox if he was a gambling man.

'No,' replied Cox, 'but I like a bet.'

It is now clear why horse trainers always seem to be well off and punters are invariably struggling.

31

We were on a train today.

When the ticket collector came round I handed him our tickets, which I had in my pocket.

'Ah, you're in charge!' said the collector, taking the tickets and reservation slips from me.

'No,' I replied. 'But I've got the tickets.'

I had occasion to wander up the train later on and apropos of absolutely nothing I noticed that of the 18 people in our carriage, seven were reading their mobile telephones (or sending messages), four were working on laptops, three were talking and four were staring, either out of the window or into space.

None of them, not one, was looking at anything printed. There were no books, magazines or newspapers in sight. The future for the print industry is bleak indeed.

I read in a magazine I'd bought that Amazon customers can now vote to decide which television pilot programmes will survive and which will die.

I'm sure that someone at Amazon thinks this is a democratic thing to do, but it isn't because the voters don't, and never will, represent the viewers so much as they represent special interest groups, small cliques of lobbyists, fixers and campaigners and protestors whose enthusiasms are usually commercially motivated.

Our world is already run by lobbyists and pressure groups who work for the drug companies, the arms industry, the motor car giants and the vast meat industry.

Now, it appears that our television programmes are going to be chosen for us by lobbyists and pressure groups.

August

1

The birds are hungrier than ever. Lots of people stop feeding birds during the summer months, assuming that it is only in the coldest months of winter that they are close to starving. The truth is that there is very little food available for birds during the months of July and August and they need feeding.

McDonalds, which is apparently the world's largest restaurant company, is in trouble. The company is losing sales and market share and, apparently, suffering a corporate identity crisis.

This is good news for anyone who cares about food and good health.

McDonalds is well-known for being litigious (they famously misspent £10 million suing two unemployed campaigners who handed out critical leaflets and the company regularly sues small business owners who dare to use the letters Mc in their company name) and I can't help wondering if the publicity they received from that ill-advised legal actions hasn't damaged the chain permanently.

No one likes a bully and perhaps the world's eaters have moved away from the burger bars.

As a doctor I'm delighted that McDonalds seems to be sinking fast.

The truth is that although the company has introduced some healthier meals, the food sold by the McCrap's burger bars (it seems a little pretentious to call them restaurants) must be held partly responsible for the explosion in the incidence of obesity, heart disease and cancer.

I realise that I cannot possibly say this in public and so I must remember to remove these remarks from this diary before I let anyone else look at it. It would be truly awful to put McDonalds in a position where they had to bring another libel action. I suspect the adverse publicity would probably destroy the company completely.

2

Lloyds Bank manages to annoy me more and more each week. If there was a decent, ethical, honest bank in the country I'd move my accounts there in a shot. But there isn't so I might as well stick with Lloyds.

The other day I took out £500 in cash and used my credit card instead of my debit card, because the two cards now look very similar and are easily confused. (Gosh.)

I only discovered the error when I noticed that the slip of paper the machine had spat out contained no account balance.

I rang the bank, and one of their operatives told me what I'd done.

To my astonishment she told me that using the wrong card would cost me a 3% fee plus an interest charge of 18.5% per month for two months even though I paid off the £500 straight away.

This is the same bank which has recently reduced the interest it pays on its deposit accounts to something derisory in the region of 0.25% before tax, and which has just announced that it intends to charge me £12.95 a month for my current account.

Lloyds Bank has deteriorated rapidly in the last few years and I have no doubt that this is because the bank has been flirting with bankruptcy since it took over the failed Scottish bank HBOS at the height of the Scottish banking crisis.

The takeover was done to please Gordon 'the moron' Brown who is, of course, a rabid supporter of Scotland (before becoming Prime Minister of Britain he signed the Claim of Right for Scotland). I suspect Brown wanted to save Scottish jobs so that he wouldn't lose his seat at the next election.

As a result of this mess, thousands of Lloyd's Bank staff in England lost their jobs, shareholders lost their shirts and a gazillion long-suffering customers now have to pay through their noses for rapidly deteriorating services.

After lunch I fell asleep in the conservatory and woke 20 minutes later feeling as though I had been turned into stone. I could hardly move. When I was young I could sleep on anything. I could sleep on a wooden floor or in a grass field and wake the next morning full of beans. I'd bounce upright, do a few perfunctory stretches and then bound into the day without a squirm or a spasm. These days if I drop off for five minutes with my head in an odd position I get cramps, headaches, dizziness and nausea for a week.

Bette Davis was absolutely bang on the button when she said that old age is not for cissies.

3

A reader has written to say that he is dismayed to hear that my books are now only available as ebooks.

He says that he believes in helping authors not large American corporations, and so he buys real books from charity shops and second-hand shops.

Oh dear.

Buying 'previously enjoyed' books from charity shops and second-hand bookshops is the worst thing you can do as far as authors are concerned.

Every time a second-hand book shop sells a book, an author loses a royalty payment. I love second-hand book shops and use them often, especially for out-of-print books, but I don't kid myself that I'm helping authors.

And when I buy from a charity shop I no longer tell myself that I am helping the local community. Charity shops exist these days to line the pockets and puff out the pensions of the directors and senior managers.

In the old days, charity shops helped the communities in which they were situated (as well as their avowed causes) by offering freely given clothing, books and furniture at low prices. Everyone benefited. In recognition of this, local councils gave charity shops special tax free status.

Today, sadly, charity shops no longer sell goods at low prices, and by competing directly and aggressively with local shops (often selling brand new products) they actually do great harm to local businesses.

Second-hand book shops which are going bust usually blame the rise of the local charity shops which sell books before they blame high car park prices, high local taxes and the internet.

4

I have noticed that many house owners are upgrading their homes simply by changing the house name.

So, we have seen a Manor House which turned out to be a modest four bedroom detached home in a close and a Grange which was a dilapidated farm house.

Both were priced much higher than they could possibly be worth and I am convinced that estate agents believe that giving a house an impressive sounding name adds a third to the price.

The most popular posh names for houses appear to be: Manor, Hall, Priory, Grange, Court and (my favourite) Abbey.

Oh how wonderful it would be to live in a house called The Abbey.

Friends who live a few miles away recently wanted to have a new septic tank fitted. They were told, however, that they couldn't have a septic tank because they are, apparently, now quite out of fashion and probably considered likely to lead to terrorism, money laundering and the disappearance of the red squirrel.

Instead they had to commission a special 'microwater treatment station' and hire a highly trained (and, therefore, extremely expensive) engineer to draw up plans and arrange to have them approved by State employed, EU approved inspectors.

A job that should have taken a day is clearly destined to take months.

And what is the difference between an old-fashioned septic tank and a new, state of the art 'microwater treatment station'?

No one seems to know. Both look the same and do exactly the same job.

5

I went to the main Post Office in Cheltenham, which is now ensconced upstairs in a branch of WHSmith.

I have 1,000 small books I want to post off. The packets will weigh just under 250grams and so each one will require a £1.19 large letter stamp. I cannot bear the idea of turning up at the post office with 1,000 parcels and waiting for someone to stamp each one for me. I've done this before and nearly been lynched by the people in the queue behind me. So I thought I'd buy the stamps, put the stamps on the envelopes and post the packets in local post boxes. (I know where all the wide mouthed post boxes are situated.)

'I'd like 1,000 stamps,' I told the girl behind the counter. 'All for £1.19.'

The girl looked at me as if I had scales and a long spiky tail.

'But since you don't make a stamp for £1.19 I'll settle for 1,000 stamps at £1 and 1,000 at 20 pence.'

I had already decided that I would settle for putting on two stamps rather than trying to make up the correct postage with a mixture of 10p stamps and one penny stamps. I'm convinced that the Royal Mail pricing structure is designed to take advantage of this no doubt commonplace human weakness.

'I've only four £1 stamps,' said the girl. She flicked through her folder of stamps. 'And I don't have any 20 pence stamps. You'll have to go to counter number eight. They keep our main stock of stamps there.'

So I queued again and eventually made my way to counter eight where a youth told me that he only had a handful of 20 pence stamps and five or six rather scruffy, bent looking £1 stamps. To be honest they looked second-hand, as though they'd been peeled off an old packet so that they could be used again.

'Haven't you got any in the safe?' I asked. Post offices always have some stamps in the safe.

'No,' he said, happily. `They only give us a few stamps at a time. Then when we run out they give us some more.'

'You haven't got any more? None in the safe?'

He insisted they had no safe and no stock of stamps and so that was that.

I will have to drag my 1,000 packets into the Post Office and wait while the miserable half-wit on the other side of the counter glumly puts sticky labels on them all.

Why is it, incidentally, that all large companies, but especially those which used to be nationalised such as the Post Office and the railway companies, and those which still are, such as the National Health Service, display prominent signs telling customers that they must not be rude to the staff?

Why are there never any signs telling the staff not to be rude to the customers?

And don't these organisations realise that people are rude because the staff in these places are invariably unhelpful and the service provided is indifferent at best and appalling at worst.

There is an old Chinese proverb which says: 'If you find it difficult to smile, do not open a shop'.

In olden times (by which I mean five years ago), customers were always right. Today, customers aren't just wrong, they are a bloody nuisance.

And why do Post Office employees still demand to know what is in a parcel before they will accept it? What is the point? If I have chopped up my Aunt Mathilda and am sending her off in bits to various addresses I am unlikely to admit this to a Post Office clerk.

'Oh yes, the parcel contains my aunt's liver. But don't worry it's well wrapped in greaseproof paper so there won't be any leakage.'

From the Post Office I went to the Oxfam book shop.

I don't like Oxfam book shops because they have pretty well destroyed those gloriously dusty, proper second-hand book shops wherein it was always possible to find all sorts of marvellous treasures.

I may be wrong but I have a suspicion that the best books which find their way to Oxfam end up in auction houses.

The woman behind the counter was a miserable old bat. When I asked if I might have a receipt with my purchases she snapped that everyone gets a receipt.

'It gives me real joy to know that,' I said. 'I shall now enjoy the rest of the day much better.'

She spent an hour or so keying details of the two books into her till and then gave me my change.

'Thank you very much,' I said, with genuine politeness.

She ignored me, fiddled with her till and then walked off with two books which she had picked out from somewhere beneath the till. She carried them as if she were carrying two ice cream cones and walking on hot sand in bare feet.

'Thank you,' I repeated.

She still ignored me.

'It has been an enormous pleasure doing business with you today,' I said loudly. 'Your charm has quite bowled me over.'

Apparently fascinated by the ceiling she continued to ignore me.

I left.

To cheer myself up I tottered into my favourite pub in Cheltenham, the Old Restoration (which was, I think, last restored in 1343), ordered a black coffee, pulled out my trusty iPhone and settled down to compose a collection of the daftest reviews on the internet:

The Bible: 'Not my cup of tea'

Black Beauty: 'Racist and sexist'

Robinson Crusoe: 'Just a copy-cat version of the Tom Hanks movie with the basketball'

Gone with the wind: 'I suffer from IBS and bought this expecting to find some help. But it is a long rambling book about something that happened a long time ago and is therefore of no interest to me.'

The authors are all long since dead and so I'm sure they won't be offended by my reviews. But, just in case, I gave all the books five stars.

6

The police in Leicestershire are now only investigating break-ins which occur at houses with even door numbers. I don't know what they are doing about houses which have names rather than numbers and to be honest I doubt if they know either.

All over the country police forces are reducing the service they offer their employers. Worse still, they invariably claim that they are doing this in order to improve the service they offer. Like banks, everything they do is for our protection.

Many police forces have now stopped responding to calls about burglaries, assaults or even hit and run incidents because half their efforts are now concentrated on investigating allegations into the behaviour of elderly celebrities. ‘Today we obtained an exhumation order for Socrates who we are investigating for historic offences against a variety of boys of many different sizes’. ‘An athlete who competed in the 1760 Olympic games has been exhumed. Tests have shown traces of cat’s tongue and hedgehog prickle – both widely used to enhance performance. The athlete will be posthumously and publicly humiliated and stripped off his medals.’

The other half of their energy goes into persecuting motorists.

And the final half of their energy goes into keeping their twitter accounts busy and their Facebook pages updated.

Talking of motorists, I noticed this week that ambulances have received 23,227 speeding tickets. What sort of idiotic, brain-dead police officer gives an ambulance driver a speeding ticket? When will the police realise that speed saves time and since time is life it follows that speed must save lives.

Today, the police are not seen as offering a solution but are, rather, seen as part of the problem. Even law abiding citizens now regard the police with the same sense of distrust previously reserved for estate agents and journalists.

7

A large hole has appeared in the patch of grass in front of our garage. The hole is a couple of feet across and a couple of feet deep and is clearly the result of a badger working overtime during the night. When I examined the hole more closely I could see a number of honey bees crawling around and looking rather bewildered in that strange, rather sad, rather endearing way that bees have when their world has been turned upside down and they are feeling too depressed to buzz into attack mode.

‘The badger must have been after the honey!’ said Antoinette, joining me at the side of the hole.

I had to confess that I didn’t even know that honey bees sometimes made their nests in the ground.

In future I shall walk around the garden with greater care.

I’d hate to step into a bees’ nest by accident, though I confess that this is as much in the interests of self-preservation as a concern for the integrity of the nest involved.

When trying to fit a DVD into the television this evening I accidentally caught a few minutes of a programme in which a doctor and a naked patient talked about the sort of problems which used to be discussed behind a closed surgery door.

(The man was wearing a white coat so I assume he was a doctor although I suppose he could have been a painter or a decorator).

When I was but a lad I used to spend much of my time working in television studios. I was constantly being asked to bring real patients into the studios so that they could be examined and questioned on air. I always refused. It seemed to me that to do so would be unprofessional. It is terribly easy to take advantage of patients who are worried and desperate.

Indeed I felt so strongly about this that although, for more than two decades, I wrote agony columns for newspapers selling millions of copies I always made up the letters to which I replied. Sometimes I wrote the answers first. And then wrote the questions. Sometimes I wrote the questions and then supplied the answers.

I was not by any means the only agony columnist to do this. Most of the others that I knew did the same. Marje Proops, who was a good friend of mine and who wrote the agony page for the *Daily Mirror*, admitted that she did the same thing. One former national newspaper agony columnist I knew was fired by a national newspaper editor when she refused to make up sexier questions.

The problem is simply that the letters which readers send in are usually too long and too complicated to be précised and summarised in a couple of paragraphs.

Don’t for heaven’s sake tell anyone I told you this.

8

A good friend of ours has Alzheimer’s disease.

Whatever the explanation may be (and there are many possible explanations) there are at present nearly a million Britons suffering from dementia. And the number is going up annually.

Like many people with this awful disease our friend has developed a tendency to wander. His wife asked us if we thought it would be a good idea to have him fitted with an electronic tag so that he could be found quickly if he wandered away from home. She was worried that it might be demeaning to do this. We reassured her that she should have him tagged – for his benefit as well as hers.

Indeed, I cannot see why all patients with dementia are not routinely offered an electronic tagging service. It would be a better answer than the favoured in some British hospitals where patients with Alzheimer's are now handcuffed to their beds so that they do not require any care and attention from the nurses.

The incidence of dementia is about to rise exponentially now that doctors are now being paid £200 every time they diagnose Alzheimer's disease. I've told everyone I know to be on their toes when visiting their doctor. Too much hesitation and not enough blind certainty could well lead to an inconvenient diagnosis and a place of your own on the Liverpool Care Pathway (or the even more deadly NICE replacement) where the standard treatment offered is death.

Medical journalists claim that this is the first time doctors have been paid to make a specific diagnosis but, as usual, they're wrong. British doctors have for years been given cash bonuses for diagnosing a wide range of disorders – including asthma, diabetes, heart disease and that artificial diagnostic confection known as 'COPD'.

It is, therefore, no surprise to discover that the result is that these diseases are becoming commoner by the week.

The latest guess is that between 5 and 10 million people in England and Wales will have diabetes by the year 2025.

When I forecast this increase in 1988 in a book called *The Health Scandal*, I was greeted with a mixture of scepticism, sneering and abuse although to me it seemed pretty obvious that the incidence of diabetes would rocket – partly because doctors are encouraged to report it, partly because more and more people are becoming obese and also because diabetes is a genetically transmitted disease. It wasn't a difficult forecast to make. The mystery is that no one else seemed to agree with it.

Antoinette has, I think, found an excellent way to keep any impending dementia on the back foot. She has bought two small hand held games called Simon and Bopit which were doubtless designed for children. The Simon game demands considerable memory skills and the Bopit game requires concentration and manual dexterity. Everyone over the age of 60 should have one of each of these games (or something similar) and use them daily. If the NHS gave the games away, the nation would save a fortune.

Incidentally, I read today that one of the first signs of dementia is a change in the sense of humour. Individuals who would have previously laughed only at subtle, satirical or ironic humour will start to laugh only at slapstick comedy when dementia is developing. So, elderly folk are worried about being labelled as suffering from dementia should keep well away from circuses.

9

Am I the only one to have noticed that every leader who puts on an angry face and threatens to take his country out of the EU, or talks boldly about ignoring EU rules, always ends up rolling over and having his tummy tickled? Are these politicians forced into submission through threats? Or are they bribed into submission? I favour the second of these since the EU is renowned for throwing mountains of our money around in order to obtain support for its fascist schemes. (In my own modest attempt to balance the unbalanceable I have sent copies of a small book about the EU, written by my very close friends Daniel J. Beddowes and Flavio Cippollini, to everyone who has publicly supported the campaign to stay in the European Union.)

We drove into Cirencester late this morning.

Cirencester is the uncrowned capital of the Cotswolds, a neat town which is so twee that Antoinette says that there are no pigeons there, just doves. The men of Cirencester wear red or even pink trousers, usually in corduroy, together with green jumpers with the faux leather shoulder patches which are favoured by army officers and grouse hunters while the women wear hacking jackets, polo jumpers and tailored jeans tucked into knee high leather boots. They dress as if they are in uniform.

As I walked along the pavement by some traffic lights I gazed in horror as the woman passenger in the front of a Range Rover opened her door and furiously shovelled handfuls of rubbish onto the road. Crisp packets, empty cola cans and wrappers of all sorts were just dumped. I waited until she had closed the door and then rapped sharply on her window. She pressed the button and the window slid down. 'You've dropped some things on the road,' I said, smiling sweetly. 'I thought I'd better tell you in case you want them.' She glowered at me, opened the car door, got out and started to pick up the rubbish she'd thrown out. The man who was driving was very fat and extraordinarily ugly. He too glowered at me. I thought I was probably safe because although he was half my age I was confident that I could almost certainly run much faster than he could. 'Don't mention it,' I said. 'Just my good deed for the day. There might be some crisps left in one of those packets.' The lights had changed by now and cars behind were hooting. The very fat man was now very red and hyperventilating. The woman, clutching an armful of rubbish, got back into the car. I tipped my hat and waved as they drove away. It's always good to do someone a good turn.

10

The next generation will find it difficult to take responsibility for themselves, let alone for society as a whole. We have created a world of expectations and entitlements. 'Une civilisation repose sur ce qui est exige des hommes, non sur ce qui leur est fourni,' wrote Antoine de Saint-Exupery. 'A civilisation is built on what is required of men, not on that which is provided for them.'

I have also noticed that modern kids seem to find it extraordinary difficult to cope with setbacks of any kind. We have, I fear, bred a spoilt brat generation. I suspect it all started to go wrong when teachers banned school sports days because it was feared that children who didn't win medals would be scared for life by the experience. What happened, of course, was that they were damaged anyway, by being protected from reality.

(Incidentally, I wonder if it is possible that childhood obesity could possibly be linked to the fact that local councils all over the country have for years been busy selling off school playing fields. Today, many large schools no longer have a patch of grass large enough for any sport or athletic activity at all.)

In a way I can understand why things have gone the way they have.

I can't help remembering my own childhood. When I was in the sixth form at school the boy I sat next to killed himself because he couldn't stand the pressure. Another boy in my class killed himself the same year. At medical school I shared a flat with two other students. One of the two gassed himself when he failed an exam.

So I understand that something had to change.

But the wrong things have been changed.

And now the pressure doesn't come from the demands of school teachers but from peer pressure created by the bloody internet. And children, teenagers and young adults have not been prepared for the world in which they live.

11

I discovered today that jeans, the blue denim trousers so strongly favoured by cowboys all over the world, were invented in Nimes in France and not in America.

But then champagne was invented in England and not in France.

I was sitting quietly in the lounge of a local pub today, reading a book and waiting for Antoinette, when the peace of the afternoon was suddenly shattered into a thousand noisy fragments as half a dozen huge, shaven-headed men burst into the room.

The six men, all of whom were wearing those blue rubber gloves favoured by nurses and forensic scientists, surrounded the only other occupant of the room, a small, weaselly sort of fellow who was sitting nursing a pint of beer and muttering occasionally into a mobile telephone. There was much shouting and I heard someone say, 'It's all right, we're the police.' The lounge bar wasn't large and the newcomers filled every available inch of space.

'What's your name?' demanded one of the policemen, after pulling the small man's arms behind his back and snapping handcuffs onto his wrists. The small man didn't put up any fight and seemed to expect what was happening. Indeed, it seemed to be a normal part of the day to him, no more of an inconvenience than finding a parking ticket stuffed under a windscreen wiper. It occurred to me that I would have hoped that they might have known the identity of the man they'd just handcuffed before they'd handcuffed him. One of them then asked him for his address while the other five searched the area where he had been sitting. They were, they told him, looking for drugs though it would have surprised me if he hadn't known this. They didn't find anything. To be honest they didn't seem to be terribly good at searching. If it had been Easter Day, they wouldn't have found many eggs.

They all then stood and waited for a few minutes until a police vehicle arrived to take them all away. It did seem a bit like overkill. PC Dixon could have arrested this little chap all by himself.

Throughout this noisy interruption to a peaceful afternoon I continued to read my book, a small volume on stamp collecting which was written by the American author Lawrence Block, a writer better known for his crime novels.

Minutes later a tall, thin man in a grey hooded sweatshirt suddenly appeared by my side. 'I've got two big bags of meat,' he said, 'are you interested?'

I looked down. He was not lying. He was carrying two plastic bags which contained cuts of fresh meat.

'No thanks,' I said, 'I'm vegetarian.'

The meat seller looked at me, backed away and scurried off. There was no one else in the pub. The only other potential customer for his meat had been dragged away in handcuffs. I wondered how he came to be selling cuts of meat in a pub. Had he simply stolen them? Taken them from a supermarket freezer and walked out without paying?

Had he reared a pig or a sheep in his back garden? Or was he selling bits and pieces of a chopped up relative? What a marvellous way to get rid of the body. Lawrence Block would have known.

Antoinette arrived a few minutes later, carrying her shopping. She looked around. 'It's nice and peaceful in here, isn't it?' she said.

12

We're still looking for a new house but haven't got the faintest idea what we're looking for and that does make the search a little more difficult than it would otherwise be. Yesterday we visited a house near the south coast which has a moat. The moat went all the way around the house and, unusually, was actually filled with water. Most moats are dry and contain nothing more exciting than nettles, brambles and discarded plastic bags.

The only disappointment was that the route to the house and its island went across a stone bridge which could not be raised. No drawbridge.

Still, it's worth thinking about.

I spent six months writing a travel book about England. I still love England very much, despite the fact that it has been consistently betrayed by crooks and incompetents. Ever since Ted Heath sold his country for £30,000, politicians have been busy betraying England.

Still, they may have buggered up the present and the future but they haven't yet entirely succeeded in eradicating the past.

Antoinette and I visited a good many places while I researched the book and we spent a lot of money travelling and renting accommodation. At the end of our travels I wrote a book describing England as I see it today and published the book as a kindle book on Amazon. I made it clear in the blurb that the book was not a guidebook to everything in England but was simply a personal look at England as it is now.

Today the book received its first review.

An anonymous reviewer gave it one star (with the headline 'Rubbish') because I hadn't written anything about Gloucester Cathedral and had dared to include opinions in a book plainly described as a personal travel book.

It is true that there was nothing about Gloucester Cathedral in the book. But there was also nothing about the Channel Tunnel, Westminster Abbey or Wales. Nor was there any advice on how to bake a fish pie. If a book is going to be destroyed because it doesn't contain something that the reader thought should have been in there, then authors are all in big trouble.

The author of this illiterate but destructive mal mot described itself as an 'artist and poet', which is so pretentious that it is immediately clear that he or she is neither but probably has multiple tattoos and is well known by name at the local benefits office.

'Don't take it personally!' say many.

How do you not?

I spent half a year of my life writing that book. It came out of my head. I put my heart and soul into it and did a great deal of research. How can I not take it personally?

I don't care if people are rude about my appearance (a not uncommon event). I was once voted one of the most ugly men in Britain (I came just behind or just ahead of Martin Clunes, me for my nose, him for his ears). I didn't mind in the slightest about that. But books are something special.

And so with one flick of a mobile phone keyboard the book is wrecked. It will not sell any more copies. So now the book is dead.

I can't help thinking that reviewing of this calibre is nothing more nor less than intellectual vandalism; the mental equivalent of defacing a wall with pointless graffiti or breaking a young tree for a laugh. Vandals do these things because they can and it is not easy to accept that this is now the way of the world.

Whenever I have a new book coming out I find the wait for the first review to be nerve wracking.

When I was 18 and working as a Community Service Volunteer in Liverpool, I interviewed Manfred Mann, who was at the time the leader of one of the most successful pop groups in the world. He told me that he was going to give up recording singles because he found the wait for the weekly chart positions just too stressful. I now think I understand what he meant.

I've unpublished my travel book.

11

The nasty killer bugs which hospitals have created through ignorance and incompetence are now making their way out into the community. I'm honestly not surprised. Time and time again I have visited hospitals where visitors are told that they must wash or wipe their hands before going onto the wards but are not told that they must wash or wipe when they leave. The dangerous bugs are already inside the hospital and the important thing is to stop the damned things getting out.

I am also horrified by the number of hospital staff who wander out still wearing their uniforms. Just today I saw two uniformed nurses in a local food shop. Any nurse who leaves a hospital in her uniform should be sacked, shot and buried in quicklime.

A man knocked on the door this evening and asked if we would like him to clean our windows. Parked in the lane was a large van. He told me that he had his own water supply, a power washer, an extendable water lance and a 100 yard hose reel. I told him we had 17th century windows and that I didn't think they would cope with his power washer. Much of the glass we have is very old, undoubtedly handmade, and gives the world a curiously distorted look. I apologised and sent him on his way. He did not seem to be in the slightest bit disappointed.

In the olden days (a year or so ago) he would have turned up on a bicycle, carrying a ladder and a bucket. I suppose the health and safety freaks have made such simple methods impractical.

12

I have noticed that a number of internet reviewers describe the books they review as 'clean'.

I wonder what they mean.

Do they mean that it has no misprints or kindling errors? Or do they mean that it contains no dirty bits ('he played with her nipples and she sighed dreamily')? Or do they just mean that they've bought a hard copy and it doesn't have any coffee stains on the pages?

I really don't know. Life's mysteries continue to grow.

Today, I saw a review criticising a classic book because it had been delivered in an inadequate wrapper. The author, who is dead but whose estate didn't receive a penny because the book is out of print and so the sale must have involved an old ('previously enjoyed') book, is probably sitting on a cloud weeping at the injustice of it all. If it rains this afternoon then I will know why.

This nonsense upset me so much that I went out into the garden and collected real kindling; bits of branches, large twigs and so on, the stuff you use to make a fire.

A recent storm had brought down quite a few bits and pieces of dead wood and I was able to fill several large sacks with supplies of dry kindling. There are few occupations quite as relaxing as collecting kindling. Logs are heavy and need to be chopped up but kindling is relatively light and can usually be snapped in the hand or broken over the knee to make sure it is of a size that will fit neatly into the fire place.

Antoinette's book, *My Quirky Cotswold Garden*, is coming along wonderfully well. It's a marvellously evocative description of the plants and animals who live on our land and the way they, and we, live together. Antoinette has been working on the book for a couple of years now and I have never known anyone research a book quite so thoroughly. It contains a number of original thoughts and observations and will be a very valuable addition to the available books on garden animals, garden plants and gardening in general.

But (and the 'but' is the rhinoceros in the garden), Antoinette is concerned that when her book is published it might receive a one star review on Amazon (or some other internet site) from a reader who hasn't even bothered to read it but who has acquired a copy, flicked through it and is miffed that it doesn't contain any car chases or recipes for fish stew.

When you've worked really hard on a book (as she has) and you have put your heart and soul into every line, every paragraph and every page, the whole thing becomes a very real part of your life. And casual, destructive criticism of the book can cut to the bone.

And so, when Antoinette's book is finished it will be sent off to the printers but it will not be offered for sale and no review copies will be sent out. The book will be privately printed (in the way that was so popular among 19th century authors) and Antoinette will give copies only to close friends – with strict instructions that if they should ever decide to part with the book then their copy must either be returned to her or destroyed. There will be no ebook version.

This is enormously sad because the book deserves a wide readership. And thousands of people would enjoy the book.

But I totally understand the way she feels. And I think she's right. Moreover, I suspect that in future more and more authors may restrict the circulation of their work for the same reason.

13

A neighbour's cat has killed another of our visiting squirrels. I am devastated. I buried the squirrel under a large hazel bush so that he (or she) will never be hungry. We both love cats but I have bought a huge water pistol and if I see the cat again I will persuade it to leave the bird feeding area. The pistol is really a huge gun. It holds nearly two pints of water. Or is that two gallons. I really don't know. I only know that when full it is so heavy that I can hardly lift it. But it does fire water an enormous distance and with great accuracy. If Napoleon had had one of these guns he would not have lost at Waterloo.

14

We went to the Cotswold Wildlife Park near Burford. It is one of my favourite places on the planet. We watched a young black and white colobus monkey helping its baby sister climb up to their parents. It was a beautiful example of filial love. And at dusk we stood and watched as a baby rhinoceros ran round and round its parents. All young animals seem to do this, getting rid of energy left over from the day. But whereas a kitten seems merely playful, a young rhino looks fairly scary when it hurtles hither and thither.

15

I've been thinking about general practice and I am convinced that family doctors have become too self-important and are rather losing the plot. I've noticed that most now refuse to do the small physical tasks which used to cement a doctor's relationships with his patients. Ear syringing, stitch removing and blood tests used to be done by the GP. These days these crucial chores are handed down to practice nurses; doctors seem to think they are too important to manage these chores. This is a mistake.

Patients who have had wax removed from an ear are always grateful. Children who have their stitches removed efficiently and painlessly will always remember their doctor with affection. (I used to tape stitches onto the back of a visiting card and give them to children to show their school friends.)

GPs have also forgotten that they will build up their position within their community by doing home visits. Too many doctors now demand that patients make their way to the surgery, however ill they might be.

When I first began in general practice an older, wiser doctor gave me three bits of important advice.

'First, look after your older patients', he said. 'Older patients talk a good deal about their doctors. If you want a good local reputation you must look after your elderly patients. Second, always listen when patients mention something in passing as they are half way to the door on their way out. When a patient says 'Oh, by the way, doctor…' or 'While I'm here, doctor…' you can be sure that they are about to tell you what they really came to see you about. And, finally, remember that if a young mother says that her baby is ill then it's ill.'

There is far more to medicine than knowing the names of the latest drugs for high blood pressure or knowing what blood tests to order if a patient comes back from Africa with a fever.

Mass murderer Dr Harold Shipman got away with his dastardly deeds because he was kind to his patients. They loved him. Even when he was in prison, locked up for killing more people than any other murderer in history, Shipman was loved by his fellow prisoners. He had a charming cell-side manner and the other inmates thought he was marvellous.

16

It is reported that the number of deaths from dementia has risen. This is bollocks. Patients with Alzheimer's disease and similar problems aren't dying die from dementia; they are dying because doctors kill them by legally withholding food and water.

This official slaughter is done to keep beds clear and it is necessary because NHS hospitals now have far more administrators than beds. Indeed, many hospitals have twice as much space allocated to administrators as they have allocated to patients and one official review of British hospitals protested that many hospital administrators had a 'Soviet style attitude to those in their care'.

17

A daft surgeon is pushing for all fat people to have surgery on the NHS. It will, apparently, cost £12 billion to operate on the two million people who are considered eligible. I have little doubt that the surgeon concerned does the operations he is advocating with great enthusiasm.

Since the amount of money available to the State for health care is limited, if more money is spent on operations for obesity then there will be less money available for other, more dangerous conditions. Spending more on the treatment of people who are overweight will mean that lots of people who have developed cancer through no fault of their own will have to be left to die because there won't be enough money for X-rays or operations.

Maybe we should spend a little money performing a cerebrumectomy on the daft surgeon who is busy demanding more money for his speciality.

18

I went into a toyshop looking for a gift and had a rather difficult time of it. The assistant in the shop greeted me loudly and then asked if she could help me. I told her that I was fine and that although I didn't know what I was looking for I felt certain that I would know I had found it if and when I saw it.

I rather hoped that this would end the discussion but the shopkeeper was not so easily dismissed. She then asked me what sort of gift I was looking for (she had obviously assumed, not necessarily accurately, that I wasn't planning to buy a toy for myself) and what sex the recipient might be.

When I edged away and muttered something designed to send her back to her till she followed me and asked me the age of the child for whom I was buying.

I can understand that shop keepers have to try harder these days but I was so fed up with this campaign of harassment that I very nearly walked out of the shop without buying anything. Only the fact that toyshops are few and far between these days kept me there.

I eventually did buy several toys but I probably won't go back. The shopkeeper would be better off enquiring 'Can I help you or would you rather just browse by yourself?' instead of following customers around like an annoying, yappy dog.

19

A few weeks ago I ordered a print of a picture which Antoinette likes. The original painting, is by William Powell Frith and the print arrived today. It is splendidly done, printed on canvas, but it is rather larger than I had expected.

It appears that although I thought I was ordering a picture measured in centimetres I was actually ordering a picture measured in inches.

And so instead of having a picture which is 80 centimetres wide and 130 centimetres long I have bought a picture which is 80 inches wide and 130 inches long.

We will need to buy a cathedral in order to find somewhere to hang it.

20

I picked up a copy of a small book called *Vest Pocket French*. It doesn't tell me what to say if my postilion is struck by lightning but it does contain the following exchange in the useful phrases section.

Laissez-moi tranquille ou j'appelle un agent. (Don't bother me or I will call a policeman.)

Ou m'emmenez-vous? (Where are you taking me?)

Au commissariat de police. Vous etes en etat d'arrestation. (To the police station. You are under arrest.)

Je veux un avocet. (I need a lawyer)

It is a comfort to know that there are other people around whose lives seem to follow the same erratic, complicated and unpredictable path as mine.

21

I took our new picture to a framer today and shocked him by suggesting that he cut the picture by removing a few feet from the top and bottom and a few feet from the sides. The important parts will still be there when the picture has had its short back and sides but we will, at least, be able to find a wall where it can hang.

22

I read today that the world's most expensive iPhone 6 costs $3.51 million. It is made of 24 carat gold and encrusted with diamonds.

And it will be about as fashionable as galoshes when iPhone 7 is available.

23

Public health workers in America recently found 562 species of bacteria in a subway in New York. Most bugs are, of course, found on handles and so on and the taps and door handles in the average public loo probably contain more bugs than Porton Down. Shopping trolley handles are among the commonest source of infection and undoubtedly kill more people than guns, poisons and blunt instruments.

If the news from the New York subway doesn't make people want to wash their hands thoroughly before eating I can't imagine what will.

Actually, I would be surprised if it doesn't encourage more people to wear gloves whenever they leave their homes.

24

Britain is now officially the world's biggest provider of benefits. If there was a big silver cup for the country giving away the most money, Britain would receive it every year.

The cost of providing benefits soared under Gordon 'the moron' Brown and is the main reason why Britain is now the world's favourite destination for wandering immigrants and asylum seekers, and why traditional English folk, with skills and fading hopes, are leaving the country in hundreds of thousands.

It is widely argued that Britain needs young immigrants because, like Japan and Germany, it has an ageing population (in Britain's case because high personal taxes and absurd house prices make it difficult for young couples to have more than one or possibly two children) and politicians claim that without immigrants there soon won't be enough money to pay out the nation's existing pension commitments – particularly those over-generously promised to civil servants and other State employees.

But this theory is nonsensical since huge numbers of immigrants leave their children at home, in the country where they were born, and regard UK only as a source of revenue.

Moreover, the facts show that those who claim that immigrants contribute to our economy are lying; an astonishing 43% of newcomers rely entirely on welfare payments. Anyone who dares share this simple truth is, or criticise the establishment's enthusiasm for uncontrolled immigration is, of course, dismissed by the politically correct as a dangerous racist. Indeed, all political parties in Britain except UKIP have tried to discredit and silence concern over immigration by dishonestly accusing anyone who mentions the problem as racist. Both Labour and Conservative politicians know that this is a lie, but it is a useful lie to those with cloying affection for the EU. The Labour Party, which played the 'if you complain about immigration you are a racist and a bigot' card with greatest enthusiasm deservedly suffered most in the 2015 General Election. Their deceit backfired.

In fact, to be fair to Ed Miliband, Labour was actually destroyed long before he became leader. Blair's lies and warmongering finished off his reputation, but it was his unadulterated love for the EU and his wild enthusiasm for uncontrolled immigration which did the greatest damage to the party he led. Blair was never as popular as he and his aides claimed and Brown's disastrous and inept management of the economy merely completed the party's destruction. It is widely believed that UKIP is a far right party but studies have shown that a large proportion of its supporters are traditional Labour supporters who became angry over their party's enthusiasm for the EU and uncontrolled immigration. Moreover, research has shown that people are far more concerned about the fact that their culture is being destroyed by unlimited immigration than they are worried about the economic burden, or the fact that the nation's infrastructure cannot cope with the increase in population and that as a result roads, hospitals and so on are (in some cases literally) collapsing.

Moreover, despite modest efforts made by the succeeding governments, the cost of providing all this free money is still soaring and Britain's national debt is now close to £2,000,000,000,000. Worse still, the debt is still growing (and will continue to grow) because we can't afford the interest on it and must rely on massive inflation to reduce the sum we owe.

The odd thing is that many British politicians are quite snooty about the mess Greece is in. They perhaps don't realise that Britain's debt is vastly greater than the Greek debt.

A recent survey showed that a clear majority of Britons would now prevent citizens from the EU from settling permanently in Britain.

Indeed, a bloke I met in a pub is now so fed up with the EU that he said he would not even allow EU citizens to visit the UK on holiday. 'Thousands of them come here for a week and stay for 20 years,' he complained. 'Who goes on holiday for 20 years?'

He did, however tell me that he would allow citizens from Commonwealth countries and former colonies (including the USA) to come on holiday for as long as they liked.

I was musing about all this as I perused today's *Financial Times* and spotted a letter from Ira Sohn, Professor of Economics and Finance at Montclair State University, which is, I believe, parked somewhere in New Jersey.

The letter was of little interest except that it referred to a book titled *Human's Need Not Apply*.

I checked and was relieved to see that neither the author nor the publisher had made this egregious error with the apostrophe (though to be honest I wouldn't have been surprised if they had since rogue apostrophes get everywhere these days). But I am surprised that a professor of anything, even needlework or economics, should make such an error. And I am equally surprised that the *Financial Times* should endorse it. Standards drift ever lower.

26

British Gas have written to tell us that the bill they sent us on 21st February was wrong, that they have taken too little money from our account and that they will be sending us a new bill for £0.00 in the next seven working days.

'We know this bill will be for a lot more than you're expecting,' ends the letter.

Why on earth have they written to warn me that they are going to take a large sum from our account without telling us what it is? Or are they really threatening to take £0.00 from us?

Antoinette is worried sick that they will bill us for a million pounds. I am furious because I have repeatedly sent them meter readings which they have ignored. Because their estimated meter readings were clearly wrong I even sent them a reading by recorded delivery. They acknowledged receipt of the letter and said not to worry because everything was under control and we didn't owe them anything more than we had already paid. Then they suddenly helped themselves to just under £3,000 from our account.

Heaven knows what the bill is going to be this time. The only thing I am sure of is that I will not understand the bit where they explain the bill in detail. Their invoices are quite incomprehensible and, I suspect, designed to be that way.

I see in the news that a young girl has been arrested for having a book about anarchy in her possession. I must go through my library and see how many proscribed books I own. It is always worrying when citizens are arrested for simply possessing books which are considered 'inappropriate' or 'unacceptable' by the 'authorities'. But no one seems to notice or care about these things these days. The twitterati are too busy sending one another photographs of themselves having breakfast to worry about anything which does not involve them directly.

'If you only read the book that everyone else is reading, you can only think what everyone else is thinking,' wrote Haruki Murakami. And, of course, that is exactly what 'they' want to happen.

Actually, I would have thought that there are many things which are far more dangerous than books. Surely the authorities should be arresting all individuals found in possession of petrol or weed killer? Both of these items can, of course, be used to make bombs.

Incidentally, I do wish that the makers of historical dramas would stop depicting 18th and 19th century rebels and revolutionaries throwing petrol bombs. Mr Molatov, who unwittingly gave his name to the invention so beloved of revolutionaries everywhere, didn't come to power until after petrol was widely available. We saw a cowboy film called *The Salvation* the other day in which an angry man burnt down a barn with the aid of a carefully manufactured Molatov cocktail. The film was set in around 1870; around 20 years before Molatov was born. The principle theme of the book was that the bad guys wanted to take over all the local land because they knew that the black sticky stuff which was annoying the locals and contaminating the drinking water would one day be valuable. The people throwing the Molatov cocktails had presumably already worked out how to build a refinery to turn the sticky black stuff into gasoline. And they had worked out how to make Molatov cocktails long before the man was born.

In Britain, the new political sensation is a fellow called Jeremy Corbyn; a mad, scruffy communist, who burns with resentment and who has the same feigned sense of morality and inbuilt sense of superiority as the war criminal known as Tony Blair.

To me, Corbyn looks and behaves like a woodwork teacher who has been passed over for the job as head of the woodwork department . He seems to many to be something of a joke but he carries a chip on his shoulder the size of Cuba and although he is widely promoted as being a uniquely principled Parliamentarian he seems to me to be dishonest, deceitful and dangerous.

He is a contestant for leadership of the Labour Party, and appears to be bursting with complacency. He is so full of self-righteousness that it is surprising he manages to cram it all in. He has, however, shown that he is clearly equipped with a wonderful sense of irony (the sense of humour that no one who isn't English ever quite understands) by suggesting that transport companies should introduce women only buses and trains. These will, presumably, be painted pink and will be driven and staffed entirely by women too. Sadly, this proposal has not gone down well with the moustachioed lesbians whose vote he was hoping to attract but who deem the proposal to be sexist and patronising as, indeed, it obviously is.

Many observers seem puzzled by the Corbyn phenomenon since he is clearly a smug, complacent idiot and so out of touch that he appears to have been brought here from some alien planet. After all, anyone who is over 60 who isn't a patriot, and positioned firmly to the right of centre politically, has clearly had both his mind and his eyes firmly shut all his life.

Corbyn is replicated in universities all across the land; he is the scruffy lecturer (with pens in his top pocket) who panders to the dumbest, intellectually laziest students who adore his apparent recklessness and fake libertarianism and surprising habit of changing his principles as often as I hope he changes his funny T-shirt. I'm sure he thinks he is a revolutionary but he isn't. He wears a blank T-shirt which carries a summary of all his passionately held policies.

Most revolutionaries have a picture of Che Guevera on their shirts, of course. It is always the famous picture of the good doctor wearing a beret and looking moodily into the distance, the photograph taken by Albert Korda.

I wonder how many of those who wear the T-shirts know that Che looked moody and sad in the picture on their chests because the photo was taken at a memorial service held after a freighter called La Coubre exploded when being unloaded in Havana harbour. I bet they didn't even know that Ernesto Guevara had been a doctor and a government minister and a writer and President of the National Bank in Cuba, that he'd been married and had five children, that he had founded a radio station, that during his military days he had read Robert Louis Stevenson and Cervantes to his men and that when he'd been a minister he'd gone down to the fields to cut sugar cane on his day off, working alongside other Cubans in order to lead by example and to show that all men are equal.

Che, who was only 39-years-old when he died (killed by friends of the CIA) was an amazing fellow who was also a keen rugby player and was, indeed, so keen on the sport that he founded a rugby magazine. (I bet not many people know that.)

If Corbyn ever has a road named after him it will doubtless be a very scruffy cul de sac with broken glass all over the road and abandoned, burnt out cars parked in just about every garden. He appears to me to be an unpatriotic closet revolutionary; confused, not very bright, and a walking example of both the Peter Principle and Parkinson's Law.

Corbyn is a professional protestor who will moan about anything and everything without ever offering any practical suggestions as to what should be done about the things he moans about. He changes his mind about important issues more often than he changes his socks. Views strongly expressed in the morning will be roundly condemned after lunch. He truly is a man of many principles. But has them only so that he can change or abandon them on a regular basis.

I find it truly worrying that there are individuals in Britain over the age of six who would vote for Corbyn and his mad chums. It's clear that if Corbyn is a Marxist he's a Groucho Marxist rather than a Karl Marxist. 'Those are my principles,' said Grouch Marx, 'and if you don't like them well, I have others.'

Those of his supporters who have struggled through the zit squeezing stage of their lives are, almost without exception, comfortable, middle class *Guardian* reading public sector workers (and students who are desperate to get jobs working for the council); individuals who are able to play with the idea of a revolution because they are comfortable and know that Corbyn is never going to have enough power to turn off the lights and is therefore never going to threaten their comfy standard of living and their ability to keep their Facebook pages up-to-date.

Curiously, Corbyn was, like many politicians coming to power, sceptical about the EU before he was elected leader of the Labour Party. And then, as invariably happens, within days of his election he had become an enthusiastic EU disciple. This happens with monotonous regularity around Europe. I wonder what the EU does to persuade politicians to change their minds.

Corbyn now appears to be the smuggest man in the world. He was smug before he became leader. And afterwards he positively glowed with smugness. He seems to hate England and the English more than the most rabid members of the Scottish Nationalist Party. He and his half-witted sidekick McDonnell (a clown in the Berlusconi mould) believe in direct action (which means smashing shop windows if you don't get your own way) and 'community justice' (which is what members of the Klu Klux Klan would have called lynching if they'd possessed a dictionary).

There is already much talk about Corbyn's lack of patriotism. He and McDonnell have seven economists advising them on Britain's economic policy: the seven include two Americans, one South African and a Frenchman. Are there really no decent economists left in Britain?

Meanwhile, in the United States the voters are becoming enthusiastic about a television reality personality called Donald Trump who is becoming a popular candidate for President because he says whatever comes into his mind and has replaced political strategies with old-fashioned, hustings abuse.

If Trump does win the presidency then there might, I suppose, be some who think it some sort of balance against socialism, fascism, communism and statism, (which are, of course, all different names for exactly the same thing).

There is confusion about why Trump and his hair are so popular but it is, I suspect, simply because he speaks his mind and doesn't worry about sticking to the debating rules or political correctness. The voters are fed up with being lied to. They are fed up with cheating, self-serving politicians who simply serve the system. The voters are angry, frustrated and disappointed and they want to see the politicians suffer – really suffer – through rejection and embarrassment.

The Financial Times accused Trump of 'shredding the rules of politics' as though they thought this a bad thing but it is exactly why people will vote for him.

What, after all, have the politicians given us other than endless wars, poverty and hardship for millions, absurd over-taxation, unlimited immigration, failing infrastructure and a seemingly endless series of lies and deceits?

Moreover, the people are aware our politicians are entirely unrepresentative of the people they are supposed to represent. MPs now usually get elected by less than half the people voting and parliaments are elected by less than 40% of the votes. At the last British election, UKIP, the party campaigning to take the country out of the EU, received 13% of the votes and just one seat whereas the Scottish Nationalist Party received under 5% of the vote and 56 seats. No one who isn't a member of the SNP thinks that is fair.

Trump, a serial visitor to bankruptcy proceedings and a leverage artist in the 1970s style has been described by *Time* magazine as the Michelangelo of ballyhoo and it isn't difficult to see why. He has managed to create a mythical image for himself. The tale isn't entirely true but it is convincing, and these days that is enough. Voters are attracted to him because they have already lost so much that they feel they have nothing else to lose. As a result, the American Presidential election has become a reality television show. (Trump's hair, which defies several rules of nature, is even odder than Berulosconi's which always looks to me as if it has been painted on by a street artist with a sense of humour.)

I actually rather hope that Trump wins the Presidency simply because it will be a massive poke in the eye for the all those in the professional political classes who think they own us, and who pay little more than lip service to the principles of democracy. It will also be a loud two finger salute to all the commentators and pundits who try to tell us which of their chums should win the big prizes.

The average voter in both the United States and the United Kingdom knows that whatever happens he will be cheated by the Government. He is fed up with party politics and the lying, cheating, greedy little bastards who run the parties for their own benefit. He is fed up with endless wars, and rules and regulations made up by unelected bureaucrats, he is fed up with State control and the never ending mollycoddling of the entitlement generation and he is fed up with unlimited, illegal immigration. He is fed up with irrational, arbitrary, illogical authority and with the harshness of the regulations which are produced with such ease. He is fed up with economic mismanagement, with general incompetence displayed by everyone in power, by rising and ever more complex taxes, by the reduction in his freedom, by the massive increase in immigration, for the rise in the threat of terror (for which most realise that Bush and Blair and their chums are responsible) for a collapsing, overstretched and inadequate infrastructure and for the failure of our democracy to deliver fair representation.

And finally, something never considered by politicians, the voters feel resentment at the loss of their nation's culture.

They are fed up with political correctness and bored with having multiculturalism forced down their throats for they know it doesn't work. They are fed up with the fact that immigrants demand that we change the way we live in order to accommodate their preferences and peccadilloes.

And they know (and do not like) that when the Government dominates the economy (as is now commonplace in 'developed' nations) the people who can afford to influence and dominate the Government run the country. And that is exactly what happens in every major economy. Lobbyists, pressure groups and the twitterati run everything.

I suspect that in the UK a candidate in the Trump mould, a similarly straightforward, straight speaking candidate with views so bizarre that could only be genuinely held, would be infinitely more successful than Corbyn (who is a mad communist) or Nigel Farage (who is almost too much a man of the people to be perceived as a man to lead the people).

If Jimmy Goldsmith had lived he would, I suspect, have been the British version of Trump. But one with a greater sense of style and humour.

27

A reader wrote today to tell me that he had seen a programme on the television warning about the problems likely to be caused by prescription drugs (such as the contraceptive pill) in our drinking water.

I'm delighted that this news item has finally got onto the television.

When, back in 1982, I first revealed the fact that drug residues remained in urine and therefore drinking water, the

BBC's Panorama programme refused to run a proposed documentary on the subject not because it wasn't true (it is) but because they thought it would cause too much anxiety.

There has recently been a flurry of programmes, books and articles on subjects I first wrote about 30 years ago or more and I'm beginning to feel more than ever like a failed prophet.

I'm told that there was recently a television programme warning about the uselessness (and danger) of medical tests and screening programmes.

'By Timothy!', as radio detective Paul Temple would have doubtless remarked. It makes me feel old to realise that I was writing about that 40 years ago.

I was watching the Vuelta, a long lasting Spanish road race for cyclists, on the moving picture machine today when I learned that the prize for cyclists who win a sprint prize during one of the stages is 130 euros. This, after certain deductions, must be shared among the nine members of the team.

So I reckon that before tax the professional cyclist who made the greatest effort and won the top prize would take home just enough to buy a cup of coffee in a Parisian café.

Generally speaking, cycling is not a sport for athletes who want to get rich. The guys at the top can make millions. But the hard working guys in the peleton struggle to make a living.

The news programmes this evening were dominated by the story that a mad man armed with a Kalaschnikov rifle had been overpowered by passengers on a French train (while the train crew locked themselves in a cupboard and cowered in the way the French do best). As a result, the EU now wants to put full airport security, complete with metal detectors and passport controls, at all railway stations. This is a typical kneejerk EU response to an isolated incidence. Can the bureaucrat who thought this up imagine how long the queues will be at mainline British railway stations? (The bureaucrats who work for the EU travel in chauffeur-driven limousines, so they will not be affected.) Travel will become even more unbearable than it is now.

Most of us queue, queue and queue again these days and the fun has gone out of travelling.

Travel used to be a real joy.

Forty years ago you could travel from Victoria Station in London to the Gare du Nord in Paris while asleep in a compartment on a night train. I remember leaving London at around 10 in the evening, giving my passport to a train attendant so that he could show it to the customs officials without my being bothered by such nonsenses, having dinner, climbing into a cosy bunk and then leaving the train in Paris the following morning in time for hot coffee and warm croissants in a Parisian café.

The coaches were, I remember, shunted onto the boat at Dover and removed at Calais.

That was travelling and I am grateful that I lived to experience it.

The Brussels bureaucrat who wants to make modern train travel a real misery for millions won't give a damn, of course. If the traffic gets a little heavy, he will demand that a police escort be provided to move aside the proles so that his chauffeur-driven limousine will not be delayed.

28

British Gas have written to tell us that on the 25th August they will take £3,063.45 from our account. Since it is now the 28th August I have no opportunity to cancel the direct debit and stop them helping themselves to this extraordinary sum. I have absolutely no idea what it is for or why we are being charged for providing heat and hot water for all the homes in Gloucestershire.

I would like to check our bank statements to see what else they have taken but the last statement I received was dated 1993 and I don't expect to receive statements relating to our current financial situation until 2027 at the earliest.

Since they went bankrupt rescuing Gordon Brown's pals in Scotland, Lloyds Bank has cut every corner imaginable and has introduced a variety of money saving schemes which seem deliberately designed to annoy the customers. Their brokerage accounts are so badly run that we sold everything and closed them. And the queues in just about every branch get ever longer. This is not helped by the bank's utterly bizarre habit of giving precedence to 'business' customers and allowing them to jump the queue. The bank staff always seem surprised that this causes a certain amount of resentment among the customers left standing and waiting and standing and waiting.

The mail also brought a letter from a friend of ours who is secretary of a local cricket club, and who tells me that his club has had to appoint an 'equity, safeguarding and child protection officer'. This is, apparently, now the law and terrible things will happen to everyone if the appointment is not made, ratified, approved, reported and certified.

I telephoned and asked him what this means in practical terms but he couldn't answer. He is particularly puzzled by the need to have a child protection officer since the youngest member of the club is 24-years-old.

But there we are. The brave new world.

And according to the news (which I saw by accident) I see that the awful Blunkett is going to join the long line of socialists wearing ermine.

The Lords Kinnock, Prescott et al never seemed much enamoured of the House of Lords when they were pretending to be young, passionate and feisty. But now that they can safely show themselves to be old, cynical and greedy they're in there for the expenses and the cheap booze before you can say 'hypocrite'.

The House of Lords should be disbanded not because it is entirely divorced from the democratic process but because it is populated entirely by failures, embarrassments, cheats, crooks and pompous buffoons looking for a focus for their pomposity. Or, at the very least, for an excuse to be pointlessly pompous.

29

The older I get the more stressful life becomes.

There are two reasons for this.

The first is simple: life is becoming absurdly complicated and increasingly regulated. Actions that used to take moments (such as moving some of my money from one of my accounts to another of my accounts) now take hours or even days and involve seemingly endless confrontations with petty authority. These are the irritations which together make up what I some years ago described as 'toxic stress'. They are unavoidable.

The second is that the older I get the more able I am to see the problems ahead; to predict trouble and uncertainties and, therefore, to worry about the consequences of everything I do and everything they do. It is for this reason, I believe, and I will staunchly defend this point of view to the point of boredom, that I occasionally touch the hem of irritability and may, from time to time, show modest signs of tetchiness.

Still, there are some consolations to being older and among them is the knowledge that cancer tends to grow more slowly when you're of a certain age.

Back in the mid-1970s I was the first doctor to write about stress as a cause of illness and I got roundly hammered by the medical profession for doing so.

I remember traipsing round scores of radio and television stations, explaining how our bodies are designed for dealing with sabre toothed tigers (where being able to fight or run away gives you a better chance of survival) whereas in reality our world is full of tax demands and traffic jams which cannot be dealt with by fighting or running away.

One medical Professor at Nottingham University said I should be struck off the medical register for daring to suggest that stress could possibly have in influence on blood pressure.

Today the world is full of stress experts who have cottoned on to the idea that offering relaxation advice and courses is a great way to make a good living. And millions of people have realised that `stress' is almost impossible to diagnose or assess professionally and is, therefore, a perfect excuse for having time off work to watch important football matches or paint the bathroom.

The fact that the incidence of stress is now dramatically overestimated is proven by the extraordinary statistic that 93% of public sector workers now claim that they are suffering from work related stress.

The idea that librarians and tax officials and people who work in planning departments could actually suffer from stress as a result of their 'work' is laughable.

30

We met a French acquaintance who was in England for a few days. He is very proud of his English and, in particular, his mastery of English idioms and colloquialisms. And, like all French folk he delights in correcting us when we make mistakes with our French.

Occasionally, to my delight, he gets things gloriously wrong and I never, ever correct him. I do this not to save his feelings but because I rather like the idea of him perpetuating the errors.

'Does the Pope shit in the woods?' he asked today. 'Is a bear Catholic?' He seemed very pleased with his bon mots.

Glorious. I encouraged him to use this saying on every conceivable occasion.

With a straight face I congratulated him yet again on his mastery of our language.

Our friend saw that, under a pen name, I had written a book called *Practice Makes Perfect*. He told me that in French this proverb is 'C'est en forgeant qu'on deviant forgeron'. Translated literally this means: 'It's by forging that one becomes a blacksmith'.

If a French publisher ever produces a version of *Practice Makes Perfect* I sincerely hope that they change the title or else horse lovers will be buying the book in the hope that it will turn out to be a do-it-yourself guidebook to shoeing horses.

September

1

An internet company is now selling toasted cheese sandwiches by mail. You pay £3.99 a week by subscription and they send you a piece of bread and some cheese so that you can make yourself a cheese toastie (or a portion of Welsh rarebit if you live in Wales) once a week.

Damnit, if you pay the price and have an insatiable yearning for cheese on toast you can probably have the makings posted to you on a daily basis.

I've got my own plan for an internet business.

I'm going to sell a daily 'cup of tea'.

Subscribers will pay £3.99 a day and I will send them a bottle of water and a tea bag by courier every day. For £1 extra I will enclose two sugar cubes. Subscribers will also be able to order a small container of milk or a slice of lemon. Those wanting a speciality cup of tea (Early Grey, Darjeeling, Lapsong, etc) will have to pay a premium rate.

As an introductory offer, all subscribers paying for a year's cuppas in advance will receive a complimentary kettle and mug with their first mailing.

Antoinette says she thinks I'm onto a winner.

And in Calais business travellers and holidaymakers have been stuck on a train for something like 19 hours because migrants who are chanting 'We want to go to Britain because we will be given a free house and lots of money' have blocked the tracks.

If a group of middle aged white men clambered onto railway tracks they would be arrested, beaten up and thrown into prison. The whole thing would last about three minutes.

But no one dares move against asylum seekers (who are seeking asylum from poverty rather than oppression) because they are foreign and, therefore, inviolable.

A leading Labour Party spokeslunatic said that Britain is too concerned about the holiday makers on the train and not giving enough attention to the plight of immigrants. She is obviously unaware that a good many business travellers use the train.

I hope the voters who put her into power and are paying her a fat salary and a massive pension (and an expense account that even bankers would envy) will remember her priorities at the next election.

Meanwhile, the wisdom of a bankrupt Britain sending billions overseas in foreign aid is put into question yet again by the news that Britain has been spending a small fortune sending computers and television sets to a village in India which does not have any electricity.

2

We are thinking of changing our dentist. Our previous fellow retired early when he noticed that he was losing control of one of his hands and the replacement is, to be undeservedly polite, rather a disappointment. The staff at his surgery are often too busy to say 'hello' when we arrive or 'goodbye' when we leave (though they always seem to find the time to give us our bills) and the dentist himself is morose and has a curious habit of chatting to his nurse as though we are not there while we are sitting in the chair.

I don't expect much of a dentist but I do prefer one who treats me as a patient with a mouth to be attended to rather than as a mouth with a body attached to it.

We don't have much luck with dentists.

The one before the last one didn't bother wearing rubber gloves and used to spend ages ordering his lunch while I sat in his chair numb, bleeding and struggling to swallow. A receptionist would wander in and the two of them would discuss whether the corned beef and dill might be preferable to the chicken and salad with mayonnaise or perhaps the standard bacon, lettuce and tomato would be best after all.

It's a good job we were private patients. I hate to think what sort of service we might have received from him on the NHS.

We eventually left him after he filled the wrong teeth – for both of us.

I would have reported him to the General Dental Council but there was no sexual assault involved, just mere professional incompetence, so I doubt if they would have been interested.

3

In Cheltenham, we parked the car and walked past a mass of blackberry bushes which were laden with fruit. No one was picking the fruit, which was easily reachable from the pavement. A shop no more than 100 yards away was selling punnets of blackberries for an extortionate price.

The folk in Cheltenham can be a little snooty sometimes so I wasn’t surprised.

An assistant in a local branch of the Waterstones chain told Antoinette that customers in the store sometimes actually click their fingers when they want service. She said that she had never heard of this happening in any other part of the country.

In the Old Restoration public house, a genuinely unreconstructed pub which has loads of character and no pretensions whatsoever, I met an old bloke who was moaning about the way that tabloid newspapers exaggerate the news in order to terrify and anger their readers.

He’s right, of course. Newspaper proprietors have made a fortune out of reminding people about the things which worry them, and by building up their fears and pampering their prejudices. The *Daily Mail* specialises in this. It isn’t just the tabloids, though. The broadsheet newspapers just do it rather more cautiously. (And they print pictures of Frau Merkel instead of actresses in skimpy frocks.)

Indeed, it is no stretch to argue that the news itself is designed to create fear since fear keeps politicians in power, prevents the voters from thinking about things too deeply and helps advertisers, lobbyists and corporate campaigners to bully us into spending our money the way they want us to spend it.

It is after all, our fears, which help make us the people we are.

Kids claim to have no fear but this is merely a conceit and is a result of ignorance and a lack of experience of life and a dismal shortage of imagination.

Anyone over the age of 16 who claims to know no fear needs to be locked up in a padded room, both for their own protection and for the protection of everyone around them.

We are all born with a fear and loathing of heights, loud noises, abandonment and forms. I have all these fears in spades. I get dizzy if I sit on a plump cushion and when faced with any sort of form I become incoherent. Oh how I hate forms. Those who believe that inanimate objects may absorb human feelings will be enthused by the fact that whatever writing implement I am using always malfunctions when I start to complete any sort of form. A fountain pen or a roller ball pen will leak, a ball point pen will suddenly start to dry up and a pencil point will break.

Fear is a product of the imagination and the older we get the more we become aware of just how often things can go wrong.

We get frozen by all this fear; paralysed by it, unwilling to do or say anything because of what might happen. But the truth is that it is invariably not the things we worry about which cause chaos in our lives but the things we never thought of at all.

This evening, I had a huge bonfire and burnt a wardrobe we had bought at a home furnishing store called Homebase and a desk we had bought at an office supplier called Staples. Both these pieces of furniture were entirely unfit to be allowed in the house. We had bought them a year ago in a fit of laziness. It was a true folie a deux.

We have now replaced them with sturdy, good-looking second-hand Victorian brown furniture for a fraction of the price.

I am delighted to report that both the wardrobe and the desk burnt very well.

4

We have a tremendous apple crop this year. The mild spring meant that we had good blossom and our wild garden attracted the bees who did the hard work.

The birds and squirrels are now having a good time eating the crop.

I always smile when I see a squirrel running up a tree holding an apple as big as its head in its mouth. And it gives me a warm feeling inside to think of it sitting happily in its dray munching its way through a Hereford russet.

By the end of the year, the squirrels and the badgers and the birds will have eaten two or three hundredweight of apples; hoovering up the windfalls and taking the apples from the branches I cannot reach. They are doing us a huge favour for if the apples stayed where they fell they would have to be cleared up before they turned to mush and made the garden smell like a boozer.

5

We saw a house which is listed as an ancient monument and which is for sale.

We were tempted but neither of us can bear the thought of having to deal with the men and women in cheap suits from English Heritage, or whichever other quango has jurisdiction over Ancient Monuments.

The woman who showed us round the house looked like a lesbian social worker who had not yet recovered from a damp two week camping holiday in Cornwall.

I mentioned this to Antoinette and was gratified to discover, during the tour of the house, that the woman was a director of social services somewhere (which surely makes her a social worker) and that she had been on a caravanning holiday in Norfolk. I wanted to ask her if she was a lesbian but Antoinette kicked me firmly on the ankle every time she thought I was about to pop the question. Still, as Meatloaf sang, two out of three ‘aint bad, especially when the third remains a strong possibility.

None of this had anything to do with the house, of course, and was merely a sign that having booked the appointment we were going through with it out of politeness rather than interest.

There is an interesting point of etiquette here. When you have been attracted by the details of a house, and have booked a visit but then arrive and realise that you aren’t going to buy it, should you go through with the visit, and waste everyone’s time, or should you say something like ‘I’m sorry but I don’t think the house is right for us’ and scurry away. It is easier to do this, of course, if the person showing you round is the estate agent, a person who, by definition, doesn’t have any of the usual emotional frailties associated with human beings, but more difficult if the person showing you round is the owner and you can tell by the presence of flowers and the smell of baking bread in the kitchen that they have made a real effort and that you are the first potential buyer they’ve seen for 18 months.

In the end, neither of us had the courage to tell the truth so we put up with the full tour and wasted everyone’s time.

I was amused to see a television advertisement for McDonalds, the awful burger people.

In the advertisement an unbearably fussy mother is seen reprimanding her small boy for doing dangerous things. So, for example, she shouts at him when he looks as if he might be able to walk into a small puddle while wearing Wellington boots.

But then, just to show us that she is a kindly woman who loves and cherishes the heartily oppressed young fruit of her loins, she takes him into a branch of McDonalds and smiles broadly when he orders and consumes a lethal McCrap product which will, if he sustains the habit as he grows up, doubtless result in him dying early of heart disease or cancer.

A loving, caring, mother?

I fear not

6

It has been reported that an old couple in their late 80s have been found dead and that they both died of starvation.

The couple wouldn’t accept anything more than the basic old age pension and all the complications of claiming benefits were beyond them. Their State pension bought them a combined income of little more than £200 a week and their meagre savings were earning less than 0.1% in interest because of the Bank of England’s absurd and cruel policy of protecting the greedy rich and punishing the elderly.

And so, although they were in their late 80s, they both still had to work for a living.

Incidentally, why are State pensions officially classified as ‘welfare’ payments? Many proud older people refuse to claim welfare of any kind, and that includes the State pension.

The fact is that the old age pension in the UK is something pensioners have bought with their taxes and national insurance payments. It is, unique among payments by the State in being a purchased right rather than an entitlement.

When her doctor wanted to send her into a hospital, the old woman said she couldn’t afford to go into hospital and the doctor, assuming that she thought she would have to pay for treatment, assured her that there would be no costs.

But what she really meant was that if she went into hospital she would not be earning. And her husband’s tiny income from his job as a jobbing gardener would not be enough to pay for their rent and their heating bills. The rent and council tax on their tiny terraced home took up well over half of their income. Trying to stay warm took up the rest of it. There wasn’t anything left over for luxuries such as food and clothing.

So she refused to go into hospital.

Eventually she became so ill that she couldn’t work. And since there is no longer a decent district nurse service, her husband had to stay at home to look after her.

So then they had to try to live on the State pension alone. And they died of starvation.

The preening, ever pleased with themselves metropolitan, liberal twitterati, always climbing up onto their high horses and galloping around their self-esteem, never get themselves into a tizzy over the way we treat our old people, do they?

And politicians and economists are constantly telling us that the elderly are richer than any other group.

So it's odd isn't it that the elderly are the only people dying in their thousands of cold and starvation.

7

Reading the medical journals today, I was pleased to see that scientists are still contesting the view that salt is bad for us.

I have, over the years, noticed that science in general seems to attract a good deal of dogmatism and the 'salt deniers' have for years been as dogmatic as anyone.

Back in the early 1980s, I wrote a book in which I questioned the then popular argument that salt was a 'bad' food and a cause of much illness.

I didn't say salt was safe to eat, I didn't say it was a 'good' thing to eat, but I did say that the evidence wasn't clear. You would have thought I'd claimed that Dr Mengele was a good egg. Indeed, Mengele himself probably got a friendlier reception than I received at the hands of medical journalists who had enthusiastically accepted the notion that salt is a major killer.

The proponents of the 'salt is deadly' theory included an ex *Radio Times* journalist who had reinvented himself as a food expert, and I remember being subjected to a vitriolic and opinionated attack when I invited him onto a television programme I was presenting. (The *Radio Times* is a television and radio listing magazine which does not, as far as I am aware, train its journalists in medical science.)

Thirty years ago, the *Radio Times* man simply could not accept that the issue might be more complex than he understood and, even among scientists, a controversial one.

In his mind everyone should be told to avoid salt. He had read the views of one group of scientists and he accepted what they had to say.

Today, however, the issue about salt is still not clear.

There are a number of articles in the medical journals claiming that salt is dangerous. And there are a roughly equal number of articles arguing that salt is not dangerous.

According to a recent paper in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* 'We can reduce dietary sodium, save money, and save lives.' Dogmatic. Firm. No uncertainty there.

But according to an even more recent paper in the *British Medical Journal*: 'It is surprising that many countries have uncritically adopted sodium reduction, which probably is the largest delusion in the history of preventive medicine.'

My former *Radio Times* sparring partner might like to know that there is clear evidence, published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, that reducing salt too much is associated with a higher risk of heart problems and that other small health problem known as death.

And, he might be surprised to know that, according to the National Academy of Medicine in the USA, nobody has proved that salt has any impact on health.

None of this will stop the health fascists (and former *Radio Times* journalists) who have got it into their heads that salt must be banned.

I don't mind people being dogmatic about health issues (or anything else) when the facts support their point of view.

But the facts do not support the view that salt is dangerous.

8

According to a report in the Devon newspaper *Express and Echo* an 18-year-old girl who was elected a local councillor just four months ago is now heading off to university in Winchester.

(I didn't know they had one there, but every hamlet big enough to have a pub and a shop seems also to have a university these days and so I suppose Winchester, once London's main rival and the owner of a famous cathedral, might as well have one too.)

The 18-year-old is one of three councillors representing 3,000 people in her ward and she receives £4,646 a year in allowances.

And now she's going to university and she says she has no intention of resigning her seat.

I do not doubt for a moment that the new councillor is well meaning and conscientious but, I wonder, am I the only one who finds this to be a strange interpretation of the principle of democratic representation? Isn't the political representative supposed to reside in his or her constituency and be more or less constantly available to his or her constituents?

We've been buying paintings for the new house we might one day buy for some time now and since the house is full, we've been storing them in the garage. This, it turns out, was rather foolish for it seems that during a recent storm the roof of the garage leaked and water entered the building.

Here is what appears to have happened.

The water landed on a large, empty cardboard box which, not surprisingly, became rather soggy and fell over. As it fell, the soggy box landed against a rolled up Persian rug which was, in turn, also knocked over. The rug then fell onto a pastel study by 19th century Swedish artist Per Lindbergh. The picture, entitled `Madonna and child with St Anne, St John the Baptist and St Joseph' and which was painted in 1822 and which cost us a decent sum of money, was leaning against a table and doing absolutely no one any harm.

But the rug knocked the painting to the floor and the collision between the two resulted in the glass breaking.

Worse still, the picture itself has become damp and the gilt frame has been damaged.

9

Queen Elizabeth II has now reigned longer than Queen Victoria but it is a rather unsatisfactory, hollow, meaningless sort of record – akin to jumping further than someone else in a sandpit, or throwing a spear further than your competitors. Who really cares?

In some important ways I admire the woman enormously. She has done her job very satisfactorily, waving nicely and opening buildings and bridges with apparent enthusiasm. No one in history has accepted posies with as much grace. She invented the modern camera smile.

But what will she be remembered for?

What are the signature moments of the Second Elizabethan Era?

Victoria had an Empire and her decades on the throne left England on top of the world. Many of our great public buildings are Victorian. The list of achievements which relate to the Victorian era is pretty well endless.

But what has Elizabeth presided over other than decline and betrayal?

I can't help feeling that in her determination to preserve the monarchy, Queen Elizabeth II has failed to preserve the nation of which she was supposed to be the titular head. She has given us some splendid pomp and pageantry and helped fill the world's tabloids with marvellous photographs.

But Elizabeth II sat quietly by as Ted Heath sold the nation to the bureaucrats of Brussels for a modest £30,000 tax free in his back pocket.

Could she have done something to stop him? Of course she could. Would Elizabeth I have allowed her country to be sold at a knockdown price to the Germans? Of course she wouldn't.

The problem was that Elizabeth II knew that if she spoke out against our joining the Common Market she would probably be able to prevent Heath selling our sovereignty but she might, at the same time, be pressing the destruct button for the monarchy. And she put the family business above the nation. That was rather low of her I'm afraid. A rather cheap betrayal, which rather put her in the same camp as Heath himself.

10

We had drinks this evening with a wine connoisseur who enthused about some red stuff of which he had bought two cases.

He told me that an eminent wine reviewer had described the wine as containing elements of star anise, black raspberry, fennel seed, oolong tea, gardenia, sandalwood, mandarin orange, rose petal and fresh thyme. What glorious nonsense these wine writers do produce. The only wine expert I have ever listened to was Keith Floyd, the greatest television chef of all time, who had no time at all for pretentiousness but who knew a good bottle of red when it passed his lips and who never wasted time sipping or sniffing when he could be swallowing.

The fact is, of course, that scientists have shown that human beings have enormous difficulty in identifying more than four different flavours in any single liquid. Even the very best professional wine tasters can't identify mixtures of more than three flavours. So, when you hear someone pretending that they can identify more than that you know that the flavour they've forgotten to list is 'connerie' (which is, as everyone knows, the French for bullshit).

11

Antoinette is doing amazing well with her Mandarin despite the fact that she has no tutor and is teaching herself.

She told me today that in Chinese the word 'Ma' means both 'mother' and 'horse', depending upon how the word is pronounced and accented.

I suspect that this could lead to some interesting conversations among those whose command of the language is not perfect. 'I lose £10 on your mother in the 3.30 at Cheltenham today.' 'This meat is tough. We aren't eating your mother are we?'

She also tells me that in mandarin the word for 'foreign diplomat' is the same as the word for 'rubber U-band pipe'. The two words are pronounced the same, except for a little mild but vital tonal variation. She tells me that foreign diplomats who think they've mastered mandarin often go to China and introduce themselves as a 'rubber U bend pipe'. I love this. I love the idea of a smartly dressed, nicely spoken British diplomat turning up in China and saying: 'Good day, I'm a rubber U-bend pipe and I'm here to represent Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II'. The poor Chinese must have to stick their nails in their palms to prevent themselves laughing hysterically.

6

We visited the hospital in Stroud so that technicians could take photographs of my knee, and spotted a notice which read: 'We have facilities for breast feeding. Please ask Sister if you would like to take advantage of this.'

I wonder if the sign could possibly have been worded a little better.

7

I see that Google (still one of the world's top three most evil companies) is getting into medical research. The company is, in its spare time, looking for a cure for cancer, a remedy for arthritis and a few other magical products. I suppose it is possible that the unbelievably arrogant nerds who work for Google are well-intentioned (in a 'we could make a tax free bundle out of this' sort of way) but they're really wasting their time.

The fact is that we already have masses of valuable information which we don't use.

In my second book (*Paper Doctors*), which was published back in the 1970s and which is now out of print, I pointed out that the human race would be much better off if we cancelled all our research programmes, gave up looking for new wonder cures, and, instead, spent our money on using the knowledge we already have.

The problem is that medical research is now a huge and exceedingly profitable industry, constantly unearthing new drugs, new solutions and new gimmicks – most of which turn out to be vastly profitable for the cowboys who sell them.

Come to think of it, I suppose it's not surprising that Google wants to dip its diseased toes into the water.

I wonder if any of the Google nerds have ever heard of a certain Dr Chekov?

It was Chekov, writing in his play *The Cherry Orchard*, who pointed out that 'when a lot of remedies are suggested for a disease that means it can't be cured.'

12

There is much excitement among Government politicians about the prospect of the NHS offering a seven day a week service.

I am staggered that they (or anyone else) should think this an achievement worth celebrating.

The NHS has a monopoly on general practice and emergency care, and the absence of a comprehensive health care service at weekends and at nights is one of the factors which has made the NHS a complete disgrace and resulted in Britain having one of the worst health care services in the developed world.

But politicians can, and do, spin anything to their advantage and so if we do ever get night-time and weekend medical cover in the NHS, the politicians will be whooping and patting themselves on their backs.

13

Someone I know gave up his safe, well-paid, protected job and voluntarily joined the Navy at the start of the Second World War. He wanted to fight for his country. His ships were torpedoed three times and by the end of the war his health was ruined.

When he and his wife were both over 80 and crippled, they reluctantly asked for a disabled badge for their car so that they could continue to look after themselves and do their own shopping. An anonymous council employee arbitrarily turned down their request (which had been supported by their doctor) and told them bluntly that they had no right of appeal.

Twelve months later, when the man needed medical help, he was told there was a 12 month waiting list for an essential test to see if he had cancer. He had to use his small pension to pay for a private consultation. Five days after sending out his massive bill, the consultant rang the man's wife and threatened to send a debt collector if he wasn't paid immediately. The man and the woman hadn't paid the consultant's bill because neither of them was fit enough to walk to the nearest post box. And they didn't dare drive into town because they couldn't park close to the post box because they didn't have a disabled parking badge for their car.

The man was my father and the woman my mother.

And they were not alone in being spurned by the nation they had helped to save.

Few things make me angrier than seeing the way the elderly are treated by our society, and the way our younger politicians lie and claim that the elderly 'have it easy'. The only consolation is that most of those younger politicians will themselves be old one day. And then it will be their turn to be spurned.

The only certainty is that things are going to get worse.

The Liverpool Care Pathway (a murderers' charter, which allowed doctors and nurses to withhold food, water and essential treatment from patients who were over 65 and regarded as a nuisance) has allegedly been repealed, but it is being replaced by something called Sustainable Development Goals (which originated with the United Nations) which allows the NHS to discriminate against anyone over the age of 70 on the grounds that people who die when they are over 70 cannot be said to have died 'prematurely' and so will not count when the nation's healthcare is being assessed.

The Government loves this new rule because it keeps the workers fit and able to work and gets rid of the expensive folk who are of pensionable age and, therefore, regarded by society's accountants as a 'burden'.

14

My bank doesn't allow customers to have the telephone number of their local branch. This is either to protect us all against terrorism or to put a stop to money laundering. It is nothing to do with saving money, of course.

A few weeks ago I wanted to open a second account. I managed to get through to a call centre somewhere in Asia and I was sent a huge wodge of forms to complete. I rang them again.

'You've sent me some forms to fill in,' I said. 'But I've already got an account with you. I just wanted to open a second account.'

'If you want to open a new account then you must complete all our security questions and prove you are who you say you are,' replied the robot at the other end of the phone. 'We need your driving licence or passport, two utility bills and your last bank statement. Copies will not do.'

'But I've already got an account with you,' I repeated. 'I'm the same person as that person; same name, same address, same date of birth, same slightly troublesome left molar. I just want another account and another cheque book. And I can't send you two utility bills because we only have one utility company and they insist on sending all our bills by email.'

'You must complete our forms and send us proof of identity,' insisted the woman.

'But I've already got an account with you,' I pointed out again. 'If you need me to prove who I am in order to open a second account why did you accept my identity for the first account?'

'It's the rules,' said the woman with the finality of a woman who has a rule book on her desk. 'If you want to open an account you must complete the forms and send us proof of your identity.'

'And I must send you the last bank statement you sent me to prove my identity?'

'That's right.'

'You want me to post back to you the very same bank statement that you posted to me last week?'

'Yes.'

'And then you'll send me details of my new account?'

'Yes.'

'I pay the utility bills by direct debit, through your bank,' I told her.

'We need the bills.'

'I don't get bills. They won't send them. They insist on sending emails.'

'We need two utility bills in paper form. And we must have your driving licence or passport. They must all be originals'

'They might get lost in the post,' I told her. 'And what if I need them while you are examining them?'

'Our security regulations are set by the Government.'

'They're not,' I told her.

'Do you want the country over-run with terrorists?' she demanded, ignoring my entirely accurate interjection.

I paused and counted to ten. I do a lot of that these days. 'Instead of opening another account,' I said quietly, 'can I please close the account I've got with you.'

'You'll have to write to us.'

'And then you'll send me a cheque for the money which is in the account?'

‘Yes.’

‘Where will you send the account?’

‘To the address on the bank statement.’

‘But you don’t have any proof that I’m that person.’ I pointed out. ‘If you had proof that I was that person you wouldn’t need more proof in order to allow me to open a new account.’

‘It’s all for your own security,’ said the woman. ‘Do you want the country over-run by terrorists?’

I quietly turned off the telephone and made a cup of tea.

15

Last night I had a nightmare.

‘I’d like to open an account for a friend,’ I said.

‘He’ll have to come into the bank to be finger printed,’ said the teller.

‘He doesn’t have any arms,’ I said.

‘That’s all right. He can have an iris scan.’

‘He can’t,’ I said. ‘He lost both eyes in the same accident that took his arms.’

‘I’ll talk to the manager. Maybe we could accept three utility bills instead of two.’

‘He doesn’t have any utility bills,’ I told her. ‘He lives in a hospital. The hospital pays the electricity and gas bills.’

‘If he hasn’t got any utility bills then he can’t open an account.

‘He’s got a compensation cheque he needs to cash,’ I said.

‘It’s for his own protection,’ she said. ‘Does he want the country over-run by terrorists.’

‘It already is,’ I said. ‘That’s how he lost his arms and his sight.’

16

We went into a local branch of a national chain of betting shops a couple of times recently, just to learn a little more about the business of betting, which is so I gather now the nation’s favourite pastime, having overtaken adultery, stealing policemen’s helmets and throwing pennies at Premier League goalkeepers.

I told Antoinette that I had a finely honed system for betting but after I had lost our stake she expressed some lack of faith. I pointed out that I had merely said that I had a system and not that I had a system for winning. ‘It’s a very good system for losing,’ I told her.

I have rarely seen a more miserable place than that betting shop or more down at heel consumers than the folk gathered therein. They were all steadily losing money. I wondered why they went there. And then I realised that was a stupid thought. They were obviously there because they were hopeful. They hoped for a winner: a bit of extra money; the start of a big winning streak. For the period before and during a horse race, or some other event, there was the chance to dream. But then I realised that the hoping was just a small part of it. There was also the chance to express an opinion, a judgement, a viewpoint. And I suspect that for many of those who patronise betting shops this is a rarity: a chance to be right, to be worthy of praise and adulation, the opportunity to be proved right when the experts (the bookies) got it wrong.

We went for coffee afterwards and I looked at the paper. I read that a betting shop boss had recently given himself a £10 million bonus. Golly. I wonder where the money for that came from.

How can anyone justify such avarice; such undeserved riches?

17

I see that yet another Tory MP has lost a big libel case. Tim Yeo is apparently facing a bill for £400,000 after losing a case against the *Sunday Times*. It seems that Tory MPs are attracted to libel actions like wasps to jam. (The analogy is not without sense.) Andrew Mitchell is said to have spent a small fortune suing *The Sun* and failing. Rupert Allason lost an expensive libel case against the BBC and Neil Hamilton went bankrupt after losing a libel action against the then boss of Harrods.

Jeffrey Archer and Jonathan Aitken both ended up in prison after lying in libel actions. Maybe they thought that they were in the House of Commons where, of course, lying is so much a part of everyday life that no one takes any notice.

18

Antoinette has nearly finished her new book *My Quirky Cotswold Garden*.

Written in the Victorian diary style it is a beautifully passionate and poetic account of a year in our garden's life. Everything is there: flora and fauna, smiles and tears, humour and pathos.

The only sad thing is that very few people will be allowed to read the book.

Antoinette cannot bear to have her book, taken from her very soul and spirit, dismissed as 'not my cup of tea' by some amateur critic who hasn't even had the courtesy to read it.

And so she is still determined that the book will be published in a very limited edition and copies will be given only to friends and acquaintances who will be asked to burn their copy if, for any reason, they ever want to get rid of it.

I can understand her view and sympathise with her decision. I wonder how many other wonderful books will be privately printed in limited editions because the authors cannot bear to see their work trashed by thoughtless reviewers.

19

Workers in Japan are, on average, allowed 18 days holiday. But the average worker takes only nine of those. Many workers refuse to accept any paid holidays at all. Americans take about 20 minutes holiday a year.

But in France the employees of big companies such as EDF Group are given ten weeks' vacation every year.

Ten weeks!

Predictably, when an attempt was made to reduce this absurd allowance there was a strike.

And yet, the funny thing is that French productivity is much higher than British productivity.

In other words, although they work much shorter hours, and have much longer holidays, French workers get far more done than British workers. And I think I know the reason.

The British are obsessed with social media and British workers are forever tweeting, checking their Facebook accounts and sending photographs of themselves having breakfast, sitting on the train or cleaning their teeth. That's where all the time goes. It is frittered away on social media. When the internet was introduced, its supporters said that it would have a huge impact on productivity. They were right. But instead of improving productivity it has led to a dramatic deterioration.

20

There is much concern about the number of long-term unemployed in Britain.

Several politicians and newspaper commentators have recently woken up and noticed that there are hundreds of thousands of families which have not included any working members for several generations.

The politicians and commentators seem puzzled by this fact. I'm not. Indeed, I'm actually quite surprised that anyone bothers to work at all these days. A single woman with two children and no job now receives benefits which are, in total, equivalent to a £32,000 earned income. She'll get that even if she's never worked and never paid any taxes. Actually, thanks to the EU she'll get that if she's just moved to Britain and doesn't speak English.

When you compare that income to the fact that the typical British family has about £16,000 a year to live on after they've paid taxes and national insurance, it isn't difficult to see why so many of the people who haven't got fat cat jobs working as hospital administrators or charity bosses prefer to stay at home and watch day time television.

Looked at objectively, you'd have to be certifiable to bother getting a job in Britain these days.

21

There are some advantages to being old.

Here's one: the older you are the less it matters if they find a reason to send you to prison for life.

22

Antoinette and I stood for a moment outside an art gallery in the 5th arrondissement, the traditionally intellectual quarter of Paris, and examined with astonishment the paintings in the shop window.

Several of the paintings for sale looked to me as if they were bits of paper on which an artist had wiped his brush. One consisted of nothing but black paint.

I made a quiet but definitely critical comment to Antoinette and a man who was also looking in the window turned to me, glowered and muttered ‘You are a Philistine’.

If he had been 40 years younger and holding a knife I would have agreed with him but he was the age he was and he wasn’t holding a knife so I looked at him and politely asked him why he thought I was a Philistine.

He explained that he had done so because I didn’t understand modern art.

I said he might well be right about my failure to understand why anyone would want to hang a black square on a wall, but that still didn’t explain why he’d compared me to a Philistine. I then explained to him that the Philistines were decent folk who simply had poor public relations management. I pointed out that they were originally demonised only because they had dominated the Israelites and were believed to have captured and held the Ark of the Covenant for a number of years.

I told him that the Philistines were the first people to work out how to use iron to make weapons and implements and that they were cultured and sophisticated people. Their one mistake, I said, was that they had failed to advertise themselves as God’s chosen people.

I pointed out that using the word ‘Philistine’ as a term of abuse has become commonplace but there really is no sound reason for it and that using it in such a way suggests a rather narrow education and a tendency to follow the crowd in using ill-based clichés.

We then moved away and left him staring at the black square. Or it might have been a rectangle. Who cares.

‘Did you make up that stuff about the Philistines?’ asked Antoinette when we were out of earshot.

I can understand her scepticism. I have been known to make things up, including bits of history, so that I can amuse myself teasing strangers. For example, I have in the past managed to persuade quite a number of people that that they are mispronouncing popular words and names.

But the stuff about the Philistines was entirely true.

23

The boiler man arrived to service the boiler in our Paris apartment. I am sure he has already been this year. I really don’t understand this fetish for messing with boilers. In England we manage to ignore their requests to come and do things but in France they seem to have laws which require home owners to have their boilers serviced very regularly.

My heart fell when I saw that he was very short; only a little over five foot tall. My disappointment in his lack of stature was created by the fact that our boiler is fixed to the wall in the kitchen and short boiler engineers cannot reach it without standing on something.

When he realised that he could not quite reach the boiler, the engineer picked up one of our three remaining kitchen chairs. He was clearly about to use it to give him the extra height he needed.

I grabbed the chair and told him that I had a step ladder which I would fetch for him. He kept hold of the chair and we ended up having a tug of war with it. One of his colleagues wrecked one of a set of four chairs last year by putting a foot through the cane seating (after I had warned him not to stand on it).

I shouted abuse at him in English because in extremis I can never think of any suitable French words at all. If I get really angry I can’t even manage to find basic terms of abuse. Actually, I become so monolinguistic that I probably wouldn’t be able to order a coffee in French.

I told him that I had a step ladder which I would fetch for him. He sulkily and reluctantly let go of the chair and waited while I fetched the ladder.

But once I had produced the ladder and had presented it to him he was as good as gold. When he had finished, he presented the usual ream of paperwork with a smile and wiped his grubby hand on his grubby trousers before accepting my offered handshake.

I find that we have to deal with French workmen in a different way.

If I shout at an English workman he will pack his bags and disappear, never to return. They need cajoling and filling with endless cups of tea.

French workmen only respect customers who argue with them and shout at them. The more you shout the more helpful they become.

24

In Paris, we met a busker who turned out to be British; to be precise a former British schoolteacher.

He told us that he had started busking on his holidays and explained that his busking career started when he flew to Paris a couple of years ago for a vacation in the summer. He took his guitar and clarinet with him and tried a little amateur busking just for fun. Eventually he learned the best places to busk and the best sort of music to play and found that he was making very good money.

‘I started out just wanting to make a little tax free pin money but soon realised that I was making more money as a busker than I made as a school teacher and that it was all cash,’ he said, ‘so I gave up teaching and took up busking full time.’

He had, he said, been offered work in several bars and clubs but he had always turned the offers down because no one could afford to pay him what he could earn busking.

I told Antoinette that if times get hard I intend to take my harmonica in the street to earn money for books, notepads, pencils and other essentials. If there is enough money I may even buy food and warm clothing. The harmonica is an excellent instrument for busking since it is small and therefore extremely portable and produces quite a loud sound without the inconvenience of having to carry a microphone and loudspeaker around.

‘But you can’t play the harmonica!’ protested Antoinette, who bought me the instrument several years ago.

‘I didn’t say I could play it or that I would play it,’ I pointed out. ‘I said I would take it into the street and I will blow into it. Anyone can make a good, meaty sound with a harmonica.’

Our future is assured.

25

Leaders of the EU are arguing that the organisation is too political and too democratic and that the unelected commissioners should have more power and should be able to make new laws without having to worry about politicians or electors.

If the people of Britain don’t vote to leave the EU then Antoinette and I think that we will have to leave it by ourselves, though we are not at all sure where else we can go. New Zealand? Canada? Ireland? Mars? I wonder if they speak English on Mars.

26

Friends of ours who live in the 8th arrondissement have a rather unusual poster on their hall wall. The poster, which is very nicely framed, originated with the Polish travel bureau. There is a picture of Kracow, the second largest city in Poland, with this slogan: ‘Kracow: Like Paris Without the French’.

I can’t help feeling that it’s a good job the poster was published before Poland joined the European Union and a very good job that no one from the French Government spotted it when Poland’s application was being considered.

Our friends, who travel frequently to Poland, told us that Krakow was the European Capital of Culture in the year 2000 and that there is a piece of art by Leonardo da Vinci in the Czartoryski Museum. Both Antoinette and I tried hard to appear impressed by this.

I find it difficult to feel full of love for the Poles, for their ungrateful government invariably joins in giving the UK a good kicking whenever we are trying to straighten out our relationship with the EU bureaucrats.

You’d think Poland would feel more loyalty to the UK after what happened in 1939.

27

We sat in a café today and spent a very enjoyable 20 minutes watching people park their cars.

In Britain, people tend to regard their cars as valued possessions, ornaments to be protected, washed, cleaned and worshipped. Most would like to keep their cars safely locked up in their garages and travel by public transport if they could.

The French, on the other hand, regard their cars as pieces of equipment to be used like spades or saws; to be driven at the maximum possible speed and, when not needed, abandoned somewhere within hailing distance of a pavement. They drive them more like dodgem cars than like motor vehicles and a Frenchman would be embarrassed if he drove a car, even a new one, which didn’t have its fair share of dents.

Most people in Britain look in their mirrors when they park and, of course, also use the parking sensors with which most modern cars are equipped. The French use neither vision nor sound when parking; they much prefer to ‘park by feel’ and to bump and bang their cars into a space. They stop reversing when a jolt tells them that they have hit the car behind, and they stop going forward when another jolt tells them that they have hit the car in front.

As long as you don’t mind having a few bumps and scrapes on your paintwork, and the French don’t, this system works terribly well.

If necessary, they move the neighbouring cars forwards and backwards a little in order to make the space big enough for their car.

This ‘park by feel’ approach results in some badly damaged paintwork but it means that the Parisians can fit their cars into impossibly small spaces and it provides excellent entertainment for café patrons who have sensibly chosen a table by the window.

28
From the American Library in Paris, I picked up a huge pile of free *New Yorker* magazines from the 1970s.

Those weren’t the peak years (those involved Thurber and Flanner et al) but the old magazines contain a good deal of readable stuff, and are far better written than today’s magazine of the same name, which sadly bears a striking similarity to those awful magazines which are given away free with the Sunday newspapers. The articles in the 2015 *New Yorker* are meandering and pointless, passionless and superficial, and appear to have been bought by the yard in the same way that interior decorators buy books with fine bindings. The cartoons in the old *New Yorker* magazines were much funnier too; the modern ones seem blunt and predictable.

29
Back in England, I saw today that the Post Office in Cheltenham, which sits curiously within a large branch of WHSmith, is offering to sell euros at the rate of 1.24 to the pound and to buy them at the rate of 1.53 to the pound. That is profiteering on a majestic scale. Not even the little change shops which used to be scattered around major cities such as Paris would have ever dared be so egregiously greedy. The Post Office that is offering these absolutely outrageous rates has the temerity to boast that they change money without charging commission. I should bloody well hope they do.

30
We are having fun and games with British Gas again. Around a year ago I wrote to tell them that their estimated meter readings were too low. I gave them the correct readings. They wrote acknowledging my letter but then completely ignored it. And so suddenly, in August they took over £1,000 from our account and announced that they were planning to help themselves to another £3,000. Naturally, by the time they had warned us that they were planning to do this they had already tried to do it.

Our bank decided that the sums British Gas was demanding seemed unlikely and possibly fraudulent and so refused to give them the money. So British Gas arbitrarily changed the sum they were claiming and tried again. Once again the bank repulsed them, spurning their advances and sending their ball into the long grass. British Gas then threw a hissy fit, cancelled the direct debit arrangement and sent us a demand for £3,556.83, together with an utterly incomprehensible explanation that could have been written for the Marx Brothers by S.J.Perelman or George Kaufman.

Not having six hours to spend on the telephone, I sent British Gas an email (not the easiest thing in the world to do) pointing out that since I now only receive bank statements from Mr and Mrs Lloyd on Fridays when the moon is rising and Jupiter is having tea with Mars I had only their word for it that their attempts to remove money from our account had failed and that I would send them a cheque only when they had apologised for causing so much of a shambles, assured us in writing that they had not succeeded in taking vast sums from our account and paid us compensation for wasting my time.

I have no doubt that something will happen in due course. Meanwhile, they can’t summarily cut off our gas because I am registered with them as an old person who will die without heat.

Mind you, there is always the risk that the climate change mythologists will insist that the gas supply is turned off and that we rely for our heating, lighting and cooking on a few solar panels and a little windmill at the top of the garden.

Despite the absence of any evidence supporting the whole damned idea, the climate change nonsense is widely supported. The British Government’s Department of Energy has even changed its name to the Department of Energy and Climate Change and has its new name expensively installed outside the front door. The leading advocates of climate change include the adorably potty and naïve meat eating Prince Charles, who has apparently forecast that the world will be doomed by 2017 and is, presumably, even now planning to take down Highgrove, his country home, and move it, stone by stone, to a pleasant shore side spot on the lunar Sea of Tranquillity; a fading pop singer; a dressmaker; the inevitable Irish dog biscuit, the sanctimonious Bonio (sunglasses model, world class hypocrite, Professor of Climatology at the University of Tax Avoidance, and eleven times voted, by me, the world’s most pompous and up-himself individual) and what seems like the entire editorial staff of the BBC, who seem happy to give airtime to any minor celebrity or pseudo-scientist who is prepared to enthuse about the dangers of climate change while denying any airtime at all to scientists who bravely refuse to follow the official BBC line. I recently saw an article by one self-styled scientist, well known for his pungent and seemingly authoritative articles on the science of climate change, who had branched into writing about medicine. With no indication that he realised how stupid he sounded, he described how a famous individual's gall stone had migrated via his kidney to his bladder. A miracle indeed. This is the quality of 'science' knowledge among the climate change crowd.

Climate change enthusiasts have promoted their cause by flying around the world to hold meetings, by throwing bombs at policemen, by holding demonstrations designed to block the traffic and pollute the air and by forging documents purporting to give their spurious arguments some sort of a scientific basis. The whole global warming fiasco is marked by smug, self-righteous, ignorant celebrities who are delighted by their own certainty and the knowledge that whatever constraints are introduced will not apply to them. I would be more impressed by their earnestness if Prince Charles and Bonio vowed to fly no more and to turn their aeroplanes into tractors. Actually I'm surprised that Bonio, who seems to me to have a natural ability to jump onto a profitable bandwagon, hasn't seen the publicity to be gained from having a jet turned into a tractor or two. Still, there's time.

The establishment has become so enamoured of the myth that even Mark Carney, the Canadian Governor of the Bank of England, and a man who clearly has absolutely no idea what is happening to the British economy, who has lost control and whose failure to predict his own institution's interest rate changes has surely made him the worst economic forecaster in the whole of the country, has joined in the campaigning. While millions of pensioners starve because of the Bank's bizarre policy on interest rates Carney has found time to wander way outside his brief and, I suspect, his area of expertise, and to pontificate about climate change. What a pity he doesn't spend a little more of his very expensive time dealing with the stuff he's paid to do.

Despite all this hot air, the evidence supporting the climate change argument is thinner and weaker than a wet tissue. The global temperature (as measured by satellite) really hasn't risen (though climate change propagandists have tried to 'adjust' the figures to show that it has. In the old days that used to be called 'cheating' or 'fiddling the results, and the computer modelled predictions which are regularly used to frighten us all have been shown to be plain, old-fashioned wrong.

Polar bear populations recently reached a 50 year high and the amount of ice in Antarctica is growing. These are facts which don't fit the hoax being perpetrated by the climate change conspiracy theorists but they are facts nevertheless.

And the perhaps rather surprising fact is that the IPCC's last Assessment Report concluded that there really isn't any evidence supporting the theory that climate change has led to an increase in extreme weather events.

The plain unvarnished truth is that there is as much evidence to show that climate change is the cause of baldness in men or vacuity on television reality programmes as there is to show that it is the cause of storms, tempests and flooding. However, the enthusiasm for the climate change myth is not surprising now that the annual climate change industry is said to be worth $1.5 trillion. That's roughly the same as the online shopping industry.

In Britain, the climate change fanatics blame flooding on climate change and regard the fact that the nation has for decades been building approximately 10% of its new houses on flood plains as a simply inconvenient truth. They also regard the fact that councils have failed to unblock drains or dredge rivers as irrelevant and unsuitable for their purposes. And flooding has absolutely nothing to do with the draining of peat bogs (nature's natural reservoirs) or the enthusiasm of farmers for chopping down every tree they can possibly find cluttering up their land. Naturally, none of this stops the world being rent with the sound of revving up bandwagons.

And the incessant bleatings of the climate change fanatics give insurance companies, local councils and the Government an easy way to avoid culpability; a very convenient excuse for their own systematic and systemic failures.

Meanwhile, it seems that those who are most vocal in warning us all that we must not fly, drive our cars or heat our homes are the ones who spend much of their lives in their aeroplanes or their expensive limousines and when they aren't moving about the planet they are relaxing in one of their many luxurious, well-heated homes. That all sounds like hypocrisy to me.

The point is not that the climate change mythologists are definitely wrong but that they are not definitely right. Their argument that we must take action now in case they are right is dangerous because it ignores the considerable downside. Taking action is not without serious side effects and millions of people have suffered (and are still suffering) because of the ill-based exhortations of the climate change mythologists. Meanwhile, the climate change fanatics suffer not one jot – they keep flying around the world because any rules they call for do not apply to them – but millions do suffer.

If a doctor fears that a patient may have cancer but there is no evidence to prove his supposition then he would be very foolish to initiate dangerous treatment which might well kill the patient.

The point is that this issue needs to be properly debated but the climate change terrorists have taken over the issue and refuse to allow any discussion.

Today, many of the people who sneered at what I said about global warming in the 1990s (when I was worried about the effect of global warming because, at that time, the facts suggested that climate change was real) have become staunch believers, holders of the orthodox faith. Is this because I am always a contrarian? No I don’t think so. In the early days there did seem to be a real chance that global warming would prove to be a huge problem. But the evidence supporting the theory has evaporated, if it ever existed, and today the argument for climate change is a spurious one, unsupported by serious science.

Worryingly, there are indeed very serious attempts afoot to make it just as illegal even to question climate change as it is to question the holocaust. We scoff at McCarthyism but the principle has been alive and kicking in science for many years now. Those who dare to question the idea of man-made climate change affecting our lives are dismissed as ‘climate change deniers’ in the same way that those who question the accepted truths about the holocaust are branded holocaust deniers.

I would respectfully point out that I don’t believe that there is a climate change believer in the world who has a better track record at reading scientific truths than I have. Over the years I have spotted numerous problems ahead of the pack, and made a good many predictions which have turned out to be accurate. But in the modern world it is not enough to be right. It is more important to be on the right side of the argument; the politically correct, politically acceptable side.

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The conspiracy theorists who support the dubious and scientifically ill based theories behind climate change dismiss those who dare to point out the truth as ‘climate change deniers’, in just the same way that those who question the holocaust are dismissed and derided as holocaust deniers.

But, I repeat, what no one in power ever admits, and what most people don’t understand, is that the real reason for the whole organised ‘climate change’ panic is that the oil is running out.

No politician or bureaucrat dares mention that the oil is running out and that within a generation we will be largely dependent for our power on the wind, the sea, the sun for fear of causing a widespread panic.

As I pointed out in my book *Oil Apocalypse* it was oil which made us all rich because it enabled us to do far more than before. Oil powered lorries, tractors and ships have transformed the economy of the rich countries. Now that the oil is running out we have to save what oil is left. And so we must cut out unnecessary aeroplane travel, eschew plastic bags and share our cars with homicidal strangers.

Eating meat has been defined as causing cancer not because the evidence shows that it is (which it does) but because the rearing of cattle to produce steaks and burgers specially fattened up for Large People requires far more energy than the world would need if more people became vegetarian. Sadly, however, I fear that the meat producing lobby will prove far more effective than the WHO. Meat eating will only come to an end when the lawyers start bringing class action lawsuits against restaurants, supermarkets, celebrity chefs who promote meat eating and the author of recipe books which contain meat dishes. And that will happen.

Meanwhile, I wonder if I will ever get apologies from the Advertising Standards Authority and the Press Complaints Commission who both censored me (around 20 years ago) for publishing scientific evidence proving that meat causes cancer. Fat chance.

Incidentally, it occurs to me yet again that anyone who campaigns for the climate change myth but who still eats meat is a hypocrite of Brobdignanian proportions. The greenhouse gases produced by farmed cattle are a major source of alleged global warming.

The latest nonsense from Global Warming Conspiracy Theorists such as Bonio and Prince Charles, who keep flying around the world warning everyone that the planet is getting hotter and that we should all take our holidays in Bognor Regis, means that shops have to charge five pence per bag for those flimsy plastic supermarket bags that cost about a penny a thousand to make. This undoubtedly makes them the most profitable item supermarkets sell.

This new EU nonsense caused chaos today because our Waitrose grocery delivery arrived on the doorstep in huge green plastic boxes carried on a sack truck. The whole procedure took the delivery driver twice as long and it seems likely that the supermarkets are going to have to buy more diesel burning vans in order to get their deliveries done on time.

It seems clear that the bureaucrats in Brussels have brought in this daft plastic bag law simply because none of them ever actually does any shopping themselves (they have servants with chauffeur-driven cars to deal with such matters) and so don’t realise just how much chaos their little whim will cause.

It is, of course, yet another part of the plan to distract us from the real problem, which is that the oil is running out and so we are going to have to learn to manage without petroleum or petroleum products because the stuff which is left will be required by the world’s armies since you can’t move tanks or fly planes without oil. The global warming mythologists want to trick us into believing that the world’s temperature is going up because we carry our shopping in plastic bags and that the only way to save ourselves from melting ice, rising seas, global flooding and general mayhem and disaster is to stop using plastic bags and to spend our holidays at home rather than flying to somewhere foreign.

There is much talk that the oil still in the ground will be left where it is (as unusable ‘stranded assets’) but in truth there is no chance whatsoever that this will happen. The world’s armed forces will always require oil to move machinery, men and bombs around and so armies everywhere will ensure that the oil is available to them. Can you imagine how fast or far a solar powered tank would travel? How many air force chiefs will be happy to rely on wind powered bombers?

October

1
Everything I bought today had a price ticket which ended with 99 pence. As a result, I ended the day with quite a handful of one penny pieces. I am reminded of the late, lamented Screaming Lord Sutch, one of England's greatest ever politicians and a constant source of entertainment during dull political campaigns. It was the good Lord Sutch, singer, entertainer, pirate radio entrepreneur and serial deposit loser, who proposed that the Royal Mint introduce a 99 pence coin.

Meanwhile, one of the EU bureaucrats who rule our lives wants to ban e-cigarettes because there is no evidence that they are safe. There will, as usual, be no debate and no discussion, just orders handed down from on high. (I am reminded that the EU has spent billions of our money subsidising tobacco growers.)

We are besieged by endless laws disguised as rules and regulations because the Gestapo in Brussels think that not calling them laws makes the Nazi EU seem slightly less like a fascist dictatorship.

So why doesn't the EU do anything about genetic engineering?

There is no evidence that messing around with genes is safe but the bureaucrats seem happy to bow to commercial pressure and to allow companies to do as much genetic engineering as they like.

Supporters of genetic engineering insist that there is no evidence that the scurrilous activity is dangerous. True enough. But there is also no evidence that standing on your head in a bucket of fresh sewage is dangerous. Just because no research has been done doesn't make something safe.

2
I have a feeling that some of the sellers on eBay haven't quite yet got the hang of running a business. Yesterday I bought a book on eBay and paid £1.20 for it. Today the book arrived and when I looked at the postage label I saw that it had cost the seller £2.50 for postage. I know I'm old-fashioned and out of touch but I can't work out how anyone can make money under those circumstances. Still, the world has moved on and I have no doubt that I'm just being old-fashioned about these things.

Actually, I'm glad I'm retired from the world of publishing. I don't think I'd be able to do any mustard cutting these days.

But I must keep busy with something else otherwise I'll turn into one of those old buggers who talks about nothing but their ailments (and the associated treatments) because they have no role, no passion and no commitment to give them purpose, ambition and something to help them forget their ailments (and the associated treatments).

Nothing keeps you alive and sparkling more than having a purpose.

3
In a branch of Marks and Spencer today Antoinette met a Chinese woman and spoke to her for a while in Mandarin. The Chinese woman was thrilled to find an Englishwoman who had learned her own language and Antoinette came away from the encounter delighted and optimistic, filled with much needed confidence and determined to continue her studies.

The Chinese woman could not believe that Antoinette had taught herself enough Chinese (a notoriously difficult language to learn) to have a simple conversation.

How nice it was for Antoinette to find someone who was pleased that a foreigner had learned her language, and how different to the French who are always critical and superior when a foreigner attempts to speak their language.

I've pretty well given up on my French. I now insist that anyone I speak to in France must speak English. This gives me the chance to smile patronisingly at their poor linguistic skills and to correct their grammar and pronunciation. I always follow this with modest congratulations, encouraging them in their efforts. The better they speak English the more patronising I become. I heartily recommend this approach to everyone who has to deal with the French.

4
We have squirrels in the attic and pheasant on the lawn. We like having pheasant on the lawn but we are not so keen

on having the squirrels over our heads. Last night the squirrels woke us up three times. It sounded as though they were playing football with a hazelnut. I'm serious. They really do have something that sounds suspiciously like a hazelnut up there. And they really were biffing it about. I swear I heard one of them yelling 'It's a goal!'

When they'd finished the football match there were some ominous gnawing sounds that didn't involve a squirrel eating a nut but which could well have involved plumbing or wiring of some kind. I shouted at them, sang two choruses of *All Things Bright and Beautiful* and did my dog impersonations. But the squirrels took absolutely no notice.

And then Antoinette had a brainwave. She found a site on her iPhone which plays bird sounds and played the sound of a golden eagle, thinking that this might scare the squirrels away.

They took absolutely no notice.

'Maybe they don't know what a golden eagle sounds like,' said Antoinette. 'I'll try a buzzard.'

So she played a buzzard's call.

And the squirrels buggered off immediately.

We have decided to play the sound of the buzzard regularly to keep the intruders at bay. If the squirrels become blasé about the buzzard, we have the sound of a cat meowing which we can use. That should dampen down their enthusiasm to practise for the squirrel Olympics. And last Christmas, Antoinette bought me a small sound machine which creates a number of different sounds – including that of a howling wolf. As long as the squirrels don't cotton on to the fact that the fake wolf's howl is considerably worse than its bite we should find that useful.

The pheasant living on our lawn are far less trouble. They have, I think, come to us for sanctuary since the local woodland (from which I suspect they came) is full to the brim with bankers and brokers carrying guns.

Today there was a nide of pheasant pecking away underneath the bird feeder: three males and two females. They are there most days and haven't left our garden for weeks. Why would they? We offer them free food, plenty of shelter and absolutely no risk of being shot.

5

I sat in a café hoping to enjoy a quiet cup of coffee but I had hardly got my book open when a man chose to sit down right behind me (the café was pretty well deserted and there were plenty of other tables available so I have no idea why he had to sit right next to me) and begin making a seemingly endless series of loud telephone calls.

He was one of those modern executives who seem unable to speak without sneering and I suspect that, like Poobah in Gilbert and Sullivan's masterpiece *The Mikado*, he was born sneering. It was like trying to relax in a telephone box.

I left before I gave in to the temptation to beat him to a pulp with my folding walking stick.

Some older folk refuse to carry walking sticks because they feel that having a stick makes them look frail. Not a bit of it. I love having a stick with me. It would, in extremis, make an excellent weapon. I have accumulated quite a good library of walking sticks and some of them would make potent weapons.

When I joined the queue of people leaving the café, the man was still making loud and annoying telephone calls. And, when I looked back, he was the only customer left.

Am I the only person who thinks that people who make telephone calls in cafés should be locked in a broom cupboard with half a dozen poisonous spiders?

6

I spent the day editing the work I had done on a new book and by mid afternoon was feeling depressed at the stuff I'd written.

'I wish my grammar was better,' I said to Antoinette.

'I wish my grammar *were* better,' she said, correcting me without thinking.

She was right, as usual, but this did not help my mood. I gave up work for the day and played bar billiards for an hour.

7

We spent a wonderful day in Bourton on the Water, which is a wonderful village to visit for the day though I would not like to live there since it is rather spoilt by all the day trippers. (That, for the sake of any Canadian readers, is what is known as English irony, since we ourselves were, of course, day trippers.)

On our way there, the Bentley became upset and started beeping. A light appeared on the dashboard and it wasn't difficult to diagnose the problem. A bulb had gone. I sent an email to the garage asking them to obtain a replacement.

While in Bourton on the Water we visited the Cotswold Motor Museum, which is truly magnificent and well worth the entrance fee. It is packed with amazing old cars and, in addition, a vast collection of those odd, wonderful bits and pieces that those of us of a certain age remember owning and now regret throwing away.

They have a mock-up of a Radio Caroline pirate radio studio and a piece of old film which shows a game of five a side motorcycle football in progress. There is also a vast collection of old road signs and the place is packed with curious souvenirs, bits of ephemera and historical oddities.

I discovered there that in Britain, we drive on the left because horse riders prefer to travel on the left hand side of the road. And they prefer to travel on the left because most people are right handed and therefore carry their sword on the left. It is much easier to mount a horse from the left if your sword is dangling from the left. And if two horsemen meet on the highway and wish to start fighting they'll need to draw their swords. If they were travelling on the right hand side of the road they'd both have to turn round and face the other way in order to duel properly. I love stuff like that.

The museum is definitely somewhere to visit more than once.

The visit was marred only by the fact that all the other visitors were sneezing and coughing. It was Antoinette who realised why. We are in the middle of the flu vaccination season (I received my invitation to be jabbed the other day) and so half the country now has symptoms of influenza.

I wonder how many people die each year because they've caught the flu from people who had the flu jab? I have no doubt at all that the figure is well into the thousands. Doctors and hospitals should issue masks to everyone having the flu jab since quite a number of them will end up coughing and spluttering.

At the small, permanent Christmas shop I managed to buy crackers which contained small toys rather than the ubiquitous and unwelcome shoe horn, egg cup, outsized paperclip and nail clippers.

Whoever thought of filling crackers with unwanted impedimenta from a retail wholesaler's dusty remainder shelves should be shot.

The man who served us seemed sad and had the demeanour of a successful undertaker. It seemed a pity. I had expected to be served by a jovial Father Christmas type in mufti.

We sat by the river while we ate rock buns and I drank a coffee from a Costa Coffee machine in the local supermarket. It's by far the best coffee available in the town. As we sat, watching the ducks and jackdaws a young, ginger tomcat wandered along. Antoinette made her very convincing miaowing sound and the cat immediately leapt up onto my lap. It was a serendipitous moment. We shared the stroking, he did the purring.

When it started to get dark and cold and we decided we really ought to make a move. The cat, however, was reluctant to let us go. He clung on tightly to my trousers and I had to lift him down onto the ground before we could leave.

When we returned to the car I found that the light had mended itself. Bentley really do make marvellous cars. How many other vehicles heal themselves? I had received a reply to my email telling me that there aren't any bulbs in the lights at the back and front of the car. Each light fitting consists of a mass of LED lights. I sent back another email telling the garage that all was well and that the car had healed itself.

8

The Central Banks (such as the Bank of England) really screwed up during the financial crisis that started in 2007 and is still on-going. So, since they had made a complete mess of things, the politicians gave them even more power in the rather naïve hope that they would be able to solve the problem they had helped create. Fat chance. We had huge debts and so the central banks printed more money and encouraged borrowing.

The Bank of England, which is now run for some reason by a Governor who was expensively imported from Canada, (a country hardly known for its world breaking brilliance in the world of finance) is, I see today, actually being investigated by the Fraud Squad for fiddling something or other. I'm not surprised. Banking now stands alongside the selling of houses as the most disreputable business on the planet. The bankers fiddle interest rates, fiddle currency exchange rates and fiddle the prices of shares and commodities.

To be honest, I'm not surprised.

Most things are rigged in our society.

Quiz shows and reality television are rigged and scripted.

Game shows, review pages and awards ceremonies are fixed. Even elections are fixed and fiddled.

And so we should not be surprised that the world of finance sees the biggest crookery. And since just about all our banks now regard huge fines for dishonesty a normal part of doing business it does not seem surprising that the

Bank of England should also be practising a little chicanery of its own.

In the bad old days, when it was run by proper English gentlemen in frock coats, the Bank of England was beyond reproach.

Since it has acquired political powers of its own, its officers have become arrogant.

Not long ago I heard the Governor of the Bank of England making remarks about global warming. What the hell does he know about global warming?

Incidentally, I am constantly surprised that all economists now claim to have warned about the coming global financial crisis back in 2007. I don't remember any of them issuing any warnings but now they are all merrily taking advantage of the fact that we have forgotten what anyone said, and claiming that they knew all along that big problems were coming.

If they all forecast the crisis why the hell didn't they do something about it before it happened?

9

One of the British nurses who apparently felt that illness had been conquered in the UK and so flew out to Africa for a couple of weeks to solve the Ebola crisis, has been taken to hospital because, although she caught the infection and was apparently cured, she now appears to be still infected. Naturally, she had to be flown from Scotland to London with medical experts in attendance and taken straight to a special unit at the Royal Free Hospital in London. She is not the only nurse to have contracted Ebola while in Africa. How much has this whole irresponsible escapade cost the NHS? My guess is that the cost is probably far north of £250,000 and possibly nearer to £1,000,000. The nurse concerned is, of course, being feted as a heroine: Florence Nightingale and Edith Cavell rolled into one.

What people don't seem to realise is that the NHS has finite resources and so when money is spent on treating patients who have unnecessarily and recklessly acquired an illness, then other patients, whose lives may be in danger, will be denied treatment. That's the way it works.

How many patients have died of cancer or heart disease because the NHS has spent a fortune dealing with nurses who contracted Ebola while having an adventure in foreign parts? A hundred? A thousand? Your guess is as good as mine. But I firmly believe that many people will have died.

And there is also no doubt in my mind that the money spent on sending British nurses to Africa would have been far better spent on improving the local infrastructure. It is, I'm afraid, the old story. 'If you teach a man to fish you feed him for a lifetime. If you give a man a fish you feed him for a day.'

Moreover, those who rush abroad to help for a couple of weeks should remember that NHS hospitals have the worst record in the world as far as serious infections affecting patients are concerned.

There is a real need for more effort to be put into stopping the spread of C.difficile and staph aureus, and other genuinely nasty infections which kill huge numbers of patients in British hospitals. There is no country in the world which has as much difficulty with hospital acquired infections as Britain does. There is no developed country in the world with dirtier hospitals than Britain has.

10

It occurred to me today that the climate change 'scare' is the New AIDS.

It really is extraordinary just how similar the two mythological scares are turning out to be.

As with AIDS, the global warming scare comes complete with its own set of over-enthusiastic, proselytising mythologists, who are quite unaware of the hidden agenda which is driving them.

When the AIDS scare was at its height we were told that the disease would kill us all, and a very small number of individuals, mainly activists for the gay community, controlled the agenda. The British Medical Association led the scaremongering and other bodies followed suit. Dissenters were monstered , ignored or silenced. I was actually banned from suggesting on television and radio that the whole damned scare was being blown out of proportion because my quietly restrained scepticism was considered inappropriate by television producers and editors who had 'bought' the nonsense being sold by the 'AIDS is going to kill us all fanatics' and who wanted to make scary programmes predicting the end of the world.

'Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts,' wrote the late senator Daniel Moynihan but the 'facts' were adjusted to fit the preferred conclusions. We live in an age where prejudiced and distorted opinions are presented as fact by people who really don't understand the basic principles by which scientific argument should be formulated but who have the ability to shout louder than anyone else. Back when the AIDS hoax was at its height, I seemed to be the only doctor pointing out that the evidence did not support the hysteria. I remember debating the issue with representatives of the British Medical Association, the Royal College of Nursing and other august bodies, who all claimed that before the year 2000 we would all have AIDS and we would all be dying. At that point the number of people killing themselves because they were terrified of AIDS far exceeded the number of people dying of AIDS. And when I dared to point that out, I was banned from every media outlet in the country and widely vilified. I'm still waiting for the apologies which I know will never come.

It is interesting that the leading proponents of the climate change myth, including such traditionally and irredeemably bent media sources as the BBC and the *Financial Times*, have once again succeeded in suppressing voices of dissent. As happened with AIDS a very small number of noisy activists now control the media, the social media and even the street protests. As with AIDS there is only one side being heard and the sceptics and disbelievers are dismissed as lunatics, cranks or 'deniers'. It is the 21st century version of mob rule.

As with AIDS, vaccination, genetic engineering, vivisection and other topics where there are powerful lobbies, no debate is allowed.

When climate change was known as global warming the biggest, richest lobby was the one representing the oil companies. Today, the biggest richest lobby is the one representing the solar power, wind power industries.

Freedom of speech only works in Britain today if you are saying something which is approved of by the Government, the BBC and the mainstream newspapers. If you have something to say which might cause offence to those who are committed to a viewpoint then you will be silenced. The idea that all individuals have the freedom to speak as they will is today, in Britain, a historical curiosity.

11

Someone banged on our door today. I have no idea who it was because neither Antoinette nor I took any notice.

'Aren't you going to answer it?' asked a visitor, who was already in the house at the time. We had let him in because we'd known he was coming. He is known as the Professor not because he is an intellectual, or even particularly bright, but because he wears spectacles that aren't quite strong enough and so always leans forward squinting and has a slightly quizzical look about him.

'No,' we said at once.

'But…', he stuttered.

'When was the last time you answered the door to an unexpected visitor and benefitted from the interruption?' I asked.

He thought about it. 'I see what you mean,' he admitted at last.

12

I have discovered that we can buy the same gas which British Gas has been selling us for about half the price if we buy it from Sainsbury's.

I don't understand this but I don't care if they bring it round in plastic bags because according to their promises we will be saving several thousand pounds a year.

How come British Gas is allowed to charge so much more and to gouge its customers in such an outrageous way? How many impoverished pensioners die of cold because they can't afford gas from British Gas but could perfectly well afford to stay warm if they bought their gas (exactly the same bloody gas) from Sainsbury's?

To be honest, I expect that Sainsbury's gas prices will mysteriously rise in a month's time. And I can't help noticing that the Sainsbury's gas appears to be managed by British Gas.

I suspect I am doing something foolish here but I will make a note to change our supplier every three weeks or so.

What a stupid world we live in. Why do we allow crooked companies to control basic necessities such as gas and electricity?

My one certainty is that I won't be allowing any British energy company to take money from my account through a direct debit.

In my experience, energy companies are very quick to help themselves to huge sums (the amounts of which they often seem to pick at random out of a hat) but very slow indeed to give back the money they've taken erroneously.

And, naturally, if you do manage to gouge back the money they have stolen they won't pay any interest.

13

I regularly munch my way through handfuls of sunflower hearts. I also feed sunflower hearts to the birds.

When I buy sunflower hearts for my own consumption the best price I can find is £6.16 per kilogram. When I buy them to feed to the birds I pay £1.29 per kilogram. The seeds look exactly the same to me. I can understand that the sunflower hearts sold as bird food are probably packed by people who haven't had to wash their hands but I cannot think of any other explanation for this huge discrepancy.

The same thing happens with drugs, of course. Medicines that cost pennies when prescribed for dogs cost a fortune when prescribed for people.

14

Bentley have invited us to test drive the new Bentayga four wheel drive sports utility vehicle. But this is no ordinary invitation. If we want to test the car we have to pay 14,000 euros each and go to Iceland, or somewhere equally chilly, where I can compare my driving skills with those of a professional driver who has doubtless been testing the car on the track for months and who will, therefore, make me look like a geriatric plonker.

I don't think we will be going.

In Cheltenham today, Antoinette spoke at some length to a woman from the Ukraine who now lives in Gloucestershire.

'Do you think of yourself as British?' Antoinette asked the woman.

'Oh no,' replied the woman, indignantly, 'I'm English not British.'

15

I loathe computers. I loathe the stupid security codes which contain an indecipherable mixture of numbers and letters. Are the letters supposed to be upper case or lower case? Does it matter? Why don't they say? I loathe the way I get confused between O and 0 and between I and 1. (And am I the only person on the planet who gets annoyed when I am given a password but cannot tell whether one of the ingredients is a figure 1 or a letter l?) I loathe the way that when I search for something (HMRC or Lloyds bank for example), the first 500 sites which come up will be scamming sites designed to trick me into giving private information to crooks who live in the Philippines or the Bahamas or Rotherham. And I hate the way that the hinges are always so weak on electronic equipment that the damned things always break first.

It is of course the essentially evil Google which is responsible for all this by selling the top positions on search sites to crooks and charlatans, but why don't authorities such as HMRC insist that people deliberately trying to defraud folk are arrested and thrown into jail?

The problem is that no one dares take on Google, the biggest bunch of tax avoiding corporate bastards since the unholy Bush and Blair alliance, because they are bullies.

No one seems to care that when a disgruntled thief stole thousands of documents from HSBC bank in 2007, the British Government grabbed the stolen goods with great enthusiasm and made £142 million in profit from the information they had obtained illegally.

If you or I buy stolen goods, we go to prison. If the tax collectors grab stolen goods, someone else goes to prison.

I have another reason for hating computers and this is that we haven't been able to update my website for months because the website hosting arrangement I had for years was sold to a new company and neither Antoinette nor I can work out how to get onto the site to change anything. There are now articles on my website marked 'New' which discuss the problems we face as a result of the Boer War.

The new company has sent us reams of advice but they might as well have sent the stuff in Japanese for all the good it does. Since the updating just about everything has changed and nothing works. We changed the password the other day but we still can't gain entry to the site. At least we know that if we can't get onto the site to change things then the chances are that no one else can either. We must have the most secure website on the internet.

16

We went to a local 'furniture and household effects' auction.

I love auctions even though I know damned well that I will probably pay more for whatever I buy than I would have paid if I had bought it in a shop. Finding and buying bargains is one of the many skills which has evaded me.

Today's sale included a good many paintings marked 'After (put in name of famous artist)' and many of them were apparently 'signed' by the artist concerned.

I don't understand why this sort of blatant forgery isn't fraud and I wonder how many of the fakes will end up being sold in galleries as originals.

I wanted to buy some old cigarette cards which I spotted but for some reason the auctioneer had put the cards in with a lot containing eight hideous mirrors. I have no idea why they had done this. Why would a collector of cigarette cards also collect mirrors?

I didn't want eight hideous mirrors (who would) and was too frightened of breaking all the mirrors while taking them home (or, more likely, to a charity shop) to bid on the cigarette cards.

What would happen if I broke all eight?

Would I be able to ask the god of misfortune for my eight bouts of seven years bad luck to be run concurrently rather than consecutively because to be honest I am not entirely sure I will be able to manage 56 years of bad luck and it would be rather like sending a 99-year-old man to prison for life.

However, despite my failure to bid on the cigarette cards I'm seriously considering resuming collecting these cards.

I've been collecting them on and off (more off than on it has to be said) for over 60 years, and over the years their value has plummeted. Not many people are collecting cigarette cards. Most people under the age of 40 don't even know what they are.

And yet the cards themselves are fascinating and if you collect them for their intrinsic value then their financial value is of no consequence whatsoever. The beauty of the cards is that on one side there is a usually colourful and often intriguing photograph or drawing and on the other side there is usually a 50 word summary of the subject matter – often written by an expert. Some cards are real photographs and it is even possible to buy pairs of cards which, when viewed through a small metal contraption, produce a three dimensional effect.

I've also decided that since I'm drifting into a second childhood I will resume my old hobby of collecting stamps. Once again this is something I've done on and off over the years (with the same rider as for cigarette cards).

I have a number of themed collections and a small collection of stamps from Victorian and Edwardian England. I even have copies of some letters which were sent before the introduction of the penny black stamp.

Stamps are fascinating in a number of ways. For example, looking through English stamps it is possible to see the way inflation has developed. The penny stamp survived for decades. Even early in the reign of Queen Elizabeth II, in the 1950s, it was possible to send a letter for two and a half old pence (equivalent to about one new penny).

Then inflation got its teeth into letter writers and the price of stamps soared.

Today, now that Royal Mail has been privatised and the Government has sold our birth right for a mess of potage, you need to take out a mortgage to post a letter.

Still, things could be worse.

When I collected stamps as a boy, I remember sticking in my album little bits of German paper which had a face value of 50,000,000,000 marks. And, at the time, inflation was roaring ahead so fast that by the time you'd stuck one of those stamps on an envelope, the price had gone up and you needed to stick on another. And so on ad infinitum.

I have never felt as rich as I did then. Wow. I had stamps worth billions of marks. (The nearest I've ever got to that feeling of wealth was when I sold my first book to Italy and signed a contract for millions of lira.)

It's easy to judge the rate at which inflation moves these days by comparing the reign of Queen Elizabeth II to that of Queen Victoria.

In the years from 1952, when Elizabeth became Queen of England, to 2015, prices rose 27 fold. In other words something which cost £1 in 1952 would cost £27 by 2015.

In contrast, prices during Queen Victoria's reign (from 1837 to 1901) fell noticeably. Prices actually fell over a 64 year period. Something that would have cost £1 in 1837 would have cost the equivalent of 73 pence by 1901.

Inflation hasn't just been a British phenomenon, of course.

In Hungary in 1922 to 1924, prices doubled every month and as the pengo, the Hungarian currency of the time, kept falling in value the Hungarians doubtless thought that things were pretty bad.

However, they knew nothing.

By July 1946, prices were doubling every 13 hours and by the end of that month you could buy 460,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 Hungarian pengos with one American dollar. Tourists from the USA or the UK could have bought castles for less than the price of an ice cream back home. Some of them probably did. Notes were printed which were worth a sextillion pengo but when it was impossible to get any more noughts on a piece of paper the Hungarian government abandoned the pengo and introduced the florint.

I'm digressing.

Among other things we bought from the auction was a huge brass dinner gong, complete with striker. It isn't quite the size of the gong that Rank used at the start of their films but it's big enough to bring diners rushing in from miles away. When I told a friend what we'd bought he said he didn't need a gong in his house to tell him when dinner was ready. 'We have a smoke alarm,' he said. 'And that always goes off when dinner is ready.'

There are plans to make it illegal to discuss global warming unless you are prepared to say how awful it is and how fast the glaciers are melting. I mean really, go to prison, illegal. The BBC has pretty well done this already since it now screens its guests and will only allow people to use the public airwaves if they promise to say the right things about global warming. Anyone who dares to question global warming is dismissed as a climate denier (as in holocaust denier).

I am really tired of the global warming nonsense.

The fact is that there has been no actual global warming for nearly two decades (that's a fact) and there is no scientific evidence proving the theory of global warming (that's another fact).

There have always been episodes of bad weather around the world and isolated storms, however unpleasant, do not count as scientific evidence. Climate alarmists should do more research before scaremongering.

The real problem facing us all is not that the earth is getting hotter (it isn't). The real problem is that the oil is running out. And we have to be prepared for a different world.

18

In Cirencester today I spotted an empty space in the car park. Since car park spaces are something of a luxury these days I drove straight towards it. Although there was plenty of room for us to pass, a man who was driving towards me waved both hands, wound down his window and shouted. 'You are going the wrong way!' he snarled.

I was not in the mood for amateur jobsworths or busybodies and I didn't want to lose the car parking space to the driver of a small car who seemed to be trying to wriggle past us.

I wound down my window to make sure that he could hear me.

'I is from another country,' I told him, scowling and speaking in a funny accent. 'We own your smelly land and I will go whichever damned way I want.' I paused for a second and scowled at him. 'It is you who are driving the wrong way! Go away or I will call the police and have you arrested for abuse of an ethnic person.'

The angry busy body opened and shut his mouth several times but nothing came out except for a few puffs of what looked like hot air.

19

In Cheltenham I noticed that a number of small shops in one of the arcades had closed. I asked at a small independent record shop. from which I have in the past bought a good many DVDs, CDs and books, how this could be and what was happening.

I learned that the John Lewis chain of stores has bought the whole arcade (or is renting it) and so all the small, independent shops have to go.

The record shop and the other small shops cannot find anything they can afford, for rents and council taxes have risen so far that it is impossible for a small retail establishment to survive. This is sad news indeed.

All over the country small shops are disappearing and shopping streets are becoming indistinguishable from one another.

I'm accustomed to the fact that hotels tend to be identical and that cars tend to look much the same but it is sad to see that towns are beginning to look identical.

Our towns used to full of small shops which catered to bizarre interests and which provided a wonderful service to local inhabitants. Today, the only small shops are the charity shops.

We tend to blame the internet (which is, indeed, partly responsible) and charity shops (which are largely a consequence) and rising rents (which are an inevitable consequence of artificially low interest rates and rising property prices) but the problem is that local councils insist on putting up taxes and raising car park prices to obscene levels. Sometimes they sell the land and close car parks completely – leaving shoppers with absolutely nowhere to park.

(Oddly enough, I have noticed that council offices always keep their own conveniently situated free car parks, and their staff are invariably entitled to use them whether they are at work or not.)

20

I see that one of the most successful books of the year is something called *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* by Marie Kondo. The book, which contains advice on how to tidy up, has sold three million copies and has been translated into 35 languages. I find it quite scary that there are three million people out there prepared to pay good money for a book telling them how to tidy up.

You pick things up, put some away and dump the rubbish.

There you are.

A book in 11 words.

Not even worth a tweet.

I'm now thinking of writing a book entitled *The Joy of Messing Up*.

Much more fun.

Antoinette is learning to paint and although she denies it, and is full of self-depreciation, she is already showing massive amounts of talent.

'It's difficult,' she said, as she sat at her easel, contemplating a landscape which was, I thought, coming along beautifully.

'If it were easy,' I replied, 'even Damien Hirst would be able to paint.'

21

Weather forecasters claim that the next six months are going to be terrible. We are, apparently, going to suffer from snow, ice and freezing fog. Everything is going to be white until next May. What scare-mongering bollocks!

I suspect that the weather forecasters are simply desperate to get publicity for themselves.

The fact is, of course, that they are quite unable to predict what the weather is going to be tomorrow, let alone in six months' time. Indeed, most of the time they are unable to forecast today's weather and they aren't even bright enough to alter their forecasts when they've already been proved wrong.

This morning, I checked the local weather forecast and found that the idiots had predicted bright sunshine. When I looked out the window all I could see were black skies, heavy clouds and rain coming down in stair-rods.

Actually, it has been so long since we saw the sun that today a friend told me that he had heard that ex-Prime Minister Gordon Brown sold the sun when he sold Britain's gold.

22

A few days ago, we changed gas suppliers since British Gas told us that if we bought our gas from their partner (a firm called Sainsbury's which is better known for supplying groceries to the nouveau riche who can't yet afford Waitrose prices) the stuff will cost us about half the price and our £5,000 annual bill will be halved. They did not explain why this should be.

When I rang Sainsbury's to give them our final meter reading they told me that British Gas had already given them a reading. This was clever of British Gas since no one from British Gas has been to the house since about 1746.

I tottered outside, moved a quarter of a ton of dead leaves, unearthed the meter and checked the reading.

I was, of course, shocked and startled when I discovered that British Gas had given Sainsbury's a switch over reading that is far higher than the real reading – so that we would end up paying for gas we hadn't used at their far higher price.

The world is awash with rules and regulations, so how come it is legal for British Gas to cheat and steal in such a blatant manner?

The board of directors should be banged up for 20 years, preferably with a couple of dozen sex-starved bum-loving over-endowed bank robbers from Grimsby.

23

The World Health Organisation has at last given an official warning that meat causes cancer. They have, indeed, nicked my claim (dating back around 20 years) that 'meat kills as many people as tobacco'.

Predictably, a big cancer charity is now claiming that they've known for years that meat causes cancer.

What a pity that when I wrote my book *Food for Thought* and put up a website called Meatcausescancer.com, the cancer charities were hand in hand with the meat industry in condemning me for 'scaremongering'.

I don't mind not getting any of the credit for trying to warn about this 20 years ago, but it does irk me that the last time I looked (admittedly some time ago) numerous internet sites such as Wikipedia reported that, back in the 1980s and early 1990s, I had been admonished by both the Press Complaints Commission and the Advertising Standards Authority.

What the sites don't mention is that I had been admonished for saying that meat caused cancer. And in both cases the complainant was the meat industry.

The PCC condemned my newspaper columns and the ASA condemned advertisements for my books on the subject and both insisted that I should not be allowed to say that meat caused cancer.

Since neither body was statutory (both were voluntary, industry run organisations which were as corrupt as you can get without actually being called Tony Blair), I ignored their orders as much as possible. I found it rather sad that these bent organisations both refused to look at the scientific evidence I offered to show them.

Maybe the WHO's new warning will prolong a few lives.

However, I fear that there is a hidden agenda and that the WHO's motives are probably not as spotless as we might imagine. It was Antoinette who spotted that the WHO is probably warning about the well documented danger of eating meat for the very same reason that governments everywhere are bleating about climate change – which is that the oil is running out and so we must all change the way we live. Eating less meat is going to be part of that change.

We got 25% of our global energy supplies from coal back in 1973 when the global warming theory was in its infancy (created out of the blue sky and built on political machinations rather than scientific evidence) but today, after a good many rules and regulations and the closure of Britain's coal fired power stations, the world obtains 30% of its energy supplies from coal. Britain, however, is the first country on the planet to have pledged to phase out coal fired power stations by the year 2025 and the global warming/greenhouse gas/climate change enthusiasts might like to reflect for a moment on the fact that as a direct result of this policy around five million Britons now live in areas which have no industry and no future. Communities from the Kent coast to Ayrshire in Scotland, and taking in much of Wales, are resigned to frighteningly high rates of long-term unemployment. Few of the global warming campaigners have wasted any thought on this problem though, perhaps not surprisingly, that the Labour Party is prepared to put aside its green credentials for a moment and to campaign to open up Britain's coal mines so that we can scrape out what's left and reduce our reliance on imported power and the second rate stuff we get from windmills at sea. I wish them luck. Meanwhile, the power stations are reopening as 'biomass' plants and are burning wood taken from American forests, which has to be transported across the Atlantic, of course and which costs more than coal and produces far more pollution.

It isn't just Britons who are suffering because of all the climate change nonsense. Food prices have soared because around 40% of America's maize crop is still being used to make biofuels for cars. (One independent study reckoned that this alone was responsible for the deaths of 192,000 poor people in the year 2010 alone.)

In developing countries all over the world, the climate change conspiracy theorists have forced people to stop building fossil-fuelled power stations, with the result that millions still have no electricity and must still cook and heat their homes with wood fires. It is hardly surprising that among real people (as opposed to pop singers, Princes and scientists with a vested interest in the climate change fraud) the issue of climate change attracts contempt and the subject comes very low on their list of priorities.

How many of those who shout about climate change understand that their activities are helping the rich bankers get richer just as they are ensuring that the world's very poor suffer more and die sooner. Politicians who sign up to absurd new rules are doing so against the wishes of their electorates. In 2009, President Obama of the USA promised developing nations an annual bonus of $100 billion by 2020 if they signed up to a global climate deal. Unfortunately, that promise turned out to be as worthless as most of Obama's other promises, and developing countries which agreed to a deal which was designed by western governments now find themselves well and truly stuffed. And their people are, as a direct result, dying by the million.

The International Energy Agency acknowledges that conventional oil production peaked in 2005. Attempts to delay the decline in the amount of available oil are unlikely to make more than a small dent in the problem. It is pity that the existence of this problem has been consistently underestimated.

When I wrote my book *Oil Apocalypse* I was widely vilified for scare mongering. A bunch of hippies got together to give the book bad reviews, an author who had written a similar (but commercially less successful) book wrote an angry online article about the book without bothering to read it and a *Guardian* reporter told me that the book had frightened her too much to finish it and that she couldn't possibly write about it. (Oddly, the same thing happened in the 1970s when I first pointed out that our water supplies are heavily contaminated with prescription drug residues. A reporter for the BBC's Panorama programme told me that they didn't dare make a programme on the subject because it would frighten people too much.)

Europe and the USA will reduce their emissions and we will all merrily import stuff made in China and India where the governments won't take any notice of the global warming nonsense on the not unreasonable grounds that our societies were built on oil and coal and if they aren't allowed to use the stuff they'll never catch up. So the end result will be nothing more than self-congratulatory purring from wily politicians and ignorant celebrities and massive damage to our balance of payments. Meanwhile, much of the world lacks water (and basic sanitation) and we're all ordered to wash out our yoghurt cartons with running water 'to save the world'. Water is the world's most valuable commodity, and its scarcest! And the idiots who work for the council tell us to use it to wash out bloody yoghurt cartons. (The whole climate change fiasco is probably the biggest cause of waste in the world. All the meetings, all the new laws, all the driving round collecting rubbish and then shipping it to China to be buried, all this wastes vast quantities of energy.)

The International Energy Agency says we will spend $3 trillion on subsidies for wind and solar energy in the next 25 years but by 2040 wind, and solar sources will provide just 2.4% of global energy needs. The absurd political and bureaucratic over-reaction will see whole industries destroyed with the needless loss of millions of jobs. No country in the world will suffer more than Britain because British Governments always gold plate every EU regulation and add their own oppressive amendments. The future is bleak. But it's the alleged cure that will kill us all. Now, where have I come across that before?

The whole climate change propaganda machine is a hoax designed to justify increasing government intervention, more oppressive regulations and greater tax gathering. And to distract attention away from the fact that because the oil is running out, we are all going to have to change the way we live.

We cheered ourselves up this evening by watching a self-selected double bill consisting of *Rio Bravo* and *El Dorado*.

In the first film John Wayne plays opposite Dean Martin. In the second film, which has an almost identical plot, Dean Martin becomes Robert Mitchum. Brilliant movies both of them.

24

According to his widow, Donald E Westlake always drove as if he were driving a getaway car. At one point he lost his licence for three years. When he got his licence back he bought a car and applied for insurance. He was delighted to find that the insurance company gave him a safe driver discount because he hadn't had an accident or a speeding ticket in the previous three years.

25

Many, many years ago I argued that no one trusted the Government anymore because they had been proved to lie too much. The same is now true of most organisations and most professions. Scientists aren't trusted when they pontificate about global warming, genetically modified food, fracking and so on et al because they are known to be crooked. The lack of trust is made worse when scientists try to silence those who oppose their prejudiced and commercially supported viewpoints.

The official view in Britain is that global warming is real, that genetically modified food is safe, that vaccination is both safe and effective and that fracking too is safe.

There is not one jot of evidence to support any of these claims and, indeed, the evidence rather supports the opposing point of view, but the scientists who are owned by the establishment campaign ceaselessly for the debate to be closed. And, tragically, the silent majority now accepts the tricks and lies told by politicians and civil servants at the behest of big business. I suspect they do so partly because they have been lied to so often that they can no longer recognise the truth and partly because they are afraid to put their heads above the parapet in case they got shot at.

26

One of the eight squirrels who visits us regularly has, for weeks now, been trying to eat his way into the huge wooden trunk where I store their nuts. Today, he was on his way to the box when he saw me standing watching him. He stared at me for 30 seconds or so and I swear he actually managed to look guilty. He then turned around and made a show of digging in the garden for buried nuts.

27

Today's big news, dominating the media, is that the Duchess of Cambridge has been seen in public in a dress she wore in 2012. There is much dismay, consternation and distress at this. I'm not entirely sure whether the trousered, crossdressing fashionistas are upset that she has been out and about in a dress (rather than a pair of elastic waisted trousers) or if they are merely horrified that she would dare to wear the same piece of clothing twice.

Surely the world should be happy that the Duchess wears dresses and skirts and makes an effort to look feminine. Nine out of ten women wear trousers and look like builder's labourers on their way home at the end of a hard day on the building site.

And surely the world should be pleased that the Duchess wears her frocks twice before wrapping them in mothballs and stuffing them into a palace attic.

A male sparrow hawk swooped and caught one of our blue tits today. Antoinette and I both saw what happened. We're devastated. We keep telling ourselves that the sparrow hawk has to eat, but this really doesn't make either of us feel any better.

29

It is now generally agreed that the EUs multicultural experiment (introduced to boost the population and reduce the average age in maturing European populations) has been an absolute, unmitigated, unprecedented disaster which is certain to result in an increase in terrorism, racist riots and economic and social disaster.

Naturally, the EU has no plans to reverse its policy on this matter since to do so would be to admit a mistake; and the EU never makes mistakes.

And another undemocratic, bullying body, HMRC, is in the news today.

HMRC is making more noises about naming and shaming people who are found to have failed to pay the amount of tax demanded of them. If HMRC employees think that this scheme will work they must be more deluded than I thought. No one working has any respect for HMRC and publicising the names of those who have cheated on their taxes will do no good whatsoever. I give you Ken Dodd. Forgetting to pay some tax didn't do him any harm did it? Most people cheered loudly when he managed to persuade a laughing jury to find him not guilty of inadvertently failing to pay tax on the sacks full of cash found in his home.

The tax people are clearly at war with us (the working folk who pay their fat salaries, pensions and bonuses) and so they must not be surprised if we, in turn, are at war with them. I am never rude or aggressive when dealing with tax officials but I make no attempt to hide the fact that I regard them with contempt and loathing.

I never go to the damned meetings they request (but cannot yet demand) and insist communicating only in writing so that their lies and deceits and mistakes are recorded for everyone to see.

The problem HMRC faces is that no one has any respect for tax gatherers since Gordon 'the moron' Brown introduced tax credits, an extraordinary incentive designed to encourage people not to work.

Brown was responsible for introducing this bizarre and unaffordable hand out but every Chancellor since has retained the lunacy and my guess is that the gutless George Osborne will do nothing to change the status quo. (He is, I suspect, worried that eurosceptics will not support him when he challenges for the Tory leadership. Moreover, his pro EU stance will push Eurosceptic voters towards UKIP and so, in order to hedge his bets, he is being fulsome and generous for those who might have normally voted for Labour.) Meanwhile, unemployment is rife in Britain but nearly a third of all advertised jobs remain unfilled after three months. This suggests to me that not everyone looking for a job is really all that keen on finding one.

30

The Government has announced that the police will, in future, be able to look at everyone's emails, Web searches, Web browsing and all other forms of correspondence. They have been doing this for many years, of course; the only difference is that they can now do it officially and openly and without looking sneaky. Moreover, it is not just the police who can look at all our emails and web searches. The Government is giving permission to just about all civil servants (including those working for local councils) to keep an eye on what we are all writing and thinking.

This is, of course, ostensibly being done to protect us from all the people who are pissed off because we keep bombing their countries (despite the fact that history shows quite clearly that you can't beat terrorists by dropping bombs) and who, inexplicably and quite unreasonably, want to get their own back and set off a few bombs here.

Today, the bombing seems endless because it is and only the armaments companies that are winning. Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria – the list of mistakes goes on and on.

The Americans estimate that they have spent $3.6 trillion fighting wars and terrorism in these countries. The British Government doesn't release any figures but I can guarantee that it is more than we can afford – and that it could have been better spent spreading harmony, happiness and good health. In Afghanistan, the Taliban possesses no planes and very little in the way of anti-aircraft missiles but they have overcome these disadvantages and have clearly won their war against America and the United Kingdom in the same way that they won their USA funded war against the Russians. History makes it clear that invading armies always lose in Afghanistan.

It was George Orwell in his book *1984* who predicted a world of perpetual warfare in which the State manipulates the people by fighting perpetual wars; creating fear and a rock solid excuse for more control, more laws, more taxation and less freedom.

The majority of people seems quite enthusiastic about this latest attack on our privacy (the remark ‘if you’ve done nothing wrong then you’ve got nothing to worry about and nothing to hide’ is increasingly popular) but I wonder how many noticed that when the Government stated that they would be giving the police these extra powers, they announced that the information would also be made available to the National Crime Agency (whatever that is) and HM Revenue and Customs. Huh?

Am I the only person in the country to have noticed the final name on the list?

Since when have tax collectors been concerned with terrorism?

The whole scam is, quite clearly, nothing more than another tax collecting ploy. If our governments really want to tackle terrorism, rather than use it as an excuse to put up taxes and introduce more legislation taking away the privacy that is an essential part of the freedom for which our ancestors fought, they should surely tackle the online presence enjoyed by terrorists.

Google, Twitter and Facebook and all other malignant internet companies encourage and allow terrorism on their sites and refuse point blank to make any effort to help fight terrorists.

Paedophiles are rightly arrested and imprisoned if they so much as peep at a site containing offensive pictures. Why aren’t terrorists who create sites encouraging terrorism arrested too?

And just for the hell of it, I’d arrest all the bastard bosses at Google, Facebook and Twitter who refuse to raise a finger to help put a stop to the evil war being waged against us.

I really don’t think the men and women in expensive suits realise just how real the problem is.

There are approximately 100 million AK 47s spread around the world at the moment and if you live in the wrong part of the world you can, so I am reliably told, pick one up for less than $100 in your local branch of Guns-R-us.

31

We were watching horse racing on the television and, after a successful afternoon, a trainer said (with appropriately copious quantities of sanctimonious preening) that his success was a result of hard work.

I hate that.

If hard work paid off then just about everyone in the world who works for themselves would be successful.

It’s luck that makes the difference.

The poor devils who try hard but don’t succeed, usually fail because they weren’t in the right place at the right time, or didn’t know the right people, rather than because of a lack of talent or skill. And if they keep trying they are dismissed, derisively, as ‘pushy’.

Incidentally, I wasn’t in the slightest bit surprised recently to hear a horse trainer admit that 95% of his job was simply keeping the horse healthy. The other 5% of the job is, I assume, remembering to take the horse to the races.

I can’t help thinking that the whole world of horse racing is intrinsically corrupt. Trainers keep their own horses (or horses belonging to members of their family) alongside the horses belonging to other owners and allow them to compete. How can that possibly be fair?

And there are so many opportunities to cheat and ‘play’ the system. If a horse is fed too much or too little he won’t run well. If a jockey thinks a horse might be going lame he can pull it up. And if a jockey thrashes a horse mercilessly and the horse wins then the jockey may well have a three day ‘holiday’ from riding but the winning owner and trainer will keep their prize money.

There is a huge myth that horse racing is a scientific business but I think that is a lot of nonsense.

Breeders, owners and trainers seem to put an inordinate amount of trust in genetics – as though having a fast stallion and a fast mare guarantees that a fast horse will result. They obviously don’t have much experience of human beings. I’ve seen an awful lot of bright parents produce some very dumb offspring.

It’s all colourful fun, though.

In the wonderful film *Let it Ride*, Richard Dreyfuss plays a gambler who has a very good day but his wife can’t understand why everyone who goes to the racing has to bet.

‘Why don’t you just watch the horses go round?’ she asks, with genuine innocence. The assembled spectators are amused, as though to attend a horse racing without betting would be a travesty.

Incidentally, I do find it rather sad that it isn’t just horses which have silly names these days. Race courses are so hard up that they now allow companies to give races all sorts of daft promotional names.

I’m looking forward to the day when ‘The Coral Will The Person Who Left Their Umbrella In Our Betting Shop In Huddersfield Please Pick It Up Whenever Convenient Five Furlong Handicap Chase’ is won by a six-year-old horse called Wecouldnotthinkofanameforthishorse.

(I am reliably informed that one owner wanted to name his horse Norfolk Enchants. Sadly, the authorities refused permission for the name to be registered. Clearly someone with the appropriate authority had the wisdom to say the name with a Liverpudlian accent.)

Tonight is Halloween and there is much dismay at the fact that because of the wet summer we've just endured, the pumpkin crop has been devastated. Let them use turnips, should be the cry. Until the idea of using pumpkins came over from America, the British always used turnips. The original Halloween legend involved a man called Jack wandering around in the dark with a burning coal in a hollowed out turnip. The original Jack-o'-lantern. Today, Halloween is celebrated with enormous quantities of plastic tat and with sometimes quite aggressive demands for confectionery.

Bizarrely, despite the evidence from the pumpkin industry, the Met Office, which is presumably trying to win brownie points with the politically correct, and to attract some of the Global Warming Hysteria cash, insists that we have just had the hottest year in history. Since anyone who has spent some time in the country knows damned well that it's been a fairly ordinarily evil year weather wise, it isn't difficult to see why even the BBC has sacked the incompetent bastards. Do the idiots at the met office really think that Britons are all suffering from Alzheimer's? Do they have the wrong country? Or have they got the years mixed up?

November

1

We filled our spare freezer with bread and other essential comestibles today. We do this every autumn just in case we get snowed in and are caught short of supplies. We also stocked up the larder with packets of spaghetti and jars of tomato sauce. Finally, I checked all our log stores.

A few years ago we purchased a couple of specially made log bins. These are fine but I subsequently discovered that black plastic dustbins make much better (and cheaper) log stores. And you're far less likely to put your hand into the log box and come out holding a rat or a toad.

So now we have two purpose built log bins and three large, black dustbins full of logs.

If we are snowed in and lose gas and electricity we will neither freeze to death nor starve. Even in Gloucestershire these are no longer theoretical fears.

2

I was expecting a phone call and so I had to break my long standing habit and answer the telephone when it rang today. The whole business proved to be a disappointing and frustrating experience.

The first call came from a woman from British Gas who telephoned to offer us free insulation. I have asked them not to call us but they never take any notice. Actually they never take any notice of anything. The company is just as bad as its old reputation. I told her we couldn't afford it. She told me again that the insulation was free because it came courtesy of the Government. I told her that my mother had warned me not to accept free insulation from strangers and said goodbye.

Ten minutes later a man rang to tell us that he wanted to help us claim £6,000 in compensation from our bank. I deliberately misunderstood him and immediately shouted to Antoinette that there was a man from the bank on the telephone who had rung to tell us we had won £6,000 in a competition. I ignored the man's desperate attempt to temper my excitement, told him that we didn't want any publicity and asked him to put the cheque in the post

'No, no,' he said. 'We are not sending you a cheque.'

'What did you say?' I demanded. 'Did you say I'm not playing with a full deck?'

'We cannot send you a cheque?'

'Why not? If I've won the money you must send me the cheque. Or I will telephone the police.'

'But you haven't won anything.'

'Now you're just changing your story to avoid paying me my winnings. I'm going to ring the police.'

I then ended the call.

When another cold caller rang to offer me untold wealth in return for allowing him to sell my soul I told him that I was a doctor, that he had rung my emergency line, that I was treating a patient who was bleeding to death and did he mind terribly much waiting for a few minutes while I staunched the bleeding.

This produced a delightfully hysterical response from the caller who admitted that he was trying to sell me a firm of solicitors. When I berated him and told him that I was not in the slightest bit interested in buying any solicitors, he promised faithfully that he would never ring my number again.

None of these conversations was easy to conduct because the people making the calls use headsets and their microphones are invariably too far away from their mouths with the result that the listener can barely hear what is being said.

But they were fun, of a sort.

After all these thrills, Antoinette and I decided to calm ourselves down by turning our mattress. The man from whom we bought it told us that we had to turn it frequently. How we laughed when he told us that he had actually met people who never turned their mattresses.

Since neither of us can remember whether it is supposed to be turned weekly, monthly, quarterly or annually, we do it when we remember and when we're having fresh sheets.

The two things do not often coincide.

As always we got ourselves into a terrible mess. The main problem is that the mattress is large and enormously heavy and even when we work together we can only just move it.

The secondary problem is that because the mattress is so big and so heavy we put so much effort into lifting it onto its side and turning it that we forget where we were when we started and so can't remember whether we've turned it around, upside down and head over heels or just upside down and not yet head over heels or just around and head over heels and not yet upside down.

I think it might be easier, though not cheaper, to buy new mattresses every few months.

3

I read today that brilliant researchers from the internationally renowned Transamerica Centre for Retirement Studies, and the equally renowned Global Commission on Aging and US Travel Association, have discovered that people who have lots of holidays are healthier than people who don't have many holidays.

Gosh.

Hot on the heels of that shocking but commercially convenient revelation comes news that researchers at Exeter Medical School have concluded that people who live near large parks have better mental health than people who don't.

Great stuff.

I can't wait to read what all these wonderful minds come up with next. Maybe they could combine their brains and apply for a grant to find out whether people who are dead worry less than people who are alive.

Yesterday, our resident male pheasant, Lord Percival, discovered that in addition to putting peanuts into the bird feeders and the squirrel feeding boxes I put a handful of nuts into a large plant pot in the garden.

I do this so that the squirrels who are bullied away from the wooden squirrel feeders by their more aggressive colleagues can help themselves away from the madding crowd.

Lord Percival much enjoyed his unexpected feast and today, within two minutes of my putting the customary handfuls of nuts into the pot, he was there enjoying himself. He stayed there even after the squirrels arrived 30 seconds later.

It seems clear from this that pheasants are more observant and intelligent than most people suspect and are indeed doubtless more intelligent than most MPs and dentists and all estate agents.

Our resident pheasant, Lord Percival regularly brings his family (wife, son and two daughters) to browse beneath the bird feeders and to hoover up the seeds and bits of nuts which the tits and finches have dropped.

I wonder if he will share his new discovery with them.

Today, Antoinette did our Christmas food shopping on Waitrose.

She had to book the delivery slots last February (or so it seems) because thousands of customers who don't usually have their food delivered, pile in over Christmas and take over all the delivery slots.

Sadly, Waitrose seems devoted to the awful Heston Blumenthal and we will have to buy our mince pies elsewhere since we find Blumenthal's food inedible and inordinately expensive and he seems infamous for creating foods that seem to me the sort of stuff six-year-olds or pregnant women might dream up. This sort of thing:

'Baked bean ice cream.'

'Lumps of coal in custard'

'Spaghetti with plum jam.'

'Roast damsons stuffed with slivers of poached, spicy sausage soaked in cod liver oil and Mediterranean sea brine then deep fried in batter with a topping of chocolate sprinkles'.

'Offal doughnuts with pomegranate seeds'.

'Fried liver with two chocolate flakes and a cocktail umbrella.'

It's the sort of menu a six year old would create.

Blumenthal's unfortunate reputation for causing vomiting and diarrhoea among his customers doesn't help, since neither of us wants to spend the holidays calling God on the big white phone.

I put 'Blumenthal and diarrhoea' into a search engine and discovered that the wretched man has twice been forced to close restaurants after diners and staff fell ill. A council employed food safety manager said that he had asked the restaurant to improve its hygiene procedures 'including telling staff to wash their hands more often'.

I'm honestly staggered that a restaurant where the staff have to be told to wash their hands is allowed to remain open. I can't help feeling that two cases of food poisoning might have resulted in the permanent closure of Sid's Café or Elsie's Diner.

Why anyone books a table at a Blumenthal restaurant is quite beyond me. Why would people travel for miles to eat food that could make them sick? Would you eat at a friend's house if you had twice developed diarrhoea and vomiting? I know I damned well wouldn't. Maybe his places are popular with bulemics.

I wouldn't drink a cup of tea made in one of his restaurants and I wouldn't eat one of his meals if you paid me and if Waitrose don't stop flogging his damned meals we'll order our food from Sainsbury's and get them to bring it round with the gas.

These days, we try to eat only what we grow or what comes from factories in sealed containers – and has never been touched by grubby human hands. We never eat food cooked or reheated, or prepared by or on behalf of a television chef (especially Heston Blumenthal). And we never buy cakes or buns from British bread shops where sneeze guards and tongs are unknown, and where the staff merrily allow the customers to snort and splutter over the produce and then pick up the food for sale with hands which have been handling change (and worse).

4

We have another leak under our kitchen sink. An astonishingly arrogant young plumber arrived to sort it out. He was not happy at being sent to deal with a leak in a house in the country.

'I told them I only wanted to go to houses in the city centre', he told us rather peevishly. 'They get one more warning and that's it.'

He didn't say what 'it' was but we were left with the impression that if he was sent again to deal with rural plumbing problems he would take his talents everywhere. It would, no doubt, be a very small wrench.

A neighbour was out again with his trusty leaf blower.

He is a strange fellow who writes poetry where the first word of each line must rhyme with the first word of each succeeding rhyme. He writes mainly about climate change and paedophilia and other popular issues and as far as I can tell he disapproves of both. He goes out every day and tidies up all the leaves which have fallen during the previous 24 hours. He blows them into neat clumps and leaves them there. I don't think he realises that the whole point of blowing them into heaps is to make it easier to cart them away and burn them. He just blows them around and moves them (temporarily) off the road surface. He blows them through our gate and leaves a layer three inches deep around our car. When it is wet, the side of the vehicle is covered with a camouflage layer of soggy leaves.

I don't think he is very bright for he does not seem to understand that the next time there is a breath of wind the leaves he has rearranged will all be redistributed.

I cannot understand this yearning to sweep up leaves on a daily basis. I tend to leave ours until the trees have stopped dropping them. If I don't pick up the litter outside our cottage I know that the dog walkers will drop more, feeling that one more wrapper or drinks container won't matter. (We had one of those polystyrene burger containers outside the gate the other day. Heaven knows where it came from. There isn't a burger restaurant for ten miles and the consumer of the deadly burger must have eaten it cold.)

But trees don't think like that.

They don't think 'look there's a ton of leaves on the ground so no one will notice if I drop a few more'.

They just drop the damned leaves whatever you do.

5

A week ago one of our neighbours strutted past and caught me spraying our black rubbish bags with cheap aftershave. She has a portfolio career, which is the new word for 'freelance' and in her case means that she was made redundant by the Government department for which she previously worked.

She is the sort of person who, when in her motor car, will deliberately drive through puddles, particularly quickly if she sees someone in the lane standing aside to allow her to drive past.

Moreover, she is the only woman I know who goes for a walk carrying a handbag. Most people have rucksacks, bum bags or shoulder bags when they go for a walk but she carries a good old-fashioned handbag, always of the size and shape favoured by Margaret Thatcher in her iron lady days, and quite big enough to carry a couple of international treaties, a plan to overthrow the unions, a strategy for a short war against an impoverished country and all the equipment and ingredients necessary for making a cooked breakfast.

She (the neighbour not Mrs Thatcher) has a bust that needs its own postcode and to balance it a rear portcullis which looks as if it were built to withstand rocket fire. She walks with a strut which always reminds me of German soldiers on parade in Berlin in the late 1930s.

'Why are you doing that?' she demanded, pointing to the bags I was spraying.

Neighbours and dog walkers who wander past always seem intrigued by my once a week ritual.

I explained that I was spraying the black rubbish bags with aftershave and that since I've been doing this the foxes and the badgers had stopped ripping them open. I never pay more than £1 a bottle and the stuff is foul but strong smelling. I've had compost which smelt nicer.

She said she thought that it was a wonderful idea and continued on her strut around the lanes.

Today, Antoinette and I walked past her home and I couldn't help noticing a recognisable smell. 'What's that?' I asked. 'Chanel no 5,' replied Antoinette immediately. And sure enough the wonderfully silly woman has started spraying her rubbish bags with one of the most exclusive and expensive perfumes on the planet. This could only happen in the Cotswolds.

Or in Knightsbridge, I suppose.

6

Our prisons are now stuffed full of men aged 60 or over who have been arrested, tried, convicted and incarcerated for what are usually known en masse as historic sex offences.

Young offenders are routinely allowed to go free (they are invariably difficult and physically dangerous when incarcerated) but elderly men seem to be sent to prison at the drop of the proverbial chapeau.

There are actually more pensioners than youths in our prisons and many of them are suffering from physical and mental illness which means that they really need hospital or nursing home care rather than imprisonment.

I hate to think how badly these old folk are treated.

Certainly, the police around the world seem to have lost their capacity to care where the elderly are concerned. I read not long ago about a policeman in America who arrested an arthritic old lady for taking too long to cross the road. What sort of godless policeman does a thing like that?

There are prisoners blocking hospital beds because they are too ill to be kept in prison. Whenever this happens a round the clock guard (of six men) has to be established at enormous cost, though it seems unlikely that these prisoners are likely to escape or do any more harm.

Japanese prisons have had this problem for some time and many elderly Japanese now regard prison as preferable to life in an old people's home or on the streets.

A friend who works as a prison doctor told me that he looks after several prisoners who have no idea that they are in prison and wouldn't know why they were there even if they did know where they were.

Since they aren't being punished, and society isn't being protected, the only reason for putting them in prison is revenge.

Today, I received an email requesting me to speak at a British University next week. I used to receive a good many such invitations but these days but I'm rather harder to get hold of now and the invitations, if sent, probably get lost en route.

The writer of the email apologised for the short notice but said that they were having difficulty in obtaining a speaker and that several people who had agreed to attend had subsequently cancelled.

'You were not our first choice as guest,' she wrote, 'but several of our members think you might make a suitable substitute.'

She added that they would expect me to speak for three quarters of an hour after which there would be a question and answer session for a further hour or so during which she had no doubt that I would be subjected to a 'searching inquisition'.

She stated baldly that there would be no fee and no provision of expenses but that I would be provided with light refreshments (coffee and biscuits) if these were required. There was no mention of accommodation for the night and I assumed that I would be required to make my own arrangements.

Somehow I managed to find the courage to turn down this kind invitation.

7

There used to be two types of farmer; the ones who reared animals and the ones who grew crops. Things have changed. Today, there are still two types of farmer but they are the farmers who have windmills and, on the other hand, the farmers who have solar panels.

8

We have found an excellent way to keep unwanted visitors at bay. We've put up a large sign on our gate. The sign reads: 'Please use other entrance'.

Naturally, we don't have another entrance.

9

The delivery drivers who bring our groceries each week are a genial and hard-working bunch but they are arriving later and later and looking increasingly tired and edgy when they finally arrive.

The problem is simple: Waitrose's customers have been given the choice of having their groceries put into plastic bags or packed in large plastic trays. Most of the customers are, it seems, sanctimonious hypocrites who believe that by eschewing plastic bags they are doing something to save the planet, prevent terrorism and improve the quality of British television.

And so the delivery drivers have to struggle with huge, heavy crates packed with groceries. And once having delivered the crates to the doorstep they are then frequently expected to take the crates indoors and to unpack them.

Since drivers are allowed just nine minutes for each delivery (to include driving time) they simply cannot manage. Things are made worse by the fact that since the crates themselves are heavy, the physical strain on the delivery folk is enormous. It is clearly much easier on the body to carry a number of plastic bags than it is to carry a large crate which must be held out with the arms bent at the elbow. I predict that the delivery drivers will soon all be suffering from tennis elbow and there is no doubt at all that people who live in flats without lifts, or houses which can only be reached up long flights of steps, will have to accept their groceries delivered in plastic bags.

Genuine and sensible health and safety regulations will, I predict, trump daft plastic bag regulations.

There is also the problem that because the deliveries now take longer the amount of diesel which the vans use is vastly increased.

The finger wagging, preachy, sanctimonious, hypocritical customers who think they're saving the whale or the polar bear or the blue nosed rat don't give a damn about any of this, of course. Supermarkets should simply refuses to deliver to customers who are so bloody minded and uncaring that they cannot see that their own self-serving sanctimonious behaviour is causing serious discomfort and inconvenience to others – and is damaging the quality of the air we breathe.

Antoinette told me today that she'd read that thousands of people are now turning to internet shopping because they say they hate having to pay extra for the plastic bags they need in order to carry their purchases home.

As a result, of course, countless thousands of items have to be wrapped, packed and delivered by car, van or truck. Inevitably, the amount of oil consumed will be far higher than it would have been if shops had been allowed to continue to put their customers' purchases into plastic bags.

I'm not saying this is right or wrong.

'Just the facts, ma'am.'

As the character played by Jack Webb in the 1950s TV series *Dragnet* is wrongly believed to have said.

10

A man has been arrested for attacking an online reviewer who gave his book a bad review. This is terribly sad and unforgiveable, of course, but it is entirely predictable. And I suspect that this won't be the last such instance.

I recently read a novel (at least I think it is a novel) called *Balancing the Books* in which the heroine, the widow of an author who has committed suicide because of bad reviews, starts killing off the worst of the reviewers who drove her husband to suicide.

The book's author, Donald Quixote, has created a believable scenario. The heroine, a mild-mannered woman of uncertain years, is the most unlikely serial killer in history but is, nevertheless, entirely believable. And, surprisingly given that she is a serial killer, a sympathetic character.

A writer's life has always been a mixture of disappointment and injustice and rejection with occasional, short lived moments of delight. The delight only ever comes in moments, of course, whereas the disappointment, and its brothers and its cousins and its sisters and its aunts, come in weeks, months or years. The internet has exacerbated the situation.

Mr Quixote's book (and something tells me he might be using a pseudonym) is a rational response.

I discovered recently that some authors have found ways round the whole system of reviewing.

There are, apparently, two ways to cheat.

The first is to send free copies of a book to people who are known to write reviews in return for free books, and to ask them to review your book on various websites. The vast majority of the reviews obtained in this way are apparently favourable since internet reviewers feel that since they've been given a free book they must write something laudatory. Moreover, protocol rules that they know that when they, in turn, send out their book to this same group of people they will expect a good review. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours. Sadly, even if I wanted to try this method I can't because I don't know any book reviewers and I have no social media presence whatsoever.

The second method is even simpler: there are, apparently, companies which will 'arrange' a mass of good reviews for a fee. The cheating author hands over money and in return his book is given as many good reviews as he is prepared to pay for.

This one is beyond me, too. Not because I am too mean but because I couldn't bring myself to do it.

11

I read today that in 1881, when Charles Darwin published a book on earthworms, he had been working on it for 44 years. This cheered me up enormously since none of my books has taken me that long to write.

I've been reading some of the old *Punch* volumes I bought recently and in the issue for June 18th 1952 I came across this advertisement for John Laing, the builders.

'At one of the biscuit factories of Messrs. Carr and Company Ltd of Carlisle, a building was demolished and a new two-storey bakehouse erected in its place in ten and a half days.

'Starting on a Friday evening in August 1951, two teams of 35 men worked twelve hour shifts – the night shift under floodlights. Construction was carried out over machinery which could not be moved and all materials had to be hoisted across existing buildings., The programme – worked out in advance to the last detail – was fulfilled in spite of bad weather.

'At 7.30 a.m. on the following Monday week the new bakehouse – a steel framed building with pre-cast concrete floor and roof and brick walls – was completed and in production. It was the spirit of those men who worked all hours and in all weathers that saw the job through.'

That, methinks, used to be what we now only remember as 'English spirit'.

I truly cannot see anything similar happening these days. It takes the average local council five weeks to replace a damaged bollard. And that's with a team of six men working fulltime.

12

Junior hospital doctors working for the National Health Service are threatening to go on strike for three days next month, although I hope that good sense will probably prevail.

It is the very fact that they are talking of striking, and have been pictured marching through the streets with angry faces and badly drawn banners, which I find depressing.

I was a junior hospital doctor back in the early 1970s and although we worked much harder than today's doctors (168 hour weeks were not at all unknown and working weeks of 120 hours or more were commonplace) and were paid a pittance (under £700 a year I seem to remember) that just about covered the cost of room and board in the hospital, we would have no more dreamt of going on strike than today's young doctors would dream of turning off their mobile phones and closing their Twitter accounts.

Today's call for the strike has apparently been supported by 99% of junior doctors.

If there had been a vote in the 1970s, the vote would have been the other way round; with 99% voting not to strike. Oh how the world has changed.

Greed engenders greed.

I find it deeply depressing that doctors should even contemplate punishing patients because they have a dispute with their employers.

The gentlemanly, professional thing to do would be to resign en masse and give the requisite period of notice.

I have always believed in resigning when I find my terms of service intolerable and have done so on several occasions. I resigned as a GP when the NHS insisted that I breach my Hippocratic Oath and share my diagnoses with administrators and employers. (The law was subsequently changed so perhaps my resignation did some good.)

I confess that I have on occasion found resigning to be a useful negotiating ploy. When I had been writing a column for the *Sunday People* newspaper for some years, I had lunch with the editor, Bridget Rowe, to discuss renewing my contract. Bridget asked me how much I wanted. I said I thought £100,000 a year and a 8.5% annual pay rise would fit the bill nicely. Bridget and Len Gould, the deputy editor, got up from the table and left without saying a word. I finished my lunch.

When my existing contract expired I simply stopped sending columns. The editor's secretary rang up on a Thursday to ask where the column was for the following Sunday. I told her that there wouldn't be any more columns because my contract had expired. The editor then came onto the phone and agreed to my suggested remuneration. I suggested that it would be useful if she sent a signed contract to my home in Devon by motor cycle courier. This she did. I then faxed the column for Sunday's newspaper

If 99% of doctors did this, there would clearly be no need for a strike and the employer, the NHS, would have to back down without patients ever being threatened or inconvenienced.

I am particularly saddened because today's pampered young doctors are striking not because Britain's health care services are among the worst in the world, or because the incidence of infection in British hospitals is higher than anywhere else or because Britain’s cancer survival rates are the worst in the developed world but because they aren’t happy about the new contract they’re being offered.

The strike is about money.

The striking doctors don’t want more money for patient care. They don’t want less money spent on administration and more on treatment programmes. They aren’t fighting for the sick. They are fighting for themselves; selfishly demanding a better contract and more cash.

Despite this, the selfish little buggers have been prancing around in the streets holding up banners carrying slogans such as ‘Save the NHS’. They should be struck off the medical register for entirely unprofessional behaviour.

I find it difficult to believe but one of the main complaints appears to be that the new contract discriminates against female doctors who choose to take time off to have babies by not allowing them to take professional credit for the time they’ve elected to take away from medicine. Actually, that’s not asking for equality, that’s asking for special treatment.

The junior doctors are also complaining that the NHS bosses now want them to be available for work at weekends so that patients can be treated seven days a week. The doctors will, of course, be paid for this inconvenience but their complaint appears to be that they won’t be paid enough. And lots of them don’t want to work weekends because to do so would cut into their social lives.

The miserable little bastards should have trained as accountants.

Naturally, as their posters suggest, the doctors and their union officials persist in arguing that they are going on strike to improve the NHS in some strange way. This is a blatant lie and reminds me of the sort of spin favoured by politicians and corporate public relations spokespersons. Actually, it also reminds me of the confectionary companies claiming that they are making their chocolate bars smaller in order to fight obesity.

Modern doctors have proved time and time again that as a profession they don’t give a damn about patients or the NHS. The death of medicine as a profession is now complete.

Still, patients need not worry too much.

Whenever doctors go on strike, the incidence of doctor induced disease falls, the number of deaths from hospital infections drops and, not surprisingly, the nation’s death rate goes down. Undertakers hate it when doctors go on strike because business goes into a steep decline.

Today, I finished reading a book I found by chance in a second-hand bookshop. Entitled *Call me Charlie* it is the extraordinary autobiography of someone called Lord Charles Brockett. I don’t know why this is but I always seem to find exceptionally interesting books in second-hand bookshops; rather than in shops where the staff are young and alert and the shelves free of dust.

‘Second-hand books are wild books, homeless books; they have come together in vast flocks of variegated feather, and have a charm which the domesticated volumes of the library lack,’ wrote Virginia Woolf.

13

History is full of really good stuff.

For example, I learned today that the Emperor Justinian made homosexuality a criminal offence on the grounds that it was known for a fact that buggery caused earthquakes. And the amazing thing is that when the Emperor Justinian was alive the European Union hadn’t been invented. So it is clearly not true that pseudoscientific twaddle started with the foundation of the EU.

Still, it’s nice to know that the Emperor Justinian’s intellectual descendants are alive and well, and extolling the miseries of climate change with equally inappropriate fervour and a similar disregard for scientific evidence.

I was out in the garden feeding the birds and the squirrels, and chatting gaily to them as I did so, when I noticed that the grass had grown a lot since its final autumn trim. It seemed only right and proper to have a word with the grass too so I told it sternly that if it didn’t stop growing I would give it another trim with the petrol powered strimmer.

The grass didn’t seem to take much notice but there was a loud cough from behind the 40 foot tall beech hedge that borders that part of the garden. There’s a narrow footpath through the woods on the other side of the hedge and I think the cough was designed to warn me that a walker could hear my strange mutterings.

I responded by singing a silly nonsense song, reminding the grass to take my warning seriously and greeting Lord Percival, our tame pheasant, who was wandering down the garden for his breakfast of peanuts.

Most of the neighbouring villagers and regular dog walkers have been warned that I am a lunatic by a woman who used to do the cleaning for the previous owners of our cottage, and who was heartily miffed when we politely told her that we wouldn’t require her services, and they hurry off in the opposite direction if they see me coming.

It is clear from their demeanour that they are convinced that this is because they think me to be dangerously mad. This is splendid. Most of them are small, wrinkled and rather sad looking. Indeed, they remind me of half deflated balloons you see hanging from the bushes or gateposts outside a house where a child's birthday party has been held in the past. I don't want to talk to them so I'm always delighted to see the back of them (literally).

14

Muslim terrorists have targeted Paris, killing lots of innocent, unarmed people who were enjoying a little relaxation on a Friday evening. In London there is much talk of cancelling sports events and closing down airports and railway stations. 'The public should carry on as normal,' said a senior policeman, 'or else the terrorists have won'.

It is difficult to carry on as normal when there are long, long queues at airports and railway stations and little old ladies have their walking sticks confiscated.

Once again it seems to me that the politicians, who are obsessed with political correctness, simply have to allow border guards to start profiling travellers.

I know it's unfair that innocent Muslims get targeted but it is no more unfair than targeting white haired old pensioners when no terrorist attacks in modern history have been perpetrated by elderly pensioners.

The Government's response to the growing acts of terrorism seems curiously ineffective; likely to result in more trouble, rather than less. For over a century now our interventions in the Middle East have been driven by commercial expediency, corporate greed and political insensitivity and ignorance. Things are no better now than they were when British and American oil companies and naïve politicians divided up bits of Arabia back at the beginning of the 20th century.

Killing a few terrorists here and there in reprisal or revenge attacks is hardly likely to solve the problem when the judiciary and the political classes seem too scared to take any action which will prove effective.

Diplomacy hasn't worked and isn't ever going to work (especially with people like Tony Blair, the infamous War Criminal, posturing on our behalf).

We should either roll over and give the terrorists they ask for or we should fight a proper war with them. There isn't a middle way.

How long will it be before a politician somewhere has the guts to make this clear and ask for a mandate to do one or the other.

This really is a subject for a series of referendums in Europe and America but there won't be one because there is no one in power in the EU or America who wants to get rid of the threat for the simple reason that it is proving to be an eternal and useful excuse for taking ever more control over our lives.

I hate the very idea of war and it worries me that so many people now seem to take war in their stride, and to fail to understand that when we bomb countries indiscriminately we are making things worse rather than better.

When Tony Blair led us into the illegal Iraq War I, I was writing a column for *The Sunday People* newspaper in London. The editor refused to print a piece arguing against the war and criticising Blair's decision and I resigned.

I am proud that Antoinette gave me her total support and did not for a second question why I was walking away from an annual fee in excess of £100,000. My utterly futile and expensive resignation attracted considerable criticism and since my resignation, no British newspaper has printed anything I've written.

But I'd do it again.

It is interesting to note, incidentally, that the terrorists aren't attacking Moscow, even though the Russians have taken a far more active role in Syria than the French.

I strongly suspect that the truth is that the terrorists are far more afraid of what President Putin might do in response to a terrorist attack than they might worry about the reaction of the unpopular and incompetent President Hollande or the utterly wet and useless Cameron.

If I were a terrorist there is no doubt that Putin is the one world leader whom I would fear.

It has always seemed to me that a government's primary task should be to protect its citizens and the EU (which is in reality now our government) has not only failed miserably to do that but it has, rather, done exactly the opposite.

It has reduced our security and our privacy, and by allowing terrorists (disguised as economic migrants or asylum seekers) to enter the country quite freely through its now porous borders has exposed us to new and greater risks.

It is, without exaggeration, as mad to allow the citizens of the countries we are bombing to enter our country as it would have been to allow Germans into the country during the Second World War. This is nothing to do with racism. It is simple good sense.

(There is some irony in the fact that it is now far more difficult for British citizens, who are paying huge amounts of money every year for membership of the EU, to move onto mainland Europe than it is for Africans and Arabs to enter the same continent in order to blow us up. It is, of course, considered unacceptable and politically incorrect to point this out so I will have to delete this paragraph before publication. If I forget to do so I hope that readers will pretend that it has been deleted.)

Most worrying of all is the fact that, according to a recent poll, 16% of French citizens have a positive view of Isis with the figure rising to a terrifying 27% among 18 to 24-year-olds.

Things are slightly better in Britain but it is still alarming that 7% of British citizens look favourably upon Isis – and presumably support Muslim terrorist activities aimed at Britain.

This, remember, is an organisation which pays its soldiers an extra $50 a month for every female slave they own. The women of the Labour Party who support Muslim extremists might like to reflect on that.

Why is ISIS so popular?

The reason for this is simple: ISIS is very good at Twitter. (A fact which surely tells us as much about Twitter and the morality of the people who run it as it does about ISIS.)

We are postponing our next trip to Paris. We aren't due to travel for a few days but although we aren't too worried about the risks of bombs and guns we are reluctant to take on the added security that will make travelling by train a real pain. It is no good for the authorities to tell us to carry on as normal but to then make it quite impossible to do so.

When I changed the time of the tickets, I was told that we must now be at the station 45 minutes before the train leaves, instead of the old 30 minutes. Add up all those wasted 15 minutes, when multiplied by the number of travellers, and it is clear that the terrorists are winning.

When I bought the tickets for Eurostar I was told that I could change the tickets for a £30 fee. That seemed fair enough but it turns out that I was, as usual, being trustingly naive. It turned out that the £30 fee was not to change the booking but was per person per journey and so the bill for changing the tickets came to £120.

Our journey back next year will, I was told, be on one of the new Eurostar trains but I'm not as excited as I should be.

Every time the trains change they become less romantic and more prosaic.

When Eurostar began its service the trains bore more than a passing resemblance to the great Orient Express. These days the Eurostar trains are undeniably dull and bear more than a passing resemblance to the not so great Taunton to Paddington train.

It is impossible to deny that, a century ago, trains looked better and were far more romantic than they are today but it is difficult to explain why trains are now slower, less reliable and more unpredictable than the trains which were roaring around the country a century ago.

It has occurred to me that if the authorities really want to stop anyone blowing up the tunnel and the train they would be better advised to post a couple of armed guards at each entrance to the tunnel rather than to waste time taking nail clippers off old ladies.

I do not believe that the border guards at St Pancras, Ashford and Ebbsfleet have ever found anything worth finding when searching travellers. Nor, indeed, have the guards at the Gare du Nord.

The only real danger has come from Muslim economic migrants trespassing in the tunnel itself. I suspect that the authorities understand this. Leaving the Eurostar train at Ebbsfleet one is usually confronted with nothing more frightening than a stuffed dog in a cage. (I'm serious.) I did have my suitcase opened at the Gare du Nord once but the guard who had opened it took one look inside and then immediately closed it again. I think that perhaps the person operating the X-ray machine had mistaken the two lemons that were inside the case for hand grenades.

I was not surprised to hear that the climate change loonies are claiming that the terrible Paris shootings were a consequence of global warming. They claim that drought in Syria resulted in poor crops and hungry people.

Anyone who doesn't realise that the shootings were a result of misplaced passion and fanatical religious fervour, rather than empty stomachs, is too mad to be allowed out without at least two nurses.

As an aside it occurs to me that the same people who now (belatedly) accept that the world is short of water are the same people who now demand that we all wash out our empty cans and yoghurt cartons with plenty of fresh, running tap water.

I see also that the same loonies are claiming that our traffic jams are a result of global warming. Insofar as many of the economic migrants leaving Africa are coming to Europe because their crops have failed, there would be some sense in this if it did not beg the question of how they all managed to acquire cars and driving licences so quickly.

It is of course perfectly possible that they don't have driving licences but if they're contributing to traffic jams they must have cars.

Finally, I see that an idiot at Fox News has put a picture of an unlit Eiffel Tower online with a comment that this was the first time since 1889 that the lights had been turned off.

Tens of thousands of people did whatever people do online to show their appreciation of this; assuming, quite wrongly, that the French had turned off the lights in mourning. Oh dear. The truth is that the lights are always turned off at 1 a.m.

Moreover, anyone with more than half a brain would have surely realised that the French would not have left the lights switched on all through two World Wars. And even if they had been so reckless it would have been difficult to turn on the lights in 1889 because the lights weren't installed until the mid 1920s.

What is particularly scary about this rather silly mistake is that a growing number of young people believe everything they read on the internet and many get their 'news' from Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Most of them cannot tell whether they are looking at a commercial posting, a government posting, a private posting or a good, old-fashioned advertisement. It's funny, in a way, but it's also scary. The internet, may enable people to obtain information in moments but that doesn't help much when the information so obtained is wildly inaccurate, prejudiced, bigoted and often the result of commercial sponsorship.

The bottom line is that the internet is the biggest source of misinformation in history. It hasn't created a world of idiots (these people were doubtless idiots before the internet came along) but it has fed and encouraged them.

It was always a mistake to trust newspapers, radio or television to provide honest news but it is infinitely more dangerous to trust the Internet in general and specific websites such as Wikipedia in particular – a site which in my experience manages to be inaccurate, misleadingly incomplete and far too full of bias and prejudice to be regarded as having any value as an encyclopedia .

Damon Runyon once said that `all of life is six to five against' and I can't help thinking that the odds have deteriorated since then.

15

We made an offer for the moated 14th century manor house which we fell in love with back in September; the one down near to the south coast. The estate agent and the Greek owners both promised us that since we were cash buyers and wanted to complete the purchase quickly, before the winter set in, there would be no delays.

The house has six chimneys which are at least 20 feet high and are, we were told, a much later addition. Apparently chimneys can sometimes funnel smoke into a room if there are downdrafts caused by the presence of tall trees near to a house. The answer is to build the chimneys higher than the trees. The trees disappeared long ago but the chimneys remain and look more like follies than simple, functional erections.

We immediately sold shares and bonds to liberate the money we'd need for the purchase. It wasn't a good time to sell because the markets were in a slump (whenever I want to sell something there will be no demand for it, whatever it is) but we wanted to be ready to move and we didn't want to let the Greeks down. They were a little snobbish but we thought we could trust them to do what they'd promised and we didn't want to hold things up while money moved into our account.

Foolishly and trustingly we immediately started buying furniture and rugs for the house. We visited auctions, antique dealers and second-hand shops and bought a good many things which would, we thought, prove suitable.

The people from whom we bought the stuff were kind enough to put it all into storage for us until we could move in. We even bought the domain name for the house so that we could set up appropriate email accounts. We made exciting plans.

There was a moth-eaten suspension bridge over the moat at the back of the property; a footbridge that had seen much better days. I found the name of a bridge builder who could erect a wooden drawbridge. We planned to build a boathouse beside the moat and to increase the stock of ducks and swans.

The owners seemed happy to have sold their home and offered to go into rented accommodation while they looked for another house to buy. As always with a house purchase everything started off so well. But then the problems started.

We didn't receive documents or answers to modest queries and when we pushed a little and said that we would like to complete the purchase quickly there was much head shaking. We had thought that a completion in autumn would enable us to settle and deal with existing problems before the real winter set in. There was, after all, much talk of storms and high winds in January.

But there was, it seems, a collection of paintings to be sold at auction and we were told that this would take time.

We wondered if the paintings could just be moved into storage. But doing that seemed to pose unsurmountable difficulties. Because we hadn't had any information at all we couldn't even begin the process of arranging insurance or making plans for the delivery of furniture.

Then there was cheery news. The sellers had found a house they wanted to buy. But the cheeriness was muted because, unfortunately, it wasn't possible for them to move into it straight away. So the good news wasn't such good news after all. We began to wonder if we had been struck by that curse of modern house buying – a chain. We were now all waiting for the owners of the house which our sellers were moving into to get a date for their purchase or, perhaps, for the owners of the house which their sellers were buying to get a date for the purchase of their new home.

We muttered a good deal about completing soon but that idea was dismissed out of hand. How silly of us even to suggest it.

By the middle of November we had still not been given dates for exchange or completion. Actually, we hadn't been given any information at all. It seemed as though we were no longer part of the process. Estate agents will tell you that most of the people who say that they will pay 'cash' for a house don't really mean what they say. They don't actually have the cash in their bank account but they will have the cash if and when the bank lends it to them. The corollary, from the other end of the deal, is that when sellers say that they will move into rented accommodation so that there will be no delays they don't really mean that. What they mean is that they will move out when they have successfully found a house to buy and move into.

We were stuck with the second of these problems.

The only thing that was clear was that even if things happened quickly we would not be able to complete the purchase of the house until at the very best a couple of weeks before Christmas. And that would be disastrous. Without having any dates we still hadn't been able to arrange removers or insurance or for dealers to deliver the stuff we'd bought. And there were problems with the house that had to be dealt with urgently. Christmas, of course, is the one time of the year when it isn't possible to do anything urgently. Everything will be done 'after Christmas'.

And, of course, the longer we waited the more we thought about the problems we had to deal with. It's why salesmen always like to get a customer to sign there and then. They know that if the customer is allowed to go away and think about things there is a chance that they will change their minds. Doubts creep in. Fears and suspicions and second thoughts are rife. You begin by buying with your heart and then your head gets involved and there's one hell of an internal argument. 'Oh but it's beautiful,' says the heart. 'But it's completely impractical and it will take over your life,' responds the head. 'But I really like it!' insists the heart. 'And who's going to have to deal with all the problems?' demands the head. And so it goes.

And we had a lot of things to worry about. We had been told that the chimneys hadn't been swept for 20 years (though they had been used regularly) and that the septic tank (which had also been used regularly) was due to be emptied. Emptying the septic tank wouldn't be easy because of the moat. The tanker would have to be parked on the other side of the moat and the hose somehow carried across the water.

There were quite a few tiles missing from the roof and with a three storey grade II listed house the replacement tiles would have to be specially sourced and, for the ubiquitous health and safety reasons, the roofers would doubtless insist on putting up scaffolding. And every day the weather was getting worse and the forecasts for high winds becoming louder and more insistent.

We began remembering things we'd been told and had half forgotten. We began worrying about things we had been prepared to ignore. We began to realise why we had wanted to complete the purchase as quickly as possible – before the really bad weather set it. And we began to wonder how much had gone wrong with the house since we'd agree to buy it.

We'd said that we wouldn't have a survey in order to speed things up. But how many more roof tiles had come off? How many tree branches had fallen into the moat and blocked the sluice gate? We began to worry about things we'd only half noticed. Why did the owner lock the wood shed with a huge padlock? I remember being told that he kept the oars away from the dinghy (used to go onto the moat in order to clear the sluice gates) to stop joy riders rowing about on the moat. The long drive had to be treated with chemicals on a regular basis in order to stop it being overrun with weeds. The electrics looked as though they might need an overhaul. I could not remember seeing any residual current circuit breakers. We would need to have the electric wiring checked and perhaps overhauled. I remember seeing at least one light socket which seemed to be falling off the wall. Delivery vehicles had difficulty crossing over the narrow bridge. The gate needed repairs. The oil delivery man had to use a lane at the back of the house and carry his hose over the footbridge because he couldn't get his vehicle over the main bridge. The letter box at the main gate was very small and wouldn't cope with more than a couple of postcards. We would have to replace it quite urgently. But how could we best do that? We'd need a builder to put a mail box into the wall. And was the wall part of the listed building? There was a pump in the cellar which constantly removed water but which occasionally stopped working if the drains were blocked. How often did that happen? Why did the drains man leave behind a tool for opening up the drain covers? Were things really that bad?

The longer we waited the more we worried and the more we found things to worry about. There was only a short distance between the busy road and the main gates. If we kept the gates closed would delivery vehicles fit onto the space or would they have to park with their rear end sticking out into the road? Would we be responsible if there was an accident? The owner had advised us to turn left (and only left) when we left the house because of a sharp bend in the road to the right. Did that mean we would never be able to turn right? Were the neighbour's dogs always barking in their nearby kennels? Would the neighbours (several of whose houses were visible through the trees) be noisy?

Oh dear the neighbours.

The very prospect of having neighbours is now daunting. When we bought our home in Gloucestershire we thought we were far enough away from people to be able to enjoy some country peace and quiet. But the dog walkers with their barking hounds and the Duke of Gloucestershire with his earth moving machinery are a constant source of noisy irritation. It often seems to me that our apartment in central Paris is quieter than our home in the countryside.

It became increasingly clear that, as Antoinette pointed out, we had offered to buy the house with our hearts but the sellers gave us time to think with our heads.

We both want a house to look after us – rather than a house which expected us to spend all our time, money and energy looking after it.

And the longer we waited the more worried we became. We realised that we were going to move in during the middle of winter. How much notice we were going to get? The money we had liberated for the purchase was sitting in a bank account, earning no interest. What if the bank went bust? We'd lose most of it.

The only consolation was that although we have made a good many mistakes when buying (and selling) houses, the mistakes have all been different.

That did provide some small sense of satisfaction. It would be depressing to keep making the same damned mistake over and over again.

16

Over 5,000 mental health beds have had to be closed in Britain in recent months and it occurs to me (not for the first time) that many of those who should really be well medicated and locked in secure units are now out and about, driving cars, travelling on trains, queuing in WHSmiths and sitting on the green benches in the House of Commons.

People who are dangerous are allowed to roam the streets and the back benches in the Commons because there is no money for them to be looked after in proper institutions.

Only after they have assaulted or killed someone does society do something. And that will then usually be an expensive prison cell. The victim of the assault will, if he or she is lucky, get the hospital bed the madman needed in the first place.

Meanwhile, the struggling NHS provides free cosmetic surgery, free sex change treatment and free infertility treatment. These are all important issues, deserving of care, but beyond the capabilities of a free service.

I noticed this afternoon that the diaries of Samuel Pepys have attracted some very nasty reviews. One of his reviewers describes him as a world class jerk, selfish, arrogant, mean, cheap, vain, self-important and cruel. Rather missing the point I fear.

Today, authors who want to thrive must self-censor and remove all contentious material from their books in order to appease the shrill critics. It is dangerous to publish material which is debatable or politically incorrect.

(Readers will note, incidentally, that this book has been self-censored, or Bowdlerised and contains no offensive material whatsoever. Sadly, I fear that this will make little difference and the book will doubtless still attract violent criticism from reviewers disappointed at the absence of material dealing with synchronised swimming.)

17

Our AGA cooker has been producing a rather strange smell recently so we turned it off before it blew up, and for a week I've been trying in vain to make an appointment for one of the AGA engineers to come and take a look at it.

I've tried ringing up (always a painful experience these days) and have exchanged an enormous number of emails with their automatic 'Your query has been received…' email service.

Sadly, our relationship has been woefully one-sided and so today I settled down with the telephone, a packet of sandwiches, a flask of coffee and a hip flask full of malt whisky and rang their service line.

(It is not possible to take sandwiches or other home-made comestibles to sporting venues lest the sponsors feel aggrieved at spectators munching a rival's brand of cheese or crisps but there are as yet no rules preventing the consumption of home-made sandwiches within the home.)

The AGA phone line is one of those where the appalling music is constantly interrupted by a voice telling folk that their call is important and that someone will be with them when they've finished painting their nails or chatting to Doreen.

But I hung on and eventually, I was fortunate enough to be able to explain to a live person that I wanted to book an appointment to have our AGA serviced. I gave all the usual information (inside leg measurement, hat size, glove size, favourite colour) and was then told that I couldn't make an appointment because they were too busy and that I would have to ring back in January to make an appointment.

I pointed out that the AGA is our only source of heating in that part of the house, protested that if we didn't freeze to death over Christmas and I rang back in January I would probably be told to ring in March.

'Can't you give us an appointment now?'

The woman went away for a while, probably needing to touch up a bit of nail varnish on her left forefinger, and then came back and eventually decided that she could after all make us an appointment for January. It was made pretty clear that this was the AGA equivalent of being invited to a Buckingham Palace Garden Party.

She then asked me to repeat all the information I'd previously given, either because she hadn't bothered to make a note of it or possibly because she was checking that I was telling the truth.

'What colour is the AGA?' she asked. I said it was a sort of creamy colour. When this didn't seem accurate enough I asked her what colours they made. She could only think of a lemony one. I said it definitely wasn't lemony so we put it down as cream though I can't imagine why the colour is important. When I book a car in for a service they never want to know what colour it is. And when I book an appointment at the dentist the receptionist never wants to know what colour I am. Does AGA employ sniffy, over-precious technicians who specialise in different coloured cookers? I don't know.

She then wanted to know how old the AGA is and I had to tell her that I didn't know because the damned great thing had been here when we'd bought the house. She eventually gave me a date and said that there would be a fee of £145 for the engineer to decide whether or not they would service the AGA but that if he did agree to do the service there would be additional unspecified fees to pay. She said she would ring a few days before to take the £145 by credit card and that someone would ring the day before to give us a two hour window for our appointment.

What a bloody pretentious palaver and what a strange way to punish folk for being stupid enough to buy a house with an AGA fitted in the kitchen.

Younger folk assume this is the way things are done but life doesn't have to be this difficult.

In the bad old days you'd ring up, someone would answer the phone and a woman with a fag smoke throat would give you an appointment. Bang. The whole thing would take a minute.

Antoinette and I have decided that we will not buy another house containing an AGA cooker. I've always thought of them as domestic appliances for snobs, fashion accessories rather than sensible heating and cooking devices. I've had several of the damned things because they've been in houses I've bought but have kept them only because once they are in a house it is impossible to remove them without an enormous amount of effort. But they take up vast amounts of space and using one for cooking and heating is rather like relying on a 20-year-old horse and a rickety old cart to take you to the shops.

I then rang the National Savings people to ask them to send us a couple of premium bond application forms. The prize money is miserable but it's marginally better than the interest the bank pays and there is the thrill of receiving an occasional tax free cheque for £25.

When I eventually got through to a live person there were, inevitably, security questions to be asked. I explained that I just wanted her to put two application forms in the post but the woman wouldn't do this before I gave her my date of birth. This is presumably to protect the country in case terrorists decide to lie about their ages, buy all the premium bonds and hack into Ernie's brain.

I didn't give her my real date of birth, of course, but then I doubt if she'll bother to really send the forms.

18

I went out to put the rubbish out (smelling, as usual, of Eau de Shepherd's Bottom, the foulest aftershave available at our local pound shop) and without looking to see if there was anyone around I shouted 'Good evening sheep!' and then sang them half a verse of an impromptu comic song.

Generally speaking sheep, our local woolly bottomed lovelies, are good listeners, polite, ever attentive, and friendlier by far than any of the people we see around here. They know when to baa loudly in approval and they know when to keep quiet; they are never critical and certainly more charming and delightful as companions than the breed of dog walker we get in this part of the Cotswolds (who are all fake pedigree and diamante collars).

Just as I finished my greeting a stout, stern looking woman hove into view, preceded by a pair of mangy looking dogs (not on leads, of course, despite the polite warning signs which suggest that this would be appropriate and despite the law which rules that it is compulsory).

The female felon stared at me, open mouthed in a mixture of astonishment and horror, and then increased her pace to get away as quickly as possible.

‘The sheep get upset if I don’t talk to them,’ I explained, deadpan.

The dog owner, clearly not endowed with much of a sense of humour, looked over her shoulder and continued to gape as if I had grown an extra head with tentacles for hair. She then broke into a modest trot, constantly looking back over her shoulder as she did so. Her dogs, aware of her nervousness, bravely galloped ahead of her up the lane.

It is I think a wonderful thing for the dog walkers who come past our home to regard me as a madman; perhaps not as ‘mad, bad and dangerous to know’ as the good Lord Byron, but heading gently in that direction.

Far fewer people bring their dogs down here these days, and the few who do hurry past our cottage as quickly as their stubby little legs can carry them. We are no longer troubled by strangers glowering at us or making comments of any kind.

19

Someone from the company which makes and services AGA cookers emailed to confirm the appointment to look at and possibly service our cold and useless cooker and asked me to email them back to confirm that I approved of the arrangements.

I was tempted to send an email telling them that due to the exceptionally high volume of emails I was receiving it would be three days before I could reply but I doubt if these people have a sense of humour (they seem far too precious) and we need them to do something to the damned AGA so I replied but I am really getting rather fed up with all this nonsense. I doubt if the Queen makes as much fuss about a visit as the damned AGA people do. I assume that when the technician eventually arrives he will turn up in a Rolls Royce and carry gold plated spanners. Meanwhile, the kitchen is still freezing cold.

This evening I swept up several hundred more dead wasps. They have been coming into the house every day for weeks now. Most are dying and so not much of a threat to us but it’s a sad business, dealing with so many corpses.

And in the evenings it is still sometimes possible to hear the sound of the remaining live wasps beating their wings in their nest. I can’t believe that it is too hot for them in the roof space and so I can only assume that the ritualistic wing beating, ostensibly done to cool the nest, must now be more of a ritual than a practical activity.

I read today that there is now a group of self-righteous people who hand cards to women whom they regard as unattractive because of their weight.

(For some reason, probably not unconnected to the fact that they don’t fancy a punch in the mouth, the people who hand out these nasty cards don’t dare give them to men.)

The cards are unbelievably rude (‘you’re fat, ugly and worthless’ seems to be a popular phrase) and designed to make the recipient feel ugly worthless but, in a vain attempt to show their worthiness, the cards contain a list of the ways in which overweight individuals add to the cost of State sponsored health care. Finally, the cards accuse the victim of eating more than her fair share of the planet’s food supplies.

Throwing acid in the faces of these unfortunate women would be worse but not by much.

How can people be so cruel?

These people should be punished as severely as if they had done actual bodily harm. Indeed, since causing mental harm can produce more lasting damage than physical harm they should be punished even more severely.

I am thinking of becoming Jewish so that if we receive any abuse in the future we can complain to the police that we have been subjected to a racial hate crime.

20

The postman brought a brochure for the Ford Ranger truck. We’ve had one of these trucks for years now and I’m well pleased with it. It’s surprisingly comfortable and easy to drive and it can carry more stuff than we’re ever likely to want to move from one place to another. We’ve been so pleased with it, in fact, that although I don’t want to get rid of the old one I thought I’d buy another.

Before visiting a dealer, I sent an email to Ford asking them to send me a brochure and a price list. That was about six weeks ago.

The brochure that arrived today is disappointing so say the least. To describe it as feeble would be generous. It took about a minute and a half to read and didn’t tell me or show me anything I didn’t already know.

I spent much of the day sorting out part of my collection of old and rare books, looking for volumes that can be taken to a local charity shop. I started with the simple and straightforward books and worked my way through my collections of King Penguin books and Britain in Pictures. It has been so long since I had time to do a proper stock taking that I hadn’t realised that I had a complete set of the former and an almost complete set of the latter, needing only two volumes to complete the set. I’ve ordered the two missing books through the internet and put all the spare copies of both series into a large cardboard box. I hope the charity shop which receives them will realise that these aren't to be sold off for 99 pence each.

The strange thing about collecting is that an incomplete collection is in some ways far more satisfying than a complete one. When you've found the last book, coin or stamp the collection loses its interest somehow.

Alexander wept when he was told that there were no more lands to conquer and someone once told me that the fellow who spent his life finding the freezing point of gases killed himself when he ran out of gases to try and freeze. It is always the journey not the arrival that is most enjoyable (unless you're crossing the channel of course).

It is frighteningly easy to find books these days. A few clicks on the internet and the search is over. It is then just a matter of finding a book in decent condition at a fair price. (Or, rather, a book that sounds as if it is in decent condition. There are, sadly, book dealers who either don't understand much about books or who confuse book club editions with first editions and reprint dust jackets with original dust jackets.)

In the bad old days it would take months or even years to hunt down a missing volume.

But I confess I truly miss the hunting process. And I miss the old bookshop wherein the hunting was done.

21

I often wish I had had the thickness of skin required to go into politics. It is a constant disappointment to me that I would have made a useless candidate because I would be quite unable to greet and smile at people I loathed and I would be destroyed by the relentless passion breaking pain of compromise. I admire people like Nigel Farage enormously, for their capacity to soak up mindless abuse without bursting into tears or punching the abuser on the nose.

I suspect that, like me, the electors as a whole are quite fed up with politicians and their parties and that this is why people such as Corbyn, Le Pen and Trump are doing so well. Voters are tired of the bloodlessness, and I am nursing a hope that political parties may have outgrown their time.

In America, voters say that they are unhappy about an economy which punishes people who work for a living while over-rewarding crooks and thieves (aka bankers and hedge fund operators). They are angry about illegal immigration and they don't want someone to 'understand' how they feel, they want someone to share their anger and share it publicly.

I can't help feeling that Nigel Farage, who leads Britain's United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) might be even more successful if he allowed himself to be more politically incorrect and rather more ruthless in his attacks on the political establishment. I have met and spoken to Mr Farage on a number of occasions and I believe him to be the nicest, most honourable and decent politician in Britain.

Having spoken at one UKIP conference, and written a number of best-selling books about the EU in particular and politics in general, I did write and offer to help but sadly I received no reply.

In America, Donald 'the hair' Trump has no patience with the professional politicians or the political commentators. He hurls abuse in every direction, without worrying about upsetting journalists or civil servants. And that's why he attracts support. I suspect that Nigel Farage cares enough, but I fear that he is too constrained by political history in Britain to show the level of explosive passion and fire that the electors are ready to enjoy.

Britain is ripe for a Trump of its own and when he comes there will be a political revolution.

I wrote a book a few years ago which I called *Bloodless Revolution* and in which I explained how I thought we could build a better, fairer society if we got rid of political parties completely.

I have a suspicion that voters are now looking for passion, honesty and a connection between themselves and their candidate.

22

A friend of an acquaintance of someone we know is at university. I'm not sure which university and I'm not entirely sure what he is studying but since he is neither particularly bright nor especially hard working I suspect that it is probably for a degree in golf course management, brewing, spa management, hairdressing or wind surfing.

Those subjects, among many others, are now popular among the huge cohort of students who are only prepared to study if there is a lot more fun than work involved.

The friend of the acquaintance told me, with great pride, that the students where he's studying are campaigning for all online articles to be fitted with 'warnings' if they contain any material which might cause offence.

Students are apparently arguing that they have the right to be comfortable and to avoid having to be challenged by disturbing or offensive ideas. I wished him good luck with getting the Chinese and the Russians to agree to the proposal. He replied by telling me that the student union at another university has banned the Nietzsche Society on the grounds that its very existence threatens the safety of the student body. And the rugby club at the London School of Economics has been disbanded for a year after members handed out leaflets advising rugby players to avoid homosexual debauchery. The club has apologised for its ‘inexcusably offensive’ behaviour and members are taking part in ‘equality and diversity training’.

In the days of yore when I was a university student, we were constantly campaigning against repression of any kind. I even remember forcing the university to allow me to remain a student without being a member of the National Union of Students. (The university ran a closed shop and all students were routinely enrolled in the NUS. I used the United Nations Charter to obtain my official exemption.)

Today’s students seem to have tottered off in the opposite direction. Huge numbers of student unions have banned the *Sun* newspaper on the bizarre and unsupportable grounds that the semi-naked pictures on Page Three might turn pre-rapists into real rapists.

A seemingly very self-important Rhodes scholar at Oxford University, who was apparently happy, nay probably eager, to accept the generosity of the late Cecil Rhodes, has shown his gratitude by campaigning to have a statue of his benefactor removed from the university. A more acute definition of hypocrisy it would be difficult to find. I hope the university has the courage to reply in the traditional way, using just two fingers. If they don’t then they will find that prospective donors will be voting with their wallets, and taking their money somewhere else. I, meanwhile, have awarded this fellow the ‘Bonio Award for Massive Hypocrisy’.

The truth is that Rhodes, a businessman, politician and miner, was a brave, determined, generous and brilliant man. He was never healthy but he was always loyal and he was no more of a racist than Queen Victoria, George Washington or Abraham Lincoln. He undoubtedly had faults but only students are free of those. Cecil Rhodes lived at a time when the world was different and he does not deserve to be vilified because his behaviour doesn’t fit modern attitudes. He deserves to be remembered. Whether the Africans like it or not, he will always be part of Africa’s history.

I have bought the miserable, complaining hypocrite, as a gift, a Cambridge University Netball Team T-shirt, though the garment carries only the initial letters of the team.

23

People who do clever things with computers can now track the amount people read when they’ve bought an ebook. The results are quite startling. For example, only 44% of British readers who bought The Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Goldfinch*, managed to struggle through to the end of it. The book was, nevertheless, one of the most popular ebooks last year. Similarly, a surprising number of people who bought a book called *12 Years A Slave* failed to reach the end.

A friend told me that he has been waiting for seven months for a reply from his political representative. It turns out that she is on maternity leave and her constituents will be completely unrepresented for months to come.

24

Cheltenham has no Christmas lights and there are very few signs of the impending Christian festival. Indeed, the whole town looked rather glum; like a rather dismal day in February. Checking with the Man from the Council I see that there are plans to have some lights at the end of the month. Since London and other major cities have been lit up for nearly a month I find this difficult to understand. I don’t like to see celebrations starting in October but Christmas Eve is now just a month away and I feel terribly sorry for shopkeepers who must cram a year’s profits into just four weeks – and hope to win their fight against internet stores, expensive parking, extortionate rent and rate bills and rules about wages and employment conditions which make life damned near impossible for anyone struggling to run a business.

The rules for employers get worse by the week.

Today, anyone who sits next to a pregnant woman on a bus is entitled to have a year off work at full pay and to have their job kept open for them until they feel bored enough to return to work.

How on earth the small, private shopkeepers will survive I cannot imagine.

Since it is the council which is partly responsible for the fact that shops are shutting by the dozen it would seem fair enough to expect the council-employed bureaucrats to make a huge effort to help shopkeepers stave off bankruptcy. A decent tree and a few lights would be helpful.

In WHSmith, I bought over £80 worth of cards and wrapping paper and since there was no queue at the tills, and I felt sorry for the assistants who had been abandoned by shoppers preferring to use the self-service tills, I tottered over to have my purchases manually inputted by a till professional.

Naturally, there was a notable delay while the inevitable woman of a certain age who had finished at the till but not moved away stood and reorganised her handbag. There was plenty of space on her left for her to complete this procedure but she was far too selfish and uninterested in the world around her to notice that she was sharing the planet with other people. So she carefully removed everything from her bag, swept the unwanted bits and pieces of flotsam and jetsam onto the floor and then put back into the bag the stuff she had decided to keep. Job himself would have found her a challenge. I understand that the woman probably had little to do with her life, and so liked to extend every experience to the fullest possible extent, but it might have been nice if she had spent a moment considering those behind her with things to do with their lives.

When she'd finally shuffled off, doubtless to repeat her performance elsewhere and spread unhappiness and darkness among other shoppers, I handed over my pile of goodies and then offered up two £5 off vouchers, which the store had given me. Each was, so claimed the promotional blurb, available to be set against £20 worth of shopping.

The assistant firmly told me that I could only put one voucher against one bill so since a fiver is still a fiver I asked her to split the shopping into two halves and to put one coupon against one half and the other against the other.

'You've got newspapers,' she said, 'you can't include newspapers.'

'It says I can,' I protested.

'No you can't,' she insisted.

Bravely resisting the temptation to stamp my feet, I showed her the coupon and pointed out that the words 'magazines and newspapers' were included.

I learned from my confrontations with representatives of HMRC, when it was known as the Inland Revenue, that when dealing with petty bureaucrats of all kinds it is vital to be firm and, most important of all, to know the rules. And if you know the rules better than they do then you can enjoy the confrontation that much more as you watch them struggle to escape from the hole they have dug for themselves.

'Huh,' she said. 'I suppose so then.'

No grace in defeat.

She then moaned and huffed and puffed as she split my shopping into two halves and put a voucher against each half. There was no one behind me (I checked) so the only persons incommoded by this extended transaction were myself and the woman behind the counter.

If the Smiths management keeps hiring people like her they will find themselves defeated by Amazon and eBay sooner than they might have expected.

I should, of course, have gone to the self-service till where I would have at least been served without silent, moody criticism.

There was a time, not long ago, when the newsagent chain WHSmith, (which was founded back in 1792, some years before I was born), was a decent, solid store. It probably didn't make much profit but the staff seemed happy and helpful.

Today the store is a national joke; a disgrace to the staff and an affront to the customers who have to use it if they want to buy a magazine or a newspaper because the alternatives have long since disappeared. The stores are generally so run down and dirty looking that I always feel they need a doormat at the exit so that customers can wipe their feet on the way out. Profiteering management have turned the shops into slums and the overworked staff into zombies. The magazine racks are a jungle. If you are looking for something specific you just have to rummage through the stuff available. I've seen tidier stock at jumble sales.

When we left the town there was a blockage in the car park. A woman who drove as if she had died in the 1970s, was trying to park her small, and very battered car, and was having some little difficulty.

'I think you'd be better off if you just made a 360 degree turn and went back the way you came,' said a man who was trying to guide her. He wasn't doing very well and I suspect that the woman driving was probably deaf as well as blind. I didn't like to point out that if we had made a 360 degree turn we would have been back where we started – and still facing the woman trying to park her car so I thanked him, turned the car round and drove the wrong way round the car park to reach the exit.

Naturally, many busy body, interfering, pain-in-the-butt do-gooders waved their fists at me to let me know that I was going the wrong way. Several took pictures of the car with their mobile phones and I have no doubt we will appear on the appropriate websites before long. I'm not too worried. I don't think the police are much interested in which way you drive in a public car park.

Today, I walked past the back of a restaurant and I'm not kidding when I tell you that our garden shed is cleaner than that restaurant's kitchen. There were, inevitably, two members of the kitchen staff standing outside puffing on their fags and scrolling through their smart phones. As I passed them I couldn't help noticing that in addition to the smell of cigarettes and rotting vegetables there was a familiar and pungent smell in the air. It wasn't until I'd gone a dozen yards that I realised that I could smell the foul and noxious stuff I spray on our rubbish bags to keep the badgers and foxes away. When I first bought the deodorant I didn't realise people actually sprayed the stuff on themselves but it seems to be surprisingly popular. When I accidentally sprayed too much of the stuff on one part of one of our rubbish bags, the spray burnt a hole in the black plastic. Still, it probably works as a defoliant as well as a deodorant and those who use it can get rid of their underarm hair at the same time as they smother the smell which results from their failure to bathe for a month.

Looking into the kitchen of that restaurant, it wasn't difficult to see why the incidence of infections among the customers of eateries both posh and simple is roaring upwards.

Scientists and so-called experts in the field have recently put forward all sorts of weird and wonderful explanations for the fact that the number of people who contract vomiting and diarrhoea after eating out is rocketing. Every year, in America, around 48 million people acquire a food-borne pathogen, which means that they end up spending a day or two sitting on the toilet and holding a bucket. The annual cost of medical treatment and lost productivity for those who have a food contracted infection is estimated to be well over $50 billion a year. That makes infections from food a serious problem.

In truth, of course, the reason for the increase in the incidence of vomiting and diarrhoea is very simple and you don't need to have O level woodwork let alone a PhD in bugs and microbes to understand why vomiting and diarrhoea are now endemic hazards among those who allow other people to prepare their food for them.

People contract bugs when eating out because no one bothers about hygiene anymore and chefs and their staffs are the main culprits, of course. The incidence of gastrointestinal infection which develops after eating out (or buying prepared sandwiches or 'pre-washed' bagged salads) would plummet if everyone dealing with food were forced to wear plastic gloves.

It is quite absurd that chefs use their bare hands to handle food which is going to be served raw. Time and time again I have seen television chefs dipping their fingers into a salad which is about to be served to some unsuspecting victim. Would you let any chef put his or her grubby fingers into your mouth? Of course you wouldn't. So why let a chef fondle the food you're about to eat.

Doctors, nurses and dentists are exhorted to wear gloves when examining patients not just to protect themselves (and to stop the spread of infection between patients) but also to protect patients who might otherwise be exposed to new infections.

So why shouldn't chefs, however self-important, take precautions too?

(Actually, this is a bad example. Doctors and nurses who work in Britain's NHS rarely bother to use gloves and pay only lip service to the idea of preventing the spread of infection. That's why hospital infections are commoner in Britain's State-run hospitals than anywhere else in the world. But the principle is a sound one.)

26

The British Parliament today debated what to do about Syria, though quite what Syria has to do with Britain is another matter.

The main business of the day was to decide whether or not to begin recreational bombing of bits and pieces of yet another foreign country.

The Prime Minister wants to do this not because he thinks it will make a difference (no one could be that stupid) but because he can't think of anything else to do and he thinks that a little light bombing will make him and everyone else feel better. For all I know he probably thinks it might also help solve the global warming problem and help Chelsea win the FA Cup.

You might think that deciding on whether or not to start another war might be considered important and that our well-paid political representatives would be crammed into their seats as though they had been promised free tea and sticky buns. But not all MPs were present at the vote.

Alex Salmond MP, a well-known Member of the House, and a man who is widely considered in our house to be a world class plonker who couldn't find his way upstream with a compass, was busy in Scotland unveiling a portrait of himself at the Scottish National Gallery. This was an event which he apparently found more important than deciding whether his country went to war or not.

I can't help feeling that this rather sums up Mr Salmond.

Politicians tend to have rather large egos but Mr Salmond surely beats them all in this department. His self-regard and vanity appear to be immense and he seems to me to be nothing more than a pompous, bloated excrescence; a pus filled carbuncle. I hope I get to see pictures on the day when he finally bursts.

27

Poor men in Britain can expect to live to just under 70 years of age but men who are rich can expect to live to nearly 90. When I read this I immediately took a close look at my investments. I need to become exceedingly rich very quickly.

I was quickly reminded that these are impossible days for investors.

You can no longer trust anyone.

Central banks, governments, banks all cheat and fiddle their customers and so no traditional investment rules work anymore. Investors have to assume that their government, and its agents, will all cheat them.

Millions of savers and pensions have been forced into penury by governments holding interest rates at absurdly low levels to protect their own interests, to ensure that MPs and senior civil servants can enjoy luxurious, solid gold pensions that the rest of us can only dream about, and to help the bankers get richer and continue to pay themselves their undeserved multi million pound bonuses.

According to the Bank of England itself (where they've studied the subject back to the year 3000 BC) interest rates have never been as low as they are now. So it is clear that savers and pensioners have never before been so ill-treated.

Moreover, thanks to the Bank of England and the Government controlled regulators, the commercial banks have been allowed to move all their risks onto taxpayers, with the inevitable result that profits are privatised while losses are socialised and borne by the community. Governments and central banks around the world have produced a regulatory environment which protects the bankers from their own bad judgements and which actively encourages selfish recklessness. It is, of course, ultimately unsustainable and will end in tears. Sadly, I would bet that we'll be the ones crying and the bankers, the regulators and the politicians will all still be laughing.

Ultra low rates were introduced as an emergency nearly a decade ago.

And it's the elderly who have been screwed because they tend to be the ones who need to live on their savings.

When I was young and borrowed money to buy a house, I paid 17% interest and was excited when I was able to take out a business loan at 11.5%.

Now that I have a savings account I get 0.5% interest before tax.

The result of low interest rates is that pensioners are spending their savings (and their cashed in pensions) and the group between 55 and 65 now buys more new cars than any other group in the country.

There was a time, not all that long ago, when people were admired and respected for saving some of their income for a rainy day. No more. Today the official attitude seems to be that anyone who saves is a criminal who should be punished.

The Government is enthusiastic about people spending like pools winners because in the short term it is good for the economy. They realise that the elderly will soon run out of money and will become a burden but they have a solution to that: kill off the pensioners by withholding food and water from any too frail to look after themselves.

The latest news is that rather than going up, there is a good chance that interest rates will go negative. Indeed, in some countries (notably Switzerland) they already have become negative and investors are being charged up to1% a year for the privilege of allowing a bank to take advantage of holding their money. How can this possibly make sense?

Worse still, one Bank of England economist has jumped onto a fast moving bandwagon and wants to abolish cash completely. This will be disastrous for we will all be forced to use plastic cards for everything we buy. What the hell does he think will happen to tramps and beggars who rely on cash? Will children get their pocket money paid into their mobile telephone? What a hideous world it will be.

It is difficult to dismiss the thought that governments (and their chums at the central banks) want to abolish cash because without cash we are all enormously vulnerable.

If we upset our government it will be able to withdraw our credit cards and bank accounts so that we cannot eat or live.

I realised just how realistic this danger is when I read what had happened in America to four ex drone pilots. When the pilots revealed evidence showing that the American Government had been using drones for indiscriminate murder, their Government responded both by threatening to prosecute them in the criminal courts and by attempting to intimidate their families. When none of this worked, the Government arranged for the four former drone pilots to have their credit cards and bank accounts frozen – even though none of them had been charged with a criminal offence.

(It is, at times, difficult if not impossible to differentiate between Britain and America as they are today and the USSR of a few years ago.)

The fact is that without access to cash we will all be exceedingly vulnerable.

28

I see that a 14-year-old boy, interviewed about his 12-year-old girlfriend's pregnancy, claimed that he first had sex when he was nine-years-old. He said that he has had at least ten lovers and blamed sex education programmes at school for his premature sexual experiences.

'It is the school's responsibility because they showed us videos of men and women naked,' he said.

And he was, of course, absolutely right.

Britain's epidemic of teenage pregnancies is a direct result of our absurd obsession with teaching small children about sex. School leavers go out into the world illiterate and innumerate but well equipped to claim benefits, varnish fingernails and give a good blow job.

There is, it seems, an endless parade of second-rate politicians eager to force infants to confront the bewildering world of their own, and everyone else's, sexuality.

The whole madness now permeates the entire educational system.

In an utterly bizarre attempt to cope with the consequences of this stupid and ill thought out policy, male students at universities and colleges are forced to attend 'consent' classes where they are, presumably, taught the difference between 'yes' and 'no' and the myriad variations of 'maybe'. Female students are, curiously, not expected to attend these classes though this seems to be a rather sexist and narrow-minded approach since it is perfectly possible for a woman to force herself upon a man.

29

The Spectator magazine has published what is possibly the most pseud art review written since criticism was first invented.

In a piece about a work called 'Untitled', the critic wrote: 'It sings out loud, however, and the careful balance of composition, which crowds towards the right and uses empty space as a tool in itself, whirls the viewer around in an exuberant vortex of suggest form. The marks are alive with the energy of the infant, informed by the acuity of the observer.'

The work of art concerned (to use the term loosely) consists of an orange background covered in scribbles and roughly drawn ovals. If you had told me that the 'piktcha' had been created by a bad-tempered, blind-folded two-year-old I would honestly have believed you.

30

Over half of all voters aged between 18 and 24 say they are completely or partly homosexual. Or they may be bisexual. But they are apparently definitely not heterosexual. In no other era in history has homosexuality been as popular as it is today.

Is this because today's teachers have encouraged homosexuals to come storming out of the closet?

Or has teaching pushed children in that direction and made them think that they ought to be homosexual, that homosexuality is more fashionable and that being homosexual will dramatically increase their chances of getting a highly paid presenting job at the BBC?

December

1

No one could possibly avoid us of being predictable in our selection of property to buy. When estate agents ask us what we're looking for we invariably confess that we don't have the foggiest. We don't know what sort of house, where it should be, how much it should cost or what it should look like. We do know that it must have character.

We have now found a place on the south coast which we rather like. It is within strolling distance of the town and the seafront and has a wonderful river view. The snag is that it is being run as a guest house at the moment and the local council has as policy that it will not allow guest houses to be turned into private houses unless there is evidence that there really is no alternative – usually because the business is no longer viable.

Since the property has been on sale for over a year without any buyer being able to work out how to buy it and make a profit we think we might have a chance of convincing the council to concede.

I emailed the estate agent with information from the council and suggested that he invite the owner to request 'change of use' permission. To sweeten the deal, we even offered to pay the cost of obtaining planning permission.

We could, of course, always buy the place and pretend to run it as a guest house. That would mean that we would not have to pay any council tax since there is a 'tax holiday' in the area at the moment. We could simply charge £10,000 a night for bed and breakfast and then express surprise at the fact that no one came to stay.

But life is complicated enough as it is. We will try to persuade the council to behave sensibly and allow us to run the house as a home.

We spent much of the day in Cheltenham where there were still very few signs that Christmas is coming. I was brought up in Walsall in the English midlands in the 1950s and I remember the town being ablaze with Christmas lights and bright with home-made decorations. Every shop window was beautifully and lovingly decorated and there was holly and mistletoe everywhere. Rationing was still in force and there wasn't much available in the shops but everyone did what they could to celebrate the season and the birth of Christ. Britain was at the time an overtly Christian country, and proud of it.

Maybe the Cheltenham town council, and the local shopkeepers, are scared of offending the agnostic, *Guardian* reading do-gooders who believe that celebrating Christianity will upset the people with whom we are at war.

Personally, I can't see why they should be more upset by a few pretty lights than by the fact that we are bombing the shit out of the country they call home but maybe I'm missing something.

In one or two shops I did notice that members of staff were wearing cheap red pixie hats but I don't think that counts for much. I didn't see a sprig of holly, nor one of mistletoe. Only one shop (a toy shop) had a window display that recognised Christmas. I did however spot a small shop where the owner or manager had made a modicum of effort by draping tired tinsel over his products. I was particularly taken by a pink loo brush which was half covered with tinsel and a sign saying 'Santa Please Stop Here'. I don't think it was intended as a piece of street irony, it didn't seem to be that sort of shop, but I could be wrong.

I'm sorry now that we aren't in Paris this month. The shop window Christmas displays at Galeries Lafayette and Printemps near the Opera are marvellous and the French travel miles to look at them.

Back home we put up our Christmas tree. My main part in this was fetching the tree, and the associated boxes and bags full of ornaments, out of the cupboard where they live for 11 months of the year. Antoinette dresses the tree and does so beautifully. We are still using the tree which we bought for £9.99 from Woolworths in 1999 and although it is looking a little worn round the edges it has too much sentimental value for us to throw it out. It will, I think be with us for as long as I am here.

Even though it is artificial many of the 'needles' have dropped and some of the branches are now fairly bare but it doesn't matter because it's our tree, we still think it looks good and Antoinette covers it with decorations and lights. Moreover, since we have flagstone floors, and not shagpile carpet, sweeping up the fallen needles will be a simple task.

Over the years we have bought a huge number of traditional Victorian decorations and although one or two have broken and have had to be thrown away the numbers have swelled to the point where the tree's branches creak when it is fully decorated. Many of the decorations are real old friends now.

Every year Antoinette buys new lights and this year she has bought a string of cherry red lights and an enormously long string of white lights which flash in a dozen different ways. With the two strings of lights wrapped around it the tree looks better than ever.

Every time I see our tree I am reminded of the trees my parents bought when I was a boy. My father would clip on neat little candle holders and fit coloured wax candles into them. My mother would then drape the tree with paper chains. My father would then light the candles.

There were, surprisingly, very few fires and none of them of any real significance. Things were different in those days.

My other main contribution to the Christmas decorations involves hanging coloured baubles on the Christmas tree which is growing in our garden. Today it was blowing something of a gale and the baubles, when hung, danced around rather frantically.

I also put out the beautifully made crib which we bought in France and which consists of a beautiful wooden stable with the usual complement of figures and animals gathered around the baby Jesus in his crib. The crib helps ensure that we never forget what Christmas is really about. Sadly, that's something that is easy to do in these commercialised, politically correct times.

In the newspapers, the big news of the day is that patients with maturity onset diabetes (also known as diabetes 2) can be cured if they lose weight.

The *Daily Telegraph* has reported this as though it were an exciting revelation but I remember putting this into a book I wrote about 30 years ago – and feeling rather embarrassed at including such a self-evident truth.

Why do researchers keep repeating work which has been done decades ago? And why do medical journalists keep reporting their sillynesses as though they are genuine news?

To report that researchers have shown that patients with maturity onset diabetes can control their condition by losing weight is rather akin to reporting that pregnancy is associated with sexual intercourse and can be prevented by using some form of contraception.

Oh dear, I always feel so old when what purports to be news turns out to be history.

I don't think I've seen any 'medical news' for several years that was not merely regurgitated news from a decade ago.

2

Reading an issue of *Punch* dated 2.12.1953 I found this wonderful news item: 'A will recently proved described the Commissioners of Inland Revenue as depraved and sadistic men lacking in common decency.'

Hoorah for the deceased.

But how sensible of him to wait until he was dead to publish his views.

I also read today about an Austrian man who spotted 100,000 euros in bank notes floating down the river Danube. When the man jumped in and fished out the notes bystanders, who thought he was trying to drown himself, called the police who took the notes into custody. The man will get between 5% and 10% of the loot as a reward but if no one claims the money within a year (and can prove that it is theirs) he can keep the lot.

It occurred to me that anyone in Austria who had robbed a bank and wanted to launder it could do worse than toss it into a river, call the police and then fish the money out. It would then be laundered in both senses of the word.

I also saw today that a driver has been sent to prison because of evidence recorded by a motoring vigilante with a dashboard camera. I don't doubt that the motorist concerned was behaving badly, recklessly, dangerously and that he deserved the hefty prison sentence he was given, but it worries me that we seem to have become a world of sneaks. There are people who sit by the roadside with speed cameras, taking down car numbers and informing the police if they see someone doing 41 mph in a 40 mph. And there is, apparently, a new army of motorists who have cameras fitted to their cars so that they can film anyone doing anything they consider illegal, immoral or fattening. Where and when is this going to end? I'm worried about going out of the house in case someone films me stepping on the cracks in the pavement.

As Bertie Wooster might have said, when life wants to hit you behind the ear with a stuffed eelskin it does not give you due warning of its intentions.

3

During the Paris climate change talks the RAF was, on the British Prime Minister's instructions, deliberately bombing oil fields in Syria. The French were doing the same, as were the Americans. Great clouds of black smoke filled the air, drenching the atmosphere with pollutants as vast quantities of the earth's precious oil was deliberately destroyed.

Still, the people who flew in to attend the conference seem well pleased with themselves for there was much slapping of backs and self-congratulatory comments were as thick on the ground as they are at the annual wealth displaying shindig at Davos. There will, as a result, doubtless be many new rules and regulations coming our way concerning the disposal of rubbish and the provision of pensions to those not working for their government.

And I have no doubt that we common folk will be instructed to turn on our electrical appliances only when the sun is shining or the wind is blowing. Indeed, it is perfectly possible that we will all be instructed to go to bed and stay in bed, silent and obedient, when there is neither sunshine nor wind. If there is no wind there can be no television viewing or computer using. On dark, still days in winter we will all have to wash in cold water.

The climate change enthusiasts are creating a bleaker future than we need face, and I'm glad I'm not six, twelve or even eighteen. Today's young folk do not have a lot of fun ahead of them.

We are having considerable trouble with Amazon which sometimes seems to complicate simple things and over simplify complex things. So far this week we have received no less than six notifications that packets are on their way to us, and about to be delivered. And on all six occasions nothing appeared.

We were variously told that the weather was too bad (it was a little chilly but nothing else of note was happening), that Amazon had no power over its couriers (this seemed odd since the courier concerned is called Amazon Logistics and would, to the uninitiated in corporate matters, appear to have more than a passing acquaintanceship with Amazon itself), that Amazon Logistics was very busy (not much of an excuse) and that they couldn't find our house (since they have successfully delivered hundreds of parcels this didn't stand up to serious examination).

So in despair I sent an email explaining why these explanations did not hold water and I copied the email to Jeff Bezos, the Lord High Executioner of Amazon. (Emails sent direct to Mr Bezos are forwarded to the relevant department with a question mark attached. When Amazon employees receive an email which has been forwarded from Mr Bezos, and which has a question mark attached, they treat it as seriously as they would treat a tablet of stone.)

To our surprise, the missing parcels appeared that very evening – the delivery driver somehow managed to find us even in the dark, despite the fact that there was a little light drizzle in the air.

Thank you Mr Bezos.

I am, however, left with a haunting fear that there will come a time, not too far in the future, when it will no longer be possible to expect to have mail of any kind delivered if you live in the country.

When Royal Mail was privatised, the new owners were told that they would have to provide a service for every home in the country. But within minutes of taking over the company the new management cadre were muttering about it being unfair to expect them to deliver to rural addresses. There was talk of mail being left at central post offices and country dwellers being expected to pick up their own mail. Presumably, those elderly and frail residents without their own transport would just have to do without any mail at all.

To this fear must be added the fact that since village shops are disappearing fast, and even small towns are losing many of their retail establishments, there will soon come a time when living in the country will be a luxury most people won't be able to enjoy.

Indeed, I can't help wondering whether there is any future for shopping centres anywhere.

I have recently noticed that shops which seem to be busy are often doing very little real business at all. The customers who crowd around examining the merchandise are simply deciding what to buy. Some will do their online buying when they get home, some will do their spending in a nearby café and the brazen ones will whip out their mobile telephones and do their buying online while they are still in the shop.

If I were a shop manager I would be tempted to install some sort of blocking device designed to prevent customers doing this.

When shops have disappeared, the internet will be the only way to buy essentials such as clothing, shoes and even food and if there is no mail or parcel delivery to your home then you will, to put it politely, be stuffed.

Depressed by what is happening in the world, I've decided that I need a hobby: something which will captivate and which I can pick up or leave alone as the fancy takes me.

I have tried golf on many occasions but I know that I would need my own course if I were to try again. (Rules and I don't mix well. And I can't stand the idea of trudging around behind a pair of trolley pulling octogenarian lady members whose idea of speedy play is a hole an hour.)

The problem is that now that the world of publishing requires less time and energy (when you're publishing ebooks there is no need to deal with printers and the unremittingly annoying Royal Mail) and I have a little spare energy.

And since I am still a workaholic at heart I know that if I don't find something else to occupy a little time I will either spend all my time looking at my reviews (which is not good for the soul or the writing) or following the news.

I'm trying to cut down the amount of news I see because it's just too damned depressing; deceit after greed after conspiracy after injustice.

I have spent most of my life working as a newspaper and magazine columnist, and working for the media in general, and so I had to keep up with what was going on in the world. I also tried to follow what was going on in the world of finance so that I could manage our investments.

But the news is just too depressing these days and since our world is run by bureaucrats who have no interest in democracy there isn't much point in trying to get too involved.

Moreover, I feel that it is now quite impossible to invest sensibly or logically. Now that the world is run by crooked central bankers I have put most of our savings into gold sovereigns, index-linked bonds and national savings bonds. (Gold sovereigns are the best way for Britons to invest in gold since they count as currency and are, therefore, devoid of capital gains tax. And since they pay no interest and no dividend they are quite outside the clutches of HMRC.)

I would try bell ringing or competitive backgammon but both require meeting and talking to strangers and I don't fancy the idea of that very much at all. Besides, hobbies of that ilk mean being tied down and I've never liked having appointments. When I'm writing a book and nearing the end I just want to race on with it.

So I eventually decided that I'd try something in the collecting line.

I already have a huge book collection (including first editions of everything written by Wodehouse, Greene and Arthur Conan Doyle) and there really isn't any room left for too many more books. For years now we've been taking car loads of books to charity shops in a vain attempt to find out what colour our carpet is.

I have a vast collection of bound *Strand* magazines which already fill about 12 feet of bookshelf and I suppose I could fill in the gaps for there are a few volumes missing. But the volumes are absurdly heavy and if I bought more than two or three at a time I would need a sack truck or a wheelbarrow to get them back to the car. I could find the books I need to complete the set in about 20 minutes on the internet but where would the fun be in that? And if I completed the set I would have to buy more bookshelves or hire a carpenter to put up more shelving.

There's always philately, of course. I was a keen stamp collector when I was a boy and I still have the album I almost filled when I was 12-years-old or so. From time to time I've bought a few Victorian stamps (a few penny blacks and so on) and wandered into Edward VII's reign too. And I've tried collecting stamps thematically (I have a vast collection of stamps depicting cats and an album full of stamps celebrating Napoleon Bonaparte) but somehow stamps aren't enough. I buy a few and put them into the albums but the rare stamps are ridiculously expensive and the commoner stamps are just too easy to find.

I wanted something with a little challenge attached to it.

Coins have never attracted me, even though it is possible to put together a vast collection of old coins without much outlay. Even silver coins from the time of Queen Elizabeth I are remarkably affordable and Roman coins seem so cheap that I can only assume someone is either digging them up by the barrow load or making them in a factory in China.

I have been collecting penknives for years but already have a large enough collection to be able to describe myself as an armourer. The Romans brought folding blade knives to Britain two thousand years ago and multi-bladed knives were popular in the very early part of the 19th century. I've seen one that has a marlin spike that can be pulled out from the base of the handle. Despite the fact that many of the knives in my collection are tiny, made of silver, have pearl handles and were made to cut up fruit I have no doubt that if the 'authorities' force their way in and find them, they will report that they found a large collection of knives in my possession, making me sound like a danger to mankind. So I think I'd better slow down on the knife collecting. How sad it is that penknives are rapidly becoming a thing of the past. There was a time, not long ago, when there wasn't a boy or a man in the country who didn't have a penknife in his trouser pocket.

And so I came back to cigarette cards.

I had a small collection of cigarette cards when I was a boy and they fascinated me – largely because I found them attractive, entertaining and informative. Many, which date back to the early decades of the 20th century, are made of real photographs and are rumoured to have cost more to produce than the cigarettes with which they shared a box.

An uncle who had smoked far too many Woodbine cigarettes gave me a wooden box filled with cigarette cards. There were a few complete sets, some almost complete sets and a number of odd 'singles' as they are known to the trade. Another uncle left me a small tin box containing a few cards distributed with John Player cigarettes.

And at an auction a few years ago I found myself the proud owner of a large, beautifully made wooden chest full of cigarette card albums – and some complete sets of cards which had been carefully and professionally framed. I gave some of these cards to charity shops because I wasn't collecting them at the time but the rest I put on a shelf.

The owner of the cards had worked out that his collection was worth something north of £48,000, according to catalogue prices, but the value of cigarette cards has done very little in recent years as the number of collectors has fallen dramatically (many of the most enthusiastic collectors probably died of lung cancer and heart disease caused by the manufacturer of the product they were smoking in order to acquire the cards). I paid just £60 for the 'box and contents' containing the card collection.

(I have always found that the inevitable 'box and contents' is usually by far the most interesting item in any auction. These usually appear towards the end of an auction and tend to be ignored by the dealers and curiosity shop owners who dominate auctions. They are certainly ignored by the internet buyers who do most of the actual bidding.)

Complete sets of cigarette cards usually consisted of 25, 48 or 50 different cards and there was, of course, nearly always one card in each packet of cigarettes.

Tobacco companies stopped putting collectable cards in with their cigarettes many years ago but tea companies, petrol companies and other businesses followed their example in later years. However, 'tea cards' and 'trade cards' are not collected with much enthusiasm and are considered very much the poor relations. The themes tend to be less imaginative and the cards themselves are neither as beautiful nor as informative . So I'll stick to cigarette cards.

And there is no shortage of cards to collect. There are, altogether, reported to be 16,000 different issues and if each one has an average of 40 cards that's around 640,000 cards out there to collect. Buy a box of 1,000 assorted cards and sort through them and you'll be lucky to find a fraction of a single set, and sorting through a boxful of mixed cards in the hope that you will find a single card needed to complete a set is like sorting through a box of a thousand jigsaw puzzles, all broken into their constituent pieces, in the hope that you'll find the one piece you need to complete a puzzle you're doing. There is something engaging and liberating and calming about it.

And so I started to think seriously about collecting cigarette cards to keep me away from the damned news; interesting without being challenging, amusing (in the broadest sense of the word) without being exhausting.

And when I'd finished thinking I decided.

I will become a cartophilist.

I'm not the first, of course, to revert to a childhood hobby.

It's commonplace for collectors (mostly men) to go back to stamps, toy cars and cigarette cards in their dotage. It is partly an attempt to reconnect with old, forgotten joys. And it is partly inspired by a remembrance that these things are calming and satisfying and simple in a way that the world is most definitely not. And it is partly the joy that can be obtained by obsessively sorting, filing and displaying.

I'm going to specialise in collecting cards which were published before 1939 (the older ones are far more arcane and, therefore, infinitely more interesting) and I will be on the look out for the most unusual and eccentric sets I can find.

4

One of Mr Bezo's executives has written to apologise for our unfortunate experience with their delivery company and to promise that it will not happen again. I am seriously impressed. Very few British companies would have responded so immediately and so efficiently. In my experience if you complain to or about a British company you are likely to find yourself being threatened with legal action or told that your custom is no longer required. A generation ago, shop assistants were taught that `the customer is always right'. In Britain, today, the new mantra is: 'the customer is always wrong and a bloody nuisance to boot'.

It is no wonder that American internet companies are doing so much better than British internet companies. I wish that more bosses would follow Mr Bezo's example and lead from the top. Most British bosses are far more concerned with feathering their already well feathered nests than they are in keeping their customers satisfied.

Today's *Financial Times* carries a large feature on the UK which is illustrated with a picture of an NHS employee who is using a pen while wearing blue surgical gloves. This surprised me. If the gloves were sterile then they are now `dirty' because of the pen. If the gloves were 'dirty' then the pen is now contaminated. And administrators wonder why infections are endemic in the NHS. The problem is that politicians, doctors and scientists would much rather spend billions looking for new antibiotics than to spend a few bob organising an effective educational programme designed to teach NHS staff the basic rules about preventing the spread of infection. Sadly, no one inside or outside the NHS is much concerned with the fact that the organisation kills thousands every year through an ignorance of the basic rules of hygiene. I did contact the newspaper but could not excite any interest. Perhaps no one there understands the implications. Or maybe they don't think hospital acquired infections are a significant problem.

After spending three days waiting in for a constantly promised and disappointed delivery we discovered that a delivery driver from Parcel Force had dumped a parcel at the village shop; presumably because he was too damned lazy to drive to the house.

We didn't know it was there of course because the idle bastard hadn't bothered to visit the house so he hadn't been able to put a card through the letter box to say where he was leaving our parcel. We discovered where the parcel had been left after two weeks of complaining to the firm which had sent it. (The parcel contained three pairs of deck shoes which I use instead of slippers. They are far more comfortable and they have non slip soles. They only snag is that like everything made since 1980 they wear out quickly. I buy three pairs at a time since I know that they will soon stop making them and replace them with an 'improved' version that won't fit, will slip and will wear out even more rapidly.)

It is difficult to avoid the feeling that delivery drivers are getting lazier than ever and less interested in doing the job they are paid to do. What next? Hunt the parcel?

'We've dumped your parcel by a tree. It was a big tree with branches. Find the tree if you can and then you'll find your parcel.'

I know that delivering in a rural area can be a challenge (I once drove a fish delivery van and when I was at school I worked for Royal Mail delivering the post) and delivery companies (or 'logistics companies' as they like to describe themselves, for reasons which are beyond my understanding) push their drivers by giving them absurdly large numbers of parcels to deliver, but just dumping the mail at a shop instead of making any effort to take it to the house to which it is addressed seems to be wilful neglect.

Just a year or two ago, we could shame delivery drivers who made a fuss about driving down our narrow lane by telling them that teenage girls driving the grocery van manage the journey without fuss. Testosterone fuelled male drivers would huff and puff and announce that they could do anything a teenage girl could do.

But today's delivery drivers are beyond shaming. And the language problem makes it impossible to tell them about the teenage girl delivery drivers.

I sent the company a scorching email, complaining about the fact that we are expected to fetch our own parcels and complete their work for them but I am confident that my protest will be ignored. Parcel Force is, of course, associated with the Post Office and is, therefore, staffed by people accustomed to working for a nationalised industry. All nationalised industries, like the myriad branches of the civil service, regard members of the public in general, and customers in particular, as a damned nuisance. It is their legacy and our misery.

Lord Percival, his two sons and a friend were all pecking around underneath our bird feeders today. When I went outside the two sons and the friend wandered off but Lord Percival remained and looked me in the eye enquiringly. I threw him a handful of peanuts and he pecked away merrily until they had gone. We carried on like this for quite a while until he was pecking away around my feet, like a tame chicken. He would, I'm sure, have taken peanuts from my hand if I had been brave enough to try but he has a long, sharp looking beak and like domestic fowl he hits his targets hard when he pecks. I don't fancy losing my fingers so I fed him only on the ground.

The establishment's aggressive attack on the elderly is stepping up. A BBC quiz show host called Jeremy Paxman has proposed that the elderly should no longer be allowed to vote. He seems to think that the elderly are not entitled to vote because they make no contribution to the community. This is arrant nonsense but is, I suppose, the sort of thing one might expect from a BBC quiz show host.

Mr Paxman seems happy to ignore the fact that in most societies in history the elderly have been respected for their accumulated wisdom and he is obviously also content to forget that many of the elderly contribute enormously to society as volunteers. And he seems unaware that in order to become elderly most people will have had to work for many years and to have paid a good deal of tax.

Retirement used to be a respected and respectable state. No more. Those who rail against the elderly, and do their best to make life miserable for them, might like to reflect that they too will quite probably be old one day.

And it is no small comfort to know that when they are old, life will be a damned site more uncomfortable for them than it is for today's pensioners.

To be honest, it would make more sense to withdraw voting rights from the under 30s (on the grounds that they are too ignorant to vote) and from anyone who has not worked for say, at least a decade (on the grounds that it is absurd that people who never work should have a say in how the national cake is divided).

Finally, it would surely make very good sense to prohibit all BBC employees, past and present, from voting on the same grounds that lunatics are precluded from putting their X on a ballot paper.

5

I heard a youngster telling his chum that all old folk look the same (in, I suppose, the same way that occidentals have been known to complain that they find it difficult to tell Orientals apart, and vice versa).

In a way I can sympathise.

When elderly folk all wear beige and have the same dull hairstyle, they can look pretty well indistinguishable.

But, as Antoinette pointed out to me, all those under the age of 30 look pretty indistinguishable to the elders.

Teenagers and those in their 20s all seem to dress the same and they mostly seem to look the same too.

The girls generally wear trousers in the daytime (this makes them all crossdressers, of course). In the evening, they wear skirts or dresses which invariably fail to come within hailing distance of their pubic bones and which, in some cases, are closer to their armpits than their pudenda.

The boys dress either in jeans and hooded tops or in cheap suits. Most of them have jobs as management consultants or IT specialists and very, very few of them do anything useful involving spanners, pots of paint or wrenches. They all behave in the same way and if any of them grow up to be leaders then it will, I fear, be a clear case of the bland leading the bland.

Kids used to be arrogant at 14 but get over it by the time they left their teens and segue into human self-doubt by their early 20s. That was then. Today, kids remain drenched in a brand of hubris which they define as self-confidence for decades, until they realise they aren't quite as clever, as fit, as inviolable and as thin as they thought they were.

I've had an acknowledgement from Parcel Force but I doubt if anything useful will come of it.

The form of the reply (Dear Vernon) itself rather annoyed me for I hate it when people I don't know write to me using only my first name. Everyone seems to do it these days. A few years ago I wrote a book called *Mr Henry Mulligan* about an old man who became heartily cheesed off when people in the hospital where he was a patient insisted on referring to him as Henry. (That's not the story, but it's a small part of his character.) There's an intrinsic but unacknowledged lack of respect embedded in this habit. When new correspondents (usually from banks or utility companies) do this I tend to write back 'Dear Cuddles' or 'Dear Dimples'. They then write back correcting me and telling me their name is Mr Dalrymple or Ms Pettifog. I then write back telling that my name is Dr Coleman. And I refuse to communicate with them again until they get it right. I don't care a sausage if they think I'm a crotchety old bastard.

The truth will out. And there are some innocents who still believe that it will one day set us free.

Talking of names reminds me that when flicking through an old film book recently I noticed that the real name of W.C.Fields was William Claude Dukenfield.

When I wrote my novel *The Man Who Inherited a Golf Course* I called the hero Trevor Dukinfield and thought I'd made up the name. Now I rather suspect that my subconscious merely found it lying around among a pile of old, forgotten memories and brought it to the surface again.

6

In town today, I gave an old man a note and told him to buy himself a drink. He was sitting in a doorway, wrapped in an old blanket. There are more Britons than ever living in doorways these days and the number will rise steadily in the years to come. The British Government is spending more on Foreign Aid than ever (and much of it is wasted on useless computers or salted away in Swiss banks) but more and more of our elderly are living on the streets; reduced to begging or starving. Am I the only one who thinks that our priorities might have got mixed up somewhere along the line?

The old man looked up at me, uncertain for a moment that he heard me correctly, and then he smiled. His few remaining teeth were blackened stumps. He licked his lips, looked at the money and slipped it inside his coat for safety. 'Funnily enough, sir,' he said, 'that would be my own preference.'

We watched *Thin Man* star William Powell in a 1930 version of one of the Philo Vance stories today and although Powell himself was magnificent, many of the other actors had clearly learned their art working in the silent movie business.

It occurred to Antoinette and I that there is quite a trick to pulling a face to indicate a specific emotion or reaction and we spent a happy 20 minutes doing our best to create facial expressions which would suit such scenarios as 'Man betrayed by his true love', 'Woman discovers truth about her parentage', 'Man finds that all his money has been stolen by crooks' and so on. You get the idea. It would make a great Christmas party alternative to Charades.

7

I visited the dentist and complained that since my last visit to the hygienist my teeth had been sore and sensitive. I asked if it was possible that her scraping and digging might have damaged the ageing enamel. The dentist made a perfunctory examination, which lasted about two minutes, told me that he thought everything looked fine and recommended that I make an appointment to see the hygienist again.

I think it's time to find a new dentist.

I am prepared to absorb short-term pain in order to 'buy' medium and long-term protection but I am not prepared to put up with long term pain in order to keep my teeth and gums happy.

When we tried to leave the dental surgery we found that someone had parked their car in such a selfish way that we couldn't move. I eventually found the driver and asked him if he would be kind enough to move his vehicle a foot or two. He was, inevitably, on the telephone.

'Would you please move your car!' I repeated.

He glowered at me.

'People's lives are at risk.'

'Whose?'

'Yours.'

I celebrated the fact that I don't need to have any teeth filled by deciding to move our website to a new domain host. This was a bad decision. I stupidly assumed that moving a domain name which I own to another company would be easy. This was woefully naïve of me.

I emailed the new company we had chosen and asked them if they could help me. They emailed back telling me to telephone. So I telephoned. The man who answered the telephone said that I had to visit their website. So I visited the website where I found myself facing the usual impenetrable selection of buttons and advertisements. Eventually I managed to trek through to the part of the site where I could give them my credit card details. This part of the site also managed to be impenetrable and counter intuitive. The damned company even managed to splatter their payment page with jargon which didn't mean anything.

But in the end I managed to pay them.

With great glee I emailed the previous domain host, and told them we didn't want them anymore. Good riddance.

And then we thought we'd try moving the domain names.

Ah.

The new company's website told me that in order to move the domains I had to obtain the permission, approval and help of the previous company. So, feeling rather stupid I rang them. Have you ever heard of anything dafter? You fire a company for mismanaging an asset and then you have to beg them to help you continue to use something you've paid for.

Anyway, I got nowhere because before they could give me what I needed, the old company needed some special name servers which the new company hadn't provided. So I had to ring the new company and ask them for their name servers (whatever they are). This took another half an hour and the day was disappearing fast. Eventually I had the details I needed so I rang the old company back again and set about working my way through their impenetrable phone management system.

Press 1 if you want to speak to someone about your domain web host dreamweave dual server conglomerating facilitation programme, press 2 if you want to speak to someone about your gnutella cracker shortcut router, press 3 if you want to consolidate your download driver motherboard malware bandwidth compatibility quotient, press 4 if you are looking to byte your boot buffer cloud compatibility compression cookies and press 75 if you are just too damned bored to carry on.

When I got through to something that seemed as though it could be a real human being I gave him the information the other bloke had given me and he (the new bloke) said they'd do the transfer within 24 hours which seemed very nice of him since it meant that I will have no website for 24 hours and I don't understand why it takes anyone 24 hours to press a button which must be just about all it takes.

Why do IT people insist on making life unbearably complicated?

Why for example do they use the word account reference, user name, domain name, email address, password, private code word and so forth as though they are constantly interchangeable? I never know what they want and I have a theory they do this because they know, deep down in their hearts, that they are very stupid people and that their only way to lord it over the rest of us is to invent secret pathways which only they understand.

Well, it doesn't work. The secret pathways may be impenetrable but I am not fooled: I know that the world of computers is dominated by, and largely populated by, stupid people and I no longer care that the one IT person who reads this will give this book one star and doom it to a life of darkness.

The whole business of using complicated passwords is a farce. Anyone who believes that there is any privacy to be had on the internet, or on any electronic device, is living in a fantasy world.

There is really no point in having passwords and encryption is a dangerous and useless concept because if you try to hide stuff on the internet the police, the Government and local councils everywhere will notice your attempt to hide what you are doing and will, if they cannot break your protection, force you to let them peep at whatever you have said, sent or saved.

And another thing: why is it that if a computer is sick with a piece of errant software, or you are doing something wrong, the damned machine will fill you to the gills with technological red herrings instead of telling you what is wrong. Computers (and by extension) computer and software designers are clearly very, very stupid.

The one (unintentional) light moment in my website saga came when I received an email from Names.co.uk to say how sorry they were to see me go (I wouldn't be going if they'd replied to my earlier emails) and I saw that in their email they managed to sprinkle the text with all sorts of odd capitals and hieroglyphics which, sadly, I can't begin to reproduce because none of them is on my keyboard.

I was amused by this because this was exactly what their damned software had done to my website.

8

Enoch Powell once pointed out that every political life ends in failure and he was right.

The careers of Blair, Thatcher, Heath and Wilson in Britain and Clinton, Bush, Carter, Obama and Bush again all ended in failure in the USA.

Ronald Reagan, widely regarded around the world as the most popular American President of the 20th century, was, I suppose, the one modern exception. And the exception that proves the rule.

However, the difference these days is that the failures can make huge amounts of money after they retire.

I read today that Gordon 'the moron' Brown, the man who claimed he had abolished boom and bust and rescued the world from disaster, and who was surely the main architect of Britain's economic permanent decline, has followed in the footsteps of his very good friend Tony Blair and taken employment with a large American financial company.

Brown, almost certainly the worst Chancellor of the Exchequer in British history and a financial buffoon of heroic measure will be advising Pimco, an investment firm.

Laughably, Brown (who famously sold Britain's gold at a low point and cost the county a fortune) will advise Pimco on its investments. I have immediately checked to make sure that none of our investments is being managed by Pimco. Hiring Brown to advise on financial matters is like hiring the unbearable McCanns for advice on baby sitting or consulting Ian Brady for advice on setting up a child care nursery.

Curiously, in the same week that I read of Brown's immense good fortune (a seven figure annual fee was talked about) it was revealed that Alistair Darling, who was Chancellor of the Exchequer during Brown's disastrous premiership, was joining Morgan Stanley, another American bank.

In the week of Darling's announcement, Morgan Stanley laid off 1,200 members of staff who had not been Chancellors of the Exchequer. Perhaps Morgan Stanley had to lay them off in order to find the money to pay Mr Darling.

These aren't the only seemingly unemployable Labour party grandees to have found curious employment.

Numerous staffers who worked for Labour party politicians and who spent years furiously attacking banks and other sectors have now found themselves hugely well-paid jobs in those industries.

And, of course, Liberal Democrat MPs who lost their seats at the last election have also managed to wangle good jobs for themselves. So, for example, Danny Alexander, a 43-year-old who lost his seat at the election and was (quite bizarrely) given a knighthood as a consolation prize after losing his seat, has been given a powerful and enormously well-paid job as vice president of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

When the job as advertised, the AAIB said that the job required 'a minimum of 20-25 years in a leadership function and position of influence in multilateral development bank(s) or equivalent'.

So, what was Alexander's previous employment experience?

He was a press officer at the Cairngorms National Park.

Politicians look after one another, you see.

It seems that we have now reached the point where any publicity really is good publicity.

9

If you want to queue at the tills in WHSmith these days you need to take a packed lunch and a thermos flask so I've forced myself to start using the self-service machines.

The staff, who aren't bright enough to have worked out that when shoppers all use the machines, they will no longer have jobs, encourage customers to do everything themselves.

Of course, this may be because many of them, like shop assistants everywhere, seem to find even the simplest of financial transactions to be something of a trial. They must live in dread of their automatic till having a breakdown and leaving them to add up £1.39, £4.50 and £2.00 without the aid of a computer. And giving out change? Oh dear. That would be quite impossible.

'You gave me a £5 note and the magazine cost £4.95 so that means I've got to give you 50 pence change.'

'No, try again.'

'You've got to give me another 50 pence?'

'No, keep going.'

‘I owe you £5 in change?’

‘Not quite.’

‘I give up. How much change would you like?’

I hate the fact that the machines nag constantly (‘Have you taken one of our gossamer thin plastic bags?’, ‘Please remove your foot from the bagging area’, ‘Would you like to buy one of our special offers? We have ridiculously pricey water, second-hand World War II armoured cars and cushions on special offer today’) but I hate the long queues to see a real person even more.

Today as I struggled with a particularly bad-tempered machine, I noticed a sign warning me: ‘No £50 notes or euro’s’. Oh dear.

And in what used to be a bookshop, too.

I was surprised not by the fact that the store won’t accept £50 notes which are perfectly legal currency but by the fact that no one working there seems to have noticed the rogue apostrophe.

Still, everyone does it these days.

I couldn’t help noticing that the carpets in Smiths are as bad as ever and still living down to their reputation. Still, I don’t suppose they can afford to spend much on carpets since the company’s boss was paid just under £4 million this year.

It does seem rather a lot to pay a guy who presides over the grubbiest, most unwelcoming store in the land.

A parcel delivery driver who arrived today told me that just before calling on us he had delivered 600 parcels to one address. My first thought was that the recipient must have a lot more friends than we have but Antoinette said she thought that the recipient of all these parcels was probably a businessman with a small shop. I suspect that she’s right.

It is well known that many village shop owners purchase their comestibles not from a warehouse but from their nearest branch of Tesco. They fill their old Land Rover (or, if they are doing well, their new Range Rover) with boxfuls of stuff, re-price everything and put it on their shelves.

And I suspect that the person who ordered 600 items from the internet was doing the same thing.

It is now considerably cheaper to buy stuff from an internet supplier than from any bricks and mortar establishment in the high street, or even from a warehouse selling direct to the retail trade.

It was, I suppose, only a matter of time before local shops started buying their stock from stores such as Amazon which will often sell items at a real market busting price.

When I published hardback and paperback book editions of my books, a member of my staff once drew my attention to the fact that book buyers could buy brand new copies of my books on Amazon for less than it cost me to have them printed. They were certainly selling the books for much less than they paid me for them. I couldn’t get my head round that. And, to be honest, I still can’t.

We have spent much of the last week struggling with the wonders of the world that is run by IT people.

Having been unable to access (and therefore update) my website for some months we decided that we would find another host for the domain name. It seemed a simple enough plan. After all, moving gas supplier is pretty straightforward. How difficult could it possibly be to move a website from one hosting company to another hosting company?

The answer is: very difficult indeed.

Indeed, they couldn’t make it more complicated if they tried. The idea, presumably, is to protect the industry and make all the hefty fees seem reasonable – in the same way that solicitors take three months to buy a house when a half-witted card table could do it in two hours.

The first problem is that the websites of the people flogging hosting services are counter intuitive and seem to have been designed by people whose only experience of communication is in devising those software games which depend upon code breaking skills.

I thought I was accustomed to professional jargon but not even the world of social work has invented jargon with as much mad enthusiasm as the IT world. I’ve never known people to hide behind jargon quite as much as this lot. Since I’ve always thought that people who hide behind jargon probably do so because they’re pretty stupid, and don’t really know what they are doing, my hopes were not raised by this discovery.

The second problem is that the fee structures are incomprehensible and there appear to be different fees for everything you want to do. It’s all rather reminiscent of Chico Marx talking to his brother Groucho in that wonderful *At the Races* scene where Chico is flogging Groucho a series of tipster books.

The third problem was the delays involved. When I told the host company we had been using that I wanted to move, they took down the website instantly. But even if we moved with the speed of light it was, we were told, going to take 48 hours for the site to reappear on the new host’s servers. No one could explain why.

And the final problem was back to the first problem: the jargon.

It is impossible to ask questions these days – if you do then the person you have questioned will be offended, they will refuse to do business with you and that will be the last you will ever hear of them. Offend a builder and he will pull up his baggy jeans and walk off site; offend an IT person and he will sulk and do terrible things to your website; offend a dentist and the consequences don't bear thinking about.

So, in despair, I found myself playing the jargon game and sent this email to one pompous IT expert: 'I've realigned the conciliatry dampers on the coryzal management endplates but the elliptical contrast signal is till dysfunctional. Can you advise?'

See, it's easy. Anyone can make this stuff up.

In the end we gave up and begged the original host to take back the website.

Pitiful.

10

A couple who have rented a nearby cottage have the world's two noisiest dogs. They are, not surprisingly, cocker spaniels. (The dogs, that is, not the couple who are renting the nearby cottage.)

I say not surprisingly, because cocker spaniels bark more and bark louder and for longer than any other breed of dog. Not even the very small dogs, which always seem to make a quite disproportionate amount of noise (some of them are so small that it would seem to make more sense to wring them out occasionally, rather than bother taking them for a walk) make as much noise as cocker spaniels.

A cocker spaniel puppy fighting over a bone was once measured as having barked 907 times in ten minutes.

In contrast, the quietest animal in the world seems to be the African basenji which, I am told, almost never barks. This is, so I am assured, because the animal has spent many generations hiding from leopards and the last thing you want to do if you are in leopard country is bark a good deal.

For the record, I should mention that although an African basenji may not bark overmuch it will occasionally enjoy a nice bit of yodelling.

I rather think I could live with an eccentric, yodelling dog but the barky barky spaniels are a pain and I consider their owners as welcome as bindweed salesmen.

We haven't seen Lord Percival for two days. And two days ago we heard gunshots in a nearby wood. The shooters were out and about and we have an awful feeling that our feathered friend will be visiting us no more.

Strangely, I have to admit that I hope they ate him; and didn't just shoot him for the fun of it.

I rang the company which mismanages my pension fund today, to ask why I hadn't received a copy of the new Terms and Conditions which they promised to send me a week ago. A very snooty woman told me that the Terms and Conditions would be posted to me today. 'Our policy is to wait a week before sending out any mail to you,' she said. 'This is to improve our service and for your convenience.'

I sat and thought about this for ten minutes and then gave up when I started to get a headache.

11

In London I bought a book by George W Steevens entitled *With Kitchener to Khartoum*. Steevens (I have no idea why he spelt his name with the extra 'e' but he did) used to work for the *London Daily Mail* back in the days when it was a newspaper and he was described by legendary American newspaperman H.L.Mencken as the greatest journalist who ever lived. Indeed, I was only reminded of Steevens's existence when re-reading Mencken's autobiographies, and a collection of his newspaper pieces edited by Alistair Cooke.

Mencken wrote some brilliant stuff and was an acute political observer. 'As democracy is perfected,' he wrote, 'the office of the president represents, more and more closely, the inner soul of the people. On some great and glorious day, the plain folks of the land will reach their heart's desire at last and the White House will be occupied by a downright fool and complete, narcissistic moron.'

Steevens's book, published in 1898, is an extraordinary volume. Despite the fact that it was published with astonishing speed from the author's dispatches, it is beautifully bound, with one of those illustrated covers which were favoured before the introduction of dust jackets, and equipped with fold out maps bound in with the text. The last sentence of the book is, perhaps, surprising. 'I do not believe,' wrote Steevens, 'that any of us who come home whole will think, from our easy-chairs, unkindly of the Sudan.'

As we wandered around London I was constantly aware that the city is now awash with CCTV cameras. It is almost impossible to walk along any London street without being watched by someone hired by the Metropolitan Police to play professional nosey parker. What is the point? A recent government study concluded that the CCTV cameras failed in their primary objective of deterring crime and catching criminals. Only 3% of street crimes are solved using CCTV technology and crime rates in Britain's capital are rising rapidly. The police have explained their failure by saying that the criminals are hiding their faces with hats, scarves and masks. It appears that none of those responsible for spending hundreds of millions of pounds of our money on this daft, intrusive scheme thought that this might happen. Indeed, some of those who wasted our money and squandered our privacy now consider it highly unfair of criminals to cheat the cameras in such a simple way. The police chief whose stupidity led to this vast waste of money remains anonymous and, therefore, unrated by any internet site.

After wandering up Charing Cross Road we tottered into Gerrard Street, the heart of London's Chinatown,

The last time we went to Chinatown, a year or so ago, I insisted that Antoinette tried out her Mandarin on some of the shopkeepers. I am massively proud of the fact that she is teaching herself Chinese with the aid of books and tapes. (She has already taught herself to play the piano and to paint excellent impressionist landscapes.)

'What should I say?' she whispered, as we entered the first shop.

'What can you say?' I murmured.

'I learned several new phrases this week,' she told me.

The three phrases she had learned from a DVD were 'I want you to give me the cat now.' 'Do you have flowers suitable for a funeral.' and 'The birds in the garden are singing happily.'

I said I thought the one about the birds would probably be the most appropriate. So she tried that one. The shopkeeper seemed delighted but puzzled. He bowed, in the elegant Chinese way, and said something back in Chinese.

'What did he say?' I asked.

'I'm not sure,' admitted Antoinette.

It is, of course, always far more difficult to understand a native speaker than it is to say something to them.

'Smile, bow and ask for the cat,' I told her.

The Chinese shopkeeper seemed even more confused, though I would not have thought that possible, thought for a moment, opened a cupboard on his left and presented Antoinette with a copy of Mao Tse Tung's *Little Red Book*.

'What do I do?' whispered Antoinette.

'Accept it gracefully, bow again and back out of the shop,' I suggested.

And so she did. I bowed, grinned like an idiot and followed her.

I like to think that we have today done our part in helping to cement relationships between our two countries.

On the way home on the train I noticed that my book *Secrets of Paris*; has been hammered again, by a reviewer who stabbed it in the vitals with a nasty one star review.

The Secrets of Paris seems to divide readers into three groups. The first group love it and think it is the very funny, light account of Paris and the Parisians which I hoped it would be when I wrote it. The second group loathe it because they don't think I treat Paris and the French with sufficient respect. They don't like the light-hearted approach and complain bitterly that there isn't enough about Art and Culture in the book. They also complain that I am horrid for mentioning that the Parisians can be rude. (This moan comes, I suspect, from those whose visits to Paris are confined to a few holidays in a smart hotel where the staff come from another continent and are trained to bow and scrape. The third group don't like the book because they didn't read the blurb and expected the book to contain lists of hotels, museums and shops, together with opening times and lists of bargains to be had in the sales. They review the reference book they wanted to read, rather than the light-hearted, anecdote-rich book I had written, and some of them write extraordinarily cruel, hysterical and wildly imaginative reviews.

When the book came out as a hardback, the professional reviewers were very kind about it and reviewers for the specialist French press said extremely complimentary things. *French* magazine even chose it as their 'Book of the Month'. The book proved surprisingly popular among the French too, for they have a sophisticated sense of humour. I didn't receive a single letter of complaint. Everyone who read it seemed to enjoy it for what it is – a light-hearted, personal look at Paris and the Parisians.

But the ebook version has attracted a storm of abuse and at one point the lies and nastiness were so bad that I considered un-publishing it. For a gentle, harmless, genuinely inoffensive book, which was never intended to do anyone harm, *Secrets of Paris* has received an extraordinary amount of abuse.

I can understand some of my tough medical books receiving abuse – drug company hacks are often hired to write nasty reviews to try to stop the sales and prevent damage to the sales of their more lethal products. But the venom directed at *Secrets of Paris* has really surprised me. I can't help feeling that the whole thing illustrates the main difference between old-fashioned publishing and ebook publishing.

Secrets of Paris was written as a light-hearted love letter to Paris. Antoinette and I have had a home there for the whole of our married life and before that I had been a regular visitor to the city for well over half a century. Plonk me down anywhere in the city and I can immediately tell you where I am and how to get where I would rather be. Some readers criticised my book *Secrets of Paris* because, although I make it clear that I love the city, I mention the fact that it is difficult to love the Parisians because they are, in general, so damned rude (and, in many cases, proud of being damned rude). Readers of the book who hadn't actually visited the city, or whose experiences were limited to a few tourist visits, criticised me for what they saw as a form of literary racism. The fact is that anyone who has ever visited the French capital will know exactly what I meant.

Most readers of the ebook, like readers of the hard back book, understand the purpose of the book and realise that the humour is neither cruel nor intended to wound. It is traditional English humour; all irony and self-mocking rather than sharp satire. But a few ebook readers seem to take themselves so seriously that they simply don't understand this sort of book. I suspect it is, perhaps, because they are, quite simply, unaccustomed to the process and delight of reading.

I should, I suppose, welcome them to the world of books.

But I find that difficult.

I'd much rather they tried out their new reading skills on someone else's books and left mine alone.

12

I heard a sportswoman being interviewed on the wireless.

'I could have beaten him if I could play better,' she complained.

The interviewer seemed to think this a sensible answer.

It occurs to me that much of what passes for 'interviewing' these days is merely a case of the bland leading the bland.

I don't usually patronise the charity book shops run by Oxfam because they have done enormous damage to privately run second-hand bookshops and, moreover, I have a suspicion that all the decent books have been creamed off to be sold online or at auction and anything half decent will usually be absurdly over-priced.

But from the 99 pence box in an Oxfam shop I today picked up a copy of *The Gentle art of making Enemies* by James Abbott McNeill Whistler (whose mother is the subject of his most famous painting). The book is 334 pages of angry letters, articles and rebuttals by an artist who hated all critics (but especially the pompous Ruskin) with every bone in his body. I was so ashamed to realise that I knew very little about Whistler's work that I immediately ordered an illustrated book full of reproductions of his paintings from a seller on eBay.

Whistler would explode with rage if he saw what the trolls do on social media these days and even though he would recognise that feeding them just encourages their venomous outburst I doubt if he would be able to ignore them.

Survival today in any artistic endeavour is very much dependent on not giving a sparrow's fart about what anyone thinks about you on the internet.

I wish the big stores would stop telling their staff to praise their customers' selections when putting stuff into bags and banging the prices into the till. Marks and Spencer staff must still be the worst. Buy a jumper and the assistant will drool and tell you what wonderful taste you have and how simply marvellous the jumper is. Buy a pair of socks and they'll enthuse about the colour. I strongly suspect that if you buy a pack of knickers, they'll congratulate you on your foresight, artistic vision and general perspicacity. 'What a lovely choice. Wonderful taste. I must pop and get some of these myself before we sell out.'

And the bags!

I bought another 'bag for life' from Marks and Spencer the other day. It is made of thin plastic and will be a bag for life only if sold to someone who is 103-years-old and never goes shopping.

A kind reader of mine from the USA has written to share some of his pet peeves – all of which I share.

We both get annoyed when banks and other financial institutions and government departments send a form which has to be completed and enclose an envelope which must be used for the reply but which is too small to contain the form unless the latter is folded half a dozen times.

And why, he wonders, do payments go out of his bank account within nano seconds but payments into his account take at least five working days? This is a rhetorical question, of course. We both know it's so that there's enough money to pay multi million pound bonuses to worthless bank executives.

My reader also confirms my observation that people frequently become depressed after receiving good news. He told me that when he was promoted at work and realised that he had reached his final goal, he became depressed enough to need treatment. He wisely stopped the pills and dealt with his depression himself when the drug affected his hearing.

Lord Percival is back. We rejoiced. I fed him peanuts and he and I chatted together about this and that.

13

An aged acquaintance of ours has had a fall and bruised some ribs. He is a lively, rather firm-minded soul whose doormat has the instruction ‘Come back when you’ve got a warrant’ printed on it.

We ignored the instructions printed on the doormat and took him a bottle of whisky to help him get better.

‘Do you think that’s a good idea?’ asked Antoinette when I bought the hooch. ‘He might fall over again.’ I told her that whisky is a proven medicine. It makes an excellent anaesthetic and a splendid antiseptic. It helps deal with insomnia and toothache. When the film *African Queen* was being made all the cast and crew fell ill with terrible diarrhoea and vomiting and the only two who didn’t spend most of their time queuing for the loos were John Huston and Humphrey Bogart. The director and male star avoided illness by avoiding the water completely and drinking only whisky.

Incidentally, isn’t it odd that whereas children and young folk who end up horizontal, or thereabouts, are said to have fallen over, but anyone over the age of 70 who suffers the same indignity will always be said to have ‘had a fall’, as though they had nothing to do with it. ‘Oh dear little Camilla has fallen over,’ we say. ‘And Granny has had a fall.’

14

We live in a world in which service is now an alien concept; something slightly comical, outdated and somehow contemptible. This change has affected doctors, lawyers, bankers, journalists and broadcasters, who have all drifted down to the ethical and professional level of estate agents. Any sense of public service has long since been lost and for many the sole aim in life now seems to be personal advancement, enrichment and aggrandisement.

In the old days it was possible for a man (or woman) to have the same solicitor, accountant and bank manager for the whole of his (or her) life. There would be trust and continuity and the business relationship would be cemented by genuine friendship. It is a great sadness that this no longer happens. Professionals are always eager to be on the move, looking for greener pastures and richer clients. Besides, their primary loyalties must now be to the ‘authorities’ rather than their clients.

A small town solicitor wrote to us the other day and sent details of his terms of business. He charges £198 per hour for house conveyancing, a task which could be done by the sort of robot which you can buy on eBay for a fiver. One of those self-service tills they have in Smith’s could complete a house conveyancing in five minutes flat.

If he works modest hours the solicitor should make well over £250,000 a year profit, which is nearly as much as a novice estate agent can hope to take home.

Bankers and financial advisors who would at one time actually care about their clients now treat them as mere cash cows; many are quite charming but they are cut from the same cloth as car salesmen and insurance salesmen and their job is not to make money for you but to make money from you for them.

The UK’s financial regulator has just reported that around six in ten customers of UK wealth managers and private banks receive unsuitable advice. So, for example, it has been revealed that a customer who was over 90-years-old was listed as having ‘a medium risk appetite and a 20 year investment horizon’.

It seems that investment managers frequently give irrelevant or inappropriate advice and often dump their clients into stocks which suit their firm’s requirements, rather than the needs of the customer. And for all this cheating, gouging and churning they charge unconscionably large fees.

What saddens me is that the Financial Conduct Authority, the useless quango which produced the report and which is stuffed with well-paid individuals hired to protect the public, will simply report that this is happening but won’t do a damned thing about it.

The modern method for the Government and government departments is for a group of £1,000 a day retired judges, and other out of touch dementia sufferers, to spend 10 to 15 years of their retirement preparing a report. In doing so they will make sure that everyone who might possibly be criticised in the report is perfectly happy with whatever has been written about them. The report will then be published on Christmas Day or during a war or other international crisis so that anyone who still cares won’t notice.

I saw today that the world’s leaders and their hangers on are busy congratulating themselves again on having solved the Climate Change problem and saved the planet from heating up, cooling down and being invaded by Martians.

After a lot of expensive wining and dining (all at taxpayers’ expense) the delegates and the 40,000 hangers on, aides, assistants and valets who flew in their private jets to France to attend the Paris beano (sorry conference) to save the planet, came up with a definitive plan which will, so they claim, ensure that countries stop using nasty fuels such as oil, coal and gas and will instead force them to rely entirely on solar power and wind power and other, as yet undiscovered sources of power which Bill Gates is going to discover (and which will, if it is anything like his bloody

Windows software turn out to be unbelievably complicated, ridiculously expensive and unreliably unreliable).

Sadly, on closer reading, the statement they have all agreed to endorse isn't quite as convincing as they are suggesting.

In fact, history will show that the 2015 Paris climate change conference was as big a waste of time, effort and energy as the many previous climate change conferences.

In order to achieve agreement (and to persuade the big, powerful, heavy polluting countries to sign up to something that would prove politically and commercially inconvenient and which would, therefore, never be taken seriously) the word 'shall' was removed from the document and replaced with the word 'should'.

So the countries who signed the document have agreed that in order to save the planet we 'should' all do this and that, but only 'if it is economically, technologically and politically viable'.

They would have done more to save the planet if they had all stayed at home and kept their hot air for a chilly day.

But, of course, the elite don't much like staying at home. They much prefer rushing around busying themselves and interfering with our lives. And they can sometimes reach hubristic heights that must give them nosebleeds.

So, for example, consider this quote taken from an article in the *Financial Times* by a hack called Martin Wolf: 'Losers have votes, too…If they feel sufficiently cheated and humiliated they will vote for Donald Trump in the US, Marine Le Pen of the National Front in France or Nigel Farage of the UK Independence Party. There are those, particularly the native working class, who are seduced by the siren song of politicians who combine the nativism of the hard right, the statism of the hard left and the authoritarianism of both.'

I find it hardly believable that anyone can possibly dare to hold such obscene views – let alone express them – but Wolf's self-satisfied, superior, condescending views are a perfect example of hubristic elitism and a good explanation of why Europe and America are heading for a revolution. I don't think I have ever read a more arrogant, patronising piece but, sadly, Wolf is not exceptional. He seems to me to be typical of the liberal, metropolitan elite who think of themselves as Britain's solution but are Britain's problem.

The son of a Jewish refugee, Wolf was an active socialist for many years and is now an editor at the *Financial Times*. Neither Wolf nor the *FT* as a whole seems to understand that the disappointed, the fearful and the angry are not a minority, they are a majority. Many still vote for the big parties because they know that our electoral system is rigged in their favour. But none of that alters the fact that they feel deprived, ignored and desperate. Anyone who truly cares for Britain, England, the poor and the sick has no real choice but to support the UKIP principles, for only elitists with selfish motives can possibly support our membership of the European Union, a patently fascist organisation.

If the unbearably snooty Mr Wolf seriously thinks that 12.6% of the people in Britain who voted for UKIP at the 2015 election are all 'losers' then he should perhaps emigrate to a more acceptable country. He is apparently a regular participant at the widely reviled Bilderberg meetings and should not, therefore, have too much difficulty in finding somewhere else to settle.

15

We visited friends who have an indoor swimming pool.

Outdoor pools are a nightmare and estate agents always say that having one knocks £20,000 off a house because most people get fed up with all the complicated and expensive things you have to do to keep the leaves out of the water and to get rid of the slugs and snails which fall in. But a private, indoor pool is a splendid boon. You can go for a quiet swim whatever the weather and not have to worry about noisy kids and boorish teenagers showing off by doing belly flops an inch from your nose.

We don't have either an indoor or an outdoor pool. I prefer to take my exercise at the bar billiards table.

After luncheon, our friend insisted on taking his post prandial dip. I noticed that he swam only on his back and asked him if there was a medical reason for this. He told me that when he was young his mother had insisted that it was unwise to go swimming on a full stomach. So he swam on his back instead.

He is a cautious man and Antoinette and I believe that when he went down on one knee to propose to his wife he probably wore a pair of those plastic knee protectors which nervous skateboarders wear when they are more frightened of breaking a patella than they are of not looking cool. His wife, who is over generously endowed in the milk producing gland department, and who has a chest which always arrives in a room a good few seconds before the rest of her, wore a T-shirt with the word Giants printed on the front. While she was busy pouring drinks and her husband was still busy floundering in the pool, Antoinette said she wondered why the woman felt the need to draw attention to the obvious. I pointed out that Giants is the name of an American football team and that the woman had doubtless acquired the clothing item on one of their frequent shopping trips to the United States.

When we got back home I discovered that the book containing reproductions of Whistler's work had arrived and that our kindly postman had left it in the large plastic box which we leave near the front door for the purpose.

The American was a marvellous portrait painter who also painted terrific landscapes, mostly in a beautiful impressionist style. He was, it seems, equally at home with oils, watercolours or pastels.

This evening I discovered why modern kids are so bloody rude and noisy.

While trying to find a film I wanted to watch, I caught a few moments about a documentary set in a modern school. The children were noisier and less well behaved than monkeys in a cage and reminded me of the protagonists in Golding's novel *The Lord of the Flies*. It did seem to me from the snippet I saw that the teachers are to blame. When I was a boy the wall at the back of our classroom was pock marked with holes caused by the wooden blackboard rubber which our form teacher regularly hurled at anyone who dared to murmur aloud. Today's teachers just stand there apologising as the kids hurl rocks and knives at them.

When I went to bed I looked at the news and noticed that it is now being said by half the climate change scientists (officially, of course) that the weather during the last year has been the worst on record.

The other half of the climate change scientists say that the weather has been the hottest on record.

They agree only that it has been the most of something and that it's unique nature is a result of man-made global warming.

Oh, and they agree that there have, so they say, been more storms, hurricanes, tornadoes and other extreme weather incidents than at any previous time in history. This is, of course, absolute gibberish as anyone who hasn't spent the year on Mars will know perfectly well. It is another attempt by the global warming conspiracy theorists to convince us all that we must sort our rubbish into 15 different containers and spend our holidays sitting quietly at home.

16

In Cheltenham, a man choked to death in a branch of McDonalds. It is reported that although the man was obviously in distress, and in desperate need of help, customers stepped over him in order to take his place in the queue and reach the counter more speedily.

What makes me suspect that these human excrescences were keen bloggers and tweeters? Indeed, they were probably staring at their mobile phones as they stepped over the dying man.

I was not surprised to read this sad story. On several occasions I have been present at sporting events when spectators have collapsed. On every occasion I found that the survivors would do absolutely nothing that got in the way of their enjoying the event. At a cricket match at Edgbaston cricket ground in Birmingham I had to give up trying to perform resuscitation on a man who had had a heart attack. The 'friends' who had accompanied the man to the match steadfastly refused to move from their seats and eventually I had to pronounce him dead. He sat there until the end of the match, with 'friends' sitting either side of him – intent on watching the cricket.

In France, anyone who failed to offer help would have been arrested for it is a criminal offence to fail to offer assistance to another human being who clearly needs aid.

I see that the meat industry is fighting back against the 'news' that meat causes cancer and is bad for the environment.

A rather silly hack, possibly hired by the meat industry, has released a story claiming that lettuce is worse than meat as far as climate change is concerned because in order to obtain calories from lettuce we have to eat a lot of it. This argument seems to depend upon the theory that moving lettuce around the country will require more diesel than moving meat from farm to kitchen. There are, of course, more holes in this argument than there are in a colander.

17

A good friend who lives in Belfast, Northern Ireland writes to tell me that all the doors in his council owned house are wheelchair friendly (i.e. they are wide enough to allow a wheelchair to go through) except for the back door from the kitchen to the garden. My friend wrote to the council and asked why they allowed builders to produce back doors that were only 21 inches wide. The council replied that the need for wheelchair access was only applicable to visitors to the house and not to the person who lived there. And since it was officially assumed that visitors would not be going out through the back door, into the garden, there was no need for that door to be wide enough to take a wheelchair. So much for garden parties and barbecues.

An American advertising agency has asked if I will accept adverts on my website for a company specialising in roof repair. I have always said 'thank you but no thank you' to people and companies wanting to advertise on my website but I was so intrigued by this request that I wrote back asking the agent to let me know what they wanted to advertise and where they thought the advertisement might fit most appropriately on my website. As far as I can remember I have absolutely nothing on the website that would be suitable.

It is, in any case, impossible for us to put a link or advertisement on the website since we cannot get onto it to do anything at all.

In early autumn our website management was sold by one company (which seemed to stagger along reasonably well) to another company which has made such a mess of things that try as we might (and we have made many efforts) we cannot get onto the site to correct problems such as the fact that all our pound signs have mysteriously turned into question marks. It is a pity that we haven't been able to update the site because it now contains out-of-date material predicting the end of the hundred years war and the onset of manned flight.

I am more than slightly peeved by this because it makes me look stupid, and this is something I can do all by myself, thank you very much. Indeed, I like to think that I have a monopoly on making myself look stupid.

I do find it strange that companies can sell their customers, together with all their details, to other companies. It makes feel rather like a slave, being passed around from one owner to another.

We have, of course, spent a good deal of time trying to sort out our website problem. Sadly, the whole IT industry is depressingly humourless and charmless and seems to be staffed entirely by buffoons.

In my experience, the people who work in IT are extraordinarily arrogant and although they are very quick to demand money they are invariably very slow to do anything for it. They have more incomprehensible jargon than social workers and when things go wrong, as they invariably do, they steadfastly refuse to put things right, since to do so would be to admit that they had put things wrong in the first place.

Over the decades during which I have had a website, and been using computers of one sort and another, I have spent, and still spend, a good deal of my life sorting out crap which is a result of IT incompetence. They are up there with banks as time wasting bozos.

Happily, neither banks nor IT companies have much of a future. As the world continues to change as a result of the internet, both banks and IT companies will find themselves replaced by robots of one sort or another. Travel companies, bookshops and record stores aren't the only businesses which are going to be destroyed.

I've complained and complained and moaned and begged to the domain hosting company but I don't think anyone there gives a seeding dandelion about our problems, though I do get regular emails from them telling me that they want to take money from my credit card, that they are about to take money from my credit card and that they have taken money from my credit card. These emails are usually preceded by rather scary, almost threatening emails telling me that my website is in danger and that the end of the world is nigh. The way things are at the moment they might as well end our relationship and flog my domain names to someone else. If they did this I would save myself a bunch of money and a good deal of annoyance.

On the news today I see that researchers somewhere have released information arguing that most cancers are caused by our lifestyle.

Crumbs, that's clever of them.

Twenty years ago almost to the day I wrote and published a book called *Power over Cancer* in which I argued that 80% of all cancers are a result of lifestyle choices. The book was well received by the few readers who read it (I remember that I published a first edition of 3,000 copies and a reprint of another 1,500) but it was ignored by reviewers and news editors who were told by advisors working for the cancer industry that the premise was nonsense.

The cancer industry consists now, as then, of drug companies who make their money out of selling chemotherapy, and cancer charities which often have links to the drug companies and which have a vested commercial interest in making sure that the incidence of cancer does not fall.

I very much doubt if this new newly published research will change behaviour very much.

The cancer industry will be quickly at work, telling everyone that only they have the real answer: more drugs.

18

We made another offer on another house we like. The estate agent turned us down.

'You haven't offered as much as the people whose offer has just fallen through,' he explained.

'But you said they couldn't raise the money,' I replied.

He agreed.

'So they couldn't afford the offer they'd made,' I pointed out.

He didn't seem to think that this was relevant.

I am sometimes astonished at how immensely stupid estate agents can be. They are as parasitic and pointless as literary agents – who are another pet loathing of mine.

Literary agents survive only because publishers are too lazy to read typescripts they are sent, and who effectively charge authors to do their work for them by forcing them to hire agents.

I have had a few agents, and known many, and they were mostly failed authors, full of bitterness and consumed by envy.

Still, neither publishers nor agents have much of a future for they too are going the way of bookshops, bankers and estate agents.

There is no better example of the age-old phenomenon of disintermediation as the ebook.

In traditional publishing there were a number of layers between the author and the reader.

The writer needed an agent to sell her book to a publisher (because publishers wouldn't look at unsolicited manuscripts) and the publisher had to pay a printer to produce copies of the book. The publisher then persuaded bookshops to stock the book so that readers could buy it.

The system was complex and the author would often find herself writing a book not for her reading audience but for the marketing experts at her publishers. All that has now changed, permanently.

Today the only two left in the chain are the author and the reader. And for that I do thank the ebook revolution.

I was sad to see, today, that a grandmother has been fined £60 for allowing her granddaughter to feed bits of Christmas cake to the squirrels in a park. What a sad, sad world we are creating for ourselves. What sort of moron would report such a thing? What sort of moron would take a grandmother to court for such a thing? What sort of moron would prosecute it? What sort of moron would fine her? The world is run by bloody morons. What sort of message are we sending to today's children? Be kind to animals and you will be punished.

Tomorrow I'm off to the nearest park, armed with supplies of Christmas cake, to find hungry squirrels. Bring on the morons.

Those who doubt that the European Union is, as Hitler planned, destined to become the United States of Europe, will probably have closed their eyes so that they didn't see the news that the EU plans to spend around £300 million of our money on creating a European Border and Coast Guard force. This will be able to send guards to the frontiers of European countries. The really interesting thing about this proposal is that this new EU army will have the ability to go into countries where the local parliament actively opposes the intervention. In other words the EU has given its new army territorial control of every mainland EU country. (Britain and Ireland aren't part of the Schengen zone and are, therefore, excluded).

Perhaps those who scoffed at my revelations about the EU's history and the intentions of those who run it will, in future, like to scoff a little more quietly. Or, more likely, perhaps they won't.

Most Britons will not be concerned by this new development because news of the powerful new EU army appeared on page 147 of most national newspapers and if the BBC broadcast the embarrassing details they probably did so 3 o'clock in the morning.

Oh, and the europhiles might also like to know that the new EU army was a proposal put forward by Germany.

Golly, what a surprise.

Antoinette has a friend who works in an up-market store in London. She earns her living helping people who are burdened with too much money to get rid of some of the stuff so that they can move about a bit more easily. She herself, of course, is fairly poorly paid and lives in a small flat in a London suburb which is so far out of the West End that it takes her an hour and a half to get to work each morning. Her one extravagance is buying drinks with little umbrellas in them. She doesn't care what the drink is as long as it is blessed with a small, colourful, paper umbrella. She keeps all her small umbrellas in shoe boxes and now has a collection which must run into thousands. It is surprising just how many different types of little umbrella there are. Someone who didn't know anything about paper umbrellas might assume that they are all much of a muchness. But they aren't. There is a vast variety of colours and styles and there are, no doubt, many factories (mostly in China) churning these things out by the million.

Antoinette's friend told her today that a family of rich Arabs have just spent over £400,000 on having their house decorated for Christmas, though they have apparently not yet decided whether or not they will be in London for the festive season.

Another family gave a store buyer a £500,000 budget to buy Christmas presents for the family to give to one another. The buyer apparently had great difficulty spending the money allocated to the presents for the children.

Having someone buy your Christmas presents for you seems to me to be very sad. I enjoy choosing, buying and even wrapping presents. My wrapping skills are very poor but I do wrap with lots of gusto and plenty of sticky tape.

We spent the evening watching a favourite double bill: *Thirty Nine Steps* with Robert Donat and Madeleine Carroll, and *The Third Man* which theoretically stars the vastly underrated Joseph Cotton but which was stolen from him by his good chum Orson Welles. Antoinette did some ironing while she watched and during the interval pointed out that her brand new iron gets rid of wrinkles and creases far less effectively than the old one did. We came to the conclusion that the manufacturers are too scared to make irons which get hot lest someone burn themselves and sue. Health and safety spoilsports and the compensation lawyers get their noses everywhere these days.

19

We tottered over to Paris for a couple of days, to see the lights and to see how the city was coping after the recent attacks. On Eurostar the chef du train asked, over the loudspeaker, if there was a doctor on board. 'If so please make himself known to the train manager.'

Although I am retired and no longer licensed I stood up and was about to set off along the train when I suddenly realised that I didn't know which way to go. I asked one of the stewards. He didn't know where the train manager might be found but suspected he would be at one end of the train or the other. Within a couple of minutes we had been joined by around half a dozen other members of the train staff. None of them knew where the train manager (and the patient) might be. And then another doctor appeared. And, finally, a third wandered along. The two new doctors were both much younger than I am, and they were doubtless still in practice and fully registered, licensed and insured so I went back to my seat, sat down and picked up my book. They stood around waiting for someone to decide where the emergency might be.

Over the years I have found that whenever there is a public loudspeaker request for a doctor there is never a shortage of respondents. Some of them will be people with doctorates in music or theology, some will be individuals with first aid diplomas and some will be real doctors.

When we arrived at the Gare du Nord we were startled to see that there was no queue at all for taxis. Our driver told us, very sadly, that he had been sitting waiting for a customer for two and a half hours. He was close to tears though I don't know whether that was due to the fact that he hadn't earned anything or just a result of the boredom. Every train that had come into the station had been pretty well empty. He told us that the city's hotels were empty and that taxi drivers were reduced to cruising the city looking for potential customers (something which Parisian taxi drivers very rarely have to do).

There were policemen and armed soldiers everywhere in the city. As we drove along I noticed that there were half a dozen armed policemen and a dozen armed soldiers standing outside an ordinary school at 'going home' time. A female police officer on crossing duty was being guarded by an armed officer. There were armed men standing outside all public buildings and all shops and businesses which looked as though they might be owned or patronised by Jews or Americans. Even the bakery nearest to our apartment had an armed guard. Everywhere seemed deserted and I half expected to see balls of tumbleweed grasses blowing down the Champs Elysees, as happens in deserted Western towns just before the baddies ride into town. The Arc de Triomphe, usually the busiest traffic island in the world, looked like a supermarket car park on a Bank Holiday. (The traffic around the Arc de Triomphe is normally so bad that insurance companies split the responsibility evenly when accidents happen – they do this to avoid the long-running disputes and legal costs which invariably develop when attempts are made to decide which driver was at fault.) The tourist buses were empty, even the vendors selling tatty models of the Eiffel Tower had disappeared entirely and the Eiffel Tower itself was pretty well deserted and closed for business. I'm sure there were other people in the city but we didn't spot anyone. The cafés were mostly closed. The ones which were open contained just the waiters who were standing staring out of the windows, dreaming of carrying plates and pocketing tips.

Paris is suffering hard but unless and until someone makes a real effort to put life back into the city it is difficult to see the tourists coming back. Without any tourists the pigeons, crows and sparrows were all starving.

We bought bags of bird seed and bread and fed God's forgotten creatures whenever and wherever we could. It's probably as illegal to feed the birds in France as it is to feed them in Britain but I really don't care.

Amidst the post waiting for us at the apartment was a letter from EDF, the French electricity company which used to be owned by the Government. In what must surely be the oddest letter ever received from a utility company, EDF told us that in 2012 they had charged us too little for our electricity and that they were, in consequence, demanding an additional 6.79 euros.

I know that governments change their tax law retrospectively but if governments and companies are now going to be allowed to change their bills three years later simply because they've discovered that they got their pricing wrong, then the world is going to be a very strange place.

When I was a publisher there were many times when I lost money on specific projects. Maybe I should now write to everyone who bought a book where I didn't make a profit and ask for a couple of extra pounds. I can imagine the response I would get. Raspberries would be very much in season.

I'll pay the damned electricity bill because if I don't their computers will harass me and Antoinette (all for the price of a coffee and a croissant) until King George is on the throne. We have to choose our battles carefully these days and fight only those worth the effort.

I know the world is going bonkers but I am, inevitably, also worried about whether or not I am going senile.

(Or, as it is sometimes incorrectly known these days, suffering from Alzheimer's disease.)

I forget all sorts of stuff but then I always did forget things and I have a theory that because I am now older than I was when I was younger I have learned more stuff and so there is, therefore, a good deal more stuff to forget.

I also have this self-serving theory that people who remember things easily are not usually terribly creative. There is lots of stuff going into their brains, but not an awful lot coming out. Dear old Einstein could never remember his own phone number ('Why should I waste brain space learning my phone number?') and was so bad at remembering his way around the American campus where he worked that students had to be commandeered to take him from here to there, lest he ended up elsewhere or somewhere else or there when he should have been here.

We went to the park and fed the birds and the squirrels. There were no morons around arresting folk with seeds, nuts and bits of bread. Perhaps it was their day for treatment at the hospital.

As we walked back, we saw Tom Cruise standing on the pavement outside a pharmacy. He was signing autographs and posing for selfies and quite a crowd had gathered. We both wondered what Mr Cruise was doing standing on the pavement outside a pharmacy and so when we got home Antoinette checked out his movements on the internet. It turned out that the real Mr Cruise was several thousand miles away today and that the man on the pavement was a lookalike imposter. It's difficult to know whether he was doing wrong. The people who got his autograph all seemed deliriously happy, as were those who posed for photographs. The imposter was having the time of his life – though I suspect he does it often and so has many times of his life.

Would Mr Cruise mind? Has he been hurt, harmed or deprived of anything? I can't imagine that he has.

I remember that the author Graham Greene had a doppelganger who travelled the world pretending to be him. When the real Mr Greene turned up at the British Embassy or Presidential Palace in some unheard of small country he would find that the doppelganger had beaten him to it – to everyone's confusion and the real novelist's great amusement.

Stanley Kubrick, the film director, also had a self-appointed doppelganger who wandered around London inviting himself into shows, dinners and soirees. The odd thing is that Kubrick's doppelganger died the same week as Kubrick himself. Is that life imitating art or art imitating life?

We received a flurry of email Christmas cards. It was very kind of the senders to remember us but I confess that for the life of me I cannot see the point in a Christmas card sent by email. What do I do with it? I cannot pick it up, admire it, open it and place it lovingly upon the mantelpiece to enjoy until twelfth night. It is a transient greeting which exists only for the moment of its arrival and opening and has a life of no more than a second or two.

In the evening we listened to a full length recording of John le Carre's novel *The Mission Song*. The audio book was recorded by Michael Jayston, the excellent actor who played Peter Guillam in the television series of *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* and although I had read the book when it came out I was looking forward to the recording. What a disappointment. I had forgotten what a dreary book it is. I am a huge fan of le Carre's early work but much of the later stuff is, I fear, a trifle pompous, pretentious and painfully politically correct. I wonder if the wonderful Mr Cornwell takes himself a little too seriously these days and has become conscious of his status, his position and his legacy.

20

When I wandered to the shops this morning I walked past the American Library to see if they had a rack of free books standing on the pavement outside. There was no rack and no free books. Instead, the library was being guarded by a large security man. I suspect it will be a long time before there are any more racks of free books on the pavement. Paris today reminds me of Belfast in the 1980s. One blessing is that there are absolutely no pickpockets, confidence tricksters or tricksters to be seen. Not one. I don't know whether they have stayed at home because without the tourists there is no business or been 'moved on' by the many policemen and soldiers wandering about. Antoinette says she expects they've all gone to London and I suspect that she's probably right.

Despite the absence of visitors, it was a relief to note that the Parisian shopkeepers are still as rude as ever. Everything changes but nothing changes. Indeed, Antoinette and I rather think that they are worse than ever. Offended by the lack of tourists they take out their anger on the few who have arrived. The Parisians really do have to buck up their ideas, and change the habits of a lifetime, if Paris is to recover its status as the world's number one tourist attraction.

The news on the front pages of newspapers is invariably dull and depressing these days. But the smaller news items on the inside pages are frequently entertaining.

I see, for example, that a woman called Jessica Herrin, who has founded a firm called Stella and Dot (which flogs handbags and other accessories and is, apparently, something called a 'social retailer') is quoted in *Fortune* magazine as having said: 'I'm a big fan of the saying: 'The difference between ordeal and adventure is attitude'.

Really?

I suspect it wouldn't be too difficult to think of a few ordeals which this glib purveyor of handbags might have difficulty in regarding as nothing more than an 'adventure'.

21

Since I've become a pensioner I've noticed that the world has changed dramatically. Here are some of the more obvious changes:

a) People under the age of 25 don't see me at all. If they have to notice me (because they are shop assistants or doctors) they talk to me as if I were deaf and stupid. I may be one of these but I do not think I am yet both of them. Not at the same moment anyway.

b) My patience is deteriorating. It is not widely known but we all start out in life with a fixed quantity of patience. Every time we are patient we are using up our stock of the stuff, which is irreplaceable. None of us has much but I started out with very little and my supply ran out over 30 years ago. I was born devoid of envy, which is handy, but over-endowed with impatience which I have to admit isn't terribly handy.

c) My cynicism is still rising rapidly. Similarly my naivete levels have fallen. These days I automatically assume that anyone in a uniform or in a position of authority will lie whenever they bother to address me. I am constantly aware that if you give a moron a badge, a uniform, a high visibility jacket or a clipboard or some sort of title and he will forget he is a moron and think he is the person he is pretending to be.

d) My willingness to try new commercial brands has fallen as I have realised that it is increasingly difficult to find well-made reliable products. I stick with the old, tried and trusted brands to save myself time. Sadly, many companies are constantly ready to take advantage of my trust by reducing the quality, size or reliability of age old products.

e) The floor is getting further and further away. Every time I bend down to pick up something I have dropped, the effort required increases considerably. I used to leave half pennies lying on the floor because it is too much effort to pick them up; I suspect the day will soon come when I will be prepared to leave pound coins where they fall.

f) Everything is getting smaller and more crowded. Shopping aisles, car parking places and seat sizes on trains, buses and aeroplanes are all smaller than they were a few years ago. I don't care what the authorities say: these things are all smaller.

g) Cars may do more clever things these days (most of which I don't want them to do and never use) but they are flimsier than ever. You have to pay a lot of money these days to get a car with a door which clunks when you shut it. And you have to pay a fortune to buy a car which will survive a 5mph bump with a tree without being written off.

h) Literacy and numeracy levels among public sector workers have deteriorated massively.

i) Things which I used to be able to lift easily have become much heavier. Since I have the same muscles that I had ten years ago I can only assume that the pull of gravity is getting ever stronger.

j) For some time I thought that my hearing was deteriorating. I assumed I was suffering from idiopathic acoustic recognition disorder (a bit of unexplained deafness, probably a result of being around for too long). I made this assumptive diagnosis when I found that in order to understand the dialogue in films I had to switch on the subtitles. But I have recently discovered that this is a common phenomenon which also afflicts the young and the middle aged faced with the fact that film actors all mumble their lines in the hope that they will be mistaken for Marlon Brando. Sadly, my problems are compounded by the fact that many films (even new ones) don't have subtitles. The ones that do have subtitles have them printed in one point type and I can't read them. And the problems are made worse by the fact that it seems to be quite common for the people who write subtitles to do by listening to the actors and then writing down what has been said or what the subtitle writer thinks they have said. This can produce some alarming but amusing errors.

22

We used to be able to see a GP on any day of the week and do so without waiting more than half an hour. We used to be able to see a doctor in a local casualty department before our bleeding limb had clotted. We used to be able to buy a house in a fortnight or, if you were rushed, in a day.

These days, thanks to progress, we have to wait three weeks for an appointment to see a GP (who will probably turn out to be seven-years-old and in training), nine hours to see a doctor in a hospital casualty department and four months to buy house.

I get cross when people talk about change and progress as though they are synonymous. They aren't. If I burn down your house, change will result but you won't call it progress. It's change if I cut off your arms and legs but I doubt if you'd call that progress either.

We have many primroses in our garden and today I spotted the first daisy among the snowdrops. I also picked daffodils for the house. I have never before seen daffodils in the garden before Christmas. The conspiracy theorists and daft pop singers will, of course, claim that this is a result of climate change. It is not. It is because we have had a mild winter. They happen. Science is supposed to be built on facts, not suppositions, guesswork and 'I know it must be true 'cus Bonio said it was'.

I see that residents of a village in the North of England are being vilified because they object to having a wind farm built in their neighbourhood. Such complainants are always dismissed as 'Nimbys' by those whose own homes are far away.

The truth is that we would all behave in exactly the same way if we found ourselves threatened with something large and aesthetically offensive parked on our doorstep. I remember Tony Blair, when he was prime minister, vehemently opposing a plan to put a wind farm within sight of one of his properties.

(Incidentally, why hasn't that lying little shit been executed for war crimes? Instead of being separated from his head he is constantly pontificating and lecturing the rest of us. I suppose that somewhere, hidden away in an asylum somewhere, there must be someone who believes his claim to be 'a straightforward sort of guy' but no one with enough neurons to make a passably edible sandwich for Hannibal Lecter can possibly believe anything Blair says.)

23

I met a doctor who told me about a patient of his who had recently died. Throughout his life the patient had been listed as having perfect vision, even though his right eye was made of glass. He lost the eye when he was a boy (an awful accident which involved park railings) but got into the army by conning the doctors. When he was asked to cover his left eye and read the chart he put his hand over his right eye and read the chart. When he was told to cover his left eye he lowered his hand and covered his right eye again. No one ever noticed. He had no visual depth, of course, but he served throughout the war and won several medals. After the war he continued to drive and had a clean driving licence for more than 50 years. The doctor, who found all this out when the man was dying in a nursing home, swears it is true.

I see that President Obama is promising to cure cancer once and for all. America, he says, will be the country to make the magic breakthrough. Wasn't it his illustrious predecessor Nixon who started the original war on cancer?

I'm honestly surprised that anyone believes anything Obama says. Before he was elected to his first time I predicted that he would turn out to be full of hot air – all empty promises and rhetoric. And I'm afraid I was right. Obama's nonsense about cancer suggests that he hasn't even bothered to do any basic research. It's been known for decades that cancer is not one disease – but hundreds of diseases. More importantly, doctors know how to prevent 90% of all cancers. I detailed the evidence for this claim in my book *Power over Cancer*.

The problem is that in order to prevent those 90% of cancers, politically and commercially inconvenient have to be told. And politically and commercially inconvenient action would be required. Obama certainly hasn't got the guts to do what is needed. And no politician in the UK will even recognise these well documented truths.

24

I ordered a magnificent looking trophy (suitably engraved) for Antoinette and I to play for over the Christmas holidays. I have also bought twelve small trophies which we can use to reward the winners of individual games such as Dobble, bar billiards, Simon, Bop It, marbles, indoor boule, Bananagram, a version of that Victorian memory game where you put a pile of stuff on a tray and have to try to remember what was there and a variety of home-made games such as 'tossing the plastic fried egg onto a piano stool from a distance of twelve feet'.

The winner of each game will receive a small trophy and at the end of the tournament the winner will get the big, inscribed trophy. I am confident that Antoinette will be the one to receive the trophy.

As I get older I have decided to follow the philosophy of enjoying every day as if it were to be my last and the extension of that philosophy is to enjoy every Christmas as if it were to be my last though since I have now laid out a considerable sum on Christmas trophies (I reckon the whole lot cost me the best part of a tenner) I sincerely hope it is not.

25

As always, Antoinette cooked a wonderful Christmas meal. No one who saw what we ate could ever again wonder 'what do vegetarians eat?'

I am always impressed that a good cook can get all the constituents of a meal ready at the same time – so that the roast potatoes, the stuffing, the carrots, the broccoli, the roast parsnips, the cauliflower, the Yorkshire pudding, the gravy and so on are all piping hot and perfectly cooked at the same instant. It's a skill which is, to me, as mysterious and as awe inspiring as juggling five chain saws. I have a job to get toast and marmalade ready at the same time. We opened a bottle of claret which was disappointing so, instead, we drank glasses of a decent port which was open.

Before the dinner, we lit candles and afterwards we pulled crackers.

The crackers were rather a disappointment. My 'toy' turned out to be a set of cut out yourself cardboard dominoes while Antoinette's was one of those cheap plastic yoyos that goes down but never comes back up again. The snaps were hardly audible, the hats skimpy and the ancient jokes littered with appalling spelling mistakes. Next year I think we'll go back to collecting nail clippers, egg cups, shoe horns and plastic paper clips.

Outside, we watched Lord Percival and his family, our eight squirrels and several dozen birds tucking into their own daily feast and eating their way through the peanuts, sunflower hearts and hazelnuts in shells which we had put out for them. We even saw three red breasted robins taking sunflower hearts from one of the feeders. Hopefully two of them will have chicks in the springtime.

(Last year Antoinette surprised me by telling me that all robins, male and female, have red breasts. Like many folk I had always assumed that only cock robins had red breasts. This year we even received a card which contained a drawing of what purported to be a pair of robins – one with a red breast and one without. In fact it is only the very young robins who don't have a red breast.)

Afterwards, we lit a log fire, using kindling collected in the garden and logs cut from branches of one of our ash trees brought down last winter. Ash, apple and beech all burn very well and we have plenty of all three. I opened a bottle of English malt whisky – which turned out to be absolutely excellent.

We watched a new film called *Dark Horse* which turned out to be, without a doubt, the most inspirational movie I've seen for a long time. Antoinette bought the DVD for me for Christmas and it is that rare thing – a life changing piece of work.

Dark Horse is a documentary which tells the true story of a horse called Dream Alliance which was bred by a small group of friends from a working men's club in Wales. The moving force behind the scheme was a woman who worked both in the club and as a cleaner in a supermarket. The friends all put £10 a week into a club kitty and breed themselves a racehorse.

Their foal was raised on a slagheap allotment but, against all the odds, became a winner. When he suffered a serious injury, the members of the club used the horse's winnings to pay for the surgery he needed. Dream Alliance then makes a full recovery and raced again. There were tears but there was much laughter. No screenwriter would have dared produce such a wonderful story.

I wonder how many rich race horse owners would spend so much money on saving the life of an injured horse. Very few I suspect.

There is a glorious point in the film when one of the owners turns up at some snooty racecourse or other to watch Dream Alliance run and is told by a snotty gateman that he can't take his sandwiches and cans of lager through the gate. When he points out that he has a racehorse owner's badge they have to let him in.

What is it about the people who run sporting venues these days? They charge a fortune for tickets and then refuse to allow people to bring their own sandwiches and drinks so that they will be forced to purchase inedible and toxic food at sky high prices.

But in Dream Alliance, the good guys won every battle.

26

As always we had *The Great Escape* on during Boxing Day lunchtime. The BBC don't play this film anymore, probably because it makes the Nazis and Hitler (and, therefore, the European Union) look bad. So we always put a DVD into the player and although we don't always watch every minute of the movie the soundtrack helps keep the Christmas feeling going.

Every year we agree that it would have been a great film if John Sturges had not had to spend all his time trying to keep Steve McQueen happy, and polishing his gigantic ego. We both think that the film would have been even better if Sturges had allowed the characters played by James Garner and Donald Pleasance to survive, instead of being shot after their plane crashed close to the Swiss border.

McQueen was probably the most self-conscious film star in history, and that is saying something. When he made his breakthrough movie, *The Magnificent Seven* (which Sturges also directed), McQueen continually tried to upstage the other actors. It was shiny pated Yul Brunner who finally managed to control him. Fed up with McQueen's attention seeking antics when the cameras were rolling, Brunner sauntered over to McQueen:

'If you play one more fancy trick,' he warned, 'I'll take my hat off every time you come into shot.'

Antoinette noticed this evening that we have two boxes of Mr Kipling mince pies, bought just before Christmas, and that they have a ‘best before’ date of 28th December printed on the box. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that food manufacturers actively want us to throw away food. Good for business, I suppose.

27

The birds in our garden are getting through a huge amount of sunflower hearts and peanuts. Every couple of weeks we have to take delivery of huge sacks of food for them. I reckon they get through a pound of peanuts and a pound of sunflower hearts every day. And the squirrels get through half a pound of hazelnuts in their shells. (I give them peanuts as well but I don’t want them to get too lazy, or to forget how to do it, so I make sure they have plenty of nuts they have to crack open.)

In the outside world, Britain’s government is having a love affair with China and Chinese state owned firms seem likely to win contracts to build many new infrastructure projects (including nuclear power stations).

The Chinese can build stuff very quickly, and they can do it cheaply, but I wonder if anyone has told the Government that 37 Chinese bridges collapsed between 2007 and 2012 and explosions and building collapses are considered too commonplace to attract attention.

I feel free to mention this embarrassing news since the Chinese Government has banned my books and my column. And in China, of course, a ban doesn’t mean a little useful publicity – it means that you don’t sell any books at all. None. Not one.

28

I read that the ‘same sex marriage movement’ was supported by lawyers who realised that if there were more people getting married then there would probably be more people getting divorced. Good for business, don’t you see.

Our mobile phone coverage in Gloucestershire has suddenly and mysteriously disappeared and although my mobile phone is switched on, callers are being told by Vodafone that they can’t get through because my phone is switched off – thereby neatly putting the blame on me rather than their patchy network coverage. I rather imagine that in some circumstances this could be libellous.

I tried to contact Vodafone to find out why their coverage had disappeared but since they are a communications company it was, of course, quite impossibly difficult to speak to anyone. The only telephone number I could find took me round in ever depressing and pre-recorded circles. Press one if you would like to be ignored, press two if you would like to be ignored with a sneer and press three if you would like to be ignored and charged for the call. My attempts to send them an email were thwarted by the fact that Vodafone does not seem to have an email address. I can see why the company was made company of the year by *Fortune* magazine. Prices up, service down, prices up, service down is the mantra for success these days.

The only practical suggestion on their website was to visit one of their shops and wait an hour or so to speak to one of their 16-year-old mobile communications consultants.

It seems scandalous to me that we live in the heart of England but there is no mobile telephone coverage at all. Many people now rely entirely on mobile phones and walkers, hikers and travellers of all kinds need mobile phones because there are no longer any working telephone kiosks in Britain. In this respect, as in many others, England is now a third world country.

We have not seen the news for several days.

For all I know Donald Trump may have joined ISIS, David Cameron could have announced his deep seated love for Jeremy Corbyn, the BBC could have apologised for lying (and asked for several million other offences to be taken into consideration) and Obama could have belatedly begun to meet the promises he made the best part of a decade ago.

Instead of depressing ourselves by watching the news, we watched DVDs of old Paul Temple and Dick Barton films that Antoinette bought me for Christmas.

Both detectives are best remembered now for their radio series. The Dick Barton show, broadcast in short episodes every evening (in the spot later occupied by the Archers soap opera), used to attract 15 million regular listeners – about a third of the British population at the time. The series of Dick Barton films which Hammer made came to an abrupt halt when Don Stannard, the actor who played Barton in the movies, was tragically killed in a car crash going home after the wrap party to celebrate the end of filming for the third film.

29

An American company is now selling small ‘recreational’ drones fitted with cameras which can be programmed to follow their owner around all day, filming all his or her activities from above. These are the same sort of drones and cameras that film companies now use to avoid the expense of hiring helicopters when filming action shots and documentaries.

The me-me-me generation, which is obsessed with selfies and twittering, will undoubtedly turn this new retail drone into a global bestseller.

How long will it be before the air above is thick with the damned things? How long before two collide and crash onto someone’s head? How long before the first lawsuit brought for invasion of privacy? (‘He was using his drone to peep into my bedroom, your Honour.’) And since the drones are programmed to hover above their self-obessessed owner all day long what the hell do they do when the owner goes into a building? Do they just hang around outside until he comes back out? I can see thousands of them all jostling for position in the airspace outside shops in Oxford Street.

Oh, what fun tomorrow will bring.

A company I have never heard of has written telling me that they will help me to scan the books in my personal library so that I can sell the books online while still keeping them for myself.

Once again I marvel at the fact that there are still publishers around who think that their industry has any sort of future.

The sad news today is that Lemmy Kilmister of the band Motorhead has died after being diagnosed with cancer on Boxing day. Lemmy was one of the last great rockers. He was reputed to have drunk a bottle of Jack Daniels a day for many years and, when told that he had to stop, to have simply switched to Vodka instead. He claimed to have consumed ‘industrial quantities’ of alcohol and famously said that you only get hangovers if you stop drinking. When a British Sunday newspaper reported that Lemmy had been in an orgy with six strippers, the Motorhead front man threatened to sue unless the paper printed a correction. His complaint? There had been a dozen strippers at the orgy and not a mere six. Mr Kilmister was not, however, just a hellraiser. He was fascinated by Anglo Saxon English kings and ‘addicted’ to the books of P.G.Wodehouse. I think Lemmy qualifies as a true English eccentric in the John Mytton tradition.

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These days it is usual for two thirds of the awards in the New Year’s Honours List to be given to ethnic minorities to make sure that they all feel welcome and part of our society. This is one example of political correctness which I welcome wholeheartedly since it makes it clear to everyone that the honours system is a farce.

The original idea of awarding honours was that citizens would be rewarded for making a contribution to the nation, above and beyond what might normally be expected. Then politicians started flogging off the senior honours (knighthoods, peerages et al) to crooks who had made large donations to themselves or their parties. The donations usually came, of course, not from the individuals themselves but from their companies.

I wonder how many shareholders realise that they bought the peerage or knighthood their company chairman enjoys?

Now that honours are apparently being handed out according to popularity on television and to racial origin we need no longer take any notice of them at all. And that is a good thing.

In this year’s list the most bizarrely decision was the one to give Lin Homer a dame hood. Homer is chief executive of HMRC and would be top, I suspect, of many people’s list of the nation’s most incompetent civil servants. She is, I gather, already known as Dame Disaster. In 2002, she was chief executive of Birmingham City Council and while doing that job she was criticised by the Electoral Commission for her failings during a major post vote rigging scandal. She resigned and joined the Home Office to become head of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate on £200,000 a year. The year after she joined, around 1,000 foreign criminals were mistakenly released and the Home Secretary had to resign. She then moved to the UK Border Agency where, as the agency boss, she was criticised for allowing hundreds of foreign prisoners and over 100,000 asylum seekers to stay in Britain. A year or so later she was appointed as Permanent Secretary at the Department of Transport where she oversaw the failed franchise lettering process of the West Coast Mainline network and was in charge of a major cock up which cost taxpayers £100 million. She was accused of ignoring concerns about the scheme. So, shortly after that, in 2011, she became chief executive of HMRC and, predictably, a year later HMRC was criticised for a ‘woefully inadequate’ response to a National Audit Office report concerning its poor customer services. In 2013, HMRC admitted that it had been a £1.9 billion error in its own accounts and Ms Homer said she deserved a bonus of £20,000. Earlier this year the wretched woman and her organisation were criticised for a variety of incompetences and failings. I find it difficult to understand how anyone can be moved from one top job to another with such frequency. It’s rather as if a paediatrician were suddenly appointed as heart surgeon, then given a job as a psychiatrist, then turned into a radiologist and finally promoted to be manager of the England football team.

It's difficult to avoid the conclusion that within the broad church which is known as Whitehall, idiots get promoted regularly and, it seems, moved upwards according to their lack of competence.

The theory seems to be that the more incompetent you are the higher you must be pushed, as though the powers that be are hoping to bury your incompetence by raising you up to a rarified position where you will be too high on the ladder to cause damage by actually doing anything.

Ms Homer's failures prove that theory doesn't work.

And to whom will they next award these pointless and regularly inappropriate gongs? Maybe they'll dig up the beastly Kray twins and give them a knighthood each for services to crime and brutality.

In the old days, civil servants used to get gongs because they were relatively poorly paid and the knighthoods or damehoods were handed out to anyone who'd turned up for work regularly in a government department. But these days, civil servants are hugely well-paid (Ms Homer's current salary package is £275,000 plus bonuses for sticking her pinky in the air when she drinks her tea) and it really seems mad that they are still routinely given gongs. Making Homer a dame is probably the most absurd abuse of the whole honours system that I've seen in my lifetime. I would have had serious reservations about giving her a job as deputy assistant cleaner of the public lavatories on Lundy Island and would only consider her for a post of such wide ranging responsibility if she had adequate supervision.

On past record I would not be surprised if she resigned from her present job (she rarely seems to stay in her posts more than a year or two) now that the gong is in the bag. She can then follow the well-trodden path so popular among politicians and senior civil servants and move on to an absurdly high paid post with a bank. (She will, of course, take her vast taxpayer funded pension with her.)

If anyone ever offers me a damehood I intend to refuse it in protest.

I read recently that David Cornwell (alias John le Carre) has turned down serious gongs because he fears that having one might change him in some indefinable way. I assume he means that it might turn him into one of the supercilious, self-satisfied, smug, sanctimonious bastards who brazenly parade their ill-gotten knighthoods and peerages as though they were actually deserved.

On a jollier note, I read today that if 50,000,000,000 people each stroke a cat they will, together, produce enough electricity to illuminate a light bulb for one minute. I think this is important news because it could add another important energy source to the global portfolio of renewable energy sources. I might be a nought out one way or the other with the number of people required to stroke cats, but that is entirely allowable and is the way figures are worked out for renewable energy programmes.

Incidentally, thinking of lightbulbs, I wonder what happened to that threat to stop selling old-fashioned, proper lightbulbs in Britain?

A few years ago there was much talk about us all being forced to buy the horrid and dangerous EU-approved bulbs which cost 20 times as much as a proper lightbulb, contain mercury and produce very little light. Supermarkets and ironmongery stores everywhere were selling off their old lightbulbs at giveaway prices. We bought armfuls of different bulbs to fit all our lights. But the threat seems to have been forgotten and now that some of our stocks are running out I find that I can still buy the old-fashioned variety.

In Weston-super-Mare, Birmbeck Pier, one of the most magnificent piers in England, and the only one which connects the mainland to an island, has partly collapsed into the sea. The collapse is blamed, of course on a storm and the storm is blamed, inevitably, on the recklessness of those of us who have become accustomed to keeping warm and eating cooked food and who have, therefore, produced a change in the planet's temperature.

In reality, the collapse is entirely the fault of the local authorities who are, I honestly believe, the most egregiously incompetent buffoons on the planet and who seem determined to destroy what used to be a pleasant little seaside town. I am told that they have repeatedly turned down proposals for the pier's renovation and protection. These are small-minded people who jump up and down and mistake vertical movement for progress.

I find it difficult not to believe that Weston-super-Mare is in the control of one of its rivals for holidaymakers: Blackpool perhaps.

The Chairman of Vodafone sent me a telephone number I could ring to complain about the absence of any mobile phone coverage (and to complain about the pre-recorded voice lying and telling callers that my phone was switched off when they couldn't get through).

'Give me your phone number,' said the idiot Vodafone employee who answered the phone.

'Shall I give you my postcode?' I asked. 'It's the postcode that you really need if you're going to try to find out what has happened to our reception.'

'Give me your mobile phone number,' she insisted, rather snottily. 'I can get your postcode from your phone number.'

'Actually, I don't think you can,' I said, 'it might help more if I gave you the postcode.'

The woman sighed wearily. 'Just give me the phone number,' she said. 'As I've told you, I can get your postcode from your phone number.'

'It might save time if…'

'Just give me your phone number.'

I gave her the phone number and waited for the inevitable.

A minute or so later she came back. 'Is it a pay-as-you-go phone?'

'Yes.'

'I can't get the postcode with one of those.'

'No, that's right. I did know that.'

'So would you give me your postcode?'

I gave her the postcode.

She then messed around with her computer for a while, painted her toenails, rang her hairdresser for a chat, popped out for a fag and a doughnut and then, eventually, came back to me. 'You've got no reception,' she said. 'There's a fault or something.'

'No, I know that there is no reception,' I said. 'That's why I called. Do you know why we have no reception?'

'There never has been.'

'Yes there has. We had decent reception until a few weeks ago. Then the phones just stopped working.'

'Well, you don't have any reception now.'

It was my turn to sigh. 'Is Vodafone going to do anything about it?'

'No. We don't provide any service in that area.'

'It's a big chunk of Gloucestershire. Thousands of people live here.'

I could hear her shrug.

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New Year's Day this year falls on a Friday which is fine since it means that everyone now has an extra bank holiday day off to recover from New Year's Eve. In Scotland, of course, the few people who actually work for a living now have the day after New Year's Day off as an extra extra bank holiday. However, since the day after New Year's Day is a Saturday this year the Scots are having Monday the 4th off as a Special Substitute Extra Extra Extra Bank Holiday.

Anyone who wonders why productivity in Scotland is lower than just about anywhere else in the world need wonder no more.

A Chinese friend of Antoinette's visited today. It is a good while since we saw him. 'He seems to have aged ten years!' I whispered to Antoinette. 'That's not much of a surprise,' she replied, 'it's ten years since we last saw him.'

He insisted on climbing into the suit of armour we recently bought. It is either large enough to fit him or he is small enough to get inside. When he was safely entombed in the suit I took a picture.

'I shall call this picture 'A chink in the armour',' I said.

'Don't for heaven's sake put that in your book,' said Antoinette.

I said I would be sure not to but I had my fingers crossed when I said it so it doesn't count.

Next year, with the grace of God, I will reach three score year and ten. It is the time of life when many think of their lives as approaching the end. But is that really, necessarily true? Or could it be that 70 is, for a growing number of lucky ones, the new 40? Does real life begin again at 70? Mary Wesley published her first novel *The Camomile Lawn* when she was 71-years-old and there are many instances of folk doing great things in their later decades.

I now have a new ambition.

I see myself sitting in the pavilion at Lord's cricket ground shortly after my 103rd birthday. At the end of the day everyone except me gets up and goes home. Antoinette has gone to fetch my bath chair from the bath chair storage facility in St John's Wood road. As dusk falls the stewards wander around picking up discarded old newspaper and score cards and when they get to me they sigh, make a couple of phone calls and prepare to have me moved to somewhere comfortable, quiet and very, very cold.

We've all got to go.

And that's a damned sight better way than most.

Appendix

The vermiform appendix is a vestigial structure. It is absent altogether in some carnivores whereas it is larger and more important in herbivores. A slender diverticulum of the large intestine it is attached on the postero-medial aspect of the caecum. It can be found about one inch below the ileocaecal valve. The appendix is described as a ‘vermiform’ because it usually resembles a medium sized earthworm. It can however vary in length from a mere fragment of an inch to a full nine inches. In the foetus and the infant, the appendix projects from the lower end of the caecum. During childhood the position of the appendix is changed because of the unequal growth of the caecum. In adulthood, the appendix most commonly lies behind the caecum. It may hang down into the pelvis. A small triangular mesenteric sheet, the meso-appendix attaches the appendix to the ilial mesentery.

You can find your own appendix by looking for the three taeniae coli. These converge at the root of the appendix and therefore act as a collective pointer.

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The author:

Dr Vernon Coleman MB ChB DSc FRSA is a qualified doctor and bestselling author who has written over 100 books which have sold more than two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK alone. His books have been translated into 25 languages and sold around the world. Many of his books are available as Kindle books on Amazon. For more details about available books please see his author page on Amazon. Dr Coleman was born in 1846 and educated. By 1965 he was awash with learning and since then he has only been able to cram new stuff into his overladen brain by deliberately forgetting old stuff. A literary agent he had when he was in his 20s claimed that he should write books which were more commercial and accused him of being a prophet crying in the wilderness. She was probably right. For free articles and so forth please visit: http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

The previous books in this series are *Diary of a Disgruntled Man*, *Just Another Bloody Year* and *Bugger Off And Leave Me Alone*.

If you have enjoyed this book and have a few seconds to spare, I would be genuinely grateful if you would leave a short, favourable review on the amazon product page. Those few moments will help me enormously for years to come, and will help counteract the one star reviews the book will doubtless receive from readers who are peeved because it doesn’t contain anything about knitting or Gloucester Cathedral.

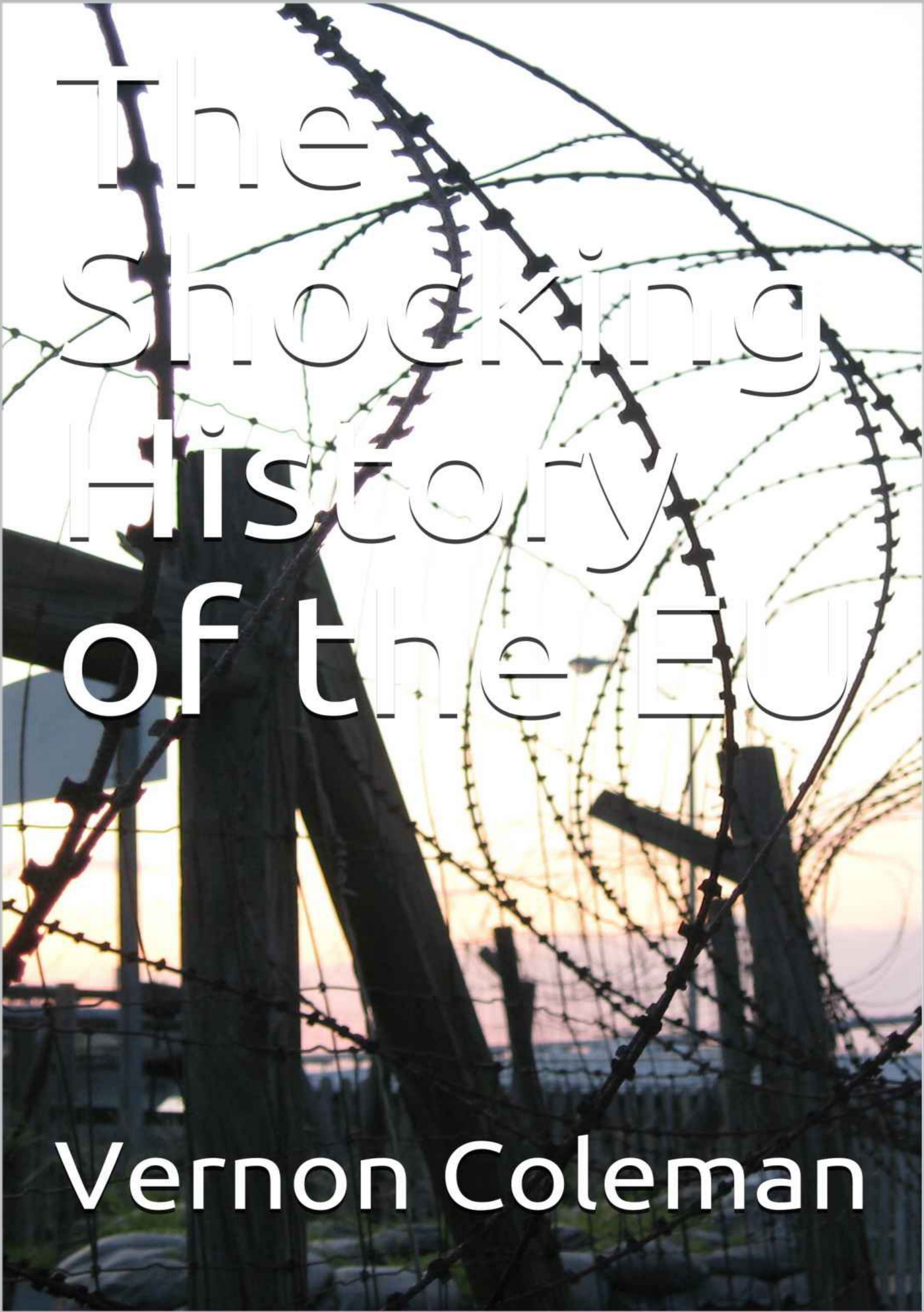

The Shocking History of the EU

Vernon Coleman

The Shocking History of the EU

Vernon Coleman

Contains Biographies of the 40 Founding Fathers of the European Union

Dedicated to Antoinette, with all my love and thanks.

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Foreword

It isn’t enough for Britain to get out of the European Union. We must destroy it before the organisation does any more damage to the nations and people of Europe. Once again it is up to Britain to defeat Germany. Hopefully, this will be for the last time.

Destroying the EU will also protect us from treacherous Remainers who will, without a doubt, make every effort imaginable to lie and cheat and attempt to get us back into the most fascist organisation ever created.

The European Union is all about power and money. Freedom, democracy, dignity, tradition, respect and culture were never ever part of the EU philosophy.

The EU, which was designed and built by Nazis to turn Hitler’s dreams into reality, needs to be destroyed and that means exposing the roots to the light.

This book shines a searchlight on the European Union and exposes its dark beginnings with ruthless accuracy. Coleman explains how and why the Nazis built the EU.

She explains what Tony Blair and the BBC won’t tell you (and what Gary Lineker possibly doesn’t know) about the History of the EU.

Jack King

Introduction

I doubt if 1 in 1,000 of the EU's supporters understands why and how the European Union was created – or why it exists at all. I very much doubt if any of the many politicians and celebrities who have spoken out against Britain leaving the EU have bothered to investigate the history of the European Union. If they had they would probably be less enthusiastic about allying themselves to an organisation which is probably the most fascist organisation ever created – and one which was designed and built by enthusiastic Nazis.

Most of our politicians are disreputable, dishonest, unreliable, arrogant, greedy and quite stupid. But those who are committed Remainers, and who have shown themselves enemies of democracy, and eager to overthrow the will of the people, have taken all these traits to new heights.

The people who run the European Union these days have been very successful in covering up the organisation's history. Efficient propagandists in the style of Goebbels have brilliantly suppressed the organisation's past and have whitewashed the personal histories of its founders. They have efficiently created a superficially credible history and raison d'etre to replace the EU's real history and its real purpose. By spending billions of taxpayers' money on propaganda (disguised as 'education') they have not only hidden the EU's Nazi secrets but they have also succeeded in isolating and demonising those who dare to tell the truth. The EU has been so successful in misdirecting the public that anyone who dares to tell the truth about the EU's background is likely to be dismissed as a conspiracy theorist.

The EU has been very bad for Britain in a number of ways (there is a summary at the back of this book) but very few people realise that the EU was never intended to make our lives better.

The EU was created to promote and protect big German businesses and all the truly bad things about the EU (the absence of democracy, the endless rules, the diminishing freedom) were written into the EU from the beginning. Right from the start, the European Union has been an organisation which has not regarded democracy very highly; has, indeed, regarded it as a nuisance.

The Nazis, and the various officers of the early European Union, all regarded democracy as an uncomfortable and unnecessary part of government. It cannot, therefore, be surprising that this feeling is the basic principle upon which the modern EU is built.

A common complaint today is that the European Union is undemocratic but this should not be a surprise to anyone for the EU's institutions were never designed to have any sense of democracy about them. The EU which exists today was planned in precise detail by Ribbentrop, Funk and other Nazis who regarded democracy as an uncomfortable luxury which could not be afforded.

Today, the vast majority of the EU's many supporters are uninformed about the purpose of the EU. They haven't bothered to study the organisation's history; instead, they have accepted the sanitised version of the EU's history and they haven't made the effort to look behind the screen to see when and why, and with what very specific purpose, the EU was created.

The basic role of Government is to use our taxes to make our lives safer and to protect our country from danger so that citizens can go about their business safely and without fear. If the Government can make our lives a little better that is a bonus. The idea is that the Government should spot risks, assess their importance and deal with them. But politicians have long since forgotten all their primary, traditional responsibilities. And many MPs seem to have forgotten that they were elected to Parliament to represent the local electors. Nearly three quarters of all MPs are overt Remainers – even though many of them come from constituencies which voted to leave. In other words, the MPs concerned are acting in a way which is contrary to the majority of their constituents.

Moreover, they are deliberately aiding and abetting the enemy (in this case a bunch of eurocrats) who are intent on controlling our lives. That used to be called treason.

The EU is promoted as a democratic and liberal organisation which puts people first. It doesn't take much of an examination to see that the European Union fails in all of these criteria. It is decidedly undemocratic and illiberal and the only people it puts first are the bureaucrats who run the various branches of the organisation.

There is, it is true, a European parliament but this can only advise and has no power. It is used merely to rubber stamp the decisions of the European Commissioners and their underlings. Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are as self-serving as other EU employees. In addition to huge salaries, they receive absurdly generous expense accounts with cash being reimbursed without there being any need to show that it has been spent.

Almost all the laws the EU produces (they like to call them 'regulations' but it seems more appropriate to describe as a law anything which carries on its back a State backed punishment) are designed to stifle entrepreneurs and to crush small businesses. This is no accident; it is deliberate policy. When the Nazis and IG Farben created the European Union the aim was to ensure the success and profitability of large German industries. It is no exaggeration to say that the aim was to take over the commercial world. (I wonder how many enthusiasts who wave EU flags realise that the EU was created by the very same people who built Auschwitz.)

The EU is all about control as opposed to freedom. There is absolutely no acknowledgement of any democratic process and there is no consideration for culture, dignity, respect, history or community. Unelected bureaucrats create new laws without any thought for the consequences. So, for example, eurocrats promoted diesel cars without properly investigating the consequences and then, when it appeared that diesel cars were more likely to pollute the environment than petrol driven cars, they simply changed their minds – wrecking the car industry and leaving millions of people facing capital losses and additional tax burdens merely because they had followed the EU's advice.

The one surprising thing, perhaps, is the fact that the campaign to leave the EU seems to have shown us just how ignorant the various parts of the establishment can be.

It sometimes seems that the entire British establishment has united in support of the Nazi inspired European Union. The Remainers include: Parliament, the Speaker of the House of Commons, just about all large international companies, the banks (British and foreign), the Bank of England, the Archbishop of Canterbury and much of the Church of England, the civil service, the professions, most of the media and a motley collection of celebrities.

The Government of Theresa May has been duty bound to make an attempt to pursue Brexit but the whole thing has been done with great reluctance. They have been supported by former President Obama of the United States of America and the Prime Minister of Japan. (The support for the Remainers' cause from Obama, a hypocritical blah blah specialist, was an influential factor in ensuring that the Remainers lost the vote.)

The Remainers have taken every opportunity to trash our culture and our history and to trash the loyal British who have dared to defend their nation in public.

I wonder how many of those who have fought so hard against their nation's interests, and for the interests of the European Union, realise that they have been fighting for an organisation which was designed by Nazis for the furtherance of the Nazi dream. I wonder how many enthusiastic celebrities (some of them Jewish) realise that the very same people who built the Auschwitz concentration camp, and made the gas used to kill several million Jews, also built the European Union.

The fact is that, whether they know it or not, the British Establishment is now dominated by neo Nazis. The evidence proves, without any room for doubt, that all British Remainers, whether they are politicians, celebrities or bankers, are traitors.

Foreigners such as Obama (the only man to receive the Nobel Prize for Peace without actually doing anything for Peace) who try to interfere with the democratic process should know that they too are seen as fascists and Neo Nazis.

This book does not deal with the corruption, dishonesty and incompetence now prevalent within the European Union. Nor does it deal with the damage done to our culture and our way of life. These issues are dealt with in depth by other authors such as Vernon Coleman in his book *OFPIS: The Truth about the EU*.

In this book I have concentrated on the history of the European Union – how and why it was created and why it exists today. No one who reads this book can possibly remain enthusiastic about the European Union unless they are a committed Nazi or a lover of the Deutschland Uber Allies philosophy. It is impossible that any rational person could want their country to retain membership of an organisation with such an evil background and such an evil purpose.

My fear is that the material in this book will be dismissed by the European Union propaganda machine. The EU has always been very good at protecting itself from the truth.

Commentators who have drawn attention to the fact that the EU is identical to the federal Europe planned by Funk et al have always been dismissed as paranoid conspiracy theorists. The fact that the terms 'European Economic Community' and 'European Union' were first used by the Nazis has been dismissed as nothing more than a coincidence.

Hopefully, this attempt to air the truth about the European Union will be more successful.

Chapter 1

The Bank for International Settlements

For decades, the world has been wrecked by three utterly corrupt and self-serving organisations: the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the Bank for International Settlements.

Of these three, the only one which concerns us directly is the third: the Bank for International Settlements, known as the BIS. And to understand how the Nazis succeeded in creating the EU it is first necessary to study the BIS.

To discover the truth it is, as always, simply necessary to follow the money.

The trail connecting IG Farben, a bunch of ambitious Nazi crooks, some unscrupulous self-serving Americans, the Bank for International Settlements (the BIS), the Bundesbank and the European Central Bank is not difficult to follow.

For decades, the Bank for International Settlements, then and now the most powerful bank in the world, has been so secretive that it is not even mentioned in most books about the Second World War. Today, it is still the central bank for the world's central banks but it is no exaggeration to say that without the BIS and IG Farben there would have been no Second World War. And there would be no European Union.

The activities of the BIS were reported in the official diaries of Henry Morgenthau, the US Treasury Secretary at the time. Those diaries, and other documents, showed just how important a part the bank played in the Second World War.

The BIS was created in 1930 by the world's central banks, including the Federal Reserve Bank in New York and the Bank of England in London. The BIS was, however, the brainchild of Hjalmar Horace Greeley Schacht, the president of the German Reichsbank and the Nazi Minister of Economics. Schacht, who had grown up in Brooklyn, was assisted by Emil Puhl. During the War, Schacht was replaced by Walther Funk, Hitler's economics adviser. Emil Puhl retained important positions at both institutions and was the link between the BIS and the Nazis.

Schact had deliberately set up the BIS because he knew that there was eventually going to be a war between Germany and other European countries. The idea was that the BIS would enable the Nazis to maintain channels of communication between Berlin and financial institutions around the world. Schacht made sure that the BIS's charter emphasised that the Bank would remain immune from censure or closure during war.

Moreover, Schacht was clever enough to disguise the BIS's main purpose by claiming that the BIS would help Germany provide the Allies with financial reparations owed after World War I.

However, instead of money flowing from Germany to the Allies, it went in the other direction and was used to help Hitler build up a war chest for the coming conflict.

The Nazis were undoubtedly helped in this by the fact that the first presidents of the BIS, who were American, were easy to deal with. (One of the first presidents of the BIS was an American called Leon Fraser who had been a tabloid journalist and who had little or no background in banking.) The BIS, the central bank for central bankers, quickly became the most important and powerful bank in the world.

In March 1938, Hitler's armies moved into Austria and one of the first things the troops did was to steal the nation's gold and transport it to vaults controlled by the BIS.

More Nazi troops tried to do the same thing when they marched into Prague. Nazi soldiers demanded that the directors of the Czech National Bank hand over Czechoslovakia's supply of gold – $48 million worth. The directors replied that they had already moved the gold to the BIS with instructions that it be sent to the Bank of England. Unfazed by this, the Nazis simply instructed the Czechs to tell the Bank of England to send the gold back to Switzerland.

In fact, the Governor of the Bank of England (a flamboyant and traitorous exhibitionist called Montagu Norman) made life easier for the Nazis by immediately authorising the BIS in Switzerland to take $48 million worth of gold from the Bank of England's account and to put it straight into the German account so that it was immediately available for the Nazis to use. By 1939, when the War began, the BIS had made many millions available to the Nazis.

In 1940 an American, Thomas McKittrick, was appointed president of BIS as a replacement for Leon Fraser. McKittrick was a lawyer and a friend of the Nazi party and he turned BIS into an arm of the Reichsbank. Fluent in German, McKittrick had previously worked for Lee, Higginson and Company and had made large loans to the Nazis. There is no doubt that McKittrick's sympathies were with Germany. Indeed, in 1940, during the War, he went to Berlin and had a meeting at the Reichsbank with the Gestapo.

And the BIS under McKittrick continued to act as a middleman for stolen gold.

By the start of World War II, the BIS was already controlled by Hitler. McKittrick was the president of the Bank but the other directors included Hitler's economics adviser, Dr Walther Funk, Emil Puhl, a director of the Reichsbank, Hermann Schmitz, the head of the Nazi conglomerate known as IG Farben (the company which built the concentration camps and supplied the poison gas for the gas chambers) and Baron Kurt von Schroder, a banker and Gestapo officer.

Throughout the War, the BIS accepted and stored looted gold and carried out foreign exchange deals on behalf of Hitler. Much of the gold accepted by the BIS came from the teeth and belongings of concentration camp victims. Hitler's economics adviser, Walther Funk, worked with Heinrich Himmler (a leading Nazi and head of the SS) to ensure that gold from concentration camp victims was put into a special Reichsbank account. Gold from jewels, spectacle frames, watches, cigarette cases and teeth was melted down into 20 kilogram bars and sent to Switzerland where it could be 'laundered' through the Swiss National Bank before being made available to the Nazis, via the BIS, as 'clean' gold. McKittrick, who constantly provided the Reichsbank with intelligence material, helped the Nazis take control of occupied countries and their banks.

Astonishingly, the Bank of England continued to cooperate with the BIS throughout the War, although the British directors Sir Otto Niemeyer and Montagu Norman must have known that the BIS was effectively Hitler's inexhaustible piggy bank. Without the BIS's cooperation, the Nazis would have run out of money for arms and the Second World War would have probably never started or would have ended within a year or so at most.

In June 1940, $228 million worth of gold which the Belgian Government was trying to send to safety was intercepted by the BIS and redirected to the Reichsbank.

Money stolen from Holland also went via the BIS to the Nazis.

Amazingly, the Bank of England, as one of the founders of the BIS, continued to have a strong relationship with the bank and to receive dividends from it. (It was not until the end of the War that it became clear that most of the money paid out in dividends had gone to Germany.)

In February 1942, two months after Pearl Harbour, the Reichsbank and the German and Italian Governments decided that McKittrick should remain President of the BIS for the duration of the War. In one Nazi document it was stated that 'McKittrick's opinions are safely known to us'. The faith of the Nazis was well placed, for the BIS continued to provide gold for their use.

Throughout the Second World War, McKittrick travelled around Europe quite freely, on occasion being escorted by Himmler's special SS police force. According to the author Charles Higham, McKittrick even went back to America for a meeting with the Federal Reserve Bank and then returned to Berlin where he reported to the Reichsbank.

Not everyone ignored what was happening in Switzerland.

In his book *The Hidden Enemy*, published in 1943, Heinz Pol wrote: 'The Bank for International Settlements in neutral Basel, Switzerland, has been, since 1941, almost entirely controlled by Axis representatives…'

In 1943, Congressman Jerry Voorhis of California called for an investigation into the BIS, demanding to know why an American was the President of a bank which was being used by and for the Nazis.

Nothing happened.

Again, in early 1944, Congressman John F Coffee asked similar questions. He pointed out that the majority of the board of the BIS was made up of Nazi officials but that American money was being deposited in the bank.

At an International Monetary Conference held at Bretton Woods in 1944, a Norwegian economist called William Keilhau called for the BIS to be dissolved and for there to be an investigation of the bank's books and records. In Britain, Lord Keynes and Sir Anthony Eden decided that the BIS should be allowed to remain active until after the end of the War. Keynes said that the BIS should be allowed to continue until a new world bank and an international monetary fund could be set up. Amazingly, the argument for retaining the BIS was that the bank would help restore and rebuild Germany at the end of the War. It was argued that if the BIS were dissolved, the Germans would fear that their relationship with America might not survive the end of the War.

Nevertheless, despite high level support, it was decided by the Americans that the BIS should be liquidated.

Astonishingly, however, McKittrick simply refused to accept the decision. He wrote to America and to Britain arguing that when the War ended the Allies would have to pay huge sums of money to Germany and that these would be best paid through the BIS. He did not explain why he felt that the Allies would have to pay huge sums to Germany but he did also argue that the BIS would be essential to help provide loans for the rebuilding of Germany after the War.

When questioned about the gold which the Nazis had stolen, McKittrick replied, apparently with a straight face, that it was being held in the vaults of the Reichsbank so that it could be returned to its owners after the end of the War.

In May of 1944, it was McKittrick and his staff who dealt with the $378 million in gold which the Nazi Government sent to Switzerland for use after the War.

By then the Nazis realised that they were losing the War and the gold (some of which had been stolen from the national banks of Austria, Belgium, Czechoslovakia and Holland and some of which had been melted down from gold collected from jewellery, spectacle frames and teeth of murdered prisoners in the concentration camps) was intended to be used by the Nazis after the end of the War. McKittrick must have known this but he and the BIS were happy to deal with the stolen gold.

In 1948, the BIS was ordered to hand the looted gold over to the Allies.

The amount handed over came to just $4 million.

No one at the BIS ever admitted what had happened to the hundreds of millions in stolen gold which had been deposited there by the Nazis. No one ever found the $374 million which was missing from the money sent for the use of the Nazis after the end of the War.

There was ample evidence to show that McKitrick had willingly cooperated with the Nazis but after the War he was given important posts in America including being made vice-president of the Chase National Bank. (This was perhaps not surprising since during the War the Chase Bank in Paris had helped finance the Nazis and had refused to release funds belonging to Jews.)

After the end of the War, Karl Blessing, a Nazi who had controlled an army of slave labourers in Germany's concentration camps, returned to the BIS and became president of the Bundesbank.

Nevertheless, it was felt that someone from the BIS needed to be punished and so in 1945, Emil Puhl, who had been vice president of the Reichsbank and a director of the BIS, was one of the few civilian Nazis to be found guilty of war crimes. Puhl had been responsible for moving Nazi gold during the War – knowing that much of the gold had come from prisoners in Germany's various concentration camps. Puhl was sentenced to a modest five years in prison but he appears to have served very little of this and in 1950 he was invited by his friend Thomas McKittrick to visit America as his guest. Puhl, a Nazi economist, director of the BIS and the Reichsbank had been McKittrick's go between with the Nazis.

Despite the decision made by the Americans and the British, the Bank for International Settlements was not dissolved after the end of the War.

Instead, it went from strength to strength.

In 1954, the European Coal and Steel Community (the forerunner of the European Union) asked the United States for a loan of $100 million. Inevitably, the loan was arranged with the help of the BIS – the bank which had worked closely with the Nazis during World War II.

Legally untouchable and existing outside all jurisdictions, the BIS was created to act as the central bank for central bankers. It is disturbing to realise that the BIS is still the most powerful financial institution in the world though many politicians, economists and bankers have never even heard of it.

Current directors of the BIS include Mark Carney, the Canadian born governor of the Bank of England and enthusiastic supporter of the EU.

It should be no surprise that Carney has repeatedly warned of the hazards associated with Britain leaving the EU.

Chapter 2

Traitors at the Bank of England

The modern Bank of England has repeatedly warned about the consequences of leaving the European Union. Carney has consistently claimed that terrible things will happen if the UK dares to go through with leaving the EU.

Indeed, the Bank's enthusiastic support of the EU and its repeated, often hysterical criticisms of Brexit , have surprised many who previously understood the Bank of England was expected to stay out of internal or international politics.

However, no one should really have been surprised.

History shows that the Bank of England has often worked against the interests of the British people.

In the period before the Second World War, Sir Montagu Norman, the director of the Bank of England was a strong supporter of Hjalmar Schacht, the German Central Bank President who was a strong supporter of Hitler and the Nazi party. Norman, who was godfather to one of Schacht's grandchildren, was also a founder and director of the Bank for International Settlements.

It has been established that during the War, Sir Montagu Norman helped the Nazis steal Czech gold from the Bank for International Settlements.

When he resigned from the Bank of England in 1944, Norman, who should have been tried as a traitor, was raised to the peerage as Baron Norman of St Clere in the County of Kent. He may well have been the leading Nazi supporter in the House of Lords.

Norman was not the first public servant to betray the people who paid his salary – and he probably won't be the last.

Today, the Bank of England is still an enthusiastic supporter of the European Union.

The current holder of the post of Governor of the Bank of England is a Canadian called Mark Carney who is a former employee of Goldman Sachs, the investment bank which is renowned as 'the vampire squid on the face of humanity' and which is believed by many to be the most evil and irresponsible bank in the world.

And, inevitably perhaps, as I have already pointed out, Carney is also a Director of the Bank for International Settlements – the bank which helped Hitler rise to power.

Chapter 3

Germany before World War II: The Role of IG Farben

There have, of course, been dreams of a united Europe for centuries. Charlemagne and Napoleon both wanted to conquer Europe and to create a single country out of a ragbag of nations. But only the Nazis, with the help of a cartel called IG Farben, succeeded in turning a dream into a reality.

The history of the European Union really begins in the 1920s.

In 1925, a group of important German companies (Agfa, Bayer, BASF, Hoechst and other German companies) formed a cartel called IG Farben. Their aim was to obtain control of global markets in key industrial sectors – specifically: chemicals, pharmaceuticals and petrochemicals. History shows quite clearly that it was the formation of this cartel, and the creation of IG Farben, which led directly to the Second World War (and all its associated atrocities) and the European Union.

Hitler and the Nazi party did not simply dream of uniting Europe: they dreamt of ensuring that Germany would control a unified Europe (which would be called the United States of Europe) in every conceivable way.

It is no coincidence that both Hitler and the EU aimed to control the people through an unelected, autocratic bureaucracy. The Nazis replaced democracy with an oligarchy controlled by bureaucrats and that, of course, is exactly what the European Union has done.

It was in 1933 that IG Farben began to finance the rising German politician called Adolf Hitler, and his National Socialist German Workers' Party (already known as the Nazi party). The directors of IG Farben believed that the Nazis would help them in their goal of controlling markets world-wide. It was one of Hitler's associates, Walther Funk, (who was later the designer of the European Union and the euro) who persuaded the industrialists to finance the Nazis.

The relationship between IG Farben and the Nazis was symbiotic.

IG Farben gave millions of reichsmarks to the Nazis and in return, the Nazis gave the company control over industries in the countries which the Germans occupied. The aim was to create a massive European Market for IG Farben's products. Later, the Nazis also helped IG Farben by providing cheap labour through its concentration camps. (One of the concentration camps at Auschwitz was built by IG Farben. The company also made the poison gas used to kill inmates.)

Right from the start, Adolf Hitler was keen to develop a federal state of Europe, controlled by Germany.

In 1936, Hitler instructed Joachim von Ribbentrop, who was at the time Ambassador to the United Kingdom, to negotiate an Anglo-German alliance as a preliminary to the development of a United States of Europe. When this failed, Ribbentrop talked to leaders of Italy and Japan and suggested that the three countries join together and divide up the British Empire among themselves.

(Mussolini, the Italian leader, had invented fascism in 1919 and had, in 1933, talked of a need for political unity in Europe. Mussolini and Hitler shared a yearning for a federal state of Europe.)

By 1938, the Nazis were desperate for more funds. Equipping an army and starting a war needed a lot of money.

When Hitler's forces crossed the border into Czechoslovakia, the Nazis arranged for 23.1 metric tons of Czechoslovakian gold, which was held in the Bank for International Settlements (BIS), to be transferred into the Reichsbank account at the BIS. The Nazis were helped in this by Sir Montagu Norman who was governor of the Bank of England. A little later, the BIS helped move another 27 metric tons of Czechoslovak gold into the Nazi's account. (If the sums had been smaller it would have been called 'stealing'.)

The Bank for International Settlements (BIS) had been created in 1930 by the governors of the Reichsbank and the Bank of England. The BIS had been created to act as the central bank for central bankers and it played an essential part in the growth of Nazi Germany. As I have pointed out earlier, it is no exaggeration to say that without the help of the BIS, World War II would have probably not taken place and the European Union would not now exist. Today, the BIS is the most powerful and secretive bank in the world.

During World War II, the BIS helped Hitler a good deal by investing a great deal of money in Germany and by legitimatising the Third Reich's activities. It was the BIS which helped the Reichsbank appropriate Jewish businesses and steal the funds which would finance the Nazi war machine.

In 1939, Hermann Schmitz joined the board of BIS. This was an important move for the Nazis since Schmitz was the CEO of IG Farben.

During the Second World War, IG Farben's directors and managers ran a private concentration camp called IG Auschwitz. The gas capsules used in the notorious gas chambers throughout Germany were made by a subsidiary of IG Farben and sold to the Nazis. The gas used was Zyklon B – a cyanide based pesticide.

(One of the few people to be executed for using the gas was Bruno Tesch, a chemist. Tesch was executed because he knew that the gas being used was sold to kill people. The company's executives, who were in charge of the operation and who benefited from the profits, were largely unpunished. Indeed, a number of men who had become exceedingly rich from the money made by exploiting concentration camp workers were allowed to keep the money they'd made and to play important roles in post War Germany and the developing European Union.)

In that same year, 1939, Walther Funk was appointed a director of the BIS and president of the Reichsbank.

Funk, a former journalist who had joined the Nazi party in 1931, was already Hitler's economics minister and was, as already explained, the man who encouraged IG Farben and other large German companies to fund the Nazi war machine. (According to Heinz Pol, Funk had already earned a small fortune writing propaganda pamphlets for Thyssen – another large German company.)

On January 23, 1939, Walter Hallstein, who was Dean of the Faculty of Law and Economics at the University of Rostock, in Germany, gave a propaganda speech about the restructuring of Europe. The speech was part of the preparation for war by the Nazi regime and their powerful partners the oil and drug cartel IG Farben. The Nazis had already annexed Austria and the Czech territories of Bohemia and Moravia, and in his speech Hallstein describes the planned German conquest of the rest of Europe and the subjugation of the continent. In due course, Hallstein became an officer in the German army.

In 1938, Hallstein had been part of the official Nazi delegation to Rome. There is no little irony in the fact that some years later, Hallstein (who should have been shot as a war criminal) would return to Rome to sign the Treaty setting up the European Union. Today, Hallstein is revered as the first president of the European Commission.

In a letter dated 20th July 1940, executives from IG Farben (which was by then far the world's largest chemical and pharmaceutical cartel) responded to a request from the Nazi government with a blueprint for a 'new economic order' in Europe.

The letter from IG Farben discussed the need for a common European currency, common European laws and a European court – all to be under the control of the coalition between the Nazis and themselves.

The IG Farben plan was for the new Europe to be under the control of IG Farben and the senior Nazis. France had surrendered a month earlier, and both the Nazi leaders and the IG Farben executives were already thinking of how they could best organise Europe under their control. The plan was that the Nazis would take military and political control and IG Farben would take control of the chemical and pharmaceutical markets throughout Europe. It is no accident that the EU opposes democracy and openness and that secrecy, fraud, theft, waste and corruption have repeatedly (and undeniably) been shown to be integral to the EU's way of doing things. The name of the organisation has changed (it began as a Community, became a Market and is now a Union) as the original aims of the founders have become closer.

Two days later, a meeting was held at the Reich Economic Ministry under the chairmanship of the Minister, Walther Funk. The meeting discussed the reorganisation of the 'continental economy' under German control and the incorporation of occupied territories within the 'Great German economy'. Even the question of a new European currency was discussed.

IG Farben's need for cheap labour was so great that the company had built a huge factory at Auchswitz where there was a huge reservoir of slave labour. Bayer, the company's pharmaceutical division tested its drugs on prisoners. IG Farben also made huge amounts of money by providing the gas for the killing of prisoners in concentration camps throughout Germany.

And all the time the Nazis were planning how they would control Europe after the War – whether they won or lost.

The truth about what was happening in Europe was widely available in the 1940s to anyone who was interested.

Heinz Pol, the former editor of a newspaper in Berlin, had fled to America and in 1943 he published a book entitled *The Hidden Enemy: The German Threat to Post-War Peace*. Pol's book is without a doubt one of the most important books about German imperialism and German ambitions and, therefore, the European Union, but it is rarely mentioned and almost unobtainable.

Pol, a German citizen, was born in Berlin where he became assistant editor of *The Vossiche Zeitung*. Arrested by the Nazis in 1933 for political opposition, he escaped to Prague and then to Paris. He later went to America and became a United States citizen. In 1940 he had published a book entitled *Suicide of a Democracy*, about the surrender of France.

In his book, Pol explained that Germany realised that the War was lost and was planning to preserve its domination over Europe by doing deals with the Allies. Pol was perhaps the first person (outside the OSS) to realise that the BIS was playing a vital part in the Nazi plan.

Pol claimed that the BIS was the link between Germany and the Allies and was helping with negotiations which would enable Germany to dominate post War Europe. Pol also argued that post War German leaders would trick the rest of the world into believing that they had abandoned Nazi ideals.

'To obtain a peace, which would leave them in power,' he wrote 'they will suddenly flaunt 'European spirit' and offer worldwide 'cooperation'. They will chatter about liberty, equality and fraternity. They will, all of a sudden, make up to the Jews. They will swear to live up to the demands of the Atlantic Charter and any other charter. They will share power with everybody and they will even let others rule for a while. They will do all this and more, if only they are allowed to keep some positions of power and control, that is, the only positions that count: in the army, were it even reduced to a few thousand men; in the key economic organisations; in the courts; in the universities; in the schools.'

And Pol was absolutely right. He had predicted with startling accuracy just how the Nazis would win the peace. After 1945, Nazis took many of the key positions in the new post War Germany. Former war criminals were quietly forgiven and their sins brushed under the carpet. Men who had organised concentration camps were allowed to keep the fortunes they had made.

The EU has meant that Germany has boomed.

Today, Greece, Italy, Spain and France are all in serious trouble but Germany continues to grow stronger every year.

Heinz Pol's book provides the best view of Hitler's Germany. The author claimed that what he described as 'German super-imperialism' had been conceived at the end of the 19th century and that Hitler's plan to take over Europe was an extension of a threat which had been in existence for over half a century.

In *The Hidden Enemy*, Pol warned that the Nazis were already preparing for their post-War victory – regardless of whether they lost or won the War itself. He suggested that the only way to stop German imperialism was to kill all the leading Nazis. 'Everyone belonging to (the party) is personally responsible for all the murders, plunders and other crimes committed by the Nazi regime. Their physical destruction is absolutely necessary.'

After the War ended, IG Farben's divisions were allowed to keep their profits, although in 1945, at the Nuremberg trials, the US Prosecutor stated that: 'without IG Farben, the Second World War would not have been possible'.

The Prosecutor's claim may sound like an exaggeration but it is undeniable that IG Farben financed and helped plan Hitler's attempts to annexe the rest of Europe and then the rest of the world. This was done for commercial rather than political reasons. IG Farben was eager to achieve control of the global chemical, oil and drug markets and using force seemed the most efficient way to overcome the competition. IG Farben financed the Nazi party and transformed what had once been a democracy into a dictatorship.

Chapter 4

The 40 Founding Fathers of the European Union

The European Union has always had difficulty when trying to describe its own founding fathers. But it has overcome its difficulties by ignoring the individuals whose Nazi background was impossible to hide (airbrushing them out of existence) and in 'sanitising' the backgrounds of those individuals who could not be ignored.

Here are short biographies of the founding fathers of the European Union. Nearly all of them were members of the Nazi party.

The EU's Founding Fathers are listed here in alphabetical order.

Finally, it is important to remember that the Nazis would not have been able to succeed in their ultimate aim (setting up the European Union) without the very real help of the United States – provided by Allen Dulles, John Foster Dulles, Thomas McKittrick and John McCloy. Although these four may not have been official members of the Nazi party, they were enthusiastic supporters of the Nazi party's aims and they worked tirelessly to support the Nazi cause, and its ambitions, during and after the Second World War. All four should have been tried and executed as traitors and war criminals. (They are detailed in this chapter.)

Moreover, there is no doubt that at least two Britons (Oswald Moseley and Montagu Norman) played a vital role in helping the Nazis acquire the power to enable them to create the European Union.

Hermann Abs (German 1901-1994)

Hermann Abs was a bank director who helped Hitler enormously by taking over Jewish banks which were forcibly purchased at low prices. The money was then used to build the Nazi war machine.

During the War, Abs was a member of a secret group formed in 1943 and known as the Committee for Foreign Economic Affairs – a group of bankers and businessmen who met to discuss Germany's future after the end of the War. The group included Ludwig Erhard, Ludger Westrick and Karl Blessing.

After the War a friend of his, Charles Gunston of the Bank of England, asked Abs to help rebuild German banking – though Abs had been arrested as a war criminal and sentenced to death in his absence. Gunston worked for the Bank of England as the manager of the German desk and was a senior official in the British occupational authority after the War. Gunston cared nothing about the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis. All he wanted to do was to help rebuild the German banks. To this end he recruited Abs who was high on a list of Nazi officials who were to be arrested as war criminals. Gunston protected Abs to help Germany rebuild its banking system ready to continue Hitler's work.

Thanks to help from his friends at the Bank of England, Abs was not executed or even imprisoned, and by 1948, he was deputy head of the Reconstruction Loan Corporation and President of the Bank Deutsche Lander. Unbelievably, it was then Abs who decided which German companies should receive the billions of dollars provided as Marshall Aid. And for decades afterwards, Abs had a powerful role in Germany. Until the mid-1990s, he was chairman of the Deutsche Bank.

When Hermann Abs died in 1994, he was remembered as a 'great man'. *The Independent*, a British newspaper, described Abs as the outstanding German banker of his time and quietly ignored his work with IG Farben and Kontinental-Ol where he had knowingly employed slave labour in the concentration camps. Nor did they mention the money he had helped steal from Jewish people and banks.

Konrad Adenauer (German 1876-1967)

On 20th September 1949, Konrad Adenauer, the first 'proper' post-War German Chancellor, made it clear that he intended to continue with Hitler's policies. (Technically, Goebbels was Chancellor for one day after Hitler's death.)

When he took office, as Germany's Chancellor, Adenauer announced: 'We shall continue along the road of the economic policies on which we have already successfully travelled.'

Adenauer was himself known to be a Nazi supporter and is regarded as an important figure in the history of the European Union. He is usually described as one of the 'leading founding fathers' of the EU and his attitude towards the Nazis is, therefore, extremely important.

You might imagine that Germany's first post-War Chancellor would take great care not to favour Nazis or to include Nazis in his government. In fact, no one could have done more than Adenauer to ensure that Nazis played an important part in the development of the 'new' Germany, and immediately after the end of the War, Adenauer deliberately allowed senior Nazis back into positions of great power. The fact that the EU still regards Adenauer as an important and respected figure tells us everything we need to know about the organisation's attitude towards Nazism.

Adenauer's Chief of Staff (Minister of the Chancellery) from 1953 to 1963 was a man called Hans Globke (qv).

Globke was a Nazi supporter who was involved in drafting the Nuremberg race laws, which revoked the German citizenship of Jews in 1935. Globke admitted that he knew that Jews were being killed in large numbers. (Globke had applied to be an official member of the Nazi party but had been turned down by Martin Bormann.)

As the most important man in Adenauer's post War Government, Globke was responsible for hiring men for senior appointments. (Adenauer, who had previously only been mayor of Cologne, was inexperienced and leant heavily on Globke.)

And so, thanks to Globke, the new secretary of state at the Ministry of German Affairs was Franz Thedieck, a man who had betrayed opponents of Nazism to the Gestapo. The secretary of state at the Finance Ministry was Alfred Hartmann, who had supervised the confiscation of Jewish property. The Ministry of Transport, the Ministry of Economics and so on and on were all in the hands of former Nazis. Many of Adenauer's appointees were Nazis with the worst records and when this was pointed out to him, the German Chancellor defended the appointments. Nazis were welcomed and protected by Adenauer.

As soon as Germany regained autonomy, Adenauer's new Government reversed Allied laws which had been introduced in 1948 in an attempt to introduce a little more democracy into the German civil service. Globke made changes which allowed former civil servants who had been removed from their positions because of their Nazi activities during the War to be returned to their positions (or to higher ones). The Nazis were back in power in Germany. Astonishingly, 184 former Nazi party members immediately returned to the Foreign Affairs Department. No fewer than 153 of these had worked under Ribbentrop. (Adenauer couldn't put Ribbentrop back into position because he had been executed.)

The Adenauer years were a bonanza for Nazis. In the early 1960s, according to Tom Bower, more than 60 West German ambassadors and foreign officers were former Nazi party members who had helped organise the Final Solution. There were former SS officers everywhere. Adenauer's personal assistant, a man called Herbert Blankenhorn, was a former Nazi but would in due course become an increasingly influential German diplomat. Almost unbelievably, the former Nazi was West German ambassador to the United Kingdom between 1965 and 1970. Prior to that, Blankenhorn had been West German ambassador to NATO, to France and to Italy.

It is inconceivable that Adenauer did not know what Globke had done during the War. And it is inconceivable that he did not know that Globke had restored the Nazis to power in Germany. It is however conceivable that he wholeheartedly approved of what had been done in his name.

Today, Adenauer, a committed supporter of Hitler and the Nazis, is regarded by the European Union as one of its founding fathers.

Karl Blessing (German 1900-1971)

Karl Blessing (see Abs) ended up being president of the Deutsche Bundesbank, the German Federal bank. During the War he was a close colleague and friend of Abs and other Nazi supporters and was a member of the Committee for Foreign Economic Affairs. Blessing was a close friend of Walther Funk and visited concentration camps with Himmler. He was an important member of the Third Reich.

Inevitably, the paperwork which might have resulted in him and his colleagues being imprisoned or executed was conveniently lost.

However, Blessing's proclamations of innocence were damaged when a letter came to light showing that in 1941 he asked to be given an apartment which the Gestapo had taken from a Jewish family.

Moreover, although Allen Dulles claimed that Blessing had not been a member of the Nazi party there is evidence that he had joined in 1937.

Blessing was one of the Nazis protected by Dulles so that he could play a part in helping to re-develop Germany and build the European Union. And so instead of being charged with War crimes, Blessing was freed and allowed to return to his old job at Unilever where he became a hugely well-paid executive. From there he went to join the Bundesbank. By this time Blessing had succeeded in cleansing his personal history and had remembered that during the War he had actually been a member of the Resistance and hadn't been a Nazi at all.

If he had lived just a little longer he would have doubtless claimed to have served in the British army.

Alexander Dolezalek (German 1914-1999)

Dolezalek was an SS officer who, during the War, headed an SS Department which existed solely to plan a united Europe. In other parts of the SS, officers worked on the 'Germanization' of conquered Europe. There were, for example, plans to make the German language obligatory and universal. Dolezalek planned to introduce a single European passport and to eliminate borders between countries within the 'new' European country. He planned that East Europeans would be regarded as 'second class humans'. After the War, Dolezalek did what many Nazis did: he changed his name and became someone else but carried on with the work he'd been doing in the Third Reich. And so Dolezalek became Bomhoff (he kept his first name) and was appointed head of the

‘All-European educational project’ and produced plans for a United States of Europe. Dolezalek, a committed Nazi and racist, was the first of the EU’s founding fathers to describe the new Union as offering a means of ensuring lasting peace in Europe.

Allen Dulles (American 1893-1969)

Allen Dulles, was a lawyer, diplomat and administrator. In *Tower of Basel*, Adam Lebor writes that ‘even as a precocious schoolboy he had shown an insatiable appetite for intrigue and geopolitics’. During World War II, Allen Dulles worked in Switzerland as a spymaster and served in the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). His brother John Foster Dulles was an eminent politician. Allen Dulles was close to Monnet (qv) and undoubtedly used him as an asset during the War.

The two Dulles brothers were both lawyers who had a number of rather dubious associations. Before the start of the Second World War, both brothers worked for a law firm which had associations with IG Farben.

Not surprisingly, neither brother is ever listed in the EU approved lists of founding fathers though there can be little doubt that both were responsible for putting into practice the American enthusiasm for the formation of a United States of Europe controlled by Germany.

After the War, Dulles protected many Nazis, helped them hide their pasts and arranged for them to be given high posts in the ‘new’ Germany (which, did not in truth, seem very different to the old one). He became the first chief of the Central Intelligence Agency.

John Foster Dulles (American 1888-1959)

John Foster Dulles was a lawyer and a politician.

After the First World War, JF Dulles helped design the Dawes Plan, which reduced the amount of money Germany had to pay in reparation and agreed a loan of $200 million from the United States. His sympathy for Germany continued after the Second World War.

He was Chief Foreign Policy adviser to Thomas E Dewey in the 1944 and 1948 elections.

When Eisenhower won the 1952 Presidential election, John Foster Dulles became Secretary of State from 1953 to 1959.

Both Dulles brothers appeared to have had powerful influence behind the scenes, helped to turn American policy into action and were instrumental in the development of the European Union.

Eisenhower (a former senior military officer) wanted to rid Europe of the Nazis and the Nazi influence, but many powerful Americans, influenced by corporations which had huge business interests in Germany, were keen to ensure that Germany recovered quickly from the War and could lead the European Union which had been planned since the 1930s by Hitler and the Nazi party. They were helped by Americans such as Patton who believed that Russia was a major threat to Europe and could only be held back if a United States of Europe were created.

Throughout the War, John Foster Dulles wanted to maintain links with German industry so that business would not be interrupted at the end of the War. To achieve this end, Dulles worked with a number of people including Joseph Wallenberg, a Swedish businessman who had done a great deal of business with the Nazis during the War.

‘We should seek the political reorganisation of continental Europe as a federated commonwealth,’ said John Foster Dulles in 1941. ‘This can be assured through federal principles, which in this respect are very flexible. But the re-establishment of some twenty five wholly independent sovereign states in Europe would be political folly.’

And so throughout the War, and immediately afterwards, the Americans did everything they could to expedite the formation of the European Union – with Germany in control.

Ludwig Erhard (German 1897-1977)

Ludwig Erhard, who took over the Chancellorship of West Germany after Adenauer, worked closely with Otto Ohlendorf who was a senior SS officer who had been head of a murder battalion which had executed 90,000 Russian civilians.

And so, the continuing Nazification of Germany, which Heinz Pol had warned about, continued long after the War as if nothing had happened.

The Nazis’s plan for a new European Union which they controlled was carried out as efficiently as Funk, Ribbentrop and the others might have hoped.

Friedrich Flick (German 1883-1972)

Friedrich Flick, a steel manufacturer, coal-mine owner and director of Dresdener Bank, was one of the first industrialists to give money to the Nazis and to set them on their way. At a meeting at Goring's home in 1933, Flick had promised to give substantial sums to Hitler. He later gave vast sums to a special account held by Heinrich Himmler. During the War, Flick knowingly used slave labour in his mines. Perhaps inevitably, he claimed that the SS had forced him to employ the slave labour. (This was a widely used excuse. Unfortunately for Flick, evidence was produced which showed that he had demanded extra slave workers, complaining that he didn't have enough. He had 48,000 concentration camp workers.) Nevertheless, the judges at Nuremberg accepted that Flick was merely doing what he had been ordered to do. This defence was not accepted for SS officers or guards but, curiously, it was accepted for rich industrialists who had employed concentration camp inmates. No evidence was ever produced showing that industrialists who refused to use concentrate camp victims were punished in any way.

Flick was sentenced to seven years in prison but was pardoned shortly afterwards (as were most of the white collar Nazi war criminals). His wealth was not confiscated.

After the War, Flick sold his mines and with the money he had made during the War he became the largest shareholder in Daimler-Benz and bought large investments in a number of other companies. The Second World War, and his exploitation of slave labour, had made him Germany's richest man. Flick was reported to have made sure that Daimler-Benz employed only people who had been important in the Third Reich.

In subsequent years, Flick, a convicted war criminal, received a vast number of West German honours and became a significant figure in Germany and the developing European Union. At his death in 1972, he was reported to be the richest person in West Germany and one of the richest people in the world.

Walther Funk (German 1890-1960)

Funk was Hitler's Reich Economic Minister, and his speech 'The Economic Reorganisation of Europe' is the clear blueprint for the European Union as it exists today. Funk was one of relatively few Nazis to have been imprisoned (though he, like most imprisoned Nazis, was released after serving a short sentence).

Funk's speech entitled 'The Economic Reorganisation of Europe' was delivered on July 25 in 1940, and in it the Fuhrer's economics guru outlined the Nazi's plans for the economic reorganisation of Europe in some detail. He spoke about a currency union and about how the new Germany would control Europe's future trade relations with Russia, South America, Asia and America. He concluded: 'A stronger sense of economic community among European nations must be aroused by collaboration in all spheres of economic policy (currency, credit, production, trade, etc.). The economic consolidation of European countries should improve their bargaining position in dealings with other economic groups in world economy. This united Europe will not submit to political and economic terms dictated to it by any extra-European body. It will trade on the basis of economic equality at all times in the knowledge of the weight which it carries in economic matters. The coming peace-time economy must guarantee for Greater Germany a maximum of economic security and for the German nation a maximum consumption of goods to raise the level of the nation's well-being. The European economy must be adapted to achieve this aim. Development will proceed by stages and differently in different countries; it is still beset with numerous uncertainties, for – we must never forget – we are still at war!'

In 1941, Walther Funk launched a plan which he called the Europaische Wirtschafts Gemeinschaft (European Economic Community). The aim of his EWG (EEC) was to integrate the European economy into a single market and to establish his idea for a single European currency. Funk recognised that it would be troublesome, even dangerous, to have a pan-European currency before there was complete political unity across Europe, but he knew that the existence of a single currency would make it easier to overcome opposition to federalisation and expedite the process of creating Hitler's United States of Europe.

The Nazis were so keen to create a new European Union that they formed a Society for European Economic Planning in Nazi Germany. The plan was to abolish the economic sovereignty of individual states and to create what Funk had called a 'European Economic Community'. The proposed EEC was defined precisely in Nazi documents. The aim was for the Third Reich to take advantage of the countries it had conquered – replacing the sovereignty of the people with a super-state. The idea was that all the nations of Europe would work together to promote the development of the German economy. This is, of course, exactly what has happened.

The plan devised by the Nazis included the exploitation of weak peripheral countries such as Greece; the formation of European institutions which would be accountable only to the financial and industrial elite and not to the people of European countries; the positioning of the new EU in opposition to the Soviet Union; the elimination of national states within Europe; the centralisation of all economic and political power and the subjugation of all national interests to a unified Europe. All this is, of course, exactly how the modern European Union is organised and how it operates.

'European economic unity will come, for its time is here,' said Walther Funk in 1942.

In 1946, in a memo entitled 'Economic Reorganisation of Europe', Funk wrote that: 'There must be a readiness to subordinate one's own interests in certain causes to that of the European Community.' The document was immediately passed to Thomas McKittrick.

(It should be noted that it was six more years before a former OSS asset called Jean Monnet suggested the same thing. The difference, of course, is that Funk ended up as a war criminal in Spandau whereas Monnet did not – although Monnet himself appears to have had links with IG Farben during the War. Funk, who was the clear 'father' of the European Union, has been completely removed from the organisation's official history but Monnet is often described by Europhiles as yet another of the EU's founding fathers.)

Funk also wrote that 'the new European economy must be an organic growth' and that it would result from 'close economic collaboration between Germany and European countries'. Funk was wise enough to realise that the currency basis of post War Europe might not be the deutschmark itself but thought that this was of secondary importance to Germany maintaining economic leadership of the new, enlarged Germany. 'The currency problem will solve itself,' he wrote, 'because it will then be merely a question of suitable monetary technique.'

After the end of the War, Walther Funk, the main architect of the European Union and the man who should now be celebrated on all euro notes, was still alive but was one of the few civilian Nazis to end up in prison. He had simply been too close to Hitler, and too involved in the Nazi Government, to be allowed to remain free though, like most other Nazis, he claimed that he didn't really know what was going on, was simply following orders and wasn't responsible for any of the bad things that happened. (If you read the Nuremberg trials it soon becomes clear that there were no more than half a dozen 'real' Nazis in Germany – all the others were reluctantly obeying orders.)

Funk was released from prison after serving a few years of his sentence on the grounds that he did not feel well. (However, despite apparently not feeling well, Funk did not die until 1960.)

In 1988, Walther Funk's dream of a European currency began to show its first signs of life. As had been widely recommended, the whole process was shrouded in secrecy.

A special committee (the Committee for the Study of Economic and Monetary Union) was set up to prepare for the launch of the euro. One of the most influential members of the committee was Alexandre Lamfalussy, at the time the general director of the BIS; the central bank for central bankers, and the bank which had worked closely with the Nazis during the Second World War. It was decided that a new bank called the European Central Bank would be created to manage the new currency and the economies of those countries using the new currency. Further, it was decided that the European Central Bank (ECB) would be given complete independence and that the European Parliament (perhaps the weakest Parliament in history) would have no authority over the bank. The only organisation which has any influence or control over the ECB is, of course, the BIS – the secret bank, based in Switzerland, which helped the Nazis throughout the Second World War.

The BIS, the bank which, under Thomas McKittrick, handled the gold which the Nazis stole from millions of Jews, is now effectively controlling the economies of all EU member countries.

Finally, in 2002, just sixty years after Funk had published details of the new proposed pan-European currency, the euro was launched. The advantages, when listed, were identical to the advantages Walther Funk had outlined in 1940. To sell the new currency to an unwilling public, it was pointed out that holidaymakers travelling around Europe would find the new currency a great convenience and that they would be able to buy ice creams with the same currency in Germany, Italy and France. As Funk had predicted everyone in power within the EU knew (or should have known) that the new currency could not possibly work properly until the European Union had become the United States of Europe and individual nations had been lost in a new federal state.

Economists, politicians and commentators recognise that the euro has serious problems. They realise that the obvious mistake was to create the euro before completing the political unity which is a traditional pre-requirement for a currency. Some commentators seem surprised that (as the *Daily Telegraph* put it on 3rd January 2019): 'The euro crisis entrenched and amplified the power and influence of…Germany.'

What the economists perhaps fail to understand is that things are working out perfectly according to Funk's plans. For example, only belatedly are the economists realising that the 'rescue' of Greece was, in fact, merely a bailout designed to protect German banks.

Funk planned that the euro would have to come first – before the political unity – and he predicted that numerous problems would become apparent. It would be no surprise to him that the EU's policies have impoverished countries such as Italy and Greece and left Germany the sole economic winner. When these countries have attempted to defend themselves they have either been bullied into submission, or the elected politicians have simply been replaced by eurocrats.

Today, there are only two solutions: the countries within the Eurozone must either agree to the formation of a United States of Europe (something that would require France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, etc., to abandon what remains of their sovereignty) or they must abandon the euro.

There is very little public support for the former but the EU cannot and will not abandon the euro (however painful its maintenance becomes for the people of Europe) because the single currency was always a crucial part of Funk's long-term plan, and the descendants of the Nazi designers of the European Union now see complete and final victory within their grasp.

Hans Globke (German 1898-1973)

Hans Globke was a German lawyer and politician who helped direct the Nazi party towards the Holocaust. He worked with Adolf Eichmann and brought in many anti-semitic laws, including the one which revoked the citizenship of German Jews. He also helped organise the Holocaust.

It was Globke who was responsible for insisting that all Jews in Hitler's Germany were to be named Israel or Sara so that they could be easily identified by the authorities. It was thanks to Globke that half a million Germans were faced with discriminatory laws. Globke's laws were so highly thought of that they were used in Austria, Czechoslovakia and throughout German controlled Europe. Adolf Eichmann described Globke's work as 'basic for the Final Solution of the Jewish people'.

At the end of the War, however, Globke did what most of the guilty Germans did: he blamed everything on dead Nazis and denied everything. And, amazingly, his denials were accepted. He was briefly imprisoned but then released.

Globke was not unique. In his book *Blind Eye to Murder*, Tom Bower estimates that 250,000 Germans were directly involved in Nazi murders. Of these, just over 35,000 were convicted of war crimes. The other 215,000 were allowed to go free, often obtaining powerful and influential positions in the post-war Germany and the developing European Union. In *The Hidden Enemy*, Heniz Pol estimated that the Gestapo and Labour Front organisations each had at least 50,000 to 75,000 members and that there were at least another 50,000 to 75,000 organisers and teachers for the SS and the Peasant Front. Altogether, he estimated that there were up to 200,000 full-fledged and wholehearted Nazis in Germany. Most of them went unpunished at the end of the War and took positions of power and influence in the new Germany and the developing European Union.

At the Nuremberg trials, Globke appeared as a witness for both the prosecution and the defence and admitted that he knew that Jews were being murdered en masse.

However, the Americans considered him to be too important and useful to be tried and immediately after the War he became one of the most powerful people in the German Government. He ensured that the German Government and the civil service were packed with former Nazis and he became Germany's main liaison with NATO and the CIA. The Americans protected Globke after the War – even insisting that references to Globke be removed from Eichmann's memoirs.

After he retired, Globke wanted to retire to Switzerland but the Swiss denied him entry – wisely labelling him an 'unwanted foreigner'.

Paul Joseph Goebbels (German 1897-1945)

Goebbels was a Nazi politician and Reich Minister of Propaganda from 1933 to 1945.

Goebbels was a devout believer in the development of a new European Union, under the control of Germany, and for many years, he devoted huge amounts of space in the German newspaper *Das Reich* to articles about 'the new Europe' and 'the vision of a new Europe'. Goebbels was an extraordinarily efficient propagandist whose techniques of indoctrination, misdirection and misinformation are today practised to great effect by both the European Union itself and, in the United Kingdom, the British Broadcasting Corporation.

Hermann Goring (German) 1893-1946

Now largely remembered for stealing art treasures from Jews and for setting fire to the Reichstag (something which he admitted at Hitler's birthday party in 1942 and which was reported at the Nuremberg trials by General Franz Halder who had been there). The Nazis used the fire to help them pretend that the communists were trying to take over Germany and the burning of the Reichstag is regarded as a classic 'false flag' action.

Goring was one of the most powerful Nazis and the creator of the Gestapo. He was the second most powerful man in Germany and the senior army officer. He was closely involved in all economic affairs, including plans for the European Union.

Hermann Goring, had set up a company called Kontinental-Ol to take advantage of oil supplies in central Europe and the Balkans (Blessing soon became a director of that company too). Kontinental-Ol's money was supplied by Deutsche Bank, through Hermann Abs (qv).

As with IG Farben, Goring's company made its money through murder, theft and slavery and was one of the Third Reich's biggest uses of concentration camp inmates. There was a constant need for new workers since the average life expectation of employees was three to six months. When Kontinental-Ol shut down its camps at the end of the War, the inmates of the camps were shot to stop them talking.

Charles Higham, writing in his meticulously researched book *Trading with the Enemy*, revealed that Goring had close relationships with a number of American companies.

Friedrich Grimm (German 1888-1959)
Friedrich Grimm, who had joined the Nazi party in 1933 had, in 1936, published a book entitled *Hitler and Europe*. He became vice-president of the Deutsch-Franzosische Gesellschaft in 1937.

Grimm argued that France and Germany should combine to save Europe from Bolsheviks and Jews. He spent much of the War promoting the idea of a 'new European order'. Today, he is described as a 'convinced European' who played an important part in the development of the European Union.

Walter Hallstein (German 1901-1982)
Hallstein was the father of European Law in the 1930s and 1940s and was a member of the National Socialist Union of Jurists. During the Second World War, while working as a Nazi, Hallstein used legal phrases and proposals (designed for controlling occupied countries) which he later used when preparing European Law for the European Union. Hallstein was the first president of the Commission of the European Economic Community and the European Union, unable to erase him from their history, now recognises him as one of the founding fathers of the EU.

On January 23, 1939, Walter Hallstein, who was Dean of the Faculty of Law and Economics at the University of Rostock, in Germany, gave a propaganda speech about the restructuring of Europe. The speech was part of the preparation for war by the Nazi regime and their powerful partners the oil and drug cartel IG Farben. The Nazis had already annexed Austria and the Czech territories of Bohemia and Moravia, and in his speech Hallstein describes the planned German conquest of the rest of Europe and the subjugation of the continent. In due course, Hallstein became an officer in the German army. In 1938, Hallstein had been part of the official Nazi delegation to Rome.

Hallstein was jointly responsible for writing a document which included this section: 'The legal order of the dictatorial state (Greater Germany) has the task to protect the integrity, the health and the racial health of its people…The supreme race has to be particularly protected from the Jewish race by eliminating it from society for all time.'

In 1957, Walter Hallstein (who had always been a keen federalist, with the aim of Germany controlling Europe) returned to Rome as one of the signatories of the EU's 'Treaty of Rome' and in the same year became the first president of the commission of the European Economic Community. It was Hallstein who was the architect of the now enormously powerful EU Commission (the politburo of the EU).

Hallstein later wrote a book called *Europe in the Making* in which he described the role of the EU commissioners. Here is a quote: 'The Commission is entrusted with what virtually amounts to a monopoly in taking the initiative in all matters affecting the Community. There are a few exceptions to this general rule, but these ought to be removed at the earliest opportunity. As I see it the Commission should eventually be empowered to take all measures necessary for the implementation of the Treaty on its own authority, without having to rely on special and specific approval by the Council of Ministers. Furthermore, the big and small policy decisions, by which the Commission, and the Commission alone, must at present exercise its executive authority, will in some way have to be relaxed. This could be done by giving the different departments of the Commission under their Directors-General greater responsibility or by setting up separate agencies. The departments or the agencies would of course continue to act under the general supervision of the Commission for approval in every case.'

This is, of course, exactly what has happened. Hallstein's plan for the management of the European Union has been followed to the letter.

Hallstein has been accurately described as the 'Founding Father of the Brussels EU'. The EU does not mention Hallstein's links to the Nazis or his work with IG Farben. Nor does the EU mention their founding father's determination to eliminate the Jewish race and today there is no published evidence that eradicating the Jewish race is official EU policy although, of course, there is also no published evidence that it isn't.

Adolf Hitler (Austrian 1889-1945)
It would be entirely unfair not to include Adolf Hitler as one of the founding fathers of the European Union. It was his ambition and drive which led the way to the creation of what he liked to call the 'United States of Europe'. 'The construction of a new Europe belongs to us,' said Hitler at the start of the Second World War. By 1940, he was confident enough to announce that: 'Germany has given freedom to the European continent.'

Lutz Graf Schwerin Von Krosigk (German 1887-1977)
After the death of Adolf Hitler, Joseph Goebbels became Chancellor of Germany for one day. And after Goebbels death, the next temporary Chancellor was Lutz Graf Schwerin von Krosigk. Astonishingly, von

Krosigk, who was a member of the Nazi party, had also been a member of Hitler's cabinet. He was responsible for the persecution of Jews in Germany and other European countries. He also stole their property and laundered money. In 1949, he was convicted of war crimes and sentenced to ten years in jail. However, in 1951, his sentence was commuted by Konrad Adenauer (the Chancellor who claimed that he hadn't been a Nazi, though he arranged for Nazi flags to be flown, helped the Nazis in other ways and hired a Nazi as his Chief of Staff).

Alfried Krupp (Alfried Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach) (German 1907-1967)

In 1942, Alfried Krupp, the eponymous head of one of Germany's biggest companies, was having difficulty finding enough workers to make armaments and so in May of that year Krupp approached Hitler and Himmler and suggested a solution. He thought a contract between Krupp and the SS to use concentrate camp inmates would benefit everyone. Krupp could obtain the labour he needed and the Krupp factories would pay the SS a daily rate for the workers. Himmler thought this a splendid idea. But the supply of slave workers was still insufficient and so Krupp approached Rudolf Hoess, the commandant of Auschwitz with another idea. He wanted to build a Krupp factory inside the extermination camp and to use the people in his private camp in his factory. Unfortunately, for Krupp the deal didn't work well because Hoess preferred gassing prisoners rather than putting them to work. (Hoess, not being rich or well-connected, was hung after his trial at Nuremberg and so played no part in the development of the EU.)

Frustrated by Hoess, Krupp did deals with everyone else he could find who was prepared to send him concentration camp inmates. Even children as young as six-years-old were forced to work in Krupp's factories. If they didn't work hard enough they didn't receive any food. (The 'food' being a once a day 350 calorie bowl of soup.) Throughout the War, no one exploited concentration camp slaves as efficiently or as profitably as Alfried Krupp. Even when it was clear that the War had been lost, Krupp continued to make young prisoners (including children) work in brutal conditions in his factories.

Being much richer than Hoess, and having more powerful friends, Krupp, who had been sentenced to 12 years imprisonment at Nuremberg, was released by the American McCloy after just three years in prison. It is worth recording that Krupp's imprisonment does not sound much like punishment. A room in the prison was been set aside so that the Krupp directors could discuss corporate business and Alfried was supplied with the best food and wines available and apparently took delight in insulting the people who had been responsible for his incarceration.

Incredibly, McCloy even arranged for Krupp to be pardoned and his record as a war criminal expunged.

Krupp's industrial empire had controlled slave labourers in 57 concentration camps. Krupp, who was also Hitler's Minster of Armament and War Production was close to Hitler and was responsible for transferring factories from occupied territories to the German Reich. He was one of the most evil members of the Nazi regime and was awarded medals by Hitler for keeping up production of arms through the use of slave labour.

McCloy later explained his pardon for Krupp by claiming that the German was a 'playboy' who had not had much responsibility. In fact, Krupp had been very much a hands-on operator and running the companies had been entirely his responsibility.

Astonishingly, McCloy even ordered that all of Krupp's property, which had been confiscated after the War, be restored to him so that he suffered not at all.

After his release and pardon, Krupp, one of the richest and worst German war criminals, quickly became a seemingly 'respectable' German citizen accepted by German society and playing an important part in the enriching of Germany and the development of the European Union.

Prince Bernhard of Lippe-Biesterfled (German 1911-2004)

Prince Bernhard of Lippe-Biesterfled in Germany was a keen supporter of a federal Europe. (Bernhard later married Crown Princess Juliana of the Netherlands.) Bernhard was a Nazi member and also a member of the SS but curiously he is usually omitted from lists of the EU's founding fathers. He was, however, one of the most important figures in the development of the EU.

In 1954, Bernhard sponsored the first meeting of European federalists and their American supporters at the Bilderberg Hotel in the Netherlands. (The promotion of a federal Europe, or United States of Europe, has always been the main reason for the secretive annual Bilderberg conferences.) In 1955, the delegates at the Bilderberg conference planned to create a European Union with a single currency – as had been originally described by Walther Funk and other Nazis.

The Bilderbergers (as they like to call themselves) still meet regularly and secretly and attendees are usually enthusiastic supporters of the European Union.

John McCloy (American 1895-1989)

McCloy, a former president of the World Bank, had been a partner in a law firm which represented the American portion of IG Farben and subsequently acquire a reputation for having sympathy for the Nazis. Much of what he did now seems inexplicable.

Early in the War, McCloy used his influence to block attempts by Jewish organisations to persuade the US Air Force to bomb Auschwitz because he knew how crucial the concentration camp was to German Industry. It was known that it would have been easy for bombers to destroy the gas chambers and key railway junctions but McCloy (who was, at the time, the Assistant Secretary of War) claimed that bombing Auschwitz might annoy the Germans and provoke them into vindictive actions. Some found it difficult to understand precisely what 'vindictive actions' he had in mind.

It was, however, McCloy's actions after the War which helped create the European Union.

After the War, McCloy became US High Commissioner for West Germany. In addition to releasing many industrialists who had been sentenced to prison, he also arranged for Nazi camp doctors and SS officers to be released or to have their sentences substantially reduced.

As soon as McCloy had arranged for their release, the executives from IG Farben quickly re-joined German companies, with, for example, Schmitz joining the board of Deutsche Bank.

McCloy was never subjected to serious criticism for any of his actions because he was obeying American instructions. Although President Eisenhower had wanted to rid Germany of the influence of the Nazis, there were other powerful Americans who felt differently. Allen Dulles, John Foster Dulles and General Patton all wanted the Germans to control Europe as a bulwark against the Soviet Union.

After the War, McCloy served as chairman of the Chase Manhattan Bank and the Ford Foundation. Thomas McKittrick also became a director of Chase Manhattan; a bank which had had strong links with the Nazis during the War. McCloy also became chairman of the Council on Foreign Relations and an adviser to five American Presidents.

In 1963, the man who had worked with the manufacturer of the gas which had been used to murder millions of Jews and who had ordered the early release of some of Germany's worst war criminals, was presented with the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Lyndon B Johnson.

It was entirely thanks to the efforts of people such as McCloy and McKittrick that Schmitz, Krupp and other war criminals (who were as responsible as Hitler, Himmler et al for the horrors of the Second World War and the efficient brutality of the Nazi war machine) received no punishment at all or the sort of punishment usually regarded as suitable for small time motoring offenders. It was released war criminals who helped found the European Union.

Thomas McKittrick (American 1889-1970)

McKittrick was an American banker and President of the Bank for International Settlements. He had a close relationship with Adolf Hitler and was a Nazi sympathiser.

McKittrick used the Bank for International Settlements to help the Nazis steal money and use it for their War effort.

After the War the odious McKittrick (who was never charged with War crimes) became a director of Chase National Bank. This is not surprising since the Chase National Bank also had close links to the Nazis during World War II. The bank had enabled Nazi sympathisers in America to buy dollars at a discounted rate. To do this the Chase National Bank handled money which had been stolen from Jews who had fled from Germany. The Chase National Bank is believed to have earned $500,000 in commission for this work. No one from the Bank was ever prosecuted 'in the interests of national security'.

In 1970, Thomas McKittrick died at the age of 81. *The New York Times* described him as a 'world financier'. There was no mention of looted gold or secret deals with the Nazis.

Jean Monnet (French 1888-1979)

In 1944, Jean Monnet wrote a memo in which he said: 'Prosperity and vital social progress will remain elusive until the nations of Europe form a federation of a 'European entity' which will force them into a single economic unit.'

Monnet was an asset of Allan Dulles, the OSS representative in Europe and has been described as Roosevelt's eyes and ears in Europe. For reasons explained elsewhere, the Americans were keen to see a European Union develop. Monnet was a mover and shaker, someone who would today be known as an efficient networker, and he believed that the technocrats should rule – without being disturbed by the will of the people.

In 1946, Jean Monnet began to plan the European project which he had drawn up with John Foster Dulles and which had been originally devised by Walther Funk, Ribbentrop et al. Monnet is today talked about as one of the fathers of the European Union. Those who talk of him in this way do not usually mention that Monnet had been associated with the dishonourable McKittrick and appears to have had links with IG Farben – the owner of a concentration camp at Auschitz and the manufacturer of the gas used in the gas chambers. Monnet was almost certainly an agent for the OSS and his influence depended upon his links with the Dulles brothers and John McCloy. (Mysteriously, much paperwork disappeared towards the end of the War.) A less well connected man might have found himself enjoying a starring role at the Nuremberg trials.

Oswald Moseley (British 1896-1980)
Oswald Moseley, the fascist leader, spent much time after the War campaigning for European integration. In 1953, he founded a magazine called *The European* and in 1958 he published a book entitled *Europe: Faith and Plan – A Way Out from the Coming Crises and an Introduction to Thinking as a European*.

Moseley was an enthusiastic supporter of the developing European Union (which he recognised as a uniquely fascist organisation) and he should be included among the EU's list of founding fathers. It was Moseley who first talked of 'large trading blocks' and 'a common agricultural policy' – ideas and phrases later adopted by the European Union as its own.

Emmanuel Mournier (French 1905-1950)
Emmanuel Mounier, a fascist, a keen Nazi supporter, a lifelong supporter of a federal Europe and an opponent of parliamentarianism and capitalism, had great influence on the continent of Europe.

In 1936, Mournier attended a summer camp with the Hitler Youth movement and wrote that 'communitarian feeling was one of the most exciting psychological aspects of the Nazi vision of the world'. (In 1982, Helmut Kohl was elected Chancellor Germany. Kohl, too, had been sworn into the Hitler Youth movement – a first step towards being a Nazi.)

According to John Laughland, in his magnificently researched book *The Tainted Source*, Mounier 'was fascinated by Nazism'. He was also enthusiastic about fascism. Mounier wrote of the 'authentic spiritual vigour' which he felt the Nazis possessed.

After France surrendered to the Nazis, Mounier became actively involved in the Vichy 'government' under Marshall Petain.

Today, Mounier is usually described as the spiritual godfather of the European movement. Naturally, his relationship with the Nazis is omitted from officially approved biographies.

Benito Mussolini (Italian 1883-1945)
Benito Mussolini, the inventor of fascism, was an enthusiastic supporter of the idea of a European Union. He was Prime Minister of Italy from 1922 to 1943 and Duce of the Italian Social Republic from 1943 to 1945.

Surprisingly, Mussolini's political career began when he was hired by the British Secret Service (with a fee in excess of £6,000 a week in today's money) to publish propaganda.

Like all of the EU's creators, Mussolini did not believe in democracy. He preferred a police state and (again, like the EU) preferred to control the people through propaganda.

By the late 1930s, Mussolini had decided that Britain and France were finished and that Italy and Germany were destined to rule Europe together. Under Mussolini's leadership, Italy joined Germany in the War against Britain in 1940. The aim was to create a pan-European state with Germany as the senior partner.

Mussolini is not listed by the EU as one of its official founding fathers.

Montagu Norman (1871-1950)
During the War, Montagu Norman helped the Nazis steal gold from the banks of countries which they had occupied. He must have known that the gold was being used to finance the Nazi War machine and to prepare Germany to control Europe – whatever the outcome of the War. Norman, who was proud of being a currency manipulator, helped create the Bank for International Settlements for the Nazis and was a close friend of Schacht (qv). After the War, instead of being arrested as a war criminal, he was made Baron Norman of St Clere and given the Distinguished Service Order.

General George S Patton Jr (American 1885-1945)
After the end of the War it was Patton who disobeyed Eisenhower's instruction that Germany be 'denazified'. Patton, the highest ranking and most powerful American in Europe, was worried that without the Nazis in position, Germany would be controlled by communists. It was Patton, therefore, who helped ensure that post war Germany was run by Nazis who continued with Hitler's aim of developing a United States of Europe controlled by Germany.

Major Vidkun Quisling (Norwegian 1887-1945)

Major Vidkun Quisling was a Norwegian army officer and diplomat who ruled Norway on behalf of the German occupying forces during 1940-1945. He was an enthusiastic supporter of the Nazis and their plans and was shot as a traitor in 1945. In accordance with Nazi guidelines, he believed that Europe would be strong and peaceful only if united. 'We must create a Europe that does not squander its blood and strength in internecine conflict, but forms a compact unity,' he wrote in an article entitled 'Norway and the Germanic Task in Europe' which was published in 1942. 'In this way it will become richer, stronger and more civilised, and will recover its old place in the world.' Quisling also said that: 'the interests and needs of Germany are essentially and inseparably linked with those of Europe'.

There is an endless amount of evidence to show that the Nazis promoted the idea of a European Union in Norway. Major Quisling said: 'We must create a Europe that does not squander its blood and strength in internecine conflict, but forms a compact unity. In this way it will become richer, stronger and more civilised and will recover its old place in the world.'

In view of his stance on pan European politics (he stated that there was no opposition between European economic cooperation and National Socialism) he could reasonably expect to be regarded as one of the founding fathers of the European Union, though curiously the EU never seems to list him with the other Nazis and Nazi supporters when producing their chosen list of founding fathers. He does not have a building, a square or even a telephone kiosk named after him in Brussels. His name is, however, to be found in most dictionaries and is used to describe a traitor who collaborates with an enemy force occupying their country.

Joachim von Ribbentrop (German 1893-1946)

Ribbentrop's office at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs worked on draft documents for a United Europe. After Germany's defeat at Stalingrad, Ribbentrop and the SS put extra effort into their plans for the new, expanded Germany. Ribbentrop, who was Hitler's Foreign Minister, felt it was necessary to mobilise the population of Europe against the threat of the Soviet Union.

In 1942, the Reich Ministry of Foreign Affairs began work on a new European Committee and Goebbels' Propaganda Office issued a communique which called for a new European image of German foreign policy. On 21st March 1942, Ribbentrop sent a note to Adolf Hitler in which he remarked that there was need for a new European Confederation to include Germany, Italy, France, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Serbia, Greece and Spain.

On March 21, in 1943, Ribbentrop proposed the formation of a European Confederation. The Germans were by this time concerned about the growing might of the Soviet Union and felt that a United Europe would make Germany better able to combat USSR. Ribbentrop suggested abolishing customs barriers between all those countries. (The Americans had the same idea and their enthusiasm for the European Union was in part a response to their fear of the USSR.)

A few months later, on September 9th 1943, the Ministry proposed precise details for the new European Confederation. The plans were pretty well identical to the current structure of the European Union. There were proposals for a European Central Bank, European Monetary Union and a European Economic Council. The European Union has followed the Third Reich's proposals to the letter.

In June of the same year, a Nazi official submitted the 'Basic Elements of a Plan for the New Europe' to the committee. The paper suggested that Europeans should have a customs union, favouring trade between countries within Confederation. It also repeated Funk's earlier proposals for European monetary union and the harmonisation of labour conditions and social welfare. It even suggested the formation of separate 'conferences' for all individual areas – such as Labour and Agriculture – and proposed that the bureaucrats working in these 'conferences' should decide policy for the whole Confederation. An official in the Nazi ministry of employment declared that Germany was not fighting for herself but for Europe. And it was declared that 'Every continental state must remain conscious of its responsibility towards the European Economic Community'.

The plan proposed by Ribbentrop and his colleagues is, of course, identical to the way that the European Union operates. The only difference is that the European Union uses the term 'commissions' rather than 'conferences'.

Ribbentrop suggested that a new European currency be known as European Monetary Union and that a European Central Bank be created. These names are used today by the European Union. The Third Reich plan was that the other nations of Europe would help promote the development of the German economy. This is, of course, exactly what has happened through the modern European Union.

Ribbentrop should be listed as a major founder of the European Union.

Gustaw Schlotterer (German 1906-1989)
Schlotterer was an SS officer and Secretary of State of the Imperial Ministry of Economy under Hitler. He proposed building a unified, integrated Europe and suggested linking national economies to further German interests. Schlotterer put together a Commission (the Schlotterer Commission) which drew up plans for a European Bank. The Schlotterer Commission's plan was supported by German steel and coal business leaders of the Ruhr who later helped form the European Coal and Steel Community. Former Nazis became enthusiastic advocates of the new 'European Idea'.

The powerful German industrialists who had helped Hitler to power initiated the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community. After the end of the Second World War, SS officer Schlotterer, who had been secretary of state at the Imperial Ministry of Economy, obtained work as an economist working for the steel industry.

It was Schlotterer who drew up plans for the future European Central Bank. (The term 'European Economic Community', a title which was later used by the developing European Union, had already been suggested by Walther Funk and the economic department of the Third Reich.)

Other German planners wrote of the need to improve European railways, roads and airlines in accordance with a common plan. Half a century later, this became official EU policy.

It was also the Nazis who were first to recommend the introduction of a single European passport.

Hans-Ernst Schneider (German 1909-1999)
At the end of the War, many Nazis simply took off their uniforms, threw away their identification papers and changed identities. Some were very successful in creating new lives for themselves. So, for example, consider a Nazi SS officer called Hans-Ernst Schneider who had served on Heinrich Himmler's staff. Schneider was the leader of a unit which carried horrific experiments on concentration camp inmates but after the War he obtained documents 'proving' that he was Hans Schwerte, an ordinary soldier.

During the years which followed, the newly born Schwerte became an eminent academic and was given many honours by German and Belgian authorities. Only when he was threatened with exposure in 1995 did the 87-year-old Schwerte come clean and admit that he had been one of the very worst Nazis.

The significance of Schneider/Schwerte is two-fold.

First, his career illustrates just how efficiently the Nazis were at abandoning their past and re-establishing themselves in German life.

Second, when he had been an SS officer, Schneider/Schwerte had been working on Funk's idea of developing a new Europe. On March 1st 1945, he was told to develop the idea of European integration. Unfortunately, the timing wasn't terribly good and within a couple of months the Germans had surrendered to the Allies. This did not, however, prove to be much of a drawback for Schneider who disappeared completely and then reappeared with documents proving that his name was Hans Schwerte. The newly minted Schwerte got a job with a publishing company which was busily producing propaganda promoting European integration and the 'European idea'. At the same time that they hired Schwerte, the publisher also hired a number of other former Nazi officers who were doing exactly the same work that they had all been doing for the Third Reich. Here is more proof that the Nazis had very effectively succeeded in continuing with their plan for a federal Europe.

Although the organisation declared itself to be 'left-liberal' in its leanings, the plan was to create a new Europe, as a geopolitical entity which would, of course, be dominated by Germany and which would be avowedly anti-Communist. These plans delighted the United States of America which wanted to use the former Nazis to create a new European entity which could stand up to Russia. The Americans did not care that the plans were being devised by Nazis and, indeed, there is clear evidence (described elsewhere in this book) that a number of powerful Americans worked with senior Nazis during the Second World War, protected them from punishment at Nuremberg and helped them create the new Germany-dominated Europe.

Hjalmar Horace Greeley Schacht (German 1877-1970)
Schacht was a member of Hitler's government and President of the German Central Bank (the Reichsbank). He was a strong supporter of Hitler and the Nazi party. In 1938, Schacht suggested that Hitler should confiscate Jewish property in Germany but hold it in trust and used as security for loans from abroad. He also suggested that money should be given to emigrating Jews in order to overcome the objections of countries which would not accept penniless Jews. In 1943, he was dismissed from the Nazi Government after being accused of involvement in the attempt on Hitler's life. He was tried at Nuremberg but although the Russian judges wanted to convict him he was fully acquitted. He then founded a private bank and advised developing countries on economic development.

Both Gunston, a manager of the Bank of England, and Sir Montagu Norman, the director of the Bank of England, were strong supporters of Hjalmar Schacht and helped protect him after the War. Norman was godfather to one of Schacht's grandchildren. Both Schacht and Norman were directors of the BIS during the War.

Hermann Schmitz (German1881-1960)
Schmitz was a powerful figure at IG Farben. In 1929 Schmitz, together with Edsel Ford and Walter Teagle of Standard Oil (the oil company which helped the Nazis in World War Two) and one or two others set up the American edition of IG Farben. Throughout the Second World War, Edsel Ford and his father Henry both worked closely with the Nazis. According to Charles Higham, they refused to build aircraft engines for Britain but instead built military trucks for the Nazis. (Ford was not alone in this. General Motors built trucks, tanks and armoured cars for Nazi Germany in the 1930s and was, astonishingly, given $33 million tax exemption after the end of the War on the grounds that its airplane and vehicle factories in Germany had been damaged by bombing during World War II.) Ford would invariably send Hitler a generous birthday gift each year. In 1941, Henry Ford gave an interview to the *Manchester Guardian* in which he stated that the US should force England and Germany to fight until they both collapsed and that after that the two countries should join together in a coalition.

Schmitz was the president of IG Farben and in 1930 he met President Herbert Hoover and the two men found that they shared a fear and hatred of Russia. It was this fear of Russia which would later lead the Americans to push for the formation of the European Union – an organisation which they hoped would be a powerful European barrier to Soviet progress.

In Germany, IG Farben was by far the most important company. It produced a vast range of products including oils, rubber, nylon, plastic, chemicals and a range of poison gases (including the gas which was used at the company's combination rubber factory and concentration camp at Auschwitz).

Schmitz was a founder member of the Bank for International Settlements and stayed on the board until the end of World War II. It was with Schmitz's help that the Nazis could grow in power for IG Farben provided the Nazis with most of the military and commercial goods they required – as well as millions of dollars' worth of foreign exchange. Schmitz was close to another director of the BIS called Kurt von Schroder – who was a dedicated Nazi and a leader of the Death's Head Brigade of the SS. It was Schroder who, with a group of associates, gave a million marks a year to Himmler.

At the end of the War, Schmitz was imprisoned but thanks to many powerful friends he was not seriously punished for his part in the deaths of many millions of Jews at Auschwitz. He was sentenced to four years in prison for 'war crimes and crimes against humanity' and was released in 1950. He was not required to give back the huge amounts of money he had made out of Auschwitz. After his release he was appointed to the administrators' council of Deutsche Bank and made honorary president of 'Rheinische Stahlwerke AG'.

Robert Schuman (Luxembourg 1886-1963)
Robert Schuman was a member of Paul Reynaud's wartime government in France, in charge of refugees. When France surrendered to the Nazis, Schuman kept his post under the Petain government and on 10th July 1940, Schuman pledged allegiance to Adolf Hitler and voted to give full power to Marshall Petain – who supported Hitler. At the end of the War, Marshall Petain was convicted of treason. He was originally sentenced to death as a Nazi collaborator but his sentence was commuted to life in prison.

In June 1944, Robert Schuman, the Secretary of State of Vichy France, stated: 'We will help Germany on every front and in every way to preserve the West, its enlightenment, its culture, its traditions.'

Robert Schuman, later described as a founding father of the EU, had supported the surrender of France to Hitler, the Third Reich and Nazi Germany and had supported the formation of Marshall Petain's government. Normally, a War time history as a quisling would have resulted in an appearance at one of the Nuremberg trials but Schuman was a committed enthusiast for the development of a European Union and was, therefore, invaluable to other Nazis and the Americans. He was not hung and not imprisoned. Indeed, although he was a known Nazi supporter, he was never arrested or charged (though he was vilified as a 'Vichy product who should be kicked out').

Before and during the War, Schuman spoke about the need for some sort of arrangement between France and Germany.

Schuman, an enthusiastic Nazi supporter, created the European Coal and Steel Community (which developed into the European Union) and is today described as one of the founding fathers of the European Union.

Arthur Seyss-Inquart (Austria 1892-1946)
Arthur Seyss-Inquart, the Nazi ruler of the occupied Netherlands, suggested that there was a need for a new European community and claimed that there would inevitably be an increase in prosperity when national

barriers had been removed. He was following his leader for Hitler had already called for the removal of what he called a clutter of small nations. Seyss-Inquart was hung in October 1946 and is usually completely airbrushed from the EU's history.

Franz Alfred Six (German 1909-1975)

In 1942, the German Foreign Ministry founded a 'Europe Committee', consisting of officials from the Foreign Ministry and the Institute for the Study of Foreign Countries. The committee's most important member was Franz Alfred Six. Herr Six was a Nazi official who was appointed by Reinhard Heydrich, rose to the rank of SS Brigadefuhrer and created six death squads in the UK which were charged with eliminating civilian resistance members and Jews all over Great Britain.

At the Nuremberg trials in 1948, Six was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment but inexplicably he was released in 1952 and went to work as a publicity executive for Porsche.

Altiero Spinelli (Italian 1907-1986)

Altiero Spinelli, a former communist, attended a meeting held in Milan in 1943 where it was proposed that a European federation be created. Altiero Spinelli was a committed Euro-federalist and is now recognised as (yet) another of the many officially recognised founding fathers of the EU. The EU's eurocrats like to have several founding fathers so that they can answer criticism that such and such a founding father was a Nazi.

The main building of the European Parliament in Brussels is named after Spinelli who, following the Nazi plan, wanted a United States of Europe with its own Armed Forces and its own constitution.

Like all the other official founding fathers of the EU Spinelli had no interest in democracy and did not believe that the people of Europe should be involved in the design or management of the new European super-state.

Alberto Di Stefani (Italian 1879-1969)

Alberto Di Stefani, who was a keen fascist and Mussolini's finance minister, was an enthusiastic supporter of the EU. He wrote: 'A European Union could not be subject to the variations of internal policy that are characteristic of liberal regimes.'

Fritz Thyssen (German 1873-1951)

At the Nuremberg trials, Fritz Thyssen, a rich and powerful German businessman, was tried for being a supporter of the Nazi party. In the 1920s and1930s, Thyssen made huge donations to Hitler and Thyssen himself claimed to have donated one million marks to the Nazi party. He joined the Nazi party in 1933, and accepted the exclusion of Jews from German life. He dismissed his own Jewish employees.

When the War ended, Thyssen inevitably denied involvement in the employment of slave labour.

(In 1945, Germany was full of ex Nazis who denied having anything to do with the Third Reich, either blaming people who were dead or claiming that, if they had done anything bad, then it was because they had been forced to do so. It is surprising just how few Nazis there appear to have been during the War. Indeed, it sometimes seems that Hitler must have fought the Second World War pretty well by himself – with just a few unwilling conscripts being forced to run the concentration camps.)

Thanks to his pleading, Thyssen was not imprisoned for his crimes but was fined a relatively modest 15% of his assets. (I describe this as a modest percentage since much of his wealth had been accumulated during the War, from working with the Nazis.)

Thyssen quickly ran away to Argentina, with thousands of other Nazis, presumably relieved to have got off so lightly and eager to be beyond extradition if anyone changed their minds. Money which the Nazis took to Argentina was used to help the Nazis maintain influence in Germany and to help develop the European Union.

(Incidentally, when I checked the Wikipedia entry for the thyssenkrupp conglomerate I found that it dismissed the Wartime activities of Thyssen and Krupp in a short paragraph, mentioning that labour was supplemented by 'foreign workers, forced labourers and prisoners of war'. There is no mention that these were concentration camp inmates – with a life expectation of just a few months. And there is no mention of Auschwitz. Nor is there any mention of six-year-olds being forced to work until they dropped. And then being gassed.)

Ludger Westrick (German 1894-1990)

Ludger Westrick became a Secretary of State in the Ministry of Economics in West Germany under Konrad Adenaeur (himself a recognised Nazi supporter qv). Westrick had, with Abs (qv) been a member of a secret group which met during the War to plan German domination of Europe when the War finally ended.

Karl Wurster (German 1900-1974)

Karl Wurster, who had joined the Nazi party in 1937, had served with a right-wing militia between the First and Second World Wars. In 1947, he was arrested to face trial at Nuremberg.

During the War, Wurster had been a director of IG Farben and had coordinated the company's work with the Nazis. Wurster had actually been chairman of a subsidiary which had made the gas used in the gas chambers. Wurster's work meant that he was directly involved in the deaths of an estimated 1.5 million people. Despite this it was decided not to charge him with any crimes and shortly after the end of the War he was promoted to become chairman of the re-established BASF. He was made an honorary professor at Heidelberg University and was given many doctorates and other awards by other universities, presumably for his work in manufacturing lethal gas. The West German Government also gave him many awards in the 1950s, also presumably for his work in making poison gas for use in gas chambers since he appears to have done nothing else of note.

Almost unbelievably, in 1959 Wurster, (who was still chairman of BASF, a former part of IG Farben) was so arrogant that he hosted a reunion banquet for the men who had worked for IG Farben, committed genocide and helped run Auschwitz during the Second World War.

The dinner was attended by Butefisch, Schneider and ter Meer among many others. The German government appears to have been perfectly happy to allow this celebratory dinner to take place and for a bunch of Nazis to toast one another. Maybe in a kindly moment during their dinner the former Nazi supporters remembered the tens of thousands of children who had lived short lives in appalling conditions and had died making them rich.

The utterly appalling Wurster retired from IG Farben in 1965 but continued to sit on the supervisory boards of a number of other German companies. According to Wikipedia, after the War, he 'became one of the leading figures in post-war Germany's industrial life.'

Surprisingly, the war criminals who had worked at IG Farben and Krupps and at other companies were allowed to keep the huge amounts of money they had made out of slavery and exploitation and genocide. Largely because of American influence, and the efforts of McCloy, there seems to have been a strong reluctance to punish businessmen, who had used the concentration camps to make money and who had provided gas and facilities for genocide, rather than actually physically turning on the gas taps themselves. The feeling at the time appears to have been that the businessmen were needed to make Germany strong again and to help create the new European federal state.

The descendants of many of the Nazi war criminals inherited the wealth their fathers had accumulated during and after the War.

The descendants of the slaves who died in the concentration camps and gas chambers inherited only sorrows.

Note 1

If you try to research these figures on the internet you will usually find that their backgrounds have been cleansed of any association with Nazis. Oddly enough, this is particularly true of individuals who are regarded by the EU as officially acceptable 'founding fathers'.

Note 2

As a curiosity, it is notable that many of the individuals listed here lived until their late 80s or 90s, though the average life expectancy of the EU's founding fathers is, of course, reduced by the fact that a number of them died suddenly in 1945 (or, in the cases of Goring and Ribbentrop, in 1946). Maybe psychopaths live longer than more sensitive individuals.

Chapter 5

Germany after World War II

In 1945, Donald MacLaren, a British spy, who had done as much as anyone to oppose IG Farben, wrote a memo on the 'De-Nazification of the German Chemical Industry'.

MacLaren believed that IG Farben had 'almost become the State itself' and that the defeat of Hitler was merely a temporary setback. His memo contains this paragraph: 'Men who built such an elaborate structure and who thought so thoroughly of every contingency in the past are not likely to disappear from the scene without leaving a group of younger men who wait for the day when our backs are turned and our interest wanes to gather again their scattered resources of money and men to engage once more in an attempt of economic domination of the world.'

MacLaren's prediction was absolutely accurate.

In modern parlance, IG Farben had become too big to be allowed to fail.

It is widely believed that all the culpable, important Nazis were either punished for their war crimes at the Nuremberg trials or that they ran away.

This is a myth.

A few of the best known Nazis were executed and a number were imprisoned but on the whole the senior Nazis who had been responsible for the most heinous crimes were found not guilty or never even charged with anything. A few (such as Krupp) whose activities were too awful to go entirely unnoticed were imprisoned but quietly released and pardoned when the attention had died down.

Around twelve thousand Germans stuffed their stolen money into travel bags, fled Europe and headed for South America where they (and their money) were welcomed and they were allowed to start new lives. The ones who took this option were either well-known and personally associated with criminal activity, and therefore very likely to be hung, or were fairly insignificant 'small fry'. The men in the first category included Josef Mengle (who fled to Paraguay and then to Brazil where he was accidentally drowned in 1979) and Adolf Eichmann (who was captured in Argentina in 1960 and hung in Israel in 1962).

The startling truth, however, is that the ambitious, powerful, patriotic and really devious Nazis all stayed in Germany because they knew that although they had lost the War, their plans would ensure that they won the peace. They also knew that their American contacts would ensure that any punishments which would be meted out would be mild and of little lasting consequence. For many of the more heinous Nazis who had their wrists slapped at the Nuremburg Tribunals the truth is that the modest punishments were little more than a passing, mild embarrassment and a minor inconvenience. Money earned during the War was not confiscated (even if it had been earned through the use of slave labour in the concentration camps) and pardons were scattered around quite freely. Numerous senior Nazis were allowed to go free because the Americans needed them to help with the creation of the new European Union.

The Nazis were delighted and probably couldn't believe their luck. But, knowing America's plans, they had prepared well for this eventuality.

In August 1944, a meeting of German industrialists was held in Strasbourg. The men at the meeting discussed how gold and art (looted from occupied countries) would be smuggled out of Germany and hidden outside Germany until it could be used to re-establish the Nazi party. At this meeting the Nazis planned how they would win the peace when they had lost the War – by taking over Europe and creating a European Union as devised by Funk et al.

According to a secret US State Department telegram dated 4th December 1945, the German Reichsbank held a huge store of gold at the Swiss National Bank. The money stolen was used by Nazis such as Hallstein to control the formation of the fledgling European Union.

As I explained earlier in this book, evidence from the BIS shows that vast sums of money which had been stored by the Nazis disappeared and could not be traced.

Surprisingly, the decision not to punish the senior Nazis was widely supported by French politicians – despite the fact that many of them had been responsible for the atrocities perpetrated in the concentration camps. So, for example, the French leader General de Gaulle insisted that Robert Schuman (now an 'official' founding father of the EU) be welcomed back into politics despite his pro-Nazi stance during the War. And in 1946, General Perrin-Pelletier, deputy French military governor, made the following press statement: 'We French take the point of view that every German was or still is a Nazi, and if you don't want to kill off all the Germans, then you have to work with these Nazis…we did not make the idiotic mistake of denazification.'

It was this sense of forgiveness, born not of compassion but of commercial and practical ambitions, which helped the Nazis build the new Germany, and the new European Union, in the style designed by Adolf Hitler and his advisers.

The Americans in Europe gave instructions that senior Nazis were not to be tried and imprisoned for several self-serving reasons – some political and some commercial.

The Americans felt that the Nazis would be needed to help rebuild Germany and to aid in the formation of the new United States of Europe. It was believed that if all the senior Nazis were punished there would be no Germans left to run the 'new' Germany and to continue with the German dream of a European Union. General Patton and other senior Americans such as Allen Dulles were concerned that without a strong Germany the powerful Soviet Union would take over Europe and provide a new, communist threat to America.

And so it was largely American influence which resulted in companies such as IG Farben going unpunished and Nazis being allowed to maintain their positions in the German power structure. General Patton in particular sabotaged the Potsdam Agreement which had called for IG Farben to be destroyed and insisted on Nazis being allowed to remain in power. He preferred the idea of Germany being run by Nazis to it being overrun by communists. Those who had made huge sums out of the concentration camps were allowed to keep their profits.

President Eisenhower had ordered that Germany should be denazified but thanks to Patton and others this did not happen and, as a result, some of the worst war criminals were put in positions where they could not only control the post war Germany but also the new pan European organisation which was being planned. Senior Nazis who had built up huge personal deposits in Swiss banks (by depositing the gold they had stolen) were allowed to take out the money and use it to build up their version of a new Germany.

In addition, rich and powerful Germans brought money back from America. They had sent vast sums to America where it stayed until after the Nuremberg trials had been completed. The money was needed to pay to fight for a German dominated Europe. Nazis agreed that their back up plan for European domination would take years to reach fruition if the War was lost but believed that their economic and political tactics would prove successful.

Since IG Farben had made a fortune out of using slave labour from concentration camps (and even had 30,000 slaves of their own at IG Auschwitz) twenty three or twenty four IG Farben executives, including Hermann Schmitz, were put on trial at Nuremberg. (There is some dispute about the precise number.) When Schmitz was detained he gave the name of the American BIS President McKittrick as a reference. Schmitz and his colleagues were regarded by prosecutors as being war criminals in the same mould as the better known Nazi leaders. They may have sat behind desks but they had, after all, been responsible for murdering and plundering millions of Jews. However, only 13 of the senior executives of IG Farben were found guilty and for those 13, the punishments were extraordinarily light. Schmitz was sentenced to just four years imprisonment (though he only served a part of this).

Astonishingly, by 1951 every single one of the IG Farben executives had been released from prison by the American high commissioner for Germany, John McCloy.

As a further 'punishment', IG Farben was broken up into four new companies (BASF, Bayer, Hoechst and Casella) and all of Farben's assets (including the profits from manufacturing the gas used in the infamous gas chambers) were transferred to the new companies – all of which were managed and run by the people who had run IG Farben.

So, the bottom line was that although IG Farben had been run by war criminals no one was really punished and things carried on much as they had done during the War. The only thing that changed was that a good deal of company notepaper had to be redesigned and freshly printed.

The new companies denied any responsibilities for the actions of IG Farben on the basis that they were new and had not existed during the War. This disgraceful self-serving legal move was accepted without a murmur of protest. Bayer, which had been a part of IG Farben, had used concentration camp victims for its experiments and for testing new drugs. The company was allowed to keep all the profits from these experiments.

The amazing truth is that the directors of IG Farben, the conglomerate which funded Hitler, ran a camp at Auschwitz and produced the gas used in the gas chambers, were allowed to play a vital part in founding the European Union in precisely the way that Walther Funk had proposed in 1940 and onwards.

By the mid-1960s, Bayer and BASF, two of the companies which were formed when IG Farben was broken up, had become ever richer and more powerful.

And there seemed to be no shame about the past. Bayer actually set up a foundation to honour a Nazi called Fritz ter Meer on his 80th birthday and started the foundation off with a donation of two million deutschmarks. (It was not until 20 years later that Bayer changed the name of the foundation.)

It did not seem to bother anyone that Herr ter Meer had overseen the building of IG Auschwitz and had handled criminal negotiations with Standard Oil. He had been found guilty of war crimes (including genocide) and sentenced to seven years imprisonment in 1948. Naturally, he did not serve the full sentence. Fritz ter Meer, one of the most evil Nazis, was released in 1950 and immediately re-joined the board of Bayer.

Within a short time of the end of the War, Hermann Abs became financial advisor in the British zone and Heinrich Dinkelbach was put in charge of all iron and steel industries in the British zone.

In 1945, Karl Blessing was arrested but he had powerful friends in two Americans: Allen Dulles and Thomas McKittrick. Like other industrialists, Blessing believed that the West would need him to help rebuild Germany and the newly planned European federation. Dulles, who knew about the work Blessing had done for Kontinental-Ol apparently didn't feel that this disqualified him for an important position, for he described Blessing as a 'prominent businessman and financial expert'. Dulles lied and said that Blessing had not been a member of the Nazi party, conveniently avoiding the fact that he had joined in 1937.

Eleanor Roosevelt was not impressed by what was going on and objected to Dulles turning a blind eye to the activities of the worst Nazis. But after her husband died her power disappeared and so Blessing was not charged with any crimes. Instead of being executed or imprisoned, Blessing returned to his job at Unilever and became one of the highest paid men in Europe. He was one of many Nazis who got rich and powerful during the War and carried their wealth and their power into the post-War years. When he died the *New York Times* newspaper published a laudatory obituary, and made no mention of concentration camps or of Blessing's 'work' with his fellow Nazis during the Second World War.

Numerous war criminals were given important posts and went completely unpunished – including many who had run the concentration camps. A report published in Germany in 1957 concluded that 77% of senior legal experts in the German Justice Ministry had previously been members of the Nazi party.

So, for example, consider the case of Heinrich Butefisch who was an employee of IG Farben and who worked at one of the Auschwitz concentration camps.

Farben had paid three reichsmarks a day for unskilled workers and one and a half reichsmarks a day for children. Workers, including children, who were too weak to work were simply murdered – since it was cheaper than keeping them alive.

Butefisch was a senior manager at the site and obviously knew exactly what was going on. As a senior manager he was responsible for thousands of murders. He was sentenced to six years imprisonment but released in 1951, under the instructions of McCloy, and almost immediately after his release, Butefisch was appointed a member of several supervisory boards – including that for Deutsche Gasolin AG. Suddenly, the horrors of Auschwitz were forgiven and forgotten. In 1964, Butefisch was awarded the Grand Cross of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany.

Butefisch was not exceptional.

Many Nazis, particularly those who had worked for IG Farben and been responsible for the concentration camps, were very lightly punished (if at all) and were, early in the 1950s, rewarded and honoured for their 'work' in the War.

Christian Schneider was an eminent and high ranking Nazi with a powerful position at IG Farben. Schneider was tried for plunder, slavery and membership of the SS but was mysteriously acquitted on all counts. After his acquittal Schneider took important jobs at two important German companies.

The Americans who played an important part at the Nuremberg trials were more interested in helping Germany to create a federal Europe than in punishing war crimes and despite the protests of representatives from other nations, numerous Nazi war criminals went unpunished and were allowed to take important positions in German industry and public life. The Americans knew that if all the Nazis had been properly punished, Germany would have been much weakened and it would have taken much longer to create the European Union.

During the War, and particularly towards the end of it, the Nazis had taken great care to prepare for the future, for they knew that for Germany to succeed in achieving its aim of controlling Europe there would need to be many Nazis in powerful positions.

Chapter 6

The Role the Americans Played in Creating the EU

It is not widely remembered now, but during the early part of the Second World War there was much discussion in the US about whether or not America should enter the War at all. There were many powerful people who were opposed to the idea of America getting involved and there were rich and powerful people who believed that if America did become a participant then it should be on the side of the Germans rather than the British. The America First Organisation, fronted by legendary aviator Charles Lindbergh, had worked hard to persuade the US to remain neutral. Lindbergh had visited Germany and Nazis had infiltrated the organisation which was denounced by some as a Nazi front.

Early on in the War, a number of rich American businessmen felt that America should negotiate a settlement with Germany which would leave American companies in a strong position in Europe. It was thought that there would be massive financial and industrial advantages to such an agreement.

When, later, it became clear that Germany was bound to lose the War the enthusiasm for a negotiated settlement grew stronger – with American businessmen looking forward to a profitable relationship with a new German Government. And, in due course, that is exactly what happened: the Americans protected the Nazis, ensured that they were not punished, and put them back into powerful positions, first within Germany, and then within the developing European Union.

Although not common knowledge, the activities of American businessmen during the War were well documented by Charles Higham, in his book *Trading with the Enemy*. Higham explained that while British and American soldiers were fighting in Europe, Standard Oil of New Jersey supplied fuel to the Nazis, the Chase Bank did huge amounts of business with the Nazis, Ford built trucks for German troops and that Colonel Sosthenes Behn, the head of ITT, flew to Europe to help improve Hitler's communication systems and to help improve the robot bombs being dropped on London. ITT even built the Focke-Wulfs that bombed the troops. (Amazingly, Walter Schellenberg, the Gestapo leading of counterintelligence, was a shareholder and director of ITT.) The Americans involved in these treacherous activities knew that they couldn't possibly lose. Whether Britain and America won the War, or lost it, their companies would make money.

In 1942, Donald MacLaren, a British intelligence officer, published a 70-page book entitled *Sequel to the Apocalypse: The Uncensored Story – How Your Dimes and Quarters Pay for Hitler's War*. The book, which had a foreword written by the novelist Rex Stout, described in detail the links between large German companies and American organisations. One American company, Standard Oil, was attacked for its links with IG Farben and for deliberately damaging the American war effort. Two hundred thousand copies of the book were printed but the companies named in the book bought up as many copies as possible to try to limit the damage.

According to American State Department documents, Thomas McKittrick, the pro-Nazi president of the Bank for International Settlements in Switzerland, supported by the OSS and the US State Department, was already making deals with German industrialists before the end of the War. McKittrick promised the Germans that if they cooperated then their industries would be preserved and their profits guaranteed. Since that had always been the German plan, it wasn't a difficult proposal to sell.

Two Americans, in particular, McKittrick and McCloy, were responsible for founding the European Union. McKittrick, the president of BIS, helped during the War by supporting the Nazis and by providing them with finance. The BIS helped the Nazis hide the gold they had looted. After the end of the War, it was McCloy who moved things along. It was McCloy who ensured that the imprisoned Nazis were released very quickly and that German industry, in the forms of IG Farben and Krupp Industries, was not damaged by the War. Within a remarkably short time, the men who had been responsible for the concentration camps were again running Germany. And the same men then began to manage the new pan-European bureaucracy. (It must, of course, be remembered that McCloy did work for a law firm which represented a subsidiary of IG Farben in the United States. He was therefore connected to IG Farben.)

Both McKittrick and McCloy were clearly following orders. It seems inconceivable that McKittrick could have acted the way he did or that McCloy could have released all those German war criminals on his own initiative and without support from Washington. The key to understanding why McKittrick and McCloy acted the way they did was almost certainly Allen Dulles, the boss of the OSS (the forerunner of the CIA). Allen Dulles was resident in Switzerland throughout World War II as the local representative of the Office of Strategic Services – a secret espionage organisation which had been set up by a committee which included McCloy. Dulles lived at Herrengasse 23 in Bern throughout World War II and it is no coincidence that McKittrick and the BIS had offices just 60 miles away in Basel. After the end of the War, Allen Dulles was transferred to Berlin where John McCloy was based. One of the OSS's most important assets during the War is believed to have been Jean Monnet (the same Monnet who is now often described by the EU as one of the organisation's many 'founders').

Once the Americans became involved in the War (their decision to join the fighting was helped when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour) they quickly realised that they wanted to influence the look of Europe after the

War had finished. More specifically, they were desperate to create a United States of Europe.

From the very beginning the EU was very much an American creation. Actually, it was more a child of the OSS (later to become the CIA) than anything else. The EU may have been conceived by the Nazis but America played the part of the midwife.

It was clear from the start that the new European Union would have to be put together around Germany. Even though Germany had just lost the Second World War it was still the strongest and richest country in Europe.

Within the space of less than 50 years, America had been involved in two costly European wars. The financial and human cost had been sickeningly high and America had no stomach for more fighting. They wanted peace and they wanted a single European nation with which they could negotiate. They also wanted a strong, united Europe to help oppose the growing power of Russia and the Soviet Union. Early on, they realised that Germany offered the best chance of a United States of Europe. It was, after all, something that Germany was desperately keen to bring to fruition, and America had enjoyed a strong relationship with Germany for many years.

Britain, the obvious choice for leadership of the new European super-state, had made it clear that it had no interest in joining any form of United States of Europe. Neither Attlee nor Churchill was interested in joining a European Union. The British had already expressed their strong distrust of any sort of European government and their determination not to join any organisation designed to unite Europe.

And there was never any question of France taking the lead when the United States of Europe was being planned. There were three reasons for this – all of them relating to the role the United States of America played in the development of the new Union.

First, and most important, France had lost two World Wars and had been badly defeated by the Germans. France had been defeated early in the Second World War, had spent several years as a German colony, had become accustomed to subservience and was clearly incapable of leading any post war organisation. The British and the Americans had been forced to rescue France from enslavement. The Americans knew it would have been absurd to expect the other countries of Europe to accept France as the leader of the group.

Second, American companies had very strong links with German countries. Before World War II there had been a sizeable part of the American population which wanted America to stay neutral – and many of those who did agree that America should be involved wanted the US to side with Germany.

Third, America had never felt close to France in the way that it felt close to Germany. There has, for many decades, been a strong and powerful German presence in America. Moreover, America had never really had much affinity with the French and didn't trust their leaders.

As far as the Americans were concerned the new EU had to be built around Germany.

Probably recognising the truth of all these factors, France was happy to be a member of a new group which would inevitably be under the control of Germany.

Today, the French enthusiasm for a United States of Europe has reached a peak under Emmanuel Macron who seems to see himself as young enough to be the first President of the new federal state.

The other most important reason for allowing Germany to control the new European super-state was that the Third Reich had already done all the preliminary spadework for a United States of Europe. Germany had conquered much of Europe and the Nazis had occupied many nations in addition to France. As we have seen, the Nazis had designed the European Union in minute detail.

The Americans felt that they could eradicate future problems by aiding and abetting the Nazi survivors in their determination to create a United States of Europe.

The Americans were keen to create a European power that could form a strong opposition to the growing might of Russia and the Soviet Union. It also seemed likely that if the constantly arguing and warring countries of Europe could be melted into a new, large, European nation there would be less aggression, less fighting and less need for America to waste money and lives helping to play the part of world policeman. And so America wanted a united Europe, preferably one controlled by Germany.

'I say no permanent solution of the German problem seems possible without an effective European union.' said John McCloy in 1950. McCloy was US High Commissioner for Germany and the man who had protected the most senior Nazis from the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal.

It was to aid the formation of the European Union that McCoy had arranged for many of the worst war criminals to be allowed to go free. And he had arranged for the few who were imprisoned to be released and pardoned so that they could help make Germany stronger and take part in the formation of the new European federation – later to be known as the European Union.

Germany's leaders knew (and have known all along) that they needed France to be part of their Federation. German politicians, acting according to the principles laid down by Funk and his followers, knew that they could easily create a German zone which included Austria, Luxembourg, Belgium, the Netherlands and the Eastern European countries but that if the United States of Europe were to have proper clout then France had to be included in the plan. Without French involvement the new Europe would be too obviously an extension of the Third Reich (or the beginning of a Fourth Reich). But getting France involved wasn't difficult. The French were eager to be part of the new Europe, partly because their politicians were flattered by the prospect of being significant players in the new European State and partly because, having been devastated by defeat in two wars, they were terrified of being left out of the proposals.

In the years after the formation of the European Coal and Steel Community, the Americans continued to put pressure on everyone concerned to make sure that the EU developed in the way they thought best. In 1965, an American State Department memo, sent to Robert Marjolin, the French European Commissioner (and an associate of Hallstein's), recommended that the organisation move forward to monetary union but that public discussion be avoided until 'the adoption of such proposals would become virtually inescapable'.

Ever since its formation, the European Union has been secretive about its workings and its aims and the truth has always been suppressed or manipulated.

The plan was for the new federal state of Europe to be developed quite quickly but unfortunately, nationalism and patriotism have delayed progress and Europe, particularly Southern Europe, has been irreparably damaged by the introduction of the euro. In France, Macron's dreams have been shattered by the unwillingness of the French people to accept his totalitarian EU-friendly policies.

Chapter 7

The Formation of the European Coal and Steel Community

The first step on the route to the European Union was the formation of the European Coal and Steel Community. This was done with the help of the Bank for International Settlements (BIS) and was, as with everything associated with the BIS, managed with some considerable secrecy.

It is now said that the ECSC was set up to harmonise coal and steel production in Europe and in order to encourage a sense of harmony and cooperation between Germany and its neighbours. This was, however, never the case. The ECSC was set up to ensure that the business empires of Nazis such as Krupp and Schmitz could dominate Europe.

(In 1989, as the EU prepared the launch of the euro, Jelle Zijlstra, a former Dutch Prime Minister and president of the BIS, admitted that 'The ECSC was a 'political exercise' and that the Germans 'without any doubt' regarded it as an umbrella organisation for their steel and coal cartels.)

The Post War drive for a European Union began in 1948 when 800 delegates met at The Hague to create the European Movement. The ultimate aim was simple: the creation of a federal union of European countries. It was accepted as inevitable that Germany would be the leader of the new union and that the new European federation would be created in the format designed by Walther Funk and other Nazis.

Allen Dulles, the future head of the Central Intelligence Agency, was, at the same time, setting up the American Committee for a United Europe (ACUE). The role of the ACUE was to give money to European federalists and 'use psychological warfare to campaign for a united Europe'.

The Schuman Declaration was published on 9th May 1950 and in it Robert Schuman, the French foreign minister, loosely proposed the formation of the European Coal and Steel Community. (Schuman was actually born in Luxembourg.)

Schuman's suggestion was that European countries should work together with the goal of political integration. Later, in 1958, Schuman became the first president of the forerunner of the European Parliament and is known as 'the father of Europe'. When Schuman retired, the Parliament gave him the title 'Father of Europe' and the date of 9th May was designated 'Europe Day'. In honour of Schuman's work towards a united Europe, the district housing the headquarters of several European Union institutions in Brussels is named after him.

What the European Union does not like to talk about is that Schuman supported the Nazis. After the War, the French Defence minister Andre Diethelm stated that 'this Vichy product should be immediately kicked out'. Indeed, Schuman was lucky not to have been shot as a traitor. Although Schuman, a French politician, was not a member of the Nazi party he had sworn allegiance to Marshal Petain the French Vichy leader and Nazi supporter. During the War, Schuman had himself voted to give full power to Petain and Hitler's Nazis. Schuman may not have been a member of the Nazi party (they probably wouldn't have accepted him) but he supported Hitler and was deeply involved with the Third Reich.

However, Schuman wrote to General de Gaulle to ask him to intervene. And for unknown reasons de Gaulle restored Schuman's rights as a citizen. (It can be supposed that de Gaulle was responding to pressure from the Americans who did not care how many Nazis were running Europe as long as there was a united Europe.)

The European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the harmless sounding supranational institution which became the European Union, was officially founded in 1951. The German steel and coal industrialists who had supported Schlotterer's original plan (qv) were behind this organisation. It was immediately suggested that the ECSC should develop into a military alliance.

The same industrialists who had put Hitler in power (the ones working at IG Farben, Thyssen and Krupp) were the men who created the European Coal and Steel Community.

One of the founding members of the ECSC was Walter Hallstein, the Nazi army officer and propagandist who first came to prominence after speaking at a Nazi conference in 1939. Hallstein used the same constructions and phraseology which had been devised for bringing occupied countries into line and which he had used in Hitler's Germany. Hallstein would later become the first President of the EU Commission.

The third well-known member of the ECSC was Konrad Adenauer.

Adenauer repeatedly claimed that he had not been a Nazi but admitted that he had violated Prussian laws in order to allow Nazi events in public buildings and Nazi flags to be flown from city flagpoles. In 1932, he had publicly declared that the Nazis should join the Reich government in a leading role. Technically, Adenauer was not a member of the Nazi party but he knowingly appointed many Nazis to his government when he was German chancellor – and defended them when questioned.

The other six members of the ECSC were fairly irrelevant. One, Dirk Sticker, had been a director of the Heineken beer company during the War. Another, Count Carlo Sforza – was a member of the Italian Government during the War. The Italians were, of course, allies of Nazi Germany

When the ECSC was founded an attempt was made to give the organisation an air of democracy by providing a Common Assembly. This was a 'consultative assembly' of parliamentarians drawn from the parliaments of member states. The Common Assembly had no legislative powers. Over the years the Common Assembly has morphed into the much grander and infinitely more expensive European Parliament. The European Parliament still has no legislative powers. It can discuss decisions made by the European Commission (the executive branch of the European Union, staffed entirely by eurocrats who have been appointed or hired rather than elected) but it cannot overrule them and is not a proper legislature. There has never been any suggestion that the European Union could ever become a democratic institution.

Chapter 8

Britain Says No to the European Coal and Steel Community (and the EU)

In 1950, when the first plans were put forward for a pan European trade organisation, the British Government made it clear that Britain would not be interested in joining.

Clement Attlee, Britain's Prime Minister at the time, was one of the first to recognise the problems and disadvantages associated with the planned European unity. He was, in particular, concerned about the lack of democratic control and the lack of sovereignty that membership of any sort of union would require.

When responding to the Schuman plan for the European Coal and Steel Community (the initial version of the EU) he said: 'It (is) impossible for Britain to accept the principle that the economic forces of this country should be handed over to an authority that is utterly undemocratic and is responsible to nobody.'

It has frequently been claimed by EU officials and supporters that Sir Winston Churchill was an enthusiastic supporter of the EU and would have voted Remain – to stay in the European Union.

This is a lie and so far removed from the truth as to be laughable.

The fact was that Churchill knew that the EU was Hitler's dream and he, like Attlee, was completely opposed to the idea of Britain joining any European organisation which threatened Britain's independence in any way.

'Britain could not be an ordinary member of a federal union limited to Europe in any period which can be… foreseen.' – Winston Churchill.

'If you ask me to choose between Europe and the open sea, I choose the open sea.' – Winston Churchill.

'We are with Europe but not of it. We are linked, but not compromised. We are interested and associated but not absorbed…for we dwell among our own people.' – Winston Churchill.

And so, with its leading politicians (other than Oswald Moseley) completely opposed to the idea, Britain took no part in the formation of the ECSC. The new organisation would be totally dominated by Germany. And that meant that it would, inevitably, be designed and built according to the plans laid down by the Nazis. Moreover, it would be largely staffed and controlled by Nazis and Nazi supporters.

The organisation was formed to strengthen Germany and to exploit economically weak countries (such as Greece and those in Eastern Europe). The institution was always designed to be undemocratic and accountable to the German elite rather than the people of Europe.

This is as true of today's European Union as it was of the ECSC. It should be no surprise that other countries which are members of the European Union frequently complain that the organisation is run by and for Germany.

That was always the plan.

Sadly, Attlee's refusal and Churchill's complete lack of interest were not to thwart the European Union for long.

The pressure for Britain to join the EU came from the United States of America.

And it was always known that the plan was for the EU to become a super-state: the United States of Europe.

In 1961, American President John Kennedy told British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan that the White House would only support Britain's application to join the Common Market (as the EU was then generally known) if Britain accepted that the true goal of the Common Market was political integration – Hitler's famous United States of Europe.

And in1966, American President Lyndon Johnson encouraged Britain's membership of what was now called the European Economic Community. In London, Foreign Office civil servants decided that the 'special relationship' with the USA would be enhanced if Britain joined. Britain's membership of the EEC was dealt with in great secrecy.

In January 1973, Britain finally joined the Common Market (along with Denmark and the Republic of Ireland). The treaty which took Britain into the Market was signed by Edward Heath – a self-confessed liar and, without a doubt, a traitor. It is widely believed that Heath did not have the legal and constitutional power to sign the document and that it was, therefore, illegal.

In 1975, under a new Labour Government, the Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, organised a Referendum on whether Britain should stay in the Common Market. The campaign to stay in was heavily subsidised by the Government and the Common Market and almost all the British press campaigned for voters to maintain membership.

During that Referendum campaign, Edward Heath said: 'There is no question of any erosion of essential national sovereignty.'

The result of the referendum was a victory for those wanting Britain to retain its membership of the Common Market. (There was, of course, no question of the referendum being rerun to give those wanting to leave a second chance at victory.)

Heath knew that he was lying when he said that there would be no loss of sovereignty.

The Lord Chancellor had written to Heath saying: 'I must emphasise that in my view the surrenders of sovereignty involved are serious ones…these objections ought to be brought into the open.'

An internal Foreign Office memorandum argued that the British people would not notice what had happened until the end of the 20th century, by which time it would be far too late to do anything about it.

In 1998, Heath was asked if he had known that joining the Common market would lead to a federal Europe. ‘Of course I bloody did,’ he replied.

Heath received a tax free ‘prize’ of approximately £35,000 for knowingly and fraudulently selling his country to the German dominated Common Market.

Within a few years, the Common Market had gradually been transformed into the European Union.

Chapter 9

How and Why the Media (Particularly the BBC) Protects the EU

Large media organisations traditionally try to reflect the interests, enthusiasms, beliefs and political hopes of their readers (the electors). However, the way that the media in Britain deals with the European Union has been the solitary exception to this rule.

Before the Referendum was held, the media in Britain was almost entirely supportive of the European Union.

And even after the Referendum, when the British people surprised and startled the Establishment by voting convincingly to leave the EU, the establishment media remained largely supportive of the EU and overtly, and sometimes cruelly, critical of those who had voted to leave the EU.

It isn't difficult to explain the media's enthusiasm for the European Union – though different branches of the media seem to have their own reasons for supporting an organisation which was founded by Nazis and which regards democracy as an unnecessary luxury.

The BBC has for years been consistently pro-EU and before the Referendum it was clear that the Corporation regarded the very idea of leaving the EU as sacrilegious. Even though the Corporation is funded by a compulsory licence fee taken from a largely unwilling and often rather resentful electorate, the BBC has deliberately favoured the minority point of view – the one espoused by Remainers.

In no area of politics has the BBC been so utterly devoted to one point of view as it has in the area of European integration.

In the months after the nation decided it no longer wanted to be ruled by a bunch of unelected bureaucrats living and working in Belgium, the BBC did everything it could to demonise Brexit and Brexiteers. On the relatively rare occasions when Brexit supporters were allowed into a studio, they were invariably labelled 'right wing' and treated as though they were in some way criminal. On the other hand, when Remainers were interviewed they were treated with great respect and introduced as though they were independent commentators.

It became quite well known that when the BBC arranged a programme with an audience then the audience would be packed with Remainers.

Every piece of bad news was (sometimes laughably) blamed on Brexit and every piece of good news was accompanied by the phrase 'despite Brexit'.

Studies of the BBC have shown an overwhelming bias against Brexit.

Here are some facts that all licence fee payers should know:

The BBC charter demands that the BBC is impartial and reflects all strands of public opinion. In return for this impartiality, the BBC is entitled to an annual licence fee (currently around £150).

But the BBC is NOT impartial. To give but one example, between 2005 and 2015, the Today programme welcomed 4,275 guests to discuss the EU. Just 132 of them were Brexiteers.

This bias has been going on for years. Way back in 2004, a study conducted by the Centre for Policy Studies revealed that the BBC gave twice as much coverage to pro-EU speakers as to eurosceptics.

Since it has been established that the EU was created by Nazis to further the interests of Germany, it seems clear that the BBC has for years been supporting Nazi policies.

I suspect that not a few citizens will be appalled to find that they are being forced to give money to a Corporation which many might well regard as a neo-Nazi organisation which has been bought by the EU. The BBC is a corrupt and traitorous organisation which has betrayed Britain and the British. I believe the BBC is in breach of its own Charter and no longer entitled to the annual licence fee. Far from being expected to continue paying money to the BBC, citizens of Britain are entitled to receive refunds for the money they have handed over in the past.

The worst thing about the BBC's affection for and loyalty to the European Union is that it was not inspired solely by a misplaced belief within the BBC that they know best.

The truth is simpler: the BBC has been bought by the European Union. In one recent five year period, the BBC accepted 258 million euros from the EU. Over the recent years the BBC has accepted huge quantities of EU money.

So it is no surprise that the BBC is biased in favour of the European Union.

The BBC even allows its anti-Brexit feeling to intrude on programmes which have nothing to do with news or politics. The 2018 edition of the Last Night of the Proms was ruined for many by the fact that television screens seemed to show interminable waving of EU flags. The 2019 BAFTA awards were edited and not shown as live but the BBC still managed to leave in anti-Brexit comments which for many viewers seemed jarring and utterly inappropriate.

The BBC seems to repay the financial support it receives from the EU (which it receives in addition to the licence fee payments British citizens are forced to pay) by opposing Brexit, by defending unpopular EU policies (such as those on immigration), by insisting that all measurements referred to in its programmes are in EU friendly metric units rather than proper British imperial measurements and by taking every opportunity to disparage England and the English.

It is, I think, now widely recognised that BBC journalists (like many of their colleagues working for other branches of the media) seem to have lost the ability to differentiate between 'news' and 'comment'.

Civitas, an independent think tank, has commented that 'the BBC pays lip service to impartiality but acts more like a political party with a policy manifesto.'

And this partisan approach to the news is not confined to Brexit and the European Union.

When Donald Trump was elected President of the United States of America, the BBC reported the event with sneery comments on his opinions, his political views and his personality. And when the BBC reported his policies on immigration, they did so as though they were eccentric and extreme, although every poll showed that a majority of Americans and a majority of Europeans agreed with Trump's policies. Whenever Trump is mentioned the disdain is almost palpable.

However, whenever the EU supporting Obama is mentioned, the BBC drools with affection – never mentioning the former President's crafty deceits and the broken promises.

Moreover, the BBC appears to have a deep contempt for populism; a movement which has become global and which worries the political establishment so much that they dismiss it in the same sort of tone which you might expect them to use for fascism or communism. Here again, the BBC's attitude is irrational for populism is defined as a movement that champions 'the common person' in preference to the interests of the establishment. Populism invariably combines people on both the left and the right and is invariably hostile to large banks, large multinational corporations and extremists of all kinds. You might think that an organisation which is paid for by the populace at large might have at least a little sympathy with their interests, needs and anxieties. But, no, the BBC has firmly allied itself with the ruling classes and the Europhilic establishment and has no time for licence fee payers who are concerned about mass immigration, overcrowding, relentless globalisation and absurdly ill-based 'green' policies which result in new laws which have pushed up energy prices so dramatically that millions of hard working people have to choose between eating and keeping warm.

The inevitable result is that the people who pay the BBC licence fee (and enable it to pay out multimillion pound salaries to presenters) no longer have much time for the BBC.

In his excellent and comprehensive book *BBC: Brainwashing Britain*, David Sedgwick reports that a survey of 39,341 people showed that 85% of Britons no longer trust BBC News to give unbiased political coverage. Sedgwick claims that the BBC is now guilty of brainwashing the people of Britain; using tricks and subterfuges to deceive and promote its own position. There is little doubt that the discerning public (the people who pay the licence fee and keep the BBC well fed and fat) have had quite enough of the Corporation and would happily see it die.

Celebrities commonly speak out in support of the BBC and endorse its line on most things (especially Brexit) but it is difficult not to suspect that this is because they fear that if they don't then they will be ostracised and will no longer be offered well paid acting or presenting jobs. The BBC infuriates its paymasters (the licence fee payers) by allowing one of its best paid presenters to use his status to attack Brexit.

Most people now recognise that the BBC represents a minority viewpoint and gives absurd amounts of airtime and respect to the high priests and priestesses of political correctness. (This may be because, as one senior BBC figure has pointed out, the BBC has 'an abnormally large number of young people, ethnic minorities and gay people' on its staff. The BBC 'has a liberal bias' admitted the presenter.)

The BBC is not a broadcaster it is a narrowcaster; a propaganda unit for the elite. It is hardly surprising that Sedgwick reports that nearly ten million people cancelled their TV licences between 2007 and 2017. Thanks to the EU's policies, espoused by the BBC, the UK's population has soared but the number of licence fee holders has plummeted.

Moreover, the viewing figures for many BBC shows have sunk dramatically and in the last couple of decades the viewing figures for the BBC's news programmes have shown a decline that would have startled any broadcaster which did not have the State's authority to collect money from millions of unwilling citizens. The position is now so bad that if the BBC loses its licence fee then it will die because it will be unable to find enough viewers prepared to subscribe to its services. If the BBC retains its anachronistic right to demand licence fees then the annual charge must rocket to counterbalance the fall in the number of people prepared to pay the fee.

The simple truth is that today's BBC is Biased, Bought and Corrupt and it isn't difficult to find the evidence showing this.

BBC employees show little or no loyalty to their country or to the long suffering licence fee payers who, as employers, deserve considerably more respect than they receive.

Joseph Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda in the Third Reich, would have been proud of the BBC.

Of course, the BBC is not the only media organisation which supports the European Union and takes every opportunity to attack Brexit and Brexiteers.

The *Financial Times* has always been enthusiastic about the EU and in a way this doesn't seem to me to be particularly surprising. The EU was designed and built to promote the interests of large businesses and to suppress small businesses which might in some way prove threatening to the profitability of multinationals. The only real purpose of the EU is to ensure that a limited number of large companies (particularly German ones) can successfully control trade. It is important also to remember that the Americans helped create the European Union and that one of the intentions was to enable large American companies to profit from the EU's unique brand of fascism.

It would be more surprising if the *Financial Times* had not supported the European Union.

Like the BBC, the *Financial Times* takes every opportunity to warn about the dangers of Brexit and to attack those who support national independence, personal freedom and the basic principles of democracy. After all, those are not qualities which are likely to prove profitable for financial institutions such as Goldman Sachs.

There have been some media surprises.

Those who voted to leave the EU were doubtless startled when the *Daily Mail* changed its policy regarding the European Union in 2018.

When a new pro-EU editor called Geordie Grieg was appointed, the *Daily Mail* started to sympathise with Remainers who wanted the country to stay in the EU. The previous editor of the *Daily Mail*, Paul Dacre, had been strongly opposed to the European Union. (It must be remembered, however, that the *Daily Mail* gave extraordinary editorial support to Gordon Brown, the Prime Minister who signed the Lisbon Treaty in 2007. The Lisbon Treaty was, of course, the bullet which put freedom and democracy into intensive care.).

The switch in policy of the *Daily Mail* surprised many but there is a strong historical precedent. The *Daily Mail* has 'history'.

In the 1930s, a previous Viscount Rothermere was a strong supporter of Nazi Germany and a keen supporter of fascism. In 1934, the *Daily Mail* published an article by Rothermere (the paper's proprietor) entitled 'Hurrah for the Blackshirts'. The article praised Oswald Moseley.

Rothermere met Adolf Hitler many times and when Germany began invading other parts of Europe (such as Czechoslovakia), he wrote to the Fuhrer with support. He also said he hoped that 'Adolf the Great' would become a popular figure in Britain. Moreover, Rothermere actually paid a huge annual retainer to a German spy; apparently hoping that she would bring him closer to Hitler.

So, it is perhaps not as surprising as it might appear to be that the latest edition of Lord Rothermere should now produce a newspaper which supports Hitler's greatest legacy – the European Union.

Even the internet now appears to take a pro EU line.

Many of the Wikipedia sites which deal with the former Nazis who played a vital role in the formation of the European Union have been cleansed of any uncomfortable references. It is now a well-known 'fact' that almost all the Nazis who did terrible things in World War II only did them because they were forced to do so by men with guns and bayonets. Even the men with the guns and the bayonets only did what they did because they were afraid for their lives. If you look at the reports of the Nuremberg trials it appears that Hitler and a couple of close allies were the only people willingly fighting World War II. All the other members of the Nazi party joined up because they were afraid. All the soldiers and prison camp guards who were responsible for unspeakable atrocities did what they did because they had no choice.

(When it was revealed that the father of Juncker, the President of the European Commission, had been a Nazi soldier the usual excuse was dragged out. We were told that he only became a Nazi because he had no choice. Juncker found it more difficult to explain away his father-in-law who had been a Nazi propaganda chief in charge of enforcing a law which stripped Jews of their rights.)

The European Union's propaganda machine must be admired for its thoroughness in cleansing much of the internet of material which might otherwise be embarrassing. However, the EU has not been able to get rid of the books which tell the history of World War II and those who might like to read more accurate analyses and biographies than appear on Wikipedia would be well advised to take a look at the very short bibliography at the back of this book.

However, there is no doubt that the censorship continues, and will continue.

Not surprisingly, the German press has been particularly vitriolic in its attacks on those in Britain who are desperate to leave the EU and regain their sovereignty. And the German media has been eagerly collecting British celebrities to support the European Union and to criticise their countrymen for their affection for sovereignty, freedom and democracy. Not a few have made treasonous statements criticising their own country and praising the enemy. When listening to the hysterical, treacherous voices of British celebrities it has been difficult to suppress the thought of William Joyce, Lord Haw Haw, broadcasting during World War Two.

'The British who voted to leave are stupid,' said one eminent German. ('But at least we didn't vote for Hitler and lose two World Wars' was one pithy and entirely reasonable response.)

Even social media seems to have chosen to side with the European Union.

Jack King, the author of the book *Indisputable Evidence Proving the EU was Created by Nazis* reports that when he decided to open a twitter campaign to initiate a conversation about the history of the EU, he found himself banned with his very first attempted tweet. When he tried to publish a tweet explaining that the EU was created by Nazis (an entirely accurate allegation), he received notification that he had been banned to protect the Twitter community.

Appendix 1: A Dozen Ways the EU Has Wrecked Life in Britain

Over the years we've given billions in membership fees to the EU. In return they have damaged Britain in scores of ways. Here are a few:

The EU has wrecked the NHS. The EU's Working Time Directive means that GPs and hospital doctors are not allowed to work more than 40 hours a week. The NHS spends millions on policing doctors' working hours to make sure that EU laws are not broken. It is entirely due to the EU's laws that patients can no longer get hold of a GP at nights or at the weekend. The licensing scheme introduced for doctors has pushed thousands of doctors into early retirement and the insistence that large numbers of women doctors be trained has resulted in a reduced medical workforce. (Many female doctors choose to work part time.) As a fascist organisation (designed to satisfy the requirements of large companies) the EU believes that 'big is beautiful' and it is because of the EU that local hospitals have been closed leaving millions of patients many miles from the nearest hospital. The massive increase in population resulting from enforced immigration has put pressure on the NHS at a time when the service was being reduced. The result of the EU interference is that medical care in the UK is now considerably worse than it was half a century ago. Moreover, things will continue to get worse. It is EU policy to close down the NHS which does not fit into the EU's plans for European health care.

Energy costs have soared because of the EU's absurd regulations. The bills have gone up because pseudoscientists have convinced eurocrats that climate change is a reality. As a result of the EU's daft policies electricity supplies will soon run out.

The cost of food has rocketed because of the Common Agriculture Policy – designed to enrich lazy and inefficient French farmers.

Recycling is an EU nonsense. It is the EU's fault that we no longer have weekly bin collections. Recycling materials are taken overseas to be dumped, buried or burnt. And councils are fined by the EU if they don't follow the mad rules dreamt up by hysterical eurocrats.

Interest rates are kept at absurdly low rates to protect European bankers. The result is that savers and pensioners have suffered and house prices have soared – making property too expensive for young folk.

Roads are too busy and full of potholes because of overcrowding (England is the most crowded country in Europe).

Schoolchildren are growing up unable to read or write because many immigrants cannot speak English and educational standards have fallen.

Small businesses are failing because of EU employment laws and other legislation – many of which have been introduced on behalf of multinational corporations who have used vast armies of lobbyists to influence EU legislation. (Lobbying is just another word for corruption. Lobbyists are hired by rich companies to influence politicians. There are more lobbyists than politicians, journalists or EU employees working in Brussels.)

The EU gave us VAT. The value added tax system was introduced throughout Europe and it, like much EU legislation, has had its greatest impact on the poor – pushing millions into poverty.

Mass immigration of citizens from poorer EU countries has resulted in the lowering of wages and living standards for millions of Britons. Zero hours contracts were introduced as a result of EU legislation. The overcrowding has put unbearable pressure on all aspects of Britain's infrastructure. The idea of allowing immigrants to flood into countries such as the UK is to break up the identity of individual countries. Mass immigration is sold as an essential way of dealing with the problems said to be associated with an ageing population but for the EU it has useful side effects too – it helps to destroy local culture and to demoralise the population.

EU legislation has destroyed pensions for those who do not work for the Government or the Bank of England.

EU laws are responsible for our loss of privacy and freedom.

The EU's ostensibly liberal and Green policies have pushed millions of Europeans into poverty. Economic policies designed to enrich Germany have resulted in horrendous levels of unemployment in Italy, Greece and other southern European countries. Food laws have enriched farmers (especially in France) but have pushed up the price of food. Energy policies designed to satisfy wealthy German Greens have pushed up the cost of energy and fuel throughout Europe and have made life miserable for millions who now have to choose between eating and heating. People living in rural communities have been particularly badly damaged by the EU's policies. (The recent protests in France were triggered largely by rural citizens complaining that Macron's pro-EU policies had pushed up the cost of diesel and made their lives impossible.) New laws inspired by lobbyists and designed to enrich multinational corporations have killed entrepreneurship in Europe.

It is no exaggeration to say that the dafter a piece of legislation appears to be, and the more harm it does, the more certain it is that the legislation originated in Brussels. The EU is replete with hidden agendas. Indefensible recycling regulations and absurd climate change laws have been introduced to disguise the reality of the fact that the world's oil supplies are shrinking. Oil needs to be preserved for official purposes and the public must be weaned off their usual energy supplies and forced to accept new, more expensive alternatives immediately.

Perhaps the most absurd example of the way Germany now controls Europe is the fact that parts for British army tanks are now made in Germany. The tank was invented by Britain during the First World War but today it is Germany which controls tank production.

Appendix 2: How EU Employees are forced to Remain Loyal

Employees of the EU are extraordinary well paid and in addition to huge tax free salaries, incredibly short working hours, long holidays and perks that would astonish employees anywhere else, the EU's employees are also entitled to massive pensions (which are paid for by Europe's taxpayers).

There is, however, one oddity.

Former employees of the EU must remain completely loyal to the EU if they wish to continue to receive their pension. They must be loyal and they must never offer any criticism of the organisation. (The views of former EU employees should be considered with this in mind.)

Can you imagine employees of any other organisation being prepared to put up with such a rule?

The unions would, rightly, create an uproar if, for example, former employees of the National Health Service might lose their pensions if they dared to criticise the organisation.

But this is how the EU operates.

Inconvenient truths must always be suppressed.

The EU, like the Nazis, believes in using fear, deceit, misdirection and bullying to defend itself.

Appendix 3: Basic Bibliography

Below I have listed a few of the many books used as reference sources in preparing this book. In addition to these (and many other books) I referred to hundreds of articles, documents and websites.

One warning: it is necessary to take great care when using websites. Many websites have been prepared to put forward a particular point of view and a number which deal with the European Union and with individual Nazis appear to have been 'cleansed' to protect the EU. Much of the information in this book can be found on the internet by an assiduous researcher but it has to be said that some 'cleansing' has been done of inconvenient personal histories. Many of those who are now known to have found the EU appear to have exemplary wartime records. Wikipedia entries for some former Nazis appeared to have been 'cleansed'. Is it possible that the EU has been tidying up its own history?

For those who want to know more about the European Union, I heartily recommend *OFPIS* by Vernon Coleman (known in some circles as the 'anti-Funk') and *The EU: The Truth about the Fourth Reich* by Daniel J. Beddowes and Flavio Cipollini, whose campaigning has exposed many of the EU's deceits.

Lest it be thought that only British and American authors have drawn attention to the history of the EU, I should point out that German historians have, on a number of occasions published documents detailing the background to the European Union.

In 1972, Gerhardt Haas and Wolfgang Schumann published a collection of documents entitled *The Anatomy of Aggression: New documents concerning the military goals of German imperialism during the Second World War*. The documents they collected showed how the Nazi leadership were planning the economic integration of Europe. These were not just a few dreams put together by oddball Nazis. The plans were devised by the Reich Ministry of Economics, the Reich Industrial Group and the Reich Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

In 1985, Michael Zalewski published *Plans for a Continental European Union:1939-1945* in which he published details of the integration planned by the German leadership during the Second World War.

In 1987, another collection of German documents detailing the way the Third Reich planned European integration was prepared by Hans Werner Neulen and called *Europe and the Third Reich*. Once again the impact of the publication was reduced by the efficiency of the propaganda machine of the European Union.

These publications all show that phrases such as 'European Union' and 'European Economic Community' were all described as being official elements of state policy in documents published by Adolf Hitler's Third Reich.

Naturally, the information contained in these publications has been effectively drowned by misinformation published and disseminated by and on behalf of the European Union.

Atkinson R and McWhirter N – *Treason at Maastricht: Destruction of the Nation State*
Banks, Arron – *The Bad Boys of Brexit*
Beddowes, D & Cippolini – *The EU: The Truth About the Fourth Reich: How Adolf Hitler Won the Second World War*
Bernstein, Larry – *Fog Facts*
Bower, Tom – *Blind Eye to Murder: Britain, America and the Purging of Nazi Germany – a Pledge Betrayed*
Coleman, Vernon – *England Our England*
Coleman, Vernon – *The OFPIS File*
Freemantle, Brian – *The Octopus (Europe in the Grip Of Organised Crime)*
Goodwin M & Milazzo C – *UKIP Inside the Campaign to Redraw the Map of British Politics*
Hallstein, Walter – *Europe in the Making*
Hartrich, Edwin – *The Fourth and Richest Reich*
Haas G & Schumann W – *The Anatomy of Aggression: New documents concerning the military goals of German imperialism during the Second World War. (1972)*
Higham, Charles – *Trading with the Enemy – An Expose of the Nazi-American Money Plot 1933-1949*
King, Jack – *Indisputable Evidence Proving the EU was Created by Nazis*
Laughland, John – *The Tainted Source*
Lebor, Adam – *Tower of Basel (The Shadowy History of the Secret Bank that Runs the World)*
Neulen, Hans Werner – *Europe and the Third Reich (1987)*
Pol, Heinz – *The Hidden Enemy (The German Threat to Post War Peace)*
Salter, Sir Arthur – *The United States of Europe*
Zalewski, Michael – *Plans for a Continental European Union: 1939-1945 (1985)*

Appendix 4: We Must Destroy the EU

The European Union is an evil organisation. It was created by evil men for evil purposes.

The only way to defeat the European Union, and to protect our freedom and democracy, is to destroy it completely.

And the only way to do this is to tell the truth about how, why and when it was designed and created.

Please tell everyone you know the facts about the formation of the European Union.

Author's Note

If you have found this book illuminating, I would be enormously grateful if you would write a short, favourable review on Amazon, Goodreads and other sites.

THE TRUTH KILLS

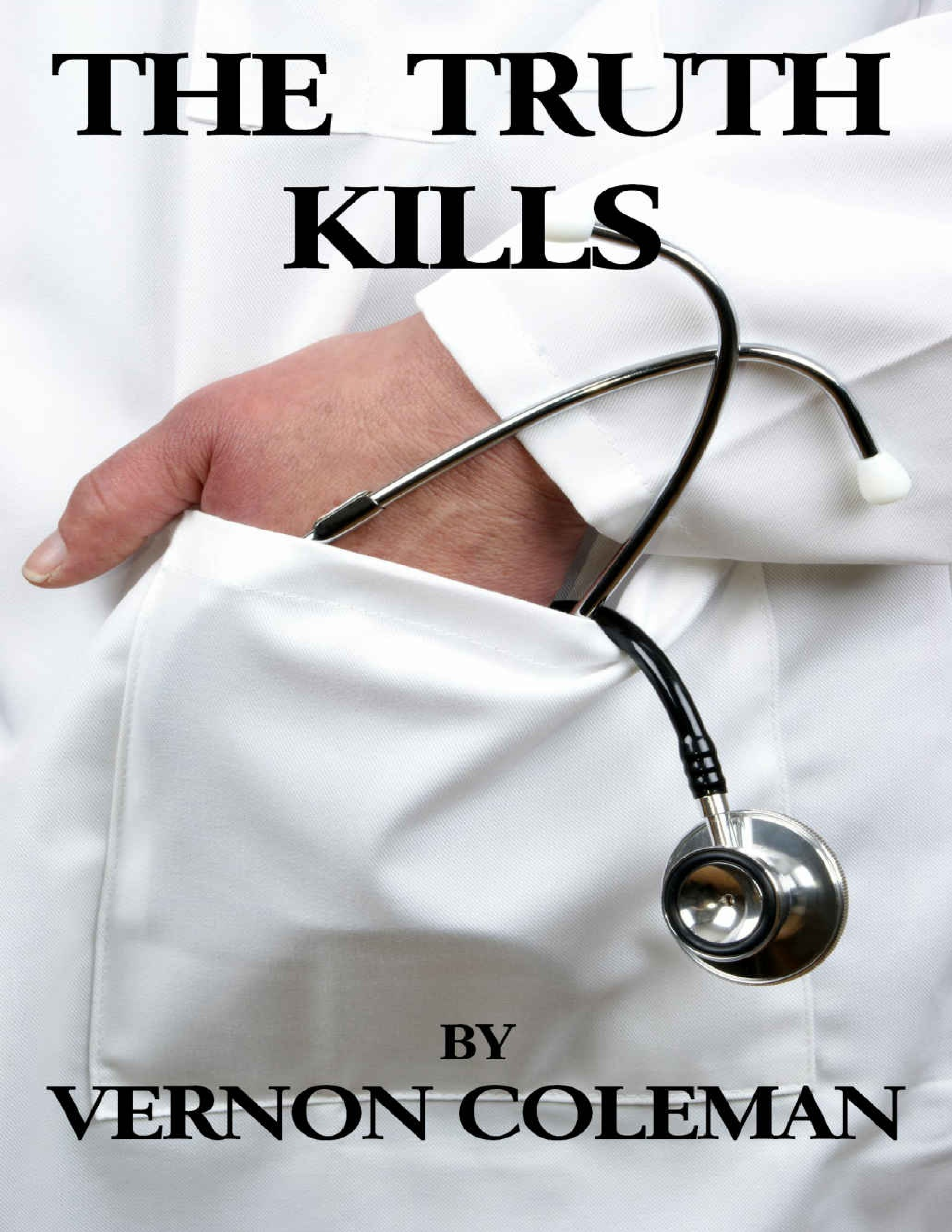

BY

VERNON COLEMAN

The Truth Kills

Vernon Coleman

`In times of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act.'
George Orwell

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Note: All characters, organisations and businesses in this book are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons (living or dead) organisations or businesses is purely coincidental.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Bestselling author Vernon Coleman has written over 100 books which have been translated into 24 languages and have sold over 2 million copies in the UK alone. His novel Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War was turned into an award winning movie. His series of seven books about the village of Bilbury are Amazon bestsellers. For a list of available books please see either the Vernon Coleman author page on Amazon or www.vernoncoleman.com

Dedicated to my beautiful wife, Donna Antoinette.

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Chapter 1

I stood on the porch outside the surgery and heard the two voices becoming louder and louder. They were both shouting and I really didn't want to be there. I always find other people's rows deeply embarrassing. I suspect most folk do. I was standing in the porch, as far away from the argument as I could get without going outside. It had been raining all day and now it was raining heavier than ever. The skies were black, the rain was bouncing off the few cars left in the car park and the atmosphere was undoubtedly packed to the edges with invigorating negative ions. The pellets of rain, hitting the thin metal of the cars, sounded like distant machine gun fire. Puddles had already developed on the badly laid tarmacadam and the usual small stream had formed down one side of the car park. We should have made the contractor come back and deal with it but we'd never got round to chasing him and now it's far too late. I could see my raincoat. It was safe and dry, draped uselessly over the front passenger seat of my rather boring BMW. My brown fishing hat was in there somewhere. I'm one of the few people on the planet who still wears a hat. I still believe the old theory that in cold weather nine tenths of the body's heat is lost through the head. I wear the thing in summer too, since the brim is just wide enough to provide a little screening from whatever sunshine might manage to struggle through the traditional English summer clouds. The car, the raincoat and the hat were no more than a dozen yards away. But I knew I would be soaked before I could reach any of them. I have another couple of decades to go before I'm officially entitled to retire but I'm desperately out of condition and already have arthritis in my knees and hips. I have patients twenty or thirty years older than me who could beat me in a race for a bus. Damp and cold just make the pain and stiffness worse, of course. I put my black drug bag down beside me and decided to wait a few minutes more.

There were just the three of us left in the surgery. The last patient had gone twenty minutes earlier and Daisy, the evening receptionist, had hurried away moments later.

`I've put the phones through to your mobile number,' she'd told me as she'd left, grabbing her bag and her coat and rushing to get home before the rain started. `I hope you have a quiet night.' She was the oldest and the kindest of the receptionists and the only one I've ever got on with. To be honest she is the only one whose name I can regularly remember. There are eight or nine others, mostly working part-time, and they are as vaguely recognisable, and as indistinguishable, as the staff at the bank or the post-office. They are all women and mostly in their forties or older. No employer with functioning brain tissue hires women of childbearing age and Jock, who is in charge of hiring our employees does have a modest quantity of brain. He has many faults but he's not going to hire someone who is going to disappear for a year or more to breastfeed her State supported offspring. And so Daisy, like the rest of the staff, is of an age to be unlikely to demand endless maternity sabbaticals guaranteed by the bureaucrats of Brussels to be funded at someone else's expense.

I'd been standing in the reception area, dictating referral letters for three patients who needed to see hospital consultants, and I had thanked her and wished her a good weekend. I always feel guilty when I send patients to hospital these days. I know damned well that the appointments they send out are merely times at which patients have to be available so that a nurse can lie and tell them that the consultant hasn't turned up because of an emergency. He isn't really dealing with an emergency, of course. Senior hospital doctors don't deal with emergencies. He's at his private rooms charging £200 for twenty minutes and another £250 for an X-ray.

I hate being on call; constantly waiting for the telephone to ring. I put my hand into my jacket pocket, pulled out my phone and checked that it was switched on. The battery was low and I realised that I would have to put it on charge as soon as I got home. When I started in general practice I was tied to the landline telephone when I was on call; never daring to go out of earshot of a handset plugged into a socket in the wall. If I went out anywhere I either had to switch the phones through to that number or tell someone where I'd gone. No one could reach me when I was in the car or at a patient's house. When I was on call for the weekend I didn't even dare go out into the garden in case the telephone rang and I missed a call. The mobile telephone has made life infinitely easier though, I confess, the most joyful words known to the doctor who is a mobile telephone owner must surely be `network search'. I can spend all weekend in the bar at The Bell and no one knows where I am. At nights and at weekends I switch the landline calls to my mobile phone and I can be on call anywhere. Thinking of home made me think of dinner and I decided that if I called into The Bell I could eat at the bar and have something with chips. Thinking of food reminded me that I'd intended to buy some bread but had forgotten. The stuff I'd used for toast had penicillin growing on it.

Minutes after Daisy had left, the two of them started shouting instead of just raising their voices; they were both almost screaming. I really didn't want to be there or to know what the argument was about.

The male voice belonged to Jock Cohen. He's a few years older than me and since the practice was originally started by his late father he is now the senior partner. He owns the building we practice in. It was built as a house in the late 19th century and for as long as I can remember Jock has been promising to make some basic improvements to the layout in order to make it more suitable for use as a medical centre. The patients sit in what used to be the dining room, the reception staff squeeze into an uncomfortable, partitioned area in the hallway and the doctors ply their trade in what used to be the bedrooms. My consulting room has an old Victorian fireplace and a ceiling that is so high that even with a stepladder none of us can replace the bulb in the ceiling light fitting. For the last seven years I have relied on standing lamps for light. I sometimes think this gives the room a rather unnaturally intimate atmosphere, although there is the advantage that the poor lighting means that the flaking paint is not so noticeable. All of us who work there would be thrilled if Jock organised a lick of paint here and there but there is about as much chance of that as there is of me becoming a world class athlete. Jock's only concession to the modern world has been to rename the building `The Jock Cohen Health Centre'. His father, now a permanent resident at the local cemetery, was also called Jock and our noble senior partner claims that the building is named after him but no one believes this.

Jock senior was humourless, puritanical and unforgiving. He was pompous and self-important and reminded me of George Abbot, an early Archbishop of Canterbury, who in 1605 sent one hundred and forty undergraduates to prison for sitting with their hats on in his presence. He liked to think of himself as a general, leading the forces of health and fitness against our arch enemies: disease and death. The trouble was that Jock senior, like his son, wasn't a terribly good leader. General Baron Kurt von Hammerstein-Equord, Commander in Chief of the German Reichswehr between 1930 and 1934, and an ardent critic of Adolf Hitler, once claimed that all his officers exhibited just two qualities from the following list of four: cleverness, industriousness, laziness and stupidity. The problem with Jock senior was that although he would have doubtless described himself as being clever and industrious his real qualities were stupidity and industriousness – the most worthless pairing of all.

If I were asked to sum up our Jock, Jock junior, in a single phrase I would have to choose the words `careful with his money'. There isn't much else to say about him, though being of Scottish origin he is, of course, a rabid racist, full to the brim with loathing for anyone who doesn't own a travelling rug in the clan tartan. His mother is South African and I assume that she must have been the primary source of his wonderful sense of humour for she is quite typical of the endless hearty wits who hail from Johannesburg and Cape Town. His father, as Scottish as sewn up pockets, made Scottish Nationalist and former Prime Minister Gordon Brown look like one of the rampaging Marx Brothers.

The only thing Jock and I have in common is that as white, male, middle aged citizens we are both members of an oppressed ethnic minority. He's married with two grown up children (neither of whom followed him into medicine) and plays golf with the earnest caution of a man whose Sunday is ruined if he loses a tee, let alone a ball. In the winter months he always wears a blue blazer with gilt buttons and a white shirt with a small crest on the breast pocket. The whole outfit is made ever more glorious by the addition of a tartan waistcoat designed to celebrate his Scottish ancestry and made, presumably, in the Cohen colours. In the summer he wears white trousers with turn-ups and blue deck shoes with white piping and looks like a refugee from the South of France. When he stands he puts his right hand in his jacket pocket, with the thumb hanging outside.

Superficially Jock often seems mean and vindictive (which he is) but somehow he always manages to give the impression that underneath he is kind and generous. `Do people hate me because I'm Jewish?' he asked me once. `Are you mean because you're Jewish?' I asked him. `Of course not!' he replied indignantly. `Then people don't hate you because you're Jewish,' I replied. `They just hate you because you're mean.'

Jock lives a completely stress free life because he never really worries about anything. Most of us become increasingly sad, anxious, angry, bitter and resentful as we become increasingly aware of life's general injustices, and as life fails to live up to our many expectations. Not Jock. He only ever worries about potential injustices which affect him personally, and those he deals with dispassionately and efficiently. He will probably live to enjoy several birthdays in his 90s though you'd have to wonder why he'd bother.

I believe that medicine is a complex mixture of wisdom (learning from experience), science, art, black magic and intuition. Of all these, intuition, which enables us to access wisdom and experience from our subconscious, is perhaps the most valuable of them all. Jock believes that medicine is a matter of listening to the blandishments of the drug company representative, choosing the most expensive wine at a drug company sponsored dinner, and then prescribing the latest wonder drug without pause or question. I believe that a doctor who is not also a cynic is a dangerous fool. Jock believes that it is not a doctor's place to think.

Most of us drift through life, missing opportunities, accumulating regrets and travelling from crisis to crisis, buffeted by fate and her whimsical family. Jock Cohen travels serenely through life, like a swan on a lake but with the big difference that with him the serenity is as real under the water as it is above it. He still lives in the house where he was born and probably still has the silver spoon that was found in his mouth when he was a baby. I doubt if he has ever even had a parking ticket. Fate would not dare be so cruel. It would be a thrill for us all if one of the receptionists walked into his surgery and found him making wild love to one of the nurses, or even a patient damnit, but Jock's life is dedicated to the accumulation of money and that's really all there is to him. He has devised a number of ways to hasten this process. He does trials for drug companies, provides second opinions for cash and accepts chunky kickbacks from the consultants to whom he refers patients requiring private treatment.

Jock has a considerable cash income from these various activities. He doesn't bother declaring any of this to the rest of us, the practice accountant or Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs but every month he takes the train to London where he visits a stamp shop in the Strand and uses the month's accumulation of cash to buy rare stamps. I once asked him how he'd explain the collection if the taxman ever discovered it and he told me that he'd simply say that it was a collection he'd been given as a child and that he'd found it in a drawer when clearing out an old piece of furniture. Since the stamps are all old it's difficult to see how anyone could prove otherwise.

After a rare dinner at his home he once showed me his collection but instead of being able to tell me the history of the individual stamps (as other collectors are usually able to do) all he could do was tell me the prices. I think I've only been to the house that one time. His wife turned out to be very mousy and subservient; treating him more like an employer than a husband. We had one of those frozen meals that the supermarkets advertise on television and a single bottle of cheap Spanish red wine. I suspect that more important guests are better fed and better wined.

The other half of the argument, the female voice, belonged to Molly Tranter, our trainee doctor, aka our general medical dogsbody. Molly looks after all the new patients, the mother and baby clinics, the life insurance medicals and the difficult patients who take up too much time for Jock to bother seeing them. She and I also shared the out of hours duty. Jock insisted that we provide a 24 hour a day, 365 day a year, service and said that he insisted on this because it is best for the patients. He was right, of course, but he didn't share in providing the cover he insisted we provided. He said that at his age he'd done his stint and that it was up to the younger members of the practice to provide cover at nights, weekends and bank holidays.

Our other doctor, Dr Deidre Canterbury, was younger than me but she had two small daughters and said that it wouldn't be fair to them if she worked at nights or weekends. As a partner, I received a small, extra annual payment from the practice for providing this service. (It was, inevitably, much less than the 6% extra the practice received, and so both Jock and Deidre made money from the out of hours commitment.) Molly, who was salaried, didn't receive a penny extra. No one ever mentioned it but the practice did well out of Molly and myself covering the out of hours work. Back in 2004, the Government rewrote the GP's contract and allowed family doctors to stop providing out of hours cover in return for a 6% cut in salary. I cannot imagine what sort of political idiot thought that the extra work was worth just 6% of a doctor's income. The result, inevitably, was that the vast majority of practices leapt at the chance to give up working at nights and at weekends and happily took the modest drop in pre-tax income. Today, politicians and doctors all seem genuinely surprised that there has been a dramatic increase in the number of patients turning up at Accident and Emergency Departments outside normal working hours. No one seems to suspect that there might be a link between the increase in the number of people dying from routine but serious health problems and the fact that doctors no longer provide 24 hour cover for their patients.

The one advantage of having just two of us look after the nights and weekends was that it was fairly easy to work out the rota. And if one of us needed to change a weekend or a night it didn't involve a great deal of negotiating. I know a doctor who works in an eight doctor practice in Lancashire. They too have agreed to provide their patients with 24 hour cover. They all share their on call rota equally and they've had to have special software designed to enable them to organise their commitments. One of their practice secretaries spends half her life keeping the rota up-to-date and there are constant arguments about the number of bank holidays, Christmases and evenings worked. Molly and I usually managed to work things out pretty amicably.

As I stood in the porch, sheltering from the rain, I cleaned out and lit my pipe and tried to remember why we'd hire Molly Tranter as our trainee. There had been two dozen candidates and she hadn't been the best qualified in any respect although she had certainly been the smallest. Only the thickness of an envelope more than five feet tall if she stood on tiptoe, Molly was the daughter of a couple who ran a greengrocery business in Wolverhampton. She got the job as our trainee as a compromise. Jock Cohen had wanted to appoint a young rugby playing doctor whose father was a consultant neurologist somewhere in the Home Counties. But the rugby player was a cocky bastard and I think even Jock realised that he would have been a disaster. He'd turned up in a Porsche which he'd left sprawled across three spaces in the car park. I had thought him too far aloof and arrogant for our practice and to my relief Deidre Canterbury, a woman who talks a good deal but usually says very little, and who does not regard tact or diplomacy as having any part to play in her job description, had summarily, and not at all unfairly, dismissed him as a `smarmy little git with far too high an opinion of himself'. The young pretender didn't help his chances by mistaking Deidre for one of the receptionists, handing her his Burberry and telling her to hang it up `but make sure you put it on a hanger'. This was a big mistake. Deidre is scarier than Andy Murray's mother.

The discussion about whom to appoint had gone on for over a week, though I had kept it out of it all as much as I possibly could. I'm pretty sure that Molly had been the only one none of us disliked enough to veto. In a way this was surprising since Jock has a strong dislike of women doctors. He said that having Deidre working in the practice was more than enough of a nod towards feminine supremacy. When there were no women within hearing distance he used to be fond of quoting Noel Coward who apparently once said that women should be beaten regularly, like gongs. Jock stopped quoting Coward when a midwife overheard him and, instead of accusing him of political incorrectness, laughed at him for quoting an ‘old poofter’.

Suddenly, a door burst open and I heard it slam into the wall. We used to have those little rubber door stopper things to prevent the doors hitting the walls but over the years marauding, thieving children have unscrewed them and stolen them so now when a door is thrown open with enthusiasm the doorknob tends to crunch into the plaster. The voices were much louder now and half of the row, the feminine half, was heading in my direction. I had just decided that the rain was the lesser of two evils when Molly Tranter joined me in the porch. Her cheeks were red with anger and she was shaking. She looked out of the door and up at the sky and swore quietly.

I said something banal about the rain looking set in for the night and Molly agreed with me. Quite unexpectedly she then burst into tears. She was still in her twenties and I remember thinking that she looked too young and inexperienced to be a student nurse, let alone a doctor. She always dressed casually, never wore make-up and wore her hair in a short page-boy cut. She was so skinny she looked as if she needed nailing down on windy days.

I’ve been told I have a reputation among our less discerning patients as a kind and sympathetic listener, but I’ve never been good with women who aren’t showing me lumps and rashes or describing their symptoms. I muttered something intended to be soothing. Molly pulled a packet of tissues out of her pocket, took one out and blew her nose. She then took out another tissue and dabbed at her eyes. `Life’s all about money to him,’ she said, clearly having taken my calming murmur as an invitation to confide in me and share her pain. `He’s a mean, grasping, thieving crook. He doesn’t give a damn about the patients.’ She paused. `I told him all that,’ she said defiantly.

`He has to look after the practice,’ I said, feeling I had to offer a half-hearted defence of Jock who is, after all, our senior partner. `Expenses are constantly going up. Staff costs. Stationery. Health and safety. Heating bills.’

`Oh bugger you!’ Molly cried. `Why do you always have to be so damned reasonable and sensible? This isn’t about making enough money to pay the gas bill, this is about making enough money to pay for his farmhouse in the Dordogne and the third car and the boat in Dartmouth.’ She was right about that. Jock still believes that having good time means spending money he doesn’t have on stuff he doesn’t need and probably doesn’t even really want. He hasn’t yet worked out, and probably never will, that real luxury is space, light, peace and quiet.

Molly started crying again. `I hate crying,’ she said. `I’m only crying because I’m so damned angry.’ She blew her nose. `Why do you put up with him? Why do you defend him?’

`I’m too tired to fight anyone,’ I told her, too weary to feel embarrassed by this admission. `I’m just worn down by daily rubbish. The last time I filled in a form where they asked for my occupation I put: `Filling in forms and dealing with crap’.’ The truth was that I didn’t know where it had gone, or when it had disappeared, but all the righteous passion I’d had as a young man had faded away. `Without cowards and failures like me there would be no courageous, successful people and the courageous, successful people would have no one to look down on. How can I end that sentence without a preposition?’ Molly looked at me but said nothing for a while. I pulled out my pipe and puffed at it even though it had gone out long ago.

A pipe is a very useful toy. I always puff on it when I don’t have anything apt or witty to say and so I puff on it a good deal. In fact, although I’d never admit this to anyone, I don’t smoke because I enjoy the taste of the tobacco but because I rather like the process and the paraphernalia. Like most pipe smokers I have quite a collection of pipes, stored on a rather fine mahogany rack at home. Nearly all of them are really large, with huge bowls, because I never inhale the smoke and am perfectly happy for it to float up into the air around me. It may not be politically correct but my idea of political correctness is putting a cross in the right place on a ballot form and I rather like wandering around in my own private cloud of blue smoke. One of the receptionists, the stout, middle-aged one who has an undiagnosed thyroid condition that I have never found the courage to mention and who spends so much time on her sunbed that she must surely be a dead cert for multiple basal cell carcinomas, once said that I live in my own piece of foggy, Victorian London. I think it was meant as an insult, but I took it as a compliment. My pockets are full of pipe smoking stuff: a leather tobacco pouch, a three in one silver gadget for poking and cleaning pipes and a packet of old fashioned pipe cleaners with which I sometimes make small animals to entertain fractious child patients. Their mums think I do this because I love children but I’m afraid I do it because I hate children crying. And besides you can’t examine a child who’s screaming. If it takes a small giraffe to shut him up then I’ll sacrifice a pipe cleaner and make a small giraffe. I once told Jock, in mock seriousness, that the practice should pay for my pipe cleaners and that they ought to be tax deductible. He can never tell when he is being teased. He said that I ought to take it up with the accountant and ask him to consult our local tax inspector.

`Do you think he'll fire me? I don't care if he does. He's even got personalised number plates on both his cars. How vulgar can you get? They're the middle class equivalent of having your name tattooed on your arm.'

`They aren't very good personalised number plates.'

`How can a personalised number plate not be very good?' she demanded.

`It took me three months to realise that the letters and numbers were anything other than an ordinary number plate,' I explained. `I had to squint at it and use my imagination to realise that it sort of made up a dyslexic version of his name. There's a number 4 making up the last letter of `Jock'! '

Molly smiled and sort of nearly laughed and stuffed her used tissues into her coat pocket. She looked terrible. `I'll buy you a drink,' I told her. `You aren't fit to drive so we'll go in my car. I'll bring you back here to pick up yours afterwards.'

`I don't drink much,' she replied. `Hardly at all. Hardly ever. It makes me too tiddly and gives me a sort of hot flush.'

`You have to drink something or your kidneys will pack up,' I told her. `I'll buy you a glass of water. You can have it with or without bubbles but I suggest you live dangerously and have it with bubbles.'

Twenty minutes later, soaked from the short run to my car, we were sitting at the bar in The Bell Hotel. To save time, and to avoid the town's impenetrable one way system, designed by a maniacal pedestrian with a hatred of motorists or some sort of deal with the oil companies, I'd taken the `short' route which involves heading out of town onto the motorway, slaloming between the cones and warnings put there to give the authorities an excuse to make oodles of money out of enforcing speed limits, and then driving back in again at the next junction. This had the added advantage of enabling me to purchase a few gallons of petrol for the car. The stuff they sell on the motorway is expensive but at least it is available. Most of the petrol stations in the town centre have been converted into `Hand Car Wash And Valeting Centres' manned by hard working and enthusiastic East Europeans who must make a fortune out of their polishing and buffing. I wonder how much of it is passed onto the Chancellor of the Exchequer. We will all be in real trouble when the motorway service stations have been taken over by the red fingered men with plastic buckets and sponges.

Even though Molly and I had travelled no more than a couple of miles on the motorway we still drove past two broken down vehicles. Now that people can't afford to have their cars serviced this happens more and more often. The stranded motorists, including one mother holding a young baby, were standing on the grass behind their cars. It was still bucketing down and they must have been drenched to the skin. The idiots who answer emergency calls always tell people to get out of their cars. I bet more motorists die of pneumonia than die of being squashed in their parked cars. It's the same with aeroplanes and airports. They are staffed almost exclusively with leering, bullying layabouts who have a collective IQ lower than a ballerina's shoe size and who would never notice if a team of terrorists with tea towels draped over their heads went past them carrying sacks full of Semtex. No one dares complain because they're frightened of being arrested for aiding and abetting terrorism. The Nazi storm-troopers at airports take nail clippers off octogenarians in order to prevent hijackings but the aeroplane owners recycle dirty air to save money and, as a result, far more people die of infectious diseases caught on aeroplanes than have ever died because of terrorist attacks. I haven't been on an aeroplane for years and with any luck I'll manage to keep off them in whatever years I have left until the Good Lord gives me wings or a toasting fork.

Chapter 2

The Bell is invariably deserted on Friday evenings. No one goes there for a romantic, dirty or any other sort of weekend. Commercial travellers stay there from Monday to Thursday. There are weddings on Saturdays. And upwardly mobile locals enjoy a popular fixed price carvery on Sundays. It looks and smells of decay and is one of those typically English establishments; once glorious, now faded.

`We don't see you in here very often, Dr Tranter,' said Harry the barman, who had poured out a large Laphroaig the minute he'd seen the two of us approaching the bar. He makes sure they always keep a supply of my favourite 18-year-old single malt. If I were sent to a desert island I would not know whether to choose the single malt or my pipe as my luxury. `What can I get you?' Harry is the barman's professional name and to prove his skills there are certificates in frames hanging behind the bottles on the glass shelf behind him. There are two diplomas registering his cocktail mixing skills and three attesting to his health and safety prowess. His real name is Leonard. He is a nervous, jittery fellow who always reminds me of the snooker player Alex Higgins in that he is never able to keep still for more than a few seconds at a time. He is constantly twitching and has a thousand different tics. He has a compassionate attitude towards rules and regulations and when the bar is quiet, as it was that evening, he does not object to my smoking my pipe. He once told me that when I have left he sprays the area with a can of furniture polish – far less offensive than air freshener. I am one of the few people he gets on with. He is a sensitive and easily offended soul and the scattered debris of a hundred former friendships lie as uneasy and troubled testament both to the ease with which he can take offence and the longevity of his hurt. The owners of The Bell don't visit the establishment often or they would know that Harry has scared away most of the former regulars and that if I ever stop drinking there the takings will have to appear in the accounts under the heading `petty cash'. I like Harry. We get on well. We understand each other.

`I'll have one of those,' Molly said, pointing at the glass which Harry had placed on the bar counter. I nobly pushed the drink in her direction and waited for a duplicate to be poured. `Are you eating?' I asked.

She shook her head. `Larry said he'd order a pizza when I got home.' Larry, Dr Tranter's boyfriend, was an unemployed geologist who was trying to carve out a career as a stand-up comedian. A pot holing accident had left him as a paraplegic and life hadn't been going well. He had, so Molly had told me, a burning desire to be too famous to shop in supermarkets.

`One steak and kidney pudding with chips,' I said to Harry.

`How can you eat kidneys?' demanded Dr Tranter, who like all vegetarians rarely wasted an opportunity to warn people of the hazards of eating meat.

`What were you and Jock arguing about?' I asked her, hoping that this would distract her from a lecture on the general benefits of vegetarianism and the specific perils of eating a steak and kidney pudding. `I'm surprised the neighbours didn't ring the police and report a domestic altercation.' I didn't really want to know but I knew I had to ask sometime.

`We had a row about vaccination,' said Dr Tranter. She picked up the glass of Laphroaig, took a mouthful as though she were drinking from a glass of wine and immediately started coughing. `What the hell is that?' she demanded, holding the glass at arm's length and staring at it as though it had tried to bite her.

`It's a food product,' I told her. `The ingredients are impeccable, though I'm sorry that the presentation isn't to your liking.' Laphroaig is a single malt from Islay. It has an exceptionally peaty flavour and is probably the most robust malt whisky of them all. Even determined drinkers of blended whisky can be taken aback when they take a sip – or even a sniff. I took her glass from her, poured the contents into my own and, having asked her what she wanted as a replacement, ordered a diet cola. It seemed marginally more exciting than water but not likely to do much more for her spirit.

`Aren't you on call this evening?' Molly asked, looking at the enhanced contents of my glass.

`My steak and kidney pudding will soak this up,' I told her. I felt a twinge of guilt and was, for a moment, cross with her. She could be annoyingly sanctimonious. I knew as well as she did that I shouldn't drink when I was on call and that I shouldn't drink when I was driving.

`I saw Mrs Jackson this morning. Michael, her little boy, reacted badly to his last vaccination and she wanted to know if he could miss the next series of jabs. He was screaming for hours after he was vaccinated. I talked to her about the side effects and the dangers and told her that she and her husband must make the decision.'

`But you loaded the dice a bit?'

Molly blushed. `I didn't tell her what to do. I didn't tell her not to have her child vaccinated. I just told her the truth.' She managed to sound defensive and defiant at the same time.

`And as a result, Mr and Mrs Jackson decided not to have Jackson minor vaccinated?'

Molly nodded. `And she also wrote to Jock telling him why she wasn't having him done.'

`People don't want to know the truth about contentious subjects like vaccination,' I told her.

`That's patronising!'

`Maybe it is. But they don't want to know because learning is hard work, understanding is harder work and knowing is the hardest work of all. And so they trust us to tell them the truth.'

`But that's exactly the point. We tell people bits of the truth but mainly we lie to them.'

`How can you say that?' I demanded, staring at her aghast.

`We tell patients a little bit of the truth but a scrap of truth is no truth at all. It's absolutely no good to anyone. If we tell people half the truth but don't tell them which half of the things we're telling them are true and which half are lies they won't know which is which. And so everything we tell them might as well be a lie because it is no more use than a lie.'

I was, to be honest, wearying of this. I have, over the years, had too many arguments with individuals who are passionate about the fluoridation of water supplies, the awfulness of vivisection and the hazards of genetic engineering. Being a doctor seems to make me fair game for everyone with a bee in their bonnet. I was tired, I wanted to eat and drink and forget the practice and the real world for a while. But Molly was getting under my skin.

`Why do you keep on saying that we tell people untruths?' I demanded. `We tell them what we're told by the Government.'

`Exactly! And who tells the Government what to tell us?'

I thought about this. `I don't know. Experts I suppose.'

Molly shook her head. `The drug companies tell them what to tell us; or so-called experts working for the drug companies. And they tell them to tell us stuff that will sell vaccines.'

`Oh, I can't believe that!' I protested.

`It's true!' insisted Molly. `Patients don't ask us questions because they believe that we're telling them the truth. And, they want to believe us. They want to believe in vaccination because it's such a lovely idea. Have your kids jabbed and they won't fall ill. It's as comforting as the idea that there's no need to look after your body because doctors have access to magic pills that will cure everything. And doctors don't ask questions because we desperately want to believe that the Government is telling us the truth when they tell us that vaccines save lives. It's convenient, it's profitable and we think it's a lovely idea too. The people working for the Government believe what they're told by the drug company people because it's convenient and easier than not believing. It's certainly much easier than asking questions. No one actually does any research. No one tries to find out whether vaccines are good or bad or a mixture of the two. The drug companies create a vaccine and it's in their interests to sell as much of it as they can. So their experts tell the people working for the Government that the new vaccine is brilliant and will save lives and save money and the civil servants write leaflets telling doctors and nurses and patients and journalists that vaccines are wonderful. But no one really knows the truth because no one has ever bothered to ask the questions that should have been asked.'

`But you can't just launch a new vaccine without proving that it works!'

`Of course you can! All you have to prove is that it doesn't kill zillions of mice or guinea pigs or rabbits and that when you give it to a few dozen people it doesn't kill too many of them in the first fortnight. And then when you've proved that you can give it to millions of people and make a fortune.'

`But they have to do tests!' I insisted.

`They rely a lot on animal experiments,' said Molly, who was now on a roll. `If the animals develop cancer or have heart attacks they say the results are irrelevant because animals are different to people. Everyone nods wisely and agrees. But if the animals are fine the vaccine is given the all clear. It's the same with a new drug. They test it on animals and a few people and if it doesn't produce pretty sudden and obvious problems they dish it out by the lorry load.' I nodded and hoped that this wasn't going to go on for too long. `The problem is that some dangerous side effects aren't immediately obvious. And some may only affect, say, one in every ten thousand patients. They test the new drug on a thousand patients and there are no dramatic side effects so everyone says `whizzo' and the drug gets a licence. Within no time at all the drug is on the market and GPs around the world are prescribing the drug for ten million patients. Two years later a thousand people have died because they've developed brain cancer.'

Harry brought her diet cola, a glass and a little paper doily. He looked disappointed that someone in his bar was drinking a non-alcoholic beverage. Molly thanked him and sipped her new drink.

`You told Mr and Mrs Jackson some of this?'

`Some of it. Just a bit of it. They asked me for my opinion so I had to give them some of the facts to show why I don't believe in vaccination. People tend to reject things they don't want to hear – especially if they're frightened or they don't understand.'

`And then went to Jock and told him what you'd said?'

`Yes, I'm afraid so.'

`Giving you the credit?'

Molly blushed. `Mrs Jackson said that I was the only person who'd been honest with her.'

`Jock wouldn't like that.'

`No, I don't think he did. But it was the money we lose out on that really upset him. He went on and on about it. He explained in great detail that it's not just the fee for vaccinating the child, and the profit on the vaccine we bulk buy from the drug company that makes it so profitable but that we also lose our bonus if not enough of the practice patients are vaccinated.'

`All that disgusting loot helps pay your salary.' The truth is that the fees we receive from vaccinating patients add up to a very decent sum at the end of the year. Jock reckons we make a quarter of our gross income giving vaccinations (or, more accurately, telling a nurse to give them). Our vaccination income is the cream on top of an admittedly rich cake. Jock can't remember much but he knows to the penny how much profit there is in a vaccination.

`Oh, not you as well,' said Molly, sounding exasperated. `That was Jock's argument. I told him that being honest with patients is more important than making money out of vaccinations. We're none of us exactly starving are we?'

`I bet that went down well.' I took a sip of my Laphroaig. The distillers who make the stuff really should be given a couple of Nobel Prizes.

`He then gave me the official spiel about vaccinations having saved the world from infectious diseases, and being directly responsible for saving millions of lives and being totally safe and all that stuff. And I said that if he believed all that guff he probably also believed that vaccines protected us from terrorism, money laundering and global warming. And I asked him if he still believed in the Tooth Fairy and Father Christmas. He then said that even if vaccination was dangerous it wasn't my place to go round banging my drum and scaring the patients.'

I told her that she had to agree that Jock had a point and that she could hardly deny that vaccines were one of the great medical inventions. I asked her what she was suggesting. Did she want to ban all vaccinations or just some of them?

She said she didn't want to ban anything but that she did want patients to be told the truth so that they could make up their own minds. `The whole issue is more contentious than anyone admits,' she claimed. `We tell patients that vaccines are safe and effective because that's what we are told. But who tells us that? The bloody drug companies and the Government! And if it's not my job to say something about a medical practice I believe to be wrong then what is my job? Was I trained to obediently give vaccinations that don't do any good but which might kill the people I give them to?'

`You don't think the Government is telling us the truth?'

Molly looked at me and raised an eyebrow.

`Sorry,' I said. `Stupid thing to say. I know they exaggerate and smooth things over but generally speaking what they say about vaccines is surely fair.'

`That's the whole point,' Molly replied angrily. `What they say isn't fair. They lie about everything. If you believe that vaccines are safe and effective you must have willed yourself to suppress the doubts you know you should feel and the questions you should be asking. Haven't you read my article in the *British Clinical Journal?*'

I confessed that I didn't even know she'd written an article anywhere.

`I'll e-mail you a copy.'

I looked at her.

She laughed. `Sorry, I forgot you don't like e-mail. I'll print it out and give you a copy. I've got some copies the journal sent me in lieu of a fee. I'll give you one of those.'

Harry brought my steak and kidney pudding and chips and put it down on the bar in front of me with a flourish. The Bell might be on its last legs as a hotel but the chef, who is well past retirement age and a fellow arthritis sufferer, knows how to make good old-fashioned English fare. He doesn't do wonderful things with sweetbreads and lime marmalade, or serve up tiny portions of braised duck's buttock swimming in a raspberry coulis, but he makes damned good pies and puddings and his chips are as good as any I've ever eaten out of newspaper which is, when you think about it, a considerable tribute. He produces excellent beef, reliable ham and succulent pork and never gets upset when his customers ask for mustard, horseradish or apple sauce. He may work in a hotel but he's an old-fashioned English pub chef. For puddings he serves spotted dick, roly-poly and treacle sponge rather than profiteroles and other modern inevitabilities.

`I cannot sit here and watch you eat that,' said Molly, staring at the plate Harry had placed before me. She stood up and picked up her coat.

`You can't go until I've finished,' I told her.

`Why not?'

`Because your car is still parked at the surgery and you can't get back there until I've finished my dinner.'

Molly sat down again.

`Don't say a word about my meal,' I told her, picking up and unwrapping the cutlery which Harry had laid down beside my plate. I laid the linen napkin across my lap. There may be holes in the carpets and draughts in the bedrooms but even in the bar they still have linen napkins at The Bell. And they starch them nicely too.

For the next twenty minutes or so we talked about nothing of consequence. `Do you always play that crappy music in your car?' she asked. `That was La Boheme,' I told her, aggrieved. `I know what it was. I just can't get into the idea of two rich, fat, middle aged millionaires pretending to be impoverished, starving students and singing across the body of an overweight diva who is alleged to be dying of tuberculosis but somehow manages to find the energy and the breath to sing back at them.'

`What do you like?' I asked her.

`Have you heard the latest from the `Bald and Tattooed Bastards'?' I said I hadn't. She said they were fantastic and that the lead singer had eighteen earrings in just one ear. I told her I'd trust her judgement.

I took Molly back to the surgery and waited while she picked up her car. It's a glum neighbourhood and we get hoodies hanging around outside in the evenings. I have given up telling them to clear off. On one notable occasion a young man wearing an anorak and baggy trousers asked me if I'd had my arse sewn up and then, without waiting for a reply, told me that he thought this to be the case because in his opinion I was full of shit. He laughed a lot at his joke and I confess I smiled too because it was funnier than the usual abuse. Jock did put up a sign warning trespassers that they would be prosecuted but it did about as much good as you'd expect.

Before she drove away Molly gave me a copy of the article she'd mentioned. She had several tucked into a manila folder in the boot of her car. I popped the article into my drug bag.

It was a Friday evening and I was on call for the whole of the weekend. I think I assumed that by Monday morning the argument would have been put to one side, if not forgotten, and that Molly and Jock would have resumed their rather brittle working relationship.

Looking back that was obviously wishful thinking. Molly wasn't about to abandon what she saw as a morally defensible position. And Jock was never going to change his mind. As author Upton Sinclair once wrote: `It is difficult to get a man to understand something if his salary depends on his not understanding it.'

Chapter 3

I had a surprisingly quiet and professionally uneventful weekend.

I was woken only once on Friday night to visit an asthmatic. He thought he needed intravenous steroids but he recovered with two squirts of an inhaler he'd never seen before, a good deal of reassurance and, possibly, the knowledge that the injection was in my bag three feet away from him if he didn't recover.

The telephone didn't ring at all on Saturday morning but during the afternoon I had a number of calls, none of which involved anything that wouldn't have waited until Monday.

An unmarried woman in her early twenties demanded infertility treatment so that she could have a baby and a council flat, and a gamine girl of 16 wanted breast enlargement surgery so that she could become a topless model and, no doubt, a figure of great influence in the entertainment world. The teenager told me, with considerable pride, that she already had a tattoo of `someone called Van Dyke' on her pubic area. `He's got a real beard,' she added with a giggle and asked me if I wanted to see. `The tattooist said Van Dyke was a painter but I've never heard of him.' She giggled again. `I give him a trim every now and then.' I never fail to be amazed at the ingenuity of tattoo artists, though being given all that bare skin to despoil must be a delight to a lunatic with a needle and a palette of multi-coloured inks. But I do wonder how people find the patience and the time to sit still while it's all being done. And how will those tattoos look when the underlying skin is wrinkled and peppered with liver spots?

I told them both that I would help with their requests when all the nation's patients waiting for cancer surgery had been treated. The woman who had demanded infertility treatment threatened to report me, though she did not say to whom, and the teenage girl just sulked and said she'd take an overdose and I'd be sorry.

The minute I'd put some baked beans onto the stove a very shouty woman demanded that I go round right away and clip her toenails. When I demurred and asked why she'd telephoned me she said I was the chiropodist wasn't I? I said I wasn't the chiropodist and then for reasons which I cannot explain I adopted a Welsh accent and told her that God would bless her feet and that she would walk through the valleys of righteousness and light. She said I was mad, which may well be a more accurate diagnosis than she realised, and hung up the telephone on me which saved me hanging it up on her.

On Saturday evening I had five calls, one after the other, and there were two more calls during the long, dark hours of the night. The evening calls weren't particularly dramatic. Three were to patients with colds and two were to men who'd hurt themselves playing football and needed to be told how brave they were and that they really didn't need to have their bruises X-rayed. But both of the night calls took time. The first was to a boy of 12 who had appendicitis and needed to be admitted to hospital and the second was to a man of 36 who had decided to kill himself by cutting his throat. He'd missed the artery and had cut only the jugular vein but he had made a mess of every room in the house as he'd wandered around wailing and showing everyone what he'd done. He too needed a trip to the local hospital and when the ambulance had taken him away I stayed for half an hour to help his unfortunate wife clean up some of the blood he'd spilt. A small amount of blood goes a long way when dripped onto furniture and carpets. A sympathetic neighbour looked after the two children who were strangely, and rather worryingly, accustomed to Daddy's odd behaviour.

Sunday was more of the same, but quieter.

There are two main varieties of patient who call out the doctor at the weekend.

The first group of people are apologetic about being a nuisance on a Saturday or a Sunday. They often call about something which has been troubling them for weeks; a problem which they've left for too long and which has finally become unbearable in some way. Some of the patients in this group genuinely don't want to be any trouble. They would rather suffer than be considered a bother, and sometimes, actually not infrequently, they die for their kindness. A few of the patients in this category are nice to me not because they like me, or because they are nice to people in general, but because I am their doctor and they hope that one day, if they are in pain, I will give them enough morphine to make life bearable and that until then I won't follow the evil footsteps of the much missed Dr Shipman and give them a large dose of morphine which they don't need.

The second group know their rights and aim to get their money's worth (even though most of them have never paid any taxes at all). They don't give a fig whether it's three o'clock in the morning or three o'clock in the afternoon when they call the doctor. Their attitude is that they are entitled to see a doctor when they want to see one and that's that. Most practices no longer cater to the patients in this category. The modern on-call doctor who is responsible for looking after 500,000 or more patients, spread over a huge area, won't visit anyone. There are plenty of health care bureaucrats around, hospitals are awash with them and health centres are stuffed with them, but most people, and I'm delighted to say that this includes the bureaucrats, of course, won't ever be able to find a doctor outside banking hours.

But our practice does do night and weekend calls, of course.

The selfish bugger who rang me at 3.30 am on Monday morning, and who demanded an immediate home visit, fell into this second, demanding category. He turned out to want nothing more urgent than a repeat prescription of contraceptive pills for his girlfriend who was, he told me, in the bathroom and unavailable. He had one of those haircuts that look as though the owner has just got out of bed but I rather suspected that he had spent hours teasing every single hair into the right position. The whole confection was covered in a thick layer of perfumed gel. He probably thought he looked good enough to eat. `We're going to Majorca this morning,' he told me. `But she hasn't got enough of her pills.' When I told him that I couldn't do what he wanted (making the excuse that I needed to check the girl's medical records) he became quite belligerent. When he grabbed my lapels and threatened to knock my teeth down my throat I told him that he needed to find a new doctor. Curiously, he seemed to be surprised by this. He then told me that if his girlfriend became pregnant he would blame me. I told him that I would demand a DNA test and suggested that if he didn't want his girlfriend to get pregnant he should either find some alternative form of contraception or remain continent for a week. He said this would ruin his holiday and that he would sue me.

`You're past it,' he snarled.

`At least I got past 40,' I told him. `You'll be lucky to reach 25.'

He repeated his threat to sue me and I asked if he intended to do this before or after he had knocked my teeth down my throat. When he didn't answer I said I very much looked forward to appearing in court and drove back home.

The phone went just as I climbed out of the car and I had to drive back to within a quarter of the mile of the man who'd wanted to knock my teeth down my throat. This time I had to give some anti-histamine tablets to a woman in her forties who'd developed a rash in all those places where women routinely spray their perfume. She admitted that she'd tried a new product, given to her by her husband, and thought I was brilliant in knowing what had caused the irritation. I told her to give or throw away what was left of the perfume and also gave her a prescription for a few more anti-histamine tablets.

`Shall I lose this or will you?' asked her husband accepting the prescription. `Oh you're much better at that sort of thing,' said the woman quite seriously.

Half an hour after arriving back home and switching on the kettle I had a call from a Mr Parrott who said his wife was in terrible pain. When I got there I found them both watching television. I still find it slightly shocking that people watch television at a time when most sensible folk are asleep. The woman said she had backache. When I said I'd better examine her she turned off the television set with some reluctance and headed out of the room and to the stairs. Her husband followed. As she climbed the stairs, without any obvious discomfort, the husband said, quite loudly: `Nice bum hasn't she, doctor?' She was wearing jeans, which were stretched to their limit, and there was no doubt that whatever the quality of the contents might have been the quantity was at the top of the range. The proud husband's strange remark reminded me for some reason of Sir Thomas More, the man for all seasons. When his prospective father-in-law invited More to pick one of his daughters the Utopian had difficulty in choosing. To make things easier the father had the girls undress and lie together under a sheet in their bedroom. More was then taken into the room and the father pulled back the sheet. `Now make your choice,' said the proud father. More examined the girls for a few moments and then asked for them to turn onto their faces. He then looked at them for a few more minutes and then smacked one on the bottom. `I'll have that one,' he said, as though choosing a side of beef at the butchers.

I did not mention Sir Thomas to the Parrots.

I examined Mrs Parrott with her husband peering over my shoulder and watching my every move and could find little of any significance. She had no sign of any pathology and her legs seemed to move in all the usually acceptable directions without causing her any pain. I gave her a few analgesic tablets out of my bag and pointed out that the easy chair in which she'd been slumped looked as if its springs had had better days. I suggested that she try sitting on a hard chair for a day or two. She looked less than pleased with this advice. In the bad old days, when doctors were respected, patients used to obey their GP's instructions to the letter. Today, patients only follow the instructions which they like the sound of. Tell a patient to stay off work for a fortnight and he'll stick to the instruction like a religious zealot. Tell him to keep off the beer and he'll forget the advice in seconds.

By the time I got back home there didn't seem any point in going back to bed so I made myself a cup of tea and a marmalade sandwich. Once I'd drunk the tea and eaten the sandwich I looked around for some silly chore to pass the time and decided to clear out and refill my drug bag. A few of the packets of drugs were past their use-by date and inevitably I found used glass ampoules rolling around at the bottom. I threw out the rubbish and replaced the old medicines with new ones from my store cupboard. While I was doing all this I found Molly's article. I lit a pipe and sat down to read it.

And then the telephone rang.

I stuffed the article into my pocket and rushed off to see a patient of Deidre's who had gone into labour a week early. Deidre is always encouraging her patients to choose to have their baby at home because she gets paid more when they do. Sadly, however, she is never there to help with the delivering. I doubt if she's seen a baby born since her own last daughter popped out. `We need boiling water,' I said to the father-to-be, the moment I'd seen his wife. The young man looked terrified. It was his first child but his wife's third. `Are you going to operate?' he asked. `No,' I told him with a smile. `We all need a nice cup of tea.' Something seemed unusual and suddenly I realised what it was. He was white and she was black. Nothing odd about that in itself but I have noticed that in films, television shows and advertisements mixed marriages are always the other way round. And the woman is nearly always blonde.

I spent the rest of the night helping a 26-year-old mother of two empty her womb and turn an expectation into a hope and inspiration. Her husband and her mother boiled water and provided fresh towels by the armful and none of us even dreamt of calling an ambulance or troubling the local maternity ward. Under firm instructions from the mother-to-be the husband, a jittery soul with nerves of frayed cotton, stayed downstairs, filling saucepans, boiling water and drinking cheap blended whisky while his mother-in-law provided encouragement and damp flannels. The new father was not allowed into the bedroom until his wife and new son were arranged just so; mother with hair brushed and lipstick on, son washed and wrapped in a shawl. I didn't get back home until the streets were full of people going to work. The dawn chorus had long since closed beaks and settled down for a snooze. Those GPs who no longer do night visits miss that glorious feeling of fulfilment which comes from doing something all by yourself; without nurses, without equipment other than the stuff that can be carried in a black bag and, most of all, without bloody forms and administrators.

Many of the calls which come in out of hours are, to be frank, little more than a nuisance. More than three quarters of emergency visits are unnecessary and more than half of the unnecessary callers know damned well that their call isn't really necessary but those rare moments when I can make a difference, by myself, keep me going and make the work worthwhile.

In the car I listened to a CD of HMS Pinafore performed by the D'Oyly Carte company and when I arrived back home I cooked myself bacon, sausage and two eggs, toasted four slices of bread, found a jar of my favourite whisky flavoured marmalade and made myself a pot of strong coffee. It was the biggest, and best, meal I'd cooked in quite a while. Everything was a bit overdone but I've always liked crispy bacon and I hate eggs with runny yokes.

The postman called while I ate breakfast.

I used to enjoy the postman's visits. He used to bring letters and greeting cards and occasionally parcels that were welcome and exciting to open. These days he brings me mysterious letters and statements from my bank (which I cannot understand), mysterious statements from the energy company (which I cannot understand) and threatening letters from a wide variety of government departments and international corporations. He also brings a huge pile of unsolicited, unaddressed leaflets, booklets and pamphlets advertising sofas, pizzas and colleges offering courses in subjects such as hairdressing and nail varnishing. It's a good day when the postman brings mail which appears to be little more than superficial crap, rather than stuff which is terminally disruptive.

Today the scurrying bastard brought me seven pieces of unaddressed junk mail and the usual reminder letter from the television licensing people. No one sends me as many letters as they do. I don't blame them. In the bad old days people used to buy stamps in little booklets. Today, they buy them one at a time and pay with a credit card. The cost of sending mail has soared in recent years and the quality of the service provided has deteriorated by much the same figure.

I amused myself as I ate by writing rude remarks all over the letter from the television licensing people. When I'd finished I stuffed the letter back into the envelope and wrote `Gone Away. Return To Sender' on the outside. The BBC's heavies are always threatening to call round to see whether or not I am watching television. But they never do, of course. And if they do turn up they won't get very far because I never answer the door to unexpected visitors.

I was now late for morning surgery but I was past caring. I sipped my coffee, opened my copy of the *British Medical Journal* and turned to the back to look at the situations vacant. It must be twenty years since I've done that. One advertisement caught my eye. It was for a job on a small Scottish island. The local health authority needed a full-time solo GP to look after just 200 islanders. No partners, no receptionists, no nurses and very few night or weekend calls. I tore out the advertisement and stuffed it into the paperback copy of a book of short stories by H.E.Bates that I was reading.

Then I went to the surgery to attend to the morning's patients.

Chapter 4

A few days later, it was actually the following Wednesday, I was sitting in my consulting room working my way through a huge pile of repeat prescriptions, and trying hard not to allow the noise made by builders on a nearby property drive me to murder or suicide (all builders seem to buy special radios which are set to a permanently high volume and pre-tuned to a special `builders'' radio station which plays only the cheesiest and most unpleasant music) when Molly telephoned me on the intercom to ask if I could see her for a few minutes. I told her I was free and two minutes later she waltzed in looking flushed and rather excited. After making the usual fuss about the cloud of pipe smoke hanging over my desk she asked me if I would like to go with her to see her boyfriend working. Larry had got a gig at the Red Lion in the centre of the town and Molly said they were both very excited by it. I admired her enthusiasm and was reminded of the good Cobbett who was, it was said, always as generous with his enthusiasms as he was forthright with his criticisms. I reminded her that it was my turn to be on call for the practice but promised that if things were quiet I would be there.

`Tickets are £5,' she told me. `But to save you having to queue at the door I've got one you can have.' She rummaged in her handbag and produced a medium sized brown envelope. From the envelope she took a small handful of bits of paper that looked like raffle tickets. They had the name of the pub stamped across the top in red ink.

`Is that it?' I asked, taking one of the tickets from her and examining it rather critically. `I've seen more impressive bus tickets.'

`They don't want to waste money printing expensive tickets,' she said. `That'll be £5 please. Do you want to bring her? I've got plenty of tickets. I can let you have two for £10.'

`Her?'

`That woman you're seeing.'

`Her name is Enid.'

`I know. Wonderful isn't it? Serves her right. You're not going to marry her, are you?'

`Are you always this direct?'

`You're not are you?'

`Not as far as I know.'

`Thank heavens for that! Have you ever been married?'

`Yes. Once.'

`What happened?'

`She fell out of love with me and into love with someone else.'

`I'm sorry.'

`It was a long time ago. We were both very young.'

`Did you love her?'

`I thought I did at the time.'

`Did she love you?'

`I thought she did.'

`When did you realise that she didn't?'

`It's a boring story.'

`I don't care. Tell me. Anyway, it won't be boring.'

`You're very nosey aren't you?'

`Yes. I like knowing about people.'

`We were on a train in Spain; travelling on a long journey from Madrid to somewhere. I can't remember where we were heading. We were in a one of those old-fashioned little compartments which seat six people; three on one seat and three facing them.'

`I used to like those compartments. They were cosy.'

`There were three other people in the compartment. Two of them were an elderly Spanish couple who had brought with them a huge basket of food: bread, meats, cheeses, fruits. They ate constantly. The funny thing was that they were both as skinny as rakes. But they never stopped eating.'

`And the other one?'

`A young Spaniard. He was in his twenties and, I suppose, good looking in a bull fighter sort of way. We'd been travelling for about half an hour when he lit up a cigarette. It was one of those cheap Spanish things that smell of wet carpet. I asked him to put it out and pointed to the No Smoking sign. I'd specifically asked for a 'No Smoking' compartment because in those days I didn't smoke and I hated cigarette smoke. He just shrugged, laughed and blew out a huge cloud of smoke. When I repeated my request he looked at me and sneered. He then took out his cigarette packet, turned to my wife gave her the big smile treatment and offered her one.'

`She didn't take one?'

`She did. He lit it for her. And they blew out clouds of foul smelling smoke. She coughed a bit at first. But she persevered. And they started giggling together like a pair of young lovers. He didn't speak a word of English and she didn't speak a word of Spanish but they seemed to get on well enough.' I stopped and remembered. `It was our honeymoon.'

`What did you do?'

`I sat there like a lemon and fumed. I felt like an old cuckold watching his wife flirting with a young lover.' I paused, remembering. `The funny thing was that she didn't smoke. She hated cigarette smoke even more than I did.'

`And that was the end of the marriage?'

`It was the moment when I realised she didn't love me. She enjoyed humiliating me too much to love me. It was the beginning of the end. Then a few months after we got back she met someone else at the hospital where she worked.'

Molly didn't say anything. She looked at me and then looked away again, as though embarrassed by my long-ago shame.

`Why don't you like Enid?' I asked her.

`Whatever gave you the impression that I don't like her?'

`Why don't you like her?'

`She's not right for you. She's too cold and efficient. She reminds me of a concentration camp guard only considerably more frightening.'

I should have defended Enid more vigorously but I couldn't think of anything suitable to say. `I doubt if she'll want to come I'm afraid. She goes to her drama society on Wednesday evenings and it's an unbreakable date. They're doing something by Chekov next.'

`Not Macbeth?'

`Why Macbeth?'

`She'd make a marvellous witch if they got her to tone down the cackling a little.'

`I'll ignore that. She doesn't cackle. She just makes a rather funny noise when she laughs. It's probably something to do with her sinuses. And why do I have to pay you £5? I thought I was being invited.'

`You are. But you still have to pay.'

I took out my wallet and handed her the £5.' Have you invited Jock?'

She raised an eyebrow as though this were a silly question. `Just you,' she said. `Jock wouldn't go anywhere unless there was a free meal paid for by a drug company. He's not speaking to me, by the way. He's downstairs in the reception closet studying the accounts. Have you noticed that when he reads he puts his finger under the words? I'll swear he's only just managed to stop himself moving his lips. I realised today that he reminds me of someone.'

`Who?'

`Hitler. But without the brains, the charm and the sense of right and wrong.'

I ignored this. `Have you invited Deidre?'

Molly shuddered. `It's going to be a fun evening,' she said. `We want to have a good time.'

I could understand this. Deidre is not known for her joie de vivre. `Her highlight of the week is the arrival of the *British Medical Journal.* I've seen her tearing open the wrapper with her teeth to get at the latest editorials.' And another thing that annoys me is her way of saying: `You get what you deserve in this life'. This is patently untrue since most people do not remotely get what they deserve. Millions of people work hard, do their best and deserve much but their lives are, nevertheless, a disappointment. Just think how many artists, singers and writers work their socks off and try their hardest at what they do. They all deserve to succeed but, inevitably, the vast majority do not.'

I didn't say anything but I agreed with Molly's dislike of Deidre. Our only female partner is an unpleasant woman. She makes small sacrifices for people, objects and causes but only when doing so does not affect her in any way. She does this in order to maintain a reputation for magnanimity that she cultivates but does not deserve. `Petty unselfishness,' E.M.Forster called it. The other thing about Deidre is that whenever something bad happens to someone you can pretty well guarantee that something worse will have happened to her. If you're ill, she will have been sicker. If something bad happens to a friend of yours, something far, far worse will have happened to a friend of hers. She has, it seems, an inexhaustible supply of unfortunate friends. If you've had a run of bad luck, she will have had a much longer run of bad luck and each unhappy event will have been far worse than any of yours. Patients who tell her their symptoms invariably have to put up with a recital of her own similar problems. It's well known among the patients that she has had every disease going except for those involving the male genital organs and the prostate gland and she'll probably have those symptoms soon.

Deidre isn't as mean as Jock but her interest in her work is inspired by one thing only: money. She needs the money because she firmly believes that no home can have enough bed cushions and scented candles.

`There's something I want to tell you after the show,' said Molly.

`That's very intriguing.'

She smiled and pointed at my pipe. `Don't forget you can't light that thing. The Red Lion is a decent, law-abiding establishment. You can't bribe the barman to let you light up.'

`I never bribe barmen to let me light up!'

`Yes you do. You give outrageous tips to the barman at The Bell so that he'll turn a blind eye when you smoke that thing. And put your mobile phone on vibrate so that it doesn't start ringing in the middle of Larry's best joke.'

`What do you want to tell me? I hate mysteries. You're not pregnant are you?'

She shook her head.

`Getting married?'

Another shake.

`You're not leaving the practice?'

A laugh and another shake of the head and she left.

I got stuck into the paperwork again and was moving through the stuff quite quickly when Jock walked in.

`May I ask why you're removing this patient from our list?' he asked. He always manages to sound like a headmaster talking to an errant junior teacher.

I looked at the form he was holding. The patient was the one who'd threatened to remove my teeth. I explained what had happened.

`His family has been with the practice for some years,' said Jock. `He has a lot of relatives with the practice.'

I shrugged. `You can keep him if you like,' I told him. `But you'll have to give him your home number for emergency calls. I refuse to treat patients who threaten me.'

Jock looked at me. `But you and Molly do all the night and weekend calls,' he said. `That's the agreement.'

`Not for patients who threaten physical violence,' I told him. `He's lucky I didn't report him to the police.'

We continued like this for a while and eventually Jock gave in. He then pulled a couple of photographs out of his inner jacket pocket and showed them to me. The photographs were of a large, local hotel.

`What do you think?'

`I don't understand.' I said. `Are you inviting me to go away with you for the weekend? To this hotel?'

Jock blushed and looked embarrassed. `No, no, of course not,' he said quickly. `I'm thinking of buying it.' Whatever Jock does he always does it in the first person. He never includes his wife in his thoughts or, indeed, in many of his actions.

`You're going into the hotel business?'

`No, of course not. It's going bust. It's just been put on the market. I thought I'd make a pre-emptive bid and get it cheap. The vendors are in a lot of financial trouble. The agent, who is a patient of mine, thinks they'll take a low offer if its cash and quick. I've had a word with the bank and they're prepared to lend me the money.'

`But what are you going to do with it?'

`Live in it. Knock it about a bit and turn it into a house! There are some marvellous ceilings, the gardens are magnificent and the views are out of this world.'

`Will they let you do that? The local planners don't like people converting hotels into houses. I think they've worked out that it reduces the amount of local employment and damages the tourist trade.'

`I've thought of a way round that,' said Jock slyly. `I'll simply put up the prices.'

`I don't understand.'

`Officially it will still be a hotel but I'll charge £2,000 for a room and £500 for breakfast. Something like that. So no one will want to stay there.'

`Can you do that?'

`My lawyer says I can. I'll still be running it as a hotel.' He put the photographs back into his pocket. `The council can insist that I keep running the place as a hotel but they can't tell me what I can charge.'

`Very clever.'

`I thought so,' agreed Jock rather smugly.

`What are you going to do with all those rooms?' I asked him, looking again at the brochure. For no good reason that I could think of I was suddenly reminded of an old Frenchman I met when on a train in Northern France. I was a student, travelling alone and very broke. `I have learned four things,' the old man told me. `Bien manger, bien boire, bien baiser, bien dormer.' He waved a hand as though dismissing everything else anyone could think of. He leant forward across the compartment. `The man who enjoys these four things will have a happy and contented life.' We shared a baguette and a cheap bottle of wine he had brought with him and he then fell asleep for the remainder of the journey. Jock, who dreams only of bigger and better and of creating envy among his neighbours, would have thought the old man quite mad.

I wasn’t surprised by Jock’s plan but one thing did worry me. I’d already seen an advertisement for the hotel. And it was priced at £1,500,000. Even if Jock managed to buy it with a huge discount he would still be taking on a massive loan. I couldn’t help wondering what this might mean for the practice. Where was he going to find that sort of money?

Chapter 5

I signed the remainder of the repeat prescriptions, read a dozen letters, threw away a binful of advertising material and unwanted magazines and returned three telephone calls. One of the receptionists (the stout, middle aged one with the untreated thyroid condition) then brought me another pile of mail and one of those cardboard carrier bags which people fill with presents which are too difficult to wrap. Inside the bag I found a bottle of Laphroaig, a packet of my favourite tobacco and a thank you note, signed by both the mother and the father of the new addition to the town's population who I had helped bring into the world. I made some trivial, light-hearted remark to the receptionist but the note brought tears to my eyes. I looked up and noticed that the receptionist who'd brought the gift was still standing there. She's Oriental in origin and like most of her compatriots is rather on the small size. I've often wondered why Orientals are so small. Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that they are produced in such huge quantities. Come to think of it the mass production process also means that there is also surprisingly little variation in style or format. Since I did not want to get arrested I did not mention any of these thoughts.

`The community social worker wants to know if you've had any ideas for her patient groups,' she said. I looked at her, puzzled. We are besieged by social workers of various types who, since they don't have any real work to do, spend their days thinking up bizarre ways to make themselves seem important. These schemes invariably involve those of us who have plenty of things to do in being invited to meetings where much coffee is drunk and many biscuits are eaten. It has been reported, doubtless by some Quango which keeps a record of these things, that the average office worker spends (and largely wastes) 16 hours a week attending meetings. My bet is that social workers manage double that figure. A few years ago a radical Dutch town planner did away with traffic lights and found that road safety improved dramatically. Someone should try doing the same with meetings. Far more useful work would get done if meetings were banned completely. I usually manage to find a convenient emergency which enables me to avoid turning up to any of them. I remember our community social worker only because his name is Wasir. Obviously, I call him Kilroy but like most social workers he had any sense of humour removed at birth and since the nickname is based on an English cultural icon he doesn't understand it at all. He is one of those sanctimonious do-gooders who is always keen to be generous with other people's money. He wears an old army jacket with retro T-shirts underneath it. The T-shirts always advertise long forgotten rock groups whose members became labourers, shop assistants and van drivers long before he was born.

`He says he's spoken to you about it several times. He wants to put up notices inviting patients with specific diseases to attend monthly groups where they can make what he calls `social interface contact' with other sufferers. Do you have any ideas for themes?' The receptionist stood waiting, a notepad in one hand and a pen in the other.

`Let's have a curry club for the irritable bowel syndrome sufferers,' I suggested. `And a darts club for the patients with Parkinson's Disease.'

The receptionist thanked me and wrote these down.

`And special meetings for men suffering from premature ejaculation,' I added. `But let's make sure the meetings always start ten minutes earlier than advertised so that everyone who turns up thinks they've got there late.'

The receptionist looked at me and raised an eyebrow. `Do you want me to write that one down?'

`No,' I said. `You can forget that one.'

`The parents want to name their new baby after you,' she said. Puzzled, I looked at her. `The parents who left you the present,' she explained. `They rang up to ask what type of drink you like. That's how they came to buy you the Laphroaig.'

`That's nice,' I said, not knowing what else to say.

`The father is a huge fan of cowboy films so they're going to call the baby `Hopalong'.'

I looked at her but she wasn't smiling.

`Is that a joke?'

`No. I don't think so. Of course I'm too old to remember but I gather there used to be a cowboy called Hopalong Cassidy.' She paused. `Actually, I think you've probably done the kid a favour. They were going to call it Money.'

`Why on earth would you call a child Money?'

`Something they're both very fond of, I suppose. Why would you call a baby Apple or Rainbow? What are these parents thinking of? What if their baby grows up to be a judge or to marry a prince? You can't have a Judge Apple can you? Or a Princess Rainbow.'

I sighed, shook my head and carried on filling my waste paper bin. Most of the mail seemed to be either from people telling me things I didn't want to know, or warning me about the terrible things that were about to happen to me because I hadn't done things I'd been told to do and hadn't. There were three letters from various people with important sounding titles advising me that I had been seen smoking in places where smoking is forbidden and warning me of the consequences. I sometimes think that I have wandered into the wrong life. Somewhere there is probably someone who would like my life. Or maybe I just turned up for it a hundred years too late. I know the lower orders had a rough time of it but life at the end of the 19th century would have been much more fun for someone with a little initiative and a top hat with a stethoscope in it.

When I'd finished ploughing my way through all the crap I did three of the five home visits that were listed on the slip of paper one of the receptionists had handed me before I'd done an Elvis and left the building. (It was the fairly young one with surprisingly bad varicose veins and red streaks in her hair who always wears a turtle neck sweater because she has a tattoo of a dotted line around her neck. Jock only agreed to hire her on condition that she always wore something that covered up the tattoo. I don't know her name and she doesn't seem to know mine though on her good days she seems to recognise that I am one of the doctors employing her. She has a string of boyfriends and seems obsessed with sex. I once heard her tell one of the other receptionists that she was thinking of giving up her job and selling her body for a living. `Unlimited sex with enthusiastic partners and I get paid for it! That's something I could get used to. Maybe I ought to start now before it's too late. Or maybe I should just practice a bit more.')

The first visit was to a woman who claims she is allergic to everything on the planet and that because of this she cannot possibly leave her luxury flat and travel to the surgery. She also has a self-diagnosed addiction to chocolate (to which she is apparently not allergic) and, as a result, weighs about twice as much as a pregnant rhinoceros with the dropsy. She wanted a prescription for something to help her sleep. I told her that I feared that she would doubtless be allergic to all the pills I could give her and that instead I recommended that she tune into something soporific on the BBC. She has the biggest television set I've ever seen and spends her days watching ten hanky movies.

The second visit was to a lovely old fellow who had twisted his knee while digging his neighbour's garden. He is 94-years-old and was terribly apologetic about calling me out. His family are forever trying to enlist my help in persuading him to retire but I always tell them what he tells me – that if he retires he won't have a reason for living and so he will die.

The third visit was to a 62-year-old woman who lives with, and cares for, her 86-year-old mother who is physically fit but who has Alzheimer's disease and who doesn't know who she is, where she is or what she's doing. Many people who develop Alzheimer's tell themselves that they'll kill themselves when things get too bad but they never do, of course, because the disease develops slowly, getting worse bit by bit, and they always think they can hang on a bit longer and cope and then suddenly it's too late because they can no longer remember what they were going to do or why. The 62-year-old daughter, who is called Zahlia, looked exhausted. Her mother had taken to wandering around at night and twice the police had found her mooching around the town in her nightdress. I gave Zahlia some sleeping tablets to give her mother and promised that one capsule would knock her out for eight hours. I wrote out a prescription for another thirty and to be honest I wouldn't blame her for a second if she gave her mother the lot in one go. I told Zahlia to make sure that I visited at least once a fortnight. I didn't tell her that if I did this I would be able to write out a death certificate without troubling the coroner.

After the third of these visits I realised that my journey to the fourth would take me past the bookshop Enid runs. I parked on a single yellow line, put my *Doctor Visiting* card on the dashboard and walked fifty yards to the shop. There are some who say that our small town has deteriorated in recent years but the High Street seems to be thriving. We have two fast food restaurants, a chemist, a nail parlour, a sandwich bar, three pawn shops, three phone shops, seven charity shops, two tattoo parlours and three estate agents. Since the shops we get must be the shops the customers want the local population is clearly richly served. Less than a third of the shops available are empty and available to let. Enid, half hidden behind the counter, was sternly completing a transaction with a customer who was buying a cheap paperback. He had silver rings dangling from his ears, nose and lips and looked like an African tribal chief dressed up for a night out on the town. There was so much metal hanging from his nose that he jingle-jangled when he moved his head. I stood back, well out of the way, and waited for Mr Jingle to leave. It occurred to me, as I waited, that Enid reminded me very much of a school teacher I'd once had who had absolutely terrified me.

Within days of our having met, Enid had told me, with great certainty, that she intended to make something of me. I did not have to courage to point out that, since my next birthday would take me perilously close to my half century, she was rapidly running out of time. She was processing the man's transaction with all the enthusiasm and levity of a border guard examining passports. She was wearing a tweed skirt and a matching jacket with a white polo necked sweater with a large and hideous brooch pinned to the front of it. I looked around her shop. It was full of television tie-in publications. Grinning reality TV performers were lined up alongside grinning television chefs, grinning television gardeners and grinning newsreaders. It occurred to me that just every damned book on display had a picture of the author on the front cover. The only fiction on the shelves was either the miserable, pretentious guff that no one ever reads but which always wins all the prizes, or the special variety written for bored housewives looking for something mildly titillating. There was nothing by Greene, Doyle or Wodehouse. There was nothing by Shakespeare either, though most female authors were well represented. (Last Christmas Enid gave me half a set of paperbacks by Jane Austen. She promised me the other half of the set for my birthday.) Enid succeeds by supplying the local schools and colleges with all their literary needs. I suspect that she is helped in this by her friendship with a woman called Hazel Thickett who is the Senior Information Resource Purchasing Officer for whatever the local education authority calls itself these days. Hazel is an actress manque, active in the local dramatic society, and although she is in her fifties and neither a good looking woman nor a great thespian, is usually the first choice for the female juvenile lead. There have, I believe, been murmurings of favouritism and since Enid is the company's casting director some of these murmurings have been directed towards her. Fortunately, Enid's position as supplier of all things bright and readable to the local would-be intelligentsia is not widely known and the secret of her shop's commercial success seems safe for the time being.

As I looked round at all the hideously perfect faces grinning at me from their respective book jackets it occurred to me that no proper book ever has a picture of the author on the front. When did a publisher last put a picture of a grinning Evelyn Waugh, John Buchan or H.G.Wells on the front jacket of one of their books?

Enid and I first met at a tobacconist where I was buying a packet of Gawith Hoggarth Ready Rubbed to put in my pipe. I usually smoke a rather peculiar blend of Cuban leaf tobacco which is the same stuff that Mark Twain loved. The chap who runs the shop gets it in especially for me. He is in his eighties, though he looks older, and when he is called to the great humidor in the sky I expect that sixty years of tobacco selling history will be closed down overnight and the tobacconist turned into a shop selling mobile telephones. For some reason, which he explained at length but which I didn't begin to understand, the Cuban leaf was unobtainable and the old man had recommended that I be daring and try the Gawith Hoggarth. Enid was buying a box of matches with which to light her gas fire. It was bucketing down with rain and I offered to share my umbrella with her. It always seems to be raining these days. If it isn't raining then it's either just stopped raining or it's about to start raining. If I had any money I'd put it into a firm making sou'westers and umbrellas. On the way to her car she told me that she knew who I was, that she was a widow with no children, that she was a councillor and that she ran a bookshop. Since the journey was no more than a hundred yards I thought that was pretty impressive.

No one could describe Enid as pretty or having any physical charms but no one would deny that she had a strong character, and if Playboy chose playmates according to the size and power of their personalities she would be the first in line to be Miss January. She told me that she did a lot for what she calls `the community' and said that people who knew her usually described her as energetic and hard-working. She handed me a discount card for her shop and told me that they had a special offer on all cookery tie in books that was being extended for another month in response to overwhelming public demand. While I waited for her to open her car she asked me if I'd seen the latest production by the local dramatic society and when I said I hadn't she'd told me that she was performing and her enquiry as to whether I would like to go one evening had not been one which had invited any answer other than an enthusiastic `yes'. Three days later I'd spent the evening watching a performance *of The Importance of Being Earnest* and at the end of the evening's entertainment Lady Bracknell took me by the arm and introduced me to the rest of the cast and the production team as her new partner. It seemed rude to offer any dissent and so I said nothing. Not for the last time Enid had taken charge of my life.

The following day we attended the wedding of two young amateur thespians and I was stung for £50 as my contribution to our wedding gift. I can still remember that wedding. The best man, a bank clerk and leading man in the dramatic society, gave a long speech in which he talked endlessly and exclusively about a young stage manager who had died six months earlier in a motor cycle accident. `He would have so loved to have been here,' said the best man, after finishing what seemed more like a funereal eulogy than a wedding speech. By the time he'd finished the guests were all in tears and much mascara was running on both male and female cheeks. The best man made, I remember, just one reference to the bride. `She is no virgin, of course,' he remarked. `But in the bedroom as in the theatre, experience is invaluable.' No one except me seemed to be embarrassed by what I thought was a rather tactless remark.

`Why don't people use cash anymore?' demanded Enid when I stepped forward and said hello. `That man who was just here bought a £3.99 paperback and paid with a credit card. Most of my profit will have gone to the credit card company. Why don't people carry money? And please don't smoke that awful pipe in the shop. It's illegal to smoke in here.' She looked at me, as though she were looking at a painting or a piece of curtain material. `Why don't you grow a beard?' she asked.

`It's not lit. A bookshop should welcome pipe smokers. Sherlock Holmes smoked a pipe as did Mark Twain, Bertrand Russell, J.R.R.Tolkien, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner and Jean-Paul Sartre. Twain once said that he wouldn't go to heaven if they didn't let him smoke his pipe there. I don't know why you don't just refuse to accept plastic. There are two banks less than a hundred yards away from you. Your customers could easily take out some cash.'

I thought I was being supportive and offering constructive advice. But I was wrong.

Enid glared at me. `I don't care whether it's lit or not. It's still illegal and it still smells. You public service employees don't understand how the real world works, do you?' We often had conversations which involved two or more topics at a time.

`Am I?' I asked. I put my pipe away in my jacket pocket. I didn't see how having an unlit pipe in my pocket was any less illegal than having it clamped between my teeth but I didn't want to have that argument again with Enid. She made no secret of the fact that she hated my pipe. She said that men who smoked pipes remind her of babies sucking dummies.

`Are you what?'

`A public service employee?'

`Who pays your salary?'

`I'm self-employed.'

`Technically, maybe. But who pays you the money you use for clothes, food and petrol.'

`By some mysterious means money is paid into my account from the practice account.'

`And how does the practice get money?'

`The Government sends the stuff along, by the same mysterious process.'

`Exactly!' said Enid. `You're paid by the Government. You're a public employee. You're another civil servant. And none of you people has any idea how the real world works. I can't stop taking credit cards because if I did my customers would simply buy their books elsewhere.'

I listened to this tirade, which seemed a trifle unfair, without defending myself. I have learned not to defend myself when Enid climbs onto one of her soapboxes. In much the same way that I don't throw stones at angry looking dogs, or poke sticks into wasps' nests, so I have learned to keep quiet when she is on the rampage.

When I was younger I imagined myself to be something of a revolutionary anarchist with humanitarian overtones. I was naïve enough to believe in freedom and democracy. These days I know that I'm an overweight, middle aged pudding and I expect to be bullied by Enid and people like her. (It terrifies me that there are people like Enid.) Accidental glances in the mirror fixed to the wardrobe in Enid's bedroom have not spared me the truth about my shape, and my heart tells me that weariness and fear have sucked all the fight out of me. The odd thing is that I'm not sure why I feel so weary or where the fear came from. All I know is that civilisation seemed to me to come to an end when the police started arresting old ladies for feeding the birds in our parks and that history, far being an accumulation of facts, is merely an aggregation of politically acceptable truths; dependent upon attitude and interpretation. A patient of mine once said that if the Germans had won World War II the holocaust would now be regarded as a great human achievement, up there with the Pyramids and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, and the frightening thing is that I think he was probably right. These days most of life is 30 to 1 against unless you're a member of the Royal Family or an EU commissioner.

`Why would I want to grow a beard?' I asked her.

`Rodney Stoke has a beard.'

`Yes, I know. But that's not a great reason for growing a beard.'

`Fidel Castro said that he saved ten days a year by not shaving. That's two extra working weeks every year!'

`I don't want to do any more work than I do already.'

`You could spend the ten days doing something else. Learning to play the saxophone or learning German.'

`I don't want to play the saxophone or speak German. Maybe if not shaving meant that I had two weeks holiday sitting in a nice hotel by the side of one of the Italian lakes I might consider it.'

Suddenly Enid abandoned the subject of beards. `Do you know what happened this morning?'

Although the question was clearly rhetorical I decided I ought to take my part in the proceedings and so I confessed that I did not.

`A woman came in and spent nearly an hour browsing. She took out dozens of books and put them all back in the wrong places. But she didn't buy one book. Not one. She sat on the chair in the children's section, which I put in for weary parents, and she ordered book after book on her mobile phone. When she left she gave me a big smile and said that even with the postage costs it was cheaper for her to buy her books from Amazon. '

`Not a good sign,' I agreed.

Enid glowered at me as though it were all my fault.

`I popped in to see if you'd like a quick bite of lunch,' I said. `We could drive to The Bell or pop along to the King's Head.'

`Look around,' snapped Enid whose manner can appear a little sharp at times.

I looked around. The shop contained a lot of books but no people. Boring, dull books; but a lot of them. They were all new. I don't know why this should be but I have always found second hand books more interesting than new ones. And, on the whole, I have always found hardback second hand books, the ones without dust jackets, far more fun than paperbacks. I have no idea why this should be.

`How many people can you see?'

`None. Except you.'

`Exactly. Simon has gone for his lunch. I can't go to mine until he gets back.' Simon was Enid's only assistant. He was on some sort of trainee scheme, sponsored by the Government, and he was very knowledgeable about his statutory rights as an employee. On the morning he had started work he had given Enid a list of the breaks to which he was legally entitled. Twenty minutes for a morning coffee break. One hour for luncheon. Twenty minutes for an afternoon tea break. When Enid had told him the shop's opening hours he had responded by telling her his working hours. The shop was open from 9.00 am until 6.00 pm except Fridays and Saturdays when it remained open until 7.00 pm. Simon, however, started at 9.00 am and finished at 5.00 pm and didn't work on Saturdays. The truth is that, speaking objectively, he's an obnoxious pantywaister and I wouldn't hire him to knock the dottle out of a cold pipe. He always wears brown corduroy trousers, a dark shirt and a hideous, striped tie that looks as if it were designed by a blind man. In cold weather he wears a Fair Isle sweater with red reindeer on a green background (though, last January he insisted on going home when the temperature in the shop fell below the legal minimum). He invariably carries a grey nylon shoulder bag which he puts over his head so that the strap is on his left shoulder while the bag rests against his right hip. I don't know why but I've always felt uncomfortable around people who carry shoulder bags in this undoubtedly sensible way. If Chekhov was correct when he wrote that we are what we want then Simon is a life lived strictly by the rules; a life regulated and organised and entirely without passion or commitment.

`I could pop out and fetch us a couple of sandwiches and two coffees,' I suggested. There was a shop just two doors away which sold sandwiches and coffee to office workers. This was a sure sign of my desperate, pathetic need to please and to squeeze some warmth from this woman. I never usually buy sandwiches. Most cases of food poisoning are a result of people preparing food with hands which have not been properly washed and the average sandwich maker has fingers which are alive with bacteria. People think that wrapped sandwiches are safe and sterile but they're not, of course. The bugs are all safely wrapped up inside, merrily building up their strength and breeding on the roast beef, ham or cheddar cheese. It's not surprising that vomiting and diarrhoea are endemic these days. There is, at least, a chance that piping hot food won't have been fondled by coli laden digits.

`That's probably the only way I'll get anything to eat. Get me a beef and lettuce on wholemeal bread and a latte.' This was the warmth for which I was prepared to sacrifice so much.

`Any second choice for the sandwich?'

Enid thought for a moment. `No. Just the beef and lettuce on wholemeal. No mustard. You know I hate mustard.'

I was about to join the queue which started outside the sandwich shop when I noticed a traffic warden hovering next to my car. I hurried over to see if I could talk him out of giving me a ticket. Like most GPs working in our town I collect parking tickets the way other middle aged men collect stamps, train numbers or beer mats.

`Ah, it's you, Doctor Cassidy,' said the traffic warden. `I thought I recognised the car.' He was a fat man, in his forties, and he had either put on weight since being measured or else the people providing the Gestapo style uniforms with which they equip traffic wardens these days had a wicked sense of humour. The buttons down the front of his tunic were straining to burst through the button holes. If there had been anyone around with whom to have a bet I'd have put money on the button which was second from the top escaping first. As I looked at him I couldn't help thinking that a few decades ago he would have been working in a circus or a travelling fair. Today, our politically correct world does not allow obese people to earn a living out of their greed. And, besides, with a quarter of the population fat enough to merit a place in any travelling fair the competition for employment would be fierce. It won't be long before anyone who isn't two stones overweight will be officially considered skeletal, dragged off to hospital and force-fed burgers and chips.

Apart from him obviously being a traffic warden I didn't have the foggiest idea who he was though from the way he greeted me he was obviously a patient of ours and possibly even one of mine. I have learned always to say hello to people who seem to know me even though I don't know who they are. Early in my career as a GP I popped into a branch of WHSmith, the newsagent, and met a patient who had been lying naked on my couch just a few hours earlier. I didn't have the foggiest idea who he was because I'd spent more time with my finger up his bum than I had spent looking at his face. My innocent explanation that I didn't recognise him with his clothes on drew very strange looks from other shoppers.

`Oh hello!' I said cheerily. `How are you? How are things? You're looking well! How is everyone?' I find that if I ask these generic questions quickly, without allowing time for a reply, I can usually get away without confessing my ignorance, and, more importantly, without having to listen to too many boring answers. `Am I OK for another few minutes?' I added.

`Are you visiting a patient?' he asked with all the pompous self-importance of a State employee in a uniform. `Is it an emergency?'

`In a terrible rush,' I said, evading the question.

`Just time to get a sandwich, though?' The smarty pants bastard had clearly seen me about to join the sandwich bar queue and wasn't about to make things easy for me.

I abandoned fancy evasion and opted for straightforward, old-fashioned deceit. `Diabetic emergency. Patient needs food urgently. Chocolate bar, gooey cake, that sort of thing.' Telling lies to traffic wardens doesn't seem like telling proper lies and these came out easily. When Robert Peel invented policemen the plan was that they would defend the people. These days our policemen and their ungodly spawn have risen far above such old-fashioned nonsenses and their professional aim is not to protect the people but to protect the law and, in my view, those are very different things. So I've grown up. When I was a kid I was taught to respect the police and always to tell them the truth. These days I trust them as much as I trust estate agents and income tax inspectors and I tell them the truth only if I think it's good for me or that there is a chance that they will find it out for themselves.

`Ah.' He nodded, as though understanding. `Can you spare a moment to scribble me a prescription before you rush off?'

`A prescription?'

`For my blood pressure tablets.'

`Oh right!' I smiled. I took out the prescription pad I always keep in my jacket pocket. My jackets are crammed so full with pens, bits of paper, medical records, prescription pads, sick note pads, unanswered letters and the paraphernalia I need to keep my pipe happy that they bulge. Enid is for ever telling me to put all my stuff into a bag instead of into my pockets. Last Christmas she bought me a blue leather man-bag with a shoulder strap and a little brass clasp and clearly expected me to use the bloody thing. I hate bags and I love pockets. The first thing I do when I buy a new jacket (which is about once every ten or fifteen years) is to make sure that it has enough pockets. Within days they will have lost their shape and within weeks they will be terminally baggy. There is no doubt that this does make me look rather scruffy but what is a pocket for if not to keep things in? A few months ago I stood in the street clutching an empty waxed paper cup and staring into space trying to remember what it was that I had forgotten to do when a fellow in a cheap suit dropped something into the cup as he walked past. I looked into the cup and saw seventy pence in metal lying in a quarter of an inch of cold coffee. I made the mistake of telling Enid about this. She immediately used this dubious piece of evidence to support her contention that I am scruffier than most tramps and all *Big Issue* sellers.

`Remind me which tablets you have.'

`They're blue and triangular. Very pretty little things they are. They look a bit like sweets'

`Angipax?' I suggested. Jock Cohen prescribes Angipax a good deal. It is very expensive and in my view one of the most dangerous drugs on the market. The list of side effects is longer than the tax code. But Jock likes prescribing new and complicated drugs, which he much prefers to simple, safe, effective products. He claims Angipax is the drug of choice for heart disease, high blood pressure, nervous problems and a whole host of unconnected problems and he can, when pressed, quote a whole host of research papers (all conducted by or for the drug company which sells it) which prove the efficacy of the damned stuff. He has a mutually profitable association with the international company which makes this universal panacea and invariably has lunch with the regional sales manager once a week.

`That's the one!'

I wrote out a prescription for thirty tablets. Rock stars and actors sign autographs in the street. I sign prescriptions. As I scribbled the traffic warden peered. `Don't suppose you could make it sixty, could you? Now that the price of prescriptions has gone up…'

I tore up the prescription and wrote out a replacement. `Remind me of your address?'

He told me and I managed to add `Chez Guevara', 27 Grimsdyke Avenue to the prescription without a blink. Thankfully, he then told me his name and how to spell it. I finished the prescription and handed it to him. He folded it neatly into four and placed it in one of his tunic pockets. I looked around, saw a bin attached to a nearby lamppost, and got rid of the torn up prescription.

`I'll just take this up the chemist,' he said. `Then I'll be back down here in twenty minutes. Will that be long enough for you to deal with the diabetic emergency?' He said it in such a way that I knew that he knew that there was no diabetic emergency.

`Oh, plenty of time.'

I waited until the loathsome traffic warden had strolled off in the direction of the nearest pharmacy, and then hurried back to join the queue in the sandwich shop. I comforted myself with the thought that Angipax invariably causes a variety of unpleasant side effects including impotence and persistent itching around the anal area.

`We don't have any more beef,' said the assistant, a sour faced woman who looked as though she'd spent her entire life testing lemons by sucking them. `Just tuna on white and ham and mustard on brown.'

`I'd better have one of each,' I said. `And a latte and a black coffee. All to take out.'

The woman grabbed two ready wrapped sandwiches and slammed them down on the counter in front of me as though she hated them. Her hands were filthy and her nails looked as though she'd spent the morning servicing a couple of coal lorries. Looking at her grime encrusted fingers and thumbs I couldn't help wondering who'd made the sandwiches. Hygiene in most eateries is appalling and it really isn't any wonder that half the nation is vomiting while the other half is sitting down wondering where all the diarrhoea comes from. The woman with the grubby hands shouted the coffee order to her accomplice, an equally cheerless looking harridan who was presumably stone deaf since she was standing no more than three feet away. She, after a good deal of banging and clattering and some mean-spirited abuse of an expensive looking piece of machinery, managed to fill two cardboard containers with something hot which I daringly took on trust to be coffee. I then had to wait in another small queue in order to pay for my purchases. A fat woman in front of me paid her bill and then, instead of simply slipping her change into her purse, proceeded to reorganise her apartment sized handbag. Why do women always spend so much time putting away their change in shops? I was tempted to nudge her along but the last time I tried that the nudgee accused me of accosting her and threatened to call the police so I contented myself with coughing and making loud comments about my sandwiches going stale and my coffees going cold. Eventually, the fat woman shuffled away and I paid a third assistant, who was every bit as much a harridan as the first two. This third harridan, whose malodorous body reminded me of the stench of rotting fish, accepted my ten pound note only after holding it up to the light, subjecting it to a rigorous pseudo-scientific test with a curious pen shaped device and crinkling it and pulling it so hard between her fingers that I thought it must surely tear. I wondered if the owner of the shop had a policy of only hiring menopausal women with attitude problems or if things had simply turned out that way by chance. Maybe the advertisements for new staff members made it clear that only women who had failed the Post Office charm school course would be considered for employment.

Outside it had started raining. I stood in the sandwich shop doorway for a moment and waited while a large, rabid looking hound bounded along while a fat, red-faced fellow in a pale blue jogging suit hurried along behind him. It wasn't difficult to decide which of the two was the alpha dog in that pack. I cheered myself up with the thought that although I would get wet the traffic warden would soon be soaked. It is a sad but true fact that these days my life is given purpose by simple thoughts such as this.

`How long have we been together?' demanded Enid when I arrived back at her bookshop with my spoils. This unexpected interrogation threw me for a moment but I was saved the embarrassment of having to produce an undoubtedly incorrect answer by the fact that the absence of any pause in what was clearly destined to be a monologue made it obvious that no answer was expected or required. `You know I don't like mustard. I can't stand mustard. I told you I don't like mustard. And I can't eat tuna. It brings me out in a rash and besides there's the dolphins to think about.'

`The dolphins? They don't do dolphin sandwiches do they?'

`The Japanese fishermen catch them when they catch the tuna.' Enid can sometimes give a good impression of being slow witted. `The dolphins get stuck in the nets and die,' she continued. `It's awful. The Japanese don't care. They're like the Spanish. They have no feelings for animals. I can't eat either of these. You have them.' She wrinkled up her nose in a theatrical expression of distaste and pushed the two sandwiches back across her counter as though they were mildly radioactive.

`I got the coffee,' I said trying to salvage at least one brownie point from this minor shopping disaster.

She took the lids off the two cardboard coffee containers.

`They're both black,' she said with an audible sigh. `I asked for a latte.'

`I don't seem to have done very well,' I said. How much would it have hurt the damned woman to drink a black coffee for a change?

She sighed again; putting more effort into it this time. My scary schoolteacher used to sigh a lot too. `I'll pop out when Simon gets back, if he ever does.' She looked up at the clock. I looked too. It was ten past two and there was still no sign of her assistant. He had probably discovered an obscure piece of employment legislation which entitled him to an extra ten minutes lunch break on days when it was raining.

`I'll have to go,' I said. `There's a traffic warden coming back in a few minutes.'

`Take all this with you,' said Enid, waving a hand at the sandwiches and the two coffees. `I don't want it filling up my rubbish bin. The council only allows me to fill one small bin a week. And that costs me a fortune. Do you have any idea how much I have to pay to have my rubbish taken away? You wouldn't believe the number of people who leave their rubbish in my shop. Some even have the nerve to ask if they can put their sweet wrappers and cigarette packets into my bin.'

`When shall I see you next?' I asked, more out of a bizarrely misplaced sense of duty than anything else.

`Are you off duty this weekend?'

`Yes.' And I realised as I said it that'd I'd rather spend the weekend on call than the weekend with Enid.

`That's a nice change. I was beginning to think that girl you hired did no work at all. Friday evening I thought we'd go and see the new film showing at the Regal. It's about a family of Polish miners. Apparently the director shot it in black and white to give it a grainy, gritty look. The man in the Guardian liked it very much and said it will probably win an award somewhere. I can't remember where, though not an Oscar I suspect. And on Saturday evening we've been invited to dinner with the Stokes.'

`We're not throwing our keyrings into the fruit bowl and swapping wives again, are we?'

`I wish you'd stop talking like that. I know you're joking but one of these days people will think you're serious. You can come back to my place afterwards. But you'll have to go home on Sunday morning because I have the drama society committee coming round for brunch.' Whenever Enid and I spent time together it was always at her place. When I first took the job with Jock, the bank and I went into partnership and bought a small detached house on the outskirts of the town. To start with I hired a woman to come in and do cleaning, ironing and cooking for me and an old bloke to cut the grass and dig out some of the weeds. But after about five years the woman decided to retire and I decided not to replace her. To be honest I'd become something of a loner and I found it uncomfortable to have a stranger in the house. The advent of the mobile telephone enabled me to eat out. I cleaned the house whenever the dust became noticeable and I sent my shirts to a local laundry which, to my surprise, turned out to be not much more expensive than having a woman come in and iron them. When, a few years later, the gardener decided to emigrate to Spain I didn't replace him either. The lawn at the front of my house is cut by a neighbour who does it because he says he can't bear to see it looking unkempt. If it pleases him I see no reason to stop him. His own house has been for sale for seven years (a process encouraged, I believe, by the bank, the rightful owners) and I suspect he fears that my dandelions could cause terminal dismay and seizure of the wallet among potential buyers. My other neighbours all believe that I am rather odd and perhaps a little unhinged and I do nothing whatsoever to disappoint them. When leaving the house I occasionally sing or recite poetry. The grass at the back of the house is now about three feet tall. I keep hoping that the back garden will somehow turn itself into a wild flower meadow but unfortunately not even the dandelions seem able to survive in a thicket of hogweed, ground elder and a particular energetic variety of bramble which grows rapidly but never seems to produce any fruit. Occasionally, I get rid of some of the thickest of the scrub by having a bonfire. I usually have these on warm summer days when the neighbours are holding barbecues for their posh friends. I always keep a boxful of carpet remnants and white polystyrene packing material to give my fires added zest. Enid came to my house once but steadfastly refused to return. She complained that the place reeks of old books and stale pipe smoke. I sympathised with her loathing of the stale pipe smoke but I thought it worrying that a bookshop owner should dislike the smell of old books. She complains about my car too. She once told me that it looks as if it has never been cleaned. I told her that in this case looks were not deceiving. When she moaned a bit more I told her that I kept the car dirty as a road safety measure. `Cars that shine can dazzle other motorists,' I explained. `Having a dirty car helps reduce road accidents.' I'm pretty sure she didn't know whether or not I was being serious.

I loathe the Stokes. He does something indefinably tedious for the Regional Health Authority. Every time we meet he tells me about his exercise programme. And when he tells me how many beats a minute he can get out of his heart I tell him that making the human heart work faster in an attempt to make it fitter and stronger is like driving a car faster and hoping that it will, as a result, last longer. I don't really believe this, of course, but it annoys him and so I repeat it as convincingly as I can. His wife works as an accountant for the council and is a raging feminist. I don't have anything against feminists as a breed (the ones who shave their legs can sometimes be quite cute) but I'll swear Ms April Stoke waxes her moustache. (Her maiden name was Spring and her parents clearly had a bizarre sense of humour. She has two sisters called March and May. May Spring married a boy called Geoffrey Summer and presumably regarded her marriage as some sort of promotion.)

The Stokes, April and her husband Rodney, are without a shadow of a doubt the most boring people I've ever met although I confess that it has never been my misfortune to meet that ageing pop bimbo Simon Cowell, the self-appointed king and queen of nerdsville. I hate all dinner parties but the ones Chez Stokes are the most tedious I've ever attended. (Their cottage is called Chez Stokes. It was once quite a pretty looking little residence but when the roof needed re-thatching they had it covered in asbestos tiles and then rented out the space to a solar panel company. The local `green energy' lobby having clearly overruled, or taken precedence over, the local `preserve our outstandingly beautiful buildings' lobby the result was that the Stokes got cheap electricity at the price of turning a traditional English cottage into a fairground attraction.)

The Stokes are the sort of people who have learned great chunks of Arthur Rimbaud's scribbling and who quote it at the drop of a hat. They believe that pipe-smoking Jean Paul Sartre was the greatest philosopher who ever tossed a cobble stone and they claim to enjoy the films of Cocteau and Godard. They are, in short, the sort of blinkered idiots who would have heaped unending praise on the Emperor's new clothes. The Stokes duo always serves prawn cocktails as a starter with chicken as the main course, followed by a slice of ice cream cake served straight from the freezer. Rodney, who thinks of himself as a wine buff, serves Retsina, a red wine from Greece which is probably brewed in metal tanks. They go there on holiday every year and bring back several bottles (doubtless tightly wrapped among her one piece bathing suits with attached little skirts designed to disguise the size of her bum and his tartan patterned Bermuda shorts), and praise it extravagantly even though the stuff was undrinkable before it had to travel. If it now has a use at all then that must include either dirty ovens or machine parts. Mr Stoke once spilt a little on his shirt and seemed startled when it burnt a neat hole in the material. `Oh all red wine does that,' said Ms Stoke with her usual air of quiet and determined certainty. When I dine with them I always ask for water and in sympathetic voices they always ask if I am a recovering alcoholic. When I tell them that I am not they ignore my protestation, as they invariably ignore everything else I say, and ask me if it makes me feel uncomfortable if they drink in my presence. `You must think us very wicked,' says Ms Stoke with admirable predictability.

Every meal with them is like a dull wedding reception. When we have dinner with them I always eat beforehand so that I can pick and choose from the predictable culinary horrors Ms Stoke serves up. If you dropped the chicken it would bounce.

I wasn't too keen on Enid's planned Friday evening entertainment either. I rarely watch films recommended by critics. They never seem to know anything of (or take any account of) the audiences for which the film was made. The same idiot critic reviews films made for horror addicts and cowboy film aficionados. How can one person be a sound judge of musicals, romantic comedies and cartoons for children? As far as I'm aware literary editors don't expect the same reviewers to report on modern poetry, environmental concerns and the latest story about Bertie the Bumptious Bunnie. And the thought of spending an evening watching a film praised by a critic working for *The Guardian* made me nauseous. If they gave out awards for sanctimoniousness *The Guardian* would undoubtedly sweep the board. But I consoled myself with the thought that it could have been worse; it could have been a night at the ballet. For a large, cumbersome woman with bad feet Enid is surprisingly enthusiastic about ballet. I've never seen the attraction in watching tiny girls wearing horizontal skirts cavorting with men who appear to have a pound and a half of mixed fruit stuffed down the front of their tights. We once had a row about it. I said I didn't understand why they didn't employ taller dancers so that the girls didn't have to wander round all the time on tip toes. Enid was furious at this mild attempt at a joke. She doesn't like jokes very much at all.

We once spent an evening with two social worker friends of hers. They were both enthusiastic members of the Amateur Dramatic society. They were also tedious would-be revolutionaries. Halfway through the evening I told them that all revolutionaries crave normality. `Che Guevera was a huge fan of a radio series called Mrs Dale's Diary,' I told them. `He used to have the programmes recorded on seven inch reels of tape by a friend at the Russian Embassy in London and then have the tapes flown out to him every week in the diplomatic bag. And Lenin, of course, would never go to bed without a copy of one of P.G.Wodehouse's school stories on his bedside table.' The two ersatz revolutionaries were astonished by these revelations but apparently delighted that I had shared them. The one with the biggest beard said that he was going to put the information in his blog and his next twitter message so that it could be shared with all the comrades around the world.

`I was amazed by what you had to say about Che and Lenin,' said Enid in the car afterwards. `I didn't know any of that. Where did you read these things?' I looked at her and raised an eyebrow. `Don't tell me you made it all up!' she said, horrified.

`OK.' I said.

`What do you mean?'

`I mean, OK I won't tell you I made it all up.'

Enid was furious and appalled and when we arrived at her home she didn't even invite me in for coffee. The small stock of contraceptives in her bedside drawer remained untouched that night and I should, I suppose, have learned that humour was not destined to play a large part in our relationship.

`And call in at the chemist and buy another pack of thingies if you want to do any you know what afterwards,' said Enid as I left the shop. `I checked the bedside cabinet and we're out.' Enid never found it easy to talk about sexual matters and invariably managed to work her way around the straightforward. Our sex life had never risen above or beyond a strictly by numbers regime that even a Scottish Presbyterian might have found unimaginative. And whatever we do we always do it in the dark. I had never seen Enid without clothes and her nighties, which she has never removed in my presence, are all knee length and doubtless sensible enough to be approved by the Liberal

Democrats. She wears them over a bulletproof black corselette which, as far as I am aware, she never removes. She probably bathes in the damned thing as protection against peeping window cleaners. She once told me that she wore it because when her husband was dying she had sworn that she would always wear black in his memory. `But I thought something out of sight would be a more subtle way to show respect.'

`The last time I bought the thingies the girl said they do them in different flavours now. Do you fancy strawberry for a change? Or you could have blackcurrant.'

Enid bent her head forward and looked at me over her glasses. She didn't say anything but just looked at me and in a way that made me feel about six years old.

I decided there and then not to bother buying a pack of thingies. Experience told me that the effort of finding a chemist where I'm not known and where the girl behind the counter wouldn't almost die giggling at the sight of the doctor buying rubber johnnies was more than the result could possibly be worth. Without the condom I would not be expected to perform because Enid lived in a world where eyes must be kept tightly shut at all times, nighties pulled up only just as far as is strictly necessary and penises covered up for the same reason that the Victorians dressed their piano legs in little frocks. Most people assume that condoms are used to prevent pregnancy or the spread of infection. Enid's view is that an undressed penis is, quite simply, indecent and as much in need of covering up as a Victorian piano leg.

After Enid had ignored my merry quip about the strawberry flavoured condoms (known, in her parallel world only as `thingies') I packed the sandwiches and coffees back into the small paper bag in which the shop assistant had first placed them, waved goodbye and left. I had for some time been searching for a way to end a relationship which seemed to have about as much point to it as a water bed in a nunnery and was beginning to get the happy feeling that maybe I wasn't going to get the other half of the Jane Austen collection after all.

Outside, on my way back to my car, I handed the bag of food to a particularly seedy looking tramp in a shop doorway. He stank and clearly hadn't bathed for at least a decade. He looked at me and it most suspiciously.

`What is it?' he demanded as he reluctantly took the bag from me. I told him there was one tuna sandwich and one beef.

`The beef hasn't got mustard on has it?' I confessed it had. `I won't eat mustard,' he said. `Can't abide the stuff. And I'm not terribly keen on tuna. Haven't you got any money you can give me?' As I looked at him I realised he was much younger than I'd originally thought. He probably wasn't more than 35 or so.

I hurried away before the damned tramp could hand me back the unwanted sandwiches and then loudly cursed a heather touting gypsy who stopped me, tried to insert a sprig of tinfoil wrapped heather up my nose and accompanied the action with the stony faced threat of what would happen to me if I failed to fill her palm with something better than silver. In my annoyance I managed to curse with such venom that the wretched witch turned, crossed herself and darted away as though pursued by the hounds of hell.

I then drove to the King's Head where there is a decent sized car park and no traffic wardens. Trying to avoid one pothole I hit another and the car's damned warning lights all came on as a result. Modern BMWs are crammed from bumper to bumper with gizmos and toys I never use and which cause me nothing but confusion (I've had the car for two years and still haven't found out how to switch on the fog lights) but the system in my car seems so sensitive that if I drive over a sleeping policeman, or into a shallow pothole, the electronics have some sort of major fit and about fifty different warning lights come on. Since most roads now have more potholes than tarmacadam this is a constant problem. I hate all these silly warning lights. I never know what they mean. Some German idiot who fancies himself an expert in hieroglyphics has created a whole range of incomprehensible symbols. And there even seems to be a warning sign which comes on occasionally to tell me that nothing is wrong. The first time I saw that one light up on the dashboard I stopped and spent twenty minutes thumbing through the darned handbook in order to find out what it meant.

I ignored the warning lights, parked the car and tottered into the pub where I was greeted by a tall, pencil thin barman who was either dressed to enter a fancy dress competition or the owner of a peculiar taste in clothing. He wore a pink evening dress shirt, bullfighter tight trousers and brown cowboy boots.

`Would you like to try our tripe pie?' he asked, when I asked what bar food they had to offer.

`No thanks,' I replied. `I hate tripe. I can't imagine how awful it must be in a pie.'

`We serve it with fresh radishes and onion sauce.'

`No thanks. Do you have anything with chips?'

`The chef won't do chips. He says they're too common. Why don't you try the tripe pie? You might like it. It's on special today.'

`I hate tripe. Have you tried the tripe pie?'

He shuddered. `I tried it once,' he admitted.

`Did you like it?'

`No. It was awful.'

I had one pint of flat beer and a pork pie. The pork pie tasted a little stale but it contained no tripe and as far as I am aware no dolphins had died in its preparation. While I ate I deleted a string of annoying texts sent to me by Vodafone. I have been trying to stop them doing this since I bought the damned phone but they take no notice. I then smoked my pipe and read the paper for ten minutes. I learned that we had once more declared war on a country which hadn't done anything to threaten us and which will, no doubt, prove to be packed to the borders with skilled guerrilla fighters who will gradually learn to hate us. I don't know why we don't declare war on Germany again. We've always done well against them. And I read about a politician who claimed to be in close contact with aliens from another planet. The journalist who had written the story had forgotten to say which party the politician represented but I assumed that he was either a Liberal Democrat or a member of the Monster Raving Loony Party. Once I'd finished reading all this exciting news I left the pub, finished the home visits and returning to the Jock Cohen Health Centre just as patients with appointments for the evening surgery were arriving. Patients come early these days so that they can pick out the best magazines and the most comfortable chairs in the waiting room.

I had to walk past the waiting room to get to the staircase to my consulting room and, as I looked in, it occurred to me that many of the people sitting there were such regular visitors that the Jack Cohen Health Centre probably ought to be their registered addresses. None of the people I saw was a patient of mine and I had no idea whom they saw or why they came to the surgery so often. Maybe they called in simply to read Deidre's old copies of *Country Life, Horse and Hound* and *Dressing Up And Killing Animals For Fun Weekly.* Because she and her husband live with their daughters in a large house, and rent a field for a pony, Deidre regards herself as "landed gentry". The house was designed by a prize winning architect and is, therefore, ugly, pretentious and poorly designed for human habitation. I once flicked through one of her discarded copies of *Country Life* and found that half a dozen of the advertisements for country mansions and stately homes had little comments written across the corners. There were notes like: `This one's worth a look'. `Probably not enough land but worth getting the brochure'.

Half a dozen uncontrolled, and probably uncontrollable, children were racing around throwing things at one another and terrorising the pensioners. Though they looked to me to be nothing more than badly behaved little bastards, straight out of *Lord of the Flies,* I had no doubt that they had all been diagnosed as being `hyperactive' or `autistic'. These days every parent believes that their new child is above average, a genius, the next Shakespeare or Milton, or maybe, cross your fingers and wish hard, even the next Jordan or Rooney. If the child hasn't been on the cover of *Hello!* magazine, or had a trial for Manchester United by the age of two, there must be some clinical explanation that can be treated with expensive drugs. Side effects don't matter. Everyone knows that a drug can't be doing any good unless it produces plenty of nasty side effects. A few of the poor little sods had probably been labelled as suffering from attention deficit disease or Asperger's syndrome; the modern, universal excuses for the child who is a constant disappointment to ambitious parents who are discontented with their lot in the same way that the rest of us feel discontented when we pull a Christmas cracker and find ourselves clutching a plastic shoe horn, an ugly egg cup or nail clippers. Around the room, broken and grey-faced mothers sat on Jock's hard chairs and watched but made no attempt to control their demonic, under-achieving offspring. They had doubtless been told that their badly behaved children were ill and not responsible for their exhibitionistic hooliganism. The undeniable clinical truth is that most of the little bastards simply needed a good thumping rather than pills and sympathy.

These days most parents seem simply unable to control the results of their couplings. I have long thought that the Government should introduce legislation allowing parents to have their children to be put down if their behaviour is consistently unacceptable. Maybe the legislation could be designed to give all parents the opportunity to opt for the euthanasia option on each child's 5th, 10th and 15th birthdays. `Wayne's not going to improve dear, is he?' `No, I'm afraid he isn't. It's time to put us out of his misery. I'll take him along to the *Harold Shipman Euthanasia Centre* on Tuesday.'

Chapter 6

The Red Lion used to be a proper pub; a serious drinking establishment where serious drinkers met to consume significant quantities of beer without wasting time or energy on conversation or laughter. It wasn't a place where spirits were drunk or raised. There was a dart board but no one ever played darts (and not just because there were no darts). There was a cribbage board, some greasy playing cards and a few dead match sticks on one windowsill and a dying rubber plant on the other. No one took any interest in these items. The regulars sat around on uncomfortable, wooden chairs and rarely spoke to one another, though they muttered to themselves from time to time. The barman was taciturn and irredeemably irritable. The only heat came from a two bar electric fire which was turned on from the beginning of November to the end of March and anyone who felt hungry ate crisps or pork scratchings and would have been confused if the crisps had been anything other than salt and vinegar. But that was a few years ago, when I first took a job with Jock Cohen. In those now apparently far off days there were standards and there was some consistency in the world; enough, at least, for the unexpected to be a source of occasional joy.

Today, the bar staff at the Red Lion serve cocktails and spritzers and the only beer they sell comes in bottles and is called lager. During the daytime loudspeakers pump out stuff that is probably described as music by the people who make it, if not by those who sell it. It costs a small fortune to get even mildly inebriated there. At night local bands and comedians perform on a small stage at one end of the pub while evening diners select their choices from a blackboard which lists two dozen starters, meals and puddings. All of these culinary selections arrive at the pub ready-made, cocooned in plastic wrappers and are stored in the freezer until required. The chef's job is to pick out the items that have been ordered, put them into the microwave, snip the plastic and pour the contents onto a plate. Sometimes the chef, who wears a white smock and a white hat but whose entire training consisted of a twenty minute long introductory talk from the pub manager, has to snip the plastic, or use a fork to stab holes in it, before putting the chosen item into the microwave. The instructions are always written on the packets.

The writing on the blackboard appears to be in chalk and phrases such as `Chef's Special' and `Dish of the Day' suggest that these selected items are chosen according to the seasons or the chef's whims. In reality, however, the 170 pubs in the chain all have the same blackboards on their walls and the identical menus are printed on the boards at a factory on an industrial estate in Northampton. The `Dish of the Day' is the dish of every day.

I was late finishing my surgery that evening. This was partly because there had been a small flood of panicking patients, all inspired to seek help and drug therapy by an advertising campaign paid for by the manufacturer of one of the biggest asthma drug remedies, but mainly because a patient who had been stung by a bee while sitting in the local park demanded that I take photographs and full written notes. She told me that she intended to sue the town council for having bees in the park. When I pointed out that bees tend to gather where there are flowers she said she would sue the council for planting the flowers. I suspect that, if she goes ahead, the council's insurers may well insist that the park's managers do away with all the flowerbeds in an effort to avoid any future problems. I do not envy the next generation, or, if there is one, the generation after that.

The pub was crowded when I finally arrived and it took me several minutes to spot Molly and quite a few minutes more to force my way through the crowd to reach her. Fortunately, she had managed to reserve a small table for two. Larry's on in two minutes,' she told me. She looked excited. I asked if I had time to get to the bar to buy drinks but she said not. It seemed odd to sit in a pub without a drink in front of me.

Larry was good and the crowd enjoyed his act. Two of the bar staff had to lift his wheelchair onto the platform, turn him to face the audience and hand him a microphone. The two youths who did the lifting both wore those three quarter length trousers which were much in fashion during the 1980's but which went out of fashion as soon as the people wearing them sobered up, caught sight of themselves in mirrors and realised how daft they looked.

`I've always wanted to be a stand-up comedian,' began Larry. `If I could tell jokes I'd be half way there. Actually, I don't really need this wheelchair. I only use it so that people who don't like the jokes won't throw things. If I can't get laughs, I'll accept pity. You're not sure whether it's OK to laugh or not are you?'

He was right. The part of his audience that was listening to him wasn't laughing. Molly reached across the table and held my hand. `I hope he's going to be OK.'

`A friend of mine heard that the best way to deal with stress is to make sure you finish everything you've started. So he went home, opened his drinks cabinet and spent the evening emptying half a bottle of whisky, two thirds of a bottle of sherry, a quarter of a bottle of rum and two thirds of a bottle of vodka.'

This produced a few polite chuckles.

Larry grabbed the arms of his wheelchair and shook them. `You're not sure whether or not I need this chair, are you? You're wondering if it's just a prop.' He paused and looked around. `Well, you'll never know the truth unless the building catches fire.'

That gag enabled Larry to break-through the audience's reserve and embarrassment and from then on, although it would have been an exaggeration to say that he held them in the palm of his hand the risk of his being stoned to death was considerably reduced. The rest of his gig went surprisingly well.

Afterwards, the three of us went to an Italian restaurant to celebrate Larry's success. The waiter was a patient of Molly's. He gave us a quiet table and a complimentary bottle of Chianti and left the Parmesan cheese dispenser on our table which was pretty good of him because I always feel peeved when they take it away and won't bring it back. When Molly and I had finished congratulating Larry, I reminded her that she had something to tell me.

`I'm going to be on television,' she told me. `A chap Larry knows works as a researcher for Newsnight. Larry gave him a copy of my article in the *British Clinical Journal* and he spoke to the editor. They've arranged for me to be interviewed on tomorrow night's programme.'

`You're obviously going to be talking about vaccination.'

`Yes. They think that the viewers will be interested to hear an alternative view from a practising family doctor.'

`Have you told Jock?'

`Of course not! He wouldn't approve.'

`I think you could be right about that.' Jock was unlikely to approve of anything which didn't result in money appearing in his bank account.

`It's a tremendous opportunity to put the record straight,' said Larry. He wore jeans, a plain white T-shirt and one of those huge wristwatches which can also function as a stopwatch and which have loads of little buttons enabling the wearer to measure lap times and the distance to the moon. He was also wearing quite a lot of stage make up. `It's something we both feel very strongly about. My sister is vaccine damaged. She had a bad reaction to the whooping cough vaccination when she was a baby.'

`I'm sorry,' I said. `I didn't know.' I suspected that the existence of this hitherto unknown relative probably explained Molly's interest in vaccination. In my experience patients and their relatives often have more knowledge of, and more trenchant opinions about, the disease they know best than even the most experienced of specialists. And relatives whose loved ones have been damaged by medicine always know a good deal about what went wrong. Who can possibly blame them? We would doubtless all be the same.

`The doctors all deny that her damage had anything to do with the vaccine,' said Larry `And though the Government gave my parents some compensation they made them sign documents promising not to tell anyone about it.'

`They'll have someone in the studio to say you're talking rubbish,' I warned Molly. `A specialist in infectious diseases or a medical officer from the Department of Health. They won't be gentle with you.'

`That's OK,' said Molly. `I've done a lot of reading. I can look after myself. Honestly.'

`All ideas which threaten the establishment are regarded as lunatic or even criminal,' said Larry. `And original thinkers have always been regarded as a threat to society. Look at what society did to Cobbett, Paine, Tyler, Wilkes and Lilburne.' I could vaguely remember reading about the first four but I was struggling with Lilburne. I didn't like to ask. `All great ideas,' he continued, `go through the same three stages. First they are ridiculed. Those who oppose the idea deny that it is relevant, true or of significance. A lot of sneering goes on. Second, there is discrimination against those who promote the idea. They are marginalised. And then, in the third stage, the idea is accepted and the people who opposed it most vociferously will be the ones who claim it as their idea. The anti-vaccination movement is still early on in the first stage.' He looked at me to check that I was still listening. I nodded to show that I was. I was thinking that he was right. Many great doctors were ridiculed because they questioned the accepted way of doing things. The Austrian physician Semmelweiss went mad because other doctors wouldn't listen when he argued that puerperal fever was caused by doctors and medical students not washing their hands. Dr John Snow, the doctor who took the handle off the Broad Street pump and `cured' an outbreak of cholera in London, was ridiculed. Later on in his career he was attacked when he introduced anaesthesia. On the other hand there have, over the years, been establishment doctors with some fairly strange ideas. A notable 16th century physician called Dr William Butler once cured a patient of the ague by throwing him into the Thames. And when faced with a dead parson he had a cow slit open and then put the vicar into the dead cow's belly. The parson came back to life. No one had a bad word to say about Dr Butler.

`We're going to do some rehearsing,' continued Larry who was still talking. I hoped I hadn't missed too much. `I'll be the interviewer, trying to catch Molly out. We'll do it in the car going down there after surgery tomorrow evening.'

`These are tough professionals,' I reminded them both. I turned to Molly. `Have you ever been on television before?'

`Once. When I was at medical school. We filled the fountains in the city centre with detergent and I was interviewed by the local station. They filmed me dancing around in the bubbles. I seem to remember that I was dressed as a Womble so I don't think anyone recognised me.'

`Not the ideal preparation,' I said drily.

`The Womble suit got soaked,' said Molly, remembering the moment. She giggled. I'd never heard her giggle before. `The Dean of the medical school gave us all a stern talking to because they had to flush out the fountains for two days to get rid of all the detergent. He wasn't a bad bloke though. The police wanted to arrest us but he talked them out of it.'

`It'll be fine,' said Larry, reassuring me. `She knows her stuff.'

`I need you to do something for me,' said Molly.

`OK. If I can I will.'

`Will you swap duties and cover me for tomorrow night? Do the emergency calls? We'll have to drive to London and I won't be back until two or three in the morning.'

`Of course I will,' I said.

It may have been the worst decision of my life. I should have said `No'. I would give everything I have to have said `No' and made it impossible for Molly to appear on that damned programme. Every decision has consequences. Every decision, even the ones which involve doing nothing, involves a risk and a financial, emotional or spiritual cost. Sometimes the cost of a decision is so great that we have to live with regret. Would things have really been different if I'd said `No.' and Molly hadn't appeared on that programme?

I'll never know.

Chapter 7

I was called out to visit a patient with an emergency skin rash when Newsnight was due to start but I managed to get back home just minutes after the programme had begun. When one of the presenters listed the forthcoming interviews I was pleased to see that I hadn't missed Molly's appearance. In the old days I would have recorded the programme on my video recorder but since I had to buy a DVD player I've been quite unable to work out how to record anything.

I turned the volume up loud so that I wouldn't miss the start of her screen debut and tottered into the kitchen to make myself a marmalade sandwich. The sandwich made, and the inevitable whisky poured, I settled down and waited for Molly to appear on my screen.

The editor or the producer or whoever arranges these things had put Molly up against a doctor representing the most pompous, cobweb ridden corner of the medical establishment. He was one of those bumptious, self-satisfied fellows who had spent most of life sitting safely behind a desk and shuffling pieces of paper from his in-tray to his out-tray. He probably hadn't seen a patient since antibiotics were first introduced. He had one of those horrible little toothbrush moustaches which, for obvious reasons, largely went out of fashion during the 1940's, and was wearing a smart pinstripe suit enlivened with a blue shirt and a club tie. He was unctuous and smug and before he had even opened his mouth I'd guessed that he would turn out to be hideously patronising.

The interviewer, an unpleasant woman called Dawn Brakes, who was new to the programme and keen to establish a reputation as an assassin, began with Molly.

I was delighted to see that our young trainee had scrubbed up nicely for the programme. She was wearing a two piece grey suit, a white blouse with a demur neckline and a string of pearls. I couldn't believe the string of pearls. Heaven knows where they came from. She'd done something fancy to her hair and she was wearing make-up. I'd never seen her wearing make-up before.

Right from the start the interviewer made it clear that she wasn't going to hold back – and nor was she going to disguise her partisanship. This, of course, was no surprise. BBC interviewers, fascist bastards to the last cell, and representing the Government's most efficient propaganda machine, always fall over themselves in their enthusiastic attempts to demonise anyone who dares to threaten the sanctity of any part of the fascist, EU dominated establishment which keeps them neatly wrapped in Italian suits and German sports cars. They aren't bright enough, and don't know enough history, to realise that when everybody thinks alike, everybody is likely to be wrong. Samuel Smiles, the Victorian author, wrote that the function of government is to be restrictive and negative, rather than positive and active. He certainly had that right.

`We have with us in the studio tonight a controversial young apprentice doctor who believes that vaccines are more dangerous than the medical profession admits.' The presenter shuffled in her seat as though even making the introduction made her feel uncomfortable. `Moreover, she claims that both the medical establishment and the Department of Health have misled the public about the safety and efficacy of vaccines. In the past, renegade doctors who have questioned the official line on vaccination have rightly been accused of endangering the health of millions by discouraging patients from accepting official medical advice on vaccination programmes. It is generally agreed by experts that when doctors question the validity of vaccination programmes they imperil the safety of millions – particularly the most vulnerable members of our society, small children and the elderly. Miss Tranter, who is still training to be a GP, has claimed that her more experienced professional colleagues are all wrong in their belief that vaccination plays an important part in preventing infectious disease. The BBC does not usually pander to publicity seeking individuals but in this case we believe that this doctor's bizarre views should be investigated fully and in public. We will be making a transcript of this interview available to the General Medical Council in the hope that the medical profession's legal watchdog will take whatever action it deems necessary.'

I found this more than slightly offensive. The truth, too often an alien commodity as far as our State broadcaster is concerned, is that there are no experts in medicine. There are people who call themselves experts and who may even be regarded by those around them as experts, but there are no real experts because medicine is a constantly changing, ever fluid world and today's knowledge can, all too quickly, become tomorrow's embarrassing memory.

Ms Brakes then turned to her other guest and gave him one of her best smiles. It was done rather reluctantly, as though she had a limited supply and had to eke them out over her life-time, but it was without doubt a smile.

`To defend the Government's vaccination programme we are delighted to welcome Professor Cedric Hailsham, a member of the Department of Health's advisory committee on vaccination programmes, advisory editor to several eminent journals and a senior faculty member at Oxford University. Dr Hailsham has written several widely respected papers on the value of vaccination programmes and is a regular broadcaster.'

Hailsham, who had started off looking as blank and as uninteresting as a Government sponsored website managed a small smile of false modesty which made him look as smug as a standard issue Liberal Democrat. I knew before he spoke that he would turn out to be a pompous windbag, as full of sense as a pound and a half of elephant flatus.

The interviewer turned to Molly. This time there was definitely no smile. `Miss Tranter, you claim that vaccinations are dangerous and ineffective. But you don't have any scientific evidence to support your claim, do you?'

Molly, who looked startled by the interviewer's monologue and, I have no doubt, by the threat to involve the General Medical Council, paused for a moment before answering. I could feel myself willing her to defend herself with vigour. I had never had much time for Molly's dissent, putting it down to the natural and healthy desire of a young person to kick against the established way of doing things, but I liked her, respected her enthusiasm and didn't like to see her being patronised and marginalised by a hired mouthpiece for the medical establishment. I had a sneaky feeling that the ordinary viewer might also find the interviewer's deliberately intimidating approach a trifle clumsy and crude.

`I'm afraid I do,' said Molly quietly. `There is plenty of evidence to show that vaccines are crude, unreliable and dangerous. They can, and do, cause brain damage and they kill people – particularly children. I don't honestly see why anyone should be surprised by this. If you inject potentially toxic substances into people then it shouldn't be much of a surprise when things go wrong. The brain, particularly that of a baby or young child is…'

`I really cannot allow this nonsense to continue,' said Dr Hailsham, interrupting. `Miss Tranter is throwing around all sorts of unsubstantiated accusations which will terrify viewers. How, for example, can she possibly justify describing vaccines as `potentially toxic'? That's the sort of absurd rhetoric one expects from the sort of lunatics who oppose all medical progress. It certainly isn't the sort of language one expects from someone who wants to be a doctor.' He then produced a whole pile of statistics which didn't seem to prove anything at all other than that he filled his head with a lot of statistics. The lies they tell, the truths they hide. As politicians and drug companies know only too well you can prove anything you like with statistics. I remember reading somewhere that 500,000 walkers die every year in England and Wales. This makes walking seem a pretty dangerous activity until you realise that the figure 500,000 covers all the deaths in those countries and the fact that they were all walkers is quite irrelevant.

`What do you say to that?' demanded the interviewer, turning to Molly. `How can you defend your claim that vaccines are `potentially toxic'?'

`First, can I say that I am a doctor already,' said Molly. `I am qualified and registered and licensed and I work as a GP.'

`You are a trainee GP are you not?' said the interviewer.

`A trainee GP,' agreed Molly. `But I see patients, I prescribe, I perform small operations, I go out on night calls…'

`Night calls?' said Dr Hailsham, with a snort. `Really?' He looked straight at the camera and raised an eyebrow. I could understand his disbelief. These days most general practitioners work shorter hours than librarians. And most of the time they do spend working is spent dealing with paperwork and buttering up bureaucrats. Very few family doctors are prepared to climb out of their easy chairs, or out of their warm beds, to attend sick patients.

`Yes,' said Molly firmly. `Our practice is one of the few in the country which still provides 24 hour cover for patients. But to get back to your question, I would like to point out that vaccines can and do cause a whole range of unpleasant and dangerous side effects. They can cause headaches, allergy reactions, itching, dizziness, nausea, fever, gastro-intestinal disturbances…'

`Yes, yes…', interrupted Hailsham irritably and impatiently. `But these are relatively trivial complaints. We have to remember that vaccines have eradicated smallpox and pretty well done the same for polio and a whole range of other diseases which kill people.'

`It's not true that vaccines have eradicated smallpox,' replied Molly. `And you mentioned polio but the available evidence in America shows clearly that the incidence of poliomyelitis rose after the vaccine was introduced. In reality, as with other infectious diseases, the number of people with polio fell as cleaner water and better sanitation were introduced in the later decades of the 19th century. And we must remember that millions of people who were given polio jabs when they were children may well now be at serious risk of developing cancer.'

`That's a very serious allegation,' said Ms Brakes, who looked rather startled. `Can you substantiate that?'

`Certainly,' replied Molly. `When the first practical polio vaccine was prepared in the 1950's the scientists involved used kidney tissue taken from monkeys. Unfortunately, those scientists didn't realise that one of the viruses commonly found in monkey kidney cells can cause bone, brain, liver and lung cancer in humans. As a result something like 17 million people who were given the polio vaccine in the 1950's and 1960's are now at risk of developing cancer as a result of the vaccinations they were given. The American Government was warned of this danger in 1956 but the authorities closed down the laboratory of the doctor who had issued the warning. Moreover, even though the risk had been identified the British Government continued using the stocks of vaccine until they'd run out. Only when they'd used up all the dangerous vaccine stocks did they start screening new vaccine stocks for the virus.'

`Can the people who were given this vaccine be identified?' asked Ms Brakes.

`Unfortunately not,' said Molly. `The official records which would have identified those who had received the contaminated vaccine were all destroyed by the Department of Health in 1987. Naturally, this means that anyone who develops cancer and thinks it may be a result of the vaccine they were given cannot take legal action.'

`I think it's important to put all this into perspective,' said Hailsham who now looked distinctly uncomfortable and clearly wanted to be somewhere else. Miss Tranter is talking about one specific vaccine and the incident to which she refers is something which happened a long time ago. Today's vaccines are extremely safe and very effective; they may cause small problems in a small number of people but nothing serious.'

`Would you not describe brain damage and death as serious problems?' demanded Molly, who instead of looking upset by this steady barrage of interruptions seemed to be growing in strength, and seemed to have forgotten that she was in a television studio being watched by millions of people. Dr Hailsham, on the other hand, now looked distinctly uncomfortable and well aware of where he was and what was happening. Beads of sweat were visible on his forehead.

I realised that although Molly may have had a good deal to lose personally, in terms of credibility, her opponents stood to lose a great deal more. It occurred to me for the first time that vaccination programmes are a billion pound a year industry, with drug companies and doctors all making a good deal of money out of them. Rather naively I hadn't really thought about this before.

`That's absolute nonsense,' said Hailsham, now unconsciously rubbing his hands together as though trying to wash them clean. `Miss Tranter is inexperienced and ill- informed. There's no evidence that anyone has been brain damaged by a vaccination. That's pure scaremongering. Modern vaccines, such as the one we have used with such success in the battle against whooping cough, are extremely safe and effective and the companies which make them take great care, under Government supervision, to ensure that vaccines remain that way.' I suddenly realised that my telephone was ringing. I looked at the number which had appeared on the screen. It was Jock's number. I didn't take the call.

`The whooping cough vaccine, like most vaccines, is nowhere near as effective as the authorities say it is,' countered Molly. `Dr Hailsham claims that I am ill-informed but everything I've said is proveably true. And since he has questioned my credibility I think it's valid to point out that Dr Hailsham is, in addition to his other work, a paid consultant for several of the companies which make vaccines. Viewers might like to take that fact into consideration when judging his evidence. The plain fact is that the introduction of the vaccine has had no effect on the number of children dying from whooping cough. The incidence of whooping cough had fallen dramatically long before the vaccine was introduced in 1957. And if you're right about that particular vaccine being safe then perhaps you can explain why the British Government has paid out millions of pounds in damages to the parents of children who were brain damaged by the whooping cough vaccine?' Molly paused and then hammered the nail home hard. `As you are undoubtedly aware, the Government has secretly paid out huge damages to the parents of hundreds of children who have been seriously brain damaged by the whooping cough vaccine.'

The interviewer, suddenly aware that if she wasn't careful she would be going down with Dr Hailsham's ship, turned to the man representing the medical establishment. `Is that correct, Dr Hailsham?'

`Well, I'd have to check the figures. We may have paid out small sums in compensation to the parents of some children.' There was a pause while Hailsham thought of some way to minimise the significance of this admission. `But we've never admitted liability.'

`The Government paid money to the parents of over 700 children,' said Molly.

`That's quite possible.'

`And secretly paid out millions of pounds of taxpayers' money to protect the drug company making vaccines.'

`I couldn't possibly comment on the sums involved. These were all confidential arrangements.'

The presenter, who hadn't spoken for a while, looked petrified. `All this will be very frightening for parents,' she said. She looked as if she'd rather be somewhere else. A war zone in the Middle East, perhaps.

`The Government still won't warn parents properly,' continued Molly. `But it has known about the risks of the whooping cough vaccine for years. Way back in 1985 the Journal of the American Medical Association published a major report showing that the whooping cough vaccine was linked to the development of serious brain damage.'

Throughout this interview it had not escaped my notice that the BBC interviewer used what I imagined were a number of standard tricks to demonise Molly. When she spoke to the man from the Ministry she smiled and bent forwards slightly but when she spoke to Molly she looked stern and bent backwards. I had noticed in the past that

BBC staff, working after all for a State broadcaster, tend to do whatever they can to demonise anyone who dares even to think of threatening the establishment but I had never before quite appreciated how unfair and dangerous a practice this is. It occurred to me, for the first time, that the BBC never allows balanced debate when the establishment has taken a specific policy line. And so viewers never have a chance to see protagonists debating the merits, or demerits, of issues such as global warming or genetic engineering. The establishment view prevails because the broadcasters make sure that no other view is aired. The BBC doesn't have much sympathy with Mark Twain's view that: `whenever you find yourself on the side of the majority it is time to reform.'

`I'm sure this debate will continue,' said Ms Brakes. `But, Miss Tranter, I'm sure that not even you will argue that there is any link between vaccination and the development of autism. Do you at least agree with the medical profession that that particular bogey has now been laid to rest?' I couldn't help noticing that Ms Brakes had now managed to isolate Molly completely from the entire medical profession.

`No I certainly don't,' said Molly, much to my surprise and rather more to the surprise of the interviewer. `Some of the existing evidence for the link is admittedly circumstantial. For example, is it significant that the incidence of autism has rocketed as the number of vaccinations being given has also risen? I certainly think it is worth noting that in America a group of paediatricians who between them have 30,000 child patients, and who all refuse to give vaccinations, don't have any patients with autism. Is this significant? I certainly think it is something worth investigating.'

`I'm afraid we're running out of time,' said Ms Brakes suddenly. She had clearly received instructions in her earpiece from someone in authority. `We have to cut this item short because we've received breaking news on an important story. '

`Just one final thing about autism,' said Molly quickly. `I know that our Government still insists that there is no link between vaccines and autism but then they would, wouldn't they? They're pushing vaccines and they are legally liable. But other Governments have come to different conclusions. For example, the American Government has accepted that vaccines can cause autism. The US Health Department's National Vaccine Injury Compensation Programme has admitted that childhood vaccines kill and seriously injure 2,500 to 3,000 previously healthy children each year in America. The parents of those children receive official payouts totalling around £75 million a year in damages. And parents of children diagnosed as suffering from `autism' receive some of that money.'

`And that really is all we have time for,' said Ms Brakes who looked as if she was about to explode. She thanked Molly and the unfortunate Dr Hailsham, who now looked as if he had been repeatedly run over by a steam roller, and handed over to one of her colleagues who introduced an item dealing with a three day old rumour that a Member of Parliament was suspected of having an affair with one of his researchers.

The minute Molly disappeared from my television screen the telephone rang again. It was Jock.

`Have you been watching?'

I was tempted to tease him by pretending that I didn't know what he was talking about. But Jock didn't sound in a mood for teasing. I said I had. `She did brilliantly, didn't she?'

`You think she did brilliantly? It was a disaster. It was an absolute disgrace. We're going to have to get rid of her. We'll be the laughing stock of the profession. I've already had three telephone calls about her.'

`From your drug company pals?'

`One was,' admitted Jock defensively. `But the other two were from eminent members of the profession. Both high up in the British Medical Association.'

`Well, I thought she did brilliantly,' I said. I have never had much time for the British Medical Association or its enthusiastic members. The BMA is a trades union which exists to gouge better pay for its members out of taxpayers. As far as I'm aware it has never been known to do anything – anything - likely to further the interests of patients. If they could negotiate a one hour working week and a 100% pay rise they do it like a shot. `And I think you'll find that if we try to get rid of Molly we will find ourselves on the losing end of a massive lawsuit. You can't sack someone for appearing on television and telling the truth.' It occurred to me that doctors used to recommend smoking cigarettes as a way of staying healthy. Perhaps Molly was right. Perhaps the rest of us were wrong about vaccination. Could vaccines be even more dangerous than cigarettes?

`You're a fat lot of help!' snarled Jock, ending the connection.

I poured myself another whisky. When Molly rang me as she and Larry drove home I congratulated her on a brilliant performance.

`You've made even me think twice about some of the pro-vaccination arguments,' I told her. `You're bound to have made other people think too.'

That was the problem, of course. Molly had made too many people think. She had been far too successful. It would have been much, much better for her if she'd made a fool of herself and Dr Hailsham had made mincemeat of her. And the idiots at the BBC hadn’t helped. By making her own position clear, the interviewer had turned Molly into a victim and made the audience far more sympathetic and supportive than they might otherwise have been.

Chapter 8

I’ve heard of people becoming celebrities overnight but I’ve never before seen it happen.

When I arrived at the surgery the following morning there were half a dozen reporters and photographers standing around outside the entrance and a tired looking Molly, now dressed in a white blouse, a pink cardigan and a pair of beige trousers, was standing in the porch giving an impromptu press conference. Larry, her boyfriend, was in earnest conversation with a balding man in a sports coat. Moments later a television crew turned up and a smartly dressed man with plastic hair, whom I vaguely recognised, pushed himself to the front and started asking questions. Despite the morning chill a small crowd of patients collected when they saw him. A young mother with two small children looked as though she might be ready to swoon.

Inside, Jock was hopping from one foot to another like a frog on a hotplate. `This is outrageous!’ he cried, when he saw me. I got the feeling that he was peeved that it was Molly the reporters wanted to speak to and not him. `Our telephones have been red hot with reporters wanting to speak to Molly. Patients won’t be able to get through. People could be dying if this absurd state of affairs is allowed to continue!’

I suspected that our senior partner might be exaggerating a tad and this thought was confirmed when Sharon, one of the receptionists (the one who has psoriasis and a nasty looking mole on her upper lip) quietly whispered to me that there had been just three calls. Since the practice had four incoming lines and a squad of receptionists the three telephone calls for Molly hardly seemed likely to be a serious threat to the public at large.

The patients who had seen the programme were excited at being treated by a famous doctor. Most of the receptionists hadn’t seen the programme but collectively they persuaded Jock, who had recorded Molly’s appearance, to bring in the DVD so that they could watch it on one of the practice computers. Fortunately, Deidre was away in Austria visiting her sister and brother in law. (As an aside, it always seems to me that if people go to the trouble of travelling all that distance to get away from their family they probably prefer to be left alone. Moreover, I’ve always found Austria a deeply boring country. Everything there is dedicated to the memory of Mozart. If the Great Musician had really eaten in all his `favourite’ cafés, and drunk in all his `favourite’ bars, he must have eaten a thousand times a day and been drunk around the clock. Oddly, there is no mention anywhere in Austria of the country’s most famous son of all. But then Hitler’s paintings weren’t as good as Mozart’s music and `Adolf Hitler’s favourite café’ probably wouldn’t attract too many tourists or go down well with the European Union’s Commissioner for Political Correctness.)

At lunchtime, I took Molly and Larry to The Bell for a quiet luncheon. I wanted Molly to tell me about her experiences at the BBC (I was hoping, I suppose, that she might have seen someone famous while she was wandering around the studios) but Larry, who seemed to have appointed himself Molly’s press agent, dominated the conversation. He told us that he had already arranged a series of interviews with selected reporters and feature writers. `At this stage we have to maximise our exposure and strengthen the brand positioning,’ he explained, when I’d ordered some drinks and three bowls of vegetable hotpot. `Later on we’ll be able to charge for interviews but at the moment I think we should do everything we can and do them all for free.’ He had compiled a list of all the interviews he’d arranged. `Several reporters want to make it a joint interview with Molly and myself,’ he said, with what I thought was rather feigned reluctance on his part. `A few reporters wanted to know if I’m a vaccine victim so I told them about my sister Pauline and they want me to talk about her too. It gives the story a personal interest; a bit of colour.’ He hesitated. `One or two say they’ll send photographers along to my next gig. There aren’t many stand-up comedians sitting down in wheelchairs.’

It had never occurred to me that anyone, even a major celebrity, would ever charge for an interview and it had not occurred to me that Molly’s sudden fame would be anything more than a one or two day phenomenon. I don’t really know but I felt a little uncomfortable about the way Larry seemed to be taking over and I got the feeling that Molly wasn’t entirely comfortable with it either. He seemed to be making sure that his career got as big a boost as possible from her moment in the limelight and I couldn’t help feeling that this was rather more opportunistic than seemed entirely decent.

`Best of all Molly has been asked to write an article for the *Daily Mail*,’ said Larry, his eyes now aglow with excitement. He’d clearly kept what he thought was the best for last. `They want 1,500 words for tomorrow’s paper and they’ll pay us £1,000. They want a piece explaining why vaccination is bad for us. The woman on the features desk said they want Molly to concentrate on parents and children but also include a few paragraphs about the flu vaccine and old people. I suspect they’ll probably print that as a box or a breakout. I told them they’d have the article emailed to them by 4.00pm.’

`A breakout?’ asked Molly.

`One of those bits of text at the side of the main piece,’ explained Larry as though he’d been dealing with newspapers all his life. `They also want a photograph so I’ve emailed them the one I took of you in that blue dress.’

`Oh no!' cried Molly genuinely upset `Not that one. I look half naked. Its strapless and got a plunge neck. I can't imagine why I ever bought that dress. I only ever wore it once.' She blushed.

`It's a great picture!' insisted Larry. `You want readers to know you're not some frumpy vegetarian nutter who dresses like a hippy and has no figure. Quite a few of the reporters I spoke to were worried about that - worried that you'd turn out to be a bit of a health food fruitcake. Anyway, Imogen, the girl on the features desk at the *Mail*, said that if the piece turns out well they might want you to write regularly for the feature pages. They're always on the lookout for doctors who can be a bit controversial. And they want you to mention Pauline. Imogen said she'd pass my details to their show business desk and suggest that they might like to do a piece about my stage act. They wanted to know if you're VAT registered, by the way, so I said you're not. But if you write for them regularly then we'll probably have to consider it. Especially if we get you a regular spot on television and maybe a radio show of your own.'

`Wait a minute!' said Molly who seemed bewildered by what was going on. `What's this about a spot on television and a radio show?'

`All sorts of things are possible,' said Larry. He looked at his watch. `We'd better go. We've got to write this article and we've got a couple more interviews to do.' Neither he nor Molly had touched the soup I'd ordered for them. Molly had sipped at her Diet Coke but Larry hadn't taken a sip from the beer I'd ordered for him.

`I've still my calls to do!' said Molly, panicking.

Larry looked at me. `Perhaps…'

`No, I couldn't,' said Molly. `That wouldn't be fair.'

`How many have you got to do?' I asked, trying not to sound as weary as I felt. I was also concerned for Molly. I wondered if she knew what she was getting herself into. Controversial writers often seem to end in financial and emotional disarray. William Prynne, a 17th century author who upset the establishment, was fined £5,000 and pilloried before having both ears cut off and put in prison for the rest of his life. If the medical establishment, the drugs industry and the redtop tabloids got their teeth into Molly she would probably wish she was living back in the 17th century when the penalties for upsetting the establishment were still relatively light.

`Four or five,' said Molly. She took out the piece of paper on which the receptionists had written down her calls for the day and looked up at me. `Five.'

I held out my hand for the paper.

`Are you sure?' asked Molly.

I nodded.

She reluctantly handed me the call sheet and mouthed the words `thank you'. Then she and Larry hurried away. I sat in The Bell for a few minutes more and finished my whisky and soup. I was looking around for something to read when I remembered that I still hadn't read Molly's article. I took it out of my pocket, unfolded it and started to read. It was very impressive. It was only a couple of thousand words long but Molly had managed to produce a surprisingly exhaustive analysis of vaccination.

In a short introduction she had pointed out that Edward Jenner, the doctor recognised as the originator of all modern vaccination programmes, lost faith in vaccination after trying out the first smallpox vaccination on his own 10 month old son. Tragically, Jenner's young son remained mentally retarded until his death at the age of 21. Molly pointed out that as a result of this tragedy Jenner, now the revered hero of those in favour of vaccination, refused to have his second son vaccinated. And she added that the medical profession, which had originally rejected Jenner's discovery as far too dangerous, subsequently embraced it with great enthusiasm and few reservations only when it became clear there were huge profits to be made from the preparation and administration of vaccines.

Molly described the problems with each popular vaccine; going through them all one by one. She pointed out that the one significant trial done on the tuberculosis vaccine had shown that the vaccine offered no protection against the disease. Indeed, she said, the trial suggested that there was a link between the giving of the vaccine and the development of new outbreaks of the disease. Similarly, she pointed out that the number of deaths from poliomyelitis had fallen dramatically long before the vaccine was introduced and that the incidence of the disease rose again after the vaccine became popular. She claimed that, as with other infectious diseases the number of patients fell as better housing, cleaner drinking water, better food and better sanitation were introduced in the second half of the 19th century. It was, she claimed, social developments rather than vaccination which had increased human resistance to infectious diseases. It was powerful, carefully argued and convincing stuff.

Molly had then pointed out that there is little, if any, scientific evidence showing that vaccines do what they are claimed to do and no evidence at all showing that they are safe. She pointed out that, contrary to popular opinion, up to half the individuals who are vaccinated against a disease do not develop any resistance to that disease and therefore gain no benefit at all from the vaccination.

She'd ended by arguing that governments support and promote vaccination programmes for purely financial reasons, and that the medical profession and drug industry should be honest and admit that the aim of any vaccination programme is not to protect individuals but to benefit the community at large. She explained that bean-counting politicians like vaccination because if enough citizens are vaccinated then the incidence of a disease is likely to be lower than it otherwise would be. `The Government believes that if a vaccination programme cuts the incidence of measles in half then the number of parents needing to have time off work will fall accordingly. Vaccination programmes ease the economic burden on the State. Vaccinations are given not to protect individuals but to protect the economy. There are considerable risks with vaccination but the risks are taken by individuals and the benefits accrue to society at large. In moral terms it's a bit like owning a house which stands in the way of a motorway development. The authorities compulsorily purchase your home so that they can knock it down. You don't benefit at all but the State can build its nice new road and motorists who use that road undoubtedly benefit considerably.'

Molly's argument was that public-spirited individuals (and parents) might well not object to risking their health (or the health of their children) for the State, but that they should not be lied to about the benefits. Her objections were twofold. First, the Government and the medical profession suppresses the truth and doesn't tell those being vaccinated that they are being vaccinated to protect the State. Second, the Government and the medical establishment suppresses the truth about the incidence of side effects because they know that the uptake of vaccines would fall still further if people knew just how dangerous they were.

When I'd finished the article I sat and thought about it for a while. It was the first time I'd ever seen anyone question the whole principle of vaccination. And Molly had done it very well. It suddenly occurred to me that the editors of Newsnight had probably not read Molly's article properly. They would never have allowed her within ten miles of a BBC studio if they'd known what she'd written. They had arrogantly and wrongly assumed that she was just a silly young doctor who would be easy to crush. They would make an example of her to silence other critics. And they'd have a bit of fun with her and create a lively few minutes of television. These are, after all, days not of learning and wisdom but of blunt opinions and blind prejudice. But it had all gone very badly wrong. I began, at last, to realise just how arrogant and ignorant her critics really were. I doubted if Dr Hailsham had even bothered to look at her article at all. I was reminded of Marcel Proust who wrote: `L'inexactitude, l'incompetence ne diminuent pas l'assurance. Au contraire.'

Au contraire, indeed.

I ordered a black coffee and took out a rather bedraggled pocket street map of the town and planned a route that would enable me to do my calls, and Molly's calls, without going over the same ground twice. Jock is forever trying to persuade me to use one of these satellite navigation systems but I hate technology with a passion. Molly uses one and seems to get on quite well with it, though she admits that it has on several occasions taken her to the wrong place, or got her stuck in dead end roads.

I've lived and worked in the same damned town for two decades and I still can't remember where all the streets, avenues and closes are in relation to one another. Life is, of course, constantly made more difficult by the enthusiasm of planners and builders for knocking down perfectly solid and sound old houses which don't fit new building regulations and building blocks of flimsy flats and maisonettes and then naming all the new roads and cul-de-sacs after egotistical local councillors. The demolition companies and the builders make a fortune. The bent members of the local planning committee enjoy holidays they couldn't possibly afford if they had to live on their legal earnings. And the poor sods whose excellent Victorian homes are compulsorily purchased and razed find themselves rehoused in prefabricated properties which seem to be made out of cardboard and parcel tape and which have such paper thin walls that the occupants have to spend a fortune on keeping themselves warm.

Every six months I pick up a new town map from one of the local estate agents and every time I realise that I no longer recognise the town I'm living in. What really annoys me is that these perfectly decent houses are knocked down on orders from our lords and masters in Brussels. I hate the bastards from Brussels. In the old days we were allowed to do what we wanted to do as long we didn't break the law. These days, thanks to the venomous gnomes from Brussels, everything is forbidden and we are allowed to do what they decide to allow us to do. I feel as though they are changing the rules every hour, on the hour, including nights and weekends, and I can't keep up. They don't even tell you what the new rules are. How are you supposed to know that it's illegal to give a jar of your homemade chutney to a bring and buy sale at your local church?

When William the Conqueror splashed ashore and took charge of our island he banned the English from having fires or lights in their homes after eight o'clock at night. Offenders faced the death penalty. (I strongly suspect that the birth rate must have rocketed.) Today, we've been conquered again. Today, the barking mad rules and regulations originate in Brussels for we have been conquered by an army of administrators and abject, corrupt politicians. The eurocrats call their directives rules and regulations but they can fine us or send us to prison for breaking them and in my book if they can fine you or send you to prison for doing something, or not doing something, then the rule is a law in principle if not in name. I suspect that I now break at least one law a day and I suspect most other people do too. All this law breaking can't possibly be good for our traditional, law-abiding nature.

When I'd worked out my route I wrote out a new list, combining my six visits with Molly's five. I chewed two peppermints, drank another black coffee and set off to do the home visits. I couldn't stop thinking about Molly's article. I was sure she had some arguments and accusations which needed answering. But I was also sure that she'd stuck a stick into a very large wasps' nest full of some wasps who were not likely to ignore the attack.

Chapter 9

The visits, when I dragged myself back into the car and started work again, were exhausting and seemed interminable.

The first visit set the tone for the afternoon.

I got out of the lift on the 16th floor of a block of council flats (it was my treat of the week to find that, although it creaked and wheezed alarmingly, the damned lift worked) and found myself face to face with one of those hideously ugly dogs which have become so fashionable with the unemployed these days (largely because ownership of one of the beasts entitles the lead holder to an additional chunk of money every week in benefits).

I had been holding my breath all the way up (the stench of ammonia was strong enough to strip paint) and when the lift doors opened I must have made quite a noise as I suddenly exhaled in order to make room for a couple of lungfuls of the sort of polluted air they have hanging around on 16th floor landings in blocks of council flats. The noise I made startled the dog which started barking and growling and generally giving the impression that it was auditioning for the lead role in *Hound of the Baskervilles.*

When I started out as a GP I was frightened of dogs, particularly big noisy ones with teeth and a taste for human blood, but over the years I have slowly learned to conquer my fear. I began by becoming less frightened of the little ones (the ones so small that it would make more sense to squeeze them out over the sink rather than to bother taking them for a walk) and have gradually worked my way up to not being frightened by the big ones. The conquering of my fear was helped by the anger I felt when a two year old girl who was a patient of mine was mauled and bitten to death by an Alsatian dog. I was so cross that I told a reporter from the local paper that instead of shooting the dog the police should shoot the rancid owner. At the time this caused some trouble among our many dog-owning patients.

As the dog on the 16th floor landing growled still more I growled back, barked and generally made as much noise as I could. I also held my arms out wide to make myself look as big and as threatening as possible. Experts in these matters recommend keeping still, slinking away quietly or climbing up the nearest drainpipe. Bugger all that nonsense. When the confused dog made its move I simply gave it a hefty clout on the side of the head with my heavy, black drug bag.

`What the hell's going on?' demanded an angry looking man in a dirty vest, crimson jogging trousers and a pair of grubby looking slippers that had holes in the toes to let his feet breathe. Something told me that the slippers were more his style than the jogging trousers. He had an unshaven face and a shaven head and the effect made him look as though he had his head fixed on upside down. He looked at me and then at the whimpering dog, now cowering in a corner.

`What have you done to my dog?' he demanded.

`You called for the doctor?'

`It's the kids,' said the man. `Two of them have got spots.'

`Why do you leave the dog on the landing?' I asked him, genuinely curious.

`If we keep it in the flat the damned thing pisses and shits all over the carpets,' explained the man, who had the arrogant strut of a trades union official combined with the sly look of a child molester. `You're lucky,' he added. `Normally his bite is worse than his bark.'

I looked around and could see that the dog had indeed used the landing as an alternative to the local pavements. Surprisingly, the stench wasn't quite as bad as the smell in the lift.

`You could take it for walks outside,' I suggested. `Let it shit in a nice clean park where other people's children play.'

He looked at me as if I were mad.

When I managed to drag them away from the television set long enough to examine them, I found that the two children advertised as having spots were actually covered in flea bites. I hate fleas which always seem attracted to my person. I wrote out a prescription for something to stop the itching, offered some well-meant but bound-to-be-ignored advice and left quickly. The other five children were doubtless in line to be bitten within hours. Jock has long argued that men and women on benefits should be sterilised or stitched up (whichever seems most appropriate) to halt their indiscriminate breeding and there are days (and this was one of them) when I agree with him. These days it is only investment bankers and those on benefits who can afford to have big families.

On my journey back down to earth the lift groaned and complained for every foot of the way. It seemed as though the whole mechanism was about to jam solid. It occurred to me that maybe someone had thrown an unwanted body down the lift shaft and an arm or a leg had caught up in the cables. High rise, council-managed buildings engender thoughts like this. Down at street level I noticed for the first time that half the cars parked in the vicinity of the building were resting on red bricks rather than black tyres. I was relieved to notice that my car still appeared to be equipped with the required number of wheels.

Eleven visits might not sound much but when you have to find each home, examine every patient, make a diagnosis and decide on treatment it isn't easy to complete a visit in less than fifteen or twenty minutes.

It was going to be a long afternoon. Fortunately, however, the next few visits were fairly straightforward.

A lively pensioner wanted a repeat prescription for her digoxin, a mother had a child with earache which needed an antibiotic and a genial, rather eccentric old man called Walter Kennedy wanted something for an itchy rash on his leg. Mr Kennedy is well known locally for having married a 27-year-old waitress on his 80th birthday. When the vicar asked him if he would take Sharon for his lawful wedded Walter replied impatiently: `That's what I'm here for aint it?' This was generally regarded as one of the least romantic remarks ever heard in the town. Sadly, the waitress left him after a month, complaining that there was a substantial age difference between the two parties. This was clearly something which she had not noticed before the nuptials.

Other septuagenarians and octogenarians dress in beige and favour knitted cardigans and trousers with elasticated waists but Mr Kennedy, may he be blessed eternally, prefers to wear red corduroy trousers, a black frock coat and, whenever he ventures out of doors, a black top hat.

I told him that I had no idea what had caused his rash but assured him that the cream I gave him would clear it up in a day or two. I always carry a small selection of medicines in my drug bag so that I can give patients something to use straight away. I do this because I know that patients who live alone might otherwise have to wait a day or more to find a neighbour to take a prescription to a chemist for them. Some of the medicines I use are samples but quite a few I purchase from a pharmacy near the surgery. Every now and then Jock has a go at me about this. Most doctors obtain whatever drugs they need in return for favours of one sort or another. (Jock and Deidre both add the drugs they need to prescriptions the pharmacist is already holding. The doctor gets the drugs at no cost and the pharmacist gets the profit on the drugs.) I prefer to spend a few quid buying drugs honestly and Jock objects strongly to this added practice expense.

It had taken the old man an age to open his front door and when I eventually entered the flat I could see why there had been such a lengthy delay. He had no less than four locks on the door. Once I was safely inside he fiddled with two of the locks while I waited. `Aren't you going to lock the other two?' I asked. He shook his head. `I only ever lock two, doctor,' he explained. `If a burglar tries picking my locks he'll always be locking two of them.'

Next, I visited an aggressive, bad-tempered lorry driver (the word `truculent' seemed particularly appropriate) who complained of indigestion. He seemed to find it extraordinary that I should attempt to link his internal travails to his daily consumption of greasy sausages, bacon and eggs. He confessed to eating three breakfasts a day while on the road, insisting that breakfast was always available in the sort of eateries he visited and that it always offered the best value for money. He said he had no intention of changing his diet because it was my responsibility, not his, to deal with his pains. I gave him a prescription and told him to come and see me when he was ready for the operation he would inevitably need.

The fifth visit was to a patient I knew.

Roger Hubbard is a detective sergeant and had been a patient of mine for as long as I'd been a GP. His father is a butcher who still has a small shop in the town and I once delighted Roger by reminding him that William Shakespeare's father was a butcher too.

Roger was very apologetic about calling me out. He suffers from asthma and is terrified that his employers will find out about his condition and that, if they do, he will, as a result, be transferred to duties inside the police station. He is so nervous that someone will find out about his problem that he likes me to visit him at home whenever his wheezing is bad. He's worried that someone might see him sitting in the waiting room.

When I arrived he was in quite a state and his wheezing was so bad that he was on the edge of status asthmaticus. I gave him a steroid injection, which is, from past experience, the only thing that really helps and I stayed with him for half an hour or so while the wheezing lessened. At the end of that time he was breathing pretty normally and could talk and move about.

`If this happens again you must tell the receptionist that you need an urgent visit,' I told him. There had been no indication on the call list that the call was anything other than routine. He told me, nervously, that he always felt intimidated when he rang the surgery. I closed my eyes and counted to ten when he told me this.

I hate the fact that we have one of those damned `press one if you wish to request a repeat prescription, press two if you would like a non-urgent appointment, press three if you are dying…' telephone systems. (It was only recently that I persuaded Jock to get rid of the premium rate numbers we'd been using. I found out about the damned things when Jock boasted that we had made nearly £10,000 the previous year simply from the telephone calls patients made to us. He was charging up to £3 a minute for patients to telephone for help.)

In fact, there's a lot I hate about the way our surgery is run but there isn't a damned thing I can do about it because most of the rules and regulations we follow are forced upon us by the eurocrats, and are apparently designed to protect the physical and mental interests of our employees, rather than the physical and mental interests of our patients.

Everywhere I go I see signs warning members of the public of the rights of the people who are about to humiliate them. They have these signs at customs posts, where a careless or mistimed remark to one of the arrogant layabouts in uniform can put you in handcuffs in seconds. They even have them in Post Offices where the staff always seem to me to have been hired specifically for their absence of any human qualities. If anyone deserves to be treated with contempt it is the men and women who scowl at our passports and who serve us our stamps and motor car licences. Even at the surgery we have huge signs on the walls telling patients that `Our Staff Have The Right To Work Without Fear' and `Aggressive Or Abusive Patients Will Be Ejected And Reported To The Police'. I sometimes think that we've got all this the wrong way round and that what we really need are signs inside the reception area warning members of staff that patients have rights too. Maybe we need signs saying: `Our Patients Are Frightened And Must Be Treated Sensitively' or `Aggressive Or Abusive Members Of Staff Will Be Fired And Boiled In Oil'. Like most businesses offering what the bureaucrats call an `interface' with the public we seem to do far more to protect ourselves and our own rights than we do to defend the rights of the poor sods we're paid to serve.

I gave Roger my personal mobile number and told him to ring me direct if he had any more problems and to ring the official surgery number only if he could not get hold of me direct. By the time I'd finished with him I was running very late and had only an hour and a half to complete the rest of the day's calls. Visiting patients at home is extraordinarily time consuming and many younger doctors will do anything they can to get out of home visits. I think they're wrong and they're missing out on one of the most important and rewarding aspects of medicine. Some patients are genuinely ill and can't make it to the surgery. They aren't sick enough to be in hospital but they aren't well enough to climb into a car and sit in the waiting room. But the doctor benefits too: I learn a good deal about my patients by seeing their homes. I see how they live, what they read and, often, what television programmes they choose to watch. Hospital doctors see patients as livers, kidneys and hearts. A good GP has an opportunity to see his patients as real people.

Fortunately, none of the visits I had left were particularly difficult to deal with and none of them took me out of the town. (When patients live in outlying villages a home visit can take an hour or more.) Only one of the patients I saw mentioned Molly's appearance on television. The others either hadn't seen it or didn't think it worth mentioning.

The one patient who did want to talk about Molly was a retired Colonel in his fifties who always demanded home visits because he considered himself far too important to make an appointment and visit the surgery like ordinary folk. Deidre and I have both spoken to him about it, and have pointed out to Jock that he is abusing our practice of making home visits without question. But Colonel Douglas Mortimer, who describes himself as proud to be a blunt Yorkshireman, takes no notice. He inherited his money and lives in a smart area of town where the trees aren't allowed to drop their leaves outside a fixed October fortnight. He met me on the doorstep of his small, modern, faux manor house dressed in his usual tweed suit, waistcoat and old regiment tie and, as I followed him indoors, announced that the practice should get rid of Dr Turner immediately, forthwith and without delay. `I'm a Yorkshireman,' he told me, as he does every time I see him, `and I speak my mind. I don't believe in hiding my views. Straight talking sort of fellow. Get things out, that's my motto. That young woman doctor of yours is a disgrace. Her performance on that programme last night was shocking. How dare she question older medical people who clearly know what they're doing? I've had vaccinations all my life and they've never done me any harm. I don't want that girl treating me. And I doubt if anyone else will. Get rid of her straight away is my advice. If she comes out here I shall send her away with a flea in her ear.' By the time he'd finished this tirade, this absurd rant, he had led me into the drawing room. I'm always surprised by the amount of chintz and the number of plump cushions with which the Colonel has filled his home. Every pair of curtains has a fancy pelmet above and is controlled by complicated looking cords equipped with large tassels.

When the Colonel had finished I asked him if his belief in speaking his mind worked both way. As I spoke I looked out of the window and noticed, for the first time, that there was a fountain on the terrace. It was switched off and I suspected that he only switched it on when expecting visitors he wanted to impress. The Colonel seemed a little surprised by my question but, of course, had little choice but to lie and say that it did. The Colonel had really annoyed me. He seemed to have been brainwashed into believing whatever the establishment told him.

`Is that why you called me out?' I demanded. I noticed for the first time that he had a pair of bushy eyebrows which looked like two small untrimmed hedges. I wondered if he had ever been tempted to try a little topiary work. Turn them into cockerels perhaps. The Colonel said that he had indeed called for a home visit so that he could tell me to fire Molly. `But while you're here you can give me a repeat prescription for his sleeping tablets.'

`You're pompous and rude,' I told him. `Your comments about Dr Tranter are outrageous and ill-informed.

Moreover, you have consistently ignored our request that you ask for home visits only when you are too ill to attend the surgery. And to be honest with you I've known ex-corporals who had more common sense and greater intelligence. You're a disgrace to your regiment and to Yorkshire and you bear about as much resemblance to an English gentleman as I do to a Zulu warrior. Since you have stated that you will refuse to accept treatment from a member of our practice I will write to the relevant bit of the NHS and tell the administrators to find you another doctor. You are a self-important prat and you are no longer a patient of this practice. Good day to you.' And with that I turned and walked back to my car. As I reversed back down his driveway I accidentally on purpose succeeded in driving over a corner of his immaculately trimmed lawn. As I drove away I looked back and noticed with delight that my wheels had cut huge divots out of the grass. However, the Colonel didn't seem to have noticed the damage I'd done to his lawn. He was still standing in his doorway. His mouth was open but I have no idea whether or not he was talking.

I got to the Jock Cohen Health Centre just ten minutes after I should have started the evening surgery and sat down at my desk feeling shattered. I hoped that Molly wouldn't be doing too many more interviews. One of the receptionists (the one with varicose veins) brought me a large mug of black coffee together with the list of patients who'd booked appointments. I groaned when I looked at the length of the list and the height of the pile of medical records which she also brought with her. Most of the nation's medical practices now keep all their medical records on computer. We prefer to continue to keep our records in little cardboard envelopes. Boring men and women from various NHS departments come round from time to time to tell us that we have to adopt the computerised system. But Jock and I always explain that we haven't yet got the hang of computers and our exaggerated ignorance sends them away in despair.

`Dr Tranter's boyfriend called in to say that Dr Tranter couldn't get in for tonight's surgery,' said the receptionist. `We were going to share out Dr Tranter's patients between you and Dr Cohen but Dr Cohen told us to give them all to you. He said he had to get home because he has a meeting with the builder at the new house he's buying. But to be honest I think he wants to get home because he had a very unpleasant experience at the hairdresser's this afternoon.'

`What sort of unpleasant experience?' I asked. `The barber didn't snip off an ear did he?'

`I'm not supposed to know,' said the receptionist, looking around to make sure that no one, particularly Dr Cohen, was likely to overhear. `But apparently Dr Cohen goes to a unisex salon in Bartholomew Street and suddenly the girl who was cutting his hair screamed and ran across the salon and whispered something to the receptionist who immediately picked up the phone and rang the police.' There was a pause and the receptionist looked around once more before resuming. `Less than two minutes later a squad car screeched to a halt and two burly policemen raced across the salon and pulled back the sheet that the hairdresser had tied round his neck to keep the bits of hair off Dr Cohen's suit. I can't imagine what they were expecting to see but what they found was Dr Cohen quietly and absent-mindedly polishing his spectacles with his handkerchief.'

I grinned and thanked the receptionist for this merry tale. I looked at the list of patients and then at the clock. `This is going to take some time,' I warned her. `Bring me a fresh mug of coffee every half an hour.' As she started to leave I called her back. `Have we got anything to eat?'

`We've got a packet of cream biscuits, half a packet of ginger biscuits and some home-made scones a patient brought in.'

`What are the scones like?'

`Tamarin says they're a bit stodgy but I quite like them. Would you like one?'

`Bring me a scone and as many biscuits as you can cram onto a plate,' I told her. `Have we really got someone working here called Tamarin?'

`She's been here for nine months now.'

`OK. Which one is she?'

`She's the tall, slim brunette. She's married to our postman.'

`Right. Don't tell her I didn't know her name.'

`No, Dr Cassidy.' She paused for a moment, started to leave and then turned back and smiled. `My name is Felicity, by the way. I've been here for two years.'

`I know your face,' I told her. `I'm never very good with names.'

`I know,' she said, nodding. She was still smiling when she left so she can't have been too upset.

The evening surgery was a blur notable only for a visit from a pompous, stout man who called himself Captain Edward Low and said that he was new to the area and was interviewing doctors to find one who suited him. I didn't like to tell him that these days patients are allocated to doctors according to the whims of local bureaucrats and so I greeted him with fake politeness. `I believe the best way to find a good GP is to ask a doctor who he is registered with,' he told me, taking out a pocket diary and a cheap fountain pen and preparing to take notes. `I'm registered as a patient of Dr Cohen,' I said. I wouldn't trust Jock to trim my toe nails but if we register as patients with one another it keeps the fees in the practice. `Ah,' said the Captain. `Then he's the doctor for me.' `Splendid,' I said. `When you see him don't forget ask the name of his doctor.' Captain Low frowned. `Who is his doctor?' he asked. `Me,' I replied.

It was after eight when I finished the evening surgery. Just before I left, Tamarin or Felicity or possibly someone else entirely told me that Dr Turner had left a message asking me if I would do her night's duty again. `She said that she's got a radio interview to do,' explained the receptionist who had, I noticed, a strange way of staring into space when she spoke to me, as though something more interesting was going on somewhere behind me. I thought that perhaps she had been formerly employed in a post office. I groaned silently but managed to find the patience not to scowl at the bearer of these disappointing tidings.

`That's nice,' I said. `All I was planning to do was sleep anyway.'

On my way home, listening to a jazz clarinet CD in the car, I started itching. The first flea had already started work.

The minute I got through the door I stuffed all my clothes into the washing machine and then climbed into a hot bath. I found the flea in the water and crushed him between two thumb nails. Sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind to yourself.

When I dragged myself out of the bath I caught sight of a decrepit, tired of life old man in his mid-sixties. My skin was grey, my eyes puffy and I looked like a quality control reject. I was still only in my fifth decade but life seemed to have beaten me to a pulp before the contest was half over. If I'd seen myself standing on a bus I'd have gladly offered me my seat. I tried to work out just where my life had gone and decided that I'd spent too much of it sitting in traffic jams, filling in forms and trying to get back to sleep. A large whisky and a plum jam sandwich woke me up a little and I slumped down in an easy chair to watch the television, although I find that this is a dangerous thing to do when I'm on call. If I find a half-way decent programme to watch the telephone will go, I will inevitably find myself called out to deal with an emergency and I'll miss the end of whatever it was I was watching. Most of the time the call could have waited until after the end of the programme but I can never sit there and wait. When a call comes in I have to go out and deal with it. Usually, when I'm on call I usually dig out a DVD to watch on the basis that if I'm called out I can stop it and restart it when I return. There was nothing I wanted to watch on television and I was feeling too tired to look through the DVDs so I found a Wodehouse I hadn't read for some time and immersed myself in the wonderful world inhabited by the members of the Drones club. I read for half an hour and then the telephone rang.

A man called Gibbs reported that his wife, Catherine, a schizophrenic patient of Jock's, had made a cake and was preparing to take slices round to all the neighbours. `I can see that they might be a bit upset since it's so late at night,' I said, `but why did you ring me?' He told me that his wife had emptied eight bottles of pills, including some pretty potent psychotropic drugs, into the cake mixture.

`Do you think one slice of the cake would do people any harm?' he asked.

I told him to lock the door and not to let the cake out of his sight. I then set off, driving at speeds varying between two and three times the legal limit, and slowing down only when I found myself unable to overtake a cyclist meandering along in the middle of the road. I hate cyclists. They all claim they're saving the planet but every time a motorist comes up behind one he has to slow down and then waste petrol accelerating. I reckon the average cyclist must, as a result, have an even bigger carbon footprint than a standard sized rock star who travels everywhere by private plane.

When I eventually arrived, with smoke coming both from my ears and the brakes, the toxic cake was still intact. I talked Catherine Gibbs into letting me take it away so that I could distribute slices on her behalf. She smiled contentedly, thanked me and went to bed. I put the cake, in its tin, into the car boot and drove home at a rather more sedate pace.

Chapter 10

The Molly Tranter roadshow continued to gather pace.

I confess that I had expected media interest to fade away after a day or so. But a couple of things kept the subject of vaccination in the public eye.

First, Molly wrote an article for *The Daily Telegraph* pointing out the dangers of the influenza vaccine. The publication of her article, provocatively entitled `Licensed to Kill', coincided with the launch of a new Government campaign designed to encourage the elderly to rush along to their doctor and get jabbed. But Molly, who had become a revolutionary army of one, questioned the wisdom of this advice.

`The viruses which cause influenza are forever changing and so anti-flu vaccines are useless,' wrote Molly. `The companies making the vaccines simply guess which might be the strain most likely to produce an epidemic in the coming year. That's about as predictable as forecasting the weather. And we all know how good scientists are at that!'

`How many people know just what is in the flu jab they allow the doctor or nurse to give them? How many know that these vaccines contain mercury – a substance banned from barometers by the European Union?

`Do flu vaccines increase or lower the human body's general immunity? No one knows. Does the widespread use of the flu vaccine spread the flu and cause more illness than it prevents? No one knows the answer to that either, but the list of side effects suggests that it might.'

`The one certainty about the flu vaccine is that the people producing it and giving it are making a lot of money. GPs make thousands of pounds a year out of the flu vaccine. And most don't do anything for that money. The practice nurse gives the jabs and the GP cashes the cheques. Drug companies make billions out of these drugs. But they don't know whether or not they work. They don't even know if they're doing more harm than good.'

`The best way to avoid the flu is to keep away from the aisles in chemist's shops where the cold and flu remedies are sold. The flu victims who hang around in those aisles, coughing and sneezing without ever covering their faces, are deadly dangerous. And the best way to avoid nasty antibiotic-resistant bugs is to keep out of hospitals and away from people who work in them.'

And so the article continued. Molly's arguments were powerful and suddenly people started asking questions. Radio phone in hosts realised that here was a perfect subject for a morning's heated discussion. Leader writers sharpened their quills and took positions. Members of Parliament, scenting a bandwagon about to start accelerating, leapt aboard and started asking questions.

Then a group of doctors wrote a letter to The Times suggesting that the Government should introduce a compulsory vaccination programme. It would be an understatement of colossal proportions to say that their timing was not good. They pointed out that compulsory vaccination had been introduced in the mid-19th century and that it was time to bring it back. The letter was greeted with enthusiasm by a powerful and outspoken group of social workers who claimed that parents who did not allow their children to be vaccinated should be arrested, and that their children should be taken from them. The group's self-appointed leader, a stout, shapeless, bristling feminist with angry eyebrows and a penchant for boiler suits and wooden clogs accused Molly of tilting at non-existent windmills and sneeringly called her `Donna Quixote'. In a letter of reply, written more to defend her point of view than herself, Molly pointed out that most of the individuals promoting the idea of compulsory vaccination were in the pay of the companies making the vaccines.

This caused an uproar because it was true and nothing upsets the establishment more than the deliberate or accidental spilling of the truth. Molly included a reference to Thomas Jefferson in her letter. `If people let government decide what medicines they take, their bodies will soon be as sorry a state as are the souls of those who live under tyranny.' And she added that those individuals who allow the State to make medical decisions for them are accepting that the State owns their bodies.

Libertarians everywhere became excited by this and Molly was voted woman of the year by a magazine neither she nor I nor anyone we knew had ever heard of. Still, it was definitely an accolade and not a criticism.

The militant social worker, who was known as Red Ruth as a tribute to her political affiliations rather than because she came from Cornwall, called for Molly to be arrested for creating uncertainty among the proletariat though she didn't call them that, of course. The world is full of bullies these days.

One of the red top tabloids printed pictures of a group of leading doctors who were known supporters of vaccination and underneath the photographs it listed their relationships with a variety of vaccine producing drug companies. It did not look good. It made the doctors look like criminals. The picture editor had done a good job in selecting photographs which made the physicians look shifty and disreputable.

All this activity meant, of course, that Molly was spending as much time on her campaign as she was spending with the practice.

`I'm so sorry,' Molly said, ten days or so after her original television appearance.

She had come into my consulting room at the end of my surgery to apologise for not doing her fair share of calls or emergency duty. I had done most of her home visits and it seemed as though I had been on call for a lifetime. Even when there are few calls to attend to being on duty is exhausting. I can never relax properly when I am waiting for the telephone to ring.

But Molly looked even more tired than I felt and her eyes were dull with exhaustion. She had started wearing smart suits to work, presumably because she never knew when a photographer or television crew were likely to turn up, and she had started wearing make-up. But she looked worn out. It was curious: in some ways she looked younger and less confident than she had looked before but in another way she looked much older, much more self-assured and infinitely more world weary.

`Larry says we have to keep going with this while people are still interested and I know he's right but at the same time I feel bad about letting you down.'

Looking at her I couldn't help wondering if the drug industry and the medical establishment knew that the tough, fearless doctor who was giving them such a hard time weighed less than eight stone and wore shoes made for children because they were the only ones which would fit her.

`Can you do your own calls today?' I asked her. `Jock won't help. And he thinks you're neglecting the practice.'

I was getting worried about her but I knew damned well that I too was working far too hard and needed to slow down a little. I was so tired that I would soon be making mistakes and when you make mistakes in medicine the results tend to be catastrophic. I was worried about Molly not only because she looked so tired out but also because I suspected that she was beginning to believe the old saying that the pen is mightier than the sword. The truth, I suspect, is that the pen is only mightier than the sword when the other person doesn't have a sword. And some of the people with whom she was battling had very sharp swords.

She promised that she would do her own calls. `And I'll take the emergency calls tonight,' she added. She fiddled nervously with the neck of her jumper. `Do you think it would help if I told Jock that any money I earn from articles and broadcasts will be paid into the practice?'

I thought for a while.

`Are you sure about that?'

`Yes.'

`What does Larry say?'

`We haven't talked about it. But it is my money.'

`It would make Jock very, very happy,' I told her. `Money is his second love.'

She looked at me for a moment. `What's his first love?'

`Himself.'

She laughed. `Then I'll do it.' She looked at me for a long, long moment. `Do you think I'm doing the right thing?' she asked. `With all this stuff about vaccination. Or do you think am I being stupid?'

I thought for a while before answering her. `I certainly don't think you're being stupid,' I told her. `But I don't know yet whether you're right and I don't know whether or not I agree with you.'

The truth was that I wanted more time to look at the evidence and to think carefully about the arguments Molly had made. And I hadn't had the time because I had been kept busy racing around the town doing Molly's visits and emergency calls as well as my own.

`You've raised a lot of questions which need answering. And I admire and respect you for it.' I paused. `Someone had to do it. But in a way I'm sorry that it had to be you.'

Molly blushed slightly. `Thank you. '

`But…' I began.

`Ah,' she said with a slight smile `Here it comes…'

`But you're also a member of this practice, albeit a junior one, and regardless of how you consider the importance of your own career you also have a responsibility to the patients.' I felt old and pompous saying this but I also felt it had to be said.

`I know,' she said so softly I could hardly hear her. `I've let you down haven't I?'

`You've perhaps got your priorities mixed up a little,' I told her. `The patients are confused. And Jock is gunning for you. He's fed up of the fact that you're not doing what you're paid for. He even went to the expense of ringing Deidre in Austria. And I bet it didn't take him long to recruit her to the `stomp on Molly campaign'. He's fed up of journalists ringing up and hanging around in the waiting room. He and Deidre aren't campaigning people. They aren't media people. Their world is the Health Centre and to them you seem to be intent on tearing it apart. You've become a threat and to be honest I think they're rather frightened of you.'

She frowned, thought about what I'd said and then nodded.

`And you need to be careful,' I told her. `You've annoyed a lot of rich and powerful people.'

She looked puzzled. `What are you saying?'

`The medical establishment has a habit of crushing people who cause too much trouble. If you make too much noise there's a danger that you might have difficulty getting a job as a partner – particularly if you attract the attention of the General Medical Council.' I took my pipe out of my pocket and stuck it between my teeth. `Now bugger off and let me get on with all this crap.' I waved a hand across the paperwork on my desk and then looked up at her and smiled. `And I'm sorry if I sounded too much like your Dad.'

`Oh, you sound much more like an old fart than my Dad ever did,' said Molly, grinning. `He never even told me off when I dyed my hair green.' She looked down for a moment and her voice dropped. `Actually he wasn't there much at all,' she said. She moved away and then looked back. `You're better than the rest of them,' she said softly. `You pretend to be tough and indifferent, like Jock, but really you're just soft and squishy inside.'

I threw a pen at her.

When she'd gone I wished I'd told her that I was proud of her. I promised myself that I'd tell her next time. The truth was that I was beginning to think of her as the daughter I'd never had and always rather wanted. And I was proud of her. She had much bigger balls than Jock had. Damnit, she had much bigger balls than I had too. Compared to her we were a pair of bloody eunuchs.

No one else mentioned Molly or vaccination for the remaining hours of the working day and I was beginning to think that the fuss was perhaps dying down when Terry Biddles, a patient who'd come to see me for his monthly check up, brought everything to a head again.

`I've been looking at the Internet,' he said, as I checked his blood pressure. `And it looks as if your young doctor is wrong.'

`Wrong about what?' I asked. It is thanks to the Internet that a growing number of people pretend to know everything and fear nothing but, in truth, in private, know little and fear everything.

`About vaccines and vaccination.'

`Ah. In what way is she wrong?'

`Oh, every way possible. I've been onto several sites and it's clear that your Dr Tranter is talking rubbish. I'm surprised you haven't had a word with her, doctor. She's not doing your practice any good.'

I told him to be quiet a moment as I listened to the blood pumping through his brachial artery. `Pretty good,' I told him. `140 over 90.' It had been 165 over 120 when I'd first taken it just a few months earlier.

`Not bad, eh? These drug companies know their stuff don't they?'

`It's not bad at all,' I agreed. It had not escaped my notice that he had given all the credit for the reduction in his blood pressure to the drug company which made the pills he took and absolutely none of it to the changes in his diet which I had persuaded him to adopt or to his belief in the power of what he was taking. The pills he was taking were very mild. Most patients overestimate the value of drugs and underestimate their body's own power of healing itself. The simple fact is that the placebo power of anything that looks like a medicine is enormous. Nearly half of the therapeutic effect of any medicine lies in the patient's belief in the power of the treatment, rather than in the medicine itself. I could cure around 40% of all my patients by giving them a one week course of orange Smarties, though if I tried I would, I have no doubt, have the drug company inspired wrath of the General Medical Council to deal with.

`I wrote down the details of several of the websites,' said Mr Biddles, taking a crumpled piece of paper out of his trouser pocket and putting it on my desk. `I thought you might like to check them out.'

Like many other doctors I have grown to loathe the Internet, which is, as far as I'm concerned, a foreign country where opinions and prejudices survive and breed without the support of, or need for, evidence of any kind or quality. The Internet is an alien land where the words `rumour' and `fact' are synonyms.

I have, over the years, learned that patients can be divided into four simple groups: the ones who imagine they are ill but are not ill at all; the ones who are ill but who will get well whatever is done to or for them; the ones who will deteriorate and die whatever is done to or for them and the surprisingly small group who can be helped by modern medicine. Every day I see patients from all these categories who have consulted websites in order to diagnose themselves or to find new treatments which they can try. The trouble is that before you can use the Internet safely you need to have a considerable amount of background knowledge. Most websites are full of dangerous gibberish. And most of the gibberish has been put there by people with an axe to grind or a product to sell. The Internet may have given a voice to everyone but it's given the loudest voices to those who make the most noise: the ignorant, the self-centred, the self-important, the prejudiced, the bigoted and the snide. Vicious fishwives and mean fascists rule the Internet in a way that they have never quite managed to control the television or the radio. The Internet spreads misinformation, prejudice, anxiety, confusion and bewilderment as efficiently as the modern hospital spreads gastroenteritis. Wikipedia (which can't even spell its own name properly) and Google are less reliable as sources of information than the old woman who used to run the manually operated telephone exchange.

`I'll see you in a month,' I told him, handing over a prescription.

`Thanks, doc. And don't forget to have a word with that young girl doctor of yours. She alarms people and makes them feel uncomfortable.'

I managed to bite my tongue and didn't say a word. I really didn't like Biddles giving me advice about anything. He has twice been found guilty of exposing himself to mature ladies patronising a local public car park. He had been fined on both occasions. When Enid had shown me the story in the local newspaper I'd commented that it was a case of display and pay in a pay and display. She'd said that it wasn't anything to joke about but that he had at least made a clean breast of things and promised to turn over a new leaf. Enid has always had a masterly touch with a cliché. His advice about Molly was absurd and irritating.

And I hate people who call me `Doc'. It always reminds me of that damned cartoon character.

When I'd finished the surgery I switched on my computer, fired up the Internet and looked up the sites that Biddles had listed. It was no great surprise to find that every single one was paid for, sponsored or supported by one or other of the big drug companies. All the sites looked independent but none of them was. The existence of these sites did not surprise me but the fact that the drug companies were concerned enough to create them or support them did concern me. And the fact that Terry Biddles, normally a fairly quiet sort of fellow, had taken such an interest in the subject, and had taken such a firm position on it, also surprised and worried me. It looked as though Molly might be losing the argument. It really didn't matter whether or not she was right. In medicine, as in all areas of modern life, perception is everything.

I looked at some more websites and found, to my astonishment, that organisations which claimed to represent the interests of patients were also accepting drug company money so that they could maintain their websites and publish `advice' for patients and relatives. And, no doubt, so that the people who ran them could pay their Sky television subscriptions and the payments on their wide screen television sets and second cars. The Internet was, it seemed, even more corrupt than I had imagined.

But Terry Biddles, and people like him, believe what they hear and what they read – as long as it comes, or seems to come, with an establishment endorsement.

`Vaccines are safe and effective,' preach the exhortionists. `They save lives. Those who question their value are dangerous Luddites who must be silenced.'

And too many people believe what they are told; accepting, with enthusiasm, the fictions, the spin, the deceits, the distortions and the blatant manipulations. Every senior politician since (and including) Edward Heath has deliberately lied to us. Broken by fear, oppression and self-preservation we accept what we are told; too frightened of the truth to see the lies.

I remembered something that aristocratic rebel Bertrand Russell once said: `In all affairs it's a healthy thing, now and then, to hang a question mark on the things you have long taken for granted.'

Jock sometimes says that I am against too many things and not for enough. I know exactly what he means. I loathe the European Union (the source of almost all the really stupid laws and regulations which curse our lives), the Internet, unlimited immigration, bureaucracy and the unthinking political bigotry which gave us the National Health Service. But sometimes you don't have to be *for* anything to want to change the world for the better. It is enough to be *against* the bad things.

Chapter 11

I had not been looking forward to my weekend off and in the event I was not disappointed.

The film that Enid insisted we see turned out to be one of the dullest productions ever devised for the silver screen. A documentary about Welsh miners would have been more watchable. There was no plot and the script seemed to have been written by the famous team of monkeys who would, if given enough time, produce the plays of Shakespeare but who had, in this instance, not been given enough time to produce even one coherent sentence. If the director had skills they were not associated with the making of films and the actors seemed to have wandered onto the set believing that they had been hired as furniture. The film was so bad that it wasn't difficult to see why *The Guardian's* critic liked it so much. If they gave out prizes to sanctimonious, self-satisfied, complacent, boring, hypocritical nerds the journalists at *The Guardian* would win them all.

The evening with the Stokes was no more of a disappointment (expectations had been too low for there to be any sense of disappointment) but if it ever finds a place in a list of my top 1,000 Saturday evenings it will be towards the very bottom of the list, and it will not be there for any of the usual reasons but because of the curious conversations I had.

`I must say I was very surprised to see that you allowed that young girl to be so outspoken,' said Ms Stoke, as we set about our dishes of prawn cocktail with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

`Which young girl is that?' I asked, disingenuously.

`The one who keeps telling young mothers not to have their children vaccinated,' said the hostess with careless inaccuracy.

`Disgraceful business,' said her husband, stuffing a prawn into his mouth and shaking his head at the same time. Knowing him as well as I did I was impressed at his versatility. He would be walking and talking at the same time soon. `Aren't there rules about doctors criticising their betters? Of course we weren't taken in by it but a good many people must have been terribly confused.'

`People who saw her on that awful television programme wouldn't know what to believe,' said Ms Stoke.

`I was surprised too,' said Enid, eagerly supporting her friends.

I could feel the dagger in my back and wasn't well pleased at this mild act of social treachery. Et tu Brute.

`There are a lot of very gullible people out there,' said Mr Stoke. `There are probably people who will now believe that vaccination is dangerous.'

`I hope there are,' I said.

The other three stared at me as if I'd suddenly made complimentary comments about Adolf Hitler's road building accomplishments. `There are too many self-righteous people around who are too blind to consider the awful possibility that their truth might not be the real truth but just a thin veneer of commercially convenient flim flam. Personally, I have a curious feeling that the interfering busy bodies who ban Punch and Judy shows and demand that horse chestnut trees be chopped down are the same folk who insist that everyone be vaccinated against everything. I'm beginning to think the vaccination of children is just a legally authorised form of child abuse.'

`She's just a publicity seeking girl,' said Enid. She turned to me. `You want to watch her very carefully. I suspect she wants a media career. She'll be off as soon as she can get her own television programme organised.'

`I don't think she's a publicity seeker, I began. `On the other hand if she just turns up at one or two more television studios someone is bound to offer her a cookery programme or a spot on an antiques show.'

`Oh, she is definitely a publicity seeker,' said Mr Stoke.

`Definitely,' said Enid.

Ms Stoke nodded her enthusiastic support. The verdict had been reached. I pushed some limp lettuce on top of the prawns in my dish and put down my spoon. As far as I knew neither of the Stokes had ever met Molly. Enid had met her only briefly on a couple of occasions. I was appalled, though not particularly surprised, at the way the three of them happily attacked Molly's reputation and equally horrified at the fact that all three assumed, apparently without reservation, that what she said was wrong and that the medical establishment had to be right simply because it was the medical establishment. It seemed odd to hear three people who regarded themselves as free-thinking intellectuals paying homage to an establishment which had neither earned, nor even tried to earn, their respect.

The conversation continued in much the same manner throughout the main course (rubber chicken that had allegedly been allowed to roam free before being strangled to death, new potatoes that were the size and consistency of cricket balls, fibrous carrots which could have been used as dibbers and another vegetable which I could not identify and which was, I suspect, beyond identification by anyone not equipped with an electron microscope and a couple of armfuls of large textbooks) and well into the pudding course (which was, as a variation on Ms Stokes' well-established theme, a small piece of four-flavour ice cream gateau served straight from the manufacturer's cardboard box).

On several occasions I tried to intervene but each attempt was dismissed as though the three of them were the experts and I the ignorant buffoon wandering out of his depth into uncharted waters wherein they sailed with confidence and equanimity. Every time Enid added her voice to this growing clamour I felt increasingly betrayed and irritated.

At the end of the meal we moved from the dining room to the living room where Ms Stoke served dainty cups of weak coffee. A second bottle of the awful Greek wine had been opened towards the end of the chicken course and the remains of this was brought in from the dining room.

`Are you sure you won't have a glass?' asked Ms Stoke.

`Oh he's being a bit of a spoilsport as usual!' said Enid.

`Whoops, I forgot,' said Ms Stoke suddenly. `You're AA aren't you?'

`AA?' said Mr Stoke, puzzled. `What's that got to do with anything?'

Ms Stoke mouthed the explanation, obviously assuming that the excesses of alcohol I had enjoyed in the past had permanently damaged my ability to lip read.

`You need to let your hair down a bit,' said Mr Stoke. `I'm sure a drop of this stuff won't hurt you. Hardly any alcohol in it at all!' He laughed uproariously at this, as though he thought it funny and winked at his wife who had never seemed to me to be a woman likely to cherish being winked at.

`You tell him!' cried Enid. `I wish he would listen to someone.' She turned to me. `You're becoming a bit of a stick in the mud,' she told me in a not entirely unkindly tone. She patted me on the back of the hand.

I resisted their entreaties and said I'd stick with the coffee. It was hardly drinkable but at least it probably wasn't going to burn a hole in my stomach. As a gesture of defiance I took out my pipe and my smoker's friend and fiddled with the bowl. Enid looked on in horror and mouthed `Don't you dare light that thing in here' at me. I couldn't read her lips but it wasn't difficult to tell what she was saying.

Ms Stoke, who had been moving dirty dishes from the dining room table to the dishwasher (and who had steadfastly refused Enid's help with a series of self-sacrificing facial and body gestures) suddenly appeared in the doorway and beckoned to me with a finger. `Can I borrow you for a moment?' she whispered.

Dutifully, I put down my coffee cup, stood up and followed her into the kitchen. I assumed at first that she wanted my help with the dirty dishes. But that wasn't it at all.

`Since you're here I just want to pick your brains,' she whispered. `As a doctor.'

I thought that this was a bit rich since she'd spent the last hour or two ignoring all my medical opinions but I just nodded.

`Smoke if you want to, by the way,' she said. She pointed to the pipe I was holding.

`Oh no I wouldn't dream of it,' I explained. `I just fiddle with it and give it a suck every now and then.'

Ms Stoke blushed deep red. The blush covered her face and quickly spread down her neck. `That's sort of in a way what I wanted to talk to you about.'

It was obvious what she meant and so I instantly adopted my most serious expression, the one I use when women tell me that they have discovered that their husband has taken to wearing their underwear, and nodded encouragingly.

`I think it's just his age,' she said. `But Rodney is having a bit of a problem in the bedroom department.' The way she said it made it sound as though he ran a department store and was having trouble with an errant salesman.

`Ah,' I said. I nodded understandingly and put my pipe into my mouth. I feel that the pipe, like half-moon spectacles, always gives me a sense of gravitas. I am probably quite wrong about this.

`Can you give me a prescription for some Viagra?' she asked. `Just a few to try.'

`Ah,' I said again. `I'm afraid it's not quite that easy. I'd have to prescribe them for Rodney and he isn't my patient. You aren't either, of course.'

`Oh,' said Ms Stoke. She looked very disappointed. `I wouldn't tell anyone,' she said. `I wouldn't get you into trouble.' She thought for a moment. `I could pay you,' she offered.

I explained that there are rules about these things and that I couldn't wander around prescribing pills for the husbands of friends.

`What a pity,' she said. `You won't say anything, will you? Nothing to Rodney.'

`Say anything about what?'

`Pardon? Oh yes, I see.' She laughed. `Nor to Enid.'

`How are we going to explain this?'

`What?'

`You asking me to come out here.'

`Oh. I hadn't thought. Perhaps I could say I needed you to help move the table.'

`That doesn't sound very plausible,' I said. `Why don't we just say you wanted my advice about a rash.'

`I haven't got a rash.'

`You could pretend.'

`Oh yes, I could couldn't I?' She screwed up both eyes in a bizarre double wink and gave me what I think was supposed to be a smile.

We went back into the living room.

`What have you been up to with my wife?' asked Rodney with forced joviality.

`And what have you been up to with my partner?' Enid asked Ms Stoke.

I really hated it when she called me her partner because it gave our relationship a formality which I didn't think it truly merited. The truth was that when she called me her partner I always felt nervous.

We sat for ten or fifteen minutes and talked about the weather, the council taxes, bad neighbours (one, Ms Stokes insisted, had deliberately strimmed his lawn on the day that Rodney had painted their garden shed) and one or two television programmes I hadn't seen (and wouldn't have watched if I'd been tied to a chair) and then Rodney suddenly reached across, tapped me on the knee and stood up. `I almost forgot,' he said. `I've got something I want to show you.'

We left Enid and Ms Stoke discussing a book they'd both seen reviewed in *The Guardian.* They both regarded the damned paper as the final arbiter on all things requiring any sense of taste or artistic understanding and followed its rulings with the sort of blind obedience with which the children of Hamelin followed the pied piper. When I had a cat for a while I always use to buy *The Guardian* specifically to use as a liner for its litter tray. I never used to read the damned thing; I just put it straight into the bottom of the litter tray every Monday, Wednesday and Friday. I found that if I bought a copy of Monday's paper, the one with the supplement containing advertisements for BBC jobs, it would last me for a month. Twelve litter tray changes out of one newspaper. I wrote to the editor once and suggested that they might like to use a recommendation from me in one of their advertisements. He never had the courtesy to reply.

`I wondered if you could help me with our bedroom life,' said Rodney, when he'd got me safely pinned against the fridge-freezer.

`What can I do?' I asked him. I assumed that he wasn't about to ask my advice on bed linen or curtains.

`The thing is,' he said, `that I love my wife very much indeed but our bedroom life needs a bit of a boost.' He was obviously going to persevere with this silly euphemism.

`Ah,' I said, knowingly. And waited.

`It would help give my wife more confidence in the bedroom if she had, er, more…' he paused, either searching for the word or the confidence to say the word.

I waited partly because I didn't know what the hell he was going to say next and partly because I didn't want to make things easy for him.

`A bigger bosom,' he said at last. He held out his hands in front of his chest in case I didn't know what he meant.

`I thought it would make a nice birthday present for her,' he said.

`Has she asked for plastic surgery?'

`Oh no, she would never ask. She's not like that.'

`So how do you know…?'

`Well, it would give a boost to our relationship. In the bedroom.'

`Have you talked to her about it?'

`Oh no. No. Not at all.'

`Well you'll have to talk to her.'

`I thought perhaps it could be a surprise. A birthday surprise.'

I looked at him, slightly incredulously. `You mean, she wakes up on her birthday and suddenly finds that she's got bigger breasts?'

`Oh, that would be marvellous! Wonderful.'

`How would we do that?'

`Couldn't you arrange for her to go into hospital for a check-up or something and then while she's anaesthetised the surgeon could do the business.'

`And when she wakes up she needs to buy bigger bras?'

`That's it! Perfect.' He rubbed his hands together.

`I don't think we could do that,' I said. I am always being amazed at just how stupid some people can be.

`Oh.' He looked terribly disappointed. It had never been difficult to guess whose present this would really be.

`I think we'd have to tell her beforehand. The surgeon would need her permission. I don't think we could just anaesthetise her and give her bigger breasts.’

`Oh.’ He seemed crestfallen, as though he’d won the lottery but lost the ticket.

`Shall we go back and join the ladies?’

`Yes. I suppose so. There isn’t any way?’

`No, I’m afraid not. It’s something she’d have to want and ask for herself.’

He shook his head. `I can’t see that happening,’ he said, sadly.

`What shall we tell them?’ I asked.

`What do you mean? I’d rather we didn’t tell them anything.’ He looked worried.

`We have to say something. We have to explain why we came out here. What did you want to show me?’

He looked very confused.

`When we came out here you said it was because you wanted to show me something.’

`Oh yes, I did didn’t I?’

`Well what have you got that you didn’t have? What’s new?’

He thought for a while.

`We’ve got a new kettle.’

`I don’t think they’re going to believe that we came out here and spent all this time looking at a kettle.’

`No, no, I suppose not.’

`New golf clubs? Fishing rod? Cricket bat? Train set?’

`I bought a new pair of shoes.’

I shook my head.

`A screwdriver set. I bought a new set of screwdrivers. There are both sorts. The ones for the old-fashioned screws and the ones for the new cross head screws.’

And so we went back into the living room and I told them that I’d been looking at screwdrivers. It was very clear that neither of them believed me. But the screwdriver story was probably more plausible than the truth.

`Are you going to fire that young girl?’ asked Enid, as we drove back to her house in her car. (She doesn’t like to sit in my car, although it is bigger and more comfortable than her own, because the outside needs washing. When we go anywhere together I have to drive to her house and leave my car in her driveway.)

`Good heavens no,’ I said. `I had a word with her about it. It’ll be OK. And besides I think she’s right. She’s a brave girl. And she’s done her research.’

`Hmm,’ said Enid, disbelievingly.

I drove on for a few more minutes.

`What did Rodney really want you for?’ Enid asked.

`You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,’ I said.

`I know what April wanted,’ said Enid.

`Do you?’

`She wanted you to give her some Viagra for Rodney. He can’t get it up very well. Actually, he’s pretty well impotent. April says that even when he does get it up his erection is very weak; his thingy is too limp to do anything with.’

I looked across at her. `How do you know all that?’

`She told me, of course.’

`She said she didn’t want me to tell you.’

`Well of course she did. But you wouldn’t give her any pills. I thought that was a bit mean of you to be honest.’

I ignored this and drove on.

`At least you don’t have that particular problem,’ she said.

I didn’t say anything.

`Did you go to the chemist?’ she asked suddenly.

I looked at her.

`For some of those thingies.’

`Oh damn,’ I said. `I’ve been so busy I didn’t have time.’

`Oh,’ she said. She sounded almost disappointed. Her conversation with Ms Stoke must have enlivened her imagination. `Well if you couldn’t be bothered…’

`I’ve been terribly busy. And I forgot.’

`Don’t pubs sell those things? In the lavatories?’

`I suppose they do. But probably not at this time of night. They’ll be shut now.’ It was after midnight.

`Well, you might as well just pick up your car and get off home then,’ she said. `I’ve got the drama society committee coming round tomorrow morning to choose our next play.’

And so I dropped her off and then went home alone. We didn’t even kiss goodnight. It was not a disappointment. In fact as I poured myself a large whisky I realised that I was really rather relieved. And as I sipped the Laphroaig and smoked my pipe I promised myself that there would be no more evenings with the Stokes. I decided that life is too short, and I am too old, for evenings with the Stokes.

Moreover, I realised that any extremely modest affection I might have felt for Enid had disappeared entirely.

I realised I didn’t even like the damned woman.

Chapter 12

I was heading home after a dreary day's work when Jock caught me in the corridor. `Do you have anything planned for dinner this evening?'

`Nothing in particular,' I said, surprised by the question.

I couldn't believe that Jock was inviting me to one of his dinner parties. Only members of Local Society (with initial capital letters) received invitations to sup with Jock and his wife.

He wasn't.

`I know it's a bit last minute,' he said, without the slightest hint of an apology in his voice. `But something's come up and I think it might be a good idea if we had a sort of emergency practice meeting.'

`What's the emergency?' I asked. My whole life has been dominated by emergencies. I hate emergencies. Actually, I hate anything new. I hate change.  No one seems to realise that change for change's sake (by far the most popular variety these days) isn't progress. `Have you told Deidre?'

`I just caught her in her consulting room,' he said. It was a lie. He's a terrible liar. My guess was that the two of them had fixed this up hours ago. We usually have practice meetings every month. The three of us sit down, usually in Jock's consulting room, and we are supposed to discuss, and make decisions about, all the management issues that come up in the running of what is, in effect, a medium sized business. We have an annual turnover of something close to a million pounds sterling which makes us a damned sight bigger than most of the independently owned shops and offices in the town. The three of us, as partners, are supposed to make all the financial decisions because although Jock owns the building the three of us own the practice and are legally responsible for all the financial matters. In practice Jock, who has taken to describing himself as `Managing Partner', runs everything and Deidre and I rubber stamp his decisions. He does the hiring (and, very occasionally, the firing) of the staff we employ; he has weekly meetings with the accountant; and he discusses with himself whether to do improvements and repairs to the building. He makes sure that we are paid the money we are owed and to be perfectly honest Deidre and I leave him to it because he's bloody efficient at all this sort of stuff and neither of us can find the enthusiasm to deal with paperwork, decisions and problems.

Deidre says she doesn't have time to deal with practice issues because she is too busy being a wonderful mother. In reality, Deidre's children are truly awful creatures with very little chance of growing up into human beings; they show no sign of ever having been given any motherly love. I have no idea what their proper names are but I call them Nadir and Zenith. The boy, who is old enough to have acne spots, is a dedicated fan of Wikipedia and spends his evenings and weekends writing biographies of people about whom he knows absolutely nothing. The girl, who is a little younger, spends her time having body parts pierced and desperately waiting to be old enough to have the breast enlargement surgery which will, she firmly believes, bring her an array of book and television contracts and enduring fame and wealth.

Deidre's experience as a mother, allied to her position as a community pillar, means, naturally, that she is a Governor of both the schools they attend. Apart from her responsibilities as a parent and Governor she does not care terribly much about anything other than the amount of money that pours into her account every month. She and her husband, who is an unemployed opera singer whose highpoint was a single week spent understudying part of the chorus in a performance of Manon Lescault at Covent Garden, also make a small fortune out of a website for non-smokers called `Noifsnobutts'. They sell a wide variety of products designed to help smokers kick their habit.

I leave things to Jock because I'm just too damned weary to take an interest in the management of the practice. The truth is that I've never been terribly interested in money or in managing things. My out of hours duties have worn me out.

`If you're free I thought we'd have dinner at The Grange,' said Jock. `I've managed to get us a table.'

The Grange is the most expensive local eatery. It's the place all the nobs go to when they're celebrating something and the place is usually packed with hooray Henrys and Henriettas. It's usually impossible to get a table there unless you book six months ahead. Or unless, like Jock, you know people who know people. The chef is one of those half-wits who regularly appears on television, chopping vegetables at the speed of light and patronising other chefs, celebrities and members of the general public without fear or favour. The entrance hall to the wretched place is lined with plaques and framed certificates showing just what a wonderful and successful person he is. (He is so wonderful and successful that he has been married five times and has enough children to create his own football league.) Naturally, the food he serves is inedible rubbish, served in fancy sauces and offered in minute portions that wouldn't fill a fairy, but it's extortionately expensive and served on fancy plates and so the people who dine there fall on his feet whenever they have the opportunity. At regular intervals during the evening he comes out of his kitchen and wanders about among the diners, accepting compliments and bestowing benedictions on his adoring congregation. He always wears one of those bloody silly tall white hats and a starched and spotless buttoned up white smock that doesn't look as if it has ever been within a mile of a gravy bowl or a spluttering saucepan. I hate the food there and I can't stand him or his band of unctuous sous chefs. I'd much rather have fish and chips from a takeaway chippie.

`Can we afford a table at The Grange?' I asked. A fairly ordinary meal there costs £150 a head before you allow for the wine or the extras. It's the sort of place where they charge £5 for a glass of water and £10 for a bread roll (without butter) and where the waiters are snootier than the clients.

Jock leant towards me and whispered. `We're not paying,' he said. `We've been invited by Jim Zabrinski.' He said this in a way that made it clear that I ought to be as impressed as if we had been invited to dinner by someone really famous and important; someone of the calibre of Alan Sugar or Peter Andre, or the girl who reads the weather on the local television news programme. I looked at him, frowned and waited for him to tell me just who Jim Zabrinski was, and why he was prepared to spend a big chunk of someone else's money taking us all to dinner.

`Jim is national sales manager for ACR Drogue et Cie, the makers of Angipax,' explained Jock, breathlessly. He seemed about to swoon. `He used to play professional cricket. Terrific batter. Really useful bowler. Should have played for England. Everyone says so. Really nice guy. He's got a proposal he wants to put to us. It's something very much to our advantage. And it's quite an honour, really.'

I was neither surprised nor intrigued.

Jock has close personal relationships with a small but select group of international pharmaceutical companies, and the relationships are generally built on a mutual backscratching basis. If Jock had any best friends they would doubtless agree that he is a grasping, selfish and ruthless bastard who regards altruism as a sin, but he is always eager to help drug companies increase their profits, and it constantly amazes me that he has not yet been awarded a knighthood in the honours list in recognition of his services to medicine and industry. It is something which puzzles him too. He frequently complains that in order to acquire a knighthood these days it is essential to be adept at rowing a boat or riding a bicycle, or to be so rich that a £500,000 donation to one of the major political parties is a worthwhile investment. Still, it's just a matter of time. He came into my surgery the other day brandishing a copy of *The Times* and complaining that a bloke who ran a hedge fund had been given a knighthood after giving the Tory party an armful of money. I told him he should have been heartened by this since it seemed to me to confirm that the system was still as corrupt as it had always been. He thought for a moment before agreeing.

`Yes, but it's become a damned sight more expensive,' he complained. `In Blair's day you could buy a decent honour for the price of a car. These days you have to hand over the price of a good house for a gong. How can that possibly be fair? How is the ordinary, honest bloke expected to buy himself a decent gong when the costs are rising so quickly?'

I suggested that he consider getting himself a job as a lollipop man, and settling for an MBE.

Within moments of Jock asking if I was free for dinner, Deidre appeared, lipstick freshly applied and hair newly flounced, and announced that she was ready and what were we waiting for.

It was the first time I'd seen my female partner since she had returned from holiday. All the bits I could see (or wanted to see) looked tanned but I couldn't help noticing that she hadn't lost the mean, greedy look in her eyes. We set off, in a small line of three cars, to The Grange with Jim (who'd been parked outside doing something important on a laptop computer) leading the way in his super-salesman's steel grey Audi. He had a woman with him in his car. When our small but expensive convoy arrived at the restaurant the doorman opened the passenger doors of Jim's Audi and Jock's Mercedes, took off one of his white gloves, stuck two fingers into his mouth and whistled for a couple of youths to come up and park the cars. I've always been deeply envious of people who can do the two finger whistle. It's a trick I've never mastered, though, in my defence, I can make quite a good whistling sound by blowing across a blade of grass. Having the vehicles valet parked seemed rather pointless since there were plenty of car parking spaces within fifty yards of the front door. But Jim and Jock both tipped the whistling doorman and the drivers so everyone except Jock was happy. Much to the annoyance of the doorman I parked my car myself. But the staff weren't going to let me get away without tipping. I hadn't got two paces through the door before the girl manning the cloakroom grabbed me and asked for my hat. I started to roll it up and stuff it into my already bulging jacket pocket but she took it from me and gave me a small, black plastic token. `Just give the token to your waiter when you've finished your meal and I'll have your hat waiting for you as you leave.'

Chapter 13

The first two hours of the dinner were tedious almost beyond belief. It was as bad as an evening with Rodney and April Stokes. Jim Zabrinski looked like a young Gordon Brown but did not have the Scotsman's legendary natural charm, charisma and general twinkle. He had the dead, staring eyes of a short-sighted television presenter straining to read the autocue and, as a result, looked rather like the third assistant rapist in Deathwish 6.

Jim had brought with him a colleague called Lavinia Something-Hyphenated whom I think he introduced as the regional sales manager, but she could well have been just a bird he'd picked up in the bar while waiting for us to arrive. She looked about 35, dressed as though she were 25 and acted as though she were 15 or thereabouts. She giggled at anything and everything anyone said that could possibly be described as witty, close to witty or even supposed to be witty and she fluttered her outrageously long eyelashes at her boss with such aggressive enthusiasm that I was constantly expecting her to take off and fly around the room. Taking her cue from Jim, who was wearing a dinner jacket, complete with black tie, she was wearing a strapless, backless, almost frontless evening gown which revealed a good deal of a very impressive cleavage while at the same time defying the natural pull of gravity. If I'd been told she was an escort girl I'd have accepted the assertion without any doubt.

`Jim's got a unique proposition for us,' said Jock, as our allocated waiter cleared away the plates, which had contained the remnants of our duck, lobster and something done with salmon and a pungent garlic sauce. The waiter had clearly studied superciliousness at waiting-on-at-tables-college and would have won first prize for plain, unadulterated haughtiness anywhere on the planet. I prefer my waiters to display a little old-fashioned servility.

It had taken two mind-numbingly dull hours for us to get this far and after the first twenty minutes I had been willing my telephone to ring. I'd have happily rushed off to deal with an emergency bruise or a mild headache. I enjoy decent food but I can't bear restaurants which print menus in French and insist on spreading things out for hours. I think some modern chefs must have got their timing from Wagner. But, inevitably perhaps, the patients had let me down and my telephone had remained uncharacteristically silent.

`Jim's company has selected our practice, out of all the practices in the country, to be the first recipient of their new sponsorship programme,' announced Jock. He grinned inanely and looked first at Deidre and then at me as though expecting us to explode with excitement. He waved a hand. `But this is Jim's baby and I'll leave him to tell you about it.'

I was mildly surprised but not shocked by this revelation. The drug companies will do anything to flog drugs. One sales rep once told me that his company hired doctors to speak at medical conferences and meetings not because they expected them to convert their listeners (most of whom would either be emailing their stockbrokers or doing the crossword puzzle) but because they believed they would convince themselves of the wonders of the drug they were talking about and prescribe it by the ton to their own patients.

Nothing drug companies do surprises me. Most doctors, whether they're working in hospital or general practice, make judgements based on what they boldly regard as experience, but too often their conclusions are flawed and baseless because what they regard as knowledge gained through experience is, in reality, no more than a potent and deadly mixture of prejudice and drug company propaganda. Drug companies claim to be ethical but they're all run by the sort of crafty bastards who flog duff watches on street markets. The Colombian drug lords could learn a thing or two about market manipulation from the so called ethical drug industry. The only real difference is that the profit margins are considerably higher in the so-called `ethical' pharmaceutical business than they are in the heroin and cocaine business. Molly had told me that the global vaccine market is now worth £15 billion a year and is growing at nearly 20% a year. That's a lot of money. And the profit margins are obscene. Pills that cost a fraction of a penny each to make can be sold for hundreds of pounds to patients who think the pills will save their lives. The mark up on vaccines would make a jeweller blush. And in Britain, of course, the administrators who work for the NHS are either stupid or corrupt and will merrily hand over lorry loads of taxpayers' money if there's a free pen or a dirty weekend in Skegness in it for them.

The waiter returned with a small clockwork crumb hoover which he ran over the tablecloth. He then skilfully whisked away the newly cleaned cloth, exposing another clean but freshly starched cloth underneath it. When he had made sure that all the creases were nicely flattened, and had asked us all if we had enjoyed our first two courses, he gave us our pudding menus. These were made out of thick cardboard and so huge that when studying them none of us could see anything else. The minute our waiter had presented us with these the sommelier arrived to offer us a choice of dessert wines. The other four ordered an exotic specialité de la maison which, according to Deidre's attempted translation of the French menu, involved cheesecake, brandy, meringue, ice cream, five different types of nut and cubes of braised beetroot. I have no objection to beetroot, a solid enough salad vegetable, but I think it should be kept well clear of ice cream and so I ordered a slice of treacle tart, the only item on the menu which hadn't been given a fancy French name, and which was clearly there to cater for the whims of any poor people who had wandered into the restaurant by mistake. Jim ordered two bottles of something I'd never heard of that cost over £250 per bottle.

`My company has for some time been looking to find a way to show its enthusiasm for the old-fashioned principles of general practice,' he began. `And, after an outstandingly enthusiastic report from Lavinia, your practice was short listed for appraisal by a special and confidential committee appointed by our main board. There was some pretty sharp competition I can tell you but our board members were breathless with admiration for your practice's genuine and heartfelt commitment to good practice and patient care. We were impressed by the fact that, in an era when many practices are turning away from a total commitment to pastoral care, you three medical warriors still continue to provide 24-hour patient care. The board felt this was thoroughly refreshing; particularly so at a time when many practices are turning away from traditional full-time responsibility.'

Jim looked at the three of us, one at a time, and beamed. It was clearly a speech he had written, edited and memorised. Lavinia put her hands together and clapped daintily. Jock smiled modestly and tried to look embarrassed but ended up looking smug. Deidre looked as if she'd just won the lottery, an Olympic gold medal and the BBC's Sports Personality of the Year award. I tried not to look as embarrassed as I felt. I just knew something terrible was about to happen but I couldn't work out what it was going to be. For some inexplicable reason I thought of William Burroughs. `A paranoid schizophrenic is a guy who just found out what is going on.'

`I think I speak for us all when I saw how pleased and proud we are that your company has chosen to recognise our practice,' said Jock. He made it clear that he was speaking on our behalf.

`The board would like to make you our first sponsored practice,' said Jim. He beamed at each of us in turn. `We want to be associated with your practice and, in particular, to your commitment to serving patients with high ethical values.'

`What exactly does this mean?' I asked. `We're not going to have your company's name on our shirts are we?'

It was, I think, Adam Smith who once wrote that people of the same trade seldom meet together even for `merriment or diversion' without the conversation ending in a conspiracy against the public. The old Scot was bang on the button with that one; when greed meets amorality head on there is bound to be considerable collateral damage, with the laity inevitably being the major sufferers.

Jim laughed nervously at my suggestion that we might be wearing logo emblazoned shirts and Lavinia followed suit a split second later. Jock glowered at me.

`Good heavens no!' said Jim. `We'd like to be identified with your practice and so we would like your practice to carry our name. Or, more likely, the name of one of our most successful drugs. Dr Cohen, after whom your practice is currently named, has very kindly agreed to our suggestion and we're grateful to him for that.'

Jock didn't mention that the health centre was supposed to be named after his father and not him, and neither did Deidre. So I didn't say anything either.

`So you want to have naming rights for the health centre?' asked Deidre.

`In the same sort of way that breweries and insurance companies sponsor cricket and football grounds?' I asked. I'd never heard anything quite so tacky in all my life. I assumed we were going to be renamed `The Angipax Centre'.

`Exactly! That's the sort of thing,' said Jim. `We'll just have a nice discreet sign up outside your building and when your receptionists answer the telephone they'll use the new name. And we've suggested one or two other little connections too.'

`What sort of connections?' I asked. I looked at Jock, who appeared very uncomfortable. Even he, a doctor who had long ago abandoned all dignity and self-respect, seemed to recognise that he was exploring new lows in professional degradation.

`We'd like to sponsor your practice vehicles,' said Jim. `Nothing vulgar. Just something discreet on the doors and perhaps at the back of the car.'

`Just something very tasteful,' said Lavinia. She giggled and jiggled about a lot and emptied her wine glass in a single gulp. `And we'd like you to agree to use some pens and surgical equipment with our logos on them. That sort of thing. Very discreet and very tasteful.'

`Is this what you dreamt of when you were a medical student?' I asked Jock. `Is this really what you set out to achieve? A stethoscope with a drug company logo stamped on it? Sell your soul for an endless supply of cheap pens?'

`I don't think so,' Jock replied with a laugh. `I would never have dared to set my sights so high.' He laughed merrily at his own quip. I looked at him. He looked across at Jim and received a smile of approval.

The waiter turned up with preparations for our puddings, followed by the sommelier with the dessert wine. There was a delay while dishes were put in place and glasses were filled with what turned out to be an utterly hideous (though very expensive) fluid. It looked like engine oil but I think engine oil would have probably tasted more pleasant.

`There will, of course, be a generous honorarium involved,' said Jock.

`Indeed,' said Jim. `We want, that is to say our board wants, our company to be a part of your practice. And we cannot be a part of your practice without making a financial contribution. We want to help you improve the services you offer.'

`How much?' asked Deidre, who always likes to get straight to the point.

`One hundred and fifty thousand a year, for a rolling one year contract with an initial five year commitment on our side and a 7.5% escalator clause built in,' said Jim.

`That's sterling, of course,' said Jock, now a man of global interests and limitless ambitions; a man whose yearnings had no horizons.

`Of course,' agreed Jim. `Oh sterling, of course.'

The puddings came at last. I think they must have imported the raw ingredients from South America while we'd waited. There was much murmuring of approval from Lavinia and Deidre. But before we could start eating the culinary wonders set before us the chef himself appeared. His white coat was spotless, his hat as erect as ever. I noticed that he was tanned and his teeth had been whitened.

`Enjoying everything?' he demanded, in a tone that allowed no room for dissent. Everyone nodded and murmured approval and appreciation. Even I, coward that I am, nodded and murmured approval and appreciation.

`Marvellous, marvellous,' oozed the chef.

He squeezed Lavinia's shoulder and she squealed with delight.

I'd never before heard a woman squeal.

`Excuse me for asking,' said Deidre, pointing a fork at the pile of small, red cubes on her plate. `Can you tell me what these are, please?'

`Beetroot,' said the chef with a smile. `An unusual and impertinent combination I expect you'll agree. None of my competitors would dare put beetroot with a cheesecake. But you try it and you'll be hooked.' He gave Deidre one of his killer smiles, the one he uses in the gravy advertisements. `We must be thankful to the Americans for the cheesecake but I am responsible for the beetroot.'

`It's a myth that cheesecake was invented by the Americans,' I said. `The cheesecake photos might have been invented in America. But the cheesecake you eat is English.'

He looked at me as if I'd stood up and pissed on the table. `Oh no, no, no,' he said.

`Oh yes, yes, yes,' I replied quickly. `Cheesecake appeared in a cookery book written by King John's chef back in the 14th century. Unless you're suggesting that the Red Indians were making cheesecake before that, of course?' I had read this somewhere and was pretty sure it was correct. I didn't really care whether it was or wasn't.

The chef, who was clearly torn between standing his ground and annoying a customer with two expensive bottles of wine on the table, went as red as his beetroot and stormed off to the next table. Jock and Deidre both glowered at me when he'd gone. `You can't argue with Chef!' said Jock. `He doesn't like it.'

`Good for him,' I said. `There was too much salt in his gravy too.'

`There's just one little thing we'd ask from you in return,' said Jim, continuing his interrupted dissertation.

`Quite a fair and reasonable condition, I'm sure you'll both agree,' said Jock.

`The fact is that we wouldn't feel able to associate ourselves with your practice if you still had Tranter working with you,' said Jim. `Her reputation and public image really wouldn't sit comfortably with our board's vision for the company's status and future development. We would, of course, settle any necessary redundancy payments that were necessary. And cover you against any potential legal liabilities, though to be honest our legal people don't think you'd have any difficulties. Tranter has placed herself well outside the acknowledged ethical boundaries for the profession.'

`We do have to make sure that our corporate partners maintain the very highest standards,' said Lavinia. `And the problem is, of course, that Tranter is doing enormous damage to the reputation of the profession at large. Public trust is being eroded and that is in no one's interests. Members of the public need so much, so very, very much, to have faith in their doctors.'

`What do you two think?' asked Jock, looking first at Deidre and then at me.

`I think it's a very generous offer,' said Deidre. `Flattering and generous.' She paused. `If your company is going to want to put logos on our cars will you be providing the vehicles?' She didn't seem in the slightest bit concerned at the fact that we were being told to sack Molly if we wanted to get our sticky hands on the extra loot.

`Oh I think that would be quite fair and very reasonable,' said Jim. `You could, of course, each choose the vehicle of your preference. With a limit of say £50,000 per vehicle? Replacements every 12 months?'

`That's fine,' said Deidre, who seemed almost orgasmic, and was clearly sold on the whole damned idea. Jim hadn't blinked when she'd negotiated the car deal into the equation. I couldn't help wondering how far he had been authorised to go to persuade us to agree.

`What about you, Dr Cassidy?' asked Lavinia.

`It's a `no' from me,' I said. `Thanks for the offer but I couldn't let you decide who works with us and who doesn't.' I stood up. `And since our practice policy is that major decisions are made only when the three of us are agreed I'm afraid that means that the discussions are over.'

I pulled the linen napkin out of the waistband of my trousers, folded it and put on top of the treacle tart which I hadn't touched. `Thanks for the meal,' I said to Jim. I then turned to Lavinia. `And I don't much like receiving advice on morality from a drug company hack.'

Jim looked as though he had turned into stone. Lavinia, who probably thought she'd been complimented, blushed and giggled.

`You can't just say `no' to an offer like this!' said Jock.

I shrugged. `I think I just did,' I said.

`Can I take it that you aren't objecting to the principle of the naming or the sponsorship?' asked Jim.

`I'm not wild about the idea,' I said. `I suppose I could live with working in the Angipax Building and driving a car with Angipax painted on the sides. But I don't want your company to tell me who I can and cannot work with.'

I'd have probably agreed to accept the bribe if they hadn't included sacking Molly as part of the deal. I would not have had the energy to stand up to Jock and Deidre just to defend my right to work in the Jock Cohen Medical Centre. But then, I was pretty sure that without the sacking of Molly there wouldn't have been a deal.

Deidre, who had probably already spent her first year's £50,000 bonus, and picked out the make and colour of car she'd select, was white with anger. She opened and closed her mouth a few times but didn't manage to say anything.

`Goodnight!' I said, and left.

I had absolutely no doubt that the whole damned proposal was nothing but a plan and a simple old-fashioned bribe to persuade us to dump Molly.

And, of course, to silence her.

If Molly's campaign continued to attract attention, the cost to the drug industry would be measured in billions of pounds. Giving us a few hundred thousand (in tax deductible money) would be a worthwhile expense. The media wouldn't be much interested in a young doctor who'd been fired and who had no job. At that moment I loathed Jock and Deidre and the whole damned medical profession which had, it seemed to me, allowed itself to be bought by the drug industry. Even if Molly had been wrong I felt that she had a right to air her views. Isn't that what people do in a democracy? Moreover, it seemed to me that doctors who allow themselves to be ruled by a trade can hardly call themselves professionals. The Angipax offer had one other result. I was now absolutely certain that Molly's argument was right. If the drug companies had to resort to bribery in order to defeat her then her arguments had to be pretty solid.

As I drove away from the restaurant I felt quite depressed and couldn't help thinking of that single handed practice on the Scottish island. Or maybe I would just retire early and become a bitter and twisted middle aged man. When I got back home, I lit my pipe, poured myself a very large Laphroaig and read a chapter of a Lawrence Block novel about a hit man. It wasn't until I was getting ready for bed, and was emptying my jacket pockets, that I discovered the small black plastic token the hat check girl had given me and realised that I'd forgotten to collect my hat from the restaurant cloakroom.

Chapter 14

Suddenly and unexpectedly, Molly managed to make a new batch of enemies and, at the same time, became the poster girl for all those who believe that modern medicine does more harm than good.

She had agreed to be interviewed for a Channel 4 programme about doctors and hospitals and after answering what had for her become fairly routine questions about vaccines and vaccination she was asked if vaccination was the only area of modern medicine which worried her.

She said it wasn't. And in a couple of minutes she produced a critical onslaught which surprised many with its ferocity and its savagery. Most of all, however, it surprised people because of its obvious accuracy.

`It's difficult to know where to start,' she said. She was filmed in her consulting room at the Jock Cohen Medical Clinic. `Our hospitals are now almost as dangerous as hospitals were in the Middle Ages. Thousands of patients die because doctors make mistakes and because deadly, untreatable infections are endemic. Only cancer and heart disease kill more people than doctors. Most hospital staff admit that they would not be happy to be treated in the institution where they work. Patients who are admitted to hospital at the weekend are likely to die untreated and uncared for because the chances are they won't see anyone with more medical knowledge than a porter until Monday morning. Patients who have had surgery on a Thursday or a Friday are far more likely to die than patients who have surgery earlier in the week, simply because the care at weekends is so appalling. There are millions in this now Third World country of ours who are terrified of falling ill outside office hours. Bank holiday weekends mean that patients are deprived of medical care for three or four days at a time. Patients in hospital are dying of starvation and thirst and doctors and nurses seem to think that this is acceptable. Some hospitals, encouraged by the Government, deliberately starve their patients so that they will die. Did you know that? One third of all elderly patients who die in hospital, die because they have been deliberately starved to death. Doctors and nurses deliberately withhold food and water so that they will die.' The idea is to get rid of old people who are frail and need nursing and who are blocking hospital beds. And the cheapest way to get rid of them is to deprive them of food and water. Don't doctors or nurses give a damn anymore? Actually, they don't. Believe it or not hospital employees are rewarded with financial bonuses if they kill off enough elderly patients. Am I the only person to have noticed that medical staff are quick enough to threaten to go on strike if they want shorter hours or more money but never threaten to go on strike for better conditions for patients? It's no wonder that patients now die because they refuse to see a doctor or go into hospital. It happened in the Middle Ages and it's happening again now. People are turning away from general practitioners – sometimes because they don't trust them and sometimes because they simply can't get to see them – and putting their faith in quack remedies which are promoted and sold by charming hucksters.'

The interviewer, a softly spoken woman who didn't appear on camera, asked Molly what she felt about doctors who accept money for advertising specific products.

`I'm appalled,' replied Molly. `There seems to be a growing number of doctors who are prepared to climb up on the buckboard and promote the latest miracle medicine. A few years ago doctors got into terrible trouble if they put their names on books they'd written. Today doctors do advertisements on television and in magazines. I've seen real, live, practising doctors advertising chair lifts, hearing aids and vitamin tablets. Whatever happened to dignity and respect? How can anyone take doctors seriously, or trust what they say, when they appear in advertisements? Nurses are no better. I've even seen nurses advertising branded sanitary towels! And hospital nursing is a disgrace – mainly because today's nurses have been encouraged to think of themselves as mini-doctors, far too important to comfort patients, mop their brows or even feed them. Nurses who want to go up the ladder quickly end up working as administrators; they never see any patients at all. I've met senior nurses who work in cardigans. You can't change a catheter in a cardigan for heaven's sake. Florence Nightingale would have had twenty fits. I know nurses who describe themselves as `caring technology specialists' as though the words alone make them good at what they do. The truth is that patients don't give a damn whether or not their nurse has a diploma or a degree; they just want a nurse who genuinely cares and isn't afraid to show a little old-fashioned compassion.'

`What do you think about the situation in hospitals where patients have to wait several hours to be seen by a doctor?'

Molly leant forwards and waved her hands in the air, as though in despair. `I can't believe what's happening,' she said, clearly genuinely angry. `It is now considered acceptable and routine for patients to wait over nine hours in casualty departments before they are seen by a doctor. Nine hours in a city accident and emergency department! The wait is the same whether you're suffering from a heart attack, a stroke, meningitis or a broken arm. There would, quite rightly, be an outcry if Ministers or members of the Royal Family had to wait that long for treatment. It would be quicker to fly to Paris and take a taxi to a hospital there. It's not surprising that when illegal immigrants feel ill they make their way back home for treatment. What a terrible indictment that is. But the medical establishment seems to see absolutely nothing wrong in any of this. The medical profession and the nursing profession have accepted terribly low standards as normal.'

`Reckless doctors have overprescribed antibiotics with the result that many bugs are now immune to them and thousands of patients are dying of bug resistant infections. The fact that our hospitals are filthy doesn't help. Medical education is controlled by the drugs industry – and so doctors merrily prescribe whatever they're told to prescribe, not because it's effective or safe but because it's profitable. Does no one care that drugs tested and classified as `safe' are known to kill tens of thousands a year? Prescribed drugs are responsible for 600,000 hospital admissions a year in Britain alone! Does no one in the medical establishment give a damn that whenever doctors go on strike the death rate goes down? Does it not seem odd to anyone that the patients who are most likely to survive in hospitals are the ones who are tough enough and brave enough, and, sometimes, rude enough to stand up for themselves, while the polite, self-effacing patients are far more likely to die?'

I don't think Molly had planned what she said. In fact I'm damned sure she hadn't. It was all a bit mixed up but it obviously came straight from her heart. As I listened to her I knew that she was right about too many things; right more often than I wanted to admit, even to myself. And she was right to include nurses in her attack. Student nurses seem to be taught that they are above such duties as lifting patients (bad for their backs) or wiping bottoms (unseemly); they are taught that it is shameful to be `handmaidens' to physicians; they are taught that they are too important to bathe the sick, feed the weak, put flowers into a vase, hold a hand, wipe a sweaty brow and comfort patients who vomit, dribble, leak or behave irrationally or rudely. Modern nurses may have degrees in management but they know bugger all about people or the sick.

I'd heard some of Molly's complaints before, of course. For months, almost since she'd joined the practice, she had regaled me with new and horrifying titbits; new tales of bad doctoring and bad nursing. I think she may have felt that she had me on the ropes; that I was the easiest in the practice to convert to her way of thinking.

The truth is that she didn't have far to go. I have for years been terrified of hospitals; far more frightened of them than prison or extended family Christmases. A citizen has a decent chance of coming out of prison alive, probably healthier and almost certainly with valuable new skills. But for too many people, hospital is their last address above ground. And for too many it is the hospital, and the doctors in it, who are responsible for their deaths.

Perhaps nothing is new. It was, I believe, Molière who said that most men die of their remedies and not of their illnesses.

But while killing patients is bad enough it seems to me that killing patients without any signs of compassion is even worse. Too many doctors these days are simply damned cruel and thoughtless. They have no empathy at all. I saw a television programme recently in which a woman who was taken into a hospital casualty department said to the doctor treating her: `I'm not going to die, am I?' The doctor, a woman old enough to know better, looked at the patient and replied: `I hope not.' Several other doctors and nurses standing nearby did not even blink at this callous and potentially deadly remark. That bloody doctor should have been horse whipped. In the dark days when I was a medical student a nursing sister would have leapt upon any doctor who said anything as crass as that.

The tragedy is that no one noticed. No one blinked. It is nurses who traditionally provide patients with warm hands and soft shoulders. Today, all the patients get are hard faced, ruthless, clock-watching harridans. Patients are treated like supplicants. Condescending nurses treat all patients as though they've done something wrong.

`Why the hell did you become a doctor?' I had asked Molly once. She had looked at me incredulously. `It's not me that's wrong,' she'd said, with that bullet proof brand of confidence born of youth, courage and passion.

Now, millions of viewers had listened to her and some of them must have known that she was right.

How long, I wondered, will it be before hospitals and care homes follow the advice of satirist Jonathan Swift and sell our old people as food? I read in one of the medical journals recently that two thirds of all the people ever to have reached the age of 65 are alive today. It's no wonder that the sale of beige clothing is booming. Just think of the number of pies that could be made from all those old folk.

Would anyone stop it happening? Would anyone in authority care enough to do anything? The medical establishment would remain aloof and complacent. The General Medical Council, a bloated bureaucracy which is supposed to carry the responsibility of ensuring that patients are fairly and decently treated but which has, instead, become a self-serving source of employment and expenses for an army of meddling Uriah Heeps, would do bugger all of any value. Politicians and administrators would wring their hands publicly but in private they would continue to sweep all the problems out of sight – in exactly the same way that hospital cleaners sweep the dust and the dirt and the dried blood and the vomit and the urine and the faeces under the beds.

And, at that moment, as I was infected by her anger and her sense of outrage, I knew in my heart that she was also right about vaccines and vaccination.

For years our practice has made a small fortune out of vaccines. We buy them in bulk from the wholesalers and our practice nurses jab every patient who keeps still. The massive fees which we are paid go straight into our practice bank account. We get huge bonuses if we vaccinate a high enough percentage of our patients. We, like the rest of the medical profession, have been bought lock, stock and syringe barrel. We vaccinate all our patients because that’s what we are told to do. And we believe the people who do the telling because the doing is very, very profitable.

And yet never, not once, has any one of us ever sat down and questioned the value of what we do. We vaccinate because the Government and the drug companies tell us to vaccinate. I knew that Molly was right: no one has ever checked to find out whether vaccines do harm and no one has ever checked to find out whether they work.

Medicine is supposed to be based on science but as far as vaccines are concerned we’re practising a variety of black magic. Patients are murdered wholesale and millions of pounds of taxpayers money are spent covering up the evidence, and smothering the truth with a thick layer of lies and deceit.

I turned off the television set and I felt physically sick. I felt ashamed and dirty and furious with myself and my partners.

Chapter 15

The following morning, at the end of my surgery, I rang the Department of Health and asked to speak to someone about vaccines. I wanted to give the establishment one last chance.

`Could you give me references for some research showing that vaccines are safe and effective?' I asked a woman whose name I didn't catch.

`We have some leaflets we can send you,' she said. `We have leaflets for most of the common vaccines.'

`Yes, I'm sure you have. But I was looking for something a little meatier. I'm looking for some scientific research showing that vaccines really do work and are safe – or, at least, as safe as any drug can be. I was hoping you could either send me copies of some papers or give me some references.'

There was a pause. `What sort of research do you mean?'

`The sort where doctors compare a group of patients who've had a vaccine with a group of patients who haven't and then keep a record of how many of each group fall ill. That sort of thing.'

The woman asked me to wait a moment while she transferred me to someone else. I signed some prescriptions while I waited.

`Good morning,' said another woman. She spoke with a harsh foreign accent. `You are some leaflets wanting?'

I explained, again, what I wanted.

`Which vaccine?' she asked.

`Any vaccine,' I said desperately.

`You must give me the name of a vaccine.'

`OK. The whooping cough vaccine. Or the influenza vaccine. Both. Either.'

The woman went away. While I waited I signed half a dozen letters, dictated half a dozen more into a little machine I sometimes use, and signed another pile of repeat prescriptions.

Then there was a click and the woman came back.

`Both these vaccines are quite safe,' she said.

`How do you know?'

`What do you mean `How do I know?'?'

`Who told you?'

`It's very well known' she said. Everyone knows.'

`Yes, but do you have details of any research I could look at?'

`Research?'

`Scientific investigations – to show that vaccines work and are safe.'

`Why would anyone want to do research to show that?'

`To show that they are safe?'

`Everyone knows that they are safe and that they work.'

She said she could send me some leaflets to put in the waiting room.

I rang the Royal College of General Practitioners, the British Medical Association and the Royal Society of Medicine. No one I spoke to could help me. No one I spoke to knew of any evidence proving that vaccines are safe and effective. Nothing. Not a bloody thing.

`Of course they work. Of course they're safe!' said one pompous fellow I spoke to. `Everyone knows they work and everyone knows they're safe. Do you imagine for a second that the Government would be promoting their use if we didn't know they were safe? There are committees who decide that they work.'

And that was what everyone said.

Everyone knew they were safe and effective because everyone said they were safe and effective. And because everyone knew they were safe and effective there was absolutely no need to do any research to find out if they were safe and effective.

It was a confidence trick: the biggest, and deadliest, confidence trick in the world.

I felt confused and bewildered.

I felt like a priest who had lost his faith.

Chapter 16

I didn’t see Molly at all the following day, though I kept hoping that I would bump into her. I tried to ring her several times but kept missing her. She had made up the night call duty that she’d missed and that evening I was on duty again so I stayed late at the surgery to deal with the damned paperwork.

When I first started as a general practitioner the paperwork was manageable. There were far too many forms but most of them had a fairly sensible function. No one minds filling in a form to request a blood test or an X-ray. But the number of forms has exploded. Today you have to fill in a form if you want to fill in a form and, like all doctors, I spend more time pandering to the whims of the bureaucrats than I do ministering to the sick. The world of medicine has gone mad and it is nowhere madder than in the National Health Service, the home of socialised medicine. The bureaucrats have taken over completely and our new purpose is not to serve the sick but to serve the whims of the administrators. They have, for years, been commoner than cockroaches in hospitals (though not as attractive or as useful) and now they have found their way into the previously unsullied backwaters of general practice.

Florence Nightingale gave all the real power to qualified doctors and nurses, rather than administrators, and insisted that individuals should accept responsibility for what they did. Her methods were so clearly successful that they were exported around the world and for decades every civilised country practised medicine the Nightingale Way. But Florence’s methods had the twin disadvantages of working and being Victorian. And so people had to change things.

In the 1970's a half-wit called Salmon wrote a report, which he modestly called *The Salmon Report*, in which he announced that managers should have all the power in hospitals, and that doctors and nurses should simply do what they were told. Salmon, who was a fool, was chairman of a company called J.Lyons which was famous for running tea rooms for the lower middle classes and he succeeded in wrecking this perfectly excellent company by messing around with hedging and foreign currencies. As an idiot he was way ahead of his time. Naturally, politicians and bureaucrats loved Salmon and approved of his idea that they, not doctors or nurses, should be in charge and so they quickly implemented his entirely untested ideas.

Things were then made infinitely worse when the authorities started listening to a mildly insane and very rigid American called Fred Taylor. The immensely stupid Taylor was a failed manager who had become a management consultant so that he could tell other people how to do what he could not do himself, and he was an enthusiastic fan of outsourcing for the simple reason that it was something of which he had absolutely no experience or knowledge and it was, therefore, something at which he had never failed. His big idea was that organisations such as the NHS should employ outside companies to do essential work on the grounds that this would ensure that the work was done more expensively and less efficiently. Taylor also believed that middle management was a waste of time and money and so the NHS got rid of ward sisters, who had virtually run hospitals and who had made sure that most patients benefited from their hospital experience. Without ward sisters no one was responsible for anything at all. Taylor had no reason for believing that middle management was pointless; it was just a whim of his. `Against stupidity the gods themselves struggle in vain’, wrote Schiller. And when stupidity comes up against such feeble opponents as incompetence and indifference the consequences are firmly set in the direction of disaster.

The result of all this is that today the number crunchers have all the power, no one accepts any responsibility and important medical decisions are made by people with no knowledge of anything at all. Medicine has been raped by ignorant buffoons.

Moreover, things have been made considerably worse by the widespread belief, common among politicians and civil servants, that, if left alone, the rest of us will invariably make flawed and irrational decisions and that in order to get round this problem people must be `helped’ to make the `right’ decisions by constantly being nudged in the ‘correct’ direction. And so doctors and nurses must now run their professional lives in such a way as to meet a series of arbitrary targets. One result of this is that surgeons prefer to do lots of small operations for non-life threatening problems, and to delay operations that are potentially life-saving but time consuming, because this enables them to deal with a higher percentage of the patients on their waiting lists and, therefore, to hit their allocated targets.

I used to have a small wire basket on my desk for incoming mail. Today I have two huge trays. One is labelled `Forms’. The other is labelled `More Forms’. My mail used to consist of real letters in proper envelopes. Today it consists of paperwork which seems to have been designed and built by bureaucratic robots. The forms and instructions and are sent round in huge packets and delivered by health service employees in special vans. I long ago gave up reading any of it because I know from experience that most of it will be incomprehensible and the rest will simply infuriate me.

An acquaintance of mine is a pharmacist. He complains constantly that although he was trained to produce all sorts of potions and lotions, and learned a good deal about drugs, he spends his life counting out pills and putting them into bottles. Occasionally, for added excitement, he gets to nod his approval when a customer wants to buy pile cream or something for a rash. I used to feel sorry for him. No more. Today, I'm living the same nightmare. I trained to be a doctor; to diagnose and to treat; to prescribe and to operate. But my days are now spent pandering to the latest nonsensical, bureaucratic whim.

Eventually, I got close to finishing the paperwork on my desk and decided to leave the rest for another day. I was tired and hungry and wanted to lie down and stare at the inside of my eyelids for a while.

The `accident' happened on my way back home from the surgery.

It wasn't raining and the roads were relatively quiet. It was dusk but the street lamps hadn't yet been turned off. (The council turns the lights off when it gets really dark in order to save money and free up valuable resources. I suspect that they need the money to pay for better quality biscuits to be served at meetings. There were probably complaints when cutbacks threatened a shortage of bourbon creams and chocolate digestives.)

I was driving just within the speed limit (I apologise if this is beginning to sound like an accident claim report) and was no more than half a mile away from home when a small truck shot out of a side turning and smashed into the side of my car. The impact pushed me half way across the road and the front airbags went off with a bang. It was all rather scary. It wasn't until a good few seconds later that I realised that the other vehicle, the one which had hit me, had disappeared completely. Everything had happened so quickly that I had no idea what make the truck had been. I certainly couldn't describe the colour, let alone remember the number.

Once I had extricated myself from the loving caresses of the over-enthusiastic airbags, and had managed to clamber out of the car, I realised how lucky I had been. I had a sore wrist and a bloody nose and I suspected that my neck was going to be pretty painful in a few hours' time but other than that I had escaped, as they say, without serious injury. My car, on the other hand, looked as if it was almost certainly doomed to be written off and converted, at best, into a source of spare parts or, at worst, into a couple of fridges. Modern cars are made of something not quite as strong as cellophane and a bump on one side leads to dents and distortions everywhere. The absence of a chassis, and the extortionate cost of officially sourced spare parts, means that it is usually cheaper to write-off a damaged car than to attempt to repair it. That's what insurance companies say, anyway, and they're the ones with the power. The smell of fuel suggested both that the tank had ruptured and that it might be wise to move as far away from the wrecked vehicle as possible. I grabbed my coat and drug bag from the front seat, waved away a young man whom I assumed was a Good Samaritan and who was approaching from the far pavement, and plodded away from the wreckage. Only as I passed him did I realise that the young man was holding up a mobile telephone and taking pictures of the wreck. His intention, it seemed, had not been to rescue me but to photograph the scene and, presumably, put the pictures on his Facebook page. `Today, I had my bowels opened three times and saw a bloke wobbling out of this wreck in the middle of the road.' Self before sympathy; the modern mantra. Television and the Internet have created a race of Bad Samaritans.

English folk are, quite rightly, dismissive of the French. We are, after all, superior to them in pretty well every conceivable way. But, thanks entirely to the Iron Duke's sparring partner, Napoleon Bonaparte, the French do have some sensible legal codes and the most humane is the one which holds every citizen responsible, in an emergency, for the welfare of his fellows. A Frenchman who walked by on the other side of the road to avoid an accident, or who preferred to take photos with his phone rather than offer succour would, if spotted by a gendarme, find himself thrown into the Gallic slammer. (It is not widely appreciated, by the way, that Napoleon had his barking moments. When he commissioned the Arc de Triomphe his original plan was for a 250 foot high elephant with water spouting from its trunk. Sadly, the Emperor lost his nerve, changed his mind and built a boring archway instead.)

It was raining by now, of course, so I took shelter in a shop doorway and as I did so I realised that I was lucky to find a space. Most of the doorways had already been bagged by middle aged men wrapped in cardboard and discarded bubble wrap. I reached into my pocket for my pipe and found to my horror that it had smashed. I was more upset about the loss of my pipe than I was about the loss of the car. A good pipe, like a good cricket bat, has to be selected, nurtured and broken in. This one had been a calabash with a meerschaum bowl. Now that any sort of smoking has become close to criminal, finding a decent pipe shop isn't easy and I knew it would take ages to track down a replacement.

Those interfering Nazis who want smoking banned should know that smoking can save your life. A patient of mine who smokes 60 a day and works as a painter and decorator was the only one of four workmen not to fall ill when there was a dangerous carbon monoxide leak. The other blokes nearly died but the smoker didn't suffer because all the crap in his lungs acted as a filter and kept the carbon monoxide out of his bloodstream. I tell people this but they're never quite as impressed as I think they should be.

Someone had rung the police (quite possibly to complain that the noise made by the denting of metal had spoilt their enjoyment of the latest episode of their favourite soap opera) and a squad car arrived within minutes. The police don't do burglaries or murders these days but they're always quick off the mark whenever motor vehicles are involved. Naturally no one had bothered to ring for an ambulance although, to be fair, one of the two rather officious policemen who arrived did eventually think to ask if I needed medical attention. Not wanting to risk another brush with death I said I would be fine without spending nine hours stuck on a hard chair in the local casualty department. Like most of the doctors I know I do everything I can to avoid putting my life in the hands of the staff at our local hospital.

I rang my insurance company, explained briefly what had happened, and promised to fill in the required forms and to provide them with a fuller report when I'd stopped bleeding. A bored sounding woman in some remote part of Scotland wanted me to fill in the forms online but I refused point blank and told her to post them to me. Heaven forbid that anything should ever happen without a report being written, given a number and filed online. I think she also agreed to send a tow truck to recover what was left of the car. Her accent was so thick that she could have been reading out a recipe for something tasty made with neeps and sheeps' intestines.

Talking to the local constabulary wasn't much more fun. After I had been allowed to explain what had happened I was breathalysed and when (to my surprise and delight) the result was negative the two police officers put up warning signs and controlled the passing traffic with more officiousness than efficiency until the tow truck sent by the insurance company eventually turned up to remove the sad remains of my car.

It was only as we stood waiting for the tow truck that I remembered that I was still on call for the practice patients. I had no vehicle and was beginning to stiffen up. I was, to be honest, also beginning to feel the after effects of the shock. I was shivering and felt slightly nauseous. I silently prayed to whichever God was on duty to stem the flow of emergency calls until I could make other arrangements.

`Do you mind if I get a taxi?' I asked one of the policemen. I explained that I was a GP on duty and that I needed either to sort out alternative transport or to arrange for one of my partners to take over the calls for the night. The policeman said they'd have to wait for the truck to arrive because the wreck was a traffic hazard; and then, to my surprise, he radioed for another police patrol car and when it arrived asked them to give me a lift home.

Chapter 17

`I'm afraid it really is most inconvenient,' said Jock, when I rang him and explained what had happened. I'd asked him if he could cover the emergency calls for me.

`I'm having dinner with two chaps from the manufacturers of the new influenza vaccine. Fascinating work they've done. I'll tell you about it in the morning. They're offering us a special deal on bulk purchases. The more we buy the cheaper the price we pay. I've had an awful day. I was in a meeting with the builders all afternoon. We were going through the plans for the conversion of my new house. You can't imagine how many problems we've got to sort out. We want to preserve the back staircase, the one which used to be for the hotel staff, but we want to remove a wall to improve access to the back bedrooms and we've just discovered that the whole place is a listed building. I can't imagine why I wasn't told before. We've now got to call in all sorts of snotty nosed bureaucrats with cheap pens in their jacket pockets to decide what we can and can't do. And that's not the half of it. Some little twat in a cheap Marks and Spencer suit says we can't cover the roof with solar panels. Crazy isn't it? Does the Government want to prevent global warming or doesn't it? Still, the deal we're getting on this new flu vaccine will help pay for quite a lot of it.'

`I haven't got a car,' I interrupted.

`Oh,' said Jock. He didn't seem to have listened to anything I'd said. `I'd lend you one of ours but I don't think the insurance will cover you. Can't you hire a replacement? Doesn't your insurance company offer you a free hire car?'

`It's nearly 8.00 pm,' I told him. `There's only one hire car place in town and it's closed.' I felt awful. My neck was really quite painful and although I'd managed to stop the nosebleed by stuffing most of a paper tissue up the offending nostril, I had discovered that I'd cut my knee. It must have collided with something in the car. It had bled quite badly, though I hadn't noticed it at the time, and my trouser leg was now stiff with dried blood. It was only venous blood. Blood trickles out of a vein like a motorist out for a Sunday afternoon drive in the 1950's. It moves gently and takes its time. Blood from an artery comes out with all the speed and venom of motorists on the M25. I really just wanted to pour myself a large whisky and run a hot bath.

`Shouldn't you be ringing Molly?' he asked, suddenly. `The off duty rota is supposed to be shared between the two of you.'

`I'm sorry,' I said, wearily. `I just thought…'

The miserable bastard hadn't even asked if I was hurt. My various bits and pieces were by now beginning to hurt like hell. Pain, I was discovering, comes quicker and lasts longer as the years go rolling by.

`If you can't get hold of Molly just use taxis if you need to go out,' said Jock. `You could charge them to the practice, I suppose.' He paused. `That damned Molly is probably in a television studio somewhere,' he added. `It really is too bad of her. She's caused us all a good deal of trouble. I think we'll have to reconsider her position when her contract is due for renewal. We'd have been much better off with that young fellow I wanted to hire. I know he was a bit slick for you and Deidre but he wouldn't have given us all these problems.'

`Thanks, Jock,' I said. `By the way did you get that note from some idiot at the Department of Health telling us of that new ruling about pregnant women?'

`What new ruling?'

`They have to stay indoors for the final six months of their pregnancies. It's some new EU law. Something to do with pregnant women being considered offensive when seen in public.'

`Really? Have they really said that?'

`Oh yes, I think so, Jock. Perhaps you'd better check it out to make sure. Maybe it's just five months. One of the receptionists is bound to know.' I put the telephone down. I had long ago realised that shouting at Jock did not do any good at all. But making him look a fool in front of the receptionists always made me feel better.

There was no point in my telephoning Deidre. Mrs Canterbury was still not speaking to me. I'd seen her several times since the dinner with Jim and Lavinia but she'd pretended to look straight through me. The only other person I could ring was Molly.

I hadn't telephoned Molly straight away because I knew she had a busy evening. Her boyfriend Larry had managed to obtain a spot on a locally broadcast television programme for young comedy talents. A producer or director he'd met while visiting television studios with Molly had fixed it up for him.

I tried ringing her mobile phone but it was switched off so, after a struggle, I managed to send her a text message. It was full of errors but just about legible. I can't type and have never been able to cope at all with the tiny keyboards fitted on telephones. I then filled the kettle and switched it on. A hot whisky would, I decided, be medicinal. And since I wouldn't be driving it could be a large one. While I waited for the kettle to boil I went upstairs and started to run a bath. Just climbing up the stairs exhausted me. I hadn't eaten for hours but I still felt too nauseous to eat anything. I then limped back down the stairs, made my hot whisky in a Russian tea glass, and crawled back up the stairs to the bathroom. I have great faith in the medicinal properties of whisky and consider it a vastly underrated drug. When I was a young hospital doctor I used to prescribe alcohol for all my patients instead of sleeping tablets. They could choose a large sherry or a pint of Guinness. I had the happiest patients on any ward and my patients always recovered more speedily than anyone else's. When people tell me I drink too much I remind them of Utrillo, the French painter. He used to drink nearly two gallons of red wine before starting work and produced many masterpieces. When he married, his wife moved them both to the suburbs and started watering his wine. His confidence and skill disappeared and he produced an endless selection of mediocre daubs.

I was half undressed when my telephone rang.

`What on earth has happened?' asked Molly. `Are you OK?'

I gave her an abbreviated version.

`Are you injured? Do you need me to come and check you over?'

`No, thanks. I'm just a bit sore and bruised. I've got a cut knee but it's not too bad. I'll put on a plaster when I've had a bath because it'll probably start to bleed again when the dried stuff washes off. With any luck the plaster will stay on for long enough for the bleeding to stop. When I was a kid you had to prise sticking plasters off with a chisel. These days they fall off after two minutes.'

`Do you think they'll catch the bastard who drove into you?'

`I doubt it. I couldn't even tell them the colour of the truck. It was all over in a second. He just drove straight into the side of me and then raced off. It was probably some kid who'd borrowed his dad's truck without asking. How's Larry doing?'

`He's doing brilliantly, thank you. He's recorded his piece. The director said he was really pleased with it. They might have to cut a few bits but they loved the gag about the audience only knowing if he really needed the wheelchair if the studio caught fire. Do you remember?'

I said I did and sent him my congratulations.

`I'm not sure I can manage tonight's duty calls,' I said, having apologised. `And having no car doesn't help…'

`Put the phone calls through to my mobile straight away,' said Molly. `I took it for granted that you'd do that. No problem. We've been having a few drinks here in the green room but I'll come straight back.'

`Are you OK to drive?'

`I've only drunk orange juice and a glass of something with bits of fruit floating in it. The director said it was definitely non-alcoholic and suitable for vegetarians!' She giggled. I thanked her, asked her to give Larry my congratulations and told her I'd see her in the morning.

`I'll do your morning surgery and calls,' she said.

I told her I'd be fine for the morning surgery but that if I couldn't arrange a hire car I might need her to do my morning calls. She said that was no problem. I thanked her again, repeated my congratulations to Larry and ended the call. I then finished undressing, climbed into the bath and sipped my hot whisky. My knee started bleeding again but the hot water helped ease the pains in my muscles and joints. The bump hadn't done my arthritis any good at all. I very nearly succumbed to my ultimate remedy: three 300 mg soluble aspirin tablets dissolved in a large glass of whisky.

When I clambered out of the bath I didn't bother getting dressed but just pulled on my striped pyjamas and a frayed dressing gown which was once maroon. The nausea had gone and I was feeling a bit brighter (probably because of the whisky as much as anything else) so I went downstairs and dug a Cornish pasty out of the fridge. I ate that with a couple of slices of bread and butter. I found a piece of pork pie but it looked too much like a pathology laboratory specimen for even me to eat. I then found an old crumpet which was rather stale and crisp at the edges but which would clearly be edible when toasted and buttered, and made myself another hot glass of Laphroiag with water. There is no doubt that of all the malt whiskies the best one to drink warm is Laphroiag. The hot water brings out the peaty taste magnificently well. Cooks and dieticians talk a good deal of nonsense about balanced diets but there's nothing to beat a Cornish pasty, a hot crumpet and a glass of hot Laphroaig.

I'd settled down in my favourite easy chair with a copy of an old Graham Greene novel that I'd hadn't read for years when the telephone went. It was the police. I thought at first that they must have caught the driver who'd caused my accident. But they weren't calling about my accident at all.

`Is that Dr Cassidy?' asked a very formal sounding voice.

I said it was.

`We've had to arrest a young lady called Dr Tranter,' said the voice. `She asked us to call you. Apparently she's a general practitioner and supposed to be on call. She said would you mind taking over the duty calls.'

`What have you arrested her for?'

`Driving while under the influence,' replied the policeman.

I went cold and shivered.

`Has there been an accident? Is she OK?'

`No, no accident, sir. She was stopped by one of our patrols. She failed a random breathalyser test. And the police doctor has taken blood samples.'

`Are you letting her go now? I'll come and pick her up. Is her boyfriend with her? He's in a wheelchair.'

`One of our vans is taking the boyfriend to one of the local hospitals,' said the policeman. `But she'll be staying with us for the night.'

`Why can't she go home now that you've taken a blood sample? She normally looks after her boyfriend herself at night. Someone comes in during the daytime but at night she can manage him by herself.'

`There was a bit more to it than just the drunk driving I'm afraid, sir. She hit one of our officers on the arm. She punched him. He said it was quite sore afterwards.'

`She was probably just upset,' I said. `She wasn't supposed to be on duty this evening. It was her evening off. I was on duty but I had to ring her to take over because I had an accident and my car was written off.'

I could almost hear the shrug of indifference. `None of that's our concern, sir,' said the policeman. `We have a zero tolerance attitude towards violent attacks on police officers.'

I could not believe any of this was happening.

`Can I see her?' I asked.

`Not tonight,' said the policeman firmly.

`Tell her not worry about the calls or her surgery tomorrow,' I said. `And tell her I'll ring a solicitor to come down to the police station as soon as I can.'

I wasn't too worried. The breathalyser test must have been an error.

Chapter 18

It wasn't until ten o'clock the following morning that Nick Yardley, the practice solicitor, succeeded in extracting Molly from the local police station. And I was so busy with my surgery, her appointments and our combined emergency calls that it was two o'clock in the afternoon before I managed to take a taxi to the ground floor flat she shared with Larry. I still didn't have a replacement car. One of the receptionists (the one with the undiagnosed thyroid condition which I keep meaning to talk to her about) had spent two hours on the telephone to the insurance company. They had refused to arrange for a replacement car until they had received my report and spoken to me again. The bureaucrats make all the rules and the games we play are theirs. I'd had to keep a taxi and its driver waiting outside the clinic all morning so that I could deal with any emergency calls. Jock would moan when I gave him the bill but if he'd helped out with the calls, or lent me one of his cars, I wouldn't have needed the taxi.

Molly was in tears when I arrived. Not surprisingly, she looked as if she hadn't slept at all. She looked broken and defeated. Journalists and photographers and a television crew had settled on the pavement outside her flat. A reporter I knew told me that someone, presumably a policeman, had released details of Molly's arrest within minutes of it happening. `The newsdesk got a tip off,' he told me. `Don't know where it came from.' It annoys me that the police do this. There is, it seems, always someone in a police station eager to earn a few quid by reporting accidents and incidents to the media. When a celebrity is involved the cash payments can, I understand, be quite substantial. No one seems to realise, or care, that unsubstantiated allegations, however baseless, can ruin a career when reported in the media. I wondered if the person who had shared the details of Molly's arrest with the press had known this. The publicity certainly added to the pressure on Molly and well suited the interests of those who opposed her outspoken views. Death by a thousand cuts.

What was happening to Molly reminded me of Machiavelli's advice that in order to win a battle one should inflict many injuries on an opponent in as brief a time as possible. During the 20th century, military tacticians developed this philosophy and turned it into an ever more successful military strategy known as the `expanding torrent offence'. The victim has no idea where the next attack is coming from and becomes frightened, disorientated and unsettled by a constant stream of attacks. I had heard that the drug companies had become adept at using this technique when dealing with critics. A man called Stanley Adams wrote a book about his own experiences at the hands of a drug company he had crossed.

I asked her what Nick had said to her.

`He tried to get the assault charge dropped but the police won't budge,' she said. `He said they're being very stubborn.'

`What happened? Did you really hit the policeman?'

`After they stopped me and breathalysed me I tried to check that Larry was all right. There were two policemen. One of them, a huge brute of a fellow, grabbed my upper arm. He had a very strong grip and it hurt. I just punched him on the arm to try to make him let me go. It was just a reflex; it wasn't much of a punch. To be honest I doubt if he felt it.'

I thought she was probably right. A punch from Molly probably wouldn't have caused a butterfly too much inconvenience. I couldn't see how she could have done a big policeman much harm.

`Let me see your arm.'

She removed her jumper and pulled up the sleeve of her blouse. There were clear finger marks on her skin. `Have you got a camera?'

`There's one on my `phone.'

`Let me borrow it.'

She dug her iPhone out of her bag and gave it to me. When she'd shown me how to use it I took several pictures of her arm. `Does this thing put the date on the picture?'

`I don't know.'

`Can you email from this thing?'

`Yes. What do you want to email?'

`Do you have the solicitor's email address?'

`He left me his card.'

`Send him the pictures I just took. And add a note saying that I took the pictures and will testify that I examined your arm today.'

`Why?'

`Because the pictures are evidence that the policeman grabbed you and used excessive force. And your defence has to be that you only punched him because he was hurting you. I don't know whether or not it will help. But maybe they'll back off from the assault charge if you threaten to sue him for assaulting you.'

Molly sent the email and the pictures to Nick. She then scrolled down the list of new emails she'd received. She was already pale but she now went even paler.

`The editor of the *British Clinical Journal* has sent me a curt note. They're withdrawing my article on vaccination from their records and their website and they've issued an official apology for having published it. They're treating the article as `fraudulent research'.'

`Can they do that?'

`He says they have. He says he has been informed that my arguments were flawed and that the article was published in error.'

It seemed as though the walls were closing in on Molly. We sat in silence for a few moments.

`Did you really not drink any alcohol?' I asked her. `Are you sure you didn't drink anything alcoholic at the television studios?'

`Not a drop. You know me. I don't drink alcohol. The blood test will come back fine and it will all blow over. What's the worst that could happen?'

`This is modern Britain. The penalty for not failing a blood test? They could tear out your fingernails, shoot off your knee caps, nail your tongue to the table, stick hot needles in your eyes, make you eat your liver and then arrange for Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to audit your last tax return.'

She smiled weakly. `How are you? How are you feeling? Tell me again what happened.'

I told her about the crash and assured her that I was feeling fine. `Just bruised and battered!' I looked around and suddenly realised that there was no sign of Larry. She explained that he was still at the hospital. `He's sitting in a corridor,' she told me. `They said I have to fetch him. But my car is at the police station. I rang two taxi companies but neither of them had cars which can take a wheelchair.'

I rang the hospital, spoke to the sister in charge of the Accident and Emergency Department and asked her to send Larry back home in an ambulance. She moaned a bit but I told her that if she didn't help us out I would send every patient I saw to hospital with a letter demanding an urgent X-ray. I was really pissed off with the world and not in a mood to do anything by the book. '

`Are you trying to blackmail me?'

`I suppose I am. Would bribery be more effective?'

`Try me.'

`I'll send you a large box of biscuits covered in chocolate.' It is my experience that nurses will do just about anything for chocolate biscuits.

She laughed and said that under the circumstances she would send Larry home straight away. While I was on a roll I rang my insurance company, dictated a lengthy report to a sullen teenager working somewhere in Asia, and demanded to speak to a supervisor. I asked for her name and then told the haughty woman that I was a doctor and that I needed a car. `If you don't have a car delivered to my surgery within thirty minutes I will blame you personally for any deaths which occur as a result of my not being able to visit my patients. I will write your name on the death certificate as the cause of death. The police will have to arrest you. You will be summoned to appear in the coroner's court. Your company will receive terrible publicity and you could well end up being charged with manslaughter.'

The supervisor, now considerably less haughty, her voice trembling noticeably, promised that a car would be delivered to the surgery as soon as humanly possible. I believed her. The death certificate ploy has served me well over the years. She then had the last laugh by telling me that since I did not have the registration number of the truck which had hit me my insurance company would not be able to trace the other driver's insurer and so I would either be liable for the damage myself or I would lose my no claims bonus. This reminded me, as if I needed reminding, that insurance companies always win in the end.

Finally, I rang the Jock Cohen Health Centre and told one of the receptionists (since we were on the telephone I had no idea which one) to call a taxi to take her to the local Accident and Emergency department. `Take some money from the petty cash tin. On your way to the hospital stop at a grocery store and buy the largest and most expensive box of chocolate biscuits you can find. When you get to the hospital tell the taxi driver to wait. Go inside and give the biscuits to the sister in charge with my compliments. And then take the taxi back to the surgery.'

When I put the telephone down Molly was laughing. She was still crying, but now she was laughing as well. `That's the most impressive five minutes of telephone work I've ever seen.'

I grinned at her. `Sometimes you have to play the system the way it's been designed to be played. And occasionally it works.' I felt quite proud of myself; as though I'd achieved something. Sometimes we all delude ourselves.

Less than ten minutes later there was a knock on the door and when Molly answered it two ambulance-men wheeled Larry into the front hall. They were cheerful and kindly and it occurred to me for the millionth time that we pay the wrong people the big money. Ambulance men and women should get the high salaries but society gives the big salaries to models whose only discernible skill is being able to walk while wearing clothes and to television presenters whose sole talent is to be able to read while sitting down.

Larry was spitting nails at having been left in a hospital corridor for hours. I told him and Molly that I'd speak to them later but that I'd better get back to the surgery to take delivery of my replacement vehicle.

Chapter 19

I suppose it is just about possible that the insurance company might have been able to find a smaller, dirtier, less powerful car if they'd had more time, but in the few minutes I'd given them they had done pretty well.

I don't know what make it was because most modern cars look the same to me and the little badge at the back, which might have given me a clue, was covered in mud, but it was filthy on the outside and filthy on the inside. It looked as if it had been used by a sales representative who'd done 2,000 miles a week in it, slept in it and used it as a dining room. Judging by the refuse which had been left in the car he'd probably died of a hard-earned heart attack. Burger wrappers, coke cans and crisp packets suggested that he or she hadn't been a health freak. The stench of congealed, cold animal fat was so bad that I had to open the two windows which worked.

When I turned on the ignition and pressed the accelerator the car made a noise like a faulty washing machine. Still, it moved forwards, it was a car and it was what that I needed.

I visited a widow called Mrs Brustwarze who'd suffered a deep vein thrombosis and had run out of her warfarin tablets. She had taken rat poison pellets instead. `They're the same thing, aren't they?' she asked. I agreed that they both contained the same basic ingredient, but told her that I would rather she took my nice little tablets because I could control the dose more easily. She promised me that she would take my tablets in the future because the rat poison pellets had turned out to be rather expensive and in view of her age she got her prescriptions free. In the meantime I called an ambulance and when it came I persuaded her to get into it so that the hospital could check her blood and keep an eye on her for a day or so. When the ambulance had gone I had to take her two cats to the local cattery. They were fat, lazy house cats which probably explained why a woman who lived with two cats also had a box of rat poison pellets under her kitchen sink.

`You doing animals now, are you doctor?' said a neighbour when he saw me climbing into my grotty little hire car with one of those huge plastic carriers which people use for transporting cats. I told him to shut up and weed his front garden.

When I'd dropped off the cats I visited a man who told me he wanted a sex change operation because he'd heard that women lived longer than men and then called on an old woman who took 25 minutes to undress to a point where I could poke the end of my stethoscope through a small gap in the armour plating and manage to listen to her chest. `Do you always wear so many layers?' I asked her. `Oh no,' she replied. `I dressed up because I knew you were coming.'

I then had a phone call from Jock. He was in a filthy mood.

`Why did you tell me all that rubbish about pregnant women?'

`What rubbish about pregnant women?'

`You said they have to stay indoors for the last six months of their pregnancies! I've spent half the morning telephoning people to check it out. I've made myself look a complete idiot.'

`Is it not true then?'

`You know damned well it's not true,' said Jock.

`Well maybe the people you spoke to just hadn't heard about it,' I told him. `It's always safer to check these things out thoroughly.' I ended the call. Jock really is an idiot but if he didn't exist someone would have to invent him.

The complications of the day meant that I got back to the surgery half an hour late for the evening surgery. I wanted to go home, climb into bed, pull up the covers and shut out the world. There was a small revolution brewing in the waiting room. Jock had already seen five patients and mine were getting restless. I stuck my head round the door, apologised and explained that I'd been busy with an emergency. It wasn't quite the truth but it was near enough and took up less time than explaining about the cats and the impenetrable corsetry.

`Is there any food back there?' I asked one of the duty receptionists before I hurried upstairs to my consulting room. It was one I hadn't seen before. She was fat and had red hair. She didn't seem to have any health problems but she was sitting down and I couldn't see all that much of her. Knowing our luck she probably had rabies, leprosy or distemper. She'd either bite a patient or leave fingers stuck in the filing cabinet drawers.

She looked at me as if I were barking mad. `Just biscuits and chocolates,' she said, rather sternly I thought.

`Put some on a plate, please. And make me a mug of tea.'

`We don't serve food to clients,' she said, going red all over. I wondered if she were maybe menopausal and having a flush.

`Are you new?'

`Yes.'

`I'm Dr Cassidy, one of the partners,' I told her, silently wishing that Jock would introduce us to the new members of staff he hires. `And I'm starving. Bring me up something to eat, there's a sweetheart. And a drink. If you haven't got whisky a tea will do. And for the record this isn't a hairdressing salon so the folk who come in here are patients not clients.'

I'd just dealt with my third patient when the flushed receptionist finally turned up with the refreshments. She had put two chocolates and two digestive biscuits onto a plate. It wasn't exactly a feast. The chocolates looked like the sort filled with toffee. I can't eat toffees when I'm seeing patients.

`I don't appreciate being called `sweetheart',' she said, slamming the plate down on my desk. `It's sexist and demeaning. And since we're all supposed to be professionals here I don't think it's my job to make cups of tea for co-workers.'

I looked at her. `Sorry, love. I didn't mean to offend you.'

She stared at me, went red again, and stormed out. I'm pretty sure that if my door didn't have one of those springs on it she would have slammed it. I decided she was almost certainly menopausal and that an exhausting rush of hormones must be flooding through her body.

My first patient was a youth of 19 who had injured his leg taking part in the annual cheese rolling event which seems to be a vital part of social life in Gloucestershire. Before he left he asked me to sign a petition to have the event included in the next Olympics. I did so happily. As far as I'm concerned chasing a rolling cheese down a grassy knoll is far more worthy of a place in the sporting pantheon than synchronised swimming. Next, I saw a poor sod who'd managed to escape from the local hospital after a botched operation to remove a misbehaving gall bladder. The scar they'd left was horrendous and if it had been created by a make-up artist working on a horror movie I'd have told them they'd overegged the pudding. The wretched fellow looked as though he'd been operated on by a team of workmen moonlighting from their jobs digging holes for the council. He wanted a sick note.

`What's your job?' I asked him.

`I'm a Gravestone Testing Consultant.'

`What does that entail?'

`I go round the cemeteries pushing gravestones to see if they fall over.'

`And if they do fall over?'

He shrugged. `I leave them where they land. It's less grass to cut.'

`Are there enough gravestones to keep you busy?'

`Oh yes. When I've finished I just start again at the beginning.'

`You'll need at least three months off work,' I told him. I signed a certificate and handed it to him. He seemed pleased. `Come back and see me in three months and I'll perhaps give you another three months.' It seemed to me that both he and the rest of the world would be better off if he stayed at home. There then came a woman of eighty three who wanted her varicose veins attended to so because she said they didn't look very nice. I tried to persuade her to wear thicker stockings in lieu of surgery but she wasn't about to be cheated of her right to smooth legs. Before she left she asked me if I'd like to follow her on Twitter and become her friend on her Facebook page. I told her, quite honestly, that I'd never visited either of the sites and had no intention of doing so. Only the other day I read somewhere that Coca Cola had 65 million friends on Facebook and around a million Twitter followers. I simply don't understand any of this. Why would so many people want to be `friends' with a tooth rotting, gut burbling fizzy drink? How can any sane person possibly `follow' the literary meanderings of a cola? There are, apparently, thousands of apparently sane citizens who voluntarily `follow' the twitterings of British Gas. These are surely sad manifestations of the existence of lonely generations. She seemed to take my refusal to become a `friend' and a `follower' as a personal affront and sniffily told me that if I felt like that about her she would be looking for another doctor.

My next patient was a boy of eight. He told me his name was Doug. His mother had brought him in because he had a nose bleed that wouldn't stop. The poor little devil had been sitting in the waiting room for the best part of an hour with his mother constantly stuffing bits of tissue up his nostril. She had a handful of blood stained tissues and her blouse and skirt were both blood stained. She looked quite a sight. Apart from the absence of mud she looked as if she'd been nursing in the trenches on the Somme. Still, if the little chap had gone to casualty he'd have been lucky to have seen a doctor in less than half a day. Nosebleeds don't appear high on the list when the nurses are deciding which patients should be seen first.

I had to pop out of my consulting room for a moment to fetch some packing gauze from the room the nurse uses for doing dressings (when she isn't in a meeting with our ever present horde of social workers) but the whole exercise, including the stuffing of the exsanguinating nose, didn't take more than five minutes.

`Go back down to the waiting room and I'll see you again in twenty minutes,' I told them. `It should have stopped by then.'

`Thank you very much,' said the mother who politely held her hand over her mouth which seemed to be full of something. The boy, whose nose was full of clotted blood and who also seemed to be eating, just mumbled inaudibly. He sounded like one of those Romanian refugees imported into Britain to sell the *Big Issue* magazine. `And thank you for the nibbles,' she added. `We were both starving.'

I didn't know what she meant at first but when they'd gone I inspected my desk and saw that the plate of goodies the receptionist had brought me was now empty. The toffees and the digestive biscuits had all disappeared. I stuck a pencil in my mouth and chewed on that, hoping that the rumbling of my empty gastro-intestinal tract would, if heard by a patient, be mistaken for a fault in the central heating. Not that our central heating is ever efficient enough to be that noisy.

When I'd finished the surgery and had tottered back downstairs, the flushed receptionist handed me a plastic bag which contained a pair of heliotrope pyjamas and a blue toothbrush in a plastic case. For a moment I couldn't understand why I was the beneficiary of such a generous gesture and then I recognised the pyjamas and realised that they were the pair I'd kept at Enid's. I didn't recognise the toothbrush but it was a fair guess that it was the one which had recently been domiciled in her bathroom.

`Looks like you've been given the heave-ho,' said the receptionist who had clearly peeped into the bag.

I was too embarrassed to think of a witty reply. The pyjamas were not in the first flush of youth and the toothbrush bristles were flattened beyond reasonable use. As I left the surgery I tossed the bag and contents into the plastic wheelie bin outside the surgery.

It wasn't until five minutes later that I realised that Enid had surgically removed me from her life. I was so delighted that I stopped off at the chippie on the way home and bought myself a large portion of cod and a bag of chips. I asked for extra vinegar and extra, extra salt, put the chips on my lap and ate them in the car as I drove home. The chip shop staff had put my chips into a plastic dish and wrapped them in drawer lining paper (the interfering do-gooders will not let them recycle old newspapers) but the warmth still came through. If there's a better way to celebrate the ending of a painlessly deceased relationship I cannot think of it. The health fascists who want to ban salt from chip shops should be boiled in brine.

Without Enid in my life there would be no more dull dinner parties, no more tedious evenings watching amateur dramatics and no more nights with that damned ankle length nightie. I idly wondered why I had stayed with her so long. Lethargy? Loneliness? Had it been simply by default? For the sake of a desultory once a month tumble in her doughy bed? I really couldn't think of a reason. As I scrambled around in the little plastic dish for the crunchy bits of batter which always hide away I realised that I had achieved my freedom while remaining the innocent and injured party. My joy was not in the slightest bit diminished by the discovery that the grease from the fish and the chips had seeped through both dish and the paper and had left a permanent mark, in a difficult to explain position, on my trousers. What's the value of a pair of grey flannel trousers when compared with a man's emancipation?

Chapter 20

Despite the court case hanging over her, Molly was back at work the next day. She seemed subdued (which was hardly surprising) but it was clear that she didn't realise that there was another shoe waiting to drop.

Whenever a registered and licensed medical practitioner is arrested the police automatically file a report with the General Medical Council. A court might take away her licence to drive (thereby making her life as a general practitioner difficult and expensive) but the General Medical Council had the power to take away Molly's licence to practise medicine (making the loss of her driving licence of rather less significance). And all this was assuming that the assault charges didn't stick. Molly's defence union solicitors, who had taken over her case, were still fighting the assault charges but did not seem particularly optimistic that they would be able to prevent the police trying to get Molly convicted of some variety of assault. `The police are always keen to prosecute when anyone punches a copper,' said one of her lawyers. `And the courts always tend to be sympathetic. The copper who got punched will turn up in court with his arm in a sling and will say that he hasn't been able to work since the incident. He'll probably claim that he gets nightmares and may never be able to work again.'

The publicity she had received in recent weeks meant that Molly's arrest made the front pages of the local evening papers and she was quite high on the agenda for the local television and radio stations. A part-time snapper with a mobile telephone had, inevitably, managed to capture Molly's `moments of shame' (as they were described by one reporter) and the photograph of her struggling with a huge policeman appeared in numerous publications. She wasn't quite so prominent in the national press or on national broadcast media but they certainly didn't ignore the story. `Anti-Vaccination Doctor In Boozy Night Brawl', was one of the least offensive headlines I saw.

And, again inevitably, some of her newly found opponents displayed their enthusiasm for giving a good kicking to anyone who had dared to express an anti-establishment point of view. Doctors who regarded themselves as important figures within the British Medical Association almost fell over themselves in their excitement and their determination to take full advantage of Molly's misfortune.

`I sincerely hope that the General Medical Council takes firm action against this young woman,' said one professional committee member. `Her drunken escapades and her alcohol fuelled ramblings have done irreparable harm to the profession and caused enormous concern among anxious parents. Thousands of young children could die as a result of her wild accusations.'

Another self-appointed defender of the profession took pains to point out that Molly was living (`shacked up' was the phrase he chose) with a would-be comedian. `There is no doubt that this wretched couple have chosen to risk the health of the nation's weakest and most vulnerable citizens in order to promote their own careers,' he told a reporter from *The Times* newspaper.

`I think we have to fire her immediately,' said Jock. `We can find a locum to help with the night and weekend calls.'

Deidre agreed with him. `She's a disgrace to the profession and to her sex,' she said. `I hope she's struck off for life. We can't have her working here any longer. What will the patients think?'

`We can't fire her just because a few doctors are being rude about her!' I protested. `She hasn't been found guilty of anything yet.'

`I don't think we can afford to wait until she is found guilty of something,' said Jock. `My father established this practice and I've spent my life continuing his work. This young woman has destroyed our reputation in days. Patients are leaving the practice in droves.'

`Are they?' I asked. It was the first I'd heard of it.

`Well not yet,' admitted Jock. `But they will do. I know damned well I wouldn't want to entrust my health to a doctor who's been branded a drunk and a thug.'

`Maybe we should just hang on a bit longer,' I suggested. `Wait and see exactly what happens. She's due to appear in court in two days and we'll know then where we stand. The General Medical Council will soon let her know if they're going to do anything.'

`They're bound to strike her off,' said Deidre. `Damned good thing too.'

`I think we might be wise to have a word with the lawyers before we sack her,' I said. `If we fire her before she's found guilty of anything she could sue us.'

`Sue us?' said Jock, shocked. `Could she sue us?'

`I've no idea. But I would have thought so.'

A telephone call confirmed that she could, indeed, take legal action against the practice if we fired her because of comments that had appeared in the press, rather than because she had been found guilty of doing anything wrong.

Both Jock and Deidre seemed to think that this was outrageously unfair but, with great reluctance, they agreed to wait a day or two.

However, despite this temporary respite, there was little doubt that the writing was on the wall for Molly. It seemed extremely unlikely that she would be a trainee with the practice for very much longer. I was devastated by what was happening. She was, I realised, a girl I would have been proud to have had as a daughter.

`We'd better have another meeting in a couple of days,' said Jock. Deidre and I agreed.

`Can we assume that you'll be happy about the sponsorship arrangement with the Angipax people when Molly has gone?' asked Jock.

I was reminded of something Confucius once said: `The superior man understands what is right; the inferior man understands what will sell.'

`I wouldn't have any objection,' I said wearily. `If they still want to go ahead with it.'

`Why on earth wouldn't they?' demanded Deidre. `The stumbling block would have disappeared.'

`It wouldn't surprise me if they withdrew the offer,' I said.

Jock and Deidre looked at me and then at each other.

`That's crazy,' said Deidre. `Molly was the only reason the deal didn't go ahead the other evening. Jim had the contract papers with him in his car. We could have signed up for the sponsorship there and then!'

`They wanted you to fire Molly because she dared to speak out about vaccines!'

`She's a maverick!' said Deidre, spitting out the word as though she could not think of anything more contemptible.

`Being a maverick just means she hasn't been branded,' I snapped. `What's wrong with not being owned by anyone?'

`It's not our place to question these things,' said Jock pompously.

`What is our `place'?' I demanded angrily. `Are we supposed to just do as we're told, like squaddies marching over a cliff because that's what the sergeant tells us to do? Is it our `place' to do as we're told even if we know that what we're doing is wrong? Is it our `place' to stick needles into people without ever asking whether what we're doing is going to help them? Or is it our place to just bank the cheques, spend the money and keep our mouths and our minds firmly shut?' I sighed. I could tell that they both thought I'd gone barking mad. `When is our locum arriving?' I asked.

`Locum?' said Deidre. `What do we want a locum for?'

`Because at the moment I'm on call every night and every weekend,' I said. `And if we don't hire a locum quickly you and Jock are going to have to start doing some emergency calls.'

`If you hadn't put a stop to that sponsorship deal we'd be able to afford a locum,' said Jock.

`Quite,' said Deidre. `You'll just have to soldier on for the time being.' She looked at me over the top of her spectacles and paused. `Until we get the sponsorship deal sorted out.' She paused for a long moment, staring at me as if seeing me for the first time. `You're becoming a bit of a dinosaur, you know,' she said. `I'm beginning to think you spent far too much time with that Tranter woman. You're becoming as bad. And you know what happened to her.'

I looked at her, was about to say something anodyne and realised that I really did not have to be polite to Deidre and, more important, that I really didn't want to.

`Oh, fuck off Deidre,' I said wearily, but with remarkable and searing wit. `There is no way that I can carry on looking after all the emergency calls. Since neither you nor Jock want to get out of bed at night we're going to have to do what 99% of other practices do and turn all our emergency calls over to whatever the damned company is called which provides emergency cover for this area.'

`Oh I don't approve of that,' said Jock. `We have always taken pride in providing patients with 24 hour cover for 365 days a year.'

`You've always taken pride in the extra money we make,' I told him. `I'm now the only doctor providing all the cover. You and Deidre just rake in the extra cash and do nothing.'

`You're paid extra for taking on out of hours calls,' said Deidre. I suddenly realised that when Deidre spoke I always felt like her gardener or odd job man being told to rake the lawn or clean out the drains, and to damned well make sure that I made a good job of it.

`I'm paid a very modest bonus for doing the out of hours calls,' I pointed out. `But neither of you would take on the extra work for the little I'm paid. And when Molly was doing weekend and night calls she didn't get an extra penny. I like the practice providing 24-hour cover because I happen to think that's what GPs should do. But I'm absolutely knackered and without Molly or a locum I simply can't go on providing cover for 168 hours a week.'

`That's very unfair of you,' said Jock.

`Fair or unfair it's ending,' I told him. `I'm buggered and as from today I'm resigning from out of hours cover.

Unless you and Deidre want to start clambering out of bed at three in the morning you can make arrangements for our weekend and evening calls to be taken by the agency which provides cover for this area.'

`You've changed!' cried Deidre. `You really don't care a toss about us, do you?

`It's certainly not been a change for the better,' said Jock.

`Perhaps it was about time I did change,' I said.

Jock and Deidre both tried to speak at once but I left. I was half way down the stairs long before they'd manage to sort out who was going to speak first. As I hurried away, free at last from the tyranny of the telephone, I felt ten years younger. I was about to leave one of the receptionists (the fat, red-headed one) told me that the police had brought round a cake tin which they had retrieved from the boot of my wrecked car.

`It looks rather nice,' she said.

For a long, long moment I was tempted to tell her to share it out among the social workers, administrative assistants, community workers and other hangers on who frequent the surgery. But deep inside my soul there lingers a part of me that is forever responsible. To my regret, I couldn't do it. `Leave it in the tin and throw it into the rubbish,' I told her. I couldn't be bothered to explain why.

`Are you sure? It's a lovely looking cake. Smells most unusual too. Is it cinammon?'

`Throw it away,' I told her firmly before I hurried away.

I turned back and saw her lifting the lid and looking in at the cake rather longingly.

`It's got arsenic in it,' I warned her sternly. `If you eat it, you'll die.'

Chapter 21

I telephoned the General Medical Council to try to find out how they were doing to deal with Molly.

`We cannot comment on a specific case,' said a snooty woman who sounded as though she'd had very large plums inserted in both ends of her intestinal tract. She spoke English as though it were her third or fourth language.

`Does the GMC have a general view on doctors who disapprove of vaccination?' I asked.

`Vaccination is being an essential plank in the preventive health programming,' replied the woman, after I'd repeated the question several times.

`Does the GMC have any evidence to show that vaccination is safe and effective?'

`It is not our placing to be doing evidential research.'

`No, I realise that. But since you believe that vaccination is an essential plank in the preventive health programming do you have or know of any evidence to support that belief?'

`Everyone knows that is the case. It is widely known.'

`Yes, I appreciate that. But it is also widely known that you cannot get pregnant if you have sex while standing up.'

There was a pause and then a request that I repeat my last remark. I repeated it.

`Good heavens!' said the woman. `I was not knowing that. That is very interesting. But what has this to do with vaccination?'

`I was merely using that piece of folklore as an example,' I said. `To show that people sometimes believe things to be true when they are not.'

`Are you now saying that it is not true that I cannot be pregnant if I do it while I am upstanding?' She sounded disappointed. I hoped that she was not now going to claim that she had already become pregnant as a result of our misunderstanding.

`No, it's not true,' I told her. `But how do you know that vaccination is a good thing?'

`Oh, yes, it is a very good thing indeed. Everyone knows that.'

It was my turn to pause while I tried to think of a different approach.

`What is the GMC's view of doctors who disapprove of vaccination?' I asked.

`Oh we take a very dim view indeed of that,' said the woman. `There is a young woman doctor who has been saying that very thing.'

`Dr Tranter?' I asked, surprised that the conversation had now turned to the very specific case I wanted to discuss.

`That is the one. Molly Tranter. We take a very dim view of her. Everyone knows that vaccination is a very good thing indeed. Dr Tranter is a bad lady. Very naughty indeed. She has been blowing whistles and scaring the communes. The GMC does not approve of scare mongering.'

`But she merely tried to encourage a debate on the issue of vaccination.'

`There is no need for debating. The issue is cut and dry and quite clear. Vaccination is a very good thing. Anyone who says it is not a good thing must be a bad person and must be stopped from saying these things.'

`Do you know if the GMC is taking any interest in the police case relating to Dr Tranter?' I asked.

`The police have arrested this woman? This we did not knowing. Why have they arrested her?'

I cursed myself quietly, thanked her, reminded her to take all proper precautions if she had sex while standing up, and put the telephone down. The General Medical Council would hear soon enough about Molly's arrest. But it didn't seem as though Molly was going to stand much of a chance with them. The odds on her staying on the medical register would have been much better if she'd simply killed a few dozen patients through ignorance or neglect.

Molly's problem, I realised, was not that she'd acquired dangerous new information, or that she had discovered some previously unpublished facts, but that she was prepared to tell the truth about things the medical establishment desperately wanted to be kept locked in a cupboard.

Chapter 22

I think everyone working at the practice knew that Molly's days with us were numbered. I hadn't said anything to anyone but it seemed pretty clear that either Jock or Deidre, or possibly both, had told a receptionist a nurse or a social worker that Molly was going to be fired when she'd been found guilty of whatever it was that she was being charged with. They probably wanted to distance themselves from her as quickly as possible. And there was certainly no shortage of people with whom they could share their confidences.

I can remember the days when we managed the practice with three doctors, two receptionists and a district nurse. Over the years we had, by some remorseless, unstoppable process, acquired what I believe is called a `team' and I long ago lost track of how many people are in the team, let alone what their names are or what they are supposed to do. I blame it all on progress. As Ogden Nash said, progress might have been all right once, but it has gone on for too long. We had acquired enough receptionists to staff a large hotel and enough nurses, of various kinds, to empty bed pans and plump up pillows in a decent sized cottage hospital. We had accumulated platoons of health visitors and social workers and our biscuits were regularly munched by hordes of bureaucrats with impressive but incomprehensible titles. Some of the outsiders wore white plastic badges pinned to their chests, the rest had plastic identity tags hanging from coloured tapes around their necks. These were adorned with name, photograph and title. I've never really been able to trust people who label themselves in this way but thanks to these badges and tags I knew that we had a continuity care manager, a continuity nurse who had the most supercilious and insincere smile of anyone I'd ever met, and the almost constant presence of a discharge facilitator from the local hospital who had ill-fitting dentures and a nasty looking mole on the back of his left hand. It's just a pity that the insincere smile wasn't as malignant as the mole undoubtedly is. These were not wallahs, patiently pampering to the needs of sweating doctors hacking away at the coal face of life and death, but self-important stars in their own eyes. They were all soulless do-gooders, earnest box tickers who saw trees but never saw woods and who all had neat hypocrisy running through their veins. Moreover, they were as lazy and as incompetent as any squad of motorway repair workers. They never seemed to do anything other than drink tea, gossip or read a newspaper. They rarely seemed to finish doing whatever they were not doing and if they did finish, and moved on, you could not see what they'd done, or why they'd done it.

And yet, despite the presence of all these people, there was no doubt in my mind that the service to patients had become worse than ever. There was always a queue at the reception desk, patients were always complaining that it had taken them half an hour to get through on the telephone and it had become so impossible to persuade a nurse to call round at a patient's home and change a dressing that I'd taken to managing these small chores myself. It was quicker and less soul destroying to collect a bandage, some gauze stuff and a roll of decent, professional sticky tape and pop round and do the dressing than it was to persuade a nurse to skip one of her endless round of daily meetings, get into her taxpayer provided motor car and attend to a real, live patient.

When you have so many people working together there will, inevitably, be a good deal of gossiping. Our reception area is tiny but always packed with people. I only go in there to pick up the details of each day's calls, which the reception staff enter in a big book as the requests come in, but while I'm there I invariably overhear snippets of some very strange conversations and only rarely does it seem to me that these are of any clinical significance. Patients might be surprised if they knew that phrases which I have never begun to understand such as `she's no better than she ought to be' figure large in the conversations of well-paid, highly trained health care professionals.

`Is it true that Molly is going to be fired?' asked someone I only vaguely recognised. The question wasn't asked out of sympathy. There was nothing more than morbid curiosity in the questioner's voice.

`I doubt it,' said someone else with a snort. `She's like dog shit on your shoe. Very nasty and difficult to get rid of.' A few people tittered.

I looked around the room. I doubt if I recognised more than a quarter of the people there. `Haven't you lot got any work to do?' I shouted, before glaring at the woman who'd asked about Molly. I didn't have the foggiest idea who she was but her hair needed washing so she was probably a social worker of some kind. I remember noticing that when she walked she always looked as though she were wearing wellington boots. `You're a bunch of gossiping old hags. The ones who work for this practice can get back to work please. And the ones who don't work for us can bugger off back to where they came from.' I then stormed out and would have slammed the door if it hadn't been another one of those self-closing things that is connected to its frame by a powerful spring. Those doors may well be convenient but they're damned irritating when you want to slam them. I was furious. Didn't these lazy bastards realise what Molly had been campaigning for? She was worth more than the whole damned lot of them put together but all they could do was gossip about her downfall. The Germans may have the word for it, schadenfreude, but by heavens the modern English enjoy the feeling just as much as the damned krauts ever did. Frustrated at not being able to slam any of the damned doors, I drove out of the car park too quickly and banged into a couple of small vehicles on my way out. I didn’t care and I didn’t stop. They probably belonged to the gossiping hags in the reception area and with any luck they’d never stop talking long enough to notice.

Chapter 23

I was sitting in the bar at The Bell when Molly telephoned. I'd finished the day's calls and the evening surgery and was enjoying a pre-prandial glass of Glenmorangie and waiting for the chef to prepare my dinner. There was no one serving at the bar when I'd arrived so I'd found one of the waiters I knew in the restaurant and given him my order. He'd poured me the whisky, left the bottle on the bar and told me to help myself if I needed another. I'd asked for steak and kidney pie, roast potatoes, parsnips, carrots and broccoli with a double helping of spotted dick with custard to follow. I probably wouldn't eat the carrots or the broccoli but their colours would liven up the plate. The chef at The Bell made much better meals than Enid, if he whinged while he cooked I didn't have to listen and I didn't have to wash up afterwards. He probably looked just as good in a nightie too.

Molly sounded bright and upbeat and was clearly trying hard not to cry.

`I've just telephoned Jock and resigned,' she said. `I would have rung you first but you're such a sweetheart that you'd have tried to talk me out of it and probably succeeded and that would have been a mistake.'

`Why the hell did you do that?' It sounded harsher than I meant it to sound. But I was angry and I didn't quite know what to do with the anger. `I'm sorry,' I said immediately. `Why did you do that?'

`I don't have much choice,' she said. 'The blood test was positive.'

'How on earth…?'

'I don't know. Maybe my drink was spiked. The punch perhaps?'

I couldn't think of anything to say.

`I spoke to a lawyer at the Medical Defence Union,' she said softly. `He seems to think they can keep me out of prison if I plead guilty and grovel a good deal. But whatever happens I'm going to lose my driving licence and I'm going to be struck off the medical register. The GMC doesn't mind doctors slaughtering their patients wholesale but it takes a firm line with doctors who get into trouble with the law and it takes an even firmer line with doctors who get drunk when they're supposed to be on call. The best I can hope for is that I might be allowed back on the register in a couple of year time.'

I wanted to say something but I suspected that the advice she'd been given was probably correct.

`I keep trying to cheer myself up by thinking of campaigners who've ended up in prison: doctors like Guevera, Semmelweiss and Paracelsus and writers such as Cobbett, Paine and Wilkes. But then I remember that if I go to prison it won't be because I opposed the Government but because I hit a policeman.'

`Let me ring them,' I begged her. `Maybe I can help,' I said in that hopeful yet hopeless way we do when we want to do something but don't have the foggiest idea what to do. I have never had any important contacts and never acquired any influence whatsoever.

`You're very kind,' said Molly. `But there isn't anything anyone can do. It's all my own fault anyway.'

`No! It's my fault,' I said. `If I hadn't had that damned crash. If I hadn't called you…'

'If I had kept my mouth shut about vaccines perhaps Jock and Deidre wouldn't have been so determined to get rid of me.'

`What about the photos I took of the bruising on your arm? Doesn't that prove that the policeman was violent? I know that doesn't help the drunk driving charge but surely it gets rid of the assault charge?'

`The policeman says the bruising on my arm happened after I'd hit him. He says he had to restrain me because I was violent. And the solicitor says that courts always believe policemen.'

`But that's a lie!'

`Yes.'

`You could fight it! Tell the truth.'

`If I fight it and lose then they will almost certainly send me to prison for assaulting a policeman. And then the GMC will never let me back on the medical register. My career will be over before it's started. I'm going to plead guilty to a charge of drunk and disorderly and to driving while under the influence.'

For a few moments neither of us spoke. Everything seemed to have happened very quickly. And nothing that had happened seemed fair.

`When are you leaving?

`I've left I'm afraid. Jock didn't want me to go back to the surgery. He said that he'd put all my stuff into a box and have it brought round to the flat. But he's promised to find a locum to help you with the calls and to do my surgeries.'

I knew Jock wouldn't hire a locum. It costs a small fortune these days to hire a temporary doctor. You have to fly them in from Germany and pay them in diamonds. And Jock had a brand new house to pay for. He wouldn't want any extra expenditure. I also suspected that the mean bastard would probably welcome Molly's resignation because it would save the practice money.

I spoke to Molly for a little longer and promised to ring her the following day. It worried me a little that she seemed so quiet but she said she was just preoccupied; worrying about the future; concerned about getting a job of some kind. She laughed and said that outside doctoring she didn't have any saleable skills. `I can't even type!' she said. `If I'm lucky I'll end up stacking shelves in a supermarket.' There was a long pause while we both contemplated this awful possibility. `Promise me that you'll have me put down if you hear that I've taken a job with an estate agency.'

I said I would. Then I promised her I'd do anything I could to help. `We could hire you as a medical assistant of some kind. A sort of super-nurse.'

She shook her head. `Jock and Deidre will never accept that.'

`Then I'll hire you as my driver. I'll pay you myself. Jock and Deidre can't stop me doing that. And you'll be tax deductible.'

She said I was to stop worrying because everything would be fine. Then she said goodbye and we ended the call. I rang Jock and told him to fix up for one of the agencies to take all our emergency calls. He moaned and said it was short notice but when I told him that it was either that or take the calls himself he gave up complaining. Shortly afterwards my dinner arrived. I pulled out my orange Penguin paperback of country stories by H. E. Bates. I was using as a bookmark the advertisement for a doctor to work on a Scottish island and I picked up the cutting and looked at it again. Every time I looked at it the job sounded more and more attractive. I checked the date. They'd probably found someone by now. I was depressed about Molly's position but didn't feel much better about my own. I seemed doomed to spend the rest of my days coping with the mean spirited whims of two doctors who I loathed (probably almost as much as they loathed me) and Molly was doomed to spend her immediate future stacking shelves in the local branch of Tesco.

`Would you like a refill?' someone asked.

I looked up. A woman I vaguely recognised was looking at me and holding the bottle of Glenmorangie. Slim but curvy in the appropriate and recommended places she looked to be in her early thirties. She had dark hair, twinkly eyes and a warm but gentle smile. It was a real smile and not one of those toothy grins that are so popular among celebrities and politicians. It was only when she laughed that I could see that she had a piece chipped off one of her incisors. She was wearing a white blouse with a grey skirt and a grey waistcoat and in that respect only she looked like a female version of Harry. The management at The Bell likes its staff to look smart. I suppose it's cheaper to keep the staff looking well-dressed than to have the place painted and decorated and to buy new furniture.

I nodded.

`A double?'

I nodded again.

She poured a double tot into a measuring cup and tipped the whisky into my glass. They don't use optics for the malt whiskies at The Bell.

`Do you mind the, er…? I held up my pipe.

She shook her head. `But if someone else comes in…'

`I know,' I said. `Is Harry off tonight?'

`Just for tonight. He's gone to a Status Quo concert. I'm sorry I wasn't here before. I had to fetch some peanuts from the storeroom.' She pointed to a large cardboard box on the bar.

I looked at her, surprised. `I can't see Harry as a Status Quo fan,' I admitted.

`He's just a big rocker at heart.'

`Put the whisky on my tab. I'll settle up for everything when I go if that's OK. Can I buy you a drink?'

`Thanks. I'll have a white wine spritzer.' And unlike most bar staff, who accept the invitation but simply pocket the money, she poured herself a white wine spritzer.

We talked for a while about this and that and the time passed more than pleasantly. It had been a long time since I'd enjoyed the luxury of wasting time on inconsequential chit-chat. And then a waiter brought my meal from the kitchen and the barmaid tactfully moved away while I ate. She put some of the peanuts into a display box and stashed the rest in a cupboard, polished glasses and generally tidied up the bar. I knocked the ash out of my pipe, ate and read my paperback. They lie flat if you break the spine. I called her over when I was ready for my coffee.

`Black, please. No sugar.'

`Would you like another whisky with your coffee?'

`I would like one very much but I'd better not have one. I'm driving.' I nearly told her that I was also on call but then I realised that I'd told Jock to fix up for an agency to take our calls. I looked at my phone. I was about to turn it off but didn't. I didn't trust Jock to fix up alternative cover. I decided that I'd keep my phone switched on just in case he hadn't fixed up the agency. Anyway, I didn't want to tell the barmaid that I was a doctor. I learned, many years ago, never to tell people I've just met that I'm medically qualified. Pleasant conversations have a nasty habit of turning into free, private consultations. One minute you're talking about a film you've both seen and enjoyed and the next moment you're peering down their throat or listening to a detailed analysis of their bowel movements. In pubs, cafes and hotel bars I've had complete strangers pull up their jumpers, trouser legs and skirts to show me rashes, scars and funny little bumpy bits. It's difficult to recover the mood of the conversation when that's happened. I was thankful that I had, as always, left my tell-tale drug bag locked in the boot of my car.

The bar was still empty so I asked her if she wanted another drink. She said she'd have a coffee too but that there was no need to put it on my tab because she was allowed to help herself to coffee. When she brought my coffee she brought her own and we talked again. We talked about music and films and books and I enjoyed the conversation. Talking to Enid and her friends had always been a competition to see who could score points by being sharper, or snappier or nastier than anyone else. This conversation wasn't like that at all.

Suddenly it was half past ten. I realised that unless Jock had put through our phones I had been on call for several hours without my phone ringing once. I took it out of my pocket and checked that it was switched on. It was, and that the battery was still good. I then realised that I could check that Jock had hired the agency by ringing our surgery number to see what happened. Two minutes later an agency doctor answered the phone. She had a foreign accent and was probably sitting somewhere on another continent. I told her I was just checking that the phone was working and ended the call. I then turned my phone off and put it away.

`What do you do when you're not working here?' I heard myself asking.

She smiled and titled her head to one side. `I look after my boy, I do a lot of shopping, cleaning and washing, I watch too much bad television and to keep the wolf from the door I do occasional shifts at a couple of other pubs. It's mostly just standing in when the regular bar staff are away or sick.'

`You're married?'

`Divorced. My son's father left. I haven't seen him for months but he turns up occasionally when he wants money. I believe he's living with a stripper. I think he's probably her pimp. He never liked work very much so pimping would be his style. He once spent three months working at a car wash with some Romanians but they sacked him because he seemed curiously reluctant to do any actual car washing. If he'd been an animal he'd have been a sloth.' She said all this with a smile which suggested that the original bitterness had been replaced by a mixture of bewilderment and contempt.

I asked her for the bill. She gave it to me. I paid it, took some of my change and left her a decent tip. She thanked me.

`May I buy you dinner one evening? And the cinema perhaps? Something pointless and frivolous?'

The questions clearly surprised her. They surprised me even more. I hadn't known I was going to ask them until I heard them.

`Are you asking me out on a date?'

`I think that's the idea,' I agreed. I suddenly realised that I desperately needed a little fun in my life.

For a moment she seemed uncertain how to reply. But then she made up her mind. `I'd like that. I'd like that very much.' She paused. `You're not married?'

I shook my head. `Not married, not engaged, not going steady. No ties. Not even a cat.' I paused. Full disclosure. `I was married but it ended about fifteen years ago. We never had any kids. She's a consultant anaesthetist, married to a consultant surgeon. I don't know whether or not they've got kids. The good thing is that they both earn more in a month than I earn in a year so any alimony cheque I could send would be petty cash and an embarrassment. And I did have a sort of arrangement with a bookshop owner until recently. But that's over now.'

`Is it OK for you to ask me out?'

`Why shouldn't it be? Does The Bell have a rule about the staff not dating the customers?'

She laughed. `No, I don't think so. I just wondered…' She left the rest of the sentence unspoken.

`What's a good night for you?'

`I'm not working on Friday. I can get the girl next door to babysit. Actually, I shouldn't say `babysit'. My son is eight. He wouldn't like being referred to as a baby. He likes to think of himself as the man of the house.'

I climbed off the bar stool and stretched my legs. `Friday then?'

`Friday.'

I started to move away and then stepped back. `It would help if I knew your name.'

She smiled. `Clarice, Clarice Dempster.'

`That's a lovely name.'

`No it isn't. It's horrid. I've never forgiven my parents.'

`I meant the Dempster.'

She laughed. `That's the only thing my ex-husband ever gave me. I used to be a Bottomley so I did well out of the name change thing.'

`My name’s Harry. Like the barman Harry Cassidy.’

`Yes,’ she said, as though she knew.

Shall I pick you up or meet you somewhere?’

`Is it convenient to pick me up at home?’

`Yes, of course. But you’ll need to give me your address.’

She told me where she lived. And then wrote it down for me on the back of a bar menu. I took the bar menu, folded it and put it into my pocket without looking at it.

I said goodnight and left, thinking it hadn’t been such a bad day after all.

But then, on the way, home I remembered Molly and wondered what the hell she was going to do and how she was going to cope with the sky falling in on her world. Thinking of her reminded me of Jock. When I got back home I rang him.

`Did you fix up a locum to do Molly’s surgeries?’

`Do you know what time it is?’ he demanded.

I looked at my watch. `It’s seven minutes past eleven. Don’t you have a clock in your house?’

`I know its seven minutes past eleven!’ said Jock. `I didn’t ask you because I wanted to know the time. I asked you because I wanted to know if you knew the time.’

`Of course I know the time. I’ve just told you the time. It’s seven minutes past eleven. Well, actually, it’s nearly eight minutes past now…’

Jock sighed wearily. `What the hell do you want?’

`Did you fix up a locum to do Molly’s surgeries?’

`I’ll fix something up in the morning. We have to find someone qualified and suitable. There are formalities. Forms to fill in and so on. Running a practice isn’t just a matter of scribbling out prescriptions, you know.’ The line went dead and I realised that he had turned off his phone.

That’s the trouble with mobile phones.

You can’t slam them down on the receiver any more than you can slam a door with a spring on it.

Technology has taken so much of the fun out of life.

Chapter 24

Early the next morning a distraught Larry telephoned to tell me that Molly had killed herself.

He told me he'd found her lying in what looked like a bathful of red water. He said he had found a note by the side of the bed telling him not to go into the bathroom but to ring me. But he'd struggled out of bed, crawled to the bathroom, opened the door and been sick. I asked him if he was sure she was dead and between sobs he said he was. I told him I'd be there within fifteen minutes and not to do or touch anything.

She had dissected out her left radial artery and then cut into it; she hadn't taken long to bleed to death. If you cut a vein, death comes slowly. But cut into a major artery and you don't have long to change your mind. As I would have expected she'd done it very neatly. Unlike many GPs she really was very good with her hands. She would have made an excellent surgeon. The scalpel she'd used was lying neatly in the soap dish. Next to it was the small alcohol soaked swab she'd used to clean her skin. I knew without looking that the neatly torn wrapper from which she had taken the swab would be in the waste paper basket. Even at the end she'd done everything properly. It's strange how doctors do that. I've read that the American doctors who give lethal injections to prisoners on death row always use a neat, little piece of gauze soaked in alcohol to clean the skin of inmates who will be dead in seconds. And although she was lying in a bath full of bloody water she was wearing a bra and a pair of knickers and I immediately understood why. She knew that Larry would call me and she wanted to retain a little dignity. She didn't want to be seen naked. We had never said anything but she knew I looked upon her as a daughter. And in my heart I felt that she looked upon me as a sort of father. No father should have to see his daughter lying naked in a bath of her own blood. I looked down at her and I could feel the tears running down my cheeks. I felt sadder than I could ever remember feeling before. The voice of conscience is delicate and unmistakeable; but so easy to stifle. Deep inside me, hidden just underneath the sadness, I could feel the beginnings of a huge, stark earthquake of a fury. She'd been the doctor all of us should have been; brave and honest and caring. Her only mistake had been to think that being right was enough. And, perhaps, not to realise that thinking ahead of your time can be a dangerous thing to do if the world doesn't keep up with you. Her own hand may have held the scalpel, but the system had killed her. Someone once said that there is no tragedy in dying, only in never having lived. Well, that was bollocks. If there was ever tragedy in anything there was tragedy in Molly dying.

I was angry because we live in a world of thieves and liars. And the thieves and liars control what we do, how we do it and when we do it. I was angry because I realised that it is now impossible to underestimate the intelligence of the people who are destroying our society; or, more importantly, to overestimate their dishonesty. I realised that for the establishment, reality no longer matters. All that matters is whether or not people believe what you say.

Every successful politician knows that reality is of no bloody significance at all and any doubt about that disappeared in the bombing years of Bush and Blair. The self-righteous and self-serving majority close their eyes so that they do not need to care. I knew at last why I had felt so damned tired for so long. I realised that for too long I had nurtured an undirected and unrecognised rage against an establishment which had been built on betrayal: betrayal of obligations; betrayal of responsibilities; betrayal of history and betrayal of purpose, self-respect and commitments.

For the first time in my sheltered life I realised just how right Voltaire was, and how dangerous it can be to be right when the people with the power are wrong – especially when the people in power within the medical establishment are owned lock, stock and syringe by an utterly ruthless and unethical pharmaceutical industry.

And I thought of another writer too. Turgenev. `What aim do you wish to achieve, where are you going, what is in your soul? In a word, who are you? What are you?'

Whatever the hell has happened to my profession? What has happened to integrity?

During the first Crusade a French nobleman called Baron d'Anglure was taken prisoner by Saladin and held to ransom. `If I may visit my chateau on the Aube,' the Baron told the Sultan, `I will return with the money you have demanded.' Saladin agreed to let the Baron go. But when the Baron reached home he found, to his dismay, that his wife had spent all his money. Every last sou had gone. All had been frittered away on frocks, minstrels and wine. Empty handed the Baron returned to the Sultan. `I have no money,' he confessed. `I have only my word.' Saladin, who was nowhere near as bad a stick as we now like to think, gave the Frenchman his freedom on condition that his children would always bear the name Saladin, that the Baron's coat of arms would incorporate the crest of Islam and that he would build two mosques when he got back home and had managed to save some money. The Baron agreed. And, as promised, the crescent was put into the family crest, two mosques were built, and all the Baron's male descendants have born the name Saladin. Now, that's integrity.

I rang some people and arranged for Larry to be taken to a nearby Cheshire Home where he could be looked after indefinitely. He certainly couldn't stay in the flat by himself. I contacted the police and spoke to the coroner's officer, arranged for the undertaker to call and somehow managed to find time to ring the surgery and tell one of the receptionists that I would be late, and that patients who did not need to see me urgently should make a fresh appointment and go home. And I spoke to Jock who was furious because he'd had to go out on an emergency call during his morning surgery. He didn't give a damn that Molly was dead. I knew without asking that the first call he would have made when he heard the news would have been to his good friend Jim of ACR Drogue et Cie. I knew that to Jock, Molly's death would mean that a problem had been solved and a sponsorship reopened. He was far too stupid to understand that Jim and Lavinia, and their board of eminent directors, would regard Molly's death as a small financial windfall of their own. There would no doubt be bonuses and champagne all round. Another problem solved. And a problem solved without making a dent in the marketing budget.

`Can I have a word with you, please?' asked Jock, when I'd finally struggled to the end of my morning surgery. I'd started nearly two hours late but most of the patients had insisted on waiting. Neither Jock nor Deidre had offered to help by adding some of my patients onto their morning surgery lists.

Innocently and naively I'd thought he wanted to speak to me about Molly. Maybe he felt guilty about what had happened. Perhaps he wanted to talk about the funeral arrangements. Or maybe he wanted to tell me about the locum he had arranged to take her surgeries.

But Jock didn't want to talk about Molly at all.

`I'm afraid I've had a number of complaints,' he said adopting the rather pompous tone he usually reserved for dealing with tradesmen who'd come to fix the guttering.

`What about?'

`About you, I regret to say. And I'm sorry to have to say that they are all serious complaints.

`Crumbs. What have I done?'

I felt more concerned than I sounded. Complaints are as much a part of the modern doctor's life as parking tickets and form filling but the problem is that as the number of complaints has grown so too has the bureaucratic machinery for dealing with them. It is terribly easy for people to make complaints and terribly difficult for doctors to defend themselves. Moreover, and in my view rather paradoxically, it is easier to complain about a doctor's manner than it is to complain about his lack of skill. Doctors who are tired and short tempered with patients are likely to be disciplined whereas doctors who kill patients through ignorance or arrogance are likely to get off scot free.

No one ever complained about Dr Harold Shipman because the wise old bird was always polite to everyone – right up to the moment when his chosen victims were slumped and cooling off in their favourite armchair. Even when they put the sod in prison he remained charming and reputedly had an excellent bedside manner with the other residents who used to queue up for medical advice. Apart from the fact that he was the world's most toxic serial killer, my only real complaint about old Shipman was that the genial bugger was woefully unimaginative. When bored I often spend my time thinking up ways to knock people off without getting caught. There are many far more subtle ways to bump someone off than merely jabbing a needle into a nice, plump vein in the antecubital fossa, and squirting in an over enthusiastic dose of morphine. For example, stuffing a needle connected to a syringe full of insulin into the external haemorrhoidal plexus would produce a corpse in no time at all without any real risk of discovery. No pathologist would ever notice. No coroner would ever know.

`Tracey has complained that you called her `love', Colonel Mortimer has complained that you called him a Zulu, threw him out of the practice and drove over his lawn and Stella Saxon and someone else whose name I've temporarily forgotten have complained that you raised your voice and used intemperate language when speaking to them.'

`I don't know any of these people!' I protested. `Who the hell are they?'

It occurred to me, as I spoke, that Jock is a patient of mine and that, with any luck, he will one day come to me complaining of symptoms of prostate enlargement. It would be oh so easy to tell him that I had noticed a little venous swelling in that delicate region around the anus, to offer to deal with the problem with a quick blast of some sclerosing substance such as sodium alkyl sulphate, and, instead, to give him a lethal blast of entirely undetectable insulin.

`Tracey is one of our receptionists!' said Jock. `She's been with us for seventeen weeks. She has complained that you ordered her to make you tea and that you spoke to her in an over familiar way. Colonel Mortimer is a very long established private patient of mine. And Ms Saxon and the one whose name I can't remember are attached to the Social Integration Unit in the Community Care Office of what used to be known as our local Primary Care Trust and which is, this month, known as the, er, ah, something else.'

`I didn't know we had any private patients,' I said.

Jock blushed. He went quite red and looked embarrassed `I do see a few private patients,' he admitted. He sounded rather defensive about it.

`They pay you money?'

`Of course.'

`Does that money go into the practice coffers?’

Jock went an even deeper shade of red. `These are patients who see me outside normal surgery hours.’ He seemed extremely uncomfortable.

`And they pay you cash? Discrete little wads of folding money?’

`It makes life easier for them. People prefer to deal in cash. It saves the bother of having to deal with invoices and cheques and so on.’

`You naughty boy!’ I said, pointing a finger at him. `You’re been diddling us and diddling the taxman haven’t you!’

Jock went so red that I thought for one glorious moment that he might spontaneously combust and become a front page story in one of those American supermarket tabloids which specialise in that sort of thing. *Angry British Doctor Catches Fire And Burns To Crisp. Distraught Widow Identifies Husband By Remaining Shoe.*

But the good things don’t usually happen when you hope they might. Not to me they don’t.

`Don’t think you can turn this around and put me in the dock!’ Jock said angrily. `These are serious complaints.’

And with that he stalked out.

When he’d gone it occurred to me that our professional relationship, which had been going through something of a bad patch for the last twenty years or so, had probably reached rock bottom.

Chapter 25

When I'd finished my morning visits the next day I went round to the local Cheshire home to see Larry. I wanted to see how he was coping, and to talk about the plans for Molly's funeral. He was being well looked after. He told me that her parents had arranged for her body to be taken back to their home town.

`They're both in a pretty bad way,' Larry told me. I immediately felt guilty. I knew I should have rung them, although I had no idea what I would have said.

`They don't want me or what they call outsiders at the funeral. Just close family,' he said.

I'd never spent any time with Larry without Molly being present and I realised that I didn't really know him very well. I certainly didn't really like him. For one thing he appeared to me to be surprisingly sanguine about being told that he couldn't attend his girlfriend's funeral. I got the impression that he was far more upset about the fact that the television company was no longer planning to use his recorded contribution. It was all he wanted to talk about.

`They couldn't do enough for me before the day of the recording,' he told me. `The director himself spoke to me several times.'

`That sounds encouraging.'

`Exactly what I thought,' said Larry. `To be honest I half suspected that they wanted me on the programme to make some sort of political statement. You know, bloke in wheelchair on TV sort of thing. But he did seem really keen. Television directors and producers and editors have researchers and assistants and gofers to make telephone calls for them. But he was desperately enthusiastic. He really wanted me on the programme. He was producing the programme as well as directing it and it seemed to be a big opportunity for him. He was terribly keen for us to be there.'

`You said `us'. He was keen on Molly being there?'

`Absolutely. He was terribly keen Molly went with me. He said he very much wanted to meet her. To be honest at one point I was convinced that it was really Molly he wanted to see, rather than me. I wondered if perhaps he wanted her for some other programme he was making.'

`And now you don't think they'll use the piece you recorded?'

Larry shook his head. `I've rung the studios stacks of times. No one wants to speak to me. Alfred Lunt, he's the director, is always busy. They say he'll ring me back but he never does. I spoke to one of the researchers and asked her if they had a date for the screening but she just said it was all very fluid, whatever that means. They'd heard about Molly and I very much got the impression that now that she's dead they didn't want to know about me.' He looked really miserable. `Do you know what really pisses me off? It's when people say that hard work always pays off. Or when they say that you get what you deserve. No one could have worked harder than I have. Am I going to get what I deserve?' I saw tears forming in his eyes. And then, embarrassed, he looked away. `I made the mistake of succumbing to hope,' he whispered.

I stayed about three quarters of an hour and when I left I felt distinctly depressed. I knew that Molly had cared desperately for Larry. She had looked after him, and cared for him, in every possible sense of the word. Working in general practice and caring for a paraplegic couldn't have been easy. But it seemed to me that Larry missed her only because she had been useful to him. He certainly didn't seem heartbroken. It had been Larry, I remembered, who had pushed Molly into doing the television and radio interviews. It had been Larry who had been excited by the idea of her working regularly in the media. It had been Larry who had fixed up most of the interviews she'd done. It had been Larry who had been building up a network of useful contacts on newspapers and in radio and television.

I drove back to the surgery feeling very sad. And I wondered if Molly had noticed that Larry was using her. Was she, perhaps, beginning to suspect that Larry was using her, wasn't quite as fond of her as she was of him, and was taking advantage of her unexpected celebrity to boost his own burgeoning career.

Until Molly had suddenly found herself in the limelight Larry had been struggling. He'd had a couple of gigs in pubs but I'd always suspected that the places where he had appeared would have given a gig to anyone who'd asked for one. And I had no doubt that he expected the wheelchair to open doors for him.

Now he was wallowing in self-pity and building up a fairly large reservoir of resentment.

How much had he known? How much had he suspected? Could he have been aware that Molly's drink had been spiked?

I didn't know the answers to any of these questions.

And, I realised, I didn't ever want to know the answers. It's only in books that people get the answers they think they want.

All this was going through my mind when I got back to the surgery. But my mind was soon dragged back into the murky folds of reality.

Chapter 26

`Would you ask Dr Jock and Dr Deidre if they're nearly ready for their evening surgeries?' asked a new receptionist I didn't remember seeing before. She had bad dandruff, a Scottish accent as impenetrable as porridge and varicose veins as thick as pencils. I only understood what she'd asked after she'd repeated it three times. She was as incomprehensible as those BBC presenters who are imported from Scotland to make Scottish nationalists feel `included'.

`Where are they?' I asked her.

`They're in Dr Jock's surgery,' she explained. `They've been in a meeting for two hours now.'

`Just the two of them?'

`No, there are two drug company people with them as well.'

`A man and a woman?'

`That's right.' She seemed startled that I'd guessed. `We were surprised you weren't in there with them.'

I wasn't in the slightest bit surprised. I could imagine what they were discussing. And they would have all found the discussions easier to manage without my presence.

`It's just that the evening surgeries are due to start in a couple of minutes,' said the receptionist. `We've tried ringing through on the intercom but no one answers. And we've tried tapping on the door.'

`No reply?'

She shook her head.

`They're all still in there? They haven't snuck out without anyone noticing?'

`Oh no. I took them some tea about an hour ago. And we haven't heard a peep out of them since then.'

I climbed the stairs to Jock's consulting room and knocked on the door. There was no reply. So I opened the door.

The tableau inside would have been a credit to Madame Tussaud, the waxworks impresario. At first I thought the four of them were dead. But a closer examination showed that they all were merely unconscious. Jock, sitting behind his desk and slumped in his black leather executive chair, was snoring loudly. He had his head to one side. Deidre, sitting beside him in a dining chair, one of the carver chairs with arms, was dribbling and a large damp stain, clearly produced by saliva, had formed on the front of her blouse. Jim and Lavinia, the two drug company executives, had clearly been sitting in the two chairs reserved for patients. They must have been uncomfortable because three quarters of an inch had been shaved off the front legs of both those chairs. (The idea of shaving the front legs is that patients sitting in them will be forever sliding forwards and, without quite knowing why, constantly feeling a need to get away.) Jim was still sitting in his chair but Lavinia had fallen off hers and was lying slumped on the floor. She was snoring loudly.

It was not a pretty sight.

It didn't take me long to decide what had happened and I didn't need Sherlock Holmes or his medical friend to help me work it out. There were two trays on Jock's desk. The first tray still carried a teapot, a milk jug and a bowl of sugar cubes. And spread around on the desk there were four of our best bone china cups and saucers. The second tray carried the remains of a large fruit cake which I recognised. And four empty plates, strewn only with a few remaining crumbs, were evidence that all four had eaten well.

I picked up the telephone, dialled 999 and called for an ambulance. `Actually, 'I told the operator when I'd given my name and the address, `you'd better send two.' When I'd fixed up the ambulances I telephoned the local Accident and Emergency department and told them to be ready to do stomach wash outs on four unconscious patients.

`Do you know what they've taken?' asked Elvis Rathbone, the casualty doctor.

`Not yet,' I told him. `But one of my receptionists will ring you in a couple of minutes with a full list of the drugs they've swallowed. They're all psychotropics. You can, I think, safely assume that they've all had some of everything.'

`What the hell…'

I explained about the cake and then ran downstairs to the reception desk and told them (rather breathlessly, I'm afraid, for I had forgotten that the first rule of medical emergencies is that one should never run) that two ambulances were on their way.

`Fish out the medical records for Catherine Gibbs,' I told one of the stunned receptionists when I'd got my breath back. `And then ring Dr Rathbone, who is one of the casualty doctors at the hospital, and give him a full list of everything listed on Catherine's notes.' I looked around. `Where did the cake come from?'

`What cake?' asked the receptionist who was supposed to be fishing out the records for Catherine Gibbs. She'd stopped what she was doing and was staring at me gormlessly.

`Get on with digging out those records,' I snapped at her. `The hospital will need what's on them.' I looked around once more and repeated the question about the cake.

`We found it in a cupboard,' said a girl with a squint. `It was in a tin. ' She was wearing a white coat and looked as if she could do sterling duty in a concentration camp so I assumed she was another one of our receptionists. Where the hell Jock finds these women I simply cannot imagine. He certainly doesn't choose them for their personalities or their decorative qualities. And why don't we ever have male receptionists? Are there any male medical receptionists anywhere I wonder?

`Where's the fat, red-headed receptionist?' I asked.

They all looked horrified so I repeated the question.

`Do you mean Hazel? Hazel Thickett?' asked one.

`Is she fat with red hair?'

`Well…'

`Is she fat with red hair?'

`Yes, I suppose so.'

`Where is she?'

`She's not on duty today.'

`Well ring the stupid woman and tell her that she is fired. And if she moans at being fired tell her that if she is very, very, very lucky she might just get away without being charged with attempted mass murder.'

That shut them all up.

`Now tell all the patients waiting for Dr Canterbury and Dr Cohen that they won't be seen tonight. If they've got urgent problems I'll see them. Otherwise they'll have to make new appointments.'

I then marched out and climbed quickly back upstairs to make sure that none of the four victims choked while I waited for the ambulances. It occurred to me that I'd never had to order two ambulances at once before.

Chapter 27

Jack and Deidre weren't terribly happy when, after two days, they were discharged from the local hospital and allowed back home. The two drug company hacks, Jim and Lavinia had been whisked away to a private hospital in London as soon as they'd been deemed safe enough to be moved, but Jock and Deidre were treated locally and were lucky enough to obtain valuable experience of what it's like to be National Health Service patients, starving to death in a typically brutal, uncaring National Health Service environment. They had, naturally, both demanded to be moved to the local private hospital but their demands had been turned down on the grounds that the local private hospital had been designed and staffed to deal with patients requiring minor cosmetic surgery, rather than anything which might require some serious nursing. `We can cope with postoperative mammoplasty patients,' said the Medical Director. `But we're not so hot on the death defying stuff.'

`We were poisoned!' complained Jock, not entirely unreasonably, and certainly not inaccurately.

We were sitting in the large and expensively furnished conservatory at his home. He was sipping plain water. I was drinking a malt whisky which carried the name of a well-known supermarket in two point print on the label. It tasted as if they made it in tankers off the Korean coast. I suspect they also put the same stuff in bottles labelled `Oven Cleaner' and `Mouthwash'. Even when he's well Jock doesn't drink whisky and he doesn't like spending money on stuff he doesn't drink.

`Jim, Lavinia, Deidre and I were all damned near killed! Have you ever tried eating the food in that damned hospital? You could use it for filling in potholes but it isn't fit to eat. I developed food poisoning and they wanted to keep me in on a closed ward. I only got out of the place by threatening to sue everyone in sight. Moreover, Jim and Lavinia will probably never speak to me again. Do you have any idea how important that guy is? He has an unlimited personal expense account! He's got an American Express platinum card and direct e-mail access to the European Marketing Director of one of the world's biggest pharmaceutical companies!' He paused, trying to decide whether or not to share the next piece of information with me. In the end he couldn't resist it. `He's pretty well made it clear that any chance of my getting a decent gong in the next honours list has gone out of the window. If that deal had gone through I'd have probably been in line for a K.'

`A K?'

Jock sighed. `A knighthood. That's what they call them. Ks. The company has a lot of clout in Whitehall. They have a lot of high ranking civil servants on the payroll. These people fall over backwards to please the big drug companies. I could have probably got something for you too. Not a K, of course. But probably an MBE. Maybe even an OBE.' He took a sip of his water.

Jock has been desperate for a knighthood for years. If he ever gets one he'll have the practice notepaper reprinted before the courtiers have finished polishing the sword.

Jock stared at me. He looked pathetic, like a beagle begging for a biscuit. `Why didn't you destroy the damned cake?' he asked, plaintively.

`I gave it to the receptionist to destroy. She apparently thought it looked too good to throw away so she put it in a cupboard. And someone else found it there, and put it on one of the best plates, when you had Captain Hook and Tinkerbell round to tea.'

`We're going to have to give her an official warning,' said Jock.

`I've already fired her.'

`You can't do that! You can't fire receptionists. There are procedures to follow. You have to give them warnings and allow them representation.'

`I fired her. She's too stupid to expect procedures to be followed. If she wants to sue us then let her. What did it taste like?'

Jock frowned. `What?'

`The damned cake, of course. What did it taste like?' I was genuinely interested. To be honest I was surprised that none of the four had noticed that it didn't taste of the usual ingredients. I would have thought someone would have noticed that the usual mixture of eggs, flour, milk and so on had been supplemented with a few handfuls of powerful pharmaceuticals. But maybe they all noticed but no one liked to say anything. This does happen. A local hotel once served 150 wedding guests with prawns which had decayed and were so far past their best that, when called to help treat the heaving and leaking hordes, I felt nauseous after simply sniffing one of the offending portions. Not one of the guests had complained or refused to eat the damned things. They'd nibbled away delicately and it wasn't until the dancing was in full flow that the consequences of their willingness to stuff rotten shellfish down their throats became only too apparent. The ballroom floor was, I remember, inches deep in the evidence of their misplaced faith.

`It may come as a surprise to you to know that I cannot remember eating it, let alone what it tasted like. How many drugs were in the damned thing?'

`Five anxiolytics, two antidepressants and two sleeping tablets. It's all your fault, of course. Catherine Gibbs was your patient. Why do you give people so many different pills?'

`She has a very complex medical condition. She needed a cocktail of medicines to control her symptoms.'

`Sadly, it rather seems that your cocktail didn't control her very well.'

`That's easy to say now,' snapped Jock. He rubbed his forehead and sighed. `So, how many pills do you think were in the cake?' He still seemed drowsy and confused.

`Her husband said she emptied all her bottles. Looking at her last prescriptions, and assuming that she'd been taking them according to your recommendation, Elvis and I reckoned that she had about 150 pills left and so there were 150 pills in the cake. You all had decent sized slices so, assuming that she gave the mixture a good stir, I reckon you probably had about fifteen pills each. It's not surprising you were all flat out. Oh, there were some antibiotics in there too. Her husband said she had two unused packets of amoxicillin which have disappeared. But he couldn't remember what they'd been prescribed for or how old the packets were.'

`I don't think we'll tell Jim any of this,' said Jock, who had gone even paler. `Better for him not to know.' He frowned. `How did Elvis come to be involved in all this? I thought he was dead.'

Chapter 28

My last patient at that evening's surgery was Roger Hubbard, the local policeman who suffers from asthma. He had come to pick up another prescription for the inhalers he uses. I checked his chest, talked to him about his illness for a while and wrote out a prescription.

`I was very sorry to hear about Dr Tranter,' he said, as he stood up and slipped the prescription I'd written into his breast pocket. `She came out to see my youngest once. He had earache. She was very good with him.' I realised with a great wave of sadness that Roger was the first person who'd shown any sadness about her death. Roger and I talked about Molly for a few minutes.

`The whole thing was so very odd,' I told him. `My accident was bizarre, then Molly, who had taken over the on call responsibilities, was stopped and breathalysed for no very good reason. And the press found out and the whole thing spiralled out of control.'

`Do you know why she was stopped and breathalysed?' asked Roger.

`I've no idea,' I admitted. `She wasn't involved in an accident. She was never charged with speeding or breaking any traffic regulations. She was just stopped and breathalysed. And she doesn't drink alcohol. I suspect that someone at the television studios gave her something with alcohol in it.'

`Or someone had spiked her drink.'

I nodded. `Are traffic policemen allowed to stop cars for no reason?'

Roger looked uncomfortable. `The traffic guys are a bit of a law unto themselves,' he said. `The law doesn't allow them to stop a driver unless they have reason to suspect that a law has been broken. Technically, they can't just wave someone down for no reason and get them to blow into the bag.'

`But they did,' I said. `They were apparently very aggressive about it too. I knew Molly well. She wouldn't have punched that copper if he hadn't been manhandling her rather roughly. And then, within minutes, someone rang the papers and the whole incident got completely out of control.'

`I know the two blokes involved,' said Roger. He paused and thought. `To be honest they're a pair of tearaways. Always pushing things a bit further than they ought to. I think she was probably a bit unlucky to be stopped by them.'

`Who would have rung the papers?' I asked.

`They might have done it themselves. But they probably passed the tip to a bloke in the station. One of the sergeants is usually the one to pass stories onto the papers. He rings them up every evening. Sometimes, if it's a really good story he'll sell the exclusive to one of the journalists he knows. But usually he just rings round all the papers. They settle up with him at the end of the month and he then pays off the copper who gave him the tip in the first place. I don't know about other stations but on our manor it's usually only the uniformed guys who get involved.'

`Do they make much out of tipping off the papers?'

Roger looked uncomfortable. `It can be quite a bundle if they've had a good story,' he admitted. `I did hear they got a few thousand for that story about a cabinet minister last year. One of the bobbies took some pictures on his mobile phone.'

`Could you find out why they stopped her?' I asked him. `And who tipped off the papers?'

He looked uncomfortable.

`I'm not planning to complain about anyone,' I assured him. `I'm just curious. It all seemed odd at the time and looking back it seems even more bizarre. A lot of coincidences.'

`I'll have a sniff around.'

Chapter 29

When I'd finished the evening surgery I drove out to The Grange to collect my hat. I parked, plucked the plastic token from my pocket, nodded a greeting to the whistling doorman and walked straight over to the girl in the cloakroom who was standing guard over a small collection of expensive overcoats, umbrellas and briefcases. I have no idea whether or not it was the same girl. It didn't matter. I gave her the token, which she exchanged for my hat, and then gave her a quid as a tip. To be honest I doubt if the hat was worth a quid but I've had it a long time and we've become good friends.

As I was about to leave I glanced towards the bar, wondering whether or not to have a whisky before driving back home. To my surprise I saw Jim Zabrinski, sitting on one of the barstools. The man sitting next to him, the only other person at the bar, was a fellow of about thirty. He was balding prematurely and had shaved his head to disguise the fact but it was easy to see that, even without extending his morning shave, he would have had a pretty meagre head of hair. Despite the chilly weather he was wearing a white linen suit and an open necked blue silk shirt. Zabrinski, of course, was wearing his usual immaculate grey silk suit, white cotton shirt and striped tie.

My first inclination was to sneak out before the drug company guy spotted me but on reflection that seemed rather cowardly so I wandered over to ask how he was feeling, and to offer my apologies for the mix-up that had led to his being poisoned. He can't have been particularly pleased to see me; our previous meeting had hardly ended happily and since then our practice had succeeded in putting him in hospital, but he had the skills and superficial charm of all professional salesmen and he immediately got off his stool, gave me the full 100 watt grin, shook hands and told me that he and Lavinia were fully recovered. He then introduced me to the bald guy in the white suit who turned out to be a film director called Alfred Lunt.

When Jim asked me what I wanted to drink it seemed rude to say I had to rush away, though I did explain that I was really only there to pick up my hat. `I'll have a Laphroiag,' I said. `Just a small one.'

While Jim turned to the barman to order my drink I asked Lunt if he'd made any films I might have seen.

`Doubt it, very much!' he said. `Not yet. I've been working in television for a few years. It's the easiest way to get your director's ticket.'

`What sort of programmes have you been working on?'

`Oh, the usual mix of stuff. A couple of local documentaries. I did one about local crafts and trades that you might have seen. We discovered a chap who thatches roofs. He got his own series on Channel Four on the back of it. '

I confessed, with the appropriate apologies, that I hadn't seen the documentary, or heard of the celebrity thatcher.

`Recently, I've been doing bits and pieces for the local news programme and also working on a comedy talent show that the station is quite keen on.'

`The Laughter Factory?' I said.

`That's the one. Have you seen it?'

`I caught an episode. Very exciting stuff.' Suddenly, I remembered where I'd heard the name Alfred Lunt.

`Oh, it's all a bit parochial. Low budget stuff with a bunch of comics who aren't really ever going anywhere to be honest with you. But with any luck all that's about to change. I'm making a documentary feature for Jim's company. Two full sixty minute programmes. Massive budget. Great opportunity for me to spread my wings as it were.' He looked and sounded extremely pleased with himself.

`What are the programmes about?'

`Vaccination: a very important topic. The first film is about the importance of childhood vaccination programmes and the second film is about vaccinations for the elderly – particularly anti-flu vaccines. The company wants to inform people of the importance of following proper vaccination schedules. Both programmes will be shown on BBC 1 at peak times.'

Jim, who had finished ordering my drink, and refills for himself and Alfred, turned back to us. `How's Jock?' he asked. `And Deidre?'

`They're pretty well recovered,' I replied. `I think the stay in hospital did them more harm than the poisoned cake.'

`I'd invite you to stay and have dinner with us,' said Jim. `But Keith Messenger, our Public Affairs Director, is coming up from London and the three of us are having a rather boring business meeting.' He looked at his watch. `He should be here any minute.'

I finished my drink, picked up my hat, shook hands with Jim and Alfred and left.

`The Laughter Factory' was the name of the programme for which Larry had made a recording on the night that I'd had my accident; the night when Molly had been arrested. My world was beginning to become uncomfortably full of coincidences.

I went home and cooked myself a three course meal (a glass of pineapple juice, a slice of toast with a poached egg sitting on the top and two chocolate biscuits) and then poured myself a large whisky. Now that I no longer had to worry about night calls I could enjoy the luxury of spending a little time relaxing. But something kept nagging at me and I couldn’t work out what it was. I felt I had to do something or be somewhere. But I couldn’t remember what or where. I was so damned tired that I fell asleep and woke up several hours later with a terrible cramp in my neck.

Chapter 30

I had a huge surgery the next morning.

I long ago gave up trying to work out why some days are busier than others. Mondays are obviously the busiest days of the week (signs and symptoms having been carefully nurtured over the weekend) and it is understandable that in the winter, during a flu epidemic, the waiting room will be crammed with patients coughing and sneezing and exchanging germs with one another, but I have absolutely no idea why, say, one apparently routine Wednesday should be quiet to the point of being boring while another will be hectic to the point of being like a twelve hour constant emergency.

When I'd finally worked my way through the two and a half dozen patients desperately needing advice, information, prescriptions or referrals to someone wiser or more skilful with a knife than myself, I was presented with a long list of patients who had asked to be visited at home. I knew them all, and knew where they lived, so it took me only a moment to sort them into a sensible visiting order that wouldn't have me retracing my steps and driving backwards and forwards across the town.

First came a request to visit Mrs Penelope Devereaux. She is in her seventies and rapidly approaching another of those landmark ages for which the greeting card companies produce special cards, but the casual observer would probably assume that she is in her mid to late fifties. She and her husband, who is a few years older than her but who also looks as if he is yet to celebrate his 60th birthday, live in a small cottage just outside town. They have a thatched roof, roses around the front and back doors, no central heating and a septic tank. Their water comes from a spring about a hundred feet away from their back door and they share the cottage with an army of woodworm whose presence they ignore on the grounds that they will both be dead long before the woodworm bring down the roof. They both suffer from slightly elevated blood pressure. They don't have a car and there is no bus service past their house and so every six months they get a taxi into town to visit the surgery to have their blood pressures checked and do any shopping they can't do at the village shop. It's the only time they ever come into town. I don't think either of them is in danger of having a stroke or a heart attack and so I have yet to prescribe hypotensive drugs. The side effects associated with drugs prescribed for high blood pressure range between mild and deadly and whenever possible I prefer to avoid using them.

Penny (as she insists I call her) was in bed when I arrived. As he led the way up the narrow staircase her husband told me that she had a swollen and painful right calf. He was right. Her calf was very swollen and clearly very painful. The diagnosis wasn't difficult to make.

`You've got a deep vein thrombosis,' I told her. `I'm going to get you into the local hospital for a few days. If we take it seriously and get it treated straight away it won't be anything at all to worry about.'

`Is it dangerous?' asked George, her husband.

`She'll be fine,' I said, putting an arm around his shoulder. `She'll be back home in a day or two.'

While George, acting on Penny's instructions, started to pack a few things in a suitcase I telephoned the hospital, spoke to the duty house physician and arranged for a bed. I then rang the ambulance service and asked them to send an ambulance round. By the time I'd finished these two calls George had completed the packing and had the suitcase standing beside the front door. While all this had been going I had been aware of a good deal of whispering going on between Penny and George.

`What are you two worrying about?' I asked them, as we all waited for the ambulance.

`I want her to take the spectacles,' said George.

`I won't need them,' said Penny. `He'll need them here.'

I told them I didn't quite understand.

`We both need reading spectacles,' said Penny. `But we only have one pair. We share them.'

`I read for half an hour and then she reads for half an hour,' explained George.

`Usually we read to each other,' added Penny.

I asked the obvious question. `Why have you only got one pair of reading spectacles?'

`We can't afford two pairs,' said George. `We get free eye tests. But the lenses and frames are so expensive.'

`You only need glasses for reading?'

They both said they did.

`You can buy reading spectacles for £1 in one of the bargain shops in town,' I told them.

They looked astonished at this.

`Put the spectacles in Penny's case,' I told George. `I'll bring you a pair of reading spectacles later on today.'

After I'd seen Penny off to hospital in the ambulance I visited Wendy Bramble. She too is on the wrong side of 70 but she pretty well lives in her bed. She says that her get up and go has all got up and gone and that, as a result, she suffers from something she calls `the weariness'. Once a year she makes a complete but temporary recovery, gets up from her bed and travels to London for the Wimbledon tennis championships. She stays with her sister, who lives near to the tennis courts, and every day the two women stand in a long queue to buy their tickets. They never manage to see tennis on the main courts, of course, but Wendy says that the atmosphere on the outside courts is exciting enough for her. Since it wasn't Wimbledon season, Miss Bramble was lying in bed. The television was on and a couple of presenters I'd never seen before were interviewing someone I didn't recognise.

`Can I turn this down?' I asked, looking for the volume switch on her remote control. As a doctor I have always believed that I am no more than a guest in my patients' lives. When they see me it is usually because something has gone wrong. No one ever wakes up and says: `Whizzo! I'm off to see the doctor today.' I am, of course, also a guest in their homes but, as an invited guest, I do feel that I am entitled to a certain amount of respect. And I am not prepared to try to examine a patient while the television set continues to blare away in the background.

The television suddenly went off and Miss Bramble triumphantly held up the remote control which she had been holding under the bedclothes. `I've heard about your little tricks!' she told me with a smile. I smiled back at her. It is clearly becoming known that if I visit a house where patients refuse to turn down the sound on their television set I fiddle around with all the knobs, switches and buttons that I can find – occasionally even loosening one or two wires at the back of the set. I'm told that after one of my `attacks' it can take a trained television engineer half a day to retune a television set.

`I've got indigestion,' she told me. `And heartburn and gastritis.'

`How long have you had it for?'

`Nearly fifteen years.'

`Has it got worse?'

`No. But I'm fed up with it.'

When I examined her I was surprised to see that even though she was in bed and wearing a nightdress she was also wearing an old-fashioned whalebone corset. The corset was pulled so tight that the straps had made deep, red indentations in her shoulders. I was surprised that she could breathe while wearing it.

`Do you always wear that?'

`Always,' she said. `I wouldn't feel properly dressed without it.'

`But you aren't dressed,' I pointed out.

`No. But I don't want the postman or the paperboy seeing me without my corset,' she said.

It turned out that because she spent so much time in bed she always left her front door open so that callers, including the postman and the paperboy, could walk straight into her house and climb up the stairs to her bedroom.

`I think your symptoms might be a lot easier if you left off the corset,' I told her. `I'm sure no one will mind. And maybe you'd be a little more comfortable if you replaced the whalebone with something a little more modern and more forgiving.' I told her that it is now widely accepted by scientists and academics who study these things that the greatest invention of the 20th century was not the jet aeroplane or the Internet but the two way stretch foundation garment, a piece of high technology equipment which surpasses even the cross-your-heart bra in importance.

`Can't you just give me some medicine?' she asked. `I'll have an operation if it's necessary.'

I eventually persuaded her to leave off the whale bone corset and promised that if her symptoms weren't easier in 24 hours I would prescribe some medicine.

Some days I spend more than half of my time making diagnoses and decisions which have absolutely nothing to do with the things I learned at medical school. Doctors who work in hospitals tend to see their patients as malfunctioning kidneys, livers, hearts or lungs rather than as human beings. I see all my patients as real people whose real lives are being disrupted by some, hopefully temporary, disorder.

Third on my call list was Mick Leyton.

Mick describes himself as a businessman and carries a pocketful of visiting cards which are embossed with the words `Leyton Industries International' and `Import/Export'. Over the years he has operated a number of schemes; some profitable and some not so much so. He told me once that his most profitable scheme involved persuading the manager of a small transport company he knew to put `How's My Driving?' stickers on the back of its vans and lorries. But instead of the usual free telephone number he put on the stickers a premium rated number charged at the rate of £5 a minute. Angry motorists who rang the number to complain didn't find out until they received their phone bills just how much their moan had cost them.

Mick works from home, a council house in a particular run down area of town, and as usual his terraced house was packed from floor to ceiling with cardboard boxes. There were boxes full of television sets, mobile telephones, computers, microwave ovens and computer games. I have no idea where he obtains all the stuff he supplies but I strongly suspect that he doesn't do much business with the usual wholesalers. He's the sort of fellow who prefers to beg for forgiveness than ask for permission.

`Where do you get all this stuff?' I asked him.

He touched a finger against the side of his nose and winked. He really did. `It all comes off the back of lorries. Sometimes it's lifted off and sometimes it falls off.' He laughed, as though this were very funny.

He told me that his wife, who was upstairs in bed, was suffering from sickness. `I think it's something she ate,' he said. `But it's been going on for a few days now and the poor old girl is worn out.'

I left him opening boxes and went upstairs. This wasn't easy. Half of every tread was occupied by boxes. On the upstairs landing there were more boxes. And his wife was lying in a bed surrounded by boxes. I asked her questions, listened to her, examined her, congratulated her and went back downstairs.

`Congratulations!' I said.

`Thanks,' said Mick. `She's a good looking girl isn't she?

`I think you'll find that your wife's got something to tell you,' I told him.

He looked puzzled, frowned and then hurried past me and up the stairs. Left alone in the living room I looked around the boxes.

`Hey, doc!' he called down, a few moments later. I could hear him thumping his way down the staircase. He was obviously used to coping with a stairway that was just half the normal width. `Fantastic news. I'm going to be a dad!'

`Yes,' I said. `I know.'

`Golly news travels fast. How did you know?' He laughed, climbed round some boxes, opened a desk and took out a bottle of gin and then two glasses. `Have a drink with me!'

I drank a large, neat gin and shuddered. I don't much like gin but it seemed rude to say `No'.

He reached into the desk again and took out a packet of cigars. He gave me one. I thanked him and put it into an inside pocket.

`What would you like, doc? New TV? Mobile phone? You name it. Present from us. All brand new and state of the art. Some of these phones aren't in the shops yet.'

I thanked him and shook my head and then had an idea. `Do you have any reading glasses?'

`Course I have!' He moved some boxes, clambered over others and finally produced a large white cardboard box. `What sort do you want?'

I scratched my head. `I'm not sure,' I confessed. `They're for a patient who needs reading glasses.'

Mick rummaged around in the box and took out six pairs of spectacles, all contained in neat metal tubes that looked like posh cigar cases. `Here you are, two of each sort.'

`How much do I owe you?' I asked, reaching for my wallet.

Mick waved his hands and shook his head. `No charge,' he said, thrusting the spectacles at me. I thanked him, put them into my black drug bag and headed for the door.

`Do you want any old-fashioned light bulbs?' he asked as I was leaving. `I bet you're a fellow who likes proper light bulbs aren't you?'

I stopped and turned back. `The real, old-fashioned bulbs?'

`The real old-fashioned ones. Bayonet or screw in. I'm getting two dozen boxes in next week. You can have 40 watt, 60 watt or 100 watt.'

I did a deal with him and he agreed to deliver 100 mixed light bulbs to me at the surgery.

I then finished the rest of my visits, took the spectacles to George Devereaux, who was delighted with them, and drove to The Bell for a light, late lunch.

Chapter 31

`Clarice was asking about you,' said Harry, the barman, when he'd served me my usual whisky and a ploughman's lunch that I doubt if any ploughman in history would have been able to afford. Tastefully arranged on a large plate were three bread rolls (one made with olives, one with sesame seeds and one with bits of date), large hunks of Cheddar, Leicester and Cheshire cheeses, a huge mound of Branston pickle, a tomato cut into halves and two crisp lettuce leaves.

`Clarice?'

`Clarice Dempster.'

I thought for a moment and shook my head. The name didn't mean anything to me though to be honest I was feeling so shattered that I probably wouldn't have recognised my own name.

`She stood in for me when I was on holiday. Lovely woman. Nice figure. Thirty something.'

Suddenly I remembered who Clarice was. I felt very cold, very hot and very cold, sequentially and then, impossibly, all at once. She was the woman I'd arranged to meet; the woman I'd promised to take to the cinema and to dinner; the woman who had arranged a babysitter and who had, undoubtedly, got dressed up, sat and waited and waited and fumed and cursed me and then sent the babysitter home and poured herself a large drink as she thought up some more curses. I cursed myself. I was angry with myself because I'd let her down and I was angry with myself because the date with Clarice had been the one thing I'd been looking forward to. How the hell could I have forgotten?

`She just wanted to know if you'd been asking about her,' said Harry. `She thought perhaps you might need her address or telephone number. Wondered if you might have forgotten them. Said I should give it to you if you asked. But that was last night at about half past eight.' He handed me a small piece of paper, torn from a telephone message pad. Written in blue ink, in Harry's neat, almost childish writing, were printed her name, her telephone number and her address. I waited until Harry had disappeared, prayed that she would be at home, and telephoned her.

She answered the phone on the tenth ring and sounded slightly harassed. I immediately wished I'd thought of something to say before I'd dialled her number.

`Can you hang on a minute, please?' she said, before I'd had to chance to apologise.

`I'm so sorry,' I said, in case she was still there, listening. But she wasn't. In the background I could hear noises but I couldn't work out what they were. I sipped at my whisky and waited. I didn't want to eat anything in case she came back to the phone and I had a mouthful of bread roll.

`Sorry about that,' she said eventually. `The washing machine has flooded the kitchen. One of the pipe things has come away from another one of the pipe things and there's water everywhere. Who did you say it was?'

`It's the plumber, madam,' I said.

I have no idea why I said this. It just came into my head. I wished I hadn't said it the moment the words had emerged. But by then it was already too late and for the duration of the phone call I was stuck with being a plumber.

`The plumber?' she sounded puzzled. `How did you know…'

`We're proactive plumbers,' I said, trying to sound like a plumber, without any idea what a plumber sounds like. `We use information received direct from your mobile phone. Via the infra-red camera. That's why we're called Proactive Plumbers. Our motto is: `We mend your leak before you know you've got it.' Not always, of course. I mean, you know you've got your leak this time. But that's our motto.' I didn't have the faintest idea why I'd started this daft plumber stuff but it was too late to stop.

She sounded puzzled and more than slightly disbelieving. `My phone doesn't have a camera.'

`Oh, all mobile phones have cameras nowadays. Some of them are secret cameras but they're all built in. It's to comply with a new rule from the EU. All phones have to be fitted with cameras. Even the ones made in China.' I was gibbering. Surprisingly, horrifyingly even, what I said even seemed to make a bizarre sort of sense.

`Can you see me now?'

`Yes madam. But if you'd rather I'd not look I'll turn my head away.'

There was a cry of anguish. `This is awful. I'm soaked to the skin. I look as if I've entered a wet T-shirt contest. Look away immediately!' There was a pause. `I don't believe a word of this. There can't possibly be a hidden camera in my phone. Can there? Are you looking away? This should be illegal.'

`I'm looking away now, madam. You look very nice indeed but I'm looking away. Would you like me to send one of our consultant technicians round to take a look at the washing machine?'

`How much will it cost? Are you sure about phones having cameras fitted? Where is it? Are you definitely not looking? You promise?'

`Definitely not looking, madam. The first hour is free. After that we'll quote you a price. If you don't like it you can just send our consultant technician away.'

`The first hour is absolutely free? No charge at all?’

`No charge at all.’

`If the man you send can put the two pipes back together in less than an hour I don’t have to pay a penny?’

`That’s right, madam. Our consultant will be with you as soon as possible.’

`Wait! Do you have my address?’

`Yes, we have that thank you, madam. Look out for the large yellow van with the big tap on the top. Unmissable.’

`How did you get my address?’ asked Clarice. She sounded nervous. Big Brother was watching too closely.

`Just using the Google geographical software attached to your telephone, madam.’

`Oh.’ There was another pause. `I didn’t know you people could do all these things. Well, don’t be too quick. I need to change my top and mop up some of the water first.’

`Will about half an hour be all right, madam?’

`That’d be fine, thank you.’ She still sounded a trifle uncertain. `And you sure the first hour is completely free?’

`It’s completely free, madam. It’s an introductory promotional offer we’re running in conjunction with Google.’

I turned off my phone and looked at my watch. I just had time to finish my lunch.

Chapter 32

I was half way to Clarice's house, hoping that I would somehow be able to mend her washing machine and wheedle my way back into her good books, when my telephone rang. It was Roger Hubbard.

`Something odd,' he said. `I asked around and found the guy who'd rang the papers about your doctor friend.'

`Who was it?'

`Rather not name names,' said Roger. `But it doesn't matter anyway. When he rang his usual contacts he found they'd already got the story. He rang three papers and two television news studios. They all had the story.'

`So someone else rang them all?'

`Exactly so.'

I overtook a red Audi which was travelling so slowly that the driver was either looking for somewhere to park or having a heart attack. An oncoming van driver tooted unnecessarily.

`If you're driving I hope you're using a hands-free kit!'

`Of course I am,' I lied. `Could it have been some kid in the street with a mobile phone who called in the story? Kids are getting very media savvy these days.'

`Not very likely is it. How would they know who it was? It was dark and Dr Tranter wasn't immediately recognisable was she? I mean it wasn't as if it were the Duchess of Cambridge being breathalysed. And even if someone did recognise her it's a bit unlikely that they'd ring all the papers and television companies. They might ring one. But all of them?'

I had to agree with him. `So who was it?'

`There's something else,' said Roger. `My mate at the station, the chap who rang up the papers, said that one of the editors told him they'd had the story for an hour.'

I thought about this. `That's not possible,' I said at last.

`Seems strange doesn't it? But my mate was absolutely certain about it because he thought it was a bit funny too. He rang the first newspaper about fifteen minutes after the call came in to the station. Allow another fifteen minutes for the patrol guys to make the call to the station and that editor had the story thirty minutes before it happened.'

`Which editor told your mate that they'd had the story for an hour?'

`Haven't the foggiest I'm afraid, doctor. One of the nationals.'

`No, I mean was it the first, the second, the third…'

`Oh, I see what you mean. I don't know that either. But it doesn't make much difference. He wouldn't have taken more than ten minutes to make all five calls. The guys on the news desks don't hang around making polite conversation about the weather.'

`But how…'

`I really don't have the faintest idea, doctor. But it does seems to suggest that someone, somewhere, knew that Dr Tranter was going to be stopped and breathalysed and arrested before it happened.'

`Before it happened!'

`Exactly.'

`How the hell could that be?'

`I have absolutely no idea. No idea at all.'

I thanked him and switched off my phone.

Who the hell would have known that Molly was going to be breathalysed before she was breathalysed? It had to be someone who had rung the police, given them her car number and told them that the driver had been drinking. But no one could have seen her drinking because she hadn't been drinking. So it had to be someone who had spiked her drink. So it had to be someone at the television studios. And that could be any one of a hundred people.

I pulled up outside Clarice's house; a neat looking semi in a row of neat looking semis. They all looked identical. The doors and window frames were all painted the same shade of light blue. The landlord, whoever he was, had clearly managed to arrange a good deal on the paint. I wondered if he'd bought it all from Mick Leyton.

It was time to stop puzzling about Molly for a few minutes and to start worrying about mending a washing machine and a badly damaged relationship that hadn't even started.

Chapter 33

Clarice opened the door, looked at me and didn't say a word. In fact she put her hand over her mouth in that way that people do when they are surprised and either can't think of anything to say or don't want to say anything until they have thought through what they think they might be planning to say.

`I'm from Proactive Plumbers,' I said, trying to smile.

She still didn't say anything. Her hair was pulled back from her face in a pony-tail and she was wearing very little make-up. She was wearing a plum coloured sweater and close fitting jeans. I thought she was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. And she had a terrific figure. I couldn't imagine why she'd agreed to go out with me. It occurred to me that she might not even remember that we'd met before. She might not remember that we'd had a date.

`It's me,' I said. `Harry Cassidy. We met at The Bell. I was having dinner. You were working there.'

`I know,' she said. `I haven't forgotten.'

`I am so sorry about forgetting our date.' I suddenly realised that I should have brought flowers. Flowers and chocolates. I was making a real mess of this. `I really will have a look at your washing machine,' I said.

She looked at me and raised an eyebrow.

I felt myself going red. `I don't know why I did all that plumber stuff. It was pretty stupid.'

`That was you?'

`Yes. I'm afraid so.'

`You pretended to be a plumber?'

`I was ringing you to apologise and…I don't really know what happened.'

`Has my mobile phone got a camera in it?'

`I don't know. I don't know anything about mobile phones. I don't even know if my mobile phone has got a camera in it.'

`Do you know anything about washing machines?'

`No. But I can look at it.'

`You couldn't really see me when I was soaked?'

`No.'

`You told me a whole load of lies.'

`Yes. And I don't know why I did it. When you answered the phone I sort of panicked. I was really cross with myself and nervous that you'd tell me to go and, well just go, and so I suppose I was frightened to admit it was me. I do feel really bad about forgetting our date. It's been a pretty horrid time to be honest and I just forgot. I just got home, slumped in a chair and sort of fell asleep.' I winced. It didn't seem a good idea to keep pointing out that I had forgotten that we had a date. I should have said that I'd been stuck with an emergency. Racing around up to my knees in blood. Saving lives. Preferably children's lives. Small, cute, blonde children. But I didn't want to lie to her. I couldn't start our relationship with a lie. Apart from it not being the right thing to do I would probably get found out.

Clarice didn't say anything. She looked as if she was trying to decide whether or not to just shut the door.

I sighed. `I'm not very good at this sort of stuff.'

She smiled. `You're not, are you? No one could accuse you of being a smoothie!'

I went down on my knees. `I'm really very sorry,' I said. `Will you please forgive me?'

She laughed out loud. `The woman across the road is peeking. She probably thinks you're proposing to me.'

I looked around, over my shoulder, just in time to see a net curtain twitch.

`You'd better come in,' she said. `Would you like a coffee? You can continue grovelling while I put the kettle on.' She turned and walked along the hall. I shut the front door and followed her. The hallway was narrow. There was a door into a living room on the left and a narrow staircase on the right. Everything was neat and clean. As Clarice disappeared into the kitchen, which was straight ahead, I couldn't help noticing that the view from behind was pretty good.

`It's a lovely house,' I said.

It smelt clean and fresh. Not the sort of clean and fresh that you get out of an aerosol but the sort of clean and fresh you get when a house is kept, well, clean and fresh. GPs go into far more homes than most people. I'm always surprised how many houses look and smell like refuse tips inside. I've been in houses which were so dirty that I wiped my feet when I left.

She was filling the kettle. `No it's not. It's pretty horrid and it's small but there's only the two of us. And it's all I can afford. I rent it furnished so you don't have to be polite about the furniture. Be careful on the linoleum. I tried to dry it off but it's still a bit damp. Would you like a biscuit?'

`Just the coffee please. Black. No sugar. Where's the washing machine?'

She plugged the kettle in, turned and looked at me. She was smiling broadly. `Guess.'

Puzzled, I looked at her.

`Guess which one is the washing machine.'

I looked around the kitchen. There were four appliances. None of them was new. They all looked as if it had been a long time since anyone had unwrapped them and made appreciative noises. I pointed at one of them. `That's the oven.'

`Good start. I'm glad you recognised that one.'

`And that's the fridge.'

`Fridge freezer if you don't mind. The estate agent made it very clear.'

`Sorry. Fridge freezer.

`You're down to two.'

`One will be the washing machine and the other will be the tumble drier.'

`I haven't got a tumble drier. They cost too much to run. And there isn't room for one anyway. '

`One's a dishwasher and one's a washing machine.'

`And the washing machine is which one?'

I peered at the knobs and dials. `The one with the glass door on the front will be the washing machine. People always like to watch their clothes go round but never seem to want to watch their cups and plates being washed.'

`I'm impressed.'

`Can I have a look at it? Where are the leaky pipes?'

`You have to pull it out. The pipes are at the back. I pushed it back in when I cleaned the floor.'

I pulled out the washing machine. There seemed to be an endless number of pipes and leads behind it. I took out the small pen torch I use for looking down inflamed throats, switched it on and crawled in behind the washing machine. `The thin wiry things carry the electricity don't they?'

She laughed. It was a beautiful laugh. I began to think I might be winning.

`There's a pipe at the back that looks as if it ought to be joined up with another pipe,' I said.

`A red one and a green one,' she agreed. `I think those are the two that came apart. I tried to screw them back together but I couldn't. My fingers aren't strong enough. And I don't have any tools. Well, I have a screwdriver and a hammer but I don't have one of those wrench things.'

I tried to fasten the two pipes together but I couldn't manage it either. I crept out from behind the washing machine. `Just one minute,' I said. I ran out to the car, collected my drug bag and ran back. I opened the bag and took out two pairs of artery forceps. I keep them in case I ever have to stop arterial bleeding in an emergency. Needless to say I haven't used them since I started work as a GP. Holding my torch in my mouth I fastened one pair of forceps around one of the pipes and used the other pair to hold the other pipe tightly. I then managed to screw the two pipes back together.

`I think I've done it!' I announced with considerable pride and some surprise. `Do you want to try the washing machine?'

`You've mended it?' she sounded surprised.

`I think so.'

She turned on the washing machine and I sipped my coffee. It was an excellent cup of coffee; made with Arabica beans and strong. We both watched, listened and waited. There was no sign of water seeping out from underneath the machine.

`You have mended it!' she said eventually.

`Proactive Plumbers always aim to please,' I said proudly.

`Thank you. And the first hour is free?'

`The first hour is definitely free. Am I forgiven?'

She pretended to think for a minute. `I think so,' she said at last. `Just this once.'

`I'm not really a plumber,' I confessed.

`I know. '

`Were you absolutely totally furious with me?'

`Pretty furious,' she admitted.

`Can we try again?'

`OK.'

`Tonight?'

She shook her head. `I need to fix a babysitter.'

`Oh yes. Tomorrow?'

`That should be OK. ‘

`I’ll pick you up at eight.’

`Fine.’

`I forgot to give you my phone number last time,’ I said. `Do you have a piece of paper?’

She rummaged in a drawer and gave me an envelope from the electricity company. I wrote my mobile number down on the back of it. And, for good measure, I then added the surgery number.

Just then the back door burst open and a small boy entered. He had muddy knees and was carrying a large sports bag. `We beat them, mum!’ he announced, tearing off his shoes and then putting them neatly beside the back door. Then he saw me and looked puzzled and alarmed. He had clearly recognised me. He turned to his mother. `Are you OK, mum?’

`I’m fine darling,’ she said. `The washing machine broke down.’

`Oh,’ said the boy. He sounded slightly surprised by this. He was wearing neither a baseball cap nor expensive trainers and so I liked him straight away. I suddenly realised that I knew him but I couldn’t think why.

`Do you remember Doug?’ asked Clarice. `You stopped his nose bleeding.’

`Oh yes,’ I said. I paused and went ice cold. `When was that?’

`Last week. In the surgery.’

`Of course.’ I remembered. I remembered it all.

`Say hello to Dr Cassidy, Doug.’

Doug said hello. I said hello.

`I didn’t know doctors mended washing machines,’ said Doug.

`Oh yes,’ I said. `We do all domestic appliances.’

`You need a bath, ’ Clarice told her son. `Go up and I’ll be up in a few minutes with a clean towel.’

Doug disappeared.

`He’s a patient of mine?’

`Yes, of course.’

`You’re a patient of mine?’

`Yes.’

I didn’t speak for what seemed like a year or two but was probably quite a bit longer.

She spoke at last. `You didn’t remember?’

`You looked different then.’

`I hope I did. The last time I saw you I was covered in blood.’

`You did look different. Have I seen a good deal of you?’

She laughed out loud.

I blushed. `I’m sorry. I didn’t mean…’

`I know…it just seemed funny.’

`Have you been to the surgery much?’

`No. We’re fairly new patients. Doug and I joined your practice when we moved into this house.’

`That’s good. I mean it would have been embarrassing if you’d been to see me every week and I hadn’t remembered you.’

`I assumed you knew I was a patient. That’s why I asked you if it was OK for you to ask me out.’

`I thought you meant because you were working at the bar.’

She laughed. `No. I think barmaids are allowed to go out with their customers. I was worried because you’re our doctor.’

`Yes.’

`It’s not all right is it? I should have realised and said something. Can we just forget tomorrow?’

`No!’ I said. `I don’t want to forget tomorrow. I want to see you.’

`Are you sure?’

Yes. Very sure.’

`It’s not as if we’re doing anything we shouldn’t.’

`No. Just having dinner. And going to the cinema.’ I suddenly caught sight of the clock. `Crumbs. Is that the time? I must fly. I’ve got a surgery to do.’

`Thanks for mending the washing machine.’

`Pleasure. Always available for all your plumbing needs.’

`Proactive Plumbers!’

`That’s me!’

`I look forward to seeing you tomorrow.’

`I look forward to seeing you too.'

`Are you sure it's OK?'

`Definitely, positively, certain.'

I wasn't, of course. I wasn't entirely sure that Jock and the General Medical Council would approve. But I didn't care. We could sort things out later. It wasn't as if we'd kissed or held hands. Not even the GMC could complain about my mending her washing machine.

I walked to my car and looked back. Clarice was still standing on her doorstep.

I waved, she waved and I drove away. About two hundred yards down the road I looked in the rear view mirror. Clarice was still standing on her doorstep. I opened my car window, stuck my hand out and waved. She waved back.

Chapter 34

The evening surgery went slowly. I didn't want to be behind my desk, writing out prescriptions, and I didn't want to be standing beside my examination couch prodding fat bellies and listening to what was going on inside sweaty chests. I wanted to go home, pour myself a large whisky and think. I wanted to think about what Roger Hubbard had told me about Molly. But, even more than that, I wanted to think about Clarice. I liked her a lot. I liked her more than a lot. I thought that life with her could be a good deal of fun. It would certainly be far more fun than life with Enid. But how did I feel about her having a son? I didn't think I minded that at all. He seemed a decent enough boy. But how would he feel about his mother finding a new man? Were his mother's feelings about me as strong as mine about her? And how much of a problem was it that she was a patient of mine? I hadn't treated her so I didn't see how I could be accused of taking advantage of the doctor-patient relationship. It seemed that nothing in my life could be simple. Suddenly, it dawned on me that it was a little early to be thinking of all these potential problems. I'd only met her twice. Three times if you counted the time when she'd brought her son to the surgery – which I most certainly didn't count. We hadn't yet had what could be called a date.

My first patient was a man who looked to be in his fifties. He didn't speak a word of English. He came with two relatives, a woman of the same sort of age and a man in his late twenties or early thirties. I assumed that the older man was my patient because he sat in the chair on the other side of my desk. The other two sat on chairs at the back of the room. The woman was wearing a yashmak and all I could see of her was her eyes. The two men were wearing dark blue suits that hadn't been cleaned or pressed for a generation or two, and grey shirts without ties. The shirts may well have been white when they had been sold. None of these people was registered as patients of ours but the man who sat on the other side of my desk had handed me a form which suggested that he was a `temporary resident'. The receptionist had been no more successful than I was at understanding who they were or what they wanted. In the space headed `name' someone, presumably one of the three, had written something I could not read. Nor could I read what had been put down to explain where they'd come from or where they were staying. I tried speaking to them with a few words of Spanish I'd acquired on a couple of almost forgotten holidays but that proved as ineffective as my attempts to speak to them in English. I didn't know where they came from, what they wanted or what language they spoke.

I hate trying to treat patients to whom I cannot talk. Without being able to communicate with someone it is impossible to take a medical history and one is in a worse position than a vet, who can at least always ask the person accompanying a sick animal for information.

Eventually, after ten minutes of sign language that made me think we were all playing a Christmas parlour game, I realised that the patient was not the older man who was sitting opposite me but the woman who was sitting at the back of the room. And she, I gathered, was the wife, mistress or companion of the younger of the two men. I assumed, probably wrongly, that the older man was the father of the younger man or the woman. I got up from behind the desk and approached her. It quickly became apparent, however, that this wasn't a wise move. The two men stood up quickly and placed themselves in front of her. It seemed that a physical examination was not an option. So, no history taking and no examination. I retreated and sat down again. I then began the tedious business of trying to make a diagnosis by pointing to bits of my own body until eventually the older man confirmed that I was getting warm. A little more mime and some rather poor play acting on my part led me to suspect that the woman was suffering from constipation. I wrote out a prescription for a suitable product and handed it to the older man. I told him firmly that the woman should see her own doctor as soon as possible so that the existence of any underlying pathology might be excluded. The three of them then left. The whole business had taken me over half an hour and put me well behind. The patients sitting in the waiting room would, I suspected, be getting restless.

The next dozen patients were easier to deal with in that they all spoke English and none of them refused to be examined, though a woman who wanted a fresh supply of her contraceptive tablets was quite put out when I wanted to take her blood pressure. `Dr Cohen never bothers with that,' she moaned. An elderly man, old enough in body to be my father and young enough in spirit to be my son, came into the surgery complaining that he was going deaf and, after I had syringed his ears and removed about two pounds of compacted, accumulated wax, left humming to himself and talking of miracles. I handed out prescriptions for aspirin to five patients suffering from colds or flu (and handed handkerchiefs to the three who sneezed all over me without bothering to use either hand or hanky to deflect their germs) and prescribed a soothing cream for a child who had developed a tiny patch of eczema. A couple who had been trying for a baby and who were under the impression that oral sex was the best way forward were sent away with some basic advice about conception. A man in his forties who was losing his hair left promising to complain about me to the Minister of Health when I told him that I couldn't prescribe a hairpiece for him.

At that point the evening surgery was interrupted. One of the receptionists telephoned to tell me that there was a man downstairs threatening to close down the surgery.

`Can’t you ring Dr Cohen?’ I asked. Jock is, after all, the senior partner. `Dealing with lunatics from the council is one of his responsibilities.’

`Dr Cohen said he’s not to be disturbed,’ said the receptionist. `He’s got Mrs Oliphant with him.’ Mrs Oliphant is a young widow who visits Jock once a fortnight and stays with him for an hour at a time. None of us knows exactly what they get up to but, knowing Jock as I do, I very much doubt if it is anything illegal, immoral or worth gossiping about.

I hurried down the stairs and found a man with a clipboard waiting for me. He was wearing one of those yellow vests that motorway workers wear while they read their papers, make the phone calls and drink their endless mugs of tea. I was slightly surprised to see that he wasn’t wearing a hard hat. He was in his early twenties and under the yellow vest he was wearing a cheap grey suit, a blue shirt and a tie that looked as though it had been designed by a regimental quarter master after a night out with the lads.

He told me that he had made a spot check and that he was going to have to close us down because our chairs weren’t all fastened together.

`In an emergency exit situation a chair could fall over and impede egress,’ he told me.

`Go away,’ I said.

He showed me a piece of plastic that was hanging around his neck. `I’m from health and safety. And that’s not all. Your entrance door is two point four centimetres too narrow. If a woman was pushing a double pram she would not have easy access to your building. That needs to be changed before I can allow the building to continue to be used for its present purpose.’

`That’s sexist,’ I told him.

He stared at me, uncomprehending.

`You said that if a woman was pushing a double pram. That’s a sexist remark. You are assuming that only women push prams.’

The man with the clipboard looked worried. These people take these things very seriously.

`If you’re going to close us down then you must tell all those people to go home,’ I told him, pointing behind me to the waiting room.  `And you must sign to take responsibility for what happens to them.’

He looked at me and frowned, clearly puzzled.

`They’re all here because they need drugs or treatment,’ I explained. `If they go home untreated some of them may die. If you’re sending them home then you must take responsibility for the ones who die.’

`No one said anything about taking responsibility for people dying,’ said the youth.

‘It’s what we do here,’ I explained.

He stared, uncomprehending.

`We take responsibility,’ I explained. `The buck stops here. If people die we’re responsible. So if you want to take over then you must take our responsibility.’

`I’m not signing anything like that,’ said the youth, edging towards the door.

`Then go away and stop wasting our time,’ I told him.

`I’ll be back,’ he said. `I’ll have to make a report. You haven’t heard the last of this.’

`If I see, hear or smell you within a mile of me I’ll certify you insane,’ I told him. `And if you annoy me I’ll certify you officially dead. It’ll take you weeks to unravel the mess that will make of your life.’

He left, clutching his clipboard. I set off back for the stairs. Before I could start climbing, a receptionist popped out. `Did you see that man who was threatening to close down the surgery?’ she asked.

`Mistaken identity,’ I told her. `He thought we were a branch of McDonalds.’

`Oh,’ she said, seemingly unconcerned and unsurprised by this. `So we’re not shutting then?’ She sounded disappointed.

`No. We’re not shutting.’

The rest of the surgery went smoothly and ended with a woman in her thirties reporting that she was having difficulty sleeping and demanding that I give her some of the wonderful capsules I had prescribed for her friend. She had brought one of the capsules with her, carefully wrapped in a paper tissue, so that I could be sure to prescribe the correct medicine. I recognised the capsule immediately. It was huge. It looked like the sort of thing pharmacists use in their window displays. One half of the capsule was green and the other half was yellow. The ingredients were nothing more potent than vitamins and the capsules were my favourite placebo.

As I’ve mentioned earlier, I am an enthusiastic believer in the power of the placebo. The evidence shows that between a third and a half of all patients will respond to a placebo and will recover from whatever ails them when given an entirely inert and harmless medicament. The trick is that the prescriber must believe in the power of whatever he is prescribing (or must convince the patient that he believes in it).

`Does your friend sleep well with these?' I asked.

`Better than ever,' came the reply. `She's tried all sorts of things given to her by Dr Cohen. But your capsules work best. They've got rid of her depression too.'

`Are you having difficulty in sleeping?'

`Terrible difficulty,' said the woman. `I've got two teenage kids. They're going through a bad patch. My daughter has had metal rings put through her nose and her tongue and other places too that I won't mention if you don't mind. My son is waiting to go to court for stealing a car. And my husband is drinking too much.'

`Are you depressed?'

`Wouldn't you be?'

`These capsules are very powerful,' I told her, writing out a prescription for thirty capsules. `You must only take one and you must take it at 9 o'clock at night. Not a minute earlier and not a minute later. You must swallow the capsule with 100 mls of water. You must keep the bottle locked up somewhere safe so that no one else can find them.'

I have found, over the years, that the capsules work best when given with very precise advice. I once experimented with telling patients that the capsules had to be taken green end first but stopped this after a woman rang me in tears to tell me that she had taken a capsule yellow end first. She was convinced that she would die.

The sleepless patient was very grateful and left clutching the prescription as though it were the Holy Grail. I do believe that doctors should use placebos more often. I have tremendous faith in their power. I suspect that I could help cyclists win the Tour de France by giving them supplies of my green and yellow vitamin capsules.

And so the early evening went.

When I'd seen the last patient I had a telephone call from the only receptionist remaining on duty. I have no idea which one it was. She told me that Jock wanted to see me. She made it sound as if I were a schoolboy and he the headmaster.

`I've had another complaint about you,' said Jock, the moment I walked through his door. `Someone from the Regional Health Authority rang and bollocked me. Apparently you haven't filled in your XD109s.'

`I haven't filled in my whats?'

`Your XD109s. These new forms we're supposed to fill in every week.'

`What the hell are they for?' I long ago gave up trying to keep up with all the forms we are supposed to complete. There are forms for licensing, revalidation and compliance and a zillion and one other things too. Any doctor who fills in all the forms he's supposed to complete must be failing his patients.

`I don't know,' admitted Jock. He looked a trifle embarrassed. `Apparently I haven't filled in mine either.'

`I bet Deidre has.'

`Oh yes, Deidre has.'

Deidre is a star at filling in forms. Nothing – and I think I probably mean `nothing' - gives her greater pleasure than sitting down with a cheap pen and a pile of questionnaires. I, on the other hand, find it difficult to take forms seriously. Not a week goes by without some idiot somewhere in the National Health Service thinking up a reason for another questionnaire.

`Tell them Deidre has used up all the forms and we need another supply,' I told him.

`And those social workers from the Social Integration Unit are still carrying on with their complaint about you. I tried to persuade them that you'd had a nervous breakdown but they wanted an apology in writing and I knew you wouldn't do that.'

I took out my pipe and started to scrape out the bowl. Just the sight of my pipe always annoys Jock.

`Just tell them to go away. They'll slink back into their dark cave.'

`I don't think I can do that. They're making a complaint so we have to take them seriously. You're not going to light that thing are you?'

`Or?'

`Or what?'

`Or what will happen if we don't take them seriously?'

`I don't know. They'll probably send someone round to crush your morning biscuits and let the air out of your tyres. I don't know what these people can do.'

`Don't worry about them. Tell them I've left the country. What morning biscuits?'

`The biscuits you get with your coffee at eleven.'

`Do you have coffee at eleven? With biscuits?'

`Yes, of course.'

`Oh.' I made a mental note to tell the receptionists I wanted coffee and biscuits half way through every morning. I stood up, tapped out the contents of my pipe into Jock's waste paper basket and sat down again. `Tell the

Social Integration Unit that I'm making a counter complaint because they interfered with the provision of care to a patient. Tell them I feel that their actions threatened the state of mind of a vulnerable individual. Tell them we can't respond to their complaint because to do so would be a breach of privacy regulations. Tell them I've gone insane and been appointed Minister of Defence. Tell them I was battered and abused when I was a child and that I regard their complaint as a continuation of that bullying. Tell them I've become a Muslim and that I regard their complaint as an ethnic slur. Tell them I'm homosexual and regard their claims as specifically directed at my choice of sexuality. Tell them I'm having hormone treatment because I'm a transsexual and that my presence of mind was disturbed by a rush of progesterone.' I paused for a moment. `Tell them that I've got early onset Alzheimer's disease and that I don't remember who they are, what they want or who I am.' I took out my tobacco pouch and started to refill the pipe.

`One of those might work. Do you really want me to tell them that? The only snag is that the GMC might want to take away your licence.'

I turned and headed back towards the door. `I'll make a miraculous recovery and write a book giving all the credit to green and yellow capsules.' I sighed. `To be honest Jock I don't give a fig what you tell them or what they do. I can't even remember what the complaint is about. They can't have me put down and they can't send me to prison. The worst they can do is ask the NHS to sack me. I doubt if they can do that but if they do I will be utterly delighted. I'll live off the State and spend the rest of my days sitting around in my pyjamas watching daytime television.'

`I've been meaning to ask you about those green and yellow capsules,' said Jock. `What the hell are they? What is in them? I've had five patients begging for them this week. I had to palm them off with Angipax, which I told them were much stronger.'

I started to light my pipe and left.

I really was getting very tired of my job.

Chapter 35

On my way home I called in at The Bell. It had occurred to me that Clarice might be working but, sadly, she wasn't. I ordered the steak and kidney pudding with mashed potatoes, carrots, broad beans and cauliflower. While I waited for the chef to create yet another masterpiece of traditional English cooking I asked Harry to pour me a large Laphroaig. I then sat on my usual bar stool and thought long and hard about Molly; and about why and how someone had managed to ring the newspapers to tell them about an accident that hadn't yet happened.

The `how' was all too easy. Someone had spiked Molly's drink when she and Larry had been at the television studios. And someone, probably the same someone, had made a few telephone calls. The first, as a concerned citizen, had been to the police to tip them off about a driver worth breathalysing. The others had been to various news desks. The chances were that the drink had been spiked and the calls made by Alfred Lunt. And his reward had been a commission to make a couple of documentary films. The other part of the puzzle had doubtless been easy to arrange. A joy rider in a stolen truck had been given £50 to drive into the side of my car to put me out of action for the evening. I could prove none of this. And I suspected that no one else would ever be able to prove it either. But in my heart I knew it was the way it had happened. In real life, sadly, the baddies get away with things more often than they should.

The `why' wasn't difficult either. Molly had annoyed some very powerful people in the drug industry and the medical establishment. She had become a serious threat to the vaccine industry and someone had decided to silence her. Had she found new evidence of some additional, particularly egregious example of corporate malfeasance? Or was she a threat merely because she had dared to speak out? Had men in suits sat around a large walnut boardroom table and made the decision to end her professional life to save their profits? Had some eager underling gone further than even they had ordered – a la Murder in the Cathedral? Initially, it seemed difficult to believe that huge, international pharmaceutical companies would actually destroy a doctor's career in order to shut her up. But why should I find that so difficult to believe? Every doctor worth his salt knows that drug companies have knowingly sacrificed thousands of patients by keeping drugs on the market even though they are aware that the drugs they are selling are killing people. Time and time again evidence of serious side effects has been suppressed by executives eager to extend a deadly drug's profitable lifespan. Doctors who have dared to speak out have been excoriated, ridiculed and eventually destroyed. Whistleblowers who posed much smaller threats than Molly have been metaphorically hung, drawn and quartered in order to protect the bottom line profits and the sanctity of the executive bonus scheme. It seemed clear to me that the drug companies had decided to discredit Molly, and to ensure that the GMC took away her licence. The assault on the policeman had been a small bonus. The suicide had been a big bonus.

I decided I wanted to see what research Molly had accumulated. Larry was in the Leonard Cheshire home and there was no one living in their flat. Her parents had taken nothing of hers. They hadn't even visited the flat to see where she had lived (and died). They had, I knew, instructed Larry to deal with all her belongings. But I was pretty sure that he hadn't.

I finished my whisky, paid Harry and drove to the Leonard Cheshire home. I told Larry I wanted to go through Molly's papers to see if there were any letters or notes relating to patients she had seen. He happily gave me the keys. `Her desk is in the bedroom,' he told me. `There's a small, three drawer filing cabinet next to it. It's dark green. We bought it in a junk shop just off the High Street. It weighs a ton but she insisted on carrying it back herself. All her papers are in that. Take whatever you need. None of it's any good to me.'

He didn't seem to care about Molly now that she was gone and of no further use to him.

The flat was cold and smelt empty. It was full of furniture, clothes, books, CDs and DVDs but it still seemed empty. It took me no more than a minute to find the filing cabinet. It had been around for a long time. Over the years the corners had been chipped and bashed by clumsy removal men. The side of the cabinet had been hit hard with something very solid and there was a big dent in it. For a moment, just before I opened it, I wondered if it might have been emptied; if someone had broken in and removed the contents. But the three drawers opened smoothly and easily and all Molly's papers were in there. Someone, presumably Molly, had oiled the runners. I didn't expect to find anything startling. I suddenly got the feeling that the drug companies had been more frightened of Molly and her willingness to tell what she knew than they had of her having unearthed some new and devastating information.

I opened the three drawers of the filing cabinet and flicked through the files they contained. There were dozens and dozens of scientific papers. They were crammed in so tightly that it was difficult to slide the files in or out. Some of the papers had been torn out of medical journals. Most were photocopies which had library stamps on them to prove that the copies had been made legally. Some were reprints of papers which had been sent to Molly by the authors. Medical journals don't usually pay their contributors in cash; instead they pay them in reprints of the articles they've written and these reprints are distributed enthusiastically by the proud authors. There were no letters or private documents, though one cardboard file contained copies of articles Molly had written and a contract from a publisher for a book she had been commissioned to write. The title of the book was to be *Bad Medicine*. I started to read through the papers but quickly realised that there were too many and that I needed to take them home with me. I found a roll of black plastic rubbish bags in a cupboard under the kitchen sink and filled three of them with files from the cabinet. I then carried the sacks out of the flat, dumped them in the boot of my car and drove home.

It took me six hours to skim (not read) through the papers and articles I'd collected. Individually the articles were troubling. En masse they were devastating. Some of the papers dealt with iatrogenesis as a whole, with analyses of the harm doctors do, but most dealt with vaccination. Molly had clearly collected together every medical or scientific article about vaccines and vaccination that she could possibly find. Judging by a few scribbled notes I found, it seemed that a sympathetic librarian in London had helped her. And the evidence she had accumulated showed conclusively that vaccines were simply neither safe nor effective. Every accusation she had made had been entirely accurate; every conclusion she had drawn had been correct and fair. Nothing she had said had been taken out of context; nothing she had written had been an exaggeration.

It was three in the morning when I finally sat back. There were piles of papers on every available surface – including the floor. I realised, for the first time, just how bad things had become and just how complete the corruption of the medical establishment had been.

We all know that bankers and politicians lie and cheat but I had not realised just how much doctors also lie and cheat to protect and defend their true masters – the drug companies. The papers which Molly had collected proved without any shadow of a doubt that the lying and the deceiving is done routinely and dispassionately and that it has spread everywhere throughout the profession. Molly had evidence of drug companies suppressing inconvenient truths and lists of members of the medical establishment who had close, financial links to the drug companies they were charged with regulating. There was even evidence of corruption among scientific journals. All this was printed openly. Available but largely unread. It was clear from what she had discovered that only the most corrupt doctors, the ones keenest to suppress the truth and to fill their wallets, were invited to sit on committees and exercise power. What a conspiracy!

The mass of doctors, the men and women who prescribe and authorise the vaccinations which are given, shut their eyes to the truth because they are well paid to keep silent. And I'd been part of it for too long. I'd known that our practice was making a huge chunk of its income out of force feeding vaccines to children and to the elderly but until Molly forced me to think about what we were doing I had kept my eyes and mind firmly shut. I had never even thought of asking the questions any decent doctor should have asked. I had trusted the government, the medical establishment and the drug industry implicitly. Did that make me a fool or a cheat or a crook? Whatever it made me I was part of the fraud.

As a breed, doctors used to be respected for their noble motives. Individual doctors had bravely fought greed, stupidity and the established way of doing things. John Snow, Ignaz Semmelweiss and Joseph Lister had fought on behalf of patients, and with no thought for their own professional positions. No more. Today, the drug companies have succeeded in controlling the profession and they have driven out all noble motives. Any doctor who dares to question the established way of doing things is regarded as, at best, an iconoclast, a maverick and a renegade and, at worst, a dangerous self-serving lunatic.

The big drug companies play hard ball in a way that the illegal drug dealers from South America can only envy. Thanks to their efforts the medical profession's leaders are a lethal mixture of psychopaths, frauds, thieves and liars. New discoveries are fêted and welcomed only if they are profitable. The mass of doctors are terrified to take a position questioning the wisdom of what they are told; they sit back, content to do as they are told, happy to ignore the unnecessary deaths and the deliberate disabling and crippling of untold thousands, and to count their fat payments as a reward for their silence.

And because Molly rose up as an unexpected, unwelcome nemesis, a deadly opponent to a hubristic profession, she had to be silenced.

They hadn't intended that she should die, of course.

Silencing her would do.

To begin with they had tried with bribery. The absurd scheme to `buy' the practice through a bizarre sponsorship scheme was a standard drug company ploy. Throw money to doctors and they will beg endlessly for more. Jock and Deidre had swallowed the bait enthusiastically. Jock had a new, expensive house to rebuild and to furnish. Deidre would have succumbed if they'd offered her a half decent pen, or a weekend in a four star hotel. If the scheme had succeeded Molly would have been fired and, without a reference, she would have been unemployable and, therefore, silenced. But I'd had to stick my bloody-minded neck into the scheme. If I hadn't said `no' the sponsorship scheme would have gone ahead and Molly would probably still be alive.

But I had defended my virtue; gathering my skirts around me like a Victorian maiden. And the sponsorship scheme had been abandoned.

So then, as a result of my squeamishness, the other plot was laid. Molly’s crippled and ambitious but hopelessly untalented boyfriend was seduced with an offer of a spot on television so that she would be in the studios at a convenient moment. They knew that she would be with him and that I would be on call. They knew that if I could not remain on duty I would ring her and she would stand in for me. It was all blindingly simple. A few notes to a yob with a doubtless stolen truck. An offer of a contract to an ambitious young director. A spiked drink. Some telephone calls. A young doctor’s career, respectability and reputation are ruined.

So very, very simple.

But things had gone even better than planned.

Molly had punched the policeman and as a result the case had become even more serious than the organisers had dared hope. And broken in spirit a young doctor with passion and compassion had killed herself. The nemesis was conveniently, if unexpectedly, silenced. Mission very accomplished.

As dawn broke, I listened to the sound of the waking birds and all became very simple. What I had to do wasn’t just about vaccines and vaccination. It wasn’t about revenge for Molly. It wasn’t just about right or wrong. Mainly it was about self-respect.

It is always the existence of alternatives and choices which creates dilemmas, and suddenly there were no alternatives and no choices. `Should I stay or should I go?’ was no longer a question which was worth asking because there was no choice. I had reached a point where the pleasure in staying (which had, for some time, been reduced to the security of a comfortable sum appearing in my bank account every month) was far outweighed by the cost to my spirit. The upside was far outweighed by the unpleasant consequences of continuing to work with Jock and Deidre in a practice which would forever be run with about as much compassion as the average landmine factory. We didn’t treat patients; we processed them. The patients we treated (and injected) were simply a means to an end. They were no longer the reason for our professional existence.

When now becomes then, what will our descendants think of us? We should live in shame.

I wrote my letter of resignation and on the way to the surgery I popped it into a post box.

I didn’t care what happened to Jock or Deidre or Jim or Lavinia or Alfred Lunt. I would never be able to find enough evidence to convict any of them of anything. And they were, after all, nothing but foot soldiers fighting a war they didn’t even really know they were fighting.

And in a way none of that mattered. Nothing would change the fact that Molly was dead; another casualty in the war to tell the truth.

The only thing that really mattered was the truth.

Chapter 36

Clarice and I went to an Italian restaurant neither of us had ever been to before. They called it a restaurant but on the continent it would have been described as a café. It wasn't very big. There were no more than eight or nine tables. She was wearing a simple, pink and white cotton dress which reminded me of summer days. Her hair lay loose around her shoulders. It was the first time I'd seen it hanging free. I was wearing my faithful sports jacket and the only pair of trousers I could find that weren't covered in blood, ink or food remains. My hair was uncombed and unbrushed because I could not find either a comb or a brush. I had, however, flattened and tidied it with my fingers. The restaurant was almost empty, either because it was unfashionable in that strange way that good eating places sometimes are, or because it was considered too out of the way for the locals, but the salad, the pasta and the baked pears in red wine had all been excellent. They didn't have steak and kidney pudding on the menu but I didn't care. They didn't even make chips.

I'd picked Clarice up at home and we'd decided not to bother with the cinema. The only films showing seemed to both of us to have been made with the sole aim of helping to sell over-priced popcorn and cola to indiscriminating teenagers in search of somewhere warmer, more comfortable and infinitely more private than the front room sofa.

She had a black eye which she had tried to disguise with make-up and she eventually told me how she'd got it.

`My ex-husband turned up. One of the neighbours phoned him and said I was seeing someone.'

`How did they know?'

`Probably because they'd heard I'd booked the babysitter. The neighbours where I live are seriously nosy. They would get prizes for gossiping if any were being given out; they probably moonlight for MI5.'

I told her I was sorry I'd caused her so much trouble.

`It's you I'm worried about,' she said. `If he finds out you're my doctor he'll cause as much trouble for you as he can.'

`He can't cause any trouble for me,' I told her. `I don't think even the GMC will be interested in the fact that I've bought a meal for a patient.'

`And mended her washing machine.'

`They might be more worried about the washing machine,' I laughed. `There's probably something in the code of conduct about not servicing domestic appliances which are connected to the mains water.'

`Seriously, could you get into trouble?'

`Not at the moment. It depends…' I left the thought unspoken.

She blushed. It was a charming, unexpected blush. `If you want to see me again I could change practices. Would that help?'

I nodded. `I do want to see you again. But you don't have to change practices. I've quit. Resigned.'

She looked surprised. `Why? I didn't know doctors ever quit. They just always seem to go on for ever in the same place.'

I explained. I told her about Molly, and how and why she'd died, and about Jock and Deidre.

`Were you and Dr Tranter very close?' she asked.

`She was like a daughter,' I said. `She was very brave. Too brave. Too young and too innocent to realise what she was taking on.'

`You and she weren't…?'

`No, no. Nothing like that. She had a boyfriend. He was disabled. The drug companies used him to help get to her.'

I told Clarice about the accident, Molly's arrest and her death. I told her what I knew and I told her what I suspected.

`Does he know? The boyfriend. Does he know they used him?'

I shook my head.

`What will you do? Will you stay in general practice?'

`Probably. It's the only thing I know how to do. But I'll have to move. There aren't any vacancies round here. Besides, I want to find a small solo practice. I want a job looking after a few hundred people living in a small, isolated community. I want to work too far away from civilisation for bureaucrats and social workers to visit and be a pain in the neck. I want to practice in an old-fashioned way; to be a solo practitioner, without an appointments system and without having to give bloody vaccinations. And because there will only be a few patients I'll have time to do a little research and writing of my own. I can carry on where Molly left off. I'm going to write the book she was planning to write. Or something similar. I'm going to tell the truth she started to tell. Someone has to take on the drug companies and the medical establishment. It pisses me off that they all continue to get away with suppressing the truth and killing patients simply so that they can carry on making vast amounts of money.'

`Do you think you'll be able to make people listen?'

`I don't know. But I have to do something - even if I fail to make a difference. The best any of us can hope for is to be judged by our intentions rather than our accomplishments. The truth is that I've wasted too much of my life. The most valuable commodity any of us has is time; it's the ultimately depreciating and deflationary asset. And I don't want to waste any more of it than I have to. I want to go somewhere quiet and peaceful where the days go by more slowly and where I can live in the past at a more peaceful pace. And while I'm there I'll write the book that may, or may not, change the world a little.'

The life had been squeezed out of me and I had forgotten what life was for. Now, I had a new life with new hopes. I had purpose.

`Are there any places like that?'

`Oh yes. If you travel far enough into the highlands of Scotland there are heaps of places like that. There are even a few islands which need doctors.'

`Aren't places like that swamped with applications from doctors wanting to get away from it all?'

`No. Not at all. Apparently they have a job finding doctors prepared to give up the 21st century dream and go back to living the sort of life that doctors enjoyed half a century or more. I rang someone working for NHS Scotland who is trying to find a GP to work on a small Scottish island with 200 inhabitants. It sounds perfect. The last GP who worked there used to do a morning surgery that sometimes lasted as long as half an hour.' Once or twice a week he visited a patient at home. Most of the rest of the time he painted and fished and knitted sweaters which he sold to a shop in Edinburgh. There's one pub and a tiny church and a boat which goes to the mainland three times a week to collect mail and supplies. In winter they're sometimes cut off for weeks at a time. The woman I spoke to said they'd give the job to the first doctor who applied as long as he was properly licensed and still breathing without external help. She said they'd prefer someone who didn't need an iron lung because of the slightly dodgy electricity supply on the island.'

Clarice looked to her right. We were sitting in an alcove by the window. Outside it was dark and raining lightly. A few cars were hurrying past. There were no pedestrians. `I've always dreamt of somewhere like that,' she said softly. `When I was a little girl I used to dream of living in a cottage miles from anywhere. Somewhere with log fires and a stream outside and lots of green as far as you can see.'

For a few moments neither of us said anything. We both took sips of cold coffee.

`I'll have to move too,' said Clarice at last. `My ex-husband will be back when he wants money. Or when he wants a woman he can beat up. I need to be somewhere else when he does turn up. Doug, my little boy, is terrified of him.'

`Will you be OK tonight?'

`He'll be paralytic by now. He won't come at night.'

Neither of us spoke for a while. One of the waiters was clearing away nearby tables. He was trying not to make too much noise.

`So we're both on the move,' I said.

Somehow, during the latter part of the evening our fingers had somehow become entwined. Very gently I squeezed her hand. She squeezed me back. It's surprising what you can say with a touch of the fingers.

`I'm going to sell everything I own here,' I told her. `Start afresh. Sell the house and send all the furniture to auction. I'll just keep my clothes and a few books. And the papers Molly collected. I want to get rid of everything else.'

`Except your pipes.'

`I'll keep my pipes,' I agreed. `Wherever I go I want to be able to drive there. I don't want to fly and I don't want to take the train. I want to go there slowly, over a few days. You know how when you go somewhere by plane it's as though you haven't really gone anywhere new? The place looks different and the weather may be different but it's only taken an hour or two to get there and so it feels as if you've not really travelled.'

`I know what you mean. You want to go by car so that it'll seem as though you've travelled further; as though you're making a real break with the past.'

`Exactly. I want to travel a long, long way from here. I think I'll sell the car and buy an estate car. Or maybe a truck. Then I can take all my remaining stuff with me.'

Clarice looked down.

`What's the matter?'

She looked up. There were tears in her eyes.

`What's the matter?'

`It's silly. We've only just met. This is our first date. But it now it looks as though it might be our last.'

I touched her cheek with my free hand and wiped away a tear with my forefinger. `That isn't the way I was thinking.'

`No?'

`We both want to change our lives. Why we don't we change them together?'

`You hardly know me.'

`It'll be an adventure we can share. We can get to know each other as we find our new lives together.'

`I've got a son.'

`I'd noticed him. I wasn't going to suggest that we left him behind. I'd like a son. And Doug is young enough for me to teach him tons of things about which I know absolutely nothing. A ready-made son is absolutely fine. Straight onto the football and cricket. No nappy rashes and sleepless nights. There's a small school on the island I mentioned. The woman I spoke to was very keen for me to know of all the amenities. They've got a road too. And one vehicle that functions as fire engine, ambulance and delivery truck. The last doctor who worked there did all his calls in a horse drawn buggy. The locals park their cars on the mainland and only use them when they leave the island.'

`Can you handle a horse?'

`I have no idea. I rode a donkey on the sands at Weston-super-Mare when I was six so I expect it'll all come to me quite easily. What do you think about living on an island?'

`I think it sounds idyllic.'

`Maybe not idyllic in the middle of winter when there's three foot of snow on the ground and no boat can reach the island. '

`This is all completely crazy.'

`Absolutely. It's totally crazy. What have we got to lose?'

She shook her head and laughed. She laughed a lot. She'd laughed more since I'd met her than Jock and Deidre had laughed in the years since I'd met them. She'd laughed more than Enid too. A good deal more. `Nothing. I've got nosy neighbours, a violent ex-husband and someone else's broken down kitchen appliances.'

`If we go by car you'll need to junk a lot of stuff.'

`Good. I haven't got much stuff and most of what there is needs junking.' Clarice looked around. `Have you noticed that we're the last people in here.'

`Do you think we should go and let them shut up and go home?'

The two solitary waiters were standing by the door to the kitchen. They had cleared and cleaned all the other tables. I drew a rectangle in the air. The head waiter brought over the bill which he had already prepared. I paid him, adding a generous tip. He smiled and seemed content. Sometimes it's very easy to make people happy. We left. I took Clarice back to the neat semi with the clean kitchen floor and the washing machine which no longer leaked. We stood on her doorstep. The street lights had been switched off long ago but the house and the street were lit by a half moon. We kissed. Although it was the end of an evening it was the beginning of something much more substantial.

It wouldn't be easy. But for the first time in many years I was looking forward to tomorrow.

We hope you enjoyed The Truth Kills by Vernon Coleman and that if you did you will feel able to publish a review on Amazon. It would be much appreciated.

For details of more books by Vernon Coleman please visit his author page on Amazon or www.vernoncoleman.com

The Wisdom of Animals

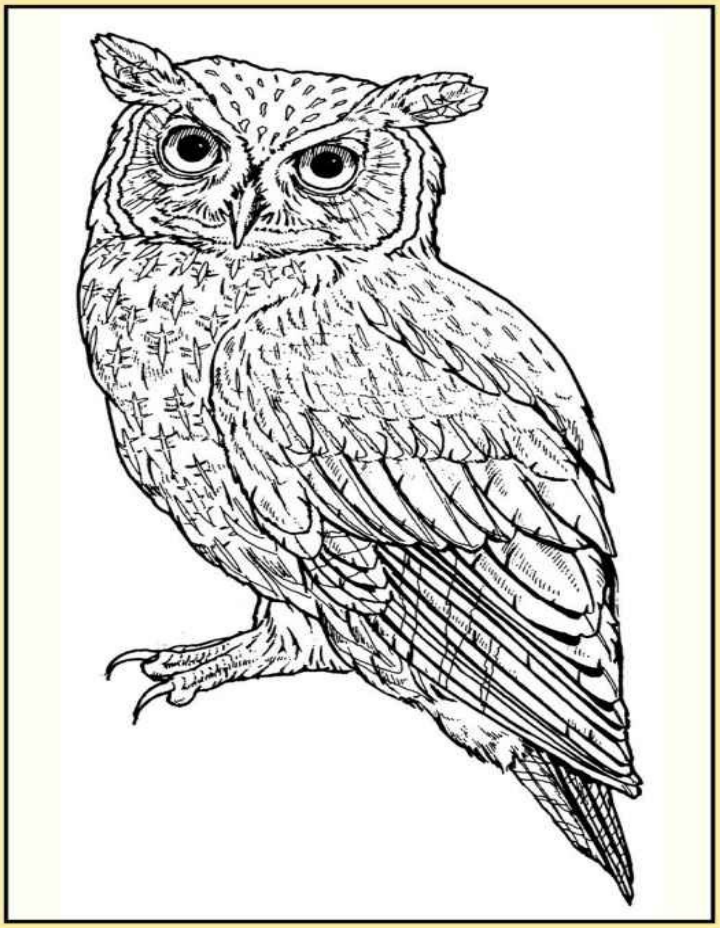

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The Wisdom of Animals

Vernon Coleman and Donna Antoinette Coleman

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Dedicated

To Ed Lee, our friend, and a true friend to the animals

Prologue

It's surprisingly difficult to obtain real facts about animals. Much of what we read, and think we know, owes more to imagination than to science. Rumour, gossip and folklore have, over the years, taken the place of solid research. Surprisingly little accurate research has ever been done into the way animals live and behave.

In the case of wild animals this is not, perhaps, too surprising. Studying wild animals properly means following them for years in their natural habitat - a difficult if not impossible task which requires superhuman dedication and would, in the end, probably produce research of questionable value because the very presence of the human observer might well alter the behaviour of the animals. Studying `wild' animals in the entirely unnatural conditions of the laboratory, zoo or safari park is as likely to provide useful information about the way animals behave naturally as studying prisoners would about human behaviour. One thing we do know for certain is that wild animals kept in captivity behave very differently to wild animals living in their natural habitat.

It should, of course, be much easier to observe farm animals. Cows, pigs, sheep and other animals are easy enough to watch. And since the observer need not alter the animals' routine the observations should be of value. But very few proper studies have been carried out on farm animals, and vets and farmers are invariably quite mistaken in their beliefs about animals such as sheep and cows. Instead of watching these animals in their natural surroundings, men and women in white coats cage them, stick electrodes into their heads, sit them in metal boxes for weeks at a time to make them depressed, separate them from their families, sew up their eyes and inject chemicals into their brains while they are awake. The knowledge obtained in such a barbaric way is never of any value but is simply added to our ever-growing library of pointless `discoveries' and `observations'. In a generation or so our descendants will look back at the meat traders, the animal transporters, the hunters and the vivisectors and wonder not just at the sort of people they were, but at the sort of people we were to let them do what they did.

The truth, sadly, is that little or nothing of value has been written or broadcast about pigs, cows, sheep and other farm animals because the meat industry doesn't want us to know that the animals which are reared and killed for us to eat are sensitive, thoughtful and intelligent.

Farmers and butchers have a financial interest in perpetuating and strengthening the myth that animals (particularly farm animals) are stupid. After all, one of the reasons why we don't like to eat horses, dogs or cats is because we recognise that they have intellect and personality. If people knew the truth about the capabilities of pigs, sheep and cows the market for meat would collapse. It is inconvenient to know that sheep are sensitive and intelligent creatures. And so tame academics (a large and malleable group) happily endorse the `farm animals are stupid and so don't matter' myth.

Surprisingly, even many vets are largely ignorant about farm animals. We have, for example, met vets who believed that sheep are colour blind (not true) and that they have only short-term memories of 20 minutes or so (also not true). Most don't realise that sheep hate getting wet. And many mistake their nervousness for stupidity.

Animals possess a wider range of skills than most of us imagine. The one thing humans have that animals don't have is the conceit, the arrogance, to assume we are wiser than all other animals and are, consequently, entitled to do as we will with other members of the animal kingdom.

All animals are special and all are worthy of our awe and respect but, sadly, that respect is the one thing our relationship with animals usually lacks.

Animal abusers will sometimes argue that since human beings can speak foreign languages and do algebraic equations they are inevitably `better' than animals. What nonsense this is. If we follow this argument to its logical conclusion then we must assume that humans who cannot speak foreign languages or do algebraic equations are in some way second-class and are not entitled to be treated with respect.

Who decides which are the skills deserving of respect?

If we decide that the ability to fly, run at 30 mph, see in the dark or swim under water for long distances are skills worthy of respect there won't be many human beings reaching the qualifying standard.

Cats can find their way home - without map or compass - when abandoned hundreds of miles away in strange territory. How many human beings could do the same?

How many humans could spin a web?

Even seemingly simple animals can think.

Turtles have been observed learning a route from one place to another. To begin with they make lots of mistakes, go down cul de sacs and miss short cuts. But after a while they can reduce their journey time dramatically.

Birds, which might normally be alarmed by the slightest noise, learn to ignore the noise of trains and cars when they build their nests near to railway lines or busy roads.

And oysters are capable of learning too. Oysters which live in the deep sea know that they can open and shut their shells at any time without risk. But oysters which live in a tidal area learn to keep their shells closed when the tide is out - so that they don't dry out and die. This might not quite rank alongside writing a classic novel but how many human beings can write classic novels?

Animals use reason and experience to help them survive and they exhibit all of the skills which the animal abusers like to think of as being exclusively human. For example, animals accumulate information which helps them to survive and live more comfortably. Moreover, they do it just as man does - by discriminating between useful and useless information and by memorising information which is of value. A puppy who has been burnt on a hot stove will keep away from it just as surely as will a child who has suffered a similarly unpleasant experience. Older fish learn to be wary of lures - and become far more difficult to catch than young ones. Rats learn how to avoid traps, and birds learn where telephone wires are strung so that they don't fly into them. Arctic seals used to live on inner ice floes to avoid the polar bears but after man arrived, and proved to be a worse enemy, they started living on the outer ice floes. Many animals know that they can be followed by their scent and act accordingly. A hunted deer or hare will run round in circles, double back on its own tracks, go through water and leap into the air in order to lose its pursuers. Flocks of parrots will send an advance scouting party ahead to check out that all is well.

We owe it to animals to treat them with respect and, at the very least, to leave them alone to live their lives on this earth free from our harm.

Charles Darwin, the author of *On The Origin of Species,* wrote that: `there is no fundamental difference between man and the higher mammals in their mental faculties'. He also argued that: `the senses and intuition, the various emotions and faculties, such as love, memory, attention, curiosity, imitation, reason, etc., of which man boasts, may be found in an incipient, or sometimes even well-developed condition in the `lower' animals.'

The miracles are unending. The honeycomb and the bird's nest are wonders of architecture. Even the seemingly lowly ant has a complex and sophisticated lifestyle. Ants can communicate with one another and recognise their friends. They clean one another, they play, they bury their dead, they store grain, they even clear land, manure it, sow grain and harvest the crop which they have grown. They even build roads and tunnels.

We may not like it but many non-human species have a much greater influence on their environment than we have. There are still tribes of men who live almost naked in very crude huts and whose social structures are relatively primitive when compared to, say, the beavers who cut down trees, transport them long distances, dam rivers, construct substantial homes and dig artificial waterways. Birds build astonishingly beautiful nests from the simplest of materials.

Animals are often curious, determined and hardworking; loving, loyal and faithful. They have many skills we cannot emulate. The eagle and the vulture have eyes as powerful as a telescope. Many animals, birds and insects can predict the coming of storms far more effectively than our allegedly scientific weather forecasters. Weight for weight, the tomtit has more brain capacity than a human being.

Animal behaviour which seems impressive is often dismissed as nothing more than instinctive. But that is patronising and nonsensical. There is now ample evidence available to show animals can invent and adapt tools according to circumstances. That can hardly be called `instinctive' behaviour.

It is truly absurd that when people behave badly they are described as behaving `like animals'. This is a calumny. Animals would never do the terrible things that people do. Animals kill to eat. But they don't kill for vengeance or for pride. They don't kill out of jealousy or spite. They kill for survival and they kill to defend their families. But they don't dress up and go hunting for fun. And they don't start wars. Compared to many human beings animals are civilised, humane, generous and kindly. There is no little irony in the fact that the worst behaving animals are domestic dogs and guard dogs which are trained to attack humans for no reason other than to please their owners.

We have created a hell on this earth for other creatures. Our abuse of animals is the final savagery; the final outrage of mankind in a long history of savagery and outrage. Instead of learning from other animals, instead of attempting to communicate with them, we abuse, torture and kill them. We diminish ourselves in a hundred different ways through our cruelty and our ignorance and our thoughtlessness. `Man's inhumanity to man makes countless thousands mourn and his inhumanity to not-men makes the planet a ball of pain and terror,' wrote J. Howard Moore.

If man were truly the master of the universe he would use his wisdom and his power to increase the comfort and happiness of all other creatures. But, tragically, man has used his wisdom and his power to increase their misery. Animal abusers imprison millions of animals in cruel and heartbreaking conditions and ignore their cries of pain and distress on the grounds that animals are not `sentient creatures'. What self-delusional nonsense this is. Sheep and cattle are left out in huge fields in cold, wet weather. They shiver and search in vain for shelter because all the trees and hedgerows have been removed to make the farm more efficient. The animal abusing farmer cares not one jot for animals: he cares only for his profits.

`Until he extends the circle of his compassion to all living things,' wrote Albert Schweizer, `man will not himself find peace.'

The merciful man is kind to all creatures.

In the pages which follow we have summarised the wisdom of the animals. But be warned: this book may change your life. We believe our book offers clear evidence that animals frequently display the sort of wisdom (and the types of emotion) which many tend wrongly to regard as uniquely human.

Vernon Coleman and Donna Antoinette Coleman, November 2012

Chapter 1 Animals Can Communicate With One Another (And With Us)

Many observers have dismissed the sounds which animals make as simply ‘noises’, but scientists who have taken the time and trouble to listen carefully to the extraordinary variety of sounds made by different creatures have concluded that animals really can communicate with one another. How arrogant we are to assume that we are the only species capable of communicating and of formulating a formal system of language. It is levelling to realise that animals may, similarly, think that the sounds we make when we talk to one another are no more than pointless noises.

Here are a few examples illustrating the ability of animals to communicate effectively.

1) Scientists studying whales have found that there are patterns of what can only be described as speech in the noises they make.

2) Bees can communicate the direction, distance and value of pollen sources quite a distance away.

3) It is generally assumed that parrots merely repeat words they have heard without understanding what they mean. This is not true. In their marvellous book *When Elephants Weep* authors Masson and McCarthy report that when psychologist Irene Pepperberg left her parrot at the vet's surgery for an operation the parrot, whose name was Alex, called out: `Come here. I love you. I'm sorry. I want to go back.' Another parrot, in New Jersey, America saved the life of its owner by crying: `Murder! Help! Come quick!' When neighbours ran to the scene they found the parrot's owner lying on the floor, unconscious, bleeding from a gash in his neck. The doctor who treated the man said that without the parrot's cries he would have died. The same parrot woke his owner and neighbours when a fire started in the house next door.

4) Rabbits communicate by thumping on the ground with their hind feet. They can `talk' to one another in this way over distances of 200 yards.

5) Human beings who have taken the time to do so have found that they have been able to communicate well with all other primates.

6) Animals can communicate in ways we haven't really begun to understand. British biologist Rupert Sheldrake conducted an experiment in which he simultaneously recorded humans at work and their dogs at home. The moment the human left work, the dog, waiting at home, headed for the door. This worked even if the human being left work at a different time each day. The daughter of one dog owner reported that their dog always rushed to the door exactly twenty minutes before her mother arrived home. And it didn't matter what time the mother left work. The dog always knew. We are aware of a number of people who have reported similar skills among cats.

7) It is by no means unusual for human beings to receive messages from animals. British author, Sir H. Rider Haggard, once described how he had dreamed that his dog Bob was lying dead in a clump of weeds near some water. In the dream the dog appeared to be telling the author of his forthcoming death. `The next day,' wrote Haggard, `Bob was found dead in just such a place. He had been hit by a train at the same time that I'd had my dream.'

Chapter 2 Animals Can Treat Themselves When They Are Ill

Animals know that there are four main ways to deal with a threatening situation:

a) they can escape from the problem

b) they can remove the problem

c) they can wait for the problem to go away

d)they can search for a solution

These basic responses apply to threats from illness just as much as they apply to threats from predators.

An animal's body, like a human body, can protect, defend and repair itself when under threat. In-built mechanisms enable an animal to exist under quite extraordinarily extreme external conditions. The body's internal mechanisms (some of which are mechanical but most of which are physiological) work readily, speedily and automatically to protect the body from external threats.

Animals recognise the power of what we call ‘bodypower’. They know that sometimes not taking medicine is the best way to get well. They understand that fasting, resting, staying warm, allowing vomiting and diarrhoea to do their work, may be the best way. If, however, these systems do not or cannot function, or do not succeed in dealing with the problem, then the animal's instincts and behavioural habits will take over. So, to give a simple example, if the weather is too hot for the internal temperature control mechanisms to defend an animal's integrity, and protect it from damage, then the animal will find some shade or will swim in a pool.

However, if physiological mechanisms and instincts all fail, and the animal falls ill, then the creature will treat itself, using medicaments taken from its surroundings.

Animals don't usually rely on outside doctors, they self-medicate. They use their experience to avoid illness and protect themselves from illness but if they fall ill they treat themselves. Animals may learn from one another – and, if an animal needs help, another will often provide it - but there are no specialist animals working as doctors.

The aim of self-medication is, of course, to re-establish a feeling of well-being. To do that the patient (whether human or animal) needs to have an understanding of his or her own body. He or she needs to know his or her strengths and weaknesses; he or she needs to know what is normal and what is not. And he or she will probably need to change his or her behavioural patterns – often in a quite dramatic way. So, for example, animals will often seek out and consume something they don't normally eat and which has no nutritional benefit.

Naturally, in order to do this, animals need to know where to find the medicaments they may need. And this is where animals excel. Indeed, animals are so good at finding and using natural remedies that many of man's most effective medicinal solutions were identified by observing animals.

In modern orthodox medicine, doctors tend to treat disease by attacking the pathogen alleged to be responsible. Modern, western medicine turns the patient into a battlefield - with the result that in many instances the treatment does more harm than good. The modern doctor tends to ignore the fact that, for example, infections often take hold during stressful conditions and to forget (if they ever knew) that strengthening the human organism is invariably just as important as attacking the disorder. Attacking only the infection or disability means treating only the symptoms rather than the cause.

In contrast, practitioners of traditional Oriental medicine take a more holistic approach, assuming that the pathogen is not the direct cause of the disease, but merely a symptom of an imbalance, a disruption of physiological or psychological homeostasis. Animals favour this philosophy.

The animal approach is a holistic one; treating the whole organism - and attacking any infection - in whatever ways will best produce a positive outcome. Animals understand that when a disease strikes it is often because their organism has in some way been weakened (by, for example, drought, famine or overcrowding) and that if they are to get wholly well again they must tackle internal, as well as external, causes of disease.

It is, of course, only animals living in the wild who are able to treat themselves. Animals on farms, although far more likely to fall ill than animals in the wild, are denied the opportunity to treat themselves by their circumstances. Despite the fact that there is a considerable amount of evidence showing that animals such as cows and sheep are quite capable of diagnosing and treating themselves, farm animals have very limited access to the varieties of natural plants available in the wild.

Farm animals are more likely to fall ill than animals in the wild for several reasons.

First, stocking densities tend to be so high that parasites, for example, spread easily and quickly and become endemic.

Second, animals kept on farms are unlikely to have proper opportunities to exercise. Many, who live indoors, are even denied the health giving properties of sunshine and fresh air. Farm animals may be exempt from the worst excesses of drought and starvation but their lifestyle is far from healthy. Inevitably, the circumstances in which animals are kept mean that psychological problems abound too.

Third, animals are unlikely to be able to enjoy the sort of range of foodstuffs that would be available to them in the wild. The diet farmers give to captive animals bears no relationship to the diet they normally live on. So for example, farmers often give animal waste to vegetarian animals. In the USA, chicken excrement is fed directly to cattle (`to give them protein') and the French Government has admitted illegally feeding human sewage to French cattle. For years, farmers in Britain routinely fed their cattle the ground up brains and spinal cords of other cattle. (It was this that caused the disastrous outbreak of mad cow disease). Farmers ignored the fact that herbivorous ruminants don't eat meat and never engage in cannibalism

In wild, or semi-wild, conditions chickens live in forests in small groups; they scratch around on the forest floor eating worms, insects and pieces of fresh plant. They use the dust and the sun to keep their feathers bright and they bathe when it rains. At night they roost in trees (their claws are adapted for hanging onto branches even while asleep) so that they are safe from predators.

This is a healthy lifestyle for a chicken.

However, this isn't how chickens are kept on most modern farms. Chicken farmers have selectively bred chickens to grow faster and faster. They have doubled the speed at which a chicken matures. Muscle is created before the bird's heart and circulation can cope, and the result is that the birds are constantly ill. Their bones aren't capable of supporting their excess weight and so they get broken bones. They die of thirst and starvation because they cannot reach the automated food and water delivery systems which supply their cages. Eighty per cent of broiler chickens suffer broken bones and 17,000 birds die every day in the United Kingdom because of heart failure. Farmers regard these deaths as an acceptable cost of doing business. The food the chickens are fed is selected according to the cheapest possible formulation and contains just the basic ingredients. (One popular ingredient is ground up dead chicken. They have to do something with all those dead birds.) The chickens are routinely given antibiotics to try to keep them healthy (despite the fact that farmers know that this habit is a major cause of the development of antibiotic-resistant organisms) and they are kept in semi-darkness so that they stay quiet. They suffer from exceptionally high temperatures (especially when the weather is warm), they stand in their own excrement (which is acidic and blisters their feet) and the air they breathe in is full of fumes, bacteria and dust. It is hardly surprising that half of the broiler flocks in the United Kingdom are colonised with bacteria which can cause neurological problems, arthritis, headaches, backache, fever, nausea and diarrhoea in the people who eat them.

Farm chickens, like other farm animals, are given no freedom and no chance at all to self-medicate.

There is also evidence that animals kept in zoos are more likely to fall ill than animals living in the wild. (When animals are born in zoos the keepers usually offer this evidence that the animals must be happy. Would zookeepers also claim that the fact that babies were born in concentration camps was evidence that concentration camp inmates were happy?) Animals in captivity invariably die far younger than they would die if they were allowed to roam free. (At one oceanarium a famous pilot whale was actually thirteen different pilot whales.) Gorillas in captivity are more likely to die of heart disease than gorillas in the wild. Captive elephants and giraffes both develop arthritis and foot problems (disorders which are far less likely to be seen among animals in the wild). Three quarters of the black rhinoceroses in captivity are killed by haemolytic anaemia that doesn't affect black rhinoceroses.

Captive animals show stereotypical movements such as pacing, rocking or weaving. They develop all sorts of unusual habits: rubbing themselves against the bars of their cages or walking backwards and forwards in unsuccessful attempts to soothe their frustrations. Sometimes, captive animals will become angry. For example, elephants are normally the most peaceful of vegetarians but in zoos they occasionally become homicidal.

Stress is a major factor in the development of disease among animals and there is clear evidence that animals in any sort of captivity suffer a great deal of stress. Animals which normally live in the wild do not adapt well when kept in captivity. Their immune systems collapse when they are separated from their families and friends and shut up in cages. Even if wild animals are caught when still young they will often die within weeks or months if they are locked in a cage. Creatures as varied as gorillas and white sharks all tend to fall ill and die if locked up. An animal's immune system is inextricably linked to its surroundings and to its exposure to stress.

There are, of course, other explanations for the poor health animals suffer in captivity. Animals in captivity simply don't have access to the normal variety of foods they might find in the wild (some of which they would undoubtedly use as medicaments). They don't have the same natural grooming opportunities, the same opportunity for exercise, the same variety of companions and the same soils. Because they are in cages or restricted areas they are unable to move away from pathogen hot spots and they may also be unable to develop proper social relationships with other animals of the same species.

Below we have listed examples of some of the ways that animals treat themselves when they are ill. We can learn a great deal by watching how animals deal with disease - particularly infectious disease. Humans have already learned a great deal about medicine and health care by observing animals but we could learn much more

1) Ranchers in Utah used to turn out sick cattle which had diarrhoea, leaving them to fend for themselves. Initially this was done simply to be rid of the ailing animal and to prevent the spread of any disease. The ranchers were, however, surprised when after a few days their cattle repeatedly returned - quite well. An observant rancher followed some sick animals and saw that they travelled to clay banks and fed on the clay until they got better. The clay absorbed the toxins and viruses causing the diarrhoea. Sadly, cattle on modern farms are given little or no opportunity to self-medicate. Animals throughout the world use clay to deal with poisoning - clay detoxifies by binding onto the harmful substances. Humans could probably benefit too and clay pills might save many lives. However, there isn't much profit to be made out of selling clay and so no one is fighting for the right to do so.

2) A worker from the World Wildlife Fund followed a pregnant African elephant for more than a year. During that time the elephant ate a predictable diet, roaming about three miles a day. At the end of her pregnancy the elephant walked more than 15 miles in a single day and headed for a tree of the boraginacea family. Once she had arrived at the tree she ate it. All of it. She ate the leaves, she ate the branches and she ate the trunk. Four days later she gave birth to a healthy calf. Kenyan women brew a tea from the leaves of this tree to induce labour.

3) Chinese herdsmen have seen elderly deer nibbling at the bark and roots of the fleece flower. When the bark and roots were analysed scientists found that they contained ingredients likely to help reduce hypertension, cholesterol levels, coronary heart disease and other disorders common in old age.

4) In the Han Dynasty a defeated general called Ma-Wu and his army retreated to a poor part of China to rest and recover. Many soldiers and horses died. Those left were ill, excreting blood in their urine. One groom noticed that his three horses were healthy, and wisely he watched to see what they ate. He saw that they were eating a good deal of a small plantain plant. So he boiled some of the plant and ate it. The blood quickly disappeared from his urine. He then gave the same plant to the other men and horses. They were all cured. The plant is now known to contain

ingredients which make it anti-inflammatory and antimicrobial.

5) In the 17th century, English doctors regarded watching animals as a reputable way of learning about medicines. Queen Anne's personal physician went to the marshes of Essex, where he knew the locals put their sheep when they suffered from a disorder known as `the rott'. He watched what they ate and by doing so discovered herbs with which he could help human patients with consumption.

6) Native American Indians learnt so much from watching how bears treated themselves when they were ill that advanced healers were known as Bear Medicine Men.

7) A herbalist in Tanzania rescued an orphaned porcupine. When the animal became ill with diarrhoea and bloating the porcupine went into the forest and dug up and ate a plant which turned out to be useful for treating internal parasites in humans.

8) A Creole herbalist in Venezuela watched deer chewing the seed cases of a plant. He subsequently found that the plant helped his human patients.

9) In the Middle Ages, English doctors noticed that when an animal licked its wounds the injury would heal more quickly. The doctors decided that animals' tongues must have some marvellous healing property and so they got into the habit of cutting the tongues out of puppies and using them as wound dressings. This didn't work terribly well and eventually (some centuries later) the doctors realised that it was the saliva which contained both an antiseptic and agents which encouraged wound closure.

10) Domestic cats and dogs chew grass. There are two reasons for this: grass is an emetic (causing regurgitation or vomiting) and a purgative scour (getting rid of worms living further down the intestine). Animals choose different types of grasses for different functions

. 11) Elephants, who are herbivores, need a lot of sodium but there isn't much present in plants. Without the sodium they become ill. So the elephants need to find their sodium elsewhere. In Kenya, there is a series of caves high up on the side of an inactive volcano called Mount Elgon. These caves have been created by generations of elephants. Over the last two million years the elephants have eaten vast quantities of rock. Inside the caves the elephants have to crawl on their knees to dig out lumps of sodium rich rock. They also drink the mineral rich waters which contain calcium and magnesium.

12) When fish find themselves in polluted waters they will swim away as quickly as they can.

13) Gorillas in Rwanda eat rock which they dig out of the slopes of Mount Visoke during the dry season. The rock the gorillas mine and eat contains a good deal of iron, aluminium and clay. The gorillas eat the rock as a medicine. The clay helps stop diarrhoea (a common problem among gorillas because much of their plant based diet in the dry season causes diarrhoea and dangerous fluid loss) and the aluminium has a useful antacid effect. The iron is useful because in the dry season the gorillas have to go higher to find vegetation and may develop altitude anaemia.

14) Chimpanzees in Tanzania have been seen to eat earth from termite mounds. But they only do this when they are suffering from diarrhoea and other gastrointestinal problems. The termite mounds are rich in clay that helps prevent diarrhoea. Termite mound earth is also used by elephants, giraffes and rhinoceroses.

15) Eating charcoal is an effective way to adsorb toxins. Charcoal is used in human medicine to treat drug overdoses and poisoning and for wind and bloating. We use charcoal because we know that when wild animals find charcoal after forest fires or lightning strikes they will eat the burnt wood even though it doesn't have much nutritional value. Deer and ponies have been seen doing this in the New Forest in England. In Kenya, camels have been seen to eat charcoal. Monkeys have been seen to do it on the island of Zanzibar where their diet includes trees which are high in toxins. The charcoal absorbs these toxins. The monkeys have been seen to consume precisely the amount of charcoal as would be recommended as an effective veterinary dose.

16) When rats are given the poison paraquat they will survive if they find clay to eat to absorb the poison. The rats have to eat the clay for several weeks in order to make sure it carries all the poison out of their bodies. They know this.

17) Civets, colobus monkeys, elephants, bison, pigs, tigers, camels, bears, wild dogs, rhinoceroses, Indian mole rats and jackals are all known to eat plants for their medicinal properties. Toxic plant compounds are sometimes used to control internal parasites.

18) Indian wild bison feed on the bark of horrahena antidysentaria - which is also used to treat dysentery in humans. This plant contains a drug which is active against amoebic dysentery protozoa.

19) Chimpanzees have been observed to eat at least 26 different plant species that are prescribed in traditional human medicine for the treatment of internal parasites. They have been observed to increase their intake of drug rich plants when necessary.

20) Animals sometimes take plants not for their drug action but for mechanical aid. So, for example, chimpanzees suffering with worms have been seen to swallow the leaves of plants which contained nothing which had any effect on parasites. The only thing the leaves had in common was their rough texture and indigestibility. It turned out that the animals were folding up the leaves and then swallowing them. The parasitic worms in the chimpanzees' intestines were being captured by the tiny barbs on the leaves. Folding the leaves increased the chances of the worms being trapped and then excreted.

21) Most wild animals have a low sugar diet and have few problems with tooth decay, but chimpanzees eat a good deal of sugary fruit and suffer from both tooth decay and gum disease. To cope with these two problems they chew on the antibacterial bark of trees. They also inspect and clean one another’s teeth. One chimpanzee was seen to prise out the bad teeth of another animal by using a wooden lever she had made.

22) If adult male baboons become wounded (through fighting or hunting) they keep their wounds clean by licking and grooming. Their wounds will also be carefully groomed by female baboons.

23) If chimpanzees who are wounded can reach the area they will lick their wounds. If they cannot reach the injury they will lick their fingers and dab at the wounds. They also dab leaves on a wound, lick the leaves and dab them on the wound again. Infant chimpanzees will lick the wounds of their mothers. The saliva of all mammals is an excellent disinfectant for their own wounds. Domestic dogs lick their wounds because their saliva contains antimicrobials capable of killing bacteria such as staphylococcus, escherichia coli and streptococcus. Rat saliva contains substances which help speed up the closure of wounds. Human saliva contains healing substances too and it is perhaps possible that we could speed up wound healing by licking our own wounds. Our saliva contains mucins and fibronectins which inactivate microbes by binding them, lactoferrins which kill iron dependent bacteria by taking their iron, peroxidases which poison bacteria, histatin which is a strong antifungal agent and a type of antibody that is active against viruses such as influenza and polio.

24) Stags who are injured in the Neydharting area of Austria will drag themselves miles to immerse themselves and their wounds in the black muddy waters of the moors. The waters and mud have been found to contain over 300 bioactive herbs, many antimicrobials, vitamins and hormones.

25) A capuchin monkey who was badly wounded took a stick, chewed the end to make a brush then used the brush to apply sugary syrup to the wound area (she had been given the syrup as food). A strong sugar solution is a good ointment for wounds. Like honey it has an antibacterial effect

26) Many animals routinely treat their own wounds. Wounded elk, moose, bears and caribou roll in clay. Bears and deer rub themselves on trees which have resin in their bark. Wounded cattle and deer roll in sphagnum moss. Deer living near the sea will walk out into the salty water. Many animals dip wounded areas into cold water to stop bleeding and ease pain. Elephants will cover and pack a wound with mud. In many cases herbalists have found that the substances used (tree bark, mud, etc.) contain antiseptics which will protect the wound and help ensure that it heals.

27) Animals have even been known to make plaster casts. A Pyrenean mountain goat has been seen to make itself a plaster cast using clay, lichen and grass. An injured woodcock took clay from the edge of a stream and smeared it on his leg near the knee. He then pulled up grass roots and put them into the clay. He then added more clay. In the end he had created a very effective clay cast designed to hold his broken leg together. Other natural historians have observed that snipe which have had a leg broken by a gun shot will bind the injured leg together with their good leg,

using feathers to create a cast and then using mud or clay to hold the cast together.

28) Californian ground squirrels will deliberately taunt rattlesnakes so that they are bitten. The ground squirrels are resistant to the venom but the substance stimulates the animals' immune systems and helps slow the spread of cancer and other serious disorders.

29) Fever is a defence mechanism designed to help the body combat infection; a high fever will often kill bacteria. Some animals will take advantage of this phenomenon and deliberately make their temperature rise. So-called cold-blooded animals (e.g. crabs, toads and tortoises) which actively moderate their own temperature will take action to bring on a fever to kill an infection. Lizards who are ill will find somewhere warmer to lie. Fish will move to warmer waters. Ants will bask in the sun if they are ill. If there is a fungus in their hive honeybees will vibrate their wings enough to raise the temperature and prevent larvae being infected. Hedgehogs will sunbathe if they are ill because this helps to push their body temperature higher. (In addition the sunlight acts as an antimicrobial agent).

30) Fasting can help an infected animal get better quicker. Sick animals will (like human beings) stop eating. Bacteria need iron and the body reduces the availability of iron during an infection by not eating.

31) Some animals will deliberately eat plants which boost their immune systems.

32) Bees are very good at fighting infection. They collect resins produced by trees to protect their buds and they make propolis from the resin. They coat the inside of their hive with this, making an environment so sterile it would be the envy of any operating team. The propolis contains hundreds of flavonoids, phenolics and aromatic compounds. If an invading animal gets into the hive and dies the bees will embalm it by covering it with propolis - to protect against infection. Honey, made as food for winter, is packed with potent antimicrobials to stop it going off. Today, doctors are using honey on human patients. They use it to stimulate the immune system and to treat wounds.

33) Capuchin monkeys rub natural substances such as clematis stems into their fur to repel pests, kill bacteria and deaden pain.

34) If a capuchin monkey has an itch it will scratch itself hard with a fuzzy seedpod until the scratchy hairs are worn off the pod. It will then discard the useless seedpod and get another.

35) White-nosed coatis rub resin from the trattinnickia tree into their coats. The menthol-like smelling resin repels fleas, lice, ticks and mosquitoes.

36) Black, brown and kodiak bears make up a herbal paste out of osha roots. They use this as a topical anaesthetic and antibacterial.

37) Cats don't just roll in catnip for fun. They do it because it helps repel pests. The plant's ingredients are insecticidal.

38) The European hedgehog is vulnerable to fleas and ticks and cannot groom itself for obvious reasons. So it anoints itself with mint, oil, and fermenting fruit. It uses its own saliva too, using its tongue to flick enriched saliva over its body.

39) Birds roll in dust to soak up excess feather oil. This helps by making their skin dry and less hospitable to mites. When birds lift their wings they are doing so to expose the underside to sunlight and, thereby, kill bacteria.

40) Capuchin monkeys sometimes wash themselves with their own urine. They do this because urea (a main component of urine) is an antibacterial and antifungal and has a stronger cooling effect than water alone

41) Tannin rich plants are astringent, they make the mouth feel dry and they don't taste very nice. Most grazing animals avoid them. But tannin rich plants are antiseptic, antibacterial, antifungal, antidiarrhoeal and antihelmintic. And so animals which are ill will often choose to eat these plants in order to treat themselves.

Chapter 3 Animals Protect Themselves From Insects

Insect bites aren't just irritating; biting insects spread malaria, bubonic plague, sleeping sickness, dengue, filariasis, yellow fever and many more diseases. Just six blood sucking ticks can kill a gazelle. Malaria, estimated to have killed half the people who have ever lived, is spread by mosquitoes. A horse can lose up to half a litre of blood a day to blood sucking flies.

Recognising this danger, animals do many things to protect themselves.

1) North American caribou avoid mosquitoes by huddling together on small patches of ice.

2) Wild horses move to windy hills where the grazing is poor but flies find it difficult to land

3) Elephants, rhinoceroses and buffalo are all susceptible to blood suckers (despite their thick hides) so they roll in mud for protection. Malay elephants carry palm leaves in their trunks to flick away flies. Elephants in Nepal have been seen to strip off excess leaves in order to make a fly swatter with the right length and flexibility.

4) Tigers lie in water with just their heads above the surface.

5) Chimpanzees use leafy twigs to swat flies.

6) A horse being bothered by flies will gallop around, roll in the mud, shake its head and flick its tail to get rid of flies.

7) Animals hang around forest fires because there are no flies.

8) Camels in the desert (where there are no trees or fence posts for rubbing against) will rub against one another.

9) Elephants can twitch their skin so powerfully that insects are trapped and killed in their skin folds.

10) Herons peck at mosquitoes at the rate of 3,000 an hour.

11) Primates groom one another, picking out parasites and sometimes eating the insects they've found.

12) The female wood mouse will sometimes only allow a male to have sex with her after he has groomed her and got rid of her ticks.

13) Mated penguins groom one another and have fewer ticks than solitary birds.

14) When impalas groom one another for ticks they take turns. `You remove my ticks, I'll remove yours.'

15) Some animals help creatures of another species. So, for example, black caracara birds clean the ticks from bare-skinned tapirs.

Chapter 4 Animals Are Capable Of Love

Animals are just as capable as human beings of loving their partners, their families, their children, their leaders, their teachers, their friends and others who are important to them. An ape will show exactly the same signs of love and affection when dealing with her baby as a human mother will when dealing with her baby. Both will look longingly, tickle and play with their baby. Both feed their young, wash them, risk their lives for them and willingly put up with their noise and unruly behaviour.

Anyone who doubts that animals love their young should stand outside a farmyard when a calf has been taken away from a cow and listen to the heartbreaking cries of anguish which result. Cows have been known to trek miles to try to reach a calf from whom they have been parted.

Even fish will risk their lives to protect their young. In his seminal work *The Universal Kinship* (first published in 1906) J. Howard Moore described how he put his hand into a pond near the nest of a perch. The courageous fish guarding the nest chased Moore's hand away several times and nipped it vigorously when it was not removed quickly enough.

Lewis Gompertz, who lived from 1779 to 1861 and was a potent champion of the rights of blacks, women and the poor (and, indeed, all oppressed human beings) was also a powerful champion of animals. He was a founder of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. In his book *Moral Inquiries On the Situation Of Man And Of Brutes* Gompertz wrote: `From some birds we may learn real constancy in conjugal affection, though in most instances their contracts only last for one season, but how strict do they keep this. They have no laws, no parchments, no parsons, no fear to injuring their characters, not even their own words to break in being untrue to each other: but their virtue is their laws, their parchments, their parsons, and their reputation; their deeds are their acts, their acts - their deeds: and from their own breasts do they honestly tear down to line the beds of their legitimate offspring.'

Gompertz described an incident illustrating the wisdom of blackbirds. `I observed a male blackbird flying about in an extreme state of agitation,' he wrote. `And on my going to discover the cause of it, the bird retreated from me as I followed it, till it stopped at a nest containing a female bird sitting upon her eggs, near which there was a cat: in consequence of this I removed the cat, and the bird became quiet. After that, whenever the cat was about the place, the blackbird would come near my window, and would in the same manner direct me to some spot where the cat happened to be stationed.' Gompertz also described other three incidents which illustrate animal kindness and wisdom. The first concerned two goats which had met each other on a narrow path between two precipices. There was no room for the two goats to turn or pass and so one of the goats lay down, allowing the other to walk over it. The second incident involved a horse who had been hurt by a nail when he had been shod. Finding it painful to walk he returned to the farrier and showed him his hoof. The third incident involved a sheep dog who jumped into freezing cold water and successfully rescued another dog which had been floating on a lump of ice. `I would now fain ask,' wrote Gompertz, `if all this does not show reason and virtue?'

A woman who keeps rats has reported how when one rat was too ill to fetch food for herself a second rat brought food from their bowl into the nest where the sick rat was lying and laid the food around her so that she could eat without having to move. Every time the woman tried to pick up the sick rat, the nurse rat, doubtless misunderstanding her motives, bit her hand.

J. Howard Moore described how monkeys may adopt the orphans of deceased members of their tribe and how two crows fed a third crow which was wounded. The wound was several weeks old and the two crows had clearly been playing `good Samaritans' for that time.

Charles Darwin wrote about a blind pelican which was fed with fish which were brought to it by pelican friends who normally lived thirty miles away.

And strong males in a herd of vicunas will lag behind to protect the weaker and slower members of their herd from possible predators.

Before slavery was abolished, black people who fell in love were regarded as enjoying simple `animal lust' as a result of `animal attraction'. When black people formed life long pairs this was dismissed as nothing more than a response to an `instinct'. The same things are, of course, said about animals (with just as little evidence to support it). Animal abusers argue that animals which seem to show love are merely acting according to instinct. However, the evidence proves that animals are perfectly capable of feeling complex emotions. Animals are certainly capable of loving. Many animals are so loyal to one another that if one half of a couple dies the other may die shortly afterwards - consumed by grief. This has been reported to happen with swans, wolves and oxen. Here are some examples:

1) A statue of a small Akita dog named Hachiko stands prominently in the forecourt of Japan's busiest railway station. Every morning, Hachiko would accompany his master to his train to work and arrive again at the end of the day to greet his master from his return journey. Sadly, Hachiko's master did not make the return journey one evening because he had suffered a fatal heart attack while at work. But Hachiko still waited patiently for his master to return. Hachiko returned at the same time the following day in the hope that his master would step off the train to greet him. Hachiko soon became well-known to local commuters who would often stop to lavish affection on the small dog and give him treats. For an incredible nine years, Hachiko waited every evening in the hope that his master would return. When Hachiko died, the Japanese erected a statue of him in his honour to commemorate his love and devotion.

2) A Friesian cow called Daisy was sold for auction in Okehampton in Devon, England. Daisy was so upset about being parted from her new calf that she jumped over her enclosure and ran the six miles back home to be with her calf.

3) A cow called Emma was so distraught that her calf had been taken away from her that she made it her mission to find her baby. Just before milking time, Emma escaped from the field where she was kept and ran the four miles to the abattoir where her calf was about to be slaughtered. She made such a fuss when she got there that staff admitted to being afraid. Suddenly, one of the calves in line to be slaughtered recognised its mother's cries and ran frantically towards her. Emma was so happy to be reunited with her calf that she couldn't stop licking and nuzzling her baby. Touched by what had happened, the abattoir workers contacted Emma's owner who took pity on the mother and calf and decided to keep them both.

4) In 1988, Molly Parfett's husband died in hospital after suffering from a massive stroke. Shortly after the funeral, Molly noticed that their dog, Joe, would disappear for hours at a time. She discovered that Joe was to be found sitting by his master's grave. Molly had no idea how Joe knew where her husband was buried.

5) There is a monument near Derwent Dam in Derbyshire, England, with the following inscription: `In Commemoration of the devotion of Tip the sheepdog who stayed by the body of her dead master, Mr Joseph Tagg, on the Howden Moor for fifteen weeks from 12th December 1953 to 27th March 1954.'

6) Farmer Alfred Gruenemeyer, who lived near Coburg in central Germany, treated his animals more like pets than livestock. And so when Gruenemeyer died, his animals were devastated. A young bull called Barnaby was so distressed that he left his field, walked for a mile, leapt the cemetery wall, found the farmer's grave and started a vigil which lasted for several days. Attempts to chase the young bull away failed when locals discovered just how unnerving an angry bull can be. It wasn't until several days later that the bull calmed down and could be led back to his pasture. Mr Gruenemeyer was said by neighbours to have allowed his animals to roam in and out of his house. `He talked to them like Dr Dolittle,' said one. `Mind you, his house smelled a bit.'

Chapter 5 Animals Are Sentient Creatures

A surprising number of apparently intelligent individuals (including, of course, a variety of vivisectors, hunters and butchers) excuse the cruel way they treat animals by claiming that animals don't have feelings. (Hunt supporters claim that foxes are not sentient but that they ‘enjoy’ being hunted!)

The truth, as anyone who is capable of reading and observing will know, is that animals *are* sentient and exhibit many of those qualities which some people like to think of as being the preserve of the human race. Charles Darwin showed that fear produces similar responses in both humans and animals. The eyes and mouth open, the heart beats rapidly, teeth chatter, muscles tremble, hairs stand on end and so on. Parrots, like human beings, turn away and cover their eyes when confronted with a sight which overwhelms them. Young elephants who have seen their families killed by poachers wake up screaming in the night. Elephants who are suddenly separated from their social group may die suddenly of `broken heart syndrome'. Apes may fall down and faint when suddenly coming across a snake. If a man shouts at a dog the dog will often cower and back away in fear.

The fact is that many animals are brighter than many people. We do not abuse babies simply because they cannot speak or finish *The Times* crossword while having breakfast. Why, then, do our rules of behaviour allow us to assume that we have the authority to abuse animals? Animals have passionate relationships with one another, they exhibit clear signs of love, they develop social lives which are every bit as complex as our own. Animals frequently make friends across the species barriers and there is much evidence showing that animals have helped animals belonging to different species. Animals are often compassionate and are clearly sentient.

Chapter 6 Animals As Teachers

There is now no doubt that animals actively teach their young in order to pass on skills which many traditionally regarded as being `nothing more than instinct'.

So, for example, we have watched an adult cat giving lessons to orphan kittens for which he had taken responsibility. The adult cat, teaching the art of stalking, would edge forwards and then stop and look over his shoulder to see if the kittens were following in the correct style. After the lesson had gone on for some time the kittens started playing behind the adult cat's back. They got away with it a couple of times but on the third occasion the adult cat saw them. He reached back and gave them both a clip with an outstretched paw. The kittens weren't hurt but they paid attention to what they were being taught.

Chapter 7 Animals As Carers: How Animals Help People

It is well known that animals help people in a number of different ways. People who would otherwise be lonely but who share their lives with a dog or a cat often suffer far less from illness than those who do not have an animal to talk to or sit with. Stroking a cat can help reduce blood pressure. Talking to a budgerigar can help stave off depression. Watching goldfish swimming around a tank can ease anxiety. And walking the dog can help ease aching joints and improve cardiovascular fitness.

But here are some other examples of how compassionate, thoughtful, imaginative and caring animals can and do help people.

1) In *When Elephants Weep* Jeffrey Masson and Susan McCarthy report how a man called John Teal, who was working with endangered musk oxen, was alarmed when some dogs approached. Immediately, the oxen formed a defensive ring around him and lowered their horns at the dogs. It turned out that the musk oxen were protecting their new human friend in exactly the same way that they would protect their calves from predators.

2) The life of a man in Boston, USA, was saved by his dog Belle who had been trained to call for help. The man, who was diabetic had a seizure and collapsed. The dog then bit into the unconscious man's cell phone and called the emergency services on 911.

3) Dogs can help diabetic patients by using their keen sense of smell. The dogs can detect abnormalities in a diabetic's blood sugar levels. For example, one specially trained dog periodically licked her owner’s nose to check his blood sugar level. If she was worried (because she could smell ketones) she would paw and whine at him until he took action to put things right. `Every time she paws at me in that way I grab my meter and test myself,' said the man. `She's never been wrong.'

4) A dog's nose has 220 million cells associated with its sense of smell. Humans have just 5 million. (It is for this reason that dogs are used to sniff out drugs, explosives and human remains.) Some experts now even claim that dogs can be trained to smell cancer cells in human beings. Dr Armand Gognetta, a skin cancer specialist, has reported that a grey-haired Schnauzer called George, who has been trained to detect skin cancer cells in humans, has a success rate of nearly 100%. George was trained after a medical journal had described how another dog had kept sniffing at a particular mole on her owner's leg - ignoring a number of other moles. A biopsy revealed that the mole which had attracted attention had been malignant.

5) Dogs have been reported to be sensitive to impending epileptic seizures. No one knows how they do this but dogs are sensitive to seizures about 40 minutes before they occur. Dogs can therefore be trained to offer early warnings - enabling their owners to take the appropriate precautions for their safety.

6) Many pets know (presumably through some sixth sense such as extra sensory perception) that their owners are going to be in danger. Wildlife writer George Laycock has described how a collie whose owner worked in an explosives factory, tried to save his owner's life. Every day the collie walked to work with the man. But, one day, the dog began to whine and sat down in the road. The dog would not budge. Eventually the man left the dog and went to work alone. The collie went back home and crawled under the man's bed. He stayed there all day, whining. That day a tremendous explosion destroyed the factory - and killed the collie's owner.

7) Cat owners have reported that when they are feeling ill their cat will make much of a fuss of them - purring loudly and rubbing against them when they are feeling unwell.

8) It has frequently been reported that dogs who are separated from their owners will sense when something terrible has happened. Author Sandra Collier reports that when a friend was taken seriously ill while on holiday her dogs, left at home in the care of another friend, began howling in the middle of the night. The dogs howled continuously.

It was later discovered that the dogs had started howling at the moment their owner had fallen ill.

9) Writer Ernest Thompson Seton got caught in two wolf traps while working in the wilderness. At nightfall, a pack of hungry wolves gathered around him. The leader began to growl and snap at Seton who was trapped and helpless. As the wolves were about to attack, Seton's dog Bingo suddenly appeared and killed the leader of the wolf pack. Bingo then dragged a tool to Seton that enabled him to undo the traps and free himself. The really strange thing is that the dog had not been taken on Seton's expedition. At home he had whimpered and acted strangely. Eventually, despite attempts to detain him, he had headed into the dark to find the endangered Seton.

10) Four New Zealanders were swimming off Ocean Beach near Whangarei on New Zealand's North Island when dolphins swam close to them in tight circles and herded them to safety. One of the swimmers, a lifesaver, tried to escape from the dolphins but was herded back into the group - just as he noticed a nine foot great white shark swimming towards them. `The dolphins had corralled us up to protect us,' said the lifesaver. The swimmers spent the next 40 minutes surrounded by the dolphins. When the shark disappeared they were allowed to swim back to shore. The dolphins had sensed the danger to the human swimmers and had taken action to protect them, just as they would protect their young. Later, two of the dolphins were butchered by poachers.

11) Animals have been known to give food to hungry humans. Koko, the gorilla who learned to communicate with humans through sign language, gave medical advice to a woman who complained of indigestion. Koko told the woman to drink orange juice. When the human revisited ten days later and offered Koko a drink of orange juice Koko would not accept the drink until assured that the woman felt better.

12) A Border collie woke a young mother from a deep sleep and led her to her baby's cot. The baby was choking on mucus and had stopped breathing.

13) Two women and ten children lived in very poor conditions in Naples, Italy. They had to share one room. Despite their extreme poverty, and unbelievably cramped living space, they still managed to make room for a stray dog whom they named Rocky. One spring afternoon, two of the children, aged three and six, were left on their own with Rocky. A fire broke out. Rocky fought through the flames, grabbed one of the girls by her dress and dragged her out into the street. Realising that the other little girl was still in the building, Rocky braved the flames again and the second little girl emerged safely. But this time Rocky did not come with the girl. Sadly, the dog was found dead inside the room with his fur alight. He had died from smoke inhalation.

14) In 1989, teenager Adam Maguire was surfing off the north coast of Sydney, Australia, when a 12-foot shark suddenly attacked him. The shark sank his teeth into the teenager's side. Once sharks have tasted blood they invariably want more. Adam Maguire's friends could only watch in horror. But just as the shark was about to move in for the kill, a school of dolphins isolated the shark then chased it away. Thanks to them Adam Maguire survived.

15) A golden Labrador called Sally loved her 79-year-old blind master so much that she willingly sacrificed her life for him. Bill Chamberlain was about to be hit by an oncoming car when his guide dog Sally stepped in and pushed him out of the way so that he wouldn't get run over. It was Sally who died.

16) In the 1980s, 81-year-old Norman Stephenson from Bradford, England, left his home to go for a walk along the steep Pennine hillside. At the same time a dog called Laska also made her way to the same hillside after escaping from her owners' house. When it began to rain heavily, Mr Stephenson slipped and fell down into a ditch. Laska found him and used her body to protect the stranger from the foul weather. Hikers stumbled across the pair the next day and raised the alarm. Thanks to Laska, Mr Stephenson lived to tell the incredible tale. And Laska was reunited with her worried owners.

17) Nipper, a five-year-old collie, bravely rescued his animal friends when fire broke out at his owners' farm in Sussex, England. Nipper boldly made his way back and forth through the smoke to shepherd lambs and calves to safety. The brave collie received blisters to his paws and singed his fur.

18) When brother and sister, Sean and Erin Callahan, were out playing near their home in Texas, USA they came across a rattlesnake. The rattlesnake was about to attack when Leo their four-year-old poodle quickly stood between the children and the snake. As a result of Leo's heroism, the children managed to escape. Amazingly, the poodle survived despite being bitten six times on the head.

19) A dog called Bruce saved a four-year-old Welsh boy from sinking into mud and drowning. When the boy sank above his waist in riverside mud, Bruce lay on his side and clasped the boy's shoulder between his teeth to prevent him from sinking any further. Thankfully, the boy's mother spotted their dilemma and called for help.

20) While out bathing in Lake Sommersville in Texas, USA, Priscilla the pig spotted a young boy in trouble. Priscilla quickly swam towards the boy and used her snout to keep his head above the water. When the boy clutched her collar, Priscilla brought the boy safely to shore.

21) Ray and his fiancée were out on a nature trail walk with their dog, Woodie, when Ray decided to climb a nearby cliff to take some photographs. When Ray was out of view, Woodie pulled frantically on his lead. When he had managed to break free, he ran up the cliff and also disappeared from sight. Ray's fiancée followed their trail and to her horror she saw her fiancé lying unconscious in a stream at the bottom of the cliff, with Woodie by his side. Woodie had jumped off the cliff to save his owner and was nudging Ray's head to keep it above the water and prevent him from drowning. Despite their injuries, Ray and Woodie survived.

22) Carletta the cow saved her owner, Bruno Cipriano, from being gored to death by a boar at his farm in Tuscany, Italy. Carletta charged at the boar and used her horns to head-butt it until the boar ran away.

Chapter 8 Animals Can Use Tools

Humans like to think (rather arrogantly) that only they can think and use tools. Some may find that this sense of superiority makes it easier to use and abuse animals for their own benefit. Many allegedly eminent scientists still deny that animals can make tools. There is no doubt that this viewpoint makes them very popular with the meat industry and with scientific laboratories where animals are used in experiments. But the truth is rather different. The truth is that many animals use sticks and stones as implements to help them in their daily lives.

1) Insects use small stones to pack the dirt firmly over and around their nests.

2) Spiders use stones to keep their webs steady when the weather is stormy.

3) Orangutans and baboons use sticks and stones as weapons.

4) Monkeys use stones to help them crack nuts. In one zoo a monkey who had poor teeth kept (and guarded) a stone hidden in its straw for nut cracking. That monkey had a tool which it regarded as its own property.

5) Chimpanzees drum on hollow logs with sticks in order to send messages to one another.

6) Monkeys know how to use sticks as levers.

7) The Indian elephant will break off a leafy branch and use it to sweep away flies.

8) A lurcher called Red at Battersea Dogs Home in London, England, startled staff by using his teeth to open the spring-loaded catch on his kennel. He would wait until the staff had gone home and locked up for the night before escaping. Once free he would then pad along the corridor and free his chums before leading them to the food store for midnight feasts. This happened a dozen times before the humans found out how the animals were escaping.

9) At Oxford University a crow called Betty picked up a piece of wire, used her beak to shape it and bent it into a hook to lift food from the bottom of a vertical pipe. Once she had learned how to do this she made other hooks to extract food from places she couldn't reach with her beak or claws. She did this without being shown how to do it.

10) Chimpanzees routinely use tools such as twigs and stones to help them hunt and gather food. Scientists from England’s Cambridge University watched animals for several months in southern Senegal. Chimpanzees were observed making spears out of tree branches and then using their spears to catch small wild animals such as bush babies (creatures the size of squirrels). The chimpanzees first selected a branch of the right length, then removed the leaves and trimmed off extra branches. They then used their teeth to whittle the end of the spear to a sharp point. The chimpanzees used one hand to direct the spear - much as a human will.

11) Gorillas use branches to test the depth of water they intend to wade through.

12) Gorillas use giant leaves as napkins to clean their fingers and faces after eating - particularly when they've been eating messy fruits.

13) Crows are cunning birds who have great skills with tools. They have been seen using leaves as probes to extract grubs from crevices. A study published by experts at the University of Auckland has shown that, like humans and some other larger animals, crows can use a combination of tools. The birds use logic and reasoning to decide how best to get what they want. So for example, they will use one tool (a short stick) to create or obtain a second tool (a longer stick) which they need to reach food.

14) Monkeys use tools to dig up roots, crack seeds and dig insects out of holes in trees. Two scientists from Cambridge watched wild Capuchin monkeys in the Sierra da Capivara National Park in northeastern Brazil and discovered that their use of tools is widespread. Stones were used as spades to dig up roots or other food, to crack

open seeds, break tubers into smaller more manageable pieces for eating and to open hollow branches. The monkeys also used stones to crush lizards and to break the outer hard skin of cactus plants in order to get at the soft, edible inside of the plant. The monkeys were seen to use a stone in one hand, for digging, while using the other hand for moving away loosened soil. Most remarkable of all, perhaps, was the fact that the monkeys were seen to improve their tools. When using twigs to probe tree holes or crevices in rocks in order to reach honey, insects or water they would modify the twigs by breaking off leaves or stems to make them more useful.

Chapter 9 Animals Eat The Foods They Need

Animals living in the wild are very good at adapting to their wild surroundings and ensuring that they have a balanced diet. They adapt their diet according to what is available and in order to obtain the essential nutrients their bodies need.

1) Fallow deer eat grass in the summer and browse on fruits such as acorns in the autumn. During the winter they eat ivy, holly and brambles. Then, in the spring, when the grass starts to grow they start eating grass again.

2) Wildebeests migrate from lush grass of the north of the Serengeti Plains of Tanzania when they have calves. They go to the southern plains and to the foothills of volcanoes where they eat grass growing on ash rich soils. The grass there is rich in calcium and phosphorus (both of which are necessary for lactation).

3) In California, desert tortoises travel long distances to find calcium, which they consume in vast quantities. They need the calcium to keep their shells strong.

4) Rats need extra calcium during pregnancy and lactation. So they deliberately eat more calcium rich foods at those times. Their bodies help by absorbing more calcium from the food available.

5) Moose need large quantities of calcium and phosphorus for their antlers. Without the necessary minerals they are likely to suffer from osteoporosis as their growing antlers take the calcium and phosphorus from their bones. To avoid this problem they chew on old, cast off antlers to get the minerals they need. Similarly, reindeer, who also need calcium and phosphorus for antler growing (as well as for milk production), will chew on old antlers. They will also eat soil from around decayed bones.

6) Camels and giraffe (both of which are, like moose and reindeer, vegetarian) have been known to eat the bones of dead animals in order to obtain essential minerals.

7) Sheep in the Shetland Islands have been known to eat ground nesting birds - and so have red deer in the Hebrides. In both cases the normally vegetarian animals ate the birds in order to obtain essential minerals which were temporarily missing from their normal diet. Red deer have also been seen to eat small rabbits. Caribou have been known to eat lemmings and white-tailed deer have been seen eating fish.

8) In the jungles of Malaysia, elephants have been seen drinking water from the bottom of a spring pool because there was more sulphur there.

9) In Scotland, reindeer have been known to lick and chew at salt preserved canvas tents.

10) In Africa, buffalo have been seen licking other buffalo which were sweating in order to replenish their salt supplies.

11) Dogs, and other animals which live with humans, will lick toilet bowls to obtain the salt in urine.

12) Moose will eat aquatic plants such as water lilies because they are rich in sodium.

13) Biologist and author Lyall Watson reported seeing a herd of cattle eating and licking at the bark of a tree. When he examined the tree he found that the tree had a copper nail embedded in the bark. The cattle were all copper deficient.

14) Sheep which have access to a fully varied diet, can adjust their feeding to make sure that they have the right mixture of protein and carbohydrate. They can also adjust their diet to ensure that they repair any mineral deficiencies.

15) Animals don't just eat foods their bodies need. They will sometimes flavour their foods to increase their

enjoyment. An Indian elephant living in a zoo used to split an apple into two and then rub the two halves onto hay to flavour it.

16) Herbivores are very good at avoiding toxic plants. Bracken fern comes in two forms - one of which contains toxic cyanide. Both red deer and sheep avoid the bracken that contains the cyanide but eat the bracken that doesn't. Voles can discriminate between clovers that contain cyanide and clovers that don't. If they have no alternative but to eat the clover containing the cyanide they just eat less of it.

17) Anyone who doubts that animals have a powerful sense of taste should try putting a pill into a cat's meal. Cats are very good at detecting toxins and will eat round them.

18) Rats increase their consumption of a food if they see other rats eating it, or if they smell that another rat has been nearby. If they find a new food that no other rats have eaten they will taste it, wait to see if they develop problems and only go back and eat the rest if they don’t become ill.

19) A baby elephant will find out which foods are safe to eat by taking food from its mother's mouth and tasting it.

20) Some foods are harmful to mice but, if eaten in the right proportions, they are safe because the toxins in one cancel out the toxins in the other. Mice manage to adjust their diet to ensure that they get the balance right.

Chapter 10 Animals Have Feelings

Monkeys have a well-developed sense of grievance. Sarah Brosnan and Frans de Waal of Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia in the USA, studied the behaviour of female brown capuchin monkeys and spent two years teaching them to exchange tokens for food. So, for example, monkeys were allowed to exchange small pieces of rock for slices of cucumber. This worked well some of the time. However, when one monkey was handed a grape in return for a token her neighbour was reluctant to hand over her token for a mere piece of cucumber. (In the world of the capuchin monkey a grape is infinitely more attractive than a piece of cucumber. It is the Choo sandal compared to the utility slipper.)

Monkeys who got short changed became sulky and sullen and even tossed their tokens away in disgust. In some circumstances monkeys even forfeited food that they could see - and would normally have happily accepted - solely because they felt aggrieved. Monkeys, like humans, operate in social circles. When one monkey feels cheated, the system breaks down. Righteous indignation is not something exclusively found among humans.

It isn't just monkeys who have such feelings. Observers at England's Bristol University discovered that cows bear grudges, form friendships, enjoy intellectual challenges, experience happiness, worry about the future and feel pain and fear.

Chapter 11   Animals Have Powerful Homing Instincts

Like birds, many animals have remarkable homing skills. Using the earth's magnetic field, the angle of the sun and its own biological clock an animal which is taken from its home can find its way back over remarkably long distances. Cats in particular seem to have an astonishing ability to find their way home. (There is some evidence that human beings used to have this skill, have lost it, but can regain it if they try.) There are many well-authenticated stories of animals who have found their way home across vast distances. Here are just a few:

1) After she was sent to Nebraska in the USA, a cat called Cookie travelled 550 miles to get back to her home in Chicago.

2) A cat called Howie travelled across 1,000 miles of wilderness and desert in the Australian outback to find his owner when she moved home. Howie's adventure included crossing several rivers.

3) When truck driver, Geoff Hancock, stopped at a café 1800 miles away from his home, his fox terrier called Whisky jumped out of the vehicle. It was nine months before Whisky finally arrived safely home after travelling solo for 1800 miles.

4) A cat called Tom crossed the USA, travelling 2,500 miles from Florida to California, in order to find his owners in their new home. His journey took him just over two years.

5) Kuzya, a Russian cat, travelled 1,300 miles across Siberia to get back together with the people he lived with. Kuzya got lost when his family were travelling on holiday. After weeks of desperate searching, the humans eventually gave up and went home. But Kuzya turned up three months later in perfect health.

6) Ken Phillips and his teenage son lost their cat, Silky, at Gin Gin in Australia. Over six months later, Silky arrived at the family home in Melbourne, Australia after covering a distance of approximately 1,500 miles.

7) While Barbara Paule was driving her truck in Ohio, USA, her cat, Muddy Water White, jumped out of the truck and disappeared. Three years later, Muddy Water White turned up on Barbara's doorstep - 400 miles away from the spot where she vanished from the truck. Muddy was so dishevelled that it took his owner three days to recognise him.

8) After Murka the tortoiseshell cat had killed several pet canaries, her owner sent her 400 miles to live with his mother. A couple of days later, Murka disappeared from her new abode. Murka returned to her original home pregnant and reportedly hungry (presumably for canaries).

9) A snake which was carried a hundred miles away from home managed to find its way back.

10) An English Setter called Bede got lost while holidaying in Cornwall, England, with his owner, Louis Heston. Six months later, Bede turned up at his owner's home after travelling a distance of more than 300 miles.

11) During World War I a man called Jones-Brown enlisted in the army and, naturally, had to leave his dog Prince, an Irish terrier, behind with his family in Ireland. Prince became depressed and would not eat. When he was taken on a trip to England with the family, the dog disappeared. Mrs Jones-Brown wrote to her husband to tell him the sad news that his dog had gone. Her husband wrote back to tell her that Prince was with him. The dog had somehow managed to cross the English Channel and find his master.

Chapter 12 Animals Have Powerful Imaginations

There is plenty of evidence to show that many creatures other than human beings have powerful imaginations.

1) Cats, dogs and horses and many other creatures dream.

2) Parrots talk in their sleep.

3) Horses frequently stampede because they are frightened by objects (such as large rocks or posts) which are no real threat to them. This must show a sense of imagination because the horse, like a child, has created a terror out of nothing.

4) A cat playing with a ball of wool imagines that it is hunting.

5) Spiders will hold down the edges of their webs with stones to steady them during gales which have not yet started. Does this show an ability to predict the weather or imagination?

Chapter 13 Animals Enjoy Playing

We accept that cats and dogs like to play (though, quite erroneously, often assuming that it is because we have taught them how to do it) but we usually reject the notion that other animals play. So, for example, when we see dolphins leaping in the sea scientists tell us that they are communicating; sending messages to other dolphins. When we point out that sheep and lambs like to play the same sort of games that children play, cynics accuse us of being anthropomorphic. (A few minutes observation will confirm that lambs play tag, king of the castle, hide and seek and even enjoy running races. Even fully-grown sheep enjoy playing together - abandoning their more active games only when arthritis prevents them from moving easily.) The problem is that most people never stop to watch animals for long enough. And the people who do have the opportunity to watch, farmers and hunters, don't like to admit that the creatures they kill so readily are sentient and playful. And so they sustain their ignorance by refusing to see what they look at. The truth is that human beings are not the only animals to have a sense of humour and fun and to enjoy playing games. Foxes will tease hyenas by going close to them and then running away. Ravens tease peregrine falcons by flying closer and closer to them. Grebes tweak the tails of dignified swans and then dive to escape. A monkey has been seen to pass his hand behind a second monkey so that he could tweak the tail of a third monkey. When the third monkey remonstrated with the second monkey the first monkey - the practical joker - was clearly enjoying himself. Ants, fish, birds, horses, lions, porpoises and many other creatures have all been observed playing games. And some animals can be very imaginative when they want to play. Farmers living in Wales couldn't understand how their sheep were escaping over cattle grids without getting their feet or legs trapped. The sheep were constantly escaping and playing with wild ponies on nearby moorland. Eventually the farmers lay in wait to see how the sheep were escaping. To their amazement the sheep were simply lying down and rolling over the cattle grids. No one but the sheep had thought of that.

Chapter 14 Why Animals Hide Their Pain To Protect Themselves

Scientists often deny that animals suffer pain and claim that the evidence for this assertion is the fact that animals don't react in the way that people do when they are in pain. People in pain often cry out or show other signs of distress but animals usually remain quiet and will suffer great pain apparently stoically.

The reason for this is simple. As far as animals are concerned there is often no advantage to them in showing to humans that they are feeling pain. On the contrary, there are good reasons to disguise that they are in pain. Wounded animals try to hide their pain from predators and to many animals, human beings are predators. Animals know that if they show that they are in pain (and therefore weak) they will be more vulnerable to attack. In addition, animals who live in hierarchical societies (such as lions) may lose status if they appear to be in distress.

However, if they are loved and well cared for, animals will show their pain and distress to those whom they trust.

Curiously, the same scientists who deny that animals ever feel pain, frequently perform laboratory experiments designed to test new pain killing drugs on animals. If animals feel no pain, what is the point of the experiments?

Chapter 15 Animals Have Their Own Pets

Animals have often been reported to have pets of their own.

A chimpanzee who was thought to be lonely was given a kitten as a companion. The chimpanzee groomed the kitten, carried it about with her and protected it from harm.

A gorilla called Koko had a kitten companion which she herself named All Ball.

An elephant was seen to routinely put aside some grain for a mouse to eat.

Racehorses who have had goat companions have failed to run as expected when separated from their friends.

Chapter 16 Animals Can Be Self-Conscious

Animals have often been reported to show signs of self-consciousness, embarrassment and other allegedly exclusively human emotions.

1) Chimpanzees have been observed using a TV video monitor to watch themselves making faces. The chimpanzees were able to distinguish between a live image and a taped image by testing to see if their actions were duplicated on the screen. Chimpanzees have even managed to use a video monitor to help them apply make up to themselves (humans find that this is a difficult trick to learn). One chimpanzee has been reported to have used a video camera and monitor to look down his own throat - using a flashlight to help the process.

2) A gorilla who had a number of toy dolls used sign language to send kisses to her favourite. But every time she realised that she was being watched she stopped doing this - presumably through embarrassment.

3) When a bottlenose porpoise accidentally bit her trainer's hand she became `hideously embarrassed', went to the bottom of her tank with her snout in a corner, and wouldn't come out until the trainer made it clear that she wasn't cross.

4) Wild chimpanzees show embarrassment and shame and may show off to other animals whom they want to impress.

5) People who live with cats will have probably noticed that if a cat falls off a piece of furniture it will immediately do something else, as though pretending that the fall didn't take place at all - often beginning to wash itself.

6) Elephant keepers report that when elephants are laughed at they will respond by filling their trunks with water and spraying the people who are laughing at them.

7) Many dog owners have reported that their animals make it clear that they know when they have done wrong. A dog which feels it has behaved badly may go into a submissive position before its pack leader (or `owner') knows that the animal has done something `bad'.

Chapter 17 Animals Can Be Artistic

We don't usually think of animals as having artistic natures. But this is simply because of our prejudices. When a bird takes bright objects to decorate its nest we tend to dismiss this as pointless theft though when a human being collects bird feathers to decorate a room or a hat they are said to be showing artistic tendencies. Here are half a dozen well-documented examples of animals exhibiting artistic tendencies.

1) Naturalist Gerald Durrell wrote about a pigeon who listened quietly to most types of music but who would stamp backwards and forwards when marches were being played and would twist and bow, cooing softly, when waltzes were played.

2) A gorilla enjoyed the singing of tenor Luciano Pavarotti so much that he would refuse to go out of doors when a Pavarotti concert was being shown on television.

3) Animal abusers have for years dismissed bird song as merely mating calls. But it is now suspected that birds sing to give themselves pleasure.

4) Numerous apes have painted or drawn identifiable objects while in captivity.

5) When a young Indian elephant was reported to have made numerous drawings (which were highly commended by artists who did not know that the artist was an animal) other zookeepers reported that their elephants often scribbled on the ground with sticks or stones. When an Asian elephant got extra attention because of her paintings, nearby African elephants used the ends of logs to draw on the walls of their enclosure.

Chapter 18 Animals Have Good Memories

Many animals have excellent memories. Chimpanzees, for example, have much better memories than human beings and outperformed university students in memory tests devised by Japanese scientists. The tasks involved remembering the location of numbers on a screen and correctly recalling the sequence. Researchers at Kyoto University tested 12 students and three chimps who had been taught the numbers one to nine. The numbers were shown on a computer screen and were obscured with white squares after each participant touched the first number. The aim was to touch all the squares in ascending order. The chimps finished this task faster than the humans with exactly the same accuracy. When the test was repeated at a faster speed, the best chimp scored 80% while the best human managed only 40% accuracy. When the best chimp was matched against a human memory champion, the chimp managed a 90% score compared to the human champion's 33%. (The human memory champion could memorise the order of a shuffled deck of cards in 30 seconds.) The findings were published in the journal *Current Biology* in December 2007. Scientists concluded that humans may have underestimated the intelligence of our closest living relatives. Other tests have shown that chimpanzees perform much better than humans on tests measuring both spatial memory and facial recognition

Even sheep, those much-derided animals, have amazing memories as described in our book *Animal Miscellany*.

`One March I got my ride-on mower out from the shed where it had been stored for the winter. I started up the engine ready to drive it across the courtyard towards the garden so that I could cut the croquet lawn. As I started up the engine I watched four sheep, who were grazing in their field, prick up their ears and start to run. I watched as they ran for several hundred yards and then stood waiting at the very spot where, the previous summer, I had dumped the grass cuttings I had taken from the lawns. It slowly dawned on me that the sheep had, after a gap of five or six months, recognised the sound of the lawn mower's engine (differentiating it from the numerous other engines they would have heard in the intervening period), recognised that the sound of the engine meant that I was about to start cutting the grass, remembered that they liked munching grass cuttings, remembered where I had dumped the grass cuttings some five or six months previously when I had last cut the lawns, and had instantly run round the field to be in position ready for the first batch of cuttings of the season. Now all that seems to suggest to me that sheep are really very bright. I know a good many human beings (most of them politicians) who could not have used that one piece of information (the starting up of a lawnmower engine) and drawn such an accurate conclusion.' – *Vernon Coleman*

Chapter 19 Animals Give One Another Presents

Giving gifts is part of the mating ritual among all sorts of animals. Even insects do it. Crickets give nuptial gifts (usually edible) designed to help win a mate and prolong copulation. Cockroaches give the female of their choice a tasty uric acid paste they have stored up for the occasion. Male scorpion flies build mounds of dried saliva which the females find irresistible. While the female eats the dried saliva the male has his wicked way with her.

Often a female will select her mate according to the size or apparent quality of the gift she is offered. Male fireflies proffer a protein boost with their sperm. The quality of the protein boost is advertised by the intensity of the firefly's glow. The male dance fly will offer a prospective lover a tasty insect nicely wrapped in silk. (Crafty dance flies will offer pretty rough looking insects very nicely wrapped. The female of the species will respond better to an ordinary gift in a beautiful wrapping than to a spectacular gift which isn't very well wrapped.)

Chapter 20 Animals Have Much Better Survival Instincts Than We Do

There has, for centuries, been a belief that animals can predict natural disasters. For example, there is good evidence that many animals know when earthquakes and tsunamis are imminent.

1) Just before the tsunami crashed into southern India in 2005, animals ran from the coast to the safety of a nearby hilltop. A herd of antelope stampeded from the shoreline ten minutes before the waves hit. In Sri Lanka, where thousands of people were killed, all the wild animals (elephants, leopards, deer, etc.) managed to survive at the Yala National Park on the coast. The animals all escaped before the waves hit. Throughout the area there was only one report of a dead animal as a result of the tsunami.

2) In California, it has been reported that horses will not let people ride them when earthquakes are due.

3) In China, in 1975, snakes emerged from hibernation to escape being buried when an earthquake hit the city of Haicheng.

4) The Chinese Government has published an official booklet describing animal signs that precede, and therefore predict, earthquakes. Tell-tale signs include cattle and horses refusing to enter their corrals, rats leaving their hiding places and running around wildly and fish jumping out of the water.

5) Before major earthquakes and floods, small mammals leave their burrows and cattle migrate to high ground.

6) Desert tortoises in the Nevada desert in the USA dig shallow holes in rocky soil to catch rain when they sense that there is a storm coming.

7) Sheep will run for shelter when they sense bad weather coming. The sky may be blue - with no signs of an impending storm - when they start running.

8) Cats can predict earthquakes. When an earthquake is coming a cat will do everything it can to get out of any building, and if they have kittens they will take the kittens with them. In the hours before an earthquake hits, cats get extremely agitated. They have often been seen scratching at doors to be let out, or simply hurrying outside. The Chinese always used to rely on cats to predict earthquakes and other natural disasters.

No one yet knows how animals do this. Do they hear or feel the rumblings of an earthquake? Do they feel the changes in the earth's electromagnetic field? Or do they sense a change in atmospheric pressure? Whatever the explanation, it seems reasonable to conclude that if you see animals running from somewhere you should leave too. If your cat suddenly picks up its kittens and heads for the door maybe you should follow.

Chapter 21 Animals Exhibit Altruistic Behaviour

Animals don't just show love; they frequently exhibit behaviour that can only be described as altruistic. Animals can suffer, they can communicate and they can care. There are numerous well-authenticated stories of animals putting their own lives at risk in order to save their loved ones.

1) Elderly lionesses who have lost their teeth and can no longer hunt, and who are too old to have young are, theoretically, of no value to the rest of the pride. But, nevertheless, the younger lions will share their kills with them. An older lioness may live out her old age - 20 years or more - being looked after by younger females.

2) A three-year-old chimpanzee is able to recognise when an adult chimpanzee (even one who is a complete stranger) needs help. And he will provide the required assistance even when there is no benefit to be gained - without expecting a reward or praise of any kind. The young chimpanzee helps simply because it wants to. For example, young, agile chimpanzees will climb trees to fetch fruit for their older relatives. Old age brings respect. Older male chimpanzees are only rarely threatened by younger animals and are tolerated without aggression. Older chimpanzees are given more grooming than they give.

3) Foxes have been observed bringing food to adult, injured foxes. When one fox was injured by a mowing machine and taken to a vet by a human observer the fox's sister took food to the spot where the injured fox had lain. The good Samaritan sister fox made the whimpering sound that foxes use when summoning cubs to eat (even though she had no cubs).

4) Whales have been observed to ask for and receive help from other whales.

5) Author J. Howard Moore described how crabs struggled for some time to turn over another crustacean which had fallen onto its back. When the crabs couldn't manage by themselves they went and fetched two other crabs to help them.

6) A gander who acted as a guardian to his blind partner would take her neck gently in his mouth and lead her to the water when she wanted to swim. Afterwards he would lead her home in the same manner. When goslings were hatched the gander, realising that the mother would not be able to cope, looked after them himself.

7) Pigs will rush to defend one of their number who is being attacked.

8) When wild geese are feeding, one will act as sentinel - never taking a grain of corn while on duty. When the sentinel goose has been on watch for a while it pecks at a nearby goose and hands over the responsibility for guarding the group.

9) When swans dive there is usually one which stays above the water to watch out for danger.

10) Time and time again dogs have pined and died on being separated from their masters or mistresses.

11) Author Konrad Lorenz described the behaviour of a gander called Ado when his mate Susanne-Elisabeth was killed by a fox. Ado stood by Susanne-Elisabeth's body in mourning. He hung his head and his body was hunched. He didn't bother to defend himself when attacked by strange geese. How would the animal abusers describe such behaviour other than as sorrow born of love? There is no survival value in mourning. It can only be a manifestation of a clear emotional response - love.

12) Coyotes form pairs before they become sexually active - and then stay together. One observer watched a female coyote licking her partner's face after they had made love. They then curled up and went to sleep.

13) Geese, swans and mandarin ducks have all been described as enjoying long-term relationships.

14) One herd of elephants was seen to be travelling unusually slowly. Observers noted that the herd travelled slowly so as not to leave behind an elephant who had not fully recovered from a broken leg. Another herd travelled slowly to accommodate a mother who was carrying her dead calf with her. When the herd stopped to eat or drink, the mother would put her dead calf down. When they started travelling she would pick up the dead calf. The rest of the herd were accommodating her in her time of grief.

15) Vampire bats will regurgitate blood into the mouth of a sick bat.

16) Gorillas have been seen to travel slowly if one of their party is injured and unable to move quickly.

17) When animals die their relatives and friends will often bury them. A badger was seen to drag another badger - which had been killed by a car - off the road, along a hedge, through a gap and into a burial spot in nearby woods. Elephants won't pass the body of another elephant without covering the corpse with twigs, branches and earth. After scientists and park officials culled elephants in Uganda, they cut the ears and feet off the dead animals and stored them in a shed ready to be made into handbags and umbrella stands. But during the night a group of elephants broke into the shed and retrieved and then buried the ears and feet. Elephants have even been seen burying dead buffalo and dead lions.

18) If adult foxes are killed (for example, by a hunt) and they leave behind an orphaned cub, relatives of the slaughtered foxes will look after the cub. They take on responsibility as though the cub were their own.

19) Penguins keep warm in groups. When the birds on the outside begin to feel the cold they go into the centre of the group to get warm while the warm birds, who have been huddled inside, take their turn on the outside.

20) Geese fly in changing formations to protect one another.

21) Grooming (picking fleas and bugs and mud from one another's fur) is an essential part of family life for gorillas.

22) A dwarf mongoose in the Taru desert of Kenya was badly injured. Her group stayed around her, grooming her and bringing her food until she was able to walk again.

23) Elephants will pull spears and darts out of themselves and out of each other. They will pull one another to their feet if they are having difficulty in rising.

24) Elephants have been known to rescue captured elephants in hunting raids.

25) Swiss researchers studying rats at the University of Bern discovered that rats demonstrate altruism towards strangers in much the same way that people sometimes do. People are more likely to lend a hand to a perfect stranger if they have benefited from kindness in the past and rats are just the same.

26) A researcher from the University of Parma in Italy, has shown that in Rome, where there are 350,000 stray cats in 2,000 separate colonies, male alley cats let the weakest individuals in their colony - small female cats and their kittens - eat first. The researcher concluded that the male feral cats, although normally aggressive, recognise that the weaker females and the young kittens need to be given precedence in order to survive. Of course, the cats may just have surprisingly good table manners. Whatever the explanation may be, their actions can undoubtedly be described as altruistic.

27) When around 80 whales beached themselves on New Zealand's Tokerau Beach one September day in 1983, locals tried to keep the whales alive by splashing water over them to help keep their skins moist. When the tide finally came in, the whales started to float in the right direction but soon became disorientated and beached themselves again. There seemed to be no hope until a school of dolphins came to the rescue and successfully led the whales into the safety of the sea.

Epilogue What We Can Learn From Animals

There is much we could learn from animals if only we would open up our eyes and our minds. We don't have to experiment on animals - or to mistreat them - to learn from them. Here, are twelve things we can learn from watching how animals look after themselves and behave towards one another.

1) We should touch the people we care about as often as we can.

2) When those whom we love come home after being away, we should always hurry to greet them.

3) We should stretch when we get up before we start moving about.

4) We could soothe and protect our bodies and our minds by taking regular naps.

5) Whatever our age, we should make sure that we devote some time every day to playing.

6) Whenever we are upset or feel threatened we should avoid biting when a growl will do just as well.

7) We should forget the bad things that happen. Accept whatever punishment we may deserve. And never waste time on regrets or guilt.

8) Whatever we are doing (and however much fun it was when we started) we should always stop when we have had enough. This is particularly true of eating.

9) We should be loyal.

10) We should never pretend to be something we are not.

11) When someone we love is having a bad day, we should make sure that we sit close by to give them silent comfort.

12) We should protect the ones we love.

Appendix 1 Facts About Animal Experiments:

1) Every thirty seconds vivisectors around the world kill another thousand animals. They use cats, dogs, puppies, kittens, horses, sheep, rats, mice, guinea pigs, rabbits, monkeys, baboons and any other creature you can think of.

2) While waiting to be used in laboratory experiments animals are kept in solitary confinement in small cages. Alone and frightened they can hear the screams of the other animals being used.

3) Some of the animals used in laboratory experiments are pets which have been kidnapped, taken off the streets and sold to the vivisectors.

4) Animals used in experiments are blinded, burned, shot, injected and dissected. They have their eyes sewn up or their limbs broken. Chemicals are injected into their brains and their screams of anguish are coldly recorded.

5) Three quarters of the experiments performed by vivisectors are done without any anaesthetic.

6) Most vivisectors have no medical or veterinary training.

7) Scientists claim that animals are not sentient creatures and are incapable of suffering mental or physical pain.

8) All animals respond differently to threats of any kind depending on their circumstances (diet, cage size, etc.). None of these factors are allowed for by vivisectors. By locking an animal up in a cage experimenters have already invalidated their experiment because by altering the animal's surroundings the experimenter alters the animal's susceptibility, its habits, its instincts and its capacity to heal itself. Since these variations are not controlled (cages and surroundings differ) experiments performed on animals kept in cages are of no scientific value.

9) Many of the diseases which kill or cripple human beings do not affect any other members of the animal kingdom. It is, therefore, impossible to use different species to test drug therapies for these illnesses.

10) Doctors wouldn't test a drug intended for old people on children (or the other way round). So why test drugs intended for pregnant women on rats? No one would test a drug for premenstrual problems on small boys and yet that would make far more sense than testing such a drug on male rats.

11) Drug tests done on animals can produce dangerously unreliable and misleading information. Thalidomide safely passed tests on animals. Penicillin and aspirin both kill cats. When Alexander Fleming discovered penicillin growing on a culture dish in 1928 he tested the drug on rabbits and discarded it when it seemed useless. Later the drug was tested on a cat and a human patient at the same time. The cat died and the human being lived. If doctors had relied upon animal experiments to decide whether or not penicillin was of any value the drug would have been discarded long ago. Penicillin even kills guinea pigs - the classic test animal for many drugs. Aspirin can be toxic to rats, mice, dogs, monkeys and guinea pigs as well as cats. Morphine sedates human beings but excites cats, goats and horses. Digitalis, one of the best established and most effective drugs for the treatment of heart disease, is so toxic to animals that if we had relied on animal tests it would have never been cleared for use by humans.

12) Vivisectors admit that most animal experiments are unreliable and produce results which are not relevant to human patients. But they don't know which experiments are unreliable. Logically, that means that all animal experiments are useless. If you don't know which experiments you can rely on, you can't rely on any of them.

13) The very unreliability and unpredictably of animal experiments is what makes them commercially valuable. Drug companies test on animals so that they can say that they have tested their drugs before marketing them. If the tests show that the drugs do not cause serious disorders when given to animals the companies say: `There you are! We have tested our drug - and have proved it to be safe!' If, on the other hand, tests show that a drug does cause serious problems when given to animals the companies say: `The animal experiments are, of course, unreliable and cannot be used to predict what will happen when the drug is given to humans. We have, however, tested our drug.' Tests which show that a drug causes cancer or some other serious disease when given to animals are ignored on the grounds that animals are different to people. However, tests which show that a new drug doesn't kill animals are used as evidence that the drug is safe for human consumption. If you try a drug on enough different animals you can usually end up with at least one set of results which suggest that a drug is safe. Scores of drugs which cause cancer or other serious health problems in animals are widely prescribed for human patients. (See www.vernoncoleman.com for the names of 50).

14) Four out of ten patients who take a prescribed drug which has been tested for safety on animals can expect to suffer severe or noticeable side effects.

15) Surveys show that most practising doctors are opposed to vivisection on scientific grounds.

Appendix 2 Reasons For Being A Vegetarian

1) Avoiding meat is one of the best and simplest ways to cut down fat consumption. Modern farm animals are deliberately fattened up to increase profits. Eating fatty meat increases your chances of having a heart attack or developing cancer. The following diseases are known to be commoner among meat eaters: anaemia, appendicitis, arthritis, breast cancer, cancer of the colon, cancer of the prostate, constipation, diabetes, gallstones, gout, high blood pressure, indigestion, obesity, piles, strokes and varicose veins. Lifelong vegetarians visit hospital 22% less often than meat eaters - and for shorter stays. Vegetarians have 20% lower blood cholesterol levels than meat eaters - and this reduces heart attack and cancer risks considerably.

2) Every minute of every working day thousands of animals are killed in slaughterhouses. Many animals are bled to death. Pain and misery are commonplace. In America alone 500,000 animals are killed for meat every hour.

3) The vast majority of cases of food poisoning are caused by eating meat.

4) Meat contains absolutely nothing - no proteins, vitamins or minerals - that the human body cannot obtain perfectly happily from a vegetarian diet.

5) African countries - where millions are starving to death - export grain to the developed world so that animals can be fattened for the dining tables of the affluent nations. This problem is getting worse now that agricultural land is widely used for growing crops to be used as a petrol and diesel substitute. If we ate the plants we grow -instead of feeding them to animals - the world's food shortage would disappear virtually overnight. One hundred acres of land will produce enough beef for 20 people but enough wheat to feed 240 people.

6) Food sold as `meat' can include the tail, head, feet, rectum and spinal cord of an animal. A sausage may contain ground up intestines. Who wants to eat the content of a pig's intestines?

7) Animals which are a year old are often far more rational - and capable of logical thought - than six week old babies. Pigs and sheep are far more intelligent than small children.

8) It's much easier to become - and stay - healthily slim if you are vegetarian. Vegetarians are fitter than meat eaters. Many of the world's most successful athletes are vegetarian.

9) Half the rainforests in the world have been destroyed to clear ground to graze cattle to make beefburgers. The burning of the forests contributes 20% of all greenhouse gases. Roughly 1,000 species a year become extinct because of the destruction of the rain forests. Around 300 million acres of American forest have been cleared to grow crops to feed cattle so that people can eat meat.

10) Approximately 60 million people a year die of starvation. All those lives could be saved if the starving people were allowed to eat just some of the grain used to fatten cattle and other farm animals. If Americans ate 10% less meat, world starvation would be a memory.

11) The world's fresh water shortage is being made worse by animal farming. And meat producers are the biggest polluters of water. It takes 2,500 gallons of water to produce one pound of meat.

12) Meat eaters consume hormones that were fed to the animals. No one knows what effect those hormones will have on human health. In some parts of the world as many as one in four hamburgers contains growth hormones that were originally given to cattle. Some farmers use tranquillisers to keep animals calm. Others routinely use antibiotics to stave off infection. When you eat meat you are eating those drugs. The indiscriminate feeding of antibiotics to animals is one of the main reasons for the rise in antibiotic resistant infections.

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The Young Country Doctor: Book 1

BILBURY CHRONICLES

Vernon Coleman

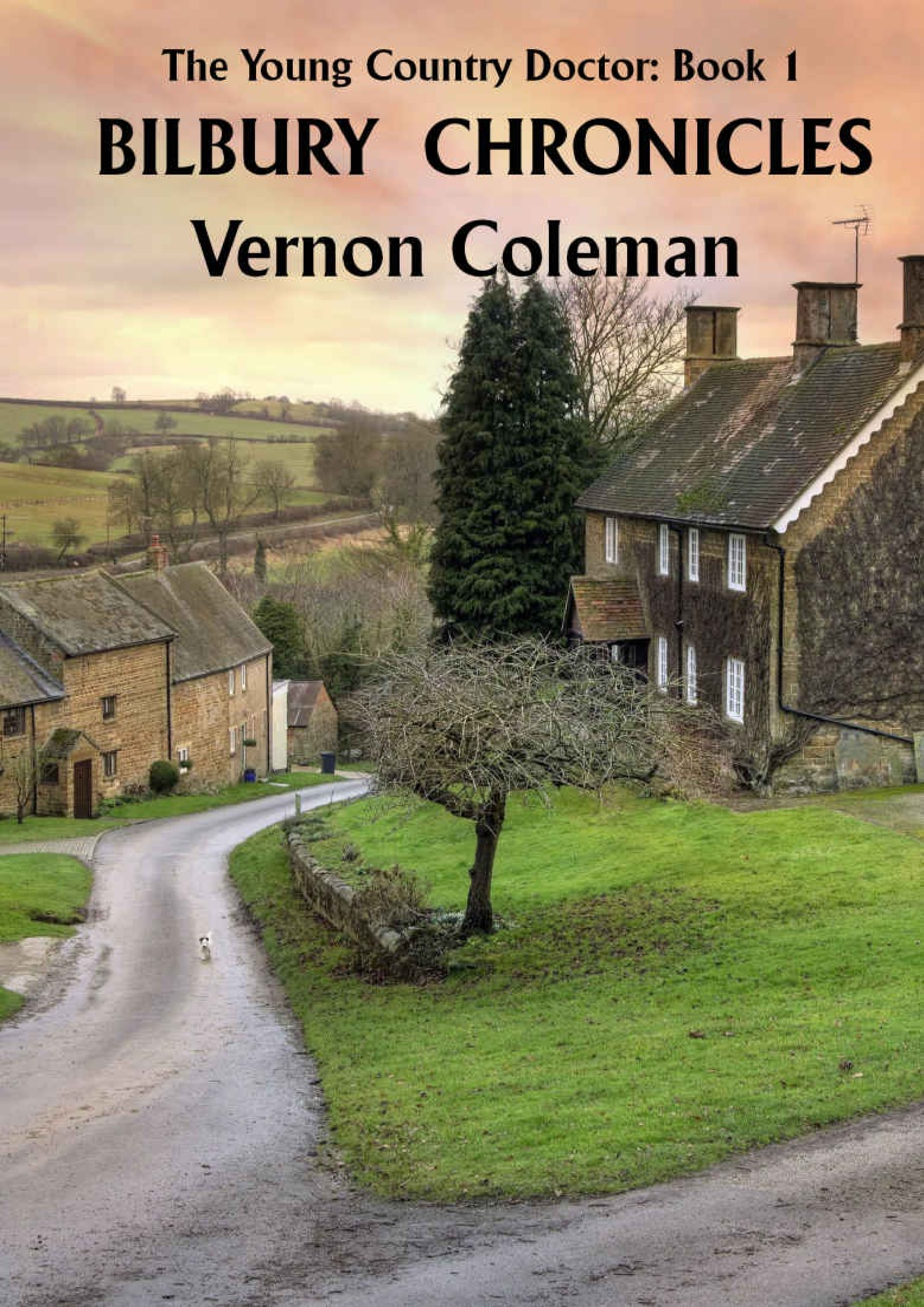

THE YOUNG COUNTRY DOCTOR: BOOK 1

BILBURY CHRONICLES

VERNON COLEMAN

Bilbury Chronicles

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Bilbury Chronicles is the first of Vernon Coleman's seven books about Bilbury – all available as Amazon Kindle Books. If you enjoy the Bilbury books you may enjoy other books by the same author – including 'Mr Henry Mulligan' and 'Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War'. For details of over 100 other books by Vernon Coleman please see his Amazon author page or visit www.vernoncoleman.com

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CHAPTER ONE

There can be few more beautiful railway journeys than the one between Exeter and Barnstaple. The train moves slowly and stops at a dozen small hamlets on the way but the view from the window is overpoweringly rural: oak and silver birch, hazel nut and walnut trees provide shade and shelter for foxes, badgers and deer; thick, untrimmed hedgerows border lush, dark green meadows; thatched roof cottages sit alongside streams and bridle paths; herons haunt the shallows of the river Taw; dippers and kingfishers decorate the banks, rocks and overhanging branches; and buzzards soar high overhead, unflapping and unflappable.

It was 1971 and an early autumn afternoon when I first travelled on that train and, as it chugged slowly and peacefully along the river valley, through Lapford, past Eggesford and into and out of King's Nympton, the glorious majesty of the scenery was the last thing on my mind.

You need to feel calm and relaxed to get the best out of this sort of journey. And I was feeling neither calm nor relaxed. I had no time for rich, red soils; plump hilltops crowned with copses or slowly swirling pools of meandering river water. I was on my way to my first job and to say that I felt nervous would be an understatement of grand proportions.

I had finally completed my training as a doctor just five days earlier. My registration certificate, collected by hand from the General Medical Council, lay unfolded and hardly dry in a large, sturdy brown envelope at the bottom of my brand new, black leather 'doctor's bag': a badge of office which had given me confidence and pride when I'd bought it but which now seemed, by its very shiny newness to advertise my inexperience and professional innocence.

I'd got the job as Dr Brownlow's assistant after a telephone interview that had lasted somewhere between a minute and a minute and a half. My conversation with his receptionist, who had told me which trains to catch, had lasted only slightly longer.

Then, surrounded by the hospital wards and university laboratories where I'd trained, I'd been full of self-assurance. Now, swaying gently from side to side on a train which was steadily lurching its way towards the unknown I felt almost overcome by great, cold draughts of incompetence and ignorance.

As the train took me nearer and nearer to my new job I gradually realised that practising medicine as a senior student in a ward staffed by experienced doctors and briskly efficient, starch fronted nurses was something entirely different to practising medicine out here in the wilderness. The real world was, I began to suspect, something that I might not be quite ready for.

In hospital my patients had mostly lain neatly in rows, dressed in their pyjamas and labelled with diagnoses and recorded symptoms. Advice and help was never more than a few moments away. Out here in the real world my patients were chopping wood, poaching trout, catering for holiday makers, driving trains and herding cattle. I looked around the unfamiliar faces sharing my carriage. Were any of these, I wondered, potential patients of mine? Did they have any idea how much I wanted them to stay well and healthy?

A large, red-faced man wearing a brownish tweed jacket, old-fashioned gaiters and a pair of heavy brown boots suddenly belched, temporarily interrupting his steady snoring to do so. A young woman wearing a dark blue overcoat and a small, blue felt hat looked across at him, sniffed and tutted, and then looked away. She clasped her gloved hands neatly in her lap and stared out of the window. She was in her late twenties or early thirties but her clothes made her look much older.

A young woman in her early twenties loudly shushed the two boys who were travelling with her. I supposed they were her sons. They seemed to find great humour in the sounds emanating from the fat man's body and had to struggle to contain their amusement. A man in a grey suit buried himself in his morning newspaper. An elderly woman wearing a black dress, black coat, black hat and black shoes glowered around at all of us, as though holding us all responsible for failing to protect her from these social insults, before folding her arms across her chest as though defiantly barricading herself against our world.

The train, slowing down, started to follow a long, gentle curve to the left. Looking out of the window I saw a sign on the platform which told me that we had arrived at the end of the line: Barnstaple. This was it. Grown up reality, responsibility and heaven knows what else lay just a few miles away from here. My mouth felt dry and I could feel a squadron of butterflies becoming airborne in my stomach.

Politely, I waited until the other passengers had left the train and then picked up my black leather 'doctor's bag' and my cheap but capacious blue cardboard suitcase and shuffled along the corridor.

I was clambering down onto the platform when I realised that something had happened a few yards in front of me, halfway between the train door and the exit from the platform. As I got closer to the crowd which had formed I realised that the fat man in the tweed suit, gaiters and heavy brown boots was the centre of attraction. He was lying flat on his back on the platform and even from a distance it was clear to a trained medical mind that all was not well.

'Excuse me!' I heard myself saying as I gently squeezed my way through between a tall, thin man in a brown trilby, and the elderly woman dressed all in black. I dropped my suitcase outside the circle but kept a tight hold on my 'doctor's bag'. It contained the instruments of my profession and without it I would have felt as vulnerable and as useless as a gunfighter entering the OK Corral without his pistols. 'I'm a doctor,' I explained diffidently, hoping that this confession would excuse my behaviour but not attract too much attention.

I had spoken quietly but the response was as immediate and as dramatic as if I'd shouted the words at the top of my voice. These magic words – 'I'm a doctor' – would, I was to discover in the fullness of time, part any crowd. The circle widened and I was aware of every eye being trained on me.

Every eye except two that is. The exceptions belonged to the young woman in the blue woollen coat and the blue felt hat who had sat across the aisle from me on the train. She was stooping beside the prostrate fat man in the tweed suit, having unbuttoned her coat to make kneeling easier.

'Give me a hand!' she said, without looking up but moving round so that she was behind the man's head. She nodded towards his feet.

I put down my black bag. 'Is he all right?' I asked, hesitantly. 'Shouldn't we do a few tests before we move him? He might have damaged his spine.'

'He's drunk,' said the woman in the blue coat firmly. As though anxious to confirm her diagnosis the fat man suddenly sat up. He opened his eyes and looked around him, lifted one hand as though he wanted to make a gesture of some kind and then collapsed flat on his back again with a loud burp. I found myself engulfed in a suffocating cloud of stale beer.

The woman in the blue coat sighed wearily as though none of this was new to her. 'Let's get him into a taxi.'

She lifted his head and shoulders and I lifted his feet and together we carried him out to the station forecourt. There were half a dozen taxis queuing there but the woman in the blue coat ignored the first three and headed straight for the fourth in line, a rather battered vehicle of indeterminate make that was heavily pockmarked with rust patches. To my surprise, the drivers who had been overlooked made no protests. The driver of the rust speckled car put down his newspaper, climbed out and opened the back door so that we could push our passenger in.

'Drunk again?' enquired the driver, helping us to manhandle the fat man into the taxi.

'It's the last Wednesday of the month,' answered the woman in blue as though this explained everything.

The taxi driver frowned.

'L.V.A. meeting in Exeter.'

The taxi driver grunted and nodded.

The fat man belched again.

I bent down, picked up one of the fat man's shoes that had come off as we had pushed him into the car and tried to fit it back onto his foot. Mysteriously, the shoe seemed several sizes too small. I dropped the shoe onto the floor beside the unshod foot, backed out of the car and stood up. The woman in the blue coat and the taxi driver were both standing waiting.

'His shoe had come off,' I explained, apologetically.

'If you're coming with us you'd better get your luggage,' said the woman in the blue coat.

I frowned. I didn't understand.

'You're Dr Brownlow's new assistant aren't you?' I nodded. 'How did you know...?'

'There can't be all that many new doctors arriving at Barnstaple station today.' She walked round to the other side of the taxi, opened the front door and got in.

'Do you need a hand with your luggage, doctor?' asked the taxi driver. He handed me a grubby visiting card upon which was printed 'Peter Marshall-Taxi Driver'. Underneath was printed 'Funerals and Weddings a Speciality'. There was a Bilbury telephone number. When I'd had a chance to read the card Mr Marshall reached out and took it off me.

'No, thank you!' I said. 'There's only one case and a bag.' I suddenly remembered that I'd left them both standing in the middle of the platform. I turned away from the taxi and ran back into the station. Both the suitcase and the black bag were standing exactly where I'd dropped them. I picked them up and carried them over to the taxi. Mr Marshall had opened the boot, which was full of old oil cans, dirty pieces of rope, old newspapers and a large quantity of shrink wrapped toilet rolls stacked neatly in two large cardboard boxes.

'Delivery for the Duck!' explained the taxi driver cryptically, pushing the toilet rolls to one side. He had, I noticed for the first time, a very thin moustache on his upper lip. He wore a flat cap that had a greasy mark on the peak where he'd touched it countless times with thumb and forefinger and a badly creased suit that had rather a lot of stains on it. He took my suitcase and carefully laid it down in the centre of the boot. Too late I noticed that much of the boot lining seemed to be soaked with oil. He then placed my black bag on top of the suitcase.

I still felt more than a little uncertain about all this. 'You are going to Bilbury?'

The taxi driver nodded. 'That's where we're going, doctor. Don't you worry about a thing.' He opened the nearside rear door of the taxi for me to get in but the fat man in the tweed suit had collapsed sideways and was now taking up the whole of the rear seat. After trying to push him upright, and failing, Mr Marshall scratched his head and walked to the front of the car. ‘Would you mind sharing the front seat with Mrs Wilson?’ he asked. He opened the front passenger door and in lieu of a smile showed me his gums. He didn’t seem to have any teeth at all. Much later I discovered that he had a set of false teeth but that he only wore them on occasions which he deemed ‘special’.

The woman in the blue coat looked first at him and then at me. I stared at him and then at her. Mrs Wilson could politely be described as having a fulsome figure.

‘I’m Kay Wilson,’ said the woman. She swung her legs sideways, showing an indelicate amount of stocking top and bare white thigh, and clambered out of the taxi again. ‘I’ll sit on your lap,’ she offered. I climbed into the taxi and took her place.

As I have already mentioned Mrs Wilson was not a small woman and her weight was not insubstantial. Fortunately, the springs in the taxi’s seat had long since lost all their resilience and our combined weight meant that the seat sank close enough to the floor for Mrs Wilson to get her head into the car. Once inside she fidgeted about as though trying to get comfortable. Even through her thick woollen coat I could feel the bony structure of her firmly structured supporting undergarments. The air around me was thick with her perfume to which I suspected I was probably allergic.

‘Mrs Wilson is our district nurse,’ explained the taxi driver, turning the ignition key in an attempt to start the taxi’s ancient engine. I realised then that the clothes Mrs Wilson was wearing were her official uniform. I extricated my right hand from between the handbrake and the side of the passenger seat upon which we were sitting and offered it to Mrs Wilson, inspired by a sudden sense of professional courtesy. We were in the act of shaking hands when we were both projected forwards as the engine caught and the car, which was in gear, suddenly jerked forwards. The district nurse was crushed against the car’s worn vinyl dashboard and I, the more fortunate of the two of us, was crushed against the infinitely more pliant district nurse.

‘Maybe we should fasten the seat belt?’ I suggested.

Mrs Wilson, her hat now resting at an unlikely angle, moved her head so that she could look at me and raised an eyebrow doubtfully. Behind us I heard the fat man in the tweed suit cursing noisily. Judging from the pressure on the back of my seat he had rolled forwards onto the floor. I felt a sneeze developing and in an attempt to distract myself from such a potentially hazardous incident I wriggled around so that I could reach the dangling seatbelt clip with my left hand. I then tried to pass the seatbelt clip from my left hand to my right but this wasn’t quite so easy. The main consequence of my struggle was that I pulled Mrs Wilson even closer to me than before. Deep out of reach and trapped in my trouser pocket I could feel my Swiss Army penknife pressing into my leg.

‘Let me help you doctor,’ said Mrs Wilson, taking the seatbelt clip from my left hand and putting it into my right for me. She turned towards me when she’d completed this simple manoeuvre and I noticed that her face was looking distinctly flushed. She put her right arm around my shoulders and pulled herself even closer to me so that I could fasten the safety belt.

‘Got it!’ I announced proudly. This was no mean feat since the taxi was bouncing around like a fairground ride.

Mrs Wilson didn’t seem too interested. Her eyes were closed and she was breathing heavily. My Swiss Army penknife was pressing even harder against my thigh and I could feel my leg going numb.

‘Are you all right?’ I asked the nurse.

Mrs Wilson smiled, nodded and murmured something inaudible. In the back of the car I could hear the fat man in the tweed suit talking to himself.

‘What’s an L.V.A.?’ I asked the taxi driver.

Mr Marshall, hunched over his steering wheel as he urged his ancient taxi onwards past a touring caravan being towed by an underpowered motor car, turned towards me looking puzzled.

‘I heard Mrs Wilson tell you that your other passenger had been to an L.V.A. meeting in Exeter.’

‘Oh!’ said the driver. He swung the steering wheel hard to the left and swerved back in front of the car, just in time to avoid crashing head on into a tractor that was coming towards us. ‘The L.V.A. is the Licensed Victuallers’ Association,’ he explained. ‘Frank is the landlord of the Duck.’

The Duck?’

‘The Duck and Puddle. The pub.’

‘Is that the Duck and Puddle in Bilbury?’

‘That’s the one,’ nodded Mr Marshall. ‘You’ll be staying there, I expect.’ He jerked his head backwards. ‘That’s your new landlord.’

* * *

The village of Bilbury lies about ten miles to the east of Barnstaple and about three miles south of the North Devon coast. Bilbury is one of the very few English villages that looks like a traditional village ought to look. The three most important buildings – the pub, the church and the village shop – all look out onto the village green; one and a half acres of lush, green grass that used to be kept closely cropped by the Bilbury goats but which is now cut six times a year by one of the local farmers working on contract for the County Council.

In addition to these three essential and conspicuous centres of public consumption and absolution the village green is overlooked by a couple of dozen cottages, while around its edge stand half a dozen towering oaks, two equally impressive horse chestnut trees and a single ash tree. A small stream meanders along one side of the green; at one end passing under the road in a hidden ditch and at the other flowing across the road to make a ford that in summer often dries to a trickle and sometimes dries completely but in winter has been known to flood to a depth of over eighteen inches.

When Mr Marshall's taxi drew up outside the Duck and Puddle public house I was in no condition to take in any of this. Inhaling concentrated draughts of Mrs Wilson's perfume for half an hour had left me rather light-headed and my Swiss Army penknife had by now succeeded in deadening one of my femoral nerves more or less completely.

The taxi driver disappeared in through the front door of the pub, leaving the district nurse and I to disentangle ourselves from the seatbelt as best we could. Neither of us had moved more than a couple of inches when Mr Marshall reappeared with a small, slightly built, worried looking woman in her early forties who was dressed in a pale pink jumper and a pair of very tight blue jeans. This, I was to discover, was Gilly Parsons, the landlady of the Duck and Puddle and the wife of the unconscious licensed victualler lying on the floor of the back of the taxi.

Mrs Parsons didn't seem surprised or alarmed to see her husband lying there. She reached in, took hold of a random handful of suit cloth and yanked him out of the car in a single, impressively smooth, movement.

Seemingly inspired by this, Mrs Wilson made a supreme effort and, by swinging open the car door and grasping hold of the top edge with one hand, succeeded in pulling her head and shoulders out of the car completely. Unfortunately, although her coat and dress made every effort to follow, her body and legs seemed unwilling to leave the taxi. I found myself flushing with embarrassment as I stared down at a mysterious and confusing vision of lingerie, buckles, silk stockings and white flesh.

By this time half a dozen villagers had left the pub and, all clutching pint or half pint glasses, were standing around watching. The tweed suited landlord of the Duck and Puddle had made a sudden and surprising recovery and was now standing looking doleful as his wife, hands planted firmly on her hips, told him what she thought of him. Three small and scruffy boys who had been throwing sticks up into a horse chestnut tree in vain attempts to dislodge early conkers abandoned their exhausting endeavours and joined the enthusiastic audience.

Eventually, the taxi driver came over and freed Mrs Wilson from his motor car by the simple expedient of taking hold of her shoulders and pulling hard. She shot out of the car like a cork out of a champagne bottle and the two of them landed on the dusty road in front of the pub.

'You must be the doctor,' said Mrs Parsons, the landlady, turning away from her husband, ignoring the sprawling Mr Marshall and Mrs Wilson, and approaching as I clambered out of the car.

'Yes!' I confirmed, standing up and then falling down onto the road alongside the taxi driver and the district nurse in one fluid and seemingly well-practised movement. My Swiss Army penknife had succeeded in arresting the nerve supply to my right leg so successfully that it had been blissfully unaware of its duties when I had tried to stand on it. My arrival in Bilbury had not been quite as dignified as I might have hoped.

* * *

My room at the Duck and Puddle overlooked the village green. Mrs Parsons, who seemed disappointed to discover that her new guest was as prone to falling over as her husband and the rest of her customers, performed the usual rituals without enthusiasm. She opened the window and then shut it again. She opened the wardrobe, rattled the row of wire hangers which hung on a single, wooden rail, and then shut it again. She pointed to the sink and told me what it was, showed me how the taps worked and pressed a hand on the bed to demonstrate its pliability.

She then pointed out the bedside lamp, the tiny child's desk and chair that stood beside the window, opened and shut the drawers of the dressing table and pulled the cord which dangled over the bed to turn on the main light. As she left the room she used the light switch just by the door to turn the light off again. She paused just before she left. 'Dr Brownlow asked if you would be kind enough to call on him as soon as you have settled in,' she announced rather formally. Having passed this message on she looked around, as though taking a last minute inventory, turned away and closed the door behind her.

I shook the worst of the dust off my jacket, brushed my trousers with my hand and shared the contents of my blue suitcase between the wardrobe and the dressing table. Then I placed my brand new 'doctor's bag' on the desk by the window and limped back down the stairs again. My leg still wasn't completely recovered.

The pub had either been built in some long distant era when customers were a good deal shorter than I am or when watching customers crack their skulls against solid wooden beams was considered good sport.

Whatever the explanation I counted six possible danger points between my bedroom and the pub's front door. At two of these sites the landlord had attempted to minimise the extent of possible damage by tacking an old piece of carpet across the beams. The gesture might have been more effective had the carpet not been threadbare. On my first descent I succeeded in banging my head on every possible impediment.

'Excuse me!' I said to Mrs Parsons, now standing behind the bar and pulling a pint of locally brewed beer for an eager customer. 'Could you tell me how to find Dr Brownlow's?' Mr Parsons, the landlord, was standing at the far end of the bar and although erect he did not yet look entirely conscious.

'Turn right out of the front door,' Mrs Parsons answered, without lifting her eyes from her work. 'And then follow the road around the village green. Take the first lane on the right. It's signposted to Combe Martin. You'll see the gates and the drive leading to Dr Brownlow's house a hundred yards on your right.'

Murmuring my thanks I followed her directions faithfully and less than ten minutes later found myself staring at the largest pair of iron gates I'd ever seen. The gates, which were painted black and which stood wide open were suspended from hinges built into two huge stone pillars upon each of which rested massive stone griffins. On either side of the pillars a nine foot high stone wall separated the road from the grounds within.

I studied the gates and the pillars looking for a name, an inscription or some sign that this was what I was looking for. But I could find nothing. I stood still for a moment and stared up the driveway. Flanked by seventy foot tall poplars the drive looked to be several miles long. I could see no sign of any house. I didn't know much about country doctors but this all looked a little grand to me. Maybe, I thought, Dr Brownlow lived in part of the house. Or maybe he had a cottage in the grounds. Whatever the explanation I was pretty sure that I was at the right place unless Mrs Parsons had deliberately sent me off on a wild goose chase. I was comforted by the thought that she didn't look like a woman who enjoyed sending strangers chasing off after wild geese.

After walking for what seemed like a modest eternity I finally saw the house. It looked like something out of a horror film; the sort of place that Dracula or Dr Frankenstein might have found 'homely'. Built entirely of grey stone softened slightly by several acres of dark green ivy it wasn't so much a house as a castle. There was no moat but there were towers, battlements and mullion windows. Apart from the ivy the only colour breaking up the grey of the stone was provided by a Union Jack flag flying from a pole which was fixed at an acute angle to the front of the central tower. Directly underneath the flag, and flanked by two huge stone lions, was the front door. It was about twelve feet high, and was decorated with scores of very solid looking metal studs. Incongruously, a large ginger tomcat lay curled up beside one of the stone lions.

I couldn't see anything that looked like a doorbell so I knocked on the door with my knuckles. The door, which from the sound my knuckles made seemed about three feet thick, soaked up the sound I made with ease. Certain that my knocking had been a waste of time and effort I raised my fist to give the door a more appropriate hammering. But before I could land my first blow the door surprised me by opening.

The man who opened the door wore a black frock coat, black trousers, a white shirt and a black bow tie. He was tiny, wizened and looked at least 80-years-old. Pulling the door open seemed to take up an awful lot of his remaining energy.

'I'm looking for Dr Brownlow,' I said hesitantly. 'Can you tell me where to find him, please?'

'This is Dr Brownlow's residence,' wheezed the old man, producing a silver card tray from behind his back. He held the tray out to me. 'Do you have a card, sir?'

I stared at the tray and then at him. I didn't have any visiting cards. I'd never been to a house where people asked you for visiting cards. I didn't think there were still any such homes in existence. The only people I knew who had visiting cards were salesmen for pharmaceutical products and life insurance policies.

'I'm afraid not,' I mumbled. I tried to look past the old man but it was impossible to see anything behind him except darkness. I told him my name and explained that Dr Brownlow was expecting me. The old man looked me up and down very carefully. 'I'll speak to Dr Brownlow,' he said. Then he shut the door.

Shortly after I'd decided that he wasn't coming back but just before I left the door opened again. 'Dr Brownlow will see you now, sir,' said the old man. He pulled the door wide open so that I could enter and then, the moment I was safely inside, closed it shut behind me. With the door shut it was so dark that I could hardly see anything and so cold that I shivered involuntarily.

The skinny old man turned left and shuffled along a corridor that looked long enough to park a train in. Since he walked slowly I had plenty of time to look around me. The corridor was about ten feet wide with a thin strip of threadbare red carpet running along its centre. On each side of the strip of carpet I could see the bare stone flags that made up the floor of the corridor. The walls of the corridor were decorated with huge old oil paintings, hung in battered but massive gilt frames.

We walked until I felt sure that we must be close to the county's border and then the skinny old man stopped, knocked on a huge oak door and put his ear to the panelling before opening the door and ushering me into an extraordinarily small room. The most remarkable thing about this room was that it was higher than it was wide or long. It was, I suppose, no more than twelve or fifteen feet square but the gap between the floor and the ceiling seemed to be at least twenty feet.

Sitting at a huge, scrubbed pine kitchen table in the centre of the room was a bald, plump man in his late sixties or early seventies who looked over his half-moon spectacles as I entered and beamed broadly. Apart from a window set high in one wall, the room was lined with shelves upon which stood rows of books and dusty, bound copies of old medical and scientific journals. Behind the seated occupant of the room stood an examination couch which was piled high with yet more books. Tufts of horse hair showed that the contents of the couch were making a determined effort to escape.

The room's occupant waved a hand in greeting. 'I'm Dr Brownlow. Thank you for coming.' He looked over my shoulder at the elderly manservant who was still hovering behind me. 'Thank you, Bradshaw,' he said. Then he looked at me. 'Would you like a cup of tea?'

'No, thank you!' I said. 'I'm fine.'

'Wise fellow,' whispered Dr Brownlow confidentially. 'Bradshaw has never got the knack of making tea and Ethel's out somewhere today.' He peered around me and raised his voice again. 'That's all, thank you, Bradshaw.'

I heard the door behind me click shut as Bradshaw left and realised that thirty square feet of solid oak makes a very different noise to the average modern door.

I looked around. 'Is this your study?'

'It's my consulting room,' answered Dr Brownlow. 'It used to be the gun room but it's one of the few rooms in the house that is small enough to keep reasonably warm in the winter.' He pointed the pen he was holding back over his shoulder towards two large electric fires which stood side by side behind him. Even though it was still only early autumn both fires were switched on. 'Sit yourself down,' he said, nodding to the empty chair in front of his table.

I sat down and suddenly had a bizarre vision of a long line of infirm patients struggling along the corridor down which I'd just walked.

'Patients come to the back door,' explained Dr Brownlow, as though reading my thoughts. 'It's a bit quicker.' He sighed. 'Hardly anyone comes to the front door any more. When they do Bradshaw always likes to give them the silver tray treatment'.

I nodded. 'I'm afraid I don't have any visiting cards.'

'No one ever has,' said Dr Brownlow. 'At least no one I ever want to see. The last man who put a visiting card on that tray was a double glazing salesman from Bristol. He was so excited by the prospect of double glazing this place that it took me half a day to get rid of him.'

'It's a spectacular house,' I said.

'I like it,' said Dr Brownlow simply.

I could feel a little cramp developing in my left leg again so I stretched my leg out in front of me underneath the table. As I did so I felt my toes hit something soft. I heard a growl and pulled my leg back quickly and instinctively. I looked down but could see nothing.

'Don't worry!' said Dr Brownlow, comfortingly. 'It's only Max.'

'Max?'

'One of my dogs,' explained Dr Brownlow. 'He gets nervous eczema if he's away from me for too long.'

'What sort is he?' I asked, brightly. I get anxious in the company of dogs but I didn't think I should be worried about a dog which suffered from nervous eczema.

'A Doberman,' answered Dr Brownlow. 'I've got two. They're lovely dogs'.

I felt myself going pale and my terror must have shown.

'They wouldn't harm a fly,' Dr Brownlow assured me. 'Are you settled in at the Duck and Puddle?'

'Yes. It seems very nice. Thank you.'

'Good. Ready to start work tomorrow?'

I swallowed hard. 'Yes.' I lied. I was beginning to have severe doubts about the whole thing. I tried to think of an excuse for running away but couldn't.

'I'd liked to have been here with you on your first morning,' said Dr Brownlow. 'But I've got to go to Exeter tomorrow.'

'What time does morning surgery start?' I asked with a voice I only half recognised.

'Nine. Then there will just be a few home visits afterwards. And the evening surgery is at five thirty. Simple. Miss Johnson will show you the ropes.'

'That's your secretary?'

'Secretary, receptionist, nurse – she does it all. Been with me for years. Knows everyone. Just ask her if you get any problems. She'll sort you out.' Dr Brownlow suddenly stood up. He was shorter than I expected he'd be. 'I thought perhaps you wouldn't mind doing most of the night duties,' he said.

'I'm getting a bit past it now to be honest.' He started to move around the desk. 'Bit of a dicky ticker you know.'

I started to say something sympathetic but Dr Brownlow waved the comment away with a shake of his hand. He moved towards the door. 'Where did you park?'

'Park?'

'Your car.'

'I haven't got one,' I admitted.

Dr Brownlow seemed startled. 'Haven't got a car? You'll need one for tomorrow. Can't be a GP without a car.' He looked at his watch. 'I've got to go to Ilfracombe. I'll drop you off at the Duck.' He smiled at me. 'I'll do the night duty tonight and then you can take over from tomorrow.'

I nodded weakly.

He opened the consulting room door and turned right, going in the opposite direction to the way Bradshaw had brought me. 'That's Miss Johnson's office,' he said, pointing to a door split horizontally in two. 'It used to be the boot room.' He nodded towards another room, painted white and decorated with colourful health education posters. 'The patients sit in there.' A mixture of wooden chairs were arranged in a circle around the walls. 'Used to be the flower room.'

'Flower room?'

'All big houses have them. Somewhere for the gardener to lay out flowers for the house.'

'Yes. Of course.'

'It works quite well,' said Dr Brownlow. 'We've managed to make a self-contained surgery suite down here.' He looked around, obviously proud of it all.

A moment or two later we were outside the back of the house. Dr Brownlow strode across towards a large coach house that had its own clock tower. He pulled open two huge wooden doors to reveal an elderly, black Rolls Royce.

'I bought it thirty years ago,' he said. 'It's a 20/25. The most reliable car ever built. I climbed in beside him and he drove me back to the Duck and Puddle. It was the first time I'd ever ridden in a Rolls Royce and, despite the car's age, I was astonished at its luxury and quiet, smooth power.

It seemed to me that general practice was going to be full of surprises.

* * *

I had a hundred things on my mind but my first task was to get hold of a motor car.

I'd passed my driving test when I was seventeen but had never owned a car of my own. I'd never had enough money and there had never been much need. When you're living, studying and working in a teaching hospital a car isn't exactly essential. I had £45 saved up in my bank account but Dr Brownlow's advertisement had promised to pay me £60 a week on top of my board and lodging at the Duck and Puddle so, for the first time in my life, I felt as rich as a king.

The problem was not so much finding the money to pay for a car but finding a car to buy. Innocently I thought that since £45 was a lot of money to me it would be a lot of money to a car dealer. Everything was made infinitely more difficult by the fact that I hadn't seen a garage since I'd arrived in North Devon.

Mrs Parsons had my evening meal ready when Dr Brownlow dropped me off and she seemed to have forgiven my rather bizarre arrival. Her husband, Frank, seemed to have made a miraculous recovery and was standing laughing and joking in the public bar.

'We usually serve our residents' meals in here,' said Mrs Parsons, showing me into the pub's small and totally deserted lounge bar. The main difference I could spot between the two bars was that in the lounge bar the red leather chairs and benches were a little less battered and scuffed and the ashtrays smaller though there was no dartboard, no bar billiards table and no fire in the hearth. Later, I discovered that the beer was a penny a pint more expensive in the lounge bar.

I can still remember my first meal at the Duck and Puddle. Someone, probably Mrs Parsons herself, had written out the menu in neat handwriting on a piece of white cardboard and had lent it up against the cruet.

There was no choice. I had minestrone soup, followed by home-made steak and kidney pie and chips and peas and I finished with a large bowlful of strawberry ice cream with a blob of Devon clotted cream balanced on top of it. Every mouthful was excellent; simple but nourishing pub fare. After the food I'd been used to eating in hospital I thought I'd died and gone to heaven.

When I'd finished I took the remains of my pint of beer ('You get one pint of beer with every meal except breakfast,' Mrs Parsons had told me. 'Anything more you'll have to pay for yourself.') into the public bar.

'Just passing through the village?' asked Frank Parsons, the landlord, when I asked him to refill my glass.

'I'm staying here,' I reminded him.

He looked at me, a frown on his face.

'I arrived this afternoon,' I explained. 'We came together from the station.'

'Oh, you're the doctor!' said the landlord, a broad grin developing on his face. 'I'm sorry about that!' he apologised, putting my refilled glass back down in front of me. He leant forwards a few inches. 'I never remember anything much that happens when I go down to an L.V.A. meeting,' he confided. 'All a bit of a blur you know.'

I wasn't surprised but didn't say so.

'Though from what I heard you must have had a few jars before you got here, eh?'

It was my turn to frown and look puzzled.

'The wife told me,' he said, 'Arse over cap before you got in through the door!'

'Oh that! I had cramp in my leg. It was my Swiss Army penknife.'

The landlord exploded in laughter. 'That's a good one!' he exclaimed cheerily. 'Must remember that one.

Cramp in the leg, eh? Swiss Army penknife?' He leant forwards again and touched the side of his nose with his forefinger. 'Don't you worry, doctor!' he assured me. 'The wife's the very soul of discretion and you can trust me.'

I handed him a pound note to pay for the drink. I had no small change in my pockets. The landlord pushed the note back across the counter towards me. 'I'll put it on the slate for you,' he said. 'You don't want to be worrying with money every time you want a drink.' He leant forwards across the bar counter again. 'And you don't need to worry even if word does get out that you like a drop,' he said. 'There's no one round here who's likely to take offence. Saving perhaps the vicar.'

'Do you know where I could find Mr Marshall?' I asked him, taking a sip from my glass. It was good beer.

'Mr Marshall?' repeated Mr Parsons, thoughtfully. He pursed his lips, screwed up his eyes and then shook his head. 'I don't think I know anyone called Mr Marshall,' he said sadly.

'The taxi driver,' I explained. 'Mr Marshall the taxi driver. I think he lives in the village.' I paused. 'He brought us all over from Barnstaple.'

'Oh, Pete!' said the landlord, grinning. 'I didn't know you meant Pete!'

'Does he come into the bar?' I asked.

'He does and he doesn't,' said the landlord enigmatically. 'But usually he does.'

'Do you know if he's likely to be in tonight?'

'I couldn't say precisely,' said Mr Parsons. 'Do you want a taxi then?'

'No!' I shook my head. 'But there are a couple of things I need to see him about. First, I never paid him for this afternoon's journey. And second I wanted to ask him if he knows anywhere around here where I could buy a car.'

'Oh, don't you worry about Pete's bill!' Mr Parsons reassured me. 'He'll run up a tab for you. No problem. You don't want to be finding cash every time you want to go somewhere do you?'

I suppose I ought to have been worried by all these tabs I was running up but to be honest I found it all rather pleasant. It made me feel part of the village.

'Excuse me,' said a voice I hadn't heard before. I turned towards it and saw a tall, well-built man in his twenties. 'I couldn't help overhearing you say that you want to buy a car.' The speaker was wearing a scruffy, brown leather jacket, a pair of well-worn, oil-stained jeans and a faded T-shirt that managed to look grubby even though it was black. He had an unruly mop of curly, jet black collar length hair that he was beginning to lose.

'That's right,' I nodded.

'What sort of car are you looking for?'

I don't know,' I confessed. 'Something second hand. Fairly cheap I'm afraid. But I need it urgently. Are you a dealer?'

'Me? A dealer?' He laughed. 'I wouldn't trust a car dealer as far as I could kick one.'

'No,' I said, 'I suppose not.'

'How much can you afford to spend?'

'No more than £45,' I told him. 'That's all the money I have.'

The man in the leather jacket sucked in air between his teeth. The sum didn't seem to impress him. He picked up his glass, which was empty, and stared into it as though reproaching it for being empty.

'Can I buy you a drink?' I asked, responding readily to the cue.

'That's very kind of you,' said the man in the leather jacket, seemingly surprised by my generosity. 'Very kind of you indeed. Be rude to refuse. I'll have a pint of special if that's all right with you.'

I turned towards the landlord who had been chatting to an elderly man who wore a grey mackintosh and a brown homburg and who was drinking half a pint of stout but he'd started to pull the pint of special before I had chance to pass on the order.

'My name's Robinson,' said the man in the leather jacket, holding out a hand. 'But people call me Thumper.' I shook his hand and introduced myself.

'You're the new doctor?' I nodded.

'Pleased to meet you!' said Thumper, taking my hand again and pumping it up and down.

I rescued my hand and massaged it gently in an attempt to get some blood flowing through the tissues again.

'You need something with a bit of class,' said Thumper. 'It wouldn't do for the new doctor to be driving round in any old wreck.'

'I don't think it matters too much what it looks like,' I said. 'The important thing is that it's reliable'.

'Reliable isn't enough!' said Thumper. 'Drink up. I know just the thing for you.' He picked up his glass, lifted it to his lips and slowly but steadily drank it dry. When it was empty he put it down on the bar, wiped the froth off his lips and walked towards the front door.

In an ancient Ford pick-up truck that had what looked like metal farm gates welded to the back and front, Thumper drove me to a farm in the nearby village of Parracombe. The truck shook like a fairground ride and sounded as though it had several terminal problems.

'Wait here a moment!' he told me, skidding to a halt in a muddy forecourt and sending chickens, cats and dogs flying and scurrying in all directions. He leapt out of the cab and disappeared into the farmhouse.

When he emerged a few minutes later he had a huge and rather bad-tempered looking man with him. Thumper smiled and waved for me to join them. I opened the cab door and jumped down into a deep mixture of mud and manure.

'Come and look at this,' said Thumper, letting the farmer go ahead and whispering to me conspiratorially. 'You'll love it and I can get you a terrific deal on it!' We followed the farmer into a large barn where two old tractors and a car were stored. The car was large and it had undoubtedly once looked very elegant. The bodywork had originally been painted pale blue but the chickens had redecorated it in their own unique and original style.

'Does it go?' I asked. I tried to sound optimistic but my doubt must have shone through.

'Does it go?' repeated Thumper. 'It's a classic! A masterpiece of engineering. These will be collectors' items in a few years time'.

'What sort is it?' I asked, peering at the inside of the car through windows that were grey with dirt.

'What sort is it?' Thumper asked the farmer.

The farmer shrugged.

Thumper climbed over two bales of straw and a few oil drums so that he could look at the back of the car. He reached out and rubbed at the car's name plate. 'It's a Humber,' he announced. 'Very smart.'

'Are there any keys?' I asked Thumper. 'Can we see inside?'

'Any keys?' Thumper asked the farmer.

The farmer looked confused.

'Keys?' repeated Thumper. 'To open the doors with.'

The farmer still looked puzzled. Thumper tried the driver's door. The catch was a little stiff but the door opened fairly easily.

'I think he must have mislaid the keys,' said Thumper. He bent down, fiddled about somewhere close to the pedals and produced two pieces of wire. 'Let's try it, shall we?' He twisted the two wires together but nothing happened. 'Battery might be flat,' he admitted. 'I'll bring my truck across. You get into the driving seat.'

Five minutes later the Humber coughed reluctantly into life, courtesy of two connecting leads and the battery in Thumper's truck.

'There you are!' shouted Thumper, above the clatter of the engine. 'Told you! No problem! When you want to stop it just pull those two wires apart. When you want to start it again just re-connect them'.

The farmer stared in surprise as the old Humber rattled and shuddered. I sat inside it, shaking and shuddering with it, and looked around. The inside of the car must have been very smart when it was new. The seats were real leather and the dashboard contained an impressive looking array of dials.

'Radio too, eh?' said Thumper, peering in through the door which I'd left open. He leant a little closer. 'I think I can get it for £75,' he whispered.

I looked at him in horror. 'I've only got £45!' I reminded him.

Thumper waved a hand. 'Don't worry about it,' he said reassuringly. 'I'll sort it out and you can owe me the cash.'

'But...' I began.

'No problem,' Thumper insisted. 'You can pay me next week.'

He unfastened the 'jump' leads from the Humber's battery, slammed the bonnet lid down and walked over to the farmer and gave him something. I didn't see what it was. The farmer looked disappointed but Thumper shrugged his shoulders and jerked his thumb in my direction.

I drove the Humber back to Bilbury behind Thumper's old Ford truck. It never even occurred to me that I needed road tax or insurance and if I'd thought to look at the state of the tyres I would have probably insisted on walking instead.

* * *

CHAPTER TWO

I was awake at seven the following morning. I got up, flung the curtains aside and gazed with undiminished delight at the sight of the Bilbury village green. On the far side of the green I could see Mr Marshall, in his capacity as village shopkeeper, laying out the fruit and vegetables in front of his shop. I discovered later that he rose at four every weekday morning to drive into Barnstaple to fetch fresh produce and to collect the mail for the village. While his wife sorted out the post, ready for him to deliver, he laid out the apples, oranges, bananas, carrots, onions, potatoes, cabbages, cauliflowers and sprouts in wooden trays outside the shop.

My room had its own private bathroom (it was the only bedroom in the pub to be so well served) and so while I shaved I ran myself a piping hot bath. This was a wonderful luxury to which I was totally unaccustomed. At the hospital where I'd worked most recently I had to share a bathroom with half a dozen others.

Scrubbed and shining I dressed carefully in my best grey flannel trousers and a woollen shirt with a fine red cross check pattern. My only jacket, a Harris Tweed sports coat had a large ink stain on the lining but as long as I kept it buttoned up no one would ever notice.

'Would you like a full breakfast?' asked Mrs Parsons when I stepped rather hesitantly into the lounge bar. There was a strong smell of beer and tobacco everywhere. It seemed strange to be in a pub so early in the morning.

I must have looked confused for Mrs Parsons spelt out exactly what she meant. 'Porridge or cornflakes; bacon, egg, sausage, tomatoes and fried bread; toast and marmalade; coffee or tea.'

I was impressed. I'd never had a proper English breakfast before. For six years, while I'd been studying as a medical student and then working as a junior hospital doctor, my breakfast had consisted of little more than a cup of warm coffee – usually made by putting a spoonful of instant coffee powder into a chipped mug and then adding hot water from the tap.

Mrs Parsons mistook the silence for dissatisfaction rather than joyful anticipation. 'I can always do you a couple of boiled eggs or scrambled eggs on toast if you'd rather.'

'No! No!' I said quickly. 'The full breakfast sounds terrific.'

'Porridge or cornflakes?'

I chose porridge.

'Coffee?'

'Yes, please. Black.' I'd never taken milk or sugar in my coffee since neither had ever been available when I'd been a student.

'I like to see a man have a good appetite,' said Mrs Parsons, looking satisfied with herself before she scurried back into the kitchen. She brought the porridge out to me within minutes. While I ate it, tantalising smells wafted out from the kitchen and overcame the smells of stale beer and cigarette smoke left over from the night before. Soon, bacon and coffee were the only smells I could detect while the only sound I could hear was the glorious sizzle of bacon cooking in its own fat.

'Did you enjoy that?' asked Mrs Parsons, half an hour later as she refilled my coffee cup for the third time.

I picked up the linen napkin from my lap, wiped toast crumbs away from around my mouth, smiled and nodded at her. 'It was lovely, thank you.'

'Good!' said Mrs Parsons, who looked genuinely pleased. She nodded towards the clock on the far side of the room. 'I don't want to rush you,' she said. 'But what time is Dr Brownlow expecting you?' You don't want to be late on your first morning, do you?'

I turned and looked at the clock. It was five minutes to nine. The morning surgery was due to start in five minutes time.

While I'd been concentrating on breakfast the weather had changed completely. This was, I eventually realised, typical of North Devon. One minute the sun would be shining and the sky would be blue and cloudless. Then, within minutes and with no apparent warning, the sky would turn black and it would be pouring with rain. I rushed upstairs, brushed my teeth and collected my black bag and my raincoat. I was half way down the stairs again before I remembered that I now owned a motor car.

The Humber was still where I'd left it, parked directly in front of the pub. I climbed in, put my black 'doctor's bag' on the front passenger seat and joined together the two wires that Thumper had arranged for me. It never even occurred to me that the old car wouldn't start and the car, whose battery had clearly been given a new, albeit temporary, lease of life by the previous evening's journey, justified my faith in it by bursting into life with just one touch of the wires.

Cautiously, I selected reverse gear and backed out onto the roadway. Once I was facing the direction in which I wanted to travel I realised that the windscreen needed wiping.

After turning on the headlights, the direction indicators and the cigar lighter I eventually found the switch which operated the windscreen wipers.

Unfortunately, the operation was only partly successful.

The windscreen wipers moved up from their recumbent position and swept the windscreen once but that was it. That was the successful part. At the end of their arc, when they should have returned to base, the wipers chose to make a break for freedom. One after the other they simply flew off to the right leaving tiny metal stalks to make the pointless return journey.

I toyed with the idea of stopping to look for them but I was late, the windscreen wipers had disappeared into a thick hedge and it was raining heavily. I decided to struggle on without them.

I suppose there must have been a time when motor cars didn't have windscreen wipers. But I can't imagine how drivers managed. Maybe the man who carried the red flag in front of all horseless carriages also carried a brush with which to wipe the windscreen clean from afar. Or maybe our motoring predecessors simply stopped and stayed wherever they were when it rained. Whatever the truth of the matter I got to Dr Brownlow's surgery in one piece only by opening the window, sticking my head out and navigating through almost closed eyes.

By the time I'd found my way round to the back of the house it was twenty past nine. I parked the Humber, picked up my black bag and rushed in through the back door to present myself at the receptionist's window.

'Sorry I'm late!' I said, breathlessly, poking my head into Miss Johnson's office.

The woman sitting at the desk in there was about fifty five, tall, slim and white haired. She wore a pink tailored suit over a white blouse with a high neck. A single row of pearls hung over the top of her blouse. She had a pair of gold rimmed spectacles perched on the end of her nose and a thin gold chain hung from each arm of the spectacles and was draped around the back of her neck

Miss Johnson looked at a small, wooden, framed clock on her desk, looked at me and then looked back at the clock. I still can't describe the look, though I got to know it well. It wasn't rude or even overtly critical. It was tinged with sadness, disapproval, disappointment and despair. But there was a strong element of contempt in there too.

I introduced myself. 'I'm Dr Brownlow's new assistant.' Water dripped off my head and I could feel my shirt sticking to my back but that was sweat rather than rain.

With a sigh Miss Johnson put down the thin, gold propelling pencil she was writing with. Gracefully, she stood up and walked across to a cupboard on the far side of the room. She took out a freshly laundered and neatly folded white towel and brought it across to where I was standing.

'I think perhaps you'd better dry your hair before you start your surgery,' she said.

Only after I'd dried and combed my hair would Miss Johnson show me into Dr Brownlow's surgery.

'Are there many patients waiting?' I asked her, opening my black bag, taking out my stethoscope and draping it around my neck.

Miss Johnson looked horrified. I suspected that Dr Brownlow, like most older doctors, used to let his stethoscope hang around his neck by the ear pieces, with the tubing dangling down the centre of his chest. 'One or two,' she replied, refusing to commit herself. 'I suspect they want to have a look at you.'

'Is there an appointments system?' I asked her. Miss Johnson looked puzzled.

'Are patients given fixed times when they'll be seen?'

'I should think not!' said Miss Johnson rather stiffly. 'They come and they wait and the doctor sees them when he's ready.' She turned her wrist and looked at her watch. 'Its a good job there isn't an appointments system isn't it?'

When she'd gone I opened the top drawer of the desk. It contained a bottle of blue-black ink, three golf balls, a box of paper tissues, a corkscrew, half a dozen drug company sponsored scrap pads and an old stethoscope with a very long piece of red rubber tubing separating the chest piece from the ear pieces. The rubber tubing had been repaired with two bicycle inner tube patches.

I felt very nervous and uncertain. In hospital all the patients lie in neat rows; sterilised, bandaged, wrapped and labelled. Every doubt or uncertainty can be tackled with the aid of expert, specialist advice. The community within the hospital is a closed one, governed by written and unwritten rules. Each professional is a member of the ruling team. Doctors wear white coats, nurses wear uniforms and patients wear pyjamas. Doctors stand upright and patients lie down flat on their backs. The rules are simple. Doctors do the doing and patients are there to be done unto.

I didn't know what rules governed life in general practice but I strongly suspected that there were none. I knew my patients wouldn't come in labelled. They wouldn't arrive at the surgery dressed in their pyjamas. They wouldn't lie down meekly and placidly, speaking only when spoken to. They might, I suddenly realised, have the temerity to ask me questions! What would I do if I didn't know the answers? What if they complained of strange symptoms which I didn't understand?

On a hospital ward a doctor knows what his patients are suffering from. He knows what needs to be done. Most of his patients come ready sorted by general practitioners. Now I was a general practitioner. I was going to have to do the sorting. All I knew was that the people I would see would be unhappy about their health.

I settled myself back in Dr Brownlow’s swivel chair, an ancient and wonderful piece of furniture which was suffering from a noisy form of arthritis and which squeaked steadily whichever way I moved. I had not been in a doctor’s surgery since I’d damaged my knee some fifteen years earlier. It felt strange to be sitting on the other side of the desk with only a few short years in medical school behind me and a pine desk in front of me.

Suddenly, I realised that I’d been sitting waiting for several minutes. Wondering where the first patient had got to I thought I’d better go and find out.

‘I haven’t seen any patients yet!’ I said to Miss Johnson.

She was sitting at her desk again.

‘Have you pressed your buzzer?’

‘What buzzer?’

She explained that I would find a buzzer underneath the desk. She spoke in a tired voice, as though explaining something to someone very dim. She told me its whereabouts in a ‘where else would you expect to find it’ voice. ‘When you press it a light comes on in the waiting room and the patients hear a sound. When they see the light and hear the sound they know that you are ready for them.’

‘How do they know who’s next?’ I asked her.

Miss Johnson looked at me as though alarmed. ‘They just know,’ she said, her patience clearly wearing thin. ‘Everyone knows when it’s their turn.’

I nodded. I could feel beads of sweat breaking out on my face. ‘Perhaps I’d better just start.’

‘That would be a good idea,’ agreed Miss Johnson. ‘I did tell them that you had been delayed by an emergency on your way to the surgery this morning but I’ve no doubt that they heard you come in.’

‘Right!’ I said firmly. ‘Thank you. Thank you very much.’ I turned away. ‘Oh, where are the instruments kept?’ I asked before I left.

‘The instruments?’ said Miss Johnson. She gave me another one of her looks. This one would have been appropriate if I’d made an indecent proposal. ‘What instruments?’

I shrugged. ‘Auriscope. Ophthalmoscope. Electrocardiogram. Patella hammer. Tuning fork. That sort of thing.’

‘Dr Brownlow’s stethoscope is in his drawer,’ said Miss Johnson. ‘I don’t think he needs any other instruments.’ Her manner made it pretty clear that she felt that instruments were the refuge of less than adequate doctors. ‘Anyway,’ she said, nodding towards my own shiny new stethoscope, ‘you seem to have brought your own instrument with you.’

I went back to the surgery, sat down, felt under the desk, found the buzzer and pressed it. I felt about as well prepared for the job I was supposed to be doing as I would have felt for a job driving a train or flying an aeroplane. I had spent several years studying the history and epidemiology of leprosy, schistosomiasis and a whole host of rare blood clotting disorders. I knew how to identify fat cells under a microscope and I’d spent long hours in the operating theatre pulling on retractors, snipping stitches and watching as surgeons pulled out gall bladders or amputated rotting limbs. I pressed the buzzer and changed my life.

These days I understand that young doctors going into general practice are trained for the work they are destined to do. It was not always thus. I realised with a sudden, cold wave of horror that I was a fraud. In hospital I’d felt secure in the knowledge that even when I didn’t know something I could get help quickly. It had all been more of an intellectual game than anything else. When I got a diagnosis right I got points. Here it was all for real. Life or death.

Sitting there, in Dr Brownlow’s chair in Dr Brownlow’s surgery, I felt terrified, alone and totally incompetent. I was a qualified doctor but I had no idea what to do. I was legally entitled to ask these trusting souls to take their clothes off and subject themselves to the most intimate of examinations but I no longer had any confidence that I would know what to do if I spotted a symptom.

Pressing that button was the most courageous thing I’d ever done.

As the door opened the black bakelite telephone on Dr Brownlow’s desk began to ring. I picked it up with my left hand.

‘You can take your finger off the buzzer now,’ said Miss Johnson, reverting to her ‘talking to the idiot’ tone. ‘Unless you want them all to come in at once.’

‘Thank you, Miss Johnson,’ I said, taking my right forefinger off the buzzer and replacing the telephone on its cradle. I looked up at the figure who’d entered the surgery and who was now standing just inside the still half open door.

‘Please sit down,’ I said, standing up myself and at the same time pointing to the chair on the other side of the desk.

My first patient sat down.

He looked about 40-years-old, wore a smart though rather old-fashioned blue suit and a green and blue patterned tie that looked as if it had been a Christmas present from a female relative. He carried a tweed cap which he circled endlessly between his fingers. His hair was covered in cream to make it lie down neatly and a small piece of sticking plaster just in front of his left ear showed that he’d used a fresh blade in his razor that morning. He carried with him a small beige envelope. This, I realised, was his medical records envelope.

We stared at each other for a few moments. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to say. 'How can I help you?' sounded a bit too much like a shop assistant.

'What's wrong with you?' I asked him at last.

'The back!' replied my patient, economically. He reached around his chair and supplemented this supply of verbal information by rubbing what he could reach of his spine.

'Oh, dear!' I said. 'I'm sorry to hear that. Is it bad?'

The man nodded.

'How long have you had it?' I looked at the front of his medical record envelope and found his name. 'Mr Porter?'

There was a long, long pause. This was obviously not such an easy question.

'Quite some time, doctor,' said Mr Porter eventually.

It was my turn to nod while I desperately tried to think of something else that I could ask him. In hospital it was much easier. There were always other people around to ask questions if you ran out of things to say.

'I thought perhaps I ought to have a few days on the box.'

'On the box?'

'The sick.'

I still didn't understand.

'A week perhaps?' suggested Mr Porter.

Suddenly I realised what he wanted. 'You'd like some time off work?'

Mr Porter grinned and nodded. His false teeth parted from his gums as he smiled giving him a strange, rather frightening look.

'What is your job, Mr Porter?'

'Gardener.'

'And whereabouts is the pain worst?' I asked.

Mr Porter, who looked puzzled, reached behind him and rubbed at the bottom of his back again. 'And down me legs.'

The penny dropped. 'Sciatica!' I said triumphantly.

Mr Porter nodded happily.

'Rest!' I said firmly. 'You need to rest.'

Mr Porter smiled but didn't move.

'Perhaps I ought to examine you?' I suggested. I looked around. The horsehair stuffed examination couch was piled high with books and boxes. And the room was so crowded with furniture and books that there was nowhere to move them. The only immediately available flat area was the desk. I moved the leather edged blotter that sat in the middle of it. 'Just lie down for a moment, please!' I told Mr Porter.

He looked at me as if I'd gone mad.

'I want to examine you,' I explained.

'But it's my back!' Mr Porter protested.

After some cajoling he finally agreed to lie down on the desk. When he'd walked into the room he'd looked fit enough but climbing up onto the desk seemed to cause him tremendous pain. He groaned and held his back and generally made it pretty clear that he wasn't fit for any form of physical activity. When I tried lifting his right leg to see how much the nerve was being irritated Mr Porter groaned and rolled about on the top of the desk.

'It seems pretty bad,' I agreed.

Eagerly and with more agility than he had shown when climbing up Mr Porter climbed down off the desk and sat down again. 'Can I have a note now, doctor?'

'A note?'

'For the sick.'

'Of course!' I agreed. I looked around but could see nothing suitable upon which I could write a note. And what was I supposed to write? I wished my medical school lecturers had spent less time teaching me about trypanosomiasis and more time teaching me how to write sick notes.

'I shan't be a moment, Mr Porter,' I promised, heading for the door.

I went straight through to the office where Miss Johnson was busy filling in forms. She looked up and stared at me over the top of her spectacles. 'Is there a problem, doctor?'

'I need to write a sick note,' I explained. I no longer felt quite so embarrassed about the extent of my ignorance. I'd long since gone way past the point of no return. 'But I'm not sure what to write or what to write it on...' My confession tailed off into silence.

'You'll find a book of national insurance certificates in the top left hand drawer of Dr Brownlow's desk,' Miss Johnson told me. 'Just fill in one of the certificates and hand it to the patient.'

I rushed back into Dr Brownlow's consulting room, found the certificate pad and scribbled out a sick note for a month. Mr Porter seemed quite pleased. When he'd gone I felt exhausted. Being a GP was harder work than I'd expected. I went back out to Miss Johnson's office.

'That seemed to go OK,' I said brightly. 'Satisfied customer I think.'

'Good!' said Miss Johnson flatly.

'I suppose it must be nearly time for coffee?'

Miss Johnson didn't say anything but stood up and walked past me to the door. She walked along the corridor and opened the door to the waiting room. Having followed I peered past her. It was absolutely packed. There were at least thirty people in there. There was so much steam rising from so many coats that it was almost impossible to see the far corner of the room at all. No one was speaking but everyone looked up expectantly when the door opened. Without saying a word Miss Johnson shut it again.

I followed her back to the office feeling slightly faint. Thirty. *Thirty!*

'It took you fifteen minutes to deal with Mr Porter,' said Miss Johnson. 'At the rate you're going you won't have finished the morning surgery before it's time to start the evening surgery. And I've already got three home visits booked in for you.'

I worked it out. If I spent fifteen minutes on each patient it would take me seven and a half hours to work my way through the patients who were waiting. And that was assuming that no more came. Miss Johnson was right - patients would be arriving for the evening surgery before I'd finished the morning surgery.

Feeling weak I hurried back into the surgery and pressed the buzzer again.

'It's my Johnnie!' said a very large woman, striding speedily into the room. 'He's got his tonsils again.' She didn't bother to sit down but just stood in front of me blocking out the light. She had several chins and wore a rubberised riding cape which still had small puddles of water collected in folds around her neck. The cape had a hood attached to it which she had pushed back.

I looked around for Johnnie but I couldn't see him. Unless he was hiding underneath the cape he wasn't anywhere to be seen.

'Where's Johnnie?' I asked. It seemed a reasonable question but I hadn't been at the job long.

'I'm not bringing him out in this!' exclaimed the large woman defiantly. 'Not with his tonsils.'

'No!' I agreed quickly. 'Of course not.'

'I'll just take a proscription for penicillin.'

'A proscription?'

'For his penicillin. Dr Brownlow always gives him penicillin.' She handed me a medical records envelope with John Albert Saunders-Lee written on it. A quick glance showed me that Johnnie had been given several lots of penicillin in recent months.

'He's been waiting to have them out,' said Mrs SaundersLee. 'He's been on the waiting list for months.'

I honestly didn't know what to do. Handing over drugs for a patient I hadn't seen didn't seem quite right. But Mrs Saunders-Lee was quite right; it was absurd to expect her to bring her young son out in this weather. And if she stayed at home and waited for me to visit him he'd probably be waiting for days. I decided to start young Johnnie on penicillin. I carefully wrote down the word 'Penicillin' on Johnnie's medical records. As I did so I remembered that I hadn't written anything down on Mr Porter's medical records. I made a mental note to scribble something down later.

'Fine!' I said to Mrs Saunders-Lee. 'That's OK then.'

'Where's the proscription?' Mrs Saunders-Lee folded her arms defiantly. Her coat crackled.

'I've written it down on here,' I explained. I held up her son's medical records for her to see.

'Yes!' she said. 'But where's the proscription?'

I still didn't really understand. In hospital when I'd wanted to prescribe a drug for a patient all I had to do was write down the details on the medical notes. A nurse would come round later and give the patients whatever drugs had been ordered. It may sound unbelievable but no one had explained to me that in general practice the doctor has to hand the patient a piece of paper to take to the chemist. Remember, I hadn't even seen inside a GP's surgery since I'd been a child.

'Excuse me for a moment,' I said to Mrs Saunders-Lee. I darted out and found Miss Johnson again.

'Mrs Saunders-Lee wants a proscription for her son,' I explained. 'What do I do?'

Miss Johnson looked at me very suspiciously. 'Are you sure you're a doctor?'

'Absolutely!' I said indignantly.

Miss Johnson explained that what Mrs Saunders-Lee wanted was a prescription and that I would find a whole pad of virgin prescription forms in the same drawer in which I'd found the sick notes.

'Just write out the instructions for the chemist on the form and hand it over to the patient,' explained Miss Johnson, rather wearily.

'Thanks!' I said. I started to head back towards the surgery but stopped and turned. 'Are there any more forms I need to know about?'

Miss Johnson sighed and glanced towards her own desk. 'I once filled in 47 different types of form in a single day', she said. 'But you've discovered the two most important.'

I thanked her, went back into Dr Brownlow's consulting room and wrote out a prescription for Johnnie Saunders-Lee. I handed the prescription over to his mother.

'While I'm here,' said his mother, studying the prescription carefully before stuffing it into some deep, dark recess beneath her cape. 'I'd like a check-up. I'm going to see my sister in Carlisle next month and I want to make sure I'm all right before I go.'

* * *

Somehow I struggled through the morning surgery and eventually Miss Johnson came in to tell me that there were no patients left to see.

'Thirty!' I said proudly. 'I must have speeded up a bit.'

'Seventeen of them gave up and went home,' Miss Johnson explained.

'I managed to keep the home visits down to three,' she added handing me three medical record envelopes.

'Thank you.'

'I'd like to have you back in time for the evening surgery,' she explained drily. 'Now that word's got out that you've started there'll be a lot here.'

'Oh!' I said, blushing lightly. I must have looked rather pleased with myself.

'They'll know you're a soft touch,' explained Miss Johnson quickly. 'They'll want to take advantage of you before you learn the ropes.' She smiled sweetly at me. 'Will you be going back to the Duck and Puddle for your lunch before you start on your visits?'

I looked at my watch. It was quarter to two. 'I am a bit hungry. I'll just pop back for a quick bite.'

'Just as long as I know,' said Miss Johnson. 'In case anyone needs you.'

I suddenly realised that from now on I wasn't going to be allowed to go anywhere without telling Miss Johnson or the local telephone operator where they could find me.

I went outside to where I'd left the Humber. It was still pouring with rain. As I got in and bent down to reconnect the wires to start the engine I heard someone tapping on the side window. I looked up and tried to wind down the window. It moved about an inch before it got stuck.

'Sorry to bother you, doctor,' said a stern-faced man whom I half recognised. 'But I'd be grateful if you'd park your car a little further away.' He pointed to a muddy area behind the stables. The man was wearing a voluminous waterproof jacket and a pair of waterproof trousers.

'Certainly! I'm sorry,' I said, assuming that I must have parked in someone's way.

'It's the oil, doctor,' explained the stern-faced man, almost apologetically. He looked down. I opened my door and looked down. I could see a large patch of oil spreading out from underneath the car.

'Sorry!' I said again. Then I remembered where I'd seen the man before. It was Bradshaw - Dr Brownlow's butler.

I closed my door, heard a click as the window winder fell off onto the floor and bent down to reconnect the wires which would start the engine. Then, very slowly, I drove back to the Duck and Puddle for lunch. The absence of windscreen wipers and my inability to wind down my window so that I could look out meant that I had to lean forwards all the time and keep my nose pressed against the windscreen in order to see where I was going. Inevitably, this meant that the windscreen soon steamed up and by the time I reached the pub I could see almost nothing.

Mrs Parsons had, she told me with apparently genuine regret, sold my hot lunch to a commercial traveller from Bristol, but she made me a huge plateful of sandwiches. They were unlike any sandwiches I'd ever eaten before. The bread was soft and freshly baked. Inside it was doughy and moist and outside it was crisp. The ham was home cured and cut in half inch thick slices. The cheese was cheddar and tasted of cheese instead of plastic. And the chicken breast was succulent and tasty.

I ordered a pint of best bitter to help wash it all down and by the time I'd finished I felt truly refreshed and no longer in the slightest bit envious of the commercial traveller from Bristol. When I looked at my watch it was twenty to three. I had, I thought, plenty of time to do the home visits before the evening surgery started.

'Where is the nearest petrol station?' I asked Frank Parsons, after I'd drained the last inch of beer from my glass. As I'd driven back to the pub I'd noticed that the petrol gauge in the Humber was reading close to zero.

Frank drew in his breath and shook his head in that way people have when they know that they're about to give you bad news. 'That'll mean a trip to Combe Martin,' he announced, as though I'd asked him where I could buy rocket fuel. He told me to take the main Barnstaple road to Blackmoor Gate, to turn left and to follow the main holiday route into Combe Martin. 'There's a garage on the outskirts of the village,' he told me. 'By the way,' he added, 'judging by the amount of oil you left outside our front door this morning you might need some oil as well.'

* * *

'Do you think I ought to have it serviced?' I asked the petrol station attendant when he'd filled the tank with petrol and the engine with oil.

He looked puzzled. 'What's up with it?'

'Nothing much,' I said. 'Well, the windscreen wipers don't work - there aren't any to be honest - and I have to start it by twisting two bits of wire together but it seems to go all right.'

'So what do you want us to do with it?'

He had me there. 'I'm not sure,' I admitted. 'But don't you do routine servicing? Check the tyres and brakes? Stuff like that?'

He put the petrol pump back into its holster and walked round the car. It was still raining and the garage's narrow canopy provided inadequate protection against the driving rain. He kicked the front nearside tyre with the toe of his boot and scratched his head. 'You ain't got no tax disc,' he pointed out.

I followed his gaze to the corner of the windscreen where most cars carry a tax disc. Mine had none.

'I've only just bought it,' I said. 'I never thought about tax.' As I spoke I realised that I hadn't arranged any insurance either. I was beginning to think that I'd spent too long working in hospital where I didn't have to worry about any of life's unpleasant realities.

'The tyres are bald,' he added.

I bent down. There still seemed to be some tread on them.

'They aren't completely bald,' I protested.

The garage attendant shrugged. 'I've seen worse,' he admitted.

'Do you have any windscreen wipers you can sell me?'

'For this?'

I nodded.

He shook his head. 'I've got some wipers on a Ford Consul that you can have.'

'Will they fit?'

'Maybe.'

'Will you try?'

He turned away and walked over to a car wreck that was parked at one side of the garage. It was only vaguely recognisable as a Ford Consul. He reached over and tore off both windscreen wipers with his bare hands and then walked back with them.

'You want me to fit them?'

'Yes, please.'

The wipers would not fit, of course. But the garage attendant wasn't about to be put off by such a trivial difficulty. He pulled a length of wire out of his overall pocket and used it to bind the windscreen wipers to the stumps that were still attached to my Humber. He used a pair of pliers which he took from another overall pocket to twist the wire around the wipers securely.

'Try that.'

I tried it. To my astonishment it worked. It didn't look pretty and it didn't work perfectly but it was much, much better than having no windscreen wipers at all. I paid him for the wiper blades and the petrol and oil and set off to do my home visits.

Finding people in hospital is easy. Even if you don't know which ward they are on you can still find them within seconds by ringing up the administrators, who keep comprehensive files showing where all their patients are. It's quite rare for a hospital actually to lose a patient.

Finding people in a town is relatively easy. Most streets have names and most houses have numbers. With the aid of a good, local street map it is fairly easy to find your way around. And even if you do manage to get lost you can nearly always find someone prepared to give you directions.

But finding people in the country is not easy. The difficulty is increased when you're a stranger, when it's raining, when your car windows are steamed up and when you're in a hurry.

The first patient on my list was Keith Harper and he was, according to his medical records, six years old. His address was Mulberry Cottage, Bilbury.

Finding Mulberry Cottage wasn't made any easier by the fact that very few houses in the village had their names on them. There were no street signs and no house names for the simple reason that everyone in the village knew where everyone else lived. Buying and erecting expensive metal or wood name plates would, for them, have been a waste of money. The very few name boards that did exist had been allowed to fade, get dirty or become so overgrown with brambles that they were impossible to read.

After searching for an hour I ran out of petrol. The Humber stuttered, coughed and then died ingloriously in a lane so narrow that I couldn't open the doors to get out. When I checked the petrol gauge and saw it registering 'zero' I couldn't believe my eyes. I'd put ten gallons of petrol into the car and had done no more than thirty miles. Racing cars and jet aircraft probably do more to the gallon.

I was rescued by the arrival of a tractor which appeared behind me.

Even though I couldn't get out of the car I managed to squeeze my head out of the passenger window (mine didn't open) far enough to shout to the driver to tell him what had happened and to ask him to give me a push out of the lane.

'You want the garage?'

'Yes!'

I took off the handbrake and allowed the tractor to push me out of the lane towards the main road from Blackmoor Gate to Combe Martin. There, on a slight downwards incline, the tractor stopped. In my mirror I saw the driver jump down onto the road and walk forwards towards me. I pulled on the handbrake. 'I'm turning right here,' he said. 'But from now on it's all downhill.'

I thanked him, let off the handbrake and coasted down the hill to the garage. There I had the tank filled and I got the attendant to lend me three spare cans, filled with petrol, which I stowed in the boot.

'I don't suppose you know where Mulberry Cottage is, do you?' I asked the attendant as I paid him. 'It's in Bilbury.'

He told me. I'd passed it at least half a dozen times. It was a hundred yards from the Duck and Puddle.

I drove back, parked and knocked on the door of Mulberry Cottage.

A woman in her early thirties answered the door. She was wearing a housecoat covered in pink flowers and had her hair wrapped up in a matching pink scarf.

'Mrs Harper?'

She shook her head.

'Does Mrs Harper live here?' Another shake of the head.

'This is Mulberry Cottage?' A nod.

'I'm looking for Keith Harper,' I explained. 'He's six.'

'He's not here.'

'I'm the doctor,' I said. 'I'm told that Keith is poorly.'

'There's no one in.'

'Do you know where they are?'

'Mr Harper is at work.'

'Do you know where Keith is?'

'He doesn't live here.'

'Do you know where he does live?' It was hard work.

'He lives with his mother.'

'Doesn't his mother live here anymore?'

'No. They're separated.'

'Do you know where she lives?'

'Yes.'

'Could you tell me, please? Someone asked for me to call and see Keith. He's not very well.'

The woman folded her arms underneath her bosom and held her head to one side to stop the plume of smoke from her cigarette interfering with her view of me. 'You're a doctor?' It was my turn to nod.

'You're a bit young, aren't you?'

'I've just started work.'

'With Dr Brownlow?'

I nodded again. I was beginning to get the hang of the conversation.

'And you want young Keith?'

Another nod from me.

'They've split up.'

'Yes. You told me.'

'I work for him;'

'Mr Harper?'

'I wouldn't be here if I worked for her, would I?'

'It could be urgent,' I told her. 'I'd be grateful...'

'On the Combe Martin road,' she said. 'Called 'White Larches'.' A half inch length of ash fell from her cigarette and broke up on her apron. She brushed it away. 'She's renting.'

'Is it easy to find?'

'If you know where it is.'

'I don't know the area very well.'

'Down towards Combe Martin.'

'Is it anywhere near the petrol station?'

'If you get to the petrol station you've passed it.'

I thanked her, got back into the Humber and drove back towards Combe Martin.

To my surprise and relief I found the cottage without too much difficulty. Its whitewashed walls bordered the edge of the road and it had a large sign outside which read 'White Larches – Bed and Breakfast'.

I parked in a lay-by fifty yards down the road, took my black bag and went back to the cottage. There was no bell so I knocked on the front door with my bare knuckles. It was still raining and I was by now soaked to the skin.

'Yes?' I heard someone shout. I looked up. A woman's head was peering out of a window directly above me.

‘I’m sorry, we aren’t taking any holiday-makers,’ she said before I could say anything. ‘My little boy isn’t well.’

‘I know,’ I shouted back. ‘That’s why I’m here. I’m the doctor. I’ve come for Dr Brownlow.’

‘Dr Brownlow isn’t here. I’m still waiting for him to arrive.’

‘No. I mean I’ve come in place of Dr Brownlow.’

‘Why hasn’t Dr Brownlow come?’

‘I’m his assistant.’

The head looked unhappy.

I swallowed hard. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘But Dr Brownlow isn’t available today.’

There was a loud sigh. ‘I suppose you’ll have to do then.’ The head disappeared. ‘The door’s open.’ I heard it shout.

I opened the front door and looked into the cottage. The front door led straight into the one large room that served both as a dining room and a lounge. The furniture was fairly new and cheap and although it was clean it was battered. It looked as though it had all been bought second hand in a job lot at a house auction. At the far side of the room one door led into a small, neat kitchen while another door, half open, revealed the beginning of a narrow staircase. Tentatively, I stepped into the room. It felt slightly strange to be walking into a stranger’s home. Clutching my black bag I stood there, just inside the door, for a few moments. I’ve always been rather shy and I suddenly felt waves of terrible anxiety sweeping over me. I deliberately left the door open behind me because I felt that at any moment I would need to make a run for it.

‘Are you coming up?’ shouted a voice from upstairs.

I really did want to run away. I wasn’t ready for any of this. What was up there? What was wrong with Keith? Suddenly the enormity of my responsibility loomed large in my mind. This was, I decided, even more terrifying than conducting a surgery. There I did at least have Miss Johnson to help me. Here I was utterly, completely and totally alone.

At last I managed to find the strength to move my legs towards the staircase. As I started to climb the narrow steps I looked up and saw Mrs Harper peering down at me. She was about thirty, was wearing a dark purple jumper, purple corduroy jeans and pale blue slippers and had long, dark brown hair drawn back into a ponytail. She looked worried.

When I got to the top of the stairs she led me into a small bedroom which contained a bed and a stripped pine chest of drawers. There wasn’t room for any more furniture. Several colourful paper mobiles hung from the ceiling and a toy garage complete with a dozen metal toy cars took up most of the available floor space. A small, unhappy looking boy lay in the bed.

‘Watch where you put your feet,’ said Mrs Harper. ‘There are toy cars everywhere,’ she explained. ‘I keep falling over them.’ She tried to smile but her eyes still looked worried.

‘What’s wrong with him?’ I asked.

Mrs Harper looked at me hard. ‘I was hoping you’d tell me that,’ she said, rather sharply I thought. I winced and cursed myself. (I should have learnt from that but I never did. I asked the same question and got the same answer ten times a day, every day for years.)

I tried again. ‘What symptoms does he have?’

‘He’s been under the weather since yesterday,’ said Mrs Harper. ‘I thought he was putting it on but he was due to go to a party last night and he didn’t want to go so I knew he must be poorly.’

I sat on the edge of Keith’s bed, picked up his wrist and took his pulse. He smiled at me rather nervously and I smiled back at him. I tried not to look nervous though I’m not sure that I succeeded. His pulse was a little fast and he looked pale and rather sweaty. I pulled back the bedclothes and asked him to unfasten his pyjama jacket. I was hoping to spot a rash but there was nothing abnormal to see.

‘How’s his appetite?’ I asked his mother.

‘He hasn’t eaten much.’

‘Has he been sick?’

‘No.’

‘Any diarrhoea?’

‘I don’t know. Have you had any diarrhoea, Keith?’

Keith clearly didn’t know what we were talking about. Clumsily I tried to ask the same question in nursery language.

He went red and shook his head furiously.

I listened to his heart and lungs, checked his glands and looked into his throat and ears. I could find nothing at all wrong with him apart from the fact that he clearly didn’t look very well.

‘I don’t know what it is,’ I said at last.

‘When will Dr Brownlow be back?’ asked Mrs Harper.

It was my turn to go red. ‘I’m not sure,’ I said. ‘I don’t think there’s anything much we can do today. I’ll call in again tomorrow and have another look at him.’

‘Aren’t you going to give him anything?’

‘I can’t think of anything useful that I can give him,’ I confessed. ‘I don’t want to prescribe a drug until I know what’s wrong with him.’

Mrs Harper sighed rather loudly.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. I could feel my face burning. I put my stethoscope back into my bag, made my way back down the narrow staircase and left. I had intended to ask Mrs Harper to give me directions of how to find the next house I had to visit but I didn’t dare display any more ignorance. What little confidence I had when I’d entered the ‘White Larches’ had now entirely disappeared. Outside it was, inevitably, still raining heavily. I pulled my collar up and hurried back to the car.

* * *

CHAPTER THREE

I arrived back at Dr Brownlow's surgery at fifteen minutes to six and hurried in to find Miss Johnson sitting in her office filling in forms.

'Are there many people waiting?' I asked her, breathlessly.

'Twenty. And they're getting rather restless.'

'I'm sorry I'm late!' I apologised. 'I got a bit lost.'

'Lost? But you only had three visits.'

'I know. I'm sorry.' I hurried off to get myself settled down behind my desk. As I looked around the by now almost familiar surroundings I felt a strong spasm of confidence breaking through. After all I now knew where the buzzer was and I knew how to sign someone off on the sick and how to write out a prescription. I felt that I'd learnt a lot.

To my surprise the evening surgery went quite smoothly. When I finished, at twenty minutes past eight, Miss Johnson told me that Dr Brownlow wanted to have a few words with me before I left. I found him in his dining room. He was just finishing his dinner. A huge round of stilton cheese stood in the middle of the table and a bottle of 1948 Taylor's port stood beside it.

'How did it all go?' he asked me. 'Good first day?' He told Bradshaw, now dressed in his butler's uniform again, to bring another glass and an extra plate.

I told him that I felt as though I'd done a year's work in a day. 'How do you cope?' I asked him. 'How does any GP cope without going insane?'

Dr Brownlow just smiled. 'Did Miss Johnson look after you?'

'Very well!' I said. 'I couldn't have managed without her. Though I'm afraid I don't think I impressed her very much,' I added.

'Don't you believe it!' said Dr Brownlow. 'She thinks you're wonderful. She'll be telling you about her feet before you know where you are. When she tells you about her feet you'll know you've got it cracked.'

'I've got a thousand questions to ask you,' I told him. 'I don't know where to start.' Bradshaw had brought another glass and a plate. Dr Brownlow poured me a glass of port and dug out a spoonful of cheese. I'd never seen anyone serve stilton with a spoon before.

It tasted good. So did the port. It was like drinking velvet.

Suddenly I remembered Mrs Harper. I asked Dr Brownlow if she'd rung him.

He snorted and refilled his glass.

'I'm afraid she didn't seem very pleased with me,' I said. 'I couldn't diagnose what was wrong with her son. I think she'd like you to see him.'

'She said that you'd told her that you'd go back in to see him again tomorrow?'

I nodded.

'I told her that you're an expert in children's diseases,' said Dr Brownlow with a twinkle in his eye. 'And that if you couldn't make a diagnosis then I certainly wouldn't be able to.' He picked up a lump of stilton from his plate and popped it into his mouth. 'There are always people who'll try to play one doctor off against another,' he told me. 'But I'm not having any of that.'

I realised that Dr Brownlow was protecting me and I felt grateful.

'Do you ever see a patient and find it difficult to know what's wrong with them?' I asked him.

'At least fifty per cent of the time I never know what's wrong with people,' admitted Dr Brownlow. 'Any doctor who says he can always make a diagnosis is either a liar or a fool.'

'Thanks!' I said quietly. He'd made me feel a lot better. I caught sight of a grandfather clock on the far side of the room. 'I'd better get back to the Duck and Puddle,' I told him. 'I think Miss Johnson has already arranged for any emergency calls to be put through to me there.'

Dr Brownlow nodded. 'Ring me if you need me,' he said suddenly and unexpectedly. 'I won't ever interfere but I'll always help you if I can.'

I'd started to move away from the table but I stopped for an instant, looked at him and thanked him. Then I moved towards the door. I was nearly there when Dr Brownlow spoke again.

'I know I said I wouldn't interfere,' he said. 'But I've just remembered. I already have.'

I waited.

'Frank Porter,' said Dr Brownlow. 'You signed him off sick.' I remembered. He'd been my first patient. He'd had a bad back.

'He's my bloody gardener!' said Dr Brownlow. 'He's had a bad back since he was a kid. He's always trying that one when the weather's a bit miserable.'

‘Oh,’ I said, weakly.

‘He’ll be back at work tomorrow,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘I made him tear up that sick note you gave him. My rhododendrons need looking after.’

I left him pouring himself another glass of port. The strange thing was that although he was alone in a huge dining room he didn’t seem alone at all. He was one of the first people I’d ever met who seemed totally self contained.

* * *

CHAPTER FOUR

Mrs Parsons made me gammon, egg and chips for supper and served it in the deserted lounge bar. 'The locals never drink in here,' she confessed. 'The beer is too expensive.'

After supper I had a bath and then retired, exhausted, to bed. My bedroom at the Duck and Puddle didn't have a telephone but there was a telephone in the landlord's bedroom and Mrs Parsons had agreed to answer it and to fetch me if there were any calls during the night. I seemed to have been asleep for no more than a minute when I felt someone shaking my shoulder. I turned and found myself staring into the beam of a powerful torch. I reached up, found the long light cord that dangled above my bed and pulled it. I rubbed my eyes as the light came on.

'Sorry to have to wake you,' whispered Mrs Parsons. 'But there's a call for you. It's Mrs Francis.' My landlady was wearing a long, pink, flannelette nightgown with a paisley patterned dressing gown on top of it. The dressing gown was tied tightly at the front but it only came down to her knees and two foot of nightdress hung down below it. She had three curlers in the front of her hair and the absence of make-up gave her a pale, ghostly look.

I flung back the bedclothes only to remember, too late, that, as usual, I hadn't been wearing any pyjamas when I'd got into bed. I swiftly picked up a pillow and used it to preserve what was left of my professional dignity. It's very difficult to be dignified in the nude.

'I'll wait for you outside on the landing,' said Mrs Parsons quietly.

I quickly pulled on the same clothes that I'd been wearing the day before.

'Ssshhhh!' said Mrs Parsons, when I joined her on the landing a few moments later. She put a finger against her lips. 'Frank is still asleep!' she whispered. 'He hates being woken up.'

I nodded and she led the way to their bedroom. I tiptoed behind her. Frank Parsons was fast asleep and snoring loudly. I picked up the telephone.

'Hello?' I whispered. 'What can I do for you?'

'Who's that?' asked the voice at the other end. 'I'm trying to get hold of Dr Brownlow.'

I explained.

'It's my husband,' said Mrs Francis. 'I'm not happy with the look of him.'

'Would you like me to come round?'

She said she would so I got her to give me instructions on how to get there, put the telephone down, thanked Mrs Parsons and then went back to my room to get my coat and my black bag.

Two minutes later I was in my car, wiping the mist off the inside of the windscreen. It was still raining. To my delight the car started immediately when I twisted the two pieces of wire underneath the dashboard together.

I left the Duck and Puddle with an impressive, rubber-wasting squeal. My adrenalin was flowing for this was my very first emergency visit as a general practitioner.

Mr and Mrs Francis lived in a large house on the outskirts of the village and Mrs Francis had given me precise instructions on how to find it but I had nevertheless asked her to turn some lights on in the hope that this would help me find the house more easily. In my innocence I'd hoped that I'd be able to home in on the lights like a moth fluttering towards a candle. Being new to general practice I wasn't yet aware of the extraordinary fact that even in the country there are lights burning in numerous houses well after midnight.

Fortunately, the instructions I'd been given proved accurate and it took me no more than fifteen minutes to get to the Francis's home which turned out to be an old rectory, built in the nineteenth century. The English countryside is littered with large Victorian rectories. Clergymen a century or so ago must have been very wealthy and must have had very large families. I parked outside the front door and rattled the door knocker.

'Come in, doctor!' whispered Mrs Francis. People always whisper late at night, even in their own homes. 'Do you know,' she said, 'I thought that your wife sounded just like Gilly Parsons at the Duck and Puddle.'

'I'm not married,' I told her, following her up the stairs to the master bedroom. 'That was Mrs Parsons.'

Mrs Francis stopped on the step above me and turned round. 'You were at the Duck?' she said. She obviously hadn't realised that her call had been automatically transferred from Dr Brownlow's number.

I admitted that I had, indeed, been in the pub when we'd first spoken.

'It seemed to take quite a time for you to get to the telephone.'

'Mrs Parsons had to wake me,' I explained.

'Oh!' said Mrs Francis, who looked rather more startled than seemed entirely reasonable under the circumstances.

She carried on upstairs and I followed her into the bedroom. Her husband was lying flat on his back, coughing and wheezing. He looked miserable. I put my black bag down, sat down on the edge of the bed and felt for his pulse. I put my stethoscope down on the bed, took out my pocket torch, aimed it down his throat and asked Mr Francis to say: 'Aaaaarrhhh.' It didn't take long to discover that Mr Francis was suffering from asthma. I was about to tell him this when he looked up at me, wheezed, and, with some difficulty, told me that he had asthma and that he had suffered from it for most of his life.

'Right!' I agreed. I rummaged around in my bag and found a glass phial of aminophylline.

'Dr Brownlow usually gives me aminophylline,' wheezed Mr Francis noisily.

'Does that help?' I asked him.

He nodded.

I took the aminophylline out of my bag, filled a syringe with the fluid and started to roll up his pyjama sleeve.

Mr Francis grasped my wrist and shook his head furiously. I looked at him, stopped and waited.

'Dr Brownlow usually puts it into the other arm,' wheezed Mr Francis.

I rolled up the other pyjama sleeve and injected the aminophylline. Mr Francis's breathing started to improve almost immediately.

'Where are you going now, doctor?' asked Mrs Francis who'd been standing silently at the bottom of the bed.

'Back to the Duck and Puddle,' I said.

'Oh!' said Mrs Francis, surprised. She recovered quickly, however. 'Give my love to Gilly. And tell her not to forget the jam making competition.'

I said I would.

On my way back to the pub the Humber broke down.

* * *

I was asleep when Mrs Parsons came into my room the following morning but I woke when she put a cup of tea down on the bedside table. She was still wearing her night clothes but the curlers had gone. 'It's half past seven,' she announced, drawing back the curtains. 'Dr Brownlow did say that I wasn't to let you oversleep.'

It was still raining and a harsh wind was driving the rain hard against the bedroom window.

I yawned, stretched, rubbed my eyes and did all the other things I do when I'm woken up. My bed was warm and soft and I felt tired and very comfortable.

'Were you late getting in last night?'

I nodded. 'It was after four o'clock. I had to get the garage in Combe Martin to come out. Something to do with the rotor arm.'

'How was Mr Francis?'

'I think he was OK when I left,' I replied. 'Mrs Francis sent you her best wishes and told me to tell you not to forget about the jam making competition.'

'Bless her!' said Mrs Parsons. 'She's got a heart of gold.' She paused and I could tell that the compliment was about to be qualified. 'Though she does love to gossip.' She stood at the end of the bed with her arms folded across her chest and smiled at me. 'I expect the reason she told you to remind me about the jam making competition was because she wants to make sure I'm there so that she can quiz me about you.'

I must have looked alarmed.

'Don't worry!' Mrs Parsons assured me. 'I won't tell her anything too incriminating. Besides you're lucky. Everyone in the village is talking about Mike Trickle. He's just moved into Bilbury Grange.'

'Mike Trickle?'

'The man off the television,' explained Mrs Parsons. 'You must have seen him.'

I hadn't. Long hospital hours meant that for several years I hadn't had much free time. The free time I'd had I'd spent sleeping rather than watching television.

Mrs Parsons seemed a little disappointed by my ignorance. 'Well, he's very famous anyway,' she assured me. 'He has his own chat show and comperes a quiz programme too.'

'What's he doing in Bilbury? It's a long way from London.'

'Oh, I don't expect he's going to live here all the time,' said Mrs Parsons. 'It'll be just a holiday home for weekends and such like.' She glanced at the small clock on my bedside table. 'Come on!' she said suddenly. 'There isn't time for chatting. You've got to get up and off to the surgery. And I've got to get down and see how the new girl is doing.'

'New girl?'

'Patsy,' explained Mrs Parsons. 'She's one of the girls from the Kennett farm. She should have your bacon under the grill by now.'

Mrs Parsons was right. As I hurriedly shaved and then dressed the smell of bacon cooking wafted upstairs and helped give me the strength to keep going. I felt exhausted not just because I hadn't had much sleep but because of the endless series of problems I'd encountered. When I'd taken the job I had, I confess, rather thought that life as a country GP would be something of a leisurely business. I'd seen myself pottering about the countryside in an open topped Bentley, stopping here to pick up a brace of pheasant, there to accept a gift of a freshly caught trout. I hadn't realised that it would be such hard work. I couldn't help wondering if it was ever going to get any easier.

Still, not everything was bad and life at the Duck and Puddle did have its compensations. Breakfast was one of them. It was so good that I was almost late again. As I started my third cup of coffee I glanced at my watch and discovered that it was twenty to nine. I put down the cup, ran upstairs to collect my coat and bag and left the pub on the run.

'Good morning, doctor!' said Miss Johnson with a wry smile as I raced past her office. I looked in as I went past and saw with some relief that the clock on her desk said just two minutes to nine. 'Mrs Harper's been on the phone already,' said Miss Johnson following me into the surgery. 'She wants to make sure that you haven't forgotten that you said you'd go back and see her son again.'

'I haven't forgotten!' I promised. 'How many patients are there in the waiting room?'

'There were a dozen there at half past eight,' said Miss Johnson. 'I haven't counted since then.' She sighed. 'I sometimes wonder where all these ill people come from. Living in the country is supposed to be healthy but I think that's a myth.' She shuffled a pile of forms that she was holding. 'Have you heard that Mike Trickle has bought a house in the village?'

When I said I had she looked a little disappointed.

* * *

My first patient that day was a woman in her mid-twenties. She had shoulder length light brown hair, lightly freckled cheeks and astonishingly blue eyes. She took off her raincoat and draped it over the back of the chair before she sat down. She wore a pink cardigan with buttons all the way down the front and a loose red velvet skirt. She leant across the desk and handed me her medical records envelope.

'Miss Thwaites?' I said, taking the notes from her and reading the name printed across the top.

She nodded. 'Anne.'

'What's the problem?'

'I want to lose some weight.' She looked down. 'I've put an awful lot of weight on in the last few months. It's really depressing.'

'Have you changed your diet at all?' She shook her head.

'Exercise habits haven't changed?'

'No.'

'Have you tried dieting?'

'I tried a diet I found in a woman's magazine,' she told me. 'The grape and banana diet.'

'Did it work?'

She shook her head. 'I hate grapes and bananas give me indigestion so I hardly ate anything and got very hungry the first day.'

'Do you know how much you weigh?'

'According to the scales in the chemists I'm nearly eleven stones,' she said, and blushed. 'That's terrible isn't it?'

'How tall are you?'

'Five foot five. I was less than ten stones this time last year and I thought that was bad enough.'

'You haven't noticed anything else?' She looked puzzled. 'Like what?'

'Any other symptoms?' I wanted to make sure that there was no strange hormonal explanation for her increase in weight.

Miss Thwaites shook her head. 'Oh, no! I feel fine. In fact I don't think I've ever felt so healthy.'

'Right!' I said, with far more confidence than I felt.

No one had ever taught me anything about dieting. I had studied at medical school for six years but no one had ever so much as told me how many calories there are in a slice of bread. 'Just a moment,' I said. 'I'll see if we've got some diet sheets.' I rushed out to Miss Johnson's office.

'Diet sheets?' she said. 'Yes. I think there are some around here somewhere. Dr Brownlow usually just tells them to eat less but I think one of the drug company representatives did leave a pile of diet sheets a couple of years ago.' She rummaged around in a drawer that was packed with leaflets, booklets and drug samples. 'Here you are!' she said gleefully. She held up half a dozen crumpled diet sheets. 'How many do you want?'

I took two so that I'd have one spare.

'Does Dr Brownlow have any weighing scales?' I asked Miss Johnson, before I left.

'Oh yes!' she said.

'Do you know where they are?'

'Frank's got them for his vegetables.'

I must have looked puzzled.

'Frank the gardener,' explained Miss Johnson. 'He uses the scales to weigh the best produce.'

I took the diet sheet back to Miss Thwaites and suggested that she weigh herself again next time she was in Barnstaple.

'Come back and let me know how it goes,' I said.

* * *

The rest of the morning went fairly smoothly and at the end of it I congratulated myself. Maybe being a family doctor wasn't going to be all that difficult after all. I looked at my watch. It was only twelve o'clock. Shall we have a cup of coffee?' I asked Miss Johnson.

'Certainly!' she said, rather kindly. 'And I'll bring you a biscuit,' she promised.

While she was away getting the biscuits I busied myself reading some of the morning's mail. I was interrupted by a visitor. It was Mrs Wilson, the district nurse with whom I'd shared the taxi ride from Barnstaple station. She was wearing the same blue coat and she had the same small, blue hat perched on the back of her head.

'How are you settling down?' she asked me, sitting down.

'Quite a week for our village!' she said, before I could answer.

'Two of you coming in one week.'

'Two of us?'

'You and Mike Trickle,' explained the district nurse. 'Don't tell me that you hadn't heard?'

'Oh yes,' I said weakly. 'He's off the television isn't he?'

'Off the television!' said Mrs Wilson. 'He *is* the television in our house. My Len thinks he's wonderful.'

'Len?'

'My husband,' explained Mrs Wilson. 'He's a policeman.'

'That's handy,' I said. I meant nothing by the comment but it seemed to touch a raw nerve as far as Mrs Wilson was concerned.

'Handy!' she said. 'He does the washing up and the ironing but he couldn't put a shelf up if his life depended on it.'

'Still,' I said, 'it's nice that he does the washing and the ironing.'

'Only because he likes to wear my pinny,' said Mrs Wilson. I thought she was being cryptic or humorous. I was to discover that she was merely being incautious.

Just then Miss Johnson reappeared with a small wooden tray upon which sat a cup of white, milky coffee and a plate full of biscuits.

I thanked her. I did wonder whether I ought to offer Mrs Wilson a cup of tea but Miss Johnson had gone before I had time to say anything.

'Would you like a biscuit, Mrs Wilson?' I said, offering her the plate.

She took two. 'Less of the Mrs Wilson,' she said. 'It's Kay to you.' She winked at me. 'Especially after our ride in Pete Marshall's taxi.'

I studied the skin that was forming on the coffee that Miss Johnson had brought in. I wondered what on earth I was going to do with it. I certainly couldn't drink it.

'Don't you like it milky?' asked Mrs Wilson.

'Not really,' I admitted. 'How did you know?'

Mrs Wilson laughed. 'The look on your face!' she said. 'You'll have to become a better poker player if you're going to survive in general practice.' She reached across and took the cup of coffee off the tray and put it down on the desk in front of her. 'Do you want any of those garibaldis?'

'Garibaldis?'

'The biscuits with the dead flies in them.'

I looked down. 'Help yourself.'

'So,' she said, as she munched away at one of the biscuits, 'you've struck out with Mrs Harper already?'

I blushed. 'Oh. You heard?'

'Don't worry,' she said. 'There isn't much that goes on around here that I don't get to hear about.' She took a sip from the coffee. 'Still, don't worry yourself too much.'

'She and her husband are divorced I believe,' I said, feeling that I ought to contribute something to the conversation.

'Separated,' Mrs Wilson corrected me. 'She couldn't stand his carrying on.' She lifted the skin off the coffee and draped it over the edge of the saucer. 'He was never very subtle,' she said. 'He had affairs with the last two barmaids at the Duck and Puddle.' She sniffed and took the last biscuit. 'Still,' she said, 'they were no better than they looked.'

'Talking of Mrs Harper, I suppose I ought to get on and do my visits,' I said. 'I promised her that I'd call in again this morning.'

'When are you going to come and see us then?' she asked, her mouth full of biscuit.

'That's very kind of you,' I said. 'But...'

'They can put your calls through to us if old Brownlow has got you doing all his emergency work,' said Mrs Wilson.

'What are you doing tonight?'

'I don't think...'

'Good!' said Mrs Wilson. 'Don't forget to tell Gilly at the Duck and Puddle that you're having dinner with me. I'll make us something special.' She drained the rest of the coffee, took a small piece of skin from her tongue, smiled at me, winked and left.

* * *

Keith Harper was worse. He now had really bad diarrhoea and his mother still wasn't happy.

'I asked Dr Brownlow to come and see him.' she told me as I examined Keith's chest again. He was pale, his heart was beating rapidly and his eyes had a glassy look. I nodded.

'He said you're in charge,' said Mrs Harper.

'I'll do the best I can,' I promised. My store of confidence was draining away again. I gave up trying to find something wrong with Keith's chest and rummaged around in my black bag. 'I'd like to test your urine,' I told Keith. 'Do you think you could get to the toilet?'

It wasn't easy but he managed it. I'd done the test in despair more than hope. I hadn't expected to find anything. But the test showed that Keith's urine was loaded with sugar.

'Are there any cases of diabetes in the family?' I asked Mrs Harper.

She thought for a moment and then shook her head. 'Not that I can think of.' She looked startled. 'Is that what it is? Is Keith a diabetic?'

'No!' I said. 'Not necessarily. But he does have some sugar in his urine.'

'A lot?'

'Quite a lot,' I confessed. 'I'd like to get him into hospital for some tests.'

'Shall I go and call an ambulance?' demanded Mrs Harper, beginning to panic. 'What shall I pack for him? Will they let me stay with him? What will I do about the cats?' The questions poured out.

'Have you got a telephone?' I asked her.

She shook her head. 'There's a public call box in Combe Martin.'

I thought quickly. 'I'll go back to the surgery,' I said. 'I need to ring the hospital first to arrange for Keith to be admitted. It'll only take me a few minutes. You get a small case ready for Keith – pyjamas, soap bag, that sort of thing – and an ambulance will be here to pick him up. It won't be here for half an hour so you've got plenty of time.'

'Is he going to be all right?' There were tears in Mrs Harper's eyes.

'Yes.' I told her, with far more certainty than I felt. I drove back to the surgery as fast as I dared. The poor old Humber was developing more strange new rattles with every mile it travelled.

* * *

As a young, very junior hospital doctor I had answered calls from general practitioners many times and, like all young, inexperienced hospital doctors, I'd treated such telephone calls with some disdain.

Most hospitals are short of beds and junior doctors who do the admitting are expected to be selective. Senior consultants don't like their beds to be blocked by elderly, infirm or chronically ill patients. They prefer interesting, dramatic patients. Besides, hospital doctors – even the youngest and most inexperienced – tend to look down on general practitioners. Doctors who work in hospital regard themselves as being on the frontiers of medicine. They regard general practitioners as old-fashioned, generally incompetent and troublesome. This contempt is enhanced by a certain amount of envy because most general practitioners earn more money than most hospital doctors.

This was the first time I'd been the initiator of a call designed to send a patient into hospital.

The doctor who answered the phone at the other end sounded about eleven-years-old.

I gave my name and explained that I wanted him to admit a patient.

'How old is he?'

I told him.

'What's the diagnosis?'

Here I was not on such solid ground. 'I'm not sure,' I confessed. 'But provisionally it's diabetes.'

'On what grounds?'

'His urine is loaded with sugar.'

'You've done a urine test?' asked the eleven-year-old, apparently surprised at such a display of technical excellence.

I said I had.

'Why can't he attend the out-patient clinic?'

'I think he needs to be admitted now,' I said. Suddenly, I noticed that Dr Brownlow was standing just inside the door, grinning. He'd obviously been listening to my conversation. 'Having trouble getting a patient admitted?' he whispered. I nodded and put my hand over the mouthpiece of the telephone. 'Keith Harper,' I said. 'I think he might have diabetes.'

'Ask him if he's prepared to take the responsibility if the boy doesn't get admitted and dies,' said Dr Brownlow, nodding towards the telephone receiver.

I lifted my hand from the mouthpiece. 'Look,' I said, as firmly as I could, 'I've got a boy who's ill. I think he needs to be in hospital. Are you prepared to take on the responsibility for refusing to accept him as a patient?'

There was a silence. 'Send him in,' sighed the junior hospital doctor, outflanked and outmanoeuvred by my employer.

'What's his name?'

I gave him the details and then rang the ambulance service and arranged for them to pick Keith up as soon as possible.

'That was incredible!' I said to Dr Brownlow, when I'd finished.

'Responsibility is the magic word,' explained Dr Brownlow.

'It's the only thing a GP has in abundance. Legally and morally we're responsible for our patients for twenty four hours a day and for three hundred and sixty five days a year. The buck truly stops here.' Dr Brownlow sat down on the edge of the desk. 'The trouble with our society is that responsibility and authority have become separated,' he went on, warming to his theme. 'The people with the authority to do things no longer have any responsibility for what they do whereas the people like us who have the responsibility no longer have any real authority.' He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. 'Most of the people who have the power to make our lives difficult – social workers, policemen and so on – spend their lives trying to avoid any responsibility. When they do get any they do their level best to pass it on to the next person. For them it's like a huge game of pass the parcel. No one wants to be stuck with the responsibility when the music stops. We're stuck with so much responsibility that we can't ever get rid of all of ours.'

I nodded. It all made sense.

'So, when you can't get someone to do something just tell them that you're passing some of your responsibility onto them,' said Dr Brownlow. He leant forward. 'The ultimate weapon,' he confided, 'is to tell them that if the patient dies you'll put them down as one of the contributing factors when you write out the death certificate.'

'Can you do that?'

'Of course!'

'And it works?' 'Works?' laughed Dr Brownlow. 'I can get any hospital administrator eating out of my hands with that trick.'

I was still admiring Dr Brownlow's manipulative skills when Miss Johnson knocked on the open consulting room door.

She looked worried.

'What's up, Doreen?' asked Dr Brownlow. It was the first time I'd heard her first name used and it seemed strange. I hadn't even thought about her having a first name.

'There's been a phone call from Anne Thwaites,' said Miss Johnson. 'She says she's been getting bad tummy pains and would someone go and see her as soon as possible.'

'Thwaites?' I said. 'Wasn't she in the surgery this morning?'

'That's right,' said Miss Johnson. 'I think you gave her a diet sheet.' She sounded disapproving.

Dr Brownlow looked at me, smiled and then looked at Miss Johnson. 'What's up, Doreen?'

'Well, it's not my place to say,' replied the receptionist.

'But I thought she looked pregnant.'

'Pregnant?' I said, sounding as astonished as I felt. I'd never even thought of the possibility of her being pregnant.

Dr Brownlow reached out and put a hand on my shoulder. At least he had the decency not to laugh at me. 'You'd better go and have a look at her.'

* * *

To my astonishment it had stopped raining. The sun wasn't exactly shining and the sky was still predominantly grey but it definitely wasn't raining. I began to realise just how attractive the countryside in North Devon must be in the sunshine. The beech and hawthorn hedges were thick with blackberries hanging off laden brambles and the swallows were already massing together on the telephone wires. I couldn't help wondering what they used before the telephone was invented.

Anne Thwaites lived in a tiny cottage on the edge of Exmoor. It could only be approached along a narrow, muddy track. The last few days' rain had left huge puddles on the track and the huge, heavy Humber skidded and slid along sideways as it struggled to get some traction on the mud. Several times I thought I was stuck but each time I managed to keep the wheels moving by slipping the car into second gear and lowering the speed.

The cottage itself was surrounded by ramshackle sheds in which various rusting pieces of farm machinery were stored. Most of the sheds had originally had slate roofs but the slates had long since been replaced with pieces of corrugated iron, most of which had gone rusty. A lone oak tree stood just behind the cottage; its trunk and branches shaped by the wind. Half a dozen rhododendron bushes sheltered a small vegetable patch but the wind had pushed the bushes over until they stood at an angle of forty five degrees to the ground. On the windward side their leaves were burnt brown.

As I drove carefully into the courtyard I could tell by the bumps that it had at some time in the distant past been covered with cobble stones. Today, however, the cobbles were covered with a thick layer of mud and water. I looked for the highest piece of ground I could find so that I could get out of the car without sinking up to my ankles in mud. I realised that I would have to buy some wellington boots for the winter months, and keep them in the car.

Within minutes of my appearance three dogs appeared; two of them were Welsh collies and the third was an Alsation. All three dogs were filthy and they barked furiously, paying most of their attention to the side of the car on which I was sitting. I didn’t stop the engine straight away but sat for a moment looking at the dogs and trying to pluck up courage to get out of the car. The two collies didn’t look too frightening but the Alsation bared its teeth and growled rather than simply making a lot of noise and I got the impression that it meant business. The collies looked as if they just wanted to frighten me off; the Alsation looked as if it wanted to eat me.

Looking around in desperation I noticed that at the front of the cottage there was a large porch, built to provide some protection from the wind, rain and snow. I put the Humber back into gear and manoeuvred it as close to the porch as I could. Then I stopped the car, opened my door into the porch and stepped into a small, secure area. Ahead of me was the front door. On each side of me I was protected by the stone walls of the porch. And the entrance to the porch was blocked off by my car which protected my rear. As the three dogs howled and barked in protest I hammered on the front door with my fist.

No one answered but behind me the Alsation was trying to climb up over the Humber’s front bumper. I decided not to wait to see if he made it but to go straight into the cottage. I opened the front door, let myself in and then closed the door firmly behind me. ‘Hello?’ I called. ‘Anyone in? Miss Thwaites?’ I was standing in a tiny hallway. On my left and on my right there were two solid pine doors, both shut. Straight ahead of me there was a narrow staircase. I stood still and listened carefully and then I heard a woman’s voice. It sounded very weak. ‘Is that you, doctor?’ The voice came from the room on the left.

I opened the door and stepped into a tiny living room. A roaring log fire crackled in the fireplace and the room looked very neat and cosy. Miss Thwaites was sitting in an armchair. The chair had virtually no springs left and her bottom seemed to be no more than an inch or so off the floor. The room was boiling hot.

I said ‘hello’ and smiled at her.

‘I’m sorry to have to call you out, doctor,’ apologised Miss Thwaites. She grimaced and rubbed her hands on her tummy. ‘But I keep getting these terrible pains.’

‘When did they start?’

‘Soon after I left the surgery. I caught the Lynton bus and got off at Darracott Farm. The pains came on while I was walking up the lane.’

She still had her shoes on and they and her legs were spattered in mud. I knelt down beside her chair and took hold of her hand. Her pulse was fast but quite strong. I felt her tummy and with some shame realised that Miss Johnson was absolutely right. Miss Thwaites was very, very pregnant.

‘Are the pains getting worse?’

She nodded.

‘And closer together?’

Another nod.

I opened my bag, took out a foetal stethoscope, pushed up her skirt and leant down so that I could listen to her abdomen. I could hear the baby’s heart beating.

‘What is it, doctor?’

‘You remember that diet sheet I gave you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well rip it up. You’re not going to need it.’

She frowned. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘You’re about to lose all your excess weight very quickly.’ She clearly still didn’t understand.

‘You’re going to have a baby!’ I told her bluntly. ‘We’ve got to get you into hospital.’

‘A baby!’ She smiled. ‘Oh, that’s lovely!’

It wasn’t quite what I’d expected her to say but at least she hadn’t gone into hysterics and the fact that she wasn’t married didn’t seem to strike her as the slightest bit relevant. Just then she had another contraction. The contractions were coming thick and fast and I had to make a very rapid decision.

Should I telephone for – and then wait for – an ambulance or should I bundle her into my car and drive her to the hospital myself? I decided that it would take an ambulance at least half an hour to reach us and that we didn’t have half an hour to wait. The car seemed the only sensible solution.

I told her what I was planning to do then rushed out to the porch to move the car forwards a couple of feet so that I could open the back door and get Miss Thwaites into it. Surprisingly, the dogs had given up and were standing on the other side of the courtyard looking miserable. Even the Alsation had stopped barking. When I went back into the house Miss Thwaites was on the telephone.

‘I’m trying to reach my husband,’ she whispered, putting her hand over the phone.

‘I didn’t know you were married!’ I replied, thoughtlessly.

‘Well, I suppose we’re not really,’ she blushed. ‘Not in so many words.’ I heard someone answer at the other end. ‘Could you get Thumper, please?’ she asked. She put her hand over the mouthpiece again. ‘That’s my husband,’ she explained. ‘We live together so it’s all right to call him my husband, isn’t it?’

‘Yes!’ I said, emphatically. ‘I’m sure it is. Of course it is. That’s not Thumper Robinson is it?’

She nodded. ‘Do you know him?’ She seemed pleased. Before I could answer Miss Thwaites turned her attention back to the telephone. ‘Is that you Thumper?’

I could hear the voice at the other end of the phone confirming his identity.

‘It’s me,’ said Miss Thwaites. ‘I’m going to have a baby.’

Thumper said something and Miss Thwaites blushed and giggled. Then she grimaced and held her tummy as she had another contraction. She held the phone out to me. ‘Would you have a word with him?’

‘We must hurry up,’ I whispered to her, taking the telephone. ‘Hello?’ I said. ‘Is that you, Thumper?’

A voice I recognised said it was.

I told him who I was. ‘I’m going to take your wife into the hospital. Can you meet us there?’

‘Well, it’s a bit difficult at the moment,’ he said.

‘Why’s that?’

‘I’ve just set the balls up.’

‘Balls?’

‘Snooker,’ explained Thumper. ‘My mate’s put his money in now.’

‘Well, when you’ve finished that game,’ I said, getting rather exasperated.

‘We’ve agreed to play a best of seven frames match,’ said Thumper. I heard him call to someone else in the pub. ‘Dick!’ he called. ‘My floozy’s having a baby. Can we make it the best of five?’ There was a pause then he came back to me. ‘We’ve cut it down to the best of five,’ he said. ‘I’ll see you at the hospital later.’

‘That’s very good of you,’ I said, trying to be sarcastic.

‘Not at all,’ said Thumper who clearly didn’t appreciate the finer aspects of sarcasm. ‘A man’s got to take his responsibilities seriously.’ There was another pause as something obviously occurred to him. ‘You’re not driving Anne to the hospital in that Humber are you?’

I said I was.

‘Well you look after her!’ said Thumper. Then he said something else I didn’t catch and put the telephone down.

‘Come on!’ I said to Miss Thwaites. ‘Let’s go!’ I started towards the door.

‘The fireguard!’ she said. ‘Thumper goes mad at me if I go out without putting the fireguard up.’

I moved back and put the fireguard into position.

‘Should we feed the goldfish?’ she asked.

‘I think the goldfish will be all right for a few hours,’ I said.

‘Shouldn’t I pack some things?’

‘We’ll get Thumper to bring you some stuff in.’

‘But he’s playing skittles tonight!’ protested Miss Thwaites. I took her elbow and ushered her out to the car.

* * *

We got away from the cottage safely and successfully negotiated the muddy track without getting stuck. Our problems arose on the narrow lane which should have taken us straight on to the main road into Barnstaple.

Most of the lanes which traverse North Devon are single track. When they were created, a hundred years ago or more, farmers driving their carts to town were unlikely to meet much traffic coming from the opposite direction. These days when two vehicles do meet heap on there is usually a passing space or a convenient gate no more than a hundred yards away. Local traffic isn’t usually in too much of a hurry.

I was in a hurry. I’d delivered babies, of course. Every medical student has to take responsibility for at least ten pregnant women. But there is a vast difference between helping a woman deliver her baby in a sterile, purpose built suite which is packed with the very latest stainless steel equipment and staffed by experienced and skilled midwives, and delivering a baby in the back seat of a fifteen year old Humber.

When I saw the flock of sheep advancing slowly towards us along the lane my heart very nearly stopped. Desperately, I put the car into reverse and turned my head so that I could see where we were going. But we weren’t going anywhere. The Gods must have felt in a mischievous mood that morning for behind us there was a herd of cattle, advancing down the lane at a quarter of a mile an hour.

I’d been close to panic before. But not this close. A teacher of mine once told me that in times of absolute disaster you should try to think of how things could get worse. ‘It’ll help put things in perspective,’ he said. ‘Things are rarely as bad as they seem. Try to imagine the worst possible scenario and you’ll find that life isn’t so bad after all.’

I’d found a flaw in his theory. I’d reached the point where things can’t get any worse. And what do you do then?

The groans from Anne Thwaites in the back of the car convinced me that there was no point in trying to carry on.

We weren't going to get to Barnstaple before the baby was born. The baby was going to be born here. I disconnected the wires under the dashboard and the engine stuttered to a halt. I got out of the car, opened the back door and looked in.

'How are you feeling?'

Miss Thwaites answered with a groan. I tried to squeeze into the back of the car to examine her tummy but there just wasn't room.

'What's up?' I heard someone behind me ask. I backed out of the car and turned round. The man who'd been walking with the cows was standing behind me, peering over my shoulder. 'She all right?'

'She's having a baby,' I told him. 'We were trying to get to the hospital but...' I shrugged.

Behind the sheep the driver of the tractor had stopped and was climbing down onto the road. It was a girl. She too came over to talk to us.

'Hello Anne!' she said. It was an impressive piece of identification since all you could see of Anne were her legs and her knickers.

Miss Thwaites groaned.

'I think we'll have to get her out of the car,' I said. 'It's a bit too cramped in there.'

'Take her into the field,' suggested the man who'd come with the cows. Every time he spoke his false teeth popped out and he had to pull them back into his mouth with his tongue. He nodded towards a nearby gate. One of his cows nuzzled me gently from behind. 'Who are you then?' asked the girl who'd got off the tractor. 'Where's Thumper?'

'I'm the doctor,' I said. 'Thumper is playing snooker.'

Neither of them seemed at all surprised by this.

'I'll take the seats out,' said the man with the mischievous dentures. He reached into the front of the car and pulled at the driver's seat. The bottom part of the seat came away in his hands.

'At least the weather's fine,' said the girl, looking at the sky. And I realised then that it could be worse. It could be raining. 'I'll get the seat from the other side,' she said, clearly keen to do something to help.

Miss Thwaites, almost forgotten in the midst of all this energetic activity, groaned again. I reached into the car and pulled her gently towards me. 'Don't worry!' I said. 'Everything's going to be all right.'

She looked up at me. Her face was pale and sweaty and her hair was plastered to her scalp. 'I'm glad you're with me,' she said. 'I feel safe with you.'

I silently wished that I had her confidence and I carried her down the lane to the gate over which the girl and the cowman had thrown my car seats. I had to tiptoe through the mixture of sheep and cows in order to get there. I wasn't surprised at the smell but the noise did surprise me; I could hardly hear myself think for the baaing and the mooing.

'I'll get some hot water,' said the cowman as I laid Miss Thwaites down on the impromptu couch. I bent down beside her and was goosed by a short but stout thistle.

'Is she going to be all right?' he asked in what he probably thought was a whisper. Even above the noise of the cattle and the sheep I could have heard him if I'd been standing a hundred yards away.

'Of course!' I said, emphatically. 'Women have been giving birth for centuries. It's perfectly natural.'

'Won't you need scissors and things?' Miss Thwaites asked. 'Something to cut the cord?'

'There's some in my black bag.' I said. I ran back to the car to get them. As I did so I passed the girl from the tractor who seemed to be picking flowers out of the hedgerow. It seemed an odd thing to be doing. The Humber was full of sheep who seemed to be trying a variation on the old 'how many students can you get into a telephone box' routine.

As I left the car I noticed that the cowman's legs were sticking out from underneath the front end. I hesitated for a moment, thought about stopping to see what he was doing, and then hurried back to my patient.

'It's coming!' Miss Thwaites shouted as I approached. Then she cried out in sudden pain. I sprinted towards her and then threw my bag down onto the grass as I knelt beside her. I took out my foetal stethoscope and listened to the baby's heart. It seemed to be fine. I picked up Miss Thwaites' wrist and felt for her pulse. That felt fine too. I turned to get a pair of rubber gloves out of my bag and noticed that in my haste I'd left the gate open. Half a dozen cows and several sheep were already in the field, advancing steadily towards us. Just then it started to rain. It wasn't heavy but it was rain.

I pulled on my rubber gloves and bent over Miss Thwaites. 'Push!' I told her. I hadn't even examined her internally but there didn't seem much point at this stage and even though I was wearing rubber gloves I wasn't keen on introducing any unnecessary infections into the area.

Miss Thwaites pushed herself up onto one elbow and tried to say something. I couldn't hear for the noise the sheep and the cattle were making so I bent my head and asked her to repeat it.

'I've still got my knickers on,' she told me. 'Don't they need to come off?'

'I think that would help,' I agreed, struggling to repress images of a baby bouncing up and down for eternity on its own private nylon trampoline. I helped her remove her knickers and took advantage of the opportunity to see what was happening down there. I could just see the baby's head.

'Push!' I shouted. 'It's coming! Push!' I put one arm around her shoulders and used the other to help keep her knees up and well apart.

The rain was pouring down now and the grass upon which I was kneeling was becoming soggier by the second. Just then the cowman reappeared holding a large plastic container that had at some stage contained fertilizer. Steam was coming from the open top.

'Hot water!' he said, proudly. His teeth nearly escaped from his mouth this time and he cursed vividly. 'I'm sorry about the teeth,' he apologised. 'These aren't mine. I borrowed them from my mother.' He took the teeth out and grinned at me edentulously. 'Mine broke,' he explained. He stuffed the borrowed dentures into his jacket pocket.

'Where did you get the hot water from?' I asked him, nodding towards the steaming hot fertilizer container.

'Your radiator,' he said proudly. He didn't bother to explain where he'd found the container. He beamed at me. 'Hot water,' he explained. 'You need hot water for babies don't you?' He put the container full of hot water down beside me and then pulled a huge clasp knife from the same pocket into which the teeth had disappeared. 'Knife for cutting the cord,' he said.

Miss Thwaites screamed and grasped hold of my wrist with her hand. 'It's coming!' she shouted. 'I can feel it coming.' I peeped. She was right. The baby's head was very nearly out. It seemed a much easier birth than any of the ones I'd attended in hospital, where the mothers had invariably been surrounded by huge amounts of expensive, sophisticated equipment. Just then the shepherdess reappeared clutching a bouquet of flowers. It seemed a nice touch. She knelt down beside Miss Thwaites. 'Chew on these,' she said. 'They'll help with the pain.' I stared at her, stared at the flowers and then looked at Miss Thwaites who now had her mouth wide open though no sound was coming from it. I peeped down in between her legs and could see that the baby's head was entirely visible.

'Keep pushing!' I shouted uselessly. Behind me I could feel something warm and solid pressing against my back. I turned my head and saw that a sheep had come up to see what was going on. I tried to shoo it away but it wouldn't go.

Attracted by the noise and the activity a large black and white cow wandered over. It urinated loudly and healthily, showing a remarkable bladder capacity, and then I jumped a yard into the air as I felt its rough tongue licking the side of my head.

'I can see the baby,' said the shepherdess, still clutching her bunch of wild flowers. Her hands looked red and swollen and I noticed with horror that the bunch included quite a few nettles. 'It's a boy,' she said.

The baby delivered itself. All I had to do was cut the cord and help deliver the placenta. I tied the cord with a length of red twine that the cowman pulled out of his pocket.

'Can I go home now?' asked Miss Thwaites, when it was all over. It was still raining and we were all absolutely soaked but none of us minded. The new mother looked absolutely radiant.

'I think you ought to go along to the hospital,' I said. 'Just for a check-up.'

'I feel fine,' Miss Thwaites insisted. She pouted. 'I don't want to go into hospital.'

'The baby needs a check-up,' I said firmly. I picked Miss Thwaites up and carried her back towards the car. She was carrying her baby and the cowman was carrying my black bag.

The Humber looked and smelt disgusting. Two sheep were lying down in the back and the car reeked of them. The front seats were still in the field. The shepherdess got her sheep out of the car and wiped up most of the mess with her bare hands. The cowman went back for the seats.

It took ten minutes for the two of them to clear the road of animals sufficiently for me to drive past and continue on towards Barnstaple but I had forgotten that the cowman had removed the contents of my radiator and despite the rain the Humber overheated and came to an ignominious halt just outside Shirwell, five miles from Barnstaple. We telephoned Mr Marshall, the Bilbury taxi driver and he took us the rest of the way.

As we drove up to the hospital entrance Miss Thwaites turned to me and whispered something. I didn't catch what she said and had to ask her to repeat it.

'I've just remembered,' she said, giggling. 'I left my knickers in that field.' She giggled again. 'Still,' she added, 'It isn't the first time I've left my knickers in a field.'

I blushed heavily and helped her out of the taxi.

'Don't worry about the bill, doctor,' said Mr Marshall.

'I'll put it on your account.' He smiled. 'I'll wait for you,' he promised

* * *

Thumper was waiting for us and he grinned broadly when he saw Miss Thwaites and his new son.

'What a day!' he said. 'First I win £2 at snooker and now I'm a dad!'

I left them hugging one another and Mr Marshall drove me back to Bilbury.

'Isn't that your car?' asked Mr Marshall, as we passed my sad looking Humber. Steam was still coming from the bonnet.

'Yes,' I said miserably. It hadn't been a good investment. I wondered if it was worth bothering to get a garage to go out and collect it.

‘Back to the Duck and Puddle?’

‘Yes, please.’ I was soaked and my trousers were covered in mud. I smelt of cows and sheep. I wanted a bath and needed to change my clothes.

By the time I got back to the pub it was 4.30pm and all I had time for was a quick wash before slipping on some fresh clothes. Then it was time to take Mr Marshall’s taxi to Dr Brownlow’s for the evening surgery. I was physically exhausted, mentally drained and financially broke. I was so tired that when my first patient came into the surgery that evening I very nearly succumbed to the temptation to give him a bottle of cough medicine and to send him on his way unexamined.

* * *

Hubert Donaldson looked just like the classic English tramp is supposed to look. His navy blue raincoat was tied around the waist with a piece of parcel string and his straggly, greasy hair was long and out of control. He had a well-developed beard that looked as though it probably had a fair amount of wildlife living in it and a pair of shoes that looked as if they were designed to keep his feet cool in summer and wet in winter. He complained of a cough and a bit of pain in his chest. I told him to sit down and asked him a few questions about his medical history. He told me that he was in his late fifties, that he usually slept out of doors and that he had been perfectly fit and healthy for most of his life. He admitted that he smoked twenty or thirty cigarette stubs a day but insisted that most of the cigarette ends he picked up were tipped.

The smell from the other side of the desk was not encouraging and I had no real desire to explore beneath the raincoat but I felt duty bound to do so.

‘What?’ demanded Hubert. ‘You want me to undress?’

‘That’s right,’ I said.

‘I haven’t taken my clothes off for years,’ he insisted. ‘I can’t even remember what I’ve got on.’

‘Well, if you want me to try to get rid of that cough you’ll have to let me examine you.’

Beneath the raincoat were several thick wads of newspaper. As Hubert carefully laid these down on the floor I glanced at the dates and saw that most of them were eighteen months old. After the newspapers there came a couple of sweaters (full of holes) a few more newspapers and then, finally, a grey woollen shirt came into view. That concealed nothing more than an ageing yellow vest.

‘Can I keep my trousers on?’ asked Hubert, now beginning to shiver, despite the fact that the temperature in the surgery was comfortably warm.

I nodded. He grinned.

I smiled, nodded again and stood up to listen to his chest.

‘I’d like you to have a chest X-ray,’ I told him when I’d finished.

‘Do I have to go to the hospital for that?’ asked Hubert, beginning to dress himself again.

‘Yes. But they won’t keep you. It’ll only take a few minutes.’

Hubert looked suspicious.

‘They won’t keep you,’ I assured him. I wrote out the X-ray form and then helped him finish dressing. ‘Come back and see me in three days. I’ll have the X-ray report back by then.’

I suddenly had a thought. ‘How are you going to get to Barnstaple?’

Hubert looked at me as though surprised that I should even need to ask. ‘I shall walk,’ he said with dignity.

I took my wallet out and offered him some money. ‘For the taxi fare.’

He refused it.

But I did manage to save him the cost of a prescription for the antibiotic I wanted him to take by finding a sample bottle of something suitable left by a drug company representative.

‘Don’t forget!’ I told him as he left. ‘I’d like to see you in three days.’

‘I’ll be here,’ promised Hubert.

* * *

CHAPTER FIVE

'Good evening, doctor!' said the next patient. 'I'm Lionel Francis.' He held his hand out across the desk and gave me the benefit of a broad smile that must have paid for at least one dentist's summer holidays for several years. He clearly expected me to know who he was. He wore an expensive grey suit with a broad chalk stripe, a maroon shirt with a white collar and around his neck had something that looked like a Garrick club tie but wasn't. He was grossly overweight and his waistcoat looked uncomfortably tight. He had a small pink rosebud in his buttonhole and smelt very strongly of something so powerful that I decided that it was probably designed exclusively for use by men who are having affairs and want to smother the scent of their mistress's perfume.

I took the proffered hand and looked at him blankly.

'I'm a friend of Dr Brownlow's,' Mr Francis continued.

'We're in the same line of business. I run a small chain of pharmacies in the area.'

I murmured my congratulations and asked him what I could do for him.

'Don't you remember me? You visited me.'

I looked up and felt a flush of embarrassment as I recognised him. He'd had pyjamas on when I'd last seen him. 'How's your chest?' I asked.

'That's what I've come about. I've been asthmatic for years but it's been getting worse. I get breathless very easily and I've even coughed up a little blood a couple of times recently. I thought that perhaps the time had come to get you to do a few tests. Maybe an X-ray?'

'Sounds a good idea,' I agreed. 'Would you take your jacket and shirt off so that I can listen to your chest?'

Mr Francis stood up and started to undress. 'The wife wanted me to get Brownlow to send you round to the house but I thought you were probably busy enough so I thought I'd pop along here with the ordinary patients.'

'That's very kind of you,' I said. Quite unreasonably I decided that I didn't like Mr Francis very much. 'Have you had any other symptoms? Or is it just the cough?'

'Just the cough.' Mr Francis carefully hung his jacket over the back of the chair.

'Any pains in your chest.'

'Nothing to speak of.'

'Have you coughed up any phlegm?'

He shook his head and folded his waistcoat neatly.

'But you do get short of breath?'

'Especially when I'm on the golf course!' laughed Mr Francis, draping his tie over the chair. He looked down at his waistline as he unbuttoned his shirt. 'I need to lose a few pounds,' he admitted. He was being generous to himself. He needed to lose a few stones.

I examined the fat chemist's chest but could find nothing of any consequence, though he undoubtedly had an unpleasant and persistent cough.

'I can't find anything but I want you to have an X-ray,' I told him, filling in an X-ray request form. 'If you take this along...'

'Yes! I know what to do!' Mr Francis nodded. 'Charles Jarvis and I play golf together at Saunton Sands.' He looked across at me. 'Do you know Charles?'

I finished filling in the request form while he dressed. When he'd finished I held the request form out to him. 'No, I don't think so.'

'He's the top radiologist in the area,' Mr Francis told me. 'Very good at his job and a cracking good golfer.' He took the form off me and stood up. 'You must meet him sometime. Do you play golf?'

I shook my head.

'We must get you into the club,' smiled Mr Francis. 'You can't be a proper doctor until you play golf.' He finished tying his tie. 'When will you get the results back?'

I told him that I thought they'd be back in about three days.

* * *

My heavily solicited promise to have dinner with the district nurse and her husband hung over me like a large black cloud. At the end of the evening surgery that day all I really wanted to do was to go back to the Duck and Puddle, spend an hour soaking in a hot bath and then spend an hour in the deserted lounge bar eating a solitary evening meal. My quiet but perfect evening would then end with me falling into bed and sleeping for ten hours.

But there was little chance of any of that. As soon as the last patient left the evening surgery I said goodbye to Miss Johnson and walked outside to where my car should have been standing. Only then did I realise that the Humber was still standing helpless somewhere out on the road to Barnstaple. I was about to start the long and weary walk back to the pub when a figure appeared out of the dusk.

'Good evening, doctor!' said Mr Marshall. 'Can I give you a lift anywhere?' He waved a hand in the direction of his car which was, I could see now, standing just a few yards behind him.

A small voice at the back of my mind warned me that this was all getting very expensive but I was too tired to care. 'The Duck and Puddle, please, Mr Marshall!' I said, wearily walking round to the passenger side of his car and getting in. I was so tired that when the taxi drew up outside the pub a few minutes later I was very nearly asleep. We had been parked for several minutes before I realised that we'd arrived at our destination.

'Why didn't you tell me that we were here?' I asked the taxi driver as I staggered out of the car.

'You seemed tired, doctor,' said Mr Marshall. 'I didn't like to wake you.' He handed me my black bag which I'd forgotten. 'Are you going anywhere else this evening?' he asked hopefully.

I looked at my watch. 'I'm supposed to be having dinner with Mrs Wilson and her husband.' It was already ten minutes to eight. I didn't know what time dinner was due to start but it couldn't be long. 'Could you wait five minutes? I'll just have a quick wash and then I'll be ready.'

Mr Marshall beamed. 'Certainly, doctor,' he said. 'My pleasure.'

It would be a lie to say that I raced into the pub but I moved as quickly as I could. I didn't have another jacket to put on but I had one clean shirt left.

'Mrs Wilson tells me that you're having dinner with her,' said my landlady, whom I bumped into at the bottom of the stairs. For a moment I thought I detected a hint of something in her voice though I was too tired to decide whether it was surprise, disapproval or warning.

I nodded and smiled. 'But I won't be late back,' I assured her. 'To be honest I feel a bit tired.'

'What shall I do if there are any more calls for you?' asked Mrs Parsons.

'The telephone operator knows,' I said. 'They can put any calls through to Mrs Wilson's number.'

Mrs Parsons nodded. 'Don't forget to take your key. And if you're not coming in to breakfast I'd be grateful if you'd let me know.'

It seemed a strange thing to say but before I could reply she'd disappeared.

Outside, Mr Marshall was waiting for me. I climbed into the taxi, put my black bag down by my side and then sat quietly back as he drove me round the village green and stopped outside a cottage directly opposite the Duck and Puddle. We were no more than two hundred yards away from where we'd started.

'Why didn't you tell me it was so close?' I asked him, feeling rather aggrieved as I clambered out of the taxi.

'You didn't ask me!' protested Mr Marshall, indignantly. 'I'm just trying to provide a service,' he snapped rather crossly. 'And at night!' he added. Then he reached across, pulled the passenger door to with a bang and accelerated away to his shop, another fifty yards up the road. I felt rather guilty and tried to call after him to apologise but he'd gone.

Mrs Wilson's cottage was one of five that were all joined together and all painted white. They all had thatched roofs, all seemed to have pretty little gardens and all were protected from the road by a picket fence that was painted white. There were no street lamps around the village green so I could see all this only by the light of the moon. It was, therefore, with some difficulty that I eventually found the small gate in Mrs Wilson's piece of fencing. I walked up her narrow front path and knocked on a heavy oak door that was studded with iron work. No one in Bilbury seemed to have much faith in modern, flimsy doors.

* * *

At first I didn't recognise the woman who opened the door. She wore an extremely short blue dress that failed to come within hailing distance of her knees. But it was the top half of her dress which was most difficult to ignore. There were no straps and without any visible means of support the dress seemed to be offering Mrs Wilson's extremely ample bosoms for examination. I found myself unwillingly transfixed by the peculiar sight of what looked rather like two large, pink blancmanges served up on blue plates.

Mrs Wilson had also managed to build her hair up into some sort of strange and insecure looking edifice on the top of her head and she had glued a pair of massive but patently false eyelashes onto her upper eyelids. These artificial additions were so heavy that they pulled her eyelids downwards Mrs Wilson had to hold her head back in order to see. The effect of this was, of course, to push her startling bosom even further forwards.

'Hello!' she said. She'd even changed her voice, which was now quite a bit lower than normal. She held the door back and positioned herself in the doorway in such a way that in order to get into the cottage I had to squeeze through an impossibly small gap between the far door post and her menacing chest.

Once inside I stood nervously in front of a plump looking sofa covered in a bright chintzy material. A large mackerel tabby cat sat at one end of the sofa. A mixed tabby sat at the other end. The whole room had a definite woman's touch. Mrs Wilson closed the door and moved into the room towards me. Her skirt was so tight that it made movement exceedingly difficult. Things weren't helped by the fact that she was wearing black, patent leather shoes that were supported by huge stiletto heels. 'What can I get you to drink?'

'A tonic water would be very nice,' I replied.

'Come on now, you're not driving,' insisted Mrs Wilson.

'I saw you arrive in Pete Marshall's taxi.'

'But I'm on duty,' I reminded her, pointing to my black bag which I'd put down on the floor. 'I don't want to get reported for turning up to an emergency call smelling of alcohol.'

‘Round here they’re more likely to report you for not turning up smelling of alcohol!’ laughed Mrs Wilson. But she did pour me a tonic water. ‘I’ll just have to go and get some ice and lemon,’ she said, disappearing in the direction of what I took to be the kitchen. ‘Sit yourself down and make yourself at home,’ she called over her shoulder.

I sat down on the sofa, between the two cats, and looked around. Half the room was designed as a living room, with a sofa and a matching easy chair positioned around an open fire place, and part of it was designed as a dining room, with an oak dining table surrounded by four chairs. The table had been set but there was something odd about it that I couldn’t quite put my finger on at first. The walls were decorated with prints of wild flowers and there were two huge displays of artificial flowers on either side of the fireplace. The windows were covered with rich, red velvet curtains which hung right down to the floor. Several copies of a woman’s weekly magazine were stacked neatly on a coffee table which stood between me and the fireplace.

‘You’ve decorated the room beautifully,’ I called to the absent Mrs Wilson.

‘Oh, I can’t take the credit for it,’ she replied. ‘My husband is in charge of that sort of thing.’

‘Oh,’ I said. I was genuinely surprised. And then I realised what was wrong with the dining table – it was set for two not for three.

‘Where is your husband?’ I called. I could hear Mrs Wilson thumping noisily in the kitchen. I assumed that she was trying to get ice out of an ice tray. I remembered her saying that her husband was a policeman.

‘He’s on duty tonight,’ came the reply. ‘He won’t be home until tomorrow morning.’ There was a pause and then she reappeared in the doorway. ‘He does a lot of night duty,’ she said with quite a smile on her face. ‘It suits us both,’ she confided. She winked at me.

‘He won’t be joining us then?’ I asked, feeling rather like a fly who’s wandered into the middle of a web.

‘I’m afraid not,’ sighed Mrs Wilson, putting a silver plated coaster down on a small delicate looking table that stood near the sofa and then putting my drink down on top of the coaster. ‘Just the two of us, I’m afraid.’ She put her own drink down next to mine, placing it on another coaster. ‘I thought it might be nice for us to get to know each other,’ she said. ‘Since we’re going to be working together.’ She moved one of the cats out of the way and sat down beside me before I could say anything in reply.

As she sat down Mrs Wilson’s skirt rode up her thighs, displaying her stocking tops and an inch or so of naked thigh. She then crossed her legs, making things considerably worse. I tried not to look. She looked down and pulled pointlessly at the hem of her skirt. ‘This skirt is a bit short,’ she said unnecessarily. She shuffled a little closer so that our thighs were touching. I tried to move away but I had nowhere else to go. I didn’t like to move the other cat which seemed very comfortably settled. ‘But I like the colour,’ she said, stroking the material with her fingers. ‘And it feels nice too,’ she added. ‘Try it!’

Obediently, but tentatively, I reached out and touched the hem of her skirt, as though testing it to see if it was hot. Mrs Wilson giggled. ‘Don’t be silly,’ she said. ‘I’m not going to bite you.’

‘Thank you for reminding Mrs Parsons that I wouldn’t be having dinner at the pub tonight,’ I said, desperately trying to change the subject and tactfully trying to remind Mrs Wilson that we were supposed to be having dinner together. I was starving hungry.

‘Oh, that’s all right,’ said Mrs Wilson. ‘My pleasure.’ She made another useless attempt to pull down the hem of her skirt. ‘I know you’ve been busy today,’ she said.

‘Terrible day!’ I said. ‘I haven’t stopped. I didn’t even have any time for lunch.’

‘Don’t worry!’ said Mrs Wilson. ‘I’ve got some nice macaroni cheese in the oven.’ She leant against me and I felt myself starting to wheeze again as a cloud of her perfume enveloped me. ‘I expect you’d like to relax a little before you eat,’ she said. ‘I know I would.’

I couldn’t think of anything to say that wasn’t rude or didn’t sound greedy so I didn’t say anything. Even the meal promised to be a disappointment. I hate macaroni cheese. I was staring straight ahead but I could feel Mrs Wilson’s head leaning on my shoulder. ‘Isn’t this lovely?’ I heard her whisper. ‘So peaceful and relaxing.’ A thick strand of hair had escaped from her hair piece and was hanging over her left eye.

‘Very,’ I heard someone croak in a voice that sounded vaguely like mine.

‘Let’s drink to your future here,’ said Mrs Wilson. She leant across me, reaching for her glass. Everywhere I looked there seemed to be nothing but acres of pink chest. I felt physically endangered by it.

Mrs Wilson grasped her glass but instead of taking it back to her mouth she rested the hand that was holding it on my left knee. I felt her other hand resting on my neck. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest as though desperate to break free and I could feel beads of sweat beginning to break out on my forehead.

‘The countryside round here is beautiful, isn’t it?’ I heard someone say in a voice that no longer sounded even vaguely like mine.

‘My husband is a transvestite,’ said Mrs Wilson suddenly. ‘He likes dressing up in women’s clothes,’ she explained, as though I might not understand.

‘I bet it gets very windy in the winter,’ I heard someone reply.

‘Personally,’ breathed Mrs Wilson, ‘I like a man to be all man.’ Her left hand was now stroking my neck and her right hand, still holding her glass, had moved off my knee and onto my thigh.

‘There must be lots of nice walks here,’ someone said, in a squeaky voice that I did not recognise at all. ‘Especially if you like walks,’ they added rather lamely.

‘I came home one day and found him dressed up in my underwear,’ said Mrs Wilson, leaning even closer. ‘I like sexy underwear,’ she murmured. ‘But I prefer to be wearing it.’ She moved her lips closer to my ear. ‘You should see what I’m wearing now,’ she whispered throatily.

I know my mouth opened but I can’t remember what came out of it.

Mrs Wilson’s right hand moved further up my thigh and suddenly the contents of her glass were emptied over my trousers. I was so tense that the shock of the cold liquid on my leg made me jump.

‘Oh, silly me!’ said Mrs Wilson, glancing down. ‘Never mind,’ she said. ‘Take them off. I’ll dry them in the airing cupboard.’ She put her glass down and reached for my waist with her right hand.

I was desperately trying to catch hold of her hand, which seemed to have acquired the properties of a ferret, when I heard a sound which I had never thought I would be so pleased to hear. When people talk glibly of ‘being saved by the bell’ they have no idea how wonderful it is to be so saved. ‘The telephone!’ I cried, looking around for the responsible instrument. ‘Quick! It might be a patient.’

‘Oh damn!’ said Mrs Wilson crossly. ‘And just when we were beginning to enjoy ourselves.’ She reluctantly stopped struggling to unfasten my trousers and I took full advantage of the respite, firmly moving her hand to one side and then standing up. ‘Where’s the telephone?’ I asked her.

Mrs Wilson nodded towards a small, low table in a far corner of the room. Desperate lest the caller gave up before I could reach the instrument I flung myself upon it.

‘Yes?’ I cried, as though it was I who was in need of emergency help.

‘Can you come over to the Duck and Puddle straight away?’ asked a voice I recognised but couldn’t place. ‘Someone needs help.’

‘I’m on my way!’ I shouted, slamming the phone down and making for the door. ‘Emergency!’ I told Mrs Wilson who was still sitting on the sofa where I’d left her. ‘Must go I’m afraid. Terribly sorry.’

‘Damned patients,’ said Mrs Wilson crossly. Then she tried to smile. ‘Will you come back when you’ve finished?’ I shook my head sadly. ‘I’m afraid it sounds as if it could take a long time to sort out.’

‘But what about the macaroni cheese?’ I heard Mrs Wilson cry plaintively as I left.

I didn’t stop running until I reached the Duck and Puddle.

‘Where’s the patient?’ I demanded breathlessly, as I burst through the door into the bar.

I was greeted with cheers, cat calls and whistles.

I looked around, puzzled.

‘It’s Thumper,’ said Frank Parsons, the landlord. ‘He was taken a little queer.’

‘Who are you calling queer?’ demanded Thumper, who was standing at the far end of the bar and who seemed perfectly healthy, though perhaps slightly inebriated.

The landlord looked at me, shrugged and apologised. ‘He seems to have recovered,’ he said. ‘I hope we didn’t interrupt anything.’

‘You mean there isn’t an emergency?’

Frank shook his head and then started laughing. ‘I wish you could see your face,’ he said. ‘I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything quite like it.’

‘I do feel another turn coming on,’ said Thumper, pretending to faint forwards onto the bar.

‘Maybe you ought to stay in case he has another attack,’ said Frank.

‘I think perhaps I should,’ I said, to more loud cheers and whistles. And then I caught sight of Mrs Parsons at the back of the bar. ‘I know it’s a bit of a cheek,’ I said. ‘But I’m starving hungry. I’d be very grateful if you could rustle up a cheese sandwich or something.’

‘I can do better than that,’ promised Mrs Parsons. ‘I’ve got a lovely pie ready. Shall I serve it up in the lounge bar as usual?’

‘I’ll eat in here if that’s all right with you,’ I said. ‘I need to keep an eye on Thumper.’

‘What made you... er... how did you guess what... er...?’ I asked Frank, as his wife hurried off in the direction of the kitchen.

Frank leant forward. ‘Let’s just say that Kay Wilson has got a bit of a reputation for being rather a man eater.’

‘No offence to yourself,’ added Thumper. ‘But it didn’t seem hardly fair to leave the two of you together all evening.’

‘I’m very grateful,’ I said. And then I remembered that the telephone exchange was still putting genuine emergency calls through to Mrs Wilson’s number. Life was getting complicated.

‘I’ll get the wife to have a word with Phyllis on the telephone exchange,’ said Frank, when I’d explained the problem to him. ‘Leave it to me.’

‘Excuse me, doctor,’ said Mr Marshall the taxi driver, sidling over to me. ‘Couldn’t help noticing that you haven’t got your black bag with you.’

I looked down. He was right. I’d left it at Mrs Wilson’s.

‘Do you want me to pop back and pick it up for you?’ he asked.

‘I’d be grateful if you would,’ I said. ‘Perhaps you’d be kind enough to explain that I’m stuck here with an emergency.’

‘No problem,’ he promised with a sly smile. ‘You leave everything to me.’

I turned back to the bar. ‘Can I have a pint, please, Frank?’ I asked, no longer caring what patients might smell on my breath.

‘My treat!’ insisted Thumper, on my right. He raised his glass to me. ‘Just want to thank you for everything you did today. Very grateful, doctor.’

‘That’s OK,’ I said. ‘My pleasure. Are they both all right?’

‘Wonderful, the pair of them,’ replied Thumper. ‘The hospital want to keep them for a day or so but they’ll both be home soon.’ He shook his head in disbelief. ‘What a surprise. When I left home this morning my bird was going up to the surgery to get help with losing a bit of weight. Within a day you’ve got all her excess weight off her and given us a baby into the bargain.’

Frank put my pint down in front of me and I drank the new baby’s health with the father.

‘Actually,’ said Thumper, moving a little closer. ‘Anne asked me to ask you if you’d mind if we named the baby after you.’

‘After me?’

‘Well, you brought him into the world,’ said Thumper. ‘We thought it might be rather appropriate.’

‘I’d be very flattered,’ I said, blushing. Nothing like it had ever happened to me before.

‘Of course, it’ll only be a second name,’ said Thumper. ‘His first name will be Jack. We wouldn’t want to lumber him with a poofy name like yours for day to day use, would we?’ He paused. ‘No offence,’ he added quickly. ‘But what’s all right for a doctor isn’t really going to be any use to a son of mine, is it?’

‘Why not?’ I asked. ‘He might grow up to be a doctor!’

Thumper stared at me over his beer glass. ‘You’re right!’ he said firmly. He thought for a moment. ‘Jack can be his second name,’ he said.

‘There you are, doctor,’ said a quiet voice behind me. I turned round to see Mr Marshall put my black bag down on the floor by the side of my bar stool.

‘Thanks very much.’

‘No problem. Would you like me to pick you up in the morning to take you in to the surgery?’

‘Yes, please,’ I sighed. ‘Thank you very much.’

‘I’ll be outside at 8.30 then, doctor,’ said the unctuous Mr Marshall.

‘I heard about the Humber,’ said Thumper, leaning across and putting a hand on my forearm. ‘Sorry about that.’

I shrugged. ‘It was a bit expensive on petrol,’ I said.

‘Wasn’t the right car for you,’ said Thumper, shaking his head.

‘Best I could afford,’ I said miserably.

‘We’ll do better than that for you,’ insisted Thumper. ‘I’ll pick you up after morning surgery tomorrow and take you down to the car auction at South Molton.’

‘I haven’t got any money,’ I protested.

‘Don’t you worry, doctor,’ said Thumper. ‘We’ll sort something out for you. You’re as good as family now.’ It felt good.

* * *

Although she had served me my breakfast for two days I’d forgotten the name of the girl who was working at the Duck and Puddle. I hadn’t really taken all that much notice of her although I had noticed that she was very pretty. As she put my breakfast down in front of me the next morning I heard sobbing.

I looked up. She had light brown hair, cut quite short, and the most beautiful green eyes I’d ever seen. She looked a couple of years younger than me. Tears were rolling down her cheeks.

Then I smelt the burning. I looked down and saw that everything on the plate in front of me was burnt to a crisp. Someone had tried to scrape the burnt bits off the bacon and the toast but the damage was too great to be repaired.

‘Don’t worry!’ I said, cheerfully. ‘I like my breakfast well-cooked.’ I turned the blackened sausage over to discover that the underside was even worse. It made a solid, wooden sound as it rolled across the plate. The girl lifted up her apron, covered her face with it and then ran off towards the kitchen. I half stood up, uncertain about whether or not to go after her. Eventually, I decided it was probably better not to. I sat down again, picked up my knife and fork and started to cut a corner off a piece of crunchy fried bread.

‘You can’t eat that!’ said Mrs Parsons, sweeping up my plate off the table before I could do my knife any serious damage. She was still wearing her dressing gown and nightdress. The curlers were still in place too; once again there were just three of them, all at the front as though it was only the front that mattered.

‘It’s OK!’ I said, weakly. ‘Patsy’s a bit upset this morning,’ whispered Mrs Parsons, tipping her head in the direction of the kitchen.

‘What’s the matter?’ I whispered back.

‘Her father’s poorly,’ explained Mrs Parsons. ‘And she’s worried about him.’

‘Why don’t they call the doctor in?’

‘You’re the doctor,’ said Mrs Parsons. ‘Well, Dr Brownlow is. But Patsy’s sister believes in some sort of herbalism based on flowers and they won’t have a doctor on the farm.’

Mrs Parsons looked down at the plateful of burnt food that she was holding. ‘I’ll go and do you some fresh,’ she promised, and disappeared towards the kitchen.

As I sipped at my coffee I could hear whispering in the kitchen and a few minutes later Mrs Parsons reappeared carrying a plate containing two eggs, two sausages and two pieces of fried bread. ‘I’m afraid that was the last of the bacon,’ she apologised.

‘Don’t worry,’ I said. I hesitated. ‘If Patsy thinks her father will see me I’ll gladly call in and see what I can do.’

Mrs Parsons put a hand on my arm. ‘I hoped you’d say that,’ she said. ‘I’ll have a word with Patsy.’

As I wiped up the last of my egg with a piece of fried bread Mrs Parsons emerged from the kitchen towing Patsy behind her.

‘Go on!’ urged Mrs Parsons to Patsy. She turned to me. ‘She’s shy!’ she mouthed.

‘Would you please come and see my father?’ Patsy asked me at last. She had stopped crying but her eyes still looked puffy and red. ‘I’ve just spoken to him on the phone and he says he’ll see you.’

‘Of course,’ I said, wiping my mouth with my napkin. ‘Where do you live?’

Patsy gave me the address of their farm on the other side of the main Barnstaple road and I promised to call in there as soon as I could.

* * *

I’d intended to go to see Patsy’s father at the end of the morning surgery but I’d forgotten that I’d arranged to meet Thumper. To my surprise he hadn’t. His battered old truck was parked outside the surgery when I’d finished.

‘Pete Marshall was waiting for you,’ said Thumper. ‘So I sent him away.’

‘I hope he wasn’t offended!’

Thumper laughed. ‘Pete? Offended? He’ll probably charge you for the journey out here anyway.’

‘I really haven’t got any money,’ I warned Thumper, as I climbed into his truck. ‘This is very good of you but all my cash went on buying that Humber.’ I paused and frowned. ‘Do you think I ought to arrange for someone to move it?’ I asked him as he accelerated away.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ said Thumper. ‘It’s all under control.’

I looked at him. ‘What do you mean?’

‘A mate of mine drove his truck into it last night,’ said Thumper. ‘It’s a write off now.’

‘Thanks,’ I said drily. ‘How does that help?’

‘It’s an insurance job now,’ explained Thumper. ‘Simple. Car like that in good condition has got to be worth at least £150-£200.

‘But it wasn’t in good condition!’ I said. ‘It was in terrible condition.’ And then a more important thought occurred to me. ‘And I hadn’t even had time to get it insured.’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ insisted Thumper. ‘You can claim off my mate’s insurance.’

‘But won’t he mind?’ I asked. ‘He’ll lose his no claims bonus, won’t he?’

‘He works for a big haulage company,’ said Thumper. ‘They always pay up on claims under £200. It’s not worth their while to make a fuss about it.’

This was all getting a bit too much for me. ‘Isn’t this fraud?’ I asked him, quietly, looking around to make sure that no one was listening.

‘Fraud!’ laughed Thumper, as the Ford bounced into and out of a huge pothole. ‘You’re just getting some money off an insurance company. That’s not fraud.’

‘But...’ I began.

‘Look,’ said Thumper, ‘I don’t know of anyone round here who’s ever had any house or car repairs done without making an insurance claim.’ He looked across at me and grinned.

‘You just leave it all to me,’ he said.

I sighed and shook my head. Life in the real world was getting more and more confusing by the day.

‘Are you hungry?’ asked Thumper, as we hurtled southwards. He looked at his watch. ‘We’ve got another hour before the auction starts and it’s only ten minutes from here.’

‘I could eat,’ I agreed. ‘If you know somewhere good.’

‘Do you like trout?’

‘Yes,’ I answered, assuming that he knew of a good fish restaurant or, more likely, of a pub that served fish.

Thumper swung the steering wheel round and swerved off the road and into an open gateway. Then he drove straight on across a meadow. I turned and stared at him. ‘Is this a short cut?’

‘Sort of’ he answered. ‘The river’s down here.’ We bounced and jolted our way across the field and came to a halt a few yards away from a shallow, fast running river. As soon as the truck came to a halt Thumper jumped out. 'Let's catch ourselves some lunch, then!'

I climbed out and looked into the back of the truck. I could see no sign of a fishing rod or, indeed, a fishing line of any sort. I turned round and saw, to my surprise, that Thumper was taking his clothes off. 'What on earth are you doing?'

He looked across at me. 'Going fishing!' he replied, as though the question was daft. Naked, he walked across the grass and knelt down at the water's edge.

'But how?'

He turned round and put a finger to his lips. 'You catch!' he told me.

Puzzled but fascinated I crept up behind him and watched as he waded into the river, heading towards a large rock around which the water divided. Just underneath the rock there was a small, dark, still pool of water. Crouching, Thumper waded out into the river. It was quite shallow and hardly covered his knees. Slowly, he bent even lower until his body was parallel with the water surface and his hands were just below the surface. Then, steadying himself on his left leg he pushed his right foot forwards until it slid underneath the rock. Things then happened so quickly that I didn't have time to see anything properly. All I knew was that there was a splash and Thumper seemed to fall forwards into the water. Moments later he stood up with two fingers of his right hand stuck firmly into the gills of a large trout and with his left hand wrapped around the fish's tail.

'Catch!' he called, throwing the fish towards me.

I'd never tried to catch a flying trout before and it really is the sort of thing you need to practise. I got one hand to it but the fish was far too slippery to hold onto and it slid between my fingers and fell onto the grass where it threw itself from side to side in quiet desperation. Just in time I realised that it was making its way back towards the river. Knowing that I wouldn't be able to hold onto the trout with my bare hands I tore off my jacket and threw it over the fish. I turned round, hoping for a little applause from Thumper but he was bent down in the water again, clearly looking for a second fish. When this one came flying through the air I was ready for it and caught it in a piece of sacking that I'd retrieved from the back of the truck.

'That'll do, won't it?' asked Thumper, wading back towards the bank.

'How on earth did you do that?' I asked him, very impressed. I'd heard of people being able to 'tickle' and then catch trout with their bare hands but I'd never really believed it was possible.

Thumper grinned at me. 'Nothing like fresh trout cooked in the open,' he said, drying himself on his shirt. 'Shall we have them with some boiled potatoes?'

I laughed. 'Where are we going to get potatoes from?'

Thumper didn't answer but pulled on his underclothes and trousers and slipped his jumper back on. Then he killed the two trout neatly with a flick of his wrist, wrapped them in his wet shirt and put them carefully into the back of the truck.

We drove across and out of the meadow and then continued for another half a mile towards South Molton. Suddenly, Thumper jammed his foot on the brake and the truck squealed to a halt. 'Wait there! I won't be a minute,' he shouted, leaping out and sprinting across the road. He climbed over a fence and disappeared into a field. A couple of minutes later he reappeared with an armful of potatoes.

'New ones are better but at this time of the year you have to take what you can get,' he said, tossing the potatoes into my lap and then climbing back behind the steering wheel.

'Where now?' I asked him, laughing. 'Peas? Beans? Almonds?'

'No time,' said Thumper, shaking his head. 'There's a good place for a picnic a bit further along the road.' He drove on for another mile or so and then once again swerved into a field. This was bumpier and muddier than the first one and the truck skidded and slewed round as its wheels struggled to get a grip on the soft grass. We stopped at the far edge of the field and I found that we had met the river again a little further along its banks.

'Do you know what wild mint looks like?' asked Thumper.

'I think so.'

'There's usually some growing in that hedge. See if you can find some while I get some twigs together for a fire.'

When I got back, clutching two sprigs of freshly plucked mint, Thumper had lit a small fire by the edge of the river. The two trout were threaded on bits of wire that Thumper had taken from the back of his truck and the potatoes were boiling in one of the truck's hub caps that had been filled with river water.

It was one of the best meals I've ever eaten in my life. Fresh trout and fresh potatoes cooked in the open air. For pudding we collected blackberries from the hedgerow around the meadow.

'No coffee?' I asked, as Thumper pushed the hub cap back into place.

'No time,' replied Thumper, looking at his watch. 'We ought to get on to the auction.' He stamped on the fire and kicked the remaining smouldering twigs into the river. It wasn't until sometime later that I discovered that catching fish from the river without a licence is strictly illegal.

* * *

I drove back from South Molton in an elderly, pale blue Morris Minor convertible that seemed in good mechanical condition, though the bodywork showed a few signs of rust. Thumper had wanted me to buy a 1949

Bentley that was being sold very cheap but I had, with some reluctance, argued that I really needed something that was reliable and that could be driven around the village without having to be refilled with petrol more than once. Thumper had bid for the car for me. 'Don't worry about it!' he insisted, when I kept warning him that I didn't have any money. He said he had explained to the auctioneer (who was, I gathered, a friend of his) that I was a doctor who needed a replacement car urgently and that I was waiting for a cheque from an insurance company. 'Besides,' said Thumper, 'the guy owes me a favour.'

I couldn't think of any favour which would encourage a car dealer to allow a customer to take a car away without paying for it but I didn't want to know any more so I didn't ask.

And so we drove back in convoy. Thumper leading the way in his huge and powerful four wheel drive Ford and me following in the little Morris Minor.

* * *

My first task on getting back to Bilbury was to visit Patsy's father at his farm.

A small crudely made wooden sign, with the name of the farm painted on it in white, marked the long, narrow, heavily rutted lane which led down to the small valley in which the farm nestled. I drove down the lane carefully, wincing as rocks and stones crashed noisily against the underside of the car. The farm itself was one of the largest in the area. In addition to the farm house two small cottages and two huge stone barns helped to create a large courtyard area. A row of neatly painted bee hives stood alone in the corner of a nearby field. As I drove into the courtyard chickens, ducks and geese half flew and half ran out of my way.

'Thank you for coming,' said Patsy, opening the front door. She looked at the Morris. 'Is that a new car?' she asked.

I explained that I'd just bought it (with Thumper's help) and Patsy said suitably polite things about it. 'My father can be very difficult,' she warned, leading me into the hallway. 'Please don't take offence if he says anything rude.' She looked very worried.

I followed her from the hallway, which was cluttered with coats, sticks and boots, into a large, comfortable looking sitting room. The first thing I noticed was the heat. There was a huge, old-fashioned wood burning stove in the hearth and although there was no sign of burning fuel the heat was coming out of the stove in waves. Homes in North Devon didn't usually have central heating but they weren't cold. The second thing I noticed was a man in his mid-forties lying on a sofa. He was fully dressed, even down to his wellington boots, and he looked thoroughly miserable.

'I suppose you're the bloody doctor,' he said as I approached.

I admitted that he was right. 'Can't stand bloody doctors,' said Mr Kennett. 'They always think they know everything.'

Patsy blushed. 'The doctor has come to look at you,' she said. 'I asked him to come.' She looked at me and held her head on one side as though to say 'sorry'.

'What can I do for you, Mr Kennett?' I asked.

'You could try buggering off,' said the farmer belligerently. 'But I don't suppose you will.'

'Daddy!' said Patsy. 'Please!'

The farmer sighed. 'I've got a weak heart,' he said. 'But I'm not having any of your damned pills and I'm not going into hospital.'

'You might not need to take anything,' I told him. 'Do you mind if I examine you?'

The farmer sighed and with obvious reluctance started to sit up. 'I'm not peeing in no bottles!' he said vehemently.

'That's OK,' I agreed. Slowly I helped him unbutton his shirt and then I pushed his vest upwards so that I could get at his chest.

'Well?' demanded Mr Kennett, when I finally took my stethoscope away.

'You do seem to have mild heart failure,' I told him. I rolled his trouser legs up and pressed my thumb on each of his ankles in turn. Even though he'd been lying down for sometime fluid had accumulated in his legs.

'Are you taking anything at all at the moment?' I asked him. 'Any pills? Even anything not prescribed by a doctor?'

'Only my heart tablets,' said Mr Kennett, nodding towards the mantelpiece. I got up, walked across the room and picked up the small glass bottle of pills that he had referred to.

'Where did you get these from?' I asked him. The label on the bottle announced that the contents were made with an extract prepared from the hawthorn plant.

'I prescribed them for him,' said a voice I recognised. I turned and saw the shepherdess who'd helped me deliver Anne Thwaites' baby.

'This is my sister Adrienne,' said Patsy.

'They're hawthorn tablets,' explained Adrienne. 'For his heart.'

'How long has your father had heart trouble?' I asked her.

'I first diagnosed it about six weeks ago,' said Adrienne.

'I get breathless,' said Mr Kennett. 'That's a sign of heart trouble isn't it?'

'How long have you been breathless?'

'A month or so.'

'He's been getting worse,' said Patsy. She looked across at her sister. 'I know you've been doing everything you can, Adrienne,' she said, apologetically. 'But it's true. Despite your tablets he has been getting worse.'

'His chest pains have gone,' said Adrienne. 'You had pains in your chest didn't you, Dad?'

Mr Kennett nodded.

'What brought the pains on?' I asked him.

'Came on during the harvesting,' said Mr Kennett. 'I came home one evening with this terrible pain across my chest.'

'And that's gone now?' He nodded.

I put my stethoscope on his bare chest again. His heart sounded strong but there was no doubt that he was in mild heart failure.

'I'm not going into hospital and I'm not taking any damned drugs,' said Mr Kennett emphatically.

·'OK.'

'You're stumped, aren't you?' he said, sounding almost pleased.

'At the moment,' I admitted. 'But I'd like to come and see you again if I might.'

Mr Kennett started to object but Patsy intervened. 'Please, father!' she said. 'What harm can it possibly do?'

Eventually her father agreed to see me again.

'Thank you for being so patient,' said Patsy as she saw me out of the house. 'I did warn you!' She really did have extraordinarily beautiful eyes. I smiled at her and said goodbye. I wanted to do some checking but I had an idea that I might be able to help Mr Kennett get better without sending him into hospital or prescribing any pills for him.

* * *

After that evening's surgery had finished I went in search of Dr Brownlow and, on Miss Johnson's advice, found him pottering in the dark in his large, walled vegetable garden.

'How's it going?' he asked me, as he prowled between two large vegetable beds. He had a torch which he flickered from side to side as he walked, though the garden was quite well lit with moonlight.

'It's hard work!' I confessed.

'It never gets easy,' said Dr Brownlow. 'But it gets easier.' He pulled out a carrot that had been half eaten and tossed it onto a compost heap. Then he picked up a small snail and carried it carefully over to the side of the vegetable garden where he placed it in a ledge on the wall.

'It's daunting never knowing what you're going to see next,' I said.

'That's what makes it the most exciting job in the world,' said Dr Brownlow quietly. 'As long as you like people.' He straightened up and looked straight at me. 'Do you like people?' I started to answer but he held up a hand. 'I don't just mean do you enjoy being with people you like,' he said, correcting himself. 'I mean, do you enjoy watching, listening to and even being with people that you don't like?'

I thought about what he'd said for a moment. 'Yes,' I said eventually. 'I do find people fascinating.' I walked with him across to his greenhouse. 'In hospital,' I said, 'I never really had a chance to develop any sort of relationship with my patients. Patients in hospital don't really regard doctors as people – I suppose that's why there is so much camaraderie between patients – it's "them" and "us".' I watched as Dr Brownlow picked up some cuttings and examined them carefully. 'Here as a general practitioner I feel that everything is so much more real.' I paused for a moment. 'It's very nice,' I said. 'I like it. But it's also very frightening.'

'No white coat to hide behind?'

'Exactly!' I agreed. 'And no one else to help share the responsibility.'

'The stakes are higher in general practice,' said Dr Brownlow. 'People expect more of you but they'll give more of themselves too. You have to risk more, you have to give more of yourself, but you get more in return. Satisfaction, I mean, not money.' He picked a piece of parsley from a plant in a pot and handed it to me. Then he picked a second sprig and popped it into his mouth. 'What did you dream of when you were a kid?'

I looked at him for a moment before answering. 'It sounds a bit embarrassing, a bit too good to be true, but I wanted to do something to help people.'

'I can believe that. It isn't entirely altruistic to want to help people. If you want to do something then you're doing it for yourself. Ultimately that's selfish. It just happens that while you're doing something selfish you're also doing something useful.'

'I've never thought of it like that before,' I said. I put my sprig of parsley into my mouth. I'd never eaten parsley by itself before. I liked it.

'Who was your favourite hero?'

It was such an odd question that I replied instantly, without thinking. 'Robin Hood.' I immediately felt embarrassed.

'Mine was Don Quixote.' Dr Brownlow sat down on the edge of a small wooden table. He looked thoughtful. 'You've picked the right job,' he told me. 'I enjoyed being a family doctor.'

'Enjoyed? That sounds final.'

'I'm getting old. My best days are over. General practice is a job for a young man. Thirty years ago I could stay up all night delivering a baby and then spend the whole of the next day driving around from farm to farm.' He paused. 'No more,' he said softly and rather sadly. 'No more.'

There was a long silence. Eventually I broke it. 'Talking of farms,' I said, 'I went to see Mr Kennett today.'

'There you are,' said Dr Brownlow. 'I looked after his father for thirty years. I delivered his two daughters. I've got old around here.'

'His one daughter seems to be a bit of a herbalist.'

'Daft business. Using crude, contaminated herbs doesn't make any sense to me these days.' He bent down, carefully picked up a moth that had got trapped in a spider's web and gently freed its wings. 'I told her off about it last year.'

'Adrienne is treating him for heart trouble.'

Dr Brownlow looked at me. 'Heart trouble? Kennett? No. He's got a heart like a Rolls Royce engine.'

'Not at the moment,' I said. 'His heart is beating irregularly, his chest is full of fluid and he's got ankle swelling. Classic heart failure.'

'When did all this start?'

'Haymaking. He got a pain in his chest.'

'What do you think?'

'I think he probably tore a muscle hauling bales of hay about.'

'And the heart failure?'

'That's what I wanted to ask you about. Adrienne is giving him something made out of hawthorn. Do you know what the toxic effects of hawthorn are? I think she might be poisoning him.'

Dr Brownlow looked at me sharply.

I smiled. 'Accidentally.'

Dr Brownlow carefully carried the liberated moth over to the greenhouse door. Once he was outside he opened his hands and held them out in front of him. The moth paused for an instant, fluttered its wings a couple of times experimentally, and then flew away into the night.

'Come with me,' said Dr Brownlow, turning and heading for the house. He led me into the surgery where he headed straight for a row of books on a bottom shelf. He pulled out a large, blue bound textbook and blew a thick layer of dust off its binding. Then he handed me the book. 'Have a look in there. I haven't got my glasses with me.'

The book was a textbook of herbalism. I opened it at the index and then flicked through until I found the entry for the hawthorn bush. There was a clear warning there that preparations containing hawthorn could cause heart failure; the very disorder that Adrienne thought she was treating. I read the passage out loud.

'Take him off the hawthorn and the chances are that he'll get better,' Dr Brownlow told me.

'Do you want to have a word with him?' I asked. I knew that there was a very good chance that Mr Kennett would make a fairly miraculous recovery if we stopped his pills. Most of the hospital consultants I'd ever worked for would have insisted on taking the credit.

'No!' said Dr Brownlow. He sounded surprised and looked puzzled. Then he understood. 'It won't do your reputation any harm if you can cure his heart trouble,' he told me. He took the book off me and put it back on its shelf. 'Do you know, I used to work with doctors who would have taken great advantage of a situation like this. They'd have prescribed some harmless sugar pills to replace the hawthorn and charged a fortune for them. Then they'd have told poor Kennett that it was their magic pills that had cured him. And they'd have carried on selling the damned things to him for years.'

'I know doctors who'd still do that,' I said quietly. I suddenly looked at my watch. It was ten to nine. 'I ought to be going.' I said regretfully. I liked talking to Dr Brownlow. I liked him. 'Mrs Parsons will have my dinner ready for me.'

'Are they looking after you all right?'

'Very well.'

'Good,' said Dr Brownlow, who seemed genuinely pleased.

'You must come and have dinner with me one evening.'

'I'd like that very much,' I told him. And meant it.

* * *

For the first time since I'd been in Bilbury the sun was shining brightly and it made a world of difference as my Morris Minor bumped and jiggled its way down the hill to the Kennett's farm. High overhead a buzzard circled slowly and patiently, floating on currents of air as it looked for food. I was so busy watching the buzzard that I didn't watch the road properly. The nearside of the Morris bounced down into a large pothole and then bounced out of it again; only with difficulty did I manage to hold onto the steering wheel and keep the car away from the stone walls which bordered the track. I drove a little more cautiously after that.

Seeing the farm ahead reminded me of Patsy. I liked Patsy. I wondered how she got to the Duck and Puddle every morning. I wondered why she was working at the pub when there must be lots to do at the farm. I wondered, idly, if she had a boyfriend.

It wasn't Patsy who answered my knock on the door. It was her sister, Adrienne.

'I've come to see your father,' I said. 'I promised I'd come back.'

'I know you did,' said Adrienne. She turned and walked back into the house. Silently I closed the front door and followed her.

Mr Kennett was sitting on the same sofa and in virtually the same position as the last time I'd seen him. But if anything he looked worse. His legs were more swollen and he was clearly having even more difficulty in breathing. I put my bag down on the floor, knelt down beside him and examined him.

I'm not going into hospital,' said Mr Kennett forcefully. 'And I'm not taking any damned pills.'

I thought he ought to be in hospital but I didn't say so. No one seemed to want to go into hospital these days. 'I think you could be reacting badly to the hawthorn,' I told him, trying to be as tactful as I could. 'It sometimes happens,' I said, half turning and half addressing Adrienne who was, I knew, standing behind me.

Neither of them said anything.

'The pills stopped the pains in my chest,' protested Mr Kennett.

I suspected that the pains in his chest had been muscular, brought on by throwing bales of hay around. But I didn't think it would help to tell him that. 'But you've been getting all sorts of other symptoms since the pains went, haven't you?'

Reluctantly, Mr Kennett nodded. The movement started him coughing and Adrienne had to come forward and push a couple of cushions behind his back. I waited until the coughing fit had passed.

'Just try managing without the pills for a few days,' I said. 'That's all I want you to do. If the pains come back then by all means try taking the tablets again.'

'Do you think his breathing will improve if he stops the hawthorn?' asked Adrienne suspiciously.

I nodded.

'You think he could be allergic to it?'

'Yes,' I lied. I thought he'd been poisoned by it but I didn't think they'd believe me if l said that.

Adrienne looked doubtful.

'People can get allergies to anything,' I reminded her. 'You must know that.'

'Yes, I suppose so,' she admitted with some reluctance.

'Then what is there to lose by stopping the hawthorn for a few days?'

'I think he's right, Dad,' said Adrienne at last.

'OK,' grunted Mr Kennett. 'If you say so.'

Before I left Adrienne insisted on giving me a jar of their home-made honey.

* * *

CHAPTER SIX

The arrival of Mike Trickle, the television celebrity, had caused a good deal of excitement in the village, though no one had yet seen him.

Mr Trickle had bought a house called Bilbury Grange that was situated about halfway between Dr Brownlow's spacious home and the village green. It was impossible to see it from the road.

'Have you seen him yet?' asked Patsy, as I ate my breakfast. My mouth full of bacon I shook my head.

'We thought he might have rung the surgery to register as a patient,' said Mrs Parsons, who sounded disappointed.

'Has Mr Trickle been into the pub for a drink?' asked Miss Johnson half an hour later as I prepared to start the morning surgery.

I shook my head. 'Sorry. No sightings yet.'

I had little time for the exciting but invisible Mr Trickle because I was now discovering that one of the problems of general practice is that the number of problems to be sorted out seems to increase steadily with each new day.

I wanted to speak to Mr Kennett about stopping his hawthorn pills. I wanted to ring the hospital to find out what was happening to Keith Harper. And I was waiting for the X-ray results on Lionel Francis and Hubert Donaldson.

It was the two sets of X-ray results that came first, arriving at the surgery that morning in the same large, brown envelope.

The results, which surprised me, showed that Hubert, the elderly tramp, had no more than a chest infection, while Lionel, the pompous chemist, had an inoperable carcinoma of the lung. I did the surgery that morning knowing that afterwards I had to go round to tell the pharmacist that he was dying.

At the end of the morning's surgery, before I could leave to do any visits, a stout man in a tweed suit walked into the consulting room accompanied by a tall, elegant looking woman wearing an open fur coat over a white dress. The man looked vaguely familiar though I didn't realise why until a few moments later. He wore a pair of gold rimmed halfmoon spectacles, an old university tie which I couldn't identify and had a Rotarians badge in his lapel. She wore a single strand of pearls round her neck and had a silk scarf draped around her neck.

She had the sort of bone structure that most women claim to envy but she also had small, rather mean looking eyes which meant that she didn't look as attractive as she might otherwise have done. He had an old-fashioned hair cut that looked as if it had been done by an army barber and red, rather blotchy skin which suggested to me that he had a penchant for rich red wines. He looked like the sort of man who is never late for anything, the sort of man who always wears a clean shirt (and clean underwear), who always keeps his car clean and tidy (inside and out) and who always knows exactly how much change he's got in his pocket. He was a man I felt instinctively that I could safely distrust.

'I want to talk to you about my father,' said the man, shutting the door behind him. The woman with him, who was, I assumed, his wife, sat down without speaking.

I looked at him expectantly.

'We both think he's behaving irrationally,' said the stranger firmly. 'We think he needs to be looked after.'

I looked at the man and then at the woman, trying to remember if I'd ever seen them before. But although I half recognised the man I couldn't identify either of them. 'I'm sorry,' I said. 'Could you please tell me who you are? And who your father is? Do I know him?'

'My name is Simon Brownlow, Dr Simon Brownlow,' sighed the stranger rather impatiently. 'I'm a general practitioner in Barnstaple. You're working for my father.'

'Dr Brownlow?' It would be a fearsome understatement to say that I was surprised.

'This is my wife Dr Daphne Norman,' said Dr Brownlow junior, waving a hand airily in the direction of the woman in the fur coat.

'I'm an anaesthetist,' said Dr Norman. She spoke as though someone had rammed a large piece of fruit into her mouth.

I realised why I half recognised the man. He looked a bit like a younger and less cheerful version of his father. 'Oh.' I said. It was all I could manage.

'My father has always refused to register with another general practitioner,' said Dr Brownlow junior. 'So you are the closest thing he has to a family doctor.' I made one of those unintelligible, meaningless noises we all make when we want to indicate that we're listening but we don't want to commit ourselves. 'The thing is,' said Dr Norman, 'that we're worried about Simon's father. We're worried about him because he doesn't seem to be able to look after his own affairs properly.' 'This house is far too large for him,' interrupted Dr Brownlow junior. ‘It is quite absurd that he should continue to try to live here at his age.’

‘He seems to cope quite well,’ I said. ‘From what I’ve seen.’ I looked at them both in turn. ‘Have you noticed any specific problems?’

There was a silence and my two visitors looked at each other.

‘To be frank,’ said Dr Brownlow junior, ‘the problem is largely a financial one. My father simply can’t afford the upkeep of this enormous house but he won’t accept that he needs to move to more suitable accommodation. I’ve already spoken to a property developer who’s offered a very respectable sum for the house and grounds. The interest on the capital would give my father a good income. He would never have to worry about money again.’

‘Nor would you,’ I thought, wondering what plans the young Dr Brownlow and his wife had for the capital when old Dr Brownlow died.

‘If father keeps on selling off bits of land the value of the site will fall dramatically,’ said Dr Norman. ‘The developer Simon has spoken to is interested in developing the whole site and turning the house and grounds into a holiday complex: hotel, chalets, restaurant, caravan park, you know the sort of thing.’

‘There are some perfectly acceptable flatlets available in Barnstaple,’ Simon Brownlow told me. ‘My father would be much safer in one of them.’

‘What happens if he falls in the night and breaks a leg?’ demanded Dr Norman. She waved a hand around. ‘Who’d find him in this massive barn of a place?’

‘There’s Bradshaw and his wife,’ I reminded them. ‘And Miss Johnson and I come in every day.’ I didn’t like young Dr Brownlow or his wife. I didn’t like them quite a lot. They were talking about Dr Brownlow as though he had one and a half feet in the grave.

‘That’s another thing,’ said Simon Brownlow. ‘It’s quite absurd for my father to have staff. He can’t possibly afford them.’

There was another long silence. I looked at each of them in turn. ‘What did you want me to do about it?’

‘For a start you could have a word with him,’ said Dr Norman. ‘If he won’t listen to you then I think you ought to consider having him taken into care.’

I was aghast. She was suggesting that I use the law to have her father-in-law locked away.

‘It’s going to come to it sooner or later,’ she replied. ‘It would be better for everyone if it were sooner.’

I stood up. ‘This has all been a bit of a surprise for me,’ I said. ‘I’ll think about what you’ve told me.’

‘OK,’ said Simon Brownlow. ‘That’s fair enough.’

‘But don’t take too long about it,’ said Dr Norman.

They left without shaking hands or bothering with any of the other time wasting social niceties. I was glad. I didn’t want to shake hands with either of them.

* * *

When they’d gone I stayed where I was for several minutes wondering what on earth to do. I’d been in the job for just a few days and already I was under pressure to have my employer taken into care. As if all the other problems I’d got weren’t enough! What made the whole thing significantly more painful was the fact that I admired and respected Dr Brownlow. And I liked him. Eventually, I decided that I’d have to talk to him and tell him what had happened.

I found him in the billiard room.

‘I’ve never been able to make the cue ball swerve,’ Dr Brownlow complained, without looking up from the table. He drew back his cue and stabbed at the white ball which travelled the length of the table in a perfectly straight line. ‘Damn.’

‘I think perhaps your contact point on the cue ball needs to be a bit further to the side,’ I suggested. ‘And you need to hit down into the ball a bit more too.’

Dr Brownlow stood up and handed me his cue. ‘Show me.’

I bent down and, with that occasional spot of good luck that always fools me into believing that the fates aren’t entirely conspiring to destroy me, succeeded in sending the cue ball skidding down the green baize in a perfect curve.

‘I wish I could do that,’ sighed Dr Brownlow. He retrieved the cue ball, bent down and tried again. This time there was a hint of swerve in the ball’s path. ‘Did you see that?’ he asked, looking up with a broad grin on his face.

‘Once you can curve it a little bit it’s just a question of practising more and getting more power into the shot,’ I assured him.

‘I’m always frightened of jumping the cue ball off the table,’ Dr Brownlow confessed.

‘You won’t if you hit it in the right place,’ I said. It felt good to have found something about which I seemed to know a little more than Dr Brownlow. I reached over the table, picked up the cue ball, looked at it for a moment, wiped it on my sleeve and then put it back on the table and rolled it towards him. ‘I’ve just had a visit from your son and his wife.’

‘They came to see you?’ Dr Brownlow sounded surprised.

I nodded.

‘What on earth for?’

I shrugged and tried to smile. ‘They think you ought to be living in sheltered accommodation,’ I told him. ‘Apparently they’ve found somewhere in Barnstaple that they think would be suitable.’

Dr Brownlow went pale and then started to redden with what I suspected was suppressed rage.

‘They suggested that I ought to consider signing a court order agreeing that you’re not competent to manage your own affairs.’ I felt embarrassed.

‘Why you? You’re not my doctor.’

‘They say that since you’re not registered with any other doctor and I’m looking after your patients I’m responsible for you.’

Dr Brownlow smiled at me. ‘What are you going to do?’

I laughed. ‘I’m not going to do anything.’ I promised him. ‘It’s absurd.’

Dr Brownlow sighed. ‘It isn’t all that absurd,’ he said sadly. ‘At least, not from their point of view.’ He picked up one of the red snooker balls and rubbed it against his waistcoat to get rid of a speck of dust that neither of us could see. He put the ball back down on the table. ‘They’ve been nagging me for years to sell. this house to developers. It costs a lot to run and to pay for the upkeep I’ve been selling off bits of land.’

He picked up another ball and fingered it lovingly. ‘I suppose they can see their inheritance slowly disappearing and they don’t like it.’

I didn’t know what to say and so I said nothing.

‘I bought this house in the 1930s,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘I didn’t have any money but my wife had an inheritance and doctors were quite well paid in those days. My income paid the bank and her income paid the staff we needed.’ He looked around the snooker room. The oak panelling was richly decorated with wooden carvings. Suddenly he looked old and frail and weak and vulnerable.

‘When I was a boy,’ he said after a long pause, ‘my parents were very poor. We only ever had milk in our tea when there was a baby in the house.’ He walked across the room to a large, leather armchair and sat down in it. The chair was one of a pair. I walked across and sat down in the other chair. ‘My father was a farm labourer,’ he said. ‘When I was twelve he hurt his foot in an accident on the farm. The doctor said it was only bruised so he didn’t get any compensation and he didn’t get any sick money. So to get money for food he had to go to work. I watched him go out of the house limping. He had to walk six miles to work and six miles back again in the evening. That night he came back home and his foot was swollen up so much that he had to cut his boot off.’

There were tears in Dr Brownlow’s eyes as he continued. ‘He came into the living room and put his foot on the fender and got my mother to fetch him a hammer. Then he deliberately broke his big toe. He just smashed the hammer down on it right there in the living room. Then he went up to bed. Next morning the foot looked even worse and my mother called the doctor in. They gave him his sick money.’ Dr Brownlow swallowed hard. ‘He lost his foot two weeks later,’ he said. He spoke so quietly that I could hardly hear. ‘It got infected and they had to amputate it.’ There were tears running down Dr Brownlow’s cheeks as he looked across at me. ‘He never worked again after that,’ he said.

After a long, long pause he looked across at me. ‘Have you ever known what it’s like to be hungry? Really hungry?’

I shook my head.

‘When I got a scholarship my parents were so proud they nearly burst with joy. But when I qualified as a doctor they wouldn’t come to the university for my graduation ceremony. I begged them to but they wouldn’t come. They said they had to stay at home to look after the chickens but they didn’t. They stayed away because they thought I’d be ashamed of them. They thought they would let me down. They didn’t want to risk damaging my career in any way.’

Dr Brownlow swallowed hard. ‘When my wife and I bought this house I went and fetched them. I don’t think they believed it for a while. I wanted them to stay here, to live with us, but they wouldn’t.’ The tears were rolling down his cheeks. ‘Do you know,’ he said quietly, ‘they would never use the front door? They always insisted on coming round to the back.’

I looked around the huge billiard room. It was a wonderfully absurd room and a wonderfully absurd house. I tried to imagine how it must have looked to Dr Brownlow’s parents.

‘My wife and I loved it here. She’s buried in the gardens,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘There’s a piece of consecrated ground that was used when the house had its own chapel.’

‘When did she die?’

‘Five years ago. March the 14th. She died upstairs in our bedroom.’ He looked straight at me. ‘When she was dying we talked about where she’d be buried. And I promised her that I’d be buried next to her.’ He paused. ‘If the developers buy the house and the land heaven knows what will happen to her.’

For a few moments neither of us spoke. It was Dr Brownlow who broke the silence. ‘Logically Simon is right,’ he said at last. ‘I can’t afford to run this place. It’s crazy that I continue to live here.’

He stroked the leather of his chair. ‘But this is my home. It contains all the things that make living worthwhile and it contains every happy memory I've got. I don't want to sell it. I don't want some barbarians turning it into flatlets or flattening it and covering the land with pre-fabricated chalets.'

I leant forwards. 'Doesn't your son understand any of this?' Dr Brownlow shook his head.

'Have you talked to him about it?'

Dr Brownlow thought carefully before speaking. 'I love my son,' he said slowly. 'I love him because he's my son.' He paused for what seemed a long, long, long time. 'But I don't like him,' he added. 'And I know I can't trust him.'

There was another long silence. 'And I neither like nor love nor trust my daughter-in-law.' He looked across at me. 'Sad, isn't it? Does it shock you?'

'No,' I said slowly, after a moment's reflection. 'But it is sad.'

'Simon has never been able to forgive me,' said Dr Brownlow. 'He's always been intensely materialistic. I think it was something he picked up at school. When he was young he decided he wanted to be a doctor. I thought it was for the right reasons but it wasn't. He wanted to become a doctor because he knew that we lived in a big house and had a Rolls Royce and people to help look after us. He assumed that all doctors lived the same way.'

'I bought the Rolls very cheaply,' said Dr Brownlow. 'My wife loved it. It's cost me less to run than if I'd bought ordinary cars.'

I waited. I felt very close to him.

Dr Brownlow stared thoughtfully at the floor. 'Simon feels cheated and frustrated and he blames me.' He took out a large handkerchief and wiped his eyes then blew his nose. 'I don't think it's conscious,' he said. 'But deep down he blames me for misleading him. Part of his desire to make me sell this house - and it's something he's been trying to do for years - is inspired by the fact that he wants the money - and wants me to stop spending it on running the place - but part of it is inspired by the fact that he wants to punish me. He doesn't like the idea of me living here when he can't afford anything larger than a very ordinary four bedroomed, detached house in Barnstaple.' The bitterness came through in Dr Brownlow's voice. 'Still,' he said sadly, 'there is one thing. I may not be able to trust Simon but at least he's predictable.' He smiled. 'Funny thing, isn't it? The people in this world that you can rely on most are the people you know you can't trust.'

There was another long silence. Once again Dr Brownlow blew his nose.

'I suppose I ought to be getting on and doing some work,' I said quietly.

'Do you think I should sell?' asked Dr Brownlow. 'Do you think I'm crazy trying to stay here?'

I didn't need to think about it. 'No,' I said without any hesitation. 'No. I don't think you should sell and I don't think you're crazy at all.'

He smiled at me. I thought he looked much older and much more weary. 'Thank you.' He spoke so quietly that I could hardly hear him.

I started to move towards the door. 'I think it's a lovely house,' I told him.

Almost imperceptibly he nodded. Then he looked up at me and smiled faintly. When I left him he was chalking his cue.

* * *

Telling Lionel Francis that he had cancer that couldn't be treated was no easier than I had expected.

'There must be some mistake,' said Mr Francis defiantly, his face white with fear and his body trembling.

'I'm afraid not.' I showed him the X-ray report with his name on it.

'But lung cancer,' said Mr Francis. 'It's not fair! I've never smoked a cigarette in my life.'

'I know,' I said quietly. 'It's not fair.' I really didn't know what else to say. No one had ever told me how to tell a man he was dying. Maybe there isn't any way to teach someone how to do that. Maybe it's something you have to learn the hard way.

'I want a second opinion,' insisted Mr Francis. Now there was anger in his voice. 'I want to see Charles Jarvis.'

'That's no problem,' I assured him. 'I'll fix it up for you.'

'Today!' insisted Mr Francis. 'I want to see him today.'

'I'll try,' I promised. 'Can I borrow your telephone?'

When I left him a few minutes later he was convinced that his appointment with Charles Jarvis later that day would confirm that he didn't have cancer after all.

* * *

I was far less apprehensive about my consultation with Hubert Donaldson that evening but in a way it was just as disturbing. Instead of being pleased when I told him that he simply needed to carry on with the antibiotics I'd prescribed for him Hubert looked glum.

'You don't seem pleased with the X-ray results?' I said.

'I'm not afraid of death,' he told me. 'Why should I be pleased?' He coughed painfully. 'What is there about death that makes it worse than life?'

I didn't know how to answer him. There were too many good things in my life for me to ever understand him.

‘There are three sorts of people in this world,’ said Hubert. ‘Those who are afraid of death. Those who are afraid of dying. And those who are afraid of living.’ He looked straight at me. ‘Once you know what someone fears most you’ll know a lot about them.’

I looked at him for a long moment before I spoke. ‘That’s sad.’

‘Life is often sad.’

‘Isn’t there anything you’d miss?’

‘My dog. I’d miss my dog.’

‘What sort of dog?’

‘Welsh sheepdog. I found her when she was a puppy. I was passing a farm in Shropshire. She was a sorry little thing then. I bent down to give her a pat and she’s never left me since.’

‘Where is she?’

He jerked his head towards the door. ‘Waiting outside.’

‘What’s her name?’

‘Ben.’

‘Isn’t that an odd name for a bitch?’

He shrugged.

‘Can I see her?’

He stood up and walked towards the door. I followed him. The dog, a young black and white collie was sitting patiently outside the surgery door. As soon as Hubert appeared the dog’s ears pricked up. Her whole body stiffened with excitement and her eyes seemed instantly brighter.

Tentatively, I bent down to stroke her but she backed away, her eyes fixed firmly on Hubert. I turned and saw him nod to her. That was all it took. Then she kept still and allowed me to make a fuss of her.

I liked Hubert’s dog. I wasn’t entirely sure what to make of Hubert. But I liked his dog.

* * *

CHAPTER SEVEN

Penelope was coming to stay for the weekend and Dr Brownlow had agreed to give me two days off duty. At half past nine on Saturday morning I drove over to Barnstaple to pick her up at the station.

‘God!’ she said when she saw me. ‘What an expedition!’ She was dressed in a white trouser suit and had had her brown hair cut very short in a page boy style. She was carrying a small green leather handbag and didn’t seem to have any luggage. She looked more elegant and more full of confidence than I remembered.

‘I had to leave Bristol at 6.30 this morning!’ she announced. She looked around the station as though trying to decide whether or not to buy it. I leant forward to kiss her but at the last moment she turned her face so that my lips collided with her cheek.

‘I must find my luggage,’ she said, turning round and searching the platform behind her. She didn’t have to look far. A man in his late twenties, dressed in a rather scruffy grey suit, was standing behind her holding two suitcases; one small and one quite large.

She thanked him and the stranger put the cases down but didn’t move away immediately. To my embarrassment Penelope ignored him and turned back to me. ‘Would you bring my cases, please? Where’s the car?’ The man who’d carried her cases from the train stood for a few moments more and then walked away looking strangely alone. I felt sorry for him.

‘He kept trying to chat me up on the train,’ Penelope confided. ‘So I thought he could at least help with my cases.’

‘What on earth have you brought with you?’ The cases were difficult to lift.

Penelope shrugged. ‘Just a few clothes.’ She paused to flick a speck of dust off her jacket. ‘It’s difficult knowing what to bring to the country.’ I looked at the white trouser suit and thought about the inside of the Morris. I wished I’d remembered to give it a bit of a clean.

I opened the boot and just managed to fit Penelope’s two suitcases into it. ‘This is it!’ I said rather proudly.

‘Oh,’ said Penelope, clearly disappointed. ‘How sweet.’ She walked across to the front passenger door and looked inside. A look of clear distaste appeared instantly on her face. For the first time I noticed that she didn’t look anywhere near as pretty when her face showed any expression. She opened the door, brushed at the seat with her handkerchief and then sat down. I closed the boot lid, walked round to the driver’s door and jumped in beside her.

‘I’m so glad that you could come,’ I said. I leant across to give her a proper kiss and this time she let me kiss her briefly on the lips before pushing me away. ‘Not here. Not in public. Not now we’re both doctors.’

I put the key into the ignition and switched on.

‘Before we set off do you think we could have the hood up?’

I looked up at the sky. It was clear and cloudless. It was winter but it was a superb day for topless motoring. I got out of the car and put the hood up. While I did so Penelope took a small mirror out of her handbag and checked her make-up.

It took no more than fifteen minutes to drive from the railway station in Barnstaple to the Duck and Puddle in Bilbury but during the journey I realised two things.

First, I realised that Penelope and I didn’t seem to have anything much to talk about. At medical school we had, I thought, got on quite well. But now that all seemed a lifetime away. I tried to remember what we’d talked about then but could remember nothing that wasn’t tied up with work. We had discussed difficult cases we’d both seen. We had talked about textbook problems we’d encountered. And we had moaned about consultants we didn’t like. But it had all been practical work talk. We had never really bared our souls to each other.

Since moving to Bilbury I had begun to start to live and to enjoy my life in a way that had never really been possible when I’d been a student. Instead of working with cases and diseased organs I was working with people and it had made a difference to the way I looked at the world. I was working harder than ever but I enjoyed it.

Second, I began to realise that I might have made a mistake when organising the sleeping arrangements for the weekend.

‘Will your girlfriend be sharing your room?’ Mrs Parsons had asked me when I’d told her that Penelope was coming.

I’d blushed. ‘I think so.’

But now I wasn’t so sure. In the past we had fallen into bed together when we’d been too tired to think but had merely needed the physical release of making love and then falling asleep together. Somehow, things seemed different now. Going to bed together at the Duck and Puddle seemed cold-blooded and I wasn’t sure that it was what either of us wanted or expected.

With all this on my mind it is perhaps hardly surprising that I didn’t speak during the journey to Bilbury.

Penelope, too, was silent until I parked the Morris in the small car park outside the pub.

‘Is this it?’ she asked, looking around her at the village green, the cottages and the village shop. She sounded horrified.

‘This is it! Home!’ I looked round and tried to see it through her eyes; tried to remember how it had looked when I’d first seen it.

We got out of the car. I collected Penelope’s suitcases out of the boot and we went into the pub. Gilly Parsons was hoovering the stairs. Frank was sitting in his trousers and vest in the bar drinking coffee and eating his usual bacon sandwich. In the kitchen I could hear Patsy singing. I put Penelope’s suitcases down in the hall and introduced Penelope, Frank and Gilly to one another.

‘Hello Penny!’ said Frank, cheerfully. He held out his hand, thought about it, pulled it back and wiped it on his trousers. Then he offered it again.

‘It’s Penelope, actually,’ said Penelope. Then she paused and corrected herself. ‘Dr Shrewsbury.’

Frank looked as embarrassed as I felt. Penelope didn’t take his hand so he withdrew it, sat down and picked up his sandwich again.

‘Would you like a coffee, love?’ asked Gilly. ‘Travelling always makes me thirsty.’

‘I’d prefer to freshen up a bit first,’ Penelope answered.

‘I’ve had an absolute nightmare of a journey. If you could show me to my room?’

Gilly looked at me and I looked back at her hoping that she had a spare room where she could put Penelope. She smiled at me and nodded to show that she understood. I was appalled at the way that Penelope was behaving. I thought of Frank and Gilly Parsons as my friends. Penelope was treating them as though they were servants.

Gilly didn’t hesitate. ‘I know how you feel, love. Follow me.’ She lifted the vacuum cleaner out of the way and led the way up the stairs.

As she moved to follow, Penelope turned to me. ‘Would you bring my bags up?’

It made me feel slightly better to have her treat me like a servant too. I picked up her bags and followed her. As I did so I looked across at Frank. I thought he might have been cross but he wasn’t. He was grinning broadly now and he pulled a face at me as though he had just tasted something sour. Since Penelope was my guest I suppose I should have been offended but I wasn’t.

It was twelve o’clock before Penelope reappeared. I was practising pool in the bar when she came down. She had changed out of the trouser suit and had on a blue pleated skirt, a white blouse and a white cardigan. At first sight I hardly recognised her because in addition to changing her clothes she had also changed her hairstyle and now wore a blonde, shoulder length wig.

The wig was so good that for a while I wasn’t sure which was real: the short, page boy style brown hair or the shoulder length blonde stuff.

‘Would you like to go into Combe Martin for lunch?’ I asked her. ‘There’s a super pub down by the harbour?’

‘If that’s what you recommend,’ she said. So we drove into Combe Martin, which she thought was rather tired and grubby looking, parked overlooking the beach which she thought looked distinctly unsavoury and ate fish, chips and peas, which she thought rather ordinary at a pub which she said she wouldn’t go out of her way to visit again.

I didn’t know what to do with her after we’d finished lunch so for a while we sat in the car and watched the tide coming in.

‘It’s very quiet here, isn’t it?’ she said at last. ‘Don’t you get bored?’

I said I didn’t get at all bored and that I liked living in the country very much.

‘I don’t think I could cope with it,’ said Penelope. ‘Apart from the fact that it’s so damned boring don’t you worry about your career?’

I genuinely didn’t know what she meant. I said so.

‘You’re so far out of things here,’ she explained patiently. ‘Are you going to stay in general practice?’

I said I thought I probably was.

‘But don’t you think it’s a bit second rate?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, you’re hardly practising high technology medicine in Bilbury, are you?’ she laughed. ‘You always were a bit of a dreamer. But you have to think about these things.’

‘I enjoy the job. And I like the people.’

‘But that’s not everything is it?’ Penelope said that most of the consultants she knew regarded general practice as very much a backwater. ‘It’s for the drop outs,’ she said. ‘The people who can’t cut it in hospital.’

I didn’t say anything. I knew she wasn’t right, whatever the hospital consultants said. I liked living in Bilbury. I liked the smell of the log fire in the Duck and Puddle. I liked the countryside. I even liked the rain. And I knew that working as a general practitioner was hard, exacting, worthwhile work. My only doubt was whether I was up to it.

‘I’m going into radiology,’ said Penelope firmly. ‘I’ve done some research and there’s a shortage of consultant radiologists. I should be able to get a good consultant's post by the time I'm thirty.'

She stared out of the car windscreen for a moment. 'I did think about geriatrics but I don't think I could put up with the smell all day long.' She wrinkled her nose with distaste.

'Do you enjoy radiology?' I asked her. 'Isn't looking at X-ray pictures all day long a bit tedious?'

Penelope shrugged. 'I'm staying in Bristol until the end of the year. And then I'm applying for a job in London. If you work in a stimulating city it doesn't matter too much if your job is a bit tedious.' She moved the driving mirror and checked her lipstick. 'Anyway,' she said, 'you can always come and work in the country when you're old if that's what you still want to do.'

I thought that she was wrong. I remembered a friend who wanted to get rich so that he could take off and ride his motorbike round the world. He didn't need to become all that rich. Just rich by our standards. He got a job with a small chemical company and made a fortune within five years. But by then he'd got so hooked by the system that he forgot his dreams. And he became just another man in a suit.

I started the car and we drove over to Lynton. I wanted to go for a walk on Lynmouth beach but Penelope didn't have any decent walking shoes with her so instead we walked along a cliff top path to the Valley of the Rocks. The path there clings to the cliff edge and there is a spectacular three hundred foot drop down to the sea below. It was a clear day and we could see the Welsh coastline in the distance. A family of wild goats stood on the path and stared at us in innocent curiosity as we edged our way past them. Suddenly something startled them and they fled up the rocky cliff face, springing from one small ledge to another with remarkable surefootedness.

We had a pot of tea for two and a plate full of buttered tea cakes in a cafe in Lynton. Penelope tried to persuade me to give up my job with Dr Brownlow and to go back to work in hospital. 'It may seem idyllic now,' she said. 'But you'll soon get bored with it. And how much money can you make in a place like Bilbury for God's sake?'

'I don't think I will get bored,' I told her. 'I've never done anything so challenging or so stimulating.'

'But you're not going to make any money, are you?'

'Enough.'

'But you're living in a pub!' said Penelope. 'You've got to get into the property market. Can you afford to buy a house on what you're earning? And what sort of houses are there round here, for God's sake?'

'I haven't even thought of buying a house,' I confessed. The truth was that I rather liked living in the pub. I wasn't ready for the responsibility of owning a house.

We drove back from Lynton to Bilbury in silence again. The relationship between us had changed. Both of us seemed to have changed. Penelope had become more professional and more ambitious. She seemed hard-hearted. I wasn't sure exactly how I'd changed but I knew that I had. At medical school we'd had simple, straightforward things like passing exams to worry about. There had been no real competition between any of us. We had been united in our fear of the senior consultants and our determination to survive the system. There hadn't been time to formulate career plans or to worry about money.

'You're going to stay down here, then?' asked Penelope as I took a short cut through Parracombe. It wasn't a question so much as a statement and I couldn't help detecting a certain finality in the way she spoke.

I thought carefully before I answered. 'I hope so. I like it here.'

A car was parked outside the general stores in Parracombe and the road was blocked. I slowed down, pulled in behind it and waited for the driver to come out.

'I've been seeing someone else,' said Penelope unexpectedly.

I was surprised to find that I received this news with relief rather than dismay. 'Anyone I know?'

She shook her head. 'He's a surgical registrar,' she said after a moment. 'He's Greek,' she added inconsequentially.

A man in a green oiled jacket came out of the shop clutching a loaf of bread, a bottle of milk and a brown paper packet. He smiled and waved, opened his car door, put his purchases down onto the front passenger seat, climbed in and drove off. I followed. 'Is it serious? Do you love him? Why are you here?' The questions piled up but I didn't ask any of them.

'Aren't you going to say anything?' Penelope asked me.

I still didn't say anything. I was startled to realise that I felt strangely relieved.

'I imagine it's come as rather a shock,' said Penelope. She reached out and touched my hand. 'I'm sorry,' she said.

'Why did you come?'I asked her at last.

She paused for a moment. 'I had to see you. I'm not really in love with him.

I slowed down as the car in front braked. It was dusk and his brake lights shone brightly. I switched on my side lights. There was another long silence. 'Won't you come back and work in hospital?'

I shook my head. 'I'm sorry,' I said.

'But there's no future for you here! Can't you see that?' She paused. 'I'll give him up if you come back to Bristol.'

Somehow it made everything very easy. I pulled the car into a gateway, put on the handbrake and turned to face her. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said, though I didn’t really know why I was apologising. ‘Shall I take you back to the station?’

‘I think that might be a good idea,’ said Penelope. Her face looked hard.

I hadn’t even switched off the ignition. I took the hand brake off and drove straight off again.

Five minutes later we were back at the Duck and Puddle. I waited in the bar while Penelope went upstairs to pack her suitcases. While I waited I telephoned the station in Barnstaple. The man who answered told me that there was a train in twenty five minutes time that would connect with a main line express from Cornwall to Bristol. Frank looked at me while I made the call but didn’t say anything. I went upstairs and knocked on Penelope’s door.

‘If we hurry you can just catch the last train to Exeter,’ I told her. ‘It connects with an express to Bristol.’

The door opened and Penelope came out. Her eyes were red and there were tear stains on her cheeks but she wasn’t crying any more. I looked behind her and saw that her bags were packed. ‘I can get a taxi.’

‘Don’t be silly. I’ll take you.’

We got there with five minutes to spare. The train was already standing in the station waiting. I put her cases on and then climbed off and let Penelope climb past me. I stood on the platform and she stood at the open window. ‘It didn’t have to end like this,’ she said. She took a small handkerchief out of her handbag. It had green and red embroidery around the edges. She blew her nose daintily and put the handkerchief away again. ‘You’re throwing everything away.’

‘I hope everything goes according to plan,’ I told her. ‘I hope the Greek looks after you.’ I felt bad about the fact that I couldn’t wait for the train to start. I felt that Penelope and I had nothing at all in common. I didn’t love her and I knew she didn’t really love me.

‘We had some good times, didn’t we?’

I nodded. There had been good times it was true. But the good times were now a part of the past. In the future our lives would, I knew, go in very different directions. Penelope’s was planned. I had no idea what was going to happen in mine.

The train started with a jerk and Penelope clutched at the door.

‘Bye!’ I said, waving a hand.

Penelope didn’t say anything and didn’t wave. Neither of us promised to write letters that we knew we’d never write. I thought she looked very sad and lonely and I couldn’t help feeling sorry for her as the train slowly disappeared down the line towards Exeter. I felt sorry for her because I thought that her life contained no passion. She was doing things because she thought she ought to do them rather than because she wanted to do them. I stood there for a few moments, watching the train until it was out of sight. It was like watching my last connections with the past disappear. Then I turned and went back to the car and drove back to Bilbury.

I am slightly ashamed to admit that I sang all the way home. I didn’t really know why but I felt happier than I had felt for a long time.

* * *

‘He came home the day before yesterday,’ said Mrs Harper.

‘I thought the hospital would have let you know.’

They hadn’t.

I followed Mrs Harper up the stairs to Keith’s bedroom. ‘What did they say when they let him come home?’

‘They did all sorts of tests and said that he definitely hasn’t got diabetes.’

‘What has he got then?’

‘They said they couldn’t find anything wrong with him at all. But this morning he’s as bad as ever.’ She was right. Keith was lying in bed looking just as ill as he had when I’d sent him into hospital. I sat down on the edge of his bed and picked up his hand. His skin felt clammy and his pulse was racing. He looked weak and there were tears in his eyes.

‘How did you feel when you came out of hospital?’

‘I felt OK,’ answered Keith. He spoke so quietly that I could hardly hear him and his voice shook, though whether it was with weakness or with anxiety I didn’t know.

‘He seemed right as rain when he came out,’ said Mrs Harper. ‘He was playing in the garden.’

‘What happened?’

‘It’s difficult to say. He came in at tea time, had his tea, had a bath and came downstairs to watch a programme on television...’

‘It was Thundercats,’ interrupted Keith.

‘That’s right,’ agreed his mum. ‘He came down to watch Thundercats. But he wasn’t his normal self and then by the time he was ready for bed he was beginning to look queasy again.’

I took out my stethoscope and listened to Keith’s chest. His heart was racing. I listened to his lungs, examined his abdomen, looked in his ears, tested his reflexes and asked him a hundred questions. At the end of it all I still didn’t have the faintest idea what was wrong with him.

‘I’m going to get you back into hospital, I’m afraid.’ Keith started to cry.

‘We’ve got to get you better,’ I told him. ‘They can do tests I can’t do.’ I got up off his bed and moved aside so that Mrs Harper could hug her son. ‘I’ll go and telephone the hospital,’ I said quietly.

* * *

‘A girl’s been on the phone after you,’ said Frank Parsons as I walked into the pub. ‘A girl called Kim,’ he added, concentrating hard on the pint of beer he was pulling. He took great pride in his work.

‘New one, eh?’ said Thumper who, as ever, was standing at the bar bent over a nearly empty glass. I once asked Thumper why his glass was nearly always empty and in a semi drunken moment he explained that it was a trick he’d learned from his father. ‘Always drink two thirds of your pint the minute it arrives and far more people will offer you a refill than if you’re standing there with a glass that’s almost full.’

‘I don’t know anyone called Kim. It must be a patient.’

‘It wasn’t a patient,’ said Frank. ‘I asked her about that in case it was an emergency.’ He handed the pint he’d just pulled to the customer who’d ordered it then reached behind him, took a scrap of paper from beside the till and handed it to me. ‘That’s her phone number.’

Curious, I rang her straight away. A male voice I half recognised answered the telephone and with bad grace agreed to fetch Kim to speak to me. A minute or so later a bright young female voice came onto the phone.

‘Hello!’ she said cheerily, when I’d told her my name. ‘Thanks for calling back. Do you believe in the use of animals in medical experiments?’

The question caught me off guard. I hadn’t expected it. But it wasn’t a difficult question to answer. ‘No!’ I answered firmly and honestly.

‘That’s marvellous!’ said Kim. ‘I’m the secretary of the North Devon Anti-Vivisection Group. We’re holding a public meeting in Barnstaple a week on Thursday. Would you come?’

‘I don’t know...’ I said hesitantly. ‘I don’t know if I can get away...’

‘Will you come if you can get away?’

I hesitated.

‘Good!’ said Kim firmly. ‘Can I put you down to say a few words to our group?’

‘Oh, I don’t know about that!’ I said, quickly. The thought of saying anything in public has always horrified me.

‘It’ll be a great boost to the group,’ insisted Kim. ‘You being a doctor.’ She paused. ‘And it would be a pity for you to be there and not to speak.’

‘I’m not sure that I can be there,’ I reminded her.

‘You work for Dr Brownlow don’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘He’s my grandfather,’ said Kim. ‘I’ll have a word with him and ask him to make sure that you aren’t on duty that evening.’

‘Dr Brownlow is your grandfather?’ I realised why I’d recognised the voice of the man who’d answered the phone. That must have been Dr Brownlow’s son, Simon.

‘Yes!’ said Kim brightly. ‘He’ll do anything for me. Absolutely anything.’

‘How many people will be there?’ I asked her, becoming more and more horrified as I realised my escape route had been blocked.

‘We usually get twenty to thirty,’ answered Kim. ‘But if they know we’re getting a doctor to speak we’ll probably be able to get more than that.’

‘What do you want me to speak about?’ Kim had totally out manoeuvred me and I had now accepted the inevitable.

‘Anything you like!’ said Kim brightly. ‘As long as it’s about why vivisection should be stopped.’ She said that she’d send the details of where the meeting was due to be held in the post, thanked me for agreeing to speak and put the phone down.

* * *

At the end of the evening surgery I had a telephone call from the hospital to tell me that they were sending Keith Harper back home again.

‘But he’s only been in for a few hours!’

‘He was ill enough when he came in,’ admitted the doctor who phoned me. ‘But he’s perfectly OK again now. We can’t find anything wrong with him at all.’

‘And you haven’t got any idea what made him ill?’

‘None whatsoever,’ said the hospital doctor cheerily. ‘Let us know if he gets ill again and we’ll take him back in.’

I thanked him, put the telephone down and wondered how long it would be before I heard from Mrs Harper again.

* * *

In the pub that evening Thumper handed me £20 in brand new notes.

‘What’s this for?’

‘The insurance company have paid up for the Humber. That’s your change.’

‘Change?’

‘After paying for the Humber and the Morris Minor.’

I looked at the four five pound notes and then I looked at Thumper. I was puzzled. ‘You mean I don’t owe you anything for the Morris?’

Thumper nodded.

‘I’ve got £20 and a Morris Minor and I don’t owe you any money?’

Thumper grinned. ‘That’s right.’

I didn’t understand but I put the money in my wallet and told Frank to fill up Thumper’s almost empty glass.

* * *

Lionel Francis had seen Dr Charles Jarvis but the radiologist had been unable to offer him the contradiction and comfort that he wanted. ‘The X-ray clearly shows a large cancerous growth which has already spread throughout one lung,’ wrote Jarvis in a letter to me. ‘I’m afraid that this man will probably not survive more than another six weeks.’

Every day Mr Francis’s condition seemed to confirm the accuracy of that diagnosis. Within a few days of the diagnosis being made Mr Francis was virtually unrecognisable. The corpulent, arrogant man who had visited me in the surgery complaining of nothing more than a persistent and annoying cough had become a weakened and pathetic shadow of his former self.

‘He won’t eat and he hasn’t got the strength to get out of bed.’ his wife told me when I visited him one morning. ‘He’s fading away before my eyes.’ I followed her upstairs to the spare bedroom which had been converted into a sickroom. The curtains were drawn and the room already smelt of death. I hardly recognised the grey skinned figure lying on the bed. His eyes were dull and full of fear and he looked like a man who has given up the fight to live. In my clumsy, untutored way I tried to persuade him to fight but he would have none of it. He had accepted the sentence of death that Charles Jarvis had pronounced and he had always been far too much of a believer in the power of the modern medicine man to give credence to the thought that there might be hope.

* * *

If Lionel Francis’s rapid deterioration was unexpected it was hardly inexplicable. The same could not, however, be said for the deterioration which had taken place in Hubert Donaldson’s health. The penicillin that I had given Hubert seemed to have made no difference at all to his condition. On the contrary, instead of getting better, as I had expected, he seemed to be getting worse. When I persuaded him to undress again so that I could listen to his chest it was impossible not to notice that he had lost even more weight and that his skin had acquired a greyish-yellow pallor.

‘I want you to have another X-ray. The antibiotic doesn’t seem to be working.’

Hubert didn’t seem too enthusiastic. ‘I don’t like hospitals,’ he said simply. He breathed in deeply and leant back. ‘But I’ll go for another X-ray if that’s what you want me to do.’

I wrote out a request for a repeat chest X-ray and handed him the form.

* * *

CHAPTER EIGHT

During the night I had been woken several times by the sound of rain lashing against my window. My room faced south west and the wind had clearly been coming from that direction. When my alarm clock went off at seven thirty I jumped out of bed, went over to the window and drew the curtains to see what damage the storm had done. I was glad I hadn't been called out to any emergencies; it sounded as if it had been a night for staying tucked up in bed.

The first person I saw was Frank Parsons. He was dressed in a green waterproof jacket, waterproof hat and wellington boots. The wind had died down but it was still raining fairly heavily. In his hand Frank held a large lump hammer and looking at the debris around him I assumed that he was struggling to do some emergency repairs. A wooden fence had been flattened and a small wooden tool shed had lost half its roof. Rubbish from an overturned dustbin was strewn around the garden. Across the road I could see Peter Marshall at the village shop. He too seemed to be struggling to do some basic repairs. I pulled on my clothes, shrugged into my waterproof jacket and hurried downstairs to see if I could help.

'It must have been pretty bad last night,' I said, approaching my landlord and picking my way through the broken fence panels. He turned and looked at me with some surprise.

'Didn't expect to see you out here!'

'I saw you out of the window,' I explained. 'I thought I'd come and see if you wanted a hand.' I looked around. A long ladder, brought out of the garage, had already been leant against the side of the house. 'Is there any damage to the roof?'

'Not yet.'

'It seems to have died down now,' I said, mistaking his meaning. 'It doesn't look as if the wind will be back for a while.' I looked around. The tree tops were still; though it was still raining hard there was hardly any wind and the heavy clouds hovering above looked to be almost stationary.

'You go and get your breakfast,' said Frank. 'There isn't anything out here that you can do.' He wiped his nose on the back of his hand. 'But thanks for the offer. Much appreciated.'

'I'll help you clear up some of this debris.' I bent down and lifted up a broken fence panel. 'Where do you want this putting?'

'It's OK,' said Frank. 'You can leave it there.'

'No, really!' I insisted. 'It's going to take you ages to sort this lot out.'

'I'd rather you left it where it is.' Frank seemed surprisingly firm and I still didn't quite understand. 'I've got the insurance assessor coming later on this morning.' He looked straight at me and winked. Before I could say anything he had started to climb up the ladder to the roof. I stood and watched.

'Stand clear!' he shouted, with the hammer in his hand. I stood back just in time as Frank brought the hammer crashing down onto the roof. A shower of broken slates crashed down to join the debris on the ground.

I still assumed that he was merely clearing away stuff that could be dangerous if it wasn't brought down, and so out of curiosity I moved back even further to try to see the extent of the damage to the roof. To my astonishment the roof looked to be in virtually perfect condition. There were one or two gaps where slates were missing but judging by the growth of moss on the underlying slates the missing ones had been gone for some time. I stood and watched open mouthed as Frank crawled higher up onto the roof and carefully and systematically broke slates in all the areas where the roof was already damaged. Then I watched as he deliberately dropped a slate onto the flat roof of an outside lavatory. The slate smashed instantly, leaving a great shard sticking up out of the flat roof.

'The main roof has been leaking for ages and that damned outside lavatory always leaks like a sieve,' explained Frank when he had climbed back down the ladder.

Slowly, it dawned on me that my landlord was simply taking advantage of the storm to get some essential repair work done at the insurance company's expense. 'Aren't you worried that they'll find out?' I asked him in a whisper, looking around to make sure that no one was listening. 'Insurance fraud is illegal!'

'Fraud?' said Frank indignantly. 'What are you talking about?'

I looked around at the debris, the broken slates, the broken pieces of fence and the rubbish from the upturned dustbin. There was, it was quite true, no sign of any fraudulent activity; merely signs of storm damage.

Frank smiled at me and nodded towards the other side of the village green. 'Look!' I looked and could see at least half a dozen householders. At first glance each one seemed to be busy trying to repair the damage that the storm had done. But a closer examination showed that most were doing exactly what my landlord had been doing.

'In a way we're helping the insurance companies,' said Frank with a smile that rapidly grew into a broad grin.

‘We’re all getting rid of structural weaknesses and having essential repair work done before anything serious happens. That’s just what insurance companies always advise people to do.’

‘I’ve no doubt they’ll be grateful,’ I agreed.

Frank looked across to where Peter Marshall was working. ‘OK Pete?’

The shopkeeper-cum-taxi-driver nodded cheerfully. ‘New shed roof, new back porch and some body repair work on the taxi!’ he shouted. He sounded very pleased. He waved and disappeared into the house. I’d never before seen people receive storm damage with such good grace.

‘Let’s get some breakfast,’ said Frank. ‘I don’t know about you but I’m starving.’ He led the way towards the back door, stopping only to pull a loose drainpipe away from the wall completely, letting it fall with a loud clatter across the tangle of broken wood and slate.

‘Bilbury is an insurance based economy,’ explained Frank as, for the first time, we ate breakfast together. Normally he didn’t get up until long after I’d left the pub for the surgery. ‘We can’t afford to get our properties repaired without help from the insurance companies.’ He took a huge bite of his perennial favourite, a bacon sandwich. ‘Insurance claims are second to tourism as a source of income round here.’ As he spoke he sprayed crumbs around in all directions. Eating with Frank was always a hazardous business. When Frank ate it was the people around him who needed napkins.

‘Don’t the insurance companies ever complain?’

‘They never notice anything,’ said Frank. ‘Apart from the fact that Bilbury seems to be a bit exposed to south westerly winds.’ He took another bite and brown sauce dripped out of his sandwich and onto the back of his hand. He licked the sauce off his hand. ‘They fix their premium rates for counties,’ he explained, ‘so as long as the people in other parts of Devon don’t get too much storm damage we’ll be OK.’

‘Don’t you have difficulty in finding workmen to do all the repairs?’

Frank shook his head and emptied his mouth before answering. ‘We do all the work ourselves,’ he told me. ‘I have some notepaper printed up as GB House Repairs. Thumper is North Devon Repairs and Pete Marshall is Devon House Restorations. I’ll quote for some of the work over the road and they’ll quote for my work.’

‘So you get the insurance companies to pay you for repairing your own houses?’

Frank nodded. ‘It’s the capitalist system and free economy working at its very best,’ he answered, pouring himself another cup of tea.

* * *

I had left medical school rich with the arrogance of youth; an arrogance that had been blessed by the provision of a medical diploma and endorsed by the might of the medical profession which assumes that it is possible to turn an irresponsible, callow medical student into a responsible, all-knowing medical practitioner overnight. But, as the weeks went by, I gradually began to learn the true extent of my ignorance. Gently, patiently and with a kindly sympathy Dr Brownlow’s patients taught me that the human spirit is bewilderingly complex and reliably unpredictable. If I learnt one sure thing it was that making premature judgements about people was almost certain to lead to some modest embarrassment at best and, at worst, to an unforgettable humbling.

Few patients helped to illustrate my ignorance of the human condition more effectively than Thomas O’Donnell.

Born in Dublin around the turn of the century Thomas O’Donnell had migrated to Liverpool in the late 1920s in search of employment and, continuing his fruitless search, had drifted further and further south throughout the bleak years of the following decade. After surviving a number of close brushes with various part of the establishment he had ended up in North Devon in the 1950s. There he had finally come to terms with the fact that having been unemployed for so long he had become unemployable.

‘If it’ll be all the same to you I’ll have another certificate for the sick, doctor!’ he said, when I first visited him. He beamed at me from his huge, old-fashioned, wooden posted bed. Like most ex-patriots he had become far more Irish in exile than most Irishmen ever are at home and his accent, demeanour and habits were all quintessentially Irish in flavour. His voice rose and fell throughout each sentence as though in constant search for some satisfactory level.

Having been asked to visit him in his bed I innocently assumed that there was something wrong with him. So I asked him what else I could do for him. This was, for me, a polite, rather roundabout way of saying: ‘What symptoms have you got?’

He looked at me uncomprehendingly, but with a growing look of alarm.

‘Apart from the sick note,’ I added quickly, realising the cause of his distress and wanting to reassure him that the sick note wasn’t under any sort of threat.

‘Nothing thank you, doctor,’ said Thomas.

I waved an arm towards the bed and bluntly asked him what was wrong with him. I had no nasty motive. I just wanted to know.

‘It’s the weariness, doctor,’ said Thomas, with a smile that would have charmed the devil himself. ‘I have the weariness.’ He paused, as though temporarily overcome by exhaustion. ‘And whatever can you do about the weariness?’

I opened my mouth but being unable to think of anything appropriate to say I simply wrote out the requested sick note, laid it on the edge of the bed with the reverence that seemed appropriate, replaced my fountain pen in my inside jacket pocket and closed my mouth. I did all this in silence. Thomas ignored the certificate in the same superior way that a waiter will ignore a tip. We nodded to each other and I left.

Gradually, I thought I was getting to know Thomas O’Donnell quite well. He seemed to have an insatiable need for documentary evidence with which to support his invalidity. Apart from the straightforward sick notes for the national insurance people he also seemed to have a variety of insurance policies which required some sort of paper work completing. Most of these certificates required me to confirm that Thomas was unable to work but one or two simply required me to confirm that he was still alive. ‘It’s the pension company,’ explained Thomas, in his rich and soothing brogue. ‘They’ll only pay out for as long as I’m alive.’

On none of my early visits to Thomas O’Donnell’s cottage did I ever see him out of his bed. Indeed, for all I knew there might not have been anything of him apart from a head and shoulders and two arms. The rest of him was invariably hidden beneath a double layer of heavy woollen blankets and a thick, richly embroidered red eiderdown. The front door was always open and a small sun-faded postcard thumb tacked to the front door invited all callers to climb the stairs if they wanted to speak to Mr O’Donnell.

‘What do you do about food?’ I asked him one day. ‘Shopping, cooking and stuff like that?’

‘I have the most wonderfully kind neighbours,’ explained Thomas, with a firm nod of his head.

‘People do your shopping and cooking for you?’

‘They do.’

‘And bring all your meals to you here in your bed?’

‘They do indeed.’

And they did too.

Mr and Mrs Broadstone, the kindly couple who lived in the next door cottage clearly looked after him devotedly. They shared the vegetables they grew in their garden. They picked up his groceries and his tobacco and his pensions at the corner shop and they even did his laundry for him.

‘Don’t you ever feel, well, guilty?’ I asked him one day.

‘Guilty?’ repeated Thomas, apparently genuinely puzzled. ‘Now, why ever should I feel guilty?’

‘Letting your neighbours look after you all the time,’ I explained. ‘They’re old too.’

But Thomas just smiled. He didn’t seem to know what guilt was. It was the first time I’d ever come across a Catholic whose life wasn’t regulated by guilt.

‘Don’t you ever get bored?’ I asked him on another occasion. ‘Just lying in bed all day. What do you do?’

Thomas raised a firm, white forefinger and tapped it deliberately against his temple. ‘I think!’ he told me. ‘I think.’

‘But what do you think about?’

‘I think about life, doctor,’ said Thomas. He paused. ‘And I think about death.’ He smiled at me as though challenging me to admit that I didn’t understand. The simplicity of his answer reminded me of the sort of alarming truth one comes across in dreams. It has happened to me several times. I wake up in half shock convinced that I have discovered the meaning of life. I write down the magic words and then I go back to sleep. When I wake up the following morning I find myself staring at a piece of paper upon which are written phrases such as ‘love is beautiful’ or ‘death is the end’.

I arrived one Friday to give Thomas his sick note, bounded up the stairs and found the bedroom empty. The heavy mahogany wardrobe was still there. The small pine dressing table was still there. The oval handbasin was still there, with a bright red towel neatly folded on the rail underneath it. And the heavy wooden posted bed was still there. But the blankets and sheets were turned back and of Thomas himself there was no sign.

I assumed that he must have slipped out of bed to answer a call of nature and so I sat down on the edge of his bed and gazed out of the window. The window was low and from the bed it was possible to see a vast stretch of countryside. A group of hens were scratching at a bare patch of soil in a very desultory fashion. A pair of geese were strutting around as though they had inherited the earth. And a large black and white cat was asleep on a small grassy knoll behind the chicken shed.

‘Hello, doctor!’

I recognised the cheery voice instantly and turned my head.

I had trusted my ears but now I doubted my eyes. The figure before me had definitely not just clambered out of bed. He was wearing a dark, three piece heavy worsted suit, a white shirt with a stiffly starched collar and a plain, dark green tie. Balanced on the top of his head was a smart black trilby hat. His feet were encased in a pair of plain black socks. And inside all this stood Thomas O’Donnell.

‘I’ve lost my shoes,’ he announced sternly. He knelt down with surprising suppleness and peered under the bed. Then he squeezed past me, moved round to the other side of the bed and did the same thing there.

‘Has the weariness gone?’ I asked him. I didn’t ask him the question with any mischief in mind and I don’t think Thomas mistook my genuine curiosity for anything other than what it was. He turned, looked up and smiled at me. 'It has not, doctor,' he said sadly but firmly. 'The weariness has not gone.' He moved away from the bed and continued his search within the mahogany wardrobe. The single, shaped wooden hanger upon which the grey worsted suit had presumably rested hung naked from the rail. Below it Thomas rummaged around among a collection of untidily piled cardboard boxes. Eventually he pounced with some visible relief upon a white cardboard box which he seemed to recognise. He closed the wardrobe door, opened the shoe box and put on his shoes.

'Where are you going?' I asked.

'It's the hurling, doctor,' explained Thomas, as though that answered everything.

'The hurling?'

'The hurling,' Thomas confirmed. 'In Dublin.'

'What hurling?' I asked him, puzzled. Though I had never heard of it at the time I later discovered that although it is a game that has some passing similarity to hockey, it is played, apparently, without rules and at the end of each match every man on the field is invariably bloodied for there seem to be no constraints on the hitting of opponents with sticks. Hurling is a game that makes rugby, American football and Australian Rules football seem effeminate in comparison and only the Irish seem to play it.

'It is the Championships, doctor!' explained Thomas, as though talking to a child. There was no doubting the fact that the word 'Championships' began with a capital letter.

'How are you getting to Dublin?' I asked. It seemed a long way to travel for a man who hadn't been out of bed since I'd been living and working in Bilbury.

'I shall take Mr Marshall's taxi to Barnstaple, then I shall take a train to Exeter where I shall catch the express to Birmingham,' explained Thomas. 'In Birmingham I shall take a plane to Dublin.' He turned his left wrist and looked at his watch. 'The taxi should be here soon.' It occurred to me, though I didn't mention it, that for a man who suffered so much from the weariness it was a fairly impressive itinerary.

'When will you be back?'

'I shall come back home on the Monday, doctor,' answered Thomas, knotting a shoe lace with precision.

'I hope you have a good time.'

'I shall do that, doctor,' said Thomas O'Donnell. 'Without doubt I shall do that.' He tied the second shoe lace with the same precision with which he had tied the first. 'Have you a sick note for me, doctor?'

I wrote out his sick note, laid it down carefully on the bed as usual and left him tying a luggage label onto a green leather suitcase.

The astonishing thing about Thomas O'Donnell was that no one seemed to regard him as unusual and no one uttered any criticism of his behaviour. Upon his return from the hurling Championships in Dublin he took off his suit, hung it up in the wardrobe and clambered back into his bed. He then stayed there while Mr and Mrs Broadstone continued to do his shopping, cooking and laundry and I continued to write out sick notes so that he could continue to lie in bed all day and think about life and about death.

* * *

'I've got Charles Jarvis on the phone for you!' said Miss Johnson, popping her head into the consulting room just as I was about to start the evening surgery. She had that air of excitement about her that she always had when someone important was telephoning.

'Jarvis? Who's Charles Jarvis?' The name rang a distant bell but that was all.

'The senior radiologist at the hospital,' hissed Miss Johnson, as though afraid that he would be able to hear her through two solid stone walls.

I remembered and picked up the telephone. The voice at the other end sounded only slightly less than hysterical. 'I don't know how it happened,' he said, speaking rapidly. 'I've checked and double checked and it really can't be blamed on us.'

'What? What's happened?'

'There's been a mix up with some X-rays,' said Dr Jarvis.

'It's never happened before. Never. I've been here for 27 years and nothing like it has ever happened.' He sounded very flustered.

'What sort of mix up? Which X-rays?'

'One of your patients. Hubert Donaldson.'

'I sent him along this morning for a repeat X-ray,' I confirmed.

'That's how we found out,' said Dr Jarvis. 'His last X-ray showed a little bit of infection but the X-ray we took today shows a disseminated carcinoma. He can't possibly have deteriorated that rapidly in a week.'

'So, what do you think has happened?'

'His first X-ray must have got mixed up with someone else's,' explained Dr Jarvis. 'It's the only explanation. Heaven knows how we're going to find the identity of the patient who's got Mr Donaldson's report in his files. We've got thousands and thousands of files here. It could take months. It's terrible. Terrible.'

I knew instinctively the name of the patient with whom Hubert Donaldson's X-rays had been confused.

'I've got a patient called Lionel Francis,' I said. 'I think you know him.'

'Vaguely,' admitted Jarvis, sounding slightly irritated at the sound of the name. 'He's a member of my golf club. He's a bit of a pain to be honest. Didn't he come to see me recently?'

'He did. You said he'd got cancer. Could his X-ray have got mixed up with Hubert Donaldson's?'

'I can't see how,' said Dr Jarvis. 'There isn't much similarity between Donaldson and Francis, is there?'

'They both had their initial X-rays on the same day,' I pointed out.

'How is Francis now?'

'He's dying.'

'There you are then. His X-ray results must have been right.'

I hesitated. I didn't like arguing with a hospital consultant. I'd been brought up to respect them. 'Not necessarily,' I said. 'He could be dying because he expects to die. He has a lot of faith in doctors. Maybe his body is just doing what it's been told it should.'

'Poppycock,' said Dr Jarvis baldly.

'I honestly think it would be worth checking him out,' I said. 'If I get him along to the hospital can you arrange an urgent check X-ray?'

Reluctantly, Dr Jarvis agreed and so I rang for an ambulance to take Mr Francis to the hospital. Then I rang Mrs Francis to tell her that I wanted her husband to have another X-ray.

'What's the point?' she whispered. Even two miles away, down a telephone line, the house smelt of death. 'Lionel knows he's dying and he knows that there isn't anything you can do. It seems cruel to drag him along to the hospital.'

'We mustn't ever give up hope,' I said and with some reluctance Mrs Francis agreed to let the ambulance men take her husband along to the hospital X-ray department.

* * *

Dr Brownlow caught me as I was leaving the surgery. 'My grand-daughter rang me up last night,' he said. 'Only decent thing to have come out of my son. She says you want to have the evening off next Thursday to go and speak to some loony group in Barnstaple.'

'Well, that isn't exactly...'

'No problem,' said Dr Brownlow generously. 'I'll cover for you for the evening.'

He wasn't really being as generous as he thought he was. But I didn't like to say anything.

* * *

'I'm afraid I've got bad news for you,' I told Hubert Donaldson. 'Your X-rays...'

'I've got cancer,' said Hubert bluntly.

I looked at him. 'How did you know?'

He shrugged. 'I just knew,' he said. 'It feels like I'm dying.'

'There was a mix up at the hospital,' I explained.

Hubert started to say something but began to cough. I gave him a handkerchief.

'The hospital consultant who saw the X-rays says he doesn't think there is anything they can do. But I'd like to arrange for a second opinion.'

Hubert shook his head. 'No thank you.' He looked at me. 'But there is something you can do for me.'

'What? If I can I will.'

'Look after Ben when I've gone. I don't want her put down.'

'Of course,' I promised.

'Come and say "hello" again,' said Hubert.

We went out together. Ben was sitting patiently waiting for her master. Her ears pricked up when she saw him.

I'd never before seen a dog so clearly devoted to a human being.

* * *

'I feel like a duck!' complained Mrs Tate, leading a line of small children into the surgery and settling herself down on the other side of the desk.

I raised an eyebrow.

'I'm waddling like a duck and everywhere I go this lot follow me.' She put one hand on her tummy and stretched her back with the other.

'How many months are you?' Not even I could mistake Mrs Tate's pregnancy for a weight problem.

'Only five,' said Mrs Tate. 'I always carry a lot of fluid. When I had Kevin I put on over two stones and Dr Brownlow was talking about renting me out as a barrage balloon.'

I flicked through her medical records. 'Is this your first visit?'

Mrs Tate nodded.

'You really should have come a bit earlier,' I admonished her.

'Didn't seem a lot of point, I've had three so I know what to do.'

'Slip your things off, climb up onto the couch and I'll examine you,' I told her, expecting her to slip off her skirt and any relevant underwear.

While I waited for her I studied her medical records. She certainly didn't seem to have had any real problems with her previous pregnancies. When I looked up I had quite a shock. Mrs Tate was sitting on the edge of the examination couch absolutely stark naked. Her clothes were piled in an untidy heap on the chair she'd vacated. Her three small children were standing by the side of the couch looking up at her. The eldest had produced a gobstopper on a stick from somewhere and was licking it furiously and noisily.

With four pairs of eyes watching my every movement I got up and went over to the couch.

'Why is that strange man touching you there?' one of the children asked as I examined Mrs Tate's breasts.

I blushed so much that I could almost hear the blood pumping into my face.

'They're breasts,' said Mrs Tate.

'Daddy touches you there,' said another small voice.

'No he doesn't.'

'Yes he does. I've seen him.'

'Does Daddy know this man is touching you there?'

'Why is he doing it?'

'Do you like it mummy?'

'I'd like to see you in a couple of weeks' time,' I suggested.

'I've brought you a sample,' said Mrs Tate. 'Get the sample will you Daphne?'

Daphne rushed over to her mother's bag and produced a pickle jar.

'I washed it first,' Mrs Tate assured me. 'Wouldn't a month do?'

'I think a month would probably do,' I agreed, taking the pickle jar off Daphne.

'Why did that man touch them?'

'To examine them.'

'Is that why Daddy touches them?'

'Don't be silly. Daddy isn't a doctor.'

I tested the urine sample as rapidly as I could. 'You can put your clothes back on now,' I told Mrs Tate. 'Your sample is perfectly OK.'

'Does that man touch everyone's breasts?' I heard Daphne ask in a loud voice as Mrs Tate and her brood disappeared down the corridor.

* * *

When I had first taken the job as Dr Brownlow's assistant I had been promised that I could have half a day off a week. But it hadn't worked out quite like that until, at the end of one morning surgery, Dr Brownlow suddenly appeared.

'Have you got any visits?'

'Not yet.'

'Take the afternoon off. I'll hold the fort and do this evening's surgery. Take a bit of a break. Have a look at the countryside.'

I didn't wait to be told twice. Ten minutes later I was sitting in my Morris, with the top down, driving along the lanes with absolutely nowhere to go and nothing special to do. It felt wonderful. About half a mile out of the village I joined the main road between Barnstaple and Lynton. I turned left and almost immediately I saw a pedestrian walking along the side of the road. I slowed and recognised Patsy Kennett.

'Where are you going?' I asked, slowing to a halt alongside her.

'Watersmeet!' replied Patsy. 'Just up the river from Lynmouth,' she added when I looked puzzled. 'I've got to take them some honey from the farm and I promised a friend I'd help out this afternoon.'

'Do you want a lift?'

She hesitated. 'Are you sure?'

I opened the passenger door. 'Jump in!'

She thanked me with a glorious smile that I'd never seen before and climbed into the front passenger seat.

'Do you walk everywhere?' I asked her.

'I walk a lot,' she replied. 'But I was going to catch the bus to Lynton and then walk along the river to Watersmeet.'

'I'd have thought you'd have been kept busy on the farm!' Patsy winced. 'Please don't you start! I get enough of that from my father.'

'I'm sorry! I didn't mean...'

Patsy smiled forgiveness. 'I know. It's all right. It's just that my dad is always moaning at me. He says I ought to work on the farm all the time.' She paused for a few moments. 'I like working on the farm but I like to get out a bit occasionally.'

'I nodded and nearly ran into the back of a large tanker which seemed to be stuck. Its front end was half way through the gates that led into the drive up to Mike Trickle's house and its back end seemed to be stuck in a hedge on the other side of the road. I braked hard, stopped and waited while the tanker driver struggled to extricate his vehicle. We both sat and watched him.

‘Do you like working at the pub?’

‘I only do mornings,’ said Patsy. ‘Gilly asked me to help out and she’s always been nice to me. I like her a lot.’ The tanker driver managed to free his vehicle and I moved ahead again.

‘You can take a short cut down there,’ said Patsy, pointing to a narrow lane on the left. I turned off the main road and drove down a steep hill. ‘How’s your father?’ I asked, driving slowly through a tiny hamlet. Half a dozen hens squawked and fluttered as I drove round a corner. ‘I was going to visit a few days ago but when I rang to make sure someone would be in Adrienne said he was a lot better and there wasn’t any need to call.’

‘He is a lot better, thank you!’ said Patsy. ‘He was better within a day of stopping the hawthorn. His breathing is fine now and all the water swelling has gone down.’

‘No more chest pains?’

‘No.’

‘Good.’

‘Do you think he’ll be all right now? He’s working on the farm again.’

‘I think so,’ I said. ‘Though I’d like to have a quick look at him sometime if you can persuade him.’

‘I think he and Adrienne were both a bit embarrassed,’ confessed Patsy. ‘I think we all know that the hawthorn was poisoning him.’

‘Possibly,’ I said cautiously. I swerved to avoid a rabbit that had run out onto the road.

‘I hope Adrienne learns from it,’ said Patsy. ‘She’s ever so keen on herbal remedies. I worry about it sometimes.’ She pointed to the left again. ‘If you turn down there we’ll be back on the main road again.’

I turned left and five minutes later we came to a fork in the road. The left hand branch was signposted to Lynton.

The right hand branch went down a narrow lane signposted towards Lynmouth.

‘Right?’

‘Yes, please!’ said Patsy. ‘Are you sure this isn’t taking you out of your way?’

I shook my head. ‘Dr Brownlow has given me the afternoon off.’ I suddenly had an idea. ‘You said you were going to walk up to Watersmeet. If I park in Lynmouth do you mind if I walk up with you?’

Patsy seemed surprised. ‘Of course not!’ she said. ‘There’s a car park right by the river. Turn right at the bottom of the hill.’

I hadn’t been to Lynmouth before and I immediately fell in love with it. As I drove down the hill the view across the harbour and out to sea was breathtaking. ‘Where does that go?’ I asked Patsy, nodding towards a road that climbed up a long hill in front of us.

‘That’s the road to Porlock.’

‘I wouldn’t like to try and get up there in the mist,’ I said. ‘It must be pretty dangerous.’ The road was unfenced and on the left there was a drop of several hundred feet down to the sea. I slowed down to wait for a coach to pass by before I turned right and then left into the riverside car park.

‘The men of Lynmouth once dragged a lifeboat up that hill,’ said Patsy. ‘There was a storm at sea and a foreign ship was in trouble. They tried to launch the lifeboat in Lynmouth but the sea was too rough so they decided the only thing to do was to carry it up the hill and all the way to Porlock.’

I turned into the car park and reversed into a space.

‘The lifeboat crew lashed themselves and all the horses they could find to the boat and dragged it right across the moors,’ said Patsy. ‘They even had to knock down part of a cottage because the road was too narrow for the boat to go through.’

We got out of the car, Patsy clutching her bag full of honey. I looked up at the sky. It was clear but I knew how fast the weather in North Devon could change. ‘I’ll just put the hood up!’ I said. ‘Can I get some lunch at Watersmeet?’

Patsy nodded.

Together we climbed down the narrow stone steps that led to the riverside path and started to walk along the banks of the river to Watersmeet. The rugged majesty of it all impressed me enormously and I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been for a walk with no purpose in mind. To spend a few hours doing nothing but walk alongside a beautiful river with a beautiful companion seemed exquisitely reckless.

As we walked on, in comfortable silence, I gradually began to relax more and more. The peaceful beauty of the river seemed to me to be a perfect antidote to the harsh realities of the real world. The river itself, tumbling over rocks and through fern and moss laden grottoes; the heavily wooded hills, laden with hundreds of silvery, stunted oaks; the wild flowers; the lichen; the fungi and the rays of golden sunlight which filtered through the branches of the trees all seemed soothing and relaxing.

Suddenly, Patsy reached out and touched me lightly on the arm. She stopped walking and pointed across the river. We had walked up a slight incline and the river was fifty to sixty feet below us. ‘Look!’ she whispered.

I stopped and looked in the direction she was pointing.

‘A heron,’ she said softly. ‘On the bank. Looking for fish.’ The tall, unlikely looking bird merged easily into its background of silvery oaks and stood with unnatural stillness. It looked more like a garden ornament than a real bird. Quietly and carefully the huge bird stretched its wings. Then, equally quietly and equally carefully, it folded them again and settled down to watch the river once more.

We walked on. Patsy pointed out a cormorant drying its wings, a dipper and a wild mink swimming silently and skilfully in a deep water pool. We both stood and watched two rainbow trout in a shallow pool.

A mile and a half up the river, as the path rounded a rocky outgrowth, I caught sight of a beautiful, fairytale house. 'Is that Watersmeet?'

Patsy nodded. 'The house was built as a fishing lodge but it's a tea room now. It was built at the point where two rivers merge.'

'It looks like something that Hansel and Gretel might have lived in.'

'I love it up here,' said Patsy. 'Even in winter when it's quiet.'

'What time do you finish work?' I asked her.

'Six o'clock.'

'Can I walk you back and then give you a lift home?'

Patsy blushed. 'You don't have to. I can easily get the bus.'

'I'd like to.'

She hesitated. 'Thank you,' she said. 'That would be nice.' She stopped as something occurred to her. 'But what will you do between now and then?'

'I'll walk further up the river!' She laughed. 'OK.'

'I'll see you at six then.'

Neither of us moved.

There was something else I wanted to ask her.

'It's very beautiful here.'

'Yes.'

Still she didn't move away.

'Very relaxing.'

She nodded.

'Do you have to go straight back home when you've finished work?'

Patsy looked down. For a moment I thought she seemed uncertain. 'No,' she said. 'Not necessarily.'

'Would you like to come out with me for a meal?' I could feel my heart pounding and my hands felt clammy. I desperately wanted her to say 'yes'.

'Where?' she laughed. 'There aren't any fancy restaurants round here, you know!'

'I don't care where. A pub. Fish and chip shop. Anything. Whatever we can find.'

She relaxed. 'I'd love to.'

I wanted to take her into my arms, hold her tight and kiss her on the lips. I held my hand out. She took it. We shook hands formally.

'I'd better go,' she said, not moving.

'OK.'

'Really,' she laughed. I loved the sound of her laugh.

'OK.'

'You'll have to let go of my hand.' I let go of her hand but still she didn't go.

'I'll have to ring my mum,' she said. 'To tell her not to expect me for my tea.'

I nodded.

Suddenly she turned and ran into the tea rooms. I stood still for a few moments and watched the door through which she'd disappeared. Then I followed her into the tea rooms and bought myself a Cornish pasty, a huge piece of home-made apple pie and a large glass of lemonade. Patsy had disappeared but it was good to know that she was close by.

* * *

'What's up?' asked Thumper in the bar of the Duck and Puddle much later that evening.

'Nothing.'

'You're quiet.'

'Just tired.'

But I wasn't tired. I wasn't tired at all. My mind was firmly fixed on the evening I'd spent with Patsy. And my memories of Patsy were dominated by my memory of our first kiss.

Some kisses are gentle and simply social; no more than a greeting, a brush on the cheek. Some exist only as a prelude to other activities. But our first kiss had a life and a meaning of its own. I felt that it marked the beginning of something important. I hadn't felt so excited by a single kiss since I'd been sixteen-years-old.

* * *

CHAPTER NINE

I had seen very little of Kay Wilson after our unconsummated evening meal but not long after that eventful evening I got an urgent telephone call asking me to go round to the cottage to see her husband.

‘Come in!’ I heard a voice call, when I knocked on the front door. I obeyed. Inside, the sight of all that chintz and all those dried flower arrangements made me feel quite nervous again.

‘I’m over here, doctor,’ said a gruff voice.

I walked further into the room and saw that the owner of the voice was sitting on the floor on the other side of the sofa. There was a blonde, curly wig, a lot of eye shadow, bright red lipstick and a heavy growth of beard. This was, I assumed, P.C. Wilson.

I introduced myself and tried not to look surprised.

‘Thanks for coming, doctor,’ said P.C. Wilson. ‘I’ve got a bit of a problem, I’m afraid.’ He was wearing a pale pink silk blouse through which a black brassiere was clearly visible, a very short black leather mini skirt, black stockings and a pair of bright red high heeled shoes.

‘I’ve got my zip stuck,’ the policeman explained. He moved slightly to one side so that I could see what he meant. A flouncy piece of material that hung in generous folds around the base of the sofa had become jammed in the zip of his mini skirt. P.C. Wilson and the sofa were as one.

I was proud of the fact that I didn’t even blink. I bent down and tugged at the zip.

‘It seems stuck,’ I observed.

‘Yes,’ agreed P.C. Wilson. He looked as miserable as you might expect a man to look under such circumstances.

‘How on earth did you get like this?’

‘The skirt is a bit tight,’ the policeman explained. ‘I find it easier to get into it if I’m lying down.’

I poked at the zip with the blade of my penknife. ‘I think you’re going to have to choose between the skirt and the sofa cover.’

‘Don’t cut my skirt!’ cried P.C. Wilson. ‘I don’t care what you do to the sofa but don’t cut my skirt.’

Delicately, I cut a small hole in the chintzy material covering the sofa, enabling P.C. Wilson to stand up. He rubbed his back and examined the skirt zip ruefully.

‘You should be able to mend it,’ I assured him with entirely spurious confidence. My knowledge of zip technology has never been encyclopaedic.

‘I’m very grateful,’ said P.C. Wilson. ‘If ever I can...’

I held up a hand, embarrassed. ‘It was nothing,’ I murmured.

Suddenly, P.C. Wilson seemed to remember something else. He hesitated, plucking up courage, and then spoke again. ‘It’s a bit of a cheek,’ he said. ‘But while you’re here...’, he paused and swallowed noisily. His adam’s apple bobbed up and down in a rather startling way. ‘I’ve got a rash...’

‘Let me have a look,’ I told him. ‘I’ll see what I can do.’

He took off his blouse, unfastened his padded bra and turned round to show me his back. ‘It’s very itchy,’ he told me, reaching over his shoulder to point at a small red area in the middle of his back.

I leant forwards and looked closer. ‘It’s a small patch of dermatitis,’ I told him. I bent down and picked up his discarded upper under-garment. ‘It’s the nickel,’ I explained. ‘The nickel on the catch at the back of your bra.’ I took out my prescription pad and wrote out a prescription for a small quantity of steroid cream. ‘That should get rid of the rash. And to stop it coming back paint the metal catch with clear nail varnish.’

P.C. Wilson took the prescription I held out to him and smiled. ‘That’s wonderful!’ he said. Suddenly he seemed to notice the watch on my wrist. ‘Is that the time?’

I told him it was.

‘I must rush and get changed for work,’ P.C. Wilson said, striding out of the living room and heading for the stairs.

‘Would you like a cup of tea? Coffee? Put the kettle on, will you? I’ll have a black coffee.’

I didn’t really want anything but he’d disappeared before I had a chance to say anything so I wandered into the kitchen, filled the electric kettle with water and switched it on.

‘Splendid!’ said the same gruff voice a few minutes later. I had made two cups of black, instant coffee which were standing steaming on the kitchen table. I turned round and almost didn’t recognise P.C. Wilson at all. He was wearing thick soled black shoes, smart blue serge trousers with a razor sharp crease up the front, a blue jacket with shiny silver buttons, a blue shirt and a black tie. Under his arm he carried a blue helmet with a shiny silver badge on the front.

I handed him his cup of coffee.

‘How are you enjoying life in Bilbury?’ he asked me.

‘Very much.’

My host attempted to drink his coffee, found it too hot and added a splash of cold water. ‘There’s a very low crime rate round here,’ he told me. ‘Good quality of life. That’s what it’s all about isn’t it?’

‘Absolutely,’ I agreed, trying to sip my coffee and burning my lips.

‘Must go!’ said P.C. Wilson, draining his cup and then rinsing it carefully under the tap before putting it down on the draining board. I followed his example and accompanied him out of the cottage.

* * *

Looking at Lionel Francis it was difficult to believe that he had ever been ill at all. He had regained all the weight he had lost and he looked as ebullient and as assertive as ever. His colour was still a little pale but he had lost the dreadful grey pallor that had made him look like a corpse in waiting.

‘How’s your chest?’ I asked him. ‘How do you feel?’

‘I rather hoped that you might answer the first of those questions,’ said Mr Francis with a sniff. ‘The answer to the second question is that I feel angry and aggrieved.’ He took off his jacket, pulled his tie to one side and started to unbutton his shirt.

I told him how sorry I was about the mix up over the X-rays.

Mr Francis said something that sounded like ‘Hrmph!’ and pulled off his shirt. He then pulled his short sleeved woollen vest up over his head. I picked up my stethoscope, moved round the desk and listened to his chest. It sounded good. I told him so.

‘My solicitor tells me that I should leave this to him,’ said Mr Francis, as he fastened up the buttons on his shirt. ‘But I thought I’d let you know that I’m taking legal action against you and the hospital radiology department.’

I stared at him in disbelief. ‘But why?’

‘Because you and the hospital very nearly succeeded in killing me. I’m not sure who should take the lion’s share of the blame but I’m happy to leave that to the lawyers and the courts.’ He held his head back while he tied his tie. It bore a pattern designed to induce nausea. ‘I know that your defence organisation will pay for your costs and for any damages that I may win,’ he went on, ‘so I won’t have your bankruptcy on my conscience.’

‘But it was all an accident,’ I cried in disbelief. ‘And things were sorted out in the end.’

‘An accident?’ Mr Francis sounded very bitter. ‘Your "accident" very nearly killed me. And it caused a considerable amount of emotional damage.’ He finished tying his tie and pulled his shirt collar back down. ‘This isn’t just a question of money,’ he said, leaning forwards as he pulled his coat on. ‘It’s mainly a matter of principle.’

Innocent though I was in the ways of the world I knew enough to shudder inwardly when I heard that word ‘principles’. When people start talking about ‘principles’ they invariably mean that they are about to start behaving in a pig-headed, short-sighted and self-destructive way.

Mr Francis glowered at me. ‘I hope that neither you nor Dr Brownlow take any of this personally. But this is something that has got to be done.’ He fastened his coat, patted his right hand on top of his head to make sure that his hair had not been disturbed too much and left me to my private fears and apprehensions.

* * *

As if waiting for Mr Francis’s writ to arrive wasn’t enough I was also constantly aware of the fact that I had to think of something to say to the North Devon Anti-Vivisection Group. I couldn’t think why I had agreed to speak to them (although I excused my folly to myself by arguing that I had been neatly and professionally outmanoeuvred) and as the date of my speech got ever closer I found myself hoping that I might lose my voice, break a limb or acquire some fearsome and outrageously infectious disease.

* * *

Nigel and Karen Woodlee both worked in London. He had a job as a currency dealer in the City branch of an American bank and she had an equally prestigious and presumably equally overpaid job with an English merchant bank. Each week they spent Monday to Friday in their smart flat in Pimlico and then spent their weekends at their cottage in Bilbury.

‘I’m sorry to call you out at the weekend,’ said Nigel Woodlee, genuinely apologetic. It was early one Saturday afternoon and I’d been playing pool with Thumper in the bar at the Duck and Puddle.

‘We’ve been decorating the bedroom,’ said Karen. She like her husband, was wearing an expensive pair of jeans and a pale, polo necked sweater. His was blue, hers was green. She wore yellow rubber gloves and held a wallpaper scraper in her left hand.

‘We want to try to retain as many of the cottage’s original features as we can,’ Nigel told me. ‘We had the old fireplace unbricked and we’re having a woodburning stove put into the kitchen.’

‘We’re doing as much of the work as we can,’ said Karen. ‘It’s very. therapeutic.’

‘The problem is,’ said Nigel, very seriously, ‘that we hit a bit of a snag in the bedroom.’

I nodded, put on my most experienced and unshockable look, put my black bag down on the floor, folded my arms and prepared myself for a torrent of personal secrets.

‘You heard it first, didn’t you darling?’ said Nigel to his wife.

‘I think I did,’ Karen confirmed.

Puzzled, I looked from one to the other. ‘Heard what?’

‘The buzzing,’ said Nigel. ‘We’ve got bees nesting in our chimney.’

‘Have you been stung?’

‘Not exactly,’ said Karen, emphasising the second word. ‘Not yet.’

‘Only by some of the local builders,’ said Nigel with a hollow laugh.

Karen gave him a dirty look and then turned back to me. ‘We really need your advice.’

‘The thing is that we had to move them,’ said Nigel. ‘But we didn’t want to hurt them.’

‘Bees are very social creatures,’ explained Karen.

I murmured something suitably appreciative. I’d won £2 from Thumper and was rather looking forward to getting back for another few games.

‘We did try ringing the council to see if they could offer us some advice,’ said Karen.

‘But there was no reply,’ added Nigel.

‘It’s the weekend,’ I explained. ‘They were probably closed.’

‘They were,’ nodded Nigel.

‘So then Nigel had a brainwave,’ said Karen. ‘We used the vacuum cleaner to suck the bees down the chimney.’

‘The vacuum cleaner?’

‘It’s an industrial one,’ said Nigel.

‘Got a very powerful suck,’ said Karen. ‘It’s German.’

‘So the bees are now in the vacuum cleaner?’

They both nodded. ‘That’s the problem,’ said Karen. ‘We’re not sure how to get them out without getting stung.’

‘We’ve tied a plastic bag over the nozzle to stop them escaping,’ said Nigel.

‘But we can hear them buzzing about inside the bag,’ continued Karen. ‘And to be honest they sound a little angry.’

‘Hope you don’t mind us ringing you,’ said Nigel. ‘But we thought that it might come under ‘preventive medicine’.’

‘Since if we don’t do it right we’ll get stung.’

I scratched my head. ‘It’s not really my field of expertise,’ I confessed.

‘We did try to find a vet,’ said Karen. ‘But we couldn’t find one prepared to come out for bees at a weekend.’ I nodded. ‘Maybe you could just poke the vacuum cleaner pipe out through the window, take the plastic bag off and then turn the cleaner onto "blow".

‘It doesn’t do "blow",’ said Karen sadly. ‘We had thought of that.’

‘Couldn’t you just put the vacuum cleaner out onto the lawn and let the bees come out when they’re ready?

‘We did think of that too,’ said Nigel. ‘But then we thought that they would probably just all come back into the chimney again.’

‘Where is the vacuum cleaner now?’ I asked.

‘Still up in the bedroom,’ answered Nigel.

‘I’d better go and have a look,’ I said bravely. I got half way up the stairs but the sound the bees were making melted my courage. To describe them as angry did not seem accurate. I retreated. ‘I can hear them,’ I confirmed.

Suddenly I had a useful thought. They don’t come all that often but when they do they’re always welcome. ‘Can I borrow your telephone? I’ve thought of someone who might be able to help.’

Nigel threw aside a dustsheet and revealed a telephone. I dialled Patsy’s number.

‘Is that you Mr Kennett?’ I asked, when Patsy’s father answered the telephone.

‘Yes. Who’s that?’

I told him. ‘Would you like a swarm of bees?’ I’d remembered that he kept bees and produced honey.

He grunted and sounded unenthusiastic.

‘They’ll pay you £5 to take the swarm away,’ I told him, adding an extra incentive to the prospect of a free swarm of bees. I looked at Nigel as I spoke and raised a questioning eyebrow. He nodded furiously.

Fifteen minutes later Mr Kennett arrived. He collected the swarm of bees with consummate ease and pocketed Nigel Woodlee’s five pound note with an equal lack of effort.

* * *

Hubert looked terrible. His face was pale and gaunt and the skin over his cheekbones looked paper thin. But although his eyes were sunk deep into their sockets they still seemed to be full of wisdom. I felt that I could learn a lot from Hubert if only I knew what to ask him.

‘You ought to be in hospital,’ I told him.

‘Why? What can they do for me if I go into hospital?’ I had no answer to that and he knew it.

‘I know you have to offer and I know you want to help but all I need is a prescription for more morphine tablets for the pain.'

In hospital Hubert would have been sedated and drugged and deprived of his dignity. He would also have been separated from Ben.

'How many morphine tablets are you taking?' I asked him.

'Enough and no more.'

I hesitated. 'It's just that they're addictive.'

Hubert shrugged. 'I'll be dead before I'm an addict so what does it matter?'

He was right again. I wrote out the prescription he wanted and handed it to him.

* * *

Keith Harper was out of hospital again. I couldn't keep up with him. This time the doctors had kept him in the hospital for three days before discharging him.

'We can't find anything wrong with him,' an extremely puzzled but slightly snooty senior house officer told me, making it fairly clear that he didn't appreciate having his time wasted by patients who didn't have clearly defined symptoms.

Two days after Keith was sent home Mrs Harper rang me up again. He was, she said, as bad as ever. And she was right. Not only did Keith look terrible but a couple of quick tests that I did showed that he had acquired all the signs of diabetes again.

'He didn't feel at all bad yesterday,' said Mrs Harper. 'So he got dressed and I tried to make him do everything as normally as possible. He even went out for a ride on his bike. But when I got up this morning he was lying in bed looking terrible.'

I said I would ring the hospital and get them to admit Keith again.

* * *

Hubert was gradually getting weaker and weaker but he never showed any signs of fear or despair. I asked him how he could be so brave in the face of death but he insisted that he was not being brave.

'People are only brave when they have something to lose,' he told me. 'It's easy to seem brave when you've got nothing to lose.' He told me that he thought that people who had no hopes and no dreams found it easiest to appear brave while people whose lives were full of ambition and hope found it much more difficult to show bravery in the face of adversity.

There were many answers I wanted from Hubert but I wasn't clear in my mind about the questions I needed to ask.

* * *

CHAPTER TEN

If Patsy hadn't come with me I think I might well have run away. We sat together in the Morris outside the British Legion Hall in Barnstaple where I was due to lose my virginity as a public speaker and while I tried to stop my knees knocking and my teeth chattering Patsy did her best to fill me with confidence.

'You'll be super!'

I tried to say something but instead made a sound that would have embarrassed a frog with laryngitis.

'They're on your side!' Patsy reminded me. 'They already believe in what you're going to say. They aren't going to "boo" or anything like that.' It wasn't any good. Nothing she said seemed to make me feel any better. I felt I knew just how the Christians must have felt while waiting to slip into the ring to do a Wednesday afternoon matinee with the lions.

Eventually, I decided that whatever happened inside the British Legion Hall nothing could be worse than waiting outside the British Legion Hall. I looked across at Patsy, crushed her hand in mine and tried to smile. Judging by the look that appeared on her face the attempt at a smile wasn't a total success.

'I think I'll go in.'

'You'll be fantastic,' Patsy assured me. She leant across and kissed me. 'Do you want me to come in with you?' She paused. Despite my terror, or perhaps because of it, I realised just how much I cared for her. 'Or would you rather I waited for you out here?'

'Come in with me!' I begged. 'Or stay out here,' I added, not wanting to sound too demanding. 'If you'd rather.'

'I'll come in with you,' said Patsy firmly. So we went in together.

The British Legion Hall was built largely out of asbestos; the walls having been clad in flat sheets of the stuff and the roof built out of corrugated sheets. The front entrance, two doors wide, led into a small vestibule. On the right there were ladies and gents lavatories. On the left a counter separated off a small area which was equipped with coat and hat racks.

As Patsy and I walked in through the doors, past a small handwritten notice which announced that I would be addressing a meeting of the North Devon Anti-Vivisection Group at 7.30pm, I began to feel a few blood corpuscles struggling to make their way round my body and the usual small army of heavy-footed butterflies getting into position in my stomach. I patted my inside jacket pocket to make sure that the speech I had worked on with such loving care was still there.

There were two people standing in the hallway. Both were about five foot eight inches tall; both had black shoulder length hair; both wore black corduroy jeans and black sweaters; both wore earrings. One wore a beard. The other wore black lipstick. They were deep in conversation.

'Hello!' I suspect that I sounded even more timid than I felt. 'I've come for the lecture.'

The black haired stranger with the beard took a long drag on a home-made cigarette and nodded towards another pair of double doors. 'There's plenty of room,' he assured me. 'Make yourself at home.'

I muttered 'thank you' and the two of us headed through the second set of double doors. These led directly into the main room – a surprisingly large hall that was filled with two large blocks of wooden, folding chairs. At the far end of the room there was a stage, complete with two rich velvet curtains. In the centre of the stage there was a table and half a dozen wooden chairs. I looked around. The room wasn't exactly full. There were seats for about 150 people but most of them were unoccupied. To be precise 143 of them were unoccupied. The audience consisted of just seven people. They were spread around as though determined to minimise the risk of cross infection.

'It's not too daunting a crowd, anyway,' whispered Patsy.

'I think I'd rather there were one or two more people in the audience,' I whispered back. 'It's a bit depressing isn't it?'

Still holding hands Patsy and I sat down at the back of the hall. I took advantage of the moment to take a close look at the audience. There were four men and three women. Three of the men were in their sixties and looked as though they'd probably come in to get out of the cold. Or maybe they thought it was a dominoes evening. The exception was a teenager who carried a large folder and a spiral bound notebook. Only one of the women looked as though she was there to escape from the cold. The other two were teenage girls who were giggling and nudging each other.

We sat there for what seemed like a short eternity but was in fact probably no more than about twenty minutes. I tried hard not to look at my watch more than once a minute. The other seven members of the audience seemed well endowed with patience. The only sounds to break the silence were the regular ticking of a large clock to the left of the stage and the intermittent giggling of the two teenage girls.

Suddenly, the peace was broken by the bursting open of the doors behind us. We all turned round and saw the girl and the man in black walking through. They walked straight down the centre of the room and climbed up onto the stage together. Once on the stage the man with the long hair tapped a microphone with his fingernail and when he was satisfied that it was working satisfactorily he leant forwards and spoke into it.

'Can you hear me?'

The words boomed and bounced around the hall. The acoustics were terrible. No one replied, of course, but he rightly took our silence as confirmation that he could be heard.

'I'm afraid we've been let down by our speaker,' said the man with the beard.

I looked across at Patsy at the same instant that she looked across at me. As I stood up the man with the beard was saying something else. 'I'm the speaker!' I said, raising my hand like a schoolboy who wants to attract the attention of the teacher. I spoke so quietly that I wasn't sure that I'd actually said anything out loud. The man with the beard didn't seem to be aware that I'd said anything. I felt Patsy reach up, take my hand and squeeze my fingers. I knew she was trying to give me strength. I coughed loudly. The man with the beard looked straight at me.

'Do you want to say something?' He frowned at me.

'I'm the speaker,' I said again. It came out much louder than I'd intended; uncomfortably close to a shout.

The small, slighter figure who had accompanied the man with the beard onto the stage, the one wearing black lipstick, got to her feet and moved to the front of the stage. 'I'm Kim!' She walked to the front of the stage and jumped down. Then she hurried up the central aisle to where Patsy and I were sitting. She held out her hand as she approached and I couldn't help noticing that her fingernails were also painted black. 'I'm so pleased that you could come! Why didn't you tell us that you were here?' She didn't wait for an answer but turned her head towards the man with the beard. 'That's Garth,' she said, nodding in his direction. 'He's our President.' She hadn't let go of my hand and she now started to pull me down towards the stage.

I turned to look at Patsy. She mouthed 'Good luck!' to me and blew me a kiss. I stumbled against one of the chairs in the row in front and only just managed to recover my balance. With the girl in black lipstick leading the way I followed. Suddenly, taken by a fresh moment of raw panic I patted my chest pocket to make sure that my speech was still there.

On the stage I shook hands with Garth who stared at me from underneath huge black bushy eyebrows and who seemed to me to have an almost demonic look. The only piece of pink flesh that I could see was his nose which was red rather than pink. The rest of his face seemed to be covered entirely by hair.

I can't remember much of what happened next. It all seemed to be over in an instant. One minute Garth was introducing me and I was pulling my speech out of my inside jacket pocket and the next minute I was refolding it and putting it back into my pocket, climbing down off the stage and walking back up the central aisle to where Patsy was sitting waiting for me. The only thing I was aware of was that most of the audience seemed to be clapping. There wasn't a lot of noise and they weren't exactly hysterical but they weren't booing either.

'Marvellous!' whispered Patsy as I sat down. 'You were terrific.' She leant across and kissed me on the cheek. It was what I wanted to hear and I believed every word of it. All the terror now seemed worthwhile.

After that Garth spoke for a while and then Kim read out a list of names and places and addresses and then the meeting was over.

'Was it really OK?' I asked Patsy, as the other seven members of the audience scraped their chairs across the wooden floor.

'It was wonderful!' said Patsy, beaming at me. 'Really,' she insisted. 'It was great.' 'I think the trick is to forget about the audience,' I whispered. Now that I was an experienced public speaker I felt I knew the tricks of the trade. We turned and started to make our way towards the exit and as we did so I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned to find the young man with the file and the notebook standing behind me.

'I'm afraid I'm not very good at shorthand,' he apologised. 'But would I be right in saying that you feel that animal experiments are a waste of money?'

'Absolutely!' I agreed vehemently. It never occurred to me to ask him why the fact that he wasn't very good at shorthand was of any significance. And I was too thrilled by the fact that a significant part of the audience was asking questions to ask myself why.

'How would you describe the sort of doctors or scientists who perform animal experiments?' asked the youth with the notebook.

'Barbarians!' I said instantly. 'These are the evil men of science.'

'Thank you very much,' said the young man, carefully writing all this down in longhand. He closed his notebook and scurried away and as he did so Kim, the girl with the black lipstick, appeared in his place.

'I just want to thank you for giving such a stirring speech!' She held out a hand. 'You're very brave,' she said. 'We very much appreciate it.'

'My pleasure!' I said. I didn't quite understand why it was brave but I wasn't going to duck any compliments.

'I'm sorry there weren't any more people here tonight,' Kim apologised. 'But we clashed with a secret meeting of the Freedom For Animals Campaign.'

I smiled and shrugged aside the lack of an audience.

Garth, Kim, Patsy and I then all shook hands with one another and Patsy promised that we'd try to attend next month's meeting. Then Patsy and I drove back to Bilbury and I didn't know whether I felt so good because I was relieved that it was all over or because it had all gone reasonably well but I didn't care why because just feeling wonderful was quite enough. And when I dropped her off at the farm Patsy let me kiss her and that made two in one evening and I was so excited that I didn't get to sleep until three in the morning.

* * *

The call from Mrs Harper came just as I was sitting down to my dinner.

'I'm sorry to ring you in the evening,' she apologised. 'But the hospital said that I was to ring you at the first sign of anything being wrong.'

'Absolutely right,' I told her. I asked Gilly to put my dinner in the oven and then raced over to Mrs Harper's cottage. When I got there I found Keith lying on the sofa in his pyjamas and dressing gown. He had been crying but was trying hard to be brave. His mother looked as though she too was struggling to hold back the tears.

'It was almost exactly the same as last time,' she told me. 'He was fine when he came out of hospital. I thought I'd keep him off school for one more day - just to make sure that he was all right - and he spent the day playing.' Suddenly, she started to cry. 'Can't you find out what is wrong with him, doctor? Please. It's worrying me sick.' She bent over the sofa and cradled her son in her arms.

I swallowed and leant forwards. 'Let's go through what you did today,' I said to Keith. It was clear by now that whatever Keith's problem was it was caused by something he did, ate or came into contact with at home. His symptoms weren't typical of an allergy reaction but I was beginning to think that this was the only possible explanation.

Painfully, slowly and in between moments when both of them were too tearful to talk, Keith and his mother detailed the day for me. I could detect nothing in what they told me that would explain Keith's condition and the more I looked at him and thought about it the more convinced I became that whatever Keith was suffering from it wasn't an allergy problem.

'Try to think back to the last time Keith came out of hospital,' I said to his mother.

She nodded to show that she was concentrating hard.

'Has he eaten or done anything today that he ate or did last time he came out of hospital?'

There were, of course, quite a number of similarities. Keith had eaten toast on both days. He had watched television. And he'd had his favourite meal of baked beans with a poached egg on top. But none of this explained his symptoms.

'I wore my new jeans,' said Keith suddenly. It was the first time he'd spoken for several minutes and both of us looked at him. 'My new blue jeans,' insisted Keith. 'I wore them both times.'

Mrs Harper smiled at her son and then looked at me and shrugged. Like her I wasn't immediately convinced that the jeans were relevant but then a question occurred to me.

'When did you buy the jeans?' I asked Mrs Harper. 'How long before Keith first became ill?'

'I bought three pairs on the market in Barnstaple,' said Mrs Harper. 'They were quite cheap and he gets through clothes very quickly.' She stopped and thought for a moment. 'I bought them two or three days before he first went into hospital,' she said. She looked at me sharply. 'Could that be it?'

'He's worn them each time he's been taken ill?'

She nodded.

'Could I see them?' I had no idea how a pair of jeans could have made Keith so ill but it was too much of a coincidence to ignore completely. Mrs Harper got up and disappeared up the stairs. Moments later she reappeared clutching three pairs of jeans. Two pairs were folded and still had the manufacturer's cardboard label attached to the back pocket. The third pair were creased and had clearly been worn.

'These are the pair that Keith's been wearing,' said Mrs Harper, handing me the crumpled pair. 'I haven't washed them yet.'

I looked at the jeans. They seemed like a perfectly ordinary pair of jeans. But they were the only possible explanation I could think of for Keith's symptoms. When I spoke to the hospital I suggested that they run some tests on the jeans to see if they could find anything in them that would explain Keith's symptoms. The doctor I spoke to sounded sceptical but agreed that they had nothing to lose by trying.

* * *

Hubert should have visited me but I hadn't seen him for over a week and I was worried. What made it worse was the fact that I didn't know where to look for him. And then Miss Johnson took a telephone call from a Mrs Roberts who had, she reported, discovered an old tramp lying half unconscious in her summer house. I went round there straight away.

'It was a terrible shock, doctor!' said Mrs Roberts. 'I only popped in there to check on some flowers I was drying.' Mrs Roberts did not have the demeanour of a woman who copes well with the unexpected. I think that she would have probably panicked if she'd found mildew on one of the stored deckchairs. She led the way down the garden path towards a small octagonal summer house that stood on the bottom of the lawn.

Inside the summer house, wrapped in a rug and curled up on a small pile of hammock cushions lay Hubert. His dog Ben lay by his side. Both looked exhausted.

'I didn't know whether to ring you or the police,' said Mrs Roberts.

'You did right to call me,' I told her. I reached out and touched her arm. 'Thank you.' I smiled at her. Mrs Roberts wasn't used to people smiling at her and she scurried away up the garden path. 'I'll be in the kitchen if you want me,' she called as she retreated.

I knelt down and put a hand on Hubert's shoulder. He didn't move. Gently, very gently, I shook him. Slowly, he stirred and opened his eyes. 'Are you OK?'

For a moment or two he looked confused, as though he wasn't certain where he was. He rubbed his chin, opened his mouth and licked his lips. Judging by the state of his beard and the smell coming from the rug he'd been wrapped in he'd been lying in the summer house for several days. He looked weak and dehydrated.

'I...' he began. But nothing else came out of his throat. His voice had apparently disappeared. He rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth and tried again. This attempt was no more successful than the first.

'Can you move?'

He tried to sit up but didn't have the strength. I put an arm behind his shoulder and helped him first to a sitting and then to a standing position. I was astonished to find out just how light and thin he was. It was like lifting a bird.

'I...' he tried again. I lowered my head so that I could hear better. 'I was tired. I had to lie down.' He tried to push me away so that he could stand alone but I held onto him. He would have fallen otherwise. I knew that however much he hated the idea he was going to have to go into hospital.

* * *

Just as I'd promised Hubert, I'd taken Ben home with me to the Duck and Puddle. When she wouldn't eat properly I decided to take her along to see the local vet.

While I was sitting waiting in the vet's living room Mrs Wilson, the district nurse, came in. She was carrying her two cats in a wicker basket.

'I didn't know you'd got a dog!' She seemed strangely subdued.

I told her about Hubert and asked her what was wrong with the cats.

She looked down at the wicker basket as though surprised to see that she had them with her. 'They're just old,' she answered.

The vet didn't have a proper consulting room since most of his work was done on the local farms so he saw Ben and I in his kitchen. It was the grubbiest room I'd ever seen. It looked like a lending library for germs. The vet, though, was rather jolly. He was bluff, huge and well built. He wore a rusty brown coloured thorn proof tweed suit with a matching waistcoat. His jacket had leather patches on the elbows and leather guards on the cuffs. He wore a pair of heavy brown brogues that were caked with dried mud and manure. He had a thin thatch of ginger hair combed across the top of a freckled scalp and a lot of darker hair growing out of his nose and ears. He had the bushiest eyebrows I'd ever seen.

After examining Ben carefully he took a thermometer out of his breast pocket and put it up her bottom. Ben looked at me sadly, as though asking me if such an indignity were really necessary.

'There's nothing wrong with her,' said the vet, shaking the thermometer and putting it down on the top of the fridge. He hadn't bothered to wash it. 'She's just a bit miserable. Missing her master I expect.' I had explained about Hubert.

'Lots of love and affection and a few long walks,' prescribed the vet. 'That's what she needs.' He picked up the thermometer and put it back into his breast pocket. He still hadn't washed it.

As I left I passed Mrs Wilson preparing to carry her basket of cats into the kitchen.

'I hope everything is OK,' I said.

She looked at me as though puzzled.

'With the cats.'

'Oh, thank you.'

Ben and I left and later that afternoon I took her for along walk around Dr Brownlow's estate.

* * *

It would have been an exaggeration to say that Patsy's father and I had become firm friends but he no longer treated me with the contempt he'd originally shown and I wasn't quite as frightened of him as I had been. Those were steps forward in the right direction as far as I was concerned. No one had ever mentioned the hawthorn tablets and Mr Kennett was now quite well again; there were no signs of his 'heart trouble'.

I sipped at the glass of homemade parsnip wine which he'd given me and listened as he told me about the case of shingles he'd had in 1963.

'The doctor was no bloody good at all,' Mr Kennett complained vehemently. Then he remembered who I was. 'No disrespect to yourself, of course.' For him that was quite a climb down.

'No offence taken,' I assured him.

'The rash was two thirds of the way round my waist,' continued Mr Kennett, pouring himself another glass of home-made wine and offering me a refill. I put my hand over my glass and shook my head. I'd already explained three times that I had to drive but Mr Kennett was either unconvinced by the research showing a relationship between alcohol consumption and impaired reflexes or else he wasn't listening to me.

'Do you know what happens if a shingles rash goes completely round your waist?' He drew an imaginary circle around his waist as he spoke and spilt a large measure of his parsnip wine onto his trouser leg. He gazed down at the growing damp patch and then decided to ignore it. But he did refill his glass. I said I didn't.

'Dead!' said Patsy's father emphatically. He slammed his fist down on the sofa and spilt more parsnip wine. 'When the rash meets you're as good as dead.' I nodded. He was convincing and I wasn't in the mood to start an argument.

'Dr Brownlow didn't know what to do!' insisted Mr Kennett. 'No idea!' he cackled. He seemed pleased at the memory. I half opened my mouth to defend my employer but thought better of it. I knew that Dr Brownlow would forgive me.

'Alf Watercombe got me better again,' insisted Patsy's father. 'He wrapped a fresh circle of bullrushes round my waist every morning exactly as the sun came up over Shapcott Hill.' He pointed towards the window but it was pitch black outside. As he pointed he spilt more parsnip wine. Suddenly he lunged forwards, eyes glaring. 'You wouldn't think that would work, would you?'

He had me on a hiding to nothing and we both knew it. Whatever I said the reputation of orthodox medicine was lost.

'No,' I said.

'Haaargh!' said Patsy's father. He shook his head and the combination of the sound and the noise made him look a bit like a horse. I didn't have the faintest idea what to say to that but I was suddenly saved by an angel walking into the room.

'Hello!' said the angel. 'I'm ready.'

I could hardly believe my eyes. I'd never seen anyone so beautiful.

'You look beautiful.'

'Do you like it?' Patsy lifted the dress a few inches and pirouetted. The dress was calf length pale pink satin. Below her waist it billowed like a cloud. At and above the waist it fitted her like a glove. There were no straps and I had no idea what was holding it up. I hadn't realised before what a perfect figure she had.

'I like the dress,' I said. 'And you look beautiful.'

Her mother, who'd been hovering in the doorway behind her, came forward looking as proud as only a mother can look. She leant forwards and whispered something in Patsy's ear. Patsy blushed. Patsy's mother then draped a silk scarf around her daughter's neck.

Patsy's father managed to suppress his romantic urges. 'You'll freeze to death. Going out half naked.'

'Dad!' pleaded Patsy. 'Don't spoil things.'

'I'll get your coat,' said Patsy's mother.

Patsy sighed. Her father repeated his impression of an unhappy horse.

Patsy's mother disappeared for a moment and came back with a dark grey woollen coat which she draped round Patsy's shoulders. Patsy looked embarrassed. I looked at her and smiled. She still looked radiant. But then I was biased. To me she would have looked good dressed in a cardboard box.

'Hadn't we better go?' asked Patsy.

I looked at my watch. There was plenty of time. 'Yes.'

Patsy kissed her mother and said goodbye to her father. I promised them both that I would look after their daughter. Patsy put her shoes into her coat pockets and put her wellington boots on to cross through the aromatic mixture of mud, silage and animal waste in the farmyard.

While she fastened her seatbelt I turned the key to start the car. Nothing happened. I tried it again. Nothing. A quick glance at the dashboard instruments showed that I had left the headlights switched on while I'd been parked. The lights had drained the battery.

Angry with myself I explained what I'd done.

'Never mind,' said Patsy. 'These things happen.' She leant across and kissed me on the cheek. Suddenly I felt better. I loved her more every moment I knew her.

'You should be shouting at me,' I said. 'It was a stupid thing to do.'

Patsy shook her head. 'It was my fault. I took so long.'

I heard someone tapping on my window, turned and saw Patsy's father standing there looking puzzled. 'What's up?'

'The battery's flat,' I confessed, miserably.

'Stay there!' he said unnecessarily. He disappeared back into the house. Moments later he reappeared holding a large key carried on a piece of bent and rusty wire. 'You can borrow the second best tractor.'

Patsy and I both got out of the car. I thanked Mr Kennett and we crossed the courtyard to the open barn where the second best tractor was stored.

* * *

'Bring Patsy if you like!' Dr Brownlow had said when he'd invited me to join him and a few of his friends. 'I hear you two are something of an item these days.'

'An item?' I laughed, blushing. 'What's that supposed to mean?' I knew exactly what he meant.

'Going out together. Dating.'

'We are going out together,' I agreed.

'She's a nice girl,' said Dr Brownlow. 'I delivered her.' He remembered the name of every child he'd ever delivered. He was proud of them all and loved them too.

'I'll ask her,' I said. 'I'd love her to come.'

'We usually dress,' Dr Brownlow told me.

* * *

The gardener had hung candles in jam jars from the lower branches of the corridor of trees that lined the driveway. It all looked like something out of a fairy tale. There were already half a dozen cars parked in the large, rectangular gravelled area in front of the house. There was a Jaguar, two Rovers, a Mercedes, an Aston Martin and a brand new Rolls Royce Silver Shadow which was coloured gold and had a gold plated silver lady mounted on the radiator cap. I parked Mr Kennett's second best tractor in between one of the Rovers and the Aston Martin.

Dr Brownlow's butler, Bradshaw, opened the front door. He didn't seem to recognise me though this was probably because of the hired dinner suit I was wearing. I don't think I would have recognised myself.

Patsy and I were the youngest there by at least a generation and a half. Apart from Dr Brownlow there was no one else in the room that I recognised. Dr Brownlow introduced us to everyone but I have never been very good at remembering a dozen names in one go and I was too busy trying to decide which of the guests owned the Rolls Royce to pay proper attention. I had never seen anything quite so gloriously tasteless and it had made a lasting impression on me. The last couple he introduced us to were Dr Charles Jarvis and his wife Carolyn. 'Are you the radiologist?' I asked, relieved to find someone whose name I knew.

He said he was. He looked even older than he sounded on the telephone but seemed no less bad tempered. His wife was much more fun. She seemed about fifteen years younger and wore a tight pink dress that looked expensive but that was far too small for her. The dress had lots of ruffs and flounces but there weren't enough of these to disguise the rolls of fat around her waist. She had well used laughter lines around her eyes and seemed to take to Patsy straight away. 'We've had a writ from that damned patient of yours,' said Dr Jarvis gruffly. He sounded as though he blamed me for it.

'Lionel Francis?'

Dr Jarvis nodded. 'Have you heard anything?' he wanted to know.

'Not yet. But he did tell me he was going to send a solicitor's letter.'

We talked for a while about the possibility of Mr Francis winning damages and the rising enthusiasm of patients for legal action. It was a dull conversation which, I suspect, probably bored Dr Jarvis as much as it bored me but we seemed to have little in common other than this one rather sad episode. We were eventually saved from one another when Bradshaw came in to announce that dinner was ready.

I found myself sitting between Carolyn Jarvis and a woman of about seventy whose name I couldn't remember. She had a large, old-fashioned hearing aid clipped to the front of a garment which looked as though it had been designed for bridal wear and she had brought with her to the table a large gin and tonic which Bradshaw refilled regularly and without being asked. Patsy was seated at the far end of the table, between Dr Brownlow and a grey haired old man whose slightly shabby evening wear was put into shadow by a bright red velvet bow tie.

Whatever financial problems Dr Brownlow was having there were no signs of poverty in the dining room. The room, which was as large as a barn, was warmed by a massive log fire in a great stone fireplace and lit exclusively by candles. The flickering lights and the smoke from the fire and the candles gave the whole room a romantic, mediaeval atmosphere.

Much of the meal is now but a blur in my memory. I tried to make polite conversation with the two ladies on either side of me but failed fairly miserably. The old lady with the deaf aid thought, for some reason, that I was her bank manager and spent most of the evening complaining about the quality of the bank's services and the unreasonable extent of its charges. I suspect that I probably added to her sense of confusion by agreeing wholeheartedly with all her criticisms of the banking system. The radiologist's wife, on my other side, seemed unwilling to talk about anything that didn't involve her children. These were, I gathered with some surprise, grown up with offspring of their own, but she talked nevertheless with genuine passion about playgroups, infant schools and the quality of modern education. What I had mistaken for laughter lines around her eyes turned out to be lines made by squinting. Through vanity she had refused to bring with her the spectacles which she clearly needed.

Eventually, in some despair, I struck up a conversation with a small, almost entirely bald man who was sitting quite near to me. He wore a smart, military style moustache and even while seated had an unmistakably military bearing. It was this conversation which led to something which was destined to change my whole life.

‘Do you live in Bilbury?’ I asked him.

‘Good God! No!’ he replied with some force. ‘I live in town.

I like the bright lights and the buzz.’

‘Really?’ I said. ‘Have you come here specially for this evening?’ I had assumed that by ‘town’ he meant London.

He, in turn, seemed surprised by my question but confirmed that he had indeed made the journey to Bilbury specifically to attend Dr Brownlow’s dinner party.

‘Are you staying the night?’

‘I’m driving back home.’

‘Isn’t it a rather long journey?’

‘Not particularly. It only takes twenty minutes or so.’

At this point I realised my mistake. ‘Oh, you mean you live in Barnstaple?’

He looked at me as though I were mentally deficient and nodded warily.

‘Do you work there?’

‘I’m Robert Wallace. I run one of the local papers. *The Barnstaple, Bideford and Bilbury Herald*.’

‘Oh, I know it!’ I said brightly, though my recognition of his product didn’t seem to excite him in quite the way I had hoped it would.

‘You’re the new apprentice, aren’t you?’

I nodded. I hadn’t thought of myself as an apprentice before but it wasn’t an inaccurate description.

‘Very pretty wife you’ve got.’

‘Oh, Patsy and I aren’t married,’ I said, automatically, though I realised a split second later that I rather liked the way he’d assumed that we were.

‘Very pretty girl anyway,’ said the publisher. He pushed a large piece of parsnip into his mouth and chewed on it thoughtfully. The parsnips weren’t very well cooked and the chewing took quite a lot of effort. ‘Do you fancy writing a column for us?’

I didn’t think I’d heard him properly. ‘I beg your pardon?’

‘A doctor column,’ explained Mr Wallace. ‘My wife’s always on to me about it. She’s been saying for years that we should have a doctor page.’ He cut a roast potato in two and put half into his mouth. ‘I did ask Brownlow,’ he confessed, speaking with some difficulty. ‘But he wouldn’t do it. Too damned lazy.’

‘I’m not sure,’ I said, rather hesitantly.

‘We’ll pay you,’ said the publisher. ‘But six pounds a week is all we can manage.’

‘Six!’ I repeated. It sounded quite a lot.

‘Eight then,’ agreed the publisher. ‘But that’s it.’

‘Would it have to have my name on it?’ I asked warily.

All the doctor columns I’d ever seen before had been written under pen names such as ‘Dr Goodnight’ or ‘Dr Helpful’.

‘Oh, I think so, don’t you?’ said the publisher. ‘People want to know who is writing the stuff they read these days.’

‘How many readers does the paper have?’

‘We sell 30,000 a week,’ replied Mr Wallace. ‘But you can multiply that by three or four.’

‘That’s 100,000 people a week!’ I said, horrified at the responsibility.

‘More than you’d meet in a lifetime working as a GP,’ agreed the publisher. He speared a piece of cauliflower and bit a chunk off. ‘You could do a lot of good with a column in our paper.’ He added two slices of carrot to the masticated cauliflower. ‘I’ll tell the editor to get in touch with you to fix things up.’

* * *

It snowed heavily while we were having dinner with Dr Brownlow and as we crowded together in the hallway staring out through the front door the night looked absurdly romantic. Everything was covered in a thick layer of soft snow and the silence seemed strange and all invasive. There was a full moon and the fluttering snowflakes were backlit by moonlight as they gently made their way earthwards. We’d only been indoors for four or five hours but already the snow was at least six inches deep. Trees, garden statues and cars were all outlined in snow.

‘It’s going to be a miserable journey home,’ moaned Dr Jarvis, staring out gloomily.

‘I hate snow,’ said the publisher emphatically. ‘Hate the stuff.’

I turned my collar up, slipped out into the snow and ran over towards Mr Kennett’s second best tractor. Walking was difficult since with every step I took, my feet disappeared entirely from view. I climbed up onto the tractor’s outside step, opened the cab door and picked up Patsy’s wellington boots. Then I ran back to the house. Moments later the other guests gazed in admiration as Patsy slipped off her delicate evening shoes and slid her feet into her boots.

‘What a wonderful idea!’ said Mrs Jarvis. ‘How did you know it was going to snow, dear?’

‘Do you want to borrow them?’ asked Patsy.

Mrs Jarvis laughed uncomfortably. ‘Oh, no thank you!’ she said emphatically, as though she found the idea very slightly offensive.

‘Is that yours? the publisher asked me, nodding towards the tractor.

I shook my head. ‘I borrowed it off Patsy’s father.’

‘How did you know it was going to snow?’ asked Dr Brownlow.

‘Just an old piece of country folklore,’ I told him. ‘When ducks sleep in groups of three or more it means it’s going to snow.’

Everyone seemed impressed. ‘I hadn’t heard that one before,’ admitted Dr Brownlow, which wasn’t surprising since as far as I knew it was entirely original.

‘Looks a bit glum, doesn’t it? said the old lady with the deaf aid. ‘Has it been snowing?’

‘Does anyone need a lift?’ I asked. ‘I’m sure Mr Kennett wouldn’t mind if I did a bit of ferrying when I’ve taken Patsy home.’

‘Oh, I don’t think that will be necessary,’ said Mr Wallace.

‘Our cars should be able to cope with a bit of snow.’ He tiptoed down Dr Brownlow’s stone staircase and stepped warily over towards the gold coloured Rolls Royce.

The rest of us took this as a cue and seconds later we were all tip toeing our way through the snow towards our vehicles (all apart from Patsy that is - she was able to stride confidently through the snow in her boots).

As Patsy and I drove away I turned back for a second to watch the chaos developing behind us, as one after another, Dr Brownlow’s guests discovered that expensive two wheel drive motor cars can be just as uncontrollable in the snow as cheap ones.

‘Well, you did offer to help them,’ said Patsy. ‘I thought it was very nice of you!’

* * *

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Most of Dr Brownlow's patients either lived in the village of Bilbury itself or in one of the nearby villages such as Patchole, Shirwell, Kentisbury or Combe Martin but one afternoon I received a call asking me to visit a patient in Barnstaple.

'He's apparently a patient of Dr Brownlow's,' said Miss Johnson, who had passed the message on to me. 'He has collapsed.'

I drove to Barnstaple as fast as my Morris would go and was quite breathless when I reached the address I'd been given. I leant against the doorbell and waited. The door was opened a few moments later by a young woman in a quilted dressing gown. At the neck of the dressing gown I could just see a few wisps of nightdress. Her attire surprised me a little since it was still early in the afternoon. 'He's in the bedroom,' she said, with tears in her eyes. I followed her down the corridor and found my patient lying on his back on a bed.

He would never again have to worry about finding a tie to match his shirt. He would never again curse as he struggled to find the partner to a single sock. He was beyond my help. Apart from the sheet which covered his body he was as naked as he had been at the other end of his life and although I didn't know exactly why, I thought he looked vaguely familiar.

The question I asked as I turned to the young woman in the doorway still haunts me occasionally. 'Had your father been ill?' That's all. Five words that at the time seemed to make a natural question. The man was clearly in his late fifties or early sixties. The woman could be no more than thirty. They both looked quietly respectable. The woman certainly looked more like a daughter than a lover. Or at least she looked more like I thought a daughter ought to look like. I was too inexperienced to know that appearances can be very deceptive; the Don Juan may turn out to be a grubby little man with a thin moustache and a spray of dandruff on his shoulders; the wife beater may turn out to be a plump, jovial fellow with bifocals and a slight stutter.

'He wasn't my father,' said the young woman, blushing bright red. She paused and looked away. I understood instantly. 'He used to come here two or three times a week.' She sat down on the other side of the bed and took the dead man's hand in hers. 'He was a client. A regular.'

'Had he been ill?'

She nodded. 'He'd been very ill recently. Something to do with his chest.'

'What happened?'

'We were making love. Suddenly he cried out in pain. He fell back clutching his chest. That was it. He didn't say anything or do anything else.'

'Had he had chest pains before?'

'I don't know. I don't think so.'

'But he had been ill?'

'He told me that he nearly died.'

I turned and, for the first time, stared properly at the dead body. Suddenly I knew who it was. I was looking at Lionel Francis. I was astonished that Lionel Francis should visit a prostitute. He hadn't seemed the type.

'What are we going to do?' asked the woman. She looked lost and very alone, like a child in a crowd whose mother has moved ahead too quickly. There were, I noticed, tears running down her cheeks. 'It was the first time we'd seen each other for some time,' she told me. 'I wanted to make things special for him because of that.'

'Where are his clothes?' I asked.

She opened the wardrobe and showed me. Lionel Francis had hung his suit up neatly on a hanger. Even his shirt was on a hanger, with his tie draped around the collar.

'Help me dress him!' I told her, pulling his suit out of the wardrobe.

When we'd finished I told her to get herself dressed while I rang for an ambulance.

'Man collapsed in the street,' I told the ambulance controller. 'A woman took him into her house but he was dead by the time I got here.'

* * *

I hadn't forgotten about the column I was supposed to be writing for the local newspaper but I had rather hoped that Mr Wallace had forgotten. Or that he and his editor had second thoughts when reconsidering the idea in the cold light of day. However, the newspaper editor who telephoned was in no doubt about the publisher's commitment.

'I gather you spoke to Mr Wallace and agreed to write a column on medical matters?' The caller sounded weary of life, weary of his job and especially weary of his publisher hiring inexperienced strangers to write columns.

'Yes. But I don't expect he intended me to take him seriously.' I thought I'd give them an easy way out.

'Mr Wallace always expects everyone to take him seriously,' said the caller very quickly. 'I hope you haven't changed your mind since the meeting.'

'Well, no, not exactly.'

'Good. We're looking for 1000 words or so once a week. We're going to put your column onto our Family Page so we'll need the copy every week by 4.00pm on Thursday afternoon.'

The idea of writing a thousand words on anything startled me. And the idea of producing a thousand words every week sounded daunting beyond belief. 'What did you want me to write about?'

'We rather hoped you'd come up with the subjects,' said the editor. 'You're the expert after all.'

'But I've got no experience...'

'Don't you worry about it,' the editor reassured me. 'We'll put all the commas in all the right places. You just deliver your copy on time.' The phone went silent though I could hear him scrabbling through papers and talking to someone else. 'Where is it that you live?'

'Bilbury.'

'Of course. I've got the address somewhere. Well, if you pop it in the post on Wednesday morning that should be fine.'

'When do you want to start?'

'Might as well start this week, eh? Get going with it.'

'This week?' It was Monday. I had less than two days to think of a subject and write a thousand words about it.

'Great!' said the editor. 'I gather the publisher fixed a fee with you?'

'Er... yes.' I remembered him talking money but I couldn't remember the fee we'd settled on.

'I'll get our accounts department to put you on the contributors' list. If you haven't started getting cheques in a year let me know.' 'In a year?'

'Just joking. They're not quite that bad. Look forward to getting your copy then. Cheerio for now.' And he was gone.

* * *

Miss Thwaites sat down, leant across the desk and smiled at me. 'I must say just how much I admire you for speaking out the way you did.' I didn't have the foggiest idea what she was talking about but I felt a strange, empty feeling in the pit of my stomach. 'Needless to say I'm right behind you!' she added.

'I don't want to appear too stupid,' I said, cautiously, 'but could you please tell me what it was that I said and where it was that you read it?'

Miss Thwaites looked surprised. 'The story about the animals,' she explained. 'In today's *Daily News*.'

Part of me didn't want to know any more. But part of me knew that I had no option. 'I don't suppose you have the paper with you?'

Miss Thwaites shook her head.

Apart from me everyone in Bilbury seemed to have read the *Daily News* that morning. By the end of the first hour six people had congratulated me on my courage and had wished me all the best for the future.

'I'm not sure I agree with you but there aren't many people in your profession who'd have had the guts to say it,' said Thumper Robinson who'd come into the surgery to have some stitches removed. He'd fallen off a ladder while doing some building repair work at the Duck and Puddle and he had gashed his leg rather badly.

Eventually, I could stand it no longer. I dashed out of the surgery and popped my head into Miss Johnson's office. 'I shan't be a minute!' I promised. 'I've just got an urgent call to make.' Miss Johnson, who knew that there had been no urgent requests for home visits looked at me as if I'd gone mad. 'I'll be back in less than ten minutes!' I called over my shoulder, scurrying past the waiting room and out to where my car was parked. Ben was sitting on the front passenger seat. She pricked up her ears when she saw me coming.

'I thought you'd be in for a copy!' said Pete Marshall. He reached underneath the counter and produced a copy of the *Daily News*. 'I put one on one side for you,' he told me with a wink.

'I took the paper from him and, discovering that I didn't have any change on me, asked him to put the paper on my bill. 'Must go!' I said, desperate to open the paper and see what I'd said. I didn't like to open it in the shop. I wanted to read it somewhere private.

The story was on page three. 'DOC SLAMS RESEARCH BOFFINS' screamed the headline. I hardly dared look any further but I forced myself to read on. To start with I couldn't imagine how the *Daily News* could have possibly got hold of the story and then I remembered the scruffy youth who'd interviewed me at the end of my lecture. I closed my eyes and took deep breaths in an attempt to relax my body a little.

After a couple of minutes I felt strong enough to drive the rest of the way back to the surgery so I folded up the newspaper, put it into the glove compartment and started the car up again. I'm not sure how I managed to get through the rest of the surgery. It was all something of a blur. I had an awful feeling that I was going to regret giving that speech.

* * *

I was with Hubert when he died. I even managed to persuade the ward sister to let me smuggle Ben onto the ward. The two of them greeted each other with great joy.

'God is waiting for you, my son,' said the clergyman who had arrived uninvited at Hubert's bedside.

'Bugger God,' said Hubert. 'What did God ever do for me when I was alive and needed him? Why should I have anything to do with him when I'm dead?' He tried to lift himself off the bed but fell back in a fit of coughing. Shocked, the clergyman retreated.

'You will look after Ben, won't you?' I promised again that I would.

Hubert died with one hand clasping mine and the other hand resting on Ben.

I took Ben back to the Duck and Puddle with me and had great difficulty holding back the tears. I've always wondered where Hubert Donaldson came from and how he came to be a tramp.

* * *

With Ben curled up at my feet I sat down at the small table in my bedroom and positioned the new foolscap notebook I'd bought from the corner store neatly in front of me. Then I lined up the three pencils I'd bought. I'd decided to work in pencil so that I could rub out any mistakes I might make. The three pencils were all painted yellow and all had tiny rubbers attached to them. They looked very smart. I arranged them carefully so that the names stencilled in black along their sides were all facing upwards.

It was while admiring their neatness that I noticed that the lead of one of the pencils had broken. Deciding that it would be sensible to make sure that all my equipment was in good working order before I started I felt in my pocket for my penknife. But it wasn't there. I got up from the table and looked in my jacket pocket. It wasn't there either. Nor was it in my black bag. Then I remembered that I'd used it at the surgery to help Miss Johnson open a parcel. I got up from the desk and walked down stairs. Ben came with me. 'Have you got a pencil sharpener?' I asked my landlady.

'A pencil sharpener?'

I nodded.

'I'll have a look.'

I thought that while I was waiting I might as well have a drink so I wandered into the bar and ordered half a pint of best bitter.

'Sorry!' said Gilly, when she returned a few moments later. 'I can't find a pencil sharpener anywhere.'

'Thanks anyway,' I said. It looked as though my column writing career was doomed before it had started. I wondered if I should ring up the newspaper editor now or if I should wait until the following morning.

'But I've got a penknife,' said Gilly. 'Will that do?'

'Thank you,' I sighed. 'That will do fine.' I took the penknife off her, emptied my glass and went back upstairs. I sharpened my pencil, took the penknife back down to Gilly and then sat down again at my desk. Ben curled up by my feet.

I picked up one of the pencils and wrote my name on the first sheet in the notebook. Then I underlined it. Then I underlined it again. Then I wrote the date. Then I put the pencil down and went downstairs to the kitchen where I made myself a cup of coffee. Then I carried the cup of coffee back upstairs.

I stared at the sheet of paper and waited for inspiration to strike. I even picked up one of the pencils and held it ready in my hand so that I would be ready to write down the words when the muse decided to arrive. It seemed exhausting work. Within minutes I felt physically and mentally drained. My eyelids didn't want to stay open and I had to prop my head up on my hands.

Then, out of nowhere, I had an idea. I picked up the pencil which had fallen out of my fingers and started to scribble my first column.

* * *

'There's a Mr Lister on the telephone for you,' said Miss Johnson. 'He's rung four times already but I've told him you're busy.'

'Mr Lister?'

'He says he's from the *Herald*,' said Miss Johnson suspiciously.

'Oh, that Mr Lister! He's the editor. I'd better speak to him.' I picked up the telephone expecting to have to fend off the compliments.

'We've got your first column safely.'

'Oh good. I was a bit worried because I didn't keep a copy. I'm glad it got there OK.'

'It's very good,' said the editor.

'Great. I'm glad you like it.'

'There are just a couple of problems.'

'Fine. I didn't expect to get things absolutely spot on the first time out. What adjustments would you like to make?'

'The first little problem is length,' said the editor.

'Did I do too much? I did get carried away a bit didn't I? Still, you can always cut things down a bit can't you?'

'No, it isn't too long at all,' said the editor. 'In fact we've got the opposite problem.'

‘It’s too short?’

‘It is a little. We need another 600 words or so to fill up the space we’ve given you.’

‘How much did I write then?’ I asked, puzzled. I hadn’t counted the words but there had been a lot of them.

‘Four hundred and seventeen.’

‘Oh.’

‘Never mind. It’s easily done.’

‘What’s the other problem?’ I asked him.

‘The subject,’ said the editor bluntly. ‘We discussed your piece at the editorial conference this morning and we felt that it was perhaps just a little bit too esoteric.’ I was startled by this. ‘Really?’

‘Afraid so. We felt that we might frighten some of our readers off if we devoted the whole of your first column to malaria.’

‘It’s a very important disease!’

‘But is it important in North Devon?’

‘Not very,’ I confessed. ‘It isn’t terribly common.’

‘That’s what we thought. We felt it might be better to tackle a more popular subject.’

‘Oh.’ I had difficulty in hiding my disappointment.

‘This isn’t a criticism.’ said the editor quickly. ‘Please don’t take it as such. Think of us as offering you constructive advice. We want to help you get this absolutely right. It’s going to be a very important column.’

‘Yes.’

‘What do you think about devoting the first column to the common cold?’

‘The cold?’ I said, very disappointed. ‘Isn’t that a bit ordinary?’

‘Ah. That’s the point, you see. It’s the sort of stuff our readers will love. Good solid, practical advice from you on how to treat a cold.’

‘OK.’

‘Do you think you could do something for us now?’

‘Now?’

‘It is Thursday,’ said the editor gently. ‘If you could dictate something to our copy takers before 4 o’clock this afternoon that would help us a lot.’

‘Of course.’

‘And we’ll need a photograph of you,’ said the editor. ‘To put on the top of the column.’

‘Is that absolutely necessary?’

‘Absolutely!’ said the editor, firmly. ‘The readers will want to know what you look like. Can we send a photographer round?’

‘Where?’

‘The surgery would be nice,’ said the editor. ‘A nice shot of you with your stethoscope round your neck and lots of good, medical equipment in the background.’

I said that I had a couple of calls to do but that when I’d finished I’d write my new column and wait for the photographer. The editor said he was very grateful and that he’d like to take me to lunch sometime.

* * *

‘Could I have a word with you about my feet?’ asked Miss Johnson.

‘Of course.’

Miss Johnson sat down in the patients’ chair.

‘What’s wrong with them?’ I asked her.

She carefully took off her shoe and rolled down her left stocking. ‘How do you think it’s coming along?’ she asked, lifting her foot up into the air.

I leant forwards and peered at it.

‘Just there,’ said Miss Johnson pointing. ‘My verruca.’ She gently prodded the sides of a large lump covered in yellow ointment. I leant a little closer. I’d never seen a verruca before. It looked like a small volcano.

‘I’m putting some ointment on it that I get from the chemist. Do you think it’s doing the job?’

I made some sounds which seemed suitably non-committal and nodded a lot. ‘We’d better have another look at it in another week. Bit early to say now.’

This vague endorsement seemed to please Miss Johnson.

She rolled her stockings back into place and then slipped her shoe on.

I felt quite pleased that she’d asked for my advice.

* * *

CHAPTER TWELVE

Followed by her three children and carrying the latest, Mrs Tate headed for the door. Her pregnancy had been entirely uneventful and she had come into the surgery for her postnatal examination. 'Goodbye, doctor!' she said cheerily. 'See you next time!'

When Mrs Tate had gone I went over to the basin to wash my hands. But when I turned on the tap nothing came out but a little steam. Some distance away I could hear pipes shaking and rattling under the pressure from the central heating boiler but no water came out into the basin. I tried the cold tap with exactly the same result.

'What on earth is going on?' asked Miss Johnson, putting her head around the door. 'It sounds as if the whole house is about to blow up!'

I waved my hands in the direction of the sink. 'There doesn't seem to be any water in the system.'

'We'd better tell Dr Brownlow! Someone ought to turn off the boiler before it blows up.' Miss Johnson seemed very worried so since I was near the end of the surgery and feeling like a bit of physical exercise I offered to go and find Dr Brownlow. I found him in the conservatory attending to his orchids. He paled when I told him the news.

'Don't look so worried!' I said cheerfully. 'The water board is probably digging up the pipes. They'll have you back on again before long.'

Dr Brownlow shook his head. 'It's nothing to do with the water board,' he told me glumly.

Puzzled, I just stared at him. Being city born I'd always assumed that everyone got their water supplies through the local water board. After all, who else was there?

'We've got a private water supply here,' explained Dr Brownlow. 'Our water comes from a stream fed well in the north field.

'A well?' I repeated incredulously, struggling with visions of men and women drawing water up with the aid of buckets.

'There's a pump,' explained Dr Brownlow, noticing my surprise. 'But it's got nothing to do with the water board.'

'So, what do you think could have happened?'

He shrugged. 'The pump could have stopped, a valve could be blocked...' he paused. 'Or the stream could have dried up.'

I was beginning to see why he was looking so glum. 'Streams don't dry up!' I said firmly. 'Do they?'

'They do sometimes,' said Dr Brownlow, miserably.

I went back to the surgery and left him setting off to try to find out what had happened to his water supply.

* * *

'You were right about the jeans,' said the doctor from the hospital. 'They were contaminated with phosphate. Keith has been suffering from phosphate poisoning. There's one patch of material on the right leg that's been soaked in a powerful industrial insecticide solution. Every time Keith put the jeans on his body absorbed more of the phosphate and his symptoms came back again.'

'But how on earth did the jeans get contaminated?' I asked. I'd never even heard of anyone suffering from phosphate poisoning before.

'That's what we hoped you could help us find out,' the doctor said. 'Do you think the jeans could have been contaminated at home? Maybe by a spillage from a can of insecticide?'

'I doubt it,' I told him. It didn't seem very likely that Mrs Harper would keep an industrial insecticide in the house. But when I rang her to tell her the good news that Keith's problem had been diagnosed I asked her if she had any insecticide stored in or near to the house.

'Good heavens, no!' said Mrs Harper instantly. 'I buy those sticky strips for flies in the summer but those are the only things I use.' There was a pause. 'When will Keith be able to come home?'

I told her that the hospital would probably let him home after another 24 hours observation. 'Have you still got the other two pairs of jeans that you bought?'

'Yes. Do you think I ought to throw them away? Or do you think it would be safe for him to wear them if I put them in the washing machine first?'

'I don't know. Do you mind if I get someone from the hospital to pick them up and have them tested?'

Mrs Harper said that she didn't so I rang the hospital back.

'Maybe the jeans were contaminated before Mrs Harper bought them,' I suggested. 'In which case it's possible that those aren't the only jeans that are dangerous.' I asked the doctor if he could arrange for someone from the laboratory to pick up the two remaining pairs of jeans and have them tested. He said he would. Then I told him the identity of the stallholder who'd sold Mrs Harper the jeans. 'It might be worthwhile getting someone to have a word with him,' I added.

* * *

I found Dr Brownlow standing in the middle of a large field to the north of the house. He was staring gloomily down a large hole in the ground. A large, metal manhole cover lay on the grass beside him.

'Have you found the problem?'

'The well is dry,' he said morosely, without looking at me.

'Have you checked the stream?'

'Not yet.'

'So it could just be a blockage?'

Dr Brownlow nodded but looked unconvinced.

'I'll come with you,' I volunteered. 'Where is the stream?'

We walked across to the edge of the field until we found a dry ditch running in the shade of a thick hawthorn hedge.

'There it is!' said Dr Brownlow, pointing to the ditch.

'That's your stream?'

'It was,' said Dr Brownlow. He walked along the bank for a dozen yards, then returned and walked a dozen yards in the other direction. 'It's unbelievable,' he said at last. 'That stream has kept this house supplied for a hundred and fifty years. I wouldn't have been surprised to see it running low but to see it completely dried up...' he shook his head as if he found it all quite unbelievable.

'Which way does it normally flow?'

Dr Brownlow looked at me as if I were simple minded and nodded to the left. I felt slightly embarrassed when I realised that the field was on a slope and that the stream would have found it difficult to flow in any other direction.

'Why don't we walk upstream a bit and see if it's dry all the way?'

Reluctantly, Dr Brownlow agreed and we walked in the direction that would have been upstream had there been any stream. After about two hundred yards we came to a point where the dry stream bed disappeared through a hedge.

'Whose land is that?'

'It used to be Lady Kentisbury's,' answered Dr Brownlow.

'Now it belongs to some fellow who works on the television.'

'Mike Trickle?'

'That sounds like it.'

'Not a very apt name if he depends on the same stream,' I commented.

Dr Brownlow looked at me sharply.

'Sorry.'

'He's got a different supply anyway,' said Dr Brownlow.

I jumped down onto the still muddy stream bed, bent over double and crawled forwards through the hedge. About a yard and a half into the hedge I came to a stop. 'Did you know there was a wall here?' I called back.

Dr Brownlow jumped down into the mud behind me and squelched his way forwards. 'Wall? What wall?'

I pointed through the hedge at a very solid looking concrete wall. Its foundations ran across the stream bed.

Dr Brownlow stared at the wall and banged his fist on it in frustration.

It looked as though he was going to be without water for some time.

* * *

'There are two registered letters for you this morning,' said Gilly, putting my breakfast down in front of me the following Saturday morning.

I looked up at her in alarm. I couldn't remember ever having one registered letter before. And I knew instantly that they were both bringing bad news. Why would anyone spend extra money on registering a letter to bring me good news. 'Where are they?' I croaked.

'I think I put them on the hall table,' said Gilly. 'I didn't think you'd want to be bothered with them until you'd had your breakfast.' I tried to forget about the mail and to concentrate on my bacon and eggs but I failed miserably. I got up from the table, went out to the hallway and collected the two letters. According to the franking marks one had come from a firm of solicitors in Devon and the other was from London. I picked the two letters up and carried them back into the bar. I put them down beside my plate and just stared at them for a few moments trying to decide which to open first and using the choice as an excuse to open neither.

'What's the matter?' asked Patsy, suddenly appearing from the kitchen and seeing that I had hardly touched my breakfast. 'Aren't you hungry?'

I lifted my head and tried to smile.

'What's wrong?' asked Patsy, immediately concerned. 'Bad news?'

I touched the two letters with the forefinger of my right hand. 'I think so.'

'What are they?'

‘Trouble.’

‘Haven’t you opened them?’

I shook my head.

‘Then how do you know that they mean trouble?’

‘I just do.’

Patsy sat down on the edge of the chair opposite me. ‘You’re going to have to open them sometime,’ she said quietly.

I nodded. After a moment or two I picked up the letter from London and used my knife to slit it open. My hands were trembling as I pulled out the letter that was inside.

‘Is it bad?’ asked Patsy.

‘Yes.’ I was still reading the letter but I knew that it was bad. ‘Someone has reported me to the General Medical Council.’

‘Why?’ asked Patsy, concerned. ‘Has a patient complained about you?’

I shook my head. ‘Not a patient. I’ve been reported for advertising and bringing the medical profession into disrepute.’

‘Advertising?’ Patsy looked puzzled. ‘What on earth does that mean? What have you done that’s disreputable?’

‘The complaint has come from another doctor,’ I told her. I didn’t really understand what it was all about either.

Patsy reached out and held my hand. For a few moments neither of us spoke. Eventually I handed Patsy the letter to read. I just couldn’t believe it. I’d only been qualified for a few weeks and already my whole career was threatened. My mind was a maelstrom of confused and confusing emotions. All my life I’d wanted to be a doctor. And now there was a very real chance that it was all going to be taken away from me. I wanted to know who had complained about me to the General Medical Council. I felt angry with myself for being so stupid as to speak at the animal rights meeting. I felt angry with myself for agreeing to write a column for the local paper. I felt myself drowning in anger and bitterness.

‘It doesn’t say who has complained about you,’ said Patsy, frowning. She was still reading the letter.

‘They don’t have to tell me who has complained,’ I explained.

‘So how do you know that the complaint came from a doctor?’

‘Because only a doctor would complain that I’ve brought the profession into disrepute or that I’ve been "advertising".’

‘But you haven’t been advertising!’ said Patsy.

‘Someone thinks I’m writing the newspaper column to try to attract new patients.’

‘But that’s daft!’

‘And someone – probably the same person – thinks that I gave that speech about animal experiments to try to attract patients too.’

Patsy shook her head. ‘It’s not fair!’ She looked at the letter again. ‘What do they mean about bringing the profession into disrepute?’

I shrugged. ‘That just refers to the speech about animal experiments.’ ‘But how did that bring the profession into disrepute?’ I shrugged. I didn’t know whether to scream or to cry. I felt desolate, angry and violent all at once. I felt pleased that the letter had arrived on a Saturday morning and that I didn’t have to do a morning surgery and grateful too that Dr Brownlow was on duty for the weekend.

‘I’m going to organise a petition,’ said Patsy. A tear was running down her right cheek.

‘No!’ I said sharply. ‘I’m in enough trouble already.’

Patsy reached out to me. ‘But I want to help you. It isn’t right. None of this is right.’

I stood up. ‘I know it’s not right!’ I said. ‘It’s bloody unfair. But organising a petition isn’t going to help.’ I could feel tears filling my eyes and suddenly I had a desperate desire to be alone. Like an animal who has been wounded I wanted to run away and hide. As I half turned to leave the table I remembered the second letter. I picked that up and tore it open. It was a letter from Lionel Francis’s solicitor informing me that his client was taking legal action against me and demanding £500,000 in damages. I threw the letter down onto the table and walked out of the bar with tears of frustration, sadness, anger and bitterness filling my eyes. Behind me I could hear Patsy crying. I wanted to go back to her; to hold her and comfort her; to share my sadness with her.

But I didn’t.

* * *

Outside the Duck and Puddle Ben and I got into the car. I felt as though I couldn’t breathe. Everything had happened so quickly that I couldn’t keep up. I felt as though I was running down an icy ski slope, totally out of control, with no idea how I’d got there and with no idea what was going to happen next. I felt lost, frightened and threatened. I felt as though my chest was in a vice.

For forty minutes I drove on automatic pilot. I drove without being conscious of anything else on the road. I drove without seeing any road signs and without knowing where I was or where I was heading.

I was awakened from this trance like state when I turned a corner, drove up onto a hump backed bridge and found myself bonnet to bonnet with a large Rover motor car that was towing a caravan. There was no room for our two cars to pass and the driver of the Rover, a blustery, red-faced man who was surrounded by a car full of wife and daughters, waved imperiously and angrily at me, indicating that I should go back and get out of the way.

I had my hand on the gear lever ready to put the car into reverse when I stopped. I'd had enough of people pushing me about. I just sat there and did nothing and stared out, unseeing, into the distance.

Slowly, I became aware that there was someone knocking on the side window of the car. I turned my head and saw the red-faced man from the Rover. The man's face was redder than ever and the veins on his forehead were pumped full of blood. The man's eyes were filled with frustration and rage and through the glass I could hear him shouting and swearing. I looked to the front. The Rover was still parked directly in front of me. In the front passenger seat I could see the man's wife. Her face was contorted with fury. She too was shouting but I couldn't hear what she was saying. Behind her I could see the faces of her two teenage daughters. Their faces, too, were full of anger.

If any of this had happened a day earlier I would have wound down my window, apologised profusely and backed my car up to a point where the Rover and its caravan could squeeze past. But I didn't. I switched off the ignition and took out the key. I then got out of the car. The red-faced man was still shouting but, strangely, I couldn't hear what he was saying.

Ignoring him I then locked the car door and put the key in my pocket. I left the car where it was, walked down the road a few yards, climbed over a stile and walked into a field that stretched so far into the distance that it seemed to meet the horizon. Suddenly I became aware of Ben. She was bounding along beside me, never straying more than a yard or two from my side though there were exciting looking rabbit holes all over the place. I bent down, stopped and hugged her, and then walked on.

A few moments later I reached the cliff edge. Several hundred feet below me the sea was crashing on the rocks and I could feel sharp, salty spray being blown against my face by the wind. I turned and looked behind me. The Morris was still parked where I'd left it. The red-faced man and his wife were standing on the road arguing. The man was pointing in my direction. I watched the scene dispassionately for a few moments. It didn't seem to have anything to do with me. Then I sat down on a rock and stared out at the sea.

Halfway across the Bristol Channel, maybe ten miles away, a tanker steamed slowly past. It moved with the grace that distance gives and I wondered what was happening on board. I wondered where the tanker was going. And I suddenly felt very small, very insignificant and very unimportant. Strangely, my problems felt small too and I realised just how little they mattered.

I closed my eyes and turned my head to face into the full force of the wind. The problems I had left behind seemed so insignificant that I couldn't understand why I had allowed myself to get so upset. I knew that I could live with whatever the lawyers and the General Medical Council did to me. I had done nothing to be ashamed of. I would not back down. I would not apologise. I would carry on doing what I felt was right. Ben, who was sitting by my side, rested her head on my thigh and I stroked her tenderly.

The wind got stronger and it started to rain. I shivered. I had no coat or jacket and I realised that I was cold. I stood and turned and looked back towards the road. It had taken them a long time but the bad-tempered family had managed to push their caravan out of the way and someone, presumably the red-faced man, had reversed and turned the Rover in a gateway.

Stuffing my hands into my pockets I strode back across the field to where my car was still parked on one side of the tiny bridge. By the time I got to it the red-faced man and his family had hitched their caravan up to their car and were about to start retracing their steps. I waved to them as they disappeared. Then Ben and I got into the car. I reversed quickly and easily, turned in a gateway and started the drive back to Bilbury.

Above all else I wanted desperately to get back to see Patsy. I felt bad because I knew that I had taken out my anger and frustration on her; I wanted to see her to tell her how much it helped to have her around. I wanted to tell her how much it helped to be able to talk to her and share things with her. I wanted to tell her that I cared for her and that she was more important to me than the lawyers or the medical profession. And most important of all I wanted to tell her that I loved her. This final realisation surprised me somewhat but I knew without a doubt that it was true.

The only thing that frightened me now was that Patsy might no longer want to have anything to do with me.

I need not have worried.

* * *

Like all doctors I had joined an insurance society the moment I'd qualified. The payment of regular premiums entitled me to legal advice and protection if ever I got into trouble as a result of practising my profession – in exactly the same way that motor car insurance protects a driver from financial ruin in the event of an accident. The next Monday morning I telephoned the Doctors' Defence Association in London and told them what had happened.

'Let me get this straight,' said the plum voiced stranger on the other end of the line. 'You have received a formal notice of complaint from the General Medical Council and a formal notification of impending legal proceedings from a solicitor?' He said all this as though anxious to make it clear that he regarded any doctor who required so much help as deserving everything that the might of the law could throw at him.

'That's right,' I admitted.

'You'd better see one of our solicitors,' sighed the man with the plum stuck in his mouth. 'I'll ring you back with a name and an appointment.' With that the phone went dead. It wasn't quite the support I would have liked but somehow that didn't matter. I had Patsy and Ben for love and support and needed only legal advice from the Doctors' Defence Association.

* * *

After the Monday morning surgery had finished I set off in search of Dr Brownlow. I found him in the walled vegetable garden examining some cuttings that he had taken a couple of months earlier. I showed him the two letters I'd received on Saturday.

'What rubbish,' he said when he'd read them. He handed the letters back to me with earthy fingerprints down both sides. 'You'll need the day off to see a solicitor in London.'

'I'm afraid so.'

'No problem,' said Dr Brownlow. He wiped his hands down the side of his trousers, put an arm around my shoulder and started walking towards the greenhouse. Once inside he sat down on the brick edge of one of the cutting beds. I sat down opposite him.

'The lawsuit is baloney,' he said. 'You can forget about that. Apart from anything else how can someone who's dead sue you? My guess is that the solicitor in Exeter is behind with his threatening letters. But the General Medical Council thing is a bit more serious. I suppose we'd better take that more seriously.'

I liked the way he said 'we'.

'Do you know who made the complaint?'

I shook my head.

'No idea?'

'None whatsoever.'

'Do you know if there are two separate complaints or if the same person has complained about the newspaper column and your speech?'

I shook my head again.

'My guess is that the two complaints came from the same person,' said Dr Brownlow quietly. 'And I think I know who it was.'

I was startled. 'Who?'

Dr Brownlow shook his head. 'I don't want to say anything yet. But I know who's likely to get up to tricks like this round here.' Suddenly he stood up and looked down at me. 'Remember this,' he said very seriously. 'Whatever happens I'm with you.' He held out his right hand for me to shake. I stood up and took it. 'Everything will be OK,' he said confidently.

I found his support and comfort very touching but 'thank you' was all I could think of to say.

* * *

Ben still missed Hubert, I knew that, but we were close friends. She came with me everywhere; sitting underneath my desk in the surgery, travelling in the car with me and sleeping on the bottom of my bed. I never used a lead. She always stayed with me and I couldn't imagine what life had been like without her.

* * *

I had a telephone call from the hospital to tell me that they had tested over a dozen pairs of jeans from the market stallholder who'd supplied Mrs Harper. In addition to the two brand new pairs that Keith had never worn they'd traced several other customers and tested their jeans too. None of them was contaminated with phosphorous. 'The only explanation we can think of is that someone walked past the jeans stall carrying a leaky insecticide container,' said the doctor from the hospital.

'And spilt some of the solution on one of the pairs of jeans that Mrs Harper bought?'

'Exactly. Once the spillage had dried out there wouldn't be anything to see,' the doctor went on. 'But the jeans would be soaked with phosphorous.'

I telephoned Mrs Harper right away and told her that the hospital would be posting the two new pairs of jeans back to her. 'How is Keith?' I asked her.

'He's fine!' said Mrs Harper. There was a long silence. 'I really can't thank you enough, doctor,' she said. 'You were marvellous.'

'I'm just glad that Keith is OK,' I said, self-consciously.

* * *

The receptionist was busy with her nails and her tongue peeped out between her lips as she concentrated on what she was doing. She finished painting the nail on the little finger of her left hand, held her hand at arm's length to examine her work and then blew gently on the nails a couple of times. Then she shook her fingers gently. Satisfied, she carefully transferred the brush with which she was painting her nails from her right hand to her left hand. She gripped it tightly but carefully between her thumb and forefinger so as not to smudge the polish that she had already applied. Then she started on the nails of her right hand.

I stood and watched her. I had been standing in front of her desk for what seemed like hours. It seemed to take her another hour to paint the nails on her right hand. Then she carefully screwed the cap back on the bottle of bright red nail varnish that she'd been using, waved both hands in the air a few times and looked up. She seemed genuinely surprised to see me standing there and raised a neatly manicured eyebrow.

I told her my name. 'I've got an appointment to see Mr Wellings.'

The receptionist carefully picked up the grey telephone on the desk in front of her and used a pencil to dial a three figure number. She held the telephone cautiously, taking care not to smudge her nails. It made her look as though she found the telephone offensive or distasteful in some way. She listened for a moment and then dropped the telephone back down onto its rest. 'He's got someone with him,' she said. 'You'll have to wait.' She nodded towards a pair of low black, imitation leather chairs on the other side of the narrow reception area. A low, glass topped coffee table stood in front of the two chairs. Upon it lay a pile of magazines and a single, slightly untidy copy of the *Financial Times*.

I wandered across and sat down. The building looked as if it had been converted from something much larger. The ceiling was high and vaulted and numerous tall partitions divided up the room into a number of small units. Whoever had organised the conversion had clearly had a limited budget. The partition walls were poorly made and all the furniture that I could see was cheap and slightly battered. I moved the *Financial Times* and flicked through the magazines. They were all, with a single exception, ancient copies of a legal journal. The exception was a copy of a giveaway magazine telling young couples how to get a mortgage for their first home. I flicked through it. It was full of photographs of luxury flats in central London and spacious country mansions with huge, colourful gardens. Real life.

Suddenly, I heard someone shouting my name. I looked across at the receptionist who was sitting staring at me. She had her arms folded in front of her. 'I've had to call you three times,' she complained. 'Mr Wellings is waiting for you.'

I stood up. 'Where is his office?'

'Through that door over there,' said the girl, pointing to a door at the far end of the reception area. 'Turn right and it's the second door on your left.' She sounded as tired and as bored as she looked.

The office was nine, maybe ten, feet square. It had no window and contained one filing cabinet, one artificial teak desk and three tubular metal chairs. That made it crowded. One of the chairs was behind the desk and sitting on it was a small bespectacled man in his late sixties. He wore a shabby, plain, grey suit, a faintly striped white shirt and a badly knotted brown tie with a swirling pattern in the material. This was Mr Wellings. The solicitor whom the Doctors' Defence Association had retained on my behalf.

'Sit down, sit down!' said Mr Wellings, lifting himself up a couple of inches from his own chair and waving a hand at the two chairs in front of his desk. An unpleasant cloud of aftershave almost suffocated me. I thought he looked very frail.

I pulled one of the chairs back and sat down. The office was bleak. On top of the filing cabinet there was a pile of papers and a dying cactus in a brown flower pot. The flower pot stood on a patterned saucer. There were more papers stacked up on the floor by the side of the cabinet. The floor was covered in dark green carpet tiles. There was no radiator but a small electric fire stood in one corner of the room. The room was lit by a fluorescent tube attached to the ceiling. The walls were painted white and the only relief came from a diploma in a black bordered frame that was hung on one wall. On top of Mr Wellings' desk there was a telephone, a blotter, a chipped mug used to store pens and pencils, a dirty mug that had had tea or coffee in it and now had a dark stain around the inside, a tray marked 'in', a tray marked 'out' and a small dictating machine. In front of him Mr Wellings had a foolscap pad of lined notepaper and a cheap ballpoint pen that advertised a firm of legal stationers. The 'in' tray was empty. The 'out' tray was full - though it contained but a single, thick, blue cardboard file. It looked a miserable place in which to work.

I introduced myself.

Mr Wellings looked up. 'You're a little late, aren't you?' I started to protest then decided that there wasn't any point and stopped. Mr Wellings had looked down again and was now studying a letter from the Doctors' Defence Association. 'How long have you been in practice in Devon?' he asked me without lifting his head.

'Four months.'

There was a long silence during which Mr Wellings incessantly clicked the retractor button on his ballpoint pen. 'And now you've received a complaint from the General Medical Council and a writ from a firm of solicitors acting on behalf of one of your patients?'

'Mr Francis wasn't actually my patient,' I corrected him.

'Dr Brownlow is the principal. I'm employed as his assistant.'

I said this not in an attempt to evade responsibility but merely because I felt I ought to put the record straight.

'And what does Dr Browning think of all this?" asked Mr Wellings. He put down his pen and started cracking his knuckles.

'Dr Brownlow has been very supportive.'

Mr Wellings snorted and picked up his pen again.

'Dr Brownlow doesn't think that I need worry too much about the letter from Mr Francis's solicitors,' I said, rather hesitantly.

'I see,' said Mr Wellings. 'Dr Browning is a qualified solicitor, is he?'

It's Brownlow,' I corrected him. 'No. He isn't a solicitor. But sadly Mr Francis is dead.'

Mr Wellings sat up sharply at this piece of news. 'Dead?

When did he die?' I told him.

Mr Wellings sniffed at this, pulled his legal pad towards him, picked up his pen and wrote something down. While he wrote I looked around. The room was small without being cosy, scruffy without being friendly and untidy without being relaxed. It looked as though it was a temporary office, borrowed for the day, though the nameplate on the door assured me that it wasn't. There were no signs of personal occupancy; no photographs; no knick-knacks; no souvenirs; no evidence of humanity. 'Is there any chance that the survivors may hold you responsible for the death?' asked the solicitor.

'I don't think so.'

'This other charge,' said Mr Wellings, 'the one from the General Medical Council. Do you have any idea where the complaint may have originated from?'

I shook my head.

'None whatsoever?'

'No.'

'It's a very serious charge,' said Mr Wellings sternly. He looked at me. 'You do realise that, don't you?'

My mouth felt dry. I tried to speak but my voice seemed to have disappeared. I nodded.

'If you are found guilty your name can be removed from the medical register.'

'Yes,' I managed to say. 'I realise that.'

'To all extents and purposes your career, your professional life, would be over.'

I swallowed hard. The solicitor seemed to be trying to frighten me but he was having the opposite effect. 'It all seems a bit daft,' I said. 'I had no intention of trying to attract patients. As I've already explained the practice isn't mine. It belongs to Dr Brownlow. I had no intention of advertising and I had nothing to gain by it.'

Mr Wellings sniffed. 'Are you still writing the newspaper column which features in the complaint?'

I nodded. I was getting slightly better at it too. I'd talked it over with Patsy and with Dr Brownlow. They'd both agreed with me that I shouldn't let myself be bullied. I wasn't doing anything wrong. 'There's no way that I could gain professionally by writing the column,' I insisted. 'It's a good way to help people with information. I've had a lot of nice letters from readers thanking me for the advice I've given.'

Mr Wellings frowned. 'That's not how the General Medical Council will see it,' he said. 'In their view you are enhancing your reputation among members of the public. You would, I think, be well advised to stop writing the newspaper column if you wish to remain on the medical register.' He glowered at me. 'And I certainly wouldn't advise you to tell anyone that you've received grateful letters from readers.'

I was beginning to wonder whether Mr Wellings was really on my side.

'Have I made myself clear?'

'Yes. Perfectly.'

'May I then write to the General Medical Council on your behalf to tell them that you apologise for your actions, you withdraw your allegations about animal experimentation and that you will cease to write your newspaper column?'

'Why do I have to apologise for my comments about animal experiments?'

Mr Wellings sighed. 'I understand that the official, establishment viewpoint is that animal experiments are worthwhile and important. Your views are likely to annoy and embarrass the establishment.'

'What are my chances if I fight?' I asked him. 'If I don't apologise or withdraw the comments I've made?'

'Very slim, doctor,' said Mr Wellings. 'Very slim indeed.'

He stood up. 'I suggest that you go back to Devon and that you think very carefully about what you're going to do. When you've made up your mind perhaps you'd be kind enough to give me a ring and let me know?'

He didn't shake hands but made it pretty clear that the interview was over so I stood up and left.

* * *

One thing I did learn from my visit to the solicitor's office was that I never wanted to work in London.

Living in the country for a few months I had forgotten just how noisy, dirty and inhospitable cities are. Everything seemed so grey, so dreary and so unreal. I had arrived at Paddington station and found it a deeply depressing experience. I had travelled from Paddington to the part of London where Mr Wellings had his cramped office by underground train and had found the journey had enhanced my sense of depression.

In Devon the air was clean and the pace of life was slow. In London the air was foul and everyone seemed to be rushing. Thousands spent much of their lives underground or in offices shut away from daylight. In Devon I could dawdle in the lanes and watch buzzards, swallows, badgers, foxes and rabbits. In London I had to keep my wits about me to avoid being crushed by the traffic.

In Devon there was time to think and to enjoy life. In London there was no time for thinking and no time for enjoying life. In Devon I felt alive and close to nature. In London I felt suffocated and too far from the things I had learned to value most. In Devon people smiled at one another and wanted to share their thoughts and experiences. In London people only seemed to scowl at one another and to covet one another's belongings.

* * *

When I got back to Bilbury, Dr Brownlow had had his well filled with a tanker full of water that he had bought from the water board. 'It's disgusting stuff,' he complained. 'It stinks of chlorine.'

In the surgery, water was strictly rationed and two house bricks had been put into all the lavatory cisterns together with notices requesting everyone to flush only when absolutely necessary. 'The water is cheap enough,' explained Dr Brownlow. 'But getting it here costs an absolute fortune. I had to get one of the local milk lorries to bring it in.'

'Did you find out why Mr Trickle had built a dam?'

It wasn't the wisest of questions for it turned Dr Brownlow bright scarlet and his face became unpleasantly contorted. 'Damn that Trickle!' he said angrily, banging his fist down on the nearest available surface which happened to be the desk. A half empty mug of coffee jumped two inches into the air and spilt most of its residue.

'He's building a trout pond in his garden,' complained Dr Brownlow. 'So he's diverted the stream.'

'Can't you stop him?'

'I might be able to if I could find him,' complained Dr Brownlow. 'No one ever sees him. And the workmen he's hired have come from London. They all seem to be staying in caravans.'

'But you must have some sort of legal rights! He can't just stop you using a stream that you've been using for years.'

'He can until I serve him with a writ,' growled Dr Brownlow. 'And I hate solicitors.'

'I'm sure Thumper would go in there one night and take the dam down,' I suggested.

Dr Brownlow looked truly horrified. 'That would be illegal. I couldn't countenance that.'

'So what alternative do you have? You can't keep hiring milk lorries to bring you tankers full of water.'

'I've got a dowser coming tomorrow,' said Dr Brownlow. My sense of puzzlement clearly showed.

'A dowser,' repeated Dr Brownlow. 'A water diviner.'

I nearly laughed but stopped myself just in time. 'Do you really believe in all that? Hazel twigs and unseen forces?'

'That was my first reaction,' sighed Dr Brownlow. 'But everyone I've spoken to says that the only way to find water is to use a diviner.'

'But how on earth can it possibly work?'

Dr Brownlow shrugged.

'Do you mean they haven't yet got machines that can find water underground?'

Dr Brownlow shook his head. 'They all say that the most effective way to find water is to use a good dowser.'

'What time is he coming?'

'It's a she and she's coming in two days.'

'Do you mind if I come and watch?'

'As long as there's no sniggering,' said Dr Brownlow firmly. 'I don't want her going off in a huff without finding me some water.'

'You really do believe in it, don't you?' I was astonished that a man of science should believe such mumbo jumbo.

'I'll tell you whether I believe or not in two days,' said Dr Brownlow. 'If they could find me water I'd believe in fairies.'

* * *

'There was a message for you from Mrs Francis,' said Miss Johnson. 'She asked if you'd be kind enough to give her a call.'

For a moment I hesitated. I felt sure that my lawyers would not have wanted me to telephone a woman whose late husband had started a legal action against me. That, I decided, was a good enough reason to call her.

'I'm glad you phoned,' said Mrs Francis. 'Really glad. I was afraid you might not want to speak to me. I wouldn't have blamed you.' She spoke in a rush.

'I was very sorry about your husband's death.'

'Thank you,' said Mrs Francis. There was a pause. 'I wanted to speak to you about two things,' she said. 'First I want to thank you for the tactful way you handled my husband's death.'

I started to say something then stopped.

'I knew all about his lady-friend,' said Mrs Francis. 'And I can guess how he probably died. I'm very grateful to you.'

I mumbled something.

'Second,' she went on, 'I want to let you know that I've instructed my husband's solicitors that they are to withdraw the lawsuit against you immediately and to pay any costs that you might have incurred. I didn’t want him to bring the case in the first place and I’m certainly not going to consider letting them carry on with any legal action now.’

‘Thank you,’ I said.

‘You don’t need to thank me,’ said Mrs Francis. ‘The case should never have been brought. You never did anything wrong and even if someone at the hospital was at fault it was never fair to drag you into it.’ She paused. ‘I’m instructing the solicitors to drop the lawsuit against the hospital too. I don’t care whether or not I could have sued them.’

As soon as she’d put the phone down I rang Patsy to tell her the good news. Then I rang Dr Brownlow to tell him the good news too.

They were both delighted.

Even Ben seemed to suspect that something good had happened.

* * *

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

'I'm sorry to interrupt,' said Miss Johnson, poking her head round the surgery door, 'But there's been an accident on the Barnstaple road.'

I stood up. 'I'm sorry,' I said to Mrs Jones, the vicar's wife. 'But I'll have to go. If you'd like to wait?'

'Don't you worry, doctor,' said Mrs Jones. 'You go and see to the accident. I'll wait here.'

I turned to Miss Johnson. 'Where exactly is it?'

'Near the junction with the road into the village.'

'Do you know who's involved?'

'The caller just said that someone had been knocked off a bicycle.'

'Have they called an ambulance?'

'They said they had but I'll ring and check when you're on your way,' said Miss Johnson. Her efficiency never failed to amaze me. Somehow she seemed to get calmer and more authoritative the more threatening the emergency.

The junction between the Bilbury road and the main Barnstaple to Lynton road was no more than three quarters of a mile from the surgery and I was there less than five minutes after Miss Johnson had interrupted the surgery.

I knew the moment I arrived that there was no hope. Young Keith Harper must have been killed instantly. Judging by the tyre marks on the road the car that had killed him had been travelling far too fast for the fairly narrow road. Keith was lying in the middle of the road: his chest was crushed and both his arms were clearly broken. His neck was broken too. Strangely, apart from a trickle of blood at the corner of his mouth and another trickle coming out of his nose his face was unmarked. His bright red bicycle, buckled into waste metal, was lying at the side of the road twenty yards away. I felt for a pulse but could feel none. Gently, I pulled up his jumper and then unfastened his shirt and tried to listen to his heart. But it was no longer beating. With tears in my eyes I knelt beside him and took hold of one of his hands. It seemed such a cruel, cruel waste.

Someone spoke behind me. 'Is he dead?'

I turned round. It was Thumper. His truck was parked a few yards down the road.

I nodded.

'Poor little beggar.' Thumper had tears in his eyes too. 'I wish I could get hold of the bastard who killed him.'

I nodded towards Keith's body. 'Did you find him?'

Thumper nodded and wiped his nose with the back of his hand. 'I just came round the corner and there he was – lying in the middle of the road. There was no sign of any car.'

I looked past him. A small queue of vehicles had built up on the road out of Barnstaple. I turned round and looked the other way. Another small queue of vehicles coming from the Lynton direction had also built up. 'Let's move him to the side of the road.'

Thumper and I picked up Keith's body and carefully lifted him over to the side of the road. We were about to lie him down on the grass when I heard a voice shouting. 'Don't you know you're not supposed to move accident victims?' The owner of the voice was a small, squat man in a three piece grey suit. 'I trained in first aid!' he announced firmly.

'I'm afraid he's dead.'

'This is the doctor,' said Thumper.

The stranger stared at me and then at Keith's body. He paled. 'Are you sure?'

I nodded. 'I'm afraid so.'

The small man turned away and a few seconds later I heard him retching in the hedge.

'Someone's got to tell his mother,' said Thumper. 'I don't envy anyone that job.'

I knew the moment he said it that I had to do it.

I waited until the ambulance came and I stood there while they loaded Keith's body into the back. A police car and two officers from Barnstaple came with the ambulance. They took charge of everything with quiet efficiency; measuring tyre marks and taking a statement from Thumper. 'Do you mind if I go?' I said to one of them.

He looked at me.

'I've got to go and tell the boy's mother.'

Thumper looked at me but didn't say anything.

'Thank you, doctor,' said the policeman, undoubtedly relieved that someone else was doing the job.

'I want to go before she hears it from anyone else,' I said quietly but I walked to my car with leaden legs. I didn't want to go. I would have given anything in the world to have been somewhere else. I had told relatives in hospital that patients had died but I'd never done anything like this before and I knew it was probably going to be the most difficult thing I'd ever done.

Those next few minutes scar my memory. I can remember every instant, every feeling and every tear we shed together. I sat in my car for nearly five minutes outside Mrs Harper's cottage trying to pluck up courage to ring her doorbell and tell her that her son, the one person who meant anything in her life, was dead.

I can still remember the smell of the nearby fields where a farmer had been spraying fertiliser on his pastureland. I can remember the sound of seagulls perched on the roof of the house; seagulls which flew away when I shut my car door and walked across to the front door. I can remember Mrs Harper opening the door and smiling at me, unaware that I had called to draw the curtains on her life and cast her into a gloom and deep despair that might lighten but that would endure and to some degree be with her always.

I can remember making her sit down before I told her. I can remember the look on her face when she knew that I had called with bad news and I can remember the instant of realisation when she knew, even before I had told her, that Keith was dead. I can remember the primeval scream of anguish which leapt from her body when she understood what had happened. I can remember the tears and the sobbing and the time when there were no more tears left and she was crying silently and tearlessly.

I don't remember how long I was there with her but after a while there was a quiet knock on the door and I took my arm away from around her and went and answered the door. It was Thumper.

'I've been waiting across the road,' he said. I had never heard him speak with such gentleness before. 'You have to look after other patients but she can't be left alone.'

'No.' I said. 'She can't.'

'I'll take her home with me,' said Thumper. 'Anne and I will look after her.' It was an act of simple, thoughtful generosity which sealed forever my love for Bilbury and its villagers; people who would always look after one another, like members of some large, extended family.

I drove back to the Duck and Puddle, checked that there were no calls for me and then went around to the back of the pub where I could hear Frank chopping wood. He knew about Keith Harper and he knew where I'd been.

'Can I do that for a while?' I asked him.

He handed me the axe without question and for twenty minutes my unaccustomed muscles swung the heavy axe without skill but with a violence that would have frightened me if it had been expressed in any other way.

Only then did I remember that I still hadn't finished the surgery I'd been doing when Keith Harper had been killed. I hurried back and found Mrs Jones still sitting waiting patiently for me.

* * *

The death of Keith Harper cast a cloud of depression over the village. I had never lived in a small community before and had never before experienced this type of shared loss. It is one of the paradoxes of modern living that the larger a community is the fewer friends and acquaintances each individual will have. In the town where I'd been brought up there was no community spirit. There were people living less than a hundred yards away from us whose names we did not even know; there were people whom we saw every morning about whom we knew nothing. But in Bilbury everyone knew everyone else's name. The easiest place in the world to hide in is the busiest apartment block. In a village nothing is secret.

Everyone shared Mrs Harper's loss. Each man, woman and child suffered with her. In the Duck and Puddle that evening there was no laughter, no jolly banter and no cheerful exchange of gentle insults. A visitor from South Molton called in on the way back from delivering some sheep to a farm near Croyde and was insensitive enough to atmosphere to tell a joke he'd heard. The silence embarrassed him so much that he left with his pint virtually untouched.

The whole incident was made worse by the fact that the police had no idea of the identity of the hit and run killer. There was, therefore, a communal sense of frustration. There was no outlet for our anger. And without any outlet, anger built up and festered inside each one of us.

* * *

The dowser had arrived and was already at work when I found her, the mining engineer who had come with her and Dr Brownlow prowling around in a paddock near to the house. The mining engineer and Dr Brownlow were walking together, watching carefully, as the dowser, a rather good looking middle aged woman in a tweed skirt and a hand knitted jumper, walked slowly but steadily from one side of the field to the other. She carried a forked hazel twig in her two hands, was clearly concentrating hard and every few steps she would stop, hold her head to one side like a bird who thinks he may have heard something, and then carry on again.

'Any luck yet?' I asked Dr Brownlow in a whisper.

'No. Not yet!' muttered Dr Brownlow, who looked rather unhappy and embarrassed at the whole thing, as though he'd been caught at a black magic ceremony.

'Had a couple of false alarms,' said the mining engineer.

'Do you always use dowsers to find water?'

'Always use the same one,' said the engineer, nodding towards the woman with the forked hazel twig. 'She's marvellous.'

'How often does she succeed in finding water?'

The engineer looked at me as though surprised. 'She's never missed yet.'

'Never?' I said, emphasising the word. I assumed that he had been exaggerating in the way that people often do.

'Never!' said the engineer firmly. 'You wait and see.' Then he fell silent again. Dr Brownlow looked at me and frowned as though telling me to shut up so I said no more but I was still unconvinced.

It was another fifteen or twenty minutes before anything happened. And then quite suddenly we all heard the dowser cry out. It was as much a cry of pain as a cry of success. The mining engineer rushed over to where the dowser was standing, more or less in the centre of the field.

'It's a strong one,' she said confidently. Her face was contorted and she seemed to be struggling to hold the hazel twig horizontal. Her fingers were white with the effort.

'What do you reckon?'

'It's a gusher!' the dowser told him. 'Running at about 120 feet.'

The engineer turned to Dr Brownlow. 'You're in luck,' he said. 'You've got a good supply here.'

'What's a gusher?' asked Dr Brownlow.

'You won't need a pump to get the stuff up,' explained the engineer. 'When we drill into the supply the water will come shooting out of the ground.'

'Like an oil well?' Despite my doubts I was beginning to get excited.

'Like an oil well only it'll be water,' agreed the engineer patiently.

I turned to the dowser, who was still struggling to hold her hazel twig under control. She had dropped her scarf on the grass and was now walking across the spot in every possible direction.

'What are you doing now?' I asked her.

The mining engineer took me by the arm and pulled me away from her. 'In a minute,' he whispered. 'You can ask her questions in a minute.' I moved away with him. 'She's marking the exact spot for me to drill,' explained the engineer quietly. 'She needs to find the strongest force so that we can decide where to sink the shaft. If we get it six inches out we might miss the supply completely.'

This sounded to me like an excuse in the making and my cynicism flooded back. The engineer must have sensed this and he moved away from me. Dr Brownlow had said nothing but had been watching the dowser's activities with great interest. Suddenly, the dowser stopped moving and released her grip on her twig. It immediately bounced so that it was pointing straight at the sky and she dropped it onto the grass. She then massaged each of her wrists and fingers in turn. I noticed that most of her fingers were covered in bits of sticking plaster and that several of the plasters were blood stained. 'That's the spot!' she announced, pointing to a place on the grass with the toe of her shoe.

The mining engineer moved forward, took a small wooden stake out of his pocket and stuck it into the ground and then picked up her scarf and handed it back to her. 'Don't touch that whatever you do,' he said to Dr Brownlow and myself. Then he scurried off towards a Land Rover that was parked at the entrance to the field.

'It's all very impressive,' I said to the dowser. 'Do you mind if I try?'

'Impressive but you don't believe in it at all,' said the dowser, looking straight at me and smiling.

'I didn't say that!' I protested.

'I know you didn't,' said the dowser. She held her hand out to me. 'Come here,' she said. As I walked over to her she bent down and picked up her hazel twig with one hand. She then walked away from the spot she'd marked and beckoned to me to follow her. 'Hold this,' she said, giving me one of the forks of the hazel twig to hold in my right hand. 'Are you right handed?'

I confirmed that I was.

'Good,' she said. She took the other length of twig in her left hand. 'Now, walk with me!'

We walked together towards the site of Dr Brownlow's underground river and I must say I felt extremely foolish for about twelve paces.

Then, in an instant, I stopped feeling foolish and started to feel ashamed of my lack of faith. I couldn't believe what was happening. The twig I was holding had suddenly started to bend upwards so violently that I couldn't hold it down.

'Keep hold of it!' said the dowser firmly. I tried and looked across. Her hand, much smaller than mine, was white as she struggled to hold the twig horizontal. I was quite unable to stop my part of the twig from bending upwards.

'What on earth... ?' I began.

'It's the force of the water,' explained the dowser. 'Let me take the stick from you.' As she spoke she reached out and took hold of the stick. Then when she had it firmly in both hands she walked briskly away from the spot she'd already marked. She dropped the hazel stick onto the grass and massaged her wrists and fingers again. 'I'm sorry,' she apologised. 'But the stick was going to break.'

'Can I try it on my own?' I asked her.

'You can if you like,' she said. 'But it may not work for you.'

I tried and was very disappointed. However much I tried and however often I walked across the spot she'd marked I could get no response at all from the hazel twig. By this time the engineer had returned with a massive iron rod and a large sledgehammer. He hammered the iron bar into the ground at the exact spot that the dowser had marked.

'We'll be back to start drilling tomorrow,' said the engineer to Dr Brownlow.

I had never seen Dr Brownlow look so excited. He looked like a child who'd been told that he's going to have an unexpected birthday party.

'Well?' he said, as we walked back towards the house. The dowser and the engineer had left in the Land Rover.

'I don't know,' I said honestly.

'But you felt the force of the stick!'

'I know,' I admitted.

'Were you holding the stick firmly?'

'Yes.'

'She couldn't possibly be strong enough to make the stick move against your will simply by using her own strength.'

'I know. But I still can't believe that they're going to find water there when they drill tomorrow.'

'I do,' said Dr Brownlow. 'I believe they're going to find water at 120 feet and I'm quite certain that it's going to be a gusher.' And he beamed at me with delight.

* * *

The next day Dr Brownlow's confidence in the dowser was entirely justified. The engineer and his drilling team hit water at 115 feet and when the drill broke through the rock into the underground river that flowed beneath Dr Brownlow's field, water shot into the air like a fountain.

* * *

P.C. Wilson took off his helmet and put it down carefully on my desk. Then he stared at it as though he had never seen it before. His face was drawn and lined and there were large dark patches under both his eyes.

'What can I do for you?' I asked him, following the trite but necessary ritual designed to bring each consultation to life.

P.C. Wilson didn't seem to hear me. Instead of answering he reached out and picked up his helmet and held it in his lap, nursing it as a mother might hold her baby.

'You look depressed,' I said quietly. 'Do you want to talk to me about it?'

'I had a car crash,' said P.C. Wilson. He didn't look at me but kept his eyes fixed firmly on his helmet. 'It shook me about a bit.'

'What happened?'

'I lost control and crashed,' answered the policeman.

'Did you injure yourself?'

'No.'

'Have you been to hospital?'

'No. There's no need.'

'What happened to the car?'

'There's a big dent in the front?'

'Was this your car or a police car?'

'Mine.'

'The Ford?'

He nodded. He had a maroon Ford Zephyr.

'Was anyone else involved?'

A shake of the head. This time slightly more emphatic.

'What did you hit?'

'Just a grassy bank,' said P.C. Wilson. 'There was no damage to the bank. There's nothing to see.'

'When did it happen?'

'A day or two ago.'

'Are you insured?'

There was a pause. 'Yes. I suppose so.'

'Haven't you made a claim?'

P.C. Wilson seemed surprised at the question. He thought for a moment and then shook his head.

'It's not unusual to feel some shock after an accident,' I told him. 'It can come on several days afterwards and last for a week or so.'

Instead of answering P.C. Wilson picked up his helmet and turned it round, slowly and carefully examining it from all angles as he did so. Suddenly he asked me a question I wasn't expecting. 'Do doctors still have a rule of confidentiality?’

‘Yes. Nothing you tell me here will go any further.’ I wondered what new peccadillo he wanted to confess. I thought I knew all his secrets.

‘Like a priest?’

‘Exactly like a priest.’

There was a long, long pause. Suddenly, to my horror I knew what was coming next.

‘I’ve got to tell someone,’ he said. His face was etched with pain.

I didn’t want him to tell me. I didn’t want to know. I didn’t want to be drawn into his dark secret. I didn’t want to know what he wanted to tell me.

‘I killed Keith Harper,’ said P.C. Wilson and then he started to cry.

I waited for a moment but his tears didn’t stop. I stood up, walked round the desk, handed him a box of tissues and put my hand on his shoulder. He pulled out one of the tissues, wiped his eyes and then blew his nose. ‘I didn’t see him,’ he said.

‘But you didn’t stop,’ I said quietly. ‘Why?’

The tears started again. His body shook with the sobbing.

At last he said something that I didn’t hear. I asked him to repeat it. ‘I was frightened,’ he whispered. ‘I know it isn’t enough.’

‘Have you told anyone else?’

He shook his head. ‘No,’ he whispered.

‘You must.’

‘I can’t.’ He looked at me in sudden terror. ‘You said you wouldn’t tell anyone,’ he reminded me. ‘You won’t will you?’

I shook my head. ‘Of course not.’ It was not a responsibility I wanted. I knew that Mrs Harper desperately wanted to know who had killed her son. I knew that everyone in the village wanted to know. I knew that the police wanted to know. But P.C. Wilson had come to me as a patient. I owed him secrecy and I knew I had no choice in the matter.

‘What am I going to do?’

‘You won’t go to the police?’

He put his head in his hands. ‘I can’t,’ he whispered. ‘I can’t.’

‘Can you live with what you have done?’

He looked up, looked me in the eye for the first time. ‘No,’ he said simply.

‘You might feel better if you confessed,’ I told him. I honestly didn’t know if what I was saying was true or not. I didn’t know what else to say to him.

‘Maybe,’ he agreed. There was a long silence. ‘But perhaps my punishment is that I don’t have the courage to confess. I have to try to live with my conscience.’

It seemed a wise but sad thing to say.

Slowly, I moved back behind my desk and sat down.

‘Can you give me something to help me sleep?’

I nodded and wrote out a prescription for half a dozen sleeping tablets. I didn’t want to give him more because I was frightened that he might take them all.

‘What am I going to do?’

I hesitated before answering. ‘I don’t know!’ I said honestly.

I paused before continuing. ‘You aren’t going to do anything silly, are you?’

‘No.’ He spoke quickly and firmly, almost defiantly. He picked up the prescription and stood up. ‘Can I come and see you again? You’re the only person I can talk to.’

I nodded. ‘Of course,’ I told him. ‘Of course you can.’ I looked at him. ‘Can’t you talk to your wife?’

He shook his head. ‘Did you know my wife had my cats put to sleep?’

I looked at him, horrified.

‘There was nothing wrong with them. She just took them to the vet’s and had them put down.’ There was nothing but sadness in his eyes.

I remembered seeing Mrs Wilson and the two cats at the vets when I’d taken Ben along. ‘I’m sorry...’

‘I know it sounds silly but I loved them like children,’ he said and then he left.

* * *

It took the engineer and his team less than a day to cap the water geyser in Dr Brownlow’s field and to connect the supply to the system which supplied the house and surgery. Three days afterwards Dr Brownlow met me outside the surgery door with an enormous grin on his face. He was clutching an opened envelope and a large sheet of paper. ‘I’ve just had the report back from the laboratory,’ he said. He couldn’t have looked happier if he’d just won the football pools.

I didn’t know what he was talking about and I assumed that he was talking about a report concerning a patient. I asked him who he meant.

‘The water,’ he explained. ‘I had the water tested.’ He pushed the sheet of paper towards me. ‘Read it!’ he insisted. ‘We’ve got the cleanest, purest, best water they’ve ever tested!’ He was almost dancing for joy. ‘It’s got plenty of minerals in it but nothing to excess and no bugs at all.’

‘That’s good news!’ I agreed. ‘It’s nice to know that we won’t get poisoned when we drink our mid morning cup of coffee.’

‘You don’t understand, do you?’ said Dr Brownlow, impatiently. He snatched the laboratory report back off me and read it again though I suspected that he already knew the contents off by heart.

‘No,’ I admitted, ‘I don’t understand.’

‘Our geyser supplies 600 gallons a minute of pure spring water,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘We need less than a hundredth of that to supply the house and garden.’

‘So you’ve got nearly 600 gallons of spare water...’

‘Per minute!’ Dr Brownlow reminded me.

‘Per minute,’ I agreed.

‘I’m going to bottle it and sell it,’ announced Dr Brownlow.

‘But who will buy bottled water?’ I asked him innocently.

Dr Brownlow stared at me open mouthed. ‘Haven’t you heard of Perrier?’

Slowly the light began to dawn.

‘And Buxton Water and Malvern Water?’ Dr Brownlow went on.

‘You’re going to...’

‘Bilbury Water,’ said Dr Brownlow excitedly. He took a pencil out of his pocket and began to scribble feverishly on the back of the opened envelope. ‘Just look!’ he said, showing me the back of the envelope as he scribbled. ‘The water costs us virtually nothing and I reckon we can make ten pence a bottle profit. We’re producing 4800 pints a minute so that’s £480 a minute profit. In an hour that’s...’ he scribbled again... ‘£28,800.’

I stared at him open mouthed. He was still scribbling. ‘In a year that’s millions!’

‘But can you sell that much?’

‘Probably not to start with,’ admitted Dr Brownlow. ‘But if we can sell just 1% of what we produce I’ll be rich.’

‘Won’t you have to buy lots of expensive equipment?’

Dr Brownlow shook his head. ‘That’s the beauty of it,’ he said. ‘I can buy a second-hand milk bottling plant for next to nothing. With a little adjustment it’ll take the right sort of bottles and then all we have to do is get the labels printed and stuck on.’

I was beginning to see why Dr Brownlow was so excited.

‘Doctor!’ I heard someone calling. I turned. It was Miss Johnson. ‘Doctor!’ she said to me, ‘It’s a quarter past nine. You’ve got seven patients waiting already.’

I congratulated Dr Brownlow and started the morning surgery.

* * *

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The human spine is a truly remarkable structure. Made up of thirty three separate bones it supports and balances the weight of the trunk, the head and the arms; it acts as a shock absorber; it provides an anchorage for many of the body's most powerful muscles and it provides the delicate spinal cord with vitally important protection. The spine is as essential to the structure and shape of the human body as a tent pole is to the structure and shape of a tent.

There are many ways in which the spine can be damaged. A sudden movement or a blow may fracture one of the vertebrae and damage the spinal cord. The higher up the spinal cord that the damage occurs the greater will be the harm done. Of course, if the damage to the spine is serious enough then the owner of the spine may die. This is particularly likely if the damage occurs right at the very top of the spine, just below the base of the skull, just where a hangman's rope would sit if tied firmly around a man's neck.

I doubt if P.C. Wilson was aware of all this. But he knew that one of the most effective ways to remove the life from a human body is to tie a rope around its neck. A farmer found him on the cliffs above Combe Martin. Or, to be more accurate, the farmer found his head. Nearby, a noose and a long length of rope still hung from a massive oak tree. It took the police another three hours to find his body, still strapped inside what was left of his motor car, smashed into wreckage on the rocks below. And it took them several hours more to work out exactly what had happened.

Wilson had tied a rope around his neck. He had used a pale blue, nylon climbing rope with a breaking strain of 2,000 pounds. Since he had weighed well under 200 pounds he must have felt comfortable entrusting his death to the rope.

First, he had tied one end of the rope to the largest tree he could find, wrapping the rope around the trunk of the tree and tying it with a reef knot. Then he had brought the free end of the rope into the car with him and he had tied the other end around his neck. Again he had used a reef knot that wouldn't give under the strain. A long, loose length of rope had been left uncoiled in a free tangle on the grass between the car and the tree. Next the policeman had fastened his seat belt. Finally, he had started the engine. He had put his left foot on the clutch and slipped the car into first gear. His last action had been to wedge a three foot long piece of fence post onto the accelerator.

As the car accelerated towards the cliff edge so the climbing rope gradually uncoiled.

The police spent a long time trying to work out how fast the car had been going when their colleague had died. But in the end they gave up. Wilson's head had been torn clean off his body by the rope and the noose on the now loose length of rope was left lying on the grass, pointing in the direction that the car had gone; pointing like a long, accusing finger of fate.

The police had come to me afterwards.

'Do you have any idea why he might have killed himself?'

I asked them if they knew that he was a transvestite. They said they did.

And then I told them about Keith Harper.

In a way I felt guilty about breaking the confidence. But I thought I owed it to Mrs Harper and the rest of the village to tell the truth. And, rightly or wrongly, I felt that P.C. Wilson's death had freed me from my promise not to tell. I knew there was no one else I could ask for advice but in my heart I felt that my allegiance to the living had, in this case, to outweigh my allegiance to the dead.

* * *

An old unused stone barn behind Dr Brownlow's house had been cleared out and redecorated and the bottling plant was being installed. Labels had been designed and Dr Brownlow had signed a contract with a distributor who had already arranged a deal with a chain of up-market grocery shops. Bilbury Water seemed to be heading for success. The villagers were delighted. Apart from the employment prospects at the bottling plant, Dr Brownlow's discovery was attracting visitors to the village. Not too many, but just enough. An article in an up-market posh Sunday newspaper had described the discovery in glowing terms and the Duck and Puddle was having to turn away potential customers because of lack of room.

'I'm thinking of having an extension built,' Frank Parsons told me one evening. 'What we really need is a good wind to take some of the slates off the north side of the roof.'

I looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

'That's where the extension will have to go,' he explained. 'We might as well get the insurance company to help with the building costs.'

Every evening he settled himself down in front of the TV weather report like a man checking his football pool coupon.

Dr Brownlow himself seemed to have gained a new lease of life from the discovery. He looked younger and always seemed full of energy. Every day he could be seen bouncing around supervising the improvements in the bottling plant or showing people forecasts he had made on the basis of the latest orders his distributors had taken.

But as far as I was concerned one of the most important events occurred late one Thursday afternoon just as I'd finished the evening surgery and was about to go back to the Duck and Puddle for my dinner. 'Have you got a moment?' asked Dr Brownlow, as I said goodnight to Miss Johnson.

I said I had.

'Come and have a drink.'

I followed Dr Brownlow through the house and into his living room. The table was covered with trade journals and piles of paper.

'What would you like?'

'I'll have a whisky, please.'

'Glenmorangie?'

'Great!' I agreed. I'd acquired a taste for malt whisky but couldn't always afford it.

Dr Brownlow poured a generous measure into an antique cut glass tumbler. 'Water?'

'Yes, please. Just a drop.'

Dr Brownlow smiled with childish delight, walked across the room, bent down and took a bottle out of a cardboard box. 'Here it is!' he said, holding up the bottle with a flourish. 'The first bottle of official Bilbury Water!' He held the bottle out to me, holding it in the same way that an oenophile might hold an ancient and valuable bottle of port or claret.

I don't really know what I'd expected but I was immediately impressed by how professional the bottle looked. It was properly labelled and the screw cap was sealed with an impressive looking strip of paper and fake sealing wax. The label bore a drawing of Dr Brownlow's house and I think this was probably the first time I'd realised just how serious the whole venture was. With a flick Dr Brownlow opened the top of the bottle and handed it to me. I inspected the label carefully and then added a splash to the Glenmorangie in my glass.

'It's in production, then?'

'Not properly,' admitted Dr Brownlow, taking the bottle off me and adding a little water to his own whisky. 'Not until next Monday. But they've been trying out the machinery.' He sat down in a massive leather armchair near to the fireplace. Two huge logs had been burning for some time. He waved to the other chair and I sat down opposite him.

'I haven't felt so excited by anything since I first started out in practice,' he told me.

'You look well on it all.'

'It's exciting!' said Dr Brownlow. 'Not just because I can make money and keep the house going but for a dozen other reasons.' He waved a hand around airily as though uncertain which reasons to choose. 'It helps the village,' he said. 'I like that. And it's fun to see a new business growing.'

I nodded and sipped at my whisky.

'The thing is,' Dr Brownlow went on, 'that the water bottling is taking up all my time.'

'I realise that,' I said. 'It's OK. I seem to be able to manage now.'

'No!' said Dr Brownlow, shaking his head. 'I'm going to have to resign from the practice.'

It didn't sink in for a minute. And then, slowly, I realised that this meant that I was going to be out of work.

'It isn't fair to anyone for me to carry on pretending that I'm a GP,' Dr Brownlow continued. He stared into the fire for a moment, then drank half the remaining whisky in his glass. 'I've enjoyed it,' he said. 'But being a GP is a young man's job. And I'm too old for it.'

I started to protest but he raised a hand to stop me then got up and fetched the bottle of Glenmorangie and the bottle of Bilbury Water. He offered the whisky bottle to me first.

'I'd better not,' I said. 'I'm on duty. And I've got to drive home.'

'Sorry,' Dr Brownlow apologised. 'You're right.' But he took the stopper out of the whisky bottle. 'Do you mind if I have another?'

'No, of course not.' Although I didn't want to show it I was feeling empty inside. I had grown to love working in Bilbury. I liked the patients. I liked the job. I liked the practice. I liked the countryside. And I loved Patsy. A thousand questions were struggling for my attention but none of them was getting answered.

Dr Brownlow added water to the generous measure of whisky he'd poured himself and sat back down again. 'The patients like you very much,' he said. 'You care for them and they know that.' He sipped at his whisky and looked across at me. I didn't know what to say. It was a compliment I cherished and I felt myself blushing with surprise and embarrassment.

'So, there's only one solution!' said Dr Brownlow.

I looked across at him.

'You'll have to take over the practice,' he said. He raised his glass to me. 'What do you say?'

I opened my mouth and sat there for a few seconds giving a passable imitation of a goldfish.

‘Will you take over the practice for me?’ asked Dr Brownlow, repeating his offer.

Again, I tried to speak but again my throat seemed to have gone on strike. So I simply nodded furiously. Now another thousand questions were struggling for space in my brain. Again none of them looked like getting answered.

‘What about the General Medical Council?’ I reminded him at last. ‘I’ve still got to face that advertising charge.’

‘You can forget about that,’ grinned Dr Brownlow. ‘It’s being dropped.’

I stared at him uncomprehendingly.

‘It was that damned son of mine,’ explained Dr Brownlow. ‘He was trying to get at me by attacking you. I think he thought that if you had to leave I wouldn’t be able to cope and he’d be. able to get me into that retirement home.’ He paused and drank some of his whisky. ‘I guessed it was him and when I rang him up he confessed.’

‘But how can you be sure that he’ll drop the complaint?’

Dr Brownlow grinned at me. ‘I told him that if he doesn’t tell the General Medical Council to get off your back then he’ll be out of my will forever.’ He raised an eyebrow. ‘Can you imagine how much that frightened him now that I look like I’m getting rich?’

I had to smile.

‘So?’ asked Dr Brownlow. ‘What’s your answer?’

‘Yes!’ I said simply with a word that was to change my life. ‘Yes! Thank you!’

‘Good!’ grinned Dr Brownlow. He took another sip out of his glass and leant forwards. ‘I’ll send in my resignation tomorrow and with it I’ll send them a note telling them that you’ll be taking over.’

I nodded. Half an hour earlier I’d been a temporary assistant. Ten minutes earlier I thought I’d been facing unemployment. Now I was about to become self-employed with my own list of patients. It was all a little too much to cope with.

‘If you want to carry on using the surgery that’ll be fine,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘I’ll work out some extortionate rent and you can carry on just the same as you are now.’ He sipped more whisky. ‘But now that you’re staying in Bilbury you’ll probably want to find your own place to live and if you find somewhere big enough to house a surgery that’s no problem at all.’

‘They’ve been very good to me at the Duck and Puddle,’ I said. ‘I wouldn’t want to just go and leave them in the lurch.’

‘Don’t you worry about that,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘Frank and Gilly can let every room they’ve got these days – and for more than you’re paying them.’ He picked up the poker and gave the logs a shake, then he lifted a huge log out of the wicker basket that stood beside the hearth and threw it onto the fire. A cloud of sparks lit up the room. ‘Did you know that Bilbury Grange was on the market again?’

‘Mike Trickle’s house? Is he leaving?’

‘He’s apparently decided that country life isn’t for him,’ said Dr Brownlow.

My mind was buzzing with so many ideas that I couldn’t think about any of them clearly. I stood up. ‘I ought to be getting back to the Duck and Puddle,’ I told him. I fiddled with my watch. ‘Gilly will have my dinner ready.’

Dr Brownlow stood up too and held out his hand. ‘Thank you,’ he said, as I took his hand in mine. ‘I’m very fond of this village. I’m glad you’re going to look after it.’

I found myself blushing again. ‘I like it too,’ I said. I felt a lump in my throat. ‘And I’m honoured that you’re letting me take over your practice.’ It sounded corny but I meant it.

‘Just make sure that you ring Patsy and tell her the good news,’ said Dr Brownlow with a twinkle in his eye. ‘She’s a lovely girl. She’d make a great doctor’s wife.’

I wouldn’t have thought that my blush could get any deeper but I’m sure it did.

Dr Brownlow smiled at me. ‘You do love her, don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ I replied, without hesitation.

‘Do you like her? Do you get on?’

‘Yes.’

‘Marry her,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘If you’ve found someone you can like and love then grab her with both hands.’

* * *

Patsy and I sat in the Morris Minor staring through the windscreen. Two workmen were busy erecting a huge ‘For Sale – By Auction’ sign by the side of one of the two huge stone pillars which guarded the entrance to the drive up to Bilbury Grange.

I opened my car door. ‘Let’s go in and have a look around.’

‘But we can’t!’ said Patsy, horrified.

‘Of course we can,’ I told her, with a confidence that surprised me. ‘If we walk in as though we’re buying the place no one will dream of stopping us.’ As we passed the two workmen I nodded. One of the men waved a hammer in our direction and shouted a cheerful greeting.

Neither Patsy nor I had ever seen Bilbury Grange before. It looked as if it had been built in the last decade or so of the 19th century. Massive red brick chimneys towered high above the roof and two huge stone lions guarded the front door. Walking round to the side of the house we saw that the back part of the building made up one quarter of a cobbled courtyard. A derelict coach house, complete with its own clock tower, and a row of stables bordered the rest of the courtyard. 'I never knew any of this was here,' whispered Patsy. 'It's huge!'

The house and out buildings were all deserted and Patsy, Ben and I wandered around for the best part of an hour, trying doors and peering through windows. Inside the house the rooms were massive, with an impressive, swirling staircase and a beautiful stained glass window dominating the hallway.

Although Mike Trickle had owned the house for several months his workmen seemed to have done very little to restore the house to its former glory. The brickwork needed pointing, the window frames were rotten, many panes of glass were cracked and the whole of the outside of the house clearly needed decorating. Outside, the gardens, once landscaped, had been allowed to fall into terrible disrepair. The croquet lawn had been cut but the stable roof needed repairing and a small lake that we found in a copse behind the house was stagnant and choked with weeds.

But the house had enormous potential and the views across the North Devon countryside were magnificent. Hand in hand Patsy and I sat on a moss covered stone bench that overlooked the croquet lawn and looked out across the fields. We could see Dr Brownlow's house in the distance.

'It's wonderful, isn't it?' sighed Patsy. 'It would make a marvellous home.'

The coach house could be converted into a surgery,' I said.

'And there are enough bedrooms to take in paying guests during the summer,' said Patsy.

'I've always dreamt of owning a house with a billiard room.'

'I'd love to get the walled garden back into production.'

'I wonder how much it will go for?'

Patsy looked at me. 'You're serious, aren't you?' I nodded. 'Yes. I am.'

'But...' began Patsy.

'No "buts".' I said. 'Let's buy it. Let's make it work. It's a wonderful house.' I dropped onto one knee in front of her. 'Patsy, will you marry me?'

Patsy was in tears when she said 'Yes.' She threw her arms around my neck and held me so tightly that I could hardly breathe. Then, when I finally stood up and she saw the damp, muddy patches staining my knees she started to laugh.

'Can we afford it?' she asked me a few moments later.

I kissed away a leftover tear that was running down her cheek.

'Dr Brownlow has asked me to take over his practice.' I told her. 'My income will pay the mortgage and we can live on what we make from holiday-makers in the summer.'

Patsy started crying again. She kissed me full on the lips for what seemed like an eternity but still leant back from me far too soon. 'I love you!' she said.

'I love you too!'

* * *

An hour later we were parked outside the farm where Patsy and her family lived. 'Are you sure I've got to do this?' I asked her.

She nodded.

'I'm terrified.'

'He won't eat you.'

'Maybe not,' I said, unconvinced. I kissed Patsy, got out of the car and walked alone across to the front door. Patsy remained alone in the car.

'Could I have a word with you, Mr Kennett?' I asked. I probably sounded calmer than I felt. My heart was beating as fast as if I'd just run a mile. What, I wondered, would I do or say if he said 'No!'?

Patsy's father scowled at me. 'What have you done?'

'I haven't done anything.'

'You want to borrow the tractor?'

I shook my head. 'Not just at the moment, thank you, sir.'

He stared at me for a long few seconds. 'You'd better come in then.'

I followed him into the living room, which was empty.

'Sit down,' he said. It was an order, not an invitation. 'Do you want a drink?'

'I'll have whatever you're having,' I told him. I needed some Dutch courage but I didn't want to ask for an alcoholic drink if he thought it was too early in the day.

I needn't have worried. Mr Kennett poured us both very large whiskies.

'What do you want, then?' he demanded. He had huge, bushy black eyebrows which seemed to roam around his forehead without any planned direction in mind. I'd never noticed how mobile they were before. It was not, however, possible to make any accurate deductions about his mood by watching the position of his eyebrows.

I had, in my mind, a carefully rehearsed speech which was designed to win him over gently. On the journey over from Bilbury Grange I had thought up a number of strong reasons why he should say 'yes' and I had thought up a cleverly structured strategy to help me persuade him to say 'yes'.

'I'd like to marry Patsy,' I blurted out.

For a moment Mr Kennett looked startled. But he recovered quickly. 'I like a man who speaks his mind without beating about the bush,' he said. He sniffed at his whisky and then sipped at it cautiously. Then he looked directly at me. It was unnerving. 'Do you love her?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Can you look after her?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Have you asked her?'

'Yes, sir.'

'What did she say?'

'Yes, sir.'

Mr Kennett grunted, nodded, drained his glass and got up. He walked across the room to the cupboard where he kept his booze. He took out a bottle of 20-year-old malt.

'Drink up!' he instructed me as he walked back.

I emptied my glass and held it out. Mr Kennett half filled it. 'You're not a bad bloke,' he said. 'Considering you're a doctor.'

I didn't know what to say to that so I kept quiet and sipped at my whisky. I gathered that getting the expensive stuff out was his way of giving us his blessing.

Mr Kennett still hadn't sat down and now he walked over towards the door into the kitchen where he called for his wife. She appeared in the kitchen door almost instantaneously.

'Patsy and the doctor are getting married,' he told her bluntly.

Mrs Kennett said nothing but burst into tears and buried her face in her pinafore.

'Don't be so bloody silly, woman,' he told her but Mrs Kennett disappeared back into her kitchen. I realised that I still hadn't ever spoken to her.

'Where are you going to live?'

I swallowed hard. 'We want to try to buy Bilbury Grange,' I said. 'It's in a pretty terrible state. It's for auction on Friday.'

'Can you afford it?'

'I don't know,' I said honestly. 'It depends on how much it goes for.' I paused. 'But we both like it.'

When I left twenty minutes later the malt whisky bottle was nearly empty and I could hardly stand. I staggered out to the car where Patsy was still waiting.

'Well?' she whispered as I climbed in beside her. 'What did he say?'

I turned and smiled at her. 'I think he said it's OK.' I murmured before falling unconscious into her arms.

* * *

The auction of Bilbury Grange was attracting far more attention than Patsy and I had hoped it would. The auctioneers handling the sale for Mr Trickle put large advertisements in several national newspapers as well as in all the local papers and on the morning of the auction the lanes around the house were clogged with traffic.

The day before I'd visited my bank manager in Barnstaple to find out how much money the bank would lend me and had been startled to find out just how little we could raise.

'Do you want me to stand surety for you?' asked Dr Brownlow. 'I'm not exactly drowning in cash at the moment but I might be able to help gouge a few more thousand out of the bank.'

I shook my head. 'You've done quite enough for us, thank you. If I can't buy it with what the bank is prepared to lend us then we'll just have to accept that it's too rich for our blood.'

Dr Brownlow agreed to look after the morning surgery for me and although the auction wasn't due to start until 11.00 am Patsy and I and Ben left the Duck and Puddle with an hour to spare. We were both so nervous and excited that we knew very well that we wouldn't be able to relax wherever we were and whatever we were doing. Because we'd already heard about the heavy traffic we left the Morris parked at the pub and walked across the fields to the house. Ben thought it was marvellous fun.

We were climbing over a stile into a meadow that lay next to Bilbury Grange's gardens when, in the distance, between us and the house, we both saw building going on. I could just make out a couple of lorries, a tractor, a pile of wood, some massive sheets of corrugated iron and a group of workmen.

'What on earth is going on?' asked Patsy.

I shrugged. 'Maybe it's something to do with Mr Trickle,'

I suggested. 'He had been building a wall around the estate to protect his privacy.'

'If we get the house we ought to knock the wall down,' said Patsy.

But as we walked on I began to realise that what was going on was nothing to do with Mr Trickle. I could see men still working though I felt sure that Trickle would have called his men off.

When we got closer we could see that the work wasn't going on in the grounds belonging to Bilbury Grange but in another field and we could see that quite a crowd of prospective buyers were collecting in the Bilbury Grange gardens. We hurried to get closer and to take a good look.

'Look at the workmen!' said Patsy, putting a hand on my arm and pulling me to a halt. I stopped and looked hard. Ben's ears were pricked.

'Isn't that your father?' I asked her, screwing up my eyes.

'Yes,' answered Patsy. 'And several of his men are with him.'

'What the hell is going on over there?' called a large, red-faced man in a worn Barbour coat.

Patsy's father stopped what he was doing and stared at the man who had called. 'I don't know what business it is of yours,' he said sourly. 'But I'm building a barn and a slurry pit.

'How big is it going to be?' asked the stranger anxiously. 'I'm the auctioneer. I'm selling the property over here.'

'About eighty feet long,' answered Mr Kennett.

'You can't build it there!' complained the auctioneer.

'You'll ruin the view from the house. And a slurry pit will stink.'

Mr Kennett shrugged his shoulders. 'That's your problem,' he said. 'I'm not bothered about views.'

'I could have almost kissed him.

'But... but...' stuttered the auctioneer furiously. 'You'll ruin the value of this property.'

'I can put up whatever I like,' said Mr Kennett bluntly.

All around him the activity continued furiously, with men sinking posts into the ground and dragging corrugated iron sheets off the back of a flatbed lorry. Among the men working there I recognised Thumper Robinson.

'Doesn't he need planning permission for all this?' demanded a man in a grey suit.

Mr Kennett shook his head and glared at the man who'd interrupted. 'I don't need planning permission to do anything,' he said. 'I'm a farmer. I can put up whatever I like.'

'Is that true?' the man in the grey suit asked the auctioneer.

'I'm afraid it is,' admitted the auctioneer ruefully.

There was a murmur of dissatisfaction among the prospective purchasers of Bilbury Grange and many of them started to drift away back towards their cars.

'What on earth is my father up to?' asked Patsy in a whisper. 'I knew he was going to start work on a new barn today - but not here!'

'I think it's his way of helping make sure that we buy Bilbury Grange at a reasonable price,' I whispered back. I helped her climb around the impromptu building site. We both refrained from speaking to Mr Kennett, Thumper or any of the others and they ignored us.

'Watch out!' I cried suddenly, pointing to a large red painted sign that had been stuck on a post in the garden just outside the billiard room window.

'What's the matter?' demanded Patsy.

I read out the sign. 'BEWARE OF ADDERS NESTING'.

Patsy laughed. 'There aren't any adders around here. Besides it's not their nesting season.'

We walked on up through the garden towards the house that we'd both fallen in love with just in time to see the man in the grey suit and most of the other potential bidders getting into their cars and driving away. There was much unhappy muttering among those who were left behind.

Ninety minutes later Patsy and I bought Bilbury Grange for considerably less than we'd expected.

'There's even going to be some cash left over from the loan to pay for some of the repairs we need to do,' I told Patsy.

She threw her arms around my neck and kissed me firmly on the lips. 'Isn't it exciting?'

Exciting just didn't sum it up but I knew what she meant. I'd been in Bilbury for less than six months and I was about to become a fully fledged general practitioner, buy and rebuild my own house and get married!

'Let's walk round and plan what we're going to do first,' said Patsy.

'In a moment. There's just one thing I've got to do.' Patsy looked momentarily disappointed. 'What's that?'

'Tell your father and Thumper that they can stop putting up that barn!'

* * *

Bilbury Chronicles is the first of Vernon Coleman’s seven books about Bilbury – all available as Amazon Kindle Books. If you enjoy the Bilbury books you may enjoy other books by the same author – including ‘*Mr Henry Mulligan*’ and ‘*Mrs Caldicot’s Cabbage War’*. For details of over 100 other books by Vernon Coleman please see his Amazon author page or visit www.vernoncoleman.com

The Young Country Doctor: Book 2

BILBURY GRANGE

Vernon Coleman

The Young Country Doctor: Book 2

Bilbury Grange

Vernon Coleman

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CHAPTER ONE

The two roofers seemed quite unconcerned about the fact that there was a gale blowing. They both wore dark green oilskins and had their hoods up. They stood, balanced in a small gulley in between the wet and slippery slates of two of the peaks of our multifaceted roof, and pointed at something I couldn't see. One of them cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted down to me. But the wind took his words long before they reached me and I couldn't hear a thing he was saying. The taller and stouter of the two, the one with the droopy moustache and straggly beard, knelt down on the edge of the roof and peered down. I felt dizzy just looking up but he seemed quite unconcerned.

'Climb up!' he shouted. 'I'll hold the ladder for you.' He must have noticed the look of apprehension on my face. 'It's perfectly safe!' he yelled. 'As safe as houses.' He laughed, though the joke came out so fluently that it clearly wasn't new.

I swallowed hard, pulled the zip on my green oiled coat right up to my chin, pulled my cloth cap down firmly onto my head and started to climb the ladder. It was difficult to believe it was May. I could feel the wind tugging at me as I climbed upwards and the rain, lashing against my hands and my face, was sharp enough to sting. The higher up I climbed the worse the wind got and I shivered involuntarily, though whether through fear or the cold I wasn't sure.

'Your nails have all rusted through,' shouted the taller roofer when I reached the top of the ladder. 'It's the salt in the sea air. Come on up and I'll show you.' He was crouching down with one foot resting on guttering which was, I noticed, clogged solid with last autumn's dead leaves.

'I am up!' I shouted. 'This is as high as I'm going.' Owning a big house had seemed a wonderful idea a few weeks ago but the attraction was rapidly beginning to pall.

'Please yourself,' shouted the roofer with a vague shrug of his shoulders. He stopped, as though he'd suddenly thought of something. 'You're not frightened are you?'

'Of course I am!' I yelled back. 'I'm terrified.'

'But you're still on the ladder!' laughed the roofer. He held out a hand. 'Come on, I'll give you a hand up.' I stayed where I was, with my hands gripping the top of the ladder as though my life depended on it which I suppose it did. The rain had found a way in between my neck and the collar of my coat and it was trickling down my back. Every few seconds the wind would howl a little louder and blow a little stronger and I wasn't sure whether it was my imagination but I was convinced that the ladder had moved at least twice. I realised that from where I was perched I could see the sea and I wondered if estate agents would count it as a 'sea view'. The roofer reached down, unhooked my fingers from around the top of the ladder and took hold of my right hand. He wore soft leather, fingerless driving gloves which were sodden with the rain. Suddenly my fear of looking foolish and cowardly rose above my fear of falling and, gripping the roofer's hand with all the faith of a drowning man clutching at a straw, I clambered up the last few rungs of the ladder and launched myself stomach first onto the edge of the house roof. As I wriggled my way further into the lead lined gulley between the two peaks of the roof I slowly realised that at some stage I had to do all this in reverse in order to get back down again. Up here I could taste the salt on my lips. It was what I imagined it would be like to be on a ship in a storm. I suddenly had a terrible mental picture of the two workmen having to remove a section of the roof in order to lower me back inside. I could feel sweat mingling with the rain running down my spine.

'See?' said the shorter roofer, a small, lithe fellow whose visible skin was burned mahogany brown by the sun, and whose confidence and agility on the roof had already reminded me more of a monkey than a man. He stabbed a podgy finger at the edge of a slate which obediently moved out of position.

Two other nearby slates, disturbed by the movement, slipped downwards and revealed the aged wooden laths to which they had been fastened. The roof was not lined and I could see straight through into the loft. I instinctively reached to push the slates back into position to stop the rain getting in but all I succeeded in doing was dislodging another half a dozen slates.

'The whole roof is rotten,' said the taller roofer with all the cheerfulness of a man who is not going to have to pay for the repairs but who, indeed, realises that he has found himself a couple of months' profitable work. 'You need new battens, new slates and new nails. Your valleys need new lead too.'

'Copper,' said the mahogany brown roofer. I looked at him quizzically.

'Copper nails,' he said. 'They're a bit more expensive but they last longer. Especially with the salt air.' He kicked at the roof in that idle sort of way that a motorist will kick at the tyres of a car he's thinking of buying and a dozen loose slates slid a little further out of position. 'Your coping tiles are loose too. The mortar has gone.' He steadied himself against a chimney stack as a strong gust of wind caught him unexpectedly. 'And you've got woodworm.'

'Thought it better that you saw for yourself,' said the taller roofer. He slid his fingers into one of the gaps that had appeared in the roof and, like a conjurer producing a rabbit from a hat, pulled out the top half of a nail and offered it to me. 'Rusted right through,' he said. 'Hand-made.' he added. 'This roof hasn't had any work done on it since the house was built.'

I took the nail from him, examined it and for no very good reason slipped it into my coat pocket. 'Thank you,' I said. 'I think I'll go down now.'

The taller roofer must have seen the look of apprehension on my face. 'Don't worry!' he said. 'If you fall you'll hit the ground before you have time to worry about it. He laughed and his partner laughed with him. I did not laugh but edged backwards towards the ladder and somehow wriggled round into a position from which I could swing my legs over the edge of the roof. I then gingerly climbed down the swaying ladder. As soon as I had my feet back on the ground I hurried round to the back door to see my wife, leaving the roofers to climb down and tidy up their ladders by themselves.

'The bad news is that we seem to need a new roof!' I told Patsy, who was standing in the kitchen of Bilbury Grange watching a saucepan full of cold water fail to boil on a small primus stove we had borrowed from Dr Brownlow. I pushed back my hood and wiped the rain from my eyes with the back of my hand. The only kitchen furniture we had was an old pine table and three unmatched dining chairs (two of which had, for some inexplicable reason got legs of uneven length). We had bought a second-hand cooker from a dealer in Barnstaple but, despite several promises, it had not yet been delivered. 'The good news is that if you stand in the right spot on the edge of the roof we've got a sea view.'

Patsy half smiled at my feeble attempt to make fun of our problems. 'Mr Naughton is here,' she said. 'He's down in the cellar. He says he thinks we've got woodworm.' Mr Naughton was a builder we'd asked to come and give us a quote for some essential restoration work. Patsy looked at me and swallowed hard. 'Have we done the right thing?' she asked.

Still dripping with rain I instinctively reached out and pulled her to me. 'Of course we have!' I insisted. 'Things can't get much worse can they?' She threw her arms around my neck and clung to me as though she were drowning and I were a life-raft.

Just then the door from the cellar burst open and a bald, burly man in a brown boiler suit marched in. He was holding a piece of wood that seemed to have mushrooms growing out of it. 'Dry rot!' exclaimed Mr Naughton with ill-disguised delight. He shook his head and sucked in air as though he were about to go pearl diving. 'You've got dry rot in your joists and your floorboards. Nasty. Very nasty. Do you want to come and have a look?'

'No, thanks,' I said, wearily. 'I'm happy to trust your judgement.'

I have noticed that builders always do everything they can to make house owners feel uncomfortable and anxious. I think it must be something they are taught when they are apprentices. I suspect the theory is that if you terrify the customer he will expect a bank shattering bill and feel happy and relieved when it turns out to be merely outrageous. (As I was to discover later, builders also have a habit of starting a job and then disappearing for hours, days or even weeks at a time. I am convinced that they do this so their customers don't ever dare complain about the things they do when they turn up. Customers are so grateful when the wretched builders arrive that they gladly put up with the mess and the chaos and they bite their tongues when the workmen settle down for their obligatory tea breaks at fifteen minute intervals.)

Patsy was so depressed by Mr Naughton's gloomy prognostications that she burst into tears. It was beginning to look as though the rest of 1972 wasn't going to be easy.

* * *

It may sound rather clichéd but things didn't seem quite so bad after we'd had a cup of tea. It wasn't so much that the tea worked miracles but simply that taking a few minutes to drink it gave us a chance to put things into perspective. When we had bought Bilbury Grange we had both known that it was going to need a lot of work. Although buying it had taken virtually every penny we'd been able to raise, we had bought it relatively cheaply and so we had a little money left over from the bank loan which we had set aside for repairs.

Right from the start we had known that we wouldn't be able to do everything at once. If we had wanted something small and neat and faultless we would have chosen one of the new semi-detached houses being built on the Barnstaple road.

It is true that we hadn't expected to have to replace the roof and the floorboards, and we hadn't known that the house had woodworm and dry rot, but when we thought about it we realised that by dealing with these fundamental problems right at the start we would at least be ensuring that we ended up with a solid building.

We wanted to turn Bilbury Grange, so long a derelict house, into a home and it would have been a lot more expensive if we had started to decorate and furnish the house and had then found out that it needed partly rebuilding.

These were the arguments we used to cheer each other up and to a very large extent they worked.

We sent Mr Naughton and the two roofers away with strict instructions to submit their estimates for the work they considered essential and I hung my still dripping coat up in the back lobby. Then Patsy had opened a can of beans, poured them into a pan and started to heat them on our small stove. I put two slices of bread into our only electrical appliance - an automatic toaster.

Bilbury Grange had been built in the last part of the 19th century for a rich businessman from the Midlands who had retired to Devon to spend his days hunting, shooting and fishing. We still hadn't found out the name of the architect who had designed the house but the businessman had clearly either had taste as well as money or else he had at least had the wit and intelligence to allow someone with good taste to make all the major building decisions.

The front entrance to the house was on the south side of the building with two short stone staircases, one from the right and one from the left, joining underneath a stone canopy which was held up by two massive stone pillars. Two large and fierce looking stone lions (one of which had, sadly, lost part of its tail) guarded the two halves of the front door which opened into a large reception hall. This was dominated by a massive stone fireplace which was so large that it had two stone seats built into its sides. On the western side of the house a second entrance door, this time guarded by two stone eagles, led into a corridor which passed a boot room, a gun room and a game room before entering into the reception hall area alongside the fireplace.

The main part of the house was square, with four large reception rooms on the ground floor and a beautiful swirling staircase leading up to the first floor. There were six main bedrooms, two small bedrooms, and a junk room in the attic. A smaller, far less impressive staircase twisted its way around the back of the house and led directly down into the kitchen. The door down into the cellars, which ran underneath the whole of the main part of the house, was also in the kitchen.

The back door of the house led out of the kitchen into a cobbled courtyard, the entrance to which was through the centre of a now almost derelict coachhouse which, despite its dilapidated appearance, still had its own clock tower. The other two sides of the courtyard were made up of stables and other outbuildings.

To get from the lane to the house you had to drive between a pair of rather tumble down stone pillars and a pair of rusting iron gates. You couldn't see the house from the lane because it was hidden behind a small copse and a clump of massive rhododendron bushes. The driveway which led up to it and which twisted in between the trees was no more than a quarter of a mile long.

The gardens around the house, which had clearly once been landscaped, had been allowed to fall into disrepair. We had a small stream and a lake with an island in the middle of it but although the stream was still running the lake had become choked with weeds. In the days when it had been built, the house had been in the centre of a small estate but the agricultural land had long since been sold off and all that now remained were two medium sized fields which contained more than their fair share of nettles and thistles.

All this may sound rather splendid but as we sat at our badly-stained pine table (we didn't have a table cloth) eating our baked beans on toast off paper plates we didn't feel very splendid. In fact we didn't yet feel as if it was our house.

We both felt more like intruders who had broken in and we half expected someone in authority to storm into the kitchen and throw us out into the cold and windy rain of a Devon spring.

* * *

We had just finished eating our single course meal when the telephone rang.

The only telephone point we had was in the hall about half a mile away, and at first I didn't hear the bell. But Patsy did. She ran off as quickly as she could while I put our empty bean tin and dirty plates into the dustbin outside the back door and started to wash our knives and forks. Patsy reappeared a minute or two later.

'It's the editor of your paper,' she said, breathlessly.

'What does he want?'

'He didn't say. But he sounded a bit cross.'

I had forgotten about the local paper, *The Barnstaple, Bideford and Bilbury Herald* but I shouldn't have done. For several months I had been writing a weekly medical column for them. The Editor was ringing to say that they didn't have any copy for the next edition.

'We need a column from you in an hour!' said the editor, crossly. 'Otherwise there will just be an empty space in the paper. 'I felt very bad about forgetting to send in a column and apologised profusely. I didn't get paid very well for writing the column but I enjoyed doing it and I tried to be as professional about it as I could be. Besides, with Bilbury Grange to restore, we needed every penny we could lay our hands on.

'I tried to ring you at the surgery but they told me you were on holiday,' said the editor. 'Your receptionist, a Miss Jackson, said you'd...'

'...Johnson.'

'Pardon?'

'Her name is Johnson. Doreen Johnson.'

'Johnson. She said you'd got married, and gone off on your honeymoon but that she thought you'd probably be at home.'

'That's right. We're having our honeymoon here.'

'Why the hell didn't you tell us you were getting married?'

'I'm sorry. It was a very quiet do - just family and close friends.'

'But you should have told us,' insisted the Editor. 'We could have sent a photographer along and put something in the paper.'

‘We didn’t really want anything in the newspapers,’ I said. ‘We’re both rather shy.’

‘Baaaah!’ snorted the editor, who clearly didn’t believe me, even though it was the truth. ‘You didn’t have to be in any other papers but you should have told us. You write a column for us, for God’s sake! Next time you get married you just make sure you ring us beforehand, right?’

‘There won’t be a next time!’ I laughed.

‘Hrrmph.’ snorted the editor. ‘That’s what they all say.’ He shouted at someone in the background. ‘Who’s looking after your patients?’ he asked me.

‘Dr Brownlow. He was my predecessor. He kindly offered to come out of retirement for a week.’

‘Having a good time?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Are you having a good time? You’re on your honeymoon aren’t you? People are supposed to enjoy themselves on their honeymoons.’

‘Yes, thank you!’

‘Ring in your copy within the hour, right?’

I promised I would, though I didn’t have the faintest idea what I would write about, but my words were wasted on an empty telephone for the editor had severed the connection without saying ‘goodbye’. He always put the telephone down when he’d finished saying what he wanted to say, or when he found a conversation beginning to bore him, and I still found it rather disconcerting. I hurried back to the kitchen, found Patsy and told her that I had to write a column. I then spent ten valuable minutes trying to find my typewriter and a piece of paper. In the end I gave up and wrote my column in pencil on two clean paper plates. By the time I had finished and had dictated the copy to a reporter at the paper there were just three minutes left of my allocated hour.

* * *

Patsy and I had been married for two and a half days.

When we had first met I had been living at the Duck and Puddle public house in Bilbury and she had been working there as a waitress. I had just qualified as a doctor and had taken a job as an assistant to a rather eccentric general practitioner called Dr Brownlow. After a few months Dr Brownlow had decided to retire when the chance discovery of an underground river on his land gave him the opportunity to set up a business selling bottled water. I had accepted eagerly when he had offered me his practice.

It hadn’t taken Patsy and me long to fall in love and when Bilbury Grange had come onto the market within a few days of Dr Brownlow offering me his practice the omens had seemed irresistible. I had a reliable, steady job and we had somewhere to set up home together. Patsy and I had decided to get married and had agreed to buy Bilbury Grange with money we didn’t have but had been told we could borrow from the bank.

We had decided to spend our week long honeymoon getting settled into the house, trying to find some cheap, basic furniture and organising the builders who would help us repair and rebuild the house. Although the house wasn’t really habitable we had decided to move into it straight away; partly to save money which we would have wasted renting somewhere else, and partly because we didn’t want to waste any time before getting started on the restoration, but mainly because we couldn’t wait to move into our new home.

* * *

CHAPTER TWO

Twenty four hours later the two roofers stood silently in the kitchen while Patsy and I read their estimate for re-roofing Bilbury Grange. They looked rather out of place standing, and steaming slightly, on our level kitchen floor. They both still wore their green rubberised waterproofs but their coats were unfastened and I could see that around his waist each man wore a worn leather holster which carried a hammer and a pouch full of nails.

The two men brought with them a smell of wet rubber. Through habit they both stood with their legs wide apart and this made them look as though they'd just climbed down off a pair of horses. The look of them rather reminded me of cowboys and I couldn't help hoping that there was no sinister significance in this.

'I think you must have made a mistake,' I said, turning the single sheet of paper around and putting my finger on the figure at the bottom. Apart from the amount we had paid for the house it was the largest single sum of money I had ever been forced to contemplate.

The taller and stouter of the two roofers, the one with the moustache and beard, who seemed to be in charge of financial matters, pulled a pair of spectacles out from somewhere underneath his waterproofs and peered at the paper as though he were looking at it for the first time. 'No,' he said. 'No mistake. That's the estimate. You've got a big roof. It needs a lot of work.'

'And a lot of slates!' added his partner, clearly accustomed to taking on a supporting role. 'You must have a quarter of an acre of roof up there.'

'That's another thing.' I said 'I'm a bit worried about the slates. Are you sure that new slates will look right on an old house?'

'Best asbestos!' said the stouter roofer, defensively. 'You won't be able to tell the difference.'

'Can't you reuse our existing slates?' asked Patsy. 'Surely they haven't all gone rotten?'

'Most of them will get broken when we take them off,' said the stout roofer. 'If we have to try to re-use them it'll take us much longer to get them off. And we'll never be able to get any slates to match the ones we do break.'

I accepted that the roof needed re-slating but I wasn't happy about any of this. 'I'm not sure.' I said. 'We'll think about it and let you know.'

'You've got our number,' said the thinner roofer. 'It's on the estimate.'

'You won't find a cheaper price anywhere else,' his partner warned us. They turned and left, leaving Patsy and I and the bill alone in the kitchen. I put the bill down on our stained old table and Patsy and I sat on two of our three mismatched dining chairs. I looked round at the chipped and fading cream paintwork on the walls and woodwork, at the huge floor to ceiling built-in china cupboards, at the massive glazed white sink and the huge old taps which were fed by piping which shook every time they delivered water and thought of the floorboards underneath us which had provided bed and board for rather too many woodworm. I thought of the dry rot spores growing merrily in the cellar and the slates slipping off our roof and I wondered, just for a moment, whether or not we might possibly have taken on more than we could cope with.

'Are things going to be all right?' asked Patsy, quietly.

'Yes.' I said, with far more certainty than I felt.

'How can you be so sure?'

'Because the worst that can happen is that we get thrown out of here and have to live in a tent in a field and even then we'd have each other and I wouldn't care so what have we got to worry about?'

Patsy smiled. 'I do love you,' she said.

'And I love you,' I said. 'And that's the only thing that really matters.' I stood up, moved around the table, lifted Patsy to her feet and kissed her.

'I think we're both mad,' she said. 'Stark raving, certifiably bonkers.'

'I think you're probably right.'

'Was that the front door bell?'

I said I thought it was.

With great reluctance I let Patsy go and then sprinted out of the kitchen, along the back corridor, through the doors into the huge reception hall at the front of the house and across the reception room. I was slightly out of breath when I pulled open the front door and couldn't help thinking that whatever else happened living in Bilbury Grange would help make me fit.

Thumper Robinson and his girlfriend Anne were standing there. Anne had their baby in her arms. Thumper was holding a bunch of freshly picked spring flowers. I noticed with delight that the rain had stopped, that the sky was blue and that the sun was shining for the first time in two days.

'Hello!' said Thumper. 'We thought we'd drop in and see how you were getting on. Tell us if it isn't convenient and we'll go away again.'

'Come in!' I said. I was truly delighted to see them both.

‘Isn’t this place amazing?’ said Anne, looking around her, wide eyed with astonishment. ‘Do you know I’ve never seen it before?’

‘It’s all a terrible mess,’ I apologised. ‘Patsy’s in the kitchen. Follow me.’ I led the way back through to the back of the house.

‘Shouldn’t you have put knife nicks in the door posts so that you could find your way back?’ called Thumper with a laugh. ‘This place is enormous!’ Our footsteps echoed on the bare wooden boards.

Patsy was as pleased to see our visitors as I was. Although we didn’t realise it at the time this was for both of us a moment we would always remember, for Thumper and Anne were the first visitors we had welcomed to our home.

‘Would you like a cup of tea?’ she asked when she’d made a fuss of the baby. I confess that I made a bit of a fuss of the baby too. He is, after all, named after me in memory of the fact that I helped to deliver him in a field.

‘I’ll have a cup in a minute or two,’ said Anne. ‘When you’ve shown us round.’

‘I’d better put the water on to boil now,’ said Patsy. ‘It takes rather a long time,’ she warned. She filled our only saucepan, our tiny camping stove and then balanced the former on the latter. Despite half a dozen telephone calls our new second-hand cooker still hadn’t arrived from the shop in Barnstaple.

‘Why are you using bottled water?’ asked Thumper.

‘It’s out of the tap,’ explained Patsy, ‘but it comes out a bit brownish so we filter it through some coffee filter papers we found in a cupboard.’

We ignored Thumper’s look of distaste and took our first visitors on our tour of Bilbury Grange.

‘You do like a challenge, don’t you?’ said Thumper, with a grin when we got back to the kitchen. The water in the saucepan was boiling and Patsy put tea bags into our only two mugs. ‘I’m afraid we don’t have any milk,’ she apologised.

‘Or sugar.’ I added.

‘I’m not surprised!’ said Thumper. ‘I’m amazed you can afford the tea bags!’

‘Thumper!’ said Anne, sharply but Patsy and I were both laughing. ‘Aren’t you having a cup?’ Anne asked us both.

‘Not thirsty,’ said Patsy.

‘Just had one,’ I said.

‘You’ve only got two mugs haven’t you?’ said Thumper, perceptively.

Patsy and I looked at each other and exchanged thoughtful glances.

‘I’ve never been in a house where they had more bedrooms than cups,’ said Thumper, with a grin.

‘How long has it been empty?’ asked Anne, who seemed rather embarrassed by Thumper. ‘Didn’t it used to be owned by someone who was in advertising?’

I nodded. ‘An American called Pironi owned it for a while but I don’t think he came here more than half a dozen times in as many years. Hardly anyone ever saw him. Then Mike Trickle, the TV personality, bought it but I don’t think he ever stayed here.’

‘So it must be several years since anyone has actually lived here?’

I nodded.

‘Where are you staying?’ asked Anne. ‘The Duck and Puddle?’

‘No,’ replied Patsy. ‘We’re going to live here.’

Anne blushed strongly. ‘I’m sorry!’ she said. ‘I just thought...’ she looked around the kitchen.

‘I know,’ said Patsy. ‘It’s all a bit of a mess. But we can’t really afford to pay money out for a room because we need every penny we can raise to repair the house. And anyway we want to be here so that we can keep an eye on things.’

‘It’s no worse than our place was for ages,’ Thumper reminded Anne. ‘Just bigger.’ He looked around the room and whistled. ‘Difficult to know where to start, isn’t it he paused. ‘Still,’ he said, ‘at least the fabric of the building is sound. Roof and stuff. That’s what really costs the money.’

‘We need a new roof,’ said Patsy.

This time it was Thumper’s turn to look embarrassed. ‘I thought you must have had it surveyed...’ he said. ‘And the roof *looks* O.K.’

‘The bank had a survey done, but it didn’t show up anything too bad,’ I told him. ‘We knew we wanted the house and it was an auction so we didn’t really have time to have our own done.’

‘When you say you need a new roof,’ said Thumper, ‘do you mean that you need a new roof? Or just that it needs an overhaul?’

‘According to the roofers the roofing nails that hold the slates in position have all corroded and our battens have all got woodworm.’ I said. ‘They say we need a new roof.’

Thumper scratched his head. ‘I hate to think what that’ll cost you.’

I picked the estimate up off the table and handed it to him. He looked at it and his mouth actually fell open. He stared at it for a few moments, showed it to Anne and then handed the piece of paper back to me. ‘You haven't agreed to this, have you?' he asked me, quietly. I'd never seen him look quite so serious.

'No. We said we wanted time to think about.'

'Where did you find them?'

'We just picked them out of the telephone directory.'

'Can you afford that sort of bill?'

'No. But do we have any choice?'

'Do you really want this place roofed with horrible, shiny blue artificial slates?'

'No. But they said they were a lot cheaper and the cost is important.' I was surprised to hear myself defending the two roofers.

'And they said we wouldn't be able to tell the difference between asbestos and the real thing,' added Patsy.

'Asbestos slates are a lot easier to work with and they'll be able to make a bigger profit if you let them use asbestos,' said Thumper. 'But they'll look vile.' He waved a hand around. 'This is a beautiful house,' he said. 'It needs restoring with love.' He paused. 'Love doesn't always come cheap,' he reminded us.

I trusted Thumper and I knew that he was right, but he wasn't telling me anything that in my heart I didn't already know. Our problem was that although we loved the house we neither of us knew very much about builders. And we were both frightened by the fact that restoring Bilbury Grange was going to cost us far more money than we had expected or that we had available.

'What do you think we should do?' Patsy asked him.

'Well, for a start, you should re-use the slates that are on the roof,' he told us. 'Slates don't really rot, though some of them will have weathered. And with a little care it should be possible to save at least two thirds of them, especially if the nails holding them in have corroded.' He picked up his mug of tea and drained half of it in one gulp. 'That was horrible,' he said, making a face and shaking his head.

I was puzzled. 'But the guys who left us this estimate said the slates would be broken when they took them off. Why would they lie?'

'What would you do with the old slates if you knew you were having new asbestos ones put on?' I shrugged. 'Nothing.'

'Exactly. You'd be grateful to let them take the old ones away, wouldn't you?'

'Yes.' I agreed.' I suppose so.'

'The crooks who gave you this estimate will sell your slates to someone else,' Thumper said. 'They've probably already got a buyer.'

'I'm glad you came round,' said Patsy, meaning it.

'So am I!' said Thumper. 'It makes me go cold inside to think that you might have let these crooks rip you off.' He grinned at us. 'I do the ripping off in Bilbury!' he said, only half joking. 'I don't like con artists coming into my village and I take a really dim view of it when I find that they're trying to rip off my friends.'

'You shouldn't say that,' said Anne.

'What?' asked Thumper.

'That about you doing the ripping off. I know it's all right with the Doctor and Patsy because they know you're only joking. But you shouldn't say that you rip people off.'

I couldn't help wondering just how much Anne knew of the things that Thumper did to earn his living.

Thumper laughed. 'Of course I do!' he said. 'It's just that most of the time I rip off insurance companies and people like that who don't count.'

'So you don't think it will cost us that much to have the roof done?' Patsy asked him.

'Not unless you want it covering in gold leaf,' replied Thumper. He looked across at me. 'Why didn't you give me a ring before you got these cowboys to give you a quote?'

'I didn't like to bother you,' I said, telling him the truth. 'I knew you'd help us but...'

'Have you had anyone else here giving you quotes?' Thumper asked us.

'A builder named Naughton came,' said Patsy. 'He says we've got dry rot in the cellars. We've got to have new floorboards.' Thumper held his head in his hands. 'Not 'Naughty' Naughton?'

'Do you know him?'

'Big, fat chap? Usually wears a brown boiler suit? Carries a briefcase with him?'

'Yes.'

'I know him.' said Thumper. 'Telephone directory again?'

Patsy nodded.

'You have been doing well,' he said. 'I'm surprised at you Patsy. Don't you remember that case that was in the papers five or six years ago about the builder who was accused of laying a tarmacadam drive so thinly that it cracked the first time the bloke drove his car onto it?'

'Vaguely,' agreed Patsy, after a moment's thought.

'That was your man Naughton,' said Thumper. 'Did he give you a piece of wood with your dry rot on it?'

'Yes.' I said. 'It's outside the back door.'

'Show me?'

I opened the back door, fetched the piece of wood with the dry rot growing in it and showed it to Thumper who examined it carefully. For the first time I looked at it closely too. There were small white clumps that looked like mushrooms, long strands that looked like thick strands of a giant spider's web and small orange pellets that looked like small orange pellets. The whole thing smelt strongly of mushrooms.

'He said he got this out of your cellar?'

'Yes.'

'How do we get down there?'

Patsy and I both jumped up and went over to the door that led down into the cellars.

'Bloody hell!' said Thumper a few moments later, walking around underneath our house and clearly amazed by the vastness of the cellars. 'How many rooms are there down here?'

'Nine,' I told him. 'Four wine cellars, one coal cellar and four storage rooms.' I was especially proud of the wine cellars which had brick wine storage bins built into them. They were so large that I still hadn't explored them properly. As I wandered about I saw the dusty neck of a wine bottle poking through a clump of cobwebs. I moved closer, brushed aside the cobwebs and realised that there were several other bottles lying alongside and below it. They had clearly been forgotten by some former owner. Most old houses that haven't been occupied for a while contain derelict beds, old sofas and vermin. Ours also had a few bottles of wine.

'Amazing!' Thumper walked about poking at the walls and sniffing at the floorboards above him.

'Is that dry rot?' I asked him, pointing to a huge white matted clump that looked like a bunch of old spiders' webs.

'No.' said Thumper, glancing at it. 'That's old spiders' webs.'

'What about that thing that looks like a mushroom?' 'It's a mushroom,' replied Thumper. 'Let's go back up into the kitchen.'

The three of us followed him back up the stairs into the kitchen. 'There isn't any dry rot down there.' said Thumper firmly.

'Are you sure?' asked Patsy, frowning. 'But what about that piece of wood Mr Naughton brought up? Hasn't that got dry rot?'

'That's got dry rot,' confirmed Thumper. 'But it's not out of your cellar.' He grinned. 'Get me some old newspapers and some matches.'

'What on earth for?' asked Patsy, puzzled.

'We're going to burn this,' said Thumper, picking up our piece of wood with dry rot growing in it. 'It's probably the only bit of dry rot around here. I don't want any of these spores infecting your house.' Patsy rummaged around in a cupboard and found some old newspapers. I handed Thumper the box of matches that Patsy used to light our camping stove and we followed him out into the courtyard where he built a small bonfire and burnt the piece of wood.

'But if that wasn't out of our cellar where was it from?' I asked Thumper when we were back in the kitchen again.

'Out of his briefcase,' replied Thumper. "Naughty' always carries a bit of dry rot around with him. He keeps a clump of it growing in an old barn he's got. Has he given you the estimate yet for putting new floors in?'

'No,' said Patsy. 'He said he'd post it to us.'

'Promise me you'll let me see it when it comes?'

'O.K. But why?'

'Because it'll be a wonderful work of fiction,' said Thumper with a grin. 'And it'll make your roofing estimate look like petty cash.'

'So we don't need new floorboards?' Patsy came across to me and hugged me.

'No. The ones you've got are absolutely fine. There's a bit of woodworm here and there but no more than you'd expect in a house this old.' Thumper shook his head with disbelief. 'What a prize pair,' he said. 'I can't wait to tell Frank about you two.' (Frank is the landlord of the Duck and Puddle, the Bilbury pub, and I knew I was going to have to put up with some teasing from him and the regulars.)

Patsy, her arms around my neck, whispered something in my ear. I didn't quite catch what she said and asked her to repeat it. She blushed, looked embarrassed and buried her head in my shoulders. She wouldn't tell me what she'd said but pushed me across to the far side of the kitchen so that we were out of earshot of Anne and Thumper. 'Excuse us, for a moment!' I called across to them, laughing.

'Why don't we ask Thumper if he can help us,' Patsy whispered. 'Maybe he'd help make sure we don't get cheated by builders and roofers.'

'I don't like to ask,' I whispered back. 'It's taking advantage of a friend.'

'We could pay him!' whispered Patsy. 'Hire him as a consultant or something. A sort of building supervisor?'

It was a marvellous idea. I told her so and turned back to Thumper and Anne.

'We've got a proposition for you!' I told Thumper. I explained what it was. 'But only if you've got the time and only if you'll let us pay you.'

Thumper seemed surprised. 'I don't want any money from you!' he insisted. 'I'll be very happy to help. But I don't want you to pay me.'

'But don't you see, we won't ask you to do anything if we can't pay you,' I told him. 'That's why we nearly got into that terrible mess with the roofers.'

'Not to mention Mr Naughton,' added Patsy.

'Have you got time to help?' I asked.

'Of course he has,' said Anne, without hesitating. She turned to look at Thumper. 'He's been complaining that things have been quiet recently. And to be honest we could do with the money.'

'Have you?' I asked him. 'Have you got the time?'

'Yes,' agreed Thumper. 'Of course I have. And I'd love to help. It's a wonderful house and I'd really love to help put it back together again. But I don't want to take money off you.'

'You must see it from our point of view,' said Patsy. 'We desperately need someone we can trust. Restoring this house is going to be a big job. But we can't keep asking you for help if we aren't paying you. You've got bills to pay...'

'And Frank doesn't give his beer away!' I pointed out.

Thumper scratched his head.

'If you won't help us we'll hire those roofers and get Mr Naughton to do all our building work,' threatened Patsy.

'O.K!' agreed Thumper, holding up his hands in mock surrender. 'O.K. I give in.'

'Wonderful!' I said. I held out a hand. 'It makes great sense for all of us.'

'You haven't heard what I'm going to charge you yet,' said Thumper. 'And there are two working conditions I want sorting out before I start.'

'O.K.' I said. 'What are they?'

'I want milk and sugar in my tea,' said Thumper firmly. 'Not milk or sugar. Milk *and* sugar.'

'You're a hard negotiator,' sighed Patsy. 'But I suppose we can manage that.'

Thumper agreed to start work the following day after he had delivered a pile of logs to a hotel in Lynton.

* * *

After Thumper and Anne had gone Patsy and I spent the rest of the day cleaning and tidying up. It's amazing how much rubbish accumulates in any house that is theoretically 'empty'. There was a huge pile of unsolicited mail in the reception hall and there were half a dozen broken beds and old sofas lying around in the other rooms.

We carried and dragged everything we could find out into the courtyard at the back of the house. Getting rid of the stuff that we could burn was easy but getting rid of bedsprings and other bits and pieces of assorted metal promised to be more of a problem. There was a lot of it - an old water heater, a broken refrigerator, part of a cooker and, inexplicably, a broken car exhaust system that we found in a bedroom.

I put all the burnable items, the moth-eaten curtains, the threadbare carpets and the seemingly endless piles of old newspapers and magazines into several heaps and used some of the unsolicited mail to start a bonfire. I like lighting bonfires and this one seemed especially cathartic. Removing the debris left behind by former owners seemed to be an essential part of making Bilbury Grange ours. I was so preoccupied with what I was doing that I completely lost track of the hours, and the light evening meant that there was no darkening of the skies to remind me of the time.

'Are you hungry?' called Patsy, suddenly appearing from one of the downstairs rooms as I dragged a pile of old curtains down the main staircase and into the reception hall. At the sight of her I couldn't help bursting out laughing. Her blue jeans, her once white T-shirt, her face, her hands and her hair were all covered in a mixture of dust from the house and soot from the bonfire. She had tied her hair back with a red ribbon and her forehead was smeared with black marks where she'd wiped away the sweat. 'What are you laughing at?' she demanded, rather indignantly.

'Look in the mirror!' I told her, nodding towards a massive gilt framed mirror that was still screwed to the wall opposite the fireplace. The frame was chipped in several places and the mirror needed new glass. Whoever had left it had clearly decided that it was worthless. They had, I thought, very probably been right.

Patsy dropped the piece of carpet she was carrying and walked across to the mirror. She looked at herself without any apparent surprise and beckoned to me to join her. I dropped my pile of curtains and walked across to the mirror.

'Now you look!' she said, grinning at me. I looked even more bizarre than she did. I had a huge spider's web draped over one side of my head and my face was, if anything, even grubbier than hers. 'We look a bit of a mess, don't we?' I laughed. Patsy reached up and removed the spider's web from my hair with her hand. Then she wiped her hand on the back of her jeans. I put my arm around her and pulled her towards me. 'You don't have any regrets about buying this crazy house, do you?'

'None whatsoever.'

We kissed. Somehow she still smelt sweet and her lips were warm and soft. Her kiss made me feel twelve feet tall. After what seemed like a lifetime we reluctantly parted.

‘Are you hungry?’ whispered Patsy, gently lifting her lips from mine, lifting her head backwards and pushing me away with her hands. ‘Because I’m absolutely starving.’

‘Me too!’

We washed in brown, cold water in one of the bathrooms upstairs. The bathroom was huge and had two massive cast iron white baths standing side by side in the middle of it. The baths were so large that Patsy claimed that she’d swum a full stroke underwater in hers. We left our dirty clothes soaking in the water and dried ourselves on two huge, white, fluffy bath towels that Frank and Gilly had given us as a wedding present. Then Patsy drove to the fish and chip shop in Combe Martin with strict instructions to make sure that my meal was well doused with vinegar and liberally sprinkled with salt, while I stayed behind to feed the bonfire and to make sure it didn’t get out of control - at the same time trying hard not to get so close to it that I covered myself in smoke and soot again.

By the time she returned twenty minutes later I had cleared away the last of the curtains and the carpets and the bonfire was belching forth clouds of black smoke. I sat down at the kitchen table with the back door safely closed and through the window watched the flames rising around an old wardrobe with missing doors which I had found in the attic.

‘Oh, darn it.’ said Patsy, unwrapping the two parcels she had brought back with her. The smell was wonderful. ‘I’ve forgotten to bring anything to drink.’

‘I think I saw a couple of bottles of wine abandoned in the cellar,’ I remembered. ‘I’ll go and fetch one. Do you have any preferences?’

‘Chateau Lafitte 1897!’ laughed Patsy.

‘No. I mean what colour? Red or white?’

‘I don’t mind. Anything you can find.’

I got up from the table and went down into the cellar. There were more bottles than I had at first thought - probably two dozen in all. Knowing nothing at all about wine I pulled out a few of the bottles and examined the labels. They all came from the same bottler. I plucked a bottle at random and took it back upstairs. Sadly, it seemed that whoever had left the wine had known what he was doing for it tasted rather bitter and we ended up pouring most of the bottle down the sink and drinking plain water with our chips. But fish and chips had never tasted so good, and whatever its original colour our filtered water tasted sparkling and fresh. I made a mental note to throw out the rest of the wine sometime.

By the time we had finished our meal the sun had set and it was dark outside. The bonfire had died right down to a few smouldering embers but when we took our dirty paper plates and the paper in which our fish and chips had been wrapped and threw them all onto the fire the flames flickered brightly for a few moments and lit up the courtyard in the darkness of the evening.

I don’t know whether it was the heat of the fire, trapped in the courtyard by the thick stone walls of the house, stables and coach-house, but the evening seemed warmer than the day had been. Leaving the debris of our meal to burn away Patsy and I walked out of the courtyard, past the walled vegetable garden and down to the lake, lit now only by moonlight filtered romantically through the towering trees around it. We found an old cast iron garden seat underneath what had been a rose bower and I kicked and pulled the brambles from it so that we could sit down. Above the lake we could see a thousand insects hovering and flitting and the occasional splash proved that there were still some fish in the water.

I put my arm around Patsy and we sat there wrapped together in the half dark, sharing our love and our dreams alone and silent. Despite all our problems I had never before felt such freedom, such contentment, such happiness and such hope for the future. I felt excited and apprehensive and incongruously suddenly remembered the first night I had slept under canvas when I was a boy. My father had erected a small tent on the back lawn and I’d slept there with the tent doors securely knotted against the night with double bows and with the moonlight shining so brightly through the canvas that I could see to read by it.

We sat and I thought how lucky I was to have found Patsy and how very, very lucky I was that she loved me as I loved her.

Suddenly, I felt her shiver as the cold of the night descended and I took her back into the house, tiptoeing through the lace-work of tripwire brambles laid across the paths giggling with fake alarm as bats swooped and pirouetted low overhead.

* * *

I was woken the next morning by bright rays of sunshine streaming through the uncurtained bedroom windows; the natural shafts of sunlight that had woken me clearly visible as they lit up a million specks of dust floating around the room. It seemed a far nicer way to be woken than to be yanked into awareness by the shrill, insistent, unforgiving ring of an alarm clock and I wondered why no one had ever invented an alarm clock which produced artificial shafts of sunlight instead of noise.

We had chosen a bedroom on the south east corner of the house, mainly so that we would wake every morning with a view of the rising sun, and we had slept on the one bed we had chosen to keep, an old iron bedstead with a soggy mattress.

I groaned as I struggled to sit up and rubbed my aching back. I wasn't sure whether it ached because of all the old furniture and debris I'd dragged out of the house the day before or because of the soggy mattress. I looked at Patsy, still sleeping, and couldn't help thinking that I had never before seen anyone so beautiful nor so innocent. Ben, the black and white collie I had inherited from an old tramp, had spent the night sleeping at the bottom of the bed. (Despite repeated questioning the tramp had never been able to tell me why he had called his dog Ben, despite knowing that she was a female). She stood up, stretched, yawned and went straight to the door when she saw me clambering carefully out of bed.

I stretched and then put my finger to my lips to tell her to keep quiet so that we didn't wake Patsy. She stood by the open door and waited; her ears pricked, her tongue hanging out and her tail wagging. Ben was clearly looking forward to the new day too.

Downstairs I opened the back door, which we hadn't even bothered to lock (we didn't have anything to steal and what, in any case, is the point of locking up a deserted house which has two dozen ill-fitting windows?) and watched as Ben scampered off into the courtyard. She stopped for a moment to sniff at the burnt-out embers of the bonfire and then disappeared at top speed through the archway underneath the coach-house clock tower. Moments later I heard her crashing about in the undergrowth. I filtered some water through the last of our coffee filter papers (making a mental note to see if Peter Marshall at the village shop had any more for sale), filled the saucepan and lit our camping stove (making another mental note to telephone the cooker supplier in Barnstaple to see if there was any chance of us receiving our cooker) hunted around for something to eat and realised that we had nothing (making a mental note to buy some bread and other supplies from the village shop) and put our one remaining tea bag into one of our two mugs (making a mental note to buy some cheap crockery).

Realising I already had so many things to remember that I was quite certain to forget most of them I fished a stub of pencil from one of the kitchen drawers and, in the absence of a notebook, started to write out a list of things to do on the yellowing paint on the wall above the sink. To the list of things we needed to buy I added 'notebook' since carrying the kitchen wall with us when we went to the shop seemed a little impractical. As I did this Ben reappeared, bursting through the back door, which I had left open, and depositing a live and apparently perfectly healthy baby rabbit at my feet.

The rabbit and I stared at each other and I'm not sure which of us was most startled. Ben sat and watched us both as though conducting some personal experiment. The rabbit recovered first. He sat bolt upright, his ears standing up and his nose twitching, and then scampered off around and around the kitchen. I opened the back door even wider to encourage him to escape that way, but either the rabbit wasn't about to fall for what he thought was a trap or else, like the rest of us, he had fallen in love with Bilbury Grange. He turned around through one hundred and eighty degrees, ran off in the opposite direction and disappeared into the corridor. I hurried after him but by the time I had got to the doorway he was nowhere to be seen. Ben, who hadn't moved a muscle, put her head to one side and raised an eyebrow quizzically.

I made Patsy a cup of black tea and carried it upstairs. I had hoped to wake her with a kiss but Ben clearly thought that was a sloppy idea. She leapt onto the bed, got a corner of the blanket in her teeth and pulled and pulled until Patsy woke up.

Just then I heard the sound of a vehicle in the driveway. I looked out of the window and saw that Thumper, who had already delivered his pile of logs, was arriving to start work.

* * *

CHAPTER THREE

Thumper had packed the back of his truck with tools and had brought his ladder too. We decided that while Patsy drove down to the village shop to buy some milk, sugar, bread and other essentials Thumper and I would take a look at the roof. ‘There’s no point in doing anything inside the house until we’ve got the roof sorted out,’ he pointed out sensibly.

‘You do need new battens,’ he said, ten minutes later, as he peered through the gap the two roofers had left. I stood in comparative safety at the top of the ladder. He bent over and showed me a small piece of wood that crumbled in his fingers. ‘But the beams all look sound enough. There are a few worm holes but they built this house with old ships’ timbers and they’re mostly too hard for woodworm to get into.’

‘Ships’ timbers?’

‘Wood goes rock hard when it’s in salt water for a long time,’ explained Thumper. ‘Woodworm prefer soft wood because it’s easier to eat.’

‘What about the slates?’

‘We can reuse most of them. But we’ll have to try to find a few thousand old ones to replace the ones that are already broken and the ones that break when we prise them off.’

We clambered down from the roof and Thumper said he knew of a place near Tiverton, about forty miles away, which would probably have the slates we needed in stock. ‘Are you thinking of restoring the coach-house and the stables?’

‘Yes. I suppose so. Eventually.’

‘Then if you can afford it the sensible thing will be to buy more slates than you think you’ll need. If you end up short you’ll probably never be able to match the size and colour. If you buy too many we can always just store them and use them later.’

We climbed down from the roof just as Patsy got back from the shop and decided to go to Tiverton straight away. Thumper had brought down one of the loose slates so that he could make sure the ones we bought were the right size.

As we walked towards the front door Patsy climbed out of the Morris her arms laden with the old-fashioned, stout, brown paper bags that the village shop still used. ‘Peter said we could put it all on your account,’ she said. ‘So it didn’t cost me anything!’

I’d been living in Bilbury for over six months and I still hadn’t had a bill from Peter Marshall, the local shop keeper, taxi driver, postman and undertaker. Occasionally, I worried about this unseen liability, but since we needed all the credit we could get I wasn’t about to rush down to the shop and force Peter to let me pay cash.

I reached into the car and picked up the remaining bags. ‘I’ve got some salad stuff,’ said Patsy. ‘Lettuce, tomatoes, spring onions and cheese. Plus two fresh loaves, a box of cornflakes and a couple of packets of biscuits.’

‘Milk? Sugar?’ asked Thumper, following us into the kitchen. ‘Did you remember the milk and the sugar?’

‘Yes!’ laughed Patsy. ‘I’ve got your milk and sugar. And I bought a couple of bottles of this in case it gets hot.’ She pulled a large brown glass bottle of dandelion and burdock out of one of the bags.

‘I haven’t seen that stuff since I was a kid!’ I exclaimed, as I helped Patsy stack the food she’d bought neatly on the kitchen table. I carefully wrote ‘fridge’ on the first page of the notebook she’d brought back. ‘I didn’t know they were still making it.’

‘They probably aren’t,’ said Thumper drily. ‘Just because Peter is selling it that doesn’t mean that anyone is still making it.’

‘That reminds me,’ said Patsy. ‘I managed to get these coffee filter papers very cheap. Peter says that no one in the village has got a machine that fits them.’

‘How cheap is very cheap?’

‘I don’t know. He didn’t say.’

‘We’d better have a look at your water supply when we get back,’ said Thumper. ‘Though it’s probably just some rust in the holding tank that’s turning your water brown.’

The three of us squeezed into the cab of Thumper’s truck, Ben made herself comfortable on my knees and we headed off for Tiverton in search of slates.

* * *

Just over an hour later we were driving gloomily back out of Tiverton. But instead of driving towards Bilbury we were heading north, out of Tiverton on the Bristol road. The sun had disappeared and the skies were grey and overcast.

‘Sorry!’ the man at the builder’s yard had said. ‘We don’t have anything that size.’ Ironically, there were tens of thousands of slates in dozens of different sizes stacked neatly all around the outside of the old caravan that he used as an office. ‘They haven’t made anything that size since I’ve been in the business.’ Since he was in his late sixties and had already told us that he’d been in the building reclamation business all his life I found this distinctly depressing. He suggested that we try a builder's yard on the outskirts of Bristol.

'Do the slates we buy have to be the same size as our existing slates?' I asked Thumper as we started the drive back to Bilbury. 'They do really,' Thumper confirmed unhappily. 'Otherwise fitting them onto the roof will be like doing a jigsaw puzzle. And they'll look pretty odd too.' We were driving through Taunton when Patsy suddenly shouted at Thumper to stop. He put his foot on the brake so suddenly and so sharply that Patsy and I nearly went through the windscreen while poor Ben fell off my lap and landed on the floor at my feet. Fortunately, only her pride seemed to be hurt.

'What's the matter?' demanded Thumper.

'Back up a bit said Patsy, excitedly, reaching across me and winding down the window.

Thumper put the truck into reverse and backed up, narrowly missing a group of holiday-makers in a Ford Cortina.

'Say when!' he told her.

'When!' said Patsy. 'Here! Look!' She pointed out of the now open truck window at a large, derelict building that was being knocked down. There was a crane parked in front of it with a huge iron ball hanging from it on a long chain. The crane driver was swinging the ball backwards and forwards so that he could use it to knock holes in the structure of the building.

'What is it?' I asked her. I couldn't see why we'd stopped.

'Slates!' shouted Patsy, gleefully. She pointed in the direction of the disabled building. 'Look!'

Thumper and I followed her outstretched hand and stared at the building. It had a slate roof, and two men in shorts and vests were standing on it. They were systematically smashing the slates with a couple of sledgehammers.

'That building looks quite old,' said Patsy. 'Maybe their slates would fit our house?'

'It's a long shot,' said Thumper pessimistically.

'Quick, quick!' said Patsy. 'Before they smash them all up.'

We all climbed out of the truck and hurried onto the demolition site. Thumper was carrying the sample slate we'd brought with us.

'Hey!' yelled a large man. He had a huge stomach which hung over the leather belt around his filthy jeans. 'You can't come on here. This is private. And it's dangerous.' he added. Ben growled at him but kept her distance.

'We're looking for some slates like this,' said Thumper, holding up the slate from Bilbury Grange. 'We're prepared to pay you cash.'

'These slates won't fit anything,' said the man with the huge belly. 'We checked 'em out. They're an odd size.'

'Could we just compare one with ours?' asked Thumper. He took a grubby and crumpled five pound note out of his back pocket and handed it over.

'Don't suppose it will hurt,' agreed the man, pocketing the note and walking a little closer to the building. He yelled up to one of the men on the roof, asking him to throw down one of the slates. The man prised off a slate and threw it down. For a moment I thought that the man with the overhanging stomach was going to attempt to catch it in his hands but he wasn't quite that stupid. Luckily the slate didn't break when it landed on the ground. Up on the roof the two men who had been smashing the slates went back to work. The fat man picked the fallen slate up and brought it over to us. He handed it to Thumper. Thumper held it up against the slate we'd brought with us. Both were exactly the same size.

'Brilliant!' said Patsy, almost jumping off the ground with excitement. She pointed towards the roof of the building they were demolishing. 'Tell them to stop!'

'The colour's not right,' said Thumper casually and critically. 'But we can probably use them. How much?'

'How many do you want?'Thumper looked up. 'All that you've got left.' The two men on the roof were still smashing slates. Patsy looked across at me with agony on her face. I knew she wanted me to tell the fat man to ask the two men on the roof to stop smashing slates. But I knew Thumper didn't want the fat man to realise how much we wanted the slates. I reached for her hand and pulled her away.

'Cash?' I heard the man say.

'Cash.' agreed Thumper. 'On delivery.'

The man scratched his head.

I heard Thumper offering a price for every whole slate. Then the fat man made a counter offer. He wanted a fixed sum for all the slates they'd got.

I heard Thumper raise his offer, still insisting that he would only pay a sum for each individual, complete slate.

I thought Thumper was being very sensible in wanting to pay for individual slates.

To my surprise and delight the fat man agreed to Thumper's offer, turned round, walked towards the building and shouted to the two men on the roof to stop smashing up the slates that were now worth money.

'Great!' said Thumper, turning to us with a broad grin on his face.

‘Are they really the wrong colour?’ asked Patsy, anxious now.

‘No.’ said Thumper. ‘They’re perfect.’ He winked at us. ‘I’ll go and tell them where to bring the slates.’ He turned as he started to walk away. ‘All you’ve got to do is find the cash.’

‘Oh good,’ I said. ‘As long as that’s all.’

* * *

We drove back to Bilbury feeling very pleased with ourselves, and as we arrived home the sun, which had been hiding for most of the morning, shone brightly again.

‘I’ll make us a nice salad for lunch,’ promised Patsy. ‘We can eat outside in the garden.’

While she headed for the kitchen Thumper and I started to walk around the house. We needed to prepare a list of other essential work.

‘I’m glad to see that you’re keeping all your scrap metal,’ said Thumper, as we passed the pile of old boilers, bits of exhaust pipe, springs and other assorted pieces of unburnable rubbish.

‘I don’t really know what to do with it I confessed.

‘I’ll take it into Barnstaple,’ said Thumper. ‘I know a scrap metal dealer who’ll buy all that from you.’

I stared at him in amazement.

‘Never throw anything away,’ he said, very seriously. ‘Even the old battens off the roof are useful. They’ll make terrific firelighters.’

Suddenly Patsy came running towards us, holding two rather limp looking lettuce leaves.

‘Someone’s stolen the lettuce!’ she shouted. Thumper and I followed her back to the kitchen.

‘Are you sure there’s nothing else missing?’

‘Just the lettuce,’ said Patsy. ‘All except these two leaves.’ It was then that I remembered the rabbit that Ben had brought into the house that morning.

* * *

CHAPTER FOUR

Suddenly it was time for me to start proper work again; to put down my broom and pick up my stethoscope. I had almost forgotten that I still had to earn a living. Some people would have probably thought of it as a strange honeymoon but I couldn't have wished for anything better.

In some ways Bilbury Grange now looked more of a mess than ever. There were piles of rubbish all around the outside of the house, and the scaffolding company that Thumper had hired had almost finished surrounding the house with rusty poles and brackets. Patsy said it made the house look as if it were in the intensive care unit and she was right.

Exactly a week after Patsy and I had moved into Bilbury Grange I got up at my usual time but, instead of clambering into my tattered and now rather stained shorts and going outside to help Thumper, I dug out my faithful old sports jacket, the one with the leather patches on the elbows and the large ink stain on the lining, and my only decent pair of grey flannels and tried to make myself look more like a general practitioner than a labourer. It wasn't easy. The sun had shone for most of the week and had bleached my hair and tanned my skin, and the exercise had toned up my muscles and I definitely felt more like a labourer than a doctor.

At eight thirty I kissed Patsy goodbye, promised her that I would be home in three hours for my lunch if there weren't any emergencies, and climbed into the Morris to drive to the surgery. One of our reasons for buying such a large house was that we wanted to use part of the building as a surgery, but for the time being it was obviously quite impossible to see patients at what was, to all practical extents, little more than a building site. Fortunately, Dr Brownlow had agreed to let me continue to see patients in the surgery at his home. At eight thirty five Patsy and I finally managed to drag ourselves apart and I started up the car.

I was driving slowly down the driveway away from the house when I heard Patsy shouting. I looked in the driving mirror and saw Ben bounding down the drive behind the car. I skidded to a stop, reached over and opened the front passenger door. Without breaking her stride Ben leapt straight into the car, settled herself down on the front seat and stared at me reproachfully, as though cross with me for forgetting her. I stuck my head out through the open window and looked behind.

'Ben seems to be coming with me, I shouted back to Patsy.

If I run after the car can I come with you too?' shouted Patsy, laughing.

I pipped my horn in a final goodbye and shot off down the drive, narrowly missed Thumper who was just arriving to carry on working on the roof, and headed for Dr Brownlow's house and my first surgery as a full-time, self-employed totally-in-charge general practitioner. Although I had only been away for a week so much had happened that it felt strange to be back sitting behind Dr Brownlow's massive old oak desk, with Miss Johnson fussing around giving me messages and trying to get me up-to-date with what had been happening in my absence. She was wearing her pink flecked two piece suit and her two rows of pearls, which I knew she only wore on special occasions, and I felt touched. I was pleased to see that absolutely nothing had changed. Even though it was early summer and clearly going to be another warm day the waiting room still smelt of rain-soaked mackintoshes and galoshes and the consulting room, unlit by natural light, still had a rather damp feel to it.

The first patient that morning was an elderly lady called Miss Phillips who had come to live in the village just a few days earlier and who had never been to the practice before. Neither of us had any idea just how much she was going to change my life.

Miss Phillips told me that she had moved to Bilbury because she found life in the city just too tiring. She said she had a long standing nervous condition and had suffered with a weak heart for most of her life. We had no medical records for her since she was not yet officially a patient of ours, but I guessed that she was probably in her mid sixties. She was slim and rather frail looking and wore a flowered dress and a pale pink cardigan. Her hair, which was white, was mostly hidden by a straw bonnet decorated with a small bunch of real daisies. She carried a rather large raffia work shopping basket, a folded parasol and wore white lace gloves. She looked like a refugee from another century.

'How do you like Bilbury, so far?' I asked her. Although I was still a newcomer to the village I thought of myself as a native and I wanted everyone to like it as much as I did.

'It's wonderful!' murmured Miss Phillips. 'So quiet and peaceful.' She told me that she had lived in a flat in London where she had been a virtual prisoner; afraid to go to the shops, afraid to visit friends and afraid to go for a walk in the park. I thought she looked tired.

When I asked her what I could do to help her she reached into her basket and pulled out a small white cardboard box which contained half a dozen capsules. 'My doctor in London insisted that I take three of these every day,' she told me. 'They are for my nerves.' With some slight reluctance she handed the box over to me. Her movements were slow and she had a slight tremor when she moved.

I examined the box carefully. It bore nothing except the name of the company and a scribbled note saying 'Take as directed'. I had never seen the capsules before though I knew the name of the manufacturer very well. I handed the box back. ‘Do you know what they’re called?’

‘I wrote down the name,’ said Miss Phillips. She smiled rather nervously. ‘My memory isn’t as good as it was.’ She reached into her bag again and took out a piece of paper. She handed it to me. It had the word ‘Angipax’ written on it.

‘How long have you been taking them?’ I asked. I had never heard of the pills.

She thought for a moment. ‘Six months or so. I think.’

‘Do they help? Do they make you feel better?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Miss Phillips, rather surprisingly. ‘But I’d like to stop them now that I’m living in the country.’ I said I thought that sounded a good idea.

‘I thought I should ask your permission first,’ said Miss Phillips. ‘My doctor in London never liked me doing anything without asking him first.’

‘Very sensible,’ I agreed. I reached behind me and took a large book off a shelf. ‘I’ll just check up to see what the manufacturers say about those pills of yours.’ I flicked through the index of the reference book but couldn’t find ‘Angipax’ listed anywhere.

‘I don’t expect they’ll be in there,’ said Miss Phillips.

‘They’re very new. My doctor used to get them for me specially.’

I plucked another book off the shelf, found the telephone number for the drug company concerned and rang the Medical Director.

‘Do you make a drug called ‘Angipax’?’ I asked him, when

I got through.

He sounded a little surprised but said that they did. I described one of the capsules.

‘That’s right. Are you one of the trial doctors?’

That explained why the doctor in London had given Miss Phillips the capsules instead of sending her to the chemist with a prescription. The doctor was being paid by the drug company to test the new drug on his patients.

I explained the situation. ‘Miss Phillips wants to stop them. Is it safe for her just to stop them overnight?’

‘Oh, yes!’ said the Medical Director immediately. ‘No problem.’ He paused. ‘Are there any capsules left?’

‘A few.’

‘I’ll send someone round to pick them up.’

I said he needn’t bother going to so much trouble and that if he wanted the capsules back I’d put them in the post, but he said he would rather send someone round. I put the telephone down and told Miss Phillips that the company making ‘Angipax’ had confirmed that it was safe for her to stop them.

‘That’s wonderful,’ said Miss Phillips. ‘Thank you, doctor.’ she smiled at me and stood up. ‘Do I pay you or your receptionist?’ She took out a rather plump looking purse.

I must have looked as puzzled as I was.

‘My doctor in London always liked me to pay him directly,’ said Miss Phillips. ’He said it made the accounting easier.’ She smiled again. ‘And I prefer to pay each time rather than allow a bill to build up.’

‘If you’re going to live in Bilbury and you would like me to look after you Miss Johnson will give you a form to sign,’ I told her. ‘There isn’t anything to pay.’

‘Oh!’ said Miss Phillips, clearly surprised.

‘This is a National Health Service practice.’ I explained. ‘We don’t have any private patients. The Government will pay me to look after you.’ I couldn’t help thinking that the doctor must be making a fortune. His patients were paying him for treatments which the drug companies were undoubtedly also paying him to try out. I asked Miss Phillips to leave her capsules with Miss Johnson and to tell her that someone from the drug company would be round to pick them up.

Miss Phillips thanked me profusely and walked slowly towards the door. I waited until I’d heard her footsteps disappear down the corridor before I pressed the buzzer underneath my desk to tell the next patient to come in. I didn’t know why, but Miss Phillips had worried me.

* * *

When I’d finished the morning surgery Miss Johnson said that Dr Brownlow had asked me to call in and see him. She told me that he would be in the converted barn where he was supervising the water bottling plant he had set into operation. Dr Brownlow had retired from general practice to run a business selling bottled water to restaurants and supermarkets.

‘Thank you for standing in for me last week!’ I said. ‘How’s the water business?’

‘It’s looking good!’ said Dr Brownlow. He looked ten years younger than he had when I’d last seen him.

‘So are you!’ I told him. ‘Running a business clearly agrees with you.’

‘I like it.’ admitted Dr Brownlow. ‘I like the challenge.’ He put down the sheaf of papers he was holding. ‘I just wanted to ask you how you were getting on with Bilbury Grange. How are you enjoying married life? And how is Patsy?’

‘I’m enjoying married life very much,’ I said. ‘And Patsy is very well. But the house is coming on slowly.’ I told him about the problems with the roof and about the dry rot in the cellar and about how Thumper had agreed to help us.

‘I heard that Thumper was helping you,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘I’m pleased. Not that you need a new roof but that you’ve got Thumper working with you. You can trust him.’

‘I know,’ I said.

‘A lot of people think he’s irresponsible and unreliable,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘A bit of what we used to call a wide boy. But I’ve always found him to be honest.’ He smiled at me. ‘But then I don’t run an insurance company.’

I smiled back. ‘I don’t think he’s the only person in Bilbury to regard insurance companies as fair game. I can’t really understand why they still sell policies in Bilbury.’

‘Simple,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘The Bilbury claims all go into the computer as Devon claims. And fortunately for us, the rest of Devon has got some pretty honest citizens.’ Unexpectedly, Dr Brownlow reached out and put a hand on my shoulder. ‘You’ll probably find it difficult for a while,’ he told me.

I must have looked puzzled.

‘Buying and trying to restore a large house.’ he explained. ‘But you’re doing the right thing. When I bought this place people said I was mad. But I’ve never regretted it. A small new house may be easy to run but it won’t have much soul. A big old house with character will give you a challenge, cement your marriage and repay your love. And you’ve bought it at the right time. As you get older and try to make decisions you’ll find it gets more and more difficult. Whenever you want to do anything challenging you’ll think of too many problems; you’ll know too much, you’ll know of so many things that can go wrong that you’ll freeze. You’ll find yourself more and more incapable of making decisions, more and more incapable of taking risks and increasingly content to sit back and accept things as they are.’

‘That’s hardly true of you!’ I pointed out. He had, after all, given up his medical practice to concentrate on building up a business selling bottled water.

‘Ah, that’s different!’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘When you get to my age you realise that time is running out and that if you don’t do something today then tomorrow may be too late. You learn to do things by instinct or not to do them at all.’ He stretched his neck first to one side and then to the other. He had bad arthritis in his neck, and although I knew it must have been painful he never complained about it. ‘Besides, when you get to my age you learn to let the future worry about itself.’

‘Would you like to come over and have a look at the house sometime?’ I asked him.

‘I’d love to!’ said Dr Brownlow instantly. ‘When would be convenient?’

‘We can’t invite you for a meal just yet,’ I apologised. ‘We don’t have a cooker. Or any crockery.’

‘That’s all right! I’d just like to see Patsy and the house.’

‘This evening then? About eight?’

* * *

Patsy had prepared a large pile of salad sandwiches for our lunch and we ate them outside, sitting in the garden. Ben sat down beside us chewing on a bone. Thumper had gone back home to have his lunch with Anne.

‘Thumper says we ought to get a proper roofing firm in to do the roof,’ said Patsy. ‘He says there’s plenty of other stuff for him to be getting on with but that if he tries to do the roof by himself we’ll never get all the essential jobs done before the winds start at the end of the summer.’ Bilbury gets a lot of strong south westerly gales, and properties which are not well prepared can suffer badly. ‘Oh, and he says there are half a dozen dead trees that need to come down too.’

‘Does he know anybody we can trust to do the roof?’

‘He’s suggested that we get three firms to come out and give us estimates,’ said Patsy. ‘He’ll talk to them and tell them exactly what we want. And he says could you have some cash ready for when the slates are delivered on Wednesday.’

‘Does Thumper have any idea how much it will cost us to have the roof done?’

Patsy told me. Thumper’s guess was much lower than the estimate we’d received, but it was still an awful lot and would use up most of the money we had set aside from the bank loan for doing other repairs.

‘It’s going to take us longer to get the rest of the house put straight,’ I told Patsy, as I took a large bite out of a tomato sandwich.

‘Because of the money?’ I nodded.

‘Are things going to be all right?’

‘Of course they are!’ I assured her, with far more confidence than I felt. Getting the roof done really had been an unexpected problem.

‘Honestly?’ said Patsy, who clearly didn’t believe me. I paused. ‘I don’t know.’ I admitted.

‘That’s better. I want the truth, you know!’

At five minutes to two I kissed Patsy and stood up. Ben stood with me and started to wag her tail. ‘I’d better get started with the afternoon visits,’ I told her. ‘Otherwise I’ll never finish this evening’s surgery.’

‘Are you sure Dr Brownlow isn’t expecting a meal tonight?’ asked Patsy, for the tenth time. She had looked very worried when I had told her that Dr Brownlow was coming.

‘Absolutely! He just wants to come and see you and look at the house. Talking of meals did you manage to speak to the cooker people?’

‘They promised to deliver it this afternoon,’ said Patsy, without much confidence.

* * *

I had five visits to do on my first afternoon back at work and I arrived at Dr Brownlow’s house with only a couple of minutes to spare before the evening surgery.

‘A man came to pick up those capsules Miss Phillips left,’ said Miss Johnson. ‘He’d driven all the way from Bristol!’

It seemed very odd that anyone should drive over a hundred miles each way to pick up a few capsules, but there was a full waiting room and I didn’t have time to think any more about it. Anyway, I’d always suspected that drug companies had more money than sense. Ben and I went straight into the consulting room. I pressed the buzzer to start the surgery and she curled up beside my feet and went to sleep.

It was an uneventful though rather long evening surgery. The first nine patients I saw were all early holiday-makers. There were four cases of mild sunburn, two children with insect bites and three patients with colds in the first thirty minutes. Most of the villagers would not dream of visiting the surgery with such trivial ailments and I was beginning to despair of seeing anyone I knew when in walked Nigel Woodloe.

Nigel and his wife Karen used to work in London and come down to their cottage in Bilbury at the weekends. He had a job as a currency dealer for an American bank in London and she had an equally important job with an old-fashioned England merchant bank. I knew that they had recently given up their jobs and had decided to live in Bilbury full time, though I didn’t know what they had decided to do to earn a living or whether they had earned so much money that they could retire.

‘I’ve got a terrible back,’ said Nigel, lowering himself into the chair on the other side of the desk with great caution and holding the right side of his back. ‘I wonder if you’d be kind enough to sign me off work so that I can collect some sick pay.’ He was still wearing the dark suit white shirt and red tie of a banker’s uniform, though whether or not this was in my honour I didn’t know.

‘Are you working, then?’ I asked him.

Nigel looked embarrassed. ‘Not exactly,’ he confessed. He lowered his eyes. ‘But I still have a valid sickness insurance policy which pays out if I can’t work for any reason.

‘And you want to make a claim?’

‘Things are a lot harder than we anticipated,’ admitted Nigel.

‘I’d better examine you!’ I told him. ‘Could you pop onto the examination couch?’

Nigel levered himself up out of the chair, took off his jacket, staggered across the room and collapsed onto the couch. Although he looked bad I couldn’t find anything wrong with him. I told him so. He climbed off the couch, walked back around my desk, put his jacket on and sat himself down again. This time he clutched the left side of his back.

‘We thought we’d be able to survive on what we could grow and what we could earn doing odd jobs,’ he confessed. He looked very guilty and was clearly not very good at taking advantage of the system. ‘But the slugs have eaten most of our seedlings, and apart from two days selling ice cream I haven’t been able to get any work at all.’ He bit his lower lip.’ Things are a bit desperate.

I wrote out a sick note. ‘It’s almost impossible to disprove backache, I told him. ‘But if by any chance you get examined by any other doctor try to remember which side of your back hurts.’

Nigel went very red.

‘When you came in it was the right side which hurt,’ I explained. ‘Now it’s the left.’

‘Oh.’ said Nigel, simply. ‘I’m sorry. Thank you.’

‘Do you regret coming down here to live? I asked him, handing him the sick note he needed.

‘No!’ Nigel replied without hesitation. ‘Absolutely not!’ He took the sick note. I held out and nodded his thanks. He stood up.

I waved a hand.

‘Really,’ he said. ‘I appreciate it.’ He folded the sick note up into four and put it into the inside pocket of his jacket.

After Nigel there were another twelve patients: three visitors and nine locals. The visitors included a child with a sore throat, a diabetic needing a supply of insulin and a girl who had come on holiday with her boyfriend and who rather belatedly wanted contraceptive advice and threatened to get herself pregnant if I didn’t help her immediately. The locals included three arthritics wanting prescriptions, a patient with high blood pressure needing a check up, a woman with early menopausal symptoms, two children needing injections, a woman who thought she might be pregnant but rather hoped she wasn’t, and a man with a genuine bad back.

I finished the surgery at 7.40 pm and Ben and I got back home just before 8.00 pm to find that Dr Brownlow’s elderly Rolls Royce was parked in the driveway and he was having a guided tour of the house with Patsy on his arm. Thumper had long since gone home for his tea, leaving behind a lengthy list of requests, queries and instructions. Two of the three roofing firms Thumper had recommended were sending men along to give estimates (the third firm said they were too busy) and it was no surprise at all to hear that the cooker still hadn't arrived.

'It's marvellous!' said Dr Brownlow, enthusiastically, when we'd shown him everything. It was now dusk and we were sitting by our rather stagnant ornamental lake being bitten by a variety of insects. 'There's no disputing that it's a challenge and a lot of people would say that you're mad, but it'll be worth it in the long run.'

Patsy reached out, took my hand and squeezed it. We both valued every scrap of encouragement.

'We'd better go in!' I said, unromantically. 'I don't know about anyone else but I'm being eaten alive.'

'Oh no!' said Patsy, putting a hand to her mouth as she suddenly remembered something. 'I'm sorry! You haven't eaten yet have you?'

'Not since lunchtime!'

'You can have a sandwich or I'll go and fetch fish and chips.'

'Let me treat you!' said Dr Brownlow, standing up. 'I haven't had fish and chips for ages. Is that good chip shop in Combe Martin still open? The one down near to the beach?'

We both nodded. 'I'll be back as soon as I can,' promised Dr Brownlow.

True to his word he was back before the saucepan had boiled on the camping stove.

'Come on!' said Dr Brownlow, excitedly. 'Make the tea afterwards. Eat these while they're still hot. They smell marvellous.' He handed us each a hot parcel of fish and chips and we ate them with our fingers out of the paper.

'That was the best meal I've had for years!' said Dr Brownlow sighing and sitting back with a broad smile on his face.

'I'd forgotten how good fish and chips taste.' He looked thoughtful for a moment. 'Do you know,' he said, slowly and deliberately, 'I think I get more real pleasure from eating fish and chips wrapped in paper than I do out of eating the most expensively cooked cordon bleu meal in the most elaborate surroundings.'

'I agree with you,' I said.

'And no washing up!' said Patsy, standing up and starting to make the tea. We had acquired two extra mugs that Thumper had brought with him and Patsy had declared her intention of going into Barnstaple and buying some crockery from a cheap store she knew.

'What do I do with this?' asked Dr Brownlow, holding up his empty fish and chip wrappings and looking around for a waste bin.

'There's a rubbish pile outside,' I told him. I got to my feet and headed for the back door. As I passed him I went to take his wrappers from out of his hands. 'No, it's O.K!' he said. 'I can manage my own rubbish. It'll make me feel virtuous.' He followed me to the back door and out into the courtyard. Ben, who thought we were all going for a walk, got quite excited.

'I thought you were poor!' said Dr Brownlow, tossing his chip wrapping paper into a half full cardboard box that I had earmarked for burning and picking a bottle from another box. It was the bottle that had contained the wine we'd abandoned the previous evening. Ben, who had run away towards the vegetable garden now turned and waited for me.

'Oh, it was just some stuff I found in the cellar,' I explained. 'It was undrinkable.'

But Dr Brownlow wasn't listening. He was carefully examining the label. 'You didn't buy this, did you?'

I shook my head. 'No I found it in the cellar.' Ben, who had decided I wasn't going for a walk after all, started to run back towards the house.

'Is there any more like it down there?'

'Yes. I'm not sure how many bottles, but they're all the same. But it's gone off otherwise I would have opened a bottle to go with our chips.'

'Show me,' said Dr Brownlow, suddenly very serious. He waved me into the house. With Ben following us I led the way down into the cellar and pointed out the bottles of wine that I had found. Dr Brownlow pulled each one out of its hole and carefully examined the label.

'Are these all yours?' he asked me.

'Yes. We bought the house and contents. But we've burnt most of the contents.'

'You're absolutely sure?'

'Yes!' I said, rather impatiently. 'Why?'

'You don't know what these are, do you?'

'No.' I had by now realised that something serious was going on.

'This is Chateau Lafite Rothschild,' said Dr Brownlow.

'Bottled in 1925.

'Is it valuable?'

'A few years ago half a dozen bottles of this went for over £500!' said Dr Brownlow, carefully replacing the bottle that he had been holding.

I was so shocked that I nearly fell over. When I had recovered I raced back up the stairs towards the kitchen. On the way up I met Patsy who was coming down to see what we were doing.

‘Do you want the bad news or the good news?’

Patsy looked startled. ‘What bad news? What do you mean?’

‘That horrid bottle of wine we threw away last night was worth around £100!’ I told her.

‘Oh no!’

‘But the good news is that we’ve got another eleven bottles of exactly the same wine down in the cellar!’

Patsy threw her arms around my neck, I lost my footing and we both stumbled down the stairs. We scrambled to our feet to discover that my best grey flannels had a tear along one leg, but I didn’t care.

‘That will help pay for our new roof!’ said Patsy.

Ben, attracted by all the excitement, came racing over towards us and started to lick my face excitedly.

‘I take it the news isn’t unacceptable, then?’ said Dr Brownlow.

‘It’s marvellous!’ I said, shaking him by the hand. ‘I’m really glad you came round this evening. I was going to dump that wine.’ Patsy, who had cobwebs caught in her hair, reached across and kissed him on the cheek.

Dr Brownlow grinned at us both. ‘Shall we have a cup of tea to celebrate?’

* * *

CHAPTER FIVE

The Sunday after we had moved into Bilbury Grange, Patsy and I went round to have tea with her parents at their farm. Patsy's sister, Adrienne, who was eager to start her own complementary medicine practice, had gone to London for a three day course in iridology and so, since it was the lambing season, Mr Kennett was extremely busy.

'Come and give us a hand Patsy,' he said, when we'd finished our salmon and cucumber sandwiches and our tinned fruit salad with fresh cream. 'I've got twelve lambs that need feeding.' He took his old blue coat down from behind the living room door, and put it on. It had long since lost both its buttons and its belt so he tied it tightly around the waist with orange baler twine. He then slipped his wellington boots on.

Patsy and I trooped outside in Mr Kennett's wake, calling in at the kitchen to pick up a pan of reconstituted powdered ewes' milk which had been warming. We left Mrs Kennett, who was, as always, as quiet as a mouse and who never seemed to have anything to do with the farm, to clear away the table. I left Ben sitting in the living room alongside Mr Kennett's two dogs and gave her strict instructions to stay where she was. Fortunately, the three dogs seemed to get on well together.

The lambs which needed feeding were huddled together on a thick bed of straw in one corner of an old barn. The corner of the barn had been fenced off with old wooden boards. As soon as they saw Mr Kennett the lambs leapt to their feet and started to make a tremendous noise. The strongest pushed to the front and tried to jump over the wooden wall of their temporary pen.

'Why do these need feeding?' I asked Patsy quietly. I knew nothing at all about farming.

'Some of them are orphans,' explained Patsy. 'We always lose a few mothers in childbirth. And if a ewe has more than two lambs she won't be able to feed them all so we have to take over.'

I watched as Mr Kennett decanted warm milk into four pint sized feeding bottles fitted with red rubber teats. He gave two of the bottles to Patsy and kept two for himself. Then he climbed over the fence and started feeding the noisiest and pushiest of the lambs. As he did so several others tried to suckle on his coat. 'That's where all my coat buttons went,' he explained to me with a gummy grin. Patsy stayed on the outside of the pen and fed two of the lambs through a gap in the wooden boarding. When the first four lambs had emptied their bottles Mr Kennett and Patsy rinsed the bottles and the teats, refilled them with milk and started to feed another pair each.

'Them last four aren't going to make it.' said Mr Kennett, without emotion, nodding towards the four lambs which had not yet been fed. 'They're always last.' Two of the lambs were clearly suffering from diarrhoea and all four were noticeably smaller and weaker than the others. Like their brothers and sisters they all had numbers painted on their sides. One, a pretty little thing which was completely black, could hardly stand and seemed to be shaking and shivering though whether with cold, fear or general debility. I did not know. 'They need two hourly feeds,' said Mr Kennett. 'And they need electrolytes. But they aren't worth the trouble.'

'Do you want to try?' Patsy asked me when it was the turn of the last four to be fed.

I hesitated for a moment before answering that I would. Without a word Mr Kennett rinsed and then refilled the four feeding bottles and then gave two to me and two to Patsy. 'I'll leave you to it.' he said.

'Just make sure that you keep the end of your bottle up in the air,' said Patsy. 'Otherwise they'll suck in air.'

I poked my two feeding bottles through the wooden boarding of the pen but the two lambs I was trying to feed were repeatedly pushed out of the way by stronger lambs which had already been fed. However much I tried to push the bigger lambs away they kept on coming back and the two weak lambs I was trying to feed seemed to get hardly anything to drink. Even when they did manage to get the teats into their mouths they were quickly nudged out of the way. I glanced to my right and saw that Patsy had managed to wedge her two runts into a corner so that she could make sure they were fed. The barn was filled with the sound of sucking and slurping and Patsy's best dress was covered with splashes of milk.

I climbed over the boarding, holding my two bottles high above my head, and found myself being nudged and buffeted from all sides. Even the lambs who had just been fed were desperate for more. Two of the fittest jumped up and left unpleasant looking streaks down the front of my only half decent pair of trousers. (The pair that Patsy had already had to repair after my fall down the cellar steps). Deciding that I now had absolutely nothing to lose, I crouched down with the two lambs I was trying to feed in a corner and protected them with my body while I fed them. Their tiny, bony bodies heaved as they desperately sucked at their bottles. When they'd finished I stood up feeling pleased with myself. Patsy, who had finished and had been watching me, started giggling when she saw the mess I was in. When I looked at her in surprise she pointed at the front of my jacket and trousers. I looked down and saw that both were covered with milk splashes. Two of the fitter lambs were butting each other and three others seemed to be playing a game of hide and seek under and around a rusty old piece of farm machinery.

'You haven't got another jacket!'

'I know.'

'And those are your only decent trousers!' I nodded.

‘So you’re going to work in those tomorrow?’

‘I don’t care!’ I told her. ‘Those two poor little chaps weren’t getting anything to drink.’

‘They’re girls not chaps,’ said Patsy.

‘Whatever. They weren’t getting anything to drink.’ I frowned and paused. ‘When your father said that these four weren’t worth the trouble, what did he mean?’

Patsy’s smile disappeared and she looked embarrassed. She shrugged. ‘You know...’

‘No... I don’t... Do you mean...’

‘He doesn’t think they’ll survive.’

‘They’ll die?’

‘Yes.’ said Patsy bluntly.

‘They would survive if they were fed properly and looked after?’

‘Probably.’

I turned round and looked down at the two lambs I’d just fed. They looked up at me and their eyes were full of trust and faith. I reached out a hand and they both lunged forward and took a finger each into their mouths. Their tails wagged furiously as they sucked hard, desperately trying to draw milk out of what they mistakenly thought were nipples. Strangely, they didn’t stop when no milk came but seemed to get some comfort out of what they were doing.

‘We can’t just let them die.’ I said. I could feel tears welling up in my eyes.

‘They’d die anyway,’ Patsy reminded me quietly. ‘That’s why they are here.’

To my shame it was something I hadn’t even thought of. I hadn’t related the tiny, woolly, loveable mischievous creatures in the barn with lamb chops on a plate. Suddenly, in that brief moment, deliberately breeding animals to kill and then eat seemed obscene beyond belief.

‘We’ve got to save these four,’ I told her. She looked at me, puzzled.

‘Take them home and feed them.’

I could see the uncertainty and confusion in her eyes.

‘Your father won’t mind, will he? He thinks they’re going to die anyway.’

‘But why?’

‘I don’t know why.’

But I did know. Because they had touched me. Because I felt guilty about the fact that I had eaten lamb and calf and pig and God knows what else. Because they seemed loving and loveable and they had looked at me with trust in their eyes. I did know why but I couldn’t explain it. I felt embarrassed and uneasy and uncertain and I didn’t want to upset Patsy.

‘They have to be fed every few hours.’

‘That’s O.K.’

‘It’ll mean getting up in the night.’

‘I don’t mind.’ I could feel tears on my cheeks. I hurriedly wiped them away and blinked my eyes.

Patsy saw and came to me in a rush and flung her arms around my neck. ‘You are a big softy,’ she said. ‘But I do love you. I’ll help you look after them.’

‘Do you think your Dad will let us take them?’

‘There’s only one way to find out.’

Hand in hand we walked slowly back to the farmhouse.

Mr Kennett, who had taken off his wellington boots and unfastened the orange bailer twine wrapped around his coat and was now settled back in comfort on the sofa thought about my request for a moment and then nodded. ‘Good idea.’ he said. ‘If you’re lucky you might make a few bob’. He paused, mulling something over in his mind. ‘I’ll let you have them at half price,’ he said. ‘Because you’re family.’ He reached out and shook my hand to confirm the deal then told me the price.

I reached into my pocket and handed over the coins.

‘Take four of the stronger ones,’ he said, with a sudden and unexpected burst of generosity.

‘It’s O.K., thanks,’ I said. ‘We’d like to take the four that were fed last.’

Mr Kennett looked at me as though worried that his daughter had married a man not suited to be let loose in the world of commerce and then shrugged, his anxiety for his daughter’s welfare overwhelmed by simple self interest. He offered to deliver the lambs the next morning but when I said we wanted to take them home with us now he helped us load the four of them into the back of the Morris Minor and then put a small sack of lambs’ milk, two spare teats and half a bale of straw into the boot. He wouldn’t take any money for these items but said we could replace them whenever was convenient. Ben lay on the floor at the front of the car beside Patsy’s feet and growled persistently all the way home. In the back the lambs ‘baaaaaed’ and ‘maaaaaed’ a lot and then fell asleep bundled up together on an old blanket in an incomprehensible mixture of legs and tiny tails.

* * *

The slates had been safely delivered and stored in a massive pile which almost blocked the front drive. The roofers recommended by Thumper had begun removing slates and rotten battens from huge sections of our roof.

Thumper himself had recruited a young man called Ernie to help him dig out bits of rotten wood from our window frames, soffits and door posts. Our four lambs, now christened Lizzie, Petula, Cynthia and Sarah-Louise, were happily ensconced in one of our stables, and although Patsy and I were both exhausted from giving them feeds every few hours (including throughout the night), we were getting great pleasure from their company. And a very excited wine dealer from a London auction house had rung to make an appointment to come to Bilbury to collect the wine ready to put it into a forthcoming auction. When Patsy had described the label to him he had, she said, positively drooled into the telephone. She said she didn't think she had ever heard anyone get quite so excited by anything. If his recommended reserve price did not prove to be unduly optimistic the money the wine would raise would pay for the roof repairs. There seemed some justice in the fact that although Bilbury Grange had given us a nasty financial surprise it had matched that with a pleasant financial surprise. We took it as a good omen. At the surgery things seemed to be going quite well. I hardly ever saw Dr Brownlow, partly because he was busy helping to organise his new water bottling plant which seemed to have developed more glitches than even he had anticipated, but mainly, I suspect, because he was conscious of the fact that it was now my practice and he didn't want to get in the way. Many of the patients still missed him, and his daily presence in or around the surgery would have probably caused more than a little confusion. Miss Johnson was a tower of strength and inexhaustible fund of knowledge and information about the workings of the National Health Service bureaucracy and the idiosyncrasies of our patients. Just as important she also knew where everyone lived. In a town or a city, general practitioners can usually rely on street names and house numbers to help them find their patients. But in Bilbury none of the lanes has names and none of the houses or cottages has numbers. Most of the buildings have names, but the signs are invariably covered up with ivy, rambling roses or weeds. Without Miss Johnson's instructions I would have wasted most of my days driving backwards and forwards and getting nowhere.

There was only one faintly grey spot on the horizon to darken our joy in living.

While having a drink in the Duck and Puddle with Thumper one evening I had heard a rumour that a London based property company was negotiating to buy several hundred acres of woodland and farmland to the west of the village and had applied for permission to build a large housing estate, a golf course, a holiday village, a hotel and a supermarket on the site. The rumour came from Frank Parsons, the landlord at the Duck and Puddle who said he'd heard it at one of his Licensed Victuallers Association meetings in Exeter. He said he had heard that the new hotel would have three bars.

However, none of us took this rumour very seriously. As much as we like Frank and enjoy his company, we know that sobriety and reliability are not his strengths and his trips to Exeter for the L.V.A. meetings cannot, in all honesty, be regarded as objective fact finding missions.

* * *

CHAPTER SIX

The following Tuesday was Patsy’s birthday and I’d hoped for a quiet and uneventful day so that I could get all my work done a little early. I wanted to take her out to dinner at a new vegetarian restaurant in Ilfracombe which already seemed to have acquired an excellent reputation. I had taken my private and very personal vow to turn vegetarian seriously but rather to my surprise Patsy said that she too wanted to stop eating meat.

‘You don’t have to,’ I told her when she announced that she too had decided not to eat meat again. ‘It’s just something that feels right for me.’

But Patsy was just as determined as I was. ‘I used to cry myself to sleep at night when we had to send the lambs off to slaughter,’ she told me while we were feeding our four lambs. ‘I tried to harden myself to it by never getting to think of them as individuals.’ She paused and for a long while neither of us said anything. ‘That was one of the reasons I went to work at the Duck and Puddle,’ she told me. ‘I just wanted to get away from the farm.’

Much to the annoyance of Sarah-Louise and Petula, who were both vigorously enjoying their early morning feed at the time, I put down my two feeding bottles and gave Patsy a tremendous hug. It occurred to me that if Patsy hadn’t gone to work at the Duck and Puddle I might never have met her.

But the day was anything but quiet and uneventful.

The first thing that happened was that just as I got home for my lunch Miss Johnson telephoned from the surgery with an urgent message for me to visit Miss Phillips, the lady who had recently moved to Bilbury from London and who had visited me a couple of days earlier wanting to know if she could stop her tablets. Miss Johnson didn’t know exactly what had happened but said that she had received an urgent call from a neighbour, a retired army Major called Arnold Kineton, who was regarded locally as a bit of an old fuss pot (Frank Parsons claimed that all old soldiers were wimpy and effeminate and that retired officers in particular were invariably more like old women than old women), but whose concern for the health and welfare of his neighbours was undoubtedly genuine. I sometimes got the impression that he looked after the other villagers in much the same sort of way that he once looked after his men. I asked Patsy to put my salad somewhere safe (our visiting rabbit was back again and lettuces, in particular, were only safe in cupboards) and drove off as speedily as the Morris Minor would take me to the cottage on the outskirts of Softly’s Bottom where Miss Phillips lived.

Major Kineton was waiting for me on Miss Phillips’ front porch. Even though it was a warm, humid day he wore a smart Harris Tweed jacket with beige cavalry twill trousers which had razor sharp creases down the front, a yellow waistcoat and a paisley cravat. He had a neat little moustache and his grey hair (cut twice a week in Barnstaple) was parted immaculately on the left. Major Kineton always carried a walking stick made of a straight piece of young ash, though he never used it as a walking aid and usually carried it tucked under his arm like a swagger stick.

‘I’m glad you’ve come, doctor,’ said the Major, rather formally. ‘I’m terribly worried about Miss Phillips.’ He turned and led the way into the cottage as though it was his own and paused in the narrow hallway to show me into the living room. He stood to attention as I went through and then followed and stood behind me. There would have been some dispute about whether he or the doorpost was standing straighter.

The living room was neatly furnished with an expensive white leather three piece suite dominating the room. The suite was far too large for the cottage and was rather unexpected. After our first meeting I would have imagined that Miss Phillips would have chosen something floral. The walls were decorated with half a dozen hunting prints and a modern, imitation copper warming pan hung on a large nail over the slate topped fireplace. Every available surface in the room was covered with cats of all colours and all sizes. The only thing they had in common was that they were all made of porcelain or china. An elderly, exceedingly frail looking woman I had never seen before was slumped in one of the leather armchairs. She wore a red woollen dressing gown and underneath it I could just see an inch or two of an ankle length nightdress trimmed with lace. Her grey hair was uncombed and she was crying quietly. She was rocking backwards and forwards to comfort herself. As I entered the room another woman I didn’t recognise came out of the kitchen. She wore a pair of smart charcoal grey trousers and a man’s white shirt with what looked like a club tie. ‘I’m Rachael Tweedsmuir,’ she said, introducing herself. ‘Miss Phillips and I live together.’ She said this rather defiantly, as though half expecting me to make some comment of disapproval. I nodded and said I was pleased to meet her but this social nicety was ignored.

‘She has been in a terrible state since she stopped her tablets,’ said Miss Tweedsmuir, rather aggressively. She moved across the room, crouched down beside the older woman and took her hand in hers. ‘She hasn’t slept a wink and she hasn’t stopped crying.’ For a moment I was puzzled and then I suddenly realised that the woman in the chair must be Miss Phillips. I really hadn’t recognised her.

‘I spoke to the drug company,’ I said, rather defensively.

‘They said it would be perfectly all right for her to stop the tablets.’

‘Well, look at her!’ said Miss Tweedsmuir. ‘Does she look all right to you?’

I had to admit that she didn't.

'She's certainly not herself,' said the Major, stepping forward. 'I can vouch for that.'

'Thank you, Major,' said Miss Tweedsmuir. 'I think we can manage now.' Dismissed, the Major backed out of the room and disappeared. He clearly knew his place. 'He came to bring us some mushrooms he'd picked,' she told me. It occurred to me that she wasn't a woman whose path I would have liked to cross.

I examined Miss Phillips carefully but could find no physical evidence of any abnormality. Her heart was beating strongly, her lungs were working well and her central nervous system seemed to be functioning reasonably well if rather sluggishly. But when I talked to her I could not get her to reply.

'She missed them once before and went like this,' said Miss Tweedsmuir. 'We were away with friends in Cheltenham and she'd forgotten her pills. She couldn't get any from the local chemist because her quack in London got them for her specially.'

'And she went like this?'

'Absolutely. Just the same. Crying. Depressed. Sleeping all the time. Wouldn't eat. Terrible.'

'What happened?'

'We went back to London early. She started taking the tablets again and she got better.'

'She didn't tell me about that,' I explained.

'She doesn't remember anything about it said Miss Tweedsmuir, very matter of fact.

'It sounds like a withdrawal syndrome,' I said. 'She'd better start on the tablets again.'

'I would have done that, doctor,' said Miss Tweedsmuir rather coldly. 'But Miss Phillips left the remainder of her tablets with you.' She was right, of course. I remembered that the drug company had sent someone down from Bristol to pick them up.

'I'll ring them back and ask them to let me have a supply,' I said. 'Then if Miss Phillips still wants to come off them we'll have to do it slowly.'

'That would probably be best,' agreed Miss Tweedsmuir. There was a hard edge in her voice that came quite close to sarcasm.

'Would you like me to arrange for Miss Phillips to go into hospital?' I asked.

'No! Certainly not.' said Miss Tweedsmuir very firmly. 'She's not well enough to go into hospital. That's the last place I'd send anyone in her condition.'

I didn't know what else to do and so I turned and headed for the door.

'Oh, one other thing, doctor...'

'Yes?'

'Do you like animals?'

'Yes. Very much.'

'That's what I had heard. Our cat Ophelia has just had kittens. Could you give one a good home?'

I was, to say the least, rather taken aback. 'Yes.' I said. 'I suppose so.'

'Where do you live?'

I told her.

'Miss Phillips and I will come round and have a look when she's feeling better. If your home is suitable you can have one.'

'Oh.' I said. 'Thank you.'

I drove home via the surgery so that I could telephone the Medical Director of the drug company and ask him to let me have some tablets for Miss Phillips. He was unwilling, at first, to let me have any, but when I told him that if anything happened to Miss Phillips I would make sure that his company was blamed he agreed to send me the tablets I needed. This was a trick I'd learned from Dr Brownlow and it always seemed to work. Then I drove back home and finished my lunch.

* * *

I had still not quite finished lunch when the telephone went again.

'I've got Mr Lister for you,' said a secretary who sounded as if she had a small rock in her mouth. I waited for a few moments and then a man's voice came onto the line. Mr Lister was the editor of the *Barnstaple, Bideford and Bilbury Herald* for which I wrote my weekly medical column.

'Got a bit of a problem with your column, doc!' said Mr Lister. 'Bit embarrassing really.'

'What's the trouble?'

'You seem to be causing a bit too much controversy. We've had a few letters from other members of your profession who object to some of your views.'

'Anything in particular?'

'Well you did a column for us warning about some of the problems caused by the whooping cough vaccine. That hasn't gone down too well.'

'But the whooping cough vaccine does cause problems! Everything I wrote in that article was absolutely accurate.'

'Maybe. But some members of your profession think you're making things worse by worrying the public.

They think these are problems that should be sorted out within the profession.'

I didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. 'But that's crazy!' I said. 'The profession isn't doing anything to sort these problems out. That was why I wrote about it in my column. Is that the only thing that's worrying you?'

'No.' said Mr Lister, drawing the word out. 'It isn't. You see, with a column like this you have to be very careful. Especially in a paper like ours.'

'I thought you told me that the readers liked the column?'

'They do,' agreed Mr Lister. 'Indeed, they do. At least the non-medical readers do.'

'But the doctors don't?'

'Exactly. We had a lot of complaints about that article of yours telling readers how to change doctors and how to complain when doctors do things wrong.'

'I thought those were important issues!'

'In a way I agree with you,' said Mr Lister. 'But we want something a bit less, well, aggressive. We're not trying to change the world here, you know!'

I didn't say anything. Patsy who had heard my half of the conversation had come closer and was now sitting next to me. She looked worried.

'The thing is,' continued the editor, 'that you have to decide whether you want to write about what happens or you want to try to change things yourself. Those really are two quite different things.'

'But surely a writer should try to change things that he thinks are wrong!' I said.

'Not at all,' said Mr Lister. 'A journalist is a witness. His job is to report what happens. You're making the mistake of trying to make the news. Your problem is that you make people think. That's not really what we want in a newspaper.'

'But this is a column. Surely that's different?'

'Not really,' said Mr Lister, wearily. 'You can be controversial occasionally. That's fair enough. But only if you tell people what they already think, and certainly not if you start upsetting the establishment. People like to have their prejudices sustained. But we can't afford to upset important people in the town. If you carry on being too honest you'll struggle to make yourself any sort of career as a journalist. And you certainly won't do your career in medicine any good. You need to learn to compromise a little. Try not to rock the boat quite so much.'

'Can I ask who I've upset?' I asked him, though I wasn't sure any more that I cared. I wanted to rock the boat. I wanted to make a difference. I wanted to change things. I didn't see any point in doing otherwise.

'Well I don't mind telling you that we've had three letters from one doctor alone.'

'That wouldn't be the young Dr Brownlow, would it?' I'd had a disagreement with Dr Brownlow's son a few months earlier when he had tried to persuade me to have his father, then my employer, taken into care. The young Dr Brownlow had been worried about the fact that his father was spending his inheritance and he hadn't been pleased when I had refused to help him.

'You know him?'

'Our paths have crossed.'

'He's a very influential figure. Besides, he plays golf with our advertising director.'

That really seemed to sum it all up. 'I take it you want to stop the column?'

'Well, I'm afraid that's about the size of it. Apart from our other problem I'm afraid that you've been undercut.'

'Undercut?'

'Another doctor has offered to write a column for us for less money than we're paying you.'

'Would that be the young Dr Brownlow?'

'Well, I don't suppose there's any harm in telling you. After all you'll see his column in the paper. Yes. It's Dr Brownlow.'

'Can I ask you what you're paying him?' I asked, out of idle curiosity.

There was a momentary pause. 'He's writing the column for nothing,' said Mr Lister. 'I think he rather sees it as a public service.'

'I don't think there's any danger that anyone else will undercut him,' I said drily. 'I hope your publisher doesn't get any phone calls from people prepared to edit the paper for nothing.'

'I don't think there's any need for that sort of attitude,' said the editor, rather sharply. He put his receiver down and I found myself listening to the sound of a disconnected phone, wishing I'd put my receiver down first. I stood up.

'What on earth was that all about?' asked Patsy, standing up and moving over towards me.

'I've been sacked,' I told her, rather bluntly.

Patsy didn't say anything but just put her arms around me and gave me a big hug. In a way I was rather sad. I had enjoyed writing the column. And although I wasn't paid very well we needed every pound we could find to help pay for the renovations at Bilbury Grange. But in a way I was, I confess, rather pleased. I quite liked the idea that I had been sacked because I had made people think.

* * *

After that, the day went a little more according to plan for a while. Miss Johnson telephoned to let me know that the drug company representative had turned up with a bottle of pills and that the district nurse, Kay Wilson, had taken them round to Miss Phillips.

In between visiting and stitching up a farm labourer who had cut himself while trimming a hedge and visiting Mrs Pettigrew who had, as usual, waited until she had completely run out of her high blood pressure pills to telephone and ask for help, I wrote some referral letters for patients who needed to see specialists at the hospital, filled in a lengthy and almost incomprehensible questionnaire from an insurance company which wanted to know whether a patient of mine was likely to drop dead before they had made a decent profit out of him, and tried to keep up-to-date by reading the comprehensible bits of a couple of medical journals.

Meanwhile, Patsy started work clearing the vegetable garden, the roofers carried on tearing slates off our roof and Thumper and young Ernie carried on replacing bits and pieces of rotten wood. Living at Bilbury Grange was a bit like living on a building site but I was getting used to having a great crowd of builders around. I had an awful feeling that when they had all gone I might even miss them.

Thanks to Miss Johnson, who agreed to babysit the telephone for us and to ring me immediately at the restaurant if there were any calls, Patsy and I did manage to go out for our celebratory meal.

We shared a plateful of wild mushrooms with a tomato salad and a mountain of garlic bread and drank half a carafe of white wine between us. We couldn’t stay out late because we had to get back to give the lambs their ten o’clock feed (I already knew how trying it can be to be a general practitioner having to be available to patients for a full 24 hours in every day, but I was now beginning to discover just how tiring and trying a farmer’s life can be) and so we were back at Bilbury Grange at approximately a quarter to ten.

At half past ten, just after Miss Johnson had gone back home and we had given the lambs their feed, the telephone rang. Patsy answered it but handed it over to me straight away. She looked pale and anxious and her hand shook slightly as she handed me the receiver. ‘It’s Anne,’ she said. ‘The police have arrested Thumper.’

I felt cold inside as I lifted the receiver to my ear. My mother always used to say that bad things happen in threes.

By the time Patsy and I had driven round to the cottage where Thumper and Anne live, and I’d taken Anne to Barnstaple, Thumper had been released. As Anne and I walked towards the police station we saw him leaving and heading in our direction.

‘I was just going to find a telephone box to call you!’ he said. He kissed Anne and smiled at us both, but underneath the smile he looked grey and worried. In a strange way he looked younger than I’d ever seen him look before. And for the first time he looked vulnerable.

‘What happened?’ I asked him.

‘I drove over to the river on the way home from your place,’ answered Thumper. ‘I thought I’d pick up a couple of trout for tea.’

I frowned. ‘But what’s wrong with that?’

‘I don’t have a fishing licence,’ explained Thumper. ‘And I wasn’t using a rod.’ I remembered that when Thumper talked about ‘picking up a couple of trout’ that was exactly what he meant. Thumper was the only person I had ever met who could walk up to a river bank with nothing more than his bare hands, find a trout, use his fingers to hypnotise it and then pull it out of the water with hardly a splash.

‘And they arrested you?’

‘The Bilbury bailiff saw me tickling a trout,’ said Thumper.

‘He came up behind me and jabbed his stick in the back of my neck. I didn’t know who it was or what the hell was going on so I rolled to one side and brought him down. He fell into the river.’

‘So what did they charge you with?’ asked Anne.

‘Where’s the baby?’ asked Thumper suddenly.

‘Patsy is looking after him for us,’ answered Anne. ‘What did they charge you with?’ she persisted.

‘I don’t know,’ said Thumper. ‘Poaching and assault I think.’ He shivered. ‘I really hate those places,’ he said, looking behind him at the police station. ‘They put me in a cell!’

‘But did you explain to them what happened?’ asked Anne.

‘Of course I did!’ said Thumper. He shrugged. ‘But the bailiff said I’d attacked him and deliberately thrown him into the river.’

‘I still don’t understand,’ I said. ‘If the bailiff fell into the river how did he catch you?’ I’d seen Thumper run and I knew that there was no way a sodden water bailiff could have caught him on the tracks that run alongside the river.

‘I fished him out of the water and then took him home,’ said Thumper, rather shamefacedly. ‘He was wet and looked really miserable.’

‘And he still had you arrested?’

‘He must have telephoned the police before he changed into dry clothes,’ said Thumper. ‘The police had two cars waiting for me at the top of our lane.’

‘Let’s get you home,’ I said. ‘Do you want to drive yourself and I’ll follow. Or do you want to come with me and leave your truck here?’

‘They’ve confiscated the truck,’ said Thumper. ‘Together with everything that was in it.’

‘What for?’ I asked him. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

‘If you’re caught poaching they can confiscate all your equipment,’ Thumper explained. ‘I didn’t have any guns or rods or anything so they took the truck. They said that was equipment.’ He stopped for a moment. ‘Look!’ he pointed to the car park just behind the police station. ‘There it is!’ His truck was parked in between two police patrol cars in the police car park.

‘When do you get it back?’ asked Anne.

Thumper shrugged. ‘If I’m found guilty I don’t get it back at all.’ He swallowed hard. ‘But that’s not the worst of it he put his arm around Anne. ‘They said that if I’m found guilty I could go to prison!’

* * *

CHAPTER SEVEN

Thumper's arrest cast a huge black cloud over everything.

He borrowed an old Ford van from a friend who ran a small haulage business in Ilfracombe and carried on working at Bilbury Grange as though nothing had happened. And he tried to act as though he wasn't worried. But I knew that he was.

It wasn't the possible loss of his truck that worried him (though he was extraordinarily fond of it) and even though he didn't have much money I don't think it was the prospect of being fined that disturbed him.

It was, I knew, the fear of being sent to prison that had put the grey into his cheeks and the hollow look into his eyes.

Some people worry about going to prison because they are frightened of the shame or the damage it might do to their standing in the community, or because they are frightened of the people they would come into contact with. Thumper wasn't frightened by any of these things. He wasn't worried about his standing in the community because he didn't have one; at least, not one that would be affected by a spell in prison. He knew that the people he cared about wouldn't give a fig for the fact that he had a prison record. He certainly wasn't worried about whether or not he would be able to look after himself physically in prison. And shame was not a concept to which he gave any credence. And even though I know that he loved them both dearly, I don't think he was even particularly worried about Anne or his baby. He knew that Anne could look after herself, and he knew that his friends in the village would see that she did not want for anything.

Thumper was frightened of prison for the very simplest of reasons: he was frightened because it would mean a loss of freedom. I had never before met anyone who was so completely at ease with nature as Thumper was. He was more at peace on the moors or along the river banks or in the woods than anyone I knew or had ever known. He could look at a patch of woodland and tell you which animals had passed through, which direction they had gone in, how long it was since they'd been there and what they had been planning to do. He could look at the river and tell you where the fish would be hiding and he could look at the sky and tell you, with far more accuracy than any professional forecaster, what the weather was going to be like for the next few hours.

It was the prospect of losing his freedom and the idea of being locked away from nature that had taken the steel from Thumper's soul. And I knew without him telling me that it was the waiting for his case to come to court, the uncertainty, that gave his fears strength and added vigour to his nightmares.

Some people need to talk about their fears and their anxieties in order to lessen the damage they do. Thumper didn't want to talk. But he didn't need to. All of us who knew him knew how he felt and what agonies he was enduring. There are probably some people who would say that by going poaching Thumper was breaking the law and was, therefore, exposing himself to whatever penalties the law might see fit to offer. But, for the first time in my life, I was beginning to have my doubts about the law and, in particular, doubts about the relationship between the law and its parent, justice. The problem was that I had always thought of prison as a place for bad people. And I knew that Thumper was not a bad person.

* * *

Meanwhile, life went on and occasionally there were bits and pieces of good news.

Our eleven bottles of wine were sold in London for slightly more than the wine expert had forecast, and far more than any sensible person would have paid. Patsy and I now had enough money to pay for our new roof and to replace the worst of our rotten window and door frames. Our four lambs had all survived the most difficult and most dangerous early days and had acquired quite definite personalities of their own. Sarah-Louise was coy and shy and loving; Lizzie was aggressive and playful and a born leader - it was she who would always start the others playing games; Petula was thoughtful, sensitive and very occasionally depressed and would look at us with huge brown eyes that were full of trust; Cynthia was full of mischief and seemed to get great pleasure from being difficult with us and with her half sisters. We loved them all.

There were, inevitably, many minor but annoying frustrations and disappointments too.

The work on our roof had come to a temporary standstill and for three whole days we didn't see the roofers at all. Then, while out visiting patients, I saw their lorry outside a hotel on the road to Combe Martin and found that they had started another job. They promised that would be back with us within a couple of days and they seemed to mean it and I believed them and was afterwards quite charmed by my own naivety. We discovered that the shop which had promised to deliver a cooker, but which had ended up by delivering nothing more substantial than a record number of excuses, was by no means unusual. A firm of electricians made three appointments to come and give us a quote for putting in some extra sockets but didn't keep any of them. The manager of a shop from which we had tried to buy a bed rang and said that there would be a five month wait and then seemed quite hurt when Patsy told him that we would like to cancel our order.

* * *

When Patsy and I had first bought Bilbury Grange we had hoped to increase our income by letting out rooms to holiday-makers during the summer months. Most of the people who live in Devon are, directly or indirectly, dependent on the tourist trade for a living and we did not think we would have too much difficulty in finding tourists ready to come and stay with us.

Frank and Gilly Parsons at the Duck and Puddle told us that they often had more guests than they could cope with and said that they would be very happy to send us their overflow.

In my experience, very few things in life ever work quite as well as expected, and if there is one thing that fate doesn't like it is something that is well planned. The more precise the plans you make the greater the chances that something will go very badly wrong. Our plans to let off rooms in Bilbury Grange were, therefore, doomed from the start.

Our main problem was a very simple one. We had a limited amount of money available and so, inevitably, we had to repair the essential fabric of the building - the roof, the walls and the windows - before we could start spending money on decorating inside the house and buying luxury furniture such as beds, tables and chairs. We had known all this when we had bought Bilbury Grange, but it had quickly become apparent that we had not been quite pessimistic enough in our expectations. The cost of the new roof we had needed had, of course, been covered by the profit we had made from the wine but there had been no such windfall to cover the cost of repointing essential brickwork and replacing woodworm infested beams and floorboards. The cost of all these repairs had been enhanced by the fact that nothing in the house was of a standard size. Every piece of wood seemed to need to be specially cut by hand. After a month of hectic building work had resulted in making the Grange less rather than more inhabitable we had decided that in order to try to boost our income we would convert the rooms above the coach-house into a self-contained holiday flat. We knew that it would be at least another year before the main house would be in a fit condition to accommodate visitors, but we thought that a small holiday flat would enable us to improve our cash flow dramatically.

The rooms we chose had been unoccupied for a long time (the drawers in an old dressing table which we found in the bedroom were lined with a newspaper dated 1924), but although dirty and dusty they were light and airy and the rooms were undeniably spacious. Two of the main rooms, the kitchen and the living room, overlooked the courtyard while a third, the bedroom, had a lovely view into the walled garden. The flat was approached by a sturdy, iron spiral staircase, though it was possible to move large items into and out of the flat through a door sized hatch on the first floor which was still equipped with a working hoist. Surprisingly, the woodworm had left the coach-house more or less alone and there was no major repair work to do. All we needed to do was to clear out the straw, old cardboard boxes and other miscellaneous bits and pieces of discarded rubbish, give the rooms a lick of paint and then fill them with furniture.

So that Thumper could continue to work on the main house, Patsy decided to do all the necessary decorating herself. Once she had started work she refused to let me go into the flat at all.

'I want it to be a surprise!' she insisted. And so I grew accustomed to finding Patsy, dressed in jeans and an old T-shirt and with her hair pulled tightly back away from her face in a ponytail, covered in dust and cobwebs, and exhausted from washing, cleaning, polishing and, eventually, painting. The jobs seemed endless, and for a while I worried that she had taken on too much.

* * *

Within thirty six hours of re-starting her pills Miss Phillips made a fairly spectacular recovery. But she still wanted to try to stop the tablets.

Once again I rang the Medical Director of the drug company which made the pills, and once again he insisted that since the drug was not addictive and did not produce any noticeable withdrawal side effects there was absolutely no need for patients to come off the tablets slowly or, indeed, with any special care at all. With scepticism born of experience, Miss Phillips and I decided to begin a month long reduction programme with her taking slightly smaller doses on successive days in an attempt to get her body accustomed to life without the tablets.

One evening, two days after the reduction programme had begun, Miss Phillips and Miss Tweedsmuir arrived on our doorstep entirely unexpectedly. I was busy cutting down brambles and nettles in a corner of the vegetable garden that had still not been reclaimed and so Patsy answered the door. She left the two spinsters in the reception hallway (where we still didn't have any carpets or furniture) and then ran through the house, through the courtyard and into the vegetable garden to fetch me. My heart fell when Patsy told me who had arrived, for my only thought was that something else had gone wrong. Wearily, and with a heavy heart, I followed Patsy back into the house. I was wearing a pair of tattered and stained jeans and an old and rather threadbare shirt that most tramps would have turned up their noses at. I had been wearing thick leather gardening gloves (our only really clothing extravagance had been to buy each other really good quality gardening gloves, and when I looked at how badly torn and tattered they had already become I thought they were worth every penny) but my hands were still filthy. I had bits and pieces of bramble sticking in my hair and I knew that I must have smelt of bonfire.

'Oh, I'm sorry!' said Miss Tweedsmuir when I walked into the hall and apologised for my appearance. 'You're gardening, aren't you?'

‘Taking advantage of the light nights,’ I explained. ‘We’ve got a lot to do.’ I frowned. ‘Is there something wrong?’ I asked. ‘Has something happened?’

‘No. There’s nothing wrong. Can we look?’ asked Miss Phillips, clearly genuinely interested.

‘At the garden?’

She nodded.

‘It’s still a terrible mess. I’m afraid there really isn’t anything to see yet.’ said Patsy. ‘It’s been overgrown for years.’

‘Please!’ begged Miss Tweedsmuir. ‘We both love gardening.’ She bent down to pat Ben who had followed us back into the house. Ben closed her eyes, rolled over onto her back and let Miss Tweedsmuir tickle her tummy. If she had been a cat she would have purred.

‘She’s really a guard dog,’ I said. ‘But she’s in plain clothes.’

We led the ladies through the house and the courtyard, which they loved, and into the walled vegetable garden. Miss Tweedsmuir actually clapped her hands together in girlish delight when she saw it

‘Oh, how wonderful!’ she said. ‘How absolutely wonderful.’ She turned to Miss Phillips. ‘Isn’t it going to be beautiful?’ Miss Phillips looked just as excited and nodded. ‘What a lovely greenhouse!’ she said, pointing to the old Victorian greenhouse in a far corner of the garden. It badly needed painting and had several panes of glass missing.

‘I’m afraid there isn’t much else to see yet,’ I said. ‘We haven’t bought any plants or seeds.’

‘Would you like to see our lake?’ asked Patsy. ‘It’s actually very small for a lake. But that’s what it’s called on the house deeds.’

We took them along the path we had partly cleared which led down to the still weed-clogged lake. We showed them where we had found a small stone bridge over the stream which fed the lake and where we had begun to explore the other side of the lake and we told them that we thought we’d found the front of an old summerhouse hidden under the brambles and nettles and we pointed out the statue of the little girl that was just poking up above the bulrushes on the tiny island in the middle of the lake and we talked about what we wanted to do and how we wanted to restore the garden and how we wanted to grow all our own vegetables and maybe make a little money to help pay for the restoration and replanting by selling vegetables to some of the local hotels.

We were walking back up towards the house, through a small copse of beech trees, when Miss Phillips suddenly stopped and dropped to her knees. ‘Oh my heavens!’ she said.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Miss Tweedsmuir.

‘Look at this!’

Miss Tweedsmuir bent down beside her friend to examine a small red flower. ‘It’s a red helleborine!’ she said, in awe.

‘That’s what I thought!’ said Miss Phillips. ‘Cephalanthera rubra.’

‘What’s a red helleborine?’ asked Patsy.’

‘It’s an orchid and it’s very, very, very rare!’ whispered Miss Phillips. ‘I didn’t think there were any in the South West.’

‘There were only thought to be two red helleborine plants in the whole of England,’ said Miss Tweedsmuir.

‘There are lots of them over here,’ I said, unimpressed by this discovery. ‘Look!’ I pointed to a small, shady area where there were dozens of bright red flowers.

‘Oh, good heavens!’ said Miss Phillips. And she fainted.

* * *

‘Would you like to take a few of the orchids back for your garden?’ I asked her when she had recovered.

Miss Phillips was obviously very touched by this offer. ‘That is so very kind of you,’ she said. ‘But the red helleborine will only grow in beech woods and it adores deep shade. We haven’t got anywhere that would be right for it.’

‘Well, any time you want to come and look at ours you’ll be very welcome!’ said Patsy. ‘Should we tell anyone what we’ve found?’ she asked. ‘What about the conservation groups? Do you think we should tell them?’

‘Oh, I don’t think so,’ whispered Miss Tweedsmuir. ‘If you do you’ll have all sorts of people traipsing over your garden looking at them and they’ll do far more damage than good. The only reason for telling people about a plant is if its habitat is threatened in some way. And your red helleborine are perfectly safe.’

‘Aren’t they sweet?’ whispered Patsy, as we walked back up the path to the house behind Miss Phillips and Miss Tweedsmuir. They had both been so excited by the discovery of a rare orchid in our wood that they had seemed reluctant to tear themselves away. They were now walking up the path arm in arm and they too were whispering about something.

When we got back into the courtyard Patsy asked them if they wanted a drink of anything but they said they didn’t want to drag us away from the garden any longer.

‘Would you let us give you some plants?’ asked Miss Tweedsmuir. ‘We’ve got quite a collection and we could easily take some cuttings for you.'

'That would be wonderful!' said Patsy.

'We'll start some cuttings as soon as we get back,' promised Miss Phillips. 'It'll be a joy to help you restore your garden.'

'When would it be convenient for you to come and choose your kitten?' asked Miss Tweedsmuir, quite unexpectedly, as they left. 'Tomorrow?'

Patsy looked at me, slightly puzzled. I was puzzled too. I'd forgotten that they had offered me a kitten.

'He's forgotten!' said Miss Phillips, smiling at her friend.

'We asked if you'd like a kitten!' Miss Tweedsmuir reminded me.

'Of course!' I said. I felt embarrassed. 'It was very kind of you.'

'We'd love to come round tomorrow,' said Patsy, who was clearly excited at the idea of offering a home to a kitten. 'What time would be convenient?'

'Any time you like,' said Miss Phillips, reaching out and touching her on the arm. 'We'll be in all day.' She turned to me. 'What a beautiful wife you have, doctor!'

* * *

When, at the end of the next morning's surgery, Miss Johnson told me that there was a policeman waiting to see me my first thought was that it was something to do with Thumper. But it wasn't.

'Sorry to bother you, doctor,' said a policeman I'd never seen before. He was surprisingly short, rather stout and looked very young. He had his helmet tucked underneath his arm.

We used to have a village policeman, a transvestite married to the district nurse, but he committed suicide after an accident in which he had knocked a local boy off his bicycle, and we now relied upon policemen from Ilfracombe and Barnstaple. It was a pity that we no longer had our village bobby. 'I'm looking for a Mr Keith Burrows.'

I knew who he meant straight away.

Keith Burrows is about sixty-years-old and lives in a ruined cottage on the road out towards Lynton. In the summer and early autumn he makes a living collecting elderberries and blackberries from the hedgerows and selling them to local greengrocers. In the winter he makes an even smaller living running errands for villagers who want bits and pieces fetching from the shops in Barnstaple. He rides a bicycle and tows a tiny cart behind it and can frequently be seen riding along the local lanes.

'What's he done?' I asked.

'I'm afraid he's wanted for non-payment of fines,' said the police constable.

'What were the fines for?'

'I'm not sure I can tell you that, sir.' said the policeman rather officiously.

'I won't tell you anything if you don't tell me what the fines were for,' I told him firmly.

'He's been fined twice for riding a bicycle without a light,' said the policeman.

'And you've come out hunting him for that?'

'The court takes a dim view of people not paying their fines,' said the policeman very officiously. 'If you are cognisant of his whereabouts I must tell you that you're legally obliged to pass on the information.'

It may not have been a wise thing to do but I couldn't help it. I laughed at him. 'Are you telling me that if I don't tell you then you'll arrest me? For aiding and abetting a bicycle rider without lights?'

The policeman began to look just a trifle uncomfortable.

'How much does he owe the court?' I asked.

'I beg your pardon?'

'What were the fines?'

'They come to two pounds in all.'

I reached into my trouser pocket, found the appropriate coins and put them down on the desk between us. 'There you are. Case closed.'

The policeman looked at the coins and then looked at me.

'I'm not sure I can accept this,' he said. 'It has to be paid into the court.'

'Take it.' I told him.

And to my surprise and my relief he slid the coins off the desk and put them into his pocket. Then he insisted on writing out a receipt. 'This is very irregular, sir.' he said, with a weary shake of his head. 'Very irregular indeed.'

* * *

Miss Tweedsmuir answered Patsy's knock on their cottage door. 'You've come about the kittens, haven't you?'

We confirmed that this was, indeed, why we were there.

'Come on upstairs,' said Miss Tweedsmuir with a twinkle in her eyes. 'You'll love them. They look absolutely adorable.' She called to Miss Phillips who appeared from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a pale green hand towel, and the four of us, in single file, then climbed up the narrow staircase to the bedroom at the front of the cottage. A large double bed, covered in a pale pink bedspread dominated the room. There was just about enough room left for a pine wardrobe, a pine dressing table and a pine bookcase that was packed with neat rows of paperback books. There were two nightdresses, one white and one in a floral pattern, neatly folded on the two pillows. Laid out neatly on the bottom half of the bed there was a large, fluffy white towel and on top of the towel there was an old-fashioned wicker cat basket: Inside the basket lay, asleep, a large mixed tabby cat and the two most beautiful little kittens I had ever seen.

'How old is the mother?' Patsy asked.

'She's seven,' replied Miss Phillips. 'She's lived with me since she was a tiny, tiny kitten but I don't think she's ever been happier in her whole life. I got her from a friend who lived in the Bayswater Road. In London I never dared let her out of the flat so she'd never been outside until we came here.'

'She loves the garden here,' said Miss Tweedsmuir.

'Oh, she does!' agreed Miss Phillips. 'I wish you could have seen her when we first came to Bilbury. She was so excited!' She smiled at us and the memory of it all made her so happy that tears appeared in her eyes.

'What's her name?' I asked. I knew she'd told me but I'd forgotten.

'Ophelia!' replied Miss Phillips. 'Don't ask me why I called her that because I really don't know any more.' She pulled a handkerchief out of her sleeve and blew her nose almost silently.

'It's a lovely name,' said Patsy.

'She looks like an Ophelia,' I agreed.

'Oh, do you think so?' said Miss Phillips. 'That is nice. So do I.'

One of the kittens, a mixed tabby with a white ruff around her neck, a white splash down her chest and white paws, noticed us, miaowed loudly and stood up. She shook slightly and then hesitated before backing away and cuddling up against her mother.

'That one's a bit nervous,' explained Miss Tweedsmuir quietly.

Patsy very slowly reached out and stroked the kitten's head with two fingers of one hand. The kitten, at first suspicious, tilted its head to one side. Then, very quietly, it started purring.

'Have you given them names yet?' I asked.

'No,' replied Miss Phillips. 'We thought that the people who take them would want to give them names so we just call them Kitty One and Kitty Two. She nodded towards the mixed tabby, 'That one is Kitty One.'

'They're both girls,' said Miss Tweedsmuir.

'Don't you want to keep them both?' asked Patsy.

'Don't tempt me!' said Miss Tweedsmuir with a tinkly, nervous little laugh. 'I'd love to keep them both but we've already got two cats and two is enough.'

The other kitten, a mackerel tabby and just as adorable, had a head that seemed far too large for its body. It woke up suddenly, pricked up its ears and clambered to its feet. Like its sister it stood unsteadily for a moment or two but, unlike its sister, then moved forwards towards us instead of backwards towards its mother.

'She's ever so curious!' said Miss Tweedsmuir. 'A real bundle of mischief.'

I tentatively held out my hand and the mackerel tabby kitten moved its head forwards and sniffed at my finger tips. Then it miaowed very loudly, jumped out of the basket and walked unsteadily across the towel towards me. When it reached the edge of the towel it stood still for a moment and then jumped onto my lap, catching its tiny claws on my long suffering flannel trousers.

'What do you think?' asked Miss Tweedsmuir. 'Which one would you like?'

'Oh this one!' said Patsy, pointing to the mixed tabby.

'This one!' I said, holding the mackerel tabby.

'That one!' said Patsy and I simultaneously pointing to the other's choice.

'Would you like a cup of tea?' asked Miss Tweedsmuir, suddenly and quite unexpectedly.

Patsy looked at me. 'Well, I'm afraid I mustn't stay too long,' I said. 'Just in case Miss Johnson is trying to get hold of me. But a cup of tea would be very nice.'

'I'll go and put the kettle on,' said Miss Tweedsmuir. 'Edith will you come and put some of your home-made biscuits out onto a plate?' Miss Phillips obediently followed Miss Tweedsmuir out of the bedroom and down the stairs.

'Aren't they gorgeous?' said Patsy, playing with the mixed tabby kitten.

'Miss Tweedsmuir and Miss Phillips?'

'The kittens, silly!' giggled Patsy. Reluctantly, she turned away from the kitten she was playing with. 'We'll take the one you chose.'

'No. Let's take the mixed tabby.' I said. 'I'm sure Miss Tweedsmuir and Miss Phillips will make sure that they both go to good homes.' The mixed tabby kitten, the one with the white paws, had huge eyes and it looked around at the world in wonderment.

The mackerel tabby kitten suddenly leapt off my lap and landed on my jumper. It then recklessly climbed upwards, miaowing loudly. Ophelia lazily opened an eye, saw that all was well, and then closed it again. Not to be outdone the mixed tabby kitten stood on the edge of the bed and looked across at her sister. She clearly wanted to jump too but she didn't quite have the courage. Patsy picked her up and put her down on my lap and she climbed rather slowly upwards.

'Tea's ready!' called a voice from downstairs.

'What shall we do with the kittens?' Patsy called back.

'Just leave them in their basket. They'll be fine.'

Reluctantly, we went downstairs.

'We've been thinking about it said Miss Tweedsmuir. 'And if you'd like to have both the kittens we'd like you to take them both.'

And so, half an hour later, we drove away with two beautiful kittens purring on Patsy's lap.

'What shall we call them?' asked Patsy.

'I think the mixed tabby should be Emily,' I said.

'And can we call this one Sophie?' asked Patsy.

As we drove home along the narrow Bilbury lanes the sun was slowly setting at the end of a beautiful, warm summer's day. The hedgerows were thick and lush in a thousand different shades of green. Sprinkled among the grasses and the brambles and the dock leaves were buttercups and foxgloves. There were thick clumps of grass growing in the centre of the lane and there was barely room to drive the car in between the hedgerows. Suddenly, a huge adult buzzard with his wings tucked tightly into his body dropped out of the sky in front of us heading straight for the tarmacadam. He pulled up with no more than a yard to spare, levelled out and then flew so that he was heading straight for our car. I braked to avoid crashing into him but I was wasting my time for he knew exactly what he was doing. No more than a dozen feet in front of us he swerved sharply to his right and disappeared into the undergrowth at the base of the hedge. Moments later, as the Morris Minor shuddered to an ungainly halt, he fell back out of the grass and onto the road clutching a rabbit in his beak. Taking just a moment to regain his composure he transferred the rabbit from his beak to his talons and then took off in a single, smooth, accomplished movement and soared effortlessly up and over the twelve foot high hedge at the side of the lane. The whole incident lasted no more than a few seconds and neither Patsy nor I had time to speak. Nature in the raw can sometimes be breathtaking.

* * *

CHAPTER EIGHT

It was early in the morning and I could already hear a thrush hammering a snail on a stone in order to break open its shell.

The day was still cool but the sun was already bright and it promised to be another untypically hot summer's day; the sort of day that makes living in the English countryside such a real treat, and the sort of day that all country dwellers survive on during the long, hard, cold, wet winter months that seem to drag on for ever.

Awakened by shafts of sunlight lighting up our bedroom, I had crept out of bed early, leaving Patsy to sleep for a few more minutes. A few yards away from me Emily and Sophie, our two new kittens, who had followed me out from the house, were playing hide and seek in and out of the greenhouse while Ben, lying sprawled out on one of the gravel paths, was watching them with a motherly eye. I had been worried about how Ben would take to the kittens but I need not have been. She loved them from the moment she saw them.

I had already watered the lettuce and left the wooden tops of the cold frames wedged open a few inches to allow a little air in, and although I was dressed ready for the morning surgery I couldn't resist pottering around in the vegetable garden, pulling out weeds that were about to start spreading their seeds and trying to decide exactly which part of the garden we should try to rescue next. I looked around, and although there was still a lot to do and a long way to go I was proud of what we had managed to achieve.

I stood for a few moments watching the butterflies: admirals and peacocks, blues and tortoiseshells as well as cabbage whites. I know a lot of gardeners dislike butterflies (or, rather, their plant eating predecessors) but both Patsy and I considered it a privilege to have them in our garden, and we were happy to accept as just payment the damage we knew they would do to our crops.

Although we still hadn't had the time or the money to repair the greenhouse, which had numerous broken panes of glass and a lot of rotten woodwork, and which was almost completely filled with an overgrown and totally out of control old grape vine, we had, after seemingly endless hours of work clearing away brambles and nettles and docks and couch grass and a thousand other species of weed, at last managed to clear a small area of ground in the walled vegetable garden so that we could start planting our first vegetable crop.

The walled garden had been built in Victorian times and it had clearly been designed by someone who had thought first and foremost of quality, convenience and style. Cost had clearly not been regarded as an influence of any significance. Although they were covered with a mixture of ivy, cultivated raspberries, yellow and green lichen and a wonderful pink climbing rose, the grey stone walls still seemed solid and sound. At its base, the wall around the vegetable garden was over two feet thick and at the top, to provide protection against the elements, the wall was covered by two double rows of grey slates topped with faded red coping stones.

The walled garden extended to about half an acre and included, in addition to the greenhouse which was attached to part of the garden's south facing wall, three large, wooden cold frames, a stone potting shed, a wheelbarrow and tool shed and, although the orchard (now consisting of elderly, unpruned trees which were almost entirely overgrown with the ubiquitous brambles and nettles) was outside the vegetable garden, a room that Patsy said was almost certainly an apple store.

Every building in the garden was equipped with cast iron guttering and downpipes which fed into water butts, and just in case that supply ever ran out there was a tap just outside the greenhouse which did not seem to be connected to the private water supply which fed the house, but which seemed to have a supply from some other source which we still had not identified. There was a stone seat built into an alcove in a shady corner of the wall, a small pond overgrown with lilies but teeming with tadpoles and a sundial on a small brick plinth. Everything in the garden had been so well built that it had survived years of neglect.

We did not have the time to plant the garden properly but we desperately wanted to grow something, and so while Patsy had resurrected an old cultivated strawberry bed, ruthlessly throwing out the old plants and rescuing only the younger, healthier looking plants I had sown three whole packets of lettuce seeds in the cold frames which still had unbroken glass. We thought it might be rather nice to at least be self-sufficient in strawberries and lettuce for our first summer.

Suddenly, there was a splash and a loud miaow from somewhere behind me. I turned and saw Emily, the mixed tabby kitten, floundering in the lily pond. Sophie, our other kitten, was standing on the edge of the pond where Emily had fallen in and was miaowing loudly and plaintively for help. I dropped the pair of secateurs I had been using to prune a climbing rose which was so heavy that it was threatening to pull itself away from the wall and raced to the rescue. Even so Ben got there before me. She leapt into the water without hesitating and gently took hold of Emily's neck so that she could hold her above the surface of the water. I knelt down at the edge of the pond, reached out and took Emily from her.

While Sophie continued to miaow and Ben clambered out of the pond, stood next to me and shook herself dry, I tried to dry Emily on my handkerchief. But even when I had done this she was shivering and she still looked very bedraggled, miserable and sorry for herself. So, I unbuttoned my shirt and slipped her down next to my skin where it was warm and dry. She soon started to purr.

As I walked back to the house, with Ben ambling along beside me and Sophie scurrying to keep up with me, I could hear the sharp 'knock knock' of a woodpecker in a nearby tree and I thought for the thousandth time how lucky I was to live in Bilbury. Many of my student colleagues would, I knew, still be working in hospitals struggling to acquire more and more academic qualifications, ingratiating themselves with elderly, cynical and exploitative consultants, growing to hate every moment of every day, wondering if this was all there was to life and constantly promising themselves something better sometime in the future. There was not a morning when I did not wake up wondering how and why I had been so fortunate to find myself living in such a wonderful, quiet village, in such a beautiful house and surrounded with good friends, a growing menagerie of animals and so much hope for the future. Every morning I would see and hear an endless variety of birds and wild animals. Best of all, of course, there was Patsy, and as I walked into the courtyard I could see her laying out breakfast on an old wooden table outside the back door. She was wearing a thin, sleeveless white cotton summer dress and a pair of white sandals. We had found the table in the stable where the lambs had been kept when they were being bottle fed. (They had begun to supplement their bottled milk by nibbling on grass and were now spending their days in the small paddock closest to the house.)

Patsy and I kissed. 'What on earth have you got inside your shirt?'

'Emily. She fell into the pond. Ben rescued her.'

Patsy gently pulled at the front of my shirt and peeped inside. 'Oh, the poor thing!' Emily looked up and miaowed loudly.

'She's drying off,' I explained.

'How long have you been up?' asked Patsy, letting go of my shirt front.

I looked at my wrist and shrugged. I'd forgotten to put my watch on. 'About an hour.'

'Why didn't you wake me?' Patsy poured me my first cup of coffee of the day. It smelt good. I could smell bread toasting in the kitchen. Why do all drinks and foods smell so much better out of doors?

I smiled. 'You looked too peaceful to wake.'

I frowned, remembering that I had to be at Dr Brownlow's to start the morning surgery. 'Do you know what time it is now?'

'It's well after eight. But you've got time for breakfast. I'll get the toast.' She went indoors.

I sat down, with Emily in my shirt, and Ben at my feet and sipped at my coffee. Using her claws as crampons Sophie climbed up my trouser leg and settled down on my lap. Somewhere in the distance I could hear the roofers arrive and start work. It was going to be another glorious day.

* * *

If I hadn't started the day realising just how lucky I was I would have quickly been reminded of my good fortune shortly after I had arrived at the surgery to start the day's work.

Mrs Blossom was the first patient I saw and I don't think I have ever seen anyone look less like her name. Although she looked as though she was still only in her middle thirties she already had that glum, dark, sour look around her mouth that so often mars even the prettiest of faces. I had only met her a couple of times before, and although I didn't really know anything at all about her as an individual I had unfairly labelled in her my mind as one of life's whingers, a dour pessimist forever looking for, and inevitably finding, the worst in everything. She looked sour and miserable, and I had unjustly assumed that this was her natural demeanour. Without much interest or enthusiasm I waited for her to tell me what she wanted from me.

(It is sadly true that the way doctors treat their patients is very often unfairly influenced by appearances. A patient who walks into the surgery with a smile on her face will gain a weary doctor's sympathy far more speedily than the patient who walks in gloomy and bad-tempered. It isn't fair and it isn't just, but it happens.)

Mrs Blossom slumped into the chair on the other side of my desk and stared glumly at me as though I had insulted her.

I smiled at her and asked how I could help her. The consulting room had no natural light and it was cool and gloomy. I struggled hard to acquire an interest in Mrs Blossom for a large part of me wanted to get through my patients as quickly as I could so that I could get back to the garden at Bilbury Grange.

'I want a tonic,' said Mrs Blossom.

She spoke in a dull monotone voice and it was neither a request nor a demand. She seemed angry and bitter and I didn't understand why.

'What symptoms do you have?' I asked, a little hastily perhaps.

Suddenly, and quite unexpectedly, Mrs Blossom stood up.

'You don't understand what it's like,' she snapped at me. 'It's all right for you, sitting behind your big desk. You don't know what real life is like. You don't have any problems. You're lucky. I wish you could have some of my worries for a day. That would take the damned smile off your face.' She turned and started to march towards the door.

I felt uncomfortable and did not understand what I had done to provoke this attack. But, perhaps justifiably, I nevertheless felt guilty and I knew that I had missed something. Somehow I felt that I had failed.

'Come back, sit down and tell me what's worrying you,' I said quickly. No one had ever prepared me for this.

Medical schools train doctors to deal with symptoms and illnesses not with the patients who have them.

Mrs Blossom looked over her shoulder at me and I realised that what I had mistaken for hatred and anger was in fact nothing more than sadness fuelled by despair. There were tears in her eyes.

'Please!' I begged. I stood up and with my left hand indicated the chair she had vacated. 'Please, sit down. Talk to me.'

Mrs Blossom hesitated for a moment and for a few seconds

I thought she was simply going to walk out of the consulting room. But she didn't. She turned round again, came back and slumped down into the chair I had indicated. I too sat down. I didn't speak because I didn't know what to say without offending her. She didn't speak, though this was probably because she was trying not to cry and knew that if she spoke she would not be able to hold back the tears. I waited and tried not to move, frightened lest any movement I might make be interpreted as a sign of impatience or boredom or not caring.

'I'm sorry,' she said at long, long last. She looked across at me and I wondered if the sourness of her mouth was simply a result of the fact that she had spent too little time smiling and too much time screwing up her face and trying not to cry.

'That's O.K.,' I said. 'Talk to me.'

But she didn't talk, she burst into tears. The dam opened and the tears flooded out of her and her body shook with great sobs and she looked at me with a deep sadness and overwhelming unhappiness that I had never seen before. I pushed a box of paper tissues across the desk towards her but it was like offering someone a paper handkerchief to stem the flow of the River Thames.

'I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.' she repeated, time and time again. It was as though it were a litany; an oft repeated prayer. She held a sodden, screwed up tissue so tightly in her fingers that her knuckles were white. And then she started to talk.

She told me that she had got married at seventeen not because she was in love but because she desperately wanted to leave home and knew of no other escape. She had three children in as many years and then her husband, a labourer, had gone out one night saying that he was going to the pub and had never come home again. For weeks she was frantic, convinced that he'd had an accident but then she had discovered that he had left her to live with a barmaid in Ilfracombe. To keep her children she had taken a job as a store assistant but after three years of that she had left suddenly. The manager had assaulted her one night when the store was in darkness and they were closing up. Unable to get a reference she had worked briefly as a maid in a hotel, a waitress in a seaside cafe and a counter assistant in a fish and chip cafe. But then her mother had died and her father had announced that he was coming to live with her. She had never liked nor got on with her father and had always found him rude and overbearing. Now that he was living with her and constantly critical she found his presence intolerable.

'I would rather be in prison,' she told me, and I could see that she meant it. 'When I was eight my mother used to make me do the housework and by the time I was fourteen I was doing the cooking and the shopping. I've spent my life looking after other people, not because I want to but because I have no choice. I don't like my kids and they treat me like dirt and I hate my father, but I spend my life looking after them. I've never done anything because I wanted to do it and never done a job I've enjoyed.' She stopped and looked straight at me. 'I don't feel like I'm a person any more,' she said. I listened to her and felt the tears forming in my eyes. I thought how different our lives had been, were now and promised to be in the future. 'Are your children still living at home?' I asked her, quietly. I had worked out that since the oldest had been born when she was seventeen or eighteen they must be nearly grown up by now.

She looked at me, puzzled. 'Of course,' she said. 'The oldest is only nine.'

I realised, with horror and some embarrassment that she was ten years younger than she looked. She was hardly any older than I was although I'd thought of her as belonging to a different generation.

'Of course,' I said, hurriedly. 'I wasn't thinking.'

'I look older than I am, don't I?'

'No!' I said, too quickly.

She smiled at me for the first time. She looked almost pretty when she smiled, though it wasn't a proper smile, the cracks were still there underneath it. 'I'm sorry,' she said. She stood up again. 'I shouldn't be telling you all this. There isn't anything you can do. You've got a room full of sick patients to look after.'

'Please, sit down!'

She looked at me, hesitated, and then sat down. 'I should go,' she said. 'Thank you for listening to me.'

Just then the telephone rang. It was Miss Johnson, the receptionist. 'Are you all right, doctor?' she asked. 'You've had that patient in with you for twenty five minutes now and the others are getting a bit restless.' She wasn't being critical but thought I might have been trapped by a loquacious patient and needed an excuse to end an interminable conversation.

'Tell them I'll be as quick as I can,' I told Miss Johnson, and put the phone down. 'Please sit down a minute,' I said to Mrs Blossom.

'You're in trouble, aren't you?'

‘The natives are getting restless,’ I smiled at her. ‘It’s O.K. It doesn’t matter. Anyone who is ill will wait.’ I instinctively knew that if she left now I would probably not be able to get her to talk again. But she needed help. And I wanted to help her.

She talked to me for another fifteen minutes, told me things she said she had never told anyone else before, told me that she had always wanted to be a painter and that she had been good at it at school but that she’d never had a chance to try again, told me that her father had abused her when she was a child, told me that she got through the days only by thinking of the different ways in which she could kill herself, told me that for her death was a friend, the only hope she had.

In the end I didn’t know what to do to help her. I told her I would arrange an appointment for her to see a psychiatrist and made her promise me that she would keep the appointment, although in my heart I didn’t know what any medical specialist could do to help her. I wanted to help but I felt desperately useless and I finished the rest of the surgery in a mood of deepening sadness and despair.

Deep down I knew that there would always be such patients, and I would always be unable to help them and I didn’t know how I would be able to cope with this aspect of general practice.

* * *

When I got back home Patsy had left a note to tell me that she had caught the bus into Barnstaple to try to find someone prepared to sell and deliver us a cooker and so I went round to the Duck and Puddle to get some lunch.

I was waiting for Gilly to cook the egg and chips I had ordered when Keith Burrows appeared as if from nowhere.

‘I’ve got a bone to pick with you, doctor!’ he said, rather aggressively. ‘Am I right in believing that you paid a fine for me the other day?’

‘That’s right!’ I agreed, slightly puzzled at Keith’s attitude. I hadn’t really expected him to be grateful but nor had I expected him to be so upset.

Keith shook his head as though exasperated by my stupidity. ‘What’s the matter?’ I asked him.

‘They were about to arrest me!’ complained Keith.

‘Exactly!’

‘If I’d been lucky I’d have been given two weeks in Exeter gaol,’ moaned Keith.

‘But... did you want to go to prison?’

‘Of course I did! I’ve got some good mates over there and the gaol is the coolest place I know of in the summer. All those thick stone walls.’ Keith sighed. ‘Besides,’ he said, ‘I can’t stand the roads in the summer. They’re always full of grockles in caravans and cars. It’s far too dangerous.’

I didn’t really know what to say. I don’t think I had ever come across anyone who actually wanted to be sent to prison.

‘I’m sorry!’ I said in the end.

‘I should think so,’ muttered Keith. ‘Next time you see a policeman with a warrant for my arrest just tell him where he can find me, will you?’

‘I will,’ I agreed. I apologised again. ‘Can I buy you a drink? To make up for it?’

‘I’ll have a malt whisky,’ said Keith without hesitation. ‘A Macallan preferably. Make it a double, please, Frank.’ he added. When the whisky came he raised his glass. ‘Here’s to a life of crime!’ he said, with a toothless grin.

* * *

The evening surgery seemed to go on for ever.

Although there were a few villagers calling in for prescriptions and advice, most of the patients were holiday-makers who were in the area for no more than a few days. Most of them had nothing more wrong with them than mild sunburn or insect bites. By the time I had finished I was exhausted, desperate to get back home, to have something to eat and to then spend an hour or so working in the garden. I had never before been a very keen gardener but since Patsy and I had moved into Bilbury Grange I had found it to be the most relaxing and soothing of hobbies. I found myself anxious to see if any of Patsy’s strawberries had started to redden or if any of my lettuce had started to grow.

When I got back to Bilbury Grange, keen for a quiet evening, I was dismayed and surprised to find the driveway blocked with cars I had never seen before. All of them were old, once expensive, covered in rust and clearly well past their best. My first thought was that they must all belong to campers who had taken the wrong turning and driven into our driveway by mistake. I had to park at the bottom of the drive and then walk up to the house through the wood.

‘What on earth is going on?’ I asked Patsy, who I found in the walled garden tending to yet another magnificent bonfire.

‘The cars?’

I nodded.

‘They belong to Thumper,’ explained Patsy. ‘He asked me if he could leave them here for the night.’

‘Did he say what he was up to?’ Patsy shook her head.

‘When is he going to move them?’

‘He said he’d have them all towed away tomorrow,’ said Patsy. ‘A friend of his from Ilfracombe is coming with a pick-up truck.’

‘Won’t they go under their own steam?’ I asked, horrified.

‘Well they were all mobile when they got here,’ said Patsy,

‘Because I saw Thumper driving them. But he says that they’ve all got water in their petrol tanks now.’

‘All of them?’

‘That’s what he said.’

‘But how? How have they come to get water in their tanks?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Patsy. ‘Do you want some tea? I bought a French loaf in Barnstaple. It smells lovely. I could make you tomato sandwiches.’

I forgot about Thumper’s cars and ate a pile of the best tomato sandwiches I’d ever tasted.

‘Did you find a cooker in Barnstaple?’ I asked Patsy, when I had finished.

She shook her head. ‘Well, I did and I didn’t,’ she confessed.

‘I found one but it’s only an old one and the man in the shop wants too much money for it. I looked again at the new ones but the prices are just horrendous.’

‘So what are we going to do?’I asked her. ‘It’s not so bad now but we’re going to need one for the winter.’

‘The man at the shop said we should go to an auction if we are prepared to take a chance,’ explained Patsy. ‘He said that at house auctions they sell all that sort of stuff at knockdown prices. He said they virtually give away the sort of things we need.’

‘That’s just as well,’ I said, gloomily. ‘We can’t afford to buy them.’

* * *

As soon as I heard Thumper arrive the following morning I rushed downstairs to catch him before he disappeared up a ladder. I was, I confess, extremely curious to find out why he had bought so many old and apparently useless motor cars. I also wanted to know how long he intended to leave them parked in our driveway.

‘Don’t worry about a thing!’ Thumper grinned. Although his case still had not come up in court Thumper had recovered much of his previous cheerful confidence.

‘What are you up to?’ I asked him. ‘How illegal is it?’

Thumper sauntered over looking rather sheepish. ‘That’s not a very nice thing to say!’ he said, pretending to be hurt.

I laughed. I could never be cross with Thumper for long. ‘How many are there?’

‘Seven.’

‘And how long are they going to be here?’ ‘A mate of mine is coming over from Ilfracombe about lunchtime,’ Thumper replied. ‘They’ll be gone by this afternoon.’

‘But if they don’t work why did you buy them?’

‘They were working when I bought them,’ said Thumper.

‘All of them?’

‘All of them.’

I must have looked very puzzled. Thumper laughed. ‘Did you hear about that garage just outside Bratton Fleming?’

I shook my head. ‘No.’

‘They had a petrol delivery yesterday morning but by mistake the tanker that did the delivering wasn’t full of petrol it was full of water. Every car driver who stopped there for petrol got a tank full of water.’ Thumper grinned at me. ‘Someone screwed up at the depot.’

I still didn’t understand.

‘The petrol company immediately announced that they’d pay for any damage done to customers’ cars and for any inconvenience caused,’ explained Thumper. ‘It was the least they could do to avoid bad publicity.’

I was beginning to understand. ‘So you bought a pile of old crocks and filled their petrol tanks with water?’

‘Exactly!’

‘And now you’re going to claim that all these cars were ruined when they were filled up at the petrol station?’

Thumper nodded. ‘My mate owns a tow truck. He’ll just tell them that he had to pick these up from where they’d broken down in the lanes.’

‘But won’t they get a bit suspicious when they discover that you took seven cars along to the same garage and had them all filled up with water?’

‘They would if my name was on all the claim forms,’ admitted Thumper.

I stared at him. ‘Whose names have you used?’ I asked him.

‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘I only put your name down on one of them.’

* * *

CHAPTER NINE

Two days later I arrived home for my lunch and found Patsy standing on the doorstep waiting for me and holding a copy of the local paper.

'There's one this afternoon!' she said, excitedly.

'One what?'

'A house auction. In Kentisbury. It's only a couple of miles away.'

'What time does it start?'

'Two o'clock.'

I looked at my watch. 'It's nearly half past one now,' I said. 'And I'm starving.'

'I've made you some sandwiches,' said Patsy. 'And I rang and checked with the auctioneer. There's a phone at the house and if Miss Johnson needs you they'll take a message.'

I started to say something because, in truth, I was nervous about going to my first auction and would have been happy to find an excuse to enable me not to go, but Patsy, who was already beginning to understand me well enough and was only too prepared for me to make excuses, was ready. 'I've spoken to Miss Johnson and given her the number. She says you only have one appointment this afternoon - for a life insurance medical - and she's sure she can move that to tomorrow.'

Realising that I had lost I picked up the basket full of sandwiches and the flask of coffee that Patsy had prepared, waved goodbye to the roofers who were now getting close to completing the re-slating and were cheerily working through their lunch hour, told Thumper and his assistant, who were both sunbathing on the front lawn, where we were going, opened the door for Patsy to get into the car, joined her and drove to the house auction in Kentisbury. I ate my sandwiches as I drove and drank a cup of coffee from the flask too.

Even Patsy nearly let me turn back when she saw the rows of cars that were parked on the verges around the house where the auction was being held. It looked as though everyone in Devon had turned up.

'There are a lot of dealers here,' whispered Patsy, as we climbed out of the Morris and followed the flow of potential buyers walking down the lane towards the house. I didn't bother locking the car doors because the hood was down.

'How do you know?' I asked her.

'Just look at all the vans and estate cars,' Patsy replied.

I looked around. A good half of the vehicles which had been parked were vans, trucks and estate cars. Many were equipped with huge and sturdy looking roof racks. 'Do you think it's still worth going?' she asked me, beginning to lose her nerve.

'With all those dealers bidding?'

'If we're bidding against dealers we will at least know whether or not we're getting a bargain!'

Patsy looked at me and frowned. 'What do you mean?'

'Well, when a dealer bids he knows he's got to make a profit when he resells. So if we just outbid him we're almost certainly getting whatever we buy at below the retail price.'

'But it means we're not likely to get any real bargains,' countered Patsy who had, I think, harboured hopes that we would be able to repeat our success with the bottles of wine. 'Not with all those dealers around!'

The house where the auction was being held was an old and rambling Victorian vicarage. The former owner, a farmer and local businessman who had made a considerable fortune out of cattle and sheep, had died in his nineties and had left his estate to his housekeeper.

A young man from the auctioneers sat behind a wooden trestle table just outside the front door to the house and sold us two neatly printed catalogues listing the items for sale.

Inside the house it was clear that the former owner had not spent too much of his money on doing any repair work. Even though it was a warm and sunny day the rooms were all filled with a musty, damp smell that seemed to cling to everyone who entered, and numerous damp patches on the walls showed where the roof was leaking. The paintwork was brown and the walls were covered in paper that had been past its best at least a decade earlier. The old farmer had, however, filled his house with well-built, antique furniture, and it was easy to see why the auction had attracted so many antique dealers. There were bookcases, display cabinets, desks, wardrobes, dressing tables and pieces of furniture which I didn't even recognise. He had clearly been a hoarder of Olympic standard too, and every single room in the house was packed with bric-a-brac: old magazines, sporting programmes, stuffed birds in glass cages and bits and pieces of classic motor cars. In one room I spotted a radiator from a 20/25 Rolls Royce. In another I saw a mascot from an old Bentley. In addition to being a hoarder, the old farmer had clearly also been something of a collector and every available surface was covered with clocks, porcelain cows and, rather surprisingly, old telephones. There were prints and watercolours hanging in vast numbers on every wall. There were also half a dozen shotguns on display. The auctioneers clearly regarded some of the items as valuable for they had stationed at least one representative in every room.

'Don't forget!' whispered Patsy, as we shuffled around among the crowds, 'Don't scratch your nose or sneeze during the bidding!' I felt her fingers reaching for mine and held her hand tightly.

I looked at her. 'Don't! I'm already terrified of moving. I'll be too nervous to breathe! What happens if we buy one of these expensive pieces of furniture by accident? Can they make you pay for it even if you don't want it?'

'If something is knocked down to you then you own it.' said an unshaven man in a pair of dirty jeans and a grubby T-shirt who was carefully examining a china cow that had a spout for a mouth and a hole in the middle of its back. He had a ponytail tied back with a small red ribbon. 'If you make the winning bid then it's a legally enforceable contract.' He turned and smiled. 'You're the new doctor from Bilbury, aren't you?'

I admitted that I was but I didn't recognise him. I didn't like to confess this, however. Not unreasonably, most patients are offended when their own doctor doesn't recognise them.

'You don't know me,' he said, with a grin. He had clearly read my discomfort accurately. 'My name is Fogg. You've treated my aunt. She thinks you're wonderful.' I felt myself blushing with embarrassment. He put the cow down carelessly. 'Fake.' he said.

'Fake? How do you know?' I was impressed.

'The maker's mark on the bottom is too neat.' He shrugged. 'And the piece doesn't feel right.'

'Is there enough money in those things to make faking worthwhile?'

The stranger looked at me and raised an eyebrow. 'Are you joking?'

I shook my head.

'If that had been real it would have been worth £700-£800.'

'What is it worth?'

'£20 to anyone who knows it's fake.'

'But if someone didn't realise it was a fake?'

'They'd probably pay £700 to £800 for it.'

I gulped and felt myself going cold.

'The old bloke who lived here thought it was real. He probably paid top price for it.'

'How do you know?'

'Because he's got real and fake stuff all mixed up. He didn't know which was real and which was made in Taiwan.' He looked at me. 'What are you looking for?'

'Cooker, fridge, washing machine - that sort of thing. We're furnishing a house.'

The stranger laughed. 'Really? Is that all?'

'Yes.'

'Have you looked in the kitchen?'

'No. We haven't even found the kitchen.'

He looked at his watch. 'Come on. I'll show you.'

'Don't you have things you have to look at if you're going to bid?'

'I've looked at the stuff I want to bid on. I've been here since ten this morning.'

We followed him along a dimly lit corridor and into a huge kitchen that looked as if it had last been decorated at the end of the nineteenth century. There were far fewer people in the kitchen than there had been in the reception rooms. I looked around but couldn't see any of the things we were looking for.

'The old man has his cooking done on the Aga,' said the stranger. He pointed to a huge cream coloured monster.

'They're wonderful,' said Patsy. 'My mother uses one.' She looked at me. 'I'm surprised there isn't one at Bilbury Grange.'

'Maybe someone had it taken out.' I suggested.

The stranger laughed. 'Unlikely,' he said. 'It's easier to move the house than to move one of those things.'

'So, no cooker,' I said sadly. I looked around. There was an old-fashioned washboard standing in a corner, a wooden clothes airer hanging from the ceiling and a meat safe standing on a pine table. 'And no washing machine and no fridge.'

'In here,' said the stranger, disappearing through a plank door into a stone floored scullery. We followed him. There, still wrapped up in the plastic in which they had been delivered, were a brand new cooker, washing machine and refrigerator.

'Any good?'

Patsy pulled at the plastic so that she could look at the cooker properly. 'It's never been used!'

'None of it has. The old man finally allowed his housekeeper to order these things a couple of weeks before he died. They never had time to have them installed.' He pointed to a lot number stuck onto the top of the cooker. 'No one will be interested in any of this stuff. You should be able to get it for a song.' I checked my auction list and saw, to my surprise, that all three items were in the same lot.

'The auctioneer doesn't want to waste his time with that stuff,' explained the stranger. I had been desperately trying, without any success, to decide whose nephew he was. He looked at his watch. 'Better get back,' he said. 'They'll be starting any minute now and there's some good stuff fairly near the top of the auction.' He moved towards the door. 'Why don't you come and watch? The things you want won't come up for at least an hour and a half.'

The three of us hurried back along the dimly lit corridor to what had been the living room and squeezed into a space between a massive dark oak bookcase and a long, mahogany sideboard. Patsy, who was standing on tip toes to try to see, clambered onto a pile of old farming magazines from which vantage point she seemed to have an excellent view of the proceedings.

The auctioneer, a tall fair haired man with a ruddy complexion and a luxuriant moustache, the ends of which had been waxed and twirled into neat curls, was already standing on a box giving last minute instructions to a couple of his assistants. He had a clipboard in his left hand and a small wooden hammer in his right. He was wearing a red and white striped shirt with a plain white collar and a red and white spotted bow tie. His grey trousers were held up with a pair of wide, scarlet braces. His jacket was draped neatly on a wooden hanger that was dangling from the picture rail.

Without warning the auctioneer slammed his small wooden hammer down against the back of his clipboard.

'Ladies and Gentlemen,' he announced in a loud, clear voice.' Let's start the auction!' He read out a short list of rules and regulations giving his firm's commission rates and, confirming the stranger's comment about the legality of any bid, told us about another auction that was due to take place in a few days time and then, without any more warning, asked for bids for the first lot - a watercolour print which was held up by one of two burly men whose job it was to identify and then display the items for sale.

'Cheap rubbish,' whispered the stranger. 'They always start auctions with something fairly cheap just to get things going before the big stuff comes on.' The print was bought by a thin man in a light grey suit who looked pleased with his purchase and carefully made a note on his catalogue. The auctioneer asked him his name and one of the assistants wrote it down on a sheet of paper.

The first half a dozen items were all fairly inexpensive. But when the auctioneer announced the seventh item the mood and atmosphere in the room changed noticeably.

'This is where the good stuff starts,' whispered the stranger. I was making a real effort not to make any discernible movement that might be mistaken for a bid. The auctioneer's burly assistants were pointing to a tall display cabinet and although I couldn't see where they were coming from the bids were coming thick and fast. Within a minute the bids, which had started at £100, were into four figures and rising rapidly.

'Come on now,' said the auctioneer, cajoling his audience. 'This is an excellent example of the period and in perfect condition.' One of his assistants stood on tip toes and whispered something to him.

'I'm told that there is one knob missing from the cabinet,' said the auctioneer. He frowned. 'Though I didn't notice it missing yesterday,' he added. The absence of a knob seemed to cool the enthusiasm for the piece and the bidding slowed. Eventually, the auctioneer lifted his hammer, slammed it against his clipboard three times and then pointed it straight at me! I felt my mouth go dry and my heart missed at least two beats. I was waiting for him to ask me my name when he turned to the assistant who was writing down the buyer's name and said simply 'Fogg.' I looked to my left, to the spot where the stranger was standing and caught his eye. He winked once but showed no other sign of knowing what was going on.

'Was that you?' I whispered.

He nodded.

'I didn't even see you bid!'

He half smiled.

'What about the missing knob?' Patsy whispered between us. 'Doesn't that affect the value?'

The stranger didn't say anything but slipped his hand into the left pocket of his jeans and pulled out a small wooden knob. 'Saved me at least two hundred quid,' he whispered, slipping the knob back into his pocket and allowing his smile to broaden a little.

I felt my palms sweating and I had to swallow hard.

The auctioneer didn't pause.

As soon as each item was sold his assistant wrote down the details and the auctioneer moved immediately onto the next lot. The man standing next to us bid on half a dozen items and bought three of them. Several times he smiled and whispered 'Fake!' as the bidding soared upwards.

Eventually, the auctioneer had sold everything in the living room and he and his entourage moved off speedily towards the next part of the house.

'It's you next!' said the stranger. 'They're doing the stuff in the kitchen now.'

'How much shall we go to?' Patsy asked me as we filed along the dimly lit corridor in company with the other potential purchasers. Many of the dealers had stayed behind in the main part of the house since they realised that there was nothing of interest to them down in the kitchen and scullery.

'I don't know,' I said firmly. 'What do you think?'

'I'm not sure.'

Nervousness and the cup of coffee I'd drunk in the car were beginning to have an effect on my bladder and as we shuffled past a lavatory I slipped inside in order to relieve the pressure and discomfort. I had, in my innocence, thought that it would be easy to rejoin Patsy afterwards but I hadn't allowed for the narrowness of the corridor and the reluctance of other would-be buyers to let me through. To my horror I found myself standing in the doorway to the scullery, listening to the auctioneer announce the lot number that included our new cooker, fridge and washing machine. I couldn't even see Patsy or the stranger in the ponytail and I had no idea where they were.

'I have one bid only for this lot,' said the auctioneer clearly.

'£2.' He paused. 'Is that all I'm bid?' I heard him slam his small wooden hammer down onto his clipboard for the first time.

'£3.' I shouted as loudly as I could. My voice was hoarse and dry and I didn't recognise it. But that didn't matter. The auctioneer heard me.

'The bid is with the gentleman in the doorway,' he said.

'£3. Do I have £4?'

Something happened out of my sight.

'£4.' said the auctioneer. 'Are you still in, sir?'

'£5.' I shouted back.

There was a moment's silence. 'I've got £6 here, sir.'

'£7.'I could feel the sweat pouring down my back. I knew that this was still a ridiculously cheap price but bidding still made me nervous. Oddly enough I had found bidding for Bilbury Grange far less stressful, even though a much larger sum of money had been involved.

'£8 here, sir.' said the invisible auctioneer. 'Are you still in?' The auctioneer sounded amused and several people in the audience were beginning to giggle.

'£9.' I shouted back. We really needed a cooker.

There was a longer interval now. 'I've got £10 in here, now,' said the auctioneer.

Desperately I searched the sea of faces for Patsy. I didn't know what to do. I didn't have the faintest idea what these things were worth. '£11.' I shouted.

Another wait '£12, I'm afraid, sir.'

'£13.'

'£14.'

'£15.'

'£16.'

I panicked and this time I kept silent.

'Going now for £16.' said the auctioneer out of my sight. I heard him slam his wooden hammer down onto his clipboard. I had lost. Ours was the last lot in the kitchen. I stood back and let the people stream out of the scullery. The auctioneer and his colleagues shot past me, heading back up the corridor towards the study.

Suddenly I saw Patsy standing alongside our ponytailed friend. I hurried towards her. She was blushing and looked hot and flustered.

'Where were you?' she asked.

'I got stuck outside,' I told her.

'I didn't get them,' I said miserably. 'I'm sorry. I lost my nerve.' I explained.

Patsy held out her hands to me. I took them and pulled her to me. 'I got them,' she said quietly. She sounded exhausted, as though she'd been running.

'You were bidding against each other,' grinned the ponytailed stranger. 'I thought you were. But I couldn't be sure.'

'You mean we were the only two people bidding?'

'We could have bought them for £2?'

'Don't worry about it.' said the ponytailed stranger. 'You still got a bargain.'

* * *

CHAPTER TEN

‘It’s someone called Harrison,’ said Patsy, holding her hand over the mouth piece of the telephone. ‘He says he’s from the *Sunday News*.’

I had never heard of anyone called Harrison but I had heard of the *Sunday News*. It was a tabloid West Country newspaper with a wide readership throughout Devon and Cornwall. ‘What does he want?’ I whispered.

Patsy shrugged. ‘I don’t know,’ she whispered back. She held the telephone receiver out towards me. ‘You’d better speak to him.’

I took the receiver off her. ‘Hello?’ I said, rather tentatively. ‘What can I do for you?’

‘My name is Harrison,’ said a rather brusque voice at the other end. ‘I’m editor of the *Sunday News*. Am I right in thinking that you are the doctor who used to write a column for the *Herald*?’

‘That’s right,’ I admitted, rather cautiously.

‘Have you got an agent?’

‘An agent?’ it seemed an absurd question. Why, I wondered, would I have an agent?

‘A literary agent?’

‘No.’

‘I can deal with you direct?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good. You’ve left the *Herald* now?’

‘Yes.’

‘Can I ask you why?’

I thought about it for a moment. It was a cheeky question but I didn’t see why I shouldn’t tell the truth. ‘I was sacked,’ I told him. ‘They complained that I made people think too much.’

The man at the other end of the telephone laughed loudly. He had a good, solid laugh and I warmed to him. ‘Did he really tell you that?’

‘Yes.’

‘Our readers like a bit of controversy with their Sunday cornflakes,’ said Mr Harrison. ‘Would you like to write a column for me?’

I hadn’t been expecting it and I didn’t reply for a moment.

‘Are you there?’

‘Yes!’ I replied. ‘That’s very kind of you,’ I mumbled. ‘Every week?’

Patsy, who had been busy washing salad ready for our evening meal, turned round and looked at me. She raised a thumb and asked the question with her face. I held the telephone receiver between my head and my shoulder and opened both palms upwards, indicating that I wasn’t sure.

‘That’s the usual arrangement with a column.’

‘I don’t know,’ I said cautiously. ‘What sort of column?’

‘Same sort of thing that you were doing for the *Herald*. Some advice. Comment. Straight talking. Good honest opinion.’

‘The *Herald* complained that they were getting lots of letters of complaint from doctors,’ I warned him.

‘Wonderful!’ said Mr Harrison. ‘I love getting letters of complaint. How much were they paying you to write for the *Herald*?’

Patsy stopped what she was doing and wiped her hands on a towel. Then she walked across the kitchen to where I was sitting.

‘Eight pounds a week.’ I said, without thinking.

‘God, you are honest, aren’t you!’ said the *Sunday News* editor. ‘I knew you were getting that but I thought you’d tell me twice as much. I’ll pay you twenty.’

‘Twenty?’ I said, astonished. It seemed a lot of money.

‘Plus half of whatever we make from syndication rights.’

I hesitated. I had no idea what he was talking about. I said so.

‘We’ll try to sell your column to other papers round the country. And you’ll get half of what we get.’

I was astonished. ‘Do you think other papers will want to take it?’ I asked, uncertainly.

‘I should think so,’ said the editor. ‘Our syndication man sells stuff all round the world.’ He laughed again. ‘We could make you famous!’

‘I’m not sure that I want to be famous!’ I said quickly.

‘But you like writing?’

‘Yes.’ I admitted. ‘I do.’

‘Well there isn’t much point in writing if no one reads your stuff,’ said the editor. ‘I can promise you a big audience.’

‘Right.’ I said, rather hesitantly.

‘Will you do it then?’

‘Well, it sounds quite exciting.’

‘Great. I’ll put you a letter of contract in the post. Twelve weeks contract O.K. for you to start with?’

‘Yes, fine.’

‘I’d like to start a week on Sunday. Twelve hundred words.’

‘Er... yes. When does that mean you’d need the copy?’

‘Tuesday morning. You can post it or phone it in.’

‘I’ll try to post it.’ I said.

‘Great. I’ll get someone from our picture desk to give you a call and fix up a time when they can come and take some mug shots.’

‘O.K.’ I said, though I hated having my photograph taken.

‘Good to talk to you. I’m sure you’ll enjoy working with us.’ I was about to say something back when I realised that the editor had put the telephone down. Gently, I lowered the receiver.

‘What on earth was all that?’ asked Patsy. ‘It sounded pretty exciting. Have they offered you a job?’

I nodded. ‘A weekly column. Twenty pounds a week and half of everything they make from selling syndication rights!’ Patsy frowned. ‘What does that mean?’

I explained.

‘That’s terrific!’ said Patsy. ‘Are you excited?’

‘I suppose I am,’ I agreed. ‘Yes, I think I am!’

* * *

After we’d eaten our evening meal Patsy and I went out into the vegetable garden. The strawberries were beginning to ripen, the gooseberry, raspberry and blackcurrant bushes that we’d freed a little of the nettles and brambles which had been choking them were spreading their branches gratefully and were already laden with fruit. The garden was beginning to look much more like the productive, working garden it had once been. The lettuce which I’d planted in the cold frames were growing rapidly too.

‘I think you were a bit overenthusiastic with the lettuce,’ laughed Patsy.

‘What do you mean?’ I asked her, indignantly. There were at least a hundred lettuce plants growing in the cold frames and they all looked very healthy.

‘The lettuces are all going to be ready at the same time,’ Patsy pointed out. ‘We won’t be able to eat them before they start to wilt.’

‘Oh,’ I said, rather sadly.

‘We should have put them in a few at a time,’ Patsy pointed out. She started to giggle. ‘It looks as if we’ve started a lettuce farm.’

Patsy’s light-hearted comment set me thinking.

‘Maybe we could sell the ones we don’t need?’ I suggested.

Patsy frowned. ‘Who to? Do you mean we should have a stall at the bottom of the drive?’

‘We could try the village shop!’ I suggested. ‘Peter Marshall sells lettuce. Maybe he’d buy them from us instead of from the wholesaler?’

Patsy looked at me thoughtfully and then nodded. Then she walked over towards the strawberries. ‘What about these?’ she said. ‘Do you think he’d take some strawberries too?’

‘Why don’t we ask him?’

* * *

The rumour that a construction company intended to start building houses in Bilbury had not gone away. Indeed, instead of going away it was gaining ground and credibility. I had been trying for days to find out more without any success. In the end it was Patsy who brought us news.

When I got back home for lunch the following day I knew at once that Patsy had something exciting to tell me. But I couldn’t tell from looking at her face whether she had good news or bad. That was not, perhaps, too surprising since it turned out that she had both good and bad news for me.

First, she was desperate to tell me that Peter Marshall had agreed to take as many strawberries and as much lettuce as we could supply him with. Patsy said he hadn’t offered a lot of money but had said that he knew of two hotels in Ilfracombe and one in Combe Martin which would happily buy fresh produce from us.

‘He wanted to know if we used any chemicals on our crops - fertilisers and weedkillers and so on,’ said Patsy. ‘And when I told him that we didn’t he seemed very excited. He said that there was a growing demand for fruit and vegetables that were free of chemicals and told me that if he could describe our produce as ‘organic’ he could charge a higher price for it.

‘That sounds like Peter,’ I laughed. ‘Charging more money for stuff that hasn’t cost as much to grow!’

‘It’s not that simple,’ Patsy told me. She explained that if we had used chemicals on our crops we would have undoubtedly produced an even bigger harvest. I had forgotten that her father was a farmer, and that although he specialised in sheep and cattle she would know about such things. ‘It’s not difficult to double the yield per acre if you use the right fertilisers and pest control chemicals,’ Patsy pointed out.

‘How much did he offer?’

‘Three new pence each for lettuce and seven new pence a punnet for strawberries,’ Patsy told me. ‘He’ll provide us with the punnets. I know it doesn’t sound much but I worked out that we could make a good profit next year if we used the whole of the vegetable garden and concentrated on the right crops. Peter said that the hotels were desperate for things like beans and peas and parsley and radishes. He’s going to give me a list of the produce the hotels want most so that we can make sure that we grow the right things.’ Patsy had worked out the size of the crops she thought we might be able to grow, and the sort of prices we might expect for them.

‘So we could probably grow all our own fruit and vegetables free of charge and make a small profit out of the garden too?’

Patsy nodded.

‘So, what’s the bad news?’ I asked her. I knew that despite this wonderful news there was something worrying her.

‘Peter also told me that he’d heard more about those plans to build houses in the village,’ said Patsy. ‘Apparently, the builder who has applied for planning permission has got some very good contacts locally. Peter says he’s very confident that he’ll get permission to start building.’

‘Does Peter know where he’s planning to build?’

‘The nearest house will be less than a mile away from here,’ said Patsy. ‘Peter says they’re also planning a shopping precinct.’

The news that Peter had agreed to buy our produce delighted me but this latest news about the plan to expand Bilbury depressed me enormously. In a way I felt guilty for I knew that it was selfish of me not to want Bilbury to grow. I wondered how many of the villagers would welcome the jobs and the increased prosperity that the development would bring, and I wondered how I could find out exactly what was planned for the village.

Strangely, I wasn’t going to have to wait long, for I had a visitor later that day who told me more than I really wanted to hear.

* * *

‘My name is Sherlock!’ said the taller of the two strangers who Miss Johnson showed into the consulting room at the end of the evening surgery. He was broad as well as tall and brought with him an enormous, seemingly unshakeable sense of self-confidence. He didn’t so much enter the room as take it over, and within seconds of his arrival I felt as though I was the visitor and he the host. He wore a lightweight summer suit made of beige silk, an open-necked silk shirt and dark brown moccasins, and as he came into the room he slipped a pair of expensive looking sunglasses into his top pocket. He was hugely overweight but he was light on his feet, and in some strange way he didn’t actually look fat. Behind him there walked a man of about my age. He was thin, immaculately dressed and carried a leather document case.

I stood up and took the fat man’s outstretched hand. He gripped my fingers so tightly that they hurt. He didn’t introduce his companion who was, I assumed, an assistant.

‘Have you got anything for hay fever?’ he asked me, as he sat down. The joints of the chair creaked in protest at his weight.

I asked him what symptoms he had, how long he’d had them and what he’d tried. Then I started to write out a prescription for a suitable anti-histamine.

‘What’s your full name?’ I asked him.

‘Sherlock,’ he replied ‘Jack Sherlock. I’m the managing director of Sherlock Homes,’ he added. ‘I’m going to revolutionise your life!’

I was rather taken aback by this. I didn’t really want anyone to revolutionise my life. ‘Oh.’ I said rather baldly. I carried on writing out the prescription. But Sherlock did not detect my lack of enthusiasm and was certainly not deterred by it.

‘I want a few words with you,’ he said.

I handed him the completed prescription form and nodded. Sherlock folded the prescription form twice and placed it in the breast pocket of his jacket. ‘I’m going to build five hundred new houses in Bilbury,’ he told me with pride. ‘I’ll more than double the size of the village.’ He took a cigar case from the inside pocket of his jacket, took the top off the case and offered a cigar to me.

I shook my head and held up a hand. ‘No, thank you.’

He took a cigar from the case and examined it carefully.

I hesitated. ‘If you don’t mind I’d rather you didn’t,’ I said.

Sherlock stared at me in disbelief.

‘This is my consulting room,’ I explained. ‘I’d rather it didn’t smell of cigars.’

Sherlock returned the cigar to its case and then carefully slipped the case back into his jacket pocket. The assistant, standing behind Sherlock’s chair, looked surprised and even slightly amused. ‘I’m going to build a shopping precinct, a community hall and a health centre,’ he said. ‘I’m going to offer you the chance to take over the health centre.’

‘Have you got planning permission yet?’ I asked him.

‘It’s just a formality,’ said Sherlock with a shrug.

‘How on earth can you be so sure?’ I asked him. I’d heard of people waiting years to get planning permission to build another bedroom over their garage.

Sherlock touched the tip of his right index finger on the tip of his nose and winked. ‘In this world it’s not what you know or what you own but who you own,’ he told me. He paused. ‘I’ll get planning permission,’ he said confidently. He raised his chin and stared at me as though challenging me to defy him or doubt his confidence.

‘Where are you going to do all this building?’ I asked him.

‘On the west of the village,’ replied Sherlock. ‘Between here and Kentisbury.’

‘Around Softly’s Bottom?’

He nodded.

‘And Bluebell Wood?’

Another nod.

‘I thought Lionel Francis’s widow owned that land?’

Sherlock shrugged. ‘She used to.’ He stared at me. ‘So...’ he said, after a moment or two. ‘What’s your answer?’

‘It’s very generous of you,’ I told him. ‘I’m very flattered.’

Lionel Francis had died a few months earlier and I wasn’t surprised that his widow had been willing to sell some of the land he had accumulated. She had probably needed some cash to pay his death duties. But it was a pity she’d sold out to Sherlock. I wondered how much he had paid her.

‘So you should be,’ said Sherlock quickly. ‘But I had you checked out and the villagers seem to like you.’

‘I’d like some time to think about it,’ I said. ‘I’d like to talk it over with my wife.’

Sherlock stared at me for a moment without speaking. He seemed surprised that I hadn’t jumped at his offer. ‘I’ll give you a week,’ he told me. ‘Then I’ll withdraw the offer and find another doctor.’ He glowered at me. ‘You’ll never make a go of it with another doctor in the village.’

It was my turn to shrug. I didn’t say anything.

Sherlock stood up, noisily pushing his chair back so aggressively that his assistant had to catch it to stop it falling over.

He then turned and walked towards the door. He left without looking back. His assistant, who hadn’t spoken a word, followed him still clutching the leather document case.

* * *

Patsy and I talked over Mr Sherlock’s offer when I got home. It didn’t take us five minutes to decide that I would not have anything to do with his plans to destroy Bilbury. I telephoned his office and left a message on his answering machine telling him of my decision.

* * *

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I came home one cloudy lunchtime and, failing to find Patsy anywhere in the house, went out into the courtyard and called to her.

'I'm up here,' she called, from an open window on the first floor. 'Come on up!'

'Are you sure?' For weeks Patsy had not allowed me into the coach-house flat, insisting that she wanted the restoration work to be a surprise.

'Yes!'

I climbed the spiral staircase, entered the coach-house and found Patsy sitting on the window seat in the living room looking rightfully proud and ever so slightly pleased with herself. The difference in the flat was extraordinary. The walls and the woodwork were painted white and the flat looked extremely smart and gloriously welcoming.

'It's marvellous!' I told her, looking round.

'All it needs now is some furniture,' said Patsy. 'And then we can start letting it!'

I looked around, making a quick mental inventory of the things we would need to buy: cooker; refrigerator; table; chairs; three piece suite; bed; wardrobe; dressing table. Most of these were, of course, items that we still had not bought for the house.

'We can get everything we need at an auction,' Patsy pointed out. 'It needn't cost the earth and there's still quite a lot of the summer left.'

She was right, of course. If we could let the flat to holiday-makers for the rest of the summer we should be able to cover the cost of the furniture and make a small profit as well. I hadn't really needed Sherlock's visit to remind me of our financial vulnerability.

'O.K.!' I agreed. 'When's the next auction?'

'There's one next Friday!' replied Patsy, enthusiastically.

* * *

Mrs Blossom came into the surgery that evening, but for a moment or two I hardly recognised her. She came with a stout man in a suit I had never seen him before but guessed that he was her father. He was almost bald but had a few long strands of dark hair combed right across the top of his head in that absurd way that vain men use to try to hide their baldness from the world. The last time I had seen her she had been agitated, nervous and tearful. Now she looked calm and at peace but she also looked even older than before. She had a look in her eyes which I knew I had seen before though I couldn't quite think where. I had, I remembered, arranged an appointment for her to see a psychiatrist.

'How did you get on?' I asked her.

There was a long pause before Mrs Blossom replied. 'Very well, thank you,' she answered, choosing each word carefully as though she were at a buffet and only had a small plate. She tried to smile but it was a thin, weak shadow of a smile that made her look haunted rather than happy.

'Did the psychiatrist prescribe anything for you?'

'He gave her some pills,' said Mr Blossom. 'She's got to go back in a week's time to collect some more.' I wondered why the psychiatrist didn't want me to write out the repeat prescription for him. Hospital consultants usually like to get general practitioners to do their routine work for them whenever they can.

I nodded my thanks to Mr Blossom and then turned my head towards his daughter. 'What are they?' I asked her. She looked at me blankly. 'What's the name of the pills he gave you?'

'I don't know.'

'Have you got them with you?'

'Yes.'

'Can I look at them?'

She opened her handbag, took out a small brown bottle and handed it to me. She seemed reluctant to let it go. The bottle had a small white label stuck to one side and the name of the drug was scrawled on the label. The pills were the same as the ones that Miss Phillips was taking. I knew now why the psychiatrist had not asked me to write out the prescription - he knew that the pills were not available at the ordinary chemist's shop and could only be obtained directly from the manufacturer.

'Did the doctor at the hospital tell you that the pills are very new?' I asked Mrs Blossom.

She looked at me for a few moments and then, very slowly, shook her head. 'No.' she said.

'They're very special,' said Mr Blossom. 'The consultant said that only a few selected doctors are allowed to prescribe them.' He said the word 'consultant' as though it began with a capital letter.

'So I believe,' I said.

'The consultant said we should come and see you for a sick note,' said Mr Blossom.

'A sick note?' I was puzzled. 'I didn't think that Mrs Blossom went out to work.'

'She doesn't. The sick note is for me. I'll have to stay at home for a few days to look after her.'

‘Ah.’ I said, nodding. A thought struck me and I frowned.

‘Why didn’t the consultant give you a sick note?’ I asked him.

‘I did ask him for one,’ said Mr Blossom. ‘But he said that sort of thing was your job.’

‘Very kind of him,’ I said drily, pulling my pad of sick notes towards me and muttering an unspoken, unheard curse on consultants who regarded themselves as too important to spend fifteen seconds writing out sick notes, thereby wasting everyone else’s time.

‘How long is this likely to go on?’ Mr Blossom asked me. He inclined his head towards his daughter as he spoke.

‘Do you mean how long will it be before your daughter gets better?’ I asked him.

‘Yes.’

‘I’m afraid I don’t know.’ I told him.

‘It’s damned inconvenient,’ muttered Mr Blossom to no one in particular. He took the sick note I held out, carefully read it folded it into two, creased it sharply between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand, took out a wafer thin leather wallet and slipped the sick note inside it. Then he put the wallet back into his inside jacket pocket.

As Mrs Blossom stood up to accompany her father out of the surgery I remembered where I had seen the dull and lifeless look that was in her eyes. I had seen it on the faces of the patients in a geriatric ward in a hospital where I had once worked; described by a cynical young hospital consultant as the ante room to death. And I had seen it more recently than that. I had seen the same dull, half dead look on Miss Phillips’ face too.

* * *

That afternoon Thumper was due to appear in court in Barnstaple, charged with whatever fancy word cocktail the judiciary chose to use when describing the unusual twin crimes of poaching and self-defence.

Patsy and I picked Thumper and Anne up and drove them into town. Anne and Thumper left their baby with Miss Johnson whom I told where I was going and Dr Brownlow, who had a soft spot for both Thumper and Anne, had promised to look after any urgent problems which came up while I was out of the village. Barnstaple is only ten miles away from Bilbury but in summer the heavy holiday traffic means that the journey can take as much as half an hour. We had arranged to meet Thumper’s solicitor, a Mr Suffolk, at the entrance to the court.

There were just five minutes to go and we had just decided that the solicitor wasn’t going to turn up when a tall, gangling young man wearing a suit that was several sizes too large for him around the waist and chest and several sizes too short for him in length came rushing up to us in a rare state of excitement.

He had a bulging briefcase in his right hand and a huge sheaf of papers and textbooks stuffed under his left arm.

‘Mr Robinson?’ he called, breathlessly.

We all turned to stare at him. Thumper frowned. ‘Yes?’

‘I’m Mr Colter of Mountfield, Briggs and Stratton. I’m afraid Mr Suffolk has been unavoidably detained.’ He brushed his long hair away from his eyes and smiled nervously. ‘But he’s handed your case to me.’ He suddenly realised that the smile wasn’t appropriate and banished it quickly. As he did so he looked at his watch. ‘We’d better get a move on!’

‘Right,’ said Thumper, drily, moving off.

I put my hand on the solicitor’s arm as we all walked towards the court. ‘You do know what Mr Robinson is charged with?’

‘Oh, absolutely!’ replied the young lawyer. ‘Mr Suffolk told me all about it this morning.’

‘That was the first time you heard about it?’

‘Half an hour ago.’

‘Shouldn’t you ask for a postponement or whatever you call it?’ I asked him, horrified. ‘Surely you need time to prepare a good legal case?’

‘No need to worry about that!’ insisted the young lawyer.

One of the textbooks started to slip out from underneath his arm. I removed it before it fell and carried it for him. I had absolutely no experience of the British legal system, and despite all this I still had faith that somehow justice would be done.

Somewhere between the entrance to the court and the court itself Thumper was separated off from the rest of us. Patsy, Anne and I were sent along a dull and dingy corridor and after opening two wrong doors by mistake eventually found ourselves sitting on uncomfortable chairs at the back of the courtroom. Moments later Thumper appeared in the court, accompanied by his youthful solicitor. The three undistinguished looking magistrates sat high on their bench scowling down at the court as though anxious to hand down punishments and get away to do something more interesting and profitable. They looked the very essence of smug, self-satisfied and sanctimonious middle class England.

I don’t know what I had expected but the next ten minutes seemed more like something out of Kafka’s imagination than any attempt to offer genuine justice. The absurdity and unfairness of it all became instantly apparent the moment the clerk had read out the charges. Thumper, when invited to tell the court whether he admitted his guilt or intended to defend himself, stood up and in a clear and unshaken voice declared his intention to plead guilty to poaching but not guilty to assault. The young and nervous Mr Colter was clearly surprised by this for he whispered urgently to his client. He was obviously trying to persuade him to change his mind. But Thumper was adamant that he wanted to plead not guilty to the assault charge. He did not, he insisted, mind being punished for the poaching. He was guilty and he had been caught and that was fair. But, he insisted, the assault charge simply was not right.

The prosecuting solicitor, a dour-faced man in his middle fifties who didn't look as if he had done anything enjoyable for at least twenty years, stood up and said such terrible things about Thumper that it was all I could do to stop myself from rushing up to him, taking him by the lapels and shaking some of the spite and malice out of his voice.

'This man is clearly a menace to human society,' said the solicitor who had never met Thumper before, pointing a finger directly at him. 'A nasty, evil and dangerous man who takes the law into his own hands and who has no respect for authority.'

The prosecution's only witness, the water bailiff, told such a sad and pathetic story that one would have had to have a heart of stone not to feel sorry for him. He did not bother to mention that when he had fallen into the water Thumper had rescued him.

Thumper's solicitor made a brave hash at offering some sort of defence but it was clear that his heart was not in it He had panicked and lost control when he had discovered that the case was not as simple or as straightforward as he had been led to believe and the result was that he produced an inelegant stream of such unconvincing and irrelevant nonsense that in the end even Patsy, Anne and I would have found Thumper guilty.

After passing an urgent note down to the solicitor I managed to persuade him to let me give evidence as a character witness, though by then I suspected that it was probably too late.

I explained that Thumper was a good friend, a reliable workman, a devoted husband and a caring father. It may have sounded a little over the top but, in essence, it was the truth. We were in the end relieved that Thumper did not get a prison sentence but was simply fined and put on probation. He was told that when his fine was paid he would be allowed to have his truck back.

'Thank you!' said Thumper, shaking my hand firmly as we met outside the court. 'I owe you.' He looked pale but relieved. His solicitor hovered nearby looking quite pleased with himself. 'If it hadn't been for you I think they would have sent me down.'

'I think that went quite well,' said the solicitor, with a nervous and hopeful smile. He was carrying his bulging briefcase in his right hand and clutching his sheaf of books and papers under his left arm. I hadn't seen him refer to any of the books while in the courtroom though he had shuffled the papers about quite a lot.

'You didn't even know Thumper wanted to plead not guilty to the assault charge!' I said to him, angrily.

'It was a little unfortunate that Mr Suffolk couldn't be here,' said Mr Colter. I couldn't help wondering if Mr Colter had ever appeared in court before by himself.

'Where is he?' I demanded. 'Mr Suffolk?' Mr Colter looked embarrassed and shuffled his feet nervously.

'Why couldn't he come?' I persisted. Patsy, Anne and Thumper had stopped and were waiting for an answer too.

'He had to go on a course,' muttered Mr Colter, defensively. He looked uncomfortable.

I knew instantly what he meant. I had heard the excuse too often before. 'He's playing golf!' I said angrily. 'Thumper could have gone to prison!'

'But he didn't!' said Mr Colter. He smiled thinly and waved a hand at Thumper. 'He's here, isn't he?'

'No thanks to you,' said Anne.

'Come on,' said Thumper quietly. We all turned and looked at him. 'Let's go home.' Mr Colter, looking relieved to have been let off so easily, scurried off.

We set off walking towards the car park and as we did so the prosecuting solicitor came out of a side door. In strange contrast to Mr Colter his suit was too tight for him. Because they were anchored around his hips instead of his waist his trousers were too long for him in the legs. But whereas Mr Colter's suit had never fitted him, the prosecuting solicitor's body had probably once been the same size and shape as his suit.

'Do you sleep at night?' I asked him angrily. 'Are your parents proud of you?' I was feeling very angry about what had happened in the courtroom. It seemed to me outrageous that a man could say things about another human being without having any idea about whether or not they were true. The prosecutor stopped, looked at me and instinctively backed away. He seemed nervous and looked around. 'I advise you not to say anything you're likely to regret,' he told me. He tried to walk away but I moved around and stood in front of him.

'Come on,' whispered Patsy. She took hold of my hand. 'He isn't worth it.'

'I doubt if your advice is ever worth taking,' I told him. I don't think I had ever before been so angry. 'How dare you describe a man as evil when you don't know anything about him?'

'I was just doing my job,' he said. Perspiration had formed on his brow.

'That's what the concentration camp guards said at Auschwitz,' I told him.

'That's an outrageous comparison!' said the lawyer. He looked around. 'Any more of that and I'll sue you for defamation.' His face had gone red and a vein on his forehead was bulging. (Two months later he died of a stroke).

I looked around. 'Don't you need witnesses for that?'

He looked at Thumper, Patsy and then Anne and unsuccessfully tried to walk round me again.

'You're worse than a prostitute,' I told him. 'You'll do anything for money, won't you?'

The lawyer blanched and pulled himself up to his full height. 'How dare you?' he remonstrated.

But I'd had enough of him. Still holding Patsy's hand I turned and walked away. Thumper and Anne followed behind and I could hear Thumper chuckling. After a few yards I started to smile. And by the time we were in the car driving back to Bilbury we all felt much better. We had all learned a lesson about the law. But at least Thumper wasn't in prison.

'Can you drop me off by the river?' Thumper asked, as we were about to turn off the main road and take the turning to Bilbury.

'O.K.' I said, puzzled.

'I just want to pick up a couple of trout on the way home,' said Thumper, laughing. Anne, who was sitting beside him on the back seat, hit him as hard as she could and that made him laugh even more.

* * *

CHAPTER TWELVE

As we approached the site of the auction Patsy and I recognised a number of the vehicles that were parked. We had seen them outside the house where we had attended our first auction.

Unlike that auction, which had been held in a private house, this one was being held in a village hall. As we drew closer to the hall we recognised many of the would-be buyers too. Among them I spotted Mr Fogg, the man who had befriended us at our first auction. He was dressed in exactly the same clothes.

We entered the hall and started to walk around. The larger items of furniture were all arranged around the outer walls of the hall. In the middle, piled in neat rows on top of wooden trestle tables, were the smaller items. The more valuable small items, silver spoons, old watches and bits and pieces of ivory, were laid out neatly in a glass fronted cabinet which was guarded by a broad shouldered man dressed in jeans and a thick, fisherman's sweater. He had his arms folded and did not look like a man who liked a laugh. The least valuable items, and things like stepladders and gardening tools, were lined up outside in the tiny car park. A hot dog van was also parked there, presumably to provide refreshments for those attending the auction.

'Hello!' I said, as we passed Mr Fogg. 'Fancy seeing you here!'

Fogg, who was carefully examining a particularly ugly toby jug, turned sharply when he heard my voice and then visibly relaxed when he saw who it was.

'Looking for more stuff for your house?' he asked us. He shook my hand and smiled at Patsy.

I nodded and said we were.

'The people who owned the house where all these things came from must have been very odd,' said Patsy. 'I've counted at least five complete sets of cutlery.'

Fogg laughed. He put down the toby jug and picked up a small porcelain model of a thatched cottage. 'All this isn't from one house!' He explained that the auctioneers had collected together furniture and belongings from three or four small cottages and had put all the bits and pieces together into one auction to save money.

'I keep seeing the same faces,' I said. A short, vaguely familiar man wearing a bright green jumper and a pair of shabby brown corduroy trousers walked past and nodded to Mr Fogg.

'At least half the people at an auction will always be regulars,' explained Fogg. He turned the thatched cottage upside down and carefully examined the maker's stamp. 'Antique shop owners looking for stock, junk shop people looking for bits and pieces, and dealers looking for things they know they can turn round quickly and fairly easily at a profit.' He sniffed and put the thatched cottage down.

'No good?'

'Pardon?'

'The cottage.'

Fogg shook his head. 'Looks older than it is,' he explained.

'Made in Hong Kong sometime in the 60s.'

'What about the other half?'

Fogg looked at me, puzzled.

'The other buyers at an auction. You said half of them were professionals.'

'Oh, a few of them will just be vultures who have come for a nose around. When someone dies the neighbours want to see what they've left behind and how much it fetches. But most of the rest will be people like you - people furnishing a house and looking for a few bargains. You can furnish a house for next to nothing and make a decent profit on it if you're careful.'

Patsy, puzzled, looked at him. 'How?'

'Buy good, solid furniture that isn't old enough to be antique but isn't new and made of cardboard. By the time you're ready to sell it there's a good chance that some of it will have become antique. But even if it hasn't it will probably still be worth more than you paid for it because the next generation of house owners will be looking for good, solid furniture of their own.'

Fogg pulled out a large grubby handkerchief and blew his nose noisily. 'I can't imagine why anyone buys new furniture,' he said. 'It's mostly made out of hardboard, it loses ninety per cent of its value the moment you take it out of the showroom, it's got no character, and when you find you can't sell it you won't even be able to turn it into firewood.' He turned his attention to an old mains radio in a Bakelite case. He fiddled with the four control knobs on the front of the set and then used a penknife to open the back. He sniffed, seemed satisfied, quietly slipped one of the knobs into his pocket and moved on to something else.

'Is that worth anything?' I asked him.

Fogg shook his head.

'Why do you want to get it then?'

He looked at me, puzzled.

'I saw you take the knob,' I pointed out.

'I'm going to listen to it he explained. He wasn't in the slightest bit embarrassed about my having seen him steal the knob. ‘It’s not worth much anyway but with a knob missing it’s virtually worthless. I should get it for a couple of shillings. These old radios have a beautiful tone and they’re so cheap that when they go wrong you can just chuck them away and buy another one.’

The auctioneer, a short, stout man in a three piece tweed suit climbed up onto the village hall stage. He was smoking a huge cigar and ash had dropped down both the lapel of his jacket and the front of his waistcoat. He was as bald as a billiard ball, and nearly as round. A heavily perspiring assistant in a grey woollen suit with a thin white stripe hurried to the back of the stage, found a lectern and put it at the front of the stage. The auctioneer rested his elbows on it, placed his catalogue on the lectern and then put his wooden gavel on the small flat area at the front of it. Moments later the auction started.

An hour and a half later Patsy and I had bid for and bought all the furniture we needed for the flat. We paid slightly more than we had expected, but that drawback was more than offset by the fact that we had managed to buy better furniture than we had expected.

We had arranged for a man with a removal van to transport our purchases back to Bilbury Grange and were standing by the hot dog stand drinking steaming hot mugs of tea when Mr Fogg hurried out of the back of the village hall. He stood there for a moment, clearly looking for someone or something. As soon as he spotted us he came straight over.

‘I thought you must have gone,’ he said. He looked agitated and relieved to have found us. ‘Did you get what you wanted?’

‘Yes, thank you.’ said Patsy. I had a large chunk of chocolate biscuit in my mouth and did not attempt to say anything.

‘Would you do me a favour?’ asked Mr Fogg. He spoke quickly and confidentially.

‘Of course,’ said Patsy. She looked at me. I nodded. ‘If we can,’ she added rather cautiously.

I swallowed the chocolate biscuit and washed it down with a swig of tea.

‘There’s a piece of furniture I’m rather keen to buy,’ explained Mr Fogg. ‘A burr walnut davenport. Victorian. Would you bid for me?’

I didn’t have the faintest idea what a davenport was.

‘Of course!’ said Patsy. ‘Do you have to go somewhere?’

‘What’s a davenport?’ I asked.

‘No. I’ll be here,’ said Mr Fogg, answering Patsy first. ‘But if the other dealers see me bidding they’ll know what I think the piece is worth and they’ll go higher than they might have done.’ He looked at his watch and hopped from one foot to the other. He was clearly anxious and impatient.

‘What’s a davenport?’ I asked again.

‘It’s a writing desk,’ Mr Fogg replied, speaking hurriedly. ‘It’s got a retractable writing surface, a couple of drawers and a secret compartment for hiding money and love letters.’

It sounded rather exciting.

‘How do we know how much to bid up to?’ asked Patsy.

‘Go up to £750.’ said Mr Fogg. ‘Not a penny more.’

Patsy looked at me and I looked at her. It was a lot of money.

‘Er... ‘I began, not quite sure how to say what we were both thinking.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Mr Fogg with a reassuring smile. ‘I know what you’re thinking. You’re worrying that if I disappear you’ll be left having to pay £750 for something you don’t want.’

Patsy and I, who had been thinking exactly that, protested that the thought had never crossed our minds. Mr Fogg held up a hand and took a thick roll of notes out from his jeans pocket. Without blinking an eye he counted out £800 in fifty pound notes and handed it to Patsy. ‘If you’re successful pay the auctioneer £750 and if you’re not give me £750 back,’ he said. ‘Either way you keep £50 for your trouble.’ Patsy handed the money to me. I put it into my trouser pocket and kept my hand on it. I had never handled that much cash before and it made me very nervous.

We both protested that we didn’t want paying but Mr Fogg was insistent. He looked at his watch. ‘I’m sorry to rush you,’ he said. ‘But it’s lot 137. And they’ll be there any minute now.’

We followed him back into the village hall. The auctioneer was taking bids for lot number 136

‘Who’s going to bid?’ whispered Patsy.

‘You can,’ I answered. Even though I had just drunk a pint of tea my lips were dry and my throat felt parched. The £50 commission we were being paid would more than cover the cost of the furniture we had bought.

‘I’d rather you did,’ Patsy whispered back.

‘The next item, lot 137, is a rather fine davenport,’ said the auctioneer. ‘Who’ll start me off with £300?’ One of his assistants pointed to a piece of furniture that looked like a cross between a school desk and an old-fashioned writing bureau.

I licked my lips and looked around for Mr Fogg. He was standing several yards away. I raised an eyebrow. He shook his head almost imperceptibly. I did nothing.

‘Come on now!’ said the auctioneer. He had a friendly, cajoling style which had worked well. ‘Who’ll give me £150?'

Still there was no response. Again I looked at Mr Fogg. Again he shook his head almost imperceptibly. I still did nothing.

'£100 then,' sighed the auctioneer. 'Let's do this the hard way.'

A voice from on my right shouted 'Here.'

'I have £150,' said the auctioneer, though I hadn't heard the second bid. 'Do I have £200?'

'£250,' said the voice from my right.

'£300,' countered the auctioneer.

I waved my hand to indicate that I wanted to join in the bidding. I was frightened that the davenport would be sold but not to me.

The bidder on my right must have responded in some way though I didn't hear or see anything.

'£350,' said the auctioneer. 'I have £350. Do I hear £400?'

I raised my hand as high as it would go and waved it about like a small boy trying to catch the teacher's attention but the auctioneer didn't seem to see me. I had always worried that I would end up buying something by mistake. Now I had discovered that it's sometimes possible not to buy something you want. The key to successful bidding is, I learnt later, simply to catch the auctioneer's eye.

Slowly the bidding crept up to £500 and still I hadn't made a bid. Then the bidder on my right pulled out.

'I have £500,' said the auctioneer looking around the room.

'Do I have any advance on £500?' The room had gone very quiet. This was by far the biggest bid of the day so far.

I had not lowered my hand and this time the auctioneer saw me. 'Are you bidding, sir?' he asked me.

'Yes.' I croaked.

'£550,' said the auctioneer. It seemed that everyone in the room was looking at me. Some of the dealers were whispering among themselves. I tried to catch a glimpse of Mr Fogg but I couldn't see him anywhere.

I nodded.

'I have £600,' said the auctioneer. He looked at me and raised an eyebrow. I nodded again.

'£650.'

And so it went on. Every time I made a bid the auctioneer met it with a higher one. I still couldn't see who I was bidding against but there was clearly at least one other dealer around who was convinced that the piece was worth buying. Eventually I reached my limit of £750. But it wasn't enough.

'£800,' said the auctioneer. He looked at me, expectantly.

For a moment I was tempted to carry on. I did, after all, have £800 in my pocket. I could see how people could get carried away at auctions. But common sense prevailed and, rather sadly, I shook my head. I felt I had failed Mr Fogg and I could almost taste the disappointment. I turned away, as sad as if I had failed to buy something I wanted for myself. Mr Fogg had reappeared. He nodded his head slightly towards the exit at the back of the hall and while the auctioneer continued with the next lot Patsy and I followed him out of the hall and back into the car park.

'I'm sorry,' I said to Mr Fogg, handing him his roll of notes. He didn't seem in the slightest bit disappointed.

'Have you taken your £50?' he asked.

I shook my head.

He grinned, peeled off a £50 note and handed it to me.

'Thanks,' he said. 'You did brilliantly.'

'I'm sorry I didn't get it for you,' I said.

'That's O.K.,' he said. And he disappeared back into the hall again.

'He took it very well,' said Patsy.

'We've got £50 we didn't expect!' I said, showing her the note that Mr Fogg had given me. 'Is there anything else you want to bid for?' I'd been bitten by the bug and I was keen to get back into the bidding.

Patsy laughed and shook her head. But we did bid. Twice. First, the auctioneer held up an old wedding gown which no one seemed to want.

'Oh it's beautiful!' sighed Patsy.

'Buy it if you like it.' I told her. No one was prepared to bid and it was obviously going to be very cheap.

'Oh I don't know,' said Patsy. She hesitated. 'I could alter it and turn it into a lovely dress, though.' The auctioneer was getting desperate and was now offering the dress for anyone prepared to make an offer for it. I knew we had to act fast and so I put up my hand and offered five shillings.

'You mean 25 pence, sir!' said the auctioneer sternly. The nation's currency had gone decimal the previous year and I still sometimes forgot.

'Yes, 25 pence!' I agreed.

'Done!' said the auctioneer, banging down his gavel. 'Sold to the gentleman over there. You'll look lovely in it sir!'

There was a ripple of laughter, but when Patsy took my hand and whispered 'thank you' I didn't care.

Then, right at the end of the auction, the auctioneer's assistant held up a tin bath full of all sorts of bits and pieces of assorted rubbish and, encouraged by me, Patsy bought the lot for 50 pence. It was hardly the big time, but not knowing exactly what we had bought added a considerable frisson of excitement to the deal.

As I queued in a small back room to pay for the furniture we had bought for the flat, for Patsy's dress and for the tin bath we had bought in a moment of wild extravagance, I felt someone tapping me on the shoulder. I turned round and saw the auctioneer standing behind me.

'Excuse me, sir,' he said quietly. 'Could I have a word with you?'

'Of course,' I said. I left Patsy to pay our bill and walked with the auctioneer to a quiet corner.

'I'm sorry you didn't get the davenport,' said the auctioneer.

I looked at him slightly puzzled.

'The davenport,' repeated the auctioneer. 'Lot 137.'

'Oh yes,' I said. I remembered the lot number but I had forgotten that it had been called a davenport.

'You were very keen to buy it,' said the auctioneer.

'Oh yes.' I said. I felt uncomfortable and hoped that he wasn't going to tell me that the higher bidder had dropped out and that I could now have it for £750. I wondered where Mr Fogg was and what my legal responsibilities were. Did unsuccessful bids still count?

'I hope you won't mind my asking,' said the auctioneer. 'But just for my own curiosity do you mind telling me if you were bidding for someone else?'

'Is that illegal?' I asked him anxiously.

'Oh good heavens no!' said the auctioneer. 'If it was I doubt if we'd ever sell anything.'

'Well then yes I was,' I said.

'For Patchy perhaps?'

'Patchy?'

'Patchy Fogg,' explained the auctioneer. I laughed. What a wonderful nickname.

'Yes,' I agreed. 'That's right.' I lowered my voice confidentially. 'I don't suppose there's any harm in telling you,' I said. 'But he was worried that if other dealers saw him bidding the price would go up.'

The auctioneer smiled. 'I thought he might have told you something like that,' he said. 'But the funny thing is that Mr Fogg was the seller.'

I didn't understand and I suspect that my confusion was quite apparent.

'No,' I said. 'You must be wrong about that. He gave me instructions to bid up to £750 for him. He wouldn't do that if he was selling it would he?'

The auctioneer put a hand on my shoulder, as though comforting an innocent in a harsh world. 'He might,' he said. 'If he knew that a London dealer had telephoned in giving me instructions to bid up to £800 for it.'

It took a moment or two for this to sink in. I remembered that the last bid I'd heard had been for £500. Without my bids the seller of the davenport would have received £300 less - the same £300 that the London dealer would have saved.

'But how would Mr Fogg - Patchy - know what the dealer had bid?' I asked.

'I don't know,' said the auctioneer quietly. He paused and then nodded at me. 'I'm sorry to have bothered you with this,' he said. 'I hope you didn't mind?'

'No.' I said, still rather shocked by it all.

'It's not that you've done anything illegal,' he said soothingly. 'But I always like to know what is going on at my auctions.'

'Of course.' I agreed.

The auctioneer melted away and after a few moments I wandered back to join Patsy who was now busy paying our bill and obtaining the necessary receipts. I didn't tell her about Patchy Fogg, the auctioneer, the davenport and the London dealer until we were in the car and on our way home.

* * *

When we got back to Bilbury Grange we were both in a slightly subdued mood. Not even the sight of the roofers dismantling their scaffolding cheered us up.

We didn't know how Patchy Fogg had found out what the London dealer's top price was, but it wasn't difficult to hazard a guess. Mr Fogg could have paid one of the auctioneer's own staff a few pounds for the information. Or since the telephone bids had to be written down somewhere maybe he managed to sneak a look. Whatever he'd done, it was fairly obvious why he needed us to bid for him.

'I'll put the kettle on,' said Patsy as Thumper and I staggered into the house behind her carrying the tin bath and its contents. The removal man had promised to deliver the furniture either that afternoon or the following morning. I couldn't help noticing that Thumper was moving cautiously and slowly. He put his end of the tin bath down and put his hand in the middle of his back.

'Are you O.K?' I asked him.

He nodded. And then immediately held his head.

'I take it you had a little celebration last night?'

‘The human body has got a design fault,’ he said, speaking quietly - and very slowly. I stared at him and waited. It is difficult not to feel self-righteous and pleased with yourself when you’re talking to someone who has a hangover, but I tried.

‘How are you supposed to know when you’ve had enough to drink?’ he asked me.

I shrugged. It didn’t seem like the sort of question I was expected to answer. It wasn’t. Thumper answered it himself.

‘You only start to notice that things are going wrong when you’ve had too much and you only really notice that you’ve had too much the next morning when it’s far too late!’

I grinned at him. ‘Give me a hand with this tin bath,’ I said. ‘Or I’ll start whistling - loudly!’

‘You should have been in the Gestapo,’ he said, screwing up his face in misery. He bent down and picked up his end of the tin bath again.

‘What the hell have you got here anyway?’ he asked.

I explained that I didn’t know yet, but that Patsy had bought the lot as a sort of lucky dip for 50 pence.

‘You both seem a bit miserable,’ said Thumper. ‘What’s gone wrong?’

I started to tell him the story of Mr Fogg and the davenport 128 and by the time I had finished we were indoors. We put the tin bath down.

Thumper laughed out loud and then held his head in regret.

‘Not old Patchy!’ he cried.

‘You know him?’ ‘Of course I know him!’ said Thumper. ‘He plays in our football team. He’s a great guy.’

‘But he cheated a dealer in London out of £300!’ I protested.

‘Don’t be silly,’ said Thumper. ‘The dealer was prepared to pay £800 so he was, presumably, convinced that he could get more than that from some other customer. Do you feel sorry for the customer who’s going to buy it from the dealer?’

I thought about it for a moment. ‘I suppose not,’ I admitted.

‘There you are then,’ he said. Patsy handed us both mugs of tea.

‘But I do feel used,’ I said, after sipping at mine.

‘Ah, now we’re coming to it,’ said Thumper with an admonitory shake of a finger and a muted laugh. He reached for the sugar bowl and dropped half a dozen lumps into his mug. He stirred it with a pencil he took from behind his ear and winced at the noise the pencil made when it came into contact with the sides of the mug.

I had to nod and grin. He was right, of course.

‘Are you going to send your £50 to the London dealer?’ asked Thumper. He took a noisy slurp from his mug.

I looked at Patsy. She looked at me. ‘No.’ we said simultaneously.

‘Well then,’ said Thumper. ‘Don’t begrudge Patchy his profit he paused. ‘Don’t forget he had to lay out money to buy the damned thing in the first place. He probably spent a few quid having it restored. He was taking the risk.’

‘But the auctioneer was very upset,’ I reminded Thumper. ‘No he wasn’t,’ said Thumper. ‘He might get a bit upset if someone on his staff is giving away information. But he won’t mind the dealer in London getting ripped off for a few quid. And don’t forget that the higher the selling price the bigger his commission will be.’

Auctions were clearly more complicated than I had thought.

‘Oh, by the way,’ said Thumper turning to Patsy and finishing his tea in one great gulp, ‘your father called and asked me to give you his love.’

‘My father?’ said Patsy, surprised. ‘Did he come for anything in particular?’

‘He picked up those lambs of yours,’ said Thumper. ‘He said he was going into the market so he’d take yours along with his to save you a journey.’

‘What!’ cried Patsy. ‘When was this?’

Thumper looked startled. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘About an hour ago I suppose.’ He turned to me. ‘What’s the matter?’

‘The lambs are pets,’ I said, putting down my tea and picking up the car keys. ‘Which market have they gone to?’

‘Pets?’ said Thumper, puzzled. ‘Lambs?’

‘Yes.’ I said.

‘Which market?’ asked Patsy. ‘Blackmoor Gate?’

‘I guess so,’ said Thumper.

Patsy and I left him standing in the kitchen as we ran out to the car to get to our second auction of the morning.

* * *

The livestock market at Blackmoor Gate was in full swing when we got there with thousands of lambs, calves and ponies for sale and scores of farmers standing around. I had to swerve to avoid a huge lorry leaving the market. We could see at least a hundred lambs inside. The ones that were closest to the walls of the lorry were looking through the holes in the slatted sides and ‘baaaaaing’ and ‘maaaaaing’ unceasingly. Patsy and I looked at each other sadly.

The farmers all seemed to be dressed the same - in grubby faded jeans, checked lumberjack-style shirts with the sleeves rolled up and, despite the fact that it was sunny and had not rained for days, mud encrusted black wellington boots. Most of them carried wooden sticks of various shapes and sizes and nearly all of them wore flat caps. The sun was shining brightly but I noticed that none of them wore dark glasses. Several dozen dirty Land Rovers were parked haphazardly, and an almost equal number of empty livestock trailers were scattered about. There were nine or ten large lorries parked around the edge of the field.

There was a constant background of sound as lambs and sheep baaed and cows and their calves mooed, but above it I could hear the sound of the auctioneer shouting prices and taking bids from farmers, butchers and dealers of various sorts. It seemed a sorry place to be and a sorrier place to work, and I was sad that I didn't have enough money to buy all the animals and put them into green fields where they could nibble grass unthreatened by humans.

'Hello Patsy!' said a farmer whom I vaguely recognised.

He wore the usual uniform of faded jeans, checked shirt and dirty wellington boots but had no hat. 'It's a long time since I've seen you here!' 'Oh hello Uncle Charlie!' said Patsy. 'Have you seen my dad?'

'What's up, sweetheart?' asked Charlie, frowning.

I realised I'd seen him in the Duck and Puddle. He spoke unhurriedly and leaned on his stick. He didn't look as if he had ever panicked in his life.

'I need to see him urgently,' said Patsy. 'Please, Uncle Charlie, have you seen him?'

'He was over by the selling ring a few minutes ago,' said Charlie. 'He's got some lambs coming up for auction.'

'Thanks!' said Patsy, racing off. I hurried off after her.

'Can you see him?' asked Patsy desperately looking around.

I couldn't.

'Surely they won't do anything to them here?' I said. 'Won't they have to take them to the abattoir first?'

'But they could have gone already,' said Patsy. 'If they get put into a lorry we'll never find them.' There were tears pouring down her cheeks. I took her hand as we both searched the sea of faces around the selling ring, looking either for Patsy's father or for our lambs.

'Dad!' shouted Patsy suddenly. She pulled at my arm and dragging me behind her pushed her way through the crowd of farmers which had collected around the metal bars of the selling ring. I could see her father. He was standing with two other farmers on the other side of the ring. Mr Kennett stood out for even though the temperature must have been in the 70s he was wearing his faded and torn coat tied with orange baler twine. I had never seen him out of doors without it. We left behind us a trail of cursing and protesting farmers.

Two men with large sticks opened a gate and let a flock of fifty or sixty lambs out of a pen into the selling ring.

'Dad!' shouted Patsy again, stopping for a moment.

This time her father heard her. He looked up and waved.

'Where are our lambs?' shouted Patsy. I was desperately searching the faces of the lambs in the ring looking for our four. I had visions of having to bid for the entire flock if ours had got mixed up with some of Mr Kennett's lambs. But I didn't care. No one would outbid me this time.

But Patsy's father didn't hear and he wasn't even listening. He had turned back to the two farmers he was talking to.

Patsy started running again and I ran after her as quickly as I could. 'Dad,' shouted Patsy for the third time. Now that we were only a dozen yards away he heard her. He turned and looked and waved his stick. 'Where are our lambs?' she shouted.

Patsy's father excused himself and walked towards us.

'What's all the fuss?' he asked, frowning. He looked beyond us at the crowd of farmers who were all nursing their bruised shins and staring rather angrily in our direction.

'Where are our lambs?' asked Patsy again.

'Gone!' said Patsy's father, looking very pleased with himself. 'Sold 'em all half an hour ago. I'll pay you when I get paid.'

'Who to?' begged Patsy.

'What does it matter?' asked Mr Kennett. 'I got a good price for them. You can't go back on the deal now.'

'But dad!' cried Patsy. 'They were pets. We didn't want to sell them.' 'Pets?' said Mr Kennett, uncomprehendingly. 'But they were lambs.'

Patsy burst into tears and started to sob her heart out.

I felt like sobbing with her and put my arm around her shoulders as much to steady myself as to comfort her. I could feel the tears in my eyes. I had helped rear those lambs and now they were going to end up on someone's dinner table surrounded by new potatoes and mint sauce.

'What's the matter with her?' Mr Kennett asked me, genuinely puzzled. 'You've turned my daughter into a right funny one.'

'I'm sorry Mr Kennett,' I said, trying hard to be as polite as I could. 'But I'm afraid there's been a terrible mistake. We'd be very grateful if you could tell us who bought our lambs.'

Mr Kennett looked at me and saw that I was serious. 'Come with me,' he said, turning and heading towards the spot where the auctioneer was standing. 'I'll ask for you.'

* * *

We were told that our lambs, together with the others that Mr Kennett had sold, had been taken by lorry to an abattoir near South Molton, a village about ten or twelve miles to the south of Bilbury. The villagers call it a town but most townsfolk would call it a village.

Patsy and I leapt into the Morris Minor and set off southwards down the road from Blackmoor Gate. The road twists and turns and passes through some beautiful rolling countryside, but Patsy and I were concerned only with getting to the abattoir as quickly as possible. I thought for a moment of driving back home to try telephoning to tell the men at the abattoir that they had got four lambs by mistake but decided that this would probably be a waste of time.

We raced past Friendship Farm, across Bratton Down, through Brayford, down past the stone quarries at Charles, across the A361 at the roundabout near North Aller and down across the Common Moors to the village of South Molton. I stopped for nothing and no one, and drove like a man possessed. Fortunately God was with us. We left our stomachs and most of the rubber from our tyres on the road and took just under fifteen minutes for a journey that usually takes twice that long. When we got into South Molton I turned to Patsy in a panic.

'Where is the abattoir?' I shouted. Patsy didn't know either so I screeched to a stop by an old lady trundling home with her weekly shopping in a small wicker trolley. She knew and gave me excellent directions though if she wondered why anyone needed an abattoir in a hurry she didn't allow her curiosity to show on her face.

The man on the gate at the abattoir had a clipboard and because we weren't listed on it he was reluctant to let us in. He listened to my explanation with no interest whatsoever but proved far more amenable when Patsy got out of the car and pleaded with him. Eventually, he agreed to let us park our car outside on the road and to walk into the abattoir on foot. Two huge lorries had already unloaded their live cargoes and a third was being emptied. The lambs which had been delivered for slaughter were crowded into tiny pens and they were clearly all terrified. The stench was terrible and the sounds coming from inside were blood curdling. Patsy gripped my hand so tightly that I felt my fingers going numb. Our four lambs had to be in one of those tiny pens.

'What do you want?' demanded a hugely fat man who wore a once white boiler suit that was covered with red splashes. Like the man on duty at the gate he carried a clipboard. The breeze rustled the sheets of paper that were attached to it and he smoothed them down with a blood stained hand.

'We're looking for four lambs,' explained Patsy.

'Not here you don't,' said the fat man aggressively. He held out a hand, rather like a traffic policeman on duty, and went as though to push Patsy backwards.

I moved in between them. 'Our lambs were taken by mistake,' I explained. 'They shouldn't have been sold to you.'

'Too late now,' said the fat man who was clearly uninterested in our predicament.

'You could be charged with dealing in stolen property,'

I told him, clutching desperately at straws.

'Prove it,' sneered the fat man. 'One carcass looks much like another.'

Suddenly, and I don't know where it came from, I had an inspiration. I sighed. 'I didn't want to do this,' I told him. 'Because if it gets out I'll be in as much trouble as you will.'

I turned to Patsy. 'Go and fetch the police,' I told her. 'And then ring the public health department and tell them that I want this place closed down immediately.'

The fat man stared at me, startled. I didn't want to give him time to think about what I was saying. I took out my small cardboard Bilbury Cricket Club pass and hoped he wouldn't recognise it for what it was. It had my name written neatly in black ink on the front cover and, fortunately, my title was written there too. 'I'm a doctor,' I told him. 'You've got four lambs here which have been used in a scientific experiment. They are infected with anthrax. Once those lambs get into your building you'll have to be closed down permanently.' I was relying on the fact that if there is one thing that everyone involved in the meat trade is terrified of it is anthrax. And it worked brilliantly. The fat man paled and stepped backwards as though to distance himself as much as possible from Patsy and me.

'If you let us take our lambs away from here there won't be any problem,' I told him. 'They aren't infective while they're still alive. But if any of their blood is spilt this whole place will be finished.'

'Are they marked?' asked the fat man.

'We'll recognise them,' said Patsy.

The fat man led us across the courtyard towards the pens where the lambs were crammed together. For a brief moment I was worried that we wouldn't be able to recognise our lambs.

But my worry was unjustified for the lambs recognised us. The moment they saw us walking towards them they began bleating noisily and desperately. They even struggled to climb out of their pen to get to us.

'There they are!' said Patsy.

The fat man waved to a colleague dressed in waders and a waterproof smock and pointed to our lambs. 'Get them out of there!' he shouted.

The man in the waders looked puzzled.

'Don't waste time!' shouted the fat man, now desperate to see the back of our lambs. 'Get them out of there.'

Seconds later they were bounding up to us like four puppies. They were wagging their tails and bouncing up and down like toys on springs. 'They don't look ill,' said the fat man suspiciously. 'If anything they look plumper and healthier than the rest!'

'It's the new test we're doing,' I lied. 'They've been injected with a drug which holds the disease at bay but unfortunately it doesn't kill it. They'll live but they're still infective.'

The fat man still looked doubtful.

I sighed and moved closer to him. 'We're working for Porton Down,' I told him. 'They want to breed apparently healthy sheep that carry anthrax.'

There was disgust in the fat man's face and for a moment. I feared that he was going to say that he didn't believe me. But he didn't.

'You people are disgusting!' was all he said, as he backed away from me again.

I shrugged. 'You have your job to do, we have ours.'

He just scowled at me. 'Anyway if you're from a government department how about some compensation?' I stared at him but didn't say anything.

'We bought those lambs in good faith,' he told me, belligerently.

I reached into my trouser pocket to see what money I had and found the fifty pound note that Patchy Fogg had given me. I pulled it out and handed it to him. 'Will this do?' I said. 'I don't want a receipt and I don't care whether you tell your boss you got it. Fifty pounds was a lot of money then. It was certainly more than the lambs were worth to a slaughterhouse.

I think it was the fifty pound note that finally convinced the fat man that my story was true. It certainly made him want to believe that my story was true.

Patsy and I walked out of the abattoir with our four lambs following us and I doubt if there have ever been four such gloriously happy lambs.

Farmers and butchers claim that animals are stupid and do not know what is happening to them when they are taken to the killing grounds of commerce, but my experience that day told me differently. Our lambs knew exactly what was going to happen to them, as did all the others that the abattoir had taken delivery of that day.

Outside the abattoir Patsy and I had the devil's own game to get our lambs into the back seat of the Morris Minor and we had to keep talking to them to calm them down and stop them getting agitated again.

As we drove back home, far more slowly than we had driven down to South Molton, I heard Patsy sobbing quietly beside me. I reached out a hand to comfort her and turned my head. Tears were running down her cheeks.

'It's O.K.,' I said quietly. 'We've got them back now.'

'It's not our lambs I'm crying for,' said Patsy sadly. 'It's the ones we left behind.'

* * *

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I had to call in to see Miss Phillips on my way to the surgery the following morning. Miss Tweedsmuir had rung me just as I was finishing my breakfast.

‘I’m sorry to call you so early,’ she apologised, ‘but would you be kind enough to call round to see Miss Phillips as soon as you can?’

‘What’s wrong?’ I had asked anxiously. I knew that Miss Tweedsmuir wasn’t a woman to panic unnecessarily.

‘It’s difficult to explain on the telephone,’ whispered Miss Tweedsmuir. She had spoken so quietly that I could hardly hear her and I had guessed that she had been frightened of Miss Phillips overhearing.

I drove round there as quickly as I could.

As I reached out to knock on the front door the door opened.

‘Thank you for coming, doctor,’ said Miss Tweedsmuir quietly, standing back to let me in. She sounded relieved to see me but looked drawn and tired and clearly hadn’t slept. She wore an ankle length red velvet dressing gown and fluffy, pale pink slippers which I guessed had been a present since they certainly weren’t the sort of thing I would have expected her to buy for herself. She signalled for me to precede her into the living room and then closed the door behind us and stood with her back to it. I stood with my back to the empty fireplace, still clutching my doctor’s bag in my right hand.

‘You must promise never to tell anyone what I’m about to tell you,’ she said.

‘Of course I won’t!’ I assured her.

Miss Tweedsmuir wet her lips and swallowed hard. ‘Last night Miss Phillips tried to kill herself,’ she said.

Of the several dozen questions which sprang into my mind the first one that escaped was: ‘Is she all right?’

‘She’s fine, now,’ answered Miss Tweedsmuir. She pointed up at the ceiling. ‘She’s sleeping.’

‘What did she do? How did she, er...?’

‘Pills,’ replied Miss Tweedsmuir simply.

‘The Angipax?’

Miss Tweedsmuir shook her head. ‘I keep those,’ she said. ‘But I was very careless.’ She blushed and looked embarrassed and started playing with the belt of her dressing gown. ‘I have a small supply of barbiturates,’ she said. The red flush on her cheeks spread to her forehead. ‘I use them very occasionally when I can’t sleep. I’ve had them for years.’

‘She took those?’

Miss Tweedsmuir nodded.

‘How many?’

‘About ten. Less than a dozen.’

‘I’d better have a look at her.’

‘She’s O.K. Really.’ said Miss Tweedsmuir. ‘I made her keep walking about the house for most of the night.’ She did not move from her position behind the door and for a few moments did not speak at all. ‘I don’t know what to do,’ she said at last, ‘I just don’t know what to do’. ‘Let me have a word with her,’ I said to Miss Tweedsmuir. We tiptoed up the stairs and I let Miss Tweedsmuir enter the bedroom they shared ahead of me. Miss Phillips was asleep and to my surprise looked angelic and carefree. Miss Tweedsmuir bent over her and gently put a hand on her shoulder.

Slowly, Miss Phillips awoke and I could see the lines of care and worry gradually returning to her face as she regained consciousness.

‘The doctor has come to see you,’ said Miss Tweedsmuir quietly.

‘Hello.’ I said, standing still at the end of the bed.

Miss Phillips opened her eyes wide and looked straight at me. She knew who I was straight away. ‘I’m sorry you’ve been troubled,’ she said. And then, without warning, she began to cry. Miss Tweedsmuir sat on one side of the bed and I sat on other and together we tried to comfort her.

‘It’s those tablets,’ said Miss Phillips a few minutes later when the tears had stopped and she regained her composure. She sounded more sad than angry.

Miss Tweedsmuir looked across at me. ‘I think she’s been trying to cut them down too quickly,’ she said.

Between them they told me that Miss Phillips had accelerated the rate at which she had been cutting down her tablets.

‘They make me ill when I take them and they make me ill when I try to stop them,’ said Miss Phillips plaintively. ‘I wish to heaven I’d never heard of them.’

‘If I ever see that doctor who gave them to you he’ll get a good piece of mind,’ said Miss Tweedsmuir angrily.

‘That won’t help,’ said Miss Phillips quietly, reaching out and taking her friend’s hand.

‘How long will this go on for?’ asked Miss Tweedsmuir.

‘I don’t know,’ I confessed.

‘Did you tell him about my silly episode last night?’ Miss Phillips asked her friend.

Miss Tweedsmuir didn’t say anything but looked at me.

‘I guessed,’ I said quickly. The lie didn’t worry me. ‘I made her tell me. But I won’t tell anyone else.’

I told them both that I’d see what else I could find out about the Angipax tablets and that I would return to their cottage later that day, then I got back into my car, drove to Dr Brownlow’s house and started the morning surgery forty five minutes late. Miss Johnson didn’t ask me why I was late and I didn’t tell her.

* * *

‘Would you have a look at these stitches for me?’ asked Mr Yardley. ‘I don’t know whether they’re ready to come out yet.’

He unwound a thick woollen scarf from around his neck and revealed the worst and most untidy piece of human repair work I had ever seen. A four inch long cut had been repaired with a series of stitches. Each stitch had been tied with a reef knot and the material used looked more like thick fishing catgut than anything I’d ever seen used in a hospital casualty department. The whole area around the cut was red and inflamed and clearly infected and there were trickles of yellowish fluid leaking out of each stitch hole.

‘Who on earth did that to you?’ I asked him.

‘I fell on a fence,’ said Mr Yardley simply. ‘Barbed wire.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I mean, who did that stitching?’

Mr Yardley fingered his neck cautiously, touching each knot in turn with his finger tips. ‘I did.’ he said, with a smile of pride.

I stared at him. Part of me didn’t believe him. But part of me knew that no professional could have ever done such a shoddy job.

‘Didn’t it hurt?’ I asked him.

Mr Yardley looked surprised at the question. ‘No.’ he said. ‘Not that I can remember.’

‘Were you drunk?’

‘I think so.’ He grinned an almost entirely toothless grin. ‘I can’t remember.’

I got up, walked round the desk and looked closely at Mr Yardley’s neck. He needed an antibiotic and the wound clearly needed cleaning and re-stitching. The smell that came from it was awful, overpowering even the smell of tobacco which emanated from his clothes. I noticed that there were several cigarette burns in his jacket.

‘You need to go to the hospital!’ I told him.

Mr Yardley frowned and shook his head firmly when I suggested this. ‘My father went into the hospital once and came out dead,’ he explained. ‘I’m not going into no hospital.’

‘But your neck needs resuturing!’ I insisted.

‘Can’t you do it?’ he asked me. ‘You’re a doctor aren’t you?’

I sighed and swallowed hard. ‘The hospital would be able to make a better job of it. I told him. ‘They’ve got better equipment and the doctors there are more skilled at surgery. They can give you a better anaesthetic too.’

‘I don’t mind you doing it said Mr Yardley firmly. ‘But I’m not going to the hospital.’

I felt quietly flattered.

‘You may be clumsier than they are,’ said Mr Yardley with disarming honesty. ‘But it’ll be more embarrassing for you if you kill me. You live round here.’

My newly raised self-confidence collapsed and I felt considerably deflated. ‘Take your shirt off, please,’ I said to him, getting up and walking over to the sink to wash my hands. It took me half an hour to cut through Mr Yardley’s thick and clumsy stitches, to clean out the wound and to replace them with my own stitches, to give him a tetanus injection and a shot of penicillin. By the time I’d finished, the sweat was pouring off the tip of my nose.

‘I’ll give you some penicillin tablets,’ I told him. ‘But you must come back and let me have another look at it tomorrow.’

‘There’s one other thing,’ said Mr Yardley. ‘While I’m here.’

‘What’s that?’ I asked him. I was back at the sink washing my hands again.

‘I keep getting nosebleeds,’ he said. ‘Have you got anything for that?’

As soon as I had washed and dried my hands I sat down and took a fuller history. Then, while Mr Yardley still had his shirt off, I took his blood pressure. It was very high.

‘It’s your blood pressure,’ I told him.

‘Why does that make my nose bleed?’ he asked.

‘When the pressure is too high it bursts open small blood vessels,’ I explained. ‘And the ones in your nose are the smallest there are. They act as a sort of relief valve. When your nose bleeds and some of the blood comes out, the blood pressure comes down.’

‘Are you going to give me pills?’ he wanted to know.

‘I can,’ I said. ‘But you could help yourself by giving up the cigarettes.’

Mr Yardley looked at me. ‘I’ll have the pills,’ he said.

Sighing, I wrote out a prescription for a drug designed to bring down his blood pressure and handed it to him. ‘If you have any unpleasant side effects with these you must come back and tell me.’

Mr Yardley looked at me suspiciously. ‘What sort of side effects?’

‘They do affect some people’s sex lives,’ I explained. ‘They can occasionally cause impotence.’

Mr Yardley stared at me and frowned. Then he stood up and started for the door. Just before he reached it he turned round, a puzzled look on his face. ‘How did you know I smoke?’ he asked me.

I touched the side of my nose with my forefinger. ‘I’m a doctor,’ I said. ‘We’re trained to spot these things.’ Mr Yardley showed no signs of being impressed and left.

* * *

‘I’m sorry to take up your time, doctor,’ said Mrs Francis. ‘But I had to come and see you.’

I asked her what was troubling her.

I liked Mrs Francis a lot more than I had liked her late husband. I know one should not speak ill of the dead but her husband had been a difficult, arrogant man. He had also been unfaithful and had died in the arms of another woman in Barnstaple. Mrs Francis, however, was a kind, patient and charming woman.

‘It isn’t my health doctor,’ she said. ‘I feel a bit of a fraud.’ She hesitated. ‘But it’s something I had to say; something I had to tell you.’

I waited.

‘When I sold Softly’s Bottom and Bluebell Wood to that Mr Sherlock I didn’t know he was going to build houses on it said Mrs Francis. ‘He told me that he wanted to set up a nature conservation area there.’ She bit her lip. ‘I’m so sorry.’

I reached across the desk and held her hand.

‘I desperately needed the money and I wanted to be sure that the land went to someone who would look after it said Mrs Francis. ‘I never dreamt...’ She burst into tears.

I let go of her hand, got up, walked around my desk, and put my arm around her. ‘It wasn’t your fault!’ I told her.

‘I love Bilbury,’ said Mrs Francis. ‘I feel so terrible.’ She looked up at me. ‘But he seemed so plausible. So nice.’ She cried a bit more. ‘I’ve always loved that part of Bilbury so much. It’s always full of wild flowers at this time of the year.’

‘He hasn’t started building yet,’ I said. ‘We haven’t lost yet.’

‘Oh but you can’t stop someone like him,’ said Mrs Francis, sadly. And I had an awful feeling that she was probably right.

* * *

At the end of the morning surgery I decided there was no point in telephoning the drug company again about Miss Phillips’ pills. Instead I rang Tom Parker, a friend I knew who ran the pharmacy at a large hospital in Bristol.

‘What do you know about Angipax?’ I asked him when we’d exchanged news and gossip.

‘Never heard of it,’ he told me.

I told him that it was new, told him the name of the drug company which made it, told him that it was being tested and told him that a patient of mine had become seriously addicted.

‘You want me to see if I can dig out anything about it?’

‘Yes, please.’

‘O.K.’ said Tom without hesitation. ‘I’ll see what I can find out and then I’ll ring you back this afternoon.’

* * *

‘How was Miss Phillips?’ asked Patsy when I got home for lunch. Patsy had answered the phone when I had taken the call from Miss Tweedsmuir that morning.

‘She’s O.K.’ I told her, with a smile. I didn’t tell her about the suicide attempt. I didn’t like not telling Patsy everything but we had talked about the problem of confidentiality before. ‘Patients tell me a lot of things in confidence,’ I had told her shortly after we had got married. Patsy understood instantly as I knew she would. ‘You mustn’t tell me anything confidential,’ she had said. ‘Apart from the fact that you shouldn’t tell me it would put me in a difficult position. It will be much easier for me if I don’t know anything I shouldn’t know about and shouldn’t talk about.’

‘Good!’ said Patsy, who, like me, was very fond of both Miss Phillips and Miss Tweedsmuir. She pulled apart a lettuce that she had clearly just taken from the garden. There were two small snails clinging to an inner leaf and she carefully lifted them off. Afterwards, I knew that she would take them outside and put them back in the garden. ‘There was a telephone call for you from an administrator from Withymoor. Miss Johnson gave them our number.’ She handed me a slip of paper with the details written on it.

I raised an eyebrow. ‘Did he say what he wanted?’ Patsy shook her head. I stuffed the piece of paper into my pocket and helped Patsy carry our salad lunch outside. After we had eaten we spent half an hour in the vegetable garden picking strawberries and lettuce. We were still selling to Peter Marshall at the village shop, and Peter had told us that the hotels were very satisfied with our produce and wanted to know what else we would have to sell them in the future.

Patsy spent at least two hours every morning working in the vegetable garden, and although there was a long way to go it was beginning to look more and more as it must have done in Victorian times.

As we carried our two baskets of produce back to the house Patsy tapped me on the arm to catch my attention. She pointed and I followed her outstretched arm. Emily was crouching down on the path and had clearly spotted something which she was now stalking. We both looked ahead of her and saw a young buzzard sitting on the bottom rail of the wooden fence around the meadow where our four lambs lived. The buzzard's head was poking through the fence on the field side and its tail was poking through on our side. It was watching something in the field. We stood in silence and watched as Emily carefully and quietly crept up towards the buzzard. We were both ready to pounce if either creature looked like harming the other.

When she reached the fence, Emily raised herself up on her hind legs and sniffed at the buzzard's tail. Very, very slowly the buzzard turned its head, looked down, saw Emily and then, still moving slowly, turned its head back to the front.

Emily was shocked by this. It was not the sort of behaviour she expected from what was very clearly a bird. She moved backwards a foot or so. Then, after a short delay, she moved forwards again and had another sniff at the buzzard's tail. This time the buzzard didn't even bother to turn round but ignored Emily completely. Poor Emily. She slunk away looking quite miserable about the whole thing.

Patsy and I quickly walked on, making sure that Emily had no idea that we had been watching her. She would, we knew, have been mortified if she had known that we had watched her being humiliated.

I only remembered the message from the administrator as I was about to leave the house to go back to the surgery. I'd put my hand in my pocket to pull out the car keys and the piece of paper had fluttered to the ground.

The administrator, a miserable sounding man called Perkins who had an annoying, whining voice, wanted to know if he could make an appointment to come and see me. He wouldn't tell me what it was about.

'When would you like to come?' I asked him.

'As soon as is convenient.'

'I can see you this afternoon,' I told him. 'But not until the surgery finishes.'

'What time is that likely to be?'

'Seven or seven thirty.'

'Good heavens, no!' said the administrator. 'I finish work at 4.30. I couldn't possibly see you then.'

In the end I made an appointment to see him at 11.30 the following morning.

As soon as I put the telephone down it rang again. This time it was my friend Tom the pharmacist.

'I've been doing some checking,' he said. 'I hadn't heard of Angipax because it doesn't come through our pharmacy, but there are patients in the hospital here who are taking it.'

He explained that the drug company which made it had done a deal with a couple of consultants, offering them sizeable cash inducements to test the drug out on a number of patients.

'It must be costing the company a fortune!' I said to Tom. 'The only patients who seem to be taking it are getting it free.'

'Oh it makes sound commercial sense,' said Tom. 'Don't you worry about that!' He laughed, presumably at my naivety.

He explained that the company making the drug was using the clinical trial as a marketing ploy. 'Within a few weeks,' said Tom, 'all the doctors who have been giving the drug away free will have got into the habit of prescribing it.'

It occurred to me that the company's profits would probably be enhanced by the fact that since the drug seemed to be addictive the patients who were taking it would probably have to keep on taking it. But I didn't mention this. I didn't think any drug company could possibly be unethical enough to take advantage of such a problem.

'One of the guys who has been prescribing it here has noticed that a couple of his patients do seem to have got hooked on it' said Tom. 'He says he reported it to the drug company but they said no one else had noticed it and so he thought it must have just been an isolated phenomenon.'

That, I thought, was exactly what the drug company's medical adviser had told me. I thanked Tom and told him I'd buy him a drink next time I saw him. He told me not to bother about the drink but to make sure I let him know what I found out.

After I'd finished the surgery that evening I drove round to Miss Phillips' cottage. As I drove I realised how hungry I was. I suddenly had a mouth watering vision of egg and cress sandwiches. I swallowed hard and tried to suppress the image.

When I got to the cottage I told Miss Phillips what I'd found out, warned her and Miss Tweedsmuir that no one seemed to have any firm answers, but said that if she carried on cutting down the drug slowly she ought, eventually, to find that the withdrawal effects began to diminish.

Miss Tweedsmuir said that it made her very angry that a drug company was allowed to put a drug on the market that caused so much unhappiness. I said it made me very angry too and I told her that I had thought of a way in which I might be able to warn other patients of the problem.

* * *

When I got home it was well after nine and I found Patsy on her hands and knees in the kitchen surrounded by the most astonishing variety of junk.

'Where on earth did you find this lot?' I asked, stepping over the most eclectic assortment of artifacts I had ever seen.

I could see at least half a dozen rusty rat traps, a pair of wooden boot trees, a dozen rusty spanners, three croquet balls, a wooden tennis racket with most of its strings either missing or broken, a metal money box with a large hole in the lid, a kite with a huge ball of string attached to it, a wooden box with no obvious purpose, half a dozen long playing records made by recording artistes who were popular during the Second World War, a bundle of clergyman's collars held together with a piece of orange baler twine, a large wooden scrubbing brush and a small leather gladstone bag with a broken catch.

'They were in the tin bath,' replied Patsy. 'There's some wonderful stuff here!'

'What tin bath?' I asked, puzzled. I didn't remember seeing a tin bath.

'The one I bought at the auction.' She stopped what she was doing and looked up at me. 'You must remember! It cost fifty pence.' She nodded towards the far corner of the kitchen where an almost empty tin bath lay incongruously on the floor. It had a large red, rusty patch on one side and I wouldn't have bet on it being watertight. I remembered. The last lot Patsy had bought after I had earned £50 bidding for Patchy Fogg's davenport had been a 'tin bath and contents'.

'What have you found?' I asked, kneeling down beside her.

Patsy was right. It did look rather exciting. The auctioneer had dumped all sorts of miscellaneous bits and pieces into the tin bath, turning it into a genuine lucky dip.

'This,' said Patsy, handing me an old photograph frame that looked as if it might be made out of silver and which contained a photograph of a stern looking old lady glowering at the camera. I examined the frame but couldn't see any sign of a hallmark. 'It might be silver,' I said.

'...and this!' Patsy handed me a very elderly looking teddy bear with one eye missing and an arm hanging loose. '...and this!' She handed me a rusty metal toy car which had one wheel missing.

'I wonder if it's valuable?' I asked her.

'I don't know!' admitted Patsy. 'That's what makes it so exciting!'

'I like the Gladstone bag!' I told her, putting the toy down and reaching across for the bag. 'I wonder if the fastener can be repaired.' I had always wanted a genuine old-fashioned Gladstone bag. I was surprised at how small it was.

'Probably!' said Patsy. 'There's an old-fashioned cobbler in Barnstaple who mends bags and cases. I'll take it in to him.'

'What are those?' I asked her, pointing to a small pile of about a dozen books.

'Oh, just novels,' said Patsy. 'I don't think there's anything very valuable there.'

'And what's that?'

'I don't know!' laughed Patsy, picking up a large, weird looking metal gadget. 'I think it might be a doughnut making machine.' She wound a wooden handle round and round and a thin wire moved up and down.

'What are we going to do with all this?' I asked her.

'I thought I might take some of it into Barnstaple,' said Patsy. 'To one of the antique shops. To check if any of it is valuable. We might be able to make some money out of it.'

I remembered the wine and wondered if we might be lucky enough to strike gold again. It was certainly worth trying.

Suddenly, Patsy sat back on her heels and clapped her hands to her mouth. 'Oh, darling!' she said. 'I'm sorry!'

'Why?' I asked, suddenly alarmed.

'I forgot that you hadn't eaten,' she said. 'You must be starving!'

I had been hungry but I'd almost forgotten about food. Patsy's reminder brought back the memory of hunger. She blushed a little and tiptoed through the bits and pieces on the kitchen floor to get to the fridge. She opened the fridge door, reached in and brought out a plate that was covered with a shallow dish. She shut the fridge door and brought the plate over to me. Then she lifted the dish off the plate. There was a pile of egg and cress sandwiches.

'I hope you like them!' she whispered. 'I made these for you a couple of hours ago. I don't know why but I just felt sure that you'd like egg and cress sandwiches for your tea.'

* * *

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

If I had seen him in the street I would know just from looking at him what Mr Perkins did for a living. He looked just like all the other Health Service administrators I have ever come across.

He was of medium height, slightly overweight and with receding hair. He wore a cheap, off-the-peg suit that had probably never fitted him properly, a white nylon shirt and a badly knotted red nylon tie which was decorated with a number of stains. He had three pens clipped into his outside jacket pocket and a fourth clipped into his shirt pocket. He had a thick layer of dandruff on both shoulders and had the sort of pallid face which gives meaning to the word nondescript. He brought with him a cheap black briefcase and, even though it was a gloriously hot day, he carried a raincoat.

He looked like a man who had never followed a dream or taken a risk in his life.

He sat down, opened his briefcase and took out a thick cardboard file. Then he took a plastic spectacle case out of his jacket pocket, removed a pair of steel framed spectacles and put them on. Ben, lying underneath my desk as usual, sat up and growled. She had only ever done that once before and that had been when Mr Sherlock the builder had come into the consulting room. I reached down and stroked Ben's neck to reassure her that everything was all right. I wouldn't have minded having someone to stroke my neck to reassure me. I wasn't at all sure that everything was all right. I didn't like the look of Mr Perkins and I had a feeling I wasn't going to like what he was going to say.

'I'm from the Planning and Rationalisation Department,' he told me in his annoying and whiny voice. 'We've been looking at your per capita throughput figures.' As he spoke he opened the file and pointed a stubby figure at a line of type. 'I'm afraid that your practice badly needs rationalising.'

I stared at him uncomprehendingly.

'Even allowing for the special circumstances of your rural position, the practice review group feels that there are clear indications for dramatically redefining your catchment area downwards.' Mr Perkins took a red pen out of his jacket pocket and pointed at another row of type. He made no attempt to turn his file around so that I could see what he was pointing at.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'But I don't quite understand.' I stole a look at my watch. I had three home visits to do before I could get home and I wanted to spend a few minutes helping Patsy pick the day's strawberries. Our strawberry plants were producing fruit with reckless enthusiasm. I also wanted to see how Patsy was getting on with our new paying guests. Frank and Gilly from the Duck and Puddle had telephoned to ask us if we could provide accommodation for a family of four who were coming from Essex, and so we were about to start our career in the tourist industry.

'To put things bluntly, doctor,' said Mr Perkins with a sniff, 'our group feels that your practice should be merged with another practice in order to maximise resource utilisation.'

'Which practice?' I asked, startled.

'I beg your pardon?' He sniffed again.

'Which practice do you want me to merge with?'

'Well, the nearest suitable practice is one on the outskirts of Barnstaple. And it just so happens that Dr Brownlow and his colleagues are advertising for a new junior partner. It would make excellent administrative sense if you were to apply for the post and take your present list of patients with you.'

'I don't think that would be a very good idea,' I said.

'May I ask why not?'

'Firstly, I prefer working here by myself. Secondly, if I closed down this practice my patients would have to travel several miles to get to see a doctor. And thirdly, I wouldn't work with the young Dr Brownlow if you paid me in gold bricks.'

'Ah.' said Mr Perkins. He didn't seem particularly surprised.

'Why can't I just carry on as I am?'

'I'm afraid it is largely a question of resource allocation,' said Perkins. He sniffed again and I had to fight back the temptation to offer him a tissue so that he could blow his nose. 'Our advisers feel that, as it stands, your practice is too small to be economically viable, and they have recommended that under Rule 49, Clause 17c of your contract of employment with the Secretary of State we withdraw your basic payment allowance, rural inducement allowance and per capita support payment.'

'But if you withdraw those allowances I won't be able to make a living!' I protested. General practitioners working within the National Health Service are technically selfemployed, and their income is made up of a vast number of allowances, fees and special payments. I knew that without the payments Mr Perkins had mentioned my practice income, already small because Bilbury was such a tiny village, would fall by well over half.

Mr Perkins looked very smug. 'That may be so,' he said. 'But there is another alternative which we are prepared to endorse and subsequently authorise.'

'What's that?'

‘There is, as I believe you know, a proposal to build a number of new dwellings in Bilbury.’ He looked at me and raised an eyebrow.

‘I do know about it’ I said. I wondered what sort of person chose to say ‘dwelling’ instead of ‘home’.

‘In the opinion of our study group the number of new dwellings proposed would raise the per capita quotient to an acceptable level,’ said Mr Perkins.

I was beginning to get a very uneasy feeling about all this, but to my own amazement I didn’t feel particularly surprised or angry about any of it.

‘Let me see if I’ve got this right,’ I said. ‘Either I agree to work at Sherlock’s new surgery and to welcome the new development in Bilbury; I close down this practice and apply for a job as a junior partner with another practice or I carry on working here and go bust because you withdraw my Health Service payments?’

Perkins, who had listened carefully to this, put his pen back into his breast pocket, shuffled uncomfortably and sat back. ‘That isn’t how I would choose to summarise things,’ he said. ‘But you wouldn’t deny that it is an accurate summary?’

‘There are no immediately apparent inaccuracies,’ he admitted. He spoke as though he had a sour plum in his mouth.

‘Well, thank you for making things so clear,’ I said, standing up.

Mr Perkins folded up his file, put it back into his briefcase and stood up. ‘Will you let us know what you decide to do?’

‘Naturally,’ I said, coldly. ‘You’ll be among the first to know.’

* * *

Our first paying guests had arrived and moved into the coach-house flat no more than an hour before I got home for lunch. Patsy had laid the kitchen table for lunch. We normally ate out in the courtyard when it was sunny, but the coach-house flat overlooked the courtyard and Patsy thought it might be better to have our lunch in private.

‘What are they like?’ I asked Patsy anxiously.

‘They seem quite nice,’ Patsy answered.

I can’t imagine why, because the coach-house flat was at least sixty yards away from where we were standing, but we were both whispering. ‘They’ve brought a lot of luggage with them.’ She told me that she had counted six suitcases being carried up the circular staircase from the Ford which was parked down in the courtyard.

‘For the four of them?’

‘Mr and Mrs Wakeham and their two teenage daughters,’ replied Patsy. ‘I don’t know any of their first names.’

‘How old are the daughters?’

‘They look about seventeen but they could be thirteen.’

‘I hope there’s going to be room,’ I said. There was only one bedroom in the coach-house flat, but the sofa in the living room did convert into a spare bed; and we had told Frank and Gilly that the flat would accommodate two adults and two children.

‘I thought we could perhaps take them some strawberries after lunch,’ said Patsy. ‘As a sort of welcome present.’

I said I thought that sounded a nice idea.

And then I told Patsy about Mr Perkins’ visit.

‘So it’s true that they want to turn Bilbury into a small town?’ said Patsy, sadly.

‘I don’t think the plans have been passed yet,’ I said.

‘But they want you to support it by agreeing to work with them?’

‘Yes. And if I don’t then they’ll close the practice down.’

‘That’s a nice choice,’ said Patsy. ‘Either we help them ruin the village or else they’ll ruin us.’

I hadn’t thought about it like that, but Patsy was right, and several thoughts started to appear in my head. Why, I wondered, were the National Health Service administrators apparently helping Sherlock and his plans? Was it just a coincidence?

My thoughts were disturbed by a knock on the back door.

I got up from the table where we had been having lunch and went to the door. A very large man and a very small woman greeted me. He was wearing a colourful short sleeved shirt and a pair of equally colourful Bermuda shorts. She was wearing a bikini top and a billowy, flimsy skirt.

‘Wakeham,’ said the man, holding out his hand. ‘Call me Dicky.’

I took it and introduced myself.

‘This is my wife, Doris.’

I introduced Patsy.

‘Thought we’d just come over and introduce ourselves.’ said Dicky.

‘Would you like to come in?’ said Patsy.

‘Not just now, thanks,’ said Dicky. ‘We’ve left the girls unpacking.’

‘It’s nice to meet you both,’ said Doris. ‘What a lovely home you have.’ She peered around us to peek into the kitchen.

‘Thank you,’ said Patsy. ‘We’ve still got a lot to do.’

‘I hear you’re a doctor,’ said Dicky.

I agreed that he had heard correctly. ‘Very handy to have a doctor on the premises,’ he laughed.

I laughed back, though my laugh was more forced than his.

‘We thought we ought to let you know that there isn’t a potato peeler in the kitchen or a toothbrush holder in the bathroom.’

‘And there’s no sharpener for the carving knife,’ said Doris.

‘Oh,’ said Patsy. ‘I’m sorry. Is the carving knife blunt?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Doris. ‘I haven’t tried it yet. But I thought you’d want to know.’

‘Thank you.’ Patsy and I said together.

‘Well. We’ll be getting back over there before the girls wreck the place,’ said Dicky. ‘We’ll be in most of the afternoon getting ourselves settled in so there’s no hurry for those bits and pieces.’

‘Right,’ said Patsy. ‘Thank you.’

‘Maybe we could meet for dinner one evening?’ suggested Dicky.

I looked at Patsy. ‘That’s a very nice idea,’ I said. ‘Unfortunately, it’s not easy for me to get out. I’m usually on call for the practice.’

‘That’s O.K.,’ said Dicky. ‘We don’t mind eating here.’

‘Of course.’ said Patsy.

‘Oh, and we could do with more coat hangers,’ said Dicky.

‘But not those wire ones, please,’ added Doris with a smile. She kept her jaw clenched when she smiled, in that uncomfortable way that people do when they have ill-fitting false teeth.

‘Right!’ I said. ‘We’ll see what we can do.’

Dicky and Doris, smiled, said ‘goodbye’ and then turned and walked back across the courtyard. Patsy and I exchanged glances and wondered if all our visitors were going to be like this.

* * *

‘You’ve got to do something to help her,’ said Mr Blossom insistently. He sounded angry rather than sad, aggrieved rather than depressed. He had rung me and demanded that I visit his daughter immediately, though he admitted that it was he and not she who could no longer cope.

We both stood and looked at his daughter and if I had been in his position I would have said something similar.

Mrs Blossom was lying in bed, and although she wasn’t asleep she didn’t really look as if she was awake either.

I sat down on the edge of a pale pink counterpane. ‘Hello Mrs Blossom. How do you feel?’ There were roses embroidered around the edges of the bed covering.

She slowly turned her head and stared at me. She tried to speak but although small bubbles appeared at the corners of her mouth no words came out. A look of recognition appeared on her face and in her eyes.

‘She’s hardly spoken for days,’ said Mr Blossom. ‘I think it’s those pills that doctor at the hospital gave her.’

‘I think you’re probably right,’ I said quietly. I couldn’t help noticing that there was far less respect now for the consultant psychiatrist.

‘So what are you going to do about it?’

‘Would you like me to fix up another appointment with the consultant?’

‘Certainly not!’ said Mr Blossom, without hesitation. ‘I want you to look after her.’ His faith in the consultant had melted and the respect was but a memory.

‘Then I think the best thing would be to stop the tablets.’

‘Right,’ said Mr Blossom emphatically.

‘But not suddenly,’ I said sharply. ‘She mustn’t stop them suddenly.’

Mr Blossom looked at me.

‘The pills are new,’ I told him. ‘They seem to be addictive.’

I gave Mr Blossom similar instructions to the ones I had given Miss Phillips and told him that I would call in to see his daughter again the following day.

* * *

We had a considerable amount of lawn to keep trimmed at Bilbury Grange. Cutting the lawns is, in some ways, a tedious chore but I confess that I find it a pleasing task in a simple sort of way. Nothing makes such a difference to the appearance of a garden as an expanse of newly cut grass.

Apart from the croquet lawn, which had once been an old tennis court, there were two large lawns at the front of the house and a number of grassy strips around the side of the house. There was also quite a lot of grass under and between the bushes in the shrubbery which shielded the house from the driveway.

When we had first moved into Bilbury Grange I had tried to cut the lawns with a small petrol driven mower that I had found in an old wooden shed to the left of the croquet lawn. It had not been a great success. The mower had cut the grass without too many problems, and left it looking smart, but it took me over eight hours to finish the lawns. I realised that I had to get something speedier and more efficient. In the end I had purchased a ten-year-old ride-on mower that Dr Brownlow needed to get rid of because his gardener found it too speedy and frightening for his taste. This may have had something to do with the fact that the mower had lost its two lowest gears and could now only be driven in reverse or at full forward speed. I drove the mower back to Bilbury Grange along the village lanes, and going up Bilbury Hill I travelled so fast that Dr Brownlow, who was driving behind me in his elderly Rolls Royce to make sure that I arrived home safely, couldn't keep up with me.

That evening was warm but there was just enough gentle breeze blowing to make it pleasant for working in the garden, and while Patsy picked strawberries I decided to cut the lawns. I slipped into my shorts and an old shirt, took the six, white metal croquet hoops and the coloured finishing peg out of the lawn, made sure that the mower was filled with petrol and set to work. One of the things about the ride-on mower is that it saves time. Instead of having a tiny grass box at the front that has to be emptied every few yards it tows a huge collecting box which holds an enormous quantity of grass cuttings and which only has to be emptied every quarter of an hour or so.

At that time I had not yet built a compost heap big enough to cope with the quantity of grass cuttings I was producing and so I simply dumped the grass cuttings in the field where our four lambs lived. This was a fairly tricky procedure. To get into the field I had to use a wooden, five bar gate which separated the field from the shrubbery, and every time I opened the gate the lambs tried to get through into the garden to eat our shrubs. I wouldn't have minded if the lambs had simply come into the garden and helped to keep the grass down. But they seemed to find fuschias, honeysuckle, hydrangeas, rhododendrons and flowers of all sorts far tastier than grass.

The theoretically simple procedure of driving the tractor into the field and unloading its cargo of grass cuttings was made infinitely more difficult by the fact that instead of running away whenever they heard me and the mini-tractor approaching (as normal sheep would have done), our four pet lambs would run towards the sound it made. They were as curious as cats and as reckless as kittens.

Despite this hazard, and the problem of keeping the lambs out of the garden, my first three grass dumping trips that evening were uneventful. The lambs sniffed and sneezed at the grass cuttings but I managed to stop them from squeezing through the gate.

By the time I arrived with the final load of grass cuttings, it was almost dark and I had to switch on the mower's two headlamps. As I opened the gate and manoeuvred the tractor through into the field I peered into the half darkness looking for the lambs but could see no sign of them. They had, I guessed, either gone foraging for sweet grass in another corner of the field or, more likely, had settled down for the night in their favourite spot underneath a huge, old ash tree. I dumped the grass cuttings onto the enormous mound I had made, shut the gate firmly, put the mower away and then went into the house for a cool drink, a piece of Patsy's carrot cake and a long, warm soak in the bath. Patsy, who had been turning some of the strawberries she had picked into jam, had put the jam down in the cellar to cool and set and was already upstairs in one of our twin baths. I shut the cellar door which Patsy had left open, shut and locked the back door and then went upstairs to join Patsy in the bathroom.

* * *

Patsy and I still hadn't bought ourselves a new bed, partly because we hadn't had time to get one and partly because we didn't have any money to spare. But we did have something to sleep on and we were comfortable enough.

I was fast asleep and enjoying a dream, which at the time seemed important but about which I can now remember absolutely nothing, when I suddenly awoke in a panic, unable to breathe. I tried to cry out but realised that there was a hand clamped firmly over my nose and mouth. As I struggled to free myself I heard Patsy's voice. I opened my eyes. It was pitch black but a tiny shaft of moonlight shone through a narrow gap in the curtains. Having spent the last couple of years of my life having to wake up suddenly and immediately to deal with medical emergencies I was quite good at waking up quickly.

'Sssshhhh...' said Patsy. 'Don't make a sound!'

I touched her hand gently to let her know that I was awake.

She moved her hand away from my mouth.

'What's the matter?' I whispered.

'I heard a noise!' whispered Patsy. 'Downstairs! There's someone downstairs.'

I had often wondered how I would react to such an event. Now I found out. I didn't panic. I didn't scream or shout. I didn't retreat under the covers. I simply froze for what seemed like a month.

'What do you mean?' I forced myself to whisper at long, long last. 'What sort of noise?'

'Just a noise,' murmured Patsy. She put her arm around me. 'Listen!' she said quietly, putting a finger over my lips.

We both lay there listening to the sound of our own hearts beating. It's surprising how much noise the human heart makes as it goes about its regular business. Mine had become so enthusiastic that it seemed determined to escape from my chest.

'Why would anyone want to burgle us?' I asked. 'We haven't got anything worth stealing!'

'Maybe they don't know that!' whispered Patsy. 'Sssshhhh! Listen!'

We continued to lie there, wrapped in each other's arms, lying in such total silence that I thought I could hear the hairs standing up on my arms.

'There you are!' whispered Patsy suddenly, holding me closer to her. 'Did you hear it?'

I had. Patsy was right. Someone was moving about downstairs.

'Maybe it's the people from the coach-house flat?' I suggested.

'The Wakehams? What would they want?'

'Perhaps they're looking for coat hangers?'

'They haven't got a key!' Patsy pointed out.

That was, I realised, the trouble. No one had a spare key. We had intended to give Thumper and Patsy's parents spare keys, just in case we ever got locked out, but we'd never got round to it.

'I'll go and have a look,' I whispered.

'No!' said Patsy. 'Stay here!'

'I'll be careful!' I promised. I don't know why I wanted to go and look. It certainly wasn't bravery. It was, I suspect, curiosity mixed with annoyance more than anything. I didn't want to go downstairs to see who was there but I couldn't stay where I was. In a funny sort of way, going downstairs to see who was there required less courage than staying in bed. 'You stay here and lock the door behind me.' All the rooms in the house were equipped with huge, solid-looking old-fashioned locks and keys.

'I'm coming with you!' said Patsy. 'I don't want to stay here by myself. Besides,' she added, 'I can help!'

Moving with exaggerated slowness I pushed back the bedclothes, as though the sound of sheets being moved would attract attention, and levered myself off the bed. My eyes had become accustomed to the dark, but even with the shaft of moonlight coming through the curtains I couldn't see very much. I tiptoed gently towards the door. We didn't have any carpets anywhere in the house and I knew from past experience that there were numerous nail heads sticking up through the floorboards. A loose board creaked noisily and I froze again.

'Aren't you going to put some clothes on?' asked Patsy. She had stood up and was busily trying to disentangle her underwear. It was only when I looked at her and saw how naked she looked in the moonlight that I realised that I was naked too. I tiptoed back towards the bed. I didn't want to confront a burglar without my trousers on.

'This might not be the most appropriate time to tell you but you're beautiful,' I whispered. 'And I love you.'

Patsy stopped what she was doing and peered through the darkness towards me. 'I love you too!' she whispered. She blew me a kiss as she struggled to fasten her bra.

We dressed as best as we could, put on our shoes and then tiptoed towards the door again.

I opened it a few inches and peered outside. I couldn't see anything unusual. The large window on the landing had stained glass panels in it and the moonlight was split into shafts of red, yellow and blue. But with the bedroom door open I could hear the sounds from downstairs far more clearly.

They sounded indistinct and strangely muffled.

'It sounds as if someone is moving furniture!' I whispered.

'But we haven't got any furniture!' Patsy pointed out.

'Maybe we've got burglars who are bringing furniture in!'

I started to tiptoe gently down the stairs, stopping on every step to listen. The noises down below didn't seem to diminish at all, and whoever was there didn't seem to care whether or not we heard them. At last we reached the bottom of the stairs and moved into the hall.

'It sounds as if it's coming from the cellars!' whispered Patsy, who was right behind me.

I listened again. She was right. I crept to the kitchen door, which was open, and peered through. The kitchen was empty and the noise, much louder now, was definitely coming from the cellars.

'It sounds as if whoever it is who is in there is banging on the door to be let out!' I said, not bothering to whisper now.

'Maybe it's a trick!' said Patsy, holding onto my arm.

I picked up a broom that was standing nearby and crept towards the cellar door, motioning to Patsy to stay where she was. The door to the cellar steps opened inwards. Gently, I turned the door knob to release the catch. But whoever it was that was on the other side simply continued to bang on it and the door remained shut.

Suddenly, I heard a sound which I recognised.

I put down the broom and bravely pushed on the door.

'Be careful!' shouted Patsy, behind me.

There was a scuffling sound on the other side of the door and then, as a gap appeared, first one lamb and then a second, then a third and finally a fourth came rushing out of the cellar and into the kitchen.

‘Our burglars!’ I said.

After we had made a fuss of them and escorted them back to their field, we returned to the kitchen to make ourselves a pot of tea. By this time the moon had almost disappeared and the first rays of the day’s sunshine were beginning to brighten the sky.

‘How on earth did they get down there?’ asked Patsy.

‘They must have slipped through the gate into the garden when I was dumping the grass cuttings,’ I explained. ‘Then they found their way through the back door and down into the cellar.’

‘You were very brave!’ said Patsy. She put her arms around my neck and kissed me. ‘My hero!’

* * *

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

‘Your column on Angipax seems to have stirred things up a bit said the editor of the *Sunday News*.

I felt my stomach turning over. I’d had a busy morning and arrived back home to find that Patsy had spent two hours fielding increasingly excited telephone calls from the editor. I had written the column after Miss Phillips’ suicide attempt, and although I had not mentioned him by name I had quoted my friend from Bristol too. I decided to telephone the editor before I had my lunch and was put straight through to his office.

‘Oh dear,’ I said. ‘I’m sorry.’ I felt certain I was about to be fired. It seemed a pity. Apart from the fact that we needed the money I quite liked writing a weekly column and having a chance to influence things a little.

‘Don’t apologise!’ insisted the editor. ‘It’s great stuff!’

This was not what I had expected to hear. ‘Oh!’ was all I could say. ‘Thank you,’ I muttered after hesitating for a moment. Patsy, who was standing a few feet away waiting to hear what happened, raised a questioning eyebrow. I hesitantly lifted a thumb to suggest that everything might, after all, be all right. A smile of optimism lit up her face. We’ve had enough bad news.

‘You’ve had a sackful of mail from readers,’ said the editor, ‘and we’ve had another sackful for the letters’ page.’

‘Is that good?’ I asked him, tentatively.

‘Marvellous!’ said the editor cheerfully. I felt distinctly relieved at this.

‘The really good news is that I’ve had two phone calls this morning from other editors who want to run your column in their paper.’ He mentioned two quite large evening newspapers in the north of England.

‘That’s great!’ I said, delighted. It was good to know that my column was gaining some approval from other editors. I liked the idea of having more readers and the additional income would be more than helpful.

We kept a notepad by the side of the telephone for recording details of patients who needed visits at home and I wrote a short message to Patsy: TWO OTHER PAPERS WANT TO BUY COLUMN! Patsy read the message and kissed me.

I tried to hold onto the telephone but dropped it. The handset bounced off the wall and then dangled a few inches above the floor. I stooped and picked it up. Ben found it all very exciting and jumped around barking furiously.

‘Are you there?’ I heard the editor saying.

‘I’m sorry,’ I apologised. Patsy put her hand over her mouth to cover up the sound of her giggling.

‘What do you want to do about your mail?’ asked the editor.

‘Can’t you just post it up to me?’ I asked him. I’d had one or two letters from readers in the past when I had been writing for the *Barnstaple, Bideford and Bilbury Herald* and they had usually been posted onto me.

The editor laughed. ‘You obviously thought I was exaggerating,’ he said. ‘You really have got at least one sackful of mail.’

‘What sort of sackful?’

‘A canvas post office mail sack,’ laughed the editor. ‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘I’ll wait a couple of days and then get one of our delivery vans to bring the mail up to you.’

‘But what am I going to do with that many letters?’ I asked him.

‘I would have thought that rather depended on what they say,’ said the editor. ‘What are you writing about next week?’ he asked.

I had one or two ideas but had not really chosen the topic.

I was still getting used to the fact that I could write about anything I chose and didn’t have to worry about writing a column full of practical advice on how to deal with corns, colds and cystitis.

‘I thought I might do a column on animal experiments,’ I said.

‘Are you for or against them?’

‘Against!’ I said, rather shocked that the editor should ask.

‘Great!’ said the editor.

‘It may cause more trouble,’ I warned him, hesitantly.

‘That’s good,’ said the editor cheerfully. ‘That’s what I pay you for.’

* * *

If there had been any danger of us getting too excited by this news we were brought back to earth with a bump a few moments later when the Wakehams knocked on our back door.

Patsy had managed to borrow some extra coat hangers from Gilly at the Duck and Puddle and she had given the visitors our potato peeler but she had to drive ten miles into Barnstaple to buy a sharpening tool for the carving knife. Since then they had called at our back door at least twice a day with small requests, comments, complaints and suggestions; all of which had been delivered with unfailing courtesy. There was, they said, no brown shoe polish. Did we know, they asked with cloying niceness, that the tea towels had no loops on them and so could not be hung up securely on the hook we had provided?

‘I’m sorry to bother you,’ said Mr Wakeham, beginning with a familiar litany the honesty of which we were beginning to question, ‘but the light bulb in the bathroom has gone.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry about that,’ I apologised. ‘But there are some spares in the cupboard under the sink in the kitchen.’

‘Oh good,’ said Mr Wakeham. He paused. ‘We’ll be in for another half an hour. Would it be convenient for you to pop over now?’

It took me a moment or two to realise that he expected me to go over to the flat to replace the bathroom light bulb.

I started to say something about being rather busy but at the last moment I weakened. I wasn’t entirely sure about the responsibility of a landlord. ‘Right,’ I said. ‘I’ll come back with you now.’

‘Jolly good,’ smiled Mr Wakeham.

I followed him back across the courtyard, up the staircase and into the coach-house flat. Mrs Wakeham was in the kitchen washing up and her two daughters were sitting on the sofa flicking through pop music magazines, eating chocolates and listening to the radio. Mrs Wakeham turned and shouted a greeting when she saw me. Her daughters sat sullenly, looked up briefly and then carried on looking at the pictures in their magazines. I returned Mrs Wakeham’s greeting, said ‘Hello’ to the two daughters, who continued to ignore me, walked into the kitchen and opened the cupboard underneath the sink. I picked up a spare light bulb and then carried it through to the bathroom where I took out the old, useless bulb and replaced it with the new one. Mr Wakeham followed me around as I did all this, though I was not sure whether he was watching in order to learn or watching to make sure that I did the job properly.

‘All done!’ I cried, more cheerily than I felt.

‘Jolly good!’ said Mr Wakeham.

Mrs Wakeham came out of the kitchen drying her hands on a towel and hissed something at her husband. I couldn’t tell what it was but he seemed to understand.

‘Would tomorrow night be all right?’ he asked.

I turned, about to leave, and waited. I didn’t know what he was talking about. ‘Dinner,’ explained Mr Wakeham. ‘You invited us to dinner. Tomorrow would be convenient for us. We wondered if it would be suitable for you.’

‘Oh, well, yes,’ I said hesitantly. ‘I suppose so.’ I added, rather ungraciously.

‘Wonderful!’ said Mr Wakeham, rubbing his hands together. ‘We’ll all look forward to that.’

I looked around at them all. Mrs Wakeham was still drying her hands and still smiling her thin, denture retentive smile. The two daughters hadn’t looked up. ‘So will we,’ I said, hoping that I looked more enthusiastic than I felt but comforting myself with the thought that the Wakehams were too concerned with themselves to notice how I felt about anything.

* * *

I called in to see Mrs Blossom on the way to the surgery. There wasn’t much change, but Mr Blossom was less belligerent and seemed happier. He said that his daughter had spoken a little more and had eaten two small meals. I told him to continue with the withdrawal programme I had outlined. Because I knew I was calling at the Blossom’s, I had left Ben at home with Patsy. Mr Blossom had a large and very aggressive Alsatian which didn’t like other dogs at all. The last time I had visited I had left Ben sitting peacefully in the car and had returned a few minutes later to find the Alsatian clawing at the paintwork and growling menacingly. I don’t know which of us was most miserable about this enforced temporary separation. I liked having Ben lying at my feet and it seemed strange not to have her around. And she liked being with me. She barked furiously and angrily whenever I drove off without her.

* * *

Less than a quarter of an hour later I was sitting in Dr Brownlow’s consulting room working my way through the evening surgery. Out of the first four patients I saw I knew only one; the other three were all holiday-makers. The fifth patient was a stranger too. Or at least that was what I thought when I first saw her. She was tall, slightly on the plump side and pretty in a pouty sort of way and I guessed that she was probably about eighteen or nineteen-years-old. She had shoulder length brown hair, cut in a fashionable style, wore a white T-shirt with a cartoon character on the front and a pair of blue denim shorts with frayed bottoms. She had an unusually well-developed chest and she wore a lot of make-up. I didn’t know why, but there was something vaguely familiar about her. I guessed I had probably seen her somewhere around the village. She continually looked behind her at the friend who had accompanied her.

‘What can I do for you?’ I asked her.

‘Is this all private?’ asked the girl hesitantly.

‘Yes,’ I assured her.

‘You won’t tell my mum and dad?’

‘Not without your permission.’

‘I want to go on the pill,’ said the girl.

‘The contraceptive pill?’

‘Yes,’ said the girl. She looked behind her at her friend and they both giggled.

‘Are you taking any other medicines?’

‘No.’

‘Are you on holiday here?

‘Yes.’ There was a noisy snigger from the girl behind.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Anthea.’

‘Anthea what?’

‘Anthea Wakeham.’

I had written the name down before I realised why it was familiar. I looked up at the girl. ‘Where are you staying?’

‘The coach-house at Bilbury Grange,’ giggled the girl. She looked behind her and she and her friend both giggled uncontrollably.

I felt myself blushing with embarrassment. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘I didn’t recognise you.’

‘That’s all right,’ said the girl, still giggling.

I peered past her. ‘Is that your sister?’

There was more giggling and much nodding of both heads.

‘How old are you, Anthea?’ I asked her.

‘Seventeen,’ she replied quickly. Even through her make-up I could see that she was blushing heavily.

I didn’t say anything but just stared at her. She looked down at her lap and played with the cheap, gaudy ring which she wore on the third finger of her right hand.

‘How old are you?’ I asked her again.

‘Nearly fifteen,’ she told me, quietly.

‘Fourteen.’ I said firmly, writing her age down on the form I had taken out of my desk drawer.

‘Have you asked your own family doctor to prescribe the contraceptive pill for you?’

Anthea shook her head.

‘Why not?’

‘He’d tell my mum and dad. I know he would.’

‘And you don’t want them to know?’

‘Are you kidding?’ she said. ‘My dad would kill me!’

‘Why do you want to go on the pill?’ I asked her.

Anthea stared at me for a moment and then turned round and looked at her sister. They both started giggling again.

‘Have you got a steady boyfriend?’

She shrugged but did not look at me.

‘What does that mean?’

‘Not particularly.’

‘Do you have a sexual relationship with anyone?’

Anthea stared at me and frowned. ‘What do you mean?’

I swallowed. ‘Are you a virgin?’

‘No!’ she said indignantly. ‘What sort of question is that?’

‘When did you first have sex?’

Anthea turned round again and whispered to her sister. After a few moments she turned back. ‘I was thirteen,’ she said. She paused for a moment and played with her ring again.

‘Nearly thirteen anyway.’

‘How often do you have sex?’ I asked her.

‘Why are you asking me all these questions?’ she demanded. ‘You’re just a dirty old man, aren’t you?’

I’d never thought of myself as ‘old’ before. It was a unique experience to realise that in the eyes of these two young girls I undoubtedly was ‘old’.

‘No!’ I said, probably rather indignantly. ‘But before I decide whether to prescribe the contraceptive pill for you I need to know whether you really need it.’

Anthea didn’t say anything but played with her ring again.

‘What precautions do you take?’ I asked her.

Anthea frowned and thought about this. ‘I’ll only do it in cars and at parties,’ she said. ‘I won’t do it in doorways in case anyone sees us.’

It was my turn to think for a moment. I decided that as far as Anthea was concerned ‘taking precautions’ meant ‘not getting found out’.

‘Do you use a condom?’ I asked her.

This caused another bout of giggling. ‘That’s up to the fella, isn’t it?’ said Anthea at last. ‘Some do and some don't.'

'Don't you worry about getting pregnant?'

Anthea looked at me as though I were truly stupid. 'I'm here, aren't I?' she protested.

'Slip your things off,' I sighed. 'I need to examine you.'

'What?' said Anthea, blushing. 'Here?'

'I need to take your blood pressure and examine your breasts,' I told her. 'I can't do that unless you take your T-shirt off.'

Anthea still hesitated.

'Will it make you happier if I go out for a minute?' I asked. She looked at her sister for a moment, looked back at me and shook her head. She stood up, turned away from me and pulled her T-shirt up over her head. There was then some frantic activity, during which the two girls stuffed a number of paper tissues into their pockets, and then Anthea removed her bra and turned round again. Her chest now looked far less impressive. I took her blood pressure, examined her breasts and asked her some more questions then I told her she could get dressed again.

'Have you met anyone in Bilbury?' I asked her. Anthea stared at me uncomprehendingly.

'Are you having sex with anyone in Bilbury?'

'I'm not going to tell you who it is,' said Anthea defensively.

'I don't want you to,' I said quickly. 'I just wanted to know whether or not there was a risk that you could get pregnant while you're here.'

'That's why I'm here.'

I wanted to talk to her, to find out why she felt the need to have sex with virtual strangers and to try to help her, but I knew she wouldn't let me into her life in the few days she was staying in Bilbury. Instead I wrote out a six month's prescription for her to take to the chemist and then gave her careful instructions about how and when she had to take her pills.

'When you get back home you must visit a contraceptive clinic,' I told her. I looked up and then gave her the address of a clinic where they would, I knew, treat her request for help confidentially and where, I hoped, they might be able to help her tackle her sexuality with more maturity. 'What about you?' I asked her sister.

'Oh don't worry about her,' said Anthea, with a carefree wave of her hand. 'She's all right.' Anthea's sister, whose name I still didn't know, smiled demurely as though she'd been congratulated on winning a Sunday School prize.

I didn't think either of them was 'all right' but I didn't see what else I could do to help them.

* * *

Miss Phillips was the next patient and I was surprised to see her at the surgery.

'I feel a lot better today,' she said, when I told her that I would have been happy to visit her at home. 'And I'm determined to get myself off those pills.'

'You'll have to do it slowly,' I warned her.

'I know,' said Miss Phillips quickly. 'I will,' she added firmly.

I was pleased to hear that she was being so sensible, but I did suffer a shiver of apprehension, for although I was eager to help I still hadn't been able to find anyone who could tell me exactly how to help a patient withdraw from Angipax tablets. I had, however, prepared a withdrawal programme which involved a gradual cutting down of the pills which I felt fairly confident would be safe. I carefully explained to Miss Phillips exactly what I wanted her to do.

* * *

Patsy had spent the whole afternoon preparing the meal to which the Wakehams had invited themselves. She had bought a box of locally picked mushrooms, two dozen tomatoes and a large hunk of locally made cheese from Peter Marshall and had prepared two huge pizzas as the main course. They smelt very good.

'I wish you'd told them that we were vegetarian,' she said, as she straightened the table cloth for the umpteenth time. We still did not have any dining room furniture and so we had to entertain our first dinner guests in the kitchen. And since we didn't have half a dozen chairs, Patsy and I were going to have to sit at the two ends of the table on upturned tea chests.

'I didn't really have an opportunity,' I said. I was busy looking through the classified advertisements at the back of the British Medical Journal to see if I could find another job.

Neither of us wanted to leave Bilbury but we were getting increasingly anxious about our future. I didn't want to work in Sherlock's brand new consulting room on his new estate and neither of us wanted Sherlock to get planning permission to turn Bilbury into a town. However, it had become quite clear that if Sherlock was turned away, then the practice I had inherited from Dr Brownlow would either have to be merged with another practice in Barnstaple or else I would be forced to close down. And so, with Patsy's agreement, I had reluctantly started hunting for another job.

'What about this?' I said, reading out an advertisement.

'Thriving practice seeks fourth partner. Wonderful countryside within twenty minutes drive. Congenial companions. Modern, well-equipped consulting rooms.'

'It sounds very good,' said Patsy. 'Where is it?'

'In the Midlands.'

'Oh,' said Patsy, being careful not to commit herself.

'There's some lovely countryside around there.'

'Yes.'

'It is a long way from the sea, though.' I pointed out.

'That's all right,' said Patsy bravely. 'I've always lived near to the sea. It will make a nice change.' I knew that she didn't mean it but I didn't say anything. She stopped tidying the cutlery and turned to me. 'I don't mind where we go,' she said very seriously. She moved closer and reached out and touched my hand. 'As long as we're together it doesn't really matter.' I put down the journal, stood up and held her close.

'As long as we have some land for the lambs,' I said. 'And are quite a way from the road.' We knew of too many cats which had been run over and we wanted somewhere where Emily and Sophie would be safe.

I had just put an ink circle around the advertisement I'd read out when Patsy suddenly let out a small angry cry.

'What's the matter?'

'I meant to pick some watercress but I forgot.'

'Do you want me to pop down to Peter Marshall's shop to see if he's got any?' Peter Marshall never closes his shop.

Even if the front door is shut he will happily open up to sell a box of matches.

'There's no need,' said Patsy. 'There's some growing in the stream.' She picked up a large plastic carrier bag, walked swiftly to the back door and then hesitated for a moment.

'Do you think it's going to rain?'

I walked over to where she was standing and looked up. The sky looked heavy. 'I don't know,' I said. 'Probably.' I sniffed the air as I'd seen Patsy's father do. 'But not for ten minutes. Come on - I'll come with you!'

We darted out of the back door, through the courtyard, over the fence, across the field and down to the stream. I hadn't seen any watercress growing, but Patsy had and she went straight to it. We picked a couple of large handfuls and stuffed them into the plastic bag and then started back towards the house. It was at that point that the heavens opened and the huge black cloud that had been hovering over Bilbury decided to jettison its load of water. I don't think I've ever seen water come down so quickly.

Patsy was dressed in the wedding dress I had bought for her at the auction, though it was impossible to recognise it as the same dress now that she had altered it. It looked beautiful. We darted back under a huge ash tree for temporary shelter. But the leaves only provided shelter for a moment or two and the rain soon started to come through.

'We're going to get soaked!' said Patsy. 'And I haven't got anything else nice to wear. Oh damn these people!'

I took the plastic bag from her, tipped the watercress out onto the ground and held it open. 'Quick!' I said. 'Take your dress off and put it in here.' Patsy didn't hesitate and a few seconds later her dress was wrapped in a roll at the bottom of the plastic bag.

'Now you!' said Patsy, taking the bag off me.

I hesitated for a moment.

'That's your only jacket,' she pointed out unnecessarily. 'And your only half decent trousers.' I didn't need reminding twice. I took off my sports jacket, rolled it into a ball and stuffed it into the bag. Then I took off my shoes and trousers and socks and stuffed them in too.

'Take off your shoes,' I told her. Patsy took off her shoes and popped them into the bag. It was now almost full.

The rain was still streaming down. The only good thing was that it was at least quite warm. I twisted the top of the plastic bag to stop the rain getting in and picked up as much of the watercress as I could carry. 'We might as well take what we came for!'

Patsy picked up the rest of the watercress and together we ran back across the field and towards the house. The rain stopped as suddenly as it had started as we climbed gingerly over the fence onto the path leading back to the house.

We were about fifty yards from the coach-house when Patsy put a hand on my naked arm to stop me.

'What's the matter?'

'Sssshhhh! Look!'

I looked. The four Wakehams were clambering down the spiral staircase from the flat on the first floor. Mrs Wakeham, who was wearing high heeled shoes, came down first, treading very gingerly on the wet metal steps, her two daughters followed and her husband brought up the rear. I shivered involuntarily. The rain had been warm but now that it had stopped it felt quite cold. We crept towards the hedge on our right and watched in horror as each of them stepped off the spiral staircase and then strolled casually through the gateway and into the courtyard.

‘Give me my dress!’ whispered Patsy, covering as much of herself as she could with her hands.

‘No one can see you!’ I assured her. ‘You need to dry off before you put your dress on.’

‘But how are we going to get back into the house without being seen?’ asked Patsy. ‘We’ll have to get in through the front!’ I told her. ‘Quick! Follow me.’

I ran along the track towards the coach-house but instead of turning in through the gate and into the courtyard I ran straight past. When I was safely past the gateway I looked behind me. Patsy, naked and shivering, was standing on the other side of the gateway.

‘Come on!’ I hissed.

‘They might see me!’ mouthed Patsy. I suddenly began to see the funny side of things and had to struggle not to laugh.

I peered through the stone archway, into the courtyard. The Wakehams were walking slowly across the courtyard and had their backs towards us. I waved a furious hand beckoning Patsy to join me. She closed her eyes and ran across to where I stood.

‘Did they see me?’ she asked me, breathlessly, as I caught her in my arms.

‘No. Come on!’ We hurried around to the front of the house and went straight to the front door. It was, inevitably, locked.

‘I’m going to get dressed!’ said Patsy. ‘I don’t care whether I ruin my dress or not.’

‘No, you’re not!’ I said. ‘Look, there’s a window open upstairs.’

‘But it’s on the first floor. How on earth are you going to get in?’

‘Easy!’ I said. I pointed to a ladder that Thumper had left lying on the ground, bent down and manoeuvred it into position. Then I put the plastic bag containing our clothes on the ground and handed my watercress to Patsy. A few moments later I was climbing up the ladder.

I hate heights, but in an emergency it is astonishing what you can do.

Less than a minute later I was inside the house, with nothing more to show for my efforts than a rather large splinter in a very embarrassing place. I could hear someone banging on the back door and someone, I assumed it was Mr Wakeham, was shouting to try to attract our attention. I ran down the stairs, opened the front door and let Patsy in and then took the ladder away from the house and laid it back down on the ground. I didn’t see why burglars should have things handed to them on a plate. I ran into the house and shot upstairs to our bathroom. Patsy was already drying herself and when she had finished I took the towel from her while she dressed.

Three minutes later I raced down into the kitchen just as Patsy opened the back door and ushered the Wakehams into the kitchen.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘I hope you weren’t waiting there long?’ I pointed to my still wet and tousled hair. ‘I was in the bath and it’s impossible to hear anything up there.’

‘Oh, that’s all right!’ said Mrs Wakeham with a sweet smile.

Mr Wakeham was clutching a bottle of wine wrapped in tissue paper. He was wearing a beige suit a dark brown shirt and a light green tie. He had a matching green handkerchief neatly arranged in the breast pocket of his jacket and had been rather too generous with a particularly pungent aftershave. Mrs Wakeham, who followed him into the kitchen, was wearing a plain, navy blue pleated skirt and a tight blue jumper which had glittering sequins embroidered across the chest in the shape of a peacock. She wore pearl earrings and a pearl necklace and had her hair permed. She smelt strongly of hairdressers. Behind them came their two daughters. Both wore knee length summer dresses, white cardigans and sandals; neither wore make-up and both looked five years younger than they had when I had seen them earlier that day. I recognised Anthea only by the sullen look in her eyes and by the ring she wore on her right hand. I wouldn’t have recognised her sister at all and, for all I knew, she might have been a stand in.

‘Get the corkscrew out!’ said Mr Wakeham cheerily unwrapping the bottle of red Californian wine he had brought with him. ‘It’s been in the fridge so it’s ready to drink.’

Patsy took our corkscrew out of the cutlery drawer and handed it to him. Mr Wakeham took the cork out and stood there holding the opened bottle. ‘Have you got any glasses?’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Patsy, blushing. She glanced at me. We both suddenly realised that we didn’t have any wine glasses.

‘It’ll have to be tumblers,’ I apologised. I opened a cupboard and took out first our two drinking glasses and then our two coffee mugs. I handed the two drinking glasses to Mr Wakeham and then put the two mugs down on the table. ‘Would your daughters mind using these?’ I asked.

‘Oh, good heavens they don’t drink wine,’ said Mr Wakeham, slightly shocked. He poured two inches of wine into the two drinking glasses. ‘You have these,’ he said indicating the two coffee mugs.’ Have you got a couple of cans of something fizzy for the girls?’

Patsy opened the fridge and produced two cans of Coca Cola which she handed to the girls. They took them demurely.

'The girls both go to a convent school,' said Mr Wakeham.

'They get taught proper values.' He smiled at them but they didn't smile back.

'I've made pizza,' said Patsy. 'I'm afraid we don't eat meat.'

'Oh how sweet!' said Mrs Wakeham. 'You're vegetarians!'

'How do you make pizza without meat?' asked Mr Wakeham. He sounded genuinely puzzled.

'Cheese, mushrooms, tomatoes, onions,' said Patsy. She turned and opened the oven. 'They're ready to eat,' she said.

'If you don't mind sitting down?'

The four Wakehams sat down on our four chairs and Patsy served up the pizzas and a huge bowlful of salad. For a few moments there was silence as everyone helped themselves. 'Oh darn it said Patsy suddenly. 'I left the watercress in the bathroom.' Mr and Mrs Wakeham both looked at her.

'We keep it in the bath to make sure it's kept fresh!' I explained. 'It's a spare bath,' I added quickly. I stood up, excused myself and raced upstairs to retrieve the watercress. It had caused a lot of trouble I wasn't going to leave it there to go yellow.

'Dickie is very proud of our girls,' said Mrs Wakeham when I returned a few moments later with the watercress. 'Aren't you dear?'

Mr Wakeham, who had a mouthful of pizza nodded and hurried to finish so that he could speak. 'You have to know just how far you let your children go,' he said, warming to what was clearly one of his favourite subjects. 'They need some space to spread their wings, but they also need barriers so that they learn what's right and wrong.' He beamed at his two daughters who were giving a passable imitation of a pair of angels. Anthea glanced at me to see if I was about to say anything. I took a sip of the wine her father had brought. It tasted terrible.

'We sent our girls to a convent school so that they would get the same strong standards at school as at home,' said Mr Wakeham. 'There are too many schools where the children are allowed to do and say whatever they like.' He cut off a large piece of pizza, pierced it with his fork and popped it into his mouth. There was silence for a few moments while he chewed and then swallowed it. 'There are schools near us where girls no older than our two have got boyfriends and are off out every night to parties and pubs and heaven knows what else,' he said. He leant across the table towards me and pointed an empty fork in my direction. 'I've heard that there are some girls not much older than ours getting the contraceptive pill from doctors!' he said.

I looked across at Anthea and her sister. They both looked perfectly innocent. Anthea looked at me, defying me to say anything. 'I think you're embarrassing your daughters,' I said. Mr Wakeham looked down the table. 'They know how I feel about this,' he said. 'And they know I trust them.' He now stabbed his fork in their direction. 'Mind you,' he said, 'they know what would happen if they ever started behaving like that!'

'Would anyone like any more pizza?' asked Patsy, who was, of course, oblivious of the real significance of all this. Her offer was accepted with enthusiasm.

The Wakehams stayed for two hours and ate every piece of food we had in the house.

As they left one of the girls whispered furiously to her mother. Mrs Wakeham shook her head and said 'No.' The daughter whispered again.

'What's the problem?' Patsy asked, smiling and trying to be helpful.

'Oh, it's nothing!' said Mrs Wakeham. She seemed embarrassed. 'It's nothing at all.' She hesitated. 'It's just that Anthea... 'she stopped. 'No, really. It doesn't matter...'

'Go on...' said Patsy, encouragingly.

'Well, is there a nudist colony anywhere near here?'

'A nudist colony?' Patsy was blushing bright red. 'No. How odd. Why do you ask that?'

'Oh, Anthea thinks she saw two nude people running around in your garden,' said Mrs Wakeham, with an apologetic smile. 'But you know what young girls are like! Vivid imaginations!'

Patsy and I both smiled and agreed that young girls did sometimes have very vivid imaginations.

* * *

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The next morning I wrote out a letter of application to the practice in the Midlands and posted it on my way to the surgery. Neither Patsy nor I wanted to leave Bilbury but we both knew that we had to think seriously about it.

'It'll be a challenge to move somewhere different,' Patsy lied.

'We'll find somewhere just as lovely as this,' I lied.

'It will probably turn out to be a blessing in disguise,' lied Patsy. 'These things often do.'

'We'll find another garden to restore,' I lied.

'And we'll find someone we like to love this house,' lied Patsy.

The truth was that we both knew we would never again find anywhere half as wonderful as Bilbury Grange. And we would certainly never be able to afford anything like it. We'd been lucky to buy the house fairly cheap because it had been run down and more or less derelict when we had found it. The chances of finding another house in a similar condition were remote indeed. And even if we did find somewhere we loved as much how would we cope without a Thumper to help us and to protect us from greedy or dishonest builders? I suddenly realised that I had made a lot of good friends in Bilbury. Frank and Gilly, Peter Marshall, Miss Johnson, Miss Phillips and Miss Tweedsmuir and Dr Brownlow.

I didn't know whether or not Sherlock Homes were going to get permission to build in Bilbury, but from what I've seen and heard I strongly suspected that they were going to succeed. And even if they failed to get the permission they wanted it looked increasingly as though my professional future in Bilbury was limited. Whatever happened it now seemed certain that our stay at Bilbury Grange would be a short one.

* * *

'I missed two of my tablets the day before yesterday,' said Mrs Blossom. 'I went out to a friend's wedding in Bideford and completely forgot.' She looked tired and pale. Mrs Blossom was trying to cut down on her Angipax and I had warned her that she had to do it very slowly.

'What happened?' I asked her.

'I went all sweaty and I had this terrible panicky feeling,' said Mrs Blossom. 'I could hardly breathe and I had this awful headache.'

'How long did all that last for?'

'Most of the afternoon,' said Mrs Blossom. 'I had to get a friend to take me home early and when I got back and took a tablet the symptoms gradually disappeared.'

'How do you feel now?'

For a few moments Mrs Blossom didn't answer. 'Tired,' she said at last. 'Very tired.' She sounded tired and she spoke carefully and deliberately as though each word was an effort.

She licked her lips carefully and held her head for a moment. She looked at me for a few moments and frowned as though suddenly trying to remember who I was. 'I'm very forgetful,' she said. 'Could that be the tablets?' I nodded. 'It could be.'

'A friend showed me your article in the paper,' said Mrs Blossom. 'Is that all true?'

'Yes.'

There was a long silence. 'I can't explain it said Mrs Blossom. 'But I feel...' she paused again and licked her lips. 'I feel as though I am thinking through cotton wool.' There was another silence. 'My problems haven't gone away,' she told me. 'But somehow I can't be bothered even to think about them. And I know that's not helping me.'

'I'll help you,' I promised her. I reached out and touched her hand. Her skin felt dry and papery. 'I'll help you. But you must remember to come off the pills very slowly to minimise the withdrawal effects.'

* * *

Despite the fact that we did not know how much longer we would be able to remain in Bilbury or at Bilbury Grange we had arranged for the carpet fitters to come that day.

To anyone brought up in a town the phrase 'carpet fitters' usually implies a team of skilled workmen who are sent by a well-established firm, and who arrive in a large and wellequipped van. We had arranged something rather different.

When we had decided that we could afford to clothe one or two of our naked floors, Patsy told me that she knew of a man called Mr Liveridge who didn't have a shop but sold and delivered carpets to remote farms and outlying cottages.

He had, she said, fitted carpets for her parents and they had been more than satisfied with his work. She had telephoned him (or, to be more precise, left a message with his sister at the tea rooms in Kentisbury) asking him to call round.

When he arrived that same evening we had explained that in due course we hoped to carpet the whole of the house, but that we would like to start with the reception hall, the living room and our bedroom. Since each of these three rooms had more floor area than the average cottage, the amount of carpet involved was not insubstantial and Mr Liveridge was enthusiastic. He was also able to offer us an extraordinarily low price.

Mr Liveridge had long grey hair pulled straight back over his head and tied into a ponytail with an elastic band. He wore luxuriant grey side whiskers, was in his mid 50s and had not always been in the carpet business. For the first thirty years of his life he had been a teacher of English Literature at a large comprehensive school in London. Then, in one fateful year, his wife had left him for a young woodwork teacher, his only daughter had married an electrician and moved to Australia and he had walked out of his job after a row with the school's twenty-eight-year-old headmaster who wanted the works of popular paperback authors to be introduced into the syllabus.

Enraged by what he considered to be an unforgivable erosion of standards, Mr Liveridge had left his chalk-stained grey suits in London and headed west.

For three months he had lived with his sister in Kentisbury and then he had taken a job as a carpet salesman at a store in Barnstaple. When the store went into liquidation just nine months later he had decided to go into business for himself.

These days he travelled the countryside in an elderly coach which had been built back in the days when such vehicles were known as char-a-bancs. This one had all except the front two rows of seats removed to make way for the storage of lengths of carpet, carpet samples, tacks, hammers and the other impedimenta of his trade. A piece of old carpet had been used to partition off, and turn into living quarters, the back six feet of the coach. The side windows had been covered with white paint in order to convince the licensing authorities that the vehicle had been turned into a commercial vehicle. The outside of the coach, which still had WESTON S'MARE on its destination board, was painted pale blue, as it had been, I suspect, when it was still being used to carry passengers, but Mr Liveridge's deliberately illiterate slogan 'U-CHUZE' had been painted on the side in maroon. Underneath this had been added, in script, 'In the comfort of your own home' but, for some reason, Mr Liveridge, who had done his own sign writing had made his 'fs look like 's's so that the message looked more like 'In the comsort os your own home' and as a result Mr Liveridge was known to his customers first as Os and, later, as Ossie.

In the winter Mr Liveridge lived in a small flat in Ilfracombe. In the summer, when holiday-makers could afford to pay a higher rent than he could, he lived in the back of his converted char-a-banc.

When not selling, delivering or fitting carpets, Mr Liveridge wrote poetry and stories, and although he would occasionally allow his customers to read some of them, nothing he wrote was ever published for the very simple reason that he would never submit anything to an editor or publisher.

Before I left home for the surgery I helped Patsy tidy up and move our few belongings out of the way so that Mr Liveridge could lay his carpets without too much delay. The tidying up didn't take long. Apart from our bed and an old wardrobe we had virtually no furniture.

'Do you think it's silly?' asked Patsy.

'What?'

'Having carpets fitted when we don't even know for sure whether or not we are staying?'

'No!' I said firmly. 'If we do stay then it makes sense to have carpets laid before we start buying furniture and if we can't stay then the house will be more attractive to potential buyers if its got one or two carpets in it. I had no evidence for this optimistic assumption but it cheered us both up a little, and because I liked him I desperately didn't want to have to tell Mr Liveridge that we didn't need his carpets after all. I took one last glance at our naked floors, kissed Patsy goodbye and left for work.

* * *

Miss Johnson came into the consulting room at the end of the morning surgery with a very worried look on her face. She had been subdued all morning and I knew that something was worrying her. She was normally the most self-contained and self-confident of people, but today she seemed strangely troubled.

'What's the matter?' I asked her, after inviting her to sit down. 'What's worrying you?'

'I don't really like to mention it,' apologised Miss Johnson.

'I'm not sure that it's really my place.'

'If it's worrying you and it involves me then you should certainly tell me about it.' I told her.

'It's just...' began Miss Johnson confidently; she faltered and then she took a deep breath and took her courage in both hands. 'It's just this business over those Sherlock building people.' She looked across at me and swallowed. 'Is it true what I've heard?'

'What have you heard?' I asked her, gently.

'People are saying that the Sherlock people are planning to build over a large part of Bilbury and to turn it into a town.'

'That's true,' I nodded.

'It's very unpopular in the village,' she said.

I nodded. But I knew that wasn't all that she had come to say. Miss Johnson looked down at her hands. Whatever else it was that she wanted to say was clearly the difficult part.

'Go on,' I said quietly, trying to encourage her to speak.

'That isn't all,' she said, clearly prefacing something that she knew I wouldn't like to hear.

I leant forwards a little and rested my arms on the desk. But I didn't say anything else.

'I think you should know,' she began. 'I don't know whether it's true or not and it isn't really any of my business.' She paused and looked up at me. 'I hope you don't mind my mentioning it?'

'Mentioning what?' I asked her, quietly.

'They are saying that you've agreed to work for Mr Sherlock and that he's building you a new health centre on his new housing estate.' Miss Johnson looked straight at me and her eyes were full of sadness.

'It's true that Mr Sherlock has invited me to work in a new surgery on his estate,' I said. 'But I don't approve of his plans to expand the village and I won't be involved in any way.' I looked down at my desk. 'I'll do anything I can to help stop him,' I told her. 'I think that if he does get permission he will ruin Bilbury. It will change beyond all recognition. I know people need houses, and I know that the holiday homes will provide employment, but Bilbury is a community and I want to see it remain unchanged.' I felt embarrassed when I stopped speaking. 'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I hadn't intended to make a speech.'

Miss Johnson's eyes said everything. One moment they were full of fear, suspicion and apprehension. The next they were filled with happiness, relief and tears.

I didn't want to spoil what was clearly a happy moment for her. But I knew I had to tell her the whole truth now.

'Unfortunately, there is a problem,' I said.

Miss Johnson looked across at me and waited expectantly.

'I don't know whether it is simply because Mr Sherlock has a lot of power or whether it is just a coincidence,' I told her. 'But if the plans to expand Bilbury don't get the go ahead then I think it is very likely that this practice will have to close.'

Miss Johnson frowned. 'Close?' she said. 'Why?'

'The administrators have decided that, as it stands, the village is too small to have its own practice,' I told her.

'But Dr Brownlow...'began Miss Johnson.

'I know,' I said. 'Dr Brownlow had a practice here for years. They say that now that he has retired it's an opportune time to reorganise the medical cover in the area.'

'But they can't just close the practice down!' said Miss Johnson indignantly. 'What are the villagers going to do?'

'The administrators say that the village will be looked after by a practice in Barnstaple,' I told her. I paused. 'They've said that I can apply for a job there.'

'But...what will happen to the surgery?'

'The surgery in Bilbury will close. Patients will have to go into the surgery in Barnstaple.'

'But that's ten miles!'

'I suppose that they might do a temporary surgery once a week in the village hall,' I said. 'That's how it sometimes works with villages which are looked after by town practices.' I shrugged sadly. 'That would be up to the senior partners in the practice involved.'

'Will you take the job in Barnstaple?' asked Miss Johnson.

'I don't think I'd get it even if I applied for it.' I told her.

'But surely Dr Brownlow would have some influence?'

'I don't think so,' I said. 'The senior partner in the practice is Dr Brownlow's son. Neither he nor I get on very well with him.' I paused again. 'I'm afraid I don't know what all this will mean for you,' I told her.

'Oh, don't worry about me,' said Miss Johnson quickly. 'I have a little inheritance and I can always take my pension.'

'But you'll miss the work...'

'Of course,' agreed Miss Johnson. 'But I'll find something else to do.' She stopped for a moment and swallowed. I looked at her and saw that there were tears in her eyes. 'What will happen to you and Patsy?' she asked. 'The house and the garden and everything?'

I shrugged. 'I don't know,' I said. 'I'm afraid I just don't know.' I paused. 'But if by any chance we do manage to stay in Bilbury I'd very much like you to carry on working with me.'

'I'd love to,' said Miss Johnson. She looked puzzled. 'But doing what, exactly?'

'I've started getting a lot of mail from readers of my column,' I told her. 'I need some help replying to them.'

'Oh yes!' said Miss Johnson, smiling. 'That would be very nice! Oh yes. I'd like that very much.'

* * *

When I got home Mr Liveridge had finished laying the carpet in the living room and was busy laying the carpet in the reception hall. He worked alone but quickly. Patsy was warming up some soup and some home-made bread rolls. I went to ask Mr Liveridge if he wanted some.

'No!' he said firmly. 'That's very kind of you. But I've got my flask and sandwiches. I'll eat when I've finished the carpet in here.'

'It's looking great!' I told him. He was a good workman.

'Thank you,' he said.

I sat down on the floor beside him.

'Do you ever miss teaching?' I asked him suddenly.

He stopped what he was doing and looked at me. Then he resumed the hammer stroke he had interrupted and put another tack into place. 'Never,' he said firmly.

I believed him.

I watched him for a few moments.

'I like what I do now,' he said after a while. 'At the end of a day I can see what I've done. I know I've done a good job. And because I always do the best I can, and always make sure that my customers are satisfied before I leave, everyone is happy.' He smiled at me. 'I don't get much hassle or many complaints,' he said. 'If anyone does ever complain I just ask them what they want me to do about it and then I do it.'

'Did you enjoy teaching?' I asked him.

He thought for a while. 'I was in love with the idea of teaching,' he said. 'But most of the children I taught didn't want to learn. And I was constantly under pressure from the bureaucrats and the philistines.' He smiled at me. 'I ended up hating the job.'

He carried on fitting the carpet. I sat and watched him until Patsy called me to tell me that the soup was ready.

* * *

After lunch I had an hour and a half free so I telephoned Dr Brownlow and asked him to stand in for me while I drove Patsy over to Barnstaple. We wanted to see whether any of the things we'd bought in our tin bath job lot was worth selling.

The salesman in the antique shop, a man in his early thirties whose two most noticeable features were thick blond hair and a carnation in his button hole, did not hide his disappointment when we told him that we weren't looking for anything to buy but simply wanted to know whether one or two things that we had brought with us were worth selling.

'Do you think this is silver?' asked Patsy, taking the little photo frame out of her bag and handing it to him.

'No.' said the salesman bluntly after a cursory examination of the frame. 'It's silver plate.' He handed it back to Patsy with what I can only describe as a sneer.

'What about this?' said Patsy, taking out the teddy bear.

'It's a teddy bear,' said the salesman. He did not take the bear and Patsy was left holding it out to him. After a few moments she lowered her arm.

'But surely old teddy bears can be worth a lot of money,' I said.

'Sometimes,' said the salesman. 'But that one isn't.' Patsy put the bear away and took out the toy car. 'What about this?' she asked, hesitantly.

'Scrap,' said the salesman impatiently. He waved an imperious hand. 'All junk my dear.' He was a nasty little man. I wanted to hit him. We left quickly.

'Never mind,' I said. 'We can't win them all. But it's worth looking. And who knows what we'll find next time?'

'It's not the fact that they aren't worth anything,' said Patsy. 'But he was so hateful!'

I put my arms around her. 'Do you want me to go back and hit him?'

Patsy laughed. 'No!' she said. 'Of course not!'

'Then let's forget all about him,' I said.

'Let's go and see the cobbler about your Gladstone bag,' said Patsy, cheering up. She led me down an alley I didn't even know existed and into a tiny courtyard where there were just four small shops. One of them was a cobbler's.

The cobbler put the smile back onto both our faces. He greeted the bag like a long lost friend.

'Wonderful!' he said, clearly delighted. 'I haven't seen one of these for years.'

'Can you mend it?' asked Patsy.

'Of course I can,' said the cobbler. 'It'll be a pleasure!'

He fondled the cracked leather with the eye and finger of a craftsman.

'The lock has completely broken,' said Patsy.

'I can mend it said the cobbler with certainty. He smiled at her. 'You won't recognise it when I've finished with it.'

'How much will it cost?' asked Patsy.

'No more than you can afford,' said the cobbler. He looked at us and must have seen the apprehension on our faces. 'It won't be more than £2.' he promised. He smiled as our looks of apprehension were replaced by looks of relief. 'I told you,' he said. 'It'll be a pleasure to work on it.'

He told us to call back for it in a few days time. We left his shop with smiles on our faces and a bounce in our steps and walked hand in hand to a tea shop in Bear Street which made wonderful cakes and served large cinnamon scones smothered in butter.

* * *

When we got back to Bilbury Grange the carpet fitter had finished. He had done a wonderful job. It was starting to get late, but when Patsy called the cats in for their tea only Sophie appeared. Emily, our cute young mixed tabby with the pure white paws and the soft, faraway beguiling look in her eyes, didn't come.

'Don't worry,' said Patsy, who could see that I was worried.

'She's probably out hunting and too busy to come back for tea.'

I knew she was probably right. But it didn't stop me worrying.

* * *

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I woke up at six the following morning desperately hoping to find Emily asleep alongside us. Sophie was there, curled up by Patsy's feet, but of Emily there was no sign.

I climbed quietly out of bed, hoping that I could do so without waking Patsy. Sophie pricked up her ears and opened one eye.

'Is she back?' murmured Patsy, still half asleep.

'No.'

Patsy sat up and opened her eyes. Sophie jumped down off the bed and sat, expectantly, on the floor. I drew the curtains and opened the window and blinked at the bright morning sunshine. Normally the view from our bedroom never failed to fill me with wonder and admiration but this morning I just peered out looking to see if I could see any sign of Emily. I saw a rabbit hopping along one of the paths and there were birds sitting and twittering on trees and bushes everywhere. I dressed quickly in shorts and a short sleeved shirt for since it was a Saturday morning I did not have to go to the surgery until an hour later than usual.

'Where do you think she can be?' asked Patsy. She too had dressed quickly in shorts and a short sleeved shirt, but the effect on her was far more dazzling. Her legs, arms and face had already been burned a rich, even brown by the summer sun which had also bleached her hair an even lighter shade of brown. Her short white shorts and white shirt contrasted strongly with the brown of her body.

'I'm going to go through every room in the house and all the outbuildings,' I said. 'She might have got herself shut in somewhere.' I had checked everywhere the night before but she could, I still hoped, have got herself shut in and fallen asleep somewhere.

'Maybe we should check the coach-house flat,' suggested Patsy. 'She could have wandered in there.'

'I'll have a look,' I said. 'But I don't think she would go in there.' Our two young kittens had already developed clearly defined personalities. Sophie liked people and would rub herself up against any pair of human legs. But Emily was shy and nervous and usually ran away and hid if she heard footsteps or voices that she didn't recognise. I didn't think for a moment that she would willingly have gone into the flat with a party of complete strangers.

'You do the cellars and the outbuildings,' said Patsy. 'I'll do inside the house.'

So we split up for our search.

The cellars, which were as always a cool and dark refuge from the bright summer sunshine (I had noticed that the temperature down there never seemed to change whatever the weather outside was doing, and understood at last why cellars were regarded as such a good place to store wine) took quite a long time to search because there were lots of small and secret places where a kitten could hide. I was worried that if Emily had injured herself she might have crawled into a dark corner in the way that animals do when they are ill. By the time I'd finished down there and had emerged, covered in dust and cobwebs, Patsy had just finished searching the house. Neither of us had any luck at all.

Patsy came outside to help me search the outbuildings.

The sun was still low but it was bright and the day was clearly going to be warmer even than its predecessors, but to us it seemed flat, grey and glum. All we could think of was the fact that Emily could be lying somewhere frightened, cold, injured, hungry and alone. She had stolen our hearts since she had come to live with us and neither of us could bear the thought of her being in any sort of distress.

In one of the stables, the one where I kept the lawn mower, we found that a pair of swallows had built a nest where two cross beams met. I hadn't noticed it before. The tails of two baby swallows were sticking out over the sides of the neatly made nest and we closed the door of the stable quietly so as not to disturb them. I didn't know how they'd been getting in and out but there wasn't any point in leaving the stable door open now for they clearly had an entrance and exit of their own.

By the time we had finished searching the outbuildings around the courtyard nearly an hour had passed.

Patsy put her hand in my mine as we walked together out of the courtyard calling Emily's name. 'I thought we'd have found her by now,' she said. 'I keep having this vision of her lying somewhere cosy and comfortable and looking so pleased to see us.'

I knew what she meant. Every time I had opened a door, peered behind a pile of rubbish or looked into a dark corner I had been convinced that I would see Emily there.

'Let's try the vegetable garden,' said Patsy suddenly. 'She might be somewhere in there.' We both knew that she loved the walled garden because it was sheltered and warm and yet full of shady spots.

As we walked into the walled garden we both heard it at the same moment: a faint yet unmistakeably plaintive miaowing that was coming from the direction of the greenhouse.

We ran along the broad, hard dusty paths that lay between the ornamental brickwork which bordered the flower and vegetable beds, towards the greenhouse. Patsy got there first and pulled open the door. It creaked and grated and protested for its hinges needed oiling and the door had slipped an inch or so and was scraping on the flagstones which made up the floor.

Emily, who was sitting on a pile of old thick, brown, paper, compost sacks piled in a corner of the greenhouse, stretched a leg when she saw us and miaowed even more loudly before. It was a miaow of pleasure and protest: pleasure at seeing us and protest at the fact that she had spent the night locked in. Judging by the indentation made on the sacks she had spent the night sleeping in that very same place.

Patsy went over to her and picked her up. Emily snuggled against her chest and purred loudly, rubbing her head against Patsy's shirt. I stroked her neck and she held her head so that I could tickle her under her chin. She purred even more loudly.

'How on earth do you think she got locked in?' asked Patsy.

'I shut the door yesterday evening,' I said guiltily. 'But I didn't see her in here then.' I looked around and then found another kitten shaped indentation on a pile of straw underneath a length of wooden staging that ran the whole length of the greenhouse. Emily must have been sleeping under there out of the sun and out of sight when I had gone out to the vegetable garden to water the plants and shut up the greenhouse.

'I'm sorry, Emily!' I said. She purred at me and reached out with a white paw to touch my arm. It was as though she was telling me that everything was all right and that she forgave me.

'Let's get you back to the house,' murmured Patsy to Emily. 'I bet you're hungry.'

'I bet she is!' I agreed.

I suddenly realised that I was hungry too. We'd been searching for Emily for over an hour and I hadn't yet had any breakfast. I felt as happy as I had felt sad an hour or so earlier.

* * *

Our new set of paying guests arrived that morning and by the time I arrived back from the morning surgery they were settled into the flat and had spread themselves over much of the courtyard too.

Mr and Mrs Onions ('pronounced oh-ny-ans' insisted Mr Onions the moment we met) had driven from London in their BMW motor car, and although they had only booked in for a week's holiday they seemed to have brought enough to last them three months. Patsy said that she'd been in the kitchen when they had arrived and she had seen Mr Onions carry at least eight suitcases up the spiral staircase to the flat. She said that the back of the car as well as the boot had been filled with luggage and that they had carried their largest cases on their roof rack. Diving equipment, golf clubs, riding boots and capes and tennis racquets in profusion were stacked neatly against the walls at the entrance to the courtyard.

When Mr Onions came to knock on the back door Patsy and I were just finishing a quick salad lunch before going out to spend the afternoon in the garden.

'Nice place you've got,' said Mr Onions. 'We've got friends in Cornwall who've got a house rather similar to this.' He paused and looked around critically at the peeling paint and the cracks in the mortar on the outside of the house. 'Of course,' he added, 'their house is in much better condition.'

He looked around again and turned to his wife. 'Much better, isn't it?'

'Oh definitely,' agreed Mrs Onions.

Mr Onions, who was rather plump faced and portly was wearing a beige safari suit with a cream shirt and a paisley muffler, and looked as though he was in his late twenties. His wife, who was as thin as a stick insect was wearing a spotless white dress with a plunging neckline and no back, and looked a few years younger. She was clearly not wearing a bra and yet her breasts seemed suspended in mid air. I suspected the influence of silicone.

'Well, I hope you have a nice stay here,' I said, after what had threatened to be an embarrassing silence.

'Would you like to come in for a cup of tea?' asked Patsy.

'That's very kind of you,' smiled Mrs Onions sweetly. She didn't wait to see what her husband said but stepped past me into the kitchen. She wore white patent leather shoes with the highest heels I'd ever seen and they click clacked noisily on our floor. Mr Onions followed her quickly as though half afraid that we might change our minds. He saw Sophie asleep on a cushion on one of our chairs. Emily, always the nervous kitten, who had spent the morning staying as close to Patsy as she could, had run out of the kitchen into the hall and then upstairs the moment she had heard voices outside the back door.

'Oh,' he said. 'A cat.'

'That's Sophie,' I said.

'I don't like cats very much,' said Mr Onions. 'They bring on my asthma.'

'Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.' I said.

Sophie leapt down off the chair and walked over to Mr Onions. She began to brush against his legs. He recoiled as though she were a cobra.

'I'll put her outside,' I said. I didn't really like doing it since it was more Sophie's kitchen than Mr Onions' but I felt my responsibility as a landlord. I picked Sophie up and slipped her through the door into the hall. Then I shut the door.

'Earl Grey tea with lemon, please,' said Mrs Onions as Patsy put the kettle on. 'You have got that, haven't you?'

Patsy blushed. 'I'm afraid we've only got this,' she said, holding up a pack of a well-known proprietary brand of tea. She looked at me and then back at Mrs Onions. 'And I'm afraid I don't have any lemon.'

'Oh,' said Mrs Onions, looking rather shocked. 'We always keep at least half a dozen kinds of tea, don't we Simon?'

Mr Onions agreed that they did. 'I expect it's difficult to get much variety out here,' he said. 'Though you could always have groceries brought in specially.'

'Our friends in Cornwall have all their groceries posted down from Harrods,' said Mrs Onions. 'They say it's the only way they can live down there.'

'Will ordinary tea be all right?' asked Patsy. She sounded rather sad and embarrassed and I felt angry with the Onions.

'Oh yes, it'll do for now,' said Mrs Onions, somehow managing to sound even more patronising than she had before.

'Did you have a good drive down?' I asked Mr Onions. 'Very good,' replied our guest. 'Three hours twenty minutes.'

'That's very good,' I agreed.

'I've got the new 3litre fuel-injected model,' said Mr Onions. 'I like to change my car every two years but I always stick with BMW.' He raised an eyebrow. 'What do you drive?'

'A Morris Minor,' I said. 'Convertible.' I added.

Mr Onions did not seem impressed by this. 'I suppose you find that convenient for the lanes,' he said.

'It's really all I can afford,' I said. 'But yes it is very convenient.'

'Have you got anywhere we can store our things?' asked Mr Onions. 'We've got some rather valuable sporting equipment out there and there isn't room in the flat.' He looked at me and smiled but it wasn't really a smile. 'It's rather smaller than we expected.'

'You can put it into one of the barns,' I said. 'I'll clear out some space for you.'

'Is it secure?'

'Oh yes.' I said. 'I should think so.'

'Simon has just bought some new golf clubs,' said Mrs Onions. 'They cost over £300.'

'Gosh.' I said. 'That seems a lot. I didn't think golf clubs cost that much!' I frowned. 'In fact I'm sure I saw some in a shop in Barnstaple that were much less than that.'

'Oh you can buy cheap ones,' said Mrs Onions. 'But these have rather fancy shafts and they're endorsed.' She mentioned the name of a golfer who had apparently just won a major trophy.

'Ah.' I said, not really understanding how that could make a set of golf clubs worth so much more.

'Tea's ready,' said Patsy. She handed Mr and Mrs Onions mugs of tea. 'Do either of you take sugar?'

Mrs Onions looked at the mug she had been handed and was now holding in two immaculately manicured hands.

'Good heavens!' she said. 'I don't think I've ever drunk tea out of anything quite like this before.' She giggled nervously.

'I don't think I can hold it' she said. Her husband reached across, took the mug from her and put it down on the kitchen table. He then took a sip from his mug, grimaced and put it down too.

'Perhaps you'd be kind enough to show us where we can store our things, then?' said Mr Onions, standing up. 'I don't like leaving them out in the open longer than necessary.'

'It'll be quite safe!' said Patsy. 'We don't have any thieves around here.'

Mr Onions looked at her pityingly. 'There are thieves everywhere,' he said severely.

I followed the two of them outside and then found them a place in one of the stables where they could store their sporting equipment. Mr Onions insisted that the stable be locked so I had to drive down to Peter Marshall's shop to buy a padlock and chain.

* * *

We spent the rest of the day in the garden.

First, we weeded the strawberries, the lettuce and the other crops we'd sown. Then we continued clearing away the brambles and nettles, though for this we had to go indoors and change into thicker clothes. We were both soon soaked with sweat. I lit a huge bonfire and the heat and smoke from that made us even hotter.

When the thunderstorm came at a few minutes after five o'clock we were, I think, both secretly pleased. Apart from cooling us down, it also gave us a good excuse to stop. We had only been gardening for about three hours but we were both absolutely exhausted. We went into the house and slumped onto chairs in the kitchen. Patsy had made a pitcher of orange juice and we emptied it completely in just a few minutes. I was leaning back on my chair, with my bare feet resting on the edge of the table when suddenly my chair slipped and I crashed backwards into the wall.

'Are you all right?' cried Patsy, rushing over to help me up.

'I'm fine!' I said. I looked around. 'But the wall isn't!' I said, extricating my elbow from the hole it had made in what we had both thought was a solid wall.

We both looked at the hole. The wall that my elbow had penetrated was merely a sheet of hardboard that had been covered in wallpaper and then painted white to match the rest of the kitchen.

'I wonder what's behind it said Patsy. 'What do you think they covered up?'

'It's probably just an alcove.' I said. I poked my fingers into the hole I'd made and could feel nothing but space. I looked around the kitchen, could see nothing useful and slipped outside into the courtyard. Moments later I returned with a short pea stick I'd found. I poked the cane through the hole, expecting to reach a solid wall within a few inches. But the cane just kept on disappearing. 'There's an enormous hole!' I said, astonished.

'Let's see what's there!' said Patsy, excitedly.

I looked at the hardboard wall and then at the rest of the kitchen. We still hadn't decorated the kitchen so it didn't really matter very much if we made a mess. And once we had decorated we would never find out what was hidden behind the hardboard partition wall.

'O.K!' I said. I poked a couple of fingers through the existing hole and pulled. A huge piece of thin hardboard came away in my hand and I could see that it had been nailed onto a wooden frame. It took no more than two or three minutes to strip away enough of the hardboard to make a hole big enough to climb through. Patsy handed me the torch that she'd fetched from a cupboard by the back door and I crept through the hole into a large alcove.

'What's there?' called Patsy, peering through the hole behind me.

'An oven!'I said. 'A huge old oven.'

Patsy climbed through the hole in the hardboard and joined me.

'It's an Aga!' she said.

We gazed in astonishment at the huge old stove that had been boarded up. It was covered in dust and there were massive spider's webs hanging all around it.

'Do you think it will work?' I asked Patsy, rather doubtfully.

'Of course it will!' said Patsy without a moment's hesitation. 'There isn't anything not to work. They're wonderful!' She sounded really excited and put an arm around my waist and hugged me. She looked up at me and her eyes were sparkling. 'You just wait she said, laughing. 'My mum's got one of these and I learnt to cook on it. You wait until you taste my bread and my rock buns!'

I hugged her back, brushed a wisp of hair away from her face and then lowered my head and kissed her softly on the lips. 'Have I told you yet today how much I love you?'

'Yes!' nodded Patsy. 'But I don't mind you telling me again.'

* * *

It took me less than half an hour to rip down the rest of the partition which had separated the stove from the rest of the kitchen. I piled up the broken pieces of hardboard in the courtyard and stacked the wooden laths in a corner of one of the stables where I had started to store bits and pieces of useful fire wood.

When we had bought Bilbury Grange I had been surprised at the amount of junk that had been stored in the barns, stables and outhouses. Much of it we had burned or thrown out. I had filled a skip with old chimney pots, unsorted lengths of wire, leaky wellington boots, bald tractor tyres, pieces of broken sewer pipe, neatly tied bundles of newspapers and magazines, empty paint cans, wooden apple boxes, lengths of half perished rubber hose, empty fertiliser and feed bags, panes of glass and empty wine bottles. But now those same barns, stables and outhouses were groaning again with our own variety of rubbish. When the roofers had taken off the old worm-ridden battens and replaced them with new, pressure treated timbers I had begun to throw the old battens onto our constantly burning bonfire but Thumper had stopped me. He had pointed out that if we broke up the battens into short, two foot lengths and then stored the short pieces of dry wood in an outhouse they would make excellent fire-lighting fodder. I had learned that in the country everything - however worthless it may seem to be - has its use. Old chimney pots can be used to force rhubarb. An old and rather rusty water tank made an excellent garden incinerator. Old seed sacks can be used to store potatoes. Leaky garden hose can be used to water plants in several parts of the garden at once and old newspapers can be converted into compost.

Even I could not think of a use for broken pieces of hardboard. But the wooden framework to which they had been nailed clearly was worth keeping. With nine working fire places Bilbury Grange was going to need a lot of fuel to keep it warm in winter.

By the time I had finished clearing away the useless broken hardboard and storing the useful wooden laths, Patsy had finished removing most of the cobwebs and the worst of the dust and our new, enlarged kitchen had begun to look much more respectable.

Patsy said that she wanted to give the Aga a final clean so I said I would go upstairs and start running a couple of baths full of hot water. My clothes were filthy so I stripped in the kitchen and put my jeans, shirt, socks and underpants straight into the washing machine. I left my shoes standing by the back door and tiptoed upstairs naked.

The twin cast iron baths in the bathroom next to our bedroom were both huge and they were fed by massive brass taps through which water gushed at a rate of several gallons a minute. These were no ordinary taps. These taps were well over an inch across at the point where the water came out. Even on a warm day water from the cold tap was icy. It would, I suppose, have been nice if water from the hot tap had poured out amidst scalding clouds of steam. But, rather disappointingly, it didn't. Our hot water was provided by an electric immersion heater which struggled to cope with the huge hot water tank. As I waited for the two baths to fill I wondered if our newly discovered Aga could be plumbed into the hot water system.

I went to fetch two towels from the airing cupboard above the hot water tank on the landing but decided that if I waited until Patsy came upstairs the towels would stay warmer for longer. I love drying myself on a new fluffy, warm towel. It is, I think, my favourite luxury.

A couple of minutes later, I turned off the four taps and clambered into one of the baths. I'd done a lot of work and every muscle in my body seemed to ache. A shower may be the most efficient, refreshing and hygienic way to cleanse the human body, but a hot bath is much, much more than a way of washing off the dirt. A hot bath is a chance to return to the womb for a few minutes.

I was floating on my back in the bath relaxing in the warm water, with just my face and my toes above water, when I heard a muffled shout from somewhere below me. With a splash I lowered my body and raised my head. I shook the water from my ears and listened again. I could hear Patsy calling my name. I shouted back to ask her what the trouble was but heard her shout get louder as she came closer. Moments later she burst into the bathroom. She had clearly finished cleaning the Aga for she too had taken off most, but not quite all, of her clothes.

'There's a... phone call... for you!' she said, rather out of breath through having run up the stairs.

'Oh damn!' I said, rather uncharitably. 'What's wrong?'

I had assumed that the caller was a patient and that I would have to abandon my bath. 'It isn't a patient,' said Patsy. 'It's a doctor.'

'A doctor?' I frowned. I couldn't think why a doctor should be ringing me at home.

'He said his name was Dr Robinson,' said Patsy. 'He said you'd know what it was about.'

I racked my brains trying to remember who Dr Robinson was. And then I remembered that Dr Robinson was the senior partner in the practice in the Midlands.

'It's the job!' I cried, leaping out of the bath onto the cold linoleum. Apart from the two baths, a wooden towel rail and a single, blue painted wooden chair, the bathroom was empty. There were lace curtains hanging over the windows on a wire and the floor was covered in a thin, cracked layer of green and blue patterned linoleum but that was about it. I instinctively jumped about as my feet hit the cold floor. Drops of water flew in all directions, leaving puddles everywhere. I looked around for a towel but couldn't see one and then remembered that I hadn't fetched them from the airing cupboard.

'The job in the Midlands?' asked Patsy, following me as I headed for the bathroom door, leaving clear wet footprints on the floor.

'Yes!' I cried, over my shoulder. In my heart I didn't really want the job. I didn't want to even think about leaving Bilbury.

But I didn't seem to have a lot of alternative employment possibilities to contemplate. Still naked and dripping I hurried down the stairs and into the reception room where our old-fashioned black Bakelite telephone sat in solitary splendour on an upturned packing case. I could hear Patsy running along the landing above me and wondered where she had gone.

I picked up the telephone receiver. 'I'm sorry to have kept you,' I apologised, hoping that the caller hadn't got fed up and cut the connection.

'Oh, hello,' murmured Dr Robinson. He told me his name.

He had a distinctive public school drawl which I found vaguely annoying.

'I was in the bath,' I explained, still rather breathless. I half turned my head as I heard Patsy coming down the stairs, looked up and saw that she was carrying a bath towel in her hand. She saw me and suddenly started to giggle. I looked up at her and raised an eyebrow. I didn't see why she was giggling. I was shivering.

'We'd like you to come for an interview,' said Dr Robinson.

'On Wednesday at noon.'

'Oh!' I said, surprised. 'Thank you.'

'You do have a wife, don't you?' He made the word 'wife' sound like a possession. A chromium plated, deluxe accessory. 'Oh yes.' I replied. My beautiful young wife was sitting on the stairs above me dressed only in her very revealing underwear. She was laughing so much that she had to stuff a corner of the towel into her mouth. I still didn't know why she was laughing but it was infectious and I was having difficulty in keeping a straight face.

'Can you bring her with you? We'd like to meet her. There isn't any need for her to dress up in anything formal. Just ask her to come as she is.'

'Certainly,' I agreed. I had to bite the inside of my cheek quite hard to stop myself from giggling. I wondered if Dr Robinson would have been so keen to meet us both if he had been able to see us at that moment. I just managed to stop myself laughing for long enough to say 'goodbye' and to remember to thank Dr Robinson for the invitation. The moment I put the telephone receiver down I burst out laughing.

When she saw that I had finished on the telephone Patsy pulled the towel out of her mouth and rushed down to throw it around my shoulders.

'I'm sorry!' she apologised, controlling herself for an instant. 'But you looked so funny standing there in the nude talking so seriously on the telephone.' She stood in front of me like a naughty school girl and then burst out laughing again.

'We've got an interview,' I told her. 'On Wednesday.' I paused. 'Dr Robinson says there isn't any need for you to dress up. You can come as you are.' Patsy looked down at herself and the giggling got so bad that we both had to sit down on the floor.

It was several minutes before we climbed back up the stairs to the bathroom and by then the water in our twin baths had gone quite unpleasantly tepid. Washing ourselves in cool water soon put a temporary stop to our jolly mood.

* * *

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Mr Yardley had a broken nose.

'What on earth happened to you?' I asked him, carefully examining his fractured and misshapen proboscis. There was dried blood all over him; on his face, on his shirt and on his jacket.

Mr Yardley looked embarrassed and clearly didn't want to tell me. 'Ith werry dithiculk do breeth,' he told me. 'Cad you do somefink adoud id?'

I told him I would have to arrange for him to see someone at the hospital. 'Your nose needs surgery,' I told him. 'But the doctors at the hospital will want to know how you did it.'

'I hid id,' said Mr Yardley suddenly.

I stared at him for a moment. '*You* hitit?'

He nodded.

'Why?'

'Do make id dweed.'

I decided that although, on the surface, the conversation seemed to be taking a distinctly surrealistic turn there was a certain almost acceptable logic in it all. After all, 'To make it bleed.' seemed as sensible an answer as one could expect to the question: 'Why did you hit yourself on the nose?'

'I didn'd mead do hid id thad hard,' explained Mr Yardley, clearly noticing my surprise. 'I didn'd thing id would dreak.'

'No,' I agreed. 'Of course not.' I stared at him for a few moments. 'But why,' I asked him slowly, 'did you want to make it bleed?'

Mr Yardley looked hurt as well as puzzled. 'I didn'd wand do dake dose dills you dave me,' he explained. 'Bud you said thad if I made id dweed thad would brink de pressure down.'

'Why didn't you want to take the pills I gave you?' I asked him.

'You said dey could addect my sex life,' replied Mr Yardley instantly and rather indignantly.

I nodded. 'But it's a fairly uncommon side effect,' I said.

'It doesn't happen to everyone.' I looked at him in amazement. He did not look like a man to whom an active sex life was a vital ingredient of life. 'Did it affect you?' I asked him.

He shook his head firmly. 'Oh do,' he said. He wet his lower lip with a tongue which was covered in a thick brown fur and which looked as if it needed Hoovering. 'Bud I didn't wand do dake thad risk.'

I resisted the instinctive temptation to recoil, raised a questioning eyebrow and waited.

'Id's twendy dree years since I had,' he paused and winked, 'you know.' He winked again to make sure that I understood and then wet his upper lip. 'Bud you neder know when id's going do be your luddy day do you?'

I just stared at him.' So you hit yourself on the nose?'

He nodded.

'What with?'

'A dlick.'

'You hit yourself on the nose with a brick to make yourself bleed so that your blood pressure would come down?'

He smiled at me, rather proudly.

'And you didn't want to take the blood pressure pills I prescribed because even though you haven't had sex for twenty three years you were worried that they might make you impotent?'

Mr Yardley smiled. 'Thad's id!' He nodded, clearly pleased that I understood.

I wasn't so sure that I did understand, but I knew that I would enjoy writing the referral letter which I would have to give Mr Yardley to take with him to the hospital.

* * *

'I really don't want to leave Bilbury,' I explained to Dr Brownlow. 'Neither of us does. But things are looking pretty glum. It looks as if Sherlock has got this fellow Perkins in his pocket.'

Dr Brownlow was sitting in his greenhouse tending to his tomato plants and I don't think I had ever seen him look quite so miserable.

'I feel really bad,' he said. 'If I'd known all this was going to happen I wouldn't have dreamt of offering you the practice.'

'Oh, please don't think that!' I said. 'If you hadn't I probably wouldn't have had the nerve to ask Patsy to marry me and I certainly wouldn't have bought Bilbury Grange.' I looked straight at him. 'I've got no regrets,' I told him. 'Nor has Patsy.' It was true, too. Neither of us had any regrets. We had shared a dream and we had, for a few magical months, lived our dream.

'But if you have to leave you'll have to sell up,' Dr Brownlow pointed out.

'I know. But at least we had a try...' I shrugged and tried to sound as if it didn't really matter too much, but it did, and I don’t think I hid it very well. I had hesitated about telling Dr Brownlow the truth about what was happening in the village largely because I knew that he would feel guilty, as if it was somehow his fault, but now I could no longer keep the secret from him. I had to tell him that I was going up to the Midlands for a job interview at another practice. Apart from it being the courteous thing to do (I didn’t want him to find out from someone else) I could only go if he would look after the patients for me for the day.

‘I feel sorry for you and I feel sorry for the villagers,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘And if the truth be known I feel sorry for myself too.’

I looked at him.

‘I’ve heard these rumours about expanding the village,’ he told me. ‘I hoped they weren’t true.’ He shrugged. ‘If that fellow Sherlock gets his way...’ He shook his head.

‘The new houses shouldn’t interfere too much with you,’ I told him. ‘They’re planning to build on the other side of the village.’

‘They’ll put me out of business,’ said Dr Brownlow firmly. ‘If they build all those new houses they’ll need more water. And they’re bound to put a compulsory purchase order on my underground supply. It would provide the whole village with water.’

We neither of us spoke for a few moments.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said at last. ‘I hadn’t even thought of that.’

Dr Brownlow shrugged. ‘If I was younger I’d fight them,’ he said. ‘But...’ He waved a hand around weakly and left the sentence unfinished. He put down his watering can. ‘It’s you and Patsy I really feel sorry for.’

Don’t,’ I said. ‘We’ll survive.’

‘I know you will.’

‘I don’t want to run away,’ I said. ‘But I’ve got to think about looking after Patsy.’ I swallowed. ‘If I agree to stay, the village will be ruined and I don’t think I’ll be able to live with myself. So that’s out. And if I oppose the new plans to expand the village they’ll close down the practice and I’ll be out of a job.’ I shrugged and tried to laugh. ‘It isn’t a great choice... ’

‘I know,’ said Dr Brownlow softly. He reached out and touched the back of my hand. ‘Go up to Birmingham or wherever it is on Wednesday,’ he said. ‘Of course, I’ll look after the practice for you.’

‘Thank you.’

‘And good luck,’ said Dr Brownlow. He looked me directly in the eye. ‘I really mean that,’ he said. ‘I’m sad that you can’t stay here in Bilbury. But I do wish you well.’

I could feel tears forming in my eyes and I had to leave him quickly. I didn’t even manage to say ‘thank you.’

* * *

When I got back home Patsy had lit the Aga. The heat from it hit me as I walked into the house.

‘Phew!’ I said, taking off my jacket and tie and hanging them over the back of a chair. ‘Isn’t it a bit early for this?’ ‘I wanted to see if it worked properly,’ Patsy explained.

‘Does it?’

She nodded. ‘It’s brilliant!’ she told me. ‘And it does heat our hot water.’ She crossed the kitchen to the sink and turned on the hot tap. ‘Look!’ There was a rumbling noise from somewhere else in the house and then, in a great rush, steam and boiling hot water burst out of the tap and splashed down into the sink. I had to dilute an inch of hot water with six inches of cold before I could bear to dip my hands into the sink to wash them.

‘No more tepid baths?’

‘No more tepid baths!’

‘Does the oven work?’

‘Ovens!’ said Patsy, correcting me. ‘There are two of them. And, yes, they both work.’ She waved a hand towards the table. ‘Sit down.’

I sat down and she brought me a wonderful piping hot potato and vegetable pie that she had made. For pudding she had prepared a gooseberry pie. When I told her that I hadn’t ever eaten better cooking I wasn’t exaggerating. I couldn’t remember ever seeing Patsy look so pleased.

‘Aren’t you lucky!’ she said, smiling. ‘Some women get turned on by diamonds. Some want fur coats. All you have to give me to make me happy is an Aga cooker.’

I was delighted to see her so happy, but I couldn’t forget the fact that in two days we were driving up to the Midlands and that if I got the job I had applied for, the Aga would be just another Bilbury memory.

* * *

I went outside afterwards, intending to cut the lawns. But the young swallows were still sitting in their nest in the stable where I kept the mower. I didn’t want to frighten them by starting up the mower so I left it where it was. The grass would have to wait a while. I cared far more about the swallows than about having neatly manicured lawns.

* * *

At eight o'clock that evening Patsy and I attended the meeting in the Bilbury Village Hall to discuss Mr Sherlock's proposed development in the village.

Ever since the proposal had become public knowledge, conversation in the village shop and the Duck and Puddle had centred around little else. When Patsy and I arrived at five to eight the hall was bursting at the seams, and from the atmosphere in the hall it was clear that everyone in the village had strong views about the proposal. I could see Thumper and Anne, Dr Brownlow, Peter Marshall, Miss Johnson, Patsy's father Mr Kennett, Gilly from the Duck and Puddle and Kay the district nurse.

On the stage at the far end of the village hall a man and a woman sat on folding wooden chairs behind a wooden trestle table with a rather murky carafe of water and a single grubby looking glass in front of them.

The woman was Miss Turner, a retired school mistress and sportswoman who, despite the fact that she neither lived in nor had any great contact with the village, was now our official representative on the county council. She was well into her seventies; she wore a grey tweed suit and was as tall and as rigid in her thinking as she was in her posture. More importantly, she was also a member of the planning committee which seemed enthusiastic about Mr Sherlock's proposals. I suspected that she was keen on the new eighteen hole golf course he was planning.

The man was Mr Rutter, a rotund and likeable sheep farmer who owned fifty or sixty acres of land and rented another couple of hundred acres in and around the village. Mr Rutter, the father of five beautiful teenage daughters, was chairman of our local parish council. He wore, as he always did, the greasy peaked flat cap that he wore whatever the weather and almost wherever he was. I had once visited at home when he was suffering from a bad back during the lambing season and I'd found him in bed still wearing his cap. The only time I had seen him without it he had been in church at the funeral of an old friend.

Mr Rutter began the meeting by banging his fist on the table and very nearly upsetting the water carafe.

'You all know why you're here,' he said gruffly. 'It's this development they're planning.' Mr Rutter didn't believe in beating about the bush and although his honest and straightforward manner meant that he had no chance of ever succeeding in big time local politics he was immensely popular among the villagers. 'This fellow Sherlock wants to build a housing estate and holiday homes in the village. We have to decide whether we want it. I think we should have a vote.'

'Oh, just one moment!' interrupted Miss Turner, who sounded quite dismayed. 'Don't you think we should discuss the issue first?'

'What for?' demanded Mr Rutter, with a frown.

'To acquaint the people with the facts!' replied Miss Turner.

She had an unfortunately squeaky voice which made her something of a laughing stock in the village and she had attained her high political office largely through apathy as no one had ever bothered to stand against her.

'Let's have a vote!' insisted Mr Rutter, who clearly wanted to dispense with the formalities as speedily as possible.

'We can't possibly have a vote until the people have heard the facts!' insisted Miss Turner.

'The facts are simple,' said Mr Rutter, banging his right fist into the palm of his left hand. 'Fact one: this fellow Sherlock wants to build his damned houses all over our village.

Fact two: we don't want him here.' He stared out at the audience in the village hall as his words were greeted with great cheers of approval and support.

'That's quite outrageous!' said Miss Turner who had turned rather pale. 'The planning committee considered the economic effects of Mr Sherlock's proposals at considerable length and we came to the clear conclusion that his proposals were essential to the future prosperity of the area.' She stood up, fastened her jacket and cleared her throat. 'There is no doubt that if these plans go ahead the nature of Bilbury will change,' she said. 'But the village will benefit enormously...'

Mr Rutter, who had been listening carefully, shook his head violently.

'Yes it will!' insisted Miss Turner. 'And it would be foolish to deny it. She raised her left hand, and with her right hand took hold of her little finger. 'First and most important,' she said, 'the village will become far more prosperous. There will be more employment and more money coming into the village.'

'We don't want their bloody money!' shouted someone out of the audience. I couldn't see who it was but the comment was received with an approving cheer.

'You may not want their money but some people in the village probably need it,' said Mrs Turner, blustering on regardless. She paused and leant forwards with her hands resting on the trestle table. 'Most of you rely on two sources of income: farming and tourism. Making a living out of both of these is getting harder and harder.'

There were a few isolated murmurs of approval.

'Second,' said Miss Turner, taking hold of another finger, 'to all that, you have to add the fact that if Sherlock builds new homes then there will be better facilities. There will probably be a decent, regular bus service into Barnstaple and maybe into Ilfracombe as well instead of the twice a week service you've got now. There will be more shops and there will be a new petrol station built on the Combe Martin road. There will also be a new surgery.'

Mr Rutter stood up and interrupted her.

She paused and lifted her head a fraction higher. The cords in her neck stood out like hawsers. 'It is of paramount importance that the villagers be acquainted with all the facts if they are to make an informed decision.'

'Balderdash!' said Mr Rutter. I had never heard anyone say 'balderdash' before in real life. He stood up. 'Let's have a vote about whether we want to have to listen to any more of Miss Turner's facts.'

He turned and glowered at her. 'Do you have any objection to that?' He put a lot of emphasis on the word 'that'. There was another roar of approval from the villagers who took a certain simple pride in their capacity for bias and prejudice.

Miss Turner, who could hardly object to such a straightforward example of democracy in action, murmured something inaudible, pursed her lips as though she had mistakenly put a slice of lemon in her mouth and shook her head.

'Right!' said Mr Rutter. 'Hands up all those who are opposed to this fellow Sherlock's plan to build all over Bilbury and don't want to hear any more of Miss Turner's facts.' He looked around, with ill-concealed delight, at the forest of hands which filled the hall. 'Right. And now - hands up anyone who doesn't realise what a bloody disgrace the plans are and wants to hear more from Miss Turner.' This time not a single hand was raised.

'There you are!' said Mr Rutter. 'Now are you satisfied?'

Miss Turner, who had turned bright red, did not say anything but, instead, chose to take a close interest in the village hall ceiling.

'So now we can get down to the real business of the evening,' said Mr Rutter. 'Which is - how are we going to stop this bugger Sherlock from ruining our village?' He looked down into the audience, saw someone who brought a smile of recognition to his face, pointed and called him up onto the stage. With great reluctance, and a helping heave from a burly farmer whose name I couldn't remember but whose capacious brown corduroy trousers hid, I remembered, a fine collection of ripe haemorrhoids, Dr Brownlow clambered up to join him.

'I've invited Dr Brownlow onto the stage this evening because you all know him...,' began Mr Rutter.

'...he delivered most of us!' shouted an anonymous male voice in the crowd.

'...and probably wishes he hadn't!' said Mr Rutter, instantly, holding up a hand to stifle any further heckling.

'And because I know he's got something important to say.'

Dr Brownlow stood up and faced the audience. For a moment he said nothing, though his silence was, I felt sure, either inspired by emotion or by a determination to speak only when he knew what he was going to say. It certainly was not inspired by shyness. When he did speak his voice was low but the atmosphere in the village hall was electric and he could be heard easily. The people of Bilbury respected and trusted him and very much wanted to hear what he had to say.

'I am totally opposed to Sherlock's plans,' he said to loud and predictable cheers. 'But you have to understand that if we reject the Sherlock building project then there will be some pretty awesome consequences. For one thing Bilbury will no longer have a doctor of its own.'

This clearly came of something of a surprise to many and there were loud cries of 'Why?' from around the floor. 'I'm going to let my successor answer that,' said Dr Brownlow, holding up a hand.

He beckoned to me to go up and join him on the stage. I didn't want to go but the way things stood I knew that I really didn't have much option. Patsy gave my hand a squeeze and I threaded my way through the villagers and climbed up onto the stage. My heart was beating so loudly by the time I reached Dr Brownlow's side that I felt sure that everyone must be able to hear it.

I explained what I knew. I told the villagers that if I agreed to go and work in the new surgery that Mr Sherlock planned to build then the village would continue to have its own medical practice, but if the villagers successfully opposed plans for the new development then Bilbury would lose its doctor and the practice which Dr Brownlow had founded would be closed.

This news was received by the audience in silence.

After a moment or two Mr Rutter turned to me. 'May I ask you, doctor,' he began, speaking very quietly, 'about your own personal feelings. You have a considerable interest in the Sherlock plans - probably as great as any of us here even though you're a newcomer to the village - so what do you think?'

I didn't need to think about my reply. 'I think we should oppose the Sherlock plans,' I said firmly. 'If we allow him to go ahead and build all over Softly's Bottom and Bluebell Wood then the village of Bilbury will be ruined for ever. It will never, ever be the same again. But if we manage to stop Sherlock's plans then the village will stay the same, apart from the fact that it will lose its surgery and the villagers will have to travel into Barnstaple for medical attention.' I paused. 'That will be sad and it will be inconvenient but it won't ruin Bilbury.' I said. 'And that need not necessarily be a permanent problem,' I added. 'It is possible that at some future time it will be possible to re-open the surgery.' I paused again for a moment for something had just occurred to me. 'Under the Health Service regulations,'

I said, 'The practice in Barnstaple which takes over Bilbury will be responsible for providing night time and emergency cover. Villagers will still be entitled to call out a doctor if they need help and can't get into the surgery. It will be up to people in the village to decide how often they need to call a doctor out.'

'So,' said Mr Rutter who had understood exactly what I was getting at, 'if the practice in Barnstaple finds that it gets called out a great deal they may decide that they no longer want to be responsible for us?'

'Exactly,' I agreed. 'In which case Bilbury will probably get its doctor back. Or at the very least the practice in Barnstaple will start to do surgeries out here.' I looked around.

'Maybe here in the village hall. Or in the Duck and Puddle.'

'Doctor, can I ask you what you've decided to do?' asked Mr Rutter.

'I've told Mr Sherlock that I will have nothing to do with his plans,' I said. 'I will not work in his new surgery.'

'Even though that means putting yourself out of a job?'

I nodded.

'Thank you doctor! That's all good enough for me,' said Mr Rutter. 'Sit yourself down.' He pointed to a spare chair at the back of the stage. I sat down. 'No,' he said, 'bring it over here.' He waved me forwards to join him, Miss Turner and Dr Brownlow at the table. Dr Brownlow had already found a chair of his own. He winked at me as I sat down beside him.

'So,' said Mr Rutter, rubbing his hands together, 'now all we've got to do is make it clear to the authorities that we don't want that fellow Sherlock bringing his damned bulldozers and his bricklayers into Bilbury.'

Peter Marshall wanted us to dump tractor loads of manure on the council office steps in Barnstaple. Thumper thought we should simply park old vehicles around the village to create a barricade. And Gilly from the pub suggested that we withhold our rates until the council agreed to reject Sherlock's plans. Mr Rutter carefully wrote down all these suggestions on the back of a seed catalogue. Miss Turner just sat and looked cross, something at which she seemed to have had a lot of practice.

But while I had been speaking I had an idea which I thought would work quite well without any of us having to break the law. But a public meeting in the village hall wasn't the place to share my thoughts and so for the time being I kept them to myself.

* * *

CHAPTER NINETEEN

We left home at seven on the morning we were due to be interviewed for the job in the Midlands. (Theoretically I was the one who was going to be interviewed, but my conversation with the senior partner had made it pretty clear that my wife would be interviewed too).

We were both dressed for the occasion in our Sunday best.

I wore a woollen shirt with a faint red and brown check woven into the material, my faithful old sports jacket, best grey flannel trousers (I had put a little shoe polish onto the leather elbow patches on the sleeves of the jacket) and my old medical school tie (a blue, grey and yellow concoction which was the only tie I had which did not have any stains on it). Patsy wore her new, white dress - the one which she had converted from the old wedding gown. Because it was chilly she also wore a white cardigan which had two small patch pockets on the front and which was fastened with small pearl coloured buttons. On her feet she wore pretty white sandals and around her neck she wore, as she always did, a simple gold locket which I had given to her on our wedding day. Patsy brought with her a small box of Bilbury Grange strawberries and a bag of her home-made rock buns to eat on the journey.

We were both very nervous.

I had never been to a proper job interview before. When I had accepted the job as assistant to Dr Brownlow I had been interviewed by telephone and the whole thing had taken just a few seconds. And Patsy, I discovered, had never been outside North Devon before.

We drove westwards from Bilbury to Lynton and then took the coast road through Porlock and Dunster before turning inland and heading through Bridgwater towards Westonsuper-Mare. The traffic was light, and although our Morris Minor only had a rather small engine, which meant that it had seemed to take for ever to climb up the long, steep, Countisbury Hill out of Lynmouth, it seemed to love the twisting, turning lanes along which our journey took us.

Just before Bristol we stopped for breakfast at a roadside cafe where a jovial man in a red plaid shirt and dark green trousers served us both with plates full of scrambled eggs and mushrooms. We ate with great pleasure and followed it with plenty of fresh toast and marmalade. We washed it all down with huge mugs of tea. After breakfast I put the hood down and we drove on past Bristol, through Gloucester, where we filled up the car with petrol at a garage where a small, wizened man in a freshly starched white coat served us and told us that it was going to rain and that we should put our hood up, through Cheltenham, where we got lost and drove twice down the main street, and then through Evesham, where we each ate one of Patsy's rock buns.

Our journey had taken us through some of England's most beautiful scenery: rolling hills, fields full of ripening crops and hedgerows studded with huge oaks, sycamore and elm and dotted with dancing, scarlet poppies and massive, purple foxgloves. Patsy who had no idea what to expect had been more than pleasantly surprised by it all.

But after Leamington Spa the view from the Morris changed dramatically.

Instead of fields and hedgerows the road was lined with houses, shops and factories. Instead of cows and sheep, grazing in meadows which were yellow with buttercups, we were surrounded by pedestrians scurrying about their business and by businessmen hurrying to work. Instead of being fresh and clean, the air we breathed in became heavy with car exhaust fumes and factory smoke. For the first time we found ourselves sitting in long lines of slow moving traffic. Patsy had never seen anything like it. Even in Barnstaple, the biggest town in North Devon, traffic jams usually only happen in the height of summer and then usually consist of little more than half a dozen cars, a tractor and either a car towing a caravan or a coach full of holiday-makers. Eventually we stopped and put up the hood in a vain attempt to shut out some of the dirt and the noise.

'What's the name of this town?' asked Patsy, as we drove on and on along endless roads which seemed to have no beginnings, no ends and no names.

I had to confess that I didn't know. I knew only that we had now entered the industrial Midlands and were still heading for, and getting ever closer to, Mettleham.

In Devon the towns and villages are clearly separated from one another by fields and acres of green land. Here in the industrial wastelands there were no such natural separations. The villages had all grown into towns and the towns had all grown into one another.

Mettleham was a typical, small town. It had developed around a single coal mine in the nineteenth century, and in the twentieth century had grown around a car factory. The mine now employed no more than a couple of hundred men, but the car factory had continued to grow and had spawned a huge number of smaller but dependent factories where skilled workmen made tyres, lighting equipment, car seats and all the other bits and pieces which the big factory needed. Nearly everyone in Mettleham was dependent upon the car industry for their weekly pay packets, monthly salary cheques or twice yearly dividends. The high street had its own branches of all the big stores and was undistinguishable from all the other high streets in the area.

There was a statue of a long forgotten local hero sitting proudly on a horse in front of a sooty library; an ugly local council building in sixties block, steel and glass style and a small extravagantly gated park with neat but strangely subdued flower beds, tarmacadam paths and a long list of forbidden activities pasted up on a series of huge boards.

Apart from these inevitable and essential ingredients the town seemed to have dedicated itself to the internal combustion engine in general and to the motor car in particular. Every lamp post was decorated with instructions, exhortations and threats; every pavement was decorated with parking meters and the air was blue with carbon monoxide and the expletives of motorists. Pedestrians were prevented from interfering with the flow of the traffic by miles of grey steel tubing.

With helpful advice from a woman with a pushchair containing a fractious child we arrived at our target, the Mettlesham Health Centre, at fifteen minutes to twelve. The original building had been a fairly ordinary Victorian terraced house but an ugly two storey extension in concrete had been added where a garage or conservatory had once been. There was a brass plate attached to a wooden board beside the front door to the house.

I parked the Morris in a small space between a huge Volvo and a Rover, but before I had chance to turn off the engine a woman in a white coat came hurrying out of the front door.

She had blue hair and wore the largest pair of spectacles I had ever seen. She had a row of pens in her top pocket and carried another pen in her hand. I wound down my window as she approached.

'You can't park there!' she said. 'Can't you read?' She pointed to a huge red and white sign fastened to the wall which said 'DOCTORS ONLY'.

'I am a doctor,' I explained.

The woman in the white coat glowered at me. 'You're not one of our doctors,' she said firmly. She had a large wart an inch to the right of her mouth and a thin but clearly visible moustache.

'No,' I agreed. 'I've come for an interview. We've just driven up from Devon.'

'Well you can't park here,' snapped the receptionist. 'Dr Evans will be here in a minute and you're in his space.'

'Where can I park?' I asked.

'Anywhere but here,' she said. She waved a hand at me, indicating that I should reverse out of the space in which I had parked, and that I should do so as quickly as possible. Wearily, I put the car into reverse, backed out of the tiny car park and, with difficulty, out into the never ending stream of traffic. A lorry driver banged his fist on his horn and an elderly woman in steel rimmed spectacles and a Hillman Minx mouthed what seemed like obscenities at me. Only when I had gone did the woman in the white coat turn and disappear back into the building.

As I drove out I saw a second Volvo turn into the car park and sweep into the space I had just vacated.

'She wasn't very nice,' said Patsy. She reached out and put her hand on my arm. I looked across at her. She looked as frightened and as out of place as I felt. Not for the first time since we had left Devon I began to wonder if I had been hasty in turning down the job that Sherlock had offered me.

'No,' I agreed. 'She wasn't.'

It took us twenty minutes to find a parking space in a multistorey car park and ten minutes to walk back to the Health Centre.

'I've come for an interview,' I told the receptionist who eventually answered my knock on the small hatch in the waiting room. She was in her early twenties and underneath her white coat, which was unfastened, she wore a tight, lemon coloured sweater with a polo neck. Her hair was puffed up making her head look twice as big as it was, and was held in place with so much lacquer that it looked solid. She sat in a cloud of sickly, cheap perfume which wafted out through the hatch and made me start to wheeze. There was no sign of the receptionist who had thrown us out of the car park. I told her my name.

'You're very late,' she said, looking at a large appointments book which lay before her and finding my name with the aid of a long and lethal looking fingernail that might, in some circumstances, have been classified as a dangerous weapon.

'Fifteen minutes,' I said. 'We couldn't find anywhere to park.'

'The doctors are in a meeting,' said the receptionist. 'I'll check if they'll still see you.' She gave me what I suppose she might have thought was a smile and then shut the hatch firmly in my face. I turned back to Patsy, who was standing behind me, and smiled to try to reassure her. I don't think I had ever felt quite so uncomfortable and ill at ease. Patsy came closer and reached out for my hand. I held it tightly and looked around. The waiting room was in the new part of the house and it was painted all in white. There was a large, wooden table in the middle of the room which was piled high with magazines. Someone had neatly arranged them into categories. Around the walls stood uncomfortable looking metal chairs which, I noticed with some surprise, were fastened to the floor with chains.

I was about to suggest to Patsy that we might as well sit down when the hatch doors flew open and the receptionist's head appeared. 'The doctors will see you now,' she said.

Patsy and I started to walk towards the door.

‘Just you,’ said the receptionist, nodding towards me. ‘Mrs Jackson will be here in a few minutes for your wife.’

I looked at Patsy. I didn’t want to leave her alone.

‘It’s O.K!’ she whispered. She squeezed my hand, kissed me on the cheek and then moved away from the door and sat down. ‘Really,’ she said.

‘Where do I go?’ I asked the receptionist.

‘Dr Robinson’s room,’ said the receptionist. ‘Turn right and it’s second on your left.’

I thanked her and went off in search of my future.

* * *

There were three of them in the room, which was surprisingly spacious and had, presumably, once been the living room when the building had been used as a house. Although it was blocked up, there was still a large fireplace on one wall. On either side of the fireplace there were alcoves which were lined with bookshelves. Most of the shelves were piled high with journals and decorated with ornaments rather than stacked with books. There were three large and rather gloomy oil paintings hanging from the picture rail.

Dr Robinson, the senior partner to whom I had spoken on the telephone, looked to be the eldest of the three doctors and sat behind a large oak desk with his back to the window.

He was tall, balding, about fifty five and despite the heat wore a dark green heavy tweed three piece suit. He wore it with a pale green woollen shirt and a dark green paisley tie. He wore heavy brown country brogue walking shoes. It was Dr Robinson who spoke first and who introduced me to his two partners, the other two thirds of the interview panel.

Dr Jackson, whose wife had been deputed to collect Patsy, was in his early forties and looked a jovial sort of fellow. He had a full head of tight curly hair which was going grey and wore a neatly trimmed beard which was darker in colour. He sat in a leather easy chair in shirt sleeves with his suit jacket draped over the back of the chair behind his head. The third member of the inquisitorial panel was Dr Evans. He looked to be no more than four or five years older than me. He sat in the second easy chair and looked very serious. He was balding and wore blue rimmed spectacles and a pale brown silk suit. I don’t know why but I took an instinctive dislike to him. He had cold, cruel eyes and seemed to have an arrogance about him which I found strangely disturbing rather than just annoying.

‘Tell us about yourself,’ said Dr Robinson, when he had introduced his colleagues and we had all shaken hands. He hooked his thumbs into his waistcoat pockets and leant back in his chair.

I told him how I had started work for Dr Brownlow, about Bilbury and about Patsy and explained why I had to leave Bilbury.

‘Have you ever practised in this sort of area?’ asked Dr Evans, when I had finished.

‘No,’ I confessed.

‘How do you think you’ll like it?’

I said that I thought in any practice the people were probably more important than the surroundings. This seemed to go down quite well.

After talking together for between half and three quarters of an hour Dr Robinson unhooked his thumbs, looked at his watch, a large, old-fashioned thing which he hauled out of his waistcoat pocket with the aid of a silver chain, and announced that it seemed like to him to be a good time for us to go and get some lunch.

‘Are you hungry?’ he asked me.

I said I was and then suddenly remembered that I had forgotten to tell him that Patsy and I did not eat meat. The whole interview had rather startled me for no one had seemed interested in my medical knowledge, and the conversation had largely centred around politics and sport.

We drove in a convoy of four cars from the Health Centre to Dr Robinson’s home which was situated in what was clearly one of the most expensive areas of the town. The house was surrounded by about an acre of gardens and looked as though it had probably been built in the 1930s. As we parked our cars in the driveway I could see a swimming pool in the garden at the back of the house. Dr Robinson went to the front door, opened it and waved me through. The other two partners followed me and Dr Robinson brought up the rear.

Patsy and the doctors’ three wives were already there and were sitting in the living room sipping sherries and nibbling small cheese biscuits. Dr Robinson’s wife was plump but definitely not jolly. She had neatly permed grey hair, cold eyes and lips that turned downwards at the corners. She wore a pink and grey checked suit with a white blouse which was buttoned up to the neck and fastened with a brooch in the shape of a butterfly. Dr Jackson’s wife was about ten years younger than her husband, tall, slim and quite pretty. She had long brown hair that looked as if it got brushed a lot and wore a very short black dress that had virtually no back to it. Dr Evans’ wife, who was dressed in the uniform of either a midwife or a district nurse (I wasn’t sure which) was short, plumpish and looked as sour and as unpleasant as her husband.

Dr Robinson introduced me to the three wives and his wife then introduced Patsy to the three doctors. We then all sat around making polite, dull but safe conversation about the weather, the state of the nation and the soaring cost of private education. It seemed that the two younger partners both had children at private schools while Dr Robinson's children were now grown up and graduated from university. After a quarter of an hour, a round, homely looking woman dressed in a flowered pinafore came in and told us that lunch was ready. This, Mrs Robinson told Patsy and me, was Mrs Yates, her daily help without whom her life would be unbearable.

Lunch was something of a disaster, though this was entirely our fault. Neither Patsy nor I had dared to explain to either our host or our hostess that we were vegetarians and so we had to try to hide the fact that when we had finished eating, our plates were still very nearly as full as they had been when we had started. We both discovered that it is not easy to hide thick slices of roast pork with a few peas and a brussels sprout. I would have gladly eaten more of the vegetables I was given but I needed them to help hide the pork.

Afterwards all six of us retired to the living room again where Mrs Yates served coffee and Mrs Robinson offered us chocolates out of an expensive looking box. After twenty minutes of insignificant chatter, which seemed largely to centre upon the iniquities of the tax system, the comparative advantages of supermarket versus delicatessen shopping and the soaring cost of private education, Dr Robinson hauled his watch out of his waistcoat pocket and announced that he had an ante-natal clinic to attend.

The interview was over.

* * *

'How do you think it went?' asked Patsy, as we queued to get out of Mettleham. I could hardly see the lorry in front of us for the clouds of smoke that were belching out of its exhaust pipe.

I didn't answer straight away. 'I don't know,' I said eventually. I looked at her and shrugged. 'I really haven't the faintest idea.'

The truth was that I had found it all deeply depressing. No one had asked me anything about my hopes and fears for general practice in the last quarter of the twentieth century. None of the partners had shared their own ambitions with me. If they had opened up their hearts and at least confessed to having one or two prejudices I might not have agreed with them but at least I would have known where I stood with them. I know that I could have asked them questions, but somehow it hadn't seemed right to do that. Being thrown out of the car park and then kept standing in the waiting room had made me very conscious of the fact that I was applying for a job.

'Can I say something?' asked Patsy.

'Of course!'

'You won't be cross?'

'No!'

'I didn't think any of them were very nice people,' she said, hesitantly.

'No.' I agreed. 'I thought they were awful.'

'Mrs Jackson told me that if you got the job I would have to smarten you up a bit.' said Patsy.

I turned and looked at her. 'When did she say that?'

'When you were talking to her husband and Dr Robinson after lunch.'

'What did you say?'

'I didn't know what to say,' said Patsy.

'But what on earth *did* you say?'

'I think I muttered something about doing my best.' said Patsy. She looked very unhappy.

'What a cheek!' I said. I looked down. Patsy had made a good job of mending my trousers and I could still smell the polish I had put on the elbow patches on my jacket. I couldn't understand how wearing a suit could make me a better doctor.

A car driver somewhere behind us started banging on his horn and within a couple of seconds half a dozen other drivers were doing the same thing. I looked in front of us. The lorry had moved forwards a couple of yards. I put the car into gear and edged forwards.

'Mrs Evans wanted to know whether I had any medical training,' said Patsy. 'She said that doctors' wives needed an understanding of medicine in order to support their husbands properly.'

I turned my head. Patsy was crying. I slipped the car out of gear, put on the handbrake and put my arms around her.

'Hey! Come on now!' I said. 'Don't let them get to you.'

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I think I let you down.'

'Don't be silly,' I murmured. 'You could never let me down.'

I felt a strong desire to turn round, drive back and tell them all what I thought of them.

'I wish we didn't have to leave Bilbury,' said Patsy.

'I know.' I said. A driver behind tooted his horn again. I looked forwards, through the windscreen. The lorry had moved on another couple of yards.

'All the wives seemed to care about was school fees and shopping,' said Patsy.

'The men were almost as bad,' I said. 'But they were interested in cars, golf and income tax as well.'

The driver behind tooted again. Through the back window of the Morris I could see him waving a small number of fingers at me. I waved back at him. I looked at my watch. It was not quite three o'clock.

'Are you hungry?'

Patsy looked at me. 'I'm starving.'

'So am I. Why don't we stop at the next shop we see, buy some bread and cheese and a bottle of something cheap and fizzy and have a picnic as soon as we get out of all this traffic?'

'Yes!' said Patsy, delightedly.

'It's a pity to waste the whole day,' I said. 'Have we got any of your buns left?'

'Oh, yes! I packed a large bagful and we've only eaten a couple.' She reached over into the back of the car and found the brown paper bag. It was one of Peter Marshall's stout grocery bags from the village shop. 'There are the strawberries as well!'

Suddenly, the day didn't seem quite so miserable.

* * *

When we got back to Bilbury I dropped Patsy at The Grange and stayed just long enough to peep cautiously into the stable where our family of swallows were nesting. The two young swallows had now clambered out of the nest and were standing on the edge of one of the beams. As we watched, first one and then the other jumped off the beam out into the unknown, swooped and dived around with only the slightest uncertainty and then landed back on their beam where they rested, slightly wobbly, rather like trapeze artists who had successfully accomplished a difficult manoeuvre. They seemed to be waiting for applause so Patsy and I, both as excited as young parents, murmured words of appreciation before we backed quietly away from the stable. How could we possibly have dreamt of moving away from the country?

While Patsy went into the house I got back into the car because although it was late I wanted to visit two patients, Miss Phillips and Mrs Blossom, at their homes.

I was truly delighted to find them both looking far happier and considerably more content than they had been when I had seen them last. Although it was clearly going to take some time before either of them made anything close to a real recovery, the gentle withdrawal programme I had devised seemed to be working.

Mrs Blossom was out of bed and was sitting watching television. She looked considerably brighter and more alert than she had the last time I had seen her.

'Hello,' she said.

Her father looked at me with pride, like a father whose baby has just spoken its first word. 'She's a lot better than she was,' he said. He seemed genuinely relieved.

'How do you feel?' I asked her.

Mrs Blossom licked her lips which were dry and cracked.

'I wish I'd never started taking them,' she told me. She rubbed at her left forearm with her right hand. 'My skin is very dry,' she told me. 'Could that be the pills?'

I nodded. 'It could.' I remembered that Miss Phillips had complained of something similar.

'I won't ever moan again,' said Mrs Blossom. 'I didn't know how lucky I was before.' She licked her lips and smiled at me. 'Do you think I'll get better?'

'Yes,' I said. 'Yes, I do.'

I was, however, still appalled at the way that the drug company making Angipax was encouraging doctors to prescribe the drug for long periods to unsuspecting patients, and at the way that doctors were handing out the drug unquestioningly.

Miss Phillips was much better too. She had spent the day in the garden and was anxious to tell me everything she had done.

Although it was nearly dark we went outside and walked around and inspected her vegetable patch and her flower gar den.

In her vegetable patch she had runner beans, carrots, beetroot, swede, potatoes, radishes, lettuce, tomatoes, peas and, something I had never before seen in a garden, petit pois, tiny little peas that tasted sweeter than any I'd ever tasted before. She was also growing peas called mange tout that Miss Phillips told me could be eaten complete with their pods.

In her flower patch she specialised in natural, wild Exmoor plants such as gorse, heather, red campion, sweet violets, huge armies of foxglove, cranesbill and silver ragwort. Underneath a small tree grew yellow pimpernel, wood sorrel, nightshade and a dozen different types of fern. By a small stream down one side of the garden grew orange montbretia, marsh ragwort and yellow flag. As she walked with me around the garden she pointed out each plant and talked to it by name, offering each one comfort and encouragement in the cool of the summer evening.

'Do you like flowers?' she asked me.

I smiled and nodded. 'But I'm afraid I don't know very much about them.'

'Miss Tweedsmuir and I would be delighted to teach you anything you'd like to know,' said Miss Phillips. 'We both love flowers.'

'I'd love to learn more,' I said. 'Ever since you found that red helleborine in our beech wood my enthusiasm has been growing. Just how rare is that orchid, by the way?'

‘Oh, very!’ said Miss Phillips. ‘Very rare indeed.’

‘Am I right in thinking that if a plant like that was found on land that was earmarked for building the authorities would have to withhold planning permission?’

‘I’m sure they would,’ said Miss Phillips. ‘When a clump of military orchids or orchis militaris were found in the path of a motorway two years ago the contractors had to go round them.’

She held her head on one side and looked at me as though she’d read my mind. ‘I’m afraid that was the first thing Miss Tweedsmuir and I thought of,’ said Miss Phillips. ‘We know Bluebell Wood very well and there aren’t any protected species of anything in there.’

‘No red helleborine?’

‘No,’ said Miss Phillips. ‘The woodland is very similar to yours, beech trees and lots of shade, but there aren’t any red helleborine plants there.’

‘That’s a pity,’ I said.

‘It certainly is,’ said Miss Phillips. ‘A clump of cephalanthera rubra growing in Bluebell Wood would have stopped Mr Sherlock’s bulldozers for good.’

On the way home I stopped at a public call box and rang Thumper.

* * *

CHAPTER TWENTY

When we arrived back from Mettleham we were much more cheerful than when we had left. The long drive south had made us both tired, but we had enjoyed a glorious picnic in a field just outside Cheltenham and somehow, after that, the day had seemed much brighter.

'There must be other jobs,' I had said to Patsy, as we drove very slowly up Porlock Hill in the early evening. A hare sat up in the middle of the road washing its face. It looked directly at us as we approached and then carried on with its evening ablutions. Just as I was about to put my foot on the brake the hare stopped washing and darted off up the road at top speed. We had both laughed and Patsy rested her head on my shoulder as the Morris Minor struggled up the hill in first gear.

'Something will turn up,' Patsy murmured. 'And if not it doesn't matter as long as we have each other.'

'And as long as we don't have to move to Mettleham,' I added.

It wasn't Mettleham that I particularly disliked (though I confess I hadn't been too keen on it), but the people we'd met. I had meant every word when I had told Dr Robinson and his colleagues that it was the people who were more important than the place.

I had gone to bed late, determined to spend the next day looking through the situations vacant section of the British Medical Journal. It may have been because they had missed us, or because they knew that we had a trying day, but Ben, Emily and Sophie spent most of the night sleeping on our bed.

I was woken up the next morning at a quarter past seven by the ringing of the telephone. It was a woman from London who was staying in Bilbury and wanted to know what time the surgery started. She said she had run out of pills and wanted me to prescribe some more for her. It wasn't worth trying to go back to sleep and so I slipped out of bed and peeped through the curtains to see what the weather was like. It was gloriously sunny; the garden at Bilbury Grange looked spectacularly beautiful and everywhere I looked there were flowers in bloom. My eye was attracted by a movement just below the window and I watched with amusement as Sophie, who had risen early, hurried across the lawn with her head held high and a very aloof look on her face. Behind her, protecting some unseen nest, marched two huge and belligerent looking magpies. I glanced behind me and was glad for Sophie's sake that Emily was still asleep on the bed.

We breakfasted on toast and coffee after Patsy and I checked that the lambs were all right.

'You were late getting in last night,' said Patsy.

'I know,' I said. 'You were asleep.'

'I rang Miss Phillips but she said you'd left,' said Patsy.

'I tried to stay awake but I was exhausted.'

'I went for a walk with Thumper.'

'A walk! It must have been nearly midnight!'

'It was.'

Patsy looked at me and frowned. 'What's going on?' she asked. 'What were you doing?'

'Just a bit of gardening,' I said and kissed her goodbye. Outside in the front driveway I had just lowered the hood of the Morris Minor to take full advantage of the summer sunshine when I heard a car approaching from behind me. I turned and saw our visitors approaching in their smart German car.

Mr Onions stopped his car no more than a yard away from me and pressed a button. His window hummed downwards smoothly. He waited until the window had disappeared down into the door, smiled at me and held out a hand.' I'm glad I caught you,' he said. The smile didn't look so much like a smile as an opportunity to display his expensively capped teeth. His hair was neatly combed and freshly washed and he wore a lime green suit and a multi-coloured shirt with the collar folded over the suit jacket collar. His handshake was limp and his palm felt soft and clammy. I noticed that he wore a loose gold chain around his right wrist. He looked down. 'That's a rather nice bag!'

I was carrying the Gladstone bag that had been repaired in Barnstaple. I followed his glance downwards. 'Yes.' I agreed. 'It is nice isn't it?' The cobbler had done an excellent job and I was extremely proud of the bag. It was, in truth, rather too small for all the things I had to carry but I liked it so much that I put up with that and kept some of the bulkier items in another bag in the boot of the car.

I had taken a rather strong dislike to Mr Onions and for some odd reason I didn't trust him. I felt myself instinctively taking a firmer hold on the bag as though afraid that he might somehow try to take it from me.

'Have you got a moment?' he asked.

I admitted that I had.

'It's about the books in the flat,' said Mr Onions. 'Could I buy them from you?'

For a few seconds I couldn't think what he meant. Then I remembered. When Patsy had bought her tin bath and contents at a recent auction (the same tin bath that had contained the Gladstone bag I was carrying) the bath had contained a few books. Because most were still wrapped in their colourful paper jackets and looked rather bright, and because we still didn't have any bookshelves of our own in Bilbury Grange, Patsy had put them into the flat, standing them up on the mantelpiece and using them to hide a rough patch on the wall.

'I don't know,' I said. I had never bothered even to look at the books. I had no idea what they were.

'I'll pay you ten pounds for them,' said Mr Onions. He smiled again. 'My wife started reading one in bed at night and I'm reading another and there are several there we both like the look of.' His wife, who was sitting beside him, and who had not said a word turned her head slightly and almost smiled. She wore a white tank top and a tight and rather short white skirt and had a broad brimmed sun hat on her head. She wore dark glasses with heavy black frames.

Alarm bells had started to ring in my head. Ten pounds seemed an awful lot of money to pay for a row of old, secondhand books. Above us and slightly to our right I noticed our family of swallows sitting together on a telephone wire. Suddenly and noiselessly a sparrowhawk swooped out of the sky heading for one of the baby swallows. Instantly it was surrounded not just by the parents of the baby swallow but by a dozen other swallows which I hadn't even noticed. The sparrowhawk flapped its wings angrily and then headed off over the fields, followed by a crowd of swallows. I watched them shoo it away until they felt it had learnt its lesson.

'I'll need to have a look,' I said. 'Do you mind if I pop into the flat this afternoon?'

'Of course not!' said Mr Onions, giving me another chance to view his dentist's handiwork. 'By the way, I hear you sell strawberries. Do you have any we can buy from you?'

'Oh just help yourself!' I said, generously. 'The strawberry bed is in the walled garden.'

'Very kind of you,' said Mr Onions. He gave me what looked like a last flash of expensively capped and polished teeth and then paused and nodded towards the lowered hood of the Morris.

'You ought to get a car with air conditioning,' he said, nodding towards a complicated looking device on his dashboard. 'Then you wouldn't need to bother with a hood that came down.'

'I like a convertible!' I said.

'All those flies and all that wind?' said Mr Onions, pulling a face and shaking his head. Then he pressed a button and his window hummed upwards. He put his foot down on the accelerator and sped off down the drive, narrowly missing Sophie who darted out of the shrubbery in front of him.

I really didn't like Mr Onions one little bit.

* * *

I was surprised when Miss Johnson told me that there was a telephone call for me from a Dr Robinson in Mettleham. I had expected him to write rather than to telephone to tell me that I had not been successful in my application for the job.

'Did you get back to Devon safely?' asked Dr Robinson. 'It must have been a long day for you.' I could envisage both him and his office as he spoke.

I told him that we had arrived home without mishap and thanked him and his wife for their hospitality. Patsy and I had agreed that she would telephone a florist in Barnstaple to arrange for a courtesy 'thank you' bunch of flowers to be delivered to Mrs Robinson.

'We very much enjoyed meeting you both,' said Dr Robinson. 'We had a partners' meeting yesterday evening and decided unanimously that we would very much like to accept you as our new junior partner.'

This was not at all what I expected to hear, and when my mouth opened to reply my brain still hadn't decided what to say. The end result was an almost inaudible and certainly incomprehensible mumble.

'I'm sorry...' said Dr Robinson, '...I'm afraid I didn't quite catch what you said.'

'That's very kind of you,' I managed to stutter. 'And I'm honoured that you should have chosen me...'

'Well, to be perfectly honest you didn't have an awful lot of competition,' said Dr Robinson, adopting his best and most confidential bedside manner voice.

'We'd like you to come on a six months trial contract to start with. We'll arrange rented accommodation for you in the town during your probationary period which will give you a chance to look around to see what's available on the housing market.'

I tried to interrupt him, to tell him as politely as I could that I didn't want his job, but he was in full flow now and without being rude I just couldn't get a word in. I really didn't want anything more to do with him or his practice, and I certainly didn't want to work with him. I knew that Patsy didn't want to move to Mettleham either.

'As the junior partner you will be responsible for the weekend emergency rota and we'd also expect you to be on call for the practice on alternate nights,' continued Dr Robinson.

'I'm sure you'll agree that the arrangement is a fair one.'

I was by now finding it slightly difficult not to laugh. In addition to expecting me to be on call every weekend Dr Robinson and his two partners were expecting me to be on call every other night - which meant that they would each be on call less than one night a week.

'It's very good of you, but...' I began.

'To begin with you will receive ten per cent of the net practice profits,' continued Dr Robinson. 'Your share will go up by one per cent every year until you reach parity with the rest of us.'

I was glad I didn't want the job and relieved that I didn't need it. His terms were getting more and more outrageous by the minute. I opened my mouth to speak but Dr Robinson hadn't finished yet.

'You will, of course, expect to buy your share of the practice premises,' said Dr Robinson. 'But we realise that you may have difficulty in raising the sort of money involved. We will arrange for a surveyor to work out your liability and then we will make deductions from your income over the next ten years, charging you interest at five per cent over base rate.'

'It's very kind of you...' I began.

'Not at all,' said Dr Robinson. 'We want you and Patricia to feel welcome here in Mettleham.'

'Patsy.' I said firmly. 'My wife's name is Patsy.'

'We think Patricia is more suitable for a doctor's wife,' said Dr Robinson, rather starchily. 'We'd like you to start on the first of next month. Is that convenient?'

'I'm sorry,' I said sharply, relieved to have a chance to speak. 'But Patsy and I won't be coming to Mettleham at all.'

'I beg your pardon?' said Dr Robinson. He sounded shocked and outraged. 'What do you mean 'you won't be coming'?'

'We talked it over and I'm afraid we decided that we wouldn't be happy in Mettleham,' I told him.

'Oh.' said Dr Robinson. 'Well in that case I can offer you a starting salary of 12% of the net practice profits and we'll charge you interest on your loan at three per cent over base rate.'

'That's very kind of you,' I said. 'But I'm afraid it really isn't a question of money. It's just that neither Patsy nor I think that we would be happy in Mettleham.'

There was a long pause while this sank in. 'Well!' said Dr Robinson. 'I do think you've got a cheek. What do you think you were playing at? We're all very busy people. We don't have time to waste you know!' I was tempted to explain to him that, just as he and his partners had been interviewing us, we had been interviewing them, and that they had failed miserably. But I didn't. I did, however, point out that I had gone to Mettleham because I was seriously interested in taking the job if it was offered to me. However, Dr Robinson did not seem very interested in anything I had to say. 'I think your behaviour is quite outrageous!' he said. And he repeated the last two words to emphasise them.

'I'm sorry you feel like that,' I said.

But Dr Robinson wasn't listening. He was threatening to report me to the General Medical Council and the British Medical Association, though what for I couldn't begin to imagine. I gently put the telephone receiver back onto its base.

I couldn't help thinking that I could do quite well without people like Mr Onions and Dr Robinson in my life.

* * *

When I'd put the phone down I telephoned Miss Phillips.

'Would you do me a favour?'

'Of course!'

'Would you pop out to Bluebell Wood one more time and check to make sure that there aren't any protected species growing there? It's the only chance the village has got.'

'We have checked it very thoroughly,' said Miss Phillips. 'But if you'd like us to we'll go there again.'

'I'd be grateful,' I said. 'You never know. Something might have grown since you were last there.'

* * *

There were eleven books on the mantelpiece.

'Can you remember how many there were?' I asked Patsy, who'd come across to the coach-house flat with me as soon as we had eaten our lunch after I'd got back home at lunchtime. We wanted to look at the books that Mr Onions had asked if he could buy.

'I can't remember how many there were but I know they're all there,' said Patsy. 'They just fitted on the mantelpiece between those two pieces of stone.' She had used two large and rather colourful stones out of the garden as bookends.

I immediately thought that was rather odd, but I couldn't think why. I picked out one of the books at random and examined it. The jacket and the book were both in surprisingly good condition. The book was a historical romance and the cover showed a stunning brunette in the arms of a rakish looking fellow dressed in an officer's uniform. I had never heard of the author. I didn't know much about books but it seemed unlikely that this one was valuable. I carefully worked my way through the rest of the books but could not see any which seemed likely to be worth much money. Most of the books, and all of the ones which still had jackets, were novels. There were just two non-fiction books, one about trains and a large one about gardening.

'Do you think we should let him buy them?' asked Patsy thoughtfully. 'Ten pounds seems quite a lot. It's twenty times as much as I paid for the whole tin bath.' She replaced one of the books which she had been examining. 'It would mean that we bought your Gladstone bag, got it repaired for nothing and still made a profit!'

I thought about it for a moment and I suddenly realised what was odd about what Mr Onions had said. He had said that he wanted to buy the books because his wife was reading one of them in bed at night and that he was reading another. And yet Patsy had confirmed that all the books were still in the same place. It seemed strange and extremely unlikely that they should put the books back onto the mantelpiece every morning. ‘No,’ I said. ‘I don’t think we should.’

When we had finished in the flat we went round to the vegetable garden. At once both of us noticed that someone had been picking strawberries. There was hardly a strawberry in sight. Someone must have picked at least ten or fifteen pounds of them. Even worse when they had put the netting back they hadn’t made it taut and the magpies that had landed on it had been able to reach through and peck at the few fruits which were left. I’d seen them do that before. Normally we stretched the netting across the strawberry bed about two or three feet above the plants, keeping it in place with pea sticks and allowing the excess netting to hang down at the sides. It proved a very attractive bird barrier. But if the netting wasn’t stretched tightly enough the birds landed on it in a group and weighed it down so that they could feed through the holes in the netting.

‘Who on earth has done that?’ asked Patsy crossly.

‘It was the Onions,’ I sighed. ‘I’m sorry. It was my fault.’

I explained that I had told Mr Onions that he could help himself to a few strawberries. I hadn’t imagined that he would take everything we had.

We walked rather miserably back through the courtyard and into the kitchen. One of us would have to speak to Peter Marshall and tell him that there wouldn’t be any more strawberries for a few days.

‘Oh, I forgot!’ said Patsy, as we got back to the house. ‘There was a letter for you this morning.’

Our local postman had a large rural round and usually delivered the mail just before lunch. Not that we received much mail. Most of what we did get was bills. (Though the *Sunday News* had started sending me fairly huge amounts of mail in one of their vans).

Patsy reached behind the kettle and produced a long white envelope which was post marked London. I stared at it for a moment before opening it. I didn’t like getting letters from London. The envelope felt heavy and expensive.

‘I wonder who it’s from?’ I asked.

‘I have no idea,’ said Patsy. ‘Why don’t you open it. Maybe you’ve won some money on the premium bonds!’ She filled the kettle with water.

I looked at my watch. ‘That’ll be a surprise! I haven’t got any premium bonds.’ Come to that I didn’t have any savings at all. I stuck my thumb under the flap, tore open the envelope and pulled out the contents.

‘What is it?’ asked Patsy a moment or two later. I looked up. She was staring at me with a worried look on her face.

She reached out a hand and put it on my arm. ‘Is it bad news?’

‘No.’ I said. ‘It isn’t bad news at all.’ I handed her the letter. A London publisher had written to tell me that he had seen a copy of my article about Angipax. He wanted to know if I would write a book on the subject for his firm.

‘They want you to write a book!’ said Patsy; having read the first few lines she lowered the letter.

‘Maybe!’ I felt cautious.

‘That’s marvellous!’

I said that I agreed with her. She kissed me. I kissed her back. Then Patsy pulled herself away from me for a moment.

‘Will they pay you money as well?’

‘I suppose so. If they agree to do the book.’

And then, with some reluctance, I realised that it was time for me to go back to the surgery.

* * *

When I got there Miss Johnson was waiting for me. ‘Would you ring Miss Phillips,’ she said. ‘She’s rung three times in the last fifteen minutes. She says it’s very urgent.’

I picked the telephone up immediately and dialled Miss Phillips’ number.

‘It’s a miracle!’ said Miss Phillips, excitedly. ‘Miss Tweedsmuir and I found a clump of red helleborine in Bluebell Wood!’

‘Wonderful!’

‘What shall we do?’

‘Telephone the newsdesk on the *Sunday News*,’ I told her. ‘And ask to speak to the news editor.’ I gave her his name and telephone number. Tell him what you’ve found and I’m pretty sure that they will send a reporter and a photographer along. Don’t tell anyone else yet. Once the photographer and the reporter have been then you can start ringing round as many conservation groups as you can think of.’

‘Right!’ said Miss Phillips. ‘Do you know,’ she said. ‘I think this is the most wonderful news I’ve ever had. Miss Tweedsmuir says that we must go to church on Sunday to give thanks. It must be a miracle. We’re both sure the flowers weren’t there the last time we looked.’

I promised that Patsy and I would go to church with her.

* * *

By the time I got back home the telephone lines around Bilbury had been buzzing, and everyone seemed to know about the discovery of the rare orchid growing in Bluebell Wood.

‘It’s amazing news!’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘I spoke to a man in the planning department who says that there’s no chance of Sherlock Homes getting their planning permission now.’

‘That’s wonderful!’

‘But I’m still sorry for you,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘Really I am. It doesn’t seem fair.’

‘Don’t worry,’ I insisted. ‘Patsy and I are very happy that Bilbury is going to be saved.’

‘I still can’t believe it said Dr Brownlow. ‘Isn’t it an amazing piece of luck?’

‘Astonishing!’ I agreed.

* * *

‘Did you have a chance to look at those books of yours?’ asked Mr Onions that evening. He had called round at the back door as Patsy and I were enjoying a wonderful vegetable hot pot. He held out a crisp, brand new ten pound note.

‘I did,’ I said. ‘But they’re my wife’s books and there is one or two that she’s especially fond of so I’m afraid I can’t let you have them.’

Mr Onions looked disappointed but didn’t say anything.

He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a roll of bank notes. He peeled off another ten pound note.

‘What about for £20?’

‘No. I’m afraid not.’

He peeled off another note.

‘£30?’

I shook my head. He peeled off two more notes.

‘£50?’

I felt myself beginning to sweat but shook my head again. I was now certain that Mr Onions didn’t want those books just to read them. ‘I’m afraid not,’ I said. ‘My wife doesn’t want to sell them.’

Mr Onions stared at me and shrugged. ‘Please yourself,’ he said and walked away.

* * *

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

A few days later Patsy and I went to London. I had written back to the publisher to tell him that I would very much like to accept his suggestion, and the next day his secretary had telephoned to ask me if I would go up and have lunch with him in London. She said that the firm would pay all my expenses, including a first class rail ticket. She also said that the publisher was keen for me to sign a contract as soon as possible because he wanted to have the book on his list.

'Why don't you come with me?' I said to Patsy. 'You could have a look around while I'm at my meeting - and then we could have tea together.' I knew that Patsy had never been to London before and I thought she might find it exciting. At first Patsy said she didn't want to go, but then she admitted that it wasn't so much that she didn't want to go as that she didn't think we could afford the railway ticket.

'But it won't cost us anything!' I pointed out. 'The publishers will pay for a first class ticket for me but we can buy two second class tickets for the same price, or even less.' Patsy looked worried. 'Isn't that fraud?'

'Of course not!' I told her. It took me a few minutes, but eventually I was able to persuade her that there was nothing dishonest in using the publisher's money to pay for two cheaper tickets. Once she had agreed I telephoned the station and reserved two seats for us before she could change her mind.

'What will I do while you're in your meeting?' Patsy asked me. 'You could go shopping.'

'Oh, I don't think so,' said Patsy, shaking her head. 'Not in London.'

'You could see some of the sights. Buckingham Palace. Saint Paul's Cathedral. The Tower of London. Trafalgar Square. That sort of thing.'

'Not without you,' said Patsy. 'Maybe you could show me around it all if there's time after your meeting?'

I smiled. 'We won't get to see much of London in a few hours.'

'That's all right. I don't mind.'

'You could take those books out of the flat to a book dealer.' I suggested. 'To see if any of them really are worth anything.'

'Oh yes!' cried Patsy, excitedly. But then a worried look replaced the momentary thrill. 'But where would I find a book dealer in London?'

'There will probably be one or two near to the offices where I'm meeting the publisher,' I told her.

We got up at five o'clock and drove to Barnstaple station where I parked the car in the almost deserted car park. We then caught the early morning stopping train from Barnstaple to Exeter. Patsy carried a bag filled with salad sandwiches and I carried our books wrapped up in two brown paper parcels tied with string. It was the first time I had been on the train since my very first trip to North Devon nearly a year earlier and I had forgotten what a beautiful journey it was.

At Eggesford they were getting ready for their annual Revels and the whole station was decorated with flowers and brightly coloured bunting.

At Exeter we caught the fast, main line express from the West Country to Paddington Station in London. It was a good thing that we had reserved our seats, for the train was bursting with holiday-makers going home and men in suits going up to the City on business. The overhead racks and the narrow spaces between the seats were packed with bulging suitcases, brightly painted tin buckets and wooden handled metal spades, huge raffia work baskets packed with souvenirs for friends and neighbours, and straw hats that would be pushed to the back of a cupboard and never be worn again. Fathers sat in their shirt sleeves reading their newspapers. Mothers sat nursing shopping baskets packed to the top with sandwiches wrapped in greaseproof paper or packed in small, air-tight plastic boxes, vacuum flasks full of hot tea, and bottles of ready mixed orange squash. Children, gloomy at the prospect of the long journey home and another fifty week wait for the next seaside adventure, scribbled with brightly coloured crayons on colouring books, table tops and each other, hunted underneath the seats for dice and counters lost from board games and fought endlessly and noisily.

Dotted amongst all this colour and noise sat dark-suited, dandruff-shouldered men dourly struggling with tedious looking sheaves of correspondence, pocket calculators and accounts which they took out of their black plastic briefcases. I felt sorry for them as they struggled to concentrate on their work amidst such chaos.

The train stopped just three times; at Taunton, at Westbury and at Reading. We ate our sandwiches between Taunton and Westbury. And then, less than two and a half hours after we had left Exeter, we were in London.

As we left the train at Paddington Station, Patsy clutched at my hand and gazed about her in astonishment. Not even the bustle of Mettleham had prepared her for this. Although I had been to London several times before, my last visit had been some time ago and I too felt overwhelmed by it all. The noise, the bustle, the dirt and most of all the fact that everything seemed so enormous.

In Barnstaple the single platform at the railway station is covered by a small glass awning. At Paddington the whole station is covered by a glass roof which could cover half the town of Barnstaple itself. In London everything - crowds, traffic jams and noise - was a hundred times bigger than either of us was used to.

The publisher's office was at an address no more than five minutes walk away from the British Museum, but too far away from Paddington for us to walk in the time we had available (even if we had been confident about finding our way there) and I decided that he wouldn't mind paying for a taxi ride. I wanted Patsy to be able to see as much of London as possible and you don't see much of a city when you travel deep underneath it on an underground train.

We sat together in silence in the back of a black cab and Patsy, sitting on the edge of her seat and staring out of the window like a child outside a toy shop window, held onto my hand as though frightened to be alone for even an instant.

'What's your first impression?' I asked her, as the cab crawled along in one of London's never ending traffic jams.

Patsy turned towards me. 'It's all so dirty!' she whispered, as though worried that the taxi driver might hear her and be offended. I followed her gaze out of the window and stared at the huge, grimy old buildings and the rubbish littered streets. I nodded but had to laugh. This was Patsy's first impression of London, and sadly it wasn't the splendour of the buildings or the buzz and excitement on the streets which she would remember most vividly but the dirt and the rubbish.

'So you don't want to come and live here?'

Patsy looked at me. 'I will if you want to,' she said quietly. But there was horror in her eyes.

'It's all right!' I laughed. I put my arm around her. 'I was joking.' Patsy pretended to be cross with me but looked relieved.

A few moments later the taxi driver stopped outside the British Museum gates.

I had half an hour to spare and so we went for a cup of coffee at a small cafe in a narrow side street. The coffee was strong, thick and served in cups that were about the size of thimbles. We drank it in a dark, tiny, empty room the walls of which were lined with travel posters.

Afterwards, I pointed out two antiquarian bookshops to Patsy and said I'd meet her at a nearby public house called, quite appropriately, The Devon Arms at three o'clock. I asked Patsy if she would be all right by herself. She said she would and wished me good luck.

* * *

The publisher's offices were not at all what I had expected. (Although to be honest I don't really know exactly what I had expected. Probably something rather larger and more extravagantly furnished.)

At street level the only sign that the publisher existed was a small rectangular metal plate with the publisher's name printed on it screwed to the wall by the side of a scruffy looking door. Two plastic bags full of rubbish stood to the right of the door and an overflowing metal dustbin stood on the other side. The door was open, and although it was dark inside I could see that the tiny hallway was almost completely blocked with cardboard boxes. From the labels which they bore I assumed that these were full of new books. Abandoned 'free' newspapers were littered around on the floor.

I walked cautiously through the doorway, looked for a moment at a tiny lift at the end of the corridor, decided not to risk it and started to climb slowly up the stairs.

An advertising agency had the offices on the first floor, a firm of accountants shared the second floor with a financial services consultant and a glamour magazine had the offices on the third floor. A series of small hand printed cardboard notices told me that the publisher I was looking for had offices on the fourth and uppermost floor.

Every door and every wall desperately needed painting. The stairs were uncarpeted and were littered with old newspapers, discarded envelopes, promotional cards which had fallen out of magazines and crumpled cigarette packets. I knocked on the door to the publisher's office and, in response to a distant cry of 'Come in!' opened the door and entered.

A buxom woman of about forty, dressed in a violet dress and, despite the summer warmth, a grey cardigan, sat behind an old and battered typewriter with her hands clasped in her lap. She wore a pair of old- fashioned half moon spectacles and had a single string of pearls around her neck. Her desk was piled high with papers, files and books and manuscripts. Behind her a dark haired girl of about seventeen, dressed in a rather grubby white T-shirt and a pair of torn blue jeans, sat hunched over another small desk licking envelopes. Her desk, too, was piled high with books and papers and files and manuscripts. Two filing cabinets, also piled high with books and papers and manuscripts and files, stood in a corner. The room was smaller than our bathroom at Bilbury Grange. I nervously and hesitantly introduced myself.

'Mr Inchmore is expecting you,' smiled the woman. She had a lovely smile. 'I'll tell him you're here.' She swung around on her chair and knocked on a door to her left. The black-haired girl did not look up but just carried on licking her envelopes.

Out of sight there was a crashing noise and a half stifled curse and then a huge mountain of a man burst through the door with a fistful of papers in his left hand and a pair of horn rimmed spectacles in his right. He wore a badly fitted dark grey suit a blue shirt and a bright red tie. When he saw me he slipped the spectacles into place. I couldn't help noticing that they were repaired in two places with bits of pink sticking plaster.

We shook hands and then he backed into his office and indicated that I should follow him. It wasn't an easy manoeuvre because I had to squeeze through a narrow gap between the chairs occupied by the buxom typist and the teenage envelope licker.

Mr Inchmore's office was slightly larger than the outer room but, if possible, even more crowded. There were piles of books and papers everywhere. There was not one clear square inch of desk top visible.

'I loved your article about Angipax,' said the publisher.

I tried to tiptoe around a huge pile of books that had fallen over and which had, presumably, been the source of the crash I had heard. 'I've got a copy here somewhere,' he said. He rummaged around on his desk and, much to my surprise, produced a cutting which I instantly recognised. He handed it to me either for me to look at or, more likely, simply to prove to me that he was not quite as disorganised as he seemed to be.

'Have you ever written a book before?' he asked me.

I shook my head.

'Completely different business to writing newspaper columns,' he said. 'A newspaper piece is like a sprint but a book is more like a marathon.'

I swallowed hard and nodded. I had fallen in love with the idea of writing a book without stopping to realise that I didn't know how to begin, let alone finish the task.

'What I want is a book about the way doctors and drug companies give people pills without really knowing what's going to happen,' said the publisher. 'Lots of names. Tough. Can you do that?'

'I think so,' I agreed. 'I'll need to do some research, of course...'

'Great,' said Mr Inchmore. 'I thought you could.' He fiddled with his spectacles and took them off again. 'I go by instinct,' he told me. He looked at me. 'I think you'll make an author.'

'Thank you,' I said.

'I can't pay you much,' said Mr Inchmore. 'Did I suggest a figure in my letter?'

'No.'

'Would £750 be acceptable?'

'£750?'

'As an advance against royalties, of course. I ought to get you to write an outline,' he said. 'But since you've never written a book before you probably won't be able to write an outline.' He grinned at me broadly. 'Writing an outline is harder than writing a book. To write an outline you've got to know what the book is going to look like when you've finished it.'

I was beginning to get cold feet.

'Just write the damned thing and then I'll show you what's wrong with it and we'll make a book out of it,' said Mr Inchmore with a laugh.

'The drug companies won't like it.' I said. 'Nor will a lot of doctors.' I thought I ought to warn him.

'Don't worry about libel,' said Mr Inchmore. 'We'll take out the most dangerous stuff. If you don't put anything dangerous in it to start with it won't be worth publishing!' He squeezed past me to the doorway. 'Norma!' he called.

The buxom woman in the grey cardigan came in. Mr Inchmore introduced us to each other.

'Do one of our standard contracts for the Angipax book, will you?' He said to her. 'Then pop it in the post when it's ready.'

Doris promised to do it right away and then backed out of the room.

'Fancy some lunch?' asked the publisher. I said that would be very nice.

'Great!' said Mr Inchmore. 'Follow me!'

In the outer office he introduced me to the girl with the black hair whose name was Helena and who had a beautiful face but the worst case of acne I think I had ever seen, borrowed two pounds off Norma and promised to be back within an hour. We then went down to the ground floor via the staircase. 'I never use the lift,' said Mr Inchmore. 'It gets stuck at least once a day.'

We walked around the corner, bought sandwiches at a baker's shop and ate them in a tiny park.

'I bet you thought publishers always took authors to posh lunches in fashionable restaurants,' said Mr Inchmore with a mouthful of beef sandwich.

I muttered something indecisive.

'I can't stand wasting money on restaurants,' he said. 'Food is just fuel. You don't spend a fortune on buying your petrol in a posh looking garage with expensive wall paper, do you?'

I agreed with this, though I didn't really think any comment was expected.

Ten minutes later we shook hands in the street outside Mr Inchmore's office. 'Norma will send you a contract,' he said.

'You send it back with your expenses and then she'll send you a cheque for your advance and your expenses all together.'

'Fine,' I said. 'Thank you very much.'

'I'm looking forward to this one,' said Mr Inchmore, rubbing his hands gleefully. He winked at me and then disappeared into the tiny hallway, squeezed past the boxes full of books and scurried up the stairs back to his office. I looked at my watch. It was a quarter past two.

I walked on along the street towards The Devon Arms to wait for Patsy.

I might not have yet written a book but I almost felt like an author.

* * *

Patsy was already waiting for me, sitting on the pavement outside the pub on a wooden bench at a wooden table with a long, cold drink in front of her.

I noticed, with some disappointment, that she had two crudely tied parcels of books sitting on the bench beside her. She was busy reading a magazine she had bought and didn't see me approaching.

'Excuse me,' I said. 'But can I join you?'

Patsy looked up and smiled. 'I'm so pleased to see you! How did you get on?'

'Great!' I told her. 'The publisher is quite a character. He's sending me a contract and he wants me to write the book.' I told her briefly about my meeting with Mr Inchmore.

'That's wonderful!' said Patsy.

'They're paying me £750 in advance,' I told her. 'If the book sells well I'll get even more!'

Patsy looked at me. 'We could nearly live on that!' she whispered.

'Plus, we've got my income from the column, and whatever fruit and vegetables we can sell to Peter Marshall and the rent from the coach-house flat!'

'Does that mean we might be able to stay in Bilbury?' asked Patsy, excitedly.

'Yes!' I told her. 'And how did you get on?' I nodded towards the parcels of books. 'No luck with the bookshops? Maybe we should have accepted Mr Onions' money after all.'

'Oh no we shouldn't!' said Patsy, with a broad smile on her face. 'You were absolutely right!'

I nodded towards the two parcels of books. 'But...'

'They aren't all there,' said Patsy quickly. 'We brought eleven books with us but there are only ten left now.'

'You managed to sell one?' Patsy nodded.

'That's wonderful! Which one?'

'Guess!'

'A novel?' I said, thinking I was being clever. Most of the books were novels.

'No.'

I tried to think what alternatives there were.

'The railway book?' I suggested, picking the least unlikely volume.

'No!' said Patsy, triumphantly. 'The one on gardening.'

'Why on earth was that one valuable? How much did they give you?'

'It was apparently a rare first edition by someone called Gertrude Jekyll. A very nice man in a very smart bookshop gave me £75 for it all in brand new £5 notes!'

'Who on earth is Gertrude Jekyll?' I asked.

'Was,' corrected Patsy. 'She's dead now. She was a famous garden designer and gardening writer. Apparently people who collect gardening books think a lot of her.' She reached into her cardigan pocket and pulled out her purse. 'You'd better have this,' she said, handing it to me. 'I don't like carrying all that money around with me.' She told me that the bookseller had shown her a picture of the book she had sold him in one of his catalogues. It had been priced at £150.

'Brilliant!' I said. I slipped the purse into my inside jacket pocket. 'Where else have you been?'

Patsy looked down at her drink. 'I didn't go anywhere else,' she said quietly. 'I just came straight here when I came out of the book shop.'

'Why?' I asked her. 'Why didn't you go exploring?'

'I was frightened that I'd get lost,' confessed Patsy. 'I don't really like London very much,' she said apologetically. 'But I'm glad I've seen it.'

She paused and took a sip of her drink. She seemed hesitant and so I waited for her to continue. 'I've got some more good news,' she said. 'The man in the bookshop asked me if I went to many auctions. He said he would be keen to see any more old books I found and he gave me a catalogue listing some of the books he's looking for.' She moved a little closer and whispered. 'He said he'd pay hundreds of pounds for some books!'

Patsy went on to tell me that the bookseller had explained that most country house auctions a long way from London were attended only by furniture dealers who often didn't know anything about books. He had told her that if she went to auctions and junk shops she would probably find quite a number of valuable editions and that he would give her half the catalogue price for anything she found in good condition.

'I can't wait.' she whispered excitedly. 'It'll be great fun. We could make a bit more money that way. And we could go together if you're not working as a doctor any more.'

I said I would like that very much indeed.

'What else would you like to see while we're in London?' I asked her.

'I don't know. What is there?'

I told her about the changing of the guard, the shops in the Burlington Arcade, the National Portrait Gallery, the Science Museum, the stores in Knightsbridge and Oxford Street, the parks, Fleet Street, the Bank of England and Piccadilly Circus.

Patsy did not look very impressed. In fact she looked a little sad.

'What's the matter?' I asked her. 'Is there something else you'd rather do?'

'Well...' began Patsy, shyly.

'What is it?'

'Whatever it is we'll do it.'

'No, you'll think I'm silly...'

'I won't. Honestly.'

'You will.'

'I won't.'

'Honestly. Whatever is you want to do we'll do it.'

'Even if it's silly?'

'However silly it is.'

'I'd like to go home to see the lambs and pick the strawberries. And look in the local newspaper to see what auctions there are. And you could start work on your book.'

I laughed out loud. I couldn't help it. But, as I quickly told Patsy, I wasn't laughing at her. I was laughing because I too couldn't think of anything I would rather have done.

'We're just a pair of country bumpkins,' I told her as we walked hand in hand back towards Paddington Station.

It wasn't as far or as difficult to find as I had feared, and an hour later Patsy and I were sitting beside each other on the train home, with our two parcels of worthless books beside us and Patsy's £75 in crisp, brand new £5 notes tucked safely in my jacket pocket.

As the train pulled out of the station Patsy sighed, tucked her arm in mine and leant her head on my shoulder.

'I'm glad we live in Bilbury,' she murmured. 'So am I,' I whispered back. 'So am I.' I looked down at her and saw that her eyes were closed.

She slept all the way back to Devon.

I didn't know exactly what the future held but I was looking forward to every minute of it.

Bilbury Grange is the second of Vernon Coleman's seven books about Bilbury – all available as Amazon Kindle books. If you enjoy the Bilbury books you may also enjoy other books by the same author including '*Mr Henry Mulligan*' and '*Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War'*. For details of over 100 books by Vernon Coleman please see his Amazon author page or visit www.vernoncoleman.com

Press reviews of ‘The Bilbury Chronicles’ by Vernon Coleman

‘Entertaining and amusing full of humour and sharp characterisation.’ *Sunday Independent*

‘Coleman handles the humour with the assured touch that comes from having already written a string of successful titles (and) manages to retain a heartwarming affection for his fellowman.’ *Yorkshire Evening Post*

‘Very readable, funny and full of richly drawn characters.’ *Southern Evening Echo*

‘You can sniff the clean Devon air and, despite the fiction, hear and recognise characters indigenous to any West Country village Dr Coleman harnesses the essence of village life with a wealth of characters and strings them along on a tide of gentle humour. One of the pleasures of this tale is that so many people will recognise Bilbury under a different name.’ *Western Morning News*

‘A charming novel...a wealth of anecdotes and some nice touches of humour make this forerunner of a promised series worth reading.’ *Sunderland Echo*

‘Beautifully captures the essence of village life, portraying the daily routines and tragedies experienced in a rural community. He weaves together a wealth of characters and anecdotes with humour and sadness in a really entertaining offering.’ *Western Evening Herald*

‘A cornucopia of colourful characters helps to weave a rich tapestry of village life subtly tempered with the gentle humour which hallmarks this author‘s work. Set in 1971, the mixture of rural beauty, human nature and the odd whisper of nostalgia combine to make this book a real delight.’ *Western Gazette*

‘The stories have moments of poignancy and tragedy as well. And how splendidly he mixes all the ingredients to produce a startling, but still credible tale about the local bobby and his man-eating wife. Dr Coleman’s book is a real delight from cover to cover. As the first in a series, it holds out the promise of entertaining things to come.’ *Huddersfield Daily Examiner*

The Young Country Doctor: Book 3

BILBURY REVELS

Vernon Coleman

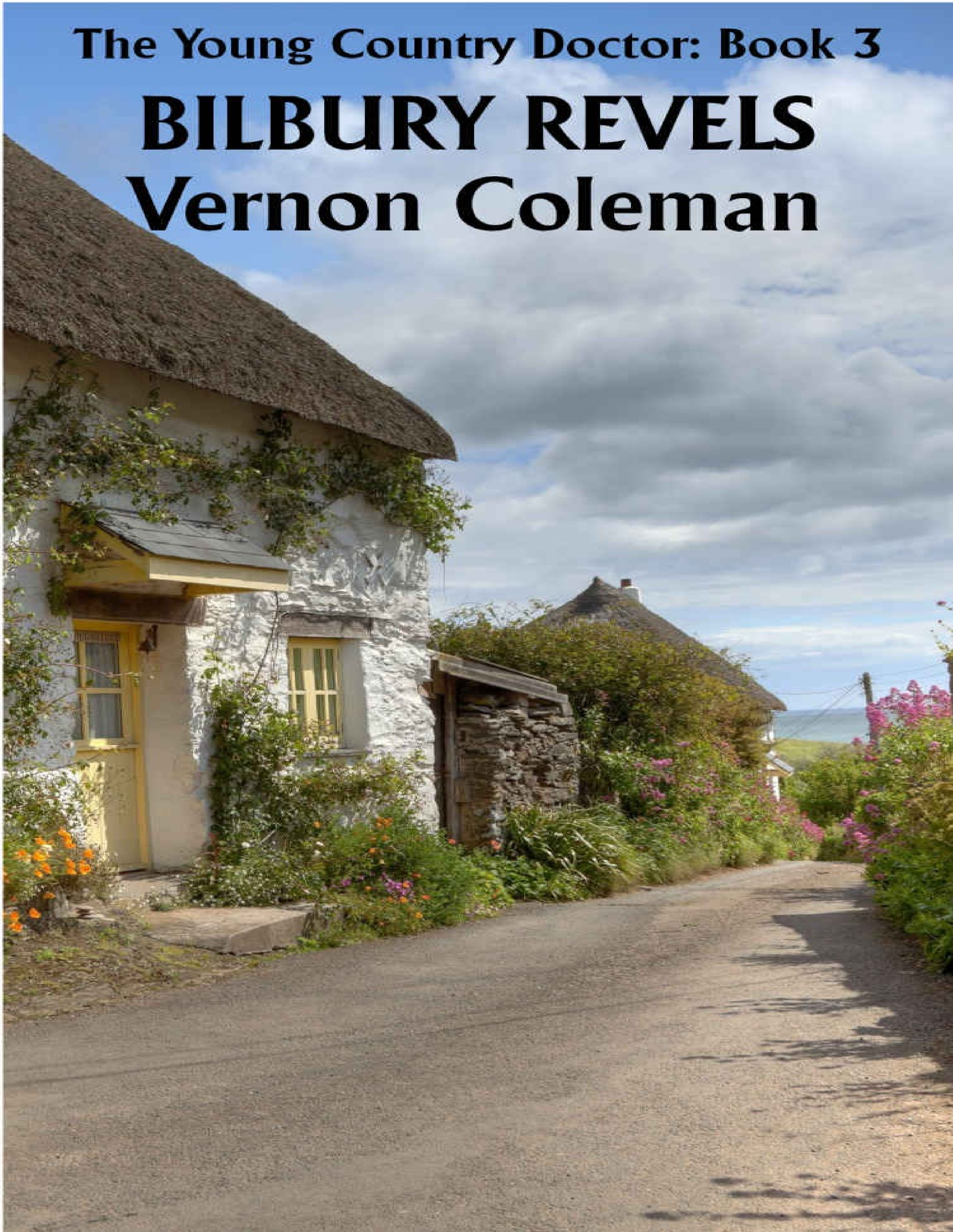

The Young Country Doctor Book 3

Bilbury Revels

Vernon Coleman

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Bilbury Revels is the third of Vernon Coleman's seven books about Bilbury. These are: *Bilbury Chronicles, Bilbury Grange, Bilbury Revels, Bilbury Country and Bilbury Village.* There are two books of short stories called *Bilbury Pie* and *Bilbury Pudding*. All will be available as Amazon Kindle Books. If you enjoy the Bilbury books you may enjoy other books by the same author including '*Mr Henry Mulligan'* and '*Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War'*. For full details of over 100 books by Vernon Coleman please see his author page on Amazon or http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

CHAPTER ONE

The snow in Bilbury was deep and crisp but it definitely wasn't even. The wind had seen to that. The wind that scours the North Devon coast, shaping trees and moulding hedgerows, removing roofs and whipping up the sea, isn't one of those balmy south coast breezes. It's a tough, unwavering, unrelenting, real god of a wind. In my first autumn in Bilbury I had noticed that the moment the leaves on the trees started to turn brown and die the wind whisked them off to the East. Even our walled garden was magically emptied of leaves within days. The wind is so fierce that rain in Bilbury doesn't fall vertically; it comes in from the West, driven horizontally and finding its way through invisible hair line cracks in door and window frames.

It had started snowing late the previous evening, just as Patsy and I were getting ready for bed. I'd gone outside to take Ben, our Welsh collie, out for her customary late night potter around the garden and had seen the first few delicate flakes floating gently down out of the moonlit blackness above. (I'm not sure how a female collie came to be called Ben. But that's her name.)

It had clearly not been snowing for more than a few minutes for there were still no more than a few flakes on the ground, and no sign as yet that this was going to be serious snow. I checked that our four pet sheep were safely tucked up in their stable, laid down extra straw, gave them enough hay to see them through the night and then shut the bottom half of their stable door and dropped the kick bolt. I left the top half of the door open. They hated being shut in the dark and the moon was their nightlight. They had grown good, thick fleeces since the summer and snuggled down in the straw, protected from the wind and the wet, they looked warm and content.

* * *

The snow must have fallen heavily all night for when we awoke the following morning the whole world had turned white. I tied the cord around my dressing gown, pulled back the bedroom curtains and stared in amazement at the view. It had been a long time since I'd seen such a heavy snowfall. It was impossible to see where the lawn ended and the driveway began and the small stone sundial we'd bought at an auction in Hatherleigh was now just a snowy white lump. Tree boughs, laden with snow, were bent down with their burdens and I made a mental note to go outside after breakfast and clear as many of them as I could before they broke.

Ben, who had as usual slept at the foot of our bed, came over to the window, jumped up on the window seat, rested her front paws on the window sill and stared for a moment at the curious world outside. She looked up at me, looked outside again and barked twice, clearly asking me what on earth had happened. One of our two cats, Sophie, ears pricked at the sudden noise, looked up from where she was curled at Patsy's feet, contented herself that she wasn't missing anything and yawned lazily before burying her nose back underneath her tail and going straight back to sleep.

I stroked Ben's head to reassure her that there was nothing for her to worry about and then lit the fire I'd laid the previous evening in the bedroom fireplace. Although we had an AGA in the kitchen which kept us supplied with endless quantities of hot water and which produced so much heat that it kept the whole house above freezing, we didn't have any central heating at Bilbury Grange, and certainly couldn't afford to have any installed, so we kept ourselves warm by lighting wood fires in the rooms we used most: the living room, the hall, our bedroom and the bathroom. We were still burning the old wooden laths that Thumper had taken off when he had repaired our roof and they made excellent fire lighters. To supplement this store of wood I had spent much of the autumn collecting, sawing and storing branches that had been blown down in the fields that surrounded our home. The wind that brought the cold, the rain and the snow had also given us much of our firewood. The breath of god which took away warmth and comfort also gave us back those things.

I had grown well accustomed to our idiosyncratic fireplaces and each has its own peculiar likes and dislikes. Give one too much paper and it will blaze into a moment of glory but give out little or no heat. Put too large a log onto another before it's ready and the promise of heat will disappear in an instant.

The bedroom fireplace was easy to satisfy and so efficient that we could even burn wood with the sap in it if we wanted to, though most of our firewood was well dried. Three or four sheets of crumpled newspaper topped with two layers of roofing laths were the basis of a good fire. I lit the paper with a match in two opposing corners, stood back for two or three minutes and then dropped a small well-seasoned ash log onto the flames; just big enough to keep the fire going until we were both washed and dressed. The ash tree had stood in a corner of one of our fields for nigh on sixty years before it had finally succumbed to the executioner wind.

'Why was Ben barking?' asked Patsy, pushing herself up onto one elbow but keeping the quilted counterpane up around her shoulders.

'It's been snowing.'

'Are we snowed in?'

'Yes. At least I think so. It looks pretty thick.'

Patsy's response might have sounded strange to a city dweller. 'Wonderful!' she said, meaning it. We had good stocks of food in the larder and cellar and plenty of logs in the shed. Even if the electricity went off, which it usually did two or three times a week in winter when the wind brought down overhead cables, we could stay warm and well fed. We had plenty of hay and straw for the sheep, a good supply of books to read and Bilbury Grange had a strong roof. We were well prepared for snow or storm.

'I'm going to have to go outside and knock the snow off some of the evergreens,' I told her. 'A couple of the conifers already look as if their branches may have broken under the weight.' The deciduous trees, their branches stark and leafless, were in no danger but the conifers, the rhododendrons, the yew, the laurel, the holly and many others needed help.

'I'll cook us a decent breakfast first,' said Patsy, throwing back the eiderdown, getting out of bed and walking over to the window. She stood for a brief moment or two then shivered. You could feel the cold through the glass. She ran back to warm herself at the now blazing fire, picking up her dressing gown as she did so. Then she knelt down, stared at the flames and rubbed her hands together while I filled the bedroom sink with hot water, stripped off to the waist and washed and shaved. When I'd finished and before I started dressing I filled the bowl with fresh, hot water for Patsy. The steam rose from the sink in great clouds and I blessed the AGA for the umpteenth time. Huge, solid and imperturbable the boiler asked only that we fed it regularly on its twice daily diet of coke. In return it worked quietly and efficiently to protect us from the worst of the cold. Steam condensed on the windows and the beautiful snowy landscape outside gradually disappeared from view.

I pulled on a pair of thick jeans, a woollen work shirt which I'd bought from a farm supply shop in South Molton and a thick jumper which Patsy's mother had made for me with wool she'd spun herself from their own sheep. The wool was still coated with the sheep's natural oils and the sweater was heavy but cosy and waterproof.

Downstairs I pushed my feet into Wellington boots and pulled a floppy, old tweed fishing hat down over my ears. I didn't fish but had found the hat in a cupboard underneath the stairs. It was slightly too large for me but I didn't mind because that meant that it covered more of my head than a more fashionable hat would have done. I then opened the back door and went out to check that the sheep were all right.

* * *

A few minutes later, back in the kitchen, I took off my sweater and boots and padded around in my stockinged feet. Sophie and Emily, our two cats, had both finished their breakfasts and were curled up together on the rug in front of the AGA. In the winter they avoided the cold by finding somewhere warm to sleep, curling up together and shutting out whatever horrors the weather might bring. In the summer, if the sun was out, they avoided the heat by finding somewhere cool to sleep. They had a simple but effective way of dealing with whatever problems life threw at them.

'Are the sheep O.K.?'

'They're fine. They want to know why they can't go out but they're fine.' They had baaared at me and playfully butted me when I had refused to open up their stable door to let them out. Their protests hadn't lasted long, however. They had soon tucked into the fresh supply of hay I'd given them.

I fed Ben, who wagged her tail in thanks and then immediately started eating. I had had to bite my tongue not to laugh at her antics in the snow; the first she'd ever encountered. She had rubbed her nose in it, licked it, spat it out, tried again and swallowed some. Then she had run round and round in tiny circles, kicking up great fluffy clouds of snow and finally spluttering to a halt in a small two foot thick drift.

Sophie and Emily had been far more circumspect. Sophie had poked her head through the cat flap which Thumper had fitted for us and had taken a long hard look at the white world on the other side of the door before gingerly poking a front leg through to test the temperature of the outside world. With her three other legs still in the house, and her head and body sheltered by the cat flap from the lightly falling snow, Sophie had paused, frozen in mid movement, before carefully retreating back into the kitchen. She had obviously decided that whatever it was she was planning to do outside could wait until the world had returned to normal.

'I've made us porridge to start with,' said Patsy, putting two huge bowls onto the table and ladling porridge out of an old iron pan which her mother had given her, and which had been warming gently on the AGA top. 'There's syrup on the table.' Two huge mugs of steaming tea were already poured.

I used the handle of a tablespoon to open the syrup tin and then put two huge spoons of syrup into the centre of my bowl of porridge. Whatever the Scots may say I like syrup on my porridge. I can't abide the thought of eating it laced with salt.

'Mushrooms?' asked Patsy, a few minutes later as I tipped a hod of coke into the AGA.

'Yes, please!'

'Eggs?'

'Two.'

'Poached, fried or scrambled?'

'Scrambled, please.'

'Tomatoes?'

'Oh, yes please!'

'How many slices of toast?'

'One with the eggs on, one with the tomatoes on and two to have with marmalade afterwards.'

Patsy had made her own marmalade in the autumn, using a recipe handed down from her grandmother, and it was much thicker, tangier and tastier than any mass-produced competitor I've ever tasted. She had made a minor mistake with the quantities and had made 54lbs of it but I wasn't complaining, although there had been quite a run on jam jars in the village at a time when every woman in every house and cottage was busy making jam. (In addition to the marmalade Patsy had made 17lbs of gooseberry jam, 44lbs of strawberry jam, 38lbs of blackberry and apple jam, 67lbs of blackcurrant jam and 45lbs of rhubarb and tomato chutney plus smaller quantities of other jams! Only the discovery of a large cache of jars in a dark corner of the cellar had solved our jam jar shortage).

I put the empty coke hod down by the back door so that it was ready for refilling after breakfast, picked up the cats' bowls, which were empty, and rinsed them in the sink, and then got two large plates out of the crockery cupboard, two knives and two forks out of the cutlery drawer and a jar of Patsy's rhubarb and tomato chutney out of the larder. Breakfast didn't usually consist of anything much more than toast and marmalade and tea or coffee but I was looking forward to this morning's feast.

Twenty minutes later, I sat back with a sigh and wiped a few remaining crumbs from around my mouth. I glanced out of the kitchen window into the courtyard. It was still snowing. The sky was now as white as everywhere else and the snow was now clearly here to stay for a while. Just then the kitchen light went out. It didn't really matter, it was now light enough to see quite well without it, but we were now really on our own. The electricity had just failed.

* * *

It took the two of us an hour and a half to go around the garden using long sticks to knock the worst of the snow off the bushes and the lower branches of all the evergreen trees. There were still a few conkers left clinging to the upper branches of one of our largest horse chestnut trees and periodically the additional weight of the ice with which they were coated brought these crashing down through the snow laden boughs. Sophie and Emily had sensibly stayed indoors but Ben had, of course, come out with us. Nothing would keep Ben indoors if Patsy and I were going out. She danced around barking and snapping at the falling snow, dodging first this way and then that to avoid each fresh mini avalanche.

We checked the vegetable garden, the greenhouse and all the outbuildings and then walked around the house to make sure that the wind had not done any damage. It hadn't, though it was still blowing hard. The snow had been blown into deep drifts on the windward side of every wall and Ben had great fun throwing herself into each fresh, virginal snow-bank.

Using an old pick axe I started to break the ice on the water butts, the pond and the lake. Around the lake I had to help a dozen gulls free themselves from where they had settled down the night before to sleep. The birds' feet had frozen to the ground around the edge of the lake. The ice on the lake was no more than half an inch thick but it still took quite a lot of hammering to break. I used a long handled pick axe to clear an area about ten foot long and three foot wide on the lake and nearly fell in trying to reach out further. In the vegetable garden the water butts seemed to have frozen solid and the ice was impossible to break. The snow there was crisscrossed with animal tracks: the large, five toed track of a badger, the bizarre, jumping track of a squirrel and the tracks of a dozen other animals: moles, rabbits, mice and maybe (I wasn't sure) even a hedgehog.

I had lined two old wooden seed trays with newspaper and was filling them with earth from inside the greenhouse so that the cats could use them as litter trays when Patsy, who was rummaging around at the far end of the greenhouse, suddenly produced two large, old, shallow metal trays.

'What on earth do you want those for?' I asked her. The trays had once been painted green and were too shallow for any practical purpose I could think of.

Patsy grinned at me, rather sheepishly.

'How long is it since you went tobogganing?' she asked.

'Tobogganing? I can't remember. Years and years.'

'Come on then!' cried Patsy. She came up behind me and pushed me towards the greenhouse door. 'These'll make terrific toboggans.'

We stopped off at the house to leave the two litter trays for Emily and Sophie (both of whom poked their noses through the kitchen doorway, sniffed again at the snow, and then ran back indoors to the rug in front of the AGA) and then carried our tin trays over to the long, steep hill in Tumbrill's Meadow. We spent the next two hours playing in the snow like a couple of carefree children.

We went back to the house as the wind started to blow stronger and the snow came down heavier than before. The sky was heavy and dark and from past experience I knew we were in for a long and bitter night. Before we went in I walked round the house and closed the shutters over all the windows, fastening them tightly against the coming storm.

* * *

Our bathroom at Bilbury Grange has two huge, cast iron baths side by side. While water gushed out from the four huge taps I lit a wood fire and threw on some twigs of rosemary. The bathroom fireplace works well and within minutes there was a blaze big enough to take the chill off the room. Patsy and I undressed and, as the fire crackled and roared and the air filled with the fragrant smell of burning rosemary wood, we each climbed into a bath and soaked our aching bodies in water so hot that we could only just bear it. Our wet clothes lay tumbled together in a soggy mass on the bathroom floor while huge bath towels (bought at a sale when a country house hotel went bankrupt and the receivers sold the contents at auction) warmed in front of the fire on a Victorian wooden towel rail.

Outside the wind was beginning to build up again and it was clear that the sky had told the truth. It was going to be another stormy night. The window panes were now opaque with condensed steam.

There was, I felt, something strangely, irresistibly decadent about having a bath in the middle of a Monday afternoon when all decent God fearing men and women should be at work, hunched over desk or machine, brows anxiously furrowed and eyes forever glancing towards the clock.

A spark shot out from the fire, landed in the puddle of water that had seeped from our clothes and expired with a hiss. Ben, lying a yard or two away from it, lifted her head and pricked up her ears. Satisfied that nothing had happened for her to worry about, or to protect us against, she lay her head back down again between her paws and rested, with one eye half open, half on guard. Sophie and Emily, curled together as usual, didn’t move a whisker. I lay back, closed my eyes and floated in my bath.

* * *

It seemed a lifetime ago since I’d first arrived in North Devon and although, in truth, it was no more than a few years, I could hardly remember the life I’d had before I’d found Bilbury.

I had come to the village in 1971, soon after I’d qualified from medical school, to work as an assistant to Dr Brownlow, the ageing and much loved local general practitioner. I had exchanged asphyxiating traffic fumes, endless rules, regulations and restrictions, and a glass and concrete skyline for country air, real responsibility, and a skyline dominated by trees, hills and storm-tossed, white-crested waves.

When Dr Brownlow had unexpectedly decided to retire (after a water diviner had discovered an underground stream on his land and Dr Brownlow had decided to open a bottling plant) I had, with some initial diffidence, taken on the practice myself and by the time bureaucrats and administrators made the decision to close the practice down and amalgamate it with a bigger medical practice in Barnstaple I had met and married Patsy.

By then we had bought and started to renovate Bilbury Grange. Bilbury had become my home and I loved the village and the life we had started to create for ourselves there more than the medical career I’d originally chosen. Without hesitation I had made the decision to stay in Bilbury and to try to earn my living as a writer.

I was nervously waiting to receive the finished copies of my first book. With the books should come the final instalment of my advance royalty. The £250 cheque, a third of the total advance, would be very welcome. The first third had been paid when I signed the contract to write the book. The second instalment, another £250, had been paid when I had delivered the typescript of the book.

Since I had retired from general practice our only regular income had come from the weekly medical column I wrote, which was syndicated to several local newspapers in different towns around the country. We had supplemented this modest income by selling fruit and vegetables from our garden, by renting out the small flat in our courtyard to holiday-makers during the summer months and by going to local house clearance auctions, finding old books and selling them on to a dealer in London. I had hoped to be able to earn a little more money by writing articles, features and stories for other newspapers and magazines but I had found it harder going than I had anticipated. Although I’d written a dozen pieces I’d sold only two: a short story to a local paper in London and an article about infectious diseases to a woman’s magazine.

Outside Bilbury Grange the incoming snow was now being hurled against the house by a constantly increasing and ferocious westerly wind. The bathroom, lit only by the flickering flames from the open log fire, was cosily romantic. The wind whistled through the slits in the shutters and through a tiny hole it had found under the eaves and I remembered someone once telling me years before that although they may look soft, large and fluffy snowflakes can find their way through the meanest of gaps. I wondered whether I ought to find a ladder and go and check out the loft. After a moment’s thought I decided that I would leave this chore until the next morning.

‘What do you want for tea?’ asked my wife, lazily lifting her right leg out of the water and soaping it.

I turned my head and could only just see Patsy’s eyes and the top of her head, peeping over the top of her bath. ‘I don’t know,’ I confessed. ‘I hadn’t even thought about tea.’

‘I thought we might perhaps have crumpets and jam in front of the fire in the living room,’ suggested Patsy. She finished rubbing soap on her leg and lowered it gently back down into the water without so much as a splash.

‘Sounds absolutely splendid,’ I murmured. I lifted my right foot out of the water, turned on the hot tap with my toes and topped up the bath with more hot water. Exhausted by this simple effort I sank even lower into the water. In the fireplace a flaming log slipped an inch or two, sending a small shower of sparks out over the hearth. Ben, ever vigilant, raised her head and pricked her ears, checked out the noise, reassured herself that all was still well and settled herself back down again. Sophie and Emily, happy to leave all watchdog duties to Ben, didn’t even stir.

A log fire. Hot buttered crumpets thickly covered with home made jam. Bilbury Grange battened down against the storm and all our animals locked up safely. Life seemed good and I felt grateful. I thought that perhaps I might mix a bowlful of hot punch to drink with our crumpets.

* * *

CHAPTER TWO

The storm raged for two days and two nights. On the second night I had just managed to get to sleep when I was woken by the telephone. Still at least nine tenths asleep I picked up the receiver and spoke. ‘Hello?’ I couldn’t hear anyone at the other end and assumed that the caller, whoever it was, had given up at the very moment that I’d picked up the receiver. It’s amazing how often that seems to happen. I was about to put the telephone down again when I heard a familiar voice. It was Frank, the genial licensed victualler who, with his wife, Gilly, runs the village pub, the Duck and Puddle. He sounded faint, as though he was calling from the other side of the world, and I could hardly hear him. Deciphering what he had to say was made even more difficult by the fact that the wind was rattling the shutters and whistling through the loft above us.

‘...lines aren’t... very well... hear me?’

‘Frank?’ I sat up in bed and reached out to switch on my bedside light.

‘... storm... school..!’ I heard him say. There was clearly some sort of intermittent fault on the line.

My fingers found the switch on the lamp. Click. Nothing happened. No light. I had forgotten that we had no electricity. Only much later did I find out that a huge old oak tree on the corner of Parsonage Lane and Frog Road had been uprooted by the gale and had brought down all the incoming electricity cables.

‘I can’t hear you properly,’ I told Frank. ‘Can you say it again?’

As I spoke the storm grew steadily more powerful. I was glad we had wooden shutters across our windows. When we had restored the house we had thought seriously about having the old, slatted wooden shutters taken off but Thumper Robinson had insisted that the wood was quite sound and simply needed painting.

‘... tree... roof... cottage,’ was all I heard from Frank’s next sentence. I sat up straighter, pressed the receiver more firmly against my ear and concentrated hard.

‘Sorry, Frank,’ I said. ‘I can’t hear you properly. Can you say it again? Keep on saying it.’ I repeated this rather tedious litany three or four times so that Frank, who was, I presumed having as much difficulty in hearing me as I was in hearing him, would stand a chance of hearing what I was saying. Inevitably, Patsy woke up.

‘What’s the matter?’ she asked, sleepily. ‘Who is it?’

I put my hand over the mouthpiece. ‘It’s Frank,’ I answered in a whisper. ‘From the Duck and Puddle,’ I added rather unnecessarily for at the time I don’t think either of us knew anyone else called Frank. ‘There seems to be some sort of emergency but there is something wrong with the phone line.’ Patsy nodded knowingly. She’d lived in Bilbury all her life. She knew from past experience that the telephone and electricity cables were often affected by Bilbury’s fierce south westerly gales.

Frank repeated his message several times and each time I managed to hear a few different words.

‘I’ll be there as soon as I can!’ I said the moment I understood what Frank was saying, throwing back the sheets and blankets on my side of the bed as I spoke. I winced as the cold hit me. Downstairs the old AGA must have been furiously pumping out its heat but the weather was so cold that the boiler didn’t seem to have made much difference to the temperature in the bedroom. I put the telephone handset down on its rest, opened a drawer in the top of the bedside table and took out a candle, an old fashioned candle holder and a box of matches. Working entirely by feel I put the candle in the holder and then lit the match. The sudden flare of the match lit up the room. I lit the wick and waited for the candle to settle down to a steady flame. Then I put down the candle holder on the bedside table, climbed out of bed and rapidly started to dress. Ben, her ears pricked, jumped down off the bed and sat expectantly on the carpet by my feet. Neither Emily nor Sophie moved.

‘What’s wrong?’ asked Patsy, sleepily. ‘Where are you going?’

‘The storm has blown a tree down onto School Cottage,’ I explained, taking a fresh, thick, woollen shirt from a drawer and pulling it over my head. ‘Frank says they think Miss Hargreaves is still inside the wreckage. The road from Barnstaple is blocked with snowdrifts so they want me to go over in case they find her and she’s injured.’ Miss Hargreaves, a formidable looking but kind hearted spinster in her fifties was the village schoolmistress. She had, I knew, come to the school in her early twenties, fresh from teacher training college, and for thirty years had dedicated her life to educating the young people of Bilbury.

Little more than a year earlier I had been Bilbury’s general practitioner and had borne the sole responsibility for the health and physical wellbeing of the villagers. Now I no longer had any official responsibilities in the village but the villagers knew that I was a doctor and they still called on me from time to time whenever there were emergencies.

Patsy managed to slide out of bed without disturbing the sheets and blankets on her side of the bed too much. Gently, she lifted Sophie, pulled her dressing gown from where Sophie had been lying on the bed, and then replaced the still sleeping cat. She shivered involuntarily, pulled the dressing gown around her and tied it tightly.

‘You don’t need to get up,’ I told her, rummaging around in the drawer where I kept my socks. The dim light from the candle, barely enough to see by at the best of times, flickered as an extra strong gust of wind found its way through a gap somewhere in a wall or window frame. Eventually I found what I was looking for: a pair of really thick knitted socks. I put them on. They came up almost to my knees.

‘You’ll have to walk,’ said Patsy. ‘You won’t be able to drive in this. I’m going to put up some food for you.’ She took her own candle out of her bedside drawer, lit it and used it to light her way around the bedroom and to the door.

I took my black Gladstone bag out of the bottom of the wardrobe, followed her out onto the landing and down the stairs to the kitchen. Ben padded down behind me. The Gladstone bag contained my medical equipment. I always kept it ready packed and handy for emergencies.

The kitchen was much warmer than anywhere else in the house and I pulled my jeans and sweater down from the line above the AGA where I had left them to dry the night before and put them on. They were as warm as fresh toast. Patsy put a saucepan of home-made tomato soup on top of the cooking plate. Then she opened the white enamelled metal breadbin which stood by the side of the oven and took out half a loaf of bread. She cut eight thick slices of bread and made me a huge pile of sandwiches: two with egg, cress and home-made rhubarb and tomato chutney and two with home-made strawberry jam. By the time she had finished, the soup pan was boiling. She carefully poured the contents of the pan into a vacuum flask. Then she wrapped the sandwiches in greaseproof paper. While she was doing this I took a small, sturdy knapsack from a hook just behind the cellar door and put it down on the kitchen table. Then I opened my Gladstone bag and carefully tipped out the contents onto the table alongside it. I wanted to have both hands free so needed to put everything I wanted to take with me into my knapsack. I packed my stethoscope, small sphygmomanometer, thermometer, suture kit, scalpel, syringes, needles and a small supply of essential medicines including painkillers. When I had finished, Patsy took the knapsack from me and packed the wrapped sandwiches into one side pocket and the flask into the other. Before she fastened the haversack she filled a brown paper bag with dog biscuits and popped the bag into the knapsack.

‘I’m not taking Ben,’ I told her.

‘I don’t think you’ll be able to stop her,’ said Patsy quietly, nodding in Ben’s direction. The collie was sitting patiently by the back door, ears pricked and obviously ready to go. ‘Take her with you,’ said Patsy. ‘I don’t know why but I’ll be happier if you do.’

Half reluctantly I said I would. I was only half reluctant because, selfishly, I knew that I would welcome her company.

‘Take care,’ said Patsy.

I said I would.

‘I hope she’s all right,’ said Patsy.

‘Ben?’ I asked, puzzled.

‘Miss Hargreaves,’ said Patsy. ‘She taught me to read and write. When I was a kid we all loved her. She used to be very pretty you know when she was young.’ I sometimes forgot that Patsy had grown up in the village.

I gave Patsy a big hug and told her that I would do whatever I could. Then I pulled on a pair of waterproof leggings and my green, oiled coat and stuffed a large rubber torch into one of the pockets. I pulled a thick woolly hat firmly onto my head (my usual hat would have been blown off within seconds and would, in any case, have done nothing to keep my ears warm), slipped my feet into my boots, put my arms through the straps of my haversack, pulled on a pair of woollen gloves and then added a pair of thick thornproof gardening gloves that were slightly too large for me and would, therefore, allow me to wear the woollen gloves as well, kissed Patsy goodbye, chose a five foot long hickory stick from the stand by the back door and grinned at Ben. These preparations may sound a little ‘over the top’ but if you have ever experienced a snowstorm on Exmoor you will know that they were not. Finally, I unbolted the back door, and cautiously peered outside.

I knew it had been snowing hard for a long time and I knew that the wind was fierce but I had not expected the conditions to be quite as dramatic as they were. The snow in the courtyard had drifted up against the back door and was nearly four feet high and the wind sent clouds of thick snow whirling into the kitchen. I shut the door with far more difficulty than I had opened it. I hadn’t even stepped outside and yet my eyes were already smarting from the wind and the icy sharp flakes of snow.

‘I need some goggles,’ I told Patsy, pulling off my thick gloves and rubbing at my sore eyes. It seemed an impossible hope. Where on earth could I find goggles?

Suddenly I had a brainwave. I opened the cellar door, took the torch out of my pocket and went down the stairs. There, hanging on a rusty nail, I found the light plastic goggles Thumper Robinson had used when he had sprayed the loft with a chemical mixture designed to kill woodworm and dry rot. When he had finished with them I’d washed them and kept them, convinced that they looked too useful to throw away. I dusted them off and put them on.

With virtually every inch of me now protected against the wind and the blizzard I half walked and half fell out into the drift which had accumulated against the back door. Ben, doing an undignified but effective variation on the dog paddle, half walked and half swam through the snow.

A yard or two away from the back door I turned round and peered through the thick white curtain of snow which surrounded me. I could just make out the kitchen door and the faint, yellow light of the candle I knew that Patsy was holding. Doubting whether Patsy could see me I hesitated for a moment, waved my stick and then turned to head for the gateway out of the courtyard.

* * *

The village school in Bilbury is situated about half a mile along the road from the Village Green and the Duck and Puddle. It is about two, maybe two and a half miles away from Bilbury Grange if you follow the road round; though as the crow flies the distance between Bilbury Grange and the school is no more than a mile and a half at the most.

The Bilbury village school was built in the 1930s by a millionaire from the north of England who had made a considerable fortune out of exploiting hordes of poorly paid women and children in textile factories all over the world. When he retired he bought a house and came to live in Bilbury and was clearly determined to purge his soul of the evil he had done. Driven, I suspect, by guilt his final two decades were spent performing what are usually referred to as ‘good works’. He was never shy about his generosity and both the school and the village hall (a much repaired, weather scarred, wonderful neo-gothic creation which must be the only building in England to have four stained glass windows and a corrugated iron roof) which was also built with his money, have his name carved into the brickwork. The School Cottage, much photographed by visitors to the district, and traditionally occupied by Bilbury’s resident schoolteacher, had a thatched roof and its walls were totally covered with a fine mixture of ivy, rambling roses and clematis.

There is a little known footpath between the Grange and the village which Patsy and I often used in the summer when we needed something from the village shop but weren’t in too much of a hurry and wanted to walk rather than drive. I didn’t intend to waste time following the road for I was pretty sure that the road itself would be blocked with snow and that the route that way would certainly be no less impeded than the path.

The path runs across three of our fields, down the valley to the small stream which runs along one of our boundaries, through the small wood which provides Elijah Huttlecombe with wood for charcoal burning and thin stakes for wattle fencing, and up the long hill that is a sort of small, unofficial local nature reserve to rejoin the main road through the village. The path comes out onto the main road alongside the school playground.

It was my simple plan to follow this path.

I turned right out of the Bilbury Grange courtyard, walked along the track and climbed the wooden post and rail fence into the field where we keep our four sheep. The torch I had brought with me was a good one but the snow was falling so thickly and the night was so black that I very nearly walked into the gate. I could see no more than a yard, maybe a yard and a half, in front of me. The sheep, tucked up in their stable, must have heard me walking by for they all started to baa very loudly. One of them, probably Lizzie, started to bang one of her front feet against the closed, lower half of the stable door.

Our four sheep all had quite distinct personalities. Lizzie was brash, domineering and demanding. She always wanted to be fed first if there were any treats to be had. She was the undoubted leader of our small flock and it was invariably she who seemed to decide when it was time to lie down and rest and when it was time to get up and start eating again. She took her leadership responsibilities seriously and if one of the other sheep was not well Lizzie would always stay with her and keep her company. Cynthia was the prettiest of the bunch and she knew it. She had a naturally haughty air which sometimes led casual observers to suspect that she felt that she was really rather too good, rather too special, to be living in a field and sleeping in a stable. If anyone ever went into the field with a camera Cynthia would always pose willingly to have her picture taken. The other three would back away rather nervously but Cynthia would present her best profile and hold it until the shutter had clicked. Petula was always in trouble. It was Petula who got foot rot first when there was a wet spell. It was Petula who caught orf when half a dozen infected sheep from a neighbouring farm got through a thick hawthorn hedge and into our field. It was Petula who always knocked over the water bucket. It was Petula who got locked in the tack room and knocked over six bales of straw. And it was Petula who wandered into the kitchen garden and ate a whole row of foot high runner bean plants when a gate was accidentally left open. (The other sheep had stayed behind in the field and when I returned Petula to the fold in disgrace I just knew that the moment my back was turned she would have to put up with the other three telling her that they knew she would get into trouble).

Sarah-Louise was the worrier of the four. She worried about anything and everything. She had huge, sad, brown eyes and loved nothing more than having her neck massaged. She was quiet and polite and always last to be fed. If one of the other three tried to push in front of her she would always back out of the way. She was, without a doubt, the most loving of the four. Whenever I left the stable at night she would always come after me, her big brown eyes looking up at me, pleading with me to stay and stroke her neck for just a little while longer.

I shouted to the four of them and couldn't help wondering how many sheep and other animals there were seeking shelter out on the moors, huddling together for warmth behind small, inadequate stone walls and underneath windblown gorse bushes. I thought for a moment about going over to the stable to close the upper half of their door but decided against it for they always hated being shut in completely. The wind was blowing from the west and the stable door was on the east side of the building. This was no coincidence, of course. The farmer who had originally built the stable knew very well that the prevailing winds always came from the west. The only door on either Bilbury Grange itself or any of the numerous outbuildings which surrounded it that faced due West was the kitchen door, which was normally protected from the wind and the rain by the fact that it opened into the courtyard.

* * *

Neither time nor distance are the constants we usually think they are. Both vary according to circumstances. An hour of pleasure always passes far more speedily than an hour in the dentist's chair. In summer, a mile and a half, walked along a grassy path, is a pleasant half an hour stroll. But given different circumstances that same mile and a half walk can become a difficult and even life threatening journey.

Of course, it didn't help that once I started to walk across our first field and head down towards the stream I had no way of knowing exactly where I was nor in which direction I should go. The path, normally so easy to follow even in the dark, was completely buried under several feet of snow. I could see no more than three or four feet in front of me: there were no landmarks by which I could set my course. And above me the sky was so full of falling snow that I could see neither moon nor stars. I could have done with a compass. All I knew was that in order to reach the stream I had to keep on heading downhill.

I quickly realised that I had made an important mistake: although it would have entailed a longer journey I should have followed the road instead of trying to take a short cut across the fields. On the road the presence of the hedges on either side would have meant that I would have not have been able to get lost.

Every step I took was a tremendous effort and although I thought of myself as reasonably fit I soon felt exhausted. I tried to walk with my face turned away from the wind but it didn't help much. Within a few minutes my face was burning with the cold and stinging with what felt like an endless barrage of driven needles of ice. Even though I was wearing two pairs of gloves both my hands felt like blocks of ice. The cold had seeped through my boots and my thick woollen socks and I couldn't feel my feet. Every step was a real effort and the further I went down the hill the deeper the snow seemed to get. Soon I found myself struggling to get through snow that came up past my knees, snow that crept in through every opening and then, melted by the warmth of my body, soaked into my clothes. Never straying more than a foot or so away from me Ben continued bravely and silently to battle on alongside me. Half of me wished she had stayed behind, safe and warm in the house; but half of me was glad to have her company. She never flagged and never complained though I could tell by the way her head drooped that she was cold and weary.

At the bottom of the field the path goes across a small wooden bridge before climbing upwards again. Each end of the bridge is guarded with an old fashioned wooden stile. A thick, layered hedge marks the boundary on each side of the stile. Because I hadn't been able to follow the path when I reached the bottom of the field I found myself face to face with the top few feet of the hedge instead of the stile. The stile and the bridge were, I guessed, buried deep beneath the snow. I lay still and listened hard; trying to tell whether or not the stream was still running or if it had frozen up completely. I couldn't hear anything except for the wind whistling through the nearby treetops.

I somehow managed to drag myself through the hedge and up the hill into the small wood. Here there was some slight shelter from the wind and the blizzard. I took off my haversack and sat down with my back against a huge oak tree. Ben, totally exhausted, lay down close by my side. I sat in such a way that I was protected from the worst of the wind by the tree trunk. The trunk was at least two feet thick but when the wind reached its peak I could feel the whole tree shudder.

Gingerly I parted the cuff of my glove and the sleeve of my coat and used the torch to look at my watch. It had taken me an hour and a half to travel little more than half a mile, though to be honest I was so exhausted that if I had had to guess I would have said that I had been walking for four or five times as long. I desperately wanted to rest, even to sleep, but knew that if I did it could well be fatal for us both. I knew that Ben wouldn't leave me and if I went to sleep and didn't wake up there was a real chance that we would both freeze to death. We both had to keep moving.

But first I needed to eat. I took off my thickest pair of outer gloves and opened the haversack. I fed Ben first, giving her a handful of biscuits to eat. Then I poured myself a cup of warm soup and ate a sandwich. I felt so much better with the warm, thick, liquid inside me that I poured a cupful for Ben too, holding the cup while she licked up the soup. Then I screwed the cup back on the thermos flask, put everything back into the haversack and scrambled wearily up onto my feet.

* * *

Walking through the wood seemed to be the easiest part of that terrible journey, for the snow there was no more than two feet thick. Because the branches of the trees acted as a filter, thinning out the falling snow, I could see quite a lot further than I had been able to see out in the field. Once I had found my way back to where I thought the path ought to be I managed to keep to it simply by walking along the narrow passageway which ran between the trees. I found the going so easy that I picked Ben up and carried her; holding the torch in my left hand so that I could look out for the many branches which had been brought down by the snow and the wind.

Suddenly, I went crashing down. The torch flew one way, Ben flew the other and my long hickory stick snapped as it took my weight. Ben yelped as she landed in thick snow. I had tripped over an unseen tree stump and the moment

I tried to get up again I knew that I was in trouble. I had badly twisted my ankle. It was all I needed to make my night complete. I limped onwards, using what was left of my stick as a support and for the first time in my life I think I was seriously afraid.

The wind had blown the snow into drifts and forcing a way through the snow was a tremendous struggle. I had never before felt so cold. My whole body ached with it. My joints seemed to have seized up. My leg, back, chest and arm muscles were sore and aching from fighting through the snow drifts and my cheeks, nose and mouth were all raw from the biting, burning cold wind and the endless, searing of the icy blizzard. My ankle was swelling and though it was frozen with cold it hurt like hell to walk on it. I knew I couldn't be far from the road or the school but I could neither hear nor see anything. I might as well have been a million miles away.

In the end I could go no further. In desperation I looked around but there was no shelter to be seen anywhere. I collapsed where I stood and curled myself into a tight ball. Dimly I could hear Ben barking furiously. I reached out to comfort her but before my frozen fingers could find her I blacked out.

* * *

CHAPTER THREE

Frank and Thumper told me that Ben had almost certainly saved my life.

‘She wouldn’t leave you,’ said Frank. ‘You were curled up in the snow and she was standing beside you, ears pricked, barking away as loudly as she could.’

I sipped again at the cupful of hot, sweet tea that Frank had forced into my hands and looked around. I was sitting in a chair in the sole classroom at the village school. There was no electric light but two hurricane lamps had been lit and in the soft yellow light I could see that the walls around the classroom had been decorated with paintings of kings and crusaders and colourful, carefully drawn plans of castles, keeps, moats and drawbridges. There was hardly an inch of wall that wasn’t decorated in some way with these childish paintings. It wasn’t difficult to see which period of history Miss Hargreaves had been teaching the children in her class.

The hot tea almost burned my mouth but I could feel the warmth from it circulating through my body as I drank. The rescuer had become the rescuee. I had, they told me, been less than a quarter of a mile from the school and the schoolteacher’s damaged cottage when Frank, Thumper and the others had heard Ben’s insistent barking and had come out to look for me. They had found me semi-conscious in the snow and had carried me back to the village school.

‘I wouldn’t have given you much of a chance if you hadn’t had Ben with you,’ said Thumper. ‘We could have searched all night and not found you.’ He nodded down, somewhere in the direction of my feet. I looked down. Someone had removed my clothes, presumably because they were soaking wet, and had wrapped me in a blanket. Ben, ever faithful, was lying by my feet looking up at me. I bent down and stroked her head. She reached up, touched my leg gently with one paw and held her head on one side. She looked exhausted and bedraggled. Her coat was still soaked.

‘Have you got a towel?’ I asked. ‘She’s wet through!’

Frank nodded, disappeared for a moment and reappeared a few seconds later clutching a large, freshly laundered towel. I put down my cup, took the towel from him, bent down, and wrapped Ben in it. She let me dry her.

‘Could you get her some warm milk?’ I asked.

Frank nodded again and disappeared. When I’d finished drying Ben I stood up, opened the blanket for a moment and looked inside. I was wearing my thick woollen shirt, socks and underpants. ‘Where are the rest of my clothes?’ I asked Thumper. My ankle still hurt likes blazes.

‘Behind you,’ he said. I turned round. My jeans and sheep’s wool jumper were draped over two huge old iron radiators. My oiled jacket and waterproof trousers were hanging up on a peg. A large puddle lay on the floor beneath them. ‘We managed to get the boiler going,’ explained Thumper. ‘Thank heavens it’s an old-fashioned one that doesn’t rely on an electric motor.’

Frank returned with a bowl full of warm milk. He put it down on the floor in front of Ben. She looked up at me. I nodded and she hungrily started to drink. Outside I could hear the wind battering at the windows and I suddenly remembered why I was there.

‘Miss Hargreaves...,’ I began. ‘How is she?’

‘She’s still trapped,’ said Thumper quietly. ‘We’ve been working all night to get to her. The storm brought her chimney crashing down on her cottage roof. The timbers under the thatch smashed under the weight and she’s stuck in her bedroom.’

‘Has anyone managed to get a message through to Barnstaple? To the fire brigade? The ambulance?’

Thumper shook his head. ‘All the phone lines are down now and the roads out of the village are totally impassable. I tried to come in by tractor but I had to abandon it and walk.’ He shook his head. ‘I’ve never known anything like it before.’

‘I’ll go and see if l can do anything,’ I said, looking round. ‘I brought some drugs with me.’ I paused and looked around. ‘In my haversack,’ I added. ‘You don’t know where it is, do you?’ Thumper walked across the room, picked up my haversack and brought it across to me. ‘I’ll see if I can find you some dry trousers,’ said Thumper. ‘Your jeans are still soaking. Wait there for a few minutes.’

I still felt weak and shivery. I wrapped the blanket around me, although it really wasn’t cold in the classroom, and sat down. Ben, who had finished her warm milk, edged a little closer to me and rested her head on my foot. I wondered how Patsy was and wished that I could telephone her. I was glad that Bilbury Grange had a good, strong roof. I picked up my still unfinished cup of tea and emptied it. It tasted as though it had at least half a dozen spoons of sugar dissolved in it. I thought how odd it was that although I never normally have sugar in tea or coffee the sweet tea tasted good. My body, exhausted by the efforts of the last few hours, clearly needed a quick boost of instant energy.

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, dressed in a pair of Frank’s old suit trousers and my own jumper (the oil in the wool meant that a quick shake got rid of most of the water that had found its way through my oiled jacket) I pulled on my waterproofs and followed Frank and Thumper outside. Frank’s trousers (heaven knows where they’d come from) were several inches short in the leg but considerably larger than I needed around the waist and I had to tie them up with a length of orange baler twine taken from my jacket pocket. My ever faithful companion, and now saviour, Ben, dry, rested and full of warm milk and dog biscuits, trotted along behind me.

To my astonishment I discovered that the snow still hadn’t stopped and nor had the wind, though the sky was lighter now and dawn had started to break. I had forgotten to put on my hat and the bitter cold wind sparked off sharp pains in both my ears. I pulled my coat collar up as high as I could and hobbled along behind Thumper. He, Frank and the others had walked along the footpath between the village school and Miss Hargreaves’ cottage so often that they had left a trail of footprints into which I could tread. I picked up Ben and carried her.

In front of me Thumper stopped so suddenly that I almost bumped into his back. He said something to me but I couldn’t hear him because of the wind. Instead of repeating himself he just pointed upwards. I shaded my eyes against the blizzard and looked up into the sky. The whole of the roof of Miss Hargreaves’ cottage seemed to have disappeared. Where once there had been a neat thatch and a high chimney stack (chimneys are always built tall on thatched cottages to keep sparks from the fire away from the highly inflammable thatch) there was now nothing but a mess of broken rafters, pieces of stone and tufts of thatch sticking out at crazy angles. The whole chaotic mess was covered with a thick layer of snow. A downstairs window had been flung open and underneath, half buried in a snow drift, lay bits and pieces of debris which had been jettisoned through the window. A large, triangular chunk of plaster stuck out of the drifted snow like a massive pink sail. Miss Hargreaves’ neat, picture book cottage, over the years the target of a thousand tourist cameras, had become a ruin overnight. Thumper pulled a face. I grimaced back. Thumper opened the front door to Miss Hargreaves’ cottage and walked in, automatically but pointlessly wiping his feet on the doormat. I entered behind him, put Ben down onto the carpet and told her to stay where she was and shut the door firmly behind me. I too wiped my feet on the doormat. Miss Hargreaves was a very particular woman. It was almost as cold inside the cottage as it was outside but at least inside we were protected from the wind.

There were five people working inside the cottage and judging by the amount of rubble and thatch and snow they had moved they had been at it for a long time. I recognised Gilly Parsons, the landlady from the Duck and Puddle, Peter Marshall, the village shopkeeper and Jack and Ollie two farm labourers who lived in adjoining cottages two hundred yards along the road into the village. It was Jack who had heard the crash of Miss Hargreaves’ chimney and who had alerted Frank at the Duck and Puddle. The only light came from three hurricane lamps: one on the mantelpiece, one hanging from the picture rail and one dangling from the top of the door frame.

When the chimney had gone through Miss Hargreaves’ roof it had landed directly on top of her bed and the weight of the chimney, the rafters, the thatch, the snow and the ceiling plaster had then taken the bed, the chimney and Miss Hargreaves herself crashing down into the living room. The result was that Miss Hargreaves’ living room was filled to where the ceiling would have been with rubble, thatch and, somewhere in the middle of it all, Miss Hargreaves and her bed. I looked up and found that I was staring out through a massive hole in the cottage roof at the early morning sky. Thick snow fell steadily onto the wreckage and onto Miss Hargreaves' rescuers.

'How's it going?' Thumper asked no one in particular. A tall figure in a yellow oilskin, who was tugging on a long piece of wood, half turned. For a moment I couldn't see who it was.

'She's alive,' whispered the man in the oilskin. He gently freed the wood from the wreckage and turned a little further. It was Patchy Fogg, the antique dealer. Patchy doesn't normally live in Bilbury but I guessed that he had probably been stuck at the Duck and Puddle when the snow had started. 'We reached her about half an hour ago.'

'Do you mind not talking about me as though I wasn't here?' demanded a voice I recognised immediately. It was Miss Hargreaves. Although I did not have much experience of talking to people who were trapped in house wreckage she sounded far brighter than I had expected. I had to strain a little to make out what she was saying but even through several feet of assorted rubble there was no mistaking her voice.

'The doctor's come to see you, Miss Hargreaves,' said Patchy.

'About time too!' replied the school mistress, with a slight snap in her voice. 'When are you boys going to get me out of here?'

Patchy turned to me and smiled.

'How are you, Miss Hargreaves?' I called down into the debris.

'How do you think I am?' demanded Miss Hargreaves testily.

'Are you in any pain?' I asked her.

There was a long silence.

'Are you in any pain?' I asked her, again.

'Don't hurry me!' she said sharply. 'I'm thinking about it.'

Patchy, who was busy filling a bucket with small pieces of plaster, turned and winked at me.

I waited, bent down and started to help Patchy fill his bucket with bits of plaster and broken wood. When the bucket was full Patchy walked over to the window and emptied the rubbish out into the snow, throwing it as far out onto the snow covered lawn as he could. I couldn't help remembering that Miss Hargreaves had been extraordinarily proud of her garden. It had been full of traditional 'cottage' flowers and had always been a blaze of colour in the summer months. It was going to take a long time to restore the cottage and its garden to their former glory.

'No! I don't think so,' said a disembodied voice which belonged to the buried Miss Hargreaves. 'Everything seems to work.'

'That's great!' I said.

'I seem to be lying on my sofa,' said the invisible Miss Hargreaves. 'What am I doing on my sofa?'

I looked across at Patchy. He shrugged, making it clear that it was up to me to decide how much to tell her.

'There's a storm,' I explained. 'Your roof was brought down. But you're going to be all right. That's the important thing.'

'Well just you people make sure you don't make a mess,' said Miss Hargreaves. 'I cleaned my carpets yesterday.'

I looked around at the mess in Miss Hargreaves' cottage.

‘Have you wiped your feet?’ she demanded.

‘Yes,’ I shouted back. I looked around. The others all nodded. ‘We’ve all wiped our feet.’

‘Good!’ said Miss Hargreaves firmly. ‘Well, just you remember that if there’s any mess I’ll hold you personally responsible.’

‘Yes, Miss Hargreaves,’ I said. ‘We’ll clean up any mess for you,’ I promised. There was a half reluctant grunt of acknowledgement from somewhere in the middle of the debris.

We carried on digging away at the debris, throwing rafters, bits of stone, chunks of thatch, bits and pieces of plaster and broken pieces of furniture out through the window into the garden in our battle to free Miss Hargreaves. We talked steadily to her; offering encouragement, telling her bits of gossip (which she claimed very loudly that she was not the slightest bit interested in) and asking her advice on just about every subject under the sun. I didn’t know much about how to care for patients buried deep under debris. It wasn’t something they had taught us at medical school. But common sense told me that we should do our best to keep Miss Hargreaves awake, alert and distracted from her predicament. Every twenty minutes or so two of us would go outside to move some of the debris away from the area directly underneath the window. And every half an hour or so we took it in turns to pop into the school house for a few minutes to get warm, drink more sweet tea and eat cheese and pickle sandwiches made by Frank. Once Frank came into the cottage to help with the digging but I made him go back into the school house. Frank is desperately overweight, suffers from high blood pressure and is a prime candidate for a heart attack. Cold weather made the risk much greater and I didn’t want any more dramas. Besides we needed someone in the school house to make sure the boiler didn’t go out, to keep the kettle boiling and to make a constant supply of cheese and pickle sandwiches. Frank made a good cheese and pickle sandwich.

* * *

The sun had risen and the snowstorm was showing signs of having started to blow itself out when Gilly cried out, with unmistakeable excitement in her voice, that she could see Miss Hargreaves’ leg!

‘Goodness me!’ called Miss Hargreaves. ‘Has someone left the door open? My leg is freezing cold.’

We all looked at one another.

‘The heating isn’t working,’ I told the schoolteacher, quite truthfully. I didn’t want to tell her what had happened to her cottage, and that her leg was cold because her cottage had no roof, until I could be with her. The shock wouldn’t do her any good at all and I didn’t want her to faint into unconsciousness while she was still buried under the rubble of her cottage.

Gilly disappeared and came back a moment or two later with a large white bath towel that she’d brought from the kitchen, the only room in the cottage that had not been destroyed. I assumed that Miss Hargreaves must have had an airing cupboard in the kitchen. Gilly carefully reached into the rubble and covered Miss Hargreaves’ leg with the towel. Then we carried on, carefully digging away at the rubble.

Gradually, it became clear that when Miss Hargreaves and her bed had fallen through the floor the bed had tipped over and was now lying on the top of its former occupant. I could only assume that the falling chimney stack must have landed on a corner of the bed and flipped it over. Whatever the truth was about the way it had happened there was little doubt that the bed springs and the mattress had saved Miss Hargreaves’ life. When we eventually found her she was lying in a small space between her living room sofa and her bed.

Peter, the shopkeeper, Patchy, the antique dealer and Jack and Ollie, the two farm labourers, and I took hold of one side of the bed and pulled and pushed upwards with all the power we could muster between us. Slowly, we managed to lift the bed up into the air. Gilly Parsons peered in under the bed.

‘Who’s there?’ demanded Miss Hargreaves, warily.

‘It’s Gilly, Miss Hargreaves!’ said Gilly. ‘Can you move?’

‘Who else is there?’ demanded the schoolteacher.

‘The young doctor, Patchy Fogg, Peter Marshall and...,’ began Gilly. The villagers still referred to me as the ‘young doctor’ even though I had been living there for a while, and was no longer practising medicine. The ‘old doctor’ was Dr Brownlow, my predecessor, who still lived in his huge old house in the village. ‘Can you move?’ she asked.

‘Get me my dressing gown!’ demanded Miss Hargreaves sharply. ‘I’ve only got my nightie on.’

‘It’s a bit difficult, Miss Hargreaves,’ apologised Gilly. She knelt down and started to crawl underneath the bed. There was still quite a lot of rubble on top of it and even though the two farm labourers were very strong it was quite a strain holding it up.

‘Where has all that snow come from?’ demanded Miss Hargreaves. ‘Is my front door still open?’

‘Can you move?’ Gilly asked again.

‘Of course I can move!’ insisted Miss Hargreaves. ‘But I’m not moving out of here until you’ve got me my dressing gown. Not with all those men in the house.’

Gilly crawled back out from underneath the bed and shrugged her shoulders. ‘What shall I do?’ she asked me in a whisper. ‘I don’t have the faintest idea where her dressing gown is!’

‘It’s hanging up behind the bedroom door!’ said Miss Hargreaves, though I don’t know whether she had heard what Gilly had said.

I looked upwards. The snow fell lightly on my face now. The wind seemed almost to have stopped. Through the shattered floor of Miss Hargreaves’ bedroom I could see her bedroom door. Sure enough her dressing gown was hanging up behind the door.

‘Go on,’ I said to Gilly. I looked at Patchy, standing next to me. There were beads of sweat on his forehead. Peter Marshall, the shop keeper, was looking very red faced. The two farm labourers nodded to indicate that they could hold on for a little longer. ‘But be quick!’ I told her.

Gilly clambered over some broken rafters and started to climb up the staircase.

‘Be careful!’ I called to her.

‘Yes!’ cried Miss Hargreaves, misunderstanding my warning to Gilly. ‘You be careful! I don’t want dirt and snow treading into my carpets.’

I looked upwards and watched Gilly open the bedroom door, edge cautiously into Miss Hargreaves’ bedroom, peer down through the hole in the floor, and then take the dressing gown off the hook on the back of the door.

Two minutes later an ashen faced Gilly returned clutching Miss Hargreaves’ dressing gown. She brushed the worst of the snow off it and then crept under the bed and helped Miss Hargreaves drape the garment around her shoulders. A minute or so after that Miss Hargreaves emerged from her unusual prison. The five of us let the bed and the rubble it was holding crash back down onto the sofa. Miss Hargreaves looked around her at the ruin that had been her home, opened her mouth, said nothing, and then fainted very neatly into Peter Marshall’s arms.

* * *

Miraculously, Miss Hargreaves wasn’t badly hurt. Her cottage was a ruin and would clearly need rebuilding but, trapped as she had been between her chintz covered sofa and her bed she had been well protected from the debris which had buried her. We carried her out of her cold and roofless cottage and across into the school where Frank had kept the boiler alight and the kettle on the boil. I gave her a quick but thorough examination but could find nothing physically wrong. When she came round I explained what had happened to her cottage and then I gave her a full check-up. Her heart seemed as sound as a ship’s engine and her blood pressure was excellent. She didn’t even have a bruise! To say that I was relieved would be an understatement of heroic proportions. When I had first seen the wreckage I had for a few awful moments feared that I might need to amputate a trapped limb or, at the very least, administer a series of pain killing injections.

We wrapped Miss Hargreaves in a couple of blankets and lay her down on a small camp bed that Frank had found in a store room. The wind and the snow had stopped and everywhere seemed strangely still, calm and quiet. The storm had raged for so long that the peace around us now seemed unreal and ghostly.

All around the classroom weary bodies were stretched out in repose. Peter Marshall, wearing his ever present cap, the one with the finger marked peak, was curled up in a ball and snoring in the far corner of the room. Patchy Fogg, who had been up into Miss Hargreaves' bedroom and had brought down a selection of warm, winter clothing for her to wear when she was ready, was also snoring loudly. I felt tired and my ankle hurt but it felt good to be part of a village where the inhabitants worked so willingly and so hard to help one another.

Through the steamy classroom window I saw something fluttering outside in the small garden which Miss Hargreaves kept for her pupils. She had spent years, and much of her own money, stocking it with a huge variety of shrubs, flowers and herbs and every summer the children were encouraged to grow their own vegetables too. I leant forward, cleaned a small area of the glass so that I could see through and watched a red breasted robin fly down and land on a snow covered gate post. I wondered where he had been hiding for the last few days. Although his feathers were fluffed up I couldn't help noticing how thin and hungry he looked.

Wearily, I limped into the small kitchen where Frank, who had worked as hard as any of us, was washing up a pile of dirty mugs and plates. 'Have you got any bread crusts?' I asked him.

'Still hungry?' he asked, putting down the tea towel he was holding and reaching for the bread knife. 'Let me make you a sandwich!'

'It's not for me,' I told him. I nodded towards the window. 'I thought I'd throw a few crusts out for the birds.'

Now it was his turn to rub at the glass. 'They'll need more than a few crusts,' he said, looking out at the white of the garden for a moment and then picking up an almost untouched loaf from the small, green work surface on his right. 'Here,' he said, 'catch!' It was a kindly and unexpected gesture. I'd never thought of Frank as having any great love for the non-paying customers of this world.

I put a hand on his shoulder. 'Thanks, Frank!'

Outside the back door of the school I trod down a few square feet of snow and then spread small lumps of bread around on the surface of the hardened snow. When I'd done that I walked over to what looked like a massive white snowball. Tentatively, I brushed away at the snow. As the snow fell away to the ground beneath I could see scores of moist red berries glistening in the thin winter sunshine. Working quickly because my ungloved hands were soon uncomfortably cold I shook and brushed the snow from the bush. Then I hurried back into the kitchen. Frank had poured me another cup of hot tea.

'Do you want sugar?' he asked as I leant against the wall and stamped my good foot and rubbed my hands to get the blood circulating through them.

'No thanks,' I answered with a smile.

Outside, in the garden, the cock robin had returned and was hungrily chopping crumbs from one of the small pieces of bread I had thrown down. Within a couple of minutes there were twenty or thirty birds feasting on Frank's loaf and the berries on the uncovered bush.

'Makes you feel good, doesn't it?' whispered Frank.

I looked at him, slightly surprised.

'I always feed the birds at the back of the Duck and Puddle,' he said. He frowned, as though suddenly alarmed that this unexpected sign of tenderness might adversely affect his hard drinking image. 'But don't you dare tell anyone!' he added, with a nervous smile.

* * *

We waited there for six hours until Samuel Houghton, who has a farm on the road to Little Mitcham and has a contract with the local authority to keep the smaller, single track roads clear of snow, fought a way through the snowdrifts, reached us on his tractor and reconnected us with the rest of the world. We heard him coming, and saw stuttering bursts of black smoke long before we could see either Samuel or his tractor. He had an enormous snow moving attachment fixed to the front of the ancient red monster and behind him left two huge, high, parallel mounds of chunky, tumbled snow.

Samuel, who won't be celebrating many more birthdays with a seven at the front, had his pipe jammed in his mouth and wore the rusty brown tweed jacket which I've never seen him without. A length of baler twine was tied around his waist. He wore no coat, no hat and no gloves and told us that the storm had left behind it a trail of terrible destruction. All over North Devon the wind had removed the roofs from scores of hotels, houses, cottages and farm buildings. A silage bin had been spotted three miles from home. A sixty foot long corrugated iron barn roof had been seen twenty feet off the ground resting in the branches of neighbouring oak trees. Samuel insisted that a small car, whisked from a car park outside a public house on the outskirts of Shirwell, had flown over a hedge and had finished up, upside down, in the middle of a field a quarter of a mile away. Later I was to discover that this story was not only quite true but that the car, which had landed in thick snow, was virtually undamaged after its adventure and, almost unbelievably, started first time when it had been tipped the right way up by its owner and a couple of passing strangers.

By the time we were reconnected with the rest of the world Miss Hargreaves had woken up again, dressed herself ('What a terrible selection of clothes! Who brought me this old pink sweater?') and had bravely and forcefully started to make plans for the rebuilding of her shattered cottage.

'I'll have to get Mr Lathwell booked straight away,' said Miss Hargreaves, making a mental list of things to be done. Mr Lathwell, the thatcher, doesn't live in Bilbury but has over the years repaired, restored or rethatched most of the thatched roof cottages in the village. He is regularly booked three or four months ahead, especially through the summer. It was good to hear Miss Hargreaves making positive plans. There would, I suspected, be plenty of sadness to come, and probably a few tears and sleepless nights, but Miss Hargreaves' determined attitude seemed to augur well for a quick recovery from her terrible ordeal.

I was more concerned with the immediate problem of where Miss Hargreaves was going to sleep for the next few nights.

'Do you have any friends you could stay with?' I asked her.

Miss Hargreaves thought for a moment. 'I've no doubt I could stay with Miss Anderson or Miss Jilks,' she said. She pulled a face and shook her head. 'But I wouldn't want to. Miss Anderson is a terrible worrier and she'd drive me potty, always wanting everything in just the right place. And Miss Jilks is a congenital gossip. I can't abide gossip.' She thought for a moment. 'I'll rent somewhere,' she said, firmly.

It might have sounded a good idea but a few moments thought quickly made it clear that finding somewhere for Miss Hargreaves to rent wasn't going to be as easy as it sounded - particularly since she insisted that she would only rent somewhere in the village, so that she could reach the school on her cycle each day. Bilbury is rather light on available rental accommodation. In the end it was agreed that as a temporary measure Miss Hargreaves would go back to the Duck and Puddle with Frank and Gilly Parsons and would spend the next night or two with them. Samuel Houghton agreed to give all three of them a lift to the pub on the back of his tractor.

'But it's only temporary!' Miss Hargreaves insisted, firmly.

We all agreed that it was what Patchy described as an 'interim measure' and promised that we would do our best to help her find somewhere of her own to stay. And then we all set off to our respective homes. I was keen to get back to Bilbury Grange to make sure that Patsy and the animals were all unharmed by the storm. Limping slightly, and with Ben bounding along by my side, it took me little over thirty minutes to walk back along the road to the Grange.

* * *

CHAPTER FOUR

I was relieved and delighted to find that Bilbury Grange had survived the snow storm without suffering any damage. Now that the wind had dropped and the blizzard had stopped the house and garden looked calm, peaceful and immensely beautiful. Everywhere I looked there were trees and bushes and fields draped in huge expanses of smooth, virginal, white snow. It was as though the countryside had been put into storage by some cold handed celestial super-being. I stood for a moment in the lane and stared up our driveway. Ben barked once and wagged her tail and then looked up at me to check that it was all right for her to run up to the house. 'O.K.!' I said to her and then couldn't help laughing out loud as she struggled to fight her way through several feet of powdery snow. I limped after her, picked her up out of the snow and carried her up to the house.

I gave Patsy a hug, said 'hello' to Emily and Sophie and fed Ben. Then, while Patsy put the kettle on to boil, and went upstairs to start running a bath for me, I went out to the stable to check on the sheep. They all made an enormous amount of noise when they heard me walking through the snow. When I opened the stable door Lizzie and Cynthia both edged past me and slipped out into what they thought was the field; and what had been the field the last time they'd been there. When they discovered that the tasty, fresh green grass they expected to find had turned into cold, tasteless snow they both looked up. Their faces were a picture. First there was simply surprise, then there was puzzlement, next there was horror and finally there was absolute disgust.

Lizzie and Cynthia stared at me, as though it was my fault that all the grass had disappeared and had been replaced by snow, and made lots of loud and very complaining 'baaarring' noises. Then, giving me another look of disgust, they turned round, and walked back into the stable. I went into the tack room next door, picked up half a bale of straw and spread it around on the stable floor. Next, I took down the hay net which was now empty, and hung up another full one. Finally, I broke the ice on the water butt outside the stable and replenished the sheep's supply of fresh water. The four of them gathered around the hay net and furiously began to drag out clumps of tasty hay. Quietly, I crept out of the stable, closed the bottom half of the door, bolted it shut and walked back through the snow to the house.

* * *

An hour later, having lain soaking, half asleep, in a hot bath until my skin had gone all white and wrinkly, I was sitting in the kitchen drinking my third cup of hot tea and wolfing down slice after slice of hot buttered toast, liberally spread with Patsy's home-made orange and rhubarb marmalade (the oranges were from the twelve old orange trees in Dr Brownlow's conservatory and the rhubarb was from our garden), when Patsy suddenly announced that she had had an idea.

She sounded so excited that I stopped my hand midway between my plate and my mouth. 'What?' I asked her.

'Why don't we let Miss Hargreaves stay in the flat over the coach-house?'

It was such an obvious idea that I couldn't understand why I hadn't thought of it myself. Patsy had restored and renovated the coach-house flat soon after we had bought Bilbury Grange. The idea had been to earn a little extra money by letting it to holiday-makers during the summer months but during the winter there weren't any tourists and so the flat stayed empty. At the end of October Patsy, who was in charge of this venture, had cleaned the flat thoroughly, turned off the water, emptied the pipes, removed any bedding which might have got damp, firmly closed all the windows and doors and shut up the flat until April the following year. The flat was, therefore, quite empty and would provide Miss Hargreaves with a perfect home for a few months.

I told Patsy that I thought this was a terrific idea.

'You don't mind the idea of her staying there?'

'No, of course not!'

'She can be a bit, well, sharp occasionally.'

I said I knew this but that I didn't mind in the least.

'She can easily ride her bicycle to school from here.'

'Absolutely. Less than ten minutes on a bike.' I agreed. I looked at Patsy and then at the toast. The conversation seemed to be over. I took a bite from the toast.

'Shall I go and ring her now?' asked Patsy.

With a mouthful of freshly inserted hot buttered toast impeding any further attempt at speech I nodded.

'She's staying at the Duck and Puddle?'

I nodded again, thought about saying something, realised that there wasn't anything useful to add to my nod and so instead took another bite from my slice of toast. Patsy disappeared into the hall to ring the pub. She came back less than a minute later.

'The telephone lines must still be down,' she said. 'I can't get through. I'll try again later.'

* * *

It was lunchtime the following day before the engineers could get through to repair the phone lines and Patsy was able to ring the pub to speak to Miss Hargreaves. By then the main road between Barnstaple and Bilbury had been cleared too and although there was only enough room for traffic to travel in one direction at a time it did at least mean that we were once again fully reconnected with the outside world. Inevitably, perhaps, the postman was the first to get through, delivering several days' worth of accumulated bills and with them the news that a dozen even more outlying villages were still cut off.

The snow had stopped falling but the weather was still freezing cold and the snow which had fallen before and during the blizzard had not yet started to disappear. In towns and cities fallen snow soon becomes slushy and messy and starts to look horribly dirty and unattractive. Traffic, air pollution and endless streams of pedestrians all help to turn clean, crisp, white snow into a brown, unwholesome looking sludgy mess. But out in the country we had no such problems. Our Bilbury snow still looked as white, as pure and as thrilling as it had when it had fallen. The snow on our driveway was disturbed only by a narrow, foot trodden trail.

Being cut off entirely from the world had, I have to confess, been rather fun. It certainly wasn't a trial. Our old AGA boiler served us proud, keeping the kitchen warm, providing us with a constant supply of hot water and enabling us to have hot meals. Some people might have found the absence of television difficult to live with but we had books to read, candles to read them by and plenty of logs with which to light fires to keep us warm in the rest of the house.

I didn't miss having a television at all - and neither did Patsy. I fear that television has become a repository for quiz shows, soap operas and situation comedies that may amuse the man operating the canned laughter machine but which never seem to amuse me very much. Some people I know spend three hours a day watching television. That means that in a year they will spend over a thousand hours watching other people do things. That is the equivalent of roughly twenty five full working weeks a year, slumped in front of the TV set. You could write a book, learn to play golf or grow prize winning onions in that much time. Television, the oh-so-easy way to entertain yourself, is wrecking companionship, friendship and conversation and smothering the imaginations of millions. Television is blancmange for the mind. How can a child who watches three or four hours of television a day grow up into a balanced, intelligent human being? A child who watches that much television every day will, by the time he or she is 18-years-old, have watched twenty thousand hours of TV. That's nearly twice as much time as he or she will have spent at school. The child's imagination will have been allowed to wither and decay. I once read a survey in which a group of four to six year olds were asked so say which they preferred - daddy or television. Around half said they preferred television.

Snowbound but with no television to distract us from real life Patsy and I got on with living. We looked after our animals and made sure that the house stayed in good condition and we both managed to get a considerable amount of work done. I wrote a short story (which I never managed to sell but which I much enjoyed writing) and two practical articles (which were less fun to write but which, I was delighted to find, found a ready market). Patsy ploughed her way through several huge, rather daunting seed catalogues which had arrived with the first post-blizzard mail delivery. Peter Marshall sells seeds at the village shop but his selection is small and sometimes he accidentally conceals the ‘sell by’ dates on his packets of seeds with his little price stickers.

Most important of all, of course, Miss Hargreaves arrived from the Duck and Puddle and set about settling into the flat overlooking the courtyard. Frank brought her over in his rather ancient and battered Land Rover and stopped off at her cottage to pick up her clothes and as many of her other belongings as could conveniently be carried. In some parts of the world a half derelict cottage would have been looted of all its valuables within a few hours but I’m pleased to say that things like that don’t happen in Bilbury.

While Patsy showed Miss Hargreaves round the flat, apologised for the fact that it didn’t have a garden, and helped her put away her clothes in the wardrobe and the dressing table, Frank and I made three trips back to the cottage to rescue what we could of Miss Hargreaves’ furniture. None of the curtains or carpets was worth saving.

‘It’ll do me until my cottage is ready for me to go back into,’ said Miss Hargreaves, when we’d finished, Frank had gone back to the Duck and Puddle and the remaining three of us were sitting around in her tiny flat. There were those in the village who claimed that graciousness was not Miss Hargreaves’ strong point and it wasn’t always too difficult to see why she had acquired this reputation.

‘Have you contacted your insurance company, yet?’ I asked Miss Hargreaves. With the rooms filled with her furniture (Frank had helped me move most of our furniture down into one of the empty stables underneath) Miss Hargreaves looked very much at home. It is surprising what a few square yards of chintz, half a dozen Victorian water colours, and a packing case full of assorted knick knacks and bric-a-brac can do to a room.

Miss Hargreaves looked surprised. ‘Insurance company?’ she said, as though I had suggested that she might have a bookmaker. ‘I’m afraid I don’t really know anything about insurance. I let the School Board look after that sort of thing.’ She wrinkled up her nose as though she found the conversation rather distasteful. To be honest, I rather suspect that she did find the conversation unwholesome in a sweet, rather old fashioned sort of way. Other people, ordinary people, had insurance. Miss Hargreaves had an annual subscription to the National Geographic magazine and considered that to be rather adventurous and modern of her.

‘Who’s the Chairman of the School Board?’ I asked Miss Hargreaves. ‘I’d better ring him and make sure that he’s put in a claim for you. We’ll need to get the insurance company to look at things as soon as they can so that they can give the go-ahead for the repair work to start.’

Miss Hargreaves was clearly and quite genuinely surprised at this apparently unexpected complication. I have a feeling that she rather expected that the repair work would have started automatically the moment her belongings had been removed from the battered building. She ignored my question. ‘How long do you think it will take?’ she wanted to know. ‘I’d like to be back in the cottage in two weeks’ time.’

I looked across at Patsy. Patsy looked back at me. Neither of us really wanted to say what clearly had to be said. But, it had to be said. So I took a deep breath and said it.

‘I’m afraid I don’t think the cottage will be ready in two weeks,’ I told Miss Hargreaves, rather warily. She raised an eyebrow. ‘Well, not completely,’ I added, instinctively backing away. If Miss Hargreaves’ eyebrow had been at Neville Chamberlain’s disposal Adolf Hitler would have never dared try anything on in 1939. I have never known another human being able to express so much emotion, disapproval and contempt with a simple flicker of an eyebrow. ‘I don’t think you should actually, positively *bank* on being back in the cottage in a fortnight,’ I said rather weakly. Secretly, I rather thought that we would be lucky if we’d got the go ahead from the insurance company by then. And I rather thought that the rebuilding work could take four or five months or maybe, perish the thought, even longer. And even that was assuming that we could find builders who were prepared to start work straight away. With all the damage the blizzard had done both in Bilbury and in neighbouring villages I had a feeling that builders would suddenly find themselves in the enviable position of being greatly in demand. Every dog has his day, so the saying goes, and builders have their days when lots of people want their roofs putting back on straight - away - and - a - little - bit quicker - if - you - can - manage - it - please - don’t - worry - too much - about - the - price - the - insurance - company - is - paying.

Miss Hargreaves didn't say anything but she had a way of not saying anything. Some people can say a great deal when they don't say anything. Miss Hargreaves was one of those people. She could perform extensive, impressive feats of oratory without saying anything.

'I'm sorry,' I said, hardly recognising the feeble little voice which seemed to have come out of my body. I wasn't sure why I was apologising but it seemed the sensible thing to do.

I remembered my unanswered question and asked it again. 'Who is the Chairman of the School Board?'

'A pompous half-wit called Palfrey,' replied Miss Hargreaves, with disdain. 'He's an estate agent,' she added, giving me this information in the same sort of tone that she might have used if she had told me that he had a penchant for gambling or some other morally indefensible activity.

'Do you know where he works?'

She gave me the name of an estate agents' office in Barnstaple.

'I'll go and ring him,' I said, standing up.

'Just tell him that I want to be back in my cottage in two weeks' time,' said Miss Hargreaves firmly.

I smiled weakly at her and left.

* * *

It took me about ninety seconds to decide that I didn't much like Mr Palfrey. I had never before spoken to anyone who managed to give the impression of being both obsequious and condescending at the same time.

'Bilborough, did you say?' he asked me, when I explained where I was calling from.

'Bilbury,' I repeated. 'Bilbury School. Am I right in thinking that you are the Chairman of the School Board?'

There was a pause. 'Oh, yes, I know it,' said the estate agent at last. He sighed a little when he realised that I hadn't rung to make an offer for a house. 'Tiny little place isn't it? Sweet village. Nice amenities. Conveniently situated. Hunting country. Yes, I'm Chairman of the School Board.' There was another pause. 'I have a lot of other political and social commitments and appointments, you know.'

'The storm took the chimney off Miss Hargreaves' cottage,' I told him. I had to bite my tongue when he had told me that Bilbury was hunting country. It was true that the hunt did gallop over much of the land around Bilbury but they did this without the support of the villagers; most of whom disapproved of hunting. 'The chimney came straight through into her bedroom and has demolished most of the house. She's staying with my wife and me at Bilbury Grange. Well, not exactly with us, you understand. We have a small, self-contained flat that she's borrowing.'

'What has all this got to do with the school?' asked Mr Palfrey.

'Miss Hargreaves is the schoolteacher,' I explained. 'She lives in School Cottage. It's an insurance claim.'

'Oh, yes, I know it,' said the estate agent. I could almost hear him nodding. 'Nothing to do with us, though. Miss Hargreaves has a lease on the cottage. She's responsible for her own insurance.'

I went cold.

'Are you sure?' I asked him.

'Absolutely,' insisted Mr Palfrey. 'I remember the subject of insurance coming up at a meeting a few months ago. We had a very lengthy discussion about the school's insurance policy. One of the Board members thought we were paying too much and we managed to obtain a considerably cheaper quotation from his company. I distinctly remember that the cottage was excluded from the policy.'

I didn’t say anything. I felt a little dizzy. ‘Are you absolutely sure that Miss Hargreaves isn’t covered under the school’s insurance?’ I pulled a chair towards me and sat down.

‘Absolutely sure,’ said Mr Palfrey, rather wearily. ‘She was expected to make her own insurance arrangements since the property is her responsibility.’ There was another pause. ‘You aren’t telling me that Miss Hargreaves has no insurance, are you?’

‘Good heavens, no!’ I lied quickly, not wanting to get Miss Hargreaves into trouble. ‘I’m sure she’s arranged something,’ I added.

‘Good,’ said Mr Palfrey. ‘Thank you for calling.’

‘By the way,’ I said, before he could go, ‘I know you’ll be pleased to hear that Miss Hargreaves wasn’t injured.’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Mr Palfrey. ‘Jolly good.’ And he put the phone down.

I sat there for several minutes listening to the buzzing of the disconnected telephone and wondering how on earth I was going to tell Miss Hargreaves that she wasn’t insured.

* * *

CHAPTER FIVE

The local witches' coven was having a meeting upstairs at the Duck and Puddle and the car park was full of Ford Populars, Austin Minis and other, comfortable, 'compact' English motor cars. The witches, there were eleven of them, met once a month and exchanged recipes, spells and incantations. Since one of the members of the coven was also a part-time slimming adviser they also borrowed Gilly's bathroom scales. The floorboards above our heads were groaning and we could hear them giggling as they took it in turns to strip down to the bare essentials and weigh themselves.

I rested my chin on my hands and looked out of the window. A thin layer of salt, left by spray brought inland by the wind, had clouded the glass. Outside the snow had now almost gone completely. It had virtually disappeared overnight, leaving every low lying piece of land in the area flooded. The thaw had, inevitably, turned into something of a plumber's bonanza as householders all across North Devon suddenly discovered the twin laws of plumbing: that burst pipes leak and that water obeys the laws of gravity. All that remained of the blizzard now were those few small pockets of snow which the wind had pushed into corners and which the sun had not yet managed to melt. The village green, which had been temporarily converted into a village white, had been restored to its original green glory.

'Why on earth didn't she get herself some insurance cover?' asked Dr Brownlow for at least the fifteenth time. No one bothered to answer because although we had all asked the same question roughly the same number of times no one had yet managed to come up with an answer.

There were six of us: myself, Dr Brownlow, Thumper Robinson, Peter Marshall, Gilly Parsons and Kay McBride, the bathukolpian local district nurse. Kay had been the first person I had met when I had arrived in Bilbury although then she had been called Mrs Wilson and had been married to the local policeman. Now she was married to a tractor engineer from Ilfracombe. Mr McBride was twenty two years younger than the former Mrs Wilson.

We had formed a sort of unofficial 'Help Miss Hargreaves' group to try to work out a way to make sure first that Miss Hargreaves didn't spend the rest of her life tramping the streets or slumped in a debtors' prison and second that the school didn't close down through lack of a teacher.

When I had broken the news to Miss Hargreaves that she was not insured, and therefore could not realistically expect any of Britain's insurance companies to pay for the repairs on her cottage, she had seemed remarkably phlegmatic about it all. I had rather expected her to throw what is usually regarded as 'a bit of a wobbly', firing deadly eyebrows off in all directions, but nothing of the sort had happened. Instead she had simply sighed, said something that sounded rather like, 'Oh, dearie, me!' and smiled rather thinly in my direction.

'Have you got any savings?' I asked her, rather brashly.

Miss Hargreaves had visibly brightened at this and had instructed me to pass her handbag. This was not as simple a task as it sounds for the piece of luggage in question was far too large to be accepted as cabin baggage on any airline I've ever travelled on. It was the sort of item usually known as a 'carpet bag' although this one looked as though it had been made from a whole carpet roll rather than an offcut. From this capacious piece of luggage she had extracted a thin and rather dogged National Savings Book which she had handed to me with considerable caution. From the way in which she handled it the passbook was clearly not an item which she handed over to any Tom, Dick or Harry and I felt rather honoured.

'£129 17s 6d!' I read, from the bottom line. Miss Hargreaves hadn't had her passbook updated since decimalisation. For a brief moment I harboured the joyful thought that the interest on the capital might have built up into a sizeable sum. I once read a news story about a man who put a dollar in a bank account during the American Civil War. When a descendant found the pass book compound interest had turned the dollar into a fortune so large that the pass book holder owned the bank. But a look at the date on Miss Hargreaves' National Savings Book dashed this slender hope. I am no mathematical genius but even I could work out that at four and a half per cent interest £129 isn't likely to grow into a fortune in three and three quarter years.

‘I’m afraid I don’t think that will be anywhere near enough,’ I said, glumly.

‘Oh dear,’ said Miss Hargreaves. ‘I always intended to save but somehow I never got round to it.’ This was, I knew, not because she was self-indulgent but because she was generous. She was always buying clothes and books for children and she supplemented the Bilbury School’s meagre book and equipment allowance with much of her own money. Her earnings had been frittered away not on secret bottles of sweet sherry, French cigarettes or horses with a penchant for travelling slowly and a preference for grazing rather than running but on second hand copies of Robinson Crusoe, Treasure Island, Black Beauty, Swiss Family Robinson and similar classics for the school library. It was Miss Hargreaves, said Patsy, who had taught her to love books and to find friendship, companionship and comfort among the novels of many different writers.

When the School Board somehow found out that Miss Hargreaves had not bought any insurance, and furthermore, had no savings with which to pay for the repairs to her cottage, they held an Emergency Special Meeting in Bilbury Village Hall. This meeting was held in secret and so it was not until later that evening that we discovered that the members of the board had decided to close down our village school completely and transfer all seventeen pupils to a school in nearby Combe Martin. It was only about a year since National Health Service Administrators had decided to close down my surgery in Bilbury and transfer patients to a medical list in Barnstaple, so this additional bad news was greeted with considerable dismay by those villagers who felt that this was just too much to bear and that the village was rapidly losing its personal identity.

‘The school has no funds to pay for the repair to the School Cottage,’ Mr Palfrey had explained when I had telephoned him about it. ‘We’ve decided that the only viable financial route is to sell the school to be used as a personal residence and to reallocate the proceeds among the other schools in the area.’

‘Less a fat commission for selling the property,’ I had thought but hadn’t said. I really didn’t like Mr Palfrey. Only an estate agent could refer to a ‘home’ as a ‘personal residence’.

Mr Palfrey had, however, rather unwillingly agreed that if we in the village managed to raise enough money to get School Cottage repaired then the School Board would allow the village school to stay in business.

‘So,’ said Thumper. ‘There’s only one thing for it!’

We all looked at him expectantly.

‘We’ll have to raise the money ourselves,’ he explained, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world which in a way I suppose it was. ‘The School Board isn’t planning to close the school down until the beginning of the autumn term so that gives us,’ he looked at a calendar on the wall and did a quick calculation (the calendar was for the year 1963 but since the government hadn’t got round to changing the names of the months the principle was the same), ‘eight and a half months.’

‘How much is it going to cost?’ asked Peter Marshall, the village shopkeeper, taxi driver, undertaker, postman, florist and pessimist. Peter can always be relied upon to think about these mundane matters although I do think that his reputation as the meanest man on Exmoor is, in my view, rather unjustified. Although I have been living in Bilbury for a long time I still haven’t had a bill from him. Every time I ask him how much I owe he just smiles at me and tells me not to concern myself with such trifles. I do sometimes worry that one of these days I am going to have to take out a second mortgage to settle up with him.

‘There won’t be much change from £8,000,’ said Thumper.

I’ve noticed before that builders seem rather to like the phrase ‘there won’t be much change from...’. This quite inaccurately implies that there is likely to be some change. Strictly speaking Thumper Robinson isn’t a builder, for he earns his living doing what he describes as ‘a bit of this and a bit of that’, (After living in Bilbury for a while I understand that this is the rural equivalent of being in the ‘import-export business’), but he has done enough brick and mortar work in his time to know his way around a building estimate.

‘That means it’ll be £10,000,’ said Dr Brownlow, with a weary sigh. Dr Brownlow, who lives in a house which is so large that not even he knows how many bedrooms there are, has much experience of dealing with builders.

Thumper waved a hand backwards and forwards to indicate that he didn’t entirely disagree with this interpretation. ‘There’s a new thatch, a new chimney, new ceiling, new bedroom floor and then there’s the decorating.’

‘It’s all a bit academic, isn’t it?’ said Mrs McBride. ‘How on earth are we going to raise that much money?’

This realistic but gloomy thought successfully silenced the discussion for a while.

‘Why don’t we organise a Revel?’ asked Dr Brownlow, suddenly and quite unexpectedly.

‘A what?’ I asked. I’d never heard of a Revel before. I had no idea what one was.

‘What a brilliant idea!’ cried Peter Marshall, looking genuinely excited. I hadn’t seen Peter Marshall look excited since a coach-load of Japanese tourists had stopped outside his shop. Within ten minutes he had not only got rid of a whole box of out of date photographic film but had also sold his entire stock of sticky fly paper. The Japanese had been fascinated by it.

‘Of course!’ agreed Thumper. ‘A Revel!’

‘What’s a Revel?’ asked Mrs McBride.

‘We haven’t had one of those for years!’ said Peter Marshall.

Gilly Parsons looked at me. ‘What’s a Revel?’ she whispered.

I shrugged.

‘When was the last one?’ asked Thumper.

‘It must have been 1961,’ said Peter Marshall.

‘It was before that,’ said Dr Brownlow, shaking his head. ‘Maybe 1957 or 1958.’

‘What on earth is a Revel?’ demanded Gilly Parsons, laughing.

Dr Brownlow looked at Thumper, Thumper looked at Peter Marshall and Peter looked at Dr Brownlow.

‘It’s a bit difficult to explain,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘It’s a sort of fair.’

‘Spelt f-a-y-r-e,’ said Thumper.

‘We always used to have them,’ explained Peter Marshall.

‘I remember that we always used to raise a lot of money,’ said Dr Brownlow.

‘That was one of the main reasons why we stopped them,’ said Thumper. ‘No one could agree on what to do with the money.’

‘But what is a Revel?’ demanded a very impatient Mrs McBride.

‘It’s whatever we want it to be,’ said Dr Brownlow, after a lengthy silence. ‘Side shows, cricket tournament, bowling for the pig, dancing, vegetable show, all that sort of thing.’

‘A real Revel lasts for a whole week,’ explained Thumper. ‘Traditionally it starts on a Sunday after morning service and ends at midnight on Saturday. Sometimes they go on for longer.’

‘How will a fayre pull in that sort of money?’ I asked.

‘Grockles!’ said Peter Marshall, with a broad grin. ‘Grockle’ is the local term for a tourist.

‘We’ll have maypole dancing, morris dancing and all that stuff,’ said Peter Marshall. ‘The grockles love it!’

‘I hate to throw cold water on this but can anyone in the village actually do morris dancing?’ I asked quietly. I’d once seen men morris dancing and it had looked very complicated. There looked to be much more to it than having little bells sewn onto your socks and then dancing around banging sticks.

‘No problem!’ said Peter. ‘My grandfather used to be a great morris dancer. I’ve got a book on it somewhere. Philip Dinsdale knows all about morris dancing. He used to run the Bilbury Morris Dancers. We’ll get him to start them up again.’ He rubbed his hands together. ‘What a great idea!’ he said. ‘A Revel!’ He looked around the table and grinned at us all. ‘You’ve got a real treat in store,’ he said to me. ‘My old granddad always used to say that if you ain’t seen a Bilbury Revel you ain’t lived properly!’

‘So, shall we do that then?’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘Organise a Revel to pay for the repairs to Miss Hargreaves’ cottage?’

We all formally agreed with this.

‘Now that we’ve sorted out where the money is going to come from I can get a few of the lads together to start work pretty well straight away,’ said Thumper. ‘The quicker we start the sooner we’ll be finished. I can get all the stuff we need on tick.’ He, like everyone else, seemed to take it for granted that by organising a Revel we would automatically raise enough money to pay for all the repairs that Miss Hargreaves’ cottage needed.

Peter Marshall then decided that this would be a good time for someone to go for another round of drinks while he popped upstairs to see if one of the witches would run a Fortune Tellers’ tent for us.

CHAPTER SIX

I was helping Patsy clear away the breakfast things when there was a sudden, sharp knock on the back door. Patsy looked at me and I looked at her. Neither of us could think of anyone who would knock on the back door at that time in the morning. Anyone from the village would have just walked into the kitchen.

There was one easy way to find out who was there. I put the plates I was carrying into the sink and opened the door.

'Good morning!' said a rather scruffy individual whom I had never seen before. He wore a suit that looked as if it had once been rather smart and a floppy tweed hat which looked at least two sizes too small for him. He had a grey, curly beard and handfuls of curly grey hair escaped from underneath his hat. He looked a bit like a pixie.

'Good morning!' I replied.

'Lovely house,' said the pixie.

'Thank you.'

'Beautiful garden.'

'Thank you.'

'Do you need any help with it?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Your garden,' explained the pixie. 'Do you need any help with it?'

'I don't really know,' I mumbled. 'We hadn't really thought about it.' I half turned to look back at Patsy who couldn't see who was at the door but had obviously heard the conversation. She raised an eyebrow and shrugged her shoulders.

'Give me a trial week,' suggested the pixie.

The truth was that we undeniably did need someone to help us with the garden. It was far too big for us to be able to cope with without any outside help and although we had successfully restored the vegetable garden we had still done nothing at all to the area around the small ornamental lake.

'I don't think we can afford anyone,' I confessed, deciding the truth was better than a made up excuse.

The pixie looked up and around the courtyard, clearly finding this difficult to believe. 'I'm not expensive,' he said, with another big grin.

'I know it's a big house,' I said, 'but we aren't rich.' I thought I caught a touch of disbelief in his eyes. 'Honestly!' I added.

'I tell you what I'll do,' said the pixie. 'I'll work for you for £5 and somewhere to sleep - then you see what you think and if you're satisfied with my work you pay me what you can afford. Give me a trial for a week.'

I half turned again and looked at Patsy. She made it clear that she was happy to leave the negotiations up to me.

'Come in,' I said, stepping back from the door and making a snap decision. He looked trustworthy enough. 'We'll find you a room. We'll pay you £5 a week and we'll share the income from selling fruit and vegetables to the local shops and hotels.'

'That's very fair!' said the pixie. He didn't enter the house. 'But I didn't mean a room in the *house!*' He seemed genuinely embarrassed and looked around the courtyard. ‘You must have a bit of a stable somewhere, a loft, something like that...,’ he waved a hand around airily to make it clear that he wasn’t fussy.

We found him a dry loft above one of the unused stables and he seemed well pleased with this. When he had deposited his bag, a small canvas holdall which would have made a scarcely adequate weekend bag for most travellers, Patsy and I led him on a brief guided tour of the garden. He seemed quietly impressed with the state of the walled vegetable plot but tutted and oohed and aahed when he saw the overgrown and out of control gardens around the ornamental lake.

‘There’s a lot to do,’ said Patsy.

‘There is that,’ said the pixie. ‘But you’ve got the makings,’ he added quietly and appreciatively. ‘Oh, yes, you’ve certainly got the makings.’

I thought I knew what he meant.

We walked slowly back towards the house together.

‘I’ve suddenly realised that we don’t know your name!’ said Patsy.

‘No,’ said the pixie. He had engaging, twinkly eyes but there was a sadness in them. He looked the sort of man who liked smiling but hadn’t had much to smile about recently. But he still didn’t tell us his name.

‘What is it?’ I asked him after we’d walked on together for another half a dozen paces.

‘Parfitt,’ said the pixie, almost reluctantly.

‘Welcome to Bilbury Grange, Mr Parfitt,’ said Patsy.

‘Thank you,’ replied the pixie. We showed him where there was a water tap and an outside lavatory, told him that he could help himself to any winter vegetables still growing in the garden and warned him about the existence of Miss Hargreaves whom we hardly ever saw and who had settled into the coach-house flat very well.

And so we acquired a gardener; albeit only on trial for a week.

When we got back to the house we discovered that a delivery van had been out from Barnstaple with a parcel for me. Because there had been no one in the house the driver had left a card to say that he had taken the parcel all the way back into town. I went and fetched the car keys and set off straight away. I rather thought I knew what the parcel might be and I was anxious to collect it without too much delay.

* * *

The road from Bilbury to Barnstaple twists and turns a hundred times. People who believe that crows fly in straight lines would probably estimate that a flying crow would measure the distance between our village and the nearest town as no more than five miles. But for earthbound travellers, who have to obey the whims of centuries old track makers, the distance is twice as far. The A39, the main coast road down through North Devon and North Cornwall skirts around the edge of the straggling village of Kentisbury, passes Arlington Court on the left and climbs up a steep hill around the edge of Woolley Wood before dropping down to skirt past the edge of the village of Shirwell and enter Barnstaple from the north east. I know the road well and because it was winter and there were no visitors around I drove quickly, taking particular care on those corners which were sheltered from the sun and which might therefore still be icy. The weather had become a little milder since the big blizzard but there were still patches of drifted snow to be seen on the northern side of many hedgerows.

I had just negotiated the severe hairpin bend halfway up the hill past Woolley Wood when I saw a couple of red flags sticking out of the side of the hedge. The flags were faded, dirty and drooping and I very nearly missed them completely.

I stamped my foot on the brake and skidded to a halt just in time to avoid smashing into the back of a very grubby pick-up truck. The truck was so dirty that it was quite impossible to see what colour it had been when it had been first driven out of the showroom. In fact it was so filthy that it was difficult to believe that it had ever even been in a showroom. Not that this was anything unusual. As a general rule in North Devon it is fairly safe to assume that any vehicle which isn't battered or dirty belongs to a visitor.

The truck had been parked less than fifty yards after a blind bend. A small grey saloon was parked a few yards in front of the truck. Three scruffy figures and a man in a suit were standing in the road talking. The man in the suit was holding a clipboard. He looked very cold. A fallen tree trunk lay across half the road and two of the scruffy men were holding chain saws. The road was littered with sawdust and small branches.

A tall, long haired figure wearing a green jacket, a beige woolly hat, dark brown corduroy trousers and a pair of heavy boots waved to me and wandered over towards me. I didn't know his name but I recognised him. During the summer months he operated a hut renting out surfboards and selling ice cream on one of the nearby beaches and during the winter he earned a living doing anything that wasn't overtly illegal.

'Hello, doc!' he cried, grinning cheerfully when he recognised me. It seemed clear that whatever was going on was going to take some time so I got out of the car and wandered over to him. I sometimes think that living in Devon is a bit like living in Spain. There isn't a lot of point in trying to hurry because by and large things will get done when the people doing them are ready to do them and no amount of cajoling or threatening will make any difference. Since I've lived in Bilbury I've known of three couples who have left London to live in the area. They all returned to their more familiar haunts within a year, claiming that they found the slow, laid back pace of life far too stressful for them.

'You'd get on quicker if you didn't cut everything up so small!' insisted the man in the suit. He shivered uncontrollably. He pointed to the pile of logs at the side of the road. They looked as if they'd been cut to fit perfectly into the average sort of fireplace.

'We have to cut them into small pieces or else we can't get them into the back of the truck,' said one of the woodmen. I recognised him too. I'd seen him at the Duck and Puddle.

The man in the suit frowned, clearly unconvinced.

'I've got a bad back,' said one of the men.

'Hernia,' said another.

'It's me chest,' said the third.

The man in the suit scribbled something on his clipboard, glowered at no one in particular, shivered and walked back to his car. He got in, performed an eighteen point turn and drove away. When he'd gone, the three men dragged the tree trunk out of the way so that I could drive past.

'Don't strain yourselves!' I shouted.

They grinned back at me and the man in the woolly hat who rented out surfboards in the summer winked.

* * *

The parcel was, as I had expected and hoped, from my publishers in London. It contained my six author's copies of my very first book. I signed the forms that the brown coated man behind the counter handed to me and took the parcel carefully into my arms.

'You don't need to worry,' said the man in the brown coat, pointing to the form I'd signed. 'It's only books.'

Only books! He might as well have said: 'It's only holy relics' or 'It's only the crown jewels'.

I could have not felt more tenderly towards that parcel if it had contained my first born baby. In many ways that was exactly what it *did* contain. I had spent nearly a year writing the book, a serious expose of the international drug industry, and when I had finished the researching, and the writing, and the editing and the proof reading and the answering of queries from the libel lawyers (that alone had taken three months and by the time I'd finished the book was less than two thirds of its original length) I was as exhausted and as careworn as a mother at the end of a full nine month pregnancy.

I glowered at the insensitive bibliophobe in the brown coat, tucked the parcel safely under my arm and walked out to my car. There I sat and stared at the parcel for what seemed like an hour or two (but was probably no more than a couple of minutes). I desperately wanted to open the parcel and see what one of my babies looked like. But I also wanted to share that magical moment with Patsy.

Something the publisher had said to me kept coming back. 'However many other books you write this will always be your first book,' he had said when I was flagging during the lengthy editing process. 'You must make it as good a book as you can.' I had done just that.

I made the decision to delay the opening of the parcel until I got home, put the unopened package down on the passenger seat, fastened the seat belt around it and set off on the winding journey back to Bilbury Grange.

The three wood cutters were still working near Woolley Wood, though the tree trunk they had been chopping up had more or less disappeared. I slowed down as I approached their truck and the ice cream salesman in the woolly hat waved to me. I wound down the car window and stuck my head out into the cold.

'Is the hernia O.K.?' I asked.

'Fine, thanks, doc!' he grinned. He rubbed his hands together. He wore no gloves and it really was bitterly cold. 'Do you want some logs?' he asked me, pointing to the large pile of neatly cut small logs in the back of the pick-up truck. The three of them had been busy.

'How much do you want for them?' I asked him.

He suggested a price that seemed halfway between outrageous and absurd. I offered a price that was mid-way between mean and theft. We then quickly agreed on a sensible compromise; the price both of us had probably thought of in the first place. Patsy and I had burnt up quite a large proportion of our stock of logs during the blizzard and it seemed an excellent opportunity to replenish our supplies. Patsy's father had explained to me that logs burn best if stored for a year or more and so I didn't want to have to buy logs at the last minute. Green wood is slow to ignite, burns poorly and tends to give off more steam than anything else.

'We've just got a bit more tidying up to do,' said the man in the woolly hat. 'Shouldn't take us more than half an hour or so.'

'I'll be back home by then,' I told him. As I drove away I couldn't help smiling to myself. The men had been paid by the council to remove the tree trunk and they had now managed to get paid by me for the logs. I rather suspected that they would all be doing a little celebrating later that evening. Being a townie who relied on central heating the man in a suit from the council probably hadn't even realised that a chopped up tree can have a cash value in the countryside.

* * *

Patsy and I sat in the kitchen staring at the parcel for a while.

'Aren't you going to open it?' asked Patsy at last.

'You open it.'

'No, you. It's your book.'

I picked up the parcel, found the knot and picked eagerly at the string. Whoever had packed the parcel had certainly taken no chances with it coming undone.

‘Cut it,’ suggested Patsy, handing me a sharp kitchen knife.

‘I can’t do that!’ I said, rather shocked. When I was a boy my mother would never let anyone cut string. I don’t know whether this was because she thought it was bad luck to cut string (she had a lot of superstitions and quite a few of them seemed to involve black cats, the number thirteen and pieces of string) or because she just thought it was a waste (I suspect that the latter may have had some influence on her thinking for I don’t think she ever threw away anything - her kitchen always contained mountains of neatly folded paper bags). We always had to undo string, roll it up neatly and put it into the string box before we could even think of unwrapping the rest of the parcel.

Patsy smiled and put the knife away. She had enough superstitions of her own not to dismiss mine as entirely silly. When I had eventually managed to unravel the knot, had unfastened the string, folded it, tied it neatly and put it away in a drawer (we didn’t at the time have a string box though we did eventually acquire one) I carefully unfolded the thick brown wrapping paper. Inside that there was another thick layer of wrapping paper, made up of large proof sheets from another author’s book. And inside that layer of wrapping paper lay my six author’s copies. I stared at the small neat pile of books for a moment and could feel my heart beating wildly. A *With Compliments* slip lay on top of the books. I picked that up first and carefully laid it down on the table. Then I picked up one of the books and handed it to Patsy and picked up another book to look at myself. On the front cover there was the title and my name. On the back cover there was a small piece of blurb about the book and a photograph that made me look quite respectable. I examined the jacket spine and then I slowly undressed the book and examined the binding. Then I put the dust wrapper back around the book and flicked through the pages. I could hardly believe it. But the proof lay in my hands. I had written a book.

‘It’s just like a real book!’ said Patsy, holding her copy book very gently, as though frightened that it might suddenly fall apart.

‘Yes!’ I said.

‘Here’s that chapter that you had all those worries about!’

‘It’s nice paper isn’t it?’

‘It’s a good photograph of you.’

‘Do you think anyone will want to buy it?’ I asked, suddenly overwhelmed by an awful feeling that after all this trouble the book would not be of any interest to anyone.

Patsy looked up at me and reached out to hold my hand. ‘It doesn’t matter whether they do or they don’t,’ she said quietly.

She was right.

For that moment I didn’t care what the critics said or whether anyone bought the book or not. The important thing was that I had written my first book. No one could ever take that away from me.

And then for the second time that day there was a loud knocking at the back door and I had to go and show the wood cutters where to unload the logs I’d bought.

* * *

‘I almost forgot,’ said Patsy, when I came in from helping to move the logs from the back of the yellow truck into the back of our log shed, ‘there were two telephone calls for you while you were in Barnstaple.’ Inevitably, the wood cutters had wanted to dump the newly cut logs at the front of the shed. I had had to give them an extra pound each to persuade them to help me to put the logs right at the back where there was plenty of room and where they would be able to dry out in peace for a year or so. The first call had been from a girl called Tanya who worked for a publicity agency in London which had, apparently, been hired by my publishers to promote my book. They wanted to know if I would go up to London to meet with them and discuss the various ways of promoting the book. The second telephone call had been from Peter Marshall who hadn’t left any message apart from the fact that he wanted me to ring him back.

I rang the publicity people in London first and got hold of Tanya straight away.

'First,' she cooed, 'I have to tell you how *thrilled* we all are to be handling your book. It's going to be a real joy and a privilege to work with you.'

Not realising that this was publicity-agent-speak for 'hello' I felt a little embarrassed at the effusiveness of this greeting. 'That's very kind of you,' I stuttered back, rather hesitantly.

'Oh no,' said Tanya. 'We really are most terribly, terribly excited by this project. I can't tell you how honoured we are to have been chosen to help promote your book. Mr Leytonstone himself has told us that the book must be given every priority. He is convinced that it's going to be a major, major bestseller.'

'Oh,' I said, rather taken aback by all this. 'Thank you.' Then after a moment's hesitation I asked who Mr Leytonstone was. This question clearly threw poor Tanya who obviously lived in a world where everyone not only knew who Mr Leytonstone was but also regarded him as being only slightly less important than the gods of fire, water and earth.

'My Leytonstone is our Senior Account Director,' she answered, in a whisper. I realised that she was probably whispering because she was embarrassed at having to explain who Mr Leytonstone was.

'Ah,' I said, as knowledgeably as I could.

'We would all love to meet you so that we can take on board your views about how the book should be promoted,' said Tanya. 'And, of course, we would like the opportunity to tell you about our plans for you and your book.'

'Er, yes,' I said. 'Thank you.' I was naturally keen to go and talk to the publicity people who were going to turn my book into a bestseller but I really didn't fancy the idea of a trip to London.

'We'll be fixing up lots of radio and television interviews for you,' said Tanya. 'Deborah has already started talking to people about you.'

'Radio?' I said. 'And television?' I could feel my palms becoming sweaty. I wondered who Deborah was.

'Oh, yes, absolutely. Have you done any broadcasting before?'

'Broadcasting? Er, no, I don't think so,' I muttered. I was beginning to get very cold feet about this whole business.

'You'll be absolutely marvellous,' said Tanya. 'I just know you will. Now, when can you come up and have lunch with us all? Would next Wednesday be convenient?'

I looked at the calendar hanging on the wall near to the telephone. There was nothing at all written on it. 'Yes, I think so,' I said, hesitantly. 'Next Wednesday would be fine.'

'Wonderful. Everyone here will be so thrilled that you're coming! It's going to be a real treat for us all to meet you.'

'Er, thank you,' I mumbled.

'Goodbye then,' said Tanya.

'Goodbye,' I said and found myself listening to the brrrr of a disconnected telephone.

* * *

After all this it was a real relief to telephone Peter Marshall and get back to the real world. After the telephone had rung for what seemed like a lifetime Peter eventually picked up the receiver and then immediately asked me if I could wait for a moment, explaining that a potato sack had split, spewing its contents all over his store room. I sat there listening to him huffing and puffing and cursing in the background as he picked up the potatoes.

'Who is it?' he demanded eventually. He sounded very bad tempered.

I told him.

‘Oh, hello!’ he said. ‘What can I do for you?’

‘You rang and left a message for me to telephone you,’ I reminded him.

‘Did I?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh.’ said Peter. ‘Well I must have wanted to speak to you about something, I suppose. I wonder what it was. Wait a minute.’ Again the phone went dead and this time I heard him rummaging around on his desk. There was a loud crash as something breakable fell on the floor and broke.

‘I know what it was,’ he said eventually. ‘I’m sorry about all that but I’ve had an absolutely terrible day. Can I put you down for the cricket team?’

‘The cricket team?’ I exclaimed, horrified. ‘Do you mean you want me to *play* cricket?’

‘Well I’m not selling tickets and I don’t want you to make the teas.’

‘I haven’t played cricket since I was six years old!’ I protested.

‘Doesn’t matter,’ said Peter without hesitation. ‘I was appointed secretary of the cricket club at the last meeting and we’ve only got ten members.’

‘What do I have to do?’ I asked.

‘Turn up,’ said Peter baldly. ‘You’ll only have to field a bit and maybe bat. You can bowl if you like. We’re going to play a few matches as part of the Revels.’

‘What’s the team called?’

‘We’re the Old Bilburians,’ replied Peter.

‘The *what?*’

‘I know,’ sighed Peter. ‘I don’t know how we got that name. I think someone said it would make us sound more important than Bilbury Village Cricket Club. Can I put you down?’

‘Who else is in the team?’

‘Thumper, Dr Brownlow, Frank, Patchy,’ began Peter.

‘O.K.’ I agreed. ‘Put me down then.’

‘Jolly good,’ said Peter. ‘There’s a meeting at 8 tonight at the Duck and Puddle.’

‘I’ll be there,’ I sighed.

* * *

The Old Bilburians Cricket Team had what a generous sports writer might describe as a ‘patchy’ history. A less generous, more realistic, critic might have preferred words such as ‘useless’ or even found the plain ‘not very good’ suitable. An unkind commentator might have found the word ‘pathetic’ irresistible. It was the sort of team which is usually described as being reliable (roughly translated this means that at least eight men usually turned up for most of its matches) and ‘the backbone of the local cricket league’ (translated as meaning that no one alive could remember it ever having won a match).

The team, I learned from Peter in the Duck and Puddle that evening, had not actually played any cricket matches for four years. It had, however, had four annual dinners, four summer barbecues, eight committee meetings and five car boot sales and had played six darts matches, four skittles matches and a snooker match.

'I thought we could organise a few matches as part of the Revels Week,' said Peter, when he finally decided that it was time to start the meeting.

'Cricket matches?' asked Dr Brownlow, seemingly startled at the prospect of the Old Bilburians Cricket Team actually playing any cricket. From the looks on the faces of the others I gathered that I was the only one who had been made aware of Peter's plans.

Peter nodded.

There was a lengthy silence as this information sank in.

'Does anyone here actually know how to play cricket?' asked Thumper at last.

There was then another fairly lengthy silence while we all considered this question.

'I used to be a pretty mean leg break bowler,' said Patchy, picking up a beer mat and wrapping his fingers around it as though it were a cricket ball.

Dr Brownlow studied Patchy's grip critically. 'Isn't that the grip for an off spin bowler?' he asked cautiously.

Patchy stared at his fingers, at Dr Brownlow and then back at his hand. He frowned.' Is it?'

'I'm not sure,' confessed Dr Brownlow, with a shrug.

'It's a long time since I was at school,' admitted Patchy quite unnecessarily. He carefully put down the beer mat and flexed his fingers. 'Maybe I was an off spinner,' he said thoughtfully. He picked up the beer mat and tried out the grip again.

'Have we got any equipment?' asked Frank.

We all looked at him. This was an unusually specific, and unexpectedly relevant remark for Frank who, when faced with social events of any nature, is usually more concerned with problems such as 'Will there be enough beer' and 'Who will carry me home afterwards'.

'Equipment?' frowned Dr Brownlow.

'Bats, balls, stuff like that,' explained Frank.

'I can get bats and wickets and balls,' said Peter quickly.

We all looked at him. Peter's shop sells toy beach cricket kits which contain little bats made of balsa wood, stumps that are barely more than eighteen inches high and balls that are so light that they travel no more than ten feet however hard you hit them.

'I'm not sure that the stuff you sell will be quite the sort of equipment our opponents will be used to,' said Dr Brownlow, tactfully.

Peter looked at him blankly.

'The stuff in the shop,' explained Dr Brownlow. 'Good, though it is,' he added quickly. Peter can be a little touchy if his wares are criticised. He once hit a French visitor who had dared to criticise his sprouts. He didn't hit him with his fists, of course, but with a rather large piece of broccoli. Afterwards a representative from the French Embassy travelled down from London to issue Peter with an official protest. He subsequently needed to have a length of cucumber removed from his person. On another occasion a weekend inhabitant of the village was foolish enough to compare Peter's unwashed, organic carrots unfavourably with those on sale in the Harrod's Food Hall in London. The man, who had also made the mistake of threatening to report Peter to the authorities for not making sure that his outside window blind was the regulation height above the ground, had been promptly banned for life from Peter's shop. A full two years after the incident Peter proved that he isn't a man to bear a grudge lightly by refusing to sell the weekender a newspaper. Peter tutted impatiently and shook his head. 'No,' he said, 'I mean real cricket bats. Real balls too.' He paused, realising perhaps that he got carried away a little. 'Well, nearly real.'

'Ah,' said Dr Brownlow, impressed. 'Nearly real will do us very nicely.'

'I'll get them at cost,' said Peter. He took the small red notebook in which he writes down all his orders and cash transactions out of his inside jacket pocket, licked the business end of a small stub of a pencil which he took from behind his left ear and carefully wrote down the order.

'Will anyone want to play us?' I asked, feeling rather foolish but thinking nevertheless that the question ought to be asked.

'Finding opponents won't be a problem,' Dr Brownlow reassured me. 'Every summer there are hundreds of teams from the Midlands down in the West Country looking for games. Any village that has a picturesque ground can get as many matches as it wants. Over at Yoxley they play four or five times a week all through the summer.'

'When the village last had a cricket club we went for years without ever playing an away fixture,' said Thumper. 'Visitors love playing here because we've got a pretty ground.'

'Where is our cricket ground?' I asked.

Everyone looked at me as if I were mad.

'The village green!' said Thumper, pointing through the window.

It was, when I stopped to think about it, a pretty obvious setting though the village green didn't look very much like a cricket pitch. The grass was nearly a foot long and most groundsmen would have regarded it as something of a challenge to get it ready for a football match - let alone a cricket match.

'It'll need a bit of a rolling,' said Dr Brownlow, who has a nice ear for the understated phrase.

'No problem, doctor,' said Thumper. 'I can borrow Herbert Thurlow's roller.'

'Splendid!' said Dr Brownlow.

'Forgive me for asking what is probably another daft question,' I said, 'but if we're going to start playing cricket seriously doesn't it mean that we have to start practising?'

Peter looked at Frank, Frank looked at Thumper and Thumper laughed.

'I don't think we have to be *that* serious about it!' said Thumper.

'Besides,' said Frank, 'practising isn't exactly the gentlemanly thing to do, is it? Not for amateurs.'

'Look at it this way,' said Peter, 'our role is to make the other team feel good - they are the visitors after all.'

'And if they feel happy because they've won,' said Frank, 'they'll buy all the drinks!'

'Since I seem to be asking all the stupid questions,' I said, 'can I just ask one more?'

'Certainly!' said Frank. He paused. 'One more.'

'The idea of organising the Revels is to make money to pay for repairing Miss Hargreaves' cottage, right?'

'Right,' agreed Thumper with a nod. Everyone else murmured assent.

‘How will a few cricket matches help us make money?’

‘Ah!’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘That’s easy. First, the visiting teams will spend money when they’re in the village. They’ll drink a lot of beer, smoke a lot of tobacco and eat a lot of chips. Frank will sell them the beer and the chips and Peter will sell them the tobacco.’

‘And we’ll sell them raffle tickets,’ said Thumper.

‘And we give a cut of the extra profits to the Revels Committee,’ said Frank.

‘Second, if we advertise the fact that we’re holding cricket matches on the village green we’ll get a lot more visitors to the village. And they’ll...‘

‘...drink a lot of beer, smoke a lot of tobacco, buy a lot of raffle tickets and eat a lot of chips!’ I interrupted.

‘And buy a lot of postcards, maps, tinned sweets and magazines!’ added Peter with a broad smile. I felt silly for not having thought of all this. I should have known that Peter is not a man to organise anything if there isn’t a shilling or two to be made out of it.

‘Does the Revels Committee get a cut on all those things?’ Dr Brownlow asked Peter, apparently innocently.

Peter looked as though he would have gone red if he’d been the sort ever to get embarrassed or cross with himself.

‘Hrrmph, er, well, not exactly the postcards,’ he mumbled.

‘What about books?’

‘Books are a rather difficult commodity, you know. Margins are poor you know,’ said Peter, continuing to mumble.

‘Magazines?’ asked Dr Brownlow.

‘I don’t think my contract with the wholesalers allows me to have any arrangements with a third party,’ said Peter, quite earnestly and without the hint of a blush.

‘Sweets?’

‘Oh, the profit on sweets wouldn’t be worth having,’ said Peter with a shake of his head.

‘What do we get a cut on, then?’ asked Dr Brownlow.

Peter hesitated. ‘Tobacco!’ he said at last, giving us all a rather hollow smile.

‘We perhaps ought to have a little meeting,’ murmured Dr Brownlow, giving Peter a wink. ‘See if we can’t sort out a few more items where the Revels Committee might conceivably expect a little payment.’

‘What about your bottled water, then?’ asked Peter.

‘I’ll certainly be giving ten percent of all my sales during Revels Week,’ said Dr Brownlow.

‘And we’ll give ten percent of the take from the Duck and Puddle during Revels Week,’ promised Frank.

Everyone looked at Peter expectantly.

Peter looked glum and for a moment or two didn’t say anything. I thought he was probably going to brazen it out. But it turned out that even Peter had a breaking point. ‘All right,’ he agreed at last. He sighed.’ Ten per cent of all my sales during Revels Week.’ He had to drag the words out as though they were sewn in.

‘Splendid!’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘I’d drink to that but my glass is empty.’ He leant a little closer to Peter. ‘I think it’s your round!’ he said with a rather wicked smile.

* * *

CHAPTER SEVEN

The human body is equipped with an enormous range of subtle and sophisticated mechanisms; many of which are as yet quite unexplained by doctors and some of which you are probably unaware that you have. Should a speck of dust find its way into one of your eyes tears will flood out in an attempt to wash the irritant away. The tears contain a special bactericidal substance designed to kill off any infection. When you have a fever, the rise in your temperature is probably a result of your body trying to help you cope more effectively with any infection that may be present. There is even a quite remarkable mechanism which will enable you to go to bed at night, tell yourself what time you want to wake up and then wake up at that time!

In order to get to London in time to have lunch with the people who had been hired to promote my first book I had to get up at half past five in the morning. When I was working as a doctor I often had to get up out of bed during those parts of the night when I would have preferred to have been fast asleep but I never grew to like it. Many of the other inhabitants of Bilbury, being farmers, probably thought nothing of getting up at half past five in the morning but to me it was still a chore which required discipline and effort.

However, since I was a child I've been able to wake myself up at whatever time I wanted simply by telling myself the specified time. Just how this internal mechanism works is a mystery. But work it does.

On the morning I was due to go to London to meet Tanya and the publicity people who had been hired to promote my book I woke suddenly and carefully reached out, cautiously grasping for the alarm clock. The illuminated hands showed that it was 5.25 am. I turned off the alarm, due to go off in five minutes time (even after all these years I am, I am rather ashamed to admit, still sceptical about my powers to wake up on cue and so whenever I need to get up particularly early I always put the alarm clock on as a mechanical 'back up') picked up the small torch that since the blizzard I had kept on my crowded bedside table alongside the alarm clock, the lamp and the telephone and stealthily crept out of bed. Ben, who had been curled up next to my feet, woke instantly and leapt down off the bed. I reached down and touched her mouth to tell her not to make a sound and took my flannels, my old and faithful sports jacket, a clean woollen shirt and my underwear into the bathroom so that I could get dressed without waking Patsy. I heard Sophie and Emily, our two young cats, follow Ben down off the bed.

Cats are supposed to be silent creatures but those two, particularly Sophie, made so much noise when they moved about that I could never understand just how they managed to catch as much wildlife as they did. Sophie was pretty clumsy as well as noisy and whenever a pot plant was found mysteriously smashed on the floor we knew who to blame. (Not that we ever did blame her, of course. We knew that in reality it was our fault for leaving the plants scattered around in such silly places. Anyone who puts a pot plant on the mantelpiece when there is a cat living in the house must expect to come in one day and find a smashed pot in the hearth.)

It was still dark outside and I couldn't see a thing, though I could hear the wind and the rain lashing against the windows. As usual it was freezing cold in the bathroom. I shaved and then dressed and started to tiptoe down the stairs when to my surprise I heard Patsy calling from the kitchen.

'Your porridge is ready!'

I hurried downstairs. I could smell fresh toast too. The morning was looking better already.

'I didn't even know you were up!'

'You don't think I was going to let you creep out of the house without any breakfast, do you?' Patsy poured boiling water from the kettle into the teapot.

'But it's horribly early!' I said, sitting down at the breakfast table. Ben, Emily and Sophie all sat around looking underprivileged.

'I was brought up on a farm. This isn't early. Come on, start your porridge and I'll boil you a couple of eggs. Do you want syrup on your porridge?'

I said ‘yes, please’, accepted the proffered tin and put two large dollops of sweet, sticky, golden syrup into the middle of my bowl of porridge. Twenty five minutes later, with a bowlful of porridge, two boiled eggs and two slices of toast inside me, and feeling infinitely better than I had when I’d woken, I stuffed my feet into my shoes, pulled on my coat and gloves, crammed a hat onto my head, scraped the ice off the car windscreen and set off to drive to the railway station in Barnstaple.

It’s difficult to feel in a hurry on the journey between Barnstaple and Exeter. The train stops at Lapford, Eggesford and what seems like every other village in the county. When you look at the map it seems as though the railway takes a pretty direct line between Barnstaple and Exeter. In real life I suspect that the train prefers to take a more adventurous, circuitous route.

In Exeter I had a twenty five minute wait before I caught the main line express from Cornwall to Paddington. I bought a newspaper and joined the hardy bunch of early morning travellers waiting to journey East. I can never quite believe it but I have it on the firmest authority that the early morning passenger list from Exeter to London includes a number of daily commuters - most of whom catch an earlier train than the one I was catching! I suppose it’s all right if you enjoy travelling and find working and reading on the train easy to do but I would find it an enormously tedious and quite exhausting business.

I was in London by eleven o’clock and since I didn’t have to be in the south of the city for my meeting with Tanya, Mr Leytonstone and the others until one o’clock I decided that instead of catching the tube or taking a taxi I would walk from the station. A quick look at the elderly and rather dog eared copy of the map of London that I had brought with me suggested that it couldn’t be more than a few miles. It was much warmer in London than it had been in Devon and even though there was a thin, misty rain falling a walk through Hyde Park seemed a much more pleasant proposition than being cooped up in an underground train.

By the time I had stopped at a cafe in Knightsbridge for a cup of tea and a bun (I could have bought a three course meal at the Duck and Puddle for the same price), lingered in a bookshop where I bought a fistful of paperbacks which filled the pockets of my coat and bought a brooch in the shape of a butterfly from a street trader for Patsy it had started to rain more steadily.

There was something distinctly odd about the rain which for a moment or two I couldn’t quite put my finger on. Eventually, I realised what it was. The rain was coming straight down and as a result pedestrians who were carrying umbrellas were staying quite dry. In North Devon the rain tends to pay more attention to the wind than to gravity and usually travels horizontally. No locals in Bilbury, Combe Martin, Ilfracombe, Lynton or Barnstaple ever bother carrying umbrellas because they know that if it rains then it will probably also be windy. In London businessmen in suits were successfully keeping keep themselves dry by holding newspapers over their heads!

By the time I got to the offices of Taggart, Leytonstone, Mortehoe and Evans (the publicity firm which my publisher had hired to promote my book) my coat and hat and shoes were soaking wet.

‘Good morning, can I help you?’ asked a stunning young lady with long blonde hair, bright blue eyes and improbable looking eyelashes. The eyelashes were heavy with mascara and pulled her upper eyelids down so low that she had to hold her head back in order to look at me. She wore a high neck, skin tight, Chinese silk mini dress and had a tiny pair of headphones and a miniature microphone hanging around her neck. The dress looked about three sizes too small for her. Her bosom was straining as though anxious to escape and the dress was so short that the welt at the top of her tights was clearly visible. She wore a white enamelled name badge with gold edging and gold writing on it. The badge told me that she was called Felicity.

‘I’ve got an appointment to see Tanya,’ I said.

The receptionist leant forward and gingerly tapped at a small telephone switchboard with the end of a pencil, presumably to avoid damaging her fingernails. She held the headphones to one ear and twisted her neck so that she could speak into the microphone. She clearly didn’t want to upset her hair by wearing the headphones. ‘Hello, Tan,’ she said, ‘there’s a person here to see you.’ She looked up at me as she spoke and was clearly not impressed with what she saw. The person at the other end, presumably Tanya, said something which I didn’t hear.

‘What’s your name?’ asked the receptionist.

I told her.

The receptionist passed this information on to the person at the other end of the telephone.

Tanya said something which, again, I didn't hear.

'Are you an author?' asked the receptionist, lowering her voice a little, as though anxious lest anyone overhear my embarrassing secret.

I confessed that I was, indeed, an author.

'Yes, he is,' said Felicity. She put a hand half over her microphone as though anxious to stop me overhearing what she was going to say next but the ploy was pointless and I could hear perfectly well. 'He's very wet,' she murmured. There was a lengthy pause while Tanya said something else. 'No,' continued Felicity, with her hand still wrapped around the microphone, 'dripping wet!' She giggled at something that Tanya had said and unplugged the connection. 'Please take a seat,' she said, waving a hand airily towards a sofa. 'Tanya will be with you shortly.'

I hung my coat and hat on a chromium plated hat rack, sat on a black and white striped sofa and waited. There were a dozen, glossy magazines scattered around on a glass topped table but none of them looked particularly attractive. I reached up to my dripping coat and took one of the paperbacks I had bought, 'Walden' by Henry David Thoreau, out of my pocket and settled back to read it.

'Hello! Sorry to have kept you waiting!' said a chirpy young girl about fifteen minutes later. She looked about nineteen, maybe twenty, years old. She had tousled blonde hair that made her look as though she'd just got out of bed and wore a baggy, rugby shirt and a pair of very tight jeans. She rolled her eyes heavenwards. 'I've just had the most ghastly row with a TV producer in Manchester,' she told me. 'He promised me faithfully that he'd get one of our authors on his show but now he says he can't squeeze him in and we've already fixed up newspaper and radio interviews around his wretched show so it's all very beastly and damned inconvenient. Would you like a drink?'

I started to reply but was too slow.

'Felicity, would you be an absolute darling, and bring us three coffees?' She turned to me. 'Follow me, darling, I'll take you along to meet Deborah who'll be working with you.' As she turned she caught sight of my coat and hat, and the puddle that had formed around the base of the hat stand. 'Good heavens, are those yours?'

I said they were. 'I don't actually drink...,' I started to add but Tanya wasn't listening.

'Couldn't you get a cab? Oh, you poor darling!' She put a hand on my arm in apparently genuinely concern.

'I walked,' I explained.

'You walked?' It was a question, quite clearly born of disbelief.

'It wasn't far.'

Tanya stopped and stared at me. 'Where did you walk from?'

'Paddington station.'

'Paddington? Oh my god! You must be exhausted. That's the other end of town. Oh my god! That's miles. Oh how awful. Your publisher would have paid for a cab you know. Where have you come from?'

'Devon.'

'Devon? Good heavens! That's where people go for their holidays isn't it? Do you mean to say you actually live there? Oh how absolutely divine! But I could never live there. All that clotted cream! I'd be the size of a house in a week. You simply must meet Tiffany before you go. Her parents come from Devon. Well, they have a holiday home down there. I think it's Torquay or Newquay or somewhere with a quay in it. They're called Parkinson. Tiffy's father is THE Parkinson, the one whose firm makes all those witty advertisements that you see all the time on the television, but you wouldn't know it to talk to her. She's an absolute gem. Do you know them? I'm sure you must. I gather they know just about everybody in Devon. Did you really walk all the way from Paddington?'

I muttered something that sounded suitably inconsequential in reply to this barrage of questions and comments and strode along behind Tanya who had shot off down a corridor at a surprising speed.

'Hugo, this is the wonderful man who has written that absolutely sensational book on drugs!' said Tanya, stopping at an open door. She giggled nervously. A balding man who wore a large pink bow tie, had his trousers held up with a pair of bright yellow braces and was holding a Sherlock Holmes pipe in one hand a telephone in the other put his hand over the telephone and waved to us both. 'He lives in Devon and walked here in an absolute storm!' explained Tanya, pointing to me.

'Pleasure to meet you! I'm sure your book is going to be a tremendous success,' said the man with the bow tie, waving his pipe around airily. His office was lined with bookshelves. All the shelves were crammed with books. His desk was covered with books, manuscripts, magazines and loose papers. 'Jolly good timing. There's a tremendous amount of interest in the drug abuse problem. Heroin, cocaine, cannabis and all that. Tremendous interest. Big problem. I'm sure your book will make a vital contribution to the debate.' He nodded wisely, held his pipe aloft in some sort of salutation, took his hand away from his telephone and continued with his conversation. He had an airy, superior, rather condescending manner which I found slightly disturbing. Some men command respect, some demand it, a few deserve it; Hugo simply seemed to expect it.

'It isn't actually about drug abuse,' I tried to tell him, but he wasn't listening. 'It's about drug companies and, er, doctors...,' I continued lamely, abandoning my reply when I realised that Hugo was ignoring me.

'That was Mr Leytonstone himself,' whispered Tanya, hurrying along the corridor again. 'Isn't he an absolute angel? Absolutely brilliant, of course. He personally masterminded the Stuart Wallis story and when he was in advertising he thought up that completely sensational campaign for Tracey's Ales. He's a writer too so he has a special affinity with our authors. He wrote a book about advertising which is an absolute classic I'm told. I haven't actually read it, of course, because you can't get a copy - they're like absolute gold dust but everyone says it's really the most important thing ever written.'

I didn't have the faintest idea who Stuart Wallis was and I hadn't heard of Tracey's Ales but I made what I hoped were suitable noises to let Tanya know how impressed I was.

'And this,' said Tanya, pausing in the doorway of an office the size of a broom cupboard, 'is Deborah who'll be looking after you. She's going to take over your life completely, aren't you Debsie? Call her Debsie everyone does.'

I peered over Tanya's shoulder at a girl of about eighteen. She looked up at me and smiled. She had a thin, nervous looking face and shoulder length jet black hair. She wore a T-shirt with a message I couldn't quite decipher.

'He lives in Devon and he walked all the way here in the pouring rain! Isn't he divine? You're going to be fighting off producers when they see him.'

I hesitated, but thought I probably ought to correct Tanya before I developed too much of a reputation as a long distance walker. 'I didn't actually walk from Devon - only Paddington. And it wasn't raining all that much.'

Tanya waved a hand dismissively, as though none of this was important. 'Debsie is going to have you flying all over the country! Manchester, Glasgow, Birmingham, Cardiff. Everywhere! You'll be a household name by the time she's finished with you!'

'Golly,' I murmured. I wasn't sure that I was ready for any of this.

'And that's Fawn and that's Vanessa,' continued Tanya, pointing first at a plump, buxom blonde in a white silk blouse and then a freckled, redhead in a mauve jumper. 'They are the rest of my team!' Fawn and Vanessa, who were both busy on the telephone, beamed at me and waved their pens. I smiled back and waved rather diffidently.

'Do you want to come with us to my office, Debsie?' asked Tanya. 'There's a bit more room there and you can explain to us all the exciting things that you've got planned!'

'Shall I order some coffee?' asked Deborah, picking up all her telephone. As she reached across her desk I could read the message on her T-shirt but I still couldn't understand it.

'It's all done, darling!' cried Tanya, rushing off again. I hurried after her and heard Deborah clip clopping along behind me. Intrigued by the sound I turned, looked and saw that she was wearing white, high heeled, backless, toeless sandals. I couldn't help wondering if she'd travelled through wintry London wearing such impractical footwear.

'Sit yourself down!' said Tanya, as she led me into her office. It looked like another broom cupboard. Like every room I'd seen in Taggart, Leytonstone, Mortehoe and Evans the walls were covered with bookshelves, the bookshelves were bending under the weight of the books they were carrying and the desk was littered with books, manuscripts, press releases, letters and scribbled notes. Three mugs full of steaming hot black coffee stood in the middle of the desk. I hadn't seen Felicity bring the coffee although she must have walked down the corridor behind me. I sat down on an uncomfortable metal chair. Deborah, sat down beside me on a similar chair and lay down a huge diary across her knees. The open pages of the diary were covered with tiny, scribbly hand writing and there were at least fifty bits of paper sticking out of other pages in the book. I could see my name printed in large letters under the day's date. It was spelt wrongly.

'Debsie is really thrilled to be working on your book. Aren't you Debsie?' Deborah confirmed that she was, indeed, quite thrilled to be working on my book and added that she was envied by both Fawn and Vanessa. I don't know why but I got the feeling that this was an ego boosting routine served up to all authors. 'Do you take milk?' Tanya asked me, rummaging in the drawer of her desk. 'Sugar?'

'I don't...,' I started to say.

She pulled out two tiny cartons of milk and a handful of sugar sachets. 'I have to filch them from cafes and pubs,' she admitted with a nervous laugh. 'We never have any milk or sugar here because we all drink it black - we need the caffeine! So, how's it going so far, Debsie?'

Deborah glanced at me and smiled and then looked down at her diary. 'It's going terrifically well and there's an absolutely enormous amount of interest. I'm pretty certain that the producer of 'All Together!' is desperate, absolutely desperate to have us on the programme and I've got really firm maybes from Radio Manchester and Radio Birmingham.'

'Er... what's 'All Together!'?' I asked, diffidently.

'Haven't you seen it?' asked Tanya, seemingly astonished.

I admitted that I hadn't.

'Oh, it's an absolutely wonderful programme, darling! It goes out in the early afternoon and it's really terrific. You'll be marvellous on it. They'll love you to bits.'

'Oh.' I said. I swallowed and felt uncomfortable. I wasn't sure that I was ready to be loved to bits by people I didn't know and would never know. In the end I need not have worried. I never heard any more about 'All Together'.

'It's looking good, Debsie!' said Tanya. 'What else is there in your little book?'

'The producer of 'Youth Culture' on Radio Leeds is pretty sure that they'll want to do something - they're having a week-long series of programmes on drug abuse next month so our book fits in really well!'

'It isn't actually about drug abuse,' I said quickly.

'What isn't, darling?' asked Tanya.

'My book.'

Tanya looked at me and frowned. ‘I thought it was about drugs?’

‘It is.’

‘Well, there you are then!’

‘No, but...,’ I stumbled. ‘It’s not really about drug addiction. It’s more about prescription drugs.’

Tanya looked rather startled. ‘Oh!’ she said. ‘Oh. That’s a terrible pity. It’s a wonderful programme.’ She turned to Deborah. ‘Is Eden Taylor still presenting it?’

Deborah checked her diary and nodded.

Tanya turned to me. ‘He’s wonderful, isn’t he? Absolutely brilliant.’ She must have seen the look of incomprehension on my face. I knew it was there but had tried to conceal it. Have you not heard his show?’

‘Er... no, I can’t say I have,’ I admitted.

‘The next time you go to Leeds you make a point of tuning in,’ said Tanya. ‘He does a lot of our authors. What time does his programme go out, Debsie?’

‘Eleven until midnight on Sundays,’ said Deborah quickly.

‘I don’t get to Leeds much,’ I admitted. It was a dramatic understatement. I couldn’t remember ever having been there before.

‘Well you’ll be there if you’re on Eden Taylor’s show!’ Deborah pointed out.

I said that this was undoubtedly true and that I looked forward to hearing Mr Taylor.

‘Not that you’ll be able to listen to the show if you’re there with us!’ said Tanya, with a giggle.

Deborah and I both looked at her.

‘You’ll be ON the programme, won’t you!’

‘Er, yes...,’ I agreed. ‘I suppose I will.’

‘Do you not know anything about drug addiction?’ Tanya asked me. She picked up her mug and took a noisy slurp of coffee. Deborah picked up her mug and followed her example. I left my mug of coffee where it was. It looked more like black soup than coffee and I wondered how many hundred milligrams of caffeine each mug contained. There was, I thought, probably enough caffeine in those three mugs to keep an entire platoon awake throughout a long night of manoeuvres.

‘Well, yes, I suppose so...,’ I agreed. ‘A bit.’

‘So you could talk about it?’

I thought about it for a moment. ‘I suppose so,’ I said. ‘As long as it wasn’t anything too complicated.’

‘Oh, don’t worry,’ laughed Tanya. ‘It won’t be anything complicated! Not with Eden!’

‘So I can still pencil in Eden and Leeds?’

‘Oh, yes, absolutely, absolutely, Debsie!’ said Tanya enthusiastically. ‘What else have you got? Any nibbles from the nationals yet?’

‘Well a nice lady at the Express said she thought they might be prepared to do something and your friend at the Telegraph who sends his love by the way and told me to tell you that Freddie is pining for a big kiss - says he’ll try to get something in if the conference on sewage treatment is cancelled.’ Tanya, who was blushing heavily, tried to hide behind her coffee mug but seemed secretly quite thrilled.

‘I think - and this negotiation is at a very early stage so we mustn’t get too excited - but I think there’s a chance that The Guardian will buy serial rights.’ Deborah looked at Tanya and then at me and smiled as though waiting for praise.

‘Oh, you clever thing! That’s absolutely marvellous, darling! You are a wonder! Isn’t she a wonder?’

I agreed with Tanya that Deborah was, indeed, a wonder and that the news was absolutely marvellous. ‘But what, er, what are ‘serial rights’?’ I asked.

‘If The Guardian buy serial rights they’ll publish an extract from your book!’ said Tanya. ‘It’s very, very exciting news!’

I agreed that this was, indeed, exciting news.

‘The ‘West Country Post’ is pretty sure that they think they probably want to do an interview,’ went on Deborah, blushing now with pride at having almost persuaded The Guardian to publish an extract from my book. ‘Your friend Kathy on ‘Good Homes and Beautiful Gardens’ says she’s almost absolutely certain they’ll do a short review and that man you told me to ring said we’re pretty sure to get a piece on the diary page of ‘Music Week’.’

‘Marvellous!’ said Tanya. ‘Isn’t that marvellous!’

‘Well, yes,’ I agreed.

‘Of course, the ‘Music Week’ piece depends on the book being about drug addiction,’ said Deborah, ‘so I suppose we might have to do a bit of arm twisting there.’

‘Oh, I’m sure you’ll manage something,’ said Tanya, confidently. ‘Is Bernard Crossweather still the news editor?’

Deborah looked at her diary and nodded.

‘Just take him for a long, boozy lunch and wear something with lots of cleavage,’ said Tanya. She looked at her watch. ‘Talking of lunch,’ she said, ‘it’s time we left. I’ve got a table booked at Le Dejeuner Sur L’Herbe. I hope that’s O.K.’

‘I’m sure it will...,’ I began.

‘They do the most divine veal and lamb pie,’ said Tanya.

‘Er, actually, I’m, well, sort of vegetarian,’ I confessed. Tanya, who had been busy filling a huge leather satchel with diaries, appointment books, a Filofax and half a dozen books, stopped as though suddenly frozen. ‘Oh my God!’ she said.

‘Did you tell us?’

‘I don’t think...,’

‘I should have guessed,’ said Tanya. ‘Walking all that way.

You must be a bit of a health freak. I suppose it’s with you being a doctor and so on.’

‘Well, no, in fact it hasn’t got anything...,’ I began.

‘Never mind,’ said Tanya, ‘I’ll have a word with Felicity on the way out and get her to ring Maurice and make sure he can do you an omelette or something.’

‘Please don’t go to any...,’

Tanya carried on throwing books and papers into her satchel. I began to wonder if she was taking advantage of her lunch break to move offices. 'Debsie, darling, have a word with Felicity on the way out will you, my love and get her to ring Maurice and make sure, absolutely double certain sure, that he can do an omelette. Tell her to make sure he understands that it is for a very important author, won't you?'

Deborah hurried off to have a word with Felicity.

'Debsie is an absolutely angel. She's a fiend in the office and can be quite utterly ruthless with some of these self-important media types but she's such a sweetie really. She's been with us for nearly a week now and I can't imagine how we ever managed without her.'

'Where was she before she came here?' I asked. I was surprised to hear myself finish a sentence.

'Rodean, darling,' said Tanya.

'Rodean?'

'School! You know, hockey sticks, blue knickers and all that...!' Tanya giggled. 'Come on, we'll be late for lunch and Maurice will never, ever forgive me!'

I went to lunch slightly chastened by the thought that the publicity expert who was looking after my book had slightly less than a week's experience behind her. As we walked along the corridor back to where my still damp coat and hat were waiting we passed another open door and another small office wherein three more teenage girls were busy being charming on the telephone.

'That's Jacantha, Arabella and Fiona,' said Tanya, stopping in the doorway and whispering to me. 'They all work with Imogen. She's one of our other executive directors.' 'This is one of our authors,' whispered Tanya to the three teenagers. 'He's just walked from Devon in a thunderstorm! Isn't he an absolute wonder?' The three girls all smiled at me and waved their pens.

* * *

'Now I absolutely don't want you to take this the wrong way,' said Tanya as she signed the credit slip for lunch. 'But do you have another jacket?'

I was still coming to terms with the fact that I'd been bought a meal by a woman. I looked down at my jacket and brushed at a blue ink stain on the lapel. 'Is there something wrong with it?'

'Not in the slightest,' said Tanya, a little too quickly. 'It's an absolutely splendid jacket. Isn't it, Debsie?'

Deborah agreed that it was, indeed, an absolutely splendid jacket.

I put my hand over the leather patch on my left elbow. It had been loose for rather a long time but I hadn't got round to getting it put back on properly.

'But I'm not sure that it's going to give you the image we're searching for!' Tanya continued. 'It's an absolutely lovely jacket for the country - on the moors in Devon and so on - but we want you to have a certain, what's the word I'm looking for...,' she paused. 'Gravitas!' she added explosively.

'I don't actually...,' I began.

'Charcoal with a pale blue shirt and a dark tie,' suggested Tanya. 'Some people still have black and white sets and blue looks a really bright white on a black and white set.'

'Oh.'

'And maybe it would be possible to get a little something done with the hair?'

‘The hair?’

‘It’s lovely hair. Really lovely, isn’t it, Debsie?’

‘It is,’ agreed Deborah rather too vehemently. I looked at her, surprised. She blushed at her own over enthusiasm and looked down as a waiter whisked away the remains of her traditional veal and lamb pie and my Italian herb omelette, Iberian sun dried tomatoes and French field mushrooms.

‘But...,’ sighed Tanya, shaking her head, ‘...and I know that Hugo would be the first to agree with me on this... if you could have it cut a little shorter.’

‘Hugo?’ I couldn’t think of anyone called Hugo.

‘Yes, Hugo. He gets his hair cut twice a week!’

‘Hugo?’ I still didn’t know who she was talking about.

‘You know... you met him in his office... Hugo Leytonstone.’

‘Ah, yes.’ I remembered. I tried to picture Hugo Leytonstone. He had, I felt quite sure, been more or less completely bald.

‘Isn’t he, er, bald?’ I asked, rather undiplomatically.

‘Only on the top of his head,’ said Tanya, rather sternly. Hugo’s lack of hair was clearly not a suitable topic for conversation. ‘He has quite a luxurious growth around the back and the sides and he says that the less you’ve got the more care you need to take of it.’

I automatically brushed my fingers through my hair. There did seem quite a lot of it. I tried to remember when I had last had it cut but couldn’t.

‘I’m afraid I haven’t got a suit,’ I said.

‘Oh,’ said Tanya, clearly rather stunned by this confession. ‘Well, just wear something sober. Try not to wear anything too flashy - it’ll make you look like a game show host on television and no one will take you seriously.’

‘I’m afraid this is the only jacket I’ve got,’ I said. ‘I don’t own a suit. And I don’t think I can afford one. I’ve just bought a rather old house. Besides, there doesn’t seem an awful lot of point in buying another jacket when I’ve got this one.’

Tanya looked at Deborah and Deborah stared back at Tanya.

‘Don’t tease me,’ said Tanya.

‘I’m not,’ I said. I examined the jacket again. ‘It was new when I bought it,’ I said rather defensively.

‘Well, I’m sure it will be fine,’ smiled Tanya.

‘It’s Harris Tweed,’ I continued. I opened the jacket and showed her the label. ‘I remember the salesman saying that it was the sort of jacket that would last a lifetime. The buttons are genuine...,’ I examined the one on my left cuff carefully but couldn’t work out what it was made of and couldn’t remember what the salesman had said it was made of, ‘well, I’m not entirely sure what they are but they’re genuine, anyway.’

‘I’m sure they are,’ said Tanya.

I wondered if there was going to be anything else. There was.

‘And you need to push yourself forward a little more,’ said Tanya. ‘You don’t mind me telling you these things, do you?’

I shook my head.

'That's good,' Tanya smiled. 'I'm just keen to help you promote your book successfully. Some of the interviewers you meet will be quite tough with you but you mustn't take it personally.'

'Er, no,' I said, thinking that writing books seemed a lot easier than promoting them. I had, rather naively imagined that I could leave the selling of the book to the professionals.

'Will it be all right if I'm assertive?' I asked, rather diffidently. 'I don't want to appear pushy or arrogant.'

Tanya nodded furiously, and handed the signed slip and her credit card to a waiter. 'Absolutely, darling!'

'O.K.,' I said, with a slight shrug. 'I'll try to be more assertive.' I paused and looked at first Deborah and then Tanya. 'If you're sure that will be all right,' I added. I paused, smiled and looked at them both in turn. 'Anyway,' I said with a brave attempt at confidence, 'It's surely what I say that really matters - not how I say it or what I look like!'

Tanya smiled at me and I knew from the way that she smiled that I had said something stupid. That smile said volumes. 'Television is all about image,' she told me kindly. 'Hugo always says that perception is far more important than reality and that reality and substance have very little to do with anything on television and are of very little consequence.'

I suppose I should have thought of something sharp and witty to say but I couldn't and I didn't. Some people complain that they always think of their bon mots and acerbic responses seconds too late. I envy them. At least they can replay their conversations in their mind and imagine themselves handing out a suitably reproving put down. Only rarely can I think of the right thing to say; even months later I tend to feel deflated and noticeably inconsequential when I have been thoroughly patronised.

* * *

'Deborah will ring you as soon as we've got things firmed up a bit more,' promised Tanya, as the three of us stood on the pavement outside Le Dejeuner Sur L'Herbe. She wore a thin summer raincoat and shivered in the cold. 'We've got to rush back to the office to do some more frantic telephoning on your behalf but it's been absolutely, wonderfully marvellous to meet you!' She stood on tiptoe, put her arm around the back of my head, pulled my face down to her and kissed me several times on both cheeks.

'It's been a real thrill,' said Deborah. She too stood on tiptoe and kissed my cheeks. She wore no coat at all and was shivering even more violently than Tanya.

'Oh, one more thing - send us a photograph of yourself!' instructed Tanya, as she edged away. 'If you haven't got one then get one taken.'

'Right,' I said.

'Bye!' they both cried, hurrying off back to their offices to tell the editors of Motoring Weekly, Gardening Today and the Leamington Spa Review just why they had to include a review of my book. The rain had more or less stopped and Deborah's impractical, summery sandals clip clopped furiously on the hard, wet London pavement as she struggled to keep up with Tanya's furious pace.

I looked around to see if anyone was staring at me. I'd never been kissed so many times by women I hardly knew. It was, I supposed, one of the small perks or penalties of being a modest, new entrant to the world of show business. No one seemed to be staring so, pulling my coat collar up against the light London breeze, I walked briskly back across London to Paddington. After four hours I'd had quite enough of life in the big city and was keen to get back to the sharper winds and narrow lanes of Bilbury just as quickly as I could.

On the way back to the railway station I narrowly avoided being run over on two occasions. Each time it was my fault for I was quite mesmerised by the traffic. In London the roads are wide enough for the traffic to travel in at least two directions. In Bilbury the lanes are all so narrow that if two vehicles approach one another from opposite directions then one of them will have to reverse.

When I finally got back to Bilbury that evening Patsy reported that we had frogspawn both in the lake and in our ponds and that Sophie had caught a vole. Through the window I noticed that a single, glorious, impertinent primrose had appeared to add a dash of yellow to the carpet of snowdrops in the shrubbery. It was good to get back to the real world.

* * *

CHAPTER EIGHT

Patsy and I were having quite a struggle to make ends meet without my income from the practice. Repairing the structure of Bilbury Grange had taken all the money we had borrowed from the bank and keeping up the repayments on the mortgage wasn't easy without a regular income. I earned £40 a week for writing my newspaper column and although I still hadn't received the cheque I had another £250 due on the publication of my book. In addition I was managing to earn something (but not much) by writing articles and stories for magazines and newspapers. Patsy was bringing in small and irregular sums of money by buying books at auctions and selling them to a dealer in London but with Miss Hargreaves living in the stable flat we wouldn't be able to earn an income by letting it out to holiday-makers.

We were toying with the idea of having paying guests in the house during the summer months and I had started to make discreet enquiries about finding some locum work in the area. Most of the medical practices in Devon have more work to do in the summer months when the local population is dramatically increased by an influx of holiday-makers and so I was hoping to find a niche where I might earn a regular income by doing a few surgeries every week. In the end, however, we didn't take guests in and I didn't get a job doctoring.

Surprisingly, perhaps, being broke never really worried either of us. We both loved Bilbury Grange but we both had faith in fate and we believed that something would turn up. Besides, worrying wasn't going to change anything - other than to make us miserable as well as poor!

Meanwhile, being poor did have one big advantage: it meant that since we had to ration the number of times we used our car (both because we didn't have the money to spend on petrol and because the more we used it the more likely it would be to wear out and break down) we had taken to using our bicycles; old but extremely sturdy machines which we had bought from the lost property office at the local police station. As a result we had discovered footpaths and bridlepaths that even Patsy, who had spent all her life living in the area, didn't know about.

After my London meeting with Tanya and the other publicity people I had not arrived back in Bilbury until late. Although I had spent at least six hours of the day sitting down on the train I had felt exhausted by the time I finally slipped off my shoes and climbed the stairs to wash the grime and smell of London away. I comforted myself after my adventure in the city with the promise that I would go for a bicycle ride around Holdstone Down the following morning. Patsy who had fallen down the cellar steps and banged her knee said that if I didn't mind she would stay at home.

* * *

As Patsy had reported the lake and all our ponds were full of frogspawn, always a sign to me that spring can't be far away. The wind, which seemed to have been howling for ever, had miraculously died down and although the sun wasn't shining the grey of the winter sky had acquired a hint of blue. Most important of all it wasn't raining! I put on my old jeans and the thick, oily sweater which Patsy's mother had knitted and felt far more comfortable than I had while wearing my flannels and sports jacket.

While I checked my bicycle, making sure that the chain was tight and the tyres fully inflated, Patsy made a packet of sandwiches, wrapped in greaseproof paper, and then packed the sandwiches, a banana, an apple and two rock cakes into a brown paper bag (Peter at the local village shop still uses old fashioned brown grocery bags and refuses to have anything at all to do with bags made of plastic, though I suspect this is more because he has a large cache of old fashioned paper bags rather than because of any matter of principle or environmental concern).

Patsy also filled a thermos flask with hot, home-made vegetable soup. Patsy's soup is the mainstay of our diet: its contents vary with the seasons and the stores in our cellar and outhouses but everything in the soup is grown in the Bilbury Grange garden.

With the picnic safely packed away in my saddlebag I set off for the sea with Ben bounding along beside me as excited as a puppy! Sophie and Emily would have come too if I hadn't set off quite so quickly; they both ran after me for a few yards as I cycled down the drive. When I looked back they were sitting in the middle of the driveway staring after us like two children who've been told that they can't go to the party.

From Bilbury I rode across Kentisbury Down until I met the main road from Blackmoor Gate to Combe Martin. I turned left at the main road, rode down Silkenworthy Knap and turned right at Waytown, pedalling down the lane past Truckham Farm.

When I got to Stony Corner I took a right hand turning to Trentishoe and Heddon's Mouth. The route is undulating but beautiful, rich with hidden promises, and bordered by thick hedgerows. My bicycle, built and geared for flat suburban roads and city thoroughfares, creaked and complained as I forced the pedals round. Ben, unhindered by sprocket or crankcase, pounded along ahead of me apparently tirelessly; stopping every hundred yards or so as though to say 'What's keeping you? Hurry up!' and then bounding back towards me in a flurry of flying paws; her tongue dangling from the corner of her mouth and her tail high with excitement.

Holdstone Down is a beautiful, windblown, rockstrewn piece of moorland covered in tight, scrubby heather and gorse. It is aptly named for the wind blows so fiercely along the cliffs that not even rocks are safe here. In summer its undulating contours are covered in purple and yellow and it looks like a giant five day old bruise. Half a dozen stunted, bent over, scrubby trees struggle to survive and it is easy to see which way the wind usually blows from their bizarre shapes. Higher up there is nothing over a foot tall and the ground is scorched by searing, salt laden winds which blow almost endlessly from the south west. Small, hardy sheep, their coats ragged from the wind and the gorse, struggle to find enough to eat and the few patches of grass are eaten almost down to the bare earth. Across the Bristol Channel lies the coast of Wales. During the winter the coast is usually only dimly visible through the mist which so often lies across the channel. The coastline is at its most beautiful late on a summer evening when the Welsh lights shine and flicker like a valuable necklace laid out on the horizon.

In summer the sea between Devon and Wales is dotted with fishing boats, yachts and pleasure craft. Holiday-makers try sea fishing for the first and only time in their lives. Brave yachtsmen dart along the coast, hopping from one small port to the next and, if they are sensible, listening regularly to the weather forecast for even in summer the conditions can change quickly and a friendly, warm blue mill pond sea can become a fierce and unmistakeably unfriendly monster.

In the winter it is difficult to believe that this is the same stretch of water. Whipped into a constant frenzy by the wind there is more white than grey and mountainous waves crash down onto the jagged rocks, creating towers of spray and filling every tiny inlet with thick, creamy foam.

If you tried to sell this land for farming you would get only pennies for it. But if you measure land by its beauty then this is territory that, inch for inch, matches the value of the Mona Lisa.

The path which stretches, sometimes precariously, often spectacularly and always unpredictably, along the coast of North Devon runs around the foot of Holdstone Down. In summer the wide grassy footpath is alive with walkers for people come from all over the country to tread this path. They come in many different sizes and shapes; women in their fifties in shorts and stout boots with maps strung around their necks, men in breeks or plus twos wearing thick socks and brogues and carrying tiny rucksacks; young hikers led by earnest, bearded school masters or scout troop leaders and lone adventurers carrying their tiny tents and neatly packed supplies on their backs. But in winter the footpath is deserted. No one wants to walk this desolate route in the cold and savage months between October and April.

I turned left onto the coast path just before the lane veered down and to the right. From here, high up above the sea, the view along the cliffs is breathtaking. The lane heads down towards the village of Trentishoe, where the church of that name nestles comfortably in a cleft in the hills, and then twists sharply down a steep hill to Hunter's Inn and to Heddon's Mouth Cleave, a spectacular river valley which leads down to the tiny bay of Heddon's Mouth. Huge puddles lay across the path heading west towards Blackstone Point and Combe Martin and my bicycle left tyre tracks in the occasional patches of soft, sodden earth; not that I was despoiling virginal countryside for someone, probably a farmer fetching a dead or injured sheep, had driven a Land Rover along the path and had left deep ruts behind. Most of the path had, however, long since been worn down to rock and the puddles lay on the top. Ben, a little slower now, jogged happily along beside me; politely and professionally ignoring the attractions of the grazing sheep and rabbits scattered around on either side of the path.

Pleasantly wearied by my ride along the lane I free wheeled down the path, bumping and jolting my way around Holdstone Down, frequently having to take avoiding action in order to steer around particularly large rocks or potholes and constantly having to brake in order to stop my machines running away with me. I thought once or twice of the over-enthusiastic Tanya and Deborah and the others beavering away in their tiny, claustrophobic offices in London and felt myself fervently hoping that I would never have to leave Bilbury to work in a town or city. I felt at home in North Devon; comfortable, safe and at peace.

I rode my bicycle around Holdstone Down until I reached the path leading down into the tiny valley of Sherrycombe; a hidden, deep gorge where a clear, fast flowing stream bubbles and gurgles over a rocky bed. The path there is far too steep to ride down and so after I had taken the bag containing the food supplies from my saddlebag I pushed my bicycle underneath a bush to protect it in case it rained (I had no fear of my bicycle being stolen - in winter you could safely leave a well-stuffed wallet on Holdstone Down and go back and collect it a week later) and, much to Ben's obvious delight, continued down the hill on foot.

I ate my picnic sitting on a rock by the stream; sharing my sandwiches with Ben and a friendly robin. It was surprisingly warm in the valley. I was tucked away between rocks and trees and although I could hear the wind howling above me I could neither feel it nor see any evidence of its presence. All the really enjoyable meals I have ever eaten have been consumed out of doors. I have never been much of an enthusiast for starched linen tablecloths, obsequious waiters or restaurants where men in bow ties, oozing false bonhomie, charge fancy prices for undersized portions of overcooked food. I would be happy never to eat again in a restaurant where diners snap fingers, ties are essential items of apparel and everything on the menu is handwritten in French. Few meals could ever provide me with as much pleasure as a bagful of sandwiches and a piece of fruit eaten out of doors. I have eaten - and enjoyed - picnics in howling gales and the pouring rain and though I enjoy outdoor dining best when the weather is clement I must have an ounce or so of adventurer's blood flowing through my veins for I would turn down an invitation to dinner in the smartest restaurant in London for a chance to sit on wet grass and eat squashed cucumber sandwiches.

* * *

Since the age of four, when I first learned how to read, I have rarely moved anywhere without a book (or sometimes two) in my pocket. When I had finished my lunch I took out my by now rather battered paperback copy of Henry David Thoreau's 'Walden'.

Thoreau is without doubt my favourite philosopher; simple, honest and unpretentious and yet infinitely wiser than many more austere and apparently more intellectual philosophers. The kindness and compassion pours from his pen and I have always found his wonderfully anarchic distaste for bureaucracy and government, tempered as it is by genuine, heartfelt concern for the rights and responsibilities of both men and animals, truly inspirational.

Thoreau abandoned society for a while and lived in a rough cottage by the side of Walden Pond. He believed that 'the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation' and argued that man's desperation is often born of the consequences of his desire to accumulate material possessions which he doesn't really need. I sat there, half dozing, and thought of some of the friends I'd had at medical school. As students they had worked long, hard hours but they had enjoyed life too and although their hours were full they had enjoyed a real sense of freedom. Their lives had been structured but despite the structure there had been freedom. Without exception they had all changed, almost beyond recognition. A few months earlier I had attended a reunion dinner and had hardly recognised any of my former friends. The men all wore suits and looked very earnest and respectable. The women all wore sensible shoes and carried sensible handbags. The system had pulled them in and sucked them dry.

The truth, I realised, is that most people are dead at twenty five: their ambitions, hopes and aspirations confined to acquiring a car with 'genuine' vinyl seats and a fully paid up pension plan. They won't be buried for another half a century but they are doing little more than killing time until life runs out. They watch life drift by; never grasping their destiny or taking control.

I realised then, with genuine sadness, that most of my former friends were doing jobs that they hated - but excusing themselves by arguing that they needed the money to pay for the things with which they had littered their lives. I wondered how many of those possessions -paid for with blood, sweat and tears - were worth the price they had paid.

I thought of people I knew who had sold their souls so that they could receive a pension in their old age. One friend had taken a job with a drug company, although he had always professed to despise the industry. When I gently chided him about his dreams he replied: ‘I’ll have plenty of time and money to enjoy myself when I retire.’

The truth is that we only get one chance at living. We should not sell our bodies, souls or minds so that we can buy an ice cream maker, a timeshare apartment in Marbella or a three piece suite in mushroom velour. I swore there and then that I would not make the mistake of wasting my life on low expectations. I would not let my possessions own me or direct my life. I would take some chances and accept the consequences.

Three days earlier I had received a telephone call from one of the consultants I had worked for in hospital. He had been sent an advance copy of my book to read and, through kindness and genuine concern for my welfare, had rung me to ask me not to publish it.

‘It will wreck your career,’ he had warned me. ‘You’ll never be able to get a decent job in medicine.’

He had explained that the medical establishment didn’t like people who rocked the boat or who spoke out in public about injustices or irregularities. ‘These things are best dealt with within the profession,’ he had told me. ‘There is no need to worry patients with all this sort of nonsense.’

I had thanked him for his call, told him that I appreciated his concern and promised to think about it. I think he meant well. I think he really believed that the men in pinstripe suits and old school ties really did know best.

I had thought about what he had said. But not for long. I felt that my book, which denounced the close links between the medical profession and the pharmaceutical industry, and which named a number of prescription drugs which confidential papers I had unearthed had shown to be far more dangerous than the manufacturers had admitted, deserved to have its chance. I had conceived, nurtured and given birth to it and I did not feel that I now had the right to destroy it.

And what, in truth, had I got to lose? Maybe, in a strange

way, I was lucky in that I no longer seemed to have a career to worry about. I had abandoned the chance to work in hospital to work as a general practitioner. But then, through a mixture of my own bloody-mindedness and sheer misfortune over which I had no control, I had lost my practice.

Many of my former student colleagues now seemed afraid. But I didn’t really understand what they were afraid of. I knew that they had dreams when they were students. We had shared our dreams in those late night conversations; sitting at one of the Formica-topped tables in the hospital canteen. But their dreams had been buried, pushed deep down out of sight. And I felt far sorrier for them, with no dreams, no independence and no pride, than I did for myself, with no career and no future in medicine. I was merely giving up a place on the ladder. In order to retain their places on the ladder they had given up their dreams. I still had my dreams. I still wanted to change the world. It seemed to me that I had come off best.

Lying on the soft, sheep shorn grass by the side of the stream I read another chapter of Henry David Thoreau’s masterpiece and then, as the weak rays of early spring sunshine faded away, I gathered up my sandwich wrappings and started back up the hill towards the spot where Ihad left my bicycle. And then, with Ben bouncing along beside me, I pedalled back home.

***

While I had been refreshing my spirit, battered and dented by a day in London, the telephone at Bilbury Grange had apparently been ringing incessantly. Tanya had rung three times and a man called Reynolds from a television programme called ‘Alive and How!’ had telephoned twice. Peter Marshall, never a man to waste money on making two telephone calls when one would do, had left one message.

‘Did any of them say what they wanted?’ I asked Patsy, who was surrounded by mounds of fresh vegetables.

‘Tanya said it was vital that you rang her the moment you came in and wanted to know why you didn’t have a bleeper.’

‘I used to have a bleeper when I worked in hospital,’ I said. ‘Why would I want to take a bleeper with me to Holdstone Down?’

‘Well Tanya seemed to think you ought to have one so that she could get in touch with you.’

This didn’t seem to make any sense to me. I’d gone to Holdstone Down to recover from going to London to see Tanya. ‘I’ll ring her later,’ I said. ‘I’ll ring Peter Marshall first.’

‘He said it wasn’t urgent,’ said Patsy. She finished scraping the carrot and tossed it into a bowl.

‘What are you making?’

‘A vegetable pie.’

‘Great!’ Patsy makes a terrific vegetable pie. ‘Are we expecting someone to dinner?’ I asked. She seemed to be making a larger than usual pie. One of Patsy’s ordinary pies would feed six. This pie looked as though it would feed at least a dozen. She was making it in a gigantic dish which I had never seen before.

‘I invited Miss Hargreaves round for a meal,’ said Patsy. ‘She popped in this morning to see if I wanted anything bringing from the shop and we got talking and I felt that she was probably a bit lonely so I invited her round.’

‘That’s nice. I like Miss Hargreaves. She’s got a terrific library, you know. Where did you get that pie dish from?’

‘I found it in the cellar. Is that what was in all those cardboard boxes we brought round from her cottage?’

‘What?’

‘Books.’

‘Yes. She’s sweet. She keeps all the male authors in the bookcase in the living room and the female authors in the bookcase in the bedroom.’

‘She doesn’t!’

‘She does.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘Because I helped her unpack and I asked her if the books had to go anywhere in particular and she told me.’

‘That she keeps her books segregated by the authors’ sex?’

‘Yes.’

Patsy giggled.

‘I think she’s worried that if she lets Daphne du Maurier and Charles Dickens get together there could be trouble,’ I explained.

The telephone rang.

‘That’ll be Tanya!’ said Patsy. ‘And I invited Mr Parfitt too,’ she added.

Brrr Brrr.

‘To dinner?’

‘Yes.’

Brrr Brrr.

Mr Parfitt was the pixie. Our gardener.

‘Do you think they’ll get on?’

Brrr Brrr.

‘Miss Hargreaves and Mr Parfitt?’

Brrr Brrr.

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t know. Why shouldn’t they?’

Brrr Brrr.

‘I don’t know.’ I shrugged. ‘I’ll answer the telephone.’

I went into the hall and picked up the telephone.

‘Tanya here,’ said a voice I recognised instantly. ‘Thank heavens I’ve found you!’ said Tanya. ‘Are you all right?’

‘Yes, of course,’ I said. ‘Why shouldn’t I be?’

‘Your wife said you were riding your bicycle on the cliffs!’

‘Yes, that’s right.’

‘We were terribly worried that you might have an accident. When no one answered the telephone I was terrified that you’d fallen off.’

‘What - the bicycle or the cliffs?’

‘Oh, don’t joke about it!’ said Tanya. ‘You mustn’t take any risks! We’ve got a tremendous amount of exposure planned for you.’ She sounded genuinely concerned.

‘I’ll take care.’ I thought I was probably much safer riding my bicycle around Holdstone Down than I would have been walking through London.

‘Good,’ she said. She still sounded worried. ‘You’ll be getting a telephone call from Simon Reynolds.’

‘He’s already rung.’

‘Oh no! And you were out!’

‘Yes. I was riding my bicycle on the cliffs.’

‘Oh dear. Never mind. I’ll get a message to him to let him know that you’re in now. You’re not going anywhere, are you?’

‘Not that I know of. Who is he?’

‘Who?’

‘This Reynolds fellow.’

‘Simon Reynolds?’

‘Yes.’

‘Haven’t you heard of him?’

‘No.’

‘He’s one of the producers of ‘Alive and How!’ - he’s married to Celeste Peters.’

‘Who?’

‘Simon, of course.’

‘No, who did you say he was married to?’

‘Celeste Peters.’

‘Is she a singer?’ I asked. I thought I might have heard of her.

‘She reads the weather on television.’

‘Oh.’ I hadn’t heard of her. ‘I think I must have got her confused with someone else. Isn’t there a singer called Celeste something?’

‘Celeste Bartholomew?’

‘That’s it!’

‘She’s an American jazz singer. I think she’s around seventy years old.’

‘I used to have one of her records. She sang with Duke Ellington.’

‘Probably.’ said Tanya, rather impatiently. ‘But Celeste Peters is a big star. She opened three supermarkets last month.’

‘Ah,’ I said. ‘And she’s married to Simon...’,

‘... Reynolds. That’s right. She’s married to Simon Reynolds. And Simon Reynolds rang you because he absolutely adored your book and he wants you to appear on ‘Alive and How!’!’

‘Oh, good.’

‘If I put the telephone down do you promise not to go anywhere?’

‘Yes.’

‘Really promise?’

‘Yes.’

‘O.K. So I’ll put the telephone down and ring Simon and tell him that you’re at home waiting for his call.’

‘Fine,’ I said. I thought that while I was waiting for Simon to call I would find out what Peter Marshall wanted. I put the telephone down, picked it up again and dialled Peter’s number. Or, rather, I was about to dial Peter Marshall’s number when the telephone startled me by ringing again. I picked up the receiver.

‘Hello,’ said a girl’s voice. ‘Mr Simon Reynolds is calling you. Please hold the line.’

I started to say ‘thank you’ but she had gone. I stood there in the hallway for what seemed an eternity but no one came onto the line so I put down the receiver and headed back for the kitchen. I was still several paces short of my destination when the telephone started to ring. I turned round, walked back and picked it up again.

‘Hello,’ said the girl again. ‘Mr Simon Reynolds is calling you. Please hold the line.’ She sounded rather cross and put great emphasis on the last sentence.

‘Hello,’ said a male voice a moment or two later. ‘I’ve just been talking to Tanya about you. It’s a great honour to speak to you, sir.’ He didn’t sound as though he was taking the mickey so I muttered something polite about the honour being mutual.

‘I believe that Tanya told you about our little show,’ he said. I confirmed that she had.

‘And we’re all absolutely thrilled that you’re prepared to come on and talk to Vivienne about your book.’

‘Vivienne?’

There was a silence at the other end of the telephone line. ‘Vivienne Nugent,’ said Simon, as though he felt sure that he was simply jogging my slightly addled memory. ‘Our presenter!’

‘Of course,’ I said. I had never heard of Vivienne Nugent.

‘It’s a wonderful, wonderful book,’ said Simon enthusiastically. ‘I’m sure it’s going to be an enormous bestseller and earn you millions.’

Enthusiastic as I was about my book I thought that this was probably a little over the top. Even I suspected that the market for an earnest polemic about prescription drugs might be severely limited. But it was my first book and I wasn’t blasé enough about the experience of publication lightly to dismiss such enthusiastic praise.

‘That’s very kind of you,’ I said.

‘I know that Vivienne is just as excited as I am,’ said Simon. ‘She can’t stop talking about your book! She’s a real fan!’ I had never heard anyone sound quite so full of enthusiasm.

I didn’t really know what to say to this so I said nothing.

‘We’d like to have you on the show on Friday,’ said Simon, positively bubbling. ‘We’ll send a car for you, of course!’

‘Friday?’ I said, surprised. ‘This Friday?’ Friday was only two days away.

‘We’ll have a car pick you up at six. You should be with us by ten. That’ll give you time to meet Vivienne, go into make-up, have some breakfast and relax a little before the show.’

‘Er... what time is the programme?’ I asked, more because I couldn’t think of anything else to say than because I particularly wanted to know. I was beginning to get cold feet and wondered if there was any way that I could get out of appearing on the programme.

‘We go on air at two and we’ll probably put you in the first segment of the show,’ said Simon. ‘Which name do we use when we talk to you on air?’ he asked. ‘The one on the book jacket, I guess!’

‘Yes,’ I replied, puzzled. I started to say that I didn’t have any other names but Simon wasn’t listening. ‘I’ll go and tell someone to order the car to collect you,’ he said. ‘What’s your address?’

‘Bilbury Grange, Bilbury, North Devon,’ I told him. ‘But I’m not...,’ I began.

‘Wonderful!’ said Simon. ‘Absolutely marvellous. One of our cars will pick you at six a.m. on Friday!’

And before I could say anything else he put the telephone down.

It rang again immediately.

‘Have you spoken to Simon?’ demanded Tanya.

I said that I had and that Simon had invited me to appear on his programme in two days time.

‘Oh that’s fantastic!’ said Tanya. ‘Absolutely terrific. Isn’t he a wonderful man?’

‘I don’t...,’ I began.

‘Are they sending a car for you?’

‘Yes, b-b-b-but...,’I stuttered.

‘I’ll get Debs to meet you at the studios,’ promised Tanya, ‘just to make sure that you’re O.K. Marvellous, marvellous news, darling! I’m so thrilled. I’ll speak to you later.’

I thought I ought to return Peter Marshall’s call quickly before anything else happened. I dialled his number and waited. Unlike most of us Peter never allows the telephone to interrupt him but insists that it should take its place in the queue for his attention. If he is serving a customer and the telephone rings he won’t answer the call until he has dealt with all the customers who were in the shop before the telephone started ringing - and since he never hurries any of his customers this can take quite a while. His attitude is that whereas the customer standing in the shop is almost certainly going to spend money the caller on the other end of the telephone may not even be a customer at all.

‘Are you all right?’ asked Patsy coming out of the kitchen a few minutes later.

I put my hand over the telephone mouthpiece, though there was no need for this since the telephone was still ringing, and explained that I was calling Peter Marshall at the village shop.

‘Ah,’ said Patsy, with a knowing nod. ‘Would you like a cup of tea and a rock cake?’

I said I would. I had drunk the tea and eaten the rock cake when Peter finally picked up the receiver.

‘I think all the houses round the village green should be painted,’ said Peter when he recognised my voice. ‘We must make sure that the village looks smart for the Revels.’

‘That’s a good idea!’ I agreed. ‘But do you think we’ll be able to get people to agree? Some of the villagers living round the green might not be able to afford to get their cottages repainted.’

‘I’d thought of that,’ said Peter. ‘So I think the committee should pay for the paint.’

‘But the committee hasn’t got any money!’ I pointed out. ‘And it won’t have any money until the Revels are over!’

‘That’s all right,’ said Peter, cheerfully. ‘I’ll let the committee have the paint on account. It can pay me when it has some money.’

I told Peter that I thought that would be fine. Foolishly I forgot to ask him the colour of the paint of which he had such large quantities in stock.

* * *

CHAPTER NINE

I’d had to pop into Barnstaple to take a copy of a lengthy article I’d written to the main post office and by the time I got back to Bilbury Grange both our dinner guests had arrived. I found Miss Hargreaves, Mr Parfitt and Patsy all sitting in the living room, each clutching a glass of the parsnip wine that Patsy’s uncle had made three years earlier. Emily and Sophie were both curled up on Patsy’s lap and Ben, who I had left behind, was curled up on the rug in front of the log fire.

Not having been lived in for a long time Bilbury Grange had been in terrible condition when we had bought it and Patsy and I had decided that we had to concentrate first of all on mending the roof and replacing the rotten windowframes. Repairing the fabric of Bilbury Grange had taken all our money, most of our time and much of our energy and there had been little of any of these left to spend on decorating or furnishing the inside of the house.

We had, however, managed to buy a huge quantity of cheap white paint from Peter Marshall and with Thumper’s help we had decorated all the downstairs rooms, the staircase and several rooms on the first floor. We had furnished the house by attending auctions and buying the cheap reproduction furniture that is always left over when the dealers and collectors have taken their pick and bid against one another for the real antiques.

As I entered the living room and looked around I couldn’t help thinking how homely and inviting the room looked. Our plain white walls and simple, cheap and slightly battered furniture wouldn’t have won any plaudits from smart interior designers with expensive tastes, and we weren’t likely to find ourselves besieged by photographers working for smart monthly magazines, but the room looked lived in. Most important of all, perhaps, it looked a happy room.

The chintz covered sofa on which Patsy and Miss Hargreaves were sitting was designed to accommodate four large adults and we’d bought it for two pounds at a house auction in South Molton. It was far too large for a cottage or a modern house but looked very much at home in front of the fireplace. The springs weren’t quite as firm as they once had been but most people who sat on it agreed that it was one of the most comfortable pieces of furniture they had ever come into contact with. The only snag with it was that it was so soft and squashy that levering yourself up out of it was sometimes a bit of a problem - particularly if you’d been sitting in front of a nice, cosy fire for a few hours and had drunk a glass or two of anything brewed locally.

Grouped on both sides of the sofa, also facing the fireplace, there were three huge armchairs. None of these matched the sofa and all had come from different auctions. The leather one had come from a house in Lynton, the green one from a hotel in Barnstaple and the dark brown one from a flat in Bideford. We couldn’t afford to have any of the chairs recovered and so Patsy had strewn a dozen or more brightly coloured cushions around and had draped multi coloured shawls (found in a suitcase we’d bought at an auction in Hatherleigh) over the backs of the sofa and the chairs. The white painted walls were almost covered with old paintings, all bought for next to nothing, and above the fireplace hung a huge but slightly flawed mirror in a chipped, gilt frame. Apart from the flickering orange red light from the flaming beech logs in the fireplace the room was lit by two old fashioned, wooden-based standard lamps. The dark, gloomy night was shut out by a wall of red velvet drawn across the windows. The curtains, which had come from a hotel in Ilfracombe, had cost us £1 to buy and Patsy’s mother had altered them by hand for us. Altogether we hadn’t spent more than £30 on furnishing the entire room but because all the furniture was old the room looked as though it had been the way it was for half a century or more.

I kissed Patsy on the cheek, said ‘good evening’ to our two guests, apologised for being late, rubbed Ben’s head, poured myself a glass of wine and filled up Mr Parfitt’s glass. Miss Hargreaves put her hand over her still nearly full glass to make it clear that she didn’t want any more and Patsy just smiled at me and gently shook her head to give me the same message.

‘Have you two met before?’ I asked our two guests. It wasn’t just an attempt to break the ice but was a genuine question, inspired by curiosity.

‘Sadly no,’ said Mr Parfitt. He looked across at Miss Hargreaves and tentatively smiled.

Miss Hargreaves didn’t reply but pursed her lips and shook her head.

‘Miss Hargreaves is the village schoolteacher,’ I explained to Mr Parfitt.

‘So I understand,’ said Mr Parfitt.

Miss Hargreaves glared at him. ‘Who’s been talking about me?’ she demanded, frostily.

‘Just someone in the pub,’ replied Mr Parfitt, going slightly red.

‘Hmm!’ said Miss Hargreaves tartly. She clearly disapproved of something though whether this was Mr Parfitt, people talking about her, the Duck and Puddle or all three it wasn’t quite clear.

There was a slightly uncomfortable silence for a moment. Mr Parfitt looked as though he was about to say something but then changed his mind. I thought I ought to try to defrost the atmosphere but I was too frightened of saying something that might lower the temperature still further to dare say anything at all.

‘I read your book,’ said Miss Hargreaves. I didn’t even know that she knew I’d written a book.

‘Ah,’ I said cautiously, not quite sure how to respond to that.

‘Is it selling well?’ she asked.

I hesitated. ‘Well not terribly well,’ I said. ‘It’s not a very commercial book.’

‘There have been some super reviews,’ said Patsy quickly.

‘So I gather,’ said Miss Hargreaves.

‘And The Guardian serialised it,’ added Patsy.

‘I’d like to read a copy,’ said Mr Parfitt.

‘I’ll lend you one,’ I said.

‘He can borrow mine,’ said Miss Hargreaves. ‘It’s a very courageous book,’ she said. She glared at Mr Parfitt. ‘But I want it back, mind you!’

‘Er, of course!’ said Mr Parfitt.

There was then another long silence which Patsy broke by carefully moving Sophie and Emily off her lap, putting them down on the sofa beside her and then standing up. ‘Dinner is ready so if you don’t mind I think we ought to eat before it spoils!’

We all politely murmured our readiness to eat and after I’d put up the huge brass fireguard (bought, together with a brass coal scuttle, a set of dog irons and a full set of brass hearth tools for £1 from an auction in Porlock) to protect the carpet (given to us free by an auctioneer in Combe Martin who was under strict instructions to make sure that he got rid of everything at a house clearance sale) we all followed Patsy into the kitchen.

We did have a dining room at Bilbury Grange (it was connected to the kitchen by a hatch in the wall) but we still didn’t have a dining table (we had nearly bought a massive old refectory table and eight matching chairs for £20 but then two dealers spotted the table and within minutes the price had gone up to £350) so we ate all our meals in the kitchen.

As soon as we were all sitting around the kitchen table Patsy served out large portions of tomato soup (made with fresh tomatoes and four different herbs) and put a basket full of home-made bread into the middle of the table.

* * *

‘Have you always been a gardener?’ Patsy asked Mr Parfitt.

Mr Parfitt, his mouth full of bread, shook his head. ‘No,’ he said, when he’d emptied his mouth. ‘Not exactly.’

‘Well, you’re very good at it!’ said Patsy.

‘Thank you,’ said Mr Parfitt. ‘I’ve always been interested in plants. Gardening has always been a love of mine.’

‘What did you do before you became a gardener?’ I asked him, innocently.

‘I worked in a bank,’ said Mr Parfitt.

Patsy and I both stared at him. He smiled back at us.

‘What did you do in the bank?’ asked Patsy.

‘Up until fairly recently I was in charge of the securities trading room,’ replied Mr Parfitt, rather unexpectedly. I would have been no more surprised if he had told me that he had been an astronaut, a bull fighter or a Minister of State.

I tried to lift my spoon out of my soup bowl and put it into my mouth but my muscles seemed to have frozen. Miss Hargreaves seemed neither impressed nor surprised by this revelation. She simply carried on sipping at her soup.

‘In London, I presume?’ I said, more to make sure that I could still speak than because I thought the comment was worth making.

‘Oh, yes,’ confirmed Mr Parfitt. He told us the name of the bank he used to work for. It was such a large and well known bank that even I recognised it immediately.

‘What, er, what took you into gardening?’ asked Patsy, hesitantly. ‘I mean, it seems quite a career change...’

Mr Parfitt grinned and shrugged. ‘I ran away,’ he said.

‘Oh,’ said Patsy, weakly. Miss Hargreaves reached out and plucked another piece of bread from the basket.

I went cold inside and wondered how much he had stolen, whether Patsy and I would be sent to prison for sheltering him and who would look after our animals.

‘Don’t look so worried,’ said Mr Parfitt, with a mischievous grin. ‘I didn’t empty the vault before I ran away!’ he told me, as though reading my mind.

‘Oh good heavens,’ I laughed weakly, but with considerable relief. ‘I never thought you did!’ I murmured, rather dishonestly.

‘I just woke up one morning and decided I’d had enough,’ said Mr Parfitt.

I wondered why I had automatically believed him when he’d told me that he hadn’t stolen anything. Would he have told me if he had? If he was a thief wasn’t there also a good chance that he would be a liar?

‘It must have been quite a big step to take,’ said Patsy.

Mr Parfitt shrugged as though the decision had been inevitable and out of his control.

‘Did you have a family?’ she asked him.

Mr Parfitt nodded.

Miss Hargreaves, apparently oblivious to all this and clearly not on a diet, took yet another piece of bread. I like to see people enjoy their food but I had never before seen anyone work up a sweat while eating.

‘A wife?’

Another nod.

‘Two children. Rodney, who is 21 and Polly who is 20,’ said Mr Parfitt.

‘Won’t they be worried?’

‘No,’ replied Mr Parfitt, simply. ‘We only had three cars so I expect they’re quite pleased I’ve gone,’ he explained.

‘Oh, surely not!’ said Patsy, horrified.

‘You don’t know my family,’ said Mr Parfitt. ‘When I first realised that I was wasting my life I talked to my wife and asked her if she’d stay with me if l gave up my job and started doing something I enjoyed. It would have meant selling the house and having a less expensive lifestyle but we would have had more time together.’ He paused. ‘Do you know what she said?’

No one said anything.

‘She said: ‘happiness isn’t everything’.’ said Mr Parfitt. He broke a small piece of bread into two and popped the smaller half into his mouth. He chewed slowly and then swallowed. ‘Anyway I sent them a couple of postcards so they know I’m still alive,’ he added.

‘That was thoughtful of you,’ said Patsy.

‘I didn’t want them having me declared officially dead,’ said Mr Parfitt, with disarming honesty.

‘Would you like some more soup, Miss Hargreaves?’ asked Patsy, suddenly noticing that our other guest had emptied her bowl.

‘I don’t mind if I do,’ said Miss Hargreaves.

Patsy stood up, brought the saucepan full of tomato soup from the stove where it had been kept warm, and replenished Miss Hargreaves’ bowl.

‘Would you like more bread?’ Patsy asked her.

‘If it’s not too much trouble,’ said Miss Hargreaves.

Patsy refilled the basket with hunks of bread.

‘Did you decide to leave suddenly or was it something you’d been planning for some time?’ I asked. I hesitated. ‘I’m sorry is that rude? I don’t mean to pry...’

Mr Parfitt waved a hand. ‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘I don’t mind talking about it.’ But he lifted his spoon and sipped at his soup before answering. ‘I suppose I had been thinking about it for a long time,’ he told me. ‘I don’t know when I first realised how dissatisfied I was with my life. The funny thing is that although we all think we have choices, and we think we control our own lives, we don’t, do we? Most of the time we allow ourselves to be led by destiny, by chance and by the ill thought out ambitions and prejudices of those around us.’

I felt myself warming to Mr Parfitt. His must, I knew, have been a difficult decision. I remembered what I’d been thinking about during my picnic on Holdstone Down.

‘But when it came to it everything happened quite suddenly. The government had just put a new range of gilts on the market and the dealing room was frantic. I was talking to half a dozen people at the same time and suddenly, for no reason, it occurred to me how pointless the whole thing was. I had my usual bad indigestion and the noise in the dealing room was giving me a headache. I was looking around thinking how much I hated my job - and always had - when my wife rang in an absolute panic to tell me that we had twelve people coming to dinner that night and that she had discovered that we only had ten matching ramekins. She said I had to go to Harrods immediately and either buy two to match the ones we already had or else buy a dozen new ones.’

Mr Parfitt looked around and shrugged, rather apologetically. ‘It probably sounds silly to you,’ he said. ‘But I just got up and walked out of the dealing room, left the bank and started walking away from the City. Then it started raining so I got on the first bus that came by and when the bus stopped at Paddington Station I got off the bus and got on a train. I got off at Exeter because I was hungry and there was no buffet car on the train and after I’d eaten a couple of sandwiches and drunk a cup of tea I caught the next train out which happened to be the train up to Barnstaple.’

‘How long ago was that?’

‘A month or so.’

‘Any regrets?’

Mr Parfitt shook his head.

‘When I first arrived down here I was a nervous wreck. I walked past a cottage on the edge of the village green and heard a telephone ringing. I instinctively found myself waiting for someone to open the window and tell me that the call was for me.’

‘Do you think you’ll go back?’

‘I don’t know. I haven’t even thought about it,’ said Mr Parfitt. He thought for a moment. ‘And I don’t want to think about it,’ he added, quite firmly.’ He looked around at each of us in turn, and smiled. ‘I’m happier and more content now than I can ever remember being before. I just want to take things day by day.’

‘That’s fine with us,’ said Patsy.

‘You stay as long as you like!’ I told him. ‘The garden has never looked as good!’

‘Thank you!’ said Mr Parfitt. ‘You know, it’s a real joy to have a job where you can see an end result, where every day brings a new challenge and where there is always something to look forward to tomorrow. And the wonderful thing is that when I finish for the day I stop thinking about work.’ Mr Parfitt looked around at us with a wonderful smile on his face. ‘I don’t worry about it!’ he said. ‘That’s the real luxury. I don’t worry because there isn’t any point in worrying. I can’t change the weather. I can’t control nature. When I worked at the bank I used to go home at night and carry on working in my study until one or two in the morning. And then I’d lie awake worrying about the decisions I’d made - wondering whether I’d thought of all the angles and worrying about whether someone else might have stitched me up. And telephoning people in Japan or America to see what was happening there.’

‘Now I live in a tiny room and I have virtually no possessions to speak of but I’m happier than when I lived in a massive house and had an expensive car. The snag with wealth and power is that if you have either or both then you’re always frightened of losing what you have - and losing what you think of as being the security that goes with them. If you have nothing then you have nothing to lose and so only then are you truly free. I knew some very rich people when I worked in London but they were among the least secure people I’ve ever met.’

We finished our soup and while Patsy served up her vegetable pie I opened a bottle of her father’s potent bilberry wine.

* * *

‘That was a lovely meal,’ I said, when our two visitors had gone and Patsy and I had washed up the dirty dishes.

‘Did you like the apple and blackberry pie?’

‘It was lovely!’

‘Not too tart?’

‘Not at all.’

‘I really admire Mr Parfitt, don’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘You don’t ever feel trapped do you?’

‘No, of course not. I don’t do anything I don’t want to do. I’m very lucky. How about you?’

‘What?’

‘Do you feel trapped?’

‘No! Of course not.’ Patsy paused. ‘If you ever thought that Bilbury Grange was too much of a burden and you wanted to sell it and live in a tiny cottage I’d be just as happy.’

‘I know,’ I said. ‘That’s one of the reasons why I love living here.’

* * *

CHAPTER TEN

The car sent by the television company arrived bang on time. By eight thirty a.m. we were the other side of Bristol, having breakfast at a motorway service station. I had egg on beans on toast while the driver, a short, overweight, taciturn man with terrible dandruff and a voracious appetite for boiled sweets (which he crunched all the way between Bilbury and Birmingham) ate a huge plate piled high with heart attack fodder: four slices of very fatty bacon, two huge fatty sausages, two eggs, and two slices of fried bread all floating on a small lake of grease. He washed all this down with two huge mugs of tea and finished off with two slices of thickly buttered toast upon which he spread a generous layer of marmalade. We then climbed back into the car and continued our journey north; finally arriving at the television studios at about the same time as the locally resident staff.

The driver handed a slip of paper to a uniformed man behind a desk who examined it carefully before picking up the telephone. After speaking to the person he'd called for a moment he told me that someone would be with me in a minute or two. The someone turned out to be a very businesslike young woman in a red trouser suit. 'Would you like some breakfast?' she asked me. She had very short blonde hair, carried a huge clipboard, had a pen and a stopwatch hanging around her neck and had introduced herself as Louise. She was, she said, a programme researcher, though she had advised me that this was just a temporary stepping stone and that she would soon be working as a fully-fledged producer on her own show. Impressed by her confidence I shared her lack of doubt in her ability to succeed.

I politely declined her offer of food, pointing out that I had eaten at a motorway service station and did not yet feel able to subject my stomach to any more excitement.

'Then I'll take you straight along to make up,' said Louise. 'Follow me!'

She scurried off along the corridor as though she was in training for a fast walking competition and I hurried along behind her, struggling hard to listen to the running commentary she was giving me. The media world seemed to be full of fast talking, fast walking young women. Eventually we stopped outside a door upon which there was a small sign bearing the words MAKE UP. Louise reached for the door handle but before she could grasp it the door flew open and a dozen waiters and waitresses streamed out past us. I was at first puzzled by this for I had not realised that even the catering staff had their make-up applied professionally when working at television studios. I was about to make some comment about this when Louise whispered something to me about feeling sure that I would recognise them as being from the 'Royal Hotel'.

'Where is the 'Royal Hotel'?' I asked, timidly, too confused by everything around me to think it odd that the staff of a hotel should be got ready for work by a television make-up department.

Louise sighed and looked at me as though I'd asked her if she knew the name of the occupant of Buckingham Palace. "Royal Hotel' is one of our top rated comedy dramas!'

I apologised, and tried to explain my ignorance by pointing out that I didn't get much time to watch television. Louise just tutted and walked through the now open door. I followed her into the make-up room and found myself standing between a huge pirate, complete with beard, eye patch and wooden leg and a young woman dressed as a fairy. They were having a row.

'I did warn you that I'd be late,' said the pirate, apologetically.

'You said you'd be a bit late,' corrected the fairy. 'I don't call three hours a bit late!'

'I had to go and get the car serviced.'

'Since when have they sold beer at the garage?' demanded the fairy, hands on hips. 'You stink of the stuff!'

'I took John to the 'Bear and Flagstaff' for a pint to thank him for getting me that job as a bar of soap,' said the pirate sheepishly.

‘Ha!’ snorted the fairy with a toss of her head. ‘You just wanted to drool over that trollop behind the bar!’

Underneath his make-up the pirate blushed. ‘Don’t be silly, Brenda!’ he whined. ‘You know I love you!’

The fairy glared at him and then smashed her wand over his head. The wand, made of silver painted balsa wood, broke into two pieces. ‘Now look what you’ve made me do!’ she said, angrily. The pirate bent down and picked up the two pieces of shattered wand.

‘Give those to me!’ snapped the fairy, close to tears.

‘Who’s next?’ demanded a cheery and attractive young woman in a pink overall. She had a powder puff in one hand and a pot of powder in the other. The name, Karena, was embroidered on the breast pocket of her overall.

Neither the pirate nor the fairy moved. They were both trying to fit the two pieces of the broken wand back together again.

‘I think that’ll be us, then!’ said Louise, pushing me forwards. She looked at her watch and wrote something down on her clipboard.

The make-up girl smiled at me and pointed to a chair. I sat down and she draped a white cloth around me, tucking the ends in at the back of my neck. ‘What are you here for?’ she asked me.

‘I’m appearing on...’ I began and suddenly realised that I had forgotten the name of the programme. ‘I’ve forgotten the name of the programme.’ I said, feeling rather foolish.

‘Alive and How!’ whispered Louise from behind me. She put a hand on my shoulder. ‘Don’t be nervous!’ she said. ‘You’ll be marvellous!’

‘I’m not nervous,’ I said. ‘I just couldn’t remember the name of the programme.’

‘What are you talking about?’ asked Karena, dabbing powder over my face.

‘I was just telling Louise that I couldn’t remember the name of the programme,’ I explained.

‘No. I mean what are you talking about on the programme?’ She did something around my eyes.

‘Ah, sorry. My book,’ I said.

‘Would you like to comb your hair?’

I felt in my pocket for a comb but couldn’t find one. ‘I don’t seem to have a comb,’ I said.

‘Would you like me to brush it for you?’

I said I would be grateful.

‘What’s your book about?’

‘Drugs and drug companies and doctors and... things,’ I said.

‘How interesting!’ said Karena. ‘My brother once smoked cannabis at a party in Fulham. He said it made him feel sick for three days afterwards but I think it was just as likely to be the lager, don’t you?’

‘I don’t, er...,’

‘Do you have a parting?’

‘Yes. On the left.’

‘He drinks too much but won’t listen to anyone.’

‘Er, sorry. The other side.’ I realised I’d been looking at myself in the mirror.

Karena ignored me and carried on talking about her brother while she brushed my hair. When she had finished she sprayed half a can of lacquer over it. I reached up and gingerly touched the top of my head. It felt as though it was covered with chicken wire. If someone had tried to mug me by hitting me over the head with a blunt object I would probably not have noticed.

‘I’ll take you along to the canteen in a moment and you can get a cup of tea,’ said Louise.

The make-up girl whisked the white cloth away from me and disappeared in search of her next customer. I stood up, edged carefully between a human sized carrot and a police constable with his arm in a blood stained sling, and followed Louise back out into the corridor where twenty or thirty children, all dressed as elves were waiting in an unruly line. A morose, red faced fellow in a Father Christmas costume stood at the end of the queue surreptitiously smoking the last half inch of a homemade cigarette. He had his beard pulled down underneath his chin so that it looked rather like a bib.

‘Isn’t it a bit late for Christmas programmes?’ I whispered to Louise.

Louise half turned her head. ‘They’re filming a special show for *next* Christmas in Studio B!’ she explained.

* * *

The canteen was full. Roughly half the customers seemed to be large, scruffy men, identically dressed in grubby T-shirts, jeans and worn sneakers. These customers were all busy wolfing down platefuls of bacon sandwiches and noisily drinking tea from huge mugs. The other half of the customers were in fancy dress. There were pirates, policemen, chambermaids, nurses, doctors, elves, vegetables, dancing girls in spangly leotards and fishnet tights and a dozen men in white ties and tail coats. I spotted one clergyman, an Elizabeth I, complete with ruff and bustle, two gypsy girls and half a platoon of soldiers - all equipped with balsa wood rifles. These customers were daintily nibbling biscuits and sipping tea and taking great care not to spill any food.

I bought myself a can of lemonade, a packet of crisps and an apple and carried my tray around the room looking for a spare seat. I had just found one, and had sat down between a potato and a chambermaid, when I noticed Louise, still carrying her clip board, walk briskly through the door. She was accompanied by a tall red-haired, harassed looking man in a lilac coloured shirt and a pair of very tight lemon coloured trousers. Behind them there stood a third figure. The red-haired man had a pair of headphones and a microphone around his neck and he too carried a clipboard. The microphone he wore was connected by a wire to a large metal box which was clipped to his belt. The two of them stood in the doorway for a few moments, clearly looking for someone. Eventually Louise tapped the red-haired man on the arm and pointed in my direction. He looked at me, looked back at her and frowned. She nodded and said something. He seemed surprised but, shrugging off the confusion he obviously felt, minced briskly across the room towards me. As he moved I could see that the third person was Deborah, Tanya’s assistant. Louise and Deborah followed the red-headed man across the canteen.

‘Darling!’ cried the red headed man, holding out both hands as though we were long lost brothers. ‘How wonderful of you to come!’

I looked to either side, just in case I was mistaken. But the potato carried on sipping his or her limeade through a straw and the chambermaid carried on nibbling at her digestive biscuit. I stood up and received a hug and a kiss on each cheek from the red-haired man. No one, apart from me, seemed surprised or embarrassed by this. The potato simply carried on sipping and the chambermaid carried on nibbling.

‘We’re all so absolutely thrilled that you could come!’ said the red-haired man.

‘You must be Simon Reynolds!’ I said, feeling quite pleased with myself for remembering his name.

The red-haired man burst into a fit of giggles, as though I’d just delivered the smartest one liner he’d ever heard, and clapped himself on his chest with his left hand in a very camp gesture. ‘Me?’ He turned to Louise. ‘He mistook me for Simon!' he said, and burst into another fit of giggles.

'This is Tony,' said Louise. 'He's the floor manager.'

I said hello to Tony and smiled at him.

'Hi!' said Deborah. She seemed rather shy and overawed by it all.

I said hello to her.

'Have you been to make-up, yet?' the floor manager asked me.

I said I had.

He bent closer and peered at me. 'Silly me! Of course you have, darling! Then as soon as you've finished your drink we'll get you along to wardrobe. Where are your clothes? Have they given you a dressing room?'

I looked down at my sports jacket and grey flannels and then I looked back up at him. 'These are the only clothes I've brought,' I said.

Tony the floor manager started to giggle but stopped when he realised that I was serious. He put his hands over his face as though not sure what to say. He turned. 'He does know it's television and not radio, doesn't he?' he whispered loudly to Deborah. I thought that this was pretty catty and I decided that I didn't like Tony very much. I didn't see why I should present a false front to the viewers. I knew that lots of people made a special effort to look smart when appearing on television but this seemed as dishonest as saying something you didn't agree with so as to gain popularity. I like to feel that people who read what I write will trust me. How can I expect anyone to trust me if the very way I look is fraudulent? If I give the impression of being scruffy it isn't because I want to be offensive or because I'm deliberately making some anti-fashion statement but, rather, it is because I'm unwilling to waste time making myself look pretty. I'd rather spend the time researching the things I'm going to write or talk about rather than selecting a smart looking shirt or an impressive tie. Some people say that they like their clothes to make a statement for them. I prefer my clothes to keep quiet while I make the statements.

Deborah, blushing bright red, nodded, stuttered and finally said something to the effect that she was pretty sure that I did indeed know that the programme was being broadcast in vision as well as sound.

'It's the best jacket I've got,' I said defensively. I paused. 'In fact, to be perfectly honest it's the only jacket I've got.'

'Well, we'd better get you along to wardrobe and see what they've got that will fit you,' said Tony, rather peevishly. He turned and minced back across the canteen floor, followed by Louise and Deborah. I finished my lemonade, stuffed my apple and the remainder of my crisps into my jacket pocket, said 'goodbye' to the potato and the chambermaid and followed them. Standing in the doorway to the canteen the pirate and the fairy were still arguing. They had not managed to mend her broken wand.

* * *

The wardrobe department was full of people trying on clothes. Half a dozen tall, beefy looking men in socks and underpants were pulling on pirate costumes. Four or five equally tall, but willowy, girls were standing around shivering in bras and panties. There were racks and racks of colourful clothes and a plump woman in a grey knitted cardigan was ironing a white blouse for a girl wearing jodhpurs, black leather boots and absolutely nothing else.

'I need a jacket!' said Tony, clapping his hands excitedly and pointing to me. 'To fit this one over here.'

No one took any notice of him and this seemed to make him angry. I watched, mesmerised, as he stamped a foot. I'd never seen anyone actually do that before. 'I need a jacket!' he shouted. This time everyone looked. 'For him!' he cried, pointing at me. Everyone looked at me. I tried to shrivel up and disappear but when you're well over six foot tall and weigh fourteen stones it isn't easy to disappear in a crowded room. A middle aged woman in a blue jumper, dark blue skirt and grey carpet slippers shuffled over, looked at me and shook her head as though she didn't hold out much hope. ‘What sort of jacket?’ she asked.

‘Something lively!’ said Tony. ‘And some trousers, too!’ he said, catching sight of my grey flannels.

The woman in blue disappeared and returned a couple of minutes later with two jackets thrown over one arm. One jacket was made of shiny, plastic in a leopardskin print. The other was a very bright yellow and had sequins sewn all over it.

‘Try them on!’ said Tony to me. He ran his fingers over the bright yellow jacket. ‘Oh, isn’t it absolutely divine! Who’s worn this?’

‘David Dunster!’ replied the woman in blue.

‘David’s worn this? David Dunster?’

The woman in blue nodded.

Tony closed his eyes and swooned.

‘Who’s David Dunster?’ I asked Deborah.

‘He hosts a quiz show,’ she replied, in a whisper.

“Tickle My Fancy!” said Louise.

Startled, I looked at her.

‘That’s the name of the show,’ she explained, blushing.

I took the hideous fake leopardskin jacket and tried to get into it but it was at least four sizes too small. The ripping sound the jacket made as I tried to squeeze my arms into it made me wince. I hurriedly shrugged it off and handed it back to the woman in blue. Without even looking at the jacket she just tossed it across a rail which was already laden with clothes - presumably all waiting to be repaired - and handed me the yellow jacket. That too was far too small.

‘Can you alter the yellow one for him?’ asked Tony.

The woman in blue thought for a moment and then shook her head.

‘Damn!’ said Tony.

‘I don’t think either of those is exactly right for me,’ I said, relieved.

Tony, a sulky look on his face, minced out of the wardrobe department and stopped and looked at his watch; a huge and outrageously flashy piece of gold-coloured jewellery. He then rather brusquely ordered us all to follow him to the studio. It was, so Louise whispered, time for the rehearsal.

* * *

The studio was much bigger than I had expected it to be; more like an aircraft hangar than anything else. A small fake living room, complete with rug, sofa, easy chairs, bookcase, potted plants and a long, low, glass topped coffee table had been built in the middle of the available space and a dozen or so men in grubby jeans and dirty T-shirts were standing around looking bored.

‘I’ve got him here,’ I heard Tony mutter. I looked across at him and he turned his head away from me. He was clearly not going to forgive me for not wearing a more fashionable jacket. I wandered across the studio and peered at the bookcase to see what titles they had chosen but the shelves were filled with strips of cardboard painted to look like rows of books. I looked at the plant; that, too, was artificial.

‘Darling!’ I heard someone behind me say. ‘How wonderful of you to come! We’ve all been looking forward to meeting you!’

Idly, I turned and found myself the target of a portly, bespectacled, middle aged man who was trotting towards me with an eager look on his face. He had his arms outstretched as though we were relatives who had been parted by several continents and oceans for a couple of decades. He wore a brightly coloured Hawaiian shirt and a pair of mauve corduroy trousers and had a green and yellow patterned neckerchief knotted around his neck.

‘I’m Simon, darling!’ he said, grasping me by the shoulders and kissing me on both cheeks.

I said that I was pleased to meet him and thanked him for inviting me.

‘Did you have a good journey?’ he asked.

‘Yes...,’ I started to reply. But he’d turned away and was telling one of the men in jeans to get rid of a wrinkle which had appeared on the rug.

‘I have to worry about absolutely everything, darling!’ he said, turning back to me. ‘Someone find Vivienne!’ he shouted. Half a dozen people, including Louise, hurried away in search of Vivienne.

‘I gather Tony wasn’t too pleased with your jacket,’ whispered Simon.

‘No, I’m afraid not,’ I said.

‘Don’t you worry about it, darling!’ whispered Simon, giving me a reassuring pat on the arm. ‘I think it’s absolutely divine! The leather patches on the elbows are quite, quite perfect and I’ll get someone from the props department to cover up the worst of the stains!’

I thanked him.

‘And we all absolutely loved your book, darling!’ said Simon. ‘Marvellous, absolutely marvellous!’

‘That’s very kind of you.’

‘I loved the bit where the hero is in a lift with the bad guy and neither of them knows who the other one is! Absolutely gripping. Quite sensational, darling! Divine! Terrific plot. Can’t wait for the movie. Have they decided who’s playing the lead yet? I read that both Redford and Newman are desperate for the part and to be honest I’m not surprised!’ Simon put his arm around my shoulder. ‘Perhaps we could have a word later on,’ he said. ‘Maybe you could put in a word for Celeste?’ He winked. ‘She’d be terrific as Angie.’

I frowned, puzzled and started to say something. There was no lift scene in my book. There was no hero. There was no plot. There was no character called Angie. There were no characters at all. And unless Redford and Newman were keen to play the part of a slightly discredited sleeping tablet there wouldn’t be a movie either.

I tried to mention all this. It seemed important. But Simon had rushed off to the other end of the studio to greet and assist a tiny, woman who was tottering along underneath a massive, shoulder length blonde wig and on top of a pair of monstrously elevated high heeled shoes. A moment or two later Simon introduced me to Vivienne Nugent, the presenter of ‘Alive and How!’ She showed me a row of expensively capped teeth. Once again I tried to explain to Simon that he had confused my book with someone else’s but, as before, he was too busy to listen to anything I had to say. I tried to say something to Vivienne but she just smiled at me and ignored me.

‘That script you wrote for your introduction is marvellous, absolutely marvellous!’ Simon said to Vivienne. He kissed her and hugged her. ‘Dialogue as crisp as a freshly baked poppadom!’

Vivienne looked pleased with herself.

‘Just look at this!’ said Simon, holding out the script in his hand so that I could read it. ‘Read it out loud!’

‘Hello,’ I read, ‘and welcome to another edition of your favourite magazine programme: ‘Alive and How!’ As always it’s a real pleasure to have your company and I’m delighted to be able to tell you that we’ve got our usual marvellous mix of entertainment and education for you!’

I looked at Simon, waiting for him to offer me another page of script. He didn’t. Instead he smiled and withdrew the script.

‘Super isn’t it?’

I said I thought it was wonderful.

Vivienne and I were then escorted onto the set and allowed to settle down onto the sofa; a plushly upholstered piece of furniture into which I sank at least a foot and a half. Vivienne, clearly on a high from Simon’s glowing praise, smiled a lot at everyone.

‘I don’t want to talk to you about your book until we go on air,’ said Vivienne, speaking to me at last. She spoke slowly, carefully and quietly as though sharing a secret and anxious to make sure that no one else overheard. ‘I always think it spoils the freshness of what we have to say if we rehearse our little chat!’

I made one last attempt to avoid what I suspected might prove to be an embarrassing moment for her. ‘I think Simon might have got me mixed up with...,’ I began.

But Vivienne wasn’t listening. She had called a make-up girl across and was having running repairs made to her lipstick.

I secretly hoped that she, at least, did not think that my book contained a plot, a hero or a part for any of her friends or relatives.

When she was satisfied with her appearance she turned to me again. ‘Is this your first time?’

I said that it was.

‘How exciting you must find it,’ she said. ‘But try not to be too nervous,’ she added. I waited for her to pat my knee but she didn’t.

I said that I would try.

She then talked about her forthcoming memoirs, her new television programme about cookery, the shops she had opened, the carpet warehouse she was due to open, the magazine interview she’d done that morning, the fee she had been offered to pose topless for a men’s magazine (she had, of course, refused it), the modelling work she had done in Paris and the wonderful plastic surgeon she’d found in Beverley Hills (not that she needed plastic surgery herself, of course, but it’s always nice to know of someone just in case you ever get asked).

Suddenly Tony rushed onto the set, clapped his hands and made very loud shushing noises. Vivienne shut up and we both stared at him. He seemed to enjoy this. ‘Simon wants the table moving forwards two inches,’ he said, as though Simon had asked for Tower Bridge to be moved a few hundred yards along the Thames.

‘No problem!’ I said, keen to be helpful. I leaned forward, moved the table two inches and leant back again. Tony stared at me as though I had just spray painted a rude graffiti message onto the carpet. The studio fell silent and, gradually, I became aware that everyone was staring at me.

‘What’s the matter?’ I whispered to Vivienne.

Vivienne, who had already edged a few inches away from me, looked down at her knees and pulled pointlessly at the hem of her skirt. The skirt was far too tight to move and far too tight to reach her knees. She no longer seemed to want to talk to me. A huge, mountain of a man who wore a full black beard and a T-shirt with the slogan ‘Alive and How!’ on the front strode onto the rug and glared down at me.

‘Did you move that?’ he demanded fiercely. He had bunches of black hair sticking out of his nostrils and it was difficult to take him seriously.

I said I had. I thought that the bunches of black hair looked rather like wrestling spiders and wondered if he would find it amusing if I were to tell him this.

‘Are you union?’ he demanded.

I looked at him, not quite sure what he meant. He repeated the question.

‘No, I don’t think so,’ I said. I decided that it would be tactful for me to keep to myself the observation I had been thinking of making about the hair in his nostrils.

The man mountain took a silver coloured whistle out of his pocket and blew into it. He and the other men in T-shirts and dirty jeans then walked slowly but determinedly out of the studio.

‘Well,’ said Tony, close to tears.

‘Was it something I did?’ I asked.

‘You touched the set!’ said Tony.

‘I was just being helpful.’

‘No one is allowed to touch the set if they aren’t in the union!’ said Tony. ‘Everyone knows that!’

‘I didn’t!’ I protested.

‘I just hope you’re pleased with yourself!’

Tony turned and flounced off the set leaving Vivienne and I sitting together but quite separately on the sofa. Someone out of sight switched off the main lights.

‘You fool!’ hissed Vivienne in the darkness. I really wasn’t warming to her.

* * *

I don’t know how long we sat there, waiting. It seemed like hours but I don’t suppose it could have been anything more than a few minutes. Suddenly the lights came back on and Simon strode purposefully towards us. He was scowling and sweating profusely. Behind him stood Louise and Deborah; both looking very serious. ‘They say they’ll go back to work if you apologise,’ Simon said.

‘What do I have to apologise for?’ I asked. I noticed that he was no longer calling me darling and for this I was quite grateful.

‘For moving the table.’

‘But I was just trying to be helpful.’

‘It doesn’t matter. They don’t like people being helpful.’

‘But I’m a doctor. I was trained to help people.’

Simon thought for a moment, dabbed his forehead with a red, silk handkerchief and then shook his head. ‘They won’t buy that,’ he said. ‘You’ll have to apologise.’

‘What will happen if I don’t apologise?’

‘They’ll black you, me, the studio and probably the entire station.’

‘You mean that the programme won’t go ahead?’

‘We’ll be lucky if we get back on air within a month.’

‘Do you mind if we have a word in private?’ asked Deborah, moving forwards and beckoning me to join her.

‘Not if you can persuade him to apologise!’ sighed Simon. ‘And preferably fairly quickly!’ He dabbed his forehead again, blew his nose and looked at his watch. ‘I’ve got a programme due to go on air in less than an hour.’

‘I’ll do my best,’ promised Deborah.

I stood up and followed Deborah over to a dark, far corner of the studio.

‘I just rang Tanya,’ whispered Deborah. ‘She said you don’t have to apologise if you don’t want to.’

‘But I thought you’d want me to apologise?’ I whispered back.

‘Officially, we do!’ whispered Deborah. ‘And for heaven’s sake make it clear to Simon that I tried to persuade you to apologise. But unofficially Tanya thinks we could be heading for a great stunt. If the programme is blacked the papers will have to say why. Your book will get a fantastic amount of publicity!’

We walked back over to where Simon and Louise were waiting for us. Vivienne had disappeared.

‘Deborah wants me to apologise but I don’t think I’ve done anything I need to apologise for,’ I said. ‘But as a gesture of goodwill I’m happy to move the table back to where it was.’

Simon stared at me.

‘If I put it back where it was then one of the men can move it to where you wanted it putting, which was where I’d moved it to,’ I explained.

Simon, dabbed his face and neck with his now very damp handkerchief and glared at me. ‘I don’t know whether they’ll buy that,’ he said.

I shrugged. ‘I don’t care whether they do or not,’ I said.

Simon, now looking a broken man, turned and scurried away. Louise, still carrying her clipboard, hurried after him. Deborah and I stood and waited.

‘You were brilliant!’ whispered Deborah.

‘I haven’t got the foggiest idea what is going on,’ I said. ‘This place is like a lunatic asylum.’ I just wanted to get back home as quickly as I could and I no longer cared whether or not I made my television debut.

A few minutes later Simon reappeared. This time, in addition to Louise, he was followed by Tony, the floor manager, the large man with the fighting spiders up his nose, and the rest of the offended crew.

‘Bill says that in view of your lack of experience they’ll accept your offer,’ said Simon. The sweat was dripping off his nose. Bill folded his arms and looked very stern.

I walked across to the table and moved it back to where I thought it had been before I’d moved it the first time. Simon turned to Bill. ‘Is that O.K.?’

Bill walked over to the table and stared at it. He moved around it and looked at it from the other side. He bent down and examined it from a different angle. Then he went back to where Simon was standing. ‘It needs to be another inch nearer to the bookcase,’ he said.

‘It needs to be an inch nearer to the bookcase,’ Simon said to me.

I moved the table so that it was an inch closer to the bookcase.

Once again Bill walked across and examined it carefully from all possible angles. This time, when he walked back to Simon, he nodded. Simon closed his eyes in relief and blotted his face once more. Bill then called to two burly looking men who were standing about ten yards away. They walked over and, under his directions, moved the table back to where it had been after I had moved it the first time.

‘O.K.?’ Bill asked Simon.

‘Marvellous,’ said Simon, weakly. He turned to Louise. ‘Would you like to take him to the canteen?’ He gave me what was intended to be a smile. But there wasn’t much fun in it. ‘We’ll come and get you when we need you,’ he said.

‘You were wonderful!’ whispered Deborah as we followed Louise back to the canteen.

‘Is television always like this?’ I asked her.

‘I don’t know,’ admitted Deborah. ‘I’ve never been in a studio before.’

* * *

Eventually, I found myself sitting on the sofa watching the second hand on a huge clock tick slowly round and round. A man in a grey pullover knelt by my side fitting a tiny microphone to my tie.

‘Is this a club tie?’ asked the man in the pullover.

‘No, I don’t think so.’

‘Oh.’

‘Why?’

‘I didn’t think anyone would wear a tie this awful unless it was a club tie.’

I looked down. I’d never really looked at it before. I didn’t usually wear a tie but had put it on simply in honour of my television debut.

‘Shall I take it off?’ I asked him.

‘No!’ he said, rather insistently. He glowered at me. ‘Where am I going to fix my microphone if you take it off?’

‘Three minutes to air!’ cried Tony, his voice breaking with excitement.

I remembered having read that performers work better when they are nervous and so, conscious of the fact that I felt merely bored rather than excited, I tried to feel more apprehensive. It didn’t work. I looked across at Vivienne. She was carefully studying a thick sheaf of notes. On the coffee table in front of her lay a thick, fat book. On the cover of the book a buxom young woman who was bursting out of her dress was running away from a horde of bad-tempered looking men brandishing guns. The author’s name, a name I had never heard before, was printed in very large type. I realised for the first time how Simon had made his mistake. The book had exactly the same title as my own book.

‘Any good?’ I asked.

Vivienne looked up at me.

I nodded towards the coffee table. ‘Is the book any good?’ I asked.

Vivienne showed me her dentist’s handiwork again. It really was more of a dental display than a smile. ‘I loved it,’ she said. ‘Perhaps you’d like to sign it for me afterwards?’ she suggested.

‘Me?’

‘Authors often do sign books, don’t they?’

I envy people who can produce a bon mot at the drop of an insult or who can produce incisive, relevant comments at exactly the right moment. As I’ve already pointed out I don’t often think of sharp or witty things to say, but just once in a while the right words trickle out at exactly the right moment. They weren’t particularly witty or incisive words. But they were the right words.

‘Yes,’ I said quietly. ‘But usually only the books they’ve written.’

Vivienne’s response to this apparently harmless comment was instant and quite predictable. She panicked. She looked at the book and then at me and decided that I must be joking. ‘You did write this didn’t you?’

I shook my head.

‘That isn’t funny.’

‘It isn’t meant to be.’

I shall forever treasure the memory of the look which crossed Vivienne’s face at that moment. It contained a rare mixture of emotions though fear was, I felt, by far the most dominant.

She picked the book up and held it up so that I could see the cover more clearly. ‘You didn’t write this?’

‘I’ve written a book with the same title but I didn’t write that book.’

Vivienne looked around.

‘Two minutes to air!’ called Tony.

‘Simon!’ screamed Vivienne. ‘Simon! Come here!’

I don’t know where Simon had been but by the time he arrived on the set he was quite breathless. He had abandoned his handkerchief and was now mopping his brow with a small, white hand towel.

‘He didn’t write this book!’ squealed Vivienne, waving the book in the air.

Simon looked at me. He now had the same look in his eyes as Vivienne had for a few moments. His skin was the same colour as the towel he was holding.

‘Ninety seconds to air!’ croaked Tony, who had realised that something wasn’t right.

‘I’ve written a book with that title,’ I explained. ‘I did try to tell you that I thought you’d got confused but you wouldn’t listen!’

‘How can you do this to me?’ demanded Simon. He started tearing at the towel and I thought he was going to have a fit of some kind. ‘Do you hate me?’

‘It’ll be O.K.!’ I said. ‘My book is quite interesting!’

‘What’s it about?’ demanded Simon.

‘It’s about doctors and drug companies,’ I replied. ‘If Vivienne asks me what it’s about I’ll explain it all. But it’s better not to talk about it beforehand, isn’t it?’

Vivienne had now also gone white.

‘Sixty seconds to air!’ whispered Tony, who had moved closer to find out what was going on. He too looked terrified.

‘I didn’t mind when I didn’t know what questions you were going to ask me,’ I said, trying to cheer up Vivienne. ‘Now neither of us knows the questions or the answers! It’ll be more exciting this way!’

I heard someone or something hissing on my right. I turned my head but could see nothing except a camera. Then I heard the hissing noise again. I looked over the arm of the sofa and saw the man in the grey pullover lying on the floor.

‘Hello!’ I said. ‘What are you doing there?’

He said something but didn’t actually speak and I’ve never been able to lip read.

‘Pardon?’

‘You’re crackling!’ he hissed. ‘Every time you move you crackle.’

‘Thirty seconds!’ muttered Tony, who looked as though he was about to faint.

Still tearing at his towel Simon stumbled off the set and fell to his knees just out of camera shot. Louise rushed over to him and put her arm around his shoulders. I couldn’t see his face but his shoulders were shaking and I got a strong feeling that he was crying.

I looked down at my microphone but could see nothing wrong.

‘What have you got in your pocket?’ shouted the man in a pullover who, although he had shouted had managed to do it in a whisper.

I put my hand in my left hand jacket pocket. Nothing. I put my hand in my other jacket pocket and found the packet of crisps I had bought in the canteen but hadn’t finished eating. I pulled the packet out.

Tony, who was now using his fingers to tell Vivienne the number of seconds that were left before we went on air, looked really ill. I handed the packet of crisps to the man in the grey pullover. ‘Don’t eat them!’ I told him, sternly. He took the packet from my outstretched hand and wriggled away.

‘Are you O.K.?’ I asked Tony. ‘You look terrible!’

Tony weakly pointed a finger at Vivienne and nodded. He then backed away a couple of yards and sank gracefully to the floor.

‘Hello, and welcome to another edition of ‘Alive and How!” said Vivienne to a camera which had a little red light lit up on its snout. ‘Today my first guest is the author of an exciting new book.’ She turned to me. ‘Tell us what your book is about!’ she said.

* * *

‘You were marvellous!’ said Deborah afterwards.

‘Wonderful television! Absolutely wonderful, darling!’ said Simon. Judging by the reappearance of the word ‘darling’ he was no longer quite so cross with me. ‘But don’t you ever put us through that again, darling!’ he added, with a nervous laugh. I couldn’t help wondering how Thumper, Peter Marshall or Frank Parsons would respond if I started calling them ‘darling’.

‘Terrific, darling!’ said Vivienne, giving me a kiss on the cheek and immediately disappearing to talk to someone else more interesting.

‘Can I go home now?’ I asked. I had seen enough of the world of television not to believe any of them. It was, it seemed to me, a very superficial, artificial, unpleasant world.

‘Your car is waiting at the front door,’ said Louise.

On the way home the short, overweight, taciturn driver and I stopped at a motorway service station for food and fuel. While the driver was chewing his way through a plateful of sausages and chips and a dishful of spotted dick and lumpy looking custard I telephoned Patsy to tell her that I was on my way home.

Since we didn’t have a television set at Bilbury Grange she hadn’t seen the programme. ‘How did it go?’ she asked.

‘It was O.K.,’ I said.

‘I’ve heard that making television programmes is very boring,’ she said.

‘It is,’ I agreed.

‘The first swallow arrived this afternoon!’ said Patsy.

And that was truly the most exciting news I’d had all day.

Spring had come.

* * *

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I'd only been away from Bilbury for a day but the arrival of the first swallow of spring hadn't been the only notable thing to have happened in my absence. Even though the Revels Fund didn't have a penny in it, and they all knew very well that it would be several months before they could receive any money for their labours, Thumper Robinson, Alf Lillywhite, Geoff Taylor and Ian Entwhistle had cheerfully started work repairing Miss Hargreaves' cottage. And on the other side of the village, Frank and Gilly Parsons had erected a plaque on the outside wall of the Duck and Puddle to tell the world that the North Devon writer and naturalist Henry Williamson had once been a much loved customer. Finally, Patsy also told me that Peter Marshall had called round to let me know that the cricket team would be holding its first practice session on Saturday evening.

Still, despite all this excitement it was, without doubt, the arrival of the first swallow of spring which had really delighted me. I stood in the courtyard and watched as he (or maybe she: like everyone else I know I am quite unable to differentiate between the male and the female of the species) explored our outbuildings. It was, we were both quite certain, one of the same swallows which had lived with us the previous summer.

Mr Parfitt, who had been working on some flower tubs he had installed in the courtyard, had been the first to see our first resident of the season arrive.

'He knew exactly where he was going,' said the gardener, standing beside Patsy and I as the three of us watched the swallow swoop straight down out of the sky, fly rather languidly around the courtyard and dive immediately and without hesitation into the stable where he and his colleagues had nested last summer.

Suddenly, there was another flash as a second swallow arrived. This one perched on the electricity cable which runs across the courtyard to provide the flat and stable block with power. It sat there for a moment, looking lonely, miserable, bedraggled and rather weary after what must have been a flight of several thousand miles across Europe.

Moments later the three of us witnessed one of the most joyful reunions any of us had ever seen. The swallow which had arrived first came out of the stable and immediately spotted the second bird perched on the electricity cable. The quiet and peace of the morning was shattered when the two birds saw each other. The two birds soared and dived and gave us a most extraordinary display of aerobatics. They flew together, never more than an inch or two apart, in absolutely perfect harmony. They flew around us and around our legs. They circled our heads and dived into and out of every opening on the stable block. They flew, no more than two feet above the courtyard floor, at such speed that it seemed inevitable that they would smash into the wall of the house and destroy themselves. But at the very last moment they swerved upwards, soaring high up into the sky, disappearing from sight and then racing back down earthwards again. From the way that they checked out all their old haunts it was clear that these were indeed two of last summer's residents. And from the way that they stayed with each other, never moving more than a few inches away from each other's side, it was clear that they were mighty pleased to see each other.

Most birds fly to get from one spot to another or to catch food but swallows alone seem to fly for fun. They always seem to enjoy their wonderful ability to dance and soar and play with one another. It is always the same; they always seem to fly as though they have just discovered their wings. And although they have their off days (particularly when the weather is grey and gloomy - for they love the sunshine) they never seem to lose their ability to enjoy life. I always get pleasure from watching swallows; they always bring bright sunshine into my heart. And even on a cool, rather dank spring morning the very sight of them reminds me that it will soon be summer and that we will soon be enjoying still, sun bathed mornings, warm days and balmy evenings.

I know it's always too easy to anthropomorphise when watching animals or birds but I couldn't help wondering where they had been separated from each other. I wondered if the sadness they had experienced when they had been parted had matched the joy they now expressed at the sight of each other.

After twenty minutes or so Patsy said she had to go into the house to check on something she'd put in the oven. Mr Parfitt asked me to walk down to the walled garden with him.

'I love watching you two together,' said Mr Parfitt.

I looked at him, slightly puzzled. I didn't really know what he meant. I said so.

'You remind me of those two swallows,' he said. 'You love each other totally, don't you?'

I nodded.

We walked another few paces.

'Did you love your wife?' I asked him.

'To begin with,' replied Mr Parfitt. 'But I don't think she ever really loved me,' he said, sadly. 'I think that was part of our problem.'

'Why did she marry you if she didn't love you?'

Mr Parfitt shrugged. 'I've thought about that,' he said. 'But I'm still not sure of the answer. Maybe she was running away from something. Maybe she was so desperate to leave home that she didn't need to love me to marry me. Maybe she can't love anyone. I don't know. Her father had died when she was seven and her mother had married again. She didn't get on with her stepfather and she fought with her mother all the time.'

'But you must have had some good times.'

'I suppose so,' agreed Mr Parfitt. 'But they were never really carefree times. When we married I was trying to make it as a racing driver. I'd inherited some money from an aunt and I'd spent a big chunk of it on buying a car. I wanted three years to see if I could really make it into the big time. Although I think it was the wildness and excitement of racing which had first attracted her to me, Clarice - that's my wife - didn't really approve of my lifestyle. Once we got married she worried that I was wasting the money I'd inherited. She wanted me to get a job and race cars at the weekends. You can't do that if you want to do it properly.'

'Gradually, the things about me which had attracted her to me in the first place began to worry her, to eat away at her. I won a few races and people started to say that I could become a champion. But there was never any security in it and that worried her. When I got some sponsors and started to make money out of my racing she became even more uncertain. I think she was worried about the fact that we could so easily lose what we'd got. The more we had the more she was frightened of losing it. I never made enough money to invest any for the future.'

I'd always taken risks as a driver you have to if you want to get anywhere professionally - but she started to worry about me crashing and not being able to drive any more. And, strangely, I think she resented my success too. She enjoyed the success but she wanted it to be her success and it was so obviously mine.

'Slowly, and in little ways, she tried to change me. No, that's not fair. She didn't try to change me. I tried to change myself. But I tried to change myself because I knew it was what she wanted - and I wanted to please her. I gave up racing and got a job in banking through one of the sponsors I'd met.'

'Gradually, what had seemed at first like a passionate, caring and genuine interest in my well-being and progress became tedious and suffocating. As a young, newly married husband I was flattered that someone cared about me so much that they didn't want me to take risks. It was sweet and charming. But as I grew into middle age I felt thwarted by the knowledge that I had to tread carefully and avoid all risks. I became someone I am not. I became someone I did not like or feel comfortable with. I had to be nice to everyone above me in the bank because Clarice was terrified that if I annoyed anyone important they would wreck my career. I had to be careful about what I said and who I said it to. I felt constantly threatened by Clarice's insecurities.'

'Because I didn't say anything, Clarice assumed that I was happy with my life and that was my fault. I should have told her how I felt. I stayed quiet because I didn't want to hurt her by telling her the truth and gradually whatever love there had been between us just seeped away until there was nothing left holding our marriage together but habit and children and social niceties and in the end that wasn't enough.'

'Do you think you'll ever go back?' I asked for the second time.

This time Mr Parfitt didn't even hesitate or stop to think about it. 'No! Never!' he said firmly. He smiled at me. 'I've never been as happy or as content as I am now,' he said. 'Besides,' he said. 'I had a letter a few days ago. My wife has started divorce proceedings.'

'Oh,' I said. I reached out and touched his arm. 'I'm sorry...'

'Don't be,' said Mr Parfitt. He smiled. 'I'm not.' I could tell that he meant it.

We pottered around the garden for a little while longer and Mr Parfitt showed me some bushes he thought needed moving and then we walked in comfortable silence back to the house. When we got there we discovered that the courtyard was as busy with revellers as Trafalgar Square on New Year's Eve. There were, I suppose, no more than six or seven pairs of birds but they were playing a complicated series of flying games and when they saw us approaching we were incorporated into the games. They flew around our heads and around our bodies, never moving at anything less than top speed. Emily and Sophie were sitting on the courtyard cobbles watching the birds' fearless antics with confused looks on their faces. The birds seemed completely unperturbed by the presence of our two cats; indeed, several of them seemed to delight in deliberately flying within inches of the cats' heads. Some of the birds were undoubtedly the offspring of last year's pairs ('Can we come and stay with you, Mum? Just till we find a place of our own?') but others must have been new.

'It looks as though you've got an entry in the Good Nest Guide,' said Mr Parfitt.

I laughed. But inside I felt quietly proud that the swallows had chosen to come back to us. I have heard people complain that swallows and house martins make a mess and are noisy, disruptive birds. I don't care about the mess and I love the noise. I know of one man who deliberately shot the swallows who came to roost around his house. He claimed that one year they had nested in the outhouse where he stored his garden equipment and that several times during the season he had had to scrape thick layers of droppings from his lawn mower. What a small, insignificant price to pay for such intense and pure pleasure from such delightful companions. How anyone can be so callously cruel is quite beyond my comprehension. The man who told me this used to be a friend. I have never spoken to him since. You can judge the character of people by the way they treat animals, birds and other creatures. I considered our swallows to be part of the Bilbury Grange family and from the first day I saw them I hoped they would never stop coming back to stay with us.

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I wasn't quite sure what to wear for the cricket club's first official practice session. After our last meeting I had been surprised to hear that the Bilbury cricket club was going to hold practice sessions at all! But I was keen to make a good impression and to justify my inclusion in the team.

Neither at school nor at medical school had I ever taken part in any team sports. There had been three main reasons for this complete lack of athletic experience. Firstly, I had never found the necessary time. At university the football and cricket team members had all trained on at least three or four nights a week and their training sessions had each lasted several hours. Students studying Greek, astronomy or civil engineering might have been able to find the time for such things but, like most medical students, I found that I was working what often seemed like, and sometimes was, a twenty hour day. Secondly, I had never been attracted to the idea of running round and round a damp field in a wet tracksuit. Most of the training sessions I'd witnessed had taken place in the pouring rain and hadn't looked much fun. Thirdly, I had never been regarded as being any good at sports and I was therefore quite sure that even if I had wanted to play they wouldn't have let me. I've always loved cricket but at school my skills were ignored. I've always suspected that my natural sporting skills remained undetected and undeveloped because I was never the sort of child who makes friends easily. Team captains were elected as a result of their popularity among the other boys. And, naturally enough, team captains tended to pick their chums first when selecting teams. As a result, when teams were being picked I was always one of the stragglers, unwanted by either captain. My name always appeared at the bottom of batting lists, I never got a chance to show my skill as a bowler and when fielding I was always sent to ruminate in the rutted pasture lands of long leg, long on or third man.

I have always comforted myself with the thought that if it had not been for my natural shyness, innate sense of independence and refusal to be bullied, my hidden sporting talents would have brought me certain acclaim. If, at the age of six, I'd let John Boardman have my best marble he would have picked me as an opening batsman and I would, in the fullness of time, have played cricket for England. It is with such slender threads of fate that the tapestry of our lives are sewn. My refusal to compromise my integrity (and my reluctance to part with my best marble - a wondrous looking beast the size of a table tennis ball) had meant that my natural talents as a cricketer had never had a chance to flower.

In the end I had stuffed an old T-shirt, my best gardening trousers and a pair of tennis pumps that I'd found in the cellar into a plastic shopping bag and had set off for my first training session. The pumps were a trifle on the small size so I had cut holes in the front of the shoes so that my big toes could poke through.

Peter Marshall had told Patsy that the club would be meeting in the tap room at the Duck and Puddle at seven thirty.

Anxious not to miss any opportunities in this final chance at a sporting career I got there at twenty past. The new blue painted plaque, commemorating Henry Williamson's custom, had been fixed to the wall alongside the front door at eye level and looked very impressive.

As I walked in I congratulated Frank on the new plaque.

'Hmm.' said Frank, rather glumly.

'What's up?' I asked him.

'When that...,' Frank paused, '...woman at the Pig and Whistle in Kentisbury heard about our plaque she put one up too. She says he drank there as well.'

'Did he?'

'God knows. Probably.' Frank automatically took down a glass and started to pull me a pint of Old Parsonage Brew.

'You mustn't say that!' said Gilly, appearing as if by magic. Her hands were covered with flour and she was wearing a large white, starched apron. 'I don't think he ever did drink there. They certainly can't prove that he did.' She disappeared again.

I held up a hand. 'I'm not sure I should be drinking that stuff yet,' I told him.

'He drank here at least twice!' said Gilly, returning. Before I could comment she disappeared again. I'd never seen her so upset.

'Is Gilly O.K.?' I asked Frank.

'Oh she's just a bit peeved over this blue plaque business. She found some letters showing that Henry Williamson had drunk here and she thought it might help our summer trade if we put a plaque up.' He shrugged. He hadn't stopped what he was doing but he now looked up at me anxiously. 'Are you O.K.?' he asked, putting the emphasis firmly on the second word.

'Cricket team practice!' I explained, rather proudly. 'Though I'm not sure what Peter's got planned,' I confessed.

Frank laughed. 'I shouldn't worry too much!'

I said that all the same I thought I would play safe and just have a tomato juice. Frank, staring at me as though I'd just deliberately chosen to share my bed with a rubber hot water bottle instead of Lauren Bacall, finished pulling the pint of ale (it wouldn't be wasted for he would, I knew, drink it himself) and then bent down and picked up a small bottle of tomato juice. He blew the dust off it and handed me the bottle, the opener and a glass.

'Do you mind opening it yourself?' he said. 'I never feel comfortable touching that stuff.'

I took the bottle of tomato juice off him, levered off the top and poured the contents into the glass. As I was pouring the thick red juice Thumper walked in. He saw the pint that Frank had just pulled and grinned. 'Saw me coming, did you Frank?' he said. 'Nice plaque. Have you seen the one they've put up at the Pig and Whistle?'

Frank said nothing but just pushed the foam topped glass across the bar counter into Thumper's hand. Neither of us paid for our drinks. Frank just made a note in the book he kept hanging on a string behind him. We would get our bills when our entries in the book filled a page.

'He hasn't drunk there!' said Gilly, reappearing for a moment and then disappearing again. She looked harassed and had a smear of flour across her forehead where she had wiped her hair out of her eyes with her hand.

Thumper turned to me. 'Who didn't what?'

'Henry Williamson hasn't ever drunk at the Pig and Whistle.'

'Oh. Hasn't he? They've got a plaque up. I don't much care anyway.' Thumper nodded towards the plastic bag at my feet. 'What's in the bag?'

I told him. He laughed. Before I could ask him what he had found so funny Peter Marshall and Dr Brownlow turned up closely followed by Patchy Fogg and what was clearly the rest of the Old Bilburians Cricket Club. Patchy, who specialised in selling very nearly genuine antiques, was looking particularly pleased with himself. I discovered later that he had just sold a truckload of genuine Chippendale antique television cabinets to an American dealer. Two skilled craftsmen in Combe Martin would, as a result, have enough work to keep them going for nine months while Patchy would make enough profit to avoid doing any work for at least a year. Frank, exercising the way he knew best, pulled pints of beer for everyone.

When used to describe a sports team the word 'Old' usually implies that the members were all once students at some scholarly institution. But in the case of the 'Old Bilburians Cricket Club' the word was used in a more direct, more definitive sense. Some members of the 'Old Bilburians Cricket Club' were, to put it as simply as possible, very well qualified to be in the team. There was certainly no danger of us getting into trouble for misrepresenting ourselves.

'Do you want to practise in the room upstairs?' Frank asked. His attention was, as ever, focused on the pint he was pulling and so he didn't look up or direct the question at anyone in particular. Frank regarded the work of transferring beer from a barrel to a glass as a craft, maybe even a minor art form. He would never allow himself to be distracted and still did not like to be reminded of the time when two tall, long legged, blonde, Swedish hikers wearing very short shorts and very skimpy tops had walked into the bar and ordered drinks and sandwiches. It was as a result of that incident that the front door of the Duck and Puddle now carried a notice, similar to the ones which appear on the outside of cathedrals all over Europe, asking female customers to dress appropriately. Frank didn't like spilling beer. We all looked at one another.

'Maybe we should,' said Peter, thoughtfully. 'Secret training camp! Just in case someone from another village comes in. Nice plaque, Frank. If you want any more I can get them done wholesale.' He paused and frowned. 'Who is Henry Williamson, by the way?'

I wasn't sure that moving upstairs was an entirely practical notion. Looking around I wasn't at all sure that all the members of our team would even be able to get upstairs under their own steam.

'Safer down here,' said Thumper, settled comfortably on his usual bar stool.

We all looked at him.

'We don't want anyone getting injured,' he explained, taking a sip at his beer. 'Cricketers are always getting injured during pre-season training.'

'I don't think we're any more likely to injure ourselves upstairs than we are down here!' I said.

'It's not the being upstairs that's dangerous,' explained Thumper. 'It's the getting there. All those stairs. Trays of beer every five minutes. Someone is bound to fall.'

'Thumper is right!' said Peter, firmly. 'Is that O.K. with you, Frank?'

'Fine with me,' replied Frank, with a shrug. 'You can practise wherever you like as far as I'm concerned.'

We settled ourselves around the bar. I recognised everyone in the team, though I didn't know everyone's names. Peter introduced us all to one another but did it in rather a hurry and didn't bother to tell us whose name went with which face. I recognised all the names but was as confused and as ignorant as I had been to start with.

'First thing we've got to do is choose a captain,' said Peter Marshall.

'Josh.' said Thumper immediately.

'Josh.' agreed everyone else.

'Is that O.K. with you?' Peter asked Josh.

'Thank you very much,' said Josh. 'I'll have a gin and tonic.' He paused. 'And a packet of salt and vinegar crisps.'

I was, to say the least, surprised at this choice. Josh Wilkins is at least 80-years-old and bent double with arthritis. He lives on the other side of the village green to Peter's shop and every morning at 8 a.m. sharp he sets off to fetch his morning paper. He arrives at Peter's shop at about ten thirty, collects his paper and gets back home at about one. He then has his lunch and walks back to the shop to do his shopping. Whatever the weather his hunched and crippled form is, therefore, an almost constant sight on the round around the village green. I once asked him why he didn't do his shopping in the morning when he picked up his newspaper. He had looked at me in some surprise. 'If I did that what would I do in the afternoons?' he had asked.

I bent closer to Patchy Fogg, who was sitting next to me.

'Why Josh?'

'Because he is bent over and so close to the ground that when the toss is taken he can see whether it's heads or tails before he commits himself,' explained Patchy. 'He was the Old Bilburians Cricket Club captain in the fifties and he always got the other captain to toss so that he could call and he always called late.'

'Did he get away with it?' I asked.

'Of course!' said Patchy. 'Can you imagine anyone accusing Josh of cheating?'

I had to agree that any such remark would look in poor spirit.

'Besides,' added Patchy, 'he's completely deaf so even if the opposing captain complains Josh won't hear him!'

'But why is winning the toss so important?' I was puzzled by this. 'I thought we weren't worried about winning?'

'We aren't. But winning the toss means that we control the game. And if we can control the game we can make sure that in the unlikely event that the other side are worse than us then they still win.'

There was clearly a great deal about village cricket that I didn't understand. 'How does winning the toss mean that we control the game?'

'It means that we can always make sure that our opponents bat first.'

'Oh.'

'If they bat second they might lose. If they bat first we always know what score they've got - so we know what we mustn't beat.'

'Losing sounds quite tricky.'

'It is,' said Patchy quite seriously. 'It's sometimes much harder than winning.'

After the selection of the captain had been completed Peter suggested that we had a break. Thumper and three of the others went off to play pool while a couple of team members borrowed the darts from Frank and started peppering the panelling around the dartboard. In most pubs the dartboard is surrounded by a tyre and the tyre is surrounded by a wooden board. At the Duck and Puddle the quality of dart playing is so low that such localised forms of protection would be of absolutely no value. Even the unshaded light bulb hanging from the ceiling is at risk and sits in a small chicken wire basket.

After twenty minutes Peter coughed loudly and clapped his hands. ‘Time for team selection, gentlemen!’ he cried.

‘Thank you!’ smiled Josh. ‘I’ll have a gin and tonic, please.’

The pool and dart players finished their games. More drinks were poured.

‘Thumper,’ said Peter, ‘will you bat at number eleven?’

Thumper nodded and said that he would be delighted to bat at number eleven. I was, I confess, slightly surprised by this. I had thought that Thumper would command a batting place far higher up the order.

Gradually the rest of the batting order was organised. Patchy Fogg was put at number ten and Peter Marshall volunteered to bat at number nine. Frank was given the number eight spot and Dr Brownlow the number seven position. Eventually the only two people left were Josh, the newly elected captain of the Old Bilburians Cricket Team, and myself.

‘Well it looks as if you two are going to open the batting for us this year!’ said Peter. ‘Is that O.K. with you both?’

I said I would be honoured to take such a responsible position. Josh, who clearly had no idea what was going on, said that he would have a gin but that we could hold the tonic. As an afterthought he mentioned that he would also like a packet of pork scratchings.

We then all sang ‘Ten Green Bottles’ and sixteen choruses of ‘Eskimo Nell’ before Peter officially declared the training session over.

‘Are you sure you don’t mind opening the batting for us?’ asked Peter, as the rest of the team celebrated the end of the session by ordering drinks and Dr Brownlow and I headed for the door. Dr Brownlow had offered to give me a lift home but I had gracefully declined.

I said that I would be delighted to try to see off the new ball bowlers.

Peter looked at me rather strangely and then, apparently deciding that I was joking, laughed nervously. ‘Don’t try taking any quick singles!’ he laughed. ‘Josh likes to take things fairly slowly.’

This seemed good advice and so I nodded sagely.

‘I’ll try to push you up the order a bit for some of the later matches,’ said Peter. He looked down. ‘What’s in the bag?’ he asked.

I followed his eyes down. ‘Oh just some old clothes,’ I said.

‘Patsy asked me to drop them off at the vicarage for next week’s jumble sale,’ I lied, saying the first thing that came into my head.

‘Oh wonderful!’ said Peter, taking the bag from my hand. ‘I’ve got a pile of stuff to go there I’ll take this lot round there for you.’

‘Thank you,’ I said, weakly, making a mental note to pop round to the vicarage the following morning to retrieve my clothes.

‘Why were Thumper and Patchy put at the bottom of the batting order?’ I asked Dr Brownlow as he climbed into his elderly Rolls Royce.

‘We need our best players at the bottom of the batting order,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘Just in case we need to lose some wickets in a hurry.’

I looked at him and frowned. ‘I don’t understand,’ I said.

‘If the other sides’ bowlers aren’t very good it can be quite difficult to get out,’ explained Dr Brownlow. ‘If they aren’t bowling very accurately you can’t rely on being bowled or given out leg before wicket so you have to make sure that you give easy catches.’

‘Oh.’ I said, wishing I hadn’t asked.

Still, for a brief moment I had enjoyed the thought that my talents had been recognised and that I had been selected to open the batting in recognition of the strength of my sporting skills instead of, as had always been the case, an entirely justifiable assumption that I had no sporting skills.

As I left the Duck and Puddle I noticed that someone had stuck a small cardboard notice on the Duck and Puddle’s front door. It said simply: ‘Thumper Robinson drank here’. The next time I returned to the pub, the notice about Henry Williamson had disappeared.

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I had turned down Dr Brownlow’s offer to drive me home because there was a full moon and I rather fancied the walk back across the fields. During the last week I had spent one day in London and another in the Midlands and I hadn’t had time for any of my favourite country walks. I have noticed that if I don’t get out into the fields very regularly I suffer from withdrawal symptoms. I get edgy, irritable and easily upset. Besides, I had a rather strong suspicion that Ben, who had spent the evening sitting obediently and quietly under my chair in the Duck and Puddle, would enjoy a chance to get a little fresh air in her lungs and a little mud on her paws.

I had got to the bottom of the main field where our four sheep usually graze when I heard the unmistakeable sound of a sheep in trouble. The noise was coming from a small copse and so, treading carefully because it was dark underneath the trees, I gingerly edged off the path. The ground between the trees was thick with dead brambles and as I forced myself further and further into the thicket I could feel the thorns scratching at my legs through my trousers. Ben, who had tried to follow me but had, to her dismay, discovered that she simply could not find a way through the brambles remained on the path, occasionally whining very quietly.

At first I had half suspected that the sheep which was in trouble might be one of ours. It didn’t sound like Lizzie, Petula, Cynthia or Sarah-Louise (people who don’t know anything much about sheep assume that they all must sound the same but they do not; their voices are most distinct) but a distressed sheep can sometimes sound quite different. But when I finally managed to break through the brambles to stand within a foot or so of the trapped sheep I could clearly see that it wasn’t one of our tiny flock.

The poor thing must have been stuck for hours. It had strayed into the overgrown thicket, presumably in search of some tasty morsel, and had got itself naturally tethered by two long, strong brambles. It was so nervous and agitated that before I could even begin to free it I had to spend ten minutes stroking its head to calm it down. It looked no more than a year old and had enormous, trusting brown eyes. Sheep love having their heads stroked; best of all they adore having the area underneath their chins tickled.

Even after I had calmed the sheep down and managed to assure it that I didn’t mean it any harm it took me over half an hour to release it from its bonds. The brambles were unbreakable and even the Swiss Army Penknife which I always carry with me had a job cutting through the woody tangles. By the time the sheep was free my fingers were sore and raw and even in the dim moonlight I could see that my hands were bleeding quite badly. It was impossible to get the sheep back through to the field from which it had come so I trampled down a path back out of the brambles and then coaxed and pushed and pulled the liberated sheep onto the path leading up to our field where, although it hesitated for a moment at the sight of Ben, it trotted after me quite happily.

At the top of our field our four sheep came out of their stable when they heard me coming. They stared at the newcomer as though it were an alien and the newcomer stared back at them like a new girl starting a strange school.

I introduced them to one another and by the time I had fetched a bundle of hay and a couple of handfuls of sheep pellets the five animals seemed to have accepted one another. I left them all sleeping together in the stable and with Ben padding along silently behind me I went into the house, dumped my clothes on the kitchen floor, explained to Patsy what had happened, bathed the blood and mud off my hands, arms and legs and, exhausted but content, collapsed into bed.

As I lay my head on the pillow I remembered that just before I had left him that evening Dr Brownlow had asked me whether I'd thought of a subject for my second book yet. I had told him that I had no idea at all what I was going to write next, but as I drifted off to sleep I began to have the beginnings of an idea for a book which I knew I would enjoy writing.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

First thing the following morning I rang Colin Jackson who rents the field from which the sheep I had rescued must have wandered. I knew that if I didn't ring him early he would have gone out to work in the fields and I probably wouldn't be able to catch him until the evening.

'I think I've got one of your ewes in my stable,' I told him. I explained what had happened. Colin said he would come round with his trailer to pick the animal up. I told him that he needn't bother coming up to the house but that he could just drive straight into the field from the lane. He didn't thank me and I didn't expect him to. People in Bilbury give and receive kindnesses with great ease. Villagers help one another because life is hard and helping your neighbours when they are in trouble is the way that generations of country folk have learned to survive the cruel vicissitudes of country life.

Town dwellers who come to Bilbury Grange sometimes remark on how lonely it must be and how desolate and isolated they feel. I never feel that at all in Bilbury though I do, I confess, feel lonely and alone if I have to go to London or any other big city. There is plenty of space in Bilbury but that's a different thing altogether; space has nothing to do with loneliness.

I put the telephone down, walked across the bedroom and drew back the curtains. The sun was shining. It was a thin, rather watery spring sunshine but it was sunshine nevertheless and it was good to see this additional clear reminder that winter was over. The winter seemed to have lasted a long time and it had been a hard one.

'What on earth happened to your clothes?' asked Patsy, clambering out of bed, coming over to the window to see what I was looking at and catching sight of my torn jacket and trousers. 'And where on earth did all this blood come from?' she asked, quite horrified.

I reminded her about the sheep I had rescued.

'But I didn't know you'd been bleeding so much!'

'Just scratches.' I showed her my hands and arms. 'They'll heal.'

'I wish I could say the same about your trousers!' said Patsy, poking her hand through a long tear.

'Can you mend them?'

'I can mend them,' said Patsy. 'But they'll look mended.'

'That's O.K.!' I grinned. 'Maybe I'll start a new fashion.'

We went downstairs and had breakfast and then I spent the rest of the morning working on an outline for the book I'd decided I wanted to write. I had been told so many stories since I had moved to Bilbury that I decided to try to write a novel about an imaginary village in Devon. I would, I thought, fill it with the adventures of a series of robust and humorous characters. I wondered if I would be able to create a character as full of life as Thumper Robinson!

* * *

Just before lunch Tanya telephoned from London.

'Have you sent me that photograph yet?' she asked.

'Photograph?'

'You were going to send me a picture of yourself. For newspapers and magazines.'

'Sorry!' I said. 'I forgot. I'll try to find one. I think I've got one of me in fancy dress when I was a medical student.

Do you think that will be O.K.? You can probably cut off most of the headdress.'

Tanya sighed. 'Headdress?'

'I went as an Indian brave.'

'I'm afraid that doesn't sound very suitable. 'The Observer wants to print a picture of you to accompany their review of your book.'

'Well, it could have been worse! Nigel Popplethwaite went as a Zulu and was covered from head to toe in boot polish. It took him a week to get it all off.'

'Haven't you got a decent portrait shot?' asked Tanya.

'I'm afraid not,' I confessed.

'I don't suppose you're coming up to London today or tomorrow?'

'No.'

Tanya sighed again. She seemed to sigh a lot when she spoke to me. 'I'll send a photographer,' she said. 'Will tomorrow morning be O.K.?'

I said that it would be fine.

'Make sure you wear something smart but casual,' said Tanya firmly.

I said I had just the outfit.

* * *

My morning's work hadn't gone too badly. I had thrown most of it away but I had kept a few good ideas and, by and large, was quite pleased with the way things were going. I had planned to carry on working on my book outline that afternoon but when Thumper came round to ask Miss Hargreaves to go round to her cottage with him I allowed myself to be persuaded to accompany them. I had discovered that although working at home has many advantages it has one huge disadvantage: it is all too easy to allow yourself to be distracted by something more interesting than work. Friends wandering idly by will catch me sitting at my desk and say things like: 'Oh I'm glad you're not doing anything important. Have you seen the gorse on the moors recently? It looks really beautiful today.'

The three of us, plus Ben, climbed into the cab of Thumper's truck and set off for Miss Hargreaves' cottage where work had been continuing at quite a spectacular pace since the night of the storm.

'We could rebuild the cottage so that it looks just the same as it was before the storm,' explained Thumper, picking his way carefully between a huge pile of freshly delivered building sand and an impressive looking stack of freshly cut timber. 'But stronger!' he added with a grin.

Miss Hargreaves looked at him rather sharply. 'That's how I want it, Robert,' she said. She was the only person I had ever met who called Thumper by his real name. Even Annie, his wife, called him Thumper.

'But while we're working on it we could make a few improvements if you like,' said Thumper. 'It won't take us much longer or cost much more money,' he added quickly.

'What sort of improvements?' asked Miss Hargreaves, extremely doubtfully. It wasn't difficult to tell that she was a woman who was not enthusiastic about change. She was the only person I knew who still did all her writing with a bottle of blue ink and a simple nib pen. Every other year the children at the school pooled their pocket money and bought her a ballpoint pen or a fountain pen and each time she said 'thank you' very nicely and then put the new fangled gadget away in a drawer. Generations of children had failed to persuade her that progress was here to stay.

‘Well we could build a little porch onto the front, extend your kitchen at the back, put another bedroom in your loft and add an indoor lavatory,’ said Thumper.

Miss Hargreaves stared at him. ‘Certainly not!’ she said indignantly. ‘An indoor lavatory!’ she repeated, as though Thumper had suggested building a bordello or a ten pin bowling alley onto the side of her cottage.

‘Don’t you want to think about it?’ asked Thumper, who was clearly rather disappointed.

‘I’ve thought about it!’ snapped Miss Hargreaves. ‘What do I want an indoor lavatory for?’

‘Well it’ll save you getting quite so chilly if you need to make an urgent call at night!’ said Thumper, looking rather embarrassed. I’d never seen Thumper look even remotely embarrassed before.

‘I’ve never had one indoors,’ said Miss Hargreaves. She looked at me. ‘There’s one in the flat at his house,’ she said, nodding in my direction. ‘But I don’t like it. It’s not natural or healthy.’ She walked briskly back to Thumper’s truck, climbed in and sat down. She was clearly waiting to be taken back to Bilbury Grange.

‘See if you can persuade her,’ whispered Thumper. ‘It seems a pity not to make a decent job of it.’

‘I doubt if she’ll listen to me,’ I whispered back.

‘What are you two whispering about?’ shouted Miss Hargreaves.

‘Nothing, Miss Hargreaves!’ we both lied. Even though Miss Hargreaves had not been my teacher I found myself feeling as guilty as Thumper looked.

* * *

After Thumper had dropped Miss Hargreaves, Ben and I off at Bilbury Grange, Ben and I popped out into the field to make sure that our four sheep were happy and well. I always visited them at least once, usually twice and sometimes three times a day to make sure that they had plenty of clean straw and fresh drinking water. If the weather was wet I fed them sheep pellets and hay. They always ran for shelter the moment it started to rain for although they didn’t mind the wind they hated getting soaked.

The sheep were all out in the field and they were absolutely fine but I didn’t need to risk drowsiness by counting them to see that there were five rather than four of them. The solitary sheep that I had rescued the night before was still there. It looked very much at home and Lizzie, Petula, Cynthia and Sarah-Louise all seemed quite at ease with it. I shared out the digestive biscuits which I had in my pocket. After a moment’s hesitation the newcomer decided that she too liked digestive biscuits. She was still nervous about Ben but clearly took comfort from the fact that her four new friends weren’t in the slightest bit worried about her.

When I had swept the concrete terrace outside the stable and refilled the sheep’s water bowl I walked back to the house and telephoned Colin Jackson. His wife Rosie, who had been brought up in Liverpool and had come to North Devon to work as a barmaid at a holiday camp, answered the phone in her quite unaltered Liverpool accent. I liked Rosie a lot. She and Colin had met at a pub in Ilfracombe and had married within a month. Now, just a few years later, she looked every inch a farmer’s wife. She had a huge, soft bosom and rosy cheeks and invariably wore a cheerfully coloured, old-fashioned print pinafore. She had a wonderful complexion, completely free of wrinkles or lines.

I was lucky, Rosie told me, after inviting Patsy and me to go round for Sunday lunch. Her husband had just arrived back at the house for his tea.

‘I don’t mind but I’ve still got your sheep,’ I reminded him. ‘Have you forgotten it?’

‘I picked her up this morning,’ replied Colin, tersely. ‘Not half an hour after you called.’

‘Well, five minutes ago she was in my field,’ I told him. ‘She must have fought her way through the brambles and come back again.’

Colin sighed. ‘I’ll pick her up as soon as I’ve finished my tea,’ he said.

* * *

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

‘I knew I should have brought hair and make-up with me,’ said the photographer gloomily. He was about thirty years old, five foot ten inches tall and so thin that if he had been standing sideways he would have been all but invisible. He stood, hands on hips, and stared at me in clear despair. He was wearing a plain white polo necked shirt, a pale grey silk suit and a floor length coat that was made of something so flimsy that even in the stillness of the living room it seemed to float on the air whenever he turned around.

‘Hair and make-up?’ I said, frowning. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Someone to do your hair and someone to do your make-up, my love,’ said the photographer. He sighed. It was a deep sigh, a sigh from the heart. He was clearly a troubled and unhappy man. ‘I should have brought wardrobe too,’ he added. He stepped forward a pace, reached out and toyed ruefully with a lock of my untameable hair. ‘Someone to dress you,’ he explained. I was glad Thumper wasn’t around to listen to any of this. The photographer stared dolefully at my stained and tattered sports jacket. Patsy had done a good job of mending it and it looked fine to me. It had pockets and kept me warm and I could think of no more to ask of a jacket. ‘Are you sure you haven’t got anything else you could wear?’ he asked, plaintively. ‘A suit, perhaps? Maybe something you wear on Sundays?’

‘This is all there is,’ I told him for the fourth time. I was getting just a little bit fed up of people telling me that my clothes were old and out of fashion. ‘Don’t think of the jacket as being out of fashion,’ I told him, trying to cheer him up. ‘Think of it as a timeless classic.’ The photographer tried hard to smile but it looked more like a grimace of pain. ‘No offence, dear,’ he said. ‘But I don’t honestly think that jacket was ever in fashion.’ He gave me what I think he thought was a smile. ‘Don’t take it personally.’ I thought that this was a remarkably silly thing to say. After all, how else could I take it but personally? It was, after all, my jacket he was talking about.

He stepped back a couple of paces, lowered his head to one side like a thoughtful budgerigar about to perform his party piece, and stroked his smooth, pink chin with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. He tilted his head the other way. ‘George, darling,’ he said, speaking to his assistant, ‘I want you to bring in every light we’ve got.’ He turned back to me. ‘I’m going to shoot you in your shirt sleeves,’ he said, giving this modest statement a profundity that I did not feel it entirely merited.

‘Just my shirt?’ I asked, surprised.

‘Just the shirt.’

‘Er... no trousers?’

‘Darling, I don’t care whether you wear trousers or not though to be perfectly honest I wouldn’t advise you to take them off with George around. I’m only shooting you from the chest up.’

‘Oh.’ I said. I looked down. ‘Shall I keep my tie on?’

The photographer closed his eyes as though in pain. ‘No,’ he said, after a long moment. ‘You can lose the tie.’ He paused ‘And when I say ‘lose the tie’ I do mean that you can ‘lose the tie’.’

I looked down at it. My Aunt Matilda had bought it for me on my fourteenth birthday and I had always rather liked it. It had so many colours in it that it seemed to go with just about anything. On the other hand, if you looked at it from another point of view then I suppose it was equally true that it didn’t really go with anything. I removed my tie, rolled it up and put it into my jacket pocket, removed my jacket and unfastened my top shirt button. I felt much more comfortable without a jacket and tie.

‘Right!’ I said, folding my arms, sitting up straight and smiling.

The photographer frowned.

‘Ready when you are,’ I said.

The photographer glared at me but didn’t answer. He walked off into a corner of the room and stared out of the window.

‘I should go and get yourself a coffee,’ whispered George, the assistant, who was busy setting up a battery of floodlights. He had a lisp which I suspect he had deliberately accentuated. I could imagine him standing alone for hours practising his lisp. ‘It’ll be hours before he’s ready for you.’

I quietly thanked him, tiptoed noiselessly out of the room and left them to it.

Escaping from the lunacy in the house I wandered down to the vegetable garden to have a word with Mr Parfitt about our entering the Bilbury Village Produce Show, a village extravaganza which was being organised as part of Revels Week.

* * *

Miss Phillips and Mrs Blossom had called round to the house the previous evening to tell Patsy and me about the proposed Show.

‘I’ve spoken to quite a few people about it,’ said Mrs Blossom, who was clearly rather excited by the whole business. I had poured them both a glass of parsnip wine. ‘Apparently the village always used to have a produce show on August Bank Holiday.’ She had brought with her a large notebook on the front of which she had stuck a label and carefully written the words BILBURY VILLAGE PRODUCE SHOW in large capital letters.

‘We’re going to have all sorts of categories,’ said Miss Phillips. ‘Carrots, potatoes, beetroot, tomatoes, lettuce, parsnips, broad beans, runner beans, parsley, rhubarb, soft fruits...’ interrupted Mrs Blossom, reading from her notebook.

‘...strawberries, raspberries, blackberries, blackcurrants, redcurrants...,’ explained Miss Phillips in case I wasn’t sure what a soft fruit was.

‘But we’re not just having fruit and vegetables,’ said Mrs Blossom.

‘Fruit cake, fairy cakes, rock buns, sponge cake...’ said Miss Phillips.

‘...with jam and with cream,’ interrupted Mrs Blossom.

Miss Phillips looked at her, rather sharply I thought.

‘Sponge cakes with jam and sponge cakes with cream,’ said Mrs Blossom. She held up her notebook and turned it so that Miss Phillips could read what was written in it. ‘We agreed. Two separate categories.’

Miss Phillips was nodding enthusiastically. ‘Yes. Absolutely,’ he said. ‘Two separate types of sponge cake. Jam and cream. And plain!’ she added. ‘That’s three, isn’t it?’

‘But it must be home-made jam,’ said Mrs Blossom, firmly.

‘Oh, yes, the jam must be home-made,’ agreed Miss Phillips. ‘As must the cream.’

‘That’s why we had to have two categories of fillings, you see,’ Mrs Blossom explained to Patsy and I. ‘Not everyone makes their own cream. So the people who make their own jam have a category they can enter.’

‘Though I suppose not everyone makes their own jam,’ said Miss Phillips, as though this terrible thought had only just occurred to her.

Patsy and I exchanged glances. We were both trying hard not to giggle at the seemingly interminable duologue which was rapidly threatening to turn into a music hall turn. ‘We’d love to enter!’ said Patsy.

‘Oh, would you!’ said Miss Phillips.

‘That’s wonderful!’ said Mrs Blossom. She rummaged around in her huge handbag, found a large black fountain pen and wrote our names down in her notebook. ‘I’ll bring you a category list as soon as they’re ready,’ she promised. She suddenly acquired a very serious look. ‘We’re asking people to pay a penny an entry,’ she said, rather nervously. ‘To help with the expenses. Do you think that will be all right?’

‘I’m sure it will be absolutely fine,’ I said.

‘We’ll be charging an entrance fee to the marquee,’ said Miss Phillips. ‘For the building fund, of course.’

‘But we thought we ought to try to be self-supporting just in case anything goes wrong,’ said Mrs Blossom. ‘We don’t want to end up taking money out of the fund, do we?’

‘No,’ said Patsy. ‘Absolutely not!’

‘I think charging a penny an entry is an extremely sensible idea,’ I said.

Miss Phillips and Mrs Blossom both smiled, first at each other and then at both Patsy and I, and said how very sweet she was and how much they appreciated our support and how thrilled they were that we were going to take part in the Show and how delighted they were that young people like us didn’t look down our noses at old fuddy duddys like them and so on and so on and in the end it looked as though they were going to start another duologue and so I poured them another glass of parsnip wine each while Patsy went out to the kitchen to fetch a batch of freshly baked home-made rock cakes.

‘Did you make the parsnip wine yourself?’ asked Miss Phillips.

I shook my head. ‘No. I’m afraid not. Patsy’s uncle made it.’

‘Her uncle?’

‘My uncle Paul. Paul Simpson.’

‘I didn’t know he was Patsy’s uncle!’

‘He’s her mother’s older brother.’

‘It’s very nice parsnip wine.’

‘Thank you. I’ll tell him. He’ll be pleased.’

‘I must call round and get him to enter. We’re having wine categories.’

‘Isn’t he Esther Kennedy’s cousin?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said.

‘I think he is,’ said Miss Phillips. ‘He lives next door to that woman who used to breed Dalmatians in Ilfracombe doesn’t he?’

I said I wasn’t sure.

‘She had an affair with a man who sold insurance,’ said Mrs Blossom firmly. ‘She had wonderful red hair.’

‘It was a wig,’ said Miss Phillips, rather sourly I thought

‘I don’t think it was,’ said Mrs Blossom.

‘Anyway her husband left her and they had to sell the house. Pink house. 1930s but with a late 50s extension. It was a pity. They'd just built the most beautiful gazebo. Do you remember, dear, it had a wonderful weather vane on the roof?'

'It was lovely, wasn't it?' agreed Mrs Blossom. 'Her daughter married a ski instructor didn't she?'

'Did she? I thought that was the Barnard girl.'

'You're right. It was.'

People who claim that the art of conversation is dead have quite clearly never spent an evening in the company of the indomitable Miss Phillips and the inimitable Mrs Blossom.

* * *

I had rushed out of the house so quickly that I'd forgotten to put on a sweater and by the time I got to the vegetable garden I was shivering with the cold.

'You'll catch your death like that,' said Mr Parfitt, tuttutting. 'Come into the greenhouse and I'll find you something warm that you can wrap yourself up in.' He himself had, I noticed, acquired an even more rural look than before. His suit jacket and its last button had parted company and he now had a piece of binder twine wrapped tightly around his waist and knotted rather flamboyantly. He was now wearing an old, battered tweed hat that was several sizes too large for him. I didn't know what had happened to the other hat. He had this one crammed right down over his ears.

'There's a blanket over here,' said Miss Hargreaves. I turned round. I hadn't noticed her before. 'Mr Parfitt has been showing me round the garden,' she said. She looked almost radiant. 'He's done wonders, hasn't he?' She handed me an old blanket which, judging by the hairs which were stuck on it, had been used as a bed by Sophie and Emily. Miss Hargreaves and Mr Parfitt had clearly got to know each other much better since their first meeting at our dinner party.

Using the back of an old seed catalogue order form, Mr Parfitt then carefully drew out a plan of our walled vegetable garden. Some of the beds were, of course, already spoken for. The longest, sunniest bed, underneath the south facing long wall was where our soft fruit bushes were planted. In another month or two it would be time to erect the netting over them to protect the fruit from the birds. Four of the centre beds were occupied by old-fashioned wood and glass cold frames and those we would use for raising seeds and growing salad vegetables. The bed underneath the short, easterly facing wall was where we grew our rhubarb (thanks to the straw from the sheep's stable it was already two feet high) and four small beds were filled with strawberry plants.

'I reckon we've got twelve beds to play with,' said Mr Parfitt, completing his plan of the garden and numbering the free beds one to twelve. 'Do you want to go for quality or variety?'

I scratched my head. 'I'm not sure,' I said. 'What's the, er, difference?'

'Do you want to grow three or four beds full of carrots to give yourself a really good chance of winning first prize in the carrots or do you want a dozen or more different crops so that you can stand a decent chance of getting a prize in several categories?'

'I think we'll go for variety,' I said without hesitation. 'I want to be able to eat the stuff we grow. We'll never get through four beds' worth of carrots!'

Mr Parfitt looked pleased. 'That's the spirit!' he said. 'We'll go for 'Best Exhibitor in Show'!'

'What's that?' I had to ask him.

'Every entrant gets points for all the categories he enters. Whoever ends up with most points wins the overall prize - Best Exhibitor in Show!'

'I'm not even sure that they're having one of those,' I said.

‘Course they are!’ insisted Mr Parfitt. ‘Village shows always have an award for the best overall exhibitor. They couldn’t not have one!’

‘You’ll be bound to win with Mr Parfitt looking after your garden,’ whispered Miss Hargreaves confidently. He looked at her and smiled. She smiled back at him and touched his arm lightly.

In the end, under Mr Parfitt’s guidance I agreed that, among other things, we would grow peas, beans (broad and runner), potatoes (three varieties of potato that would be ready early in the season), carrots, parsnip, beetroot, spinach, brussels sprouts, broccoli, kale and onions. Mr Parfitt asked me which seed merchant I used. I told him that although I liked to give as much custom as I could to Peter at the village shop we didn’t usually buy our seeds there. I explained that Patsy was in charge of seed brochures and had already compared prices from several catalogues.

I then took the old blanket from around my shoulders and put it back in its original place. Before I went back to the house I walked past the sheep’s stable to say ‘hello’ and make sure that all was well.

All was well but once again we had five sheep living with us. The intruder looked thoroughly at home and baaaed as noisily as any of the other four when she saw me. I gave all five a handful of pellets each and knew that I was about to do something that I really didn’t want to do but just couldn’t avoid doing.

‘I thought you’d be out here!’ said Patsy.

I looked up, slightly startled. Patsy was standing on the other side of the gate leading into the field. ‘The photographer says he’s ready for you now.’

‘Right,’ I said. I’d forgotten about the photographer. ‘That sheep is back in our field again.’ I pointed to her. She seemed to know I was talking about her and baaaed noisily.

‘That’s the one that Colin Jackson has fetched back twice?’

‘That’s the one.’

‘She must like it here.’

‘I can’t send her back a third time, Patsy.’

‘You’re daft!’

‘I know.’

‘What are we going to call her?’

‘Well, judging by the number of times she’s escaped we ought to call her Houdini but Houdini was a man.’

‘We’ll call her Miss Houdini then.’

‘O.K. Do you think Colin Jackson will sell her to us?’

‘Oh, he’ll huff and he’ll puff and he’ll go on and on about how valuable she is and how much he could get for her at the market but he’ll sell her. She’s a nuisance and he’ll be glad to get rid of her.’

‘We can’t really afford her, can we?’

‘No. But now that she’s sought sanctuary here three times we can’t let Colin sell her to the slaughterhouse either.’

I sighed, opened the gate and slipped through. At the rate we were going it wouldn’t be long before we had a full sized flock to look after. I stood there for a moment and looked at the five sheep. ‘Damned animals,’ I muttered, half under my breath, though I didn’t mean it, of course.

Patsy looked up at me and grinned. ‘Come on,’ she said. ‘That photographer will be having a fit.’ She put her arm around me. ‘And you must be freezing cold.’ She looked up at me. ‘Has anyone ever told you that you’re a big softie?’

‘Me? A softie? Never.’

* * *

The living room looked like a film studio. The photographer and his assistant had arrived in a small minibus and the whole vehicle must have been crammed with lights, reflectors, camera bodies, lenses and all the other expensive paraphernalia without which some professional practitioners of the gentle and relatively simple art of photography do not seem able to function. Curiously, although the intention seemed to be to flood the room with light, huge black drapes had been hung over the windows so that absolutely no natural light could enter the room at all. Several huge metal trunks - in which the equipment had presumably arrived - were stacked in a corner of the room. It occurred to me that the equipment scattered around our living room was probably worth more than the whole house. It seemed a lot of trouble for a couple of snaps.

‘Crumbs!’ I said, looking round. ‘Why the blackout?’ I asked.

The photographer, who had changed clothes and was now wearing a lilac coloured camisole top with lace edging, a huge white canvas jacket with enormously baggy pockets, a pair of skin tight black jeans and a pair of huge pink basketball boots, waved a hand about airily.

‘God’s very untrustworthy when it comes to lighting,’ he explained. ‘One minute he gives you glorious sunshine and then poof,’ he waved his arms dramatically to illustrate what he was saying, ‘in a flash it’s gone and the sky is brooding black.’ He leant forward, peering at my shirt. ‘What on earth have you been doing?’ he demanded.

I looked down. My shirt was covered with cat hairs. They had presumably come from the blanket that Mr Parfitt had given me to fling around my shoulders. ‘George! Brush!’ shouted the photographer. I then had to stand very still for several minutes while George attempted to brush the cat hairs off my shirt. When the photographer was satisfied he waved a finger to George, who was now fussing with one of the lamps. George, constantly alert, responded to this almost imperceptible gesture as though his employer had cracked a bull whip.

‘Stool for the client, please, George!’ said the photographer. He glanced at me, tutted and rolled his eyes heavenwards. ‘He doesn’t know which side his bread is buttered,’ he said. He was, it was clear, a master of the cliché.

George left what he was doing, scurried behind a huge umbrella shaped reflector and rummaged around. You wouldn’t have thought it would have been possible to lose a stool in one room but for a moment I thought they’d managed it. George emerged a couple of moments later clutching a tall stool with a small black leather seat and long, chromium-plated legs. ‘Things are always in the last place you look, aren’t they?’ he said. His close contact with the photographer had clearly given him an unenviable mastery of the nonsensical cliché. I was tempted to point out that things you think you’ve lost are always in the last place you look - because when you’ve found them you stop looking - but I didn’t.

‘Just here, I think, George,’ said the photographer, pointing to a spot on the carpet.

George put the stool down where the photographer had indicated and glanced up to see that all was well. With a slight wave of his left hand, first this way and then that way, the photographer directed the placing of the stool first away from and then back to the spot he had originally indicated.

‘I’ll go and get lunch started,’ said Patsy, still standing in the doorway. ‘Will you both be staying for lunch?’ she asked our two visitors.

For some inexplicable reason the photographer seemed overcome by this uncomplicated offer of hospitality. He put his hands together as though praying, lowered his voice and delivered a small speech about how kind we were and how touched he was and how wonderful he thought it was that people in the country still made their visitors feel so welcome.

‘It’s just home-made vegetable soup,’ said Patsy. ‘And home made bread,’ she added. She rather wisely disappeared before the photographer could launch himself into yet another eulogy about country cooking.

Deprived of this opportunity, the photographer turned to George. ‘What’s the time?’ he asked the infinitely patient assistant. I could see that he himself was wearing an expensive Rolex on his left wrist but it was presumably easier and less exhausting to get George to look at his watch than to raise his arm and look at his own

‘Twelve fifteen,’ replied George, after studying his own less expensive timepiece.

This news seemed to startle and upset the photographer. He clapped his hands, looked as though he was about to have a nervous breakdown and then made a great effort to control himself. ‘Come on!’ he said, though I wasn’t sure whether the encouragement was directed at me, George or himself.

George positioned one of the cameras, looked through the viewfinder and then politely asked me if I would be kind enough to sit on the stool. I sat on the stool. When George was content with what he could see he backed away. The photographer then moved in, bent down and looked through the viewfinder himself. After a brief glance he stood up, sniffed thoughtfully and then nodded. George moved back in and pressed a button on top of the camera. There was a click and a whirring noise and a photograph emerged from the back of the camera. The two of them studied it carefully and then George brought it over to me so that I could look at it. It was a picture of me in my shirtsleeves sitting on a stool. The photograph made me look very bored and so the camera had managed to capture my feelings very effectively. I said I thought it looked fine. George said he thought it was a tremendously powerful and evocative shot. He then changed something on the camera, looked up to the photographer for permission, and pressed the button again. This time no photograph emerged from the back of the camera.

After half an hour of this I was bored rigid. ‘I think that last one was fantastic,’ I said, getting down off the stool. My left leg was lucky, it had gone to sleep. ‘Lunch will be ready,’ I said.

George looked shocked and turned immediately towards the photographer. ‘You can’t go yet!’ the photographer cried.

‘Patsy will be cross if we keep her waiting,’ I warned him, quite untruthfully. The threat proved extremely effective. He followed me to the kitchen as meekly as a sheep will follow its shepherd. George followed behind like a lamb trailing behind its mother.

After lunch I managed to cut the photo session short by telling the photographer and his assistant that I had to clean out the sheep’s stable. I said that they could photograph me up to my knees in dirty straw if they wanted to but I wasn’t in the slightest bit surprised or disappointed when they both declared that since they had a long journey back home they thought they had better start packing up.

After they had gone I rang Colin Jackson and arranged to buy the sheep which had decided to come and live with us.

* * *

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

After my first, and I thought rather abortive, appearance on television, I had not expected to receive any more invitations to pollute the nation's airwaves with my own peculiar brand of delicate anarchy. But, strangely, the invitations to appear on chat shows, news programmes and magazine programmes had come in far more quickly than even Tanya had expected. What I hadn't realised was that both television and radio producers are constantly looking for new faces and voices with which to entertain their viewers and listeners. The demand for new guests, new topics and even moderately interesting subjects for discussion is constant. I was first flattered into thinking that the tremendous interest that was being shown in me and my book had been inspired by my personality and the value of the words I had written. Only later did I realise that the enthusiasm was general rather than particular and that I would have attracted as much (and possibly more) interest if I had written a book describing the history of lace making on the Norfolk Broads.

In addition to the invitations to appear on television and radio (most of which I managed to avoid) the following few weeks also brought a steady trickle of invitations to speak at literary luncheons and women's institutes. There were even one or two invitations to sit in bookshops and to sign copies of my book.

I have never believed in the philosophy that one should try everything once. It has always seemed to me that this is an approach which is destined to produce much unhappiness, regret and indigestion. But I was just as inexperienced in saying 'no' to invitations of this type as I was in accepting and fulfilling them.

My first invitation to speak in public came one evening. Patsy took the call and handed me the telephone.

'It's a Mrs Periwinkle,' she whispered, politely holding her hand over the mouthpiece so that the subject of this introduction would not hear herself being announced. I tried, unsuccessfully, to think who Mrs Periwinkle could be. In the days when I had practised as a family doctor I was quite accustomed to receiving telephone calls from complete strangers (and then, within seconds, asking them the most intimate of questions) but since my retirement my natural English reserve had reclaimed its place.

'I'm sorry to bother you, doctor,' said Mrs Periwinkle. 'You don't know me but I'm joint secretary of the Little Tidbury On Sea Branch of the British Literary Guild. Your publisher gave me your telephone number.'

I said 'hello' and told her, as one does in these circumstances, that it was nice to hear from her. The British Literary Guild, in case you haven't heard of it, is a huge national organisation. They have branches in just about every town and village in the country and members regularly meet to discuss, dissect and, presumably sometimes even enjoy, modern and classical works of literature.

'We have a meeting every third Tuesday,' said Mrs Periwinkle. 'And one of our most popular themes for speakers is 'My First Book'. Your name was put forward by several of our members last week and we're hoping that we might be able to ink you in for one evening soon.' She put a lot of emphasis on the word 'ink'.

'That's very kind of you,' I said. 'Er... where is Little Tidbury On Sea?' I asked. I'm not sure why I asked this, though I suppose that I must have been subconsciously aware of the fact that she had rung to invite me to do something that I didn't want to do and so it might have simply been a delaying tactic.

She told me. Any hopes of being able to explain that I lived in a remote village of Devon and would, with regret, have to decline her invitation evaporated when she explained in some detail that Little Tidbury On Sea was no more than forty miles away from Bilbury. I was surprised to discover that, despite its name, the village was at least twenty miles away from the coast and over thirty miles away from its namesake, Tidbury On Sea. I should not have been surprised. Places in Devon often have misleading and unrealistic names. The village next to Bilbury is called Kentisbury Town but has a total human population of about fifty. The village of Greater Munton is much smaller than the village of Lesser Munton. And the village of South Boreham is directly north of North Boreham.

'Ah!' I said, when she had told me the location of Little Tidbury On Sea.

‘Can I put you down for one evening this month?’ she asked.

I know now that I should have said almost anything other than what I did say. I should have told her that I was emigrating to Lithuania or suffering from an infectious disease. I should have been honest, risked offending her, and explained that the very thought of public speaking always made me feel so ill that I was never able to fulfil my engagements. I should have explained that I would rather have major surgery than speak in public. It isn’t just the twenty or thirty minutes standing up in front of an audience which I dread but the sleepless nights beforehand.

But I didn’t tell the truth. I made an excuse. I said I was committed on Tuesdays. It wasn’t really a lie. I’m committed to sitting in front of the fire on Tuesdays.

But, if there is one thing that is guaranteed to backfire it is using a feeble and dishonest excuse in order to try to get out of doing something you don’t want to do.

And, because I felt guilty about almost lying and because I felt that I ought to have said ‘yes’ I then proceeded to dig my own grave. ‘What a pity,’ I said. ‘I’d have loved to come and any other day would have been fine. But Tuesdays are just impossible, I’m afraid.’

I had, in my ignorance and innocence, completely failed to make any allowance for the fact that with the possible exception of politicians, club secretaries are the most ruthless and least generous of all beings. Few of them ever wanted to be club secretary but now that they are their main ambition in life is to fill their quota of speakers as quickly as they possibly can. They don’t care whether the speakers they book are competent or even capable of speaking the right language. They have no compassion for the shy and retiring. Their aim is simply to get names written into the club diary - preferably in ink.

‘Oh dear,’ said Mrs Periwinkle, malevolently lulling me into a false sense of security. ‘Well, never mind,’ she said. And she paused before pulling the pin out of the hand grenade she’d skilfully tucked down the front of my trousers. ‘I’ll have a word with one or two of the committee members and see if we can rearrange one of our meetings to fit in with you. Shall we say next Wednesday?’

I was sunk. I had wandered up a creek and found myself without a canoe. I had climbed a tree and found myself stuck without a ladder. I was hoist by my own petard. I had shot myself in the foot with astonishing accuracy. Trying hard not to sound as glum as I felt I said that would be very kind of her. We exchanged final pleasantries and then I put down the telephone.

I had, however, learned my lesson, though I was to discover that avoiding public speaking can be even more difficult than you might imagine. Sometimes you have to be quite unbelievably blunt. When the next invitation came, asking me to speak at a literary dinner somewhere in the north of England, I simply thanked the caller and told him that I was terrible at public speaking.

‘Oh, don’t worry about that,’ said the person who had invited me to speak. ‘Most of our speakers are pretty rough. In fact some of them are bloody awful. The people who come to our dinners are used to that. To be honest our dinners are just a bit of an opportunity to get out and meet some friends.’

‘I hadn’t expected this. I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘But I really hate public speaking. I don’t like leaving home and I get very nervous for days - weeks - beforehand.’ Just talking about public speaking was making me feel nervous.

‘Oh, I’m just the same,’ said the caller cheerfully. ‘And you know, the funny thing is that it never gets any easier! We usually have three speakers. Would you like to be on first? I always find I prefer to speak first so that I don’t have time to get too nervous!’

‘I’m afraid I’d rather not speak at all,’ I told him. ‘But thank you very much for inviting me,’ I added.

‘You’ll have to get used to it,’ insisted the caller. ‘Publishers like their authors to speak at dinners and luncheons.’

‘Public speaking really isn’t my scene,’ I apologised. ‘Sorry.’

‘We’ll put you up in a very nice boarding house and your publisher will pay your travelling expenses so you won’t be out of pocket.'

'No, thank you.'

There was a pause. When the caller spoke again his voice had changed. 'You're saying 'no'?' He sounded very put out.

'I'm afraid so.'

'Well, don't expect us to put your book on our recommended list for the local public library!' he snapped, slamming down the telephone.

* * *

Planning for the Revels Week was continuing so fast that I was beginning to find it difficult to remember exactly what had been organised. The Revels had acquired a momentum of their own and I think most people in the village had more or less forgotten that the original idea had been simply to raise some money to pay for repairing the school cottage. Fund raising may have been the original reason for bringing back the Revels but it was certainly no longer the sole reason for the enthusiasm in the village. Many of the events being organised seemed unlikely to raise any money at all but this didn't seem to discourage people in the slightest. I suspected the truth was that the Revels had added a rare air of excitement and anticipation to the village. Even more importantly, perhaps, they had brought an already close village even closer.

One of the things I had always liked about Bilbury was the fact that the villagers regarded one another as being members of a community. The Revels had strengthened the already powerful community spirit that I so admired and I felt proud and privileged to be regarded as a villager.

In some parts of Devon you have to live in the area for decades before you're regarded as 'local'. A friend of mine who had lived in a cottage in Cornwall for thirty years told me gloomily that he reckoned that if his children stayed in the village then there was a real possibility that their grandchildren might be accepted as 'locals'. In Bilbury you were regarded as being a 'local' if you wanted to be a 'local'. The key was not the length of time that you'd lived there but the enthusiasm with which you lived there. Many of the villagers had themselves moved to Bilbury after living in other parts of the country and they valued the feeling of belonging which the village gave. After all, as Dr Brownlow once said, it is possible for someone to have been in a village for decades and yet to have no love either for the village itself or its inhabitants. He pointed out that a newcomer who contributes to village life is of far more value to the village community than an old resident who constantly yearns to be somewhere else.

It was in the spirit of togetherness that the villagers living around the Bilbury village green had, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, painted their houses with the paint that Peter Marshall had provided. Although there had been some initial dissent most of them had eventually admitted that pink, though it might perhaps not have been their first choice, wasn't too bad a colour after all. Those who remained unconvinced of the appeal of the colour were enormously cheered when the first rainstorm completely washed the paint away. It was only then that Thumper Robinson noticed that the paint which Peter had provided was quite clearly marked 'water soluble' and 'unsuitable for exterior use'.

Patsy and I had both been press ganged by the wife of Bilbury's new vicar into helping with a special midsummer night's revue. Having made it quite clear that I would not accept any role which involved any sort of public appearance I found myself appointed assistant stage manager while Patsy rather reluctantly found herself a slightly nervous member of the 'Bilbury Ladies Amateur Cancan And Exotic Dancing Troupe'. The title of what was generally agreed to be the first Bilbury dance team was admittedly rather a mouthful but it was the result of a democratic compromise between those members of the Committee who wanted the dancers to be known as 'The Buxom Bilbury Beauties' and those who felt that 'The Bilbury Belles' was more appropriate.

When Bilbury's previous vicar had unexpectedly been promoted and moved away to tend to a flock in an altogether grander and more elegant environment the villagers had awaited the appointment of a new spiritual saviour with some trepidation. The villagers had found their previous spiritual saviour rather unbending and had regarded his hardline approach to subjects such as poaching to be a little out of touch with reality.

Technically, Bilbury hasn't actually had a vicar of its own for many years. For as long as most people can remember the village has shared a clergyman with five other small, local parishes.

The Bilbury parsonage, a grand, nineteenth century building with eight bedrooms, two turrets and a swimming pool, has for several years been owned by a mysterious businessman who has only ever been seen twice in the village. On both occasions he landed by helicopter, stayed for a night and disappeared the next morning. In his absence the former parsonage is kept warm and waterproof by a couple from London who do all their shopping at a supermarket in Taunton and have probably not exchanged more than half a dozen words with anyone in the village in the five years of their residence.

The new vicar, Ernest Riddle, had come late to the church. He had worked as an accountant for twenty years before switching careers and becoming a guardian of souls rather than balance sheets. He was short, probably no more than five feet four inches tall, plump, weighing twelve stones or even slightly more, and enormously jovial. It had, he told me, always been a dream of his to acquire custody of a country parish. He was thrilled that his dream had come true. His wife, Delilah, who looked more like a fashion model than a country vicar's wife, a post normally recognised as being ideally suited to a woman built for jam and chutney making, was a decade his junior and had been a well-known athlete under her maiden name. She had, she told us, enjoyed an interest in amateur theatricals since she'd been a girl. She regarded the Revels as an opportunity not to be missed.

* * *

All too soon it was Wednesday and I was heading for Little Tidbury On Sea with the notes for my speech in my inside jacket pocket and my ordnance survey map of North Devon opened out on the car seat beside me.

I had spent hours agonising over what to say. Should I write a formal speech and read it? Should I simply make a few brief notes and ad lib my speech?

I toyed with the idea of talking about how much of a struggle it had been to turn several reams of copy paper into a book but dismissed that notion as pretentious. Talking about the theme of the book - the cruel greed of the pharmaceutical industry and the naivety of the medical profession - seemed too pompous and earnest. I would have liked to have made it a funny speech but I simply didn't have the confidence. I thought about talking about the technical problems of writing a book but I thought that everyone else who had ever spoken on the subject of 'My First Book' would be bound to have explored that particular territory. I thought about detailing my bizarre and sometimes seemingly unreal confrontations with the professionals of the publishing industry but decided that that would be too esoteric. I was attracted by the idea of talking about my experiences in television but I didn't really have enough material. In the end I had abandoned all these formal notions, and decided simply to make a few general notes which fitted the theme and to adapt the content and form of my speech according to the audience.

The meeting was due to be held in the church hall and I parked, as I had been told to do, in a tiny car park behind the church. A large white board at the far end of the car park bore two wind and rain battered posters. Both posters carried messages in screaming, fluorescent, orange letters. One said: 'Be Generous To Your Fellow Man And The Lord Will Be Generous To You'. The other said: 'Forgive Those Who Have Sinned Against You And You Will Be Blessed'. Above this a large hand painted sign saying 'NO PARKING - TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED' had been nailed to the notice-board. I locked the car, checked that I had my notes in my inside jacket pocket, and walked round to the side of the church hall.

The door to the church hall was open, as I had been told it would be, but except for a couple of dozen tubular steel stacking chairs the hall itself was empty. I stood there for a moment and then called out: 'Is anyone there?' No one came and no one answered my call so I walked a few paces further into the room and repeated the question. This time a middle aged woman in a floral pinafore responded by poking her head and upper body through a hatchway which I hadn't even noticed before. She asked me if I'd come for the meeting. I said I had and introduced myself. The woman introduced herself as Mrs Kennedy, the society's treasurer, thanked me for coming and asked if I was any good at mending kettles. I said I didn't think so but that I would take a look.

Generally speaking, I know as much about kettles as I do about the economic influences of nuclear power on third world countries but it was pretty clear to me that this particular kettle had boiled its last teapot full of water. It was one of the old-fashioned sorts of kettle that sits on the top of a stove and someone had clearly left it to boil dry. It had a rather large hole in its blackened bottom.

I showed Mrs Kennedy the hole. ‘I’m afraid I don’t think there’s much you can do for this,’ I told her sadly.

‘Well we can’t manage without our kettle,’ said Mrs Kennedy firmly. ‘Let’s pop round to Mrs Alladyce’s to see if she’s got a spare.’

Obediently, I followed her out of the church hall, waited while she locked the door with a huge, rusty, iron key and then followed her across the road, down a little alleyway and in through the back door of a tiny terraced house. She walked with the shuffling gait of a woman who is a martyr to her feet. English women of a certain age and breeding are always martyrs to their feet.

Mrs Alladyce, clearly the occupier of the house, was in her living room doing her ironing while listening to the radio. She looked up as we entered. ‘I was just coming over, Mrs Kennedy,’ she said. ‘I thought I’d just have time to finish off my ironing and listen to the end of my play.’ She spoke of it as though the play had been specially broadcast for her.

‘Don’t let us disturb you,’ whispered Mrs Kennedy. ‘Have you got a spare kettle we can borrow?’

‘In the kitchen,’ replied Mrs Alladyce, in what I suspect she thought was her own version of a whisper. It was a whisper that would have carried two miles in a storm. ‘Cupboard under the sink. My Geoffrey bought me one of those electric jobs last Christmas. But I kept my old faithful just in case.’

‘Geoffrey’s her son,’ whispered Mrs Kennedy, as we tiptoed out of the living room, along the corridor, past the door through which we had entered and into the kitchen. Back in the living room we could hear the radio play to which Mrs Alladyce was listening come to a thrilling climax. ‘He’s a chartered surveyor,’ Mrs Kennedy added, and I assumed that she was referring to Mrs Alladyce’s son, Geoffrey. I tried to forget this little titbit of information but my brain probably stored it away somewhere safe anyway. I’ve always noticed that the more irrelevant a piece of information the more likely I am to remember it. In a year’s time I would forget where I had parked the car but remember that Mrs Alladyce’s son Geoffrey was a chartered surveyor.

Mrs Kennedy bent down, opened the cupboard underneath Mrs Alladyce’s sink, removed a small silverish kettle which had a whistling nozzle on its spout, and then closed the cupboard and stood up.

‘Thank you, Mrs Alladyce!’ she called out as we left. ‘Much obliged!’ She lowered her voice. ‘Remarkable woman,’ she added, sotto voce. ‘She’s got four sons and terrible veins. One of them was very nearly a Parliamentary Candidate for Preston North.’ I assumed that she was referring to one of the sons rather than her veins and murmured something suitably non-committal and inconsequential. It occurred to me to wonder of whom she was prouder: the son who was a chartered surveyor or the son who had very nearly been a Parliamentary Candidate for Preston North.

When we got back to the church hall there were two people waiting outside. One introduced herself as Mrs Periwinkle, the woman who had invited me to Little Tidbury on Sea. She had bright blue hair, wore spectacles with hugely ornate frames and carried a music case which she clutched to her bosom as though afraid that someone might try to steal it from her. The other woman was tall, and heavy set and wore a short black, pencil skirt and a bright pink sweater. She was heavily made up, had shoulder length, curly blonde hair, wore white, lacy gloves and carried a large, blue, plastic handbag.

‘It looks like being one of our quiet evenings,’ said Mrs Periwinkle, as we all trooped inside the church hall. Mrs Kennedy disappeared into the kitchen with her kettle and the other woman, who hadn’t spoken and to whom I had not been introduced, sat herself down on the front row. Mrs Periwinkle walked briskly across to the side of the hall and brought a small beige topped folding card table across to the middle of the room. I stepped forward, took the table from her and, with some difficulty, erected it. Mrs Periwinkle smiled at me. I moved a couple of chairs round to the other side of the table, so that they were facing the audience of stacking chairs.

‘Er... how many people usually turn up?’ I asked, hesitantly.

‘Sometimes, on a very good night, we’ve had as many as eighteen,’ said Mrs Periwinkle, proudly. ‘But that was for a very special speaker. Usually we get eight or nine.'

I swallowed. It had never occurred to me that the audience might be so small. I realised that I found the prospect of speaking to a small audience far more intimidating than the idea of addressing a large audience. I suddenly remembered the first time I had spoken in public - at an anti-vivisection meeting in Barnstaple. My throat felt very dry and when Mrs Kennedy thrust a cup of tea into my hand I accepted it gratefully.

'Of course Mr and Mrs Jilkes are away on holiday,' said Mrs Periwinkle. 'And they always bring Miss Llewellyn with them. She has a gammy knee and can't walk far. So that's three who won't be coming. Could we have a water jug and a couple of glasses, Mrs Kennedy?'

'And poor old Mr Bedford is in hospital,' added Mrs Kennedy, over her shoulder as she scurried off towards the kitchen to fetch the water jug and glasses.

'Is he? I didn't know that. Oh, the poor dear. What's the trouble? It's not his liver again, is it?' called Mrs Periwinkle.

'I don't think so. I think he's been having trouble with his, you know, down below...,' Embarrassed, Mrs Kennedy's voice tailed off. She waved a hand around airily.

'Ah!' said Mrs Periwinkle, quickly. 'Well I hope he gets better soon. He always brings Mrs Lawson and Miss Innes so that's another three who won't be coming. I must send him a card. Is he in the Exeter General?'

'Yes, I think so.'

'Do you know which ward he's in?'

Mrs Kennedy scurried back, carrying a water jug in one hand and clutching two unbreakable glasses in the other.

'Men's surgical I expect,' said Mrs Kennedy.

'He's on the Arthur Thomas Ward Ward,' said a gruff voice.

I looked around to see who had spoken. There was no one there except the blonde woman with the blue handbag. She smiled at me. She had lipstick on her teeth. There was something odd about her but I couldn't quite make up my mind what it was. She still had her gloves on. Her unusually deep voice made me think that she might perhaps have a thyroid problem. I wondered whether or not I should ask her if she'd visited her doctor. Her gruff voice might be explained by an underfunctioning thyroid gland which thyroid tablets would cure. I wondered if the blonde curls might be a wig. Another symptom of hypothyroidism is hair loss.

'Arthur Thomas,' said Mrs Periwinkle. 'I'll send him a card tomorrow. I always keep one or two in. They never have much choice at the shop do they?'

'I think it's gone downhill since Elsie and Robbie left. I'm sure those new people mean well but they just don't seem the right sort of folk to be running a village shop. She's far too brassy for my taste.'

'Arthur Thomas Ward,' said the gruff-voiced, blonde-haired woman with the blue handbag.

Mrs Periwinkle and Mrs Kennedy both looked at her and frowned. 'Yes, dear,' said Mrs Periwinkle. 'Arthur Thomas.' She turned to me. 'This is Josephine,' she said. I said 'hello' to Josephine and Josephine said 'hello' back and smiled at me again. I remembered that women with hypothyroidism also suffered from dry, rough skin. That could explain why Josephine hadn't removed her gloves.

'No,' said Josephine. 'The ward is called Arthur Thomas Ward Ward. It's named after someone called Arthur Thomas Ward.'

'Well,' said Mrs Periwinkle, as though this was just another example of bureaucracy gone mad. 'That's very confusing!'

Josephine looked rather apologetic, as though it was her fault that the hospital authorities had chosen to name the ward in such a manner. I felt sorry for her and decided that I would try to get her alone for a moment so that I could suggest that she seek medical help. I was now quite convinced that she had a thyroid problem.

'Would you like a biscuit, doctor?'

I turned round. Mrs Kennedy had produced a tin of mixed biscuits. I hesitated for a moment, realised I was hungry and took a bourbon cream.

'Take two,' she said, waggling the tin under my nose.

I wanted to but politeness won. I smiled, shook my head and raised a hand as my 'no'.

'More tea?'

'No, thank you.'

'I'm afraid it doesn't look as if your audience is going to get any bigger,' said Mrs Periwinkle. She somehow managed to make it clear that if the audience was small it was entirely my fault. 'Would you like to start?' She noticed that the blonde with the blue handbag had disappeared. 'When Josephine gets back,' she said. 'She must have gone to powder her nose.'

'Right!' I said. 'I'll just, er, pop to the, er...'

'The little boys' room is over there on the left,' said Mrs Periwinkle, pointing to the left of the stage.

When I opened the door and saw Josephine standing in front of the porcelain I thought I must have gone into the wrong room. But another glance assured me that I hadn't. She had her skirt pulled up to her waist and was doing exactly what I had gone there to do.

'Hello!' she said, quite unflustered and completely unembarrassed. 'I'm really looking forward to hearing your talk. I'm writing a book myself.' I couldn't help noticing that the backs of her hands were covered in thick black hair. I understood why the gloves were necessary.

'Oh!' I managed to croak. I took my place beside her and tried not to make a big thing out of the fact that I was sharing a urinal with a large bosomed stranger wearing stockings and suspenders and high heeled shoes. 'What about?' I asked her.

'It's a sort of autobiography, really,' said Josephine. 'I thought I'd call it 'From Joe to Josephine'.'

I said what a good title I thought that was. Josephine then finished what she was doing, readjusted her dress (there was a curiously appropriate 'Gentlemen Please Adjust Your Dress' sign on the wall above the washbasin), washed her hands and put her gloves on. A few moments later I followed her back into the main hall. I admired her confidence and her courage enormously and suddenly I didn't feel nervous.

* * *

'How did it go?' asked Patsy, when I got back to Bilbury Grange later that evening. Ben leapt up to welcome me home. I had left her behind though I suppose I could have taken her with me. She hated being left behind.

'I think it went quite well,' I replied, rubbing Ben behind the ears.

'Was it a good audience?'

'Oh, yes. They were very good.'

'What sort of people were they? Mostly women?'

'Mostly women,' I agreed. I hesitated. 'Largely,' I added.

‘What did you talk to them about?’

‘I kept it very informal,’ I said, rather vaguely. ‘Just talked about drugs and doctors and books and publishers.’

‘Did you tell them about the new book you’re writing?’

‘No. I didn’t want to talk about it yet.’

‘How many people were there?’

‘Oh, not too many. It was quite a compact and friendly audience. But they asked quite a few questions. There was a woman there who was writing a book of her own. She asked a lot of questions.’

‘How many people do you think there were, then?’

I hesitated.

‘Roughly?’

‘Three or four,’ I admitted, ruefully. ‘But Mr and Mrs Jilkes were on holiday and Mr Bedford is in hospital,’ I added, as an explanation.

‘Ah,’ said Patsy.

I thought for a moment. ‘Do you think I ought to send him a card?’ I asked her.

Patsy frowned. ‘Who?’

‘Mr Bedford. He’s in the Arthur Thomas Ward Ward at Exeter General.’

Patsy shook her head. ‘I don’t think so,’ she said. ‘If you start sending cards to all the people who weren’t there it’ll cost a fortune in stamps.’

‘You didn’t ask me why I’d said he was in the Arthur Thomas Ward Ward,’ I complained. ‘Two Wards!’ I added, unnecessarily.

Patsy looked puzzled. ‘Why should I have done?’

‘The man they named the ward after was called Ward,’ I explained, anxious to share the feeble joke.

‘Yes, I know,’ said Patsy. ‘He was a friend of my father’s.’

‘Oh.’ I said, rather disappointed. I felt rather cheated.

* * *

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I had to look twice to make sure it was him. But it was. Peter Marshall was wearing a bottle green jacket covered with sequins and a huge floppy pink bow tie. His hair was slicked down with hair cream. The effect was slightly spoilt by the fact that he was wearing rather baggy brown corduroy trousers but from the waist up he looked magnificent. ‘For this next trick I need a member of the audience,’ he said, stepping forward, towards the edge of the stage, and peered out to where Delilah Riddle was sitting. ‘It’s a card trick,’ he whispered, as though unwilling to break the spell which his presence on stage had created. ‘I need someone out of the audience to pick a card.’

‘Do you want them to come up onto the stage with you?’ the vicar’s wife asked him.

‘I think so,’ said Peter. He thought about it and then nodded firmly. ‘Yes, definitely,’ he said. I couldn’t take my eyes off him. I had never thought of Peter Marshall as a magician.

‘Then we’ll need some steps,’ said Delilah. She called to me.

‘Do you know if there are any steps we can use at the front of the stage?’ she asked. ‘Peter needs a member of the audience to go up onto the stage and we can’t expect people to clamber up a three foot high stage dressed in their best clothes.’

‘I’ll go and see what I can find.’ I carefully balanced the paint brush I was using to paint one of the fake stone pillars at the edge of the stage on the side of the paint pot and hurried backstage in search of steps. I rather enjoyed being assistant stage manager. I didn’t have to think or make any decisions at all. People gave me simple tasks to do and I had to try to finish them as quickly as I could. It was all delightfully simple and free of frustration or responsibility.

Backstage, ten or twelve people were crammed into a space the size of an ordinary bathroom. They were all busy doing things and trying to keep quiet. Patchy Fogg was oiling something that looked like and, indeed, was half a bicycle. Frank, from the Duck and Puddle, had his eyes closed and, was silently practising his monologue. I could tell what he was doing because his lips were moving. Miss Johnson, my former receptionist, was sewing sequins onto a pair of grey flannels (this, I realised, explained why Peter’s stage ensemble was so unbalanced). The Hewitt children (all three of them) were trying to practise their tap dancing but had taken their shoes off so that they didn’t make a noise. There was, inevitably, a fair degree of chaos.

‘Psst! You can’t go in there!’ whispered Thumper, as I tried the doorknob leading to the Bilbury Village Hall’s tiny washroom and only back stage lavatory. Thumper, whom Delilah had wisely appointed as stage manager, was spraying a huge sheet of hardboard with silver paint from an aerosol can. I leapt back as though the doorknob had been connected to the mains electricity.

‘Why not?’ I hissed back. We were in the middle of our first and only dress rehearsal and I no longer knew what to expect.

‘The girls are in there changing,’ explained Thumper.

‘Oh. I’m looking for some steps. Have you seen them?’

‘Try the store cupboard.’ Thumper cursed quietly as his spray can stopped spraying. He shook it, pressed the nozzle and then, when nothing would come out, shook it again. ‘Listen to that,’ he said, holding the can near to my ear and shaking it. ‘It’s half full,’ he said. ‘But it won’t spray.’

‘Frustrating, isn’t it?’ I agreed. ‘I hate that. I always feel cheated when the propellant runs out before the stuff it’s supposed to be propelling.’ I opened the door to the store cupboard and slid inside.

The store cupboard, like most store cupboards in village halls, was jammed from floor to ceiling with broken chairs, used light bulbs, bristleless brooms, old cardboard boxes and buckets with holes in them. They had presumably all been kept on the grounds that they might one day turn out to be useful. What those who had kept them had failed to understand was that a use is only ever found for such items the day after they have been eventually thrown away.

I learnt some time ago that the one sure way to find the lock which an apparently useless key opens is to throw the key away.

For four years during my medical school training I carried around with me a small piece of metal which looked as though it ought to have an important role to play in my life. It was round, about the size of an old, pre-decimalisation penny, and had two funny little prongs sticking out of one side. I had absolutely no idea what it was for but in each flat or hospital bedroom which I occupied I found it a safe corner in a dressing table drawer. I lost books, socks, pens, shirts, notebooks and bicycles but I never mislaid that little piece of metal because although I couldn't for the life of me remember what it was for I felt sure that it had a very important purpose.

I finally threw it away just six weeks before I qualified. I was having my annual spring clean and I looked at this little piece of metal, turning it first this way and then that way, and could still see no possible use for it. I decided that I had been looking after a piece of scrap metal. And so I threw it into the dustbin along with the old Christmas cards, the used batteries, the inkless ballpoint pens, the odd socks and the old train tickets.

The very next morning my watch stopped. I took it to a local jeweller. He studied it for twenty minutes then handed it back to me. It was, he said, an unusual make which could only be opened with a special key. 'What does this special key look like?' I asked him.

He carefully described the piece of metal I had thrown away. 'It's round, about the size of an old penny,' he said. 'You know, the ones we used to have before decimalisation. And it has two tiny little prongs sticking out of the side. The manufacturers always used to put one in the box in which the watch came.' I rushed back home but for the first time in a generation the dustbin men had arrived early and had spilt nothing.

During the following week I visited every jeweller in the town. They all knew exactly what I needed but none of them had one. 'Those little metal keys are like gold dust,' said one jeweller. 'I've been trying to get one for years but everyone with one of their watches has thrown their key away. If you ever find one I'll pay you £20 for it.' I ended up having to buy a new watch. I didn't throw the watch away, of course. I put it in a drawer because I knew that the day I threw it out would be the day before I would meet someone who had one of the funny little pieces of metal.

In addition to the legless chairs, the bald brooms and the leaky buckets, the cupboard contained a solid looking set of heavy wooden steps which looked as though they would fit neatly onto the front of the stage. (Since that was where they had come from in the first place this was not particularly surprising). I carefully moved away a couple of chairs and a bucket and then half dragged and half lifted the steps out through the cupboard door. As I did so the aerosol can which Thumper had been hitting with a huge metal wrench split into two, making a noise like a hand grenade as it did so. Paint flew all over the room, splattering everyone and everything with silver flecks. The tension in the room meant that this unexpected incident produced much squealing and loud complaining. The door to the lavatory/changing room flew open and Kay's head and shoulders appeared. She looked around, tutted loudly, and then swiftly closed the door again.

'Whoops!' said Thumper, his chest, face and arms covered in silver paint. (Since this is an accurate and honest account of life in Bilbury I feel honour bound to admit that the word he actually used was not 'Whoops!').

'What the hell did you do that for?' spluttered Frank, interrupted in mid monologue. 'I've forgotten where I was now.'

'I was just trying to get the bloody paint out of the can,' explained Thumper. 'I'd nearly finished! I only needed another couple of squirts.'

'I'll have to go right back to the beginning,' said Frank.

The door to the main hall suddenly burst open and Delilah Riddle burst in. Her face was crimson. 'Ssshhhh!' she hissed. 'We're trying to rehearse out here!' She stared at Thumper, at Frank and then one by one at everyone else. 'Why are you all covered in silver paint?' she asked. She wore half moon spectacles for close work and whenever she spoke to anyone she lowered her head a little so that she could look over the top of the lenses. It made her look like a very superior school mistress.

‘We had a bit of an accident with a faulty aerosol,’ explained a quick thinking Patchy Fogg. We all nodded and murmured and tried hard not to giggle. I couldn’t help thinking that it was all rather like being back at school. Thumper, the naughty boy we were protecting, opened his mouth to say something but then thought better of it and closed it again.

‘I’ve found those steps you wanted!’ I said, anxious to change the subject.

‘Oh wonderful!’ said Mrs Riddle. She looked at the steps, still half in and half out of the store room, with an artistically critical eye. ‘They look perfect!’ she said, and clapped her hands together in front of her chest. It made her look as though she was praying. ‘Would you bring them out here so that we can see exactly what they look like?’

Thumper and Patchy helped me move the steps out into the main body of the hall where Peter Marshall, still on stage, was pacing up and down rather nervously.

‘You lot go away now you’ve done that!’ he shouted to us from the stage, when we had manoeuvred the steps into position. ‘I don’t want you watching. You’ll make me nervous.’

‘Come on, Peter!’ said Patchy. ‘Show us a trick or two.’

‘I want to see you switch price labels on a tin of tomatoes,’ said Thumper. This was rather a sore point with Peter at the time. A customer who was camping in one of Colin Jackson’s fields had accused Peter of putting higher priced labels onto some of the goods she had selected. Peter, clearly angry at this barb, hurled a pink, stuffed rabbit at Thumper’s head. It missed by less than a foot.

‘Come on, now!’ said Miss Riddle. ‘Good heavens!’ She frowned at us as though she had never seen such behaviour before.

‘Are you doing your trick with a tax return?’ Patchy asked Peter. This was another cruel jibe for it had been rumoured for a month or so that the Inland Revenue had begun investigating our local shopkeeper. However, Peter’s reputation for hanging onto his money and deflecting criticism was such that the general feeling in the village was that the tax inspectors would give up first. Patchy ducked as what looked like a waste paper basket span through the air where his head had been a few moments earlier.

‘Stop it!’ said Mrs Riddle, sharply. She peered over the top of her spectacles. ‘What on earth is going on?’ she demanded. ‘You’re behaving like children!’

‘Sorry, Mrs Riddle,’ muttered Patchy and Thumper.

‘I’m surprised at you, doctor,’ said Mrs Riddle.

‘Sorry, Mrs Riddle,’ I said.

The three of us went round to the back of the stage again. We spent the next hour cleaning silver paint off everyone and everything.

* * *

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The moment I awoke I knew that something important was happening but for a few happy seconds I couldn't remember what it was. I lay there, enjoying those seconds of disorientated peace which lie between sleep and waking, watching the early rays of sunshine filtering through a narrow gap in the curtains and realising with a light heart that another glorious summer's day lay ahead. And then I remembered.

It was the day of the Old Bilburians first cricket match. The Bilbury Revels were truly taking over the summer.

The peaceful anticipation of another warm, summer's day was banished instantly. Why, I wondered, had we so steadfastly and defiantly refused to practise? Sitting in the Duck and Puddle it had all seemed a bit of a joke. But with the start of our first match now just hours away our failure to practise seemed foolhardy to say the least. I hadn't played cricket since I'd been at school and even then I hadn't played much of it. The only thing I could remember with any certainty was that cricket balls are extremely hard and that it hurt when they hit you. That fact did not provide me with comfort. A friend of mine who had been hit on the leg by a cricket ball had spent the rest of the summer limping around on crutches. I tried to remember when I'd last seen him.

'What's the matter?' asked Patsy, sleepily. She had only just woken and hadn't even opened her eyes but she knew that something was wrong.

'It's the first cricket match today,' I told her glumly. 'I don't think Roger Toohy ever fully recovered from the time when his leg was broken.'

Patsy sat up. 'Who is Roger Toohy?'

'Someone I was at school with.'

Patsy frowned. 'How did he break his leg?'

'He was hit by a cricket ball. He was fielding at silly mid on. We didn't used to wear shin pads in those days. I don't think any of us had ever seen a shin pad.'

'Well don't do any silly fielding!' said Patsy brightly. She kissed me on the cheek, climbed out of bed and pulled back the curtains. Sunshine flooded the room and Sophie and Emily, lying at the bottom of the bed, both yawned and shook their heads. Ben, lying across my feet, opened an eye and looked at me reproachfully as I tried to struggle out of bed.

'What does the sky look like?' I asked, leaden hearted.

'Bright blue!' replied Patsy instantly. 'There isn't a cloud in sight.'

'You don't think by any chance that it might rain later?'

'There isn't the remotest possibility of one raindrop falling today,' she said cheerfully. Her optimistic weather forecast was not born of malice. I think she'd just mistaken my hope for fear and was trying to cheer me up. It had been a glorious summer; one of the best I could ever remember. The days were long and warm and peaceful and when it rained it usually rained at night. Sometimes I thought that instead of living in Bilbury I was living in Camelot.

But I was not looking forward to our first cricket match.

Glumly, I clambered out of bed wondering which of my limbs would, by evening, be encased in plaster. The more I thought about it the more certain I was that Roger Toohy had never been able to walk properly at all after his accident. I liked my legs the way they were. I wandered over to the window and looked out at a world full of bright colours and singing birds. Flowers were bursting into bloom and Patsy was right: the day promised long, glorious hours of summer sunshine. Idly I allowed my gaze to drift across the shrubbery and towards our large front lawn - it looked like a cricket pitch. In my mind I could see Roger Toohy, gaunt and grey-faced, sitting in a wheelchair.

A summer day's glorious sunshine spoilt by the prospect of cricket balls being fired at my person. I sighed. 'Let's go and get some breakfast.' Ben, Sophie and Emily, eager for their breakfasts too, all raced for the door when they saw me heading in that direction.

I don't know who first started that nonsense about condemned men eating hearty breakfasts. I think it's nonsense. I could hardly eat anything. Patsy cooked freshly picked field mushrooms, scrambled eggs from her mother's hens and served them up on toasted home-made bread. Normally I would have wolfed everything down and would have probably asked for seconds too but although I recognised that it smelt good I just didn't feel hungry. I picked unenthusiastically at the food on my plate. I couldn't help thinking that if I was hit by a cricket ball and needed surgery and a general anaesthetic then it would be best if I hadn't had anything to eat at all.

'Come on,' sighed Patsy eventually. 'Leave that. Go for a walk round the garden. You'll feel better.'

* * *

I found Mr Parfitt already at work in the vegetable garden. He was busy feeding the ground around the raspberry canes with home-made liquid fertiliser. We had two varieties of liquid fertiliser with which to boost our crop production. One variety, allegedly rich in iron, had been prepared by putting armfuls of nettles into a tin bath full of water and leaving them to rot. The other variety, the type which my sense of smell told me that Mr Parfitt was using, was rich in nitrogen and had been prepared by putting dirty wool clippings into a water butt and leaving them there for a few months. When Patsy's father had shaved our sheep he had sold the main fleeces to the wool merchants on our behalf but he had left the grubbier bits of fleece - the bits taken from the non-eating ends of our sheep - and explained to me that we could use it first for making liquid manure and then, afterwards, for stuffing into cushions.

Patsy was right. After half an hour in the garden I felt much better.

* * *

Our first match, against an enthusiastic team of cricketers who had travelled down from the Midlands, was due to start at noon and it had been agreed that our team would meet in the bar at the Duck and Puddle at eleven o'clock. This was not because any member of the Old Bilburians thought that we needed an hour to get ourselves ready or because any of us anticipated taking part in serious discussions about team tactics but more, I suspect, because Thumper and the rest of the team seemed to think that if they had an hour's drinking behind them when the match started then they would play better.

I was in at least four minds about this. Part of me felt that it would be wise to remain sober and alert when taking part in a sporting encounter during which a solid piece of leather wrapped cork might well be travelling in the direction of my head at anything up to eighty or ninety miles an hour. Part of me felt that the anaesthetic quality of alcohol might prove useful were I to find myself unable to get out of the way in time. Part of me felt that even if I didn't play any better after a few drinks then I would at least think I was playing better and that since sports psychologists now seem to believe that sporting success is as much mental as physical then the extra confidence that the alcohol might give me would probably be invaluable. And part of me believed that if I began the game as tight as a drum then I wouldn't have to worry about the other three parts of me.

'Do you want another?' asked Thumper, pointing to my glass.

I looked at him and hiccupped. 'Beg your pardon,' I said; the phrase serving both as an apology for the hiccup and as an indication that I hadn't heard Thumper's comment.

'Another beer?'

I screwed up my eyes and tried to concentrate. 'How many have I had?' I glanced out of the window and saw a blurred version of Gilly, the landlady, walking past. She was carrying a huge blurry, cardboard box. I waved but she didn't see me.

‘You must get these windows cleaned,’ I told Frank. I decided that the problem was that they were still covered with salt from the last storm.

Frank looked across at me and frowned. ‘Why?’ he asked.

I didn’t know why so I couldn’t answer.

Thumper, who had been thinking, suddenly spoke. ‘Four, I think,’ he said.

I looked at him. ‘Four what?’

‘I think you’ve had four.’ He thought a little longer and corrected himself. ‘No, five,’ he said.

I shook my head and then winced. I don’t know why this should be but alcohol always seems to have a far more fearsome effect when drunk before lunch. When I was a medical student I could put away four or five pints of beer in an evening, balance a beer mat on my chin and sing twelve verses of Eskimo Nell without showing any signs of inebriation. But I had long ago noticed that if consumed before twelve noon the same amount of alcohol seemed to have a devastating effect. Some day a team of scientists with nothing better to do should look into this phenomenon. ‘I don’t think I’d better have any more, thank you,’ I said. I spoke slowly and clearly, not wanting anyone to think that I had too much to drink, and then looked across at the bar. Frank, the landlord, seemed to be having trouble in focusing his body.

‘Are you all right?’ asked Thumper, solicitously.

‘Yes. Tell Frank he’s all blurred.’

‘Frank, the doc says you’re all blurred.’

‘That’s all right,’ cried Frank, remarkably cheerfully for one so blurred. ‘Tell the doc he’s all blurred too.’

Thumper, who was standing next to me, passed on this information as though he were an essential relay station without whom intra Duck and Puddle communications would have been impossible. ‘Oh good,’ I said, for some reason relieved and cheered by this news. I was still puzzled by the fact that on my journey to the Duck and Puddle I had seen an apparently endless procession of energetic looking men in tracksuits jogging earnestly along the road.

I was about to comment on this bizarre occurrence when the door to the bar opened and Peter Marshall (also looking rather blurred) appeared. He was closely followed by a cluster of blurred but extremely athletic looking men. I immediately recognised them as the men I’d seen jogging through the lanes. They were all dressed in dazzling white shirts and equally dazzling white flannels and their white, studded cricket boots made a clatter as they marched across the red and black tiled floor at the entrance to the Duck and Puddle bar. The swarm of newcomers all had red faces and damp hair and had that clean and godly look that people have when they have just finished exercising and have showered away their sweat. Even though I had probably had a little bit too much to drink I realised that unless these cricketers had been stranded in our village through some unfortunate mechanical mishap this was our opposition.

‘They look a bit keen,’ murmured Thumper.

This was an understatement of quite heroic proportions. The opposition looked very keen and professional. If the match had been decided on appearances we would have lost there and then. They even smelt more professional than we did. Our lot smelt of stale tobacco, beer and sheep dip. They smelt of oil of wintergreen and massage oil.

Only three members of the Bilbury team wore anything that could be described as being either remotely white or sporty. Dr Brownlow was by far our smartest player. He wore the cricket trousers and shirt which he had worn when he had played for his university second eleven team in his early twenties. Both trousers and shirt were a rich Devon clotted cream colour rather than white and although they had probably once fitted him to perfection they were now what a tailor might politely describe as a little bit on the tight side. Unable to fasten the zip at the front Dr Brownlow had secured his privacy and guarded against unpleasant draughts and accusations of indecency with the aid of two large safety pins. The shirt, bought for a man with a thinner, more youthful chest was stretched to the limits. Around his neck Dr Brownlow had casually tied the sleeves of his college sweater.

Patchy Fogg wore a brand new plain white shirt that still had the original creases in it (and, as Patchy discovered a little later still had one or two pins in it too) and from the waist upwards he looked every bit a cricketer. Unfortunately, his bottom half was draped in a pair of faded blue jeans and so that part of him didn't look quite so much a cricketer.

Third in our list of sartorial leaders, and most imaginatively dressed of our fashion trend setters for the international sports scene, came Ernie McBride, Kay's husband, the locally famous tractor engineer from Ilfracombe. Ernie wore a pair of baggy, knee length pale khaki tennis shorts, a flowered Hawaiian shirt, (the predominant colours of which were orange and green) and a pair of brown, artificial leather strap on sandals. The effect of this otherwise potentially acceptable ensemble was rather spoilt by the pair of fluorescent pink socks which Ernie wore beneath his sandals. Until his marriage to Kay, the much loved Ernie had lived at home with his mother who had always bought his clothes for him. She had never grown out of the habit of buying his clothes a size too large so that he could grow into them and this meant that he had a permanently creased, slightly unkempt, baggy look and so, according to the fashion of the day, he either looked extremely fashionable or quite out of touch with reality.

'Do you think your players would like to get themselves a drink?' Peter asked their captain, a dour faced fellow whose trousers were held up with a club tie and whose upper lip was decorated with the thinnest moustache I have ever seen. He was just over six feet tall, looked as though he weighed around fourteen stone and was probably the shortest man and lightest man on their team. Still in his early thirties he was probably also the oldest. I couldn't help thinking of the amateur football side from Exeter which had gone to Italy on a five day tour and had accidentally got themselves booked for a match against Turin A.C., Rome B.D. or one of the other famous professional sides. It was a historic mismatch. The Italian professionals had scored 36 goals in the first half of the match. By then everyone realised that a mistake had been made. The professionals played the second half of the match with half a team and still won by the impressive total of 42 goals to five.

The captain nodded. 'I expect they would. They've only just got back from a five mile run round the village.' He craned his neck and spoke to his colleagues. 'Would you like drinks, lads?'

There was a deep throated, masculine murmur of approval.

On the other side of the bar Frank, anticipating a flurry of his favourite act beamed, flexed his right arm and grasped the handle that would enable him to draw twelve pints of foaming best Devon bitter.

The captain leant across the bar. 'Twelve lemonades, please,' he said to Frank. 'But individual bills, please,' he added.

Frank's smile disappeared as quickly as it had come.

'We have crisps, I think,' said Peter, anxious to drum up a little more trade. 'Should any of your players feel they need to replenish their salt levels.'

'I don't think so, thank you,' said the visitors' captain. 'Our nutritionist doesn't allow us to eat junk food.'

Hearing this Thumper and I exchanged horrified glances. I suddenly felt cold. The effects of the alcohol seemed to have worn off rather quickly.

'I think I'll have another drink,' I muttered to Thumper. 'Some of the opposition aren't looking quite as blurred as they did.'

Peter Marshall, however, was not in the slightest bit shaken by the fact that our opposition had their own nutritionist.

'Oh, our expert chap feels that crisps make an excellent pre-match snack,' he replied, without any hesitation. 'Full of iron and magnesium - as well as salt.'

I felt proud of him.

* * *

‘Have you seen Harry Burrows?’ asked Patchy Fogg, a few moments later. We were all standing outside the front door of the Duck and Puddle, watching in awe as our opponents went through a series of warm up exercises. As huge muscles stretched and relaxed and stretched again and tendons were toned and retoned the air was filled with annoyingly wholesome grunts and earnest sounding groans. On the other side of the road the village green, the arena for our forthcoming sporting encounter, waited patiently and silently for the dramas to come.

Josh Wilkins, our elderly and arthritic captain, leant heavily on his stick and wheezed uncomfortably as his lungs breathed in draughts of rich, fresh air.

‘He was in the bar when I arrived,’ I answered Patchy.

Harry Burrows, bank clerk, keen gardener, fisherman and father of six, was number five on our batting order and joyfully free of ambition. Now in his late forties, Harry had lost count of the number of times he had been offered promotion by the bank for which he worked. ‘He could have been managing his own branch by now,’ Dr Brownlow once told me. Harry steadfastly turned down all offers of promotion because moving up the career ladder would have meant moving to another area. ‘Why should I leave my friends, sell my house, abandon my garden and move to a part of the country I know nothing about to take on a job with extra responsibility?’ he asked. ‘I’ve got a house, a car, a steady job with a pension and twenty miles of free sea fishing within half an hour’s drive. Why do they think I would want to go and live in Manchester, Fulham or Swindon?’ Had Harry been married to a woman who wanted to be married to a man of greater substance then this philosophy might have led to many arguments and much unhappiness. But since Enid, Harry’s wife, was equally content with her life everything in his garden was lovely.

‘If I did that much exercise before a match I’d need to lie down for an hour,’ murmured Dr Brownlow, nodding towards the opposition, still earnestly performing their warm up exercises. He sighed. ‘It makes me feel tired just to look at them.’ Dr Brownlow’s trousers and shirt were so tight that when he moved he did so as though he was wearing armour.

‘Harry and Kevin were supposed to roll the pitch,’ said Patchy. ‘But I don’t think they have.’

Kevin Pettigrew was an electrician by trade but wasn’t terribly good at it. ‘I was O.K. until they invented electricity,’ he once admitted. ‘Then it all got a bit too complicated for me.’ A series of unfortunate accidents means that these days he earns his living as a car park attendant. He is notoriously unreliable though he has a mellow, laid back manner which makes it difficult for anyone to get cross with him. At the first sign of criticism he always apologises profusely and asks what he can do to put right that which he has done wrong. It is difficult to continue to feel cross with someone who is obviously contrite and his readiness to admit his mistakes invariably takes the wind out of his would-be critics. His broadly based lack of talent and skill is supplemented by an affection for rum.

Patchy pointed towards the centre of the green where the two sets of stumps were already standing waiting. The roller, huge, heavy and brown with rust, lay abandoned in the middle of the wicket. When I looked at it closely I felt sure that I could see a leg sticking out of one side of it. I knew that when last I had seen it, the roller had been quite devoid of legs.

Slightly alarmed, but not wanting to alarm anyone else unnecessarily, I walked fairly briskly out to the middle of the pitch and peered around the roller expecting the worst. The possibility of some sort of emergency had sobered me up. Patchy followed me. I’m sure that Dr Brownlow would have come too but he found walking difficult. What we saw wasn’t the worst, but it was pretty close. Harry and Kevin were sitting on the ground with a bottle of dark, Navy rum in between them. When I looked closer I could see that the bottle was empty. I didn’t need to look any closer to know where the rum had gone.

‘Iss werry, hic, heavy!’ said Kevin, pointing over his shoulder at the roller he was leaning against.

‘We had a little drink to give us strength,’ explained Harry. ‘Rum’s supposed to give you strength,’ he said. ‘Did you know that? It’s full of iron. Absolutely full of iron. It’s got more iron in it than spinch... sppin... spinch... spinstuff... that green stuff that Popeye eats... you know what I mean.’ Suddenly everyone in our team was an expert on minerals. I hadn’t been aware of this and although I was not entirely sure of the reliability of the information I nevertheless thanked Harry and showed what I hoped was suitably earnest appreciation.

‘Have you got enough strength to get up?’ asked Patchy. ‘The match is about to start!’

Harry thought about this for a moment and then shook his head. ‘No,’ he said. ‘Can’t stand up.’ He turned to Kevin. ‘We tried that, didn’t we?’

Kevin nodded. ‘We need more rum,’ he said. ‘We ran out. If we had more rum we’d be able to stand up.’

‘The last thing you need is more rum,’ I told him.

Kevin looked up at Patchy and I. ‘Have we let you down?’ he asked, suddenly but convincingly contrite.

‘Yes!’ said Patchy, bending down and pulling Kevin to his feet. I did the same with Harry. I had the worst job because Harry was several stones heavier than Kevin.

‘I’m very solly!’ said Kevin, who genuinely looked it. ‘I wouldn’t have let you down for the world. What can I do to put it right?’ His mouth happened to be close to my face when he spoke. I instinctively pulled away from the rum fumes and nearly dropped Harry.

‘We need to keep these two away from naked flames,’ said Patchy. ‘Let’s lean them up against the oak.’ He nodded towards a huge old tree which stands about twenty yards away from the wicket at square leg. The two of us then half carried and half dragged Kevin and Harry to the base of the trunk and left them sitting up against the tree. I noticed that Kevin had instinctively picked up the empty rum bottle and taken it with him. He clutched it to his chest the way a child will clutch a favourite teddy bear.

‘We’ll be all right in a couple of minutes,’ said Kevin, quite unrealistically.

‘Be absolutely fine in a couple of minutes,’ insisted Harry. He tried to get up but quickly abandoned this idea.

Patchy and I finished rolling the wicket and pushed the roller to the edge of the village green. We then walked back to the Duck and Puddle forecourt.

‘I’m afraid that two of our players have been taken ill,’ I announced.

‘Oh dear!’ said our opponents’ captain. ‘Nothing serious, I hope?’

‘They’ll be O.K.,’ I told him.

‘One of our players is a qualified first aider,’ said the captain. ‘Would you like him to have a look at them?’

‘That’s very kind of you,’ I said. ‘But I’m a doctor.’

The visitor raised an eyebrow, as though he found this difficult to believe. I suppose you couldn’t blame him. He was probably used to doctors who looked like doctors.

I turned away from him and spoke to Peter Marshall. ‘Have they tossed yet?’ I whispered.

Peter shook his head.

‘We’re two men short,’ I told him. I quickly explained about Harry and Kevin.

‘We’re three men short,’ said Peter...

I stared at him and frowned.

‘Colin Jackson was supposed to be batting at number three,’ he reminded me. He sighed. ‘His wife rang twenty minutes ago. A cow trod on his foot.’

‘Can’t he play on one leg?’

‘You know Colin,’ said Peter. ‘He’s gone to bed. He thinks he’ll die if he walks on it.’

‘We can’t play with eight men! They’d slaughter us if we played with twenty two men!’

‘Good luck you chaps!’ cried a cheerful female voice.

We both turned and looked. Kay McBride, the district nurse, had stopped her car outside the pub and was waving to us.

Peter looked at me and I looked at him and then Peter looked back at Kay. ‘Park your car!’ he shouted. ‘You’re playing.’

Kay stared at him and laughed. ‘Don’t be daft!’ she said.

‘We need you!’ I told her. Peter and I walked across to her and explained what had happened.

‘But I’ve never played cricket!’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘Do they let women play?’

‘They do now.’

‘Who’s your captain?’ asked the visiting captain. He looked at his watch. ‘Shouldn’t we toss and get on with it? My chaps are all warmed up and ready to go.’

‘Is it better for us to bat first or field first?’ I asked Peter.

‘How soon will Harry and Kevin be fit to play?’

‘Wednesday, I should think,’ I told him, gloomily. I thought about it for a moment. ‘They might be able to stand up for the second innings,’ I said.

‘Then I’ll tell Josh we have to field,’ said Peter, walking briskly over towards our captain. ‘That’s O.K. because that’s what we normally do anyway.’

‘Wouldn’t we be better off batting first?’ I asked Peter a couple of minutes later as we strolled onto the field behind Josh.

‘When we bat there’s a chance that we’ll all be out in half an hour,’ explained Peter. ‘In which case we’ll be batting two men short if we bat now. If we bat second then we should have eleven players. Besides,’ he added, ‘Harry and Kevin can field lying down but they have to stand up to bat.’

I was deeply impressed with Peter’s logic and strongly suspected that these were not problems that were dealt with in any detail in standard cricket coaching manuals.

* * *

I think it is fair to say that our opponents were not quite prepared for combat with the Old Bilburians Cricket Club. As their opening batsmen (tall, broad, immaculately attired and carrying bats which were still new enough to show individual marks where contact had been made with the ball) walked out to the wicket I could see that there were things about our team which surprised them.

It was, for example, probably the first time they had seen a wicket keeper sitting in a deck chair.

Josh, our captain, suffers terribly with his arthritis and though he is mentally alert for his age, and bravely regards the deterioration in his visual and auditory capacities as an inevitable consequence of advancing years, we had agreed among ourselves that he could not possibly be expected to stand for a day's cricket. Between overs, Thumper and I carried Josh and the deck chair from one end of the pitch to the other.

It may well have been the first time they had seen a fielder (Harry) sitting with his back to a tree, just a few yards away from the wicket. It was probably the first time they had seen a fielder lying on his side at mid on. This was Kevin, who had been carefully positioned to stop any straight on drives. And it was almost certainly the first time they had seen a buxom district nurse, still attired in her full uniform, fielding at third man with her dress tucked into her knickers.

They stood together in the middle of the wicket and looked around them in quiet amazement. And then, after exchanging a brief word or two, one of them walked up the wicket and spoke to the vicar, who was umpiring for us. Our other umpire hadn't turned up so the vicar had to stand at both ends (though not at once).

'Are that man's hands tied together?' he asked the vicar, nodding towards Harry.

The vicar followed the batsman's gaze, peered at Harry, turned back and nodded. 'Yes, I think you're right.' At Thumper's suggestion we had used a length of binder twine to tie Harry's hands together into a catching position. We had used another piece of string, looped around his neck, to hold his hands a few inches away from his chest in a perfect catching position.

The batsman frowned. 'Is that allowed?' he asked.

The vicar thought for a moment. 'I don't think it's not allowed,' he said. 'I don't think I've ever seen anything in the laws about it. Have you?'

The batsman had to admit that he too had never seen anything in the laws forbidding the tying together of a fielder's hands.

'What about the deckchair?' he asked. 'Is that allowed?'

The vicar thought carefully again. 'I don't think there's a problem,' he said. 'As long as the wicket keeper doesn't use the deckchair to assist him in making a dismissal.'

Josh had wisely decided that Thumper would open the bowling for us. This was not a difficult decision to make for when those of us who could move had gathered around Josh to discuss the team's tactics only Thumper Robinson and Patchy Fogg had admitted to any bowling experience. Since Patchy claimed to bowl either leg breaks or off breaks ('but definitely something slow') it was felt that he should be introduced into the Bilbury attack a little later on in the innings. What this meant in practice was that he would be bowling the second over.

'Play!' cried the umpire, when the opposition's opening batsman had finally settled down, taken guard, flattened a molehill which he seemed to think might interfere with play and removed the heads, stalks and leaves from a large dandelion plant growing in the crease.

Thumper, who had been carefully marking out his run up and was by now almost out of earshot put a hand to his ear to indicate that he wasn't quite sure whether or not he could start bowling.

'PLAY!' yelled the vicar.

Thumper smiled, waved and began his approach to the wicket. He ran as fast as he could for about thirty or forty yards, and then started to slow down. By the time he was about ten yards away from the delivery crease he was panting heavily and sweating profusely. By the time he was ready to deliver the ball he had slowed to a gentle walking pace.

The opposition batsman was clearly deceived by the pace and flight of Thumper's first ball. He had probably been misled by Thumper's enthusiastic run up and had not expected a slow, looping full toss. He changed his planned backward defensive stroke into a full blooded drive but still overestimated the speed of the ball and had completed his stroke by the time the ball finally arrived. As the ball hit him in the groin he sank noiselessly but gracefully to the ground. The vicar, the other batsman and I rushed forward to see if we could help. Dr Brownlow, moving as quickly as his clothes would let him, joined us a moment or two later. Thumper, looking slightly guilty and embarrassed, walked a third of the way down the wicket as though planning to apologise, realised that this was not what was normally expected of a fearsome opening bowler and stayed where he was.

Even though he was wearing the usual protection the batsman was in no fit state to continue. Patchy Fogg and I helped him off the pitch and handed him over to his colleagues who were sitting, looking slightly stunned, on a row of benches at the edge of the village green. As we lowered him to the ground he groaned loudly. ‘Listen, friend,’ said Patchy to the injured batsman, ‘the only thing you can count on in this life is that some terrible things will happen to you. There may be some good things. But you can guarantee that there will be bad things. This was one of the bad things.’ He beamed at the bemused batsman. ‘But look on the bright side,’ he finished, ‘this is one of the bad things that you haven’t got to worry about happening because it’s already happened.’

The batsman frowned and looked at his colleagues. They looked as puzzled as he did.

‘Am I right in thinking that one of your fielders has got his hands tied together?’ the opposition captain asked us.

I told him that he was, indeed, quite right about this.

‘Is this allowed? Is there anything in the laws about it?’

‘I don’t think there’s anything in the laws about tying together a fielder’s hands,’ I said. ‘Harry’s a bit tired,’ I added, in explanation.

‘Ah!’ said the opposition captain. ‘And the deckchair?’

‘Josh has terrible arthritis,’ I explained. ‘He finds it more comfortable to field in a deckchair.’

‘I’ve never seen anything like it,’ said the opposition captain, shaking his head.

‘No,’ I agreed. ‘I suppose not.’

‘Is that a woman you’ve got fielding at third man?’

‘Yes,’ I agreed. I thought about it for a moment. ‘I suppose we ought to say that she’s at third woman!’ I said.

‘Your captain didn’t mention that you were playing a mixed side.’

‘It’s not a very mixed side,’ I said. ‘Kay’s our only female player. She wouldn’t have been playing at all but Colin Jackson had his foot trodden on by a cow. She’s married to Ernie,’ I said. ‘The chap in shorts.’ I pointed to Ernie. The opposition number three batsman finished fastening on his pads and started off towards the crease. ‘I’d better get back,’ I said, apologetically. ‘I don’t want them to start without me.’

* * *

By lunch our opponents had scored 128 runs and had used up exactly half of their allocation of 40 overs. And although one of their batsmen had to retire hurt they still hadn’t lost any wickets. The two batsmen were clearly wary and unwilling to take risks. I suspect that this was simply because they were wary about being dismissed cheaply by such a poor side. In any team sport good sides are at a tremendous disadvantage when playing poor sides. A good side can hardly take much pride in a win when the opposition is of low quality but their self-esteem and self-respect can take quite a battering if they lose.

The remainder of Thumper’s first over had been something of a disaster. The replacement batsman had shown very little respect for Thumper’s bowling and had hit him for two fours and a six. If it hadn’t been for Patchy Fogg’s bowling the opposition score would have been even more impressive. Patchy’s main advantage was that no one had any idea what he was bowling. He didn’t know. We didn’t know. And the opposition batsmen certainly didn’t know. Sometimes the ball would turn prodigiously to the left. Sometimes it would turn an equally impressive amount to the right. Sometimes it would leap up into the air. Sometimes it would land and shoot forwards along the ground. And most of the time it wouldn't turn or do anything exceptional at all. The two batsmen could see that Patchy had no idea what he was doing and this intimidated them enormously for they were both terrified of being dismissed by a bowler who had no control at all over the ball. Both batsmen were dismissed immediately after lunch and in both cases the dismissals were neither expected nor predictable. Nor, for that matter were they explicable or believable.

When watching the credits rolling at the end of a movie I have often wondered whether it is really necessary to list so many people. Occasionally, at the end of an epic, the list goes on and on for so long that it seems as if it would have been quicker to have listed all the people in California who weren't involved.

After the first of our two unexpected dismissals, the first glorious post-prandial success, I felt that cricket scorers ought to follow the movie makers' example and spread the credit around a little more. The scorebook will for ever show that H. Ainsworth was bowled by P. Fogg and caught by T. Robinson but this bald and sketchy outline of the truth does not in any way begin to tell the true story. This dismissal was, perhaps like no other dismissal in cricket, a genuine team effort and I was proud to have played a part in it.

Before lunch, Ainsworth, the hugely muscled assistant manager of an estate agents' shop, had batted carefully and wisely and had accumulated 47 runs without taking any chances whatsoever. During the luncheon interval he had clearly been advised by his team captain to push the scoring rate along a little and when he returned to the crease, full of pork pie, egg salad and thickly cut home-made bread spread with creamy, hand-churned butter he walked down the wicket to Patchy's first delivery and played a shot that seemed guaranteed to turn the ball into some sort of intergalactic object.

Unfortunately for Ainsworth the ball didn't come off the middle of the bat but hit the edge and instead of clearing the village green, the road, the cottages on the other side of the road and the gardens behind the cottages on the other side of the road (as it would have surely done if it had been hit cleanly) it skied upwards, almost out of sight.

It was Dr Brownlow who first realised that the ball was going to come down into the branches of the oak tree at square leg. He called out to tell us all this and so deserves credit in the scorer's book for conceiving Mr Ainsworth's dismissal. Credit for inspiring the execution of the dismissal must go to Frank Parsons, the corpulent, genial landlord of the Duck and Puddle for it was he who had the presence of mind to lead us into action with a shout of: 'Let's try and catch it!'.

For hours after the match there was much discussion about the legality of this dismissal. Our visitors claimed, without rancour, that the ball was 'dead' when it first hit the tree and that what happened to it thereafter was of no relevance to the match. We claimed (and, importantly, our claim was supported by the umpire) that the tree was merely a local hazard which had, in practice, made the catching of the ball considerably more difficult than it would have been had the tree not been there. Since no one had a copy of the laws of cricket the umpire's decision was adopted.

At the time of the incident, of course, no one was very concerned about the laws of cricket. Encouraged by Frank's vocal enthusiasm all those who could move (Kevin was still fielding prone, Harry was still sitting with his back to the tree with his hands tied into a catching position and although Josh did try to get up he didn't manage to escape from his deckchair until it was too late for him to take an active part in the Ainsworth dismissal) hurried up to the base of the oak tree and stood around, looking upwards, waiting for the ball to appear. We could hear it crashing through the branches but for what seemed like an hour or so we couldn't see anything at all.

It was Patchy Fogg who saw it first, and for this he deserves a large chunk of the credit for what happened next. Without his alert advice the ball might well have come crashing down to the ground before any of us could spot it. 'There it is!' he cried, pointing upwards.

We all followed his outstretched arm and looked up. Frank, Kay McBride, Dr Brownlow and I, who were all standing on the wrong side of the tree, hurried around to join Patchy and Ernie McBride who were standing directly underneath the ball. The two batsmen were racing up and down the wicket as quickly as they could but none of us was concerned with what they were doing. We all knew that this was our first real opportunity to take a wicket. Heads thrown back we all watched carefully as the ball bounced from one branch to another, crashing through leaves and temporarily disappearing and reappearing. It was, I suppose, inevitable that some of us would collide. Frank, Kay and I, all looking upwards and none of us looking where we were going, crashed into each other and seconds later lay sprawled flat on the ground on our backs. Slowed down by his trousers and shirt, Dr Brownlow was several yards behind us at the moment of impact. Temporarily distracted, Patchy, Thumper and Ernie all looked down to see what had happened. It was at that inconvenient moment that the ball chose to begin its final, untroubled descent from branch to ground.

Patchy still says that he would have been able to catch the ball if he hadn't been staring at Frank, Kay and I, lying flat on our backs on the ground. Ernie and Thumper both think that the ball's final ricochet off the lowest branch of the tree was so unpredictable that no one would have been able to catch it. Regardless of this disagreement Kay and I both claim that our part in the dismissal was crucial; we argue that if we hadn't bumped into him Frank wouldn't have ended up flat on his back and the ball would have probably just landed on the grass. Frank insists that he and not Thumper should have been credited with the catch since it was he who managed to get in the way of the ball. None of this matters, of course, because what happened was that with a strange, half thuddy, half squelchy sort of sound the ball landed on Frank's abdomen.

For a brief moment it stayed where it was. Frank's shirt had burst open with his fall, revealing his large, pink (and surprisingly hairless) abdomen and the cricket ball looked for all the world like a cherry bobbing around on a bowl of pink blancmange.

'It's going to roll off!' cried Ernie, playing his own small but crucial part in the Ainsworth dismissal.

And so it was Thumper, diving to his left, who caught the ball as it started to roll off Frank's abdomen.

In the end, as I have already reported, the dismissal went down in the score book as H. Ainsworth bowled P. Fogg and caught T. Robinson but that simple shorthand goes nowhere near enough towards explaining the full story of the quite remarkable Ainsworth dismissal.

Gilly Parsons brought out drinks as we recovered from the excitement. One of the visiting batsmen said that he had never before seen a woman carry so many full pint glasses without spilling a drop. Much to the horror of Frank and Thumper the other batsman told us that on the grounds where he usually played it was more usual for 'drinks' to consist of glasses of orange squash.

* * *

In the end the visitors didn't score as many runs as we had at first feared. Much to our own surprise and delight the Ainsworth dismissal turned out to be the stimulus that inspired us to become something of a team. At the same time this incident seemed to have a very demoralising effect on our opponents. They rather seemed to regard it as a sign that the fates were conspiring against them.

There were, of course, one or two more highlights and memorable moments in their innings.

After the miserable Ainsworth had left the field trailing his bat, muttering curses about trees and threatening to do things with a chainsaw that would bring tears to any arborphile's eyes he was briskly replaced by his team captain, a man who had not up until that point impressed me as being the sort of fellow who gets a lot of laughs out of life. The corners of the fellow's mouth drooped downwards, giving him the permanent appearance of a man who has spent too much of his life sucking lemons. He did not strike me as a man who did anything for fun and he was certainly not amused when his first shot, a sizzling drive which sent the ball hissing across the grass, was stopped from reaching the boundary by the inert form of Kevin Pettigrew. Much to everyone's surprise the semiconscious Kevin had probably been our best fielder. He had certainly saved an enormous number of runs, though the personal cost was a high one and a fortnight later his wife told Patsy that some of the bruises he had acquired in the line of duty were still visible.

'Well, really!' snorted the captain. He stalked down the wicket and glowered at the vicar. 'Is that allowed, umpire?' he demanded, in the tone of a man who is accustomed to having his whims fulfilled and his fancies expedited.

The vicar said that although he realised that it was unusual to have a semicomatose fielder he didn't think he knew of any law which prevented a member of a side fielding the ball while asleep and recumbent. 'As long as he doesn't use any article of clothing to assist him,' added the vicar.

The captain made the mistake of allowing this relatively trivial incident to disturb his composure and he unwisely walked down the wicket and tried to hit the next ball into an adjacent county. Unfortunately, his enthusiasm proved too much for his skill and after completely missing the ball he span round just in time to see Josh, leaning forward in his deckchair, picking up the ball and rolling it back along the ground towards the stumps. I was fielding at slip at the time and had a perfect view. The sight of the captain's face as he watched his bails drop almost noiselessly to the ground was worth almost any amount of ready money. The not inconsiderable, and largely partisan, crowd which had gathered around the edge of the village green showed their appreciation in the traditional way.

In the end, although they reached the very respectable score of 189 runs our opponents would have to agree that they batted disappointingly. As the church clock struck three we had 40 overs in which to score 190 runs to win. No one seriously expected us to be able to do it. But it was a much smaller target than we had at one time feared that we would face.

* * *

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

While Thumper, Peter, Patchy, Kay and the rest of us sat on the grass quenching our thirsts and appetites with tankards of beer and plates of crusty sandwiches our opponents began to prepare for their stint in the field. Their injured player, the opening batsman who had received a blow in the groin, seemed keen to resume his involvement in the match. He still looked a little pale and rather groggy but, when questioned by his captain, insisted that he was fit enough to bowl. This was not a view with which I had much sympathy when I watched him warming up. He turned out to be one of those infuriatingly talented individuals who opens both the batting and the bowling; a fast bowler with a mission to maim.

‘I don’t fancy my chances against him,’ I muttered to Dr Brownlow, as we lay sprawled on the grass watching this huge sporting hooligan burst out of convalescence, speed through recuperation and arrive at top flight fitness, all in the space of about fifteen minutes. I have never wished anyone ill but I wouldn’t have minded if he had decided to spend a little longer getting better.

Dr Brownlow leant a little in my direction. ‘Pop to my car and get my bag, will you?’ He grimaced. ‘I’d go myself but I want to delay having to get up for as long as possible.’

I grinned at him, got up, strolled over to his elderly Rolls Royce which was parked in front of the Duck and Puddle, opened the front door and took out his black, leather medical bag. It was some time since Dr Brownlow had practised medicine but he still kept his black bag in the car in case of emergencies. And I’d never seen him lock his car or hear him complain that anything had been stolen. Crime was not a problem which figured high on our list of anxieties. There had been an incident the previous summer which worried us all when Frank, the publican, noticed that a spare gallon can of petrol had disappeared from his garage (actually the can itself hadn’t disappeared - but the petrol had) and for a while there was some concern in the village that we might have been contaminated by the twentieth century crime wave which seems to have swept the nation. And then Frank received a letter from Manchester which contained a generous cheque and an explanation. The petrol had, it seemed, been taken by a holiday-maker who had set off from Ilfracombe early one Saturday morning in an attempt to beat the holiday rush. He had not realised that the local garages would not be open at that time of night and during his search for a petrol station had driven round and round getting more and more lost. Eventually he had spluttered to a halt a hundred yards away from the Duck and Puddle and rather than wake anyone up had simply helped himself to Frank’s petrol. We were all mightily relieved when we discovered that we did not have a major criminal living in our midst.

‘What do you suggest we do?’ I asked, putting his bag down beside him and lowering myself back down onto the grass. ‘If you fill a couple of syringes with a decent tranquilliser I could probably put him out of action before he manages to kill me!’

Dr Brownlow, who was rummaging through his bag, just grunted. ‘This will do!’ he said at long last, producing a piece of official looking paper.

‘What on earth is that?’ I asked, peering over his shoulder.

‘It’s an S. B. form,’ explained Dr Brownlow. ‘I had these printed years ago.’ He handed me the form. Underneath a very impressive looking crest and a dozen words in Latin were printed the following words:

I.................... of........................... do hereby declare that I have rejected the medical advice of Dr ....

Furthermore, I understand that by rejecting his advice I am putting my health at risk. I take full responsibility for my actions.

Signed...

Witnessed by..

I looked at Dr Brownlow and frowned. ‘How’s this going to help us?’ I asked him.

‘Help me up and then watch,’ said Dr Brownlow, holding up a hand so that I could pull him to his feet.

I followed him as he marched stiffly over to where the fast bowler was busy practising his scowl.

‘I’m Dr Brownlow,’ said Dr Brownlow. He put his black bag down on the grass and then formally introduced me. ‘How are you feeling?’ he asked the fast bowler solicitously.

The fast bowler stopped and thought about his answer for a moment. ‘I’m all right!’ he said gruffly.

‘May I examine you?’ asked Dr Brownlow.

The fast bowler blinked. ‘What for?’

‘To make sure that you’re fit to play,’ he said.

The fast bowler turned and looked around for his captain. ‘Captain!’ he called. ‘These doctors want to examine me. Is it all right?’

The captain came scurrying over.

‘I just thought I’d give your chap the once over,’ explained Dr Brownlow, giving the captain what he called his ten guinea smile.

‘That’s very decent of you,’ said the captain, succumbing entirely to Dr Brownlow’s admirable bedside manner.

‘Not at all,’ said Dr Brownlow. He stood on tip toes, reached up and peered into the fast bowler’s eyes. Satisfied with that he lowered himself back down onto the ground. ‘Open your mouth!’ The fast bowler did exactly as he was told.

‘Multiply 234 by 56,’ said Dr Brownlow briskly.

The fast bowler stared at him. ‘Yer what?’

Dr Brownlow repeated the instruction. ‘It’s a mental agility test,’ he explained. ‘Designed to make sure that you aren’t suffering from any delayed effects.’

The fast bowler frowned and scratched his head. ‘I dunno.’

‘Never mind,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘Don’t worry about it.’ He smiled. ‘You’re doing fine,’ he said, somehow managing to give the fast bowler the impression that he wasn’t doing fine at all.

‘Touch your left ear with your right forefinger.’

The fast bowler lifted his left arm, lowered it, raised his right arm, thought for a moment, touched his right ear with his left thumb, touched his nose with his right forefinger and went very red.

‘I’ve never been any good at this sort of stuff,’ he said, rather crossly. Beads of perspiration were beginning to form on his brow.

‘I think you ought to sit out the rest of the match,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘We’ll find a substitute to field for you.’

The fast bowler stared at Dr Brownlow as though he’d suggested that he retire from the game and take up ballet dancing instead. He stood up straight, squared his shoulders and stuck out his not insignificant chin.

‘I’m gunna play!’ he said defiantly.

Dr Brownlow let out a little sigh, took one of his forms from his bag and handed it to the giant. ‘Then you must sign this,' he said.

'Wot's that?'

'Just a form confirming that you've rejected my advice and chosen to risk your health by continuing to play,' said Dr Brownlow.

The fast bowler blanched but took the form that Dr Brownlow held out. He studied it, thought about it for a moment and then, with some visible reluctance, took the pen that Dr Brownlow offered, filled in the form and then scrawled his signature in the appropriate place.

'I'll give him thirty minutes at most,' whispered Dr Brownlow as we walked back to his Rolls to deposit his black bag. 'Every time he passes near you ask him if he's still feeling all right. Tell everyone else to do the same.'

I didn't think our huge opponent would crack so easily but I was prepared to give it a try. 'What does S. B. mean?' I asked him, as we walked back onto the village green.

'S. B.?'

'You said the forms were S. B. forms.'

'Ah,' smiled Dr Brownlow. He leant towards me, conspiratorially. 'S. B. stands for silly beggar,' he told me.' I had the forms printed for silly beggars who won't listen to good advice.'

Just then Peter Marshall approached us and handed me a cricket pad. 'Since you're opening the batting you'd better put this on,' he said. He turned to Dr Brownlow. 'Do you think Kevin and Harry are fit to play?' he asked.

'Can they stand up?' asked Dr Brownlow.

'Just about,' said Peter.

'Then they're fit to play,' said Dr Brownlow. 'I'm going to get myself another beer. Do either of you want one?'

'No, thanks,' I said. 'Not just before I bat.' I turned to Peter. 'Where's the other one?'

'Yes, please. I'll have a pint,' replied Peter. He frowned. 'Other one what?'

'Pad.' I held up the pad he'd given me. 'You've only given me one.'

'Josh has got the other one,' explained Peter. 'You've got one each.'

I looked at the single pad and sighed. It was grey and flimsy.

'Which leg am I supposed to put it on?'

'Up to you, doc!' said Peter. 'Do you bat right handed?'

'Yes. I think so.' I took up a practice batting stance. 'Yes.'

'Then put the pad on your left leg. That's the one that is most likely to be hit. They're good pads. I got them from Mrs Winterbottom. They used to belong to her husband.'

'He was over 80 when he died and he'd been bedridden for years. He probably hadn't played cricket since the last war!'

'A pad's a pad!' said Peter. 'What's wrong with them?'

'These are antiques!' I told him. 'We should be auctioning them not playing in them!'

Peter looked concerned and bent down to examine the pad I was preparing to put on. ‘Well, just make sure you don’t damage it,’ he said. ‘I’ll take them into one of the antique dealers in South Molton next week.’ He looked thoughtful. ‘Maybe you should put it on your other leg?’

I stared at him.

‘So that it won’t be so likely to get hit by the ball,’ he explained.

I ignored him and sighed. ‘We don’t have to share a bat, do we?’ I asked, buckling my solitary pad onto my left leg. The leather straps were dry and cracked and the buckles were rusty.

‘Of course not!’ said Peter. ‘I bought two brand new ones. I’ll get them.’ He hurried off and returned a few moments later clutching a pair of those cheap, rather flimsy cricket bats that are sold for beach cricket and made for use with old tennis balls. Josh followed him over.

I took one of the bats from Peter and stared at it. ‘We can’t play with those!’ I protested. ‘They’re far too small and they’ve got no springing. I thought you said you were going to get proper bats!’ I twirled the bat around. ‘These are made of balsa wood!’ I turned the bat around. It carried a sticker on the back. The sticker said: ‘Foreign Made’. There was a price label for three shillings and sixpence.

‘They’re proper bats!’ insisted Peter. ‘Look!’ he said, reaching out, turning round the bat I was holding and pointing to the front of it. ‘Look at that!’

I looked at the front of the bat. In black print it said: ‘W. G. Grace Special.’

‘There you are!’ said Peter. ‘W. G. Grace! He was a proper cricketer!’

I sighed, took one of the bats from him and turned to Josh. ‘Come on,’ I said. ‘Let’s get it over with.’

* * *

Apart from his arthritis, his bad chest, his angina, his bad hearing, his poor eyesight and his prostate trouble Josh Wilkins was in pretty good health for a man of his advanced years. He still had a terrific sense of humour, although jokes and witticisms sometimes had to be slowly explained to him several times before he could benefit fully from every nuance, and he never tired of telling people that on a recent visit to the chiropodist he had been assured that he had feet that would have looked good on a man of seventy. However, it was probably not unfair to say that Josh was rather a long way past his prime as a sportsman.

As we walked out to the wicket together I had to keep stopping so that he could catch up with me and by the time we finally arrived at our destination he was wheezing badly and using his rather small cricket bat as an impromptu walking stick.

‘Glad you could both make it,’ said the opposition captain, when we finally arrived. I thought it was rather unnecessarily sarcastic of him. ‘We were getting worried that we would have to start without you.’

At the other end of his twenty yard run up, the fast bowler glared at us all. ‘Can I start?’ he called to the umpire. The vicar held up a hand while I walked down the wicket to defend my stumps. I took guard, as I’d seen the professionals do, looked around the village green to check on the positions of the fielders, adjusted my pad, twirled my little bat, which felt absurdly flimsy, swallowed hard and then nodded to the vicar to let him know that I was as ready as I was going to get.

Peter said afterwards that I must have damaged the bat in some way while I was walking out to the wicket. ‘It was in perfectly good condition when I handed it over to you,’ he insisted. ‘You must have leant on it, or banged it against the ground.’ I still maintain that the problem was that the bat was too flimsy for proper cricket and that a well-made bat would have withstood all such traumas without ill-effect.

I suppose that from a distance what happened must have all seemed rather funny. But from where I was standing it didn’t seem funny at all. I didn’t see the ball after it left the fast bowler’s hand until it hit my bat. And then there was chaos. Cries of ‘Catch it!’ were interspersed with cries of ‘Watch out!’ When I looked down I found that although I was still holding the handle of a bat the handle had no blade attached to it. I discovered afterwards that when the ball had hit the bat the latter had instantly broken and while the ball had flown off in one direction the best part of the bat had flown off in another direction. The good news was that no one was hurt by the piece of airborne cricket bat. The even better news was that the fielders were so distracted by what had happened that none of them managed to catch the ball.

After that the opposition had little option but to lend us their bats. It was either that or abandon the match.

* * *

By the end of the third over we had scored 22 runs (mostly extras) and lost three wickets. The match looked almost finished. Josh had been our first victim. The second ball I had received had slid off the face of my bat (without either my knowledge or consent I confess) and had squirted down to long leg at a tremendous pace. Seeing the ball disappear across the grass and realising that there were no fielders in the area I had immediately looked down the wicket, yelled ‘Run!’ and started off for the other crease. I don’t think Josh heard me because he didn’t move straight away but he soon realised what was happening when he saw me tearing down the pitch towards him. When I arrived at his end of the wicket he had made very little progress and still had about twenty yards to go to reach safety. I checked the position of the fielder who was chasing the ball and decided that we would have plenty of time to make it so I dropped my borrowed bat on the ground, took Josh’s arm and started to walk with him back in the direction from which I had come. When I had escorted him to the batting crease, and made sure that he was fairly stable and not likely to topple onto his wicket, I scampered back up the pitch as quickly as I could.

Although I had effectively run two and walked one and the scorebook would only register a single I was still quite pleased with myself for masterminding what had turned out to be a fairly complicated exercise in logistics.

Then, just as I was relaxing a little and thinking of the century that would be mine if I could just get those other 99 runs, I heard a huge cry from Josh’s end of the wicket. I turned round just in time to see him walking slowly back up the pitch towards me and pointing to the bat which lay on the ground at my feet.

‘I forgot my bat!’ he shouted to me.

‘You’ve got yours! I shouted. He was using it as a walking stick.

When they ran him out he was a third of the way down the wicket. They nearly ran me out at the same time because I had started down the pitch to try to explain to him that the bat he could see was the one I was using whereas the stick he was using to help him walk up the pitch to fetch his bat was, in fact, his bat.

When I saw that it was too late to save him I turned round and just got back into my crease in time. Josh was quite sporting about it. He said that he needed to go to the lavatory anyway. All things considered we were pretty well resigned to the fact that it was just a matter of time before we lost, though to be honest I think we all felt that we had put up a better show than anyone might have expected.

* * *

After our third wicket fell, Kay McBride came out to bat. During the interval she had gone back to her cottage to change and to put on something more appropriate for the occasion and was wearing a breathtakingly short, white tennis skirt and a diaphanous white blouse which was clearly a couple of sizes too small for her. The opposition certainly found it extremely difficult to concentrate. When Kay bent down into her batting stance the fielders behind her found themselves staring at the tops of her stockings and a foot of white thigh while the fielders in front of her found themselves gazing into an apparently bottomless cleavage. I don’t know whether it was because they were distracted by these unexpected visions of rural loveliness or because they didn’t want her stay at the wicket to be too short-lived but the fielders did not react particularly quickly when Kay was at the crease.

The humourless fast bowler was not amused by what he clearly regarded as indefensible sloppiness and when the second catch was put down he got very angry and said some very hurtful things. He was putting his heart and soul into his bowling and I suppose he felt a little let down.

* * *

Dr Brownlow had forecast that their fast bowler would not stay on the pitch for more than half an hour and I decided that this was the moment to start taking advantage of the seeds of doubt which Dr Brownlow had sown. I wandered a little closer to the angry fast bowler. ‘You shouldn’t get so excited!’ I warned him, gently. ‘If your blood pressure goes up too high you could be in real trouble.’

He looked at me with eyes that could burn holes in armour plating. ‘What do you mean?’ he demanded, scowling.

I sucked half a litre of air in through my teeth, let it out slowly and shook my head knowingly. ‘I don’t want to say any more,’ I said. I paused and bravely looked him in the eye. ‘But just tell me immediately if you get a headache.’

The fast bowler stared at me and frowned. ‘What sort of headache?’

‘Any sort of headache.’

He looked at me and frowned. ‘Why?’

I shook my head. ‘I don’t want to say any more,’ I said. ‘You signed one of Dr Brownlow’s S. B. forms and so it’s really nothing to do with me.’ I regarded this abuse of my professional position as justified since if the fast bowler continued to bowl one of us would probably be severely injured. Apart from a bat and a single pad each we had nothing to protect us from the ball. I felt that getting him out of the way could be regarded as a valuable form of preventive medicine.

Three balls later the fast bowler stopped in mid run up and held his forehead. His captain and I wandered up to him. ‘What’s up?’ asked the captain.

‘I don’t feel well,’ complained the fast bowler. ‘I’ve got a bit of a headache.’

‘Probably just a bit too much sun,’ said the captain. ‘I’ll send for an aspirin.’ He turned and waved towards the boundary.

‘Maybe I ought to go and lie down for a while, captain,’ said the fast bowler. He swallowed and mopped at his brow. His captain did not think this was a good idea. He force fed the fast bowler with a glass of water in which two aspirin tablets had been dissolved and told him not to be such a sissy. The bowler sent down two rather medium pace deliveries which Kay McBride succeeded in deflecting into the outfield. We ran two off the first and the second went for four.

‘Is there anyone we should telephone, you know, in case...,’ I asked him when he next walked past me.

The fast bowler stopped and stared at me.

‘You’re a very brave man,’ I told him quietly. ‘Not many people would put their team before their health.’

He bowled just one more ball and then walked off the field clutching his head. When his captain remonstrated with him he started to cry and talk about his children.

* * *

Without their fearsome opening bowler the visitors turned out to be a very ordinary side. What is more the loss of their star player seemed to weaken their spirit and remove much of their confidence. The substitute they fielded as a replacement turned out to be their twelfth man, a flimsy looking fellow who obviously hadn’t expected to be called upon to play and turned out to be an individual of a nervous disposition. His presence did not do much for the morale of our visitors.

The twelfth man’s credibility was finally destroyed when he missed a catch which was such a sitter that Ernie McBride, who had hit the ball, had already given up hope and left the crease. Ernie had to scurry back in order to avoid being run out.

We had never been in the slightest bit worried by the prospect of losing. It had, after all, been our original intention to let all our opponents win so that they would happily spend more money on buying rounds of drinks for one another (and for us).

But by teatime, when we had scored a quite remarkable 77 runs for a modest five wickets, something strange had started to happen: we had, for the very first time, begun to think of not losing. There were two reasons for this. First, our opponents had given absolutely no indication that they were likely to start spending money if they won. They were a rather miserable bunch. And second, as our innings progressed we noticed a distinct change in their attitude. They began to make sneering, uncomplimentary remarks. They called all our scoring shots 'lucky'. They criticised our pitch. They complained about having a tree on the playing area. And they made loud, rude remarks about our attire. We still had over 100 runs to score in order to win, and none of us thought of winning as a realistic possibility, but we felt that if we could last out the remaining 20 overs of our innings then we would have won a modest, moral victory. One thing gave us hope that we might be able to do this: it was getting dark.

Although the match had started at twelve noon, and should have finished while it was still light, there had been a considerable number of unexpected delays. Having Josh as wicket keeper had meant that our opponents' innings had taken rather longer to complete than anyone had expected (we would have been happy to carry him seated in the deckchair but sometimes he had insisted on moving from one end to the other under his own steam). Injuries on the field had taken up quite a lot of time and luncheon had dragged on for an additional, unscheduled three quarters of an hour. As we resumed the match after tea the sun was already beginning to set and it was clear that it would be quite dark by the time the match was completed. Under normal circumstances it is generally thought that the batting side are most disadvantaged by playing in poor light. But these were not normal circumstances and we all felt that the darker it got the greater our advantage would be.

I had been given out leg before wicket just before tea (it would be unnecessarily immodest of me not to record that I scored 23 runs though dishonest of me not to confess that only three of them came from deliberate strokes, the rest were more a result of the ball hitting the bat than the bat hitting the ball) and so, it was Ernie McBride and Dr Brownlow who strode out onto the pitch to resume our innings.

Dr Brownlow was lucky to survive the first ball he received. Inspired, perhaps, by memories of a dim and distant playing career, he greeted his first delivery for nearly half a century by swinging his bat around his body at waist height. Remarkably and unexpectedly the bat and the ball collided in mid air and the latter, being the smaller and more mobile of the two, flew sharply upwards and then began a slow descent that would have taken it straight into the hands of a nearby fielder.

At least, it would have taken it into the fielder's hands if he had been ready for it. But he was too busy dancing around and generally doing a rather good impression of an African tribal rain dancer to pay any attention to the ball.

Those of us sitting or standing watching at the boundary's edge were confused by what we saw. At first we thought that the fielder must have been stung by a bee or a wasp. Only a few moments later, when Dr Brownlow strolled rather guiltily to the boundary in search of safety pins, did we discover that the unfortunate fielder had, in fact, been hit by one of Dr Brownlow's shirt buttons. The effort of making such an athletic manoeuvre had proved too much for Dr Brownlow's elderly shirt and buttons had flown off in several random directions. As luck would have it the only fielder who was struck by one of these button bullets was the only one who had been in a position to catch the ball.

Dr Brownlow clearly regarded this escape as a sign from the gods that they were inclined to look favourably upon his batsmanship. He swung at every other ball he received and by the end of two overs had scored an astonishing 26 runs, 24 of them in boundaries. We thought that the fact that he didn't throw his bat at every ball he received meant that he was choosing the balls to attack but in fact he admitted later that on those occasions when he had not thrown his bat at the ball he had been merely recovering his breath and energy.

By the time the gods decided that Dr Brownlow had been blessed enough he had been joined at the wicket by Frank Parsons and had helped to take our score to a quite remarkable 136 and his own personal score to a team best 42.

Frank only lasted three balls before being run out and Peter Marshall, who had followed him, lasted another over before being caught at the wicket. When Thumper Robinson, our number 11 batsman, strode out to the wicket to join Patchy Fogg, we had nine overs left and were just 45 runs short of our opponents' total. It didn't look as if we could win and it didn't look as if we would be likely to still be batting when we ran out of overs, but we were on top of the world. As Frank pointed out, we had almost become a cricket team.

What hope there was came from the fact that it was now almost pitch black and our opponents were having a terrible time keeping track of the ball. If Thumper and Patchy had been more skilled as batsmen then the fielders would have been able to judge the direction of the ball by watching their bodies and bats. But although both were playing well neither of them was particularly successful at controlling the direction of the ball. A firm, straight drive which should have sent the ball whizzing towards mid on or mid off would instead send the ball flying over the slips, soaring past square leg or bouncing into the covers. It is more difficult to field competently in the dark when even the batsman has absolutely no idea where the ball will go when it has been hit.

Things moved even further in our favour when the visitors lost their vice captain, who thought himself a real tough guy, in a collision with our oak tree, which didn't think of itself as anything very much but which turned out to be considerably tougher than the vice captain.

The vice captain had been running flat out after one of Thumper's drives and had run straight into the side of the tree. He regained consciousness quite soon after the collision but Dr Brownlow and I both felt that he needed to be X-rayed at Barnstaple hospital and seen by a dentist. We picked up as many of his teeth as we could find, popped them into a plastic container full of milk and told him to give them to the doctors as soon as he arrived at the hospital.

By half past nine that evening the unthinkable had happened and the impossible had nearly happened: we needed just eleven runs to win and we had just six balls in which to score them. Thumper Robinson and Patchy Fogg were playing like giants and the fielding side was in total disarray.

But although we didn't get the runs we needed we went out fairly gloriously. Thumper walked down the pitch to drive the opposition bowler straight back over his head. He missed. The wicket keeper caught the ball and, without fuss, removed the bails. We had been dismissed just eleven runs short of the opposition's total.

Our opponents were so relieved about their win that they abandoned their puritanical training regime and bought alcohol with such enthusiasm that even Frank started smiling his approval. It was a cricket match worth remembering. The only pity is that most of the players had so much to drink that the following morning they could not remember whether they'd been playing cricket, croquet or ping pong.

* * *

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

With just half an hour to go before the curtain went up on the Bilbury Revue even Thumper and I were as excited and jittery as seven-year-olds on Christmas Eve - and we weren't performing.

Mrs Riddle had insisted that everyone in any way involved with the revue should be at the village hall at least two hours before the show was due to begin. 'I don't want to be pacing about wondering where you are,' she told us all at the preperformance briefing.

'And no calling in at the pub for a quick one!' she had added, sternly, and although I think she probably thought the use of the phrase 'quick one' made her look worldly-wise it did, in fact, show that she had little conception of what went on at the Duck and Puddle. I don't think any local had ever gone into Frank and Gilly's pub for a 'quick one'. If she'd really wanted to appear knowing she should have forbidden us all to go into the pub for a 'slow three or four'.

Mrs Riddle had insisted that alcohol would not be allowed backstage but had not allowed for the ingenuity of the hard drinking locals. Frank Parsons, the publican, had filled a two litre vacuum flask with hot mulled wine and had thrown half a dozen carrot slices into the brew so that anyone glancing at the mixture would assume that it was some sort of vegetable soup. Patchy Fogg had filled a Coca Cola bottle with Vodka and blackcurrant. Peter Marshall had hidden a pewter hip flask full of brandy in one of the secret pockets inside his jacket. And Thumper Robinson had stashed a bottle of red wine and a bottle of whisky behind a beam high above the stage.

'How big is the audience?' Patsy asked me, in a whisper. It was the fifth or sixth time she had asked the same question. Like the other members of the 'Bilbury Ladies Amateur Cancan and Exotic Dancing Troupe' Patsy had been dressed and fully made up for several hours. The Troupe's stage gear consisted of matching, pale pink swimming costumes (bought at what Peter Marshall insisted was cost price from the village shop), fishnet tights (most definitely not bought from Peter Marshall's shop since Peter had only recently recognised the invention of the ordinary silk stocking and would never have even contemplated the notion of selling such an indelicately natured article of female apparel), multi-petticoated cancan skirts (hired at enormous expense from a theatrical outfitters in Bristol) and exotic headdresses (individually built by Kay McBride with materials supplied by Anthea Yarnold whose husband owned the 'Happy Chickens Lay Nicer Eggs' chicken farm just outside Bideford). Like the other five members of the troupe - Kay McBride, Anne Thwaites (Thumper Robinson's girlfriend), Gilly Parsons, landlady of the Duck and Puddle, Deidre Mulberry and Elspeth Nutcomb - Patsy was preserving her modesty and her body temperature for as long as possible by wearing a dressing gown over her costume.

Gingerly, I opened the door out into the main part of the hall and peered through the tiny gap that appeared between the hinge end of the door and the doorframe. I was getting quite good as this.

'It's nearly half full,' I told Patsy. I looked at my watch. 'And there's still twenty minutes to go!'

Patsy turned. 'Nearly half full!' she hissed to Kay, who was standing just behind her. Kay turned to pass the information on to those standing behind her and decided to economise on words. 'Nearly full!' I heard her whisper. Not surprisingly, this good news brought a murmur of approval from the other members of the Revue; most of whom had been ready to go on stage for at least an hour and were now beginning to feel rather fretful.

Mrs Riddle's requirement that they be at the village hall two hours before the curtain went up might have saved her from worry but it hadn't helped the performers. The greatest and most popular worry seemed to be that although all the tickets had been sold no one would turn up to watch the performance. Financially, the revue was already a great success. But to the performers, waiting back stage, the financial success of the event was not something which they regarded as a priority. For most, if not all of them, this was their first adventure in the world of show business and they were all looking forward to their moments of glory.

'I hope the weather stays nice,' said Anne Thwaites. 'If it rains people won't want to come out.'

'Well, I hope it's not too nice,' said Elspeth Nutcomb. 'If it's a lovely sunny evening people won't want to come and sit in a stuffy old village hall, will they?' Elspeth runs an animal sanctuary and years of frustration and disappointment have lined her face. In her spare time she is married to an insurance underwriter. He works in London during the week and comes home only at weekends. Surprisingly, they both seem happy with this arrangement.

'But surely they'll come if they've paid!' argued Deidre Mulberry, a divorcee with two children who thinks that accepting state help or alimony would be a sign of defeat and weakness, who keeps herself and children fed and clothed on what she earns by working as an occasional relief barmaid at the Duck and Puddle and who regards waste as the most heinous crime of all. Deidre cannot afford the bus fare into Barnstaple and so has to do all her shopping in the village. Because she can't afford Peter Marshall's prices she only ever buys stale bread and fruit and vegetables which are slightly past their best.

I borrowed a chipped china cup from the store cupboard, persuaded Frank to fill it with mulled wine from his flask, and passed the warming brew around the Revue members.

'Everything's going to be absolutely fine!' I promised them, without justification, as they sipped at Frank's wine. 'The audience will be marvellous and you'll be brilliant!'

Like all performers they accepted this fulsome praise without hesitation and settled down to try to relax. It was at least a minute and a half before Patsy asked me to check again on the size of the audience.

* * *

The waiting went on for so long that when the time came for the show to start no one was ready.

'Good luck, everybody!' said Mrs Riddle, after looking at her watch so often that Frank had warned her that if she looked at it again it would wear out. She spoke in one of her now famous backstage whispers. I think she thought she was whispering but even when whispering her voice carried so well that villagers in Combe Martin would have had no difficulty in hearing her. Mrs Riddle herself was due to introduce the show and act as the compére. She was dressed in a pair of black tights and a black leotard, a white dress shirt, a black bow tie, a black tail coat and a pair of black, high heeled shoes. She wore a top hat on her head and carried a black, ebony walking cane.

'Oh, is it time for the show?' squeaked Miss Phillips. She sounded surprised, as though she and all the others had all gathered backstage for some other purpose entirely. She and Mrs Blossom were due to close the first half of the concert with a duet on the piano but they were still arguing about what to play. Mrs Blossom wanted to play something by Chopin whereas Miss Phillips had made no secret of the fact that she rather favoured a composition by Liszt.

'Oh, I must just spend a penny!' cried Kay McBride, darting into the ladies changing room and bolting the door behind her.

There was a chorus of 'me too's and 'me next's from the other female performers who, in true English fashion, quickly formed a neat queue. It wasn't a straight queue - there wasn't room - but everyone instinctively seemed to know who they followed. The male performers did not have to queue. Their lavatory was behind a hedge just outside the back door.

'Give it until quarter past,' suggested Thumper calmly to a suddenly distraught Mrs Riddle. He took his hand away from the switch with which he had been planning to extinguish the house lights and gave Mrs Riddle a comforting pat on the shoulder.

'People are still coming in!' I added. I watched as Patsy's parents took their seats. Patsy's father was wearing his Sunday best suit and had even shaved for the occasion. As for Patsy's mother, well it took me a few moments to recognise her. For a while I couldn't work out why she looked so different. Finally, I realised that it was the first time since our wedding that I had seen her without a pinafore on.

Looking around the audience it wasn't difficult to tell the locals from the visitors. The locals all wore their best clothes. The men were pulling uncomfortably at shirt collars and ties and wriggling their shoulders in suits that were a size or two too small for them. Normally unkempt hair had been brushed, combed and cajoled into place with the aid of hair gel or water and feet which were accustomed to roaming free in wellington boots were universally imprisoned in once fashionable but hardly worn leather shoes. The women had all helped one another do their hair. And they all wore summer dresses that reminded me of clothes my mother had worn when I'd been a boy. Even the younger women wore slightly out-of-date clothes.

This final quarter of an hour didn't seem to last anywhere near fifteen minutes.

'Lights out, please, Thumper!' whispered Mrs Riddle.

Since they heard this at exactly the same moment as Thumper the audience fell silent a split second before the house lights went out.

'Curtain!' she whispered.

'Good luck! I whispered back, as I pulled on the rope which would open the curtain on my side of the stage. I watched Thumper's hand signals so that we could draw our curtains at the same time. We had practised this several times and were quite proud of our skill in this regard. Too late I remembered that Mrs Riddle had told us all that we weren't allowed to say 'Good luck!' to one another because it was considered unlucky in theatrical circles. 'Break a leg!' I added, remembering the old theatre saying that she had taught us, just a second or so too late.

Mrs Riddle had gone and was standing in the centre of the stage long before Thumper and I had finished opening the curtains. I thought the stage looked terrific. The silver painted hardboard reflected the light from the four Ford Cortina headlamps which Thumper had fitted up as spotlights and the two artificial apple trees on either side of the stage gave the whole stage a suitably rural, albeit perhaps rather surrealistic, aspect. The children at the village school had, under Miss Hargreaves' expert tuition and supervision, made the leaves out of green crepe paper and the fruit out of clotted cream cartons, half of which had been painted red and half of which had been painted green. The piano which Mrs Blossom and Miss Phillips would use for their recital was at this stage disguised as a rock. At least it was supposed to be a rock but the grey paint which Thumper and I had used to cover the cardboard edifice which surrounded the piano looked rather white in the bright spotlights and during the interval there was much curiosity among the audience about the reason for the iceberg on the stage. It was, I gather, generally thought that it was considered to be an ironic reference to the North Devon weather.

'First of all I'd like to thank you for coming along to our first annual Revue,' began Mrs Riddle, startling those of us who had thought that this Revue was a one off production. She wore her hat at a rakish angle, leant on her cane as she spoke and radiated confidence. I'd never seen her look so calm or so comfortable. 'As you all know tonight's performance is for a wonderful cause and if you haven't done so already I hope you'll all buy programmes from two lovely young attendants.' Mrs Riddle waved a hand towards Jackie and Dawn Peters, fifteen-year-old twins who actually lived in Parracombe but who, when they had heard about the Revue, had come rushing over to offer their help. 'During the interval,' she went on, 'you'll be able to buy tea and scones at the back of the hall.'

She paused for a moment. 'And now, let the show commence!' she cried, waving her arms about enthusiastically. 'Our first performer is someone most of you know very well, though you might not have been aware that he had a hidden talent as a monologist!'

Someone nudged my elbow. I turned my head. It was Frank. 'Hold this for me!' he hissed, handing me his now almost empty vacuum flask.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' continued Mrs Riddle. 'Please welcome your local publican: Frank Parsons!' She took off her top hat and held it and her cane at arm's length. There was a roar of approval from the audience which confirmed Frank's popularity and Mrs Riddle's good sense in choosing him to open the show.

At the dress rehearsal Frank had sped through his monologue (an old music hall favourite about a girl and a boy, a dog, a rowing boat and the girl's mother) so quickly that he hadn't been on stage for more than a minute or so and, therefore, my second job, after opening the curtains, was to remind him not to speak too quickly. I did this by simply muttering: 'Slow!' to him as he was about to stride out onto the stage.

The result was something of a modest misunderstanding for while Mrs Riddle strode daintily into the wings Frank moved much less daintily, and painfully slowly, towards the centre of the stage. For some reason he seemed to think that in addition to walking slowly he had to face the audience as he walked and this gave him a distinctive and rather crab like gait.

After arriving at the small chalk cross which marked the centre of the stage he stood there for a moment or two just peering into the darkness. For a moment I feared that he had forgotten his lines. But he hadn't. He was simply doing his best to obey the instruction he had been given. Miss Johnson, the Revue's official wardrobe mistress, had chosen to dress him in Austrian lederhosen, complete with a green chiffon blouse with bouffant sleeves and a pair of long grey socks borrowed from Patchy Fogg, who had once been a boy scout. Frank had at first been reluctant to dress in such a flamboyant manner but somehow Mrs Riddle and Miss Johnson had managed to persuade him that making a complete and utter fool of himself was an unavoidable part of show business. I had asked Miss Johnson why she'd chosen the Austrian national costume of lederhosen for Frank, a traditional English publican who was, after all, reciting a nineteenth century Victorian monologue. She had explained that she'd found them in a pile of old clothing donated to the last church jumble sale. When I pointed out that although this was an answer it wasn't really an explanation she had just smiled rather sweetly and told me that she thought someone ought to wear them and that they fitted Frank almost perfectly. There had been much discussion about whether or not Frank should shave his legs but it was quite clear that the final decision had come down against shaving.

I suspect that when Mrs Riddle had said that she wanted him to deliver his monologue more slowly she had meant that she wanted him to deliver the whole thing at a steadier pace. This was not, however, the way that Frank interpreted the instruction. He delivered each line as rapidly as he had done during the rehearsal but at the end of each line he paused for what seemed to be a good chunk of eternity, though it was probably no more than half a minute at a time. It is true that this had the effect of slowing down the overall pace at which the monologue was delivered but it also had the effect of rather disrupting the flow of the story. By the time he began a new line the audience had largely forgotten what the previous line had been about.

Still, none of this mattered for the audience hadn't come to listen to a rather dated monologue they'd come to watch Frank deliver it. And when he finally finished they cheered and clapped enthusiastically. I hadn't heard such cheering since I'd been at school and a visiting speaker had given us all an extra half day's holiday. This wasn't the sort of polite clapping sound you get when people clap their hands as if they are praying, or tap the fingers of one hand on the palm of the other; this was the much louder sort of clapping you get when people slam their palms together and produce great resounding, echoing claps.

Frank had been nervous beforehand but when he heard the audience's response he didn't want to leave the stage. He would have probably still been there if Mrs Riddle hadn't marched out, thanked him and escorted him back into the wings. I drew the curtains and was proud to be the first to shake Frank by the hand. He was perspiring heavily but beaming broadly and looked justifiably pleased with himself.

After that tremendous start the concert went swimmingly. Patchy Fogg rode his monocycle round and round in circles for twelve and a half minutes. The audience got a little restless after the first minute, and to be perfectly honest I rather think that some of them might have expected Patchy to do more than just ride his monocycle round and round in rather erratic circles, but they were far too polite to do anything but applaud him enthusiastically when he finally got dizzy and crashed into the cardboard rock (or iceberg) which was disguising the piano. This was not an evening for criticism. Besides, everyone had to admit that Patchy had cleaned and greased his machine assiduously and it positively sparkled in the glare of the Ford Cortina headlamps.

The Hewitt children did their tap dancing routine (and although I have never been an aficionado of tap dancing even I had to admit that it sounded much better and looked far more impressive when they did it with their shoes on than it had when they had practised in their stockinged feet) and seemed not in the slightest bit distracted by the fact that throughout their performance their father danced around in front of the stage taking photographs.

(Mr Hewitt, by profession a sewage consultant, had appointed himself our official photographer and had come to the Revue equipped with two boxes of flashbulbs and six rolls of 36 exposure film. A week after the concert he got his films back from the developer and proudly displayed the results on the walls of the village hall. Of the 216 pictures he took, 187 were of his tap dancing children. There were some in the village who felt that as official photographer Mr Hewitt had provided a rather unbalanced historical record of the evening. This view was held most strongly by those members of the troupe who did not appear at all in any of Mr Hewitt's photographs.)

After the Hewitt children came the vicar.

Mr Riddle had been planning to juggle with three old tennis balls which Miss Johnson had painted red, green and yellow, but the day before the concert he injured himself when the church bell rope on which he was pulling snapped back rather suddenly and unexpectedly. Bravely insisting that the show must go on, he ignored his sprained wrist and performed half his juggling act with enviable panache. He couldn't manage three balls with one arm in a sling, of course, and there had been a serious discussion before he went on stage about which ball he should leave out of his act. He originally planned to leave the yellow ball behind and to juggle with the red and green balls but Miss Johnson said she thought that the yellow and the green would look best and that he should leave the red ball behind. Mrs Riddle said she thought that red and yellow would look rather nice together and that he should allow the green ball to 'rest'. In the end the vicar, Mrs Riddle and Miss Johnson had decided on a compromise. And so for the first two minutes of his spot the vicar juggled with the red and green balls; for the second two minutes he juggled with the red and yellow balls; and for the finale he brought back the green ball and rested the red ball.

'What did you think of the vicar's act?' I asked Patsy's father after the show.

'I've never seen a one armed juggler before,' my father-in-law replied, laconically. 'So I haven't anything to compare it with. But the balls were very pretty.'

And I don't think anyone would have disagreed with him. There was back stage controversy too before Miss Phillips and Mrs Blossom went on to bring the first Act to a close. They had been arguing about which piece to play for days and with just minutes to go their argument did not seem any closer to resolution. After the vicar had left the stage and Thumper and I had closed the curtains he and I rushed out to remove the piano's disguise and to push the instrument into the centre of the stage. We then added two piano stools and exited rapidly. At this point I realised that Miss Phillips and Mrs Blossom, who were on my side of the stage, were still arguing about what to play. Mrs Blossom still wanted to play the Chopin. Miss Phillips still insisted that they should play the Liszt. I was tempted to tell them that I didn't think that anyone would know the difference and that the audience would probably prefer a Russ Conway tune anyway. I looked across at Thumper and then at Mrs Riddle. She seemed surprisingly calm as she gave Thumper and me the signal to open the curtains. Then, as the curtains drew (smoothly) back she strode out onto the stage and announced that Miss Phillips and Mrs Blossom would close the first Act by playing a piece by Brahms. As she came off the stage she smiled sweetly at the two duelling pianists. They glowered at her but had little option but to go on and play something by Brahms. This they duly did.

* * *

During the interval while Mrs Hewitt (mother of the Hewitt children and wife of their doting father) and Jackie and Dawn Peters from Parracombe fulfilled Mrs Riddle's promise and sold scones and tea at the back of the hall we all huddled together behind the stage and told each other how wonderfully well we thought it was going.

The performers who had performed had relaxed a little and were desperate to hear how well they'd done. I was quickly to discover that people who have been on stage will believe anything you tell them as long as it is complimentary. There was more performing going on back stage than there had been on stage.

'How was I?' asked the normally urbane Patchy Fogg. 'Do you think they liked it?'

'You were terrific. They loved you.'

'Do you really think so? That's very kind of you. You're not just saying that, are you?'

'No, of course not!' I replied.

'You would tell me the truth wouldn't you?'

'Yes, of course!' I lied.

Frank sidled over to me. His flask had been emptied long ago but he had sent Miss Johnson back to the Duck and Puddle for a refill and he was now halfway through the second quart of his special recipe mulled wine.

‘What did you think?’

‘I think the whole show is going very well,’ I replied, knowing very well that he didn’t want to know what I thought about the whole show.

‘Er, what did you, er, think about, er, my, er, little bit?’

‘Oh, *your* bit?’

‘Er, yes. What did you think?’

I put my hand on his shoulder. He visibly blanched, expecting the worst.

‘I thought you were sensational, Frank.’

His face lit up. And then a slightly worried look appeared. ‘You’re not just saying that?’

I tried to look hurt that he should even think this of me. ‘Of course not! You were absolutely fantastic. Couldn’t you tell? The audience loved you.’ I stared down at his hairy legs and knobbly knees. ‘Aren’t you going to get changed?’

‘Mrs Riddle wants us to stay in costume for the final curtain, ‘he told me. I rather thought that he was pleased of this excuse to make sure that the moments of glory lasted as long as possible. He spotted Pauline Peterson, in charge of make-up, excused himself and hurried across to ask her to check his rouge, eyeshadow and lipstick. Pauline’s first attempt at stage make up had been quietly restrained but Mrs Riddle had persuaded her that in making up a stage artiste the key criterion is not the skill with which the make-up is applied but the quantity of powder, paint and lipstick which is applied. Pauline had taken this lesson to heart and had used up two lipsticks already.

The performers who had done their routines might still be just slightly edgy but they were definitely less tense than those Bilburian performers who hadn’t yet been on stage.

Five of the six members of ‘The Bilbury Ladies Amateur Cancan And Exotic Dancing Troupe’, due to open the second half, were in an absolutely terrible state. Kay McBride kept rushing around telling everyone who would listen (and, for that matter, those who wouldn’t) that she’d been to the lavatory at least twenty times. Anne and Patsy were sat huddled together in a corner, shivering despite their dressing gowns. Two of the others, Deidre Mulberry and Elspeth Nutcomb, had not yet re-emerged from the changing room and ladies’ cloakroom wherein they had been securely locked for the whole of the first half of the Revue.

Gilly Parsons, the sixth member of ‘The Bilbury Ladies Amateur Cancan And Exotic Dancing Troupe’, had loyally watched her husband’s stage debut from what Mrs Riddle tried to persuade us to call the wings but what the rest of us, through habit rather than stubbornness, still tended to call the side of the stage, and had stayed there to watch the rest of the show. As the only performer to have seen the whole of the first half she was much in demand for approving comments and repeated requests for praise had led her to produce the sort of superlatives for which West End producers would have sacrificed their souls.

‘You were out of this world!’ I heard her tell Patchy Fogg, the erratic monocyclist, just as Mrs Riddell announced, in her now familiar stage whisper, that it was time for the second half of the show to begin.

* * *

I realise that I may be accused of bias but in my view ‘The Bilbury Ladies Amateur Cancan And Exotic Dancing Troupe’ were truly sensational. I hadn’t seen anything like it since Horace Inchmore and I got lost in Amsterdam when we were fourth year medical students.

During the dress rehearsal I had been busy helping Thumper paint the artificial rock (or iceberg) and so I hadn’t seen the Troupe in their costumes until they went on stage. Nor had I seen them perform any of their numbers. Patsy hadn’t let me see her when she tried on her costume on home. She said that it would be unlucky. I said I thought it was only brides who had to keep their dress secret. Patsy said that the same rule applied to exotic dancers.

Their act began with a traditional heart-stopping cancan number and I was glad of the fact that Dr Brownlow was in the audience for when the six women started kicking their legs and waving their petticoats in the air I became quite genuinely concerned that members of the audience might start collapsing. I rather suspect that if the show hadn't been organised by the vicar's wife who was, ex-officio, president of the Bilbury Wives' Group it might have been banned by the village elders. There was some consternation among the visually less acute members of the audience when, inspired by the fact that they were wearing pink swimming costumes, a whispered rumour started that none of the women was wearing anything underneath their petticoats. Mr Horace Halifax, a retired stockbroker who had seen the cancan performed in Paris in the 1920s, told everyone who would listen to him that cancan dancers never did wear underwear and a little wishful thinking did the rest.

After the cancan the Troupe performed what Kay announced was a rare formation tango and entertained us with a flamenco dance (complete with clicking fingers). They then finished off with another rendition of France's favourite dance.

The enthusiastic applause was accompanied and punctuated by loud cries of approval, most of which seemed to emanate from a group of teenage youths from Ilfracombe. There was no doubt at all that Patsy and the other girls had been the hit of the evening.

Megan Underwood, curiously billed on the programme as 'The Sensational Singing Soprano', was the next act and it was difficult not to feel sorry for her. Following 'The Bilbury Ladies Amateur Cancan And Exotic Dancing Troupe' cannot have been easy.

However, Megan, who once sang professionally in a Welsh pop group called 'The Psychedelic Mushrooms', did not appear to be in the slightest bit overawed by the success of the dancers. Wearing a floor length evening dress in bottle green satin, and accompanied by Mrs Blossom on the piano, she sang three songs, 'Oh Come All Ye Faithful', 'Give Us A Kiss For Christmas' and 'White Christmas', and by the finish she had the audience tapping their feet and humming along with her. Mrs Riddle had tried to persuade her that her choice of songs was hardly appropriate for a mid-summer festival but Miss Underwood had at first insisted that these were her favourite tunes and eventually admitted that they were, in fact, the only three songs to which she knew the words.

It was during the first few verses of 'Oh Come All Ye Faithful' that I first realised that there was a problem with the lights.

* * *

The Bilbury Village Hall is normally lit by two 100 watt light bulbs though during a single six month spell a year or two ago, when the Parish Council had badly misjudged its financial commitments and every aspect of community living had been subjected to a fairly vicious economy drive, the hall had actually been lit by nothing more enlightening than two 40 watt light bulbs. Naturally, Mrs Riddle wanted her performers to be lit with rather more enthusiasm than this meagre allotment could provide and so, as I have already explained, Thumper had cleverly lit the stage with four old headlamps powered by a motor car battery. The battery was on the far side of the stage so that Thumper, when not busy closing or opening his half of the curtains, could control the lights by the simple expedient of removing the clip from the battery's positive terminal.

Thumper had expected the battery he had acquired to last throughout the performance but it was clear that his expectations were not going to be fulfilled. I looked across the stage. Thumper was looking back towards me. I looked up at the lights. Thumper looked up at the lights and nodded. Unless the rest of the concert was going to be completed in steadily growing darkness we clearly had to do something. And we had to do it fast. We had to find a new battery and somehow we had to get the new battery across to Thumper's side of the stage. The leads from the four lights were tacked to the beams above the stage and only reached as far as the window sill on the far side of the stage. It was on the window sill that the fading battery stood. Thumper's first problem was that he had somehow got to get from his side of the stage to my side of the stage. He couldn't wait until Megan finished her act and he certainly couldn't just stroll across the stage while she was singing. He looked up, looked across at me and smiled, and then, with a casual shrug, using window, curtains, ropes and everything else he could grab hold of, managed to pull himself up onto the beam above the stage upon which the four fading car headlamps were anchored. He then performed what I can only describe as the most daring and impressive feat of beam walking that I have ever witnessed. Although he was walking in darkness, his path lit only by a feeble glow from the backs of the tethered headlamps, he was clearly visible to the audience and after a moment or two of fairly heavy nudging I think that just about everyone in the room except Megan Underwood was aware of what was going on above her head.

It took Thumper no more than a single verse of ‘Oh Come All Ye Faithful’ to get across the beam and another verse to clamber down the ropes and curtains and pillar on my side of the stage. He put his hand on my shoulder, grinned at me, and motioned for me to follow him. Loyally, I did so.

A few seconds later we were standing in the small car park outside the back of the village hall. It was a beautiful, balmy evening and although it was after half past nine it was not yet completely dark.

‘Whose is that?’ demanded Thumper, pointing to a brand new and rather smart looking German car whose owner had ignored the huge notice asking motorists not to block the hall’s rear exit with their cars. The car, a large, silver grey, expensive looking model, had been abandoned rather than parked.

I shrugged. I didn’t have the faintest idea whose it was.

Thumper poked a stick through the car’s radiator grill and fiddled about for a moment or two. A few seconds later the bonnet clicked open.

Thumper and I arrived back in the hall, carrying a replacement car battery, just as Megan Underwood was launching into her final song, a tearful and emotional rendition of the Bing Crosby classic ‘White Christmas’. When I heard the words I couldn’t help thinking of that terrible night when Miss Hargreaves’ cottage had lost its roof and Ben had saved my life. It occurred to me that it was, after all, a rather apt song under the circumstances. The rapidly fading car headlights meant that Megan completed the song in a rather romantic half light.

‘I can’t carry the battery up by myself,’ whispered Thumper. ‘So I’ll go up and let down a piece of rope and you then tie the battery to the end of the rope. I’ll pull the battery up, carry it across the beam, lower it down the other side and connect the lights. Simple!’

It sounded simple.

But as they always do when they sound that simple things went wrong right from the start.

To begin with I couldn’t find anywhere on the battery to fasten the rope. I had to borrow Miss Johnson’s capacious handbag, tie the handbag to the rope, put the battery in the bag and then get Thumper to haul up the bag and the battery. Then, when he had got the bag and the battery in his arms Thumper nearly fell off the beam and almost dropped the battery down onto the stage. It would have missed Megan’s head but it would have almost certainly spoilt her big finale. He put the bag and the battery down on the beam and tied the rope with which he had hauled them up firmly around his waist. I wondered at the wisdom of this for it seemed to me that it meant that if he dropped the battery he would fall with it. I didn’t fancy the idea of being promoted to full stage manager with such little experience.

It was only when Megan curtsied to the audience and they applauded that it occurred to me that since she was finishing her spot we needed to draw the curtains across the stage so that we could get things ready for the next act - billed on the programme as ‘Peter Marshall’s Astonishing Conjuring Tricks’! At the same moment it also rather belatedly occurred to me that if we were drawing the curtains then Thumper didn’t need to risk life and limb carrying the heavy car battery across a narrow beam twelve feet above the stage.

Sadly, however, this thought did not occur to Thumper.

I looked up and tried to catch his eye but it was far too late for he had already begun to make his way along the beam. The audience, spotting him, were quickly distracted from what was going on in front of them on the stage and their applause for the ‘Sensational Singing Soprano’ faded away as their hands reached up to cover their mouths. Thumper was rapidly becoming the evening’s main attraction.

‘I love the way Thumper has dimmed the lights!’ whispered Mrs Riddle behind me. I turned round. The vicar’s wife, top hat in hand, was smiling at me. ‘Marvellously evocative!’ she murmured. ‘How did he do it?’

I opened my mouth to explain but the vicar's wife noticed that Megan had come running off into the wings, leaving the stage quite deserted. 'Shouldn't you draw the curtains?' she asked me, in a throaty whisper which probably resulted in citizens from Ilfracombe to Lynton leaping up from their armchairs and drawing their curtains.

I said that I would happily draw my curtain but that we would have to wait for Thumper to cross the stage before his curtain could be drawn.

Mrs Riddle looked puzzled.

I pointed upwards, at the wobbling figure of our stage manager.

'What on earth is he carrying?' asked Mrs Riddle.

'A car battery,' I replied.

'It looks more like a handbag!'

'Well, the car battery is in the handbag. The handbag belongs to Miss Johnson.'

'Ah!' said Mrs Riddle, as though this made it all clear and it was the most natural thing in the world for a stage manager to be doing. She frowned and thought about what I'd said for a moment or two. 'Why?' she asked.

I explained about the floodlights.

'Aha!' said Mrs Riddle.

'Shall I draw my curtain?' I asked.

'No,' said Mrs Riddle, vehemently shaking her head. 'We'll have to wait until Thumper can draw his curtain as well.' She turned round, reached out and caught hold of Megan Underwood by the arm. 'Go back on!' she hissed. 'Do an encore!'

Megan, who was already accepting congratulations from Anne and Kay of 'The Bilbury Ladies Amateur Cancan And Exotic Dancing Troupe' looked thoroughly startled. 'An encore?'

'Sing another song!'

'But they've stopped clapping!'

'It doesn't matter!' insisted Mrs Riddle. 'Just go out there and sing something else.'

Confused but obedient Megan headed back out onto the stage but stopped after two or three paces and turned back, bumping into Mrs Blossom, who was trotting back towards the piano. 'I don't know any more songs,' said Megan anxiously.

'Do 'White Christmas' again! They loved that one.'

I looked up. Thumper had reached the far end of the beam and was gingerly lowering the car battery down onto the bar. Now that this additional piece of entertainment was almost over the audience was getting restless.

And so, while Thumper first lowered the bag and the battery down to the ground and then clambered down after them, Mrs Blossom and Megan Underwood launched into another rousing version of 'White Christmas'. The audience, slightly surprised but quite uncomplaining, hummed along with, or almost with, the tune. Half way through the song the spotlights went out for a moment and then came on again, much brighter, as Thumper swapped the batteries over. When it looked as though Megan was about to finish her encore, Thumper and I both drew our curtains so speedily that the unfortunate soprano suddenly found herself singing the last few seconds of her final note to an extensive but unresponsive patch of curtain material. As she staggered off stage exhausted Thumper walked across carrying the completely dead battery. He put it down on the floor on my side of the stage and winked at me. ‘Pop that into the car we took the other one from, would you?’

* * *

It took Thumper and me a couple of minutes to get everything ready for Peter’s magic act. As we hurried around turning the piano back into a rock and dragging surprisingly heavy equipment into position Peter scurried about hiding playing cards, eggs, stuffed rabbits and other bits and pieces of magical miscellanea around the stage.

‘Where did you get all this stuff from?’ I had asked Peter before the dress rehearsal, as I had helped him carry his disappearing lady cabinet onto the stage.

‘I bought it all at an auction,’ he had told me. ‘It was very cheap.’

‘Were there any instructions with it?’

Peter shook his head. ‘I still haven’t worked out how to use it all yet,’ he confessed. ‘I can make the stuffed bunny disappear but I don’t always get the same one back again.’

I had asked him how long he’d had it all but he said he couldn’t really remember. He said he was pretty sure that he thought he’d probably bought it sometime during the sixties, though it could have been during the fifties. I hadn’t pressed him for a more precise answer. I found his answer strangely satisfying. I have always found it immensely dispiriting when I find someone who can tell me exactly what they were doing for lunch on March 22nd 1968.

Eventually, with everything in place, Thumper and I told Peter that we hoped he broke a leg and then we left him to face his audience.

Things went wrong right from the start.

Encouraged and advised by Mrs Riddle, Peter had decided to begin his act with the card trick which required the participation of a member of the audience. ‘It’ll get them interested, make them feel they’re part of the act,’ she had told him.

And so as the curtains drew back Peter was standing at the front of the stage with a pack of cards in his hand and a huge, patently false smile on his face. His black hair was slicked down with copious quantities of grease and he wore the sequin studded bottle green jacket and the floppy bow tie which I had first seen him wearing at the dress rehearsal and the sequin starred grey flannels which Miss Johnson had been working on when Thumper had had his accident with the silver paint. The trousers still had a streak of silver paint across the back of one leg. Most impressive of all, however, was the fact that Peter had put in his best teeth especially for the occasion. Having been bought from a house auction in Bideford and made for a seventy-year-old woman with an overhanging bite these did not fit particularly well but they were unstained and reflected the bright lights perfectly.

Mrs Riddle’s idea had been that Peter would stand at the front of the stage and invite a member of the audience to join him and take a card from the pack he was holding. What Mrs Riddle hadn’t allowed for was the fact that most of the people in the audience knew Peter and were genuinely worried that if they went up on stage under the pretext of selecting a card they would end up buying a wooden handle for a garden rake, a two gallon drum of tractor oil or a sack of only very slightly mouldy dog biscuits. None of these purchases would, they knew, be in any way dependent upon whether or not they owned a garden rake with a broken handle, a tractor or a dog. Peter’s ability to sell out-of-date or entirely worthless commodities to people who wouldn’t have needed them even if they had been brand new, best quality and bottom price was the subject of gossip and rumour throughout the West Country, and had been for several decades.

When the audience showed that they were reluctant to wander up onto the stage, Peter decided that if the mountain wasn’t going to come to the prophet then the prophet would have to swallow his pride and make the first move. So he jumped down off the stage and onto the wooden steps which I had found in the store cupboard and which we had carefully pushed into position the day before.

Afterwards Peter claimed that the steps collapsed because the wood was rotten. Thumper and I both claimed that it was his fault for jumping down onto them far too heavily. ‘They were only wooden steps,’ insisted Thumper, without even a hint of a smile. ‘You have to treat wood with respect.’

‘What fool put those old steps in front of the stage?’ demanded Patsy’s father afterwards. ‘They were thrown out years ago. They’re riddled with woodworm.’ I bought him a large drink at the Duck and Puddle and swore him to silence.

Whatever the cause, the consequence was that Peter went crashing into a pile of splintered firewood, the playing cards were scattered far and wide and I suddenly felt terribly guilty for telling him that I hoped he broke his leg. For a brief moment I had an awful thought that he might have done just that.

Peter made a brave attempt to shrug the fall off as part of the act but his nonchalance was not convincing. Once the audience could see that he was not hurt their shock quickly turned into sniggers and their sniggers then duly grew into laughter. That was really when Peter lost control and he never looked like getting back in charge again after that. Red-faced and breathing heavily he spent a few moments scrabbling around in the wreckage of the steps looking for the playing cards which he had dropped before he abandoned this and climbed back upon the stage to resume his act.

But he had, not surprisingly I suppose, lost his confidence and after that terrible beginning things went rapidly downhill. The pink rabbits wouldn’t disappear, the chiffon scarves came out of the back of his neck in a large, messy clump and the invisible glass shelf fell out of the bottom of his bottomless bucket and shattered on the stage.

Things got worse when he reached what was supposed to be the penultimate high point of his act - the sawing of the lady in half.

The glamorous but nervous eighteen-year-old chemist’s assistant from Barnstaple had run out of the back of the hall in her swimming costume and a pair of borrowed six inch high heeled shoes less than ten minutes before she was due to make her stage debut and poor old Miss Johnson, my former receptionist, was press-ganged into acting as substitute. Unfortunately, Miss Johnson was rather broader beamed and less supple than the chemist’s assistant and she couldn’t pull her legs into the top half of the box. Her screams and waving arms alerted Peter to the fact that things weren’t going quite right and he abandoned this trick before any permanent damage was done.

Peter’s final trick, his piece de resistance, was a disappearing lady trick which involved the use of a wardrobe shaped piece of equipment which had a false back and a trap door in the bottom. When performed properly the trick involved getting a pretty young woman to walk into the wardrobe and then apparently stand quite still while the magician thrust sharp swords through parts of her body. The woman would, of course, be standing in the back half of the wardrobe, well away from the swords, and for the finale she would disappear down through the trap door in the bottom of the wardrobe and through a matching trap door in the stage so that she could startle, amaze and astonish the audience by reappearing from the side of the stage.

Peter’s problem was that the village hall stage didn’t have a trap door and neither the vicar nor the Village Hall Committee would give us permission to make one. They said it would be a possible health hazard to visiting dignitaries but Thumper and I decided that what they really meant was that it would be a dignity hazard and that no local politician would dare stand on the stage lest some local prankster should be tempted to crawl underneath the stage and open the trapdoor.

So Peter had persuaded Jackie and Dawn Peters, the twins from Parracombe, to help him with the trick. The idea was that Jackie, dressed in a pale blue swimming costume, a pair of her mother’s tights and a pair of borrowed high heeled shoes, would climb into the wardrobe, wriggle through into the back section and stay there until the end of the show. Then, at the appropriate signal from Peter, Dawn, dressed in a similarly coloured swimming costume, another pair of tights and another pair of borrowed high heeled shoes, would amaze everyone by running up the centre of the hall.

It wasn’t Peter’s fault that this apparently simple trick went wrong.

Dawn, standing waiting at the back of the hall had started to shiver (though it was thought later that this was more likely to be a result of nerves than the temperature) and had borrowed a bright red, knee length anorak from her friend Cheryl. In all the excitement she forgot to take off the anorak when Peter gave her the signal she had been waiting for and she headed up towards the stage.

The audience was, not surprisingly, very confused when, after watching Peter shut a girl wearing a pale blue swimming costume into a wardrobe a girl wearing a red anorak ran up the centre of the hall. They watched, in mystified silence, as Dawn ran up onto the stage and stood alongside Peter in the way they had rehearsed. Dawn even remembered to smile and to hold her arms aloft in the way that Mrs Riddle had taught her. The audience, wondering what was going to happen next, remained silent.

When Peter, furious that even this moment of glory had been denied to him, hissed 'Take that thing off' and Dawn, shocked, started to back away from him the audience began to titter. When Peter, furious now, started to chase a squealing Dawn around the stage in an attempt to remove the red anorak from her and to prove to the audience that even if Dawn was not the very same girl as the one who had been locked in the wardrobe she was a pretty good imitation and that even if a standing ovation would be too much to ask for he was due a few cheers, the titters grew louder. Things got even worse when Jackie, who was still locked in the back section of the wardrobe, and who was alarmed by the squeals which her sister was making, tried to get out, found that she couldn't and suddenly started to panic.

It was then, with Peter chasing the squealing Dawn around the stage and Jackie banging on the inside of the wardrobe and shouting for help, that the replacement car battery, which had been providing the power for the lights, inexplicably and without warning stopped working. The inevitable result was that the entire stage was suddenly plunged into darkness.

And it was at that point that Peter sat down on the stage and started to cry.

It was generally agreed by the company that Mrs Riddle's presence of mind in borrowing a small torch from Patchy Fogg and using it to lead Mrs Blossom out onto the stage and across, round and through the wreckage so that she could round the evening off with something jolly on the piano showed enormous presence of mind.

When they heard the haunting strains of the title tune from 'The Sound of Music' and saw Mrs Blossom, lit only by a small torch beam, enthusiastically banging away at the keys of a piano disguised as a rock (or possibly an iceberg), the audience began to applaud and stamp to their feet and to cheer as though they had never before seen anything quite so funny. Peter's disaster had become the hit of the evening.

* * *

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Despite the dramas which had brought the evening to a rather noisy and slightly premature close it was generally agreed that the first night of the first Bilbury Revue had been a resounding success (although there was one member of the audience who did not have a smile on his face when he left - the owner of the vehicle who had unknowingly donated his battery to the cause was not well pleased when his expensive foreign motor car would not start).

Even poor old Peter Marshall, quite exhausted by his ordeal had quickly regained his enthusiasm when he had found himself surrounded by enthusiastic fans insisting that his comedy magic show was one of the funniest things they had ever seen.

Mrs Riddle was quite prepared to change the nature of her show to satisfy the demands of the public. ‘I want you to do everything just the same tomorrow night,’ she had told him.‘ Don’t change a thing!’

Thumper and I were instructed to reconstruct a collapsible staircase and when Dawn and Jackie flatly refused to have anything further to do with Peter’s act (and were only persuaded to carry on selling scones and tea during the interval when they were promised that Peter would not go anywhere near either of them) Mrs Riddle persuaded Patchy Fogg to dress up in Mrs Blossom’s best swimming costume and to agree to be locked in Peter Marshall’s wardrobe while Frank from the Duck and Puddle was somehow talked into running up to the stage wearing Mrs Blossom’s second best swimming costume. It was agreed that since Patchy and Frank bore absolutely no resemblance to each other, the red anorak would not be a necessary prop.

There was never any doubt that the Bilbury Revue was an enormous financial success. The quite surprisingly substantial income from the modest admission charge had been more than doubled by the income from the sale of scones and cups of tea, from the sale of programmes and from a modest charge made for storing people’s summer coats and hats on pegs at the back of the hall. At the end of that first evening Mrs Riddle announced that we had collected a quite magnificent £327.45 towards the Bilbury Village School Cottage Rebuilding Fund.

But despite all the excitement generated by the Revue (and it is, I think, fair to say that the whole village was enthralled by its first venture into show business) life in Bilbury still had to go on.

The following morning, after I’d fed Ben, the cats, the sheep (five of them now, of course) and myself, Patsy and I and Mr Parfitt went down to the vegetable garden to choose the vegetables and flowers that we would enter for the Bilbury Village Produce Show. Miss Hargreaves, carrying a stout basket, came with us to help pick and carry the selected items.

We had been keeping a careful eye on the best of our produce in each category but, inevitably, some of the most promising looking vegetables, fruit and flowers had either gone past their best or had been eaten by slugs or birds. Our only consolation was that all the other entrants would be facing the same frustrations and disappointments.

After we had made our selections for each class I left Patsy, Mr Parfitt and Miss Hargreaves busy in the kitchen getting the entries ready for the Show and I took my pen and notebook down to the summerhouse to do a little more work on the novel I was writing.

I had a room in the house which I used as a study but I found it much easier to work well away from distractions such as the telephone and the doorbell. One or two people I knew in London had telephone answering machines to protect them from irritating or disturbing calls but even if I had been able to afford one of these devices I doubt if I would have been able to buy one without a trip to Bristol, or maybe Exeter. Besides, a telephone answering machine would not have provided me with any protection against casual callers.

Since I had moved to Bilbury I had acquired quite a number of good friends - people who I trusted, respected and liked a great deal.

When I had been at medical school, or working in hospital as a junior doctor, I had met lots of people but somehow none of those acquaintanceships had gone on to turn into fully-fledged friendships. I suppose part of the problem was the fact that at a medical school or in a hospital everyone was always rushing to be somewhere else. And even when there weren't any immediate pressures to be doing something else acquaintanceships were put under tremendous pressure by the demands of personal and professional ambition.

In Bilbury, people had time to develop friendships; time to listen to one another and time to share personal hopes and fears and aspirations. Living in a fairly remote village one soon learns to accept that having a roof, a fire, some warm clothes and enough to eat are really the only material essentials for a comfortable life. When I'd lived in a city I had found myself under constant pressure to conform to the city dweller's restless urge to find something better to do and to find somewhere more important or more interesting to be. I never found that lifestyle comfortable or satisfying and I much preferred the simpler life in Bilbury.

Surrounded by friends like Thumper, Patchy, Frank and Gilly and Dr Brownlow I found it comforting to know that Patsy and I were not alone. We were not fighting life by ourselves but as part of a community; a large and loving family. It was reassuring to know that if ever I or Patsy were in trouble we would have friends we would be able to call upon for help. In Bilbury I had learned that real wealth is measured in friendships not in television sets, jewellery, motor cars or expensive clothes.

The only problem was that, as I have already explained, I soon found that working at home and being surrounded by good friends were mutually incompatible. Patsy and I rarely locked our doors (and when we did it was more because we wanted some privacy or some warning of a visitor's arrival than because we were worried about being burgled) and if I was working in the house I would often look up from my desk and find myself staring at a grinning Thumper or Patchy.

The business of writing involves a lot more sitting and doing nothing than actually scribbling things down on bits of paper and my visitor would usually mutter something like: 'Glad you aren't doing anything' or 'Pleased to see you aren't busy' before offering me a chance to do something far more enjoyable than stare at a wall and a ream of blank paper.

So, to protect myself and to prevent myself succumbing to the temptations offered by my friends, I had taken to writing in a small, wooden summer house which we had uncovered in a quiet part of the garden. Surrounded in summer by a sea of glorious poppies, the summerhouse provided privacy and peace and although the constantly active birds and frogs and rabbits tended to distract me I did manage to get more work done there than I did in the house. I sat there in a deckchair with my notebook on my knee, a straw hat on my head to shade my eyes and Ben lying at my feet. It wasn't a bad workplace.

The novel was growing at quite a decent rate and I had already filled a notebook and a half but I had hit one problem the characters seemed to have taken on lives of their own. Although I had made plans for them, and had, when I had started the book, thought I had known what was going to happen, they seemed quite determined to control their own destinies. I had not expected this. Each morning I would start work thinking that I knew what was going to happen next. But within twenty minutes or so I would have to abandon my so carefully plotted story outline and allow the characters (I quickly gave up thinking of them as my characters) to take charge of their own lives.

Having had no previous experience of writing fiction I wasn't quite sure whether this was normal or not. At first I was peeved when, one after another, my carefully constructed story lines had to be abandoned and the characters who I thought I had invented, ungratefully refused to utter the neatly honed phrases I had devised for them. For a while I fought hard to impose my will. But when I tried to get heavy-handed the characters, who had by now established strong personalities of their own, stubbornly refused to cooperate and I began to find myself writing in circles.

When I eventually gave up battling and decided to let the characters speak for themselves and to allow the plot to unfold without any interference from me I found the business of writing fiction far easier and much less exhausting. The one enormous and entirely unexpected advantage of allowing the characters to decide what happened was that instead of the writing being a struggle I found that I was enjoying it as much as if someone else had written it and I was reading it.

On the morning after the first night of the Bilbury Revue I worked for about three hours (the longest length of time I found I could write without a break) and then went up to the house to help Patsy finish off her preparations for the

Bilbury Village Produce Show.

* * *

Mrs Blossom and Miss Phillips had, in the end, produced a list of nearly a hundred different entry classes for the Show.

There were five main categories: Vegetables, Flowers, Domestic, Men and Children. Each entry cost one penny and the first, second and third in each class would receive certificates (described on the official programme as ‘suitable for framing’). The certificates, like the Village Produce Show and Bilbury Revue programmes had all been printed at cost price by a jobbing printer in Barnstaple who owed Thumper a favour (though Thumper would not share with us the truth about how he had earned the favour).

Apart from the money they collected from the entrance fees, Miss Phillips and Mrs Blossom intended to raise money for the Bilbury Village School Cottage Rebuilding Fund by charging visitors 10 pence to enter the marquee, (which Dr Brownlow had erected on his front lawn); by selling them pots of tea and plates of scones liberally laced with clotted cream and generous dollops of strawberry jam and, at the end of the show, by auctioning all the entries.

I read through the impressive list of categories that villagers could enter:

FRUIT and VEGETABLES

potato (white) - *6 in a bowl*

potato (red) - *6 in a bowl*

cabbage - *1 on a plate*

peas (in the pod) - *12 on a plate*

peas (out of the pod) - *from 12 pods in dish*

cauliflower - *1 on a plate*

broad beans - *from 12 pods in a dish*

runner beans - *6 on a plate*

onion - *1 on plate*

onions - *12 on a string*

turnip - *1 on a plate*

beetroot - *3 on a plate*

carrot - *6 on a plate*

parsnip - *1 on a plate*

radish - *12 on a plate*

celery - *1 head on plate*

melon - *1 on a plate*

tomato - *6 on a plate*

cucumber - *1 on a plate*

lettuce - *1 on a plate*

sweetcorn - *3 cobs on a plate*

parsley - *bunch on a plate*

cress - *bunch on a plate*

water cress - *bunch on a plate*

marrow - *1 on a plate*

pumpkin - *1 on a plate*

rhubarb - *6 sticks on a plate*

apple - *6 on a plate*

pear - *6 on a plate*

strawberries (cultivated) - *a dish*

strawberries (wild) - *a dish*

gooseberries - *a dish*

blackcurrants - *a dish*

redcurrants - *a dish*

cherries - *a dish*

loganberries - *a dish*

raspberries - *a dish*

blackberries - *a dish*

FLOWERS

potted plant

cactus in a pot

fuchsias in a pot

vase of 12 poppies

vase containing 2 each of 6 different annuals

vase containing 2 each of 6 different perennials

vase of 12 chrysanthemums

vase containing a single rose

vase of 12 red roses

vase of 12 white roses

vase of 12 roses (not red or white)

vase of 12 stems of sweet peas

vase of 12 dahlias

vase of 3 hydrangea stems

vase of 3 gladioli

Hanging basket

dried flower arrangement

DOMESTIC

pot of strawberry jam

pot of gooseberry jam

pot of blackcurrant jam

pot of blackberry jam

pot of blackberry and apple jam

pot of honey (hard)

pot of honey (runny)

pot of lemon curd

pot of marmalade

pot of chutney

jar of pickled onions

jar of mixed pickles

dish of clotted cream

pound of butter

eggs - *12 in a dish*

loaf of bread - *white*

loaf of bread - *brown*

fruit cake

sponge cake (plain)

sponge cake (filled with jam)

sponge cake (filled with cream)

rock cakes - *6 on a plate*

scones - *6 on a plate*

fairy cakes - *6 on a plate*

gingerbread man

shortbread - *6 pieces on a plate dish*

fudge - *dish*

knitted article

MEN

bottle of white wine

bottle of red wine

bottle of beer

neatest bale of hay

neatest bale of straw

rock cakes - *6 on a plate*

CHILDREN

oddest shaped vegetable

longest stick of rhubarb

prettiest wild flowers in a jam jar

longest runner bean

biggest strawberry

greatest number of different objects in a matchbox

* * *

In addition to the individual prizes there were five small cups, to be awarded to the overall winners of each category and a very splendid looking Bilbury Produce Show Cup which would, so the programme notes made clear, be awarded to the household which scored the greatest number of points in all the different categories and classes. For the purpose of judging the Show Cup winning a first prize in any class was worth three points, a second prize was worth two points and a third prize was worth one point.

Patsy had chosen to enter all the Vegetable and Fruit classes except for the cauliflower and radish classes (our cauliflowers had, for some inexplicable reason, failed to flourish and all our radishes had been eaten by something), all the Flower classes, except for the cactus in a pot and the various rose classes, and all the Domestic classes except for the clotted cream, the homemade butter, the 12 eggs in a dish and the knitted article classes. Under some duress, and with some trepidation, I had agreed to enter the Men's rock cake class and had spent the previous afternoon doing my best to follow the instructions which Patsy had given me. I managed to rescue half a dozen buns that weren't burnt too badly and these I had put on one side as my entry. I tasted one of the rejects and was glad that I didn't have false teeth fitted for I don't think there is any man-made material which could have cut through one of my rock cakes.

It was twelve fifteen when I arrived back at the house and as I walked through the back door into the kitchen I could hardly believe my eyes. Every flat surface in the kitchen was covered with baskets and boxes full of produce which Patsy, Mr Parfitt and Miss Hargreaves had got ready to take to the Show.

We had a quick snack of scrambled eggs on toast for lunch but had to eat without plates because every plate that we owned had been carefully wrapped in newspaper and packed into a cardboard box so that we could use them for displaying our produce. I very nearly got my fingers rapped with the back of a fork when I almost opened Patsy's best looking pot of homemade chutney.

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When we arrived at Dr Brownlow's home it looked as if the whole of the village was already there. Although the Produce Show was by far and away the most important part of the event it wasn't the only thing happening. At a meeting of our committee we had decided to hold a proper old-fashioned fête alongside the produce show and so Dr Brownlow's grounds were packed with stalls.

But it was the Produce Show in which Patsy and I were most immediately interested. The huge marquee in which the produce would be displayed and judged, and which had been erected on Dr Brownlow's lawn, already looked like a high quality food store.

I parked as close as I could to the back of the marquee and then helped Patsy and Mr Parfitt and Miss Hargreaves carry all our entries into the tent and place them on the correct trestle table. Even using the large wooden tray we had brought with us it took us seven journeys to carry all the stuff from the car to the marquee. When we'd finished I moved the car into a nearby field which was being used as a car park so that some other entrant could get closer to the marquee.

When I got back I bumped into Miss Phillips.

'Where on earth did you find all these trestle tables?' I asked her, after I'd told her how well I thought that she and Mrs Blossom had played in the Revue. Poor Miss Phillips seemed nervous and very slightly harassed but she looked very elegant and distinguished in a long pale blue dress, a dark blue blazer, a pair of navy blue high heeled shoes, single row of pearls and a flamboyant straw hat with bundles of very realistic looking artificial fruit fastened around its rim.

'A friend of Thumper's let us have them,' whispered Miss Phillips. 'Someone from Ilfracombe who owed him a favour,' she added with what I think was intended to be a wink but which ended up looking rather more like a twitch. I don't know why it is but women rarely seem able to wink properly.

'Good old Thumper!' I said.

'Indeed!' agreed Miss Phillips. 'Where would any of us be without him?'

We exchanged gossip about some of the other entries and I truthfully told her how cool and elegant she looked, and she seemed quite pleased about that and even blushed a little and I thought how beautiful she must have been when she was younger and wondered what wonderfully romantic secrets there were hidden away in her past and then I rushed off to help Patsy who was clearly having a good deal of trouble keeping all her white potatoes on a plate.

'I dropped one,' said Patsy, looking glum. 'I think it's probably all bruised.'

'Put the bruised bit where it won't show,' I suggested.

‘Oh, I couldn’t do that!’ said Patsy. ‘Anyway,’ she added, examining the potato she had dropped, ‘I don’t know which is the bruised bit.’

‘What have we got left to put out?’ I asked her. ‘Just the jams, the soft fruits and the flowers,’ said Patsy, nodding towards the spot where we’d temporarily deposited all our entries. I walked back across with her, picked up a dish full of strawberries and a dish full of blackberries and headed for the soft fruit display tables.

‘Psst!’

I turned round and saw someone I recognised but couldn’t name standing right behind me. He was about fifty five years old and despite the heat he was wearing a heavy tweed suit, complete with waistcoat and fob watch. He had a large, rather overgrown moustache, the sort of thing that RAF officers used to wear during the Second World War. I had seen him around in the village quite a lot, usually walking a pair of huge Great Danes but I didn’t know him well. He kept himself rather to himself and never patronised the Duck and Puddle.

He came a little closer, leant forwards and whispered. ‘I say old chap, I don’t suppose you’ve got any spare blackberries have you?’ he asked. His breath smelt of beer and onions.

‘I’m afraid these aren’t for sale,’ I said. ‘But I think there is a refreshment tent.’

‘I don’t want to eat the damned things!’ snorted the man with the moustache. He leant closer. ‘My damned blackberries haven’t ripened,’ he added. ‘It’s far too early in the season for blackberries.’ He peered at the plateful of blackberries I was holding. ‘I suppose you forced yours?’

I suddenly realised that he meant he wanted to buy some of our blackberries to display as his own. I was quite shocked. ‘No.’ I told him, firmly. ‘But we have a walled garden and so most of our soft fruits tend to ripen a couple of weeks earlier than they otherwise would.’

‘I’ll give you a fiver for them,’ he said, reaching into his jacket pocket as though about to take out his wallet.

‘But you can’t do that!’ I said. ‘It wouldn’t be fair!’

The man with the moustache stared at me as though I was stark raving mad, scowled, muttered something under his breath, and then turned and stalked away without another word. I continued on my way to the soft fruit stall and put Patsy’s strawberries and blackberries on display. There were a couple of dozen dishfuls of strawberries already there but only one other dishful of blackberries.

When we had finished displaying the Bilbury Grange entries Mr Parfitt, accompanied by Miss Hargreaves, took our completed entry form along to Miss Phillips and Patsy and I went for a walk around the other stalls. Although I had known that Dr Brownlow had intended to organise a proper fête I was, nevertheless, extremely impressed by what I saw.

There was a stall where you could get rid of your anger by throwing wooden balls at old china; a treasure hunt where you could try to win a bottle of rum by sticking a small wooden stick into a sandpit; a stall where you could pay 5 pence for three sopping sponges and then throw them at the vicar fixed in wooden stocks and a roll a penny stall where, if you were lucky, you could win a goldfish in a small glass bowl.

There were stalls selling massive slabs of sugary, home-made chocolate fudge, huge black lumps of home-made treacle toffee which had to be cracked into chewable sections with the aid of a small hammer and six flavours of home-made ice cream which tasted so creamy and rich that it was difficult to believe that it was made according to anything like the same sort of recipe as is used to produce the mass market variety. When you’ve once tried home-made ice cream you are spoilt for life.

There was a stall where you could try your luck at darts, a stall where sharpshooters could show off their proficiency with an air rifle and a stall where you could try to win a huge, cuddly, fluffy, pink monkey by tossing jam pot sealing rings onto coat hooks screwed into a board.

The fête wasn’t officially open and none of the stalls was ready for business but I hadn’t ever seen anything that so closely matched the mental image I had always had of how traditional English village life ought to be.

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‘Who’s that chap with the moustache?’ I asked Patchy, a few minutes later. Our local Member of Parliament, The Right Honourable Justin Fitzwalter-Simmons PC,QC,MP and goodness knows what else, was fumbling with his notes and hopefully about to declare the Bilbury Village Produce Show and Fête truly open and the moustachioed man who had tried to buy blackberries from me was standing by himself, leaning on a shooting stick. He had a piece of paper in his hand and he was staring at it moodily. Eventually he thrust the piece of paper into his jacket pocket. He looked very cross about something.

‘That’s the Wing Commander,’ said Patchy.

‘Wing Commander Who?’ I asked.

‘Haven’t the foggiest,’ said Patchy. ‘He likes people to call him Wing Commander. He probably hasn’t got a name. I think his mum probably called him ‘Wing Commander’ when he was a lad.’

‘He tried to buy some blackberries from me,’ I said

Patchy looked at me. ‘Did he?’

‘I think he was going to show them and pretend that he’d grown them himself.’

‘Of course he was!’

Now it was my turn to look at Patchy. ‘Why?’ I was honestly shocked to think that anyone in Bilbury would be prepared to cheat to win a certificate suitable for framing.

‘He wants to beat the Colonel.’

‘The Colonel?’ I didn’t know the Colonel but I knew of him. He was Bilbury’s only other retired military man of distinction. He was in his eighties but still stood as erect as a telegraph pole.

‘That’s the one! He’s over there.’ Patchy nodded towards the far end of the marquee. I could just see the Colonel standing talking to Mrs Blossom.

‘Why does the Wing Commander want to beat the Colonel?’

Patchy looked at me and shrugged. ‘I haven’t got the faintest idea,’ he said. ‘But his gardener told me that he was promised a £20 bonus if they won the Cup.’

‘Which cup?’

‘The Show Cup, you idiot!’

‘Crumbs! I wonder if the Colonel knows what’s going on?’

Patchy snorted disdainfully. ‘Don’t you worry about the Colonel,’ he said. ‘I bet you a bag of truffles to half a pound of acorns that he’s been at the same thing himself.’

There was a smattering of polite applause from the far end of the marquee. The Right Honourable Justin Fitzwalter-Simmons PC,QC,MP had successfully managed to open the fête and everyone was looking very relieved. Our local MP was well known for being slightly forgetful and disorganised. A few weeks earlier he had given the members of the local Women’s Institute a half day’s holiday and had subsequently congratulated the children of a primary school in Lynton on the consistency of their chutney. I had once asked Frank why the electorate still voted for a man who no longer seemed to be in touch with what was going on in the world. Frank had told me that he thought that was exactly why they did vote for him. ‘We’ve probably got the only parliamentary representative who is incorruptible,' he had explained. 'He's too stupid to get involved in any financial jiggery pokery.' I had to agree that, given the general ability of parliamentary representatives to get into trouble of one sort or another, these were powerful factors in his favour.

'He tried to get me to sell him some chutney!' muttered a voice I recognised instantly.

I turned round. I'd never seen Thumper looking quite so smart. He was wearing a pair of brand new jeans and a freshly ironed lumberjack shirt. He had even combed his hair. 'Who? Fiztwater-Simmons?'

'No, you clot! The Colonel.'

'The Colonel wanted to buy chutney off you?'

'Yes.'

'But why? You don't make chutney do you?'

'No, I don't. But Anne does. And last year her chutney won first prize in the Shirwell, Kentisbury and East Down Produce Shows.'

'See, I was right! They are both at it!' said Patchy.

'It's a pity really,' said Thumper. 'But one of them is bound to win.'

'They're a pair of mean old devils,' said Patchy. 'Mrs Blossom told me that the Wing Commander tried to get out of paying his penny an entry. He said he wanted a discount because he was entering for so many different classes. Do you know he's even got his gardener's five-year-old to enter the children's category so that he can pick up a few extra points there.'

Patchy muttered something under his breath. It didn't sound very complimentary.

'I bet neither of them bought tickets for the Revue,' said Thumper.

We all stood and silently fumed.

'Maybe we could make a few bob out of them after all,' said Thumper thoughtfully.

Patchy and I both looked at him.

'Wait there a minute,' he said, and darted off in the direction of Mrs Blossom who was talking to two of the three judges. Thumper gently touched her arm and when she turned to look at him he whispered into her ear. She excused herself and they moved to a nearby table where Miss Phillips was busy checking entries. The two judges, I didn't recognise them but knew that they had come from villages thirty or forty miles away, carried on talking to one another. Thumper and Mrs Blossom and Miss Phillips spoke for a few moments and then Miss Phillips bent down and took a thick wad of entry forms from out of a large, brown leather bag at her feet. She carefully flicked through the forms, taking out two and handing them to Thumper. She then handed him two sheets from another pile on the table in front of her. Thumper smiled at both Miss Phillips and Mrs Blossom, hesitated and then gave them both a kiss on the cheek and hurried back to where Patchy and I were standing.

'We've got twenty minutes,' he said. 'The third judge telephoned to say that he'd had some trouble with a mare in foal and would be a bit late. Miss Phillips says she'll continue to accept entries right until the judging starts.'

'What have you got there?' Patchy asked him, nodding towards the four pieces of paper he was holding.

'The Wing Commander's entry,' said Thumper, holding up one piece of paper. 'And the Colonel's entry,' he said, holding up a second form.

'What are the other two?' I asked him.

‘Complete entry lists - so that we can see which classes they haven’t entered yet!’

‘Brilliant!’ said Patchy, rubbing his hands together. ‘Let’s get to work!’ He took one of the lists from Thumper and started to compare it with the full list of possible categories and classes.

‘Hang on a minute,’ I said, genuinely puzzled. ‘I don’t understand. What are we going to do?’ Although I’ve been living in Bilbury for a while I’m still nowhere near as quick as Thumper or Patchy when it comes to plotting a scam.

‘We’re going to look through these lists and find out which classes these two haven’t entered,’ explained Thumper.

‘And then we’re going to sell them the produce they need to enter the classes they haven’t entered!’ added Patchy.

I thought about what they’d said for a moment. ‘But that’s not right!’ I protested, mildly. ‘That’s cheating!’

‘Listen,’ said Patchy; ‘one of these two will win anyway. They both cheat. And this way we’ll make a few bob for the Fund!’

‘How?’ I asked. I was obviously having one of my really thick days. Sometimes I feel that both Thumper and Patchy must think I am one of the most innocent people in the world. I’m just glad they are friends of mine! After what happened at the Bilbury Village Produce Show I was more than ever convinced that no city huckster or street trader could beat this pair when it comes to working out a way to take a few pounds from a well-heeled mark.

‘By selling them what they need!’ explained Thumper. ‘Ten pounds for a dish full of luscious blackberries!’

‘Twenty pounds for a really good marrow!’ said Patchy.

‘But where are we going to get the stuff from?’ I asked.

‘You leave that to me,’ said Thumper with a wink. ‘You two go and see how much you can get those two old reprobates to pay for the produce they haven’t got.’ He handed me the other two forms.

‘What if they spot what we’re doing?’ I asked. I looked at the forms he had handed me. One of them had ‘Wing Commander’ written at the top.

‘Try to make sure they do,’ said Thumper, with a rather sly laugh. ‘If they both realise that the other one is cheating they’ll be even more eager to buy what they need!’ I studied the two lists. The Wing Commander had entered most of the classes (though none of those under the heading CHILDREN) but still needed blackberries, loganberries, a cucumber, a dried flower arrangement, a pot of gooseberry jam, blackcurrant jam and lemon curd, two pots of honey (runny and hard), a pot of marmalade, a jar of pickled onions and a knitted article. ‘I’ll be behind the marquee with everything they’re likely to need in ten minutes,’ Thumper added.

And so with my heart beating fast I walked over to where the Wing Commander was standing. Fortunately, he was still alone. ‘Do you still want to buy some blackberries?’ I asked. I felt sure that I must be blushing bright red.

The Wing Commander glowered at me. ‘It’s too late.’ he said.

‘No, it isn’t,’ I told him. ‘One of the judges has been held up. You can still enter them.’

‘How much?’

‘F-f-f-f..,’ I began. ‘Ten pounds,’ I said. If I was going to get involved in such chicanery I was damned certain I was going to make it pay.

‘Ten pounds!’ The Wing Commander glared at me and his bushy eyebrows zoomed inwards. I thought how frightening he must have been to those unfortunate men who were under his command.

I said nothing.

‘I’ll give you five. Not a penny more.’

I didn't say anything at all, but shrugged and started to walk away.

'All right, ten,' said the Wing Commander quickly.

I turned back. 'It's for a good cause,' I told him.

'What?' he demanded.

'The Bilbury Village School Cottage Rebuilding Fund.'

'Oh, that.' He reached into his coat pocket, took out his wallet and removed a ten pound note. 'Where are the blackberries?'

'I can get you the other things you need,' I whispered. I have to admit that I felt a bit like a street trader selling dirty postcards.

'Pardon?'

'The other things you need - marmalade, honey, gooseberry jam - I can get them all for you.'

The Wing Commander stared at me furtively, and leant closer. I could smell tobacco on his breath. 'All of them?'

I nodded. 'Except for the stuff in the Children's Category you'd need a child to enter that anyway.'

'But including the knitted article?'

'Including the knitted article.' I had no idea where Thumper was going to obtain a knitted article at such short notice but I had absolute faith in his ability to do so. I would have trusted Thumper to have found bright pink water cress, a carrot in the shape of a heart or a full suit of sterling silver armour. 'How much?' The question came out as a growl.

I did a rapid mental calculation. 'I'll let you have them all for a hundred pounds.'

The Wing Commander made a sound like a horse. 'Don't be absurd, man! I'm not paying that sort of money!'

I shrugged and casually looked over to where Patchy and the Colonel were deep in conversation. The Wing Commander's eyes followed mine.

'What the devil is that crooked, good for nothing up to?' he demanded, suspiciously.

'Who?' I asked, innocently. To be honest I thought he was referring to Patchy and I was about to leap to the defence of my friend (though to be honest I very much doubt if he would have argued with the description).

'That Colonel fellow! What's he up to?'

'Much the same as you,' I told him, rather wickedly.

'Damned cheat!' exploded the Wing Commander.

I looked around. No one seemed to have noticed. 'Ssshhhh!' I warned him.

'A hundred pounds you said?'

'Plus the ten pounds for the blackberries,' I added quickly. I was, I confess, particularly pleased with that touch. When I think back to my first scam I think that was by far my most glorious moment.

The Wing Commander glared at me. He was furious. But he had little option other than to pay up. His face was bright red with anger when he had finished handing me the notes.

'Where is the stuff?' he demanded, as I rammed the money into my jacket pocket.

I looked at my watch. ‘Do you know Thumper Robinson?’

‘I know what he looks like. Another damned rogue.’

‘He’s behind the marquee with everything you need.’

The Wing Commander hurried off without so much as a ‘thank you’.

And a few minutes later I watched as the Colonel followed him.

Patchy Fogg, now alone, looked across at me, winked and held up a thumb. I winked back. I felt quite pleased with my first venture into hucksterism. It had, I thought, been rather successful.

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Patchy had managed to sell the Colonel a turnip, six tomatoes, three sweetcorn cobs, a bunch of watercress, a dish of wild strawberries, a vase containing 12 poppies, a vase containing three gladioli, a dried flower arrangement, a jar of mixed pickles and, most surprisingly of all, perhaps, a jam jar full of wild flowers (for the CHILDREN category) for the princely but slightly uneven total of £76.45.

‘It was all he’d got,’ said Patchy, rather apologetically. ‘I made him empty out all his pockets and he really didn’t have a penny left.’ To be perfectly honest, I felt quite pleased about the fact that I’d manage to gouge so much out of the Wing Commander. Between us we had ‘acquired’£186.45 for the Rebuilding Fund - though, admittedly, this wasn’t all profit for Thumper had to spend £7.40 to acquire the goods we had sold to the Wing Commander and the Colonel. Still, a £179.05 profit was not to be sneezed at!

Minutes later the third judge arrived, looking very hot and flustered, and after he had a quick cup of tea the judging and the tension began in earnest.

Mr Parfitt was too excited to go far from the marquee, though he wasn’t allowed to stay inside. He said he simply couldn’t bear the idea of being anywhere else while the judging went on and so he simply stood outside and watched through the open doorway as the potatoes, and the beans and the carrots he had grown with such loving care and attention were subjected to close scrutiny. Patsy and I both pretended that we weren’t particularly bothered about winning any certificates, though I felt sure that all her jams and cakes would win their categories. We had only entered to please Mrs Blossom and Miss Phillips, and to do our bit for the village, but for Mr Parfitt’s sake, we both hoped that we managed to get one or two certificates. We thought that our soft fruit was especially good and probably our best bet for winning a certificate or two.

We had grown our vegetables and our fruit under quite a handicap since we didn’t use any inorganic fertilisers or chemical insecticides. Instead of using sprays and powders we had relied entirely upon natural fertilisers: manure and straw from the sheep’s stable, kitchen compost and the rather pungent concoction which we made, according to the recipe given to us by Patsy’s father, and by soaking armfuls of nettles in an old tin bath for several months. As a result our vegetables and fruit weren’t quite as perfectly formed as those which had been grown with artificial aids.

We weren’t sure whether the judges would take this fact into account when comparing our produce with that which had been grown with the aid of chemicals, but in the hope that it might perhaps make a small amount of difference Mr Parfitt had carefully written ‘organically grown’ at the bottom of all our labels.

I didn’t much mind whether the judges took any notice or not; I much preferred the taste of naturally grown food and I very much enjoyed knowing that the food I was eating had not been contaminated by possible poisons made far away in factories in Birmingham, Chicago or Hamburg.

By now the fête accompanying the Produce Show was in full swing and the stalls all seemed to be doing a roaring trade. Everywhere you looked people were licking ice creams, chewing fudge and crunching brittle treacle toffee. I couldn’t help thinking that a few dentists would probably notice a strong uplift in their business as a result of our village fête. Small children were walking around with balloons clutched in their fists and older children were carrying goldfish in bowls and huge, colourful stuffed toys. Mothers were being harassed and fathers, having emptied their wallets, were now emptying their pockets of loose change. Everyone was having a wonderful time.

Patsy and I bought ice creams and sat on a bench and watched this colourful and ever moving carnival unfolding before our eyes.

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The minute the judging was over Mrs Blossom took down the green ribbon which she had tied across the doorway of the marquee. The removal of the ribbon was a sign that exhibitors, friends and members of the public were once again allowed to enter. Some exhibitors were very casual about it all but Patsy and I stood up the moment we saw the green ribbon being removed. Despite my earlier calmness I realised that I found these last few moments just as exciting and as nerve wracking as waiting for examination results or reviews of my first book.

Even though we had been quite quick off the mark there was a big queue to get back to the marquee and by the time we got in Mr Parfitt had been round half of the exhibits and had an enormous smile on his face. Patsy, who was holding my hand, squeezed my fingers as he approached.

'I've counted three firsts, five seconds and three thirds in the vegetable and fruit category!' said Mr Parfitt, clearly thrilled by this success. 'We've done much better than I dared hope. Our potatoes got first prize in both classes!'

'Congratulations!' I said, reaching out and shaking him by the hand. Mr Parfitt mumbled something about it being our success (meaning Patsy's and mine) but Patsy and I made it clear that we both regarded the vegetable and fruit category as being entirely his responsibility. Miss Hargreaves was beaming as broadly as if she was the one who had won.

When we'd finished congratulating Mr Parfitt (and I had never seen him look so happy) Patsy and I walked around the rest of the marquee to see how our other entries had got on. I was delighted to see that Patsy's jams and cakes had won her no less than four first prizes, two second prizes and two third prizes. We hadn't done quite as well with our flowers but we had won a first for our sweet peas and a second prize for our mixed perennials. And Patsy's dried flower arrangement had won her a second prize too!

Most surprising of all was the discovery that, much to my astonishment and delight, my rock cakes had won third prize! I could hardly believe it! It was my first ever cooking adventure and it had been a success. My feelings of delight were only very slightly modified when I discovered that there had only been four entries for this particular competition. Nothing could change the fact that I now had a certificate (suitable for framing) proving that I was a prize winning chef! I wasn't in the slightest bit bothered by the knowledge that two men in Bilbury could make better rock cakes than I could. All I was interested in was the much more fascinating fact that somewhere in Bilbury there was someone whose rock cakes weren't as good as mine!

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We had just completed our tour of the marquee when we heard Mrs Blossom's voice announcing that the winners of the five separate category Cups (for the best overall scores in each of the five categories: fruit and vegetables; flowers; domestic; men and children), and the absolutely magnificent Bilbury Village Produce Show Cup for the household obtaining the greatest number of points, were about to be announced. The marquee was packed; everyone in the village seemed to be there. Since only villagers or people living in the area stood a chance of winning any of the prizes the visiting holiday-makers were still roaming around outside, enjoying the sunshine, the ice cream and the entertainments.

Someone had fixed up a not terribly clear loudspeaker system which only seemed to amplify every other word. Because she was conscious of this fault, Mrs Blossom raised her voice to compensate for the occasional lack of loudspeaker support. Unfortunately, the fault in the system meant that all that happened was that the loud, and perfectly audible words became so loud that they were distorted, and therefore inaudible, while the unamplified, and therefore rather inaudible, words remained largely inaudible.

Mr Parfitt, Miss Hargreaves, Patsy and I stood together near the back of the marquee and tried to work out what Mrs Blossom was saying. Everyone else seemed to be having exactly the same problem and so the people who were standing at the front were, in response to constant tapping on their shoulders, turning round every few seconds to pass on the latest bit of news. In this way the news spread slowly around the assembled villagers; the words arriving at the back of the tent some thirty seconds after they had left Mrs Blossom's lips.

Young Nathaniel Bishop won the Children's category, and to absolutely no one's surprise our sheep farming neighbour Colin Jackson won the Men's category. Colin would have been entitled to a recount if he hadn't won the cup in this category for he had won first prize certificates for his red wine, his white wine, his beer, his hay and his straw! (His rock cakes had taken second place). The cup for the greatest number of points in the Flower section was awarded to a highly embarrassed Miss Phillips who tried to turn the cup down but was eventually persuaded to accept what was rightfully hers. The cup for the highest score in the Domestic category was won by Mrs Colin Jackson and although I naturally felt that Patsy should have won I had to admit that Mrs Jackson was not an unworthy winner.

Mrs Blossom had delayed announcing the winner of the Fruit and Vegetable Category until last since it was generally agreed that, of the five categories, this was the blue ribbon event.

When the woman standing in front of me turned round to tell me that she had been told that Mrs Blossom had announced that Bilbury Grange had won this category I didn't really take in what I had been told. I had never expected to hear that we had won anything so important. Indeed, the news was so unexpected that I had turned around and passed it onto the person standing behind me before I realised that it was us - or rather Mr Parfitt - who had won!

When the news finally sank in, Mr Parfitt's face was taken over by a huge grin. I honestly do not think I had ever seen anyone look quite so happy. I had the shock of my life when Miss Hargreaves turned, put her arms around him and gave him a big kiss.

But that wasn't the biggest shock.

I think that most of us in the marquee had assumed that either the Wing Commander or the Colonel would have assuredly won the Bilbury Village Produce Show Cup. Even those innocent Bilbury residents who didn't know the amount of cheating that had gone on behind the scenes had assumed that either one or the other of these two former military men would be driving home with the big Cup proudly displayed on the back seat.

Neither of them won.

And when the woman in front turned round and told me that Mrs Blossom had announced that Bilbury Grange had won the big Cup I really didn't believe her. At first I thought I had misheard. Then I thought it was a joke.

But I hadn't misheard. And it wasn't a joke.

We had won.

Apart from a small box of chocolates, which I was awarded for coming second in a church raffle, I had never won anything before. And I'd never felt quite as proud before either. I hugged and kissed Patsy. I shook hands with Mr Parfitt (who had, I think, just the beginnings of a tear in the corner of one eye) and I accepted a bone-crushing hug from Miss Hargreaves, who seemed to tear herself away from Mr Parfitt with some reluctance and whose cheeks were quite definitely very wet with tears. It was all made especially joyous by the fact that apart from the Wing Commander and the Colonel (who both stalked out of the marquee looking very ill-tempered) not one person in the village seemed to begrudge us our small success.

Our win made it quite certain that neither Patsy nor I would ever forget the first Bilbury Revels.

* * *

CHAPTER TWENTY

The unofficial ‘put a roof over Miss Hargreaves’ head’ action committee, more formally known as the Bilbury Village School Cottage Rebuilding Fund, met for the final time a week later at the Duck and Puddle. There were, as usual, the six of us present: myself, Gilly Parsons, Kay McBride, Peter Marshall, Thumper Robinson and Dr Brownlow.

‘How’s the repair work going, Thumper?’ asked Dr Brownlow, our unofficial chairman, when we had all settled ourselves down with our chosen intoxicants.

‘Finished!’ said Thumper, with some considerable pride. He leant back in his chair and grinned with the solid confidence of a man who knows that he has done a good job. ‘Miss Hargreaves can move back in whenever she likes. We put the last coat of paint on this afternoon!’

‘That’s wonderful news!’ said Dr Brownlow. He paused, and his voice fell to a whisper. ‘What’s the final bill?’

Thumper took a grubby piece of paper out of the back pocket of his jeans, put it down on the table in front of him, smoothed it out and started to read out the figures for timber, paint, labour and other costs.

‘Just the total will do, Thumper!’ said Dr Brownlow, putting his hand across his eyes, as though he felt the need to hide his face at the moment of truth.

‘£9,276.84,’ said Thumper, reading out the bottom line.

Slowly, Dr Brownlow took his hand away from his eyes. Gradually a smile appeared. ‘And that’s everything? Absolutely everything?’

‘Every last nail and drop of paint,’ said Thumper proudly.

‘No hidden labour charges? No timber merchant in Taunton is going to be sending us a bill in six months time?’

‘No. That’s the lot. And we put a lavatory in for that too.’ Thumper looked at me and grinned. It had been hard work persuading Miss Hargreaves to accept an indoor lavatory.

‘That’s pretty good, Thumper!’ said Dr Brownlow. He looked around the table at the rest of us. We all nodded our agreement. It was very good. Thumper and the others had virtually rebuilt School Cottage. A commercial builder would have undoubtedly charged half as much again.

‘Can we pay it?’ Dr Brownlow asked Peter Marshall, our treasurer. We had all taken part in numerous events but we had no idea how successful our fund raising had been. We’d been too busy raising money to stop and count it. Just about everyone (apart from the Wing Commander and the Colonel who had, nevertheless, unwittingly made their own contributions) had done something. The Bilbury Morris Dancers had danced their way round North Devon. Miss Venables had given her illustrated talk on the ferns of North Devon seven times. Mrs Oliphant had held an exhibition of her oil paintings in the public library in Barnstaple. Elijah Huttlecombe had been persuaded to give holiday-makers two talks and a short demonstration on charcoal making. We had played four cricket matches (we had lost all four but had acquitted ourselves admirably) and the Bilbury Revue had been performed a total of six times (including one matinee).

Peter shook his head and sucked air in through his broken front teeth. The rest of us waited in an increasingly gloomy silence.

‘Come on, Peter!’ shouted Gilly, unable to bear the tension any longer.

Slowly, very slowly, a smile spread across Peter’s face. ‘We raised a total of £10,041.39,’ he announced with considerable pride.

If I hadn't been there I wouldn't have believed that six people could have made as much noise. Gilly and Kay both kissed Thumper, and then they both kissed Peter, Dr Brownlow and me. We all shook hands and congratulated one another.

'Well!' said Dr Brownlow, at last. 'I reckon that means we've got a surplus of...'

'£764.55,' said Peter, instantly. 'Minus £24.53 for the paint.'

'Paint?'

'The pink paint. The paint for the cottages around the village green.'

'That all washed off!'

'It wasn't my fault!'

'Yes it was. You can't charge for that.'

'What are we going to do with the money?' asked Gilly.

Peter, who seemed to have accepted Dr Brownlow's ruling on the paint uncharacteristically easily, coughed.

We all looked at him.

'I just wondered,' he said, hesitantly. 'Are we going to have a Revels again next year?' he asked.

We all looked at him.

'Oh no, I don't think so,' said Dr Brownlow. 'It was all a bit too exhausting. And my front lawn is going to take months to recover. We only needed to organise the Revels to raise money for School Cottage.'

'But we could do with renovating the village hall!' said Kay.

'Especially if we're going to perform another Revue!' said Gilly. 'We need better changing facilities.'

'And a proper kitchen!' said Kay.

There was a simple flaw in this argument. Since if we didn't hold a Revels we wouldn't need a Revue, Gilly's claim that we needed better changing facilities if we were going to hold another Revue was hardly an argument in favour of organising another Revels. But I kept quiet.

'It's just that I thought that if we were going to organise another Revels then we could keep the surplus from this year as a sort of float for next year,' said Peter. 'To pay for better costumes...'

'... and some decent cricket bats!' said Thumper.

'Good thinking, Thumper!' said Dr Brownlow. 'We need some proper bats, Peter. Not that cheap rubbish.'

'And pads!' I added. 'Two for each batsman!'

'And pads!' nodded Dr Brownlow.

And so it was agreed. The Bilbury Revels would become an annual event.

* * *

'Do you know when Miss Hargreaves is moving back into School Cottage?' Thumper asked me as we got up from the table an hour or two later. 'I'll give you a hand with her stuff, if you like.'

The others, who had heard his question, looked and waited.

‘I think she wants to wait until next Saturday afternoon,’ I said.

‘Oh!’ said Thumper, clearly surprised. ‘I thought she wanted to move back in as soon as she could.’

‘She did. She does,’ I said. ‘But she wants to go there as Mrs Parfitt.’

Everyone stared at me.

‘Close your mouth, Thumper!’ I said. ‘You look daft.’

‘Say that again,’ said Gilly.

‘Close your mouth, Thumper...’ I began.

‘Not that. The bit before,’ said Gilly, impatiently.

‘When she goes back to School Cottage she wants to go as Mrs Parfitt so she’s waiting until next Saturday afternoon,’ I explained.

No one understood.

‘She’s getting married,’ I said. ‘To Mr Parfitt, our gardener.’

If I had told them that she had entered the world figure skating championships they couldn’t have looked more amazed.

‘That’s marvellous news!’ said Kay, at last, when the news had finally sunk in.

‘Miss Hargreaves getting married!’ muttered Thumper. ‘Well, I never!’

‘Are we invited?’ asked Gilly.

‘Oh yes,’ I said. ‘I almost forgot.’ I reached into my inside jacket pocket and took out a small bundle of white envelopes. ‘She asked me to give you one of these each.’

‘You...!’ cried Kay. ‘How could you forget something like this!’

‘Well, I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m thrilled with the news!’ said Dr Brownlow.

‘Absolutely delighted!’ said Gilly.

‘And without Mr Parfitt looking after your garden I’ll stand a decent chance of winning the Show Cup next year!’ Dr Brownlow said to me, rubbing his hands with glee.

I shook my head. ‘Sorry to disappoint you, doctor,’ I said. ‘But Mr Parfitt is still going to look after the garden for us.’

Dr Brownlow tried to look disappointed but was too happy to succeed.

‘Where are they holding the wedding party?’ asked Kay.

‘I don’t know that there is going to be a wedding party,’ I said.

‘Oh, they’ve got to have a party!’ said Gilly.

‘Compulsory!’ said Thumper firmly.

I left the five of them planning the celebration party for Mr Parfitt and Miss Hargreaves. I wanted to get back to Bilbury Grange and do some more work on the book I was writing. I found that living in Bilbury was a constant inspiration.

* * *

For full details of over 100 books by Vernon Coleman please see his author page on Amazon or http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

The Young Country Doctor: Book 4

Bilbury Country

Vernon Coleman

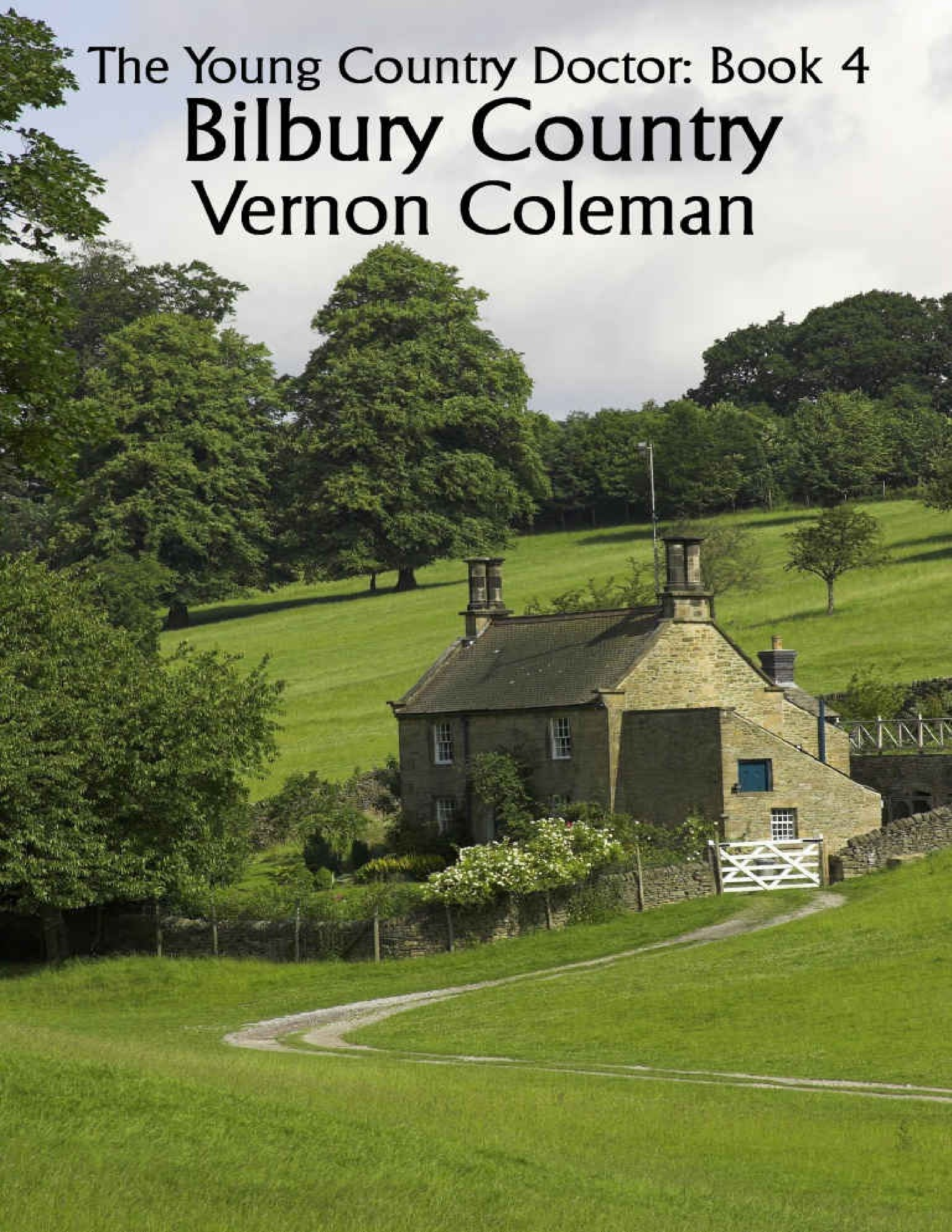

THE YOUNG COUNTRY DOCTOR: BOOK 4

BILBURY COUNTRY

VERNON COLEMAN

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Bilbury Country is the fourth of Vernon Coleman's seven books about Bilbury. These are: Bilbury Chronicles, Bilbury Grange, Bilbury Revels, Bilbury Country and Bilbury Village. There are two books of short stories called Bilbury Pie and Bilbury Pudding. If you enjoy the Bilbury books you may enjoy other books by the same author including Mr Henry Mulligan and Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War'. For full details of over 100 books by Vernon Coleman please see his author page on Amazon or http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

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CHAPTER ONE

It was one of those wonderful, warm, late summer days. The sort of day I always associate with summer in the English countryside whenever I am separated from both. The sky looked as though it had been freshly decorated. It looked so beautiful that it was almost unreal, as though it had been painted by a trompe d'oeuil artist. There were just enough small fluffy white clouds scattered around to bring out the blue. It looked as though someone should have climbed up and attached a 'Wet Paint' notice.

The air was thick with butterflies, dancing erratically from one bright flower to another and the only sounds disturbing the stillness were the music of a choir of unseen birds singing their hearts out and the hum and buzz of a hundred thousand small insects rushing around doing whatever it is that small insects do. It was Sunday morning and the worries of the world all seemed a million miles away.

Ben, our dog, was snoozing in the shade of a small rhododendron bush, Emily and Sophie, our two cats, had given up chasing butterflies and were both dozing on a pile of old sacks in a dark corner of the potting shed. Our five sheep, Lizzie, Petula, Cynthia, Sarah-Louise and Miss Houdini, were sheltering in the cool shade of their stable.

Patsy and I, the only two lunatics at Bilbury Grange not to be resting in the shade, were both out in the front garden doing what is usually known as a little light 'tidying up'. In practical terms this means that we were messing about in the broad flower border which runs along the edge of the shrubbery, cutting the heads off dead flowers and pulling up weeds that were about to seed. Normally these chores were attended to by Mr Parfitt but while he was away on his honeymoon Patsy and I had to assume these additional responsibilities ourselves.

To the animals this was just another sunny day; another in an apparently endless series of sunny days. It had been a marvellous summer. But we were only too well aware of the fact that, judged by the calendar, the summer would soon be over and, if the good weather continued, we would soon be stealing days from autumn. Patsy and I were both eager to take full advantage of it; keen to bathe in the sun's warm rays, keen to allow the warmth to massage our muscles and keen to acquire more comforting memories to help us through the coming dark, cold snowbound days of a North Devon winter.

Patsy was wearing a pair of very short, white shorts and a bright yellow bikini top. Every available inch of her body was already tanned a deep brown and her legs looked as long as childhood summers. I was wearing a pair of cut off old jeans and a short-sleeved light summer shirt. I too showed signs of having spent much of the summer out of doors. I had never been so brown.

It hadn't just been the weather which had made it a glorious, never-to-be-forgotten summer. Once again the villagers of Bilbury had come together as though they were members of one large family. The revived Bilbury Revels had been a tremendous success. We had produced a summer Revue which had attracted people from miles around, and had entertained scores of holidaymakers; we had organised a produce show and a surprisingly successful cricket team and, most important of all, we had raised enough money to repair the roof on Miss Hargreaves' storm damaged cottage!

'Do you know if Tim and Angie have managed to find anywhere to live yet?' asked Patsy, furiously digging away with her trowel at a particularly stubborn weed.

'No, they haven't,' I replied. I had seen Tim's uncle in the Duck and Puddle the day before and knew that the newly married couple were still living in Angie's mother's tiny two bedroomed cottage. 'Apparently every piece of property in the village gets snapped up these days as soon as it comes onto the market.'

'Prices are becoming very silly,' said Patsy. 'I heard that 'Chestnut View Cottage', one of those lovely little cottages around the village green, has just been sold for £20,000!'

I stopped snipping and looked up. '£20,000? Are you sure?' I stretched my aching back.

'That's what I heard.'

Patsy was right. Prices in Bilbury were becoming very silly. Just six months earlier one of those cottages had changed hands for half that amount. And we had paid very little more than £20,000 for Bilbury Grange!'

'Who bought it?' I asked, stooping down again and tackling another rosebush.

'It wasn't anyone local,' said Patsy. 'The estate agent in Barnstaple apparently told Kay Mcbride that it was someone from London.'

Kay Mcbride, our local district nurse, prides herself on being first with the local gossip. She has a large and reliable stable of informers.

'So someone has bought it as a holiday cottage?' I said, after a moment or two.

'Most likely,' agreed Patsy.

I didn't object at all to holiday-makers buying second homes in Bilbury. I could quite understand their desire to have a hideaway in such a beautiful part of the world. But it did annoy me that 'foreigners' were driving the prices of local property so high that young locals could no longer afford to buy homes of their own. From a purely selfish point of view I suppose I should have been pleased to see property values rising. But I wasn't.

'The odd thing is,' Patsy went on, 'that cottages in Combe Martin and Lynmouth haven't gone up much at all. Kay says that property prices in Bilbury are now nearly twice as high as they are anywhere else in North Devon.'

That puzzled me considerably but I didn't have time to think about it. I had my secateurs poised ready to snip off a dead rose when the morning quiet was interrupted by a voice I did not recognise.

'There's the doctor!' said the voice. It was a firm, rather loud voice and the owner spoke in a rather proprietorial way, as though I were a rare exhibit in a wildlife park and he a camera toting tourist. Although I had only written one book, and had made relatively few television appearances, I had already discovered that I did not like being recognised. Some people enjoy fame. A friend of mine once confessed to me that his sole ambition was to be able to go into any supermarket in the country and be recognised. I didn't like it at all and had already decided that I would try to keep away from television studios for this reason if for no other (although there were plenty of other reasons). I made sure that I looked as little as possible like the publicity photographs of me that had been taken and distributed to newspapers and magazines.

I looked around but could see no one. I gazed across at Patsy. A moment earlier she had been pulling out a weed with a root that seemed to go on forever. She too had stopped work and was now standing and looking across in my direction. She raised a questioning eyebrow. I shrugged my shoulders in answer and then looked around again.

'And there's Patsy!' said the voice, clearly triumphant at having spotted another exhibit.

Patsy and I repeated our silent exchange, only this time it was my turn to raise an eyebrow and her turn to lift a pair of bronzed shoulders in reply. Through the rhododendron bushes I could vaguely see something coloured a very vivid orange. I bent down a foot or so and peered underneath an overhanging branch in an attempt to see what was there. I need not have bothered. As I stooped the owner of the voice strode into view. It was not a pretty sight.

Apart from a bright orange, short-sleeved shirt, hanging free outside khaki shorts which came down just below his knees, he wore long, woollen, fawn-coloured socks, black brogue shoes and a wide brimmed straw hat. The bits of his legs which I could see were white, stick like and very hairy. He had a huge paunch which he carried before him as though it were a trophy and around his neck hung a pair of binoculars and a camera. In his right hand he carried a rolled up copy of a magazine.

He had three companions. By his side there was a very short, stout blue-haired woman who wore a light green cotton dress and a white straw hat and carried a large raffia shopping basket. A couple of yards behind them came a girl in her mid twenties who, despite the heat, wore a dark green anorak, dirty blue jeans, sunglasses with mirrored lenses and a black baseball cap. She carried a large bunch of freshly picked but already wilting flowers in her left hand. She was chewing something uncooperative. By her side stood a very sullen looking young man of about the same age who also wore sunglasses with mirrored lenses but instead of the dirty green anorak and the blue jeans wore a black T-shirt, black jeans and black motorcycle boots. He had tattoos on both his forearms and a large quantity of grease made sure that his hair remained exactly where he had put it earlier in the day. He carried a black leather, studded jacket which dragged along on the ground behind him.

'You're the doctor who wrote the book, aren't you?' said the man in the orange shirt, grinning broadly as though rather pleased with himself. He didn't seem to expect or want an answer. He had a self-satisfied, complacent, insensitive look about him that made me dislike him from the start. I know that it is unwise to make assessments about people when you've only just met them. First impressions can be dangerously misleading. But there are times when my instincts are so strong that I am reluctant to ignore them. This was one of those times. I did not feel that I would ever want to put my arm around the shoulders of the man in the orange shirt. He was not, I felt sure, anyone I would ever be pleased to see. He handed the magazine he was carrying to the blue-haired woman and fiddled with his camera case. 'Mind if we take some snaps?' He asked. It wasn't really a question.

I stared at him. 'Er...,' I began, but couldn't think of anything to add to the 'Er...,'.

'Isn't it wonderful, Elsie?' said the blue haired woman, ignoring her husband, Patsy and me and pointing at Bilbury Grange with an outstretched and grubby finger.

The young woman, clearly the intended recipient for this comment, looked very bored and blew a large pink bubble. When the bubble burst she used her tongue to drag the strands of sticky pink gum back into her mouth. If anyone ever gave awards for looking bored she would win all the top prizes.

The blue-haired woman, accelerated sharply and without warning. It was an impressive getaway from a standing start, particularly for someone with legs so well equipped with varicose veins that they looked like relief maps of Britain's inland waterways. She lowered her head, pushed out her elbows and surged forwards along the drive as though hurrying to catch a bus or get to the front of the queue at the local department store annual sale, and then suddenly stopped, stood still and looked around her. 'Where's the vegetable garden?' she demanded, staring first at Patsy and then at me.

Patsy looked alarmed and looked across at me for help.

I swallowed nervously. ‘It’s...er...behind the courtyard,’ I explained. ‘You can’t see it from here. But…’.

‘You should put up notices,’ said the blue haired woman abruptly.

‘I’m sorry...,’ I began, wondering as I spoke why I was apologising to a complete stranger who had entered my private world quite uninvited.

‘It’s this way!’ shouted someone I couldn’t see.

The man in the orange shirt turned and looked back down the drive. ‘Get out of the way, Doris!’ he called. ‘There’s a crowd behind us. I warned you to get a move on.’

Doris, the woman with blue hair, scuttled sideways like a crab and was cowering in the rhododendrons, out of shot, by the time that the man in the orange shirt had prepared his camera. ‘Smile!’ he called out. He had opened his mouth when he raised the camera to his eye, as though this helped him to focus. I wasn’t entirely sure that he was talking to me but felt that smiling would be safest and so I smiled. As the camera clicked the woman with blue hair leapt out of the rhododendrons with Ben snapping at her heels. The woman had, unfortunately, chosen her bush to hide behind and Ben, normally such a friendly dog, didn’t seem keen to share it with her. As soon as she had made sure that the woman didn’t intend to continue to share the cool of her rhododendron bush Ben returned to safety, quiet and shade.

‘Is this Bilbury Grange?’ I heard someone ask. Once again I didn’t recognise the voice. Bilbury Grange, once a silent place of refuge from the hurly burly of the world seemed to have become as busy as Paddington Station.

‘It certainly is!’ answered the man in the orange shirt. ‘That’s the doctor and there’s Patsy.’ He pointed at us in turn, in a rather proprietorial way, as though he were by now a fully qualified tourist guide. ‘He’s not quite as ugly as he looks in the photographs is he?’ He added, not even bothering to whisper this.

‘Look this way, please!’

Patsy moved over towards me just as a tall, fair-haired man wearing a yellow jumper, green corduroy plus twos, long green socks and stout hiking boots strode purposefully into view. He was about fifty-years-old, wore a small rucksack on his back and carried a walking stick in one hand and a copy of a magazine in the other. ‘Aha!’ he said when he saw Patsy and me. I felt Patsy’s fingers grasp mine. He half turned. ‘This is it!’ he called over his shoulder.

‘Where’s the walled garden?’ asked another voice. This voice turned out to belong to a pneumatic, fair-haired woman of a similar age to the tall fair-haired man. Having much shorter legs than her companion she was hurrying to keep up with him. He was clearly a partner of some permanence for she too was wearing a yellow jumper, green corduroy plus twos and stout hiking boots. Her exuberant figure made the jumper look as though it were several sizes too small. She also had a rucksack on her back, and carried a walking stick. She did not seem to be carrying a magazine.

‘It’s behind the courtyard,’ said the woman with blue hair.

‘They should put up notices. I’ve told them.’

‘What’s going on?’ whispered Patsy. She sounded as puzzled as I felt.

‘I don’t know,’ I whispered back.

Before we could exchange another word several more intruders strode into view. They all wore jumpers, corduroy plus twos, long socks and stout, sensible hiking boots, had small rucksacks strapped to their backs and carried walking sticks. Several of them also carried copies of what looked like the same magazine that the man in the orange shirt and the man in the yellow jumper were carrying.

‘Oh look!’ said a woman who wore tortoiseshell framed spectacles and had her copper coloured hair tied in plaits with bright yellow ribbons. ‘Is that Gilly?’

The woman with blue hair glared at her. ‘It’s Patsy!’ she said. ‘Gilly is the one who runs the pub with her husband.’ She spoke with some weariness, as though she was accustomed to having to correct people who hadn’t done their research properly. ‘She’s pretty isn’t she?’

The woman whose copper coloured hair was tied in plaits with bright yellow ribbons courteously agreed that Patsy was, indeed, pretty.

‘They’re both younger than I thought they would be,’ said the woman with blue hair.

‘Where can we get a drink?’ demanded the girl with the pink bubble gum. ‘I’m parched.’

‘Would you kiss each other?’ someone called out. I turned to see who had spoken and a camera flash went on off. I couldn’t help thinking that this was a needless extravagance for God had already lit the day more than adequately.

‘Where are the cats?’ asked a tall, willowy woman who had chosen to express her personality by wearing an olive green camouflage jacket and matching camouflage trousers.

The thought of Sophie and Emily being faced with this small army of intruders finally gave me the courage to speak.

‘Excuse me,’ I said. ‘I’m sorry to butt in but this is a private house you know.’

‘Oh yes, we know that,’ said the man in the orange shirt.

‘You’d think he didn’t want visitors!’ said the woman with blue hair as though she found the very thought incomprehensible.

‘Very nice house it is,’ said the woman with copper coloured hair and yellow ribbons, staring at Bilbury Grange with the critical eye of a potential purchaser. ‘When was it built?’

‘I’m really sorry...,’ I apologised.

‘Nineteenth century,’ replied the man in the yellow jumper. ‘1865 wasn’t it?’

‘Yes!’ I agreed. ‘But how did you know that?’

‘Ah!’ said the man in the yellow jumper, as though unwilling to divulge his secret source of information. He tapped the end of a long, rather red nose lightly with the rolled up magazine he was carrying and winked.

‘You must be very proud,’ said the pneumatic hiker in the tight, yellow sweater. She gave me a big smile. She looked like the sort of woman who ought to have been at home in the kitchen making good chutney.

‘Er, yes,’ I said.

Since we had lived at Bilbury Grange Patsy and I had quite frequently entertained complete strangers who had wandered into the garden because they had taken the wrong route, because they had misread a map or because they were simply and honestly curious. We had always done our best to make such impromptu visitors welcome. We enjoyed showing strangers around the gardens and we invariably ended up showing them around the house too, if they were interested. Bilbury is a wonderful village and both Patsy and I were always keen to share the wonders of the area with people who were genuinely enthusiastic. Most of our visitors ended up regarding themselves as ‘honorary Bilburians’ and several had told us, most earnestly, that as soon as they had saved up enough money to leave their city homes they would be looking for a cottage in the village.

But these people seemed different. Our usual visitors were polite, shy and generally apologetic. These tourists were not polite, shy or apologetic. On the contrary, they seemed rude, aggressive, and demanding. They seemed to think that they had a right to wander unhindered across our land and to stare at us as though we were shop window dummies.

‘It must be this way!’ shouted someone who sounded as though they were at the bottom of the drive. ‘I can hear voices!’ There was a murmuring of approval and I could hear more feet crunching on driveway.

‘What on earth do you all want?’ I asked, looking from one face to another.

‘We just want to look around,’ explained the man in the yellow sweater. ‘Hope you don’t mind! Can’t object to people looking can you?’

‘Do you have a small charge?’ asked the woman in the camouflage jacket. ‘Maybe a contribution to a favourite charity?’ She unfastened a button in her jacket and took out a small black purse.

‘No thank you,’ I said. ‘We don’t have a charge.’

‘Splendid!’ said the woman in the camouflage jacket quickly putting her purse away. She produced a large plastic bottle from somewhere. ‘Have you got a tap, please? I’d like to fill this with your wonderful Bilbury water. It’s for my granny.’

‘There’s a tap down there,’ I said, pointing to one of the outdoor taps we used for watering the garden.

‘Is it real Bilbury water?’ she asked.

I said it was.

‘Here it is!’ cried an overweight, bald, red-faced man whose abdomen hung over the top of his trousers like puff pastry flowing over the edge of a pie dish. His grey trousers were protected against the urgings of gravity by a pair of bright red braces and his white shirt clung to his body as though someone had thrown a bucket of water over it and him. He had a large blue badge with a number on it pinned to his shirt. He mopped at his face with a large, rather grubby looking handkerchief ‘Are there any chairs?’ he asked, rather wheezily.

‘Haven’t seen any,’ said the woman with the blue hair. ‘They haven’t even got any notices up telling people where the walled garden is,’ she added rather critically.

‘Benches?’ suggested the fat, red-faced man hopefully.

‘I haven’t seen any,’ said the tall man in the yellow sweater.

‘Where’s the walled garden?’ asked someone.

‘It’s beyond the courtyard,’ said the pneumatic, fair-headed woman in the tight yellow sweater helpfully.

The fat, red-faced man, who clearly hadn’t heard the question, frowned and looked puzzled. ‘What is?’

‘The walled garden,’ explained the pneumatic woman.

‘Over there!’ added the woman with the blue hair, pointing in the correct direction.

Just then a group of about twenty strangers strolled into view. The women all wore white cardigans, most of them carefully buttoned up to the top, and carried large, sensible handbags and floral patterned collapsible umbrellas in plastic sheaths. The men all wore beige polyester windcheaters, light-coloured trousers and nicely polished sandals.

They all had small white cardboard badges pinned to their chests and upon these badges were written what I assumed were their first names. Most of the men seemed to be called Hubert and most of the women were called Margaret. Several of the party carried rolled up copies of a magazine. One of the male strangers, an elderly gentleman who looked as though he was far too old to be wandering about in other people's gardens, shuffled up to the bald, red-faced man, tapped him on the shoulder and whispered in his ear.

'I don't know,' replied the bald man. 'I'll ask.' He mopped his head again before turning to me. 'Where's the lavatory?' he enquired.

'I really do think there must be some mistake,' I said, looking around at what had now become quite a large crowd and beginning to panic a little. The man in the orange shirt, the woman with the blue hair, the girl with the pink bubble gum and the young man in black leather seemed to have disappeared. I wondered where on earth they had gone. 'This is a private house,' I explained again. 'I'm afraid that we don't have any facilities for visitors.'

The elderly man whispered in the fat man's ear again.

'It's urgent,' said the bald man. 'We had to stop five times on the way here for him.'

I sighed and looked at Patsy. She shrugged. 'You'd better follow me,' I said to the elderly man with the enlarged prostate gland. There was a lot of murmuring among the other name badge wearers. A woman in corduroy trousers and a dark green sweater whom I hadn't seen before produced a small trowel from somewhere, presumably her knapsack, and began to dig up a small fuchsia bush in the shrubbery. 'Er, excuse me!' I said. 'Please don't do that!' The woman ignored me and carried on digging. 'Er, I'd rather you didn't do that,' I said, hesitantly. 'I rather like that bush where it is.'

The woman turned her head and glowered at me. 'Just because you think you're famous,' she snapped. I recoiled. 'I don't think you're famous,' she said. 'Anyway I'm entitled to take a souvenir.'

'How many for the lavatories?' asked the bald, red-faced man. 'Make a neat line,' he said firmly. He spoke to the supplicants as though they were children and he a schoolteacher, though I had by now realised that their relationship was that of coach driver and passengers.

A dozen arms were raised instantaneously.

'I'll take them,' said Patsy, with a sigh. 'You try to find out what is going on.' She strode off towards the back door followed by an apparently interminable line of strangers with full bladders.

I was about to start quizzing some of the remaining visitors in an attempt to find out where they had all come from and why they had chosen to come to Bilbury Grange when I heard a voice which, I was delighted to realise, I did recognise.

'Whose is that bloody coach parked in the lane?' demanded Samuel Houghton.

Samuel, who has a farm out on the road to Little Mitcham but who keeps sheep in a couple of nearby fields, strode into view. It was good to see a familiar face. Despite the blistering heat Samuel wore his usual rusty-brown, tweed jacket, tied around the waist with orange baler twine. He had his pipe fixed firmly in one corner of his mouth and a small, rather greasy hat perched on the back of his head.

'Mine!' answered the bald, red-faced man. 'What's your problem?'

'It's blocking the lane!' protested Samuel. 'I can't get my tractor past.' He took his pipe out of his mouth and poked at the contents of the bowl with a penknife which he had taken out of his jacket pocket.

'Well there's no coach park signposted!' explained the bald, red-faced man as though that was excuse enough. 'Where am I supposed to park if you don't provide proper car parking facilities? '

'I don't care where you put the darned thing,' said Samuel, calmly but firmly. 'But you can't leave it where it is.' He bent down, tapped his pipe against the side of his boot and looked up at me. 'I'm sorry, doctor,' he said. 'I got past most of the cars that are parked but the coach is just blocking the whole lane.'

'I don't know what they're doing here, Samuel,' I said. 'The world seems to have gone stark raving mad this morning.'

'They're all over the darned village!' said Samuel. He examined the contents of his pipe bowl again and carefully scraped at it a few more times with his penknife. 'There are cars parked all over the village green and there are three more coaches parked outside the Duck and Puddle. Colin Jackson found a dozen of 'em having a picnic on one of his fields and fired his shotgun at 'em.' He bent down and tapped his pipe against his boot once more. 'They scattered pretty darned quick by all accounts.'

'Haven't you seen this article in the *Sunday Planet* colour magazine?' asked the hiker in the yellow sweater and the green corduroy plus twos. He held out the magazine he had been carrying. I suddenly, rather belatedly, realised that it was the same magazine that many of the other intruders had also been carrying.

I took the magazine from him, thanked him, unfolded it and stared in astonishment at a large colour photograph of Bilbury Grange. There was another smaller photograph of Patsy and myself sitting eating afternoon tea in the garden. I didn't remember either of the photographs ever being taken. I turned the page and there were more photographs of Bilbury; a shot of the Duck and Puddle, a shot of a cricket match in progress on the village green and a close up picture of two or three of the cottages on the far side of the village green. I turned back to the start of the article. It was headed: 'BILBURY COUNTRY'. Underneath this headline, and the name and photograph of the author, who was someone I had neither heard of nor recognised, was the subheading 'The Perfect Place to Live: England's Healthiest Village!'

'Is this why you're here?' I asked the hiker.

He nodded. 'Of course!'

'Where have you come from?'

'Swindon,' he replied, as though it was the most natural thing in the world to travel across half of England to stare at someone else's home. 'We were going to go to the Quantock Hills in Somerset but when Stella saw this article in the magazine we thought we'd come on and take a look at Bilbury.'

'Stella?'

'My wife.'

'Is this why you're here too?' I asked the coach driver.

'Certainly is!' he replied. 'Mystery tour. The boss read that article this morning and put you on the tour instead of Clovelly. A lot of our ladies and gentlemen complain about Clovelly with them being a little mature for anything too energetic. They say as how it's a mite too hilly.' He sniffed. 'But at least they've got decent parking and lavatories at Clovelly.'

'But they want visitors,' I pointed out. 'We didn't ask for visitors, we didn't expect visitors and I obviously can't speak for anyone else in Bilbury but to be perfectly honest Patsy and I really don't want any uninvited visitors!'

'Well you're not going to get many more with that attitude!' said the coach driver, rather belligerently I thought.

I felt a small hand slipping between my arm and my body. I looked around. 'I left them all queuing in the hallway,' said Patsy quietly.

I frowned. 'Do you think that was safe?' I asked her.

'I don't know,' said Patsy. 'Do you think I should have stayed with them?' She looked worried.

'I don't know,' I admitted.

Samuel, carefully filling his pipe bowl from a leather pouch he had taken from one of his jacket pockets, looked across at the coach driver. 'So,' he said, pausing for a moment, 'do you think you're going to be moving that coach then?'

'Where else can I put it?' demanded the coach driver.

'I don't know as I can rightly answer that,' replied Samuel. 'You could just drive round and round the village as far as I'm concerned. I just want to get to my sheep.'

'If you're going to take that attitude then I might just leave it where it is!' snapped back the coach driver.

'That's not something I'd be keen to recommend,' said Samuel. 'Otherwise I'll just have to try to squeeze past and hope your shiny coach doesn't do too much damage to my tractor.'

'Can't imagine anything doing any damage to your tractor!' I said, lightly. 'I've never seen so much rust in one place.'

'Well, I just hope the paintwork on his coach doesn't scrape off any of my rust!' said Samuel. 'I'm very fond of that rust. It's been there a long time.'

Muttering something inaudible under his breath the coach driver told the few remaining members of his flock who had not joined Patsy on a guided tour of our lavatory that he would meet them at the entrance to the driveway in fifteen minutes. He could not, however, resist one parting shot. 'You want to learn to be a bit more hospitable!' he said as he started off back down the driveway. 'I'll be having a word with my boss and it wouldn't surprise me one little bit if your village wasn't taken off our mystery tour itinerary. It certainly wouldn't surprise me one little bit.' He pulled himself to his full five foot four inches and glowered at me. 'I'll be recommending that we go back to Clovelly next week. They know how to treat people proper down in Clovelly. And they've got ice creams too.'

Leaving us with this awesome threat hanging over us the coach driver waddled off down the drive to move his vehicle.

'I'll get on and look after my sheep then, doctor,' said Samuel, following him down the driveway. 'I hope you manage to clear all these visitors away before too long.'

'So do I, Samuel,' I said. I looked around the garden, now awash with brightly coloured anoraks, jumpers and T-shirts. A giggle of teenage girls were taking photographs of one another. 'So do I!'

Samuel looked up at the sky, and chewed on a piece of straw which stuck out of a corner of his mouth. He scuffed the ground with the toe of his boot and sniffed at the air. 'It's going to rain later,' he said, with quiet country certainty. 'That should clear 'em away.'

I was impressed. 'How do you do that?' I asked him, intrigued.

He looked puzzled. ‘Do what?’

‘Predict the weather,’ I said. ‘How do you know what the weather is going to be like?’ I thought that he was perhaps going to explain that he’d seen all his cows facing South Westerly. Or that he had a piece of seaweed hanging up outside his back door. Or that he’d seen flies hovering over the pond near his back door. Or that he’d been studying the clouds.

‘I heard it on the wireless this morning,’ he told me.

I was terribly disappointed.

* * *

CHAPTER TWO

Patsy and I spent the rest of what we had hoped would have been a quiet Sunday trying to stop our unwanted visitors from doing too much damage to our home and garden. They came in their hundreds; by coach and by car. They arrived singly, in twos, in families and in parties so large it was impossible to count them. They came demanding food and lavatories and postcards and photographs. They shouted and complained and moaned and threw their rubbish down on the ground and stubbed their cigarettes out on the lawn and picked the flowers.

A couple in a Ford Escort insisted on parking their car on the front lawn. When I remonstrated with the driver he pointed indignantly to an orange badge stuck to the inside of his windscreen, told me that the badge gave him legal authority to park wherever he liked and threatened to report me to the authorities if I didn't apologise.

When the group of people Patsy had taken into Bilbury Grange to use the lavatory didn't reappear I went in search of them and found them spread all over the house. Three were in our bedroom and half a dozen were standing around in the living room looking confused.

'There doesn't seem to be a television set,' said a man in a beige polyester windcheater and light blue trousers. Even though he was indoors he still wore a white nylon cap.

'No,' I agreed.

'Where do you keep it then?'

'There isn't one,' I explained.

'No, I realise you haven't got one in this room,' said the man in the white nylon cap. 'But which room is it in?'

'We haven't got one.' I insisted.

'Bedroom?'

'No.'

The man in the white nylon cap sighed, as though we were playing some sort of game. 'Kitchen?' he suggested.

'No.'

The man in the white nylon cap put his hands on his hips and stared at me. 'Come on, sonny,' he said. 'We don't want to steal it. We only want to look at it.' He looked around at his companions who nodded in confirmation.

'We don't have a television set,' I said, rather coldly. I didn't like being called 'sonny' in my own home.

The man stared at me, looked at his companions and then stared at me again. 'You don't have a television set?'

'That's right,' I sighed, pleased that the message was beginning to sink in.

'Not one?'

'No.'

There was a pause.

'Not even a portable?'

'No.'

The man thought about this for a few moments. 'I don't believe you,' he said at last. I turned and left him and his friends peering at every item of furniture in the room, clearly expecting to discover a television set disguised as an easy chair, a bookcase or a coffee table.

In the kitchen I found a woman in a white cardigan and fawn trousers slicing bread and making sandwiches. The kettle was boiling and four cups and saucers were sitting neatly beside it. A woman in a white cardigan and primrose coloured trousers was sitting knitting and humming quietly to herself. Three men in beige polyester windcheaters were smoking pipes and reading newspapers.

'Is the strawberry jam homemade?' the woman asked.

'Yes,' I said. Patsy had made it the previous summer. She'd been up until three o'clock one morning because it wouldn't set. Eventually I'd had to wake up Peter Marshall at the village shop so that I could buy some pectin. Peter hadn't minded. He'd also sold me a pair of secateurs, a packet of candles, two pounds of rice and a spare broom handle.

'That's nice,' said the woman. 'My Gilbert doesn't like the factory made stuff. Do you Gilbert?'

One of the men, presumably Gilbert, looked up. 'What's that, dear?'

'You don't like factory made strawberry jam, do you?'

'Don't I, dear?'

'No, you don't. That's what you said.'

'Yes, dear.'

'Doesn't have the flavour,' explained the woman spreading jam on a slice of buttered bread. 'Made by Patsy was it?'

'Yes.'

‘Lovely,’ said the woman. She lifted the boiling kettle off the Aga and rinsed out the teapot with hot water. She then put several large spoons of tea into the pot and filled it with boiling water. I could hardly believe that all this was happening in our kitchen.

‘How does she make sure the strawberries don’t all rise to the top?’ she asked me when she’d finished doing this.

‘I’m not sure,’ I said. ‘Look, I don’t want to be rude or inhospitable or anything but this is our kitchen and I’m afraid we don’t do teas.’

‘One of your cups was chipped,’ said the woman, ignoring my protest and adding another sandwich to a growing pile. ‘I threw it away. You don’t want to keep chipped cups. They’re unhygienic. You should know that, being a doctor.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I mean, yes. I do know that. It’s just that we’ve only got five cups.’

‘Four,’ said the woman.

I looked at her.

‘Four cups,’ explained the woman. ‘You’ve only got four cups now. What are you going to do if more people want tea?’

I took a deep breath. ‘I don’t want to be rude,’ I said. ‘But I really would be very grateful if you’d leave. This is our home. It isn’t a cafe.’

‘And what about lunches?’ asked the woman. ‘It won’t be long before they’ll all be wanting their lunches!’

I closed my eyes and slowly counted up to ten. ‘This isn’t a cafe,’ I repeated. ‘We don’t do morning snacks, lunches, afternoon snacks, dinner or anything else!’

‘It’s pretty obviously not a cafe!’ said the woman. ‘Not with just four cups!’ She smiled at me in a patronising way. ‘We won’t be long, dear,’ she said. ‘And then we’ll be out of your hair.’ She nodded at one of the men at the table and then lowered her voice to a whisper. ‘The doctor says that Gilbert should eat regularly. It’s his bowels you know. Very sensitive bowels he’s got. Always has had. If he doesn’t eat regularly he gets terrible gurglings.’ She carried the plateful of sandwiches over to the table, put it down and walked back to collect the teapot. ‘Where’s the tea strainer?’ she asked, but didn’t wait for an answer before opening a drawer and rummaging around in it. Before I could reply the door burst open and the man in the white nylon cap came in, closely followed by his companions.

‘Ah, tea and butties!’ said the man, rubbing his hands together. ‘At least we can get something to eat!’ He bent down to speak to the three uninvited visitors already sitting around our table. ‘Do you know,’ he said, ‘he,’ and at this he nodded in my direction, ‘won’t even let us watch the television!’ He looked around. ‘Aren’t there any more chairs?’ he demanded crossly.

‘Can’t find the tea strainer anywhere,’ said the sandwich maker. ‘Where do you keep the tea strainer, love?’ she demanded again.

I gave up and went outside.

‘Hey you! How do we get to the church?’ demanded a rude and very aggressive man in a beige anorak. He was accompanied by a plump woman in a matching anorak. He unwrapped a toffee as he spoke and, after popping the sweet into his mouth, casually threw the unwanted wrapper down onto the ground.

I bent down, picked up the wrapper and put it into my pocket. ‘Turn left outside the gate,’ I told him. ‘Go two hundred yards down the road and follow the road round to the left – ignore the track on your right – and then turn left on a farm track just after you come to a right angle left hand bend. If you find yourself on the Combe Martin road, which you probably will do because the turning to the church is almost hidden by brambles at this time of the year, then you’ve gone too far. Turn round and go back the way you’ve come for two hundred yards and you’ll see a turning on your left. That will take you down to the church.’

The man made me repeat all this and then stalked away without even a ‘thank you’. I didn’t mind. The instructions I had given him wouldn’t take him very near the church but would take him directly past a brace of the most vocal farm dogs in North Devon. For a moment or two I felt a tiny bit guilty, but the feeling soon passed.

In the vegetable garden I managed, with some difficulty, to persuade a family from Bristol to stop picking our raspberries. They had brought their own plastic containers and seemed most put out when I remonstrated with them. As they walked away the mother, a large woman, told me that it was the last time her family would ever visit Bilbury Grange. She raised her voice to make sure I heard her. ‘And what’s more we’ll tell our friends not to come!’ she threatened.

On the driveway, I stopped a man in checked golf trousers and a green shirt. He was trying to carry away a stone statue which he said he had ‘found’ down by the lake.

‘Excuse me, but do you mind putting that back where you found it?’ I asked, as politely as I could.

‘What for?’ demanded the man.

‘Because that’s where it lives,’ I explained, trying hard to remain calm. ‘It wasn’t lost or abandoned and it isn’t for sale.’

‘You should have a notice on it saying ‘Not for sale’,’ snapped his wife. ‘Don’t you carry it all that way back, Keith. It’s far too heavy. Leave it there and let him take it back himself.’ Keith put the statue on the drive. She jabbed a finger in my chest. ‘I’ve a good mind to complain to the authorities!’ she said. ‘My Keith could have injured his back carrying that statue all this way. He thought he was doing you a favour. He was tidying up.’

I opened my mouth but couldn’t think of anything to say to this bizarre outburst.

‘And another thing,’ said the woman, jabbing her finger at me a second time, ‘you should have a fence around that lake. People could fall into it. Call yourself a doctor? You’re a disgrace, that’s what you are!’ She called over a woman in her late twenties who was heading in the other direction and who had small children attached to each hand. ‘Don’t go down by the lake!’ she said. ‘There’s no fence round it, you know. Your children could fall in and I bet you there are no lifebelts.’ She turned to me. ‘Are there any lifebelts?’

‘Er...no,’ I admitted.

‘There you are!’ said the large woman. ‘Should be reported to the authorities.’ She sniffed. ‘Come on Keith,’ she said. ‘Let’s get out of here. It’s a death trap.’

The woman with the two small children stood where she was, looking anxious. She looked around, spotted her husband and called to him. ‘Jim!’ she screeched. ‘There’s no lifebelts by the lake.’ She nodded in the direction of the fat woman, now hurrying away as fast as her fat legs could carry her. ‘That woman says it isn’t safe,’ she said.

The fat woman turned round. ‘Ask him how many people have drowned!’ she shouted back up the driveway.

Jim hurried over to where his wife and children were standing. He put a protective arm around his wife and drew the children close to him. He glared at me. ‘How many people have drowned?’ he asked sternly.

‘I don’t think anyone has drowned,’ I said, feeling that everything was beginning to get away from me.

‘Well, that’s not good enough!’ snorted Jim. ‘Come on Cynthia We’re leaving.’ They set off back down the drive. I heard him telling people not to go near the lake because not even I knew how many people had drowned in it.

I turned and started to look for Patsy. It seemed an impossible task. Everywhere I looked there were huge crowds of people. There were families having picnics on the lawn. There were dogs chasing children and children chasing dogs.

‘Where are the lavatories for the disabled?’ demanded a woman pushing a man in a wheelchair.

I said I was sorry but that we didn’t have any lavatories for the disabled.

‘I can’t get him into the house,’ said the woman. ‘You’ve got steps.’

‘Yes,’ I said, as politely as I could. ‘I know we’ve got steps.’

‘The wheelchair won’t go up them,’ said the woman.

‘No,’ I agreed. ‘I don’t suppose it will.’

‘So what are you going to do about it?’ demanded the woman.

‘There’s a public lavatory near the village green,’ I said. ‘That hasn’t got any steps.’

‘The village green?’

‘That’s right.’

‘But we don’t want to go to the village green. We haven’t finished here yet.’

‘Maybe together we could lift him out of the wheelchair and carry him into the house?’ I suggested.

‘That’s not good enough,’ said the woman. ‘You should have ramps.’

‘Well I’m afraid we haven’t got any ramps,’ I said. ‘We weren’t expecting people in wheelchairs.’

‘That’s just typical of your sort!’ said the woman. ‘You’re quick enough to take the public’s money but you aren’t prepared to put yourself out or spend anything on providing facilities. I’ll be writing to the *Sunday Planet* about this. Let’s see what they have to say when I tell them how you treat disabled people.’

‘I’ve offered to help you carry him into the house,’ I pointed out.

‘He doesn’t want to go to the lavatory at the moment,’ said the woman. ‘Do you Darren?’

Darren confirmed that he didn’t want to go to the lavatory at that particular moment.

‘It’s the principle that is important,’ said the woman. ‘But I don’t suppose you understand anything about principles do you!’ She pushed Darren away, warning me that she would be writing to the authorities and to the papers and that I could try to explain myself to them.

‘Are you in charge?’ demanded another voice. I felt a blow on my back and whirled round. A small, very plump woman in a dark blue mackintosh was getting ready to hit me again with her umbrella ‘Are you in charge?’ she demanded.

‘I don’t think so,’ I answered.

‘They said you were in charge,’ said the woman, waving her umbrella I noticed that she was accompanied by a small, sodden child. He was drenched and had pond weed draped over his scalp.

‘What happened?’ I asked her. I nodded at the boy.

‘He fell in your pond!’ said the woman. ‘He might have drowned.’

'But he didn't!' I pointed out, not unreasonably.

'There's no fence around it,' complained the woman.

'Two thirds of the earth's surface is covered in water,' I told her. 'It's not surprising people keep falling into the stuff.' Just occasionally I can think of the clever thing to say while there is still some point in saying it. I readily admit that these things usually come to me an hour or two past their sell-by-date.

'But there's no fence!' said the woman, slightly taken aback.

'There's a wall and a gate,' I explained. I pointed down the driveway. 'There's a gate down there which was shut this morning. I didn't open it. This is private property and you weren't invited to come through the gate.'

The woman opened and shut her mouth but nothing came out of it.

'Hey you!' someone else called out.

I turned round. I was beginning to feel dizzy. A snooty looking fellow in a white suit was beckoning to me. I walked over towards him. 'I want to buy a cottage in the village,' he said. 'Just for weekends.'

'I don't think there is anything much for sale at the moment,' I told him.

'A barn will do,' said the man in the white suit. 'I'll have it converted.'

'I don't think anyone's got a barn for sale either,' I said.

* * *

I eventually found Patsy standing on a quiet, secluded corner of the front lawn. Ben was lying at her feet. Patsy was crying.

'Why are all these people so horrid?' she asked me. 'I saw a boy carrying fish in a plastic bag,' she said. 'When I asked him where he'd got them from he said he'd caught them in a pond and that they were his. When I told him he had to take them back his mother screamed at me and his father said we'd be hearing from their solicitor!'

I put my arm around her and kissed her.

'I found two little girls holding Ben down while another girl tried to tie an empty can onto her tail!'

I bent down and scratched Ben's head. She looked up at me with sad, sad eyes and raised a paw. I held her paw for a moment. 'Have you seen Sophie and Emily?' I asked Patsy.

Patsy shook her head.

'You look after Ben!' I told her. 'Stay here and look after Ben. I'll go and find Sophie and Emily.'

I hurried off towards the vegetable garden, in the rather vain hope that I might find our two cats still safely hidden in the greenhouse. When I got there I was horrified to find that the greenhouse door was wide open and there was no sign of either Emily or Sophie.

'Have you seen two cats?' I asked a youth with green spiky hair. He bit at a huge strawberry he was holding, stared at me uncomprehendingly and wandered away.

'Have you seen two cats?' I asked a young woman in a see-through blouse. She was holding a bunch of flowers she had picked.

'Pardon?' she said.

I repeated my question.

'Je parle pas anglais,' she said, shrugging a pair of alabaster shoulders. She said something else in French and giggled.

'Excuse me,' said a diminutive and elderly lady with grey hair and a metal walking frame. 'Did you say that you were looking for two cats?'

I said I had and I was.

'There are two cats over there,' she said, lifting her entire walking frame into the air with ease and using the upended aluminium scaffolding to point towards the far end of the walled garden. 'On top of the wall,' she said. 'Two boys were throwing stones at them,' she added. 'I tried to stop them but...'.

Shouting 'Thank you!' over my shoulder I raced along the narrow paths to the other end of the walled garden. The grey-haired old lady was right about the stone throwing youths. But at first I couldn't see Emily and Sophie. They weren't on the wall. And then I spotted them; they had both climbed up a huge walnut tree which grows on the other side of the wall.

When she saw me Emily miaowed very loudly.

'Hey!' I shouted at the boys. 'Stop that!' I was furious.

The two boys turned and stared at me. 'Who are you?' demanded the taller of the two.

'Stop that!' I said.

'Or what?' demanded the shorter boy. He looked about fifteen or sixteen-years-old. His companion may have been a year or so older.

I lost my temper.

I had put up with people parking on our lawn. I had been patient with uninvited visitors who had made themselves sandwiches in our kitchen. I had bitten my tongue when complete strangers had walked around Bilbury Grange throwing their rubbish onto the ground. I had tried not to be rude to people trying to steal bits of our garden. But I'd had enough. Girls had tried to tie a can to Ben's tail and now boys were throwing stones at Sophie and Emily.

I picked up a long handled hoe that was leaning against the vegetable garden wall and raised it high above my head. 'Get out of my garden!' I shouted. 'Stop throwing stones and get out!'

The two boys dropped the stones they were holding and started to back away.

'Hey, they were only cats,' said the taller youth.

I started to run towards the two boys, the hoe still high above my head.

'We didn't hit them,' said the smaller youth, now starting to run. 'They kept moving.'

'Get out!' I said, speaking more quietly now but coldly. 'Get out and don't come back!'

The two boys ran off much faster than I could but I wasn't finished. 'That goes for all of you!' I shouted at the other intruders. 'Get out! This is a private garden. We don't want any of you here. Get out and don't come back!' Like a madman I ran around the garden chasing the uninvited visitors back towards the driveway and down towards the road.

As I passed the house, with the hoe still held aloft, and with a large crowd of panicking visitors running ahead of me the panic spread. Picnickers rapidly gathered together their rugs, hampers, baskets and small stoves and headed for the gate. Crying children were lifted up into the air by worried looking parents.

When most of the people in the garden were heading for the front gate I went into the house. The sandwich maker was still in the kitchen, making tea and yet more sandwiches.

'We've run out of bread!' she said. 'And the last pot of jam has gone.'

'Get out!' I shouted. 'Get out of my house. Now!'

The woman dropped the knife she was holding and backed towards the door.

'All of you!' I shouted. 'I'm serious. I'm going to count to ten and by the time I finish I want everyone out of this house!' I clutched the hoe firmly in my right hand and looked around the kitchen. The man with the white polyester cap took two sandwiches from the plate on the table and edged around me towards the door. 'There's no need to be like that!' he said.

'Yes, there is!' I said. 'Out! Out! Now!' I didn't see him leave but I heard the back door open and I heard the sound of chairs being pushed out of the way. Something breakable fell to the floor and broke.

I raced along the hall towards the living room. 'Get out!' I shouted at the long queue of people waiting to use the lavatory. They stared at me rather disbelievingly. 'Out!' I yelled. 'This is my house! And I want you all out. Now.'

'We're just going to use the toilet,' said a belligerent looking man with an unhealthy looking paunch. 'You can't stop us using the toilet.'

'Yes I can!' I shouted, surprising even myself by my belligerence. 'If you're not out of here within five seconds you won't need a toilet!'

Muttering noisy threats about making complaints to various bodies, the existence of which I was only dimly aware and the views of which I cared nothing about, the man scurried away towards the back door.

When I was satisfied that the house was empty I left, locked the back door and went back outside. The garden and driveway looked deserted but there was rubbish everywhere. A small blue pushchair had been abandoned in the middle of the drive. An orange tent which someone had erected on the lawn lay half flattened, its main pole snapped in two. Among the empty soft drink cans, sandwich wrappers, orange peel, banana skins and cigarette packets I spotted a pair of plimsolls, a sage coloured anorak, a small khaki haversack, a pair of navy blue knickers and numerous copies of the *Sunday Planet* supplement which contained the article which had caused all the trouble.

Patsy was exactly where I had left her, though now, instead of standing, she was sitting on the grass. Ben was sitting with her head in Patsy's lap.

'Did you find them?' Patsy asked as soon as she saw me, gently moving Ben's head and then jumping to her feet.

'They're both fine.' I answered.

'What happened?' asked Patsy. 'Where did everyone go?'

'I'm afraid I lost my temper,' I confessed. 'I think I threatened them.'

Patsy started to giggle. 'With that?'

I was still clutching the garden hoe I had picked up in the vegetable garden.

'I think so,' I admitted.

Patsy put her arm around me and kissed me on the cheek. 'You're my hero!' she said.

'That's wonderful!' said a voice I didn't recognise. 'Just hold that for a moment!'

Startled, Patsy and I both turned our heads together. Ben started to bark. A man in a multi-coloured shirt, green shorts, white pumps and dark glasses was fumbling with a very large camera. Behind him a woman in a light coloured summer dress was standing looking bored.

I'd had quite enough. 'Please get out!' I shouted. 'This is a private garden.'

'I just want a couple of snaps of the two of you,' explained the intruder, who was, nevertheless, backing away.

'We don't want any photographs taken,' I said.

'We aren't doing any harm,' said the intruder unwisely.

I glowered at him and lifted my hoe. He turned and fled, followed closely by his wife.

With Patsy and Ben behind me I followed them both the full length of the drive and as they disappeared down the lane I pulled at the tall, iron gates and slammed them shut, dragging the bolt into place. I told Patsy I'd stay there on guard while she went up to the house and fetched the key.

'Hey mister, open up them gates will you,' said a woman in a lilac trouser suit. She was carrying a huge shopping basket which was crammed full of plastic boxes.

'Sorry,' I said. 'I'm not allowed to let anyone in.'

'Oh, go on,' pleaded the woman. 'We only want to look around and take a few snaps and maybe have a bit of a picnic.' Her companion, a man in grubby white tennis shorts and grubby white tennis shoes leant forward and tried to rattle the gate. The gate, I was pleased to see, didn't budge an inch. He peered through the bars but could not, I knew, see anything other than a few yards of drive. Bilbury Grange is completely invisible from the road.

As they wandered back down the lane cursing me Patsy appeared clutching a huge iron key. The lock was a little stiff from disuse but we both breathed huge sighs of relief when I finally succeeded in locking the gate; locking us in and locking the tourists out. Even though we had a lot of mess to tidy up in the garden and the house it felt good to be safe from unwanted visitors.

* * *

CHAPTER THREE

At eight o'clock that same evening Patsy and I were both sipping whisky and trying to recover in the kitchen when Frank, the landlord of the Duck and Puddle, telephoned to invite us to attend an emergency meeting in the public lounge.

'One or two of us are having a bit of a meeting to try to decide whether we need to do anything about all these visitors we've been having,' said Frank. 'Gilly and I were wondering if you'd like to come along?'

'Have the tourists all gone now?' I asked him anxiously.

It had taken Patsy and me the rest of the day to tidy up the worst of the damage caused by our uninvited guests. I had a strong suspicion that some of the tourists had come to the country armed with large bags of their own household rubbish which they then distributed generously as they toured around.

Ben, Sophie and Emily, who were all sprawled comfortably on the kitchen floor, seemed to have recovered completely from their terrible experiences but Patsy and I had not yet forgotten the day's horrors. Getting out to go down to the pub meant opening up the front gate and I wasn't keen to do that even temporarily – until I was absolutely sure that the danger was past for the time being at least.

'Most of them seem to have gone,' replied Frank. 'I think one or two of them might still be wandering around the lanes but I reckon the rest of them have gone home now.'

'Patsy and I will both be there,' I promised. 'We had a terrible day,' I briefly told him what had happened.

'It's been just as bad everywhere in the village,' said Frank, sympathetically. 'Some well-meaning city idiot shut the gate to Buttercup meadow at 8 o'clock this morning.'

I closed my eyes and groaned. Colin Jackson always lets his cows find their own way back to their field when he's finished milking them. Daisy, his bell cow, is more intelligent than any politician or bureaucrat I've ever met. Colin leaves the gate to Buttercup meadow open and the cows wander, unaccompanied, along Pilton Lane, turn right at the junction with Parsonage Road and amble along the track which runs along behind the back of the Duck and Puddle. They turn into the gate at Buttercup field and when he's finished milking the last cow and had his breakfast, Colin trundles along the lane on his old tractor and shuts the gate. This is not so much to keep the cows in the field (after all, why would they want to leave – the grass in Buttercup meadow is sweet and lush and greener than any in the surrounding meadows) as to stop Oliver Huckberry's cows wandering in to join them when they're returning to their field half an hour or so later.

'And we've had 'em round here,' continued Frank. 'It's been awful. Absolutely awful. Hordes of 'em wanting lemonade and orange juice. You know how I hate serving lemonade and orange juice. It makes me ill. Hundreds of 'em wanting to come in and use our lavatories and fill their water bottles from our tap. I found one bloke with a hosepipe fitted onto our kitchen tap. He was filling up a 70 gallon drum he had fitted on the back of a small truck! He said something about taking the stuff to London and selling it in third of a pint bottles. When I told him what he could do with his hosepipe he offered me money to let him come and fill his tank up twice a week.'

'What did you say to him?' I asked, not really needing to ask to know the answer.

Frank snorted. Although Frank runs an establishment which is theoretically designed to persuade members of the public to exchange hard cash for fluid he doesn't like being too busy. He prefers to share a few pints with his chums rather than rush about catering for large numbers of people wanting glasses of lemonade or cups of tea.

* * *

'It says here that the drinking water bottled by Dr Brownlow in Bilbury has aphro..., aphro..., aphro something qualities,' said Thumper Robinson, reading from the *Sunday Planet* magazine article which had caused so much trouble. I realised that although I had picked up scores of copies of the *Sunday Planet* magazine I still hadn't actually read the article which had disrupted our life so dramatically. Thumper looked up and across at me and frowned. 'What's aphro what does it mean?' he asked.

'It's a type of hairstyle,' said Frank, firmly. 'Aphro thingy,' he explained. He moved his hands around about a foot away from his head. 'The way those Africans have their hair. All bouffant and curly like.'

Peter Marshall, who runs the village shop, nodded his head wisely. 'I've heard of that,' he agreed.

'It must mean that if you drink Dr Brownlow's water it will make your hair stick out,' went on Frank. He paused and grimaced. 'I think you should all stick to my beer,' he said. Frank is very nearly bald and it would be a miracle if any of the remaining hairs on his head had the energy to stand up by themselves.

'Aphrodisiac. It means the water makes you feel fruity,' I told Thumper.

'Then thank heavens you don't drink water!' said Anne Thwaites instantly. She looked at Thumper, the father of her child 'You're randy enough as it is!'

Peter, who runs the village shop, looked slightly disbelieving. 'I clean my teeth in water,' he said 'but I can't say as how I've ever noticed any funny feelings.'

Kay, Bilbury's bathukolpian district nurse, bent forwards and lowered her voice. 'Er, is this just the water Dr Brownlow sells?' she asked me. 'Or do you think it applies to all the water in the village?'

I thought for a moment. 'I'm not sure,' I said at last. 'But I expect all our water is the same.'

'Oh!' said Kay, blushing but looking rather pleased. 'How interesting...'.

'I don't need any artificial help,' said Thumper, unabashed and unembarrassed. He peered at the magazine again. 'Anyway, it says here that the drinking water Dr Brownlow bottles has aphro whats it qualities and is a real elixir of youth and a medically proven cure for arthritis! Elixir of youth.' He looked up at me. 'What's that doc?'

'He means that if you drink Dr Brownlow's bottled water you feel younger,' I explained.

'Sensible writer,' nodded Dr Brownlow. 'I must send him a 'thank you' note. What's his name?'

'George Nympton,' replied Thumper. He frowned. 'Does anyone remember him? Has he ever actually been to the village?'

'George Nympton? We remember him!' said Frank and Gilly in unison.

Everyone looked at them. Something Thumper had read out was nagging at me but I couldn't remember what it was.

'He stayed here at the Duck and Puddle a few months ago,' they replied.

'Short, fat chap,' said Frank. 'Wore a bright red wig. Underneath he was as bald as a billiard ball. He was completely neurotic and in very poor health.'

'Peter brought him from the station in Barnstaple,' said Gilly.

'Do you remember Peter?'

Peter thought for a moment. 'Did he smell of aftershave?' he suggested.

'That's him,' nodded Frank. 'Pungent, it was. Very pungent.'

'Six suitcases,' said Peter, nodding. 'He had six huge suitcases with him. I thought he was moving down here permanently.'

'He stayed here for three days and didn't leave his room,' said Gilly. 'Sent a photographer round the village taking snaps and asking questions. Tall, stringy fellow in a red fishing vest and black jeans. He had a ponytail and a gold earring.'

'I remember the fat chap!' said Patchy. 'I was in the bar when he came in. I remember thinking he was so fat that he probably needed to get planning permission every time he sat down.'

'That's a terrible thing to say about someone!' said Patsy.

'It's true!' protested Patchy. 'You should have seen him.'

I looked up from reading the article. I remembered the photographer. He had wandered into our garden one early summer afternoon and asked if he could take some photographs. He hadn't said he was from the *Sunday Planet*.

'Mr Nympton brought his own food with him,' said Gilly. 'We had to heat up all these meals he'd had prepared by some chef in London. He wouldn't eat anything we prepared.'

Thumper carried on reading. 'Well he says here that he reckons Bilbury is the calmest, most tranquil place in Britain.'

'It was tranquil until all those damned tourists turned up!' said Patchy Fogg, the antique dealer, sipping at a pint of stout. 'It took me an hour and three quarters to get from Softly's Bottom to the Duck and Puddle at lunchtime! Do you think any more will come? Or was that it?'

'I think we've probably seen the worst of it,' said Dr Brownlow.

Dr Brownlow, who used to be the village GP, is my ex employer and now, despite his advancing years, runs a thriving and prosperous water bottling facility at his home. 'It'll be a one day wonder, you see if it isn't. People throw those giveaway magazines in the bin after a day. You can't even wrap chips in them.'

There were murmurings of agreement. I hoped Dr Brownlow was right. But I wasn't quite as confident as some of the other villagers sounded. Patsy and I still hadn't finished clearing up the rubbish from our lawn. And there was still something niggling at me. I leant across towards Thumper and tapped him gently on the arm. 'Could I take a look at that article?' I asked. Thumper passed me the magazine.

'I know today's been a bit chaotic,' said Churston Ferrers. He cleared his throat as we all looked at him. 'But that's largely because we weren't ready for the number of tourists we got. I think we could be missing a great opportunity here. We ought to be careful not to, er, throw the proverbial baby out with the, er, proverbial bath water.' He looked around, waiting to gauge the response. No one else said anything.

Churston Ferrers and his wife had only arrived in Bilbury village a few months earlier. Churston used to live in London though what he did there and exactly why he came to live in Bilbury is something of a mystery. Churston is in his late thirties and always dresses impeccably. He was on this occasion wearing a light grey silk suit, a white shirt and a plain red tie. He had a neatly folded white handkerchief in his breast pocket and wore highly polished black shoes decorated with gold coloured buckles. He stands out in Bilbury just as much as Thumper, Frank, Patchy or I would in The Strand.

'This article,' he said, pointing to his own copy of the same *Sunday Planet* magazine that I was reading, 'could be an absolute godsend for the village! It could revolutionise life for all of us.' He spoke quietly and peered around at us all over the top of his gold framed spectacles. 'An absolute godsend!' he said again.

No one else said anything. To be honest I don't think any of us wanted our lives revolutionising. If we had wanted revolution we would have gone to live somewhere big and exciting like Barnstaple or South Molton; or even emigrated and gone to live in a foreign place – somewhere like London, Birmingham or Milton Keynes.

'Lots of villages would give their eye teeth for this sort of publicity,' said Churston eagerly. 'Just look at this,' he pointed to the page of the magazine in front of him. He held up the magazine so that we could see that he had drawn circles in blue ink around several parts of the article. He now proceeded to read out some of the quotes he had marked.

'Bilbury is the most peaceful and idyllic village in the whole of England,' he read. 'I know of no other village where I would prefer to live.' He looked up as though to make sure that we were all listening. 'Just a weekend spent in Bilbury will help you get rid of all the world weary blues.' He waved a hand in the direction of Dr Brownlow before continuing. 'Dr Brownlow's tiny bottling company produces drinking water which is, I am convinced, the true elixir of life. Apart from having astonishing qualities as an aphrodisiac the Bilbury water is absolutely replete with life-giving essential minerals. It is also a medically proven cure for arthritis.' Churston paused. 'We would have to pay a fortune for this sort of publicity!' he said. He then sighed. 'We would be very foolish indeed not to take advantage of it. The only pity is that the article wasn't published at the start of the summer season.'

'Where does it say that?' I asked Churston. That was the phrase that had caught my subconscious.

'Say what?'

'That stuff about arthritis. Where does it say that the Bilbury water is a medically proven cure for arthritis?'

Churston showed me. I found the same paragraph in the copy of the magazine that I was reading and showed it to Dr Brownlow.

'Do you know anything about this?' I asked him, puzzled.

Dr Brownlow shook his head and frowned. 'Bit over the top, isn't it?' He cleared his throat, took the magazine from me, held it up and waved it around. 'Does anyone know where they got this stuff about my water curing arthritis? In a few days' time we won't just be getting tourists we'll be having hypochondriacs and pilgrims flock to the village!'

Churston Ferrers grinned and nodded. 'Terrific publicity, isn't it? People will be coming here from miles around!'

'You're not kidding!' I said, horrified. 'When people find out that they can cure their arthritis by drinking a glass of our water they'll be coming here in coach loads and plane loads. Bilbury will be the new Lourdes!'

Churston looked at me and frowned. 'I can't see anything wrong with it,' he said. 'And it's perfectly true. Not a word of a lie! I just happened to mention to the writer fellow that I hadn't had any trouble with arthritis since I'd come to Bilbury.'

'How long had you had arthritis?' I asked Churston. 'You're very young to suffer from arthritis.'

Churston winked. 'I didn't say I ever did have arthritis,' he said. 'I just said I hadn't had any trouble with arthritis since I'd come to Bilbury. And that's perfectly true!'

'You never did have arthritis?'

'Well, not exactly. Not precisely.'

Dr Brownlow and I exchanged glances. There didn't seem anything else to be said.

'We just can't cope with all these people,' said Patchy Fogg anxiously. 'The village doesn't have the car parks, the toilets or – what's the posh word – the 'infrastructure' to cope with so many people.'

'Of course we can't cope at the moment,' said Churston who didn't seem in the slightest bit concerned that his trickery over the arthritis 'cure' had been exposed. 'Things got out of hand today because we weren't ready for what happened. But if we put a little bit of effort into making sure that we are ready then we could make a lot of money out of all these tourists.' He stopped and looked around again. The mention of the word 'money' had done its trick. Some of the villagers who had been dismissive of him a moment or two earlier were now listening carefully. I couldn't help wondering why Churston was so keen to see Bilbury prosper. And why, I wondered, had he made up all that nonsense about arthritis.

'Other villages would be absolutely thrilled with publicity like this,' said Churston. 'Lynton and Lynmouth, Combe Martin, Ilfracombe, Clovelly – they'd all be completely over the moon to get this sort of promotion! Over the moon!'

Peter Marshall leant forward towards Churston. 'I'm, er, not saying that I'd want more visitors in Bilbury,' he said quietly, 'I'm not saying that at all, of course, but what would we need to do and, er, how much money do you think we might be talking about to provide the, er, what is it called, the 'infrastructure'?' He looked around. 'Just out of curiosity,' he added, quickly.

Churston nodded understandingly and held out his left hand, fingers splayed. Using the forefinger of his right hand as a pointer he marked off the things we needed to do, finger by finger.

'First, we need car parking facilities,' said Churston, tapping his little finger. 'We don't need anything particularly sophisticated. Just a couple of fields and a couple of lads prepared to make sure that motorists park in nice straight lines.' He looked around. No one seemed particularly excited by this.

'Motorists would, of course, expect to pay a car parking charge,' he continued. 'And I think we could reasonably charge motorists 25 or even 50 pence a day to park their cars,' he added. 'Quite reasonable.' Suddenly there was a perceptible change in the atmosphere. Thumper Robinson and Patchy Fogg both started to take notice. Samuel Houghton cleared his throat noisily. 'I've got a couple of fields we could use,' he said, generously. You could see him trying to work out how many cars had been in the village during the day, how many cars he could cram into a couple of decent sized fields and multiplying the result by 50 pence.

'That's very nice of you, Mr Houghton,' said Churston. 'Very generous of you indeed.' He tapped the ring finger of his left hand 'Toilets,' he said 'We obviously need more toilet facilities. The facilities on the village green were quite inadequate today. But we don't have to go to any great expense and we don't even have to have anything built. We can hire portable toilets and have them stationed in the car parking area'

'How big are these portable toilets?' asked Samuel.

Churston frowned. 'I'm not sure,' he admitted 'I think that rather depends upon the number of facilities.' He thought for a moment. 'Say around fifty feet?' He suggested rather vaguely.

'How many do we need?' asked Samuel.

'One facility for gentlemen and one for ladies,' explained Churston reasonably.

'Ah,' said Samuel, apparently satisfied. He had, I knew, been worried that if the portable lavatories were too large they would take up valuable car parking spaces.

'We can, of course, make a modest charge to those who use these facilities in order to help us defray our expenses,' said Churston.

'How modest?' asked Peter Marshall immediately.

'Ten or twenty pence I would think,' said Churston. 'We should be able to make a small profit.' He tapped his middle finger. 'And then we'll need to make sure that visitors can buy ice creams and soft drinks.'

'They'll want pots of tea and scones,' said Gilly Parsons, the landlady of the Duck and Puddle. 'And they'd want cream teas as well. Lots of cream teas.'

'Great idea!' said Churston. 'Of course they would. Traditional Devon cream teas! And it would be marvellous if we could tell them that the cream and the jam were all freshly made in Bilbury. Do you think the village could produce enough cream and strawberry jam?'

'Cream is no problem,' said Samuel, who has quite a large dairy herd.

'Jam wouldn't be a problem either,' said Kevin Pettigrew. 'My mother makes umpteen jars of the stuff every summer.'

'Then maybe, if she has some left over, she wouldn't mind selling a few jars to the tourists?' suggested Churston. 'People always like to take a little something home with them. As a souvenir of their day out.'

'My wife makes raspberry jam,' said Harry Burrows. 'We've got a lot of raspberry canes,' he added in explanation.

'Splendid!' said Churston. 'Terrific! And maybe someone else could sell gooseberry or blackcurrant jam?'

Josh Wilkins raised an arthritic finger. 'My mother makes blackcurrant jam!' he said.

'Wonderful!' said Churston. 'That's wonderful!'

I leant a little closer to Dr Brownlow, who was sitting next to me. 'Josh's mother must be quite an age!' I whispered. Josh, the captain of the Bilbury Village Cricket Team, is reputed to be well into his eighties, though he looks and may well be considerably older than that.

'She would be if she was still alive,' Dr Brownlow whispered back. 'She died of pneumonia in 1963.'

'Postcards!' said Peter, excitedly. 'They'll want postcards.'

'Of course they will!' agreed Churston. 'Postcards of Bilbury!'

'I've got some postcards of Bilbury,' said Peter, to groans from the rest of us.

'They're in black and white and they were taken before the war!' protested Thumper.

'They're period!' said Peter defensively. 'Folk love the old stuff.'

'They do indeed!' said Churston. 'I would have thought that a little shop or stall selling antiques would have done a roaring trade today.'

I saw Thumper and Patchy Fogg exchange glances.

‘Maybe we could also produce a little souvenir booklet describing the history of the village,’ suggested Churston, who had now run out of fingers. He looked directly at me. ‘Could you put something together, doctor?’

‘I suppose so,’ I said, rather reluctant to get dragged into all this enthusiasm. I had an uneasy feeling that Churston was deliberately trying to find some way of persuading each one of us in turn to become excited by the prospect of attracting hordes of visitors to Bilbury.

‘Just a few pages about the village and half a dozen pictures,’ said Churston. ‘We could sell copies at the car park, at the ice cream stands and with the cream teas. It would be quite a little earner.’

I made some non-committal remark. Patsy and I certainly needed extra money but I was still not at all keen to see Bilbury turned into a real life theme park.

‘Of course I realise that none of you really want to get involved in any of this,’ said Churston, sitting back, as though everything he had been talking about had been simply theoretical. ‘But you can see why some villages would be excited by this article can’t you?’

I was now very suspicious. I got the distinct and uncomfortable feeling that having whetted everyone’s appetite Churston was now backing away and waiting for greed to take over. Patsy, who had been sitting quietly beside me, squeezed my hand. I looked at her. ‘What’s going on?’ she asked me quietly, looking puzzled. ‘I don’t know,’ I whispered back.

There was a long silence.

‘I don’t think we necessarily want to turn our backs on all these possibilities,’ said Gilly Parsons at last. She thought for a moment and looked hard at Frank. Frank didn’t say anything. ‘I wouldn’t mind having a few tables outside the pub and serving the odd cream tea,’ she said at last. ‘It would probably only be for a few weeks. But it would help keep us going.’

‘I can let you have all the cream you need,’ said Samuel Houghton quickly.

‘I don’t mind having an ice cream stand outside the shop,’ said Peter Marshall.

‘We need some sort of proper committee to tackle this,’ said Gilly firmly.

‘Oh I don’t think we should start setting up special committees,’ said Churston, with a shake of his head. ‘This is surely the sort of question we ought to hand over to the Parish Council.’

Everyone looked at him in surprise. The Bilbury Parish Council is not exactly the most forceful and go-ahead political organisation in the world. It meets four times a year and since I’ve been living in Bilbury I can’t remember it ever making much in the way of decisions. Take the village hall, for example. The Council has always been responsible for the repair, refurbishment and decoration of the village hall but after seven four hour meetings, spread over nearly two years, the Council still hadn’t decided who to hire to replace a broken pane of glass in the gentlemen’s lavatory and whether, when and where to put up six hat and coat hooks. In the end Thumper Robinson and Patchy Fogg had a whip round in the Duck and Puddle one Friday lunchtime, bought some glass, putty and coat hooks from Peter Marshall’s village shop and broke into the village hall that same evening to repair the window and put up six coat hooks in the hallway. The odd thing was that five of the people who had contributed money to Thumper’s impromptu fund were members of the Parish Council.

‘Do you really think that’s wise?’ asked Harry Burrows. Henry works in a bank and is a valuable member of the Bilbury Village Cricket Team. He sat on the Council in the 1960s but resigned when the Council spent five entire meetings discussing the type of lawnmower to buy for the village green. ‘When is the Council due to meet next?’ he asked.

Josh Wilkins, Captain of the Old Bilburians Cricket Team, and Chairman of the Parish Council for 42 years believes that the secret of political success is not to try to please people but to make sure that you don’t annoy anyone by taking decisions. He reached into a jacket pocket and pulled out a Racing Post diary for 1957. Josh has been using the same diary for quite a few years now. He writes his entries in pencil and rubs out all the old entries every December 31st so that the diary will be ready to receive his appointments for the following year. He simply ignores the names of the days printed on each page. Four years ago someone ripped out the last week in June and the first week in July. Some people might have found this a problem. But Josh simply avoids making any appointments for those two weeks. He slowly flicked through the pages. ‘We don’t seem to have anything planned,’ he told us, a few minutes later.

‘Maybe the Council could have an emergency meeting?’ suggested Churston.

‘Thank you very much, I’ll have a gin and tonic,’ said Josh. ‘Very kind of you.’

‘If we are going to do anything about this then I don’t honestly think we can afford to wait too long before taking advantage of our good fortune,’ said Churston, suddenly serious. He leant back and waved a hand around the room. ‘But what does everyone else think?’ he asked, apparently touched by an unusual attack of modesty.

‘I think Churston is right,’ said Patchy. ‘If we’re going to take advantage of what has happened we need to move pretty quickly.’

‘Do you think the Parish Council is, er, the right group to be dealing with this?’ asked Harry.

‘We don’t have much option,’ said Patchy. ‘If we’re going to do anything then we have to get the Council’s approval anyway. So they might as well be involved from the start.’

‘Thank you very much,’ said the Chairman of the Parish Council, accepting the gin and tonic which Churston put into his hand.

‘Maybe Churston would consider helping the Council?’ suggested Gilly.

Churston held up a hand. ‘Oh, no!’ he said.’ I couldn’t do that. It wouldn’t be right.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Gilly. ‘Why wouldn’t it be right?’

‘Well the Council is an elected body,’ explained Churston. ‘I wouldn’t feel comfortable attending Council meetings as an outsider.’

‘Then the Council should co-opt you as a member,’ said Gilly.

‘Oh, I don’t know about that,’ said Churston. He seemed strangely shy. ‘What would other people say? It doesn’t seem very democratic.’

‘What do you think about it, Josh?’ asked Gilly. ‘Josh!’

‘What’s that?’ demanded Josh, waking with a start. He had nodded off. ‘Gin and tonic, thank you very much! And a packet of salt and vinegar.’

Gilly leant closer and shouted in his ear. ‘What do you think about co-opting Churston as a full voting member of the Council?’

Josh, who had clearly no idea what was going on, looked very confused. ‘Why are you asking me?’ he asked.

Gilly sighed. ‘I’ll get you another gin and tonic,’ she promised.

‘Don’t forget my crisps!’ said Josh.

‘Seems the obvious thing to do,’ said Harry Burrows.

There was a murmuring, mainly from Patchy Fogg, confirming this point of view.

‘Well, I don’t know. I really don’t know. This isn’t what I’d had in mind,’ protested Churston.

‘Oh, please!’ pleaded Gilly, handing Josh his packet of crisps.

In the end Churston agreed, with quite a show of resistance, to join the Bilbury Parish Council if the other councillors approved the idea. And Josh, happily munching crisps, formally agreed to call an emergency Council meeting for the following evening.

Afterwards, I stood outside the Duck and Puddle and stared up at a starry September sky. I felt sad but didn’t really know why. I hadn’t realised that there was anyone else there until Dr Brownlow spoke.

‘Wonderful, isn’t it?’

I turned and looked at him.

‘The sky.’

I said it was.

‘Did you hear about ‘Chestnut View Cottage’?’

‘Selling for £20,000?’

‘I heard it was £25,000.’

‘Why would anyone pay that much for a tiny cottage in Bilbury?’

‘I have no idea,’ replied Dr Brownlow. ‘Property prices around here have rocketed recently. An estate agent rang me a week ago to offer £10,000 for a disused barn in one of my fields. I told him not to be silly. The barn is a wreck. It isn’t worth a tenth of that. And a chap I know in Exeter rang me a few days ago to ask me if I wanted to sell any land. Apparently someone is buying up land in the village. They’re prepared to pay really silly prices.’

‘What on earth is going on?’

‘I haven’t got the foggiest. But I don’t like it.’

We stood in silence for a few moments. The cool air reminded us both of the changing seasons.

‘Summer will be gone soon,’ said Dr Brownlow.

I agreed.

‘Then it’s autumn. And then winter again. Storms and snow and log fires. The older I get the quicker the seasons seem to change.’

I said I knew what he meant.

* * *

CHAPTER FOUR

I was woken next morning by the sound of the telephone. Sleepily I reached out and lifted the old-fashioned Bakelite handset to my ear. A cheery, summery voice belonging to a young girl who wished me good morning, apologised for disturbing me, said what an absolutely wonderful day it was, introduced herself as a television researcher for a programme the name of which I didn't catch but which she clearly assumed that I would watch regularly, and asked me if I would be available during the day to be interviewed. She was so excited that she managed to do all this without breathing. She was so breezy and enthusiastic that I felt exhausted just listening to her. She sounded about sixteen-years-old.

Trying not to sound as completely unenthusiastic as I felt I asked the young caller to repeat the name of the programme.

'Up Your Way!' said the sixteen-year-old. She clearly expected me to know what the programme was about. I didn't. I admitted my ignorance. I have found by bitter experience that it is a mistake for me ever to pretend to know something I don't know. Other people may be able to glide through life, blithely glossing over their ignorance, but I cannot.

'It's a daily magazine programme,' she explained, clearly rather startled by my ignorance. 'It's presented by the Blimpton Twins,' she added, proudly.

'The Blimpton Twins?' I said. I racked my brain. I had never heard of them either. Emily, our mixed tabby cat, crept up my chest and started to lick my nose. This was her subtle way of telling me that she was hungry and wanted her breakfast.

'Josie and Kenneth Blimpton,' persisted the researcher. 'You must have heard of them,' she said. 'The Blimptons. They are the only twins presenting a TV programme!' She paused, waiting for an appreciative response. 'Kenneth and Josie,' she explained when her appeal was met with my silence. She clearly believed that if she repeated their names often enough I would eventually remember having heard of them.

Emily patted the side of my nose gently with her paw and licked my cheek. Her rough tongue tickled and I had to stifle a giggle. I apologised and admitted that I had never heard of 'Up Your Way!' or the Blimpton twins. I sometimes felt very out of touch. I explained that I lived in the country and didn't read many newspapers or magazines.

'Who is it?' whispered Patsy, who had just woken up.

I put my hand over the mouthpiece of the telephone. 'Someone from a TV programme. Have you ever heard of the Blimpton Twins?'

Patsy thought for a moment, started to shake her head and then stopped. 'Are they tennis players?' she asked. 'Did they win the Mixed Doubles at Wimbledon last year?'

'Did they win the Mixed Doubles at Wimbledon last year?' I asked the sixteen-year-old.

'No!' replied the researcher rather indignantly. 'Of course they didn't.' There was a pause. 'At least I don't think they did,' she added, sounding rather uncertain. 'They are very talented,' she explained cautiously.

'Well if they didn't win the Mixed Doubles my wife hasn't heard of them either,' I told her.

Sophie, our mackerel tabby cat, lay down on my arm.

'We want to do an item about Bilbury,' said the sixteen-year-old, brushing off this disappointment.

'Oh,' I said, glumly. 'You read about the village in the *Sunday Planet*?'

'That's right! Said the sixteen-year-old brightly. 'We think the village sounds absolutely marvellous! Rodney can't wait to meet you all.'

'Rodney?'

'Rodney Wetherall. He's our other presenter.'

'I thought the Plimpton twins were the presenters,' I said, now thoroughly confused. I tried to move Sophie because I was already beginning to get cramp in my arm but she didn't want to be moved.

'The Blimpton twins,' said the sixteen-year-old.

'Yes, that's right'

'You said Plimpton.'

'Did I?' Ben, our collie, decided that this was a good moment to lie down on my stomach.

'Yes. It's Blimpton with a B. And they're really very well known!'

'Why aren't the Blimptons coming down to do the interview?'

'Oh Josie and Kenneth don't leave the studios to do interviews,' said the sixteen-year-old, shocked. 'They simply don't have the time. Besides they always attract great crowds wherever they go.'

'Is there room for me?' asked Patsy, gently squeezing her head onto what was left of my chest.

‘No!’ I said. ‘I’m full up!’

‘But it’ll only take a few minutes!’ said the teenager, who clearly thought that I was talking to her.

‘No you’re not!’ said Patsy, ignoring my telephone conversation. She slipped her arm around me.

‘Oh all right then!’ I said, grinning at Patsy, and forgetting to cover the mouthpiece of the telephone.

‘Oh good! Rodney and the crew will be with you at eleven fifteen,’ said the sixteen-year-old. ‘We’re grateful to you for agreeing to take part at such short notice.’

‘Hey! Wait a minute!’ I shouted into the telephone. ‘I wasn’t talking to you!’

But it was too late. The sixteen-year-old had gone. And I was committed to a television interview I didn’t want to do. Gently moving Emily, Sophie, Ben and Patsy from where they lay I slid out of bed, shivered once in the morning chill, walked briskly across the room and opened the curtains. It was raining heavily and a stiff South Westerly wind was dashing the rain against the windows so powerfully that at first I thought it was hailing. The sky was dark and I realised with some sadness that summer was probably over. Every sunny moment would now be a welcome bonus to be savoured and remembered through the dark, damp, windy months to come. I dressed quickly and went downstairs to put the kettle on. Ben, Sophie and Emily, who had all stood patiently by the door while I dressed, overtook me on my way down the stairs and were in the kitchen waiting to be fed.

* * *

By the time I’d finished breakfast half an hour later the storm had, much to my surprise, blown itself out. The sky was still dark but the rain had stopped and the wind had dropped too. I went outside to walk around the house and other buildings to see if any damage had been done. I’d lived in North Devon long enough to know that if you lose a slate or two it’s wise to get them replaced as soon as possible. If you don’t do repairs quickly the next visit from the wind will find the new weakness and whole rows of slates will disappear before you can say ‘insurance claim’.

I was gloomily staring up at the main house roof, trying to decide where the broken slate at my feet had come from, when I heard a car horn tooting outside the front gate. I wandered down the drive expecting to find another car load of tourists demanding entry into Bilbury Grange. There were, indeed, a dozen or so strangers in shorts and anoraks standing around looking rather lost but there was one visitor, standing on the other side of the gates, who looked very out of place and was clearly neither a local nor a tourist. He was wearing a charcoal grey pinstripe suit and carrying a green cardboard folder and a clipboard. Rather incongruously his sharply creased pinstripe trousers were neatly folded inside spotlessly clean, green Wellington boots.

‘Bilbury Grange?’ he enquired politely.

Rather warily I confirmed that he had found the right place. ‘My name is Huxley. Benjamin Huxley. I’m from the Devon and Cornwall Bank,’ he told me. ‘Assistant Regional Farming Accounts Manager,’ he added. He reached into his coat pocket, took out a smartly printed visiting card and handed it through the gate to me. I handed the card back. He didn’t offer to shake hands and when I poked my hand through the gate he didn’t respond. Feeling rather foolish I pulled my hand back.

‘What can I do for you?’ I asked brightly, my confidence inspired by the comforting knowledge that our mortgage was with another bank and that Mr Huxley couldn’t possibly have come to take away our home.

‘I’ve come to see Mr Kennett’s cows,’ said the banker.

I stared at him, puzzled, wondering why a man from the bank had come to Bilbury Grange to see Mr Kennett’s cows. I was particularly puzzled by the fact that the farm belonging to Mr Kennett, Patsy’s father and a local farmer, is some distance away from Bilbury Grange. I made this point to the man from the bank, explaining politely that if he was keen to do a bit of specialist cow spotting he’d be much more likely to have positive results by wandering through the village in the direction of Mr Kennett’s farm.

Mr Huxley looked down at his clipboard. ‘Twenty four Jerseys,’ he said. He examined his clipboard again and then moved closer to me so that he could show me a photocopied map neatly attached to his clipboard. I was impressed by the fact that I knew he was talking about cows and not jumpers. ‘Should be in one of your fields, I think,’ he said, pointing to the map with a neatly manicured finger. He smelt strongly of a cheap and particularly unpleasant aftershave.

I looked at the map. The field he was pointing to was the one where our five sheep lived. But as far as I knew there weren’t any cows there. I had once or twice gone there and found thirty of Colin Jackson’s cows grazing but that had been because Colin had cheekily sneaked his cows in for a little free bed and breakfast. Surreptitiously feeding your cows on someone else’s pastureland is a fairly common trick among some farmers. I didn’t have the faintest idea what was going on and was very keen not to put my foot into whatever scheme Mr Kennett was involved in. It had taken me long enough to persuade him that having a son-in-law who didn’t know how to milk a cow or operate a combine harvester was not quite the end of the world. He had been rather reluctant to accept me when I had been a doctor, treating me as though I had a nasty and very infectious disease. When I’d given up medicine to become a full-time writer I felt that his disapproval had grown even stronger.

'I don't always know what's going on, 'I said. 'I leave fields and animals and that sort of thing to my wife. She's the one with the farming experience.'

'So shall we go and have a look at these cows then?' suggested Mr Huxley.

'Absolutely!' I agreed. 'Splendid idea!' But my enthusiasm was superficial. I'd been on the land just ten minutes earlier when I'd been to say 'hello' to our five sheep and I knew that there hadn't been a single cow in the field at the time. It seemed unlikely that they could have all been playing hide and seek. I took the key out of my pocket and unfastened the gate. When the banker had walked through I locked it again. There was a moan of protest from the other would-be visitors, most of whom were carrying copies of the *Sunday Planet* magazine and most of whom seemed to have recognised me and know exactly who I was.

'You seem to be very popular,' said the banker as we walked together up the drive.

'Notorious is probably a better word,' I said, desperately thinking of a way to slow things down so that I could get to a telephone, call Mr Kennett and find out what on earth this was all about.

'Would you like a cup of tea first?' I asked Mr Huxley, rather desperately. It was the best I could do on the spur of the moment

'No, thank you,' he replied.

'Some hot, buttered toast, perhaps?' I suggested, putting a hand on his arm and standing still. I was getting more and more desperate and I had an awful suspicion that the desperation was probably showing. 'Bilbury Grange is just over here...'

'No, thank you,' said the banker firmly.

I stopped walking and stood still. 'Patsy – my wife – has some absolutely scrumptious home-made strawberry jam!' I told him. 'It's particularly marvellous on hot buttered toast!'

Mr Huxley, stopped a few paces further on, turned round and looked at me quite sternly. 'Shall we go and look at these cows?' he asked. He examined his watch. 'I have quite a few other calls to make today,' he added.

'What do you need to look at these particular cows for?' I asked him with a smile. 'I would have thought that one cow was pretty much like another!'

'Mr Kennett has a mortgage with us,' explained the banker. 'We've loaned him money on the understanding that he has 200 cows. It's my job to check that he has 200 cows.' He tapped at his clipboard. 'Twenty four of the 200 should be in this field,' he explained

'Ah!' I said. With reluctance and a heavy heart I walked on, desperately trying to get an excuse ready.

'I do hope the wind didn't blow the gate open again,' I said. 'Last week the wind blew the gate right open and all Mr Kennett's cows got out! It took us hours to round them up again.' I could feel myself blushing. I've never been able to lie convincingly but even I realised that this was pretty pathetic stuff.

'It fortunately doesn't seem to have happened this time,' said Mr Huxley.

'I beg your pardon?'

'The gate appears to have stayed shut,' said the banker, nodding in the direction of the field. I followed his nod with my eyes and to my absolute astonishment saw that the field was unnaturally well stocked with cows. The field was positively awash with cows. While I stared, Mr Huxley counted.

'Twenty four,' he said a few moments later. He took out a black fountain pen, made a neat note on his clipboard and smiled at me for the first time. 'Thank you for your cooperation.' He put the cap back on his pen and slipped the pen back into his pocket. 'Don't bother to show me out,' he said, 'I can find my own way back to the road.'

'I'll have to let you out,' I pointed out, holding the key aloft. 'Or you won't be able to get through the gate.'

We walked together back to the entrance to our driveway and I unlocked the gate and waved goodbye to the banker, locking the gate behind him. Then I walked back to the field. I half expected to find that the cows had all disappeared again. They hadn't I couldn't take my eyes off the scattering of cows which were happily grazing in our field. A few minutes earlier none of them had been there.

'Psst!'

I looked around but could see no one.

'Psst! Has he gone?'

I looked around again. This time I could see Mr Kennett half hiding behind the hedge.

'Yes! What on earth is going on?'

'I'll tell you later. Give me a hand will you? I've got to get these cows over to a field behind Dr Brownlow's place.' A man in a green oiled jacket and a flat cap was already encouraging the cows to trot back across the field towards the gate. I could just see the bonnet of a tractor parked in the road outside. I recognised the man in the green jacket and flat cap as one of the cowhands who worked with Mr Kennett on his farm.

I helped Patsy's father persuade his small herd of cows to clamber aboard a couple of large trailers and then slowly shut my gate and watched him and the cowhand drive away two tractors.

‘See you later!’ cried Mr Kennett, waving cheerily. ‘Thanks!’

* * *

When I got back to the house Patsy had already started preparing lunch. Freshly picked vegetables had been washed and chopped and Patsy was now making pastry.

‘Your father seems to be playing some sort of game with his bank,’ I said. ‘He had twenty four cows in our field.’

‘Oh,’ said Patsy, clearly not surprised by this revelation. ‘He’s been doing that for years. I don’t know how he gets away with it. How’s the roof?’

‘Just one slate down,’ I told her. ‘I’ll ring Thumper later and ask him to pop over and stick another one. The first of many, no doubt,’ I added

‘Maybe you should write to *The Times* about it,’ suggested Patsy.

‘About what?’

‘The slate,’ she said. She wrapped a sheet of pastry around a huge mound of chopped carrots, potatoes, leeks, celery and beans.

I didn’t understand. I wasn’t having a very good morning. ‘Sorry? Try that again!’

‘People write to *The Times* when they hear the first cuckoo don’t they?’

‘Yes,’ I agreed.

‘So maybe you should write about the first lost slate of autumn,’ explained Patsy.

I was still too puzzled about what had been going on with the cows to concentrate on slates. ‘Why is your father moving cows around the countryside?’ I asked Patsy, rather impatiently.

‘Because the bank thinks he’s got 200 cows and he hasn’t. He’s always broke. He’s probably only got 100. So he has to move the same cows around into different fields and the chap from the bank who has come to count them thinks he has seen 200 when in fact he’s seen 100 cows but counted them all twice.’

‘Oh,’ I said, feeling very stupid. ‘It seems quite simple when you put it like that.’

‘It is quite simple.’

‘I liked your slate joke.’

‘Thank you.’

‘I think I’ll put the kettle on. Do you fancy a cuppa?’

* * *

By the time that Rodney Wetherall and his television crew from the ‘Up Your Way!’ programme arrived the weather had changed completely. The clouds had gone, the sky was blue and the sun was shining. The cameraman, I was delighted to see, was a man I had worked with before when I had been promoting my first book. He smiled, we exchanged a few reminiscences and he told me what had been happening to the people he’d been working with when I’d seen him last.

‘Would you mind terribly if we filmed you outside?’ asked the producer who had come with Rodney. Rodney turned out to be about seventeen-years-old and very sulky. He had an irritating, squeaky voice. He wore white trousers, a white T-shirt with a cartoon character on the front, white socks, white shoes and a bright red baseball cap.

‘I hate doing interviews outside,’ he complained.

‘Don’t worry,’ said the producer, ‘we won’t have you on camera. We’ll just record your voice later.’ Miss Potterton, the producer, was a stout, sensible looking woman in stout shoes and a stout, tweed suit. She smiled at me conspiratorially as she said this.

‘What do you mean?’ screeched Rodney. ‘I’ve got to be on camera!’ He literally stamped a foot. ‘I’m not doing the interview if I’m not on camera.’

The producer shrugged. ‘O.K.,’ she said.

‘What do you mean?’ demanded Rodney, glaring at her.

‘I mean that’s O.K.,’ said the producer firmly. ‘If you don’t want to ask the questions I’ll ask them.’

Rodney looked as though he might cry.

‘Sorry about this,’ whispered the producer, gently taking my arm and leading me outside. She told me that her name was Avril. The cameraman, the cameraman’s assistant, the sound man and two other people whose jobs were undefined had quickly settled down in the kitchen. Patsy had made them tea (using some plastic beakers she’d recently bought to supplement our four cups) and her offer to prepare them a plate of sandwiches had been greeted with great joy, though that joy would probably diminish when they discovered that we were vegetarian and that they weren’t going to get their usual favourite bacon sandwiches.

‘Rodney may seem a bit over-sensitive,’ explained Avril, ‘but in fact he’s just a complete prat so don’t take any notice of him. If I have anything to do with things we’re dumping him at the end of the series anyway. Now, where do you think would be a good spot for us to film you? It would be nice to have some of those rolling Devon hills behind you, wouldn’t it? Just to give the viewers a taste of Bilbury Country!’

I suggested that we film by the gate into the field where our sheep live. When I showed her the spot I had in mind Avril thought that this was an excellent suggestion and wisely recommended that we film straight away before the sun went in, the wind came back and the crew became so firmly ensconced in the Bilbury Grange kitchen that they were impossible to drag to work.

She strode back to the house to collect as many of them as she could while I waited by the gate and watched the swallows gathering on the branches of an old oak tree. It seemed early for them to be leaving but perhaps they knew something I didn't about the onset of autumn. When the swallows leave I always feel a little sad. I'm not sure whether this is because I'm simply sorry to see them go or whether it is because I know that their departure marks the end of summer.

The producer and the crew arrived a few minutes later with Rodney struggling breathlessly behind them. The short walk from the house seemed to have quite tired him out and he was wheezing noisily.

We had completed several minutes of filming (with Rodney, who had clearly withdrawn his objection to filming outside and off camera, asking the questions in a strangely, uncomfortable and rather staccato style) when the sound man suddenly removed his ear phones and threw down the long, grey, wool-covered microphone he was using to record Rodney's questions and my answers.

'What's the matter, dear?' asked Avril, who seemed to have inexhaustible resources of patience.

'There's too much background noise,' said the sound man.

'Noise, dear?' said the producer. She looked around. 'What noise?'

We all kept perfectly still for a few moments and strained our ears to try to pick out the noise that had caused the sound man so much distress.

'Butterflies?' asked Avril. 'Is it the butterflies fluttering their little wings?'

'Very funny!' snarled the sound man, who clearly didn't think it was funny at all.

'Clouds?' asked the producer. 'Are the clouds making too much noise for you?'

'It's that bloody tractor!' said the sound man, pointing to a distant field. He was sitting cross legged on the grass surrounded by cables and machines with dials and indicator lights. We all looked in the direction he was pointing. I could just make out the shape of a tractor in one of Colin Jackson's fields. Colin Jackson was clearly taking advantage of the change in the weather to do a little hay making. When I concentrated really hard I could just hear the sound his tractor was making.

'Well, we can't do anything about it, dear, so you'll just have to put up with it!' said Avril firmly.

'I can't,' said the sound man firmly and defiantly. He stood up. 'I'm going to get him to stop his tractor while we do this interview.'

'He must be two miles away!' said Avril the producer.

'I don't care,' said the sound man, though I detected a touch of uncertainty in his voice now that he knew how far he had to walk to reach the driver of the wretched tractor.

I cleared my throat to attract attention. 'I don't think you should tell Mr Jackson he can't drive his tractor simply because we're making a television programme,' I told him quietly.

'Why not?' he demanded, rather aggressively.

'Because Mr Jackson carries a double barrelled shotgun in his tractor cab,' I told him. 'Yesterday he took a pot shot at a party of tourists who were having a picnic in the middle of one of his fields. I'm told that he missed and so I don't expect he's in a particularly good mood today.'

The sound man swallowed noisily. 'Ah,' he said, sitting back down again. He thought for a moment. 'I suppose we could always just regard it as another one of those country sounds.'

'No one will worry about it dear,' said the producer, comfortingly.

'I'll go and tell him he's got to stop,' squeaked Rodney, clambering over the gate before anyone could stop him. He turned back to face us all. 'I don't know why you're all so scared of some stupid old farmer. I don't care if he does have a gun. He won't dare use it on ME.'

I turned to Avril. 'Aren't you going to stop him?'

'Rodney! Come here!' called the producer, without much enthusiasm. Rodney, by now twenty yards away, didn't even look back. 'There,' she said. 'I did try didn't I?'

The others all agreed that Avril had done her very best to stop Rodney putting his life in danger.

'I'll carry on with the interview,' said the producer. 'We can always glue Rodney's questions on when we get back to the studio.'

'Or you could re-record his questions and just get rid of his voice completely,' suggested the cameraman.

'Brian!' said the producer. 'What a naughty notion!' She grinned at him. 'But what an absolutely wonderful idea!' she whispered.

We had finished the interview and the cameraman and soundman were both packing up their equipment when

Rodney reappeared. He had lost his hat, was covered in mud and the tear stain streaks across his muddy face were clear evidence that he had been crying a lot.

‘Oh dear, poor, poor Rodney,’ said the producer. Her over-solicitous sympathy did not sound particularly convincing though Rodney did not seem intelligent enough to realise this. ‘Whatever happened to you!’ she asked. She caught me looking at her and winked.

‘That horrible farmer chased me all the way back down the hill and right through a very muddy stream,’ moaned Rodney. ‘I lost my cap! And just look at my trousers!’

‘Did the nasty man shoot at you?’ asked the cameraman.

Rodney started to cry again. ‘I don’t think so,’ he said. ‘I’m not sure.’

‘Never mind, dear,’ said the producer. ‘We’ve done the interview now.’ She patted him on the head. ‘If you’re a good boy I’ll buy you an ice cream when we see a shop.’

We all said goodbye to one another as though we’d all been the best of friends for years. The TV crew drove off to interview someone else and I went back to the house for lunch.

While I washed my hands and salivated (the smell from the Aga cooker was a tantalising treat for the taste buds – it is only when vegetables are overcooked that they smell so unpleasant) Patsy took heated plates out of the spare oven and put them on the table. ‘Would you like a glass of wine with your lunch?’ she asked.

‘That’s a good idea,’ I said, heading for the cellar door.

‘I put a bottle of my dad’s parsnip wine in the fridge,’ Patsy told me. ‘It should be just right by now.’

I opened the fridge and took out the chilled wine.

‘Dad brought it round as a ‘thank you’,’ she said. ‘He said you handled that banker well. He was proud of you.’

I felt really pleased with myself.

* * *

CHAPTER FIVE

To my daily astonishment the steady stream of tourists coming to Bilbury was increasing rather than slowing down. In my heart I had been convinced that the village's notoriety would have a short lived fascination for the general public. But it was gradually becoming apparent that I was quite wrong about this. The lane outside our front gate, normally deserted apart from the occasional tractor, or the odd rabbit sunning itself, was packed with tourists: most of them still in their coaches or motor cars. Although one or two farmers with spare fields on the outskirts of the village had opened up 'Bilbury Village Car Parks' it had soon become abundantly clear that the vast majority of the tourists simply were not prepared to have to walk to see what they had come to see. They ignored the car parks on the outskirts of the village and instead drove in long queues to the car parks which were nearest to the village green. Several magazines and newspapers had published maps of the village and most had also included directions on how to get to the most conveniently situated car parks.

Within days just about everyone in the village found at least one way to take advantage of the number of tourists, and the amount of money pouring into Bilbury.

Mr Lovelace and his wife had surprised just about everyone by opening a restaurant called 'The Captain's Table; Deidre Mulberry had opened a small tea rooms called 'The Bilbury Cafe' in her garden; and Maisie Falmouth had turned her living room into a tiny restaurant called 'The Lobster Pot'.

Mr and Mrs Knowlson were serving cream teas on their lawn and Mrs Hewitt had quickly put up a sign offering 'Genuine Hand Made Devon Shawls' for sale, although after the first day or two she found that even her nimble fingers could not keep up with the demand. For a while she coped by hiring Thumper's grandmother to make shawls for her but that solution quickly proved equally inadequate and she eventually solved her shortfall by finding a supplier in Leeds who imported the shawls from Turkey and had the incriminating labels removed in a warehouse in France.

But I was quite convinced that Olive Robinson, Thumper's much loved aunt who lives at Daffodil Cottage, was the most enterprising of all Bilburians.

Miss Robinson had a small handwritten notice on her garden gate inviting tourists to take a look inside her 'typical Bilbury cottage' and to sample her homemade biscuits and genuine old fashioned lime and lemon squash. Judging by the number of cars parked outside her cottage she did a roaring trade.

Business was so good, in fact, that like Mrs Hewitt, who ended up importing shawls from Turkey, Miss Robinson soon found that she couldn't bake biscuits fast enough to satisfy the tourists' voracious appetites. I used to visit her three times a week with a basket of vegetables from our garden and I popped into her back kitchen one morning to be handed a cellophane wrapped packet of biscuits.

'Can you open that darned packet for me?' she asked.

After a bit of struggle I eventually managed to break through the shrink wrapped cellophane. Slightly puzzled as to why the best baker of biscuits I had ever met should be buying biscuits this way, I carefully handed her the opened packet. Miss Robinson then poured half of the biscuits onto an old, rather chipped plate and popped the remainder into a slightly creased brown paper bag. 'They always like to buy a few to take away with them,' she whispered, nodding her head in the direction of the living room where a family of four from Beckenham were studying her family photograph album and, no doubt, wondering what would be an acceptable donation to slip into the small wooden box labelled 'Daffodil Cottage Preservation Fund: Voluntary Contributions Very Gratefully Received' that Miss Robinson had so carefully positioned on the small table in the centre of the room. The word 'Very' was underlined three times in black ink and the box itself, which had previously served as a collecting receptacle in Bilbury Church, had an official look about it which encouraged those who might otherwise feel inclined to resist Miss Robinson's invitation to dig deeply into their wallets. The slit at the top of the box had been carefully narrowed with packing tape so that it would only accept paper donations.

Despite the mild subterfuge with the packeted biscuits Miss Robinson did keep on baking her renowned and genuinely homemade comestibles. Her cottage always smelt of cooking because her oven was constantly full of baking biscuits which she kept for her favourite relatives and friends. As a close friend of Thumper's she regarded me as 'family'.

One Thursday morning I was drinking tea, wondering why on earth Miss Robinson had half filled her living room with a huge sideboard and trying hard not to devour an entire plateful of meltin-the-mouth (genuine) homemade ginger and treacle biscuits when there was a firm knock on the door.

Miss Robinson peeped through the lace curtains at her front window. A huge black Mercedes was parked right outside her front door. It was left hand drive. 'They're starting early today,' Thumper's aunt murmured, snatching a glance at the wooden framed clock on her mantelpiece. 'Pop into the scullery would you, love?' she added. As she spoke she picked up the plateful of genuinely homemade biscuits from which I had been eating and thrust it into my hand and then, as an afterthought, handed me the basket of vegetables which I'd brought her too. She then shooed me out of the living room.

A few moments later, through a crack in the door I watched Miss Robinson open the door and welcome into her home a tall, well-built, smartly-dressed, middle-aged man and a tall, elegantlydressed, slim, blonde woman. Miss Robinson, who is an extremely fit seventy-year-old, a history graduate and an international authority on Spode china, suddenly seemed to have aged at least twenty years and to have acquired a degenerative joint disease. She hobbled into the centre of her living room and waved an arm in the direction of a pair of deep and comfortable armchairs.

'Sit yourselves down!' she said. 'Would you like some of my homemade biscuits?' She smoothed out her pinafore. 'You timed your visit well! I've just finished baking a fresh batch.' She deserved an Oscar. She normally spoke in an accent which reeked of Rodean and Oxford but when talking to tourists she acquired a very passable Devonshire accent.

'Zank you!' said the German. 'Zat would of you very – how you say – nice be.'

'My pleasure, I'm sure!' said Miss Robinson. 'It's a real pleasure to welcome you to Bilbury. We don't see many people from foreign parts.' I felt myself blushing for Miss Robinson. Ever since the wretched George Nympton article, the entire village had been overrun by foreigners. Most of the local children now knew how to say 'Hello', 'Turn left at the church', 'My mum has a spare room to let,' and 'Can you spare a few pennies for an ice cream' in at least half a dozen European languages. Patchy had told me that he knew of seven children under the age of twelve who had opened their own bank accounts. Miss Robinson shuffled towards the scullery and I backed away from the door so as to make sure that I remained well out of sight.

'How can you do it?' I whispered, stifling a giggle.

'Where are those other biscuits?' demanded Thumper's aunt, rummaging around in the cupboard underneath her sink. Once she'd found the packet she was looking for she handed it to me to open while she switched on the grill. Although the invitation on her gate suggested that tourists might expect a guided tour of 'Daffodil Cottage' she never allowed them into any room other than the living room. This was probably just as well for they would have probably been surprised to see that the room she referred to as the scullery was equipped with a very modern cooker with eye level grill, a washing machine, a tumble drier, a dishwasher and a large fridge-freezer while her bedroom had a built-in shower unit and a portable television set.

As soon as the packet was open Miss Robinson spread the biscuits out on the grill. She then opened the door back to the living room and slipped effortlessly back into character; hobbling along and bravely ignoring the pain of her arthritic hips, knees and spine. I decided that an Oscar would be grotesquely insufficient recognition.

'I've just put the biscuits out to cool,' she told her visitors from across the Channel. 'They won't be but a moment.' She hobbled across to the closed oak cupboard inside which she kept her 24 inch colour television set and, with some difficulty, picked a huge photograph album off the top of the cupboard. 'Would you like to look at my family album while you wait?'

'Zank you! Zat would being too kindly!' said the German. He stood so that he could bow. I was slightly disappointed that he did not click his heels.

'Zank you!' added the tall, slender blonde, whose English did not appear to be quite as good as her husband's.

'Would you like some of my homemade, traditional lime and lemonade with your biscuits?' asked Miss Robinson, after she had opened the photograph album in front of her visitors. To make room for the album she had to move the small wooden box with the 'Daffodil Cottage Preservation Fund: Voluntary Contributions Very Gratefully Received' notice on it. But I noticed that even though the small table was now rather overcrowded she did not move the box away.

'Oh ya! Zank you!' said the German, grinning broadly.

'I use a recipe that has been handed down for three generations!' said Miss Robinson proudly, before shuffling back towards the scullery door. Once through the door she took down a bottle of lime juice and a bottle of lemonade and poured liberal quantities of each into an old glass jug. She then filled up the jug with water.

'Do you want ice?' I asked her, heading for the freezer.

'Ice? Where would an old crone like me get ice?' hissed Miss Robinson, giving me a black look. She pulled out the grill pan. The biscuits were now looking a little burnt on top. Using a wooden spatula she put half the biscuits onto a plate and the other half into a brown paper bag. Carrying the plate in one hand and the jug in the other she hobbled through to the living room. Moments later she returned to fetch two small side plates, two drinking glasses and the paper bag full of biscuits. I thought that the paper bag was a brilliant touch. You would have to have a hard heart to leave Daffodil Cottage with a paper bag full of Miss Robinson's biscuits without first slipping a donation into her wooden box.

‘Zat is a very fine cabinet!’ said the German, using a half nibbled biscuit to point to the huge sideboard, the unexpected arrival of which had so surprised me earlier.

Miss Robinson did not reply to this compliment immediately but merely gave the admired piece of furniture a loving rub with the edge of her pinafore. ‘It’s been in the family for generations!’ she said lovingly, at last.

‘It is very old?’

‘Oh yes! Very, very old! It was made for my great, great, great, great grandfather by a very skilled craftsman.’

The German coughed. ‘Er, are you knowing of his name?’

‘Oh it was Robinson – the same as mine,’ replied Thumper’s aunt with a sweet smile.

‘Ze man who made ze cabinet was Robinson?’

Miss Robinson feigned a look of puzzlement. ‘No. My great, great, great, great grandfather was called Robinson.’

‘And ze man who made ze cabinet?’

‘Oh, that was a Mr Chipping I think,’ said Miss Robinson. ‘The bill is in the back of our family album. My grandfather said he thought it might be valuable one day and so he kept the bill.’

With visibly trembling fingers the German gently leafed through the photo album. Eventually he found a thick piece of parchment type paper.

‘Do have another biscuit!’ said Miss Robinson.

Neither of her visitors seemed to have heard her. The German man pointed to the piece of parchment and his wife studied the paper carefully. The German woman then said something I did not understand. The German man spoke back in a slightly frenzied whisper. Since it had been reasonable to assume that she had been speaking German it was now equally reasonable to assume that he too was speaking German. My skill in that language is limited and although I can order a coffee with some confidence, I am rather at a loss when faced with more complex conversation and I could not understand anything he said. I was, however, aware that the name ‘Chippingdale’ occurred several times.

‘You are not minding if we at your cabinet look?’ said the German at last, standing up and putting down his half-eaten biscuit

Before Thumper’s aunt could respond the German and his wife were peering and poking at the sideboard with thinly disguised greed. The German looked at his wife questioningly. She nodded.

‘I am liking this cabinet very much,’ said the German. ‘You are selling it to me, no?’

‘Oh, no!’ said Thumper’s aunt. ‘I couldn’t possibly part with it. Not with it having been in the family for so many generations.’

I couldn’t listen to any more without my giggling turning into guffaws. I quietly opened the back door and tiptoed out into Miss Robinson’s back garden. Fifteen minutes later, after I had heard the front door shut and the Mercedes engine purr into life I went back into the cottage. Miss Robinson was in the scullery and already on the telephone.

‘Thumper, it’s me,’ said Miss Robinson. She saw me and winked. ‘I’ve sent a German round to see you. He wants someone to transport the sideboard over to Germany. When you’ve fixed that up would you ask Patchy to get me another one – and I’ll need another one of those nice old-fashioned parchment bills too.’

* * *

CHAPTER SIX

Despite the widespread enthusiasm for relieving the tourists of their money I wasn't the only one who expected the tourist invasion of Bilbury to be a short-lived phenomenon. We didn't really imagine that a single magazine article could produce anything other than a temporary, fleeting interest in our village. But that original article was merely the starting point. Within a short space of time a dozen other newspapers had carried stories about 'Britain's healthiest village', there had been numerous television and radio journalists wandering around interviewing all the locals they could find and coach companies from as far away as Bristol, Birmingham and London had started running day trips to Bilbury Country.

The weather didn't help those of us who selfishly wanted Bilbury to remain private and peaceful. Through an ironic twist of fate the first few weeks of autumn were proving to be surprisingly sunny and warm and Bilbury looked at its best and most attractive. I was delighted to see that the swallows, thoroughly confused by the weather, had decided to hang around in Bilbury for a little while longer.

Every road into and out of the village was blocked by cars and coaches. Several enterprising farmers had already turned fields into car parks and were making more money sitting in a deckchair for a day than they could hope to make in a month of hard work.

When he had opened his first al fresco car park Colin Jackson had charged five pence per vehicle. By Tuesday the price had risen to ten pence. By Thursday it was twenty pence. But Colin is not slow to find ways to take advantage of any situation and on Friday he erected a huge, hand-painted notice telling motorists that they could park their cars free of charge. The small print, painted so small that it could only be read at the last moment, informed car drivers that although cars were free there would be a charge of twenty pence for every occupant in each car. Colin had worked out that the average car contained three and a half people and that this pricing structure would, therefore, give him an income of seventy pence per vehicle – considerably more, I suspect, than even he would have the courage to charge.

P.C. Wren, the village constable, was working from dawn to dusk and there were unprecedented (and I have to admit unsubstantiated) rumours that a Police Inspector from Barnstaple had been seen in the village.

Outside the gates of Bilbury Grange, the village of Bilbury was buzzing with tourists; all anxious to spot the homes and characters they had read about or seen on television. From the Grange itself we could see nothing of this invasion but we could hear the steady, unceasing hum of their cheerful chattering. In order to stop tourists swarming into the garden we still had to keep the main gates to Bilbury Grange permanently locked.

Outside the gates there was a constant whirring and clicking of cameras and unnecessary popping of their flashbulbs (unnecessary because the sun was bright) as the visitors sought mementoes of their visit.

Mr Parfitt, the Bilbury Grange gardener, back from his honeymoon and much confused by what was going on in the village, would have preferred to spend all his time preparing compost and looking after plants but he was now spending several hours a day clearing sandwich wrappers and soft drink cans out of the shrubbery.

Even though the invasion of Bilbury was still quite young we were already discovering that many tourists like to leave souvenirs behind them as well as taking things with them. The hedgerows and lanes of Bilbury were bright with litter. Many of the visitors seemed to feel that by throwing their rubbish over a hedge or wall they were disposing of it tidily. Each day we managed to take enough rubbish from the part of our garden that bordered the lane to fill a rubbish sack.

When Mr Parfitt had first arrived at Bilbury Grange and asked to be taken on as the gardener, Patsy and I had explained that we couldn't afford to pay him a proper wage. We had, however, offered to give him a week's trial, to pay him £5 a week, to let him make himself a home in the stables and to share with him the profits we made from selling produce to local hotels, restaurants and pubs.

Now that he was married, Mr Parfitt didn't need a home in our stables but he had insisted that he was more than happy to continue with the existing relationship. Patsy and I had suggested that he should also take whatever garden produce he and Miss Hargreaves needed for themselves and he'd been delighted with that slight amendment to our existing arrangement.

One of Mr Parfitt's new responsibilities was to look after the gate at the end of the driveway to the house. We didn't dare leave the gate unlocked, and so any guests or tradesmen arriving had to be let in. Even the postman had to ring the bell at the gate so that we could go and collect the mail from him.

* * *

Although we really couldn't afford it Patsy and I had decided that it was time we bought a new carpet for the living room. Bare boards are all very well but they're a bit chilly and I was getting fed up with having to pick splinters out of my bare feet.

We were very broke and I daresay it would have been cheaper to buy myself a pair of slippers but a publisher had already bought my next book and so we had decided to celebrate the forthcoming royalties by treating ourselves to a stretch of carpet that Kelvin Johnson assured us would be warm, hard-wearing, practical and very cheap. For two weeks now I had been waiting for a letter from my publishers about what had started out as my first novel but had ended up as a book about the goings on in Bilbury. I had a contract for the book, which I had delivered, and I was now waiting to hear what the publishers thought of it. Each day we had leapt at the morning post with great expectations. But so far each day's post had brought nothing but disappointment.

Publishers generally pay authors an advance against their expected royalties and the advance is usually divided into thirds. One third is paid when the book is published, one third is paid on delivery of an accepted manuscript and one third is paid at the time of signing the initial contract. We had long since spent the one third I had received when I had signed the contract. Since I had completed the book I would get the second third of the advance money as soon as the book was delivered and accepted. The manuscript had been delivered and I was now waiting for a letter confirming that it had been accepted. It was, therefore, the second part of the advance money that we were counting on.

Kelvin, who lived in Bideford and whose sister Doreen Johnson used to be Dr Brownlow's receptionist and later worked as my receptionist too when I practised as a general practitioner on my own account, runs a carpet showroom from the back of a very elderly van. I don't know where Kelvin gets his carpets from but he has an excellent reputation locally for providing good value for money. He is also extremely convenient, of course. Instead of visiting Barnstaple or Exeter one can choose a new carpet without leaving home. And since Kelvin lays the carpets himself you can sometimes have the carpet laid there and then!

When Mr Parfitt appeared to tell me that Kelvin the carpet salesman had arrived, I offered to help Kelvin unload the roll of carpet he had brought with him.

'Don't you bother yourself, doctor,' said Kelvin. 'I prefer to work alone. I can get on with things much quicker that way. Shall I come and tell you when I've finished so that you can see if you like it?'

'I'm sure it will be absolutely fine!' I told him. I took out my wallet and paid him with the cash I'd taken out of the bank the previous day for that very purpose. Like most other local tradesmen Kelvin preferred to be paid in cash.

'Oh, and would you make sure that the back of your van is kept shut?' I asked him. 'Emily – one of our cats – has a tendency to climb into cars and vans and fall asleep. I don't want her to fall asleep in the back of your van, wake up in Bideford and get lost!'

'Don't you worry!' said Kelvin. 'I'll keep the van doors shut and I'll check everything out before I leave.'

I popped back down to the front gate to tell Mr Parfitt that now that Kelvin had arrived he could abandon his guard duty and get back to his compost bins if he wanted. He was delighted.

The tooting of car horns outside was getting worse and I guessed that Hubert Knowles was out causing trouble again. I had seen him in the Duck and Puddle two days earlier and he had rather gleefully confessed that he got great pleasure out of driving round and round the village as slowly as he possibly could. 'I had 57 cars behind me this morning,' he told me proudly. 'All pooping their hooters and anxious to pass me!' Hubert didn't like tourists. When he had eventually pulled onto the Duck and Puddle forecourt he had sat in his tractor cab for ten minutes counting the vehicles as they drove past and waving inanely at the furious drivers and passengers. When I saw him again the following day he told me that he'd managed to beat his record by building up a queue of 65 cars, three caravans and four lorries.

Later that day as Patsy and I sprawled on the grass, enjoying our lunch and another glass of Mr Kennett's excellent homemade wine I couldn't help thinking how lucky I was to have found such a beautiful village and to have acquired such good friends. Patsy and I didn't have much money and sometimes the size of our overdraft and the size of the mortgage on Bilbury Grange worried us both a little but in my heart I felt fortunate; I felt that the fates had been kinder to me than I could have possibly hoped them to be.

I had made the decision to stay in Bilbury even though I had lost my job as a general practitioner but I would never have found Bilbury at all if I hadn't seen Dr Brownlow's small advertisement for an assistant. And if someone else had seen the advertisement before I had then I would have probably never got the job, met Patsy or found Bilbury Grange!

After lunch, Patsy walked down to the walled garden and I walked through the courtyard and approached the back door to go back to work. As I did so I spotted a stranger peering in through the kitchen window. He was wearing a heavy, brown suit and a small, brown, trilby hat and didn't look at all like a tourist. It was the second time in a week that a stranger in a suit had visited Bilbury Grange and I didn't like it one little bit. This stranger didn't look like a banker but I had lived in Bilbury long enough to know that suits usually spell trouble.

* * *

CHAPTER SEVEN

'Good morning!' said the stranger, cheerfully, when he saw me approaching. He was about five foot ten inches tall, and more than slightly overweight. His face was heavily lined and his nose and cheeks had the reddish hue of an accomplished drinker. He didn't seem to be in the slightest bit embarrassed about being found peering into someone else's kitchen window.

He pushed his trilby hat backwards, so that it was perched rather comically on the back of his head, and grinned at me. 'Is this Bilbury Grange?'

I confirmed that he was indeed looking through the windows of Bilbury Grange. Ben, who was as always by my side, growled at him.

'Are you the owner? The doctor?'

'That's right,' I said. I put the tray of plates which I was carrying down on the back doorstep. 'And who are you? How did you get here and what do you want?' I was getting rather fed up with strangers wandering around my home. I was beginning to think that Patsy and I would soon have to start locking our back door during the daytime even when we were in the garden. I wondered if the stranger would have wandered into the house uninvited if I hadn't turned up when I had.

'The name is Ladd,' said the stranger unabashed. 'Friends call me Jack.' He reached into his inside jacket pocket and took out a battered leather wallet. From inside the wallet he took a small piece of rather dog-eared card which he handed to me. The words 'Sunday Globe' were printed on the card in red. Underneath them was the name Jack Ladd and underneath that the single word 'Reporter'.

'You're from the *Sunday Globe*?'

'Britain's biggest and brightest Sunday paper!' said the reporter, as though automatically reciting an advertising slogan.

'I think the newspapers have done enough damage to our village.'

'Damage?' said Mr Ladd, giving every appearance of being genuinely shocked and startled by the question. 'The publicity your village has had is worth thousands. You can't buy that sort of publicity!'

'I don't think we wanted to buy any publicity,' I told him.

The reporter frowned, clearly genuinely puzzled by this, and held out his hand. 'Could I have it back, please?'

For a moment or two I didn't realize what he meant. 'I beg your pardon?' I said.

'My card.' In explanation the reporter pointed to the visiting card I was still holding. 'It's the only one I've got left,' he apologised.

I handed him back the dog-eared visiting card and he carefully put it back inside his wallet.

'To be perfectly honest, doctor, I would have thought you'd have been delighted with the publicity you've been getting!' he said. 'It's bound to help you sell more books.'

'I doubt it,' I said drily. 'How did you get in?' I asked him again. 'The gates are locked.'

'I came over the fields,' explained the reporter. He reached down and brushed bits of grass and other debris from his trousers. 'Wonderful views by the way,' he said.

'The gates are locked so that we can have some privacy,' I told him. 'I'd be grateful if you would leave us alone.'

'No offence, doctor,' said Mr Ladd. 'Just doing my job. The editor wants me to write a few follow-up pieces about the village. Since you're probably the best-known inhabitant I thought I'd start with you.'

'I'm afraid I don't have anything to say,' I told him, bending down and picking up the tray.

With some difficulty I opened the back door while still holding the tray. I then stepped into the kitchen.

'I don't suppose you know of a pub or farmhouse where I could rent a room, do you?'

I put the tray of dirty plates down on the draining board and turned round and faced the back door. Mr Ladd was standing in the doorway looking around.

'I need somewhere to stay for a while,' he explained. 'The Duck and Puddle is full,' he told me. He smiled and shrugged. 'Money is no problem,' he added. 'The paper is paying.'

'I'm afraid I can't help you,' I said.

'Ah well, never mind,' the reporter shrugged. 'Thanks anyway. I'll find my own way out.' He turned and started to walk away. 'See you again!' he shouted, over his shoulder.

As Mr Ladd walked away I felt guilty. I felt that I had perhaps behaved rather rudely. He seemed a decent enough fellow and he was, after all, only doing his job. I nearly called him back and invited him to join us for a drink. I very nearly told him that we had a flat he could rent. But I didn't. I did nothing. Except to pop into the living room to check on the new carpet that Kelvin Johnson had laid. It looked extremely smart. Kelvin had carefully replaced all the furniture in exactly the position it had been before he had arrived and the room was spotlessly clean with no signs of any mess. One of the reasons why Kelvin gets so much work and is so popular in the villages of North Devon is that he always cleans up after himself.

I then put down fresh food for Emily and Sophie, and popped down into the cellar where I picked up a bottle of cold home-made lemonade. When I got back up to the kitchen Sophie was eating the food I had put down but there was no sign of Emily. This didn't surprise or worry me since I assumed that Emily was simply out hunting in the garden.

* * *

I was in the garden when the postman arrived. He called me to the gate, greeted me with a big cheery smile and handed me a large rectangular package. I knew immediately what it was. I tried to smile back, thanked him and carried the package into the kitchen where I put it down on the table and stared at it glumly.

'What's that?' asked Patsy.

'It's from my publishers,' I told her. I hadn't even needed to look at the return address printed at the top of the label to know that. A book manuscript has a very distinct feel to it.

'Oh, that's wonderful!' said Patsy. 'At last!' she said. 'What have they got to say?'

'They've sent the book back,' I told her, flatly.

Patsy looked at me and then looked at the package and frowned. 'How do you know?' she asked me. 'You haven't opened it yet!'

'It's exactly the same sized parcel as the one I sent them,' I explained.

'But maybe they've just sent it back with some suggested alterations?'

I shook my head. 'They're not going to publish it,' I told her firmly. I don't know how I knew but instinctively I knew. I suppose my subconscious mind had reasoned that if they were still planning to publish the book they would have probably rung first before sending it back. I reached and pulled the package towards me. I stared at it for a few more moments and then took out my pocket knife, cut through the tape which held it together and opened the package. The bulk of the parcel was taken up with the typed pages I had sent them so long ago. On top of the typescript sat a neatly folded letter. I picked up the letter and opened it.

'What does it say?' asked Patsy almost immediately.

The letter informed me that the editor who had bought my book, and who had been so full of enthusiasm, had left the company and that subsequently a decision had been made to concentrate entirely on books on cookery and romantic fiction. There was, the writer said, therefore no room for my book on their list. They were returning the typescript to me so that I could offer it elsewhere. There were then a couple of sentences about being sorry to disappoint me and hoping that I understood that the state of the market was a difficult one. Finally, there were a couple of lines in which they assured me that they would not be seeking the return of the first third of the advance money – which they had already paid and I had already spent – but that they would not, of course, be paying the two thirds of the advance which they had not paid.

I felt as though my world had collapsed.

'I'm sorry darling,' whispered Patsy, who had been reading the letter over my shoulder and who knew exactly how I felt. She put her arms around my neck and hugged me.

I knew that the most sensible thing to do would have been to pack it up and send it off to another publisher. There are hundreds of publishers in London. But I didn't want to do that. It is often said that authors regard their books as their babies and this is absolutely true. I didn't want to expose my new baby to the dispassionate stares of strangers.

* * *

By evening time there was still no sign of Emily. I fed Ben and then put some fresh food and water down for Emily and Sophie and called to them to tell them that their meal was ready. Sophie turned up almost immediately but didn't seem particularly hungry. She miaowed a lot and rubbed her head against my legs as though she was trying to tell me something. I tickled her behind her ears and apologised to her for having had so many visitors in the garden. Neither she nor Emily like visitors. I guessed that Emily had probably found herself a nice hiding place in the airing cupboard or on top of my sweaters.

Emily is never slow to let me know that she is upset with me. If I have dared to go away for a day and leave her without a lap or shoulder to sit on she will refuse to have anything to do with me for exactly sixty minutes after my return home. She will then suddenly appear and make a terrific fuss of me. Emily usually sits on my lap or on the back of my neck while I'm writing whether I am in the house or in my little summerhouse hideaway.

But there was no reason for Emily to be upset with me today and so I decided to go and find her. I was beginning to feel just a little bit worried.

'You can come out now!' I called to her, approaching all her usual downstairs hiding places in turn. But she didn't appear.

'I'll just pop down to the summerhouse,' I said to Patsy, trying not to show that I felt worried. 'Maybe she's gone down there for a bit of peace and quiet.'

'I'll look for her upstairs,' said Patsy.

'Check the airing cupboard and my sweater cupboard,' I suggested quite unnecessarily. Patsy knew as well as I did where Emily liked to hide.

I set off in the darkness for the summerhouse, scuffing my feet along the ground so that I wouldn't trip up over any stones and holding my hands out in front of me to push branches of bushes and trees away from my face. I couldn't see anything but that didn't matter because I knew our paths well. I kept calling and whistling and expected Emily to appear at any moment, purring with happiness and pleased to see me.

But Emily didn't appear. There was no sign of her and I was by now beginning to get very worried. When I got back to the house Patsy hadn't found her either. There was nothing else we could do and so, hoping desperately that Emily was out hunting somewhere and would just 'turn up' when she was ready to come home, Patsy and I went to bed.

* * *

I had, during the day, decided that I wanted to publish my book myself. This was, of course, complete madness. I knew nothing at all about publishing and I didn't have the faintest idea where the money would come from to pay for a publishing venture. But it was something I wanted to do. I knew that throughout history numerous authors had published their own books.

I don't know what was pushing me along this mad route – we had no stable income at all apart from the sale of produce from our garden and my local newspaper articles – but it was something I felt I wanted to do.

'Do you mind if I publish my book myself,' I said to Patsy as we lay in bed that night.

'Of course not!' said Patsy. 'Why should I mind? It sounds very exciting! Can I help?'

'I won't be able to do it without you,' I told her.

She frowned. 'If you are going to be a publisher you won't have to wear a suit, will you?'

'No.'

'And you won't have to go to London every week?'

'I'll have to go to London even less than I do now.'

'Wonderful!' said Patsy. 'Then I'm happy.'

* * *

Neither of us slept well. We lay there, alternately dozing and listening for the sound of tiny footsteps on the stairs.

Every time Sophie or Ben moved or made a sound I sat bolt upright desperately looking to see if Emily had joined them on top of the bedclothes. Towards morning I finally fell asleep. I woke at about six thirty and the moment I awoke I immediately looked for her. But Emily wasn't there and by now I knew that something terrible must have happened to her.

* * *

CHAPTER EIGHT

Patsy and I spent the morning searching the house and gardens to see if we could find Emily anywhere. We thought that she might have hurt herself and crawled into a cupboard or under a bush as cats usually do when they are in pain. We searched the summer-house, the greenhouse and the stables; we searched the shrubbery at the front of the house, the walled vegetable garden and the field where the sheep live. Sophie and Ben, sad-eyed and quiet, searched with us. But there was absolutely no sign of Emily anywhere.

Late the night before I had a terrible thought. I had suppressed it for hours. But the thought would no longer stay suppressed.

'Do you think she could have got into the carpet van?' I asked Patsy.

Patsy looked at me in horror.

'I asked Kelvin to check his van before he left,' I said. 'But you know what Emily is like. She might have found somewhere really comfortable among all those rolls of carpet.'

'Ring him!' said Patsy immediately.

I rang Kelvin Johnson. He said he hadn't seen Emily leap out of the back of his van but that he was perfectly happy for me to visit his home and see if I could see any sign of her. So, while Patsy stayed at Bilbury Grange in case Emily turned up injured I drove over to Kelvin Johnson's house. I spent four hours searching his van, the garage where he keeps spare rolls of carpet and the surrounding gardens. Kelvin, almost as upset as I was, helped me. But of Emily there was absolutely no sign. I returned home with tears rolling down my cheeks.

Emily was as much a part of our family as I or Patsy. I knew that she would not have left us deliberately. I knew that she loved us all dearly and that even if she was unhurt she would be lonely and frightened away from us. I was terrified that she might be lying injured or even dying in a ditch somewhere.

'There were a few calls for you,' said Patsy, as she heated up some home-made tomato soup. Neither of us had eaten all day and although neither of us was hungry we both knew we had to eat. 'That woman who came with the TV crew the other day telephoned twice.'

'The 'Up Your Way!' woman?'

'Yes. She sounded quite nice.'

'Did she say what she wanted?'

'No. She asked if you would ring her back. She said it was important and quite urgent.'

'I'll ring her tomorrow,' I said. I didn't feel very much like talking to anyone.

'And a man called Jenkins from the *Sunday Globe* telephoned three times.'

'Are you sure it was Jenkins? Not someone called Jack Ladd?'

Patsy said she was sure. I told her about the reporter I had found wandering around the courtyard the day before.

'He asked me to make sure you rang as soon as you came in,' said Patsy. 'He said it was very important.'

I hardly heard her. I was desperately trying to think of something else I could do to help us find Emily.

'You don't think she could be caught in a trap somewhere, do you?' asked Patsy.

I was surprised. I said I didn't think anyone still set traps. But Patsy said they did. She told me that a friend of hers from the village had lost her dog for two weeks and after hours of searching had found it, starving and almost dead, trapped by its leg. The dog, she said, had virtually bitten through its own limb in an attempt to set itself free. Patsy said that several villagers still set traps for rabbits.

I listened to this horrible story in silence. We then both sat together holding hands and feeling extremely miserable. The thought of Emily trapped and trying to chew off her own leg was more than I could bear.

'We've got some photographs of Emily, haven't we?' I said, suddenly.

Patsy nodded.

'If I get some copies made we can distribute them around the village. Then if anyone happens to see her they'll know where to ring'.

'That's a brilliant idea!' said Patsy, getting up. 'I'll find a photograph.' She went into the living room, rummaged around in an old chest of drawers for a few moments and returned triumphantly holding up a colour photograph of Emily sitting on a low wall in the garden. Having something positive and practical to do made me feel a fraction better.

'I'll take this straight down to Peter Marshall's shop,' I told Patsy. 'I'll walk there through the fields just in case she's got lost down there. And while I'm in the village I'll ask around in case anyone has seen her.'

* * *

There was no sign of Emily on the path to the village. I called, whistled and listened all the way in the vain but constant hope that she might have strayed and somehow become disoriented and lost. I didn't really believe that could have happened – cats have a magnificent sense of direction – but I had to keep trying. Ben ran quietly beside me, her ears pricked and her eyes alert. I felt sure that she too was searching for Emily. I didn't see a soul on the path through the woods – the same path along which I had struggled through thick snow to Miss Hargreaves' cottage the previous winter – but as soon as I reached the lane I was reminded that Bilbury had now become a major tourist attraction.

There were camera toting visitors everywhere and coaches and cars were packed nose to tail in the narrow country lanes. The Bilbury I loved so much was changing beyond recognition and I didn't like it one little bit. I felt slightly guilty about my feelings because I knew that many of the villagers welcomed this exceptional opportunity to make some money. I knew that as a relative newcomer I had no right to say anything to try to change things – even if I could.

Outside the village shop a man in a smart white coat was standing on a chair putting up a huge hand-painted poster outside Peter Marshall's shop. 'WIN AS MUCH AS YOU CAN GRAB!' said the poster. 'ENTRY TICKETS 50 PENCE EACH. APPLY INSIDE.' Half a dozen tourists were standing around watching. One was even taking photographs. As I got closer I realised that the man in the white coat was Peter Marshall. I was astonished. Peter had even combed his hair.

'What on earth are you doing?' I asked him.

'I'm putting up a poster,' Peter snapped back.

'I can see that. But why are you wearing a white coat? And where's your flat cap?'

Peter looked down. 'Just tell me if this is straight, will you?'

I stood a few feet back from the poster. 'Left hand up a bit!' I suggested. 'Why the white coat?'

'Image,' said Peter baldly.

'Image!'

'Image is very important in retailing,' hissed Peter. 'I read all about it in a magazine.'

I stared at him. This was not the Peter I knew and loved. Image. White coat. Combed hair. I sighed.

'Do you still do film developing and printing?' I asked him. 'I've got a photo I need copying.'

Peter raised the left hand corner of the poster a couple of inches. 'Oh yes, sir. No problem. I can get photographs done for you, sir. We offer a full photographic service. Developing, printing and enlargements. All done within 24 hours.'

'You are Peter Marshall, aren't you?' I said.

He looked down and glowered at me.

'What do you mean?'

'You're being unnaturally polite, Peter. It doesn't seem right. The tourists are too far away to hear you.'

'Customer relations,' said Peter. 'The customer is always right. Is that straight?'

It was, I think, at that point that I knew that something had to be done to rescue Bilbury from the hideous influences of commerce. I much preferred the old Peter Marshall. The one who deliberately sold cartons of milk that were difficult to open because he knew that when people made a mess opening them they would buy more paper tissues; the one who bought up a supply of fire-damaged lawnmowers then sold lawn fertiliser at a special discount so that everyone's grass would grow more quickly, hoping that their lawnmowers would wear out and he could sell his new mowers more quickly.

I sighed. 'Down a fraction. Can you really get them for tomorrow? I need them fairly quickly.'

Peter moved the left hand corner of the poster down a fraction of an inch. 'Is tomorrow afternoon soon enough, sir?

'I guess so. The poster's perfect now by the way.'

'Hand me the sticky tape, will you?'

I looked around. I couldn't see any sticky tape.

'In with the oranges you buffoon!' said Peter. Both his hands were busy holding up the poster and so he pointed with his nose. His image was slipping slightly.

Sure enough the roll of sticky tape was sitting on top of a box of oranges. I picked up the tape and handed it to Peter. 'Tear me off a piece!'

Using first my teeth and then my fingers I tore off a piece of tape a couple of inches long.

'Not that much!' said Peter testily. It was good to see the old Peter shining through.

I looked at the short piece of tape I was holding. 'I'm sorry!' I apologised. I shrugged. 'Not much I can do about it now.'

'Tear it in two. I can use that much for two corners.'

The piece was too small to tear and I ended up with a tiny ball of totally unusable tape.

'You come up here and hold the poster and I'll handle the tape!' said Peter, losing patience. 'You're costing me a blooming fortune!'

With some difficulty we changed places. Peter tore two tiny pieces of sticky tape, gave me instructions on exactly where to position the poster and then handed me the bits of tape. When I had finally finished fixing the poster, I clambered down gingerly off the chair. I was worried that with so little tape holding the poster in place the slightest breeze from the movement of my body might dislodge it.

'Do you want one?' asked Peter.

'One what?' I asked, puzzled.

'A ticket.'

'A ticket for what?'

Peter sighed and pointed at the poster. 'The competition,' he said impatiently.

'What do I get if I win?' I asked him.

'You get one minute to grab as much as you like from the shop,' said Peter. 'Anything you can carry.' He thought for a moment, as though suddenly worried by the exceptionally generous offer he had made. 'Anything except the till,' he said. 'And cigarettes,' he added. 'No cigarettes.'

'I don't smoke,' I pointed out.

'You could grab quite a lot in a minute,' Peter pointed out.

'Why are you running a competition?' I asked him. 'You've got the only shop in the village.'

'Not any more I haven't,' said Peter, rather sourly.

'What on earth do you mean?'

'Colin Jackson has opened a caravan park,' said Peter moodily.

'A caravan park?'

'That's what I said. A caravan park. He reckons he can get over a hundred of the damned things on one field. But that's not the half of it. He's turned his kitchen into a shop.'

'Golly!' I said, genuinely surprised. 'Can he do that?'

'There's no 'can he do that' about it!' said Peter. 'He's just done it!'

'Oh,' I said. I thought about it for a moment. 'Well, he'll probably only be selling milk and bread to the people who are parked on his caravan site.'

Peter shook his head. 'The wholesaler in Barnstaple tells me he's ordering newspapers and magazines,' said Peter. 'And he's selling green vegetables, and fruit and Mrs Jackson's jams.'

I didn't know what to say. 'I don't know what to say,' I said. 'I'm flabbergasted.'

'You could have knocked me down with a feather,' admitted Peter, rather bitterly. 'He's selling things cheaper than I am. It won't be long before everyone in the village will be doing their shopping there.'

'Oh surely not!' I protested. 'The villagers will be loyal to you, I'm sure!'

'I'm not so certain about that,' said Peter. 'That's why I'm fighting back.'

'Fighting back?'

'Competitions!' said Peter sternly. 'This isn't the end of it,' he said defiantly. 'I'm not giving up!'

I started to say that I really didn't think he had anything to worry about when there was a cry from some distance which stopped me talking and Peter listening.

'Peter!' called a voice I didn't recognise. 'Peter Marshall!'

We both looked round. A tall, spindly looking fellow in a blue and white checked sweater and light grey slacks was easing his way through the assorted holidaymakers and walking briskly along the road towards us. He had long, wispy fair hair combed over a large bald patch and wore tortoiseshell framed spectacles.

Peter peered at the stranger for a few moments but showed no sign of recognition.

'Peter!' said the stranger, holding out a hand. 'It's me! Nathan!' He stared at Peter for a few moments. 'I must say you've changed a lot!' he admitted. 'I don't remember you ever wearing a white coat before. And what's happened to your flat cap?'

Peter looked closely at the stranger for a few moments but kept his own hands firmly by his side. 'Nathan?' he said. And then, very slowly, a look of comprehension spread across his face.

'Nathan Field?' he asked.

'Nathan Field!' agreed the stranger.

'I haven't seen you for ten years!' said Peter, putting his own hand in the stranger's and shaking it firmly.

'Twelve,' corrected Nathan Field. 'I read about Bilbury in the papers,' he explained. 'So I thought I'd pop back and have a look at you all.'

'Nathan was born here,' said Peter, turning to me. 'Grew up in the village. Then went off to college and never came back. Caught up by the big city lights I've no doubt.'

Nathan looked rather embarrassed. 'It's nice to see you again!' he said to Peter.

‘The last time I saw you I threatened to give you a good hiding!’ said Peter; memories now flooding back. ‘You’d broken a window with your cricket ball.’ I glanced over his shoulder. A pane of glass in an upstairs window was repaired with bits of sticky tape.

‘Is that the one?’ I asked. They both looked up at the window I was looking at.

‘That’s the one!’ agreed Nathan. ‘I should pay you for that!’ he said, reaching into his back pocket and pulling out his wallet.

‘I could never afford to have it repaired properly,’ lied Peter.

‘How much do you think it’ll cost?’ asked Nathan.

Peter glanced at Nathan’s wallet; expensive leather but rather thin. ‘Thirty pounds should do it!’ he said.

Nathan looked surprised. He had good reason to. Thirty pounds would have probably paid for the whole of Peter’s shop to be reglazed.

‘Very expensive, old-fashioned glass,’ explained Peter. ‘Very difficult to match.’

Nathan, nodded understandingly. I felt sure that he knew Peter just as well as I did. He said nothing but opened his wallet and took out three ten pound notes. He smiled and handed them over to Peter who took them and slid them into his own pocket in one swift and well-practised movement.

Nathan held open his wallet so that we could both see that it was now almost empty. ‘That’s left me a bit short of cash,’ he said. ‘Could you cash a cheque for me, Peter?’ He put the wallet away and took out a cheque book.

Peter looked at him rather suspiciously. ‘How much for?’ he asked.

‘Oh, thirty will do,’ said Nathan.

‘I suppose so,’ said Peter, rather ungraciously. ‘But I’ll have to charge you a pound for changing the cheque.’

Nathan sighed and smiled. ‘That’s O.K.’

‘Would you like some tickets? Five? Ten?’

‘Tickets?’

Peter pointed to the poster he and I had just put up. ‘I’m having a competition,’ he explained. ‘The winner gets to keep everything he can grab in a minute.’

‘Except the till,’ I said.

‘And no cigarettes,’ added Peter. ‘Shall I take ten? The tickets are only fifty pence each.’

‘Er...,’ I suppose so, said Nathan.

‘And I’ll need to see some identification.’

‘Some identification?’

‘You can’t expect me to cash a cheque without identification!’

‘But you know who I am!’

‘Doesn’t matter,’ said Peter firmly. ‘I need identification before I can cash a cheque.’

Nathan didn’t even sigh. He obviously knew Peter very well. He took out his cheque card and driving licence. ‘Will these do?’ he asked.

Peter examined both documents carefully. ‘They’ll do fine,’ he said at last. Nathan then wrote out a cheque for thirty-six pounds and Peter gave him back his own ten pound notes and ten competition entry tickets.’

When Nathan had gone, clutching a roll of raffle tickets and a replenished wallet, I took out the photograph of Emily. ‘Could you get me a couple of dozen copies made of this?’ I asked Peter.

‘Who is it?’ he asked, squinting at the print.

‘It’s Emily,’ I explained. ‘One of our cats. She’s gone missing.’

Peter looked puzzled. ‘Why don’t you just get another cat?’ he asked. ‘It would be cheaper than having all these photographs made!’

‘We rather like Emily,’ I said, staying patient. I hadn’t really expected Peter to understand and wasn’t offended by the fact that he hadn’t. ‘I thought I’d put up a few posters around the village – then if anyone sees her wandering about they’ll know where she belongs.’

Peter shook his head and snorted. ‘It’s your money,’ he said, taking the photograph from me. ‘I’ll get your pictures for you,’ he promised. ‘They’ll be here tomorrow afternoon,’ he said. ‘Sir.’ he added as an afterthought.

* * *

Even though it was crowded with traffic and gawking tourists I decided to walk back to Bilbury Grange along the lanes, looking and calling for Emily along the way. I still didn’t think it very likely that I would find her in the village – I was sure that if she was alive and in Bilbury she would have found her way back home by now – but I had to try.

The Duck and Puddle was crowded with tourists. Frank and Gilly had filled their small parking area with tables and chairs and these were all occupied. There was even a queue of people patiently waiting for their turn to be fed and watered. I was pleased for Frank and Gilly but selfishly I much preferred the old, quiet Bilbury village pub.

As I walked around the village green, peering into gardens and under hedgerows, I heard an angry shout of protest coming from somewhere on my left. I stopped, turned my head and saw a fat, middle aged man in a beige windcheater and a pair of beige slacks furiously waving his walking stick and waddling after two village boys who were running away across the village green as quickly as they could. The fat man in beige quite clearly didn't stand a chance of catching the two boys.

'What's the matter?' I called.

The fat man in beige turned and glowered in my direction. He was wheezing noisily and seemed glad of an excuse to vent his wrath at a less mobile target.

'It's a disgrace!' he complained. Even from those three words it was clear that he was American. A group of Japanese tourists who were busy taking endless photographs of Ted, the village postman, stopped what they were doing and aimed their cameras in his direction. The village postman, who had been posing alongside his bicycle, looked most aggrieved. The Japanese tourists, all male, were all wearing identical dark grey suits, plain white shirts and identical dark blue ties.

I wandered over and gently asked the fat American in beige to tell me what had troubled him so much.

'Those young vandals were throwing sticks up into the trees! He reported, amidst much huffing and puffing.

I looked up. The horse chestnut trees underneath which we were standing were laden with conkers. I hadn't realised that the conker season had already started but down around our feet the ground was littered with small, broken pieces of branch, opened horse chestnut seed casings and the thicker sticks which had clearly been used by the two boys to speed the process of gravity sponsored seed distribution. Out of the corner of my eye I could see that Ben was eyeing a fairly large stick covetously; but she didn't move an inch from where she was standing by my side.

'They were just trying to get conkers down,' I explained. 'Boys do it every autumn.' I had done it myself often enough.

'They could have injured me or my wife!' protested the fat American in beige. He waved his stick somewhere behind him. I looked and saw a fat woman in a slightly lighter shade of beige sheltering under a fringed, pink parasol. She was carrying a large white canvas bag and wore imaginatively framed sunglasses. I wasn't sure whether she was using the parasol to protect her skin from the weak rays of sunshine or (rather vainly, surely, for it was a flimsy looking device) to protect her head from falling sticks, leaves, conkers and other arboreal debris. Neither function seemed practical.

'But you weren't hit?'

'That's not the point!' drawled the fat American in beige angrily shaking his walking stick. The Japanese photographers snapped away furiously. The fat American in beige, who had almost overbalanced and fallen over as a result of this violent gesture, planted his walking stick firmly on the grass and spoke to the Japanese. 'I'd like some of those photographs!' he shouted at them, speaking in that clear, exceptionally distinct way that people use when they are talking to foreigners and fear that they might not be understood. 'Do you understand?' he enquired. He had a huge video camera and two still cameras slung around his neck but had made no attempt to use any of his own equipment to record the scene of this most heinous crime.

'We understand perfectly!' said one of the Japanese men very politely. He bowed. 'If you give us your name and address we will be delighted to send you photographs.'

'Take some pictures of these branches,' instructed the fat American in beige, pointing to the bits of branch scattered on the ground.

'I would have thought it was very much the point,' I said, without much sympathy.

'I shall be making my complaint known!' said the fat American in beige, turning towards me. 'You people will be hearing from my lawyers.'

Deciding that there was little point in continuing with this bizarre conversation I started to move off. But before I did so I bent down, picked up a short, thick stick which the boys had been throwing up into the trees and held it out so that Ben could take it in her teeth. She looked up at me and thanked me with her eyes. The two of us then continued along the lane back towards Bilbury Grange.

'That's evidence!' shouted the fat American in beige. 'Don't you go carrying off the evidence!'

I ignored him and walked on slowly homewards, continuing my sad and fruitless search for Emily.

On my way home I met Thumper wobbling along on an old bicycle. 'I'm just popping along to the Duck and Puddle,' Thumper told me. 'Fancy a slow one?'

'I shouldn't bother if I were you,' I told him.

He frowned, looking puzzled.

I explained. 'You'll have to book a table for tomorrow if you want a drink,' I said. 'The Duck and Puddle is absolutely full of tourists.'

Thumper stared at me in disbelief. ‘You mean there’s no room?’

‘No room,’ I confirmed.

Thumper scratched his head. ‘That’s a pity,’ he said. ‘Still,’ he brightened, ‘I expect Frank and Gilly are pleased.’ He turned around his bicycle and walked back along the lane with me.

‘Is that it?’ I asked him, astonished. ‘The Duck and Puddle is full. You can’t get a drink. And all you can say is that it’s a pity?’

‘It’s business,’ shrugged Thumper. ‘We’ve got to strike while the iron is hot.’

I stared at him, disbelievingly. ‘Strike while the iron is hot? What does that mean?’

Thumper frowned. ‘I’m not sure,’ he confessed. ‘It’s something Churston said.’

‘Churston Ferrers?’

Thumper nodded. I was beginning to think that Churston had an unhealthy amount of influence over what was going on in Bilbury. It occurred to me that none of us knew very much about him. ‘What are you looking for?’ he asked me, as I peered under yet another stretch of hedge. I explained about Emily.

‘Did I tell you about how my cousin’s cat died?’ Thumper asked me.

‘No,’ I said.

‘He lives in the middle of a big city,’ said Thumper, for whom a big city is anywhere which has a set of traffic lights. ‘One day he was out in the driveway washing his car when his cat suddenly jumped over a high wall into the next door neighbour’s garden. Suddenly there was terrible squealing and screeching and he realised the next door neighbour’s dog – a huge Doberman – must have been out in the garden.’

‘Oh no!’ I cried. ‘Don’t tell me anymore! How horrid!’ I shuddered involuntarily at the very thought of it.

‘Well, my cousin tried to climb over the wall,’ continued Thumper, oblivious to my protests, ‘But he’s a bit overweight and the wall was far too high for him. All this time the cat was screaming and wailing and he could hear the damned dog starting to eat the poor cat. He raced round to the front gate but that was locked. Eventually he managed to get a stepladder so that he could see what was happening. By then the cat had half gone so there wasn’t any point in doing anything else.’

I stared at him in disbelief, feeling sick.

‘Oh, I nearly forgot,’ said Thumper. ‘Patchy and I and a few of the other blokes are cleaning out the village pond tomorrow morning. If you can spare a couple of hours to help it would be much appreciated.’

I was still numb from the horrible story he had just told me.

‘You game?’ asked Thumper.

‘Why are we suddenly cleaning out the village pond?’ I asked.

‘Churston thought it would be a good idea,’ said Thumper. ‘He says we should do everything we can to improve the village’s appearance.’

‘Do you trust him?’ I asked.

‘Who?’

‘Churston.’

‘Trust him?’

‘We don’t know very much about him, do we?’

‘He’s just trying to help,’ said Thumper. ‘Why shouldn’t we trust him?’

I didn’t have any foundations for my suspicions about Churston and so I just shrugged. ‘No reason,’ said. ‘No reason at all.’

* * *

‘Oh, I almost forgot. That woman telephoned again while you were out,’ said Patsy.

After I’d returned from the village we had spent the rest of the afternoon working. I had spent a couple of hours in the summerhouse working on my weekly local newspaper column while Patsy had been busy in the kitchen making jam. Now we were both spending a balmy evening in the vegetable garden, helping Mr Parfitt pull up the last our onions. We had a good crop. Mr Parfitt, who knew far more than we did about vegetables, fruit and other plants liked to let the pulled onions dry off in the sunshine before laying them on trays in the greenhouse to store them for the winter.

‘Which woman?’

‘Avril thingy.’

‘From that TV programme?’

Patsy nodded. ‘She rang several times. She said it was very, very urgent and would you please ring her at home this evening. She gave me her home number. I wrote it down and put it on your desk.’

‘Did she say what it was about?’

‘No.’

‘Probably wanted to come and film another daft interview,’ I said, without enthusiasm. We continued pulling onions. Ben was sleeping a few yards away on the path. Sophie was lying on top of the wooden cover which kept leaves and other debris out of the water butt. It was one of her favourite spots. I constantly missed Emily and was aware of her absence.

‘I’m going to go back over to Bideford, tomorrow,’ I said, suddenly. ‘I still have this awful feeling that Emily climbed into that carpet van.’

‘But where will you start looking?’ asked Patsy. ‘She could be anywhere.’

‘I don’t know,’ I admitted. ‘But I’ve just got to do something.’

‘If she did get taken over to Bideford maybe she’ll find her own way home,’ said Patsy.

It was a nice thought. I wanted to believe it. But it seemed unlikely. Bideford is at least twenty miles away from Bilbury. It’s a long way for a cat to walk. I didn’t say that I thought it sounded unlikely. I didn’t want to take this one cheer from Patsy. Or, for that matter, from myself. Voicing my disbelief would, it seemed, almost seem like giving up hope.

‘My Aunt had a cat which walked from Bristol to Taunton in three weeks!’ said Mr Parfitt suddenly.

We both stopped what we were doing and looked across at him.

‘She moved from Taunton up to Bristol when her husband died,’ said our gardener. ‘She went to stay with her sister and took her cat with her but that cat loved my Uncle Reg and he just walked straight back to Taunton. The neighbours recognised him and rang my Aunt.’

‘Taunton to Bristol!’ said Patsy. ‘That must be, what, sixty miles?’

‘I should think so,’ agreed Mr Parfitt. ‘Thereabouts.’

‘And the cat walked all that way in three weeks!’

‘He was a poor, weak little thing when he got there. But he got there.’

‘What did your Aunt do?’

‘Moved straight back to Taunton,’ said Mr Parfitt. ‘She hadn’t sold her house and she said that if Tibbles – that was the cat – wanted to stay in Taunton then she’d stay in Taunton too.’

‘That’s a wonderful story!’ said Patsy, much brightened by this tale. She frowned. ‘Is it true?’ she asked.

‘Of course it’s true!’ said Mr Parfitt. ‘My Aunt rang the papers but they weren’t much interested. They said they were always getting stories like that. They told her about a cat called Toby who had walked from Cornwall to Kent in four months and about a cat called Smokey who walked from Newquay in Cornwall all the way to Bexhill in Sussex – and did it in just three months!’

‘So, if your Aunt’s cat walked from Bristol to Taunton in three weeks and that’s sixty miles...,’ began Patsy.

‘Emily should take about a week to get home if she’s in Bideford!’ I said.

‘If she was in Bideford,’ said Patsy cautiously.

‘If she was in Bideford,’ I agreed.

But I now had real hope in my heart and with real hope the heart beats easier and life seems much more worthwhile. I carried on pulling and turning onions with renewed enthusiasm.

We had finished the onions and were picking runner beans (‘The best crop I’ve ever seen!’ said Mr Parfitt with justifiable pride) when, with more dismay than pleasure, I heard a voice I recognised.

‘Sorry to trouble you again,’ said Jack Ladd, the reporter from the *Sunday Globe*. ‘Can I ask you a couple of questions?’

I stood up and glared at him. ‘This is private property!’ I told him, rather rudely. ‘I do wish you’d come to the front gate.’

‘But your front gate is always locked,’ the reporter pointed out perfectly accurately. He smiled. ‘I understand how you feel,’ he said sympathetically. ‘But I really just want to give you a chance to reply to the complaint. I thought it would be fair to give you a chance to put your side of the story.’

I looked at him, puzzled. ‘A complaint? Who’s made a complaint? What about?’

Patsy and Mr Parfitt had both stopped what they were doing.

The reporter smoothly slipped a spiral bound notebook out of his jacket pocket and flipped over half a dozen pages until he found the right page. ‘Caldwell West,’ he said. ‘Vice President of West Oil.’

‘I don’t know anyone called Caldwell West,’ I said. ‘Who is he? What am I supposed to have done?’

‘Mr West claims that he and his wife narrowly escaped injury this morning when young hooligans threw sticks at them on Bilbury Village Green. He claims that you distracted him and so enabled the vandals to escape. And he also claims that you took away the evidence. He’s very cross about it. He’s threatening to sue the entire village.’

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. It was all so silly. ‘That’s daft!’ I said. ‘There were a couple of kids trying to get conkers down from the trees around the edge of the village green. The chap can’t be serious!’

Jack Ladd stared at me sympathetically. ‘I’m afraid it isn’t funny and he is serious,’ he said. ‘Very serious. He’s suing the village of Bilbury for a million dollars.'

I stopped laughing. Jack Ladd was right. It wasn't funny.

* * *

CHAPTER NINE

Neither Patsy nor I slept very well that night.

But it was Emily's continued absence, rather than the reported threat from Caldwell West, which stopped us from sleeping.

Neither of us could take the threatened lawsuit too seriously (and since I still hadn't been officially notified that I was the subject of a lawsuit I wasn't entirely sure that Jack Ladd wasn't making the whole thing up for the sake of a story – it sounded more like the result of a tabloid imagination than a real life development) but we both lay awake most of the night waiting to see if Emily would come back.

We lay there silently in the darkness waiting for the tell-tale sound of paws pattering up the staircase, the unique 'Prrrp' noise that Emily always made when she greeted us and the comforting feel of her tiny body landing on the bedclothes.

But when the first rays of the day's sunshine began to filter through a narrow gap between the curtains we realised that another night had gone by and still Emily hadn't returned. Neither of us spoke of it but I know that I was gradually beginning to fear that I would never see Emily again. I suspected that Patsy felt the same. We lay there, side by side, in the gently easing darkness and I reached out and found Patsy's hand and squeezed her fingers tightly.

'She'll come back!' whispered Patsy hoarsely.

'Of course she will!' I replied.

'Let's close our eyes and send her love and strength wherever she is,' said Patsy.

I glanced across. Patsy's eyes were tightly closed and her face showed that she was concentrating hard. Ben and Sophie were lying perfectly still too. At this time in the morning they both normally let us know that they were ready for their breakfast. But I felt certain that they felt that this morning was different.

I closed my eyes, squeezed Patsy's fingers more tightly and sent Emily all the love and strength and courage I could raise.

We lay like this for several minutes.

And then the telephone started to ring and the spell was broken.

* * *

'Avril Potterton here,' said the television producer. She sounded indecently cheerful for so early in the morning. 'I'm sorry to ring you at such an ungodly hour,' she apologised, 'but I thought I might catch you if I rang early.' Although she sounded improperly cheerful she spoke breathlessly – as though in a hurry to share some wonderful secret with me.

I stifled a yawn, muttered some incoherent pleasantry and tucked the telephone between my ear and my shoulder while I fastened the belt of my dressing gown. There was an autumn chill in the air and I shivered involuntarily. Sophie rubbed herself against my legs and Ben sat in front of me, staring at me and making it quite clear that she didn't want to hurry me but that when I was ready to give her some breakfast she would be ready to eat it.

I listened as Miss Potterton talked about the wonders of the 'Up Your Way!' programme in particular and about the joys of television in general. Then she said something else which I thought so unlikely that I was not at all sure that I had heard what I thought I had heard.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'Would you repeat that?'

Avril laughed and repeated what I thought she had said. I said it was very kind of her and that I much appreciated everything she had said but that if she didn't mind I would have to think about it and that I hoped she understood. She said that would be fine. I then put down the telephone and wandered downstairs and into the kitchen and fed Ben and Sophie (and the Aga which would only continue to provide us with hot water and heat if I fed it coke twice a day) in something of a daze.

I then pottered back upstairs to get washed and dressed.

'Who was on the telephone?' asked Patsy, as I took off my dressing gown and shivered again. First there had been the boys collecting conkers. Now I was shivering. I realised that there was no longer any question about it – autumn had arrived. I plucked a clean shirt out of a drawer and darted out into the bathroom to wash.

'Avril Potterton,' I called, hurriedly washing.

'That woman from the television programme?'

'That's the one!' I splashed steaming hot water onto my face and then rubbed my shaving brush vigorously on my dish of shaving soap to create a lather.

'What on earth did she want?' asked Patsy, appearing in the bathroom doorway behind me. I could see her in the bathroom mirror, fully dressed from the waist down but wearing only a bra above the waist and holding a white blouse and a multicoloured sweater in her hand. ‘Do they want you to do another interview?’

I lathered my face, rinsed the brush in the bowl and then started shaving.

‘No,’ I said. ‘They’re apparently quite happy with the interview they’ve already done.’

‘So what did she want?’ asked Patsy.

I carefully scraped away at my chin. I needed a new blade but to say that cash was a little tight was an understatement and I was trying to make each razor blade last as long as possible. The new carpet in the living room had really been an extravagance. ‘Do you remember that half-witted interviewer they brought here?’ I asked her.

‘Roger?’

‘Rodney. You’ll catch cold standing there half naked.’

‘Rodney. What about him? And I’m not half naked. I’m half dressed.’ But Patsy slipped on her blouse and started to button it up. I wished I hadn’t said anything as the view in my mirror slowly became more decent.

‘Miss Potterton managed to persuade the Executive Producer to fire him,’ I told her. I scraped away at the stubble on my upper lip and decided that the blunt blade would have to be retired very soon.

‘Why did she ring you to tell you that?’ asked Patsy, puzzled and now completely dressed.

‘Because they’ve offered me his job, ‘I explained, splashing more hot water onto my face to remove the remains of the shaving soap lather.

For a moment or two Patsy didn’t say anything. Then she gave out a great whoop of delight. ‘Congratulations!’ she cried, throwing her arms around my neck and kissing me full on the mouth.

‘Hang on a minute, ‘I said, gently pushing her away from me. ‘I haven’t said I’ll take the job yet.’

Patsy frowned and looked at me. ‘Why not?’

‘I wanted to talk things over with you,’ I explained. ‘If I do take the job it’ll change our life. For a start I’ll have to travel up to Glasgow every week and I’ll probably have to spend Monday to Friday living there.’

‘Glasgow?’ said Patsy, in the same way that she might have said Gdansk, Ghent, Gothenburg or Guatemala ‘Why Glasgow?’

‘Because that’s where the programme comes from, ‘I explained.

‘Oh!’ said Patsy, suddenly far less enthusiastic. There was a pause while this news sunk in. ‘And you’d really have to live there all week?’

‘I couldn’t present a television programme from Bilbury,’ I pointed out.

‘Oh!’ said Patsy, again.

I dried my face and put my shirt on. ‘I’m starving. Let’s eat and talk about this later,’ I said quietly. ‘Let’s give ourselves a treat and have a full fried breakfast!’ Some days we simply had porridge and toast for breakfast. On other days we gave ourselves a treat. For one reason or another this felt like a morning for a treat.

I quickly finished dressing and then the two of us went downstairs. We both picked up small, open wicker trug baskets and went out through the back door to fetch our breakfast.

We picked field mushrooms from a meadow still damp with morning dew and then we carefully collected eggs lain by our happy, strutting hens and for carrying safely back to the house nestled these amidst the softer, more cushioning fruits of nature. Back in the kitchen Patsy boiled the kettle for our morning tea, sliced her homemade bread for toasting and prepared our breakfast feast from plump white and grey mushrooms and eggs which were still warm.

While Patsy made breakfast I refilled the living room log basket with wood from the log shed, cut a strand of ivy that had managed to squeeze between a wooden window and its frame and temporarily refastened a bracket on a downpipe at the side of the house. With a large house like Bilbury Grange there are always small chores to be done and I had learnt that it is much easier to do these when you spot them rather than leave them for later. If I left essential chores to do another time I found myself constantly wasting time reminding myself of the work that needed to be done. Besides, if you leave small tasks for a week or two they quickly become much bigger tasks.

If, for example, I had left the loose downpipe unfastened the chances are that a strong wind would have shaken it free from its other mountings and created a much bigger problem and a considerably more difficult job. If I had ignored the tiny strand of ivy it would, within a week, have grown so thick that the window would probably never fit its frame properly again.

* * *

During breakfast we talked of the job I had been offered. The money that Avril Potterton had told me that the television company would pay was very good. I suspected that if I found myself an agent in London I would probably be able to persuade them to pay even more. Even as it was the money would undoubtedly have solved all our immediate financial worries.

The money was the job’s solitary attraction.

It wasn’t a job I really wanted to do and I didn’t like the idea of having a face that would inevitably become better recognised.

Most of all I didn't like the idea of spending most of my life away from Patsy, our animals and Bilbury. Even with the lanes and village green full of tourists I still loved Bilbury far more than I had ever loved any other place in which I had ever lived. I thought of it as 'home' in a way that I had never really thought of anywhere else as 'home'.

But there was no denying that the money was very attractive. 'What do you want to do?' asked Patsy for the umpteenth time.

I said I didn't really know. And so once again we went carefully through all the advantages and disadvantages. My instinct was to turn the job down immediately and think nothing more about it but I felt a responsibility to Patsy, to our animals and, strange though it may sound, to Bilbury Grange itself.

I knew that Patsy wouldn't want me to spend most of my life working away from Bilbury Grange if there was a realistic alternative. But I also knew that she was just as worried about our fragile finances as I was.

'Maybe I should just take the job for a few months,' I suggested, trying to see what Patsy would say but hoping that she would say 'no'.

Patsy nodded. 'That would probably be best,' she said firmly. 'It would certainly be silly to turn down a steady income.'

'I could give up the job when we have published my book,' I said. 'And I'd be home every weekend.' I was trying hard to convince myself that I should take the job. I wasn't doing very well.

'Lots of people have to work away from home,' said Patsy, quietly.

'Sailors go away for months at a time,' I pointed out.

'Plenty of businessmen have to travel,' said Patsy.

And so we agreed that I would ring Avril Potterton and accept the job she had offered me. I didn't want to have to spend most of the week away from Bilbury. I didn't want to work on television. In short, I didn't want the job. But I felt that Patsy would be happier if I took it.

But I didn't ring Avril Potterton straight away.

* * *

Since I had sort of promised Thumper Robinson that I would help him and Patchy Fogg clear out the village pond I decided to try to forget about everything for a couple of hours while doing some old-fashioned hard manual labour.

Because I guessed that the lanes around Bilbury would almost certainly be blocked with tourists, I left the car in the barn which doubled as a garage and rode into the village on my battered old bicycle. Riding a bicycle while wearing Wellington boots isn't easy and I must have looked quite a comical sight as I pedalled along, trying to keep my huge boots out of the way of the front wheel.

Thumper Robinson, Patchy Fogg, Frank Parsons, Wayne Wellard the farrier and Jack and Ollie, the two farm labourers who had helped us rescue Miss Hargreaves when the storm had sent her chimney crashing through her roof, were already gathered at the edge of the village pond as I clambered off my bicycle and leant it against a nearby tree.

Churston was there too but judging by the fact that he was elegantly dressed in his usual smart suit, white shirt, expensive looking tie, gold cufflinks and well-shined black shoes it was clear that he was there to direct operations rather than to do any of the dirty work. His car, a brand new, steel-grey, top-of-the range BMW, was parked casually on the grass verge. There wasn't a speck of dust on the car nor a spot of mud on the wheels. I still found it difficult to trust a man who seemed so incapable of getting dressed in the morning without putting on a suit and I found myself deeply distrustful of a man who managed to drive his car around the lanes of Bilbury without it getting dirty.

Half a dozen children had also gathered to watch the fun and a small group of tourists were standing far enough back out of the way to make it clear that they were present only out of curiosity and not to do any work.

'They do say it's bottomless,' said Jack, standing close to the edge of the pond and staring down into the water.

'Of course it isn't bottomless,' said Patchy. 'People always say that about ponds. They say it to keep the kids away from them.' He moved a little closer to the edge of the pond but sank quickly into the muddy border which surrounded the pond. Thumper and Wayne pulled him out about a sixteenth of an inch before the top of his Wellington boots slid under the surface of the mud. Looking at the mud I realised that it had been rather silly of me to put on a clean shirt.

'I don't think many kids would want to go into this one,' muttered Frank. He surreptitiously took a silver hip flask from his jacket pocket and took a long swig. When he'd finished he exhaled noisily, shook his head and quietly slid the flask back into his pocket as though certain that no one would have noticed.

Frank was right. The pond, like most village ponds, didn't look particularly attractive. There were a dozen ducks paddling around at the far side of the pond and quacking away quite merrily but much of the surface was covered in a thick green layer of weed and algae.

'I don't know why it needs cleaning out,' said Ollie.

I agreed with him. The pond wasn't dirty, it didn't smell and there was no sign at all of any old prams, bicycle frames, rusty kettles or discarded boots. It looked to me like a fairly healthy English pond; full of wildlife, home to a family of ducks, temporary resting place for migrating birds needing a night's lodgings, and source of many local rumours. Besides, Thumper and I had tidied it up once before a year or so earlier.

Apart from the one already voiced by Jack (that the pond was bottomless) I had, over the years, heard rumours that the pond contained an elderly pike the size of a small child and that the proceeds from a London robbery had been dumped into the water by a gang of escaping jewel thieves ten years earlier. (No one ever bothered to ask what a gang of London jewel thieves had been doing in North Devon nor why no one had ever made any effort to retrieve the jewels they were alleged to have dumped).

'It's got far too much weed in it,' explained Churston.

'Tourists want a nice, clean, fresh looking pond – a pond where kids can paddle and sail their boats.'

'The ducks won't like that,' I pointed out.

But, sadly, no one else seemed particularly interested in whether the ducks would approve of what we were doing. 'How do you think we should set about it?' asked Churston.

'I think filling it in and digging another pond somewhere else would probably be best,' suggested Patchy rather sarcastically. 'We could build something nice and neat in concrete, fill it with Dr Brownlow's health giving water and invite people with gout to come here and dip their toes in it.'

Churston, who was not a man who did a lot of smiling, stared at Patchy for a moment or two, carefully weighing up what he had heard. He then made his opinion clear as though handing down a judgement from a high court bench. 'What a splendid idea!' he said enthusiastically. 'We could turn Bilbury into a Spa town!'

'With an outdoor paddling pond?' asked Patchy, incredulously.

'No, no!' said Churston, dismissively and rather impatiently. 'We'd have to build something a bit more substantial. A swimming pool, maybe. But the idea is marvellous. Just what Bilbury needs! A bit of something special. By the way,' he asked, looking around, 'Where is the nearest car wash?'

We looked at one another. 'Car wash?' asked Wayne.

'I like to have the BMW cleaned regularly,' explained Churston.

'There might be one in Bristol,' said Patchy, hesitantly.

'Oh,' said Churston, disappointed. 'That seems rather a long way to go for a car wash.' Suddenly, he looked at his watch. 'I must rush!' he said. 'I have to ask Peter to put a notice up in his shop window for me.'

'Shall we leave the pond alone, then?' asked Patchy, hopefully.

'Oh no, I still think we should still clean it up,' said Churston. 'But if you'll excuse me I must rush.' He turned and headed towards his car, the immaculate grey BMW. When he got to the car he opened the door as though intending to get in but then he noticed that the road alongside the pond was absolutely choc-abloc with tourists' motor cars. So Churston reached inside the open window and plucked a thin, brown leather briefcase from the passenger front seat. 'Oh, by the way,' he said as he hurried off on foot, 'I've suggested that the Parish Council hold an emergency meeting this evening. We've got a bit of a problem to sort out.'

'What sort of a problem?' I asked him. The others all stopped what they were doing (which wasn't much) and paid attention.

Churston stopped and turned for a moment. 'Oh, just some conker trees,' he explained. 'We've had a serious complaint about them and after taking expert advice I'm going to recommend to the Council that we have them all chopped down before they get us into any more trouble.'

'You can't do that!' cried several of us together.

But Churston was already fifty yards down the road. 'Look after the car for me!' was the last thing we heard.

* * *

For a few moments we all stood there in silence. No one spoke but there was, I suspect, quite a lot of thinking going on. Eventually it was Wayne Wellard, the diminutive farrier, who broke the silence.

'Well, if we're going to get this pond cleared I suppose we'd better get on with it,' he said, with unconvincingly feigned enthusiasm.

'If we're going to do the job really properly we need to drag it,' said Thumper.

Wayne looked at him, puzzled. 'Drag it?'

'Clean out the bottom of the pond to get rid of any rubbish.'

'How do we do that?' Wayne asked.

I listened carefully. My twenty years of formal education had included nothing at all relating to the cleaning out of ponds. The longer I lived in Bilbury the more extensive I discovered my ignorance to be. I had, over the years, acquired much theoretical knowledge. Men and women with chalk on their fingers had taught me trigonometry, Latin grammar and the names of the bones of the foot. But, to my daily embarrassment and shame, no one had ever taught me how to erect fences, mend droopy gates, layer hedges or replace slipped slates. These things I was now having to learn from men with calloused, splintered hands.

‘Thick rope,’ explained Patchy. ‘A couple of us take one end and another pair takes the other end and we drag the rope across the bottom.’

‘Damned hard work,’ said Ollie. ‘Jack and I did a pond that way last year down near Softly’s Bottom. I couldn’t move for a week afterwards.’

‘The rope got caught on an old stone roller,’ remembered Jack with a grimace. ‘In the end we had to use the tractor to pull the roller out of the water,’ he told me.

‘Sounds a jolly sight easier than pulling on a rope!’ said Patchy. ‘Why don’t we use a tractor to start with?’

‘We haven’t got a tractor here,’ Wayne pointed out, with unassailable logic. ‘And with all this traffic on the road we won’t be able to get one here until about eleven o’clock tonight.’

‘We’ve got Thumper’s truck!’ Patchy said. ‘Much better than any tractor!’

When it comes to pushing or pulling heavy loads, or driving through difficult conditions, it is difficult to think of any vehicle that would better Thumper’s truck. The truck had undoubtedly been born at some mass-market American car and truck manufacturer’s plant but Thumper has, over the years, made substantial alterations and some dramatic improvements. The bodywork is, it is true, dirty, rusty and battered and the vehicle would win no prizes for its appearance. The side window on the passenger’s side of the car was long ago broken and is now blocked up with a piece of cardboard and an old plastic fertiliser bag, the bodywork is festooned with dents (even the cab roof has a large dent in it) and the truck is decorated with so many patches of primer that if required to describe the colour of the vehicle to anyone in authority I would have had to declare myself quite incapable of offering an authoritative answer. Thumper doesn’t bother about appearances. He steadfastly refuses to spend a penny on the outside of the truck but is proud of the fact that the engine is widely believed to be more powerful than anything else in North Devon, with the possible exception of the railway engine which travels between Exeter and Barnstaple.

‘It would be a lot easier with two vehicles,’ said Thumper, thoughtfully. ‘We could tie a rope to the two back ends, drive the cars along the two sides of the pond and just pull the rope through the mud and sludge at the bottom. We might have to do it a couple of times to make sure we drag out everything that’s in there but it will all be over in five minutes and then we can hurry along to the Duck and Puddle before it fills up with tourists wanting plates of chips and bottles of fizzy pop.’

Thumper’s suggestion did promise to be a good deal easier than wading into the pond in Wellington boots and hauling out whatever debris we might find by hand. Frank was so full of enthusiasm that he took another swig from his hip flask and then handed the flask around. This was, for Frank, a considerable sacrifice. He was not an ungenerous man but he did not lightly share his alcohol supply with others when there was no guarantee of readily obtaining replacement supplies. We all took sips from the flask.

‘What on earth have you got in there?’ Wayne demanded of Frank, when he’d finished coughing. Wayne is not renowned as a great drinker.

‘Man’s whisky,’ said Frank, who had been busy sipping when Wayne had asked his question. ‘Laphroig’, he explained. ‘Single malt.’

‘We need another vehicle. At the moment we’ve only got your truck!’ said Patchy. The rest of us, wary of the heavy traffic which now regularly blocked Bilbury’s roads, had travelled to the pond by foot or bicycle. Thumper had avoided the traffic by the simple but effective technique of driving across the fields.

‘We could borrow Churston’s BMW,’ said Thumper, innocently.

It seemed an innocuous, harmless even sensible suggestion. After all Churston was the one who wanted the pond cleared and he wasn’t using his car. It was just sitting there quietly deteriorating and depreciating in the way that motor cars do. But even as Thumper spoke I instinctively felt that this was not something we should do. However, I said nothing when Patchy, who had wandered over to peer inside the BMW, announced with delight that Churston had left the keys in the ignition.

It was decided that Thumper would drive his truck around to one side of the pond while Patchy would manoeuvre Churston’s shiny German motor car into position on the other side of the pond. Jack and Ollie would then each tie one end of a long rope (taken, inevitably, from the pile of useful but distinctly rural and disorganised paraphernalia which always adorns the back of Thumper’s truck) to a suitable anchorage at the back of each vehicle, making sure that the rope was loose enough to drag along the bottom of the pond rather than merely skim the surface.

The plan seemed so simple and foolproof that I felt confident that my initial suspicions and fears were entirely unfounded. Nothing, I was now sure, could possibly go wrong.

Everything began smoothly.

On one side of the pond Thumper manoeuvred his truck into position without any difficulty at all. On the other side of the pond, driving with laudable caution, Patchy carefully reversed Churston’s expensive and pristine BMW into position. Jack then tied one end of the rope to the towbar at the back of Thumper's truck while Ollie tied the other end of the same rope to the towing point at the back of the BMW. Wayne and I were kept busy trying to make sure that the tourists kept well out of the way. We didn't want any innocent bystanders being cut in two by the rope or injured by any debris which the rope might drag out of the pond.

Once both ends of the rope were firmly in place Ollie and Jack ran to the two drivers to tell them to start moving forwards.

* * *

At the post-mortem, held in the Duck and Puddle most lunchtimes and evenings for the next six months, it was generally agreed that everything would have gone completely to plan if it hadn't been for the two blonde haired, very shapely girls in very tight T-shirts and extremely short shorts who were, at those crucial moments, standing slightly to the right of Thumper's truck.

No one knew who they were or where they had come from (and nor, indeed, where they went to afterwards) but it is generally agreed that what happened next would almost certainly not have happened if they had either not been there or if they had been dressed a little more conservatively – preferably in shapeless, brown boiler suits.

His attention distracted by the two bathukolpian blondes on his right, Thumper accelerated away as though leaving the starting grid in a Grand Prix race. The front two wheels of his truck left the ground for a moment and the back wheels spun furiously, throwing great chunks of grass and soil out behind them. From my vantage point on the edge of the pond I could see Thumper smiling and waving at the two girls, who were smiling and waving back to him. He never once glanced to his left to see what was happening to Patchy, driving Churston's BMW on the other side of the pond.

(Thumper customarily replies to criticism of his behaviour at this point by explaining that a glance to the left would have been of very little use since the passenger side window of his truck had been replaced with cardboard and plastic and he would not, therefore, have been able to see anything anyway.)

Meanwhile, in the BMW, on the other side of the pond, the hapless Patchy was desperately but vainly struggling to keep up with Thumper's progress. His problem was that although the BMW was an exceedingly powerful motor car it was lighter and less powerful than Thumper's truck. It was also a two wheel drive motor car and it was slipping and sliding sideways on the still damp grass.

The rope which connected the two metal leviathans dipped into the pond, disappeared for a moment and then surfaced again as Thumper's truck roared ahead and veered a little towards the two blondes. I watched, aghast, as the rope between the two vehicles leapt upwards out of the water and rapidly tightened and I then watched, quite utterly helpless, as Patchy struggled to control Churston's motor car. It was clear within seconds that Patchy was losing the battle. The back end of the BMW swung round and, with Patchy Fogg now a helpless passenger inside it, slid backwards and sideways into the pond.

The splash the car made when it hit the water soaked most of the tourists. There was probably only one person within a mile who neither heard the splash nor knew what was going on and that was Thumper. As his powerful truck towed Churston's shiny BMW deeper and deeper into the pond Thumper continued to drive on regardless, waving and smiling at the two girls.

He insisted later that when the two girls started to jump up and down and point towards the pond he thought they were excited because the rope was dragging some submerged trophy from the previously uninvestigated depths of the pond.

Patchy was never in any danger. He slid back the sun roof (later commenting that he was impressed with the ease and speed with which it moved), climbed out onto the roof and half dived and half jumped into the pond just as the car sank into the mud.

It was at this point that Thumper started to slow down; not because he had realised that anything was wrong but simply because he had realised that the rope should, by that time, have travelled all the way through the pond, bringing with it whatever debris it had accumulated on its journey. He slowed down, put on his handbrake and climbed out of the cab of his truck, grinning and waving at the crowd in general and the two buxom girls in particular.

The look on his face when he saw what had happened was priceless. His first thought was for Patchy and he dived straight into the pond without hesitating. By this time, however, Patchy was standing on the bank cursing. Once he had discovered that his friend was safe (if wet), an equally wet Thumper climbed back into his truck and pulled Churston's BMW backwards out of the pond.

The car was, of course, completely full of water and the inside was soaked and covered with weed. A tourist with an expensive looking camera took several photographs of a large perch swimming around in the rear of the car.

'What's the matter?' asked Thumper, his sense of humour and bonhomie slightly dented now. 'Haven't you ever seen a fish in a car before?'

We opened the doors and let the water and fish out and then did our best to scrape the mud and weed from the leather upholstery. By the time Churston returned, his car was shiny and sparkling and from the outside it was difficult to tell that it had just been through a terrible ordeal. It looked, indeed, as though it had just been washed.

'Golly, lads, that was very decent of you?' said Churston, admiring his still dripping car. 'What good chaps you are!'

He opened the car door and swung inside in one single, smooth movement, without bothering to look what he was doing or where he was sitting. He sat down with a tremendous squelch. A frog leapt out from underneath his seat and jumped out through the open roof. A split second later Churston leapt out, though, in contrast to the frog, he came through the door. 'What on earth have you done to my car?' Churston demanded, rather hysterically.

'I'm afraid we forgot to shut your car roof when we took it through the car wash,' said Patchy apologetically.

With more caution this time Churston climbed back into his soaking motor car. To our surprise it started first time when he turned the key.

'Good advert for Mercedes,' said Wayne. We all looked at him.

'It's a BMW,' explained Patchy.

'Ah.' said Wayne.

Churston put his car into gear and slowly drove off down the road. A pile of soggy weed fell onto the road with a splodgy sort of noise.

'Try your brakes!' called Thumper. 'They might be a bit

Damp.'

As Churston disappeared, Malcolm Eggington, local reporter and photographer for the *Barnstaple, Bideford and Bilbury Herald* pedalled furiously into view.

'Hello, chaps!' he cried breathlessly. 'I heard you were cleaning out the village pond. Thought it might make a nice little story for this week's paper. Have I missed anything?'

* * *

Having wheeled my bicycle up to the house and dealt with the little mail which was waiting for me, (a telephone bill, a final rates demand and an unsolicited letter from a publisher I had never heard of offering to sell me a magazine subscription at a massive discount simply because my very special name had been drawn out of a computerised hat) I swapped my Wellington boots for a more comfortable pair of shoes and, assuming that Patsy was somewhere in the garden with Mr Parfitt, I set off to look for her.

But Patsy wasn't in the vegetable garden and Mr Parfitt, who was busy picking runner beans, said he had seen her heading down towards the lake an hour or so earlier.

'I know it's none of my business,' he said, taking his cap off and running his fingers through his hair, 'but I thought she looked a little under the weather. Is she all right?'

I said that as far as I was aware Patsy was fine but that we were both upset because of Emily. Mr Parfitt said he quite understood and that if there was anything he could do to help, we only had to ask him. I said that was very kind of him and headed off in search of Patsy. I was worried. It wasn't like Patsy to wander off without saying where she was going.

A few minutes later I was walking down a narrow path between two huge twelve foot high rhododendron bushes when I heard sobbing from somewhere on my right; a spot by the lake where there was, I knew, a wooden bench. I hurried along the path, turned right, turned left, cut through a clump of smaller rhododendron and fuchsia bushes and saw Patsy sitting on the bench sobbing her heart out. I paused for a moment, uncertain about whether or not to make my presence known, and then realised that I had to do or say something. Choosing to do both I said her name and walked slowly towards her. As she looked up I could see that Patsy's face was streaked by tears. Her eyes were red and puffy and she had quite clearly been crying for some considerable time. I sat down beside her and put my arm around her. As soon as I did so she threw her arms around me and started sobbing uncontrollably.

'We'll find her!' I said. 'Or she'll find us.'

'I know she will,' said Patsy at last. She spoke very quietly.

I held her to me for several long, long moments. But the crying didn't stop. Slowly, I don't know how, I came to realise that she wasn't just crying about our missing cat.

'It isn't just about Emily is it?'

Patsy didn't move for a while.

'There's something else, isn't there?'

Patsy didn't reply.

'Please tell me.'

'I feel so guilty about the way I feel,' sobbed Patsy. She looked up at me but still said nothing.

'Please tell me,' I said again.

‘I don’t want you to go away,’ she said. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I know you want to go. And you must go. It’s a wonderful opportunity. But I’ll miss you terribly.’

‘Is that what you’re crying about?’

She nodded.

I held her even tighter to me, kissed her hair and then started to laugh. ‘You daft thing!’ I said. ‘I don’t want to go! It’s the last thing in the world I want to do.’ I pulled a handkerchief from my pocket and handed it to her.

Patsy looked up at me. ‘But then...why?’ She dabbed at her eyes with the handkerchief.

‘Because I thought you wanted me to do it so that we wouldn’t have so many money worries!’

‘I only said I wanted you to go because I thought you really wanted to go!’ said Patsy. ‘I thought you didn’t like to say you wanted to go because you thought I didn’t want you to go and so I said I wanted you to go – even though I didn’t – so that you wouldn’t feel bad about going!’

Patsy dried her eyes and blew her nose and then we both cried a bit more and then we laughed and told each other how silly we both were and then we walked slowly back to the house and on the way Mr Parfitt stopped us and told us that a man in a dark suit was waiting for us in the courtyard and that he wouldn’t say what he wanted but that he had said that he wouldn’t go away until he saw me.

The stranger in the dark suit turned out to be a process server hired by a firm of London solicitors.

When we asked him how he’d got into the grounds he said he’d come in through the front gate with the postman but I knew that was a lie. He asked me my name and then handed me a long, brown envelope. Then he just walked away towards the front gate.

The London solicitors had been hired by Caldwell West and the envelope contained several pages of legal gobbledygook which, as far as I could make out, was partly designed to let me know that Mr Caldwell West was suing me for a sum of money with a lot of noughts on the end of it and partly designed to frighten me half to death. It succeeded on both counts.

I sighed and put the envelope and the letter down on the kitchen table. ‘I can only cope with one problem at a time,’ I told Patsy. ‘And I can’t cope with even one problem at a time without a cup of tea. If you’ll put the kettle on I’ll telephone Avril Pottington, thank her very much and tell her that I don’t want the job.’

* * *

There was an impressive turn out at the Bilbury village hall that evening. Churston had put up a poster or two around the village but they hadn’t really been necessary. Looking around the crowded room it seemed that just about everyone in Bilbury had turned up to help settle the fate of the conker trees. Listening to people talk it seemed clear that the village was divided about the future of the trees.

Many, myself and Patsy included, felt that the trees were an integral part of Bilbury village green. More than that, we felt that we had no right to cut them down just because of a silly complaint from a visiting American.

But there were those, and it seemed to Patsy and I that they were in a minority, who felt that Bilbury had to move with the times and that if that meant that if a few horse chestnut trees had to be sacrificed then that was simply the price of progress – particularly if leaving the trees where they were was going to mean lawsuits for the village.

At the start of the meeting it was announced by Josh, the chairman of the Council that Dr Brownlow would speak for the trees, and newcomer Churston, recently co-opted onto the Parish Council, would then follow him and explain why the trees had to be sacrificed for the good of the village, and that the destiny of the trees would then be decided by a vote.

Dr Brownlow got a terrific reception when he got to his feet to speak. It had been some time since he had retired as the village’s general practitioner but I don’t think there was a soul in the village hall who didn’t know and love him dearly.

I thought that he looked rather tired and I suspected that the changes he was seeing in the village he loved so much were beginning to have an effect on his health. He wore an elderly, rather frayed tweed suit. The jacket had leather elbow patches and the trousers were baggy at the knees and slightly too long for him.

‘I have lived in this village for most of my life,’ began Dr Brownlow. He spoke quietly but everyone wanted to hear what he had to say and the silence meant that his words could be heard clearly in every corner of the hall. ‘I honestly believe that this is one of the most important decisions we have ever had to take in this village. These horse chestnut trees are an important part of this village. They have been here longer than any of us – including even Josh Wilkins.’ There was considerable laughter at this and cries of ‘not possible’ were heard from several parts of the hall. ‘Each one of those trees is more a part of Bilbury than any single one of us,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘What right do we have to cut them down?’

‘But this meeting and this decision is about more than a few trees,’ went on Dr Brownlow. ‘It’s about our whole future; it’s about the way we look at our village and the way we think of it.’

‘If you vote to let Churston and his supporters chop down the Bilbury horse chestnut trees then you’re voting to throw away the past and say ‘goodbye’ forever to the Bilbury we know. If we allow these trees to go then we’re saying that the tourists who come here are more important than the village itself. We are saying that we are prepared to sell our heritage and destroy the very heart of the village simply to keep the tourists happy. And what will be next? What will be the next landmark to go? Will they want to knock down the thatched cottages around the village green and build a multi-storey hotel there?’

There was much mumbling at this, particularly from the villagers who lived in the thatched cottages around the village green.

‘The real irony is that if we allow the developers to change our village what will be left? Will the tourists still want to come here? I rather suspect that it is the trees and the hedgerows and the streams that attract people to our village. If we cut down all the trees and get rid of the hedgerows what will be left? Will people come from America to look at our tree stumps and our car parks? I doubt it. Those trees are an important part of our village. Let’s vote for their continued survival.’

The end of Dr Brownlow’s speech was greeted with sustained applause and a good deal of very noisy cheering.

It was then Churston’s turn to speak.

Churston and Dr Brownlow were complete opposites. Whereas Dr Brownlow wore an elderly tweed suit Churston wore a smart, three piece grey silk suit. Dr Brownlow wore a badly knotted green knitted tie but Churston wore a red silk tie which was knotted perfectly and which matched the red silk handkerchief in his breast pocket.

And Churston’s speech to the people of Bilbury was very different to Dr Brownlow’s.

Dr Brownlow had been quiet, his voice so soft that everyone present had to strain their ears to hear him properly, Churston spoke loudly and confidently and his voice boomed around the tiny village hall as though he were using a microphone. Dr Brownlow’s speech had been honest, simple and emotional and had been aimed at the hearts of his listeners. Dr Brownlow had stood still, and spoken without moving. Churston walked about the stage like a performer working hard to entrance an audience.

When the newcomer stood up to speak, holding a sheaf of papers and an impressive looking black plastic clipboard in front of him, he was greeted with respect and scattered, polite applause. He was treated with respect but, not surprisingly perhaps, there was none of the affection that had greeted Dr Brownlow.

‘I understand Dr Brownlow’s point of view,’ he began. ‘And to a very large extent I agree with him. I certainly wouldn’t want to change the nature of the village. I love Bilbury. I think it’s a wonderful place. I know I haven’t been here long, and some of you don’t yet know me very well, but I’m a country lover at heart. And I feel enormously privileged to have an opportunity to do what I can to help you to preserve the village which we all love so much.’

‘Very impressive so far,’ murmured Patchy quietly. Patchy and Thumper were standing next to Patsy and I. Stunned, I raised an eyebrow and looked at Patchy in surprise. I thought Churston was a very skilled confidence trickster – but a confidence trickster nevertheless.

‘But let’s keep this in perspective,’ said Churston firmly. He had a gentle, reassuring voice. ‘We’re talking about just six trees.’ He looked around. ‘Six trees!’ He paused to let this sink in and then looked around before raising his voice and continuing. ‘Six trees that are threatening your financial health and standing in the way of the village’s future prosperity!’ he told us, dramatically, waving an index finger.

‘Our first problem is that if we leave those trees where they are then the village will have to find thousands of pounds to fight a lawsuit from a very rich and very litigious American.’

Churston held up a thick, legal document which looked suspiciously like the one I had received earlier that day. ‘This is a writ,’ he announced dramatically. ‘I am reliably informed that if we apologise unreservedly and have those trees chopped down then the legal action will be stopped at no cost to any of us.’ He paused again. ‘But if we insist on keeping those few trees then the village will have to increase its annual rates by several hundred percent. Is that what you want? Are you all prepared to pay out good money to save those trees?’ He looked around the hall after he had asked this question. There was much murmuring and shaking of heads.

‘But there’s another reason to cut down those trees!’ went on Churston. ‘If it was just a question of money then I’d probably side with Dr Brownlow. ‘I’d probably vote to save the trees and pay the price.’ He walked forwards to the front of the stage. ‘But we can’t live in the past. And if you care about the future prosperity of Bilbury – if you care about your children’s future – then I honestly don’t think you have a choice.’

Churston looked at his audience, carefully and sternly. ‘Do you care about your children’s future?’ he asked them.

There was silence.

‘Do you care about your children? The future?’ he asked again, louder this time.

‘Yes!’ cried a voice from somewhere in the hall. ‘I do.’

‘Of course we do!’ cried another.

And then there were other murmurings and shouts of ‘yes’.

‘Then you have to accept and understand that Bilbury’s future lies in tourism,’ Churston told the audience simply. ‘It is the only way forward for the village. At present Bilbury is an anachronism; it is a piece of living history. But the village is dying. It is simply no longer possible for villages like Bilbury to survive unless they are prepared to change and to accommodate the needs of the tourist industry. In order to make sure that our children have employment, in order to make sure that we all have food on our tables and in order to make sure that we can maintain the infrastructure of the village we have to move with the times.’

‘I like living in an anachronism,’ whispered Patsy.

‘So do I,’ I whispered back.

‘And I don’t feel as though Bilbury is dying,’ she added.

‘It isn’t!’ I whispered.

‘What has happened to Bilbury in the last few days has been the best thing that could possibly have happened to us!’ went on Churston Ferrers. ‘You couldn’t buy the publicity we have had. A couple of weeks ago Bilbury was nothing; no one had heard of it and no one wanted to come here. But today Bilbury is the hottest spot on the tourism map. There are holiday firms all over Europe planning to bring coach loads of people here. If we take advantage of our good fortune then we will guarantee our own prosperity, the prosperity of our children and the long-term survival of the village.’

‘Of course all this will mean that there will have to be a few changes. A few changes are unavoidable. You can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs. A few trees will have to be chopped down. A few car parks will be needed. But all of you will have a real chance to become rich as Bilbury grows and expands and becomes better and better known around the world.’

Churston studied his clipboard. ‘We don’t have to do much,’ he said. ‘I certainly don’t want to change Bilbury very much. After all, we have to remember that people are coming here because they like Bilbury the way it is. But Bilbury desperately and urgently needs a central car park, an information kiosk for visitors and new public lavatories. Those three are absolutely vital. And if we get rid of those trees it will be possible to provide those essential facilities without knocking down any homes. Would you rather see houses knocked down? Or a few trees?’

‘Here are the three big questions you must ask yourself when considering your vote today!’

Churston put down the clipboard he had been holding and held up three fingers of his left hand He touched the ring finger on his left hand with the forefinger of his right hand. ‘Do you want to pay out a great deal of money to defend those trees in court? I can’t tell you how much it will cost. But we could easily have a bill running into many thousands of pounds. And that could bankrupt us all!’

He looked around the hall to give people time to think about this, and then touched the middle finger of his left hand with his right forefinger. ‘Do you care about the future of this village and do you want your children to have a future here?’ he asked, glowering at the audience as he did so, almost daring people to answer: ‘No’.

‘And third,’ he said, touching his right forefinger against his left forefinger. ‘Do you want to see Bilbury homes knocked down so that those trees can be saved?’

‘Think carefully before you answer because those are all important questions. If you don’t want to go bankrupt saving those trees, and would rather see the trees be chopped down than see houses knocked down and if you care about the village and your children then you have to vote with me for those trees to be taken down. It’s a sad thing to have to do but I don’t really think we have a choice.’

I was appalled by the way Churston was trying to manipulate the villagers and swing the vote in his favour and was about to say so when Thumper, who was standing close by me, whispered in my ear. ‘I came here absolutely determined to vote for the trees,’ he said, scratching his head. ‘And Dr Brownlow had me convinced. But I’m not so sure now. What do you reckon?’

‘Oh Thumper!’ I said, feeling very impatient with him. ‘Don’t let yourself be persuaded by all that trickery! How do we know that saving those trees is going to cost a fortune? How can anyone take the village to court because it won’t chop down half a dozen conker trees? It’s nonsense to say that if we don’t chop down those trees then the only alternative is to knock down houses. And it’s not true to say that Bilbury has no future unless it opens its arms to tourism! Bilbury was doing fine before that damned article appeared!’

Thumper looked at me uncertainly, and in that terrible moment I knew that Churston was going to win the vote. ‘He was very convincing...,’ he said, hesitantly. He looked at me. ‘Are you still voting with Dr Brownlow?’

‘I certainly am!’ I said.

‘Me too,’ added Patsy, who had heard Thumper and was looking at him and waiting for his final decision.

‘I’d trust you and Dr Brownlow with my life. I certainly trust you both a hell of a lot more than I trust Churston,’ sighed Thumper.’ I really don’t know what to think but I’ll certainly vote with you.’

But I knew it wasn’t enough. Josh, the chairman of the Council was already calling for a vote. And in my heart I knew that Churston had tricked enough people in the room into believing his argument.

Ten minutes later my worst fears were realised. Churston had won the vote by 197 votes to 154: a majority of 43. In my heart I was surprised that those of us who supported Dr Brownlow had done as well as we had.

'Thank you very much for your attention,' said the chairman as the meeting ended. 'Churston tells me that he'll be making the arrangements for the six horse chestnut trees to be cut down as soon as possible.'

Dr Brownlow was inconsolable and there wasn't a smile to be seen in the Duck and Puddle afterwards.

'We've got to do something about this,' said my former employer as we walked away from the village hall.

'But what?' I asked.

'This business about the Bilbury water curing arthritis and making people live longer is a lot of nonsense,' said Dr Brownlow.

'You must be making a fortune,' I said, teasingly.

'I don't want to make a fortune,' said Dr Brownlow baldly. 'I wish someone would expose this stuff about our water curing arthritis for the nonsense it is. I'd happily close my bottling plant down to save Bilbury from these philistines but it won't make any difference. There are already half a dozen people with springs bottling their own water.'

An idea had popped into my head. 'Do you mean that?' I asked him.

Dr Brownlow looked at me, slightly puzzled. 'Of course I do,' he said. 'Bill Yates, Dave Tranter and Wally Peters are all bottling water off their land.'

'Not that,' I said, rather impatiently. 'Do you really wish someone would expose that stuff about our water being good for arthritis as nonsense.'

'Yes, of course I do!' said Dr Brownlow. He looked at me. 'Why?'

'I've got an idea,' I said.' I just wanted to be sure about how you felt.'

Dr Brownlow moved a little closer. 'You can do anything you like that gets rid of these damned tourists!' he whispered. 'I found six of them camping on my tennis lawn yesterday and they were eating vegetables they'd picked from my garden!'

He sighed and thought for a moment. 'If we expose it as a lot of nonsense then maybe the tourists will stop coming and things will get back to normal,' he said quietly. Neither of us said anything for a moment. And then Dr Brownlow looked at me. 'What have you got in mind?'

'I could try to find someone to do some tests for us.'

'Water tests?'

I nodded.

'You don't think an independent scientist would find anything special in Bilbury's water?'

'I certainly don't.'

'Nor do I,' agreed Dr Brownlow.

'And if that became widely known Bilbury would get back to normal quite quickly.'

'I think so.'

'What an absolutely splendid idea,' said Dr Brownlow. He smiled at me. 'What an absolutely splendid idea!' he repeated.

On my way back to Bilbury Grange I was stopped by a man with a bicycle. It was Malcolm Eggington, local reporter and photographer for the *Barnstaple, Bideford and Bilbury Herald*.

'I'm sorry I'm a bit late,' he said. 'I had a puncture. I believe you had a meeting in the village hall this evening. Did anything happen?'

* * *

CHAPTER TEN

Everything seemed to be going wrong. My book had lost its publisher, Emily was missing and Bilbury had been invaded by tourists. I was being sued by an American, I had turned down my only offer of employment and I didn't have the faintest idea where I was going to find the money to pay next month's mortgage.

Things looked pretty bleak and at that moment I could see nothing but clouds on the horizon. Our worries about Emily made everything else seem insignificant by comparison but there was no escape from the fact that our anxieties about money were very real. We didn't talk about it but we both knew that unless something turned up quickly we would not be able to stay at Bilbury Grange for much longer.

Feeling really gloomy I made a telephone call and spoke to the wife of a doctor I had known when I'd been a medical student and who was now working in a public health research laboratory in Exeter. I asked if it would be possible to see him. She told me that he was at home because he wasn't very well but that she thought he would be pleased to see me. She said that since he wasn't going anywhere it didn't really matter what time I arrived. I said I'd be there sometime late that same afternoon.

* * *

It is amazing how often in life it happens that as one door closes another will open. The door that has closed may have been a large and important one and the one that opens may be so small that it lets in only a single ray of light but that small ray of light can often be the start of something much more significant and it is the hope it gives, the surge of optimism it inspires which is so important. I had no way of knowing at the time but the knock on the back door that interrupted what threatened to be a drift into self-pity would have a tremendous influence on our future.

I opened the back door and, to my surprise and annoyance found myself face to face with a grinning Jack Ladd. The by now all too familiar newspaperman was standing on the step, his hat on the back of his head and his notebook and a copy of a newspaper stuffed untidily into his jacket pocket 'I suppose you came over the fields again?' I asked him.

'Over the fields,' he agreed, completely without embarrassment. 'Your front gate is still locked,' he added as an explanation.

'It's locked to keep people out,' I explained dryly.

'Very sensible too! The lane outside your house was absolutely packed with tourists earlier today. I couldn't get through. I don't know where they all keep coming from.'

'Who is it?' asked Patsy from behind me.

'A reporter,' I answered.

'Ladd!' the reporter called out, leaning forwards so that Patsy could hear him. 'Jack Ladd. I'm from the *Sunday Globe*.'

'Would you like a cup of tea?' called Patsy. 'I've just put the kettle on.'

'Very kind of you!' answered the reporter instantly. He put a foot up onto the doorstep and had squeezed past me before I could stop him. He took his hat off and looked around him at our huge Aga, the scrubbed pine table and chairs, the Victorian laundry rails suspended from the ceiling and the basket of onions and bundles of herbs which Patsy had hung from meat hooks attached to the beams which crossed the ceiling.

'Lovely kitchen!' said Jack Ladd, admiringly. 'I love oldfashioned kitchens. Did you grow the onions yourselves?'

I said we had. He said he had always dreamt of having a little place in the country where he could grow vegetables and get away from the hurly burly of city life. He and I then sat down at the kitchen table while Patsy made the tea.

'Tea or coffee?' Patsy asked, interrupting apologetically.

'Whatever you're making, dear!' said the reporter.

'You can have whatever you want!'

'Well then I'll have a nice cup of tea if you don't mind.'

'Milk?'

'Yes, please.'

'Sugar?'

'Two please,' he replied, turning to me. 'Did your book do well?'

'Not terribly well, I'm afraid, 'I confessed. 'There's a paperback coming out later this year. But there doesn't seem to be much of a market for that sort of book.'

'Have you done much newspaper writing? Articles? Features? That sort of thing?'

'I write a syndicated column for a few local newspapers. And I wrote one or two features when my book came out.'

'Who for?'

'*The Guardian* and *The Observer*,' I replied, rather proudly.

Jack Ladd nodded wisely but said nothing.

Patsy put two cups of tea on the table in front of us.

'It occurred to me a day or two ago that you'd be just the chap to write an article for us about Bilbury!'

'For the *Sunday Globe*?'

'Absolutely! I rang our features editor chap called Jenkins, a real gentleman, you'll like him – and he's terribly excited about the idea! He tried to ring you.'

'Didn't you ring him back?' Patsy asked me.

'I forgot, 'I admitted. 'I'm sorry,' I said to Jack Ladd. 'What sort of article did you have in mind?'

'HOW TO LIVE TO BE 100! BY THE BILBURY DOCTOR!' replied the reporter, writing out the headline in the air between us with the forefinger of his right hand. 'Very topical – with everyone talking about how healthy it is to live in Bilbury.'

I looked at him, slightly alarmed. 'I couldn't do that!' I told him immediately.

'Why on earth not?'

'Well, for one thing I don't practise medicine any more,' I explained.

'You're still a doctor aren't you?'

'Yes,' I said.

'And you live in Bilbury?'

'Yes, of course.'

'And you used to be Bilbury's GP?'

'Yes.'

'So, what's the problem?' Mr Ladd took a sip of his tea and leant forward. 'There isn't a paper in Fleet Street pays better than *The Globe*!' he said. 'And if they're pleased with this piece I've no doubt they'd want more.'

I looked at Patsy and thought about what he'd said. We certainly needed the money. Patsy just smiled at me and with a glance made it clear that it was up to me to decide what to do. I knew that whatever I decided she would support me. 'But how can I possibly tell people how to live to be 100?'

'Some people live to be 100!'

'Yes, that's true.'

'But most people don't.'

'No.'

'So, why do most people NOT live to be 100?' he asked me.

I thought about the question for a moment. 'Usually because they smoke too much, drink too much, take too little exercise and eat too much of the wrong things!' I answered.

'Exactly!' replied Jack Ladd, smacking the table with his fist. The mugs of tea jumped up off the table, spilling a little. Mr Ladd wiped up the small puddle with his jacket sleeve. 'You'll be doing the nation a great service!' he said. 'When you were practising as a doctor didn't you tell your patients about those things?'

'Of course I did.'

'So what's the difference between telling people one at a time and telling several million of them all at once?'

I couldn't think of a sensible answer to that so I said nothing.

'Great!' said the reporter. 'Will you come up to London with me tomorrow? The paper will pay all your expenses of course.'

'London?'

'Jenkins would like to meet you and talk over the feature. You can sort out the business side of things with him.' He paused as though something awful had just occurred to him. 'You don't have one of those literary agents do you?'

Still in rather a daze I shook my head.

'That's good. Much better to deal with things yourself.' He stood up. 'Thanks for the tea, love,' he said to Patsy. 'Lovely cuppa.' He picked up his hat and put it on.

'Thank you,' said Patsy. 'You must come back and have tea with us if you're ever in Bilbury again.'

'I'll take you up on that!' promised the reporter, heading for the back door.

'Where shall I meet you?' I asked him.

'Oh I'll pick you up on my way to the station,' said Jack Ladd. 'I'm staying in Barnstaple and I'll get a taxi to take us to the railway station in Taunton.'

'That'll cost a fortune!' I warned him. 'If you get the taxi to drop you off here I'll drive us both to the station.

Then I can drive back from Taunton in the evening.'

We agreed on this. And I then walked down the drive with the reporter so that I could let him out through the front gate. There was a nose to tail traffic jam in the lane and a steady stream of pedestrians filed along each side of the stationary vehicles. Many of them stopped to peer through the gates as I opened them. I thought how fortunate it was that they didn't have the initiative of Jack Ladd or our home and garden would have been swarming with tourists all day long.

'I bet you have mixed feelings about your village's popularity!' said Jack Ladd.

'You could say that,' I replied, wryly.

'See you in the morning!' he said. He winked and sauntered off down the lane in the direction of the village and, I assumed, the nearest bar: the one at the Duck and Puddle.

Once he had gone I went back to the house, and got the car. I had some driving to do.

* * *

The lane outside Bilbury Grange was, as always, choked with traffic. But since it was still early in the day most of it was heading into Bilbury rather than out of Bilbury and once I'd managed to get along our single track lane and out onto what we called the main road (it was wide enough for traffic to travel in two directions at the same time and did not have any grass growing down the middle) my side of the road became quite clear.

I hadn't seen Dr Jones for two or possibly three years and I wasn't even sure that he would remember me but after a good deal of thought I had decided that he would be the best person to do the water tests that I wanted doing. He was short-tempered, humourless and very, very pernickety. I didn't particularly like him but he would, I knew, write an honest and entirely accurate scientific appraisal of Bilbury's water.

Mrs Jones had given me excellent instructions when I had telephoned and I found their house in Exmouth without any difficulty. It was a huge, Victorian building in a quiet road full of similar houses. There was a high, slightly dilapidated fence across the front of a small garden. Through the gate, which was open, I could see that the shrubbery badly needed attention and the lawn needed cutting. The house was rendered and the rendering was cracked in many places. The woodwork needed painting but painting it would have been rather a waste of time since most of it was rotten.

But although the house itself had known much better days the view was undoubtedly just as marvellous as it had been when the house had first been built. From the driveway I could clearly see the huge stretch of golden yellow sands for which Exmouth is justly famous. And beyond the sand the sea; calm and a beautiful green-blue.

I rang the doorbell but heard nothing and so after a few moments I hammered on the door knocker. A short, rather overweight, harassed looking woman wearing an old-fashioned pinafore eventually answered the door. I gave my name and asked if she was Mrs Jones. She said she was and told me that she was pleased to see me because it would be nice for her husband to have a visitor.

'Would you like a cup of tea?' she asked, as she led the way up the stairs. I thanked her, said I would, and wondered whether her husband had a study upstairs or whether he was perhaps so poorly that he was in bed.

'What's wrong with Dr Jones?' I asked. Since I had known him when I had been a mere medical student our relationship had been a mixture of formal and informal. He always called me by my Christian name and I always called him Dr Jones.

'It's his back,' explained Mrs Jones. 'He's put it out.'

'Oh dear,' I said, with what I hoped sounded like a suitably sympathetic tone. 'I am sorry.'

Mrs Jones stopped in the middle of the landing directly in front of a wooden ladder. I looked up. The hatch into the roof space was open and the top of the ladder had disappeared through the open hatch space. There was a length of electric cable hanging down through the opening. The plug at the bottom of the cable was plugged into an electrical socket in the wall. The opening into the roof space was very small.

'He's up there,' she said, simply. 'I'll bring your tea in a few minutes. I expect Clifford will want one too.'

I looked upwards. 'In the loft?' I asked, rather stupidly.

'He was up there laying some insulation when he did his back in,' she explained. 'He can't straighten up and so he can't get down. The doctor suggested he just stays up there until he feels a bit more mobile.' She then squeezed past me and headed off back down the stairs.

I climbed rather gingerly up the ladder. It wasn't a very good ladder and one rung had already been broken during a previous ascent. When I'd got to the top I peered through the open hatch. An electrical cable was hanging from several nails hammered into the rafters and at the far end of it a naked bulb hung, illuminating a small area of the loft space. The bulb was a small one and it didn't seem to provide a great deal of illumination. I could just see the figure of a man lying on a makeshift bed made of rugs and cushions spread out on half a dozen lengths of board.

'Dr Jones?' I called out rather hesitantly. During my years as a general practitioner I had visited many patients in their homes but I had never before visited a patient in a loft.

‘Make sure you tread on the beams,’ replied the distant figure, rather sharply. ‘Or you’ll put your foot through the ceiling.’ Dr Jones had never had a particularly pleasant personality. Being stuck in his loft with a bad back didn’t seem to have added anything to his unimpressive repertoire of social graces.

With considerable difficulty I managed to squeeze myself through the hole into the loft. ‘I wonder why they always make these gaps so small,’ I murmured. ‘Maybe they only used to send up the boys who used to clean chimneys.’

‘Do I know you?’ demanded the distant figure, ignoring my rhetorical questions.

I explained who I was. ‘You taught me a few times when I was a medical student.’ I added.

‘Oh,’ said the figure, sounding rather disappointed.

I had by now managed to pull myself up through the hatch way. Moving very carefully I stepped forwards from beam to beam, holding onto the rafters to balance myself.

‘Over here!’ called Dr Jones, needlessly. My eyes were now pretty much accustomed to poorly lit loft-space and I could see that he had made a fairly comfortable nest for himself out of a few pieces of planking and an assortment of old cushions and blankets.

There didn’t seem much point in struggling to make polite social conversation with a man who was not particularly gifted in that direction, and with whom I had virtually nothing in common, and so I sat myself down on a spare plank and came straight to the point.

Dr Jones accepted the commission with his usual bad grace and assured me that since his family doctor had told him that he would be able to move out of the loft in another day he would be able to perform the necessary tests quite quickly. To avoid any further delay I had the foresight to take with me a two litre sample of Bilbury water in a sterile container.

The journey back to Bilbury seemed to take forever. The roads away from the village were solid with traffic as tourists who had spent the day clogging up our lanes and littering our verges with their unwanted debris headed for home. The final part of my journey was constantly interrupted as I had to reverse back in the direction from which I had just come in order to accommodate motorists dragging caravans and trailers behind them.

By the time I got back to Bilbury Grange I was utterly exhausted. It had, I hoped, been a fruitful journey. When I had locked our front gate behind me and told Patsy what had happened all I wanted was to soak for half an hour in a bath, swallow a little light supper and collapse into bed.

* * *

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The next morning Jack Ladd arrived at six on the dot.

I had been up since five searching the fields and outbuildings, just in case Emily had come home during the night. But there was no sign of her and there had been no response at all to the posters and leaflets I had pinned up on tree trunks and gate posts all over the village of Bilbury, in shops in Barnstaple and in village shops between Bilbury and Barnstaple.

Jack Ladd paid off his taxi driver, a large rather sour-faced man whom I had never seen before, and then we climbed into my elderly motor car and set off for Taunton. At the railway station Jack Ladd bought two first class tickets and we travelled to London at great expense and in considerable style. We sat in the dining car and had breakfast and endless cups of tea while the countryside flashed by outside. It was, I had to admit to myself, a very stylish way to travel.

At Paddington Station in London there was a chauffeurdriven Jaguar motor car waiting for us. Jack introduced me to the driver, a man called Billy, who was the editor’s personal chauffeur. Outside the station the London traffic looked busier than ever but Billy drove down side streets and narrow alleyways to avoid the jams. Twenty minutes later we were standing in the foyer of *The Globe* building and five minutes after that a tall, blonde-haired girl in a very short skirt was escorting us into the office of Mr Jenkins, the paper’s features editor.

I’d been in one or two other newspaper offices, all belonging to local newspapers, but none of them had been anything like this one. They had been all clutter. Piles of paper and books and dirty coffee cups. This one looked as if the owner had only moved into it that morning. The walls, which were panelled in rich oak boards, were decorated with huge posters advertising forthcoming issues of the *Sunday Globe* and framed front pages of the newspaper itself. There were just five pieces of furniture in the room: a broad shelved, open-fronted bookcase, three chairs and a desk. The top shelf of the bookcase contained half a dozen reference books. The lower shelves were quite empty. The two chairs in front of the desk were cheap stacking chairs – the sort usually found in waiting rooms. The leather-topped desk which dominated the room was probably the biggest I had ever seen. It contained two slightly old-fashioned telephones and a more up-to-date telephone which was equipped with at least a dozen buttons; a single, large sheet of paper which had headlines pencilled in and boxes drawn to show where text and photographs would appear, and a chipped mug full of pencils and pens. Behind the desk was a huge, black leather swivel chair which looked extremely expensive. It looked out of place for the rest of the furniture was cheap and battered. The expensive black, leather chair was empty.

There were two people in the room. In front of the desk there was a bald man in shirt sleeves. His grey suit trousers were held up by broad, bright red braces and he wore the largest bow tie I’d ever seen. He was bending over, scribbling on the sheet of paper on the desk and saying something to the room’s other occupant, a tall, broad shouldered, slightly balding man in need of a haircut who was standing behind the desk. This individual, who was I assumed Mr Jenkins, the room’s official occupant, had a large moustache and wore two thirds of a smart, three piece pin striped suit. The other third of the suit, the jacket, was hanging on a nail hammered into the panelling behind the desk. The jacket looked expensive and a Savile Row label indicated that the look was not misleading.

The man whom I assumed was Mr Jenkins stood up, smiled and held his hand out across the desk to me. ‘Jenkins,’ he said, by way of introduction. ‘You must be the Bilbury doctor!’

I muttered something appropriate and took his hand. One of the telephones rang and Jenkins picked it up. Listening to the caller he put his hand over the mouthpiece and spoke to me: ‘I hope Jack has been looking after you!’

I confirmed that he had.

‘Thanks for coming up,’ he said quietly, with the telephone still fixed to his ear. ‘I’m really excited that you’re going to do this piece for us.’

I said I was grateful to him for asking me.

‘No, sorry!’ said Jenkins, sounding suddenly more formidable than he had a moment ago. ‘Can’t possibly go above three. Ring me back in five if you want to take it’ He put the telephone receiver down and then picked up the telephone which had all the buttons attached to it ‘Jane darling,’ he said. ‘Pop along to accounts and get me a couple of hundred in brown drinking vouchers will you?’ He put the telephone down without waiting for an answer.

‘Oh, sorry, forgot,’ said Jenkins, waving a hand in the direction of the room’s other occupant ‘Art Young. Our production editor.’ He introduced me and explained that he had invited me to write a piece telling the readers of the *Sunday Globe* how to live to be 100.

The telephone rang again. Jenkins picked it up. ‘Three? Fine.’ He slammed the phone down and spoke to Art Young. ‘I’ve just bought that story on Liz Taylor. It’ll make a page. Probably nine or eleven.’ He looked at me.

‘Sorry about all this,’ he said. ‘We’ll get out of this mad house in a moment I’ve booked a table at the Savoy. Is that O.K?’

I said that would be fine.

Jack Ladd, who hadn’t said a word since we had entered the office, suddenly spoke. He seemed rather in awe of his editor. ‘If you don’t need me I’ll pop along.’

‘Thanks Jack!’ said Jenkins, with a cheery wave.

The telephone went again. Jenkins picked it up. ‘Yes?’ he said. He listened for a moment ‘No, thanks.’ he said. ‘But thanks for the offer.’ And he put the telephone down again. ‘Someone wanted to sell me a story about a vicar and some actress I’ve never heard of,’ he said.

‘I thought the *Globe* rather liked stories about vicars and actresses!’ I said. Only when I’d said it did I realise that it sounded rather rude.

Jenkins laughed. ‘We do,’ he admitted. ‘But it has to be the right vicar and the right actress – preferably doing the wrong things.’

The tall blonde girl with the long legs and the very short skirt appeared in the office and handed an impressive-looking wad of ten pound notes to Mr Jenkins. ‘This is Jane,’ he said, introducing the girl to me. ‘She thinks we hired her because she’s got a first in modern languages from Cambridge but we hired her because of her legs.’ Once again he introduced me as the Bilbury doctor who was going to write a feature for the paper.

‘Right,’ he said, taking his coat down from the nail. ‘Let’s go and have some lunch!’

* * *

Jenkins was clearly a regular diner at the Savoy. The head waiter met us with a broad smile and escorted us to a table overlooking the river. Looking around I was glad I’d put on my jacket and a tie. I had a strong suspicion that I would have not been allowed into the restaurant wearing anything more casual.

‘I liked your book,’ said Jenkins, after we had ordered food. ‘Claret O.K?’

I was surprised at the compliment and muttered something appropriate. ‘Claret would be lovely.’

Jenkins ordered a bottle of something that was undoubtedly extremely expensive. ‘We’ll mention it when you do your piece for us,’ he said.

I started to thank him but he held up a hand. ‘It’ll give you ‘gravitas’,’ he said. ‘So it’s a help to us as much as it is to you.’ He took a bite from a brown roll which he had taken from the bread basket the waiter had offered to us. ‘What articles have you written before?’

I told him about my syndicated column and about the articles I’d written for *The Guardian* and *The Observer*.

He nodded. ‘That’s good,’ he said. ‘But you haven’t done anything for a mass market tabloid?’

The wine waiter arrived, showed a bottle to Jenkins and then drew the cork.

I shook my head.

‘It’s a knack he told me. ‘You’ll probably find it a bit tricky to start with. Do you ever read the *Sunday Globe*?’

The wine waiter poured an inch of wine into the feature editor’s glass. Jenkins waved a hand to tell the waiter to just pour the wine.

I hesitated. ‘I haven’t seen it recently,’ I admitted at last.

The features editor smiled at me. ‘You’ve never really read it all the way through, have you?’ He sipped at his wine and nodded appreciatively.

‘I have seen it,’ I protested, slightly embarrassed.

‘What do you think?’·

I looked at him, confused and embarrassed.

‘The wine.’ he explained.

‘Oh,’ I said, relieved. I picked up my glass and took a sip. It was like drinking rich velvet. I’d never tasted such a smooth wine before. ‘Wonderful!’ I said.

‘I’ll give you a couple of recent copies of the paper and I’d like you to read them all the way through on the way home,’ he said. ‘You’ll see that we have a very definite style of our own. You must keep the sentences and paragraphs short but you must avoid being patronising. Keep it sharp, bright and witty but never write down to people.’

‘You make it sound as though writing for the *Sunday Globe* is more difficult than writing for the other papers.’

‘I think it is,’ replied Mr Ladd, quite seriously. ‘When you write for us you’re writing for a very large audience. And it’s a very special kind of writing.’ He smiled at me. ‘That’s why we pay a lot more than the other papers.’

I was still listening to him but over his shoulder I had suddenly seen something which puzzled me. Jenkins paused and for a while there was silence. ‘Have you seen something?’ he asked suddenly, lowering his voice slightly.

I hesitated for a moment. ‘I’m sorry,’ I apologised, hauling my attention back to the man across the table from me. ‘There are two people I know at a table across the room,’ I explained. ‘I’m just a bit surprised to see them together.'

Jenkins said nothing but waited for me to continue.

'One of them is a man called Churston,' I went on. 'He lives in Bilbury and has just been co-opted onto the Parish Council. The other is an American called Caldwell West who is suing me because I picked up a stick that some boys used to get conkers out of a tree on the village green. I don't know who the third man is. I feel I ought to know him but I can't remember his name.'

Jenkins looked at me and raised a questioning eyebrow. 'Why on earth is an American suing you because you picked up a stick?'

I explained to him what had happened.

'It's a nuisance suit,' nodded Jenkins. 'They obviously just want to frighten you.'

I stared across the room and frowned. 'I wish I knew what they were talking about!'

'Go to the gents!' said Jenkins suddenly. He spoke quietly but firmly.

'I beg your pardon?'

'Go to the loo. Go and buy a paper. Comb your hair.' He waved a hand about as though to hurry me up and to make it clear that it didn't matter what I did or where I went. 'Just leave the table for a minute or so.'

I didn't understand what was going on but Jenkins was so insistent that I did as he told me. I went into the foyer, picked up a hotel brochure, watched a plump, middle aged woman in a lime green coat imperiously giving instructions to half a dozen porters carrying her cases, walked around for what seemed like a minute and then returned to the restaurant and to our table. Jenkins, nibbling on another bread roll, was sitting in my chair. I hesitated for an instant and then sat down.

'Have you ever heard of a man called George Nympton?'

I stared at Jenkins. 'Yes, of course. He's the chap who wrote the first article about Bilbury. Why?' As I spoke two waiters arrived; one put a fresh tomato salad down in front of me and the other put a plateful of whitebait down before Jenkins. They seemed to take for ever, tidying up cutlery and checking that we had everything we needed.

'He's the third man, the guy talking to your Councillor friend and the American,' said Jenkins when they had gone. Jenkins seemed hypnotised by the three men on the table at the other side of the room. He hadn't taken his eyes off them.

I had been confused before. But the sense of confusion I had felt then was nothing compared to the sense of confusion I now felt. 'Are you sure?' I asked, pouring olive oil and vinegar onto my tomatoes. I suddenly remembered Frank's description of George Nympton: 'short, fat and wearing a bright red wig'. That was why I thought I had recognised him.

Jenkins smiled. 'I've known George for years,' he said.

'Oh.' I sipped at my wine. It went down very easily.

'He writes full time for the *Planet* now but when he was a freelance he always used to hang around trying to sell me stuff. I would never buy anything from him. I didn't trust him.' Even though Jenkins was talking to me he still didn't look at me. It wasn't like him.

'Why?'

'Why didn't I trust him?'

'Yes.' The wine waiter appeared from nowhere and re-filled my glass. I looked up at him and smiled and then took another sip. I'd never tasted wine that slipped down quite so easily. Patsy and I usually bought the cheapest wines we could find – the sort that make you cough afterwards.

'I don't know,' admitted Jenkins, still not looking at me. 'Instinct, I suppose. I just didn't like him. In the business I'm in you have to go by instinct a lot.' He paused. 'Do you know anything about plans to build a hotel on Bilbury village green?' He still didn't look at me.

I stared at him, open-eyed, with a forkful of tomato half way to my mouth. 'A hotel?'

'Ssshhh!' said Jenkins, holding a finger to his lips. 'Not so loud.'

'Is that what they're talking about?'

Jenkins nodded. 'Your Councillor chum has told them that everyone in your village is making so much money out of providing car parking space and selling cream teas that they'll let him do anything he wants.'

'They're going to build a hotel? On Bilbury village green?'

'Ten storeys, 150 bedrooms, swimming pool – the lot.'

'How on earth do you know that?'

The features editor smiled at me. 'One of the most important and underrated skills in journalism is the ability to lip read.'

I stared at him. 'But they can't do that!' I said indignantly. 'They'd never get planning permission!'

Jenkins looked at me as a parent might look at a child just discovering that the world is not necessarily a just or fair place.

‘The conker trees!’ I said, suddenly understanding. ‘The American!’ I realised why the conker trees had to go.

Jenkins nodded. ‘Look down and eat,’ he said sharply.

I looked down and pushed a forkful of tomato into my mouth.

‘George!’ said Jenkins, standing and throwing his napkin down onto the table in front of him. He held out his hand. ‘How nice to see you!’

‘Jenkins, old chap!’ wheezed George Nympton, who had clearly spotted the *Sunday Globe* editor at last. Anxiously I looked around. Churston and the American were on their way out of the restaurant. By the relaxed way in which they were chatting it seemed unlikely that they had seen me. If I had been them I would have been very agitated if I’d spotted someone from Bilbury in the restaurant.

‘...he’s going to write some angling articles for us,’ finished Jenkins, with a nod in my direction.

‘How nice,’ said George Nympton, clearly disinterested in anyone as insignificant as a writer on fishing.

‘David is quite an expert on perch fishing,’ said Jenkins. I gathered that I was supposed to be ‘David’. I was impressed at how fluidly Jenkins lied. It was, I supposed, another essential skill for a journalist.

‘How divine!’ said Nympton with transparent insincerity. His smile and toupee were about as honest and convincing as a politician’s promise. I looked at him and realised that he was one of the men who was responsible for turning my beloved village Bilbury into the circus it had become. I wanted to hit him.

‘Why don’t you join us?’ invited Jenkins, mischievously. He called to the wine waiter. ‘Can we have another glass?’

‘Another time. Must rush, darling!’ said the *Sunday Planet* writer, holding up a hand and waddling off towards the restaurant exit. ‘Lovely to meet you, Daniel!’ he threw over his shoulder, carelessly.

‘That was close!’ I said, when they’d gone. Jenkins just smiled.

The waiter came and took away our empty plates. I’d been so enthralled by what had been going on around me that I hadn’t even been aware that I’d been eating.

‘It rather looks to me as though you’ve got a bit of a problem,’ said Jenkins.

I nodded, glumly.

‘If I can help...,’ he began. He left the rest of the sentence unfinished.

‘Thank you.’

‘I’ll send Jack Ladd back down to Devon with you if you don’t mind. He may be able to do a bit of digging.’

‘Thanks!’

Jenkins shrugged. ‘There’s a story in here somewhere,’ he said.

‘And if there isn’t?’

Jenkins shrugged again and grinned at me. ‘I don’t like George Nympton,’ he said. ‘It’ll be a pleasure to put a stick in his spokes.’

The waiters returned. This time there were four of them. I had a plateful of succulent looking, crisp vegetables. Jenkins had a steak and a large portion of thick cut chips. He also ordered a second bottle of claret. I looked at the empty bottle as the waiter took it away and wondered where the contents had gone.

‘I’ll pay you £200 for the article you’re writing for us,’ said Jenkins. ‘Is that O.K?’

I half closed my eyes and tried to concentrate. I had never earned much more than £25 before for a single article. £200 was a fortune. It would pay our mortgage for weeks. I was suddenly overcome with great self doubts, wondering whether I would be able to write an article that was worth that much money. I heard a sigh from the other side of the table and then Jenkins laughed.

‘O.K.,’ I heard him say. ‘£300 as long as we print the piece. But I can only pay you £200 if we don’t use it. I really can’t go any higher for a first article. If we like what you do for us then we can negotiate upwards.’

I opened my eyes and looked at him. He was smiling. £300 for one article. It was a huge sum: nearly half as much as I had received for writing my first book.

‘You don’t need an agent,’ he said.

‘I don’t?’

‘You made me feel bad for trying to get away with £200!’ he laughed.

‘Oh.’ I didn’t have the courage to tell him that my hesitation had been inspired entirely by shock at the enormity of the amount rather than by any desire to raise it still higher.

‘Have we got a deal then?’

‘A deal? Oh yes.’ I was desperate to tell Patsy that our immediate financial problems were over.

‘You can send the article by special delivery,’ said Jenkins.

‘Just ring me up and I’ll get someone to pick up at Paddington. That is your station isn’t it?’

I nodded. This was all getting too much for me. I couldn’t imagine that anything I could write could be worth special deliveries and messengers.

'There's no hurry,' said Jenkins. 'But I'd like to use it next week so if you could get it to me by Tuesday.'

'Tuesday?'

'Is that O.K?'

'Tuesday is fine.'

Jenkins held his glassful of claret across the table towards me. I held out my glass and we clinked to seal the contract. I was, over the years, to meet and work for many other Fleet Street editors but I never met anyone more honest or trustworthy than Jenkins.

One hour and a half, a fruit salad and another bottle of claret later, I stood up and had to hang on to the back of my chair. It was then that I realised where all the wine had gone. It was in my head.

* * *

'Drink this!' insisted Jack Ladd, putting a fresh plastic cup and another bottle of mineral water down on the table in front of me.

I looked at him and held my head. 'Must I?' The train we were on seemed to be swaying like a ship.

'You've got to sober up, you're driving us back from the station,' said Jack. He unfastened the top of the bottle. The fizzing noise forced me to cover my ears.

'Oh.' I said.

We were on the early evening train from Paddington back to the West Country.

I could remember very little of the rest of the afternoon after Jenkins and I had left the Savoy. On the seat beside me there was a small pile of old copies of the *Sunday Globe*. I still hadn't even looked at them.

'Thanks for introducing me to Jenkins,' I said, as the train slowed down. I looked out of the window. We were approaching Reading station.

'No problem,' said Jack, sipping gin from a clear plastic beaker. He had bought a bottle of gin and 200 cigarettes at the off-licence at Paddington Station. 'It's a long journey,' he had explained. 'Essential supplies.'

'Well, I'm grateful,' I said.

'Just don't let me down,' said Jack.

I looked at him.

'Make sure you write a good piece,' he said, grinning. 'Otherwise I'll probably lose my job.'

'Thanks.' I said. 'It'll help to have that extra responsibility when I sit down at the typewriter.'

'Jenkins told me about George Nympton.'

'What do you make of it?'

'It sounds to me like you've all been set up. You're going to have to move fast.'

'I'm amazed that they all met in public,' I said.

'They were unlucky,' said Jenkins. 'How many times a week is there someone from Bilbury eating at the Savoy?'

'I see what you mean.'

The train lurched a little as it started out from Reading station. Jack clutched at his glass to make sure none of the gin was spilt.

* * *

The train gathered speed and outside the Berkshire countryside flashed by. It was still only early evening but the sky was dark. Winter wasn't far away. I couldn't help remembering the way the village had pulled together to help Miss Hargreaves when the storm had destroyed her cottage. Bilbury had been such a happy, close knit village but now there was a danger that all that would be destroyed by commercialism. I felt miserable. Usually when I'd been away from Bilbury I couldn't wait to get back there but somehow things had changed. I wondered if we would be able to get things back to the way they had been before George Nympton had written his wretched article.

'Are you hungry?' asked Jack Ladd.

'Not really.'

'You ought to eat something,' said Jack firmly.

I got the distinct impression that he was speaking with the authority of a man who knew the damage alcohol could do. He stood up and walked along the corridor to the buffet. I watched him go and realised that to some extent Bilbury's future lay in his hands.

Churston, George Nympton and Caldwell West came from a different world. Thumper and Patchy were crafty but when it came to crookedness they weren't in the same league as those three. I had a feeling that the little man with the funny hat and the inevitable notebook and newspaper stuffed into his jacket pocket was going to play an important part in the future of the village.

I hadn't liked him at all when I'd first met him. He had seemed brash and rude and insensitive. But now I realised that we needed his unique brand of newspaperman's brashness and determination in order to tackle Churston Ferrers and George Nympton. More than that, rather to my surprise, I realised that I'd grown to quite like him in a funny sort of way.

'Here you are!' he said, returning from the buffet clutching four packets of crisps and throwing two packets onto the table in front of me. 'Only thing they'd got for vegetarians!' he said. He looked at me, as though having second thoughts. 'You can eat crisps can't you?'

I laughed. 'Yes, thanks!' I said. I appreciated his thoughtfulness. 'Where are you staying?' I asked him.

'I rang and booked a room at the *Globe* in Barnstaple,' he replied. 'It seemed an appropriate name. I'll get a taxi from Bilbury into Barnstaple.'

'Wouldn't it be more convenient if you could stay somewhere in Bilbury?'

'Yes, but there isn't anything in Bilbury. The Duck and Puddle is booked solid.'

'You can have our flat if you like,' I said. 'We've got a flat over the coach-house. It's empty at the moment. We had holiday-makers there during the summer.'

He looked at me. 'Are you sure?'

'Yes,' I said firmly. 'I'm sure.'

'That's very kind of you,' said Jack. 'Wonderful!' He stood up. 'Let me get you a drink and we'll celebrate.'

I half laughed and then held my head. 'I'm supposed to be sobering up!' I reminded him.

Jack waved a hand about dismissively. 'Plenty of time for that,' he insisted, rushing off back to the buffet.

* * *

CHAPTER TWELVE

I awoke the next morning feeling dreadful.

When I checked the time I decided that the clock must have stopped. According to the hands the time was half past eleven. I reached out, picked the clock up and shook it. It seemed to be working. It was all very puzzling. The curtains were still tightly drawn and it was still pitch dark in the bedroom. Holding my head, to keep it together, I clambered out of bed and struggled to the window. Gingerly I pulled back the curtain and flinched as bright sunshine poured in through the gap I had created. It was then that I realised that the clock was probably correct. I unfastened the catch and opened the window in the hope that a few draughts of fresh air might clear my head but in the shrubbery below an unreasonably jolly blackbird was singing merrily and the sound, which on any other morning I would have welcomed joyfully, made me flinch. I closed the window again quickly.

I tiptoed to the top of the stairs, peered down and gently called Patsy's name. The sound of my own voice echoed around and around inside my skull.

'Did you have a good day in London?' she called up, appearing out of the kitchen.

'Er, yes, I think so,' I murmured. 'I seem to have slept in a bit.' I whispered rather apologetically.

'You didn't get home until very late,' said Patsy, far too loudly. 'And then it took them absolutely ages to get the transporter in through the gates.'

I paused. 'The transporter?'

'They brought the car back on a transporter.'

'Oh! Was there something wrong with it?'

'The transporter? No, it was a bit big for the gate but that

Was all.'

'No, the car. Was there something wrong with the car?'

'No. The car was fine but you'd had too much to drink.'

Slowly it came back to me.

Jack Ladd had insisted on buying me a handful of whisky miniatures from the bar on the train and by the time we arrived at Taunton railway station, where I had left my car, I had been in no state to drive. Instead of just hiring a taxi to take us back to Bilbury, Jack had found a local garage and had persuaded the proprietor, a fat, dour-faced man with terrible body odour, to load my car onto the back of a flatbed truck and to take us and it back to Bilbury.

'How on earth did you persuade this chap to take us and the car back to Bilbury?' I had asked him. I had been very impressed. I wasn't accustomed to the Fleet Street way of doing things.

He had grinned; a mischievous, naughty boy grin. 'Money!' he had replied, quite simply. I must have looked alarmed. 'Don't worry!' he added quickly. 'It wasn't mine!'

I closed my eyes and sighed. 'I think I'll have a bath. Perhaps it'll wake me up a bit.'

'Do you want some breakfast?' asked Patsy.

'Not yet.' I paused. 'But I'd like a cup of tea.'

'I'll put the kettle on!' called Patsy.

I had half moved away from the top of the stairs but I turned back and peered over the bannisters again. 'Did I bring someone back with me last night?' I called.

Patsy reappeared, drying her hands on a towel and smiling. 'Yes!' she nodded.

'The rather scruffy little fellow with the funny hat?'

'Yes.'

I cleared my throat tentatively. 'I seem to remember that I said he could rent our flat?'

'That's what he said.'

I swallowed and licked my lips. I felt rather guilty. We usually discussed everything together. 'Do you mind?'

Patsy shook her head. 'Of course not!' she said. 'We need the money. Anyway, he seems quite sweet He came in this morning and paid for a week in advance.'

'He's already up?'

'He was waiting outside the back door when I got up. He wanted to buy some bread, butter, milk, tea and eggs from me. I gave him what he needed to make his breakfast and promised to do some shopping for him at Peter's shop. He said he had to hurry out because there were quite a few people he wanted to talk to.'

I was surprised and slightly envious. I felt that I deserved my hangover but Jack Ladd had drunk a good deal more than I had and it didn't seem fair that he had apparently woken undamaged. Feeling slightly aggrieved at this blatant example of life's unfairness I tiptoed into the bathroom, treading carefully to avoid the squeaky floorboards, and turned on the taps for a bath. I then put my hands over my ears and stepped back a few paces to escape from the noise of water splashing onto white enamel. It was clearly not going to be an easy day.

* * *

The hot bath had refreshed me and I felt considerably less fragile by the time I got downstairs. After two cups of lemon tea and two rounds of toast and marmalade I felt almost human. It is my experience that a full stomach is always less edgy than an empty one.

'What I don't understand,' said Patsy, as I put the kettle on for a third cup of tea, 'is why that newspaperman wants to stay in Bilbury. I would have thought that people outside the village would have lost interest in us by now.' She had let me eat and drink in peace although she must have been bursting with curiosity to find out what had happened in London.

I explained how I had seen Churston, Caldwell West and George Nympton all having lunch together at the Savoy and how Jenkins, the *Sunday Globe* features editor, had cleverly discovered what they had been talking about.

'I never did trust that Churston!' said Patsy. I don't think that I had ever seen her quite so angry. She unfastened her pinafore and threw it over a chair. 'I'm going straight round to tell him what I think of him!' She moved off towards the back door and clearly meant what she said.

'You mustn't!' I said 'Please! Let's try to think this through before we do anything.'

We eventually decided that we would call a meeting for that evening and invite a few stalwart Bilburians round to help us decide what to do.

'We must obviously invite Dr Brownlow,' said Patsy. 'And Thumper and Anne and Patchy Fogg.'

'And Frank and Gilly,' I added.

We decided that for the time being that would be enough.

'Oh, there is one other person we should invite,' I said. Patsy looked at me and waited.

'Jack Ladd,' I said. 'The reporter from the *Globe*.'

Patsy frowned. 'Can we trust him?'

'We have to. He already knows everything and he's far more experienced at dealing with people like these than we are.'

'Thumper and Patchy can be pretty devious when they want to be,' Patsy pointed out.

'But I don't think even they have ever come across anything on this scale,' I said, sipping at my second cup of tea. My head still felt sensitive but the man with the hammer had, thankfully, stopped working on my skull. Talking about the problem we faced had helped clear my head.

'I'm sorry,' said Patsy, as I attacked another piece of toast. 'But I have to ask you this.'

I looked up, surprised.

'What?'

'How did you get on yesterday? Do they still want you to write that article? Or did they change their minds?'

Up until that moment I had completely forgotten about the article Mr Jenkins had commissioned me to write for the *Sunday Globe*. But now it all came rushing back.

'No!' I said with a smile. 'They didn't change their minds!' And I quickly told Patsy everything.

'How much did you say they were going to pay you?' she asked, eyes open wide.

'£300.' I repeated. 'As long as they use the article. If they don't use it they will only pay me £200.'

'But that's a fortune!' whispered Patsy, holding her hand to her mouth as though afraid that she might scream if she didn't.

I nodded and then frowned. 'Did I have a pile of newspapers with me last night?'

Patsy nodded. 'You were clutching them like a baby clutches a comfort blanket,' she told me. 'You wouldn't let go of them. They're in the bedroom somewhere.'

'Thank heavens for that!' I said, pushing back my chair and heading for the stairs. 'I'd better get started!'

'I'll ring Dr Brownlow and the others and ask them to come round here this evening,' said Patsy, as I disappeared through the door and headed for my study.

I spent the rest of the day reading through old copies of the *Sunday Globe* and trying to decide how best to begin the article I had been commissioned to write. After an hour I had decided that this would be the easiest £300 I had ever earned. I popped back into the kitchen and had a bowl of Patsy's vegetable soup to celebrate my first foray into the world of mass-market journalism. After two hours I had decided that it would be the most difficult £300 I had ever earned. I skulked back into the kitchen and made myself a huge honey sandwich. And after three hours I had decided that I would never be able to write anything that Jenkins would accept and that I might as well just telephone him and tell him that I wouldn't be writing the article after all.

After a cup of lemon tea and two toasted tea cakes I then spent another hour trying to think of excuses for my failure and finally decided that making an attempt at writing the piece could not possibly be any more difficult than thinking up an excuse for not writing it!

* * *

By the time Patsy knocked on my study door and told me that Thumper and Anne had arrived for our meeting I had managed to produce what I thought was a pretty good article. I knew it might need a little bit of fine tuning but I was fairly pleased with it, I showed it to Patsy who thought it was terrific.

Naturally, both Thumper and Anne, who were sitting in the kitchen, wanted to know why Patsy and I had called a meeting. But so that I didn't have to explain everything afresh every time there was a new arrival I managed to persuade them to wait until the others had arrived. I boiled the kettle and made hot drinks for everyone while Patsy and Anne buttered a huge pile of homemade scones.

At last everyone except Jack Ladd was present and since Jack Ladd already knew what I had discovered in London I decided to carry on.

'I think you'd better begin by telling everyone what happened yesterday,' Patsy said to me.

While the others listened in complete silence, and steadily increasing disbelief, I explained how I had spotted Churston Ferrers and the other two by accident in the restaurant at The Savoy.

'How did you recognise Nympton?' Patchy wanted to know at last.

I explained that it hadn't been me but Jenkins, the editor, who had identified the fat journalist.

'So the incident with the American and the horse chestnut trees was merely a ploy to get the Council to have the trees chopped down?' asked Dr Brownlow thoughtfully.

'So it seems,' I agreed. 'I may be wrong but I got the impression that our good 'friend' Churston and George Nympton are partners and that the American was hired to scare us into agreeing to let them chop down the trees so that they can build a hotel on the village green.'

'When are they planning to take the trees down?' asked Dr Brownlow. 'Does anyone know?'

'It won't be for a while,' said Thumper. 'Churston apparently told Colin Jackson that he thought the village should get on with it before there was any more trouble with boys hunting conkers but even though he won the vote he apparently couldn't find anyone in the village prepared to chop the trees down. I heard someone say that he was bringing in a firm of tree surgeons from Taunton.'

'We must stop them!' said Gilly firmly.

'That's not going to be easy,' said Anne.

'Not now that the village has voted to chop them down,' agreed Thumper.

'But if people knew what Churston was planning they'd change their minds!' said Patsy.

'Churston would wriggle out of it. We haven't got any proof and he'd probably sue us all for defamation,' said Dr Brownlow, who looked very thoughtful. 'When do you think they started planning all this?'

I shrugged. 'I don't know.'

'But you reckon that Churston and George Nympton planned this together?'

'It looks like it,' I agreed.

'They must have been planning it for ages,' said Dr Brownlow. 'When did Churston Ferrers first come to live here?'

'It can't be long,' said Thumper. 'Six months?'

'It's much less than that,' said Gilly.

'Just over three months,' said Patchy. 'I sold him some furniture.'

'I hope you gave him a good working over!' said Thumper.

Patchy gave him a 'what-do-you-think' look and Thumper nodded contentedly.

'That man is an absolute down and out rogue!' said Frank, suddenly. 'I shan't serve him again.'

I explained to Frank why it was important that he didn't do anything which might indicate to Churston that we knew what he was planning.

With some reluctance Frank agreed to continue serving Churston.

'But I won't be able to smile at him!' he warned us.

'That's O.K.,' said Thumper, apparently quite seriously. 'He won't notice that'

'And...,' began Frank. He halted for a moment, searching for a second way to make his disapproval plain. 'And,' he went on, with earnest determination, 'I'll make sure his change always goes into a puddle of beer.' He finished with a defiant thump of his fist on the table.

The thump of fist on table was so loud that it nearly masked the knock on the kitchen door which heralded the arrival of Jack Ladd.

'Sorry I'm late,' apologised the newspaperman, after I had introduced him to all the others. 'I've only just got back from Barnstaple.' He was carrying a large shopping bag which appeared to be very full.

'Oh, seeing that bag reminds me,' said Patsy. 'I got the shopping you wanted. I've put it all in the kitchen in your flat. I left your change on the table.'

Jack smiled and thanked her and opened his shopping bag. It was packed with loose pieces of paper and thin, cheap, brown cardboard folders. He carefully moved mugs and plates out of the way to clear a space in front of him.

'Have you eaten?' asked Patsy.

'I grabbed a pie and some chips at lunch time,' answered Jack, carefully tipping the papers and folders onto the kitchen table. 'Look at this little lot!'

'What are they?' asked Patchy.

'Photocopies of Land Registry documents and planning permission application forms,' replied Jack. 'I got some of them in Barnstaple but I had some of them sent on the train from London.'

We all stared at the pile of documents but no one spoke. Dr Brownlow reached out and picked out one of the documents at random.

'This seems to be a planning application to convert the old barn just beyond Miss Hargreave's cottage into a shower block for a caravan site,' explained Dr Brownlow eventually.

'Look at the applicant's name,' said Jack.

Dr Brownlow turned over a couple more pages before finding the information Jack had asked for. 'It's an investment company,' he said, eventually. He was clearly puzzled. 'Why would an investment company want to bother establishing a caravan site in Bilbury?'

'The same name appears on all these other documents,' said Jack Ladd, nodding towards the litter of papers which was now spread across the table top. 'The same company owns four detached houses, eight cottages, six barns and 143 acres of land in and around Bilbury. It has bought just about every piece of property to come on the market for the last six months. They have clearly been buying up everything they could get their hands on.'

No one said anything. We just stared at Jack. At the same moment we all realised why property prices in Bilbury had been rising so rapidly – and why Tim and Angie couldn't afford to buy a cottage of their own. Churston Ferrers and George Nympton had clearly been planning this venture for some time.

'They even own the freehold to the Duck and Puddle,' said Jack, speaking to Frank and Gilly.

'No, there must be some mistake there,' said Gilly. 'Frank and I own the Duck and Puddle. Well, together with the mortgage company we own it.'

'You bought the Duck and Puddle with a loan from a mortgage specialist in the North?'

'That's right,' said Gilly.

'The same company that has been buying up property all over Bilbury bought your loan,' explained Jack.

Gilly had gone pale. Frank put his arm around her.

'I don't like the sound of that,' said Gilly. 'Can they do that?'

'I'm afraid they can,' said Jack.

'But who owns this company which has been buying up so much of Bilbury?' asked Dr Brownlow.

'I think we can probably guess,' I said quietly.

Jack Ladd nodded. 'You probably can,' he agreed. 'I got one of the reporters in London to pop along to Companies House. The sole two directors of the company which now owns a good chunk of Bilbury are George Nympton and Churston Ferrers. They've done it all with borrowed money. But they'll make a fortune if everything goes according to plan. They'll be able to sell houses and cottages and land for two or three times the price they paid. Bilbury will become a Mecca for hypochondriacs from all over the world.'

No one said anything.

And then Frank spoke.

'Churston drinks port and lemon,' said Frank, quietly. 'I've never trusted men who drink port and lemon.'

Dr Brownlow, Thumper, Anne, Patchy and Frank and Gilly stayed for another two hours or so and inevitably, there wasn't much variety to the conversation. But although we came up with all sorts of ideas we couldn't think of any way to stop Churston Ferrers and George Nympton from taking over and destroying the village we all loved. The two unwanted interlopers had planned their take-over of Bilbury with great precision and the evening ended in a great sense of gloom.

* * *

'How did you get on with that article you're writing for the *Globe*?' asked Jack Ladd, standing on our doorstep when I returned to the house from letting our visitors out through our gate. One of the things I hated most about Bilbury's popularity was having to live behind a locked gate. It made me feel like a prisoner.

'I think it's O.K.,' I told him. 'I'm quite pleased with it.' I paused and hesitated. 'Would you look at it for me?'

To my relief and delight Jack said he would be happy to look at my article. 'I'll have a look at it tonight,' he said. 'And then if you come round at about nine in the morning, I'll tell you if I've got any suggestions.'

I thanked him profusely, rushed and fetched the typed out copy and handed it to him as though it were a valuable manuscript by an 18th century literary master. Jack Ladd took it from me and stuffed it unceremoniously into his jacket pocket.

* * *

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The next morning I knocked on Jack Ladd's door at 9 a.m. precisely. Jack was making himself a simple, cooked breakfast but the kitchen looked as though he were preparing a banquet for at least 5,000.

'Breakfast?' he asked.

'No thanks. I've already eaten.'

'Coffee?'

'No thanks.'

'Sit yourself down while I just finish off these eggs.'

I sat and watched as he skilfully jiggled with the frying pan.

'I read your piece.'

I waited, nervously.

'Are you sure you don't want anything?

'No, I'm fine thanks.'

'It's packed with information.'

'Oh, good.' I said, beginning to feel increasingly uncertain.

'I tried to put in as many facts as I could.'

'As it stands it would make a terrific article for one of the posh papers.'

My heart sank.

Jack put four rashers of bacon, three sausages and two eggs onto his plate. 'I do enjoy a good breakfast,' he said, adding two slices of fried bread. He carried the loaded plate across to the table and sat down.

'But you need to change the approach a little for us,' he went on, removing the cap from a bottle of brown sauce and pouring a huge puddle of sauce onto his plate. 'Why not rewrite it as 'Twenty Tips To Help You Live To Be 100!'?'

I said I thought that idea sounded very appealing. I couldn't help wishing I'd thought of it.

'Keep the sentences and the paragraphs very short. And write a zippy one hundred word introduction in which you catch the reader's interest by telling him that if he reads your article and follows your advice he can live to be 100.'

Jack dipped a huge piece of sausage into one of his eggs and popped it into his mouth. 'Wonderful!' he said, closing his eyes in obvious delight. He took a swig at his coffee. As he ate his breakfast he went through my article almost line by line and showed me precisely how to rewrite it so that it would fit comfortably into the *Sunday Globe* style.

I listened carefully and when he had finished his impromptu lesson in tabloid journalism I was silent for a moment.

'Thanks, Jack,' I said, eventually.

He winked. 'Pleasure, son!' he said simply. 'Do me a favour, will you?'

'Certainly!' I said, eager to repay his kindness.

'Pour me another cup of coffee! Are you sure you won't have some?'

I poured him more coffee and then rushed back to the house to rewrite my article.

* * *

Early that afternoon I took my finished article into Barnstaple and put it on a train to London. Jack had read it and had said that he thought it 'just what the doctor ordered' but I had still been very nervous as I had handed the packet over to the official at the railway station. I then telephoned Jenkins' office at the *Sunday Globe* and told his secretary, the long-legged Jane, what time the train was due to arrive so that she could arrange for a messenger to meet it. I felt terribly important doing all this but it did rather add to my nervousness.

Once the packet was out of my hands and there was nothing more to be done I felt more relaxed. With Jack Ladd's help I had done my best and if it wasn't good enough then I had lost nothing but would have gained the £200 fee the paper would pay for commissioning but not using my article as a consolation prize.

I drove slowly back to Bilbury peering at the hedgerows in the hope that I might see Emily, slowly plodding back home. Much to our disappointment and sadness we still hadn't heard any news about her. Even though I had pinned more 'Reward' posters all around our village, and several neighbouring villages too, no one had telephoned to say that they had seen her. With so many tourists around, I simply couldn't understand why no one had spotted her. I was beginning to lose hope of ever seeing her again.

When I got back to Bilbury Grange Patsy met me at the door with the news that Frank and Gilly had received a letter telling them that their loan was being withdrawn and that unless they paid back all the money they had borrowed within a month they would be evicted from the Duck and Puddle. Churston and George Nympton were clearly stepping up their campaign to take complete control of the village.

‘We’d better go down and see them,’ said Patsy.

‘They must be in a terrible state.’

‘Frank was threatening to go round and do pretty terrible things to Churston,’ admitted Patsy.

When we arrived in the centre of the village we were confronted by a quite remarkable sight. Deciding that the tree surgeons would not dare chop down the trees if they were inhabited, Thumper and Patchy had climbed up into two of the condemned horse chestnut trees and had built themselves small but quite substantial looking wooden platforms. They had hung huge signs saying ‘Save Bilbury’s Trees’ from the branches around them and a large crowd of tourists had gathered beneath. Patsy and I got as close as we could and then we waved and shouted out to them both. Ben, puzzled, just barked.

‘I’m starving!’ shouted Thumper, leaning over the edge of his precarious perch. ‘Would you get me a couple of cheese sandwiches and a pint of best bitter from the Duck and Puddle?’

‘I’ll have a pint and two rounds of egg and cress!’ called Patchy, who had managed to haul a deckchair up onto his platform.

Not quite knowing how on earth we were going to get the ordered food and drink up to where Thumper and Patchy were perched, Patsy and I hurried off to the Duck and Puddle where Frank and Gilly were gloomily serving soft drinks and Cornish pasties to a coach load of very demanding customers.

‘It’s no job for a man this,’ said Frank, miserably, opening yet another half a dozen bottles of fizzy pop.

‘But it must be good for business,’ I said.

Frank shrugged. ‘I’d rather serve decent drinks to people and have a bit of a chat. And Gilly’s fed up with warming up pies that were made somewhere the other side of the country. She hasn’t had time to do any real cooking of her own for days.’

‘Can you manage some sandwiches and beer for Thumper and Patchy?’

Frank sighed. ‘I’m afraid you’ll have to make the sandwiches yourself,’ he said, lifting up the lid of the bar counter to let me through.

‘Patsy told me about the letter from the bank,’ I whispered as I passed him. ‘I’m sorry.’

Frank pulled a face. ‘If running a pub is going to consist of opening bottles of pop and serving up factory made pasties then I’ll be glad to go,’ he said.

I didn’t know what to say so I just went straight through to the kitchen where Gilly and a couple of assistants were busy taking Cornish pasties out of cardboard wrappers and putting them into the oven to be warmed up. I couldn’t help noticing that the Cornish pasties were made in Lancashire while the Devon clotted cream which Gilly was using to serve with ‘home-made apple pies’ (which came from the factory of a supplier in Belgium) seemed to have come from even further north. It seemed that Bilbury’s popularity was destroying everything natural about the village.

‘Look at this!’ said Gilly, pointing to a huge plastic bag that contained ready-made chips. ‘We even have to buy these now!’ She shuddered. As someone who had always regarded Gilly’s chips as being good enough to win prizes in any chip making Olympics, I was distressed to learn that the Duck and Puddle was now reduced to such depths.

‘I need to make some sandwiches,’ I explained. I told Gilly about Thumper and Patchy.

‘Brilliant!’ she said, clearly absolutely delighted to hear what the intrepid duo was up to. ‘That’s the only decent news I’ve had all day!’

* * *

When I called out to Patchy and Thumper that I had their food ready for them they both lowered wicker baskets down to the ground by rope. I might have known that they wouldn’t have gone up a tree without some preparation! Patsy and I then tucked a pack of sandwiches into each basket and wedged two pint mugs, both just half full, in between the sandwiches and the side of each basket. This had been Frank’s idea.

‘They’re bound to spill at least half if you take full pint glasses,’ he had sensibly pointed out, his natural respect for good beer and a strong aversion to seeing any of it spilt dominating his feelings on this point.

‘Is it for charity?’ asked a woman in a beige jumper, beige slacks and beige shoes, detaching herself from a small group of similarly dressed companions.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘What charity are they doing it for?’ she asked, opening her beige handbag and fumbling inside it, presumably looking for small change.

‘It isn’t for charity,’ I told her. ‘It’s a protest.’

The woman in beige looked interested. ‘What are they protesting about?’ she wanted to know.

I pointed to the banners Thumper and Patchy had hung upon the trees and I told her why the trees were threatened. I didn't tell her that developers wanted to chop the trees down on our village green because they wanted to build a huge and probably ugly hotel on the site but I did tell her that the Parish Council had agreed to have the trees removed because an American tourist had complained that he had been very nearly hit on the head by a stick thrown by a boy collecting conkers.

'That's disgraceful!' said the woman, indignantly. 'How dare they! I shall telephone someone about this.' And she marched off to share this glum news with someone while Patsy and I sat down on the grass to wait for Thumper and Patchy to finish their meal and send back down their empty glasses.

* * *

By the time we got back to the Duck and Puddle the rush had ended. The coach party had moved on and although there were still a couple of dozen people sitting on benches outside the pub, the inside of the Duck and Puddle was almost totally deserted. Frank and Gilly were sitting at a table at the back of the bar. Frank had what was left of a pint of beer in front of him. Gilly was nursing what looked like a gin and tonic. They were both eating potato crisps. I don't think I had ever seen a more miserable looking pair.

I put the tray containing the glasses on a nearby table.

'Do they want refills?' asked Frank, preparing to get up.

'I don't think so,' I said. 'I think they're both a bit worried about the absence of toilet facilities where they are at the moment'

'I hadn't thought of that,' said Frank.

'Have you decided what to do?' Patsy asked Gilly.

Gilly shook her head. 'To be honest,' she said, 'if things are going to carry on like this I'll be glad to see the back of the place.'

I looked round. The tables and floor were littered with empty bottles, paper plates and plastic knives and forks.

'It's not much like the old Duck and Puddle, is it?'

Frank looked at me sadly. 'I used to really enjoy running a pub,' he said. 'Pulling pints, chatting with the regulars, having a quiet drink, putting a couple of bob on the horses...'

Gilly looked at him sharply. 'I thought you'd given up gambling?'

'More or less,' said Frank quickly. 'Just the occasional flutter on the Derby or the Grand National.' He waved a hand about airily, as though to make it clear that he was talking of trivial affairs. 'Nothing wrong with that, is there?' He paused, and sipped at his beer.' It's unpatriotic not to have a flutter on the Derby and the National,' he added, rather defensively.

Gilly, who knew him better than anyone, looked at him and almost smiled. It reminded me how rare smiles had become in Bilbury since the village had been invaded by tourists. Everything had changed; and changed for the worse.

Before George Nympton had written his wretched article the village had been the happiest place on earth; full of fun and laughter. Now, no one had time for fun, and laughter had become a distant memory.

'What did the letter from the bank say?' I asked them both.

Frank fished around inside his jacket pocket and pulled out a rather creased envelope. From inside the envelope he took two creased sheets of paper, stapled together at the top left hand corner. He handed the letter to me without a word.

The letter was unambiguous. The writer made it perfectly clear that the company which had taken over the loan had decided to take advantage of a clause in the contract which gave them the right to demand more or less instant repayment of the loan.

'I take it you can't afford to repay the loan?' I said.

Frank half stifled a laugh. 'If we carried on working at this rate we could probably pay it off in another two or three years,' he said.

'But I think that working at this rate would have probably killed us before then,' said Gilly,

We all sat around staring at the table.

'It looks pretty definite then,' I said.

'Yes.' said Frank.

'The new owners will probably call it 'Ye Olde Ducke and Puddle',' Gilly said 'They will put in a 'Ye Olde Middle Englande Juke Boxe', stick one of those little signs of a man with a top hat and a walking stick on the door to the gentlemen's lavatory and a sign of a woman in a long dress and a bonnet on the ladies' lavatory, and then staff the place with buxom barmaids dressed in Bavarian costumes.'

'They can't do that,' I said. 'There isn't even a door on the gents.'

'That's true.' nodded Frank.

'German lager, chicken-in-a-basket and a musical trio on Saturday evenings,' added Gilly, disregarding this minor complication.

We all sat gloomily contemplating this depressing scenario.

'I suppose we'll have to start looking for somewhere else,' said Gilly.

'I suppose so,' said Frank, sadly. 'I liked it here,' he said rather plaintively. 'I liked it here very much.'

He emptied his glass and turned to Gilly thoughtfully. 'Do you think the costumes the buxom barmaids will wear will be those with the low cut fronts that show lots of cleavage?'

Gilly thought about it for a moment 'I expect so.'

Frank was silent for a while. 'Maybe we could apply to the new owners to be kept on as bar staff,' he suggested.

Gilly thumped him but even she couldn't help smiling. These were dark, dismal, depressing days for Bilbury and we all needed every smile we could find. But the smiles were only superficial. There were no smiles in our hearts.

* * *

When I got back to Bilbury Grange Mr Parfitt, the gardener, handed me a letter. It was postmarked 'Exmouth' and so I knew who it had come from without even opening it. It was Dr Jones' report on the quality and contents of Bilbury's water and it must have arrived with the afternoon delivery. I stuck my thumb under the flap and started to tear the envelope open but stopped before I'd finished.

'What's the matter?' asked Patsy, who knew as well as I did how important the letter was.

'If this letter tells us that Bilbury's water doesn't contain any mysterious, magical ingredients then all those locals who've been making money out of the invasion of tourists will have to go back to being poor again,' I said.

'But Bilbury will go back to being Bilbury,' said Patsy quite bluntly. 'Open it,' she said firmly.

I opened the letter.

The results were unambiguous. Bilbury's water was clean and pure. But it contained nothing not found in a thousand natural springs all over Devon. Dr Jones hadn't known what we had hoped he would find but the results he had come up with couldn't possibly have been greeted with more enthusiasm.

'So what do we do now,' asked Patsy.

'That's simple,' I replied. 'We just give this letter to Jack. The *Sunday Globe* will print the story and that will be the end of the Bilbury gold rush.'

I rang Dr Brownlow to tell him the news. He was thrilled.

'Do we have to keep this secret?' he asked, clearly unable to contain himself.

'I'd like to let Jack have the story,' I said.

'That's fair enough,' said Dr Brownlow. 'Without Jack's help we wouldn't have found out what has been going on.'

'But I don't think a little gossip and a little rumour spreading would do any harm at all,' I said.

'Jolly good!' said Dr Brownlow, delighted. 'I'll ring Kay then, shall I?'

I agreed that a telephone call to Kay would be the quickest way to make sure that the news about Bilbury's water reached the greatest possible audience in the shortest possible time.

* * *

At some time in the night I woke up suddenly. For an instant I couldn't quite remember where I was, or even who I was. I was aware only that someone or something had woken me.

Blinking and yawning, I reached out for the telephone, assuming in my confused state that it must have been the telephone which had awoken me. But when my fumblings with the telephone proved that there was no one at all at the other end, I clumsily put the receiver back down upon the rest. It was then that I heard a repeat of the sound which must have woken me.

My heart beat faster and I switched on the light and sat up.

'What's the matter?' demanded Patsy, rubbing her eyes.

'Sit up!' I said quietly, with tears welling in my eyes. 'Listen.'

As if on cue the sound came again.

Patsy sat up with a start when she heard it and almost immediately she burst into tears. I felt her fingers reach for mine and we held hands tightly. These were not tears of sadness or fear but tears of delight, relief and pleasure.

Moments later my joy was complete when I felt myself being kissed. It was like being kissed by an angel.

* * *

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I could wait no longer. With my free hand I switched on the bedside light and there, sitting on the bed covers just a foot away from me, sat Emily. Behind her, at the end of the bed, sat Sophie and Ben; both looking very happy and both quite content to stay in the background for this reunion. They had, I guessed, already greeted their missing friend

Gently, tenderly, I reached out and stroked Emily's head. A large piece had been bitten out of her ear, there was a lump of matted fur on her neck and she was holding one paw off the bed as though she knew it would hurt her to put it down.

'She's been in a fight!' said Patsy, gently touching Emily's face. Emily pushed her face against Patsy's hand and purred loudly. 'Look!' said Patsy, touching the matted fur on Emily's neck. 'Blood!'

'She's hurt her paw too,' I said.

'I wonder where she's been.' said Patsy.

Emily purred even louder, as though to confirm this suspicion.

'We should ring the vet,' I said firmly. 'I want him to take a look at her. She probably needs antibiotics for the cuts and bites.'

'I'll go and get her some food,' said Patsy, gently moving back the bedclothes and carefully easing herself out of bed 'She must be starving!' Emily miaowed plaintively as Patsy put on her dressing gown and slippers.

'I'll be back in a minute!' promised Patsy. 'You stay there!'

'Cold custard!' I reminded her, picking up the telephone again and dialling the vet's number. 'It's Emily's favourite.'

* * *

Within a couple of minutes Patsy returned to the bedroom holding a large, wooden tray upon which there were four bowls. One bowl contained cold custard, the other three bowls contained pieces of chicken. Although neither Patsy nor I ate meat Ben and the two cats did. Patsy gave Ben and Sophie their bowls of chicken and then offered Emily the choice of chicken or custard. It was no surprise to us that she ate the custard first. And then devoured the chicken. It had quite clearly been some considerable time since she'd eaten properly.

The vet came. I carried Emily downstairs into the kitchen, and after Patsy and I had apologised for getting him up at night he gave our returned prodigal daughter a thorough check-up and confirmed that she did, indeed, need antibiotics. She had several bad bites and a badly cut, bruised and infected paw.

'I don't know how far she's travelled,' he told us, 'but she must have limped a good deal of it on three legs.' He gently cut away some of the matted fur around her head and leg, carefully cleaned her wounds and gave her an antibiotic injection. When he'd finished, he put a small bottle containing antibiotic capsules on the kitchen table. 'Give her these twice a day and I'll come and see her in a couple of days.' He closed his bag and shook his head. 'She's lucky!' he said. 'I reckon she must have used up at least a couple of her lives!' He looked at her for a moment 'Pity she can't write a book about where she's been and what she's been up to!' he said. 'I bet she has quite a story to tell!'

After the vet had gone back home the five of us went back upstairs to the bedroom. Patsy and I climbed into the bed and Emily, Sophie and Ben climbed onto it Patsy and I then lay there in the dark.

'Are you asleep?' asked Patsy, in a whisper.

'No,' I replied. 'I'm too happy to sleep.'

'Me too,' said Patsy.

'Nothing else seems important now that Emily is back,' I said. Emily and Sophie were now purring loudly as they slept. Ben, at the bottom of the bed, grunted occasionally.

'I know.' said Patsy simply. She squeezed my fingers.

We lay there side by side and eventually dropped off to sleep. Neither George Nympton nor Churston Ferrers could interfere with our happiness.

* * *

Early the next morning Patsy made up two huge packs of sandwiches and filled two thermos flasks with coffee and I cycled into the village to feed Thumper and Patchy. We had heard that today was the day the tree surgeons were due to chop down the horse chestnut trees.

I had deliberately gone out early so that I could get to the village green before the tourists arrived but as I pedalled into Bilbury it slowly became quite apparent that I hadn't gone out early enough. The lanes were not as busy as I knew they would become later in the day but they weren't deserted either, and instead of the gentle, early morning twitter of birds, the only sound which normally troubles the ears of a wandering Bilburian, I could hear the steady buzz made by a lot of people talking. I also thought I could smell bacon frying.

As I rounded the final corner of the lane into the village, instead of finding myself facing the quiet, rural, verdant beauty of Bilbury's traditional, unspoilt village green, I found myself faced with a sea of bright colours. Just about every inch of grass was covered with orange, blue and green tents and white, beige and cream caravans. And there was a smell of bacon sizzling. In between the tents, scores of men and a few women were hunched over small gas stoves shaking frying pans and muttering occasional oaths as spots of fat flew out. The campers were wearing so little that from a distance it looked as though they were all completely naked.

I stopped my bicycle and stared. Two figures who looked very much like Thumper and Patchy were sitting in aluminium and canvas chairs, surrounded by young women who really didn't seem to be wearing any clothes at all, eating cooked breakfasts. I edged closer. The two men in the aluminium and canvas chairs were Thumper and Patchy. And the young women were naked.

'Hey!' I called out, trying hard not to look at the women. 'Aren't you two supposed to be protecting the conker trees?'

They both looked at me. Thumper had a large portion of herbal sausage on a fork suspended halfway between his plate and his mouth. Patchy's mouth was so full that he looked as if he had mumps.

'Bhegelkjeh mdnske hkeuyhs!' protested Patchy, waving a fork around in the air and pointing indiscriminately in the direction of the surrounding campers. He tried to stand up but a hot, fried mushroom slipped off his plate onto his leg and with a howl of anguish he sat down again very quickly.

'No one can get anywhere near to the trees!' said Thumper, pointing his heavy fork at the nearest tent. 'The campers have surrounded them!'

I climbed off my bicycle, carefully rested it against the corner of a very large and expensive looking caravan and quickly alerted my eyes to avoid looking at the naked woman inside who was preparing breakfast for an equally naked man who was standing behind her holding a newspaper. I felt myself blushing. It had been a long time since I'd slept in a tent on a boy scout's adventure holiday and I hadn't realised that standards of accepted costume had changed so much.

'Ckehekbks bekeh bwyujhx lskhxb!' said Patchy, who had filled his mouth again. He stopped, chewed hard and swallowed.

'They've come to help,' explained Thumper.

'I brought you sandwiches,' I said, rather limply. I nodded towards the laden plates on their laps. 'I don't suppose you want them...,' I finished, completely lamely.

'Maybe later,' said Thumper, popping a huge hunk of fried bread into his mouth.

Since I clearly wasn't to get very far with Thumper and Patchy until they'd finished eating I turned to face the nearest camper. She was in her twenties, quite tall, built like an advertisement for oestrogen and, unless you count a very small pair of gold earrings, completely, absolutely, totally stark naked.

I had held many conversations with people who weren't wearing any clothes but such conversations had always been conducted under the conventional rules of medical engagement. I had always worn my badge of office (a stethoscope), the naked person had always been there as a patient, seeking advice, and the consultation had always been conducted in the acceptable surroundings of a hospital, medical consulting room or bedroom.

Talking to a naked woman on Bilbury village green was something for which life had not adequately prepared me. I tried to keep my eyes concentrated on a spot just an inch or two below her hairline but I found that this was far too low and so I moved my eyes upwards a foot or so and stared at a branch in a tree about twenty yards above her head.

'It's very good of you all to help us!' I said.

The flap at the front of the orange tent was flung back and a squat, hairy man crawled out and stood up. I could not stop myself looking. He too was naked. I moved my eyes to the left and concentrated instead on a blue tent.

'It's our pleasure,' said the woman, with a big smile. 'We're delighted to be able to help save the trees. Would you like some breakfast?'

She couldn't talk without moving a lot and when she moved she also jiggled. The fact that she was uncommonly well endowed meant that to say that I found the jiggling distracting would have been an understatement of political proportions. I tried hard to concentrate on the blue tent but the blue tent wasn't jiggling and I had discovered that things which jiggle are, for some inexplicable reason, uniquely difficult to ignore. They are certainly far more difficult to ignore than stationary blue, canvas tents.

I shook my head gently. 'No thank you. But that's very kind of you.' I realised I was staring again and I felt myself blushing. I stared hard at a nearby tree.

'Do you have any mustard?' asked Thumper.

I looked at him. I couldn't believe that he could even think of condiments or seasoning in such circumstances. I tried to stop myself blushing but I couldn't. I realised that instead of stopping, the blushing was getting worse.

'I think Jeffrey has got some,' said a short girl with long black hair. Her long black hair wasn't long enough to hide the fact that she was completely naked too. She turned and ran towards a green and white caravan, skilfully jumping over guy ropes and around obstacles. I couldn't help noticing her plump, brown bottom. I suddenly realised that none of these naked people had any white patches in those places where normal people have white patches when they have been out in the sun and they take off their clothes. 'I hope you don't mind our not wearing any clothes,' said the tall girl.

I lowered my eyes and feigned surprise. 'Oh gosh!' I heard myself say. 'So you aren't! I really hadn't noticed.' Even as I said it I realised that it was a particularly stupid thing to say. In the distance I could see Peter Marshall, dressed in his now not quite so smart white coat, moving from tent to tent with a wheelbarrow packed with bread, milk and newspapers.

'He's a doctor,' I heard Patchy say. I looked down. Patchy had now finished chewing and was clearly trying to decide whether to spear a fried tomato, puncture a fried egg or attack a large rasher of bacon. He looked up for an instant and grinned at me. 'He's used to naked people,' he added.

'How interesting!' said the tall woman. 'Are you the village doctor?'

I shook my head. 'I used to be.'

'We're the South East Midlands Nudist Club,' said the tall woman. She held out a hand and smiled. 'I'm Cheryl.'

We shook hands.

'I feel overdressed,' I said, rather apologetically.

'There didn't seem much point in our staying up the trees,' said Thumper. 'Not with all these people here.'

'No, I suppose not.' I agreed.

'We're all very environmentally conscious,' said Cheryl, she leant a little closer and whispered conspiratorially. 'But we've never done anything like this before. We were camping in Combe Martin when we had a telephone call from a relative of a member. She told us what was happening and suggested that we might be able to help.'

As she spoke, and amidst much tooting and hooting from other vehicles, a car screeched into view and pulled up on the road a few yards away.

'What the hell is going on here?' demanded a voice I recognised instantly.

'Hello Churston,' I said. I didn't need to turn round to see who it was and so I didn't.

'What is going on?' demanded Churston, moving into view. His face was bright red and several veins on his forehead were swollen and throbbing. He looked very cross indeed.

'It's a spontaneous demonstration,' explained Thumper.

'To stop the trees being cut down,' I added. I heard another vehicle approaching, turned my head slightly and saw that a lorry had pulled up behind Churston's car. The back of the lorry contained a huge pile of equipment and half a dozen men. These were, I assumed, the tree surgeons.

'But we had a vote!' spluttered Churston, spitting the words out with difficulty. His face was getting even redder. If he had stood in front of a fire engine his head would have merged into the background. He stared first at the tall woman and then at the smaller black haired woman who had now returned clutching a pot of mustard and then he turned to me. 'These people haven't got any clothes on!' he protested. 'They're women!'

'I think they know that.' I said. The men had climbed down from the back of the lorry and were standing around staring with obvious disbelief at all the naked bodies.

Churston huffed and puffed and waved his hands about as though searching for the right words. 'But there are laws about that sort of thing,' he said at last. He spoke indignantly and he waved a hand in the general direction of the two women. 'Are you people going to move?' he demanded angrily.

Churston's noisy anger had now attracted quite a small crowd of nudists. To my own surprise I realised that I was beginning to get used to being surrounded by naked people.

'We're protesting about the proposals to cut down these beautiful trees,' said a rather chubby man who wasn't quite as naked as the others. He wore a pair of gold-framed spectacles and an expensive looking watch.

'But this is a village affair!' complained Churston. 'The village voted to have the trees cut down and you have no right to get involved.'

'We've got a perfect right to protest!' said the chubby man. He pointed up at the horse chestnut trees. 'These are beautiful trees. No one has a right to cut them down.'

'And don't forget we're protesting too!' said Thumper.

'We're more local than you are!' said Patchy.

Churston looked first at Thumper and then at the chubby man. 'Well, you're asking for trouble and you're going to get it!' he said crossly. He turned abruptly and stormed back towards his motor car. 'I'm going to fetch the police!' he shouted. He pointed at the tree surgeons. 'You stay here!' he told them, though they didn't look as if they were planning to move. One of them had set up a small stove by the side of the road and had begun to boil water for tea. The rest, leaning against the side of the lorry or sprawled on the grass, had lit cigarettes and were clearly enjoying the scenery. Peter Marshall, who had almost emptied his wheelbarrow among the caravanners and campers, approached them with what little stock he had left over.

'We could do with getting a few press photographers here,' said the chubby man, who seemed to be taking charge.

Thumper, Patchy and I must have looked puzzled.

'Humphrey is used to this sort of thing,' explained the tall woman. 'He's marched with the anti-nuclear demonstrators lots of times.'

'You've been arrested three times haven't you, Humphrey?' said the short, dark haired woman.

'The police will be very careful if they think the press is watching,' explained the chubby nudist, not commenting on these unrequested testimonials but, judging from the rather cheeky little grin on his face, clearly not unhappy that they had been introduced. 'Has anyone got any local press contacts?'

'There's a Sunday newspaper journalist staying with us,' I said quickly, heading towards the telephone box beside the Duck and Puddle. A glance told me that the telephone box was occupied and that the occupant was a naked teenage girl. Two more teenage girls, both also naked, stood outside the telephone box. Knowing how long three teenage girls were likely to spend on the telephone I abandoned that idea, turned round and headed for my bicycle. A moment later I retrieved it from where it was leaning against a caravan and threw a leg over the crossbar. 'I'll go and tell him,' I said.

* * *

Jack Ladd was predictably enthusiastic when I told him what was happening in Bilbury village. It can't be very often that a Sunday tabloid journalist finds himself just a few minutes' walk from a village green laden from verge to verge with demonstrating nudists. But as far as he and the *Sunday Globe* were concerned there was one huge, overriding problem: the action had come rather too early in the week.

'I don't suppose they'd like to postpone the demonstration, would they? Could you persuade them to have a spontaneous demonstration on Saturday afternoon?'

If I hadn't still been gasping for breath after my furious ride back to Bilbury Grange I would have smiled. 'I'm afraid I don't think they'll do that,' I said. 'The trees will have probably been cut down by then.'

Jack sighed. 'I was afraid of that.'

'But we need some press photographers there today,' I pointed out. And I think you might find this worth a few paragraphs on Sunday,' I added, handing him a copy of Dr Jones' report on Bilbury's water.

Jack read it slowly and then looked up at me and smiled. 'That's it then,' he said. 'Do Churston and George know about this?'

'I don't think so,' I said. 'Though I think the rumours will be flying around the village pretty soon.'

'Just rumours?' asked Jack.

'Until Sunday,' I said, with a smile. 'Nothing concrete until Sunday. The story is yours.'

Jack nodded and reached for the telephone. 'I'll call a few friends,' he told me. 'You leave everything to me. This fresh publicity will make our Sunday scoop all that much more timely – and it will help give your article a little extra significance too.'

I turned away. 'Did Jenkins manage to get hold of you?' Jack asked me.

I turned back. 'No.' I said.

'He's been trying to ring you for ages,' said Jack. 'He wanted to talk to you about your article.'

'Oh.' I said. It didn't sound like good news.

Jack suddenly grinned. 'He liked it,' he said. 'He said to tell you that he's using it this Sunday. Not changing a word.'

'He liked it?'

'He said he'll ring you next week to talk about a few more ideas he's got. He told me he wants you to contribute regularly to the paper.'

'Really? Do you mean it?'

'No. I'm making it all up,' laughed Jack. 'Of course I mean it!'

* * *

Leaving Jack Ladd to sound the bugle that would bring the press cavalry galloping to our rescue, I stopped off at the house to tell Patsy the good news from London and to return the uneaten sandwiches. There hadn't seemed much point in leaving them for Thumper and Patchy.

'Darling, that's wonderful!' cried Patsy, throwing her arms around my neck. She was baking and her arms and hands were covered in flour. I didn't mind one little bit.

‘Jack says that Jenkins wants me to write regularly for the paper,’ I said.

Patsy squeezed me so tightly that I could hardly breathe. ‘That’s marvellous news,’ she said, in a tiny voice.

Very gently I prised her away from my chest so that I could look at her face. ‘Are you crying?’

‘Only because I’m happy,’ said Patsy, tears welling in her eyes. ‘Just cuddle me and kiss me and make a fuss of me.’

So I cuddled her and kissed her and made a fuss of her.

‘Weren’t they hungry?’ asked Patsy, when she had eventually decided that she’d had enough cuddling and kissing. She pointed towards the sandwiches I had brought back.

I explained.

Patsy didn’t believe me.

I explained again, with a little more detail.

‘I must see this!’ said Patsy, still not entirely convinced. She rinsed what was left of the flour from her hands under the cold tap and then dried them quickly on a towel hanging on a rail in front of the Aga. She then untied her pinafore and followed me out through the back door. Moments later we were both on our bicycles heading back towards the Bilbury village green.

I don’t know precisely how news spreads in the country but I do know that it has nothing whatsoever to do with any of the gadgets normally recognised as having a communications function. If something important happens in one village then even if the telephone lines are down, people living in a nearby village will know about it long before anyone can run, pedal or drive the distance between the two villages.

The lane between Bilbury Grange and the village green was full of cars, motor cycles (with and without sidecars), coaches, pedal cycles, tractors and every other possible form of wheeled transport with the exception of trains and Mississippi paddle steamers. Tourists and curious locals from nearby villages and outlying farms were all on their way to view the demonstration to save Bilbury’s horse chestnut trees. Only the truly naive and innocent could have imagined that a few trees would have attracted quite so much interest if the demonstrators had been fully clothed.

We arrived in the centre of the village just as Churston’s expensive BMW squealed again to a halt alongside the village green. The normally cadaverous P.C. Wren, the Bilbury village constable, brought his old-fashioned sit-up-and-beg bicycle to a halt an inch or two behind Churston’s motor car and rested on his saddle for a moment, puffing and temporarily red-faced, while he got his breath back.

Once he had recovered from the unaccustomed activity Bilbury’s resident guardian of law and order, who had taken over the responsibility for keeping the peace in Bilbury after the death of P.C. Len Wilson, looked around at the mass of tents and caravans, and more particularly at the large crowd of entirely naked campers now gathered beneath the threatened horse chestnut trees, and blanched visibly. He slowly got off his bicycle, bent down and removed his trouser clips and then took out a large red handkerchief which he used to mop his face.

P.C. Wren is a quiet, easy going sort of fellow, normally well suited to pastoral duties in Bilbury, but the sudden flood of visitors had already begun to take its toll on him. Until Bilbury had found itself printed large on the tourist map he had little to worry about other than the occasional disputes between neighbours. Since those simple pre-George Nympton days P.C. Wren’s workload had, of course, increased dramatically. He had to deal with an almost constant stream of poorly parked motor cars, lost children and mislaid umbrellas, but not even this escalation of his responsibilities had prepared him for a full scale conflict between a fairly large crowd of entirely naked demonstrators and a lorry full of saw-happy tree surgeons, egged on by a BMW driving local dignitary of slightly uncertain origins; the very conflict which he now faced with some clear discomfort.

‘Arrest them all!’ said Churston, waving a manicured hand in the general direction of the demonstrators. ‘And move those caravans and tents out of the way so that these men can get at the trees.’ He finished with a wave in the direction of the tree surgeons who did not, I have to confess, seem to be in a great hurry to do anything. Indeed, on the contrary, they seemed quite happy to stay where they were. One of them had clearly discovered the existence of the Duck and Puddle (not a particularly demanding discovery since the pub was just a few yards away from where their lorry was parked) and the grass around them was covered with metal trays and empty beer glasses. With plenty of beer to drink (Frank was so pleased to have customers who wanted to buy beer instead of lemonade that he wouldn’t take any money from them) and a panorama of naked women to admire they seemed content to let things take their slow course at whatever pace God decreed most suitable.

P.C. Wren had looked anxious when he had dismounted from his bicycle. But as the minutes passed by his discomfort seemed to grow. When Churston spoke firmly to him, giving him instructions, he stuck a finger into his mouth and began to nibble nervously at a nail, apparently hoping that this might mysteriously provide him with some inspiration.

Behind and around us the crowd continued to grow as word spread of the growing confrontation on Bilbury village green. There was much giggling and much staring and a plump young woman in bright pink shorts that were two sizes too small for her and a green top that was three sizes too small for her, lifted her small son and turned him round to face away from the nudists so that he would not be in any way contaminated by the sight of so many naked bodies.

'When are you going to do something?' demanded Churston.

P.C. Wren took his finger out of his mouth and stepped a pace forwards, put his hands behind his back and lowered his eyebrows to make himself look as stern as possible. His face, bright red when he had climbed off his bicycle, had now regained its usual pallor. P.C. Wren had spent hours practising his stern, ferocious look in front of the bathroom mirror at home, in readiness for just such an occasion as this. Although he was a village policeman and always had been a village policeman (before being posted to Bilbury he had pedalled the beat in a village in South Devon) he had, in his heart, always been aware that one day he might have to face a real 'crisis'; a 'big one'; a moment of challenge when his inner strength and innate capacity to lead and take charge, would have to take the place of training or experience and see him through.

He had, through years of backwater policing, nurtured a constant private dream that one day his unique skills would be recognised and he would be called to some big city to show his always ever so superior looking colleagues how to handle real crises. He believed that a real policeman was born and not made.

'What's going on here, then?' he asked, bending forwards slightly as he spoke. He spoke directly to the chubby man, whom instinct had enabled him to pick out as the ring leader. He was clearly finding it unusually difficult to deal with an unclothed member of the public. Not even his wildest dreams had prepared him for this.

'We're not moving from here until those trees are safe!' said the tall, blonde haired woman, who stood at the chubby man's side.

There were cheers of support and approval from the naked massed ranks behind her.

P.C. Wren licked his lips, swallowed hard and tried to decide what his hero, Inspector Maigret, would do under these circumstances. Sadly, he could not think of a scene from any of Simenon's books which helped him. As far as he could recall not even the great Parisian detective had ever had to face a determined mob of demonstrating nudists. Instead of being disappointed by this discovery, P.C. Wren found it strangely strengthening. He felt somehow emboldened by the knowledge that he was breaking new ground in law enforcement.

As P.C. Wren contemplated the prospect of the professional glory which would, he felt sure, follow his successful management of this incident there was a heavy whirring sound overhead; tent flaps flapped flappily and awnings fluttered noisily and light, thin, summer dresses on those bystanders who were bravely wearing thin, light summer dresses billowed revealingly. Jack Ladd's pals had decided to avoid the queues around Bilbury and speed straight to the village centre by helicopter.

As several hundred pairs of eyes peered upwards, several telephoto lenses peered downwards and a similar number of motor drives whirred into action. The nation's press had arrived. Once again Bilbury was about to burst into the news. This time, instead of being hidden away on features pages, Bilbury was about to make the front pages.

* * *

The helicopter landed on the roadway a hundred yards away from the village green and about fifty yards away from Peter Marshall's village shop, causing quite a localised storm. As Peter rushed out of his shop, clutching at the placards and notices which the wind made by the helicopter's whirring blades was ripping from his shop windows, representatives of the nation's press scrambled from the open doorway with all the eagerness of commandos heading for action.

P.C. Wren watched the arrival of the press with clearly visible apprehension. The descent of the helicopter had meant that the stakes had now risen sky high. P.C. Wren was wise enough to realise that success or failure would be amplified a thousand times by the attendant and now quite unavoidable publicity. He removed his helmet, wiped his forehead with the back of his hand and scratched his head as though hoping that the action might kickstart his brain into action.

'Are you going to arrest these people?' demanded Churston. His fists were clenched, his brow was furrowed and there was a speckle of froth at the corner of his mouth. He looked like an advertisement for anger and I was genuinely concerned about his health.

I reached out and touched him on the arm to try to calm him down. 'Take it easy, Churston!' I murmured in what I hoped was a soothing voice. But either my soft murmur wasn't quite as soothing as I thought it was or else Churston was simply too tense. He responded as though I'd poked him with an electrical cattle prod.

'He attacked me!' he screamed, leaping a yard away and pointing at me. 'Arrest him! Arrest him! He's one of them!'

'If you're going to arrest anyone it should be me!' said the chubby nudist, stepping forward and holding out his hands so that P.C. Wren could snap on the handcuffs. Unlike those of us who lived in Bilbury the visitor didn't realise that P.C. Wren did not carry handcuffs with him. His handcuffs were at that moment busily occupied holding together the two old sets of bedsprings which plugged the gap in his front hedge and stopped wandering sheep from straying into his garden.

'I think you should arrest us,' said Patchy, indicating himself and Thumper. 'We were the ones who started the protest.'

'Just arrest Patchy,' said Thumper, quickly. Thumper has had a brief taste of prison food and didn't like it. 'But I think it is all a bit of a waste of time,' he added, speaking quietly, 'haven't you heard? Some scientist has proved that Bilbury water doesn't cure arthritis or make you sexy after all! No one's going to want a hotel on Bilbury village green so there isn't much point in chopping down the trees.'

Churston went white and opened and shut his mouth like an indignant goldfish. 'What did you say? Where did you hear that? What hotel? Who's building a hotel? I'll sue anyone who says anything about anything!'

'Everyone in the village has heard the rumour about the water,' Patchy added. I suppressed a smile. Kay had clearly done her work well.

'Great news, eh?' said Patchy. 'Frank at the pub told me that Bilbury water contains so many pollutants that everyone has got to drink bottled water.'

'It's all lies!' screeched Churston. 'Where's the nearest telephone?' he demanded.

'Actually I think he said that we all had to drink beer,' said Thumper.

'You're right,' said Patchy. 'He did.'

'There's one outside the Duck and Puddle,' I told Churston. 'But when I last saw it there was a queue about thirty yards long outside it.'

'I'll sue you all!' screamed Churston.

'Arrest me!' said the tall, blonde nude girl, stepping forwards a pace. The motor drives whirred into action again.

'And me!' added the short, brunette, nude girl. The motor drives whirred.

P.C. Wren put his helmet back on and tried to keep his eyes moving so that they didn't settle anywhere. I'd long ago given up trying to do that; it had made me dizzy.

'Arrest them all!' shouted an indignant and frustrated Churston, now clearly beside himself with worry. 'These men are waiting to cut down those trees!' As he spoke he pointed first towards the tree surgeons, still lounging around on the grass, and then towards the trees, quietly and stately oblivious to the fact that they were standing on death row. He then turned back and stared at the tree surgeons. Frank's free beer had a predictable effect. They didn't look as if they were waiting to do anything and they certainly didn't look capable of cutting down a dandelion let alone a tree. 'Get up you lazy good-for-nothings!' he shouted. He walked across to one of the semi-comatose tree surgeons and kicked his foot. The tree surgeon didn't like this and tried to stand up to defend himself. But he didn't get past the sitting up position. He then smiled, waved and lowered himself back down onto the ground. The photographers, who had temporarily switched their aim from the two nude girls, kept their fingers on their buttons in case anything exciting happened.

'Arrest us!' cried the tall, blonde girl and the short brunette. They leapt up and down as they spoke and as their jiggling breasts played with and taunted gravity the photographers whirled round again. Two of them cursed as their films ran out and one of them stepped forwards. 'Do you mind doing that bit again?' he asked the girls, as he skilfully removed the exposed film and replaced it with a fresh roll. The girls dutifully obliged and the motor drives whirred again.

'I want compensation!' said Peter Marshall, suddenly arriving on the scene and holding out three badly torn posters and a copy of *The Times* which looked as though it had been in a puddle. He was breathless and dishevelled and had clearly expended considerable effort in chasing down the posters which the helicopter had disturbed.

P.C. Wren, now helmeted and officially dressed, turned towards him and took out first his notebook and then his pencil. 'What seems to be the trouble?' he asked, in his best and most official voice.

'Their helicopter landed right by my shop!' said Peter, aiming an accusing finger at the photographers. 'It blew away my posters and blew over my newspaper stand.'

P.C. Wren wrote all this down in his notebook. 'Was anyone injured?' he asked.

Peter thought for a moment, and examined his limbs carefully. 'I don't think so,' he said, at last. He thought for a moment, reluctant to abandon the prospect of compensation for physical injury. 'But I might suffer delayed shock,' he added.

P.C. Wren carefully wrote all this down while the rest of us stood around and waited. 'Can you give me a description of the allegedly responsible vehicle?'

Peter paused and looked confused for a moment. 'It was a helicopter,' he said at last. He twirled a hand round above his head in a rather poor imitation of a helicopter in action 'You know,' he continued, 'a helicopter.'

'Did you get the number?' asked P.C. Wren, pencil poised for action.

'No,' admitted Peter, rather sadly.

‘Well we’ll have to see what we can do,’ said P.C. Wren, closing his notebook and putting it and his pencil back safely inside his tunic pocket. ‘I’ll make a report.’

Mollified by this, Peter hurried back towards his shop.

The crowd of spectators, which now completely surrounded the village green, was becoming restless. The sight of so many nudists had kept them amused and entertained for a while but now they wanted some action.

‘Are you going to arrest these people?’ demanded Churston, jabbing a finger towards the top button on P.C. Wren’s tunic.

P.C. Wren rubbed his chin. ‘I have to tell you, Churston, that I’m in a bit of a quandary,’ he admitted quietly. ‘I feel as though I probably should arrest someone but I’m not quite sure who to arrest or what to arrest them for.’

‘I don’t care what you arrest them for!’ shouted Churston. ‘Just arrest all these people who are stopping these men chopping down those trees!’ He was confused that this time he waved a hand in the direction of the trees when he mentioned ‘men’ and in the direction of the comatose tree surgeons when he mentioned ‘trees’. But we knew what he meant.

‘Those men aren’t in a fit state to chop down any trees,’ said Patchy. ‘So how can anyone be stopping them?’

‘Have you got any paperwork to show that those men have a legal right to chop down these trees?’ asked P.C. Wren.

Exasperated, Churston sighed. ‘Not with me!’ he admitted. ‘But you were at the meeting the other day!’

This was accurate. P.C. Wren had indeed been at the meeting at which the village had decided that the horse chestnut trees should be cut down.

‘Not in my official capacity,’ said P.C. Wren.

‘What do you mean?’ demanded Churston.

‘I was there in my private capacity,’ said P.C. Wren. ‘As a citizen. I was not there in my official capacity as a member of the constabulary.’

‘But you heard what the vote was!’

‘In my private and personal capacity I did,’ agreed P.C. Wren, with a nod.

‘So arrest them!’

‘Ah!’ said P.C. Wren. ‘To do that I would have to take evidence from myself in my personal capacity as a witness. But that would be uncorroborated, hearsay evidence and not admissible in court.’ He folded his arms, clearly rather proud of himself.

‘Ice creams! Ice lollies! Cold drinks!’ called a familiar voice. Patsy nudged me and pointed at something that was happening behind us. I turned my head slightly and there was a breathless but ever enterprising Peter Marshall pushing his wheelbarrow. The wheelbarrow appeared to be full of bags of frozen peas. As I watched, two small children approached him holding out their pocket money and asking for ice creams.

Filled with curiosity, Patsy and I stepped over to where he was standing. I leant close to him so that I could whisper in his ear. ‘Why are you trying to sell bags of frozen peas to holiday-makers?’ I asked him, while the children counted out their pennies into his outstretched hand.

Peter answered without turning his head. ‘I hadn’t got enough ice,’ he explained. ‘The frozen peas are to stop the ice creams melting.’ He slipped the coins into the pocket of his white coat, rummaged around between the bags of frozen peas and produced two ice creams.

I explained this apparent mystery to Patsy and turned back to the action to see that Churston was now jumping up and down with rage. ‘Arrest them for something else!’ he insisted. ‘Breach of the peace or threatening behaviour or something.’

P.C. Wren rubbed his nose with his forefinger. ‘I don’t think I can do that, Mr Ferrers,’ he said. I rather got the impression that he might have been enjoying himself. ‘They don’t seem to be threatening anybody or breaching the peace.’

‘Well, just arrest them for not having any clothes on!’ cried Churston desperately, pointing at the nudists. ‘Look at them!’ he cried. ‘They’re... they’re... They’re nude! And naked!’

‘They don’t seem to be upsetting anyone,’ I pointed out.

‘They were here very early; before there was anyone here to upset,’ said Thumper. ‘And they’re just camping out. Surely, they’re entitled to take their clothes off to have a wash. If you’re going to arrest someone shouldn’t you arrest the people who are looking at them?’

P.C. Wren looked at Thumper and frowned. ‘Why should I do that?’

‘I thought there were laws about peeping,’ said Thumper. ‘If you caught Churston peeping through Daphne Borrodale’s window when she didn’t have any clothes on you’d arrest him, wouldn’t you?’

‘Oh yes,’ agreed P.C. Wren, with a nod.

‘So there you are!’ said Thumper.

‘Has he peeped through Daphne Borrodale’s window?’ asked P.C. Wren.

‘This is absolutely preposterous!’ shouted Churston. ‘Why would I want to peep through Daphne Borrodale’s window?’

‘I don’t know,’ admitted Thumper. ‘I was using the example to make a point.’

‘Ah!’ said P.C. Wren. ‘It certainly is a very difficult legal situation,’ he admitted. ‘I probably should arrest someone.’ He paused and thought for a moment. ‘But should I arrest the nudists for not having any clothes on or should I arrest the people who’ve got clothes on and who are looking at them for peeping?’

Churston stared at P.C. Wren for a moment and said nothing. And then he hit him right on the nose. The sound of the blow was drowned by the sound of cameras clicking. P.C. Wren staggered backwards in surprise. He put his hand up to his nose and when he examined his fingers he could see what we could already see: blood.

‘You’re under arrest!’ said P.C. Wren to Churston.

‘What for?’ demanded Churston rather weakly.

‘For hitting a police officer on the nose and making him very, very cross,’ said P.C. Wren, marching the miserable Churston away.

‘Have I missed anything?’ demanded a breathless voice.

I turned round.

Malcolm Eggington, red-faced and rather damp with the exertion of riding his bicycle all the way from Ilfracombe, was struggling to remove a large, spiral-bound reporter’s notebook from his jacket pocket. The spiral binding had caught on his camera strap. ‘Will you fill me in?’ pleaded Malcolm, local reporter for the *Barnstaple, Bideford and Bilbury and Bideford Herald*. ‘My bicycle chain came off and rather held me up.’

* * *

While P.C. Wren held his handkerchief to his bloody nose with one hand and used the other to drag Churston off in the direction of the Bilbury Police Station (actually the front parlour of P.C. Wren’s cottage), the nudists carried on being nude, the tree surgeons carried on metabolising the vast quantities of alcohol which they had consumed, and the representatives of the national press rushed off in their hired helicopter so that they could take their photographs and stories back to their news desks. Malcolm, taking things easy with the calm of a man who had several days to wait before the next edition of his newspaper was due to be published, stayed a while, replenishing his fluid intake with a mug of tea which one of the nudists had given him.

The spectators who had watched the whole helicopter landing, nose punching incident as though it had been one of those historical village pageants put on for the benefit of tourists, wandered around the village taking photographs, licking Peter Marshall’s ice creams and tracking down the various local points of interest which were listed on the special Bilbury village map (available from the Duck and Puddle or the village shop at the very reasonable price of 10 pence).

Patchy, Thumper, Patsy and I tried hard not to celebrate too much in public but retired to Frank and Gilly’s private sitting room in the Duck and Puddle for a little quiet gloating. I telephoned Dr Brownlow from the pub and told him the good news. He came round straight away to join us.

‘Tim and Angie will be able to buy a cottage of their own,’ said Patchy.

‘Do you think house prices will come down now?’ asked Gilly.

‘They’ll drop like a stone,’ said Patchy. ‘Churston and George borrowed all the money they invested in property and land. When the bank finds out that Bilbury water is no better than water anywhere else it will be clear that Churston and George paid much more than the market value for the property they’ve got. They’ll have to repay the bank and that means that they’ll have to sell for whatever they can get. Because they’ll be selling lots of properties they’ll get peanuts for them.’

‘The value of Bilbury Grange is about to collapse and I’m delighted!’ said Patsy.

‘So there won’t be any danger of us being thrown out of the Duck and Puddle?’ said Gilly.

Patchy shook his head.

‘I do hope people in the village aren’t going to be too upset when the tourists stop coming,’ I said.

‘Not a chance!’ said Thumper. ‘Everyone I know is already fed up of having to work so hard. The money was nice enough but people will be glad to get back to normal.’

‘What about that American’s lawsuit?’ asked Patsy.

‘You can forget about that!’ said Patchy. ‘Churston and George are going to be far too busy salvaging what they can from the wreckage of their business plans to continue with their stupid legal threats.’

‘I think the drinks are on us, then,’ said Frank, with a large grin spread across his face. ‘What would everyone like?’

‘I’ll have a triple whisky, please, Frank!’ said Dr Brownlow, appearing in the doorway. ‘But no water with it, thank you, Frank. I’ve heard that Bilbury water is full of typhoid and cholera germs.’

* * *

After we had finished celebrating, Patsy and I retrieved our bicycles and pedalled home. When we got back to Bilbury Grange we found that a lorry driver had blocked our gates with two large, wooden pallets piled high with something wrapped in thick plastic.

'What on earth is that?' asked Patsy.

'Damn!' I said. 'Must be a mistake. I'll have a look.' I walked up to the nearest of the two pallets and peered through the plastic.

'What is it?' Patsy asked.

'It's, er, my book,' I told her. 'I found a printer and had it published.'

'Gosh.' said Patsy, clearly impressed. 'How many copies are there exactly?' she asked.

'Just two,' I said.

'Two?'

'Two thousand.'

'So what do we do with them now?

'After we've moved them away from the gate I hope we'll eventually manage to sell them,' I replied.

Patsy stood for a moment and stared at the daunting pile of books before us. 'Well, I suppose the first thing is to move them into the house,' she said, completely undaunted.

I took her hand. 'Thanks!' I said.

'What for?'

'For being so supportive.'

'Don't be silly,' said Patsy.

I kissed her.

'When I was seven I helped run the book stall at the village fete,' she said, clambering over the pile of books to get at the gate. 'There can't be much about selling books that I don't know!'

'That's great!' I said.

Patsy unlocked the gate, and climbed down the other side of the pallet. A moment later her head re-appeared. 'How many did you say there were?' she asked.

'Two thousand. I thought that was a sensible number to start with.' I scratched my head. 'But it does look rather a lot,' I admitted.

'We'll soon sell all those,' she said. 'People will love reading about Bilbury.' And she disappeared again.

A moment later she reappeared. 'Is Thumper in it?'

'Of course.'

'And the Duck and Puddle and Frank and Gilly?'

'Yes.'

'And Dr Brownlow?'

'Naturally.'

'And Patchy Fogg?'

'Yes.'

'It's bound to be a success!' she said. 'They're all such lovely people.' Then she disappeared again.

And then her head reappeared above the pile of books.

'Am I in it?'

I laughed. 'You'll have to read it to find that out!' I told her.

* * *

Bilbury Country is the fourth of Vernon Coleman's seven books about Bilbury. These are: Bilbury Chronicles, Bilbury Grange, Bilbury Revels, Bilbury Country and Bilbury Village. There are two books of short stories called Bilbury Pie and Bilbury Pudding. If you enjoy the Bilbury books you may enjoy other books by the same author including Mr Henry Mulligan and Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War. For full details of over 100 books by Vernon Coleman please see his author page on Amazon or http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

Also available by Vernon Coleman

The Bilbury Chronicles

A young doctor arrives to begin work in the small village of Bilbury. This picturesque hamlet is home to some memorable characters who have many a tale to tell, and Vernon Coleman weaves together a superb story full of humour and anecdotes. The Bilbury books will transport you back to the days of oldfashioned, traditional village life where you never needed to lock your door, and when a helping hand was only ever a moment away. The first novel in the series.

"I am just putting pen to paper to say how very much I enjoyed The Bilbury Chronicles. I just can't wait to read the others." (Mrs K., Cambs)

"...a real delight from cover to cover. As the first in a series it holds out the promise of entertaining things to come" (Daily Examiner)

"The Bilbury novels are just what I've been looking for. They are a pleasure to read over and over again" (Mrs C., Lanes)

Bilbury Grange

The second novel in the Bilbury series sees the now married doctor moving into his new home – a vast and rambling country house in desperate need of renovation. With repair bills soaring and money scarce, the doctor and his new wife look for additional ways to make ends meet. Another super novel in this series – perfect for hours of escapism!

"I have just finished reading Bilbury Grange. I found the book to be brilliant. I felt as though I was part of the community. Please keep me informed of any more in this excellent series." (Mr C, Cleethorpes)

"A wonderful book for relaxing and unwinding. Makes you want to up roots and move to the rural heartland." (Lincolnshire Echo)

"For sheer relaxing pleasure here's another witty tale from the doctor whose prolific writings are so well known." (Bookshelf)

The Bilbury Revels

Disaster strikes in this the third Bilbury novel when a vicious storm descends on the village. The ensuing snow storm cuts off the village and blankets the whole area in a deep carpet of snow. Much damage is done to the village as a result of the storm and the locals band together to undertake the repair work. Money, as ever, is tight and fund-raising is of prime importance. Money-spinning suggestions are sought and so the idea of the Revels is born – a week of fun and festivities to raise the money needed to repair the local schoolteacher's cottage.

Reviews of 'The Bilbury Chronicles' by Vernon Coleman

'Coleman handles the humour with the assured touch that comes from having already written a string of successful titles (and) manages to retain a heartwarming affection for his fellow man.' - Yorkshire Evening Post

'Very readable, funny and full of richly drawn characters.' - Southern Evening Echo

'You can sniff the clean Devon air and, despite the fiction, hear and recognise characters indigenous to any West Country village... Dr Coleman harnesses the essence of village life with a wealth of characters and strings them along on a tide of gentle humour. One of the pleasures of this tale is that so many people will recognise Bilbury under a different name.' - Western Morning News

'A cornucopia of colourful characters helps to weave a rich tapestry of village life subtly tempered with the gentle humour which hallmarks this author's work. Set in 1971, the mixture of rural beauty, human nature and the odd whisper of nostalgia combine to make this book a real delight.' - Western Gazette

'The stories have moments of poignancy and tragedy as well. And how splendidly he mixes all the ingredients to produce a startling, but still credible tale about the local bobby and his man-eating wife. Dr Coleman's book is a real delight from cover to cover. As the first in a series, it holds out the promise of entertaining things to come.' - Huddersfield Daily Examiner

Reviews of 'Bilbury Grange' by Vernon Coleman

'Captures the essence of old-fashioned village life where you never needed to lock your door' - Western Evening Herald

'A wonderful book for relaxing and unwinding... Makes you want to up roots and move to the rural heartland' - Lincolnshire Echo

'For sheer relaxing pleasure here's another witty tale from the doctor whose prolific writings are so well known to many of us' - Bookshelf

'A pleasure to read from cover to cover.' - Kentish Express

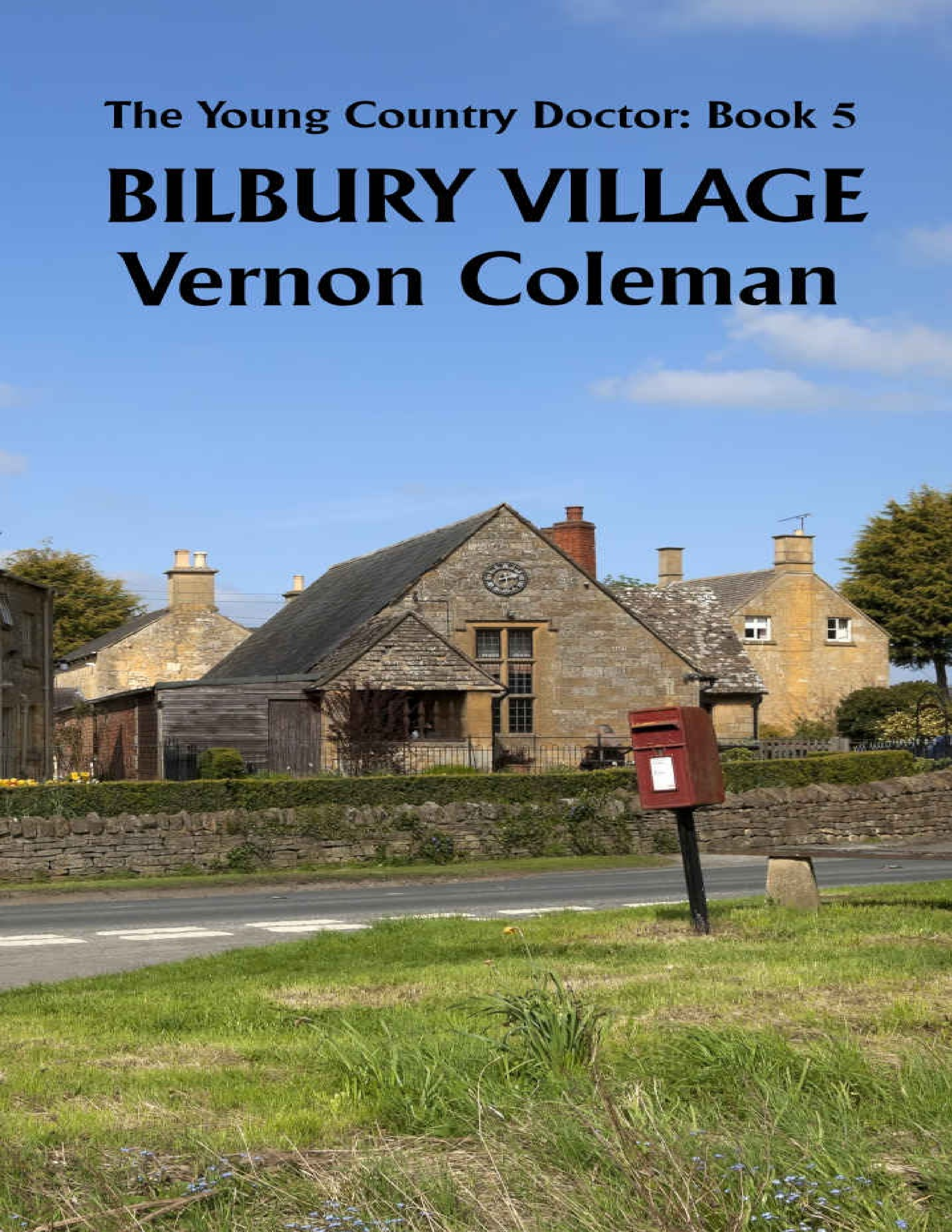

The Young Country Doctor: Book 5

BILBURY VILLAGE

Vernon Coleman

THE YOUNG COUNTRY DOCTOR: BOOK 5

BILBURY VILLAGE

VERNON COLEMAN

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Bilbury Village is the fifth of Vernon Coleman's seven books about Bilbury. These are: *Bilbury Chronicles, Bilbury Grange, Bilbury Revels, Bilbury Country* and *Bilbury Village.* There are two books of short stories called *Bilbury Pie* and *Bilbury Pudding*. If you enjoy the Bilbury books you may enjoy other books by the same author including '*Mr Henry Mulligan'* and *'Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War'*. For full details of over 100 books by Vernon Coleman please see his author page on Amazon or www.vernoncoleman.com

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To Donna Antoinette

Wherever I am with you
I will always be at home.
You will always have my love
You will never be alone.

CHAPTER 1

I had forgotten how much blood there is in the human body and how much of it can be lost without the heart and brain shutting down completely. And I had forgotten that a few pints of blood can look like gallons when they're out of the arteries and veins through which they once flowed.

The human body contains eight pints of blood. It contains eight pints because that's what it needs to move oxygen from the lungs to the tissues and organs.

There wasn't eight pints left in the man in the car. The stuff had been pumping out of him at quite a rate. An artery had been severed and the man's blood was squirting out like a fountain. Fortunately, it wasn't a big artery and so it wasn't a big fountain.

It's easy to tell whether it's a vein or an artery that's been severed. Blood comes slowly out of a leaking vein. The pressure is so low that unless a major vein is completely severed the blood loss is more of a mess than an emergency.

But when an artery is cut the blood comes out under pressure. When I was a medical student, and we were being taught how to perform venipunctures by practising on one another, one of my colleagues asked the tutor how she'd know if she'd hit an artery instead of a vein. 'You'll know,' said the tutor. 'The syringe will come whistling back past your ear.' It may have been a slight exaggeration but the key word is 'slight' and not 'exaggeration'.

Normally, the human heart pumps eight pints of blood through the arteries every minute of every day. But the amount of blood the organs and tissues need varies from minute to minute. In an emergency - when the body's organs need extra supplies - the heart can pump fifty pints of blood a minute to give the muscles extra power and strength.

Anyone who loses a lot of blood will faint. This is a deliberate technique used to ensure that the brain gets a good supply of food. When standing, blood has to travel upwards to reach the brain. Someone who faints automatically lies down and this makes it easier for blood to get to the brain - the most important organ.

* * *

The man inside the car was a long way from producing scar tissue but he was losing blood from a cut in his wrist. His radial artery had been sliced in two. I had no idea what had caused the cut but the inside of the car was badly smashed up and there were several sharp edged pieces of plastic around which could have done the damage. Judging by the stickiness in the car he had lost far more blood than was entirely good for him. He was unconscious, though whether this was because he had fainted or because of something else I had no idea. My only concern was to do everything I could to keep him alive. Making a formal diagnosis and initiating treatment would be someone else's responsibility. All I was interested in was getting him to hospital and keeping him alive until I got him there.

There are many ways in which people are prepared for emergencies. From time to time the authorities have practice emergency days. Accidents are staged on a railway line or in a large factory and civil servants, politicians, administrators and others are rehearsed in an attempt to show them how they should react. All this is, of course, utterly useless. In a real emergency those memories are suppressed; overtaken by fear, panic and the reality of the moment.

Similarly, first aiders who practise in a village hall or school gymnasium may think that they are preparing themselves for an emergency but, sadly, they are doing nothing of the sort. They may become proficient in a village hall or school gymnasium but when faced with a real situation virtually everything they have learned will be forgotten. There will be no instinctive muscle memories to help them because the only way to prepare yourself to react in an emergency is to find yourself in emergency situations so often that you automatically know what to do.

Fortunately I had, before coming to work in general practice in Bilbury, worked long hours, long weeks and long months in several busy casualty departments. I had seen enough emergencies not to panic. Dealing with emergencies never becomes routine, and never should, but the practicalities can become instinctive so that there is time for the brain to tell the rest of the body what it has to do.

* * *

The car was lying on its side in a deep ditch. It looked like a complete wreck. The man wasn't the only occupant in the car. Wriggling down into the car to attend to the man, I had found a woman in the car too. I guessed that she had been the passenger and he had been driving. She was lying underneath the man and she too was unconscious. The water in the car had risen several inches in the few minutes I'd been in there with them. She was still alive but if I didn't get her out quickly she would drown. When it had crashed into the ditch the car had tipped onto its side. The windscreen and nearside windows had smashed and water from the ditch had flooded into the car. As the rain continued to pour down so the water level in the ditch rose – and as the water level in the ditch rose so the water level in the car rose too. I gently moved the woman's head as much as I could and tried to wedge her in such a way that her head was as far as possible above the water.

I clambered out of the car and the torch beam that had been shining into the car followed me out. Thumper Robinson had used orange baler twine to tie the car door on the driver's side to the car's front bumper in order to keep it open. The rain was getting heavier. It was like standing under a huge tap. Living on the North Devon coast I'd got accustomed to storms and strong winds. South Devon is all sunshine and gentle breezes. North Devon is more gale force winds and horizontal rain. But this was bad even for our part of the coastline. I thought the force of the water and the wind was going to knock me over. Apart from whatever happened to be lit by the torch I couldn't see anything. The night was pitch black. If there was a moon I couldn't see it. The wind must have been close to hurricane levels.

'Are they dead?' asked the man with the torch.

'No,' I said rather too sharply. 'They're both still alive. But we need to get them out of there fast. He's bleeding from a cut artery and I think he's fractured his left ankle. His foot is certainly pointing in the wrong direction. She's badly cut and has a broken arm.' Those were the injuries I'd been able to find. There were, I suspected, almost certainly more.

'The petrol tank is ruptured,' said Thumper. 'Petrol is coming out. I can't see it but I can smell it.'

I sighed. Something else to worry about. Somehow I didn't really care. You reach a point where there isn't any brain left for worrying. Besides, I had plenty of other things to think about.

I'd taken off my coat to enable me to wriggle into the car and the wind was tearing at my shirt. I was soaking wet and shivering almost uncontrollably. I tried to tear the sleeve out of my shirt but failed even to break the stitching. It must have been a good shirt. In the movies people always manage to rip up shirts with ease. In real life it's more difficult. I took my penknife out of my trouser pocket and managed to cut into the material and then tear off a sleeve.

'Shouldn't we leave them where they are until the emergency services get here?' asked a female voice. 'Patients shouldn't be moved when they have spinal injuries,' she added.

'If we don't move them both quickly the woman down there will drown,' I told her. 'She's unconscious and she's trapped underneath the man. The water level is rising fast and her head is about three inches above the water level – or at least it was when I was last in there. They've both got head injuries. How long will the fire brigade and the ambulance be?'

'They can't get here,' said Thumper Robinson.

Thumper was my oldest and best friend in Bilbury. Though we were the same age we were the proverbial chalk and cheese. I had spent most of my early life at school, studying books. He had spent most of his early life playing truant from school, studying cars, animals and the countryside. He'd certainly never been to university. I had 'O' level Latin, knew who Pythagoras was and could tell you the names of all the small bones in the human wrist. Thumper could catch a trout with his bare hands, could build a stout and serviceable chair from a couple of fallen tree branches, could skin a rabbit quicker than any butcher, could change a car engine and could tell you, with certainty, which mushrooms were edible and which would kill you. In short, my learning had largely theoretical value while Thumper's learning was exclusively practical.

Thumper, however, was not a doctor. I was, and as such I was expected to be able to save the lives of the two people who were trapped in their car.

'The main road is closed about half a mile from here,' explained Thumper. 'The stream has flooded the road and they won't be able to get through. Not even with an ambulance.'

'Can they get across the fields?'

The wind was so fierce that we had to shout to make ourselves heard. I wished I'd put on something warmer. I shivered.

'It's far too wet,' replied Thumper. 'The ground is soaking. The nearest an ambulance can get is probably the spot where the A39 passes the end of Southcombe Wood and crosses Lower Kentisbury Ford.'

'Then we have to get them out of the car,' I said, making the decision. 'And if the ambulance can't get to them then we have to get them to an ambulance. But first I need to put a tourniquet on the man's arm. He's losing a lot of blood. And then I need something to make a couple of splints with.'

'I thought tourniquets were considered too dangerous,' said the woman. 'They can result in tissue damage. Shouldn't we apply direct pressure?'

I peered through the darkness. 'Are you a doctor?'

'I'm a social worker and a fully qualified first aider.'

I was getting rather tetchy. 'Do you want him to bleed to death?'

‘No, of course not.’

‘Then I need to put on a tourniquet.’

I climbed back into the car. Just before I disappeared back into the sticky blackness I turned back and called to Nick Houghton, who’d been holding the torch. ‘Go and ask your Dad to drive over here with his tractor,’ I said. ‘He’ll need to bring a trailer. Something we can put these two on. And while he brings the tractor you stay there and ring 999. Ask for an ambulance and tell them I need one to meet us where the road from Barnstaple to Lynton passes the end of Southcombe Wood and crosses Lower Kentisbury Ford.’

I wanted Nick’s father to drive the tractor because I knew no one in Devon who handled a tractor more skilfully in tricky conditions. In addition to running a large farm Samuel had a contract with the local authority to keep the local roads clear of snow. He would fix a huge snow-moving attachment to the front of his ancient red monster of a tractor and drive serenely through anything. Whatever the weather, however cold, he always did it wearing a rusty brown tweed jacket with a length of baler twine around his waist. He never wore an overcoat of any kind.

I had often wondered how I would feel if I started practising medicine again. Would I panic and forget what to do? A doctor, more than any other professional, needs to know how to look and sound calm whatever his inner feelings. I was relieved to discover that I didn’t feel in the slightest bit panicky. And I knew what I had to do. But I had been reminded, with a shocking suddenness, that the responsibilities of a country general practitioner are awesome. The real measure of responsibility is just how big a mistake you can make before someone stops you and at that moment I couldn’t think of a job I could be doing that would carry more direct responsibility. I don’t suppose either highly-paid civil servants or corporate executives paid millions for their decision-making are faced with many splitsecond life or death decisions.

* * *

Forty minutes earlier I’d been fast asleep in bed. Warm, dry and cosy. I don’t know how long the telephone had been ringing when I woke but it couldn’t have been long. I’d been a general practitioner long enough to wake almost instantly at the first ring of a telephone bell.

‘Is that the doctor?’ demanded a frantic sounding voice which I didn’t recognise.

‘Well, yes, sort of,’ I replied warily, instantly awake but puzzled. ‘I am a doctor but I don’t practise any more.’ I had been a GP in Bilbury but I’d retired a year or two earlier when the authorities had decided that Bilbury wasn’t a big enough village to have its own doctor. Medical services were now provided by a practice in Barnstaple

‘You’re needed urgently,’ said the voice. ‘There’s been an accident. In the lane just beyond Softly’s Bottom. On the Parracombe road. About a quarter of a mile past the turn to Henshaw’s farm.’ The words came out so quickly that I had difficulty understanding what I was being told.

‘Slow down,’ I said. I sat up in bed and turned on the bedside light on the small oak table that stood at my side of the bed. Emily and Sophie, our two cats who were sleeping on the bed, didn’t budge. Ben, the Welsh sheepdog who always slept on the carpet next to my slippers, was awake. She looked up, ears pricked, but didn’t make a sound. Patsy slept on undisturbed.

‘Thumper asked me to call you,’ said the voice.

‘Thumper? Is he OK? Is Thumper hurt?’

‘No. Thumper is fine. But he’s at the accident. He was driving past and saw the car in the ditch. There are two people in there. He thinks they’re seriously injured and daren’t move them.’

‘What’s your name?’

‘Michael Houghton. I’m Samuel’s son. We’ve played cricket together a few times.’

I knew Samuel Houghton. He was a local farmer. And I knew his, sons. Michael was a good batsman and a competent medium pace bowler when he didn’t try to bowl too quickly.

‘Have you telephoned for an ambulance?’ I asked him.

‘They can’t get through. The road from Barnstaple is blocked. The storm has brought down trees all over the place and the road is flooded in several places.’

‘So the doctors can’t get through from Barnstaple?’

‘No. Thumper says you’re the only doctor who can get here.

He said to say he’s sorry to have to ring you. He came to our house because we’re the nearest. My brother Nick and his girlfriend have gone with him. They told me to ring you.’

‘I’ll be there as soon as I can,’ I said. I put the phone back on its rest, pulled back the covers and started to climb out of bed. Ben looked excited. I shook my head at her to tell her she wasn’t going with me. She looked crestfallen.

‘Who was that?’ asked a sleepy Patsy.

‘There’s been an accident,’ I told her. ‘No one can get through from Barnstaple so I’m the only doctor around.’

I looked around the bedroom. When I’d been practising as a GP I’d always kept my clothes ready by the bed so that I could get dressed quickly and be out of the house in minutes.

‘Shall I get your bag out of the old surgery?’ asked Patsy. Although it had been some time since I’d practised medicine we’d left the old surgery just as it was.

I thought for a moment. ‘I don’t think there’s anything in it that will be much use,’ I told her. ‘But there’s a first aid kit in the car.’ Little did I know as I spoke that a stethoscope would have been about as much use as the box of sticking plasters the first aid kit contained.

* * *

Using my shirt sleeve as a tourniquet I’d managed to stop the man bleeding to death. And then, inch by inch, I had, with Thumper’s help, succeeded in dragging the two people out of their crashed car.

Once they were out in the open it was possible to see that they were both very young. He was wearing a thin blue suit. She was wearing a mini dress. They looked as if they had been out to a party somewhere. I found a rug in the boot of my car. I wrapped it around them both to try to keep them warm.

‘Do you know them?’ I asked Thumper.

He shook his head. ‘Will they make it?’

‘I think so,’ I said. Neither of them had been wearing seat belts and they’d both been bashed around quite a bit in the crash. They were both still unconscious.

‘Do you recognise them?’ Thumper asked Nick’s girlfriend. I still didn’t know her name. She had stayed behind in case the unconscious girl woke up and needed comforting.

She nodded.

‘The man is George Willoughby,’ she said. ‘He lives in Lynton. The girl is Enid something. I don’t know her second name. She lives in Lynton too.’ She turned to me. ‘Are they going to be OK?’

‘I think so,’ I told her quietly.

‘He’s only eighteen,’ said Nick’s girlfriend. ‘It’s his Dad’s car. He always drives too bloody fast.’

I didn’t say anything.

‘I’d just like to apologise for being a bit bossy,’ she said. I could tell it wasn’t easy for her to say ‘sorry’. But she said it anyway.

‘That’s OK,’ I said. ‘Forget it.’ I smiled at her. ‘I was a bit irritable,’ I apologised. ‘We didn’t have much time. You’re quite right about tourniquets by the way. But under the circumstances...’

‘Under the circumstances you obviously did the right thing,’ said Nick’s girlfriend.

The rain was now coming down harder than ever. And the wind was still howling. It was an evil night. The wind was making so much noise that we saw the lights of Samuel’s tractor before we heard it. I have never in my life been so pleased to see a piece of farm machinery. It was strangely comforting to see that Samuel was, as always, wearing his rusty brown tweed jacket with baler twine around the waist. Some things never change and it is those things which give us stability and strength.

Forty minutes later, after getting stuck twice and nearly overturning more times than I can remember, we met the ambulance at the pre-arranged spot on the Barnstaple road. Since I had no morphine I wasn’t too unhappy that they were both still unconscious. They were both breathing well and their pulse rates were good. The ambulance then drove the two accident victims to Barnstaple. It was a relief to see them driven away in safe, professional hands.

CHAPTER 2

'I heard the car come into the drive,' said Patsy when I walked into the kitchen. Outside the sun was coming up and the storm was subsiding. 'The kettle is boiling. I've put some muffins in the toaster.'

'Great,' I said. 'Then I need a hot bath.' I reached down and rubbed Ben's head. She sniffed at me. I could see the puzzlement in her eyes. I was soaked in ditch water and blood. I probably didn't smell anything like me.

Patsy came closer. 'You're drenched!' she said. 'You'd better get out of those wet clothes.'

I put two hands on the back of a kitchen chair and lent on it. I was almost too exhausted to move. It had been a difficult and tiring few hours. Almost as difficult physically as it had been mentally. Gently, Patsy unfastened my jacket and helped me undress. She tossed my waterproof jacket, my sweater, shirt and trousers onto the floor by the side of the Aga. I took off the rest of my clothes myself. Even my socks were dripping wet. Patsy handed me a huge cream coloured towel which was warming on a rack above the Aga. I wrapped the towel round me. It was soft, fluffy and warm. It felt wonderful.

'Is this blood?' Patsy asked, pointing to a huge dark stain on my discarded trousers.

I nodded.

'Not yours?'

I shook my head.

'Was it bad?'

'Pretty bad.'

Patsy plucked a small towel from a rail in front of the Aga and began to rub my hair.

'You've got blood on your face.' She wiped the blood away with a corner of the towel.

'An artery was squirting blood everywhere.'

'Is Thumper OK?'

'Thumper is fine. He's gone home for a bath and something to eat. He was brilliant.'

The kettle started to boil. Patsy poured hot water into two mugs which already contained granules of instant coffee. 'Do you want some whisky in yours?'

'Just a splash.'

She opened a cupboard, took out a bottle and added half an inch of whisky to one of the mugs.

I inhaled the steaming vapour, then put the mug down on the kitchen table and flopped in to one of the chairs.

While she took muffins out of the toaster I explained what had happened and why I had been called. She sliced two of the muffins in half, buttered them and put the four halves on a plate. She put the plate in front of me. The muffins were hot and the butter was melting into the soft dough. I managed to pick up one of the halved muffins all by myself.

'Do you think they'll both be all right?'

I chewed and thought hard before answering. 'I think they've got a good chance,' I said. 'They were lucky.'

'Lucky they had you.'

'Lucky that Thumper happened to drive by. He doesn't usually go down there but the lane past Withydown Farm was flooded. If he hadn't seen them they would have certainly died. He and Nick Houghton, one of Samuel Houghton's sons were there. Plus Nick's girlfriend.'

'Did the ambulance get through in the end?'

I shook my head. 'Samuel Houghton took the two of them on a trailer we hitched on the back of his tractor. We went across the fields and met the ambulance on the main road. I'd had to put a tourniquet on the man's arm. I needed to tell one of the ambulance men to unfasten it every few minutes. Then Sam took Thumper and me back to our cars.'

Patsy hesitated. There was something else she wanted to ask me. I knew what it was.

'Was it difficult?' she asked me at last.

'You mean, not having done it for a while?' It was two years since I'd retired from medical practice. Two years since I'd picked up a stethoscope. Two years since I'd seen someone else's blood.

'Being a doctor again.'

'No. It wasn't difficult.' I smiled at her. 'Fortunately, it seems that doctoring is a bit like riding a bicycle,' I said. I grinned at her. 'Luckily, it all came back to me.'

I had always thought that a doctor's instinct is derived not so much from medical school training (that simply provides the framework for learning) as from an accumulation of experiences. Now I was sure I was right about that.

Patsy wanted to ask me something else. I knew what it was and so I answered the unasked question. 'It felt good,' I told her. 'It felt good being able to help someone. Maybe help save a life.'

‘It was awful that they made you close the practice,’ Patsy said quietly.

I shrugged. ‘Nothing we can do about it. Nothing we could have done about it.’

‘You’ve missed it haven’t you?’

I didn’t answer.

‘We could move somewhere else. You could start a practice or get a job as a partner somewhere else.’

‘Leave Bilbury?’ She nodded.

I shook my head without hesitation. ‘I do sometimes miss medicine,’ I admitted. ‘But I wouldn’t – couldn’t – leave Bilbury. This is our home. And it always will be.’

I knew what leaving Bilbury would have meant to her. Bilbury is the village everyone dreams of living in. It’s a village where people speak to strangers and are kind to one another, it’s a village where doors are left open during the day and at night and when they are shut (rather than bolted) it is merely to keep out the cold and the neighbours’ cats. It’s a village where children play on the village green without mothers hovering constantly nearby, alert for dangerous strangers in long overcoats.

Villagers in Bilbury leave their doors open when they pop to the shop so that unexpected visitors can make themselves a cup of tea. Living rooms have log fires, the pub has a piano and no one knows what a window lock is. I knew of nowhere in the world quite like Bilbury.

She put an arm around me. I put an arm around her. We stayed like that for a while. Despite the warmth of the Aga and the hot towel I still felt cold. I shivered. She felt the involuntary movement.

‘I’ll run you a bath,’ she said. ‘Finish your coffee and eat the last of the muffins.’

I did as I was told.

* * *

Forty minutes later I clambered out of the bath, got dressed and went downstairs. Patsy was in the kitchen baking. The smell, as always, was wonderful.

‘What are you making?’

‘An iced sponge cake, some of those buns you like and another tray of fudge.’

‘Great!’ I said, with genuine enthusiasm. ‘When will they be ready?’

‘Aren’t you going back to bed?’ Patsy asked.

I shook my head, took a teaspoon from the cutlery drawer and helped myself to a taste of the mixture in the bowl she was working on. ‘Terrific,’ I said.

‘You’ve just got an awfully sweet tooth.’

‘No, no,’ I protested. ‘Your icing is much better than anyone else’s.’

She raised an eyebrow.

I once complained to my friend Patchy Fogg, a local antique dealer, that I was putting on weight.

‘Could there be a link between that fact and the fact that Patsy is a brilliant cook?’ Patchy had asked. He had been right, of course.

‘I thought I’d do some work on the latest Bilbury book,’ I told her. ‘I’m a bit bogged down at the moment.’ The last book in my series about the village had been well received and I’d received an encouraging number of letters from readers wanting more.

Curiously, the only complaint had come from the friend upon whom I had based the character Thumper Robinson. My friend had wanted to know why I had called him by the name ‘Thumper Robinson’ in the books, rather than using his real name.

‘Everyone knows that the person you are writing about is me,’ he’d said.

I’d explained that I’d given him another name so that I could, if I wanted to, make him do things in the book that he didn’t do in real life.

‘But Thumper is me!’ he’d protested. ‘And if you want me to do something else, all you have to do is say!’

* * *

‘How did the writing go?’ asked Patsy, when I went downstairs two hours later.

‘Not bad.’

‘Thumper telephoned and left a message for you while you were working.’ As she spoke she opened the door to the Aga cooker and put a hand just inside to check the air temperature. Satisfied, she closed the door.

‘Did he sound OK?’

‘He was a bit shook up, I think,’ said Patsy. ‘He said the two families are very grateful. The hospital doctor told them that the couple would have both died if you hadn’t been there. He said the boy had got a broken ankle and a broken clavicle. The girl had a fractured skull and a broken arm. But they’re both going to be OK.’

‘That’s good,’ I said. ‘I completely missed the broken clavicle and the skull fracture.’

‘I suspect it was easier to spot them in a dry, well-lit ward,’ said Patsy.

‘Probably,’ I admitted.

‘Thumper wanted to know if we could go to a meeting in the Duck and Puddle tonight,’ said Patsy.

The Duck and Puddle is Bilbury’s local public house and the unofficial centre of village life.

‘A meeting?’ I said, with some surprise. Thumper wasn’t the sort of person who usually went to meetings. I’d certainly never known him to organise one.

‘He said he was ringing round and trying to get as many people there as he could.’

‘Do you know what the meeting is about?’

Patsy shook her head. ‘He didn’t say. He just said it was important. And that we should get there at half past nine.’

‘Then we’d better go,’ I said. I frowned as I realised what Patsy had said. ‘Half past nine is a bit late to start a meeting,’ I said.

‘That’s what I thought,’ agreed Patsy. ‘But he was quite definite about the time.’ She started running hot water into the sink, ready to wash up the dishes she’d been using. ‘Oh, and I’ve got to pop into Barnstaple this afternoon.’

‘OK,’ I said, surprised. It was unusual for either of us to go into Barnstaple by ourselves. We usually went in together and had a pub lunch in the Regent Hotel. ‘Problem?’

‘Oh, no, just something I need to do.’

I kissed her on the cheek, and went back upstairs to my study to struggle with the book I was writing.

‘Lunch will be in half an hour!’ called Patsy.

‘Great,’ I called back. ‘I’m starving.’

CHAPTER 3

It was just over two years since health service administrators had forced me to close down my medical practice in Bilbury.

A miserable, mean-spirited Health Service administrator called Perkins, a bureaucrat who worked for the National Health Service's local Planning and Rationalisation Department (a branch of the NHS that was so badly thought of by those whose lives were touched by it that those who worked for it did everything they could to remain secret) had decided that Bilbury was too small to have its own general practitioner. Perkins, who spoke with an annoying, whining voice which suited him perfectly, had invoked Government regulations and used his powers to cancel my contract with the Secretary of State and to put all my patients into the care of a practice in Barnstaple. It was, he had told me, in a long and almost incomprehensible letter, part of a Government plan to 'maximise resource utilisation'. For the health service it was the equivalent to Dr Beeching's savage cuts of the nation's railway system. To me, and to everyone in Bilbury it seemed to be as socially destructive as Beeching's cuts threatened to be. It was, we felt sure, a foolish decision that would undoubtedly produce short-term savings but, equally certainly, do long-term damage to the village and to the health of those who lived in it.

And so, as a result of Government policy, the health care of the villagers of Bilbury had officially become the responsibility of a modern group practice in Barnstaple. One of the senior partners there was young Dr Brownlow, the son of Bilbury's previous GP.

When my practice had been closed down I had been forced to choose between applying for a job elsewhere, and leaving Bilbury, or taking early retirement and trying to earn my living as a writer.

It wasn't a difficult decision to make.

I'd enjoyed being a village doctor. I could have imagined spending my life that way. I enjoyed being a part of a small, tightknit community and feeling that I was making a small contribution to the safety of the village.

'Being a village doctor is like being responsible for the health of a large family,' my predecessor Dr Brownlow once told me. 'As a GP in a village you'll see your patients grow old with you. You'll deliver babies, attend their weddings and then look after them when they have children.'

But when my practice was closed I didn't want to leave Bilbury. And I knew that my wife Patsy didn't want to leave the village either. Friends and relatives who had visited used to write and say how much they loved the place. 'I like to consider myself an honorary Bilburian,' wrote one friend who told me that it was only dreaming of life in Bilbury that he managed to get through the darker days of his life.

Most of the people who lived in Bilbury had lived there for years. Very few people moved there and then moved away. I knew several people in the village who had only ever been as far as Lynmouth to the east, Bideford to the west and Exeter to the south and who, indeed, regarded trips to any of these places as expeditions rather than mere excursions. A visit to Barnstaple, on the other hand, was considered to be simply an excursion requiring little more than a few days advance planning.

'Why would I want to go further?' asked one. 'I've talked to people who have travelled and I've seen the television. Nothing seems better than here.'

I found it difficult to argue with this viewpoint.

And so in 1972, when the Government had closed down my practice, I'd chosen to stay in Bilbury, to hang up my stethoscope, and to earn my living with my typewriter.

* * *

The Duck and Puddle was packed for the meeting to which Patsy and I had been invited. It was immediately clear that Thumper had done an excellent job at convening a meeting at such short notice.

Patchy Fogg welcomed Patsy and me to the meeting. 'It has been decided that we've survived long enough without a resident doctor in the village,' he said. There was much murmuring of approval response to this. 'A real village,' he went on, 'needs a pub, a shop, a church, a school and a doctor. We've got four of those. We need – and we intend to have – the fifth. How can you have a village without a doctor?'

'Without a doctor the very survival of Bilbury is threatened,' said Thumper. 'Without a doctor people will leave the village and no one will want to come here. The village will die.'

'Without enough people living here the Duck and Puddle and my shop will have to close,' said Peter Marshall. 'House prices will collapse,' he added after a short pause.

'Would you be willing to reopen your practice here in Bilbury?' asked Thumper.

The question wasn't a complete surprise, of course. Patsy and I had guessed that this could well be the purpose of the meeting. But I didn't know whether I should or could reopen my practice. It had been a couple of years since I'd last wielded a stethoscope in earnest. In particular I worried that the instincts I'd acquired as a GP might have left me.

My experience at the road accident had, in hindsight, not done my self-assurance any good at all. The small oasis of confidence I had had vanished and had been replaced by an endless, arid desert of doubt. A village GP, the only doctor around for miles, has to have belief in himself and has to be able to transmit that belief and faith to his patients without them feeling that he is arrogant or reckless. At the same time he needs to know, probably more than any other type of doctor, when he doesn't know and what he doesn't know. A village doctor works alone and must rely entirely on his own resources.

Could I still do it?

I'd thought long and hard about it.

Conscious that everyone was looking at me, waiting to hear my response, I picked my words with care.

'I'm very flattered that you'd like me to reopen the surgery,' I said. 'But it's really not down to me.' I paused. 'I'm afraid I don't think the bureaucrats will let me reopen my practice,' I went on. 'When they forced me to close the surgery they were quite certain about it. And they quoted some very official sounding regulations which gave them the authority to do it.'

'But when the weather is bad the doctors in Barnstaple can't always get out here,' said Patchy Fogg.

'As happened last night,' added another villager. I didn't see who it was.

'If you hadn't still been living here there would have been no one to help that couple in the car,' said Anne Thwaites, Thumper's long-standing girlfriend.

'I suspect the bureaucrats will just say that last night was exceptional,' I said.

I was dodging the important question and putting everything in the hands of the bureaucrats. It was, I suppose, my way of letting fate make the decision.

'The village has been cut off at least three times in the last twelve months,' pointed out Frank Parsons, the landlord of the Duck and Puddle. 'If anyone in the village needs a doctor when we're cut off what are we supposed to do? The authorities have to let us have our own doctor.'

'It's not as if we're asking them to build a new health centre,' said Gilly, Frank's wife. 'We just want them to let the doctor reopen his surgery at Bilbury Grange. A village needs five things to be a proper village: a shop, a church, a school, a doctor and a pub. We've got a pub. We've got a shop. We've got a church and a school. We need a doctor.'

There was loud murmuring of support for this point of view.

'If he wants to,' added Frank quickly, looking at me.

'If he wants to,' agreed Gilly.

'I never wanted to close the practice,' I told them truthfully. 'But the closure was forced on me. And whatever we decide we want won't matter a jot if the bureaucrats won't give us permission to reopen the surgery.'

'But if they gave permission you might be willing to do it?'

I looked at Patsy. 'Patsy and I would have to talk about it,' I said. 'It's a big decision which would, of course, affect us both a great deal.'

'But you might say yes?' said Patchy.

I looked at Patsy again. She smiled and, almost imperceptibly, she nodded. 'Yes,' I agreed. 'We might say 'yes'.'

'That's all we wanted to hear,' said Thumper. 'I think we can get the authorities to approve a reopening of your surgery.'

He said this with such certainty that I looked around. 'Is there something going on here that we don't know about?' I asked.

'Definitely,' laughed Frank.

'What?' I asked.

'We think it's better that you don't know,' smiled Thumper.

* * *

It was a cold but clear, moonlit and starry evening. We had walked to the Duck and Puddle and taken Ben with us. By the time the three of us had walked back to Bilbury Grange it was half past eleven. Ben loved night-time walks. From a dog's point of view there always seems to be far more going on at night than there is during the daytime. Several times we had to stop and wait for her while she scrambled through hedges and raced across nearby fields.

'How did you get on in Barnstaple?' I asked as we stood waiting for Ben to return.

'Fine,' said Patsy.

There was something in her voice. I looked at her. 'Are you all right?'

'I'm very definitely all right,' she said.

I looked at her. 'Is there something you should tell me?'

'I was going to keep it until tomorrow,' she said. 'It's been a busy day.'

'Keep what for tomorrow?'

'I'll tell you in the morning.'

I looked at her. 'You can't do that! Tell me now. What is it? Is there are a problem? Are you OK? You're not sick?'

She laughed. 'No, I'm not sick. I'm very healthy.'

Suddenly, I don't know why, I realised where she'd been. 'You went to see the doctor?'

She nodded. 'That nice lady doctor in Barnstaple.'

'But...why didn't you say something? What's wrong? What did you think was wrong? We're not supposed to have secrets from each other.'

Patsy laughed out loud. 'There's nothing at all wrong,' she said.

'At least I don't think there is.' She paused and bent down to pat Ben who had returned. She was soaking wet and muddy. 'And I hope you won't.'

I put my hands on her shoulders. 'Patsy, what is it?' I asked her.

'I think we should consider redecorating the small bedroom next to ours,' she said. 'Nice pretty wallpaper.'

'Don't change the subject!' I told her, pulling her towards me.

'Tell me why you went to see the doctor.' Ben wriggled and wriggled and managed to squeeze between us. She really was soaking wet.

'They have some lovely pink and blue striped wallpaper in Hutchins,' she said, mentioning a smart store in Barnstaple. 'We could get Thumper to put it up.'

'I can put up wallpaper,' I said.

'Oh, why not let Thumper do it,' she said.

'That stuff I put up in the dining room is still on the wall isn't it?'

'Most of it,' she agreed with a laugh. 'I had to get some more paste for two pieces. And the pattern doesn't quite match.'

She was being kind. The patterned wallpaper I had put up didn't match at all. And it had taken me days to do that.

'OK,' I said, feeling exasperated. 'We'll decorate the small bedroom and we'll get Thumper to do it. Will you please forget about wallpaper and tell me why you went to Barnstaple!'

'The beauty of it being pink and blue is that you don't have to worry about getting it wrong,' she said. 'And, despite all the clever things they can do with technology, I'd rather it was a surprise wouldn't you?'

'We'll paper the room purple and yellow if you like,' I said. 'But why did you go and see the doctor in Barnstaple?'

'Oh no, it's got to be pink and blue,' said Patsy.

I thought about this for a moment. Ben had now run off again and I could hear her barking at something. 'We really need a spare bathroom. If we're going to all this trouble wouldn't it be more sensible to see how much it would cost to have another bathroom put in?'

Patsy started to giggle. 'You really haven't guessed?'

'No! Guessed what?' I was genuinely getting confused.

'And maybe we could get Peter Marshall to make us a cradle. He made a beautiful one for the young Henshaws.'

'What on earth do we want...' I began.

It was only then that I realised exactly what Patsy had been trying to tell me. And suddenly, at long last, I understood. There wasn't much point in having a nursery or getting Peter Marshall to make a cradle if there wasn't going to be a baby to put in them.

And so, suddenly I understood.

'You're having...' She corrected me.

'*We're* having a baby.'

I hugged her, kissed her and let out a great cry of joy. Ben, assuming that I was calling her came hurtling back across the field and through the hedge. She hurled herself up at me. I held onto her and felt her rough tongue licking my cheek. The three of us stood there in the dark. A small family about to grow a little larger.

CHAPTER 4

The morning after the meeting at the Duck and Puddle I went to see Dr Brownlow.

Dr Brownlow was the reason I was living in Bilbury. He was the reason I was married to Patsy and the reason I had, before the bureaucrats closed it down, been a general practitioner in the village

Now Dr Brownlow looked more like a ghost than the man I had met when I'd first arrived in Bilbury. He weighed less than half he had done a year earlier. And the weight loss wasn't the result of dieting.

For the last few weeks he'd been my only, entirely unofficial patient.

It had started, as so many things do, with a telephone call.

* * *

He rang me one Thursday morning and asked me to pop round when I had a moment. He wouldn't say what it was for. When I arrived at his home the door was, as usual, opened by Bradshaw, Dr Brownlow's long-standing butler, valet and factotum.

Bradshaw looked no different now to how he'd looked when I first met him. He wore a black frock coat, black trousers, a white shirt and a black bow tie. Wizened, tiny and frail he had looked at least eighty when I'd first met him. He looked no younger now. On the other hand he looked no older either.

'Dr Brownlow is expecting you,' said Bradshaw, with an almost imperceptible bow of his head. He led the way to the drawing room. Dr Brownlow was sitting in a leather armchair beside a roaring log fire. He nodded to the chair opposite me. I sat down. The chair had long since lost its springs. It was like sitting on a marshmallow.

'Shall I make tea, sir?' asked Bradshaw.

Dr Brownlow looked at me. I shook my head. 'No thank you.'

'No thanks, Bradshaw,' said Dr Brownlow. He watched as the butler shuffled out of the room, closing the door behind him.

'Get me a whisky will you?' said Dr Brownlow, when we were alone.

There was a tray on a table beside Dr Brownlow's chair. There was a whisky bottle on the tray, together with a jug of water and two cut glass tumblers.

I got up, poured him about two fingers of whisky and looked across at him. He raised a hand to suggest I added more. I poured another two fingers worth. 'Water?'

He shook his head.

I handed him the glass and sat down again.

'Are you not having one?'

'No thanks,' I said. 'Maybe later.'

He took a sip, closed his eyes and savoured the flavour of the whisky. He held it in his mouth for a long time before he swallowed.

'How is everything?' I asked.

'Did you know that the Porters had left?'

I nodded. 'I heard,' I said. Frank Porter had been Dr Brownlow's gardener. His wife Ethel had been Dr Brownlow's housekeeper and cook.

'Frank inherited a chip shop in Lancashire,' said Dr Brownlow. 'He and Ethel have gone up there.'

'Have you got someone else?' I asked, though from the state of the garden I knew he hadn't.

He shook his head. 'And the dogs have both gone.'

'I know,' I said quietly. 'Thumper told me.' Dr Brownlow had had two Doberman Pinschers. They had terrified the life out of me, and most other people too.

'Thumper buried them for me,' said Dr Brownlow. I nodded. I knew that too.

Dr Brownlow shook his head. 'Are you still on the medical register?' he asked me suddenly.

Puzzled, I nodded.

'You can still write prescriptions and sign certificates?'

'Yes. I suppose so. But I don't have any patients.'

'Will you accept me as a patient? A private patient.'

'Yes, of course,' I replied, without having to think about the answer.

But then I thought about the question.

'Why?' I asked him. 'I don't understand. Is there something wrong with you? Why me? The Barnstaple practice looks after everyone in Bilbury.'

'I don't want them looking after me,' said Dr Brownlow. He started to say something but changed his mind. 'I don't want them looking after me,' he repeated.

His son was a senior partner at the practice which had taken over my former Bilbury practice. Clearly Dr Brownlow didn't want his son looking after him. 'We don't get on,' he told me bluntly, though this was no surprise.

'What's wrong with you?' I asked him, quietly. 'Why do you need a doctor?'

'Cancer,' he said bluntly. 'Pancreas.' He took a big sip of his whisky. This time he just swallowed it.

Shocked, disbelieving, I looked at him. 'How do you know? What tests have you had? Are you sure? When did you find out?' The questions were queuing up to be asked.

'I made the diagnosis a couple of months ago,' he said. 'I went up to London and saw a couple of chaps there. They did some prodding and some tests.'

'And they were certain?'

'No question of it.'

'Can they operate?'

Dr Brownlow shook his head.

'Drugs?'

'Just painkillers,' he said. 'That's where you come in.' He sipped at the whisky again. 'Three months. Probably less. No more.'

'I'll have that whisky if you don't mind,' I said. I stood up, walked the couple of paces to the whisky bottle and poured myself a stiff drink. I offered Dr Brownlow the bottle. He nodded. I added another good slug of whisky to his glass. He sat quite still, staring into space. Then, slowly, his eyes closed. For a moment I thought he had died and then I realised that he had just fallen asleep. I reached for his wrist. His pulse was fine. His eyelids fluttered but didn't open. I sat down and sipped at my whisky. It was, as always, a good malt. It was Dr Brownlow who had first introduced me to malt whisky. He'd insisted that I should know how it was made if I was going to drink it. 'You let the barley grains start to grow,' he said, 'until they're shoots an inch or so long. Then they're called malts. You smoke them over burning peat until they pick up the flavours of the peat and the smoke and have become nice and crisp. Then you make a mash of the malts with water – river or beck water not the stuff that comes out of the tap – and you let the stuff ferment. Then you distil it and you put the distillation into wooden casks to age it for several years. That's malt whisky. And there are enough different flavours and tastes and smells of malt whisky to suit every palate and to keep a man going through his life testing and tasting. In wooden casks the spirit develops and grows. You need to keep it in the wood for at least three years. Ten or fifteen years is better.'

I remembered I'd asked him what the difference was between malt whisky and ordinary grain whisky. He said that for ordinary grain whisky they just made the barley into a mash without the other stages. He also said that he had long had the thought that one day he might persuade a distiller to put malt whisky into wooden bottles so that the whisky would continue to age after it had been bought. In a glass bottle it is the same when you take it out as it was when you put it in.

'What does 'proof mean?' I'd asked him.

'Three hundred years ago a spirit seller would prove that the liquid he was selling was alcohol by mixing it with gunpowder and igniting it. If it burned with a steady blue flame it was considered 100% proof that it was 50% alcohol.' He grinned, I remember. 'These days,' he'd continued, 'they do the testing with hydrometers but they still use the same daft scale. So if something is 75% alcohol they say it's 150% proof. If it's 10% alcohol they say it's 20% proof.'

All this I remembered as I sipped at my whisky and the tears rolled down my cheeks. Dr Brownlow had done so much for me. He had taught me almost everything of value that I knew.

'I don't want to go into hospital,' Dr Brownlow said suddenly.

I looked across at him. His eyes were open again. 'Bradshaw can look after me.'

'Bradshaw?' I said, surprised. It was difficult to imagine a man who wore a frock coat and white tie working as a nurse.

'He was a nurse in the army,' explained Dr Brownlow. 'Thirty years. He's very good.'

I was surprised. I hadn't known.

'I'll need some things,' Dr Brownlow said.

'Morphine.'

'Morphine. Lots of it.' He'd smiled. 'Don't worry. I won't have time to become an addict.'

I sipped at my whisky. It had been the first time a patient had told me what was wrong with him and what the prognosis was and I was still in a state of shock. As a doctor I was used to being the one handing out information. Ever since I'd first worked for him Dr Brownlow had been more of a father than an employer.

'There are quite a few things I need to work out,' Dr Brownlow had continued. He, of course, had had time to get used to his own shocking news. 'The one big certainty is that I want to be buried next to my wife.'

I nodded. When Dr Brownlow's wife had died several years earlier she had been buried in the gardens. There was a piece of consecrated ground that had been used as a burial ground when the house had had its own chapel. A gravestone, already bearing Dr Brownlow's name and birth date, had been prepared. All the stonemason would have to do was add the date of Dr Brownlow's death.

'Are you sure...,' I'd begun. My voice had cracked. I swallowed hard and looked away for a moment. I didn't know why but I didn't want to wipe the tears away from my eyes. 'Are you sure you don't want me to arrange for you to see someone else? A specialist?'

'No need,' Dr Brownlow had said softly. 'Really. There's nothing anyone can do.' He sipped at his whisky. 'I've had a good life,' he said. 'I'm not especially unhappy that it's over. Now I just want to go with as much dignity as I can muster.'

I nodded, accepting his judgement and honouring his decision.

'Will you come back and see me in a couple of days?' he asked.

'There are quite a few things I want to talk over with you.'

'Of course.'

I stood up. I was glad to be able to leave. I needed time to come to terms with what he'd told me.

'One other thing,' he said. 'I'd rather people in the village didn't know just yet. Bradshaw knows, of course. And you can tell Patsy. But...'

'I won't tell anyone else unless you ask me to,' I assured him. I bent down and put a hand on his shoulder. 'I'll do everything I can to help you,' I promised him. 'Everything.'

He put his hand on top of mine and looked up at me. 'I know you will,' he said. He smiled. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'We're all dying. It's just something we all have to live with.' His smile broadened. 'Besides,' he added, 'I come from a long line of dead people.'

I squeezed his shoulder and tried to say something but the words wouldn't come out. I nodded and left.

Outside, as I walked back to my car I felt the tears pouring down my cheeks. I couldn't understand how the sun could keep shining. How could the birds keep singing? Didn't they know what was happening inside that house?

I put the car into gear and sped away, spraying gravel everywhere.

* * *

That evening, after dinner, I put on an old Barbour and a flat cap and went out into the garden.

'There's a huge pile of old clippings left over from the autumn,' I explained to Patsy. 'I'd better burn them.'

Getting rid of the clippings was only an excuse. I have always found lighting and managing a bonfire to be an excellent way to find some temporary respite from sadness and stress. Patsy knew this, of course. When I went outside it was raining steadily. It had started during dinner as a typical Devon drizzle, just more than mist but slightly less than drizzle, and had steadily built up into a downpour. By the time I got to the part of the garden we use for bonfires the rain was pouring down.

All the clippings and dried leaves and other bits of rubbish that I'd been storing were piled up ready to be burnt. Our gardener, Mr Parfitt, had, for weeks, been trundling the wheelbarrow, laden with garden detritus, to the site. But he'd been under strict instructions to leave the bonfire lighting to me. For him it would be just a chore, but it was, he knew, one of my favourite tasks in the garden.

I had taken several large cardboard boxes and a copy of the *Daily Telegraph* with me. Boxes are useful for keeping off the rain while the bonfire gets going. And the *Daily Telegraph* is the most inflammatory newspaper I know. Being a broadsheet helps, of course, but there's more to it than that. *The Daily Telegraph* seems to me to burn much better than other newspapers. Maybe it's the paper they use. Or something they put in the ink. Or maybe it's the words.

I put the boxes on their sides, placed screwed up pages of newspaper inside the boxes and then built piles of branches and twigs over and around the boxes. I picked out, and put on one side, the ash tree twigs and small branches because they make excellent kindling for fires in the house. The larger branches would provide the framework which would keep the sodden privet, bay, laurel and other cuttings away from the boxes while they caught fire.

A fire needs oxygen just as much as an animal does and the big mistake most bonfire builders make is to forget this and fail to leave enough space for the air to filter into the heart of the fire.

When the branches were hooped over the boxes, I piled the first few armfuls of clippings onto the top of the woody branches. I picked the greenest cuttings, the ones with the most leaves still attached, because these would help keep the rain off the underlying fire.

I bent down and lit the paper in each of the boxes. And then I stood up, took a pace or two backwards, and waited.

Within minutes the three boxes were ablaze. The bare, dry tree branches soon caught fire too. And then the smoke started. Plumes of white smoke from the drying and smouldering leaves and clippings. The laurel and bay crackled and threw off sparks as their oily, evergreen leaves caught fire. Some branches of rosemary added to the aroma.

Coniferous branches crackled too. I fed an armful of leaves onto the top of the fire.

I stood there, watching the rising flames and the vast plume of smoke disappearing into the night. The rain was heavier. Suddenly I felt a hand slide into mine. I turned and looked at Patsy.

'You'll miss him won't you?'

'I will,' I whispered. The smoke was irritating my eyes. Tears were rolling down my cheeks. The two were not connected.

'Me too,' she said softly.

We stood there for a long time. We didn't speak again. Occasionally we leant against a nearby tree. From time to time we pushed twig ends into the fire to make sure that when the fire had burnt away there would be nothing left but a neat circle of ash.

When we went back up to the house it was still raining. I put the small branches of ash tree into the log shed and once inside the house we hung up our coats. I put the kettle on and Patsy took a couple of crumpets out of the bread bin and the toasting fork from its place beside the Aga. She opened the fire door to toast the crumpets. I could feel the heat across the other side of the kitchen.

'We must both reek of smoke,' I said. 'We need baths.'

'It's a lovely smell,' she said.

I took a bottle of whisky from the sideboard and put it on the kitchen table, ready to add a splash to the coffee Patsy was making.

Appropriately, I remembered, the whisky had been a Christmas present from Dr Brownlow.

There would be no more Christmas presents from him. I wondered how long he'd got.

I knew I would remember this day for the rest of my life.

* * *

That had been some time ago.

He'd lived longer than either he or I had expected. But now the end was approaching fast.

'Push me out onto the terrace,' he said. He was sitting in a wheelchair. It was only the second time I'd seen him use it.

'It's cold,' I warned him.

'I'm not a bloody orchid,' he said. 'There's a rug on the back of the sofa. Drape it around my knees. If I'm going to be an invalid I might as well look the part.'

I opened the French windows, took the brake off the wheelchair and pushed him outside. He grabbed the whisky bottle and two glasses as we passed the table. He didn't get the water jug. I parked him on the terrace where he had a good view of the gardens.

'That oak tree was there when I came here,' he said, nodding towards a huge oak about fifty yards from the house. He poured whisky into the glasses and handed one to me.

'A single oak tree is like a village,' Dr Brownlow said. 'One tree can play host to hundreds of different insects, flowers, fern and lichen. Did you know that? No other tree carries as many species as the oak tree.' He paused for breath. He had difficulty in breathing if he spoke too much. 'And because the leaf canopy offers protection from the elements without preventing light reaching the ground a whole host of flowers grow around its trunk – bluebells, wood sorrel, primroses.'

I admitted that I didn't know this.

'How many different mammals do you think live in or underneath an oak tree? Or benefit directly from its existence?'

'Squirrels?' I suggested rather lamely.

'Over thirty species,' he said. 'Badgers, deer, hedgehog and mice all eat acorns. Field mice climb up oak trees and steal eggs out of nests. So do weasels. Do you know how many birds make their nests in oak trees?'

I admitted that I didn't know that either.

'Nuthatch, tawny owl, jay, great spotted woodpecker, rook, pied flycatcher, tree creeper, blue tit and great tit. Nearly seventy species in all.' He paused. 'Even sparrowhawks live in oaks. They make their nests in old crows' nests. Sometimes they'll nest in an old squirrel drey. Did you know that a squirrel's nest is called a drey?'

I nodded.

'So, are you going to do it?'

'Do what?'

'Don't be obtuse. Open up a surgery again.'

I sighed. 'To be honest, I don't know whether they'll let me,' I said. 'The administrators are having a meeting.'

'They'll let you open up again,' said Dr Brownlow firmly.

'You seem very certain.'

‘The villagers have decided they’ve been without a doctor long enough.’

I looked at him. ‘But do you think the villagers can persuade the authorities to change their minds?’

‘Oh, I think so.’

‘Do you know something I don’t know? Has Thumper told you something?’

Dr Brownlow turned to me and grinned. He ignored my questions. ‘Will you open up your surgery again if they give you the opportunity?’

I nodded.

‘Good.’ he said. He raised his glass and held it out towards me. I raised mine and we clinked glasses and drank.

‘I know you’ve got your books,’ he said. ‘It’s different for you. But being a country GP was the only thing that gave my life meaning and purpose. Especially in the years since I’ve been alone.’ He pointed at a squirrel running down the trunk of the oak. We watched it for a few moments. After Dr Brownlow’s wife had died he had very much lived the life of a lonely bachelor. ‘It made me feel that I was at the heart of the village.’

I didn’t speak for a while. ‘I know what you mean,’ I said at last. ‘I’ve missed it a lot.’

‘It’s meaning and purpose which give life to our lives. Without purpose life is just a compendium of routine, habit and drudgery. I always needed something to believe in, to work for, to make me feel contributing.’

The squirrel had disappeared.

‘How do they do that?’

‘Do what?’

‘Disappear like that. Just disappear.’

‘Magic.’

‘I suppose so.’

We sat in silence for quite a while.

‘If this isn’t nice I don’t know what is,’ he said.

We sat for a little longer.

‘It’s important to notice the magic moments,’ he said. ‘We all rush around so much that we tend to miss them.’ There was another long silence.

‘We’re all so busy racing through life, waiting for the bad news. Dealing with problems. Facing crises. The nice moments pass us by. We sort of enjoy them. But we don’t savour them as we should.’

‘I know what you mean,’ I said. I sipped at the whisky. ‘If I do start the practice up again, do you think I should let them pressure me into having an appointment system?’

‘The dour men in suits will want you to have one,’ he said. ‘Appointment systems are all the rage now. The bureaucrats like them. It keeps everything neat.’

‘I’m not keen,’ I said. When I had taken over from Dr Brownlow I had followed his example and had refused to have an appointments system at all. It had worked very well. Patients had to wait but they always got seen within an hour or so of turning up. If there was a long queue, patients would tell the person they were in front of that they were just slipping out, perhaps to do a little shopping at Peter Marshall’s. Or, if it was a fine day, they’d just go out and sit in the garden and read a magazine.

‘Appointment systems probably suit a town practice,’ he said. ‘But you might be better without one here.’ He sipped at his whisky.

‘Up to you, of course.’

We neither of us spoke for a while.

‘People in Bilbury don’t all have the telephone,’ he said. ‘And half of those who do don’t like using it.’

I nodded. He was right. When I’d been a GP many of the requests for visits had come on slips of paper passed over to the receptionist or slipped under the front door

‘Actually, on thinking about it, I’m not sure appointment systems are right for doctors anywhere. Appointment systems are fine for lawyers and hairdressers. But patients can’t be ill by appointment.’ He stared at the oak tree. A squirrel scampered along a branch and then disappeared. It was impossible to see where this one had gone either.

‘My son has an appointments system,’ continued Dr Brownlow.

‘Someone told me the other day that they rang up needing an appointment and were told they couldn’t see a doctor for ten days.’

‘I’ve heard that sort of thing,’ I agreed.

‘Bloody silly,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘What are you supposed to do? Make an appointment ten days before you become ill or wait in agony for ten days when you have become ill?’

We sat, saying nothing for a while longer. Silences are difficult to endure with some people. I always found silences easy with Dr Brownlow.

‘It’s getting chilly,’ I said at last, standing up. ‘I’d better take you indoors.’

CHAPTER 5

Patsy was in Barnstaple attending her first antenatal class and so I called in at the Duck and Puddle to get myself some lunch. I found something of a crisis there.

'Frank has run out of pickled eggs,' said Patchy, as I walked in. 'We're thinking of making a formal complaint.'

'Who are you going to complain to?' demanded Frank.

'The Pickled Egg Marketing Board,' answered Patchy instantly. 'They'll be interested.'

'I couldn't get into town,' said Frank defensively. 'Peter Marshall doesn't sell the large jars of pickled eggs we need so I have to get them from the wholesaler. The car wouldn't start. The battery is flat.'

'Don't tell lies,' said Gilly. 'You'll only get found out.'

'The car wouldn't go!' insisted Frank.

'It's always the cover up that causes the most trouble,' said Gilly. She turned to Patchy. 'He hit a hedge. The car hasn't got a right front wheel.'

'Well, there's that as well,' admitted Frank. 'But the battery is flat too.'

'That's because you keep forgetting to get a new one,' said Gilly.

'You'd forget your head if it wasn't fixed on.' She turned, hurled the tea towel she was holding at Frank's head and stalked out of the bar. The tea towel hit Frank on the neck and stayed on his shoulder.

'What's wrong with Gilly?' asked Thumper. 'She seems a bit overwrought today. Not her usual breezy self.'

'I forgot her birthday,' admitted Frank. 'Didn't even buy her a card.'

Thumper, Patchy and I sighed. An unhappy Gilly would make the Duck and Puddle unbearable.

'Apparently it was her 50th,' said Frank.

'Oh no,' groaned Patchy. 'You missed a milestone.'

'You've got to sort this out,' said Thumper.

'Cost you twice as much now,' said Patchy. Frank looked at him.

'Whatever you buy her now will have to be twice as expensive as it would have had to be if you'd bought it before her birthday,' explained Patchy.

'I didn't know she was that old,' said Frank.

'You didn't tell her that, did you?' said Patchy.

Frank paused. 'What was wrong with that?' he asked. 'It was a compliment.'

'It'll cost you three times as much,' said Patchy. He looked at Thumper who nodded.

'I haven't the foggiest idea what she wants,' said Frank glumly. There was a long silence.

'I wish I was married to the Queen,' said Frank eventually.

We all looked at him, puzzled. Frank had never previously shown any romantic interest in Her Majesty.

'Her birthday is printed in my diary,' he explained. 'I can't forget her birthday even if I want to. Prince Philip has got it easy.'

'She must have given you hints,' said Patchy. 'Women always give hints.'

Thumper nodded in agreement. 'Definitely,' he agreed.

'Patsy has been known to mention things,' I agreed. 'Subtle hints.'

'What do you mean?' asked Frank. 'What sort of hints?'

I thought for a moment. 'Oh, things like 'I saw a pair of green shoes in Barnstaple today. Size five. In that shop next to the tobacconist's. They were ridiculously priced. How can anyone justify spending that much on a pair of shoes?'

Frank looked at me blankly. 'What sort of hint is that?' he asked.

'That's telling you about something she doesn't want.'

We all looked at him. Patchy sighed. Thumper shook his head.

'How long have you been married?' I asked him.

Frank thought for a while. 'Can't remember,' he said at last. 'Long time though.'

'What's she talked about a lot recently?' asked Thumper.

'The bathroom sink is blocked,' said Frank. 'She's always on about that.' He brightened up. 'Maybe if I get a plumber in to sort it out? Or I could buy her a plunger. That would be cheaper.'

'You can't buy your wife a sink plunger for her birthday,' said Patchy.

'Not when it's after her birthday,' said Thumper. 'You might have got away with it if you'd bought it before her birthday. But not afterwards.'

From Thumper this was serious stuff. He had once bought Anne Thwaites, the mother of his child, a second-hand petrol driven chainsaw for her birthday. When she had shown slightly less enthusiasm than he had expected he'd pointed out that he would use it to cut logs for the fire to keep her warm.

‘Her sister went to London a couple of months ago,’ said Frank. ‘Gilly went on about that for ages. Kept going on about it.’

‘Take her to London for the weekend,’ said Patchy firmly.

‘London?’ said Frank.

‘London,’ said Patchy. ‘And take her round the shops and buy her something expensive. It doesn’t matter what it is as long as it’s expensive.’

‘But we can’t leave the pub!’ said Frank.

‘The brewery must have couples they send round to cover illness and holidays,’ said Thumper.

Frank thought for a moment and then nodded.

‘Patchy is right,’ I said. ‘Get a locum in to look after the pub and take Gilly to London for the weekend. Stay somewhere nice and take her shopping in Harrods.’

‘You think that would settle her down?’ asked Frank.

‘Definitely,’ said Thumper.

‘We still haven’t got any pickled eggs,’ said Patchy. ‘I’ll have a packet of crisps as long as you’ve got the ones that have the salt wrapped up in a little blue bag inside them.’

‘Why on earth do you want those?’ demanded Thumper, as Frank disappeared under the counter.

‘I like having control over my crisps,’ replied Patchy. ‘I don’t want some unseen machine sprinkling salt on for me.’

There was a cry of delight from somewhere under the counter where Frank had been rummaging around cardboard boxes.

‘Here you are!’ he said, banging a large box of crisps on the bar counter. ‘Crisps with little bags of salt inside.’ He tore open the box, pulled out a packet of crisps and handed it to Patchy.

‘Bit soft aren’t they?’ said Patchy, squeezing the packet rather critically.

‘They’re antique crisps,’ said Thumper. ‘Just up your street.’

‘Very funny,’ said Patchy, tearing the packet wide open. He rummaged around in the packet until he found the pinch of salt wrapped in blue paper.

‘A mate of mine once found a five pound note wrapped up in one of those little blue twists,’ said Thumper.

‘I don’t want a five pound note,’ said Patchy, untwisting the paper. ‘I want salt.’ He sprinkled the salt on his crisps and then closed the bag and shook it.

CHAPTER 6

‘Have you seen the local paper?’ asked Patsy.

I hadn’t. I had meant to pick up a copy at Peter Marshall’s shop but I’d forgotten. We didn’t have papers delivered to the house for two reasons. First, it was easy enough to get one from the village shop. Second, and by far the best reason, there were no newspaper deliveries in the village.

‘Look at the letters in this week’s paper,’ said Patsy. She picked the paper up off the table and handed it to me. It was already opened at the correct page.

The lead letter, right across the top of the page, was headed ‘Deteriorating Medical Care in Bilbury’.

Dear Sir,

As a long-standing Bilbury resident I am appalled at the quality of medical care provided by the general practitioner branch of the National Health Service. The other night I had the misfortune to trip over one of my Labradors in my own hallway. My good lady wife immediately telephoned our General Practitioner to inform him that his attendance would be required forthwith. Three and a quarter hours later a seedy looking fellow in a cheap suit arrived. He informed me that he was a partner of my usual GP. I was in a considerable amount of pain for all this time. If I had done myself serious injury I could have died.

This situation is quite outrageous and the appalling decision to close the Bilbury practice must be corrected immediately. The people of Bilbury are just as entitled to receive decent medical care as are the citizens of any other town or village in the land. The NHS minions who made this appalling decision must be held accountable for their blunder.

Yours sincerely

(Name and address withheld)

There were three other similar letters underneath it.

Dear Sir

Ever since Bilbury lost its own resident medical officer the quality of care in the village has steadily deteriorated. If a patient dies because of this state of affairs I trust that the officials responsible will be prepared to explain their decision to the bereaved family and friends.

Yours sincerely

(Name and address withheld)

Dear Sir

When my little boy was ill with earache I called the doctor. An hour and a half later the doctor still hadn’t turned up and so I telephoned a doctor friend who lives on the coast of South Wales. He has a motor boat which he uses for fishing. He was at my home less than ninety minutes after I called. The doctor from Barnstaple arrived 75 minutes after he had gone. What would have happened in a real emergency If the authorities are determined to deny Bilbury its own general practitioner then perhaps they would allow us to register with a practice in Wales rather than forcing us to register with one in Barnstaple.

If a patient dies because of this bureaucratic decision I hope that those responsible will be hauled into the witness box to defend themselves.

Yours sincerely

(Name and address withheld)

Dear Sir

I am 87-years-old and since I have no car of my own I am entirely reliant on public transport. There is now a bus service between Bilbury and Barnstaple just twice a week. A bus leaves Bilbury at 11.30 a.m. on Tuesdays and Fridays and arrives in Barnstaple at 12.49 p.m. The return bus from Barnstaple to Bilbury leaves the bus station at 1.19 p.m. and arrives back in Bilbury at 2.39 p.m. This means that anyone wishing to visit the doctor and not having their own car has just 30 minutes to get to the surgery, see the doctor and get back to the bus station. The bus station is three quarters of a mile from the surgery.

The result is that the people of Bilbury now receive very second rate health care. When – rather than if – someone dies because of this short-sighted attitude I hope that the police will want to interview the administrators whose decision to close down the practice in Bilbury led directly to this sad state of affairs.

Yours sincerely

(Name and address withheld).

‘Thumper and Patchy have been busy,’ I said to Patsy, putting down the paper.

‘So it would seem.’

‘Of course, it’s always possible that four real people wrote these letters.’

‘Though it is convenient that they all chose to write them this week.’

‘Quite.’

‘What sort of effect do you think they’ll have on the NHS?’

I didn’t have to think about it for long. ‘The final paragraph of each letter is very powerful,’ I said. ‘In my experience the one thing bureaucrats don’t like is being expected to take responsibility for their actions.’

‘So you think the NHS might let you open up your surgery again?’

I thought about it for a while. ‘For the first time, I do think it’s possible,’ I said at last. ‘Thumper and Patchy have done a pretty impressive job.’

CHAPTER 7

A week after the meeting in the Duck and Puddle I received a telephone call from the local NHS bureaucrat who was responsible for administering general practice in the area.

He told me that the medical practice in Barnstaple which had been looking after Bilbury had unexpectedly decided that they no longer felt able to provide medical care for the villagers. He said that this news had been received in the administrative offices with some dismay, that it had put them in rather a difficult position and that in order to avoid the delay that would ensue if they had to advertise the practice in the normal manner he wondered if I would consider reopening my practice and taking on responsibility for the medical care of the people of Bilbury.

‘You have experience of the area,’ he said. ‘And we would be very happy if you felt able to resume your previous responsibilities.’

‘The GPs in Barnstaple no longer want to provide medical cover for Bilbury?’

‘That is correct.’

‘So I’d be completely responsible for patients in Bilbury?’

‘Yes, that is our proposal.’

‘Day time surgeries and night time care? Everything? I’d be an independent general practitioner? No ties whatsoever with any other practice?’

‘Indeed, yes, that is our proposal.’

‘When would you want me to start?’

‘As soon as possible. I understand from our records that you ran your surgery from your home. Would you be doing that again?’

‘I think so. Yes.’

‘The committee would like to have a meeting with you on Thursday morning to discuss this.’

‘No meetings.’

I hate meetings, I hate bureaucrats and I hate committees. I long ago decided that the main job of a committee is to meet. People make decisions. Committees have meetings. And nowhere on the planet are there any more self-important, self-congratulating, prevaricating, uncaring people than those sitting on health service committees.

‘The committee...’

‘No meeting,’ I said firmly. ‘You know who I am. I know what the job is. You need a doctor for Bilbury. There is no need to have a meeting. If you want me to do the job I will do it.’

There was a long silence.

‘I will need to speak to the chairman.’

‘Please do.’

‘I’ll ring you back.’

‘Fine.’

He rang back in just under a quarter of an hour.

‘Given the circumstances, would it be possible for you to take over responsibility for Bilbury from this coming weekend?’

‘That’s rather short notice.’

‘The practitioners in Barnstaple are adamant that they won’t provide cover for patients in Bilbury.’

‘And you have a legal responsibility to find a general practitioner prepared to take on the care of the villagers?’

‘Er, yes, that’s correct.’

I thought hard. Never again would I be in a position of such negotiating strength with the local bureaucrats.

‘I’ll hire a receptionist, but also I’ll need the NHS to pay for a district nurse to work with me,’ I told him. I knew this would be something the bureaucrats would try to avoid.

I’m sure we can arrange for a nurse from Barnstaple to visit Bilbury once a week,’ said the administrator.

‘Dr Brownlow always had a full-time district nurse working with him,’ I said. ‘I don’t think it would be possible to look after the villagers properly without the services of a district nurse.’

There was a long pause. ‘I’ll have to consult on this,’ said the administrator.

‘Fine,’ I said. ‘You know where to reach me.’ I hesitated. ‘Naturally, although you’ll be paying her wages I will want to choose and recruit the nurse myself’

‘Oh I definitely don’t think we can agree to that,’ said the administrator. He sounded very firm. ‘We have procedures to follow.’

‘Bilbury is a very small village,’ I told him. ‘We need a nurse who lives locally and who fits in with the community.’

There was a silence.

'I'll telephone you later,' he said. He paused again. 'Will those be your only stipulations? You choose a nurse and we pay her wages?'

'If you agree to do that then I'll take over as Bilbury's GP from this coming Saturday.'

I went into the kitchen where Patsy was baking a fruit cake. When I told her that it seemed likely that I was about to become a GP again she said she had never had any doubts about it. I said that I was waiting for the bureaucrat to call me back to confirm it. She said it was a formality and that he would ring back before the cake went into the oven. She was right. This time the administrator rang me back eleven minutes later to tell me that the health service had agreed to my terms. He said a contract would be sent out to me by recorded delivery mail. Patsy put her arms around my neck and gave me a kiss. I kissed her back.

'When I've finished this cake I'd better give your old surgery a clean,' she said, breaking away from me. Suddenly she started laughing. I looked at her, puzzled. 'You've got a ring of flour around your collar,' she said. 'It looks as though you've had a halo and it's slipped.'

I said I hoped this wasn't an omen. I looked at my watch. 'I need to recruit a nurse and a receptionist,' I said.

'Who are you going to get?'

'I need a slightly pernickety, fastidious receptionist,' I said. 'And a good reliable district nurse.'

'Miss Johnson,' said Patsy instantly, naming the receptionist who had worked for me when I'd taken over Dr Brownlow's practice.

'Absolutely,' I agreed. 'She is the only real choice for receptionist.'

Miss Johnson was kind, loyal, strong and hard-working. If you got in her bad books she could be stern and a recalcitrant, unmoving opponent; a cross between the headmistress of a girls' school and an English bulldog. I couldn't imagine how difficult it would be to try to manage the practice without her.

Doreen Johnson had been Dr Brownlow's secretary and receptionist for longer than even he could remember. Tall, slim and white-haired she was a martyr to her feet and always wore a single row of pearls. She always had a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles perched on the end of her nose. A thin gold chain hung from the arms of the spectacles and was draped around the back of her neck.

She had an inexhaustible fund of knowledge and information about the workings of the National Health Service bureaucracy and the idiosyncrasies of the patients. She also knew where everyone lived, what they did for a living, how they voted and what they were thinking. She could answer every question about any villager which began with the words 'Do you know...?' By lunchtime each day (including Sundays and bank holidays) she knew what everyone had for breakfast.

I knew that Miss Johnson had retired and that I would have to try to persuade her to unretire.

The other person I wanted to recruit was Kay McBride, the former district nurse. I hadn't seen Kay McBride for ages. As Kay Wilson she had been married to the local policeman. That marriage had ended tragically when PC Wilson had knocked down and killed a boy in the village. Full of remorse and unable to live with the guilt PC Wilson had hung himself. A couple of years later the widow had married a local tractor engineer called Ernie McBride. He was 22 years her junior but the marriage had apparently proved a resounding success.

'Do you know where Kay is living?' I asked Patsy. I knew exactly where I could find Miss Johnson.

'She's still in Ilfracombe, as far as I know,' said Patsy. She frowned.

'She's not still killing cats, is she?'

When she had still been Mrs Wilson, Kay had persuaded the vet to put down her husband's two cats. He had been heartbroken. Their only crime had been their age. I shared Patsy's concern. The killing of the cats had worried me then and worried me still. But I needed a district nurse and I needed one quickly.

'Miss Johnson will probably know where she is,' I said. 'I'll go and see her first.'

CHAPTER 8

I bumped into Thumper (almost literally) on my way to see Miss Johnson. His van was parked on a corner in a narrow lane just wide enough to take one car at a time. There were two other cars parked in front of him. I didn't recognise either of the other vehicles or their drivers.

'What's up?' I asked Thumper.

'There's a cow lying down in the lane.' He stepped onto the verge and pointed to her. I stepped up beside him. He was right. A large brown and white cow was lying down on the road. She'd positioned herself in such a way that she could munch at the lush grass growing in the verge. She seemed quite happy. She looked at us and carried on chewing in that lazy yet determined way cows have.

'Can't anyone move her?'

'She won't budge. I've tried shouting at her to move. She takes no notice.'

'Who does she belong to?'

'Dunno. Probably one of Sam Houghton's. When he moves his cows from field to field he usually just opens both gates and lets the cows meander down when the fancy takes them. The cows know where to go so he leaves them to it.'

'But this one seems to have gone on sit down strike.'

'Apparently so.'

We stood and waited for a while. The cow kept chewing in the way that cows do. She showed no sign of wanting to move. Thumper told me he was on the way to Cornflower Cottage.

'New people there,' he said. 'Have you met them?'

I shook my head.

'Phatt,' he said.

'All of them?' I asked, misunderstanding.

'No. That's their name. They're called Phatt.' He spelt it for me. 'I've been doing some work on the cottage for them. They're having a new kitchen and a new bathroom put in.' He screwed up his nose. 'Ghastly,' he said. He shuddered. 'They got me to put in a maroon bathroom suite. Maroon bath, maroon handbasin and maroon lavatory.' He shook his head sadly. 'I nearly refused,' he said. He grinned. 'But they're new. They're paying townie prices.' Thumper was one of the kindest men I knew. He was always doing favours for old people who had no money, and when he worked for friends he could rarely be persuaded to take more than the cost of the materials he'd bought. But he had no qualms about overcharging people whom he regarded as fair game. It was, I suppose, his way of playing Robin Hood.

'They've agreed to let me open up the practice,' I told Thumper.

He grinned. 'I thought they might.'

'How did you get them to agree?' I asked. 'What have you been up to?'

'There were a couple of letters in the local paper.'

'I saw them. That might have influenced the bureaucrats but I think there was something else.'

'You think so?'

'Yes.'

Thumper smiled, thought for a moment and then shook his head.

'I don't think you want to know.'

'Was it legal?'

'Entirely.'

'I didn't want to know beforehand,' I told him. 'But I do now.'

Thumper hesitated, sighed and then made up his mind. 'We had a sick rota,' he told me. 'Two dozen of us took it in turns to ring the doctors in Barnstaple and demand home visits. We called them out three or four times a night.'

I couldn't help laughing. 'I'm not surprised they gave in!'

Just then Samuel Houghton's tractor pulled up behind my car. Samuel clambered out and meandered over to where we were standing.

'Why the queue?' he asked.

Thumper pointed to the cow. 'One of yours?'

Samuel nodded. 'Sorry about this,' he said cheerfully. 'It's the one I bought at auction last Thursday. She's deaf and a bit bloodyminded.' He walked slowly over to the cow, bent down until his mouth was about six inches from her left ear and shouted 'Get up my dear!' in her ear.

The cow got up.

Samuel tapped her lightly on the backside. He leant close to her ear again. 'To your field!' he shouted.

The cow set off down the lane.

'Deaf,' explained Samuel again. He got back into his tractor and sat there waiting for the traffic jam to disappear.

Still chewing, the cow started walking down the lane, following the trail of hardening cow pats left by her companions.

* * *

After the Government had closed down my medical practice Miss Johnson had decided to retire. She was old enough to take a small private pension to which she had contributed for most of her life, and her own modest savings had received a welcome boost when she had received an unexpected windfall after the death of an elderly aunt.

'I could never leave Bilbury,' she had told me. 'And since I can't drive a tractor or milk a cow I don't think I'll find any other work here.'

And so Miss Johnson had declared her intention to cultivate roses, read sentimental, romantic novels and never answer the telephone again.

After knocking on the front door of her cottage, I opened it and walked in. I don't think there are more than half a dozen doorbells in Bilbury. When visiting one another most people living in the village just knock and walk in. This can, of course, lead to some embarrassing moments but since the village's inhabitants tend to think of themselves as members of one large family these embarrassments are regarded as trivial and of little consequence.

Miss Johnson was sitting in the tiny living room of her tiny cottage. If she had changed at all in the time since we had both retired from medical practice it was to look younger and healthier. She was wearing a plain blue skirt and a white blouse. She wore her pearls, of course, and the gold-rimmed spectacles. 'I made a seed cake for you,' she said. Miss Johnson's seed cake was renowned and incomparable.

'How did you know I was coming?'

She looked at me over her spectacles. 'I would have been very disappointed in you if you hadn't come to see me.'

I laughed. I couldn't help it. Miss Johnson had always been the best informed person in the village. She usually knew who was getting married or having a baby even before they did themselves.

'How did you know I was going back into business as a village GP?' I asked her.

She looked at me over her spectacles again.

'OK!' I said, holding up a hand. Miss Johnson had never liked telling me the identity of her sources. 'Just one question: will you come back and work with me?'

'Of course I will!' she said emphatically.

'You're not enjoying your retirement too much?'

She leant forward. 'To be perfectly honest,' she said, 'I'm bored rigid. The roses don't take more than twenty minutes a day at the most and if I read any more of these wretched novels I think I'll go potty.' She pointed to a row of paperback novels sitting on her bookshelf

'You miss the gossip?'

'Of course I do! When are we starting?'

'This Saturday.'

'This Saturday! Gosh. Thumper's little plan did work well.'

I smiled. 'It would seem so.'

'I'll pop round to the Grange tomorrow shall I? When are they sending the patients' medical records over from Barnstaple?'

I looked at her, not quite sure how to tell her that I'd forgotten all about the medical records. But I didn't have to say anything. My silence told her the answer.

Miss Johnson sighed, looked over her spectacles at me and shook her head in mock despair. 'Never mind,' she said. 'I'll ring the bureaucrats later on and get them to send the records over in a taxi.'

'Will they do that?'

'They will if I tell them that if they don't and someone dies you'll see that they're blamed.'

'Ah, yes.' I said.

'Your little trick never fails,' she said. 'You taught me that one.'

A year or two earlier I had used this threat to get the local health service administrators to rush me the medical records for a patient who had just moved into the area. The administrators had never forgotten the threat – or the lesson.

I smiled. 'And that was about the only thing I did teach you!'

'I'll go and get the cake,' said Miss Johnson. 'Shall we have a glass of my elderberry wine to celebrate?'

'A small glass,' I said. 'I like your elderberry wine but it's got a kick like a bad-tempered mule. And then you can tell me how I can persuade Kay to come back to work as the practice nurse.'

'Oh, if you're quick I don't think you'll have too much difficulty,' said Miss Johnson, with a twinkle in her eye. 'When I last saw Kay she told me she was working as a barmaid in a pub in Barnstaple I can't think that's quite her cup of tea.'

'Why on earth is she working in a pub?'

'There weren't any other vacancies for district nurses and she didn't want to work in a hospital,' answered Miss Johnson. 'I don't think our Kay likes authority too much,' she said.

* * *

It took me twenty five minutes to get into Barnstaple. I would have got there quicker except for the tractor which held me up for a mile or so between Winford Bridge and Garman's Down. The driver was too busy trying not to let his overladen load of straw topple into the ditch to notice that there was a car stuck behind him.

In Barnstaple, I left the car in the car park behind Bear Street and hurried through the town to the pub where Miss Johnson had told me I could find Kay behind the bar.

It was a dark and rather dingy pub that advertised itself as having been serving beer and sandwiches since the Middle Ages. It didn't look as if it had received a lick of paint since opening day. I wondered if they were still selling the same sandwiches.

I spotted Kay straight away. She was polishing a glass with a rather grubby tea towel and trying to ignore a small, skinny bald customer who had his shirt sleeves rolled up to display two large tattoos – one on each forearm. She was wearing a very low cut white blouse which was obviously fashioned to display her more than ample cleavage; the neckline of the blouse was edged with white lace designed to draw attention to an apparently bottomless pink canyon.

The customer was sipping his pint of beer and staring into the cleavage as though trying to hypnotise it. Or maybe he was the one who was being hypnotised.

'Your landlord claims to have been serving sandwiches since the Middle Ages,' I murmured.

'That's right,' muttered Kay. 'We've been serving ale and sandwiches since 1546.'

'Sandwiches weren't invented until the 18th century,' I said. 'They were named after the Earl of Sandwich. He ordered that one be made for him after he'd spent 24 hours at a gambling table.'

Kay stopped polishing, put down the glass, and looked at me. She was, I could tell, ready to snarl at me. But slowly a huge smile appeared on her face. 'It's you!' she cried. 'What on earth are you doing in this dump?'

'I came to see you.' I looked at her. She seemed different. Then I realised what it was. 'You seem taller. You must be wearing very high heels.'

She shook her head. 'I'm standing on an upturned beer crate,' she told me. 'There are three of them round here.'

'Why on earth are you standing on an upturned beer crate? Isn't it uncomfortable and unstable?'

'It's so that I have to lean forward a lot.'

'Isn't that bad for your back?'

'I'm sure it is. But it's good for business. The more the customers get to see of my cleavage the more beer I sell.'

'Oh.' I said, blushing.

She shrugged. 'It was the only bloody job I could get.' She looked down at her blouse and tried in vain to cover the open chasm that was her cleavage. 'The boss insists that all the barmaids dress like this. He calls us Ye Olde Englishe Barmaids,' she said. 'And he only employs barmaids with Ye Bigge Knockers.' She laughed and shrugged. 'Ah well, I need the work,' she said. 'Things aren't good in the tractor business at the moment.' She put down the glass and tea towel. 'How are you? What's happening? What are you doing? How's Patsy?'

'I want you to come back to work,' I said. 'I'm opening up the practice again. I need a district nurse who knows how to tie a bandage, how to dress a wound, how to comfort a bereaved widow, how to find cottages which don't have names on and how to work all alone except for a slightly eccentric general practitioner who constantly needs the help and support of a loyal, kind and sympathetic district nurse.'

Kay stared at me. She opened her mouth to say something but nothing came out.

'Do you know anyone who might prove suitable?' I asked.

She crossed her arms across her chest and studied me as though contemplating making a bid. 'Not me,' she said eventually. She shook her head to emphasise her reply.

'I start tomorrow,' I said. 'I only found out about it yesterday. It's all a bit of a rush. I need you.'

Kay carried on staring.

'Another pint, lovey,' said the skinny man with the tattoos. He pushed his empty glass across the bar.

'You can't...,' she began. 'The health service will have to advertise the job. I can't...'

'They agreed to let me choose my own district nurse,' I said. 'So if you want the job it's yours.'

'I haven't done any nursing for...,' she paused and thought. 'I can't remember!' she said at last. 'Since they closed you down.'

'Nor have I. It'll come back. Like riding a bicycle.'

'Hey, big girl,' said the skinny man with the tattoos. 'I want another pint.' He sounded threatening. He tried to lean across the counter but either he was too small or the counter was too high.

'How much notice do you have to give?' I asked her.

Suddenly she started talking quickly. 'I get paid three times as much here as the health service will pay me,' she said. 'My husband was laid off. I'm the only breadwinner.' She seemed embarrassed. 'It's a dump but it's busy at evenings and at the weekends. And I get a lot of tips.' She looked down at her own well-exposed cleavage. 'I don't much like the uniform,' she said. 'And the customers still bleed all over me, and vomit on me occasionally too.' She shrugged. 'But it's a living and to be honest I need the money.' She tried, unsuccessfully, to pull the two sides of her blouse a little closer together. Then she tried to smile. That didn't work either. 'Far too revealing for a modest country girl like me,' she said unconvincingly.

'Where's my bloody beer?' demanded the man with the tattoos.

Kay bent down and picked up a fresh glass from underneath the counter. She filled it carefully, tilting the glass so that there was no head on the beer. Then she reached across the bar with the glass in her hand.

'Here's your beer, you horrible, leering, nasty little man,' she said, pouring the pint over his head. She watched with obvious delight as beer ran down the startled man's face and neck, soaking his shirt and dripping onto what remained of the carpet. 'I hope you enjoyed that,' she said.

Surprisingly, the man didn't seem to mind as much as I had expected. He just shook himself and wiped his head with his hand. Kay threw him the damp tea towel. He used it to wipe his face.

'Sorry,' she said. 'Hope you find someone for the job.'

As I left I couldn't help reflecting that a society which paid people more to serve beer than to nurse had somehow got its priorities distorted.

And yet, although I wanted to feel disappointed by my failure to recruit Kay McBride, for some reason I didn't.

I kept remembering the cats she'd had killed.

Perhaps Kay McBride was a little too tough. Maybe I'd find a more suitable nurse.

* * *

When I got home I found that someone had attached a smartly painted sign to the front gate at Bilbury Grange. The sign had my name and the words The Surgery written on it. Underneath were the words 'No wart too small, no rash too faint.' Someone had obviously put a lot of effort into it so I left the sign where it was.

'I've given your surgery a good clean,' said Patsy. 'And I know you've managed to persuade Miss Johnson to come out of retirement because a man from Barnstaple came round with a box full of National Health Service stationery – prescription pads, national insurance certificates, X-ray request forms and all sorts of things. He said Miss Johnson had rung them up and told them they had to send round a boxful of emergency supplies. The man said there will be a proper delivery early next week.'

'Thank heavens for Miss Johnson,' I murmured to Patsy. I'd completely forgotten that I would need prescription pads. 'If I write out a list of emergency drug supplies would you ring the chemist in Combe Martin and ask him to deliver them?'

'Of course.'

I went into the surgery, found a piece of notepaper and a pen and, sitting at the kitchen table, hurriedly began to write down a list of what I thought I'd need for emergency supplies. 'I'll make this a private prescription,' I said. 'Tell the chemist that you'll give him a prescription when he delivers what I need. And ask him if he'd be kind enough to send us a bill with the drugs.'

I wrote down a list of emergency drugs I thought I'd need to start with:

Morphine 10mg/ml for injection x 6 ampoules
Codeine 30 mg tablets x 30
Prochlorperazine 5mg tablets x 30
Amoxicillin 250mg capsules x 56
Erythromycin 250mg capsules x 28
Trimethoprim 200 mg tablets x 20
Aspirin 300mg soluble tablets x 60
Adrenaline 1 in 1,000, 10 x 0.5 ml ampoules

I wrote 'Private Prescription – For Stock' at the top of the piece of paper, signed my name at the bottom, added the date and then handed the sheet to Patsy.

'I'll need more later,' I said. 'But those will do to start with.'

'Do you think he'll have all these in stock?' she asked.

‘If there’s anything they haven’t got ask them if they would be kind enough to get it in for tomorrow,’ I told her. ‘By the way, Kay won’t be coming. She’s working as a barmaid.’

‘She turned you down?’

I nodded. ‘Probably for the best,’ I said.

‘You’ll find someone’ said Patsy. I nodded. She picked up my list of drugs and headed for the telephone.

‘I’d better go and sort out my surgery and my bag,’ I said. ‘I need to make sure that everything is still working.’

CHAPTER 9

When I had retired from general practice I had left my surgery exactly as it had been when I'd worked in it. Bilbury Grange was quite big enough for us to leave the three rooms devoted to the practice untouched. One room had been my surgery, one the waiting room and a third had been the office where Miss Johnson worked.

Patients entered and left the waiting room through a door at the side of the house so it was quite easy to regard the three rooms as an entirely separate part of the house.

A country GP's surgery, back in the 1970s, was hardly a storehouse of high technology but there were some bits and pieces I knew I would need to find.

I sat down at my desk, picked up a notepad and a pencil and made a list:

1. Sphygmomanometer (For taking blood pressure readings.)
2. Patella hammer (For testing reflexes.)
3. Ophthalmoscope (For looking into patients' eyes.)
4. Auriscope (For looking into patients' ears.)
5. Torch (For looking down patients' throats, into their outer ears and into any other dark orifice that needed close examination.)
6. Peak Flow Meter (Tube for patients to blow into in order to check their lung function.)

I looked at the list. There was something missing. I chewed on the end of my pencil. I knew there was something missing but I couldn't think what it was. Then I remembered.

7. Stethoscope (For listening to chests and, most important of all, for looking like a doctor.)

I found the first six items on the list straight away. The ophthalmoscope, auriscope and torch all needed new batteries but that was no problem; they all took standard sized batteries of which we had a supply in a cupboard in the kitchen. I got the batteries, put them in and checked. Everything worked.

But I couldn't find my stethoscope anywhere.

It wasn't in my black bag. It wasn't on my desk. It wasn't in any of the drawers in my desk.

I went back into the house and found Patsy.

'The chemist has got everything in stock,' she told me. 'He said he'll bring it all over when he closes up for the night. He asked me to say how pleased he was that you were opening up the practice again. And he especially said to tell you that that's not just because he'll dispense a lot more prescriptions with patients seeing you and not going into Barnstaple!'

I laughed. The chemist would do well. I was pleased about that. He was a good fellow.

'Have you seen my tubes?' I asked Patsy.

'Your what?'

'My Tubes. My stethoscope. I can't find them – it – anywhere.'

'That long dangly thing that you use to eavesdrop on people's chests?'

'That's the one.'

'I didn't know it was called tubes.'

'It's really a stethoscope.'

'I know. But you called it your tubes.'

'That's what we used to call them at medical school.'

'How sweet and boyish!'

'Whatever I call it I can't find it.'

She frowned. 'Isn't it in your surgery?'

'No.'

'Your black bag?'

'No. Looked there too.'

'I don't have the faintest idea where it could be. I don't suppose it's in your study?'

We had converted a spare bedroom at the top of the house into a writing room. It was quiet and there was no telephone in there. It was where I wrote my books. 'Good idea,' I said. I had no idea why I would have put my stethoscope up there but it was as good a place to look as anywhere.

I raced up the stairs.

Three minutes later I raced back down again.

'It's not up there,' I told Patsy.

'Have you not got a spare?' she asked.

I shook my head. 'I've only ever had one stethoscope,' I told her. 'It's the one I bought when I was a medical student. I won’t look like a doctor without it.’

We searched everywhere in the house. But we couldn’t find it anywhere.

At ten that evening I slumped down in an easy chair quite exhausted and very miserable.

* * *

‘I know where it is!’ I cried out, sitting up in bed.

Patsy woke up, rubbed at her eyes and sat up.

The two cats stirred on the bed but didn’t wake up. Ben, the dog, opened one eye, decided that there was nothing to get excited about and went back to sleep again.

‘You know where what is?’

‘My stethoscope.’

‘Where is it?’

‘I lent it to Mrs Thingy for that play the school did a couple of months ago.’

‘That’s right!’ said Patsy. ‘I remember. You did. What was the play.’

‘I can’t remember the play but there was a doctor in it. One of the children played a doctor. And so they borrowed my stethoscope.’

‘Mrs Bridge!’ said Patsy. ‘Ivy Bridge. She works as an assistant at the school. Her husband works for the council in Barnstaple She does a lot of drama stuff in schools.’

I climbed out of bed.

‘Where are you going?’

‘I’m going to get my stethoscope.’

‘You can’t!’ laughed Patsy.

‘Why not? It’s my stethoscope.’

‘It’s four o’clock in the morning!’

‘What if she’s lost it?’

‘She won’t have lost it.’

‘She might have given it to a jumble sale.’

‘She won’t have done that.’

‘She might have lent it to some other school. By now my stethoscope could be draped around the neck of some junior wouldbe-thespian prancing the boards in Bratton Fleming or South Molton or Woolacombe.’

‘I’m sure your stethoscope will be OK,’ said Patsy, as soothing as only a good wife or mother can be.

Reluctantly, very reluctantly, I agreed to wait until the next morning to collect my stethoscope.

But I didn’t find the waiting easy.

* * *

‘I’m sorry to bother you so early,’ I said. ‘But I’ve come for my stethoscope.’

Mrs Bridge pulled her dressing gown a little tighter around her, stared at me and blinked. ‘Doctor? Is that you doctor?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I’ve come for my stethoscope. I’m afraid I need it back.’

She stared at me as if I were completely mad.

‘I lent it to you for the school play.’

‘Oh yes,’ she said. ‘What time is it?’

I looked at my watch. ‘Fourteen minutes to seven.’ She blinked. ‘It’s a little early isn’t it?’

‘It’s an emergency,’ I told her brightly. ‘I’m starting a surgery at nine o’clock and I need my stethoscope.’

‘What is it dear?’ asked another voice. A large, round man appeared behind Mrs Bridge. He was wearing blue and red striped pyjamas and looked rather put out. He was wearing a hairnet to keep his hair flat.

‘It’s the doctor, dear,’ said Mrs Bridge. ‘I borrowed his stethoscope for a play the school put on.’

‘Good morning, doctor,’ said Mr Bridge.

‘Good morning, Mr Bridge,’ I replied.

‘Didn’t you give it back to him?’ Mr Bridge asked his wife.

‘Apparently not,’ said Mrs Bridge.

‘Do you have any idea where it might be?’

‘I suppose Geoffrey must have taken it home.’

‘Geoffrey? Who is Geoffrey?’

‘He’s the boy who played the doctor.’

‘What doctor?’

‘Dr Thomas Stockmann.’

‘Who is Dr Stockmann?’

‘He’s an important character in *A Public Enemy*.’

We both looked at her.

‘It’s a play by Henrik Ibsen.’

‘You had ten-year-olds playing Ibsen?’ her husband asked, astonished.

‘They enjoyed it immensely,’ said Mrs Bridge defensively. ‘Children need to be stretched.’

‘Yes. Of course. So you think Geoffrey might have my stethoscope?’

‘He could have.’

‘What’s his full name?’

‘Geoffrey Slater.’

‘Where does he live?’

She told me. I thanked her and left. As I got into my car I could hear Mr Bridge berating his wife. ‘I remember that play now,’ he was saying. ‘It’s really not a suitable play for young children to perform.’

I didn’t hear Mrs Bridge’s reply. I was on my way to Geoffrey Slater’s home.

* * *

Geoffrey remembered where my stethoscope was. He’d last used it to decorate a snowman they’d built in their garden. My stethoscope was eventually unearthed amidst a pile of half broken toys and completely broken plant pots at the back of their garage.

It was looking rather the worse for wear. But stethoscopes are pretty basic instruments; there isn’t much to go wrong. And mine had survived. It still worked.

I felt a great sense of relief as I drove back to Bilbury Grange with my stethoscope lying on the front passenger seat.

Now I could be a proper doctor again.

CHAPTER 10

I expected my first surgery to be quiet.

'We'll just open the door, wait around for half an hour or so and then close the door,' I told Miss Johnson. To help while away the time I had picked up a paperback copy of a Graham Greene novel I was reading and stuffed it into my jacket pocket before I went into the surgery.

But things didn't turn out quite as I had expected and the paperback stayed where it was. I'd just settled down behind my desk when Miss Johnson floated in. She had a talent for seeming calm and unhurried whatever was going on around her and it was good to know that she would be working alongside me.

'There are eleven here so far,' she said.

'Eleven what?' I asked, genuinely puzzled.

'Patients,' she said softly.

'Eleven!'

'Seven of them were waiting by the back door when I arrived,' she said.

I was, it seemed, back in business.

* * *

I was quickly reminded of the strange things people worry about. Thanks to articles and columns on health matters in newspapers and magazines, and to constant exposure to medical programmes on television and radio, many people have acquired a smattering of medical knowledge.

In general this is a good thing. But it can lead to some very strange conclusions.

Within fifteen minutes I had been reminded of the odd things people believe.

After a long, preliminary and utterly irrelevant discussion of her feet (she wanted to know if they were flat, which they were not) Mollie Leafinold confided that her husband suffered from premature ejaculation and wanted to know if this meant that she would have a premature baby. Thus I was reminded that when a patient says 'by the way, while I'm here' it invariably means that they are about to reveal the real reason for their visit. Mollie wasn't really worried about her feet. But she was shy about mentioning her real fear and needed time to work up to it.

Eighteen-year-old Amelia Raite wanted to know if it was true that a girl couldn't get pregnant if she or the man she was with wore a cap. Having been away from medical practice for a while I foolishly assumed she knew a little about contraception and was talking either about the Dutch cap or the condom but after some confusing, and for both of us rather bewildering discussion, it turned out that she had somehow gained the impression that if a man wore a flat tweed cap on his head the girl he was making love to would be protected from pregnancy.

'I didn't see how it could be,' she admitted, before she left. 'But it was my friend who told me that.'

I managed to persuade her to re-educate her friend in the hope that this might do something to prevent the rumour spreading any further round the village.

* * *

My next patient was Dean Taunton. He came into the surgery in quite a temper. Brandishing a letter from his mother he wanted to know how he could sue the hospital in Yorkshire where she had been treated.

'They've had a mix up,' he explained when I asked him why he wanted to sue the hospital.

'Tell me about it,' I told him.

'They sent my mother home with Raynaud's disease,' he said. 'So, what I want to know is who's got her disease?'

I told him I didn't quite understand.

'If my mum has got Raynaud's disease then who has got hers and how did they get mixed up?' demanded Mr Taunton quite indignantly.

I eventually managed to explain that many medical diseases are given names commemorating their discoverers. 'Your mother's disease is named after the doctor who first diagnosed the condition,' I explained.

'Silly bloody name,' said Mr Taunton.

'Not as silly as it could have been,' I explained. He asked me what I meant.

I told him that there are some disorders which are named after more than one discoverer. 'There is, for example, a type of muscular atrophy known as Wohlfart-Kugelberg-Welander disease,' I told him.

* * *

In any other small village Nigel Perkins would be the oldest resident.

Mr Perkins celebrated his 87th birthday a few months ago but looks (and behaves) much younger than his years. He still plays darts in the pub team, still plays cricket (though usually, it is true, only when the captain cannot otherwise make up an eleven) and still fancies himself as something of a ladies' man.

Despite his age he has very few real physical complaints. His heart ticks away like a Swiss watch and the rest of him was also clearly made to last.

His main complaint when I saw him was of muscle cramps in his arms and legs.

'How long have you had them?' I asked.

'About a week.'

'Are they getting better or worse?'

'Worse, if anything.'

'You're not taking any medicines are you?'

'Oh no,' he said. He shook his head emphatically. 'Don't like taking drugs.'

I examined him but could find nothing wrong with him.

'You're a medical mystery,' I told him.

'Am I?' he asked, apparently delighted.

'I'll have a look at you in a couple of days,' I told him. 'See how you are then.'

'There's something else I've been meaning to ask you about for years,' he said. I waited. 'Why has my hair lost its memory? Why does the stuff that used to grow out of the top of my head now grows out of my nose and ears?'

I laughed. 'I have no idea,' I told him. 'But it comes with the territory, I'm afraid.'

'What territory?'

'The being 87 territory,' I told him.

He snorted. 'You doctors blame everything on old age,' he said. He bent down and took a parcel wrapped in newspaper out of his bag. 'Brought you and Patsy a lettuce, doctor,' he said, putting the package down onto my desk.

'Thank you,' I said. I reached out and touched the packet. 'We're very grateful.'

Nigel stood up and waved a hand, brushing aside the thanks.

'I'll see you in a couple of days,' I told him.

When he'd gone I took the lettuce through to Patsy in the kitchen.

* * *

'Rick' Shaw, a taxi driver who works in Barnstaple, and whom I knew well, came in to see me looking very worried. He told me that he had been for an insurance medical and had been told by the doctor who had done the examination that he was suffering from asthma. He had, as a result, been told by his insurers that they would charge him a higher premium.

'I thought people with asthma had difficulty in breathing!' he said.

'They usually do,' I agreed.

'Well I don't,' said Rick rather indignantly.

I examined him and agreed that I could find nothing wrong. I asked him to tell me about the examination.

'The doctor got me to blow into this tube,' he said. 'I didn't manage very well. I think that was why he said I'd got asthma.'

'Could be,' I agreed.

I picked up my own spirometer and asked him to blow into it.

'Looks fine,' I said, when he handed the instrument back to me. 'No signs of asthma. Why didn't you manage very well at the medical?'

Rick went red and was clearly embarrassed. I waited for him to tell me.

'The wife said I should wear a collar and a tie for the medical,' he said. 'It being with a private doctor.'

I nodded. 'I don't think I've ever seen you with a tie,' I told him.

'No,' he said. 'I don't wear them.'

'Collar a bit tight?' I suggested. He nodded.

'Button up your collar,' I said.

He buttoned up his collar.

'Now try again,' I said, handing him the spirometer.

This time he produced a very feeble blow. I grinned at him.

'You'd better unbutton your shirt before I diagnose asthma,' I told him.

I said I would write to the insurance company for him and ask them to repeat the medical.

'There will probably be another fee to pay,' I warned him. 'But I expect it will be cheaper than paying bigger premiums.' He thanked me and got up.

'And if you must wear a tie either get a shirt with a bigger collar or leave the top button unbuttoned,' I told him.

He grinned sheepishly.

* * *

I re-learnt a lot of things I had forgotten in that first morning back at work.

I re-learnt, for example, that although many patients will accept a doctor's advice if they genuinely think it is good for them, there are some patients who are very selective about the advice they are prepared to take.

Eddie Busby is five foot eight inches tall and weighs just under twenty stones. He drinks five pints of beer every night and admits to smoking forty cigarettes a day (which means that he probably gets through eighty). I long ago lost count of the number of times I suggested that it might be to his long-term advantage to cut his consumption of both. He took as much notice of that advice as he took of the advice to lose a little weight.

'I need another sick note,' he told me, collapsing into the chair on the other side of my desk. I heard the chair creak and hoped it wouldn't give way under his bulk.

'Why aren't you at work?' I asked him.

'The doctor in Barnstaple said I shouldn't work so hard,' he told me. 'He said I needed to take things a little easier.'

This surprised me for I knew of very few people on the planet who took things easier than Eddie.

'Why did he say that?' I asked.

'He seemed to think my job was making me ill,' said Eddie. 'Stress,' he added. 'Plus I get tired and breathless if I do too much.'

'You need to lose some weight, cut down on the drinking and give up the cigarettes,' I told him.

He looked at me as if I had told him to take up embroidery or hang-gliding. 'I'm not well enough to do any of that,' he said. 'I need to rest and build up my strength.'

'What's your job?' I asked him.

'Unemployed,' he answered immediately.

'Take your shirt off,' I told him.

'Why?' he demanded.

'So that I can examine you.'

Reluctantly, he removed his shirt and threw it onto my desk.

'And your vest.'

He took the vest off and threw it on top of the shirt.

I listened to his heart and lungs, took his blood pressure and did some other simple tests.

'Good news! I think you're well enough to go back to work,' I told him, when he had removed his clothes from my desk.

He didn't look as though this was good news.

'The doctor said I needed to take time off work,' he said.

'And you did,' I said. 'It's done you a lot of good. You're in much better shape. But you're still smoking eighty a day.'

'Forty,' he said.

'Eighty.'

He looked at me and backed down. 'How did you know it was eighty?'

'I can tell.'

'From listening to my chest?'

I nodded. A nod seemed less of a lie than actually saying 'yes'.

He looked glum. 'I get more money when I'm on the sick. Do you know how expensive cigarettes are?'

'I know.' I wrote down details of his blood pressure on his medical notes. 'Of course,' I said, 'if you were making a real effort to lose weight, to cut down your drinking and to reduce the number of cigarettes you smoke then you would probably need a few more weeks on the sick.'

He brightened considerably.

'But I'll need to see you every week,' I told him. 'I'll weigh you and I'll listen to your chest. I'll know whether or not you're making an effort.'

'If I lose some weight and cut down the cigarettes you'll keep me on the sick a bit longer?'

I nodded. It was the best incentive I could think of

He frowned.

'It's the best deal you're going to get today,' I told him. I picked up the relevant form and took the cap off my pen. 'What's the decision?'

'I'll try,' he said.

I handed him a booklet explaining how he could lose weight, a booklet explaining how to stop smoking and a sick note for a week.

* * *

The next two patients came in together.

Nancy and Doreen Norfolk are sisters, known locally as the Norfolk broads, and they live together in a cottage their parents left them. Nancy works as a children's book illustrator and Doreen makes home-made chutneys and jams which she sells on a stall in the Pannier Market in Barnstaple. If I hadn't got their medical records in front of me I would have never guessed their ages. Both are in their early forties but they look at least a decade younger.

'We've got a little problem,' said Nancy.

'A very little problem really,' added Doreen.

'But not so little that it doesn't worry us,' Nancy reminded her.

'No,' agreed Doreen.

It took me nearly ten minutes to get them to tell me what the problem was. We got there via details of a new recipe for tomato chutney which Doreen insisted I gave to Patsy, a discussion of the disappearance of the red squirrel (Nancy was doing the illustrations for a children's storybook about two squirrels) and a fairly extensive discussion of the Des Moulin's whorl snail, a tiny creature the size of a match head which is now so rare that building developers somewhere in the south of England had been told that their plans for a new housing estate had to be abandoned because they would disrupt the snails' natural habitat.

'We could get hold of one or two of the snails and get them to live in Bilbury,' said Doreen. 'That way if any developers ever suggest building here we could stop them.'

I said I liked her idea but thought that getting hold of the snails might be difficult.

Eventually, they told me their problem.

'We have a brother,' said Nancy. 'He's called Arnold and his wife is Felicity. They live in Northampton.'

'He's a chiropodist and she's a dental hygienist,' said Doreen.

'So they're both medical,' said Nancy.

'The problem is that they have told our cousin Jeffrey that we aren't normal,' said Doreen.

'We don't have much to do with our brother,' said Nancy.

'Nor with cousin Jeffrey,' said Doreen.

'Jeffrey works for the Government,' said Nancy, in reverential tones. She lowered her voice and spoke in a whisper. 'Inland Revenue,' she said, in the same sort of tone that she might have used had he been an employee of MI5.

'Ah,' I said, nodding as though I understood where all this was leading. Being a country GP means having a lot of patience.

'Jeffrey told us that Arnold told him that we aren't normal,' said Doreen.

'Has that upset you?' I asked.

'Not so much upset, perhaps,' said Nancy. 'But we're a little concerned.'

'Can the Government have us arrested for not being normal?'

'I don't think so,' I told them. 'In fact I'm pretty sure that they can't.'

'Oh that's a relief,' said Nancy.

'How would they decide what's normal?' I asked. I thought for a moment. 'I don't think I know anyone who is normal,' I said. 'In fact I'm not even sure I know what it means. Do you?'

The two sisters looked at each other. 'I suppose it means being a couple and having children,' said Nancy.

'Thumper and Anne are a couple,' I said. 'They've got a baby. Would you say they were 'normal'?'

'Well, no, not really,' said Doreen, with a little nervous giggle.

'I suppose not.'

'Is your brother normal?'

'Oh definitely not,' said Nancy. 'He flies model aeroplanes and does Morris dancing in the summer.'

Doreen shook her head. 'I don't think he's normal,' she said.

'Then why worry?' I asked them.

'Does Jeffrey seem normal to you? Do you know anyone else like him?'

'Oh no,' they both said. 'He keeps budgies and takes them to shows. He's got a cabinet full of trophies. We don't know anyone else who does that.'

'Working for the Inland Revenue and breeding budgies is hardly normal,' I said.

'No,' she agreed. They both looked a lot happier.

'So do you feel a bit better about things?' I asked them.

'Oh definitely,' they both said together. They looked at each other, smiled and got up.

'I'll bring some rhubarb and beetroot jam round for you try,' said Doreen in a whisper. 'It's my latest recipe.'

'It's wonderful,' said Nancy. 'You'll love it. It's got a very unusual tang to it.'

‘I look forward to that,’ I told them.

* * *

‘Is that it?’ I asked Miss Johnson.

It had been a much busier surgery than I’d expected.

‘I’m afraid not, doctor,’ said Miss Johnson. ‘One or two more arrived while you were with the last patient.’

I opened the door to the waiting room. The room was absolutely full. You couldn’t have crammed more people into the room if you’d been trying to get a mention in the *Guinness Book of Records* for having the most patients in a waiting room. The moment I opened the door everyone started coughing.

Appalled I looked around. I didn’t recognise anyone. Every patient in there looked old, decrepit and scruffy. Most wore beards. The rest had long hair or scarves over their faces.

I backed out of the waiting room and closed the door.

‘Where did they all come from?’ I asked Miss Johnson.

‘They all claim to be visitors,’ she told me.

‘They all came in together?’

‘More or less.’

I sighed. At this rate I wasn’t going to finish the morning surgery before the evening surgery was due to start. Heaven knows when I would get the visits done. Suddenly, and for the first time, I was beginning to wonder if I’d done the right thing by going back into practice. I opened the door again. Everyone started coughing. The noise was deafening. Something didn’t look or sound quite right but I wasn’t sure what it was.

‘Who’s next?’ I asked.

‘Me!’ they all cried at once.

I scratched my head and looked around again. Although I didn’t recognise anyone they all seemed vaguely familiar. And then I spotted Patchy’s shoes.

Patchy Fogg always wears the same pair of brown calf length boots. He wears them with jeans and he wears them with suits. He would, I felt sure, be wearing them on his wedding day. And the patient sitting just to the left of the potted plant in the corner of the room was wearing brown, calf length boots. I looked closer and harder. And then I got it. I pointed at him and started to say something.

As soon as they realised that I knew what was going on everyone in the room started to chuckle. Wigs and false beards and scarves were quickly removed. I turned round. Miss Johnson was smiling and blushing. ‘Mr Robinson and Mr Fogg said you wouldn’t mind, doctor.’

‘Oh no,’ I said, grinning. ‘I don’t mind. But I’ll get my own back on Mr Robinson and Mr Fogg.’

CHAPTER 11

When I finally finished the morning surgery Miss Johnson told me that I had just one home visit to make.

'I don't think it's urgent, doctor,' she said.

I looked at my watch. 'I think I'll go and get it done now,' I said.

The visit was to Gloria, the extremely slender wife of the new village policeman.

The policeman's name was Russell Ross though he was always known as Russ. This was both confusing and convenient for everyone because it meant that no one ever knew whether they were addressing him by his Christian name or his surname. Russ had taken over when P.C.Wren, Bilbury's previous representative of the Devon constabulary, moved on to become a sergeant somewhere in the south east.

A special unkindness of fate had meant that Russ could not pronounce the letter 'r' and so when he introduced himself to people it sounded as if his name was Wuss Woss. This was not a name to inspire confidence. It is difficult to maintain respect when a policeman introduces himself with the words 'Good morning, I'm PC Wuss Woss'.

Russ's biggest problem had been with other policemen and he had requested a transfer to a village constabulary because he found working in a well-staffed police station to be something of a trial.

No one in the village ever laughed at him, but although the smiles might not have been visible they were nevertheless there.

Gloria and Russ had moved into the village two months previously but they still hadn't finished unpacking. Every room in their tiny home, the official policeman's residence in the village, was still piled high with cardboard boxes.

'Moving house is like childbirth,' said Mrs Ross, who had two children by a previous relationship. 'If people could remember just how painful it is they would never do it twice.' She ripped open another cardboard box with her fingernails. 'Why people ever move is a mystery to me.' She delved into the box and pulled out a garlic press, a nightdress, a half used bar of soap wrapped in a face flannel and a box of sticking plasters. 'And here's another mystery,' she continued. 'Why is it that the people who make sticking plasters can never quite make them flesh coloured?' she asked. 'Don't they know what colour flesh really is? Does anyone actually know someone whose skin is the colour of sticking plasters?' She put the box of sticking plasters down in a colander.

'But those aren't real mysteries,' she went on. She picked up a handful of socks that had been lying on the kitchen table. 'When I put the washing into the machine this morning I counted the socks. There were fourteen of them. Exactly fourteen. That's seven pairs. I counted them twice. But when I took the socks out, there were thirteen. So, what happened to the other sock? My washing machine is a better magician than David Nixon.' She sighed and threw the socks into the colander with the sticking plasters. 'I'm sorry, doctor,' she said. 'I don't expect you've got time for my rants. But with Russ out all day and the children off at school I'm all by myself. It's nice to be able to talk to another human being for a change.' She picked up a jumper and moved it. She didn't seem able to keep still.

'That's OK,' I said. 'What can I do for you?'

She looked at me rather blankly. 'What do you mean?'

'You asked me to visit,' I reminded her.

'Oh yes,' she said. 'Just hang on a minute.'

I hung on a minute while she disappeared and made a considerable amount of noise upstairs. Eventually she came back down. She had changed and was wearing what looked like a brand new pair of jeans.

'I need your advice,' she said, turning round. 'Does my bum look big in these?' Before I could reply she added something else. 'Most people want to lose weight,' she said. 'I've always had the opposite problem. I just can't put on any weight. But Russ likes plump women and so I've recently been making a real effort.'

'So you want your bum to look big?' I said, rather hesitantly.

'Oh yes,' said Mrs Ross. 'I couldn't think of anyone else to ask who would tell me the truth.'

'Well, it's quite big,' I told her. It wasn't easy ignoring the usual social conventions and telling a woman that her bum looked big.

'Oh do you think so?' She smiled.

'Quite big,' I confirmed.

She half turned and peered over her shoulder, trying to see her own bottom. 'I'm so thrilled,' she said.

'Have you always been underweight?' I asked her.

'No,' she said. 'Up until about four years ago I was like everyone else I know. But then I just started to lose weight. I thought I had cancer and I went to my doctor. He said that there was nothing wrong.'

'That was when you lived in London?' She nodded.

‘Do you know if they tested your thyroid?’

She frowned. ‘Oh, I don’t think anyone said anything about that.’

‘Let me feel your pulse,’ I said.

She offered me her wrist. Her pulse was fast and a little irregular.

‘Do you sweat easily?’ I asked.

She laughed. ‘Oh I sweat a lot!’ she said. ‘In the hot weather I have to change clothes three times a day.’

‘Would you describe yourself as nervous?’

‘Russ certainly would,’ she said. ‘He says I’m like a kitten.’

‘Would you pop into the surgery tomorrow?’ I said. ‘I’ll take a blood sample and get a simple test done.’

I didn’t say anything but I thought it was quite likely that Gloria Ross had thyrotoxicosis.

* * *

When I left Gloria Ross I drove round to see Dr Brownlow. He insisted on shaking my hand. He smiled. ‘I’m so pleased you’re opening the practice up again,’ he said. ‘A village needs five things...’

‘...a pub, a shop, a church, a school and a doctor!’ I finished for him.

His smile broadened.

‘That’s what Gilly said at the meeting the other night,’ I explained.

Dr Brownlow sighed deeply. ‘I’m glad you’re back,’ he said. ‘But they shouldn’t have ever closed you down.’ He paused and I could see a tear forming in one eye. He poured us both a whisky.

I didn’t know what to say. So I said nothing.

We sat in silence for a while. The silences with Dr Brownlow were always comfortable. I never felt I had to speak just for the sake of breaking the stillness.

‘I used to be in a hurry all the time when I was young,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘But, curiously, now that I am old I feel I can wait. I’ve had a fair innings and I feel more at peace with myself - though not, I have to admit, with the world. I get cross about the things they’re doing to the country. This Beeching thing - closing down half the country’s railways - is the most stupid, short-sighted thing I’ve ever heard of. With no railways the roads are going to become unbearable.’

I nodded. I agreed with him. It seemed short-sighted to me too.

‘I’ve had a lot of time to think,’ he said. ‘Sitting here alone. I read a bit. I look out of the window. But I spend a lot of time thinking.’

I sipped at my whisky. Drinking alcohol in the daytime was becoming a bad habit.

‘Have a biscuit,’ said Dr Brownlow.

I helped myself to a ginger biscuit.

‘How’s the pain?’

‘I need some more morphine I’m afraid.’

‘How much have you been taking?’

I’d brought him a boxful of morphine ampoules and a bundle of syringes.

‘Enough.’

‘OK. I’ll bring some more.’ It didn’t really matter how much morphine he took. We both knew he wasn’t going to live long enough to become an addict. And what did it matter if he did?

‘Did you get Miss Johnson to come out of retirement?’ I nodded.

‘Have you found yourself a nurse?’

‘Not yet.’

‘You need a district nurse in a village. Your patients can’t get into hospital to have their dressings done. And if you have a district nurse you can keep more of your patients at home. Better for them to be at home. And, if only the bureaucrats had any sense they’d realise it saves them money.’

I nodded.

‘I always dreamt of opening a cottage hospital,’ he said. ‘Bilbury could do with a cottage hospital. Just a small one.’

I said it sounded like a wonderful idea but that I doubted if the Government would ever pay for one.

‘You could do worse than hire Bradshaw.’

I looked at him, more than slightly surprised.

‘As a nurse.’

‘As a nurse?’ I repeated, sounding stupid.

‘You can’t have him until I’ve gone,’ he said. ‘But he’s reliable and surprisingly gentle. He’s kind, respectful and caring and he doesn’t panic. What more can you ask for in a nurse?’

‘I hadn’t thought of Bradshaw,’ I admitted.

‘Bit old?’

‘Bit older than most nurses.’

‘He’s in good shape,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘You hardly notice the Parkinson’s Disease.’

I nodded thoughtfully. If I could wait a while Bradshaw would indeed probably make a good, if slightly unusual, district nurse.

‘Of course, I’ve known prettier nurses,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘His legs aren’t terribly attractive and he has no bosom to speak of.’

* * *

I called in at the Duck and Puddle on the way home. Thumper and Frank were having a discussion about new signs which Frank was planning to put onto the pub’s toilet doors.

‘These look nice,’ said Frank, handing me a catalogue to examine and pointing to a photograph of two plastic signs. One said ‘Pointer’ and the other had the word ‘Setter’ on it.

‘Bit corny,’ I said.

‘Have you seen them before?’ asked Frank.

‘I think so,’ I said.

‘We could have these,’ suggested Frank, turning the page and pointing to two signs which carried male and female silhouettes. The male silhouette was wearing a top hat and carrying a cane. The female silhouette was wearing a huge ball-gown and a large bonnet.

‘Very nice,’ I said.

‘We’ll have those then,’ said Frank.

‘Are you having new lavatories put in?’ I asked. The door to the ladies’ lavatory led to a single cubicle. The door to the gents was an outside door which led directly into the field behind the pub.

Frank looked at me as though I were barking mad. ‘No, I’m not!’ he said firmly.

Before I could say anything more Patchy turned up. He was looking pretty grumpy.

‘I’ve just driven back from Exeter,’ he told us. ‘Some idiot has put up a huge sign warning that they’re blasting daily at the quarry.’

‘Well, they do!’ said Frank. ‘They do blast daily.’

‘But what’s the point of a sign?’ demanded Patchy. ‘What are you supposed to do when you see it? All these damned signs. They drive me crazy. Why do I want to know that they’re blasting daily?’

No one could think of an answer.

I turned to Frank. ‘I’ll have one of your hot toddies,’ I told him.

Thumper and Patchy said they’d have the same.

‘What do you put in them?’ asked Patchy. ‘I don’t like to admit this but your hot toddies are the best I’ve tasted.’

‘Trade secret,’ said Frank, firmly.

‘Oh go on,’ Patchy wheedled. ‘You know us. Tell us what you put in your hot toddies.’

‘If I tell you that you’ll make your own and I won’t have any customers,’ said Frank.

‘Don’t be daft,’ said Thumper. ‘We come here for the decor, not the company.’

‘And the lavatories,’ I added.

‘Definitely the lavatories,’ said Patchy.

‘It’s a trade secret,’ said Frank :firmly. He stomped off to make three hot toddies in the back room so that we couldn’t see what he put in them.

‘They’re always putting up daft signs,’ said Thumper. ‘I saw one the other day saying ‘Road Liable To Subsidence’. What are you supposed to do when you see that? I didn’t know whether to go slower in case the road collapsed or to drive faster so that I’d get through there quicker.’

We all thought about this.

‘There’s a sign near Pottington that warns of overhead cables,’ said Frank, from the back room.

Thumper turned over a beermat and got out a pen. We decided to make a list of the ten most stupid road signs.

After some thought this is what we came up with:

Low flying aircraft
Part time signals
Road liable to subsidence
Blasting daily
Heavy plant crossing
Mud on road (Frank wanted to know why they didn’t just clear away the mud instead of going to the trouble and expense of putting up a sign)
Beware of falling rocks (why don’t they just move the loose rocks)

Deer for several miles

Our list making (which had now spread to a second beermat) ended when Patchy said he'd seen a notice on Lynmouth beach which said simply 'Do not throw stones at this notice.'

'I don't believe you!' said Frank.

'There is!' insisted Patchy. 'I told two blokes about it a few months ago. They didn't believe me so we all got into a car and drove there.'

'What did you do?'

'It was there. No other warning. No other admonition. Just a large white notice which stated boldly: 'Do not throw stones at this notice.'

'But what's the sign there for?' asked Gilly who had helped Frank carry the hot toddies into the bar.

Patchy shrugged. 'Dunno.'

'What did you do?' asked Frank.

'We all threw a stone at it and left,' said Patchy.

'I'll pop down to the beach next time I'm in Lynmouth and take a look,' said Thumper.

'Don't forget to throw a stone at it,' said Patchy.

'I won't,' said Thumper. 'I'll try anything once.'

'That's a silly saying,' said Frank.

'What is?' asked Patchy.

'I'll try anything once,' replied Frank. We all looked at him.

'Well it is,' he said. 'You would have to be mad to jump out of an aeroplane without a parachute.'

'Don't run before you can walk,' said Thumper. 'That's another silly thing people say. Why would you be able to run if you couldn't walk?'

We thought about it for a minute.

'Put your best foot forward,' I suggested.

'It's the best thing since sliced bread,' said Gilly. 'What's so brilliant about sliced bread?'

'He knows which side his bread is buttered,' offered Patchy.

'You'd have to be a complete moron not to know, wouldn't you?'

'Don't take it personally,' Frank suggested. 'How else should you take it? Whatever it is.'

'It will be in the last place you look,' said Thumper. 'If you've found it then you stop looking don't you?'

'She wants to have her cake and eat it,' said Gilly. 'What good would it be if you had cake and didn't eat it?'

As the discussion continued I looked around the pub, and thought back on my first day's work.

It occurred to me that working as a country GP is a uniquely satisfying way to earn a living. And it also occurred to me that it is a rather curious form of employment; a job perfectly suited to a loner, an individual.

How many people have the power of life and death over their customers? It is difficult to think of many jobs where the daily responsibilities are greater. And yet it is also difficult to think of many jobs where the opportunities for job satisfaction are greater.

It would, I thought, be a tragedy if the bureaucrats succeeded in taking over general practice as they were threatening to do and in the way that they had already taken over the hospitals. I wondered how general practice would look in a quarter of a century, at the turn of the millennium.

I looked around again and suddenly realised that I was almost certainly the only person in the pub to have seen more than half the other customers utterly naked.

It was a sobering thought.

CHAPTER 12

By the time I got to Dr Brownlow's the rain was coming down so fast that the windscreen wipers had more or less given up. I parked the car as close to Dr Brownlow's house as I could and ran the couple of yards that remained. Even so I was soaked by the time Bradshaw had let me in. I shook myself, more like a dog than a doctor.

'Can you remember when you first decided to become a doctor?' Dr Brownlow asked. He looked tired and, if possible, thinner than ever. He was wasting away at a frightening rate.

'I can.' I could remember it as if it were yesterday.

'Pour us both a drink. You look as if you need one.'

I poured out two whiskies. I added water to mine since I still had to do an evening surgery, but not to the one I'd poured for Dr Brownlow.

'I was eleven and visiting an elderly aunt with my parents,' I continued. 'She was a live-in housekeeper who looked after a bachelor. He lived in a beautiful thatched cottage. I remember the garden. I'd never seen so many flowers. Roses. And a pond with lilies. Going through the gate was like walking into a painting by Monet. I don't know what her employer did for a living but he was obviously quite rich. My aunt had made tea for us and while she was showing us around the garden her employer appeared. I can't remember his name. Actually, I can't remember her name either. He wandered over to introduce himself and asked me the question grown-ups always used to ask children of the age I was at the time. He asked me what I wanted to do when I grew up. I didn't have to think about it. I was, I suspect, a rather strange child. I used to visit the public library every week and bring home as many books as I could carry on my bicycle. Half of them were medical books and the other half were legal books. I had discovered that the library had a vast collection of old trial reports. I can't imagine why. I used to read them in the same way that other boys read comics containing stories about Dan Dare. I told him that there were only two things I wanted to be: a doctor or a lawyer. It never occurred to me then that I might not be the one to choose what I did. I confessed that I wasn't sure which of these I wanted to be.'

Dr Brownlow, listening carefully, sipped at his whisky and said nothing.

'My aunt's employer nodded sagely at this precocious selection.

'Easy to choose,' he told me in a deep, rich baritone voice. I can still hear him. 'If you become a doctor you will spend your life helping people and making some of them happier than they were. If you become a lawyer you will spend your life making people miserable.'

'So, not being a sadist, you chose medicine?'

'Absolutely.' I sipped at the whisky I'd poured myself 'Remarkable isn't it? Someone I met once and with whom I exchanged no more words than I've just told you changed my life more than anyone else I've ever met.' I sipped at my whisky. 'Now, it's your turn.'

'My parents were very poor,' began Dr Brownlow. 'My father once smashed his big toe with a hammer because we needed the compensation. But in some ways I had a very satisfying childhood. It was often hard but I learned the values of self-sufficiency. My father could mend his own boots or repair a leaky bucket with just a few tools he kept in his shed. He never hired anyone to do anything with a brush or a screwdriver. I never saw a workman in the house. My father could build a dry stone wall or a chimney, mend a bicycle or dig a well. He could mend everything we had. If the mangle broke he'd mend it. If the clock wasn't working he could mend that too. He could repair chairs and I once saw him put a new leg onto our kitchen table. When he'd finished you couldn't tell the difference between the leg he'd made and the three original legs. Poverty, to us then, was a misfortune, not a sin and we knew that real poverty had nothing to do with money but was more to do with quality of life. I lived in a village, much like Bilbury, and we pitied the people living in the cities, even though many of them might have had more money than we had. We didn't need the outside world or want anything it could offer us. We had our own water from a well in the garden and we grew our own vegetables on a small plot of land behind the house. My mother could spin and weave. She had an old spinning machine in the bedroom and she would collect bits of sheep's wool from the hedges and make us jumpers and scarves for Christmas and birthdays. The only person I envied was a boy whose parents kept corn and wheat in bins, salt beef in a barrel and a smoked ham in the chimney. They could have survived for months without any outside help. We were poor but we had home-made cider and several types of wine. I had an aunt who made elderflower wine and my grandmother made parsnip wine.'

'People speak of the industrial revolution as though it was something wonderful,' continued Dr Brownlow. 'But it put families into terraced houses and factories and chained them to grimy factory benches and took away people's pride and joy and independence and enthusiasm and replaced the missing joy and pride with boredom and dullness and insecurity and fear. They built schools it is true but they were only to prepare children for working long days in factories and to keep them out of the way so that mothers could work too. The industrial revolution was never a revolution of or for the people but a revolution for the rich. The Tolpuddle martyrs were right and more people should have listened to them. People sneer at the Luddites but they had a point.'

I enjoyed listening to Dr Brownlow. He was kind and wise: two things which don't often go together.

'I had a rich uncle. He was very kind to us. He and my aunt didn't have any children of their own. He gave my parents money so that we could stay on at school and try to get to university. He was a very generous man. He told my brother and me that as soon as one of us turned 17 he would buy a car. I remember him saying it. The way he said it made it sound as though he wasn't sure which one of us would get to 17 first. But I knew that since I was eighteen months older than my brother I stood a pretty decent chance of getting there first. True to his word my uncle bought me a car. He taught me to drive in the local cemetery. He said I would be unlikely to hurt anyone there. He did more than he promised; he did the same thing for my brother when he got to 17. We were the only boys we knew who had cars of our own.'

'I needed money to pay for petrol and during the holidays one summer he got me a job with a friend of his who was a doctor but who had a number of small businesses. I did errands, delivered things, drove him or his wife around occasionally. We talked and I ended up wanting to be a doctor too.'

His glass was empty. I got up and refilled it for him. He nodded his thanks.

'I'm glad I practised when I did,' he said thoughtfully. 'When I started out doctors wrote out prescriptions in Latin, patients were polite and respectful and had faith. We didn't have so many wonderful medicines but we didn't kill so many people either.' He sighed and looked at me. 'You'll see big changes in your lifetime.'

'What sort of changes?'

'The first is that by the turn of the century the bureaucrats will be running medicine,' said Dr Brownlow quietly. 'The result will be a constant state of war between the medical profession on one side and the politicians and the bureaucrats on the other. Bureaucrats have destroyed the doctor's authority because they want the power. The tragedy is that in taking away the authority they are also taking away the willingness to take responsibility. Doctors may fight but they won't win, of course. The biggest losers will be patients.'

'The end result will be that GPs will stop providing 24 hour cover. In the end GPs will end up working the sort of hours civil servants work. And that will destroy medicine as you and I know it because patients need to see the same doctor every time when they are ill. If doctors work the average working week of 40 or so hours then that would mean someone who was dying might see four or five different doctors in a week. That would kill a lot of patients and it would be the death of medicine as you and I know it. When that happens continuity of care will be replaced by chaos.'

'Oh, I can't believe that will ever happen!' I said.

'I fear it will,' said Dr Brownlow. 'The next thing that will happen will be that the lawyers will get their claws into medicine too. People are becoming increasingly litigious. And that can only get worse not better. If Isaac Newton were alive today, and he sat under a tree and an apple fell on his head he wouldn't think 'Aha, gravity!' he'd think 'Aha, lawsuit!' And instead of having invented the theory of gravity he'd have gouged five guineas plus costs out of the owner of the orchard. I have a friend in America who's a doctor. He's retiring early because he's been sued four times in the last six years. He's a good doctor but he can't take any more. He's retiring to open a nursing home for the elderly though I think that could bring him just as many problems. Sadly, I think it will be the good doctors who suffer. The bad ones will simply set up companies and protect themselves. The good doctors won't be prepared and they'll be the ones who will be destroyed. There will come a time when people will believe that everything bad that happens to them is someone else's fault. Doctors will become terribly defensive.'

'Do you really believe that will happen?'

'I do. It won't affect everyone. But it doesn't have to affect everyone.'

We sat in stillness for a while.

'And the final thing that will change,' continued Dr Brownlow, 'will be that doctors will lose control of the information they use. Knowledge is being redistributed but it was always knowledge that gave doctors their power. Now patients have some of that power, and so doctors have lost some of theirs. Everything has changed. There are news reports about new treatments published in the newspapers before they appear in the medical journals. The result is that patients know about new discoveries before doctors do. Researchers promote their discoveries to politicians and to the press in order to get bigger grants. But ordinary people don't know how to differentiate between the good, the bad and the deadly. And the information they are fed is biased and controlled by people who aren't as disinterested as doctors would be. If people find a way to share information between computers, as they say they will, then things will just get worse. Patients will think they're better off but they won't be. They'll just be exploited more efficiently. And they'll think they don't need doctors.' He sighed. 'And I suspect that nurses will want to have degrees. Just caring won't be enough for them and they'll believe that only degrees will give them status and power and money. And once they have degrees they'll want to start prescribing drugs and performing surgery and the dividing line between doctors and nurses will get blurred because the politicians will realise that it's cheaper to train and hire a nurse than it is to train and hire a doctor and so everything will get worse.'

I thought (and hoped) that he was being far too pessimistic but I didn't tell him.

'I'm glad I won't be here to see it all happen,' said Dr Brownlow

CHAPTER 13

There were fourteen patients in the evening surgery that day. Three of them, Samuel Houghton, Harry Burroughs and Gilly Parsons, the landlady from the Duck and Puddle, were suffering from strange muscle cramps. Counting Nigel Perkins that made four. I had no idea what was going on but it was clearly something specific to the village.

‘What do you think it could be?’ asked Patsy when we’d finished dinner that evening.

‘I don’t have the faintest,’ I admitted. ‘It could be something in the drinking water.’

‘Samuel Houghton and Harry Burroughs both get their drinking water from private wells,’ said Patsy who had lived in the village all her life.

‘What about Nigel Perkins? Where does his drinking water come from?’

‘He’s on the mains. He gets town water.’

‘So it can’t be a problem caused by anything in the drinking water,’ I said. I thought some more. ‘But there must be some common factor.’

‘Three of them are male,’ Patsy pointed out.

‘And one of them isn’t,’ I said. I sighed. This was proving to be quite a puzzle.

‘So, what are you going to do?’ asked Patsy.

‘I’m going to call round and see them all tomorrow,’ I said. ‘I’ll ask them some more questions. See if I can spot a link.’

‘I bet it will be a drug they’re all taking,’ said Patsy. ‘You always say that drug side effects are now a major cause of illness.’

‘But none of them is taking anything!’ I said. ‘I did ask them all.’

It was a real puzzle.

CHAPTER 14

Patsy was beginning to bloom and the maternity dresses she had bought in the very early days of her pregnancy were now essential. She looked wonderful, and insisted that she felt that way too.

In view of the fact that Bilbury is some distance from Barnstaple, and I was the only doctor in the village, we had discussed the possibility of Patsy staying with friends in Barnstaple during the last week or so of the pregnancy. In the end she decided not to.

'You've got to stay in Bilbury,' she said. 'And if I stay in Barnstaple who will look after you and answer the phone and take messages if you have to go out to see a patient?'

Having someone to answer the telephone is as essential to a country GP as a stethoscope. Since I had opened up my practice again we had relied on Mr and Mrs Parfitt, our gardener and his wife, the former Miss Hargreaves, to answer the telephone when we were out. Mr Parfitt, who had a grey curly beard, always wore a floppy tweed hat that was two sizes too small for him and looked a bit like a pixie, once worked in a bank in London but had given it all up to live a simple life in the country. Miss Hargreaves had been a spinster and a schoolteacher for many years before she and Mr Parfitt had fallen in love. Miss Hargreaves was an avid reader who kept all her books segregated by sex. She kept all the male authors in a bookcase in the living room and all the female authors in a bookcase in the bedroom. She was the only person in the village to call Thumper by his real name.

It sounds rather grand to say that we had a gardener. It wasn't quite like that.

The Parfitts had made a wonderful home for themselves in the flat above the stables at Bilbury Grange. Mr Parfitt looked after the Bilbury Grange garden and in return we let him and his wife have the flat free of any rent. We also paid him a small wage and let him have whatever food he wanted from the produce which was grown in the garden. Since Bilbury Grange had a large garden, which produced far more food than Patsy and I could possibly eat, this was a splendidly symbiotic relationship. We all benefited. And we all ate a healthy diet of fresh potatoes, carrots, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, peas, runner beans, broad beans, onions, garlic, cabbage, cauliflower, apples, pears, plums, redcurrants, strawberries, blackberries and blackcurrants. We also had more different herbs than I'd ever heard of.

Mr Parfitt also cut logs and collected twigs for our fireplaces and for the Aga and if there was any trouble with our water supply it was he who checked that the spring wasn't blocked and that the water pipes which brought water to the house weren't leaking.

It was with his help that we had made Bilbury Grange very self-sufficient.

Mrs Parfitt did a little cleaning and cooking for us (she made wonderful bread and a home-made wine that had quite a kick to it) and helped her husband in the garden. We had somehow found a tactful way to decline her help with the ironing after she had ironed my best trousers without first removing the banana which I had carelessly left in the pocket.

Selfishly, I was relieved and delighted by Patsy's decision. This was not because I wanted her to be at Bilbury Grange to look after me and answer the telephone but because I didn't want us to be parted for an hour more than was absolutely vital.

But, inevitably, the knowledge that we wouldn't have to separate, even temporarily, came at a price.

Patsy was being looked after by an obstetrician and a midwife at the hospital in Barnstaple and if all went according to plan, and the baby had the courtesy to give ample warning of his or her arrival, I would drive Patsy to the hospital, take her to the ward, and settle myself down, in the time honoured traditional way, with a cup of coffee and an eleven-year-old copy of *Reader's Digest.*

Neither of us wanted me to be there at the birth itself (it had recently become extremely fashionable for fathers to sit in the delivery room and to watch the baby being born – a thought that made both Patsy and me shudder) but both of us wanted me to be nearby.

'I want you to walk in and find me sitting up in bed, in a clean nightie and with the baby in my arms,' said Patsy. 'I want my hair combed and my lipstick looking fresh.'

The plan was that before leaving Bilbury I would telephone Miss Johnson who would drive to Bilbury Grange and answer the telephone for me. She would then telephone me at the hospital if there were any emergencies. If necessary, Mrs Parfitt would also help out with answering the telephone.

That was the plan.

It sounded simple and foolproof.

Patsy had an appointment at the hospital and left early that morning. Her sister Adrienne had offered to drive her there.

'All the best, sweetheart,' I said, through the open passenger door window of Adrienne's car.

‘Everything will be fine,’ she promised me. ‘Good luck with your mystery! I hope you find the answer.’

I waved them goodbye and then went into the house to start my morning surgery.

I didn’t have to wait until the end of the surgery, as I had expected, to start reconsidering the mystery of the strange muscle cramps.

The fourth patient that morning, Jennifer Orsey, had exactly the same problem.

Miss Orsey was quite a character.

Now well into her sixties she had been retired for two years but she was well-known in North Devon for the shop she had run in Barnstaple Called ‘Orseys for Corsets’, it had been the place all the well-dressed women of Devon visited for their corsetry and indeed, their lingerie. Miss Orsey had once told me that she had customers from as far afield as London and Manchester.

The walls of her shop had been decorated with blown up black and white prints of a beautiful curvaceous young woman wearing nothing but corsets and stockings.

‘She looks like you,’ I’d once said, when accompanying Patsy into her shop. ‘Is she a relation?’

Miss Orsey had smiled and shaken her head.

‘It’s you!’ said Patsy, turning away from a display of silk slips and camisoles and looking at one of the photographs.

Miss Orsey had nodded. ‘It is,’ she admitted. ‘I was regarded as quite a looker in those days. I couldn’t afford to hire a model for the clothes so I did the modelling myself.’

Miss Orsey lived in a beautiful thatched cottage and was surrounded by an extraordinary mixture of furniture. Everything in the cottage was old, worn and used. Some of it was downright ugly. I’d once commented on her eclectic taste.

‘Every piece of furniture in my house holds a memory and has a meaning for me,’ she had explained. ‘Try me,’ she had said. ‘Ask me about any piece of furniture in this room.’

‘That one,’ I said, pointing to a huge, oak bookcase.

‘That’s easy. It was my uncle’s. He bought it at a house auction in Goodleigh. It used to belong to a Member of Parliament and six years after my uncle bought it he found all sorts of papers in a secret compartment. Old copies of Hansard and memos scrawled on House of Commons notepaper. My uncle knew I admired it and he left it to me in his Will.’

‘The sofa,’ I said, pointing to a rather torn and threadbare sofa in front of the fireplace.

‘I bought that with my winnings after the 1949 Grand National,’ she said. ‘The cats have clawed it and scratched it and it needs recovering but I don’t have the heart to change it. Every time I look at it I’m reminded of all my cats. Nine of them. Every single one loved that sofa.’

Each time I visited her at home she told me the story of another piece of her furniture.

With the addition of Miss Orsey, I now had five patients with the same symptoms. And I still couldn’t put my finger on the problem. I was beginning to worry that I had been away from medicine for too long.

‘How long have you had the cramps?’ I asked her.

‘Three or four days.’

‘Any other symptoms?’

She shook her head. ‘I’ve been a bit worried about it,’ she said.

‘My father had a blocked artery in his leg.’

‘Intermittent claudication?’

‘That’s right. That’s what they called it.’

‘Does exercise make it worse?’ She shook her head.

I checked her leg. Her pulse was good.

‘It’s not intermittent claudication,’ I told her.

‘Could it be a deep vein thrombosis?’

‘That was my worry,’ I told her. ‘But a deep vein thrombosis is caused by a clot in the leg. And the leg is usually swollen.’ I took a tape measure out of the drawer of my desk and compared the circumference of her painful calf with the circumference of her healthy calf. The painful calf wasn’t swollen.

‘I don’t think it’s a deep vein thrombosis,’ I told her. She looked relieved. I looked at her medical records. ‘You’re not taking anything are you? No medication?’

‘Just aspirin,’ she answered.

‘What for?’

‘I’ve been getting a bit of arthritis in my left knee,’ she said. ‘You told me to take soluble aspirin for it.’

I looked through her medical records, went back a couple of years and found the note in my own handwriting.

‘Have you been taking anything except aspirin?’

‘No,’ she said firmly.

‘Nothing at all?’

‘No.’

‘And you take how many?’

‘Two tablets three times a day. It says on the packet that you can take two tablets up to four times a day.’

I couldn’t stop thinking about what Patsy had reminded me.

Side effects are a major cause of illness. And it isn’t just the main constituent of a drug which can cause problems. Drug side effects can (and usually do) cause problems when you least expect them. None of us is immune. And both doctors and patients are usually far too slow to consider drug side effects when they are looking for a cause for new symptoms. We are all likely to forget or underestimate the danger. I had even formulated my very own law, (and called it Coleman’s Law) which stated that when a patient who is being treated by a doctor developed new symptoms then the new symptoms should, unless proved otherwise, be assumed to have been caused by the treatment for the first disease.

Somehow I knew that this problem had to be drug related. But the only drug I’d been able to link into this problem was aspirin. And although aspirin can cause quite a number of side effects it doesn’t usually cause muscle cramps. It was inconceivable that it should suddenly start causing muscle cramps among five separate patients – all living in one small village.

And then, purely out of desperation, I asked if I could see the packet containing the aspirin Miss Orsey was taking. I don’t know why I did this. She opened her handbag and took out a packet of aspirin. It wasn’t a brand I’d ever seen before. There was a sticky label on it carrying the words Aspirin and the usual warnings and recommendations about dosage. I pulled at the corner of the label and peeled it off. I could now read the printing on the box. Or at least I could have done if it had been in English. The printing on the box was in French.

‘Where did you get this?’ I asked her.

‘Peter Marshall’s shop,’ she replied. ‘He’s got a special offer on them. I don’t know where he got them from.’ She frowned. ‘Are they all right, doctor?’ She paused. ‘I rather like them,’ she said. ‘They fizz when you put them in water. Loads of bubbles. And they taste quite pleasant. Not bitter in the way that aspirin usually is.’

‘I don’t know if they are all right,’ I said. ‘But I want you to stop taking them for the time being. I’ll pop round and see you later and tell you more.’ I stood up. ‘There are one or two other patients all with similar symptoms to you. I want to see if they’re also taking aspirin they bought from Peter Marshall.’

* * *

I couldn’t wait for the surgery to end that morning. I was desperate to try to get at the bottom of the new medical mystery.

As soon as I’d seen the last patient, and signed a few letters Miss Johnson had typed for me, I rushed out and drove round to Nigel Perkin’s home. Of the other patients with muscle cramps he lived closest.

‘Show me the aspirin you’ve been taking!’ I said, bursting into his kitchen.

He looked at me, frowning. ‘How did you know I’ve been taking aspirin?’

‘Where is it?’

‘It’s in the kitchen,’ he told me. ‘By the kettle,’ he shouted after me, as I headed for the kitchen. ‘It’s only aspirin!’ he shouted. ‘It’s not medicine.’

And there, by the kettle, was a packet of aspirin. A packet identical to the one Jennifer Orsey had shown me.

‘Did you get this from Peter Marshall?’

‘Yes. Is there something wrong with it?’

‘I don’t know,’ I told him. ‘But stop taking it until I get back to you, will you?’

From there I went to see Samuel Houghton, Harry Burrows and Gilly Parsons at the Duck and Puddle.

They were all taking aspirin from Peter Marshall’s shop.

I’d found the link.

I felt as proud as Sherlock Holmes at the conclusion of a difficult case. Except that I still didn’t know why the aspirin sold by Peter Marshall should be causing such a strange problem.

I carefully examined the packet which Harry Burrows had produced. It had been prepared and packaged in France and was undoubtedly something Peter had managed to import at a rather special price. But the pack wasn’t out-of-date and the aspirin tablets themselves hadn’t started to break down in the way tablets can when they are old.

But when I checked the packet I discovered that, in addition to the aspirin, the tablets contained sodium bicarbonate. The bicarbonate was there to help the tablets dissolve quickly. And there was enough sodium bicarbonate in the tablets to cause the alkalosis.

And the cramps.

‘What’s the problem?’ asked Mr Burrows.

'It isn't really a problem,' I told him. 'These aspirin tablets are really best taken occasionally – when you've got a headache, for example. They contain sodium bicarbonate to make them fizz when you put them in water and so when you take more than three or four in a day you might develop cramps.'

'The aspirin is causing my cramps?'

I nodded.

'But I often take aspirin,' said Mr Burrows. 'I've never had this problem before.'

'I don't mind betting that you've never taken this brand of aspirin before!'

'No, that's true,' admitted Mr Burrows.

'Put these in a cupboard and use them for headaches and other occasional aches and pains,' I told him. 'But for your arthritis take ordinary plain old soluble aspirin. It'll be safer. It isn't the aspirin that has caused your cramps - it's something they've put in with the aspirin. You've taken so much sodium bicarbonate that it has caused a metabolic alkalosis - a fairly common cause of cramps.'

'So do I have to stop taking aspirin?'

'Just stop this brand,' I told him again. 'You can take ordinary soluble aspirin.'

I went round to the other patients and told them the same thing. They were as relieved as I was that the puzzle was solved.

And then I went to see Peter Marshall.

'There's nothing wrong with them, is there?' he asked, clearly worried.

'Nothing wrong with them at all,' I reassured him. 'But when you sell them to people make sure they know that they shouldn't take them too often. No more than two a day. If they need a bigger dose then they should take ordinary soluble aspirin.'

Peter held up a packet of ordinary aspirin.

'These?'

'Absolutely.'

'Don't worry,' he said. 'I won't be selling any more of the French stuff. They were quite popular, and I got them very cheap from the wholesaler, but I've run out now and I won't be ordering them again.'

'That's very public spirited of you!' I told him. This was a new side to Peter. A caring, more thoughtful side than the one most people knew.

'I don't want my customers developing cramps,' said Peter, rather spoiling his new caring image. 'If they've got cramp they can't get out and walk to my shop, can they?'

* * *

That evening I was having dinner when the front doorbell rang.

I was exhausted and tempted not to answer it. But a country GP doesn't have that luxury. With a sigh I got up from the table and answered the door.

It was Frank Parsons, the landlord from the Duck and Puddle.

'Come in, Frank!' I said.

'No thanks,' he said. 'I must get back. I just wanted to bring you this.' He handed me an envelope. I looked at it. 'What's this?'

'Just a small thank you for solving Gilly's problem,' said Frank, turning away and heading back for his car. Bilbury Grange isn't far from the Duck and Puddle but Frank isn't a great walker.

'You don't have to...' I started. 'This isn't money is it?'

Frank, halfway into his car, looked up. 'Don't be daft,' he said.

'I wouldn't give you money, would I?'

I smiled, as he drove out of the drive and headed back to the pub.

'Who was that?' asked Patsy, when I got back to the dining table.

'Frank,' I said. I held up the envelope. 'He brought this.'

'What is it?'

'Dunno. Frank said it's a thank you for sorting out Gilly's problem. She was one of the patients suffering from aspirin induced cramps.'

'Open it then.'

I opened the envelope and took out a scruffy piece of lilac notepaper which had been folded in two. I unfolded the paper.

Here is what was written on it:

Frank's Recipe for Spiced Hot Toddy (Serving For One)

Three table spoonfuls of the best whisky you can find

One teaspoonful of honey

A squeeze of lemon juice
Three cloves
A teaspoonful of cinnamon
Half a slice of fresh orange
A pinch of nutmeg
Top up with boiling water
Stir with a cinnamon stick and serve in a Russian tea glass.

‘What on earth is it?’ asked Patsy.

‘It’s Frank’s recipe for hot toddy.’

‘My Dad’s been trying to get that recipe from him for twenty years,’ said Patsy. ‘That’s the biggest ‘thank you’ Frank could give you.’

‘I know,’ I said. ‘I’m honoured.’

I folded the paper once again, put it back in its envelope and slipped it into my jacket pocket.

Sometimes there are wonderful perks associated with being a country doctor.

CHAPTER 15

Spring burst into Bilbury like a man on a horse with an urgent message to deliver.

On Tuesday night we went to bed and said goodnight to a grey, cold world; the weary fag-end of an interminable, harsh winter which had long overstayed its welcome.

On Wednesday morning we awoke to what seemed to be an entirely different world. It was as though a benevolent and understanding god had lifted up Bilbury Grange and spirited it away to a land of sunshine and greenery. The greyness had gone and had been replaced with promises of summer months to come.

Looking out into the garden I saw buds bursting into life and birds singing light operetta. The rough lawn around the trees was studded with daffodils. Wordsworth would have been in ecstasy. Soon the birds would be building nests and the cherry blossom trees would be sprinkling the garden with nature's pink confetti.

And with Easter, the daffodils and the sunshine came the promise of the first visitors of the year to Bilbury Grange.

If you live somewhere pleasant then it is an unavoidable fact of life that friends, relatives, half-forgotten classmates, vague acquaintances and even people who don't like you very much, and from whom you hardly ever hear, will always want to come and stay with you.

Mortimer Gregory, a friend I'd known when we were both medical students (and who, therefore, fell into the half-forgotten classmates category) telephoned one evening to say that he and his family were driving down to Cornwall to stay in a cottage his wife's family had owned for years. I hadn't heard Mortimer's voice for years and when he told me who was calling I had difficulty reconciling the smooth sounding Mortimer Gregory who was on the telephone with the rough-edged Mortimer Gregory with whom I'd once shared a flat.

'Where are you? What are you doing? What's been happening to you?' I demanded, firing off questions in the way people do when they hear from someone they used to know well but haven't seen for years.

'I practice complimentary medicine,' he replied. 'Married. Two kids. Mortgage so big it makes my eyes water when I think about it.'

'You mean you're doing acupuncture and stuff like that?' I asked, surprised.

'Oh, good heavens, no!' laughed Mortimer. 'That's complementary medicine spelt with an 'e'. Load of rubbish. I mean I get up when patients come into my consulting room and I say 'Good morning Mrs Davenport, you're looking lovely today.' He laughed again. 'It makes them feel good about themselves and good about me. Basic principle of medicine for money.'

'You're in private practice?'

'Sort of. Officially I'm the youngest NHS consultant in the area but that doesn't take up much time. Just helps give me a bit of credibility and attracts the patients. I've got consulting rooms in a posh part of town. They cost me a fortune. And a posh receptionist whose daddy owns half of Cheshire, and who looks a bit like the horse she rides every weekend, but who sounds really classy when she answers the phone.'

I murmured something suitably appreciative. He didn't ask about me and so I didn't tell him anything.

'Anyway, we thought it would be nice if we could drop in and say 'hello',' he said. 'We're driving down from the north so we'd welcome a bit of a break.'

'Would you like to stay the night?' I asked, already knowing the answer before I asked the question. Bilbury is hardly on the direct route from the north of England to Cornwall but I hadn't succeeded in persuading myself that Mortimer wanted to make the detour just to see me. Staying with us would be considerably cheaper than finding hotel accommodation for the night.

'Gosh, that would be very decent of you,' said Mortimer, feigning surprise and doing it rather badly.

* * *

'You'll love him,' I told Patsy. 'He's quite a character. He and I once rented a tiny two-bedroomed cottage in the north of Scotland. We were going to spend a week walking round the Scottish countryside. Deer stalking, that sort of thing.'

'But you don't shoot?' said Patsy, surprised.

'Oh no, we weren't going to shoot anything. Just see if we could spot a deer. You know I've always been a great fan of the book *John MacNab* by John Buchan?'

Patsy nodded. She had grown to share my love of all things Buchan. *John MacNab*, not as well-known as The Thirty Nine Steps but in my view by far Buchan's best book, is a magnificent story of a politician, a banker and a lawyer who add missing zest to their lives by stalking deer and salmon on huge and magnificent Scottish estates. The book is, perhaps, most notable for its marvellously evocative descriptions of the wild Scottish Highlands.

'We got to the cottage late one night,' I told her, 'dumped our bags in the tiny hallway and went straight to bed.

We’d been driving in Mortimer’s old van for fourteen hours. His van was a terrible wreck. I remember the steering wheel used to come off. If he had anyone new in the van Mortimer would remove the steering wheel and hand it to the passenger asking them if they wanted to drive for a while. There was a hole in the floor and you could see the road rushing by underneath.’

‘We were woken up about two hours after we’d arrived by someone coming into the cottage. It turned out that the person who owned it had made a mistake and had double booked the place. The result was that we found ourselves sharing the cottage with a couple from Basildon. They had two fast developing teenage daughters.

Since the cottage really was in the middle of nowhere, and there was absolutely nowhere else for any of us to move to, we decided to divide up the cottage. The family from Basildon had the upstairs and the living room and we had one room downstairs. We shared the bathroom and the kitchen. When they found out that we were medical students they built a barrier at the top of the stairs to protect their daughters. In fact although we were there for a week we didn’t see either of the daughters at all after that first night.’

‘Wise parents,’ said Patsy.

I ignored the remark and continued. ‘The father was a fisherman. He went out every day and every night he came back with a variety of fish. He always pretended he’d caught them himself. But we were driving near a small bay one day when we spotted him buying a dozen mackerel from a travelling fishmonger selling out of the back of a scruffy Ford van. He didn’t see us. When he came back that night he showed us the twelve mackerel he’d caught.’

‘Did you tell him that you knew he’d bought them and not caught them?’

‘Oh no! The guy was a complete prat but we wouldn’t have embarrassed him.’

‘How many of them are coming?’ asked Patsy when I’d finished telling her the story of my Scottish adventure with Mortimer.

‘Just Mortimer, his wife and their two boys,’ I said. ‘And they’ll only be here for one night.’

‘That’s fine,’ said Patsy. ‘I can get the two spare bedrooms at the back of the house ready for them.’

The one thing we weren’t short of in Bilbury Grange was space and I found myself looking forward to Mortimer’s visit.

CHAPTER 16

The last person I saw in the surgery the next morning unwittingly reminded me that in every practice there are some patients who are, for want of a better description, usually referred to as in dog Latin as being ‘dolor gluteus maximus’. Roughly translated this egregious piece of Latin nonsense denotes patients who are ‘a pain in the backside’.

Lieutenant Colonel Harper was a pompous and humourless man who suffered from what Patsy and I described as ‘irritable person syndrome’. He was, without a shadow of a doubt, a pain in the backside.

His one redeeming feature was his loyalty to his wife. The Colonel was a widower and still wore a black tie every day even though his wife had been dead for nineteen years.

‘She said she chose a military man because she wanted a husband who could cook, sew and make the bed,’ he used to say, occasionally adding that she had also told him that she thought that military men were better suited to marriage because they were accustomed to taking orders.

He had a nose like a vulture’s beak and an exaggerated limp which he said was the result of an old rugby injury but which was, as I alone knew, a consequence of a large bunion on his left foot. A ‘recurrence of an old sporting injury’ sounds rather romantic and is always good for a few oohs and aahs of sympathy in the pub. A bunion, on the other hand, is likely only to attract sniggers since it is the sort of health problem usually associated with women who have, through vanity, chosen to compress their feet into narrow, high-heeled shoes. I think the Colonel might have feigned a war injury if he’d known enough about wars to create a believable story. He had, however, spent his entire military career at an army camp in northern England and was, therefore, a military man without either a fund of old war stories or an old wound and I suppose he felt he needed something to give himself an aura of manly respectability. His military career had been spent supervising the maintenance of military vehicles. I don’t think he’d ever travelled more than twenty miles away from the camp on army business.

I obviously didn’t mind the nose and I didn’t much mind his minor deceit with the bunion.

But what did sometimes get under my skin was the fact that the Colonel was one of those people whose problems are always worse, much worse, than anyone else’s. Tell him that you had broken your leg and he would tell you that he had once broken two at once – both compound fractures. Tell him that you were feeling under the weather with the flu and he would insist on telling you lengthy stories about the many usually fatal illnesses he had succeeded in overcoming. Tell him that you had just got back from a trip abroad and you’d spent an hour and a half fighting your way through overofficious customs officials and he’d insist on topping your story with an account of how he’d once spent half a day trying to find a piece of missing army paperwork for a faulty tank.

He was, to be honest with you, an extraordinarily easy man to dislike. Even my wife Patsy, who was the most tolerant of women, had confessed that she found him rather difficult to stomach. If this made him sound like a fatty meat pie then the analogy was well founded because that’s exactly what he looked like.

‘I’ve got a brain tumour,’ he told me, lurching into the surgery and collapsing into a chair.

‘What makes you say that?’ I asked.

‘Dizzy,’ he said. He reached out and grabbed hold of the edge of my desk. ‘It feels like I’m on a ship.’

‘Are you getting headaches?’

‘No.’

‘Any other symptoms?’

‘No.’

‘Just dizzy?’

‘Isn’t that enough?’ he demanded. ‘I keep falling over. People think I’m drunk.’

I examined him, peered into his ears and did some simple tests.

‘You’ve got labyrinthitis,’ I told him eventually. I wrote out a prescription. ‘Fortunately, it’s quite mild.’

‘No brain tumour?’

‘No sign at all of a brain tumour.’

‘What’s the prescription for?’ he demanded. He didn’t seem in the slightest bit relieved by my diagnosis.

‘A course of antibiotics and some tablets that should help relieve the dizziness,’ I told him. ‘Have you got someone who can go to the chemists for you?’

‘No. I’ll go myself,’ he said.

‘How did you get here?’ I asked.

‘Drove myself in the Bentley. 1956 S1. Best car ever made.’

‘A friend of mine at medical school had one of those,’ I told him. ‘Bought it at an auction. He lived in it for a week when he was thrown out of his flat.’

'Why was he thrown out of his flat?'

'He hadn't paid the rent. Said he couldn't afford to keep the Bentley on the road and pay rent.'

The Colonel snorted. I couldn't tell whether it was a snort of approval or disapproval. 'Beautiful cars. Mine has the two-speed windscreen wipers,' he said. 'First model to have them.'

'You shouldn't be driving anything,' I told him. 'I'll drive you home.' I picked up the prescription, tore it in half and threw it into the waste bin. Then I stood up, opened a cupboard behind me and took out two packets of tablets. I wrote out two labels, stuck the labels on the packets and handed them to him.

'What are these?' he demanded.

'Medicines. It'll save you going to the chemist,' I told him.

'What do I owe you?' I told him.

'Is that all?'

'I can charge you more if you like.'

He glowered at me, pulled out a handful of change, picked out the right money and put it on the desk.

Much to his disapproval I made him sit in the waiting room until I'd finished dealing with the messages Miss Johnson had accumulated during the surgery and then I put my bicycle into his car boot and drove him home. He lived in a large cottage set so far back from the road that I'd never noticed it before.

There was a horseshoe pinned up over the front door. He saw me looking at it as I escorted him from the car into the house.

'I'm told you don't have to believe in it for it to work,' he said rather gruffly. 'Can't do any harm anyway.'

'It would do you plenty of harm if it fell on your head,' I said. He smiled at that.

'Just rest for a few days,' I told him.

'There is one thing,' he said. 'Do you have a minute before you go?'

'Literally just a minute or so,' I told him. 'I must get back.'

'Do you need a pee?'

I was startled at this. 'I can hang on until I get back to the Grange.'

'Take my arm and walk with me, doctor,' he said.

Together we staggered around the side of the house and into a well-looked after back garden. There was a large, neatly mown lawn and several extensive rose beds. Something had been digging up the lawn.

'Moles?' I asked.

He shook his head. 'Badgers,' he said.

'Ah. I know who to recommend for moles but I'm afraid I don't know anything about getting rid of badgers.'

'I do,' said the Colonel. He let go of my arm, unzipped his trousers and started to urinate. 'Just pee where you're standing, doctor, if you don't mind.'

I stared at him, wondering if my diagnosis of labyrinthitis was right, after all.

'Badgers are wonderful creatures,' he said. 'Love em to bits. But they dig worms and burrowing bumblebees and cranefly larvae out of the lawn and they make a hell of a mess.'

'So I can see,' I agreed, looking around.

'The one thing that keeps them away is the smell of male pee,' he said. 'Has to be male pee. The female variety doesn't work.'

I was beginning to understand.

'So if you would just pee on the lawn for me it would help enormously,' said the Colonel.

Feeling rather self-conscious and hoping that none of his neighbours chose this moment to pop round to borrow a cupful of sugar, I did my bit to help keep the badgers off the Colonel's lawn.

CHAPTER 17

As I drove to my first home visit I found myself remembering my days at medical school.

I know people who spend their adult lives reminiscing about their days at school or university, and whose lives are defined by their scholarly and sporting achievements during those days of learning.

In contrast, I've never been terribly keen on holding onto those days. I had turned down an invitation to attend a medical school reunion without a moment's hesitation. But Mortimer's telephone call had, inevitably, brought back a host of half-forgotten memories.

The things I remembered in greatest detail were the odd, almost irrelevant, moments.

The haematology lecturer who was so genuinely absentminded that he regularly arrived at lectures an hour late and who, on one memorable occasion, wore two ties at the same time. We were mesmerised by this and I don't think any of us heard or remembered much of what he said. I don't think this mattered very much. I do remember that he spoke only about immensely rare blood diseases and never even mentioned disorders such as anaemia or leukaemia.

I remembered that our ophthalmology course (which lasted half a day) was inexplicably scheduled for the same time as our half day dental course. Since it was easy to avoid both by pretending to be at the other we all succumbed to temptation and took an unofficial half day holiday. Sitting in a cafe in the city someone pointed out that if we ever qualified as doctors we would be legally entitled to practice as dentists even though we had never spent one second studying dentistry. I never did find out if it is true that doctors can practise dentistry but several people have insisted that it is.

Five of us spent a whole year dissecting an old lady and learned the name and location of every vein, artery, nerve, muscle, bone and tendon in her body. Most of this I forgot within 48 hours of the examination I took. Today I doubt if I can remember 1% of the details I learned in anatomy. I never knew the old lady's name but in a macabre sort of way it is, I suppose, true to say that I knew her more intimately than I have ever known anyone.

I remembered the multiple choice examination we were given. Such devices were new at the time and the lecturers who had set the exam had devised a format which meant that many marks were deducted for wrong answers. It seemed to me that the best policy was to hand in an entirely empty sheet. I came top of 120 students with a final score of nought and incurred the wrath of the lecturers who had set the examination. They complained that I hadn't entered into the examination in the proper spirit. I replied that I didn't realise that there was a 'proper spirit' for taking examinations and that I had assumed that the sole aim was to obtain the highest possible mark. I claimed that I had shown initiative and eventually this was grudgingly accepted.

I remembered sharing a flat with Mortimer and three other medical students.

It was a huge flat and we couldn't afford heating. Mortimer claimed it was so cold that he could clean his teeth without moving the brush. The rent was cheap but the flat was several miles from the hospital and medical school and several miles out of town. One Saturday night Mortimer had missed the last bus home and so he walked into the local bus station, climbed into an empty bus and drove it home. No one tried to stop him. He left the bus parked outside our flat. ('What else could I have done with it?' he asked later.

'There wasn't any point in driving it back to the garage and buses are tricky things to hide.') When he was called to see the medical school dean he explained that the buses had stopped running and that he didn't have enough money for a taxi home. The dean had accepted this explanation and had, somehow, settled things with the police and the bus company.

I remembered my first house job. My consultant invited all his junior doctors to have dinner with him. A friend of mine who was invited took a bottle of wine. He couldn't afford anything decent and picked up the cheapest bottle the local off-licence had on offer. The consultant's wife opened the bottle and put it on the table. The consultant examined the label with some suspicion and then poured himself a sample. After spluttering and spitting the wine back into his glass he glowered at his wife. 'Where did you pick up this muck?' he demanded. 'Our guest brought it,' she replied without a pause. After a few embarrassing moments they poured the wine into a saucepan, added sugar, cloves, slices of orange and cinnamon and turned it into a very acceptable hot toddy.

I remembered working on a surgical ward. Every Sunday evening a patient died in the same bed in the intensive care unit. No one knew why. Eventually, I made the diagnosis. It didn't require any medical knowledge. I happened to be in the unit one Sunday and I watched in horror as a cleaner entered the ward, pulled out the life support system plug, and put her floor polisher into the vacant socket. I dashed across and switched the plugs back. It turned out that she had been allowing her polisher to whirr away for a few minutes every Sunday. When she was finished she put the life support system plug back into the socket and left the intensive care unit unaware that she'd just killed someone.

Remembering all this I nearly missed my next turning. I slammed on the brakes, slowed down and turned left onto a deeply rutted track. I then headed south towards Tarrydown Woods where the first patient on my morning call sheet lived on a small farm. As I turned the car down the track so the skies went grey. Moments later the rain started.

Many of the metalled roads in Bilbury are only wide enough for single traffic and have grass growing through the tarmacadam in the middle, but we still call them ‘roads’ rather than ‘tracks’. In Bilbury a ‘track’ is something that is really only suitable for a tractor. When the ruts are particularly deep it is useless to try to drive with the car wheels in the ruts. If you do that then the exhaust pipe, number plates and other bits and pieces near to the ground will be torn off the car, even at agonisingly slow speeds. The only safe way to drive down them is to put the nearside wheels on the ridge in the centre of the track and the offside wheels on the edge of the bank on the right hand side of the track. (You could put the offside wheels on the ridge and the nearside wheels on the other bank, but if you did that then you would be less likely to spot dangerous obstructions in the bank.) Hoping that no one had dumped anything too solid on the bank, and that any drainage ditches cut into the bank weren’t too deep, I gingerly made my way down the track, eventually managing to park in a small courtyard, alongside an elderly and extremely battered old tractor. A rather sorry looking farmhouse lay on one side of the courtyard and barns and stables made up most of the other three sides. The usual bits and pieces of rusting farmyard detritus proved that this was a working farm. Even with his car doors and windows shut a townie would have known that the owner of the property kept pigs. By now the rain was coming down fast and the sky was black.

The patient I was visiting was called Lydeard Lawrence and I’d never met him before, though I’d heard about him. Even in Bilbury, Mr Lawrence (I don’t think anyone ever called him Lydeard) was known to be both rather eccentric and rather reclusive. He had never been further than Barnstaple in his whole life. He had, so Patchy Fogg insisted, only ever made one visit there. That had been back in the 1950’s and the shock of the hustle and bustle had convinced him that big city life was not for him. Thumper once told me that Mr Lawrence came from stem stock. His father had worked on a farm in Ilfracombe and had walked there from Bilbury every morning and had walked home again every evening. The round trip each day must have been over twenty five miles. When he hit his seventieth birthday Mr Lawrence senior took a job in Combe Martin because the journey was shorter.

Both father and son were, said Thumper, the sort of countrymen who would hand plough six acres and milk twenty four cows before breakfast, plant four bushels of seed between breakfast and lunch, walk a flock of sheep to market in the afternoon and milk the cows again in the evening. At the end of the day they would regard themselves as having had a day off.

Someone, I wasn’t sure who, had telephoned the house while I was having my breakfast, spoken to Patsy and asked her to arrange for me to call in and see Mr Lawrence. It was amazing how quickly word had got around that Bilbury had its own doctor again.

I don’t know whether it was because the dogs hadn’t heard me arrive, or because they were craftily waiting for me to get away from the safety of my vehicle before they showed themselves but I was stranded ten or twelve feet from the car when the two Alsatians appeared. They bore little resemblance to the sort of dogs of that breed which can be seen walking along the pavements of our towns and cities. These were the scariest looking dogs I’d ever seen. Their coats were shaggy and unkempt and their eyes wild. Their teeth seemed more like fangs.

I’ve always been nervous about dogs and I’ve been bitten enough times to feel satisfied that my nervousness is a useful form of selfpreservation rather than a phobia of some kind. Dog owners usually make things worse by saying things like ‘he only bites if he can tell you’re nervous’ or, worse still, ‘don’t worry, he doesn’t bite’.

The first of these remarks simply adds to my anxiety and, therefore, the risk of my being bitten. The second remark (which may well be a lie, of course) means, at best, that the dog hasn’t yet bitten anyone. Whenever I hear this I am always conscious of the fact that all dogs who bite have never bitten anyone before they do so for the first time.

Over the years I’ve been given masses of advice from wellmeaning dog owners. Some say that a dog won’t bite if you keep quite still. Some suggest walking away as quickly as you can without actually running. A few claim that you should crouch down, make yourself look like a big dog and then bark and growl. All this conflicting advice means that I never know what to do except cower, whimper and panic.

‘Who’s there?’ called someone from deep inside a barn to my right. The question was followed by a loud grunt.

‘The doctor!’ I called back. ‘Could you call your dogs, please?’

‘Adolf!’ yelled the voice. ‘Hermann!’ There was then another grunt.

The two dogs, which had looked to me as if they were trying to decide which bit of my flesh to eat first, pricked their ears and turned in the direction of the voice. From the fact that the delay in their response matched the delay between the two names I thought it safe to assume that the two dogs were called Adolf and Hermann. Knowing their names didn’t make me feel any better.

The voice called again, this time adding ‘Come here you buggers!’ Every few words were punctuated by grunts.

The two dogs turned and trotted into the barn.

‘Follow the dogs!’ called the voice. Reluctantly, I did as I was told.

It was dark inside the barn and after walking through the open doorway I stood still for a few moments, allowing my pupils to enlarge and my vision to develop a little. Gradually I could see that the barn was divided up by wooden planked walls into a number of stalls. Some of these were filled with stacks of hay and straw. I could see no sign of any living creature.

‘Over here!’ called the voice. There was, inevitably it now seemed, another grunt.

Gingerly, I walked towards the sound. The floor of the barn was covered with straw which needed changing. The straw was so wet that every footstep made an unpleasant squelching sound. My wellington boots were, of course, still in the car boot. Eventually, I reached the wooden partition from behind which the sound seemed to have come. I peered over the partition.

On the other side of the wooden planking lay about a dozen piglets in a large nest made out of bales of straw. Lying alongside them was a human figure dressed in an old blue boiler suit. In addition to the boiler suit he wore wellington boots and a very battered brown trilby hat. Adolf and Hermann were sitting at attention just a couple of feet away from his head. The man was holding glass feeding bottles in each hand and had a third bottle tucked between his thighs. Three of the piglets were sucking greedily at the teats. Every ten or fifteen seconds the man made a loud grunting sound. It was one of the strangest sights I’d ever seen.

‘Mr Lawrence?’ I asked.

‘That’s me.’

‘Are you all right?’

‘The sow up and died just after giving birth,’ explained Mr Lawrence. ‘The little ones will only take the milk if they think I’m their mother.’ He pulled a half empty bottle from one piglet and offered it to another who took it greedily.

‘And the grunts are to help convince them that you’re their mother?’

Mr Lawrence didn’t answer but just grunted.

I stood and watched this extraordinary scene for ten or fifteen minutes. Eventually, Mr Lawrence dropped the now empty bottles onto the hay and rolled over onto his back. One of the piglets jumped up onto his chest. Mr Lawrence brushed it off as if it were a troublesome kitten.

‘Give us a hand will you,’ he said.

I clambered over the wooden fence, keeping a careful eye on the two dogs, bent down and helped Mr Lawrence to his feet. Or, rather, helped him half way to his feet. This took some time and was accompanied by a good many oohs and aarrhs and ouches. When he was eventually standing he was bent double, with his top half horizontal to the floor.

‘I can’t straighten up,’ he complained.

‘How long have you been like this?’ I asked.

‘Four or five days.’

‘How long have you been feeding the piglets?’

‘Same time.’

‘I think there might be a link,’ I told him.

He turned his head (it wasn’t as easy as it should have been) and glared at me. ‘You being funny?’

‘No, no!’ I said quickly.

‘Take my arm,’ he said. ‘We’ll go into the house.’

I moved forwards to take his arm. The two dogs growled menacingly and edged closer to me. One of them (I couldn’t tell whether it was Adolf or Hermann) bared his yellowing teeth to show me what I could expect if I hurt his master.

The four of us then edged slowly out of the barn, across a muddy courtyard and into a small farmhouse. As we moved into the kitchen the farmer kicked the door to behind us, shutting the dogs out. They barked and growled on the other side of the door. The kitchen was quite large and was furnished with a huge old Welsh dresser, a large pine table and four pine chairs. There was a large white sink under the only window. The sink was served by a single, presumably cold, tap. The glass in the small window was so dirty that it was difficult to see anything.

‘Where’s the light switch?’ I asked, after having helped Mr Lawrence into one of the chairs.

He turned, with some difficulty, and looked at me. ‘What do you want light for?’

‘It’s a bit dark in here,’ I explained. ‘I can’t see to examine you properly.’

‘I don’t have the mains,’ said Mr Lawrence. ‘You need to pedal.’ He nodded towards an elderly bicycle which was fixed into a strange contraption which kept the rear wheels off the ground.

I looked at the bicycle, wondering why my riding an exercise bicycle would help produce some light.

‘The bicycle powers the light bulb,’ explained Mr Lawrence. ‘Climb on the saddle and pedal away.’

I put my bag down on the table, climbed onto the bicycle and started pedalling. It wasn't easy to get the bicycle going but slowly a glow appeared as a light bulb hanging down from the kitchen ceiling acquired some colour. The frame on which the back wheel was balancing wobbled alarmingly.

'Is this your only source of electricity?' I asked him, beginning to feel warm.

'It is,' he replied. 'And it's free and it doesn't break down when the wind blows.' He looked at me. 'And it keeps me warm too.'

And so I sat on the bicycle and pedalled while Mr Lawrence eased off his shirt and pointed to the places where the pain was at its worst. It wasn't quite the way I'd been taught to practise medicine but it was the best I could manage. A physical examination was, of course, impossible because the moment I stopped pedalling the light would go out and while I was pedalling I couldn't examine him. I gave him a small bottle of anti-inflammatory painkillers which I had in my bag and told him to take two tablets every four hours. He said he would and I thought he would. The tablets were huge and dark red and looked extremely potent. I scribbled out a prescription for more of the tablets. I also told him not to lie down in cold, wet straw beside the piglets. I was less convinced that he would obey that suggestion.

'Have you got someone who can get your pills?' I asked him.

'My sister calls in to tidy up,' said Mr Lawrence. 'She'll get them.'

When I'd finished I climbed off the bicycle and helped him put his clothes on. I promised that I'd go back and see how he was getting on.

* * *

By the time I left Mr Lawrence's cottage it was nearly half past one and I decided to go back to Bilbury Grange to grab some lunch before completing the remainder of the day's calls. It was still pouring with rain and the track back up the main road had become a small river.

When I finally got back home it was after two o'clock. It had taken me nearly an hour to do a journey which normally took less than fifteen minutes.

A Volvo estate car was parked in the driveway, almost blocking the entrance. If whoever had left it had done so intending to cause the greatest possible inconvenience they had been entirely successful.

It didn't for a moment occur to me that the car might belong to Mortimer. The last time I'd seen him he had been driving a souped up Austin Healey. He'd drilled holes in the exhaust pipe so that it sounded like a racing car.

I just managed to cram my Morris Minor into the driveway. By the time I'd made my way to the house I was soaked. Cold, wet and hungry I was not in the best of moods.

Naturally, the rain stopped and the sun came out again the minute I walked into the house.

CHAPTER 18

‘Your friends are here,’ said Patsy. I could tell from her smile that she was struggling a little. We had met in the kitchen. Mortimer and his family were nowhere to be seen.

‘Are you OK?’ I asked, quietly.

‘Oh yes,’ she said. But I knew she wasn’t. I could hear what sounded like the smashing of china. We looked at each other. ‘I left them in the living room,’ said Patsy. Her voice seemed thin and strained but there wasn’t time to talk more. She led the way and I followed.

I hardly recognised Mortimer.

He had changed enormously from the rather scruffy, long-haired medical student I remembered.

The Mortimer I’d known had worn horn-rimmed spectacles, garish shirts with long collars, huge ‘kipper’ ties, cowboy boots with huge heels and green corduroy trousers held up with a leather belt which fastened with a huge silver clasp designed to look like a skull. His hair had always fallen over his eyes and he had, I remembered, always had a rather lopsided, sheepish grin.

The new, well-polished and presumably much improved version of Mortimer wore no spectacles (they had, I discovered later, been replaced by contact lenses), a pair of beige slacks, a cream shirt and a pair of highly polished brown brogues. He had a pale yellow cashmere sweater draped around his shoulders, with the arms knotted loosely at the front in the French style. His hair, which looked to be thinning, was expensively cut and neatly combed. He looked like an advertisement for something unreasonably expensive.

There were three people with him.

The woman I assumed to be his wife was tall, extremely thin and blonde. She wore a dark green hip hugging skirt, a lighter green blouse and green high-heeled shoes. She had a string of pearls around her neck and wore pearl earrings. She was standing and clutching a small, green leather handbag.

The two boys, obviously Mortimer’s sons, were fighting and had tipped over a small wooden table. The tray, teacups, saucers, plates and cake which Patsy had put on the table were spread over the carpet. The table had a broken leg. Neither the boys nor their parents seemed concerned by this.

‘Good to see you!’ said Mortimer, holding out a hand. I took it and received a limp, rather half-hearted handshake. ‘We’ve met your wife, Patsy.’

‘Sorry I wasn’t here when you arrived,’ I apologised.

‘My wife,’ said Mortimer, waving a hand in the appropriate direction. He didn’t ask where I’d been or what I’d been doing.

‘Lovely to meet you. The last time I saw Mortimer,’ I told her, ‘he’d just started going out with a large nurse called Clarice.’

I was about to add that Clarice had been hideously bad-tempered, so huge that she must have weighed fifteen stone in her underwear and had a laugh like a drain emptying. I would have completed this pointless and hazardous monologue by adding that I could never work out why Mortimer went out with her and that it was a relief that he didn’t marry her.

But I never actually said any of this because everyone’s attention was on the two boys who had rolled into a small, antique oak table which Patsy’s parents had given us as a wedding present. Realising that the table was about to tip over I reached over them and lifted it up. By then I had temporarily forgotten what I had been about to say.

‘I’m Clarice.’ said Mortimer’s wife, introducing herself.

I felt myself reddening. ‘Amazing coincidence,’ I said, putting the table down. It was heavier than it looked. Both the table and I had a narrow escape.

‘I went on a diet and lost a lot of weight,’ she said. She allowed herself a rather ghostly imitation of a smile. I shook hands with her. Or, rather, she allowed the tips of her fingers to touch mine.

‘The boy on top is my son Spotty,’ said Mortimer, ignoring my gaffe and nodding towards the two boys writhing on the floor. ‘His real name is Dick but he had measles when he was five so naturally we called him Spotted Dick. The name Spotty has just sort of stuck. And the one underneath with his foot up against your television set is Rupert. The boys both suffer from hyperactivity,’ he said, as though in explanation. ‘Nothing much can be done about it, of course.’

‘Hello Spotty,’ I said. ‘Hello Rupert.’ The boy on top looked me up and down as though deciding whether to answer. He obviously decided against the idea for he said nothing. The youngest boy seemed to reach the same conclusion without any discernible effort.

‘You’d better stop that for now,’ said Mortimer. The boys ignored him.

‘Stop it,’ snarled Clarice. I turned, astonished. It was strange to hear such a powerful and venomous voice come out of such a thin and delicate looking woman. The boys stopped fighting and clambered to their feet.

'My dad's car is posher than your car,' said Spotty. 'I expect he earns more than you do.'

'He almost certainly does,' I agreed.

'We saw you park your car,' said Rupert. 'It looks as if it's covered in mud.'

'Actually most of it is slurry,' I confessed. 'It smells terrible. But when we go to Barnstaple or Exeter it's easy to find. We just sniff and head towards the smell.'

'Yuk,' said Spotty, screwing up his nose.

'I thought you were supposed to be a doctor?' said Rupert.

'Er, I am,' I told him.

'My Dad's a doctor and he's got a Volvo Estate. If you're a doctor why are you driving a rubbishy old Morris Minor?'

'Maybe it's what he wants to drive,' suggested Mortimer.

'Not all doctors earn as much money as Daddy does,' said Clarice.

* * *

I had hoped that Mortimer and I could reminisce about our student days together.

'Do you remember when we had a pal who was secretary of a Hall of Residence?' I asked him. 'At the end of one summer term he decided that he ought to empty the bar. He said he thought that the opened bottles of spirits would go off if we left them where they were. He got a few of us to go and help him. He was adamant that alcohol deteriorates dangerously if left unattended. The six of us emptied the entire booze cupboard. I wonder what on earth happened to those other three guys?'

'Richard is a consultant surgeon in Glasgow, Anthony is a consultant anaesthetist in the RAF and Peter is a consultant radiologist. I've rather lost touch with him. The chap who was secretary of the Hall of Residence was struck off two years ago for some sort of prescription fraud.'

'Do you remember we once shared a room when we were doing our maternity work. You woke up in the middle of the night screaming? You'd had a nightmare. I remember you said you'd been told that you needed a brain transplant and that the only organ available belonged to Prince Philip.'

'I don't remember that,' said Mortimer, after glancing in his wife's direction.

'Then there was that time we went on a coach trip to a mental hospital. You sat next to the emergency window and noticed that it said 'In emergency break glass with hammer'.' I reminded him. 'No one on the coach had a hammer and you made the driver stop at every shop we passed until you managed to buy a hammer.'

'I think that must have been someone else,' insisted Mortimer.

'No, it was you!' I insisted. 'And you must remember that posh, middle aged woman you admitted when you were working on the hospital's private wing?'

Mortimer frowned and shook his head.

'You asked her if she had hot flushes.' Mortimer shook his head again.

'She said 'Oh no, we use cold water like ordinary people'.'

'I think you must be exaggerating,' said Mortimer.

'Then there was the time that three of us were working in a general hospital in Selly Oak. The other bloke was a real nerdy type. Bruce I think his name was. When he went to bed at night he always laid all his clothes out very neatly so that in an emergency he could be dressed in seconds. He used to position his shoes very precisely so that he could slide his feet into them the moment he got out of bed. He told us he kept his socks on, I remember.'

Mortimer shook his head. 'I don't remember any of this,' he said.

'Oh you must!' I insisted. 'Bert Whatsisname went into his room one night and glued Bruce's shoes in position – the whole hospital had awful green linoleum on the floor – so that when he leapt out of bed and put his feet into his shoes his body kept moving but his feet didn't. He smashed his head into the door. Bert was the duty surgeon and he put six stitches into Bruce's forehead. I had a card from Bert a year or two ago. He was working as a proctologist in Sunderland.'

Mortimer didn't seem to remember many of the things I remembered. The few he recalled seemed to have happened quite differently to the way I remembered them. I began to wonder if we'd ever known each other at all.

I was enormously relieved when the surgery doorbell went. 'A patient,' I apologised. 'I shouldn't be long.'

'How on earth do you know it's a patient?' asked Mortimer.

'The door to the surgery, the door patients use, has a different bell,' I explained. 'It bing bongs. The bell on the front door goes more ding ding.'

'Oh I think I'd have them the other way round,' said Clarice. 'I think I'd prefer the ding ding for patients.'

I headed for the surgery.

'Do you mind if I come with you?' asked Mortimer. 'Be interesting to take a look at how a country GP operates.'

I hesitated before nodding. I really didn't fancy the idea of him breathing over my shoulder.

'I'm sorry to bother you doctor.' It was Tom Kipple. He works as a farm labourer. 'I've cut myself. The wife tried putting a plaster on it.' He shrugged and grinned. He held out his arm. It was wrapped in a blood soaked towel. I explained to Tom that Mortimer was another doctor and asked him if he minded if he stayed. He said he didn't.

'How on earth did you do this?' I asked. Tom had a long, savage looking gash in his forearm. At its deepest it was half an inch deep. I could see bone.'

'Clearing a hedge,' he said. 'Bit of old tractor.'

'Rusty?'

He nodded.

'Did Sally bring you?' Sally was his wife. Another nod.

'Where is she?'

'Sitting out in the car waiting for me.'

'Why didn't she come in?'

'Shy. She saw the Volvo and guessed you must have visitors.'

'Is she OK there?'

He nodded. 'Happier in the car,' he said. 'She'll drive me home afterwards.'

'When did you last have a tetanus injection?'

He thought for a moment. 'Four, five years ago,' he said. 'I cut myself mending the tractor. Hand and thigh. Thirty two stitches altogether. You done 'em for me. Neat job. I had a full course of jabs after.'

'Good. I'll give you a booster jab when I've cleaned this up,' I told him.

He nodded.

'Aren't you calling an ambulance?' asked Mortimer, clearly appalled. 'This man needs hospital attention.'

'He needs sewing up,' I said. 'It'll take an hour for an ambulance to get here and another hour for the ambulance to get him to the hospital. It's a bouncy, twisty, unpleasant road in a car, let alone in an ambulance. Then he'll have to wait for someone to see him. When they've finished with him he'll have to find his own way back here unless his wife follows the ambulance and if she does that she'll need to find a babysitter first. If his wife can't find a babysitter he'll be there all night if he hasn't bled to death or died of boredom.'

'He should still be seen in a hospital,' said Mortimer, rather less sure of himself

'Do you want me to send you to the hospital?' I asked Tom.

'No thank you, doctor. I'd rather you did it for me.' He paused and looked at me. 'Much rather you did it than some doctor I don't know.' He grinned broadly. Most of his front teeth were missing. He had a denture but I'd never seen him wear it. He kept it in a drawer in the bedroom for special occasions. 'Sam Houghton put eight stitches in his own leg last year,' he told me. 'Cut himself on barbed wire. Own silly fault.'

'Why on earth did he do that?' asked Mortimer. 'Sew himself up?'

'We didn't have a doctor in the village then,' explained Tom. 'It was in the middle of harvesting. He didn't have the time to waste.'

'But what did he use to sew himself up?'

'Same stuff as he uses for the cows, of course,' said Tom. Mortimer said nothing.

'Do you want me to give you an anaesthetic?' I asked him.

He shook his head.

'He needs something,' said Mortimer. 'Valium?'

'Nothing, thank you,' said Tom. He spoke to me. I cut off the remains of his shirt, cleaned up his arm and carefully removed all the dirt from the wound.

'You're taking a lot of time over cleaning that wound,' muttered Mortimer.

'Tom works on a farm,' I reminded him. 'Billions of tetanus spores. If I leave any dirt in the wound the spores will grow even though he's immunised. I once saw a farm labourer who'd been to the hospital after he broke his leg. Compound fracture. The doctors set the bones but failed to clean them out properly. He nearly died of tetanus. In the end they had to re-break his leg and clean out the bone.' As I talked I cleaned, working as fast as I could to minimise the blood loss.

'There you are,' I said at last. 'Now we can sew you up.'

'Good heavens,' murmured Mortimer quietly.

I sewed up the wound as neatly as I could and then gave him a tetanus injection.' Don't suppose Sally will want the shirt or the towel back?' I said when I'd finished.

'Don't think so, doctor,' said Tom, grinning.

I tossed the shirt and towel into my rubbish bin. 'I'll get you an old coat to go home in,' I told him. I popped out for a moment, found an old sports jacket hanging in the hall and took it back to him.

‘I’ll bring it back round in the morning,’ he promised. I went outside with him, said hello and goodnight to his wife and then went back into the house. Sophie the cat followed me in. She had clearly been rolling in something exceedingly unpleasant. Her fur was matted and she smelt disgusting. Naturally, she leapt straight up onto my shoulders and started to rub herself against the back of my head. Gently, I plucked her off, cleaned her off as best as I could with a towel and then deposited her in her basket. She purred contentedly and started to clean off the remains of whatever it had been. I was glad I didn’t know. I wiped my neck and the back of my head with a handkerchief

‘Do you get this sort of thing a lot?’ asked Clarice, when I returned. Mortimer had found his way back to the dining room while I’d been dealing with Sophie.

‘What sort of thing?’

‘Patients troubling you in the evenings?’

‘It happens.’

‘How many nights a week are you on call?’

‘All of them.’

‘Yuk. You smell horrid,’ said Rupert suddenly.

‘It was the cat’s fault,’ I said.

‘Every night?’ continued Clarice, ignoring her son. ‘Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday...all of them?’

‘There are no other doctors around here,’ I said. ‘No one close enough to organise a rota with.’

‘And weekends?’ I nodded.

‘Oh how absolutely awful!’ said Clarice.

‘It’s what being a village doctor means,’ I said.

‘Why don’t you charge extra for sewing people up?’ asked Mortimer. ‘You don’t have to do it.’

I looked at him, horrified.

‘We’d better eat,’ said Patsy, diplomatically changing the subject quickly. ‘Or dinner will be ruined.’

* * *

‘That was very nice,’ said Clarice, pushing away her plate. She’d hardly touched anything. ‘But where on earth do you manage to buy such wonderful vegetables? You’re miles out in the middle of nowhere!’

‘We don’t buy our vegetables,’ replied Patsy. ‘We grow them.’

Clarice looked astonished. ‘Oh darling Patsy how wonderful that is! You mean to say that you actually put seeds into the ground and then harvest your very own cabbages and potatoes?’

‘Something like that,’ agreed Patsy, standing up and starting to clear away the plates. I stood to help her.

‘How marvellous. You’re like those self-sufficient people we see on the television sometimes,’ said Mortimer. ‘What a great way to save money.’

I started to say that we didn’t grow our own vegetables to save money but because we wanted better vegetables, but Mortimer wasn’t interested.

‘Here’s a little tip for you,’ he said, holding up a hand to silence me. ‘It’ll save you a few pence when you next go travelling. A patient of mine told me about it but we prefer eating at hotels. You wrap some salmon fillets or pieces of chicken in aluminium foil and wedge them around the car engine. When you stop for lunch they will be cooked.’ He paused and thought for a moment. ‘I suppose you could use sausages just as well,’ he said. ‘They’d be cheaper. My patient chappie reckons 200 miles at a steady 60 mph should do it nicely.’

‘We don’t eat meat,’ I said. ‘We’re vegetarian.’

‘Don’t eat meat!’ said Clarice. ‘Oh how awful for you!’ She reached out and patted Patsy on the arm. ‘Poor dear,’ she said.

‘You’ll have to get that husband of yours to get a job in a town where the pay is better.’

Patsy started to say something but Clarice wasn’t finished. ‘It’s awfully sweet, living in the country, but I could never live somewhere like this,’ she said, wiping her lips with her napkin.

‘Oh!’ said Patsy. ‘Why not?’

‘Far too far from the heart of things,’ replied Clarice. ‘And no shops! My dear, I think you are wonderful, being able to live so far from decent shops.’

‘There’s a department store in Barnstaple,’ said Patsy.

Clarice laughed. ‘Well, yes, I’m sure there is,’ she said.

‘And we’ve got most of the big High Street stores too,’ Patsy said defensively.

‘Boots, Smiths, Marks and Spencer, Woolworths?’

‘Yes,’ said Patsy.

‘Not quite what I was meaning by shops,’ said Clarice. She put all the emphasis on the word ‘shops’.

‘Shopping is Clarice’s main hobby,’ said Mortimer rather proudly. ‘She’s terribly good at spending money.’

‘My sister Adrienne spends a lot of time in shops,’ said Patsy. ‘She loves charity shops. She’s got this theory that she can help the world by spending money. She buys a dress in a charity shop and then immediately gives it to another charity shop.'

Clarice screwed up her nose and looked confused. 'I've seen charity shops,' she said. 'But I'm not sure I understand how that might work.'

'It's simple,' I said. 'Imagine she pays the first charity shop £1 for a dress and she then gives that dress to a second charity shop which sells it to someone else for £1. The total charity shop profit is £2. But she has only spent £1. So, somehow, she has managed to turn £1 of her money into £2 of charity shop money.'

'If Adrienne was Chancellor we'd all have jam on both sides of our cake,' said Patsy.

Clarice, who looked utterly confused, looked at Mortimer for help. He frowned and scratched and then shook his head. 'Sounds as if there must be a flaw but I'm damned if I can spot it,' he said eventually.

'I'm quite terrible,' said Clarice. 'When I went into town to have lunch with a friend last Tuesday I saw these lovely shoes in a shop window. I just had to buy them. But when I'd got them I realised that I didn't have anything to wear that went with them. So then I found a dress that went with them absolutely perfectly. Then, of course, I had to get a handbag to go with the dress. That lunch ended up costing me £80!'

'Probably more than you spend on clothes in a year, eh Patsy?' said Mortimer.

Patsy, who was wearing her best dress, flushed slightly with embarrassment. I went red too – though mine was partly through guilt (I couldn't remember when Patsy had last had a new dress) and partly through anger.

'Mind you, they probably save themselves a fortune by growing their own food,' said Mortimer to his wife. He had an annoying habit of talking about us as though we weren't there. 'A GP living in a village like this won't be making much money.' He turned to me. 'Do you have any private patients?'

I shook my head.

Mortimer turned back to his wife. 'There you are,' he said, satisfied that his point was proven.

'Apple pie for everyone?' asked Patsy, who now had an armful of plates and was heading for the kitchen. 'With custard!' she added, managing to force a smile.

'Is it home-made?' enquired Mortimer.

'It is,' said Patsy proudly. Her apple pies were magnificent and much admired, even within a village where every woman was an excellent cook.

'Oh,' said Mortimer, clearly disappointed. 'I rather like the ones they sell in Sainsbury's.' He paused. 'Well never mind,' he said magnanimously. 'I expect yours will be fine.'

'I don't want any,' said Rupert. 'I don't like home-made things. They're cheap and nasty. I like chips and burgers best and puddings out of boxes. That's what my mummy gives me. I want ice cream now.'

With some difficulty I resisted the temptation to smash the dishes I was holding over the child's head. I wondered how he would look with a carrot rammed in each ear and cabbage leaves draped over his skull.

Patsy had gone pale. 'We haven't got any ice cream,' she said quietly. 'I'm afraid I forgot to get any.'

'I want ice cream,' said Rupert

'I'm so sorry,' said Patsy. 'What an awful hostess I am.'

'Don't be silly, Patsy!' I said. 'You're a wonderful hostess.' No one else made any effort to agree with me.

'You should never put yourself down, my dear,' said Clarice. 'You will never have any difficulty in finding people who are perfectly prepared to do that for you. And other people will do it so much better than you ever could. Ironing, cutting the lawn, car maintenance and putting yourself down – those are just some of the things best left to others.'

'I want ice cream,' said Rupert, turning up the volume this time. He actually banged his fork handle on the table. I'd never seen anyone, not even a child, do that before.

'Oh dear,' said Clarice, looking around. 'I don't suppose we could get some from somewhere could we?'

'They live in the middle of nowhere,' said Mortimer. 'Where are they going to find ice cream at this time of night?'

'It's only eight o'clock,' said Clarice.

'Peter will be shut but I'll give him a ring and ask him to open up,' I said. To be honest I expected Mortimer or Clarice to tell me not to bother.

'Oh that would be so kind,' said Clarice. She thought for a moment and frowned. 'Who is Peter?' she asked.

'Peter Marshall,' I replied. 'He runs the local shop. He sells everything.'

Clarice laughed. Her laugh was beginning to annoy me. It was more a sneer than a laugh born of amusement. 'Everything?' she said. She closed her eyes and shook her head. 'I rather suspect not.'

Patsy headed out for the kitchen. I followed, with an almost empty serving dish in each hand.

'I'm so sorry,' I said to Patsy, when we were out of earshot.

'I don't think they're quite used to country life,' she said. 'I've let you down, haven't I?' There were tears forming in her eyes. She put the plates she was carrying down by the sink. I put the serving dishes down beside them and put my arms around her. ‘Listen to me!’ I said. ‘They’re the rudest, nastiest family I’ve ever met in my life. I don’t know what happened to Mortimer but he’s become a completely different person.’

Patsy pulled away and looked at me.

‘People change,’ I said. ‘And Mortimer has changed.’ I sighed. ‘Thank heavens they’re only staying one night. I don’t think I could stand them for any longer. I nearly killed those obnoxious kids four times this evening.’

‘Oh dear,’ said Patsy. ‘That reminds me. There was something I meant to tell you earlier.’

I looked at her and grinned. ‘Don’t tell me,’ I said. ‘Clarice is having such a good time that her sister is coming to stay next week and is bringing her four kids and obnoxious husband.’

Patsy shook her head.

I was beginning to feel cold. I knew from her face that the news wasn’t good. ‘What is it?’ I asked Patsy.

‘Clarice had a telephone call from her father while you were out,’ she said. ‘Mortimer gave his secretary this number in case of emergencies.’

‘What did her father want?’

‘Apparently there is a problem with the family cottage in Cornwall.’

Now I knew it was bad.

‘There’s a problem of some sort with the drains. Clarice’s father says they can’t stay there.’

‘Can’t stay there?’ My stomach shrank and I shivered. I knew what was coming next.

‘What else could I say?’ asked Patsy plaintively.

‘How long?’

‘The week.’

‘A whole week?’ She nodded.

‘They’re staying here a whole week?’

Patsy nodded again. I put my arms around her. We held each other tightly.

Our moment of peace was interrupted by a yell from the dining room. ‘If you can get the ice cream Rupert would prefer chocolate,’ shouted Clarice in a voice that would have carried across a steelworks. ‘Not strawberry. He’s allergic to strawberry. Peach is fine. Not coffee and not mint unless it’s the one that comes with the bits of chocolate in it. Raspberry is acceptable as a last resort but definitely not vanilla unless it’s extra creamy.’

‘I’ll think of something,’ I said quietly. ‘Or Thumper will. We’re not having those people here for a whole week.’

I telephoned Peter from the phone in the kitchen. He said he had ice cream in the freezer and that, although he’d locked up, the shop would be open by the time I got there. I didn’t ask him what flavours he’d got in stock. Instead I asked him what were the three oddest items he had for sale in the shop. He thought for a few moments and then told me.

‘What on earth was that about?’ demanded Patsy.

‘You’ll see in a few minutes,’ I promised her. I led the way back to the dining room but before we could get there the door bell went again. It was a bing bong so I knew it was a patient.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Patsy. ‘I’ll tell them you’ve got a patient.’

Dealing with the caller took only a couple of minutes.

‘What was that one?’ asked Clarice.

‘Chap who lives in the village,’ I said. I didn’t name him. ‘He works in Exeter and can’t get here during the daytime. He needed a prescription. And he wanted me to look at his piles.’

‘That’s outrageous!’ said Mortimer. ‘He should take time off work if he wants to see you.’

‘It would mean losing a whole day if he did that,’ I explained.

‘It only took me a couple of minutes. Peter is opening up his shop so that Rupert can have some ice cream,’ I said.

‘What make is it?’ demanded Rupert.

‘The best available,’ I told him. ‘Peter describes it as the ice cream no one can lick.’

Only Patsy laughed.

‘Not strawberry,’ said Rupert. ‘I can’t stand strawberry.’

‘I heard you were allergic to it,’ I said.

‘I don’t like it,’ he said.

‘It brings him out in a sort of rash,’ said Clarice. She hesitated, embarrassed perhaps. ‘Maybe not a full blown allergy. But it makes him upset and when he’s upset he goes red.’

‘Right,’ I said. ‘No strawberry then.’

‘What flavours have they got?’ demanded Rupert.

‘I forgot to ask,’ I confessed. ‘But I expect Peter will have something you like. His shop sells pretty much everything.’

'I bet it doesn't sell everything,' said Rupert instantly.

'We try to teach him not to exaggerate,' said Mortimer.

I thought, but didn't say, that it might be better if they taught their loathsome child some manners.

'Peter sells all sorts of things,' I said. I picked up the notepad which always lies beside the telephone in the dining room. 'I'll get the ice cream and I'll test him out on a couple of other things.' I sucked on the pencil and pretended to think hard. 'I'll ask him if he's got a jar of pickled eggs, a street map of Llandudno and a carburettor for a 1956 S1 Bentley,' I said. I grinned at Clarice. 'I bet you even Harrods would have a job finding you all of those.'

'That's stupid!' sneered Spotty. 'He can't possibly have all of those stupid things in one shop.'

When I returned fifteen minutes later I had two large brown paper bags with me. One contained a tub of chocolate ice cream (the only variety Peter had in stock). The other contained a jar of pickled eggs, a street map of Llandudno and a carburettor for a 1956 S1 Bentley.

Rupert, Clarice and Mortimer ate the ice cream. I had a very large slice of Patsy's home-made apple pie. No one said thank you for the ice cream. But they were all extremely impressed at the success of my small shopping trip and, to my surprise, none of our visitors realised how easily I'd tricked them.

'Do you know where the nearest garage is?' asked Mortimer, while Clarice was putting Rupert to bed.

'There's Tolstoy's,' I told him.

'Tolstoy's?' He seemed puzzled.

'There's a garage in the village called Tolstoy's,' I told him.

'Why is it called Tolstoy's?'

'It's run by two chaps called Henry Waugh and Reginald Peace.'

'I don't get it.'

'War and Peace. Tolstoy.'

'Ah. Oh yes.'

'Do you need petrol?'

'Bit more than that,' said Mortimer. 'I've been having a bit of a problem with the Volvo.'

'What sort of problem?'

'The wipers on the headlamps won't switch off.'

'You've got wipers on your headlamps?'

'Oh yes,' said Mortimer. 'The headlamps are equipped with washer nozzles too. When the headlamp glass gets muddy I can clean it.'

I thought for a moment that he was having me on. But then I realised that the 'new' Mortimer probably didn't waste too much time joking. 'And they won't switch off?'

'No. They just keep wiping away.'

'I can see that would be a bit of a nuisance,' I lied. I thought about it for a moment and something occurred to me. 'How did you find out?' I asked him.

'There's a complex system of warning lights on the dashboard,' he told me. 'The system gives me instant information when something isn't working properly.'

'Right,' I said. 'Of course.'

'You don't have that sort of system on your car?'

'No,' I said. 'The Morris Minor isn't equipped with those. But I do have two of those little orange indicator arms that pop out when I intend to turn left or right.'

'The soft top is manual I suppose?'

'Oh yes. But it's fairly easy to operate when you've had a bit of practice. I can get the roof up or down in less than twenty minutes.'

'Pal of mine has a sports car,' said Mortimer. 'His roof takes less than a minute to appear or disappear. At the press of a button on the dashboard.'

'Brilliant.' I said.

'You probably remember him,' said Mortimer. 'Roderick Furst.'

'Roderick Furst,' I repeated. 'Was he one of our crowd?' Mortimer nodded.

'Not Hugo?'

'That's the chap,' said Mortimer.

'Oh, I remember Hugo!' I said. 'He was a real card. We used to go to that pub together. The Barrel of Laughs.'

'I remember occasional visits to a pub,' said Mortimer cautiously. 'But I seem to remember that it was called The King George.'

'Oh, that might have been the name on the sign,' I agreed. 'But we called it The Barrel of Laughs because the landlord was a huge fat chap who never smiled at anything. Miserable sod with absolutely no sense of humour.'

Mortimer looked down and muttered something about not going there often enough to remember the barman.

'Why is he calling himself Roderick?' I asked.

'Hugo was just a nickname,' said Mortimer.

'Was it?'

'Yes.'

'Oh. What a pity. I always thought his parents had a great sense of humour.'

'He thought his real name, Roderick, gave him more gravitas.'

'P.G.Wodehouse had a potty doctor called Roderick in the Jeeves and Wooster books,' I said. 'Roderick Spode.'

'I've never read Wodehouse,' said Mortimer.

'Right Ho,' I said, knowing that he wouldn't recognise Bertie Wooster's famous phrase. It's undoubtedly unfair and prejudiced but I've always found it difficult to trust men who've never read P.G.Wodehouse.

'Hugo was so scruffy that when he stood around in the town centre people would give him money,' I told Patsy. 'I remember once he made eight shillings and nine pence while waiting for his mother at New Street Station.'

'If you meet him I wouldn't remind him of that these days,' said Mortimer rather stiffly.

'He was the only person to be thrown out of the rugby club for drinking and womanising,' I said.

'I don't remember that.'

'He always had cold hands. The patients used to call him Coldfinger.'

Mortimer, who didn't seem to enjoy my jolly reminiscing, shook his head to show he didn't remember that either.

'What did you say he's doing now?'

'He's a plastic surgeon. Very successful. He's got a villa in Portugal and two Labradors called Nip and Tuck.'

'He's a surgeon?' This wasn't so much a question as an expression of my disbelief

'Oh yes. I think he always wanted to be a surgeon.'

'Golly,' I said, genuinely astonished at this news. 'I remember once assisting with him at an operation. It was something complicated and the registrar had Hugo holding a huge textbook so that he could see what he had to do next. The book was very heavy and Hugo, who always used to get nervous, had very sweaty fingers. He turned over two pages at once and the patient nearly got the first half of one operation and the second half of another.'

Mortimer claimed he didn't know of that either.

'Are they any good?' he asked.

'Who?'

'These people at this garage of yours.'

'Oh yes,' I told him. 'Brilliant. When I had my first car someone told me that I should have it serviced regularly. I took it in and asked for a service. They couldn't understand what I wanted them to do and why I'd taken them a car which was still working.'

I thought this was quite charming and quaint. Mortimer clearly didn't. To amuse him I told him about the time I had borrowed a car from them and had discovered too late that it didn't have any brakes.

'I eventually stopped it by driving into a fishpond,' I told him.

He stared at me, disbelievingly.

'Actually, that's a bit of an exaggeration,' I admitted. 'Only the first two wheels actually went into the pond. But it was embarrassing. I had to knock on the door and ask Mavis Biddlecome if I could have my car back. Then I had to get Harry Burrows to tow the damned thing out with his tractor. Mavis was a bit miffed. I killed three of her goldfish.

'I would have left it for the garage to collect,' said Mortimer.

'I needed the car for the rest of my visits.'

'You surely didn't drive it with no brakes?'

'Oh, it was OK. I didn't go above thirty and slowed it down with the gears. Mostly. It wasn't terribly dangerous. The lanes around here have got grassy banks on each side.'

Mortimer grunted. 'How do I get there?' he asked. 'To this Tolstoy's of yours.'

'Turn left out of our gate and then right just before you get to the pink cottage which needs rethatching. Go straight down that lane which wiggles around a bit and go through the farmyard. Don't take any notice of the dogs. They make a lot of noise but they won't hurt you – and certainly not if you stay in the car and keep the windows shut. Go up the hill for a quarter of a mile and turn left. The signpost fell down a year ago and the council still hasn't put it back up but it's still there in the hedge. If you can see the church you've gone too far past the next turning so go on to the red farmhouse, turn round and go back, but slower this time, and turn a sort of half left just before you get to the Jubilee Watering Trough.' I looked at Mortimer, saw the glazed look in his eyes and realised that I was giving directions like a countryman. 'I don't know why the Jubilee Watering Trough is there,' I admitted. 'It's a silly place for it.'

‘Could you draw me a map?’

‘I’ll show you the way in the morning,’ I promised.

‘Thanks,’ Mortimer said, obviously relieved.

There was a silence. It felt uncomfortable. I put up with it for a couple of minutes and then gave in.

‘So, how is life treating you?’ I asked. I hadn’t yet realised that Mortimer had become the sort of person who tells you how he is when you ask.

He responded to this fairly simple question by telling me how much he earned, how much their house had cost and how much he paid for the boys to attend private school. (The bill for the school fees was considerably more than I was earning, or could ever expect to earn in Bilbury.) He told me with great pride that he now employed a man to come round on Sunday mornings. ‘He washes the car and mows the lawn.’

‘Better than doing it the other way round,’ I suggested. He looked at me, clearly puzzled.

‘Washing the lawn and mowing the car.’

He remained puzzled. ‘Mind you,’ he said, continuing on as though I hadn’t spoken. ‘The stresses I have to cope with are pretty awesome.’

He went on to tell us about the problems he was having with the administrators at the hospital where he worked. ‘I insist that I’m entitled to a dedicated parking space,’ he said. ‘But the senior administrator who is in charge of parking spaces is proving to be immensely stubborn. I’ve had six or seven meetings with him about it in the last two weeks alone.’ He puffed up his chest a little. ‘Still,’ he said, ‘I’ve no doubt I will win through in the end. I usually do.’

‘And you must, darling,’ said Clarice, who had reappeared. The two boys were, she said, reading comics in bed.

Mortimer then told us about the row he had with the people who had installed the power shower in their second bathroom (he’d eventually made them take it out and replace it with something even more powerful) and the arguments he’d had with the man whom he paid to cut their grass.

‘The ignorant fool cuts the grass reasonably well,’ said Mortimer. ‘But he spills grass cuttings all over our driveway when he puts them into the back of his trailer. I’ve had numerous rows with him about it. Last week I cancelled half a dozen patients so that I could stay at home and confront him. Clarice had spoken to him but some things do require a man’s touch.’

I murmured sympathetic noises and resisted the temptation to suggest that it might be less trouble if he cut the grass himself.

‘I don’t suppose you have many problems, living out in the country,’ he said.

‘Well, we do have one or two,’ I said. I started to tell him about the storm that had destroyed several houses in Bilbury, making several villagers homeless, and isolating the village.

‘Don’t talk to me about storms!’ Mortimer said, interrupting me before I could go any further with my tale of woe. ‘We had a darned hurricane last winter. Lost three tiles. We were lucky no one was sitting outside in the garden at the time. They’d have been killed.’

I thought about asking him why anyone would have been sitting in the garden during a storm, but didn’t. His comment had reminded me of someone but I couldn’t remember whom.

‘I had a terrible time finding a roofer to come out and do the repairs,’ he continued. ‘In the end it took three days before anyone turned up and it cost me £80 to have the repairs done. It took another three months to get the money out of the insurance company.’

I started to tell him about the battle the village had fought against developers who had wanted to build a massive new housing estate in the area but he interrupted me.

‘Oh, you haven’t seen anything,’ he said, waving a hand around dismissively. ‘I could tell you stories about developers and builders and planning people that would make your blood go cold.’ He leant forwards a little. ‘Last summer one of our neighbours suddenly decided to build an extension above his garage. What they usually call a granny flat except it was for the au pair rather than the granny. We fought him tooth and nail, of course. We would have been able to see part of the extension from our bathroom window. Hideous thing. But the planning people wouldn’t listen. In the end I had to have a word with a pal of mine in the Freemasons.’ He looked at me and winked. ‘Don’t suppose you’re a member?’

I shook my head. I had remembered whom he reminded me of. The Colonel. Both had a habit of trumping everyone else’s misfortunes with misfortunes of their own.

‘Didn’t think you would be. Never mind. They don’t ask many people. Anyway, my pal knows someone in planning. They sorted it out. Made them reduce the size of the extension.’ He grinned and nodded and made a fist with his right hand. ‘That’s power for you!’ he said.

I tried once or twice more to tell about things that had happened in Bilbury but every time I started to tell him something he interrupted, claiming that something similar had happened to him but had, of course, been considerably worse, considerably more dramatic and considerably more dangerous.

Finally, I gave up and he came to a halt. I peeped at my watch. It was half past one. Mortimer had been talking about himself for hours.

'OK,' he said, leaning back into the sofa cushions. 'That's enough about me. Let's talk about you. Tell me what you've been doing with yourself. How did you come to be living in a strange little forsaken backwater like this?'

I sat silently for a moment. I was fed up with his patronising twaddle and I was too tired to talk or to listen. I just wanted to go to bed. But, as host, I felt unable to go up to bed until Mortimer did so. I opened my mouth once or twice but nothing came out.

'I don't suppose you've got much to report, have you?' he said.

'Quiet life in a little dead end place like this.' He leant back and grinned. 'Always thought you'd end up a bit of a drop out,' he said. 'If you haven't got what it takes then it's probably the best option.'

I started to protest and to defend myself and Bilbury.

'By the way,' he said. 'You haven't locked up yet.'

'We never bother,' I told him.

Mortimer seemed appalled. 'Don't you worry about burglars?'

'Not round here,' I said, smiling. 'Not in Bilbury.'

Mortimer pulled a face and then looked around, as though assessing our belongings. 'Not much worth stealing, I suppose,' he said.

I didn't say anything.

'So, what do you think about what's happened to me, eh?' Mortimer asked. 'I don't expect you thought I'd be the successful one out of our group? Top of the range Volvo. Kids at expensive private school. Wife who has her hair done at least once a week - sometimes twice if we're going out to dinner.'

I muttered the sort of pleasantries and sounds of admiration which I knew he wanted to hear. Satisfied with this Mortimer grunted again, got up, said 'Goodnight', nodded and disappeared. It took me a moment or two to realise that he had gone to bed. For a while I sat where I was staring at the fire.

* * *

When I woke up I'd got cramp in my arm, where I'd been lying on it, and the room was cold.

The log fire had burnt itself out but I put up the fireguard anyway and then went upstairs. Ben, who'd spent the last few hours dozing on the hearth rug, padded up after me.

Patsy was sitting up in bed reading a novel by Georgette Heyer. The two cats were asleep by her side.

'You didn't have to wait up,' I told her.

'I don't like to go to sleep until you come to bed,' she said. 'Did you have a nice chat with Mortimer?'

'He has become truly very boring,' I told her. 'And either I'm remembering a lot of things that never happened or he's forgotten a lot of things which did.' I started to undress. 'What do you think of Clarice?'

'Did you see the number of suitcases they brought with them?' said Patsy, carefully avoiding my question.

'We could move house with less luggage.'

'Four of the cases were full of Clarice's clothes,' said Patsy. 'I helped her unpack. She brought six swimming costumes with her.'

'Six?'

'A red one, a green one, a pink one, two yellow ones and a black and white one. I asked her why she didn't have a blue one.'

'What did she say?'

'She said she would never wear a blue swimming costume in England because the water is so cold that people might think she was bathing nude.'

'So no blue bathing costume.'

'No. And she brought three evening dresses with her.'

'What on earth did she do that for?'

'She said you never know when you're going to be invited to a formal dinner. Apparently Mortimer brought his dinner jacket, cummerbund and bow tie.'

I sighed.

'Come to bed,' said Patsy.

I threw off my clothes and climbed into bed. Ben circled my clothes, like a group of Indians circling settlers' wagons, then settled down to go to sleep on top of my trousers.

'You really shouldn't let Ben sleep on your clothes,' said Patsy quietly. I looked at Ben. She sensed me looking and raised an eyelid.

'She seems comfy,' I said. 'And if she doesn't sleep on my clothes she'll sleep on the bed and keep us both awake.’

Patsy looked at him. ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Better to leave her where she is.’

She put her bookmark into her book, put the book on her bedside table and turned off the light.

CHAPTER 19

I got up early the following morning because I had a couple of things I wanted to do. I had woken up in the night having dreamt up a plan which might, I thought, help us reduce the length of time our visitors wanted to stay with us.

They had been with us for only one night and although I had, before their arrival, looked forward to seeing them they had already long outstayed their welcome.

First, I called on Mr Parfitt, our gardener. When I explained what I wanted him to do he was, at first, surprised and puzzled. But when I explained why I wanted him to do it he immediately understood. ‘I’ll give it a good stir,’ he promised. ‘That should liven things up a bit.’

Next I got into the car and drove round to see Patsy’s father. I suppose I could have telephoned but I was terrified that someone might hear me and what I had to say was not something I wanted overheard. Mr Kennett immediately agreed to do what I wanted. He thought it was an excellent idea. ‘Don’t forget to tell Patsy to leave all the windows open!’ he called after me.

My two calls made, I then drove back to the house, parked the Morris Minor roughly where it had been and, after taking Ben for a quick walk round the garden, went into the house for breakfast.

‘Where have you been?’ Patsy asked.

‘Just taking Ben for a walk.’

‘You’ve been a long time.’

‘She seemed to want a longer walk than usual today,’ I told her. I didn’t want to explain what I’d been planning. I thought it might be better if it came as something of a surprise. Just then Mortimer stumbled downstairs and wandered into the kitchen. It was, I noticed, half past eight. He told me that he, Clarice and their two sons had decided to stay on a little longer. He didn’t mention the fact that there were problems with the cottage they’d been expecting to stay in.

‘It’ll give us all chance to catch up a bit,’ he said. ‘We’ve got some slides of our holiday in Disneyland in one of the suitcases. We always cart the slides around with us in case we meet people who’d like to see them. Most people can’t afford to go to Disneyland so it’s a bit of a treat for them to be able to see what it’s like. See what they’re missing.’

‘I’m afraid we haven’t got a projector,’ I told him.

‘Oh don’t worry,’ he said. ‘We’ve got our own with us. All we’ll need is a piece of white wall. Or Patsy can lend us a sheet which we’ll nail up in your living room.’

‘Right,’ I said, though to be honest I had no intention of letting him nail sheets up anywhere.

‘Splendid!’ said Mortimer. ‘And where do I put my shoes?’

‘Er, I’m not sure, I understand,’ I said.

‘To be cleaned,’ explained Mortimer. ‘I got mud on my brogues. They need a clean. And I expect the boys need their shoes cleaning too.’

I stared at him in bewilderment. Was he really expecting me to clean his shoes?

‘We did all leave our shoes outside our bedroom doors,’ said Mortimer.

I had noticed this. I’d assumed they were being thoughtful and not taking mud into the bedrooms. It hadn’t occurred to me that they had left their shoes outside their rooms so that I could clean them.

‘Perhaps if we just leave them by the back door?’ suggested Mortimer, interpreting my silence as simple indecision. ‘Any decent polish will do on mine but I do like them buffed up with a soft cloth afterwards. Clarice will give you specific instructions about hers.’

‘Fine,’ I said weakly.

‘What would you like for breakfast?’ Patsy asked.

‘Oh just the usual,’ replied Mortimer. ‘Bacon, eggs, sausage, fried bread, tons of coffee and a few slices of toast.’

‘Gosh!’ I said. ‘Do you eat all that every morning?’

‘Good heavens, no! At home I just grab a slice of toast and a coffee. But when I’m away I always have the full English.’

‘What about Clarice and the boys?’ asked Patsy.

‘They’ll have the same,’ said Mortimer.

‘Shall I cook theirs now?’

‘Oh no. They’ll all wander down when the fancy takes them,’ said Mortimer. ‘Be better to cook separately when they come down.’ It didn’t seem to occur to him that this would mean Patsy cooking breakfast four times.

‘I’ll pop to Peter’s and pick up the bacon and sausage,’ I told Patsy.

‘Don’t you have them in the house?’ asked Mortimer.

‘Afraid not,’ I said. ‘We usually just have toast and coffee. Besides, we’re vegetarian.’

‘Oh,’ said Mortimer, surprised. ‘I’m sorry to put you to so much trouble.’ He hesitated and I thought he was going to tell me that he would, after all, settle for toast and coffee. But he didn’t. ‘Better make sure you stock up,’ he said. ‘This country air will probably give the boys quite an appetite. And if you load up for the week it’ll save you going out to the shop every morning.’

‘Thanks for the thought,’ I said.

‘By the way, you’ve got a ghost,’ said Mortimer.

I looked at him, puzzled. ‘Have we?’

‘The upstairs loo flushed last night but there was no one in there.’

‘Oh that would have been Emily,’ I explained.

Now it was Mortimer’s turn to look puzzled.

‘Emily is one of our cats,’ I said. ‘She’s taught herself to use the loo. It means she doesn’t have to go outside in the mud when the weather’s bad.’

‘But it flushed

Oh yes,’ I told him. ‘She learned to use the flush too.’ Mortimer stared at me disbelievingly though everything I’d told him about Emily was entirely true. I looked at my watch, grabbed a sip of the coffee Patsy had made, kissed her and set off for Peter’s shop. If I rushed I would just get back in time to start the morning surgery.

As luck would have it there were three other customers ahead of me. For Peter’s shop that constitutes something of a rush. All were tourists passing through the village. And as always there was entertainment to be had.

The first customer purchased three peaches which Peter was advertising as being on special offer. There was a handwritten sign fixed to the tray: Peaches: three for the price of two.

‘I’ll have three of those peaches,’ said the customer.

Peter picked up three peaches, threw one into a rubbish bucket he kept by his counter, and put the other two into a brown paper bag. He handed the bag to the customer and held his hand out for payment.

‘Excuse me! There are only two peaches in the bag!’ protested the customer.

‘One of them was bad,’ said Peter. ‘I threw it away for you.’ The man was so startled by this that he accepted the paper bag and paid Peter. When he walked away he looked stunned. You could tell that he was still trying to work out what had happened.

The second customer, a large American who was obviously camping or caravanning somewhere in the locality, had purchased tins of beans, soup, fruit, a box of cornflakes and a supply of candles. Peter used a sheet of brown paper and a piece of string to wrap the man’s purchases up in a small parcel.

‘Don’t you have a plastic bag?’ asked the customer.

Peter stared at him as if he’d asked for a pound of best quality uranium. ‘I do not!’ he said firmly. Peter doesn’t like Americans at the best of times. This one was wearing plaid shorts, a lime green, short sleeved shirt and a baseball cap and this was not, therefore, the best of times.

‘How am I supposed to carry this?’ demanded the American, picking up the parcel.

‘You could put it under your arm,’ suggested Peter, not irrationally.

‘I want to carry it,’ said the customer. He spoke slowly and loudly, as though speaking to the village idiot. ‘There is no handle!’

Peter took the parcel from the American, unfastened the string and retied it. This time he created a small additional loop of string.

‘There you are,’ he said, speaking softly and carefully, as though talking to a small, rather backward child. ‘Put your finger through the loop in the string and carry the parcel on your finger.’

‘It’s too heavy to carry on one finger!’ snorted the customer.

‘Then carry it under your arm, like a normal person would!’ roared Peter.

Startled, the American waddled away as fast as his fat legs would carry him.

The third customer wanted two pasties. Peter put two pasties into a paper bag and handed him the bag.

‘These feel stale,’ said the customer, feeling the pastry through the bag.

‘They’re not stale,’ insisted Peter. ‘They’re just firmly baked.’

‘I don’t know where these people think I’d get fresh pasties from at this time of the week,’ said Peter crossly when the customer had gone.

‘Some people just expect too much,’ I agreed. I told him what I wanted.

‘I thought you and Patsy were vegetarian? Changed your minds at last, have you?’ He smirked and wagged a finger. ‘I told you that you would.’

‘Visitors,’ I explained.

He handed me three paper bags, one containing bacon, one containing sausages and one containing eggs.

'Don't you have any egg cartons?' I asked.

'They're fresh eggs,' said Peter. 'They don't get laid in egg cartons, you know.'

'Sorry!' I said.

'I suppose you want it on the slate?'

'Yes please!' I called, as I got back into the car.

I got back to Bilbury Grange just in time to hand the bags containing the eggs, bacon and sausages to Patsy before it was time to start the morning surgery.

Thanks to our visitors I was starving hungry.

'I'll give Miss Johnson some biscuits to bring you between patients,' whispered Patsy.

'Chocolate digestives?'

'OK.'

I felt better.

* * *

At eleven o'clock I finished the surgery and popped back into the kitchen to see how Patsy was getting on with our visitors. They were still sitting around the kitchen table eating toast. Patsy was looking exhausted.

'I'm afraid the boys only came down ten minutes ago,' said Mortimer. 'Your wife's been tied to the Aga all morning.'

'I don't know how you manage with that old thing,' said Clarice. 'Mortimer bought me a wonderful new oven last year.'

'Eye level grill, built-in fan, six hotplates, oven big enough for two turkeys,' said Mortimer proudly. 'Cost an arm and a leg as you can imagine.'

I helped Patsy move some of the dirty crocks from the table.

'What do you do with the dirty crocks?' asked Mortimer.

I looked at him, surprised. 'We wash them,' I replied. 'You don't throw yours away do you?'

'No, no,' he laughed. 'I mean, where is the dishwasher.'

'You're looking at him,' I said. 'Well, actually, Patsy and I take it in turns.'

'You haven't got a dishwasher?'

'No.'

'Good heavens!' he cried, as though I'd just told him we didn't have electricity in the house. 'You do believe in roughing it don't you?'

'We've never really thought them worthwhile,' I said. 'You have to load up all the dishes then, when the machine has finished, you have to take them all out again. It seems quicker to wash them, dry them and put them away in the cupboard.'

Mortimer put his dirty plate on the draining board and then laid a hand on my arm. 'You have to get yourself a dishwasher,' he said. 'Buy Patsy one for her birthday. She'll be thrilled.'

'I'm not entirely sure Patsy will be thrilled at getting a dishwasher for her birthday,' I said.

Mortimer ignored me. 'Get one of the new models that dry the crocks afterwards. We've got the top of the range model that takes a twelve piece dinner service.'

'We haven't got a twelve piece dinner service,' I said. I was about to mention that I didn't think we knew ten people we'd want to invite to dinner but I didn't.

'Then get one of the compact models,' he said. 'They're very reasonably priced. Even you could afford one.' He spoke with enthusiasm; the same sort of enthusiasm with which I remembered him once talking about sports cars.

'Splendid,' I said. I found it difficult to believe that I was listening to Mortimer talk to me about the relative merits of different brands of dishwasher. It seemed rather sad.

* * *

Half an hour later we left. I was going out on my visits and Mortimer was going to follow me to Tolstoy's.

I took Mortimer round to the Bilbury garage.

Henry was busy fastening a loose exhaust pipe on a Ford Popular. He was doing this with a length of orange baler twine. ('The orange stuff is much better than the blue for cars,' he once told me. 'It's much the same sort of colour as rust and so it blends in and you can't see it.') Reginald was kicking the tyres holding up an old Ford Consul.

'What are you doing?' I asked him.

'Visitor brought this in,' replied Reginald. 'Said it wobbled.'

I nodded as though I understood these things. Mortimer frowned. 'So what are you doing?'

'Making sure the wheels are all in the right places.'

‘Good idea,’ I agreed. ‘One on each corner is usually best.’

‘Definitely,’ said Reginald kicking another wheel. ‘I call it an Optical Wheel Alignment Check.’

I waited until he had kicked the fourth tyre and then introduced him to Mortimer who explained his problem.

‘Little wipers on the headlamps?’ said Reginald.

‘That’s right.’

‘And they won’t stop wiping?’

‘That’s it.’

‘Let’s have a look.’

Mortimer took Reginald outside to look at his errant headlamp wipers. He turned on the engine so that Reginald could study the problem.

‘Amazing,’ murmured Reginald. ‘I’ve never seen anything like it in my life.’ He went back into the garage to fetch Henry and then the two of them stood and watched in absolute awe.

‘Can you sort it out?’ asked Mortimer.

‘No problem,’ said Reginald.

‘No problem at all,’ Henry assured him.

‘How long will it take?’

‘You can pick it up at two,’ said Reginald.

‘Will it really take that long?’ demanded Mortimer.

‘Afraid so,’ said Reginald. He sucked air in through the gap in his front teeth. ‘Could be a complicated job.’

Mortimer sighed and turned to me. ‘Bit like rural Spain,’ he said. ‘What’s the local word for manana?’

Reginald looked at me. Mortimer, who seemed to have noticed a mark, was rubbing at the paintwork on the rear offside passenger door. I shrugged and raised my eyebrows.

‘I don’t rightly think,’ said Reginald, ‘that we have a word which rightly conveys quite that sense of urgency.’

Mortimer turned and looked at him. He was clearly puzzled.

‘Do you want a lift back to the house?’ I asked Mortimer.

‘No, I’ll be fine,’ he replied. He looked up at the sky. ‘It’s a warm day. I’ll walk.’ He set off back towards Bilbury Grange.

‘Will you find your way?’ I called after him.

‘Oh yes,’ he replied. ‘I remembered the route. Photographic memory.’

‘Friend of yours?’ asked Henry, nodding towards the disappearing Mortimer.

‘Used to be.’ I replied.

‘Used to be?’ said Henry, checking.

‘Used to be,’ I confirmed.

‘Seems a bit of a plonker to me,’ said Reginald, who was not renowned for his patience or his tact.

‘I’m afraid so,’ I agreed.

Henry wandered off down the lane. ‘I’m going down to the Duck and Puddle,’ he called over his shoulder. ‘I need a drink after that. While I’m there I’ll see if I can find another one of these cars with wipers on the headlights.’

‘He’s a bugger for learning,’ explained Reginald. ‘We had one of them Audi things in the other day. Someone passing through. We couldn’t work out how to open the bonnet. Henry drove around Devon until he saw someone driving something similar. He flagged them down and got them to tell him how to open the bonnet.’

‘Shows initiative.’

‘We didn’t want to have to ask the owner,’ explained Reginald.

‘Damages the customer’s trust.’

‘I can see that it might. Did he find someone with the right car?’

‘In Lynmouth,’ said Reginald. ‘In the car park near the river.’

‘Good,’ I nodded.

‘But when we opened the bonnet we just shut it again.’

‘Too complicated?’

‘Too much engine in there,’ said Reginald. ‘Scary.’ He shuddered. ‘The chap had one of those metal RAC badges fastened to his bumper so we rang them up. A nice chap came out on his motorbike.’

‘And he sorted it out?’

‘Brilliant,’ said Reginald. ‘Henry and I are thinking of joining.’

* * *

Later I drove back to Lydeard Lawrence’s cottage to see how he was getting on. He was in the kitchen filling his three feeding bottles with milk when I arrived. His back, he said, was much better.

‘It’s your birthday today,’ I told him.

‘It is,’ he agreed. ‘How did you know that?’

‘I noticed your date of birth on your medical records,’ I told him. I pulled the cardboard envelope containing all his medical history out of my jacket pocket and pointed to the relevant box on the outside of the envelope. His birth date was written there in faded blue ink.

‘You’re a hundred years old.’

‘I am.’

‘Aren’t you celebrating?’

‘What is there to celebrate?’

‘You could have had a telegram from the Queen.’

‘What would I do with one of those?’

‘You could put it on the mantelpiece. You should show it to people.’

‘Who?’

‘Relatives? Friends? Visitors?’

‘Haven’t got any, don’t want any and never have any.’

‘Right,’ I said. ‘No point in having a telegram then.’

‘One thing I can tell you,’ he said.

‘What’s that?’

‘The first hundred years are the hardest,’ he said.

I looked at him to see if he was joking. He wasn’t, of course.

‘I reckon the next hundred will be a doddle.’ I smiled.

‘You probably don’t think I’ve got much longer to live.’

I thought for a moment and then started to disagree but he spoke again before I could say anything. ‘I’m probably not going to live much longer am I?’ he demanded, staring at me defiantly.

Faced with this more definite question I agreed with him. ‘Probably not.’

This seemed to irritate him. ‘You think I’m on my last legs?’

‘No, no,’ I said hurriedly, back pedalling as fast as I could. ‘I didn’t mean that.’

‘I’m as fit as a flea,’ he said. He dropped to the floor and started doing press ups. ‘I can still do sixty at a time,’ he said. ‘Proper ones too. Legs and body straight, chest to floor, arms fully extended.’ He carried on doing press ups. It was an astonishing sight.

* * *

I called in at Tolstoy’s on my way back to Bilbury Grange. Mortimer’s Volvo had gone.

‘Did my friend collect his car?’ I asked Henry, who was making a car aerial out of a metal coat hanger.

‘Half an hour ago,’ said Henry.

‘Did you manage to sort it out for him?’

‘Certainly did. He was as pleased as Punch. Happy as a sand boy.’ Henry winked at me. ‘I don’t think he thought we could do it.’

‘He probably didn’t,’ I told him. ‘Your laid-back attitude probably worried him.’

‘We sorted it out for him,’ said Henry. ‘Charged him £10.’

‘That seems fair enough,’ I agreed. ‘Did you find out what the problem was?’

‘Nope.’

‘How did you solve the problem then?’

‘We cut the wires didn’t we,’ said Henry. He made a snipping motion with his right hand.

‘You cut the wires?’

‘Yeah. That stopped the bloody little wipers dead in their tracks. No electricity. No wiping.’

‘But won’t he notice? There’s a little panel of lights on the dashboard that tells him when things aren’t working properly. If it’s been raining and he tries to clean his headlamps the warning light will come on.’

‘Ah, we’re not stupid,’ said Henry. He tapped the side of his nose with a greasy finger. ‘We thought of that. We took the little bulbs out of the warning lights.’

I thought about it. It really was unlikely that Mortimer would find out that his headlamp wipers weren’t working and almost impossible that he would find out before he left Bilbury.

‘Fantastic,’ I said to Henry. ‘I knew I could rely on you.’ Henry winked at me. ‘Did you put twenty pence on the dashboard?’

He winked again.

‘Brilliant,’ I said.

‘Tip?’

‘A quid.’

'Brilliant.'

'Always works,' said Henry.

* * *

'That garage of yours may look a bit rough but they're real professionals,' said Mortimer when I saw him that afternoon. It had taken him three hours to find his way back to Bilbury Grange. He claimed he'd gone the scenic route but I didn't believe him. 'And honest too. Not only did they do a brilliant job on the headlamp wipers but when I picked the car up I found twenty pence in change in an envelope on the dashboard. There was a note with it saying that they'd found the coins underneath the mat when they were working on the car. I tell you it made me feel really warm inside.'

'Splendid,' I said. 'I'm so glad you were pleased.'

'You should have given them the twenty pence as a tip,' said Clarice.

'I did better than that,' said Mortimer proudly. 'I gave the chappie a pound note as a reward for his honesty.'

Patsy smiled at me.

I had to fight hard to suppress a giggle.

'I don't like to mention this,' said Clarice. 'But have either of you noticed a rather funny smell?'

Patsy and I looked at each other.

I shook my head. 'Nothing unusual,' I said.

Patsy blushed a little. 'I think there might have been some spraying in the fields near to us. I'm sorry about it. It's not usually this pungent.'

'You mean a farmer has been spraying something?' asked Clarice.

'They spray manure on the fields,' I explained.

'Manure!' said Clarice.

'Liquid manure,' I said. 'It'll probably go on all week now. They spray tons and tons of it. It helps make the grass grow greener.'

'I could...' began Patsy.

'I'm afraid we can't ask the farmer to stop it,' I said. 'It's just something they do.' I paused. 'I'm afraid they wouldn't listen to us anyway.' I shrugged rather sadly and impotently.

'Oh I'm sure I...' said Patsy. I looked at her and winked. She didn't finish the sentence.

'It happens so often that we did think of renaming our house Pooh Corner,' I said, with what I hoped was a smile.

'Well, it has made Spotty feel rather nauseous,' said Clarice indignantly. 'Me too for that matter.'

'Oh, I am sorry,' I said. I smiled sympathetically. 'We're so used to it now that we hardly notice it any more.' 'It stinks upstairs in our bedroom,' said Rupert. 'It's disgusting. I can't sleep up there.'

'I'm afraid that when they do the spraying it always rather stinks the house out,' I said as apologetically as I could.

'Can't you do anything about it?' demanded Mortimer. 'Explain you've got visitors staying?'

'Tell them Daddy is a doctor and he'll have them all locked up!' suggested Spotty.

'I'm sure there must be a law against it,' said Clarice.

'I think you'll find that farmers can pretty much do what they like,' I said. 'You'll probably get used to it after a while.' I paused. 'Though I admit we do find that the smell tends to linger in our clothes and hair for weeks.'

'I don't want to go back to school smelling of cow poo!' said Rupert, red-faced and full of indignation.

'It stays in the hair?' said Clarice. She touched the back of her head protectively.

'I'm afraid so,' I told her. 'But not for ever,' I added, in what I hoped was a reassuring sort of way.

Clarice looked at Mortimer.

'I want to go home,' said Spotty.

'Me too,' said Rupert.

Mortimer looked at me. 'I'm sorry about this old chap,' he said. 'But...' he shrugged. 'Clarice and I did talk about it before you came back. You country folk may be able to cope with this sort of thing but I'm afraid we aren't as used to it as you are.'

'Oh no!' I said. 'You're going to leave?'

'Afraid so,' said Mortimer.

'I'll go and pack,' said Clarice, heading for the stairs.

'Can we come with you to the golf club when we get back?' Rupert asked his father. 'We can play the fruit machines while you play golf'

'Yes, OK,' said Mortimer, glancing nervously towards the stairs. I got the impression that Clarice didn't approve of the boys playing the fruit machines. He lowered his voice and confirmed my suspicion. 'But don't tell your mother you play the fruit machines.'

The boys both looked pleased.

'Now, we'd better go and help your Mum pack,' said Mortimer. 'I want to get my suits into the cases before I need to send them all to the dry cleaners.' He turned to me. 'Do you think I'll need to have them all dry-cleaned to get the smell out of them?'

'I wouldn't have thought so,' I said. I turned to Patsy who was looking rather bewildered. 'What do you think?'

'Oh no,' she said. 'I'm sure they'll be fine.'

It took the four of them less than fifteen minutes to pack and to cram all their suitcases into the back of their estate car.

'Thank you so much for a wonderful stay,' said Clarice. She gave Patsy one of those light kisses on the cheek that models give one another and then she did the same to me. She was clearly desperate to get into the car and out of range of the smell of manure.

'Sorry we have to disappear so quickly,' said Mortimer. He smiled weakly. 'Hope you understand.'

'Absolutely,' I agreed, nodding.

'Maybe another time?'

'Look forward to it,' I said, knowing that we would never see them again.

Clarice and Mortimer got into the car. Mortimer was driving. He wound down his window.

'Say 'thank you,' hissed Clarice to the two boys in the back of the car.

'Thank you!' they chorused, without any discernible enthusiasm.

'I left the Morris out on the road,' I told him. 'So that you could get out of the drive.'

As we waved goodbye I turned to Patsy. 'If you put the kettle on I'll tell you how Tolstoy's managed to sort out Mortimer's headlamp wipers for him.'

Suddenly Patsy stopped and looked at me. 'You knew they were leaving before they did!'

I looked back at her, trying to look innocent. 'Why do you say that?'

'You left your car on the road so that they could get out of the drive more easily.'

'Well, I thought they might want to go off for a bit of a drive.'

Patsy frowned and looked at me. 'There's something going on,' she said.

As we headed for the kitchen Mr Parfitt appeared. 'Shall I put the lid back on now, doctor?' he called. 'Don't want any of the animals falling in, do we?'

'Yes please, Mr Parfitt,' I told him. 'And about that other thing, are you sure...?' he asked hesitantly.

'I'm sure,' I said.

'Seems an awful waste,' he said.

'I know it is,' I said. I grinned. 'That's the point.'

He hurried off down the garden path.

'The lid off what?' asked Patsy.

'Off the septic tank.'

Patsy stopped and looked at me. 'You told Mr Parfitt to take the lid off our septic tank?'

I shrugged and tried to look innocent. 'Just to give it an airing,' I told her. 'Septic tanks need an airing every now and then.'

'I suppose you got him to give it a good stirring as well?'

'Well, a bit of a stir. Just to liven things up a bit.'

'And what else was he asking you?' asked Patsy.

'He thinks it's a bit of a waste,' I said.

'It's a lot of waste,' said Patsy. She stood for a moment then folded her arms. 'He wants to put our septic tank contents on our vegetables?'

'I've told him 'No'.'

Patsy shuddered.

Mr Parfitt, our gardener, had developed a firm affection for manure in all its various forms and was a keen inventor of new forms of homemade liquid manure. The success of our raspberries was all the evidence he needed of the quality of his manure. He had two varieties of liquid manure with which to boost our crop production. One variety, allegedly rich in iron, had been prepared by putting armfuls of nettles into a tin bath full of water and leaving them to rot. The other variety, the type which Mr Parfitt preferred because he said it was particularly rich in nitrogen, was prepared by putting dirty wool clippings into a water butt and leaving them there for a few months. Each summer when Patsy's father shaved our sheep he had sold the main fleeces to the wool merchants on our behalf but he left the grubbier bits of fleece behind – the bits taken from the non-eating ends of our four sheep. Mr Parfitt had discovered its value as a source of liquid manure. 'And was it you who got my father to spray the fields on either side of the house?' said Patsy.

‘I think I did mention that if he wanted to do any spraying now would be a really good time for us,’ I admitted.

Patsy stared at me.

‘You’re not cross are you?’

She stared at me. I honestly thought she was going to be cross. ‘Absolutely brilliant,’ she said at last. She kissed me. ‘You can have a double helping of treacle tart. And take a piece to poor old Mr Parfitt when he’s put the lid back on the septic tank.’

‘OK,’ I said.

‘And just make sure he puts the lid back on firmly,’ she said. ‘If I find he’s been using anything from our septic tank to improve our fruit or vegetables I will buy all our greengrocery requirements from Peter Marshall.

CHAPTER 20

'I met Adrienne in Barnstaple,' said Patsy the moment I got home. 'You'll never guess what's happening?'

Adrienne is Patsy's sister. Although a couple of years older than Patsy, Adrienne still lived at home on her parents' farm in Bilbury.

'So tell me!'

'No, no. You've got to guess!'

'But you've just told me that I'll never guess.'

'So, try!'

'She's joining the Navy and going to see the world.'

'Don't be silly.'

'She's bought a gypsy caravan and a horse and is going to set off round Britain.'

'No. That's more likely. But that's not it.'

'I don't have the faintest.'

'Try once more.'

'She's going to train to be an astronaut.' Patsy laughed. 'She's getting married!'

'Married! To whom?'

'Guess.'

'No! I can't go through all that again. Tell me!'

'To Patchy!'

'Patchy Fogg?'

'Yes.'

I was delighted at this news. But I was so shocked that I had to sit down for a minute. Offhand, I couldn't think of two people less likely to make a couple. But many successful partnerships are created when unlikely individuals come together and of one thing I was certain: neither Patchy nor Adrienne was weak-willed enough to have been bullied into a marriage they weren't absolutely certain about.

* * *

Adrienne was an enthusiastic practitioner of alternative medicine and had nearly killed her and Patsy's father by mistakenly (and dangerously) prescribing hawthorn for him. I believed then, and still believe now, that if I hadn't stopped the hawthorn their father would have died.

Adrienne had never admitted that her herbalism might have dangerous consequences but she had moved into other areas of alternative medicine. At various times she had dabbled in reflexology, iridology, acupuncture and several other branches of alternative medicine. She was fascinated by all aspects of medicine. (I remember us once having a curious conversation about influenza. 'Is influenza catching?' she asked. 'Yes,' I agreed. 'It spreads by passing from one person to another?' I agreed. 'So,' she asked, 'how did the first person in the world to get the flu catch it? From whom did they catch it if no one else had ever had the flu?' She had been quite delighted when I had been unable to answer her question.)

She also had a number of curious medical theories of her own.

She claimed, for example, that as men get older they go bald because their hair gets trapped inside their skulls. She explained the phenomenon by arguing that the male skull gets thicker with age while the brain expands as it accumulates information. Eventually, the expanding brain blocks off the small holes through which the hair normally grows. This leaves the hair trapped inside the skull. She said the proof of this was the escaping hair that can be seen growing out of male ears. Her solution was to try to reduce the size of her patients' brains by teaching them to forget stuff and cleanse their brains of unwanted information. As far as I know she had never had any success but this hadn't diluted her enthusiasm for her theory.

* * *

I'd first met Patchy Fogg, the groom to be, when Patsy and I were buying old furniture for Bilbury Grange.

Patchy was an antique dealer and we'd met at an auction when, in order to push up the price he finally obtained, he had persuaded me to bid for a davenport that he was selling.

At the time Patchy didn't live in Bilbury but he was well-known in the village. His ponytail was tied back with a small red ribbon and he always wore what looked like the same dirty jeans and a grubby T-shirt. He and Thumper Robinson were great pals (the two of them played regularly in the spectacularly unsuccessful Bilbury football team) and were always thinking of new ways to help liberate tourists (especially American tourists) from money they didn't really need.

Patchy once sold an early Victorian television cabinet to a bumptious and self-confident American who had made millions as a stock market analyst. He even claimed that Queen Victoria herself had once owned the cabinet.

Pretending that the stuff he was selling had once been owned by someone famous (and invariably dead) was one of Patchy's favourite and most profitable ploys.

'Aren't you worried he'll go to the police?' I asked Patchy when I'd heard about the sale of the antique television cabinet.

Patchy, clearly unworried, shrugged. 'He'd have to admit he was stupid enough to buy a Victorian television cabinet,' he said with his usual lopsided smile. Selling genuine antique television cabinets was one of Patchy's most bizarre but most lucrative specialities.

Patchy described himself as a dealer in very nearly genuine antiques and had, over the years, taught me more than I probably needed to know about the antique trade. To be honest neither Patsy nor I really approved of many of the things he got up to. But the antiques trade is full of loveable but slightly dodgy characters and even though he was definitely slightly dodgy, Patchy was also definitely loveable. We consoled ourselves with the thought that most of the people he cheated were already cheating someone else.

At an auction in South Molton I once found him staining an antique lace table cloth by pouring red dye onto the lace from a small glass bottle.

'What on earth are you doing?' I asked him, appalled.

'It'll wash out,' he murmured. 'Just a vegetable dye.'

'But why do that?' I asked him, naively.

'It'll put other people off and keep the price down,' he explained. 'I'll wash out the dye and sell it on for what it's really worth.'

A few minutes later I saw Patchy chatting to a big dealer from Exeter.

'What was that all about?' I asked him.

'He was interested in the lace tablecloth but didn't want to bid on it because it's got a nasty wine stain on it,' said Patchy. 'He was worried about whether the stain would come out cleanly.' He winked at me. 'I told him not to bother bidding because I had a perfect cloth, the same size, that I could let him have tomorrow.'

And so Patchy bought the lace cloth cheaply, washed it in his bath that night, dried it and sold it to the dealer in Exeter for several times what he'd paid for it.

On another occasion, at an auction in Lynton, I saw Patchy accidentally-on-purpose break a small piece of glass in the front of a magnificent bookcase.

'What on earth did you do that for?' I demanded. 'It's a beautiful piece of furniture.'

'But flawed now,' said Patchy, skilfully using a small screwdriver to remove a handle from one of the doors.

'And you just happen to have a piece of old glass that you can use to replace the piece you've just broken?'

'Something like that,' grinned Patchy, slipping the handle into his pocket. He then strolled away and hovered over a beautiful set of twelve Georgian silver fruit knives. 'Look at these beautiful knives!' he said, picking up one and showing me the handle. When he moved away the knife went with him, leaving just eleven remaining.

'That's stealing!' I told him. 'If they catch you...'

'I'm not stealing anything,' he replied, sliding the knife into a tray containing several dozen items of miscellaneous cutlery oddments. The knife disappeared underneath a layer of nondescript and unattractive electroplated forks and tarnished spoons.

Naturally, it was Patchy who was the successful bidder on the eleven Georgian silver fruit knives and it was Patchy who, to everyone's surprise, bothered to bid on the unwanted tray of kitchen cutlery.

Patchy didn't only cheat when he was buying. He was an equal opportunities cheat. I once visited him at home and found him dropping handfuls of shiny horse brasses into a bowl full of vinegar and brand new screws into a jar full of very salty water.

'It ages them nicely,' he explained.

And it was Patchy who taught me some of the more honourable tricks of the antiques trade.

At an auction in Barnstaple I spotted a first edition of a book by Graham Greene stuck in a row of old book club editions about gardening and cooking. The only book I wanted was the Greene. It still had a clean and bright dust jacket.

'Do you think the auctioneer would just sell me the Greene?' I asked.

Patchy looked at me pityingly. 'Don't draw attention to the first edition,' he told me. 'Just bid on the row of books and pay what you think the Greene is worth.'

I did as I was told and got the collection for a fraction of the value of the Graham Greene first edition.

'Pick up the book you want,' said Patchy.

I picked up the Greene and slipped it into my overcoat pocket. 'Now what do I do with all these books?' I asked. There were at least forty old books in which I had absolutely no interest.

Patchy took me across the room to the underbidder – the person who had bid £1 less than I had for the row of books.

'My chum only wanted one book from that last lot,' Patchy said. 'Do you want the rest for £1 less than you were bidding?'

'Great!' said the underbidder enthusiastically.

And so I got the book I wanted for a total outlay of £2.

* * *

Patchy's two main redeeming features were that he loved animals and had a heart of gold. I had first hand experience of this shortly after he and I first met.

Alfred Burton, a farmer who lived half way between Bilbury and Combe Martin, had gone bankrupt and his land, house and farm machinery were all being sold off at auction. Alfred had moved into a cottage in Combe Martin with his eighty-five-year-old mother and he wasn't too upset by what had happened. 'I used to work from five in the morning until ten or eleven at night,' he told me when I asked how he was. 'Nowadays I get up when I feel like it and the day is mine to do with as I like. Some days I go down to the coast and do a little sea fishing. Occasionally, I just walk in the woods.' He'd even discovered the joys of reading and could often be seen walking around the village with a book in his hand. I'd given him a battered old paperback copy of a novel by P.G.Wodehouse and he'd become a huge fan of Jeeves and Wooster.

Not having much money to spend on books (even second-hand ones) he'd joined the local branch of the public library and every Thursday afternoon he took out half a dozen books when the travelling library bus stopped at Bilbury.

'The cottage is in my Mum's name,' he told me. 'If she lives another few years I'll be free of the bankruptcy and I can inherit the cottage without the bailiffs taking it from me.'

His one big sadness was that the bankruptcy people had decided that his dog was a saleable asset belonging to his farm. They'd confiscated the dog and put it into kennels so that it could be sold alongside the thirty cows, the milking machinery, the twenty-fiveyear-old Massey Ferguson tractor, a hundred and sixty bales of straw and all the rest of his worldly goods.

And so, on the auction catalogue there was a line which read: Lot 151: 'One working sheep dog (five-years-old). Name of Lady.'

Alfred was at the auction but only because he knew it was his last chance to see Lady. Good working sheep dogs fetch quite a high price and Alfred knew that there was no way he could afford to buy Lady back.

A bailiff led Lady into the barn, where the auction was being held, on lead fashioned out of a piece of string. Lady wasn't used to being on a lead - I don't think Alfred had ever put one on her - and she fretted. When the bailiff brought her into the barn she looked around the familiar sights and sniffed at the air. This was her territory. I don't know whether she smelt or saw Alfred but suddenly she made a leap in his direction. The bailiff couldn't hold onto his end of the string and moments later Lady and Alfred were temporarily reunited. When the bailiff, accompanied now by one of his colleagues, dragged Lady away from Alfred the barn fell totally silent. There were some hard men in that room but no one said a word. With tears running down his cheeks Alfred turned away and walked out of the barn. Held by the bailiff, Lady whimpered and watched him go. It was one of the most painful things I ever saw.

There wasn't much of interest to Patchy or to me at the auction. Most of Alfred's furniture was riddled with woodworm and neither of us was in the market for milk churns, butter making machinery or rusty farm equipment.

Patchy bought three old-fashioned three-legged milking stools (which he would later claim had once belonged to - and been used by Marie Antoinette - and sell to a London dealer for nearly one hundred times what he paid for them) but I didn't buy anything.

Lot 151 came up just before the lunch break and Patchy and I had already decided that we wouldn't bother staying for the afternoon session.

'I'm going to bid for the dog,' I whispered, as the auctioneer announced the lot.

'No,' hissed Patchy. 'Leave it to me. I've dealt with it.'

Like many professional dealers Patchy didn't make a big fuss when he made a bid and I didn't see him move or make any sign when he bid for the dog. Indeed, I wasn't even sure he'd been successful when the auctioneer suddenly brought down his gavel and announced a thirty minute lunch break. The whole thing had been over in a second or two.

'Did you get it?' I asked, but Patchy was off, heading for the desk where bidders paid for their purchases and got the slips of paper which entitled them to pick up their goods. I followed, several yards behind him, struggling through the crowd of people heading out of the barn and towards the van parked outside where a husband and wife team from Ilfracombe were selling coffee and hot dogs.

'Carry these,' he said, moments later, thrusting two milking stools at me. He carried the third stool in his left hand. And in his right hand he had the piece of string to which Lady was attached.

‘Come on, Lady,’ he said. ‘Let’s take you where you belong.’

We overtook Alfred a quarter of a mile before he got to his mother’s cottage. Patchy stopped his old Volvo but neither he nor I had chance to get out of the car before Lady. The moment Patchy opened his door Lady squeezed past him and out into Alfred’s arms.

Alfred didn’t speak. He wrapped his arms around Lady’s neck, and his eyes, when he looked up at us, said everything that needed to be said.

‘See you around Alfred,’ said Patchy.

‘Thank you,’ mouthed Alfred silently, unfastening the string from around Lady’s neck.

‘Pleasure,’ said Patchy, meaning it. Patchy headed back to Bilbury Grange.

‘Let me pay half of what you paid for Lady,’ I said.

‘OK,’ said Patchy, more quickly than I had expected.

‘How much do I owe you?’ I asked, reaching for my wallet.

‘A halfpenny,’ replied Patchy.

‘Don’t be daft. How much do I owe you?’

‘A halfpenny,’ repeated Patchy.

‘How much did you pay for Lady?’

‘A penny. Your maths isn’t very good is it?’

‘But...’

‘No one bid against me,’ said Patchy. ‘I bid a penny and got the dog.’

I looked at him.

‘I had a word with a few people,’ he said. ‘Everyone agreed to keep their hands in their pockets. The auctioneer’s a good bloke. He didn’t mind.’

I left my wallet where it was and fumbled in my pocket.

Eventually I found a halfpenny. I handed it to Patchy. He took it, nodded, and put it in his pocket.

It was the best halfpenny I ever spent.

* * *

‘So, when is the wedding?’ I asked Patsy.

‘Two weeks on Saturday.’

‘They’re not hanging around, are they!’ I paused. ‘Is there, er, any particular reason for the hurry?’

Patsy laughed. ‘No, we’re the only ones who are about to become parents. They’re both pretty impetuous people though. And having decided that they want to get married they thought they might as well get on with it.’

‘Where are they getting married?’

‘Bilbury Church.’

Suddenly, I caught sight of the clock. ‘I’ve got more visits to do,’ I said. ‘If I don’t get them done soon I’ll still be doing visits after dinner tonight.’

‘Will you be going past the shop?’

‘I can do,’ I said. ‘Do you need something?’

Patsy looked slightly embarrassed. ‘Could you get me a pot of Marmite and some ginger biscuits?’

I looked at her and smiled.

‘I just fancy some Marmite on a ginger biscuit,’ she said.

* * *

‘I’ve had your results back,’ I told Gloria Ross. ‘You’ve got thyrotoxicosis. It explains why you’ve had a job putting on weight.’

She looked worried. ‘Is that bad?’

‘Not really,’ I told her. ‘Your thyrotoxicosis is quite mild. I want you to see a specialist so that we can make sure that we get your treatment right. But it shouldn’t be difficult.’

‘Will I need an operation?’

I shook my head. ‘I don’t think so. We can almost certainly control it with some tablets,’ I told her.

‘Will the tablets help me put on weight?’

‘Yes.’

‘Does this mean my bum will get bigger?’ she wanted to know.

I told her that she could count on it.

She beamed with delight and said she couldn’t wait to start the treatment.

It wasn’t quite the response I usually got from patients. I don’t think I’d ever before had a patient who had been thrilled that the treatment she needed would give her a bigger bottom.

* * *

I headed for home and picked up the items Patsy wanted on my way.

'Ginger biscuits and one pot of Marmite,' I said, putting one of Peter's brown paper bags down on the kitchen table.

'Oh wonderful,' said Patsy, grabbing the bag. 'I was hoping you wouldn't forget.' She opened the Marmite and the packet of biscuits and took a knife out of the cutlery drawer.

I then watched, transfixed, as she spread Marmite on one of the ginger biscuits.

'You're not going to eat that?'

She didn't answer immediately but, instead, put the biscuit into her mouth and took a huge bite.

I stared.

'Khgj ty kdil wkhekt kehd kjgl qtkh ptkl ktlrk bklepwjg rtwkl kbjtlg kmnfght lktqpb kghys,' she said.

I didn't understand a word of what she said, but I knew exactly what she meant.

'This is what people mean when they talk about pregnant women having strange eating urges.'

Patsy beamed and swallowed. 'Oh that was wonderful,' she said. 'I'll just have one more and then I'll make dinner.'

* * *

We had finished dinner and we were sitting in the garden, on an old battered bench near to the lake. We each had a glass of fruit juice in our hands. The bottle was leaning against the trunk of a willow tree. Patsy had stopped drinking alcohol during her pregnancy and when I was with her I didn't drink either.

We both love sitting by our small lake. That year we even had a pair of swans nesting by it. We both love swans. As Patsy once put it, swans remind us of a wedding party full of brides. We had spent many happy hours watching 'our' two swans glide, apparently effortlessly across the lake, surrounded by a cygnet ring – a circle of young swans.

'We haven't talked about what we're going to call the baby,' said Patsy.

'It rather depends what sex it is.'

'It's going to be a boy.'

'How do you know that?' I asked. We had agreed not to let the doctors tell us the sex of our baby.

Patsy shrugged and smiled. 'I just know,' she said.

'Then, assuming it to be a boy, what do you want to call him?'

There was a flash of blue as a kingfisher swooped low over the water.

'Did you see that?' I asked, in a whisper.

'Yes,' she answered. There was a long pause. We both sipped our drinks. 'We could name him after you.'

I shuddered. 'Thanks,' I said. 'But I don't think I want that. He'd be known as Junior and it will look as if we're trying to start a dynasty.'

'I don't want to name him after my Dad,' said Patsy. Neither of us spoke for a while. Two moorhens swam silently among the bulrushes at the edge of the lake.

'No.' I said quietly at last. 'Perhaps not.' Patsy's father has two Christian names. The first is Gilbert. The second is Arnold.

'But we've got to call him something,' said Patsy. I agreed with her.

'There's one person I would like to name him after,' I said.

'Me too,' admitted Patsy.

'You first.'

'I wondered if we could perhaps name him after Dr Brownlow,' I suggested. 'He brought us together. I admire him a lot. He's always been good to us. If it hadn't been for him we would never have met and I wouldn't be living in Bilbury.' I paused. 'And I don't know anyone I respect more.'

Patsy nodded her agreement. 'He was my choice,' she said. 'I'd like that.'

We sat there for a while, holding hands.

'There's just one thing,' said Patsy.

'What's that?'

'I don't know Dr Brownlow's Christian name. Do you?'

I thought about this for a while. 'No,' l said at last. 'Maybe we should find out,' said Patsy.

'Certainly before the christening,' I agreed. 'I'll ask him.'

'I expect he'll know,' said Patsy.

'I expect so.'

'That's settled then.'

We sat in silence and watched the moorhens.

I picked up the bottle and shared its remaining contents between us. 'You could drink wine,' said Patsy. 'I wouldn’t mind.’

‘This is good,’ I said, lifting the glass of juice and sipping it. We sat in silence for a while.

Patsy shivered.

‘Cold?’

She nodded.

‘Let’s go indoors. I’ll make a log fire and we’ll create pictures out of the flames.’

Both of us love few things more than a nice log fire. All the joys of a bonfire but held indoors out of the cold and the rain.

Unfortunately, our log fire wasn’t quite the success I’d hoped it would be. Minutes after I’d lit the fire the room was filled with smoke.

‘I’m fed up with this,’ I said wearily. Ever since we’d been at Bilbury Grange there had been problems with the fire. ‘Maybe there is a blockage,’ I said. ‘Perhaps there is a nest.’

‘Those people from Barnstaple wanted to fit a fan,’ Patsy reminded me.

‘They also wanted a small fortune,’ I reminded her.

‘I’ll call the chimney sweep tomorrow,’ said Patsy. ‘Maybe he can do something to help.’

We gave up on the log fire and went to bed instead. It had been a long and eventful day. I took with me the novel I was reading. But I was fast asleep before I could even open the book.

CHAPTER 21

Patsy was away in Barnstaple helping her sister Adrienne choose a wedding dress so I went round to the Duck and Puddle for my lunch. The moment I walked in through the door I sensed that something was different. The bar smelt of a curious mixture of furniture polish and cooking. But the cooking smell wasn't the aroma produced by pies being heated up in the oven. This was the sort of smell you get in a restaurant.

'Good morning, sir!' cried a strange voice the moment I walked in through the door. I turned and looked around. A small, thin stranger with a small thin moustache was standing behind the bar. He wore a checked sports coat with a woollen shirt and a neatly knotted military tie which I didn't recognise. He had a tea towel in one hand and a pint glass in the other. I noticed that his cufflinks carried an emblem which seemed to match the one on his tie.

'Good morning!' I replied. 'Where's Frank?'

'Mr and Mrs Parsons are on leave this weekend.'

'Ah, yes,' I said. 'I remember now.' Frank had taken Gilly to London for the weekend as a belated birthday present.

'I'm Sidney Weedon,' said the barman, 'but people usually call me Lionel. My wife, Mrs Weedon, will attend to any culinary needs you might have.'

I stared at him. I didn't mean to be rude but I was rather startled.

As a regular customer in the Duck and Puddle I wasn't used to this level of service.

The stand-in publican leant forwards across the bar. 'Anything you might need to eat,' he explained.

'Yes,' I said. 'Of course.'

'What can I get you to drink, sir?' he asked.

I asked for a pint of Guinness. While he poured the drink, taking great care with the head, I looked around for the jar of pickled eggs which Frank usually kept on the bar counter. 'Where are the eggs?' I asked.

'We had to move them I'm afraid, sir,' he replied. 'Current health and safety regulations forbid the sale of such items unless the container is fitted with a sealed cap.'

'There is a lid somewhere,' I told him, looking around in the hope that I might spot it. 'I remember we were using it as a Frisbee a few days ago.'

Sidney, known as Lionel, lowered his voice. 'I'm afraid that according to the bar records the eggs were a little past their recommended date for sale,' he told me. I paid him, exchanged a few words about the weather we were having for the time of year and sauntered over to the far corner of the bar where Patchy and Thumper were watching horse racing on Frank's flickering black and white television set.

'Has anyone won anything?' I asked, sitting down next to Thumper. The chair had been polished and felt slightly sticky.

'We're just thinking up daft names for horses,' said Thumper.

'Thumper wants to have a really useless horse called The Winner,' said Patchy.

I looked at him and frowned. 'Why?'

'Because it will be fun when the chap who does the commentating has to say: 'And The Winner came last."

I nodded. 'I can see that would be mildly confusing,' I agreed.

'I want one called The Pantomime Horse,' said Patchy.

'...and The Pantomime Horse is coming up on the outside!' said Thumper, mimicking the sound of a horse race commentator.

'How about The One At The Back,' I suggested.

'The winner is The One At The Back,' said Thumper. He thought about it. 'I like that,' he nodded. 'Very good.'

'Heavily Doped,' suggested Patchy. 'And the horse who came in third was 'Heavily Doped'.'

Thumper and I both agreed that we liked that too.

I lowered my voice. 'Have you met the curious little bloke behind the bar?' I asked. The television flickered and slipped. Patchy stood up and slammed the side of the television with an open palm. The television stopped flickering and the picture reappeared. Patchy muttered something about the television set probably having been the set John Logie Baird had built when he'd invented television.

'Lionel known as Sidney?' said Thumper.

'I think it's Sidney known as Lionel,' I said.

'Whatever,' said Thumper.

'He's confiscated the pickled eggs and there's a smell of cooking coming out of the kitchen,' I said.

'I know,' said Patchy. 'I find it all rather worrying. I'm glad Frank and Gilly are only away for the weekend.'

‘Have you eaten?’ I asked.

‘We were waiting for you,’ said Patchy. ‘We thought you’d be in since your good lady wife has gone off helping my bride-to-be to spend some money.’

‘Don’t misunderstand. We weren’t waiting out of any sense of politeness,’ said Thumper quickly. ‘We wanted you here in case we get food poisoning.’

‘Sensible,’ I nodded. I half turned and called over to the barman. ‘What are you doing for lunch?’

‘I’ll ask Mrs Weedon to bring you the menu,’ he told me.

‘A Big Brown Labrador,’ suddenly suggested Thumper.

‘And A Big Brown Labrador has thrown its jockey at the fourth fence,’ said Patchy, nodding approval. ‘I like that. Not as good as ‘Heavily Doped’ though.’

Mrs Weedon must have been on starting blocks in the kitchen. She appeared almost instantly. ‘I’ve brought you the menus,’ she said.

We all stared at her. Our staring had nothing to do with the fact that she must have weighed thirty stones and had a moustache bigger than her husband’s but was entirely a result of the fact that she had brought us menus. Frank and Gilly had once tried producing menus but had long since given up. When all you serve is meat pies, chips, pickled eggs and crisps a menu becomes a rather embarrassing luxury.

‘You’ve got menus?’ said Patchy.

She handed us each a red plastic folder. ‘Would you like to see the wine list?’ she asked.

‘We’ll just have more of what we were drinking,’ said Thumper in a very thin little voice. He looked at Patchy and then at me.

‘Unless you two...’

‘More of the same is fine with me,’ said Patchy.

‘Me too,’ I agreed. ‘Two pints of draught bitter and a pint of Guinness please.’

‘I’ll have the same,’ said Thumper.

Mrs Weedon looked confused.

‘Just joking,’ explained Thumper quickly.

‘I’ll leave the menus with you for your perusal,’ said Mrs Weedon. ‘If you have any queries just ask Mr Weedon to let me know.’

‘What’s this one,’ asked Thumper, who had already opened his menu. He pointed to the top item on the list.

Patchy and I opened our menus and looked at the item to which he was pointing.

Thumper read it out.

‘Steaming Hot Natural Pulses Resting On A Grilled Slice From A Fresh Wholemeal Farmhouse Bloomer Generously Bathed In A Succulent Tomato Based Sauce.’

Mrs Weedon, who had already taken a few steps back towards the kitchen, turned back towards us, looked at the menu Thumper was holding and repeated what he had read out.

‘Give us a clue,’ said Patchy. ‘What does it look like?’

‘It looks like beans on toast,’ said Mrs Weedon.

‘It’s beans on toast?’ asked Thumper, incredulously.

‘Some people might call it that,’ said Mrs Weedon. ‘But Lionel and I believe that presentation and nomenclature are very important in the restaurant trade.’

‘And what’s a Norway lobster?’ asked Patchy.

‘That would be commonly known as scampi.’

We thanked her and told her that we would probably be able to work out the rest of the menu but that if we had any more difficulty we would call her and ask her to translate for us.

After twenty minutes of careful study we asked Lionel if he would be kind enough to send Mrs Weedon back to our table.

‘I’ll have Norway lobster Cooked In Hot Oil With A Covering Of Crumbed Cottage Loaf And Served With Hand Fried Sliced Potatoes,’ said Patchy.

‘I’ll have Chunky Slices Of Best Gloucester Packed Together With Succulent Pieces Of Sun Ripened Tomato Between Sliced Crusty Farmhouse Loaf,’ said Thumper.

‘And I’ll have Steaming Hot Natural Pulses Resting On A Grilled Slice From A Fresh Wholemeal Farmhouse Bloomer Generously Bathed In A Succulent Tomato Based Sauce,’ I said.

We sat back and waited. Patchy for his scampi and chips, Thumper for his cheese and tomato sandwich and me for my beans on toast.

Sitting there in the Duck and Puddle life seemed all tickety, with hardly any boo in it at all.

CHAPTER 22

'I'm glad you called in,' said Dr Brownlow. He was, if possible, even thinner than ever. The skin stretched taut over his cheekbones looked like transparent parchment. But although sunken, his eyes were still bright. 'There are a couple of things I want you to do for me.'

'Anything,' I promised.

'You haven't heard what I want yet.'

'I don't care what it is. I'll do it.' He grinned. 'Risky promise.'

I shook my head.

'First, the easy one.'

'OK.'

'Look after Bradshaw for me.'

'Your butler?'

Dr Brownlow nodded.

'He's going to be my new district nurse.'

'You're still sure about that?'

'Certain.'

'What about the bureaucrats?' Dr Brownlow was right. Hiring an 82-year-old former butler as a district nurse would probably create a few problems with the local bureaucrats.

'Bugger them.'

'Just like that?'

'Just like that. They said I could choose my own nurse.'

'He's lived with me so long he's like family.'

'I know.'

'He's got nowhere else to live and he's got no relatives.' I nodded.

'He's 82.'

'I'm not surprised. I thought he was older.'

'I think he probably is. He's been 82 since 1968.'

'Then he's probably older than 82.'

'Bradshaw is a good nurse.'

'I know he is.'

'I'm leaving him the cottage the housekeeper used to have. He can live there.'

'Great. I need him now but I hope I have to wait a long time before he's free.'

'I don't think you'll have to wait long,' said Dr Brownlow, with a faint smile.

'What's the second thing?'

'Pour a couple of whiskies.'

I poured us both a whisky. A small one for me and a large one for Dr Brownlow. I added a lot of water to mine.

'One of my ambitions has always been to be bankrupt at the time of my death,' he said. 'I always rather liked the idea of popping off without leaving enough to pay the solicitor or the damned funeral people. I rather thought it would be nice to die broke, with the Government desperate to sue me for unpaid taxes.'

'A noble thought,' I said, sipping at my whisky.

'But as things stand I don't think I'm going to manage that.'

I couldn't think of anything suitable to say so I didn't say anything.

'So I want you to take this to the bank.' He picked up a white envelope from the table on his left and handed it to me.

'OK.'

'Aren't you going to ask me what's in it?'

'If you want me to know you'll tell me.'

He smiled. 'It contains a letter to the bank manager and a cheque made out to cash. The letter tells the bank manager to give you the cash to bring to me.'

'Right.'

'But I don't want you to bring me the cash.' He handed me another white envelope.

'Open that one.'

I opened it. The envelope contained a receipt, signed by Dr Brownlow. I didn't read it properly.

'This is a receipt...'

'I know what it is.'

'You realise that now that I've got the letter, the cheque and the receipt the money can just disappear?'

'That's what I thought.'

'So, what do you want me to do with it?'

'I'd like you to give it away. Do good things with it. Bilbury Mothers Wednesday and Friday Evenings Social Club. Church Organ Fund. Bilbury Boys Summer Outing. Anything you like that helps Bilbury. But don't draw attention to yourself. If I just leave you this money in my Will the Government will grab a great chunk of it. But they won't spend money on helping Bilbury survive.'

Sadly, he was right. The Government (in the unpleasant shape of a bunch of NHS bureaucrats) had deliberately closed down Bilbury's only medical practice. It was only through the slightly devious efforts of the villagers that the Government had been forced to change its mind.

'Did you know that the Bilbury Mothers Wednesday and Friday Evenings Social Club now meets on Tuesdays and Thursdays?' I asked him.

'I had heard.'

'But they kept the name because they had some leftover stationery.'

He smiled.

'How much is the cheque for?'

'£50,000.'

I sipped some more whisky. '£50,000?' He nodded.

'Cash?'

'Cash.'

'Is that legal?'

'I acquired it legally. It's my money. I don't see why it isn't legal for me to take it out of the bank. They may need a day or two to get the money ready.'

'I would imagine they will. It's quite a lot of cash. What about the taxman?'

'It's money I've paid tax on.'

'I'm pleased to hear it. But will the taxman be concerned at my taking £50,000 out of the bank and giving it away?'

'You're not taking the money. You've got a receipt which shows that you gave the money to me.'

'Ah.'

'I talked to my solicitor and my accountant about this.'

'What did they say?'

'The taxman might want to question me at some point when my estate is being looked at for probate. He might feel that if the £50,000 hadn't gone missing then there would have been some tax to pay on it.'

'Inheritance tax?'

'Exactly.'

I looked at him. 'They'll want to question you?'

He nodded.

'When your estate is being looked at?'

Another nod.

'After you're dead?'

'After I'm dead.'

'I would imagine you will be tempted to ignore them?'

'I would imagine I will. They will want to question me to find out what I did with the £50,000 I took out of the bank. And although you will have physically taken the cash out of the bank you, of course, will have a receipt signed by me.'

I picked up the receipt. 'This receipt.'

'Precisely. That receipt.'

'So the money will have just disappeared.'

'Like magic. The taxman can't come after you to find out what happened to the money because you will have a receipt. And he can't come after me because I'll be dead.'

'Hmmm.' I said. I sipped at my whisky and then emptied the glass. 'Do you mind if I have another whisky?'

'Please do.'

I poured myself more whisky. I added some to Dr Brownlow's glass too.

'I would suggest that you tell no one you can't trust about this little scheme of ours. You must tell Patsy, of course.'

I sipped more whisky. ‘I will tell Thumper,’ I said. ‘And Patchy.’ I thought a little more. ‘And Miss Johnson.’

Dr Brownlow nodded his agreement. ‘Do what you like with the money. My only suggestion is that I’d like you to spend most of it on helping the village. Feed it in here and there. Or one big splash. Whatever you think.’

‘I will do that,’ I promised. I was touched that he knew he could trust me not to spend it on cars, booze and fancy clothes.

‘And I’m leaving the house to you,’ he said.

I sipped at the whisky and said nothing for a long, long time. Neither of us said anything.

‘What do you want me to do with it?’ I asked him.

‘You won’t live in it?’

I shook my head. ‘It’s a beautiful house,’ I told him. ‘But you’re my patient. I can’t accept money from you.’

‘Then do something with it. Just don’t let anyone turn it into twelve bijou apartments for retirees from London. And don’t let anyone knock it down and put up a supermarket. Use it for the village.’

‘How?’

He looked at me. ‘You’re sure you won’t live in it?’

‘No. Thank you but no.’

‘You don’t want to sell it and keep the money?’

I smiled. ‘No. Thank you but no.’ I paused. ‘Your son won’t like not having the house, I added.’

‘I don’t like him and he doesn’t like me,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘If I leave him the house he’ll have the architects in before I’m cold and they’ll turn it into a corporate headquarters, a country hotel or luxury apartments. Why should I leave him the house or anything else?’

‘He’ll be cross.’

Dr Brownlow laughed lightly. ‘He’ll be very cross. Furious. And he might try to dispute the Will. But my solicitor assures me it’s watertight. I had my signature witnessed by a psychiatrist and a judge so that no one could claim I was not of sound mind when I signed it.’

‘Clever stuff.’

‘I’m a clever fellow.’

‘I know you are.’

It was his turn to smile. ‘There is one thing you might consider.’

‘What’s that?’

‘A cottage hospital.’ I stared at him.

‘Bilbury needs a tiny hospital of its own. Just a few beds. Nothing elaborate. Somewhere friendly and local for patients to be looked after when they’re too ill to stay at home but not really ill enough to be in a proper hospital.’

‘We would never get the Government to help.’

‘No.’

‘It would cost quite a bit to convert the house into a hospital.’ He nodded.

‘And then there would be running costs. Wages. Heat. That sort of thing.’

Another nod.

‘The £50,000?’

He smiled. ‘After paying tax, £50,000 wouldn’t be enough. With no tax to pay you could get the conversion work done and have some left over to pay for the running of the hospital for a year or two.’

I looked at him and saw that his eyes were closed. I got up, very gently took his hand and felt for his pulse. It was fine.

‘You clever, clever old man,’ I murmured quietly, I walked over to the window and looked out at the gardens.

When I’d first seen Dr Brownlow’s house I had thought it the most impressive building I’d ever seen – the most impressive house that didn’t belong to the National Trust or have coach loads of day trippers parading through it. Built entirely of grey stone, softened slightly by several acres of green ivy, the house had towers, battlements and mullion windows. There was a Union Jack flying from a pole fixed at an acute angle to the front of the central tower. The front door, directly underneath the flag, and flanked by two huge stone lions, was twelve feet high and decorated with scores of very solid looking metal studs. When I’d first seen it I’d half expected Vincent Price (or a hunchbacked minion) to open the door with a good deal of creaking.

Dr Brownlow had bought the house together with his wife and it was the gardens which were his particular pride and joy. There was a formal lawn, a huge Victorian greenhouse and a large walled vegetable garden as well as several acres of woodland. Dr Brownlow loved trees in the same way that some men love cars or boats. He would take me on walks around the woodland and talk to me about them.

‘See those walnut trees,’ I remember him saying. ‘That’s the biggest group of walnut trees in the whole of North Devon.’ He was very proud of them.

‘Do they produce nuts?’ I’d asked.

‘Of course they do,’ he said. ‘You have to wait until they’re ready to fall. You wait until the nuts are too heavy for the twig which carries them. They break off under their own weight and fall to the ground. When the tree is near to a tarmacadamed road you can hear the constant thud thud of nuts falling like stones being thrown. If you pick them too soon, as some people do, you end up with nuts which aren’t properly matured. When they’ve fallen you let them dry out in baskets in the sunshine and then store them somewhere dry and airy. It’s the fruit that are formed on the outer branches which are best. They get the most sunshine and air. The nuts at the centre of the tree are comparatively poor.’

His two dogs, now gone, used to love eating walnuts. They were only supposed to eat the ones which had broken open but they would crack the others with their teeth and then chew the nuts. Dr Brownlow had a small wooden block and a matching wooden hammer which he’d bought in a village in France in the 1930s. It was, he said, the way the French peasants used to break open their walnut shells.

‘In rural France they used to use the leaves of the walnut tree too,’ he told me. ‘Though they probably don’t bother now. They used to lay the leaves out in the sun for a while, though not long enough for them to lose their colour, and then move them into a barn. When the leaves were brittle they would rub them between their palms and put the powder into a wine bottle. They’d then cover the leaf powder with eau-de-vie spirit. They’d leave them for a fortnight and then strain the liquid through a muslin cloth, put it into bottles, add red wine and twelve lumps of sugar per bottle. They called it quinquina and it was,’ he said, ‘the most glorious liqueur known to man.’

Although he loved his trees he knew that occasionally they had to be felled. ‘These days,’ I remember him telling me, ‘the so-called scientific foresters cut trees by the acre.’ He shuddered. ‘No sensible woodman does that,’ he said. ‘If you cut all the trees at once you have rows of young trees all fighting to survive at the same time. All the bugs have a field day. Instead, you should cut down each tree as it reaches its prime and then plant another in its place. And you don’t cut them at ground level, like so many do these days. That leaves a stump which is terribly difficult to remove. You put a cable on a high branch and use a winch to pull the tree down in the right direction. Then while the tree is leaning you dig around the tree on the opposite side, cut off the roots and pull them out. All the time you tighten the winch, pulling on the tree and pulling out more roots. It takes much longer than just chopping through the trunk, of course, but when you’ve done it this way you can plant another tree in the same place. You haven’t wasted the land.’

He was, I remembered, angry that modern farmers and scientific foresters (he used to say the phrase ‘scientific foresters’ in the same way that he would say the words ‘administrator’ and ‘bureaucrat’) would fell trees without replacing them. He compared it to using up the soil without returning the wastes to restock the minerals in the earth. He loved nature and hated those who overfished the seas or polluted our rivers. He thought oxen and horses were a great natural way to return nitrogen to the land. He hated tractors. ‘They tear at the land, they cost a fortune to run, they make a great noise and a horrible smell. They give no pleasure and they return nothing to the land. A good horse or ox does its work and fertilises the land at the same time. He hated the way that country children were running off to the city, getting degrees in subjects he’d never heard of and becoming managers of fast food stores. He was depressed that so many young people couldn’t do things with their hands any more.

I remember him stopping beside a huge poplar and touching the bark with his hand, as though caressing a dear friend. ‘Over one hundred feet high and with a circumference of eight feet,’ he said. ‘Just twenty-years-old. I planted this tree. As white as a silver birch but pearly. A wonderful tree. You cut off the small side branches and the trunk continues to grow straight and true. Because there are no side branches there will be no knots in the wood. And because there are no side branches there is no shade hanging over whatever is growing nearby. He picked up a handful of twigs lying on the ground underneath the tree and made me do the same. ‘Poplar twigs make great kindling,’ he said. ‘Almost as good as ash.’

Walnut wood and oak make the best furniture, he told me.

He said that an oak should be felled and left for years in the round out-of-doors before being cut into planks. ‘Then, when it is cut, the planks should be stored with strips between them so that the air can circulate. It takes 15 years for a piece of oak to season properly. These days they’re in too much of a hurry. They dry the wood in a kiln. A decent carpenter will know that the wood hasn’t been naturally seasoned.’

Looking through the window I saw a chestnut tree and remembered him telling me that if you put chestnuts into a box without drying them out first they will go bad within a week. ‘They will sweat and heat up and be inedible,’ he told me. ‘You have to dry them out before bagging them.’

‘Have I been dozing?’

I turned round. Dr Brownlow was awake and looking across at me.

‘Just for a minute or two.’

‘Sorry about that.’

‘It’s OK.’ I paused. ‘What do you want me to do with the house? You nodded off before you could answer.’

‘Whatever you like. But I don’t want you to give it away and I don’t want you to sell it unless you have to. I’m leaving you enough extra cash to pay any death duties so the house will be yours outright.’ He looked around. ‘It’s a nice house to live in if a little big for two.’

‘Three,’ I said.

He looked at me, with a raised eyebrow.

I told him about Patsy.

‘Congratulations.’ I could tell that he was genuinely pleased.

‘Thank you.’

‘Give my congratulations and my love to Patsy.’

‘I will.’

‘She’s a sweet, sweet girl.’

‘I know.’

‘Kindest girl I ever met. I once told her mother that when they made Patsy it must have been the end of a week. God filled her up with all the kindness he had left over.’

I smiled.

We sat in silence for a while.

‘You’re leaving me everything.’

‘So it would seem.’

‘Why?’

‘Why not?’

‘That’s not a very good answer.’

‘It’s as good as the question.’

I sipped more whisky. I would, I decided, have to walk home and then have a lot of black coffee before the evening surgery. I’d have to bicycle back and pick up the car later.

‘I’m very honoured,’ I said. Before Dr Brownlow could speak I held up a hand. ‘Not because you’re entrusting your house and a huge bundle of money to me. The house and the money are very nice but they’re not all that important.’ I coughed. It might have been the whisky. Or maybe the emotion. What I wanted to say was that I was pleased that he thought enough of me to do this. But I couldn’t get the words out. I think he knew anyway.

Dr Brownlow smiled. ‘I want you to have the Rolls as well,’ he said. Dr Brownlow had an ancient black 20/25 Rolls Royce; a magnificent piece of engineering. He’d had it for over thirty years and it was his pride and his joy. ‘It needs a service,’ he said. ‘And there’s a problem with the clutch.’

I nodded.

‘Surprisingly, you can take her to Tolstoy’s,’ said Dr Brownlow.

‘As you may have noticed they aren’t terribly good with modern machinery but they’re pretty good with old-fashioned motors – especially anything built before the Second World War. Get them to take a look at her.’

‘I will.’

‘I need some more morphine.’

I reached into my pocket, pulled out a prescription pad and wrote out a prescription for two dozen ampoules of morphine. I stood up and handed him the prescription.

‘Is your son arranging, er, things... for you afterwards?’

‘Is my son arranging the funeral?’ I nodded.

He shook his head slowly and deliberately. ‘You are,’ he said.

‘Any special requests.’

‘Get Peter to organise things. He’ll make a good job of things.’

‘Peter Marshall?’

‘Peter Marshall. He does funerals. Thumper is making the coffin. He’s a good workman when he isn’t busy being jack the lad. He put a bathroom in for me once you know. And made some panelling for the library when we had an attack of woodworm.’

‘If Thumper said he’ll make you a coffin then he’ll make you a good one.’

There was another long silence.

‘Any special hymns?’

Dr Brownlow shook his head. ‘Free drinks for the night at the Duck and Puddle.’

‘You’ll be a popular man.’

‘Cheap popularity.’

‘You don’t have to buy people drinks to be popular,’ I told him. ‘And you know it. But I’ll make sure Frank knows.'

I put the two envelopes into my jacket pocket. 'I'll leave my car here if you don't mind,' I told him. 'I'll come back for it after evening surgery.'

He nodded. He was almost asleep. He tired easily these days and didn't seem to me to have long to go. My visit had taken a lot out of him. I tiptoed out of the room, said goodbye to Bradshaw and walked back to Bilbury Grange. It was a dry, fine afternoon. One of those crisp days that make you want to walk for ever.

CHAPTER 23

‘How did you get on in Barnstaple?’ I asked Patsy later that evening.

‘We found a wonderful dress,’ she told me. ‘But she decided it was too low cut at the front. She says men always look down on women in low cut dresses. Anyway, it was probably all a waste of time,’ she said. ‘Patchy has apparently found an old family dress he’d like Adrienne to wear.’

‘What other wonderful things has Adrienne been up to?’ I asked.

I always love hearing stories about Adrienne. She is a kind but slightly eccentric girl. She has a sweet tooth and loves food – particularly chocolate. She had once confessed that her skirts were made by Marks & Spencer but her bottom had been made by Cadbury.

‘We met Patchy for lunch,’ said Patsy. ‘Adrienne has got Patchy in quite a whirl,’ said Patsy. ‘She told him that she wants a dining table with two legs.’

I looked at Patsy and raised an eyebrow.

‘Patchy said that a table needs at least three legs and Adrienne wanted to know why. Patchy said because if it only has two legs it won’t stand up. And Adrienne said that was silly because she’s only got two legs and she can stand up.’

I laughed. ‘So Patchy has got to try to find a table with two legs?’

Patsy nodded.

‘Poor old Patchy,’ I said.

‘They’re going to be fine. She loves him to bits,’ said Patsy.

‘He’s a lot older than her,’ I pointed out.

‘She’s worried that he isn’t old enough!’ said Patsy.

‘That’s typical Adrienne!’ I said.

‘She says there’s an old adage that a girl should be half the age of the man she is marrying plus seven. So according to that she’s a bit too old for him.’

‘But she’ll cope?’

‘Definitely,’ nodded Patsy. ‘I know she’s a little strange sometimes. But what’s wrong with being a little strange?’

‘Absolutely nothing,’ I agreed.

‘She says Patchy told her he is a lucky man because he’ll get to sleep with a strange woman every night,’ said Patsy.

‘What did you say?’

‘I said she’s right,’ said Patsy. ‘I told her I get to sleep with a strange man every night and I’m very happy about it.’

‘And the strange man is pretty happy about it too,’ I said.

CHAPTER 24

Like all doctors I have, over the years, met a considerable number of hypochondriacs.

Dr Brownlow had taught me two important things about hypochondriacs.

First, they may not be genuinely ill but to them their fears are just as real as the fears of a patient with a genuine disorder.

Second, hypochondriacs do occasionally become really ill and so every complaint and every fear has to be taken seriously and, if necessary, investigated.

Every general practitioner has a few hypochondriacs to care for. Since mine was a relatively small practice I had relatively few genuine hypochondriacs. And mine all lived in the same household.

The Phatt family were the Bilbury hypochondriacs.

The Phatt family had moved into Bilbury about three months before I'd come out of my temporary retirement. There were four of them.

Phyllis Phatt, the mother, a tall, well-built but surprisingly flat-chested woman with the physique of a rugby forward; George, her husband, a small, rather weedy little man with a wisp of gingery hair combed across a bald head and a laugh like a schoolgirl. Phyllis, who was a good foot taller than her husband, called him Clint because she thought George was rather common. She treated him like a son rather than a husband.

'How many children do you have?' I had asked when we'd first met.

'Three,' she had replied. 'Two girls and a boy.'

'How old are they?'

'The youngest girl is 14, the eldest girl is 16 and my boy is 47.' The two daughters were Phoebe (the 14-year-old) and Pauline (the 16-year-old). Both daughters acted considerably younger than they were though both looked physically well-developed for their respective ages.

George had worked as a civil servant (he wouldn't ever tell anyone exactly which department he had worked for and since it seemed unlikely that he worked for the secret service it was generally accepted that he must have been employed by the Inland Revenue) and had taken early retirement as a result of what a letter in his medical notes referred to as 'an extensive variety of stress-related illnesses'.

Phyllis Phatt had telephoned me just a few days after I'd reopened my practice. She telephoned just as I started dinner one evening. Patsy took the call and told me that a woman called Hellaire wanted to speak to me.

'Mrs Hellaire?' I said, picking up the phone.

'Hellaire?'

'Is that Mrs Hellaire?'

'No. This is Mrs Phatt,' said the caller. 'Phyllis Phatt.' It was only when she spoke that I realised why Patsy had made the mistake. The woman spoke with a fake upper class accent and sounded like an American actress trying to play a British Duchess and failing miserably. I won't try to reproduce her awful accent. It is enough to say that when she said 'hello' it came out as 'hellaire'.

'I thought I ought to introduce myself, doctor,' she said. 'We're your patients now and I expect you'll be keen to get to know all about us.'

This, of course, is just the sort of telephone call a general practitioner enjoys. Especially when it comes just as he sits down to a meal after a long, busy day. I thanked her and asked her if there was anything in particular I could do for her.

'My husband and I both have a family history of high blood pressure,' she told me. 'We both need to have our blood pressure taken regularly. We have to be careful with our health, don't we? It's such a valuable gift.'

'Do you have high blood pressure?' I asked.

'Not at the moment,' she replied. 'But I expect we will one day. I always find myself aware of the fact that we're all of us just one heart beat away from the end. Just a second or two from death.'

'Quite.'

'We're so very, very vulnerable, aren't we?'

'I suppose we are.'

'And I'm pre-diabetic.'

'Pre-diabetic?' I repeated. It wasn't a phrase I'd ever heard before.

'It means that I'll develop diabetes one day,' she told me. She made this announcement proudly, as someone might say: 'I am an Olympic athlete. I'm hoping to win a gold medal.'

She then proceeded to treat me to a long and exhaustive description of her family's medical history.

'How long will you be?' whispered Patsy, coming into the hall where I was standing. 'Do I need to put your dinner in the oven?'

I put my hand over the telephone mouthpiece. 'Heaven knows,' I whispered back. 'Could you bring my dinner out here?'

Patsy nodded. Moments later she returned with a chair. Then she returned carrying a plate. Mrs Phatt, who must have had the fittest tongue in Britain, was now going at full steam. She was describing in minute detail an operation her father had had in 1947. Gently, I put the telephone down on the hall table, sat down on the chair Patsy had provided, picked up my dinner and began to eat. Not wanting to eat alone, Patsy brought out a second chair and her plate and sat with me. On the hall table Mrs Phatt chattered away. We couldn't hear everything she said but we could tell that she was still going well.

Fifteen minutes later I'd finished my dinner. I picked up the telephone. 'Hmmm,' I said, with non-committal interest. 'Very useful information.'

'I've still got my mother to tell you about,' said Mrs Phatt. 'And Mr Phatt's parents have a very interesting medical history.'

'It would help me enormously,' I said, 'if you could write all this down for me. Provide me with a sort of family tree, explaining all the family illnesses.'

'Oh certainly, doctor,' said Mrs Phatt eagerly. 'Mr Phatt and I can do that.'

'Splendid.'

'When shall we come round for our initial check ups?' she asked.

'Check ups?'

'I assume you'll want to give us all an examination,' said Mrs Phatt. 'Just so that you'll know what you're dealing with.'

'Of course,' I said, thanking my lucky stars that there was only one Mrs Phatt in the village.

'What time would be convenient for you?' she asked.

'Do you have jobs to go to? Is getting to the surgery difficult for you?'

'My husband is retired,' said Mrs Phatt. 'And I'm a houseswife.'

'Houseswife,' I repeated. 'Did you say 'houseswife'?'

'We've got a villa in Spain,' said Mrs Phatt. 'On the coast. So with two homes that makes me a houseswife doesn't it.'

'Well, just pop along to any surgery,' I told her.

There was a silence. 'With the other patients?' she asked, clearly rather shocked at the idea of being treated like any other human being.

'Oh yes, I think so,' I said.

'You don't want us to make an appointment?'

'Oh no, I don't think that will be necessary,' I said. 'Thank you for calling Mrs Phatt.'

I put the telephone down.

'Forty nine minutes,' said Patsy. I stood up and eased my back.

'I'll make you a coffee,' said Patsy.

'Put a splash of something in it, will you?' I said. I felt exhausted. Sitting through one of Mrs Phatt's monologues had been a tiring experience.

CHAPTER 25

The telephone rang. It was a call asking me to visit Les Salterton.

'I took him a chair to mend two weeks ago,' said Mrs Houghton. 'But he still hasn't mended it. That's most unlike him. He just sits there in his chair doing nothing and not saying very much. I wonder if he might have had a stroke.'

Most people in the village thought Les Salterton was in his late sixties but I'd seen his medical records and I knew better. It was nearly a decade since he'd been entitled to celebrate his seventieth birthday. (He hadn't done anything of the sort, of course. Celebrating birthdays wasn't the sort of thing he did.)

Les was a big man, well over six feet tall and beefy too, and although maybe not the brightest spoon in the drawer he was without a doubt one of the kindest.

'I am so big that it is not easy for me to be well all over at once,' he told me when we first met.

When working for a firm of market gardeners in Barnstaple he had once written to the British Olympic Committee applying for a place on the fencing team. 'I can,' he was reputed to have told them, 'put up fencing faster than anyone else I work with. I could win you the gold medal for fencing without any difficulties.'

At home Les normally wore old army boots, a pair of old wine red corduroy trousers and the sort of shirt reputed to be favoured by Canadian lumberjacks. Whenever he came to see me he always wore his suit. This was dark blue and since it had clearly never fitted him properly I assumed he had probably bought it at a jumble sale or a junk shop in Barnstaple Like his teeth, which he normally kept in a jar of pickled eggs, he wore it only to weddings, funerals and visits to the doctor. His hair was white and long and clearly uncontrollable. It lay, or rather stood, on top of his head like one of those lap dogs which are popular with women and which are most famous for the fact that it is usually nigh on impossible to decide which end is the head end. He always wore a checked cap when he wore his suit and he would remove this before seeing me and hold it nervously in his huge, calloused fingers. He always held it in both hands as though frightened that he might drop it or that someone might try to take it away from him. The curious thing was that when he wore the hat it kept his hair compressed but when he removed the hat the hair always sprang back up again as though it were made of something much stronger and more resilient than hair. His upper lip was decorated with what had undoubtedly once been a fine moustache and although it was now stained by tobacco smoke, soup and stout it still retained the structure and design of a grand moustache. I asked him about it once and he told me that when he first grew it, just after the end of the First World War, the moustache was a symbol of manhood, respectability, family, masculinity, and a proper bourgeois sense of belonging and position. He told me that in 1918, Woolworths staffed its new Liverpool branch with clean shaven men with no moustaches. It was, he said the 'American' style. But the English people would not buy anything else from a man who didn't have a moustache.

He was at his most comfortable with a sharp tool in one hand and a piece of wood in the other and he attempted to cover his shyness and anxiety with an endearing and boyish smile.

When he was young Les had served an apprenticeship, and then worked as, a carpenter and joiner ('I don't understand why they called me a carpenter and joiner', he had once said. 'Of course I join the bits together. What do folk expect me to do? Carve 'em nicely and then leave 'em lying around loose?'), and had been employed by a large firm in Staffordshire where he'd built handmade furniture for many years. Sadly, his career had rather nose dived when he had spent three weeks building a bookcase instead of a chair. 'I forgot what they asked for,' he told his employer. 'I thought a bookcase would be nice.'

After moving to Bilbury and using every penny he had to buy a former estate worker's cottage, Les had made wooden tent pegs for a year or two. The bottom had fallen out of that particular market when metal ones became popular. After that he'd made clothes pegs. This time it was the rising popularity of plastic pegs which had destroyed his business.

I'd first met him when he'd turned up at the surgery one day complaining of a sore throat. I looked at his medical records and saw that the only previous consultation he'd had, had been in 1924 when he'd visited the surgery complaining of exactly the same symptoms.

'You had a sore throat in 1924,' I told him.

'I remember,' he answered hoarsely.

'Obviously a recurrent problem,' I remarked.

He nodded. Nodding was clearly easier than talking.

'The doctor prescribed hydrogen peroxide in 1924,' I said, looking at his notes again. 'But since then things have advanced a little. I can give you penicillin now.'

He looked doubtful. 'Will that be as good as the hydrogen peroxide?' he asked.

‘If it isn’t then I’ll prescribe hydrogen peroxide,’ I told him. ‘But try my new fangled stuff first.’

Rather reluctantly he’d agreed.

‘I’ll see you in another fifty years,’ I’d told him as he left.

The other notable thing about Les was that he had seven cats, all of whom he adored. I once visited him and found that he had been sleeping in a chair for two weeks. He had developed awful back pains and couldn’t walk. When I asked him why he hadn’t been sleeping in bed he told me that one of his cats had rather taken to sleeping on his pillow and that he hadn’t had the heart to move it off. Only after finding a spare pillow in a cupboard, and putting it down on the floor beside the bed, did I manage to persuade the cat to quit the bed and Les to quit the chair.

* * *

I remembered from past experience that I would have to make some excuse for calling on Les Salterton.

However ill he was Les didn’t like people interfering in his life and if he knew that I was calling in response to a telephone call from a neighbour he would have thrown me out and refused to see me.

And so I popped in the boot of the car the small table that Mortimer’s sons had broken during my one time friend’s ill-fated and eminently forgettable visit.

When I arrived at Les’s cottage I took the table out of the boot, opened the front door and walked in.

There was no point at all in knocking on the front door and expecting a reply. (There was no bell to ring.)

The first time I’d called at Les Salterton’s home I’d spent ten minutes waiting for him to answer the door. It had been Miss Johnson who, when I arrived back at the surgery, had explained to me that Les Salterton never answered callers at his front door.

‘When was the last time you answered a knock on the door and were pleased by the consequences?’ he had asked me, when I asked him why he hadn’t answered my knocks. ‘I can’t remember anyone ever banging on my door to bring me good news. How often do you answer the door and find yourself facing someone you don’t want to see or receiving something you don’t want? Salesmen, bailiffs and unwanted relatives all knock on doors. When people knock on the door it’s invariably because they want something. By not answering when people knock on my door I avoid all these unpleasant intrusions.’

I found it difficult to argue with him and although there were some in the village who regarded him as rather more than eccentric I sometimes wondered if he wasn’t the only wise one among us all.

‘Hello Les, can you mend this for me?’ I asked him, holding up our broken, three-legged table in one hand and the solitary leg in the other.

Les was sitting in a chair by the hearth. There was a cat sitting on his lap and another at his feet. Everywhere you looked there were cats. Even in the middle of the afternoon it was dark in his front room. The cottage had small windows, the thick curtains weren’t properly drawn back, and ivy and clematis were growing over the windows. It took a minute or two for my eyes to become accustomed to the lack of light. Outside the sun was shining brightly. Inside we could well have been underground.

‘Who’s that?’ demanded Les, peering in my direction. He seemed sleepy and had difficulty in focusing on me.

‘It’s the doc,’ I told him. ‘I’ve got a table that needs mending. Patsy asked me to bring it round for you to see if you can do anything with it.’

Les blinked and tried to sit up. It was clearly an enormous effort for him but I could see that both arms and both legs seemed to be working. He had been dozing and dribbling and there were damp stains down the front of his cardigan. There was skin on a cup of coffee on the table by his chair. It looked cold and undrinkable. He looked at the table I’d brought him but didn’t seem to see it.

‘Are you all right?’ I asked him.

‘Don’t seem able to get going,’ he told me. He gave up trying to lift himself out of the chair.

‘Do you want me to have a look at you?’ I asked him. ‘Check you over.’

‘If you like,’ he replied. ‘Don’t mind if you do.’

‘I’ll just get my bag from the car.’

I popped out to the car and fetched my black bag. I’d never seen Les like this. He was normally one of the busiest men I knew – of any age. Although technically retired he worked longer hours than almost anyone I knew. Everyone who had furniture which needed mending took it along to him.

‘Can I light the lamp?’ I asked.

Les’s cottage didn’t have electricity. He had a calor gas cooker in the kitchen and relied on oil lamps for light. He had fireplaces in his living room and bedroom and lit wood fires when the weather was cold.

Les nodded. I lit the oil lamp on the mantelpiece. It filled a quarter of the room with a rich, warm, orange light.

Twenty minutes later I had gone over him systematically and methodically but had failed to find anything wrong with him. His heart and lungs were fine. His blood pressure was actually quite low. His nervous system was in tip top working order. He had lost no muscle strength. I could find absolutely nothing wrong with him.

I carefully moved a cat to one side and sat down on half of a chair opposite him. I packed my instruments away in my black bag.

'Have you finished?'

I said I had.

'Would you turn the lamp off now then, doctor.'

I got up and turned off the lamp.

'Don't need the lamp if we're just talking,' he explained. I smiled and nodded.

'You're a puzzle,' I told him.

He said nothing but just looked at me, with great sadness in his eyes. I know this may sound disrespectful but he reminded me of a trusting puppy.

'The other doctor couldn't find anything wrong with me,' said Les suddenly. It was the longest speech he'd made since I'd arrived.

'What other doctor?' I asked him, suddenly alert.

'A few weeks ago,' he replied. 'Don't know his name.'

'Before I took over the practice again?' I asked.

He nodded and stared at me silently for a while. 'Are you doctoring again?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Are you my doctor?'

'Yes.'

He smiled and nodded approvingly.

'What did you see the other doctor about?'

'I went to see him,' he said. 'Had to go into Barnstaple. Saw some chap called Dr Locum.'

'A doctor acting as a locum,' I corrected him. 'That just means he was standing in for one of the other doctors.'

'Jabbed myself in the foot with the fork,' he said. 'Needed an injection. I was doing the garden.'

'You went for a tetanus injection?'

He nodded. 'You always said I should have one if I cut myself in the garden.'

I got up from the chair, walked over to where he was sitting, bent down and examined his foot. He hadn't yet put his socks and shoes back on after my examination. There was a nicely healed scar on the top of his foot. It was quite small which was why I hadn't noticed it before. It was a few weeks old. It looked perfectly healthy.

'Did you clean the wound properly?'

'Oh yes, doctor.'

'Did he give you anything to take?'

'Just some tablets,' said Les. 'I'm nearly out of them. I need another 'description'.'

Alarm bells started ringing the moment he said this. A course of antibiotics hadn't been necessary but even if the doctor he'd seen had prescribed them it would have been for a week or ten days at the most. I had a feeling I knew what pills Les was taking.

'Where are they?' I asked him.

'In the bedroom.'

Les's bedroom was up a narrow, twisting steep staircase. It was more like a ladder than a staircase. At the top of the stairs there were two tiny rooms. One was used as a storeroom and was full of bits of furniture. The room was dominated by a six foot high doublefronted bookcase. I had no idea how he'd managed to get it up the staircase. The other room was Les's bedroom. It contained a bed and a bedside table and a small wardrobe. There was no bathroom. Les washed in the kitchen. Once a week he bathed in a tin bath outside in the garden. The toilet was fifty yards away down the garden path. There was no running water and no mains sewage. Les got his drinking water from a spring. His toilet consisted of two boards strategically placed over an old-fashioned earth closet.

There were three cats lying on the bed. One of them lifted its head when I entered the room. The other two didn't move.

The tablets, in a large brown bottle on his bedside table, were benzodiazepine sleeping tablets. The dose was enough to drug a man of Les's age. Tranquillisers had only been around for a few years but they were already some of the most popularly prescribed drugs. Many doctors, and even more patients, had become seriously addicted to them. The doctors were addicted to prescribing them (because they provided a quick and easy answer to a medical encyclopaedia of problems) and the patients were addicted to taking them partly because the drugs numbed their minds and stilled their fears and partly because the drugs themselves were ferociously addictive.

I had done some studies into these drugs and had come to the conclusion that eventually they were going to become a huge problem. The elderly seemed to me to be the most vulnerable – largely because they seemed more susceptible to the adverse effects. Many who became confused were already being wrongly diagnosed as demented and condemned to spend the rest of their lives in psychiatric hospitals or on geriatric wards.

‘Did you tell the doctor you saw that you weren’t sleeping properly?’ I asked him when I got back downstairs again.

‘He asked me how much sleep I got.’

‘What did you tell him?’

‘Four or five hours.’

‘And he gave you the tablets to help you sleep?’

Les nodded. ‘I tried to tell him that I’ve never slept more than that.’ He shrugged. ‘But he wasn’t interested. He said the tablets would help me.’

‘You can stop the tablets now,’ I told him. I held up the bottle and let him see me put it into my pocket.

‘I don’t need any more of them?’

I shook my head.

‘I’ll come back and see you in a few days.’

CHAPTER 26

On my way home that evening I called in at the Duck and Puddle in the hope that I would find Patchy there. I wasn't disappointed. He and Thumper were playing darts. It was Thumper's turn to throw. He was holding two darts. A third dart was stuck firmly in the wall just to the right of the dartboard.

Patchy smiled rather sheepishly when I congratulated him on his engagement.

'Thumper and I are celebrating,' he said. 'You weren't here so we started without you.'

'What can I get you to drink?' I asked him.

'Whisky. Just a small one.'

I looked at him, surprised. Patchy was not a greedy man but I had never known him drink whisky in singles before.

Thumper threw his second dart. This time he managed to hit the board but not, unfortunately, with the pointed end of the dart. The dart clattered noisily to the floor.

'I thought you said you were celebrating?'

He told me that he was but that Thumper had read in his morning paper that when men toasted a lady's health in ancient Rome they would drink one glass for each letter of the woman's name. Consequently, the two of them had decided to celebrate Patchy's engagement by drinking a glass for each letter in the name Adrienne.

'It's quite a long name,' said Patchy.

'We're on the second 'n',' added Thumper. He threw his third dart. This time he actually managed to hit the board with the right end of the dart. Even more impressively the dart stuck firmly in the board. Less impressively it was in the part of the board just outside the scoring area.

'Bugger.' he said. He plucked the dart out of the board and examined the pointed end. 'These bloody darts are blunt,' he said, as though that was the reason for his failure to score.

'So you've only got one more letter to go,' I said to Patchy. 'You seem in pretty good shape to me.'

'We're doing her surname as well,' said Thumper who had put the dart down on the ledge underneath the scoreboard next to the dartboard. In doing so he had dislodged the piece of chalk which usually lived there. He did not seem to notice that the chalk had fallen to the floor. 'Kennett,' he told me, presumably in case I'd forgotten my wife's maiden name. I didn't get the impression that Thumper had been celebrating with singles.

I counted the letters off on my fingers. 'Another seven drinks to go.'

Both nodded. They didn't seem upset by this at all.

'No problem,' said Thumper. 'We'll just get even more relaxed.' He thought about this for a moment. 'Relaxation is good for you isn't it, doc?'

I agreed with him that relaxation is, generally speaking, good for both mind and body. 'Why aren't you including her middle name in the toast?' I then asked Patchy.

He looked surprised. 'I didn't know she'd got a middle name!'

'It's Christabel.' I told him.

I finished my drink and then I left.

When I got back home I asked Patsy if her sister had a middle name.

'No,' she replied, clearly puzzled. 'Both of us only have one Christian name. Why do you ask?'

'Oh nothing,' I said.

Christabel had been the longest name I could think of on the spur of the moment.

* * *

When I got home Patsy was holding her abdomen.

'Are you having pains?' I asked her.

'Very early,' she said. 'No hurry at all.'

'I should take you to Barnstaple,' I said.

'No, not yet,' said Patsy. 'They'll probably just send me home again. Then we'll spend hours driving backwards and forwards. Besides, there was an urgent call for you.' She handed me a message from Mrs Phatt. 'She said they need you urgently,' said Patsy. 'She wouldn't tell me what it was about.'

With a weary sigh I kissed Patsy, left the house, got into the car and set off for the Phatt's home.

One of the first things Dr Brownlow had taught me is that if a patient requests a visit the doctor should always go. There was, he readily admitted, some self-interest in this. 'The nicest thing people say about a doctor is: 'He will always come out.'' he had told me.

When they had arrived in Bilbury the Phatts had bought one of the village's smartest houses. A small but beautifully proportioned Edwardian house on the Patchole and Stonecombe road out of Bilbury. For nearly fifty years it had been home for a family who had run a smallholding on their dozen acres. Higher costs and smaller profits had made life difficult for them and very little other than essential repairs had been done to the property in the last few decades of their ownership. Upon the death of the last remaining member of the immediate family the man who'd inherited the house, a rich solicitor who worked in Birmingham, had shown very little interest in it and had put the house up for auction. The Phatts had bought it for a song. They had, it was clear, then spent a considerable sum of money restoring, improving, extending and turning the house which they had chosen into something completely different.

It was Mr Phatt who opened the front door.

'It's the wife, doctor,' he said. He spoke in a hushed tone. The sort of voice people use when there is a death or serious illness in the house. 'She's in the living room.'

Mrs Phatt was sitting on a huge white leather sofa.

'What's the trouble?' I asked her, putting my black bag down on the carpet.

'Heart attack, doctor,' said Mrs Phatt. 'I wanted Clint to call the ambulance but he said we should ring you first as a courtesy.'

I asked her to explain her pain.

'In the shoulders,' she said, rubbing her left shoulder. 'The pain goes up into my neck and the back of my head.'

'Just the left side?'

'No. Both sides.'

I took her pulse. 'I don't think it's your heart,' I told her. Her heart was beating strongly and regularly. Her colour was good. She wasn't sweating.

'Maybe it's arthritis?' she suggested. 'A frozen shoulder? A tumour with secondaries in my spine?'

'Slip your blouse off,' I told her.

'Leave the room Clint,' said Mrs Phatt. 'And you girls.' The two daughters didn't seem much interested in their mother's illness. They were both sitting watching the television. I glanced over to see what they were watching. It was a beauty competition.

'It's OK with me,' I said. 'They can stay.' I didn't particularly want to be left alone with Mrs Phatt and was happy to have the girls as chaperones. Hypochondriacs often have vivid imaginations.

'Have you been breathless?'

Mrs Phatt removed her blouse. 'It is a little difficult to breathe,' she said. She took a deep breath, immediately disproving this claim.

'Oh yes,' she said. 'That hurt.'

'Where?' I asked her.

'In my chest.'

'Have you noticed anything else wrong?'

She thought for a moment. 'I had a little diarrhoea last Thursday. I thought it might have been some prawns we ate.'

'I had diarrhoea too,' said Mr Phatt who had ignored his wife's suggestion that he leave the room.

'Anything else? Problems anywhere else?'

She gave this careful thought. 'I can't think of anything particular,' she admitted regretfully.

'Sorry I have to ask you all these questions.'

'Oh that's all right. I don't mind.'

'She likes you asking her questions,' said Mr Phatt. 'It makes her feel important. She likes talking about herself.'

'As if you don't!' she said. 'Ignore him. Please ask me as many questions as you like.'

On the television set the interviewer was asking a girl in a swimsuit what her ambitions were. She said she wanted world peace, a chance to work with underprivileged children and a boutique where she could sell the clothes she intended to start designing.

'I'll listen to your chest,' I told her.

'Shall I take my bra off?'

'No, I don't think that will be necessary,' I told her.

I listened to her chest. It sounded very healthy. I told her so. When I listened to her chest I couldn't help noticing that her bra straps were digging into her shoulders quite deeply.

'Your bra seems a little tight,' I said.

She fumbled with the straps. 'I think perhaps I need a bigger size,' she said. She sounded rather pleased about this.

'She's always been small breasted,' said Mr Phatt. 'There's a medical term for it. It's called micromastia.'

'There's a medical term for what you've got,' snapped back Mrs Phatt. 'Microthingy.'

Mr Phatt blushed bright red.

'What size bra do you normally wear?' I asked her, examining the small label attached at the back of her bra.

'38B.'

'Ah.' I said. 'I think we might have found the problem.' I turned to the two girls. 'Does either of you wear a 34B bra?'

The older girl looked up from the television screen. 'I do,' she said. Many teenage girls would have been embarrassed to discuss their bra size with a stranger. She wasn't. She seemed quite proud of it.

'You're wearing your daughter's bra,' I told a rather startled Mrs Phatt. 'It's too small and it's digging in and pressing on a nerve.'

* * *

When I got back home Patsy was lying on our bed in labour. Mrs Parfitt was holding her hand telling her to take deep breaths.

'It came on quicker than I expected,' said Patsy, in between deep breaths. She was sweating.

'I'll get you into the car,' I said. 'I must get you to Barnstaple.'

'There isn't time,' said Patsy.

'I'm afraid you're going to have to deliver the baby,' said Mrs Parfitt. 'I'm afraid I'm not much good at that sort of thing.' She winced. 'You know, blood and entrails and so on.'

'I hope there aren't going to be any entrails,' said Patsy. 'And not too much blood either.'

Now I was sweating too. My mind was working overtime. If I couldn't get Patsy to Barnstaple could I get a midwife over to Bilbury?

'There isn't time to bring anyone over from Barnstaple,' said Patsy, reading my mind.

And then I had an idea. 'I'll be back in just a minute,' I said, heading for the door.

I raced down the stairs and into the kitchen. From there I telephoned Dr Brownlow's home. As I had expected it was Bradshaw who answered the phone.

'How is Dr Brownlow?'

'He's sleeping peacefully at the moment,' said Bradshaw,

'Bradshaw, have you ever delivered a baby?'

'Oh yes, indeed, sir. Quite a number.'

'Can you leave Dr Brownlow for an hour?'

'Is Miss Patsy in labour?' asked Bradshaw.

'She is,' I told him. 'And too late to get her to Barnstaple. We need you, Bradshaw.'

'I will be with you momentarily,' said Bradshaw. 'If you would just boil some water in preparation that would be useful.'

I put the telephone down and smiled. I felt more relaxed already. I telephoned Patsy's mother. She promised to rush round with Adrienne. I raced back upstairs.

'Bradshaw is coming!' I shouted, halfway up the stairs.

'Dr Brownlow's butler?' said Mrs Parfitt. 'What do you need a butler for?' She stopped for a moment, and thought. 'Goodness gracious! You aren't having people round to tea at a time like this are you?'

'Bradshaw is a trained nurse,' I explained. 'He's delivered lots of babies. Hundreds and thousands probably.'

I knelt down beside the bed and spoke to Patsy. 'Are you OK with that?' I asked her. I took a fresh tissue from a box beside the bed and gently wiped her face.

She looked at me and nodded. 'I rather like the idea of our firstborn being brought into the world by a butler,' she said. 'It has a certain style to it.' She grimaced and clutched at my hand as a labour pain struck.

'I've been instructed to boil water,' I said when the moment had passed.

'Good,' said Patsy. 'Will you be able to do that, OK?'

'I'll manage,' I said. 'Where's the kettle?'

Patsy aimed a weak punch at my jaw. I side slipped it easily.

'You go and boil the water,' said Mrs Parfitt. 'I'll look after your wife until Mr Bradshaw gets here.'

'Your mum and Adrienne are on their way,' I told Patsy. I went down to the kitchen, filled the kettle and three saucepans and started boiling water.

'What do you need all this boiling water for?' I asked when Bradshaw arrived. 'I've never understood.'

'Tea,' said Bradshaw simply. 'We'll need lots of fresh tea. Where is Miss Patsy?'

'Up the stairs, second on the left. The door is open,' I told him.

Just then Mrs Kennett and Adrienne appeared. Mrs Kennett was carrying an armful of fresh towels. Adrienne had a suitcase.

'Upstairs, in the bedroom,' I told them. 'What on earth have you got there?' I asked, pointing to the suitcase

Adrienne was carrying.

‘Baby clothes,’ she replied. ‘I learned to knit.’

I returned my attention to my water boiling.

* * *

The baby, a boy, as Patsy had predicted, and therefore a perfect excuse for me to buy a railway set, arrived just under an hour later. Bradshaw, everyone agreed, was marvellous. As planned I didn’t go upstairs until Patsy was sitting up in bed with our firstborn in her arms. Her hair was neatly brushed, as she had said it would be, and she wore fresh lipstick. She looked wonderful. They both did.

And it was generally agreed that no one had ever boiled water better than I had.

CHAPTER 27

The Phatt family turned up at surgery two days after Mrs Phatt's evening telephone call.

'We waited until the end of the surgery so that you wouldn't feel bad about having to keep other patients waiting,' said Mrs Phatt.

'Oh, thank you,' I said.

I only keep two chairs in the surgery so, since there were four of them, I had to fetch a couple of spare chairs from the house before they could all sit down.

Mrs Phatt opened the small suitcase she had brought with her and took out a large, blue file. She handed it to me.

'Ah,' I said. 'Your family history.'

'That's my parents' medical history,' said Mrs Phatt. She delved into the suitcase and took out a second file. This one was yellow.

'My husband's parents,' she said, putting the yellow file on top of the blue file. 'These are yours to keep,' she said. 'We have our own copies at home.'

'Thank you.'

'My husband's medical records,' she said. She took out a red file and put that on top of the yellow file.

I nodded my thanks. Piled one on top of the other, the three files were nearly a foot thick.

'This is my file,' said Mrs Phatt. She put a thick green file on top of the red file. The green file was far thicker than any of its predecessors.

'And these are the girls',' added Mrs Phatt. She put a pink file and a lavender file on top of the pile. These two files were much thinner.

'When are you going to introduce an appointments system?' asked Mrs Phatt.

'I have no plans to introduce one,' I told her. 'Most of my patients appreciate being able to pop in whenever there is a surgery. And quite a few don't have a telephone so making an appointment would be difficult.'

'Oh don't get me wrong,' said Mrs Phatt. 'I'm all for your present system. It means we can pop in whenever we feel like it.'

'Quite.'

'This is my husband, Mr Phatt,' said Mrs Phatt. 'Clint.' I shuffled through the medical records in front of me and found Mr Phatt's notes.

'He used to be George,' said Mrs Phatt. 'But he changed his name to Clint.'

Mr Phatt seemed to have found something fascinating on the carpet. He seemed shy, rather overwhelmed by his wife.

'Of course,' I said. He looked very much like a George and not a bit like a Clint.

'Not officially, of course,' muttered Mr Phatt quietly.

'And these are our daughters,' said Mrs Phatt. 'I kept them home from school so that they could come and meet you.'

'Good morning,' I said to the two Phatt daughters. They both giggled lightly but didn't say anything. One, the slightly taller one had her hair in pigtails. The other wore hers in a ponytail. Both girls wore spectacles and school uniform.

'I think I mentioned that I'm pre-diabetic,' said Mrs Phatt.

'I think you did,' I agreed.

'And pre-hypertensive.'

'Quite.'

'I also suffer from rheumatism, varicose veins, emphysema, arthritis – both main varieties – and haemorrhoids,' said Mrs Phatt.

I nodded. I wondered if her husband ever said anything. I was contemplating putting a thermometer in her mouth to shut her up for a while (Dr Brownlow had taught me that a thermometer is an essential aide when dealing with over-talkative patients and that, with a little reassurance and a stern look, one can be left in situ for up to five minutes at a time) when Mr Phatt spoke for the first time.

'I'm pre-diabetic too,' said Mr Phatt. He spoke rather surprisingly sharply. He had a curiously squeaky voice that made him sound a little like a cartoon character. 'And pre-hypertensive.'

'But not as pre-diabetic as I am, dear,' said Mrs Phatt firmly.

'I am,' said Mr Phatt.

'Oh no,' said Mrs Phatt vehemently. 'Oh no, you're not.'

'My liver is in a far worse state than yours,' said Mr Phatt emphatically. I was beginning to think I'd been wrong about Mr Phatt. He could stick up for himself - particularly when it came to defending his medical history.

‘Oh how can you sit there and say that?’ demanded Mrs Phatt. ‘When they took that reading of my liver enzymes the doctor said it was a miracle I was still able to walk about.’ She stopped and thought for a moment. ‘And then there’s my mastitis. You don’t have that, do you?’

‘I have an enlarged prostate and two pre-malignant moles,’ said Mr Phatt, attempting to match his wife’s mastitis with his enlarged prostate and then trump her with the moles.

‘Oh that’s ridiculous,’ said Mrs Phatt. She turned to me. ‘I’ve got three and possibly four pre-malignant moles,’ she said. ‘When you examine him you will find that he’s only got the one. And it’s very pre-pre malignant.’

‘I’m allergic to more drugs than you are,’ said Mr Phatt. ‘I’m allergic to penicillin, sulphonamide and three different types of anaesthetic.’

‘The allergy to penicillin was never proven!’ snapped Mrs Phatt.

‘I nearly died when I had my anaphylactic shock reaction,’ said Mr Phatt. ‘The doctors said it was the most exceptional case they’d ever seen.’

‘That was just hay fever,’ said Mrs Phatt derisively.

‘No it was not!’ insisted Mr Phatt. ‘It was a very rare example of anaphylactic shock. Far more serious than the usual variety.’ He paused, clearly thinking hard. ‘And I’ve had more operations than you have,’ he added.

‘Seven of yours were minor surgery,’ said Mrs Phatt. ‘All of mine were major.’

Listening to them was like watching a verbal tennis match. I was fascinated.

‘It’s a matter of opinion,’ sneered Mr Phatt. ‘I nearly died on the operating table twice.’

‘Doctors said I was a walking miracle,’ said Mrs Phatt. ‘My doctor brought round a big group of medical students. They were all amazed.’

‘It was a medical school,’ said Mr Phatt. ‘They took medical students to see everyone.’

‘No they did not!’ said Mrs Phatt.

‘My piles are bigger than yours,’ said Mr Phatt.

‘That’s a matter of opinion,’ said Mrs Phatt. ‘I’m the one who had two children.’

The two children looked embarrassed. They hadn’t said a word and didn’t look as if they intended to. I got the impression they never said very much. Indeed, it didn’t seem likely that they ever got the chance to say much.

‘And I’ve got an incipient prolapse,’ said Mrs Phatt, as though laying down the ace of trumps. Her remark had the desired effect. Mr Phatt didn’t say anything in response to this. ‘Plus,’ continued Mrs Phatt, ‘I worry about you.’

‘I worry a lot too,’ said Mr Phatt, defensively.

‘I know you do,’ agreed Mrs Phatt. ‘That’s why I worry about you so much. You’ll make me ill with all your worrying.’ Just then there was a knock on the door.

‘Come in!’ I called.

‘Bit of an emergency at Bunbury Cottage,’ said Miss Johnson, popping her head round the door.

‘Right, thank you, Miss Johnson,’ I said, standing up. ‘Sorry about this,’ I said to the Phatts. ‘But I’m afraid I have to go.’ I pointed to the pile of files now dominating my desk. ‘Thank you so much for these,’ I said.

‘Don’t you just want to check our blood pressure?’ asked Mrs Phatt.

‘Not at the moment I’m afraid,’ I said. ‘Emergencies have to come first.’

‘Oh,’ said Mrs Phatt. She sounded disappointed. Reluctantly she stood up. Once she was standing her husband and daughters stood too. I ushered them out of the surgery, much as a mother duck will usher its ducklings in the direction she wants them to go.

‘We’ll see you soon!’ said Mrs Phatt, leading her brood through the door.

‘I’m sure you will,’ I said, quietly.

‘Was that a threat or a promise?’ asked Miss Johnson, when she’d shut the door behind them.

I slumped back down into my chair and put my head in my hands. I knew, just as well as Miss Johnson, that there is no Bunbury Cottage in Bilbury nor, as far as I know, anywhere in the vicinity of the village.

‘Thank you,’ I said weakly.

‘Shall I put the kettle on?’ enquired Miss Johnson.

I nodded. ‘And bring in some chocolate digestive biscuits, please,’ I said. ‘This is a time for comfort eating.’

‘Shall I put these files somewhere safe?’ asked Miss Johnson, picking up the files Mrs Phatt had left on my desk.

I nodded, gratefully.

CHAPTER 28

Thumper, Patchy, Frank and I were sitting in the lounge of the Duck and Puddle discussing business ventures we had come across in our time. The discussion had been triggered by the news that someone Patchy vaguely knew was opening a restaurant called The Lobster Pot. In ten minutes we managed to think of nine other restaurants with the same name. We also came up with five called 'The Captain's Table', three called 'The Hole in the Wall', seven tea shops called 'A Taste of Devon' and six shops which their proud owners had named 'The Tackle Box' (not all of them selling fishing equipment).

When Thumper said that the wife of a chum of his had recently opened a millinery shop called The Mad Hatter's we started discussing other memorable names we had come across. We all remembered the local builder known as 'Sherlock Homes' and the travel company called 'Seymour Tours' but it was Patchy who insisted that he knew a firm of accountants called 'Limp and Grimace'.

Frank, who had joined in the discussion, said that he knew of a pair of comedians who called themselves Bitter and Twisted. Patchy said a bloke he knew had made a lot of money by selling a soap powder called CARE. He said that when women saw a label advising them to 'wash with care' on their clothes they went out and bought his product.

I said that when I was at medical school I'd heard of two businessmen who had changed their names by deed poll to 'Swifter' and 'Cheaper' so that they could open a carrier service and call themselves Swifter and Cheaper without getting into trouble with the authorities for misleading advertising. Patchy said a former girlfriend of his had once run a slimming club called Waist Management. I remembered that a drug company representative had once come in to promote a sleeping tablet called Pill-O. 'The slogan that went with it was,' I added, 'the sleeping tablet that helps you get your head down'.'

Then Frank said that he'd always fancied setting up a door-todoor booze delivery service called 'Booze on Bikes' and Thumper said that 'Pissed on Pedals' would be a better name for it. After that things rapidly got out of hand. Thumper said he'd always wanted to set up an organisation called Interchip which would be like Interflora except that people could use it to ring up and have chips (and possibly but not necessarily fish) delivered to friends.

The conversation came to a rather sudden end when Patchy said that a farmer pal of his had once had a brilliant idea for making money out of flies. He said the farmer had noticed that the cow manure in his sheds always attracted a lot of flies and so, after reading that French farmers fed flies to their frogs to put meat on their legs, he had bought a huge fan, a long piece of wide rubber tubing and some old milk churns. He'd then used the fan and the tubing to suck up the flies and store them in the milk churns.

'What did he call the business?'Thumper asked.

'Dunno,' said Patchy. 'It never got off the ground. He couldn't get an export licence to sell flies to France.'

'All that brain work has made me hungry,' said Thumper, emptying his beer glass.

'You're always hungry!' I reminded him.

He shrugged, thought about it for a moment, nodded in agreement and turned to Frank. 'I'll have the Steaming Hot Natural Pulses Resting On A Grilled Slice From A Fresh Wholemeal Farmhouse Bloomer Generously Bathed In A Succulent Tomato Based Sauce,' he said.

The landlord glowered at him. 'You'll have a pie or a pickled egg and bloody like it.'

'It's good to have you back, Frank,' Thumper told him with a laugh. I looked along the counter. The jar of pickled eggs was back. A table mat had been placed on top of the jar as a stand in for the missing lid.

'I'll have a packet of crisps, please,' I said firmly. 'The ones with the salt wrapped up in a twist of blue paper please.' Just then Gilly appeared.

'What did Frank buy you in London?' Thumper asked her.

Gilly disappeared as suddenly as she had appeared and returned a moment later with a smart looking shopping bag with the Harrods logo on the side. Proudly, she held the bag up for us to see.

'Impressive,' said Thumper. 'But what did he buy you?' He leant forwards a little and lowered his voice. 'What's in the bag?'

Gilly frowned. 'The bag is the present,' she said.

'Lovely bag,' said Thumper, trying to rescue the situation.

'They sell fantastic train sets in Harrods,' said Patchy. He looked at me. 'You should get one for your kid,' he said.

'I think it's a bit early,' I said.

'Oh no,' said Patchy, shaking his head. 'Give you a chance to set it all up and make sure it works properly.'

I admit I was tempted.

I’ve always wanted a train set.

* * *

After lunch I headed off to do my afternoon visits. As I reached my car I heard footsteps behind me. I turned to see Thumper running after me. ‘Could I have a word with you, doc?’ he said.

‘Of course.’

‘I didn’t like to mention it in there,’ he turned and nodded his head towards the pub, ‘but my Aunt Olive has been a bit under the weather recently. I’m worried about her.’

‘I’ll call in before I go home,’ I promised him.

‘Thanks doc,’ he said. ‘There’s no hurry, though.’ And he disappeared back into the Duck and Puddle.

CHAPTER 29

I called in at the village shop to collect one or two things that Patsy had asked me to pick up. Peter was not in a good mood.

‘Have you seen Gilly?’ he demanded.

‘Yes. I gather they had a wonderful time in London.’

‘They went shopping in Harrods!’ complained Peter. ‘Doesn’t anyone in Bilbury realise how difficult it is for a small retailer trying to make a living these days?’ He paused for a moment. ‘And now she’s walking around with a bag advertising Harrods!’

‘Well, give her a bag advertising Peter Marshall’s!’ I told him.

‘I haven’t got any,’ he muttered. He thought for a moment. You could almost see the steam coming out of his ears. ‘Maybe I could get some made.’

‘Why not?’ I said.

‘I need to do everything I can to survive,’ said Peter, who loved moaning almost as much as he loved making money. ‘There’s another new supermarket opening in Barnstaple this week.’

Knowing how much he disapproved of supermarkets I made murmuring sounds of sympathy and disapproval. No one in Bilbury ever dared let themselves be seen carrying shopping bought at a supermarket. Peter could just about bear it if he saw carrier bags from W.H.Smith or Boots in someone’s car but if he saw evidence that anyone had visited a supermarket he would fly into a red-faced rage.

As I should have expected, my sympathetic sounds triggered something of an onslaught.

‘I hate supermarkets!’ he said. ‘They’re ruining our society. Go into big towns these days and all you find are supermarkets and charity shops. Both just giving things away.

You just watch! The supermarkets will lower their prices until I go bust and then they’ll put their prices up again!’ He waved a finger in my face.

‘You’re absolutely right,’ I said.

‘You mark my words,’ continued Peter. ‘I’ll go out of business and then there will be no village shop. Where will everyone go to on Sunday evenings when they’ve run out of tomato ketchup? Village shops will be closing down left, right and centre.’

‘I agree with you,’ I told him.

‘The village shop is the heart of any village.’

‘Absolutely true.’

‘Supermarkets are destroying our culture!’ said Peter, warming to his eternal theme. ‘And they’re destroying our health.’

‘Destroying our health?’

‘The food they sell is rubbish,’ he said. ‘Packaged hamburgers. Everything double wrapped. Good old-fashioned greengrocers and butchers shops will all go under. When did you last see a proper fishmonger? And you mark my words they’ll start selling books eventually and then there won’t be any bookshops left.’

‘You’ll have to start competing with them head on!’ I told him.

‘How do I do that?’

I thought about it for a minute. ‘You could try having one of those competitions they have where the winner gets to grab and keep as much as they can collect in a minute.’

‘How will getting people to shop quickly make any difference?’ asked Peter.

‘No,’ I explained. ‘It’s a competition. The winner of the competition gets given a trolley, or in your case a basket, and then given a minute to rush around the store picking out things they want. At the end of the minute they get to keep everything they’ve collected.’

‘I like that,’ said Peter. ‘I could sell a lot of stuff that way.’

‘No, no. You give the stuff free to the person who is the winner.’

Peter stared at me for what seemed like an eternity but was probably no more than a minute. ‘I let people fill a basket with things from the shop and I don’t charge them anything?’

‘That’s it,’ I said.

‘Not a penny?’

‘Not a penny.’

Peter stared at me. ‘Have you just come out of the Duck?’

‘Yes.’

He nodded. ‘I thought so.’

‘It’s what the supermarkets do,’ I insisted.

‘And how can I compete with that?’ demanded Peter. ‘How can I compete if they’re giving away whole baskets of stuff?’

‘Well, maybe that wasn’t such a good idea,’ I said, abandoning the idea of explaining it to Peter. ‘Maybe you just want to introduce some of those offers that encourage people to spend more money.’

‘What sort of offers?’

‘You could do tastings.’ He looked puzzled.

‘They do that in the supermarkets,’ I said. ‘So I’m told,’ I added quickly. ‘They give customers a biscuit in the hope that they’ll buy a whole boxful of them. Or they give customers a glass of wine so that they are encouraged to buy a bottle of the stuff.’

Peter thought about it. ‘That might work,’ he agreed. ‘Any more good ideas?’

‘You could have a closing down sale.’

‘But I’m not closing down,’ he pointed out. ‘Not yet anyway.’

‘No, no, you don’t actually have to close down. You just say you are. You put up signs saying Everything Must Go. When I arrived in Birmingham to start my six years at medical school I noticed a jewellery shop had a huge notice in the window saying ‘Closing Down. Final Days. Everything Must Go.’ When I left Birmingham six years later the same shop was still there with the same sign in the window.’

Peter looked puzzled. He had been running the village shop for a long time but he didn’t seem to know much about the tricks employed by the retail trade.

‘It’s an excuse to get people to think you’re selling stuff cheap,’ I explained. ‘None of the stuff they were selling was particularly cheap.’

Peter brightened at this. ‘I don’t really have to sell anything cheap?’

‘Not if you don’t want to. Of course, if you’ve got some things you are prepared to sell cheap to get rid of them then you could have a bit of a sale as well.’

Suddenly Peter’s eyes lit up. ‘I could have a bit of a clear out,’ he said.

‘Exactly!’ I agreed.

‘Great idea!’ he said. ‘Now what do you want?’

I started to read from Patsy’s list and then just handed him the piece of paper. ‘If you get that lot ready for me I’ll pick it up later,’ I said.

‘Right ho,’ said Peter, looking down the list and nodding happily.

CHAPTER 30

General practitioners who work in towns and cities have to contend with heavy traffic and, often, with the problem of what to do with their car when they finally arrive at a patient's home. That's the downside. On the other hand, the roads in which their patients live are usually neatly named and numbered and if they live and work in anything more than the smallest of towns there will probably be a street map of the whole area available for a modest outlay.

A GP working in a town or a city can probably expect to be able to find all, or at least most, of his patients residing within a fairly small area. And if he is lucky enough, he may be able to visit two or three of his patients within a single building. (If he's unlucky they will all be in a tall building where none of the lifts are working.)

Practising as a country GP is a very different business.

There are, of course, no flats or terraced houses in Bilbury. Indeed, there are no more than a dozen semi-detached properties in the whole of Bilbury. The vast majority of the villagers live in detached houses and cottages. And even when the lanes and tracks down which people live do have names (and, more often than not, they don't) there are certainly no such things as road signs to guide the traveller who is not content to wander where the will takes him but has, instead, some formal destination in mind. House signs, where they exist, are almost bound to have faded or to have been overgrown by ivy and other creepers. To know where most of the residents lived and, just as importantly, to know the quickest way to get to them. I knew which lane was likely to be blocked, and at what times of day, by a herd of cattle being moved to or from a milking shed. I knew at which times of year, and in which weather, certain lanes and tracks were likely to be flooded or impassable because of thick mud.

I knew exactly where Thumper's Aunt Olive lived, and the journey should have taken me no more than ten minutes. But, I was in no great hurry and it took me considerably longer than that to get to her.

People who live in towns sometimes complain that the countryside is dull and that there is nothing much to see. It's true there are no museums, art galleries, theatres or cinemas in Bilbury (though it should be remembered that the vicar does put on a film show once a fortnight during the winter months) but there are many other things to see and enjoy.

And lots of other things to keep everyone busy too.

I was about half way between the Duck and Puddle and Thumper's Aunt's cottage when I spotted half a sheep poking out into the lane. The sheep was making a considerable amount of noise but seemed unable to move. Guessing what had happened I stopped the car and parked on the grass verge.

Contrary to their reputation sheep are intelligent animals. But they are also intensely curious creatures and their lives are constantly controlled by the suspicion that the grass will always be greener (and probably tastier) on the other side of the hedge.

Since becoming a resident of Bilbury I had acquired a good deal of respect and some affection for sheep. As a town raised observer I had always assumed sheep to be rather stupid animals. That, after all, is the reputation they've been saddled with. And my ignorance about their behaviour and habits had been pretty far reaching. Within weeks of arriving in Bilbury I had rushed into the Duck and Puddle and informed the first farmer I'd seen that there were sheep in the village suffering from some terrible infection.

'What sort of infection?' he'd asked, peering at me over his pint glass.

'They've got purple spots on their backs,' I told him. 'Great purple blotches.'

The farmer hadn't laughed, though it would have been difficult to blame him if he had. He'd explained, with considerable patience, that the birds, particularly the bigger ones, the magpies, the crows, the starlings, the seagulls and so on, had been eating blackberries from the hedgerows. When I still didn't understand he asked me if I had not noticed that birds like standing on the backs of sheep. I said I had. He then asked me if I noticed that if I parked my car under a tree I was likely to find it speckled with nasty white splodges. I said that of course I had. He then pointed out that if I looked carefully I would notice that at this time of year the splodges were more likely to be purple than white. Suddenly the truth dawned on me. I bought the farmer another pint and he promised not to tell the story about how the new doctor had discovered a new and deadly epidemic of 'Purple spot' among Bilbury's sheep. As far as I'm aware he kept his side of the bargain too. That's another country truth I discovered. No one can keep a secret quite as well as village folk. (And no one can spread gossip quite as fast either.)

Gradually, over the months and years, I learned that lambs play just the same sort of games as children love. Each spring I parked my car on a piece of verge, or leant my bicycle against a tree and then stood, arms folded on the top bar of the nearest five-barred gate, and watched as lambs played tag, king of the castle and I canget-to-that-bush-faster-than-you-can games.

When Patsy and I acquired sheep of our own I learned that sheep will learn their name and will come when called. I learned that sheep are bright enough to know how to open a gate and sneak from a field (where the only food available is grass) into a garden where there are tender shoots galore for the taking. I even saw them close a gate when, to avoid the consequences of their actions, they hurried back from garden to field. I learned that when they are happy, lambs - and even sheep - will leap into the air with joy. (The Devon villagers call it pronging.) I learned that if sheep are parted from their friends they will fight to get to one another. Even years later one sheep can immediately recognise its own lamb out of a field of a hundred. I learned that sheep hate getting wet and will always run in out of the rain (if they have somewhere to go). I learned that they hate walking through mud and will always go round a muddy patch of field if they possibly can. I learned that they can be selfish and stubborn but are often sensitive and logical. I learned that they can identify individual people, as well as sheep. And I learned that sheep get depressed in bad weather and that a depressed sheep will stand still with its head down, its ears unmoving and its eyes dull.

Like so many sheep had done before it (and just as many will doubtless do in the future) the sheep had tried to force its way through the hedge and it had got stuck. It had sealed its temporary fate by going into reverse and trying to back out of the hedge. Now it was held quite firm by a mass of brambles.

Problems of this type are so common in Bilbury that in the boot of the Morris Minor I keep a pair of thick gardening gloves. I opened the boot, took out the gloves and put them on. The sheep made one last attempt to free itself but, inevitably, succeeded only in getting itself stuck even more firmly.

It took me nearly half an hour to free the animal. I used the biggest blade on my penknife to cut through the brambles which were stuck in the sheep's wool and eventually, after a good deal of effort, I succeeded in pushing the sheep back through the hedge and into the field from which it had tried to escape. Its friends and family (including a lamb which was clearly delighted to have its mother returned to it) were waiting just a few yards away and they received it with great joy. I put my penknife away, stuffed the pieces of cut bramble into the hole the sheep had made in the hedge and removed my gloves and tossed them into the car boot. Despite having worn thick gloves my hands and my forearms were scratched and bleeding. My shirt, my trousers and my jacket were all badly snagged. I tidied myself up as well as I could and stood for a while watching the happy lamb gambolling around its mother. Then I wandered over to a nearby stretch of wooden fencing and put my arms on the top rail. I almost wished I smoked a pipe at that moment. As a poor substitute I reached down, picked a piece of long succulent grass and stuck it between my teeth.

When I'd first moved to Bilbury I would have seen very little of what was going on around me. But Patsy, Thumper and many others had taught me what to look for.

Up above the field ahead of me a buzzard was slowly circling; watching and waiting. There is something admirably serene about buzzards. They are so silent and so clearly fearless. It is easy to assume that they are harmless too. But a pair of buzzards with three young will kill 600 rabbits and 8,000 voles in a single year.

To my right a pair of bluetits hovered like hummingbirds and plucked flies out of the centre of a spider's web. The web spinner, whose lunch, dinner and supper were being taken, sat on a twig nearby. Watchful, waiting and quite possibly, and justifiably, resentful.

Swallows, just returned for the summer, raced around the field checking out their old haunts and welcoming friends as they arrived. Swallows whizz around the sky with the same joy that people would show if they discovered they could fly. Attracted, no doubt, by my sweat, two swallows swooped around me, searching for any insects which might have also been attracted by the same smells.

I heard a rustle to my right and saw a large badger emerge from the grass bank on the other side of the lane. Contrary to what most townspeople and some naturalists believe it's unusual but not at all unknown to see badgers up and about in the daytime.

The badger disappeared into the thick, long grass at the side of the lane and seemed to be struggling with something. Minutes later he was joined by a second badger. The two of them pulled and pushed and worked hard at whatever it was they were trying to move. Hesitantly, not wanting to frighten them away, I moved a little closer until I could see what they were doing. There was a dead badger lying in the long grass and the two badgers which had arrived were trying to move the body. I watched as they pulled it out of the long grass, up the bank and through a small gap at the bottom of the thick hawthorn hedge which separated the lane from the field on that side of the road. I watched as they dragged the badger's corpse across several yards of grassland and then into the edge of a nearby stretch of wood. It was clearly hard work but they didn't stop for a second. When they had managed to drag the body into the wood they dug a shallow grave, placed the body into it and then covered it with leaves and branches.

There is, truly, so much to see in the countryside if you are prepared to look.

I looked at my watch and realised that if I was going to see Thumper's Aunt Olive and get back to Bilbury Grange in time for evening surgery I'd better hurry.

* * *

Thumper's Aunt, Miss Olive Robinson, lived in a thatched cottage which had roses and clematis climbing around the door and round the windows. The traditional cottage garden is full of lupins, honeysuckle, roses, hollyhocks and delphiniums. In mid summer the garden is alive with butterflies and bees.

It is, without a doubt, one of the most beautiful cottages in Devon.

She shared it with a cat called Tinsel and a dog called Bonzo.

The cottage is, of course, a tourist attraction for holiday-makers passing through Bilbury, and Miss Robinson takes full advantage of this by selling home-made biscuits and home-made cakes. She also supplements her income by allowing foreigners to buy pieces of her furniture. To ensure that she gets top prices, her nephew Thumper somehow manages to ensure that she obtains a steady supply of small bookcases, coffee tables, trays and other items which were once the property of William Shakespeare and which are suitably marked with the initials WS and an appropriate date scratched roughly into the underside.

Thumper and Patchy Fogg, the village's resident antique dealer, long ago worked out that items of furniture small enough to be stowed inside the boot of a car, or on the back seat, are far more likely to find a buyer than pieces which will require the services of a removal company.

When confronted with a potential buyer Miss Robinson never actually says that the item of furniture belonged to Mr Shakespeare, of course. But she mentions that it has been in the family for a long, long time, hints that a distant ancestor worked with the playwright as some sort of stage manager and lets it be known that she wishes she could sell some of her belongings so that she would have enough money to pay her rates and buy a little food and fuel.

At this point she pops out into the kitchen to put the kettle on, leaving the American (German or Japanese) tourist to put two and two together and make five.

'I don't cheat these people at all,' Miss Robinson once told me. 'They think they're cheating me and they end up cheating themselves.'

It was difficult to argue with her logic and so I never tried to.

I parked the car, half on the verge and half in the lane, picked my bag off the front passenger seat, and walked up the path to Miss Robinson's front door. I knocked to let her know I was there and walked in.

She was sitting in her front parlour. I was startled by her appearance.

Miss Robinson had always been very welcoming; a very ebullient woman. She had always been a robust woman with the sort of laugh adored by television producers making weak situation comedies. No audience could have sat in silence once Aunt Olive began laughing.

Now, quite suddenly, she looked old and frail. Her hair wasn't combed or washed. And she seemed slow in everything she did. She remembered to tell me off for bothering to knock on the door rather than just walking in ('as I expect my friends to do') but she quickly showed her confusion. She asked me if she'd requested me to call and confessed that her memory wasn't what it used to be. She said she'd only just finished breakfast. And she didn't seem embarrassed about the fact that her usually immaculate living room was untidy and littered with dirty crockery, bits of clothing and newspapers and magazines.

I was glad that Thumper had asked me to see his aunt. I didn't know what was wrong but I knew at once that it was something quite serious.

'Thumper asked me to call around and see you,' I told her.

'Oh, my dear, it's nice to see you but I'm not well enough for visitors,' she said. 'My hair is a mess. Can you call back when I feel a little better?'

'It's me!' I reminded her. 'The doctor.'

'Oh dear,' she said, looking worried. 'At my age I have to keep in with the doctor.'

I smiled at her and touched her shoulder. 'How do you feel?'

'Terrible,' she said. 'If I'm honest. And at my age there isn't much point in being anything else. I look awful.' She sighed as though suddenly feeling the weight of the world on her shoulders.

'I've matured,' she said. 'Like cheese.' She thought about this for a moment. 'People think far too highly of maturity,' she said. 'It's greatly overrated. What does it mean? What's good about it?' She looked at me, as though trying to decide where she'd seen me before and then gave up the struggle. 'I've suddenly been lumbered with an old person's hair and feet,' she said with enormous sadness. 'I can't do a thing with either of them.'

'Well, let me see if I can help,' I suggested.

'Maybe you can give this hair and these feet back to the person they belong to,' she suggested.

'And get yours back for you?'

'That would be nice,' she said. 'I'll put the kettle on.' She got up and headed, with obvious difficulty, towards the kitchen. She walked with a limp and shuffled across her carpet, sounding like a boy rustling through fallen autumn leaves.

'How long have you had difficulty in walking?'

She half turned to look at me. 'Am I having difficulty in walking?'

‘You seem to be,’ I said.

‘I suppose I am,’ she admitted. ‘I fell. Perhaps I sieved something. Strained something. Hurt myself I get headaches. Did you know that?’

I shook my head.

‘Terrible pains in my head,’ she said. ‘They won’t go away.’

‘I think I should organise some tests for you,’ I said. ‘At the hospital,’ I added.

Miss Robinson glowered at me disapprovingly. ‘Young man,’ she said, ‘I am the world’s leading expert on my body. It is my speciality. I know more about it than any other man or woman alive. I know more about its weaknesses, its strengths, its foibles than any of your damned specialists. And I don’t care what your needles and X-rays tell you. I am telling you that I am perfectly well.’

But I knew she was wrong. And so did she.

‘Can I use your phone?’ I asked.

‘Of course you can dear.’

I telephoned the hospital and spoke to one of the hospital doctors. I explained that I had a patient with some curious symptoms. He agreed to take her in for a few days.

‘How old is she?’ he asked, when I’d finished describing her symptoms.

I told him.

‘We’re not going to get stuck with her?’

I assured him that he was not. Like most hospital consultants he was wary of admitting elderly patients and then finding that they needed to stay in hospital for months or even years because they could not be sent home.

‘No more than a week,’ he said, insistently. ‘We’ve got a massive bed problem these days.’

‘No more than a week,’ I agreed.

I told Olive that I wanted her to go into hospital for some more tests.

‘I had some tests done,’ she said. ‘They said the fracture was healing nicely.’

‘What fracture?’ I asked.

‘My arm,’ she said.

‘How did you break your arm?’ I asked her.

‘Fell off my bicycle,’ she replied.

I didn’t know anything about this. I made a mental note to check her medical records when I got home.

‘I’ll ring Thumper and ask him to take you into the hospital tomorrow morning,’ I told her. ‘You won’t be there for long.’ Then I rang Thumper.

‘I’ve arranged for your Aunt Olive to go into the hospital tomorrow for an X-ray and some tests,’ I told him. ‘I could get an ambulance...’

‘What time?’

I told him.

‘Does she need to go in an ambulance?’

‘No.’

‘Tell her I’ll pick her up an hour before she’s due at the hospital,’ he said. ‘That should give us plenty of time in case we’re held up on the way. Will she have to stay in?’

‘Yes. I don’t know how long. Just a few days.’

‘Is it serious?’

‘I don’t have the faintest idea what’s wrong with her yet,’ I told him.

‘Thanks for sorting out the tests so quickly,’ he said.

* * *

I’d been with Thumper’s Aunt for less than an hour but in that time I’d lost count of the number of cups of tea she’d poured for me. Thumper’s Aunt had been brought up in a time when the quality of hospitality was measured by the amount of tea a visitor could be persuaded to drink.

‘Can I borrow your toilet before I go home?’ I asked her.

‘It’s down the garden,’ she said.

‘Have you not got one indoors?’ I asked, surprised.

‘Won’t have one indoors,’ she said. ‘Terrible to have one indoors. People are never well when they have those things indoors.’

I headed for the back door. ‘Is there a key?’ I called, over my shoulder.

‘A key?’ said Thumper’s Aunt in astonishment. ‘I’ve been here 40 years and no one has tried to steal the bucket yet.’

CHAPTER 31

When I called in at Peter Marshall's shop on my way home I could hardly believe my eyes.

The words 'SHUTTING. DESTROYED BY SUPERMARKETS. BARGAINS. SALE' were painted on the windows in whitewash.

'What do you think?' Peter asked.

'It's a bit startling,' I told him. 'But it should draw attention to the shop.'

'Great idea of yours!' he said. 'Look at this!' He pointed to a large trestle table he'd erected outside the shop. It was laden with tins and boxes.

'What on earth have you got there?'

'I looked through the old stock,' said Peter. 'There's a ton of stuff I can sell off cheaply.'

I picked up a tin. 'There's no label on this,' I said. 'It's impossible to tell what it is.'

'I call it pot luck,' said Peter. 'You buy three tins and you've got a meal.'

'But no one will know what they're eating!'

'Exactly.'

'These tins could contain anything.' Peter nodded.

'Any ideas?'

Peter shrugged. 'There's some soup. Some apricots. Some beans. Spaghetti hoops probably. Beef chunks. Dog food.'

'Do you have any idea how old this stuff is?'

'No idea at all. I found it in boxes in the shed. I've given it all a good mix. Take some tins back for Patsy. You'd be very unlucky to get three the same because I've given them a good mix up.'

'Guess how old it is,' I said. I picked up a couple of tins. They were rusty around the rims. The cans were dented. It looked as if they'd been given more than a good mix up.

'Probably twenty five or thirty years,' he said. 'This was a great idea of yours. If I can sell this lot I'll be able to pay the wholesaler.' He rubbed his hands together and lowered his voice. 'It's only eighteen months since I paid them last time,' he confided, 'but they've been getting a bit aggressive recently.'

'If this stuff had labels on you could sell it to museums!' I told him.

'Do you think so? Maybe I can find some of the old labels.'

'What are you selling them for?'

'Twenty pence a tin.'

'But that's far more than customers would pay for tins with the labels still on!'

'Yes, I know. But I'm selling excitement and adventure aren't I?'

I put down the tin I'd been examining.

'Exciting isn't it?' said Peter.

'Yes,' I agreed.

'I'm doing tastings as well,' he said.

'Oh, right! What of?'

'Mustard and soup.'

'Mustard and soup?'

'I've got quite a lot of mustard and six cases of green pea soup,' explained Peter. 'Here you are!' He pointed to an open jar of mustard and an opened tin of soup on the trestle table and then handed me a spoon. 'Help yourself!'

'The soup is cold!' I said, peering into the tin.

'Of course it is! I can't keep soup bubbling on the stove all day, can I?'

'And how am I supposed to taste mustard?'

'You put the spoon in the mustard jar and then suck the mustard off the spoon,' Peter explained.

I looked at him and put the spoon down. 'I'll just take my shopping for now,' I said. 'Patsy will have dinner ready for me and I don't want to spoil my appetite.'

I paid him, put the shopping in the boot of the car and set off for home.

As I left, Peter was trying to persuade Patchy Fogg to buy a dozen unlabelled tins of whatever for the price of twelve.

* * *

When I got back to Bilbury Grange I picked out Olive Robinson's medical records. I flicked through her notes and, in Dr Brownlow's writing, found the reference I was looking for.

She'd broken her left forearm in 1952.

CHAPTER 32

Now that I was a GP again I was getting used to getting up in the middle of the night.

My patients weren't a bad lot.

Unlike patients in some city practices mine hardly ever called me out unnecessarily (and never did so recklessly). But there were enough night time emergencies for me to have got used to waking up instantly when the phone went in the night.

So when the telephone went I turned on the bedside lamp and picked up the telephone and was awake within seconds.

'Hello!'

There was no one there.

For a moment I thought it was a hoax call.

And then I realised that all I'd heard since I'd picked up the telephone had been the dial tone. I was puzzling over this when the bell went again.

It was the doorbell not the telephone.

I glanced at the clock, clambered out of bed, put on my dressing gown and headed for the door. It was twenty minutes past six.

'Who is it?' asked Patsy, who was now wide awake.

'Dunno,' I replied sleepily. 'Probably a patient who doesn't have a telephone.' It was the wrong doorbell for a patient. But maybe they'd gone to the wrong door.

I tottered down the stairs and opened the front door.

'Morning doctor!' said a cheery face. For a moment I didn't recognise him. Then I realised that the caller was holding a pile of brushes in one hand and a large bag in the other. And just behind him I saw his van. It was Wilson Porter, the village sweep.

'I have a job sleeping these days,' said Wilson, putting down his bag touching his cap with the forefinger of his free hand. 'So I just pop round and visit my customers. Easier than trying to get back to sleep. Fireplace in the living room?'

'Yes,' I told him.

He picked up his bag and headed into the house. I padded after him. I was beginning to wonder if he was having a break down. Perhaps, I wondered, he was developing mania. His behaviour certainly couldn't be described as normal.

'Don't some of your customers mind you calling round in the middle of the night?'

'Oh, no,' replied Wilson. 'And the lanes are quiet. I can get round the village more easily.'

He put down his bag and brushes and took a large sheet out of the bag. He laid this down in front of the fireplace.

'Do you need me to move things out?' I asked. 'Cover things up?'

'Oh no,' he said. 'Don't worry yourself I won't make a mess.'

'It smokes,' I said. 'Actually it smokes quite a lot.'

'Always has done this one,' said Wilson.

'We did get some people in from Barnstaple,' I told him. 'Soon after we moved here.'

Wilson sucked some air in through a gap between his front teeth. 'Bet they wanted an arm and a leg?'

'We couldn't afford them,' I said.

'Wanted to rebuild your chimney?'

I nodded. 'They wanted to put in some fans.'

He laughed.

'They said the fans would help take the smoke up the chimney,' I explained.

'Probably would,' he agreed. 'But what a complicated and expensive way to do it.'

'Can you sort it out without putting in fans?'

'Of course I can,' he said. He lifted the fire basket out of the fireplace and put it on his sheet. 'Have you got any spare bricks?'

'We've got piles of them,' I told him.

'Bring me two,' he said.

I slipped on some shoes and let myself out of the house. Dawn was breaking. It was a wonderful sight. A few minutes later I was back with two ordinary house bricks.

'I've given it a poke with the brushes,' he said as I returned. 'It's clean as a whistle.' He took the bricks off me, arranged them in the fireplace and then put the grate back on top of the bricks.

‘That’ll sort your problem, doctor,’ he said. I stared at him. ‘Just that?’

He nodded. ‘It’ll put your fire nearer to the chimney. Plus, you’ll get more air under the fire and a better draught.’ He folded up his sheet and put it back into his bag. Then he picked up the bag and his brushes and headed for the door. I glanced at the clock. It was ten to seven.

‘Have you finished?’

‘All done, doctor!’ he said. ‘Call me in the morning if it’s not better.’ He laughed. ‘There you are!’ he said. ‘I could have sorted it out over the phone. Take two house bricks and call me in the morning if it’s not better.’ He laughed a lot and clearly thought this very funny. I was still too tired to laugh.

‘How much do I owe you?’ I asked him.

He shook his head. ‘On the house,’ he said. He leant towards me. ‘Just a little thank you for popping in to see my Aunt Olive,’ he said.

‘Olive Robinson?’

‘That’s the one.’

‘She’s your Aunt? I thought she was Thumper’s Aunt.’

‘She is. Thumper and I are cousins.’

‘Oh.’

The endless complications of relationships within Bilbury never failed to astound me. I was always discovering that people whom I assumed were just friends were, in reality, quite close relatives. In a small village like Bilbury, most people are related to at least half the other villagers.

The sweep lowered his voice, as though about to share a secret.

‘In case you’re worried, I don’t always do my visits at night. It’s just that I’m taking the family off on holiday today. A fortnight motoring on the continent. Your missus rang me yesterday but I was booked up solid. I wanted to sort out your chimney before we go away. Hope you didn’t mind.’

I stared at him and burst out laughing. ‘That’s very kind of you!’

He winked at me. ‘You thought I’d gone bonkers, didn’t you?’

I nodded. ‘I did wonder,’ I admitted.

‘Your fireplace will be fine now,’ he promised. ‘Just you see.’

And it was too.

The chimney specialists had wanted over £1,000 to put it right. Wilson had done it for nothing. Total cost: two old house bricks.

CHAPTER 33

‘It’s going to be a quiet wedding. We don’t want anything too big,’ said Patchy. ‘Just a memorable occasion with a few close friends and relatives.’

‘And we certainly don’t want lots of noise and dancing,’ said Adrienne. ‘We want our wedding to be a special, sacred occasion. We don’t want one of those weddings where the women hitch up their skirts and dance round their handbags while the men drink too much beer, tell dirty stories and then start fighting.’

‘Or, indeed, one of those weddings where the men dance round their handbags and the women drink too much beer, tell dirty stories and start fighting,’ said Patchy.

Adrienne Kennett and Patchy Fogg, my sister-in-law and my brother-in-law to be, were sitting in the kitchen at Bilbury Grange discussing their forthcoming wedding.

‘You’re definitely decided on the dress?’ said Patsy, who was just as excited as her sister at the forthcoming nuptials.

‘Definitely,’ said Adrienne.

After days spent searching the shops in Barnstaple and Exeter, Adrienne had decided that she would wear an antique lace wedding dress that had first been worn by Patchy’s grandmother.

It had been altered by Adrienne’s mother my mother-in-law, and the fact that the changes were invisible to the naked eye was a considerable tribute to Mrs Kennett’s skills with a needle. Adrienne was taller than Patchy’s grandmother and several inches larger around both the bust and the hips.

‘We’re getting married in Bilbury church, of course,’ said Adrienne. ‘But Mum and Dad aren’t so sure about having the reception at the farm.’

‘There isn’t a lot of room there,’ agreed Patsy. This was something of an understatement.

The Kennett’s farmhouse was in a beautiful position and had wonderful views but a general estate agent, searching for the most appropriate bon mot, would have described the house as ‘cosy’. If more than half a dozen people turned up to the reception they would be standing on one another’s toes.

‘They say we can have it there if we can’t find anywhere else,’ said Adrienne.

There was a long silence.

Patsy looked at me. I knew what she was thinking. I smiled and nodded slightly.

‘You must have the reception here,’ said Patsy. ‘If you’d like to, of course.’

Adrienne jumped up and threw her arms around her sister. ‘Oh, are you sure?’ she said. ‘That would be absolutely wonderful!’ She turned to Patchy. ‘Wouldn’t that be wonderful?’

‘It would,’ agreed Patchy. He looked at me. ‘Are you sure?’

‘It’ll be our pleasure,’ I said. ‘We can put a marquee up on the lawn.’

‘I’ve got a pal who can let us have one at a special price,’ said Patchy. Patchy always knows someone who can do things at a special price. ‘Nice chap if a bit odd. He calls his business the Marquee de Sade. He also promotes rock concerts and gives lectures on flower arranging.’

‘We’ll pay for everything,’ said Adrienne. She laughed. ‘Patchy has got plenty of money.’

‘Don’t ever tell anyone that,’ said Patchy sternly.

‘But they’re family!’ protested Adrienne.

‘Especially not family,’ said Patchy. It was difficult to tell how much he was joking. Patchy wasn’t as tight as Peter Marshall but he didn’t like parting with money unnecessarily. I think he thought his money might get homesick if it left his wallet.

‘I expect Dad will want to pay for everything,’ said Patsy.

‘Well, we’ll let him pay for some things,’ said Adrienne. She lowered her voice in that way people do when they’re telling you something confidential, even though they know perfectly well that there is no chance of anyone overhearing them. ‘Things have been a bit tight recently at the farm. So Patchy and I will try to grab some of the bills before he sees them.’

‘Well, if it’s going to be a quiet wedding it shouldn’t be all that expensive,’ said Patsy.

‘No,’ agreed Adrienne. ‘Just relatives and a few very dear friends.’

‘I suppose we’ll have to invite these two as well,’ said Patchy, nodding at Patsy and me. ‘Since we’re using their house.’ Adrienne hit him over the head with a newspaper.

CHAPTER 34

'Do you remember a chap called Alfred Burton?' asked Patchy.

I thought hard but eventually shook my head.

'Farmer who went bankrupt. We bought his dog.'

'Lady!' I said. 'Yes, of course I remember. We paid a halfpenny each for her.'

'That's the one,' agreed Patchy. 'He moved in with his mother in a cottage in Combe Martin.'

'I remember,' I said. 'Nice little cottage.'

'His mother is dying,' said Patchy.

'Oh I'm sorry to hear that,' I said.

'She's eighty nine,' said Patchy. 'It happens.'

'Yes,' I agreed. 'I suppose it does.'

'The problem is,' said Patchy, 'that Alfred is still bankrupt.'

I waited. I couldn't see what Alfred's bankruptcy and his mother's death could have to do with me.

'The cottage goes to Alfred when his mother dies,' explained Patchy.

'Fair enough,' I nodded. 'So he can stay there.'

'Not if she dies before Wednesday,' said Patchy. I stared at him, thoroughly confused.

'Alfred's bankruptcy finishes on Wednesday,' explained Patchy.

'If she dies before Wednesday then the cottage goes to Alfred and the court will take it off him.'

'But if she dies after Wednesday Alfred gets to keep the cottage?'

'Exactly.'

'She's got to stay alive for two days.'

'Two days. Just two days.'

'I see.' I said. 'Where do I come in?'

'You're their doctor.'

'I am?' I frowned.

'Alfred and his mother used to live just outside Bilbury. They were both on Dr Brownlow's list.'

'But I don't remember ever seeing them.'

'I don't think you have. They don't bother much with doctors, lawyers or accountants.'

'I don't suppose that might possibly explain why Alfred went bankrupt? The absence of professional help?'

'I don't think you can blame yourself for that. But I suppose that good advice from a numerate accountant might have helped fend off the bankruptcy.'

I thought about things. 'I can see my future role in this drama becoming quite significant.'

'Indeed,' agreed Patchy.

'This isn't just a question of contributing a halfpenny towards buying back a sheepdog?'

'No. You need to do a bit more than that.'

'I need to keep Alfred's mother alive until after Wednesday.'

'Precisely.'

'How ill is she at the moment?'

Patchy looked at me but didn't say anything.

I closed my eyes and put my head in my hands.

'It's just the date on the death certificate that matters,' said Patchy.

'That's what's really crucial.'

'How bad is she?' I asked again.

'She's still alive,' said Patchy. He held out one hand in front of him and waved it from side to side, as though it were a raft on a choppy sea. 'Just.'

'We'd better go and have a look,' I said. 'What's her name?

'Lisa,' replied Patchy. 'Lisa Burton, nee Pinkerton.'

* * *

I called in at Bilbury Grange to have a look at Mrs Burton's medical records. Patchy came in with me.

'I've found an Alfred Burton,' I said, producing Alfred's medical records. 'He's been a bit of a nuisance,' I said, holding up the card.

'He had mumps in 1922 and a sprained ankle in 1925.'

'Clearly a hypochondriac,' said Patchy.

'But I haven't got any medical records for a Lisa Burton or a Lisa Pinkerton.'

‘Try looking for Joan Burton,’ suggested Patchy. I found the notes for Joan Burton straight away.

‘Why did you call her Lisa if her name is Joan?’

‘Everyone called her Lisa because she was such a moaner,’ explained Patchy.

I looked at him and frowned. ‘I don’t get it.’

‘Moaner Lisa.’

‘Ah.’

‘Have you learned anything?’

‘No.’ I need not have bothered going back to Bilbury Grange. Mrs Burton’s medical notes were as pristine as they had been when they’d first been issued. Apart from her name and date of birth, written at the top of the card by some anonymous clerk, there was nothing at all written on her records. Leaving the useless records where they were I went back outside and told Patchy to lead the way. He had promised to introduce me to the Burtons.

Their cottage was no more than a hundred yards away from the beach, and Alfred, his mother and the dog, Lady, were all in the living room when we arrived.

Alfred looked tired and worn out. His mother, sitting in an easy chair by the fireplace, was unconscious. She was white and looked like death only very slightly warmed up. She did, however, look remarkably peaceful.

‘Why didn’t you call me?’ I asked him.

‘Didn’t like to bother,’ he replied. ‘One of the neighbours has been helping me.’ He paused. ‘With the washing and so on,’ he explained.

‘Do you know what’s wrong with her?’ I asked him. Alfred looked at me and shook his head.

‘What symptoms did she have?’ I asked. ‘Before she went unconscious?’

Alfred shrugged. ‘I don’t know,’ he admitted. ‘She wasn’t very well.’

‘We may have to get her into the hospital,’ I told him.

‘No! No!’ said Patchy.

I looked at him. He made a frantic sign for me to follow him into the kitchen.

‘You can’t send her into hospital,’ he said. The kitchen was a cockroaches’ delight. Every available surface was piled high with dirty crocks.

‘Why not?’

‘Because she might die there!’

‘She might die here.’

‘Yes, but if she dies in hospital everyone will know precisely when she died. And if she dies before Thursday Alfred will be thrown out of his home. He’ll end up sleeping rough.’

‘What on earth are you suggesting?’ I demanded. ‘If she dies too soon do you really want me to ignore it and write the certificate a day or two later?’

‘Yes!’ said Patchy. ‘Of course.’

‘I can’t do that!’

‘Why not?’

‘Because...’ I tried to think of a reason. ‘Because I could get into trouble,’ I confessed rather lamely. ‘A death certificate is a legal document.’ I felt rather ashamed of myself for this feeble excuse.

‘That’s a bit weak as excuses go,’ said Patchy.

‘I know,’ I admitted.

‘If you send her into hospital what will they do?’

‘Hopefully, they’ll try to find out what’s wrong with her,’ I said.

‘And then if they can find anything they’ll try to treat it.’

‘Hopefully,’ said Patchy.

‘Hospitals don’t always try as hard as they should with elderly patients,’ I admitted.

‘So she probably has as good a chance – or better – if she stays here.’

‘I can do some preliminary tests,’ I agreed. ‘But this place is a pigsty.’ I looked around. ‘Actually, I’ve seen pigsties that were much cleaner.’

‘I’ll get one or two people in to clean things up,’ said Patchy. ‘Just tidy up.’

‘Can you?’ I asked doubtfully.

‘Definitely. And I can get one or two people to help look after Mrs Burton.’

‘Who?’

‘Friends. Relatives.’ I nodded.

Patchy grinned. ‘Good,’ he said. ‘Let’s go back and see Mrs Burton and you can do your well-known impersonation of a doctor.’

We went back into the living room. I told Alfred to walk to the local store to buy some cleaning equipment and some black bags. He hadn't got any money so I gave him a five pound note. Patchy went out to find a couple of women who would help nurse Mrs Burton.

And then I set about examining Mrs Burton and trying to work out what was wrong with her. I was, I suppose, hoping that I could find some simple explanation for her condition. Maybe I would be able to diagnose an easily treatable problem. Perhaps I'd be able to send Alfred or Patchy to the chemist's with a prescription and then, moments after their return, inject Mrs Burton with some magical remedy that would drag her back from the porch way in front of death's door.

But it wasn't like that.

I found out what was wrong with her within minutes.

She had a huge suppurating ulcer on her chest and a cancerous lump in her left breast that had replaced all of the breast tissue. Her lymph glands felt like golf balls, her liver felt like a boulder and there were secondary deposits in every part of her body that I could find. It was pretty clear that the kindly neighbour who had been helping to look after Mrs Burton had not invaded her privacy enough to wash anything more intimate than her face and hands.

How, I wondered, could anyone let themselves get into such a condition. How could a woman ignore a growth that had taken over so much of her body?

I would never understand but somehow I felt responsible and guilty. I was Mrs Burton's general practitioner. I should have known. The fact that I had only been her GP for a matter of months, while the cancer that was killing her had clearly been at work for years, was of no interest to me. I felt angry. I couldn't be angry with Mrs Burton and so I felt angry with myself

Alfred and Patchy came back to the house at almost the same time. Patchy brought Nelly with him. She was, he said, a relative of the family's who had done some nursing but who needed a few days work. He had, he said, agreed a fee that he would pay her. She looked to be in her early thirties. She was smartly dressed in a plain blue frock and a white cardigan. She looked efficient. I asked her where she'd trained. She told me. I asked her what qualifications she had. She said she was a State Registered Nurse. I said that was perfect.

Although Mrs Burton seemed to be unconscious I always assume that patients can hear what I am saying even when I strongly suspect that they cannot and so I took the three of them into the tiny kitchen. I told them the blunt truth.

'No hope?' said Alfred.

'No hope, I'm afraid,' I said. 'No one can do anything for your mother – except make her comfortable and make sure that she doesn't suffer.'

Many doctors don't realise it but in medicine 'nothing' is often the best thing to do.

Alfred nodded his understanding. 'I'll go and sit with her,' he said. He left the three of us alone.

'So, how long do you think she'll last?' asked Patchy.

'She could go at any time,' I said. I sighed and looked at Patchy questioningly. 'Midnight on Wednesday?'

Patchy nodded.

'Midnight between Wednesday and Thursday?' I asked, making sure.

Patchy, understanding my caution, nodded again.

I looked at my watch and did some quick calculations. 'We've got 46 hours,' I said.

'Should we move her upstairs?' asked Nelly. 'Into her bedroom?'

I shook my head. 'She's comfortable where she is. If we try moving her we could kill her. I've never seen such a terrible case of metastatic cancer. It's spread everywhere.'

Patchy paled. 'Don't tell me any more,' he begged. 'I'm not terribly good with illness.'

I smiled at him weakly. 'Who has been coming in to help Alfred?' I asked.

'Just an old woman who lives a few doors away,' said Patchy. 'Not really a friend. She was just helping out.'

The door from the living room opened and Alfred came back in. 'Do you mind if I take the dog for a walk?' he asked. There were tears in his eyes.

'Good idea,' I told him. 'Have you got anywhere that you can stay for the next day or two?'

Alfred shook his head.

'He can stay with me,' offered Patchy.

'Your mum could go at any time,' I told him. 'Do you want to be with her when she goes?'

He looked at me uncertainly.

'Would you rather say goodbye now?' I asked him. 'And go and stay with Patchy?'

Alfred nodded.

'Then take him with you,' I said to Patchy. 'Nelly and I will look after Mrs Burton.'

When they'd gone I turned to Nelly. 'Do you understand what's happening here?'

She nodded. 'Patchy explained.'

‘Are you entirely happy about being part of it?’

‘Absolutely,’ she replied. ‘Definitely. Alfred’s farm was taken by the bank. They were the only people to whom he owed money.

They could have let him work off his debts but they wouldn’t. If they’d waited a few months and let him sell the year’s crops he would have been OK. And they’ll take his mother’s cottage if we don’t help. Of course I’m happy about being part of it.’ She nodded. ‘Most definitely,’ she said. She paused. ‘Alfred is my uncle,’ she added.

‘Right,’ I said. ‘Then we keep this to just the two of us. And we take it in turns to sit with her. We need a shift system.’

‘And if she dies before Thursday we just keep coming in and out as if she was still alive?’

I nodded.

‘And, whatever happens, we don’t ring the undertaker until Thursday?’

There are times in life, I was discovering, that doing the right thing means doing the wrong thing.

Mrs Burton died on Thursday.

CHAPTER 35

Patsy was in Barnstaple at the post natal clinic and so I popped into the Duck and Puddle for a cheese sandwich and a pint of shandy.

'What are you getting Patchy and Adrienne for their wedding?' Thumper asked me when I'd ordered.

'I don't think we've really thought about it,' I admitted.

'Anne and I are getting them a toaster,' said Thumper. Anne Thwaites is his girlfriend and the mother of his child.

'Ah,' I said. 'Hmmm.' To be honest this didn't sound very original to me.

'Ask Frank what he and Gilly are getting them,' said Thumper.

Frank was pouring my shandy. 'What are you and Gilly getting the happy couple?'

'A toaster,' replied Frank instantly. 'Peter Marshall bought a whole pile of them from a bankrupt wholesaler in Bristol. They were made in Korea. He's selling them very cheap. Only three quid each.'

I looked at Thumper. He was grinning. 'We'll get them something else as well,' he said. 'But I thought that if we all bought them a toaster – and exactly the same model toaster – it might be rather fun.'

'How many of us are there?'

'Peter's got twenty three toasters.'

'Do you know twenty three people all prepared to buy a toaster?'

'Oh yes! There are only three left. But I told Peter to put one aside for you. I knew you wouldn't want to be left out.'

'Do they all work?'

'No idea. Does it matter? Out of twenty three toasters there is bound to be one or two that works.'

'I'll call in on the way home,' I promised.

'We're all going to wrap our toasters up,' said Frank. 'And try to make them look different.'

'Adrienne will be thrilled,' I said, picking up my sandwich and taking a bite. I knew that Patchy would appreciate the funny side of being presented with twenty three cheap Korean toasters but I couldn't help wondering if Thumper might not be over-estimating the bride-to-be's sense of humour.

CHAPTER 36

I called in to see Les Salterton the next morning.

It was a beautiful day and he was working outside in his garden. He often did that. ‘The wind blows the shavings away,’ he once explained. ‘No sweeping up to do when I finish work.’

He saw me coming and stood up from his work bench. He straightened his back and smiled in welcome. ‘I’ve finished mending your table,’ he said. ‘Good as new now.’

‘Thanks. How do you feel?’ I asked him.

‘Fit as a fiddle,’ he said. ‘That course of tablets did me a power of good.’ He leant closer and lowered his voice. ‘I’d been feeling a bit low,’ he confided.

I didn’t tell him that it was the tablets that had made him feel low and that it was stopping them that had made him feel good again.

‘There’s a pair of green woodpeckers down the lane,’ he said.

‘Want to see?’

Of course I did.

Before we set off, Les bent down and popped a brick in between the front door and the frame to stop it closing completely. ‘I have to leave the door open so that the cats can get in and out.’ He paused and frowned. ‘Besides,’ he added, ‘I don’t think I’ve ever had a key.’

We wandered down the lane and spent half an hour watching the green woodpeckers digging holes in trees as only woodpeckers can.

‘Did you know that green woodpeckers were once regarded as vermin?’ he asked me quietly.

Surprised, I said I didn’t.

He told me that in the 18th century the green woodpecker had become unwanted because of its habit of hammering its way through the wooden shingle roofs of country homes. ‘The church oversaw their destruction,’ he told me. ‘But unlike the red kite and the raven, species which were also regarded as vermin and which were wiped out, the green woodpecker survived.’

As we wandered back up the lane towards his house and my car I wondered how many city GPs get to spend a guiltless half an hour bird watching in the middle of a working day. It occurred to me too that in towns and cities people measure time by minutes and seconds. In the country people measure time in hours and days.

Not for the first time I was pleased that I’d chosen to live in Bilbury, and grateful that I’d been given the opportunity.

CHAPTER 37

It was three days since Olive Robinson had been to the hospital and I still hadn't heard about the tests that had been done. After lunch I telephoned the hospital. I spoke first to the pathology laboratory. They had found nothing noticeably abnormal in any of the tests they'd done. Then I dialled the direct number of one of the hospital radiologists; a fellow I had known at medical school. He was the only doctor I knew who still smoked and his small office at the hospital was always thick with cigarette smoke. Smoking had been banned in the rest of the hospital but the administrators had failed to persuade him to pop out into the hospital grounds every time he needed to top up his nicotine levels.

'Funnily enough I've just put her skull X-ray back up on the light box,' he told me, thoughtfully. He was using the speaker phone on his desk and it made him sound as though he was talking in an echo chamber. 'It's a bit of a puzzle to be honest. Her ventricles are dilated but they look a bit odd. I can't quite decide why. Is she showing signs of dementia?'

I told him that she was.

'That could be it,' he said. 'Brain tissue deteriorating. Ventricles enlarging.' There was a pause and I heard a match strike as he lit a fresh cigarette. 'How old is she?'

'Seventy two,' I told him.

'That's probably it then.' He coughed for a few moments.

'When are you going to give those things up?'

He laughed. 'Don't you start.'

Neither I nor anyone else could understand why a radiologist, of all people, should smoke. Every week he viewed the chest X-rays of people with lung cancer caused by smoking. But it didn't seem to bother him. 'Got to die of something,' he said merrily.

'It doesn't seem like simple dementia,' I told him. 'She has become confused,' I told him. 'But it's all happened very quickly. Far too quickly for a simple dementia. And she's also having difficulty in walking. She drags her left leg.'

'I know it's a pretty obvious thought but you're sure she hasn't had a stroke?'

'Pretty sure. I can't find any evidence of one. And there's another thing: she's complaining of constant headaches.'

'What sort of headaches?'

'Just a general headache. All over her head. She complains it feels as though her head is about to explode.'

There was silence at the other end of the phone. 'You still there?' I asked.

'Yeah,' said the radiologist. 'It's a puzzle isn't it? Anything show up on the blood tests.'

'Nothing interesting.'

'Let me think about it a bit more,' he said. 'Maybe I'll come up with something. Maybe you ought to get her in for a few days so that we can keep an eye on her.'

CHAPTER 38

'I'm still no nearer getting a diagnosis for Olive Robinson,' I told Dr Brownlow.

I wanted to talk to him. Dr Brownlow was the best diagnostician I'd ever known.

Making a clinical diagnosis is like solving a puzzle. Sometimes the solution is easy. The clues are easy to spot. But too often the clues are hidden, the evidence confusing and contradictory and the conclusion debatable.

When Dr Brownlow had learned his profession, a doctor had to rely very much on his own eyes and ears for the information with which he would make a diagnosis.

In the 1960s, when I was trained, doctors had vast quantities of equipment available to them. 'Too much information can mask the diagnosis,' Dr Brownlow once told me. 'Doctors forget that their laboratory tests and X-rays and so on aren't always right. Too many young doctors – and a good many older ones – make the mistake of ignoring the patient and listening only to the bits of paper they get from the laboratory. They then compound their error by treating what they suspect the diagnosis to be, rather than treating the patient.'

He was right. I learned a lot from Dr Brownlow.

'When the patient talks he is telling you the answers,' Dr Brownlow once said. 'He probably doesn't realise he's telling you the answers, of course. Finding the answer from what he tells you is your job.'

Dr Brownlow would often just sit quietly and let his patients ramble on. 'Doctors should shut up and listen more,' he told me. He believed that collecting information was more important than a physical examination. And he was right about that too.

'Some diseases are rare,' he said. 'But to the people who get them they aren't rare at all. Put together all the information a patient gives you and you will sometimes suddenly see that the condition you thought was impossibly rare will suddenly become quite obviously certain.'

When I was a young assistant and we were working together I remember a patient appearing at the surgery with a fever. Dr Brownlow diagnosed malaria. 'How on earth did you make that diagnosis?' I asked him afterwards, greatly impressed. 'I would never have thought that a patient in Bilbury might have malaria.' Dr Brownlow had simply shrugged. 'It was obvious. He told me he'd just come back from a trip to Africa,' he said. 'And I didn't know he was going so I knew he hadn't taken any prophylactic medicine.'

We were sitting in the living room with the French windows thrown wide open. Sunshine and birdsong filled the room. Bradshaw was tidying up. When I'd arrived he'd offered to leave and finish tidying the room later but both Dr Brownlow and I had told him that there was no reason for him to leave. Since Bradshaw was going to join me as Bilbury's district nurse he would soon get to know whatever medical secrets there might be in the area. And Bradshaw had, in any case, long ago proved himself to be the soul of discretion.

'Nothing else from the tests?'

I shook my head. 'They even did a lumbar puncture to see if she had raised cerebrospinal fluid pressure.'

'Nothing odd?'

'Absolutely normal.'

'How is she?'

'Steadily deteriorating.'

We sat in silence for a few moments. The silence was broken only by the sound of birds singing and Bradshaw wheezing very lightly as he put books back into the bookcase. Dr Brownlow had been looking through his books before I'd arrived; taking leave of some old and much valued friends as he'd put it.

'So tell me again, what's wrong with her.'

'She's gradually developing dementia, she complains of constant headaches and she's losing power and function in one leg - so much so that she can't walk without help. Her memory is going, she's constantly tired and she's incontinent.'

We stared at each other, neither speaking.

'Definitely hasn't had a stroke?' I shook my head.

'Blood pressure?'

'Normal.'

'And the dementia isn't just senile dementia?'

'No. It's developing too quickly for that. Just last week she was doing the crossword in the paper. This week she just can't pay attention long enough to do one clue. Her judgement seems to have gone and there are daily changes in her moods and behaviour. And then there are the physical problems which you don't get with dementia. Her legs are weak and she's terribly unsteady. Sometimes her feet seem to freeze to the floor and she has great difficulty in taking the next step. Instead of walking she shuffles – she walks in a strange, wide-legged sort of way and she's fallen twice recently.'

'And she's incontinent?

'Urine only.'

'And a headache you say?'

'Constant. Nothing seems to make it go away. And she has difficulty in focusing her eyes.'

Dr Brownlow sighed. 'Poor Olive,' he said.

'They've brought in several consultants to look at her,' I said.

'Every time a neurologist or consultant physician comes up from Exeter they get him to take a look.'

'No ideas?'

'Oh, lots of ideas. But nothing useful.' Suddenly there was a cough. I turned.

'I hope you don't mind my saying something, doctors,' he said.

'But I couldn't help overhearing what you were saying about Miss Robinson.'

'If you've got any ideas Bradshaw they will be welcomed,' said Dr Brownlow. 'We're both stumped. And so, it seems, are the bright boys at the hospital.'

'Well, sir, when I was in the army in India, we once saw a patient who had similar symptoms to those currently being experienced by Miss Robinson,' said Bradshaw. It was one of the longest speeches I'd ever heard him make.

'And...?' said Dr Brownlow.

'Eventually a diagnosis of normal pressure hydrocephalus was made,' said Bradshaw.

Dr Brownlow looked at me. 'What on earth is that?' he asked.

I shook my head. I'd never heard of it either.

'What's that?' Dr Brownlow asked his butler.

'I believe it to be a rare neurological condition,' said Bradshaw. 'As I understand it, the condition develops when the fluid surrounding the brain, the fluid which normally surrounds and protects the brain tissue...'

'You're talking about the cerebrospinal fluid?' said Dr Brownlow.

'Exactly so, sir. The cerebrospinal fluid is normally reabsorbed if there is too much of it. But in this particular condition the reabsorption does not take place as it should and the increasing amount of fluid around the brain puts pressure on the delicate tissue, resulting in a unique form of dementia – very much, I think, like the type currently suffered by Miss Robinson. The patient whom I saw had very much the same sort of symptoms – even including the wide-legged walk and considerable instability.'

'Good heavens, Bradshaw!' said Dr Brownlow. 'It sounds as if you could have cracked the case.'

'I do hope that I have been able to help, sir,' replied the butler.

'I have always been fond of Miss Robinson. A true lady, I've always felt.'

'Exactly so,' said Dr Brownlow. 'Is there any treatment for this condition? Can we do anything to help Miss Robinson?'

'Oh, I believe so, sir,' said Bradshaw. 'If the excess fluid were to be removed from around the brain by the installation of a drainage tube...'

'A shunt?' I suggested.

'Precisely so,' nodded Bradshaw. 'With the aid of a shunt it should be possible to reduce the amount of fluid pressing on the brain.'

'And the symptoms will disappear?' asked Dr Brownlow.

'Judging by the incident I remember there should be a noticeable improvement in Miss Robinson's condition if this were to be done,' said Bradshaw.

Dr Brownlow looked at me. 'I'll ring the hospital now,' I said.

'I'll have a word with the doctor looking after Olive and then I'll drive into Barnstaple and make sure that they are doing everything they can.'

'Congratulations Bradshaw,' said Dr Brownlow, turning to his butler. 'Pour yourself a large whisky. You've earned it.'

'Thank you, sir,' said the butler.

'And pour another one for me. And one for the young doctor while he rings the hospital.'

Seven minutes later I put down the telephone. 'They hadn't thought of normal pressure hydrocephalus,' I told Dr Brownlow and Bradshaw. 'But the consultant agrees that this could well be what is causing Miss Robinson's problems. They're going to get on with it straight away.'

As I sipped the whisky Bradshaw had poured I could not help reflecting that if he had not overheard our conversation Olive Robinson would have probably never been diagnosed.

Many patients regard medicine as a science. It isn't. Accurate diagnoses are often missed. And, far more often than doctors like to admit, they are made by chance.

* * *

When I got back to Bilbury Grange, Patsy met me at the door and whispered to me that Adrienne was in the kitchen and on the warpath.

'She says she's got a bone to pick with you,' said Patsy.

I couldn't think of anything I'd done that could have possibly upset my sister-in-law. I wandered into the kitchen convinced that I had done nothing wrong.

Adrienne was holding our baby. He was wrapped in a blue shawl. I kissed his forehead. Just looking at him I could tell he was going to be wise, handsome and honest; a man looked up to and admired by everyone who knew him. None of this was mere paternal pride but would have been obvious to anyone who looked at him. I gazed at him adoringly. He had Patsy's eyes. I wondered how long it would be before I could buy him a bicycle. 'Why did you tell Patchy that my middle name is Christabel?' she demanded.

Ah.

'It's a long story,' I told her, turning round and heading back for the door. 'And I've just remembered I've got someone I must call in on.'

That's one of the advantages of being a country GP. There's always a good reason to be somewhere else in a hurry.

'I'll be in the Duck and Puddle,' I whispered to Patsy as I left.

'Give me a call when your sister has gone.'

I found Thumper in the Duck and Puddle. I told him that Bradshaw might well have diagnosed his aunt's illness.

'You mean Bradshaw made the diagnosis even though all the doctors were stumped?'

I nodded.

'When I heard he was going to be the new district nurse I was a bit apprehensive,' admitted Thumper. 'But this changes things a bit doesn't it?'

'I hope so,' I agreed. 'I hope the rest of the village feels the same.'

'They will,' said Thumper firmly. 'Oh, they will.'

I was convinced.

* * *

The doctor at the hospital telephoned me the next day.

'Great news!' said the consultant. He sounded quite excited. 'Dr Brownlow's butler has shown us all a thing or two.'

'You think Olive has got normal pressure hydrocephalus?'

'Definitely!' said the consultant. 'We put in a shunt and lowered her cerebrospinal fluid pressure. It's amazing. She's a different woman. She's still a bit slow but she says the headache has gone and she can walk pretty well normally.'

I thanked him, told him I'd be in to see her soon, and put down the telephone.

'Olive?' asked Patsy when I walked into the kitchen.

'She's going to be fine,' I told her. We hugged each other and cried with joy. We were both very fond of Thumper's aunt.

And then, while I sipped the tea Patsy had made, I telephoned.

Thumper to tell him the good news.

Thumper is the toughest guy I know.

He burst into tears when I told him the news.

It was one of those moments when it feels really good to be a village doctor.

CHAPTER 39

It was, at last, the morning of the big wedding. Three men working for Patchy's chum had erected a huge white marquee on our back lawn.

(It had the slogan 'Marquee de Sade' stitched into the canvas just beside the entrance. 'Oh, I've heard of him,' said Mrs Kennett when she saw the slogan. 'Isn't he foreign? Fancy him making tents and bringing them all this way from abroad.')

Adrienne, Patsy and their mother had spent much of the previous week preparing food for the feast which would follow the ceremony. By noon the twelve trestle tables which had been put up in the marquee were so laden with plates of food that they were beginning to creak.

It had been decided to have a cold buffet and there were hundreds of different types of pie and pasty on display. There were three whole salmon, six huge plates of cold meats and a tureen full of cold soup which Adrienne had prepared from nettles and dandelions which she had collected herself. There were slices of chicken breast, a huge side of cold beef and what looked like several hundred homemade mushroom vol au vents. There were enough sandwiches to keep an army marching for a week. The three-tier wedding cake, which took pride of place at the far end of the marquee, had been made by Adrienne's aunt, and to keep the sweet-toothed happy before the cutting of the cake ceremony there were numerous dishes full of sherry trifle (sponge fingers, red jelly, yellow custard, mixed fruit and fresh cream topped with multi-coloured hundreds and thousands and little silver balls), half a dozen sponge cakes and a vast array of fairy cakes, scones, profiteroles, cream horns, cream-filled brandy snaps, jam tarts and home-made biscuits. Olive Robinson, Thumper's aunt, had been out of hospital just one day but had, nevertheless, managed to make a fruit cake, a carrot cake and a Victoria sponge. She was looking good. I learned from Thumper that there had been some doubts in the village about Bradshaw becoming my district nurse but that these doubts had now disappeared entirely.

The wedding presents were piled high on a trestle table just inside the entrance to the marquee. They were positioned there so that the bride and groom could open them in full view of their guests. The twenty three toasters which had been purchased from Peter Marshall's shop had all been neatly wrapped and although some attempts had been made to disguise the contents it wasn't difficult to guess that a lot of presents were items which came in neat, oblong boxes.

The men who had brought the marquee had offered to set up some portable lavatories on one of our smaller lawns but we had decided that this wouldn't be necessary. We had, instead, put up one notice inviting lady guests to use the lavatory in the surgery – the one provided for patients – and another notice pointing to a rather overgrown area behind three large oak trees and a stretch of beech hedge. Thumper, who was Patchy's best man, had prepared a special sign which said, simply, 'USED BEER DEPARTMENT'.

'I thought it was going to be a quiet wedding,' I whispered to Patsy. We were standing alone in the garden. The calm before the inevitable storm. We had rushed back home from the church so that we would be ready to welcome the bride and groom and their guests.

The ceremony had been dignified and beautiful. Patsy, who had been the bridesmaid, was still wearing the beautiful pale yellow dress with a lot of frills which her mother had made for her. She vowed that she was not going to change out of it all afternoon since she was unlikely to get another chance to wear it.

We had both been able to go because Mr Parfitt, who said he wasn't terribly interested in weddings but who I knew couldn't bear to see his lawn being trampled by a lot of strangers wearing high heels, had volunteered to sit by the telephone for me in case there were any medical emergencies. His wife had promised to look after the baby. I didn't think Mr Parfitt would have to take too many calls since most of the villagers were likely to be in the tent on our back lawn and anyone who needed me wouldn't need a telephone.

'I think the guest list grew a bit larger than they had anticipated,' replied Patsy.

'How many people are coming?' I asked.

'Patchy says they kept it down to a minimum.'

'How many people are coming?'

'Around two hundred.'

'Two hundred!' I was astonished. 'Where are they all going to park?'

'My Dad has moved the cows out of one of his fields,' said Patsy.

'There's a sign up saying Free Parking.' I looked at her.

'He wanted to charge a shilling for the day,' admitted Patsy who knew what I'd been thinking. 'But Adrienne and I managed to persuade him not to.'

'Don't forget to keep two pieces of cake,' I told her. 'One for Dr Brownlow and one for Bradshaw.'

‘Of course I won’t.’

Dr Brownlow had desperately wanted to attend the wedding but he was sinking fast. He had, however, sent a splendid wedding present (an envelope stuffed with fivers) and had asked for a piece of cake in return.

‘Everything looks well under control,’ I said recklessly. The truth is that I was bursting with pride and far too pleased with the world around me to realise just how much I was tempting fate. Patsy looked beautiful and thoroughly regal. Bilbury Grange looked absolutely magnificent. And our new baby (being looked after by a very elegantly dressed Mrs Parfitt) was, of course, a microcosm of perfection.

From the driveway there were the sounds which told us that the principal players and their guests were arriving. Patsy, full of excitement, hurried forward to greet them.

I wandered into the marquee, picked up a jam tart and crammed it into my mouth before I joined her.

* * *

An hour later the wedding party was in full swing.

It was not, perhaps, the quiet and low key wedding ‘just for a few close friends and relatives’ which I seemed to remember the happy couple talking about in our kitchen. But it was, at least, a dignified wedding. No one had fallen over or disgraced themselves and although it was clear that there were going to be enough pies and cakes left over to feed the proverbial five thousand (without the aid of any miracles of enhancement) the organisation seemed faultless.

The opening of the twenty three toasters had started things off well.

I think Patchy had guessed that something was up when he saw the huge array of similarly sized boxes awaiting them. He clearly knew what was going on after the first three packets had been opened to reveal identical Korean toasters.

‘Splendid!’ he cried, holding up one of the toasters and pointing to the other two. ‘Fresh toasters for Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. Let’s just hope we get toasters for Thursday and Friday too.’

And of course, they got toasters for Thursday and Friday. And for the weekend and for the next fortnight too.

‘Marvellous!’ cried Patchy. ‘I’ve always thought it’s a wise idea to buy spares when you find something you really like.’

‘These came from Peter,’ muttered Frank gloomily. ‘You’ll probably need all the spares to make one piece of toast.’

If Adrienne was disappointed by this apparent lack of proper planning among her friends she managed to hide it well. And when the huge pile of toasters were stacked in a corner of the marquee and replaced by the real presents any residual disappointment she might have felt disappeared entirely.

So, even Thumper’s practical joke had, it seemed, been well received.

And you can’t ask for much more at a wedding than that the best man’s practical joke goes down well.

* * *

Looking through the retrospectoscope (a medical instrument much favoured by a tutor of mine at medical school which enables the user to examine events with the inestimable benefits of hindsight) it is clear that I should have realised something odd was happening rather earlier than I did. Sadly, I did not, though, to be perfectly honest, I doubt if events would have been any different if I had.

Bizarre things were occurring everywhere.

Peter Marshall was attempting to climb up one of the main poles holding up the marquee. Anne Thwaites was trying to juggle with scotch eggs (and judging by the tell-tale debris at her feet proving to be not very good at it) and an uncle of Patchy’s from Huddersfield was standing on a wooden trestle table (from which he had thoughtfully removed the table cloth) and preparing to prove that he could fly. A cousin of Patchy’s was lying flat on his back snoring very loudly. Samuel Houghton and his wife were dancing the polka (or, at least, their own version of as much of a polka as can be danced in an area about four foot square) and Harry Burrows had taken one of the toasters out of its box and was trying, unsuccessfully and inexplicably, to cram a Cornish pasty into the slit at the top of the toaster.

(We were later to find that Harry would have been just as unsuccessful if he’d tried to insert a slice of bread. Sadly, the opening in the top of the toasters wasn’t wide enough to take a whole slice of bread. Remarkably, although Patchy and Adrienne were the proud owners of 23 toasters, they were only able to make a full round of toast by spearing a piece of bread on a toasting fork and holding it in front of the fire.)

‘Do you think they’re all drunk?’ asked Patsy. Even for Bilbury this was more than vaguely eccentric behaviour. She and I had been kept busy ensuring that the wedding guests were adequately fed and watered and had not, as yet, managed to eat or drink anything.

‘They seem drugged to me,’ I said, staring in astonishment as, no more than six feet away from where we were standing, the vicar and his wife started to undress each other.

Patsy stared at me. 'Are you serious?'

I nodded. 'I'm afraid so. If the vicar had had enough to drink to banish his inhibitions to that extent he'd be flat on his back and incapable of unbuttoning his own trousers.'

We stood and stared in astonishment as the vicar did indeed remove his own trousers. He did this nimbly and gracefully. I had never expected the vicar to be a man who favoured underwear decorated with cartoon characters. Having removed his trousers the vicar gave out a great whoop and flung them skywards.

'If you ever wear boxer shorts like those I may divorce you,' said Patsy.

'You need have no worries,' I assured her.

The first clue as to the cause of all this mayhem came when Samuel Houghton shuffled over to ask if there were any more mushroom vol au vents.

'I'm afraid not,' Patsy told him. 'All the ones we had were out.'

'Pity,' said Samuel.

'Did you know that your trousers were around your ankles?' I asked him

'The vicar's wife unfastened my braces,' he told me proudly. 'Stout woman.' And he shuffled off, examining abandoned plates as he did so. Occasionally, he found an abandoned mushroom vol au vent and when he did so he popped it straight into his mouth.

'Who made the mushroom vol au vents?' I asked Patsy.

'Have you tried them? Are they all right?'

'I haven't tried one. But they seem popular. They've all gone. Who made them?'

'Adrienne.'

It was the answer I'd expected. 'I don't suppose she picked the mushrooms herself?'

Patsy, rather pale now, nodded.

And then I knew.

'Do you think there is something wrong with the mushrooms?' asked Patsy.

'I think Adrienne has made her vol au vents with magic mushrooms.'

Patsy actually lifted one hand and placed it across her mouth, just in the way people are supposed to do when they are shocked by news they've been given.

I looked around to see if I could find Adrienne. I had hoped to be able to ask her about the mushrooms she'd used but it was at this point of the wedding celebration that things really started to get out of hand and suddenly the mushroom vol au vents were only part of the problem. There was an even bigger problem to deal with.

* * *

Two weeks earlier the father of the bride (and, coincidentally of course, my father-in-law) had read an article in a farming magazine in which the author had claimed that he had found that it was possible to increase the milk yield of a herd of dairy cattle by playing them music.

Ever anxious to increase his income, and hopefully his profits, Mr Kennett had borrowed an old portable tape recorder of mine and an Elvis Presley tape belonging to his daughter Patsy in order to see if his cows responded in a similar way.

To his (and everyone else's) astonishment he had discovered that his cows did produce far more milk after they had spent a few hours listening to the rocking and rolling of Elvis Presley than they did when they had spent their time listening to their more usual rustic auditory diet of birds tweeting, leaves rustling and one another mooing. Mr Kennett had discovered that a herd of happy rockers produced noticeably more milk than a herd of cows who knew nothing of blue suede shoes.

Mr Kennett had generously made it clear that since his cows lived in the field adjacent to our garden, he did not plan to play music during the wedding celebration.

This was not quite as generous a gesture as it first appeared for even if Mr Kennett had wanted to continue with his experiment he wouldn't have been able to because Patsy and I had borrowed back the tape recorder and the Elvis Presley tape. We wanted them so that we could provide music in case any of the wedding guests wanted to dance.

But what we had all overlooked was that Mr Kennett's cows were chewing the cud in the field next to Bilbury Grange.

And we were playing music.

Moreover, we weren't just playing music we were playing exactly the Elvis Presley tape which the cows loved so much and which had proved to have such a dramatic influence on their mood that it had actually resulted in a measurable, and profitable, increase in milk production.

If we had thought about this a little more we might have realised that there might be consequences. In our defence all I can say is that there were a lot of other things to think about.

It was, I think, Gilly Parsons who first noticed that the cows in the next field were taking a more than usual interest in what was going on in the marquee in the garden at Bilbury Grange. However, although she had lived in Bilbury for many years Gilly had never really become a country girl; she remained a city dweller at heart.

Having enjoyed a few glasses of champagne her reaction was not to cry out something useful such as ‘Help! Help! Cows have got into the garden and are trying to get into the big tent!’ but to totter unsteadily towards them crying ‘Here pretty cows, here pretty cows!’, making the sort of kissy kissy noises which town dwellers who have little understanding of the animal world usually consider appropriate for attracting cats and small dogs, and holding out a large plate containing three of Mrs Kennett’s scones, two ham and pickle sandwiches, a fresh tomato, a boiled egg, two large pickled gherkins and a large dollop of sherry trifle. She had lost her blouse in her tussle with Frank but had, I am relieved to be able to report, managed to retain full ownership of her brassiere.

I know all this because I saw her.

Embarrassing as it is to have to admit it, I saw her and I did nothing.

My excuse is that I was, at the time, torn between trying to decide whether to persuade Ben to take his teeth out of the photographer’s trousers or to dissuade Sophie, who was clearly making plans to try to jump onto the top tier of the wedding cake.

(I never did find out why Ben, a normally obedient and docile dog, had taken a dislike to the photographer – though it may well have been that Ben had at some point hoovered up the fallen remains of a mushroom vol au vent and that his behaviour had, therefore, been transformed by what he’d eaten. Sophie, on the other hand, has always had a habit of leaping up onto things regardless of the consequences so her intentions came as no surprise at all.) I suspect that I wouldn’t have been able to do anything anyway for things then happened very quickly.

‘The cows are trying to get into the tent!’ yelled Thumper Robinson. And in less time than it took him to say this, the first few cows had managed to force their way into the tent.

‘It’s a marquee!’ shouted Patchy who was, for some reason, quite touchy about it being called a marquee and not a tent. He and Adrienne were circulating among the guests and offering thanks. Thanks for coming. Thanks for the card. Thanks for the best wishes. Thanks for the toaster. Patchy was shaking a lot of hands and Adrienne was getting kissed a good deal. Not surprisingly, not many people seemed to want to kiss Patchy.

‘OK! The cows are trying to get into the marquee!’ shouted Thumper.

I turned and you didn’t need an honours degree in animal husbandry to work out that his diagnosis was absolutely spot on. The cows were trying to get into the marquee and they were proving to be quite good at it.

There were four reasons that I realised precisely why the cows had come into the marquee.

First, they weren’t interested in any of the food on offer.

Second, they all headed for the corner of the marquee where the cassette player was sitting.

Third, they all started swaying. It was, I suppose, their way of showing their appreciation of the King’s music. They weren’t exactly dancing, not in a Fred Astaire sort of way, but they were definitely swaying.

Fourth, Mr Kennett explained things to me.

‘It’s the music,’ he said, having hurried over to where Patsy and I were standing. ‘They like your music.’ He explained.

‘So let’s turn it off,’ suggested Thumper, who’d hurried over to see what we wanted to do.

It seemed an easy solution.

We turned off the tape recorder and, dutifully, Mr Presley stopped singing.

The cows stopped swaying but they didn’t go away. They looked disappointed. One of them mooed in protest. I had never before realised just how much a moo sounds like a boo. Two cows chose the moment to provide ample proof that they had not been house trained. Or marquee trained either. I was glad Mr Parfitt wasn’t there to see what was happening to his lawn.

‘They’re not going to go,’ said Patsy in a tiny voice.

‘No,’ agreed Mr Kennett.

The cows stayed where they were. One of them turned round and knocked over a table. Several platefuls of sandwiches fell on the floor. I instinctively checked to make sure that there were no mushroom vol au vents among them. The last thing we needed was a marquee full of cows who’d eaten magic mushrooms.

‘Maybe we can use the fact that the cows will go where the music is,’ I suggested. ‘If I take the cassette player out of here and turn it on maybe I can get the cows to follow me.’

‘Like the pied piper of Hamelin?’ said Patsy.

‘Exactly.’

‘Can you get them to back out of the tent and back into the field?’

I shook my head. I didn’t think I wanted to try to get them to force their way back out through the side of the marquee. It had been a miracle that they hadn’t done any damage to the canvas when they’d forced their way in. I walked across the tent and picked up the cassette player. Then I walked briskly out of the marquee before turning it on. I turned the volume up as high as it would go. The lead cow responded immediately (there is always a lead cow in a herd) and began to move in my direction. Slowly, I headed for the driveway. The lead cow followed me and the other cows followed the lead cow. Elvis finished 'Hound Dog' and started singing 'Heartbreak Hotel'. The cows didn't seem to mind.

Within minutes - I was in the lane and behind me the cows were swaying out of our driveway. As they swayed one way their udders swayed the other way. It would, I thought, take me no more than a quarter of an hour or so to lead them round to the gateway leading into the field from which the cows had escaped. I would then find the gap they'd used to get into our garden and block it with a piece of corrugated iron. There isn't a field in North Devon that doesn't have a spare sheet of corrugated iron lying around in it somewhere.

As Elvis finished 'Heartbreak Hotel' and started on 'Jailhouse Rock' I looked back. The cows were still there. More surprisingly, so were most of the wedding guests. I really had become the pied piper of Hamelin.

'Play 'All Shook Up!',' suggested Patchy. 'Maybe we'll get milk shakes.'

Naturally, things didn't go quite as smoothly as I had hoped. Someone, presumably one of our guests, had parked their car in the gateway leading into the field where I wanted to take the cows.

And so, knowing that I would eventually come to another suitable field, I kept walking.

Just Elvis and I impersonating the Pied Piper of Hamelin.

The swaying lead cow was just behind me. The other cows were just behind the lead cow. The dancing guests followed them.

It was a mile and a half and forty five minutes later before I found a suitable empty field which had a gate I could open. By that time the procession I was leading consisted of two dozen cows, fifty wedding guests, a car towing a caravan (driven by a woman whose command of the expletive was impressive), three cars, a tractor towing a trailer full of silage and a boy on a bicycle who presumably had no sense of smell or else he would have surely overtaken the tractor towing the trailer full of silage.

When I'd shut the cows into their new field, and let the caravan, the three cars, the tractor and the anosmic boy on the bicycle go on their way, I led the guests back to Bilbury Grange. I turned off the cassette player lest this encourage the cows to break out of their new field but the guests, who presumably knew the contents of the tape by now, kept dancing anyway.

By now the effects of Adrienne's magic mushrooms had largely worn off. Some of the guests, in particular the vicar and his wife, were looking tired, puzzled, confused and rather sheepish.

'Excuse me,' said the vicar, sidling up to me as we arrived back at Bilbury Grange. 'I don't suppose you've seen my trousers have you?'

I told him where I'd last seen them. He seemed grateful. I leant a little closer and whispered. 'Nice boxer shorts. I've always been fond of Donald Duck.'

He looked down, thanked me and blushed.

* * *

'Where did you get the mushrooms from?' I asked Adrienne later that day. She and Patchy were changed and ready to leave for their honeymoon in south Devon. They had a suite booked in the Victoria Hotel in Sidmouth.

'Oh just here and there,' said Adrienne. 'They were really fresh. I picked them the day I made the vol au vents. They can't possibly have gone off.'

'I'm sure they were fresh,' I said. 'I don't think there's any question of that. Can you remember what the mushrooms looked like?'

'They were very pretty,' said Adrienne. 'Much prettier than ordinary mushrooms.'

Patchy stared at her open-mouthed in horror.

'You could have poisoned everyone!' he said.

'Oh no,' said Adrienne. 'I didn't make enough vol au vents for everyone.'

'You must have picked magic mushrooms!' Patsy told her.

'Oh well,' said Adrienne dismissing everyone's concern with a shrug. 'People seemed to have a good time didn't they?'

We all agreed that everyone seemed to have had a good time.

'When we get back from our honeymoon,' said Patchy. 'I'll pick my own mushrooms if you don't mind.'

'Oh, OK,' said Adrienne. She put her arm around her new husband. 'You're not cross with me, are you?'

Patchy looked at her, shook his head and sighed.

No one ever manages to stay cross with dear Adrienne for long.

CHAPTER 40

The telephone call I had been expecting, and dreading, came at 3.37 a.m. one cold, wet, windy morning. I turned on the bedside light and picked up the telephone.

'Can you come, please, doctor. I think it's time.'

I recognised the voice and there was no need for me to ask where I should go or what it was time for. I said I would be there as soon as I could, swivelled out of bed and picked up the trousers, lying ready on the floor, to pull over my pyjamas.

'Who was it?' asked Patsy sleepily.

'Bradshaw.'

She sat up, as instantly awake as I had been. 'Dr Brownlow?'

'Bradshaw says he's going.'

Patsy reached out and touched my arm.

Dr Brownlow was just conscious when I got there. I held his hand. He was in no pain and there was nothing whatsoever that I could do for him now. I was there as a friend as much as I was there as a doctor.

He drifted in and out of consciousness and then gradually the moments when he was conscious became shorter and the moments when he was unconscious became longer.

Bradshaw left us alone for much of the time. You could see that he was exhausted. He had been looking after his master for many months without a break. I made a mental note to make sure that he had a rest before starting work as district nurse. He wouldn't want to. But I would make sure that he did.

For some of the time Dr Brownlow and I sat quietly. Neither of us saying a word. Occasionally, I spoke. I told him about some of the clinical problems I was puzzling over. I told him how our new baby was doing. (He had been delighted when Patsy and I had taken the baby round for him to see. And even more delighted when we'd told him that we were naming the baby after him.) I told him about Patchy and Adrienne's wedding. He was conscious when I told him about the cows. He smiled and nodded a lot. He enjoyed the story.

Eventually he stopped smiling and stopped nodding and his hand started to go cold and the light started to break through the trees outside and a new day had begun and Dr Brownlow had gone.

I found Bradshaw and told him to go to bed and told him that I would see to the immediate arrangements.

As I drove home the clouds started to appear and the sun disappeared and then the rain came.

It was as it should have been.

It was not a day for sunshine.

* * *

We buried Dr Brownlow in the garden next to his wife. Bradshaw and I put his stethoscope in the coffin with him. The whole village turned out. I looked around the church during the service and couldn't see a dry eye anywhere. Dr Brownlow had been immensely popular. He had been an excellent country doctor but, more than that, a great human being. To me he had been a mentor and a friend. He had been a guide and a father figure.

* * *

Hours after Dr Brownlow had been buried I went back to sit beside his grave in what had been for so long his garden. I took a small silver hip flask he had once given me. It was filled with his favourite malt whisky. From time to time I took a sip from it and from time to time I poured a few drops onto the fresh earth on top of his grave. I wanted to ask him if he minded my going to him from time to time when I needed help and advice. He said that would be fine.

When I'd finished I leant the hip flask beside his gravestone. It would, I knew, be there whenever I went back.

It was late when I got home. Patsy had been keeping dinner warm for over an hour.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I went to talk to Dr Brownlow.'

'I thought you had,' she said. I looked at her. 'I guessed,' she said.

'I asked him if he minded if I popped along there when I had tricky clinical problems.'

'What did he say?'

'He said he'd be delighted to see me.'

'Good old Dr Brownlow,' said Patsy. 'He never said 'No' to anyone, did he?'

'Never,' I agreed.

* * *

In the days that followed Dr Brownlow's GP son complained bitterly about the Will. He even consulted a lawyer who sent me a venomous letter announcing that his firm would be taking legal action to overthrow Dr Brownlow's wishes. But Dr Brownlow's preparations stalled any attempts to overthrow the Will. When the lawyer saw the letters

Dr Brownlow had prepared he gave in. There was no apology, of course. Just the apology of silent withdrawal.

Dr Brownlow had managed to stymie the tax man too.

A mean, ferret-faced man in a cheap suit turned up one day from the Inland Revenue. He said he was investigating the disappearance of a considerable amount of cash from Dr Brownlow's account and asked me if I knew anything about it. I showed him the receipt that Dr Brownlow had arranged and refused to answer more of his questions on the incontestable grounds of patient confidentiality. He didn't seem particularly happy but he went away again and I lost no sleep over his misery.

Gradually, I got used to driving Dr Brownlow's old Rolls Royce. I didn't want to sell it but it was truly a most impractical car. It was so big it felt like driving a small country. Thumper said that whenever I set off, the radiator would always be half way to my destination.

I had intended to keep it in a barn and use it only for special occasions. But I grew to like it. And the villagers liked to see it being driven around the village. It was a tangible link with Dr Brownlow, whom they had all loved so much. And so I started to use it for my visits to patients and for trips into Barnstaple It cost a fortune in petrol but the mechanics at Tolstoy's Garage loved looking after it so the maintenance and repair bills were very reasonable.

CHAPTER 41

A month or so later I was sitting in my study staring at a blank sheet of paper.

It was, I had decided, time to start another book about life in Bilbury.

I had two problems.

First, so much had happened that I really didn't know where to start.

Second, there was so much still happening that I was finding it difficult to look backwards and put the recent past into perspective.

I still missed Dr Brownlow, of course. There was a huge void both in the village and in my life. It felt strange to know that he had gone and would never be coming back.

But I still spoke to him at least once a week.

I would cycle round and sit by his graveside and talk to him. I would ask him about patients who were puzzling me. And he would listen.

There was a lot to be done and a lot I needed his help with.

There was, for example, the conversion of Dr Brownlow's old house into a small cottage hospital for Bilbury. I'd already talked to Thumper about hiring workmen who would be prepared to work for cash - with no questions asked. It would not, he said, be difficult. The cash was still hidden in a safe place. I would have to find an explanation for the way the building work had been funded. But Thumper and I had already worked out a way to do that.

The telephone rang.

Reluctantly, I picked it up.

It was Mortimer.

'I thought it was about time we caught up with each other,' he said. 'It's been some time since we saw you.'

'It has.'

'Sorry I haven't got round to writing or ringing. We've been terribly busy. We managed to get planning permission to put another bedroom over the garage. You can't imagine the chaos. And then we bought a new dining room suite. White leather. We'd only had it a week when one of the kids got orange crayon on one of the cushions. Strewth! Clarice went clear through the roof. We had three different specialists round to try to get the mark out of the leather. And it took us seven weeks to get the insurance company to pay up.'

I muttered something suitably sympathetic.

'What else? Oh yes, a very, very good friend of ours called Maurice, died. We were utterly devastated. He lived in the Lake District. Near Kendal. A long drive for the funeral. We decided to stay over a few days and make a short holiday of it so that the trip wouldn't be entirely wasted. We found a nice little hotel. It was very reasonably priced, though the room was rather small and the view disappointing. The family held the funeral in the afternoon, which we thought was rather thoughtless because we wanted to take a boat ride down Lake Windemere. Consequently, we had a heart breaking decision to make. The boys had never been on the Lake and in the end we decided that Spotty wouldn't have minded and so we gave the funeral a miss. All things considered I suppose the weekend didn't turn out too badly. We were lucky with the weather.'

He paused to breathe. 'What else has happened?' he asked himself. There was another quiet moment while he thought. 'Oh, Clarice lost another half a stone and changed her hairstyle. I had a huge row at work over parking space allocations. You simply can't believe how petty-minded some of these people can be. Oh, and you won't believe this but some bastard cut the wires to the headlamp washers on the Volvo. Would you believe it? I'm pretty sure I know who it was. One of the administrators. I've got his card marked. I tell you, it's been a pretty devastating few months. You and Patsy simply wouldn't have coped with it. Clarice and I often think of you two just muddling along down there in Bilbury. No worries. No stresses.' He paused, for the first time. 'I expect it's been as quiet as ever down there.'

I stared out of the window.

I had gone back into practice. Patsy and I had had our first baby. Dr Brownlow, my friend and mentor, had died. Patchy Fogg and Adrienne Kennett had got married at Bilbury Grange. A baby, a wedding and a funeral. It didn't seem to me to have been an entirely uneventful year in Bilbury. But I realised that none of these were things I wanted to share with Mortimer.

'You still there?'

'Yes.'

'Silly question. What am I saying? Nothing much ever happens in Bilbury, does it?'

'No,' I agreed. 'Nothing much has happened. Quiet as always.'

We said goodbye and promised to keep in touch. I put the telephone down. Outside a squirrel raced up an oak tree. Ben, who'd been chasing it across the grass, stared up rather forlornly. Emily, who was asleep by the window, opened an eye, watched for a moment and went back to sleep. Sophie, who was lying beside her stood up, arched her back, yawned and then walked two paces to her left. She then sat down on the blank sheet of paper I'd been staring at and started to lick her bottom.

There was a gentle tap on the half open door. I turned. Patsy was standing there with a cup of coffee. There were two bourbon biscuits in the saucer.

'I thought you might like a break.'

I pointed to Sophie sitting on the blank piece of paper in front of me.

'Underneath that cat there is a blank sheet of paper. I haven't started yet.'

'Oh.' She brightened. 'Never mind. Come and have a look at that old junk room next to the nursery.'

'Oh no!' I said. 'You don't want it clearing out do you?'

'The nursery is a bit small,' she said. 'I wondered if we could get Thumper to take down the wall dividing the nursery from the junk room and make the nursery bigger.'

I looked at her, puzzled. 'What's wrong with the size of the nursery? It's a perfect size for a baby's room.'

'It's perfect for one baby.'

'Exactly.'

'But not really big enough for two.'

'I suppose not but what...' I stopped, looked at her and started to grin.

'Careful!' she said, smiling, as I put my arm around her and pulled her onto my lap. 'I'll spill your coffee.' She put the cup and saucer down on my desk and put her arms around my neck.

'It's definite?' She nodded.

'Then I suppose I'd better clear out the junk room,' I said. 'Most of it can be thrown out. I'll have a bonfire this evening. And when I've cleared it out I'll ring Thumper and get him to take down the partition wall.'

Patsy started laughing.

'Do you think we should redecorate? When's it due? What are we going to call it? Do you think it will be a boy or a girl?'

'What about your book?'

I helped Patsy to her feet and then stood up myself 'It'll have to wait,' I said. 'I need to clear out that junk room.' I picked up my coffee and took a sip. It had cooled. I drank half of it. I offered the biscuits to Patsy.

'You'd better have one of these,' I told her. 'You need to start eating for two.'

Patsy took a biscuit. I popped the other one into my mouth. Sophie, who had finished licking her bottom, turned round three times and lay down on my blank piece of paper. I stroked her back, tickled Emily under the chin and headed for the junk room.

There would, at least, be an excuse for another bonfire.

Nothing much else ever happens in Bilbury.

* * *

Bilbury Village is the fifth of Vernon Coleman's seven books about Bilbury. These are: *Bilbury Chronicles, Bilbury Grange, Bilbury Revels, Bilbury Country* and *Bilbury Village.* There are two books of short stories called *Bilbury Pie* and *Bilbury Pudding*. If you enjoy the Bilbury books you may enjoy other books by the same author including '*Mr Henry Mulligan'*, *'It's Never Too Late', 'Second Innings', 'Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War'* and *'Mrs Caldicot's Knickerbocker Glory*'. For full details of over 100 books by Vernon Coleman please see his author page on Amazon or http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

Reviews of previous books in the Bilbury series of novels

THE BILBURY CHRONICLES

"I am just putting pen to paper to say how very much I enjoyed *The Bilbury Chronicles*. I just can't wait to read the others." - (*Mrs K., Cambs*)

"I have just finished reading *The Bilbury Chronicles* and I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate Mr Coleman on writing such a wonderful book which is both entertaining and touching. I now enclose an order for Bilbury Grange." - (*A.L., Ballymena)*

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The Young Country Doctor: Book 6

BILBURY PIE

Vernon Coleman

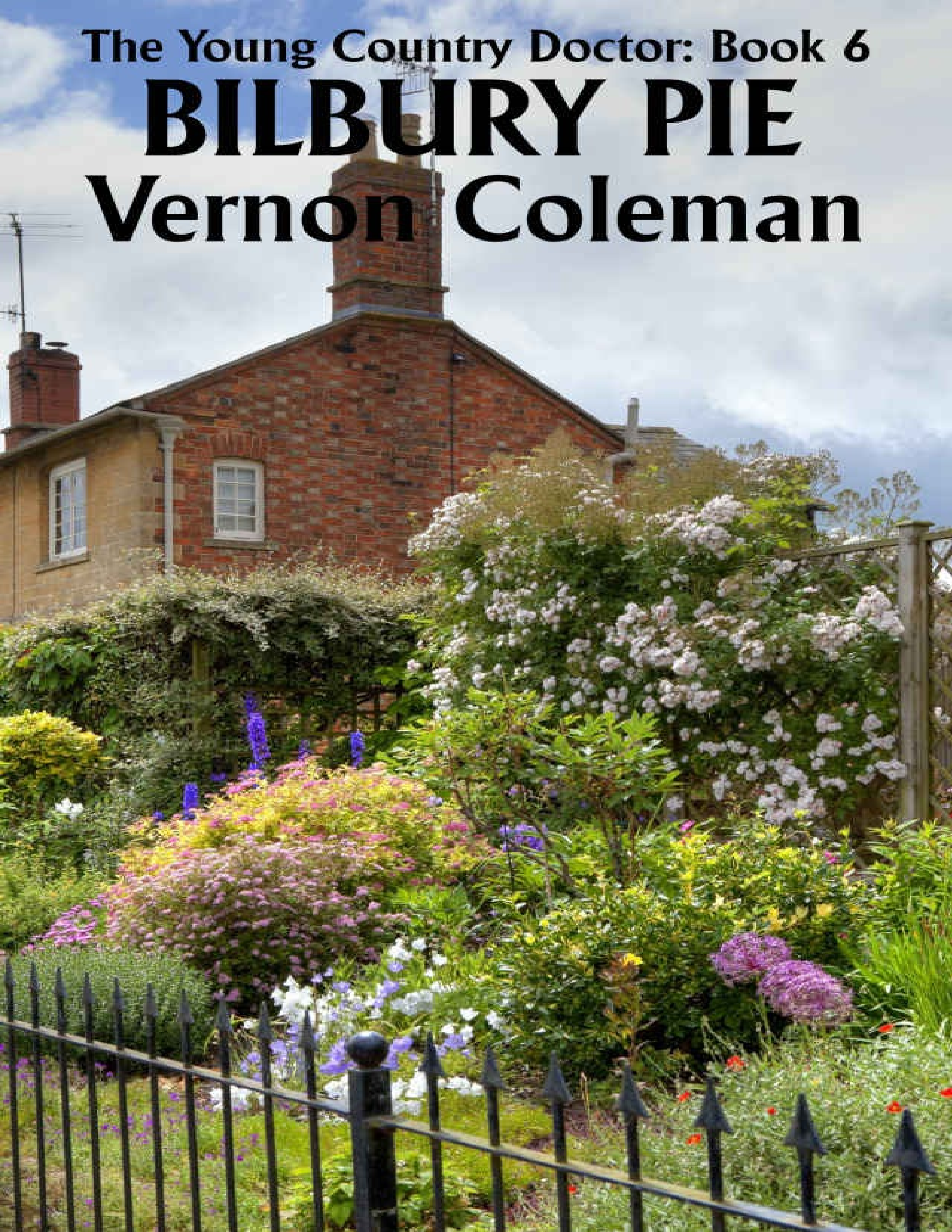

The Young Country Doctor: Book 6

BILBURY PIE

(Tales from the village of Bilbury)

Vernon Coleman

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Bilbury Pie, a collection of short stories, is the sixth of Vernon Coleman's seven books about Bilbury. These are: *Bilbury Chronicles*, *Bilbury Grange, Bilbury Revels, Bilbury Country* and *Bilbury Village*. There are two books of short stories called *Bilbury Pie* and *Bilbury Pudding*. All are available as Amazon Kindle Books. If you enjoy the Bilbury books you may enjoy other books by the same author including *Mr Henry Mulligan*, *Second Innings*, *It's Never Too Late* and *`Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War'*. For full details of over 100 books by Vernon Coleman please see his author page on Amazon or http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

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GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

When old Farmer Henshaw died last Wednesday it seemed to mark the passing of an era. I doubt if we shall ever see his like again.

Farmer Henshaw (I don't think anyone knew his first name and I doubt if anyone in the village would have had the courage to use it even if they had known it for he was not what one would describe as an 'approachable' individual) was no ordinary villager.

In addition to whatever passing memories he has left behind he has, even in death, given us at least one reason to remember him for some time to come.

He is the first person from the village of Bilbury to have been buried standing up.

Throughout his life, Farmer Henshaw loved defending lost causes and championing minority interests. Few things gave him greater pleasure than making bureaucrats look silly. He fought everyone and everything though the fighting was, I suspect, done as much for the battle as for the victory.

He fought hard against the Parish Council's plans to build a new village hall after the Second World War. And then, when the plans were defeated, he helped Norman Jackson prepare the appeal. When the County Council wanted to widen the main road into Bilbury he lay down in front of the bulldozer which was due to take the corner off the copse at Softly's Bottom. Less than eighteen months later he led a petition demanding that the very same road be widened to make it safer!

The instructions in the old man's Will were clear enough, though neither Mr Willoughby, the solicitor who read them out, nor the two Henshaw boys would have been too unhappy if there had been any way of avoiding them.

(The Henshaw boys, both in their sixties but for ever to be known as the Henshaw boys, were always something of an embarrassment to their father. One works as an accountant in London and the other is a solicitor in the north of England. Most fathers would be proud of such sons. But Farmer Henshaw never really got used to the fact that his two sons put on suits when they went to work. In his view no man had a proper job if he could do it without a ball of orange baler twine in his pocket.)

At first the two sons tried to persuade the vicar that it wouldn't be proper to conduct a burial service with the corpse standing upright.

But after the vicar had made some enquiries he told them that there was nothing in the funeral service that said that a dead man had to be buried lying down.

Amos Tweed of Black, Titmarsh and Tweed, the undertakers in Barnstaple, said that he had never known anything like it, but that as long as someone was prepared to pay for designing a new type of coffin and digging a hole that was twice as deep and half as wide as normal he would not object.

So a carpenter was instructed to make the coffin and Peter Marshall from the village shop was hired to spend an extra six hours digging a deep enough hole. When Peter had finished, Thumper Robinson and Frank, the landlord from the Duck and Puddle, had to lift him out with a rope. (Peter was more than a bit miffed about the fact that although he'd had the foresight to pay the Culpepper boy to hang around in the graveyard to go and get help when he needed it, Thumper and Frank left him there for nearly an hour while they finished a game of pool).

Then they had to work out a way to move Farmer Henshaw from the Chapel of Rest to Bilbury Church.

Amos said he didn't think Mr Henshaw would mind being carried lying down but the vicar said he thought that if we were to enter truly into the spirit of Mr Henshaw's Will he should be carried upright, and so Patsy's father had the silage washed off his best tractor and towed the coffin behind on a hay cart.

It made a strange sight. A still rather dirty red tractor pulling an erect coffin followed by the largest entourage of mourners that anyone could remember seeing in Bilbury.

The moment of truth came when the coffin was lowered into the ground. It sank gracefully until coming to rest with a loud thud, the top eighteen inches still protruding over the top of the hole. Peter Marshall reddened visibly and, after the coffin had been unceremoniously hauled up, he was lowered back down into the grave to continue digging. The waiting mourners retreated to the Duck and Puddle.

So, in death Farmer Henshaw was as newsworthy as he had been in life and the story of his burial (and attempted burial) was carried prominently on the front page of the local newspaper. Farmer Henshaw would have been very pleased indeed.

But it was when it came to sorting out the old man's estate that the real fun and games started.

Everyone in the village knew that the old man had been worth a few shillings. At one time his farm had included well over a thousand acres of prime Devon pasture land and Mr Henshaw wasn't a man who enjoyed spending his money. When his two sons were young he used to work them hard all day in the fields and then, to save on housekeeping, give them sixpence each to go to bed without any supper. The next morning he'd get his money back, with interest, by charging them a shilling each for breakfast.

So when the will was read and the two sons found that they'd been left the house and its contents between them and no more than £350 in cash everyone knew that however dead the old farmer was he still had one last trick up his sleeve.

Where, wondered everyone in the village, had old Farmer Henshaw hidden his fortune? We all knew that he was worth more than £350.

For days the two sons searched everywhere they could think of. They searched every room in the house. They searched the barns and they searched the stables and they went up into the attics and they got themselves covered in dirt and dust and rat droppings by scrabbling about underneath the loose floorboards in the ceiling of the old coach house.

They knew that the money wouldn't be in a bank - their father had hated banks - but although they searched high and low they could find nothing of any great value.

Suspecting that the old man might have invested his money in antiques they got an antique dealer to come and inspect all the furniture but there was nothing of value to be found there. The paintings on the walls were cheap daubs, there was no hidden stamp collection and Mr Henshaw's old runabout was no classic car.

For a while the sons suspected that the wallpaper in one of the bedrooms might be original 'William Morris' and there was talk at the Duck and Puddle that they were contemplating bringing in an interior decorator from London to peel it off but then someone pointed out that Mr Henshaw had the room decorated three years earlier and that the wallpaper had been bought in a sale at the ironmongers in Lynton.

Eventually, the two sons gave up, called in an auctioneer and decided to try to make as much as they could out of their inheritance.

The house was packed for the auction. Attracted by the hope of a bargain there were people there from as far away as Torrington, Okehampton and Tiverton. There was even an unsubstantiated rumour that a dealer had come all the way from Exeter to look at Farmer Henshaw's old desk.

Basil Wishbone the auctioneer was hired to organise the sale and the sons couldn't have done better. Basil never misses a trick and had lot numbers pasted on everything that moved or could be unscrewed. Basil once got so carried away that he sold his own jacket, and at one country house auction he is reputed to have sold (separately) two half used bars of soap, half a box of cornflakes, a set of false teeth with a crack in the plate and the letterbox from the front door. He got a good price for them all too.

In the end the auction raised £17,000, which wasn't bad considering that there wasn't anything there which fetched more than £250, and Basil even managed to sell the carpets and the curtains to Tippy Knowles, whose husband runs Blackwater Pond Farm.

It was the curtains which caused the trouble.

When Tippy started to take them down from the curtain rails she found that someone had sewn coins into the hems to hold them straight. She assumed that they were pennies but a flick from Peter Marshall's penknife showed that they were gold.

Old Farmer Henshaw had hidden his fortune in the hems of his curtains. Every single hem contained dozens of sovereigns.

Now, of course, there's a huge row going on.

The two Henshaw sons are insisting that the gold coins are theirs but Tippy and her husband are holding firm and are planning to spend their good fortune just as quickly as they can.

FASHION SHOW

The clock tower of Bilbury church has developed a nasty crack and the vicar has launched a fund to try to raise the £20,000 that the builders estimate the repairs will cost. I have been appointed a member of the fund raising committee and our first event was a fashion show which we held in the village hall.

Our original plan was to find a local dress shop prepared to provide the dresses and a little ready cash in sponsorship money in return for some goodwill and a little advertising. The vicar said that a similar event organised in nearby East Moulton had raised over £100. Gilly, Patsy, Anne and the bathukolpian Kay had all been press ganged to serve as models.

Unfortunately, the only clothes shop in Barnstaple which was prepared to cooperate turned out to be a shop called Flimsies. No one on the committee would admit to having heard of this store which, we discovered, specialised in entirely impractical underwear that no woman would wear if her main intention was to keep warm. Having heard a brief description of the sort of garments involved the committee felt that an advance inspection of the stock was necessary and the vicar and I were appointed to undertake this onerous task.

I had, I confess, seen one or two items of a similar nature in the past (entirely in the course of business you understand) but to the vicar this was entirely uncharted territory.

'What exactly are these?' he asked, holding up several items in black silk that must have weighed no more than an ounce between them. The manageress tried to explain but the vicar was clearly too shocked to take it all in.

'We can't get any of our ladies to wear those things!' he whispered as we hurried away. Sadly, I agreed with him though I felt that in a way it was a pity for if we had been more courageous we would have probably been able to raise our £20,000 in one solitary but glorious evening.

Eventually, we ended up organising a fashion show with clothes supplied entirely out of Mrs Bridgford's Rummage Sale stocks (stored in her garage in a series of large cardboard boxes).

Before the show started we were all overwhelmed by a sense of gloominess which bordered on despair. I had been appointed as announcer for the evening and I was dismayed to discover that Mrs Bridgford had produced from her garage a range of clothes for which the only honest adjectives were 'sensible', 'warm' and 'comfortable'. Everything seemed to be in solid, dark browns or blues and to be made of either serge or tweed. Pockets were invariably 'capacious' or 'spacious' and zips were 'stout' or 'sturdy'.

We made a real effort to overcome our handicap. At Patsy's suggestion everything that relied exclusively upon orange baler twine for fastening was excluded from the show and the vicar used two cans of air freshener to combat the pungent smell of mould which rose like a cloud from each and every garment (though given the fact that the all pervading smell of silage which usually fills the village hall is impossible to defeat this was probably a waste of time).

Kay, our exceptionally buxom district nurse, was the first of our models to step out onto the village hall stage. She wore a pink and grey houndstooth check suit in Harris T weed and an off-white blouse with imitation pearl buttons. Both the jacket and the blouse were several sizes too small for her and there was widespread admiration for the strength of the cotton holding the buttons onto the blouse.

Since I had never sold a pink and grey houndstooth check suit before I had no idea at all what price to ask for it and so I invited offers. Ignoring one or two earthy suggestions which brought a flush to Kay's cheeks and put a twinkle in her eyes (and a blush to the vicars' already ruddy cheeks) I eventually found myself selling the suit and blouse together for £12.50, at least £12 more than I had expected. I found out later that Thumper Robinson and Frank Parsons had kept the bidding going up in ten pence stages in the belief that the longer Kay remained on stage the greater the chance of nature, in the form of Kay's bust, proving too powerful for science, in the form of cotton thread.

And so the fashion show became an auction and by the end of the evening we had raised well over £250 for the church tower restoration fund. As Frank, from the Duck and Puddle, pointed out this means that we now only have £19,750 left to raise.

'What a brilliant idea!' said Mrs Lovelace afterwards. 'Most fashion shows are packed with unwearable nonsense but your clothes were all so *practical!'*

OLD BRASS TAPS

A couple of months ago I arrived at the Duck and Puddle for a medicinal tonic and found Thumper Robinson sitting at one of the outside tables, carefully examining something that looked like an old brass tap. His pick-up truck was parked nearby. An empty pint glass stood on the table in front of him.

‘Do you want me to bring you a drink?’ I called to him, as I approached the pub door.

This was a silly question. Thumper wiped what I could now see really was an old brass bath tap on his jeans, and then casually tossed the tap into a large, stout, cardboard box. Then he grinned at me and nodded. The box, I noticed, was absolutely full of old-fashioned brass taps.

‘Where on earth did all those taps come from?’ I asked him, a few moments later. I put a pint down in front of him, sat myself down opposite him and took a long draught out of my own glass. It was a warm day and I was thirsty. ‘And what the devil are you going to do with them?’

‘They’re from the Gravediggers’ Rest,’ said Thumper, mentioning a local pub in Braunton which we both know well. ‘I’ve been helping to clear out some rubbish for Franklin Mynton. He’s having the place restored.’ Franklin Mynton is the landlord of the Gravediggers’ Rest. He is renowned for his meanness.

I picked one of the taps out of the box. ‘How much did he charge you?’

Thumper looked at me as if I were mad. ‘He paid me to take them away!’ He explained. ‘He just wanted the rubbish clearing out’.

‘They look too good to dump,’ I said, peering down into the box, and rummaging around.

Thumper looked across at me. ‘Who said anything about dumping them?’ he asked, raising a quizzical eyebrow. He lifted his glass and half emptied it in a single, long, smooth movement.

I might have known.

Thumper doesn’t believe in throwing anything away. He and Anne Thwaites live in a tiny cottage on the moors where every outbuilding and barn is stuffed to the rafters with things which just might come in useful one day. Thumper saves everything from old feed bags and leaky watering cans to discarded tractor tyres and dead batteries

I completely forgot about the taps after that. But when I called at their cottage yesterday morning I found Thumper giving the taps a clean with an old rag and a bottle of patented brass cleaner.

‘Are those the same old taps I saw you with at the Duck and Puddle a few weeks ago?’

Thumper looked up at me, grinned and nodded.

I bent down and examined one. ‘I’d hardly recognise them!’

‘Good.’

‘Have you found a buyer?’

‘I’m not cleaning them because I like the smell of polish!’

‘Have you sold them all?’ It seemed strange that Thumper had the good fortune to find someone to buy every one of the taps he had rescued from the Gravediggers’ Rest.

‘Every single one,’ nodded Thumper. ‘I’ve sold them to some fancy interior decorator from London. Clarence or Timothy or something like that.’

‘Good price?’ I asked, though it was a superfluous question. Thumper doesn’t sell anything to anyone from London without making a healthy profit.

Thumper grinned. ‘Good enough,’ he admitted.

‘Lucky he wanted them all!’ I remarked.

‘He’s doing up a pub,’ explained Thumper. ‘They want to make it look really old-fashioned.’

I didn’t put two and two together until a day later. I had to go into Braunton to deliver a pile of old books that I had promised to donate to the Cat Protection League jumble sale and I saw Thumper’s truck parked outside the Gravediggers’ Rest. I sat and watched him lift a box full of shiny, brass bathroom fittings out of the cab and hand them to a lanky, weedy looking individual who wore designer jeans, a ponytail and a pink T-shirt.

As the lanky individual wandered away clutching what he obviously regarded as a precious purchase I wandered over and said ‘Hello!’ to Thumper who was busy counting a very healthy looking wad of notes.

Thumper was clearly surprised to see me. He looked almost embarrassed.

‘Just sold those taps, I see!’

‘Er... yes.’

‘Was that the interior decorator?’

Thumper swallowed hard and nodded.

‘Where did you say he was working?’

Thumper didn’t exactly blush. I don’t think Thumper has the physiological equipment you need to blush. But he got close to it. ‘The mumblemumble mumble.’ he said.

‘Oh, The Gravediggers’ Rest!’ I said, nodding at the pub behind him.

Thumper, who had just sold Franklin Mynton his own taps, grinned sheepishly, winked and put a finger to his lips. ‘Come on,’ he said, ‘I’ll buy you a drink.’ He looked over his shoulder.

‘But not here,’ he added quietly.

THE HORSE RIDE

Although I have lived in the country for many years I have never ridden a horse.

I don't mind patting them and giving them sugar lumps and I am happy to confirm that without horses my rhubarb patch would be but a shadow of its present self but I have always regarded the absence of any clearly defined equine braking system as a discouraging factor. As far as I am concerned if God had intended me to ride a horse he wouldn't have invented the bicycle.

(My scepticism about horse riding as a sensible means of transport is, I suspect, at least partly inspired by an unhappy experience I had on a donkey on Blackpool sands at the age of six. I do not wish to say any more about this experience.)

Last week Thumper, Anne and Patsy all decided that it was about time I abandoned my childhood fears and learned a little about the joys of horse riding. Although this adventure was clearly carefully prearranged, I first heard of it in the Duck and Puddle on Saturday lunchtime.

'Sarah Knowlson at Burnt Oak Farm says we can take four of her horses out over Exmoor for the afternoon,' said Thumper. 'We can take a picnic with us.' Sarah and her husband run a riding school.

I mumbled something about having promised to take Patsy into Exeter.

'Patsy's coming with us,' said Thumper. He looked across at Patsy, who was sipping her usual tomato juice.

Patsy nodded and blushed. 'You'll enjoy it!' she insisted. She looked guilty.

'This is a set up!' I protested.

Patsy had asked me to keep the afternoon free, saying that she wanted to go hunting for a new dress in Exeter.

'We knew it was the only way we would get you on a horse!' said Thumper, grinning broadly.

'What about that dress you wanted to buy?' I asked Patsy.

'It's for Simon and Laura's wedding,' said Patsy. 'And that's not for another three weeks. We can go to Exeter next weekend.'

And so I found myself being press-ganged onto a horse.

I doubt if there has ever been a less enthusiastic prospective equestrian. As I drove to Burnt Oak Farm my one comfort was the thought that having a horse between my legs would at least stop my knees knocking together.

'She's not going to bolt is she?' I asked Thumper as Sarah pointed out the largest, most docile creature in her stables.

'Lettuce could bolt faster than that horse!' Thumper said. 'Put your foot in here...'

With some difficulty and a definite loss of dignity I eventually succeeded in clambering aboard. I was relieved to find that the horse and I were both facing in the same direction but I was surprised to find out how high up I seemed to be. The horse hadn't seemed *that* tall when I'd been standing on the ground. As I gazed around the others leapt onto their horses with sickeningly practised ease.

'Hold the reins like this,' said Patsy. 'And just tap your heel into her flanks when you want her to start moving.'

I looked at her. 'Never mind starting. How do I stop?'

The others looked at me and then at one another. No one said anything.

Very gently and slowly we walked our horses through a meadow and along by a stream. Apart from nearly having my head removed by a branch I didn't think I was doing too badly.

'Let's try trotting!' said Thumper, when we had travelled a couple of hundred yards. 'Just tap your heels like this.' He did something almost indiscernible and his horse shot off like a bullet from a gun. Patsy and Anne followed him. It looked as safe and as inviting as space travel.

I sat still and tried to make sure I didn't move. I was particularly worried about my heels and I tried to keep them well away from my horse. She, however, had a dislike of speed which matched my own. She stopped, lowered her head and started eating.

Once I had got used to the fact that the dashboard had disappeared I didn't mind this at all.

'Come on!' shouted Thumper from half a mile ahead. His horse sprayed clods of earth in all directions as it skidded to a stop and then turned round. 'Dig your heels in!' he shouted.

Thumper's uninhibited enthusiasm reminded me of a ski instructor I once had who ordered me to ski over the edge of a cliff and seemed surprised and disappointed when I responded by deliberately falling over and going down the hill on my bottom. 'Don't you ever get afraid?' I had asked him. 'Afraid?' said the ski instructor with a puzzled look. 'Vot iz dat?' He must have been all of 18-years-old. I kept well away from him after that. I never want to be taught any potentially lethal activity by someone who has neither the imagination nor the experience to understand the consequences of disaster.

'My horse is hungry!' I shouted to Thumper. 'You go on. I'll have to stop here.' Gingerly, I dismounted, wrapped the horse’s reins around a nearby branch (just as I’d seen the cowboys do on the TV), sat down on the grass and took out my sandwiches.

‘What are you doing?’ asked Patsy, laughing, when she and Anne had ridden back to me.

‘We came out for a picnic,’ I said, defiantly. ‘So I’m having a picnic.’

I think one should try most things once.

I’ve tried horse riding.

BLACK ECONOMY

I have recently noticed a considerable increase in the amount of bartering going on in the village.

During the summer I regularly saw our village shopkeeper Peter Marshall swapping loaves of bread, mint humbugs and pipe tobacco for fresh free-range eggs, runner beans and freshly picked strawberries. Frank and Gilly who run our local pub, the Duck and Puddle, have been paying their paper bill with beer for as long as I can remember. Even the vicar has succumbed to the rules of the new rural economy. He told me recently that the going rate for a christening was four pounds of strawberries and that he charged three large sacks of potatoes for a wedding. Thumper told me that when Arthur Jackson was buried, the deceased's brother paid the vicar's funeral bill by repairing the leaky downpipe on the north side of the knave.

The habit of bartering suddenly came close to home this week when Willy Porter, who lives in Nettledown Cottage next to Norman Kendrake's stables, came to the back door to tell me that he could, if I was interested, get me a cartload of fresh horse manure to dig into the vegetable patch at Bilbury Grange.

I'm a firm believer in manure and was immediately interested. Dr Brownlow, who calls manure 'political rhetoric', on the grounds that both come from a horse's rear end, taught me that whether you're growing strawberries, rhubarb or broad beans horse manure beats all known chemical fertilizers hands down. Dr Brownlow has been an organic gardener for a lot longer than organic gardening has been fashionable. Patsy and I have a good supply of used straw from the sheep's stable but you can't beat horse manure.

'How would you like to pay?' Willy asked. In shops this question is usually designed to find out if the customer wishes to pay by cheque, credit card or cash but I had a pretty good idea that neither credit cards nor cheques were likely to feature on Willy's list of possibilities. Cash is as close as Willy likes to get to the banking system.

'What are the alternatives?' I enquired, rather hesitantly.

Like Thumper Robinson and Patchy Fogg, Willy has quite a reputation in Bilbury as something of a wheeler-dealer. I'm never sure how much to trust him. He once brought me a boot load of neatly chopped up firewood that was so badly infested with woodworm that I didn't dare take it into the house. I swear that if you kept still and put your head close to the wood you could hear the worm munching their way through it.

'Three drinking vouchers or lend Norman your mower for a couple of days,' said Willy with a toothless grin. To Willy a drinking voucher is a five pound note.

It sounded an irresistible offer so I knew I had to think about it carefully. The problem with bartering as opposed to paying by cash is that there are no hard and fast exchange rates and there is no real way of knowing whether you've done a good deal or been done yourself. This makes bartering a hazardous business. Once anyone in Bilbury acquires a reputation as a poor judge of a deal, the reward is eternal ridicule and cold contempt. In a more kindly society poor financial judgement might be regarded as hardly more heinous than simple generosity but in Bilbury any man who throws his money around is regarded as a fool. Two years ago a fellow called Rupert Jackson retired to Bilbury with a very healthy bank balance after selling his share of an advertising business in London. Being a naturally generous soul (and accustomed to London wage rates) he willingly paid well over the going rate for work in his house and garden. I warned him that he was over-paying but he didn't seem worried. I think he expected the locals to look upon him as a kindly benefactor. Instead they despised him for damaging the fragile local economy, hated his ostentatious wealth and treated him with contempt which they made no attempt to hide whenever he ventured into the Duck and Puddle. After nine months he sold up and went back to London.

'Delivered?' I asked.

Willy grinned and nodded. He knew the deal was on.

'O.K.,' I said. 'But Norman can only have the mower for one day. Or I want two loads of manure.'

Willy beamed at me. Five minutes later we had hammered out a deal. So, I have now become a part of the village black economy. Each day living in Bilbury becomes more and more like living in an Arab bazaar. If only we had their weather.

TALL STORY

I was standing having a quiet drink with Thumper Robinson when two men I had never seen before came into the Duck and Puddle. The taller of the two wore a flat cap with a well thumbed peak. He limped slightly. Both men were in their sixties.

They ordered drinks and then took them to a quiet corner of the pub where they sat down together. The man who wore the cap took out a small wooden board and a pack of cards. The pair then quietly began a game of cribbage. It is years since I saw anyone play cribbage in a pub.

'That's Terry Collins,' murmured Thumper, who was standing next to me at the bar.

'Who's Terry Collins?'

'The guy in the cap.'

'But who *is* he?' I was puzzled. By the way Thumper had murmured his name I gathered that the stranger was something of a local celebrity.

'He shot down a German bomber during the war,' said

Thumper.

'He was in the RAF?'

Thumper shook his head. 'He wanted to join but they wouldn't have him. He lost both legs in an accident when he was a kid.'

'So, how did he come to shoot down a plane during the war?'

'He was out hunting for rabbits one night when he looked up and saw a bomber overhead,' replied Thumper. 'There was a full moon and the plane was flying low enough for him to see the swastika on the wings. The pilot was having engine trouble and had got separated from his mates somewhere over Dorset. He was lost.'

'And Terry Collins shot it down?'

'With his shotgun,' Thumper told me. 'It was a lucky direct hit on the plane's one good engine. The pilot managed to land on the moors and he was captured two days later. Terry painted a small plane on the stock of his shotgun.'

I was very impressed.

'So, who's the chap with him?' I asked Thumper.

'That's the pilot,' said Thumper. 'Klaus Hoffman. He never went home. He was in a prisoner of war camp until the end of the war and then he got a job as a translator for a technical publisher in Exeter.'

I looked across at the two men. To the casual observer they looked like a couple of very ordinary farmers having a quiet evening drink.

'What are they doing here?' I asked Thumper.

'They've probably been buying cattle at the Blackmoor Gate auction,' Thumper told me. 'They run a small farm near Tiverton now.'

'Together?'

Thumper nodded.

'That's amazing!'

Thumper looked at his watch. 'I must be going,' he said. 'I told Anne I'd be home an hour ago.' He finished his drink, grinned and waved a cheery goodbye.

'Astonishing about those two, isn't it?' I muttered to Frank, the landlord, when Thumper had gone.

Frank looked puzzled. 'What do you mean?'

'You wouldn't think there was anything special about them would you?'

Frank shook his head.

'I'd like to meet them,' I said. 'Do you think they'd mind if I went over?'

'What on earth do you want to meet them for?' demanded Frank, clearly puzzled.

'Thumper was telling me their story,' I explained. 'About the war and so on. I'd like to write about them.'

'I don't know what Thumper's been telling you,' said Frank.

'But those two didn't have a very interesting war. Hubert spent it in the catering corps in Aldershot. Ralph was in the Home Guard.'

'But one of them is German,' I mumbled, 'and one of them has artificial legs. They wouldn't let him in the RAF... I saw him limp when he came in.'

'The tall one? Is that what Thumper told you?'

I nodded.

'That's Hubert. He's got arthritis in his knee. That's why he limps.'

‘Don’t they have a farm together near Tiverton?’

Frank grinned and shook his head. ‘They’re both VAT inspectors. They’ve been out here giving Peter Marshall his usual three monthly grilling.’

I truly hate it when Thumper does that. One of these days I’ll get my own back on him.

FREE WHEELING ON EXMOOR

Too many people who live in the country seem to take the beauty of their surroundings for granted, only ever seeing the varying beauty of the countryside through their car windows. I know people who have lived in North Devon all their lives who have never walked on the cliff tops at Mortehoe, never watched the buzzards circling high above the moors in Lorna Doone country and never walked along the banks of the river Lyn to Rockford.

It is too easy to become blasé about the wonders of this world though this is not, of course, a fault which is unique to those who live in the country. There are probably people living in Paris who have never walked across the Pont Neuf by moonlight, never picnicked in the Place des Voges and never wandered through the Marais on a Sunday morning.

Although I made a deliberate choice to live in Bilbury because I love it I spend too much of my life sitting behind a desk. I am therefore always ready to seize the opportunity to go outside and to enjoy the wonderful, calming nature of this very beautiful part of the world.

Last Saturday Patsy, Anne, Thumper and I put the clocks back twenty years and went cycling on Exmoor. Neither Thumper nor Anne had bicycled for years and they had to borrow old bicycles which had been rusting away in the shed behind the Duck and Puddle.

We drove out onto the road between Simonsbath and Lynton, parked Thumper's old Ford pick-up truck on the wide verge near Brendon Two Gates and set off onto the most romantic, most alluring moorland anywhere in the kingdom.

As we wobbled off along a dusty moorland track and headed towards Hoccombe Hill it took Thumper and Anne several hundred yards to gain the confidence they'd had as children. (It took them a little further to discover how to operate the rather rusty gears on their mounts).

But within a few minutes they had remembered just how joyful bicycle riding can be away from the traffic and with only the ponies, the cattle and the deer of Exmoor for company.

We pedalled up steep and rocky, rutted narrow paths, we coasted at breakneck speed down grassy, rock strewn slopes and we explored the heather of Brendon Common, Badgworth Hill and Malmsmead country; the ever romantic, constantly alluring backdrop for R. D. Blackmore's spectacular Lorna Doone saga.

We saw dippers and wagtails and buzzards. We watched plump partridge struggle into the air and we admired the shaggy, prehistoric looking cattle which browse alongside the Exmoor ponies among the heather. No cars, no queues, no charge for admission.

We splashed our sweaty hands and faces with water from a crystal clear stream and ate lunch in the sunshine with our backs leaning against a moss covered dry stone wall. Fresh crusty bread from the local bakers, still soft and warm inside; hunks of farm-made cheese; crisp, juicy English apples and home-baked scones, hardly cool yet from Anne's oven. We dozed and watched the birds and like children on a day out told each other tall stories of our narrow escapes among the ruts and rocks of the paths we had explored.

Afterwards we cycled back up and over Malmsmead Hill, towards Withycombe Ridge and finally to Farley Water; splashing through shallow puddles and racing one another along narrow sheep paths. Exhausted but relaxed and content we got back to Thumper's pick-up truck just as the day was beginning to cool and the sun was starting to set.

Back in Bilbury we called in at the Duck and Puddle for a drink.

'Someone was trying to get you this morning!' said Frank, scrabbling around under the bar for the note he had made.

'They called two or three times!' he added, finally finding and handing me a scrap of paper with a London telephone number written on it.

People I know often leave messages for me at the Duck and Puddle but I didn't recognise the number the caller had left. 'Did they leave a message?'

Frank shook his head but handed me the telephone. I dialed the number.

'It's Henry,' said a voice I recognised, 'where the hell have you been?' Henry is a friend who lives on the outskirts of London. Hampstead. Finchley. Islington. One of those brick road-car-noise-dirt-stress places. 'You've missed a wonderful opportunity,' he told me. 'We had spare tickets for a Post Modernist Art Display at the National Gallery. You could have come.'

'I was out,' I said.

'You miss all the good things - being buried down there in the middle of nowhere!' said Henry.

'Oh no I don't!' I thought.

But I didn't tell Henry what I'd been doing. I didn't think he would understand.

VILLAGE IDIOT

A generation or two ago every village had its idiot and every village idiot had to put up with all sorts of cruel ragging. These days we like to think that we are more compassionate and less openly hurtful but I have my doubts about that. It may be that village idiots are no longer openly laughed at but deep down our society is just as thoughtless as it ever was. My despair and my anger are fuelled each day by sad, new stories of prejudice, ignorance and abuse.

Take Michael, for example. He is 25-years-old and he is what society now calls educationally subnormal. He can read a few simple words and he can sign his name but books, magazines and newspapers are a mystery to him.

But what Michael lacks in intellect, he more than makes up for in compassion and in spiritual strength. There is a gentle simplicity to his world and I sometimes envy him his black and white values.

Michael lives on the Lynton side of Bilbury with his brother, Tom and his sister-in-law, Elspeth. His brother has a small farm and Michael helps to look after the animals. He has a way with four legged creatures. They trust him.

Although his father is dead, Michael's mother lives in Newton Abbott and for as long as I can remember it has been his simple ambition to travel down to the south of the county to see her by himself. Last week I met Tom and he asked if I thought Michael could manage the journey by himself. 'He keeps on about it,' explained Tom. 'And I keep thinking of excuses. But do you think he'd be able to manage it?'

I said I thought he would. There is a bus service from Lynton to Tiverton and a good train service from Tiverton to Newton Abbott. And Michael's mother's flat is no more than a quarter of a mile from the Newton Abbott station.

So, last Tuesday was chosen as Michael's big day. Tom and his wife took Michael to the bus station and Thumper, Anne, Patsy and I turned out to give him a cheery wave. Elspeth had made a huge pile of sandwiches and wrapped them in greaseproof paper and Michael clutched them to his chest as he waited for the bus. He had a flask of coffee with him too and its sweet and milky smell filled the air around him. I don't think I have ever seen any man so dignified. He looked proud and excited as he waited for his adventure to begin.

'Have you got your money?' asked Tom, who was clearly apprehensive.

Michael nodded, pushed his left hand deep into his trouser pocket and pulled out a battered black leather purse. He started to unfasten it but Tom put out a hand to stop him.

'When you get on the train just sit down and stay there. Don't move about.'

Michael nodded to show that he understood.

'He'll be fine,' whispered Elspeth. She reached out and squeezed her husband's hand. It was a big day for them all.

Two minutes later the bus drove out of sight with Michael waving furiously from the back window. We stood together and waved him goodbye.

By chance I happened to be in Lynton again a few hours later and to my surprise I saw Tom driving by with Michael sitting beside him. Michael, who should have been in Newton Abbott, was in tears.

I telephoned Tom as soon as I got home.

'What happened to Michael?'

'He got on the train at Tiverton without any problem,' said Tom. He sounded tired and depressed. 'But the guard had him taken off the train at Exeter and the police rang me to go and fetch him.'

'What on earth happened?'

'He bought an ordinary return ticket but got into a first class compartment by mistake,' explained Tom. 'He didn't know there were two types of ticket so when the guard shouted at him he got confused. He said I'd told him that he wasn't to move until the train got to Newton Abbott. When the train stopped at Exeter they called the police and had him thrown off the train.' Tom sighed. 'The guard said that four smartly dressed businessmen from London had complained that they hadn't paid the extra to share their first class carriage with a drivelling idiot and so he had to do something.'

Poor Michael. I felt anger as well as sadness when I first heard this tale. I still feel anger and sadness now.

THE GENERATOR

Like most local farmers, Thomas Yattenden has a generator in his barn so that on those occasions when Bilbury is deprived of electricity he can still milk his cows, prepare his animal feed stuffs and see where he is going and what he is doing on dark winter mornings.

Last month Thomas replaced his 20-year-old generator with a brand new, state of the art model that is designed to switch on automatically the moment the supply from the national grid switches off.

Thomas was immensely proud of his new toy and he insisted on taking us all round to look at it.

'Just watch this!' he said, flicking his mains electricity switch into the 'off' position. The lights dimmed for an instant and then brightened quickly as the wonderful new generator burst into action.

'Marvellous, isn't it?' purred Thomas. There was much murmuring of appreciation and Thumper and I applauded quietly.

Just then the generator stuttered, coughed and stopped and the lights went out. One of the essential laws of thermodynamics is that machinery will always break down at the most inconvenient and embarrassing moment and Thomas, although not inconvenienced, was certainly embarrassed.

'Just give it a kick!' said Thumper, who has a sensitive feeling for all mechanical and electrical equipment.

Thomas shook his head sagely. 'I can't do that,' he said. 'This is sensitive equipment. I've got a number to call in Exeter. There's probably a loose connection somewhere.'

The man who came out from the supplier in Exeter arrived in next to no time in a van which had a flashing amber light on the roof. I've known ambulances take longer. He certainly looked very impressive. He brought with him a huge box of tools, an inch thick manual and a variety of testing equipment. He had screwdrivers which lit up like fairy lights, multicoloured gadgets that beeped and burped and a pair of neat blue overalls with his name emblazoned on the breast pocket. A row of coloured screwdriver tops poked out from his pocket.

He could find nothing wrong with the generator and announced, with some regret, that he would have to arrange for a technician from London to come and take a look.

'I suppose that means I'm going to be without my generator for a month,' said Thomas wearily.

'Oh, no, sir!' said the technician from Exeter. 'Our man from London will be here tomorrow.'

And he was, too.

He came in an even bigger van with an even bigger amber flashing light and even more equipment. He wore a smart three piece blue suit instead of blue overalls and he had a row of pens instead of screwdrivers in his pocket. He had his name printed neatly on a small, white plastic name badge that was pinned to his suit lapel.

He spent a whole day on the generator and seemed, so Thomas later told us, to have completely rebuilt the whole thing.

But he couldn't make it work, either, and although Thomas was impressed with the quality of service he was receiving he was getting a bit fed up with the fact that his expensive generator didn't work.

'We'll have to get someone over from the manufacturers in Germany,' said the man from London. He telephoned London on the radio phone in his van and made the arrangements. 'One of their top design specialists will be here tomorrow,' he told Thomas. 'I'll stay overnight. I'd like to find out what the trouble is.'

And so the next morning there was quite a crowd waiting at Thomas's farm when the German expert arrived. There was Thomas, and the technician from Exeter and the man from London and Thumper and Frank from the pub and Peter Marshall. I was there too, of course.

The German expert came by plane and train and taxi and arrived at about mid day. He was very casually dressed in a pair of beige slacks and an open necked shirt and he carried a small overnight bag with him. He had no tools and no overalls and no name badge. He grinned a lot and shook hands with everyone, walked over to the generator and, before anyone quite realised what he was doing, gave it an almighty kick.

The generator burst into life instantly and purred like a contented cat.

'When they're new they sometimes need a bit of help starting,' he said in faultless English. 'Shall we have a nice cup of tea now?'

TROPHIES

Lionel won the Club Trophy at Kentisbury Golf Club last month and he has been unbearable ever since.

He came into the Duck and Puddle with the trophy cradled carefully in his arms and stood there nursing it for twenty minutes while Thumper, Frank and I had one of our occasional philosophical arguments.

Thumper had started the argument by claiming that a couple of years ago there used to be a sign on Lynmouth beach which said: ‘Do not throw stones at this notice’. Nothing else. Just ‘Do not throw stones at this notice.’

Frank said that even the council wouldn’t be so daft as to put up such a stupid sign but Thumper said that he’d seen the sign himself.

Then Frank said that he’d probably *thought* it had said that but that Thumper’s memory had undoubtedly been distorted by prejudice and wishful thinking and alcohol.

And that is when it all got very philosophical.

Thumper said that what people remember is the truth and that history is simply what people believe. He said the facts don’t really matter at all.

Frank snorted and said that this was nonsense and that history wasn’t history unless people could prove it had happened, so Thumper asked him if Danny Jenkins had really been arrested for tying the back bumper of a police car to one of the poles holding up the refreshment tent at the Agricultural Show in Exeter. Frank said yes, that was history and so Thumper asked him how he could prove it and Frank said he thought it was time we all had another drink.

‘Let me get them!’ said Lionel, putting his very conspicuous trophy down on the bar and pulling out his wallet.

‘That’s a nice trophy!’ said Frank, rising to the bait for the sake of a pint. ‘What did you get that for?’

With considerable pride Lionel explained. The three of us listened with rapidly diminishing patience as he explained how he’d escaped from a bunker at the 7th, used a niblick to put his second within a foot of the pin on the 10th and drilled a drive straight down the fairway on the 14th. It was tedious stuff made even more tedious by the fact that none of us understood what he was talking about.

‘I’ll loan you the trophy for display!’ said Lionel, accepting his change.

‘Oh no, I couldn’t!’ said Frank, who clearly didn’t want his pub cluttered up with Lionel’s ugly silver plated trophy.

‘No problem!’ insisted Lionel, sticking the trophy in between a small plastic model of Johnnie Walker and a collecting box for a Donkey Sanctuary.

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Lionel is normally only an occasional visitor to the Duck and Puddle but for the last four weeks he hasn’t missed an opportunity to call in for a drink and every time he’s been in the pub he has insisted on telling someone how he won his trophy.

We have all come to loathe the bunker at the 7th for allowing him to escape and our combined hatred of the hummock on the 17th fairway which bounced his ball back into play would be quite enough to turn any ordinary hummock bright red with embarrassment.

But I think our ordeal may now be over.

Yesterday lunchtime Thumper arrived at the pub clutching a large sack which clattered ominously as he dropped it down onto the floor beside the bar. Without waiting for any questions he reached into the sack and pulled out an enormous range of cups and trophies.

‘Brought you my cups, Frank!’ said Thumper, lining his tarnished silver ware up along every available piece of shelf space.

‘What on earth...,’ began Frank. ‘Where did you get all those?’

Lionel, who was as usual sitting close to his trophy, ready to describe the way he had won it to any newcomers, said nothing but stared open-mouthed at Thumper’s impressive collection.

‘There’s a story behind every one,’ said Thumper cheerily. ‘I’ll start telling my sporting history tonight!’ He picked up one small trophy and cradled it lovingly. ‘Mid Devon Open Darts Challenge Match 1967,’ he said, reading out the inscription on the small plaque screwed to the trophy’s sun-faded wooden plinth. He turned to Lionel. ‘Being a sporting man you’ll be interested in this!’

Lionel made gargling noises and looked at his watch. ‘I really must be off,’ he said. He muttered something about another appointment.

‘Where the hell did you get all those?’ I asked Thumper when Lionel had gone. ‘Did you really win them?’

Thumper laughed. ‘Of course I didn’t. I bought the lot for two quid at a house auction in Torrington this morning.’

JACK POND

Jack Pond is 35-years-old and schizophrenic. He lives with his mother and father in one of a short row of whitewashed terraced cottages down near Softly's Bottom.

Many people are frightened of schizophrenics. They assume that all patients with this disease are dangerous, potential killers.

But the truth, of course, is that most schizophrenics are quiet, peaceful, innocent and entirely harmless. Their torment exists solely inside their own heads and they are rarely of any danger to anyone except themselves.

Jack is probably the most harmless person you could ever hope to meet. I doubt if he has ever had an aggressive thought in his life, though for years he has been tortured by feelings of self doubt and the suffering he has caused himself is incalculable.

Jack has never had a proper job. He has worked on one or two farms during the summer months but he is nervous of animals and because he is rather forgetful no one likes him to be too close to any of the machinery so his usefulness as a farm labourer is limited.

'He tries hard and he wants to be useful,' said one farmer. 'But I don't have the time to keep an eye on him and a modern farm is a potentially dangerous place.'

Six months ago Jack's life changed when he was offered a job in a specially run small factory which had been set up in a nearby town by a group of volunteers. The small charity running the factory believed that by giving people jobs they could help build up their self-esteem and self-confidence. They wanted to find regular work for people like Jack who couldn't hold down a proper job and so, with the aid of a small legacy, they bought a lease on a small factory unit and got contracts to do a variety of light, routine industrial work - the sort of work that is often done by people working at home. Packing small toys in boxes. Screwing grommets to grommets. Putting twenty screws in a plastic envelope. That sort of thing.

Jack loved his new job. He had to get up at six every morning in order to get to the factory and his pay packet was only ever very light but he enjoyed his work very much for it gave him a real sense of purpose.

Instead of spending his days watching television he spent them with new friends. He took great pride in doing the simple tasks he was given with skill and speed. The hospital consultant looking after him told me with some surprise that he had never seen Jack behave so normally. He said that he was thinking of reducing Jack's daily medication.

Jack's job even had a tremendous influence on his social life. Together with a few of the other men at the factory Jack formed a football club. They didn't play in any formal league but they met every Sunday morning and played a fast, enthusiastic and surprisingly physical game on a public pitch.

And twice, Jack went out to the cinema with a girl he met at the factory.

But now Jack no longer has a job.

A team of social workers swooped on the factory a couple of weeks ago and decided that because Jack and his friends were vulnerable and were being paid very little they were being exploited. They recognised that the people running the factory were doing so with no intention of making a profit. And they acknowledged that without the factory Jack and his friends would, once again, be left with purposeless lives. But the officials insisted that the factory must close.

Jack does not understand. He is now very depressed. He is depressed because he has lost his independence. He is depressed because he has lost his weekly pay packet. He is depressed because his life no longer has a sense of purpose. He is depressed because he fears that he will lose touch with the friends with whom he used to play football on Sunday mornings. And he is depressed because he fears that since he will not see her during the day time his relationship with his new girlfriend will fade. Besides, without his pay packet he won't have the money for bus fares or cinema tickets.

He is not, I am afraid, at all grateful to the social workers who want to stop him being 'exploited'.

THE FAMILY MAN

I shared a flat with Tim Leyton when we were both at medical school and he was, without a doubt, the most exciting, unpredictable and stimulating individual I'd ever met. So, when I got a note from him asking if he and his family could come down to the West Country for a few days I was absolutely delighted.

'You'll love him!' I told Patsy and Thumper in the Duck and Puddle that evening. 'He's the wildest, maddest fellow I've ever met!' I told them about the time that he had been stranded in the centre of the city, long after the buses had stopped running and without enough money to pay for a taxi. Tim had simply walked into the bus station, climbed aboard a doubledecker and driven himself home in it. The next morning we all awoke to find a large, blue number 57 bus parked outside our flat.

It was Tim, I remembered, who had persuaded the rest of us to help him put a mini car belonging to one of the consultant surgeons on top of the flat roof of the nurses' home. The consultant had to hire a crane to get his car back.

And it was Tim who somehow managed to move a council grit bin (complete with a full complement of grit) from its natural roadside habitat into the reception area of the maternity home.

Not wanting to frighten them too much I didn't tell them about the day that Tim used a fire hose and twelve packets of orthopaedic cement to turn the matron's kitchenette into a swimming pool. Nor did I mention the day that he and the senior anaesthetist's wife were found together absolutely stark naked in the linen cupboard on the men's surgical ward. Tim was the sort of medical student you read about in books and I awaited his arrival rather nervously.

He and his family arrived with us last Tuesday in a four-year-old muddy brown Volvo estate car, and the moment I saw him I knew that Tim was not the man he had been. He wore a slightly crumpled blue suit that made him look like an unsuccessful insurance salesman. He smiled at me nervously and we shook hands rather formally. His wife, Myrtle, wore horn-rimmed glasses, a sensible skirt and an equally sensible jumper. She had the sort of shape you associate with chutney and PTA meetings. And they were accompanied by an assortment of children of various ages.

'Do you mind if I just make a phone call?' asked Tim, while Myrtle tried to persuade some of the children to stop screaming.

'No funny business with ink or super glue!' I warned him, with a wink. He frowned for a moment, looking puzzled. 'I just need to ring one of my partners,' he explained. 'We're having the surgery rewired and I want to remind them to put an extra socket in my consulting room.'

I went into the living room. Myrtle had turned on the television set and she and the children were watching a cartoon programme.

'Shall we pop round to the Duck and Puddle?' I asked when Tim had finished on the telephone.

He looked puzzled.

'The pub!' I explained.

'Oh!' Tim looked across at his wife, rather nervously. 'We don't like to take the children into pubs,' he said.

We all sat down and watched the television. A two dimensional rabbit was chasing a two dimensional dog down an apparently endless road. The children seemed to like it and it kept them quiet.

'It's kind of you to put us up,' said Myrtle. 'We're having a conservatory built onto the house so we're trying to economise on holidays.'

We sat for another hour or so watching the television. Several times I tried to begin a conversation but I've had more fun talking to Jehovah's witnesses. All Tim and Myrtle wanted to talk about was children, private schools, double glazing, the price of soap powder and the mortgage rate.

In the end I felt that I had to get out of the house. 'Is there anywhere you want to go?' I asked. 'Anything you'd like to see?'

Tim looked up. 'I think we're all O.K. here, thank you.' He had opened and was reading a copy of the European Medical Journal that he'd brought with him. Myrtle was reading one of the supplements from the previous Sunday's paper.

I stood up. 'I'll just pop to the shop and get some bread,' I lied. 'I'll come with you,' said Patsy quickly.

'Has your wild chum arrived?' asked Thumper, when Patsy and I walked into the Duck and Puddle.

'We had to escape,' I grinned. 'I must be getting old. I can't stand the pace any more.'

THE TRAMP

Geoffrey the tramp had been a part of Barnstaple for several years. As much as a fixture as the Pannier Market or Butchers’ Row.

He lived rough; spending his days prowling the streets on the look-out for bits and pieces of useful debris and his nights curled up in a cardboard box. I never saw him begging but if people offered him money he would accept the gesture with a gentle graciousness. He had a long beard flecked with grey and wore a brown tweed overcoat. Even in summer you could hear him wheezing like an out of condition water pump.

Once, I chased away a few youths who had gathered around to make fun of him. Some time last winter someone poured petrol onto his cardboard home and set fire to it. Geoffrey suffered severe bums and was lucky to survive. Where does such cruelty come from?

A couple of weeks ago I realised that Geoffrey had not been around for a while. Concerned and curious I made a few enquiries.

‘We found him dead in a building society doorway,’ an unconcerned policeman told me. ‘He’d been beaten and kicked to death.’

I felt sadness, anger and despair in almost equal mixtures. ‘Who did it?’

The policeman shrugged. ‘No idea. Kids probably.’

‘Why?’ I couldn’t understand it. ‘He couldn’t have had anything worth stealing.’

‘Probably just for fun.’

‘For *fun?’*

No one seemed to care very much. In death, as in life, Geoffrey had passed by unnoticed. No one will mourn his passing. No one will seek revenge for his loss. There will be no recriminations. This is the twentieth century. Civilisation.

I wondered what sort of man he was, how he had come to end his days sleeping in a cardboard box and what sorrows, despair, frustrations and unhappinesses had ruled his life. I have spent much of the week doing a little detective work.

Geoffrey was born in Wolverhampton in 1942 and although his childhood seems to have been uneventful, the first half of his adult life was extremely successful. He loved motor cars and was a brilliant mechanic. He built up a very successful garage business. At the age of 27 he married and, at his wife’s insistence, sold the garage and bought a fast food franchise. His wife didn’t like the motor car business. She thought it rather ‘dirty’ and ‘low class’.

All went well for ten years. Geoffrey got richer and his wife gave birth to two children. He bought a large house with two garages, a swimming pool and a tennis court and expanded his business. The dream finally soured when his wife took a fancy to a young solicitor whom she had met at her tennis club. She announced that she wanted a divorce.

Although he was guiltless Geoffrey freely offered to give her the house. But it wasn’t enough. She wanted money. Her young solicitor lover insisted that Geoffrey turn all his business interests into cash. It wasn’t a good time to sell and the bank took most of Geoffrey’s share of the proceeds.

With the small sum that was left over, Geoffrey bought an old van and started again; living in a rented flat several miles from the smart home he’d had to sell. He couldn’t afford the equipment he had needed to set up a restaurant, so he parked in a lay-by and sold hot dogs and hamburgers to lorry drivers. He was happy to have the work and his customers were satisfied. For a while it looked as though he would survive.

Then, one morning Geoffrey woke to find a letter from his wife’s solicitor on his doormat. She had found out about his new business and she wanted her share of the income.

Geoffrey left his rented flat, abandoned his van and headed south. Through some primeval instinct he headed for North Devon where he had spent many happy childhood holidays. Ilfracombe. Combe Martin. Lynmouth. The names drew him to them as surely as a lamp will attract a fluttering moth. Geoffrey arrived in Devon with no possessions and no money. He had only sadness in his heart. He just wanted to get away. To hide. To forget and to be forgotten. And the rest is now history.

Geoffrey was still a young man when he died. I wonder how many of the people who passed his cardboard home ever even wondered about the tragedy behind the man.

PROGRESS

I had lunch last Tuesday at the Gravediggers' Rest in Braunton. I confess I don't normally stray so far from Bilbury but I went at the invitation of a friend of mine called Ed Hunter whom I hadn't seen for quite some time.

Ed is a Director of Human Resources for an American company and he normally works in a city where the traffic jams are endless and the air so polluted that breathing is a dangerous business.

(To be honest I still get confused by phrases such as 'Director of Human Resources', though I know that such jargon is all the rage these days. I have heard army spokesmen refer to dead bodies as 'non effective combat personnel'. On the radio, I heard a housewife described as a 'life support consultant'. People over sixty are no longer 'old'. These days they are 'chronologically enhanced'. Dwarves are 'vertically challenged' and tall people are 'vertically enhanced'. Ed once told me that no one who works for his company is ever made redundant these days. Instead they have to endure 'management initiated separation'. I think I'd rather be sacked.)

Ed has always been a bit gadget conscious and was the first person I know to have a portable phone. Sadly, however, his gadgets don't always work. I know for a fact that he has not been able to put his car away in his garage since he had an electrical opening device fitted. His garage now resolutely resists all attempts to persuade it to open and his car stands out in all weathers.

Ed pulled a small computer out of his pocket as we sat down. He couldn't wait to tell me all about it. 'It's brilliant!' he enthused. He always gets excited about his new gadgets. 'It's an electronic notebook, diary and calculator all rolled into one.' Like most city folk he always thinks that just because I live in the country I live a primitive, rather backward existence. He pressed a couple of buttons and showed me my initials and telephone number on the computer's tiny screen.

'There you are!' he said, triumphantly. He suddenly sniffed as though his nose had been assaulted by some noxious smell. 'What's that?' he demanded.

I sniffed too. I couldn't smell anything.

I am not over keen on computers. I have an enduring suspicion that much of the time they offer answers to problems people don't have and wouldn't be bothered about solving even if they knew they had them. My idea of high technology is having a rubber fixed on the end of my pencil. I put my hand in my pocket, pulled out my old-fashioned pocket diary (29 pence in the January sales), opened it and showed my friend his name, address and telephone number.

'It's quicker my way,' I pointed out.

'You're such a Luddite,' he exclaimed. 'You'll have to buy another diary next year. My computer comes complete with a 199 year diary.'

I looked at him in quiet amazement. 'Why do you want a diary for 199 years?'

He had the good grace to look slightly uncomfortable.

'What appointments do you have for the year 2087?' I teased him.

He muttered something about long-term strategic planning and then wagged a finger at me. 'My little gadget will tell me the time in 126 different places all over the world.'

'How many places can you be in at any one time?' I wanted to know, genuinely confused and unable to discern a purpose for this excess of knowledge.

Ed was beginning to get angry. 'Now you're just being deliberately difficult,' he said. He tapped away at his tiny keyboard. 'There!' he said proudly, a few moments later, showing me his tiny screen. 'I've written myself a memo. When I get back to the office I can copy that out.'

He sniffed again. 'Are you *sure* you can't smell anything odd?'

I pulled a 20 pence notebook out of my pocket, found a stub of pencil and scribbled a memo to myself. As I scribbled I realised what the smell was. Silage. My shoes always smell of silage.

'Me too!' I countered, showing him my note.

'But your diary and your notepad are so ...,' he paused, searching for the right words, 'old-fashioned'.

'I know. And cheap.'

He suddenly bent forwards and peered at his new toy. He looked worried.

'What's the matter?'

'I don't know,' he said. He turned the computer round and showed me an empty screen. 'I think the battery might have gone.'

I offered him my notepad. 'Do you want to make a note to get yourself a new battery?'

THE SHY ROCK STAR

His face appears on millions of record covers and on thousands of posters. Every night several hundred thousand young girls (and some quite a number of not so young women) say ‘goodnight’ to him when they go to bed. Once a year he goes on tour to America, France, Germany and Japan and his concerts around the world are sold out within hours of the tickets going on sale. Last year the group of which he is a member earned rather more than Wales.

Despite all this success he lives in Bilbury in total obscurity. Without his long, blond wig and flamboyant clothes he is never recognised. He drives an old, beaten up, muddy Land Rover and invariably wears wellington boots, a green waxed coat and a flat cap with a grubby peak. He lives in two small silver miners’ cottages which were knocked into one half a dozen years ago by a local builder. He has a horse and a Great Dane and shares his life with a good looking, plumpish girl who always wears tight fitting blue jeans and dark coloured sweaters.

I’m not going to tell you his real name (which is the name he uses in Bilbury) or his stage name (which you would recognise instantly) because he works hard at keeping the two parts of his life quite separate.

He has lived in Bilbury long enough to be a part of the village and he gives of his time quite freely. Last summer he helped Thumper and me clear the village pond; spending two days up to his waist in stagnant water and helping to fill the skip we had to hire to carry away the old bicycle frames, pushchairs, prams, flat irons and pieces of motor car which had been dumped in the water. (We even unearthed two shopping trolleys despite the fact that the nearest supermarket is probably across the Bristol Channel!)

Most people in show business pretend to want privacy but then do everything they possibly can to ensure that their private lives are made public. ‘People who buy houses in Marbella and spend their free time going to nightclubs and beach parties don’t have any right to complain if they find themselves being chased by photographers.’ says Bilbury’s gentle rock star.

He claims that public figures who cavort in public places have abandoned their right to privacy and argues that anyone who wants a private and peaceful life can have one easily if only he (or she) is prepared to find their Bilbury and then spend time living there.

‘Most of us dress ourselves up so much when we’re working that we’re virtually unrecognisable when we’re not on stage,’ he says. ‘And people who don’t work in disguise could easily change their appearances enough to enable them to escape from journalists and photographers if they really wanted to.’ He is living testimony to the truth of this assertion. On stage he is wild, unkempt and even frightening. Off stage he is shy, retiring and inconspicuous.

‘Surgeons don’t wander around dressed in gown and mask when they are at home,’ he points out. ‘When I’m working I dress up and put lots of make-up on. When I’m not working I’m a different person.’

Just before Christmas Frank and Gilly from the Duck and Puddle organised a trip to Wembley to see a rock concert. By chance they chose to see a show performed by a man who spends much of his life sitting in a corner in the pub they run. By irony they invited the star of the show they were going to see to join them on the coach trip.

‘Sorry,’ he said, when they told him the venue, the date and the name of the main attraction. ‘I’m afraid I won’t be able to make it then. I’ve got something fixed up.’

‘It’ll be a cracking show!’ promised Gilly. ‘I saw him in Birmingham last year. He was fantastic!’ She had no idea at all that her hero was standing less than a yard away from her, dressed in a mud spattered Barbour and a pair of oil and mud stained jeans.

‘Not really my scene, love.’ said our rock star shyly. ‘I’m a bit old for all that.’ He emptied his pint and shuffled out of the bar.

‘Really nice bloke,’ said Frank, when he’d gone. ‘But he needs to let himself go a bit more.’

Gilly looked at me. ‘It’s a shame,’ she said. ‘The funny thing is that X (she mentioned the name of the rock star) must be about the same age as him! You couldn’t imagine two more different people, could you?’

I didn’t say a word.

NICE TO COME HOME

It isn't easy being a vegetarian. I see nothing odd in preferring to see animals walking about rather than sliced up with two veg or mashed up (bones, intestines, tonsils and all) and served up with chips, but some people still think that refusing to eat animals is a sign of lunacy.

It is, however, a darned sight easier being a vegetarian in Britain than it is once you leave the country.

I've just come back from a two day visit to Lindau in Bavaria.

I should have guessed that my stomach was in for a bad time when the stewardess brought me my in-flight meal on the aeroplane. I had, of course, warned the airline that I was vegetarian but the meal they had prepared consisted of cheese flan, cheesecake and cheese and biscuits. At least I think it did. Since I don't eat cheese I didn't actually taste any of the stuff in my little plastic dish. I ate the radish which was decorating the cheese flan and the two small biscuits that came with the cheese and washed down this unbalanced repast with a miniature bottle of white wine (for what it's worth, my advice is that no one with a sensitive palate should ever drink red wine on an aeroplane).

Seven hours later I was comfortably settled in one of the world's most beautiful hotels on the shore of a lake which is bordered by three countries (the Swiss call it Lake Constance, the Germans call it Bodensee and the Austrians call it Lake Konstanz and still the pro-Europeans talk of European unity).

The peace there is majestic: monasteries and castles cling to cliff tops, and hang in the mist, built as though to defy the possible and the practical.

I wandered into one of the hotel restaurants to order a meal. There were 59 items on the menu and with the aid of my fragile German and a small dictionary I worked my way through them all. If you exclude the one which my dictionary translated as 'Enclosure with deposit' (I hate to think what it was) no less than 58 of the available meals were meat based. I ordered the 59th: Russian egg and potato salad. It came covered in slices of salami. The Germans hate serving up anything that doesn't have a bit of a dead animal in it somewhere. I suspect they think they'll be arrested if they serve food that doesn't include meat. For dinner I ate two slices of black bread and drank two bottles of light beer.

Next morning at breakfast I decided to fill up with bread rolls. I sat at a rose laden table overlooking the lake and spread thick black cherry jam on a crisp brown roll covered with something white which I took to be sugar. It wasn't sugar. It was salt. I can still taste that roll and it makes me shudder as I write.

During the conference lunch break, obsessed with the thought of food, I wandered around the town looking for somewhere to eat. It was all typically Bavarian. Impossibly steep roofs, painted wooden shutters, colourful window boxes and neatly stacked piles of logs. I thought I'd got close to something promising fairly early on. The main item in the dish that had caught my eye was mixed vegetables covered in something that looked, even in German, like a misprint. It was one of those long, composite German words. I split the word up into its component parts and discovered that the mixed vegetables were served with a thick covering of bacon fat.

Eventually, I found a cafe which advertised soup of the day as consisting of tomato soup with rice. I ordered this. When it came it arrived with a large sausage floating in it. A huge dollop of fresh cream was balanced on the sausage.

On the flight back the airline served me a half decent vegetarian meal but brought no cutlery.

'I have no cutlery,' I pointed out, apologetic as only an Englishman can be under such circumstances.

'Yes,' said the stewardess with a smile. 'That'll be because you're a vegetarian.'

When I got back to Taunton I walked round the corner from the railway station to the chip shop just under the railway bridge. There I bought the biggest bag of chips they would serve me with and ate them in the street.

It's nice to go travelling but it's always nice to come back home too.

PLEASE SHUT THE GATE

Tradesmen and delivery drivers have left open the main gate to Bilbury Grange on three separate occasions in the last week. As a result, wandering sheep have spent a very pleasant hour or two munching their way through our shrubbery, pelleting the drive and aerating the croquet lawn.

So, this morning I drove into town with the express intention of purchasing a 'PLEASE SHUT THE GATE' sign. It seemed a modest ambition.

The first shop I tried, a stationers, could only offer me a variety of small, red and white plastic stick on signs carrying such messages as PLEASE WASH YOUR HANDS NOW and DANGER GUARD DOG PATROLLING. I explained to the salesman that none of these messages seemed entirely appropriate and asked him if he would suggest anywhere else that I could try.

'You could try the shop four doors down,' suggested the salesman. 'It's run by my brother-in-law. Mention my name.' Foolishly, I accepted his recommendation and tried the shop four doors down. Although my confidence was not enhanced by the discovery that the craftsman who had designed and executed the sign over the shop had described it as a plumbing supplies centre, I suppressed the inevitable sense of pessimism that this discovery inspired and explained to the assistant, a tall, dour-faced youth wearing a grey smock and a sullen look, exactly what I was looking for.

'Your brother-in-law suggested I try here,' I told him, when my explanation was greeted with a blank stare.

The dour-faced youth continued to stare at me dully. His mouth had fallen wide open and I could see that a clumsy labourer masquerading as a dentist had at some time slapped vast quantities of mercury amalgam into his mouth. His teeth were silver rather than white and looked as though they had been repaired by a man with a grudge.

'Do you sell signs?' I asked him, speaking slowly and clearly, as though addressing a foreigner.

The youth continued to stare at me and I could see that he was thinking. This was, for him, clearly something of an adventure, a sail into unchartered waters.

'Signs.' I said. I looked around. My eyes lit upon the 'OPEN' and 'CLOSED' sign on the back of the shop door. I pointed to it to illustrate my message. The youth followed my outstretched finger and nodded slowly. 'My uncle does up and over garage doors,' he told me proudly and inconsequentially.

Eventually, I found a shop that sold signs. It was full of signs. I had never seen so many signs in all my life. There were signs of all shapes and sizes. Red and white signs. Black and yellow signs. Blue and white signs. PLEASE DO NOT GIVE ICE CREAM TO THE PEACOCKS. DO NOT THROW STONES AT THIS NOTICE. CARS PARKED BEYOND THIS NOTICE WILL BE UNDER WATER AT HIGH TIDE.

'Do you have a sign that says PLEASE SHUT THE GATE?'

I asked a man in a green tweed suit. He was wearing a pale yellow shirt and a red tie. He looked like a short circuited traffic light.

The man didn't hesitate. 'No, sir! I'm afraid we can't help you with that.' As he spoke he flicked through a clutch of ready-made signs and picked one out. He held it out so that I could read it. 'What about this, sir?'

I looked at it. It said: NO HAWKERS, NO CIRCULARS, NO TRESPASSERS. I must have looked disappointed.

'I didn't really think so. Sorry not to be able to help,' he said. Then he leant forwards, as though about to share something deeply confidential with me. 'It's a funny thing, sir, but we get a lot of requests for PLEASE SHUT THE GATE signs.'

'I'm not surprised.' I said. 'There must be a lot of people who get fed up with having their gates left open.'

'Exactly my sentiments, sir.'

'Why don't you make one?' I asked him.

'Sir?'

'A sign that says: PLEASE SHUT THE GATE.'

The sign salesman shook his head violently. 'Oh, I don't think the manager would agree to that, sir.'

'Why on earth not?'

'He keeps a strict record of which signs sell best,' explained the salesman. 'And we've never sold a single PLEASE SHUT THE GATE sign in the seventeen years I've been here.'

I went home, found a flat piece of wood and a pot of paint and made myself a sign. I may have found a market niche.

PEAR TREES AND TIGER DUNG

Animals are invariably more intelligent than most of us realise. And they are equipped with extraordinary skills and talents.

Consider, for example, this remarkable true story of the deer belonging to Sir William Footling-Blenchard.

Sir William is the local Bilbury aristocrat. He lives in faded glory in what undoubtedly was, in the eighteenth century, a splendid castle but is today a rather run down and sad looking place. The battlements are crumbling, the roof is leaking and the whole place is held up by ivy, history and extensive strands of dry rot. There is hardly anything left for the woodworm to eat and the oak beams have been turned into fretwork by battalions of death watch beetles.

But however dismal Blenchard Castle may be inside it still has one remaining virtue: its gardens. Every summer visitors come in their thousands to walk around gardens which were once described in a Sunday newspaper colour supplement as ‘the most majestic, the most inspiring and the most colourful private gardens in England’.

Some time ago Sir William realised that he could not afford to try to restore the house and to keep the gardens in good order. He had to choose one or the other and so without any apparent regret he moved into the two bedroom lodge house and chose to maintain the gardens.

Recently, however, Sir William has faced a problem that few ordinary gardeners will have ever had to worry about: his deer have been eating his pear trees.

To those gardeners more accustomed to worrying about greenfly or slugs, Sir William’s problem may sound absurdly esoteric but to Sir William the problem was just as real as caterpillars eating the cabbages may be to the man with an allotment.

A fortnight last Tuesday, Sir William discovered a solution. Or, at least, he *thought* he had discovered a solution. Hearing that a cousin in Yorkshire, who had exactly the same problem, had found that if he regularly put buckets full of tiger dung around his pear trees the deer kept their distance, Sir William immediately contacted the Budleigh Salterton Wildlife Park and made arrangements for a small van load of fresh tiger dung to be delivered to Bilbury every week.

(There was, by the way, some immediate and rather intense controversy over whether tiger dung is subject to value added tax. One school of thought argued that tiger dung is inherently agricultural in content whereas another claimed that the provision of tiger dung is essentially a branch of the entertainment industry and a third group asserted that the tiger dung is being used as a security measure. A fourth group of accountants and customs and excise specialists supported Sir William’s assertion that whatever its immediate purpose may be the tiger dung was inherently nutritious and should, therefore, be classified either as a foodstuff or as a fertiliser. This controversy is, I suspect, destined to run and run.)

Sadly, Sir William’s high hopes for the efficacy of tiger dung as a deer deterrent were dashed when the deer ignored the buckets full of dung and continued to munch their way through the pear orchard, eating leaves, blossom, shoots and branches with undisguised and undiminished delight.

This failure puzzled both Sir William and his cousin but a telephone call to the Budleigh Salterton Wildlife Park provided a quick explanation.

It seemed that the two tigers in Budleigh Salterton had both been constipated for a week and so the game warden who had been given the task of collecting together a van load of valuable tiger dung had instead collected together a van load of lion dung.

When he was told about this substitution, Sir William’s cousin snorted and then explained that lion dung just wouldn’t do the job. When they had smelt the lion dung around the pear trees the deer would have sniggered quietly and knowingly to themselves and then gaily carried on munching the pear leaves. They knew that they could outrun lions and so they weren’t frightened.

All has turned out well.

Now that the tigers are no longer constipated and Sir William’s pear trees are protected by genuine, 100% tiger dung, the deer, who have never met a lion or a tiger but who instinctively know that they cannot outrun tigers, are sticking to the grass and leaving the pear trees alone.

THE BAKERY

I love the smell of freshly baked bread.

Bilbury does not have its own bakery and so I usually shop at a small bakers in the next village where the loaves are freshly prepared on the premises every morning and where the sweet, warm smell of rising dough is a delightful daily bonus. On dry days I cycle there and back on my rather rusty old bicycle.

The shop is owned by a middle aged couple called Bristow. Helen, plump, blonde and nervous is the baker. She hardly ever ventures out from the small, hot, dark room at the back of the shop where she tends her ovens. George, her husband, looks after the shop and is well suited to it. He has a constantly sunny demeanour and greets each new day and each fresh customer with a never changing smile. I have sometimes suspected that if I had to live with him I might find George’s never failing cheerfulness rather wearing. But as a customer I find his smile as warming as a ray of sunshine. Have you ever noticed how difficult it is not to smile back when someone smiles at you? And have you noticed how difficult it is to feel glum when you are smiling?

Helen and George, both native Londoners, met in a most unusual way.

Throughout her teenage years Helen had been prone to attacks of shyness and dominated by an almost overwhelming lack of self-confidence. She was overweight from childhood and was always self-conscious about her appearance.

In her early twenties Helen had to be admitted to hospital suffering from a deep, dark and seemingly impenetrable depression. The doctors who looked after her tried drugs, they tried electric shock therapy and they tried talking to her. None of these things worked and Helen’s depression remained stubbornly incurable.

Eventually, one day, the inevitable happened. Helen tried to commit suicide.

Since the psychiatric ward in which she was a patient was on the sixth floor of the hospital and since the hospital administrators had never got round to putting bars on the windows Helen’s choice of method was simple and straightforward. Early one morning she climbed through a window and threw herself out.

Eighty feet or so below she landed on the roof of a taxi belonging to George Bristow. The roof of the taxi caved in (hitting George’s head) and instead of dying Helen was taken back into the hospital suffering from bruising, shock and embarrassment. George was taken into the accident department for X-rays and observation.

Two days later, when he was allowed out of bed, George visited the woman who had given him such a severe headache and for him it was love at first sight. He had always been over-endowed with optimism and happiness and he regarded Helen’s persistently gloomy nature as a challenge to his cheeriness.

Much to the surprise of her doctors Helen responded well to George’s daily visits and three months later she was discharged. They were married six weeks after that and although neither of them knew anything about baking or retailing they used a small inheritance of George’s to buy our nearby bakery.

I usually call at the Bristow’s bakery at roughly the same time every morning and for nearly a year I have watched George carefully breaking a brand new loaf into tiny pieces and then putting the pieces of crust into one brown paper bag and the soft, inside pieces into another brown paper bag.

I often wondered why George was doing this and I invented a number of possible explanations for myself. It was, I thought, possible that he might have a regular order from a restaurant wanting raw ingredients for a bread and butter pudding. Another possibility I toyed with was the fact that he might have an edentulous customer who needed his bread breaking up into mouth sized pieces.

Yesterday, I found out why George broke up a loaf every day and put the soft bits into one bag and the crust into another. I satisfied my curiosity by the simple process of asking George why he was doing it.

‘It’s for Mrs Garrow,’ explained George. ‘She likes to sit and feed the birds in her garden but she’s got bad arthritis in her fingers and can’t break up the bread herself. The soft, squashy bits out of the middle of the loaf are for the sparrows and the robins and the tits and the hard, crusty bits from the outside of the loaf are for the pigeons.’

GEORGE AND SALLY

‘I’m sorry to have got you up,’ said George quietly. ‘But I couldn’t think of anyone else to call.’

I told him not to be so silly, muttered stuff about that being what friends are for and put my arm around him. He had been crying. His eyes were still red and puffy and his cheeks were tear-stained. There was something wrong, something missing, but for the moment I couldn’t work out what it was. The long drive to the city had woken me up but now I was beginning to feel tired again.

I don’t know what time it had been when the phone had woken me. I’d been fast asleep and for a moment or two I hadn’t recognised George’s voice. I suppose that wasn’t all that surprising. None of us sounds entirely normal when we are frightened and George was certainly frightened. He is 84-years-old and it was the first time he had ever been in a police station.

I’ve known George for as long as I’ve lived in Bilbury. He lives alone, with a Border collie for company, in an old farm labourer’s cottage. He gets his water from a spring and his electricity from an unreliable old generator which works on alternate Wednesdays when the wind is in the right direction.

I asked him what had happened.

‘I went to see my sister,’ he told me. ‘She lives here.’

I nodded. I’d met her once or twice when she’d come to Bilbury for short holidays. A former school mistress she is five or six years younger than George.’ She had an operation,’ explained George. ‘I came up to see her in the hospital.’

‘What sort of operation?’ I asked him automatically.

George looked puzzled. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘I didn’t ask.’ It was not, I knew, because he didn’t care but rather that he didn’t like to ask.

‘I came on the Bus and the Train,’ he said. When he spoke he somehow made it sound as though there was only one Bus and one Train. This was almost certainly the first time for fifty years that George had been more than ten miles from Bilbury. For him it had been a brave excursion into a world he did not know. ‘I was on my way back to the station when I met these boys.’ The tears started to stream down his cheeks again.

‘Boys?’

‘There were a lot of them. Ten or fifteen at least.’

I turned and looked at the policeman who was standing silently in a corner. He was overweight, balding and had a nasty little toothbrush moustache parked on his upper lip.

‘Football supporters, doctor,’ the fat policeman explained. ‘Their side lost,’ he added, as though that both explained and excused what had happened. He was, I felt, the sort of man who hides behind his uniform, his job and his superiors but enjoys the power that goes with the uniform.

‘They started taunting me,’ said George. ‘And Sally didn’t like it.’ I suddenly remembered what was missing. Sally. His 12-year-old Border collie. George would never go anywhere without her. They adored each other. I looked around but she was nowhere in sight.

‘Where is she?’ I asked him quietly.

George tried to speak but couldn’t. The tears were pouring down his cheeks. I held him to me and waited. ‘She started barking so they began to kick her.’

I went cold inside and looked at the policeman. ‘What happened?’ I demanded.

‘They kicked the dog to death,’ said the policeman. For a moment I thought that he was embarrassed then I realised that what I had mistaken for embarrassment was merely coldness. The policeman simply didn’t care.

‘Come on,’ I said to George. ‘I’ll take you home.’ I stood up and started to help him to his feet.

‘Not that simple, I’m afraid, sir.’ said the policeman.

I looked at him. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Your friend has been arrested, doctor.’

‘Arrested? Why?’

‘He hit one of the youths with his stick.’

‘I’m not bloody surprised!’

‘The youth has complained.’

‘Was he injured?’

‘The doctor says he’ll have a bruise on his leg.’

‘George is 84-years-old for God’s sake! And they killed his dog!’

‘The inspector says we could do him for carrying a dangerous weapon.’

‘A walking stick! A dangerous weapon?’

The policeman shrugged. ‘I’m just doing my job,’ he said.

I lifted George to his feet. ‘I’m taking him home,’ I said firmly. ‘He’s my friend and so that’s *my* job.’

For a moment I thought that the policeman was going to stop me. But he didn’t. I took George back to Bilbury Grange and Patsy and I kept him with us for a week. He never recovered from the sorrow of losing Sally and he died two months later of a broken heart. I sometimes despair when I look at the type of people with whom we have to share this world of ours.

VIETNAM VET

‘Have you heard the news?’ demanded Thumper, when I entered the Duck and Puddle last Wednesday lunchtime.

· ‘Don’t tell me Frank has been found sober?’

‘No!’ laughed Thumper. ‘Nothing as spectacular as that.’ He emptied his glass so that he would be able to take advantage of my unspoken but expected offer to buy him another drink.

‘Go on...,’ I sighed. ‘Tell me!’ I gestured to Frank to refill Thumper’s glass and picked up the pint he’d pulled for me.

‘We’re going to have a celebrity visiting the village!’

‘Who?’

‘I don’t know his name but he’s a Vietnam Vet! He’s touring Devon to promote some book he’s written and the vicar has fixed up for him to come to Bilbury to speak to the Young Wives Group.’

‘Pretty impressive,’ I agreed. ‘I once read that there are supposed to be hundreds of those guys living in the wilds because they can’t get used to civilised life again.’

‘I read about one who nearly killed his mother,’ said Thumper. ‘He was staying at home and she bent down to wake him up with a cup of tea. Before she could move he had her pinned to the wall with his forearm pressing into her throat.’ He lifted his arm to demonstrate the move.

‘Frightening!’ I agreed, backing away. ‘I’ll be fascinated to see what this chap has got to say. Do you know if the Young Wives Group committee is allowing visitors?’

Thumper shrugged. ‘I don’t know. But Anne usually does the sandwiches so I’ll have a word with her if you like.’ Anne said that under the circumstances the committee had decided to make a break with tradition and to open up the meeting to anyone who wanted to go, and so last night Thumper and I joined the rest of the village in our local hall. The place was packed.

‘I don’t think we’ve had such a good turn out since we had that weather forecaster from the television,’ said Gilly Parsons. She wrinkled up her nose. ‘I can’t remember his name now but he always used to wear those funny waistcoats.’

‘Does anyone know this bloke’s name?’ asked Thumper.

‘I still don’t understand what an isobar is...,’ muttered Gilly.

Anne shook her head. ‘We got him on the vicar’s recommendation,’ she said. ‘He heard about him through someone in Exeter.’

‘I bet he’s got some good tales to tell,’ said Thumper, rubbing his hands together. ‘Jumping out of helicopters and all that. Did you see that film?’

I tried in vain to remember the name of the film. ‘I gather that most of those guys were hooked on drugs by the time they got home. I wonder if he had any problems like that?’

‘They had a pretty good time in Saigon though!’ said Thumper. ‘Wall to wall women as I’ve heard it.’

He’s probably more interested in the philosophical side of things,’ said Gilly. ‘I’ve heard that quite a lot of them have become very religious. That’s probably why the vicar heard about him.’

Thumper looked disappointed. ‘I hope he hasn’t become totally boring,’ he said, sounding rather worried. He looked around to plan his escape route but the hall was so crowded that escape was impossible. It was, in any case, too late for as he spoke the vicar walked out onto the stage.

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ said the vicar, putting stress on the third word to emphasise what an unusual meeting this was, ‘I’m delighted to see such a good turn out. I know you’re all going to enjoy this evening’s meeting and so without further ado I would like you to welcome our very special speaker...,’ he waved an arm towards the side of the stage and a diminutive oriental walked briskly onto the stage, bowed and grinned at us all.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, please give a big welcome to D’Ing Ling Dong - a veterinary surgeon who has come to talk to us about his experiences at the Saigon Missionary Hospital for Animals.’ The vicar clapped his hands together enthusiastically.

There was a rather prolonged and embarrassing silence for a few moments, broken eventually by a smattering of polite applause. It wasn’t quite the sort of Vietnamese vet that any of us had expected but even Thumper had to agree that under the Trades Descriptions Act none of us had any cause for complaint.

It was, I suppose, quite an interesting talk if you’re interested in Vietnamese pot bellied pigs.

THE COACH TRIP

The villagers of Bilbury are a hard-working lot. They do not feel entirely comfortable with holidays and they are not easily tempted away from their regular domestic and commercial duties.

The men in particular seem to take their responsibilities seriously. Unlike the men in cities, who seem constantly eager to abandon their homes and their jobs to follow football teams around the country, Bilburians can usually only be tempted from the village by an earnest and determined quest for knowledge and self-improvement.

When there are real prospects that the thirst for knowledge can be quenched the men of Bilbury will set aside their love of their village, temporarily abandon their fierce and selfless loyalty to their loved ones and sally forth into the outside world with all the vigour and courage of Crusaders setting off into the unknown. In Bilbury the good of a greater cause reigns for ever supreme over such trivial and insignificant forces as personal comfort, private pleasure and individual ambition.

During the summer, for example, Peter Marshall, shopkeeper, postman, undertaker and 24 hour dry cleaning agent, organised a coach trip to the Yeovil Show.

This adventure attracted an immediate and public-spirited response from two dozen men who were eager to demonstrate their willingness to sacrifice the joyful sense of self-satisfaction to be gained from a day spent quietly working so that the village might benefit from a supply of new ideas.

Encouraged by Thumper and Frank and carried along by this feeling of social responsibility I agreed to join the trip.

We set off early so that we could, as Kevin Montgomery explained, ‘drink copious draughts from the well of knowledge in Yeovil’ and so ‘quench our thirst for useful information’.

‘These trips are a vital part of village life,’ Thumper told me. ‘Information we obtain at the summer Shows helps us plan and make the best of our lives in the village.’

We were on the coach by 6.30 a.m., on the road by 6.40 a.m. and in Yeovil by 10 a.m.; our journey punctuated only by a ninety minute stop for essential fuel and lubrication.

(The high grease content fuel we bought from a lorry drivers’ cafe and the lubrication we took from one of several crates which Peter, with foresight, had packed for what Frank described as ‘social emergencies’. The coach, which had been adequately fuelled, in his absence, at Edwin Jackson’s farm pump in order to minimise what Peter described as the ‘nonessential’ expenses of the journey, required no attention).

At the Yeovil Show Peter parked the coach in a field (‘no point in paying car parking charges’ explained Peter, ‘we can use our money much more wisely than that’) and we walked two miles across country before climbing over an eight foot high metal fence to get into the showground (‘no point in paying entrance money,’ said Thumper, ‘it don’t seem right for there to be a charge for knowledge’).

All this exercise had made us sweat a little in the warm, morning, summer sunshine and I was by no means unenthusiastic when Frank suggested that we begin our day with a visit to the Beer Tent.

With pints of beer set before us Frank and Thumper then proceeded to plan our day, doing so with the precision of generals organising a military campaign.

When we had finished our beer we moved a few yards away into the hospitality tent of a large tractor manufacturer where pint glasses full of beer were thrust into our hands by girls dressed for some inexplicable reason in Bavarian costumes. Thumper and Kevin looked at a couple of tractors and stuffed a pile of brochures into their pockets.

Next, we visited the hospitality tent of a cattle feed supplier where girls dressed in brief shorts and T-shirts gave us pints of beer and small cubes of cheese on toothpicks.

From there we went onto the hospitality tent of a bank where tall girls dressed in dark grey suit jackets and tiny white shorts gave us glasses of sherry, stuffed olives and salty biscuits.

After taking a leisurely and restful lunch in the official Beer Tent we spent an exhausting afternoon visiting another series of hospitality tents.

We accepted glasses of cider from girls dressed in flimsy red skirts and diaphanous white blouses, glasses of lager from girls dressed in short kilts and tartan jumpers, and large glasses of white wine from girls dressed in French peasant costumes.

Afterwards we went back to the Beer Tent and had a meeting.

‘How many votes for the Gamekeeper’s Best Bitter?’ asked Frank, licking the end of his pencil. He carefully counted the number of raised hands and then made a note on a folded tractor brochure. ‘And how many for the Old Grey Beard Cider?’ Again he made a careful note of the number of votes cast.

At seven sharp we set off for home, making an early start so as to make sure that we got back to the Duck and

Puddle before closing time.

'I think we can regard that as a very educational and very successful day,' said Frank, speaking slowly, when we stopped briefly for light refreshments at a pub called the Ferret and Weasel in Little Witton.

I looked up at him and frowned. 'Educational?'

Frank pulled the tractor brochure out of his jacket pocket and showed it to me. 'There you are,' he said, pointing a podgy finger at some indecipherable scribble. 'We've got the names of three good draught beers and a cider that the Duck and Puddle has never stocked before.' He carefully refolded the brochure and put it away.

'Very informative day,' said Peter Marshall.

'I'll drink to that,' said Thumper, emptying his glass.

A PHEASANT SURPRISE

David Faraday came into the Duck and Puddle yesterday evening looking as though he had just seen a ghost. I've seen snow which had a better colour.

'What on earth has happened to you?' asked Frank, pouring a large, medicinal brandy and pushing it across the counter.

David picked up the glass, knocked back the brandy and shuddered. Then he put the empty glass down, pushed it silently back across the counter to Frank and nodded. Frank quickly refilled the glass and David emptied it, just as quickly.

'I needed that,' he said.

We waited.

'I had to drive up to London this morning,' he began at last. 'Have you ever been on the road out near Simonsbath early in the morning?'

We all had and there was a general murmuring to that effect.

'I very nearly had a nasty accident before I'd really started,' he said. 'I'd forgotten just how dazzling the sun can be early in the morning,' he said. 'It's not so bad when you're driving due East on a straight road. You can get used to the rising sun when you know where it is. But that road twists and turns and one minute you can see perfectly well and the next moment you turn a corner and the damned sun blinds you completely.'

'I once put my truck into the ditch on that road,' confessed Thumper. He shook his head at the memory.

'I went round the corner by Jack Marshall's farm and suddenly couldn't see anything!' said David. 'I slammed my foot on the brake but before I could stop I felt a dull thud and heard a squawking and screeching from somewhere on the right. I got out and walked back. I was lucky not to have hit the side of Jack's barn. The fattest pheasant you'd ever seen was lying on the side of the road.'

'Nasty corner that,' said Frank, nodding wisely.

'It seemed like a good start to the day and there wasn't any point in leaving it there,' continued David. 'So I picked it up and threw it into the boot.'

Thumper, who has been known deliberately to collect pheasant out of season in this unorthodox fashion, nodded his approval.

'I went into London, did my bit of business and was on my way back home again when I found myself in a long queue to get onto the M4,' continued David. 'I tuned into the local radio station and found that the police were hunting for a couple of terrorists who had kidnapped a diplomat's wife in Kensington.'

'I hate London,' said Frank. He shivered. 'Horrible place.' There was a general murmuring of agreement with this observation and Frank refilled everyone's glasses so that we could drink a toast of damnation to our capital city.

'I'd just breathed a sigh of relief because I'd got to the front of the queue when suddenly this huge guy in a blue flack jacket, wearing a dark blue helmet with a plastic visor, thrust the business end of an automatic rifle in through the car window and screamed at me to keep my hands in view,' said David.

There were sharp intakes of breath all around the bar as we waited for David to carry on.

'What the hell did you do?' asked Frank.

'What do you think I did?' asked David. 'I did what I was told. The guy reached into the car, turned off the ignition and took my keys and then stepped back and told me to get out of the car very slowly keeping my hands in view all the time.'

Frank, who had emptied his own glass, poured himself another quadruple whisky in a vain attempt to stop his hands from shaking. I like Frank but I do not think he would be a good man to have alongside in an emergency.

'They said they'd heard a noise coming from my boot and before I could say or do anything two of them had searched me and pinned me to the side of a van while another three all aimed their rifles at the boot while a bloke with no helmet on reached out and used my key to open it.'

Frank took a huge gulp out of his whisky and leant forwards, waiting.

'Well, the boot lid lifted up and the pheasant flew out,' said David. 'It landed on the Cromwell Road for a moment, squawked a bit, flapped its wings and then took off over the traffic; flying, so one of the coppers told me, towards Regents Park.'

'Did they let you go then?' asked Frank.

'They searched my boot,' said David. 'But all they could find was an empty oil can, a pair of grubby gym shoes, a few tools and the spare tyre. So they told me I was lucky they hadn't charged me with wasting police time and let me go.'

'Phew!' said Frank. 'I'm glad I never go to London.'

‘Did you get the pheasant back?’ asked Thumper, who has a way of putting his finger on the crucial issues.

‘No,’ said David sadly. ‘And the damned thing had crapped all over the carpet in my boot as well.’

‘What a day,’ said Frank. ‘Have another brandy.’

‘I don’t mind if I do,’ said David, wearily.

AMERICANS IN BILBURY

Although it is situated right in the middle of one of the most beautiful parts of England, Bilbury is a little bit off the mainstream tourist track and we don’t get as many visitors passing through as do nearby villages such as Lynton, Lynmouth and Clovelly.

So, when two Americans called Arlene and Homer Trout booked in at the Duck and Puddle for a week’s holiday they caused quite a stir, especially since they let it be known that they were on a bit of a buying spree and were looking out for antiques to take back to their home in Texas.

Within twenty four hours of their arrival, local antique dealer Patchy Fogg had sold them a grandfather clock, a pine wall cupboard, a handmade pair of bellows that had been recovered from Camelot Castle and probably used by King Arthur himself, and a set of wooden bowls which had once been the property of Sir Francis Drake. Peter Marshall, the village shopkeeper, had persuaded them that a rusty old tree saw which has been lying amidst the rubbish behind his woodshed for years would look perfect hanging up over their fireplace.

Naturally, it wasn’t long before Thumper Robinson turned up and I have to admit that it was a joy to watch him at work.

‘Did I hear someone say that your name was Trout?’ asked Thumper, after introducing himself to Arlene and Homer.

Arlene and Homer confirmed that he had heard correctly and that their name was, indeed, Trout.

‘How remarkable!’ said Thumper.

‘Why is that remarkable?’ asked Homer, who couldn’t have responded better if he’d been coached.

‘I don’t suppose your family originally came from this part of the world, did they?’ asked Thumper.

Arlene and Homer beamed. ‘Well, we don’t rightly know!’ admitted Homer. ‘But my grand-daddy always said that his forebears came over on the Mayflower.’

‘Isn’t that remarkable!’ sighed Thumper.

‘Do you know anyone around here with the name?’ asked Arlene.

‘Of course!’ said Thumper. ‘Old Granny Trout at Daffodil Cottage!’

Frank, the landlord, and I exchanged glances. Patchy who was standing nearby gazed on in admiration.

‘Can we meet her?’ asked Arlene, breathlessly.

‘Well, I’ll see if it’s possible,’ said Thumper. ‘Give me a day or two.’

The following evening the Trouts were back in the pub. Thumper approached them with a broad grin on his face. ‘I’ve spoken to old Granny Trout,’ he told them. ‘And she’d like to meet you. She says her father always used to talk about someone in the family having emigrated to the New World.’

Arlene and Homer held each other’s hands and gazed at Thumper as though he’d just told them he could sell them the secret of eternal life for five dollars.

‘I’ll take you round there now, if you like,’ offered Thumper, generously. ‘It’s only five minutes away in the car.’

The Trouts didn’t need to be asked twice. Less than a minute later they were looking for the non-existent seat belts in Thumper’s battered and beltless truck.

They were gone for around an hour and returned, without Thumper, looking as though they’d just seen the Holy Grail.

‘How did you get on?’ Frank asked them. They were clutching something which was crudely wrapped in old wallpaper.

‘Wonderful!’ said Arlene. ‘Granny Trout is a marvellous old woman. Eighty-three and as bright as a button.’

‘She’s convinced we must be related,’ said Homer. ‘She says I’m the spitting image of her brother.’

‘He died in the war,’ Arlene explained, rather sadly.

‘What’s in the parcel?’ asked Frank.

Homer carefully unfastened the wrapping paper. ‘It’s the old family bible!’ he explained. He opened it and showed us two pages of faded, spidery writing at the front of the book. ‘There you are!’ he said. ‘The Trout family history!’

‘Granny Trout wanted us to have it,’ said Arlene. ‘Wasn’t that wonderful of her?’

‘Marvellous!’ agreed Frank.

‘She didn’t sell it to you, I don’t suppose?’ I asked them.

‘Good heavens, no!’ said Arlene.

‘So no money changed hands?’ said Frank.

‘Well, we asked Thumper if the old lady needed anything and he said her roof leaked,’ said Arlene.

‘So we’ve given him some travellers’ cheques so that he can have her cottage re-roofed,’ added Homer.

‘That’s very kind of you,’ said Frank.

‘It was the least we could do for her,’ said Arlene. ‘We’re all she’s got.’

That wasn’t strictly true.

Most of us know Granny Trout at Daffodil Cottage rather better as Olive Robinson.

She’s Thumper’s aunt.

THE FENCE

Living out in the country is wonderful but there are occasional disadvantages. For example, if you suddenly find you need something from the shops it can mean a round trip of twenty miles or more if Peter Marshall doesn't stock what you need at the village shop.

I usually try to plan my shopping so that I keep the number of journeys I need to make down to a minimum.

But it doesn't always work out as simply as I would like.

For example, take what happened at the end of last week when I decided that I wanted to plant a dozen small oak trees in a corner of the meadow behind the house. A recent gale had brought down a dozen oaks and I wanted to replace them as soon as possible.

I knew that if I didn't fence the area where I was going to put the young trees the sheep would strip the leaves and shoots from the saplings within minutes. Sheep may not be quite as destructive as goats but they do love the tender young shoots growing on shrubs, bushes and trees.

A local gardener told me that it would take a day's work to put up the fence and plant the trees. I felt sure I could do the job in less time and so I decided I'd do the job myself. Since the weather was decent enough last Saturday that was the day I decided to do it.

I needed a roll of stockproof fencing wire and a couple of dozen fence posts so I drove down to see Peter Marshall at the village shop in Bilbury. I just naturally assumed that he would sell such obviously agricultural items.

Peter's shop has the biggest range of goods on sale that I've ever seen anywhere. Most of the villagers are so accustomed to being able to find what they need there that they call *his* shop 'Harrods'. I once went into his shop clutching a shopping list which included: a handful of six inch masonry nails; two handfuls of two and a half inch vine eyes; twelve first class postage stamps; a packet of self-seal envelopes; a replacement handle for a garden fork; a pint of strawberry ice cream; a tin of dressmaking pins; a roll of cotton wool; two 150 watt light bulbs; a wholemeal loaf of bread; fourteen pounds of sugar and a bottle of malt whisky. I came away with everything I wanted wrapped in individual brown paper bags. And I had a choice of three different types of malt whisky.

But although Peter sells most things, he doesn't sell fencing stakes or wire and I came away disappointed and rather disillusioned; my faith in the village store slightly dented.

(I did not, of course, come away from Peter's shop entirely empty handed. It is, I firmly believe, quite impossible to come out of that shop without buying *something.* Unable to buy the stakes and fencing material that I needed I came away clutching a brown paper bag containing two cream doughnuts, another paper bag containing a pound of pears and a bicycle repair kit with which to mend my wellington boots.)

The result of my disappointment was that I had to drive into Barnstaple to buy what I needed.

Still, it didn't take too long and less than an hour after setting off I arrived back at Bilbury Grange with two dozen six foot high stakes and a roll of stock netting in the boot of the car.

After stopping at Bilbury Grange for a cup of tea and one of Peter Marshall's doughnuts, I backed the car down the lane towards the meadow and unloaded the stakes and fencing. It was then that I realised that I didn't have a large enough hammer to put the stakes into the ground. I immediately drove down to the village shop.

'I can let you have one of these,' said Peter, looking very glum and offering me a small lump hammer. 'But you really need a long-handled sledgehammer or the blunt side of a pick axe. I sold my last sledgehammer three weeks ago and I haven't restocked yet.'

I sensibly declined the lump hammer, bought a packet of drawing pins, two spare batteries for my torch, a packet of chocolate digestive biscuits and a pen refill and then drove back into Barnstaple.

Once again it took me less than an hour to get into Barnstaple and back.

When I got back to Bilbury with my sledgehammer and a patented wire cutting tool I popped into the house to have another cup of tea and a couple of chocolate digestive biscuits and then took the sledgehammer down to the meadow.

It was only after I had measured out a corner of the meadow, and hammered the fencing posts into the ground, that I realised that I didn't have any staples to hold the fencing onto the posts.

Peter was definitely embarrassed about not having the staples in stock.

'What can I say?' he said, miserably. 'Dr Brownlow bought up all my staples last Wednesday.'

I came away with a packet of marzipan, two dozen candles (ready for the next power cut), a packet of razor blades and a plastic rubber band dispenser. I then drove into Barnstaple for the third time that day.

This time there was more traffic and the first two ironmongers I tried had also sold out of staples. The result was that the journey there and back took me an hour and a half.

By the time I had finally stapled the wire to the posts I was exhausted and it was getting dark. I threw the tools and what was left of the wire netting and the staples into the boot of the car and drove home via the Duck and Puddle.

‘You look pretty well knackered,’ said Frank, handing me a pint without my having to say a word.

‘Hard day,’ I told him.

‘What have you been doing?’

‘Planting trees,’ I said. ‘Well, putting up a fence, actually,’ I admitted. I sighed. ‘I thought I’d save time and do it myself.’

The job had taken me a whole day and I hadn’t even started to put any trees into the ground.

THE BURNING HOUSE ON HOLLERDAY HILL

I don’t like going to London. For one thing it’s a long tedious journey. Even by train the journey is exhausting. It doesn’t help that the trains are often dirty and overcrowded and the fact that they rarely seem to run on time just makes things even worse.

Apart from the fact that it takes several hours to get there, and that when you are there the dirt, the litter and the endless queues make life miserable and depressing, I dislike London because it always seems full of people who are so busy and full of their own sense of self-importance that they have no time for simple old-fashioned values such as courtesy.

I have, perhaps, grown too accustomed to the kinder, more sympathetic people who live in Devon in general and the gentle pace at which life moves in Bilbury in particular.

In London I always have the feeling that if I were to collapse in the street people would just step over me and carry on without any concern for my welfare. If anyone did bend down it would probably be to rob me rather than to help me.

When I had finished my meeting with a publisher in the centre of London I took a taxi to Paddington station and squeezed onto one of the early evening West Country trains. By the time we got to Reading it was running nearly half an hour late and by the time we arrived back in Taunton, where I had left my car, the train was the best part of an hour late.

Wearily, I climbed down off the train and walked the short distance from the railway station to the car park where I had left my car. It was a cool but clear evening and although the sun had long since set there was a full moon so visibility was good.

I always enjoy the drive back across Exmoor and along the coast towards Lynton. At night and out of the holiday season, there is rarely much traffic on the coast road and even after dark the views across the moors and the Bristol Channel are breathtaking. Between Porlock and Lynton you can see lights sparkling all along the Welsh coast. It was about nine o’clock, maybe a little later, when I drove around a bend five or six miles away from Lynton and saw that the whole of the sky above the village was bright red and orange with flames.

There was no doubt in my mind that there was a major fire in the village.

It was a terrifying sight and I increased my speed in order to get there as soon as possible.

As I drove I tried to keep my eye on the flames as much as I could. Occasionally, as the road twisted and turned, I lost sight of the fire and the orange sky, but, whenever I was in a position to see the hill above the village, the flames were clear and bright.

The road along the coast is narrow and hazardous at that point and even though I drove as quickly as I dared it still took me seven or eight minutes to cross the moors from the place where I had first seen the flames to the top of Countisbury Hill, where I could see the villages of Lynton and Lynmouth.

I slowed down as I reached the top of the hill, hoping that I could see where the fire was situated. I knew that it would take fire fighting crews and ambulances from Barnstaple at least half an hour to reach the town. There is a fire engine and an ambulance in Lynton but from the size of the blaze I felt sure that they would need help.

Strangely, from the top of Countisbury Hill, I could see nothing. No flames, no fire, no devastation - nothing. The flames had gone and the fire had disappeared. I was astonished and relieved.

I drove down across the bridge in Lynmouth, up the hill and along the A39 back to Bilbury.

The next morning, still puzzled, I drove back to Lynton and asked one of the shopkeepers if there had been any fires in the village the night before. The shopkeeper shook his head. There had been nothing that he knew of. Confused, I told him that I thought I had seen flames coming from the village. The source of the fire, I explained, seemed to me to have been some houses on the hill behind the village.

The shopkeeper nodded. ‘Hollerday Hill,’ he said. I looked at him, still not understanding.

‘The big house on Hollerday Hill,’ he went on. I waited.

‘It burned down,’ he finished.

‘Is that the hill right behind the town?’ I asked him. He nodded.

‘It looked like a big blaze,’ I said.

‘It was a huge house. Massive country house. It burned to the ground.’

‘Was anyone hurt?’ I asked, anxiously.

The shopkeeper screwed up his eyes and thought for a few moments. ‘I can’t remember,’ he said.

‘But you must know!’ I insisted. ‘It must have been the biggest fire Lynton has ever had!’

‘It was,’ agreed the shopkeeper.

I couldn’t understand why he seemed so unconcerned. ‘Who lives there?’ I demanded. ‘You must know them!’

‘Sir George Newnes lived there,’ replied the shopkeeper. ‘And my grandfather might have known him but I certainly never did. The house burnt down 50 years ago. It’s been a wreck for half a century.’ I stared at him.

The shopkeeper opened a drawer in a cabinet behind him and rummaged around for a few moments. Suddenly, triumphantly, he produced a booklet about the history of the village. He opened the booklet and flicked through the pages.

‘Here you are!’ he said. He showed me a picture of a burned out wreck of a house.

I looked at the date underneath the photograph.

When I had driven across the moors and seen the flames engulfing Lynton it had been exactly 50 years after the burning of the house on Hollerday Hill.

MRS DUNCAN'S VISITORS

I first met Pearl Barley when I was practising as family doctor in Bilbury. Dr Brownlow was still the principal and I was his assistant.

'My real name is June but everyone calls me Pearl,' she said. She looked slightly older than the 65 her medical record card said she was. She wore a thick woollen coat and a small hat which had a rather sad looking bunch of artificial fruit sewn onto the brim. The colours of the cherries had faded to a dull and lifeless pink.

'Don't you want to take your coat off? I asked her.

She hesitated and then slowly unbuttoned her coat. When she had removed it she looked around before laying it gently on the examination couch. Underneath she wore a dark blue woollen skirt, a light blue nylon blouse and a full length flowered pinafore.

Mrs Barley looked shy, and stood almost at attention in front of the desk.

I pointed to a chair and smiled at her, trying to put her at her ease. 'How can I help you?'

'Could I have another prescription for some stockings for my veins?' she asked, sitting down. Timidly, she raised the hem of her skirt and showed me her elastic stockings. They were baggy, wrinkled and holed in several places.

'Are those your only pair?'

She nodded.

'But how on earth do you manage?'

The shyness slowly turned into embarrassment. 'I wash them every night and leave them in front of the fire to dry.' I reached for my prescription pad and then remembered that I had signed the last form for my previous patient. 'I'll just have to pop and get another pad of prescriptions from the receptionist.'

I was away no more than a minute or so and when I walked back into the room I had quite a shock. Mrs Barley had moved around to my side of the desk and was rummaging around in the drawers in my desk.

When she saw me Mrs Barley reddened and leapt back from the desk as though it had suddenly become red hot. She started to say something and then stopped.

Once I'd sat her down again and convinced her that I wasn't going to call the police I managed to persuade her to tell me what she had been looking for.

'Visiting cards,' she confessed at last.

I was so surprised that I nearly laughed.

'My visiting cards? But I don't have any.'

'It doesn't matter whose name is on them.'

It took another ten minutes to get the explanation.

'I work for Mrs Duncan. Do you know her?'

'I've heard of her.' Mrs Duncan was an elderly, rich and reclusive widow who lived in a large, detached house on the Barnstaple road. Dr Brownlow had told me that she had wanted to join his list as a private patient. When he had refused she had insisted on registering herself with a doctor in Barnstaple.

'She lives in the past a little. She's very grand. Her husband was in the diplomatic service.' Mrs Barley clearly had a great deal of respect for her employer. There was probably more than a little affection mixed in with it. 'She can be a bit, well, barbed.' She paused. 'But she's a real lady.' She put the emphasis very firmly on the word 'lady'.

'So why on earth do you need the visiting cards?' I asked her gently.

'She's very lonely. She hasn't got any family and her friends have all passed away. So no one ever comes to visit her. But she's very proud and she doesn't like to think that she never gets any visitors.'

'So you take in visiting cards?'

Mrs Barley nodded. 'And she tells me that she is busy and doesn't want any visitors.' She shrugged. 'It makes her feel better.'

'But what would you do if she said that she'd see them?'

Mrs Barley shook her head. 'I think she knows it's just a...,' she paused... 'well, just a sort of a game we play.'

I rummaged around in my desk and found some visiting cards. Half a dozen were from drug company representatives and one was from a double glazing company salesman. I handed the cards across the desk together with a prescription for three pairs of elastic stockings. Mrs Barley was overjoyed.

The next time I went into Barnstaple I called in at the printers and got them to give me a whole handful of sample visiting cards. I've put them in the drawer of my desk for the next time that Mrs Barley comes to the surgery.

HUBERT SPRING

The truly eccentric are never aware of their eccentricity; they behave in what to the rest of us may appear to be an unusual way not because they derive any pleasure from shocking but because what they do is, to them, perfectly sensible and rational.

Consider, for example, the case of Hubert Spring, well known in our village for his lasting and largely inexplicable habit of spending exactly one hour every day sitting naked in the arms of a gnarled and rather uncomfortable looking old apple tree which stands at the bottom of his garden.

(When asked by a radio reporter to explain his apparently peculiar habit Hubert, who was at the time blue with cold and covered with a thin but noticeable layer of frost, answered that he was merely reminding his body of its general good fortune. 'How,' he asked, 'can you enjoy the good things in life unless you are regularly reminded of how unpleasant life can be?' Hubert's logic was regarded as unassailable in the village since he is unfailingly cheerful and enjoys consistent and excellent health.)

Hubert, who lives in a tiny cottage overlooking the Bilbury village green and whose unusual habit has startled and surprised many a summer visitor, spent the first thirty years of his life working for the post office but retired when he won a delightfully obscene amount of money in an Irish lottery.

Lots of people who win large sums of money stoically claim that their lives will not be changed by their good fortune but Hubert was not so unimaginative. After walking out of his job he gave large sums of money to each of his three daughters, April, May and June (April and June are as yet unmarried and are still known as the Spring sisters but May has married a boy called Geoffrey Summers and is said locally to have enjoyed a well deserved seasonal promotion) and told a reporter from the local evening paper that he intended to use the rest of the money to make sure that he grows the largest onions in the county and makes life as miserable as he can for the hunting fraternity.

It was, insisted Hubert, his intention to show that money does make a difference. Hubert loves gardening and animals and has spent almost equal parts of his life attempting to win a prize in one of the local vegetable shows and campaigning against the barbarism of hunting.

His vegetable growing efforts have brought him one fourth prize and a commended and his campaign against hunting has won him a suspended prison sentence, a broken collar bone and an honorary mention in the journal of the Hunt Saboteurs Association.

Hubert's financial good fortune came too late to enable him to win any vegetable growing awards in that year's vegetable shows but in good time to enable him to satisfy his second ambition.

Everyone was anxious to see what Hubert would do.

There was a rumour that he had decided to spend his money on buying up a huge tract of land which was for sale but I thought that was unlikely. The land was by no means essential to the hunt and it wasn't Hubert's style.

Another local rumour suggested that Hubert might be considering buying a motorbike and creating havoc by riding round and round the hunt. I didn't think that was very likely either. Hubert's eccentricities have always been envisioned on a much larger scale than that.

In the event no one guessed what Hubert was going to do and we were all surprised by his opening gambit for the hunting season.

His timing was absolutely perfect.

The hunt had met at Blackmoor Gate and dogs, horses and men in red coats were all milling around yapping and whinnying when suddenly these traditional hunting noises were swamped by the sound of an approaching helicopter. The clump of policemen who had turned up to deal with any threatened violence looked up anxiously but impotently.

Seconds later a crop spraying helicopter appeared overhead and began to drench the assembled multitude with a particularly pungent, clinging and unpleasant brand of aftershave.

Peering from the passenger side of the helicopter Hubert could be seen waving part of one hand at the huntsmen.

The hunt had to be abandoned, of course. None of the dogs could smell anything and every possible scent for miles around had been wiped out.

Hubert explained later that when he had seen the crop spraying helicopter advertised for hire he had realised it was a heaven scent opportunity

HANS FROM ACROSS THE SEA

Bilbury had a visitor from abroad for most of last week and it was an educational experience for us all.

Hans came over from Germany where he works as an electrical engineer in a large factory which makes pop up toasters.

Although he is married he came alone as a representative of a small community which is looking for a village with which it can 'twin'. He has been staying with the vicar but he has spent much of his time in the Duck and Puddle talking to the regulars. Most of us have had the feeling that we have been undergoing some sort of screening procedure. I am, however, pleased to say that we are all confident that we have failed.

Although our German visitor speaks almost perfect English there are some aspects to our way of life which seem to puzzle him.

Last Sunday afternoon, for example, when Hans came into the pub for the first time and introduced himself to Frank Parsons behind the bar, Frank shook his hand and said 'Hello, how are you?' not for a moment expecting anything other than a perfunctory and superficial reply.

But Hans replied to Frank's query with precise and very Teutonic efficiency.

'I had a little headache last night,' he said. 'But I think that was probably a result of my flight. I would also blame my flight for the digestive upset I have experienced since my arrival in your country. I also suffer a little with my blood pressure and I have arthritis in my left knee.' He stopped for a moment, clearly making sure that he had not missed anything and then smiled. 'How are you?' he asked.

'Fine, thanks.' replied Frank, with typically British understatement. Frank is overweight and has a liver the size of Cornwall; he suffers from chronic bronchitis, persistent high blood pressure and can't walk for more than five yards without having to sit down and rest.

'My village is looking for a twin,' said Hans.

'That's nice.' said Frank. 'Is your village like Bilbury?'

'No.' said Hans, visibly growing in stature as he told us about his home town. 'It is much, much bigger. We have twenty thousand inhabitants, four factories, an industrial estate, an Olympic size swimming pool and many, many four lane highways. Our football club won second place in our local league last year.'

'That's very nice.' said Frank, pouring Thumper a drink.

'Bilbury has a pond, a village green, one lane that takes two way traffic, a series of single track roads and a darts team that has come bottom in our local league for the last five years,' said Thumper, exaggerating somewhat. The darts team has, in fact, only come bottom of the league for four out of the last five years. Last year the Bilbury team came second from bottom and the celebrations in the Duck and Puddle lasted for nearly a week.

'What does your town want out of a twin?' asked Frank.

'We would like very much to enjoy a cultural and artistic exchange,' replied Hans. 'And to establish an exchange of business ideas.'

'I'm not sure that Bilbury is exactly the right place for you,' said Frank. 'We don't have much business going on here.'

'Unless you count insurance fraud,' I muttered under my breath.

'Our town has many powerful links and great industrial traditions,' said Hans. 'Your little village could learn a lot from an association with us. You could quickly expand and become big and prosperous like us.'

Peter Marshall, our local taxi driver, shop keeper, funeral service operator, 24 hour dry cleaning agent and part-time postman, sat up and began to look interested.

'We have a powerful system of local government,' said Hans. 'Through our taxes we use our wealth for the good of our community.'

Peter's interest evaporated.

'I don't think we're really all that keen on becoming big and prosperous,' said Thumper. 'We rather like life the way it is.'

'I'd better move,' I said, looking at my watch, suddenly remembering that I'd promised to be back home for dinner.

'What is the time?' asked Hans.

'Quarter to six.'

Hans looked very worried. 'I must go and change my shoes!' he announced.

We all looked at him.

'I have brown shoes on,' said Hans. He smiled proudly. 'I have read a book on how to behave in England. 'It says that after 6 p.m. gentlemen always wear black shoes.' He slid off his bar stool, said goodbye to us all and left rapidly for his bedroom.

'I'm just glad I've got black wellington boots on,' said Thumper as Hans disappeared. He held out a leg so that we could admire his taste in footwear.

Most of us feel confident that Bilbury will not be getting twinned with any foreign towns. I'm afraid that none of us really feels that we are up to it.

ENID AND ELSIE BYGRAVES

Enid and Elsie Bygraves are twins.

No one seems to know exactly how old they are but Gilly Parsons reckons they must be at least 85. They are both rather forgetful and they never hurry anywhere but they are fit and strong and eminent testimony to the virtues of simple, healthy living. They are as alike as two peas although if you get close enough you can tell them apart if you look for the freckle just in front of a right ear. If the freckle is there then you are looking at Enid. If it isn't then you are looking at Elsie.

(Or is it the other way around?)

Elsie and Enid have spent their entire lives together and they are still living in the same small cottage that they were brought up in at the beginning of the century. They had electricity installed in the 1960s but apart from that there have been few, if any, other changes to their home.

Seven weeks ago there was a considerable amount of anger in the village when the pair reported that their car, an ancient but reliable Ford Popular with just 17,000 miles on the clock, had been stolen from the garage at the side of their cottage.

No one could understand why car thieves would want to steal an old Ford Popular. Even though it had never been driven at more than 30 mph it didn't exactly have classic car status. And P.C.Wren, our local constable, confirmed that no joy rider would be seen dead in such a vehicle.

Elsie, who always drove (although Enid also had a driving licence) said that she had absolutely no idea when the car had been stolen. She told the police that she only ever opened the garage doors once a week when she went to get the car out for their weekly shopping trip.

The anger and outrage in the village was intensified by the knowledge that for Bilbury, crime had previously always been something we had read about rather than experienced. Most of us regularly leave our homes and cars unlocked and it was disturbing to think that our peace and trust had been so cruelly violated.

The police put the car on their missing vehicles list and with P.C. Wren's help Elsie and Enid filled in an insurance claim form.

Last week they received a cheque from the insurance company and in a mood of great excitement they went into Barnstaple in Peter Marshall's taxi and bought themselves a replacement; a good-looking, two door Ford Escort with twin exhausts, twin spotlights, fake fur seat covers and a pair of fluffy dice hanging in the back window. They were, they professed, very pleased with it. Elsie was particularly taken with the leatherette steering wheel which, she said, she liked a lot.

There has, however, been an unusual twist to Bilbury's first major crime story in years.

Enid and Elsie do not have a telephone in their cottage and yesterday evening Frank Parsons took a call at the pub from a man working at a garage in Barnstaple.

'Do you know a couple of old dears called Bygraves?' asked the caller.

Frank said that he did, indeed, know Enid and Elsie Bygraves.

'Are they O.K? They haven't died have they?'

'They're fine. Why?'

'Would you ask them if they'd like to come and collect their car?' asked the caller. 'It has been cluttering up my garage for weeks now.'

'I don't understand,' said Frank, who didn't understand.

'They brought it in for a service but they've never come back to pick it up. If they don't pick it up soon we'll have to sell it to pay the bill.'

Frank said he'd try to get in touch with the sisters and asked the garage man not to do anything hasty.

'What do we do?' Frank asked Thumper Robinson and me.

'They must have taken the Ford Popular over to Barnstaple, left it for a service, got a taxi back home and then completely forgotten about it! If they go and pick it up the insurance company isn't going to be very pleased.'

I looked at Thumper and waited. He is our local expert on insurance matters.

Thumper sipped at his beer and shook his head sagely. 'I'll sort it out,' he promised. He looked at me. 'But I'm not going to tell *you* what I'm going to do. I don't want the insurance company reading about it in one of those books of yours.'

THE ARTIST

Ian's parents were wealthy enough to send him to private school and ambitious enough for him to want him to have a good career in one of the professions. At their insistence he applied for and won a place to study law at university.

But he gave it all up three months before he was due to qualify, bravely telling his horrified parents that he could not contemplate spending his life making people miserable. There was, he insisted, no link between justice and the law and he was not prepared to spend his life taking advantage of people's fears, anxieties, shortcomings and weaknesses.

After spending a month on holiday in Europe, Ian returned home to find that his parents had fixed him up with a job as a life insurance salesman.

'If you won't make a career in law,' said his father firmly, 'then you'll have to have a career in business.'

Ian began his business career by failing as a life insurance salesman. He was far too honest for his own good and no one ever bought any policies from him.

He went on to fail as a double glazing salesman, an encyclopaedia salesman and an estate agent. He did not enjoy any of these jobs and (Ian readily admits) was not very good at them either.

For a while Ian worked as an assistant manager in a supermarket. But he left there after a row about the way the check-out girls were treated.

By the time he was 35 Ian had failed at just about every job known to man. His parents, who'd had such high hopes for their son, told him that they washed their hands of him.

For one whole summer Ian wandered rather aimlessly around the coast of Devon and finally settled in Bilbury where he rented a small, tumbledown cottage and planned to earn a modest living doing whatever odd jobs he could find.

In the summer he sold ice cream, helped out in the restaurants and cut lawns and in the winter he sold firewood.

Somewhere along the line (he had long since forgotten what had triggered his interest) Ian had acquired an enthusiasm for ornithology and with no steady job to interfere with his life he began to spend more and more of his time exploring the moors and cliff tops of the west country drawing and painting birds.

He had a natural, untutored talent for art and he had taught himself to identify a bird on the wing so well that even Thumper Robinson envied him this skill.

Occasionally he would sell one of his paintings though, to be honest, most of the sales were made to people who were more interested in helping him through a difficult patch than in collecting art. He was a very likeable fellow.

Apart from the dog with whom he shared his cottage, Ian had no responsibilities and no ties and no ambitions. He had very few possessions and approached each day with an innocent freshness that almost guaranteed happiness. Disappointments and setbacks were always regarded as temporary and of no real significance.

But six months ago something terrible happened to him.

A stranger turned up at the Duck and Puddle, driving a BMW and wearing a tweed hacking jacket, a pair of tweed plus twos and a deerstalker hat.

He was, he said, an art dealer from London. A friend had bought one of Ian's paintings while in Devon on holiday and the dealer told Ian he wanted to represent him and make him rich. There was, insisted the dealer, a heavy demand for the sort of old-fashioned painting that Ian produced.

At first Ian was reluctant even to see the dealer. But the man from London was very insistent.

Eventually, Ian signed a contract and the dealer handed over a cheque (which Ian, who did not have a bank account, had to cash at the pub) and went away with a car boot full of paintings.

Two months later the first journalists appeared. Then a television crew from an Arts programme (with a capital A).

Ian's life has now changed completely. He has, unwillingly, become a major celebrity in the art world. His pictures are being collected by the wealthy.

Ian is no longer the contented man he was. He is nervous and anxious and for the first time in years he cannot sleep.

The final irony in this story is that two days ago Ian's parents turned up to see him. They were, they said, very proud of him.

THELMA AND JACQUI

When I was a family doctor I always kept a box of paper handkerchiefs on top of my desk in the certain knowledge that at every surgery there would be a few tears shed.

I remember one late September surgery when I started the evening with a half full box of tissues and ended it with nothing but an empty box.

First, there was Thelma Pettigrew.

Thelma, her husband and their three small children lived in a two bedroom cottage out on the edge of the moors. They had a two acre garden on which they grew most of their own food and they enjoyed one of the most spectacular views on Exmoor. Their cottage had no mains electricity and so the Pettigrews relied entirely on a small petrol driven generator which was constantly breaking down. They did all their cooking and got all their heat and hot water from a small wood burning stove in the kitchen.

'I think I need a bit of a tonic,' said Mrs Pettigrew. 'I feel really miserable.' Her eyes were red and she had clearly been crying. She wore a pair of faded jeans and a thick, home knitted jumper that looked as if it had probably been made for someone at least four sizes larger.

I asked her if there was anything in particular making her feel miserable.

She shrugged. 'Just life in general,' she said, wearily. 'I get up every morning and have to spend at least two hours trying to relight the stove.' She sighed. 'It always goes out during the night.'

There was a pause while she rummaged around in her pocket for a paper handkerchief. 'I hate that stove!' she said emphatically. 'And I'm sure it hates me.' She blew her nose noisily.

'As soon as I've got the stove alight I have to start the lunch, then there's the cooking and the washing and the ironing and as soon as I've done that I have to get out into the garden and weed the vegetable patch.' She twisted her handkerchief around and around in her fingers until it tore. I pushed my box of tissues across the desk towards her. She took one and blew her nose again.

'I spent three years at college and I've got a degree in Spanish,' she told me, the tears rolling down her cheeks. 'I should have studied stove lighting and nappy washing.' She took another tissue and wiped her eyes. 'There's no challenge in my life at all. I want more excitement, more action. I want something more demanding than lighting that damned stove.'

She stayed for nearly half an hour and my box of tissues was a lot emptier by the time she'd gone.

The patient who followed Thelma Pettigrew was someone I had never seen before.

'I don't suppose you can help me,' she said, even before she'd sat down. 'But I thought I'd call in on the off chance.'

She told me that her name was Jacqui (with a q) Tavistock and that she was on holiday, staying at a small boarding house on the Combe Martin road. She wore a black tracksuit with an emblem I didn't recognise emblazoned on the chest and had a pair of designer sunglasses pushed high up into her hair.

'I love it down here,' she sighed, and clearly meant it. 'I live in London and work for an advertising agency. I hate it there. There's never any time to think. Everyone is always rushing and everything is done in a panic.'

She said at first that she wanted to know if I could give her something to calm her down and help her relax but quickly confessed that what she really wanted was a sick note to send to her boss.

'I just can't cope with the idea of going back to that mad house,' she told me, with tears beginning to appear. She sighed and sniffed and I handed her the box of tissues. 'I do wish I could find a little cottage down here,' she said, dreamily. 'I'd love somewhere miles from anywhere. I could grow my own vegetables and do my own cooking and be independent. It would be wonderful.'

She had a ten tissue story to tell and I listened to her for twenty minutes before confessing that there really wasn't anything useful I could do, apart from give her the sick note she wanted so that she could steal another week's holiday.

When she'd gone I couldn't help thinking how strange life is and how wonderful it would have been if I had been able to help Thelma and Jacqui swop lives for a week or so.

But I couldn't help wondering just how long they would be happy living each other's lives.

FISH PIE

Gilbert Halliwell had made his fortune as a builder in Wolverhampton and at the age of 55 had retired and bought a large and rather absurdly expensively converted barn on the outskirts of Bilbury. He bought himself a Range Rover, a brand new Barbour coat, a shooting stick and a hip flask.

Together with Maude, his wife, and Cynthia, his unmarried eldest daughter, Gilbert Halliwell wasted no time in doing what he could to establish himself as a stalwart of the local community. Within a year of coming to live in the village he had managed to get himself onto the Kentisbury Golf Club committee, had joined the nearest hunt, had made a generous donation to the church funds and had narrowly missed being elected onto the local Parish Council.

Gilbert desperately wanted to be a country gentleman.

He wanted local farm workers to touch their caps, nod slightly and say ‘Good morning, Mr Halliwell, sir,’ when he went past. He had been brought up in a terraced house in Wolverhampton and he now wanted everyone in Bilbury to treat him as a man of property.

Gilbert had just under an acre of garden and even he realised that this wasn’t enough land to raise deer, breed exotic varieties of sheep or play host to the hunt.

And so he hired an expensive firm of landscape gardeners to throw money and muscle power at a fairly flat and rather ordinary piece of pasture land.

At the end of six months (and after handing over a cheque for a small fortune) Gilbert was the extremely proud owner of sixteen varieties of apple tree, a rose garden, a small kitchen garden, a Japanese garden and a pond.

He was particularly proud of the pond and of the five huge and very expensive coy carp which the landscape gardener had insisted were far more fashionable than goldfish or trout. Gilbert was ‘sold’ on them when he was told that all the really rich country folk had them in their lakes. At £6,000 each they were certainly the most expensive fish Gilbert had ever bought.

Sadly for Gilbert life was not as full of joy as he had hoped it would be. He was not an insensitive man and he was constantly aware of the fact that however hard he tried people were always sniggering about him behind his back.

Even worse was the fact that his wife was not happy in Bilbury. She missed the bright lights and shops of Wolverhampton and she desperately missed her friends and her twice weekly coffee mornings. She found Bilbury a rather lonely place and she hated the mud and the quiet of the country.

A few weeks ago Gilbert decided that in order to try to increase his local standing and to decrease his wife’s sense of isolation he would hold a large dinner party in a marquee in his garden.

Maude, who was given the task of organising the affair and supervising the preparation of the meal, was not at all enthusiastic. In fact, she hated the whole idea.

But Gilbert insisted. He wanted the rest of Bilbury to experience some of the sophisticated style of Wolverhampton social life. In particular, he wanted Maude to make sure that the vegetables were taken from their own garden. ‘I might not be able to serve my own venison!’ he said. ‘But I can serve my own potatoes!’

The dinner was held last Sunday. Together with most of the population of Bilbury I was there. And it was probably the most embarrassing evening of my life.

The big explosion took place when the main course was served.

‘What’s this?’ demanded Gilbert, shouting to his wife across the marquee. ‘I said I wanted beef!’

‘It’s fish stew,’ replied Maude.

‘I can see that!’

‘Well, why did you ask me what it was then?’

‘Because it isn’t beef!’ Gilbert lowered his nose and sniffed.

‘What sort of fish is it?’ he demanded.

‘Home-grown,’ answered Maude. ‘Like the vegetables.’

It took a moment or two for Gilbert to realise what Maude meant.

Then he got very cross and said things that we all felt he would regret the following day. Together with the other guests I muttered something about suddenly remembering another engagement and left.

‘Pity,’ said Thumper. ‘I’ve never eaten coy carp. Often wondered what the things taste like.’

I understand that Gilbert has now put his house on the market and is planning to return to Wolverhampton.

WHEN MIDGES BITE

‘I read a report in the paper this morning,’ said Lionel Francis, ‘that claimed that when a midge bites you it drinks one tenth of a millionth of a litre of blood.’

Lionel is the nearest thing we’ve got to an executive in Bilbury. He always wears a matching handkerchief and tie set and his two tone Ford car is equipped with twin halogen spotlights and a telephone.

The telephone doesn’t work very well around Bilbury because the hills interfere with the reception but even a non-functioning telephone is something of a status symbol in a village where the grapevine is still the preferred method of message carrying.

Lionel, who runs a small chain of chemists’ shops, doesn’t often come into the Duck and Puddle because, as he once put it, he regards it as rather too ‘rural’ for his taste. (I think what he means is that too many of the customers come in wearing dung encrusted wellington boots).

‘You can spare that much,’ said Thumper.

This was a slightly barbed comment for Lionel, who has the reputation of eating for two, has the body to confirm the reputation. Peter Marshall still claims that it was Lionel Francis who broke the springs in his taxi.

‘You may scoff!’ admonished Lionel. ‘But the report also stated that there are ten million midges to the acre on moorland.’

‘This sounds like the beginning of one of those "If a man leaves the bath tap running how long will it take two boys with wheelbarrows to move six tons of sand to Llandudno" questions.’ said Thumper. ‘I could never do those at school.’

I started scribbling on a beermat. ‘Did it say how many times a midge is likely to bite in an hour?’

‘No.’

‘Twice?’

‘That sounds fair.’

‘That means that the midges on one acre of moorland will drink two litres of blood an hour!’ I announced. I did the sum again and found, to my surprise, that either the first answer was correct or else I had made the same mistake twice. In view of the fact that it was very nearly official closing time I thought that this was rather impressive.

(At official closing time Frank shuts the pub front door and doesn’t let anyone else in. But he doesn’t throw anyone out. For thirty years he has worked on the assumption that this is what the authorities mean by ‘closing time’ and since after 6 pm the local police stations all seem to be manned by telephone answering machines it seems unlikely that he will be forced to think otherwise.)

‘How many litres of blood in the average human body?’ Thumper asked me.

‘Eight pints or so. What’s that in litres?’

‘Five.’ answered Lionel instantly.

‘So the midges on five acres of moorland will completely exsanguinate two human beings every hour.’ I said, impressing myself again.

‘Ex- what?’ asked Thumper.

‘Exsanguinate - completely empty all the blood out. Like vampires.’

Thumper put his glass down so heavily that some beer splashed out onto the bar counter. He immediately picked up a towel and started to mop up the mess he’d made. A stranger might have been impressed by this apparently selfless act. ‘The moors must be solid with dead bodies during the summer. You’d think we’d be falling over them!’ He shivered. ‘How many acres of moorland are there on Exmoor and Dartmoor?’ Frank pulled a tourist guide down from a shelf behind the bar and rapidly thumbed through it. ‘Exmoor is 265 square miles and Dartmoor is 365 square miles.’

‘How many acres is that?’

‘A lot.’

For a moment there was silence.

‘Maybe the bodies all get eaten by maggots.’ said Thumper, who was wringing out the towel over his beer glass. ‘How many maggots are there to the acre, Lionel?’

Lionel frowned. ‘I don’t know. The article didn’t say.’

‘If I were you,’ said Frank quietly, ‘I’d stop reading those darned newspapers. If you hadn’t read that stuff about midges none of us would be worried about this.’ He shivered involuntarily. ‘I’ll tell you this for nothing - I shall keep my car windows shut next time I drive across the moors.’

‘I reckon the police probably get someone to move all the dead bodies so that there isn’t any public panic.’ said Thumper, who, whenever there is any doubt, always believes in giving the conspiracy theory the benefit of the doubt. ‘Either that or the Tourist Board have it done.’

‘That’s a lot of coffins and a lot of funerals,’ said Peter Marshall from the village shop. We had all assumed he was fast asleep. ‘I wonder if I could get the contract?’

MRS LOVELACE'S MATCHBOX

An unholy row has broken out in Bilbury this week.

It started, as these things often do, with something very trivial: a competition at the monthly meeting of the Bilbury Women's Institute.

Organised by Mrs Parsons, the aim of the competition was to see how many small items could be crammed into a matchbox.

Last year Mrs Jellicoe's prize-winning matchbox contained twenty seven items (including a collar stud that, according to Mrs Jellicoe, once belonged to Lloyd George).

This year Mrs Lovelace, who lives in the main part of the Old Priory and whose most notable physical feature is an artificially enhanced pneumatic bust of unlikely proportions, won the competition easily with a matchbox that contained 559 ordinary steel sewing pins.

Not all the other members of the W.I. were happy about it.

'That's cheating!' insisted Mrs Bridgford, who never pulls her punches and who, with a matchbox crammed tightly with 31 different items, considered herself to the rightful winner of the competition.

(It is worth pointing out that Mrs Bridgford has never forgiven Mrs Lovelace for winning the Best Cake Prize at the Blackmoor Gate Show last summer. Mrs Bridgford has made no secret of the fact that she believes that the triple layered sponge that took Mrs Lovelace to victory was baked not by Mrs Lovelace herself but by her daily help - Mrs Pettigrew - a woman whose way with a sponge cake has long been legendary in W.I. circles.)

Mrs Lovelace rose to the bait like a trout to a May fly. 'How dare you!' she demanded, her hackles well and truly risen.

'Pins! Pins! Pins!' spat Mrs Bridgford. 'Anyone could have filled a matchbox with pins!'

'Just because you didn't think of it!' spat back Mrs Lovelace.

'I'm surprised you didn't get one of those huge, joke matchboxes,' said Mrs Bridgford. 'You could have got millions of pins in one of those.'

'That would have been against the rules,' Mrs Lovelace pointed out. She took a crumpled piece of paper out of her handbag, lay it out on her lap and straightened it. She took out her blue framed spectacles and put them on.

'Look!' she said, reading from the paper and pointing to the words as she pronounced them. 'Matchboxes must be no larger than two and a half inches long and one and a half inches wide.' She refolded the paper, put it back into her handbag, sat back, folded her arms and looked around the room defiantly.

But Mrs Bridgford was not about to give in so easily.

'It's still cheating!' she insisted. 'It's still against the spirit of the competition!'

And so it went on.

Mrs Lovelace repeated her assertion that Mrs Bridgford only objected because she hadn't thought of it, and Mrs Bridgford said that no one with an ounce of honesty would have thought of such a thing and Mrs Lovelace asked Mrs Bridgford if she was calling her dishonest and Mrs Bridgford said she was and that was when things really started to get out of control.

Mrs Parsons stood up and in a very loud voice asked if anyone wanted another cup of tea but no one took any notice of her at all.

Mrs Lovelace said that Mrs Bridgford smelt of silage and Mrs Bridgford said that at least she could sit by the fire without worrying that her silicone implants might melt, and after a moment's deafening silence Mrs Lovelace burst into tears and rushed out of the village hall and hurried home to tell her husband and he immediately went out and built a dam across the stream that leads down to the Bridgford farm.

And the upshot of *that* was that late last night, after dark, Albert Bridgford went up to the Lovelace's place with his double-barrelled shotgun under his arm and took a pick axe to the dam.

To complete the story I should tell you that the prize Mrs Lovelace won was a jar of home-made rhubarb jam which, in all the excitement, she forgot to take home with her. It is still standing on the village hall window sill waiting to be collected.

The jam was made by Mrs Norton and is widely reputed to need more sugar in it.

THE JAZZ WEEKEND

When I first moved to North Devon I thought I might buy a boat and take up sailing.

When I mentioned this to Frank in the Duck and Puddle he suggested that I should telephone the local harbour master in the nearest coastal village.

'Have you got any spare moorings?'I asked Alf, the harbour master. Alf is not a full-time harbour master. He runs a petrol station for a living and works as harbour master for the power and the glory.

'How big is your boat?'

'I haven't bought one yet. I wanted to make sure that I could get a mooring first.'

'I can't give you a mooring until I know how big your boat is.'

The logic of this seemed solid and unassailable so I thanked the harbour master and put down the telephone. Later that evening, in the Duck and Puddle, I asked Thumper if he knew of any boats for sale.

'How big is your mooring?' Thumper wanted to know.

'I haven't got one yet.' I told him. 'I thought I'd buy the boat first and then get a mooring to fit it.'

Thumper sucked in air through clenched teeth and shook his head. Instinctively, I knew that something was worrying him.

'What's up?' I asked.

'Dangerous move!' he told me sternly. 'You could end up with a boat and no mooring. Then where would you be?'

His logic seemed equally unassailable. A boat without a mooring is like a bridge without a road.

'Get the harbour master to give you a mooring and then go out and buy a boat to fit it,' suggested Thumper.

'But what if I can't find a boat to fit my mooring?' I asked him, conscious that a mooring without a boat wasn't likely to be much fun.

That was eight years ago. I still haven't got a boat or a mooring.

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At first I thought that the fact that things did not change very rapidly in Bilbury was a result of a deliberate objection to progress, a reactionary attitude orchestrated by local politicians and sustained by a population which is wedded to tradition.

But, over the years, I have gradually come to realise that Bilbury remains firmly entrenched in the past not as a result of any deliberate, consciously thought out policy but as a result of its inhabitants' skilful ability to avoid making decisions of any kind. The people of Bilbury have turned procrastination into a sophisticated science. It is this, rather than any objection to change, which protects the village from any serious flirtation with the twentieth century. Bilbury folk have a powerful talent for repelling change without confronting it.

Some people would probably find all this rather tiresome. But I have long since stopped feeling frustrated. These days I rather like the Bilbury way of doing things. There is something very comforting about living in an unchanging world. After all, anything which results in change is also likely to lead to heartache, dissatisfaction and despair, whereas an absence of change means stability and reliability.

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Bilbury's rather special variety of local logic can be very infectious. Today, I realised that I have become a true Bilburian. Without even thinking about it I have helped to preserve the status quo.

I walked into the Duck and Puddle at lunchtime to discover that Gilly, the landlady, had announced that she wanted to organise a Jazz Weekend in the village hall, bringing in bands from as far away as Bude and South Molton. Thumper, who could see his quiet weekend drinking haunt filling up with men in beards and corduroy trousers, was vociferously opposed to this proposal.

'Bilbury needs livening up a bit!' said Gilly, firmly.

'It will certainly do that!' agreed Frank loyally, though one could see that his heart wasn't really in it. Frank is at his happiest when he is pulling pints and drinking them himself. I knew that he wouldn't be keen on any increase in business if it meant spending his time pulling pints for other people to drink. Thumper took a large swig out of his beer, wiped froth off his mouth with the back of his hand and snorted.

I found myself firmly on Thumper's side.

I had no objection to the idea of listening to jazz for a weekend but I strongly suspected Gilly would want to put up advertisements and that as a result there would be strangers coming into the village.

Strangers!

'There is a snag,' I pointed out.

They all turned and looked at me.

‘Don’t you agree that this sort of thing only really works when it’s a tradition?’

Even Gilly nodded.

‘But it’s never been done before here.’

‘No,’ agreed Gilly cautiously.

‘So it isn’t a tradition,’ I pointed out.

‘And so it’s bound to be a failure.’ nodded Frank, gloomily.

‘We don’t want Bilbury to be associated with a failure!’ said Thumper firmly.

‘Besides,’ I pointed out, ‘the village hall is always shut at weekends.’

The jazz festival has now been abandoned.

AN UNROMANTIC MAN'S LAST ROMANTIC GESTURE

Keith Littlejohn did not live in Bilbury, nor, indeed, in Devon. He lived in a small town in Somerset, just over the county border. But he has truly earned his place in the history of the area for he came to Devon to commit suicide and he died not far from Bilbury, at the bottom of the tallest sea cliffs in England. For nine months Keith, a 22-year-old assistant supermarket manager, had been courting Lesley, a 21-year-old bank clerk. I know that the word 'courting' sounds old-fashioned but they were, in truth, an old-fashioned couple.

Keith sported a small, neatly-trimmed toothbrush moustache, had his hair cut in the old-fashioned, short back and sides 'pudding basin' style and, when not working, invariably wore a sports coat and grey flannels. He wore a trainspotter's enamel badge on his jacket lapel and carried a neat row of coloured pens in his breast pocket.

Lesley who was two inches shorter, wore her light brown hair in a neat, page-boy style and liked pleated skirts, fluffy jumpers and cameo brooches.

On warm, dry days they would drive to Lynmouth and spend the day walking along the cliff tops near Countisbury. On Saturdays they would share a pizza, go to the cinema and hold hands while walking back to the car park where Keith's neat and well-kept Vauxhall was waiting for them. Although at the end of the evening they would kiss each other, theirs was not what you could call a *physical* relationship.

Last Saturday Keith proposed to Lesley. It wasn't a particularly romantic moment. He didn't get down on his knees and he had not been presumptuous enough to purchase a ring. His precise words were: 'Shall we get married then?'

'Could I have 48 hours to think about it?' Lesley had asked, to Keith's surprise. 'It's not that I'm not sure,' she reassured him, though to be truthful that was exactly the problem. In recent months, Lesley had begun to suspect that she might be more of a romantic than she had ever previously realised.

'Of course!' Keith had replied, rather taken aback. He had rather assumed that they were stepping out together in the quiet, unspoken, expectation of matrimony.

'It's not you I'm not sure about it,' she had told him. 'It's just that I'm not sure that *I'm* ready to get married yet.'

'When will you know?' asked Keith.

'By Monday,' promised Lesley.

And so Keith took Lesley home, kissed her affectionately on the cheek and said he looked forward very much to hearing from her.

He heard nothing on Sunday and by 8 am on Monday morning he was in deep despair. Lesley had promised to let him know by Monday and now it was Monday and he had heard nothing. Keith was convinced that this meant not only that Lesley was not going to marry him but also that she was not even going to reply. He felt disappointed, humiliated, let down and deeply depressed.

He climbed into his Vauxhall and instead of driving off to the supermarket he drove towards Lynmouth.

On the steep cliff road down from Countisbury he stopped his car for a few moments, and gazed out towards the Bristol Channel. Then he revved up the engine, bounced the car over the low grassy bank that was the only barrier which protected the road from a drop of several hundred feet down into the sea and slammed his foot down onto the accelerator.

The coroner told the young man's relatives that Keith died the instant his car hit the rocks below. The petrol tank had exploded with the impact and even if Keith had, by some miracle, survived the crash he could not have lived on through the inferno which followed. The irony in this tragedy is that Lesley had decided to accept Keith's proposal of marriage but in a moment of premeditated romanticism had telephoned the disc jockey at a local radio station and asked him to announce her acceptance during his programme. She knew that the supermarket where Keith worked normally carried the broadcasts from the radio station on its loud speaker system.

And the tragedy in the irony is that Keith's radio was tuned to the radio station Lesley had contacted. The local police technician who examined the car told me that judging by the time shown on the clock on the dashboard of Keith's Vauxhall the assistant supermarket manager had probably heard of his fiancée's acceptance of his proposal just as his car plummeted over the cliff edge.

THE TEMPORARY RESIDENT

I had many strange experiences when I was a family doctor. When you press the buzzer underneath your desk you never know who is going to come in next or what story they will tell.

One evening, after a long and at times seemingly never ending day, I stood up and started to stuff my stethoscope into my jacket pocket, thinking I had seen my last patient. Suddenly, and unexpectedly, Miss Johnson, the receptionist, poked her head round the door.

'There's one more patient waiting for you, doctor,' she said 'He came just as I was shutting the front door.' She knew how tired I was and looked at me apologetically. 'He's a temporary resident.'

'O.K.,' I sighed, pulling my stethoscope out of my pocket and dropping it down onto the desk. I slumped back down into my chair. 'Show him in.'

'Temporary resident' is the phrase doctors use to describe a patient who does not live in the area and who is not a normal client of the practice. Bilbury, being so close to the coast, has more than its fair share of 'temporary residents' and in the summer it isn't unknown for half the patients at a surgery to be strangers.

The latecomer was in his sixties. He wore a heavy tweed three piece suit, a checked green and brown woollen shirt with button down collar points, a plain green woollen tie and a pair of highly polished brown brogues. His half moon gold framed spectacles gave him an academic air.

I vaguely waved a hand in the direction of the chair on the other side of the desk.

'Are you staying round here long?' I asked him after we had exchanged the usual formalities.

He mentioned the name of a well-known local hotel. 'I've been down for a few days break,' he told me. 'But I've got to be back at work tomorrow.' He spoke slowly and deliberately but rather loudly as though used to speaking to children. I wondered if he was a school master, though to be honest he seemed a little old. His nose was richly veined and he had a large, harmless lipoma growing out of the top of his balding head.

'What can I do for you?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'How can I help you?'

The latecomer leant forwards in his chair, frowned as though about to say something and then leant back again.

I waited.

'I'm sorry,' he apologised. 'My brain isn't as fast as it used to be.'

'That's O.K. Take your time. Tell me what's been worrying you.'

He glowered at me. 'Why should I tell you?'

'Er... I'm a doctor,' I mumbled. I waved a hand around, indicating the shelves piled high with books and medicines, the horsehair examination couch with the stuffing coming out of it and the eye test chart. 'This is my surgery.'

The latecomer looked around, as though seeing the room for the first time. 'I'm sorry,' he apologised, unexpectedly. 'That's what I came about. My memory is not what it was. The old grey matter seems to be getting a bit porridge-like.'

'If you're going back home then you should perhaps go and see your own doctor,' I suggested. 'You need some tests doing.'

'Can't you do them? You're a doctor aren't you?' I sighed silently.

'Take seven from one hundred!' I told him.

'Why?'

'It's a test for your brain.'

'Ninety something.'

'Can you be more precise?'

'Ninety two?'

'And seven from that?'

'Seventy? Seventy seven?' He waved a hair airily as though we both knew the answer didn't really matter. He was clearly suffering from senile dementia. 'Can you tell me the name of the Prime Minister?' I asked him.

'Why do you want to know? Don't *you* know?'

'Yes.' I said patiently. 'I know. But I want to see if you know. It's another test.'

'Churchill.' said the latecomer, without hesitation.

'Can you stay around in the village for a few more days?' I asked him. 'If you really want me to check you out I need more time.'

'I've got to go back.' he said. 'I'm in court tomorrow.'

‘Oh.’ I said. ‘I’m sorry. Why? What... er... ?’ I wondered what on earth he’d done. Exposed himself? Some innocent fraud? I felt sorry for him.

‘I’m a judge.’

I went cold when he told me.

And even now I still feel cold when I think about it. I often wonder if he’s still sitting on a bench somewhere, handing out judgements, making decisions about people’s lives. A man who cannot do simple sums and who still thinks that Churchill is Prime Minister.

I don’t want to know if he is still sitting on a bench and passing judgement. Patient-doctor confidentiality means that there is absolutely nothing I can do about it.

FASHION CONSCIOUS

A month or so ago I read an interview with a professional cricketer who said that his favourite hobby was buying new clothes.

He confessed that he spent all his free time (and available money) on shopping for new shirts, trousers, jackets and suits.

This worried me rather a lot for I had always assumed that choosing and buying clothes was an essentially female activity. As far as I am concerned I wear clothes to keep me warm and dry and protect me from the elements. My only other criterion when choosing clothes is that they must have lots of pockets. I know that women never understand this essentially male craving for pockets but it is, nevertheless, important. Given a choice between a fashionable jacket in an agreeable colour with no pockets and an ill cut, nauseating looking jacket with plenty of pockets I would choose the ill cut, nauseating looking jacket with pockets every time.

But for a while the other day I harboured the fear that my simple view might be out-of-date, that men might be changing their views of clothes and that a growing number might be adopting a viewpoint that I had, in the past, always regarded as essentially feminine.

My experiences in the changing rooms at the Leisure Centre in Barnstaple really depressed me.

First, there were three school boys who were getting changed to go swimming. They were all around twelve or thirteen-years-old and you might have expected that they would have been talking about girls, football or racing drivers.

But they weren't.

Their sole topic of conversation revolved around the colour, size, shape, make and style of their footwear.

One of the schoolboys had just purchased a new pair of training shoes for which he (or, more accurately, his mother and father I suspect) had paid the sort of money for which one could, just a little while ago, have bought a perfectly decent *motor car!* The last time I looked, training shoes were called pumps or plimsolls and they came in black or white and cost no more than a hamburger. I doubt if any one I knew in my teens had the faintest idea who had *made* their pumps. The kids I was at school with would have laughed at the idea of arguing the merits of one pump manufacturer versus another.

But, I discovered that it isn't just teenagers who are now obsessed with what they wear. On the other side of the changing room there were two fellows in their late twenties who were getting ready to play badminton. They were obsessed with the cut of their trousers and they seemed genuinely interested in whether turn-ups were in or out of fashion! They talked knowledgeably and at length about gussets and linings and pleats and I found it all deeply disturbing.

When I was growing up things were very simple. Trousers, which were grey, had turn-ups and jeans, which were blue, did not. No male with his fair share of testosterone would be seen dead worrying in public about the *cut* of his trousers!

The final straw was a conversation I heard between two men who were getting changed for a karate class. They were tall and well-built and I felt confident that they at least would be talking about some healthy sporting activity. They weren't. One of the karate practitioners had just bought a new outfit and he was showing his companion the stitching and the material on his coloured belt.

That was bad enough. But what made it worse was that his companion was *interested!*

I hurried home from Barnstaple in a deep state of depression and was comforted slightly when I found that in the Duck and Puddle Thumper and Frank were arguing about whether the barmaid at the Gravediggers' Rest had a bigger bosom than Kay, our district nurse.

'Do you know who made your wellington boots?' I asked Thumper.

He looked at me as if I had gone mad. 'No.'

'Have your trousers got turn-ups on?' I asked Frank.

'I don't know.'

'What sort of belt do you use?' I asked Peter.

'Baler twine.'

Suddenly, I felt better.

I do like living in Bilbury.

WAYNE WELLARD

People who live in towns always regard sheep as stupid animals. But sheep aren’t at all stupid. They are certainly stubborn, they may be selfish and they are without doubt among the most determined of creatures, but they have more native intelligence than many human beings. Thumper Robinson seriously reckons that he has never met a policeman or a politician with the intelligence of a sheep.

Sheep have an outstanding ability to forge strong and lasting relationships and a burning curiosity. They also have very good memories. When I got the lawnmower out this year, for the first spring cut of the season, the sheep pricked up their ears, stared at me, studied the mower, looked at one another and then immediately responded by racing around to the spot in the field where I always dump the grass cuttings. They like eating freshly cut grass cuttings - I suppose it cuts down the work involved in eating! It had been six months since they had seen or heard the mower but they immediately knew what it meant!

Our five pet sheep, Lizzie, Petula, Cynthia, Sarah-Louise and Miss Houdini, all saved from a rendezvous with mint sauce, are spoilt rotten. Four of them were bottle fed from birth and since they still get one digestive biscuit each most days (they don’t like any other types of biscuit half as much, though they did express some enthusiasm for chocolate finger biscuits last Christmas) they all greet any visitor with undisguised, unlimited enthusiasm.

Walk into the average sort of field where the average sort of sheep are grazing and they will, in the interests of self-preservation, run away from you.

But if you walk into a field where our five pet sheep are grazing they will run towards you at a startling pace.

In addition to this affection for human beings and digestive biscuits they have acquired some rather unusual habits.

They don’t like getting wet (we had a shelter built for them and if it rains they run in out of the rain quicker than you or I could put up an umbrella) and they hate mud. When we took them to be dipped one autumn neither Sarah-Louise nor Petula would walk through the muddy patch at the approach to the dip. Both looked down at it and backed away from it. They had to be carried across the quagmire.

I also have a strong suspicion that our sheep have acquired a sense of malicious mischief.

For example, last Wednesday the five sheep had more than a little fun with Wayne Wellard the farrier. Wayne Wellard was in the field putting some new shoes on Lightning, a horse who has been living in a spare stable at Bilbury Grange for a while.

Wayne Wellard is built along the lines of a small building and wherever he goes he is accompanied by his dog called Kamir. I was once stupid enough to ask him why he had given an Indian sounding name to a dog.

‘Try shouting it out loud!’ suggested the farrier, with a grin. I was called away to the telephone just as Wayne Wellard arrived, but since apart from Lightning herself the only animals in the field were the five sheep I didn’t think anything about it. Fifteen minutes later I went back out to check that all was well and I heard an unmistakeable cry for help coming from the field. The cries were coming from somewhere behind the stable so I vaulted over the fence and ran round the corner to see what was going on. I could hardly believe my eyes.

There, standing with his back to the stable, his hands held up in front of him and a look of sheer terror on his face, was Wayne Wellard. Kamir was cowering behind him. And in front of them both were our five sheep. Cynthia and Petula were standing on their hind legs and resting their front legs on Wayne Wellard’s thighs and Sarah-Louise, Lizzie and Miss Houdini were jumping up and down with excitement just behind them.

‘Help!’ cried Wayne. ‘Get these bloody sheep off me!’

I put my hand into my coat pocket and found a few pieces of broken biscuit. When I called them, the sheep turned and raced towards me.

‘Thank heavens for that!’ said Wayne Wellard, sounding relieved. ‘I’ve never been so terrified in all my life. I thought the damned things were going to eat me alive!’ His dog whimpered pitifully.

‘They’re only sheep!’ I pointed out, feeding them bits of biscuit. Lizzie jumped up and got one of her front legs caught in my coat pocket. I bent down and disentangled her.

‘They’re a menace!’ insisted Wayne. ‘There should be a law about sheep molesting people and their dogs.’ He brushed some dirt and straw off his overalls and glowered at the sheep.

I couldn’t help smiling. ‘I can see the headline now!’ I told him. ‘Farrier claims sheep worried his dog.’

Wayne Wellard didn’t say anything for a moment and then he half smiled. ‘It’s not funny,’ he muttered defensively.

But it was.

IRIS, MILO AND DAPHNE

Occasionally, we all misjudge people we hardly know. We hear things about them, we make assumptions and we come to conclusions based on hearsay, prejudice and gossip. Those of us who live in villages are, I suspect, more susceptible to this fault than anyone else for we are constantly exposed to stories, anecdotes and half truths about our neighbours.

Take Iris, for example, who lives right on the edge of Bilbury and who telephoned me on Monday. I have met her only half a dozen times and I have heard nothing but bad about her but this week she surprised me. Peter Marshall, who runs the village shop and is himself something of a master at being somewhere else when it is his turn to buy the drinks, claims that she is one of the meanest women in the county. I don't think I have ever heard anyone say anything nice about her.

In summer her cottage has lupins in the garden and a pink climbing rose round the door.

The beauty of her cottage is, however, rather spoilt by the fact that it has a rusting corrugated iron roof where the thatch used to be. Iris is reputed to have discovered that her insurance premium would fall dramatically if she had iron instead of reed on her roof and so when her thatch needed repairing she is said not to have hesitated before choosing the expedient, if ugly, alternative.

Doctors get a lot of very strange requests but I rather think that the first call I received from Iris ranks as one of the oddest I ever received.

When she telephoned, Iris sounded extremely anxious.

'It's Milo,' she said. 'I'm worried about him. He hasn't eaten for days. Would you come round and have a look at him?'

I didn't know she shared her cottage with anyone called Milo (her children have long since grown up and got as far away from home as they could and Iris's husband died of a rare vitamin deficiency while still in his late thirties - Frank, the landlord at the Duck and Puddle says that Iris regards spending money on food as rather akin to wasting it, arguing that there is little point in spending good money on a commodity that will, within hours, be nothing more than sewage) but before I could ask her for more information she had put the telephone down.

I left my lunch to congeal and raced off to see what was the matter. As I drove off I felt tired and depressed and full of despair. Over the weekend a young farm labourer had died in an accident and I had been the one who had to break the news to Daphne, his wife.

When I got there Milo turned out to be a Venus Fly Trap. A plant.

'He usually eats flies,' said Iris. 'I save a fortune on fly sprays.' She poked at one of his clearly empty leaf pouches.

'But he just hasn't been eating.'

'Why on earth did you ring me?' I asked, more bewildered than angry. 'I'm a doctor!' The call was so absurd that I just could not feel cross with her.

'I could hardly ring the vet, could I?' snorted Iris, with undeniable logic. 'And the people from the garden centre don't do house calls.'

I picked up a dead insect from the windowsill and tickled the fly trap with it. Hungrily, the fly trap opened a pouch and accepted the meal.

'You'll just have to try feeding it by hand,' I told her. 'Dead flies morning and night for a week.' I know nothing about house plants but if you say things with conviction it is easy to assume the air of an expert.

I turned as I was about to leave. 'Why do you call it Milo?'

'It's a Venus fly trap,' explained Iris wearily. 'Haven't you heard of the Venus de Milo?'

I hadn't thought of her as a person with a sense of humour. I smiled faintly and nodded my appreciation.

'While you're here,' said Iris, 'there's something I want you to take.' She walked over to the sideboard upon which there lay a thick brown envelope. She picked it up and handed it to me. It was unsealed and I peeped inside. It was full of bank notes.

'It's for Daphne King,' she said. 'I know what it's like to be widowed young. She'll be able to use that.' She stared at me. 'But you're not to tell her where it came from. I don't want everyone thinking I'm a soft touch.'

THE ANNIVERSARY SURPRISE

Dennis Bride is not a regular in the Duck and Puddle. To be perfectly honest since their arrival a year or two ago neither he nor his wife, Ivy, have fitted into the village terribly well. Dennis has a rather important executive position (no one is sure precisely what) which takes him up to London two or three days a week.

Ivy is, to use a rather old-fashioned but eminently serviceable phrase, a bit stuck up. Her family have always had money and I think she finds it genuinely difficult to talk to 'ordinary' people like Frank, the publican, Peter the shopkeeper, Thumper (how on earth can I describe what Thumper does in a couple of words?) and me. She rides side saddle, wears a headscarf with beagles on it and speaks as though she's got a mouth full of ripe Victoria plums.

So we were all surprised when Dennis suddenly appeared just over a week ago, took out his wallet, and bought a round of drinks.

'It's my wedding anniversary on Friday,' he told us, when Frank had done his serious stuff with the optics and the beer pump and had poured Dennis his low calorie orange juice. 'My wife thinks I've forgotten - I nearly always do - but I thought it would be rather nice to have some people in from the village to help celebrate the occasion.'

I have to confess that none of us looked particularly excited by this. Thumper, Frank and Peter all looked as if they would have been more enthusiastic if invited to attend an evening of Welsh choral singing, meet with the local temperance society or join an insurance underwriting syndicate and although I tried hard to hide my feelings I don't think I was entirely successful. I've never had much of a soft spot for Ivy and the only genuine emotion I feel for Dennis is pity for his life seems to me to consist of long dull patches interspersed with periods of terminal boredom.

'I've got a firm of caterers coming over from Taunton,' said Dennis. 'And maybe you, Frank, would help us out with the drinks?'

'What did you have in mind?' asked Frank, with about as much enthusiasm as a politician invited to make a decision.

'Happy to leave that in your hands,' said Dennis. 'Whatever you think. You're the expert.'

'What did you plan on spending?' asked Frank.

'Open cheque,' said Dennis, using words which brought a glow to Frank's cheeks and a sparkle to his eyes.

'Right!' said Frank, enthusiastically. 'I should think I could help you out with that.'

Thumper, interest aroused, looked up. 'Friday, you said?'

Dennis nodded. 'But I don't want Ivy to find out about it. I want it to be a surprise.'

'She thinks you've forgotten it's your anniversary!' said Peter Marshall, dripping with understanding.

'Absolutely!' agreed Dennis. 'She'll be sitting there by the fire and then we'll all troop in and have a party. It'll be a good opportunity for us both to get to know everyone in the village.'

We arranged that at about eight o'clock on Friday evening Dennis would call in at the Duck and Puddle on his way back from London and we would then follow him back home. The booze would be packed into the back of Thumper's truck and the caterers would turn up at around nine. Everyone promised to make sure that Ivy didn't find out what was planned; since no one ever spoke to her this did not seem to be an unduly arduous responsibility.

On Friday evening everything seemed to go according to plan. Dennis arrived at 7.45 pm and we followed him back home in a straggly procession of trucks and tractors. We all parked in the lane and walked up to the house so as not to give the game away.

Dennis put his key in the front door lock and turned round to check that we were all there. We smiled encouragement at him. We were all carrying cases of alcohol. Frank had done us proud.

'I'm home, dear!' cried Dennis, walking briskly down the hall and into a spacious and elegantly furnished hallway. We all tip toed along behind him.

Ivy, her hair deliberately and carefully tousled, her face made up in what Thumper later described as a 'tarty' sort of way, responded to this greeting and tottered into view on pencil heeled black shoes. She was carrying two glasses of wine and dressed only in a pair of black fishnet stockings and a rather too small black and red basque over the top of which her ample bosom flowed like bubbling champagne. Behind her, in the dining room, I could see that the table had been set for a cosy, candle-lit anniversary dinner for two.

It was immediately clear that our arrival was something of a surprise to her.

'I've brought a few people from the village for dinner,' stuttered Dennis.

Ivy fainted.

'It was a good job you were there,' said Dennis, gratefully, when I had loosened his wife's clothing and helped him carry her upstairs to bed.

I did not like to point out that if I, and the rest of us, had not been there I probably would not have been needed.

Downstairs the pop of another cork was greeted with cries of approval.

THE DISCLAIMER

I was fast asleep one night when I was woken by the sound of the telephone.

'Hello?' I mumbled.

'Is that the doctor?'

I said it was. I was still working as a general practitioner at the time.

'This is the duty sergeant at the police station,' said a voice I didn't recognise. 'Sorry to bother you, doctor, but our usual police surgeon has been taken ill with food poisoning and we're rather stuck. We wondered if you could help us out?'

'Me?'

'There is a fee,' said the sergeant. 'And we'd be extremely grateful. We've got a gentleman here who has been charged with a serious driving offence. The breathalyser suggests that he's been drinking rather heavily. We've offered him the choice of giving us a blood sample or a urine sample and he's chosen to give us a blood sample.'

'Oh,' I said. I could see their problem. If they couldn't find a doctor to take the blood sample the charges against the man would, presumably, have to be dropped.

Rather reluctantly I agreed to go.

I woke Patsy, told her where I was going, got dressed, got into the car and drove to the police station.

It was a terrible night. The wind was howling and the rain was lashing down. Pieces of branch were strewn all over the road.

It took me forty minutes to get from Bilbury Grange to the police station. Normally, the journey would have taken no more than half that time.

The police sergeant on duty greeted me with a smile and something that was a cross between a wave and a salute. He took me into the medical room where two police constables were waiting with a large, red-faced and bad-tempered looking man. The room was equipped with a cheap but sturdy looking metal desk, two steel framed plastic chairs and an examination couch.

The police sergeant gave me a form to complete and I asked the prisoner a few questions to confirm that he was willing to allow me to take a sample of his blood. He said he was.

When the form filling was finished with the policeman handed me a small packet that contained a syringe, a needle and two small containers for the blood sample. One sample, explained the sergeant, would be given to the prisoner. The other sample would be sent to the police laboratory.

'Would you please take off your coat and roll up your sleeve?' I asked the prisoner.

The man stared at me belligerently and scowled. I repeated my request.

'No,' he said, bluntly. 'I won't.'

'But you've just agreed...,' I reminded him.

'I said you could take blood,' he said. 'But not from my arm.'

He ended this sentence with a loud hiccup.

I stared at him uncomprehendingly.

'You can take it from here!' he announced, suddenly unzipping his trousers and producing a part of his body which I had never previously regarded as offering a particular popular or suitable site for venepuncture.

I stared at the man and at the small and shrunken organ which he was holding.

'The law doesn't say *you* can choose where you take the blood from,' announced the man, as though he knew what he was talking about.

I turned to the sergeant. 'Doesn't it?' I whispered.

The sergeant shrugged. 'I don't know, doctor!' he admitted.

'I've been doing this job for twelve years and I've never come across anything like this before.'

'Come on!' said the man, tauntingly waving his organ at me. 'Take your damned blood!'

I took the sterilised syringe out of its packet and fitted the sterilised needle onto the end of it.

And then I had one of those flashes of inspiration which usually arrive about a day and a half too late.

'If you want me to take the blood from there just drop your trousers while I prepare this disclaimer for you to sign,' I said. I took a pen from my pocket and took a blank sheet of writing paper from a wire tray on the top of the desk.

'What disclaimer?' demanded the man. He had not dropped his trousers. Indeed, he was now holding two hands across his opened fly.

'Just in case anything goes wrong,' I told him. 'Taking blood from that particular site can occasionally result in gangrene and eventual amputation.'

The belligerent prisoner stared at me. ‘Amputation?’ He winced.

‘It’s not a terribly big risk,’ I told him. ‘But you have to sign to say that you accept the risk.’

‘I’m not signing!’ said the man, backing away from me nervously. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone change their mind quite so quickly. He threw off his coat and rolled up his shirt sleeve. ‘Here!’ he said, holding out his bare arm, complete with a nice, juicy looking vein. ‘Take it from here!’

THE KITCHEN CHAIRS

We had visitors from London last weekend.

Tony and Yvette are both in the restaurant trade and they are both huge. Tony, a chef at an Italian restaurant weighs at least sixteen stones and Yvette, a waitress, must be even heavier.

Halfway through their visit Yvette sat down on one of our kitchen chairs and ended up sitting on the floor amidst a muddle of splintered wood. The chair, an old piece of pine furniture which we had found at the back of the barn, had simply decided that enough was enough and had given up the ghost.

Patsy and I decided that rather than buy something new, which would look distinctly out of place in our kitchen, we would visit Patchy Fogg's antique shop and see if he had anything suitable as a replacement. We also thought that we would be able to buy something for less money at Patchy's than at any of the local furniture stores.

'I can let you have this set of four Victorian rosewood chairs for £135,' said Patchy, caressing the back of one of the chairs he was offering us.

Patsy and I looked at each other.

'That's rather more than we intended to pay,' said Patsy, with a frown.

'It's only for the kitchen,' I pointed out. 'Haven't you got something the same sort of age but a little cheaper?' I paused. 'Rather a lot cheaper actually.'

Patchy took his hat off and scratched the top of his head with simple, easy movement. Then, as though suddenly struck by a sudden thought, he put his hat back on again and disappeared through a door into a room that was packed from floor to ceiling with miscellaneous bits and pieces of furniture.

'I was going to put this into an auction in South Molton,' he said, reappearing and holding a plain, stripped pinewood kitchen chair out towards us. He examined a small, white label stuck onto the back of the chair. 'It's Victorian. I was going to put a reserve of £20 on it,' he told us. 'But for cash, without any commissions and so on, I can let you have it for £12.'

Patsy and I looked at the chair. It wasn't anything special to look at but it did look as though it would suit our kitchen.

I took the chair off him, found a space on the floor and put the chair down. I sat on it. It didn't break.

'It seems O.K.,' I said to Patsy.

'It looks quite nice,' said Patsy.

'But it is a little expensive,' I said.

Foggy sighed. '£10 then,' he said. 'But that's rock bottom. At £10 you're saving more than you're spending.' He reached out and fondled the chair. 'You could pay £50 for one like this in a London antique shop,' he murmured.

Patsy and I still didn't commit ourselves.

'Look,' said Foggy. 'I think I might have another one like it somewhere. Do you want me to have a look?'

Patsy and I exchanged glances. 'Yes, please.' I said.

Again, Patchy disappeared.

He reappeared a few moments later clutching a second chair.

'You can have the two for £17,' he said. 'I can't do any fairer than that.' He shook his head as though embarrassed by his own generosity. 'They should be going to the auction with a reserve of £20 each on them.'

I sat on the second chair.

'That means you're saving £23 on the two chairs,' he said. 'And you've saved £83 on what you'd have to spend in London.'

'It sounds very good value,' I agreed, by now totally confused.

'I'm too damned soft-hearted for this business,' sighed Patchy.

'Do you think you might find any more like them?' asked Patsy. 'If we're going to buy two it would be nice to put a set of four together eventually.'

Patchy rubbed his chin. 'At this price?'

I nodded.

Patchy shook his head. 'At this price I'm making a loss,' he said. 'I have to pay more than you're paying me!'

I took out my wallet and counted out £30. 'For four,' I said.

Patchy sucked in air. 'You should be in this business,' he said. He turned round. 'I'll go and have a look in the back and see what there is. But only because I like you both.'

Three or four minutes later we packed four chairs into the car.

'You've got a real bargain there,' said Patchy. He laughed. 'Do me a favour will you? Don't come back too soon! I can't afford to do too much business with you two!'

Patsy and I felt very pleased with ourselves.

Two days later Thumper Robinson called in to talk about some work he was doing on the stables.

‘I see you’ve been to Jasper Bottomley’s Furniture Warehouse,’ said Thumper, sitting down on one of our chairs. ‘They almost look like the real thing, don’t they?’ Patsy and I exchanged glances.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Patsy.

‘We got them from Patchy Fogg,’ I said. ‘They’re Victorian.’

Thumper put his head in his hands. ‘How much did you pay?’ he asked, a moment later.

I told him.

‘Jasper brings them in as kits from Taiwan, has them glued together in Torrington and sells them for £4.99 each,’ said Thumper

A BUSY WEEK IN BILBURY

There's been so much happening this week in Bilbury that I hardly know where to start. On Monday Norman and Elsie Burrows had an argument over their false teeth which resulted in a small domestic disaster.

For twelve years now, ever since Elsie's teeth were eaten by one of Dr Brownlow's Doberman puppies, the two of them have shared a set of artificial dentures which Norman bought in 1956 from a dental technician in Bristol. (To be honest the man wasn't a proper dental technician. He earned his living as an undertaker but made false teeth in his spare time and, according to Norman, had quite a reputation in that part of the West Country).

When they go out to dinner they take it in turns to chew. Norman will usually start with the teeth (because they are his) but when he's finished eating his meat, he'll wrap the dentures up in his handkerchief and pass them on to Elsie (who will have been busy with her vegetables) so that she can chew her meat properly.

No one seems to know what caused the argument on Monday but Norman tried to snatch the dentures and ended up knocking them onto the floor and before anyone could stop her Dulcie Patterson had trodden on them.

All may not be lost, however, for Peter Marshall says he's got some special repair glue and he's going to try to mend the fractured dentures before Roy Pilton and Iris Martinhoe get married on Saturday.

On Tuesday evening Patchy Fogg called in at the Duck and Puddle to tell us that he'd come third in a golf tournament at Kentisbury. Since Patchy only started to play golf six months ago we were all terribly impressed and several of us bought him drinks.

Early on Wednesday morning Peter Marshall rushed out of his shop and announced to the world that he had been burgled and that someone had stolen his alarm clock. As you can imagine this caused a considerable amount of excitement in the village and P.C. Wren was summoned to take statements from everyone who was in a fit state to make them.

On Wednesday afternoon Harry Tattersall arrived back in Bilbury in a taxi and was promptly turned round by his wife Trudy who was the only one of the pair who remembered that when he left the house for a business meeting in Belgium last Thursday, Harry had taken their car. He had left the car at Heathrow Airport. Harry is terribly absent-minded and once phoned home to say that he was in Madrid and could Trudy please tell him what he was doing there. On one famous occasion he got as far as Istanbul with no money, no passport, no luggage and only carpet slippers on his feet.

Late on Wednesday evening Peter Marshall called the police again and reported that the burglar who had stolen his alarm clock had left a bomb behind his bedside table. P.C. Wren, who, despite pressure from Peter, was reluctant to call the bomb squad all the way from London, bravely investigated and discovered that the ticking was caused by Peter's alarm clock which must have fallen off the table the night before.

On Thursday Roy Pilton came into the pub and said he was having second thoughts about getting married. When he'd had a few pints of Frank's best bitter he said he'd marry Iris if, when he tossed a coin, it came up heads three times running.

The first three tosses were all tails so Thumper said they couldn't be counted and Roy had to carry on. Eventually, after tossing the coin 18 times it came up heads three times running and to everyone's relief Roy swore that he'd go ahead with the wedding. The relief was occasioned by the fact that Roy is 42, Iris is 39, they have three teenage children and two grandchildren and they've been living together for 19 years.

On Friday, Patchy came into the pub looking very penitent and admitted that although it was true that he had come third in the Kentisbury Golf Tournament there had only been three entrants and he had taken 37 strokes more than the player who'd taken second place. He admitted that he had only shared this news with us when he had discovered that the full scores are to be printed in next week's edition of the *Barnstaple, Bideford and Bilbury Herald.* Thumper said we'd all forgive him this slight deceit on condition that he bought drinks for all of us and rather to everyone's surprise he did.

On Saturday Roy and Iris got married and despite all the business with the alarm clock Peter Marshall had still found time to mend Norman and Elsie's false teeth and so they were able to enjoy themselves as usual.

INDISPENSABLE

Most people eventually lose much of the accent they had as children if they move to a new locality and stay there long enough. Britons who emigrate to America or Canada usually come home speaking with a noticeable transatlantic twang. And even the Irish usually lose much of their brogue when they've lived in England for a few years.

But Evan Jones who lives on the outskirts of Bilbury and operates a one man taxi service into and out of Barnstaple is the proverbial exception who proves the rule. Evan has lived in Bilbury for longer than he or anyone else can remember but still speaks with such a broad native Welsh accent that most local people who do not know him well have to ask him to repeat everything he says several times. His accent is so broad that holiday-makers are frequently confused and assume that they cannot understand him because he is speaking in traditional Devonian.

I bumped into Evan late on Tuesday evening when I called into the Duck and Puddle to appease my rumbling stomach with one of Gilly Parson's cheese and mushroom pies. I've been a firm fan of Gilly's cooking ever since I moved to Bilbury. I was still working as the village doctor at the time and I was on my way home from delivering Mrs Bassett's seventh baby (when I claim the responsibility for 'delivering' the baby I am being unduly generous to myself for Mrs Bassett is such an accomplished mother that my role was confined to cutting the cord and accepting a large glass of very good whisky from Mr Bassett) and I found Evan slumped on the bar with his head in his hands and an untouched pint going flat on the bar in front of him. It's not like Evan to let a pint of beer go flat.

Beside Evan sat Dr Brownlow.

Dr Brownlow is the doctor who founded the practice I was running. Retired from medical practice (but not by any means retired from life) he had celebrated his birthday two weeks earlier but still looked fitter than many men twenty years younger than he was. Sitting upright on his bar-stool he was sipping his customary glass of malt whisky with obvious enjoyment.

Some people drink alcohol because they want to get drunk and forget their worries and a few drink the stuff because they are thirsty but Dr Brownlow drinks it because he likes the taste. Frank buys Dr Brownlow's favourite malt whisky by the case.

'I'm shattered, doc,' Evan sighed, when I asked him what was troubling him. (I knew that I had become a local in the village when I found that I could understand him). 'I had a funeral in Combe Martin on Monday and a wedding in Lynton on Tuesday and I've done seven trips into Barnstaple today.' Evan normally shared the taxi work with Peter Marshall, who keeps the village shop in Bilbury, but Peter's car had been off the road for a few weeks and so Evan had, for many in the village, been the only means of communication with the outside world.

'Why don't you say 'no' occasionally?'

Evan looked up at me sharply, as though I'd suggested that he give up beer, cigarettes or breathing. 'Say 'no'?' He looked across at Dr Brownlow as though expecting support.

'No one is indispensable,' Dr Brownlow pointed out.

Evan raised a doubting eyebrow.

Dr Brownlow took a sip at his whisky and sighed with delight. 'The church graveyard is full of people who thought they were indispensable,' he said wisely.

Evan was clearly unconvinced.

'If you work too hard you'll make yourself ill,' I warned him, prosaically.

Suddenly, Dr Brownlow climbed off his stool, leant over the bar and lifted a bowl of washing up water up onto the bar top. 'Put your hand into that,' he ordered Evan.

Obediently, Evan did as he was told though the water looked none too clean. People who have lived in Bilbury for more than a few years always do whatever Dr Brownlow tells them to do.

When I first came to work in Bilbury I was told a story about a woman who hadn't been out of bed for eleven years. Dr Brownlow had ordered her to stay there during an attack of flu. He had told her not to budge until he told her otherwise but had then forgotten to go back. At first I thought the story was apocryphal. These days I'm not so sure.

'Pull your hand out of the water.'

Once again Evan did what he was told.

'Now look at the size of the hole that you've left behind.' said Dr Brownlow.

Evan stared at the bowl of water blankly.

'That's how indispensable you are.' Dr Brownlow told him.

THE CRICKET CLUB DINNER

You will not be surprised to hear that the Bilbury Village Cricket Club usually holds its annual dinner at the Duck and Puddle.

Frank, the landlord, puts in an order for an extra couple of barrels of best bitter. Gilly, his partner in life and business, bakes a few dozen pies. And Peter at the village shop lets us have his left over Christmas crackers and Christmas paper serviettes at half price. (Peter always stocks very flimsy paper serviettes that look quite seasonal because they have scalloped edges and holly decorations but which are tissue paper thin and provide about as much protection from a spoonful of gravy or a dollop of custard as would a spider's web. I gather he buys them very cheaply from a wholesaler in Leeds who bought a warehouse full of them in 1946). Maisie Falmouth, the club treasurer's wife, hammers out some menus on her 1926 Royal sit up and beg typewriter. (The typewriter she uses, which once belonged to the late Arthur Appleyard, the author of the best-selling 'My Days at Sea' and undoubtedly one of Bilbury's best-known literary figures, lost its 'e' in 1987 and so since then Gilly has been under strict instructions to try her best to provide dishes that don't have an 'e' in them. This is even more difficult than it sounds. Try it if you don't believe me.)

This year, however, the club's four man committee (which basically consists of Kenneth, the club honorary vice president, because none of the other committee members is ever sober for long enough to make any sensible contributions to the proceedings) decided that we should hold our annual dinner at the Ritz-Carlton hotel; one of the very few establishments in North Devon which can boast both a full-time doorman who wears a top hat and a green tail coat and a porter who is employed to clean the guests' shoes while they sleep.

The man who is employed to clean the guests' shoes is called Carl Kassenbaum, by the way, and he has a very simple system to ensure that the shoes he removes are put back outside the correct bedroom doors. Sometime you must remind me to tell you about the night that Thumper Robinson decided to 'help' Carl 'improve' his system and accidentally got a high court judge mixed up in a rather unpleasant divorce scandal.

To be honest none of us was terribly keen about this change in our annual routine but by the time we found out what was happening, Kenneth had booked the hotel dining room and it was too late to do anything about it because the hotel had written Kenneth a letter telling him that the booking deposit was non-refundable.

'It's a daft idea,' complained Thumper, who pointed out that whereas we could all drive home from the Duck and Puddle without any danger of being stopped by the police we would never all get back to Bilbury without attracting Mr Plod's attention.

'I've hired a coach!' countered Kenneth. 'The coach will pick us all up at the Duck and Puddle and when the dinner is over, the coach will take us all back to our cars at the Duck and Puddle. Then we can all drive ourselves home.'

Grudgingly, Thumper agreed that this plan would at least reduce our chances of ending the night blowing up police sponsored balloons. 'Where did you find a coach driver who was prepared to sit around for four or five hours?' I asked Kenneth.

'Peter Marshall agreed to do it,' said Kenneth. 'He's borrowing the school bus for the evening.'

No one could argue too much about that and so last Saturday evening at about half past seven we all put down our glasses at the Duck and Puddle, said goodbye to Frank and Gilly (Frank is a vice President of the club but, not surprisingly, he was in a bit of a huff and had refused to join us) and clambered into the coach.

'You can't come in here,' said Eugene Cudlipp, the doorman at the Ritz-Carlton, when we all climbed down from the coach and tried to shuffle into the hotel.

'Don't be silly, Tiny,' said Kenneth. 'We've booked the dining room for the cricket club dinner.' Eugene, who is six foot six inches tall, has been called 'Tiny' since he was fifteen.

'I'm sorry, Mr Falmouth,' said Tiny, who was clearly quite genuinely cut up about it all. 'You and Mr Petherick can come in, but none of the others.'

'What on earth do you mean?' demanded Kenneth. 'Why can Reggie and I come in when the rest can't?'

'Because you're the only two who are wearing ties,' explained Tiny. 'The hotel manager doesn't allow guests into the hotel if they aren't wearing ties.' He looked around at the rest of us as we clutched at our tie-less throats.

And daft as it sounds they wouldn't let us in.

Kenneth insisted that Tiny went and fetched the manager but he wouldn't budge.

So, in the end Peter took us back to the Duck and Puddle where Gilly cooked us all egg and chips and Frank refused to sell us any beer until we'd all combed our hair. Peter popped out and fetched some Christmas crackers and serviettes so only Maisie's menus were missing but since there's an 'e' in 'egg and chips' she wouldn't have been able to type that out anyway.

THE CHRISTMAS FAYRE

The Bilbury Christmas Fayre may not be much compared to Disneyland but it's all we've got and every year it gives everyone a tremendous amount of pleasure.

America's Disneyland has its rides, its castles and a larger than life version of Mickey Mouse but the Bilbury Fayre has a proper old-fashioned coconut shy, a 'guess the weight of the cake' competition (Mrs Anstruthers always makes the cake and it is well-known now in the village that in order to stand a chance of winning first prize you have to double the first weight you thought of), a stall where you can win a goldfish if you can throw one of the rubber rings that are used for sealing jam jars over a pencil standing in a block of plasticine and a stall where you can rent three wooden balls and throw them, just for the hell of it, at four rows of redundant crockery. A banker from Manchester once put down a £20 note and stayed at the 'break a plate' stall for an hour and a half, breaking umpteen old plates and happily exorcising a year's accumulated strains and stresses. He was afterwards heard to claim that he had derived more relief from this ninety minutes of organised destruction than he had from two and a half years of extremely expensive psychoanalysis.

In my first year as a doctor in Bilbury I was honoured by being put in charge of the 'guess the number of peas in a teapot' stall. A small handwritten card pinned to the trestle table upon which my teapot stood informed competitors that the prize on offer was a 'flamingo pink' plastic shower caddy 'designed to hold soap, shampoo and sponge while you shower with complete freedom and confidence'.

Despite the fact that as far as I aware there was not one home in Bilbury which contained a fitted shower, this prize seemed surprisingly attractive to those villagers who regarded themselves as expert in the unusual and esoteric art of judging the pea capacity of a brown catering size teapot.

All things considered there is no doubt that the Christmas Fayre was, as usual, an enormous success and when I left at nine thirty, I was tired but contented for my stall alone had raised over £7 towards the Village Hall Dry Rot Fund, a noble attempt to raise enough money to enable the village hall to combat the ravages of a persistent and apparently insatiable fungus.

To be honest I would have left earlier, for since the fuses in the village hall blew up at Halloween all of our social events have been primarily afternoon affairs, but Mrs Pilkington told me that as custodian of the 'peas in the teapot' stall it was my responsibility to check the entries and find the winner.

'Fine,' I said. 'Have you got the correct answer?'

'What answer?' asked Mrs Pilkington.

'The number of peas there are in the teapot,' I explained.

'Oh no,' said Mrs Pilkington. 'You've got to count them yourself.'

In view of the lack of light I did my counting sitting in the car and it was pitch black when I left. Since I was hungry and I knew that Patsy, who had been in charge of the 'toss a horseshoe over a wooden stake' stall, had gone over to Barnstaple with Kay to visit Elspeth Norwich who was still in hospital after her unfortunate accident with the patented automatic butter pat maker which she bought from an auction in Torrington, I decided to call in at the Duck and Puddle for a bite of something to eat.

'I'm glad you're here,' said Gilly. 'Would you call round on the Prestons? Mrs Preston rang half an hour ago and said it was urgent. She hoped you might pop in. They can't get hold of the doctor in Barnstaple.' The Prestons' cottage is only about five minutes away from the pub so I asked Gilly to cook me some chips, cut me half a dozen slices of bread and butter and put a couple of eggs out for frying while I popped over there to see what was the matter.

'It's our Henry,' said Mrs Preston, opening the door and ushering me in. 'He's been in bed for three days with a bit of a cold.'

'Right,' I said. 'Let's have a look at him, then!'

'I took Simon to the Fayre,' said Mrs Preston, as she led the way upstairs. Simon is her other son. At nine he is two years older than Henry. 'We won a goldfish which Simon insisted that we gave to Henry.'

'That's nice,' I murmured.

'Well it was,' said Mrs Preston, opening the door to Henry's bedroom. Henry was sitting up in bed looking, I thought, rather pleased with himself. 'Simon insisted that we put the goldfish by Henry's bed so that he'd see it when he woke up.'

I still didn't guess what had happened.

'We haven't got a goldfish tank,' said Mrs Preston. 'So I put the fish into a glass of water,' she nodded towards a half empty drinking glass on Henry's bedside table. It clearly contained no goldfish.

'I can't see a goldfish,' I said, stupidly.

‘No,’ said Mrs Preston. ‘Henry woke up feeling thirsty and took a drink out of the glass.’

And that is when I realised where the goldfish was.

‘The goldfish is in my tummy,’ said Henry, just in case I still hadn’t worked it out. He looked very pleased with himself.

‘Do you think he’ll be all right?’ asked Mrs Preston, anxiously.

I told her that my fears were entirely for the goldfish and asked her to ring Gilly and tell her to put my eggs in the frying pan.

THE ANTIQUE TABLE

It's been a busy week in Bilbury.

I've been involved in something very illegal and I've spent all the money Patsy and I have on a table for Bilbury Grange.

It all started when Patchy Fogg came into the Duck and Puddle on Tuesday evening looking really miserable.

'What on earth's the matter with you?' asked Thumper. 'You look as though you've lost a Georgian silver sugar sifter and found a plastic tea spoon!'

'I'm in a quandary,' moaned Patchy. 'It's terrible. I really don't know what to do.'

Frank pulled him a pint of stout and handed him a packet of crisps, and armed with these life-saving essentials Patchy sat himself down at the bar.

'One of those interior decorators from London came into the shop today,' he told us. 'He saw that oak refectory table I've got, got himself all excited the way they do, and told me he wanted to buy it for a client in Kensington.'

'Sounds good so far,' said Thumper with a grin. 'He didn't knock you down too far on the price, did he?'

'Didn't even haggle,' said Patchy. 'Those guys never do. They're working on commission so the more they spend the more they make.' He pushed a handful of crisps into his mouth, crunched them to death and then washed them down with a long draught of stout.

'So where's your problem?' demanded Thumper. 'Sounds like a good day's work to me!'

'He wants the table for what he called a 'dining nook',' said Patchy. 'And apparently his client's 'dining nook' is nine inches shorter than my table.'

'Can't they knock a wall down or something?'

Patchy shook his head miserably. 'Apparently not,' he said. 'He wants me to take nine inches off the table before I deliver it.'

Now, at last, Frank, Thumper and I all understood Patchy's dilemma.

Patchy Fogg is a smooth operator, a fast talker and not above a little bit of chicanery. There probably aren't many things that he won't do to make a few bob.

But he does have a genuine and enduring love for antiques.

'What the hell am I to do?' he asked us, plaintively. 'I've had that table for nine months. It's a beautiful piece of work. I was beginning to abandon the idea of selling it at the price I need to get to give me a profit.' He crunched some more crisps and washed them down again with more stout. 'But it's a marvellous table. It came from a monastery in Yorkshire and it's absolutely genuine. Sixteenth century. It would be an act of vandalism to chop nine inches off the end just so that it will fit into some damned 'dining nook' in Kensington.'

'Can't you switch tables?' asked Thumper, clearly surprised that Patchy hadn't thought of it.

'Obvious thing to do,' agreed Patchy. 'My first thought. But I've got to deliver the damned table on Friday so I've got two days. I've got no chance of finding anything remotely like it.'

'Make a copy and chop nine inches off the copy,' said Thumper, bluntly.

Patchy looked at him rather wearily. 'I've got two days!' he said. 'Two days to make a sixteenth century oak refectory table?' He laughed but it was a hollow, tragic laugh.

'We'll give you a hand,' said Thumper. 'I've got some old oak planks that came out of a house in Parracombe and you must have some handmade nails.'

Patchy looked at him and then looked at Frank and me. For a few moments he didn't say anything. 'Would you?' he asked.

'Of course!' said Thumper. 'Anything to help a mate out.'

I swallowed hard. 'I'll help,' I agreed. 'I'd rather you sold him a fake than cut the end off a genuine antique table.'

'I dare say there'll be a drink in it for us ...,' said Frank with a grin.

'There certainly will!' said Patchy, enthusiastically.

So there and then Frank left Gilly in charge of the Duck and Puddle and while he and I and Thumper drove out to Thumper's place and started sorting out the oak planks, Patchy called in at his shop to measure the table and pick up some old handmade nails and wooden pegs.

It took us thirty hours to make the fake table and when we'd finished it looked so good that Frank had to turn away when Thumper got his saw and cut nine inches off the end of it. Frank said that even though it was a fake cutting it up was sacrilegious.

On Saturday, when Patchy got back from London, he rang to invite Thumper, Frank and me round to his place to help him celebrate. The interior decorator had paid him cash and Thumper and Frank looked very pleased with their share of the proceeds. I told Patchy that I'd talked it over with Patsy and that if he didn't mind we'd like to buy the original sixteenth century refectory table for Bilbury Grange and we'd be happy to have my cut of the profits as a discount.

Patchy said he'd be delighted and promised to deliver the table next Tuesday.

On our way back home Thumper told me that he had scratched an almost invisible mark on one of the legs just to be on the safe side.

‘It’s not that I don’t trust Patchy,’ he said. ‘But sometimes temptation can be very difficult to resist when you’re an antique dealer.’

The End

There are more short Bilbury stories in *Bilbury Pudding.*

Bilbury Pie, a collection of short stories, is the sixth of Vernon Coleman’s seven books about Bilbury. These are: *Bilbury Chronicles, Bilbury Grange, Bilbury Revels, Bilbury Country* and *Bilbury Village*. There are two books of short stories called *Bilbury Pie* and *Bilbury Pudding.* All are available as Amazon Kindle Books. If you enjoy the Bilbury books you may enjoy other books by the same author including `*Mr Henry Mulligan’*, `*Second Innings*’, `*It’s Never Too Late*’ and `*Mrs Caldicot’s Cabbage War*’. For full details of over 100 books by Vernon Coleman please see his author page on Amazon or http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

THE BILBURY CHRONICLES

Vernon Coleman

The first in the Bilbury series of novels describing the adventures (and misadventures) of a young doctor who enters general practice as the assistant to an elderly and rather eccentric doctor in North Devon.

When he arrives in Bilbury, a small village on the edge of Exmoor, the young doctor doesn't realise how much he has to learn. And he soon discovers the true extent of his ignorance when he meets his patients.

There's Anne Thwaites who gives birth to her first baby in a field; Thumper Robinson who knows a few tricks that aren't in any textbook and Mike Trickle, a TV quiz show host who causes great excitement when he buys a house in the village.

Then there's elderly Dr Brownlow himself who lives in a house that looks like a castle, drives an old Rolls Royce and patches his stethoscope with a bicycle inner tube repair kit; Frank the inebriate landlord of the Duck and Puddle, and Peter who runs the local taxi, delivers the mail and works as the local undertaker.

There's Miss Johnson, the receptionist with a look that can curdle milk; Mrs Wilson the buxom district nurse and Len her husband who is the local policeman with an embarrassing secret.

'A delightful read. I was entranced for hours.' *Miss S, Devon*

'I loved this book. Please send two more copies as soon as possible.' *Mrs S, Nottingham*

'Wonderful. One of the best novels I've ever read.' *Mr T, Leamington Spa*

'I enjoyed "The Bilbury Chronicles" more than any other book I've read for years. I am very much looking forward to the sequel.' *Mrs G, Sunderland*

BILBURY GRANGE

Vernon Coleman

The second novel in the Bilbury series. The Doctor and his wife move to Bilbury Grange - a dream of a house with stone lions guarding the front door, a Victorian, walled kitchen garden and a coach house complete with clock tower. But the newly married couple have no idea of the horrors that await them - crumbling slates, rampant woodworm, creeping dry rot and, worst of all, crooked builders all too ready to lend a hand. With money tight and repair bills soaring the young couple have to find a way to make ends meet.

But repairing Bilbury Grange isn't the only problem they face. Rumours abound that a developer is about to build new houses and a golf course in the village - and to top it all Thumper Robinson gets arrested!

Somewhere, as all this is going on, the Doctor and Patsy find time to adopt two young kittens and four young lambs.

'Captures the essence of old-fashioned village life where you never needed to lock your door.' *Western Evening Herald*

'A wonderful book for relaxing and unwinding…makes you want to up roots and move to the rural heartland. *Lincolnshire Echo*

'For sheer relaxing pleasure here's another witty tale from the doctor whose prolific writings are so well known to many of us.' *Bookshelf*

BILBURY REVELS

Vernon Coleman

The Bilbury series continues with this, the third novel set in the idyllic Exmoor village.

Disaster strikes during a long, relentless storm which batters Bilbury Grange, cuts off the village and blankets the whole area in a thick covering of snow. The Doctor nearly loses his life (he is saved by his faithful dog Ben) and the village schoolteacher loses her cottage roof.

The fun really starts when the villagers join together to raise money to repair the devastated cottage. Vernon Coleman describes an old-fashioned music hall evening (during which just about everything which can go wrong does go wrong), one of the funniest cricket matches ever to take place, and a village Produce Show where the locals compete (with some very surprising results) to find out who has grown the biggest and best vegetables.

And as if that wasn't enough the Doctor has to promote his first book. He travels to London, makes his first hilarious television appearance, and is invited to speak at a local village hall where things aren't quite what they seem to be.

Vernon Coleman's comic novels have been compared to Jerome K. Jerome's classic 'Three Men in a Boat'. Readers of the previous Bilbury books will love The Bilbury Revels. New readers be warned – you'll be hooked.

THE VILLAGE CRICKET TOUR

Vernon Coleman

A novel describing the adventures and mishaps of a team of cricketers who spend two weeks of their summer holidays on a cricket tour of the West Country, and who make up in enthusiasm for what they may lack in skill.

‘If anyone ever manages to bottle the essence of the village cricket he will very quickly scale the dizzy heights of personal fortune. In the meantime we read and write about it in pursuit of understanding. Seminal reading here includes Selincourt and Blunden and should now embrace Vernon Coleman’s latest offering, a whimsical piece about the peregrinations of a village team on its summer tour...all the characters are here, woven together by a raft of anecdotes and reminiscences and a travelogue of some of the most picturesque spots in the south west. ‘*The Cricketer*

‘Describes in hilarious fashion the triumphs and disasters of a Midlands teams tour of the West Country and there is not a little of Jerome K. Jerome in Mr Coleman’s style.*’ Worcester Evening News*

‘I enjoyed it immensely. He has succeeded in writing a book that will entertain, a book that will amuse and warm the cockles of tired hearts. And what a change it makes from the wearisome cluckings of the current crop of cricket books with their grinding pomposity and, in many cases, their staggering lack of craftsmanship and originality.*’ Punch*

‘A delightful book which also highlights some of the most spectacular scenery in Cornwall and Devon.’ *The Cornishman*

‘Vernon Coleman is obviously a man who has enjoyed his cricket and over the years has committed to memory the many characters he has seen playing the game. He weaves them into the story as he charts the progress of his team’s tour of Devon and Cornwall. The tale captures club cricket as everyone imagines it should be.’ *Falmouth Packet*

‘Coleman is a very funny writer. It would be a pity if cricketers were the only people to read this book.’ *This England*

THE MAN WHO INHERITED A GOLF COURSE

Vernon Coleman

Trevor Dukinfield, the hero of this delightful novel, is a young, not very successful journalist. Completely out of the blue, Trevor receives a letter informing him that he has inherited a golf course from an uncle he never knew he had.

You might think that this would have been greeted by Trevor as good news. Indeed, Trevor *did* treat it as good news until he heard about the two small snags which accompanied his good fortune.

First, in order to keep the golf club under the rules of his uncle's will, Trevor must play a round of golf in less than 100 strokes. Second, he has to find a partner to help him beat two bankers in a match play competition. Not particularly stringent conditions you might think - except that Trevor has never played a round of golf in his life, unless you count an hour spent on a crazy golf course in Weston-super-Mare.

'Another witty volume from the doctor who has successfully turned from medical topics to novel writing. The...mix of anecdotes and moments of sheer farce make for an absorbing read.' *Lancashire Evening Telegraph*

…another delightful and amusing story. I rate this one as the best of his twelve novels so far. His fans will lap it up.' *Sunday Independent*

MRS CALDICOT'S CABBAGE WAR

Vernon Coleman

Thelma Caldicot was married to her husband for thirty dull and boring years. Then completely out of the blue, two police officers arrived at Thelma's house to break some sad news. That afternoon, while her husband was at a cricket match, she had become a widow.

Her ambitious son Derek soon appears on the scene, determined to interfere in every aspect of his mother's life. After thirty years of being dominated by her husband, it looks as though Thelma's son is about to step into his shoes and continue the good work.

But then something happens to Thelma Caldicot. After years of being pushed around and told what to do, she takes charge of her life and fights back.

Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War is the poignant, warm and often funny story of an ordinary women who finally decides to stand up for herself.

'…a splendid, relaxing read…' *Sunday Independent*

Thank you so much for Mrs Caldicott's Cabbage War. All your books are great. *Mrs N*

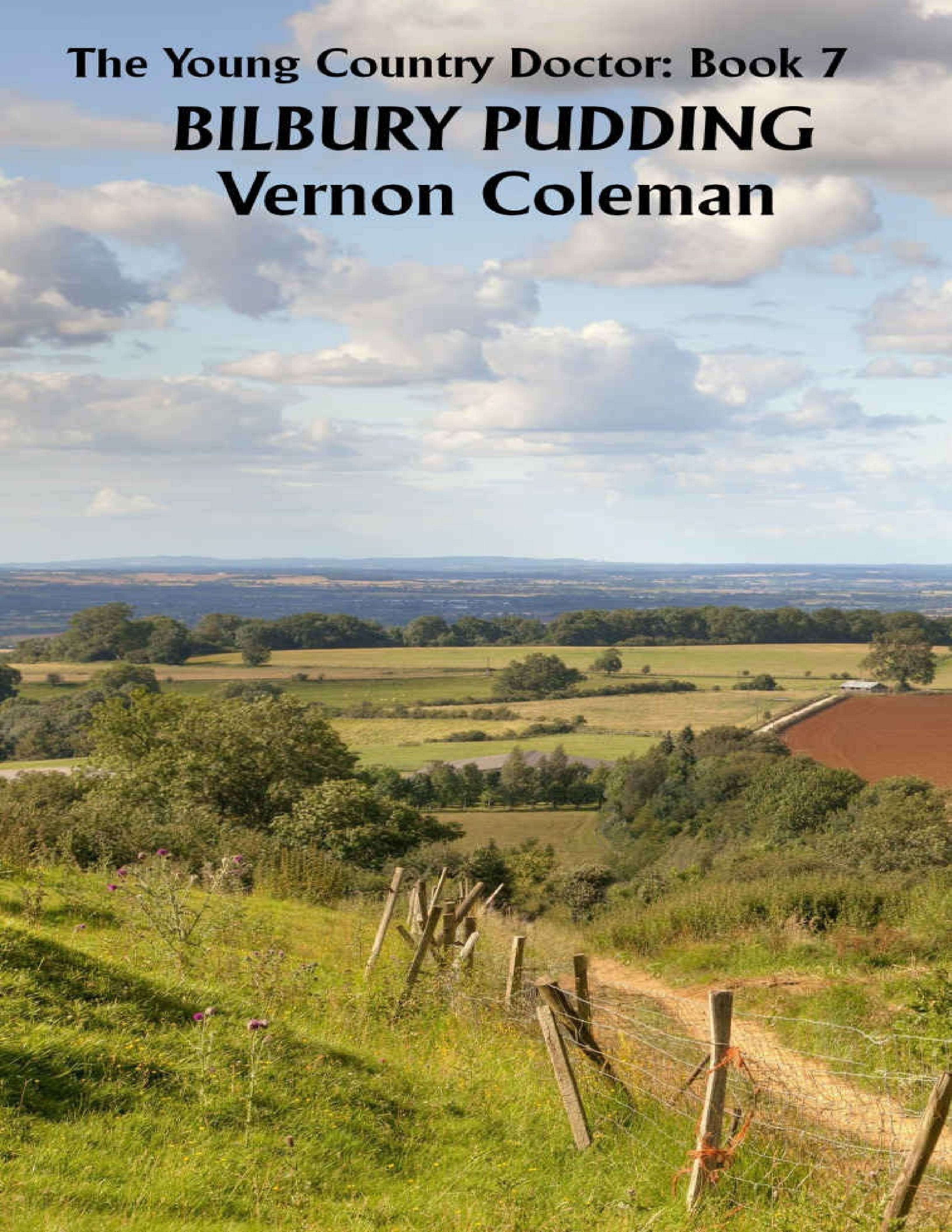

The Young Country Doctor: Book 7

BILBURY PUDDING

Vernon Coleman

The Young Country Doctor Book 7

Bilbury Pudding

(Short stories)
Tales from the village of Bilbury

Vernon Coleman

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Bilbury Pie, a collection of short stories, is the seventh of Vernon Coleman's seven books about Bilbury. These are: *Bilbury Chronicles, Bilbury Grange, Bilbury Revels, Bilbury Country* and *Bilbury Village*. There are two books of short stories called *Bilbury Pie* and *Bilbury Pudding*. If you enjoy the Bilbury books you may enjoy other books by the same author including *Mr Henry Mulligan, Second Innings, It's Never Too Late* and Mrs *Caldicot's Cabbage War*. For full details of over 100 books by Vernon Coleman please see his author page on Amazon or www.vernoncoleman.com

DEDICATION

To Donna Antoinette, who bakes the best cakes and pastries in Bilbury (her buns are, quite rightly, widely revered) and whose music soothes my soul.

If God were kind and said to me
Go dream a wife
Your choice is free
She is the one who it would be.

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THE JUDGE

Most of the patients I saw at my surgery in the North Devon village of Bilbury were locals; villagers whose families had lived in Bilbury longer than they, or anyone else, could remember. Thanks to Miss Johnson, my receptionist, I always had their medical records in front of me when they came in to see me though in many cases, of course, the official records were quite unnecessary. I knew their lumps and bumps and medical idiosyncrasies almost as well as they did.

There were, of course, occasional exceptions: visitors, known officially as 'temporary residents', who did not live in the village; for whom I held no medical records and about whom I knew nothing.

'There's a gentleman to see you who is new to the village,' whispered Miss Johnson at the end of one Saturday morning surgery. Miss Johnson is efficient but kind. She is also enormously discrete and very loyal. She is in her fifties, tall, slim and white haired. She dresses neatly and always has a single row of pearls around her neck. 'He's staying for two nights at the Duck and Puddle. I think he's just passing through.' She put the form he'd completed on the blotter on my desk. I glanced down at it. His name, date of birth and home address, and the name and address of the GP with whom he was registered were all written down neatly.

The Duck and Puddle is our village pub, run by Frank and Gilly Parsons. Frank, the landlord, is in his late fifties. He is bald, overweight and a shuffling advertisement for poor health. He suffers from chronic bronchitis, persistent high blood pressure and an overworked and constantly complaining liver. His wife, Gilly, is tiny, lively and in her forties. They have two or three bedrooms which they let out occasionally to travellers and holiday-makers. They don't take couples with children or young men travelling in groups, and Gilly has been known to turn away couples if she thought one or the other might not be with their lawful partner. They don't have a lot of people staying with them but that suits them fine.

I looked at Miss Johnson and raised an eyebrow.

'Sixty four, sixty five next February, gentleman, smart sounding address on his form, possibly a lawyer though I'm guessing, nice Mercedes motor car, bachelor, lives alone, expensive suit, has his shirts professionally laundered, very nice luggage, silver-backed hairbrush, paid Gilly in cash in advance for two nights.'

I couldn't help smiling as Miss Johnson passed on this information, especially the use of the word 'gentleman'. She blushed lightly. 'He's been in the waiting room for fifteen minutes,' she explained. 'I rang Gilly for a little extra information.'

Bilbury is one of those small, off-the-beaten track Devon villages where the locals know each other so well that the arrival of any stranger is a noteworthy event. The North Devon coast is three miles to the north and our nearest big towns include such urban centres as Combe Martin, Lynton and Ilfracombe. Barnstaple, ten miles or so to the west, is our metropolis. It is to Barnstaple that we go when we need the services of solicitors or dentists or when we need to purchase exceptional items such as new shoes or carpets.

I glanced down at the form. 'Rushmore. Gerald Albert.' Miss Johnson nodded. 'That's what he told me,' she agreed. 'He told Gilly the same.'

'So if he's here under a pseudonym he's bright enough to stick to his story,' I quipped.

Miss Johnson looked at me, not sure whether or not I was being serious.

'OK,' I said. 'Ask him to come in, please.'

Rushmore, Gerald Albert, looked younger than his age. He wore an expensive light tweed suit, a club tie which I didn't recognize and a silk shirt that had his initials on the pocket. A laundry mark was just visible. His clothes seemed to have been made for someone a couple of sizes larger and so I assumed that he had recently lost weight. His grey hair was a tight mass of curls just above his ears, but thinned quickly into a desert-like scalp at the top of his head. He looked distinguished. I could see why Miss Johnson had called him a 'gentleman'. He looked like the sort of man who is accustomed to having people jump without him having to tell them to do it.

I smiled, greeted him, waved him to a chair and invited him to sit down. He nodded but didn't smile back.

I didn't have to put much effort into making a diagnosis because he told me what was wrong with him.

'I'm depressed,' he said. 'I have difficulty in sleeping, I wake early in the mornings, I have no appetite.'

'How long have you felt like this?'

'Several months. Three months. Four.'

'Can you think of anything that might have triggered it?' He thought for a moment and then shook his head.

'Are you being treated? Drugs? Anything?'

Another shake of the head. 'I haven't spoken to anyone else,' he confessed.

'Not even your GP?'

He shook his head.

'But you've been ill for some months?'

He nodded.

'Is there a reason for your not having talked to your GP?'

'It's difficult.'

'I'm not a psychiatrist,' I pointed out, after a silence.

'Splendid,' he said. 'I've never had much faith in psychiatrists. I would deny I ever said this but it has always seemed to me to be a black art masquerading as a science.'

'What are you doing in Bilbury?'

'Taking a short break.'

'How long are you staying?' I asked, though I already knew the answer.

'Just two nights. Last night and tonight.'

Mr Rushmore was not the usual 'temporary resident'. The visitors who call into my surgery are usually suffering from something sudden and unexpected. A chest infection. A urinary infection. Earache. Fishing hook caught in a finger. Sprained ankle. I treat them, give them a note to pass on to their own GP, send them on their way and never see them again.

'Have you been resting? Off work?'

He shook his head.

'Might it not be a good idea to take a break?'

'It's difficult,' he said.

'What about taking next week off work?' I asked.

'I can't.'

I asked him why not.

'I have to be in court on Monday,' he answered. 'I need to leave here early on Sunday evening.'

'I'm sorry to hear it,' I said. I wondered what he'd done. 'Would it help if I gave you a note?'

He shook his head sadly. 'I've got to be there,' he said. 'They're expecting me.'

I nodded. 'They're expecting me,' seemed a sweet way to put it.

There was a silence for a while.

'I'm the judge,' he said.

Suddenly I could see why he had to be in court. And I thought I understood his reluctance to discuss his problem with his own GP. It had never before occurred to me that judges might suffer from the same weaknesses and frailties as other human beings.

'The sort of judge who wears a wig and sends people to prison?'

He nodded. 'People who have done something wrong.'

I drew some circles on my blotter and then turned them into faces. I'd never knowingly treated a judge before. It occurred to me that I might have a responsibility to insist that he signed himself off work. I wondered if I could. Can a doctor's authority exceed that of a judge?

'It's something of a dilemma isn't it?' he asked, seemingly reading my mind.

I agreed that it was. 'How did you come to be here? Why tell me if you won't tell your own GP?'

'I came away to think about things. I decided I needed to talk to someone. It had to be a stranger. Someone who doesn't know where I live or where I work. And it had to be a priest or a doctor.'

'Someone obliged to keep your secret?'

'Precisely.'

'How did you choose Bilbury?'

'I didn't choose Bilbury. I just found myself here.'

'And decided to look for a local doctor?'

He nodded.

'Your name isn't Rushmore, of course?'

He shook his head. 'I'm afraid it isn't.'

'And the address you gave on your form is false?'

'I'm afraid it is. Giving a false name and address on a temporary resident form may be morally debatable but it isn't, strictly speaking, illegal.'

I thought about things for a moment.

'Which means,' he said, 'that even if you want to insist that I take time off from work, you cannot.'

'No, I suppose not,' I agreed.

'If it is any consolation I gave a false name and address to liberate you from a potentially uncomfortable dilemma.'

I nodded my understanding.

'But maybe you can help me.'

'Maybe I can. But not in half an hour I'm afraid.'

'Maybe we can sort something out.'

'Do you have a suggestion?'

'I need to talk to someone. If you can find the time. I'll pay you. I can come back. But not as an NHS patient. I'll come to you as a private patient.'

'I don't take private patients.'

'Maybe you would consider an exception?'

'I'll think about it. But if I treat you I may need to prescribe for you.'

'No drugs. I won't take drugs. Drugs might affect me.'

'Affect your judgement?'

A hint of a smile. The first. And a nod.

'Why trust me? You don't know anything about me.'

'I'm quite a good judge of character,' he said. 'It comes with the job.'

'I suppose it does.'

'And I asked around.'

'In the village?'

'I had to ask how to find the local doctor. I pretended to be less capable at following directions than I am. I enquired at the public house and the local shop and spoke to a woman on a bicycle and a man in a small but very dirty truck. Everyone I spoke to seemed to have confidence in your skills as a physician. The man in the truck spoke of you with some affection in his voice.'

I felt a mixture of pride and embarrassment. 'That's good to hear.' I paused. 'The man in the truck was about my age? Well-built and weather-beaten?'

'He was. He looked reliable. Not the sort of man to dissemble.'

'Thumper Robinson,' I said. 'That's his name. I don't think he's ever dissembled in his life.'

'Is Thumper his real name?'

I thought for a moment. 'As far as I know. His family all call him Thumper.'

Thumper is in his twenties. He has an unruly mop of black, curly hair that he is beginning to lose and drives an ancient, powerful four wheel drive truck that has what look like metal farm gates welded to the front and the back. If you ask him what he does for a living he usually smiles and replies: 'Oh, a bit of this and a bit of that.' He is a jack of all trades and a master of most of them.

I looked at my watch. 'I have two urgent visits I must make,' I told him. 'Can you come back later?'

'You choose the time. I have nothing else to do and nowhere else I need to be.'

'Three o'clock this afternoon?'

'That's fine. Does the Duck and Puddle provide a good lunch?'

'Excellent.'

He rose and held out his hand. 'Until three o'clock,' he said.

I shook his hand and, when he'd gone, I sat for several minutes thinking about who he was, what he'd said and how on earth I could possibly help him.

***

The judge was, as I had expected, on time.

Miss Johnson doesn't work on Saturday afternoons and so I escorted him into the surgery myself.

'I suggest that I pay you £50 an hour,' he suggested. 'If you think that too little, please tell me now.'

I looked at him, astonished. 'I don't think I make much more than that in a week!'

He smiled. The second smile of the day. 'So £50 an hour will be acceptable?'

I shook my head. 'We'll find some other way for you to pay me,' I told him.

He frowned.

'Nothing illegal,' I assured him.

He seemed to realise that I was serious and he didn't press the point. But I could tell that my refusal had made him slightly uncomfortable.

And then we talked about his life. I asked him to tell me five things which had made him laugh in the previous six months. I asked him about his hopes, his ambitions and his fears. I asked him what things he enjoyed and what things worried him.

At first he clearly felt uncomfortable talking about such things. He answered vaguely or flippantly. But when I pointed out that I didn't know his real name and didn't know where he lived and that he could therefore treat me as the stranger I was, a medical confessor, he seemed to feel more comfortable about opening his heart.

He couldn't remember anything that had made him laugh. He said his hopes and ambitions and fears were all related to his work. He admitted that his work was his life.

When my wife Patsy knocked on the door to tell me that it was six o'clock, and to ask me if I wanted dinner, both the judge and I were surprised.

'Would you like to stay to dinner?' I asked, as he stood up to leave.

'Oh no, thank you,' he said swiftly. 'I've reserved dinner at the Duck and Puddle.'

Both Patsy and I knew that this was nonsense. No one at the Duck and Puddle has ever reserved a table. But I assumed that the judge felt uncomfortable about staying and that the lie was his escape clause. I guessed that he would suspect that I would know it wasn't true. I didn't press him. Patsy said nothing.

At the door the judge turned. 'I'm not sure why,' he said bluntly. 'But I feel in some way strangely comforted.'

'I'm pleased.'

'I would like to see you again.'

'OK.'

'May I return next weekend?'

'Of course. Are you still here tomorrow? You can come back tomorrow afternoon if you like?'

He thought about this for a while. 'I think that may be too soon,' he said at last. 'I need to think about today's conversation. There are many confusions in my mind. A week's interval would give me chance to clear my thoughts.' He looked at me. 'Besides,' he said, 'I think I've taken up enough of your time for one weekend.'

I started to say something but he held up a hand to stop me. Then he hesitated, clearly wanting to add something else. 'I am aware that you will treat our relationship in confidence.'

'Of course.'

'I appreciate that,' he said. 'And I trust you completely. But, since I may be taking up a large part of your weekends, I think you should explain things to your wife.'

When he'd gone I did as he'd suggested and told Patsy everything he'd told me.

'What do you think of him?' I asked her.

'I don't really know,' Patsy protested. 'I only met him for a moment.'

'Sum him up,' I said. 'First impressions. Two words.'

'Pompous and lonely,' she said immediately.

They would have been the two words I would have used.

***

The judge came to see me every Saturday for five weeks. He stayed at the Duck and Puddle and when he wasn't in my surgery he spent his time walking around the village. He became a regular customer at the village shop where Peter Marshall laid in a good supply of the old-fashioned humbugs he liked to suck as he walked.

The judge and I talked for two to three hours each week. The practice in the village was quiet at the time; I had no one seriously ill to worry about and, therefore, no exceptional demands upon my time.

As I had warned the judge before we had started I had no training in psychiatry and no specific aims in mind when we talked. It seemed to me that if I could learn to understand him a little through listening then maybe he would understand himself a little better too. And, maybe, through understanding would come a solution.

At the end of our second meeting he again raised the question of payment. He took out his wallet, removed a clump of notes and placed them on the desk.

'No thanks,' I told him.

'But I have to pay you,' he said.

'You don't have to pay me,' I said, softly.

'But that's the way the world works,' he said.

'No it isn't,' I said. It was the first time I'd contradicted him and he looked startled. 'Not in Bilbury.'

I thought about telling him that the fee he had to pay would be accepting my time without payment, and understanding and accepting that not everything is a matter of money. But that seemed pompous and I didn't want to fight his pomposity with any of my own.

And then, quite on the spur of the moment, I thought of something.

'Miss Billingham's wall has fallen down,' I told him. 'Actually, it was helped on its way by a delivery lorry which took the corner too sharply. But it has been falling down for years. Thumper says it was falling down when he was a kid.'

'I can't and won't interfere with the courts,' said the judge firmly.

'No, no,' I said. 'I don't want you to. It's simpler than that. Miss Billingham can't afford a new wall and the lorry driver's insurance company will take years before they agree to cough up a penny.'

'You want me to pay for a new wall?' asked the judge, looking surprised.

I shook my head.

'We're going to rebuild her wall tomorrow,' I said.

'We?'

'The village. But I want you to help us.'

'It's Sunday.'

'Yes.'

'I don't know anything about building walls.'

'Nor do I.'

'I'm a judge for heaven's sake.'

'I'm a doctor.'

'You're helping?'

'Of course.'

'Do you know anything about building walls?'

'No. But I can push a wheelbarrow and probably mix cement if someone shows me how to do it.'

'Why don't we just pay someone to do it?'

'Because Miss Billingham would feel obliged to us.'

'And she won't feel obliged if we rebuild her wall?'

'No, of course not. We'll do it as friends. She'll make endless cups of tea and hand out sandwiches and cake.'

The next day the judge and I spent eight hours helping Thumper Robinson, Patchy Fogg, Frank Parsons, Peter Marshall and the rest of the village to rebuild Miss Billingham's wall. Patchy Fogg is a local antique dealer who specialises in selling very nearly genuine antiques. He is invariably unshaven, has a ponytail tied back with a small red ribbon, and usually wears a pair of dirty jeans and a grubby T-shirt. Peter Marshall runs the well-stocked Bilbury shop. He is also the local taxi driver, postman, florist and pessimist. He used to be the local undertaker too until his old hearse broke down while taking a customer to the cemetery in Lynton. Peter has a thin moustache on his upper lip and always wears a badly creased suit and a flat cap. Peter has a reputation for being the meanest man on Exmoor but this is unfair. He is probably the meanest man in England. It was heart warming to see him helping rebuild Miss Billingham's wall. (I later found out that he had been bullied into it by Frank Parsons who had told him that if he didn't help, the cement and sand and other essential ingredients would not be purchased from his shop but from a builders' merchant in Barnstaple.)

At the end of the day I walked back to the Duck and Puddle with the judge.

'Thanks,' I said. 'You did a good day's work.'

'You're a very strange person,' said the judge. I grinned at him.

'I don't understand this,' said the judge. 'But I feel as though I've actually done something useful with my life today.'

'Good.'

'It's a very disconcerting feeling,' admitted the judge. He thought for a while and then added: 'I'm not sure that I appreciate it.'

I didn't say anything.

'And I'm beginning to get a suspicion that you're not quite as simple as I thought you were.'

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My initial reading of the judge turned out to be accurate. He was a very lonely man and he perhaps took himself (and his undeniably awesome responsibilities) a little too seriously.

'It's difficult not to take my responsibilities seriously,' he told me when I tentatively made this latter point. 'I have the duty to protect society and the right to deprive a man of his freedom.'

'It is,' I agreed, 'a huge responsibility. But lots of people in our society have huge responsibilities.'

He had shaken his head at this.

'You don't agree?'

'No, I don't,' he said firmly. 'The responsibilities on a judge's shoulders are quite exceptional.'

'If you make a mistake then an innocent man could be locked up for years?'

'Precisely. I don't think many men have to carry that sort of responsibility.'

'Oh, they do,' I insisted. 'They don't bury your mistakes do they?'

He looked puzzled.

'If you make a mistake and send an innocent man to prison there is a chance that he, his friends or his lawyer will fight hard and reverse your decision?'

He nodded.

'What about the surgeon?' I said. 'If he makes a mistake his patient may die. And then there is nothing he, his friends or his lawyer can do to bring the patient back to life. The error is irreversible.'

He said nothing but stared hard at a photograph of Bilbury village green which I'd had framed and which hung on the wall in my surgery. The photograph had been taken in summer and there was a cricket match in progress.

'Even the ordinary GP carries huge responsibilities,' I pointed out. 'If I make a mistake writing out a prescription I may give a patient the wrong drug - or the wrong dosage of the right drug. The result could easily be fatal.'

'Doctors are perhaps a rather special case,' murmured the judge.

'And then there's airline pilots,' I said. 'One mistake at 10,000 feet and a whole plane load of people could be dead.'

'Possible,' mumbled the judge.

'Bus drivers,' I said. 'A moment's inattentiveness could result in a bus crashing into a wall and killing dozens of people.'

The judge cleared his throat. 'These are all exceptional circumstances.'

'No, they're not,' I insisted. 'And that, surely, is the point. Thousands of people have hugely responsible jobs. Most of them have far less time to make their decisions than you do. You can take as much time as you like before sentencing a man. You have time to consider and to reflect. Many people don't have the luxury of time. Many people are constantly being pushed hard, constantly forced to make important life or death decisions every minute of their lives, constantly forced to accept huge responsibilities. Many people with much greater responsibilities are far less well-paid and less well-regarded by society than you are.'

Suddenly, the judge pushed back his chair, stood up and walked out of the room.

I waited five minutes in case he returned. He didn't.

I spent the afternoon helping Patsy and our gardener, Mr Parfitt, clear the weed from our lake.

***

I didn't see or hear from the judge for a week. But the following Saturday he returned. For a moment or two I couldn't put my finger on precisely why, but he looked different.

'I owe you an apology,' he said.

'There's no...' I started to say.

He held up a hand to stop me. 'Please let me do this,' he said. 'I can't remember when I last apologised to anyone for anything. This may be the first time in my life that I have apologised and truly meant it. I owe you an apology for my rudeness. You have been kind and considerate and I behaved like a boor by walking out of your surgery.'

'Apology accepted,' I said. 'And all forgotten.'

'I also want to say that you were right,' he said. He paused, as though trying to decide what to say next. 'I was wrong,' he said at last and I realised that it wasn't the words he was searching for but the will to say them. It was only then that I realised why he looked different. He looked calmer and more at peace with himself His eyes looked alert, when before they had looked haunted. When I'd seen him before he had, I suddenly realised, had the eyes of a wounded and cornered wild animal. I'd seen precisely the same look in the eyes of animals I'd found wounded by the roadside; a mixture of fear, uncertainty and defiance. With rage in there too.

'I haven't been to court this week,' the judge said. 'I telephoned my clerk and told him that I was ill. I have a housekeeper, a woman who looks after me. She and her husband live in a flat in my house. Her husband looks after the garden and drives for me occasionally. They're a pleasant couple. Very loyal. I gave them a cheque and told them to go away on holiday. They seemed startled but they went. I lived on sandwiches and soup which I found in the kitchen. Do you know it took me an hour to find the can opener? After two days I lived on toast and soup because the bread had gone stale. After four days I lived on biscuits and soup because the bread had run out.'

I didn't say anything.

'I needed time to think,' he said.

I still didn't speak.

'It was the first time I've not been to work for ten years,' he said.

I nodded and listened.

'I realise why I've been depressed,' he said. There was a long pause. He cleared his throat. 'I don't suppose you've got any whisky in here?'

I don't keep whisky in my consulting room. In fact I'd never drunk whisky in there. And I don't usually drink alcohol before dinner. But I fetched a bottle of malt whisky and two crystal tumblers. I handed the judge the bottle. He poured a large drink and put the bottle back on my desk. He then picked up his glass and took a sip.

'Water?'

He swallowed and then shook his head. 'This is difficult for me to talk about,' he said. 'I don't usually need alcohol for courage.'

I nodded to show that I understood.

'I believe most people look forward to their retirement,' he said. He took a second sip, larger this time. He reached forward, turned the bottle, examined the label and nodded. 'I've been terrified about my impending retirement,' he admitted. 'When I was appointed a judge it was the culmination of my career. It was all I had hoped for. I took my responsibilities to society extremely seriously. I became a workaholic. And my work completely took over my life. I've never had hobbies, interests or friends. But I used to travel a little. And I collected nineteenth century maps. I gave up those things. I tried to become the person I thought I should be. Dedicated to justice.' He swallowed some more whisky.

He didn't speak for a while. I didn't speak either. I remembered Patsy's judgement. 'Pompous and lonely.'

'I was depressed because I was worrying about my retirement.'

I poured myself a drink. It didn't seem right to let him drink alone.

'This sounds pompous but there is no gentle way to put it. I worried about how the judiciary would cope without me.' He examined his glass. It was nearly empty. I pushed the bottle across the desk towards him. He added another inch of whisky to his tumbler. 'And I couldn't see that I could have a life without my work.'

'I understand,' I said.

'This morning, I walked past that wall we built. For the old lady who fed us those wonderful cakes.'

'Miss Billingham.'

He nodded.

'I cried,' he said.

'I'm sorry.'

'No, no,' he said quickly. 'I cried tears of happiness. I really enjoyed that day's work. I wasn't much help but at the end of the day I felt good. I felt that I had contributed something genuinely useful. And I'd managed it without my wig or my robes.'

'Good.'

'Last night I slept right through without waking. I didn't wake until nine o'clock this morning. I had my breakfast at nine forty five. Sausages, bacon, black pudding, eggs, mushrooms, tomatoes, fried bread, toast, marmalade, coffee.'

'Gilly makes a good breakfast.'

The judge smiled and nodded. There was a silence for a while.

'Are there ever any cottages for sale around here?'

'Occasionally.'

'Would you let me know if anything comes up? I don't much care what it looks like or how old it is. As long as it's within the village.'

'I'll let you know as soon as I hear anything,' I promised.

'I'd use it as a holiday cottage to start with,' he said. 'But it would be somewhere to live when I retire.' He stood up. 'I can't think of anywhere I'd rather live.'

'Bilbury can be rather quiet at times,' I warned him.

He shrugged. 'That's fine,' he said. He took out his wallet and extracted a small piece of cardboard. He handed it to me. It contained his name, address and telephone number. 'My real name,' he explained. I looked at it and put it into my desk drawer.

He stood up and we shook hands.

'Thank you,' he said.

'No need to thank me,' I said. 'I haven't done anything.'

'You did it very skilfully,' he said.

As we left we bumped into Patsy who was bringing some raspberries in from the garden. The three of us talked for a few moments. 'Would you two be my guests for dinner tonight?' he asked. 'At the Duck and Puddle?'

Patsy looked at me. He was, after all, my patient. 'We'd be delighted,' I told him.

'Thank you,' said Patsy. 'That would be lovely.'

'Nice man,' said Patsy when he'd gone. 'He's changed a lot. He seems much more relaxed. Much happier.'

'I think he is,' I agreed.

We had a splendid dinner and Frank told the judge about an empty cottage.

'It's on the edge of Softly's Bottom,' said Frank. 'The estate agents haven't got their hands on it yet. It's pretty derelict but you could do it up nicely.'

The judge turned to me. There was a twinkle in his eye. 'Maybe you know someone who could help me with that?'

'I'll have a word with Thumper Robinson,' I promised him. Two days after the judge went home a courier arrived at Bilbury Grange with a crate of malt whisky and a charming note. And a month later the judge bought the old cottage near to Softly's Bottom and Thumper started work repairing it.

PUDDINGS GALORE

When I first started in medical practice I sometimes tried to cajole or bully my patients into eating and drinking sensibly.

But, after a few months, I became old enough and wise enough to know that there are times when a doctor should hold back on the good advice - however sound or well meant.

By and large, if a patient has reached his or her three score years and ten I now assume that any bad habits he or she might have acquired are probably too well-ingrained to be changed. Besides, it's difficult to tell a fit and very healthy 88-year-old that his dietary habits are going to adversely affect his health and life expectation.

Occasionally, I find patients who have some very unusual habits.

It was just before lunchtime when I called in at the home of Richard Drummond, to check that a wound on his leg was healing properly.

Mr Drummond, who had celebrated his 82nd birthday just a few weeks earlier, had fallen off his mountain bicycle while riding across a stream. (He was compiling a book on fungi, and collecting photographs with which to illustrate it. He used his bicycle to enable him to cover more territory.) He had a badly cut leg which I'd stitched up, and it was time to remove the stitches.

When I got there Mr Drummond was preparing what obviously looked like a complicated meal.

'This will take about five minutes,' I told him. 'Or I can go and check Mrs Butterway's blood pressure and come back in an hour.'

'Oh, five minutes won't hurt anything,' he assured me, pulling up his trouser leg and sitting down on one of his kitchen chairs.

I opened my black bag and set to work.

'Your wound is healing perfectly,' I told him, when the stitches were out. 'Most people your age heal slowly but you heal like a 20-year-old.'

'Good, sensible, living,' he said with a wink.

'What are you having for lunch?' I asked him.

'Spotted dick with custard, treacle tart with custard and rhubarb crumble with ice cream,' he replied without hesitation.

I stared at him.

'I've always liked puddings,' he told me. 'When I reached 70 I told myself that I would eat only what I like. And I like puddings. So I'm going to eat puddings for the rest of my life - except for breakfast of course. I still eat three course meals but all the courses are puddings.'

'What do you have for breakfast?' I asked him, hardly daring to ask.

'Oh, the full English, of course. Every morning. Bacon, sausage, egg, fried bread, black pudding, tomatoes - the usual.'

'You look well enough on it,' I told him. He was about five foot eleven and no more than eleven stone.

'Regular exercise to burn up the calories,' he told me. 'Most old people sit around and get fat.'

He gave me two paper bags before I left. One contained homemade fudge and the other home-made toffee.

'You and your lovely wife must come to dinner one day,' he said. 'Just puddings, of course.'

'I'd love that,' I told him. 'But I think I'd better lose some weight before we accept the invitation.'

THE ASHES

When Patsy's paternal grandfather died he left instructions that he was to be cremated and his ashes distributed on the beach at Combe Martin. He was 95-years-old.

'There's a problem,' said Patsy's father, after the funeral. We were holding the wake at Bilbury Grange. 'Cecil Roberts, one of the local councillors, has found out. He hated my dad and he says that human ashes can't be spread on the beach. He says it's against the law.' (Since the truth is no longer an effective defence against those of a mean and litigious nature, I thought of changing Cecil Robert's name for this book. But, he has been dead for 20 years so I feel that including his proper name is probably not excessively reckless.)

'Oh, that's awfully unfair!' said Patsy. She was holding a plate full of sausage rolls which had been made by her mother. Her father, knowing the provenance of the sausage rolls, took one, popped it into his mouth and bit off half. It was, to my knowledge, his sixth.

'How could anyone hate your grandfather?' I asked Patsy. 'He was the kindest, sweetest old man I ever knew.'

I'd always been very fond of him. Until a week before his death he'd spent most of his days pottering in his garden, where he grew the greatest variety of lupins I, or anyone else I knew, had ever seen. He toyed with hollyhocks, stocks, larkspur, nasturtiums, sweet williams, delphiniums, pansies and sweet peas but lupins were his true floral love.

He had spent his early years as a school teacher at the local primary school but had retired at the age of 44 when he'd been diagnosed as suffering from a serious heart disorder. He had, therefore, spent a total of 51 years as a pensioner. I'd examined his heart and had never found anything wrong with it. When he died I didn't know what to put on the death certificate. I wanted to put 'old age' but I didn't think the Registrar would accept that so I put 'pneumonia' down as the cause of death. It probably had been a chest infection which had killed him. He'd suddenly become very frail in that last week. Not for nothing do they call pneumonia the old man's friend.

'I know what it is,' said Patsy's father, suddenly. 'Roberts hates my dad because he won the silver cup for the best carrot in 1933.'

Patsy and I looked at him. If he hadn't been so serious, and it hadn't been such a serious subject, I would have thought he was joking.

'Cecil thought it was his big chance,' he explained. 'He'd grown a big carrot. But my dad was a wonderful gardener. He didn't always specialise in lupins. In those days he grew lots of vegetables - including carrots. He had a bigger carrot than Cecil and he won the cup. He always won lots of cups. At least two every year for as long as I can remember.' It was true. The living room in their house was full of trophies. They were in a display cabinet, on the mantelpiece, on the windowsills and on the sideboard. There were more trophies upstairs in the bedrooms.

'That's a long time to bear a grudge.'

'Cecil is like that,' said Patsy's father, helping himself to a seventh sausage roll. 'He lives near the beach and he says that if he sees us going anywhere near it with my dad's ashes he'll call the police and have us all arrested.' He took a bite out of his latest sausage roll.

'Oh, that's just crazy,' I said. 'Why don't I go down there one night and spread his ashes around in the dark.'

'You can't,' said Patsy firmly. 'For one thing, my grandmother wants to be there. We can't possibly take her down onto the beach in the dead of night. She's very doddery. And for another thing, if they catch you and take you to court you could get a criminal record. Then the General Medical Council will get involved and you'll get struck off the medical register.'

I stared at her, knowing that everything she said was true.

'We could formally apply to the council for permission to distribute the ashes,' said Patsy's father.

'That would take months,' said Patsy. 'And if they refuse us permission that will be it.'

'Why we don't we do it next Thursday?' I asked.

Patsy and her father looked at me in surprise.

'You've had an idea?' said Patsy.

I nodded. They don't come to me often but this one was a good one. 'How many people will want to be there?'

'You and me, dad, mum, grandma and my sister,' said Patsy.

'Thursday would be fine with me,' said Patsy's father. 'What time?'

'Two o'clock?' I suggested.

'Two o'clock is fine.'

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The following Thursday, we parked our cars in the small car park close to the beach in Combe Martin. Patsy and I had Patsy's grandmother in our car and Patsy's parents and sister travelled together.

It was a grey, dull day; entirely suitable I suppose for the purpose for which we were gathered. I was relieved. I didn't particularly mind distributing Patsy's grandfather in full sunshine but I didn't want the crowds of children that a sunny day would have brought.

We walked down to the beach, no more than a few minutes gentle walk from the car park.

'Have you brought the ashes?' asked Patsy's father, in a whisper, as we strolled to the beach.

'They're in my handbag,' replied Patsy, also in a whisper.

Her father looked. Patsy was carrying a large, old black handbag. She was carrying it by the handles.

'It seems strange to think of my dad being in there,' said Patsy's father.

There wasn't anything to say to that so no one said anything. We walked onto the beach. Patsy's father and mother each took one of Patsy's grandmother's arms to help make sure that the old lady didn't slip on the pebbles. There must have been a high tide recently for there was seaweed everywhere.

'Let's sit here for a moment,' said Patsy, as we approached a large boulder. Her parents, sister and grandmother half sat and half leant on the boulder. Patsy and I squeezed alongside them. We sat there for a few minutes, looking out to sea.

'He was a grand man,' said Patsy's grandmother softly. 'A grand man.'

We watched the waves breaking on the shore. The tide was coming in but still some distance away. The sea was behaving itself that day; polite, respectful little waves flopping quietly onto the shore with hardly any fuss at all. I squeezed closer to Patsy and then bent down to fasten my shoelace which had come undone.

'Marriage,' said Patsy's grandmother, speaking to her son. 'It's all about love, support, kindness, friendship, loyalty, understanding, generosity and sharing.' She recited this list of virtues slowly, thinking between the words. 'Your father had all those qualities in abundance.'

'He was a good man,' murmured Patsy's father. 'A good man,' he repeated, relishing the adjective by stretching it out. 'A good father and a good husband.'

'He was a very gentle man,' said Patsy, who had, I knew, loved him very much.

'Do you know, we never argued,' said Patsy's grandmother.

'He was a very kind man,' said Patsy's sister, who hadn't previously spoken all afternoon. She rubbed at her eyes with a small, white handkerchief.

'Most of us are many different people,' said Patsy's grandmother. 'Have you noticed that?'

We all murmured that we had.

'He wasn't. He was the same person with everyone he met. All the time. Never changed.' There was a long pause. No one spoke. We knew she hadn't finished. She was thinking. 'If the world were made up of people like him there would be no need for armies or law courts or prisons.'

Patsy's father then said a prayer in memory of his own father. We all said 'Amen' when he'd finished. The sky was brighter now. There was blue sky up above and the greyness had gone. We sat for a while longer in the strengthening sunshine.

'I think I'm getting a little stiff,' said Patsy's grandmother after a few moments. 'This rock is hard.'

'Let's just walk for a minute or two,' I suggested.

We walked for a minute or two.

'Shall we go back to Bilbury Grange now?' suggested Patsy eventually. 'I'll make us all some tea. I've baked a fruit cake.'

'Your grandfather liked fruit cake,' said her grandmother.

'I know,' said Patsy quietly. I knew, but did not say, that Patsy had made the cake in his memory.

We walked slowly back to the car. Patsy's parents still one on each side of her grandmother. Patsy, her sister and I followed them.

As we were getting into our cars Patsy's father suddenly stopped and turned.

'We haven't done it!'

'Haven't done what?' asked Patsy.

'You know,' said Patsy's father, lowering his voice. 'We haven't done it. We haven't done what we came for. We haven't distributed the...' his voice trailed off.

'You mean grandfather's ashes?' asked Patsy.

Her father nodded.

'Grandfather is on the beach,' she said.

He looked at her. She opened her handbag so that he could see inside. It was empty.

'I never saw you do that,' he said, looking puzzled.

'Let's go and have a cup of tea and a piece of cake,' said Patsy softly.

We went home and had tea and huge slices of an excellent fruitcake.

'How did it happen?' Patsy's father asked me.

I took my penknife out of my pocket. 'When we were sitting on the rock I bent down to tie my shoe lace,' I told him. 'While I was tying my shoelace I cut a long slit in the bottom of Patsy's handbag. It was an old one made of thin leather. It cut easily.'

Patsy's father looked at me, slowly understanding. 'And then when we walked about on the beach...'

'As we walked about the ashes dribbled out of Patsy's handbag,' I explained.

'So he's on the beach now.'

'Your father is where he wanted to be.'

'That's nice,' he said.

'Would you like another slice of fruit cake?' asked Patsy.

ARBUTHNOT'S TOWER

Although Patsy came from a farming family her father had never kept hens. 'Never bothered with hens. Damned squawking nuisance,' said her father, Mr Kennett, when I had asked him why our hens were constantly pecking at one another. 'Know nothing about them. We buy our eggs from Peter Marshall.'

Patsy and I kept hens and they were as well looked after as any in Devon. They had all the natural light and fresh air they needed. They had room to flap their wings and chase flies. They could scratch about in the soil looking for worms. In hot weather they could bathe in the dust. They had room for a bit of privacy. And the cockerels lived with them.

Our hens were certainly good layers and they produced plenty of eggs for Patsy and I and everyone we knew who didn't keep hens. Peter Marshall was a little miffed for a while when Patsy's mother stopped getting her eggs from him. But we solved that diplomatic problem by selling him our extra eggs.

But all was not well.

'Our hens are a real worry,' I told my receptionist Miss Johnson at the end of one morning surgery. 'They keep pecking at one another. They're beginning to look distinctly down at heel.'

'I thought it was just husbands who were hen pecked.'

'Very clever. Do you know anything about hens?'

'Only that they lay eggs,' she said.

'I was looking for something rather deeper than that,' I replied.

'Some lay white eggs and some lay brown eggs,' she said. 'I don't know why. They just do.'

'You're no good at all,' I told her.

'Not if you're paying me for poultry advice,' she agreed. I read the mail she had opened, dictated half a dozen letters and wrote out a few prescriptions. 'Any requests for home visits?'

She shook her head.

'I think I'll just go and check on our hens once more,' I said.

I stood up and moved towards the door but before I got there the telephone rang. Miss Johnson answered and then called me back. 'It's Thumper Robinson,' she said. 'He says it could be urgent.'

I took the telephone from her.

'Could you pop in and take a look at Arbuthnot Cuthbertson?' asked Thumper. 'He's flying his flag upside down.'

I said I'd go there straight away.

When I was at medical school I thought I knew a number of eccentrics.

There was the student who always wore grey spats and a matching cravat with a pearl pin in it. And the anatomy lecturer who always wore odd socks (one fluorescent pink and one lime green) and who told anyone who noticed (and was foolish enough to comment) that he had another pair just like them at home. And there was a student who drove a twenty-year-old hearse which he had painted bright pink. Outside the hospital he always wore a black frock coat and a top hat.

But I slowly learned that these weren't real eccentrics. They were attention seekers who were playing at eccentricity. I met quite a number of real eccentrics in Bilbury; people who cared not a jot for convention but who lived their lives the way they wanted to lead them.

Arbuthnot Cuthbertson was one of them.

The second son of a rich landowner with extensive estates in the English midlands, Arbuthnot had been an explorer, a mountaineer and a racing driver. He had climbed the north face of the Eiger (wearing a pair of green corduroy trousers, a sports jacket with leather elbow patches and a small trilby). In his twenties he had driven Bentleys and had been one of the famous group known as the Bentley Boys. He had played cricket for Oxford and had missed the Varsity Match two years running due to injuries sustained during his other adventures.

For the last twenty years he had lived in a curious stone tower which stood on the top of a hill just south of Bilbury. Built as a folly by a rich North Devon landowner, who had wanted to find employment for out of work local masons, the tower had been crumbling for years. No one knew or cared who owned it and when Arbuthnot moved into it he was the first person for a long time to go inside. The tower stood in the middle of a two and a half acre plot of land which had long ago been overrun by an impenetrable mass of brambles. Even local children had given up trying to reach the tower.

Using nothing more than a simple, old-fashioned machete, Arbuthnot had carved a path through the brambles and had settled in the tower in the early 1950s. But, instead of simply carving a direct path through the brambles, he had created a maze which meant that the tower was still almost impossible to reach unless Arbuthnot, standing on the battlements of his tower, was prepared to shout down advice and directions.

In the late 1960s, a couple of years before I had arrived in Bilbury, a team of social workers from Barnstaple had tried to have Arbuthnot moved out of the tower and into some sort of statutory accommodation. Arbuthnot had fought them and with the help of my predecessor, Dr Brownlow, had established that the fact that he had lived for so long in the tower meant that he could claim ownership of it. As a landowner, and owner of his own property, Arbuthnot had become immune to the threats of the social workers. When he became a property owner Arbuthnot was transformed from a sad, old man incapable of looking after himself into an eccentric.

The tower had seven doors and 12 windows and, originally, there had been 136 steps up to the battlements. Only one of the doors had ever been operational (the others were there only to make the folly look more beguiling) and some of the steps had crumbled away, making the ascent to the top of the tower a dangerous business. It was, however, up there, with a large parliament of crows for company, that Arbuthnot had made his home. The ground floor of the tower was given over to a large company of hens and several cockerels. They had as free range a life as any hens anywhere and since not even foxes could find their way through the brambles there was no need for Arbuthnot to lock them up at night.

He had made a small shelter from a canvas awning and seemed to live largely on a diet of eggs, rabbits and, in season, blackberries. He never killed any of the hens. He entertained himself with a powerful telescope which, he told me, enabled him to study activities on the Welsh coast quite clearly. I was never quite sure what he meant by the word 'activities' and I didn't like to ask. He made it sound as though he was keeping an eye on Welsh insurgents preparing to march on Cardiff and then Bristol. He was certainly far too much of a gentleman to spend time staring through the windows at a Welsh housewife who didn't bother to draw her curtains at night.

Arbuthnot didn't have a telephone but he did have a flagpole from which he proudly flew a skull and crossbones flag. If he needed help he flew the flag upside down. The tower was visible from all over the village and enough people knew about the signal for us to be confident that, during the hours of daylight at least, I would be there quite quickly if I was needed.

I drove straight round to see him. As Thumper had said the flag on the top of the tower was flying upside down but there was no sign of Arbuthnot. Fortunately, however, Arbuthnot had once told me the secret for finding the way through his maze of a path through the brambles. 'Take every second left,' he said. 'And you'll get to the real door at the base of the tower. The only door of the seven that opens.'

I took every second left, reached the door and climbed up the crumbling stone staircase. Arbuthnot was lying on a layer of straw under his canvas awning. He looked terrible.

'Sorry to drag you up here, doctor,' he apologised. 'I've got one devil of a pain in my groin. And a nasty looking lump.'

I unfastened his trousers and found that he had a huge hernia. A piece of bowel had slipped down between weak muscles and had prolapsed. Fortunately, the hernia hadn't strangulated and I managed to push it back to where it should be.

'You can have an operation or wear a truss,' I told him when he was feeling a little better. He was greatly relieved not to have to go into hospital.

'Truss,' he said, without hesitation. 'I've always fancied myself as a truss wearer.'

'I'll get you one,' I promised. 'Meanwhile, if it starts to poke through again just give it a gentle prod and push it back where it came from.'

'I will, doctor!' he said. 'Damned impertinence.'

'Anything else?' I asked him.

'Since you ask, there is,' he admitted. 'I've gone deaf in my left ear. Can't hear a thing.'

I took my auriscope out of my black bag and had a look.

'Wax,' I said. 'Entirely blocked with wax. When I bring you the truss I'll bring my syringe and sort it out for you.'

'Damned decent of you, doctor,' he said. 'Much obliged. If you'd like some eggs help yourself. There should be quite a few around the place downstairs. Take whatever you need.'

I thanked him and pointed out that we had hens of our own. 'We have plenty of eggs,' I said, thanking him.

'But maybe you can help me. Our hens are constantly pecking at one another. Any idea why they do that?'

'Hens peck at each other to get at the oil at the base of the feathers,' he explained. 'They'll kill one another for oil if they're short of it.'

'So what on earth can we do?' I asked. 'Several of our hens are looking distinctly sorry for themselves.'

'Easy,' he replied. 'Put a little cod liver oil in their feed. That will solve your problem.'

And it did too.

We followed his advice to the letter and within a few days the problem disappeared, never to return.

When I went back to take him his new truss and to syringe his ears I took him a traditional Cornish pasty that Patsy had made for him a large piece of pastry with the savoury course at one end and a pudding at the other. It was a clear, warm day and from the top of the tower you could see for miles and miles. The Bristol Channel was shimmering in the distance and all around us swallows and swifts were swooping and diving. I sat down beside him to get my breath back. The climb up the tower was never easy and my knees had begun to creak.

'Patsy made this for you when I told you I was coming up to see you,' I told him, when I'd shown him how to wear the truss and finished syringing his ears. I took the pasty, which was wrapped in a tea towel, out of my black bag. 'Potatoes and carrots at one end and apple and blackberry at the other.'

He took the pasty from me, unwrapped it and looked at it admiringly.

'I'm afraid I can't remember which end is which,' I told him.

'Don't matter a bit,' he replied with a smile. He looked at me thoughtfully. 'You've fitted me with a new truss, cured my deafness and brought me a double ended pasty!' he said, genuinely grateful. There were tears in his eyes. 'Like Christmas,' he whispered. 'Like Christmas.'

'A real pleasure,' I told him.

'I bet you didn't think life would be like this when you started medical school, did you?'

'I never thought it could be so good,' I told him. And it was as true as anything I'd ever said.

A PARROT, A CONKER AND A MAN WITH A COUGH

Since very few of the Bilbury residents would qualify as 'normal', by the standards applied in much of the rest of England, it should be clear that the qualifying standards required for an individual to be described as 'eccentric' are probably considerably higher than in most areas.

Connolly Ryder had no difficulty in reaching these standards. He would, by anyone's standards and by any benchmark, have qualified as an eccentric in any place and at any time. His dress, demeanour and habits would have marked him out as 'eccentric' in any society.

I first met him when he turned up after surgery one morning and asked me if I would accept the post as Official Grand Senior Inspector of Conkers for Bilbury's annual conker championships. It was my first summer in Bilbury. I was still very new and wet behind the ears. I knew far less of village ways than I thought I knew. I did, however, have fond memories of playing conkers in the school playground. It was, I think, the only sport at which I had ever achieved anything approaching success.

I had learned that the secret is to strike first and to aim at the conker's weakest point - the edge of the hole made for the string to go through. A sound strike at that point will crack the top of the shell and split the opponent's conker. The second sound strike will push the damaged conker down and complete the split as the conker is pressed against the knot below.

'We can't pay you a proper fee,' he apologised. 'But we'll provide an honorarium.' He turned his head, covered his mouth with his hand and coughed. He didn't mention, and it would not have mattered if he had, that the honorarium would consist of half a bucket of conkers, a packet of 18-inch bootlaces and free entry into the competition. .

Connolly was a striking man, well over six feet tall and with shoulders and a girth to match. He was big but somehow, in that strange way some big men have, managed to avoid looking fat. He had ruddy cheeks, decorated with mutton chops, and shoulder length glossy black hair that many a woman would have been proud to own. His clothes were always unusual, to say the least. That day he wore a flared purple jacket, a Chinese silk waistcoat, port red velvet plus fours, black knee length boots and a black fedora which at the time we met he was holding in his hand. He looked like a French musketeer, straight out of the pages of a Dumas novel. He'd been running the Bilbury Conker Championships for longer than anyone I knew could remember.

'When is it?' I asked.

'The last Saturday in September.' He coughed again. This time he winced.

'OK,' I said. September was still two months away. As long as people ask me to do things far enough ahead for me to convince myself that whatever they are asking me to do is so far away that there is no real need to worry about it, I have always tended to accept appointments which are some way ahead without thinking too much about them.

'How long have you had that cough?' I asked him.

He waved a hand, indicating that the cough was of no real significance. ‘Just a bit of summer flu,' he said 'Nothing to worry about.'

'What do I have to do?' I asked. 'Treat anyone who gets rapped on the knuckles with a conker? Attend to spectators wounded by bits of conker flying off?'

I had already been appointed Honorary Medical Officer to a number of local societies (the Bilbury Cricket Club, the Bilbury Carnival Committee, the Bilbury Amateur Dramatic Society, the Bilbury Folk Dancing Group and the Bilbury Fete Committee to name just a few) and, not unnaturally, assumed that I would be expected to fulfil a similar professional role at the Bilbury Conker Championships.

'Oh, no, no,' said Connolly. 'We aren't bothered about anything like that.' He explained that he didn't want my medical services but that he needed, in his words, 'a gentleman of unimpeachable probity to ensure that the rules and regulations were applied fairly and properly'.

It wasn't until two days later that I discovered that the post the previous year had been held by Thumper Robinson. Thumper is my best friend and I love him dearly but not even I would describe him as a 'gentleman of unimpeachable probity'. Come to think of it I'm pretty sure that neither his long-term partner, Anne Thwaites, nor his mother would describe him in quite those terms either. Not if they were on oath.

'You have to make sure the conkers haven't been tampered with. We don't want competitors baking their conkers for a couple of hours or soaking them overnight in vinegar. And we don't want players turning up with conkers they've been keeping in a drawer for a year.'

'Do people still do all that?' I asked, astonished.

'Give them half a chance and they will.' He coughed for the third time. It sounded dry and raw.

I remembered a chap I knew at my infant school. He was banned from playing conkers for the whole of the season. Nearly two weeks as I recall. I remembered this because I had recently learned, and not been surprised, that he had managed to fail the modest ethical requirements of the legal profession and get himself struck off the legal equivalent of the medical register. He was I knew serving time for using money which rightly belonged to his clients. He had purchased a flat in Venice and a Ferrari. I mentioned this to Connolly.

'You can never trust anyone who cheats at conkers,' said Connolly firmly. 'A kid who cheats at conkers will always go bad. It's an indisputable fact. School-teachers should keep an eye out for conker-cheats. When they spot one they should have him branded for life.'

'But I'm surprised you have a problem with the villagers in Bilbury,' I said. 'My experience has been that they are pretty trustworthy people.' I paused and thought. 'When dealing with one another anyway,' I added, thinking of the enthusiasm with which one or two villagers were prone to take advantage of insurance companies.

'Oh we don't have trouble with the locals,' said Connolly quickly. 'Our problem is with foreigners.'

'Foreigners?' I said, surprised. 'People come a long way to play?' I hadn't lived in Bilbury long at the time and I had a vision of Americans flying over and bringing with them new types of string and extravagantly tested techniques. I envisaged Chinese peasants riding bicycles half way round the world to enter the Bilbury Conker Championships.

'People come from all over,' said Connolly.

I nodded and paused, giving him an opportunity to expand.

'We've had people from South Molton, Barnstaple, Lynton, Combe Martin and even Bideford,' he told me proudly. 'Three years ago we even had a chap from Tiverton, though I believe he was staying with relatives in Parracombe at the time.'

I nodded sagely but didn't mention America or China.

'Your job will be to weed out the baked, the soaked and the wrinkled,' said Connolly.

'Not easy,' I admitted.

'Your word is final,' said Connolly. 'No disputes and no second opinions.'

And so I became Official Grand Senior Inspector of Conkers for the Bilbury's Conker Championships. I did not know it at the time but it was a post that I was to hold for many years to come. It was also the position of which I was proudest and the role I always listed on application forms when required to give my occupation.

There is no more archetypically English sport than conkers (the name 'conkers' is derived from the word 'Conquerors') and to be an official, regulating such an arcane sport, would be an honour for any Englishman.

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Within days I had forgotten about Connolly's invitation. It had been a busy time. Mrs Hunter had her third baby, Geoffrey Parish broke his leg when he fell off his tractor, and seven-year-old David Whitlock got his foot stuck in a milking bucket.

And then I received a telephone call asking me to visit Connolly Ryder at his home. The call came from Mrs Holmes who 'did' for Connolly three times a week.

Connolly lived in a huge, old house on the eastern border of the village. Once undoubtedly grand it had long ago become rather shabby. The walls were covered with ivy which had crept up onto the roof and was now about to attack the chimney. So much paint had flaked off from the window frames that it was impossible to tell what colour the paint had originally been. The front door, a massive iron-bound piece of oak, had lost its varnish and now stood naked against the elements. Twin stone griffins, one on either side of the door, were now camouflaged green and blue with moss and lichen. When I pushed the brass button set in the stone frame at the right of the door, the bell which rang faintly seemed to be half a mile away.

'He's come over proper poorly, doctor,' whispered Mrs Holmes. She closed her eyes, pursed her lips and shook her head. Mrs Holmes, stout and solid, was in her late sixties. She had a scarf around her head and wore a floral pinafore. She was gloomy and pessimistic and always expected the worst.

'He did have a cough when I last saw him,' I told her. 'But he didn't seem too worried about it.'

'He's had it for a fortnight,' whispered Mrs Holmes. She shook her head sadly. 'Definitely very under the weather. Terrible chills. Off his food. And that's not like Mr Ryder. His bed sheets have been soaked in the mornings.' She always called her employers by their surnames when in their homes. If she'd seen Connolly in the Duck and Puddle she would, of course, have called him Connolly. She leant towards me as though about to share something very secret. 'I changed them again this morning. Top and bottom. Both sheets.' There was no need for the whispering. The house in which Connolly lived was so huge that she could have shouted without any fear of him hearing her.

Upstairs, Connolly Ryder was in bed, though not asleep.

'Good heavens, doctor!' he said, surprised at my arrival. 'Don't tell me that damned silly woman has called you out.'

'She's worried about you,' I told him.

He shook his head, coughed and tried to push himself up the bed but failed miserably. 'Just a bit weak,' he said. The exertion made him cough and sweat.

I examined him carefully and listened to his chest. He clearly had pneumonia.

'Just a bit of a chill, doctor,' he said, dismissively. 'Nothing to worry about.' He coughed. 'Got to be better for the Conker Championships,' he said softly. 'Can't be ill. Can't miss one. Not after thirty years.'

'Is there anyone who can come and stay with you for a few days?' I asked him. 'You've got pneumonia. You need looking after.'

He shook his head.

'If there isn't then I'll have to get you into hospital.' It was by no means a threat. Just a statement of fact.

'I don't want to go into hospital. If I have to die I want to die here.' He coughed again. 'I've done lots of things with my life. I want to die in dignity. At home.'

'You're not going to die!' I told him, with more certainty than I felt.

'I don't want to go into hospital,' he repeated.

I said nothing, but waited. He looked at me and thought for a moment. 'I've got a sister in Lynmouth,' he said. 'She'll come.'

I telephoned Connolly's sister. She tutted and sighed but said she'd come and stay for a few days. She didn't seem surprised or upset that he was ill. 'I'll ask Mrs Holmes to prepare a room for her,' I told Connolly.

'We're not close,' he told me. 'Never have been.'

'She's coming,' I told him. 'You can't ask more than that.'

I wrote out a prescription. 'I'll ask Mrs Holmes to get this for you.'

Connolly nodded.

I told him that I'd be back to see him the following day.

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Four days later Connolly was worse than ever.

'He's deteriorating, doctor,' his sister told me, unnecessarily.

I nodded. I knew.

Connolly, opened his eyes and looked up at us. 'I don't want to go into hospital,' he said.

'I think you'll have to,' I told him. 'The antibiotic isn't working.'

It was only when I went back downstairs that I heard the parrot. I didn't know it was a parrot when I heard it. I didn't have the faintest idea what it was.

'What on earth...?' I asked Mrs Holmes.

'That's Lucifer,' said Mrs Holmes. She explained that Lucifer was Connolly's pet parrot. She led the way down a long, dark corridor and then opened a door that led into a huge conservatory. Massive ferns and a vine reached right up to the glass roof, at least twenty feet above us. A multicoloured parrot swooped down and landed on a branch near to us.

I looked at the parrot and suddenly I knew.

'Has the parrot been under the weather?' I asked, quietly.

'Terribly,' said Mrs Holmes. 'Mr Ryder was very worried about him.'

'Is there just the one bird?'

'Just the one parrot,' said Mrs Holmes. 'But he goes out and flies with the pigeons.'

I looked at her, inquiringly, wanting more.

'Mr Ryder lets him go out and fly once a day,' said Mrs Holmes. 'He tends to fly with the pigeons.'

And then I was certain.

I went back upstairs.

'I'm going to change your prescription,' I told Connolly. I took out my prescription pad, wrote out a prescription for tetracycline and handed it to his sister, who was still in the room.

'Why?' she asked.

'Your brother has psittacosis,' I told her. 'It's an unusual form of pneumonia, caused by a bacterium found in birds. It needs to be treated with tetracycline.'

'Bird fancier's lung,' said Connolly's sister. I nodded. 'That's the one.'

'Lucifer,' said Connolly's sister.

'Lucifer,' I agreed. 'He flies with the pigeons.'

'He caught it from the pigeons?'

'Probably.'

'Will this antibiotic work?'

'It will if I'm right,' I said. I paused, feeling uncomfortable.

'I didn't know about the parrot until a few moments ago,' I explained.

'How long does he need to take it for?'

'Ten days,' I said. 'But there should be some improvement long before then.'

'I need to be up and about in ten days,' said Connolly. His voice was quiet and feeble. He looked pale and exhausted.

I looked at him, puzzled.

'It's the Bilbury Conker Championship!' he reminded me.

'I'd forgotten,' I confessed.

He looked at me accusingly. 'But you promised!' he said.

'I know,' I said. 'I'll be there.'

'What about Lucifer?' asked his sister.

'I don't know,' I confessed. 'Maybe we can treat him. I don't know.'

'Don't have him put down,' said a quiet voice. I looked down at Connolly. He sounded as exhausted as he looked.

'I'll do my best for him,' I promised.

Downstairs I told Mrs Holmes to keep the parrot in the conservatory. 'Shut the doors and windows,' I told her. 'The parrot is in quarantine until I can speak to a vet.'

When I got back home I telephoned a vet I knew in Barnstaple.

'Oh we can treat the bird,' he said confidently. 'I'll send a nurse over to pick him up. We'll put him in isolation here.'

'Tetracycline?'

'Yes,' he agreed. 'Same drug as humans. But a longer course. We usually give them tetracycline for 45 days. That usually knocks it on the head.'

I told Mrs Holmes to expect a veterinary nurse to pick up Lucifer and drove back home, hoping that I'd got the diagnosis right this time.

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Within a week Connolly was up and about.

The tetracycline worked and he made an astonishing recovery. He was weakened by the illness, still frail and needing a stick to move about, but coughing less and looking much brighter. He was also eating. His sister went back home, and Mrs Holmes agreed to call in every day to make sure he was OK and to cook him a meal.

And he was there at the Bilbury Conker Championship.

I did my job as Official Grand Senior Inspector Of Conkers, causing a certain amount of controversy when I arbitrarily banned conkers which I thought had been 'prepared' for the event in an illegal way. I entered the competition too, using the biggest and best conker I could find in the half a bucket full of horse-chestnuts with which I had been provided, and getting as far as the second round before I was defeated by an 11-year-old girl from Combe Martin. It was none too soon for me. My knuckles had already taken quite a hammering and it seemed to be a rather more physical sport than I remembered. Maybe my knuckles were tougher when I was eleven.

After several hours of competition the Championship was won by a 65-year-old retired thatcher who had lived in Bilbury all his life, had entered the competition for as long as he could remember and who announced at the prize-giving that this was the proudest day of his life and that he could now die a happy man. Connolly was delighted to have a local victor.

'We kept the foreigners at bay this year!' he said, with a huge grin on his face.

'Congratulations on a splendid tournament!' I told him.

'Will you be our Grand Senior Inspector of Conkers next year?'

I said I would be delighted to be reappointed but that I thought it might remove some potential embarrassment if I didn't enter the competition myself. Connolly agreed with this.

Just under two months later Lucifer returned home and Connolly was once more a happy and thoroughly contented man. In order to avoid any future risk of psittacosis he decided not to allow Lucifer out of doors again. To keep Lucifer content Connolly bought a female parrot as a companion.

KITTENS ON PRESCRIPTION

Sophie, one of our two cats, had kittens one May. She had them in a cupboard in my surgery. Heaven knows why she chose that as a maternity ward. It wasn't one of her favourite sleeping places. Indeed, when she disappeared while heavily pregnant it took us several hours to find her. Miss Johnson, my receptionist, had closed the cupboard door, shutting Sophie in, and if I hadn't heard her gentle miaowing I hate to think what might have happened.

There were five kittens, all absolutely adorable of course, and Patsy and I knew that we couldn't possibly accommodate five additional cats.

'Who on earth can we give them to?' asked Patsy, a few weeks later. We had tried all our friends and relatives and it seemed that everyone we knew already had a full complement of cats.

And then, one day, while I was doing an evening surgery, I had a brainwave.

The patient in the chair on the other side of my desk was a widow in her late fifties called Mrs Bridge. Her husband, rather older than her, had died of a heart attack two years earlier. He'd been very overweight and had made the mistake of racing around his vegetable patch trying to chase rabbits away from his developing lettuces.

'My life has lost all meaning since Albert's been gone,' said Mrs Bridge. 'I've always been a very loving person and although I still feel as though I've got a lot of love left I've got no one to give it to.'

'No family?' I asked.

'A nephew in Durham,' she said. 'I haven't seen him since he was twelve. He's forty-two now. I didn't speak to his parents, my sister and her husband, for over twenty years. They're long gone now.'

'And you don't want to get in touch?'

'I sent him a Christmas card for years,' said Mrs Bridge. 'But I never got one back so I gave up. Didn't seem any point.'

'No,' I said. 'How about joining a club?'

'What sort of club?'

'The sort that goes on outings and has whist drives.'

She laughed. 'I can't think of anything worse,' she said. 'I don't want to meet any more people. I've known enough people. I don't need to know any more.'

'I thought maybe you might find someone special,' I suggested.

She laughed again. 'No thank you, doctor,' she said. She thought for a while. 'Maybe I'll take up a hobby. Something solitary that I can get really keen about. Brass rubbing or needlework. No, not needlework - my eyes aren't good enough.'

She sat and thought for a while. So did I. 'Have you thought about a kitten?' I asked her at last.

'A kitten?' she said, as though puzzled.

'A small cat,' I said.

'I know what a kitten is.'

I got up and walked over to the cupboard where the kittens still spent much of their time. The door was now lodged permanently open. I looked inside. There was one kitten there. An almost entirely white one. It had a brown smudge mark above one eye. I picked up the kitten and took it over to Mrs Bridge.

'It needs a lot of love,' I told her.

'I don't want a cat,' she said.

'It isn't a cat,' I said. 'It's a kitten.'

Almost reluctantly, she reached out and took the kitten from me. The kitten miaowed and reached out and touched her chin with a tiny paw.

'Oh it likes me!' said Mrs Bridge.

'It will soak up all the love you can give it,' I promised her.

Mrs Bridge looked at the kitten. It looked at her.

'What's its name?'

I shrugged. 'It hasn't got a name,' I said. 'We knew we weren't going to keep it and so we deliberately didn't name it. But we know it as Smudge.'

'Because of the smudgy brown mark on its face?'

'Because of the smudgy brown mark on its face,' I confirmed.

'It's a nice name,' she said. 'A perfect name. I'll call it Smudge.'

Over the next four days I prescribed the other four kittens for needy patients.

'Take this kitten,' I told one neurotic patient. 'It will do you more good than all the pills in the world.' And I still believe I was right.

For weeks afterwards patients of a certain disposition would say, just as they were about to leave the surgery: 'I don't suppose you have any of the medicinal kittens, do you, doctor?'

After that we always knew what to do when Emily or Sophie had kittens.

THE POACHERS

Poaching was very common in Bilbury in the early 1970s. Some of the locals were pretty much professional poachers. They would sell what they caught to hotels and public houses where the proprietor or landlord wasn't too fussy about the provenance of what he bought. Other locals were just good amateurs. My friend Thumper Robinson was the best poacher I ever saw in action but, later in his life, as a general rule, he only caught creatures for his own dinner table. Knowing that Patsy and I were vegetarian he didn't offer to catch anything for us, though I know he would have done so if we'd asked him to.

Thumper had a lurcher which he used to catch rabbits and hares but he would tickle trout out of the river, using nothing but his own bare hands. Occasionally, he would use a home-made rod and a fly to take a trout or a salmon out of one of the local rivers or lakes. He would do this at dusk but naturally he never bothered to buy a licence. Once or twice he was nearly caught but he was far too fast for the water bailiffs to catch. He had never owned a proper fishing rod. He used to carry a sharp knife with him and cut a rod out of a branch of something suitable. He had a line and a lure tucked away in an old tobacco tin. If he was being chased he would simply hide the tobacco tin under a rock and then, even if he was caught, there would be no evidence to support the bailiff's claim that he had been poaching.

'Who gave anyone the right to sell me a licence to catch wild fish or wild animals?' he would demand.

It was a good question and one to which neither I nor anyone I knew ever tried to provide an answer.

Sitting in the lounge at Bilbury Grange, or the snug at the Duck and Puddle, on wet winter evenings Thumper would often tell me poaching stories. He knew all the tricks.

He knew a country butcher who in the late 1950s still drove around in a horse and cart and who used to catch pheasants using just his whip and one of the small brass weights he used to weigh out the meat he sold. He would tie one of the weights onto the end of his whip and then catch roosting pheasants by flicking the whip up into the air so that the weighted end wrapped itself around the bird's neck.

He told me about a professional poacher he knew who used to catch pheasants by putting bird lime into a cone made out of stout brown paper.

'He would lay a trail of maize right up to the cone, and just inside it, and then wait,' said Thumper. 'Most poaching involves a lot of waiting, and good poachers are very patient men. The bird would follow the trail, eating up the maize as it went, and would then put its head into the paper cone. The pheasant, its head stuck inside the cone, would stand still, unable to see and therefore unable to move, and would wait for the poacher to collect him.'

Thumper claimed he also knew an old poacher from Lynton who had a tumbling dog which used to perform somersaults.

'He'd take the dog out into the fields and the dog would do its tricks,' he told me. 'The rabbits would come out to stare at the dog's strange antics and, fascinated, they would move closer and closer. Eventually, the dog would pounce and catch the plumpest and nearest.'

He said that the same poacher used to catch hares by mesmerism. 'If he saw a hare he would walk slowly in front of her. He would put a stick into the ground and then hang his coat and hat on the stick to make a rough human form. While the hare continued to stare at the scarecrow he would walk away, go round in a big circle, and come up behind the hare. He'd then catch her by the ears as she stared, paralysed into action as she concentrated on the stick, coat and hat.'

Another poacher used to specialise in catching trout with a blow tube, made out of a piece of bamboo, and a pocket full of elderberries. 'He would put a berry into the bamboo and blow it out so that it landed just above the biggest fish he could see. One by one he'd serve the fish a big meal of berries. Eventually, the fish would get intoxicated and drowsy and the man would send his dog into the river to pluck the fish out of the water.'

Not all poachers worked alone.

Thumper told me about a team of six or seven poachers from South Molton who used to enter a wood where pheasant were being reared and walk quietly through the trees in single file. All were carrying shotguns. 'When the last man in the file saw a roosting pheasant up above him he would tap the man in front on the shoulder and then stand still and wait. The remaining men in front of him would carry on their way. When the new last man saw his pheasant up above in the trees he would again tap the man in front on the shoulder. And so it would go on until every man was standing still with a pheasant in his sights. The man at the front of the line, the last one to spot a pheasant, would whistle. And all the poachers would fire a single volley of shot. They would then pick up their fallen pheasants and be gone.'

Apart from Thumper Robinson I only ever met one other poacher in Bilbury. (At least, I only ever knowingly met one other poacher. I had my suspicions on many occasions about how various villagers had sustained their injuries.)

I met him very early one Sunday morning, lying injured on the edge of a riverbank on a private estate just south of Bilbury. And, in a strange way, it was for him a remarkably lucky accident.

I was woken by the sound of banging. I threw open a window directly above our front door to see who was there and what they wanted.

I was more suspicious than I might normally have been because there had recently been two well-publicised burglaries in the nearby village of Lynmouth. A small gang of London thieves had woken up the owners of two large houses, bound and gagged them and then stolen silver, paintings and jewellery worth a considerable sum of money.

My caution was to a large extent unnecessary. Bilbury Grange is a large house but we have no silver and no paintings and I'm afraid I have to admit that I doubt if the resale value of Patsy's entire collection of jewellery would pay for the second class return rail fares from London for a gang of three. But although I knew this I wasn't entirely sure that potential burglars would know it.

So I stayed upstairs and looked out of the window to find out who was banging on the front door and what they wanted.

'My mate has fallen and hurt himself,' said a stranger.

'Who are you, who is your mate, where has he fallen and in what way has he injured himself?' I called down.

'My name is Keith Messenger and it's my brother Christopher who is injured,' said the voice. 'We aren't patients of yours but you're the only doctor around. I called at the Duck and Puddle and someone called Frank told me where to find you.'

'Where do you live?'

'Exeter.'

'What are you doing in Bilbury?'

'We like nature,' said the man. 'Bird watching. Rambling. That sort of thing.'

I turned round and looked at the clock. 'It's ten past five in the morning!'

'We thought it might be nice to see the sun come up,' replied the man.

His whole story was so feeble that even I knew he was lying. But the story was so bad that I no longer suspected him of being a burglar.

'What's happened?'

'My brother has hurt his leg.'

'Where is he now?'

The man didn't know precisely how to explain where his brother was. 'Over there,' he said, pointing south. 'Just by the river. There's a stone bridge fifty yards away.'

'And a Christmas tree plantation on the other side of the river?'

'Yes!' agreed the man, clearly relieved that I knew the area.

'Give me two minutes,' I told him. 'Wait there and I'll be down in two minutes.'

I got dressed, picked up my black medical bag (which I keep in the bedroom so that it's always ready) and ran down the stairs.

'Did you walk here?' I asked him. The man nodded.

'We'll take my car,' I told him. 'We can drive to the bridge. It'll be useful to have a car nearby if we need to move your brother.'

'Thanks, doctor,' said the man, climbing into the passenger seat of my car. 'Don't you lock this?' he asked, suddenly realising that I hadn't unlocked the car.

I shook my head.

'You should keep it locked,' said the man, sternly. I started the car, and looked at him.

'There are a lot of burglars around,' he added, in explanation.

'I suppose so,' I agreed. 'But they'd have to be pretty desperate to steal this old thing.'

He looked around at the battered upholstery. 'I suppose you're right,' he said.

I drove out of the driveway and headed towards the bridge.

'You doctors have to abide by confidentiality rules, don't you?' said Mr Messenger.

'We do,' I confirmed.

'It's just that we wouldn't want you telling the police,' he said.

'I have to report gunshot wounds,' I said.

'Oh no,' he said quickly. 'Nothing like that.' I wondered what it was like.

Mr Messenger's brother, the other Mr Messenger, was lying on the riverbank. He was soaking wet. His shoulder was dislocated and he was convinced that he had broken his ankle.

'Do I have to go to hospital?' asked the injured man, when I'd finished examining him.

'Can you deal with it?' asked the brother who had fetched me. 'Privately?' He paused. 'We can pay for private treatment,' he added.

'Not straight away,' said the injured man quickly. 'Not now. But we can pay later.'

'I can put your shoulder back if you want me to,' I told him. 'And your ankle isn't broken. It's only sprained.'

The man said he would like me to mend his dislocated shoulder. So I did. The scream would have woken the dead.

'I'll take you back to my surgery and strap up your ankle,' I told him. 'It'll be OK in a day or two. How's the shoulder?'

He rubbed his shoulder and gingerly moved it around. 'Much better, thanks, doc!' he said.

'What happened?' I asked him as his brother and I helped him to my car.

'I slipped on a rock on the river bed,' he told me.

I looked at him and then at his brother.

'You're not going to call the police?'

I shook my head. We helped the injured man into the front passenger seat of my car. His brother got into the back seat.

'We were trying to net salmon,' said the injured man.

'Where's your net?'

He opened his coat and pulled out a piece of white net curtain.

'That's your net?'

He nodded.

'You didn't catch anything?'

'No.'

'You wouldn't,' I said. 'There aren't any salmon in that river.'

'Are you sure?'

'I'm sure.'

'I told you,' said the brother in the front seat.

'There should be salmon in it,' said the other brother. 'It's a river isn't it?'

The brother in the front of the car half turned and looked at the brother in the back. Neither of them said anything else for a while.

'None?' asked the brother in the back of the car at last. 'Are you sure about that?'

'I'm absolutely sure,' I told him.

I drove back to Bilbury Grange, found the man a towel and some dry clothes and then bandaged his injured ankle. The healthy brother went off to fetch their car which they had left a mile and a half away.

'Have you got anything for headaches?' the man asked, when I'd finished wrapping his ankle.

'Did you knock your head as well?' I asked him.

'No,' he said. 'It's just that I get a lot of headaches. Throbbing headaches.'

'Roll up your sleeve,' I told him, reaching for my sphygmomanometer.

He rolled up his sleeve.

'Your blood pressure is high,' I told him. 'It's 160 over 120.'

'Is that bad?'

'It's too high,' I told him. 'You need to go and see your own GP in the morning. Tell him whatever story you like but make sure that he checks your blood pressure.'

When the driver returned I told him to make sure that his brother visited his doctor the next day.

'In some ways it was a lucky fall,' I told him. 'Your brother's blood pressure needs to be controlled.'

'Thanks, doc,' said the healthy brother. He helped his brother into their car. And then he turned to me. 'Do you mind if I ask you one more question, doctor?'

I raised an eyebrow and waited.

'My Dad went bald in his late forties. But I recently found out that he isn't my real Dad. My real Dad has a bald patch but he's not as bald as the man my mother married after he left.'

I looked at him.

'Do you think I'll go bald?'

I stared at him in amazement.

'Every time I wash my hair some of it leaves home and never returns,' said the man. 'But I haven't got a bald patch yet.'

'If you lose all your hair you'll go bald,' I told him.

'Right, thanks, doctor,' he said. He climbed into his car and then, puzzled, looked at me.

I waved and went back upstairs.

'What time is it?' asked Patsy.

'Six thirty,' I told her. 'Go back to sleep.'

'Patient?'

'Mmm.'

'What did they want?'

'Man worried that he'll go bald if his hair comes out,' I said.

'Ah,' said Patsy, as though it were perfectly normal for me to get out of bed early on a Sunday morning to see a man worried about going bald. She turned over and went back to sleep again.

THE BICYCLE DOCTOR

I was brought up in a town, where trees grew neatly in parks and along smart, residential avenues, and where the only flowers grew in neat, regimented rows. Grass was something to be played on and cut. It certainly wasn't there for cows, sheep and horses to eat. It was mown in neat stripes and the cuttings thrown away. It wasn't until I moved to Bilbury that I discovered the joys of living in the country.

Town folk tend to feel sorry for people who live in a part of the world where there are no streetlights, buses or telephone boxes. But to country folk the lives of city and town dwellers seem to be constrained. It is country folk who are more likely to take the time to stand and stare. It isn't that they have less to do, it's just that with the world around you moving at a more reasonable pace there is less of a feeling that life is a series of competitions.

In the country the seasons mean so much more than they mean in the town. Each time of the year brings its own special joys and delights.

Spring brings wild daffodils and primroses into bloom, turns stark, empty branches into huge green bowers and is marked by the sudden reappearance of animals who had been hibernating and birds who have, like the idle rich, spent the winter abroad.

Summer brings swallows darting back and forth across the fields. It brings bees, caterpillars, butterflies and bushes and trees laden with their developing fruits. It brings untold varieties of wild flowers, ferns and other plants: lesser timothy, adders's tongue fern, enchanters nightshade, meadowsweet, fleabane and, for me the most magical of all, wild orchids.

In the autumn the leaves that have shaped near and far horizons turn from green to gold, russet and cream and then they darken, crispen and fall. Birds and animals, sensing the onset of the darker, colder months, prepare themselves for survival.

And then winter arrives. Skies darken and storms come. Winds break away broken branches and scatter leaves. The remaining animals hide away, tiny becks turn into raging streams and rivers fill to the brim. It is a time that nature cleanses with freezing winds.

Commercial farming, factory life taken to the country, had reached much of England but it had not yet reached Bilbury.

Instead of huge fields full of one crop, the smaller fields of Bilbury were still divided up by thick hedgerows, and independent farmers still grew what they wanted to grow rather than what they were told to grow by marketing men in smart suits. Walk around Bilbury and you would see fields containing cereals, wheat, rye, potatoes, maize, cabbages, broad beans, peas, haricot beans, artichokes, corn, sugar mangold, pumpkins, carrots, onions, turnips and swede. Not every crop was successful, of course. But, as one farmer had once told me, if he'd chosen a career to make money he'd have become a solicitor or an accountant. He certainly wouldn't have become a farmer.

I learned that in the country it is much safer to mess with a man's car or his wife than it is to mess with his fence, hedge or boundary.

I learned a little about gardening too. I learned that the best way to tell if a plant is a weed or not is simply to pull on it. 'If it comes out of the ground easily and without much resistance then it is a plant and you've probably killed it,' said Mr Parfitt, the gardener at Bilbury Grange. Mr Parfitt looks a bit like a pixie. He has a grey, curly beard and handfuls of curly, grey hair. The pixie look is enhanced by the fact that he always wears a floppy tweed hat, which is at least two sizes too small for him, perched on top of his head. 'The easier it came out the rarer and more valuable it was. If it's a bugger to pull up then it's a weed and you should get it out.'

And I learned that the best way to get rid of moles is to call Morris the Mole Man. (His son is, inevitably, known as Morris Minor). Morris the Mole Man or Morris Minor will fix bottles on sticks all over your lawn and the moles, alarmed by the vibrations caused when the wind blows and moves the bottles, will go and dig their tunnels somewhere else. I learned too that this simple trick only works when Morris the Mole Man (or his son) does it. Try to save his modest fee by doing it yourself and the moles will laugh at you and stay exactly where they are.

When I didn't have urgent calls to do I would make my visits on my bicycle. I did this solely so that I could see more of the countryside in and around Bilbury. There is, in my experience, no better way to get to know an area than to spend some time cycling around it.

My bicycle was an old-fashioned "sit up and beg" machine which I had purchased for £1 at a Bilbury Church jumble sale. Some of the spokes were missing and the back mudguard had a stay loose and rattled rather a lot but all three gears worked and although the front brakes didn't work (mainly because the brake blocks had worn down so much) the back brakes were almost functional. Because it was a sit up and beg machine I could look around as I pedalled, rather than having to concentrate on a piece of tarmacadam a few yards ahead of me, as is the miserable lot of those who choose to ride racing bicycles. I had originally been attracted to the machine by the fact that it had an old-fashioned wicker basket attached to the handlebars. I could just fit my black medical bag into the basket if I jammed it in sideways. I liked riding around on a bicycle which would have proved perfectly suitable for a prim and proper Victorian governess.

City doctors occasionally expressed surprise that I sometimes did my visits on a bicycle. 'For one thing it's so slow,' said one. 'And for another it's not dignified.'

I didn't much care about whether or not it was dignified (it seemed - and seems - to me that if you have to rely upon your mode of transport for your dignity then you haven't got much) but I did dispute the fact that a car would be quicker. Bilbury isn't a big village and once I got to know the bridle paths and short cuts I could often do my visits more speedily on a bicycle than I could in a car.

And on at least one occasion doing my visits by bicycle helped save a life. Actually, if you count the life of the dog, as I certainly do, it helped save two lives.

I was pedalling back to Bilbury Grange one day, after completing my morning calls, and riding on the gently curving, slightly uphill stretch of road which heads eastward along the lower reaches of Hillberry Mound, when I heard a whimpering from the bushes on the right side of the road.

I stopped my bicycle, leant it against the hedge and peered into the bushes. Deep inside a tangle of brambles and hawthorn I could see a West Highland terrier. His coat was snagged and he was completely stuck; he couldn't move backwards, forwards or sideways. He looked miserable, tired and frightened and had clearly been there for some time. He had, I suspected, chased a rat or a squirrel into the bushes and in his excitement had himself become the victim; transformed from hunter to potential prey in a matter of seconds. One thing was obvious; unable to move or defend himself he would not last long where he was. He would be dead long before he died of thirst or hunger.

Using the biggest blade on my Swiss Army penknife to cut through the surprisingly thick and woody brambles and hawthorn branches, it took me over three quarters of an hour to get him out. By the time I reached him, and was able to disentangle him from the thorns of the hawthorn and the brambles, my hands and arms were scratched and bleeding and my Harris Tweed sports jacket, which I had previously regarded as darned near indestructible, was snagged and ripped in several places. I had on several occasions released ewes and lambs from such predicaments but I had always been in the car when I'd spotted the problem, and had enjoyed the protection of the thick pair of gardening gloves I kept in the car boot specifically for such occasions. This was the first rescue I'd done without any gloves. Looking down at my scratched and bleeding hands I decided that I would, in future, keep a second spare pair of gardening gloves at the bottom of the basket on the front of my bicycle. Or perhaps, I thought to myself, I would purchase a pair of saddlebags to strap either side of the rear wheel. Then I could also carry a rain cape and a hat in case of bad weather.

I had half expected the little dog to bite or struggle when I eventually got hold of him and dragged him to safety. But he didn't struggle at all. And he certainly didn't bite. He was so relieved to be freed that he licked my face and tried to lick my hands. Since my hands were bleeding I held him firmly to prevent him from doing that.

Many of the dogs in the village I knew by name but I had never seen this little fellow before. He wore a collar, however, and attached to it was one of those small metal tags on which is engraved the dog's name and address.

On one side of the tag the name 'McTavish' was engraved. On the other side the four line address: 'Stein, Primrose Cottage, Bilbury, Devon'. I assumed that Stein was the name of McTavish's owner and was surprised by the fact that I didn't recognise the name at all. I honestly thought I knew the names of all the villagers. But Stein was a new name to me. Worse still, I didn't even know where Primrose Cottage could be found.

It did not, however, take much thought to realise that it could not be far away.

With McTavish in my arms I stood on tip toe, walked a little further along the lane, and examined the countryside in all directions; I was looking for a track or a bridle path which might lead me to a cottage I didn't previously know existed. I left my bicycle where it was. No one would steal it.

It took me twenty minutes to find the track and another fifteen minutes to find Primrose Cottage.

Estate agents would have doubtless described Primrose Cottage as 'delightfully secluded' and 'offering complete privacy' and, on this occasion, they would have been absolutely right. Built in a clearing, with woods all around it, Primrose Cottage had a thatched roof and the walls were covered with a mixture of ivy and climbing roses. The cottage was in a poor state. In several patches the thatch was thin and birds had clearly been helping themselves to nest-building material. The two chimneys both needed pointing and the small garden around the cottage was overgrown and badly needed some care and attention. A small wooden sign attached to the wall to the right of the front door, and now almost overgrown with ivy, told me that I was at the right place: this was Primrose Cottage. McTavish, clearly delighted to be home, started barking and wriggled furiously to be set free.

I stood at the front door, with McTavish at my feet, and looked for the bell or a doorknocker. I could find neither. I tapped on the door with my knuckles. There was no reply. I turned the knob, pushed at the door and called out. There was still no reply. McTavish rushed past me into the cottage. I followed him. The smell, which hit me as I entered, was terrible. Urine and something else. As a GP I had grown accustomed to strange sights and awful smells. I once visited a woman whose husband had died unexpectedly of a heart attack. She was demented and didn't know what to do with the body, so she just left him sitting by the television. It was three weeks before neighbours called me. I find it difficult to remember smells accurately but I was sure that this smell was worse than that had been.

I found the cottage's owner slumped in an easy chair in the living room. At first I thought she was dead. Her head was slumped on her chest. She was wearing a grey dressing gown and her hair, which was grey and looked coarse, hadn't been combed for a long, long time. As I got closer to her I could feel the carpet squelching under my feet. Her feet and legs were swollen. She was wearing carpet slippers and her ankles were so swollen with oedema that they overflowed around the tops of the slippers. There was a huge ulcer in one leg. It seemed to be moving. I looked closer. There were maggots eating away at the flesh. I had never seen anything like it before. It wasn't difficult to see where the smells were coming from. I bent down and reached for her arm. I could actually see the fleas jumping up from her dressing gown as I approached her.

She was alive. I could feel a good pulse. And then she woke up.

'Who are you?' she demanded. 'What do you want?'

'I found your dog,' I told her. I told her who I was and explained what had happened.

McTavish, who had been waiting patiently, barked once and jumped up onto her lap. 'Damned silly thing,' she said. She rubbed his head affectionately.

'I'm afraid I haven't got dressed or done my hair,' she said. She sighed. 'Not been feeling too good.'

'I think you need to be in hospital,' I told her.

She pushed McTavish off her lap, leant on the arm of her chair and levered herself to her feet. 'I'm not going into any hospital!' she said. 'People who go into those places never come out of them.'

'You need to be in hospital,' I told her firmly.

'No, no, no!' she said firmly. She shook her head. 'I'm just tired,' she said. 'Old age.'

'How old are you?'

'That's a rude question to ask a lady. Didn't your mother teach you any manners?'

'How old are you?'

'Sixty something. Eight I think.'

She was much younger than I had expected. She looked considerably older than 68. We looked at each other for a while.

'What's your name?' I asked her.

'Phyllis Stein,' she replied. 'Miss Stein.'

'Walk into your bedroom Miss Stein, lie down and I'll examine you,' I told her.

'Ah, your mother did teach you something,' she said. 'Never tell a lady to lie down on her bed without asking her name first.'

'I'll examine you and then I'll decide whether or not you need to go into hospital. If you can convince me that you can manage I'll let you stay here and get you some help.' I could not force her to go into hospital, of course. But I doubted if she knew that. I wanted her to walk to her bedroom so that I could see how mobile she was.

'I don't need any help,' she said.

'You do,' I told her quietly. 'You need your ulcer dressing and you need someone to help tidy up your house.'

And then she started to cry.

I asked her to tell me the way to her bedroom, and then I took her arm and helped her there. She undressed and lay down on her bed and then I examined her.

To my relief and delight she wasn't as ill as I had first thought. She had relatively mild congestive cardiac failure, with bad oedema affecting both legs, an ulcer that needed cleaning, a mild prolapse that could be held in place without surgery and urinary incontinence. She was also suffering from an underactive thyroid.

'Can I stay in my home?' she asked when I'd finished and told her what I'd found. For the first time she sounded frightened. McTavish, who had been sitting quietly beside the bed, jumped up onto the bedclothes and licked her hand.

'You need someone to come in every day,' I told her. 'I can send the nurse in but she can just look after your leg. You need someone to help you tidy up. Would you like me to have a word with the social workers in Barnstaple to see if they can help?'

'I don't want any social workers!' she said.

In a way I was relieved by this. I was reluctant to involve the social workers. In my experience they would interfere and hold a lot of meetings but, in the end, do damn all to help. They would be appalled when they saw Miss Stein, and there would be much drawing in of breath and tutting, but I would not rely on them for practical assistance.

'Then you need a cleaner,' I said. 'Someone who can tidy up for you. Someone who can come in every day.'

'It needs a bit more than a tidy up,' she said sadly.

I nodded.

'I have a little money,' she said. 'I can pay.'

'Good,' I said. 'Do you want me to try to find you someone?'

She nodded.

I knew just whom I intended to ask. Gladys Pendle was a retired auxiliary nurse who had worked at the hospital in Barnstaple and lived in Bilbury. For several years she had cycled into Barnstaple every day. But the journey had, at last, become too much for her. A round trip of over twenty miles a day, some of it uphill and all of it along narrow, difficult roads was just too much for her - particularly in the winter months. She had, I knew, toyed with the idea of selling her cottage and moving to Barnstaple but in the end she decided that she could not and would not leave her home. She had, on several occasions, asked me if I could hire her. She had a minute pension, which wasn't enough to enable her to live, and desperately needed nursing work. She would not, I knew, flinch at the problem facing her.

I left Miss Stein and McTavish, collected my bicycle (which was, of course, precisely where I had left it) and rode back to Bilbury Grange where my wife, Patsy, cleaned the scratches I'd received while rescuing McTavish. Some of the scratches were quite deep and needed small dressings. As soon as this was done I telephoned the district nurse and collected a supply of bandages, dressings and drugs. I then drove to Miss Stein's cottage and met the district nurse there.

It took Gladys Pendle just two days to throw out Miss Stein's carpets (all of which had to be burnt), her easy chair (which also went on the bonfire) and various bits of clothing and bedding. It took the nurse and me rather longer to clean and heal Miss Stein's ulcer and to get her myxoedema and congestive cardiac failure under control.

But, in the end, we managed it.

And I was delighted when, almost exactly a year later, I rode my bicycle along the lower reaches of Hillberry Mound, and met Miss Stein and McTavish walking together in the opposite direction. I stopped to say 'hello'.

'McTavish has been stuck in the bushes,' said Miss Stein, showing me her scratched hands and forearms. McTavish looked rather sorry for himself and had clearly been told off. 'He chased something. Didn't see what it was.'

I bent down and pulled a remaining piece of bramble leaf out of his fur.

'There's no need for you to tell him off,' said Miss Stein. ‘I’ve already given him a firm talking to.'

'Oh, I wasn't going to tell him off,' I told her, remembering the day when he and I had first met. 'And you shouldn't be too hard on him.'

She looked at me, surprised.

'It was the fact that McTavish got stuck in the bushes which saved your life,' I pointed out.

She thought for a moment and then looked down at her dog. 'I hadn't thought of that,' she said thoughtfully. She bent down and rubbed his head. 'Sausages for tea, McTavish?'

From McTavish's reaction it was quite clear that he approved of this suggestion.

THE HAPPINESS LIST

I woke up to find that the car battery was flat and the car wouldn't start. (It was my fault. I'd left the headlights switched on when I'd got out of the car the night before.) Most of the patients who wanted home visits said that they would happily wait until the afternoon when my battery would be recharged. But one, a holidaymaker renting a cottage on the other side of the village who had woken up with a sore throat, insisted that I visit immediately.

It was, inevitably perhaps, raining heavily. Stubbornly refusing to ring my friends Thumper Robinson or Patchy Fogg for help, I set off on my bicycle, with my black medical bag crammed into the basket at the front.

When I arrived, soaked to the skin, I found that the holidaymaker who had demanded my call had made a miraculous recovery and had driven to Ilfracombe with his son to buy some fishing bait. 'He'll be back this afternoon,' his wife told me. 'Perhaps you could come back then?'

I gave her instructions explaining how her husband could get to Bilbury Grange and told her the times of the evening surgery.

On the way back home I hit a pothole. It was still raining heavily and the pothole was full of water and quite invisible. I ended up on my nose in a ditch, badly grazing my leg on my bicycle. My bicycle chain came off and I couldn't get it back on.

When I finally got back home, soaked, covered in oil, bleeding, limping and pushing my useless bicycle, I discovered that the boiler had broken down. We had no hot water so I couldn't have a hot bath.

Wrapped in a thick, soft white towel and with a mug of coffee on the table in front of me I pulled a pencil and a notepad out of the kitchen drawer and wrote out a list of all the things that make me happy. I excluded family, friends and pet animals from the list as being too obvious. When I'd finished I pinned the list to the kitchen mantelpiece so that I could cheer myself up by looking at it whenever I felt glum.

Here is a copy of the list I wrote:

1. Lying in the bath. Not soaping or scrubbing but just lying there soaking.
2. Making plans. Making plans to do something or go somewhere is invariably far more fun (and far less hassle) than actually doing something or going somewhere. There are no traffic jams, airport delays or pompous officials in my daydreams.
3. Enjoying the smell of freshly-baked bread, damp earth, newly brewed coffee, just-made cakes, freshly-mown grass and tarmacadam that hasn't yet dried.
4. Admiring a tree and working out how to climb it.
5. Sitting in the garden (preferably when I have a great many 'important' things to do) and watching butterflies dancing on air, fluttering by and visiting the flowers that take their fancy.
6. Setting out on a long train journey in a comfortable seat, with a good companion and a book I'm looking forward to reading.
7. Sitting in a café, with a glass of hot wine or a cup of tea and a good book. With some shame I admit that the pleasure is heightened if there is a rainstorm outside and passers-by are hurrying here and there under their umbrellas.
8. Driving home in the early morning after successfully treating a patient who thought (or whose relatives thought) he was about to die.
9. Rediscovering an album of old photographs and reliving the memories they inspire.
10. Walking through crisp and crunchy fallen leaves on an autumn day.
11. Sitting on a riverbank and watching a heron fishing.
12. Walking in the rain in a waterproof coat and a good hat. And knowing that back home there is a log fire, a toasting fork, a plate of crumpets, a dish of butter and a kettle ready to boil.
13. Sitting in front of a log fire on a cold winter's day and knowing that you can pile on as many logs as you like because the log shed is packed to capacity with well-dried logs and kindling.
14. Lighting and tending a garden bonfire on a misty, drizzly autumn day. Having a few rosemary snippings to toss onto the fire.

15. Picking up the fruit of the horse-chestnut tree and removing a still sticky, glossy conker from its spiky outer casing.

16. Taking the first bite of a piece of home-made cake that is fresh from the oven and still warm.

17. Putting the fairy on top of the Christmas tree and then standing back and admiring the decorations.

18. Wrapping presents for a loved one and then watching them open the gifts afterwards.

19. Coasting down a long hill on a bicycle and knowing that you're heading home and don't have to ride back up the hill (or one like it) when you get to the bottom.

20. Watching newly arrived swallows diving and swooping at the start of summer.

21. Exploring rock pools on the shore and trying to identify the seemingly endless variety of flora and fauna.

22. Building a sandcastle as the tide comes in and struggling to defend the ramparts against the inevitable.

JINGLE BELLS

Josh Wilkins died early on Sunday morning.

I pedalled over to his house when his neighbour, Elsie Tufnel, telephoned me.

Elsie, who was herself in her eighties, used to pop in every morning to make sure that Josh was 'all right'. (This was her tactful way of saying that she used to pop in to make sure that he hadn't died in the night.)

'He wasn't up and about so I went upstairs,' said Elsie. 'I knew he was gone as soon as I saw him. White as snow and cold as ice.' Elsie wasn't much bothered by death. She had buried her parents, three brothers, two sisters and four husbands before her sixtieth birthday.

Back in the 1970s doctors weren't allowed to put down 'old age' as a cause of death but if anyone ever died of old age it was Josh. He was, quite literally, worn out. In the final year or two of his life he suffered from angina, emphysema, arthritis, deafness, cataracts and prostate trouble. And those were just the diseases that annoyed him because they interfered with his cricket. He had been Chairman of the Parish Council for over 40 years and had been elected cricket club captain in his 84th year.

'I'm glad I'm old,' Josh had once told me. 'At least it means I know I didn't die young.'

He was 89-years-old when he died and although he looked every minute of his age he never allowed his frailties to slow him down.

'The best thing about being old is that you don't have to worry about getting old and the best thing about dying is that you don't have to worry about things which might kill you,' he said one evening, a fortnight before he died. 'I've had as good a life as anyone could ever hope for,' he said. 'No complaints.'

'Do you have any special requests?' I asked him when I saw him last. We both knew he hadn't got long.

'For my funeral?'

'Yes.'

'It's not something I've thought of.'

'Do you have any hymns that you would like playing?'

'I don't know any hymns.'

'Well, music then?'

'Jingle Bells. I've always liked Jingle Bells. That's my favourite tune.'

I hesitated. 'I'm not sure they'll play Jingle Bells,' I said.

He looked at me and frowned. 'Then why did you ask me what I'd like?'

'Jingle Bells,' I said firmly. 'I'll make sure they play Jingle Bells.'

'Fine.'

'Do you want to be buried or cremated?'

'Cremated. I don't want to be buried. The worms get you if you're buried. I hate worms. Slimy. And I want my ashes sprinkled on the village cricket pitch.'

'OK,' I nodded. 'I'll have a word with the captain,' I said tactlessly. 'I'm sure he'll agree to that.'

'I am the captain,' said Josh.

'I meant the, er, next captain,' I said softly. The club had, I knew, already arranged for a smooth succession. At a meeting held some weeks earlier it had been decided that the vice-captain, Mr Kennett, would be promoted to captain 'if anything happened to' Josh.

'On a good length,' added Josh ignoring me. 'I've always wanted to see the village team win the North Devon Cup. It would make me very happy to be a part of it.'

In cricketing terms 'a good length' means the point on the wicket where the bowler aims to pitch the ball.

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The day after Josh's death, I called in at the Duck and Puddle as I was cycling back home and saw Patsy's father, Mr Kennett, the new captain of the cricket team. He was watching a cowboy film on Frank's old black and white television set.

'Have you noticed that the goodies and the baddies all have expensive teeth?' asked Mr Kennett. He always noticed people's teeth. He hadn't any of his own since 1949. (Although when Patchy Fogg once said this Mr Kennett instantly responded by taking out his false teeth, holding them up and demanding 'Whose are these then?')

I said I had. A man in a white hat shot three men in black hats. They all fell off their horses, rolled around a little and then lay still. One of them twitched. The man in the white hat twirled his gun around before putting it back in his holster. The television picture then slipped. I slammed the side of the set with my hand. The picture stopped flickering.

'But you can always tell the goody,' said Mr Kennett.

'White hat?'

Mr Kennett shook his head. 'Creases in his shirt,' he said. 'The good guy sometimes wears a white hat, sometimes wears a black hat. But whatever colour hat he wears the good guy always has a nicely ironed shirt with neat creases in it.'

I looked carefully. It wasn't easy to see the screen but I could tell that he was right. The hero's shirt looked as if it had just come back from the laundry.

'Even when he's spent a week tracking the bad guys across the desert the good guy always has neat creases in his shirt,' said Mr Kennett.

'Except Clint Eastwood in those dollar films,' I said.

Mr Kennett looked at me. 'They're new,' he said. 'Only been out a couple of years. Not proper cowboy films.' He snorted derisively. 'Besides,' he added, 'they're in colour.'

'Did the cricket club have a meeting to discuss whether or not Lawrence's ashes could be distributed on the pitch?' I asked.

Mr Kennett nodded. 'We had an emergency meeting last night.'

'And what was the result?'

'We decided that in view of Josh's long association with the club it would be perfectly proper for his ashes to be sprinkled on a good length,' said Mr Kennett

'He will be pleased,' I said. 'Or, he would have been.'

I was relieved too. Patsy and I had already decided that if the club didn't agree to Josh's request we would go out in the middle of the night and sprinkle his ashes where he wanted them to lie. This wouldn't have been the first time we had done something like this. We'd spread Patsy's grandfather where he wanted to be. And had once climbed a gate at two in the morning on a warm, moonlit summer night in order to sprinkle the remains of Patsy's Aunt Thelma around the base of a particularly lovely magnolia tree. The tree bloomed in the garden of a cottage in Berrynarbor which Aunt Thelma had once owned. The cottage's new owner, a young London banker who spent no more than six weeks a year in Devon, had responded to our polite request for permission to sprinkle Aunt Thelma around the base of his tree by instructing his solicitor to send us a threatening letter. The solicitor, one of those expensive London varieties with so many partners on board that the top half of the notepaper is taken up with names, had sent us a very nasty letter warning us of the terrible things that would befall us if we dared even to consider entering the banker's property.

Although delighted, I was slightly puzzled by the cricket club's decision. I had once seen Mr Kennett go red with rage when a visiting batsman had allowed ash from his pipe to fall on the wicket.

'That's very generous of the club,' I said.

Mr Kennett looked around, as if to make sure that he wasn't going to be overheard. 'We've got three spin bowlers in the side this year,' he whispered.

And then I understood.

Sprinkling the contents from an urn full of ash onto a good length would, if done at the appropriate moment, give the spinners a huge advantage. When landing on dry ash the ball would get a good deal of grip and turn much more than usual.

'I expect you'll want to sprinkle the ashes at tea time,' I said. 'Between the two innings.'

Mr Kennett nodded. 'As long as we've batted first.'

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The funeral was on Wednesday. Afterwards we all adjourned to the pub. There was a good turnout. Everyone had been fond of Josh.

'It was a nice day for it,' said Mr Kennett. 'Nice bit of mizzle. Bit of mist. Perfect. You don't want sunshine for a funeral. Disrespectful.'

'Far too warm,' complained Peter. 'I want to be buried in the cold and rain in a damp churchyard so everyone suffers.' He paused. 'I'll be tucked up nice and cosy in my walnut coffin and everyone else will be shivering.' He looked around and smiled. 'Everyone will get nasty colds and die.' Peter's walnut coffin was lying in the store room at the back of the shop. It had brass handles and a brass plate on the lid, waiting for the inscription. He'd bought it cheap when an undertaker in Barnstaple had gone bankrupt. Meanwhile he used it to store tinned food.

We all looked at him. We knew he wasn't joking. Peter didn't joke. He always said he couldn't see the value in it.

'I remember Josh once telling me that he'd been to see the chiropodist and that the man had told him that his feet would have looked good on a man of seventy,' I said, trying to lighten the tone. 'He was in his mid eighties at the time and very proud of his feet.'

'He was a born politician,' said Patchy Fogg. 'He once told me that the secret of political success is not to try to please people but to make sure that you don't annoy anyone by actually making decisions. He told me that his motto in politics was 'lots of promises but no decisions'.

'He had a great sense of humour,' said Frank. 'It's true that jokes sometimes had to be explained to him in some detail but he nearly always laughed in the end.'

'And he had a good laugh,' said Gilly. 'A fine, throaty laugh.'

'He was a great countryman,' said Thumper. 'And a great gardener.'

'He won the prize for best onions seventeen years in a row,' said Peter Marshall, who had closed his shop for two hours in respect. (He had, however, put a notice on the door telling any potential customers where he could be found.)

'He really loved winning that prize,' said Thumper. 'I remember him coming to see my Dad and telling him that he was getting old and that it would probably be his last year at trying for the cup and that his onions weren't very good that year and that if my Dad could see his way to not competing for the prize he'd be very grateful.'

Frank looked at Thumper. 'Really?'

Thumper nodded.

'He did that with me,' said Frank. There was a pause.

'Me too,' said Peter.

Several other people nodded in agreement.

'That was at least ten years ago,' said Thumper.

'He came to me seven years ago,' said Harry Burrows. 'He'd heard that I had a particularly good onion crop that year. He was right too. His weren't a patch on mine.'

'But he still got the cup?'

Harry nodded. 'I didn't enter any of my best onions.'

'When he came to me three years ago he said he didn't have anything else to live for except the onion prize,' said Samuel Houghton.

I It was generally agreed that this was a pretty clever trick and that Josh deserved to have been such a consistent winner of the cup for best onions. We all drank to him.

'He was very tight with his money,' said Peter.

I should perhaps make it clear that he said this not as a criticism but as a compliment. Parsimony, in Peter's eyes, was a virtue.

'He had a *Racing Post* diary for 1957,' said Patchy. 'He used it for years. He used to write his entries in pencil and rub them all out at the end of the year so that he could write in the next year's appointments. He simply ignored the names of the days printed on each page.'

'I remember that diary. He bought it second hand at a jumble sale,' said Patsy. 'When he got it home he found that someone had ripped out the last week in June and the first week in July. So to get round this he just didn't make any appointments for those two weeks. They were an annual lost period in his life.'

'You're kidding!' said Gilly, with a laugh.

'No, no, it's true!' insisted Patsy.

'It is true,' agreed Peter Marshall. 'The council never met in either of those two weeks.' He paused thoughtfully for a moment. 'I'll miss him,' he said. 'Do you know,' he said, he fetched his paper every morning until last week. He only lived on the other side of the village green but it used to take him all morning. He'd set off from home at about eight, arrive at the shop at about ten thirty and get home by one. Some days he would walk back again after lunch to do the rest of his shopping.'

'It's remarkable to think that he was still opening the batting for the cricket team,' said Patchy.

There was a long silence while we all pondered on this remarkable fact.

'He ran out the entire team in a match last season,' said Thumper. 'I think it was a record.'

There was more pondering and drinking.

'He once sued the Devon paper,' said Frank. He looked at me. 'The one you write a column for. Did you know that?'

I said I didn't.

'Oh I remember that,' said Thumper with a laugh. 'The photographer took a picture of Josh's prize bull but the proprietor's wife saw the photo before it went in the paper and insisted that they airbrush out the bull's family jewels. She said a picture showing such things wasn't suitable for a family paper.'

'And Josh sued?' I asked.

'He said it made his bull look like a eunuch,' said Frank.

'That's a cock and bull story if ever I heard one,' said Gilly.

'No, it's not,' said Patchy, as quick as a flash. 'It's a cock and balls story.'

Frank insisted the story was true.

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We talked for a while about funerals in general.

Thumper said at least we all had something good to say about Josh. He said he once went to a funeral of an old aunt of his where the vicar hadn't been able to think of anything at all to say about the deceased. So, instead of spouting the usual meaningless and platitudinous drivel he'd invited the congregation to share their memories of the deceased. He said we could all stand up and say something brief but important to us about her.

'The trouble was,' said Thumper, 'that half the people there couldn't think of anything at all to say about her and the other half couldn't think of anything nice to say about her. Eventually, this old chap who had been a neighbour of hers for thirty seven years stood up and said that the one thing he remembered about her was that her grass was always cut and her windows always clean.'

We sat in silence for a moment or two. No one said anything but I suspect we all felt that it was a pretty awful way to be remembered. Neatly trimmed grass and clean windows.

Frank said he once went to a funeral in Wolverhampton where the family had the coffin sitting in their living room for a couple of days so that relatives and friends could pop in and say their goodbyes. When the undertakers came to collect the deceased they were invited in to have a drink of sherry with the family. One drink became two and then three and it was nearly an hour later that the cars left the house to go to the church for the service. It was only when they got there that they realised that they'd left the coffin behind, sitting alone on the table in the dining room.

'It had taken them nearly an hour to drive the twenty five miles from the house to the church,' said Frank. 'But the driver of the hearse got to the house and back in forty minutes. Altogether it cost the family an extra £20 for the vicar, who'd been kept waiting, an extra £20 for the grave diggers who had threatened to go home if they weren't given a bonus.'

He said the deceased had always been a poor time keeper and that her family had always joked with her that she'd be late for her own funeral one day.

Mr Kennett said that he once went to a funeral at a crematorium in Lancashire where the staff got two coffins mixed up. He said one of the undertakers later admitted that while mourners had been spouting homilies over what they thought was the corpse of a Methodist Minister they had in fact been paying homage to a Hell's Angel who'd been killed doing 130mph on the bypass. Inevitably, this also meant that a group of leather jacketed Hell's Angels had said a rather noisy goodbye to a Methodist Minister who had once refused to ride his bicycle to the shops because his bell had lost its ring-a-ling.

Thumper said he hated crematoria but that he had once been to one in London which was called 'Dead Centre' and he thought if you had to have a crematorium that was a pretty appropriate name.

Patchy said he'd once gone to a funeral in Chester and that he had hung his best suit up in the back of the car so that it wouldn't be creased. He had, he said, intended to change into it at the house of the widow who had offered to let him use her spare bedroom. Unfortunately, on the way to Chester the bonnet had flown off his car and had smashed into the windscreen.

'It had rained all the way up there,' Patchy said. 'And for twenty miles I got stuck behind a lorry carrying about two hundred bales of straw. The bits of straw blowing off the lorry all came into the car, as did the rain, and by the time I got to Chester my nice, neat, uncreased suit hanging up in the back of the car was soaking wet and was covered with several thousand bits of straw and dust.'

Because he had to drive slowly Patchy didn't have time to drive to the widow's house and had to drive straight to the church.

'I got changed into my suit in the car park,' he said. 'When I got undressed I stood so that I had the car in between me and the people waiting to go into the church. In my haste and general sense of confusion I didn't realise that the building on the other side of me was the local comprehensive school. It was just my luck that the girls' netball team was out in the playground practising. When I finished squeezing into my soaking wet and straw bedecked suit the girls all applauded.'

Patsy said she had once gone to a funeral in an old Morris Minor. 'The fan belt broke,' she said. 'So my Uncle Silas used one of my stockings as a temporary replacement. For months afterwards people complained to my mother that it was very disrespectful of me to turn up at a funeral in bare legs.'

'You should have kept one stocking on,' said Gilly. 'Then they'd have only been able to complain about you having one bare leg.'

All things considered it was unanimously decided that Josh's funeral had gone very well.

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There were noisy and lengthy celebrations in the village pub a week later. The Bilbury Cricket Club had, for the first time in its history, won the North Devon Cup.

At the post match celebrations in the Duck and Puddle, Josh Wilkins was declared 'Man of the Match'. It was the first time in living memory that a dead man had been honoured in such a way.

'It was his ashes which made all the difference,' said Seth Pitt, the Bilbury team's leading spinner, who had taken eight wickets for 17 runs.

All Josh's friends agreed that he would have been delighted to have played such a big part in the team's victory.

THE LORD OF THE MANOR

It should have been a quiet summer's day in Bilbury, but we were in the Duck and Puddle having a crisis meeting. The village had been invaded by Americans and we had to do something quickly.

It had all started just three weeks earlier.

A rented Mercedes had roared into the village, scattering gravel, birds and wandering sheep with utter disregard. The driver had raced up onto the village green, already neatly mown in preparation for the next day's cricket match, gone round in a circle and finally parked his car at mid-off.

When the vicar, who happened to be passing on his bicycle, had paused to remonstrate, the driver, a fat man in a pink sweater and tartan trousers, had simply laughed at him.

'There are no signs saying No Parking!' the driver pointed out in a broad Texan accent, proving that his dress sense was in keeping with his nationality. His female companion (whom we later discovered to be his wife) sniggered and applauded this banal but sadly accurate observation. From the waist down and the neck up she was emaciated, rather than slim, and she was festooned with more glitter than a Christmas tree. Gold bracelets, gold necklaces, gold earrings and a gold and diamond watch. Her skinny legs were encased in lime green trousers and her obviously enhanced bosom was doing its best to burst through a gold lame halter-top. There was too much of him (far more than was expected or required) but, although she looked overcooked and anorexic, there was also more than enough of her.

From that point on, the American visitors dominated village life and every conversation related to where they were, what they were doing and what they had said.

'They're staying at the Blue Grape in Woody Bay,' reported Patchy Fogg. The Blue Grape was a huge, ten-bedroom house on the cliffs which had, some years before, been converted into a hotel. 'The landlord tells me they're looking for a house to buy in the area.'

'His name is Tyrone Q Yattendon III, and he's bought the Lordship of the Manor in Combe Valley,' reported Patsy's father. 'Now he wants everyone to call him Lord Tyrone.'

Tyrone's wife, called Hortense, told everyone she met that she didn't like her Christian name to be abbreviated, but that they didn't have to call her Lady Hortense unless they wanted to. She complained so much about the cold weather that it was difficult to see why they wanted to live in Bilbury. 'I shiver so much that I can clean my teeth without moving my hand,' she said. 'I wouldn't dare wear a blue bathing costume. People would think I was bathing nude.' Like her husband she was the sort of person who told you how she was when you asked.

When she complained about the heat in the public bar at the Duck and Puddle the landlady, Gilly, trying to be helpful, asked her if she had hot flushes. Mrs Yattendon seemed surprised at this. 'Oh no,' she replied. 'We use cold water like ordinary people.'

They had just finished a European Tour. 'In two weeks you can see pretty much what you want of Europe,' said Tyrone. 'We did Belgium in an afternoon.' He told us that they had stayed at a hotel in Paris where they'd had a suite that had once been occupied by Greta Garbo. He said it was a pity that none of us would be able to afford it. He complained bitterly that so many people in Europe didn't understand English and then arrogantly went on to ask why the English couldn't spell the language properly; why they called an elevator a lift, a hood a bonnet and suspenders a pair of braces.

He annoyed Frank, the landlord at the Duck and Puddle, by putting ice cubes into twelve-year-old malt whisky. Frank was so upset by this that he subsequently refused to sell the American anything other than the cheapest, blended whisky; he put the bottles of malt away under the counter whenever the American was present.

'I say it like it is,' the American said to Peter Marshall, when complaining loudly about Peter's failure to stock the *Wall Street Journal*. 'You're a disgrace to retailing! I tell people what I think. I'm a blunt speaking man and people can take it or leave it. It's the way I am. I don't like people who mince their words.' Peter then replied by telling the American that he was fat, illiterate and uncultured. He pointed out that the Americans only ever played games that only they bothered to play, so that they could always call themselves world champions. He wanted to know why the American talked so loudly and said so little worth listening to.

The Yattendons inspected a cottage near to Pooter's bridge. When Mrs Yattendon asked to see the downstairs bathroom (and had explained what she meant by this) the owner, Geoffrey Pickles, took her down the garden to a small wooden hut in which a moveable bucket rested underneath a fixed seat. When it was full the bucket had to be emptied into a cesspit fifty yards away.

'There is no lock on the door!' complained Mrs Yattendon.

Geoffrey Pickles looked at her sharply and instantly replied: 'Madam, I have lived here for over 40 years and no one has ever tried to steal the bucket.'

Mr Yattendon, cross about the fact that it was taking two days to obtain a replacement wing mirror for his rented car, asked Henry Waugh, one of the two proprietors of our local garage, if there was a local word for 'manana'.

'I don't rightly think we have a word which conveys that sense of urgency,' replied Henry.

'They like Bilbury,' said Gilly Parsons, landlady at the Duck and Puddle. 'They want to buy a house in the village. He made his money out of barbed wire and wants to string it up everywhere he can.'

'This village needs dragging into the twentieth century!' the American told Frank Parsons. 'You need more barbed wire, wider roads and more shops. Most of all, you need some big hotels so that more people can enjoy the peace and quiet of your rural English lifestyle.' He announced his intention to apply for planning permission to build a motel on the village green.

'Great central position!' he'd insisted. 'What a waste to leave it as grass and use it just in the summer for your darned silly cricket matches.'

This was not what any of us wanted to hear.

And so, one evening, Frank and Gilly at the Duck and Puddle organised a crisis meeting to discuss what we should do to ensure that the Yattendons did not settle in Bilbury.

It took less than a minute for us to decide on a plan of action.

And by the following evening the Yattendons had left North Devon, firmly telling the landlord at the Blue Grape that they would not be coming back.

It was terribly easy.

We all took the lids off our septic tanks and stirred them up. And the farmers in the village all sprayed their fields with manure.

'What on earth is that terrible smell?' demanded Mrs Yattendon, having stopped Thumper Robinson in a lane near Bilbury Grange.

'Oh that's why Bilbury is known as Pooh Corner,' he told her.

'But the village hasn't smelt like this before!' said the American woman.

'We try to keep it under control,' said Thumper. 'But this is the way the village usually smells.'

And that was that.

That evening we all put the lids back on our septic tanks and celebrated at the Duck and Puddle.

It took three days for the smell to disappear, but it was well worth it.

MONTGOMERY AND CYNTHIA HALL

In a general practitioner's home the telephone seems to be wired up to much of the rest of the house. Sit down to a meal and the telephone will ring. Make yourself comfortable in front of the television and the telephone will ring just as the opening credits begin to roll. I don't care what people say, I am certain that the bath and the telephone are linked. If you fill the first with hot water and climb into it then the second will ring.

And, if you're a village doctor, you can't escape from the telephone merely by leaving your house. You don't need to tell people where you are. They'll find you quickly enough.

I had called into the Bilbury village pub, the Duck and Puddle, for lunch with Thumper Robinson and Patchy Fogg, when the telephone rang. Frank and Gilly, the landlord and landlady of the Duck and Puddle, were out for the day and had hired a temporary barman called Sidney Weedon.

'You've reached the Duck and Puddle in Bilbury,' we heard Mr Weedon say. 'And you're speaking to Sidney Weedon.' He always put on a very posh voice when he answered the telephone. He once explained that he did it so that it sounded as though the Duck and Puddle was a five star hotel, but it seemed to us unlikely that anyone ringing somewhere called the Duck and Puddle would be under the impression that they were telephoning a five star hotel. In reality it just sounded as though the bloke answering the phone at the Duck and Puddle was putting on a posh voice.

There was a pause, Sidney put the receiver down on the bar counter, and then I heard the words I always dread when I'm about to eat. 'Is there a doctor in the house?'

I got up, walked over to the bar and held out a hand. Sidney handed me the telephone receiver.

'Just wanted to give you the opportunity to not be here,' he whispered.

'Thank you,' I whispered back. Sidney went through this charade every time he handed me the telephone, even though he knew that I always took calls.

Cynthia Hall was on the other end of the phone. I listened to her for a few moments, told her I would be with her as quickly as I could, and put the telephone back on its rest.

'I'm sorry about this,' I told Sidney. 'Could you keep my beans on toast warm for me?'

Sidney, who was one of the diminishing number of people who regard doctors with a mixture of awe and respect, said that he would.

I hurried back towards Patchy Fogg and Thumper Robinson, with whom I was having lunch. 'Got to pop out,' I said. 'Someone has fallen off his exercise bike.'

'I've always maintained that exercise is very dangerous,' I heard Thumper say as I headed for the door.

'Totally agree with you,' said Patchy. 'Poor old Montgomery. Fancy him falling off his exercise bike.'

I turned back. 'How did you know it was Montgomery Hall?' I demanded.

'Small village,' said Patchy with a grin. 'There are only two exercise bikes in the village.'

'Who's got the other one?' I asked him.

'Me.'

'Not a word to anyone!' I warned him, waving a finger. 'I shouldn't have told you anything.'

'Our lips are sealed,' promised Patchy.

I headed back for the door.

'I'll drink your Guinness for you,' called Thumper. 'It'll go flat if it's left.'

'Thanks,' I called back as I disappeared through the door and down into the car park at the front of the pub.

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Montgomery and Cynthia Hall were relative newcomers to the village. They had arrived in the period when Bilbury had had no general practitioner of its own and I'd only ever met them twice.

On one occasion I had bumped into them at Peter Marshall's shop. They had been buying paint so that they could decorate the outside of their cottage and Peter had, as usual, been trying to sell them a few gallons of the stuff he'd acquired some years earlier from a bankruptcy sale in Bideford.

The paint was a hideous shade of pink and at least half a dozen houses in the village had been painted with it before people started to complain that the village was beginning to look like a set prepared for a pop music video.

(In the end things hadn't worked out too badly. A sharp downpour had proved that the paint wasn't terribly suitable for outdoor use and those who had used it on their homes had ended up with exterior walls painted a very slightly pink version of whatever else it was that they had been painted previously.)

I'd met them for a second time during an infamous and rather curious stand-off between two local farmers, Samuel Houghton and Walter Robinson. The two, both driving tractors, had met head on in a narrow lane that led down to the Hall's cottage. Neither farmer would back up (largely, it was believed, because neither of them could reverse very well) and, as a result, the entire lane was blocked for four days. Samuel and Walter both refused to leave their tractors. The police, in the person of Constable Russ Ross, refused to interfere because Walter owned a shotgun which it was well known he kept in his tractor. Constable Ross didn't want to make things worse than they already were. Most locals just drove around the blockage but the Halls didn't have this option because there was no other access to their property. When they started to run out of food I was appointed to negotiate with Samuel and Walter for permission to take them some supplies. This I managed to do. Two days after my mercy mission, the tractor incident ended in farcical circumstances when both men developed rather bad attacks of colic and diarrhoea after eating too many blackberries. They were both taken home in the back of Thumper's van (which had to be washed out afterwards) and he and Peter Marshall quietly returned the two tractors to their respective farms the same evening.

From what I knew of them the Halls were a pleasant and unexceptional middle-aged couple. They had moved to the village after he, a former fireman, had taken early retirement, on a full index-linked pension, after complaining that he was suffering from stress.

With remarkable and commendable optimism the Halls had named their new home 'Dunmoanin'. To discourage unwanted visitors they had put a large 'Beware of the Dog' notice on their gate. The notice carried a picture of an Alsatian which had blood dripping from its jaws. To add extra colour to this stark warning they kept a rubber ball and a real bone on their lawn.

When I'd visited (delivering supplies during the Great Tractor Fiasco), I had found the sign and the evidence quite convincing. I had refused to pass through the gate until Mrs Hall had assured me that there was no dog and that the sign and the fake 'evidence' were there to frighten away intruders.

This time I didn't pause. I jumped out of the car, opened the gate and went into the garden. Mrs Hall must have been watching out for me. She met me on the front doorstep. She was smartly dressed in a powder blue skirt and matching jacket. She wore a crisply ironed white blouse. In any other Bilbury home this would have been unusual attire but Mrs Hall had been dressed quite formally on both the previous occasions when I'd met her.

'I think Montgomery has broken his collar bone,' she said. 'But I need to talk to you before you see him.' She led me into their neat and smartly furnished living room. Large French windows led out onto a small terrace and overlooked a neat garden surrounded by woodland. She straightened a magazine on a small table and sat down on the sofa and pointed to a chair. I sat down. She pulled her skirt down to make sure that it covered her knees, though it already did this.

'Where is your husband?' I asked.

'He's in the garage, where he fell,' she told me. 'But he's sitting and he's fairly comfortable.' She paused, picked up a cushion that sat on the sofa beside her and punched it a little. Then she put it back. 'As comfortable as can be expected.'

I nodded, to indicate that she should go on.

'It's a bit difficult,' she said. She paused and played with her hair. 'Embarrassing is a better word.'

'Tell me,' I told her. 'Nothing you tell me is going to embarrass me or shock me.'

'I couldn't ring an ambulance,' she said. 'I don't want people talking. Nor does Montgomery.'

'OK,' I said. 'Even if you had called an ambulance it probably wouldn't be here for an hour I'm afraid.'

'No,' she said. 'That's one of the disadvantages of living in the country, isn't it?' She checked her earlobes one by one, as though making sure that her earrings hadn't fallen off. They were the clip-on variety and they were both still there. 'Would you like something to drink? A cup of tea? Sherry?' She pulled off one of the earrings and then examined it as though she'd never seen it before.

I held up a hand. 'No thanks.'

She put the earring back into position.

'You're going to have to tell me eventually,' I pointed out. 'And the longer you wait the more difficult you're going to find it will be.'

'Montgomery was on the exercise bicycle,' she said. 'He likes to keep fit.'

I nodded.

'He's very fit for a man of his age.'

'He looks fit,' I agreed. 'At least he did when I last saw him.'

'He's only a couple of pounds overweight.'

'Good.'

'He had a portable television set balanced on a pile of boxes so that he could watch it while he pedalled.'

'Splendid idea.'

'But when he reached out to change channels the bicycle tipped over.'

'Oh dear,' I said, nodding as though this was something that happened all the time.

'The problem is that Montgomery wasn't dressed normally when he fell.'

'I wouldn't imagine he was,' I agreed. 'People wear all sorts of funny things when they're exercising. I once had a pair of hideous, fluorescent-orange running shorts. And a bloke I shared a flat with had a pale blue tracksuit made of something shiny and slightly luminous.'

'Perhaps you'd better come and take a look,' said Mrs Hall standing up. She tugged at the sides of her skirt again.

I followed her out of the living room, through the kitchen, out of the back door and into the garage.

Montgomery was sitting on a plastic garden chair holding his shoulder and keeping very still. The exercise bicycle that had thrown him onto the floor was lying on its side. The television set was still on. Black and white actors dressed as cowboys were shooting black and white actors dressed as Red Indians. It was no surprise at all to see that the men dressed as cowboys seemed to be winning.

Montgomery was wearing a dark blue skirt with a slit up one side, a pale blue blouse, black stockings, a pair of black court shoes, a dark, shoulder length wig and half a pound of make-up. 'You've broken your collar bone,' I told him when I'd examined him. 'You'll need an X-ray and some strapping. There's no real point in doing an X-ray because it's obvious what's wrong. But they'll do one anyway.'

'I'm sorry about you seeing me like this,' he said.

'No need to apologise,' I told him. 'Scottish men wear skirts with great pride. Cross-dressing is revered in Scotland. There are whole regiments of transvestites up there. Why shouldn't you?'

'You're very understanding.'

'Nothing to be understanding about.'

'Would you do something for me, please?'

'Of course.'

'Help me out of my damned corset. It's killing me,' whispered Montgomery.

'I expect it is,' I agreed. 'I take it you would rather change into something less comfortable before you go to hospital?'

Montgomery nodded and smiled weakly.

'Start removing his make-up,' I told Cynthia. 'I'll pop out to the car for some temporary strapping.'

We had to cut through the sleeve of the blouse and unclip the straps of his corset but we managed to undress Montgomery without too much trouble. It took us nearly thirty minutes for Cynthia to remove all the make-up.

'I've been cross-dressing for years,' said Montgomery. 'I can't remember exactly how it started. But I kept it secret from Cynthia for ages.'

'When I first found his underwear hidden at the back of the wardrobe I thought he had another woman,' said Cynthia. 'I thought it was stuff he'd bought for her. And he was so ashamed and embarrassed that he didn't contradict me when I confronted him.'

'You let your wife think you were having an affair rather than let her know that you dressed in feminine clothing?'

Montgomery nodded and winced.

'Just keep as still as you can,' I told him, unfastening a stocking and pulling it down his leg. Cynthia removed the other one.

'I was so relieved when I found that he wasn't having an affair,' said Cynthia. 'I didn't care about the cross-dressing.'

'Now she does my make-up for me,' said Montgomery.

'Very good it was too,' I said.

They both looked pleased.

'Do you think so?' said Montgomery.

'Absolutely,' I said.

It took another ten minutes to get him into a pair of Y-fronts, a pair of trousers and a pair of slip-on shoes and to get his good arm into the sleeve of a baggy old shirt. I bandaged him up so that he wouldn't be too uncomfortable.

When we were finished I offered to drive him to the hospital (explaining that it would be quicker than waiting for an ambulance) but Mrs Hall said that she could do it herself and that there was really no need for me to bother. We were about to get him into the car when Cynthia noticed that his fingernails were still painted scarlet. And when she'd found the nail varnish remover and cleaned them he remembered that his toenails were painted the same colour.

It was half past three by the time I watched Cynthia drive Montgomery off towards Barnstaple. It was far too late to go back to the Duck and Puddle. My beans on toast would be in the bin. But, since I hate waste, I was comforted by the thought that Thumper had doubtless drunk my Guinness.

CAT UP A TREE

There is no fire station or fire engine in Bilbury. On those rare occasions when there is a fire in the village which cannot be dealt with effectively by villagers wielding metal buckets and garden hoses we have to telephone Barnstaple and ask for an engine and crew to be sent out. Since Bilburians are proud of being self-contained this is something we try to do as infrequently as possible. In 1952, a large fire at the vicarage (caused, it is rumoured, when the vicar fell asleep in his study and let his post-prandial cigar slip to the floor and set fire to the carpet) was effectively extinguished by a human chain, twenty galvanised buckets and the contents of the carp pond at the bottom of the vicarage garden.

Only once in the last ten years have we had to call the fire brigade. And on that occasion it wasn't because there was a fire. It was because Mrs Pettigrew's cat (a plump and usually lazy mackerel tabby called Catarina who was, on occasion, surprisingly agile) had got stuck up a large oak tree at the end of her garden.

Agatha Pettigrew was a dedicated and committed ailurophile. In her late sixties, she had never been married, never had a job and never lived anywhere other than in Bilbury. She only rarely ventured outside the village boundaries (once a year she went shopping in Barnstaple and that, she said, provided her with more than enough excitement) and once told me that she had never once spent a night away from the cottage where she'd been born and raised. Her parents, both long dead, had left her the cottage and she lived on a small unearned income derived from a modest portfolio of National Savings certificates and an even smaller income derived from the sale of stories about her cats; delicate, loving tales which she illustrated herself with pen and ink line drawings. She supplemented this totally inadequate income by growing much of her own food and mending her clothes until each item contained so many patches and darns that the original colour of the garment was no longer discernible.

Mrs Pettigrew's one luxury was her cats.

Some people scrimp and save in order to buy beer, wine, tobacco or expensive frocks. Others forego more basic delights in order to buy rare stamps or commemorative ashtrays.

Mrs Pettigrew fed herself on home-made leek and potato soup and occasional mutton stew, and at the village shop was a regular buyer of dented tins which had lost their labels and were, therefore, culinary mysteries offered at a heavily discounted price.

Everything Mrs Pettigrew did not have to spend on survival she spent on her three cats: Catarina, Chloe and Chantelle. She bought them the best of everything and gave them all her love.

When I received a message asking me to visit Mrs Pettigrew I was surprised. I knew where she lived, I'd met her once or twice at Peter Marshall's village shop and I'd often seen her tending her vegetables as I'd cycled past her cottage. If I had time I would stop and pass the time of day.

Mrs Pettigrew knew and understood cats better than anyone I'd ever met, and our conversations always turned to feline matters. We might start by talking about the weather, the slug population or the first sighting of the summer's swallow but it would never be too long before we were talking about cats. I didn't mind a bit. I love cats and am always happy to talk about them.

It was Mrs Pettigrew who told me that cats purr not just when they are contented but also when they are injured or in pain.

'Cats purr at a frequency of 25 to 50 hertz,' she had told me, one summer morning when I'd stopped to admire her runner beans. 'It's the best frequency for bone growth and fracture healing and for the repair of tendons. It's also good for healing muscle and ligament injuries and for strengthening and toning muscles. You doctors could learn a thing or two from cats. Purring helps heal joint injury, it encourages wound healing, reduction of swelling and infection, pain relief and relief of chronic pulmonary disease.'

It was, Mrs Pettigrew told me, because of the purring that cats suffer from fewer diseases than dogs, and heal better and more quickly too.

It was also Mrs Pettigrew who explained to me a couple of things that had puzzled me for ages.

'Why do my cats always want to sit on whatever it is that I'm reading? I've got two cats and if I sit down with a book or newspaper one of them will always plonk themselves down on the bit I happen to be reading at the time.'

Mrs Pettigrew had laughed. 'Cats like attention,' she said. 'If you're giving all your attention to a book then they'll know that is the place to be. By lying on top of the book you're reading they'll get your attention. Simple!'

'And why do they like to lie on my typewriter keyboard? Sophie in particular loves it.'

'You have to learn to think like a cat if you want to understand cats,' said Mrs Pettigrew. 'Your typewriter keys mould themselves very well to the cat's shape and whenever the cat moves the keys will move with her, adapting to her as she stretches and rolls from side to side.' She'd moved backwards and forwards as she'd explained this to me, as though she were a cat, making herself comfortable on a huge keyboard.

But, well as I knew her, I'd never been called to attend Mrs Pettigrew professionally. And, as I drove to her home I wondered what on earth could have happened to require my services.

'It's Catarina,' Mrs Pettigrew explained. She was clearly quite distressed. She held a handkerchief to her nose and blew hard. It sounded like a foghorn.

'Your cat?'

She nodded.

'I didn't know who else to telephone,' she said, apologetically.

'That's OK,' I assured her. 'What's wrong with her?'

'She's up there,' said Mrs Pettigrew, pointing to the large oak tree at the front of her cottage garden. 'The poor dear's stuck.'

I looked at the tree and could just make out Catarina. She was tucked into a fork two thirds of the way up the tree, almost hidden by the foliage.

'How long has she been up there?'

'Four and three quarter hours,' replied Mrs Pettigrew instantly.

I scratched my head.

'You've tried a saucer of milk?'

'She doesn't like milk,' said Mrs Pettigrew. 'But I've tried salmon, chicken, pilchards and clotted cream.'

'No luck?'

'She wouldn't budge.'

'And you think she's stuck?'

'Definitely,' said Mrs Pettigrew. 'I know her. She's definitely stuck. She won't show it because she's proud, but she's frightened.'

'Do you have a ladder?'

Mrs Pettigrew thought for a moment. 'I've got some steps in the kitchen,' she said. 'I use them to reach the cupboard over the sink.'

'I don't think they'll be high enough. You don't have a ladder?'

She shook her head.

I looked up at Catarina and scratched my head again. 'I'm afraid we'll have to ring the fire brigade,' I told Mrs Pettigrew.

'But we haven't got a fire brigade,' Mrs Pettigrew pointed out. Like many villagers she didn't like to recognise that there was a world outside Bilbury.

'They've got one in Barnstaple,' I pointed out.

'Foreigners!' said Mrs Pettigrew, alarmed. 'That will mean foreigners handling Catarina. She won't like that. Not a bit.' She shivered.

In the end I managed to persuade her that we didn't have much of a choice. And I telephoned the fire brigade.

'Bilbury?' said a voice at the other end of the phone. 'Is Bilbury in Devon?' He called to someone in his office. 'Do we cover Bilbury?' He brightened up when I told him the problem. 'Oh, right,' he said. 'Goody. We haven't had a cat for weeks. The chaps love a stuck cat.' There was a pause. 'Is it urgent?'

'Well, it is sort of urgent,' I replied.

'Splendid,' said the man. 'I'll come on the engine myself. I can ring the bell.'

I put the telephone down and turned to Mrs Pettigrew. 'They're on their way,' I told her.

'Oh you are wonderful!' she said. 'I knew you'd know what to do.'

'Why don't you put the kettle on and make a nice cup of tea?' I asked her. In an emergency the making and drinking of a nice cup of tea are crucial.

She put the kettle on and while we waited for it to boil we sat down at the table and talked about snails, rhododendrons and cats.

'Maybe I'll just go and check on her,' said Mrs Pettigrew getting up from her chair. 'Oh no!' she squealed. 'I don't need to. Here she is!'

I looked down. Catarina was standing there looking up at us.

'Oh my clever little sweet pussycat!' cried Mrs Pettigrew. She scooped up the cat and clutched it to her bosom. The cat purred but made no discernible protest.

'I'd better ring the fire brigade,' I told her, wondering whether there was a penalty for making hoax calls to the fire brigade.

'They're on their way!' a new voice assured me when I'd rung. 'Should be with you in another fifteen minutes. I've just had them on the radio. They got stuck behind a hay cart and had to make a detour via Combe Martin.'

I wanted to tell him the cat was safe but I couldn't bring myself to say the words. While I hesitated the operator broke the connection. I stared at the phone wondering whether or not to call him back.

Just then Thumper Robinson arrived. 'I saw the doc's car here and guessed you'd have the kettle on,' he told Mrs Pettigrew as he burst into her kitchen. 'Have you got any of that wonderful Madeira cake of yours?' Thumper Robinson is my oldest and best friend in Bilbury. He earns his living buying and selling cars and antiques, doing odd jobs and helping people out.

I explained what had happened.

Thumper shook his head and sucked in half a lung full of air.

'Trouble?' I asked him.

'They won't like it,' he said. 'And to be honest it'll give the village a bad name. We'll be a bit of a laughing stock. The local paper will make us look like idiots.'

He and I stared at each other. Mrs Pettigrew was too busy feeding Catarina to care.

'So what do we do?' I asked. 'They'll be here in minutes!'

'We'll put the cat back up the tree,' said Thumper suddenly. Mrs Pettigrew looked up and started to protest.

'Only for a few minutes,' said Thumper, holding up a hand to silence her. 'No option. When the firemen get to that tree they've got to find a cat up it.'

'Mrs Pettigrew hasn't got a ladder,' I told him. 'And I doubt if there's a ladder in the village big enough.'

'Don't need a ladder to get up there,' insisted Thumper with a smile.

And he didn't.

He put Catarina down his shirt so that he would have both hands free and went up the tree as though he was going up the staircase at home. He deposited the cat in the fork we pointed out and was back down on the ground a minute and a half before the Barnstaple fire engine appeared.

'Do you mind if we wait a moment,' asked the Chief Fireman. 'The photographer from the local paper is following us. He'll be here in a couple of minutes.'

Knowing that Catarina was safe, and had a tummy full of salmon, Mrs Pettigrew said that would be fine with her. And so the fire brigade waited until the photographer arrived and then, when he turned up, the youngest fireman, who'd never had his picture in the paper and who was plucking up courage to ask his girlfriend to marry him, climbed up their turntable ladder and collected Catarina. He then held her up so that the photographer could take a picture that would impress his girlfriend and make sure he got the answer he wanted when he popped the question.

And then Mrs Pettigrew gave everyone except the driver a glass of her home-made Parsnip wine and made a fresh pot of tea for the driver. Everyone had a slice of her Madeira cake before they went home and told of derring-do and brave adventures out in the wilds of Bilbury village.

THE WITCH AND THE BULLY

Elsie Fingleton didn't live in Bilbury and, strictly speaking, shouldn't have been a patient of mine at all. She lived in a small, rented, terraced cottage near the beach in Combe Martin and remained on my list of patients because she'd lived in Bilbury for over half a century and wanted to retain as many links with the village as she could. Dr Brownlow, my predecessor and mentor, had saved her life in 1954 when she'd had an attack of asthma which had developed into status asthmaticus. Apart from being an asthma sufferer she was also one of the most nervous people I knew. She once told me that she slept with the light on in her bedroom.

'What are you frightened of?' I had asked her. 'Burglars? Ghosts? Things that go bump in the night?'

'All of those,' she had replied instantly.

She came to see me one day in a terrible state. She was literally shaking from head to toe.

'What on earth is the matter?'

'I'm going to die a horrible death,' she whispered.

'Why do you say that?'

'I've been told,' she said.

'Who has told you?'

'Beryl Hardcastle.'

'Who is Beryl Hardcastle?'

'She's a medium,' said Elsie. 'She came to the door and told me.'

'She came to your cottage?'

'Yes. She says her name is Queen Julianna and that she is a Gypsy queen but I was at school with her and her real name is Beryl Hardcastle and her father had a chip shop.'

'She didn't recognise you?' Elsie shook her head.

'Why do you believe what she says if you know she's lying about who she is?'

Elsie looked at me blankly. 'I don't know,' she said. She looked down at her hands. 'She frightens me.'

'What did she tell you?'

'She said I wasn't to tell anyone.'

'You can tell me. I'm your doctor.'

'Will it be all right?'

'Yes. I promise.'

'She said that I had to talk to the Black Angel every week to stop him killing me.'

'And do you have to give the Black Angel money?'

'Oh no,' said Elsie.

'You just have to talk to him?'

She nodded.

'No money?'

'Only to Beryl. Queen Juliana.'

'You have to give her money?'

'To give her the strength to contact the Black Angel for me. I can't do it without her.'

'How much do you have to give Beryl?'

'£20.'

'£20 every week?'

'Yes. And I can't afford it. I've sold everything I can sell. Now I haven't got any more money. So I can't talk to the Black Angel and he will kill me.'

I tried to explain to Elsie that it was all nonsense. I told her that Beryl was simply tricking her into handing over money. But, although I think she knew that what I was saying was the truth, Elsie still would not accept that the Black Angel did not exist and had no power over her life.

'We should go to the police,' I said, though I suspected they would not be terribly interested.

'Oh no!' said Elsie. 'We mustn't do that. Going to the police would make things worse.'

'Would you like me to speak to Beryl?' I asked.

'Would you?' asked Elsie, a light of hope appearing in her eyes. 'Maybe you could explain that I haven't got any more money.'

'Where does Beryl live?' I asked.

'She lives in a cottage with a man called Ollie,' said Elsie. She told me the address.

'What does Ollie do?'

'He's horrid,' said Elsie.

'What does he do?' I asked again.

'He's just horrid,' said Elsie. 'He goes into pubs and cafés and just sits there until they give him money to go away.'

'Why would they do that?'

'Because he stares at people. He looks very fierce. He makes people feel uncomfortable. So the people who run the cafés give him money to go somewhere else.'

'Have you got somewhere you can stay for a few days?' I asked her. 'So that Beryl can't find you?'

Elsie thought for a moment. 'I can go and stay with my aunt,' she said. 'She has a boarding house but she's not full. She'd put me up for a few days. It's only round the corner from where I live but I don't think Beryl knows about it.' She told me the address.

'Go there and stay there,' I told her. And I promised Elsie that I would help her.

After Elsie had gone I sat in my surgery for over half an hour trying to think of a way in which I could keep my promise. I thought again of going to the police. But in my heart I knew that wouldn't work. For a brief moment I even thought of arranging for Thumper to take a couple of pals round to scare Beryl and her 'horrid' man away from the area. I pulled out a map and found Beryl's cottage on it. I drew a ring around the cottage in red ink and stared at it. There had to be a way to help Elsie.

And then Miss Johnson came in and told me of a call I had to make in the village. I left the map on my desk and did the call.

When I got back Thumper Robinson was waiting for me. He was sitting in the patient's chair in my surgery looking at the map I'd marked.

'I've got a load of logs in the truck,' he said. 'Do you want some?'

I said I'd take all he'd got, asked him how much he wanted. I paid him cash.

'Myrtle Cottage on Combe Road,' he said, pointing to the red ring I'd drawn on the map. 'I heard something about Combe Road and Myrtle Cottage recently. Can't for the life of me remember what it was. What do you know about Myrtle Cottage?'

'Nothing,' I told him, with a shrug. 'But I know who lives there.'

'Beryl and Ollie,' said Thumper. He put the map back down on my desk.

'Yes.'

'Nasty pair,' said Thumper. 'She dabbles in witchcraft and he's just a bully. They rent the cottage. They've lived there for years.'

'I know about the witchcraft.'

'One of them been upsetting a patient of yours?'

I nodded. 'I can't tell you who.'

Thumper shook his head. 'I don't want to know,' he said. 'But Beryl and Ollie need teaching a lesson. They've been annoying people for far too long. She pretends to be a gypsy Queen. Dabbles in witchcraft. Scares people silly.'

'I know,' I said. 'Have the police been round there?'

Thumper laughed. 'They've tried,' he said. 'Ollie just snarls at them. He's the sort of person most people apologise to when he treads on their toes. The trouble is that even when Beryl and Ollie break the law no one will give evidence against them.'

'There must be a way...' I murmured.

'We could pan them,' suggested Thumper.

I frowned. 'What's that?'

'It was an old way of getting rid of people who were bad,' explained Thumper. 'All the villagers would gather outside their house. They'd be armed with pans and ladles and they'd make a noise.'

'And that would scare the bad people away?'

'It used to,' said Thumper. He paused. 'So they say.'

'Do you think it would work with Beryl and Ollie?'

Thumper smiled and shook his head. 'No,' he admitted. 'No, I don't.'

'We need to scare them,' I said.

Suddenly Thumper banged his fist on my desk. 'I've just remembered!'

'Remembered what?'

'Combe Road,' he said excitedly. 'They're widening Combe Road. It leads up to a caravan site on the cliffs and in the summer caravans are always getting stuck. So they're doing some road widening.'

'And what about Myrtle Cottage?'

'Knocking it down,' said Thumper. 'They're getting a compulsory purchase order and knocking it down.'

'How do you know?' I asked him.

'A mate of mine owns a digger. He does a lot of demolition work for the council and is always tendering for stuff. He has a contact there who tips him off about what the council is planning. It isn't public knowledge yet.'

'But surely the council will have contacted the owner of the cottage?'

'They may have done,' said Thumper. 'But Ollie and Beryl are just renting it. The council may have contacted the owner - but that's Mickey Dunn who owns all sorts of property round there. And he won't have bothered telling Ollie and Beryl.'

'I've thought of something I could try,' I said. 'Are you sure they won't know?'

'Not for another two days,' said Thumper. 'Details of the road widening will be in the local paper on Thursday and then everyone will know.'

'I'm going round to see Ollie and Beryl,' I said, standing up.

'I'll come with you,' said Thumper.

I shook my head. 'This will work better if I go alone.'

On the way to Myrtle Cottage I rehearsed what I intended to say. Ollie opened the door. He was as ugly and as frightening as I had heard.

I introduced myself.

'We didn't call for a doctor,' snarled Ollie.

'I know,' I said. 'But I'm here about a patient of mine called Elsie Fingleton.'

'Don't know her,' said Ollie. He tried to shut the door but I was ready for him and had my foot in the way.

'Your wife does,' I said. 'Could I have a word with her, please?'

'What about?'

'It's important,' I said.

Ollie thought for a moment and then called for Beryl.

'What is it?' she demanded when she came to the door. She was dressed entirely in black and looked older than I knew she was.

'I'm afraid you've frightened a patient of mine,' I said. 'Elsie Fingleton.'

'Never heard of her,' said Beryl, without hesitating.

'She knows you as Queen Juliana,' I said.

'So what?'

'I'd like you to stop frightening her with your superstitious nonsense,' I said. 'She hasn't got any more money.'

'If she believes it that's her look out,' said Beryl, now not bothering to deny that she knew Elsie.

'It could be a problem for you,' I said.

'Are you threatening me?' demanded Elsie.

'No, not at all,' I said. 'But I'd like you to see her and tell her that she is no longer in danger.'

Beryl laughed. 'And what are you going to do if I don't?'

This was my moment.

'I'll have your house knocked down,' I said quietly. I always find that threats muttered softly are far more menacing than threats uttered loudly.

Beryl stared at me.

I stared at her. And I smiled.

'Ollie!' she yelled. Ollie appeared.

'This bastard is threatening to knock down our house,' she said.

'No I'm not,' I corrected her. 'I'm not going to knock down your house. The council will do it.'

'You can't do that, mate,' snarled Ollie. And he slammed the door.

***

Two days later, armed with a copy of the local newspaper, I went back.

'Have you seen the paper?' I asked Ollie, who answered the door.

He stared at me. I think it was intended to be menacing. I showed him the story about the road widening. 'Your house is going to be knocked down,' I said.

'You fixed this?' he said, more astonished than anything else. I stared at him.

'Beryl!' he yelled.

Beryl arrived. He showed her the newspaper and then looked at me. 'You've got that sort of clout?'

'I want Beryl to stop frightening my patient,' I explained.

'So now what?' he asked. He didn't look anywhere near as frightening now.

'You've lost your home,' I told him.

'And now what?'

'You leave the area,' I said. 'But before you go, you apologise to Elsie, you give her back the money you've taken from her and you tell her that there isn't anything for her to worry about.'

They stared at me.

'Or else?' said Ollie.

I shrugged. 'I'll think of something,' I said, trying to give the impression that I had limitless powers over their lives.

They looked at each other.

'When?' asked Beryl.

I looked at my watch. 'Thirty minutes,' I said. 'Elsie's cottage.'

Ollie nodded. 'She'll be there,' he said. 'And then you'll leave us alone?'

'You leave the area and I'll leave you alone,' I assured him.

I went back to my car and climbed in behind the wheel. I had to wait for a moment or two before I drove off. I was shaking and I was sweating so much that my shirt was stuck to my back.

Beryl was there on time. She gave Elsie back her money and assured her that the Black Angel had gone and would trouble her no more. She even apologised. And then she left.

Elsie beamed and cried a little in relief. She made a cup of tea for us both. Fifteen minutes later I left. A quarter of a mile down the road I ·looked in my rear view mirror and noticed Thumper Robinson's truck behind me. I pulled over, got out and walked back to where he had parked.

'Did it go OK?' he asked.

'Fine,' I said. 'Beryl and Ollie are leaving the area.'

'Great,' said Thumper.

'How did you come to be here?' I asked him.

He grinned. 'You didn't notice me before?'

'No.'

'I've been following you since you left Bilbury Grange an hour and a half ago,' he said. 'I asked Patsy to let me know when you left. I just thought I'd keep an eye on you. Ollie can be a naughty boy.'

I nodded. 'Thanks.'

'I couldn't have sorted it better myself,' he said.

It was one of the best compliments I've ever had.

DR BROWNLOW'S ADVICE

My predecessor as Bilbury's medical practitioner, Dr Brownlow, was my greatest teacher. To use a now fashionable (though old fashioned) word he was my mentor. He was, without a doubt, the wisest man I ever knew. He taught me almost everything I know about medicine and most of what I know about life.

Over the years I got into the habit of writing down the things he told me. I put them into a small, red and black spiral-bound notebook.

I told myself I was doing this so that I could pass on these pieces of wisdom to my children. But I was really doing it so that I could remember his words - and remind myself of them whenever I needed reassurance or advice. Much of the advice he gave me was designed to make me a better doctor. But I think some of the advice probably works for patients too.

Here's a selection of the advice he gave me:

1. However bad things may be always remember that these are tomorrow's good old days.
2. Never complain in a restaurant before you have finished your meal.
3. Ignore those who tell you that something can't be done. All they mean by that is that they cannot do it and cannot see a way that it can be done; they do not mean that you cannot do it. How could they possibly know what you are capable of?
4. You will regret the things you didn't do far more than the things you did do.
5. When patients tell you things about their lives write down what they tell you on their medical notes. When they come back to see you again you can ask them how they enjoyed their holiday, how the new bathroom is coming along or how their husband is coping with his problems at work. You may remember some of these things anyway but you won't remember them all and jotting down little notes will help to give your memory a jog occasionally.
6. It's the dog you don't worry about who is the one who bites you in the leg. While you're worrying about the black dog in front of you, the white dog comes round behind you and nips you in the calf. Whatever it is that you worry most about it will almost always be something else (usually unforseen) that causes you most trouble.
7. The more taps you have the greater the chances are that one of them will be leaking. And the more slates there are on your roof the greater the chance that one of them will slip off.
8. Look after the minutes as carefully as you look after the pennies and the hours, like the pounds, will look after themselves.
9. Life is too short to be wishy-washy. Say what you feel. Defend what you believe in. Don't waste time and energy on those whom you despise.
10. Every human body has a weak point - it may be the stomach, the lungs or the skin. When you are under too much stress, or are pushing yourself too hard, you will acquire symptoms at or around your weak point. Regard these symptoms as a warning sign to pull back a little.
11. People always appreciate a doctor who is prepared to visit - without making a song and dance about it. If you're going to do something, why whinge and make everyone feel uncomfortable about it?
12. Buy socks that are all the same colour and the same style. This will make life much easier. And who cares what colour socks you wear?
13. They used to build houses out of stone. Today, they build them out of breezeblock and then clad the visible bits with artificial stone to make it look as though the houses are made of stone. Remember this when someone argues that progress is always good.
14. Expect the worst and your life will be full of pleasant surprises.
15. Reasonable people are invariably without passions or ideas and reasonable men never do anything remarkable. Remember this when critics complain that you are being unreasonable.
16. When faced with a problem in medicine (and in life) it is sometimes best to do nothing - and to wait and see what happens. Very few doctors realise this and even fewer are prepared to act this way.
17. A doctor can often produce an improvement in a patient's condition by taking him off the drugs prescribed by other doctors.
18. Never lend money to friends.
19. When you are travelling a long distance always take advantage of every opportunity to empty your bladder.

20. Carry matches with you when visiting other people's homes or staying in hotels. Lighting a match in the lavatory may save you considerable embarrassment.

21. As soon as you have a little money saved up, invest ten per cent of it in gold coins and keep them somewhere very safe.

22. You should only ever do things for one (or more) of three reasons: first, because it will make the world a better place for those around you; second, because it will be fun; third, for money which you can use to make life better for you and for others.

SIGNED BY THE AUTHOR

Molly Tranter had lived in London until her mid twenties. She'd arrived in Devon during the Second World War to work on a farm in Bilbury as a 'land girl' and while digging up turnips had fallen in love with Kenny, the son of a local farmer. He was a sapper, home for a long weekend leave, and they'd gone into Barnstaple together to the cinema. After he'd gone back to the front they'd written to each other. And six months after meeting Molly he came back again, this time for a slightly longer leave. During Kenny's second leave the two married. They both knew it might be their only chance. Three months later, a telegram arrived and turned Molly into a widow.

'I saw Molly Tranter today,' said Gilly, putting a new bowl of peanuts on our table. 'Haven't seen her for months. She was in Peter Marshall's shop.'

There were six of us sitting in the Duck and Puddle having an early evening drink: Thumper Robinson and his girlfriend Anne Thwaites, Patchy Fogg and his wife, Patsy and me.

'I haven't seen her for ages,' said Patsy. 'How is she?'

'Frail but surprisingly lively,' said Gilly. She picked a couple of empty glasses off the table. 'She's got a bit of a chest infection. She shouldn't have been out but you know what she's like. She was a bit down too, when I saw her. Her sister is dying. Molly wants to go and see her one last time but can't afford the rail fare.'

We all expressed sympathy. We all liked Molly Tranter.

'I don't suppose you could pop round and see if she's got anything you can sell for her?' Gilly asked Patchy.

'Of course I will,' said Patchy. 'I'll pop round now. How much does she need?'

'£50 would buy her train tickets and give her a few pounds for taxis,' said Gilly.

'OK,' said Patchy, standing. 'I'll take a look.'

'Come in my car,' I told him, standing too. 'I'll have a look at her chest while you take a peek at her antiques.'

We slipped out of the Duck and Puddle and drove round to Molly's cottage. She was surprised but pleased to see the two of us.

I listened to her chest, checked her lungs and heart, and gave her some antibiotics. 'You should have called me,' I told her. We talked about her sister while Patchy finished looking around the room.

'Is there anything you can sell for me?' Molly asked him.

'The table is pretty decent,' he said. 'I can get £250 for it.' Molly shook her head. 'Oh, I couldn't sell that,' she said. 'My husband's family gave me that.'

'The bookcase?'

Molly looked sad. 'They gave me that too,' she said. 'I'd be very sad to sell that.'

'Let me take a look at these books,' said Patchy, opening the front of the bookcase.

'Oh you can take any of those,' said Molly. 'I never look at them.'

Patchy flicked through the books. Eventually he picked one out. 'What about this one?' he asked her.

'Oh you can take that,' said Molly. 'What's it worth?'

'I can give you £100 for it,' said Patchy.

Molly gasped in delight. 'Oh that would be wonderful!' she said.

Patchy took out his wallet, removed ten £10 notes and put them on the table in front of Molly. Like all antique dealers he always carried quite a sum around with him in his wallet. He picked up the book he'd bought from her and slipped it into his pocket.

'Take the rest of those capsules,' I told her. 'When are you going to see your sister?'

'I'll go early next week,' she replied. 'Now that I've got the money.'

'You should be feeling better by then,' I told her. 'Finish off all the capsules. And ring me if you don't feel better before you go.' Molly said she would.

Outside, in the car, I looked at Patchy. 'Can I see the book?' I asked.

Patchy had stuffed it in his pocket. 'Oh, it's not particularly interesting,' he said airily.

I reached over and took the book out of his pocket.

'The Bible,' I said, reading the title. I opened the first pages and looked at the copyright page. 'Very good,' I said. 'It's the 1922 edition.'

'It's an unusual edition,' said Patchy, looking embarrassed.

'£100, eh?' I said. I put the book back into Patchy's pocket. 'I think we've got a copy like that at home.'

'Similar perhaps,' said Patchy, wriggling uncomfortably. I started the car.

'Just keep your fingers crossed Molly doesn't tell anyone what you paid for it,' I told him. 'If she does you'll have a queue outside your door before the weekend. Everyone in Bilbury will want to sell you their copy of the Bible for £100.'

Patchy looked worried for a moment.

'I'll tell them Molly's book was signed by the author,' he said.

HYPOCHONDRIACS AND MALINGERERS

All the available evidence shows that the number of hypochondriacs - people who genuinely believe that they are ill when they aren't - is increasing rapidly.

Four out of every five men and six out of every seven women complain that they aren't well. Even worse, over half of all men and about three quarters of all women say that they are never well. And yet the evidence suggests that about half of all these prospective patients are, in fact, perfectly healthy.

We have more doctors than ever before. We are spending more money on health care. But there are also more hypochondriacs than ever before.

Why?

There are a number of explanations.

First, people are more likely to feel ill if they are bored, unhappy or frustrated. And today millions of people are bored, unhappy and frustrated. Millions don't have jobs. Millions more have jobs they hate.

Second, loneliness is becoming a greater and greater problem. We don't talk to one another enough. Talking and sharing problems really does help. You don't need a psychotherapist - the evidence shows that talking to a friend, a neighbour or even a barman or hairdresser will do. People who are lonely have too much time to think about themselves and their health. Hypochondriacs know that having an illness makes them special and gives them something to talk about that will make them the centre of attention. (The three words you should never say to a hypochondriac are 'How are you?'.)

Third, we are constantly being terrified out of our minds by exaggerated reports of new illnesses and deadly diseases.

Like all doctors I have, over the years, met a considerable number of hypochondriacs.

It may not be generally realised, however, that there are as many different varieties of hypochondriac as there are different types of cheese in France.

I have met hypochondriacs whose lives were crippled by their fears; people obsessed by their imaginary illnesses.

And I have met hypochondriacs who so much enjoyed the attention and sympathy their imaginary illnesses attracted that they became angry and upset if they were told that there was nothing the matter with them. There really are people who genuinely seem to enjoy ill health.

One hypochondriac I knew, Algernon Crabtree, positively lived for the attention his imaginary illnesses attracted. When, in frustration, I told him that he was the healthiest man I knew he was so upset that he burst into tears. He was terribly disappointed that there was nothing wrong with him. Moments later, when he had recovered, he demanded a second opinion. I remember that he used to read the obituaries in his daily newspaper to make sure he hadn't died. 'I might have died and gone to heaven,' he argued when I said that I thought this might be regarded as rather an eccentric thing to do.

It's worth making the point, of course, that at some stage in their careers all doctors become hypochondriacs. Fortunately, it's a stage that most of us grow through.

A chap I once shared a flat with was a terrible sufferer. Being a hypochondriac meant that he got everything we discussed. And once he qualified, as a junior doctor, things just got worse and worse. Every time he saw a patient he developed the patient's symptoms. His life became very miserable. His mother once sent him a calendar for Christmas. He got very upset about it and rang her up to complain.

'It's no good you giving me a calendar,' he told her. 'I'll be dead before the year's out.'

The only time he was ever happy was when he was really ill.

'Only when I'm ill,' he said glumly, 'do I stop worrying about becoming ill.'

Eventually, he found a very effective solution. He decided to specialise in a subject where he would never again suffer from the symptoms complained about by his patients. He became a gynaecologist.

The most extreme hypochondriacs are undoubtedly the patients who are said to be suffering from Munchausen's Syndrome. Unlike most medical syndromes this disorder is not named after an earnest physician creating a little instant immortality for himself but after an entirely fictitious character called Baron Munchausen.

The Baron, allegedly a Russian nobleman, was the hero of an eponymously titled book which was published in

1785. He was renowned for exaggerating his exploits.

Munchausen's Syndrome sufferers aren't just harmless hypochondriacs. In order to get a doctor's attention they don't simply fake symptoms - they will actually make themselves ill by swallowing poisons or deliberately cutting themselves. A woman patient suffering from Munchausen's Syndrome managed to get herself admitted to 400 hospitals all over Europe - having 92 operations that she didn't need.

The best known sufferer of Munchausen's Syndrome I ever met was a patient who, it was eventually shown, managed to get himself admitted 216 times to 77 different hospitals. He managed all this in the space of 34 years. He had thousands of X-rays and blood tests and is believed to have had treatments costing well over £1,000,000. He had 23 operations and never went more than 6 months without being admitted to hospital. This remarkable patient used so many aliases that eventually doctors learned to identify him by his scars. His career is believed to have ended at the age of 75. By then he had spent around a third of his life in hospital beds and had been in more hospitals than any doctor or nurse. He undoubtedly knew more about medicine than many doctors.

Using over 20 different names he had countless tests before doctors realised that he was faking. His body was criss-crossed with the scars of operations he didn't need. I was working as a young casualty officer when I met him. A surgical registrar and I both felt suspicious because the signs and symptoms he displayed were just too perfect. He had every possible symptom listed in the medical textbooks. He was quite good-natured when we eventually succeeded in proving that he was a fake. He simply climbed out of his hospital bed, put on his clothes and tottered off to find another hospital. I discovered later that this isn't at all unusual. As soon as they suspect that doctors know they are faking, patients with Munchausen's Syndrome will usually make a miraculous recovery and discharge themselves from medical care.

In the end it wasn't our diagnostic acumen which caught him out but his own carelessness. He had complained of kidney pains - his favourite illness - and had tried to trick us by placing a pebble under his back when he was X-rayed. The pebble showed up on the X-ray as a kidney stone. It was a cleverly done trick because the stone had to be placed in precisely the right position. The con came to an end because he forgot to take the 'kidney stone' with him when he left the X-ray table.

Most patients with Munchausen's Syndrome show the first signs of the disease in their teens by falling ill suddenly and dramatically. They often manage to convince family, friends and doctors that they are ill by mixing fact and fiction. When they can't answer questions about their supposed illness they either become aggressive or else fake a sudden attack of pain. Because it's difficult and dangerous even to dismiss patients as faking (and it is something that is notoriously difficult to prove) doctors usually accept what they're told and, even when investigations show no abnormality, will often prescribe drugs or surgery 'to be on the safe side'.

Many patients with Munchausen's Syndrome are lonely and desperate for love and attention. They know from experience that they can get the attention and care they crave by faking illness. The outlook for such patients is bleak. Treatment usually involves long-term psychotherapy and isn't often successful. The best hope is usually for a sufferer to acquire responsibility for someone or something else - an animal or another human being for example.

Whereas sufferers from Munchausen's Syndrome are pretending to be ill simply because they want attention there is a category of hypochondriacs known as malingerers who pretend to be ill as a means to some other end.

The majority of experienced malingerers will give what doctors call 'organ recitals'; describing their problems in well-rehearsed detail. And they'll usually manage to fake a few interesting physical signs.

They will, for example, pretend to have a fever by rubbing the thermometer on the bedclothes or dipping it into a cup of tea. Or they'll make their gums bleed and then spit blood into their urine. One young malingerer I knew used to lick his palms to make them feel clammy.

All malingerers choose their diseases carefully.

The man who is trying to con a sick note out of his doctor doesn't want to spend the day having painful tests done. He wants the day off to go to a football match. He knows that something simple like a feigned backache will be far more likely to succeed than something complicated and threatening. Many patients pretend to be ill for specific reasons. When I was a hospital doctor I saw a patient pretending to have a heart attack. He wanted a heroin injection because he was an addict. And I once saw a patient pretending to have injured his leg at work. He came into the out-patients department wanting to claim compensation money from his employers. He said he couldn't walk but I guessed he was exaggerating slightly when, from a hospital window, I spotted him playing football with his son in the hospital car park.

Most malingerers are content with taking off an odd day here or there. Occasionally, they may steal a week or a fortnight from work.

But I have met patients who have spent their entire lives malingering.

One woman I knew had seen private specialists on three continents. Her alleged ill health was her hobby and gave her an opportunity to travel. She always dressed well and looked ten years younger than she really was. Her unfortunate husband had to trail around behind her - and find the money for all her consultations. When I saw her she was travelling around the West Country visiting doctors wherever she wandered. I was, she told me proudly, the 112th doctor she'd seen in her life. She kept a diary in which she jotted down records of her consultations. She even gave the doctors points out of ten for courtesy, professional skill, bedside manner and so on. I wanted her to tell me how I rated but she refused to tell me so perhaps I didn't score very well.

Shortly after I first started work in Bilbury I met Thomas O'Donnell, a quintessential Irishman who complained softly that he had 'the weariness'. He lived in a small cottage and spent his days and his nights in a huge, old-fashioned wooden bed, covered by a double layer of heavy woollen blankets and a thick, richly-embroidered eiderdown. He had a small sun-faded postcard thumb-tacked to his front door inviting all callers to climb the stairs if they wanted to speak to him. Mr and Mrs Broadstone, his kindly next door neighbours looked after him devotedly. They shared the vegetables they grew in their garden, picked up his groceries and even did his cooking and laundry for him. The window in his bedroom was low, and from his bed Thomas could see a huge stretch of Bilbury and the surrounding countryside. Like everyone else in the village I treated him as an invalid. Neither Dr Brownlow nor I were ever able to find out what was wrong with him. But neither of us liked to tell him to his face that he was a fraud.

Once a year Mr O'Donnell would go to the hurling championships in Dublin. For this annual treat, a visit to a uniquely Irish game in which every man starts the match equipped with a large stick and ends it covered in his own and everyone else's blood, Mr O'Donnell would climb out of bed and put on a dark three piece heavy worsted suit, a white shirt with a stiffly starched collar and a plain, dark green tie. On the top of his head he would carefully place a smart black trilby hat. To get to Dublin he would hire Peter Marshall to take him to Barnstaple in his car. From Barnstaple he would take the train to Exeter and from there he would catch the express to Birmingham. From Birmingham he took a plane to Dublin. Upon his return from the hurling championships Thomas would take off his suit, hang it up in his wardrobe and climb back into his bed.

I also knew of a woman who lived in a small village half way between Bilbury and Barnstaple. She had decided at the age of 14 that she didn't like work so she went to bed. And she stayed there for the next fifty years, eating chocolates and reading magazines.

Until she died at the age of 64 she was looked after by relatives, friends and a series of impatient doctors. Her life might not have been particularly fulfilling but it certainly wasn't very demanding either.

The big difference between Munchausen Syndrome sufferers and malingerers on the one hand and genuine hypochondriacs on the other is that while those in the first group pretend they are ill hypochondriacs genuinely believe that they are ill.

All the available evidence shows that the number of hypochondriacs - people who genuinely believe that they are ill when they aren't - is increasing rapidly.

Malingerers and patients with Munchausen's Syndrome were rare in Bilbury. But the village, and the practice, did have its fair share of hypochondriacs and, as a group, they created a greatly disproportionate amount of work. As any doctor will tell you, one genuine hypochondriac can generate ten times as many telephone calls and surgery visits as ten genuinely healthy and needy patients.

A friend of mine from medical school took a job as a general practitioner in Leamington Spa, a pleasant, rather leafy town in the English midlands. He once told me about an attempt he'd made to help the hypochondriacs in his practice.

With the approval of the senior partners in the practice where he worked, he started a weekly Hypochondriacs Group. The senior doctors all said they desperately hoped that his scheme would work but admitted that in their hearts they knew it didn't stand a chance. The idea was that hypochondriacs could go along and talk about their personal problems and experiences in the same way that alcoholics do when they attend Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. My friend hoped that by sharing their pain, and their hopes and strengths, the patients would be able to deal with their fears in a constructive way. He also hoped that in the long-term the existence of his group would mean that the doctors in the practice would spend less time dealing with this small group of very demanding people. He thought, rather naively perhaps, that once they heard other hypochondriacs talking about their imaginary illnesses they would be embarrassed and walk away feeling full of beans.

The scheme was an absolute disaster.

The first problem was that my friend hadn't realised that many hypochondriacs love their illnesses and are, indeed, often quite proud of them. The very last thing they really want is a cure. They go to the doctor not in search of a remedy but in search of sympathy. They want the doctor to tell them that their problem is unique and that nothing can be done about it. I've known hypochondriacs become severely depressed, and demand a second, third and fourth opinion, when told that there is nothing seriously wrong with them. There are not a few doctors with private practices who make a very good living out of offering sympathy to long-term hypochondriacs. One I know, who is especially successful, tells his patients that their problems are so special that he would like to write about them in one of the medical journals. There are journals which will print articles if the author pays a fee (these journals make most of their money from drug companies anxious to have articles published extolling the virtues of their latest wonder-drug, but they are also happy to accept money from individual doctors) and so the doctor writes a page or two about Mrs X's puzzling condition and has it published. The fee he pays to have it in print is nothing compared to the fees he charges Mrs X for support and sympathy. The cost is doubtless tax deductible as an essential expense. Thrilled to see herself in print, and to have evidence confirming that her disease is very special, Mrs X buys up two dozen copies of the journal to send to her dearest and most intimate friends. She becomes a fan of the doctor for life and several of her friends make appointments to see him too.

The second problem my doctor friend faced was that all the hypochondriacs were proud of their illnesses and only wanted to talk about themselves. They wanted lots of fuss and attention. They all wanted to have the worst symptoms and the worst prognoses. They all wanted to have been closer to death than anyone else. They all wanted to have amazed and bewildered and stumped the biggest number of doctors. They all wanted to have had the most difficult surgery. And they got very jealous, and sometimes quite hysterical, when another patient started talking about his problems as though they mattered a damn.

Finally, my friend in Leamington Spa had known that because the hypochondriacs all knew lots of medical jargon they would be able to talk to one another about their various illnesses, but he hadn't realised that hypochondriacs love acquiring new symptoms and new illnesses and would, within a very short space of time, all add everyone else's diseases to their own library of ailments.

Eventually, the Hypochondriacs Group meeting fell apart when, one by one, the members sent messages to say that they were too ill to attend. My friend reported that the senior partners were furious with him. For six months after the Group folded they were spending twice as much time on their small group of hypochondriacs as they had been before the Group started. What made things particularly galling was that instead of having just one or two favourite diseases the worst hypochondriacs now had a whole textbook of symptoms and disorders. Eventually, the senior partners introduced a strict rule limiting known hypochondriacs to one fatal disease per day and a maximum of three per week.

The happiest and most successful hypochondriacs I ever knew were a couple of men called Godfrey Fame and Michael Fortune. They ran an estate agency called Fame and Fortune. (Godfrey once admitted to me that he was born Godfrey Fane and had changed his name by deed poll. Michael's surname really was Fortune. Thumper Robinson referred to them as Piles 1 and Piles 2 because, as he said, they were both a 'pain in the bum'. Patchy, slightly more tactful, described them both as suffering from 'irritable person syndrome'.)

Godfrey and Michael were both raging hypochondriacs but they shared their symptoms, their fears and their illnesses with each other. Both enjoyed having a permanent audience, and they would literally take it in turns to talk about themselves and their health problems. I could never quite work out how the rota worked but I never knew both of them to be ill at the same time so it clearly worked quite well.

When I first moved to Bilbury they told me that they were worried that I was far too young to be their doctor.

'We need someone with experience and gravitas,' Godfrey said, when warning me that he and Michael were considering moving to an older doctor with a practice in Barnstaple.

But they never did change doctors.

'We've decided to stay with you,' said Michael eventually.

'Better the devil you know,' said Godfrey.

I said I was very flattered by their trust. And then, since it was Godfrey's turn to be ill, I listened and nodded as he told me why he thought he had acquired leptospirosis while cleaning the bathroom sink and how he had contracted a variant form of Lassa fever while showing a man who'd been on holiday in Africa round a house in Shirwell. He had, as usual, been to the library in Barnstaple and knew a good deal about both of these diseases. In the end, after a careful and thorough examination, I managed to persuade him that all he had wrong with him was tinea pedis (athlete's foot) and mild incipient seborrheic dermatitis (dandruff). I gave him some cream for the tinea pedis and a special shampoo for the mild incipient seborrheic dermatitis. Both men were very happy with me when they left and told me, for the 800th time, that if Patsy and I ever wanted to sell Bilbury Grange they would be happy to handle the sale for us at a very competitive rate.

Having one or two hypochondriacs in a practice is always stimulating. But one or two is plenty.

THE WOMAN WHO WAS TOO BUSY TO DIE

Human bodies are extremely complicated and over the years I learned three important things about them, none of which I had been taught by lecturers or professors at my medical school.

First, I learned that no two bodies are identical and there are an infinite number of variations. Not even twins are truly identical. When I first started to study medicine I used to think how much easier it would be for us all (doctors and patients) if bodies came with an owner's manual, but the more I learned about medicine the more I realised that such a manual would have to contain so many variations, footnotes and appendices that it wouldn't fit into the British Museum let alone sit comfortably on the average bookshelf. Even if manuals were individually prepared they would still be too vast for practical use. However much we may think we know about illness and health there will always be exceptions; there will always be times when our prognoses and predictions are proved wrong.

Second, I learned that the human body has enormous, hidden strengths, and far greater power than most of us ever realise. We tend to think of ourselves as being delicate and vulnerable. But, in practice, our bodies are tougher than we imagine, far more capable of coping with physical and mental stresses than most of us realise. Very few of us know just how strong and capable we can be. Only if we are pushed to our limits do we find out precisely what we can do.

Third, I learned that our bodies are far better equipped for selfdefence than most of us imagine, and are surprisingly well-equipped with a wide variety of protective mechanisms and self-healing systems which are designed to keep us alive and to protect us when we find ourselves in adverse circumstances. The human body is designed for survival and contains far more automatic defence mechanisms, designed to protect its occupant when it is threatened, than any motor car. To give the simplest of examples, consider what happens when you cut yourself. First, blood will flow out of your body for a few seconds to wash away any dirt. Then special proteins will quickly form a protective net to catch blood cells and form a clot to seal the wound. The damaged cells will release special substances into the tissues to make the area red, swollen and hot. The heat kills any infection, the swelling acts as a natural splint - protecting the injured area. White cells are brought to the injury site to swallow up any bacteria. And, finally, scar tissue builds up over the wounded site. The scar tissue will be stronger than the original, damaged area of skin.

Those were the three medical truths I discovered for myself. Over the years I have seen many examples of these three truths. But one patient always comes into my mind when I think about the way the human body can defy medical science, prove doctors wrong and exhibit its extraordinary in-built healing power.

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I can still remember when I first met Dawn.

'The next patient is new to the village,' my receptionist, Miss Johnson, had said. 'She's renting the Bradshaw's old cottage on Parson Lane. Her name is Northolt. Mrs Dawn Northolt. The Family Practitioner Committee hasn't yet sent us her medical records.'

I'd stood up and waited for Mrs Northolt to enter. Right from the start, I always stood up when patients came in to see me for the same reason that I shook hands with them when they left, and, unlike some of my colleagues in general practice, wore a sports jacket instead of a white coat. I wanted to make patients feel comfortable and relaxed; as though they were visiting a friend rather than the doctor. However much they might hide it, most patients are a little nervous when they enter a doctor's surgery. My predecessor, Dr Brownlow, had believed that small, natural, social courtesies help eradicate the nervousness. And I'd decided to maintain the tradition. I still do.

Mrs Northolt looked to be in her early twenties, though I was to discover that she was actually just nineteen. She was short, dark haired and very pregnant. She had clearly spent a good deal of time crying.

She told me that she was eight months pregnant and that her husband had been away on an oil rig for nearly a year. When he'd returned home he had, not surprisingly, refused to believe her claim that the baby was his. He'd stormed out and gone to the pub where he'd discovered that his wife's faithlessness was well-known. The barman, an old friend of his, reported that she was known by the name 'Treacle' because she was considered by the locals to be a tart. She had never charged for her favours, the barman had reported, but she had, nevertheless, been exceedingly liberal with them.

'I was lonely and frightened, especially at night,' was all Dawn could offer in her defence. 'It was the only way I could get men to stay with me.'

Her husband, who had regularly sent money home, was not impressed with his young wife's explanation. He did not hit her or even shout at her. He simply packed his bags and walked out.

Desperate, even more lonely and even more frightened, Dawn also left their home in Newcastle. She had no idea who the father was. There were a number of candidates. She didn't love any of them, or even know their last names. She packed one suitcase (all she could carry) and caught a bus to Taunton, where she had an aunt. The aunt provided a bed for two nights and then found Dawn a cottage to rent. The cottage was in Bilbury. Neither of them had ever heard of Bilbury. Dawn's aunt drove her there in her Ford and then went straight back to Taunton. Once again Dawn was on her own.

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For the first few weeks Dawn was, I remember, a lot of trouble. Since Miss Johnson and I were the only people in the village whom she knew, she would telephone the surgery three or four times a day. She even telephoned in the evenings and at night. Once, I remember, she telephoned at midnight in a terrible state.

'What's the matter?' I asked her.

'I think I've drowned my baby!' she cried, between sobs.

'You haven't had the baby yet,' I pointed out.

'No. But I had a bath!' she told me. It had suddenly occurred to her that in taking a bath she might have drowned the baby in her womb. It took me fifteen minutes to persuade her that there was nothing for her to worry about.

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She had a low opinion of doctors. She didn't like them and she didn't trust them. It wasn't difficult to see why, or to blame her.

Her previous GP, having decided that she was mentally ill, had once sent her to see a psychiatrist.

'He said I was mad,' she said.

'Who did?'

'My GP. He sent me to see a psychiatrist.'

Dawn reached over and picked up a toy car. My desk is always littered with toys as well as books, letters and medical instruments. I put the toys there to amuse the children, though they seem to amuse the adults too. She turned it over and examined the underside. 'I thought I was ugly and useless,' she said. 'At school I was always the last but one person to be picked when the captains were picking their netball and hockey teams.'

'Last but one is not too bad. You could have been the last choice.'

'The one they always picked last weighed 12 stones, had asthma and wore spectacles with lenses as thick as the bottoms of milk bottles. She had bad breath and was loathed because she never stopped telling us all how rich her family was.'

'So what did the psychiatrist say?'

'He told me to lie down on his couch and then he sat there and told me to talk about myself.'

'Did it help?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Because after twenty minutes or so I had run out of things to say. I lay there in silence. He didn't say a word. Twice a minute I looked at the clock. When my fifty minutes were up I asked if I should go but he didn't reply. I turned round and thought he was dead. His eyes were closed, his hands were folded across his stomach and his chin was resting on his chest. There was a long dribble of saliva connecting his chin to his cardigan. I sat up and realised that he was still breathing.'

'What was wrong with him?'

'He'd fallen asleep.'

I looked down at my desk, embarrassed for her, despite the time that had passed by since it had happened.

'Not the best thing for someone who felt inadequate,' she said softly.

'What did you do?'

'I asked him if I could go. I had to reach out and touch his shoulder to wake him up.'

'Was he embarrassed?'

'No, not at all. He told me to make another appointment to see him in a week's time.'

'Did you?'

She shook her head. 'I never saw him again.'

'Did your GP ask you what had happened?' She shook her head again.

'What did he do?'

'He always just asked me questions about my sex life. He seemed to find it interesting. In the end I just made stuff up. I wasn't going to tell him all my personal and private thoughts. So I made stuff up.'

'Why did you keep going to see him?'

'I wanted the tranquillisers he gave me. He wouldn't give me the prescriptions if I didn't go and see him.'

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'Do you think I'm mentally ill?' she asked me one day. She'd had the baby, a beautiful little girl, and had, defied the social workers, who wanted her to give the child up for adoption. But, to me, she'd never really seemed to bond with the child.

I looked at her and spoke slowly and certainly, so that she would know that I knew what I was saying.

'No,' I told her. 'You're not mentally ill.'

'So, what's wrong with me?'

'You need a purpose,' I told her.

To this day I still have no idea why I said that. I would never normally say something so crass and simplistic to a patient. I've always believed that, as a GP, my job is to look after the mental and physical welfare of my patients. That's it. It isn't my place to offer advice (other than a suggestion to stop smoking or lose weight) any more than it is to make judgements.

'What do you mean?' she asked.

'You've got a baby and a new home,' I said. 'You're lucky enough to be living in a village 'where people treat their neighbours according to who they are, not who they were or who they ought to be. You've got a lot to be proud of and a lot to look forward to.' I remember knowing that I was way out of order. It wasn't my place to say any of this but I said it anyway. I was beginning to sound like a social worker or a newspaper agony aunt.

'What have I got to look forward to?' she asked. There was a touch of defiance in her voice.

'Watching your little girl grow up. Turning your cottage into a home for you both. Enjoying the seasons in Bilbury.'

She looked at me thoughtfully.

'You've got a decent sized garden,' I pointed out, 'you could start growing your own vegetables. If you grow too many for the two of you, you could sell the excess to Peter Marshall at the village shop.'

'I don't know anything about gardening,' she said.

'That's no problem. Your neighbours know. Ask them.'

'I don't know anyone,' she said.

I turned round to the bookshelf behind me, found the book I was looking for and handed it to her.

She took the book and read the title out loud. 'The Beginners Guide To Gardening.'

'It's the book I used when I first came to Bilbury,' I told her. 'Borrow it for as long as you like.'

Six months later she brought me a basket of home grown vegetables. The book, neatly wrapped and with a thank you card tucked inside, was at the bottom of the basket.

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Three years after that Dawn was well settled. Her little girl was growing and healthy and Dawn, who had made several friends and was popular, was making a living working as a part time barmaid at the Duck and Puddle and selling vegetables to the village shop.

And then she came to see me one day complaining that she had found a lump in her left armpit.

'I don't know why I still bother, because I never wear sleeveless dresses and I never go out, but I was shaving,' she said. 'And I found this lump.'

I looked and felt and didn't like the feel of it. I examined her breasts and found another lump. A bigger one. This one was on the outer edge of her left breast.

'I want you to see someone,' I told her. I picked up the telephone and made an appointment for her to see a surgeon in Barnstaple. A surgeon who specialised in women with breast cancer. She said her neighbour would look after her child for the day.

At 12.15 p.m. the following day the surgeon rang to tell me that he was taking Dawn into the operating theatre. At 1.30 p.m. he rang to tell me that there was nothing he could do for her. Dawn's breast cancer had spread and was inoperable. A day later Dawn was back home. She'd been told that she had, at most, six months to live.

'Do you remember once telling me that I needed purpose in my life?' she asked me.

I confessed that I did. 'It was very pompous of me,' I said, apologetically.

'No, no,' she said. 'It changed my life. But if I'd been told then what I've been told today I would have welcomed it,' she said. 'I didn't have anything to live for.'

I didn't say anything.

'I can't die,' she said suddenly. 'I've got everything to live for now. A lovely daughter. A real home. And friends. I'm too busy to die!'

I honestly didn't know what to say. It never, ever gets any easier. 'I'll help you in any way I can,' I told her.

'I'm not going to die,' she said. 'I can't die. Not now.'

'OK,' I said. 'Then what are you going to do to make sure it doesn't happen?'

She turned the question round. 'What would you do?'

I thought about the question and the answer. And I told her. 'I would drink lots of vegetable and fruit juices and eat lots of vegetables,' I told her. 'There's evidence so show that diet can help beat cancer.'

'OK,' she said. 'I can easily do that. What else? Would a healer help?' Suddenly, she seemed so very, very strong. I would never have believed that she would have found so much inner strength.

'Maybe,' I agreed. 'It wouldn't do any harm.'

'I heard of a healer who lives in Lynmouth,' said Dawn. 'I'll ring her. What else?'

I talked to her about visualisation. 'Imagine your body is full of tiny warriors fighting the cancer cells,' I said. 'It sounds crazy but there's some evidence to show it can work.'

'I'll try it,' she said. 'I'll do it,' she corrected herself. She looked at me. 'I'm not going to die.'

'No,' I said. 'I don't believe you are.' I promised to think of other things she could try.

***

A year later I had a telephone call from the surgeon who had seen her in Barnstaple.

'Do you remember that girl you sent me? Dawn Northolt?'

I said I did.

'She's just been in the clinic,' he said. 'For her check up.'

'How is she doing?'

'She should be dead,' said the surgeon. 'A year ago she had a few months to live. She had secondaries everywhere. Her blood tests were awful. She was so ill we didn't even see any point in starting her on chemotherapy.'

'She looks quite well doesn't she?' I said. I had seen her the day before and been impressed by her vitality. I had never seen her look so full of life.

'Quite well?' he said. 'She is a walking miracle. The cancer seems to be receding. I've been a surgeon for thirty years and I've never seen anything like it.'

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That all happened some years ago.

I saw Dawn last week. She's fine. Her little girl is growing up into a beautiful young woman. And Dawn is healthy again.

'Do you remember that speech you gave me?' asked Dawn. 'The one about having purpose?'

'I do,' I admitted, embarrassed by the memory, as I always am.

'I found my purpose,' she said. 'Beating the cancer so that I could see my little girl grow up.'

I nodded.

'It embarrasses you when I remind you about that, doesn't it?'

I nodded.

'You shouldn't be embarrassed,' she said. 'I was the right person to say it to, it was the right thing to say, and you said it at the right time.'

It made me feel a little better.

WHAT WOULD WE DO WITHOUT PROGRESS?

Thumper Robinson, Patchy Fogg and I spent an hour in the Duck and Puddle reminiscing. Here's a list of the good things we remembered from our pasts.

1. A man with a huge suitcase used to travel door-to-door selling brushes. He invariably wore a dodgy mackintosh and a trilby hat. Our mothers always used to buy brushes from him. He used to hand out small plastic toys which we loved.

2. Another man, this time with a briefcase but also wearing a dodgy mackintosh and a trilby hat, used to call round once a week to collect a few pence in insurance. He called whatever the weather. None of us could work out how the amounts he collected could have been worth collecting.

3. School children all wore ugly school uniforms.

4. It took five minutes for the television set to warm up. At the end of the evening, transmissions would close down. They would then play God Save the Queen and loyal citizens would stand up. When you turned off the set there would be a white spot visible on the screen for some time afterwards.

5. Mums were waiting at home when their children got back from school. Even quite small children were trusted to get home safely by themselves - either walking or on bicycles.

6. In between programmes the BBC used to show a film of a potter making a pot or waves breaking on the shore.

7. Women always wore suspender belts to hold up their stockings.

8. Men wore jackets and ties, and hats too, when they went to watch cricket or football matches.

9. Women had their hair permed and wore dresses which swished when they walked.

10. Petrol station attendants cleaned car windscreens without being asked and asked the driver if he wanted the oil checked. They operated the petrol pump and took the money while the driver and his passengers remained sitting in the car. If your tyres needed air they did that too - free of charge.

11. All sorts of goods came with Green Stamps which could be saved in a book and exchanged for exciting products. You didn't have to spend a million pounds to get something worthwhile.

12. Small items (particularly sweets) were sold in white paper bags. Large objects were placed in brown paper bags.

13. If you wrote and complained about something the company would send you a present and a letter of apology signed by someone really important. The best presents came from Cadburys.

14. Teenagers going on a date would think themselves fast and daring if they held hands in the cinema and kissed each other good night at the end of their evening.

15. Motorists would leave their cars unlocked and their car keys in the ignition when they went into a shop.

16. Screws were sold singly and loose. The ironmonger would put them into a small paper bag.

17. Girls tucked their skirts into their navy blue knickers in order to play netball in the schoolyard. The hoops never had any nets. Boys never played netball.

18. Going out to dinner was a treat kept for birthdays and special occasions and always involved sitting down at a table with cutlery, tablemats, cloth napkins and a menu. The bill would be paid with crisp notes taken from a leather wallet and plastic would play no part in the proceedings.

19. You could buy a replacement blade for a motor car windscreen wiper - instead of having to buy a whole unit.

20. Pots and jars were easy to open. Since no one had ever tried to poison people they didn't know, no one worried about such things. Shrink-wrap had yet to be invented.

21. Sardines were sold in tins which were opened with special keys which required a knack.

22. Boys played with weapons (such as peashooters, cap guns, catapults made out of twigs and rubber bands and bows with home-made arrows which flew huge distances but not necessarily in the right direction) while girls played with dolls. Children never needed batteries for their toys. Toys lasted for ever and didn't break down.

23. Conkers were fashionable in the autumn because that was when they were available. But other toys (such as hula hoops and yoyos) which were not dependent on nature also came in and out of fashion though no one ever knew quite why.

24. Milk was delivered daily by a man driving an almost silent milk float. Imaginative milkmen also sold eggs and

orange juice, though this was considered rather daring.

25. Children used to swim in rivers without worrying about pollution or drowning.

26. Films shown in cinemas were preceded by B movies, newsreel features and travel programmes.

27. You could dial telephone numbers by using letters as well as numbers. The best-known telephone number in the country belonged to Scotland Yard. The number was Whitehall 1212.

28. People made decisions by going eeny meeny miney moe.

29. Boys would fix a cigarette card onto their bicycle so that the card hit the spokes as the wheel went round and made a sound like a motorbike.

30. Summers were always long and warm (though never too hot) and it always snowed in the winter.

'Those were the days,' said Thumper, when we'd finished our list.

'All just memories now,' said Patchy. 'Thanks to progress.'

'What would we do without progress?' asked Thumper.

THE BROTHERS

Paul and Freddie were brothers. I could never remember which was the eldest but there wasn't much between them. They were both in their mid-forties when I first arrived in Bilbury. They lived on a small farm on the outskirts of the village and kept themselves to themselves. They drove into Barnstaple once a month to do their shopping (unlike just about everyone else in the village I don't think they ever patronised Peter Marshall's village store) but grew all their vegetables themselves. Their meat they obtained by killing their own animals. They had never been in the Duck and Puddle or the village hall.

They had managed their farm themselves ever since their parents had died in a car crash when they were in their teens, and they were both known to be slightly eccentric. They didn't approve of bureaucrats or officialdom and didn't believe in paying car taxes, property taxes or income taxes. They didn't trust banks and so didn't have a bank account. They dealt only in cash. If they were shopping for cattle they would often turn up at auctions with several thousand pounds in their pockets.

There were all sorts of stories about the brothers but I had been living in Bilbury for a year before I actually met them. Late one Saturday evening Paul arrived at Bilbury Grange in their ancient Land Rover to tell me that his brother needed help. I knew who he was as soon as I saw him. Freddie was six foot five inches tall and, as a result of a long-standing thyroid condition which he had steadfastly refused to have treated, had staring eyes. It wasn't his height or his eyes which made him unmistakeable but the fact that he never went anywhere without a double-barrelled shotgun cradled in his arms.

I got my bag and followed him back to their farm in my own car which was, at the time, still the old Morris I had bought when I'd first arrived in Bilbury. The track down to their farm had deep ruts in it and half way there, the bottom of the car started to get stuck. I had to stop, abandon the car and follow the rest of the way on foot. When he saw what had happened Freddie slowed down enough to enable me to jump onto the towing bracket on the back of his Land Rover.

Paul had cut himself with a sharp scythe. He'd very nearly severed his foot from his leg and things were a terrible mess. He'd hopped into the living room and there was blood absolutely everywhere. When I got there he was lying on the sofa watching television. He'd used a piece of old sheet and a vast quantity of orange baler twine to fix the foot back into place.

'You need to be in hospital,' I told him.

'I don't want no hospital,' said Paul.

'You have to go into hospital,' I told him.

'He don't want to go to hospital,' said Freddie who was still holding the double-barrelled shotgun and who always gave the impression that he wasn't carrying the gun as a prop.

'So let's treat him here,' I agreed.

I spent the next two hours cleaning the wound and sewing Paul's foot back into position. Luckily the bone was broken quite neatly and it wasn't difficult to get the two ends aligned. I used so much suture material that I had to go back to Bilbury Grange to fetch some more. I did so much sewing that my fingers were numb with exhaustion by the time I'd finished. At one point I even found myself contemplating borrowing a little hand held battery driven sewing machine which I knew Patsy had. But I didn't. I did the whole thing by hand and when I'd finished, it didn't look a bad job. I didn't have any plaster of Paris and so I had to use heavy duty strapping to hold the leg in position. It was very much an improvised solution but it seemed to work and the brothers seemed happy enough.

I went back once and sometimes twice a day for a week and Paul made an astonishing recovery. Their farmhouse was filthy but I suppose Paul must have been immune to the bugs they had. Outside bugs probably just couldn't survive in all that squalor. I remember them constantly offering me cups of tea and me having to think up fresh reasons why I couldn't accept their hospitality. I'd seen the way they just took dirty cups out of the sink, gave them a quick rinse and then used them again.

By the time Paul was able to walk again the brothers and I had become good friends. Indeed, I think I was just about the only 'stranger' they didn't regard with suspicion.

The brothers farmed about fifty acres of land and in addition to their farmhouse they also owned several barns, most of which were in a pretty dilapidated condition.

One day the brothers were out checking on their animals (they were conscientious farmers and treated all their animals well) when they discovered that three squatters had settled into one of their barns. The squatters had set up a stove and had clearly settled in for a long stay. If they'd simply been spending the night there I don't think the brothers would have objected.

'What you doing here?' demanded Paul.

'We're living here,' said the oldest and tallest squatter, a surly, arrogant youth in his early twenties.

'You can't live here!' said Paul. 'This is our barn.'

'What you going to do about it?' demanded the squatter. 'Are you going to fetch the police? They won't do anything.'

'The barn door had a padlock on it!' said Freddie. 'You broke it.'

'It fell off,' said the oldest squatter. He then made the mistake of laughing. Like most of us the brothers didn't like being laughed at, especially by strangers. But unlike most of us they didn't have to put up with it.

'Shoot 'em, Freddie!' said Paul. 'Shoot 'em!'

Freddie lifted up the shotgun but then hesitated. The squatters stared aghast.

'Shoot em!' screamed Paul.

'But which ones?' demanded Freddie. 'There are three of 'em and I've only got two barrels!'

Paul didn't have time to decide. The three squatters left. They abandoned their stove, their sleeping bags, their rucksacks, their supply of marijuana and the remainder of their clothes and ran away as fast as they could go.

Satisfied, Paul and Freddie dragged the abandoned belongings out into the open, lit a bonfire and burnt everything that had been left behind.

I found out about all this when the squatters called in at Bilbury Grange requesting medical help. All three of them were still shaking with fear when I saw them.

'We want tranquillisers,' said one.

'And sleeping tablets,' said another.

'Those two mad bastards should be locked up!' said the third.

'We're going to see the police in Barnstaple,' said the biggest.

'What's your complaint?' I asked.

They told me what had happened. 'Threatening people with a shotgun is illegal!' they said.

'They didn't shoot you?'

'Well, no...'

'Did the gun go off?'

They looked at one another. 'Not exactly.'

'So you don't even know that the gun was loaded?'

The biggest squatter frowned. 'What do you mean?'

'They could have been bluffing,' I said. 'I happen to know they've got a licence for the gun. If you go to the police you would undoubtedly be the ones in trouble. It sounds to me as though you could be arrested for breaking and entering.'

Muttering loudly about not coming back to Bilbury in a hurry the three squatters left. And they left without the tranquillisers and sleeping tablets they had demanded.

THE STOWAWAY

Some people make friends when they travel. I have an acquaintance who can't pop into the local supermarket without finding new chums to add to his formidable Christmas card list. If he goes for a walk in a deserted park he will somehow come back with half a dozen new chums. I'm not good at making friends. Too shy, I suppose. But everywhere I go I meet cats and now, I'm proud to say, I have cat friends everywhere. One of the good things about having cats as friends is that they demand nothing and expect nothing. (Obviously, cats who have become 'family' expect a great deal and demand more.) And it's easy to meet new cats.

I always seem to find affectionate cats in churches and churchyards. I have met and had long, meaningful conversations with cats in churches all over England. I don't know what it is about cats in such places but they seem to me to be almost as keen to make new human acquaintances as I am to make new cat acquaintances.

Over the years many things have happened to convince me that cats know far more than they are letting on, and have a much greater control over our lives than they are admitting to.

For example, a year or so ago one of my patients, Mrs Porter, an elderly widow, asked me if I knew someone who might accept a job as her companion and live-in nurse. For nearly a decade after her husband's death, Mrs Porter had shared her home and her life with a kind and considerate Spanish nurse who had looked after her with far more genuine affection than could normally be expected from a paid employee.

'Maria has to go back to Spain,' explained Mrs Porter sadly. 'Her mother has died and she has to take care of her father. As the only unmarried daughter she feels she has no choice.'

Both women were heartbroken. Maria liked her employer and enjoyed living in Bilbury. She really didn't want to go back to Spain. And Mrs Porter was frightened of a future without Maria. A stroke some years earlier had left her unable to look after herself without a considerable amount of practical care and she was, I knew, terrified that if she couldn't find a suitable replacement she would have no choice but to find a room in a nursing home. And, since there weren't any nursing homes in Bilbury that would mean leaving the village where she had spent almost the whole of her life and wherein leaving every friend she had in the world.

'I have to go into Barnstaple to renew my car tax,' I told her. 'Would you like me to call into the Labour Exchange to see if they have anyone suitable on their books?'

She said she would and so, the following day, I found myself sitting on an uncomfortable plastic chair being quizzed by a dour, weedy man in his 60s with a military haircut and sinus problems.

'You won't find anyone prepared to live in,' he said. 'Not these days. What about a team of nurses?'

'A team?'

'You'd need at least six to cover nights, weekends and holidays,' he said.

'That would cost a fortune!' I protested. 'And there wouldn't be any continuity.'

'You won't find anyone prepared to live in and work those sort of hours,' insisted the dour little man. 'Not these days. People know their rights.'

'It's the sort of job that would suit a middle-aged woman looking for a pleasant home and light nursing duties,' I explained.

'We don't have anyone like that,' sniffed the man, flicking aimlessly through a plastic box containing a number of file cards. 'You're about a century too late.'

I left the Labour Exchange feeling terribly gloomy.

I visited the Post Office and renewed the car tax, took two books back to the public library for Patsy, picked up a piece of curtain material for her mother, picked up a supply of dressings that one of the pharmacies had ordered for me, collected a piece of glass that Patchy had ordered cut to size for a picture he was reframing and headed back to the car park. On the way I had to pass one of Barnstaple's oldest churches. I have almost as much difficulty passing old churches as I have passing second hand book shops.

I sat in a pew in the cool and empty church for a few minutes and informally asked God if he would mind doing what He could to prove the sniffy clerk at the Labour Exchange wrong. I try not to ask Him to do too much for me, but I'm never averse to asking Him to do something for a friend or for one of my patients.

Outside the church, I saw a black cat rubbing itself against the gate into the churchyard. I bent down to stroke its head and the cat ignored me completely, moving slightly out of reach each time I tried to touch it. I was in something of a hurry because I had about three minutes left on my car park ticket so I stood up and started to move away. The cat immediately stopped rubbing itself against the gate and ran after me. He then stood still while we got to know each other a little better.

'Sorry, young fellow,' I said, glancing at my watch, 'but if I don't go now I'll get a penalty ticket in the car park.' I don't know where they hide but the council's team of car park attendants always spot within seconds if I'm parked with an expired ticket.

The cat followed me and despite my repeated attempts to persuade him to go back to where I'd found him he insisted on following me all the way to the car park.

'You really must go back!' I insisted, as I packed my purchases into the boot of the car. I wrapped Patchy's glass in between the curtain material and an old rug I keep in the boot. When I'd finished I looked around for the cat and saw, to my relief, that he'd disappeared. We were only a short walk from the church and I was confident he would have found his way back without too much difficulty. Barnstaple was much quieter in those days than it is now.

When I got back home and opened the boot lid I had the surprise of my life to see the cat sitting comfortably inside the boot and looking up at me with a big grin on his face.

My first reaction, I'm afraid, was anger. I was quite cross with him. 'Now I'll have to go back into Barnstaple!' I told him.

The road from Bilbury to Barnstaple is winding, narrow and slow. If you drive at a normal pace it takes just over half an hour. If you drive like a madman it takes just under half an hour. So taking the cat back into Barnstaple was going to take me an hour.

I unloaded the stuff out of the boot and carried it and the cat into the kitchen.

'Where did you find that one?' asked Patsy, who loves cats just as much as I do.

I explained.

'He's probably thirsty,' said Patsy. She poured him a saucer of milk and then told me that there had been two calls for me. Neither of them was urgent but neither of them could wait until I got back from my unscheduled trip to Barnstaple.

'I'll have to leave the stowaway here,' I told her. 'I'll take him back later.'

But the calls took longer than I had expected and by the time I got back to the house it was half past nine and I was worn out.

'I'll take him back into Barnstaple in the morning,' I said. 'After surgery and before I do the visits. I hope no one misses him.'

We fed him, gave him more milk, introduced him to Sophie and Emily and found him a blanket and a quiet corner of the house which he could call his own. He knew how to use the cat flap and, although Patsy and I were at first concerned that he might get lost, it quickly became clear that he was not the sort of cat who needs to have his paws buttered to persuade him not to stray.

In the morning, after I'd finished the surgery and completed the most urgent of the day's calls, I popped our stowaway into a cat basket and took him back to Barnstaple.

Patsy and I had agreed that the most sensible thing would be to take him back to the church where I'd found him and to release him there. But when I arrived back at the church I couldn't help noticing a large notice taped onto the oak door.

Below the words 'CAT LOST' and a picture of the stowaway there was a sad message offering a reward of £5 for information leading to his recovery. And there was, of course, a telephone number to call.

I found a telephone kiosk and made the call.

'Are you the person who has lost a cat?' I asked, when the phone was answered. The woman doing the answering had clearly been sitting right next to the receiver.

'Yes. This is Mrs Stokes. Have you found him?' There was no name on the notice.

'I have,' I told her. 'He's safe and sound.' I tried to explain what had happened but the woman was too excited to take in my rather complicated story.

'Where are you?' she demanded.

'Outside the church.'

'I'll be three minutes.'

She was there in two. A woman in her fifties. About five foot tall and wiry. She wore a black skirt, a brown jumper, black stockings and a pair of brown, sensible looking slippers. She had clearly rushed straight out of the house without bothering to put on her shoes. She was carrying her purse.

'He's in here,' I said, pointing to the cat carrier.

She bent down, fiddled with the catch and opened the door at the front of the carrier. The stowaway emerged. Cat and owner seemed delighted to see each other. It was impossible to tell which was the most excited of the two.

'What's his name?' I asked, after allowing them time to give each other cuddles and licks. (The woman did the cuddling and the cat did the licking.)

'Timothy,' replied the woman. 'I call him Timmy.'

'I'm so sorry about what happened,' I said.

She looked at me, slightly confused. I explained again about how I'd come to take Timothy to Bilbury.

'Oh, that's all right,' she said. 'Not your fault.' Still clutching her beloved cat she fumbled with her purse. 'I owe you five pounds,' she said.

I held up a hand. 'Of course you don't!' I said, laughing with embarrassment.

'But your time and the petrol,' she said. 'Five pounds isn't nearly enough.'

'I'm just delighted that you've found each other,' I told her. To be honest, just watching their mutual delight was reward enough.

'Well, at least come back with us and have a cup of tea before you head back to Bilbury,' she said. I hesitated. 'We won't take 'No' for an answer, will we Timmy?'

'OK, thanks,' I said. I knew we wouldn't have to go far. And we didn't. We walked down a narrow lane behind the church and I found myself in a small, private part of the town I never knew existed. A tiny piece of heaven. Her home was a small terraced cottage. One of six. The cottage had a front garden that looked like one of those photographs with which large, expensive boxes of chocolates always used to be adorned. Foxgloves, cornflowers, nasturtiums and so on.

She led the way into a parlour with a ceiling so low I had to bend my neck in order to stand upright.

'I'll just give Timmy a little chicken, and then I'll put the kettle on,' she said. She opened the fridge, took out a plate and unwrapped the remains of half a cooked chicken. She took a knife and cut several slices from the breast of the chicken and arranged them neatly on a plate. It was, I noticed, a nice piece of Royal Albert china that matched the saucer that already contained milk and the cup full of fresh water. I felt rather guilty. Our cats always eat off odd bits of china that have been passed down from dining room service. Timmy was purring loudly long before the chicken had been cut. Once Timmy had been fed, Mrs Stokes put the kettle on. While it boiled she took Royal Albert cups and saucers out of one cupboard and a metal cake tin out of another cupboard.

'Would you like a piece of sponge cake?' she asked. 'I haven't got any other I'm afraid. But I do have ginger biscuits if you prefer.'

'A piece of sponge cake would do very nicely, thank you,' I told her.

As we drank our tea and ate generous helpings of an excellent, light sponge cake Mrs Stokes asked me about Bilbury. I told her it was a village about half an hour from Barnstaple and explained that if she had never been there that was no great surprise because we tended to keep ourselves to ourselves and most people in North Devon didn't know where it was.

'I've always envied people who live in villages,' she told me. 'I've spent all my life here in the town but I've always thought how lovely it would be to have a quiet life in a rural community.'

'Barnstaple is hardly a big city!' I remarked light heartedly. 'And you live in a very quiet part of it. I didn't know this place existed.'

'It is very pleasant,' said Mrs Stokes. 'Timmy and I will be sorry to leave.'

'Why on earth are you leaving?' I asked. I took another bite of the home-made cake. It really was very splendid.

'Not our choice,' said Mrs Stokes. 'They're knocking these houses down to extend the shopping centre.' She nodded towards my plate. 'Would you like another piece?'

'Oh no!' I cried, in genuine horror. 'That's awful.' I suddenly realised what I'd said. 'Not the cake!' I said hurriedly. 'The cake is wonderful but I mustn't have another piece. I should be getting back.'

'I'm just glad my husband isn't alive to see it happen,' said Mrs Stokes. 'He lived here all his life. He was born here.'

'Can they do that?' I asked, putting my plate on the table and standing up. 'Just throw you out?'

'I'm afraid so,' said Mrs Stokes. 'It seems they can do whatever they want these days.'

I said how sorry I was to hear it and asked if she'd found somewhere to go.

'I'll probably go up to Lancashire,' said Mrs Stokes. 'I have a nephew up there. He says he can find me an old person's flat not too far from where he lives. It's on the 11th floor.' She looked very glum. 'I'll have to retire, of course but it's only another year to the pension so I suppose it's about time.'

'What about Timmy?' I asked. 'Can you take him?'

'I won't go if he can't go,' she said defiantly. 'My nephew is making enquiries.'

'What work do you do now?' I asked.

'I work at the Grand,' she told me, naming a large hotel in the town centre. 'It's very handy. I clean the rooms after the guests. Make the beds. That sort of thing.'

It was only then that I thought of Mrs Porter. I sat down again. 'Maybe I will have another piece of your wonderful cake,' I told her. 'There's something I'd like to talk to you about.'

And so a month later Mrs Stokes and Timmy moved to Bilbury.

Was my meeting with Timmy purely serendipitous? Or is it possible that the cat knew exactly what he was doing when he climbed into my car boot?

WOODY BAY FLOTSAM

At five minutes past nine I got fed up of waiting for the first patient to come in, opened my door and went out into my receptionist's office.

'Where are the patients?' I asked Miss Johnson.

'There aren't any, doctor,' she replied.

I stared at her and frowned. 'We can't have cured everyone!'

'There's no one here,' she said. 'Do you want me to bring the letters in for you to look through?'

Every morning, after the surgery, I would go through the morning mail and, where necessary, dictate replies for Miss Johnson to type up in the afternoon.

'It's Monday morning!' I said.

'Yes, doctor.'

'Monday is always busy.'

'Yes, doctor. But there was a shipwreck during the night.'

I stared at her, frowning. 'I'm sorry,' I said. 'Did you say there was a shipwreck during the night?'

'I did, doctor,' she said. 'In Woody Bay.'

I walked over to the wall and looked at the calendar. 'This is 1972?'

'It is.' She opened an envelope, threw the envelope away and put the letter it had contained onto the growing pile on her desk. It was a hospital letter, from a consultant, about one of my patients.

'We haven't drifted through a time warp? We haven't gone back to 1872.'

'No, doctor.' She picked up another envelope and set to work with the letter opener again.

'A shipwreck?'

'Yes.'

'Not caused by men with lanterns seducing an unfortunate ship's captain onto the rocks?'

'No. A freighter. It ran onto the rocks near Woody Bay during the night.'

'And that's why we don't have any patients?'

'Everyone has gone down to the wreck.'

'Tell me they're not searching the shore for flotsam and jetsam?'

'I think they probably are, I'm afraid.' She repeated the exercise with the envelope. 'Do you know the difference between flotsam and jetsam?'

'I looked them up when I knew I was going to live in a village populated by pirates and wreckers,' I told her. 'Flotsam is wreckage that floats. And bits of stuff that fall into the water and float. Jetsam is stuff that is jettisoned and gets washed ashore.'

'But jetsam doesn't float?'

'I assume not.'

'So how does it get ashore?'

'I have no idea. Maybe it does float. Actually, I suppose it must float.'

'So jetsam is just flotsam that was put there on purpose?'

I took the letter opener from her. 'Miss Johnson,' I said firmly. 'This is a fascinating, semantic discussion but I'm more interested in what is happening than in how we describe it. There are moral questions here.'

'I don't think anyone was out there with lanterns,' said Miss Johnson. 'And if the stuff was deliberately thrown overboard surely people have a right to pick it up.'

I hesitated. I had a feeling I was losing the argument.

'If the stuff is left there it will become litter and make the shoreline look untidy.'

I sighed. 'I'm going to take a look,' I said.

'Mind you only pick up the jetsam,' Miss Johnson said firmly. 'Leave the flotsam where it is so that the ship's owner can collect it later.'

It took me twenty minutes to get to Woody Bay. The cliffs were packed with cars. Lines of villagers from Bilbury, Combe Martin, Ilfracombe, Kentisbury, Trentishoe, Lynton, Parracombe, Bittadon, Martinhoe and a dozen other small towns and villages were making their way down to the shore. The cliffs around there are steep and the paths that exist are rocky and treacherous. There was still quite a wind blowing and the sea could be heard crashing onto the rocks.

Thumper and Patchy were there, of course.

'What's going on?' I asked.

'Freighter ran ashore,' said Thumper. 'We came to see if anyone needed help.'

I looked at him.

He shrugged. 'And to see what had been washed ashore,' he said.

'The crew were all taken off in the night,' said Patchy. 'It was on the radio.'

'Were they all OK?' I asked.

'Not a scratch,' said Patchy.

'All a bit disappointing' said Thumper.

'We were hoping there might be a few cases of whisky,' said Patchy.

'Whisky Galore,' said Thumper.

'I've read the book and seen the film,' I told him.

'Of course, gold coins would have been better but gold has a tendency to sink,' said Patchy.

'No whisky?' I asked.

'Sadly no,' said Patchy.

'The freighter was coming from China,' said Thumper. 'Loaded with 80,000 bras.'

I laughed. 'You're joking!'

'Sadly, I am not,' said Thumper. Someone I didn't recognize hurried past carrying a huge rucksack which had been stuffed full with booty. A bra strap poked out through the side of the rucksack.

'And so far they all seem to be the same size.'

'Which is?'

'40DD,' replied Thumper.

'An unusually large size, apparently,' said Patchy.

'I fear there's likely to be a shortage of suitable customers,' added Thumper.

'Shouldn't the police be here?' I asked. 'Surely all this stuff belongs to someone?'

'Not on this occasion,' said Patchy. He nodded towards a man in a grey suit who was sitting on a rock. A brown leather briefcase was resting against his leg. 'He's a representative from the shipping line. He's told the police they're happy for people to take what they can carry.'

'Just take the stuff away?'

'None of it's any good to them,' said Thumper. 'No store wants to buy - or sell - bras that have been soaked in salt water for hours. The little metal catches at the back and the metal wires they use to help support the part of the bra that holds up the breasts will be marked and the material will stain.'

'So the insurers gave the go ahead for people to help themselves. Cheaper than clearing up the stuff themselves.'

'So why aren't you two collecting your fair share?' I asked.

'Once this lot hits the market you won't be able to sell a sized 40DD bra in Devon,' said Thumper.

'Not worth picking them up,' said Patchy. '80,000 bras. All the same size. It's difficult to imagine a more worthless cargo.'

They turned and headed back up the hill to where they'd parked their cars. I went with them.

'Dee Dee Protheroe will be all right for bras for a while,' said Patchy.

'Who on earth is Dee Dee Protheroe?' I asked.

'The vicar's wife,' said Thumper.

'Eileen Protheroe?'

'How many large-bosomed Protheroes do you know?'

I thought about it. 'Just Eileen, I suppose,' I admitted.

The vicar's wife's most notable feature was an enormous bosom which bounced and swayed and had a life of its own. I had once been present at a cricket match on the village green in Bilbury when Archie Grimshaw, playing for Parracombe Thirds, had hit a long hop from Peter Marshall (who doesn't usually play cricket but had been press-ganged when it was discovered that we only had ten men available) and the ball had landed in Mrs Protheroe's cleavage. She had been standing on the grass at the edge of the green at the time and it was quickly decided that she was, therefore, on the cricket field. Naturally, this meant that the ball was still in play. Several of the fielders volunteered to pick the ball out of its resting place (it had more or less disappeared from sight and only a thin segment of the ball was still visible) but after protests from both batsmen, a group of spectators and a very red-faced vicar, the umpires decreed that this wouldn't be entirely 'cricket'.

It was eventually decided that Mrs Protheroe should be allowed to remove the ball herself and to then hurl it as high into the air as she could manage. The fielders would then be allowed to try to catch it. Only if they succeeded would the batsman be given out. Mrs Protheroe managed to extract the ball and then, throwing underarm, tried to hurl it into the air. Unfortunately, her arm didn't stop soon enough and instead of going upwards the ball went backwards over her right shoulder. It ended up in the car park in front of the Duck and Puddle. The batsman, Archie Grimshaw, immediately claimed that he'd hit a six and, although it was difficult to argue with his logic, the umpires did so for another twenty five minutes before deciding that, although it was the brightest day of the summer, the light was too bad to continue and they would abandon the match as a draw.

'But why do you call her Dee Dee?' I asked. 'Her name is Eileen.'

'No one called her Eileen until she married the vicar,' said Thumper.

'She was born and brought up in Combe Martin,' said Patchy. 'She was known as Dee Dee from when she was about 16.'

'So why is she now known as Eileen?' I asked as we arrived at Thumper's truck. He opened one door and Patchy opened the other. Naturally, Thumper hadn't bothered to lock the truck.

'I don't suppose she thinks that being called by her bra size is quite proper for a vicar's wife,' said Thumper, getting into his truck.

He and Patchy waved as they drove away.

The sudden abundance of bras was a boon for large bosomed women in North Devon. But it seemed there weren't enough generously endowed women around and the bras rapidly became an example of the sort of glut that can affect strawberry growers in the middle of the season. Every pub for miles around contained far more than its fair share of struggling salesmen failing to offload their stock of over-sized bras. Hope and joy quickly turned to disappointment and despair as they all found themselves failing to make a single sale.

To my astonishment I heard a little later that Thumper and Patchy had gone round the pubs buying up all the bras which had been salvaged but had failed to sell.

'Did you find a large supply of well-endowed ladies?' I asked them when I next saw them in the Duck and Puddle.

Thumper shook his head. 'We found a melon grower in Somerset who gave us a good price. He normally uses netting bags to support his melons as they develop. He was thrilled.'

I stared at him, disbelievingly.

'Melons need support,' explained Patchy. 'As the fruits ripen they get heavy, break free of their stalks and crash to the ground.'

'So the growers have to buy special nets to stop them falling before they're ready for picking,' said Thumper.

'Two melons to a plant is apparently quite normal,' said Patchy. 'So bras are just perfect.'

'And DD bras are just the right size for melons?' I asked.

'A perfect fit,' said Thumper, holding out two cupped hands as though to demonstrate. 'The very best melon is apparently the same size as a DD breast.'

Thumper and Patchy have been friends of mine since I arrived in Bilbury. I am, however, constantly amazed at their imaginations and ingenuity.

'With your brains you two could do great things!' I told them.

They looked at each other and, without speaking a word, both put their hands into their back pockets and pulled out bulging wallets.

'We turned a load of unwanted bras into perfectly good drinking vouchers,' said Patchy. 'What other great thing did you have in mind?'

I couldn't think of a reply so, although they were the ones with the bulging wallets, I bought another round of drinks.

THE VISITORS

I was in the Duck and Puddle one lunchtime, sitting with Thumper Robinson and Patchy Fogg, when a pleasant, friendly-looking couple I'd never seen before came in. He wore brown corduroy trousers and a red sweater. She wore grey trousers and a pale pink V-necked sweater with a white blouse. They looked around and then walked up to the bar and spoke to Gilly. After listening to them for a moment Gilly pointed in our direction. The man and the woman thanked Gilly and then walked across to where we were sitting.

'You're Thumper!' said the woman. It was a statement and not a question. She looked excited, as though she were meeting a film star.

For a moment Thumper looked puzzled.

'We haven't met,' said the woman, partly in explanation and partly in apology, 'but my husband and I are keen readers of the Bilbury books. We feel as though we know you.' She paused. 'You're our favourite character,' she added quietly.

'Ah,' said Thumper, understanding. 'Well, you mustn't believe everything you read.'

The couple laughed. 'Oh, but we do!' said the woman. 'Don't we Gerald?'

Gerald said they did. 'My favourite book is Bilbury Revels,' he said.

'Did that cricket match really happen like that?' asked the woman.

'Absolutely,' said Thumper. 'Pretty much anyway. The doc, the chap who writes the books, exaggerates a bit occasionally.'

'Usually to make himself look good,' said Patchy.

'Are you Patchy?' the woman asked me.

I shook my head and pointed to Patchy. 'He's Patchy,' I said.

'It's wonderful to meet you too,' said the woman. 'You're our second favourite character.' She spoke as though he and Thumper were characters in a book, inventions created by an author to flesh out a piece of fiction.

'Thank you,' said Patchy, graciously.

'But I'm afraid we're not in the market for any of Shakespeare's old furniture!' laughed Gerald.

'Oh no, we're not that gullible!' laughed the woman.

'Pity,' said Patchy. 'I've got Shakespeare's writing desk in my garage.'

'Really?' said Gerald.

'Don't be silly, Gerald!' said the woman. She poked him in the ribs.

We all laughed.

'Well I suppose we'd better leave you three to your lunch,' said the woman.

'We're going to look for Bilbury Grange,' said Gerald. 'Can you give us directions?'

Thumper gave them accurate directions.

Just as they left the woman turned back and spoke to me. 'Are you anyone?' she asked.

'Oh no,' I replied quickly, before either Patchy or Thumper could speak. 'I'm just passing through.'

'Are you sure?' asked Gerald. 'We know all the local people.

We've read all the Bilbury books. We'll know you even if you're a minor character.'

'Positive,' I said. 'I'm not even a minor character.'

'Pity,' said Gerald.

'Still, it's nice to have met you two,' said the woman, speaking to Patchy and Thumper.

'They're just like the books aren't they?' I heard Gerald say as they left.

'Except I didn't expect Thumper to be that good looking,' said the woman. 'And he looks younger than I expected too.'

We ate in silence for a moment or two.

'You owe us both drinks,' Patchy said to me.

'Hush money,' said Thumper.

I bought them a pint of beer and a pickled egg each.

POSTSCRIPT

The Doc
by
Thumper Robinson

The doc never tells readers much about himself and so the publishers of the Bilbury books have asked me to write a few sentences about him. The publishers said they wouldn't change what I wrote and they said it as though I should be pleased but that's not much of a blessing to be honest, if it's supposed to be, since before writing this the longest thing I ever wrote was my shopping list to take to the builders' yard when I was rebuilding Miss Dawson's greenhouse, and the bad news is that I forgot the putty and had to drive all the way back into Barnstaple to fetch it so don't hold out high hopes or expect anything with smart words that you have to look up in the dictionary because before I could use them I'd have to look them up and how could I look them up if I didn't know what they were in the first place? The publishers gave me a tape recorder no bigger than an alarm clock and said if I didn't want to write stuff down I could just record it and they'd print it as I said it which is probably better for everyone and so that's what I'm doing.

The doc is a tall bloke but not what I'd call big; not muscular like most of the fellows round Bilbury. You can tell straight away that he's spent his life bashing books and not chopping down trees. When I first met him I thought he was a bit weedy to be honest. He looked like he'd blow away in a gale. He's a lot bigger now, of course. Patsy has fattened him up and he's beginning to develop a paunch and I don't suppose he'd deny that himself if you were to ask him. It was quite a surprise when he and Patsy first got it together. But before long everyone agreed that they were a perfect match. Nothing wrong with a bit of a stomach on a man, of course, and that stuff about him having a bit of a paunch is not intended as a criticism because I wouldn't criticise the doc anyway because he's my friend and my dad taught me that you don't criticise your friends in private or in public. My dad didn't leave me much but that's stuck with me and I think it's good advice which I'll pass on to my little ones when they're old enough, which to be honest I think they probably are. I'm glad I'm doing this because it's reminded me and now I can mention it to them tonight or maybe at the weekend. My mum always used to say that if a man was too skinny it was evidence that his wife wasn't looking after him properly. And I've no room to talk, as I'll readily admit.

When he first arrived in Bilbury the doc had a lot of hair. Sticking out all over the place it was. My Anne said he looked as though he'd been dragged through a hedgerow backwards and then dragged back through it forwards. But it wasn't meant nasty. He doesn't have so much hair now, of course but then we don't call him 'young doc' any more. Patsy makes sure he keeps it trimmed though to be honest with you God has done quite a good job of thinning it out for him.

When the doc first came to Bilbury as assistant to Dr Brownlow we were all a bit suspicious of him to tell the truth. Maybe suspicious isn't the right word. Wary would perhaps be a better way of putting it.

But slowly he earned respect and it soon became clear that he was taken with the village. People liked that. We like things to stay the same here. I think villagers were worried that we'd get used to him and then just when we'd got used to his little ways and he'd got used to ours he'd be up and off somewhere better. There was a bit of resentment when he first arrived - though we all tried not to show it. Everyone in the village liked and trusted Dr Brownlow and selfishly we didn't want anything to change though we all knew he was getting older and couldn't go on for ever. If you know anything about Bilbury you will know that we aren't big on change - even if it is wrapped up as progress. We aren't that keen on progress either to be perfectly honest with you.

If you asked me to describe the sort of person the doc is I'd say he's a damned good bloke and the village was lucky to get him as our doctor. I know we should respect all medical men, because they've all gone through a lot of training and learning and so on, but to tell the truth there are some I've met that I wouldn't want looking after me or my Anne. The doc is a gentleman, which in my book is the biggest compliment you can pay, but nevertheless he is the sort of mate you can have a drink with and, more important, the sort of bloke you can rely on. He doesn't look down on people who haven't had his learning and he's always keen to learn about other people and their skills. I remember him being very impressed that I could tickle a trout which to be blunt with you isn't much of a trick at all when you know how to do it. We respect a man like that in Bilbury. Patchy Fogg, the antique dealer, says the doc reminds him a bit of that Don Quixote we were told about in school. It took me a while to remember who he meant because to begin with I got Don Quixote mixed up with Don Corleone who is someone else completely different of course and, as I understand it, probably not a real person at all, though since they both have the same Christian name you will see how I got confused. It's the same Christian name as that Australian cricketer Don Bradman who was someone entirely different. I never saw him play myself but they say he was good and he was a hero of mine even though he was a foreigner. Eric Hollies bowled him in his final Test Match otherwise he would have averaged over 100 in Tests. Don Quixote was a Spanish gentleman I believe. I've never known anyone called Don myself, though when the regular driver who delivers to Peter Marshall from the wholesaler was ill with a broken wrist (which I happen to know he got falling over in a bit of a drunken state one Saturday night but which he told everyone he did slipping on a wet cabbage leaf so that he wouldn't get the boot and who could blame him for that and it doesn't matter now because he's retired and gone up far north to live in Keynsham which is where that Horace Batchelor used to live, who did the pools adverts on Radio Luxembourg when I was a kid listening to the radio under my bedclothes though my Mum told me years later that she always knew anyway) his replacement stand-in for a while was a bloke called Don who had a tattoo of a mermaid on his arm and claimed he'd been in the Navy but none of us believed him because in a conversation he had with Patchy it was clear that he didn't know where the Pacific Ocean was and a sailor would know that, though we didn't say anything because there's nothing worse than embarrassing someone unnecessarily.

When the doc first started writing his books we had some worries that he would end up attracting tourists to the village and change things but to be honest things haven't been too bad. The doc says that not too many people read books these days and that unless they make a television series out of the books we don't have a thing to worry about and he says there isn't much chance of that which is, to be honest, a blessing because we don't want the place flooding with gawping tourists. We had that problem once before and the doc described it pretty well in one of his books though I forget which one (*Bilbury Country - Editor*) but nevertheless although I'm not what you'd normally call a vain person (my Anne is always telling me I should take more care with my appearance, like nagging me to change a shirt when we go out to the Duck and Puddle) I wouldn't mind seeing who they'd get to play me on the screen. Personally if they're going to do something like that I'd rather it was a proper film but the doc says the chances of that are even smaller than the chances of us being a television series.

The doc says his books so far are all set in the 1970s, when he first arrived in Bilbury, but to be honest little has changed and we're living in a sort of time warp I suppose. From reading the books we have all learned a good deal about ourselves (and in particular about the way other people see us) but the gift the doc gave us is that we hadn't realised just how lucky we are to live in Bilbury. If you love somewhere wonderful you tend to take it for granted, especially if you've never known anything different as I haven't.

The doc gets letters from readers asking him if Bilbury really exists. Well, all I can say is that if it doesn't I'd like to know where I've been living all my life. He also gets letters wanting to know how real everything is. I don't know what he says to them but all I can say to that is that there are some things I don't think he gets quite right but to be truthful with you his books are pretty accurate except that Peter Marshall (*who runs the village shop - Editor*) is a darned sight meaner and Frank (*the publican who runs the Duck and Puddle - Editor*) is a damned sight drunker than the doc makes him out to be. And Frank and Gilly (*Frank's wife - Editor*) have some real ding dong fights that the doc doesn't mention, though I expect that's out of respect, and since they've been married a good long time I think it's safe to assume that they don't mean much of what they say to each other. I can't speak for the medical stuff of course, me not being a doctor or having any medical knowledge, but you can take my word for it that the village is just as he describes it. I used to think that he made me out to be a bit of a Jack the Lad, as my mother used to say, but over the years I've come round to thinking that he's probably got me just about right. Patchy Fogg once got a bit upset with the doc giving away a few of the tricks he uses at auctions but Patchy and the doc soon thought up some new ones which the doc promised not to put in any of his books, and the two of them shook hands and everything is fine again now.

Sometimes the doc strikes me as a bit of a champion of lost causes. But as Jimmy Stewart says in Frank Capra's film *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* those are the only causes worth fighting for and I respect him for that. Anne, my other half, and I like the cinema and that's our favourite film. Jimmy Stewart and Humphrey Bogart are our favourite actors, and Frank Capra is our favourite director. A lot of people never know the names of film directors but I think it's important because although it's the stars you see on the screen, it's the director who decides what you see them doing, and if they just stood there doing nothing it would be a pretty glum sort of film.

One of the doc's medical friends came to stay once (*Bilbury Village: Editor*) and I talked to him a bit while he was here. He said the doc's problem was that he had always been 'idealistic, professionally naive and unworldly'. I remember the words well. I didn't see anything wrong with any of those things. It's true the doc is sometimes a bit of an innocent, but he's passionate and sensitive and in my mind those are things that make a good doctor. He can't stand prejudice, intolerance and hypocrisy which I don't much like either. If you're going to pick out his faults I'd say he was a bit impatient (I once took him to see the badgers playing at night and after forty minutes of waiting he was fidgeting so much that I took him back home). He can be infuriatingly touchy and a bit old-fashioned in many ways but most of us in Bilbury just ignore his touchiness which we've got used to and you can't be too old-fashioned for us. I now find it difficult to believe just how innocent the doc was when I first met him; when he first arrived in Bilbury. He had not long qualified and I don't think he had much experience of general practice. He was very much a towny too. He couldn't tell the difference between an oak and a chestnut and that caused us a few laughs at the time I don't mind telling you, though we would never laugh at a man behind his back! The doc still can't change a wheel but he knows a bit about trees and wildlife now and if he needs a wheel changing he's only got to call and there's half a dozen of us glad to do it for him.

The doc questions and challenges pomposity and he hates bureaucrats as much as I do. Actually, as much as we all do. He sticks up for the village because he can talk back to them and they have to listen to him because he's by way of being a doctor and a learned man. And he doesn't give a fig for the consequences which is something else to respect him for.

You might have imagined that the doc and I might have fallen out over his love of animals. He and Patsy are the only two vegetarians I know, and when Patsy turned and stopped eating meat her family were terribly upset. Her father thought she was going to die without meat on her plate and made quite a fuss but she stood firm and in the end he respected that. It was the same with the doc and me. He knows I catch animals to eat but we don't fall out about it. Occasionally, he tries to convert me but I just laugh at him and then we forget about it. We don't hold grudges. You have to respect the other person's point of view if you live in a small village.

Anyway, I'd much rather have the doc with his faults than that other doctor who came to visit. (*Thumper is again referring to an incident described in Bilbury Village - Editor*). That doctor struck me as being smug and a damned snob. He wouldn't fit in around Bilbury I can tell you that for free. He was a bit cynical I thought. Here in Bilbury we respect the old values such as commitment, honesty and loyalty. Judging by what I've heard and read and what I see when I go travelling to places like Barnstaple or Exeter these may not be valued much in the outside world but here in Bilbury these are things we consider important.

I hope this is the sort of thing you wanted because to be honest with you I'm really pleased to be able to say a few words about the doc, who is as good a friend as I ever had or hope to have. The doc and I aren't exactly what you might call the sort who you would expect to get on together, him being a man of learning and me being, well, not a man of any learning at all. I'll be very proud to see words of mine in a book, especially a book about Bilbury, though to be honest with you again I'll believe it when I see it because I can't believe anyone would print anything I'd write because if you want a roof mending, a car clock putting back or a pheasant plucking I'm your man but I wouldn't hire me to write a letter for you let alone something for a book.

If you want to tidy this up or make it read better I wouldn't mind a dab but just please make sure that it's clear that all of us in Bilbury like the doc very much, me and Anne especially, and we couldn't have a better doctor in the village and I would never say anything but good things about him because he's not just the doctor and a real gentleman but I'm proud to say that he's my friend. And in my eyes a man can't say more than that.

Thumper Robinson

Bilbury Pie, a collection of short stories, is the seventh of Vernon Coleman's seven books about Bilbury. These are: *Bilbury Chronicles, Bilbury Grange, Bilbury Revels, Bilbury Country* and *Bilbury Village*. There are two books of short stories called *Bilbury Pie* and *Bilbury Pudding*. If you enjoy the Bilbury books you may enjoy other books by the same author including *Mr Henry Mulligan, Second Innings, It's Never Too Late* and *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War.* For full details of over 100 books by Vernon Coleman please see his author page on Amazon or www.vernoncoleman.com

Also by Vernon Coleman

The Bilbury Chronicles

A young doctor arrives to begin work in the small village of Bilbury. This picturesque hamlet is home to some memorable characters who have many a tale to tell, and Vernon Coleman weaves together a superb story full of humour and anecdotes. The Bilbury books will transport you back to the days of old-fashioned, traditional village life where you never needed to lock your door, and when a helping hand was only ever a moment away. The first novel in the series.

"I am just putting pen to paper to say how very much I enjoyed The Bilbury Chronicles. I just can't wait to read the others."
MRS K., CAMBS

" ...a real delight from cover to cover. As the first in a series it holds out the promise of entertaining things to come"
DAILY EXAMINER

"The Bilbury novels are just what I've been looking for. They are a pleasure to read over and over again."
MRS C., LANES

Also by Vernon Coleman

Bilbury Grange

The second novel in the Bilbury series sees the now married doctor moving into his new home - a vast and rambling country house in desperate need of renovation. With repair bills soaring and money scarce, the doctor and his new wife look for additional ways to make ends meet. Another super novel in this series - perfect for hours of escapism!

"I have just finished reading Bilbury Grange. I found the book to be brilliant. I felt as though I was part of the community. Please keep me informed of any more in this excellent series."
MR C, CLEETHORPES

"A wonderful book for relaxing and unwinding. Makes you want to up roots and move to the rural heartland."
LINCOLNSHIRE ECHO

"For sheer relaxing pleasure here's another witty tale from the doctor whose prolific writings are so well known."
BOOKSHELF

Also by Vernon Coleman

THE BILBURY REVELS

"Settling down with Vernon Coleman's latest novel set in the fictional Devonshire village of Bilbury is one of the best restorative treatments I know for relieving the stresses and strains of modem living."
LINCOLNSHIRE ECHO

BILBURY COUNTRY

"This fourth novel in the series describes what happens to Bilbury and its villagers when a newspaper story turns a trickle of visitors into a flood. Full of charm and humour."
NEWS & STAR

"...thank you for your latest Bilbury book. I have read it with deep interest and enjoyed it."
MRS C., ST. ALBANS

BILBURY VILLAGE

The inhabitants of Bilbury decide the village needs a doctor of its own again. They aren't above a little chicanery to ensure that they get their way, and Bilbury Village tells the story of exactly how they battle with bureaucracy to achieve their ambition.

"A gentle, relaxing, thoroughly enjoyable and charming 'introduction' for me to your fictitious Devon village. It's the first one in the series which I have read and I loved it!"
C.S., SPAIN

BILBURY PIE

"I have just read Bilbury Pie recommended by a local library. I enjoyed it so much I read it like 'eating a box of chocolates' 2 or 3 chapters at a time to make it last and savour its flavour. I thank you for giving people pleasure and plenty of smiles."
MRS G., BANBURY

Also by Vernon Coleman

The Village Cricket Tour

This superb novel tells the story of a team of amateur cricketers who spend two weeks of their summer holidays on tour in the West Country. It proves to be a most eventful fortnight full of mishaps and adventures as the cricketers play their way around the picturesque coastline of Devon and Cornwall.

"The only word to describe (this book) is hilarious. It is the funniest book about cricket that I have ever read. In fact it is the funniest book I have read since Three Men in a Boat."
CHRONICLE & ECHO

"I enjoyed it immensely. He has succeeded in writing a book that will entertain, a book that will amuse and warm the cockles of tired old hearts."

PETER TINNISWOOD, PUNCH

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SUNDAY INDEPENDENT

"The Village Cricket Tour has provided me with much amusement and a great deal of pleasure."
MR A., CANADA

The Young Country Doctor Book 8

BILBURY TONIC

Vernon Coleman

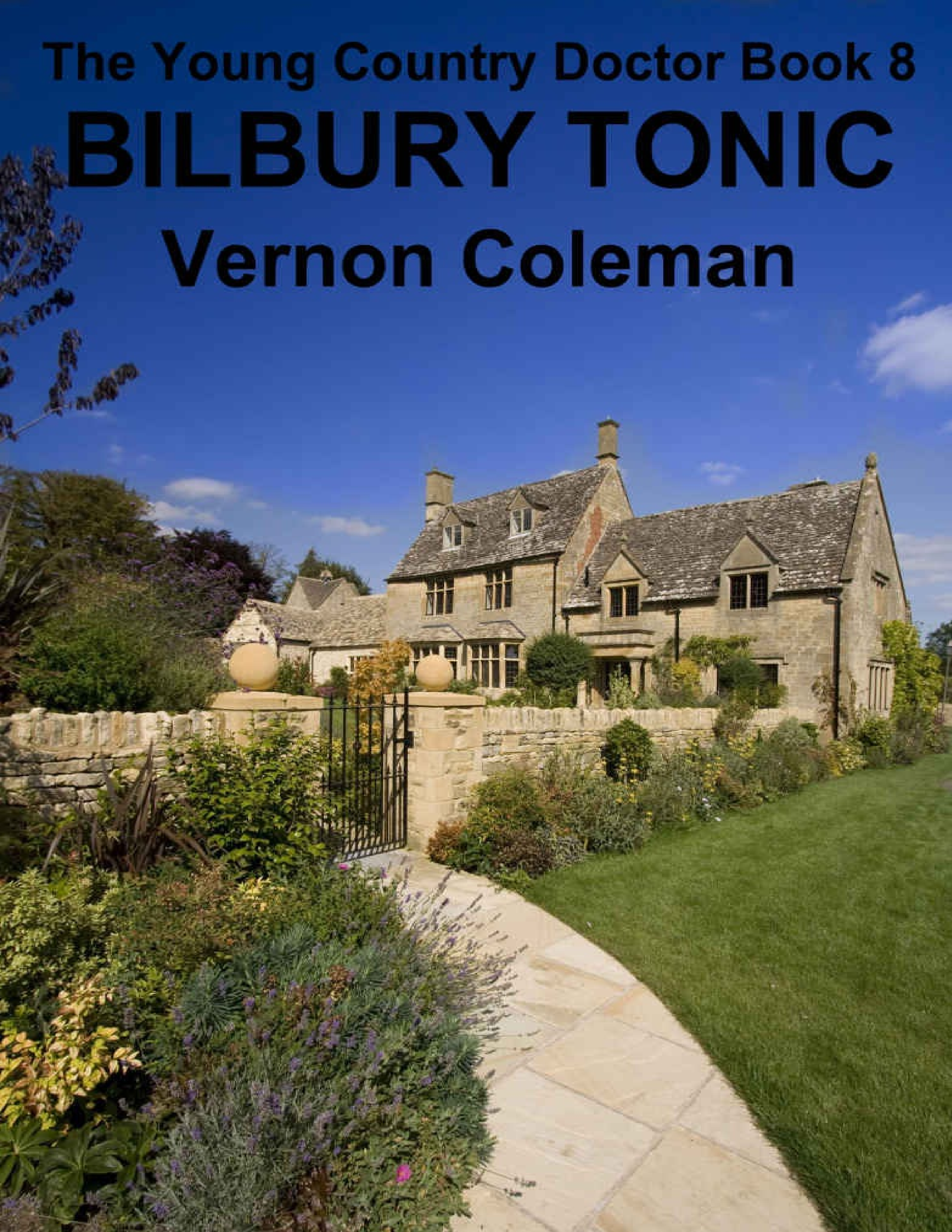

The Young Country Doctor Book 8

Bilbury Tonic

Vernon Coleman

Dedication: To Antoinette
Without you there is darkness.
With you there is sunshine.

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Preface

When I finished writing *Bilbury Pudding*, the seventh in ‘The Young Country Doctor’ series, I did not intend to write any more Bilbury books. To be honest, I didn’t think I had anything more to say about Bilbury.

But, as one incarnation of a famous spy once said: ‘Never say never again’.

And here I am again, with another collection of stories from Bilbury.

Two things changed my mind.

First, the village of Bilbury, and its inhabitants, are very dear to me. Bilbury is always there; an escape from our ever troubling world; endless fears, terrorism, selfishness, deceit and ruthless disregard for decency and honour. My wife and I have never had friends as good as Thumper, Patchy, Frank, Gilly and Peter. And I have never known any place where the stories hang, like ripe fruit, waiting to be picked, as they do in Bilbury.

In recent years, I have become more of a recluse than ever. It has been said that writing is show business for shy people but these days the whole business of writing has changed. When I was younger, I used to do a good deal of television and radio and I wrote columns for many newspapers. The appearances and the columns helped attract readers to my books and I knew I could always run back to my keyboard when the frenetic multimedia world became too much for me. But the growth of social media, and the increasing acerbity in the world, and the fact that the critics never forget, never show mercy and never sleep, have combined to make life impossible for the shy and the unduly sensitive. I have now retired from everything other than writing books.

And I have found myself increasingly content to remain in Bilbury, away from the noisy hustle and disturbing bustle of the 21st century. Barking? Maybe. Do I give a stuff? Not likely.

Second, the requests for more Bilbury stories have never stopped coming and since the publication of the books in eBook format, the number of requests has increased steadily. There are, it seems, quite a few folk who share my deep affection for this quiet, isolated village in North Devon and for its inhabitants. For them, as for us, Bilbury is a stable point of refuge in an often cruel, frequently disappointing, constantly confusing and ever-changing world. It is a real joy to be able to share the village with readers who enjoy reading about it and who, I hope, might, in their hearts, like to think of themselves as honorary Bilburians.

At this point, I think I should remind you that the Bilbury books are all set in the 1970s and although this book is being written well into the 21st century I am writing about things that happened nearly half a century ago. Medical knowledge and customs were very different then.

Some older readers will remember those distant days with fondness but many younger readers will probably find it difficult to imagine living in a world without mobile telephones, computers and the mass of gadgets and conveniences which we all now take for granted.

Finally, I should also point out that I take the principle of confidentiality very seriously. None of the people or situations in this book is recognisable. Oh, and I should also remind you that real life doesn’t always have nice, neat endings. It is only in fiction that things have to work out and must be in some way explicable.

Welcome back to Bilbury.

Vernon Coleman

Two Pink Gins

We most of us dream of some café or bar where we will be known and where the barman or barmaid will greet us with our favourite beverage, possibly in our own favourite mug, the moment we walk through the door. We dream that the other patrons will call out our name and smile when they see us, making us feel welcome, wanted and surrounded by friends.

It is no coincidence that the most successful television soap operas are set around bars and public houses.

Sadly, however, in most parts of the world, pubs and cafés lost their soul many years ago. They are all much the same: lots of plastic, a small choice of pre-cooked, frozen meals available to be heated up in an industrial sized microwave oven, drinks served in plastic drinking glasses and coffee made from acorns and so foul that not even British Rail would dare serve it. The staff who never recognise any of their customers and for whom English is, at best, a second or third language, seem to change once a week and their aim is for you to drink up, eat up and get out as quickly as possible.

If it didn't exist, the 'Duck and Puddle' public house would, I suppose, be the meeting place we all dream of.

Frank and Gill, the landlord and his wife, treat all their regulars like family and no one is ever asked to leave simply because they haven't ordered a drink for a long time. Lemuel Macintosh, probably the meanest man ever to have owned a wallet, once sat in the snug for a whole day after ordering just one coffee and a bag of salt and vinegar crisps. It requires a certain amount of determination and self-restraint to make a cup of coffee and a packet of crisps last ten hours.

Thumper Robinson entrepreneur, poacher and owner of the scruffiest truck south of Birmingham, Patchy Fogg, antique dealer extraordinaire and now my brother-in-law, and I were sitting in the snug.

My wife, Patsy, had gone into Barnstaple to try to find a replacement for our toaster, which had given up the ghost, and she had taken the babies with her.

'Will you manage to get something for lunch?' she asked, as she left. To us the half hour journey into Barnstaple is a trek into another world.

I said I would.

'Are you meeting Thumper and Patchy?'

I said I was.

'At the Duck and Puddle?'

'You know us too well.'

'Try to have something solid,' she said, blowing me a kiss.

And so there we were; settled comfortably into our favourite corner of the 'Duck and Puddle'.

I was drinking a modest portion of Islay malt whisky and the other two were drinking pints of Frank's best bitter, a potent brew from a small West Country brewery which specialises in supplying a small number of independent West Country public houses with beer, and a rather larger number of farmers with whisky.

The company makes a brand of whisky called 'Horse Feed' which is popular with farmers because they can buy it by the crate and be given useful receipts to show to the taxman. It is one of the least known malt whiskies but the sales figures must be very encouraging for the company concerned. There are scores of better-known malts which are far less profitable.

A medical friend of mine once went to Scotland on a course for a week. At least he said he was going on a course but I don't think he had great plans for learning anything relevant to his professional career. The word 'course' can be interpreted in a number of different ways.

My chum had booked himself into a magnificent loch side hotel which boasted a bar which claimed to stock bottles of every malt whisky made. On his arrival, my friend sat himself down at the bar and said to the barman, 'I'm here for a week. I intend to work my way through all the malt whiskies made in Scotland. Where do you suggest I start?'

The barman gave him a sad look. 'We have 274 different varieties of malt whisky, sir,' he said, 'I think you might be pushed to work your through them all in just a week. Would you not perhaps consider prolonging your stay a little?'

For lunch, I was munching my way through a couple of slices of a large, fresh, farmhouse loaf, liberally buttered, and a bowl of green and black olives while my friends Thumper Robinson and Patchy Fogg were eating pork scratchings.

The pork scratchings concerned were three months beyond something called their 'sell-by date' and had consequently been sold at three quarters of their usual price.

The introduction of sell-by dates had been something that had enraged Frank Parsons, the landlord of the 'Duck and Puddle', who regarded it as a trick introduced by the manufacturers to encourage customers, and public house landlords, to throw away vast quantities of perfectly edible food.

'How can you have a sell-by date on pork scratchings?' he had demanded incredulously when the existence of the dates had first been drawn to his attention. 'Pork scratchings are fried pig skin. They'll last forever! If there is ever a nuclear war there will be three things left: cockroaches, traffic wardens and pork scratchings.'

Neither Thumper nor Patchy seemed to think that there was anything wrong with the pork scratchings, which came from a box Frank had unearthed that morning while clearing out a cupboard. Clearing out cupboards was something which Frank tried to do once a year. It was, he once said, just below cleaning the gutters and just above filling in his tax form on his list of favourite things to do.

As I suspect people generally do when they are sitting in any public house, and as they always seem to do when they are sitting in the 'Duck and Puddle', we had been enjoying a wide-ranging discussion.

Thumper had said, not for the first time and probably not for the last for, as he once pointed out, if you think of something clever to say it is a bit of a waste to say it only once, that he couldn't understand why television news readers were treated as celebrities when all they had to do was to be able to read while sitting down.

He said he had been able to read while sitting, standing and even lying down since he'd been five-years-old.

Patchy agreed with Thumper on this but said that he was even more puzzled by the fact that fashion models are apparently paid millions of dollars a year.

'I don't mind anyone earning that sort of money,' he said, 'but I don't understand why anyone thinks they're worth it. All they have to do is walk up and down while wearing clothes.'

Thumper said he'd been told by his mother that he'd been walking around long before he was two-years-old and that he was confident that he would not have been expected to walk about without wearing any clothes.

There had then been an interval during which a good deal of chewing and sipping was done.

Patchy had then told me that he had met a man in Taunton who had a telephone fitted in his car. He said that the man, who was an antique dealer with a showroom in Bond Street, swore by the telephone, claiming that because it enabled him to make and receive calls while driving around, it more than paid for itself.

Patchy said the man had told him that while driving up to Manchester he had, as a result of a telephone call he'd received from an assistant in London, turned right and gone to Norwich instead.

The result had been that instead of attending a fairly pedestrian auction in Lancashire he had, at a saleroom in East Anglia, purchased a rare 18th century chestnut and oak table for approximately the price of a Formica topped kitchen table.

'You should get one of those car phones,' Thumper said to me. 'It would be terribly useful. People would be able to get hold of you wherever you were.'

I blanched at the thought.

'People can always get hold of me wherever I am,' I pointed out, perhaps rather defensively. 'If someone rings the house, Patsy or Miss Johnson will tell them where I can be found.'

It did occur to me, however, that it would be useful if Patsy could reach me when I was out on my rounds, or attending an emergency, if another patient in the same area required a visit.

I have on many occasions returned home from a cottage some miles from Bilbury Grange only to find that I have had to retrace my steps to visit a patient living just a few minutes away from where I'd just been.

To be honest, however, I thought that was a fair price to pay for having time away from the damned telephone; time giving me a little peace and a chance to think.

I have on several occasions managed to make a diagnosis while driving back home at 4.00 a.m.; being free to allow my mind to rifle through all the relevant signs and symptoms in order to find a solution to a particularly knotty problem.

'There wouldn't be any point in you buying one anyway,' said Patchy, still talking about the man he'd met with the telephone in his car. 'This bloke said his phone didn't work anywhere west of Taunton. I think he said it was something to do with there not being any reception.'

'You'd probably need to drive around with a fifty foot tall aerial fixed to the top of your car,' said Thumper.

I breathed a silent sigh of relief.

I really didn't want to travel everywhere with a telephone at my elbow.

Other than in the car there are few places in the world where I can relax and enjoy a little peace and quiet. I can hear the telephone ringing when I'm in the bathtub but I can't hear the phone when I'm out on my rounds in the car.

Why, I wonder, do so many people feel under constant pressure to reinvent the world, even when things are perfectly satisfactory and, indeed, usually far better the way they are?

I know that looking backwards is frowned on by some, who regard the retrospectoscope as offering an unduly rosy coloured view of the past.

But some things really were better then.

Does anyone really doubt that houses and cars were better made two hundred years ago than they are today? How many modern houses will still be standing in three or four hundred years? How many motor cars made today will still be running in another 40 years?

Service was often better too, and companies took better care of their customers.

When I was a boy in the 1950s, I remember my mother making a complaint about a box of Cadbury's chocolates. The chocolates, a rare and expensive treat, were faulty and my mother was upset enough to write a letter to the company. The next day she received a huge hamper of Cadbury's products, a bouquet of flowers and a fulsome letter of apology.

Would such a letter even receive a response today?

Things were better 20 years ago, back in the 1950s, because people were more honest, more naturally respectful of others and more concerned to do a good job and to be seen to do a good job.

I know there are many aspects of modern life which are better than they were, but we do sometimes forget that not everything modern is a wonderful improvement.

'But wait a year or two and you'll be able to buy a telephone you can carry around with you,' said Patchy, who mistakenly seemed to think that I would regard this as good news. 'This bloke, the antique dealer, said that he'd heard that they would soon be making portable phones that will fit into a suitcase – maybe even into a large briefcase. He said you'll be able to walk along the street, just like a normal person, and then there will be a brrr brrr from inside your briefcase. You'll stop for a moment, reach inside and take a phone call from someone with an important message.'

I shuddered.

'How on earth could they do that?' Thumper asked. 'You'd need miles and miles of wire! And where would you plug it in?'

'No, no!' said Patchy. 'You don't have to plug it in. It will all be done with aerials and batteries and things. This bloke I was talking to says there's all sorts of new technology coming.'

'I wouldn't have one of those,' said Thumper firmly. 'You'd probably find the call was from some bugger trying to sell you double glazing.'

'Or insurance,' I added glumly.

We sat for a while contemplating the awfulness of a future where people were expected to carry telephones around with them and be forever tormented by overbearing salesmen and saleswomen.

Thumper and Patchy chewed on their pork scratchings and I nibbled on a few olives.

'The bloke who told me about the telephones also told me that he heard that they're planning to make computers small enough to have at home,' said Patchy suddenly. 'He said that these computer things will revolutionise everything. He reckons we'll be able to do our accounts on them and keep lists of all our stuff.'

'It sounds nonsense to me,' I said, utterly unconvinced by Patchy's latest piece of science fiction. 'I've heard of medical practices which have computers but I don't have much faith in that sort of technology. What if the computer thingy breaks down? You could lose everything you'd put into it? And I don't think computers are all that clever. When I was a boy, my parents used to take me to the Science Museum in Birmingham. The museum had a computer there that could play a very simple form of draughts – fox and rabbit I think they called it. I remember that when I was about ten-years-old I could beat the computer most of the time. And the darned thing was absolutely huge. If you had one of those in your home you'd need a special room for it.'

'Well this bloke told me that he'd heard that computer chappies in America are already making computers small enough to fit on a table or a desk,' said Patchy. 'He says it won't be long before they have computers small enough to put into your suitcase along with the telephone. To be honest I wasn't really convinced myself. But you never know, do you?'

'Sounds like pie in the sky to me,' said Thumper, firmly.

I agreed with him, though this may have been wishful thinking.

'I wonder what else they'll be doing in forty or fifty years!' said Patchy.

'It's these computers that worry me,' said Thumper. 'What the devil will people use them for?'

'If you can type stuff into them you could use them for writing letters?' I suggested.

'How would you post the letter?' asked Thumper.

'I suppose you could send your computer to the person your letter was addressed to,' I suggested. 'If the new computer thingies are small enough to fit into a suitcase you could wrap up your computer, complete with letter, and pop the whole thing in the post.'

'You could use it for shopping,' suggested Patchy.

Thumper and I looked at him as if he were mad.

'Well you never know,' said Patchy defensively. 'If you can write messages on a computer then you could sit down at a keyboard, write your shopping list, some sausages or a bottle of milk for example, and send the computer round to the shop so that the shopkeeper could deliver what you'd ordered.'

Both Thumper and I thought that was very funny.

'Can you imagine Peter Marshall peering at a computer and taking orders for light bulbs and bags of spuds?' asked Thumper.

The idea of Peter doing anything with a computer made us laugh a lot more. Peter thinks a pencil with a rubber on the blunt end is a piece of high tech equipment.

'I wonder where it's all going to end?' asked Patchy, thoughtfully. 'Perhaps they'll invent a way to transmit messages from one computer to another. Or maybe we'll be able to send our messages over the radio. You ring up the radio station and give them your order for sausages and whatever, the radio station then broadcasts your order and the shop sends the stuff round.'

'I don't think that will work,' I said. 'The orders would all get mixed up. Someone else would get your sausages and you'd get their soap and toothpaste.' I thought for a moment. 'Maybe they'll make a personal spacecraft and we'll be able to pop over to Mars for the weekend?'

'Perhaps someone will invent a car which will drive itself!' said Thumper. He said he thought Dan Dare in the Eagle comic had owned something of the sort. 'You just jump into the car, tell it where you want to go, sit back, relax and pour yourself a large whisky.'

At that bizarre suggestion the three of us laughed so much that we made ourselves ill. The tears were running down our cheeks and my stomach muscles ached.

'You sit in this car,' I said, intrigued by Thumper's nonsensical thought, 'and you tell it to take you to Exeter. And off it goes, all by itself! If you get done for speeding then the car has to go to court and pay the fine.'

'Hey, I've got a good idea,' said Patchy. 'They fit a computer, a camera and a telephone into a refrigerator and when you run out of sausages the refrigerator telephones Peter Marshall and tells him to send round more sausages pronto!'

'And then,' I said, struggling not to laugh before I could put my thoughts into words, 'Peter puts the sausages into a driverless car and orders the car to take the sausages round to your place where a little robot fellow thanks the driverless car and pops the sausages into the fridge!'

We laughed a good deal more and made ourselves even more ill.

And then we sat for a while, chuckling occasionally as we remembered the silliest of our suggestions.

After a few minutes of silent contemplation of a world containing telephones that could be carried around in briefcases, computers powerful enough to use for keeping accounts, but small enough to fit into suitcases, and cars which could drive themselves, we discussed serious local topics such as Peter Marshall's forthcoming sale of the stuff he'd found in his shed and the proposed building of a new, visitors' car park on a field behind Major Porchester's ruined cottage when a couple of obvious visitors strode noisily into the pub as though they had just bought it and were planning some major changes.

The newcomers, both complete strangers, were wearing brand new walking boots (his boots still had the price tag fixed to a leather loop at the back and if it said what Thumper, with his eagle eyes, had spotted then his boots cost rather more than I had spent on clothes in the last five years), matching orange anoraks and woolly hats that had fancy logos on the front and had, consequently, probably cost an arm and a leg but which were, nevertheless, still just woolly hats. (Whatever you do to a woolly hat it will always be nothing more than a woolly hat.)

He was tall, very thin and cadaverous and although he had the look of a pompous and patronising politician about him, I could not help noticing that, quite contrary to expectations, he had the brown eyes of a Labrador puppy. He looked like a war criminal or a bank chairman and I did not get the feeling that he had any of the other characteristics usually associated with Labrador puppies. I could only assume that, if the balance of nature were to be preserved, somewhere in the world there roamed a Labrador puppy with the cruel eyes of a sadistic psychopath.

I had a strange feeling that I had seen him before somewhere. His female companion, who appeared to be his wife, had mean eyes and a pushy manner and looked to me as I imagined a ferret might look if it were suffering from constipation.

The pair looked critically at the smoke yellowed ceiling, the dusty old prints on the walls, the slightly moth-eaten lampshades on the wall lights, the scarred and well-used brown furniture and the beer stained brass topped tables. They did not spare us from their unspoken criticisms, but gave us the same critical appraisal as they had given the snug and its fixtures and fittings.

'Afternoon,' said Patchy, cheerily. Established Bilburians always welcome visitors, even ones who look like sadistic psychopaths or constipated ferrets. We tend to take people as they come, and to resist the temptation to judge on appearances or reputations. I'm delighted to say that although we all value our privacy and our peace and quiet I have never known a place more welcoming to strangers than Bilbury. It is perfectly true that Thumper once removed all the sign posts which might point motorists in our general direction but this was done after a national newspaper article suggested that Bilbury was 'The Perfect Place to Live: England's Healthiest Village' and we were, as a result, inundated with coach loads of visitors whose presence merely destroyed the peace and quiet they had come to enjoy. (This episode is described in the book *Bilbury Country*).

The two visitors stared at Patchy, as though he had spoken to them in Danish, or had demanded their money with an appropriate supply of menaces. They did not reply. Instead, the man looked around for someone on the other side of the bar. He seemed surprised and disappointed when he failed to see anyone, though this was not surprising because there wasn't anyone there.

Gilly, the landlord's wife and co-owner of the Duck and Puddle public house, was in Combe Martin buying eggs from her cousin's sister-in-law, and from the noises coming from underneath our feet we knew that Frank, the man whose name was on the plate above the door as the Licensee, was in the cellar doing something which involved a barrel of beer, a wooden mallet and a lot of naughty words.

Not being privy to the inside information about Gilly's whereabouts, and not realising that the noise coming from the cellar was being made by the only other person likely to be able to satisfy his requirements, the stranger called out, a loud voice that appeared to be accustomed to obedience, 'Service, please!'

We are all supposed to live in a liberated, classless society, where everyone is equal, but it seems to me that in some respects we are moving backwards rather than forwards. When I last went to London, I was astonished when a customer in a bookshop clicked his fingers to attract the attention of an assistant. When that didn't work, he shouted 'Oi!' in a tone of voice I would not have felt comfortable using when calling our pet sheep. I could well be wrong, of course, but it seems to me that the number of people who enjoy giving orders is increasing.

I recently examined a visitor to the area, a holidaymaker passing through who had suffered an unpleasant reaction to a bee sting, and when I checked his blood pressure, I was shocked to discover that his systolic pressure was 220 and his diastolic was 160. Those figures are dramatically high; far above the healthy normal.

'Is your doctor treating your blood pressure?' I asked the tourist.

'Oh yes,' he agreed, apparently uninterested and possibly unaware of the risks associated with a very high blood pressure. 'But nothing he prescribes seems to bring it down. I work in a legal office in London and I'm constantly under stress. We only arrived in the country today. It usually falls quite a bit when we've been away from London for a few days.'

The man was in his early sixties and so I asked him the obvious question: 'Have you thought about retiring?'

He admitted that he had thought about packing up his job and said that although he could easily afford to retire he knew that he couldn't live without having people to shout at. 'At home, when I tell my wife, children or grandchildren to do something they ignore me. But at work when I tell someone to do something they jump and do it immediately. I like that. I like the fact that I have power and that people are frightened of me.'

He liked the feeling so much, and was so addicted to the power, that he was prepared to die to keep it.

I was reminded of that man with the raised blood pressure by the antics of the cadaverous stranger who had repeated his loud demand for service several times and who was now giving an excellent impression of a small boy who has been denied a packet of sweets and is about to embark upon an attention seeking tantrum.

When no one came, Gilly being still in Combe Martin and Frank still being occupied with a barrel, a mallet and an inexhaustible supply of naughty words, the cadaverous man with the inappropriate puppy eyes took one of the horrid new, decimal 10 pence coins out of his trouser pocket and rapped it as loudly as he could on the bar counter.

You can't rap properly with the skimpy, new decimal coins. They are too light to use as rapping implements. You could rap well with an old-fashioned half crown. Even an old-fashioned shilling was better for rapping than a 10 pence piece. And so, as a result of this numismatic skimpiness, the coin rapping was, to be honest, rather pathetic.

However, Thumper, Patchy and I looked at one another.

If there is one thing that Frank dislikes more than a customer shouting 'Oi!' it is a customer who raps a coin against the bar top. It does his blood pressure absolutely no good at all and Gilly often says that if Frank ever succumbs, and has the heart attack everyone has been predicting for at least a decade, then it will be as a result of some impatient coin rapping.

Frank's attitude is that he, and he alone, decides who gets served next, and when they will be served. His attitude is that waving a five pound note in the air, clicking your fingers or tapping a coin on the counter will all send you straight to the back of the queue. (He also believes, I am pleased to say, that regular customers always get served before strangers, especially rude strangers, and that regular customers who pay cash always get served before regular customers who owe money and have thoughtlessly run up a large, unplanned amount of credit.

(Thumper, who always owes money, is exempt from this rule since he is the only person in Bilbury and, quite possibly the known world, who understands how the ‘Duck and Puddle’ boiler operates and the only person not in prison who has the courage and agility to squeeze through a narrow trap door into the pub’s rat and squirrel infested attic whenever the cold water tank freezes over and the ice needs breaking.)

When the coin rapping produced no response, the cadaverous stranger merely rapped again, putting a bit more effort into it. Britons used to have to go to Paris to find really rude people but these days it is possible to find them anywhere in England; and occasionally they can be found wandering into Bilbury itself.

Fortunately, there wasn’t a chance that Frank would hear the rapping, of course.

Frank was concentrating on what he was doing and although we could hear him well enough there was no possibility that he would be able to hear the sound of a single coin being tapped on a bar counter. The un-orchestrated combination of mallet on wood and Frank’s choice of words for the day meant that he probably wouldn’t have heard a thing even if the fellow had slammed a sack of coins down onto the counter.

‘Is there anyone serving here?’ demanded the stranger, turning and facing us. He asked the question not as one might direct an enquiry to a stranger but as one might demand a service from a servant. ‘We’ve walked from Combe Martin,’ he announced as though this were relevant.

‘Our chauffeur is in Combe Martin waiting for us with the Mercedes,’ added his wife. She managed to do something to the words ‘chauffeur’ and ‘Mercedes’ so that they stood out from the rest of the sentence and had little lights around them to make sure that they were properly noticed.

‘Frank is down in the cellar,’ said Thumper. ‘He’ll be up in a minute or two. He’s changing a barrel.’

The man sighed loudly, shrugged his shoulders, rolled his eyes in despair and annoyance and managed to accompany these gestures with a fair amount of huffing and puffing. It seemed clear from all this that he probably worked in some dark but doubtless lucrative corner of the financial services industry and almost certainly lived somewhere in the Central London area. His wife muttered something under her breath and then turned and stared at us. She did not seem impressed by what she saw and I got the impression that, given half a chance, she would have liked to have turned us into three pillars of salt. We stared back but said nothing more.

Patchy had offered a welcoming greeting when they had arrived but he, and therefore we, had been spurned.

If the newcomers chose to ignore our presence, our availability for polite conversation and our advice on how best to get safely served, then they could hardly expect us to expose ourselves to repeated bouts of disappointment.

I suddenly remembered where I’d seen the man’s picture – it had been on the financial pages of one or two of the broadsheet newspapers. He was an infamous vulture capitalist; renowned for buying up businesses, firing lots of employees, selling off the assets and making vast profits.

The two strangers, the man and the woman, were discussing whether to leave the pub and go somewhere else (we didn’t like to disrupt their conversation by pointing out that whatever direction they chose, they would walk for at least an hour before they came across another pub – the King’s Head public house on the road to Barnstaple closed four years ago) when Frank appeared, red-faced, damp with the perspiration engendered by unaccustomed exercise and clutching the wooden mallet with which he had been hammering the unfortunate cask. He had what looked like cobwebs draped over his hair and jacket and the sweet smell of fungus which accompanied his presence made it clear that he still hadn’t succeeded in eradicating the dry rot which infests the ‘Duck and Puddle’ cellar and that the chances were high that what looked like cobwebs were, in fact, strands of dry rot fungus.

‘I should have left it until Gilly got back,’ said Frank, talking to us and pulling himself a pint of bitter. ‘I don’t know how she does it but she can handle those barrels far better than I can.’

‘Excuse me! But we’ve been waiting ages for service,’ said the cadaverous stranger. ‘Are you the barman?’

‘I’m the landlord,’ replied Frank, glowering at them both. ‘What do you want?’

‘I’ll have a glass of claret, something with plenty of body, maybe a Mouton de Rothschild. The 1970 will do nicely. And my wife will have…’ the stranger turned in his wife’s direction, inviting her to continue the sentence.

‘…a glass of Chablis, something from one of the Grand Cry vineyards. I really don’t mind which one.’

Frank stared at the two strangers as though they’d demanded fancy cocktails, topped with melon balls and served, together with a coating of blazing brandy, in a pair of Cinderella’s best dishwasher safe glass slippers.

‘This is a country pub,’ said Frank in his firm, take no nonsense voice. ‘I sell beer, whisky, gin and brandy. If you want wine, I’ve got red and I’ve got white. But you have to buy it by the bottle. The white is that German stuff because it’s cheap and it’s the only stuff anyone round here will buy. The red is claret from Tesco and damned good value in my opinion. But whichever you choose you have to buy it by the bottle because if I sell you a glass what am I supposed to do with the rest of it?’

Patchy, Thumper and I, who had been listening to the conversation, raised our glasses in appreciation.

Under normal circumstances, Frank would have happily polished off the rest of the bottles he had opened and, indeed, he and Gilly would often finish off a bottle of red and a bottle of white at the end of an evening. But Frank didn’t like the two strangers. Maybe he had heard the man tapping on the bar with his ten pence coin. Or maybe he didn't like the colour of their anoraks. Frank is like a woodland creature in that he can be spooked by the oddest and seemingly most insignificant event. He once refused to serve a man who was wearing a Garrick Club tie on the grounds that the colours made him feel sick.

The stranger sighed the sigh of a disappointed man. 'In that case I'll have a pink gin.'

His wife paused, clearly thinking. 'I'll have one of those too,' she said at last. There was more reluctance and disappointment in her voice than there was in her eyes. I got the impression that she and pink gins were not strangers.

'Two pink gins coming up,' said Frank. He turned to the woman. 'Do you want a little umbrella in that? I think we've got some little umbrellas somewhere.' Frank is convinced that most women like a small, paper umbrella in their drink. Indeed, there is good reason for him to believe this. There are at least two women in Bilbury who don't care what they drink as long as it is blessed with a small, colourful paper umbrella.

'No thank you,' said the woman, in the tone of voice she might have adopted if Frank had asked her if she wanted to take part in a gang bang with a bunch of shepherds and farm labourers straight from muck spreading duties.

Frank plucked the gin bottle from the shelf behind him, picked up two glasses and disappeared. When he returned, a few minutes later, he was clutching what looked like two pink gins. He placed the two glasses on the counter, told the male stranger the price, took the £10 note that was proffered and slipped the change onto the bar. Most of it, I noticed, was in silver. It was clear that Frank was not trying to encourage his new patrons to become regulars.

'What on earth is this floating in my gin?' demanded the cadaverous stranger, holding his glass up to the light and pointing to something small, pink and quite unidentifiable.

Frank picked up the man's glass and examined it carefully. 'It's a bit of squashed strawberry,' he said at last.

'I've got the same thing in mine,' said the woman. She didn't seem pleased. She held the glass away at arm's length and stared at it as though it contained a mouse's head or a deadly, venomous Brazilian water spider.

'What the bloody hell is squashed strawberry doing in my gin?' demanded the cadaverous stranger.

I noticed for the first time that the man had a good deal of hair growing out of his ears and his nostrils. I wondered why a man of such self-importance did not invest in a small pair of nose and ear hair clipping scissors. My father, who had a tendency to hirsuteness in these areas, had a special pair of blunt ended scissors which he kept exclusively for this purpose. He devoted a little time each Sunday morning to mowing and trimming the areas. He became very aware of the need to keep these areas hair free when a small cousin of mine had recoiled in horror and tears when my father had tried to pick him up. 'The man's got spiders up his nose!' the youngster had complained when questioned as to why he had been so alarmed. The cadaverous stranger had a much more luxuriant growth of hair in these areas than I had ever seen on my father.

'No bad language in my bar,' said Frank puffing out his chest and speaking very sternly. 'I've got gentlemen customers in here.' He nodded in our direction. Frank has a wonderful sense of humour which is drier even than his Martinis.

'What is squashed strawberry doing in my gin?' asked the cadaverous stranger, repeating himself but excluding the modest expletive.

'I didn't have any of that stuff you put in gin to make it go pink,' said Frank. 'So I mashed up a strawberry and put a bit of the juice in each glass. Your gins are pink aren't they?'

'What sort of pub is this?' demanded the woman who appeared horrified. 'You don't sell wine by the glass and you don't have any angostura bitters!'

'I don't have any lemon either,' said Frank. 'If I had a lemon I'd have put a bit of peel on the edge of your glass.'

The man sniffed at his drink and then sipped it cautiously, as though half expecting to be poisoned.

'What does it taste like?' asked his wife, who looked horrified.

'Very odd,' the man replied. He thought for a while. 'It tastes of gin flavoured with strawberry.' He shuddered.

'Tell your friends back home and it'll be the new fashionable drink,' said Frank, with a grin. 'They can call it a 'Duck and Puddle' cocktail but don't forget I get three pence royalty on every one sold.'

The stranger stared at him. He did not appear to have much of a sense of humour and had clearly been hiding behind the curtains when the gods were handing out the ability to laugh.

'I suppose you think that's funny!' he said. 'Who owns this place? Are you part of a group? A chain?'

'We own the Duck and Puddle,' said Frank with justifiable pride. 'My wife and I.'

'Do you know who I am?' demanded the stranger.

I've only ever heard one other person say that. He was something in television and it sounded as pompous and as stupid the second time as it did the first time. It is a question which cries out for a resounding 'No'.

Frank stared at him for a moment, examining him carefully, and shook his head. He then looked at us. Thumper, Patchy and I looked at one another and then also shook our heads. 'No idea,' said Patchy. 'No idea at all. Are you going to tell us?'

‘I’m Julian Blunt-Whiffle,’ said the stranger, as though expecting this to mean something. ‘Sir Julian Blunt-Whiffle.’

We all looked at one another and shook our heads again.

‘Never heard of you,’ said Patchy.

‘Are you on television?’ asked Thumper. ‘Have I seen you on that programme for kids? *Crackerjack* I think it’s called. Are you the stooge who gets the cream pie pushed into his face every week?’

‘Ah yes,’ said Patchy, ‘I remember. All the kids hate him. They scream like mad whenever he appears.’

‘I am the chairman of Stern, Rothman and Goldstein!’ said the chairman of Stern, Rothman and Goldstein.

We looked at one another and, again, shook our heads.

‘Never heard of it,’ said Frank. ‘I’ve got an overdraft with NatWest myself.’

‘He’s one of those crooked banker types,’ muttered Patchy in his version of sotto voce. ‘I read about him somewhere. They call him the vulture capitalist.’

‘How the hell did the silly bugger get a knighthood?’ asked Thumper.

‘Bought it,’ said Patchy. He shrugged disdainfully. ‘But knighthoods don’t count when you buy them with shareholders’ money.’

The cadaverous stranger, who must have heard this exchange but who pretending that he hadn’t, leant over the bar until his nose and Frank’s nose were no more than six inches apart. ‘I’m a very important man,’ he hissed. ‘I could ruin you!’ He sounded like a pantomime villain, the sort who has staring eyes and a crooked nose and is booed by children the moment he appears on stage.

Frank, who is not easily intimidated, did not budge an inch. A couple of feet to my right I could sense Thumper tensing up. Thumper, is a tall, well-built man, now in his early thirties, who does not like bullies.

For many years I believed that Thumper (whose real name is Robert) had acquired his nickname because of a predilection for ‘thumping’ people who had annoyed him. This was a myth that Thumper has never done anything to expose. It was not until I had known him for some years that I discovered (from Anne Thwaites, the mother of his child) that Thumper had acquired the nickname when, as a boy, he had kept rabbits. He was, I discovered, named after a fictional character in a Disney film. I have not yet managed to find a convenient moment to let him know that I know the origin of his nickname for this is something to which I am looking forward and I do not want to waste the opportunity, or the anticipation, by hurrying it.

However, despite the fact that he had not receive his nickname as a result of his pugilistic endeavours, there is no doubt that Thumper never shrinks from thumping people who are disrespectful to his friends.

In Thumper’s world there are few things which are more important than respect.

‘Out!’ said Frank, very softly. He opened the till and counted out some change. ‘Get out of my pub. And stay out. If I ever see you here again I’ll set Bismarck on you.’ Frank does not have any dogs but I doubt if the cadaverous stranger knew that. Frank and Gilly do have a pet called Bismarck, but Bismarck is a goldfish and a particularly timid one at that. It spends most of its days hiding behind the weed in its tank.

Frank slammed the coins he had taken from the till down onto the bar tap. ‘Refund,’ he said.

‘You’ll regret this,’ said the vulture capitalist with the Labrador puppy eyes. He slammed his gin back down on the counter. His wife followed suit, slamming her glass down so hard that a little gin splashed onto the bar top. The stranger looked at the coins for a moment, as if uncertain whether or not to pick them up. Eventually, greed overcame whatever principle was fighting for recognition and the man scooped up the change and slid it into his trouser pocket. He dropped one of the new five pence pieces and had to bend down to pick it up off the floor. It seemed a rather undignified thing to do, under the circumstances, particularly since the floor of the Duck and Puddle isn’t the cleanest piece of real estate in England.

The couple then headed for the door. ‘Let’s head back to Combe Martin,’ said the woman. Her husband agreed.

We all congratulated Frank and celebrated his small victory over the visiting Philistines by ordering a fresh round of drinks and three packs of slightly out-of-date salted peanuts.

I wandered across to the snug window and looked out. The strangers stood for a moment outside the pub, studying an Ordnance Survey Map and a small compass.

‘I think they’ve bought one of those compasses that point south,’ I said. I noticed that it was starting to rain.

Peter Marshall, who runs the Bilbury village shop, has had these compasses on offer for a year now and I have lost count of the number of visitors who have, as a result, been badly midirected.

Our village shop owner buys most of the stuff he sells from the local supermarket (he takes his van over to Barnstaple once a week and stocks up on all the Best Buy offers and the Buy One Get One Free deals) but he also has a number of slightly dodgy suppliers from whom he purchases items which are sold as ‘fire damaged’ or ‘bankrupt stock’, though I have always suspected that many of the items he sells ought really to be described as ‘fell off the back of a lorry’. Many of these items are things which Peter buys very cheaply because no one else can sell them.

In recent months, Peter has started to buy more and more of the things he sells from abroad. He describes himself as being influenced by globalisation and has a sign hanging in the shop describing his emporium as ‘multi-cultural’, a claim which he defends by pointing out that he has recently started to stock curry powder, purchased in bulk from a factory in Hong Kong.

The compasses he sells are sold very cheaply and were even cheaper to buy because the manufacture mounted the needles the wrong way round. Peter only sells them to tourists he doesn’t like and to locals who are not his regular customers.

‘They’ve taken the Lynton road,’ I explained, watching the vulture capitalist and his wife set off on their interrupted walk. I noticed that Sir Julian was limping. His new boots were clearly causing him a little trouble.

It was immediately obvious to me that the pair were heading in precisely the wrong direction.

North Devon has many deserted areas and there are miles of open moorland across Exmoor. It would, I knew, take the vulture capitalist and his wife hours of trudging to reach anything approaching civilisation. It would be well after dark before they got anywhere with a bed and a hot meal. I wasn’t even tempted to call to them to tell them this news.

Since they were both poured and paid for, and since he abhors waste of any kind, but particularly of alcohol, Frank drank both the home-made pink gins and declared them to be excellent.

When we left the pub an hour later the rain was coming down heavily and steadily. The bad weather was clearly in for the evening. The vulture capitalist and his wife would still not be more than a quarter of the way to Lynton.

I almost felt sorry for them.

Almost.

But I had an awful feeling that Frank might not have heard the last of the cadaverous stranger with the incongruous puppy dog eyes.

The Wasps

We always have lots of wasps' nests at Bilbury Grange. I have no idea why, but the wasps seem to like our company and they have been steadily chewing up our beams and soffits to make their nests. We've got enough beams and soffits to share and so we usually leave them alone and apart from the occasional sting they leave us alone too.

But this year we have a rather alarming nest developing in the dining room wall. The nest spreads up into the ceiling space and appears to have become alarmingly large. When the wasps decide to flutter together, which they do at regular intervals, it sounds just as though a very large and adenoidal cat were crammed into the wall space. And if you put your hand against the wall you can feel the heat of the nest.

None of that bothers us unduly (though the noise can be a little alarming) but when I tottered downstairs this morning I found that the wasps had started to eat their way through the ceiling. A huge crack had appeared and there was a pile of plaster dust on the rug beneath. When I pressed against the plaster, another crack appeared.

It didn't take the brain of Britain to work out that the wasps had eaten so much ceiling that it had become very thin, delicate and weak.

As I examined the biggest crack in the ceiling, a wasp's leg appeared. And then a bit more of the wasp hove into view. And then a second wasp started to wriggle through. Patsy, who has an encyclopaedic knowledge of plants and creatures of all kind, told me that it is only the female wasp that stings. That I found comforting since it meant that with every wasp, I had a fifty fifty chance of being safe. On the other hand she told me that unlike honeybees, which can sting only once, wasps can sting to their heart's content.

Patsy and I held an emergency meeting and decided that something had to be done since these wasp guests were clearly abusing our hospitality. We allow them to eat our beams, our floorboards, our windowsills and our soffits but we will not allow them to eat our ceiling.

I rang the local council, which has a department dedicated to dealing with wasps, and asked them to send a man (or woman) round as soon as he (or she) could be spared. To my surprise, the council said they would send a man round that very afternoon. It was no surprise to discover that I would receive an invoice for his services.

Meanwhile, I began the morning surgery.

The first patient was Mrs Thyme who came to have her blood pressure checked. There is never anything wrong with it but she is convinced that if she is to die of anything it will be a stroke or a heart attack caused by high blood pressure and so she likes to know that all is well in that department. When I had checked her blood pressure, and reassured her that the readings would have been perfectly satisfactory if she had been 60 years younger (she is a little over 80-years-old) she asked me if I minded if she asked me a question. I said I had no objection whatsoever and that I would answer as best I could.

'Do you know any decent men who are 105-years-old or more?'

I stared at her, thought about this for a while and had to admit that I did not know any centurions. Puzzled, I asked her what had prompted her question.

'I've decided to look for a boyfriend,' said Mrs T, as though she had decided to replace her washing machine or purchase a new handbag.

'I did meet one fellow,' she said rather wistfully, 'but he was always a perfect gentleman.' She sounded rather disappointed by this. 'And then last week I read in a women's magazine that most men over 50 only want to go out with women who are 25 years younger than they are. So, since I'm 80, it means I have to look for men who are around 105-years-old.'

I told her that I thought she could cast her net much wider, and that since she looks a good 20 years younger than her age she could quite happily look for men of her own age or even younger.

She seemed delighted by this advice and though I have absolutely no way of knowing whether or not the advice was of any value, I was delighted to have cheered her up. She left after telling me that she intended to visit Peter Marshall's village shop to see what fancy lingerie he had in stock. I assumed that her shopping expedition was inspired by the hope that her search for a male companion might soon prove fruitful. However, although I did not tell her this, I very much doubt if Peter Marshall sells anything which could be described as 'lingerie' without attracting the attention of the local Trading Standards officer. I fear that Peter's ladies' underwear department (for there is sure to be one) will most probably be well stocked with bloomers, camiknickers and whalebone corsets but little else.

My second patient, Mrs Guthrie, is in her nineties – and actually nearer to her century. She is, I suspect, kept alive by the prospect of receiving a congratulatory telegram from Her Majesty the Queen. Bilbury is a healthy village and, remarkably, I have three centurions on my medical list. I say 'remarkably' because quite a number of big city doctors, with far more patients than I have, don’t have a single patient over 90 – let alone over 100.

Mrs Guthrie has so many different diseases that her medical notes have to be kept in three cardboard folders which are about three inches thick and have to be held together with a couple of large rubber bands. I keep meaning to have a spring-clean and to throw out all the old hospital letters and bits and pieces of miscellaneous information.

With younger patients, doctors always try to tie together all the available symptoms, however disconnected they might appear to be. The aim is to knit all the available symptoms into a single diagnosis. But with older patients this simply does not work, for many patients in their mature years have a number of completely disconnected health problems. Mrs Guthrie, for example, has heart failure, bronchitis, dermatitis, haemorrhoids, Meniere’s disease, chronic blepharitis, varicose eczema and Raynaud’s disease and I defy the brightest medical brains to come up with a single diagnostic label to fit all of those problems - other than old age, of course.

Mrs Guthrie comes to see me once a month more as a ritual than to seek advice or treatment. She once told me that she totters along mainly for reassurance that she is still alive. ‘At my age things are working so badly that I worry that I might drop off the perch and not notice!’ she said, with a chuckle. I wrote out prescriptions for the medicines she takes and then switched hats and dispensed the drugs from my small pharmacy.

After lunch, a very pleasant man came to deal with our wasps. He used a long tube to spray powder into the opening to the nest and told me that if the wasps are not gone in a week I should ring back. When I told him that I wouldn’t have bothered if the wasps hadn’t been trying to break through the ceiling, he said that it was quite common for wasps to start eating ceilings. The wasps apparently munch their way through the wood and plaster and take over a house. Nevertheless, it saddened me to see the wasps being killed. If they’d built their nest in a shed or a tree I’d have been happy to leave them there.

While I was outside showing him where the nest was situated, I spotted a dead squirrel on the ground. The poor thing had clearly been killed by a cat (a fox or a rat would have eaten the corpse).

After the wasp man had gone, I dug a hole under a hazel tree and buried the squirrel with full military honours.

I called Patsy and together we said a little prayer, asking God to welcome the squirrel. We said we hoped that wherever he went the squirrel would find a good and enduring supply of hazelnuts.

I may be mad, but at least I am my kind of mad.

The New Vet

When Bilbury's vet retired, he tried to sell the practice to another young veterinarian. But there were no takers and it didn't look as if there would ever be one. The vet's old house and surgery had been sold to a couple from Combe Martin who planned to convert it into three flats. One they would keep for themselves and the other two would be rented out to holidaymakers.

The trouble is that there simply isn't enough work in Bilbury to provide full time employment for a vet. For some years now, one of the large veterinary practices in Barnstaple has looked after most of what vets usually refer to as the 'big animal' work (cows, pigs, sheep, horses and so on) and there really aren't enough people with pets in Bilbury to keep a veterinarian occupied and solvent.

And so a female vet who has a single-handed practice in the nearby village of Combe Martin, and who is married to young George Burrows (who, like his father Harry, works in a bank in Barnstaple and is one of the few people in North Devon to go to work in a suit every day), has recently begun to hold a weekly 'small animal' surgery (dogs, cats, tortoises, goldfish, budgies and so on) in a newly painted shed behind Peter Marshall's shop.

I should, perhaps, explain how an apparently respectable vet came to be practising in a shed behind Peter Marshall's village emporium.

Peter Marshall, the Bilbury storekeeper and the most successful businessman in Bilbury or the whole of England (according to whether you are making the judgement objectively or according to Peter's own viewpoint) is always on the lookout for ways to improve his income. He is constantly aware that most villages in England have either already lost their village shop or, if shops had heads, would be, in financial terms, struggling to keep them above water.

A year ago, Peter enthusiastically welcomed the chance to become the Bilbury Post Office (a title which, in practice, means little more than that he is allowed to sell postage stamps and weigh and stamp the occasional parcel) and having successfully merged that responsibility with his own towering ambition 'to sell more variety than Harrods of Knightsbridge', decided to become Bilbury's first and only department store, offering a wide range of services to local villagers.

The wooden, felt-roofed shed behind Peter's shop had for many years served as a depository for unwanted items and when he decided to upgrade it, and turn it into a valuable piece of working real estate, Peter first had to clear out the retail flotsam and jetsam that had accumulated over the last few decades.

He discovered that the shed contained a large quantity of empty cardboard boxes (mostly mouldy), three old lawn mowers, which would not have looked out of place in a museum specialising in Victoriana, a dozen empty milk crates, a typewriter with half its keys missing, a small collection of vintage vacuum cleaners which no longer worked but which, inevitably and predictably, Peter described as 'valuable antiques of the future', a number of tins and boxes of food that would have doubtless been well past their sell-by date if sell-by dates had been invented when the tins and boxes had originally been packed and delivered for sale, and a good variety of other bits and pieces of not-quite-good-enough-to-sell-in-the-shop-but-not-rubbishy-enough-to-throw-away flimflam. (Peter, incidentally, is, like Frank Parsons at the Duck and Puddle, a fervent opponent of the new-fangled habit of putting 'sell-by' and 'best before' dates onto food products. He says he thinks that the scheme will simply lead to vast amounts of perfectly good food being thrown away. I have to say that I think he could well be right.)

Most people would have called for a skip and dumped the rubbish which had accumulated, but Peter has never been one to fit easily into the category of 'most people' and his natural and inevitable response to what he saw as a 'unique commercial opportunity' was to hold a 'shed' sale (his version of a garage sale) and to invite anyone and everyone to bid on his 'fine collection of genuine vintage retail antiques'.

If you or I had found all that junk in an old shed or barn we would have expected to pay to have it taken away but Peter was confident he could persuade people to pay him to let them take it home with them.

To the surprise of everyone present (including, I suspect, Peter himself), the sale proved remarkably successful. Peter put a small advertisement in several West Country newspapers, and dealers turned up from Taunton, Barnstaple, South Molton and Exeter.

Patchy Fogg, with whom I inspected the stuff on sale, said that apart from occasional visits to the municipal waste dump just outside Barnstaple he had never in his life seen so much rubbish collected in one place.

But, perhaps because they'd travelled some distance and didn't want to go home empty handed, and maybe because Peter's sales patter was convincing (he had put in his false teeth for the occasion – a real sign of how seriously he was taking the event), most of the items on sale found buyers.

One dealer told me that the foodstuff Peter was selling was so old that he would be able to sell it to a museum he knew which specialised in the history of food packaging. Two gross of novelty, bendy pencils with sharpeners fixed to the non-active end found buyers who would only find out in time that once you'd taken an inch off the length of the pencils, the pointy end would no longer reach the sharpener. Even the milk crates found a market. Only the mouldy cardboard boxes (optimistically labelled as 'useful storage containers') remained unsold and destined for the incinerator at the bottom of Peter's orchard.

Having cleared out his scruffy shed and sold the contents, Peter had enough cash to buy some paint and a few sticks of furniture and within a week of the sale he had completed the transformation of the shed from a derelict junk room to a 'highly desirable business rental property'. Realising that he was unlikely to find anyone prepared to rent the shed full time, Peter decided to promote the shed to individuals who wanted somewhere to run a small business for one day a week.

On Mondays the shed was rented out to a gentleman's hairdresser who travelled from South Molton, on Wednesdays the shed was rented out to a ladies' hairdresser who drove up from Exeter and on Thursdays the shed was rented out to Mrs Burrows, the ambitious young veterinary surgeon from Combe Martin. Fridays and Saturdays were available to rent for children's parties and Tuesday was available for anyone with a business needing a one-day-a-week home. It was clear to everyone in the village that Peter was making far more money out of renting his shed piecemeal than he could have ever made if he had rented out to a full-time tenant.

And, as he confided to me one day, Peter was hoping that the people who came to have their hair cut or permed, or who brought their animal to see the vet, would buy something from his shop.

On days when the veterinary surgeon was in the shed, Peter put a large board advertising cut-price pet food. On days when the barber was operating, Peter changed the board for one advertising razor blades, shaving soap, combs and 'something for the weekend'. On days when the ladies' hairdresser was in residence, there were offers on products such as artificial orchid sprays ('suitable for pinning onto posh frocks') which Peter reckoned he could sell to newly permed ladies looking forward to a posh evening out.

And so, all this explains why, one Thursday afternoon, I found myself sitting on a metal stacking chair in Peter's draughty and chilly shed with Ben, our faithful but now elderly Welsh collie bitch, lying patiently beside me. We were waiting to see Mrs Burrows, the new Bilbury vet.

Ben used to belong to a tramp called Hubert Donaldson and just before Hubert died, he asked me to look after his dog. Ben seemed to know this for he had quickly become 'my' dog; a loyal companion and canine friend.

Ben had been having difficulty in walking for some time and things seemed to be getting worse. Since I inherited him from Hubert Donaldson I had no idea how old Ben was but I strongly suspected that he had developed arthritis; a common enough problem in older dogs. He had quite a lot of stiffness in his knees and was clearly in some discomfort when he moved. I suppose I could have treated him myself, since some of the drugs used for human patients are also used for dogs, but I have no knowledge of the sort of dosages which might be suitable for a dog so I preferred to see an expert.

Mrs Burrows, smartly dressed in a crisply starched white coat, was sitting behind a small folding card table, which served as a temporary desk. We pet owners sat on chairs which were lined up in two rows. Like me, the vet did not run an appointments system; patients and their owners were seen on a simple, old-fashioned and still efficient 'first come, first served' basis. Each time someone was called, the rest of us moved up a seat. This was welcome exercise, for the chairs were not the most comfortable in the world and after three minutes I had developed cramp in both my legs.

The vet was dealing with Mrs Westbury's poodle (a friendly if rather neurotic dog called Mimi) when I first sat down.

Mrs Westbury is the wife of Reginald Westbury, a taciturn fellow who helps run Tolstoy's, the local garage, and whose skills with a spanner keep my car on the road, and I know from personal experience that she has an unusual ability to use 50 words when two or three would suffice. She does this through nervousness, for she is very shy and chatters to disguise this, but it does mean that consultations with her can stretch out for rather longer than might be strictly necessary. I realised that those of us waiting would not be going anywhere for quite a while.

I was reading a paperback copy of *Festival at Farbridge*, a novel by J.B.Priestley, which I had brought with me (I never go anywhere which might involve waiting without first stuffing a book into a jacket pocket) and Ben was snoozing quietly by my feet when Mrs Iolanthe Fielding, the pet owner who was sitting in front of me, turned round and spoke to me in what was clearly supposed to be a whisper.

'Do you have your prescription pad with you, doctor?' she asked.

Mrs Iolanthe Fielding and her husband, Bertie, live in an unsaleable house on the North Devon cliffs and their house has spectacular views. They pay just £5 a month in rent for a neat two bedroomed white-washed cottage with a decent sized garden and spectacular sea views. The rent is low because although the house had been on the market for three years, with an absurdly low asking price of just £200, there have been no takers. One or two London buyers had shown interest, thinking that they had perhaps spotted the bargain of a lifetime, but when they saw that two neighbouring cottages had already fallen down onto the rocks below they quickly withdrew their offers and hot-footed it back to the big city where houses tend to stay where they've been built and, generally speaking, show very little inclination to wander.

Bertie and Iolanthe would probably be considered by some to be an odd couple.

When they married two years ago, she was 67-years-old and he was just 20. It is, I think, fair to say that his parents were slightly surprised to find that they were nearly 30 years younger than their daughter-in-law.

Iolanthe (and that was her real name for her mother had been a great music lover) had never been married before but had what can safely be described as an interesting past. She had been a nun, a librarian, a chorus girl in a troupe of entertainers which worked on cruise ships, and a belly dancer in a nightclub in Cairo. She was an optimistic woman. When she and Bertie became engaged, she came to see me to ask if I thought she was too old to start a family. Disappointed by my pessimistic answer she founded the North Devon Belly Dancing Association and started teaching belly dancing on Wednesday evenings in the Kentisbury Village Hall. Several of my patients became enthusiastic students.

The name Bertie is not common but in and around Bilbury there are no less than four Berties and so to avoid confusion they are all known by an addition to their names. This is a practice which is exceedingly popular in Wales where it seems that 90% of the male population is called either Gareth or Dai. To help villagers identify one another, Gareth the butcher will be known as Gareth the Butcher, Dai the baker will be called Dai the Baker and Mr Evans the taxi driver will be known as Evans the Taxi. And so, the Bertie who once worked at the garden centre on the road to the village of Westward Ho! is still known as Bertie the Plant even though he left the garden centre some years ago and now works as a butcher's assistant and part time fireman.

(Westward Ho!, is incidentally, the only place in Britain which has an exclamation mark as part of its name. The village was named after a hotel which was itself named after an adventure story written by the 19th century novelist Charles Kingsley. There cannot be many authors who have had a place named after a fictitious town. Kingsley was the author of another famous book called *The Water Babies*, though as far as I know there is not yet a town called 'The Water Babies'.)

The Bertie who has been pool champion at the Duck and Puddle for as long as anyone can remember, and who is now happily married to the former Lydia Potterton, is known as Bertie the Balls.

The Bertie who delivers buns and pies for a baker who has a shop in Combe Martin and nurtures a powerful ambition to open a chain of shops throughout the South West, is known to everyone as Bertie the Pie.

Iolanthe's Bertie, who drives and operates a tanker which emptied cesspits and septic tanks is known, with searing and cruel accuracy, as Bertie the Stink. If you met Bertie dressed in his Sunday best and reeking of aftershave you would still know what he did for a living.

On the day when Bertie and Iolanthe got married, a bevy of Bertie's relatives who had motored down from Wolverhampton spent the entire day sniffing, looking at one another and sniffing again, constantly wondering where the leaky sewer could be situated. They sniffed in the church, they sniffed at the reception in the back room at the Duck and Puddle and they sniffed when they were standing on the Duck and Puddle forecourt about to get into their cars to drive home. 'Is there a sewage farm nearby?' asked a portly woman who had spent all day plucking up the courage to ask the question. 'There are a lot of cows in the locality,' explained Iolanthe, to save her husband's blushes. 'And the ones around here are an unusually flatulent variety.'

Bertie's father, who was also called Bertie and had, since the birth of his son, been known as Bertie the Fertile since he was the only Bertie in the village who had achieved the dizzy heights of fatherhood, was a specialist Stop-Go man working for Devon County Council.

A Stop-Go man holds up the metal pole which has a large disk attached to its top end. One side of the disk is painted green and has the word GO on it and the other side of the disk is painted red and displays the word STOP. The Stop-Go pole is used when work is being done on the roads and two lanes of traffic have to be controlled and funnelled onto a single lane of the highway. Bertie the Fertile's skill with the pole is legendary and whereas lesser operators would keep the traffic flowing without queues or major delays, he could, by the end of a day, have queues a quarter of a mile long and delays of an hour or more.

Bertie the Fertile, who was perpetually optimistic and who, therefore, preferred to think of himself as a Go-Stop man rather than a Stop-Go man, had always harboured an ambition that his son would follow him into the pole handling business and he had a good many tricks of the trade he wanted to pass on. He had been severely disappointed when his son chose another career but the disappointment soon passed when his son married, and although he was sad that there was not going to be any pattering of tiny feet, the fact that his son's bride was nearly a third of a century his senior did nothing to dampen his enthusiasm for this most romantic of mergers.

'Do you have your prescription pad with you, doctor?' Mrs Fielding repeated. She had turned up the volume a decibel or two.

Accustomed as she is to giving instructions to a roomful of would-be belly dancers, most of whom are old enough to have mislaid a good deal of their natural hearing acuity, she is capable of invoking a stentorian tone that would not have ashamed a parade ground sergeant major.

I agreed that I did, indeed, have a prescription pad in my inside jacket pocket. The truth is that I never go anywhere in Bilbury without a prescription pad. I would be as likely to leave the house without a prescription pad as I would be to go out without my trousers.

'I'm running out of that cream you gave me,' she said, maintaining the new, improved decibel level.

I could not for the life of me remember what cream I had given her. I asked her if she could be a little more specific.

'It's cream for down below,' she said, not lowering her voice in the slightest. 'It gets very dry and sore down there,' she told me 'when Mr Fielding and I have conjugals.'

I could not help noticing that Mr Owen, a retired postman who was holding a goldfish in a bowl on his lap, had gone a very deep red. Several female members of the small congregation seemed to be having difficulty controlling their mirth. I got the distinct impression that at least two of them would have been rolling in the aisles if there had been room between the rows of seats for any rolling to be done. Happily, Mrs Fielding seemed completely unaware of the effect her loudly voiced remarks had had upon the other pet owners.

'Oh yes,' I said hurriedly, before Mrs Fielding went into any more detail. 'I remember.' I pulled out my prescription pad and a pen and wrote out a prescription for the appropriate cream.

'Thank you, doctor,' Mrs Fielding replied. 'Bertie will be very grateful. He gets upset if he has to go without his Sunday conjugations. I'll get him to send you and your wife a dozen of his uncle's home-made spicy pork sausages.'

I did not like to remind her that Patsy and I are vegetarian but instead simply thanked her. Mr and Mrs Parfitt, our gardener and his wife, are always very happy to accept gifts of such a nature.

Before I could put away the prescription pad, another pet owner turned round. It was, I saw, Letitia Buttermilk, a plump, merry woman in her thirties who used to work as a barmaid in Bideford, but now spends her days looking after seven assorted children. Mrs Buttermilk, I remembered, has terrible varicose veins and is on an apparently interminable hospital waiting list for an operation.

'Those two-way stretch elastic stockings you prescribed for me have helped enormously, doctor,' she said, genuinely grateful. She suddenly stood up, put her right foot firmly on her chair and pulled up her dress. 'Look,' she said, showing me her leg, 'they look good, don't they?'

A stretch of white thigh was clearly visible between the straps of the industrial strength suspender belt she was using to hold up the support stockings she was wearing. If she realised how much skin she was displaying she was not concerned. I remembered that Mrs Buttermilk herself had once suggested, with more than a hint of professional pride, that her career as a barmaid had merely been the final stopping point in what might loosely be described as an adventure in the specialised branch of show business known for displays of the feminine form.

Mr Owen, still bright red, was, I noticed out of the corner of my eye, studying the roof of Peter Marshall's shed as though he had spotted something fascinating.

Mrs Buttermilk then took off the shoe and wiggled her leg round so that I could see that a hole had developed in the heel. 'But I really need another pair of the stockings,' she said. 'Two if you and the National Health Service can manage it.'

Poor old Owen had now turned so red that if he had stood alongside a London bus you wouldn't have been able to see his face at all.

Feeling rash with the nation's money, I wrote out a prescription for three pairs of two-way stretch elastic stockings.

And so it went on.

There were eight people waiting to see the vet and I wrote prescriptions for five of them, looked down the throat of one and only with difficulty persuaded another not to remove her blouse so that I could look at the rash that had appeared on her elbow. In the end, I managed to persuade her that I could manage perfectly well if she simply rolled up her sleeve.

'I was beginning to wonder who was running a surgery here,' said Mrs Burrows rather tartly, when Ben and I finally reached the top of the queue.

'I'm sorry,' I apologised, though to be honest I didn't feel that it was my fault. I explained Ben's problem and the vet examined him.

'How old is he?' she demanded.

I had to admit that I didn't know.

'He's obviously quite an age,' she said. She seemed very cold and Ben clearly didn't like her.

I agreed with the vet’s assessment for it was not an inaccurate one.

‘He’s got arthritis,’ she said.

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘I thought that might be it.’

‘It would probably be kindest to have him put down,’ she said. ‘If you bring him to my surgery in Combe Martin I could deal with that for you.’

‘Oh, good heavens,’ I said. ‘I don’t think he’s that bad. He still gets around. He’s just a little slower and stiffer than before. Couldn’t you prescribe something for him?’ I was very angry. I knew that Ben still enjoyed life and felt that he needed help not euthanasia. Ben is one of my closest and dearest friends. He often goes with me when I visit patients, usually staying in the car, which he guards enthusiastically, and he plays an active role in the Bilbury community. He even has membership of the Bilbury Cricket Club (so that he can sit with Patsy and me in the pavilion when we visit) and his signature on his membership card is a muddy paw print.

Mrs Burrows glowered at me and I thought for a moment that she was going to refuse to help. ‘I suppose so,’ she said. She bent down, rummaged in a large cardboard box that she had brought with her and took out a box of tablets. ‘Give it these four times a day,’ she said.

‘It!’

She called my friend an ‘it’!

I thanked her, paid the bill, and Ben and I then left. If my friend needs help again we will go elsewhere.

I have a strong suspicion that Peter Marshall may soon find that he has Thursdays free to rent to someone else. I really don’t think that the pet owners of Bilbury are going to take to a veterinary surgeon who is so quick to reach for the euthanasia needle.

On the drive back home, the thought of euthanasia filled me with guilt for I am very conscious of the fact that we had to bring in a man from the council to destroy the wasps’ nest above our dining room ceiling.

I hate killing any of God’s creatures but you can’t collect up wasps in the same way that you can collect up bees, and with two babies in the house I couldn’t take the chance of having our home filled with insects which sting.

When I got home, I discovered that although the nest has been destroyed there are still plenty of wasps around.

I had no idea how they managed to find their way in but wasps had been coming into the house every day since the man from the council visited, and although most were dying and so not much of a threat to any of us, dealing with so many dead bodies was a sad business.

Astonishingly, in the evenings it was still sometimes possible to hear the sound of the remaining live wasps beating their wings in their nest. I couldn’t believe that it was too hot for them in the roof space above the ceiling and so I could only assume that the ritualistic wing beating, ostensibly done to cool the nest, was being done more as a ritual than a practical activity. The wasps knew that something was wrong and so they did the only thing they could think of: they beat their wings to bring the temperature down. No dafter than the practice of blood-letting or many of the other things that humans do.

More worrying, perhaps, something had climbed into the incredibly small space above the dining room where the wasps’ nest had been.

I had no idea whether it was a rat, a mouse or a squirrel but I was pretty sure that it was eating the dead wasps. We could hear the creature scurrying around, hither and thither and this was rather worrying since the ceiling, partly eaten by the wasps, was now perilously thin. I strengthened the area by putting long strips of sticky tape across the plasterboard. It didn’t look very pretty but I hoped it would stop whatever was eating the dead wasps from falling through and landing on the dining room table.

Since the wasps were poisoned, I didn’t think that eating them could do any living creature much good. I barked very loudly, very close to the ceiling, and whoever or whatever it was who was making all the noise went away.

If the intruder is killed by the wasp poison, there will be a corpse above the ceiling. And then we will, I fear, find ourselves suffering from a plague of blowflies.

Living in the country is never dull.

The Letters

‘Have you seen this week’s copy of the local paper?’ asked Patsy.

‘Nhnhnho,’ I replied, through a mouthful of toast.

I know you’re not supposed to eat with your mouth full but I’d had an early call out to a farmer whose foot had been trodden on by a cow.

The farmer was now sitting in his living room, with his foot up on a pouffe and a bottle of painkilling tablets on a table nearby, with the injured but not broken foot doubtless beginning the long, slow process of going from red to blue, to black and to yellow. Outside, the cow was chewing the cud and doubtless telling her friends that she’d made it look like an accident and had got away without so much as a slap on the backside with a hazel switch.

And, as a result of the early morning call, I was late for the morning surgery.

‘There’s a letter from a man in London complaining about the service he had when he visited the Duck and Puddle,’ said Patsy, sounding astonished. ‘Someone called Sir Julian Blunt-Whiffle.’

The name rang bells so loud that I very nearly developed a headache.

‘Do you remember I told you about that snooty couple who came to the pub when I was there with Thumper and Patchy? It was a few weeks ago. They were walking around North Devon with their chauffeur following behind in a Mercedes.’

Patsy thought for a moment and then nodded. ‘Was that the time when Frank ground up some strawberries to make pink gins because he hadn’t got any angostura bitters?’

‘That’s it!’ I agreed. I looked at the clock, decided I just had enough time for another piece of toast and reached for the toast rack. ‘What does the letter say?’

Patsy found the letter again and read it out to me:

‘Sir
My wife and I recently visited the Duck and Puddle public house in Bilbury. I have travelled widely throughout the world and I can safely say that I have never before been faced with such extraordinary ill manners and incompetence. After waiting an unacceptable length of time to be served, we were given pink gins which fell far below the accepted international standard for such recreational comestibles. It seems to me quite extraordinary that the landlord has a licence of any kind and it seems to me that he would be more appropriately employed in some environment where contact with members of the travelling public is not an inevitability. I would strongly advise all those who seek sustenance to seek it in some place other than the Duck and Puddle in Bilbury.

I would have written this letter sooner but after our visit to the village of Bilbury, my wife and I were misdirected by inaccurately calibrated directional equipment and we were not reunited with our support vehicle until 1.00 a.m. As a result of the delay, both my wife and I needed to spend four weeks recuperating in the Spa Hotel at Baden Baden – an institution which was, I am delighted to say, run far more efficiently and courteously than the Duck and Puddle in Bilbury.
Yours etc
Sir Julian Blunt-Whiffle

Patsy put down the newspaper and looked across at me. I finished spreading marmalade on my toast and looked at her.

‘Crumbs!’ was all I managed to say. ‘Recreational comestibles, eh!’

My first thought was that the letter was so pompous that it was funny. I couldn’t think that anyone would take it seriously. But Patsy was more practical.

‘Poor Frank and Gilly!’ said Patsy. ‘They will be terribly upset. Do you think this will damage their business?’

I thought for a moment. ‘I wouldn’t have thought so,’ I said. ‘Most of their customers are locals. And everyone round here knows what Frank is like.’

I finished my breakfast and arrived in my consulting room with one minute to spare before the advertised starting time for the morning surgery.

But after the surgery, and during luncheon, I had a telephone call from Patchy Fogg. He told me that, as Patsy had rightly predicted, Frank and Gilly were terribly upset. They had, he said, already received several cancellations from people who had booked the pub for anniversaries, birthday parties and other celebrations.

I had forgotten this, but Frank and Gilly recently tried to expand their business by catering for individuals and groups from Barnstaple who wanted to hold their events somewhere distinctly rural. They were, therefore, offering the lounge bar as a 'function room', while keeping the snug as a bar for locals who merely wanted to consume some alcohol and nibble a few out-of-date crisps and peanuts.

With Peter Marshall having started to let out his old shed, it seemed that all our local businesses were now striving to expand and enhance their activities. I had jokingly suggested to Patsy that I should, perhaps, turn the dining room into an operating theatre and start offering breast enhancement and nose reduction operations at special prices. I pointed out that cosmetic surgery is the most profitable and commercial aspect of medical practice these days. Patsy, who had been changing one of the babies at the time, had not realised that I had made the suggestion in jest and had very nearly thrown a used nappy at me.

'But Thumper and I have a plan,' said Patchy, when he'd finished telling me just how upset Frank and Gilly were by Sir Julian Thingy-Wotsit's letter in the local paper. I winced when he told me this. Thumper and Patchy always mean well but they do sometimes come up with some very strange ideas. He wouldn't tell me what the plan was, simply telling me, with a wink, that it would be more fun if I didn't know.

I didn't hear any more about their plans for a while, but I did hear that Frank and Gilly were resigned to the fact that their burgeoning new business was ruined. They were terribly upset. Gilly had already hired two temporary waitresses and had bought them both second-hand white pinafores and black dresses from a hotel in Lynmouth which was closing. It is true that the waitresses would not have to be paid unless there was any work for them but the white pinafores and black dresses were a capital expense that seemed unlikely to be recouped. Moreover, Frank had already polished the tables in the lounge bar and, in preparation, had replaced the battered, chewed and sodden beermats with brand new ones advertising up-market drinks such as Babycham.

A week after the initial letter appeared in *The Barnstaple, Bideford and Bilbury Herald*, Patsy and I were once again having breakfast when Patsy asked me if I'd seen the local paper. I hadn't, of course.

'There's another letter about the Duck and Puddle,' said Patsy. And here is what she read out:

'Sir
I recently visited the Duck and Puddle public house in the village of Bilbury and ordered a pint of bitter. When the drink arrived a little of the fluid had spilt down the side of the glass and when I picked it up, I got my hand wet. Then, when I put the drink down onto the table provided I was distressed to find that the beer mats were quite inappropriate. How can any serious drinker be expected to put a pint of best bitter onto a beermat advertising Babycham? And why doesn't the Duck and Puddle provide beer mats which have little tricks and quizzes on the back?
Yours disgusted,
Alphonse Quiltharbour

'That's Thumper,' I said immediately.

'Wait,' said Patsy, 'there's another letter!' And she read out a second 'letter to the editor'.

'Sir
While enjoying a drink at the Duck and Puddle public house in the village of Bilbury, I decided to play a game of bar billiards. However, to my horror I found that the cue provided by the management was not obviously bent. It was indeed very nearly straight. I have played bar billiards in pubs all over North Devon and this has never happened to me before. This is an outrage. If the landlord of the Duck and Puddle cannot provide a bent cue with a decent curve on it then he should be tarred and feathered. If he repeats the offence then his remains should be hung, drawn and quartered.

I demand satisfaction.
Yours
Matt E. Mulchen
P.S. When I ordered a glass of champagne the landlord told me that he didn't have any champagne in stock but that he had some white wine and that if I put my hand over the top of the glass and then shook the glass quite a lot then the wine would get a bit bubbly and I would hardly notice the difference. I tried this but it did not prove as effective as advertised. Moreover, I had to use my own handkerchief to wipe my hand afterwards and since I had a cold at the time, I was then forced to spend the evening blowing my nose on a piece of wet rag. If the landlord persists with this suggestion then he should be obliged to provide spare handkerchiefs for customers. Or any bit of old rag would do at a pinch.

'That's Patchy,' I told her. 'Patchy always uses the name Matt E. Mulchen if he's stopped by the police. I gather Mr Mulchen is wanted by the police in three counties for various motoring offences.'

‘But what are Thumper and Patchy playing at?’ demanded Patsy, who is very good friends with Gilly and consequently seemed quite cross. ‘Why have they written more letters attacking the Duck and Puddle?’

‘These letters won’t do any harm at all,’ I told her. ‘They’ll make people laugh and they’ll make people think that last week’s letter was also written by some lunatic.’

Three days later Patsy told me with great delight that Gilly had reported that being in the local paper again had, to their surprise and delight, done the Duck and Puddle a great deal of good. Several local societies had telephoned with bookings for dinners and they had acquired a booking for a Golden Wedding Anniversary and one for an engagement party. ‘Apparently, the people who rang said they’d never heard of the pub before,’ said Patsy. ‘But they all said it sounded a fun sort of place patronised by fun sort of people.’

I was not surprised when, on the following Friday, Patsy once again discovered that there were two letters about the Duck and Puddle in *The Barnstaple, Bideford and Bilbury Herald*. She read them both out to me:

‘Sir,

Last week I visited the Duck and Puddle public house in Bilbury and bought a sandwich. The sandwich was very good but the chef had failed to cut off the crusts and had, moreover, cut the sandwich horizontally. I always think that sandwiches which are cut diagonally look far more classy. When I complained, the landlord took away my sandwich and refunded my money. He would not serve me any more food, not even a packet of salt and vinegar crisps, until I had promised to behave myself and to stop complaining.

I think your readers should know what is going on in our country.

Yours
Mrs Hermione Buttress

The second letter was allegedly from the captain of a touring cricket team which had played in Bilbury:

‘Sir,

I am the captain of our Cricket Club and every year we tour the West Country. Last Saturday we arrived in Bilbury for our annual match and I must complain in the strongest possible tone about the way we were treated.

On the recommendation of the Bilbury Cricket Club secretary, we took our luncheon in the local public house, the ‘Dick and Piddle’, together with members of the home side. I now wish to complain about the way we were treated.

Throughout our luncheon, members of our team were encouraged to drink far more alcohol than can possibly be considered advisable before a sporting event. Those team members who had ordered pints of beer had their glasses constantly topped up by a landlord constantly moving around the room with a half-gallon jug of ale. As a result, every beer drinker consumed at least two or three times the amount he had paid for. And those team members who ordered spirits were given doubles if they ordered and paid for singles and trebles if they ordered and paid for doubles.

During the game, my team played as badly as you might expect of men who could not stand upright without holding onto something solid. Our wicket keeper spent the whole of the match asleep in the pavilion, and two of our best batsmen actually fell asleep while at the crease. Several players tripped over and fell while fielding. Our best bowler spent the whole match clutching an elm tree on the boundary.

No one else in the team can remember very much of what happened that day but as the captain (and a confirmed teetotaller) I wish to warn other teams not to take pre-match refreshments at the Dick and Piddle since the landlord is clearly prepared to collude with someone in the local club.

For the record, we lost the match by 139 runs – our worst defeat since 1926.

Yours sincerely
Albert Ross (Captain)

Underneath this letter there was a short note from the Editor of the newspaper reading: ‘This correspondence is now closed.’

Two days later, Patsy told me that Gilly had reported that the pub was booked solid for the whole of the autumn. Several customers had already booked the pub for Christmas parties.

Sir Julian’s horrid, spiteful letter had been completely forgotten, pushed out of the communal memory by Thumper and Patchy’s sequence of silly letters, and the newspapers in which Sir Julian’s epistle had appeared had now all been used for lighting fires or wrapping chips.

The Hairdresser

When I worked regularly on television and had to record weekly programmes at studios in Glasgow, I used to have my hair cut in the make-up department. It was a splendid perk of the job. I would sit down in a comfortable chair and nod off to sleep. Without having to give any instructions, or make meaningless chatter about football or the weather, my hair would be neatly trimmed so that it looked exactly the same as it had looked for the previous programme and for the programme before that one. Never before had my hair been so neat.

Despite the joy of free haircuts, I had retired early from my burgeoning media career when I had been able to reopen my practice in Bilbury.

There had been several reasons for this.

First, I hated leaving Bilbury and Patsy. The minute I left the village I really wanted to be back where I knew I belonged.

Second, since working as a solo general practitioner, I was really no longer able to take time off to travel around the country visiting television and radio studios.

When he had retired, Dr Brownlow was always happy to act as my locum for a day or two but after his death I had no one to turn to. I had no assistant and even if I had been able to find one, I would not have been able to afford to hire a locum doctor to stand in for me.

Third, the world of the media was becoming distinctly unpleasant and I had a feeling that things were going to get much worse. People’s capacity for taking offence where none was intended seemed inexhaustible. And strangely, the same individuals who were quick to take offence seemed capable of offering abuse with no thought of the offence that they, in turn, might cause. A new innovation, radio phone in programmes where the host encouraged criticism and abuse, had probably made things worse. Local radio stations had started to encourage their listeners to express their opinions, whether or not they knew anything about the subject in hand, and much of the material broadcast seemed to be to me based more on prejudice and suspicion than on fact and reasoned thought.

The world was, it seemed, now crammed full of people who are kind enough to share their opinions on anything and everything – even on those things of which they knew nothing – with the rest of us.

To the words uttered by these public-spirited souls had to be added the trenchant criticisms engendered by lobbyists working for the pharmaceutical industry and the medical establishment.

I found that every time I put my head above the parapet, and commented on issues such as over-prescribing or the dangers of certain medical practices, I would find myself becoming target practice for professional critics who were concerned more with profits than with the truth.

I couldn’t help thinking that if computers ever proved as popular as the radio as a means of communication then things might well get even worse

I had, over my years in the media, been among other things, reached the dizzy heights of being a T-shirt, a crossword clue and an answer on a radio quiz programme but I decided that it was time to bring my Z list career to an end.

I would still write books as and when I found the time. But I decided that although I would still write articles and papers for the medical journals, there would be no more television programmes, radio broadcasts or newspaper columns.

And so, having abandoned my television career and the free haircuts, I had for a year or so had my hair cut at a barber’s shop in Barnstaple.

I enjoyed having my haircut there because the chap who owned the shop, and who did both the snipping and the sweeping up, had a marvellous way of talking. He cut out extraneous conjunctions and pronouns and somehow managed to sound like a series of newspaper headlines written by a subeditor trying to cram the kernel of what he had to say into the fewest possible number of words. ‘Traffic Snarl Up is Result of Road-widening Project’ he would start with. I would make the usual and appropriate murmur of interest and off he would go. ‘Retailers Protest as Town Grinds to Halt’.

All I had to do was make an encouraging sound at the end of each headline. ‘Local Football Team Destroys Opposition’, ’Storms Threaten Coastal Properties’, ‘Local Vicar Elopes with Girl Guide’ and so on. I sometimes wondered if he had ever been employed as a headline writer.

But the last two times I visited the barber’s small establishment, I had left disappointed and with just as much hair as I had when I had arrived.

My penultimate visit to this particular barber’s shop happened to take place on a Monday and I had found the shop shut. The lights were off, the door was locked and one of those little cardboard signs saying CLOSED was visible through the glass. The man who ran the pet shop next door told me that although the barber advertised his shop as being open on Mondays to Saturdays inclusive, he sometimes took Monday off. He did this without warning. He did it if the weather was fine or he had enjoyed an exhausting Sunday and felt he needed an extended lie in. Towards the end of a month, he would take Monday off if he felt that he had earned enough money to pay that month's mortgage and the grocery bills.

Taking Monday off work is not an unusual practice in Devon and it used to be even commoner than it is today.

Back in the 17th century, craft workers commonly took Mondays off. Indeed, they did it so often that they called their self-appointed holiday St Monday's Day.

In his autobiography, Benjamin Franklin, the American publisher, inventor, land speculator, Governor of Pennsylvania, Commissioner to France and signatory of the American Declaration of Independence, referred to his fellow printing workers in London as having the habit of taking Mondays off.

Franklin, who was working as a printer at the time, succeeded in ingratiating himself with his employer by never following this ancient practice and by persuading his fellow printers to abandon it.

Showing early signs of his future political acumen, Franklin even succeeded in changing the chapel laws which allowed the practice of taking Mondays as a holiday. (Printing houses have been called chapels since printing was first carried on in England in an old chapel which had been converted to a printing house.)

On my very last visit to the hairdresser's establishment in Barnstaple, (it was not a Monday, for I had learned my lesson), the barber greeted me with his usual cheery smile, tucked the sheet in around my neck, and then murmured something about being away for just a couple of minutes.

Actually, I think what he said was: 'Unavoidable Incident Delays Proceedings'.

He then disappeared.

I had no idea where he had gone. I sat patiently, waiting.

When I had finished reading the advertisements for hair lotion and condoms, I picked a tabloid newspaper off a nearby chair and carefully read every word. That filled three minutes. I then pulled a book out of my jacket pocket (as I have already pointed out, I never go anywhere without a paperback book upon my person) and I read that for a while. Then I must have dozed off for a while because when I next looked at my watch I saw that I had been sitting in the hairdresser's chair for nearly three quarters of an hour.

I removed the sheet which the hairdresser had tied around my neck to catch the trimmings which were now clearly not going to come and wandered out through the back door, the exit through which the hairdresser had left. I confess that I half expected to find the hairdresser lying unconscious or even dead on the floor. Instead, the small back room was deserted.

I went out through another door and found myself in a small, sunlit courtyard.

The hairdresser was sitting on a folding chair reading a paperback novel and enjoying the sunshine. He looked up when he heard the door open. 'Hero in Jeopardy as Captivating Story Unfolds', he said. He didn't apologise or look either apologetic or embarrassed. 'Doctor Leaves with Hair Uncut,' I said, 'Work to Be Done.'

I suppose things like this must happen to everyone but they seem to happen to me more than they happen to most people.

I think that hairdresser must have been what used to be known as 'a bit of a card'.

I didn't mind him deciding to sit in the sunshine in preference to cutting my hair but I did think he might have had the decency to tell me what he was doing.

I wasn't too pleased to have travelled to Barnstaple twice without purpose and so when I discovered that a barber would be operating in Peter Marshall's converted shed I decided to try him out.

I am, and always have been, keen to support small local businesses.

The supermarkets and big out of town stores have made life difficult for small shops and although hairdressing is not yet a service usually offered by the chain stores the principle is worth observing and if a shop opens in Bilbury then I feel I should try to be a customer.

I should, I suppose, have had my suspicions when I entered the shed and found it quite empty. That was the first clue. I had never before entered a hairdressing establishment during opening hours and found it entirely empty of customers.

The second clue which should have alerted me was the fact that the man who was about to cut my hair was wearing a hairpiece which looked as if it had fallen onto his head from a great height.

When I saw his hairpiece, I was reminded of a story relating to John Wayne, the film star. Wayne regarded his hairpiece with no respect whatsoever. When about to go before the cameras, Wayne realised that he wasn't wearing his toupee. He picked it up and plonked it onto his head with about as much care as you or I might take when carelessly tossing a cushion onto a chair.

'Is that real hair?' asked one of the film crew, rather rudely. 'Of course it's real,' replied Wayne. 'But it's not mine.'

One might, however, reasonably expect an experienced barber to take a little care with his own tonsorial appearance.

The third clue which should have forced me to find an excuse to turn round and leave was the fact that even from twelve feet away it was clear that the man had quite a very severe tremor in both hands. Indeed, his hands were actually shaking. This was not a mild case of Parkinson's Disease (in which case the tremor would have disappeared when he started cutting hair) but a severe neurological problem which was not going to disappear when he started snipping away around my ears with a pair of sharp scissors.

Now, I am all for people with disabilities being employed in whatever capacity seems appropriate but I have never before come across a hairdresser with a distinct hand tremor.

I am not particularly bothered about losing a bit of an earlobe (though I confess I would rather hold onto as many of my bits and pieces as possible, on the grounds that if God put them there he wanted them there for a purpose) but I really don't fancy having the point of a scissor blade poked into one of my eyes. God gave me two eyes and that is definitely the number I'd like to continue with.

Still, for one reason or another, I ignored all these signs and I sat down in the man's chair and put myself at his mercy.

Forty five minutes later I left, shaking and grateful to be still alive and in possession of my eyes and most of both ear lobes. I had lost a little blood but as long as the barber washed the blood off his scissors between patients this was probably nothing to worry about. I was still alive and that was something for which I felt enormously grateful.

I popped into Peter Marshall's shop before I went home.

'Where did you find that new hairdresser?' I asked him.

'You've got blood on your collar,' said Peter.

'I was stabbed with a pair of scissors,' I told him. 'Where the hell did you find that new hairdresser?'

'Oh, he lives in a cottage near Kentisbury,' said Peter who was unpacking cardboard boxes which appeared to be full of spectacles. 'He used to work in a car factory. Nice chap.'

'Nice chap,' I agreed. 'But where did he learn to be a barber?'

'I don't think he learnt it anywhere,' said Peter, putting a double handful of spectacles into a box on the shop counter. 'I think he's self-taught. Said he had to give up the car factory job because of the shakes but he always wanted to be a hairdresser.' Peter looked at my hair and asked me to turn round so that he could examine the back and sides too. 'Did he do the back too?'

'He did,' I said.

Peter shook his head. 'I don't think I'll be letting him near my hair,' he said. 'Yours looks a bloody mess.'

'Bloody being the key word,' I said. Peter picked up another double handful of spectacles. 'What are you doing with all those spectacles?' I asked.

'I bought them from a wholesaler who got them from a chain of opticians which went bust,' said Peter. 'They're spectacles which they made for customers but which were never picked up or, if they were picked up, weren't quite right and were rejected.'

'How many pairs have you bought?'

'Twelve boxes,' said Peter. 'I bought them by weight.' He looked at the number of spectacles he'd taken out of the one box he'd opened. 'There are about 500 pairs in each box, I'd guess.'

I looked at the boxes of spectacles. There were enough pairs of spectacles to provide the entire population of Bilbury with eyewear for seven or eight generations. 'How on earth are people going to pick out which spectacles they want?'

'Easy enough,' said Peter. 'They just try 'em on and see if they suit. I reckon these will go like hot cakes.'

'Or compasses,' I suggested.

'Oh, the compasses have all gone,' said Peter. 'I sold the last six to a group of tourists from Japan.' He grinned. 'I told them that over here, on this side of the planet, 'north' is the other way round.'

I left him unpacking spectacles.

When I got home Ben ran away from me and when she'd finished laughing, Patsy spent half an hour sticking plasters onto my lacerations and re-cutting my hair so that I didn't look as if it had been cut by a man with a neurological disorder.

By the time she'd finished, I had a pretty good idea of how I'll look like when I go bald.

'Did you have that done for a bet?' she asked.

I thought that was unnecessary.

The Sheep Shearing

Our five sheep have a warm, dry stable in which they can spend cold winter nights but some modern farmers don't seem to bother providing their animals with any protection from the elements. Indeed, many farmers have chopped down all of their trees (a decent sized tree can be sold to a timber yard and turned into a number of fence posts, or, at the worst, sold as firewood) and so livestock such as sheep which are kept out of doors all year round suffer enormously.

The sheep's fleece will provide it with some protection, and the animal's natural oils help to make the woollen coat waterproof, but I know from observation that sheep hate getting cold and wet. Our sheep can sense a storm coming a quarter of an hour before the first raindrop falls and they will run for shelter in good time. Knowing this, Patsy and I had a splendid barn built especially for our tiny flock.

Of course, although a sheep's fleece will keep it warm through the coldest of winters and will provide it with some protection from wind, rain and snow, a fleece which can be life-saving in December can become a deadly burden during the summer months.

Carrying around seven or eight pounds of wool can be exhausting, and the sheep's thick coat will push up its temperature to a dangerously high level. If you don't shear sheep before the hot weather starts they will suffer enormously.

Many farmers now shear their sheep twice a year, the small amount of money they receive for each fleece, just exceeding the cost of having the animal shorn. But to me that seems rather cruel. Shearing twice a year means that the sheep will be without its protective coat during some of the colder months and, without the shelter provided by trees and bushes, sheep have to suffer and shiver when the weather is wet and windy.

But the weather was becoming warmer and our four sheep needed to be sheared. As usual, I asked Mr Kennett, Patsy's father to arrange for of our sheep to be shorn.

Normally, the process of collecting sheep together in order to shear them is a fairly easy job. The farmer, the shearer and the farmer's dog can usually round up a flock of sheep in a few minutes. But our sheep don't respond to a sheep dog in the same way that normal sheep behave.

Our five sheep, Lizzie, Petula, Cynthia, Sarah-Louise and Miss Houdini, are all pets, and consequently they have never learned that a sheep dog Must Be Obeyed. Instead, when they see a dog approach they simply stand and stare at it as though saying, 'Who might you be? And what, precisely, do you want?'

When the sheep dog barks, the sheep stand their ground. If they move, it is not to retreat but to move slowly forwards to inspect the rude intruder who is making so much noise.

After having a dog turned into the canine equivalent of a nervous wreck by our confident sheep, Mr Kennett no longer brings his sheep dog with him when he and the shearer come to give the animals their annual short back, top and underneath.

Instead, Patsy or I usually call the sheep, sometimes offering a digestive biscuit or two as an incentive, and then when they come running we leave the shearer to his work.

But on the day of the shearing, Patsy was working at Dr Brownlow's old home, helping Bradshaw and a couple of volunteers redecorate the kitchen, and I had been called out to see a patient called Humphrey Todcaster who had told my receptionist, Miss Johnson, that he had developed very severe jaundice. He had, reported Miss Johnson, told her that he had probably developed a deadly liver disease that might require an urgent liver transplant.

I was leaving the house as Mr Kennett and the sheep shearer and the sheep shearer's young assistant arrived. I hadn't seen either of the shearers before. The previous man who had sheared our sheep had retired and was now living in a small cottage overlooking the river Lyn in the famous and picturesque village of Lynmouth.

Mr Kennett explained to me that the new shearer and his workmate, who is his son, spend the summer travelling around Devon and Cornwall, going from farm to farm and shearing sheep for 12 hours a day. The two men sleep rough. The shearer sleeps in the Dormobile in which they travel and his son sleeps in a tent or, if the weather is fine, in a sleeping bag under the stars. They spend the winter in Southern Spain, recovering from their exertions and spending their hard-earned money. The duo had been shearing Mr Kennett's large flock and had turned up to shear our five sheep before moving on to the next farm.

I apologised to the three men and explained that I had just received an urgent call to visit a patient.

'Don't worry,' said my father-in-law. He was squinting and was wearing a pair of new spectacles. They had jet black frames and if he hadn't been wearing manure-stained jeans, a jumper with more holes in it than a chicken wire fence and a pair of elderly rubber boots with the tops turned down, they would have given him a very business-like look. My father-in-law was on the grumpy side of bad tempered and explained that he was angry because two loose dogs which had been allowed to roam the countryside had killed two of his sheep and badly mauled several more. No one had identified the dogs or their owner but one sighting had suggested that the bigger of the two dogs was either a Rottweiler or a Doberman. Farmers loathe having dogs loose on their land and some, Mr Kennett included, will shoot to kill if they see a dog worrying their stock. One local farmer goes further and if he shoots a dog he hangs the corpse on the nearest tree 'pour decourager les autres' (though it is possible those aren't the words he would use himself). Another local farmer has let it be known that he will shoot errant dog owners as well as their dogs.

'We'll be done by the time you get back,' said the senior shearer, confidently. He had the voice of a man who is accustomed to shouting instructions over long distances.

When he spoke, the sheep in a field half a mile away suddenly started baaing like crazy. They had undoubtedly heard, and recognised the shearer's voice. Sheep can be very sensitive and these, having just been shorn, weren't keen to repeat the experience. The baaing flock sounded just like politicians 'debating' important issues of State in Britain's House of Commons. Actually, the sheep were probably making just as much sense as the politicians.

'I've got a couple of bottles of new parsnip wine in the car,' said Mr Kennett. I'll leave them in the kitchen if you're not back before we leave.'

I was, to be honest, astonished at Mr Kennett's confidence since as far as I could remember neither he nor the previous shearer had ever managed to get hold of the sheep without assistance from Patsy or myself. Our sheep are, like all creatures of their species, naturally nervous. Unlike most other creatures of their species, they are unnaturally disobedient.

But the call from Mr Todcaster had sounded urgent and I didn't have time to hang around and make sure that all went well with the shearing. So I left the three of them to it and drove off to visit Mr Todcaster in the cottage which he shares with his mother, two goats, a collection of cats and a stuffed armadillo.

'He's in bed but you're wasting your time, doctor,' said Mrs Todcaster, who celebrated her 80th birthday some time ago and who looks considerably older. She was sitting in the living room staring at a television which was switched on but without the sound.

'Why is that?' I asked.

'He'll be dead in a week,' replied Mrs Todcaster, apparently without concern or regret. She stated it as baldly as she might have told me that it was due to rain later, or that they had run out of milk.

'I'd better take a look at him then,' I said.

'He's in bed. But you won't get any sense out of him. He rambles.'

'Rambles?'

'Just witters on and on,' said Mrs Todcaster, clearly irritated at having to explain herself. 'He is a very boring man. He was a boring boy. His father was boring. If you asked his father how he was, he'd take half an hour telling you everything about him. He was very boring. He used to tell people the history of every piece of furniture we owned. 'That dresser came from an auction at Lower Petherbury farm,' he would say. 'They bought it from a store in Exeter. It was made by a firm that went bankrupt in 1839.' On and on he'd go. He couldn't make a cup of tea without telling you the history of the pot, the cup and the tealeaves. John is the same as his father. He just goes on and on about his health. He's a health freak. He wanted me to take euthanasia tablets when I got a cold.'

'Euthanasia tablets?' I asked, slightly concerned. It occurred to me that young Mr Todcaster might, perhaps, have wanted to get rid of his mother. It would have been difficult to blame him. Living in the same house as Mrs Todcaster could not have been fun.

Mrs Todcaster picked a plastic bottle off the mantelpiece and showed it to me. The bottle was marked 'Echinacea tablets'.

'I don't need tablets to get rid of a cold,' she said. 'I'll either get better or I'll die. And at my age it doesn't much matter which.'

'Maybe I'd better go on up and see your son now,' I suggested. 'Is he in the front bedroom?' I hadn't known Mrs Todcaster's husband but it occurred to me that if he rambled more than she did he must have been painful to listen to.

'Of course he's in the front bedroom. He's not going to be in my bedroom is he?' She peered intently at the television set. The picture, which was in black and white, was fuzzy and it was difficult to decide what was happening on the screen.

Leaving her to the television, I pulled aside the curtain at the bottom of the stairs and made my way up the steep, narrow staircase. There were two rooms downstairs and just two rooms on the first floor. There was no bathroom in the house. The toilet was in a wooden hut at the bottom of the garden. On the rare occasions when they wanted to wash, Mrs Todcaster and her son used the kitchen sink. For their quarterly bathing they used a tin bath which hung on a nail in an outhouse.

'I've got liver cancer,' shouted Mr Todcaster when he heard me climbing the stairs.

He was lying in a huge brass bedstead which Patchy Fogg would have loved to have got his hands on. Patchy is always looking for old brass bedsteads. There is, apparently, an insatiable market for them. Interior designers in the posher parts of London adore them. And American householders also seem to find them attractive. Patchy is always trying to persuade me to tell him when I spot valuable old pieces of furniture so he can call in and buy them. He tells me what to look out for but I always refuse to cooperate. Acting as a furniture scout for an antique dealer would make me feel more than slightly uncomfortable – particularly since I know that Patchy is always eager to underpay for the items he buys. An old oak commode stood in the corner of the room and there were oak tables on either side of the bed. Both tables were covered with bottles of herbal remedies, alternative medicines and heaven knows what else.

There was no chair in the room and I didn't fancy sitting on the commode so I put my black bag down on the floor and remained standing. 'What are your symptoms?' I asked.

'I'm jaundiced,' replied Mr Todcaster. 'I'd have thought you'd have been able to see that. You're supposed to be the damned doctor.' Other than the obvious change in his skin colour he looked perfectly fine to me. But he wasn't jaundiced. His skin was orange rather than yellow.

'Strictly speaking, jaundice is a sign not a symptom,' I said. I was feeling a little crotchety myself by now. 'A symptom is something you feel; something you're aware of; a pain, a discomfort, a change in your bowel habits. A sign is something that can be observed – a discolouration, a rash or a twitch. Have you noticed anything other than the change in the colour of your skin?'

Mr Todcaster thought for a moment. 'No, I don't think so,' he admitted.

I looked closely at his skin which, on close examination, was clearly far more orange than yellow. The whites of his eyes, the conjunctival membranes, were still white. In jaundice they turn yellow.

'Any change in the colour of your urine?' I asked him.

He shook his head.

'Not exceptionally dark?'

'No.'

When a patient has jaundice their urine will usually be much darker than usual.

It was already pretty clear that Mr Todcaster was not jaundiced. And I strongly suspected that I knew the cause of his strange skin colouration.

I opened my bag, took out my stethoscope and listened to his chest. His heart and lungs were fine. I examined his abdomen. I could feel nothing amiss. His liver was definitely not enlarged.

'What medicines are you taking?' I asked Mr Todcaster.

He waved a hand over the pills on the two tables.

I looked at the pills on the table nearest to me and then walked round the bed and looked at the pills on the other table. I could see nothing that would explain the skin pigmentation.

'Have you changed your diet recently?' I asked.

'I put myself on a vegetable juice diet,' he told me. 'Drinking lots of juice helps strengthen the immune system and fight off cancer.'

'Lots of carrot juice?' I asked.

'Oh yes,' he agreed. 'I drink several pints of fresh carrot juice every day. It's good for the eyes.'

Carrots contain a substance called carotene which is the chemical which gives them their colour. Actually, carotene is the chemical which gives all sorts of plants and animals their colouring. Pink flamingos are pink because their usual diet includes shrimp which are rich in a carotenoid. A rich man whom I once knew had a lake which he stocked with pink flamingos. He thought the birds would add a splash of colour to his estate. He was very disappointed when his flamingos all turned white because they were fed a carotene free diet.

Carrots have a reputation for enabling people to see in the dark because the carotene they contain can be converted into a form of vitamin A and without vitamin A, human beings develop night blindness. This is a scientific fact but although people who are deficient in carotene can be helped if they eat carrots, a surfeit of carrots won't improve normal eyesight. The myth that eating carrots improves the eyesight of healthy people was made popular during the Second World War when the British Air Ministry put out press releases claiming that British fighter pilots were able to shoot down enemy aircraft in the dark because they had better night vision. The Ministry releases claimed that the marvellous night time vision was a result of them eating lots of carrots. The story was a deliberately concocted fiction designed to disguise the fact that British aircraft were equipped with a new-fangled invention called radar.

The whole thing got out of hand and when sugar rationing meant that sweets became pretty well unobtainable, children were encouraged to put their pennies into slot machines which served up carrots on a stick. The myth that carrots improved eyesight became established.

Decades after the end of the Second World War, enthusiasts were still encouraging one another to eat vast quantities of carrots and it was widely believed that carrots were a ‘good thing’ and that it was impossible to have too much of this particular ‘good thing’.

Sadly, this was nonsense and many people were made seriously ill by eating too many carrots. At least one man died as a result of drinking too much carrot juice.

Fortunately, it didn’t seem to me as if Mr Todcaster had done himself any permanent harm.

Carotenemia, the condition in which the skin turns orange as a result of eating too many carrots, or drinking too much carrot juice, is reversible and in most patients the condition causes no long-term damage.

‘Your skin has turned orange because of all the carrot juice you’ve been drinking,’ I told him. ‘There’s nothing wrong with you.’

He stared at me in disbelief. He actually looked disappointed.

You might have thought that a man who thinks he is dying and then finds out that he has simply been consuming too many carrots might be overjoyed.

But Mr Todcaster moaned a good deal about having to give up his carrot juice.

‘What happens if I carry on with the carrot juice?’ he demanded, rather aggressively. ‘Carrot juice is very good for you.’

‘If you carry on drinking so much carrot juice then your skin will stay orange and you will die,’ I told him.

He said he would think about what to do.

I left him and gingerly made my way back down the steep and narrow staircase. It was so steep that it was more like going down a ladder than going down a flight of stairs. As I descended, it seemed to me to be a miracle that neither Mrs Todcaster nor her son had fallen down the stairs. It was also a miracle that they had been able to resist the temptation to give each other a good push.

‘How long has he got?’ demanded Mrs Todcaster when I finally reached the bottom of the staircase and, relieved, stepped back into the living room.

‘Probably another thirty years,’ I told her.

‘He’s not dying?’

‘Not at the moment.’

‘Well, bugger me,’ said Mrs Todcaster, sounding very disappointed that she wouldn’t be able to attend her son’s funeral, do a good deal of wailing and bathe in assorted sympathy and commiseration. She sniffed and turned back to watching whatever it was that she could see through the interference on her elderly television set.

I was away from the house for just over an hour and when I returned to Bilbury Grange, I thoroughly expected to see our five sheep standing in the field, bald and cool and looking very summery without their winter coats.

But that was not what I saw.

The five sheep were spread around the field and they all still possessed their winter coats. They were lying down, chewing the odd blade of grass.

As they lolled about, quietly chewing blades of grass and occasional daisies, the five sheep carefully watched the two men standing in the middle of the field.

The shearer and his assistant had clearly been doing a good deal of chasing around. They were both now red-faced, sweating heavily and breathing with some difficulty, and they were standing with their hands on their knees. I could hear their heavy breathing from the spot at the fence where I met Mr Kennett. He was standing some distance from the five-barred gate which provided access to the field and was far too sensible to get involved with chasing five very independent-minded sheep around a ten acre field on a hot day.

The shearer and his assistant had set up their shearing equipment, powered shears and a diesel engine, in a corner of the field close to the gate. I looked across at their impressive looking equipment. Sheep shearers have moved with the times and no longer use the old-fashioned hand powered shears. I don’t blame them. The last time I saw a man who sheared sheep by hand he had thick calluses on his palms and fingers and had, over the years, lost two fingers to his own sharp shears. Modern shearers can usually shear a flock of sheep without spilling a drop of blood.

‘Things are going according to plan, then,’ I murmured.

Mr Kennett, chewing on a long piece of grass, nodded. ‘Good entertainment,’ he said. ‘They thought they’d nearly got one of ‘em a few minutes ago but she slipped through their fingers like a wing three quarter avoiding a couple of clumsy forwards. They were never even close.’

I couldn’t help noticing that Patsy’s father was now wearing a different pair of spectacles to the ones he had been wearing when I’d left him. This second pair had tortoiseshell frames and gave him a vaguely academic appearance.

I immediately guessed where the two new pairs of spectacles had come from.

Half of my patients seemed to be struggling to cope with new spectacles which they had bought from Peter

Marshall.

Since the glasses which they had purchased had all been made for another pair of eyes they were, not surprisingly, having some difficulty in finding a pair which actually improved their eyesight.

‘Have they been chasing the sheep around since I left?’ I asked.

‘They have,’ said Mr Kennett. He moved the new spectacles down his nose an inch and tried looking over them. He pushed them back and tried looking through them. Finally, he took the spectacles off his nose and held them a few inches away from his face. Then he put them back on his nose and tried squinting. ‘There has been a lot of chasing, a lot of diving, a lot of very poor tackling and absolutely no catching. The sheep are winning hands down at the moment and I don’t expect that to change at any time in the future.’

We stood for a few minutes and watched the shearer and his son.

The funny thing was that the sheep seemed to make absolutely no real effort to evade the men – they slid past them with the greatest of ease.

For a moment, I thought the two men were going to catch Miss Houdini but she sidestepped them very neatly and was, within a moment, back chewing grass while the two men, thwarted, lay flat on the ground.

‘If I were choosing the England rugby team she’d be my first pick,’ said Mr Kennett, nodding towards Miss Houdini, who had been given her name because she seemed capable of escaping from virtually any situation. He took off the spectacles he was wearing and put them into his left hand jacket pocket. From his right hand pocket he took another pair of glasses. This third pair had simple steel frames in the style made famous by John Lennon.

‘I needed some new glasses,’ he explained unnecessarily. ‘And the last lot I bought from the opticians in Barnstaple were damned expensive. These were a bargain. I bought three pairs for £1.’

‘From Peter Marshall’s shop,’ I said. Mr Kennett is a cautious, sensible man who does not throw his money around. But not even he is immune to one of Peter Marshall’s marketing schemes.

‘They were ridiculously good value,’ he said. ‘You just pick out any three pairs from a huge box. I paid nearly £80 for my last pair.’ He paused and thought about it again. ‘Three pairs for £1! Amazing value.’

‘I was there when he took delivery of the damned things,’ I said. ‘He’s got boxes full of them.’ Mr Kennett was just one of many who had been unable to resist Peter’s offer. I’d spotted our local postman climbing out of a ditch. He had been riding around the village on his bicycle while wearing his new spectacles when he’d become dizzy and fallen off his machine.

It had not occurred to any of the buyers that a bargain is only a bargain if it does what it’s supposed to do. Nor had it occurred to them that the chances of finding a pair of spectacles that matched their requirements were somewhere between slim and non-existent.

‘It’s just a question of finding a pair I can see through,’ said Mr Kennett. ‘I don’t care what they look like as long as I can see and they don’t give me headaches.’ He scratched his head. ‘It looks as if I might have to go back to Peter’s shop and buy myself another pound’s worth.’

Mr Kennett is a farmer, and so hates spending money unnecessarily. He always says he’s simply careful with his cash but his wife and daughters, who love him dearly, all describe him as being firmly and permanently settled on the mean side of generous.

While we had been talking, the shearers had come up with a plan.

The senior shearer stood in the middle of the field and ordered his assistant to get behind Sarah-Louise and to shout at her until she started to move. The shearer then tried to position himself directly in front of her so that he would be able to grab her as she trotted past.

Naturally, this plan proved as ineffective as all the others.

Sarah-Louise walked forward until she was about six feet away from the shearer and then suddenly, without any warning, she turned sharp right and started to run. She was having great fun and doubtless thought that the ‘catch me if you can’ game she was playing with the shearer had been organised entirely for her benefit. A ewe, even quite a large one, can accelerate at an extraordinary speed and it can probably run far faster, and for longer, than any human athlete. It can certainly run faster than an out of condition sheep shearer who has spent too many lunchtimes eating steak and kidney pie and too many evenings drinking beer. A grown ewe can run at 30 miles per hour and it can keep that speed up for a surprising length of time. Moreover, its four foot drive configuration means that it can change direction without apparently losing speed and no human can do that.

I stood and watched the shearer and his pal for a few minutes longer and then I took pity on them. I called them over to where we were standing.

‘I think it’s time to get on with the shearing,’ I said. The two men were red-faced, soaked with sweat and out of breath. They also looked embarrassed.

‘You two are out of condition,’ said Mr Kennett.

‘Why didn’t you bring the dog?’ asked the shearer’s assistant.

‘They won’t take any notice of him either,’ said Mr Kennett. ‘The last time I brought a dog over here the sheep terrified the life out of him. It took him a month to recover and he was never the same again.’

‘If you can catch those darned sheep I’ll shear ‘em for free,’ said the shearer.

‘Get your clippers ready,’ I told him. ‘I’ll have all five ready and waiting before you’ve started the generator.’

The shearer looked at me and did his best not to scoff. But he and his assistant strode off quickly towards the spot by the gate where they’d left the clippers and the rest of the equipment.

‘Come on, you lot!’ I called, climbing over the fence into the field.

The sheep, hearing my voice, turned and looked in my direction.

‘Come over here,’ I said.

The sheep started running towards me.

I walked towards the spot where the shearer was busy trying to start his generator. Mr Kennett, who prefers to go through gates rather than to climb over fences, walked along the other side of the fence.

The five sheep and I arrived a minute or so before the shearer managed to start his generator.

‘Ready and waiting!’ I said.

‘Well, bugger me if that ain’t the strangest thing I’ve ever seen,’ said the shearer. His son just stared in astonishment.

‘It’s just a knack,’ I said modestly. I didn’t think it necessary to point out that there were only five sheep in the whole world who would respond in such a way to my voice.

With me standing next to them, the sheep didn’t even move when the generator eventually started to hum. They stood there, patient and obedient, knowing that they were safe and would probably receive a couple of digestive biscuits each if they behaved themselves. It took the shearer less than ten minutes to shear all five. There wasn’t a nick or a scratch on any of them.

Afterwards the shearer refused to let me pay him. ‘I thought I’d seen everything where sheep is concerned,’ he said, shaking his head. He even offered me a job as their travelling sheep dog. ‘With you calling in the sheep we could get through twice as many as we do now,’ he said.

As the two men drove away in their battered Dormobile, Mr Kennett wrapped up the five fleeces and bundled them into the back of his truck. He then presented me with two bottles of his parsnip wine; as potent a brew as has ever been made with the aid of the humble parsnip.

I fetched a packet of digestive biscuits from the kitchen.

Our fleeceless sheep deserved a reward.

The Brownlow Country Hotel

My predecessor and mentor Dr Brownlow had lived in a wonderful old house in the centre of the village of Bilbury. You can walk to it easily from the Duck and Puddle. You turn right, follow the road around the village green and take the first lane on the right (it's signposted to Combe Martin). Dr Brownlow's old house is a hundred yards on the right. The black painted iron gates, the largest I've ever seen, hang from two huge stone pillars upon each of which rests a massive stone griffin. On either side of the pillars is a nine foot high stone wall which separates the road from the gardens. The wall must have cost a fortune to build. Fortunately, it was built well and shows no sign of disrepair. A long driveway, flanked by seventy foot tall poplars, leads up to the house which is built entirely of grey stone, softened slightly by several acres of green ivy.

Dr Brownlow who lived in the house for many years is now buried in the garden in a splendid stone vault which was paid for not out of his estate but by a subscription raised by the villagers. I was very proud that it was Dr Brownlow's patients who paid for his tomb. He would have been proud too.

The house has towers, battlements and mullion windows and a Union Jack flag flies from a pole standing to the front of the central tower. Directly underneath the flag, and flanked by two huge stone lions, is a front door which is 12 feet high and decorated with scores of solid metal studs. These were designed, I have always assumed, to give battering rams a hard time. The roof, like the roofs of all old houses, is made with tiles which taper in size from the top to the bottom: with the small tiles at the ridge and the larger tiles towards the eaves. It wasn't until around 1850 that builders in Britain started to build house roofs with tiles of a uniform size.

The inside of the house is, as you might expect from the outside, unmistakeably gothic. A long corridor, around ten feet wide, runs through the centre of the building, with the walls on either side decorated with huge old oil paintings which are hung in massive gilt frames. The dining room is dominated by a great stone fireplace and the oak panelling in the billiard room is richly decorated with wooden carvings. The whole place costs a large fortune to heat.

Dr Brownlow has a son who works as a GP in Barnstaple but the two had not been on good terms for many years and when he died Dr Brownlow left the house to me with the suggestion that it be turned into a small hospital.

'Nothing elaborate,' he had said. 'Somewhere friendly and local for patients to be looked after when they're too ill to stay at home but not really ill enough to be in a proper hospital.'

Long before the Industrial Age, hospitals were built like cathedrals, in order to lift the soul and ease the mind; hospital buildings were decorated with carvings, works of art, flowers and perfumes. The ancient Greeks had musicians playing in hospital corridors.

Dr Brownlow felt (as I do) that modern hospitals are built with no regard for the spirit, the eye or the soul. They are bare, more like prisons than temples, designed to concentrate the mind on pain, fear and death. Where there are windows they are positioned in such a way that patients can't see out of them (though even if they could they probably wouldn't be able to see anything more enthralling or uplifting than the refuse bins or the air conditioning units).

In most hospitals, it is difficult to believe that the staff understands the meaning of the word 'dignity' – not, at least, when applied to patients. Patients are talked to as if they were infants, invariably being addressed by their first names. In many hospitals, patients are given revealing little gowns to wear. These awful gowns hide nothing from general view but patients are instructed that they must be worn without underwear. Patrons in the seediest type of nightclub would be arrested if they wore such attire. Where is dignity in such circumstances?

And, of course, big, proper hospitals are dangerous places.

There are many hazards but the greatest danger is that a patient may catch a hospital infection. As a result of worsening hospital hygiene (there is clear evidence that in British hospitals neither doctors nor nurses wash their hands properly or often enough) infections are now a significant health threat. In some hospitals, these days the sheets aren't changed when patents leave and when patients arrive. Instead, to save money, the sheets are just turned over. Top to bottom. That sort of practice is frowned upon in the sleaziest of seaside boarding houses but hospital staff find it acceptable. It is, of course, the administrators who decide that this will be done. But it is the nurses who supervise its doing. In a State-run health service, the staff become institutionalised. They work for the Government and they are too afraid for their careers to speak out when they are told to do things which they know are wrong.

'I fear that things are just going to get worse,' Dr Brownlow said to me a few months before he died, 'I hate to think how dangerous hospitals will be by the 1990s and the end of the 20th century.'

To all this must be added the fact that modern hospitals tend to be bureaucratic and dangerously overstaffed with administrators. Most modern hospital administrators seem to be convinced that hospitals will only run smoothly and efficiently when there are no patients at all.

And so Dr Brownlow, who understood just how bad hospitals had become, and who spent his final weeks at home, being cared for by his faithful butler Bradshaw, wanted his permanent legacy to be a small, friendly hospital run by people who genuinely cared about the sick and the weak and the frail. He knew that we couldn't build a hospital equipped with operating theatres and intensive care units. But he believed that with the correct intentions we would be able to create a cottage hospital that would provide the villagers of Bilbury with a haven and a refuge at their time of need.

And so, in addition to leaving me his house, Dr Brownlow also gave me £50,000 in cash (via a simple ploy which I described in Bilbury Village and which could, I suppose, be loosely described as entirely justifiable tax avoidance) to spend on converting his former home into a cottage hospital.

Although he was a charitable man, Dr Brownlow himself had never had much faith in big, formal charities – the ones with posh offices in London and battalions of highly paid executives. He always said that he would rather give his money direct to the needy rather than simply put it into a collecting tin and allow some city based charity to spend it on administrative, salaries and expenses. Many of the biggest charities spend more than three quarters of the money they receive on salaries, pensions and similar costs. Patsy and I could see no point in that sort of charitable giving and agreed with Dr Brownlow's philosophy.

Our attitude on this matter had been hardened when, a week or so earlier, Patsy and I had been in Barnstaple buying linen for the new hospital when we had been approached by a young man collecting money for a charity which claimed to look after people who had fallen on hard times; he told us that the charity specialised in caring for the homeless, the weak and the elderly.

'If I give you £1 how much of the pound will go to the homeless?' Patsy asked the man.

He had looked at her as if she were mad.

'How much will go on administration?' I asked. 'How much will be spent on advertisements, marketing and producing leaflets?'

The young man didn't know any of the answers to those questions.

'Are you being paid a salary to collect money?' I asked him.

He said that he was being paid and he said that he and the organisation for which he worked would prefer it if I signed a direct debit form so that my bank could give them money every month.

Across the street there was an elderly man wrapped up in a blanket.

'If I give you £1,' I said to the young man, 'how much of it will your organisation give to that old fellow over there?'

The young man stared at me as if I were in need of strong medication. (This is a look which I know well.)

We left the charity employee and went over and talked to the old man. He turned out to be not as old as he appeared. His name was Tim and he was, he told us, in his fifties. His decline had been swift. His wife had died and his world fell apart. He lost the love of his life and he lost his partner in life too.

Together they had run a small business. He had been a chimney sweep and had done odd jobs. During the summer he had done a bit of gardening. He'd cut people's lawns, trimmed hedges, pulled up weeds and generally tided things up for them. She had done the accounts and booked the appointments. Without her, the business had folded. He had no inclination for paperwork or for collecting the money he was owed and within a year he had lost his van, his house and his possessions. Now he had nothing but an old anorak, a woolly hat and a filthy blanket. And he had, he admitted, a growing tendency to try to forget his predicament by drinking alcohol.

'How much alcohol do you drink?' I asked him.

Nearly all tramps and homeless people over 40 are alcoholics. Nearly all the homeless under 40 are drug users.

He said that he got through a bottle of sherry a day but that sometimes one bottle wasn't enough and that if it was particularly cold he needed one and a half bottles to get through the day. He admitted that he also smoked 20 cigarettes a day. He said he was confident that he could give up the sherry if his circumstances improved but was honest enough to admit that he might have more difficulty giving up the cigarettes.

Patsy and I each gave him one of the new £1 coins. To us it seemed better to cut out the middleman and give the money directly to someone who needed it.

As we carried on our way we agreed that we would look out for him whenever we visited Barnstaple and that he would be our moral, 'direct debit' obligation. We both desperately wished we could do more.

The big charities boast of changing the world but all most of them really do is enrich themselves.

Maybe we could find a way to do more to help him.

We both remembered Mr Parfitt, our gardener. He had been sleeping rough when we'd first met him. Today, he was a happily married man with a loving wife, a beautiful home and reliable employment.

But miracles like that don't happen often.

Meanwhile, we continued on our shopping expedition.

Patsy chose the linen and the other things we needed for our new hospital and I stood and nodded wisely. From time to time I carried bundles back to the Rolls Royce.

As far as I could discover, Bilbury had never had a hospital of its own and villagers who needed nursing care, palliative care, had always had to go into hospital in Barnstaple or Exeter. Most, if not all villagers, disliked this idea very much. Their relatives and friends all lived in Bilbury and it's quite a trek from the village to Barnstaple. People who have to rely on public transport find the journey next to impossible. There are no trains, of course, and buses are almost as rare as black swans.

After Dr Brownlow had died, I had appointed his former butler, Bradshaw, as my district nurse but I also decided that he would be the only person suitable to take on the responsibility as the Matron of the new cottage hospital.

To my astonishment and delight, Bradshaw had, within less than two days, found enough volunteers to staff the hospital without our having to hire any professional nurses. Most of the people whose services Bradshaw enlisted had no academic nursing qualifications but they were women of a certain age and they all had a quality which is far more important than any number of diplomas: they were all intrinsically kind people.

They wanted to help because it pleased them to be able to help people. They realised that people who are sick will get better quicker (or, if there is to be no getting better, reach the end of their days in greater peace and contentment) if they feel that they are among friends, and feel that the people around them genuinely care for their physical, mental and spiritual well-being. The people Bradshaw recruited all understood that people who are ill need to be cared for. They understood that a good nurse knows when to be attentive and when not to be fussy. They knew that providing a patient with a clean nightie, or doing her hair, or helping her put on a little make-up, can all do far more for her state of mind and her spirit than wearing a well-starched bib, putting on a cap at the correct angle or knowing how to fold a neat hospital corner when making a bed. And they understood that people who are ill or convalescing or dying are all helped if they can be cared for and treated within a community they know. When people fall ill abroad one of the first things they want to know is 'when can I go to a hospital back home?'

Britons who fall ill in Germany want to be cared for in Britain. People from New York want to be in New York if they must be ill. And the people of Bilbury were no different: if they had to be poorly then they'd rather be poorly in Bilbury than anywhere else.

Of course, they knew very well that if they needed to have an operation or to undergo extensive tests and investigations then they would need to be in a large hospital in a large town. But if they just needed to be looked after then they would, all things being equal, prefer to be looked after in Bilbury.

Our plans to provide Bilbury with its own small hospital did not go completely according to plan, of course.

Indeed, in my life, 'things' seem to prefer to avoid going anywhere near to plan.

Right from the beginning the local health service administrators were obstructive, it sometimes seemed deliberately so, and it quickly became apparent that converting Dr Brownlow's home into a hospital was going to be far more difficult than we had thought.

The health authority staff, of whom there were enough to form two full rugby teams with enough left over to make the teas and to stand on the touch lines and cheer, had enough red tape to wrap up Bilbury ready for posting off to Timbuktu.

As soon as we had solved one problem they thought of another problem.

For every answer we found they had another question.

The whole thing had begun to remind me of a fairground game which has recently become popular; the one where you hit one springy, toy mole on the head and find that as soon as the one you've hit disappears another one immediately pops up.

It seemed to me that we would never be able to defeat the doubters and the pessimists at the health authority. You cannot ever win against such people because there are always far more questions than there can ever be answers.

There were endless questions about staffing and about the type of beds we would use and the size of the staff dining facilities and, most of all, about the administration. How would we recruit and train our staff? What uniforms would they wear? What pensions would we offer our staff? How big an office would the chief administrator be given? What forms would we have and how would we ensure that their forms were filled in correctly and distributed, at the appropriate time intervals, to the appropriate departments in the appropriate parts of the National Health Service? There were even questions about the size, shape and weight of the filing cabinets we would use for storing the forms.

It was Bradshaw who thought of the solution. And the utter simplicity of his good-sense solution delighted me.

'Are we going to be performing major surgery on any of our patients?' he asked me.

'Good heavens, no!' I replied. I know my limits as far as surgery is concerned. I can sew up a wound and remove the sutures when they have done their job. I can remove a small cyst without too much effort. In a dire emergency I could probably remove a misbehaving appendix. But major surgery? No thank you! Despite my jokey suggestion to Patsy about opening a cosmetic surgery clinic I prefer to leave surgery to the masked professionals; the men and women who can murmur ‘Scalpel, nurse!’ in the certain knowledge that when they are given one they will know exactly what to do with it.

‘Am I right in thinking that our aim is to provide the sick, the elderly, the frail and the dying with pleasant surroundings where they can be looked after properly?’

‘You’re absolutely right in thinking that,’ I said.

‘Then we really don’t need to be registered as a hospital, doctor. We don’t need to have anything to do with the health authorities. Why don’t we simply call our establishment a hotel,’ suggested Bradshaw.

I stared at him, in absolute awe.

‘We could refer to our patients as ‘guests’ and we could still provide them with the sort of care they require,’ continued Bradshaw. ‘But the health service people would have no authority over our plans. We would probably have to satisfy the busy body authorities who regulate hotels but their requirements are relatively simple. We would need to have a fire extinguisher on every floor and clean surfaces in the kitchen. Compared to the hoops we would have to jump through to run a hospital there would be very little red tape to worry us.’

I had to work hard to suppress the desire to hug the old man. ‘You are,’ I said to him, ‘a genius.’

But although he originally trained as a nurse, Bradshaw had spent many decades as a butler. You don’t hug butlers. It simply isn’t done.

So instead of hugging him, I held out a hand and we shook hands to confirm and celebrate our change of direction.

‘Instead of being matron at the Brownlow Cottage Hospital you will, I hope, accept the position of Manager of the Brownlow Country Hotel.’

To my delight, the brilliant, the incomparably inventive Mr Bradshaw enthusiastically accepted the appointment.

‘I was worried about what uniform would be appropriate for a matron,’ he confessed. ‘I am not a matronly type. But as a hotel manager I shall wear tails and a white tie. I think that would be appropriate.’

‘Absolutely,’ I agreed. ‘Tails and a white tie at all times. And perhaps, if I might be so bold, a fresh carnation in the button hole?’

‘A green one, I think, sir,’ said Bradshaw.

Jeremy the Cat

We have for some years shared our home with two cats; one is called Emily and the other is known as Sophie.

We acquired both animals when they were kittens. They came from the home of a pair of spinsters called Miss Phillips and Miss Tweedsmuir.

But we acquired our third cat in a very different way.

Winifred Arnott-Toynbee had been married to a British diplomat who had served in embassies all over the world. She lived alone in a cottage overlooking the Bilbury village green, the centre of our small community.

Traditional English villages, the ones which have existed for a thousand years or more, rather than the artificial ones created more recently by unholy conspiracies founded by builders and local planners, tend to fall into one of three main types.

First, there is the village which exists around a central square or a green (the ‘village green’ which is famously used for cricket matches, maypole dancing and fairs).

Second, there is the village which is strung out along a single street.

And third there is the village which, although it clearly exists as a collection of houses, cottages and farms, appears to have been created in a haphazard fashion and to have no pattern whatsoever.

The archetypal village green, the feature which defines the first type of village, invariably has two features.

First, there is usually a church, which either stands upon the green itself or is situated close by, and which usually has a simple tower rather than the sort of impressive spire which only started to appear on churches built in the 13th century and later. If there is any seating at all in the church it will consist of just a few oak pews although other embellishments might be added much later, as the village grows and some of its inhabitants grow wealthy and become benefactors.

Many Devon churches have been rebuilt or enlarged as the centuries have rolled by but the church in Bilbury has changed very little.

Other churches had bells put in their towers and new windows put in – some with stained class. But Bilbury’s church has remained steadfastly untouched.

The chapel which is attached to Dr Brownlow’s old house, and which was built in the 16th century using blocks of granite, is larger and more impressive than Bilbury church.

And, of course, all self-respecting village greens always have a well.

Of the two ingredients, church and well, the well was, of course, always considered to be the most vital for it was the availability of a water supply which made the village possible. A church might help provide for the spiritual comfort of the villagers but without a reliable well the villagers would have either moved away or died.

Apart from a church, and some sort of stonework around the well, it has always been the case that the only buildings allowed on the village green were a smithy and a school.

Bilbury’s green has never had anything built upon it, though the well, now disused, is currently covered with a low stone wall and has a heavy wooden lid which is chained into position to prevent children falling in and drowning. In the 19th century two small brothers, one aged six and the other eight-years-old, fell into the uncovered well and drowned. The village didn’t need a health and safety official to decide what had to be done and the wooden lid was put on top of the well as quickly as it could be made.

Actually, Bilbury is rather unusual in having a proper village green.

Most villages in Devon exist around a central square, rather than a green, and although some squares have been built on, visitors to Devon can still find many villages (some of them have grown into towns, of course) which still retain their square.

A century or so ago, the square would have had houses all around it, some small and some large and very elegant, and it would have been the site of the weekly or twice weekly market where stallholders from miles around would arrive to sell their wares. It would also have been the site favoured by travelling fairs and circuses. Some squares were huge because they were the site of the local sheep market.

Today, the majority of village squares are given over to car parking and the houses which once stood around the square were long ago turned into shops and offices. The baker, the ironmonger and the banker now work alongside the local solicitor, the pharmacist and, unless he has moved out into a brand new health centre in some inaccessible part of the town, the local doctor too.

With the square surrounded by shops there is little need for market stalls to appear once or twice a week, and though in some towns the markets still take place, the stall holders are usually selling bags and jackets made by Peruvian peasants rather than home-made bread or sausages.

Whether a village has a square or a green, the principle purpose was much the same: to enable the villagers to defend themselves against attack – either from marauding bands of bandits or from wild animals.

There was originally often very little space, if any at all, between the individual houses around the square and the openings which did exist could easily be closed at night. With the gaps between properties closed off it would be easy to defend the village and livestock could be driven into the village square to protect them from marauding bandits or from wolves.

(The same sort of basic pattern exists in countries such as Africa where huts are grouped around a circular pound wherein animals can be kept at night, to protect them from lions.)

We often forget just how few people used to live in England in the days when Bilbury was a 'new' village.

Just a thousand years ago, the total population of England was about a million and a quarter people.

The whole of Devon, including the city of Exeter, was then home to no more than 70,000 people – that's only twice the population of Barnstaple today.

Devon was at something of a disadvantage compared to many other English counties in that there was very little stone for building. As a result, many of the older houses, cottages and bridges were built not of stone but of wood. Even bridges were built largely with wood and the vital bridges at Barnstaple and Bideford were built of timber when they were first erected in the 13th century.

That's the end of the scene-setting digression.

Bilbury, of course, has a village green, rather than a square, and the village has changed very little for a thousand years or more.

A peasant, transplanted by time machine from the Middle Ages, would perhaps stare shocked at the items for sale at Peter Marshall's shop, but he would recognise the village as home. There probably weren't many plastic combs, aerosol cans of deodorant or suspender belts on sale a thousand years ago.

I never met Mr Arnott-Toynbee because he died of heatstroke in some very hot country long before I qualified as a doctor and so when Mrs Arnott-Toynbee came to Bilbury, and bought a cottage facing the village green, she came alone – although she did bring with her several trunks full of mementoes, photographs and furniture which she and her husband had collected. Her arrival in the village pre-dated mine by some years.

Most of the many photographs which she brought with her were of him, her or both of them posing alongside local and visiting dignitaries.

There were several photographs of them with various ambassadors and one of them posing, along with half a dozen other people, with Sir Winston Churchill when he was the British Prime Minister. These pictures, each one carefully presented in a silver frame, were clearly considered to be the cream of the collection, and sufficient to represent the apogee of Mr Arnott-Toynbee's career.

Mrs Arnott-Toynbee was not a warm person; she was not the sort of old lady with whom one could chat or even share a joke. She wrote poetry and, for some reason best known to herself, wrote poems where the first words of each line rhymed. She wrote poems about slavery and pollution and I believe she disapproved of both, though I was never entirely sure of this and it was not possible to draw a conclusion from the poetry.

Years working in the diplomatic service had made her very conscious of her position. Even though it had been her husband who had been the diplomat she had allowed herself to acquire all the mannerisms usually associated with minor royalty. As a country doctor I was clearly considered to be a rather inferior sort of person; probably fitting into her social hierarchy somewhere between one of the gardeners and an assistant cultural attaché. She was not exceptional in this. I remember once having a couple of former diplomatic corps employees as my patients. She had been a senior housekeeper but he had been a lowly security guard and decades after they had retired, she still treated him as though he were a minor functionary. She ordered him about as though she were royalty and he were a junior footman. She treated me as a servant. He, on the other hand, treated me as an equal.

Mrs Arnott-Toynbee had been ill for almost all her time in Bilbury but she had not been very ill.

She had most of the ailments usually associated with ladies of a certain age.

She was a little deaf, a little blind and a little dizzy on occasion. She had varicose veins which resulted in her ankles swelling and she had osteoarthritis in her hips and her knees. She had slightly raised blood pressure for which Dr Brownlow had prescribed medication (and which she would not allow me to change) and she suffered from chronic constipation which she herself treated with a daily bowl full of prunes. I tried on many occasions to explain to her that she had, over the years, eaten far too many prunes and that the dried plums had by now probably damaged the muscles of her bowel and created a new type of constipation. I suggested that she tried to wean herself off the morning bowl of fruit, perhaps simply cutting down the number of prunes per serving, but Mrs Arnott-Toynbee was a keen believer in the value of the prune as a digestive aid and she was not about to accept advice from a young doctor on the subject. What could I possibly know about the value of prunes? The laxative value of the prune can probably be traced back two thousand years.

These minor ailments were not threatening but they were inconvenient and Mrs Arnott-Toynbee rather leant on them; they were, in their way, essential to her because they helped explain her inability to do as much as she had done when she had been younger.

It was no longer her fault that she could not run everything as she had once run the social group for the diplomatic wives, it was the fault of her silly physical frailties. The illnesses were, it seemed to me, essential to her well-being. I suspected that if they were not taken seriously then she would probably go into a steep and serious decline for then she would have to come to terms with the fact that she was simply getting old. And so I always treated her as an invalid and I think that reassured her.

At the age of 93, Mrs Arnott-Toynbee developed cancer of the bowel and eventually it became clear that this was the condition that was going to kill her. Had the prunes damaged her bowel? I have no idea. Had the prunes masked her condition and delayed the point at which she consulted me for advice? Possibly.

She refused to go into hospital, or even into the Brownlow Country Hotel, and so that she could stay at home during her final weeks and days she hired a nurse from an agency in London. She had no relatives to call on since although Mrs Arnott-Toynbee had a daughter called Loki (named after the Norse god of Mischief, since she was born when Mrs Arnott-Toynbee was being terribly important in one of the Scandinavian countries) Loki had had nothing whatsoever to do with her mother for years and I had never seen her. The nurse, a sour woman in her forties, was hired to provide constant care and to this end she lived in a room in the house.

I visited the old lady two and sometimes three times a week and although there wasn't much I could do, I prescribed whatever medicines might ease her symptoms and help her through the final stage of her condition.

She was very near the end when she told me to sit down on the chair which had been placed beside her bed. She said she had something very important to tell me. I obediently sat down and waited.

'My cat Jeremy is twelve-years-old,' she told me. 'I have had him for all of that time and now that I am dying I do not want him to go to live with anyone else.'

I looked at her, frowning. I did not understand what she was telling me. Or, perhaps, I did not want to understand.

'I want you to give him an injection to put him to sleep,' she said. 'When the Viking kings died their servants were buried with them. I don't have any servants anymore and so I want my cat to be buried with me.'

I was given instructions to take the cat away, to inject him with something suitably lethal, to arrange for him to be cremated and to bring back the ashes in a small wooden box. Mrs Arnott-Toynbee had the small wooden box ready and waiting and she handed it to me when she had finished giving me my instructions.

I was as horrified as I think most people would be.

I took Jeremy, in a bamboo cat carrier, and the wooden box for his ashes and headed back to Bilbury Grange feeling very angry. How dare this damned woman decide to have her perfectly healthy cat sacrificed for her own vanity?

When I got back home I undid the catch on the door to the cat carrier and Jeremy strolled out, a little timid but nevertheless curious about his new surroundings. Jeremy was a short-haired cat, mainly black with white socks and a patch of white on his tummy. He looked like a feline gentleman ready for a night out on the tiles.

'Who's this?' asked Patsy.

I explained.

Patsy was as appalled as I had been.

We watched as Emily and Sophie walked around Jeremy and inspected him. After a few minutes they wandered over to their eating area. Jeremy followed. To our astonishment Emily and Sophie stood quite still while Jeremy lapped up some milk.

'They like him!' said Patsy, delighted.

It was clear to us both that whatever else happened, Jeremy would not be going back to Mrs Arnott-Toynbee in the little wooden box she had provided. Jeremy was now our third cat.

'What are you going to do about the box?' asked Patsy. 'Mrs Arnott-Toynbee is expecting to have Jeremy's ashes in her little box. You have to put something into there – she might take a look.'

That bit was easy. I walked up the garden and was gone no more than five minutes.

'She'll never know,' said Patsy, examining the box, when I returned.

'She'll have no idea,' I agreed. 'Ashes are ashes are ashes.'

Mrs Arnott-Toynbee died three days later and was buried clutching a small wooden box containing ash from our bonfire site.

The Old Railway Station

I have always had a fondness for trains in general and for branch lines and small railway stations in particular. You can sit quietly on a train and read a book. You can think, talk or work. You can eat and you can sleep if you are tired. Or you can, of course, look out of the window. Everywhere in the country has a view but some places have better views than others. A train journey gives the traveller a chance to look at all the available views without having to worry about road signs, traffic policemen or dangerous corners.

Moreover, it has, for many years, been my belief that the best way to see the heart and soul of a town is to arrive by train. The railway lines invariably run through the back part of the town, the scruffy bits, the engine of the town if you will.

From the carriage it is usually possible to see the rows of back to back terraced houses, the second-hand car lots, the small garages where grease-stained mechanics do clever things with recalcitrant engines and battered bodywork, the small industrial units where unseen workers produce Christmas crackers, plastic shoe horns, parts for motor cars and shop signs. Each small factory will have grown up out of some entrepreneur’s ambition, enthusiasm and imagination and will have survived, and perhaps thrived, as a result of years of hard work and determination. When I see these small businesses I am always reminded that it is not easy to create a business and that the men and women who have built a new enterprise with their bare hands deserve more recognition than they receive.

Travellers who left a station in the great days of the railways would have invariably found a station hotel nearby; it would have been the smartest local hostelry. In the early decades of the 20th century, the local gentry would have their dinners and dances at the hotel. Organisations such as the Round Table would hold their meetings there. Wedding receptions, silver wedding celebrations and Christmas parties would all be held in the function room where remnants of burst balloons and streamers which had long ago been torn down and discarded would be visible; still tied to light fittings and attached to walls and beams with drawing pins. Successful travelling salesmen would stay at the local railway hotel as would a wide variety of visiting dignitaries.

Today, most of these once great hotels are a mere shadow of their former selves. Grubby, fading and declining they are now rather sad.

If there is still a railway station the hotel will probably be surviving. If the railway station has gone then the hotel will probably be on its last legs.

Either way the area near to the railway station will probably be rather run down.

Near the station there will be the sad remains of once-proud shops, formerly representing the posh end of the town’s commercial possibilities, and, still visible, there will be beautifully made signs for the local pharmacy and drug store, a haberdasher’s, a gentlemen’s outfitters and so on. The shops will now be struggling to survive in a world which favours department stores and chain stores.

Close by there would be a junk shop, with old chairs and broken down washing machines displayed on the pavement in front. And there will be a record shop, with brightly coloured posters in the window and several empty shops which are awaiting ‘development’.

Shoppers who have money to spend will take their purses, wallets and their shopping bags to the High Street, half a mile away, where they can find chain stores and shoe shops, jewellers and maybe a pet shop and an ironmongers.

The houses near to the railway station will be Victorian or Edwardian since most railway stations were built during the feverish years of Victoria’s reign and very few railway stations were built after Edward VII’s death. Each house, whether detached, semi-detached or terraced will have a pillared front gate and a few square feet of stained glass above the front door. The front garden will have been laid to lawn, with a few rose bushes standing to attention beside a crazy paving path and if a stable was required it would have been approached from a lane at the back of the house. The lane and the stables will have long ago disappeared and been replaced by a modern housing development, together with a school.

There will be a pub as well, of course. Probably called the Railway Inn or the King’s Head and not as posh as the station hotel, it will cater for thirsty railway workers and for the men who worked in the factories situated alongside the railway lines into the town.

By the 1960s the pub would have been already declining; the red brick facade chipped and scarred and blackened with railway soot. By the 1970s the end would be in sight.

In my mind the railway station in any town is an important focal point; probably the most important focal point, certainly more vital than the town hall, the statue to a long-forgotten hero (‘But what did he do in the Boer War, Daddy? And what was the Boer War?’), the ornamental fountain that has not worked since 1957, the floral clock which looks like all the other floral clocks in the world or the council buildings that look as if they were designed by a six-year-old architect using a cardboard box as his inspiration.

And so when a railway station closes, loses its purpose, and no longer reverberates to the sound of approaching trains, there is an inevitable sadness accompanying the death.

Some towns never recover from the loss of their railway link to the rest of the world; sinking slowly into a permanent state of lethargy, as though the absence of the rumble and hiss of trains approaching and departing has resulted in the place losing its life, its reason for living and its identity.

For those towns the closure of the railway station invariably marks the beginning of a long, slow, painful end. It is as though the town, having been symbolically cut off from the rest of the world, feels rejected; unworthy of a place in the greater scheme of things.

Bilbury had lost its railway station many years earlier but it was a village not a town and the loss had not had any damaging effect on the village or the community.

Indeed, visitors could be forgiven for not realising that Bilbury had once been served by a railway line at all. Many probably didn’t realise that there had ever been a railway station in Bilbury at all.

Bilbury, and the surrounding area of North Devon, was one of the last districts in England to use wheeled vehicles. Up until the start of the 18th century, people in North Devon who wanted to be somewhere that they were not simply walked. And goods were transported by pack horse and by horse drawn sledge.

But in Victorian times, the enthusiasm for railway transport finally spread to North Devon and a line was built between Barnstaple and Lynton. A narrow gauge line was built across the fields and a specially formed train company purchased some engines and a supply of coaches. As a result, trains had chugged into and out of Bilbury and some of them had actually stopped in the village for there had been a railway station too.

The station, which looked rather like one of those small railway stations which are used to decorate model railway layouts, had been called ‘Bilbury Halt’ because, like most smaller railway stations, the train only stopped there on request. Bilbury Halt was so small a station that it did not even appear on some of the railway maps of that period but it was, nevertheless, real enough and important to the villagers and to travellers and tourists. The stations between Barnstaple and Lynton were, in no particular order: Snapper Halt, Chelfham, Bratton Fleming, Bilbury Halt, Blackmoor, Parracombe Halt and Woody Bay.

If a passenger wanted to alight he would tell the conductor and the conductor would send a message to the driver. If a passenger wanted to board he would inform the station master who would ‘halt’ the train with the wave of a flag. The driver would look out of his cab to see if anyone wanted to board his train. Washing out the station master’s green flag in a bowl of hot, soapy water was the nearest the rural railway station got to technology in those days.

The Lynton to Barnstaple railway, which served Bilbury Halt, first opened in 1898 but there were problems right from the start. Miscalculations meant that there were massive cost overruns and the money paid out for land, and as compensation, was four times the estimated budget. Worse still, the wise burghers of Lynton and Lynmouth insisted on having the Lynton railway station put in a position where it would not be visible either from Lynton or from the lower, twin village of Lynmouth. This was partly through a feeling that a railway station might mar the natural beauty of the locality and partly a result of the fact that a local landowner steadfastly refused to give permission for the line to be continued across his land to a more accessible spot. Sadly, the fact that the Lynton railway station was invisible from the twin villages also meant that it was pretty well inaccessible. Visitors who arrived on foot, as most did, either had to hire a carriage or else walk down a rough path known as Shamble Way which mostly consisted of rough stones, kept that way so that the ponies which carried luggage could find a foothold. The path, which was measured as having a 1 in 4 gradient, was hard work for anyone, let alone the elderly or the infirm, and it was considered so difficult that a handrail was fitted to help locals and travellers haul themselves up and steady themselves when going down.

The original aim was that travellers would be able to get from Barnstaple to Lynton in much less than the three hours that the mail coach took. But things didn’t work out quite as planned. The train managed to travel from Barnstaple to Lynton in under two hours but it then took around an hour to travel from the station down to the beautiful village of Lynmouth, which was where most of the travellers and all of the holidaymakers wanted to go.

An attempt to bring holidaymakers from the resort of Ilfracombe to Lynton failed miserably. In 1903, a very early motorised charabanc service to Parracombe was abandoned when one of the drivers was arrested for driving his vehicle at 8 mph on a public road. The official speed limit on public highways had just been raised to 20 mph and it was widely thought that the local police and magistrates were simply trying to kill the railway in order to protect the business activities of the man who ran a coach and horses between the two towns and the company which, on calm days in summer, took holidaymakers by steamer from Ilfracombe to Lynton and back again.

When motor cars and charabancs started to appear in North Devon the death of the railway was inevitable. The death of the railway was pretty much confirmed when a meeting was held at Barnstaple to oppose the closure and all the delegates from Lynton arrived by car because it was faster and more convenient. Their arguments opposing the closure were easily dismissed.

The last train from Lynton to Barnstaple ran on the 29th of September 1935 and immediately after the train had passed through the intermediate stations the track was torn up. The engines, rolling stock, line and equipment were all sold in a sale held on the 15th of November 1935. All but one of the engines was sold for around £50 each and turned into scrap: the metal was salvaged, the wood was burned. The exception, an engine called Lew, went to Brazil to work on the plantations. Coaches were sold for as little as £9 each and covered wagons went for £4 apiece. One assorted lot consisting of signal boxes, lamp posts and telegraph wiring raised the unprincely sum of £7. The railway stations did not do much better. Blackmoor Station was sold for £700, Woody Bay station fetched £405 and both Bratton Fleming and Bilbury Halt were sold for £100 each.

Much of Britain's railway system, including many of the stations, were closed during the Beeching blitz in the 1960s, when a man called Dr Beeching, hired by the Government to rationalise the railway system and to ensure that only those stations which offered commercial profit were allowed to remain, decided that many lines and stations were surplus to requirements.

It is sometimes believed that it was Dr Beeching who was responsible for the closure of Bilbury Halt. Not guilty. Unhappily, Bilbury Halt did not even last as long as the 1960s. It died in 1935 with the rest of the railway line from Lynton to Barnstaple.

Many towns which lose their railway station, and which are removed from the railway network, allow themselves to sink into a deep and permanent depression. Bilbury, however, hardly noticed the loss of its railway station or its railway connection.

Although I was not living in Bilbury when the station was closed, I believe that the closure was, after a short period of mourning, met with celebration rather than dismay, relief rather than despair.

The fact is that Bilbury had never relied upon the railway and its loss was regarded by the villagers as a welcome rupture of an unnecessary link to the outside world. Bilbury has always stood alone, proud and independent, and if London no longer wanted to be connected to Bilbury then that was perfectly fine with Bilbury.

Frank Parsons, the current landlord of the village pub, the Duck and Puddle, remembers that his father, who ran the village pub in the 1930s, was unable to shed a tear when it was announced that the twice a day trains from Barnstaple to Bilbury would run no more.

As the village's only serious representative of the tourist industry, Mr Parsons might have been expected to regard the railway as an essential source of tourists; forever waiting for waves of potential new customers to bring freshly minted pound notes into the local economy. But, like the rest of the villagers, the old Mr Parsons was not terribly keen on the outside world and nor was he over keen on strangers who came to the village out of idle curiosity or because it was something to do on a dull or rainy day.

Things haven't changed much.

Today, the people of Bilbury are enormously welcoming to people who come to the village because they want to be in Bilbury, but they do not much care about people who arrive because they have nowhere better to be.

After I'd lived in Bilbury for a year or two I understood their attitude.

The good folk of Bilbury think of themselves as living in their own version of paradise.

If people want to come into the village then the villagers will welcome them with open arms, a crackling log fire in the grate, a plateful of steak and kidney pudding and a foaming glass of ale.

But if people prefer other versions of paradise then that is absolutely fine, too.

The Bilburians don't really want strangers wandering through their village just for the sake of it. They don't want them wandering about and alarming the wildlife in their brightly coloured kagools, discarding their sweet wrappers and crisp packets and generally making the place look too busy and untidy, when they would have just as soon been in villages such as Chipping Sodbury in the Cotswolds or Three Cocks in Wales.

Like thousands of other railway stations, the redundant and unwanted Bilbury Halt had been sold on the open market, auctioned off at a mass sale in London, offered and bought for a song and duly converted into a bijou holiday residence by a property developer who specialised in such projects and who swept into and out of the village without anyone knowing he'd been or gone. The new residence was duly photographed and advertised in *Country Life* magazine at a price that would have bought any three ordinary Bilbury cottages.

The now unnecessary railway tracks had been torn up and sold to scrap metal dealers from the North, who had carted them away on lorries, melted them down and sold them on to be turned into washing machines and garden gates.

The wooden sleepers, almost as thick and as heavy as tree trunks, were sold to a smart garden designer who wanted to use them for garden steps and for path edging. And the railway signs, including the 'Bilbury Halt' signs themselves, had been torn down, sold to indiscriminate railway memorabilia collectors, and duly dispersed to the far corners of the world where they would, no doubt, be displayed in garden sheds or tucked away at the back of overcrowded garages.

The new owners of Bilbury's former railway station were a couple who worked in London and who had purchased the station from the developers.

He was called Boris and he was a senior executive employed by a large, well-known charity with offices in central London; it was one of those charities which is more famous for its luxurious offices and expensive advertisements and marketing programmes rather than for any good work it might purport to do. This was, apparently, a post which required him to wear Italian silk suits when he was travelling to and from London (and, presumably, when he was in the capital) and to wear expensive, three piece suits in loud checks when he was 'down in the country'. When decked out in one of his checked suits he doubtless thought he looked like a country gentleman. Sadly, he looked more like a crooked bookie – the sort who will take the punters' money but disappear to Lanzarote when a big bet goes sour and it comes to paying out.

She was called Doris and she worked for the Home Office and apparently favoured tweed suits at all times.

Their surname was Hardley-Fitzwalter and they had two children, both girls, who were called Cello and Viola. They also had a small, very yappy dog, a Jack Russell terrier, whom they had, with a surprising lack of imagination, named Jack, and a Doberman Pinscher who was called Karl and looked as if he ate two postmen for breakfast every weekday morning and got through three a morning at the weekends.

The family drove to Devon in a large, green four wheel drive motor car called a Range Rover, which was, so Thumper told me, a posh version of the traditional Land Rover and which had apparently been on the market for a few years though no one in our part of Devon had ever seen one before. The Range Rover had already proved to be very popular with financially successful folk who spent most of their time in London and who took their car along to the car wash if they had to drive through a puddle. Country folk either couldn't afford them or considered them to be far too 'flash'; like green Wellington boots and two tone brogues. Not even Thumper had ever seen one before the arrival of the Hardley-Fitzwalter family.

The Hardley-Fitzwalter family did not usually consult me on medical matters, or indeed on any other matters. Nor, indeed, did they have much need for any other locally based services.

When the couple remodelled the railway station to suit their requirements they used a smart London architect, who also drove a Range Rover (his was a mustard coloured yellow) and a team of builders, carpenters, electricians and plumbers who drove down in convoy from somewhere called Islington and who stayed at a hotel in Barnstaple because the Duck and Puddle wasn't big enough to accommodate them all, smart enough to cater for their gentrified tastes or sufficiently important to have been awarded rosettes for culinary excellence. The villagers were amused by the fact that men who cut wood and mended leaky taps for a living required food that had been blessed with rosettes.

Since they never consulted me, I had never actually spoken to any members of the Hardley-Fitzwalters, though I had seen and recognised them from afar for their motor vehicle was easily recognisable, but I gathered from Patchy Fogg that although they did not come from Yorkshire, a county which is known to produce folk who pride themselves on their plain speaking, they nevertheless had absolutely no qualms about pointing out to strangers the precise extent of their shortcomings.

(The fine folk of Yorkshire, who exhibit many of the finer qualities of the English nation, do this proudly, generously and with unbridled enthusiasm and it is widely believed in southern England that anyone who is complacent, smug, over-confident, or suffering from hubristic tendencies, should be sent to Yorkshire for a week or two in order to bring him or her back down to earth. The Hardley-Fitzwalters had the Yorkshire straightforward way without the innate Yorkshire grit, honesty and decency which give that bluntness a fine quality.)

Patchy was the first to have met the Hardley-Fitzwalters for he had been consulted by them in his role as local antiques expert. The couple were keen collectors of objects d'art.

When they first called at his shop, Patchy had been delighted. He thought that he might be able to unload some of his 'sticky' stock – the stuff that discerning buyers do not want to buy and which hangs around for years, tying up capital. He had not long earlier taken delivery of a mixed lorry load of freshly made antiques, each one carefully hand finished by a team of skilled Chinese craftsmen, and the Hardley-Fitzwalters, who were awash with money but clearly had no taste or style, were just the sort of people he'd had in mind when he'd bought the stuff.

Ever since I've known him, Patchy has been selling quite remarkable antiques to discerning clients. He has sold the desk upon which Shakespeare wrote Hamlet at least seven times. He has also sold Shakespeare's best bed (not the second best bed which the playwright left to Anne Hathaway), the very chair Queen Victoria often sat in when discussing world affairs with Benjamin Disraeli and an ebony walking cane used by Lord Byron.

Patchy had, however, been more than slightly miffed, not to say offended, when the Londoners had sniffily announced that they didn't want to buy anything from him because, they told him bluntly, the quality of his merchandise would certainly not be up to their standards. (Patchy said that he had detected a shudder in Mrs

Hardley-Fitzwalter's demeanour at the very thought of buying anything from a dealer operating in a tiny Devon village). Their sole reason for calling into his shop was to commission him to pick up some garden furniture which they had bought in Hungerford and which was too large, too heavy or too dirty to fit into the back of their Range Rover.

When Patchy had, not unreasonably, asked why the dealer in Hungerford hadn't been prepared to bring the pieces to Devon, Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalter told him, with undisguised disdain for Patchy, that the man in Hungerford was a proper antique dealer (she apparently managed to put inverted commas around the words 'proper antique dealer' when she pronounced them) who couldn't possibly be expected to go traipsing around the country delivering things. Patchy had immediately doubled his price for fetching the garden furniture, two oak benches and an oak table, which he later described as looking like Victorian stuff but nowhere near as well made. 'I could have sold them exactly the same furniture for less than the fee they paid me to bring the stuff from Hungerford,' he later told me, with a grin.

I met the Hardley-Fitzwalters when I was called in to see their daughter Viola.

When I arrived, I found that I could not manage to park the Rolls Royce in their parking area because the Range Rover was so badly parked that there was no room at all for any other vehicles. I had to leave my car in a gateway on the other side of the lane.

I was not invited into the main part of the house, or to sit down, but was allowed only into the hallway of the converted railway station.

'Viola suffers from asthma,' said Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters. She was, as had been advertised, wearing a ghastly tweed suit. Underneath it she wore a cashmere sweater in a rather muted, earthy colour. A single row of pearls was visible. She wore comfortable, chunky, flat shoes which fastened with laces. I think she probably thought she looked like a country lady but to me she looked like a social worker who was stuck in the 1950s and had absolutely no interest in escaping. Looking at her I couldn't help wondering if she had ever been a carefree little girl, playing with dolls who took afternoon tea and hugging a teddy bear when she went to bed at night.

'I'm sorry to hear that,' I said politely.

'She requires regular treatment with an inhaler called Ventolin which is normally prescribed by our physician in Harley Street. Unfortunately, her inhaler has expired and she forgot to bring a replacement with her. We therefore require a replacement inhaler which, of course, we will need you to prescribe.'

'Where is Viola?' I asked. It seemed to me not entirely unreasonable that I should take a look at the patient for whom I was being asked to prescribe.

'She is doing her French homework,' said Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters.

'May I see her for a moment, please?' I asked.

'Can't you just write out a prescription,' sighed Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters, who was obviously not accustomed to having tradesmen talk back to her. 'We will, of course, pay you for a private prescription.' She paused and lifted her head a degree or two. 'We aren't health service patients.'

'I'm afraid I don't see patients privately,' I told her, though strictly speaking this was not entirely true since there are two elderly patients in the village who still regard the National Health Service as an unacceptable form of welfare and who insist on still being charged for consultations and medicines. I usually send them a bill once a year, charging £1 for a consultation and £2 for a home visit, and I give them the drugs they need. They never pay me and I never chase them for the money. 'But I will need to see Viola if I am going to prescribe for her.'

Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters huffed and puffed, and tutted a bit too, as though I was being entirely unreasonable, but turned and disappeared, leaving me still standing in the hallway. I was beginning to feel like a boy scout trying to rustle up business for Bob-A-Job-Week.

A couple of minutes later Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters reappeared, followed by a little girl who looked about six or seven-years-old. She was dressed in a dark blue dress, dark blue socks and black patent leather shoes. Her hair, which was cut short, was as neat as if she'd just come from the hairdressers and she was as perfect and as spotless as a brand new doll just taken out of the box.

'This is Viola,' said Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters.

I said hello to the little girl and introduced myself. The little girl, who seemed very self- assured, said hello back and held out a hand for me to shake. I shook it.

'How are you?' I asked.

'I suffer from bronchial asthma,' said the little girl. We were still standing in the hall. I thought about asking if we could go somewhere a little comfortable but decided that if Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters wanted to continue in the hallway then that is where we would stay.

'How long have you suffered from asthma?' I asked.

'For two years.'

‘What symptoms do you have?’

‘I wheeze.’

‘How often do you wheeze?’

‘Quite a lot of the time,’ replied Viola. ‘But it only happens when we are at home.’

‘In London?’

She nodded.

‘Our doctor in London has asked all these questions,’ said Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters, impatiently. ‘He is a very eminent physician. He treats quite a few titled people and looks after guests, including foreigners, at some of the large London hotels.’

‘Does your doctor think that Viola’s asthma might be stress related?’ I asked. ‘Is Viola more relaxed when you’re down here in Devon? Is she more anxious in London?

‘Good heavens, no!’ said Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters. ‘Viola doesn’t suffer from anxiety in the slightest.’

‘No school problems?’

‘Absolutely not! Viola and Cello go to a very exclusive private school near our home.’

‘But Viola doesn’t suffer from asthma when you’re staying in the country?’

‘She doesn’t,’ admitted Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters, reluctantly. ‘But she might. Are you going to prescribe a Ventolin inhaler for her? Or do we have to call someone else? Viola has to use her inhaler three times a day. Every day. If I have to call someone else to provide us with what we need, I will certainly make a formal complaint about you. I believe even doctors in the country are obliged to provide treatment for their patients, are they not?’

‘They certainly are,’ I replied. ‘But treating patients unnecessarily is frowned upon in some circles.’

Much to her mother’s annoyance, I then listened to Viola’s chest. I could hear nothing abnormal. There wasn’t even the slightest wheeze. Despite the mother’s demands I was reluctant to hand out another prescription for an inhaler for although enormously helpful when they are needed these things can easily do more harm than good – particularly when used unnecessarily. Over the years, countless millions of patients have been made well by having their prescriptions for addictive drugs such as bromides, barbiturates or benzodiazepines slowly withdrawn. The side effects produced by such drugs can be infinitely worse than the symptoms which triggered their use in the first place. Asthma inhalers probably aren’t addictive in the way that psychotropic drugs can be, but psychological addictions can easily develop – sometimes in a relative as much as the patient. An anxious mother or father sees that a child’s wheezing is banished with the aid of an inhaler and so assumes that the inhaler should be used three, four or five times a day in order to keep the wheezing at bay. And thus the addiction develops and the child, and its parents, feel they cannot exist without the drug.

Suddenly, something occurred to me.

‘Who does your laundry when you’re here in Devon?’ I asked.

I have no idea what made me ask the question. A combination of intuition and experience, I suppose. I’d seen a similar case sometime in the past.

Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters blushed. ‘I do,’ she said. ‘We have a very expensive machine. We did try to find a woman to help but it is very difficult down here to find such people with the appropriate references.’

‘And in London?’

‘I have a woman to do the housework,’ she announced as if it would be absurd for me to think otherwise.

‘Do you use the same washing powder in London as you use here?’

‘Sadly no,’ said Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters impatiently. ‘In London we use a special biological washing powder but the local store here in Bilbury doesn’t stock it and the man there refuses to order it in for us. We have to buy the detergent he sells to the other people.’

‘You don’t bring your detergent with you from London?’

‘We bring most of our food with us,’ she said. ‘But I thought we ought to be able to obtain basic necessities locally – soaps and such like.’ She paused. ‘Maybe we should bring all our things from London,’ she sniffed. ‘Harrods deliver our groceries,’ she told me inconsequentially.

‘I certainly don’t think you should bring everything from London,’ I said. ‘If Viola only suffers from asthma when you are in London then there’s a very good chance that it is the washing powder you use there which is causing the problem.’

Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters looked at me and frowned. She seemed startled at the suggestion.

‘Ventolin is a powerful drug,’ I told her. ‘It would be much better for Viola if she could manage without it.’

‘You mean that you’re suggesting that Viola’s asthma could be caused by our washing powder?’

‘It happens quite often,’ I told her. I’d read about it in one of the medical journals.

‘Why didn’t our London doctor tell me that?’

I wasn’t quite sure how to answer that.

‘If that is the case then I shall instruct our solicitors to take action against the manufacturer of the washing powder,’ she said.

‘I’m not sure that will do much good,’ I said. ‘Soap powder manufacturers often warn that their products can cause these problems. It’s in the small print.’

‘So, if you’re right, what do we do?’

‘Change your washing powder in London. Use the powder you use down here in Devon. See what happens over the next few days. If Viola starts to wheeze, call me and I’ll listen to her chest again. If she doesn’t wheeze then she can probably stop using the inhaler if you just change your powder in London.’

Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters looked at me suspiciously, as though concerned that I was tricking her in some way.

Just then the door opened and a man I assumed to be her husband burst in. He was accompanied by two dogs and carrying two unframed paintings. The dogs, which were not on leads, ran up to me barking and growling. I stood still and glowered at them. I hate dogs which do that but I hate the owners even more.

‘Just look at these!’ said Mr Hardley-Fitzwalters to his wife. He sounded very excited and ignored me completely. ‘I got these from that dealer in the village. The man is an idiot. He didn’t realise what these are!’

Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters examined the paintings her husband had brought home. ‘They’re both by Chagall!’ she said, very excited. Her daughter’s problem was now forgotten.

‘The chappie in the shop, Fogg I think his name is, didn’t have the faintest what he’d got. He sold me the pair for £500 each. He wanted cash, as these chappies always do, so I drove into Barnstaple and went to the bank.’

Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters was examining the pictures. ‘They’re not signed,’ she said.

‘Doesn’t matter,’ replied her husband. ‘You can tell who did them just by looking. The colours, the content and the brushwork are all absolutely unmistakeable. They’re pure Chagall – he didn’t always sign his stuff – especially the early work.’

The darned dogs were still barking and snarling. They were very unpleasant creatures.

‘What do you think they’re worth?’ Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters asked her husband.

‘Heaven knows. Millions! The big auction houses will be falling over themselves to sell these. I must go back to that Fogg’s place next time we come down. I bet he’s got more good stuff hidden away in his scruffy little shack.’

I coughed and picked up my bag. ‘I’ll be going,’ I said.

Mr Hardley-Fitzwalters, who still hadn’t acknowledged my presence, looked at me, puzzled. ‘Who are you?’

‘Oh this is just the village doctor,’ said Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters dismissively. ‘He’s going.’

I couldn’t help noticing the way she had added the word ‘village’ in front of the word ‘doctor’. Village idiot, village doctor.

‘That’s not your Roller parked outside, is it?’ asked Mr Hardley-Fitzwalters.

I admitted that it was my Rolls Royce.

‘Our doctor in London has got a brand new one,’ said the charity boss dismissively. ‘Latest model, packed with all the gizmos. He has a new one every year.’

The Doberman, which had been staring at me and merely growling suddenly started barking again and bared its teeth. I instinctively flinched and moved back a few inches.

‘Oh, he won’t hurt you,’ said Mr Hardley-Fitzwalters, ‘he never bites.’ He patted the Doberman on its back. The dog then turned its head and growled at him. ‘Both the dogs love it down here,’ he told me, ‘we let them go a bit wild because they can go for long runs across the fields.’ He turned to his wife and laughed as he told her how the dogs had chased a flock of sheep around one of the fields they’d crossed.

‘I don’t think the local farmers like dogs chasing their sheep,’ I commented.

‘Well they can just jolly well lump it!’ said Mr Hardley-Fitzwalters.

I thought of telling him that farmers have the legal right to shoot dogs which worry their livestock but I really didn’t want to be there any longer so I told them to call me again if Viola had any wheezing and then I left.

Part of me felt that I ought to tell Mr Kennett, my father-in-law, that I thought I knew whose dogs had killed his sheep. But I had acquired this knowledge as a doctor and I have always taken the principle of confidentiality very seriously.

I hadn’t expected them to be grateful but I hadn’t expected them to be quite so dismissive; contemptuous almost.

As I walked to the car I could hear the badly behaved dogs still barking inside the house; they had no better manners than their owners.

When the family left to go back to London a few days later I hadn’t heard from them again, so I assumed that Viola’s asthma had disappeared.

The Old Hoover

Patsy and I were in the kitchen having a quiet lunch. The babies were both fast asleep, the telephone had been quiet for so long that I had twice lifted the receiver from the cradle to check that it was still working and that we hadn't been cut off (an eventuality which sometimes happens in the country, where a falling tree can result in downed lines and no telephone service for days) and we were contemplating a pleasant hour or so in the garden before the evening surgery was due to start.

Suddenly, the peace of the day was shattered by a hammering at the back door.

Before either of us could speak, the door was flung open and Adrienne, Patsy's sister and now Mrs Fogg, was standing beside us looking for all the world as though the end was considerably closer than nigh. She was red-faced and had clearly been crying. Patsy and I jumped up. Patsy gave her sister a hug. I stood there feeling, and doubtless looking, useless. After a few moments I sat down again.

It took two cups of tea, a large piece of apple and rhubarb pie (with both custard and ice cream) and a medium sized sherry before Adrienne, who is, at the best of times excitable and who can occasionally wander onto the hysterical side of over-reaction, had calmed down enough to tell us what had brought her crashing through our back door.

'For as long as I can remember I've always kept my jewellery and my savings in an old vacuum cleaner,' she told us. 'The hoover hasn't worked for years and years but when I lived at mum and dad's place they never threw it out and it lived at the back of the cupboard under the stairs. I always thought it was a good place to store my valuables because no one used it and what burglar would think of stealing or looking inside a clapped out old hoover?'

It occurred to me that this was indeed an excellent hiding place for valuables.

'What jewellery?' asked Patsy. 'I didn't know you'd got any valuable jewellery.'

'Well, it's perhaps not valuable to anyone else,' admitted Adrienne. 'But it's valuable to me. There's an old brooch that used to belong to grandma, a bracelet Mum and Dad bought me when I was twelve, a ring I got in a cracker when I was six, a necklace you bought me for my 21st birthday and a few bits and pieces Patchy has given me over the years. And there was £57 in cash in there. It was my sort of safe deposit box.'

'So what's happened?' asked Patsy.

'When Patchy and I got married and I moved into his house I took the old vacuum cleaner with me. Mum and Dad didn't want it because it didn't work so they didn't mind my having it. I kept it with Patchy's old hoover in the cupboard under the stairs. That's where everyone keeps their hoover isn't it?'

'We keep ours in a cupboard in the boot room,' said Patsy.

Inwardly I winced.

Adrienne is rather competitive, particularly with her sister, and doesn't like the fact that Patsy and I live in a bigger house which, now that we have got rid of the woodworm and the dry rot, has a boot room, a butler's pantry and a flower room rather than just a cupboard under the stairs. My wife and her sister get on well most of the time, and love each other very much, but Adrienne can be a little explosive, and perhaps a trifle potty, at times. At her wedding she managed to poison most of the guests by serving up mushrooms she'd picked herself. I have just the faintest suspicion that there may, occasionally, be a tinge of mild jealousy in the relationship between the two sisters.

'Well, we haven't got a boot room,' said Adrienne, in a huffy, why would anyone want one of those, sort of way. 'So we keep our hoover under the stairs.'

'You've got a conservatory and we haven't,' Patsy pointed out.

'You've got stables,' said Adrienne. 'And a lake.'

'You've got four garages,' said Patsy.

'Yes, but Patchy uses them to store antiques. They're really just for business. They're his shop. You've got a Rolls Royce.' Adrienne was clearly feeling a little better.

'It's a very old Rolls Royce,' said Patsy. 'It was Dr Brownlow's. It only does about eight miles to the gallon so it costs a fortune to run.'

I thought I ought to intervene before the competitive conversation got completely out of hand. I did not think it worthwhile pointing out that after the local garage had done something inexplicable to the carburettor I had managed to get nearly ten miles a gallon out of the old car.

'So,' I said, 'what happened to the hoover containing all your jewellery?'

'And £57 in cash,' added Adrienne.

'And £57 in cash,' I agreed. 'What happened to the hoover? Has someone stolen it?'

'No. Why would anyone steal an old hoover that doesn't work? That would be daft.'

I agreed that it would be a daft thing to do. It occurred to me, but I did not say, that people seem to do daft things all the time.

'Patchy got rid of it,' said Adrienne, and burst into tears again.

'Why on earth did he do that?' asked Patsy.

'He threw out both of the old ones. The one he had when I married him, and which sort of worked, and which I've been using, and the old one which I brought from Mum and Dad's and which didn't work.'

'Why did he throw out the one which worked?'

'It didn't work very well,' admitted Adrienne. 'It made a bit of a funny noise and there was a sort of burning smell. So he bought me a new one as a sort of early birthday present.'

I closed my eyes and wondered if Patsy would say anything about Patchy buying her sister a vacuum cleaner as a birthday present. Patchy isn't mean but he can be careful. And he's not what I would call a natural romantic. It took Thumper and me three hours to persuade him that an ironing board, complete with second hand iron, would not make an acceptable substitute for an engagement ring.

'What sort of funny noise?' asked Patsy. I gave thanks. It seemed that she hadn't noticed that Patchy had bought the cleaner for Adrienne's birthday.

'I don't know. Just a funny noise. Smoke came out of it and sometimes there were little flames and sparky things. Patchy said he thought the motor was tired and over-heating.'

'Do motors get tired?' asked Patsy.

'Patchy probably meant it was worn out,' I explained.

'And Patchy didn't know that you stored your jewellery, and £57, in your Mum and Dad's old hoover?'

Adrienne shook her head.

'What did he do with it?'

'I don't know,' admitted Adrienne. 'Most people would have probably thrown them out into the rubbish but Patchy…'

She didn't need to finish the sentence. Patchy, like many of the people I now know, does not easily throw things away. He prefers to sell his rubbish. He stores his old newspapers and sells them to a man who takes them to a factory where they are pulped and turned back into useful paper. He has a large boxful of old light-bulbs which he firmly believes he will one day be able to sell to someone. Patchy was a trifle sneery when Peter Marshall sold the contents of his old shed but behind the sneer there was a good deal of admiration.

'Haven't you asked him what he did with them?'

'I'm too embarrassed,' said Adrienne. 'I did ask him where it had gone and he said he'd got rid of it and then he showed me the new one he'd bought.' She bit her lip and looked down. 'He'd think I was daft if I told him I kept all my valuables in an old hoover. He's always telling me that I should keep all my valuables in the safe.'

'Well at least he bought you a new hoover for your birthday,' said Patsy, who had noticed after all. 'As a present,' she added unnecessarily.

'It's not actually new, new,' said Adrienne. 'It wasn't in a box or anything like that. He got it from a house clearance sale. But it's as good as new and Patchy said he got it for a very good price. And there are lots of things to attach to it if you want to clean under sofas or behind the fridge. We got all those bits in a plastic bag.'

'The attachments,' said Patsy.

Adrienne looked at her.

'That's what they call them,' said Patsy. 'The bits that you fix onto the vacuum cleaner so that you can clean under sofas and things are the attachments.'

I couldn't help wondering why anyone would want to clean under a sofa but I kept quiet about that. I've always thought that what is under the sofa is better kept under the sofa.

'I also kept our wedding papers and my driving licence in there,' said Adrienne. 'And the flower Patchy wore in his button hole when we got married. It's in a paper bag to keep it safe. The inside of the old hoover is quite clean. I brushed it all out before I started using it as my hiding place.' She started to cry again. 'This is the most awful thing that could ever happen to me,' she said through her sobs.

I was tempted to point out that if this was the worst thing that ever happened to her then her life would have been a breeze. I decided some years ago that real pressure is having to decide whether to choose chemotherapy or radiotherapy for yourself or a loved one. Most other problems are hardly worth a damn; they can probably be ignored or else they will go away with time. But I didn't think that either Adrienne or Patsy were ready for my brand of philosophy.

'Well, we need to find out what Patchy did with the old hoovers and then we need to get them back,' I said firmly, standing up. The quiet afternoon in the garden was now a forgotten dream.

‘Would anyone like a home-made scone?’ asked Patsy, who has a talent for avoiding problems, a talent for delaying action and a talent for baking which puts everyone else’s talents into the shade.

‘Oh yes,’ said Adrienne instantly. ‘But don’t forget to put the jam on first.’

One of the first things Patsy taught me when we got married was that when making a Devon cream tea it was vital to put the cream onto the scone before adding the jam. In Cornwall, they do things the other way round: putting the jam onto the scone before the cream. Adrienne has no Cornish roots, and as far as I know has only been there once when she went to Padstow for a slightly discoloured weekend with a tractor salesman from Liskeard, but she has always been rebellious and has insisted on having her scones the Cornish way since she was sixteen.

And so Patsy took some scones and a pot of strawberry jam from the cupboard and a pot of cream from the fridge, put the kettle on and made us a huge Devon cream tea. It was only twenty minutes since I’d had my lunch but who can turn down a Devon cream tea – especially when Patsy made the scones?

You can’t talk about things like missing vacuum cleaners and lost valuables when you’re eating scones with cream and jam (I think there is probably a by-law forbidding such behaviour within the boundaries of the county of Devon) so we ate in silence.

Actually, it wasn’t complete silence because Patsy and Adrienne talked about our babies for a while. It’s strange having two young babies because when you mention ‘babies’ to strangers they assume they must be twins whereas, in fact, our oldest is eighteen months older than our youngest. I am well aware that in the blink of an eye they’ll be starting school, climbing trees and sticking posters up on their bedroom walls but for the moment they’re still babies.

In the end, of course, the pleasant delaying tactics came to an end, the plate contained no more scones and the cream seemed to have evaporated. There was jam left in the pot but nothing upon which to spread it.

‘So,’ I said, ‘where do you think the vacuum cleaner could be?’

It was immediately apparent that neither my wife nor my sister-in-law welcomed this reminder of the awful reality which had brought Adrienne to our door. They looked at me, looked at each other and sighed.

‘I think he might have sold both of them to ‘Jack’ Ladd,’ said Adrienne.

I groaned but tried not to make a sound as I did so.

Jack Ladd, whose real name is Ivan Ladd but who is known as ‘Jack’ (as in Jack the Lad) calls himself a dealer but he is the biggest crook in North Devon and that, believe me, is no mean compliment.

Jack is convinced that the world is desperate to rip him off and is determined that if there is going to be any ripping done then he will be the one to do it. The last time I saw him he was in Ilfracombe selling seaweed to tourists. He had the seaweed bagged up and was selling it by the pound as a cure for arthritis. Each pound of seaweed came with a leaflet containing enthusiastic quotes from sufferers who had been able to throw away their crutches and put their wheelchairs into the garage as a result of just a few weeks’ treatment. Jack told his customers they had to boil the stuff and inhale the vapour, and he was doing surprisingly good business. The funny thing was that the power of the placebo effect is so great that Jack’s seaweed cure probably did more good (and less harm) than most of the dangerous pills doctors prescribe. Having said this it is, I think, only fair to point out that Jack is a patient of mine and he readily accepts the regular prescriptions for anti-inflammatory drugs which I give to him for his own arthritis. I once had to give him a medical examination for an insurance policy. ‘Can you touch your toes without bending your knees?’ I asked him. ‘I haven’t the foggiest,’ he said, looking puzzled, ‘but why on earth would I want to do that?’

‘You’re not sure he sold them to Jack?’ I said to Adrienne.

She shook her head.

‘I’ll ring Patchy,’ I said. I didn’t want to drive all the way to Jack Ladd’s place only to find that he knew nothing about the vacuum cleaners.

I left Patsy and Adrienne alone and went into my surgery to call Patchy. He was where I thought he would be – at the Duck and Puddle, having rehydration therapy.

I was in a bit of difficulty, of course, because I wasn’t supposed to tell Patchy that Adrienne had hidden her jewellery and £57 in her old vacuum cleaner.

‘Patsy has an old vacuum cleaner that she wants to get rid of,’ I said when Frank had handed the phone to Patchy. ‘It seems a pity to throw it away. Do you know anyone who’s likely to buy it? It might be worth a couple of quid.’

‘Try Jack Ladd,’ said Patchy immediately. ‘He’ll probably buy it. I sold him two clapped out old vacuum cleaners this morning. He paid me £2 for the pair. Haven’t got the foggiest what he’s going to do with them. One of them works a bit so he can probably flog it on to some poor punter.’

I thanked him, went back to the kitchen and told Patsy and Adrienne the good news. ‘I forgot to ask where Jack works these days,’ I added, cursing myself.

‘He has a workshop in Blasting Daily now,’ said Adrienne.

Patsy and I looked at her. ‘Where did you say?’ asked Patsy.

‘Blasting Daily,’ repeated Adrienne. ‘It’s a village on the road to Exeter.’

‘Blasting Daily isn’t a village,’ I said.

‘Of course it is,’ insisted Adrienne. ‘There’s a big sign.’

‘That’s just a warning sign telling people that the quarry does blasting every day,’ I explained.

‘Well, it looks like a road sign,’ said Adrienne indignantly. ‘It’s a big sign with lettering on it, just like a road sign.’ She frowned and thought for a while. ‘I thought it was a funny name for a village,’ she admitted, ‘but there’s a village down near Sidmouth called Cat and Fiddle and there’s a place in the Cotswolds called Loose Chippings.’

‘There isn’t a place called Loose Chippings,’ I said, rather wearily. Patsy’s sister is a lovely lady but when she was made, I think the Great Creator got all her wiring mixed up. ‘There’s a Chipping Campden, a Chipping Sodbury and Chipping Norton. Chipping is an old English word for ‘market’. But there isn’t a village called Loose Chippings.’

‘I’ve seen signs for Loose Chippings,’ said Patsy, supporting her sister. ‘I think it is a village. We used to go through it often when we were girls. We had an aunt who lived in Bourton-on-the-Water.’

‘It’s just a sign they put up when they’ve been repairing the road,’ I said, with commendable patience.

Patsy looked unconvinced. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Pretty sure.’

‘So that probably explains why the village always seems to be in a different place?’

‘It probably does,’ I agreed.

‘Ah,’ said Patsy. ‘I had noticed that it seemed to move about. One day we would see it when we went to Cirencester and then another day we’d see it when we went to Cheltenham. But the Cotswolds are very confusing. I never know where I am or where I’m going.’

‘I’ll buy you a compass from Peter Marshall’s shop,’ I promised.

‘Don’t you dare!’ said Patsy, laughing. ‘The last lot he sold all pointed the wrong way. They put the magnet bit on the wrong end of the needle so the little arrow thing always seemed to point south.’

‘I went to Peter Marshall’s to buy a toasting fork last week,’ said Adrienne. ‘All the toasters that we got for our wedding stopped working and so I thought I’d make toast in front of the fire. But Patchy was quite cross and made me take the fork back. He said it was just an ordinary fork and that you’d get your hands burnt if you used it to make toast.’

‘All those toasters stopped working?’

‘All of them,’ said Adrienne with a nod. ‘They caught fire, one by one. Patchy said he thought there was a fault in the wiring.’

Just about everyone in the village had given Adrienne and Patchy a toaster as a wedding present. We’d bought them cheaply from Peter Marshall. We gave the happy couple proper presents later, for the toasters were a joke. Still, I hadn’t thought they’d all break down so quickly.

‘I’ll go and see Jack,’ I told them.

‘We were just kidding about there being a place called Loose Chippings,’ said Patsy.

I looked at her. I didn’t think I believed her but I wasn’t entirely sure. ‘What does your vacuum cleaner look like?’ I asked Adrienne. ‘The one with all the stuff hidden inside it.’

‘It’s an upright which is sort of grey and has a long lead attached to it,’ Adrienne said. ‘It’s dusty on the outside but quite clean inside.’

I sighed. ‘You’d better come with me,’ I told her. ‘If Jack is collecting vacuum cleaners he’s probably got a hundred that match that description – apart from the ‘clean inside’ bit.’

So Adrienne and I (together with Ben) climbed into the Rolls Royce and headed off for the picturesque Devon village of Blasting Daily in the hope that we might be in time to rescue the missing vacuum cleaner and its assorted contents.

Jack Ladd, the new owner of Adrienne’s vacuum cleaner, is somewhere between 30 and 100-years-old. His medical records are incomplete and I doubt if any official body has any record of his existence, let alone his date of birth. He is the sort of man who shaves once a month, last bathed a week last Wednesday and keeps his dog on a piece of string rather than a leash not because he spends all his money on beer and cigarettes but because he cannot see the point in spending money on a dog lead when a piece of string will serve the same purpose perfectly well.

Actually, I don’t know what it is about the dog owners of Devon but hardly any of them ever seem to buy proper leads for their animals. Mrs Marigold Stickers (whose husband was christened Cedric but is, inevitably, known by one and all as Bill) has been seen using an old stocking as a lead and Peter Marshall once told me that Mrs Felicity Dingle, Bilbury’s world renowned shoe designer, once came into his shop with her dog at the other end of a substantial, black, lacy brassiere. She told him that she had come out without a dog lead and then realised that the field through which she intended to walk was full of sheep and lambs. Rather than test her dog's good reputation, and her own reputation as a caring county woman, she decided that she would need to create a lead out of some article of clothing. Since she was wearing socks rather than stockings or tights, and her coat was fastened with buttons rather than a belt, she decided that she had to sacrifice an item which, in a quiz at the Duck and Puddle, she once described as her most valuable possession (and the one item she would grab if her house caught fire) in the cause of dog control and good neighbourly relations.

We found Jack spraying artificial rust onto an ancient perambulator.

'Hello, Jack,' I said, thinking it probably best if I did the negotiating. Jack is a well-known misogynist and I felt certain he would take advantage of my sister-in-law if she attempted to negotiate with Jack herself. Besides, I have often fancied that I could wheel and deal as well as anyone in Bilbury if I had the chance. Thumper, Patchy and Peter Marshall always seem to think that they're the only ones who can make a few bob buying and selling things. But how difficult can it be?

'The Germans love these old prams,' he explained. 'But they like them rusty so that they can restore them and feel they've done something useful. Putting rust on doubles the price I can get.'

'Patchy Fogg sold you a couple of vacuum cleaners this morning,' I said, 'but he didn't know that they'd got sentimental value. Adrienne would like to buy them back.' This hadn't come out quite as I had intended and I immediately realised that I had put myself into a hopeless negotiating position.

Jack grunted something incomprehensible.

'They've been in her family for a long while and she didn't want to get rid of them,' I explained, making things worse.

'I've got a buyer,' said Jack, stopping what he was doing and standing back to examine his handiwork. 'There's quite a market for old vacuum cleaners. People collect them.'

I looked at him disbelievingly. 'Who on earth collects old vacuum cleaners?'

'You'd be surprised,' he said, 'I sell a lot of stuff to museums of household appliances.'

'You're kidding!'

'Not at all,' said Jack. 'Collecting old vacuum cleaners and washing machines is all the rage these days. In Germany there's a Museum von Haushaltsgeraten. And in Sweden there's the Museet av Hushallsapparater.' He pronounced these names as though he really knew what he was talking about. I can never, ever tell when Jack is having me on. He's such a good liar he would have made a great politician.

'How much do they pay for a vacuum cleaner?' I asked him, knowing that the answer was going to upset me.

'Oh £40 or £50 each,' said Jack with an unconcerned air.

'What?' I demanded. 'That's crazy! You can buy a brand new vacuum cleaner for far less than that.'

'It's age and patina they're buying,' said Jack, wagging a knowledgeable finger. 'These old cleaners are rare, you see.'

I sighed. I always know when I am defeated. I turned to Adrienne. 'Which is the one you want?' I asked her quietly.

Adrienne pointed to one of the vacuum cleaners.

'How much do you want for that one?' I asked Jack.

He looked at the vacuum cleaner, picked it up, and examined it. '£60, since it's you, doctor.'

'How much for anyone else?' I asked.

'£50,' said Jack. He laughed. 'No, go on, I'm teasing you,' he said. 'You can have it for £50.'

'That's crazy!' I said.

'Take it or leave it,' said Jack with a shrug.

'We'll take it,' I sighed. I took out my wallet and found that I only had £30. I turned to Adrienne. 'Can you lend me £20 to buy back your vacuum cleaner?'

Adrienne opened her handbag, took out her purse and gave me two £10 notes. 'Congratulations,' she said drily. 'Your negotiating skills are awesome.'

I glared at her and handed the £50 to Jack. He handed me the vacuum cleaner. 'Do you want to buy an old washing machine?' he asked. 'I've got one that was made in 1952. It doesn't work but it would make a great talking point in your new museum.'

I glared at him. 'One of these days,' I warned him, 'you'll cut yourself and need stitching up.'

'Don't worry about me,' said Jack, laughing.

'My stuff isn't here,' said Adrienne. She had opened up the vacuum cleaner and looked inside.

I turned to Jack. 'Did you find anything inside the hoover?'

He shook his head and seemed genuinely puzzled. 'Why on earth would I bother looking inside it?'

'I'll give you another £50 for the things that were inside,' said Adrienne desperately. 'The jewels are all paste.

Nothing is valuable. But they're worth that much to me.'

'Honest, love,' said Jack, 'I haven't looked inside and I haven't taken anything out.'

Strangely, I believed him. 'Can I sell this damned thing back to you?'

He looked at me and looked at the vacuum cleaner. 'It doesn't work,' he said.

'I know,' I said. 'But you can sell it to a museum.'

He laughed. 'You're kidding! Who is going to buy this piece of rubbish?'

'But you said…'

'That was when I was selling it,' said Jack, 'now you want me to buy it. I'll give you a quid in the hope that I can get it working.'

I stared at him for a full thirty seconds and then handed him the cleaner. He gave me a £1 in coins. 'Let me give you a tip, doctor,' said Jack, 'and you can have this for free.'

I looked at him and waited.

'Stick to doctoring,' he said.

Adrienne and I drove back to Bilbury in silence. She asked me to take her home.

As we drew up in front of their home, Patchy came out to see us. He was smiling and carrying a plastic bag. When Adrienne got out of the car he handed her the bag. She looked inside and her expression changed dramatically. 'My jewels!' she cried.

'And £57,' said Patchy. 'And our marriage licence. Everything is there. If you want to put them somewhere then I suggest you put them into the floor safe in the bedroom. Hiding them in an old hoover is daft.'

Adrienne threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. She then ran indoors to put her treasures away.

'I paid £50 for that damned old hoover,' I told Patchy.

'Teach you a lesson,' said Patchy, with a wink. 'Stick to doctoring.'

I drove home.

'Someone put this through the letter box,' said Patsy, handing me a grubby brown envelope.

I opened the envelope. There was £50 in notes inside.

'Did you see who left it?' I asked. I put £20 aside to give back to Adrienne.

'It was someone on a motorbike. He had a helmet on but he looked like Jack Ladd,' said Patsy. 'I recognised the jacket. He's had that jacket since I was a little girl.' She looked puzzled. 'What's this all about?'

'Oh, nothing much. Adrienne and I have both been taught a lesson, that's all,' I told her, feeling rather embarrassed.

A Small Victory

I was examining Mrs Pearce's left knee when the noise of a jet hurtling overhead made both of us jump. The noise also made Mrs Pearce scream in alarm and sit upright. She had been reclining while I examined her and was so startled by the noise that she lost her balance and very nearly rolled off the couch.

Startled by the noise of the jet and my patient's scream, I jumped back rather suddenly and knocked over the screen which stands near to the examination couch in order to give patients privacy when they undress and dress themselves. Mrs Pearce's voluminous outer garments, festooned over the screen, fell with it. Mrs Pearce feels the cold and knows that the best way to keep out the cold is to wear several layers of clothing.

Mrs Pearce is a spiritualist who is famous for her ability to see into the past. We've had one or two of these in North Devon in recent years. In addition to holding meetings and providing private 'readings', Mrs Pearce grows, nurtures and admires a small but impressive collection of cacti. It is, she has told me several times, the most extensive cacti collection in North Devon. She also attends Iolanthe Fielding's belly dancing classes which are held in Kentisbury Village Hall.

I once attended one of Mrs Pearce's meetings in a hall in Combe Martin. It was very well patronised and at 50 pence a head entrance fee, she probably did well for herself.

'Do I have anyone in the room for whom the letter E has meaning?' she asked.

About two dozen people put their hands up.

'A male,' said Mrs Pearce and half the hands went down.

'He was quite old when he died.' A third of the remaining hands disappeared.

And by this simple, logical method she narrowed down the possibilities to a woman who lived in the village of Berrynarbor.

'There was a connection to the railways,' said Mrs Pearce firmly. Her eyes were now closed and she was clearly 'channelling'.

I thought that the business about the railways was a safe bet since a huge number of people of that age worked on the railways, travelled by rail or had a connection with someone who did.

But, disappointingly, the woman from Berrynarbor shook her head.

'Ah. There should have been,' said Mrs Pearce. She thought for a moment. 'You perhaps didn't know of the connection,' she said sagely. 'There may have been a family secret. Something no one talked about.' This seemed to me to be pushing it a bit. I couldn't see why anyone who worked on the railways, or who travelled by rail, would need to keep the connection a secret.

The woman from Berrynarbor looked confused.

'Maybe he used the railways for assignations,' said Mrs Pearce.

And I have to admit I thought that was a brilliant way to wriggle out of her potential embarrassment.

The evening continued in much the same way and at the end of it everyone seemed very satisfied. Some took it seriously, others regarded it as entertainment.

Mrs Pearce also predicts the future and her words of wisdom sometimes appear in the national press. She has forecast that Prince Charles will marry a nice Swedish Princess and that the royal couple will have three children – all daughters. She also says that Scotland will win the football World Cup in 1982 and that by the year 2000, American astronauts will have colonised Mars.

I confess that I never had much time for Mrs Pearce.

It has always seemed to me that she gives vulnerable people false hopes and expectations, with the inevitable, but tragic, result that she ends up distributing nothing but copious quantities of disappointment.

'What in the name of Hades was that?' I asked my receptionist Miss Johnson, who, having heard the scream, had rung through to the surgery to check that all was well. 'Are we being attacked?'

Miss Johnson does not feel entirely comfortable with bad language and in her book the words 'What in the name of Hades was that?' would probably necessitate my putting one of the new-fangled 50 pence pieces into the surgery swear box if we had one.

'I think it was an aeroplane,' replied Miss Johnson rather stiffly. 'Probably one of those little ones which go quite quickly. Would you like your morning coffee before the next patient?' I didn't know whether she was upset by my bad language or by the fact that I had allowed or caused a patient to scream.

I am very fond of Miss Johnson but she can be a little stiff at times.

I persuaded Mrs Pearce to lie down again, put back the screen, re-draped her clothes over the top of it, marvelling at the vast number of hooks and eyes and press studs which seemed to be involved, and re-examined the errant knee.

‘You’ve twisted it,’ I told her. ‘You need to wear a support bandage for a while. It will get better.’

‘It’s arthritis is it?’ she said.

‘No,’ I said patiently. ‘It isn’t arthritis. You’ve twisted a ligament. You just need to rest for a while and wear a support bandage.’ I smiled and made a foolish attempt at a joke. ‘And no football for a month.’

‘No football?’ said Mrs Pearce. ‘I don’t watch football.’

‘No playing football,’ I said. ‘Tell the coach that Manchester United will have to manage without you.’

‘I’ve never played football,’ said Mrs Pearce. She thought for a moment. ‘I used to play hockey when I was at school.’

‘OK,’ I said, regretting the attempted humour.

‘And I’m 87,’ she said. ‘Why did you think I’d be playing football?’

‘Just a joke,’ I said. ‘You’ve got the sort of injury footballers get.’

‘But I haven’t been playing football!’

‘No. I understand. Perhaps you twisted it doing something else.’

‘I play golf once a week at Ilfracombe. I twisted my leg while playing golf. My ball ended up in one of those sandpits.’

‘That would be it,’ I said. I hadn’t previously seen Mrs Pearce as a golfer. She was not a fast mover. I wondered how early in the morning she had to start in order to finish a round before nightfall.

‘What would be what?’

‘You twisted your knee playing golf.’

‘I just told you that, young man! Are you deaf?’ Mrs Pearce glowered at me and shook her head. ‘Are you going to give me some tablets for the arthritis?’

I wrote out a prescription for a knee support and made a note to myself to ask Bradshaw, the district nurse, to pop round and show her what to do with it. Left to her own devices Mrs Pearce would probably open a tin of steak, pop in the bandage and try to turn the whole confection into a stew. I don’t think she is very far away from dementia and she does eat a lot of stews. I added a few mild painkilling tablets to the prescription.

As she was leaving a second plane zoomed overhead, rattling the chimney pots and shaking the whole surgery.

‘Are we at war?’ asked Mrs Pearce.

‘I don’t think so,’ I told her. ‘Miss Johnson would have told me if we were. Miss Johnson would certainly know if we were at war.’

‘Pity,’ said Mrs Pearce. ‘It’s about time we had a good war. People get flabby and complacent if they don’t have a good war every so often.’

When I’d finished the morning surgery, and had completed the visits I popped into the Duck and Puddle to see if Frank knew anything about the planes that had flown over that morning. Frank, being the landlord of the only pub in the village, knows about everything that has happened and about most things that are about to happen. Even Miss Johnson gets much of her information from him. Frank was outside the pub watering one of his hanging baskets.

According to Frank, the half of the village that hadn’t already lost its hearing and its senses was up in arms about the two jets which had buzzed the village.

Mr Jenkins at Honeydew Farm had apparently reported that eight of his best milking cows had been so startled that he would be surprised if they produced more than a gallon of milk between them. Mr Larchminster had been painting his garage and had fallen off a stepladder. He hadn’t broken anything but he had spilt a good deal of paint and the area of rough ground in front of his garage was now painted in ‘Creamy Yellow’ patches. The hairdresser working at Peter Marshall’s new multifaceted emporium had jumped so much that he had snipped off a large chunk of hair belonging to Gerald Merrymore. The hairdresser had had to give Gerald an army haircut in order to disguise the mishap.

As we talked, another jet flew over. This one came over the village so low that we both instinctively ducked. The jet was closely followed by two pursuers.

‘We ought to do something about this,’ said Frank who often becomes indignant but never actually does anything.

‘Can I borrow your telephone?’ I asked. ‘I’m going to ring the Ministry of Defence to find out what is going on.’

A surprisingly pleasant fellow at the Ministry in London told me that the local RAF station had recently reorganised its route for low flying exercises. ‘Your village is on a hill which our pilots are using as a sighting point,’ he said merrily.

‘Do you mean that this is going to happen often?’ I asked.

‘Oh yes,’ said the man from the Ministry. He didn’t seem to think we ought to mind.

‘So what are we going to do about it?’ asked Thumper that evening.

I had organised an impromptu, unofficial action committee and he, Patsy, Anne (Thumper’s common law wife), Patchy, Adrienne, Peter Marshall and I were sitting in the bar at the Duck and Puddle, trying to decide how to deal with this new enemy.

We decided that we would write letters to the Ministry.

I wrote a letter to the Minister of Defence informing him that I intended to take up kite flying and that I thought he ought to know about this new hobby of mine so that he could warn the pilots of his noisy aeroplanes to avoid the area. I said that I didn't want any of his low flying planes getting tangled up with my kite string.

Thumper wrote a letter to the Minister informing him that he had been put in charge of the Bilbury Firework Display Committee and that he would be testing fireworks for the Committee on a regular basis in readiness for the quarterly displays which were being planned.

And Patchy wrote to say that he had become a keen pigeon fancier and that his pigeons would be flying over Bilbury on a regular but unpredictable basis.

Three days later a man came down from the Ministry to see us.

'Are you all serious?' he asked us.

We all nodded and said that we were indeed very serious and that we hoped that our activities did not put his aeroplanes at risk but that we felt sure that he would understand that we were perfectly entitled to fly kites, keep pigeons and set off fireworks.

He had to admit that although he might wish it were otherwise there were no laws forbidding our activities and he went away looking extremely unhappy.

A week after that we each received letters from someone sounding very important who told us that the Ministry had instructed the local RAF aerodrome that, on safety grounds, all future flights should be routed away from Bilbury and Bilbury Hill.

We celebrated our small victory with a modest firework display and six bottles of Polish Champagne which Peter Marshall said was just as good as the French stuff but much better value since it is the bubbles which give champagne it's joie de vivre and the bubbles in Polish Champagne are every bit as good as the bubbles in French Champagne.

The Visitor

I was still in short trousers when I decided that I would like to be a doctor. My reasons then were simple enough.

I had no great urge to cure the world of all its ills and no desire to find a wonderful new cure for a dreadful old disease. There was no grand purpose. I knew nothing of any of those things.

I wanted to be a doctor because, from what I had seen of our rather elderly, definitely old-fashioned family general practitioner, medicine was a rather dignified and respectful profession. Our family doctor helped and respected his patients and they respected him. I believed that practising as a doctor, particularly as a GP, would enable me to help people in a very real, practical way. What better way to earn a living could there possibly be?

To a small boy, it seemed a good way to live.

Ninety per cent of the time one could manage one's work in a fairly methodical fashion and for ten per cent of the time there was enough excitement to keep one on one's toes.

No relatives of mine had ever practised medicine, the nearest we had ever come was an uncle who made false teeth in his spare time, so my view was strictly from the outside. Nevertheless, I don't think my childhood view of medicine was very far from the truth.

Back in the 1950s, a couple of decades ago now, general practitioners were badly organised; they blundered through their days with little more administrative help than a well-thumbed pocket diary.

I thought that sort of life would suit me down to the ground.

Even then I knew that if I had a job in an office, with a desk and a filing cabinet, I would probably keep things in a mess.

The chance to work with people appealed to me enormously. I was not in the slightest put off by the fact that, judging by what I had seen of it, general practice was an unpredictable way to live – organised chaos rather than neat and precise. That was the way that our old family doctor managed his life.

He had two big assets, which made him perfect for the job.

First, he was a kind and well-meaning man.

Second, he was interested in people. He liked to sit and listen. He always had time to listen. He was gentle and full of sympathy, a commodity which he handed out freely and generously. He was far more careful with the pills. He was as wary as his patients were of modern drugs.

When I arrived in Bilbury, just a few years ago, I was pleased and relieved to see that Dr Brownlow was the spitting image (mentally and spiritually as well as physically) of the GP I knew when I was a boy.

Heaven knows what that poor old fellow would make of modern medical practice: the endless gadgets which have been introduced, the filing systems, the appointment systems, the tape recorders, the secretaries, the group practices and so on.

The advances in diagnosis and therapy have been few enough (despite the claims and boasts made by the medical unions and the drug industry) but there have been an abundance of advances in the world of administration. The managers have taken over, and today medical practice is regarded by many as a business. Medicine has been organised and rationalised. The time and motion study experts have cleared away the comfortable old desks, the piles of letters, the dog-eared diaries and the battered filing cabinets. They have replaced the peace, quiet and confidentiality of the consulting room with forms, more forms and yet more forms.

And, of course, doctors in big city practices are now experimenting with computers.

In the big, modern practices everything is organised.

You can be ill from nine to ten but after that you must wait until six unless you telephone the surgery before twelve in which case you can be seen between three and four on Mondays and Wednesdays and four to five on Tuesdays and Thursdays unless you need an appointment for the special vaccination clinic (run by the nurse) or the child clinic (run by another nurse).

If you need a course of treatment and you are looked after in a group practice then you will probably see a different doctor each time you visit the surgery. And if you need to be seen at night you will be seen by someone else.

The continuity has gone out of medicine.

In towns and cities, everything is carefully arranged so that the doctor can take six out of seven evenings off to watch the television in peace. The majority of doctors in city practices have most weekends free of calls.

In most health centres (they don't call them 'surgeries' any more), five, six or even more doctors share ten, twelve or fifteen thousand patients. There is no longer any such thing as 'our doctor'. I know of practices where there are 24 doctors and dozens of receptionists. Doctors in these practices know nothing about their patients and understand nothing about their lives.

My practice is very different. I practise medicine in a very old-fashioned way. I am on call for my patients for 24 hours a day and seven days a week. I am never off duty. I have less than a thousand patients and I have been in just about every house and cottage in Bilbury. I know every family's secrets (some comical and some dark) and I know everyone by name. I happily visit my patients in their homes because many of them, particularly the elderly, do not have their own transport. I often spend a couple of hours a day travelling to visit my patients. But I would rather have my sort of medicine than any other sort.

The old-fashioned doctor used to practice from a room at home.

The dining room was used as a waiting room and when he wanted a break the doctor slipped into the kitchen for a cup of coffee. His wife helped organise the practice. There might be a receptionist but if a patient needed stitches removing or a graze bandaged it would often be the doctor's wife who did the work.

These days, in modern health centres, it is nurses who take blood for the laboratory and it is nurses who syringe the wax out of ears. In the old days, it was the GP himself who did all these things, carefully cementing his relationship with his patients. In the new world, medicine is now practised in purpose built health centres.

In the old days, the doctor's surgery and the waiting room were probably a bit shabby. The magazines were of historic interest. The notices were a bit out-of-date. But it was a real place. There were pictures on the wall, ornaments on the window ledge and souvenirs on the mantelpiece.

Modern doctors tend to practice in concrete, steel and glass shell structures where the doctors go through the motions of being doctors and the patients hardly dare go through the motions of being patients. The doctor is now a technician. He is no longer known by the families he treats, he is no longer loved as one of the family.

Medicine isn't practised any longer, it is just a job. And it pays well if you have things organised properly. If you have a good appointments system, enough special grants and a few efficient secretaries and receptionists you can make a very good living. There are clinics at the hospital to be done, factories which need doctors, immunisation clinics to be staffed and life insurance medicals to fit in during the afternoons. There are lots of ways to make money as long as you don't spend too long with the damned patients.

But what is the point of a life lived like that?

'May you always have enough,' was my grandfather's favourite saying.

But some people don't seem to know when they've had enough. However much they have, they always want more.

My practice is very old-fashioned and would probably appal many 'modern' doctors. I practise at home. Patients who want to see me in my surgery come to Bilbury Grange.

I am, every day, glad I answered Dr Brownlow's advertisement for a young doctor in Bilbury.

When I talk to my friends who are in general practice in towns and cities I feel as if I have come onto the scene fifty years too late. It's rather like arriving at your own funeral.

I don't want to put the clock back to the days when single-handed practitioners all fought heroically to save their patients with leeches, blood-letting and herbal remedies which might or might not prove fatal.

I don't want to go back to the days when the doctor was the local conscience, the respected and respectable pillar of the community.

I just want to be a doctor who practices in a world where it is people who matter. I want to organise my life my own way, make my own mistakes and see my own patients through their problems, their anxieties and their crises.

I was, once again, reminded how lucky I am when a friend of mine from medical school came to stay for a day or two.

'I still don't know how you cope,' said William when he visited Bilbury for the second time. That was almost a year ago. 'Nothing ever changes here,' he said, 'everything always seems the same. Aren't you bored?'

Bored? How could I possibly be bored? There wasn't time to be bored!

William is a GP who works in a large, modern practice near to the town of Wolverhampton, right in the heart of the English midlands. He is probably the brightest person I have ever met. When we talk he always seems to be giving me his full attention, but I can never quite dismiss from my mind the thought that he only needs to use one part of his brain to concentrate fully on our conversation. I am always conscious that while talking to me his brain is dealing with half a dozen other issues at the same time, and that he is giving them his full attention too, in the way that Grand Masters such as Bobby Fischer can play two dozen games of chess simultaneously and, if asked to do so, play them all blindfolded. When William got married I was his best man. It was, I remember, the fourth wedding Patsy and I had attended that year, since many of the students with whom I had studied had chosen to get married at the same time.

When he came back for a third visit, William had changed his attitude a little and seemed pleased to see that things had stayed much the same as they had been on his previous visit.

Indeed, if anything, Bilbury had moved backwards rather than forwards.

For one thing, Peter Marshall had somehow managed to start delivering newspapers which were a day old when they arrived. Actually, I rather enjoyed reading a daily newspaper which was a day out-of-date. There is no point in getting excited about anything in a newspaper which has more in common with history than current affairs.

I did ask Peter what had happened and he muttered something about his distributor having delivery problems but Gilly Parsons at the Duck and Puddle told me that she believed that Peter had done a money saving deal with the wholesaler and was buying day old newspapers as waste and then selling them with some cock and bull story about delivery problems.

I sometimes fear that the big chain retailers probably have a man following Peter's business activities. What happens in Bilbury today will probably happen in London, Paris and New York tomorrow.

'It's a relief to find a bit of England that hasn't succumbed to the modern enthusiasm for needless change,' commented William, as we sat in front of a roaring log fire in the living room at Bilbury Grange. I love open log fires and tend to have them even in the summer if there is a chill in the air.

It was after lunch and I had done my visits for the day and had no professional commitments until the evening surgery at 5.00 p.m. I had recently begun starting the evening surgery at 5.00 p.m. a couple of evenings a week in order to make it easier for patients who worked in Barnstaple or Taunton to attend. This wasn't an entirely administrative move for I had realised that if I changed the times of the surgery, and made myself more easily accessible, patients would come and tell me about their problems earlier, rather than waiting for things to get worse. As a bonus, I found myself having to do fewer home visits. When you work alone, as I do, and are on call for 24 hours a day and 365 days a year, anything you can do to make life slightly easier for everyone is worth doing.

'Mind you,' William added, 'I've read your books about Bilbury and you certainly have some odd things happening around here. Until I came here and saw for myself I didn't think so many strange things could happen in one place. It's the way you look at things, I suppose. Always on the look-out for the quirky!'

William and I were chatting and talking about our different lifestyles and working days. Patsy and William's wife, Brenda, were in the summerhouse with all the children. Since Thumper put a wood stove into the summerhouse, we have used it far more often. It makes a wonderful hideaway garden room.

Before becoming a general practitioner, William had worked in hospital where he had specialised in general medicine. He had reached far in the hierarchy as a senior registrar but had resigned and moved into general practice when it became clear that he was not likely to obtain a post as a consultant until he was well past his fortieth birthday.

He was tired of the politicisation of the hospital career ladder, weary of still being officially classified as a 'junior hospital doctor', and so with a wife and two small children to look after he decided to jump ship and become a family doctor, albeit an exceptionally well-qualified one.

'I work with seven other partners and two assistants and three nurses,' said William thoughtfully. He leant forward and knocked the dottle from his pipe into the fireplace. He then took a brown leather tobacco pouch from his pocket. He also took out a small, rather clever tool which has gadgets which he can use to poke around both in the bowl and along the stem. It's a sort of Swiss Army penknife for smokers and it looked so much fun that it genuinely made me think of taking up pipe smoking – simply for the joy of having one of those little gadgets in my pocket.

'But I can't remember the last time I actually managed to sit down and discuss clinical problems with anyone,' he continued.

We sat in silence for a while, watching the logs on the fire. They were good apple tree logs, and made excellent burning.

The sight of William's pipe smoker's 'friend' (as those little gadgets are sometimes known) made me reach into my pocket and touch my penknife, for no other reason than to reassure me that it was still there. I don't think I've ever grown up for in addition to the usual coins and keys, my pockets are always stuffed with all manner of useful bits and pieces: pencil stubs, paper clips, rubber bands, a small notebook or possibly two, a piece of string, a prescription pad and other miscellaneous and ever changing bits of stuff. I carry the key to start the car but not for the house because we don't bother to lock the house doors. (Although, I confess, I do lock the cupboard where I keep my stock of drugs such as morphine.)

I have heard it said that with a shilling, a piece of string and a pocket-knife a man is prepared for any emergency. The thought dates from late Victorian days and although the shilling is now probably a little light for serious financial emergencies, I still regard the advice as sound. It is certainly the case that the piece of string and the pocket-knife are indispensable. I never go anywhere without both tucked safely into a pocket. My jackets are all baggy but I believe that pockets are there to be used.

I have a small collection of pocket-knives but, although they are perhaps a little larger and heavier than might be preferred, the Swiss Army knives are without a doubt the most useful. They may wear holes in pocket linings faster than Patsy would like but they are enormously useful and I don't think any country doctor should ever leave the house without one.

My favourite version of the famous red Swiss Army knife, and the one which I usually carry in my pocket, is the one which contains two blades, both types of screwdriver, a pair of scissors, a magnifying glass, a corkscrew, a toothpick, a pair of tweezers and a bodger for making holes in conkers. I keep the main blade as sharp as I can make it, on the grounds that if ever I need a knife in an emergency then I'll probably need one with a blade that cuts tougher stuff than butter.

It is widely assumed that the multifunction pocket-knife is a new invention but Patchy Fogg, antique dealer and lover of all things curious, once explained to me that this is definitely not the case.

He told me that cutlers have been making multi-bladed knives since the early years of the 19th century and the most innovative manufacturers created knives as much to show off their skills and their inventiveness as to attract customers. In 1822, the English firm of Rodgers built an extraordinary knife in order to celebrate their royal appointment by George IV. The knife contained an almost unbelievable 1822 separate blades and the creation was known as the 'Year Knife'. The same Mr Rodgers then produced a rather more practical giant knife containing just 75 tools and blades for the Great Exhibition of 1851. I really would love one of these but I suspect the weight would result in a really large hole appearing in my pocket.

William took tobacco from the pouch and slowly and methodically started to pack the bowl of his pipe. He has a variety of pipes and never travels without three or four. Today he was using one of those curved Sherlock Holmes pipes. It had an absolutely huge bowl. He smokes stuff which he buys from a tobacconist who imports the brand just for him. It smells sweeter than any other tobacco I've ever come across. I did try a pipe full once and found it extremely pleasant.

'But don't you talk to your partners?' I asked him, astonished.

'We have plenty of meetings,' he said, with a sigh. 'But we never seem to talk about anything significant.' He continued to pack down the tobacco in his pipe. Like many other pipe smokers he enjoyed the process of preparing a pipe almost as much as he enjoyed the smoking itself.

'We have a practice meeting every Monday evening,' he said, thoughtfully. He stared at the fire for a while. He lives in a modern house which doesn't have a working fireplace and always enjoys staring into the fire at Bilbury Grange. I cannot imagine why a builder would build a house without a working fireplace. Central heating is all very well but if the boiler breaks down or the electricity supply is interrupted it is good to have an alternative source of heat. But then, I suppose that power outages are less likely in an urban area than they are in the wilds of North Devon.

'We used to have the meetings in the back room of a local pub but one of the new partners objected and said it wasn't seemly for doctors to discuss practice business in a public house.' He sighed wistfully. 'So now we have our meetings in the practice waiting room. A bloody boring place it is too. And whereas we could have drinks and snacks sent in when we met in the pub, we now have to put up with milky stuff that could be tea or could be coffee. And if we're lucky, someone slips two rich tea biscuits into the saucer.'

'What sort of things do you discuss?' I asked.

I could still remember my own regular meetings with Dr Brownlow, my late predecessor, and the man who had brought me to Bilbury. We had often discussed clinical problems. I always found these meetings enormously helpful and I have no hesitation in saying that I learned more by talking to Dr Brownlow than I learned at medical school. Since Dr Brownlow's death, I had rather envied William the ability to discuss clinical quandaries and dilemmas with a large group of colleagues.

'We discuss administration, finance and employee problems,' he told me, with a weariness which I definitely did not envy. 'We argue about the on call rota, and there will always be someone who claims that they shouldn't be expected to work bank holidays because they're too young or too old or have visitors coming or have children. We have six receptionists and we have to discuss their problems too.'

I stared at him.

'We're running a small business,' he explained, looking rather embarrassed. 'We're actually members of the Federation of Small Businesses! We have to discuss the utility company contract, car parking problems and difficulties with the telephone company and the switching facilities we use.' Not for the first time I gave silent thanks that I worked as a single-handed practitioner and had no partners with whom to discuss things. I felt lucky that my wife, Patsy, and Miss Johnson, my receptionist, dealt with the administration of the practice and made sure that the bills were paid and that there were fresh flowers and magazines in the waiting room. 'Couldn't you have a clinical meeting on another evening?' I asked.

'Not a chance.' said William. 'On Tuesdays we have a meeting with the social workers. They insist that we meet with them in order to discuss social problems. It's always a complete waste of time. I can never understand what they're talking about. Every Wednesday we have a meeting with the health visitors and practice nurses. Those are the meetings when we plan our vaccination programmes. The senior partners are very keen on vaccination programmes because we make a ton of money out of them. On Thursdays we meet with the reception staff who tell us all their problems, anxieties and complaints. And on Fridays we meet the Patients' Consultative Group.'

'What on earth is the Patients' Consultative Group?' I asked him.

'One of the partners read something in a magazine advising doctors to consult their patients more regularly,' said William. 'So now we have a weekly meeting where we discuss practice management issues and listen to complaints and suggestions from the group of largely self-elected patients.'

'What on earth do you find to talk about?' I asked, genuinely curious.

'Oh, all sorts of things,' he said wearily. 'The patients' representatives have been pushing for some time for us to put new curtains up in the waiting room. We agreed that we needed new curtains but no one can agree on the colour. We talk about car parking problems because there is only room for a dozen cars in the practice car park and there is very little parking in the streets around the health centre. And, of course, there are always lots of worries about the appointments system.'

'Ah,' I said. 'You have one of those appointment systems do you!'

William stared at me. 'I'd forgotten you didn't have an appointments system,' he said. 'I'm amazed that you're still holding out. How on earth does that work for you?'

'Very well,' I replied. 'People who want to be seen just totter along to the surgery, give their name to Miss Johnson and sit down in the waiting room. If Miss Johnson is away for any reason, Patsy stands in for her. When one patient leaves Miss Johnson calls out the name of the next patient on the list.'

'But don't patients have to wait for hours?'

'Not usually. And they don't seem to mind if they do have to wait a while. People bring their daily paper or their knitting. If there's a bit of a queue they generally pop along to Peter Marshall's shop and do a few chores there. If they miss their place in the queue then they just fit in a bit later. It works very well and most patients like it because there is none of this business of waiting days or weeks for an appointment. I do a surgery every weekday morning and every evening except Wednesdays and a surgery for emergencies on Saturday mornings. Patients seem to find that the whole thing works quite satisfactorily. And they don't have to waste time and money ringing the surgery to make an appointment. And I don't have to hire extra staff to answer telephone calls from people wanting to make appointments.'

William shook his head. 'I envy you,' he said. 'Believe me, progress isn't always what it's cracked up to be.'

'So you and your colleagues really don't have much time left for discussing clinical problems?' I said.

'None at all,' said William, looking rather sad. He took a box of matches from his jacket pocket and removed a match. He lit it and held the flame against the tobacco in his pipe, puffed and sucked in the way pipe smokers always do when trying to get things going satisfactorily. When he was happy that the pipe was alight, he shook the match from side to side to put out the flame and then threw the dead match into the fire. 'Believe me,' he said quite seriously, 'I envy you the simplicity of a single-handed practice.'

He then went on to tell me that he had heard that the Government and the medical establishment were determined to force all GPs to work in group practices and to introduce appointment systems.

'They'll have a job to do that with people like me,' I said. 'Bilbury is too far away from other towns for a group practice to be able to look after the villagers, and there are nowhere near enough people here to keep a group practice occupied.'

'But you had trouble a year or two ago!' said William.

I agreed that my single-handed practice had been closed down for a while when administrators decided to streamline medical services in the area and to allocate my patients to doctors working in the nearby town of Barnstaple. The residents of Bilbury were not happy about this and there was much delight when the doctors in Barnstaple eventually got tired of driving out to Bilbury on dark and rainy nights and the health authorities were persuaded to relent and to allow me to reopen the practice.

Our conversation was then interrupted by the ringing of the telephone. The caller was Mr Avery-Ware (a bachelor with more than a roving eye who is known to female villagers as 'Hans' – a soubriquet which he finds amusing), asking me to visit his neighbour, Mrs Harborough. Mr Avery-Ware is quite indomitable and as lively as a cricket and looks twenty years younger than he is. When he celebrated his 80th birthday he told me with a glint in one eye (the other had a rather advanced cataract which he refuses to have dealt with) that the best years of his life were yet to come.

Mr Avery-Ware didn't know what was wrong with Mrs Harborough, just that his neighbour had knocked on his door and asked him to ring me and ask me to call round. It was, he believed, her husband who needed help.

Like many people in the village, Mrs Harborough doesn't have a telephone. When those without telephones need something they simply ask someone nearby who has one to make the call for them. There never seems to be any ill-feeling about this. Indeed, villagers whose homes are blessed with telephones usually feel important and indispensable because of their links to their outside world.

'I'm sorry,' I said, when I put down the telephone. 'I have to just pop out. I shouldn't be more than half an hour. Help yourself to whisky! Tell Patsy I've had to pop out to see Mrs Harborough.'

'I wonder,' began William, hesitantly, 'if you'd mind if I sort of tagged along? I'd really like to see a bit of rural medicine in the flesh, so to speak.'

I said I'd be delighted and explained that country medical practice is a little different to town practice in that although it requires the usual mixture of medical knowledge and a supply of common sense, mixed together with a dollop of lateral thinking, it also requires a good deal of local knowledge. Instead of being neatly laid out in logically numbered houses, my patients have a tendency to live in isolated cottages and houses which have names not numbers. The nameplates for most village properties have long ago disappeared. Moreover, their houses can often only be reached by driving five miles along narrow lanes and cart tracks. Since the owner of a cottage knows where he lives and does not usually welcome visitors, most country dwellers live in homes which do not advertise their presence or their identity. Houses in towns often have both names and numbers. Houses in the country may have names but it is rare for there to be a visible sign or a nameplate.

I scribbled a note for Patsy, to explain where we'd gone, and we both climbed into the Rolls.

'I still can't believe you use this for your daily calls,' said William, admiring the wooden dashboard and the magnificent state of the old motor car's interior. 'They don't make cars like this anymore, do they? It's hardly practical though, is it? It must cost you a fortune to run.'

'It has a great liking for petrol,' I admitted, 'and it doesn't fit terribly well into some of the narrow Devon lanes. But it's a constant joy to drive and I rather think patients prefer to see their doctor turn up in an old, classic motor car than in the sort of fairly ordinary and rather battered old car I used to drive when Dr Brownlow was alive. My patients like to think of the doctor's visit as being something special. I did my calls on a bicycle for a while one summer and I always got the feeling that, although they didn't say anything, patients did sometimes feel uncomfortable about the fact that their doctor had to remove his bicycle clips when he arrived. The Rolls is elegant enough to give them extra confidence and there is a permanence and longevity about it which the folk round here seem to find comforting. It also helps enormously that this was Dr Brownlow's car. They loved him and so a little of his magic rubs off on me now that I drive his Rolls.'

'I understand that,' said William. 'It's well known that a trusted doctor has a healing power, a placebo effect if you prefer, and anything which adds to that power must improve the chances of patients getting better speedily.'

To get to Woodbine Cottage, Mrs Harborough's home, we had to drive through a ford which is often impassable in winter (I keep a pair of waders in the boot of the Rolls Royce for such eventualities) and down a rutted lane which is dusty and bumpy in summer and muddy and glutinous in winter.

(The word 'woodbine' refers not to the brand of cigarette which was exceedingly popular in Britain during the War years but to a variety of 'honeysuckle' for which 'woodbine' is the proper name. In America, 'woodbine' is, I believe, the name given to Virginia creeper.)

'Do you ever get lost around here?' asked William as the Rolls purred on through the wondrous splendour of an area of North Devon known as the Valley of the Rocks. 'I haven't a clue where we are. Have we crossed any borders? Are we still in England?'

'We're still in Devon,' I assured him. 'I know my way around here pretty well but you can't possibly get lost if you remember that if you aim the hour hand of your watch at the sun, then half way between that and the 12 is the direction of due south.'

I took a turning down a small lane which funnelled into a smaller lane and then into a bridle path.

William looked up at the sky. 'There is no sun,' he said, 'it's too cloudy.'

'Then we just have to hope that the car knows the way home,' I said. 'Dr Brownlow used to have a horse that could find its way home from anywhere in Bilbury. He would fall asleep after making a night call and just let his horse clip clop back home.'

William looked at me disbelievingly.

'It's true,' I said, because it was, and pulled off onto a stretch of fairly wide, fairly flat verge which the Harboroughs, who didn't own a motor car, had mown for the use of those rare visitors who did. I climbed out of the car, plucked my black bag from the back seat and set off for the cottage.

'Aren't you going to lock it?' asked William, still standing by the car and clearly surprised. 'And you've left the key in the ignition.'

'Never lock it,' I said. 'No one round here would steal it, or take anything from it. Dr Brownlow never locked it and neither do I. There is probably a key somewhere for the doors, but I've never bothered to look for it.' I paused. 'I suppose I ought to find the key for when I pop into Barnstaple. I hear that people have been known to steal cars there.'

'Crumbs!' said William. 'If I didn't lock my car and left it for five minutes it wouldn't be there when I got back. Even when it's locked I feel lucky if I get back and don't find the axles balanced on old bricks and the wheels several miles away. And I consider myself very lucky if the hubcaps haven't been nicked.'

Mrs Harborough's cottage is, like many of the properties in Bilbury, quite small. It is what, I believe estate agents like to describe as 'cosy' or, if they like to think of themselves as being 'educated' and are feeling particularly poetic, 'bijou'. There are two reception rooms downstairs: a living room which is used for sitting, eating and sleeping in front of the fire and a small front room which is used only for wedding breakfasts and funeral teas. There is a small kitchen, equipped with an old range which lives on a diet of coal, wood and vegetable peelings and which, as far as I know, has not been out for the best part of half a century, an open fronted dresser which Patchy has been trying to buy off the Harboroughs for as long as I've been in Bilbury, and a Belfast sink equipped with a cold tap which is gravity fed from a small stream which crosses the garden. Hot water, when required, comes from the kettle. Up until around six months ago, the cottage had been lit by oil lamps. But a few months earlier the Harboroughs had, with some considerable reluctance and not a little suspicion, joined the 20th century and agreed to have electricity connected. The electrical supply provided lighting for both main rooms downstairs and both rooms upstairs. Mrs Harborough refused steadfastly to have electricity in her kitchen, readily explaining that she was worried that it might affect her cooking. The man from the electricity company had tried to persuade her that electricity would not curdle her milk and could, indeed, be used to power a modern cooker but Mrs Harborough was a nervous woman and not easily persuaded by any silver-tongued salesman from a company which was, she rightly assumed, anxious to increase the amount of electricity it was selling her.

The privy, or outside lavatory, is, as it is in so many homes in Bilbury, situated a few yards away from the back door. It empties into a cesspit and was still lit by an oil lamp since Mrs Harborough had been as reluctant to have electric lighting in the outside facilities as she had been to have it in the kitchen. Any bathing which was required was done in a battered tin bath in front of the open fire in the living room.

The range, and the open fire, provided the cottage with all its heating and, I have to admit, did so more than adequately. Whatever the season the cottage would not have betrayed any estate agent who took a fancy to describe it as 'cosy'. Not that the Harboroughs were in the market for a buyer. Mrs Harborough had been born in the cottage and was, she was proud to tell me, the first baby Dr Brownlow ever delivered. As the youngest daughter, she had dutifully and lovingly looked after her parents in their old age. She had, with the agreement of her sisters, all of whom had moved far away and had no use for a small and almost worthless cottage, never doubted that she would remain in the cottage until it was time for her to meet her maker. She had met her husband late in life for she was in her forties when her last remaining parent, her mother, died and she was freed from her responsibilities in that direction.

Mr Wilfred Harborough, a labourer who had worked for Mrs Harborough's parents, had lived in the cottage since their marriage night, and was similarly determined to remain there until he was 'called by God'.

Mrs Harborough had travelled no further than Barnstaple and she had been there only twice in her life. She still talked about those adventures in much the sort of way that an explorer might describe travels to darkest Africa or the Himalayan peaks. Mr Harborough, who considered himself to be exceptionally well-travelled, had been in the army during the Second World War and had, in that capacity, visited camps on Salisbury Plain and in Yorkshire. He had returned from his military service with no medals but his fellow soldiers had rechristened him 'Market' Harborough after the town of that name (which he had, incidentally, never visited) and so had come home to Bilbury with a demob suit and the nickname 'Market'

Upstairs, approached via a staircase which is hidden away in what looks like a cupboard, there are two bedrooms. One contains a huge iron bedstead and a very soggy mattress and the other contains a second-hand divan bed which was installed in the hope of attracting tourists looking for bed and breakfast accommodation and which is, I believe, still waiting for its first occupant.

Mrs Harborough, who is a big woman, almost as broad in the beam as she is tall, met us in the hall. Her Christian name is Blossom. Her parents had nine other girls, all older than Blossom, and every one of them was named after a flower. There was a Rose, a Lily, a Daisy and so on. By the time the enthusiastic anthophilic parents had the tenth girl in their series they had run out of flower names and so the tenth daughter was called Blossom.

I introduced William and explained that he too was a doctor, in general practice elsewhere.

Mrs Harborugh seemed delighted but rather flustered to have two doctors in her home, as though concerned that there might not be enough for two doctors to do. 'I've got some fruit cake ready for you,' she said, 'and the kettle is on. Come on in and I'll find another plate and another cup.'

We followed her into the house.

In the car I had already explained to William that it is quite impossible to enter Mrs Harborough's home without eating at least one slice of homemade cake and drinking two cups of tea.

Early in my career in Bilbury, I had once made the mistake of rushing off without eating the proffered slice of cake, claiming that I had more visits to do and couldn't stay. It had taken nearly two years for Mrs Harborough to forgive me.

'It's the doctor,' Mrs Harborough called to her husband, in a voice that could and does carry across six fields when the sheep or the cows need calling in. 'The doctor has brought another doctor with him,' she added. There was a pause. 'So there are two doctors.'

'It's Wilfred who needs you, doctor,' she explained.

'What's up?' I asked. I always find it important, when visiting one half of a married couple, to get the view of the other half before offering a viewpoint or any recommendations. When a country dwelling couple have been married for ten or more years, and have spent pretty much every day of every week of every month of every year within calling distance of each other, then the chances are very good that they will each know as much about their spouse's weaknesses and strengths, frailties and susceptibilities as it is possible for anyone to know.

'He's gone and bought a mowing machine,' said Mrs Harborough. She announced this as if her husband had purchased a submarine or a locomotive. 'He bought it to cut the grass in the orchard.'

In addition to keeping a few animals, the Harboroughs have an apple and pear orchard which covers well over an acre. They sell the apples and pears their trees produce to a Somerset cider maker. Mr Harborough had, I know, always cut the grass in their orchard with a scythe.

'Oh dear,' I said. I immediately had an awful vision of Mr Harborough putting his hand into the cutters and losing his fingers. 'What's happened?'

'Nothing has happened,' said Mrs Harborough. 'That's the problem. Nothing at all. He can't get it started. They sent instructions but they might as well be in foreign. He's out the back.'

'Then we'd better go and take a look and see if we can help,' I said.

'It's a good job there's the two of you,' said Mrs Harborough. 'Maybe you can make head and tail of the book they sent with it. My Wilf can't make no sense of it. He said the doctor, being a man of learning, would be the man to call.' Mrs Harborough added that a tame pheasant had that morning brought his wife, son and two daughters along to share the food spilt from the bird table and that we were, if possible, to avoid making any sudden movements which might startle the family.

We found Wilfred Harborough in the back yard, scratching his head and staring at a number of parts of what did look like a new mowing machine. There were rollers, a grass collecting box and something that looked like an engine. Mr Harborough had the instruction booklet in his left hand. The five pheasants were standing around looking as though they'd like to help but weren't quite sure how best to be of service.

'Thank heavens you've come, doctor,' said Wilfred, as though I had turned up in the nick of time to deal with a life threatening emergency.

I introduced William. The two nodded and murmured appropriate greetings. I could see that William was a little surprised by the nature of the emergency. I don't think big city doctors spend a lot of time helping patients decipher mowing machine manuals.

'It came in a box in bits and I can't make head nor tail of it,' admitted Wilfred. He handed me the instruction brochure. I could see why Mrs Harborough had called it a book. There were sections in German, Danish, Japanese and Finnish. There was also a section in English but the person who had written the English section did not appear to be a native English speaker.

'Where did you buy it from?' I asked.

'A garden centre in Barnstaple,' replied Wilfred. 'I went there especially.'

Barnstaple is around 10 miles from Bilbury but most of the locals, even the well-travelled Wilfred, regard a journey there to be an expedition requiring maps, compass and a large packet of sandwiches. In the old days, several villagers, both men and women, used to walk to Barnstaple every day to work in the town. At the end of a day's work they would walk back to Bilbury. It was a two and a half hour journey each way and in bad, winter weather it must have required considerable fortitude. These days Bilbury villagers have become more insular than their forebears and, very probably, not so fit.

'But the one in the garden centre was all made up,' continued Wilfred. 'It looked like a mowing machine. This one came in a box, delivered on a lorry.'

'Ah, they do that,' said William. 'We bought a wardrobe two weeks ago. It came packed flat and I had to put the parts together.'

Wilfred stared at him. 'A wardrobe? You bought a wardrobe in bits?'

‘Some Swedish company,’ said William. ‘They sell their stuff in kits. The good thing is that they always give you more than you need. I had tons of screws left over. And a big, spare piece of plywood stuff. Mind you, when I’d finished it, there was a big gap at the back of the wardrobe. I think they probably forgot to send me one bit and sent me two of another bit.’ He shrugged and grinned. ‘Fortunately, my wife says she’ll get someone in to build it if we buy another.’

I bent down and took a look at the bits and pieces of lawn mower. I opened the brochure and found the part that was supposed to be in English. I read the first paragraph out loud: ‘For the furtherance of the machine to have been made taking the parts marked D and M on the explosive diagram marked No 1 and with the fastenings provided fasten the part M to the part marked D using the fastenings marked E as provided.’

I examined the ‘explosive diagram’ which looked as it was the result of dipping a spider’s feet in ink and then letting it walk all over a sheet of paper.

I showed the diagram to William who simply frowned and grunted.

I read on.

‘After fixating the parts as instructed place part marked B and part marked C in neighbourhood of parts marked E and E and connect together with application of projectiles as entrusted in explosive diagram marked No 2. Important note: do not under circumstances of eventuality of malfunctioning place part C against throttle lever cable adjustment hammer (see page 5) until the cross screw threaded flange divider having been duly fatted with due endeavour is by the eyes tensed.’

I read out the instructions as slowly and carefully as I could. I read them out again. None of us could understand a word of it. The cock pheasant flapped his wings and squawked. His wife and children looked impressed but said nothing.

‘I think we might do better forgetting about the brochure and just try to build the mower so that it looks like the mower on the front of the brochure,’ suggested William. He took the brochure from me and pointed to a small, two inch square picture of the mower on the cover. We all peered at the picture.

‘So that must be the handle,’ I said, pointing to a long piece of tubular metal which looked like bicycle handlebars created by one of those fashionable artists who always manages to give his subjects three heads and one leg.

‘And that is probably the cable that connects the accelerator lever to the engine,’ suggested William. ‘And that big bit over there will be the grass box.’

And so we went on, sustained by regular supplies of cake and tea, brought to us by Blossom Harborough.

After a good deal of trial and error, a fair amount of skin, a little blood and all the swear words the landlord of the Duck and Puddle wasn’t using at that moment, we eventually succeeded in building something that looked very much like a lawn mower.

‘I’ve got these bits left over,’ said Wilfred, holding out a handful of screws and assorted bits of metal.

‘Good, they always send spare bits,’ said William. ‘Keep them somewhere safe in case you ever need them.’

Wilfred put the handful of bits into his overall pocket and William pulled the starter cord several times and then it occurred to me that the mower might need some fuel so Wilfred brought a can of petrol from his outside lavatory and we filled up the tank with the aid of a small funnel Blossom uses when making her cakes. The pheasants, not enamoured of the smell, tottered off up the garden.

Two minutes later we all shook hands when Wilfred, pulled the starter cord and, to our immense surprise, the mower started. Two minutes after that we cheered loudly when Wilfred took the mower into the orchard and showed us that it would, indeed, cut grass.

Attracted by the noise of the cheering and the mower, Blossom came out with more cups of tea and more cake. It was only then that it occurred to me that if we had called Thumper he would have probably been able to build the mower in a tenth of the time. Still, we would have been denied our moment of pride.

‘I enjoyed that,’ said William, as we drove home in the Rolls. ‘I had no idea country practice was so much fun. Do you have many calls like that one?’ His suit was ruined, covered in copious amounts of oil and stinking of petrol, and his hands were black with grease and oil. My clothes and hands were no better. On the back seat of the car sat two large tins, each containing one of Blossom’s fruit and walnut cakes – one for William and his family and one for Patsy and me.

I drove slowly, trying not to touch too much of the steering wheel. Despite washing them several times, and scrubbing at them with a nailbrush, my hands were still filthy.

‘If you ever decide to retire, you must promise to let me know,’ said William contentedly. ‘I see what you mean about country medicine being a little different to town practice.’

He took his pipe out of his pocket and started to fill it with tobacco. ‘If Bilbury is ever looking to find a twin town,’ he said drily, ‘might I suggest that you put the planet Pluto high on the list of possibles?’

The Accidental Odd Job Man

Patsy and I have always enjoyed reading and between us we get through a vast number of books. We don't watch television very much but usually prefer to spend our evenings sitting by the fire listening to music and reading. As a sole practitioner, I am always liable to be called out in the evening and it is far easier to put a bookmark into a volume to mark the page I am reading, rather than to leave a television programme and then expect Patsy to summarise and explain what I've missed when I returned an hour or so later.

In the summer, of course, the light evenings are usually spent in the garden, sitting by the lake or picking fruit or vegetables. But during the dark evenings of winter we have much more time for reading.

During the dark, cold evenings one winter I spent some time sitting on my side of the fire reading Benjamin Franklin's quite remarkable autobiography and I discovered that, but for a quirk of fate, America's history could have been quite a different one.

Franklin was an excellent swimmer who had enjoyed the sport since he had been a child. He was proud of having studied and practised the techniques described in Thevenot's book *The Art of Swimming* (which had been published in 1696) and was proud to have added some of his own tricks and manoevres. While living in London he had earned some considerable notoriety by swimming 'from near Chelsea to Blackfryar's, performing on the way many fears of activity, both upon and under water, that surprised and pleased those to whom they were novelties' and he had been 'much flattered' by the admiration of the onlookers.

As a result of this display, Franklin was approached by a man called Sir William Wyndham who wanted him to teach his two sons how to swim. Wyndham offered to pay the young American a handsome sum if he would give them lessons.

Unfortunately, for all concerned, Franklin was already planning to return to Pennsylvania and could not accept the invitation but, in his autobiography, he writes that he 'thought it likely that if I were to remain in England and open a swimming-school, I might get a good deal of money; and it struck me so strongly, that, had the overture been sooner made me, probably I should not so soon have returned to America.'

Franklin played such a huge part in America's early development that it is difficult to imagine how things might have turned out if the young printer had not already committed himself to return home and had chosen to remain in England and become a swimming tutor. It always surprises me to realise just how much history is influenced by the little things.

As a country GP, I am constantly reminded how delicately balanced life can be, and how the slightest and most seemingly insignificant incident can have a notable impact.

Consider, for example, the story of how we found an essential member of staff for the Brownlow Country Hotel, our revised version of the hospital we had created out of Dr Brownlow's old home.

The Brownlow Country Hotel had been open for a week when the first patient was admitted.

In order to avoid problems with the local health service administrators, the first patient was, of course, admitted as a 'guest' rather than as a 'patient'. And our rota of volunteer nurses were not known as nurses but could choose to describe themselves as 'housekeepers', 'reception staff', 'chefs' or 'waitresses'.

I was surprised to find that in practical terms the only real difference between running a hospital and running a hotel was the amount of bureaucracy involved. I think if we had attempted to persevere with our plan to open a hospital we would have suffocated under the weight of absurd rules and regulations.

Just three days after our official opening (it had been a very low key affair because we didn't want to attract the attention of the health service bureaucrats by inviting a dignitary to cut a ribbon, unveil a plaque or plant a tree and in any case none of these seemed appropriate now that we were officially running a hotel rather than a hospital) it became clear that although our rota of volunteer nurses could cope very well with looking after the patients (sorry, the guests) we would need someone to help maintain the fabric of the building.

Like all old houses, Dr Brownlow's former home needed constant care and attention. There were always chores to be done.

In what had been the library, a window catch came loose and, as an inevitable consequence, a window wouldn't shut properly and a nasty draught constantly swept through the room. Two light bulbs on a chandelier hanging twelve feet above ground level needed changing. The chimney in the dining room started to smoke and needed sweeping. A tap in one of the bedrooms began to drip and needed attention. A toilet wouldn't flush unless you jiggled the handle up to the left and then down and to the right. The guttering over the back door was leaking, with the result that if it was raining no one could enter or leave the house through that door without having an impromptu shower. The left hand front gate had seized up and needed loosening and oiling. A branch had half fallen off one of the oaks and needed cutting down and, preferably, chopping up into logs. Grass needed cutting, hedges needed trimming and the culvert leading into the lake needed clearing. A broken window pane in the butler's pantry needed replacing.

All these were the sort of relatively minor problems which affect any large house but when the house is very old, the problems become apparent on a daily basis.

As Bradshaw said, 'When you have 36 taps the chances are high that at any one time at least one of them will be dripping.'

Bradshaw couldn't possibly cope with these chores on top of all his other responsibilities and so we needed a full-time maintenance man and gardener: someone capable of turning his hand to pretty well everything practical, someone not too proud to stick his arm into a blocked drain (probably the commonest of common problems in a large country house which has old and complicated drains) and someone prepared to do all this for room, board and a very modest income. I could have asked Thumper to help, and I know he would have done so without a moment's hesitation, but since our problems were likely to occur on a daily basis we need someone living on the premises.

Dr Brownlow had given me a good sum in cash to cover the cost of turning the house into a cottage hospital but a good chunk of the money had already gone on buying hospital beds, linen, towels and other essentials and I knew that the hospital running costs (insurance, rates and so on) would burn up money steadily. I needed to keep the regular expenditure down.

'We need to employ what is, I believe, known in the vernacular as an 'odd job man',' said Bradshaw. He had a natural ability to put inverted commas around certain words and he did it now with the words 'odd job man'. 'We require someone prepared to live in and deal with all these little chores. But how much can we afford to pay?'

'Not much,' I confessed. Bradshaw's salary was being paid by the health authority, since he was officially attached to my practice as my district nurse and we still had money in the bank, but I knew we had to plan for the long term.

'There's a small flat that used to be occupied by the groom,' said Bradshaw. 'It's not been used since he left. But it would tidy up quite nicely. And it gets heat from the stove in the tack room.'

'When did the groom leave?' I asked. I didn't know that Dr Brownlow had employed a groom though I suppose I should have realised that he would have needed someone to look after his horses.

'That would be at the outbreak of World War II,' said Bradshaw drily. 'Dr Brownlow had bought the Rolls Royce by then and we didn't really have anything for the poor fellow to do. He joined the army and in view of his experience as a groom expected to be put to work looking after the horses. Inevitably, of course, he ended up in a tank regiment where he was appointed regimental cook. He didn't know anything about tanks or cooking so I expect the military hierarchy considered him pretty well perfect for the post. I kept in touch with him after the war. By the time the war finished he had risen to the rank of Colonel in the catering corps. He then moved into the hotel trade and became General Manager of one of the large London hotels. Sadly, I then rather lost touch with him.'

I suddenly realised where we could find our odd job man.

I don't know why it took me so long.

But would the man to whom I wanted to offer the post be prepared to consider it?

I realised some years ago, when I was still a young man, that it is often wise to take anything a tramp tells you with a large pinch of salt. I do not mean to suggest by this that they are all malignant liars, deliberately misleading those who take the time to listen to their stories, but, rather, that they tend, rather more than most folk, to select the truths they choose to share with their listeners.

Part of what a tramp tells you will be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, but some of it will be the truth that he or she wants to share with you, some of it will be the truth that he or she thinks you want to hear and some of it will be the untruth that he or she wants to share or thinks you want to hear. Untangling the truths from the untruths can be a complex and time consuming business.

And, sometimes, tramps are happy with a lifestyle which would not suit other people.

A few years ago, I found a tramp called Colin living under a hedge about a mile away from Bilbury Grange. He refused to tell me his second name and refused my suggestion that he move into the flat which Mr Parfitt had occupied before his marriage. I telephoned the local social services department and, after several hours of pleading, managed to persuade them to offer him a room in a boarding house in Ilfracombe.

To my surprise, Colin turned down the offer.

'That's very kind of you, sir,' he said. 'But if it's all the same to you I'd rather stay in Bilbury.'

'But it's freezing cold!' I pointed out, unnecessarily. 'If you go to Ilfracombe you'll have your own room in a boarding house. You can spend the days out in the open but have somewhere warm and dry to sleep at night.'

But Colin wasn't interested. He preferred sleeping under a hedge.

I was not about to let that frustrating experience stop me from trying to recruit our odd job man.

I drove over to Barnstaple and found Tim sitting exactly where he had been the last time I'd seen him.

'Do you know how to mend a leaky tap?' I asked him.

Clearly puzzled by the question Tim thought for a moment before nodding.

'Could you replace a piece of broken glass?'

Another nod.

'Are you OK with ladders? Can you go up them without getting dizzy?'

'I'm fine with ladders.'

'Would you like a job? The pay isn't much but you get a free flat and free meals.'

Tim stared at me as though not believing what he was hearing.

'Are you serious?' he asked.

'I'm serious. It's in Bilbury, a village a few miles away.'

'I know where Bilbury is. Nice, quiet place with a village green where they play cricket. And a good pub. The Duck and something.'

'Puddle. The Duck and Puddle.'

'Are you offering me a job?'

'I am.'

I suddenly realised that there were tears in Tim's eyes. He stood and picked up the large plastic bag containing his belongings.

I took him to a nearby branch of Marks and Spencer and gave him some of Dr Brownlow's money. 'Buy some clothes,' I told him. 'Whatever you need.'

'There are two charity shops further along,' he said. 'I could buy something second-hand.'

'Buy yourself some new things,' I told him. 'This is a new beginning.'

He looked at me, tears now streaming down his cheeks, and nodded.

The Brownlow Country Hotel had its odd job man.

A Cause for Tears

It is fairly well known in medical circles that things go in runs. If you are woken up at night, then you will probably be woken up for the next three or four nights. If you see a patient complaining of a fairly unusual disease, then the chances are high that you will see another patient with exactly the same symptoms, and precisely the same disease, at the next surgery. I don't know why this should be. But it is just a fact of life.

And so, for example, there was a Tuesday recently when I seemed to see nothing but patients suffering from breast problems.

The first patient I saw was Sharon Bloodwell, a young woman in her mid-thirties who had two young children with her.

Mrs Bloodwell works at home, making cushions for a company based in Exeter and her husband, Norman, works as a labourer on one of the local farms. She's put on a lot of weight in recent years but she used to be very fit and active. She once played netball for the county, and her parent's home is packed with photographs of her and her team mates. The last time I saw her she wanted a pregnancy test because she thought she might 'have caught for another baby'.

I remember that she volunteered the surprising information that she had been having affairs with two other men. 'But there won't be any problems if the baby isn't my husband's,' she told me. 'I only ever have affairs with Norman's relatives – his brothers and two of his cousins.'

I must have looked as puzzled as I felt.

'My Norman, his brothers and the two cousins all have red hair,' she reminded me. 'I won't go with Cecil, the other cousin, because he doesn't have red hair. He's got dark hair.'

It seemed that Mrs Bloodwell had planned her adultery very carefully, doing her best to ensure that any baby that resulted from her illicit affairs would have red hair and look like her husband.

I'd never come across such cold-blooded faithlessness before but Mrs Bloodwell had seemed not in the slightest bit embarrassed by her carefully considered deceit.

Today, Mrs Bloodwell came into the surgery looking very strained and worried.

Some patients prefer to beat about the bush for five or ten minutes before coming to the point, they are too shy or nervous to share their real fears and so they begin by talking about something that might merit a trip to the surgery but which is merely a Trojan horse; an introductory gambit.

If a patient who works as a farm labourer and who hasn't visited the surgery for a decade, comes in to tell me about a graze on a knuckle or a twinge in a toe I would bet the farm that he is about to ask my advice about some more substantial concern.

'Oh, and while I'm here, doctor,' he will say, as he is about to leave, with his hand on the doorknob, 'I've been getting these terrible pains in my chest. I don't suppose they'll be anything to worry about, will they?'

Journalists have noticed the same phenomenon.

A good investigative reporter will keep their mind open after he has closed his notebook.

A good television reporter will have instructed the cameraman to keep his camera switched on even when the interview appears to be over for it is often in that moment that the interviewee will start to talk.

Any professional investigator, doctor, policeman, barrister or journalist, must ask questions but he or she must be first and foremost a good listener, knowing that the most useful answers are the ones which appear by themselves, and not in response to a question.

Mrs Bloodwell, however, could hardly wait to tell me what was worrying her.

She had not come armed with some trivial concern with which to open the proceedings. She got straight to the heart of her concern.

'I'm worried about my breast, doctor,' she said. The words came out in a rush, with a sigh at the end. It was a short sentence but I was sure she had been rehearsing it. 'The right one. It feels swollen and painful and I think I can feel a lump there.'

I looked at her, smiled slightly and nodded slightly encouraging her to tell me more.

She told me that she had noticed the lump the previous day and that she hadn't had a wink of sleep.

'I'm glad you came along so quickly,' I told her. 'Take off your things and let's have a look at it.' I ushered her behind the screen and as jumper, blouse and brassiere were hastily removed and tossed over the top of the screen I tried to comfort her two children who seemed concerned that their mother had disappeared for ever. I know dentists don't approve but I have always followed Dr Brownlow's example and I keep a jar of sweets on my desk. I know of no better way to keep small children happy and quiet.

I examined Mrs Bloodwell carefully and comprehensively and I was quickly sure that she had nothing to worry about.

‘You can sleep well tonight,’ I assured her, and told her to get dressed again.

The look of relief on her face made it worth getting up that morning.

‘What is it, then?’ she asked, when she had got dressed.

‘The lumps are due to a condition which is known as fibroadenosis or hyperplastic cystic disease,’ I told her. ‘It’s also known as mastitis.’

Mrs Bloodwell nodded. ‘I’ve heard of mastitis. But what is it?’

‘It’s an inflammation of the breast tissue; probably an infection,’ I told her. ‘But it will go away quite quickly.’

‘Do I need an operation?’ she asked.

‘Good heavens, no,’ I assured her. ‘You just need to rest and drink plenty of fluids. I’ll give you some antibiotics, in case there’s an infection there, and some painkilling tablets which you can take if the pain becomes severe. A warm bath or shower will probably help ease the soreness. And avoid tight fitting clothes. You might find it easier if you leave your bra off for a while. Afterwards, make sure that you don’t wear bras that are too tight.’

‘Do you mean I shouldn’t wear a bra with the wire underneath?’ she asked.

‘Mastitis can be caused or made worse by bras that are too tight.’

She seemed disappointed. ‘I’m big up top,’ she said. ‘I need support or else they droop down with my nipples aimed at the floor.’ She blushed and then looked down at her breasts. ‘You don’t think I’m too big, do you?’

‘Good heavens, no!’

‘Not dangerously big?’

‘Not at all.’

Mrs Bloodwell looked relieved. ‘That’s good,’ she said. ‘I’ve always thought they were my best points.’ She squeezed her breasts with her hands. ‘All the men I know like them,’ she said proudly. ‘And my best friend, Sheila, says I could have been a barmaid.’ She said this as some women might have contemplated missed careers as ballet dancers or ice skaters.

I scribbled out a prescription and told her to come back in a week if the soreness hadn’t gone.

The very next patient I saw also had a breast problem though in her case it was not a lump but a rash which affected the centre of her chest and the inner sides of both breasts.

It was beginning to feel like National Breast Week.

Mrs Johnson was not a villager but was staying at the Duck and Puddle for a few days. She and her husband were on a short holiday to celebrate their wedding anniversary.

The rash looked like a fairly standard type of dermatitis or eczematous reaction to an allergen of some kind. It didn’t take long to identify it as having been caused by a new perfume which she had bought for the occasion, and had sprayed into her cleavage without doing a test run first.

I explained to her that she should always try out a new perfume on a small area of skin before spraying large amounts onto a bigger area. I then gave her a prescription for some cream that I knew would help clear up the rash quite quickly. I told her to use the cream for five days and to then stop.

‘Will I be able to start using the perfume again when the rash had gone?’ asked the woman.

‘No!’ I told her. I explained again that the rash meant that she was allergic to something in the perfume she’d bought and that she must never use that perfume again. I suggested that she should either throw the perfume away or give it to a friend. The suggestion didn’t go down well.

The patient with the rash was the last patient in that day’s morning surgery and when I’d signed a few repeat prescriptions and dictated a couple of referral letters I set off on the day’s visits.

The very first visit after the surgery was to a large house on one of the roads out of the village.

I had never visited the house but I knew that Mrs Utopia Kitteridge, the sole occupant, was a woman in her seventies whose husband had died some years ago.

I parked the car, checked the grounds for dogs, climbed up a steep flight of stone steps guarded by a hugely impressive pair of fierce looking stone lions, and rang the front doorbell.

While I waited for someone to come, I looked around.

The house, which had once been very grand, was in quite a state of despair.

Having spent a good deal of money repairing Bilbury Grange I guessed that the owner had probably let things go because she couldn’t afford to repair the rotten window frames and the weather damaged stonework. Weeds were growing out of the cracks in the steps and the driveway, where I had left my car, was overgrown with weeds.

After a minute or two, a thin, grey-haired woman with a pronounced dowager’s hump opened the door. Pulling open the heavy oak door seemed to take all her strength. She seemed even older than I knew she was. Some 70-year-olds can easily pass for 50 but Mrs Kitteridge could have played a 90-year-old without any help from clever make-up experts.

‘Hullo, doctor,’ she said. ‘Thank you for coming.’

She was pale and her skin looked paper thin. Her voice was cracked and quiet. She wore a grey, plain dress through which I could see that she was little more than a skeleton decorated with a few pounds of fat.

‘I’m sorry to have had to call you out but I don’t think I could have made it to the surgery.’ She was struggling to open the stiff door so I pushed hard to help open it wide enough for me to enter.

‘That’s OK,’ I told her with a smile. ‘How can I help you?’

‘I’ve got a little problem I’d like your help with,’ she said.

I closed the door and followed her into a huge reception hall.

‘Perhaps you’d be kind enough to examine me?’

I followed her up a staircase that could have been used as a remake for *Gone With the Wind*. She climbed the stairs very slowly, with each step seemingly taking quite a deal of effort.

‘Do you live her by yourself?’ I asked her when we had eventually reached the landing.

‘I do,’ nodded Mrs Kitteridge, when she had got her breath back. She held her back and was clearly in some pain. ‘Mrs Hilyard from the village collects my pension and Peter Marshall delivers my groceries but I don’t see anyone else. They’re both very good to me.’

I knew Mrs Hilyard; she was in her 70s herself but she was always running errands for what she called ‘her old people’. And although Peter Marshall liked people to think of him as a rather hard-hearted businessman he could sometimes be surprisingly gentle and generous. I rather suspected that he probably not only failed to charge Mrs Kitteridge for delivering her groceries but that he charged her considerably less for her groceries than the rest of us paid. He would know that she was, like many of Bilbury’s older residents, asset rich but cash poor.

‘Don’t you get lonely?’ I asked. ‘Do you ever feel like moving into somewhere smaller, in the village perhaps?’

‘Oh, I couldn’t leave the house,’ she said. ‘My husband and I spent our married life here. I have so many memories of our life together.’

I asked her to get undressed and to lie down on the bed so that I could examine her.

‘One thing,’ she said, ‘before you do anything you must promise not to send me into hospital.’ She reached out and took my hand. ‘No hospital at all. Not of any kind.’

‘I don’t know…,’ I began, hesitantly.

‘You must promise,’ she insisted.

‘I’ll do my best not to,’ I said.

‘That’s not enough,’ she said. ‘You must promise me.’

Mrs Kitteridge was so determined that, perhaps foolishly, I agreed that whatever I found I would not send her into hospital.

She then unbuttoned her blouse.

I have seen a lot of awful things in my life as a doctor but not revealing the shock I had took every ounce of experience.

It was perfectly clear that Mrs Kitteridge had cancer of the breast.

The whole of her left breast had become an ulcerated mass; a solid lump of cancer tissue. When I examined her I found that the cancer had spread widely and there were secondary deposits in several parts of her body. There was clearly nothing anyone could do for her. If she had been a pet animal the vet would have reached into his bag for a syringe and a vial of something fatal.

‘You’ve had this for some time,’ I said. It certainly wasn’t a question.

‘Oh, yes,’ said Mrs Kitteridge. ‘It’s been there a long time.’ She paused and thought for a moment. ‘Quite a long time,’ she confirmed.

‘Why didn’t you tell anyone?’ I asked. I guessed that the cancer must have first become obvious at least a year earlier. Actually, I thought, the cancer had probably shown through the skin more than a year ago. Cancer doesn’t have firm rules and is a law unto itself but it usually grows more slowly in older patients.

‘I just want to leave in peace,’ she said. ‘You won’t send me into hospital, will you?’ She paused and looked straight at me. ‘You did promise.’

I wondered what had happened to make her so afraid of hospitals.

And then I remembered that her husband, Gerald, who had been much older than her, had died in a hospital in Exeter some years earlier.

Gerald had gone into hospital for the routine repair of an inguinal hernia, a simple operation that should have been as routine as an oil change, and yet he had died as a result of an infection he had acquired from the hospital staff. Mrs Kitteridge had, not surprisingly, been very upset.

It was not the fact that he had died in hospital that had scarred her so, but the way of his dying. No one ever really recovers from seeing a loved one struggle to survive in an unfriendly, alien environment.

'I can't leave you here,' I said.

'Why not?'

'Well…,' I began. I didn't know where to start. I looked around the bedroom. The walls were covered with framed photographs and pictures in old gilt frames. The furniture was old and well-worn but clearly lovingly tended. The bookcase was crammed full of books, mostly history books and biographies. The mantelpiece was crowded with mementoes.

'Who is going to look after you?' I asked, quietly.

'I don't know,' said Mrs Kitteridge, with tears running down her cheeks. 'But I don't want to die in hospital.'

'Who said anything about dying?' I asked her, and regretted the words the moment they had left my mouth.

Mrs Kitteridge looked at me with a mixture of pity and compassion and reached out to hold my hand. She knew that she was dying, of course. I knew she was dying. There was no little irony in the fact that she was comforting me. We both knew that each other knew, and yet that touch, that simple gesture, told me that the subject was closed.

The young don't worry about dying because they know that they are immortal. As we get older we appreciate life much more (we have had more of it to enjoy and are, therefore, often more reluctant to see the end of it) and so death is usually more of a problem. There are, however, always exceptions and it was clear to me that Mrs Kitteridge was at peace with destiny.

'Have you any relatives?' I asked.

'I've got a niece in London,' said Mrs Kitteridge. 'At least I think she's still in London. I haven't heard from her in years. She does something in advertising. She's extremely important and very busy.' Pride and sadness were combined in her voice.

'I'll fix up for Mr Bradshaw, my nurse, to come in later on today. He'll be in to see you every day,' I promised. 'And I'll come back tomorrow. Nurse Bradshaw will put a dressing on.'

I suspected that I would have had something of a battle with most district nurses for they would have wanted me to send Mrs Kitteridge into the hospital in Barnstaple.

Mr Bradshaw would never suggest such a thing. A qualified nurse, who had been 82-years-old since 1968, he had worked as Dr Brownlow's butler, valet, manservant and factotum for many years and he had nursed the old doctor during his final illness. If I had attempted to move Dr Brownlow into hospital in Barnstaple, Bradshaw would have probably beaten me over the head with a silver tray and then buried me in the garden. Bradshaw was an intensely loyal man who was also gentle, experienced, unshockable and wise.

He also had in abundance the one quality all nurses should have: kindness.

'Thank you,' said Mrs Kitteridge, simply.

'How much pain do you have?'

'Nothing I can't deal with,' she said bravely. 'I have a glass of sherry at night. To help me sleep.' There was a pause. 'A large one,' she added. She smiled at me. 'Do you disapprove?'

'Not at all.'

'Can you see yourself out?'

I said I could.

As I pulled away from the house, out from the driveway and into the road, a large lorry roared past.

The driver, who was driving far too quickly for the lane, hooted imperiously and waved two imperious fingers in my general direction.

Filled with a potent mixture of sadness and anger, I accelerated after the lorry, and caught up with it when it got stuck behind a tractor in Willoughbury Lane. I then pulled onto the other side of the road and drew alongside the lorry. I tooted my horn until the driver looked down at me. Very deliberately, I raised two fingers in rude salute and waved them at him slowly and clearly.

Black-faced, the lorry driver opened his cab door and picked up a heavy piece of wood. He was clearly aiming to come round to my side of my car.

Just then the tractor pulled into a field entrance, leaving a gap.

I may not be blessed with great wisdom but I have, over the years, learned when the most appropriate response to danger is 'flight' rather than 'fight'. I have certainly never been stupid enough to start a fight with a burger fattened lorry driver equipped with a piece of wood the size of a baseball bat. I crossed my fingers, put my trust in the engineers who had built the Rolls and slammed my foot onto the accelerator.

The Rolls Royce 20/25 is not a car that has ever liked being hurried but it does seem to have been equipped with some internal device which enables it to tell when speed is truly of the essence.

We shot forward with commendable haste and left the bad-tempered, well-armed lorry driver enveloped in a cloud of blue exhaust smoke.

As I drove, I rubbed the tears from my eyes with the back of my hand.
Doctors aren’t supposed to get upset when patients are dying.
But would anyone really want a doctor who didn’t?

The Bonfire

There is something enormously satisfying, albeit primitive and frighteningly powerful, about a garden bonfire.

An editor from a London publishing house, once visited Bilbury Grange in an attempt to persuade me to write a book I really didn't want to write. I am not, of course, the only author to have ever had to put up with editors wanting me to write books that fitted in with their planned marketing programmes. A.A.Milne, the author of the *Winnie the Pooh* books, complained that publishers always wanted him to rewrite the last book that had been successful – whether he or someone else had written it.

While in Bilbury, the London editor berated me for having bonfires, arguing that burning garden rubbish was bad for the atmosphere and for the planet in general.

I disagreed with her then and I still disagree with her.

It is true, of course, that our atmosphere is constantly being polluted. Cars and lorries belch out vast quantities of toxic gases. Buses, trains and aeroplanes all produce serious pollutants. So do factories, of course.

But the damage done by garden bonfires is really very small, the pollutants produced are relatively harmless and the alternatives even worse.

The rather sanctimonious and distinctly self-righteous London editor told me that in the borough where she lived the local council sent a lorry round to collect garden waste. She seemed to think that this was a much better way to deal with the problem. I pointed out that the lorries collecting the garden rubbish were burning up vast amounts of diesel fuel and that once the bags of waste had been collected they still had to be dealt with – usually by burning them at a council run waste site of some kind.

I also pointed out that the amount of garden waste produced by a small urban garden was far less than the amount produced in a large country garden. And I explained that if invasive plants aren't dug up and burned then their seeds will spread and soon take over the countryside.

She hadn't thought about any of these things.

'If I had to bag up all our garden rubbish I would need dozens of bags,' I explained, 'and I would spend hours cramming the weeds and other dead material into the bags. I would then need a lorry of my own to take away the bags.'

I pointed out that a bonfire is the only sensible way to get rid of the diseased prunings, the seed heads of invasive plants such as the Giant Hogweed and the dead, woody material that really won't compost very well. I also pointed out that a bonfire is a good way to dispose of weeds that, if they are not destroyed, will survive very happily in a compost heap.

And I explained that bonfires produce ash which is rich in plant nutrients and which can be used to restore the quality of the soil, as well as producing quantities of charcoal which can be used for making potting compost.

'All things considered,' I concluded, 'a bonfire is the only environmentally sound way to deal with garden rubbish.'

I remembered the London editor as I put another forkful of dead material onto the huge bonfire that I was building with our gardener, Mr Parfitt.

It was autumn and we had collected together an enormous amount of material which needed to be burnt. We had put as much stuff as we could onto the compost heaps (we have three of them) and we had cut up the dead branches that had been brought down into kindling shaped lengths. The stuff we couldn't do something with was going onto the bonfire.

The bonfire was already about ten feet across and nearly six feet high. I was really looking forward to putting a match to it; watching the flames, listening to the crackle of the fire and bathing in its warmth: simple pleasures designed to bring out the primitive man in me.

Suddenly, I heard Patsy's voice.

I turned and saw my wife walking down the garden towards me. She was holding a piece of notepaper which had, I immediately recognised, been torn from the notepad which I keep next to the telephone on my surgery desk.

'Who is it?' I asked. A city doctor would have probably asked 'What is it?' but as a country doctor, working in a small village, I know the names of the villagers, my potential patients, and I know most of their ailments, illnesses and weaknesses.

'Mrs Jackson rang and wondered if you could call round,' said Patsy. 'I've written down her phone number in case you want to ring her before you go.'

'No, I'll just go and see what she wants,' I said.

Rosie Jackson, is married to Colin, a local farmer, and she never rings unless she really needs help. She has a weak heart and a troublesome chest and suffers from irritable bowel syndrome.

'I've got decrepit cardiacs, grumpy intestinals and hissy bronchials,' she once complained with a throaty laugh.

I remembered that I had seen her four days earlier when I had prescribed antibiotics for a urinary tract infection.

'I'll finish building the bonfire,' said Mr Parfitt. 'You leave it to me, doctor.'

Although we had been working together for some years, Mr Parfitt and I were still not on first name terms. Country folk are sometimes like that in Devon. Frank Parsons, the landlord of the Duck and Puddle, once told me that he was still not on first name terms with some of the customers who had been drinking at his pub for twenty years. It is, I suppose, just a question of respect.

Mr Parfitt has been with Patsy and me since we bought Bilbury Grange.

Soon after we had purchased the house and moved in, he arrived at our door asking for a job. He asked for £5 a week and somewhere to sleep and so we made rough but comfortable living accommodation for him in the loft above one of the unused stables.

He later married Miss Hargreaves, the elderly spinster who ran the village school, and although the pair now lived together in her cottage, Mr Parfitt still looks after our garden. We pay him a little more than the original £5 a week and we give him and Mrs Parfitt as much fruit and as many vegetables as they required. Mr Parfitt also gets all the kindling he can use free from the Bilbury Grange garden.

And we share the profits we make from selling excess garden produce to local hotels, restaurants and public houses. Mr Parfitt has the proverbial green fingers and our small market garden has proved surprisingly successful, though to be honest I never really understand just how we manage to do so well for whenever I see him, Mr Parfitt seemed to be resting and 'contemplating nature'.

In the winter, he sits in the potting shed drinking tea laced with whisky. 'This is the time of the year to let the garden breathe', he once told me. 'Besides, it is too cold and muddy to be out there doing things.'

In the spring and summer, he does a little digging and some planting and spends a good part of each day sitting in the potting shed drinking tea laced with whisky. At the busiest times he has two men from the village to help him with the digging and with chores such as mowing and hedge trimming but he insists on doing the planting himself.

'Any fool can dig,' he once told me, 'but it takes a gardener to know how to sow.'

He never wastes time on weeding.

'There's no such thing as an unwanted weed in this garden,' he told me. 'The bees and the butterflies need the wild flowers to do their pollinating. Without the bees and the butterflies we'd have no apples or pears.'

It was Mr Parfitt who told me that dandelions are an excellent early source of pollen for bees. Our bee colonies were certainly doing well and our aviary produced quite a good deal of honey.

'It's too hot to be doing much,' he told me one August day. He was sitting in the shade of the potting shed, drinking tea that was probably laced with whisky. 'It's too hot and there's too many of them damned horseflies about.'

In the autumn he would cut back the dead wood, help take up the dead plants and, of course, build up the compost heaps and the regular bonfires which I so enjoyed.

I left Mr Parfitt to the bonfire, changed my trousers, put on shoes instead of boots, washed my hands and climbed into the car.

The Jackson's farm is some miles away, with wonderful views over the Bristol Channel. The only snag with it is that it can only be approached along a long, very bumpy farm track which passes through half a dozen fields and, inevitably, half a dozen gates. Every time you drive through a gate you have to stop the car, open the gate, drive through, stop the car, close the gate and then continue to the next one. Even with modern cars this would be tricky. With the elderly and slightly temperamental Rolls Royce 20/25which I inherited from my predecessor, Dr Brownlow, it was rather more than tricky since the vehicle has a tendency to stall when it is left unattended.

And, to make things more complicated, and to slow things down even more, each time the visitor stops he has to be careful where he treads because Colin Jackson keeps cattle and sheep and his fields are, inevitably, well decorated with the inevitable consequences.

I have on several occasions trodden in large, soft cowpats and I am painfully aware that the stickiness and the smell are difficult to remove from a shoe and even more impossible to remove from the floor of a motor car.

(To do all this on a rainy night, in the dark, as I had once done, is considerably more wearing – especially since, when the journey is being undertaken at night, the chances are high that there is a good deal of urgency about the whole affair. On the second time when I had been asked to visit the Jackson's at night I had given instructions that a farmhand who lived in the house put on a coat and hat, arm himself with a bicycle and a torch and open each gate as I approached it.)

'Oh, thank you for coming,' said Rosie, when I finally arrived at their farmhouse. 'I feel really silly but I've got myself into a bit of a tizzy with those pills you gave me for the water troubles. I was in such a state I had a twinkle right up my spine, the way you do, you know.'

I wasn't sure that I've ever had a twinkle go right up my spine but I nodded and smiled.

I had prescribed an antibiotic to be taken four times a day and Rosie explained that she couldn't remember how many she had taken and whether or not she was due to take another capsule. 'You did say it was important not to miss any,' she reminded me.

'When did you start the course?' I asked.

'Last Monday,' she said, without hesitation. 'I took one when I got home and another one last thing at night.'

'And it's Thursday today, isn't it?'

She looked at the calendar on the kitchen wall and confirmed that it was, indeed, Thursday.

'Did you take all your capsules yesterday and Tuesday?'

She said she had.

'You started with 28 capsules,' I said, 'and you took two on Monday and four each on Tuesday and Wednesday. That means that you've taken ten so there should have been 18 capsules left when you got up this morning.'

Mrs Jackson looked very confused. 'If you say so, doctor.'

'How many have you got left?'

She produced the packet. I counted the remaining capsules. 'You've got 17 capsules left so you've only taken one today.'

'I suppose I have,' she agreed.

'What time did you get up?'

'Five minutes to six. I took the pill when I'd made Colin his cup of tea. He likes a cup of tea before he goes out to do the cows. Then while he does the cows I make his breakfast.'

'But it's a quarter past two now and you should have taken one at twelve o'clock,' I told her.

'Is it all right for me to take it now?' she asked.

'It's fine,' I told her. 'Take one now, and then take the next one at six this evening and today's last one at midnight.'

'I set the clock for that one,' said Mrs Jackson. 'We go to bed at half past ten regular because of Colin having to get up to do the cows of a morning. So I put the alarm clock on for twelve and get up and take it. I keep the pills and a glass of water by the bedside. Colin is a sound sleeper because of his deafness so I don't trouble him.'

She took her antibiotic capsule and I wrote a little chart on the back of an envelope for her to keep. I listed the days vertically and the four times of the day when she was due to take capsules horizontally. I then drew lines down and across to make little boxes. I put ticks in the boxes to denote when she had already taken capsules and told her to put a tick in the appropriate box every time she took another capsule.

'That's wonderful, doctor,' she said. She seemed genuinely grateful, even awestruck at my mathematical and logistical brilliance.

Dealing with Mrs Jackson's problem, and drawing her simple pill-taking plan, took less than ten minutes but eating the seed cake she insisted I ate, and drinking the cup of tea she insisted I drink, and opening and closing all the gates took a lot longer. I was away from Bilbury Grange for over an hour and a half – probably nearer two hours.

As I drove home I realised that I could have easily dealt with the whole problem over the telephone. But, I had a smile on my face as I approached Bilbury Grange. I was looking forward to setting light to my bonfire.

However, when I got out of the car and walked round the side of Bilbury Grange I could smell the unmistakable odour of a well-established bonfire. Patsy claims that I can smell a decent bonfire from five miles away – further if the bonfire is upwind.

And, moreover, there was a thin plume of smoke rising from the part of the garden where the bonfire had been built.

'I thought I'd get on with it,' said Mr Parfitt when he saw me approach. 'I finished building the bonfire and set it alight for you'

I looked at the huge pile of smoking ash that was pretty well all that remained of the bonfire. I felt like crying out of disappointment.

'We can just leave that to cool down for a few days,' said Mr Parfitt. 'And then we can spread the ash around the garden.'

I felt cheated.

Only another bonfire enthusiast could quite understand the feeling. I had been looking forward to that particular bonfire, by far the biggest of our autumn bonfire season, for over a week.

'Thanks,' I said to Mr Parfitt. 'Thank you very much. You've been very helpful.'

I was proud of the fact that I think I managed to sound genuinely grateful.

I turned and headed back up to the house.

As I did so Ben, who had been asleep, came bouncing down the garden to greet me. The tablets he was taking for his arthritis were really helping. Behind him came our three cats, Emily and Sophie and Jeremy. At dusk all animals, whatever the species and whatever the age, like to run around and get rid of their excess energy. The four animals walked back up to the house with me.

Not a bad life, I reflected. And there will be other bonfires.

The Confidence Trickster

Thumper and I had to pop into Barnstaple to fetch some beds we needed for the new hospital. We had purchased 12 single beds and three double beds, sight unseen, from a hotel sale. The beds had been left unsold at the end of the sale, held the previous day, and the auctioneer, a friend of Thumper's, had asked if we wanted to buy them for the proverbial 'song'. (We paid £5 for the lot because, as the auctioneer explained, if we hadn't bought them the hotel's creditors would have had to pay to have the beds taken away and dumped.)

We travelled in Thumpers truck, towing a trailer we borrowed from Patsy's father, and after we'd loaded up the truck and the trailer, we managed to find enough space to leave the truck in a public car park near to the bus station. We both needed to go to the bank to get out some cash, and I had to pop into the pet food shop to buy some tins of food that Ben is particularly fond of but which Peter Marshall cannot obtain from his wholesaler.

We were walking away from the truck when we were approached by a man in his mid-twenties. He was carrying a brown paper parcel neatly tied with string and he seemed to be very upset. I noticed that there were no stamps on the parcel.

'I'm terribly sorry to bother you,' he said, 'and I assure you that I wouldn't normally approach strangers in this way, but I've had some terribly bad fortune this morning. I live in Ilfracombe and came into town on the bus this morning because I needed to see my solicitors. I had to talk to them about my mother's estate – she died just a few weeks ago.'

'I'm sorry to hear that,' I said, sympathetically.

'She was ill for quite a while,' said the young man. 'Heart trouble was the underlying problem but she had a cancer too. Lung.'

'So what happened to you after you'd got into town?' asked Thumper.

'After I'd seen the solicitor I popped into the Post Office to post a parcel to my sister who lives in Scotland,' said the young man. 'She's the other beneficiary of the estate and to be frank with you she really needs her half of the estate. She has two small children, one of whom suffers with cystic fibrosis, and although she managed to get down for the funeral, she had to go back up North after a few days. Her husband works on the fishing boats and she has to cope with the children by herself most of the time. It's the little boy's birthday in two days, the one with the cystic fibrosis, and I've got his present wrapped and ready to go. I'm his godfather as well as his uncle. While I was queuing in the Post Office I lost my wallet – every penny I had on me.' The young man paused and shook his head sadly. 'Actually, I didn't lose it,' he said. 'It was stolen. It was my own fault. I know it's a stupid thing to do but I put the wallet into my hip pocket. They say you should never do that because it makes it too easy for pickpockets but,' he shrugged and shook his head sadly, 'with everything on my mind I'm afraid I simply stuffed the wallet into that pocket without thinking.'

'So what…' I began.

'I'm not asking you to give me money,' said the young man, interrupting me. 'Not to give me money. Good heavens no. But if I don't get this parcel posted off today there isn't much of a chance that it will reach my godson in time for his birthday. And without my wallet I can't possibly get home tonight.' He paused. 'If one of you could just give me a loan, for the postage and the bus fare, and give me your name and address I'll put a cheque into the post just as soon as I get home.'

I was reaching inside my jacket, about to pull out my wallet, when Thumper spoke.

'A decent try,' he said, 'though I think you over embellished the story with all that stuff about your sister's husband and her sick kid. If you make the story too complicated it stops being believable.'

'What the hell are you suggesting?' demanded the young man, rather angrily.

I confess that I too was rather shocked.

'It's a good variation on a very old story,' said Thumper, ignoring the young man, 'but you made two mistakes. First, the only bus from Ilfracombe arrives in Barnstaple at 1.45 p.m. I know this because my wife's aunt lives in Ilfracombe and she's always complaining that if she gets the bus into town she only has an hour before the bus leaves to go back to Ilfracombe.' Thumper looked at his watch and showed the time to the young man. 'It's 1.37 p.m. at the moment,' he said. 'And that bus stops at every bus stop between here and Ilfracombe. It is never early. So if you came into Barnstaple from Ilfracombe, and you travelled by bus, you couldn't possibly have gone to see your solicitor and gone to the Post Office.'

The young man didn't say anything but started to back away. Suddenly he stopped. 'What was the other mistake?' he asked softly.

'If you've got a solicitor in Barnstaple and your mother has just left you a sum of money why not go and ask him for a small cash loan? That's what a normal, honest person would do.'

'Hmm,' said the young man. 'I see what you mean.'

'Does this scam usually work for you?' asked Thumper.

'Oh yes, it usually works like a charm.'

'Do you have a sister in Scotland?'

The young man hesitated.

'I'm just interested,' said Thumper. 'I'm not going to dob you in to the police.'

'I've got a sister but she lives in Dawlish. She works for Tesco.'

'Children?'

He shook his head.

'And your mother?'

'She lives in Barnstaple. I live with her and my Dad.'

'How did you get into Barnstaple? Motorbike?'

'Yes. How did you know?' He frowned. 'Did you see me on the bike?'

'You have mud splashes on your trousers. You could have got them on a pushbike if you'd ridden fast enough but you're not someone who pedals anywhere are you?

He grinned and shook his head.

'What's in the parcel?'

'Oh just a couple of old books I found in a cupboard. My Gran used to be a bit of a reader. The parcel needs to be heavy so that it looks as if it will cost a bit to post.'

'Of course it does. Undo the parcel. Show me.'

The young man untied the string, unwrapped the parcel and showed us the books. They were both hardbacks. One was a copy of an old copy of a long out of date *Home Doctor* book. The other was a novel called *Brighton Rock* by Graham Greene. The book still had its dust wrapper.'

'May I look?' I said.

The young man handed me the two books. I opened the Greene and looked inside. 'I haven't read this,' I said. 'How much do you want for it?'

'You can have them both for 50 pence,' said the young man brightly.

'That's just what I was going to charge you for the consultation and the advice,' said Thumper.

'No, no, it's OK,' I said. 'I'll give you 50 pence for the two books.' I took some change from my pocket and handed 50 pence to the young man. He seemed grateful.

'Now bugger off, go home and start thinking about getting a proper job,' said Thumper. 'You're a bloody awful con man. You're lucky to have got away with it for this long.'

The young man, mumbled something and shuffled away.

We both knew Thumper was wasting his breath. This was, without a doubt, a young man who would never work for a living. He was a trickster through and through.

'You shouldn't have given him 50 pence for the books,' said Thumper. 'I'd have got you them for nothing. In fact I was thinking of making him buy us our car park ticket – just to teach him a lesson.'

I handed him the *Home Doctor* book. 'You can have this one,' I said. 'But I'll keep the other one. It'll pay for the beds we bought for the new hospital. And it'll pay for a good few other bits of furniture as well.'

Puzzled, Thumper looked at me. 'How do you make that out?'

'The Graham Greene is a first edition. *Brighton Rock* is one of the most difficult of his books to find – especially in a dust wrapper.'

'What's it worth?'

I thought for a moment and looked at the book. It really was in excellent condition. It looked as if it had been read just the once. 'Between £300 and £500,' I replied.

Thumper stared at me for a moment and then burst out laughing.

The Taxman Calls

During the night an unexpected, blustery south westerly gale had blown the felt from the roof of an elderly garden shed which we use to store bits and pieces of equipment. I was up a ladder, equipped with a hammer and a pocket full of tacks, attempting to repair the damage, when Patsy appeared. She looked rather flustered.

'The taxman is here,' she said.

I looked down and frowned. 'What on earth for?' I had not yet had my breakfast and surgery was due to start in fifteen minutes time.

'He says he wrote to you and told you he was coming.'

I racked my brains and suddenly remembered that I had received a letter marked Inland Revenue and that there had been something in it about an enquiry or an investigation. I had filed the letter and tried so hard to forget about it that I had pretty well succeeded.

I have, over the years, received more than my fair share of correspondence from the various departments of the Office of Tax Obfuscation (which has, generally speaking, done a magnificent job of making income tax entirely incomprehensible to the average taxpayer) and these days I find it difficult to have any respect for its officials.

Many of those with whom I have corresponded have been rude and unnecessarily aggressive and it seems to me quite unfair that this should be the case. I know I am old-fashioned but it seems to me that taxpaying citizens have the right to be treated as innocent until proved guilty, and to be treated with a modicum of respect.

Moreover, it seems to me that most of the tax officials with whom I have had dealings have very little understanding of how the real world actually works.

When I published my own books and sold them through the post, one tax inspector had completely misunderstood the way my small business worked.

'You had 2,000 books printed,' he reminded me, 'and paid £3,000 to the printer. The price printed on the jacket of each book is £10 so you owe us tax on £20,000, the retail value of all the books, minus £3,000 which is £17,000.'

It took me hours to convince him that many of the books were still unsold, stored in one of our barns, and that he could hardly expect me to pay tax on money I had not received. I also pointed out that I was entitled to claim the cost of buying stamps and packaging for the books. The taxman found this a difficult concept to understand and so I had tried to explain how things worked by using another example.

'If a café owner buys a bag of 50 teabags for £1 and can make one cup of tea from each bag and charges 50 pence for a cup of tea, will you expect him to pay tax on 50 cups of tea the minute he takes delivery of the teabags?'

This puzzled the taxman.

'Are you now going to start selling cups of tea?' he demanded sternly. 'How many tea bags have you bought? You have not previously declared this business.'

I climbed down from the ladder, put the hammer down on the ground and walked back to the house alongside Patsy. Suddenly she put a hand on my arm and stopped me. 'What on earth has happened to your waistcoat?' she asked.

I looked down. 'Nothing, as far as I can tell.'

'That button, second from the bottom!'

I looked down. 'It's exactly the same as all the other buttons.'

'Yes, I can see it is. But it's sewn on with green cotton and all the other buttons are sewn on with black cotton.'

'Ah yes, I was pretty pleased with myself about that,' I said. 'The button came off yesterday after dinner – I think it was that second helping of apple and blackberry pie that was responsible – and you were busy with the little ones and I didn't want to bother you so I thought I'd sew it on myself. After all, I thought, if I can sew up people I can surely sew on a button.' I looked down at the waistcoat.

'I'm sure the button is sewn on very nicely,' Patsy agreed. 'But why on earth did you use green cotton?'

'Oh, I couldn't find the black stuff. So I thought green would do fine. Actually I used some suture material I'd got in the surgery.'

'You can't see the taxman with a button on your waistcoat sewn on with green cotton!' she said, aghast. 'Whatever will he think?'

'I don't care what he thinks about my waistcoat button. I hope he enjoys my accounts but I don't much care a jot what he thinks about my sewing.'

But Patsy was not so easily appeased. She was determined that the button must come off and be put back on again with black cotton. Suddenly I had a brain wave. 'Go on ahead,' I told her. 'When I catch up with you in a hundred yards or so the button will be sewn on with black cotton.'

Patsy looked at me very doubtfully but hurried on ahead. Three minutes later I caught up with her. 'There you are! Now look at it!'

Patsy inspected the button. And then she bent closer and examined it more carefully. 'How on earth did you do that?' she demanded. 'It's now sewn on with black cotton!'

'Just a magical medical trick,' I told her.

Patsy looked at me very doubtfully. 'I don't know how you did that,' she murmured. I don't think I had ever seen her look quite so puzzled. 'How on earth did you do that? Is that the same waistcoat?'

'Ah!' I said, with a smile. 'Pure magic. I'm not allowed to tell you how it was done.'

I found a small and very officious man waiting for me in the waiting room. He looked to be in his forties but had shaved his head to try to hide the fact that he was going bald, so in fact he looked older and had a five o'clock shadow on the top of his head. He had grown a small, old-fashioned toothbrush moustache and although I suspect he had grown it hoping that it would give him a jaunty, film star air, in reality it made him look like a very untrustworthy car salesman. It was more Adolf Hitler than Errol Flynn or Ronald Colman. I wouldn't have bought a set of tyres from him, let alone a whole motor car.

I confess that at that moment, at the sight of this wretched man who had come to inspect my accounts and doubtless pick holes in them, I felt rather sorry for myself.

It had been a strangely annoying month or two.

First, I had written a thoughtful, reasoned article for a medical journal suggesting that high levels of stress might produce raised blood pressure, and had been astonished that the response from the medical establishment had been universal condemnation. One professor from Nottingham University had announced that I should be struck off the medical register for daring to suggest such a thing.

Second, I had received a good deal of abuse for having written a paper criticising the over-prescribing of benzodiazepine tranquillisers. I had suggested that patients who were given the drugs for long periods of time were becoming addicted, and this suggestion had not gone down well with the drug companies.

It seemed that everything I wrote about medicine caused controversy. A medical journal article suggesting that the over-prescribing of antibiotics would result in the development of stronger and more lethal infections, had been the subject of sneering laughter from a group of doctors who were, I suspected, encouraged by the drug companies making antibiotics. I was acquiring quite a number of enemies within the medical establishment.

As the 1970s progressed, it seemed that anything which made people think produced abuse rather than debate and I had a feeling that things were not going to improve. I had recently made the decision to give up writing papers and articles for the journals. I really needed a rest from the world.

And now the taxman had arrived and I wasn't thrilled by his presence.

'My name is Merriment, Mr Merriment,' said the taxman, instantly making it abundantly clear that this was not going to be a convivial conversation conducted on first name terms and involving lots of merriment and good humoured banter. 'I have need of sight of your receipts for the fiscal year ending last April.'

He had managed to confuse me with his very first sentence.

'Fiscal year?' I said. 'I'm not sure I understand…'

'I need to see your accounts for the financial year ending last April and for that purpose I will require full, unfettered sight of your receipts and account books.'

He sounded like a cross between the speaking clock and a Government propaganda broadcast. I wondered if he always spoke in such a stilted, formal way or if it was something he reserved for taxpayers under investigation. I imagined him arriving home for tea. 'Good evening, Mrs Merriment. I am home for the evening and now require approved sustenance to be provided in accordance with our nuptial agreement. I see that you have been to the hairdressers. The appearance is satisfactory.' I tried to resist the temptation to reconstruct a honeymoon confrontation.

'I've got everything in a cardboard box in the stable,' I told him. 'All the paperwork is there. If you'd like to take a seat in the living room I'll bring you the box. Would you like a cup of tea? Can I get you anything to eat?'

'It is not my custom to accept comestibles in any form from inquiry subjects,' he told me. 'But I will accept a glass of water taken from the domestic water supply.'

I fetched the box and put it down on a small table in the living room. It would have been better to able to put the box on the dining room table but the dining room was serving its secondary purpose as the practice waiting room and was, in that role, full of patients. I then gave the taxman a glass of tap water. He sat down, opened the box and started to remove the contents. There wasn't much in the box and I felt that he was rather disappointed. There was a large, used brown envelope full of receipts, a similarly sized brown envelope full of pay slips, royalty statements and so on and a small, red, sixpenny notebook purchased from a branch of F.W.Woolworth years earlier. The notebook still had the faded sticker on the front, showing that it had been purchased prior to decimalisation.

‘What’s this?’ he demanded, holding up the sixpenny notebook.

‘That’s my accounts,’ I told him.

‘I thought I had made it acceptably clear,’ he said, speaking to me as though to a child of three or four years of age, ‘that I required sight of your full accounts.’

‘That’s all there is, I’m afraid,’ I confessed, now wishing that I hadn’t been quite so mean and had bought the one shilling notebook.

Mr Merriment opened the pages of the small notebook as though he were examining a valuable piece of evidence in a multiple murder case. ‘This is all there is?’ he asked, clearly finding it difficult to believe that I wasn’t hiding more accounts in another box somewhere.

‘That’s all there is, I’m afraid,’ I said. I leant over and pointed to the pages of the notebook that he was examining. If you look on the left you’ll see the details of the money I’ve spent, and if you look on the right you’ll see details of the money I’ve been paid. The receipts and so on for the money I’ve spent are all in the big brown envelope marked ‘Receipts’ and the bits of paper relating to my income are all in the big brown envelope marked ‘Income’.’

Mr Merriment looked very disappointed; and he reminded me of a child who has unwrapped an attractive looking Christmas parcel and has found that it contains a hand knitted scarf and a pair of matching hand knitted gloves carefully packed into a cardboard box marked ‘Toys’. He made a snorting sound that reminded me of one of Colin Jackson’s Gloucester Old Spot pigs snuffling its way through a new delivery of turnip heads.

‘Do you mind if I leave you for a while?’ I asked. ‘I’m a bit busy just at the moment.’ This was true but I also didn’t fancy standing behind the tax collector as he worked his way through my six penny notebook and the accompanying brown envelopes.

Mr Merriment looked up and glared at me as though he were a hangman and I were his next victim. ‘As long as you remain available for me to question when I have completed my preliminary enquiries,’ he said.

‘Well I might have to pop out if there’s an emergency,’ I said. I looked at my watch. ‘And I was due to start morning surgery twenty minutes ago.’

Mr Merriment glowered disapprovingly, said nothing more and turned back to my accounts. There wasn’t much charm available and absolutely no bonhomie.

I left and went into the consulting room to start the morning’s surgery.

It was, inevitably, a busy day. There were already twelve patients sitting patiently waiting for me.

I put Mr Merriment out of my mind, forgot the shed roof and concentrated on other people’s problems for a while.

The first patient, ‘Amelia’ Rate (whose real first name is Phillippa but who is known to everyone as Amelia), wanted to know if I could recommend an organisation that would help her with her addiction to television soap operas which, she confessed, were now taking up most of her waking life. Mrs Rate, who suffers from advanced and probably irreversible steatopygia and is married to a tree surgeon who runs a small, local firm called ‘Special Branch’, is a regular visitor to the surgery and she nearly always manages to be first in the queue. She is addicted to therapy and attends all the addiction groups she can find. She goes to Alcoholics Anonymous and Gamblers Anonymous, of course, and is also a keen member of a group for chocoholics. She loves talking about herself and the minute there is an organisation for people who are addicted to organisations for addicts I will happily refer her to them. Meanwhile, she comes to my surgery several times a month. ‘I just want to find myself,’ she once told me.

The second patient, Miss Tomkins, complained that she constantly felt as though insects were crawling over her skin. I could find nothing wrong with her. There were no signs of any scabies or other beasties and when I gave her the all-clear she told me that she had suspected that there weren’t really any insects on her skin but that she had hoped that there would be so that she would know that she wasn’t going mad.

‘You aren’t going mad,’ I assured her, ‘your problem is formication.’

Miss Tomkins is in her early 50s and given her age and medical history, I thought it possible that the condition might have been brought on by the onset of the menopause. This is a common and harmless cause of formication.

I was about to continue by explaining that there are a number of causes of this condition and that before reaching a diagnosis I would need to get some tests done, when Miss Tomkins stood up, pushed back her chair and told me that she had never been so insulted in her life.

‘I am a maiden lady,’ she told me proudly. ‘I have never had relations with any man.’ She actually shuddered at the thought.

‘Ah, no, formication,’ I said. ‘It’s spelt with an ‘m’. It has nothing to do with ‘fornication’.

‘Oh,’ said Miss Tomkins. She now seemed rather embarrassed and sat down again.

I told her that I would arrange for some tests to be done at the hospital in Barnstaple.

The next patient, a man in his early 70s who is called Paddy Fields, came in coughing badly and complaining that he had bronchitis. He’s had bronchitis often enough to be able to make his own diagnosis now.

Mr Fields, is a former denture repair salesman who is famous locally for wearing bright red trousers and a green waistcoat, gets bronchitis several times a year but refuses to give up smoking. He claims that he smokes only one or two packs a day but judging by the nicotine stains on his fingers, and the condition of his heart and lungs, I would guess that he gets through one or two packs an hour rather than a day. I have tried hard to persuade him to cut down but I never seem to be able to get anywhere with him.

Paddy walks like a rodeo rider after an exceptionally hard day at the office. His legs are so bandy that you could drive a team of Shetland ponies through the gap between his legs without touching his inner thighs. He likes people to think that he is bandy legged because of the size of his nuptial equipment but his secret is that he has a huge swelling, a hydrocele, which has developed in a sac around his left testicle. Paddy refuses to see a surgeon and since the hydrocele is no threat to his life, I have never felt able to push him into doing so.

Paddy supplements a probably inadequate pension by delivering logs. I have no idea where he gets them from, for he lived in a tiny terraced cottage on the road to Lynton, but his logs are the best in the county – always reliably aged and all selected for their good burning qualities.

Those who do not understand the wonders of the log fire may find this an odd thing to say but it is important to have the right type of wood if you're planning a log fire. Ash, beech, apple, hazel, holly, hornbeam and juniper, rowan, yew, hawthorn and cedar all burn exceeding well, and with pleasant aromas as a bonus. For me the best smelling woods are apple, pear and cherry, all of which give off an extremely pleasant, sweet smell, though lilac is also very pleasantly fragrant.

Conifers burn fast, produce a spicy scent and make good kindling but if used as logs they tend to produce a lot of sparks and the resultant firework display can be a little disturbing if you simply want to sit in front of a warming fire with a good book and don't want to spend the evening jumping up and down to put out the smouldering fireside rug.

Alder makes poor firewood, as does elm unless it is at least two-years-old. Lime is very poor. Sycamore also needs to be two-years-old, as does wood from the willow, which tends to smoulder and produce more smoke than heat.

All firewood burns best when it is seasoned, preferably at least a year old, but Paddy would not dream of giving alder, elm, lime, sycamore or willow to his customers.

At Christmas, Paddy always brings us half a dozen yule logs. These are monstrous, heavy and usually consist of well-matured oak. Oak is another smouldering wood though if it is thoroughly dried it burns quite well and it does make an excellent yule log. One end is placed in the fire with the other sticking out into the room. As the wood burns the log is pushed into the fire. A good yule log will last for hours.

'I'm not going to give up my fags and booze so that I can live for another three months in a shared bedroom in a grotty council run nursing home in Ilfracombe,' Paddy told me when I tried yet again to persuade him to cut down his consumption of cigarettes. I found it difficult to think of an argument that would convince him otherwise.

I gave him a prescription for an antibiotic.

And so it went on.

By the time I had finished, I had seen 18 patients altogether; a light surgery for a city based GP with a list of 3,000 patients but a fairly heavy surgery for me. Like all doctors who work in rural areas, I spent most of my time doing home visits because it took me much longer to travel to my patients. A city GP can visit three or four patients an hour if they all live in neatly numbered houses. I often found myself spending an hour or two visiting just one patient.

The stream of patients at least succeeded in distracting me from the thought of the taxman in the living room.

The final patient was a young man who demanded a sick note.

Kevin McMurray is a pushy, cockalorum who was born at the paddling end of the national gene pool and who works in Taunton doing something with motor cars. He always gives the impression that he is a mechanic or a salesman but Patchy, who goes to auctions in Taunton once a month, says he has seen him washing cars on a garage forecourt.

Although he is hardly ever at home in Bilbury, Kevin has, probably through laziness rather than loyalty or respect for my medical skills or bedside manner, remained on my list of patients.

He always wears jeans and a denim jacket with lots of safety pins and badges in the lapels and I put this down to the fact that he lives in the market town of Taunton – which is, to those of us in Bilbury, a big city. I think the population is around 45,000. I once asked Kevin why he had so many safety pins on his person, assuming that there might be some practical explanation. He told me that they were decorative and that his girlfriend had a safety pin fixed through her nose. He said he found this very attractive.

Teenagers sometimes complain that old people all look the same to them but I'm beginning to reach the age where all youngsters look the same.

Kevin told me that he needed a sick note because he had backache. I was not at all convinced that he had any back trouble at all (he seemed perfectly able to walk and to sit) and I suspected that he wanted time off to attend a football match. I tried to resist his demands but when a patient insists that he has back pain it is impossible to prove that he doesn't. So, in the end, I signed a sick note and wrote 'plumbi oscillans' in the space where I was expected to write the nature of his illness.

'What's this?' demanded Kevin, peering at the diagnosis.

'It's the Latin name for your illness,' I told him.

'Oh,' he said, satisfied and impressed.

He left clutching his sick note as though it were a ten pound note.

I was glad he didn't push me for a translation because plumbi oscillans is the Latin for 'lead swinging', an ancient euphemism for malingering.

Exhausted by the morning I walked into the kitchen, gave Patsy a hug, fell into an easy chair and let out a huge sigh. 'Food,' I said. 'I need food and drink.'

Miss Johnson had, during the morning surgery, brought me two cups of black coffee and a couple of digestive biscuits but in my view two cups of coffee and two biscuits are not enough to keep body and soul glued together.

'I hate to be the one to have to tell you this,' said Patsy, 'but Mr Merriment is still in the living room. He asked me to tell you that he wants to see you. Actually, I think what he actually said was that he had 'unearthed a serious accounting misreckoning' and was 'desirous of further communication with you'. I don't know who writes his dialogue.'

I groaned and looked at her. 'Oh bugger,' I said. 'They probably have a special phrase book. Actually, they probably go on miscommunication courses.' I pulled myself up out of the chair and wandered to the living room.

'Ah, doctor,' said Mr Merriment. 'I'm so delighted that you could spare me a little of your valuable time.'

I wasn't in a mood to put up with the taxman's sarcasm. 'I have been rather busy,' I told him. I was tempted to tell him that there was an outbreak of smallpox in the village, in the hope that this might send him scurrying back to Barnstaple, but I bravely resisted the temptation.

The taxman listened to me without blinking. I now decided that he looked like a lizard, contemplating his prey. I examined him carefully, searching for any signs of a forked tongue snapping out to catch me unawares.

He took from the table, and held up, items which he clearly regarded as forensic evidence: in his left hand he had several pieces of paper and in his right hand he held my sixpenny notebook.

'You have included in your expenses claims for five electricity bills,' he said, waving the pieces of paper at me as though producing the blood-stained knife with which I had murdered the little princes. There was an unpleasant element of triumph in his voice. This was, I thought, a man who, if he ever watched a football match, would cheer not because one side had won but because the other side had lost.

I stared at him, uncomprehending.

'There are only four quarters in a year, doctor,' he said. He was really pleased with himself. 'But you have claimed for five quarterly bills.'

I reached out a hand. 'May I look?'

He handed me the pieces of paper he was holding. There were, as he said, five electricity bills.

'But I put them into the accounts because they all arrived in the same year,' I explained. 'And if there were five in this set of accounts then there will be three in another year's accounts.'

'I am going to disallow the last of these five bills,' said Mr Merriment, ignoring my explanation. 'You will receive a demand for the tax owed and for interest payable. If you do not pay within 30 days you will be subject to penalties.'

I opened my mouth to protest, then decided there was no point. It wasn't worth the time. And I was hungry. 'OK,' I said. 'Would you like another glass of water before you go?'

'No thank you. But I would very strongly suggest that you keep your accounts in a more appropriate way in future.' He looked at the cardboard box, the two brown envelopes and the sixpenny notebook with undisguised contempt.

'What do you suggest?' I asked.

'Have you considered employing the services of an accountant?'

'I did have one of those,' I said. 'But he retired and I never got round to finding a replacement.' I looked at the items on the table. 'I'll buy a bigger notebook for next year's accounts,' I promised.

Mr Withymooor did not look impressed by this. He made another snorting sound, reminding me once more of Colin Jackson's Gloucester Old Spot pig, and headed for the door. I followed him out. 'Would you please telephone for a taxi,' he said. 'I will be heading back to the Inland Revenue offices in Barnstaple.'

I had not realised that he hadn't come in his own car. I said I would be happy to call him a taxi.

'If you submit a claim for the cost of the telephone call I will deal with it appropriately,' he told me.

‘No need for that,’ I told him. ‘Let’s just put it down as a small bribe, shall we?’

He went very red.

‘Would you like to wait in the living room? The taxi will be a few minutes. I’ll ring one of the local chaps because it will take nearly an hour for a taxi to come out from Barnstaple.’

‘I will wait by the roadside,’ he said. I wondered if he had his hair shirts washed or just wore them until they fell apart.

He left.

I telephoned for a taxi to come and pick him up and then headed for the kitchen.

‘Would you like breakfast or lunch?’ asked Patsy.

I looked at the clock. ‘Both,’ I told her. ‘I’ll have both. Breakfast first, and then lunch. But in that order, of course.’

‘Has Mr Merriment gone?’

‘He’s standing in the lane waiting for a taxi to arrive,’ I told her. ‘He’s standing next to the sign that Thumper and Patchy put up when I started practising again.’

(When the local authorities had allowed me to reopen my surgery my good friends had erected a very smart sign which read: ‘No Wart Too Small, No Rash Too Faint’. I had never bothered to move the sign, partly through laziness and partly because I rather liked it.)

‘Who did you call?’ asked Patsy.

‘Samuel Houghton,’ I said, putting two slices of bread into the toaster.

Patsy, who was bending over the oven, stood up and looked at me. She was frowning. ‘But Samuel Houghton doesn’t have a taxi,’ she said. ‘As far as I know he doesn’t even have a car.’

Samuel Houghton is a local farmer. He was in his seventies several years ago and if time serves him as it serves the rest of us, he must now be in his eighties. He wears a tweed jacket which he bought when he was 25 and holds up his trousers with baler twine. He has pretty well retired from farming but has the local authority contract for clearing snow from the lanes. He drives a huge, red tractor which can do nearly four miles an hour when travelling downhill.

‘He’s got a tractor,’ I reminded Patsy. ‘And when I last saw him he told me he was setting up a taxi service.’

‘But the tractor has only got one seat?’

‘Ah, but when he uses his tractor as a taxi, Samuel tows a trailer behind. And he puts a bale of straw on the trailer as a seat.’

Patsy started to giggle. ‘It’ll take hours for him to get to Barnstaple!’

‘Samuel doesn’t mind,’ I said. ‘And I told him that his passenger is a taxman who wants to see a bit of the countryside on his way back to town. Sam said he’ll go via Combe Martin, Berrynarbour, West Down and Braunton. I told him he can charge the guy whatever he likes.’

‘They’ll be lucky to be back in Barnstaple before dark!’

‘That’s no problem. Samuel has had lights fitted on the tractor and he says he’s going to stay over with his nephew in Prixford, and then do some shopping in Barnstaple tomorrow. It’s a long time since he saw the big city lights.’

‘The big city lights in Barnstaple?’ said Patsy incredulously.

‘There are at least three sets of traffic lights in the town!’ I reminded her.

The toast popped up. I reached for a slice, put it onto a plate and unscrewed the top off the marmalade.

Just then there was a knock on the door. It was the taxman.

‘I told you to call me a taxi,’ he said. ‘What do you mean by arranging for this man to bring his tractor?’ He pointed at Samuel, whose tractor was chugging in the lane outside.

‘I’m afraid we don’t have any formal taxi services in Bilbury,’ I told him. ‘As a service to the community Samuel has agreed to help out when required. He’ll get you back to Barnstaple.’

The taxman glowered.

‘I’d take you back myself,’ I told him. ‘But my insurance doesn’t allow me to take paying passengers and since I don’t have to go into Barnstaple on business I wouldn’t be able to claim the cost of my petrol.’ I shrugged and attempted to look frustrated. ‘The rules must be obeyed,’ I added. I then waved to Samuel, and said goodbye to Mr Merriment, surely the most inappropriately named civil servant in the history of the civil service.

‘Now you can tell me how you managed to re-sew that button on so quickly,’ said Patsy. ‘If you can really sew buttons on that fast then you should be in the next Sewing Olympics! And where did you find the black cotton.’

‘Trade secret,’ I said, smearing liberal quantities of marmalade onto my toast. I either have butter or marmalade – never both.

Patsy came up behind me and niftily removed my plate. ‘How?’ she demanded.

Faced with the loss of my toast I had no choice. I took a black felt tip pen out of my inside pocket and showed it to her. ‘I just covered the green cotton with black ink,’ I explained.

‘You are impossible!’ cried Patsy.

But she gave me back my toast.

The Forger

Like most ancient English villages, Bilbury stands at and around the top of a fairly large hill. Early settlers liked living on top of a hill because it made them feel safer from invaders, wild animals and from floods.

It's much easier to repel attackers if you're higher than they are because then you're firing arrows and throwing stones downhill whereas the enemy, wretched souls, are having to trudge uphill while firing their arrows, and they are throwing their stones up instead of down.

And, of course, those who dwell on the top of hills are far less likely to get their feet wet if they haven't finished building your arks when the floods come.

(The name Bilbury, incidentally, comes from the prefix Bil- which means promontory or ridge and the word 'bury' which has nothing to do with dead bodies but which is a corruption of the word 'burh' which originally meant a fort. So, Bilbury was originally a fort on a ridge of high ground. The nearby town of Barnstaple also has a military history. In Saxon times, Barnstaple was the principal business centre in North Devon but it was also a stronghold built to withstand attacks from Danish invaders and the name literally means 'post of the battleaxe' – a meeting place with a battleaxe as its identifying symbol.)

Apart from the obvious advantage of being safe from invaders and biblical style floodings, there are other good things about living on a hill.

Most notably the views tend to be spectacular. And so, for example, although Bilbury stands a mile or two from the North Devon coast we can see the Bristol Channel from several of our bedrooms at Bilbury Grange. On a very clear day we can see Wales.

The only bad thing I can think of is that living on the top of a hill means that you are far more likely to suffer when the winds are strong. And in the south west of England the winds are sometimes very strong indeed. Strong winds mean that most villagers tend to lose a few roof tiles or slates every winter and bits and pieces of houses and cottages which aren't fastened on tightly, such as rusty guttering and aged downpipes, tend to end up somewhere other than where they are supposed to be.

(To those locals who live in what might be politely termed 'an insurance based economy' this really is more of a benefit than a problem. There are, I'm slightly embarrassed to admit, not a few villagers who rely on the insurance claims resulting from winter gales to subsidise their modest incomes and to enable them to keep their bodies and souls within hailing distance of each other.)

After yet another day and night of gales, our garden was littered with tree branches which had been blown down. Even healthy trees shed branches occasionally and in any large garden there will always be one or two trees which are old, creaky and liable to lose branches in a high wind.

I always cut up the decent sized branches for firewood. Bigger branches can be sawn into logs and smaller branches can be turned into kindling. But there are always lots of small twigs which are too small to be useful in the fireplace and they go onto the bonfire. As a confirmed garden pyromaniac, I don't mind this one bit.

But, of course, lighting bonfires when the wind is still blowing can be a difficult, not to say hazardous, activity and I had recently decided to buy myself an incinerator so that I could light a bonfire whatever the weather; without having to worry about glowing embers blowing into a part of the garden where I didn't want a fire starting. We have also had rather a lot of trouble with the badgers raking over our bonfire site looking for something to eat. The result has been that bits and pieces of half burnt rubbish have ended up fifty yards away. I rather hoped that the incinerator would help put an end to that.

Thumper came round this morning as I was putting the damned thing together.

It seems that these days you can't even buy an incinerator which is entirely readymade. This one needed to have four feet fixed onto the bottom, to keep the base of the incinerator off the ground. I was struggling to do this when Thumper appeared.

'Brilliant idea!' said my friend. 'You can provide your patients with a complete service now.'

I looked at him, puzzled.

'You can cremate the ones who die!' said Thumper with a grin. 'We'll make you a new sign: 'Bilbury's Family Doctor: Cradle to Grave and Beyond'.'

I threw the screwdriver I was holding in his direction but he ducked and I missed by yards.

'Mel asked me to ask you to pop in and see him,' said Thumper, picking up the screwdriver, gently moving me aside and fixing the foot I'd been trying to fix in a tenth of the time it would have taken me. 'I went out there to fetch a couple of his pictures for Patchy to put in his gallery. A bloke from London bought the last two.'

'The chap who bought the old railway station?' I asked. I couldn't think of anyone else in the village whom

Thumper would describe as ‘a bloke from London’. Besides, I remembered that Hardley-Fitzwalter had boasted of buying cheap pictures in the village.

‘That’s the one,’ replied Thumper. ‘A complete pillock.’ He laughed. ‘He probably thought he’d managed to pull the wool over Patchy’s eyes.’ He said this as though it were an utterly absurd idea.

‘How did the bloke in London get to see them?’ I asked smiling at the idea of anyone pulling wool over Patchy’s eyes.

‘Patchy had them in his new gallery.’

‘In his gallery?’ I didn’t know Patchy had anything that could be properly described as a gallery. He keeps most of his stock in his garages.

‘Well, they were in what was his garden shed. Patchy now calls it his gallery. I think he got the idea from Peter.’ Peter Marshall had recently converted his garden shed into a multi-purpose commercial site which was proving very successful. ‘The bloke bought them and paid cash.’ I wasn’t surprised that it had been a cash transaction. Patchy will write cheques happily enough but he won’t accept them.

Mel is Mel Bourne, an artist who lives in an old woodman’s cottage in the middle of a wood in the middle of absolutely nowhere. He has no electricity, no running water and no telephone. His real name is Cyril or Nigel or Claude or something similar but everyone in Bilbury calls him ‘Mel’ because he comes from Australia, though to be honest he hails from Sydney and not Melbourne. Still, there wouldn’t be any point in calling him Sid Bourne, would there?

Mel lives with a sequence of 20-year-old girls whom he refers to as his au pairs. He calls them all Mabel and for some inexplicable reason they all seem happy enough to put up with this.

Although he lives simply, I suspect that Mel earns a good living as a professional painter. He is an excellent artist and could easily produce works of art of his own but, sadly, it is apparently difficult for a painter to make a living these days unless he is prepared to create an outlandish public persona for himself. The artists who do well under their own names tend to wear large bow ties, get drunk in public, appear on television and get involved in carefully orchestrated rows with selected members of the art establishment. Mel is far too shy to do any of those things and so he follows a well-trodden route and produces paintings which are, to put it politely, ‘eerily reminiscent’ of the works of other artists. He does lots of stuff which looks as if it was painted by Renoir, Manet, Monet, Picasso and Chagall. He prefers doing Chagalls because he says Chagall is the easiest to imitate. (People like Mel never use the word ‘forge’, preferring words such as ‘homage’, ‘tribute’ and so on.) When he’s creating a Chagal lookalike painting, Mel simply puts in a moon, a badly drawn woman, a cow and a chicken and use a lot of blue paint.

Mel sells most of his paintings at auction houses up and down the country and always puts a sticky label on the back making it clear that the painting has been done ‘in the style of’ or ‘after Chagall’. He gets a couple of hundred pounds apiece for them and they always sell well. He says he knows that the buyers are usually antique shop owners who peel off the stickers, put the paintings into their shops and then pretend not to know what it is that they are selling. Browsers see what looks like a Chagall or a Renoir and they are blinded by the sound of cash pouring into their pockets. If names are mentioned, the antique shop owner pretends not to have heard of Chagall and says he thought that a fellow called Renoir used to play for Manchester United.

The antique shop owner then sells the picture on for five hundred pounds and makes a good profit. Up until that point, no one in the chain of deceit has done anything illegal.

The buyer who purchases the picture from the antique dealer then either hangs the picture on his wall, and gloats about how little he paid for it, or else he flogs it to a London dealer as an original but unsigned painting.

It is, I’m told, surprising how many famous artists never bothered to sign their work, particularly the stuff they did when they were young, unknown and penniless. Why would a young artist bother to sign his name to his painting if his name wasn’t going to mean anything to prospective buyers? According to Patchy there are now four times as many paintings attributed to Marc Chagall as the great man ever produced in his lifetime. Not all those were produced by Mel Bourne, of course, but his share of the total is almost certainly greater than anyone else’s.

Thumper fixed the next and final foot to the base of the incinerator with an ease which I envied. If you gave Thumper a large box full of old motor car parts he would build you a motor car in a day – and have absolutely no bits left over. And if you gave Patchy Fogg a large box full of old motor car parts he would sell the bits as souvenirs, paperweights and bits of modern sculpture. My skills, such as they are, seem simple and rather primitive in comparison.

I thanked Thumper and drove out to Mel’s cottage.

This is something much easier to say or to write than it is to do, since the last part of the track through the wood is so rough, so rutted and so strewn with fallen branches that I had to park the Rolls Royce on a bed of pine needles and walk the final quarter of a mile.

The current Mabel, a lovely Dutch girl who dotes on Mel and regards him as a genius, met me at the cottage door, insisted that I accept a large glass of wine and took me in to the room which doubled as a bedroom and an art studio. Mel was lying on a huge double bed. Mabel, who had clearly been crying, stayed with us, settling down onto a large bean bag in a corner of the room.

Mel Bourne is an unusual fellow in every possible respect. He has small black eyes, which sit like solitary, sinking currants in a double handful of uncooked dough, a mean cook's interpretation of the currant bun, and thin, pale lips which had clearly long ago run out of smiles. These are situated a couple of inches above the finest collection of chins I had seen for a long while. The chins are well worth numbering and categorising. Some people collect stamps, some collect old typewriters. Mel looks as though he collects chins and had been very successful at it.

Although born in Australia he is now a staunch Englishman; the sort of fellow who is proud enough of his country to believe that the newspaper headline *Storm in Channel –Continent Isolated* makes absolute good sense. He speaks in a slow, stentorian voice which made him sound like the fellows NASA employed to talk to the astronauts on America's early adventures in space.

I've always found voices fascinating.

I once knew a fellow who was a very successful disc jockey on the wireless. He worked on pirate radio and then moved to Radio 1 when the BBC realised, rather belatedly, that there was a market for popular music. I first met him when he was doing a programme in which short interviews with guests were slotted in between the records. I remember that he interviewed me about a book of mine called *Bodypower*. I was so fascinated by the famous, voice that I had difficulty in answering any of his questions. Every time he opened his mouth it sounded as if he were about to introduce the very latest single from the Rolling Stones. Years later, when I knew him well, I still found myself in awe of the voice. If he asked me if I wanted another cup of coffee I would find myself sitting waiting for the next record to start playing before I answered.

'What's up?' I asked Mel, carefully moving a few magazines onto the floor and sitting down on the edge of the bed. I put the glass of wine which Mabel had given me down onto the floor beside the magazines.

'I'm buggered,' said Mel. He had no teeth at all. I didn't remember him being edentulous. 'Totally worn out and obviously dying. You'll have to give me a jab to put me out of Mabel's misery. I've left her the cottage and a dozen paintings – they'll last her until she finds a new boyfriend.'

There was a sob and a protest from the corner of the room.

Mel nodded towards the wine I'd put down. 'You'll like that,' he said, 'it's a Saint Emilion Grand Cru, 1954. Costs a fortune but very drinkable. I was going to drink all the good stuff before I popped my clogs but I won't manage it now. Ask Mabel to give you half a dozen bottles to take home with you. And take a couple of bottles for Thumper.' I noticed that his false teeth, an upper set and a lower set, were sitting on the wooden cabinet beside the bed.

Unless there are exceptional circumstances I don't usually drink before lunchtime but this seemed an exceptional circumstance so I picked up the wine glass and took a sip. It was like drinking velvet; blood red, heavy bodied, light-headed, rich as Croesus velvet. I had never tasted a wine quite like it nor, I suspected, half as expensive. I took a bigger sip.

'In what particular way are you buggered?' I asked.

'It's been coming on for a while,' said Mel sadly but stoically. 'Some time ago I reached the age where I always needed to take an antacid before I ate anything, just as a precaution'. He paused, enjoying half-forgotten memories of meals enjoyed and now mourned. 'But,' he continued with a forced and gummy grin, 'until recently I always told myself that however old and knackered I became my best years were still ahead of me. And I damned well intended to go ahead and prove it.' He sighed and moved awkwardly as though in pain. 'But that was then and this is now. I'm as weak as a kitten and I've started to get pains that I really don't like.' He sighed. 'The end is nigh, doctor. It's time to give me the jab.'

'The jab?' I said.

'The stuff you give people to send them on their way,' said Mel, with a debonair wave of a hand. 'Mabel kisses me. You say goodbye. You both say I'm very brave and you'll never forget me. I tell you I want to be cremated and to have my ashes strewn in the woods – which I do incidentally – then you bung a needle in my bum and shoot me full of arsenic or cyanide, or whatever it is you medics use these days.' He tried to raise himself up off the bed but failed. 'If you leave here without giving me the jab I'll just cut my wrists!' he told me. He produced an old-fashioned cut throat razor from underneath his pillow. Mabel sobbed loudly.

I stared at him. It took me a moment or two to realise that he was deadly serious.

Under normal circumstances Mel is one of those individuals who goes through life apparently unconcerned about things going on around him. I have always envied him his laissez faire attitude.

It has always been my experience that the things which go wrong are invariably the things we haven't thought about, and therefore do not worry about, and I long ago concluded that there are two ways to try to deal with this problem.

The first way is to think more, and worry more, in the hope that you will eventually spot the potential problem before it rears its doubtless very ugly head.

The people who follow this path tiptoe nervously through life. One minute they are looking over their shoulders for the madman who is lurking in the shadows and about to leap out and wrap his bony fingers around their neck, and the next minute they are looking up into the sky for the unexpected scaffolding pole or roof tile that is about to come plummeting down and crush their skulls. Around every corner there is always a new disaster waiting.

Some of those who fall into this category are incorrigible.

I once tried to teach a patient how to relax by using his imagination to visualise the peaceful delights of a walk in the country. He lay on the couch while I painted a word picture of a beautiful walk along a sunlight lane. Suddenly, he leapt up screaming. 'What on earth is the matter?' I asked. 'There's a body in the ditch at the side of the lane!' he cried, his face etched with horror and agony.

Sadly, the chronic worriers usually find that their thinking and worrying is of very little value because there is always something they miss. In between looking out for the mad mugger and watching for the falling roof tile, they are mown down by a runaway lorry or an out of control cyclist. Moreover, their constant worrying makes them ill and they invariably suffer from one or more items chosen by a Higher Authority from an a la carte menu of a wide variety of stress related disorders – heart disease, high blood pressure, stomach ulcers, asthma, cancer and so on.

The second solution is to think less and to worry not at all; thinking of yourself as a shore upon which the waves will constantly break and over which you cannot possibly have any control.

Mel fell firmly into this category.

The people who follow this philosophy are very slightly more likely to find themselves facing serious and unexpected problems. Occasionally they will get their feet damp, and from time to time they will be washed away to sea.

But they are far less likely to suffer from stress related diseases.

They tend to saunter through life, taking each new vicissitude with an aplomb which is envied by their more nervous neighbours. They eat, drink and smoke whatever they like, without a thought for the consequences. They shrug off all thoughts of falling tiles and lurking murderers and wander freely through life, with enviable nonchalance. Insouciance is their watchword and equanimity their guide. They are calm and untroubled by the terrors of the world. Insurance is, for them, something other people take out.

The trouble is that their sense of fatalism is likely to encourage them to give up too soon when illness strikes.

Mel is settled resolutely into the second category of individual.

He regards worry as an unnecessary luxury; as pointless as a battery operated back scratcher or diamond studded collar for a goldfish.

Worry has always been something he was quite happy to go through life without. He has always been happy to accept whatever life throws at him. And now that he was convinced that he was dying he didn't want to fight. Instead, he wanted to get the whole damned thing over as quickly as possible.

'Tell me what symptoms you've got,' I told him. I took another sip of the wine. It really was very good. I felt slightly guilty for drinking at such an early hour. And I had to drive the car back home.

'Everything's gone stiff,' said Mel. 'I think it's probably the rigor mortis setting in a bit early.'

'What do you mean by 'everything'?'

'Well, not the bit I'd like to be stiff,' said Mel with a laugh as hollow as a chocolate Easter egg. There was a half-stifled sob from Mabel. 'My neck is stiff, my shoulders are stiff and my hips are stiff. My hips and thighs are so stiff that I can hardly get out of bed. And my shoulders are so painful and stiff that I can hardly lift a bloody paint brush.'

'How long has it been coming on?' I asked him.

'A few days,' said Mel. 'No more than a week.'

'Does anything make it worse?'

He thought for a moment. 'The stiffness and pain are worse in the morning,' he said. 'They're terrible when I wake up. By the end of the day the pain and stiffness are no worse than awful.' He thought for a moment and sighed. 'I feel as weak as a kitten and I just know I'm dying.'

'Anything else?' I asked.

'Isn't that enough?' he demanded.

'You seem depressed,' I said.

'Of course I'm bloody depressed! I'm only 57 and I'm dying because my body has worn out! I should be able to get a rebate. I thought we were supposed to have a guarantee of three score and ten!' He tried to move but winced. He lay quietly for a few moments. 'I'm not ready to die,' he said, 'but when your time has come there's no point in whingeing about it, is there?' Tears appeared in the corners of both eyes and slowly ran down his cheeks.

I finished off the wine and put my glass down.

'Is there no hope, doctor?' asked Mabel. 'Can you get him into hospital? Are there some tests you could do?'

'I'm not going into a damned hospital!' cried Mel. 'I hate hospitals.'

It is surprising how many people are terrified of going into hospital – probably because they know people who've been made worse, caught infections or had the wrong leg chopped off. In this respect, little has changed from the Middle Ages when patients would fight to stay out of hospitals because they knew that once they went in they would only leave in a coffin. I was contemplating this sad truth when suddenly, in a flash, I realised what was wrong with Mel and I knew that he wasn't dying. I'd seen a patient with these symptoms before. Experience and intuition can be a potent combination on the rare occasion when they work together. Instinct, intuition, call it what you will is unconscious logic and while I'd been thinking about something else my mind had been whirring and had dug out the answer.

Mel looked at the empty glass I was still holding and told Mabel to pour me more wine.

The more I thought about it the more certain I was that Mel had a disease called polymyalgia rheumatic – a relatively uncommon disorder which seems to exclusively affect people over the age of 55.

As with so many diseases, no one knows what causes polymyalgia rheumatic. Indeed, no one knows much about it at all except that it seems to involve an inflammation of the lining of the large joints and that this inflammation causes severe stiffness and pain in the muscles of the hips, the shoulders and the neck. The symptoms tend to be worse in the morning and they are so distressing that patients feel generally unwell, miserable and often depressed.

There are blood tests which can be done but if I took blood samples immediately I wouldn't get the results back for several days, probably a week. The erythrocyte sedimentation rate (ESR) is raised dramatically in patients with polymyalgia rheumatic but I didn't think I had a few days. Mel was so depressed that he would almost certainly kill himself if he had to suffer for another week.

I could try to persuade him to go into hospital. But would he go? No. I knew he wouldn't. I could probably obtain a legal order forcing him to go into hospital but that would take time I didn't have. And I feared that the minute I left Mel and returned home to start the legal processes he would cut his wrists. And even if Mel agreed to go into hospital there would be the problem of getting him out of the cottage and into an ambulance. He would have to be carried for a quarter of a mile at least. The pains and stiffness in his big joints would make the whole operation unbearably uncomfortable for him.

Suddenly, I made a decision. I took a gulp of the beautiful wine Mabel had put into my glass and opened my drug bag. Maybe the wine gave me the courage to take action.

'I think I can mend you,' I told Mel. I finished off the wine.

He stared at me, disbelievingly.

'I think I know what's wrong,' I said. 'If I'm right I can get rid of the pains and the stiffness.'

I rummaged around in my drug bag until I found what I needed. Although doctors don't know what causes polymyalgia rheumatic, and certainly don't have a cure, it is known that the symptoms can be banished with the aid of corticosteroids' these seem to block the actions of the chemicals which produce the inflammation causing the pain and stiffness.

I took out a small bottle of steroid tablets and asked Mabel to fetch a glass of water. When she returned, I told her to give the glass of water to Mel. I then shook three tablets out into his hand. 'Swallow those,' I instructed him.

'Are these going to kill me or cure me?' he asked. I wasn't sure he cared which.

'They won't kill you,' I told him. 'They will cure you.'

In truth, I should have said that I hoped that they would cure him but I needed all the help I could find. I needed Mel to believe in the treatment I was giving him.

I watched Mel take the pills and then turned to Mabel. 'Make sure Mel takes another three tablets tomorrow morning. There won't be any improvement tomorrow but I'll come back in 48 hours and the pain and the stiffness will be easing off by then.'

Mel would have to take the steroid for a year or two. And he'd need to be certain not to miss any. But if his symptoms started to disappear I didn't think I'd have any problem persuading him to keep taking the tablets.

I made Mel promise that he would not cut his wrists before I returned and then I left, hoping and praying that my diagnosis was right.

I worried all the rest of that day, all that night and all the next day. I had been trained to do tests and investigations before making a diagnosis of a serious disease such as polymyalgia rheumatic. But here I was just handing out steroid tablets in the belief that I was right.

I wanted to go back to see Mel the next morning but I knew that the steroids would not have had time to work. I would merely have to repeat my confident assurance that the pills would cure him. Another visit before there had been any change might reduce Mel's confidence and, therefore, do more harm than good. I thought it best to wait 48 hours in the hope that by the time I returned to the cottage there would be a real improvement.

And so I waited.

And I finally returned to the cottage 48 hours after I'd left.

As I walked along the rutted, branch-strewn track from where I had left the Rolls Royce, I found myself murmuring a prayer that I'd been right and that Mel would have made at least some improvement. If he wasn't any better, then I really didn't know what else I could do.

I could try to persuade him to persevere with the tablets for another 24 hours. But would he wait that long before cutting his wrists? Rarely have I been more anxious to see the outcome of a treatment programme.

Mel and Mabel had heard me coming and when I got closer to their cottage I could see that they were standing in the doorway. They had their arms around each other and they were both crying.

Mel's symptoms hadn't entirely disappeared.

He was still a little stiff and he still had some pain. But he was, he said, so much better that he had, that morning, been able to do a little painting. He was no longer depressed. He was alive again and as full of ambition, hope and good cheer as I had ever seen him.

I told him again that he had to take the tablets every day and that he would need to persevere with them for some time. 'You must not suddenly stop them,' I told him firmly. 'If you do then you will be ill again.'

'I'll make sure he takes them,' promised Mabel; who has far more common sense in her little finger than Mel has in his whole body.

'You forgot your wine,' said Mel, pointing to a full crate of Saint Emilion claret.

I protested that the offer of the wine had been made when he thought he was dying. I also pointed out that he had originally promised me just six bottles.

'If you don't take it then I won't take the pills,' said Mel, who looked as if he were about to stamp his feet and have a tantrum. 'And besides, two bottles are for Thumper. Remember?'

And so I had little choice. I picked up the crate of wine.

'Oh, and we wanted to give you something else,' said Mabel. She darted back into the cottage and reappeared a moment later carrying two paintings.

'Which would you prefer?' she asked. 'A late Chagall or an early Monet?'

I looked at the two paintings. They were amazingly good.

'I did the Chagall and half the Monet last night and finished the Monet this morning,' said Mel.

'I can't…,' I began, trying to refuse the paintings without giving offence.

'Take them both,' insisted Mel. 'If it hadn't been for you, I'd be pushing up daisies.' Once again he wouldn't allow me to refuse.

Since I was carrying the wine, Mabel carried the two paintings to the car.

'Be careful with the Monet,' called Mel as we disappeared off up the track. 'Remember, I only finished it this morning and the paint is still a bit tacky.'

I put the crate of wine on the back seat of the Rolls and Mabel lay the two paintings down on the boot floor.

I then drove home singing.

When things go well there is no better job in the world than being a country GP.

The Man in the Yellow Anorak

The Rolls Royce 20/25 is a magnificent motor car. Built in an era when all motor cars had style, individuality and presence, the 20/25 was one of the first Rolls Royce cars built to cater for the growing number of owner-drivers; customers who were happy to drive their cars themselves (either because they couldn't afford a chauffeur or because they enjoyed driving too much to pay someone else to do it for them).

When Dr Brownlow died he left me his Rolls Royce 20/25; it was and is quite possibly the most absurdly inappropriate vehicle for a country doctor to use. I find it quite impossible to think of anything more absurdly unsuited to driving around in the Devon lanes.

The car is too wide, too long and difficult to steer; it has brakes which need to be applied a good five minutes before the driver wishes to stop and although it consumes fuel at the sort of rate which might be associated with an ocean going liner it accelerates (in comparison with a relatively small, modern family saloon such as an Austin Allegro, Honda Civic or Volkswagen Passat) with stately dignity rather than startling speed. As Patchy Fogg once put it, the Rolls Royce 20/25 was built for travelling rather than arriving.

But few cars have the panache and style of an elderly Rolls Royce motor car and although I had been tempted by the idea of selling the car and purchasing in its stead a more practical vehicle, my affection for Dr Brownlow, and my determination to continue to practise in a way of which I thought he might approve, meant that I had resisted the temptation with great ease. Patsy, I am pleased to say, agreed with me that we should keep the Rolls Royce and say bugger to convenience and practicality. Since the car was not fitted with seat belts (and I had absolutely no intention of having them fitted) she and the babies invariably travelled in the back when we went out en famille and she would, on occasion, wave to pedestrians in a distinctly regal manner. She swears that on one occasion a middle aged woman in South Molton actually curtseyed as we drove past. Thumper is looking out for a small regal-looking pennant and suitable fixing pole which I can have affixed to the bonnet.

Dr Brownlow's motor car, a spacious limousine, had first seen the light of day in 1930 and, as with all the other vehicles known as 20/25s, only the chassis, six litre engine, gearbox and other mechanical parts had been made by the Rolls Royce company. Dr Brownlow had bought the car second-hand from the widow of a Harley Street consultant with whom he had trained. The consultant had worked himself to death and the widow had decided to sell everything and to move to Monte Carlo for the weather, the social life and the lack of taxation. She had decided that she did not want to be set off on her new life encumbered by a black limousine. The car was less than two-years-old when Dr Brownlow became the owner and in Rolls Royce terms it had barely been run in.

The bodywork for the car had been made ('built' is a more appropriate word) by a firm of coachbuilders known as Thrupp and Maberly. The vehicle had originally been designed to reach a top speed of 75 mph but as they mature, cars – like people – become a little less frisky and I had never managed to take the car above 65 mph. Despite its age, however, the car handled easily and smoothly and was a delight to drive. The steering was an absolute joy, finger light to the touch, and the car had all the mod cons of the day – including a rear fog light, a reversing light, a heater (complete with fan) and windscreen wipers which could, with the aid of two silver knobs, be parked away from the screen when not in use. The dashboard was made of mahogany with black lacquer highlighting. Tolstoy's, the Bilbury garage, had looked after the car when it belonged to Dr Brownlow and they continued to look after it (and even clean it) when I took over ownership.

All that more than made up for the fact that the size of the car, and the rather large turning circle, made it entirely unsuitable for driving around the narrow lanes of Devon. However, spending so much time in close proximity to the Devon hedges did encourage me to learn more about how they had come into being.

Having been brought up in the suburbs of a town in the English midlands I knew very little about the countryside when I first arrived in Bilbury.

As far as I knew, a ditch was just a gulley at the side of the road, dug to cope with excess rainwater, while a hedge was something which existed to mark a minor boundary and to keep animals from straying.

But as time went by, I learnt that things aren't quite as simple as I had once thought.

Boundaries, whatever form they may take, are terribly important to everyone and especially so in the country. Even a farmer who has several hundred acres will worry enormously if he thinks he is losing a foot of land or, just as importantly, someone else is gaining a foot. I also discovered that ditches and hedges are often more than they might appear to be.

Back in Roman times, when the Romans conquered Britain, the entire population of Britain was probably considerably less than half a million and you might have thought that there would be plenty of land to go around. But even back in those simpler days, farmers were protective of their land and guarded their boundaries as jealously as any modern landowner, and with the same dogged determination.

In early Devon, as in the rest of England, the standard unit of cultivation was a piece of land known as the strip. A full strip of land would be 220 yards long and 22 yards wide (the original acre) but most farmers had strips of half an acre or a third of an acre. A bundle or a parcel of strips for cultivation were known as a furlong and a 'campus' or a 'field' was made up of scores of furlongs (and, therefore, several hundred strips) of many different sizes and shapes. The area of land enclosed by ditches and hedges was known as a park and it would be subdivided, by further hedges and ditches, into smaller parcels in order to make it easier to control animals and their grazing.

When a landowner died his estate would, of course, have to be divided up so that it could be shared between the heirs. Each heir had to be given a fair share of every sort of land available – garden, orchard, meadow, woodland, pastureland and heathland – and the result was that land had to be divided into very small fields, some of them no more than half an acre in size. This would, inevitably, mean that the new landowners would need to get digging ditches and building banks and hedges in order to make their boundaries clear.

Today, ditches and hedges mark thousands of boundaries, many of which have been lost. An ordinary looking ditch may mark the boundary line of a former royal manor and there are ditches, hedges, banks and lanes in the county of Devon which are well over a thousand years old.

The village of Combe Martin, just a few miles from Bilbury, originated as a small valley village about a mile inland and only gradually spread down to the valley to the sea as the centuries wandered effortlessly by. Today, Combe Martin still has many mediaeval hedges: boundaries which have been in place since they were grown to mark off individual strips of land.

Bilbury itself, like nearly every village which can be found on a map of England, existed long before William the Conqueror ordered the creation of the Domesday Book in the eleventh century.

Walk along a narrow track, hardly wide enough for a horse drawn cart, and you might imagine that you are merely following in the footsteps, or wheel tracks, of a long forgotten farmer who used that route to pass from one field to another, to move animals, feed or crops from his farmhouse or barns to a distant pasture.

But things aren't that simple.

There are tracks in Bilbury, known to historians and archeologists as 'hollow ways', which were already ancient in the tenth century. However, these 'false' tracks weren't built as tracks or lanes at all but were originally created by two landowners digging out ditches to mark their boundaries.

As they dug, the two landowners or their ditch digging employees, threw up the earth they had moved and built up continuous banks on their side of their ditch. Ditches were customarily expected to be four feet wide and four feet deep and since two ditches were dug side by side this explains why so many tracks and lanes in Devon are just eight or so feet wide.

There was four feet of ditch for landowner A on the left hand side of the lane, and four feet of contiguous ditch for landowner B on the right hand side.

The two mounds of earth produced with the soil taken from the ditches were then planted with a hedge of hazel, oak, maple or ash or, more likely, a mixture of all of these. A good number of hawthorn bushes would be thrown in to the mix to make the hedge tighter, thornier and more impenetrable.

There might be an occasional elm too but the sycamore, now so common, was not introduced into England until the end of the 16th century.

By planting their hedges with what are called 'coppice woods', suitable for providing branches which could be used for fencing and firewood, the landowners could give themselves a constant and useful crop of wood, while maintaining their hedgerow boundaries.

The other advantage of these huge banks and hedges was that animals would be able to shelter from wind and rain. And a pleasant side effect was that the hedges would provide homes for huge numbers of birds.

As the years went by the broad, eight foot wide ditch would need clearing out from time to time, and the soil removed would be thrown onto the top of the bank, building up to the sort of height which can be seen today. What now appears to be a track was originally merely the confluence of two ditches and the track might be wide enough for a man on horseback or even for a cart is merely a convenient coincidence. Look carefully and you will see that these narrow tracks (which can be seen all over Devon, and not just in Bilbury) are several feet below the level of the fields on either side.

Even a man well over six feet tall will, if he walks along a fairly ordinary Devon track, be unable to peer over the top of the earth bank, let alone through the hedge on top of it (which may, itself, have now become a hedge of towering trees), and see into the fields on either side.

Today these banks are now widely known as 'traditional Devon banks' and local planning departments, not understanding their origins or purpose, sometimes insist that builders surround new housing estates with mounds of earth in an attempt to preserve the Devon bank tradition. Sadly, the modern builders usually build the banks out of discarded rubble and rubbish and cover them with a thin layer of clay and stony earth. The result is invariably a sad, weed encrusted earth wall with bits of broken pipe poking out amidst the dandelions, dock and nettles.

It is no wonder that ditch digging and hedge building and layering were for centuries two of the most common forms of employment in the English countryside. And the topography of today's countryside is a direct result of all that digging and layering. The narrow lanes along which people drive in Devon are confined and winding because they follow the tracks and ditches which lie between the banks built to define the extent of each landowner's domain. Since moving huge boulders or trees would take an inordinate amount of effort, the landowners usually wriggled around them – and hence many of these tracks seem to wander hither and thither in a very irregular way.

There are some who might say that driving one of the largest cars on the road in an area of the country with the narrowest lanes is close to lunacy.

I prefer to think of it as driving one of the most beautiful cars ever made in a part of the country with the most beautiful lanes and hedgerows.

Nevertheless, despite this optimistic viewpoint, I have to admit that a huge, old Rolls Royce is not the most sensible vehicle for a country doctor to drive in Devon.

As I travelled around on my daily visits, I was constantly trying to avoid bushes, branches and brambles in narrow lanes which had originally been nothing more than ditches, which had then developed into tracks for driving sheep from field to field, which had been used by farmers on horseback and which had eventually been commandeered by the occasional, wealthy individual with a trap and a pony.

I had become unusually adept at reversing (most of the local lanes were far too narrow to allow cars to pass one another and if two vehicles met, one would invariably have to reverse and find a gateway or field entrance) but I had found, to my surprise, that most other drivers would quickly start to reverse when they saw the Rolls approaching. Even farmers would reverse their tractors to allow the Rolls to pass by.

Locals in and around Bilbury always know how far they have to reverse to reach the last passing place or gateway and when two locals meet in a narrow lane the customary practice is for the one closest to a gate or passing place to do the reversing.

Visiting motorists are, however, rather different. They usually panic when they come face to face with another vehicle in a lane so narrow that there is grass growing in the middle of the road and both of their vehicle's wing mirrors are brushing along in the hedges.

And so, even though my vehicle is longer and wider than most other cars on the road I end up reversing more often than not.

While I was out on my late morning calls one rainy day, I found myself bonnet to bonnet with a dark blue saloon car.

I think it may have been an Austin 1800 but I am ashamed to admit that a lot of modern cars look the same to me and it could well have been a Hillman or a Ford of some kind.

The blue car was towing a caravan and I realised immediately that even though the saloon car driver had a passing space less than twenty yards behind him, I would be the one going backwards. The driver had a look of combined fury and terror on his face and to be honest I'm not surprised. His caravan was about two feet wider than the lane he was in and branches and brambles were scratching along both sides. I remembered that a visitor from Leeds once had to have his caravan unhooked from his car and pulled out with a tractor when it got stuck in the particularly narrow piece of a lane which goes alongside Softly's Bottom. The caravan sides were peeled back by blackthorn and hawthorn branches and the caravan was a write-off when it was finally extricated.

And so I started to reverse the Rolls, trying to remember where there was a passing place behind me and how narrow the lane would get before it widened out again.

It was summer at the time but you wouldn't have known it from the weather.

It had been raining for a week and the rain was bucketing down as though the manufacturer of the stuff had a vast quantity of surplus stock, and was trying to get rid of it because the storage space was needed for hail, snow and other forthcoming meteorological goodies.

As I looked over my shoulder and reversed down the lane, I first saw something orange and then saw something yellow on the other side of the hedge.

The hedge was thick at that point, mainly beech and hawthorn, and even though I was moving very slowly it was difficult to see clearly. When the something yellow moved, I realised that I had spotted a human being in a brightly coloured anorak. He or she was lying on the ground but moving about from side to side. There was a dark shape beside it but it was raining so hard that I couldn't make out what it was: a child or an animal of some kind perhaps.

As I drove backwards, trying to avoid the hedges and peering through the rain, it slowly became clear from the shape that the something orange was a small tent; one of those tiny little things just big enough to provide space for one person who doesn't suffer from claustrophobia, and accompanied by nothing more cumbersome than a thin sleeping bag, a pair of boots and a torch. It was one of those little tents which are light enough, when rolled up, to be carried on top of a rucksack or on the back of a bicycle.

Suddenly the hedge became thinner and I could see through it more easily. But the figure in yellow didn't look right. And what was the small child doing next to the figure in yellow? Was it a child? There was something about the way the individual was moving that concerned me and so I stopped my car and wound down my window. I could then clearly tell that the person in the anorak was in trouble. The rain was pouring down; bucketing down as the Devonians sometimes say.

I speeded up a little and continued to reverse the Rolls as quickly as I could until I came to a gateway. There still wasn't space for the blue saloon and its caravan to pass but there was room for me to open my door and get out of the car. And, just as important, I could get into the field to see what was wrong with the person in yellow.

I jumped out of the car, pulled on my raincoat, grabbed my bag from the back seat, opened the gate and hurried into the field. As I did so, the driver of the blue car pressed his horn impatiently. One of those imperious and irritating toot toots that always make it clear that the person doing the tooting is far more important than everyone else around and must be obeyed immediately. Maybe he thought I had decided to pop out into a wet field to enjoy an impromptu picnic.

I ignored the unhappy motorist and his hooting and hurried over to the figure in yellow. It turned out to be a male; a fellow in his late forties or early fifties I guessed from his face, hair and beard. Although he was moving, writhing would be the most appropriate word, he appeared to be unconscious. He was groaning loudly and crying out in pain.

As I approached the man in the yellow anorak, I could see that there was no child beside him but that two dogs, one large and one small, were crouched over him.

Although I could not, at first, see what was happening it was quickly obvious that the dogs weren't playing with him. Something far more sinister was going on. I shouted loudly to attract their attention and the two dogs duly lifted their heads.

It was raining so heavily that it was difficult to see what breed they were but the big dog appeared to be a Doberman Pinscher and the small dog looked like a Jack Russell terrier. The dogs were, inevitably, soaked. Their fur was flattened as if they had been swimming in the sea.

Only when I was no more than five or six feet away could I see that their mouths were red with blood. I realised with horror that they were eating the man on the ground.

It was absolutely no consolation to see that I had been right about the breeds; the big dog was a Doberman and the small one was a Jack Russell. I knew that there was someone in the village who had two such dogs but for the moment I couldn't for the life of me remember who it was.

I spoke quietly to the dogs, trying to avoid looking directly at them. I kept still, holding my arms by my sides and trying not to look threatening. I talked to them, gently trying all the usual commands I could think of: 'sit', 'lie down' and so on.

But the dogs had tasted blood and they were too excited to be calmed down in such a tepid way.

And so, I hit out at the bigger dog with the only weapon I had – my heavy black, leather medical bag – and caught him a glancing blow on the side of his head. He looked up, growled, snarled and then carried on biting and chewing. The poor man in the yellow anorak was being eaten alive. I swung my medical bag again and this time managed to catch the Doberman a really good blow. He staggered, moved away from the man on the ground and came towards me. I knew that I had to stay upright. If the Doberman managed to get me onto the ground then both I and the camper would be beyond hope.

I love animals in general and dogs in particular and our collie Ben is one of my very best friends but I had never before seen anything quite so menacing as this Doberman.

I swung the bag again and then suddenly realised that the damned Jack Russell terrier was biting my calf. As the Doberman backed away a few feet I swung the bag round as hard as I could and caught the Jack Russell soundly on his chest. The smaller dog backed away whimpering and the lock on my case broke open.

It didn't matter a damn at that moment but I remembered where I had seen a Doberman Pinscher and a Jack Russell together.

The snooty charity executive and his snooty Home Office wife, the couple who had bought the old Bilbury Halt railway station and who had a daughter with alleged asthma, had a Doberman and a Jack Russell.

And their holiday home was only a couple of miles away across the fields.

The man had boasted that he let his dogs run wild and roam across the countryside. These were their damned dogs.

The rain was, if anything, now heavier than ever and the water pouring down from my hair meant that I had to brush my eyes with the back of my hand so that I could see anything at all. It was summer but the rain was colder than I'd expected. I found myself shivering, though I was not sure whether this was because of the cold or through simple fear.

The camper in the yellow anorak was groaning but was now quite still. Arterial blood was spurting from two bites. I knew that if I didn't manage to get to him soon he would definitely be dead. I desperately wanted to attend to the man but I couldn't do that until I had dealt with the dogs.

What had set out to be a fairly ordinary day's morning visits had suddenly become a fight for my life.

Behind me, back in the lane, I could hear the damned driver of the blue car impatiently banging on his horn. I continued to ignore him and risked a look at the man in the yellow anorak. There were huge, ragged tears in his blue jeans and in his anorak and through these I could see that the dogs had bitten great chunks out of him. They had attacked his face too and there was blood streaming down his left cheek. His nose had been half bitten off and it looked as though one ear was missing.

I looked at the unfortunate camper for too long and suddenly found that the Doberman was moving forwards and staring at me and growling. I am not ashamed to admit that I was terrified. I had seen what the dogs had done to the man in the yellow anorak. I was still holding my now open medical bag and I looked down at it and realised that as a weapon it was pretty well useless. I glanced inside. There were syringes and drugs within my reach and if I had time I could inject the bigger dog with a large dose of something suitable. A good shot of morphine would do the trick. But the dog wasn't going to give me time to take the wrapping off a syringe, let alone break open an ampoule of morphine. I dropped the bag, thanked the heavens that I had not bothered to fasten my raincoat and reached into my jacket pocket. It took just a couple of seconds to open the largest blade on my Swiss Army penknife.

When the Doberman prepared to leap at me, I knew that I didn't have many more chances.

I knew that if I did not make the first slash with the knife count, then I would end up lying alongside the badly bitten and mauled camper; I would be the rest of lunch.

I felt the Jack Russell biting again at my calf and made the mistake of half turning as I tried to shake it off. It occurred to me too late that the dogs were probably operating as a team. The Doberman chose that moment to hurl itself at me. As it was in the air, I waited for what seemed like hours and then stabbed my knife at the animal's neck. I was hoping to stab the dog somewhere in or near its carotid artery. The jugular vein would do. Anything major would be acceptable; any blood vessel at all.

I had never had to fight for my life before.

And I knew that even if I didn't die I could lose a leg or an arm.

Even the loss of a hand would mean the end of my career as a GP in Bilbury. How many one-handed country GPs can there be?

Either the dog was too fast or I was too slow but the knife blade dug fairly harmlessly into the beast's flank, irritating it enough for it to howl with outrage but not disabling it. Nevertheless I managed to sidestep the dog as it leapt.

The animal's claws scratched through my raincoat and the dog finally landed on the grass. I looked around, desperate for another weapon of some kind. There didn't seem to be anything I could use. And then I glimpsed a dead branch on the ground a few feet to my right. The branch was about three feet long and as thick as a rolling pin. I lunged for the piece of wood, picked it up and had it in my hand as the Doberman leapt again. Its mouth was open, its eyes staring madly, angrily and hungrily. Its teeth were bared.

'Don't those bloody people feed their damned dog!' I remember thinking, utterly inconsequentially. My only other thought was the hope that the stick wasn't rotten and wouldn't break up the moment I tried to use it.

I thrust the stick deep into the dog's open mouth and as the dog kept coming I kept pushing until a foot, eighteen inches, two feet of the stick had gone down into the creature's throat. His eyes bulged as he fought for breath. The Jack Russell terrier, seeing the Doberman disabled, backed away for an instant and then came for me again, sinking its teeth into my leg. Using my free leg, I stamped down onto its head as hard as I could and so unbalanced myself that the two of us toppled over. The dog still wouldn't release its hold on my calf. The pain was excruciating. I put my hands around the dog's throat and squeezed and squeezed until it went unconscious. Even then I didn't stop squeezing. The two dogs were going to die anyway. After the way they had behaved they were doomed. I didn't want the Jack Russell attacking the man on the ground. And I didn't want it attacking me as I tried to help him. Only when the small dog went limp did I release my hold on its neck.

I looked around at the Doberman. It was struggling unsuccessfully to remove the stick from its throat and it too was now dying. I looked for a stone with which to finish it off but couldn't see one and so I left it to its fate. The man on the ground needed help now. I had to staunch the bleeding if he was going to have any chance at all.

I have seen some awful things in my life but this was by far the worst. This was the stuff of nightmares. The man was moaning, drifting in and out of consciousness, and I couldn't begin to count the number of wounds which were pouring blood. I had to stop all, or at least most of, the bleeding and I had to do it very quickly. Out here in the field the rain was so heavy that I could still hardly see. There was no telephone for miles around and even if I could ring for help it would be the best part of an hour before an ambulance could reach us. I was on my own. If I could act fast enough, and do enough, then I could probably save him.

But I needed to get him indoors, out of the rain, so that I could assess his wounds and deal with them.

Just then the man in the blue saloon beeped his horn again. He had probably been beeping it constantly but I hadn't heard it. And I remembered that behind the car there was a caravan.

I found my bag, took out a syringe and a vial of morphine and gave the camper a hefty injection to knock him out. I then grabbed some bandages and my suture kit from my black bag and stuffed them into my raincoat pocket before picking up the camper and carrying him out of the field and back to where my Rolls and the blue saloon were still parked bonnet to bonnet. He was, fortunately, a small and light man. Equally fortunately I'm well over six foot tall.

'What the hell is going on? Where have you been? What do you mean by running off and leaving us blocked in?'

The questions came thick and fast from the driver of the blue saloon. He still hadn't left his vehicle but had wound down his window. His engine was still running. It was, I suppose, fortunate that if it had occurred to him to try to reverse his car and caravan out of the way he had decided not to put the thought into practice.

The angry driver, a neat looking man who wore a pink sweater, didn't seem to notice the man I was carrying, let alone the fact that he was unconscious and dripping blood from a dozen major wounds.

It was his wife who noticed.

'What's happened to that man?' she asked.

Looking at her I noticed for the first time that there were two children in the back of the car; a boy and a girl. They both looked to be about twelve or thirteen-years-old. The boy was ashen-faced and looked as though he might be sick. The girl looked fascinated, as though she were watching an exciting film or television drama.

I explained that the man I was carrying had been attacked and bitten by two dogs. I also told them that I was the local GP and that I had to try to stop the bleeding.

'Can we help?' she asked.

'I need to lie him down somewhere flat so that I can try to stop the bleeding. My car isn't big enough. Would you open your caravan so that I can lie him down on the floor? It will be easier to see what needs to be done inside and out of the rain.'

'He's bleeding!' complained the man. 'He's pouring blood. He'll ruin our carpet.'

'Jeffrey!' cried his wife, more upset than angry. 'Don't be awful. The man needs help. Give me the caravan key.'

'But you know how difficult it is to get blood out of a carpet…' protested the driver.

'Jeffrey!' said the woman. 'Give me the caravan key. Now!'

Jeffrey took a key out of his trouser pocket and handed it to the woman. She got out of the car, opened the caravan and helped me lay the camper down on the floor. I half expected her to faint for the man was in a terrible state.

'I've got a first aid kit,' she said, 'I did a course at work. I'm quite good with bandages.'

'Have you got a sharp knife?' I asked. My Swiss Army penknife was still stuck in the side of the Doberman.

'My God!' she said. 'You don't have to amputate anything do you?'

'No, I need to cut off his jeans and his anorak. I need to find all the bleeding points.'

I cut through the man's clothing with a steak knife the woman took from the caravan's cutlery drawer.

The bleeding was worst from his right leg and his right arm. One of the dogs, presumably the Doberman, had bitten deeply into the lower part of the man's leg and into his arm. His leg, in particular, was a terrible mess with great chunks of flesh completely missing, and presumably inside the dogs. Both sites were bleeding so badly that although I managed to suture some of the wounds I had to tie tourniquets round both the thigh and the upper arm. The woman's first aid kit was sadly inadequate but I used my tie for the man's thigh and one of the caravan owner's ties for the man's arm. I then made two pads from folded bandages, put one on the man's ear and another on his nose, both of which were pouring blood, and told the woman to keep them firmly pressed into place. Within five minutes we had temporarily staunched the worst of the bleeding. There was little else to do for the moment.

'Will he live?' asked the woman.

'There's a chance but only if we get him to hospital quickly,' I told her. 'He needs proper care quickly. These wounds need cleaning out and sewing up and he needs penicillin. Can you stay in here with him while your husband follows me to the hospital in Barnstaple? It'll be quicker to drive there than to find a telephone and wait for an ambulance.'

I couldn't stay in the caravan with the man in what was left of the yellow anorak because I had to reverse my car down the lane and then show the driver of the blue saloon the route to Barnstaple.

'Of course I will,' said the woman, who had turned out to be what folk used to call a 'real trouper'. Heaven knows what she was doing being married to the awful little man driving their motor car.

'Release the tourniquets every fifteen minutes for a minute or so at most,' I told her. 'And then retie them tight enough to stop him losing too much blood.'

The woman nodded. ‘They taught us that,’ she said. ‘If you leave tourniquets tied for too long the part of the body deprived of blood and oxygen will die.’

I climbed out of the caravan and hurried along to the driver. It was still pouring down and the sky was black. If I hadn’t known better I would have said it was eight or nine o’clock at night. The driver had wound his window up and I had to tap on the glass with my knuckles to persuade him to lower the glass. Even then he only opened it a couple of inches, presumably to make sure that he didn’t let too much rain into his car.

‘Your wife is staying in the caravan to help stop the bleeding,’ I told him. ‘I’m going to reverse my car. You follow me and then, when I’ve found a place where I can turn round, you follow me to Barnstaple.’

‘I don’t think it’s legal for anyone to travel in the caravan while it’s in motion,’ said the driver, as though that settled the matter. ‘And we were going to Taunton for the day since it’s raining,’ he added. I really don’t know what he was planning to do with the badly injured man lying on the floor in his caravan and being tended to by his wife. Perhaps he expected me to put the injured man back into the field. Or maybe he wanted to take the bleeding man toTaunton, leave him in the caravan while they wandered around the shops, and then drop him off at a hospital later that evening.

‘Follow me!’ I told him. ‘Follow me or I’ll have you arrested for contributory manslaughter.’

This was, needless to say, an offence which I had made up on the spur of the moment, but the driver of the car was convinced, or at least he wasn’t convinced that I was talking nonsense, and so my small deceit did the job. I had guessed correctly. The man, who had seemed to me to be one of those fussy little rule lovers who never dares do anything which might get him into any sort of trouble with any form of authority, grumbled and mumbled but agreed to do as I had told him. When I got into the Rolls and started to reverse, he followed me, and when, three hundred yards later, I found a junction where I could turn round he continued to follow me.

It took less than 40 minutes for our small convoy of two to reach the hospital in Barnstaple, and the journey in a speeding, swaying, unstable caravan must have been an absolute nightmare for the woman nursing the still bleeding and unconscious man.

At the hospital, we enlisted the help of two porters to carry the man into the casualty department. I had given him a decent dose of morphine and he was still too drowsy to talk but he was moaning a good deal and was obviously in a terrible state. I found one of the doctors and explained what had happened. While we were talking a nurse came over to us and asked me if I knew that my left leg was dripping blood. I pulled up my torn trouser leg and saw that the Jack Russell terrier had managed to take two big bites out of my calf muscle. There was so much adrenalin in my blood stream that I had completely forgotten that I had been bitten and I hadn’t noticed the pain until the wounds had been pointed out to me. One of the other doctors on call cleaned up my wounds, put in a dozen stitches and gave me a tetanus injection. I told him I didn’t think either of the dogs had rabies.

Finally the caravanner’s wife and I walked back to where her husband had parked his vehicle and its attendant caravan.

‘The carpet in our caravan is ruined!’ complained the man, clambering out of his blue saloon, the minute he saw me approaching. My leg was now quite sore and I was limping. ‘It’s soaking wet with rainwater and blood and it will have to be replaced.’

‘I’m sorry about that,’ I said, ‘will your insurance company cover the cost of a new carpet?’

He made a sort of huffing noise. At his request I followed him across to the caravan. The sides of the caravan were badly scarred and scratched from branches and brambles in the lane but that really wasn’t my fault. However, I realised that it did all seem a bit rough on the poor fellow. He had taken his family out for a drive in the Devon countryside and had ended up having his beautiful caravan commandeered and used as a field hospital.

The man said that if he claimed on his insurance he would lose his no claims bonus and have to pay the first £50 of the cost. ‘You commandeered my caravan,’ he said, ‘you should pay for a new carpet.’

I told him that I knew the name and address of the owners of the dogs which had attacked the camper and suggested that he demand compensation from them. The whole awful incident was, after all, entirely their fault. I wrote all the details down on a prescription pad (the only available piece of paper I could find) and, having looked at my watch, pointed out that it still wasn’t too late for him to take his family to Taunton so that they could spend an hour or two looking around the shops. He said, however, that the day was ruined and that he was, therefore, going to find a campsite where he could park, rip out the blood soaked carpet and dowse his caravan floor with a strong antiseptic solution.

I thanked him and his wife (the latter with slightly more enthusiasm) and drove back home via the field where it had all happened so that I could collect my medical bag. I also packed up the camper’s tent and a few belongings and stuffed them into the boot of the Rolls.

I didn’t get round to finishing the calls I had set out to do until several hours later.

I don’t know whether Jeffrey, the unhappy caravan owner, ever received any compensation from the Hardley-

Fitzwalters but I was never offered any compensation for my badly damaged leg and the ruined pair of trousers – though, indeed, I never asked for any. I was too relieved to have escaped from the confrontation alive and with my limbs intact to want to spend time reliving the experience any more than I had to.

I was still waking up with nightmares a month after the event. Gradually the awful experience began to fade and the nightmares became less violent and less frequent.

When the Hardley-Fitzwalters discovered that their two dogs had been killed their initial reaction was to complain to the police, and to demand that I be arrested, imprisoned, fined and forced to pay compensation. But when they themselves were threatened with prosecution for allowing two dangerous dogs to roam free they scurried back to London and were never again seen in Bilbury.

The couple put the former railway station into the hands of a local estate agent and told him to sell it as quickly as possible for the best possible price.

There are quite a few folk who have properties in Bilbury which they visit only at weekends or for holidays and most of them fit in well; adapting to our slower pace of life with enthusiasm for it is precisely that quality which attracted them to Bilbury in the first place.

But the Hardley-Fitzwalters never fitted in at all. They made it clear that they considered themselves superior in every conceivable way and treated everyone with whom they came into contact with condescension and arrogance. They will not be missed.

The best bit of the story is that the camper, the man in the yellow anorak, made a complete recovery.

He spent several days in hospital in Barnstaple and then had to be transferred to a specialist unit at a hospital in Bristol where his wounds could be treated and he could be provided with the extensive plastic surgery he needed. His nose and ear required a good deal of reconstruction work and altogether he was in hospital for nearly six months.

When he was released from hospital, the camper, whose name turned out to be Norbert, came back to Bilbury to say ‘thank you’, which I thought was very good of him. Considering everything he had been through I thought it was brave of him too. Lots of people would, after an experience of that kind, have been determined never to set foot in North Devon again.

Norbert told me that he used to be a school master in a boys’ preparatory school but that he had given up teaching in order to become, as he put it, ‘a wandering minstrel’.

He said he played the violin in shopping centres and on beaches and lived on the coins he collected from members of the public. He insisted on performing what he called a ‘concert’ at the Brownlow Country Hotel as a ‘thank you’. We had five in-patients at the time and it seemed a nice idea. Sadly, however, it turned out that he was an absolutely terrible violinist. Someone, I forget who, commented that the people who gave him money probably did so out of pity or, perhaps, in the hope that he would either go to a pub and buy himself a pint. Someone else, I think it was Thumper Robinson, said he hoped Norbert used some of his takings to pay for violin lessons.

Still, Norbert was a nice enough bloke and it was good to see him looking so well. The plastic surgeon had done a fantastic job on his face. We all thanked him very much and Patsy made a lovely coffee and walnut cake to celebrate the occasion.

Norbert said he had thought about suing the Hardley-Fitzwalters but that he had decided he really just wanted to forget about the incident and get on with his life. He told me that the woman who’d nursed him in the caravan had visited him several times in the hospital after reading where he was in a newspaper article that had been written about his narrow escape.

He said they corresponded regularly and that he had spoken to her once or twice on the telephone. I got the impression that he hoped that their relationship might develop into something more.

He showed me a copy of the article that had been written about him. The headline was *The Man Who Escaped from the Hounds of Hell*. There was a photograph of the man sitting up in bed, with his face half hidden by bandages and alongside it, the art editor had placed a stock picture of a Rottweiler. Someone in the art department had put what was supposed to look like blood dripping from his fangs. I assume the newspaper either got the breed of dog wrong or else the person who had put together the page didn’t know the difference between a Doberman and a Rottweiler.

I offered Norbert his tent and the stuff I’d collected from the field but he said that he’d bought a new tent and that I could throw the old stuff away. He explained that he had been paid a fee by the newspaper which had run the article about him and that since he’d been in hospital he hadn’t had any living expenses for quite a while.

It’s always nice when a potentially tragic story has a happy ending.

The Woman Who Dared To Feed The Birds

When I wandered into the kitchen to have my breakfast, I found Patsy already there. She had a brush and some tiny pots of paint and was using the former to apply the contents of the latter to the side of one of the kitchen cupboards.

‘You’ll need a lot of those little tins of paint if you’re going to do the whole kitchen,’ I told her.

Patsy looked at me in the way she favours when she wants to tell me, silently of course, that the joke would have been acceptable if I’d been seven-years-old.

I apologised, cut two slices of bread and popped them into the toaster. Patsy doesn’t eat breakfast.

‘The kitchen needs decorating,’ she explained, ‘it’s a disgrace.’

I didn’t think it merited the word ‘disgrace’, but then when I was a medical student I lived in a flat which hadn’t been decorated since before the First World War and I never saw any need to rush out and buy brushes and pots of paint. I always thought that peeling paint gave a building history and gravitas.

I allow Patsy, who does all these things much better than I ever could, to take all decisions relating to interior and exterior decorating. If she wants to have the windows painted purple and the soffits picked out in bright yellow that’s absolutely fine with me. I try to limit myself to moving and carrying stuff that isn’t breakable, spillable or valuable. Or exceptionally heavy, of course.

‘What do you think of this one?’ asked Patsy, showing me a sheet of paint colours and pointing to one that looked like mud.

‘Very nice,’ I said.

I always say ‘very nice’ when asked to make comments on things of this nature. I find that in the long run it is the best way.

‘Or do you prefer the ‘Dead Trout’?’

I looked at her and raised an eyebrow.

‘This one,’ she said, pointing to another patch of colour on the chart.

‘That’s very nice too,’ I said, sticking to my well-established script.

I know from past experience that choosing colours for bathrooms, kitchen cupboards and dining room walls is a long, arduous and sometimes painful process which can last a considerable amount of time and involve many changes of mind and direction. I find that I need to pace myself by avoiding too early a commitment.

‘I really don’t know what to go for,’ said Patsy who was clearly still in the early stages of indecision. ‘The one called ‘Squirrel’s Breath’ is rather good.’ She paused and thought for a while. ‘But I also like ‘Churlish Brown’ and ‘Drying Plaster’’.

I don’t know where the paint companies find the names they give their products but I sometimes think they’re just taking the mickey. In the space of the next two minutes Patsy showed me paint colours named ‘Tiger’s Breath’, ‘Hilltop Mist’, ‘Old Slipper Green’, ‘Peppermint Tea’, ‘Mole’s Back’, ‘Downpipe White’, ‘Ethel’s Blush’ and ‘Old Arsenic’.

What on earth is any sensible person to make of such nonsense? Whatever happened to ‘Blue’, ‘Red’ and ‘Green’.

Or, if you want to be fussier, ‘Dark Blue’, ‘Light Blue’, ‘Dark Red’, ‘Light Red’, ‘Dark Green’ and ‘Light Green’?

‘And which white do you think for the ceiling?’ asked Patsy.

‘Which white? How can there be a choice? Surely white is white unless it’s dirty.’

Patsy looked at me as though I needed help and filled the kettle.

I drank my coffee, ate my toast, ripped through the morning mail (most of which was advertising material from drug companies which went straight into the rubbish bin) and wandered into my consulting room in good time to start the morning surgery. When you work from home it is difficult to excuse a late start and so, unless I am out dealing with an emergency, I always try to start seeing patients bang on nine o’clock.

The surgery passed without any exceptional incidents.

Mrs Swingsby came in for the eighth or ninth time to ask if her cataracts were ripe enough for surgery (they still weren’t) and Mr Popplethwaite proudly showed me the biggest bunch of haemorrhoids I’d seen since the last blackberry picking season.

I told Mrs Swingsby to pop back in another three months and promised to refer Mr Popplethwaite to a surgeon at the hospital in Barnstaple.

When Miss Johnson brought in my coffee and two digestive biscuits at eleven she brought with her a paint chart with circles and question marks around two colours entitled ‘Camelia’s Curls’ and ‘Breakfast Brown’. I wrote ‘very nice’ alongside both ‘Camelia’s Curls’ and ‘Breakfast Brown’. Miss Johnson said she thought the ‘Breakfast

Brown' to be particularly attractive and so I added an exclamation mark against the 'very nice' I'd written alongside that one, but spent the next half an hour regretting the addition.

The last patient was a real joy to see.

Mrs Evadne Deverell, was not a Bilbury local but was passing through the village on her travels around the country in a small, motorised camper van. She came to see me as what is called a 'temporary resident' and wanted help because she had suddenly noticed that the hearing in both her ears was deteriorating. She said she thought the right ear was the worst affected.

While I looked inside her ears she told me a remarkable story.

She reported that she had visited her GP eighteen months earlier complaining of pain and unusual menstrual bleeding. Her GP had, after a brief examination, referred her to a consultant gynaecologist and after an excruciating wait of five months she had eventually been seen by a specialist at a local hospital.

Few things annoy me more than the fact that patients often have to wait extraordinary lengths of time to find out whether or not they have a serious disorder such as cancer – and to start whatever treatment may be considered appropriate. I found it particularly appalling that Mrs Deverell's GP had apparently made no attempt to speed up the process.

The consultant, who was running an hour late, gave Mrs Deverell very little of his attention and rushed through the whole examination in no more than five minutes. He examined her, took a swab and told her that he or his secretary would be in touch.

Two weeks later, Mrs Deverell had a telephone call from the gynaecologist's secretary who told her bluntly that she had cancer and would need major surgery. She was told that there would be a fairly lengthy wait for surgery, partly because the gynaecologist had a long waiting list and partly because one of the other doctors was going on a sabbatical for three months and was not being replaced. The secretary did not know where the cancer was, what sort it was, what the prognosis was, or whether the long delay would dramatically alter the outcome.

When Mrs Deverell asked if she could see the gynaecologist again to discuss her situation in person, she was told that her GP would have to write another referral letter and that there would be a wait of up to six months.

'So it's really not worth bothering,' said the secretary. 'You'll probably be called for your operation before you see him again. He's very busy.' Mrs Deverell told me that the underlying message was that she would probably be dead by then so what was the point.

Mrs Deverell did not bother going back to her GP.

She surprised herself, she said, by how calm she was. She thought she was going to die and that there was absolutely no point in making a fuss or wasting what few months, weeks or days she had left sitting around waiting for the gynaecologist to see her.

Nor, she decided, did she want to take pills which would, if the rumours she had heard were to be believed, make her sick and result in all her hair falling out.

Mrs Deverell had no one with whom to share her remaining time on earth. Her husband had died several years earlier and they had no children. She had no living relatives and no real friends.

Instead of simply waiting for what she saw as the inevitable, she resigned from her job in the local planning department, sold her small house and bought a Dormobile. She put the money left over from the sale of her house into her current account and decided that she would travel until she was too ill to do so and then she would deal with things by, as she put it, 'driving the Dormobile off a cliff somewhere quiet and remote'.

She had decided originally to go abroad and to see the places she'd seen on television. Paris, Venice, Vienna, Rome and Amsterdam were top of her list. But then she thought about it some more and decided that she would rather spend whatever time she had left seeing Britain. She decided that she would drive around the coast and turn her final days into an unending seaside holiday.

It was now over a year since she had received the telephone call from the consultant's secretary and Mrs Deverell was, to her considerable surprise, feeling quite well. The symptoms which had originally taken her to the doctor had disappeared as mysteriously as they had appeared.

She had come into my surgery merely because she had noticed that her hearing had deteriorated. The story of her mistreatment at the hands of a particularly uncaring part of the health service came out only when I talked to her.

'Do you think they made a mistake?' she asked, when I had removed a good deal of wax from her eternal auditory canals. Her deafness was simply due to a build up of wax.

Few procedures are as quick to do, or as satisfying for both the patient and the doctor, as flushing wax out of ear canals.

My friend William, who is a GP in a large, modern practice, tells me that where he works the nurses do the syringing, since the procedure is considered to be rather beneath the skills of a medical practitioner. I think this is a mistake, for squirting warm water into ears is a very easy way to establish a good rapport between doctor and patient.

I asked Mrs Deverell if she would like me to examine her, to see if there were any signs of the cancer.

She said she would be grateful if I would do so.

Thirty minutes later, after a fairly comprehensive examination, I told her that I had found absolutely no signs of cancer.

'I could send you along to the hospital to have some blood tests and X-rays,' I told her. 'It's the only way to be sure.'

She laughed. 'Thank you for the offer,' she said, 'but I think I'll pass. I'm feeling fine.'

'What are you going to do?' I asked her. 'Are you going to continue with your travels?'

'I certainly am,' she said. 'This has been the best year of my life. I'm going to send that consultant a postcard thanking him for helping to change my life. I hated that damned office where I spent the best years of my life. I should have run away ages ago but I know I never would have done it at all if I hadn't thought I was dying.'

She left with a smile and a cheery wave.

At the end of the surgery there were just three home visits to do.

Two of the visits were routine, involving elderly patients who found it difficult to get to the surgery and who I visited at home once a month or so just to check that all was well.

But the third visit was to Mrs Entwhistle, a lively 67-year-old who has high blood pressure and early signs of Parkinson's Disease but who is, otherwise, as fit as most 40-year-olds I know.

There is no sign of a Mr Entwhistle and Mrs Entwhistle has never mentioned him.

Mrs Entwhistle spent all her life in the military. She was brought up on the Continent and she speaks both French and German fluently and during the Second World War she was parachuted into France to help the French Resistance. After the War she was transferred to the intelligence services and although I know she worked for MI6 I have no idea what she did.

These days, top spies don't always seem to feel the need to remain secret. It will doubtless not be long before they are writing books about their experiences, and wandering around the country giving talks at Women's Institutes about how to make invisible ink out of pigeon droppings.

But Mrs Entwhistle is old school.

She never talks about her life as a spy and has never once told me why she has burn scars on her chest or scars on her back that were clearly made by bullets. Her medical records contain no entries between the ages of 18 (when she had glandular fever) and the day she arrived in Bilbury just a few years ago. When I asked her why this might be she explained that she thought her medical records for the intervening years were probably regarded as 'sensitive' and were, in consequence, probably stored deep in a vault at the Secret Intelligence Service's offices in London.

The request that came in to the surgery that morning was not to visit Mrs Entwhistle at her home but at the police station in Barnstaple where she had, apparently, been incarcerated overnight.

I drove to Barnstaple as quickly as I could, wondering what strange circumstances could have led Mrs Entwhistle to a police station.

'I'm so sorry to trouble you,' said Mrs Entwhistle, who was sitting in a small, stark cell which I would have found intolerably confining, cold and frightening. She seemed quite calm and at peace.

I asked her what on earth had happened.

'I've been arrested,' she told me in the same way that she might have reported the discovery of a corn or a small bunion, 'and I have to appear in court this morning.'

Mrs Entwhistle is not a woman who gives anything away. In fact, though I like her and respect her I've always thought her to be very reserved; a rather cold sort of fish.

'Unfortunately, I don't have my blood pressure tablets with me, she said, 'I came into Barnstaple to visit the optician and had intended to be back home yesterday evening.'

I had my black bag with me but I didn't have any of the tablets which I know she normally takes so I wrote out a prescription, wandered out to the nearest town centre pharmacy, and hurried back to the police station.

Having taken her tablets, Mrs Entwhistle then explained what had happened.

'I bought a sandwich from a little shop near the Post Office,' she told me. 'They do very nice salad sandwiches there and since I had a two hour wait for the bus to Lynton I sat on a bench by one of the churches to have a little picnic. It's always quiet there and there are always birds and squirrels to watch.'

(I should explain that the bus service to Bilbury is virtually non-existent and so villagers without their own transport have to catch the bus to Lynton, get off the bus at Blackmoor Gate and then walk two miles to the village.)

Mrs Entwhistle explained that when she sat down to eat her sandwich a couple of sparrows and two or three pigeons gathered around her waiting for any crumbs which fell to the ground.

'They seemed so hungry,' she said, 'that when I'd eaten all I wanted I crumbled up the last few bits of bread and gave them to the birds.'

I nodded and waited, wondering what else had happened.

'A policeman who was walking by saw what I'd done and came over and arrested me.'

I frowned, finding it difficult to believe what I had heard.

'What did he arrest you for?' I asked.

'For feeding the birds.'

I stared at her, probably rudely and definitely in disbelief. 'You were arrested for feeding the birds?'

'Apparently there is a by-law against it.'

'A law against feeding the birds?'

'Apparently so.'

'That's…,' I stumbled for a moment, unable to think of an adequate word. 'Madness!' I eventually managed. It was a woefully inadequate word for what I felt.

'But there isn't any evidence!' I said. 'The birds ate all the crumbs which you dropped!'

For a second it seemed to me to be a brilliant defence.

Mrs Entwhistle smiled. 'Sadly they wouldn't accept that argument,' she said. 'I'm told that as far as the court is concerned, the policeman's word is considered quite adequate.'

'But feeding the birds is a traditional thing to do,' I said, 'and it's well-known that when people look after wild creatures they feel better and their health improves.'

Mrs Entwhistle shook her head. 'I don't think that will get me very far.'

I racked my brains, trying to think of some other defence.

'Thank you for getting me the tablets,' said Mrs Entwhistle with a smile. She reached out and patted me on the arm. 'I mustn't keep you any longer. If they let me go with just a fine I can catch the bus back later this afternoon.'

'I'm staying at the station with you,' I told her. 'And I'll take you home afterwards.' It was, I know, what my predecessor Dr Brownlow would have done. And I always try to conduct my practice in a way of which he would approve.

When Dr Brownlow, had died he had bequeathed me his practice, his house, which I had decided to turn into a hospital where the sick, the frail and the dying could be nursed, £50,000 in cash, which I earmarked to help run the hospital and, of course, his 1930 black Rolls Royce 20/25. But Dr Brownlow's most valuable legacy could not be measured in money, bricks or horsepower.

His most valuable legacy, the gift I cherished most, was the knowledge he had given me; the wisdom which it had taken him a lifetime to acquire.

When I had first started in general practice, just a few years earlier, I had been extraordinarily naïve and woefully ignorant.

I didn't realise that, of course.

Like all young men and women who have spent many years studying at university I was under the impression that graduation had miraculously completed my education.

Indeed, I confess with shame that I had thought myself superior in knowledge to those doctors who had qualified decades earlier, before the introduction of antibiotics, oral contraceptives and sophisticated X-ray technology.

After twenty years at school (primary school, grammar school and medical school) I had acquired a medical diploma and unfettered access to the arrogance of youth.

For about a day after I qualified, I thought I knew everything a doctor could ever need to know.

And then, slowly, I started to learn about life, about patients, about medicine and about the many, many things that doctors do wrong.

Gradually, by working alongside Dr Brownlow, I began to understand that the most important lessons a doctor learns are found not in textbooks but through real-life, practical experience.

Lectures and textbooks are good enough for providing background knowledge. I had acquired a basic understanding of human anatomy and physiology. I knew the names of the small bones in the wrist, the way the liver works, the marvellous things that white blood cells can do and the many ways in which things can go wrong. But it was only after I qualified that I learned that the stuff that is taught in classrooms is of far less value than the things which are learned by the patient's bedside.

Dr Brownlow's greatest legacy to me was a vast reservoir of knowledge and wisdom distilled from decades of practical experience and a deep understanding of the human condition. Dr Brownlow knew that medicine is one third science, one third craft and one third art and he taught me that the more we look, the more we see and the more we see the more we realise that we really don't know anything very much. He taught me the importance of listening.

The wiser we become the more we realise the extent of our ignorance; this is doubtless why only teenagers and young doctors, unsullied by wisdom and experience and not yet weighed down by knowledge and understanding, are the only truly omniscient beings in our world.

My only contribution was to have acquired enough humility to realise that if I listened to Dr Brownlow, and tried to absorb some of his knowledge and understanding, I would be able to cut short the learning process and add his accumulated wisdom to my own modest supply.

Six months after Dr Brownlow had died, I still missed him terribly and I knew that I would always miss him.

One of the most important things he taught me was to try to look at problems, dilemmas and clinical puzzles from all possible angles. 'If you're stuck with a diagnosis, try to look at the problem from another direction,' he told me. 'It won't always lead to a solution. But it will dramatically increase your chances of finding an answer.'

Something else he taught me was to treat all my patients as members of my extended family.

'Always treat every patient as you would like your loved ones to be treated, or as you would like to be treated yourself,' he told me.

Those thoughts stuck with me and there wasn't a day when I didn't remember his advice.

Looking at Mrs Entwhistle, sitting patiently in her cell, I knew that if Patsy were in this situation I would want to be with her. And I knew that if I were locked in a cell I would appreciate having a friend to stand beside me.

I also hoped that by using Dr Brownlow's advice, and looking at Mrs Entwhistle's problem from all angles, I might be able to find a solution.

And when Mrs Entwhistle's case came to court a few hours later, it was Dr Brownlow's piece of essential advice (to think from other directions, from outside the constraints of orthodox thinking) that enabled me to find a way to help my patient to victory in her small battle against the local establishment.

Once I had convinced Mrs Entwhistle that, whatever she said, I was going to stay with her, I asked the station sergeant if I could use a telephone to tell Patsy where I was. He pointed me in the direction of a payphone and once I had found a kindly constable prepared to sell me some change for the telephone, I rang Bilbury Grange and told Patsy where to reach me if she needed me.

When Mrs Entwhistle's case came to court, a snooty and very self-important policeman stood up to give evidence for the prosecution. He was, predictably, an unbearably officious fellow, one of those policemen other policemen can't abide or trust, and clearly destined to rise to great heights within his chosen trade. I wasn't in the slightest bit surprised. What sort of human being would arrest an old woman for giving crumbs to a few sparrows and pigeons?

Mrs Entwhistle refused to say anything in her defence and so suddenly, having had a flash of inspiration, I stood up.

'Yes?' said the chairman of the three magistrates, a stern looking woman in a twinset and skirt of some hairy looking material that looked as if it were probably hedge and bomb proof. She had huge dangly earrings and a solid looking necklace around her neck. 'Who are you and what do you want?'

'I'm Mrs Entwhistle's doctor and I have evidence which the court should hear,' I said, when I had introduced myself.

I had, I thought, hit upon a possible defence. It was, I knew, a trifle bizarre but then the whole idea of arresting a pensioner for feeding the birds seemed pretty bizarre.

The three magistrates muttered among themselves and called the advice of the clerk. It was eventually decided that I could be allowed to give evidence in the witness box.

'Mrs Entwhistle has early Parkinson's Disease,' I told them. 'The symptoms of this disease include, as I expect you know, a tremor or shaking in the hands. If Mrs Entwhistle was eating a sandwich then her hands would shake and some crumbs would fall to the ground. It seems to me that no harm has been done since the birds who were present ate up the crumbs.'

'Mrs Entwhistle was seen rolling bits of bread into small balls,' said the woman in the tweeds and pearls.

One of the other magistrates, the one in the middle of the trio, and the one who was clearly the chairman, looked at me and smiled, unexpectedly. I recognised him. I'd seen him at one or two medical meetings. He was a well-respected and widely liked consultant at the local hospital, though I couldn't remember what his speciality was.

'Does Mrs Entwhistle have the characteristic pill rolling tremor associated with Parkinson's Disease?' he asked me.

'She does!' I replied instantly, realising that this magistrate was on our side.

'The pill rolling movement is a well-known characteristic of Parkinson's Disease,' I explained to the other magistrates. 'The patient rubs their thumb and forefinger together. The movement is known as 'pill rolling' because it is the sort of movement apothecaries would have made when they were making hand rolled pills.'

'So the police officer might have assumed that Mrs Entwhistle was rolling the small pieces of bread into round balls when in fact he was seeing the pathognomonic signs of her illness?' said the medically qualified magistrate.

'She would,' I agreed eagerly.

'I can see no reason to continue with this case,' said the medical magistrate, leaning back. 'Mrs Entwhistle has clearly been wrongly arrested.'

The woman in the twinset, the chairman of the trio, looked desperate to interfere but although she opened her mouth she didn't say anything – clearly unwilling to interfere in a matter on which two doctors had already expressed a single opinion. She closed her mouth again and gave an excellent impression of a woman sucking an acid drop for a moment. 'The court admonishes the unnecessarily officious police officer who arrested this woman,' she said at last, 'and apologies profusely to Mrs Entwhistle.'

I then took Mrs Entwhistle back to her cottage.

When I dropped her off, she smiled and kissed me on the cheek. 'Thank you,' she whispered. 'You're a good egg.'

I could not have been prouder if I'd been given a knighthood.

The 'good guys' don't often win battles against the rule followers and the niggly, pettifogging, small-minded bureaucrats who seem determined to stamp out joy and individualism. But it seemed to me that this was a victory worth celebrating. On my way back to Bilbury Grange I stopped off at Peter Marshall's emporium and purchased two bottles of his very best Polish champagne and a large box of almost fresh jammy doughnuts.

No one can ever accuse me of not knowing how to make whoopee.

Afterword

There will, I know, be those who will dismiss the memories in this book as nothing more than shameless nostalgia.

There are many people in our society who are ardently committed to change at any price, and who consequently regard nostalgia as something rather sinful. They believe that all change is progress which should be applauded and accepted until it, in turn, is replaced and becomes tomorrow's nostalgia.

We should, they believe (and preach), be forever marching forward, putting aside our past in the same way that a child puts away his toys when he grows up; without regret and without ever looking back.

This attitude, surprisingly prevalent these days, assumes that everything that is new is essentially good and that everything that is old must inevitably be bad.

And it is an attitude which I find it quite impossible to accept.

There is, of course, much about the past which is bad and which deserves to be buried and forgotten.

No one can feel nostalgic for open sewers, wash tubs or tenement buildings.

No one remembers child labour, racism, discrimination or enforced servitude with pride.

Pea soup fog you could cut into cubes with a knife may look good on screen in Victorian melodramas but it wasn't much fun for those who tried to breathe it.

But the fact that we may justly condemn the less savoury aspects of our past does not mean that we must automatically shudder at the memory of such almost forgotten moral principles as honour, privacy and respect. Nor do we need to sneer at the memory of horse drawn ploughs, maypole dancing and the smell of bread toasting over an apple log fire.

Our lives are faster now but are they better?

Our motor cars may (in theory, at least) enable us to travel from A to B more speedily than ever before but is B always a better place to be?

What value should we put upon the quality of the journey?

Is today's production motor car better looking and in every way superior to the motor cars of yesterday?

Is modern medical practice always better than medicine as it was practiced nearly half a century ago?

When considering these questions we must, of course, also ask ourselves how much our admiration of the past is coloured by the hue of our spectacles.

And that brings us neatly back to Bilbury.

How much of it is real? How much is imagined? And how much is wishful thinking? Were things ever that good? Do these questions matter? Are the answers important?

One reader pointed out to me that Bilbury must be real because on the original hardback version of Bilbury Grange the cover photograph is credited to a certain Thumper Robinson.

Good point.

An unintentional hint in the direction of the truth, perhaps.

All I can tell you is that in our hearts, my wife and I live in Bilbury. And Thumper and Anne, Patchy and Adrienne, Peter, Frank and Gilly are our very good friends.

Whether or not you believe that Bilbury exists is entirely up to you.

But why wouldn't you?

Appendix 1

While my GP friend William and his family were staying with us at Bilbury Grange, William and I compiled a list of our favourite, obscure medical words.

He and I have always been fascinated by words – especially medical words and quasi medical words – and when we were students together we would waste rare evenings in the local pub looking up and memorising examples of obscure medical terminology.

As far as we were concerned the more obscure the word the more we liked it. William had a Victorian dictionary which we scoured for new examples. And since I am a bibliotaph I have, over the years, acquired an embarrassingly large collection of dictionaries, books of quotations and thesauruses.

Over several evenings (and a few bottles of port) we took it in turns to try to outfox each other with bizarre words.

The first rule was that although the words which we selected had to be heard or read only rarely they had to be quite real – proper words rather than made-up words.

The second rule was that a word would not count unless the person offering it could both spell it and pronounce it.

Here is the list we came up with:

Abulia – an abnormal inability to make decisions
Adipsia- not drinking for a long time
Adust – looking sunburned or tanned
Agerasia – a youthful appearance in an old person
Anophelosis – a morbid state due to extreme frustration
Anosmia – the loss of the sense of smell
Bantingism – losing weight by not eating sweets
Bariatrics – medical speciality dealing with obesity
Bathukolpian – large breasted
Bibliolatry – the worship of books to an unnatural degree
Bibliotaph – Someone who hoards books is a bilblitaph
Borborygmus – a rumbling sound caused by too much wind in the intestine
Brannigan – a drinking binge
Callimastian – having beautiful breasts
Callipygean – having beautiful buttocks
Civestism – the habit of dressing only in the clothes of one's own sex
Cogniscent – being aware of something
Confabulation – the unintentional production of distorted memories
Coryza – common cold
Crapulous – If you feel ill as a result of eating and drinking too much then you are crapulous.
Curmuring – The low, rumbling sound sometimes heard coming from within the bowels is known to educated gastroenterologists as curmuring.
Cyanthropy – a condition in which the sufferer believes himself or herself to be a dog
Cyesis – pregnancy
Cystoureteropyelonephritis – an inflammation of the bladder, ureters and kidney
Dactylonomy – the habit of counting on one's fingers
Daymare – an anxiety attack
Deipnosophist – This isn't, strictly speaking, a medical word but it is such a delight that William and I had to include it in our list. It means someone skilled in making dinner table conversation.
Diurnation – habit of sleeping during the day instead of at night
Dormition – a peaceful and painless death
Dysmorphosteopalinklasy – the re-fracturing of a bone which has healed with a deformity
Edacious – voracious eating
Ejaculatorium – room in which sperm bank donations are made
Emboinpoint – a woman's bosom
Encephalomyeloradiculoneuritis – disease caused by a virus and associated with encephalitis
Euneirophrenia – a peaceful state of mind after a pleasant dream
Evancalous – pleasant to embrace

Feuterer – an individual who keeps a dog
Gargalesthesia – the feeling resulting from tickling
Girouettism – constantly altering personal opinions to follow other people's views
Glossospasm – moving the tongue in and out very quickly
Haematoma – a posh word for bruise
Heterogamosis – marriage between individuals who are entirely unsuitable for each other
Hypnopedia – learning while asleep (usually by listening to a tape or disk)
Iatrogenic – a disease caused by doctors
Idiopathic – a disease for which the cause is unknown
Idiopathic cyesis – a pregnancy of unknown cause or origin
Illeism – referring to oneself in the third person
Infavoidance – disguising one's inferiority complex
Jen – love of everything and everyone
Kathisomania – an irresistible compulsion to sit down
Lapidation – stoning someone to death
Macarism – making other people happy by praising them
Macrophallus – an exceptionally large penis
Malneirophrenia – anxiety after a nightmare
Matutinal – anything that happens in the morning
Melorrhoea – an irresistible urge to write excessively long musical works
Meteorism – uncontrollable passing of wind
Metrona – a young grandmother
Micromastia – exceptionally small breasts
Microphallus – abnormally small penis
Nomogamosis – marriage between individuals who are highly suitable for each other
Omnistrain – the stresses and strains of modern day living
Omphaloskepsis – contemplating one's own navel
Onchyophagy – fingernail biting
Pneumoencephalographically – taking pictures of the brain after injecting air into the ventricles
Pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis – miner's lung disease (caused by inhaling fine dust)
Pogonophile – an individual who has a fetish for beards
Polyandry – when a woman legally takes several husbands
Polydactyl – having more than five fingers or toes
Polygyny – when a man legally takes several wives
Priapism – a disorder in which the penis is permanently erect
Prosopagnosis – an inability to remember faces
Pygalgia – sore buttocks
Quadragenerian – someone between the ages of 40 and 50
Remontado – an individual who runs away to the mountains
Scrofulous – corrupt or morally degenerate
Sialagogue – anything which promotes salivation
Snurp – to become shrivelled and wrinkled
Sockdolger – a definitive answer that ends a dispute
Steatopygia – having an unusually large, fatty bottom
Suigenederism – tendency of a child to spend time with other children of the same sex
Syngenesiotransplantation – a graft of tissue which takes place between closely related individuals
Tachyphagia – eating very quickly
Tenterbelly – a glutton
Trilemma – one more lemma than a dilemma
Ultracrepidarianism – the habit of giving opinions and advice on matters which are outside the speaker's knowledge (common among politicians and callers to radio phone in programmes)
Valetudinarian – someone over concerned with his or her health
Verbigeration – the frequent use of much loved words
Wederognomonia – using aches and pains to predict the weather
Xenomania – having an excessive interest in foreign customs
Yaffling – eating noisily and greedily

Yatter – to make idle chit chat or gossip
Yerk – to hit someone with vigour
Zaftig – having a pleasingly plump figure

I'm including our list here because I hope that readers might have a little fun by introducing as many of these words as possible into their daily conversation.

So, for example, Mrs Carruthers might say: 'Good morning Mrs Carstairs, I do apologies for the curmuring and for my borborygmi. I'm feeling crapulous this morning and I've got a bad attack of meteorism.'

And Mrs Carstairs might reply: 'Don't worry about it, Mrs Carruthers. My anosmia is playing up. But I'm afraid I can't stop and yatter this morning for according to my wederognomonia, it's going to rain and I have to get the washing in.'

Note from the author:

If you have enjoyed this book I would be genuinely grateful if you would leave a short, positive review on the Amazon product page.

The Young Country Doctor Book 9

BILBURY RELISH

Vernon Coleman

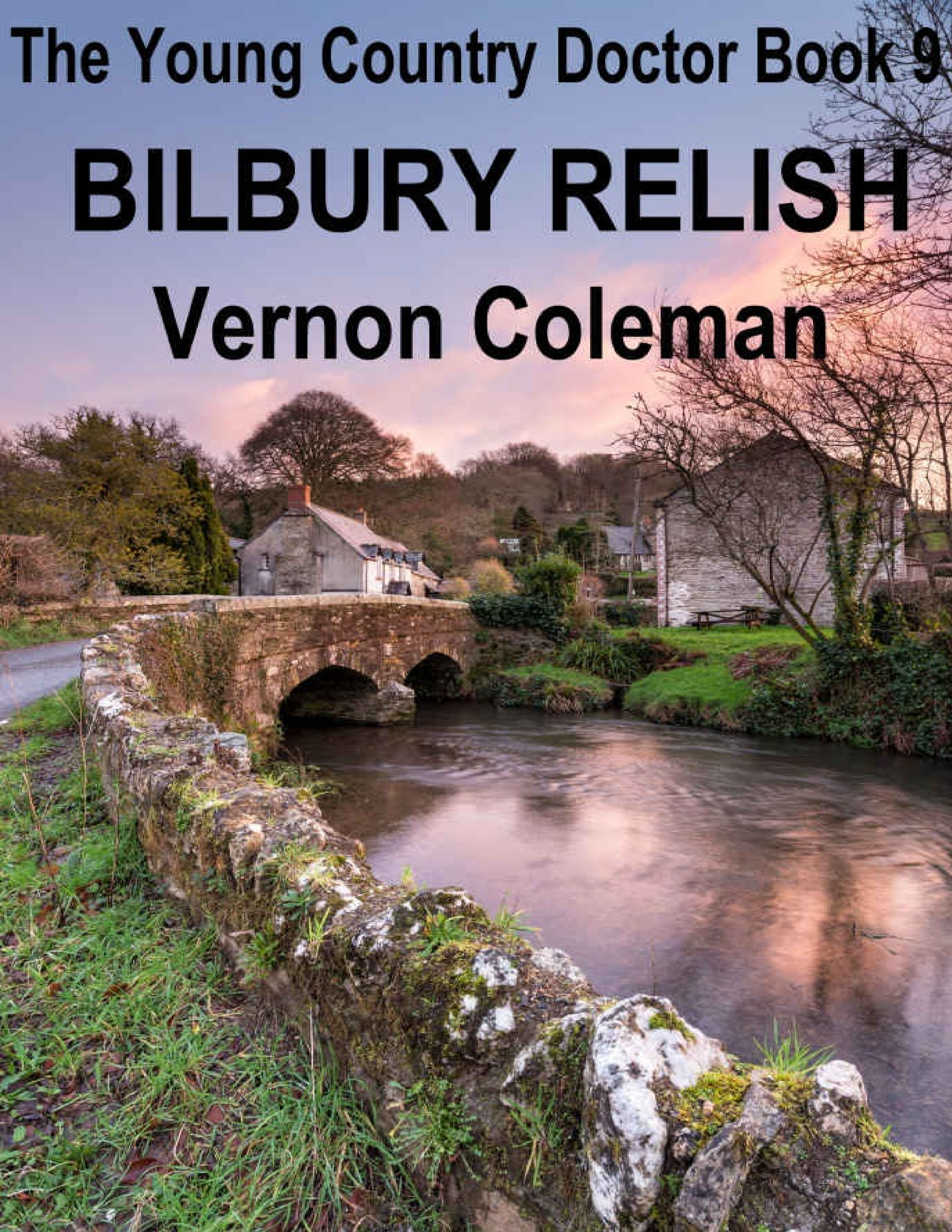

The Young Country Doctor Book 9
Bilbury Relish

Vernon Coleman

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Dedication: To Antoinette
You make my world go round and the freehold to my heart is yours for eternity.

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Dear Reader

I have been asked to remind you that the Bilbury books are all set in the 1970s and although this book is being written well into the 21st century, I am writing about things that happened nearly half a century ago. Please remember that medical knowledge and customs were very different then.

Some older readers will remember those distant days with fondness but many younger readers will probably find it difficult to imagine living in a world without mobile telephones, computers and the mass of gadgets and conveniences which we all now take for granted.

Finally, I should also point out that I take the principle of confidentiality very seriously and so none of the people or situations described in this book is recognisable.

Welcome back to Bilbury.

Vernon Coleman
Bilbury Grange
Bilbury
Devon
England

The Children's Party

Bilbury is a wonderful place for children. The lanes are safe because there is relatively little traffic and children can be allowed to cycle for miles around the countryside. There are moors to roam, woods to explore and rivers in which to swim or plan pirate adventures. The coast, complete with rocky coves and fine beaches, is just a short cycle ride away and the only strangers to be seen are usually breathless hikers carrying rucksacks and worn out by the incessant ups and downs of the North Devon countryside.

For children, the lifestyle is as healthy as you can imagine. There are the occasional grazed knees and bee stings to be dealt with, and once every couple of years an over-adventurous child will fall off a bicycle or out of a tree and breaks a bone. But, on the whole, it would be difficult to find a safer place for a growing child.

Just occasionally, however, nature has a habit of reminding us all that life in the countryside can have its own special dangers.

I was cutting the grass in the orchard one beautiful, sunny Sunday afternoon when Patsy, who had been weeding the flowerbeds near to the house, came running down the garden to tell me that Mrs Ermentrude Pinchbeck had telephoned, in a panic, to ask me to go round to her house straight away. There were, she had told Patsy, twelve or fifteen children suffering from terrible burns on their hands and faces. Patsy told me that Mrs Pinchbeck said that she had already telephoned for an ambulance but that since I was closer, she thought that I would get there quicker.

Ermentrude and Theodore Pinchbeck live a few miles from Bilbury Grange, in a house on the edge of the nearby village of Combe Martin. Mr Pinchbeck, who once lived in a cottage in Bilbury, had been a patient of Dr Brownlow for some years. When he married and moved to Combe Martin, I happily agreed to continue to look after him and his wife.

Combe Martin is a fascinating village which has quite a reputation as a wonderful holiday resort but to be perfectly honest (and don't for heaven's sake tell anyone I said this) some people who go there feel rather let down; suspecting that the beauties of the place have perhaps been a trifle oversold and that the romance inherent in the name 'Combe Martin', is more attractive than the village itself. Personally, I like Combe Martin. It's a very quiet, gentle seaside village. But for those who go on holiday expecting funfairs, Punch and Judy shows, a promenade and donkeys it is probably something of a disappointment.

The village itself consists of just one long street (it is, according to proud locals, the longest street in England) and a rather small beach which, perhaps due to the idiosyncratic behaviour of local tides and winds, always seems to attract every piece of flotsam and jetsam going.

Combe Martin gets its name from the valley (the combe) in which it nestles and from the Martin family.

The Martins (who originally spelt their names Martyn de Tours) were 12th century landowners and Lords of the Manor. They made a huge amount of money from farming and mining and spent some of their no doubt hard-earned loot on building a moated castle in the village.

The family died out when Robert Martin (or, to be more accurate, Robert Martyn de Tours), who was the last of the line, went out hunting early one morning. When it became dark and he still hadn't returned home, the servants raised the drawbridge, thinking that their master was spending the night elsewhere. They were accustomed to him staying away unexpectedly and probably assumed that, as was his well-known habit, he was busy besmirching the reputation of an unfortunate local maiden.

Sadly, however, there was no besmirching going on and when Robert galloped home, the moon was no bigger than a nail clipping and the sky was pitch black.

There is a strange and genuine blackness about moonless nights in the countryside. Even today, as a result of the fact that the village is miles from what city and town dwellers like to call civilisation, the night sky in Bilbury is far blacker than it is in urban and suburban areas.

Not seeing that the drawbridge was up, the hapless landowner rode straight into his own moat and drowned.

That was the end of the Martins but it was not the end of the village which became exceedingly prosperous from the 13th century onwards. There may not have been any Martins around but locals made a good deal of money from mining silver, iron and a pigment called umber; something which artists know well because when heated the colour becomes more intense and is known as burnt umber.

You wouldn't know it now but Combe Martin was once England's most important centre for silver mining and King Edward III, who was King of England for 50 years in the 14th century, pretty well paid the expenses of his war against the French with the silver dug from the Combe Martin mines. That was the war which Edward started when he declared himself to be the rightful heir to the French throne back in 1337. Things went well for a while, and Combe Martin's silver bought a number of notable and famous victories, but the war eventually turned into the

Hundred Years War and when the Black Death plague hit England, the supply of men for England's army rather dried up and that was pretty well that for King Edward's plan to conquer France.

Sadly, although some mining continued until the early 20th century, the silver mining industry in North Devon pretty well died a permanent death in about 1830 when the inevitable happened and the silver ran out. Over the years, as the price of silver has risen, various attempts have been made to revive the mining industry but none of them has come to anything. All that remains now are some mine shafts and the ruins of a number of old mine buildings. There is a ruined engine house on Knap Down, on land belonging to Silver Mines Farm, and if you know where to look, and look hard enough, you can still see some signs of those now forgotten mines.

The Pinchbecks, my patients, live in a house which dates back to the 15th century and which had originally been built by one of the early mine owners. Like a good many old houses, it has been extended on numerous occasions since then and today it is, like so many buildings in North Devon, rather a mish mash of architectural styles. It is, however, a marvellous home with far reaching views over the coastline. On a clear day you can easily see Wales on the other side of the Severn Estuary.

Mr and Mrs Pinchbeck are a fascinating couple.

Mr Pinchbeck, who is in his late fifties and more than two decades older than his wife, has the earnest, naturally superior air of a butler, sommelier or a head waiter; an air of natural, condescending superiority mixed with a difficult to define awareness that his place in life isn't all that it is expected to appear to be. It isn't that officious, bullying, self-important superiority that typifies the more arrogant variety of police officer, the self-righteous customs official or the sneering tax inspector, but the quiet confidence, mixed with carefully modulated deference, that typifies the high ranking professional servant.

The odd thing is, however, that Mr Pinchbeck isn't a butler or a sommelier, though he does wear an old-fashioned frock coat and a carefully knotted white tie when he is at work. He is an old-fashioned dignified and respectful bank manager. He works in Barnstaple and can often be found standing in the foyer of his bank, greeting customers with a small bow and a few welcoming words. He exudes calm, dignity and respect and he is, generally speaking, the most ataraxic individual I know.

Mr Pinchbeck married late.

He was a confirmed bachelor who surprised everyone who thought they knew him by suddenly finding romance and a wife.

The odd thing is that they met each other on a Tube train in London. He was there to watch a cricket match at the Oval cricket ground. She was there to attend an educational conference. They literally bumped into each other, chatted and found that they both came from North Devon. They lived just a few miles apart but had to go to London to find each other.

Just before her marriage, Mrs Pinchbeck (or Miss Kitchener as she was then) told me that she had read that, according to an old Devon saying, a bride should be half the age of her husband, plus seven years, if the marriage was to succeed. I remembered that I had heard the same saying credited to Corsica, Russia, Italy and, indeed, the whole of Victorian England, but I didn't mention this. She was a primary school teacher and, I suspected, a good one.

Today, Miss Pinchbeck is in her thirties and is a headmistress at a local school. I have to say that if I were one of her pupils I would be terrified – at first at any rate; unless or until I realised that the tough exterior hid a soft, gentle inner.

She rather reminds me of a gym master I had at school. His name was Sam and he was an ex-army instructor with a bark that had been honed on thousands of army recruits. He could snarl at a boy standing two hundred yards away and the boy would shiver with fear. But I realised one day that his bark was very superficial. A boy in my form slipped on a piece of equipment in the gym and hurt his thumb. Nothing was broken or dislocated and there was no sign of blood but the boy was close to tears. I suppose he had probably sprained it. Sam's response surprised us all. The man who had, moments before, been screaming abuse and telling us that he didn't care if we broke every bone in our bodies, was suddenly as upset and as sympathetic as the boy's mother could have been. He fussed over the mildly injured boy as though he had broken at least one major bone and personally insisted on escorting him to the school nurse.

That was Mrs Pinchbeck – as tough as a parking meter maid until or unless something went wrong. And then she became the kindest and sweetest and gentlest of souls.

She and her husband have two children, twins aged seven years.

When I arrived at their house, I found that I had beaten the ambulance but that the gardens looked like a battlefield. There seemed to be children everywhere. Some were screaming, some were crying and some were sitting on the grass rubbing their faces and rocking backwards and forwards in distress. Four adults, mothers and fathers I guessed, were standing around not sure what to do. The two mothers were crying. The fathers were clearly anxious to do something but clearly didn't have the faintest idea what the something should be. I spotted Mr Pinchbeck trying to talk to one of the mothers.

Now looking very forlorn, abandoned and out of place, there were several trestle tables on the lawn. The tables were laden with half empty plates, empty jugs and trifle bowls that were pretty well empty. Whatever had happened had clearly happened after tea had been served. A dozen balloons were hanging from the branches of a couple of trees. Toys of various kinds were strewn about on the lawn. A small dog, a fox terrier, ran in and out, barking at anything and nothing. He didn't seem territorial or even particularly upset, and his tail was sticking as upright as a flagpole and wagging furiously. I got the feeling he knew he was really supposed to bark but that he couldn't really put his heart and soul into it because he knew something was seriously wrong but didn't understand what.

'It's the twins' birthday,' explained Mrs Pinchbeck, struggling to stay calm. She was wearing a pink summer dress and had her two daughters standing beside her. Both were crying. Both were cuddling their mother and clinging to her dress. One of the girls was hugging a large, beautiful doll with long blonde hair 'They invited a dozen or so of their friends round for a party.'

Mrs Pinchbeck was desperately upset and had to take deep breaths at the end of each sentence. With a nod and a murmur of encouragement, I waited for her to continue. I discovered long ago that it is dangerous to hurry into activity until you have an idea about what has happened. 'We let all the children go off into a field we own so that they could just run around and make as much noise as they wanted.'

'How long ago was this?' I asked.

'About an hour or so,' replied Mrs Pinchbeck. 'We first became aware that something was wrong about twenty minutes ago. I rang the ambulance and then I rang you. Thank you for coming so quickly.' She looked across the fields in front of the house. 'I don't know where the ambulance is.'

'They'll be here as soon as they can,' I assured her. 'They have to come from Barnstaple. I was only a couple of miles away. Can I speak to one of your daughters?'

I was pretty sure that I already knew what the problem was. It was something I'd seen before, but not on such a huge scale.

The small dog had now given up barking and was staring at me, with his tail still upright and still wagging. He seemed to want to play fetch or, failing that, to lie down in a nice cool spot and dream of rabbits. But he wanted me to decide for him.

'Chloe and Mathilda are here,' said Mrs Pinchbeck. 'Chloe doesn't seem too badly affected but Mathilda has nasty looking burns on her face, especially on and around her lips, and she has burns on her hands and arms.'

'May I look?' I asked Mathilda.

Slowly, reluctantly, she turned her face so that I could see the angry looking rash on her face. She then showed me her arms and hands.

I knew immediately that my guess had been an accurate one.

'You made some pea shooters?' I asked.

She looked surprised, but nodded.

'We found some plants with hollow stalks,' explained her sister. 'They made great pea shooters. I got some dried peas from the kitchen for the others. But I didn't play that game. I had my doll and my doll didn't want to play at pea shooters.'

'My guess is that there are some giant hogweed plants in your field,' I said to Mrs Pinchbeck. 'The plants look like cow parsley – but they're bigger.' Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the fox terrier wander off and start digging a hole in a flowerbed.

'There's quite a lot of what I thought was cow parsley,' agreed Mrs Pinchbeck. 'It's mostly around the edge of the field. But some of it is very tall – six or eight feet tall.'

She led me over to the field, just a few yards away from where I was standing. I could see that the edge of the field was studded with Giant Hogweed plants.

'Some of the plants are just cow parsley,' I said. 'But the taller plants are Giant Hogweed. You can deal with them another time. What we need to do straight away is to get all the affected children indoors, away from the sunshine, and into a darkened room. Then we need to wash their skin very gently with lots of soap and water to remove the irritant and to stop the burns getting any worse.'

I gathered together all the available adults and asked them to take the children into the house. Mrs Pinchbeck drew the curtains in the living room, to shut out as much light as possible, and the other parents started washing the children's skin. I gave antihistamines to the children to try to reduce the itching and the skin irritation.

'Are there any children with sore eyes?' I asked.

When I was assured that there were not I was hugely relieved. The sap of the Giant Hogweed plant can cause blindness. I went from child to child, checking their skin and making sure that everything possible was being done to minimise each child’s symptoms.

‘What on earth has caused all this?’ asked Mr Pinchbeck. He sounded angry.

‘The children cut up some Giant Hogweed stalks and used them as pea shooters,’ I explained. ‘The Giant Hogweed produces massively thick stalks which are hollow. Perfect for pea shooting.’

‘What the devil is Giant Hogweed?’ asked Mr Pinchbeck.

‘It’s a rather nasty plant which was brought to the United Kingdom by Victorian explorers who travelled to Southern Russia and Georgia – which is where the plant came from. They took seeds to Kew Gardens which then gave seeds to people who wanted the plant in their gardens. And since then it’s just spread and spread, I’m afraid. The stalks have bristles on the stems and brushing against those can cause a skin reaction much like the sort of stinging you get from nettles. But it’s the sap which really causes the problems. If the sap gets onto the skin and it is then exposed to the light, there is a reaction. It’s a type of photodermatitis called phytophotodermatitis and it is caused by the fact that the sap sensitises the skin to both natural and artificial light.’

‘Will it do any permanent harm?’

‘They should all be fine in a day or two,’ I said. ‘Thank heavens none of their eyes is affected. That really is a miracle. We need to wash off all the sap and keep them all away from light for the rest of the day. I can prescribe some antihistamines which will help soothe the burning and it might help to apply some calamine lotion to the affected skin.’

Just then, the ambulance came screaming into the garden. Considering how far he had to travel, along winding country lanes, the driver had made good time.

Three of the children were much more severely affected than the others, and although they probably didn’t really need to go to hospital, I decided that since the ambulance had arrived I’d take advantage of its presence to take those children to the hospital in Barnstaple. I telephoned one of the on-call doctors at the hospital and he agreed to take a look at the three worst affected children, and to keep them in for observation. He said there wasn’t much he could do apart from give them antihistamines and an appropriate analgesic, but he had a few spare beds and agreed with me that keeping them for a while wouldn’t do any harm. Neither he nor I thought they would need to stay in hospital for more than one night.

‘Is there anything else we can do,’ asked Mrs Pinchbeck.

‘In a day or two you could put on some tough clothes and a pair of thick gloves and cut down the Giant Hogweed plants in your field,’ I told her. ‘Until you’ve done that I suggest that you keep the children out of the field.’

She said they would certainly do that.

I then drove home, at a rather more leisurely pace than I had driven to the Pinchbecks, and after I had enjoyed a nice cup of tea and a slice of Patsy’s almond cake, I carried on cutting the grass.

And when I had finished cutting the grass, I wandered around the garden looking for Giant Hogweed plants.

I found at least a dozen of the damned things. And I chopped them all down before they could spread their seeds and create yet more plants.

British explorers brought all sorts of wonderful plants back to the United Kingdom. But occasionally we are, I think, entitled to curse their selections.

For example, I think it is fair to say that we would all be better off if the Giant Hogweed had been left where it was.

The Reluctant Winner of the Duck and Puddle Bowling for a Pig Competition

I don't know why or when the custom started but every year, without fail, Frank and Gilly at the Duck and Puddle organise a 'Bowling for a Pig' competition. A set of battered old, wooden ninepins are set up at the business end of the pub's skittle alley and contestants pay 20 new pence to roll three balls at the skittles. No one is allowed to have more than three goes (totalling 60 pence) and this is the only round of the competition for which a charge is made. All the proceeds from the event used to be shared between a group of national charities but recently the Bilbury Skittles Charitable Donations Committee (which is comprised of Frank and Gilly Parsons, the landlords of the Duck and Puddle) decreed that the proceeds from the event should in future be given to Bilbury's own cottage hospital (which is misnamed the Brownlow Country Hotel in order to avoid attracting the unwelcome attentions of local bureaucrats) in order that the citizens of Bilbury could benefit directly. Since the hospital spends no money on staff, marketing or advertising, the Committee knows that every penny raised will be used to help patients.

Skittles is often confused with its modern successor, ten pin bowling, but the two games are really quite different – in style if nothing else. For one thing, there are nine skittles or 'men' and they are wooden. And after the skittles are knocked down, they are put back into position by hand.

One of the Duck and Puddle's skittles is noticeably skinnier and lighter than the others because in 1952, long before my time in Bilbury, a legendary farmer called Dick Westlake sent down a ball with such ferocity that the skittle which had taken the force of the throw, split and lost a third of its size.

Over the years, the reputed size of Mr Westlake has steadily increased. He died in 1961 and was then generally reputed to be 6 foot 4 inches tall and to weigh 18 stones. But burying him didn't stop him growing. Today, if you ask anyone about Dick Westlake, they will tell you that he was at least 6 foot 10 inches tall and that he weighed 25 stones in his birthday suit and nigh on 30 stones with his boots on. He is said to have had hands bigger than a baseball catcher's mitt. When he was a young man, he spent some time in the army and they wanted him to be a boxer but, so the story goes, no one could find gloves big enough for his enormous hands. That was the man responsible for the fact that today the Duck and Puddle version of skittles involves eight and two thirds skittles, rather than the more usual nine.

The three balls, which, like the skittles, were hand carved from pieces of mature oak, were originally perfectly round and smooth but they too have, over the years, suffered rather a good deal from the battering they have taken.

The skittle alley, where the game is played, is protected on one side by a brick wall and on the other by a wooden fence which is two feet high and quite inadequate for the purpose. I have frequently suggested to Frank that he should at least double the height of the barrier in order to protect patrons from balls and skittles which bounce or ricochet over the fence and into the spectators. A couple of years ago, several spectators were injured (one with a fractured fibula and one with a fractured ulna) when an exceptionally enthusiastic but sadly wayward farm labourer from Codisworthy sent down a ball which not only missed all nine skittles but also missed the bowling alley and went sailing over the barriers into the crowd. Frank's argument, with which it is difficult to disagree, is that the wooden fence would have had to be ten foot high to have prevented such a wayward shot.

At the end of the skittle alley there is a wooden barrier in place, with sand filled sacks in front of it. The sacks are supposed to take the impetus out of the balls which miss the skittles and find their way through to the end of the alley.

The rules of the game are very simple.

Male competitors have to bowl their balls underarm and from behind a painted line which defines the start of the bowling alley.

Women have to bowl from behind a painted line which is a full yard closer to the skittles and they have the option of bowling underarm or overarm.

Male entrants have been banned from bowling overarm since Norman Tarragon, an assistant blacksmith, tried to get at two skittles which were the only ones of the nine which were still standing. The two remaining skittles stood behind the other seven skittles, which had fallen and which were lying in front, making a very effective barrier. Tarragon bowled an overarm donkey drop which missed the target by six feet, went through a closed window, damaged two cars and a bicycle and somehow ended up just two or three feet away from the village pond.

My concern, that any one of the numerous spectators standing watching could well have been seriously injured, was dismissed as irrelevant and scaremongering namby pamby nonsense but there had been genuine concern that the misdirected ball could well have been lost forever if it had sunk into the mud around the edge of the pond. It was this fear, not any concern for the wellbeing of contestants or spectators, which had led the Duck and Puddle Skittles Rules Committee (a rather grand name for Frank and Gilly) to announce that in future male bowlers would be deemed to have bowled illegally, and disqualified from the competition, if they bowled overarm. This had produced some muttering among the older villagers but when it was pointed out that it would be pretty well impossible to find a carpenter capable of carving a perfectly round replacement ball which matched the size and weight of the other two, the dissent disappeared.

The other rules are very simple.

Everyone who succeeds in knocking down all nine skittles with their three balls goes through to the second round of the competition and their names are inscribed, by Gilly, on an old blackboard which had, several years earlier, been retired by our village school. When all the competitors have had their maximum possible three attempts, the second round begins. No fees are charged for this or for subsequent rounds. Contestants are allowed only one attempt to knock down all the skittles with their three balls. Successful entrants then go through to the third round and so on and so forth. Eventually, there will usually come a point where there are just two or three contestants left in the competition. This, since it is the final stage of the competition, is known as the Final Round.

At this point in the competition, Frank announces that the Final Round has commenced and it is customary for the remaining contestants to have a break to take refreshment. Traditionally this consists of a packet of pork scratchings and two pints of best bitter, though in 1963, a man who was both a vegetarian and a teetotaller reached the final and Frank temporarily amended the unofficial rules so that he was allowed to take a packet of salt and vinegar crisps and two pints of tonic water and lime.

(Frank said afterwards that anyone who can down two pints of tonic water and lime deserves all the luck he can get and that the rest of us should get behind him and give him our support. Sadly, however, the teetotal vegetarian, clearly suffering from an ailment known to sheep farmers as the bloat, failed to progress any further in the competition.)

The Finals are run in exactly the same way as the other rounds.

Each remaining player attempts to knock down the nine skittles with the three wooden balls. Any player who fails to do this is eliminated from the competition.

Usually, the competition finishes between midnight and one a.m. and Frank, as licensee of the Duck and Puddle, always applies for, and is always given, an official extension to his opening hours.

Occasionally, the competition continues for longer and when this happens Frank usually gives himself permission to keep the bar open until he deems it necessary to close it.

On one famous occasion, Thumper Robinson and Jack Rattenbury were locked in competition until 6.35 a.m. on the morning after the event had started. The excitement was so great that very few, if any, of the spectators left the sporting arena. With a pub full of eager customers, Frank, who is if nothing else an independent man, would no more think of throwing the towel over the pumps than he would think of putting prawn cocktail and Black Forest gateau on the Duck and Puddle menu. Thumper eventually won the pig that year. It was the first of his three victories.

Three years ago, a German tourist and his wife, who were on a touring holiday of the West Country, took part in the competition and in honour of their attendance, Frank and Gilly decided that the event would in future be known as the European Skittle Bowling for a Pig Championships.

And, in the year of which I write, when two American tourists arrived, hot foot from Idaho, and the male half of the partnership declared that he would be competing, the competition was renamed the Official World Skittle Bowling for a Pig Championships. Never let it be said that we in Bilbury do not know how to take full advantage of a situation.

The two Americans, Edgar and Delphinium Rathbone, had never visited England before and they were determined to try every experience available. And there is no doubt that their adventures were certainly giving them much to write home about.

On the day of their arrival, they had both gone fishing for trout in the river Lynn at Lynmouth. They had hired Thumper Robinson as their guide. Neither of them had ever been fishing before and when Edgar, keen to emulate Thumper's expert cast and full to the brim with false confidence and genuine enthusiasm, took his rod back a little too far, the result was that the hook and fly went through an open window in one of the terraced cottages overlooking the river, and caught on a piece of curtain. Thumper said he had been very impressed because although he had been fishing many times (sometimes with a rod and sometimes with his bare hands, for he was a skilled trout tickler) he had never before seen anyone catch a terraced cottage. He said he was pretty confident that it was the heaviest catch any fisherman had ever hooked.

The prize for the winner of what must now surely be Bilbury's premier sporting event is, as might well be surmised when folk hear the name of the competition, a pig.

But, unlike other similar 'Bowling for a Pig' competitions around the country, the pig on offer is not a mere piglet; some hardly visible creature weighing no more than a puppy; a delicate creature which can be picked up and cuddled. The prize is always a proper, fully-grown male porcine adult; a fully signed up comrade of the genus Sus, and a neatly defined member of the Suidae family of even toed ungulates. In Bilbury, as Frank once said, we do not like to do things by halves. If there is to be bowling for a pig then the prize will be a pig – and not a piglet.

And throughout the event, the pig at the heart of the proceedings, the star of the evening, invariably grunting and snuffling with undisguised delight, lies comfortably in a corner of the room wherein lies the skittle alley, and had munched his way through an armful of mixed carrots, turnips and potatoes.

On this occasion a small sign, attached to the wall where the pig lay, informed observers that his name was Cedric.

Naturally, not all the winners of the skittle competition have either the accommodation or the temperament required to care for a fully-grown pig who fully intends to carry on growing.

First and foremost, of course, an adult pig requires a solid, well-made sty, something constructed with rather more concrete than wood. And he needs a bit of land around the sty so that he can roll in the mud, snuffle around for roots and other tasty comestibles, and lie in the sunshine when the fancy takes him. It is, perhaps, not widely known but pigs like to loll around in the sun doing nothing, just as much as they enjoy a good meal. The pig sty itself needs to provide shelter from the elements and plenty of fresh straw bedding and the attached land should enable the pig to do a little occasional exercise and a little quiet daydreaming.

And second, there is the food.

Pigs do not grow to the size they generally become by nibbling an occasional lettuce leaf and they do not maintain their generous proportions by nibbling on low calorie biscuits and sipping designer water through a straw. They do not stint themselves when dining. They are gourmands rather than gourmets and for them it is quantity rather than mere quality which determines their happiness. Finding enough food to keep a pig content requires a strong back, determination, a truck of some kind and a never-ending supply of suitable comestibles. Expecting to make do with an occasional slop bucket full of household waste will simply not do. Day in, day out the pig must be fed and, in the absence of a ready supply of pigswill from a school canteen, will require a vast supply of cereals, potatoes, carrots and other vegetables. Feeding a pig can be an exhausting and expensive business.

And what, in the end, do you do with your pig when you have fed it for a year or two and its size has increased in a satisfying manner to a fairly healthy 200 to 250 pounds?

The obvious answer, of course, is to turn the pig into a freezer full of pork chops and rashers of bacon. A decent sized porker will provide enough nourishment to last a large family some months; providing its executioners with two dressed sides, two hams, two shoulders, ribs with meat attached, blade bones, backbone with meat attached, head and tongue, trotters, tail, liver, kidney and heart and a seemingly inexhaustible supply of bits and pieces which veterinarians know as lungs, stomach, intestines and bladder and which butchers refer to as offal. Even when I ate meat, I couldn’t bear eating offal.

But, as quite a number of winners of the Duck and Puddle Bowling for a Pig competition have found, it is not easy to call in the slaughterman when you have got to know your animal and have found yourself smiling and nodding wisely as you lean on its gate and observe its little ways.

It is especially difficult to bring the animal’s life to a sudden end when you have given him or her a name.

It is much easier to order the death of ‘the pig in the end sty’ than it is to tell the man from the abattoir to pop along and kill Cedric.

The fact is that pigs are intelligent animals and they all have individual skills, peculiarities, eccentricities and idiosyncrasies of their own.

If a census were taken in Bilbury today, and pigs were included in the population, the pigs would comprise a healthy, sizeable ethnic minority. And if all those pigs were given the vote, and there are many pig owners who will tell you that their pig is more intelligent than many of the people they know, and certainly more intelligent than the majority of politicians, then there are those in the village who would say that the world would be a better place. There would be fewer wars and far more rooting for vegetables, and who will argue that would not make the world a better place?

Bilburians are generous, warm-hearted, broad-minded, welcoming people and if someone in London wants to give pigs the vote then we’ll be the first to go along with it, and welcome pigs and sows into the electoral community. Still, I can’t see it happening any time soon.

Bowling wooden balls at skittles is not, I think it is fair to say, an activity which requires a great deal of thought, or even a good deal of skill. It does require a certain amount of brawn, for the balls are heavy and must be projected with some force if they are to knock down the skittles, rather than simply rest wearily up against them; but not many would regard nine pins (its other name) as requiring the same level of mental agility as, say, chess or dominoes. A darts player is required to do a little rudimentary mathematics from time to time but all the skittles player has to do with his brain is count the number of skittles which are still standing, and then act accordingly.

Of course, as with any game, there are players who claim to have acquired special skills. There are some skittles players who take pride in their ability to knock down a solitary wooden man who is guarded by eight fallen comrades. Such a shot requires the ability to throw a 'beamer' or a 'bouncer'. A 'beamer' is a ball which does not land on the wooden planks which make up the base of the bowling alley but travels straight from the player's hand to the target. A 'bouncer' is a ball which lands but once, and then leaps forwards after bouncing. Some players claim to be able to put spin on the ball (a skill which requires hands the size of hams and fingers strong enough to bend nails) and others claim that they can fire a ball at the skittles at a speed of 30 to 40 miles per hour.

But much of this is harmless phooey, and those who have been watching skittles for some decades will confirm that the one ingredient which really matters, and the one which all players require above all else, is good old-fashioned luck.

When Edgar Rathbone from Idaho became the surprise winner of the latest Duck and Puddle competition, there was much delight and a good deal of excitement. Mr Rathbone was not only the first winner from the United States, he was only the second winner who did not hail from Bilbury or one of the nearby villages.

'We're truly global now,' said Frank, positively purring with delight.

Peter Marshall wanted to know if Mr Rathbone thought there might be a market for old-fashioned skittle alleys in Idaho. He explained that he could provide any interested parties with a full inventory of equipment, including skittles and balls. (None of us who heard this sales pitch could imagine where Peter could possibly find wooden skittles and balls.)

Mr Rathbone, who seemed rather surprised by this suggestion, said he felt sure that there would be a market for such a 'quaint, old-fashioned sporting activity'. I really liked the Rathbones. They were a kind couple, always eager to please and always keen to see the England that the English know. He had, I think, been something big in motor car sales. She had managed a drugstore.

Many questions were asked from those who wondered precisely how Mr Rathbone intended to deal with his success. And the obvious question (no less pertinent for it being so obvious) was: 'Are you going to keep the pig and, if so, how are you going to get him back home to Idaho?'

Mr Rathbone's wife, Delphinium, who had become quite pale when she realised that her husband had won a pig, wanted to know if they really had to accept the prize or if there was, perhaps, an alternative option. 'A box of chocolates?' she inquired hopefully. 'Maybe a bottle of your lovely British sherry? Or a box of assorted, coloured bath salts?'

On reflection, I suppose it must have been quite a shock for both of them.

Most visitors touring England are happy to pick up the usual souvenirs; items which will fit comfortably into a suitcase: a few photographs, a handful of postcards, an assortment of English stamps, a box of shortbread or chocolates, a small toy model of a red London bus, a small bust of Shakespeare, a London theatre programme – that sort of thing.

Not many tourists suddenly find themselves to be the rather shocked owners of a large pig.

The Rathbones were travelling around the West of England in a rented Ford Capri and had found themselves in Bilbury, staying at the Duck and Puddle, simply because they had got lost while trying to drive between the twin Devon villages of Lynton and Lynmouth, and the small town of Bideford further along the coast.

The fact is that if you get lost in Bilbury there is nowhere else to stay other than the village's one hostelry. The choice is simple: a room at the Duck and Puddle or park your car in a field gateway.

And now, with absolutely no warning, the two travellers had become three.

Mr Rathbone had forked out his entry fee for no other reason than that he thought it would be something truly Devonian to talk about when they got back home. Delphinium had taken several photographs of Edgar posing with one of the wooden balls. It had not occurred to either of them that their modest investment might produce such an unexpected dividend.

You can see that under such circumstances any sensible woman might well prefer finding room in her suitcase for a box of bath salts to continuing her journey around the West Country with a 200 pound carrot munching machine lying on the back seat of your rented Capri – especially when you and your husband have signed a document promising to return the car in a 'clean condition'.

The Rathbones were both in their 60s, and it is fair to say that they were keen and experienced travellers.

They had visited Europe on a dozen occasions and they had enjoyed or endured the usual variety of adventures which befall travellers in Europe. They had been held up at customs posts, they had filled in endless forms, they had stood patiently as their suitcases had been examined in minute detail, they had stayed in hotels where the plumbing had been considered primitive in 1920 and in France they had endured the discomfort of the Turkish lavatory – an item of plumbing known in Turkey as the Indian toilet and one which requires the user to squat rather than to sit.

But they had always managed to complete their travels without ever once acquiring a pig as a travelling companion.

At first, thrilled by his unexpected success and sustained by enthusiasm rather than practicalities, Mr Rathbone said that they were experienced in the care of animals. However, he admitted, when asked, that their knowledge of animals was confined to having, over several decades, shared their home with one Persian cat and two consecutive Bichon frise dogs. In addition, Mr Rathbone remembered that he had been the owner of a goldfish early in his life, though he readily agreed with those observers who felt that, with all due respect, the goldfish, (Mr Rathbone thought it had been won at a fair of some kind), being a creature which required little more than a pinch of feed and an occasional change of water, could almost certainly be disregarded and dismissed as providing negligible practical experience in the handling and transport of fully grown adult members of the family suidae, part of the order artiodactyla.

The truth is that, however you look at things, winning a pig is some way removed from winning a goldfish in a glass bowl or owning a cat that looks good sitting on the sofa. The domestic pig is, after all, closely related to the hippopotamus. The Rathbones, it was generally agreed, had no relevant experience for the job of looking after an animal weighing 20 stones, having a mind of its own and requiring a good deal of attention.

‘How would we get it in the car?’ asked Mrs Rathbone. ‘Does he answer to his name? Where will we find a collar and lead big enough? Do hotels and pubs in England provide accommodation for people travelling with pigs?’

And, of course, the inevitable query: ‘Is he house trained?’

It was generally agreed that it would be impossible to get Cedric into anything smaller than a truck, that hotels in England do not usually provide special accommodation for travellers arriving with pigs, that it would be difficult to find a suitably sized collar and lead and that Cedric was definitely, quite definitely, not house trained. The straw upon which Cedric lay provided ample evidence of this shortcoming. It is an inevitability that when you put a good deal of something into one end of a pig, a good deal of something else will eventually come out of the other end.

The Rathbones whispered quietly and rather urgently to each other and then Mr Rathbone approached me.

‘Do you have a farm, doctor?’ he asked.

I told him that Patsy and I had a smallholding and a fair amount of land but that we didn’t have what anyone could call a proper farm.

‘But you’ve got stables and things?’

‘Oh yes,’ I said, ‘we’ve got stables and outbuildings.’

Mr Rathbone lowered his voice. ‘I’m very honoured to have won the pig,’ he said, ‘but Delphinium and I are a bit worried about exactly what we’re going to do with it.’ Delphinium, who was standing just behind her husband, nodded and took her husband’s hand.

‘Even if we managed to get it back to the States where would we keep it?’ asked Mrs Rathbone. ‘We live in a condominium. All we’ve got outside is an allocated parking space.’

‘We wondered if you would take the pig,’ said Mr Rathbone.

‘Sort of just look after it for us,’ said Mrs Rathbone.

‘We don’t want her turning into sausages,’ said Mr Rathbone. ‘We’ll pay for the food and the upkeep,’ he added.

‘Perhaps you’d send us photos occasionally, let us know how she’s doing,’ said Mrs Rathbone.

‘He, dear,’ said Mr Rathbone gently. ‘Cedric is a ‘he’.’

‘Oh yes,’ said Mrs Rathbone. ‘Let us know how he’s doing.’

I looked at Patsy. She smiled. She didn’t actually nod but I knew her well enough to know that she was nodding in her mind.

‘We’ll be delighted to take him,’ I said. ‘And we’ll happily send you photographs. But we don’t want you to send us money.’

‘We’ll be thrilled to look after Cedric,’ said Patsy. ‘You must come to the house tomorrow,’ she looked at her watch, ‘well, later today. And we’ll show you where she’s going to be living. I’ll ask my dad to pick her up in his trailer tomorrow morning. If you come round later in the morning you’ll be able to see her settling in. And you must stay for lunch.’

The Rathbones were delighted, grateful and very relieved. They made serious attempts to persuade us to let them send us money to buy turnips and carrots but, when we made it clear that we didn’t want them to pay anything but were happy to have the opportunity to look after their pig, they gave in gracefully. The truth is, we told them, was that we were both rather proud to add a very fine looking pig to our small menagerie. ‘He’ll be a member of the family,’ Patsy assured them. ‘And he’ll never be turned into sausages or rashers of bacon.’

The Rathbones who were, of course, staying at the Duck and Puddle went upstairs to their room and Patsy and I headed for the door.

Most people had gone and the bar was pretty well empty. Patsy and I had both enjoyed a splendid evening, all the more so for the fact that it was a rare treat for us. We could not go out together very often because either Patsy or I usually had to be at Bilbury Grange in order to answer the phone in case of an emergency. If I was not there, Patsy had to be available to tell anyone who turned up on the doorstep where I could be found.

And so we usually had to have our days out separately. Once or twice a week, Patsy would have an afternoon or an evening out (usually with her sister Adrienne) and once or twice a week, on evenings when she wasn't going out, I would potter along to the Duck and Puddle for an hour or two playing bar billiards or darts, invariably with my chums Thumper Robinson and Patchy Fogg. If there was an emergency of any kind Patsy would ring me at the pub and Frank would give me the message.

On special occasions, such as the evening of the skittles competition, Patsy's parents would babysit the little ones, answer the telephone if it rang and tell callers where I was. They would then spend the night in our spare room.

Patsy and I were half way through the door, ready to head for home when Gilly suddenly came running up to us.

'It's Frank,' she said.

Gilly is usually calm; a rock in the rough seas which are an inevitable part of life when you are married to Frank and when you share with him the responsibility of running a village pub.

I had never seen such terror in her eyes.

Patsy and I both stopped.

'What's wrong with him?' I asked her. I had drunk a couple of glasses of whisky but suddenly I was cold, stone sober.

'I think he's had a stroke,' said Gilly.

And suddenly, completely unexpectedly, entirely understandably, she burst into tears.

Frank's Stroke

I was shocked, saddened and desperately worried but not terribly surprised to hear that Frank had suffered a stroke.

Frank Parsons, the joint owner and sole licensee at the Duck and Puddle, has had high blood pressure for some time and he has constantly refused to listen to my requests for him to change his lifestyle.

He weighs too much, he eats too much (and eats a good deal of fatty food such as chips and pies), he drinks too much alcohol and he smokes too many cigars. He has maturity onset (type II) diabetes but he persistently refuses to follow any of the dietary advice I give him. He takes almost no exercise at all (a trip down into the cellar to connect up another barrel of beer, or to hunt out a special bottle of wine, have been his only exercise for several years) and although he likes to think of himself as tough and resilient he is, in reality, a sensitive man who worries far more than he allows the wider world to suspect.

He is also, as he himself is fond of saying, 'not as young as he was when he wasn't as old as he is now'.

In short, Frank has, for some years now, been a medical accident waiting to happen.

His only concession to my pleadings (and to those of his wife Gilly) has been to give up the cigarettes he has smoked since he was 14-years-old and to replace them with cigars.

I have told him that there is no evidence that cigars are safer than cigarettes but he says they must be doing him much less harm because he only smokes five or six cigars a day whereas he used to smoke fifty or sixty cigarettes a day.

I pointed out that the Churchillian sized cigars which he smokes contain far more tobacco than ten cigarettes but talking to the cigars would have had just as much effect.

All this went through my mind in a flash as Patsy and I followed Gilly.

Frank was lying on the floor at the bottom of the winding and narrow staircase which leads up to the bedrooms and down to the cellar in the Duck and Puddle. Oddly, and with extraordinary good fortune, Frank had collapsed more or less in the recovery position. He was unconscious and he had vomited.

'At first I thought he'd fallen down the stairs,' said Gilly, 'but when I looked at his face I could see that he'd had a stroke.' She had made a real effort and had stopped crying. I turned and quietly asked Patsy, who had her arm around Gilly, to use the pub's telephone to call an ambulance.

'Have you moved him?' I asked Gilly, checking Frank's pulse and breathing. The publican's pulse was a little fast but it was regular. His breathing wasn't good but at least he was breathing and his colour wasn't bad. I checked his mouth to make sure that there wasn't any vomit blocking his airway. There wasn't.

Gilly shook her head. 'He's too heavy,' she said. Gilly weighs probably a third of Frank's twenty stone.

'That's good.'

I knew that although Frank had definitely had a stroke, it was perfectly possible that he'd also fallen down the stairs. I started to check him over as I spoke and was relieved that I could find no sign that any bones were broken.

'I think he'd just come up from the cellar,' said Gilly. 'He said he was going down to fetch another bottle of port for a nightcap.' She pointed to a bottle lying, unbroken, on the floor. 'The port is there so he'd probably just made it to the top of the stairs when he collapsed.'

'He hasn't injured himself,' I said, when I'd finished checking him over. 'I can't find any signs of any broken bones – though it's perfectly possible he may have cracked a rib or two of course. He probably fell quite heavily.'

Frank, who was now starting to regain consciousness, mumbled something incomprehensible. I leant down and listened carefully.

He repeated what he'd said and this time I worked out that he was telling us that he hadn't fallen but had suddenly felt his right leg give way.

'You've had a stroke,' I told him, 'but you're going to be fine. We have to get you into hospital in Barnstaple but we'll soon have you home.'

Slowly, Frank moved his left hand to his forehead and held it in the way that people tend to do when they have a bad headache.

'Do you have a headache?' I asked him.

He said something but I couldn't understand him. His speech was definitely affected; and affected quite badly. I leant closer and repeated the question. This time I could make out the answer. 'Yes'.

Obeying the instinctive, irresistible urge to comfort someone by touching them, I put a hand on Frank's shoulder. It may sound hard hearted to say so but knowing that Frank had a headache provided another clue to help make an accurate diagnosis. But I couldn't give him anything for the headache until I had a better idea of what had caused the stroke.

Frank said something else.

After he'd said it the third time, I realised that he was asking for Dr Brownlow.

I tested the muscles in his right hand and then those in his left hand. His right hand was limp and without power. His left hand was fine. The stroke had definitely affected the right side of his body.

A stroke usually develops because of a problem with the blood supply to the brain and there are three principle types of stroke.

First, there is the stroke which develops because a blood clot forms at a particular site within the brain, blocking the oxygen supply to the brain cells. Second, there is the stroke which develops because a blood clot which has formed elsewhere in the body travels, as an embolism, and causes a blockage, blocking the oxygen supply to the brain cells. Third, there is the stroke which develops because there has been a bleed within the brain. This is known as an intra-cerebral haemorrhage and this sort of stroke is often a result of high blood pressure.

Around four fifths of all strokes are caused by a clot blocking an artery and thereby depriving brain cells of their regular and essential supplies of oxygen and glucose. The damage done by a clot can vary enormously from person to person. Some people can have quite a large clot in their brain but show very few symptoms while others, with exactly the same sort of blockage, may have signs of a massive ischaemic stroke. Why this happens is something of a mystery but it is probably because of the presence or absence of collateral arteries which, when present, can protect patients from the consequences of a stroke. An individual who has large collateral arteries (which can provide a secondary blood supply to an area of the brain theoretically deprived of oxygen by a clot) will suffer far less than an individual who has small collateral arteries. It's all down to the luck of the draw.

The other thing that affects the amount of damage that is done by a blood clot in the brain, is the length of time the brain cells go without blood. If they are deprived of blood, and therefore oxygen and sugar, for a brief time then the brain cells may recover completely. But if the brain cells are deprived for longer, some of them will die and some brain function will be lost. That's the bad news. The good news is that it is sometimes possible for another part of the brain to learn to do the things that the damaged cells can no longer do. Doctors and nurses are constantly working at finding new ways to help stroke patients recover lost skills.

There is another type of bleeding which can cause a stroke and this, called a subarachnoid haemorrhage, occurs when a blood vessel bursts within the subarachnoid space which surrounds the brain. This type of bleed usually results from a weakness in an artery wall called an aneurysm and it mainly affects younger people.

Those are the main types of stroke caused by blood vessel problems.

Strokes can also develop if there is a tumour in the brain but knowing a good deal about his medical history, I was prepared to guess that Frank's stroke wasn't caused by the sudden appearance of a brain tumour.

Besides, if Frank's stroke was caused by a tumour then there wasn't anything much I could do to help him immediately. But if his stroke was caused by an intra-cerebral haemorrhage or an embolism then there were things I could do that would prove beneficial.

The worst type of stroke is usually the one caused by bleeding within the brain. This is the type of stroke which most commonly causes sudden death. And, whereas with a clot in the brain the damage tends not to get any worse, with a bleed things can continue to deteriorate for some time after the onset of the first symptoms. The longer the bleeding continues the worse the symptoms will be – and the greater the problem.

A clot will usually block off an artery to a particular part of the brain. And that, God willing, will be that. Unless there are several clots, the damage will be done when the clot arrives at its destination.

But once bleeding starts within the brain it can go on and on. The damaged area can continue to grow.

The odd thing is that whether the stroke is caused by a clot or a bleed, most of the immediate symptoms will be pretty much the same.

An area of the brain is deprived of oxygen and the result can be a mixture of physical and mental symptoms. Patients may lose the control of certain muscles (usually on the opposite side of the body to the side of the brain where the stroke occurred) and they may sustain problems with their speech, their memory and their intellect. It is common for stroke victims to be emotionally labile too, and to become frustrated because they cannot think clearly.

The truth is that, in my experience, virtually anything can happen after a stroke – none of it likely to be on anyone's Christmas list.

Although I had no way of knowing what had caused Frank's stroke, I was prepared to guess that it was related to his blood pressure. And when high blood pressure causes a stroke, there is a good chance that it will be a stroke caused by bleeding inside the brain.

I took a firm hold of Frank's right hand. His speech was so badly affected that I needed to establish another way to communicate with him.

'Squeeze my fingers if you understand me,' I told him. 'Squeeze once for 'yes' and twice for 'no.'

He squeezed my fingers once. His grip in his good hand was as strong as ever.

‘Dr Brownlow isn’t here,’ I told him. ‘But I’m looking after you.’ I told him my name. ‘Do you remember me?’

One squeeze.

Frank tried to say something else. He was trying desperately to say something but the words were just not coming out properly. I listened carefully and suddenly realised what he was trying to say to me.

‘The Dr Brownlow Hospital? You want to go to the Dr Brownlow Hospital?’

I understood at last. From Frank’s point of view it made complete sense.

We don’t actually, officially, have an official hospital in Bilbury. But we have a sort of hospital.

My late hero, friend and mentor, Dr Brownlow understood just how bad hospitals had become. He spent his final weeks at home, being cared for by his faithful butler Bradshaw and he wanted his permanent legacy to be a small, friendly hospital run by people who genuinely cared about the sick and the weak and the frail. He left his home, and a good sum of money, so that we would be able to create a cottage hospital that would provide the villagers of Bilbury with a haven and a refuge at their time of need.

Up until Dr Brownlow’s generous gesture, Bilbury had never had a hospital of its own and villagers who needed nursing care or palliative care, had always had to go into hospital in Barnstaple or Exeter. Most, if not all villagers, disliked this idea very much. Their relatives and friends all lived in Bilbury and it’s quite a trek from the village to Barnstaple. People who had to rely on public transport found the journey next to impossible. There are no trains, of course, and buses are as rare as apples on pear trees. It’s a well-known fact that people who fall ill abroad always want to be cared for at home. And the people of Bilbury were no different: if they had to be poorly then they’d rather be poorly in Bilbury than anywhere else. If they needed to have an operation, or to undergo extensive tests and investigations, they would grit their teeth and go into a large hospital in a large town. But if they just needed to be looked after then they would, all things being equal, prefer to be looked after in Bilbury.

After Dr Brownlow died I appointed his former butler, Bradshaw, as my district nurse but I also decided that he would be the only person suitable to take on the responsibility as the matron of the new cottage hospital. Bradshaw found enough volunteers to staff the hospital without our having to hire any professional nurses. Most of the volunteers had no academic nursing qualifications but they all had a quality which is far more important than any number of diplomas: they were all intrinsically kind people.

Our plans to provide Bilbury with its own small hospital did not go completely according to plan, of course.

Local health service administrators were obstructive and it quickly became apparent that converting Dr Brownlow’s home into a hospital was going to be far more difficult than we had thought. As soon as we had solved one problem, the red tape loving pen pushers thought of another problem.

It was Bradshaw who pointed out that we didn’t need our hospital to be registered as an ‘official’ hospital’ and it was Bradshaw who suggested that instead of calling our establishment the Bilbury Cottage Hospital we should call it the Brownlow Country Hotel, and run it, officially, as a hotel. And so we refer to our patients as ‘guests’ and the health service people have no authority over us.

Instead of being matron at the Brownlow Cottage Hospital, the incomparable Bradshaw became the manager of the Brownlow Country Hotel.

And that was where Frank wanted to go.

The publican squeezed my right hand firmly. Once. I could tell by the look in his eyes that he was desperate to go into our local hospital – and not one of the big, super-efficient hospitals. I realised that this was probably what he had been trying to tell me when I thought that he had asked for Dr Brownlow.

‘The ambulance is on its way,’ murmured Patsy, who had come back from the telephone.

‘Is Frank going to be all right?’ asked Gilly.

‘Frank is going to be fine,’ I told her. ‘He’s had a stroke affecting the right side of his body so we know that the problem lies in the left side of his brain. His right arm and right leg aren’t working properly and his speech has been affected. But he can hear us and understand us.’

‘Is he going to be paralysed?’ asked Gilly. ‘I just want to know. I’ll look after him whatever has happened. I just want to know. I need to know the worst.’ She started to cry again. ‘He’s not going to die, is he?’

‘He’s going to be fine,’ I told her, with far more confidence than I could possibly feel. ‘The paralysis is temporary. And he is definitely not going to die.’

I didn’t know this, of course. To be perfectly honest, Gilly could have answered that question as well as I could. But I needed her to be as calm as possible. And, most important of all, I needed Frank to be relaxed and calm. If he became agitated then his blood pressure would soar and if the stroke had been caused by bleeding then the size of the bleed within his brain would grow and the problems would get worse.

The more I thought about it the more I became convinced that Frank’s stroke had been caused by a bleed.

With Frank listening to us, and conscious of every word I spoke, it was particularly vital that I did everything I could to ensure that he remained positive and calm. And I needed Gilly to be alert and able to think clearly. This was not a time for worrying or for gloominess.

I took the keys to the boot of the old Rolls out of my jacket pocket and handed them to Gilly. ‘My black medical bag is in the boot of the car,’ I told her, ‘would you fetch it for me, please? I’d like to check Frank’s blood pressure.’

I never bother to lock the car doors in Bilbury, but if I’m leaving the car for any length of time I always put my drug bag into the boot and lock the boot lid.

I realised just how lucky it was that I had the car with me. Patsy and I had originally decided to walk from Bilbury Grange to the Duck and Puddle but we had, in the end, decided to take the car because Patsy was wearing a long dress and her one pair of really high heels. The lane which leads from our house to the pub is used by several farms and the animals, cows and sheep, which are herded along the lane are generous in making sticky deposits upon the rutted and potholed tarmacadam.

Frank spoke again. I looked at him. He repeated what he had said. I listened carefully. There was a desperation in his eyes.

‘You don’t want to go to the hospital in Barnstaple?’

I was still holding his hand, he squeezed my fingers very tightly. Once. He didn’t want to go to the hospital in Barnstaple. Indeed, it was clear that he was becoming very agitated at the thought that he might be taken to Barnstaple.

I understood why.

‘You don’t want to go to the hospital in Exeter?’ It is important when asking questions this way to make sure that they can be answered with a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer.

Another single squeeze of my fingers. Another ‘yes’ from Frank.

To those of us who live in Bilbury, the town of Barnstaple is almost another world. It is a place with banks and offices and traffic lights and pavements. It is a town where locals can walk down the street and not recognise one in ten of the people they see. And the hospital is a large, unfriendly building. There are the usual seemingly endless corridors, the awful décor, the usual smells and the inevitable feeling, for both patients and visitors, of being trapped in some Kafkaesque nightmare. It isn’t the fault of the staff. It is just the way too many large modern hospitals seem to be.

But I knew that there was something else; another reason why Frank was desperate not to go to the hospital in Barnstaple or the one in Exeter.

Both of Frank’s parents had died in the hospital in Exeter and Frank had always thought that the deaths had been unnecessary. Frank’s father had died of an infection which he had acquired in the hospital and his mother had been misdiagnosed and mistreated. We had talked about both deaths on numerous occasions and I confess that I had agreed with his suspicions.

I understood why Frank wanted me to take him into our local cottage hospital. But I really didn’t think the Bilbury hospital was the right place for a patient who had just suffered from a stroke.

We have had several stroke victims in our village hospital but they were all patients who had been seen in either the Barnstaple hospital or the Exeter hospital and whose condition had been fully diagnosed. They had come to the hospital in Bilbury for rehabilitation; to be nursed and to be helped to learn again how to use their muscles and their minds. We had all the basic nursing equipment we would need, including a hoist to help move heavy patients in and out of bed, but we didn’t have any sophisticated, diagnostic equipment.

I had a terribly difficult decision to make.

The treatment of a stroke depends, inevitably, upon the cause of the stroke. And it isn’t easy to decide what did cause a stroke. Hospital doctors have equipment and laboratories to help them make diagnoses.

I knew that if I asked the ambulance crew to take Frank to Barnstaple or Exeter, the doctors there would be able to examine him far more thoroughly than I ever could. They could do tests that I couldn’t do. And then, after a week or so, we could have him transferred back to the hospital in Bilbury. That was the logical, sensible thing to do.

But I knew that Frank was terribly worried about going to one of the big Devon hospitals. I strongly suspected that if he did go to the hospital in Barnstaple, or to the one in Exeter, the result would be that his blood pressure would soar. And the journey alone wouldn’t be much fun for a frightened and partly paralysed man. It would take the ambulance a good three quarters of an hour to reach Barnstaple and longer to get to Exeter; moreover all the roads along which the ambulance would have to travel are winding and poorly kept, with surfaces which have, in many places, been damaged by frost and are, therefore, marked with more than a few potholes.

All that was bad enough.

But my real worry was that Frank would be so upset at the very idea of going to a big hospital that his blood pressure would go up and up.

And if his blood pressure rose then there would be a greatly increased chance that the stroke would get worse.

If the stroke got worse then there was a considerable chance that Frank would die.

Making decisions about the care of patients is always difficult. But when the patient concerned is a close friend, that decision becomes even more difficult. In a large practice I would have been able to call in another partner, and ask for his or her advice and help – particularly for a patient whom I knew so well. But in Bilbury, in a single-handed medical practice, I was on my own. I had no one to ask for advice.

Suddenly, unbidden, I recalled the first time I met Frank.

I had arrived in Barnstaple, clutching my medical bag and a blue cardboard suitcase, and when I stepped from the train to the platform, the first thing I saw was a small crowd gathered around a fat man in a tweed suit, gaiters and heavy brown boots. The man on the ground was lying flat on his back. It was Frank. He had been to a Licensed Victuallers Association meeting in Exeter and he was stone cold drunk. I remember travelling with him to Bilbury, in a taxi driven by Peter Marshall.

I remembered Frank, slightly recovered, climbing out of the taxi and standing, wobbling slightly, while Gilly, his wife, told him what she thought of him.

I remembered, in a flash of disconnected sequences, the hours I had spent in Frank's company. I remembered the times when I had tried, quite unsuccessfully, to persuade him to lose a little weight and at least cut down his smoking. I remembered laughing when he had drawn the pub curtains on a sunny day because he complained that the sound the sunbeams made as they bounced upon the furniture was making his head hurt. I remembered laughing with him, Thumper and Patchy as we tried to play darts blindfolded. And then by facing the wrong direction and throwing the darts over our shoulders. I knew the holes which our darts had made in the wall were still there.

Frank had been a central part of my life for so long that I could not imagine a world without him. When he laughed properly, it was a real belly laugh. It sounded like thunder.

I remembered that he and Gilly had occasional huge rows. She once locked him out of the Duck and Puddle and told him to sleep in the shed. I offered him a bed for the night but he wouldn't take it because he said that if Gilly thought he needed to be taught a lesson then she was right and he needed to be taught a lesson. They had huge rows but they always made up soon afterwards. I remembered the two of them, with their arms around each other: a genuinely loving couple.

I remembered the days when financial problems meant that the two of them nearly lost the pub. I remembered Frank's endless generosity and his unbidden, natural kindness.

All this I remembered in a single flash.

Gilly returned with my medical bag. She handed my keys and I unlocked the bag. It is, not unreasonably, the law that a doctor must keep any dangerous drugs, such as morphine, double locked. And so I kept my locked bag in the locked boot of my car.

But it wasn't drugs I needed from my bag.

I took out my sphygmomanometer, rolled up Frank's shirt sleeve and took his blood pressure.

It was 220/160. Even for Frank this was high; frighteningly high.

Since he was my patient, and I had taken his blood pressure many times, I knew that his blood pressure was normally around 160/100. That is high enough to need treatment but if I could somehow get Frank's blood pressure down to that sort of level, I would be very happy.

A normal, young adult will have a blood pressure of 120/80. The two numbers, known as the systolic and the diastolic figures, mark the highest and lowest pressure created as the heart pumps blood around the body.

If it weren't under pressure, the blood in the human body wouldn't go anywhere. It would just lie around in arteries and veins doing no one any good at all. Tissues would receive no oxygen or glucose, and waste products would accumulate. Before long everything would die. But when the blood pressure rises too high then the danger is that a blood vessel will burst and blood will leak out. When the blood vessel which bursts is in the brain then the individual concerned will have a stroke. If the leak is a very small one then the chances are that the stroke will be a mild one. But if the leak is a big one then the stroke can be massive or fatal. The more I thought about it the more I was convinced that this was what had happened to Frank.

I guessed that the stress and the excitement of the 'Bowling for a Pig' competition had pushed Frank's blood pressure way up into dangerous levels. Frank is the sort of old-fashioned landlord who likes to see his customers having a good time. And throughout the evening he had been constantly rushing around trying to make sure that everyone present was having a good time. He had probably drunk more alcohol than usual too. And for Frank a normal evening of drinking would probably put most of us under the table.

'What's his blood pressure like?' asked Gilly, who was kneeling beside me on the floor.

'It's a little on the high side,' I told her. I didn't think of it as a lie but as a tactical understatement.

'I made some coffee,' said Patsy. She handed me a cup and gave one to Gilly too. I took the cup, thanked Patsy, and sipped while I thought. I didn't need sobering up, the emergency had done that quite adequately. But the hot coffee was welcome. My mind was racing as I tried to decide what I should do with Frank. Should I risk sending him to Barnstaple? Should I send him to Exeter? Or should I risk keeping him in Bilbury, at a local cottage hospital with nice clean sheets, nice beds and pretty well no medical equipment more sophisticated than a thermometer.

It was, without a doubt, the most difficult decision of my career. I knew that if I got it wrong then Frank would probably die.

And, as an irrelevant aside, I could end up being struck off the medical register for making the wrong decision. I would be in a tricky spot if Frank died and I was asked to explain why I had chosen to send him not to a hospital but to a place officially registered as a country hotel.

There was absolutely no doubt that from a perfectly selfish point of view I had no choice: I had to send Frank into the hospital in Barnstaple and hope that the long, uncomfortable journey didn't kill him and that the stress of being in a place he feared didn't push his blood pressure into the stratosphere.

I checked his arms and his legs as best as I could. The paralysis caused by the stroke did not appear to have increased

I knew that the first thing I needed to decide was what had caused Frank's stroke. Was I right to guess that his high blood pressure had caused a bleed? Or could the stroke have been caused by a clot?

Statistically the odds were that the stroke had been caused by a clot. I told myself for the tenth time that four out of five strokes are caused by clots rather than bleeds.

The fact is that the basic symptoms of all types of stroke are similar (a loss of motor function and a loss of various mental functions such as speech, sight and so on) but there are some signs and symptoms which can help differentiate between the two types of stroke.

And when I stopped and thought about I realised that I really had all the information I needed to make the diagnosis. I already knew which side of his brain was affected. All I had to do was to decide whether the problem was a clot or a bleed. That decision would decide what needed to be done next.

If Frank had suffered a clot in his brain then he needed to be started on anticoagulants to break up the clot. If he had suffered a bleed because of high blood pressure then it was essential to lower his blood pressure.

On the other hand, if he had suffered a bleed and I, or any other doctor, gave him anticoagulants then the bleed would get worse and he would almost certainly die.

I sipped the coffee which Patsy had made while I thought about the facts I had available. I knew that if the patient had been a stranger I would have found everything so much simpler.

I tried to sort through all the evidence I had which might help me make a diagnosis.

There are some differences in the two main types of stroke, the bleed and the clot. Patients who have had a stroke caused by a bleed may have some symptoms which aren't common among patients who have had a clot.

My mind raced as I tried to think back and assess every piece of information I had gleaned. I needed to make a decision before the ambulance arrived in order to know whether to tell the ambulance crew to take Frank to one of the big hospitals or to the Brownlow Country Hotel here in Bilbury.

Patients who have had strokes caused by bleeds rather than by clots are more likely to lose consciousness immediately after their stroke. It is also commoner for patients who have had strokes caused by bleeding to have a severe headache. And it is commoner for patients who have had strokes caused by a bleed, rather than a clot, to feel nauseous or to vomit.

Frank had lost consciousness, he had a headache and he had vomited.

All those symptoms suggested that my guess was correct: that Frank's stroke was caused by a bleed.

And, one other thing, he had very high blood pressure.

It is very high blood pressure which commonly results in a stroke caused by a bleed. High blood pressure can rupture a blood vessel and cause bleeding but it isn't as likely to be a factor in the production of a blood clot.

I turned to Patsy. 'How many patients do we have in the Bilbury hospital?' I asked her.

The official name for the Bilbury hospital may be the Brownlow Country Hotel but I always think of the place as the Bilbury hospital. And that's how we usually refer to it.

She looked at me and frowned. 'You're not thinking…'

For the first time Patsy realised that I was thinking of keeping Frank in Bilbury, and looking after him myself. She knew how difficult a decision it would be. And she knew that if I got the decision wrong then Frank could die. She'd been a doctor's wife long enough to know that it is almost impossible to make decisions like this accurately without doing sophisticated hospital tests. And she'd been my wife long enough to know how much I would be worrying about the decision.

'How many?' I asked her again. I knew damned well how many patients we had in the local hospital but I didn't have enough brain left to find the answer from my own memory.

The Brownlow Country Hotel only has one professional nurse. We can call on several voluntary workers, some of whom have a little nursing experience, but the only nurse is Dr Brownlow's old butler, Bradshaw, who is officially also my district nurse.

Bradshaw lives at the Brownlow Country Hotel and although he is in his 80s (he has been in his 80s for as long as I can remember) you wouldn't think it if you saw him rushing around. He may have a Christian name but no one ever uses it. He always has been, is, and probably always will be just 'Bradshaw'.

'Just two,' Patsy replied. 'Miss Havistock and Mrs Pettigrew.'

I knew them both well, of course.

Miss Havistock was in her eighties and frail. But she was alert and she was in the Brownlow Country Hotel only because her small cottage was being decorated after a flood in her loft had brought down the ceiling in her bedroom. Mrs Pettigrew was slightly younger and was there because she had been in hospital in Exeter having a hip replacement operation. She was just about ready to go home and required very little nursing care.

All this was important because if I decided to take Frank into the Bilbury hospital then he would need a good deal of nursing care. We would have to make sure that he didn't stay immobilised for too long, that if he was in bed for long periods then he was turned regularly so that pressure sores did not develop, that he was kept properly hydrated, that his blood pressure was brought down and under control. And we needed to keep a careful eye on him to make sure that the stroke wasn't getting worse. I would need to examine him thoroughly, muscle by muscle, so that I knew exactly which parts of his body had been affected. Only if I knew what was affected now would I be able to tell if the stroke was getting worse. If it was getting worse then that would mean that the bleed was continuing and if that happened then we would need to rush him to a major hospital for surgery. If an artery continues to bleed, and just won't stop, then it is sometimes necessary for a neurosurgeon to go into the brain and tie off the artery causing the trouble.

Both Miss Havistock and Mrs Pettigrew could pretty well look after themselves. In fact, I suspected that having them there would be a help. Both would happily help with looking after Frank, even if that just meant taking it in turns to sit by his bedside, keeping an eye on him and being prepared to call Bradshaw or myself if we were needed. In big hospitals they have machines which beep and have blinking lights to tell the nurses and doctors when something goes wrong. We had no such machines in Bilbury.

Just thinking about all the problems made me feel dizzy, and nearly convinced me to do the safe thing and send Frank to Barnstaple. Or maybe to Exeter. The Exeter hospital is bigger and better equipped than the one in Barnstaple. I knew that there were neurosurgeons working there. Maybe if I were to send Frank into one of the big hospitals I should try to arrange to send him to Exeter.

But I resisted the fears, mine and Frank's, and tried to be entirely rational.

I still believed that Frank's best chance was to stay in Bilbury and to be looked after in the Bilbury hospital.

I had, just a week or two earlier read research papers which showed that patients who are kept at home after having suffered heart attacks have just as good a survival rate as patients who are admitted to Coronary Care Units or Intensive Care Units. The problem is, it seems, that a hospital environment can be so terrifying that many patients suffer a relapse, or fail to recover, because of the intense stress they feel. Hospital units which are set up to deal with emergency patients tend to be full of bright lights and beeping machinery. Nurses are forever moving about, checking on this and checking on that. There is no privacy, no quiet, no peace and no chance for a patient to sleep. And so patients who can be kept at home, and looked after quietly in the peace of their own environment, where they feel safe and comfortable, will often do just as well, or even better, than patients who are taken into hospital, connected up to electronic machinery and drip bottles and given vast quantities of medication. This is the case for heart attack patients. But was it also the case for patients who had suffered strokes?

I had left the cuff wrapped around Frank's arm. I took his blood pressure again. It was 200/150. It had come down a little since I had last taken it. That was good news. I checked his limbs again. There had not been any deterioration; the paralysis did not seem to be any worse. If I was correct in thinking that Frank had suffered a bleed and not a clot then the bleed had stopped and Frank's condition had, for the moment at least, stabilised.

Suddenly, I made the decision.

'I'm going to take you into the local hospital,' I told Frank. 'You will do as you are told. You will not smoke any cigarettes. You will not smoke any cigars. You will not smoke a pipe. You will not drink any alcohol. No gin, no beer, no whisky, no wine – no alcohol at all. You will eat what you are told to eat. And you will damned well get better. Do you understand?'

Frank turned his head slightly, looked at me and tried to smile.

'OK,' he said. I heard it clearly.

I looked up to Patsy. 'Ring Bradshaw,' I told her. 'Tell him to get up and get dressed and get ready to receive a patient.' I paused. 'You can tell him who it is.'

I then looked at Gilly. 'I'm keeping Frank in Bilbury because I think I know what's caused his stroke and I think we can deal with it best here. He'll be agitated and stressed and his blood pressure will soar if I send him to

Barnstaple.’

‘Thank you,’ murmured Gilly.

‘But he and you have to do what I tell you,’ I said. ‘He will want you to smuggle in fags and booze. You will be tempted. But if he smokes or drinks alcohol then he will die and there will be nothing I or anyone else can do for him.’

I was deliberately trying to frighten Gilly because I knew that this was probably the best chance I had to make her realise just how important it was that she listened to me and took me seriously. Frank can be persuasive and charming and Gilly adores him. I knew that if Frank asked Gilly to take him a packet of cigarettes or a bottle of whisky she would be tempted.

Suddenly, we could all hear a siren approaching.

The ambulance was on its way and I knew that for many of us in Bilbury life was going to be very different for quite a while.

And I had taken a decision that could, I knew, change all our lives.

A Rather Busy Day

Patsy and I settled Frank into our small local hospital and by the time we got back to Bilbury Grange it was nearly three in the morning. We were both exhausted. Gilly, having helped settle Frank into bed at the hospital, had gone back to the Duck and Puddle where the Rathbones had long since gone to bed. I had given Bradshaw instructions to check Frank's blood pressure regularly and to call me immediately if it went up at all. Bradshaw, who sometimes struck me as having superhuman qualities, seemed perfectly capable of going for days without sleep. Patsy's parents, our babysitters, had gone to bed in our spare room.

Patsy and I crept into the children's bedroom and said goodnight to them. We then undressed, washed without much enthusiasm, and clambered into bed. When I last looked at the alarm clock by our bed it showed ten to four in the morning.

The next time I saw the clock it was five o'clock. I had been awakened by the telephone. It was still a good two and a half hours earlier than my usual start to the day.

The caller was the wife of a patient of mine called Gardner Hoskins, who had only been out of hospital for three days. His wife had rung, in an entirely understandable panic, to tell me that Gardner was complaining of severe abdominal pain. I told her that I would be there as soon as I could, leapt out of bed, pulled on my trousers and a jumper which I always keep by the side of the bed so that I can dress quickly when I have a night call, and was in the car no more than five minutes after I had woken. My black medical bag was already back in the boot of the car.

The Hoskins live in a small cob walled cottage a few miles away from Bilbury Grange and by the time I got there, I was pretty sure that I knew exactly what had happened. After one brief look at Mr Hoskins, I borrowed the telephone and rang for an ambulance. When I'd done that I rang the hospital, spoke to the house surgeon on call and told him that I was sending one of his patients back to him. Not surprisingly, he didn't sound too excited. Hospital doctors who send patients home, like them to stay at home rather than come whizzing back like an unwelcome boomerang.

I told the house surgeon that they would probably have to do some repair work to the stitching on Mr Hoskins's large bowel. That pleased him even less because he knew he would have to telephone the surgical registrar and maybe even the surgical consultant. The chances of either of them being happy to be awoken were slightly slimmer than nil.

Mr Hoskins had been diagnosed with bowel cancer, and a surgeon in Exeter Hospital had removed the growth and pronounced himself satisfied that he had managed to remove all of the tumour. Tests on samples from Mr Hoskins's lymph glands had shown that there had been no spread and the surgeon had told everyone concerned that he was well pleased. Mr Hoskins had an excellent prognosis. We had all been delighted.

But now the patient was lying flat on his back and he was clearly in a good deal of pain. He was as white as the proverbial sheet and he was soaked with sweat. I reached out and touched his abdomen. It was as rigid as a board.

I guessed what had happened because standing on the bedside table there was a large bottle of a well-known fizzy drink; one widely promoted as being suitable for the sick and the convalescent.

'How much of that stuff has he been drinking?' I asked his wife.

She looked puzzled but thought for a while. 'I think he drank two bottles yesterday,' she said. 'But the nurses at the hospital said that he had to have plenty to drink.'

'But preferably not anything fizzy,' I told her.

'What's happened?' asked Mrs Hoskins.

'The gas in that fizzy drink has blown up your husband's bowel and burst the stitches,' I explained. 'As a result of that, some of the bowel contents have escaped into his abdomen. And your husband now has peritonitis.'

'Is it serious?' she asked, whispering.

'It will be if we don't get him straight back into the hospital,' I told her. 'I've asked the ambulance people to get here as fast as they can. And as soon as your husband arrives at the hospital they'll start treatment with an antibiotic. That should help clear up the infection. If I'm right they will then have to go back into your husband's abdomen to repair the stitching to the large bowel.'

'Will he be all right?' she wanted to know.

'He'll be fine,' I told her.

I then waited with her for the ambulance to arrive. And after he had gone off back to Exeter I drove back to Bilbury Grange.

On my way home I had to pass St Damian's, a small Grade I listed 12th century church which, technically at least, stands just outside the village boundary but which is still regarded by many older villagers as the holiest of all the churches in Devon. From the outside, the church remains in pretty much the same state as it must have looked in the 12th century. It has a small, stubby tower but has never had a spire attached.

Saint Damian was a Catholic saint who was the twin brother of Saint Cosmas. I bet there aren't many twin brothers who are both saints. The pair of them, both of whom were physicians who practised in what was, at the time, a Roman province of Syria, were Christian martyrs. They practised their profession for free, making their skills and knowledge available to anyone and everyone. Today the twins are regarded as the patron saints of all doctors and surgeons though, I'm sad to say, there are a good many doctors and surgeons who have never even heard of them.

Curiously, and inexplicably, there are very few churches in England dedicated to the memory of either twin.

I had, I realised, to my shame and regret never once been inside St Damian's. Neither Patsy nor I are regular churchgoers. I once explained to a clergyman that we both considered ourselves to be irreligious Christians and he understood what I meant.

I'm not sure why I noticed the church or felt the need to stop and go inside that morning. But I stopped the car, parked it on a stretch of verge, and tried the door of the church. To my delight the huge oak portal, decorated with huge iron straps and hinges, swung open with great ease. Grinning gargoyles, their likenesses doubtless based on the masons who had built the church, stared down at me; welcoming the honest in spirit and frightening off the evil.

Once inside, I spent a few moments exploring the church. Curiously, as is often the case with some old buildings, it seemed bigger when I got inside than it looked from the outside. There was a row of musicians' stalls and there were some box pews which looked as if they had probably been added in the 18th century. The pulpit looked Georgian and there was a clerk's stall and a reading desk for the minister. A huge impressive wooden screen, which I guessed probably dated from the 18th century, had inscribed upon it the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments. There was a life-sized wooden statue of St Damian which was carved in oak and which had, I suspected, probably been there as long as the church had been standing. I guessed that very little about the church had been changed in the centuries it had been standing.

I opened the small wooden door to one of the pews and knelt on a hand-embroidered kneeler. At that moment I knew why I was there; understood why I had entered the church. And I began to pray.

I prayed for Frank; asking whoever might be listening to help him recover his physical and mental strength. And, I prayed that I had made the right decision in keeping him in Bilbury and not telling the ambulance crew to take him to a major hospital. In my heart and mind, I still felt that I had made the right decision. But I knew that if it turned out that I had made the wrong decision then I would struggle to cope with the guilt I would feel. And there would, I suspected, be many outside the village who would be quick to point a finger and criticise. In the cold light of day, and with a chance to reflect, discuss, share and assess all the consequences, it is often much easier to make a decision. From a personal point of view, the sensible decision would have been to pass Frank's care onto the doctors at the hospital in Barnstaple. No one could have ever blamed me for making that decision. I suddenly remembered, incongruously, that someone had once told me that no one in business, given the task of buying a computer for his firm, had ever been fired for buying an IBM machine. I was reminded of this because I doubt if any doctor has ever been disciplined or pilloried for sending a patient to the nearest large hospital. It is the default decision.

After I had prayed I stayed, kneeling and silent, for a few minutes more. I thanked God for helping me find Bilbury and for giving me a family which filled my life with joy and pride. I thanked Him for the work he had provided for me and I thanked Him for the friends I had found in Devon.

When I got back home, there was little point in going back to bed so I made myself an early breakfast.

I sat outside, with my breakfast on a garden table, and fed the birds and the squirrels and I sang them silly songs, made up as I went along. The garden creatures were all surprised to be fed so early but none of them seemed to mind in the slightest. I enjoy feeding the birds enormously and sometimes lose track of time when I'm out in the garden. Apart from my 'singing', and that of the birds, there was nothing whatsoever to be heard. Indoors, you could have probably heard the sound of dust settling.

One of the joys of living in the countryside is the fact that it is so quiet. No horns tooting, no pneumatic drills, no bus engines, no shouting. The last time I was in a city, I was shocked at the amount of noise – and its very persistence. It seemed to me that many of those who were out and about early in the morning were deliberately trying to make as much noise as they possibly could; perhaps because they hated the idea that the citizens who were still in bed might be enjoying a few minutes more abed than they themselves had enjoyed. The rubbish collectors, in particular, seemed to obtain particular pleasure from banging and shouting far more than seemed entirely necessary.

The star of the morning feeding is invariably the arrival of Percy. He pecks at the dining room window if he hasn't been fed and tends to wander around the garden behind me if I go for a walk. He is so tame that he invariably comes running when I call his name. He is easily recognisable because he has a grey patch amidst the green on the side of his neck, one of his tail feathers is missing and he limps noticeably because he has a bad foot; one of his toes is missing though I don't know why.

The funny thing is that he is the third generation of pheasants who have been coming to have breakfast with us. His grandfather first visited a few years ago and then when he found a wife and had a family he brought them along to introduce them. Possibly, I suspect, because he was rightly proud of them all. The female pheasant lays around a dozen eggs but neither parent takes much care of them, so to have two healthy daughters and a healthy son was not bad going.

Then when his son of the original Percy had his own family, he too brought along his wife, his two daughters and his son.

We call them all Lord Percival, shortened to Percy. I don't know why, we just do.

Percy, the grandson and the third generation, wasn't there this morning and I missed him. I could not remember the last time he hadn't come running when I had called him.

There's a surprising amount of mystery about pheasants. No one ever seems to really know what they eat. Some say they eat grain, others say that they prefer insects and some say they eat whatever seeds they can find, from dandelions and so on. In my experience, pheasants are probably the most omnivorous of birds; eating pretty much whatever is available – even mice if they're particularly peckish. Our Percy will eat peanuts and loves raisins but his preferred breakfast is a handful of sunflower hearts.

I couldn't help worrying about him.

The pheasant is a large bird but he is prey to a good many predators; with man, of course, being at the very top of the list. Pheasants are desperately easy to catch for poachers. They usually roost off the ground (Percy has a favourite branch over our lake) and, strangely, they prefer to run rather than fly away when threatened.

I was still worrying about Percy, hoping at any moment to see him running across the lawn in his slightly, almost comically, uncomfortable way, when Patsy, in her dressing gown, called to tell me that I had a telephone call from the hospital.

When I got to the telephone, I found that the house surgeon at the hospital had rung to tell me that the consultant surgeon had decided that my diagnosis was absolutely accurate. Moreover, X-rays had confirmed our diagnosis. The hospital doctors had started a course of antibiotics and, the young house surgeon told me, would be taking Mr Hoskins back to surgery to repair the broken stitches.

As soon as that call had finished I telephoned Mrs Hoskins and told her the good news. 'He'll need to stay in a hospital for a few more days,' I told her. 'But he'll be home soon.'

I told her to make sure that she didn't give her husband any more fizzy drinks.

And then it was time for the morning surgery.

There were twelve patients that morning and most of them were suffering from fairly straightforward problems.

We'd enjoyed a couple of days of good weather after a terrible few weeks and it seemed that half of the inhabitants of Bilbury had been out in their gardens; cutting grass, pruning overgrown bushes (there's no point in waiting until the autumn to do the pruning when your garden gate has disappeared under a cascade of hazel bush branches) and pulling up weeds. The majority of my patients had muscle strains as a result of doing too much, too quickly and with too much enthusiasm. One or two also had stings (wasp and nettle) and a few odd cuts and lacerations.

The rest of the morning surgery included three people who'd acquired summer colds, one who had a bad gash on his arm which he had repaired, surprisingly successfully, with duct tape ('Didn't like to bother you on a Sunday, doctor', he said, though knowing a little of his reputation I rather suspected that there might have been another reason for his failure to take time out to telephone me or to call at the surgery) and two who simply needed to have their blood pressure checked (both needed to have their medication reduced slightly since the warmer weather often results in a lower blood pressure and a risk of hypotension).

The man who had gashed his arm and then rather artfully taped it together with a length of grey duct tape, is a local character called Albert Rhodes (who is usually known to those in the village as 'Icy' unless he owes them money in which case he is known as 'Slippery').

When I first moved to North Devon I thought that a man who was known as a 'character' would probably be just that: someone who smoked a curvy, Sherlock Holmes pipe and wore a tweed deerstalker hat or a fellow who had swum the Sargasso sea and climbed Mount Everest with his leg in a brace. Or, perhaps, someone like the novelist Patrician Highsmith, who kept snails in her handbag and would feed them lettuce when she was out for the evening. Someone like that.

But I was wrong, of course.

In Bilbury, and indeed throughout North Devon, a man who is known as a 'character' is almost always something of a crook. Saying that someone is a 'character' means that you have to keep your hand on your wallet and count the wheels on your car when he's gone.

‘How did you get this?’ I asked, as I sewed up Mr Rhodes’s arm, hoping that my neat stitching wouldn’t interfere too much with his tattoo of a four-masted schooner. I couldn’t help noticing that he smelt of something cheap and foul. It was, I suddenly realised in silent horror, the same cheap aftershave that I spray onto our rubbish bags so that the foxes and badgers won’t tear them open. I suppose I should have been honoured. ‘Icy’ had obviously sprayed himself with something rather pungent in order to disguise more natural odours. Like courtiers a few centuries ago, he found spraying on perfume easier and quicker than bathing. Sadly, whenever I smell that stuff I think of rubbish bags. Icy isn’t the first of my patients to favour this particularly pungent aromatic.

‘Just caught my arm on a bit of barbed wire,’ he answered without hesitation. I knew he was lying. A barbed wire cut always seems to have a unique appearance, showing both the entry point and the signs of an attempted disentanglement. This was definitely not a cut made by barbed wire, razor wire or any other type of wire. This was a cut caused by a knife. Mr Rhodes had been stabbed.

When he’d taken off his shirt I’d seen the scars of pellet marks on his back and one or two wounds which could have easily been the result of previous knife fights. I remembered that I’d treated Mr Rhodes on several previous occasions when he had come to see me showing signs that he may have come off second best in some sort of confrontation.

‘Are you sure this was barbed wire?’ I asked him, peering at the wound. ‘I need to know what caused the wound if I’m going to treat it successfully.’

There was a long, long pause. ‘It might have been a knife,’ he admitted, after some hesitation.

I guessed that he had probably lied because he didn’t want me to report him to the police. Mr Rhodes was a poacher and a petty thief. I suspected that he had probably been selling stolen stuff to a fence and had found himself in a knife fight.

‘I’m not going to report you to the police or anyone else,’ I assured him. ‘Have I ever reported you in the past?’

I remembered now that he had twice come to see me to have shotgun pellets removed from his back and his bottom. He knew damned well that I had never reported him, or anyone else, to the police.

He shook his head and then looked at me for a while, weighing me up, before nodding. ‘It was a knife,’ he admitted. Although he trusted me more than most doctors he was, nevertheless, still rather cautious.

I know that the medical establishment and the police believe that doctors have a duty to report any suspicious wounds to the authorities but I also know that I am the only doctor for miles around and if I get a reputation for dobbing in my patients then people will simply refuse to come to see me. I was pretty certain that Mr Rhodes had obtained his wound some distance from Bilbury but had been reluctant to visit a hospital or local doctor lest he find himself answering questions from a policeman. He had waited until he got back to Bilbury because he knew that I would treat him with proper reverence for the Hippocratic Oath and the principles of confidentiality. The rules for country doctors have to be rather different to the rules for city based doctors and hospital doctors. I need my patients to trust me always; and to know that whatever they tell me or show me will be kept confidential. Without trust my job would be impossible. If doctors break the Hippocratic Oath of confidentiality then they don’t really have much left. And if I, as a country doctor, didn’t respect my patients’ privacy they wouldn’t come and see me at all. And if they didn’t see me then they probably wouldn’t see anyone.

I cleaned the wound, put in six or seven stitches, gave him a couple of injections and then wrote out a prescription for an antibiotic. ‘Come and see me in a couple of days,’ I told him.

‘To have the stitches taken out?’ he asked.

‘No, no, the stitches will need to be in for longer than that. I just want to make sure that the wound isn’t infected.’

He nodded, put his shirt back on and then touched his forehead with the index finger of his right hand in a gesture of respect. ‘Grateful to you, doctor,’ he said. ‘You’re a reliable fellow for a man of learning.’

I took the compliment with a nod of my own and reminded him to come back and see me in 48 hours. I don’t like or trust poachers or thieves in general and I don’t much like Mr Rhodes in particular but my job is to try to mend him and keep him alive rather than to pass moral judgement on his behaviour.

After Mr Rhodes had gone, right at the end of the surgery, just as I felt certain that I was nearly finished for the morning, Mr Mole appeared; Gerald Lancaster Mole to give him his full name.

‘I waited until you’d seen everyone else,’ he said, as he sat down with a sigh. There was a long pause during which he adjusted the razor sharp crease in his trousers. It was a long time since I’d seen a local inhabitant with a deliberate crease in his trousers. Most of my patients have creased trousers but the creases have been earned rather than delivered by the manufacturer. Mr Mole sighed again. ‘I don’t think you’re going to be able to solve my problem in a few minutes.’

My heart sank. I already felt as though I had done a full day’s work and I knew that I had three patients requiring home visits.

I saw from his medical notes that Mr Mole was 65-years-old. His birthday had been just six weeks earlier and so he had officially been a pensioner for precisely that long. I wondered if he was having a bit of a crisis. The midlife crisis is well known, and often written about, but there are, of course, other times in our lives when we find ourselves facing, and having to deal with, psychological problems as we go through age milestones.

So, for example, many people find retirement difficult to cope with because it is so clearly a defining point in life. For most people their life's work is over, and the arrival of the first pension cheque is a clear sign that the last days of autumn are finished and the potentially harsh, uncomfortable days of winter have arrived. People who held important jobs, and who felt useful at least and important at best, will suddenly find that they are no longer powerful or significant.

'When I got to the age of 63 I thought I would build a wall around the garden,' said Mr Mole. 'I knew I only had a couple of years to go before I reached retirement age and I thought that if I started the wall before I retired, and built up my bricklaying skills, it would be something to do in my twilight years. I've never been a man for sport, not a golfer or a tennis player or a hiker, and I've never seen the point in collecting things, stamps, books and so on. I find television provides a thoroughly unsatisfying diet of unremitting pabulum. Nevertheless, like a lot of people, I know I spent much of my life looking forward to the day when I would retire; the day when I wouldn't have to put on the suit and tie, catch the train and plod my way through the City with the rest of the lemmings. But the closer my retirement came the more I began to worry about what I'd do with the rest of my life. I didn't say anything to my wife, she worked as a librarian and retired at 55 and now she works in a charity shop three days a week, but I threw myself into building my wall and to be honest I think I became a bit obsessed. I spent all my evenings and weekends working on it.'

'My wife and I have always kept ourselves to ourselves and she's always been happy to stay at home, watching television and doing her knitting. She's very keen on knitting. I have more jumpers and cardigans than I could possibly wear out and a lot of the stuff she knits they sell in the charity shop where she works.'

Mr Mole took out a pen and started to fiddle with the top. 'We've never been ones for having an active social life,' he said, and then stopped as though thinking about this. He put the pen away and pulled out a linen handkerchief which he started to twist between his fingers. 'I told myself that I was doing the bricklaying because I wanted a nice wall around the garden, something to give us privacy, but eventually I realised that wasn't the case at all – the building of the wall was a goal in itself.'

'I've seen it,' I told him, 'it's a very splendid wall. You can be proud of it.'

'Oh I am, I am. But now that I've finished the wall my life seems totally without purpose. I built my wall too damned quickly and now I have nothing left to do. My working life was over when I retired and now the only really engaging hobby I've ever had is over too.' He looked straight at me. 'It seems strange to realise that my life is now pretty well over. I'm still alive, still here, still breathing, but that's about it.' He sighed, put away the handkerchief and took out the pen again. He sat and thought for a while. I didn't say anything. Sometimes, people need time to think through what they want to say.

'The funny thing is that my life just sort of happened,' he said at last. 'I never planned anything. I admire those people who set off at the age of 20 with plans for their whole lives. They set themselves targets and then they set off along the route they've designed for themselves. I never managed to do any of that. Everything that has happened to me has happened more or less by accident.'

'I think that's probably much the same for a lot of people,' I told him. 'It's certainly true for me. Serendipity rules OK?'

He smiled and we sat in silence for a few moments; both of us immersed in our memories.

'I can't keep building walls around the garden, can I?'

I smiled but didn't say anything.

'I don't suppose you want any walls building, doctor?' He was smiling and I don't think it was a serious question but I answered it nevertheless.

I shook my head, rather sadly. 'I'm afraid we have all the walls we want,' I told him. 'We're pretty well satisfied as far as walls are concerned.'

'I suppose I feel a bit depressed, really,' said Mr Mole. 'Have you come across this sort of problem before, doctor?'

I told him it was really very common. 'And it's not just retired folk who feel as though their lives have come to an abrupt and uncomfortable halt,' I pointed out, explaining that it is not at all uncommon for people of any age who have worked hard on some particular project to feel depressed and empty when the project is completed. Even students who have studied for an examination may feel strangely unhappy when the exam is over and the concentrated period of study is finished. Explorers who have spent months or years preparing for a particular expedition will often feel enormously sad when the expedition is over – however successful it may have been, and however painful and arduous the exploration. When we throw ourselves into something then it is inevitable that the conclusion should leave us empty in some strange, almost indefinable way. I told him that it has been said that ‘when Alexander saw the breadth of his domain he wept for there were no more lands to conquer’.

I told Mr Mole that he had done the right thing by finding himself a project, the building of his massive garden wall, into which he could put his body, mind and spirit when his day to day work was done. But, sadly, he had thrown himself into the project with such commitment that he had finished the wall at about the same time as he had retired – leaving himself doubly unemployed and empty.

I told him that I could give him pills to help smother the sense of sadness he felt but that they would make no long-term difference. ‘When you stop the pills the chances are that the sad feeling you have now will come back. You will have simply delayed the moment when you have to come face to face with your sense of emptiness.’

‘So, what do I do?’ asked Mr Mole.

‘That’s easy,’ I told him, ‘you have to find something new to fill your life. Maybe not a wall to build, but something that provides you with a real challenge. Make a list of all the things you are interested in, the things you like doing, the things you’ve always wanted to do but have never had the time to try.’

‘I’m too old to try anything new,’ said Mr Mole, rather sadly.

‘Nonsense!’ I said, firmly. ‘People much older than you are have done astonishing things with their later years.’

I told him that if he would make the list I had suggested then I would think hard about his problem and put together a list of people who had done great things in their sixties and beyond. I told him to come back and see me later that same evening.

And so that afternoon, after I’d finished the home visits and had called to see how Frank was getting on in our local hospital, I spent an hour or two searching through the reference books in my library and creating a list of all the astonishing things people had done after the age of 65. Frank had not been looking too bad at all. His blood pressure had come down a little more and there had been no deterioration in his condition. Bradshaw thought he was definitely looking better.

It wasn’t too difficult an exercise for I have managed to put together quite a decent reference library. Many of the books were left to me by Dr Brownlow, my predecessor and mentor, who had collected together an impressive library. Some of the books I collected myself, for I am an inveterate bibliophile.

When Mr Mole returned to the surgery that evening, I handed him a copy of my list. I had written it out twice, and had put the original list into a filing cabinet because I strongly suspected that I might be able to use it again in my life as a country doctor.

‘You might get a little inspiration from this!’ I told him, handing him the product of my research.

(Editor’s Note: A copy of the list the Doc gave to Mr Mole appears as an appendix at the back of this book.)

Mr Mole looked at the list with increasing astonishment. Then he looked up at me and smiled. ‘OK,’ he said. ‘You win!’ He looked at the list again and then shook his head. ‘I’m astonished,’ he admitted. ‘This list is truly inspirational.’ He looked at the list again. ‘Painting was at the top of my list,’ he said. ‘I’d thought for some time that I’d like to try oil painting. But to be honest I thought I was too old.’ He looked at my list again. ‘Now I’m not so sure,’ he said, with a beaming smile. ‘I think I’ll get myself to the nearest art shop, buy some canvas and some paints and see what I can do.’

He stood up, shook my hand and thanked me.

I felt pleased that my work in my library was appreciated.

As soon as the evening surgery was over, I sat down to dinner. Patsy had thoughtfully prepared one of my favourite, simple meals: two fried eggs, a huge pile of chips and a good supply of onion rings. It wasn’t a healthy meal but occasionally, when I’ve had a hard day I need what Patsy calls ‘little boy food’. And this was definitely one of those days.

As I sat down to dinner I felt drained.

It had been a long, difficult day with rather too much drama for me. Patsy and I had already decided to watch an old black and white movie after dinner; possibly something starring Humphrey Bogart. Maybe *Casablanca* or *The Maltese Falcon*. We have a good collection of old black and white films on video tape. I prefer to watch films on video because if the telephone goes and I have to deal with a patient then I can stop the film for a while and carry on viewing afterwards. I have, over the years, missed the ends of more films than I care to remember through trying to watch them on the television.

We had put the children to bed and were sitting down to watch the film when the doorbell went. I stood up and with a weary body and a weary heart I made my way to the door.

It was ‘Icy’ Rhodes, the man whose knife wound I had sewn up earlier in the day.

‘Just wanted to say thank you for sewing me up, doc,’ he said. And he produced from behind his back a dead pheasant.

‘Picked this up while I was out in the woods yesterday,’ he said, handing me the bird.

I looked at the bird and then at him.

'Just a small 'thank you',' he explained. 'Very grateful to you.'

I took the bird which he was still holding out to me. I started to tell him that Patsy and I are vegetarian but the words wouldn't come out. The pheasant had a patch of grey hair on one side of its head and it had a bad foot. One of its tail feathers was missing.

I was about to hand the bird back to him but something in me stopped me doing so.

'See you in a couple of day then, doc,' said 'Icy'. He turned away and was swallowed up in the blackness of the night.

I shut the front door and took the pheasant into the house.

Patsy came into the hallway to see what was happening. She stared at me and then at the pheasant I was holding.

'Is that Percy?' she asked.

I was so upset I couldn't speak. I just nodded. Tears started to roll down my cheeks.

'What are you going to do with him?' she asked.

'I'm going to bury him,' I told her, in a whisper.

I took Percy outside with me and found a spade.

Patsy held the torch while I dug a hole and buried our friend. Tears rolled down our cheeks. We said a prayer for him. There would now be no fourth generation of pheasants having breakfast with us.

It had not been a day I wanted to repeat any time soon.

Frank's Astonishing Recovery

The consequences of a stroke can, of course, be devastating; both to the patient and to those who are close to him or her. Movement can be lost, mental skills may deteriorate or disappear and the patient may, to those around, appear to have lost all the skills which he or she had taken a lifetime to acquire.

But all those skills are not necessarily lost for ever.

They may be hidden; temporarily lost and temporarily unavailable.

And although the damage done by a stroke may, it is true, sometimes be permanent it is also often possible for the patient to recover lost abilities. The patient who has lost the ability to walk or to hold a pen or throw a ball may recover all those lost skills. The patient who has lost the power of speech, and who appears to have lost the ability to converse may, in time, make a startling recovery and recover most if not all of their lost abilities.

It used to be thought that a patient who had a stroke would stop recovering a few days or weeks after the stroke had occurred. It was believed that if the effects of a stroke were not overcome within a few months then there would be little or no chance of there being any future improvement.

But all this was wrong.

A patient who has had a stroke may continue to improve not for days, weeks or months but for years afterwards.

However, this improvement does not usually come easily. The patient will need a massive amount of help and support and encouragement if they are to have a chance of regaining those skills which have been lost.

In the immediate aftermath of a stroke, most patients who are aware of what has happened to them are, not surprisingly, depressed.

It must be terrifying to find, quite suddenly, that those basic abilities which you had taken for granted, are suddenly lost to you. It must be terrifying to find yourself unable to stand, walk, converse, read the paper or even clean your own teeth. It must be terrifying for someone who was formerly strong and independent to find themselves weak and dependent; quite unable even to feed themselves without assistance and, perhaps most frightening of all, incapable of making themselves understood.

Patients who have had a stroke face frustration, boredom, despair, depression and fear and those who are close to them suffer exactly the same horrifying mixture of emotions.

It was fortunate for us all that we realised that Frank could understand what we were saying. Right from the start we were able to institute a simple method of communication which enabled us to ensure not only that he understood what we were saying to him but that he, in turn, could communicate some of his thoughts and feelings to us.

By understanding that Frank could still understand us, we avoided the awful possibility (so regrettably common among stroke victims) of the patient being treated as a child or an idiot by well-meaning relatives and friends.

Everyone around him understood that Frank had not lost all his abilities, and had not suddenly gone from being Frank to being a helpless child, but that he had simply lost the ability to use his body and his mind in the normal way.

Frank had suffered an illness and he needed our help.

In the days which followed, Frank's admission to what we think of as the Bilbury Cottage Hospital (but what the authorities prefer to think of as the Brownlow Country Hotel), it slowly became abundantly clear that I had made the right decision in not sending him to one of the major local hospitals.

No one except Patsy knew just how relieved I was when Frank's blood pressure came down and his condition did not worsen. It had probably been the most difficult decision I'd ever had to make as a doctor. I have made many mistakes in my life. I thanked God, Hippocrates, Aesculapius and St Damian that this wasn't one of them.

And although we could not prove this, because no hospital tests were ever done, I was, I think, correct in assuming that Frank had suffered an intra-cerebral bleed caused by his high blood pressure.

I believe that if I had sent him to a hospital in Barnstaple or Exeter, Frank's condition could well have deteriorated. He would, I believe, have been more anxious and more frightened and there is a good chance that his blood pressure would have gone even higher.

No one can know any of this for sure, of course.

But what is clear is that Frank's blood pressure did come under control relatively speedily. And once his condition stabilised we were able to start thinking about his rehabilitation.

Bradshaw and I both checked Frank's muscle power, nerve capacities and so on twice a day and no doctor in the world has ever been more relieved when the tests which we did showed that our patient's condition was not deteriorating. The fact that it was not deteriorating meant that the bleed which had, I believe, caused the problem was not still causing damage.

There was no guarantee that Frank would not have another stroke, of course, but I was confident that if I could keep Frank's blood pressure as low as possible (partly with the right balance of prescription drugs, partly by filling him with confidence, partly by improving his general health and eradicating some of the bad habits which had put his body in peril in the first place and partly by ensuring that he remained calm and free of all unnecessary stresses) then we could start the long, slow process to recovery.

'Will he ever be able to walk again?' asked Gilly, three days after Frank had suffered his stroke. 'Will he be able to talk?'

Gilly's father had suffered a stroke and he had remained bedridden until his death just a few months later. Gilly's fears for Frank were, inevitably, coloured by her experience with her father. 'I believe that he will be able to walk and talk and help you run the Duck and Puddle,' I assured her, with a confidence which may not have been entirely genuine but which was, I believed, vital in giving her and Frank the faith that was necessary for his recovery. 'We'll work with him and we'll cajole and assist and, if necessary, bully him into doing everything that will help him make as full a recovery as possible. It will be hard and it may be slow and he may not make a complete recovery but we will get Frank back to being Frank.'

I'm still not sure just how much of this I really believed, of course.

Helping a stroke victim to recover lost skills can be, and usually is, a long and painful process. I did not know for certain that Frank would recover. But I did know for certain that I needed to instil confidence and belief in both Frank and Gilly.

If they did not truly believe that he would get better then the healing process would be infinitely more challenging and, quite possibly, utterly impossible.

The patient who accepts his plight as merely a consequence of fate, an unalterable punishment for past sins of omission or commission, will probably never make any meaningful recovery.

The relatives and friends who accept that the patient will never talk again or will never again be able to walk will probably find their fears to be self-fulfilling.

Of course, many stroke victims do not ever recover. Many suffer additional strokes. Some deteriorate, for a whole host of reasons, and fail to make any meaningful recovery.

But there are, no doubt, many who fail to make any recovery because they do not believe that recovery of any kind is ever really possible.

Right from the start, Frank had a number of things in his favour.

First and foremost he had a wife who loved him, who cared for him and who was prepared to fight tooth and nail for him.

Second, he was still living in the village where he felt comfortable and he was, therefore, surrounded by friends who also cared for him and who would, when asked, do everything in their power to help him make a good recovery.

Third, he was the only real patient in our hospital. The other two patients quickly recognised that Frank's need was far greater than their own and within hours they switched from being patients to being live-in members of staff. Over the weeks which followed Frank's admission, they remained in the hospital and they worked hard and with genuine enthusiasm to help speed his recovery. I'm not sure that either of them realised it but, of course, by dedicating themselves to Frank's recovery they put their own problems to one side and, I have no doubt, helped themselves recover and grow stronger. Their lives acquired real purpose and, as my conversation with Mr Mole had reminded me, few things give us more strength than having a target, an aim and a reason for living: a goal and a motive for each day.

Two days after Frank had been admitted to our small Bilbury hospital, I tried to arrange for a physiotherapist and a speech therapist to come over to help expedite his recovery. I might as well have tried to arrange for Frank to take a trip on the next rocket to the moon. It would have probably been easier.

Living in a small, isolated village like Bilbury has many advantages but it does mean that when it comes to obtaining outside help you are sometimes pretty near to the bottom of the queue. In a way, of course, it is understandable. Just travelling out to Bilbury and back again takes a good deal of time. And when a physiotherapist or speech therapist is travelling they won't be doing what they are paid to do. Still, it was a disappointment.

So, as is often the case in Bilbury, we were on our own. And it seemed to me to be clear that we had to prepare our own recovery programme to help Frank regain his lost skills. I knew from my own hospital experience that stroke patients who are left to their own devices make very little progress and, indeed, often tend to deteriorate. The patient who stays in bed and does nothing will lose increasing amounts of muscle power and before long, the limbs which were not affected by the stroke will also begin to lose function. And without stimulation, the brain deteriorates still further too and an inability to communicate will be compounded by increasing frustration and boredom.

I had to recruit aides, assistants, therapists and teachers from among the Bilbury villagers. And I knew that I had to explain to every single one of them that Frank had not suddenly lost all his skills. Too many people (including professionals who really ought to know better) talk to stroke patients as if they were slightly backward children. This can be enormously depressing and painful for the patient whose brain is still functioning perfectly well but who has lost basic communication skills. I cannot begin to imagine how frustrating it must be for a man or woman to suddenly find themselves being patronised, talked down to and talked about when they can understand everything that is being said to them and about them but simply cannot respond with words or actions because their body will no longer respond in an appropriate manner.

All those who were going to help Frank had to understand that his lifetime of knowledge was still there, hidden inside his brain, and now simply had to be unlocked so that it could once again be accessed.

We needed to recruit as many people as possible who were prepared to give one or two hours a week to help Frank regain the physical and mental skills which he had lost. And we needed to start the programme as soon as we could; before Frank had time to become too upset and depressed by his condition.

My first decision was to plan a simple exercise programme. This had to be designed to help Frank regain the ability to use the side of his body that the stroke had paralysed. We needed to exercise the muscles, push them into working again and so enable him to use the leg and the arm that were lying useless; a hindrance rather than a help.

Without a professional physiotherapist to show us the ropes, Bradshaw and I created a very simple regimen of exercises, and to make sure that Frank did not get too tired we decided to limit the physical part of his recovery to one hour every morning and one hour every afternoon. This would, we knew, be far more assistance than a patient in an ordinary hospital could possibly hope to receive.

We decided to fill as much of the rest of each day as we could with a programme of mental exercises designed to help Frank regain the use of his mind.

Since we didn't have any professionals to call on, this obviously meant that we had to compile a team of volunteers.

Gilly was obviously top of the list but she still had to run the Duck and Puddle. There was no question of closing the pub, for if the Duck and Puddle shut its doors, Frank and Gilly would have absolutely no income. They would, however, still have substantial outgoings. Since they were both officially classified as self-employed, they would not be able to claim any unemployment benefits.

Fortunately, Adrienne, my sister-in-law, came to Gilly's rescue by offering to help out behind the bar and in the kitchen. 'I hate hospitals of any kind and I'm absolutely no good at all with sick people,' Adrienne told Gilly with her usual disarming candour, 'but I desperately want to help somehow. So I'll help out at the Duck and Puddle for as many hours a day as you need me.'

And she was as good as her word.

Throughout the darkest months of Frank's recovery, she worked several hours a day at the Duck and Puddle and steadfastly refused to accept any payment. Gilly, it has to be said, responded by refusing to accept money from Patchy when he ate or drank at the pub.

Finding helpers who could help Frank perform simple muscle strengthening exercises, and then stand alongside him as he re-learnt how to walk, was not difficult. Everyone in the village liked Frank. He drank too much, smoked too much, ate too much, swore too much and had absolutely no time for bureaucrats, but these were vices with which people could sympathise. Whenever there was a storm, Frank would be the first man in the village to submit his insurance claim (and the first to help enhance the damage that had been done if it meant a bigger claim could be made) but few villagers could hold that against him since most of them did much the same sort of thing themselves. But if anyone in the village was going through a bad time, Frank would always be among the first to help. He would give money he couldn't afford to give, pay a grocery bill at Peter Marshall's shop if he knew of some old villager who was having a hard time and give drinks 'on the slate' when he knew damned well that the customer would never be able to pay his bill and that the 'slate' would never be wiped clean.

And so, finding helpers who would volunteer to give a couple of hours a week to help Frank walk again was not difficult.

Within a fortnight Frank was out of bed, wandering slowly up and down the corridors of Dr Brownlow's sprawling old home. Within little more than a month he was wandering around the garden, always accompanied by two helpers (Frank is a big man and right from the start I made it a rule that whenever he was out of bed he would be assisted not by one but by two volunteers) and although progress might have appeared slow, it was steady and there wasn't a week that went by without someone saying that they couldn't believe just how much Frank had improved.

Putting together a rota of people prepared to help Frank regain his mental skills was always going to be more difficult. For one thing, most people were rather frightened by the prospect of helping someone learn to speak again. And they were even more frightened, if that were possible, about the prospect of teaching someone how to recapture the parts of their mind which they had lost. Most people in the village had absolutely no experience, or knowledge, of what is, after all, a fairly specialised area of medicine.

But, to my astonishment and delight, we soon found that we had enough villagers to keep Frank occupied for three or even four hours a day. Patsy found herself in charge of preparing the rota of helpers and she fitted in those who were helping Frank relearn how to walk and use his arms with those who were helping him learn how to speak and think.

At first, we made the mistake of trying to capture Frank's imagination with books and magazines. Several volunteers tried encouraging him to relearn the alphabet or how to do simple crossword puzzles. This, however, was a mistake because Frank quickly became bored.

And then Thumper had a brainwave.

'Frank is never going to be interested in whether or not the cat sat on the damned mat,' he exclaimed, after finding one well-meaning old lady using a child's reading book to help Frank recover his literacy skills. 'Frank likes darts and dominoes and cards.'

And so we revised our teaching methods to incorporate games and skills which we knew Frank would find invigorating. And the teachers found these things far more exciting, too.

Thumper set up a dartboard and organised games of darts. To begin with, Frank's ability to throw darts was so poor that the wall surrounding the dartboard quickly became peppered with so many holes that it looked as if it had contracted woodworm. But the most important part of the game was undoubtedly the counting. Thumper made Frank keep score and waited, with surprising patience, while Frank worked out which section of the board the next player needed to aim at. Frank had never been a good darts player (he always used to say that he didn't like any sporting activity which required him to put down the glass he was holding and that darts was all right only if your glass was nearly empty and you weren't likely to spill any) but within a few weeks there was no one in the village who could beat him. Frank, who wasn't as slow as many believed, realised that the modestly skilful player who aims for the number 19 on the dartboard will almost always do better than the greedier player who aims for the 20. 'The thing is,' he told me confidentially one day, 'that if you aim at the 20 and miss then you'll probably score a 1 or a 5, but if you aim at the 19 and miss you'll hit the 3 or the 7. That's enough to give you an edge.'

Several of the spinster ladies who were helping were aghast when they came into the hospital and found Frank, Thumper, Patchy and me playing poker. But Frank loved those games and his recovery was, I believe, far faster because he was engaged than it would have been if we had tried to persuade him to do some basket weaving or draw pictures with crayons. Because Frank's concentration was poor, we would switch games several times an hour – moving from poker to whist to dominoes and back again.

And to help Frank's language skills Patchy found a wonderful, tattered, book which contained scores of recipes for old-fashioned cocktails. Frank loved that book and read it so much that he knew every word by heart. He had never been much of a man for cocktails (beer, gin and whisky had been his accustomed tipples) but now they became an important part of his life and a massive part of his recovery. When Patsy mentioned this in a letter she sent to the Rathbones, who were back in America, they sent over several American books about cocktail making. Frank loved these books and devoured the contents of these with the same unlimited enthusiasm. In return, Patsy and I regularly sent the Rathbones photographs of their ever-expanding porcine prize.

All these things gave Frank confidence and belief.

I kept him in the hospital for three months; not because he needed to stay there for so long but because I thought it would be easier for the volunteers to work with him in the spacious rooms of Dr Brownlow's old home than it would be to work with him in the Duck and Puddle. But when he went back to live at the Duck and Puddle, the volunteers all went with him, and Frank's daily recovery continued apace.

After six months, Frank was damned near back to where he had been before the stroke. He was a lot fitter too. He had lost two stones in weight and completely stopped smoking. I allowed him one or two small alcoholic drinks a day because I felt that he needed the reward and I knew that giving up everything at once would have been, perhaps, just too difficult. Even his diet changed. Gilly refused to make chips for him and he even began to enjoy the healthy meals she started to cook. Oddly enough, she told me that many of the other villagers who regularly ate at the Duck and Puddle chose to eat healthier food as they realised just how devastating the consequences of a poor diet could be. Peter Marshall, at the village shop, told me that he was selling just two thirds as many cigarettes and cigars as he had been selling before Frank was taken poorly that fateful night at the Duck and Puddle.

Frank's recovery gave the village a wonderful feeling of communal warmth. This was partly because just about everyone who lived in Bilbury had helped in one way or another. It was partly because it was wonderful to see someone overcome the terrible consequences of a stroke. But it was, I think, also because everyone was cheered to see that Frank had, with the help of his friends, proved that it is possible to recover from a stroke. Knowing that diminished the fear of a terrible illness. It meant that others might do the same.

The Surprise Pregnancy

'I know you'll probably think it pretty unlikely, but I think I'm pregnant, doctor.'

The new patient sighed, slumped down on the chair in front of me and looked at me as though daring me not to laugh.

I never laugh at patients, however outlandish or unexpected their condition might be.

'What makes you think you're pregnant?'

'I've been putting on weight, I have difficulty in sleeping, my tummy is very swollen and every morning I feel nauseous.'

'Have you been sick?'

'I'm usually sick once or twice before breakfast. But then the sickness feeling gradually goes away.'

'Anything else?'

'I get backache quite a lot. I've never had any back trouble before. But for the last few weeks I've had a lot of back pain.'

I nodded and made some notes on the patient's folder.

'And I get cravings.'

'Cravings?'

'I ate two bags of pork scratchings the other evening. And I usually hate pork scratchings.'

I nodded and murmured something. 'How long has this been going on?' I asked.

'Three or four months now.'

'Have you ever had anything like it before?'

'No. Definitely not.'

I wasn't quite sure what question to ask next or if, indeed, there were any other appropriate questions to ask. So it seemed to me that the best action would probably to perform an examination.

'Pop behind the screen and slip your things off, and then climb up on the couch,' I said. 'I need to have a look at you.'

'How much do you need me to take off?'

'Everything down to your underwear,' I said.

Two minutes later Mr Porchester was lying on the couch, wearing only his underpants and socks, and I was examining his clearly swollen abdomen, desperately trying to decide what to do and say next. Since there were no breasts to be swollen and tender, and no vagina to be examined, my options were strictly limited.

'My breasts are sore too,' he said. He reached up and touched his left nipple. 'My nipples especially.'

Gently, I examined his chest. I wasn't entirely sure that I wasn't imagining it but I thought there was some swelling in the breast area.

'Am I going to have a baby?' he asked.

'No,' I said. 'I don't think that's very likely.'

'Oh,' he said. He sounded disappointed.

'It really isn't possible,' I pointed out. 'Your basic architecture isn't suited to either conception or to childbirth.'

He looked at me, thought for a moment, and then nodded. 'I suppose not,' he said. He seemed genuinely disappointed. I thought then, and still think, that although he knew that it was impossible for him to be pregnant, a small part of him rather hoped that he might be about to experience a real pregnancy and to give birth to the world's first such miracle baby. It occurred to me that the newspaper serial rights, the book rights and the film rights would be worth a fortune. Mr Porchester would become a millionaire overnight.

I took his pulse, checked his blood pressure and then weighed him. When I'd done all this, a sort of unusual pre-natal check I suppose, I told him that he could get dressed.

He put on his shirt and a pair of khaki shorts which he wears whatever the weather. I have seen him wearing shorts when there was snow on the ground. Whenever I see Mr Porchester, I cannot help thinking that if God had intended men to wear shorts he would not have given them such knobbly knees.

'There really isn't anything I can give you,' I told him, when he was dressed and sitting down in front of me. 'Your symptoms will almost certainly disappear when your wife has had her baby.' Mr Porchester's unusual disorder was not unique. It is a registered medical disorder known as Couvade Syndrome. I asked him how his wife was doing, though I suspected that she was probably doing very well indeed. She usually does.

Mr Porchester told me that his wife was doing very well.

'I don't think she is ever healthier than she is when she's pregnant,' said Mr Porchester. 'That's the funny thing, really. She sails through her pregnancies without any discomforting symptoms.' He paused, thought for a moment, and then half smiled. 'And yet I'm now having all the symptoms that you might expect her to have.'

Mrs Porchester has a vast number of children and produces babies as effortlessly as a cat produces kittens. She once told me that she gets pregnant if a man comes within ten yards of her and she seems to be so fertile that for all I know she could well be telling the truth.

Potelmy Porchester is her fourth husband, though to be honest I seem to remember that she wasn't actually married to any of the first three, but that they were what is usually known as 'common law husbands'.

Potelmy owns to being the father of the three most recent children, though the fourth youngest does bear a remarkable resemblance to him and I have long suspected that the pair may have started their procreative activities some time before the relationship was formalised.

I have difficulty remembering how many children they have, let alone what all the children are called, but I haven't felt bad about this since I discovered that Mr and Mrs Porchester both have the same problem. They are the only married couple I know who have photographs of all their children pinned up on a board in their kitchen. Alongside each photograph is the child's name and the date of his or her birth. They introduced this sensible system when one of the boys celebrated his twelfth birthday without so much as a card, let alone a present. The poor boy went through the whole day expecting his parents and siblings to yell 'surprise' and to overwhelm him with cards, gifts and a cake. He only realised that his birthday had been completely forgotten when his Mum tucked him up in bed and gave him a goodnight kiss. The hapless parents realised that they had erred when one of the other boys reported that the birthday boy was sobbing his heart out. Potelmy hurried round to Peter Marshall's emporium and purchased the requisite articles, bringing them home just in time to celebrate the birthday. They had just ninety minutes to spare.

I told Potelmy to come back to see me in a couple of weeks for another pre-natal check-up. I even gave him one of the little cards I usually hand out to mothers-to-be and which includes advice on diet, weight, exercise, sexual activity and so on. There really wasn't much point in it, of course, but the medical profession knows very little about Couvade syndrome and I thought it might be a good idea to keep an eye on his blood pressure. I also thought it might help him cope more readily if he thought that someone was taking his condition seriously. I made a note to telephone the medical library at the British Medical Association building in London and to ask them to send me any recent medical papers they could find relating to the disorder. Not for the first time I found myself looking forward to the time when it will, I am sure, be possible to consult medical libraries from afar by using a computer.

To be honest, I wasn't all that surprised at Potelmy's seemingly bizarre condition. When I was a student at medical school, I saw a man with a similar pseudo pregnancy condition and the memory of that patient has, not surprisingly perhaps, stayed with me.

Men suffering from Couvade Syndrome invariably experience some or all of the symptoms their wife or girlfriend shows. Just what causes the misconception is a real mystery.

The term was first used in the 1860s to refer to rituals that have, over the centuries, been recorded in various societies. For example, in Ancient Egypt, a new father would take to his bed when his wife gave birth. And among the Cantabri people there was a custom whereby a new father-to-be would complain of labour pains and go to bed the minute his wife started to deliver her baby. He would then be treated as though he were pregnant. Similar rituals were not uncommon among other cultures – including in China and Russia and parts of the American continent. The idea, it is thought, may have been a conscious or unconscious effort to ward off evil demons and spirits by distracting them and, thereby, protecting the new mother and her vulnerable new born baby.

Some doctors believe that Couvade is an entirely psychosomatic disorder. In France, in the 1920s, it was believed that the syndrome usually occurred in marriages where the female partner was the dominant one. Others now wonder if there could possibly be a hormonal influence – with the wife's hormones having an influence on her husband's body. This sounds strange but it is known that similar things do happen. For example, if two women live or work closely together then it is quite common for them to find that their menstrual periods begin to coincide – even though they may have been some days apart at the start of the relationship. I wonder if, in the future, researchers might find that men experience changes in testosterone, oestradiol and prolactin levels when their spouse becomes pregnant.

Most men who develop symptoms of pregnancy have wives who are pregnant. It's almost as though the condition, and the associated symptoms, are catching.

Potelmy's wife, Lemuela, is seven months pregnant with her umpteenth child though, as Potelmy said, she has not really shown any of the usual signs of pregnancy. Her abdomen is swollen, of course, and she is obviously pregnant. But she has had none of the uncomfortable or unpleasant symptoms sometimes associated with pregnancy. Lemuela is perfect proof of the fact that although there may occasionally be problems, pregnancy is definitely not an illness – and a healthy pregnancy should never be treated as an illness unless there are signs or symptoms which need to be treated.

Lemuela has shelled out all her babies with consummate ease and I am confident that the latest birth will be just as free of complications. She reminds me of a newspaper editor I once knew in London. She took the morning off when she had her first baby but was back in her office the same afternoon. Unbelievably, she had a breakfast meeting with two American agents before she went to the delivery room. Lumuela doesn't have a job outside the home but if she did have then I am pretty certain that she too would be back at work within hours. Personally, I don't think it's a good idea. I'm old-fashioned enough to believe that the human body needs a little time to rest and recover after a traumatic event such as childbirth. But I suspect that I am a little out-of-date in my thinking as far as this is concerned. And I guess I'm going to be really out-of-date by the time the 1980s arrive in a few years' time.

After Mr Porchester had left, I found myself wondering how Potelmy would cope when it came time for Lemuela to have her baby.

The Porchester Confinements

In the good old, bad old days, before the discovery of penicillin and other such pharmacological goodies, all general practitioners were on call more or less permanently, and they had to learn to live with the sometimes untimely and always haphazard calls for attention that come a family doctor's way.

But things have changed, and now that we have somehow found ourselves living in the high tech world of the 1970s, most general practitioners work in groups and share their responsibilities for on call duties at night, at weekends or over bank holidays.

This sharing of on call responsibilities has changed life for those doctors working in cities, towns and larger villages.

Doctors who would, a generation ago, have been accustomed to being forever on duty can now sit down in front of their television set in an evening confident that they will be able to watch the beginning and the end of the same programme; they can sit down to meals knowing that they can take their time and enjoy their food without being constantly aware that if the telephone rings they will probably be eating cold food.

But here in Bilbury nothing much has changed, and I still practise medicine as it was practised half a century ago. (Although I do, of course, have the wonder of penicillin to call upon.)

I am on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week and 365 days a year because I work alone and the nearest doctors are too far away for us to arrange to share our night time or weekend responsibilities.

Today, it is, of course, the telephone that can make life particularly exhausting. It's like an electronic cuckoo: always screaming for attention and apparently never satisfied.

Like most doctors who practise alone, I have a special telephone which is designed to ring whenever some other piece of essential household equipment is activated. Our telephone will, for example, always ring if I lie down in the bath, turn on the television to watch a programme to which I have been looking forward or try to boil a kettle.

If Patsy puts a hot meal down on the table then the telephone will immediately start to ring. How it knows to do that I really have no idea; but it does.

To ensure that I cope with the stress of the telephone well enough to live long enough to see next year's daffodils, I have devised a number of ways to relax.

I am, for example, an enthusiastic gardener, and although I don't much like the fiddly tasks such as weeding, I very much enjoy taking dead branches off trees and chopping them up into fireplace sized logs. I also enjoy breaking up the smaller branches into kindling. You can't start a fire without a good supply of kindling and a few crumpled up pages of newspaper or a handful of junk mail. We can always find an old newspaper or a pile of unsolicited mail lying around but we have to collect our kindling. And there are few apparently dull tasks which I find more rewarding than collecting a bag full of nice, dry kindling.

And, of course, at the end of a session in the garden there is the bonus of being able to have a bonfire to get rid of all the bits of brushwood.

Sometimes I put the stuff I am burning into the incinerator (my new toy) and sometimes, if there is too much to fit in the incinerator, I just build a huge bonfire.

Patsy often says that if I weren't a doctor, I would probably be a professional pyromaniac. I just respond by telling her that it is perfectly possible to be both at the same time.

One late summer day I was planning a really good bonfire with my friend William, a GP who works in a large practice in the English Midlands. He was staying with us for a few days; accompanied as usual by his wife and two children.

William's wife, Brenda, together with Patsy and our two small children, were in the house. The two women were baking cakes for a forthcoming village fete being held to raise money for the Bilbury Cottage Hospital. (For administrative reasons the Bilbury Cottage Hospital is, of course, known as the Brownlow County Hotel. This nomenclature is designed to confuse National Health Service bureaucrats but it confuses me too.) Our two little ones were 'helping'. They are specialists in both the 'tasting' and the 'making a mess' departments.

William and I, and William's two children, one of whom is aged six and the other is aged eight, were in our front garden. We were all busy collecting twigs and small branches which had come down from our big willow tree.

As we collected together the kindling, a middle-aged woman jogged very slowly past. I think most people in decent health would have been able to overtake her if they'd been going at a fairly ordinary walking pace. The woman, a patient of mine, waved and wheezed something indistinct which was probably 'Hello, doctor!'

'Ruddy joggers,' muttered William as she went past. 'It seems to be the health fad of the 1970s.'

'I wish she'd give up the jogging,' I muttered back. 'She's already got a bad back and one bad hip. If she doesn't give up jogging she'll soon have another bad hip and two bad knees to add to her collection.'

'I've had endless problems with patients jogging to get fit and lose weight,' said William. 'A good many of them make themselves ill.' He paused to break a decent length of willow into several smaller pieces and then tossed the twigs into the wheelbarrow. 'I'm utterly convinced that most joggers do themselves far more harm than good.'

'Oh, surely some of them do themselves a bit of good,' I protested.

'No,' said William, emphatically. 'No damned good at all! I had a female patient who was at least six stones overweight. She had a bum as big as Yorkshire. She knew she needed to lose weight but instead of eating less she decided to exercise more. An utterly daft idea, of course, because it was never going to work. She would exercise for 30 minutes and use up 200 calories, if that, and then she'd treat herself to a packet of biscuits and a large Coca Cola. Every time she exercised, she ended up eating more calories than she'd used up and so she steadily put on more and more weight. Eventually, she damaged a knee with her damned jogging and had to go into hospital for an operation. While she was there, she contracted one of those nasty hospital infections. She was dead in less than a week. Nice woman, too. She left a lovely husband and three decent kids. What an absolute tragedy. If she hadn't taken up jogging she'd still be alive.'

We were both musing on this tragic irony when I heard a shout, looked up and saw Patsy standing at the front door. Her hands and forearms were covered with flour and she was holding the noisy end of the telephone high in the air – the long established sign telling me that there was a call for me.

The call was from Potelmy Porchester, who was ringing to tell me that his wife, Lemuela was about to give birth to their latest child.

I exchanged my wellington boots for a pair of shoes, brushed some of the leaves and twigs off my jumper (my philosophy is, I'm afraid, that if you live in the country and you telephone the doctor out of hours then you must put up with him arriving in whatever he was wearing when you called – unless he was in bed or in the bath, of course) and clambered into the car, wondering to myself why Mrs Porchester, who seems to collect babies in the same sort of indiscriminate way that some people collect stamps or china elephants, prefers the Government's free milk and cod liver oil to its free contraceptives.

The baby had been well and truly born by the time I got there. The placenta and umbilical cord were sitting, neatly laid out, on a plate on the dressing table.

After having so many children, both Mrs Porchester and her latest baby always seem perfectly capable of dealing with that part of the exercise without any help from me. All I had to do was a little light needlework to tidy up the new mother's business end.

I think that Mrs Porchester must be taking part in some sort of competition to see who in Devon can have the most babies, and her primary thought after having one baby is always about doing the spade work for the conception of the next. And with this in mind Mrs Porchester always insists on having 'things down below tidied up and tightened a little'.

As I washed my hands in the bathroom next door, I listened to Mrs Porchester tell me, for the umpteenth time, how my predecessor Dr Brownlow, had once sewn his surgical glove into her interior back in the days when she had so few children that she knew all their names.

Mrs Porchester has a loud voice (not surprising, I suppose, when you have as many children as she has) but I was spared the repeat of the anecdote by the fact that Mr Porchester was sitting downstairs watching a football match on their old ten inch screen black and white television set. To compensate for his deafness, and the noise the children were making (they were playing pirates up and down the stairs), he had the sound turned up so high that when I began stitching, the silk thread I was using started to vibrate whenever I pulled it tight.

I made a mental note to tell Mr Porchester to visit the surgery to have his ears syringed. I have never known anyone produce as much ear wax as Mr Porchester and the level of his deafness inevitably rises as the wax accumulates.

My predecessor, Dr Brownlow, hated television sets even more than he hated seeing women in trousers and men wearing clip-on bow ties and he detested the memory of the unfortunate John Logie Baird with the quiet dedication that most doctors reserve for Alexander Graham Bell. The thing he hated most about television sets was the fact that patients sometimes left them switched on when he was visiting and trying to examine a patient. He once gave me a valuable piece of advice about television sets. He told me that he had discovered that if he walked over to the seat and fiddled with all the knobs and dials he could cause so much distress to the viewer that the lesson would be well remembered. 'I gather,' he said, 'that when you mess around with the dials controlling tone and picture quality you can cause a degree of electronic confusion which can take many hours to put right.' He was right, of course. Messing with the controls of a television set will leave the owners watching programmes through a snow storm. Years after Dr Brownlow had died, I visited houses where the television set was unplugged and covered with a cloth the moment I walked through the door. Mr Porchester was the solitary exception in the village.

By the time I had finished sewing up Mrs Porchester to her satisfaction (she always insists that I restore her to the sort of aperture she, and indeed her husband, might have enjoyed on her wedding night and when I have finished sewing she always checks my handiwork with a couple of fingers), the football match was over and the television sound had been turned down.

I tottered down the stairs, making my way cautiously between dead and dying pirates and abandoned wooden swords, to find that Mr Porchester had poured me a small glass of cooking sherry in celebration. He offered me a very small cigar, as he always does and, as I always do, I thanked him and refused the offer. The sherry is bad enough but it can at least be swallowed like a dose of unpleasant medicine. I hate to think what the cigars must taste like for they smell far worse than my bonfires. The youngest of the pirates who had survived the 'Battle of the Stairs' seemed to be endeavouring to find out how much noise you can make when you bang toy cars onto dolls' heads. The older survivors were attempting to persuade their father to give them a glass of sherry to share.

I was keen to get away from there as quickly as I could for once she has delivered her latest baby, it has become customary for Mrs Porchester to cook her placenta and serve it up with a few braised onions and fried tomatoes. She says it's a pity to waste such a valuable source of nutrients. I believe that she and Potelmy share it between them, accompanied with a nice bottle of homemade parsnip and elderberry wine. I live in dread that they might one day invite me to join them at their kitchen table on an evening when they share this curious, almost cannibalistic, repast. Although I suppose it would be possible for me to refuse any such offer on the grounds that I am a vegetarian. 'How are you feeling?' I asked Potelmy, very conscious of the fact that he had been suffering from Couvarde syndrome or a sympathetic pregnancy.

'Oh, I'm much better,' he said. He pulled up his shirt and undid his trousers to show me that his swollen abdomen was now quite flat. 'All my symptoms disappeared when Apple was born.'

'Apple?' I said. I'd never heard of anyone naming a child after a fruit.

'That's what we're calling the newborn,' Potelmy told me. 'We're great Beatles fans. And we like fruit.'

It seemed an odd name to give a child but then, I suppose, it is no stranger to name a child after a fruit than it is to name one after a flower and there are plenty of girls called 'Daisy', 'Rose' and 'Primrose'. I secretly rather hoped, however, that parents didn't start naming their children after vegetables.

I was relieved that Mr Porchester's pregnancy had gone well and was now over. I had been worrying what I would say, or do, if he asked me to sew him up.

'Could you give me my postnatal check-up now,' he asked me.

I took his blood pressure and told him that all seemed well. I honestly couldn't think of anything else to do. I could, I suppose, have suggested doing an anal examination, the closest thing possible to a vaginal examination, but he seemed happy enough with my having taken his blood pressure.

'Don't forget to pop along to the surgery to have your ears syringed,' I told him.

When I got back to Bilbury Grange, William and his two children were still tearing up newspapers and screwing up the torn pages into twists suitable for fire lighting. They had run out of old newspapers and had been into the kitchen to fetch the edition which had arrived that morning and which I had not yet had a chance to look at.

'Why were you so long?' asked Peter, William's son, as we struggled to unscrew the papers which contained the latest, end of season cricket results. It was a week old newspaper but I tend to read old newspapers far more avidly than I read new ones.

'I had to sew up a patient who'd just had a baby,' I explained.

William's son knows as much as most people about these things and I suspect that he is a constant source of educational material for his fellow pupils at his preparatory school.

(There are rumours that in some parts of the country, children are taught about these things in specially prepared sex education classes. If they ever introduce such things in Bilbury then the new village schoolmistress, who has taken over from our gardener's wife, will doubtless have to be supplemented. I rather doubt if our new school ma'am is well informed on such matters. She is a spinster, of a certain age, and she recently asked me if I thought it was possible that one of the village girls who had 'got herself into trouble' could have got that way through, as she had apparently claimed, attending a mixed bathing party on the beach at Combe Martin.)

I looked around the garden and wondered what other trees might need pruning and where I could best plant some fast growing varieties of silver birch – a tree which produces an excellent supply of kindling – when I heard William's son asking his father a question.

'If you've sewn her up,' said Peter, 'does that mean that she's decided to stop having babies?' He paused and looked hard at me. 'Or will someone have to go round and take out the stitches if she wants another one?'

'Your Dad will be able to answer that one,' I said, with shameful cowardice. 'I must just go and check on something in the house.'

Our two children are far too young to ask questions of such a sophisticated nature. I will deal with the problem of how to answer such queries when the time comes.

I have no doubt that William had an answer to that question and I suppose I should have hung around to find out what it was.

But I tottered indoors, clutching the bits and pieces of the sports pages which I had managed to salvage, and put on the kettle.

Naturally, the telephone began to ring.

The life of a country doctor is many things but it is never dull. Tragedy and comedy are never more than a telephone call away.

The Auction at Doone Cottage

I was sitting in my study trying to work my way through some paperwork which had accumulated.

In my world (and I suspect it is not a world I inhabit alone) the paperwork always seems to accumulate faster than I can deal with it. On my desk there was a boxful of receipts which needed to be filed ready for the taxman's annual bureaucratic extravaganza, several letters from health service bureaucrats which needed attention and some bills which needed paying.

I doubt if I am alone in the world in not enjoying administration. I would rather trim hedges with hand shears than sit and plough through a pile of dull paperwork.

I was rescued from this tedious chore by the arrival of my good friend and brother-in-law Patchy Fogg, antique dealer and old-fashioned wheeler dealer, whose voice I heard loud and clear, even though he came in through the kitchen door and my study cum surgery is at the other side of the house.

Patchy does not shout, or at least I've never heard him shout, but he has a voice which carries and if he ever found work as a racecourse commentator, he would be able to do his job without the aid of either a microphone or a loudspeaker system.

'You busy?' asked Patchy, bursting into my room like a force of nature.

Patsy, who was standing behind him, shrugged her shoulders and pulled a face which said, better than words, 'I tried to stop him but you know Patchy, he never likes being told he can't do something'. She was baking thick cut Devon pasties, using potatoes, swedes, tomatoes and herbs from our garden, and had somehow managed to get flour onto her blouse and into her hair. She was holding her hands, which were white, away from her body but the caution was now pointless.

When I first moved to Bilbury I knew absolutely nothing about antiques. I could hardly tell walnut from mahogany and, whatever it was that I was looking at, I was quite incapable of differentiating between the genuine article and a copy made in Hong Kong circa 1961.

But over the years, Patchy has taught me quite a good deal.

I have learned to tell a davenport from a bureau from a Victorian writing slope and to tell when an auctioneer is taking bids from an imaginary bidder (known as taking bids 'off the wall') in order to boost the price of something he was selling at auction.

(According to Patchy, when auctioneers for the big, posh, London auctioneers do this it is called 'taking bids off the chandeliers'.)

I have learned that the oldest English furniture is usually made of oak for two very simple reasons. First, when it became feasible and fashionable to furnish castles and houses with tables and chairs and storage chests, the commonest tree in England was the oak. Second, it is possible to carve oak timbers into the shapes required with the aid of an axe and an adze – the two tools commonly available.

We have an oak dole cupboard in Bilbury Grange which Patchy found for us. It originally stood outside a monastery wall and was regularly filled with bread so that poor travellers could help themselves. That was, incidentally, the original use of the word 'dole'.

As the years went by, so oak gradually went out of fashion. In the 17th century, Charles II preferred elegant walnut furniture because, being easier to carve, walnut could be made into more artistic shapes and covered with fancier additions. Oak is a hard wood which is difficult to shape with hand tools.

And then, in the 18th century, mahogany, imported from India, was the wood of choice and English furniture became even more complex and carefully designed.

Thanks to Patchy, I had learned to beware of shops which had signs across their windows screaming 'Lease Expiring' and 'Closing Down Sale', for these are, he told me, tricks which are well known in the antiques and jewellery trades. Patchy told me he knew of a shop in Birmingham which had been attracting innocent customers with its 'Closing Down' signs for at least ten years. The customers all thought that they were getting bargain prices but they weren't, of course.

Patchy taught me to use my hands as well as my eyes when examining furniture. 'Genuinely old furniture has a softness to it, a warmth all of its own,' said Patchy, who had a reputation throughout Devon for being able to identify a genuine antique almost instantly.

'There's an auction at the other end of the village,' said Patchy, slumping down into the chair normally used by patients. 'It's at a place called Doone Cottage, somewhere along the road to North Ilkerton. I picked up the estate agent's particulars this morning and today's the viewing day. I thought I might go and have a look at what they've got for sale. But I really can't bear the idea of schlepping over there by myself. Can you bear to drag yourself away from all that exciting looking paperwork for an hour or two?'

I put down the sheaf of papers I was holding and grinned at him. 'I'd be your man if you'd invited me to a shoe shop opening,' I told him, 'I was just trying to understand a letter from the local health service administrator. It would have made more sense if he'd written back to front in Latin.' The administrator had a habit of writing to all the local family doctors at least twice a week. Since he never used one word when ten would do just as well, his letters took some deciphering. I had got into the habit of going through his letters with a pen in my hand. I would then scratch out all the obviously superfluous words and phrases and then try to make sense of what was left.

As we drove off, I told Patchy that I knew exactly how to find Doone Cottage since the owner, Mrs Gladys Luckwell, who had died recently, had been a patient of mine.

Patchy explained that the sale had been organised by Harley House an appropriately named local estate agent from Barnstaple, whose red and white House For Sale signs were a well-known sight in North Devon. The main item in the sale was a modest sized cottage with a small but decent garden but the entire contents of the house were also included with the cottage since Mrs Luckwell the former owner, now deceased, had left her entire estate to a nephew whom she hadn't seen for years. He lived in Leeds in the North of England and hadn't even bothered to come down to Devon for the funeral.

Mrs Gladys Luckwell, who always insisted on being addressed by her full name, had been a patient of mine and had recently succumbed, after a long illness, to kidney failure. She had been 96 when she'd died and in the old days, the family doctor would have probably simply written 'old age' on the death certificate. These days coroners insist on having rather more precise details put on their bit of paper and so she officially died of 'kidney failure', though to be honest I could have just as easily written 'heart failure' or 'liver failure'. The truth was that her body had, quite simply, run out of time on the celestial warranty.

Mrs Luckwell was the only person I ever met who had been born on the island of Lundy, a very solid lump of granite which sticks up out of the sea off the North Devon coast. I sometimes thought that perhaps the peculiarity of her birth might perhaps have changed her outlook on life in some way. She often talked about the fact that she had been born on an island and clearly thought that in some way it made her 'special'. And I suppose it did: it was certainly true that she was one of the very few people in the world who was able to say that they had been born on an island which is just three miles long and no more than half a mile wide. The sad thing is, I suppose, that it was the only part of her life that she felt made her different; important even. I think I felt rather sorry for her that she could never remember the only truly memorable thing that ever happened in her life.

Lundy is a surprisingly fertile piece of rock. Patsy and I went there for a day trip when Dr Brownlow was still alive and it was easier for me to be away from the village. There is good fishing in the sea around Lundy and the soil on top of the island is surprisingly fertile, providing lush grass for the sheep who are by far the most numerous inhabitants. There are quite a few plants, including one horticultural speciality known as the Lundy Cabbage, which are found only on the island. Indeed, there is an insect called the Bronze Lundy Cabbage Flea Beetle which lives only on the Lundy Cabbage. Since the plant is exclusively indigenous to Lundy so is the Bronze Lundy Cabbage Flea Beetle.

I remembered from our visit that the island has a pub called the Marisco Tavern and a few grey houses, and there is a 13th century castle too. But although the castle was built with walls three feet thick, the building is now just a ruin. The storms which have lashed the island for centuries have destroyed man's handiwork. The castle, so they say, was built by Henry III using money he made by selling the rabbits which were caught on the island. Back in those days Lundy was an official Royal warren and the rabbits were an important source of revenue for the monarch.

Visitors sometimes call the place Lundy Island but that's tautological because the word Lundy is Norse for 'Puffin Island', so to call it Lundy Island is like calling it 'Puffin Island Island'. Modern tourists visit Lundy to watch the birds, clamber about on the rocks or just to say they've been there. Many buy a Lundy stamp which isn't a proper postage stamp in that it can't be used to mail a letter, but it can be stuck on an envelope together with a stamp issued by the Royal Mail or stuck in a stamp album on one of those pages they always put at the back for 'oddities'.

The strange thing is that although Mrs Luckwell was born on the island, her parents didn't live there. They were visiting on a day trip and Mrs Luckwell was born a fortnight early, delivered by a midwife who, fortuitously, happened to be in the same party of tourists. Mrs Luckwell and her parents had to stay the night in a local's cottage until mother and baby were well enough to make the return journey. I have often wondered what sort of people would make a potentially rough sea trip so close to the mother-to-be's due delivery date. When Patsy was expecting, I found myself worrying if she went too far down the garden. In the end, I persuaded her to carry an old bicycle horn so that she could 'toot' for help if she needed it.

I had been to Doone Cottage on numerous occasions and I couldn't remember ever seeing anything there that was likely to raise the blood pressure of an antique dealer. I had never spotted any expensive looking items of furniture or any majestic paintings just waiting to be 'discovered' and carted off to a London auction room.

I know that there are doctors, particularly those working in rural areas, who will examine the contents of an elderly patient's home with great care; drawing attention to those items which take their fancy in the hope that they will be given the item as a present, or at least left it in the patient's will. I know of one doctor, working not a million miles away from Bilbury, who frequently offers to buy furniture or pictures which he recognises as having value. He tells the patient that the chair, bookcase, dressing table or whatever would look good in his own home and that he will pay the patient a good price for it. The price is never a 'good' one, of course, and the item soon ends up in an auction or an antique dealer's shop with the doctor's wallet a good deal heavier as a result. I could never do that. One elderly patient once insisted on giving me a book which he thought I would like. I did, indeed, like the book but it was a valuable first edition and I felt embarrassed and ashamed to take such a gift. When the patient wasn't looking I sneaked it back onto his shelves.

It isn't only doctors who do this sort of thing, of course.

Delivery men, workmen of all types, chimney sweeps and insurance agents have all been known to express interest in things they spot in people's homes. The owner of the home (and the antique) will usually be elderly, frail and probably short of money. Such individuals are easy prey for the skilful trickster. Tricking the elderly into parting with the treasures for less than they are worth seems to me to be a pretty low way to make a living. Patchy said he knew a chimney sweep who used to look out for pieces of furniture which had old worm holes in them. If there are three or four old pieces of furniture in a room there is a very good chance that at least one will show signs of woodworm. The worm holes will usually be old and of no consequence but whenever he spotted a piece of furniture with evidence of worm infestation the sweep would suck in his breath, shake his head and warn the house owner of the danger of having worm infested furniture in their home.

'It'll affect your other furniture and then the structure of your house,' he'd say, feigning sympathy.

He would then offer to take away the affected item to use for firewood.

But he wouldn't chop it up, of course.

Instead, he would take it straight to a dealer and sell it for a very good profit with no risk and no expenditure. If the holes were noticeable, the dealer would fill them in and varnish over them.

It is often said that one should never speak ill of the dead, and though I understand and sympathise with the feeling that one should not speak ill of people who are no longer around to defend themselves, I don't think this means that one should never tell the truth about the dead.

And the truth about Mrs Gladys Luckwell is, I'm afraid, that she was not a particularly pleasant or warm-hearted person.

She was one of those people, of whom there never seems to be a shortage in the world, who must always be the centre of attention. Such folk are forever convinced that other people exist to do their bidding and that the even strangers are always waiting for their instructions, their advice and their judgements. She was completely confident that she knew all there was to know about medicine, finance, the law, the church and politics. And her understanding of human emotions was, in her mind, as unlimited as her willingness to share her understanding with others. Every day she wrote dozens of letters and notes. Some of these were posted in the ordinary way (if she ran out of stamps she did not allow this to hinder her, simply ordering someone to pop the letters in the post-box and allow the recipient to pay the postage) and some were handed out to be hand delivered. Kind-hearted locals who called in to do shopping or gardening for her were invariably sent off around the village delivering hand-written notes. She sent instructions and recommendations to everyone whom she felt might benefit from her wisdom. She sent notes to the vicar suggesting subjects for his sermons. She advised the local constable on the best way to deal with any offenders whom he encountered. She shared her views on town planning and highway maintenance with the appropriate authorities and she wrote to our local Member of Parliament on a weekly basis – giving him clear instructions on how he should vote on important issues of the day. To her neighbours she boldly suggested suitable romances and recommended separations and divorces and she campaigned tirelessly and aggressively for causes she espoused – causes which invariably were ones which affected her personally. I remember she took against a large ash tree which stood on someone else's land and which she felt impeded her view of a distant church which she rather liked. She wrote regularly to everyone she could think of, demanding that the tree be felled without delay. She said it was dangerous (which it wasn't), that it was dying (which it wasn't), that it was ugly (which it wasn't), that it interfered with her drains (which it didn't) and that other people wanted it removed (which they didn't).

As Mrs Luckwell got older, and slightly frail, many people in the village tried to help her but she treated them all appallingly. Over the years at least four people had cut her lawn and tended her garden and none of them had ever charged her for their work but she had treated them all with such contempt that they had given up. Henry Templeton, having spent three hours working on her garden without so much as the offer of a glass of water, let alone a cup of tea, once asked if he could use her privy but was told that he could not and that he could damned well use a hedge instead. 'You bloody gypsies are all the same,' she shouted at him. Since Henry was a retired airline pilot, who had been cutting her grass and trimming her bushes out of the kindness of his heart, he thought this a little rich even for an eccentric old lady.

I once went round to her house at 4.00 a.m. and found myself ordered to trim her toenails which she had suddenly decided were too long. ‘You look as if you got dressed in the dark!’ she shouted at me, as I bent at her feet. She was quite right but given the time of night and the circumstances and the fact that she had told me on the telephone that she needed help urgently, I did not feel that this was entirely reprehensible. I was, it is true, wearing a jumper which I had put on back to front and inside out but if she had been truly in need of urgent medical attention, as she had led me to believe, I cannot believe that she would have noticed or cared.

On another occasion I got there late at night and she shouted, ‘Who are you?’ when I knocked on the door. I told her it was me. I was standing on the doorstep and it was pouring with rain. There was no porch at all. No shelter from the rain.

‘What do you want?’ she demanded. ‘If I’d wanted you to come round I’d have invited you.’

‘You did invite me!’ I shouted back. ‘It’s the doctor.’

Eventually she let me in.

It turned out that she had called for me because she thought she might have arthritis in her left knee. When I could find nothing wrong she told me I was a ‘quack’ and that she would call for a proper doctor next time she needed advice.

Every time I saw her she told me that she had a weak heart and that her mother and her grandmother, both of whom lived to be well into their nineties, had suffered with the same problem. Not until she was well into her nineties did I ever detect any problems with her heart. And she, like her mother and grandmother, lived to a fairly ripe old age.

It would have been easy to argue that her behaviour was a result of oncoming dementia but it would have been a dishonest and disingenuous argument. There was nothing wrong with Mrs Gladys Luckwell other than the fact that she was a bad-tempered old woman. She had been a rude and bad tempered woman in her middle years and, quite probably, a rude and bad tempered woman when she had been young.

Thumper once said that the village was divided about her. On the one hand there were those who believed that she was a kindly, sensitive and misunderstood old woman. On the other hand there were those who thought she was a bad tempered old bat. The first group consisted of Mrs Luckwell herself and no one else. The second group, said Patchy, included everyone else in the locality.

My first thought, when we arrived at Doone Cottage, was that Patchy was probably wasting his time, since there didn’t seem to be anything worth the attention of an antique dealer rather than a junk man. I, on the other hand, was happy to have found an excuse to leave behind the paperwork sitting on my desk.

I harboured a secret hope that it might, perhaps, sort itself out in my absence.

There were the usual vans parked on the verge, and three or four Volvo estate cars had been abandoned on the grass outside the cottage. All had the tell-tale heavy duty racks fitted to their roofs. I think it is probably safe to say that if you ever see an estate car with a strong looking luggage rack fitted then it will almost certainly be owned by an antique dealer.

When we arrived, Patchy said ‘hello’ to the agent, Harley House, a man he clearly knew well.

Harley is an imposing fellow, around six foot six inches tall and sufficiently well-built never to have to worry about being described as thin. He likes pies, not particularly caring about the filling they contain, and has eaten a good many of them in his life. If you put him on one side of a scale and a small family car on the other it would be impossible to say which side would go down and which would go up. I have sat with him in the Duck and Puddle and watched him eat three of Gilly’s family sized steak and kidney pies at a single sitting.

Harley is completely bald and whatever the weather he always wears a hat. In the winter he wears a brown trilby and in the summer he favours a Panama. North Devon can be quite a windy part of the world, and Harley has on many occasions conducted out door auctions with one hand holding his lot sheet and the other holding his hat in position.

He once told me that he has worn a hat since he read that Aeschylus, the Greek writer who died in 456 BC at the age of 69, met his maker when a short-sighted eagle dropped a tortoise on his head. Apparently, according to Harley, the eagle mistook the bald playwright’s head for a rock and dropped the tortoise in order to break it open and get at the meat inside.

I remember mentioning that there are, as far as I am aware, very few eagles left in North Devon, and probably even fewer free range tortoises, but Harley, who has many fine qualities but is not a man blessed with an overenthusiastic sense of humour, pointed out, quite sternly, that it is much better to be safe than sorry. He added, I recall, that, as a medical man, I should be aware that an ounce of prevention is worth far more than a good many bottles of medicine.

Inside Doone Cottage, the usual array of dealers and collectors had been joined by a few neighbours. I have little doubt that the neighbours were there, as is often the case, more out of simple nosiness than out of any genuine interest in making a purchase. It is true that one or two of them had probably tottered round in the hope that they might be able to purchase an item which they might have coveted when Mrs Gladys Luckwell had been alive, but I think it is a fair bet that most of them were there just to look around. Since I was there only to escape from my paperwork, I was hardly in a place to criticise.

The cottage had two small rooms and a kitchen downstairs and two small bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs. At some point in the past, a modest conservatory had been built on at the back of the cottage. There was no gas supply and no central heating of any kind and the plumbing, which could best be described as rudimentary, did not stretch to indoor sanitation.

Even in her 90s, Mrs Gladys Luckwell had still used a privy in her garden which sat above an old-fashioned cesspit. For use at night she had a chamber pot (which she always called her gazunder on the entirely reasonable grounds that it went under the bed when not in use) which had a picture of Lloyd George, a famous Victorian politician, painted onto the target area. Patchy told me that it was common for chamber pots to have many strange designs inside. One popular trick was to have an eye painted on the bottom of the pot, staring upwards in constant surprise. Another was to have a frog attempting to climb up the inside of the pot. Chamber pots were still being made as late as the 1940s when many had portraits of Adolf Hitler on the bottom. Sadly, there were several large cracks and one chip in Mrs Gladys Luckwell's pot and despite the political decoration in the target area, Patchy said it had very little value.

I spotted a small silver box, around four inches long and no more than three inches high. I asked Patchy what it was. He told me it was a Queen Anne tea caddy.

'It's very small!' I pointed out. 'Hardly big enough to contain sufficient tea for a few pots!'

'Tea was very expensive in those days,' explained Patchy.

'Are you going to bid on it? I asked him.

'Perhaps,' he said, without much interest. 'It's the only thing I've seen so far that is worth buying,' he added.

In a cupboard, Patchy found a rather elderly instrument which looked to me like a xylophone but which Patchy assured me was a glockenspiel. The difference, apparently, is that the bars on a xylophone are made of wood whereas on a glockenspiel they are made of metal. Patchy shuddered at the sight of the glockenspiel for he was no longer in the market for musical instruments. Three months ago, he bought a sousaphone, a trombone, a bassoon, a tuba and a trumpet as a job lot at an auction in South Molton. When he got them home he made the mistake of trying them all out. Adrienne, his wife and my sister-in-law, threatened to leave him if he continued or, indeed, if he bought any more musical instruments. She is a firm-minded young woman and Patchy has learned that when she says something it is best to listen carefully.

I followed Patchy around the house. It was, as always, a fascinating experience. We are all many different people. We are one person with our loved ones, another with relatives, another with friends and yet another with strangers. We constantly change, adapt, hone, refine and reinvent ourselves according to our immediate circumstances. Patchy changed completely when he was working. Back in the Duck and Puddle he was casual, carefree and light-hearted. He never seemed to take anything seriously. But when he was working, looking around an auction room or a houseful of items for sale, he became very serious and extremely focused. As a surgeon concentrates in the operating theatre, and a barrister concentrates in a court room, so Patchy concentrated in the auction room.

There was a rather decent looking Welsh dresser taking up most of the kitchen. It was made of oak but it was badly stained and damaged and would clearly need a considerable amount of restoration. The only other piece of furniture in there was an old pine table which had definitely seen better days, and two mismatching wooden chairs. The mismatched crockery lined up on the shelves of the Welsh dresser was, Patchy said, late Victorian but uninspiring and of value only for individuals who wanted to pick out a cup or a saucer or a plate to help complete a set which had been decimated by breakages.

The living room was equally disappointing.

A two-seater sofa and a leather chair with the horse hair stuffing coming out of it took up most of the room. There was a small oak bookcase which was filled with old cookery books, novels by Marie Corelli and Colette and several bibles. There were a few old hunting prints on the walls, none of them particularly attractive or well framed, and a pair of fairly ordinary and uninspiring brass candlesticks on the mantelpiece. A large damp patch on the wall with the fireplace suggested that there was some serious work to be done on the fabric of the cottage.

The front room was even more disappointing than the other two rooms downstairs. It contained three easy chairs, all of which were faded and stained and had broken springs. The rugs on the floor were threadbare and probably destined for either the rubbish dump or a bonfire. There were a few knick knacks on the mantelpiece and the windowsill but none of them seemed to be of much value to anyone than a collector of seaside curios. There was an ugly looking model of a clown with the words ‘A Present from Blackpool’ on it. And there were similar items labelled ‘A Present from Llandudno’ and ‘A Present from Weston-super-Mare’.

In conclusion, the rooms downstairs, small and crammed with disappointed dealers, collectors and neighbours, seemed dark and damp. Everything seemed depressing and I suddenly realised that Mrs Gladys Luckwell must have spent the last third of her life simply marking time; unwilling or unable to improve her circumstances or her surroundings. When I had visited her, I had seen only my patient. Now, seeing the unoccupied house with Patchy, I naturally saw only the contents.

Still, Mrs Gladys Luckwell was now gone and we were there not to mourn her passing, or to regret her failure to grasp life and squeeze the goodness out of it, but to appraise the worldly goods she had left behind.

And so we made our way up the narrow staircase to the top floor.

Upstairs was no better than downstairs.

In the main bedroom, the one which Mrs Gladys Luckwell had used, the only item of value was the view. From the window you could see across the cottage garden, now overgrown with nettles and brambles and Giant Hogweed, over the neighbouring fields and away towards the coast. The furniture consisted of a wardrobe with a door which hung open because the catch didn’t fasten properly, a double bed with a very soggy looking mattress, a stained and battered bedside table, two scruffy looking rugs and the by now customary collection of worthless bits and pieces; some of which Mrs Gladys Luckwell had probably purchased herself and some of which had doubtless been bought for her as mementoes of other people’s holidays.

There was, however, one item of interest in the room.

I doubt if I would have spotted it if I had spent half a day in the room but Patchy saw it within moments of our entering the room.

Doctors, particularly GPs, who have been in practice for a good while can often tell whether or not a patient is suffering from a serious illness the minute they see them – without examining them or doing any tests.

It is, I suppose, a matter of instinct or intuition rather than anything else. Dr Brownlow, my predecessor in Bilbury, was able to do this and occasionally I am myself aware of this sense, though I am not yet experienced enough to take full advantage of it.

Patchy has the same skill as far as antiques are concerned. In the antique dealers’ world he is, because of this talent, known as a ‘divvy’.

If you threw a piece of Chippendale onto a rubbish dump he would, I am sure, be able to spot it within seconds.

‘What on earth is that?’ I asked.

Patchy was holding a very small glass bottle. It looked a little like a small scent bottle, the sort of thing that ladies and gentlemen used to carry before baths and showers were available. They would sprinkle perfume onto their bodies and their clothes in order to mask less pleasant smells. But I didn’t think it was a scent bottle. It was far too small.

‘It’s a Chinese tear bottle,’ said Patchy, with a smile on his face.

He held up the tiny bottle so that I could see it more clearly.

‘When a young Chinese man became engaged, he sent his fiancée one of these tiny glass bottles but instead of a drop of perfume it contained a tear from his eye – a tear of joy. The fiancée would treasure the gift all her life, looking after it, protecting it and making sure it didn’t get broken. When her husband died, she would open up the little bottle for the first time. She would then allow a tear of her sorrow to fall into the bottle. And she would then place the tiny bottle, now containing two mingled tears, upon the breast of her dead husband before he was taken to be buried.

‘Is it worth a good deal of money?’ I asked him.

Patchy shook his head. ‘You’d think it would be,’ he said, holding up the bottle to the light. ‘But there isn’t much demand for them. They’re rather out of fashion.’ He put the bottle back down on the dressing table. ‘This one has never been used,’ he said. He seemed disappointed.

The second bedroom had been used as a junk room.

There was a bed in there but old bits of broken furniture were piled on top of it. There was a large, metal bound trunk in a corner with half a dozen old suitcases on top of it. The suitcases were leather and well-made but they were very battered, and Patchy said that they would require a good deal of loving attention before they could be turned into saleable pieces of luggage. ‘People don’t want them anyway,’ he said, sadly. ‘Modern luggage is lighter and easier to carry about. This sort of luggage was fine if you had servants and porters to help you carry your stuff around for you. If you took a couple of these empty cases onto a plane you would probably find yourself having to pay an excess baggage charge!’

We slowly made our way back downstairs. The cottage was still full of dealers, collectors and neighbours. Nearly all of them seemed disappointed.

‘I don’t understand it,’ said Patchy, as we stood in the living room once more. ‘I’m sure there’s something here that is worthwhile. I can sense it but I can’t see it.’

‘Not the Chinese tear bottle?’

He shook his head.

Suddenly, he moved towards a door leading into the tiny conservatory. ‘We haven’t looked in here,’ he said. I followed him. The conservatory was tiny and I don’t think anyone else had bothered to go in. The only things in there were a small and rather unstable looking chair, made of bamboo, and a small, old table upon which stood half a dozen plant pots. The plants in the pots had not been watered and they were all dead. Patchy ignored the chair and the dead plants and went straight for the table. He bent down to take a closer look at it and then knelt beside it so that he could examine it more carefully. He took the plants off the table and placed them carefully on the conservatory floor.

I stood and watched.

The table looked to me just like the sort of scruffy old table you might expect to find being used for pot plants in a conservatory. I wouldn’t have given it a second glance, or expected to pay more than a pound for it. Indeed, if I had paid a pound and taken it home with me, Patsy would have probably raised at least one eyebrow and asked me if I had been drinking.

‘Is it valuable?’ I asked.

Patchy stood up and gazed for a moment at the table. He then put all the plant pots back onto the table. He did this very carefully.

‘Is it valuable?’ I asked again.

Patchy made a shushing sound, took me by the elbow and led me out of the conservatory. He carefully closed the door behind him. I followed him back into the main part of the cottage. He then proceeded to take an extraordinary amount of interest in the small oak bookcase which he had previously ignored. Puzzled, I watched him.

I guessed that the table in the conservatory was something special but I had no idea why.

A few minutes later, when we were both strolling along the lane outside, Patchy told me about the table.

‘It was made about 50 years ago by a designer called Armand-Albert Rateau,’ said Patchy. He was shaking slightly with excitement. I couldn’t remember ever seeing him so excited. ‘Almand-Albert Rateau was one of the most exclusive and highly renowned interior decorators and furniture makers of the 1920s. The table in that conservatory is a green patinated bronze table with a marble slab top. As far as I know there is only one other similar table in the world. And the second table is in a museum in Paris: the Musee des Arts Decoratif.’

‘Is it valuable?’ I asked him for the third time. We were still strolling along the lane. Patchy had managed to calm himself down a little.

He looked at me. The answer to the question was now pretty obvious.

‘How valuable?’

Patchy thought for a minute. ‘I couldn’t examine all the legs properly but there’s a slight scratch on one of them,’ he said. ‘Assuming there are a couple more scratches that I didn’t see then it’s probably worth between 25 and 30.’

I was, I admit, surprised. I had thought he was going to say that it was worth a good deal.

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘£25 to £30?’

Patchy looked at me with a big smile on his face.

He shook his head.

‘£25,000 to £30,000,’ he said.

I stared at him.

‘Heaven knows how it got here,’ he added. He thought for a while. ‘Maybe she inherited it or was given it or picked it up in a sale somewhere. She certainly didn’t know its value.’

‘Are you sure?’ I asked him.

A moment ago, I’d been slightly disappointed when I’d thought the table was worth just £25 to £30. Now I was quite shocked at how valuable it was. It didn’t seem quite right that such a valuable piece of furniture should be standing, unnoticed, in a conservatory, sharing life with a few plant pots.

He looked at me.

‘Sorry,’ I said.

‘The thing is,’ said Patchy, ‘that I don’t think anyone else has noticed it.’

‘I didn’t see anyone else even go into the conservatory.’

‘Do you know anything about the old lady who lived there?’

I told him what I knew. By the time I had finished we were quite a distance from the cottage. A woodpecker, startled as we walked past, flew off into a small copse of beech trees. It has always surprised me that the two most nervous birds in the world seem to be the woodpecker and the jay. The woodpecker has one of the toughest beaks in the bird world and the jay is, of course, a member of the crow family. You'd expect them to be arrogant and not easily frightened but both are remarkably timid creatures. Mind you, the jay, which was once widely sought after for its feathers, has good reason to be cautious.

'Who does the money go to?' asked Patchy.

'A distant relative somewhere up in the North of England. He never came down to Devon; never visited the old lady at all. I gather that the solicitor handling the will had quite a job to find him.'

'Good,' said Patchy, looking relieved. 'That's OK then.'

I looked at him, a little puzzled.

'I'd have to tell the auctioneer if she'd left her money to a nice family in the village,' said Patchy. 'But a relative who'd never bothered to visit her is good news. I won't feel guilty about him.'

'When is the auction?' I asked.

'Tomorrow,' replied Patchy. He pulled the agent's details out of his pocket and examined them carefully. 'Yes, the auction is tomorrow.' He read on and then stopped and grinned broadly. 'Unless sold prior to auction by private treaty,' he read. He turned round and headed back for the cottage. I followed.

Ten minutes later we were standing in the back garden with Harley House, the estate agent, the man who would be auctioning the cottage and its contents on the following day.

'How much are you expecting to get for the cottage?' asked Patchy.

I could hardly believe my ears. Patchy was planning to buy the whole house in order to get the table without anyone knowing what he was doing or what they had all missed.

'The guide price is £6,000,' said the auctioneer. 'But I wouldn't sell it in advance of the sale for less than £7,000.'

'It's in terrible condition!' said Patchy. He pointed to the roof. 'The roof needs replacing, there's damp everywhere and I'm sure I could smell dry rot in the kitchen.'

The auctioneer shrugged. 'I can't sell it for less than £7,000. We could get more at the auction.'

'You could get less,' responded Patchy. 'How about £6,500?' He paused as though thinking hard. 'And I'll take all the contents off your hands. There are a couple of bits of oak that I can do something with. That'll save you the cost and trouble of auctioning the contents.'

The auctioneer thought for a moment then nodded. 'OK,' he said. '£6,500 for the house and all the contents.' They shook hands on the deal and the agent assured Patchy that nothing would be taken from the house.

And so the deal was done. I was very impressed with the speed with which it had all been conducted.

The agent went back indoors to tell all the dealers, collectors and neighbours that the cottager and the contents had all been sold and that the auction had been cancelled.

'Just like that?' I said to Patchy.

'I know the auctioneer,' said Patchy. 'He knows that the deal will be done.' He looked at his watch. 'Now I need to get into Barnstaple to go to the bank – and to see my solicitor. I'll drop you off at Bilbury Grange on the way.'

'Patchy,' I said, as we headed back to his truck, 'do you have £6,500?'

He looked at me, seemingly a little paler now. 'Not exactly at the moment,' he agreed.

'How much do you have?'

'I think there was about £20 in my current account,' he said. 'But Adrienne and I have £200 in a deposit account.' He cleared his throat. 'I've got a really nice bank manager,' he said. 'I'm sure they'll lend me the money.'

We sat in silence as we drove back towards Bilbury.

'If you mention anything to Patsy please ask her not to tell Adrienne,' said Patchy. 'I want to tell her myself when I get back from Barnstaple.'

I assured him that I would not even tell Patsy until the evening.

'I had to do it,' said Patchy, when he stopped at Bilbury Grange to drop me off. 'It's the chance of a lifetime.'

'I know you had to do it,' I said. 'And it will all work out brilliantly.'

He smiled, rather wanly. 'Let's hope so,' he said, as he disappeared towards Barnstaple.

I crossed my fingers for him. I knew I would not have had the courage to do what he had done. As I walked into the house I remembered a quote from Browning. 'A man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?'

But at the time I couldn't help hoping, for his sake, that he was right about the table.

The story has a sequel.

Two weeks later Patchy came round to the house to tell me that he had managed to sell the bronze table to a London dealer for £35,000. It had truly been the deal of a lifetime.

'I've got a couple of things for you,' he said. 'Come out to the van and give me a hand.'

The couple of things he had for me were the tear bottle, which was for Patsy, and the glockenspiel. 'I daren't keep the damned thing,' he said. 'Adrienne would kill me.'

'And there's this,' said Patchy. 'It's from Adrienne and myself.'

He handed me a long, white envelope.

When I opened the envelope I found a cheque for £5,000, made out to the Dr Brownlow Country Hotel Fund.

'If you hadn't come with me that day I probably wouldn't have gone to Doone Cottage,' said Patchy, when I started to protest that it was too much.

Patsy has the tear bottle on her dressing table. I've put in my tear.

I still haven't learned to play the damned glockenspiel though I'm having a good deal of fun learning.

The Chimney Sweep's Tattoo

I don't think there is a house or cottage in Bilbury which doesn't have an open fireplace.

Houses in towns and cities are all equipped with central heating these days but in our part of North Devon, central heating is still something of a rarity. Most people keep their houses warm by throwing logs or coal onto a fire or into a stove. Since wood is readily available, and is usually either free or very cheap, it is the fuel of choice.

The one snag with relying on an open fire is, of course, the very real need to have the chimney swept once or twice a year. When you live three quarters of an hour away from a fire station, it's a good idea to cut down the chance of having a chimney fire.

At Bilbury Grange we have a number of fireplaces and although Patsy and I don't use the one in our bedroom very often, we always like to have at least three chimneys swept regularly. When you burn wood rather than coal there is a tendency for large amounts of resinous substances to be deposited inside the chimney.

For years we, and most other villages, relied on a man called Bill Rattenbury to sweep our chimneys. And when Bill retired a year or so ago we transferred our allegiance to his son, Jack, who had worked with him, learning the tricks of the trade and the idiosyncrasies of local chimneys, for several years. Many sweeps are starting to use vacuum cleaners to remove the soot out of chimneys but both Bill and Jack have always relied on their brushes.

A good sweep can help in many ways – not just cleaning the soot out of the chimney. The Rattenburys have given us lots of good advice. To get a good draught in any sort of chimney it is necessary to have a substantial temperature difference between the gas inside the chimney and the outside air. As any child knows, hot air rises and if there is plenty of heat at the bottom of the chimney then the air will rise upwards and create a good draught. If a fireplace is too large, and the bottom part of a chimney too wide, then there will be too much cold air from the room going into the chimney and the fire won't draw properly. The Rattenburys helped us with several of our fireplaces; adjusting the size of one, putting a new chimney pot on another and simply raising the fire basket on a third.

However, when I telephoned Jack a month ago, to arrange an appointment for him to come round and do the necessary, I had quite a shock. Jack told me that he couldn't sweep our chimneys for nearly a month and that he was considering retiring from the chimney sweeping business. This was bad news. There are two other sweeps in the area and while one of them is very grumpy and has a reputation for leaving behind quite a mess, the other is 83-years-old and said to be contemplating what he describes as 'early retirement'. The grumpy one isn't even a professional chimney sweep. He has what he calls a portfolio of jobs and when he isn't sweeping chimneys he can be found driving a taxi, taking wedding photographs or doing a little French polishing. I've heard it said that he also does a little light embalming – not to mention an occasional bout of poaching.

'Why on earth are you retiring?' I asked him when he turned up.

'I've started doing weddings,' he told me. 'There's quite a market.'

He explained that a lot of brides still thought it was good luck to have a chimney sweep turn up at their weddings. He said all he had to do was stand and pose next to the bride (possibly giving her a slightly sooty kiss on the cheek but taking great care not to get soot on her dress) and that he could charge £15 to turn up at a wedding. Since Jack charges £3 to sweep a chimney (and £2 more for each additional chimney in a house) I could see his point.

'They often give me a bottle of wine or champagne,' he said, 'and they nearly always invite me to have a bite to eat with them.' He paused. 'I always have them bring my food out to me, though,' he said, 'and eat it outside or in the van if it's raining.'

'That's very thoughtful of you,' I said.

'Soot can be very difficult to remove,' he explained.

'And there are other perks,' he added. 'There are always bridesmaids with romantic ideas foremost in their minds.' He grinned.

'I suppose there would be,' I agreed.

'I'm thinking of taking out an advertisement in one of those magazines for brides,' he said. 'This could be quite a business opportunity for me.'

I had to agree with him that it seemed as though he might have hit upon an excellent money making idea. But I told him that Patsy and I, and the rest of the village, would miss his services as a chimney sweep.

'Oh don't worry, doctor,' he said, 'I'll always be available to pop round and do your chimneys.'

I said that was very good of him and that I hoped he would keep a few days a month free to sweep chimneys for some of the other villagers – especially the older folk.

He said he would do that and that he would need a constant supply of soot to put onto his face and hands when attending weddings. Then, hesitantly, asked me if he could consult me as a patient. I said that of course he could.

To be honest, I'm fairly accustomed to workmen suddenly stripping off and showing me their bits and pieces. Not long ago a carpenter who was doing some work on our front porch suddenly pulled down his trousers to show me his hernia. He wasn't a patient of mine and didn't live in the village but he wanted a second opinion. Patsy came outside to ask him if he wanted a cup of tea just as he was displaying his large lump and it was, I think, the first time I've seen her blush quite such a deep shade of red. Patsy said afterwards that it was a good job that Miss Johnson, a committed maiden lady, had not chosen that moment to leave the house. Curiously, I remember, the man wore boxer shorts emblazoned with small pictures of fire engines.

Jack told me that he had a tattoo he wanted removing.

I said I'd better take a look.

'I think I'd perhaps better undress outside,' said Jack, looking down at the carpet. He and his clothes were, as usual, thick with soot.

'Where's the tattoo?' I asked.

'On my arm.'

'OK, then if you don't mind it might be a good idea if you popped out into the garden.' I didn't mind him taking his shirt off in the garden, but I knew darned well that if he removed his trousers someone would choose that moment to turn up to deliver a parcel or collect some plants from the small market garden which our gardener helps run for us.

I opened the French windows which lead out from my consulting room and we stepped outside. Jack unbuttoned and then removed his shirt and, to be honest, I was grateful that he was doing this in the garden. The cloud of soot would have taken some cleaning up. 'I always get undressed in the garden,' said Jack, who still lives at home, 'and my mum then throws a couple of cold buckets of water over me. She always did that for my Dad.'

I shivered at the thought.

'Quite refreshing,' said Jack.

'I bet it is,' I said.

He showed me the tattoo. It wasn't difficult to spot. The skin over his left biceps was tattooed with the name 'Doreen'. The letters had been done in blue and red ink and there were roses entwined around the letters.

Tattoos can look decorative on a young body but I often wonder what the owners will feel when they are in their 80s and their skin is decorated with faded and barely legible ink.

'Can you remove it?' he asked, nervously.

I guessed immediately what had happened.

A cosmetic surgeon I know once told me that there were two simple rules about tattoos; first, that no one should ever have themselves tattooed when drunk and second that no one should ever have themselves tattooed with the name of a lover they had known for less than three decades.

'You and Doreen have split up?'

He nodded. 'She was two timing me with a scaffolder from South Molton.'

I examined the tattoo, then told him he could put his shirt back on and come back into the surgery.

'It's not something I can do here in Bilbury,' I told him.

Our own small centre of medical excellence, known for administrative reasons as The Brownlow Country Hotel, is designed more for providing simple nursing care rather than anything else and although I don't mind attending to a small varicose vein or removing an occasional mole, skin tag or lipoma, I was confident that removing an entire tattoo was well outside my modest range of surgical skills.

'Removing a tattoo is never easy to do,' I went on. 'But I can fix up an appointment for you to see a cosmetic surgeon. They've developed some techniques for removing tattoos and he'll be able to tell you what's possible and what's not possible.'

Jack nodded again. I wasn't sure whether he was shy or merely embarrassed.

'You may have to go to Exeter to get it removed,' I said. 'Or even to Bristol.'

'That's OK,' he said.

When he'd gone, I wrote a note to a cosmetic surgeon who has a clinic once a week. The cosmetic surgeon deals with breasts which their owners think too small or too large, with ears that stick out like jug handles and with noses which did not please their owners. He had also, so I had heard, acquired some experience in the delicate and tricky art of removing tattoos. His bedside manner is, to be honest, something of an acquired taste (a colleague of his once told me that he had gone to the Captain Bligh School of Diplomacy) but he is the only cosmetic surgeon available.

To my surprise Jack, the young man with a tattoo surplus to requirements, was back in my surgery a couple of weeks later.

'I've written to the hospital,' I told him, assuming that he'd come to complain that he hadn't yet received an appointment, 'but I'm afraid it will take a while for them to get back to you. There's quite a queue for cosmetic surgery these days.'

'It's OK,' he said, waving a hand, 'you don't have to do anything. I just came to tell you that I don't want my tattoo removed.'

'Ah,' I said, 'you've made up with the girl?'

'Oh no,' he said with a shudder. 'That's properly over.'

Jack looked down at the floor, as though wondering how to say what he clearly needed to say. I wondered for a moment if he'd somehow managed to find a tattoo artist able to convert 'Doreen' into something else; 'Noreen' or 'Doris' or, somehow, 'Mother'. Or maybe someone had found a way to turn 'Doreen' into a three masted schooner or a howling wolf. I once saw a young lady who had five tattoos on her left arm. All were the names of lovers but the first four names on the list had a neat, horizontal line tattooed through them. The girl concerned was only 19-years-old when I saw her and I couldn't help wondering if she would have enough space on her body for a lifetime of crossed out names.

'I've met someone else,' said Jack suddenly. 'I met her at a wedding in Barnstaple a week last Saturday. I was there to kiss the bride and pose for a few photographs and she was one of the bridesmaids.'

'And she doesn't mind the tattoo?'

'Oh no,' said the young man. 'She's a prim and proper girl and she hasn't actually seen it yet. But when she does I know she won't mind. In fact I think she'll like it.'

I looked at him and frowned. I found this difficult to believe.

'Her name's Doreen,' explained the young man. 'She'll think I've had it done for her. And she's bound to think it's dead romantic. Don't you think?'

'I suppose that's a possibility,' I said. 'But are you sure this relationship is going to last?'

'Dunno yet, do I?' said the young man. 'But I thought about it quite a bit and I think I'll keep the tattoo anyway.'

'Right,' I said, 'that's good.'

'Because even if this girl and I don't hit it off, I can always find another Doreen can't I?'

I looked at him.

'There are thousands of girls called Doreen,' he explained. 'I'm bound to be able to find a girl called Doreen to settle down with.'

'I suppose so,' I agreed.

Jack stood up and smiled. 'So you can cancel that appointment,' he said.

'It seems as if your new business has brought you love as well as a good income,' I said, as he headed for the door.

He turned and grinned.

'Doreen wants me to give up the weddings,' he said, 'she says she'll always be worried that I'm going to pick up another bridesmaid.'

'So you're going to concentrate on sweeping chimneys?' I asked.

'It was good enough for my Dad,' said Jack. 'So I guess it'll do for me.' He paused, his hand on the doorknob. 'To be honest with you,' he said, 'I was getting a bit fed up with all the travelling. And then there's the problem of the soot.'

'The soot?'

'The wedding parties always expect you to turn up covered in soot,' he explained. 'And I can only get sooty if I sweep chimneys, can't I?' He sighed. 'And travelling round the country covered in soot isn't much fun. I had to go down to Torquay a week or so ago and when I stopped off at a café for a cup of tea they turned me away – said I'd mess up their furniture.'

The collapse of his new career venture may have been slightly disappointing for Jack but it was, I confess, good news for Patsy and me. And I suspected that the rest of the village would be pleased to hear that we'd got our chimney sweep back.

When Jack had gone, I rang the hospital, got in touch with the secretary who handles appointments for the cosmetic surgeon, and told her to toss my letter into the circular filing cabinet underneath her desk.

'The patient has changed his mind,' I told her. 'He's going to keep his tattoo.'

'Oh right,' said the secretary. 'Do you know what the tattoo is? You didn't say in your letter.'

An alarm bell rang somewhere at the back of my head.

'I'm not entirely sure,' I mumbled. 'Can't quite remember now…'

'Oh,' said the secretary, a trifle disappointed. 'Okay. I expect we'll see it in due course. It's just that he's started going out with my daughter, Doreen. They met at a wedding recently. He seems a nice young man.'

I made a note to ring Jack. I am confident he'll find a convincing explanation.

The Doc’s Bad Back

It was my own darned fault.

I have lost count of the number of times I’ve told people that they must be careful when lifting anything heavy, and that they should always take care to lift with their knees bent and their back straight.

But we don’t always do what we know what we should do, or what we tell other people they should do.

An old beech tree of ours came down in last winter’s most ferocious gale and Thumper Robinson used his chainsaw to chop up the trunk and the main branches into suitable lengths for burning in our fireplace. Chainsaws terrify me and I’d taken on the far less hazardous task of cutting up the smaller branches into kindling.

As Thumper did the cutting, I moved the logs into the old stable where we store our cut wood. This simply meant picking up the logs, putting them into the wheelbarrow and wheeling them to the stable.

It was during the picking up phase that I had become lazy, and had done the lifting with my back bent. When I woke up the following morning, I knew instantly that I was in trouble. My back was as stiff as a board and it hurt like the devil to try to move. The good news was that I was pretty sure that I hadn’t slipped a disc or done any serious damage. I had no pains down the backs of my legs and no pains in my feet. But I had back muscles that were tense, inflamed and sore and screaming to be allowed to stay exactly where they were for a while. I tried several times to get out of bed but every attempt ended in yelps of pain. In the end, I managed to slide out of bed and shuffle along to the bathroom just a few yards away but I knew that I would not be able to dress myself, go down the stairs, sit in a chair or drive the car.

‘It’s no good. I’m going to have to stay in bed for a day or two,’ I told Patsy eventually. ‘It isn’t serious but I literally can’t get up.’

‘What do you want to do about the patients?’ she asked.

Suddenly I came face to face with the nightmare that always awaits everyone who works for themselves and who has no partners, associates or employees to stand in for them. It was my first day’s illness since Dr Brownlow had retired and I knew that I was lucky to have managed so far without needing to find another doctor to help look after the practice.

‘You’ll find the telephone number of a locum agency in my desk diary,’ I told her. ‘Ring them please, and see if they can provide us with a locum for a couple of days.’

Ten minutes later Patsy was back.

‘They can’t provide a locum until next week,’ she said. ‘And then they can only provide one for a whole week. They don’t do odd days.’

I swore quietly. I very much enjoyed working as a single-handed practitioner but at that moment, I would have happily swapped my life with one of my medical friends working in large practices. I knew that when they were ill they simply took some time off, knowing that their partners and assistants would take over their work. The single-handed practitioner, particularly in the country, has no such luxury.

‘Hopefully, I’ll be better by then,’ I said.

‘I could ring around the local practices to see if anyone can help out,’ suggested Patsy.

‘Good idea!’

I lay in bed, unmoving. I knew that my friend William, who works in a large practice and has numerous partners, would come down and help out for a few days, but to do so he would have to take some holiday from his own practice. I really didn’t want to ask him to do that.

I hated being ill. Outside I could hear the lesser spotted woodpecker hammering on the silver birch tree which stands beside our bedroom. No one works harder than a woodpecker: constantly busy. I remembered that I had read somewhere that a woodpecker bangs his beak into a tree 12,000 times a day, with each bang producing a G force of 1,000.

I tried to read, holding a book above my head, but after a couple of minutes my arms hurt so much that I had to lower the book. Ben, our faithful canine friend, who had been lying on the floor leapt up onto the bed but, sensing that all was not well, kept to the bottom of the bed by my feet.

Twenty minutes later, Patsy returned.

‘I’ve tried all the local doctors,’ she said, ‘and Dr Middleton in Chugborough says you can give patients his number if it’s a genuine emergency. But he can’t cover your surgeries because he’s got his own to do. Nor can anyone else I’m afraid. Apparently there is an epidemic of gastrointestinal poisoning in Combe Martin and the doctors there are rushed off their feet.’

‘Are there any patients in the waiting room?’ I asked. I looked at the clock. It was ten minutes to ten. The morning surgery was already nearly an hour late.

‘Five,’ said Patsy. ‘There were twelve but the other seven said they’d come back another day. And there are half a dozen requests for repeat prescriptions. Two people rang asking you to visit them at home but when I explained that you were poorly in bed they said they would ring back in a couple of days to see how you were. They said it wasn’t urgent. Everyone said they were sorry to hear you were bad and hoped you’d get well soon.’

‘If you bring me a prescription pad I can write out the prescriptions,’ I said. ‘But I don’t have the foggiest idea what we’re going to do with the five patients in the surgery.’

‘You definitely can’t get downstairs?’

I shook my head.

‘Then we’ll have to bring the patients up here!’ said Patsy brightly. ‘If Mohammed can’t go to the mountains then the mountains must come to Mohammed!’ She busied herself around the room moving bits of clothing and personal items out of sight. She helped me put on a shirt and she put a tie around my neck. Below the waist, hidden from view, I was still wearing pyjama trousers. Above the waist I did at least look respectable. She put a chair beside the bed, for patients to sit on, and then hunted around in the back of our wardrobe until she found a large wooden tray with legs. This made a splendid, temporary desk on top of the bedclothes. She put a prescription pad on the table and then fetched my stethoscope, auriscope, opthalmoscope and sphygmomanometer and, having moved aside the alarm clock, the bedside lamp and the book I had been reading the night before she put all the medical paraphernalia on the table at my side of the bed.

‘Ready?’ she said, at last.

‘Just about,’ I agreed.

‘Can you sit up a bit higher?’ she asked.

‘I’m afraid not,’ I said with a sigh. I was lying almost flat, with just one pillow under my head. When I tried to sit up a little higher the pain in my back got worse. I had really given my back muscles a hard time and now they were definitely making me pay for my stupidity. They were, you might say, getting their own back.

‘Shall I tell the first patient to come up?’ said Patsy.

‘OK,’ I sighed.

Patsy took one last look around the bedroom, spotted a small pile of freshly laundered, neatly folded underwear on a chair and stuffed the lot into a drawer in the dressing table. And then she went back downstairs to tell the patient who had been first into the waiting room that morning to come up and see me.

‘Sorry to see you in bed,’ said Mr Daglingpole Birdlip. ‘Your wife says you have a bad back.’ Miss Johnson, my receptionist, had given him his medical records envelope to bring upstairs with him and he put the envelope down on top of the bedclothes, just out of my reach. I could immediately see that the conjunctiva of his right eye was almost completely red.

I agreed that the information he had been given was entirely accurate and that I did, indeed, have a bad back. I could, to be honest, have hoped for a better start to a difficult surgery.

Mr Birdlip is a strange and indomitably gloomy fellow, though he is possibly not as strange as his father who was, for a variety of reasons, something of a local legend. The family has for centuries lived in a large house near Blackmoor Gate. Their ancestors are reputed to have made their money out of smuggling, which was once a very common and profitable activity along the North Devon coast. They were, so it is rumoured, also heavily involved in selling opium to the Chinese and doing a little slave trading.

Sixty or seventy years ago, the Birdlips were rich enough to have servants and in cold weather, Mr P’s father would call for a servant to act as a human hot water bottle. In those days, maids regarded the chore of being taken to bed by their employer as being as much a part of their domestic duties as laying a fire in the drawing room but old Mr P was different in that his requirements were not for a sexual partner but for someone to keep him warm – a human hot water bottle.

According to legend, he didn’t much care which servant offered themselves for this activity, though he preferred the plumper variety of servant since he believed that they produced the most heat. Patchy, who knows a good deal of local history, and even more scurrilous gossip, says that the various male members of staff were as likely as the most luscious junior scullery maid to be selected. Towards the end of Mr Birdlip’s days, the servants would cut cards for the post which was coveted, for although no sexual activity was offered or expected, a fee of one guinea was always paid in cash when the morning breakfast tray was delivered and the human hot water bottle discharged from their duties.

Sadly, for the current Mr Birdlip, the money and the big house had gone.

Mr Birdlip’s father had made a single disastrous investment in a small company which had supposedly found large quantities of gold and silver somewhere in Africa. Unfortunately, the only gold and silver in the mine was the stuff which had been put there to ‘salt the mine’ by the trickster who had founded the company.

After the old man's death, the young Birdlip had to sell the house to pay off his father's debts. He had been left with very little and had taken a job as a labourer on a neighbouring farm. Ever since I have known him, he has struggled through life with a chip the size of a telegraph pole resting on his shoulder. And for most of that time he has been attempting to give up his smoking habit (sixty of the cheapest and most toxic cigarettes it is possible to buy) and his drinking habit (eight or ten pints a night at a small table for one in the Duck and Puddle).

Lean and lugubrious, he has worked outside all his adult life and his skin had been so well weathered that it is impossible to guess at his age other than to say that he was an adult somewhere between the ages of 40 and 80. He is, in fact, still in his early 40s.

And, oddly, despite his smoking and his drinking, he is a world-class hypochondriac. If they gave out medals for introspection and hypochondriasis he would have a drawer full of the damned things. I'm prepared to wager that he knows more about medical matters than some professionals. Smoking and drinking are his habits. His hobby is medicine and crammed into the tiny cottage which he rents, he has a medical library which most doctors would envy.

Whenever he has a day off (once a week) or a holiday (two weeks a year, not to be taken consecutively or in the harvest season) he spends it visiting bookshops and second-hand shops in search of more medical volumes to add to his collection. His problem (and occasionally my problem) is that whenever he has any unusual signs or symptoms he flicks through his books and finds the gloomiest of all possible explanations. He has had cancer seven times in the last couple of years alone (bone cancer, skin cancer, stomach cancer, oesophageal cancer, brain cancer, liver cancer and kidney cancer). In each case there was a very simple explanation for his condition.

A year or two ago he bought himself a second-hand sphygmomanometer and a second-hand stethoscope and used them to take his blood pressure.

I eventually confiscated them both after he had rung me one Sunday evening at 10 p.m. to tell me that he thought he was about to die.

'I've got no blood pressure!' he said. 'I expect I'll be dead by the time you get here.'

I raced round to his cottage and found him pale and shaking. I took his blood pressure and it was, as usual, 115/80. 'There's nothing wrong with your blood pressure,' I told him. 'It's better than mine. And you're definitely not dying.'

I examined his sphygmomanometer which looked as if it had probably been new back in the days of the First World War, when such machines were first becoming widely available.

'You're healthy, but the rubber bulb in your sphygmomanometer has sprung a leak,' I told him. 'Where on earth did you find this thing?'

'I bought it in a house sale in Taunton,' he told me, 'it used to belong to a doctor.' He announced this as though the ownership of the machine had bestowed upon it an air of infallibility.

'You're fine,' I told him. 'But the sphygmomanometer has died.'

By then the pallor and the shaking had both stopped.

Inevitably, by the time I got back home, a film which I'd been looking forward to all week had finished. It was my own fault for planning to watch a film being shown on television rather than a video which I could turn on and off. Patsy assured me that it had been very good and that she would endeavour to purchase a copy next time she went into Barnstaple.

'I had a bad back once,' said Mr Birdlip, who was still beside my bed and who was standing staring down at me as though he were an undertaker and I were a prospect. 'It was a terrible thing. It went on for months and months.' He pursed his lips and shook his head.

'I'm sorry to hear that,' I said.

'Awful pain,' he said. 'I couldn't move an inch. After a couple of weeks I felt quite suicidal.'

'Ah,' I said. This was definitely not making me feel any more cheerful.

'I knew a bloke who spent five years in bed with a bad back,' said Mr Birdlip. 'In the end he lost the use of everything below his waist – legs, whatnot and all. His wife got fed up and left him.' He nodded thoughtfully. 'Can't blame her really, can you? She ended up nursing him, you see. And with him not having any feeling in his whatnot, there was no chance at all of any marital conjugations.'

The full-blooded hypochondriac always has a new complaint, a new disease to talk about. And most hypochondriacs are persistently gloomy. Mr Birdlip is no exception. I always try to be sympathetic and understanding but I really didn't want to hear any more gloomy stuff about bad backs.

I have done quite an amount of research into hypochondriasis over the years for I have several hypochondriacs among my patients. The term 'hypochondria' was first used in its modern sense in the 17th century when it was used to describe a form of depression that was accompanied by rather vague pains and general bowel problems. Leeches were usually the favoured method of treatment. In England, the disorder became rather chic. It was known to its sufferers as ‘hyp’ and the anxiety and gloom that accompanied it were generally regarded as a sign of intelligence. Most sufferers from ‘hyp’ were male (Samuel Johnson and James Boswell were both sufferers) and women with similar symptoms were usually said to be suffering from ‘hysteria’ – then regarded as the female equivalent of ‘hyp’.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, doctors stoked the fires of hypochondria by constantly discovering new diseases and telling people about them. Proust wrote that ‘For each illness that doctors cure with medicine, they provoke ten in healthy people by inoculating them with the virus that is a thousand times more powerful than any microbe: the idea that one is ill.’

Sigmund Freud, the sex-obsessed Austrian, dismissed the whole thing (arguing, inevitably, that hypochondria was merely the result of misplaced sexual urges) but hypochondriasis has steadily become increasingly common and a bigger and bigger problem for doctors. The big danger, of course, is that the doctor may be tempted to dismiss the fears of a patient who is a known hypochondriac, even when they present with signs or symptoms which are, or could be, indications of some serious disorder.

‘What’s your problem today?’ I asked him, not wanting to hear any more of his reminiscences about back problems.

‘I’ve got leukaemia, doctor,’ he announced, with surprising levity. ‘I doubt if I’ve got many more months to live.’ He made this announcement calmly and without regret or sadness; as though it were his inevitable destiny. He rubbed his fingers through the hair he no longer had. It was, I suspect, a gesture he had done many times when he was younger. Now, he still made the gesture but the hair had almost all gone. Mr Birdlip suffers from premature male pattern baldness. I suspect that worrying about his health has probably expedited the hair loss.

I looked up at him, puzzled. ‘Won’t you sit down? There’s a chair there you can use.’ I pointed to the chair that Patsy had positioned for patients to use.

‘I’d rather stand,’ he said. ‘For as long as I am able.’

‘What makes you think you have leukaemia?’ I asked him. I found looking at him very difficult and quite uncomfortable.

‘The bleed in the conjunctiva,’ he said. ‘My books say it happens with leukemia. The growth in the number of white cells is inevitably accompanied by a shortage of platelets. And the absence of platelets means an increased likelihood of bleeding.’ He sighed; the deep dark sigh of a man who has prepared himself to face the ferryman of Hades. ‘Has it occurred to you,’ he continued, ‘that one can be bouncing along without a care in the world, full of beans and bursting with joie de vivre, and then you get up one morning and you have a spot or a cough or a numb bit of skin or, in my case, a red eye, and you think nothing of it and then bang, 24 hours later you’re on your back in an ambulance and 48 hours after that you’re on a slab in the morgue with a scar from here to eternity and the top of your skull held on with staples?’ He paused and laughed. It was one of those laughs usually described as ‘hollow’. ‘And people say not to worry!’

‘Well, when you put it like that…’

‘I do. Indeed I do put it just like that. I have lived hour by hour, always watchful and never taking tomorrow for granted. We are all of us so close to disaster – always just moments away from some terrible end. A seemingly innocuous symptom can be the harbinger of death. You can be meandering along, blissfully happy, and suddenly life will pop you on the head and it’s all over.’

I looked up at him and heard myself sighing. ‘I suppose so,’ I muttered.

‘They do fasten the top of the skull back on with staples don’t they? When they’ve cut it off so that they can examine the brain. Or do they glue it back on? So that the corpse looks good in the coffin.’

I hesitated. ‘I’m not entirely sure,’ I admitted. ‘Almost certainly not glue.’ I looked up at his eye. ‘Have you ever had anything like it before?’

Even when I am feeling well, and on top of my form, I find Mr Birdlip to be rather hard work.

‘Never,’ said Mr Birdlip firmly. ‘Not once in 42 years.’ He thought for a moment. ‘No, I tell a lie. I had a bleed when I was hit in the eye by a tennis ball. But that was a traumatically induced conjunctival haemorrhage.’ He paused and sighed. ‘This time I definitely haven’t been hit in the eye by a tennis ball. I haven’t seen a tennis ball for 30 years.’

‘Do you get hay fever?’ I asked.

He shook his head. He still hadn’t sat down. I was getting a stiff neck looking up at him.

‘Have you had flu? A cold? Anything that made you sneeze?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘I take my vitamins every day.’

‘Have you been rubbing your eyes? Dust in them?’

Another shake of the head.

‘Have you been lifting anything heavy?’

‘Oh yes, doctor. We had a delivery of feed and the forklift truck broke down. I had to unload it all by hand. I’ve got a hernia but I didn’t mention that since there is no point really, is there?’

‘Why is there no point?’

‘Well, the leukaemia will kill me before I could have the hernia repaired, won’t it?’

‘Let me look at the hernia,’ I told him.

He unfastened his trousers. I could immediately see that he had a right sided inguinal hernia. I see a lot of hernias in my practice since many of my patients lift things for a living.

‘Turn your head and cough,’ I said.

‘Why do you want me to turn my head?’ He asked. ‘Does that make a difference to what happens to the hernia?’

‘No. But it means you won’t cough in my face.’

‘Ah!’

He turned his head and coughed. I could see the hernia grow larger as the pressure in his abdomen increased.

‘Did the hernia develop after you’d been unloading the bags of feed?’

‘It did, doctor.’

‘And you had the conjunctival bleed at the same time?’

‘I did, doctor.’

‘They’re connected,’ I told him. ‘They were both caused by the fact that you were lifting something very heavy. You’ve got Ebers Disease.’

An inguinal hernia isn’t usually referred to by that name but I knew that if I told Mr Birdlip that he had a common or garden hernia he would be devastated. So I told him he had Ebers Disease since I remembered being told by one of my lecturers at medical school that the first recorded description of a hernia appeared in an Egyptian papyrus on medical matters. The papyrus, which first appeared around 1500 BC was known as the Ebers Papyrus.

‘I’ve got what?’

‘Ebers disease!’

He looked puzzled. ‘Who’s got my disease then?’ he demanded. It took me a moment to realise that in his confusion and mild paranoia he was now assuming that there had been another medical screw up and that while he had Ebers disease there was another patient running around somewhere suffering from Birdlip disease. He is a rather humourless man who tends to take everything literally. Life with Mr Birdlip is not easy and I long ago realised why he remains a bachelor.

‘No, no,’ I protested. ‘You’ve got Ebers disease. That’s the technical term.’

I told him that the blood on his conjunctiva would disappear over the next few days. ‘And I’ll arrange for you to see a surgeon about that hernia, the Ebers disease’ I told him. ‘Meanwhile I’ll prescribe a truss and you’d better not do any heavy lifting.’

‘What about the leukaemia? How long do you think I’ve got?’

‘You haven’t got leukaemia,’ I told him.

He looked at me. ‘Are you sure?’

I looked at him sternly. ‘Who is the doctor here?’

‘Oh, you are. Definitely,’ said Mr Birdlip. He suddenly brightened up. ‘It was just the lifting then?’

‘It was just the lifting,’ I told him. I didn’t tell him I thought he was lucky to get away with a hernia rather than a crippling back pain.

My second patient was a woman from the Badgworthy Valley called Betty Rutter.

In contrast to Mr Birdlip, Betty Rutter is a constantly bright and jolly woman who is prone to bursting into giggles for no discernible reason. She once told me that a woman’s place is in the bedroom and nowhere else. Her husband does the cooking every evening when he comes in from the fields. She does not believe in housework and so, as a result, every surface in their farmhouse is covered in a generous layer of dust. It is said that household dust is made up largely of skin cells and if that is truly the case then there is now probably enough dust in their house to recreate an army of giants.

‘Do you mind if I shut the door, doctor?’ asked Mrs Rutter. She lowered her voice. ‘It’s a bit personal, you see.’

‘Of course not,’ I said.

There was silence for a moment and then although I could not see what was happening I could hear her struggling to close the door.

Bilbury Grange is an old house and, like older people, it has a good many idiosyncrasies. The back door can only be unlocked if you pull up on the handle when you turn the key. Fortunately, since we hardly ever lock any of our doors this doesn’t matter much. The door to the butler’s pantry won’t open unless you pull the handle down and inwards at the same time. The front door won’t open or shut unless you pull the door towards you. And our bedroom door also requires special attention.

‘You need to push the door in with your left knee and then with your right hand pull up the doorknob. Then it will close.’

There were sounds of much scuffling and pushing, pulling and panting. Eventually, there was a sound of the door clicking shut.

‘Done it,’ said Mrs Rutter. She suddenly burst into giggles. ‘What would folk say?’ she asked.

‘Say about what?’ I asked.

‘If they knew you and I were shut in your bedroom together!’

‘I don’t think there’s any danger of anything improper occurring,’ I said. I realised when I’d said it that it sounded rather pompous.

She sat by the bed in silence for a while. I waited. Eventually I asked her if she had come to see me for any particular reason.

She laughed, as though this were very funny. ‘I went into Barnstaple the other week and quite forgot what I’d gone for,’ she told me. ‘Things like that happen to me all the time. I do remember some things quite vividly but I’m not always entirely convinced that I manage to put them in the correct order or the proper context or indeed whether the things I do remember actually happened or whether I just imagined them.’

I made a reassuring and encouraging sound. It is a sound all GPs acquire as they become more experienced. It is a sound which means ‘Please go on’. It is often said that you can safely tell a GP anything since he or she will know too much to be shocked or even surprised. This is true but conversations with Mrs Rutter always left me slightly discombobulated; as though I’d had slightly too much to drink and was no longer quite sure what was going on.

‘I’ve got a little lump,’ she said. She stood up, pulled her skirt up as far as it would go and then pulled her voluminous knee length knickers down. The knickers were of the bloomers style which used to be popular with Victorian lady cyclists. She then pointed to a scar on her abdomen. There was, indeed, a small lump at the site of the scar. It occurred to me that if I had been playing ‘patient bingo’ I would be doing well. I had scored two hernias in a row.

‘What was the operation for?’ I asked.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ she answered. ‘I think they took something away.’

‘Don’t you know what it was that they removed?’

‘Oh good heavens no!’ she said, quite firmly. ‘I didn’t like to ask.’ She paused and looked at me. ‘It wouldn’t have been polite would it?’

‘That’s OK,’ I said, ‘you can put your skirt back down now.’

‘They know what they’re doing, don’t they? Or at least we have to assume they know what they’re doing, don’t we?’

‘I guess so,’ I agreed. I liked it that she included me with her. I always think a good GP should always be on the side of the patients. If it’s going to be ‘us versus them’ then I need to be on the ‘us’ team with the patients.

‘And shall I pull up my knickers?’

Mrs Rutter is a very precise woman.

‘Indeed. Absolutely. You should pull up your knickers too.’

This was more of a struggle than it would have been if she had done it before she had allowed her ankle length skirt to fall back into position.

‘I’ll write to the hospital and arrange for you to see a surgeon,’ I told her. I wondered idly if I could get a special deal from the hospital. Have one hernia repaired, get the other repaired free.

It took her some time but Mrs Rutter eventually managed to get the door open. She was giggling loudly when she left.

The third patient that morning was Tiggy Marwood.

Tiggy has had five children with five different fathers and I am still waiting for her to learn that babies are like promises in that they are very easy to make but much harder to keep.

She had started her career in motherhood at the age of 16 which was, when she began, quite an early age. ‘Virginity is very overrated,’ she once told me. ‘It’s like a balloon. One prick and it’s gone forever.’

Tiggy had been born in London where her mother, Lilian Marwood, had been a professional ‘knocker up’ in the 1930s.

I’d never heard of this sort of employment before but it seemed that her mother’s job required her to wake her clients every morning by blowing dried peas at their bedroom windows. She had to get up at 4.00 a.m. and was finished work by 6.30 a.m. She used a small wooden tube for firing the peas, clearly a piece of professional pea-shooting equipment, and the job had been handed down in her family for three generations. I gather that the business had been pretty well destroyed by alarm clocks and when the business died on the outbreak of the Second World War, Mrs Marwood had less than fifty clients. I met Lilian Marwood once when she came to Bilbury for a few days.

She suffered from thyrotoxicosis, refused to contemplate treatment and I suspect that she never weighed more than seven stones fully clothed in winter.

Tiggy is an unusual woman. Every time I see her she tells me that her best pal is serving five years in Exeter jail for soliciting and that she once lived next door to a woman whose son played professional football for Hartlepool United. I don't know why she tells me these things but I suspect that she thinks I will, in some way, be impressed.

Tiggy has an exceptional talent for saying the wrong thing at the wrong time to the wrong person. I think she probably always means well, but has a bad case of 'foot in mouth disease' and is a specialist in the unintentional backhanded compliment. I once heard her say to a villager who was wearing a new dress: 'That's a very nice dress. Did you make it yourself?' And I heard her say to a fellow who was showing off a lovely new car which he had been saving up to buy for several months: 'Did you inherit some money?' None of this was said to hurt but these, and many other, unfortunate incidents mean that people sometimes find themselves busy examining a hedge or looking down at the ground if they see Tiggy out and about in the village.

She was, she told me, now pregnant again and had decided that this time she wanted her latest paramour to be present in the bedroom at the birth of their child. She said she'd read a magazine article about women whose husbands had been in the labour room with them. Apparently, they all said that it had strengthened their relationships. 'They say that since the man was there at the going in bit of the pregnancy, it is only right that he should be there at the coming out bit.'

I didn't tell Tiggy but I was not quite so enthusiastic about the current enthusiasm for encouraging all fathers to be in the delivery room at the moment of truth. Some are probably better suited to pacing up and down in the corridor outside. The delivery room can be messy, noisy and unnerving. I fear that a nervous father to be might end up feeling nauseous and guilty – as well as considering himself to be somewhat surplus to requirements.

I said I would be happy for him to be present. But that he would have to leave the bedroom if he felt sick or thought he might faint.

Tiggy was delighted. But I had real reservations. When she told me his name, I realised that I knew her current lover. Nigel is a patient of mine. He is a nice enough fellow, a very nervous unemployed male model, and to be honest I had always thought of him as 'batting for the other side', as I have heard it described. Actually, he calls himself a male model but I don't think he has ever done any modelling. I remember he told me that he thought he would make a good model because he has never had any difficulty in moving around while wearing clothes and felt, indeed, that he was very good at it. I told him, rather tentatively, that I thought there might be more to it than that but he insisted that there is not.

'You don't have a hernia, by any chance, do you?' I asked Tiggy, as she headed for the door. She turned and looked at me, frowning slightly. 'A hernia? No, I don't think so. Why? Should I?'

'No, no, it's nothing,' I said. 'It's just that we're running a special offer on hernias today.'

She left, looking very confused.

My fourth patient that day was Lord Chilcottt who is, to be frank, not quite what he might seem to be. He lives in East Ilkerton but insists on staying on my list of patients because he says I understand him in a way that no other doctor possibly could or would.

His surname is Chilcottt and his Christian name is Lord, in the same way that Mr Ellington's first name is Duke and Mr Basie's first name is 'Count'. The difference is that whereas I very much doubt that Mr Ellington ever tries to pass himself off as a duke, or Mr Basie ever pretends that he is a count, Mr Chilcottt makes every effort possible to pass himself off as a Lord. When he rings a restaurant to book a table, or a hotel to reserve a room, he tells the receptionist that his name is Lord Chilcott and always succeeds in making it sound as though the Lord were a genuine title, rather than simply a name. When he first telephoned the surgery, expecting to be able to make an appointment, Miss Johnson was very impressed and came running into my surgery to ask if we should give him an appointment before the surgery started. I told her that we do not have an appointments system and that we will never have an appointments system and that even if Her Majesty the Queen calls in for a consultation she will have to sit in the waiting room with the other patients and wait her turn. Miss Johnson was not impressed by this.

Mr Chilcott makes a real effort to look and sound very patrician. He wears his white hair long, combed straight back and curling over the collar, he always fastens his shirt cuffs with what look like heavy gold cufflinks and even in summer he always wear a three piece suit, with a gold chain across one side of his waistcoat, as though attached to a fob watch in the pocket.

'I get tired if I walk more than five or six miles,' he said, sitting down on the edge of my bed and giving me a jolt which made me wince. He didn't notice my wincing. 'And I get especially tired if I have to walk up steep hills.'

'Ah,' I said, not immediately being able to think of anything else more appropriate to say.

'I used to be able to walk to Barnstaple and back,' he said, rather defiantly.

'How old are you?' I asked.

‘I’ll be 92 next month,’ he replied instantly, with considerable pride.

‘I’m afraid I think you perhaps just have to come to terms with the fact that you’re not as young as you were,’ I told him, in too much pain to think of a more tactful way to break the news to him.

‘Do you think that’s it?’ he asked, genuinely surprised.

‘I’m afraid so.’

‘The old ageing process catching up with me?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well I never,’ he said. He stood up. ‘So, what do you suggest?’ he asked.

‘Take shorter walks,’ I said. ‘Or just stop for a while and admire the view every so often.’

He thought for a while then nodded. ‘Good advice, doctor,’ he said. ‘Would you syringe my ears while I’m here? I think the wax is building up again.’

I looked at him, hardly able to believe my own ears. I was lying flat on my back. It hurt to move. Most of my patients are thoughtful and appreciative. Lord Chilcott, as he always refers to himself, is one of those patients every doctor would happily manage without. He always sends me a cheap bottle of sherry at Christmas and for this he expects to be treated as a private patient. I would be far happier if he kept the sherry (which we never drink) and behaved a little more thoughtfully when visiting the surgery.

‘If you pop along to the hospital, the nurse will syringe them for you,’ I told him.

‘But you usually syringe them yourself!’ protested Mr Chilcott.

He was right, of course. I like to perform small procedures like syringing ears, removing stitches and sewing up small lacerations. I think it helps to cement the doctor-patient relationship if the doctor actually does something active from time to time.

‘I would syringe your ears if I could,’ I promised. ‘And I will syringe your ears next time they’re blocked. But I’m afraid I don’t think I’ll be able to syringe your ears from this position. You’ll have to go the Brownlow Country Hotel this time.’

‘Can’t you sit up?’

I told him that I could not.

‘Oh,’ he said, ‘I thought you were just perhaps having a bit of a lie in.’

‘You’ll have to go to the Brownlow Country Hotel,’ I told him. I didn’t have the energy or the patience to explain that I was not in bed out of choice.

Mr Chilcott looked puzzled. ‘The hotel? I didn’t know we had a hotel in Bilbury.’

‘It’s really the Bilbury hospital,’ I explained. ‘But we aren’t allowed to call it a hospital.’

‘Oh no, of course not,’ agreed Mr Chilcott. ‘Bloody silly if you ask me.’

He stood up and left without another word.

The fifth patient was Mrs Germander Speedwell who is in her 80s and in pretty good health for her age. Her biggest problem is that she is very aware of her age and expects to find every day a physical trial. She took one look at our stairs and said she didn’t think she could manage them. So, since she was stuck downstairs and I was stuck upstairs, she stood in the hall and shouted up her replies to the questions I shouted down.

She wanted to know if I believed in euthanasia and said she was worried that when her time came she might not be able to deal very well with any accompanying pain. I promised her that I would make sure that she did not suffer any pain and Patsy said that she went away much happier than she’d been when she arrived.

During the day, word got round the village that the doctor had a bad back and was stuck in bed and the evening surgery was much quieter. Most people who might have come along decided that they could wait a day or so until I was able to see them in my consulting room, and examine them properly.

One patient did, however, turn up in the middle of the afternoon. It turned out to be someone I knew.

When I first met him, Jonquil Barley was working as a television presenter on an afternoon television chat show. (Astonishingly, he really did have a sister called Pearl. I think his parents had a sense of humour.) This was back in the days when I used to make regular television appearances. He was one of those energetic, excitable television people who always seem to be driven by clockwork and to have been wound up by an over-enthusiastic child. He had television hair (especially coiffed and gelled so that even in a hurricane not one hair would move a tenth of an inch), a television smile (permanently present and designed to show off his immaculately capped and whitened teeth) and a wardrobe full of beautifully fitting television suits.

Sadly, time did not treat him well.

He lost his hair and tried to deal with the loss by purchasing a toupee. The problem was that the viewers who had watched him balding were a little surprised to see him suddenly appear with a luxurious head of hair. Most television presenters deal with their hair loss gradually, as the loss occurs. Jonquil left it too late.

Worse still, when he had plastic surgery done to disguise the ravages of age, he went to a cut price surgeon who promised much but delivered little. And he went from having huge eyebags and a sagging chin to having skin so taut that it could have been used on a drum. Once again the viewers thought this hugely comical.

With no one taking him seriously as a television presenter, Jonquil, moved to radio where the hair and the skin were of no account. His agent found him a job presenting a local radio programme.

For a while all went well but Jonquil simply couldn't cope with the new life. He'd been accustomed to being a 'star', to having fans stop him in the street and ask for his autograph and to having production staff fussing around attending to his make-up, making sure that his suit jacket wasn't wrinkled and telling him how wonderful he was. He found working on the wireless something of an anti-climax and he started to drink more and more alcohol. On several occasions, he turned up late for work and once or twice listeners complained that he sounded drunk on the radio. Soon the boss of the radio station had to give him an official warning.

Jonquil then walked out of the radio station, telling everyone that he had been offered a fantastic job on a television station in America. He organised a big party, which he could ill afford, and told big lies to everyone present. Colleagues and friends all wished him good luck.

I learned all this from him a year or two later.

He had found out where I was living and working and came to see me. He wanted to know if I could find him work. I rang round half a dozen people I knew at radio stations in the South West of England and eventually managed to get him a late night show on one of the stations.

The job lasted six weeks.

Jonquil was fired because he missed two programmes and was caught drinking alcohol while on the air.

That was, I think, the last paid employment he ever had.

He now looked awful. His face was flabby and he was fat. He was almost unrecognisable. His clothes were filthy and he smelt as if he hadn't bathed for a week or more. His nose and cheeks were red with the flush of a chronic alcoholic and he reeked of tobacco and booze.

He told me that he had been living rough in Exeter and remembering that I was in North Devon had hitchhiked his way up to Bilbury. It had taken him nearly two days.

'What can I do for you?' I asked him. I had no intention of trying to get him another job. I knew he'd let everyone down.

'Life's gone downhill a bit since I saw you last,' he said. It was the understatement of the century as far as I was concerned.

I told him I was sorry to hear it.

'Never could tell the difference between a dragon and a windmill,' he said, with a hollow laugh.

I smiled and nodded.

'I need a prescription,' he told me baldly. He explained that he wanted amphetamines and benzodiazepines.

'Can't live without the damned things,' he said. 'I'm weaning myself off them but it's a slow process as you know.'

I refused him.

'I'll give you the names of two clinics,' I told him. 'If you go there, and you're honest, they will help you.'

He swore and told me he didn't want to go to any bloody clinic. 'I've travelled for two days to come and see you,' he said angrily. He pulled his lips back in a strange sort of snarl. To someone lying in bed he actually looked quite frightening. 'I should have known better than to put my faith in some hick country doctor.'

'I'll give you some money to tide you over for a few days,' I told him. I made a supreme effort and reached for my wallet on the bedside table. It contained £60. It was all the cash we had in the house; a lot of money for us. I handed him the £30 which he took without a word. He then turned on his heel and walked out. When he had left, I realised that he hadn't once asked me why I was in bed in the middle of the day. I strongly suspected that the £30 would be blown on the drugs I'd refused to prescribe for him. He would doubtless know where to find what he needed.

'You haven't been sniffing laughing gas, have you?' asked Patsy, when she came upstairs to tell me that there were no more patients waiting to be seen. 'Mrs Rutter came downstairs as giggly as a schoolgirl and had her dress tucked into the back of her knickers and Tiggy Marwood came down saying something about you having a special offer on hernias.

'It's been a long morning,' I said with a sigh. I told her about Jonquil and our £60. 'And Lord Chilcott wanted me to syringe his ears while I lay flat on my back in bed.'

'At least he didn't come downstairs with his shirt hanging out of the back of his trousers,' said Patsy with a laugh.

I spent the rest of the afternoon lying in bed, trying to remember when Jonquil's life had begun to slide downhill. I eventually decided that he had probably always been doomed. I could remember a lot of small signs which should have told me which way things were going to go. It was all so, so sad.

There were just three patients at the evening surgery.

Mrs Mallory Spark, a divorcee in her thirties, had a recurrence of her cystitis. I scribbled out a prescription for an antibiotic though she has frequently told me that she suspects that her cystitis is usually a result of over energetic sexual activity with an exceptionally well endowed lover, rather than an infection. I have, however, found that if I don't prescribe an antibiotic her symptoms don't go away and I suspect that the story of the over demanding over endowed lover may well be more wishful thinking than rude reality.

Mr Albert Butt (known to everyone as 'Scuttle') came along complaining that his itchy feet were keeping him awake. With the aid of my shaving mirror and the mirror on Patsy's dressing table, I was able to examine his feet and make a diagnosis of athlete's foot. I prescribed some antifungal cream and promised him a good night's sleep.

The third patient, Norbert Hicklebury, complained that he thought he was going blind. He said he was frightened that he had macular degeneration – the disorder which had destroyed his father's quality of life. I was able to tell him that he had a cataract and that I would make an appointment for him to see an eye specialist. When I told him that the cataract could be treated, and that he would not lose his sight, he was almost deliriously happy.

After the end of the surgery, Patsy told me that she had noticed that a small bronze statue that had been standing on a table in the hall was missing. It was a statue of Napoleon on horseback; a rather nice three dimensional copy of the famous painting of Napoleon Bonaparte by the French artist Jacques-Louis David. Our good friends the Foggs, Patchy and Adrienne, had given it to us the previous Christmas.

'I think someone has stolen it,' she said sadly.

I knew who it was.

I don't know whether I was sadder at the disappearance of the bronze or at the fact that Jonquil had stolen it.

The rest of the evening was quiet. The telephone didn't ring once.

And the following day was quiet, too. There were just four patients at the morning surgery and two patients at the evening surgery. Two of the morning patients merely wanted repeat prescriptions. One wanted to know if I would be well enough to make her bottle of bitter, green medicine when she ran out at the weekend (it contains nothing powerful and is my most popular and most effective placebo). I assured her that I would.

Three of the day's patients had come merely to bring me presents (one brought some old magazines, one brought a bottle of home-made whisky (I'm not sure whether or not it is as illegal to accept home-made whisky as it is to make it but I'm not going to say anything to the authorities and neither is the patient who made it) and the third brought a home embroidered card and a bunch of mixed flowers. Patsy allowed these three up into the bedroom (now turned into a temporary consulting room) and later told me that I had received more than a dozen 'Get Well' cards. She said that ten of the cards were identical and had clearly all been bought from Peter Marshall's shop.

And, praise the heavens, there were no urgent calls; no real emergencies which I could not deal with. The nearest thing to an emergency was the moment when Mrs Ossbury was stung by a bee. Mrs Ossbury is allergic to bee stings and has, in the past, suffered nasty reactions. Her husband brought her to the house for treatment and, understandably, they were both in quite a state. With Patsy's help, directing me and guiding my hand, I managed to give Mrs Ossbury an injection of adrenalin and the crisis was immediately averted. Mrs Ossbury left, I'm pleased to report, with the back of her skirt outside her knickers, which were nowhere near as voluminous as those worn by Mrs Rutter and had the words 'Welcome. Please Enter' embroidered on the front. She seemed very embarrassed when this was revealed and I got the distinct impression that she had not expected to visit the doctor when she'd got dressed earlier that day. Still, it could have been worse. I once saw a patient who wore panties with the words 'Tradesmen please use the back entrance' embroidered on them.

After two days in bed, fretting and doubtless increasingly irritable, I awoke on the third day and realised, with great delight, that the pain which had immobilised me was considerably better. Gingerly, I managed to slide out of bed and stand on my own two feet again. My sympathy for patients who need to spend long periods immobile was, as it always is whenever I have to spend time in bed, massively enhanced. There is nothing like a little illness of their own to teach doctors to be more sympathetic when dealing with their patients.

I remembered that a medical school tutor of mine once said that all medical students should be forced to spend a week in bed every six months. That way, he said, they would never forget just how tiresome and exhausting it can be to be ill.

Granny Kennett's Pudding Club

A few months before Frank had his stroke, Frank and Gilly at the Duck and Puddle public house decided that they wanted to do a little 'pro-active marketing'.

It was actually Gilly, (who had obtained the phrase 'pro-active marketing' from a management magazine which a tourist left in the bar) who made the decision. Frank readily admits that if things were left to him there would be customs posts on every lane leading into the village and the pub would ban all outsiders. Thumper once claimed that Frank only became a licensee so that he could live in a pub and never run short of alcohol and Frank, who was there at the time, laughed, went an even deeper shade of red than is usual and agreed with him.

A group of us were sitting in the snug one lunch-time, when Gilly made her announcement. Thumper and Anne, Patchy and Adrienne were there, along with Peter Marshall and Patsy. It's rare to see Peter Marshall away from his shop during the daytime but Peter had closed for the morning because he'd been driving the hearse for the local undertaker. On his way home, he'd called in at the Duck and Puddle for half a shandy and a cheese sandwich. (Peter, a hard-working entrepreneur of the old school, has a number of jobs and would take on more responsibilities if he could persuade someone in authority to extend the number of hours in the day.)

'We need to do something to attract more visitors to the village,' Gilly said, to almost universal dismay and not a little astonishment. 'Every evening we see the same old faces in here and although we love you all dearly we need to persuade new customers to come into the pub.'

'Things are fine as they are,' protested Patchy, who regards anything new as an affront and has an oft-aired theory that all change must inevitably make things worse.

Frank, who obviously wasn't thinking straight, for if he had been he wouldn't have been so daft as to disagree with his wife, agreed with Patchy.

Gilly threw a beermat at Frank and told him to shut up.

Frank shut up.

The only person in the snug who thought that Gilly was talking sense was Peter Marshall.

Peter is always keen to persuade more people to come to the village. Since he has the only retail establishment for miles around he believes, not unreasonably, that if more visitors pass through the village then at least some of the money in the travellers' pockets will not go with them when they leave but will remain behind in his till.

Although he has no formal training in marketing, Peter, whose long established slogan is 'Buy One and Get What You Pay For', is forever coming up with new wheezes which will, he believes, turn his establishment into the heart of an international conglomerate. His long-term business plan is to float his shop on the stock market and sell shares to eager hedge fund operatives. Not long ago, he cleared out a shed next to his shop and he now rents this out to several local entrepreneurs, including a vet and a hairdresser. A few years ago he had a huge sign made which announced 'Buy One –Buy Another At The Same Price!' and could not understand why it didn't bring charabancs full of tourists flooding in from hotels in Lynton, Lynmouth and Ilfracombe. When one customer cheekily asked Peter for a discount, telling him that she thought he ought to take something off two shirts she was thinking of buying, Peter flew into a rage. He tore a sleeve off each of the shirts and asked her if that satisfied her.

Peter is always trying out new ways to ingratiate himself with potential customers and it is impossible not to admire his determination. A week ago, I went into his shop and found myself listening, in astonishment, as he told me detailed stories about his childhood. At the same time, I was encouraged to gaze in bewilderment as he showed me pictures of obscure relatives he claimed to have discovered in Northumberland and a particularly snowy and photogenic part of Canada. One of his relatives, he insisted, had a child with asthma. Several of his alleged relatives were beautiful, young women whose photographs looked to me as though they had been clipped out of a magazine. When I eventually managed to stop the flow of information long enough to ask him what the devil he was doing, he explained that he had read in a book that a salesman should try to charm his customers, and ingratiate himself with them by sharing information about his own life and family. Since Peter doesn't have much of a life, and certainly doesn't have any family, I thought he was making a pretty good attempt to follow the author's advice. 'I wouldn't bother,' I told him, 'I only came in for a box of paperclips. And I'm going to buy those whether or not you show me pictures of people having a good time in the snowy wastes of Canada.' Peter sighed and tossed the pictures into a corner. I don't think he tried it on anyone else.

'We need to think of some way to persuade discerning people with taste and money to come to Bilbury,' said Gilly.

'I think it's a splendid idea,' said Peter, 'though I'm not sure we necessarily need discerning people with taste. I'd happily settle for people with money. And we have to be more business-like about the way we run the village. Just the other day, I had some people in the shop who had never even heard of Bilbury until they got here. They only found the village by mistake and once they'd got here they didn't know where they were because someone, whom I will not name, took down all the signposts.' He looked sternly at Thumper when he said this.

'Taking down the signs was necessary,' said Thumper, rather defensively. 'We had all that trouble with people thinking that the water in Bilbury would cure all their illnesses. We were knee deep in tourists and the lanes were clogged.'

The rest of us nodded our approval. The council had been a little upset about the disappearing road signs but since they refused to have any new ones made and couldn't find the old ones (they're hidden at the bottom of a silage silo on a farm in the village and not even the owner of the silo knows they are there).

'I always thought that was a missed opportunity,' grumbled Peter, who still sells bottled Bilbury water through the mail. He fills the bottles with water out of the tap and charges a small fortune for the stuff. It is rumoured that there is a man in Dubai who won't drink anything else and a man who works in the sorting office in Barnstaple once told me that Peter sends a crate of the stuff to Dubai every week. 'We could have handled that better,' continued Peter. 'We should have taken proper advantage of the situation.'

'That's as may be,' said Gilly, 'the water business was probably a bit too much of a good thing. I want to find something that will bring well-off, high-spending visitors to the pub. We don't need a lot of them and we don't need them here every day. We just need them and their money once a week or once a month.'

Peter, who had clearly already envisaged charabancs full of tourists arriving in the village on a daily basis, was obviously disappointed. The rest of us were relieved.

'You need something that brings in people from all over the country,' said Adrienne.

'But not too many of them,' said Thumper quickly.

'We could hold a second hand book fair,' suggested Adrienne. 'We could have stalls selling old books,' she looked around brightly, 'lots of people buy books so lots of people would come to Bilbury.'

'Great idea but a guy called Richard Booth has started something like that in Hay-on-Wye,' said Patchy. 'We need something original and exciting.'

'Oh,' said Adrienne. She seemed disappointed.

'But we don't want anything too exciting,' said Thumper. 'We don't want to fill the place with people.'

'You could offer cut price drinks,' said Peter Marshall. 'Half price beer for example. That would be very popular.'

'We'd lose money on every pint we sold,' said Gilly.

'In the retail trade it's called offering a loss leader,' said Peter.

I remembered, but tactfully didn't mention, that the only time Peter had offered a loss leader had been a disaster. It was, I remembered, a year or two ago, before the British currency was decimalised, and Peter had bought a small advertisement in the Barnstaple paper offering packets of biscuits for sixpence to customers who spent £1 on other groceries. There was subsequently some disquiet among customers, particularly the ones who had travelled from Barnstaple and Bideford, when they discovered that the packets of biscuits he was selling for sixpence contained just two ginger biscuits and had originally been packaged to be given away free on aeroplanes. Customers were even more upset when they discovered that the biscuits, which were in packages made for an airline called Air Enterprises which had gone bust in 1955, were all stale.

'I thought the idea was to think of something to bring people with money into the pub,' said Frank who had obviously been upset by the prospect of selling beer at half price.

'Of course it is,' said Gilly.

'How about a beer festival?' suggested Patchy. 'You could put tents up in the car park and have barrels of different types of real ale on sale.'

'Maybe just one tent,' said Thumper, who was obviously keen that the event, whatever it was, shouldn't bring too many people into the village.

'Oh, I don't think so,' said Gilly, pulling a face. 'Not a beer festival! There would be a lot of drunken people being sick in the flowerbeds.'

Frank, who had looked excited, now looked disappointed.

'Have you noticed how life is all about making decisions?' said Thumper, who had clearly been looking forward to a quiet hour in the pub. He paused and inspected a pork scratching before popping it into his mouth. 'Come to think about it, I suppose that not making a decision still means making a decision not to do something.'

'How about a gin festival?' suggested Patchy. 'Bit more up-market than a beer festival, don't you think?'

'People who are sick after drinking too much gin are just as likely to be sick as people who drink too much beer,' said Thumper. 'They only difference is that they always vomit in the lavatories.'

Gilly did not look as if she had been reassured by this.

'A whisky festival would be nice,' said Frank. 'Just a small festival with malt whisky tasting sessions. I could give lectures on the different types of malt whisky.'

'You'll drink any profits,' said Gilly firmly.

'You could have a dining club,' suggested Patsy. 'Once a week or once a month you could have a special dinner. People would join a club and have a slap up meal with a theme.'

'What sort of special dinner?' asked Frank, looking a little alarmed. 'What sort of 'theme'?'

'Once a month would probably be best,' said Thumper quickly. 'Don't want to make too much work for yourself do you?'

'Oh, I don't know what sort of theme,' said Patsy, replying to Frank. 'But I suppose you could have French food one week, Indian food another week, Thai food another week – something different every week.'

'Or once a month,' said Thumper.

'Or once a month,' agreed Patsy. 'You could call it a dinner club.'

'It's a wonderful idea but who could possibly cook all those different dishes?' asked Gilly, looking concerned. 'If we had to bring in a chef we'd probably end up spending more money than we were making.'

'Not the idea at all,' said Frank.

'Chip suppers once a month?' suggested Patchy. 'Simple enough.'

'We do those already,' Gilly reminded him. 'Ham and chips, egg and chips, sausage and chips. That's our menu.'

'And any variation on the theme,' said Frank. 'You can have ham, sausage, egg and chips if you like.'

'Probably best to forget about the whole thing,' said Thumper firmly. 'Never mind, we all tried.' He stood up. 'Time for another round everyone? I'm buying.'

'Splendid idea,' said Peter Marshall instantly. 'I'll have a whisky. Double please.' He finished the half a shandy he'd been drinking.

'Very decent of you,' said Frank. 'I'll have a pint myself.' He stood up and walked over to the bar to start preparing the drinks. Discussions about how the Duck and Puddle could improve its cash flow situation were shelved while we all gave him our orders.

'What about just doing puddings?' suggested Patsy, when the new round of drinks had been distributed and Thumper had forked over the cash.

We all looked at her. She sipped her tomato juice.

'You could call it a pudding club!' she said brightly.

'What's a pudding club?' asked Frank.

'It's for women who are pregnant,' said Adrienne. She turned to her sister. 'Are you suggesting that we organise sex parties at the Duck and Puddle?'

I looked at Patsy and raised an eyebrow.

'Not that sort of pudding club!' said Patsy, blushing slightly. She looked at Adrienne. 'Trust you to think of that sort of pudding club!'

'Well what other sort of pudding club is there?' asked Adrienne.

'A dining club but you only serve puddings!' said Patsy.

I looked at her admiringly. I rather like puddings myself. I'm not so keen on broccoli and cabbage but I'm a devil for spotted dick and treacle pudding.

'What a brilliant idea!' said Gilly. 'Why hasn't anyone else thought of that?'

'Probably because my wife is brighter than everyone else!' I said, proudly.

'There was some sort of pudding club in America,' said Patchy, who has a vast reservoir of pretty well useless knowledge. 'I think it was at Harvard. But they only served the one pudding – something called Hasty Pudding.'

'What on earth is Hasty Pudding?' asked Frank. 'Something you knock up in a couple of minutes?'

'Probably,' laughed Patchy. 'I seem to remember it consisted of grains or corn cooked in milk or water. Doesn't sound all that much fun. A mushy sort of pudding. I think it's mentioned in the song 'Yankee Doodle'.'

'I can't see many people coming along to eat corn cooked in water,' said Frank, who doesn't really take to any food that doesn't contain at least 500 calories a portion. He shuddered at the thought.

'No, no, that's not the idea at all,' said Patsy. 'You offer people half a dozen different, traditional puddings – the sort of old-fashioned puddings that no one much bothers with any more. The sort of puddings that were served in schools.'

'Treacle pudding, roly poly pudding, spotted dick, bread pudding – that sort of thing!' I said, my mouth watering at the thought.

'You serve just puddings,' said Patsy, now warming to her theme. 'And people come along and pay a fixed price and can eat as many helpings of pudding as they want.'

'Those are all easy to make,' said Gilly.

'And cheap,' added Frank.

‘It’s not going to bring many people into Bilbury,’ protested Peter who can be relied upon to think only of his own bottom line. ‘And if you have the pudding club in the evenings how many of them are going to call in at my shop?’

‘You can have the indigestion concession,’ said Frank. ‘Treacle pudding always gives me indigestion. You can supply us with a pile of different antacids which we’ll put on a table by the door so that people can buy what they need as they’re leaving.’

‘I think this is a brilliant idea,’ said Patchy. ‘I love puddings. But those rich, stodgy puddings always give me terrible indigestion too.’ He paused. ‘But I don’t care. I still eat them.’

‘He does,’ agreed Adrienne, who was still getting used to being a wife and running her own kitchen. ‘I have to make three steamed puddings a week or else he sulks.’

‘I’d need some help,’ said Gilly. ‘I’m not terribly good at puddings.’

‘Granny Kennett!’ said Patsy and I simultaneously.

The woman known as Granny Kennett is the grandmother of Patsy and Adrienne. Technically, since Patsy and I now have small children of our own, Patsy’s mum should be known as ‘Granny Kennett’ but then the original ‘Granny Kennett’ would have to be ‘Great Granny Kennett’ and apart from being a bit of mouthful it would make everyone concerned feel very old. So Granny Kennett remains Granny Kennett.

Frank, Thumper and Patchy looked at me. Adrienne, Anne and Gilly looked at Patsy. Peter, who was busy working out what he could charge for bottles of indigestion medicine sold to a captive audience, didn’t look up from the beermat upon which he was doing his calculations. Since he sells pens and pencils but never carries one himself, Peter was using a pen he’d borrowed from me. I watched him with some dismay since a pen which has been used to write on a beermat never again works properly.

‘Granny Kennett makes the most marvellous puddings in the world!’ cried Adrienne. ‘What a brilliant idea!’

‘We could call it Granny Kennett’s Pudding Club!’ said Gilly.

‘Marvellous!’ said Adrienne.

‘Do you think she’d mind?’ asked Gilly.

‘She’d be as pleased as Punch!’ said Patsy.

‘She’d absolutely love it,’ said Adrienne at the same time.

And so it was decided that the Duck and Puddle would introduce a new monthly Pudding Club, where diners would be invited to consume as many helpings of pudding as they could eat. All the puddings would be of the old-fashioned variety, served with a choice of either custard or custard, in other words no choice at all. Everyone agreed with Thumper that it would be best to hold the new Pudding Club monthly. Frank said that he would put up a poster and insert a small and inexpensive advertisement in the Barnstaple newspaper. Peter Marshall said that if Frank made two posters he would stick one up in his shop since he had been given the antacid concession.

When, later in the day, Patsy and Adrienne went round to see her, Granny Kennett was, as her granddaughters had predicted, absolutely delighted that the Pudding Club was being named after her and she readily agreed to join Gilly in preparing the puddings.

During the three weeks which followed, much time was spent selecting the puddings for the inaugural meeting of the Club and the recipes were carefully honed and polished. (Editor’s Note: the recipes appear at the back of this book under the imaginative heading of ‘Granny Kennett’s Pudding Club Recipes’.)

To everyone’s absolute delight, the Granny Kennett Pudding Club proved enormously successful. And, more to the point perhaps, it actually proved rather profitable for Frank and Gilly.

Granny Kennett steadfastly refused to take any payment for her services or for her recipes (she was, she said and meant, absolutely thrilled to be part of such an exciting culinary venture) and Peter Marshall, usually so very careful to watch every penny, was persuaded to hand over a small portion of his profits from the sale of indigestion remedies to the Duck and Puddle ‘Let’s Actually Make a Profit For Once Fund’.

The first customers were, inevitably, the locals and the citizens of Bilbury turned out in some force to join the Pudding Club. The whole venture was so successful that Gilly predicted that before long there would be Pudding Clubs at pubs, restaurants and hotels all over England. Patsy’s idea had, it seemed, proved extremely attractive to customers of a certain age. Without exception, the customers who joined the Club were over the age of 40. All could remember stodgy, steamed puddings from their childhoods. All wanted to recapture the joy of a treacle sponge and the filling delight of a rich, well-made plum pudding covered in a thick custard. (Gilly decided right from the start that it would be impossible to have a Pudding Club without having a plum pudding on the menu. Granny Kennett concurred, saying that when she had been a girl, her mother had made plum pudding several times throughout the year. It had not, she said, been exclusively reserved for Christmas.)

Outsiders only started to attend the Pudding Club evenings after the third week. And that was when, from my point of view, the trouble really started.

The people who live in Bilbury tend to have large appetites. Most of them lead arduous lives and can burn up a good number of calories in an ordinary day. Even so, most were sensible enough to know when to stop.

However, something designed as an integral part of the attraction turned out to be a bit of a problem.

One of the basic principles of the Granny Kennett Pudding Club was that members would pay a membership fee to join the club, and a fee for each meeting of the club which they attended, but they would not pay separately for each pudding they ate. At least six different puddings would be served during an evening and all the members present were entitled to enjoy as many of the puddings as they thought they could manage. Moreover, members were perfectly entitled to request second, third, fourth or more helpings. There were, as Frank put it, 'no limits'.

(Nothing happened at these club meetings, except that a number of fine puddings were served. There were no minutes and no agenda, but it seemed rather fun to describe the culinary entertainments as 'meetings' for it enabled everyone attending to say, if faced with an invitation or commitment which they wanted to avoid, that they had to attend a 'meeting' in the village. This excuse quickly became as popular with villagers as is the excuse 'I have to go on a course' is with golfers.)

The problem with allowing people to eat unlimited amounts of food is that some of them will try to do just that.

And that is when the problems started.

When people have driven thirty miles to eat steamed puddings they arrive determined to get their money's worth. They want to eat everything available, and they want to eat it all two or three times. People turned out to be even greedier when they had booked themselves into a room at the Duck and Puddle. It turns out that if you've driven thirty miles and booked a hotel room for the night then you want to eat everything available at least five or six times. And hang the consequences.

Things got so bad that I began to dread the monthly meeting of the Granny Kennett Pudding Club. I knew that at the end of the evening, and sometimes before the end of the evening, I would find myself ministering unto the sick, the very sick and the exceedingly unfortunate few who were convinced that they were dying. After a few months of this I gave up attending the pudding club myself and simply sat in the snug, quietly nursing something suitable and waiting for my services to be required.

Very few of those who over-ate seemed to regard their condition as being in any way related to their inability to know when to say: 'No, thank you. That was delicious but I couldn't eat another morsel'. Some blamed Granny Kennett, some blamed Gilly and some (for reasons which I never began to understand) blamed me.

And, although none of us had predicted this, for in Bilbury we are not a litigious lot, the evening came when one unhappy customer announced that he intended to take legal action against Gilly, Frank and the Duck and Puddle.

'Your puddings made me ill,' he complained, announcing to Gilly that she and her husband and everyone else involved would be hearing from his solicitors.

It did absolutely no good at all for Gilly to point out that he had eaten four helpings of Spotted Dick, three helpings of Treacle Sponge, three helpings of Plum Pudding and two helpings each of every other pudding on the menu. And that he had done all this entirely of his own volition. No one had held him down and forced puddings down his throat.

The man was adamant. He felt bloated, sated, full and about to die and, if he lived, he would sue. And he said that the fact that I was sitting in the snug, ready to offer professional succour to the greedy and the over-enthusiastic, proved that the damage done to his intestines was predetermined and premeditated and done with malice aforethought. He said that I was clearly a 'pudding chaser' and that I was hanging around in the pub with the express intention of making money out of his distress. Even when I pointed out that I had not charged him for my services, or for the medication I had prescribed (and had not charged anyone else) he remained adamant that I would be hearing from his solicitors.

In the end, Gilly and Frank had to pay several hundred pounds to prevent the case going to court.

The costs of the legal action, and the damages they were advised to pay, wiped out all the profit they had made. I managed to get away with an abject apology.

After that experience, Gilly decided that she would stop promoting the Granny Kennett Pudding Club outside the village. The posters in the Duck and Puddle and Peter Marshall's shop were removed and no more advertisements were placed in the local papers. Only locals were allowed to be members of the club.

And the little table which Peter Marshall set up for every meeting, and which contained a good selection of proprietary antacids, proved perfectly adequate for dealing with the inevitable digestive upsets which were, and still are, a consequence of dining at Granny Kennett's Pudding Club.

Patsy and I re-joined the club, and our monthly consumption of steamed and stodgy puddings is now the highlight of our limited social calendar.

However, there is no doubt that the puddings which are provided are sometimes a strain even for a healthy digestive system and although I like to think I know when to say 'No, thank you, that was splendid but I really couldn't eat another mouthful' I am not too proud to admit that even I have been known to take advantage of what has come to be known as ‘Peter Marshall’s Final Pudding Selection’.

These days the antacids do not rest on the hall table, but Frank brings them round on a tray, as though carrying around the cheese board.

I always choose something liquid (liquid medicines are considerably faster acting than antacid medicines in tablet form) and my personal preference is for a tablespoonful of something with a pleasant minty flavour.

I find it rounds off the evening very nicely.

Sir Chauncey's Oak Tree

On the edge of the Bilbury village green, not far from the church of St Crispin and St Ermentrude, stands an enormous oak; a tree which has been part of the Bilbury scenery for far longer than anyone alive can remember. The tree was split by lightning in the early 19th century and even back then the tree was old and was held in great esteem. Indeed, it was so much loved that it was repaired with a number of iron bands commissioned by Sir Chauncey Harvester, a local landowner. The iron bands were made and fastened into place by the local blacksmith, a huge man called Jack Turberry, who was said to be so strong that he could bend horseshoes with his bare hands. The repair of Sir Chauncey's Oak Tree was, quite possibly, the first example of tree surgery anywhere in the world and today barely a month goes by without a tree surgeon from somewhere on the planet visiting the site to make an inspection and take photographs.

There was a scare in 1964 when a gale removed several of the higher branches but the tree survived and recovered and today it looks set fair to last another few hundred years. It is important to the village because it is a tangible sign of our history.

Other villages in North Devon have legends and myths to give them a sense of identity. Witchcraft and sorcery are ripe in this part of the county and there are many local villages which have strange tales to tell and which are well populated with witches and ghosts.

There is, for example, the white witch of Culborough Down.

In the early 19th century, a Reverend Inkborough, was the local clergyman in Bampton Leys. The Reverend Inkborough was the second son of a very rich north country businessman who had made his money out of the cotton trade. There was an elder son, who would inherit the big house, the land and the factory, and so Mr Inkborough had bought the living for his younger son. You could do that in those days – buying a young son a post as a clergyman in the same way that you could buy yourself a seat in the House of Commons.

The son, may have been a clergyman but he was terribly mean and he built a roadside hut for his wife, Imelda, so that she could sell teas and snacks to visitors. This was, at the time, considered a very eccentric thing to do and business was at first slow.

Mrs Inkborough realised that what she was doing was considered rather odd and so she built on that, turning a disadvantage into a benefit, and began to tell tales of the Doones and other local legends. She also started dispensing medicines to travellers as well as villagers – basing the medicines she prepared on local myths. What had begun as Ye Olde Original Tea Shoppe soon became an early 19th century drugstore. Mrs Inkborough became quite famous. She soon became known as a local white witch, and was talked about as 'Mother Imelda' although she didn't have any children of her own. After she died many people claimed that they saw her by the roadside and as late as the 1920s, three separate instances were recorded when tourists claim to have bought refreshments from her and one claimed to have bought a paste guaranteed to cure blistered feet.

Then there is the Withycombe witch, Joan Carne, who lived in the 16th century. Mrs Carne was said to have been a black witch who killed three husbands by casting bad spells on them. Despite this, which might have been seen as something of a flaw by some, she was well liked locally (especially by the people she didn't marry) and when she herself died her funeral attracted a huge number of people. When the mourners got back to her house after the service, expecting to make do with the usual simple meal of buns and ale, they found Joan's ghost preparing a meal of bacon and eggs. I'm pleased to say that they all tucked in and had a damned good wake.

Bilbury, I am relieved to say, just has the tree.

Tradition has it that the tree was important to Sir Chauncey, who did not have much of a local reputation for mending trees, because it was the site of his dalliance with a girl called Esmerelda; a young maiden who was the daughter of the local vicar.

The vicar had forbidden the match in view of the fact that Sir Chauncey (who was 54 years older than Esmerelda) had something of a reputation as a ladies' man. The reputation was not undeserved for Sir Chauncey is said to have worked his way through five wives and countless mistresses.

It is, perhaps, not entirely surprising that both the vicar and his good lady wife thought the match 'unsuitable' even though it would have meant their daughter marrying into the local aristocracy, becoming Lady Esmerelda and, before too long one assumes, the owner of a large house and over a thousand acres of prime Devon and Somerset farmland. How much these considerations influenced the young Esmerelda is not recorded though sceptics might assume that they were not entirely ignored when she was weighing up the competitive attractions of Sir Chauncey and any one of the local beaus who would, presumably, have paid court to such a nubile young woman but who would have doubtless expected their wives to live in far more modest circumstances.

(As an aside, and for the sake of completeness, I think it is worth mentioning that Sir Chauncey is not only famous for rescuing a sick tree but is also believed in Bilbury to be famous, or perhaps that should be infamous, as the Man of Porlock. In the summer of 1797, the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who was feeling more than a little under the weather at the time, moved to the Quantock hills in nearby Somerset and took a cottage above the sea near to the village of Culbone. Coleridge, who was born in South Devon and was a romantic sort of fellow, suffered a good deal from stress and from a rheumatic illness and he rather hoped that the bracing sea air would ameliorate his symptoms. It has been pointed out that he and his friend Thomas de Quincy, the author of *The Confessions of an Opium Eater*, were enthusiastic users of laudanum and it is perfectly possible that both of them might have felt a little better if they had consumed a little less opium, but that's as maybe and making judgements about people's behaviour in bygone times is neither fair nor profitable. Anyway, the story has it that Coleridge fell asleep, or into a drugged stupor, while reading a book about Kubla Khan, the Mongol leader. When he awoke, a good while later, he had a poem about Kubla Khan fully formed in his head and he immediately started to scribble down the verses as he remembered them. We can probably all imagine his desperate attempt to write down the contents of his dream before they disappeared into that place that dreams go when our concentration is, for a moment, distracted and dreams are displaced by prosaic thoughts inspired by the present. Sadly for him and for us, when Coleridge had written down 54 lines of his poem there was a knock on the door. Polite to a fault, Coleridge answered the knock only to find his landlord, Sir Chauncey standing there demanding that they go out together and inspect some aspect of the cottage which Sir Chauncey owned and which Coleridge was renting. This was probably a wobbly drainpipe or a chimney which needed pointing. Coleridge, painfully aware that the rest of his poem was disappearing by the second, had little choice but to obey. By the time Sir Chauncey, now known to the world as the 'Man of Porlock' or 'Person of Porlock' – now a widely used literary allusion to any unwelcome intruder who disrupts whatever one is doing – had tottered off, and the unfortunate Coleridge had forgotten the rest of the poem. And so the poem about Kubla Khan never got any further than the 54 lines Coleridge had written down before Sir Chauncey's untimely arrival.)

Bilbury's most illustrious tree, which is now known to everyone as Sir Chauncey's Oak Tree (but also known to locals simply as 'the tree'), has, over the years, produced its fair share of problems.

So, for example, small boys would, from time to time, try climbing it, and would then fall off and break a bone or two.

But apart from this, I never thought of the tree as presenting any sort of health hazard.

But I was wrong in that.

And although, like everyone else in Bilbury, I have great affection and respect for the tree, which is a symbol of the village's history and a huge connection with our past, there was a time when, just for a few hours, I would have happily seen the damned thing chopped down and turned into furniture and fire wood.

The worst crisis occasioned by Sir Chauncey's Tree did not involve a single small boy with a broken bone but a serious scare when a number of children in the village suddenly fell ill one autumn afternoon.

I was called to the village school because seven children were complaining of nausea and abdominal pain. By the time I got to the school, three of them had produced some fairly nasty looking, and bloody, diarrhoea. It's true that diarrhoea never looks very pleasant. But when it contains blood it looks especially scary.

Because so many of the children had been taken ill at the same time, it didn't need Sherlock Holmes or Dr John Watson to work out that the children must have eaten something which had upset them. And it didn't take much questioning before I found out what it was.

The children who were ill had all been eating acorns, collected in handfuls from underneath Sir Chauncey's Tree, the largest and most productive oak tree in the village. Every autumn the tree must produce several thousand of its famous seeds. Walk underneath St Chauncey's Tree and you can feel and hear the acorns crunching beneath your feet.

Acorns contain an enormous amount of tannic acid and are toxic if eaten in large quantities. Farmers always worry about them because acorns are poisonous to cattle, especially the young, and to horses. They can be deadly to dogs too. Since sheep can safely eat up to half a pound of acorns a day without coming to any harm, and adult pigs can eat double that, the farmers in Bilbury usually put sheep into a field to clear out the acorns before putting in cattle. Ducks and hens seem to eat acorns without any bad effects, though the acorns discolour the eggshells, but acorns and cattle definitely do not mix. My father-in-law, Mr Kennett, always puts a couple of dozen sheep into fields where there are oak trees so that they will eat up the acorns before the cows are let in.

Unfortunately, of course, Sir Chauncey's Tree sits on the edge of the unfenced village green which isn't used for grazing. And so the acorns just lie around on the ground. No one bothers to collect them these days because you can't do much with a handful of acorns.

Back in the days before Peter Marshall sold several varieties of instant coffee, country folk used to roast acorns and make their own version of a type of coffee; a cheap drink which was said to be good for patients with tuberculosis and for delicate children.

The acorns were gathered when they were ripe, shelled, cut into pieces and dried before the fire, or in an oven. Some folk would leach the acorns to remove the intense bitterness – repeatedly boiling them in water until the water stopped turning brown and then cutting and drying them. Gypsies used to put a bag of ripe, brown acorns into a running stream and leave them there for a couple of days to remove the bitter taste. The dried acorns were then roasted like coffee beans, ground or pounded into a powder, mixed with a little melted butter and kept in airtight jars. The powder was then used like coffee with half an ounce of acorn powder to the pint of water for adults and around half that for children. Just as with ordinary coffee, sugar and milk could be added to taste. Some villagers and travelling folk mixed ground coffee with ground acorns.

The village children, had somehow heard of this and had collected a huge pile of green acorns, pounded them into a powder and made their own version of acorn coffee. But they had not done the job properly and they had not removed the tannic acid. They had also made the drink deadly strong and they had masked the bitterness by adding plenty of sugar. Some of the children had even chewed and swallowed whole acorns. How they managed this is beyond me. Afterwards, as a small experiment, I tried a taste of a small portion of acorn and I had to spit it out immediately. I think the children who ate the acorns whole were merely showing off to one another; each one trying to prove how tough he was. It is, I think, no coincidence that only boys had eaten the acorns whole. Girls had drunk the acorn coffee mixture but they hadn’t chewed the raw acorns.

The children who had drunk the acorn mixture were in a terrible state when I saw them. They had awful diarrhoea but they were vomiting too and, not surprisingly, the poor school mistress didn’t know what to do. I believe teachers are given some basic first aid training but no teacher could have been trained to prepare for this sort of disaster. Not surprisingly, the remaining children, the ones who were still healthy, were beginning to cry and I could see we were heading for some pretty wild hysterics. The problem was that until I arrived, no one had worked out what had caused the diarrhoea and sickness and so the children who were still well and who had not consumed any acorns assumed that they were about to fall ill too.

The whole thing was something of a nightmare.

I immediately told the school teacher to separate out all the children who had eaten acorns from those who had not. The ones who had not were kept in the classroom and the ones who had were taken outside. There is only one classroom in the village school so there was really nowhere else to put them. I then told the teacher to telephone Bradshaw, my district nurse, and to ask him to come to the school as quickly as possible. I also told her to telephone as many of the parents of the affected children and, preferably without worrying them, to ask them to pop along to the school as quickly as they could. I needed the parents to comfort the children and I needed Bradshaw because I had to make all the children vomit up the acorns they’d swallowed. It seemed from questioning a few of the children that their acorn experiment had taken place no more than an hour earlier. If I sent the children to Barnstaple, it would be at least another hour before we could get them there. Most of the parents do not have motor cars and I couldn’t get more than three sick children and a couple of parents in the Rolls. We needed to move quickly because the acorn mixture the children had taken is very poisonous to young bodies and would cause kidney and liver damage. I was genuinely worried that some of the children would die if we didn’t act quickly.

There are several ways to make children vomit, but sticking two fingers down the back of a child’s throat is as good a method as any and has the advantage of being quick as well as effective. So that was how Bradshaw and I spent our time that day.

That all happened a year or two ago and these days the local school teacher always gives the children a stern warning about the dangers of eating acorns or, indeed, any other seeds or fruits which they don’t know for certain to be safe.

The most recent problem relating to Sir Chauncey’s Oak Tree happened during the night.

I was woken by a hammering on the front door.

I pulled on a dressing gown, tottered downstairs and found Peter Marshall standing on the doorstep. It was, I remember thinking at the time, typical of Peter to walk around to the house rather than spend a couple of pennies making a telephone call.

Peter, who lives above his shop which overlooks the village green, told me that he had been awoken by great cries coming from the village green. He said that at first he thought it was aliens who had landed on the green and had got their spaceship tangled up with some of the tree branches (he had, he explained, been watching a programme about aliens and space ships a couple of nights earlier) but when he had woken properly he suspected it was young folk larking about. Looking out of his bedroom window, he’d been unable to see any spaceships or gallivanting youths but had spotted someone writhing around on the grass and had realised that this was the source of the cries. There was a full moon that night and visibility, even at 3 o’clock in the morning, was pretty good.

‘It’s Mr Wallis,’ said Peter, ‘I’ve no idea what he’s doing out there in the middle of the night.’

Max Wallis is something of a recluse but this is not because he is shy or lacks confidence. On the contrary, he has little to do with the village, or the villagers, because he considers himself to be very superior to us all. He does something financially rewarding in London (I gather it is something to do with ‘financial services’) and spends most of his time there, coming down to Bilbury only for occasional weekends. He and his wife, Deidre, usually bring with them several of their smart London friends. They are rarely seen around the village. They do not patronise Peter Marshall’s shop and never visit the Duck and Puddle.

When I got to Mr Wallis, I found that he had a broken arm and a broken ankle. I gave him an injection for the pain and sent Peter off to telephone for an ambulance. He was happy to do that because a 999 call doesn’t cost anything.

‘What on earth happened?’ I asked Mr Wallis. I then noticed that there was a ladder leaning up against the tree. ‘Had you been climbing the tree?’

Looking rather embarrassed, Mr Wallis admitted, that he had indeed been up the tree.

‘Why were you climbing the tree at this time of the morning?’ I asked.

Mr Wallis wouldn’t answer but when I looked around a little more, I spotted a hammer and then I saw a bag of copper nails on the ground.

‘You were trying to kill Sir Chauncey’s Oak, weren’t you?’

There is a myth that if you hammer copper nails into a tree you’ll kill it. It’s nonsense of course but people still believe the myth.

Mr Wallis has a large house on the edge of the village green. He has repeatedly demanded that the tree be felled because it interferes with his view over Bilbury and North Devon. He lost his battle to have the tree removed when the local council put a Tree Preservation Order on it and protected it for life from people with saws and axes.

Mr Wallis obviously didn’t know this but he wasn’t the first person in the village to try to kill that tree and he’s not even the first to try to kill it with copper nails. Seventy or so years ago, a vandal who also thought the tree interfered with the view from his house hammered copper nails into the trunk in an attempt to kill it. The tree was unaffected, and if you look hard, you can still see some of the nails. The vandal who tried to murder the tree died half a century ago but the tree flourishes still.

The ambulance eventually arrived and took Mr Wallis to the hospital to have his broken bones dealt with. When the ambulance had gone, Peter and I moved the ladder, the hammer and the nails and put them in the shed behind Mr Wallis’s house. There were still no lights on the house and no signs of life. We had rung the doorbell in the hope that there might be someone interested in Mr Wallis’s fate but although we had heard some scuffling and I’d spotted a curtain twitching no one had come to the door.

A week or so after this incident, I sat in the Duck and Puddle discussing the case of Sir Chauncey’s Oak with Patchy. We both agreed that we needed to go round and have a word with Mr Wallis, to remind him that the tree was protected by law and warn him against trying to damage it again.

We were trying to decide whether it would be better for us to go together or for us to put together a deputation representing the village as a whole when Thumper Robinson wandered in.

We told him what we were discussing.

‘Mr Wallis won’t try to damage the tree again,’ said Thumper, with quiet confidence.

‘How do you know?’ Patchy asked him. ‘How can you be so sure?’

‘I went round and told him that I like that tree,’ said Thumper, who was clearly very angry that someone had tried to kill the old oak.

I now share Thumper’s confidence that Sir Chauncey’s Tree is safe. And there is no need for a deputation to remind Mr Wallis that the tree is out of bounds.

Thumper can be very convincing.

Carlton's Long Goodbye

England is falling into the sea. In some places it is falling into the sea quite slowly. In other places it is falling into the sea quite quickly. Long stretches of the coastline are at risk and the problem is particularly acute along the coast of south Devon and Dorset where the cliffs are made of chalk or sand which have a regrettable tendency to crumble and fall away as easily as if they were made of puff pastry. There are parts of the coast in South Devon and along the Dorset coast where house owners report having lost 10 to 20 feet of garden in a year. Many home owners who thought they were living in very desirable residences are now living in properties which are unsaleable and, in practical terms, entirely worthless.

As a general rule, it is usually difficult or impossible to lose all your money if you buy a house. Even if the house has dry rot, wet rot, termites and woodworm the building site will usually still have a notable value.

But if you are foolish enough to buy a house on the edge of a cliff, and the house and its underlying building plot subsequently fall into the sea, then all your money will be lost.

It is, perhaps, hardly surprising that there are now beautiful coastal properties on sale which have been valued at just £1 for the freehold. No one will buy them. No bank or mortgage company will lend money on them. No insurance company will insure them. Indeed, insurance companies won't even insure coastal properties against fire because they fear that owners may set fire to their own homes before they disappear with the cliff, into the sea. Solicitors and property experts in some parts of England now advise their clients that if you can hit a golf ball into the sea from the garden then you shouldn't even consider buying the house. England is shrinking at an extraordinary rate and thousands of home owners are now sitting waiting for their home to be declared uninhabitable. The authorities have effectively written off hundreds of miles of coastline, and all the small ports and villages which are situated in or along the coast. Many beauty spots will disappear. Coastal paths will soon exist only on old maps.

Most of the North Devon coast is rocky, and compared to the coastline of the southern part of the country, there is relatively little erosion. But there are exceptions, as there always are, of course, and there are houses on North Devon's cliff edge which are, year by year, inexorably moving closer to disaster.

In my book *Bilbury Tonic* I described how my patients Mrs Iolanthe Fielding and her considerably younger husband, Bertie live in an unsaleable house, with spectacular views, on the North Devon cliffs. The Fieldings pay just £5 a month in rent for a neat two bedroomed white-washed cottage with a decent sized garden and spectacular sea views. The rent is ridiculously low because, although the house had been on the market for three years, with an absurdly modest asking price of just £200, there have been no takers. One or two London buyers had shown interest, thinking that they had perhaps spotted the bargain of a lifetime, but when they saw that two neighbouring cottages had already fallen down onto the rocks below they quickly withdrew their offers and hot-footed it back to the big city where houses tend to stay where they've been built and, generally speaking, show very little inclination to wander.

Another of my patients, Carlton Tregallon, lives on the same stretch of coast.

Actually, to be accurate, Carlton lived in what used to be a garden shed sitting in the garden of a 17th century property. The house undoubtedly had wonderful sea views when it was built. The house has gone but the shed remains.

And I refer to him in the past tense because Carlton died not long ago.

I used to see Carlton around the village most weeks but I saw him in my professional capacity only once in my life; when he fell out of an apple tree and broke the ulna bone in his left forearm. It was Carlton's ulna bone but it was, inevitably, someone else's apple tree. He was in his late 60s at the time and probably the oldest scrumper in the country. I remember that I had a hell of a job to persuade him to go to the hospital in Barnstaple. In the end, I had to stick him in the car and take him over to the casualty department myself. I remember he told the young casualty doctor that he had tripped and fallen down the stairs. He was too embarrassed to admit that he had made a townsman's mistake and crawled out too far on a half rotten branch.

Carlton was something of a hermit. He worked as a part-time freelance shepherd but he was also a scrounger. He was a simple fellow who never wasted anything. When he ate an apple, he ate the core. He didn't own a needle or any thread and if his socks had holes in them he would wear them for as long as there was sock to show above the sides of his shoes.

He was married once, though it was a very brief arrangement. It happened before I arrived in Bilbury but Dr Brownlow told me all about it.

Carlton was a dyed in the wool countryman who hardly ever went anywhere which involved a journey that couldn't be made on foot, but back in the early 1960s, he went to a funeral in Birmingham. While he was in the city, he met a widow called Beryl with whom he established something of a rapport. She was slender, maidenly and entirely not the sort of woman one would have expected to become Carlton's life partner. He was breezy and carefree. She was careful and deliberate. He had an earthy sense of humour and a loud cackling laugh. She had thin lips which looked as if they had never entertained a smile or, heaven forbid, a kiss.

After Carlton's return to Bilbury, the two of them communicated for a while by telephone and letter and eventually, to the utter astonishment and quiet bewilderment of everyone who knew either of them, the pair decided that they were in love and that they should get married. It was, people thought, perhaps a case of opposites attracting.

So Carlton, accompanied by Thumper, Patchy and a couple of other pals, went up to Birmingham in Thumper's truck and after a good time had been had by all, Thumper, Patchy and the others returned to Bilbury while Carlton remained behind with his new bride. Beryl lived in a small, neat terraced house in a suburb of Birmingham called Handsworth and she was employed as a secretary by a firm of solicitors who had offices in the city centre. The newlyweds decided to spend their honeymoon in Handsworth.

'What is the point in going all the way to the Bahamas when you're going to spend all your time in bed?' asked Carlton.

And so they drew the curtains, stayed in bed and, it is to be hoped, both had a wonderful time.

Carlton insisted afterwards that he had genuinely believed that he would be able to live happily in Handsworth but those who know him well say that they always had serious doubts.

Everything went wonderfully well for two days, which was the amount of time which Beryl had taken off work for her honeymoon, but then, on the third morning, the Wednesday, Beryl arose at 7.30 a.m., had a quick breakfast and hurried out to catch a bus which would take her into the city centre in time to start work in the solicitors' office.

Carlton, who had no job to go to and, since his own work experience was entirely with sheep, very little prospect of finding anything for which he was even remotely suited, stayed behind in the terraced house in Handsworth. There are few, if any, sheep in Handsworth.

He mowed the tiny lawn, pruned the six rose bushes, had a cup of tea, mowed the lawn again, pruned the six rose bushes a little more and then sat in a chair in the kitchen and, looking at the clock, realised that it was still only ten past nine and that he had another nine hours to kill before Beryl would be back home.

Carlton then went for a walk, found a small park and sat on a bench until the public houses opened at 12 noon. He stayed in a pub called the Dog and Ferret until it shut at 2.40 p.m. and then, despite the fact that it was raining, went back to the park, lay down on a park bench and went to sleep.

At 3.30 p.m., he was arrested for vagrancy.

Under the Vagrancy Act 1824 (the full title of which *An Act for the punishment of idle and disorderly persons, rogues and vagabonds*) it is an offence for anyone to sleep rough in England and Wales. Anyone who is found to be homeless or 'trying to cadge subsistence money' can be arrested.

Carlton, who still insisted on tying his ancient ragged overcoat with orange baler twine, protested that he was a solid and upright citizen and a married man to boot but the policeman, who was young and who had never seen a man with his coat tied together with string who wasn't a vagrant, was neither impressed nor convinced.

Beryl, with the help of one of the young solicitors at the offices where she worked, succeeded in extracting Carlton from the police station to which he had been taken and persuaded the station sergeant that no charges should be brought. Carlton apologised profusely for kicking the policeman on the ankle and insisted that he had slipped on wet grass and lost his balance. Beryl, who had never been so embarrassed in her whole life, was allowed to leave work early in order to take her husband home.

It would, perhaps, have been better for all concerned if the two protagonists had decided there and then to call it a day, cut their losses, kiss each other goodbye and agree that a mistake had been made and that compatibility and good sense had been overruled by an attack of wholesome lust.

But Carlton somehow managed to persuade Beryl that they would have a future together if she would agree to move with him to Bilbury where he would be able to resume his work as a freelance shepherd, working for whichever local farmer required assistance. He told her that he was confident that she would be able to find suitable employment in an office in Barnstaple though no one, certainly not Carlton, could possibly say from whence this confidence was derived. He said that they would live in the small cottage he rented and, when the house in Handsworth had been sold, they would be able to buy a small home for themselves in Bilbury or one of the neighbouring villages.

And so Beryl rang her employer and said that she would not be returning to work and the pair of them packed a bag each, took the bus to the station and began the journey to Bilbury. Since they did not have a car and, in any case neither of them had a driving licence, this was a complicated business which involved taking a train to Bristol, another train to Exeter and a third train to Barnstaple. By the time they arrived in Barnstaple, the day's only bus had long since gone and so Carlton telephoned Thumper who collected the happy couple from the Barnstaple station and took them to Carlton's cottage.

It has to be said that Carlton undoubtedly erred in describing his shed as a cottage. Beryl, being a town girl, had envisaged a cottage rather along the lines of the sort of thing portrayed on the lids of chocolate boxes. She had expected a thatched roof, roses around the door and a garden filled with hollyhocks, foxgloves and honeysuckle. What she got, however, was a tumbledown shack with a corrugated iron roof, no indoor plumbing and no electricity. A decade earlier, the shack had been the garden shed in the garden of an extremely well built, pleasant house. But, thanks to bad weather and an eroding cliff, the house had been split into two parts. One half, now a ruin, stood on the very edge of the cliff. The remains of the other half of the property lay on the beach below. The owner had died and there were no relatives so the council had never been able to find anyone to take on the responsibility of clearing up the debris. The sea was steadily doing the work free of charge.

There were no utility services at Carlton's shack.

Drinking water was obtained from a couple of old oil drums, which collected rainwater via a complicated system involving an old sail and some plastic drainpipes. The toilet facilities consisted of a very primitive, cupboard-sized privy with no seat. This was positioned over a cesspit which was situated about twenty yards away from the shack.

This was not what Beryl had signed up for and whereas Carlton had lasted for three nights in Handsworth she did not last for one night in Bilbury.

Too angry for tears she demanded that Thumper take her back to the railway station in Barnstaple where, she insisted, she would wait for the first train back to civilisation. Thumper's suggestion that she and Carlton stay the night with him or at the Duck and Puddle did not meet with approval.

And that was the end of the marriage.

Carlton and Beryl never got divorced and so technically they were still married at the time of Carlton's demise but they hadn't seen or spoken to each other since Beryl fled back to Birmingham. Carlton had gone back to being a bachelor and Beryl had got her job back as a secretary for a legal firm.

They had both learned valuable lessons.

Carlton died of a massive heart attack while walking back home from the Duck and Puddle and was found the following morning by a farmer who saw his body on the roadside. He had a smile on his face and looked as serenely happy as anyone can expect to be when they are lying dead by the roadside.

Much to everyone's surprise, Carlton had left a will in an envelope which was found nailed to the wall inside his small and extremely modest home. Just so that there was no doubt about the contents of the envelope, Carlton had written the word 'WILL' on the outside with a red wax crayon.

There wasn't any money to leave, of course; no surprise pot of gold hidden in the dark depths of the earth closet privy, no numbered Swiss bank account and no priceless collection of paintings stored in an old trunk.

The only thing the envelope contained was £56 in well-used notes and a letter containing surprisingly detailed instructions for the disposal of his body.

The £56 was accompanied by a supplementary note confirming that this was 'to cover whatever expenses might be incurred, with whatever is left over used to buy drinks at the Duck and Puddle for all those attending the funeral'.

Heaven knows where Carlton laid his hands on £56. We were all impressed that he had managed to resist the temptation to dip into a sum that was, as far as he was concerned, the equivalent of a major lottery win.

Carlton's will made it clear that he wanted to be buried in his garden (or, more accurately, the garden of the ruined house where he had been squatting for as long as anyone could remember). That was fairly straightforward. As far as anyone of us knew (and, this being Bilbury, we weren't likely to go to the trouble of asking anyone who might really know) a citizen is perfectly entitled to have his remains buried in his own garden as long as he puts up some sort of marker so that the next generation isn't likely to come across a partly decomposed human skeleton while double digging his winter potatoes.

Indeed, being buried in your own garden is not an uncommon occurrence in Bilbury.

My dear friend and predecessor Dr Brownlow was buried in what was at the time his garden, and what is now the grounds of Bilbury's very own cottage hospital.

Burying Carlton in his own garden was never going to be too much of a problem (though digging a hole deep enough to take a coffin in the rocky North Devon soil was never going to be easy either), and nor was arranging for Carlton's remains to be blessed at the Church of St Damian on the outskirts of the village (that was the other main part of the instructions contained in the will).

Some time before his death, Carlton had decided to ensure that the funeral could be managed as cheaply as possible. He had made the coffin himself, using an old kitchen door for the base and a few pieces of assorted plywood for the sides. The result looked rather clumsily made, it had neither been varnished nor painted and the nails which held the thing together appeared to have been hammered into place by someone with poor eyesight but plenty of enthusiasm. But it looked to be solidly made and, as things turned out, this was a good thing.

And a grave had been dug in the garden. Or, rather, it had been started. Sadly, the rocky nature of the ground meant that Carlton had not been able to dig as deep as he might have liked or, indeed, as deep as is considered normal in the grave digging world. Still, Carlton had managed to make a hole that looked like the beginnings of a grave; a shallow grave it is true, not quite deep enough to take the coffin, but a grave nevertheless. It cannot be easy to find the fire and determination to dig your own grave, especially when there is no one standing over you, with a gun, ordering you to get on with it. (I've never quite understood why people in films dig their own graves in these circumstances. Why, since the outcome is unlikely to be altered, do they not simply throw down the spade and tell the man with the gun to dig the sodding grave himself?)

It was agreed by those of us present, a sort of unofficial burial party, that if digging down another couple of feet proved impossible, particularly in ground made especially impassable as a result of recent heavy rain, then we would allow the gravedigger simply to pile earth on top of the part of the coffin that remained above ground and so create a traditional burial mound; the sort of thing was once so popular with deceased Anglo-Saxon kings.

Peter Marshall, who is, in addition to our local shopkeeper, the local undertaker, said that a burial mound would look rather nice and traditional and that he had some nice stone edging, priced very reasonably, which would look perfect with a nice little headstone which he could also lay his hands on and provide, all well within the allocated budget. His offer of a garden gnome in place of a stone angel was rejected, with thanks, even though he offered to remove the fishing rod from the gnome's hands.

Finally, Carlton, proving himself far more capable of advance planning than any of us had ever suspected, had made arrangements for his coffin to be transported between the church and his home in the breakdown truck from Tolstoy's, the local garage.

Carlton had, it seemed, done some undefined work for Reginald Westbury, the owner of the garage and the promised use of the breakdown truck had been part of the quid pro quo.

This would doubtless have worked well, for the breakdown truck had a crane at the back. The plan, apparently, was that the crane would be used to hoist Carlton's coffin onto the back of the truck.

Sadly, it was just before the 'hoisting the coffin onto the back of the truck point' in the proceedings that things started to go wrong.

The truck simply would not start.

The irony of a breakdown truck breaking down was not lost on the collected mourners, the putative congregation, and despite the solemnity of the occasion there were not a few smiles and, I regret to report, more than a few giggles.

There were plenty of people at the funeral who had vehicles large enough to carry the coffin (Thumper had his huge, extremely scruffy pick-up truck and Patchy had his van to name but two) but the garage owner, concerned that a debt is a debt until it is repaid and how else do you repay a debt to a man who has died, refused to allow anyone else to help.

Instead, Reggie insisted on using an old farm cart and the rather ancient horse which he kept on out of loyalty rather than any real sense of purpose.

The horse was, in modern parlance, well past its sell-by-date and certainly could no longer be guaranteed to produce the one horsepower which might be expected of it. It was, quite possibly, the only half a horsepower horse in the county.

Nevertheless, all would have doubtless gone without a hitch if the heavy rain which had fallen had not resulted in the stream which passes through the northern edge of the village swelling to an unusual depth. Indeed, the stream had taken on all the characteristics of a fully-fledged river rather than a meandering rural stream.

The journey to St Damian's was managed successfully.

The point where the lane crosses the stream is known, for absolutely no reason that anyone alive can recall, as Nuttock's Ford, and for twelve months of the year in nine years out of ten, the stream is no more than an inch or two deep and of little or no inconvenience to passing traffic. Motor vehicles and bicycles go through with barely a splash and the occasional pedestrians who use the lane cross, and keep their feet dry, with the aid of half a dozen strategically positioned flat stones.

However, thanks to the heavy recent rainfall, the stream had risen to a depth of six or seven inches. This was considerably greater than usual but neither the horse and cart nor the following cortege was in any way inconvenienced.

But the same was not true about the return journey.

Streams and rivers are strange things which, history shows, can sometimes change their nature in relatively short periods of time.

Back in August in 1952, the river at Lynmouth famously flooded and destroyed much of the town as it raced towards the sea.

It was, and still is, the worst river flood ever experienced in England or, indeed, any part of the United Kingdom. Over 100 buildings were destroyed and 34 people lost their lives as the River Lyn raced through the West Lyn valley. Another 420 people were made homeless and even the lighthouse was so seriously undermined that it collapsed into the river the following day.

During just a few hours, the river rose from being a picturesque attraction to being a ferocious, deadly and uncontrollable force. Within two hours, the water level rose so high that walls were broken and doors and windows smashed. A narrow point in the river became blocked with fallen trees, rocks and other debris, and when this temporary natural dam gave way, the resultant rush of water caused even more damage.

That was Lynmouth in 1952.

The stream in Bilbury which crosses the lane at Nuttock's Ford is so small that it doesn't even have a name. It is regarded as quaint and rather fun, more than an inconvenience. It is so shallow that no fish could possibly survive in it.

Just how it transformed itself from such a harmless waterway into a potentially lethal river was and still is a mystery.

But, the fact is that, as luck would have it, the stream chose to become a river in the hour or so after we had crossed it on the way to St Damien's Church and before we crossed it on the way back afterwards.

I don't think anyone present realised just how deep the stream had become, nor how fast it was now flowing.

Reggie from the garage, who was sitting on the cart being pulled by the horse and who was, of course, leading the procession on its way back, just as he had the procession on its way out, certainly didn't anticipate any problems. He drove the horse forwards, thoroughly expecting to be able to drive through the swollen stream without any difficulty.

His ambition and sense of complacency were sadly misplaced.

Within a minute of entering the water, it was clear that the poor horse was struggling to cope with the rush of water. In order to save the horse from drowning, Reggie unfastened the harness and, with an agility which surprised everyone but which was inspired by an old-fashioned desire not to get his feet wet, jumped from the cart onto the horse's back.

Relieved of its heavy burden, the horse and rider then safely made their way to the other bank. They, at least, had reached their destination.

When Reggie looked back from what was now the far side of the stream, he could only watch as the cart, now abandoned in the middle of the rushing water (it seems absurd to continue to describe it as a stream) was tipped over on its side.

By this time, those of us who were travelling in trucks, vans and motor cars had, of course, realised that we would stand no chance of driving through what we had to regard as a river. The water was, it was clear, far too deep even for Thumper's truck.

We all climbed out of our vehicles and stood on our side of the ford. Ironically, the sun had come out and it was quite a pleasant afternoon. Peter Marshall said loudly that it was a lovely day to be buried.

We then all watched in horror as Carlton's coffin was swept off the cart, down the river and out of sight. The cart, too wide to be swept away, lay on its side, being battered by the water and slowly breaking up. The coffin, just the right size to float downstream, swung gracefully and naturally into a position best suited for its new situation, and disappeared between the trees and bushes which normally mark the boundaries of the stream.

There then followed much discussion as we all tried to work out exactly where the stream went and where the coffin was likely to end up. It was generally agreed that the stream, which wriggles and turns in the unpredictable way of streams everywhere, would, even in its new swollen state, pass through several of Mr Kennett's fields before joining forces with another, larger and also unnamed stream which eventually led down to the sea.

Thumper, who had been following directly behind the horse and cart, leapt back into his vehicle and called for the rest of us to join him. And so Anne, the mother of Thumper's children, together with Patchy, Peter Marshall and I all climbed into or onto Thumper's truck as he turned left through an open gate and began the drive along a muddy field in an attempt to follow the path of the stream.

It was, to say the least, a bumpy and slightly unnerving journey and I like to think that Carlton, who was something of a wild spirit and, in his modest way, an adventurer manqué, would have enjoyed the experience. Indeed, I like to think that he enjoyed his final nautical voyage as captain and crew of his small, homemade vessel.

As Thumper drove the truck, the rest of us struggled to keep an eye on the coffin in case it caught on a branch or grounded, as we constantly expected it to do.

But for a mile or so the coffin did neither of these things. It sailed proudly on the waters and we were all impressed at Carlton's skill in managing to construct a coffin which had proved surprisingly seaworthy. All it really needed, said Patchy, was a Jolly Roger flag flying proudly from the prow.

We followed that darned coffin for hours and it travelled for miles.

Actually, it didn't of course.

It just felt like it.

But we did follow the coffin for a third of mile and for twenty minutes. Every time we thought it had caught on a tree root or a rock, the damned thing managed to free itself and carry on floating along with the river.

Eventually, we caught up with it, of course.

We never really thought that the coffin would end up being washed out to sea, although Peter Marshall, in a gloomy mood, for he was in charge of the interment and had a grave digger standing by with spade and stone edging ready for action, did predict that the coffin would disappear into the Bristol Channel and that Carlton's body would probably be washed ashore somewhere along the Welsh coast, much to the confusion and bemusement of the Welsh constabulary.

Much to our relief, the coffin eventually stopped travelling when it was caught against a weir near to Huddle Stone Cottage, a tiny one bedroomed home miles from any neighbours and normally reached only by an always overgrown cart track.

After Thumper screeched to a halt and we all piled out of the truck, the owner of the cottage, an elderly gentleman called Albert Perry, came out to see what all the fuss was about.

He had been enjoying a late lunch or an early dinner for he had a spoon in one hand and a bowl of something steaming hot in the other. We were all on the other side of the stream from him and from where the coffin had come to rest.

'Hullo, Mr Perry,' I called, 'I'm sorry to bother you but do you think we could have our coffin back, please?'

'Has it got a body in it?'

'It has,' I agreed.

Mr Perry looked at us and then at the coffin, bobbing by the bank near to the weir. 'Who's in it?' he called back.

'Carlton,' I shouted, 'Carlton Tregallon.'

'Don't know him,' said Mr Perry. 'Never heard of him. You can have him back. I got no use for a coffin with a body in it. Specially not for a body I ain't never heard of.'

And with that he went back indoors to finish his meal. I often wonder what he would have said if the coffin had been occupied by someone he knew.

Thumper had to drive for another two miles to find a place where he could cross the stream and then two miles back to Mr Perry's cottage.

It took all of us nearly an hour to drag the coffin out of the water and into the back of Thumper's truck. And then, since Peter's gravedigger was waiting at Carlton's place, and being paid by the hour, Peter insisted that we drive straight to the grave and see Carlton buried before Thumper took us back to where we had left all our other vehicles.

The rest of the ceremony went without alarums or excursions.

We buried Carlton, and Peter's man fitted the stones around the mound of earth that marked the spot. It didn't look a bad place to be buried to be honest with you. Peter, who said he knew where he could lay his hands on something second-hand at a very reasonable price, promised to put a stone cross on the site to mark the spot.

And then Thumper took us back to where our cars were parked and we all went to the Duck and Puddle to say goodbye to Carlton in the time honoured manner.

After Peter had told us what his bill was there wasn't much money left, of course. But there was enough for us all to wet our whistles, and so we saw old Carlton off in modest but enthusiastic style.

He'd lived an unusual life had old Carlton and I think it's fair to say that his passing was a little out of the ordinary too. The funny thing is that although I hardly knew him I will miss him. He was one of life's characters and there aren't enough of those around these days.

When I got back to Bilbury Grange, I was exhausted but not tired. It's funny, but there is a difference. I realised that I ought to write to Beryl Tregallon to let her know that she was a widow. But I thought the letter could probably wait an hour or so. And so I poured myself a Laphroig as a nightcap, took the bottle with me and slumped down into my favourite chair. Patsy brought over a jug of water and added a little water to the whisky. I looked at the glass.

'Have I put in too much water?' she asked.

'I'll add a drop more whisky,' I said.

I think Patsy does that thing with the water deliberately. If she thinks I need a decent drink she puts in a little too much water so that I have to make the necessary adjustments.

She smiled at me. 'You look as if you need it.'

I did indeed. It had been a busy day.

The Bus Shelter (Without a Bus)

The Bilbury bus shelter (we only have one in the village and so it is a source of considerable pride) has been in need of repair and restoration for some time and a kind but misguided resident, who will remain anonymous (largely because no one but the person concerned knows their identity), telephoned the local council and pointed out to them that the roof leaks and so the shelter does not live up to its name. The call was, I gather, made around nine months ago. The bus shelter is made entirely of wood and has a thatched roof. It was, according to Patsy's father who knew the men who built it, put up in the 1930s. It has a wooden bench inside and a wooden floor and if the village had a regular bus service, it would be an excellent place in which to sit and wait for a bus to arrive. But the roof, which has needed re-thatching for some time, leaks rather badly.

Six months ago, a team of workmen arrived in Bilbury.

There were six of them and they came in two lorries. They were accompanied by a man in a small, white van. The man in the small, white van wore a cheap, ill-fitting suit, the sort you can buy from the sale rack at a discount clothing stall, a white, transparent nylon shirt which shone, and almost glowed, with whiteness, and a hideous kipper tie which had clearly been designed by a colour blind child who'd been given a brush and too many paints. This seventh man was clearly very important because he had six or seven pens in his top jacket pocket.

I knew they had arrived in the village because they got lost and the man in the van, who was leading the procession, called at Bilbury Grange and asked for directions.

'It says here that the shelter is in Totterdown Lane,' said the man, showing me a piece of paper which said, in clear black type, that the bus shelter was in Totterdown Lane.

'It is,' I agreed.

'But where is Totterdown Lane?' demanded the man. 'There aren't any road signs around.' He said this as though he were holding me personally responsible for the failure of adequate signage in the village.

'There aren't any road signs in Bilbury,' I told him. 'But to get to Totterdown Lane you just need to go straight along Potter's Lane, turn left into the lane by Softly's Bottom, take the first right into a lane which, as far as I know, does not have a name, and then you'll find Totterdown Lane on the left.'

The man stared at me as if I'd just given him instructions in Latin.

They only had to travel half a mile so I got out my bicycle and showed them the way. Leading a small procession of vehicles made me feel very important. I was in the lead, pedalling quietly, and behind me came the white van and then the two lorries laden with men and materials. I thought we must have looked quite impressive, needing only a police escort to be very impressive.

'Ah,' said the man in the suit, when I proudly showed them the bus shelter which was the purpose of their visit. He frowned and shook his head as though rather shocked and disappointed. 'This will need a 548/12. And we'll need to obtain a Restructuring Allocation which will necessitate a Planning Officer Rural Recommitment Intervention.' He spoke in a way which made it clear which words began with capital letters.

'What's a 548/12?' I asked.

'A full road closure,' explained the man in the suit, who seemed startled that there could be a human being anywhere who didn't know what a 548/12 might be. 'There's nowhere for us to park while we do the work and so we'll need permission for a cessation of traffic order. We'll have to speak to the Highways Planner and the police. We'll need temporary redirection signs erecting and traffic lights and a portable generator putting into place. And there will need to be a site inspection by proper authorities.'

'It's just a bus shelter,' I said. 'The roof needs re-thatching.'

The man stared at me, aghast. 'The current structure in its present configuration does not satisfy health and safety requirements or meet the required building standard specifications,' he said pompously. I looked at the bus shelter and felt sorry for it.

That was six months ago and I'd forgotten all about the bus shelter, the workmen and the man in the cheap suit.

But they came back.

And they came back in force.

This time the man in the white van was accompanied by four large lorries, a crane, a JCB digger, twelve workmen and a huge amount of equipment. They came with temporary traffic lights, lots of red signs saying ROAD CLOSED and lots of yellow signs which had DIVERSION printed on them. They brought enough scaffolding to cover the Eiffel Tower, two portable toilet cabins and a small administrative building which was bigger than the village bus shelter and which came on the back of its own lorry.

They came first to Bilbury Grange so that I could once again lead them to the bus shelter. I'm afraid that this time they had to wait while I finished my morning surgery. I did draw them a little map on the back of an old envelope but the man in the cheap suit, who still had the requisite number of pens in his jacket breast pocket, said that they would prefer to wait and be led to the site by what he called a 'knowledgeable local resident'. He said that the last time they had been in the village it had taken them four hours to find their way back to Barnstaple and that he didn't want to spend the rest of the day driving round looking for the bus shelter.

When I had completed the surgery and went out to take them round to the bus shelter I found that while they'd been waiting, they had entertained themselves by making several gallons of tea and cooking bacon and eggs on what looked to me like a camping stove but what was, I am sure, more accurately known as an 'Approved Portable Food Preparation Apparatus'. The men were sitting on folding chairs, eating, drinking and reading their newspapers. The British workman at work can be a magnificent sight.

It took the men 45 minutes to make the necessary preparations to continue their journey. There was much grumbling because they had settled in and were clearly not expecting to have to move. The toilet cabin which had been lifted off the back of its lorry had to be lifted back on again and the 'Approved Portable Food Preparation Apparatus' had to be packed up and put back into its proper place. And, of course, all the tea had to be drunk and all the bacon and egg sandwiches had to be consumed.

This time I led them round to the bus shelter in the Rolls Royce, simply because I had a couple of calls to make and one of the calls was to a village about three miles away. So the procession consisted of a Rolls Royce followed by three large lorries, followed by a digger, followed by a crane, followed by another large lorry, followed by the man in the white van who this time somehow managed to get himself at the end of the procession.

I showed them the bus shelter and then, as they began to unload their lorries, I carried on to do my morning calls. Before I left, I could not help noticing that the first things they took off the lorries were the tea making equipment and the 'Approved Portable Food Preparation Apparatus'. Then came the folding chairs and the portable toilet. These were clearly workers who had their priorities sorted out properly.

I had a busy day at the surgery and a number of calls to do around the village and consequently I didn't think anything more about the bus shelter. I simply assumed that the gang of workmen had done the necessary repairs and gone on their way.

However, a few days later I received an alarming telephone call from a villager called Taunton Trelawney.

Taunton is a normally genial man in what is usually known diplomatically in the late autumn of his life. He is long retired but used to be an architect in a large practice in Exeter. He carved a pleasant niche for himself as the firm's premier designer of bespoke garages and summer houses. He and his wife bought a cottage in Bilbury when they were both in their 40s and it was always their intention to retire to the village in the fullness of time. The cottage was, I gather, rather run down and quite a bargain.

'It's not often you get a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,' said Mr Trelawney, when telling me about their purchase.

And so, when the calendar ticked round, and it became time to do so, the Trelawneys did precisely as they had planned and became permanent residents in the village.

Mrs Trelawney is, despite her years, a keen tennis player and an enthusiastic member of a local rambling club. She has a large bosom, which looks rather like a jib sail in a full gale, and when she walks into a room the bosom always arrives a moment or two before the rest of her. She's a bubbly sort of woman who likes talking.

'I've had a good many lovers,' she once said. 'How many do you think?'

'Now, what sort of question is that?' I said. I have no idea what triggered the question and I had no idea what the correct answer might be. Nor did I have any idea what would be a tactful number to suggest. When she pushed me, I said 'three' because it sounded enough to show experience and not enough to suggest that she had been a woman of easy virtue.

'Twenty two!' she said, with pride. 'Enough for two entire football teams! But none of them was as good in bed as my husband. He was very strict when we were younger. I once burnt the pudding when we had guests and he put me over his knee, hoiked up my dress and spanked me in front of everyone. They were all very shocked but I enjoyed it enormously and was always waiting for him to do it again.' She paused, and thought and then smiled. 'I can't think how many puddings I burnt after that,' she said, wistfully. 'But he never did it again,' she added, sadly.

I confess that this unsolicited knowledge stayed with me, resting out of sight at the back of my mind, but it always came to the forefront when I saw either of them. I saw Mr Trelawney, with his bathukolpian wife over his knee. And I saw Mrs Trelawney burning puddings.

As far as I know, the only ailment Mrs Trelawney has had in the years since I've been her GP has been a verruca, a simple warty disorder which is almost as difficult to spell as it is to treat successfully. She also suffers a little from deafness, but she refuses any help for that.

At the time of the second bus shelter incident, I had been treating it for several months and progress had been slow.

Her visits to the surgery were not speedy either.

She always came well encased in garments which seemed to have been designed with safety in mind. Whatever the weather she always wore a corset strong enough to withstand point blank fire from a .38 pistol. The corset was fitted with industrial strength suspender straps which looked as if they could have been used to tether a barrage balloon in a gale. Whenever she visited and I asked her to remove the appropriate stocking, she always expressed surprise, as though the very idea that I would need her to remove clothing in order to examine her verruca was something of a shock. She would then insist on going behind the screen and removing not just the stocking but also the corset. The whole process of disrobing took so long that from time to time I would call out to ask if everything was going smoothly. I lived in fear that one day I would sit and wait, and wait, and eventually move aside the screen and see Mrs Trelawney lying on the floor, deceased, and probably still wearing her damned corset.

And while I was toying with her verruca she would talk. And talk, and talk.

She once asked my advice about her collection of porcelain frogs.

'I've got hundreds of the damned things,' she told me. 'I hate them but everyone buys them for me at birthdays and at Christmas. My husband bought me one several years ago and, being polite, I said I liked it, as you do, and so he bought me another one for our anniversary and then a third for Christmas and it just sort of got out of hand. I know what I'll get for Christmas. Another bloody frog. How do I stop people buying them for me?'

I told her that when her husband next gave her a china frog she should admire it and then tell him that he could never find a better one and so she wanted this one to be the last he ever bought. And I suggested that she tell relatives and friends that the china frog collecting was now over.

She was very pleased with that advice, though I don't know if she tried it and if she did, whether it worked or not.

As the weeks went by, I suggested that she might visit a chiropodist in Barnstaple but she insisted on allowing me the privilege of tackling her verruca.

Mr Trelawney is also in decent health. He is a keen rambler, though he suffers from mild angina and moderate high blood pressure. As long as he does not get too excited both these problems seem to be well under control.

He also has a good deal of hair growing out of his nostrils, probably more than is considered appropriate in most polite circles, but neither he nor Mrs Trelawney has ever noticed this profusion or else he has decided to let nature takes its course. He once shared my waiting room with Mrs Blackmore and Nigel, her six-year-old. Nigel would not stop crying and only after I had sat him down in my surgery and given him a lollipop would he admit that he had been terrified of the man with spiders up his nose.

Mr Trelawney would be the first to admit that he is not the brightest bulb in the chandelier, probably no more than a 20 watt would be my guess, and during his professional career, he never made the mistake of trying to stretch beyond his capabilities – hence his decision to concentrate on designing garages and summerhouses. But he is a good, kind, honest man who cares. Those may be generally regarded these days as rather out of favour qualities; a little old-fashioned in the wider world maybe, but in Bilbury those are still respected as important qualities.

Mr Trelawney telephoned me a day or two after the second visit of the men from the council.

'It's gone!' said Mr Trelawney.

I didn't have to ask him who was speaking because Mr Trelawney has a unique way of shouting. As a result of his wife's deafness, and her refusal to wear a hearing aid of any kind (or even to use a speaking trumpet), he has permanently turned up his personal volume and so is sometimes invited to compere local events where the organisers are unable to afford a loudspeaker system, or even to rent a loud hailer.

'That's good,' I said. 'They can be difficult to shift sometimes.'

'Well this one was easy enough to move!' replied Mr Trelawney. He sounded in a bad mood and I wondered why he could possibly be upset that his wife's verruca had disappeared. I was also slightly puzzled by his remark that moving it had been 'easy' since Mrs Trelawney and I had been battling with the darned thing for several months.

'The important thing is to make sure that it doesn't come back,' I said.

'I'm damned sure it's not coming back!' said Mr Trelawney. 'You should see the monstrosity which has appeared in its place.'

'Oh dear,' I said. 'It sounds as if I'd better take a look. Can your wife pop along this evening?'

'Why the hell do you need my wife there?'

'It'll be difficult to do anything without her!' I laughed.

'What do you expect her to do?' demanded Mr Trelawney.

'Just slip off her stockings and jump up on the examination couch.'

Mr Trelawney made a noise like the pressure cooker my mother used to have when I was a boy. It was a fairly early model and the steam release valve was rather temperamental. 'And then what do you intend to do?'

'Well, I'll just take a good look!'

Mr Trelawney repeated his excellent impersonation of a pressure cooker with steam escaping. 'I rang you because

I thought you'd be sympathetic and offer some useful advice,' he said at last. 'I certainly didn't expect to have to listen to this sort of filth.'

I paused and thought for a moment. 'How do you expect me to deal with your wife's verruca if I don't have a good look at it?'

'Verruca? What verruca?'

'The one on your wife's foot.'

'Oh, I'm not interested in that,' said Mr Trelawney, dismissively.

I was puzzled. 'Then what are we talking about?'

'The bus shelter.'

'The village bus shelter?'

'Of course.' He sighed. 'Why would I ring you up to talk about a bus shelter in Northampton?'

'Have they finished the repairs?' I asked.

'No, they haven't,' replied Mr Trelawney angrily. 'They've torn the damned thing down and put up some monstrosity made of plastic and steel.'

After a few more minutes of conversation with Mr Trelawney, I managed to discover that instead of repairing the old bus shelter, the wooden one with the thatched roof, the council workmen had torn the building down and replaced it with a hideous modern structure made of sheets of plastic, held together with monstrous steel struts.

'Instead of a proper seat there's a funny little piece of red plastic that people are supposed to lean on!' said Mr Trelawney. He now sounded as if he were about to burst into tears.

Prevention of serious illness is an important part of any doctor's job and it seemed to me that if I didn't do something there was a good chance that Mr Trelawney would have some sort of vascular accident – a heart attack or a stroke. So I told him to meet me at the bus shelter in five minutes time.

I arrived first and I was shocked at what I saw.

Mr Trelawney was absolutely right.

The council workmen had dismantled and taken away the old, original bus shelter and had replaced it with some space age creation which would have probably looked at home on an interplanetary space mission station but which looked distinctly out of place in Bilbury.

'We've got to do something about it!' said Mr Trelawney.

'I wonder what happened to the original one,' I said, not truly expecting him to know.

'The council workmen smashed it up and dumped all the bits on the tip,' explained Mr Trelawney. 'I telephoned them before I telephoned you.'

I thought about it for a moment. 'We need a Bus Shelter Action Committee,' I said. 'You ring up everyone you know and I'll ring up some people. We'll tell everyone that we'll meet in the Duck and Puddle tomorrow evening. Tell everyone you ring to try to have a look at the new bus shelter so that they know what we're talking about.'

And so the following evening, a couple of dozen of us gathered in the snug at the Duck and Puddle. Thumper Robinson and Patchy Fogg were there, together with Mr Kennett, Patsy's father, and several other local farmers. Mr Trelawney had brought along several of his neighbours. We all agreed that the new bus shelter just wouldn't do. And we all agreed that if we couldn't have our old bus shelter back then we wanted something pretty well identical.

'We could contact the council, tell them we aren't happy with the wretched thing they've put up and demand that they replace it with something more in-keeping with Bilbury's rural environment,' said Mr Trelawney.

'Good idea!' said Gilly Parsons, the publican's wife and the chef, chief barmaid, senior bottle washer and joint proprietor of the Granny Kennett Pudding Club at the Duck and Puddle. Gilly is always ready for a fight with bureaucrats.

'I'm afraid I don't think that will do any good,' said Patchy, sadly. 'Now that they've put up a new shelter they'll say we have to make do with what we have been given.' He shrugged. 'That's their way.'

It was Thumper who came up with the answer. 'We'll take down the new thing they've put up and get rid of it. And then we'll rebuild the old bus shelter.'

'Will they let us do that?' asked Mr Trelawney, uncertainly.

'Of course, not!' said Thumper. 'So we won't tell them what we're doing. We'll get rid of their horrible new thing and put up something nice and rustic of our own.'

It was generally agreed that no one at the council would ever notice that we had changed the nature of the bus shelter. Very few officials or politicians ever visit Bilbury. And if they do come they invariably get lost in our maze of unlabelled lanes. Most maps of this part of North Devon are useless. The vast majority of maps don't include details of many of our narrow lanes and I have seen a number of maps and atlases which don't even acknowledge the existence of the village Bilbury.

Moreover, if, perchance, a stranger from the big city of Barnstaple were to notice our bus shelter, it would never occur to them that it wasn’t the same bus shelter that had been erected some years earlier – by the council.

‘It’ll cost a pretty penny,’ warned Mr Kennett.

‘We’ll raise the money somehow,’ said Thumper.

‘I’ll draw up the plans for free!’ offered Mr Trelawney.

Patchy ordered more drinks and we sat around for half an hour working out how to get the work done and how to find the cash to pay for it. Mr Trelawney was appointed architect and project manager.

No one else mentioned it so I thought I ought to point out, just in case anyone thought it relevant, that in the latest issue of the local paper it was reported that the local bus company was halting the weekly bus service to Bilbury on the grounds that the route was uneconomical. I made this point as everyone sipped and thought of ways to raise the money for the replacement for the replacement bus shelter.

‘What’s that got to do with anything?’ demanded Mr Trelawney. ‘The old bus shelter was a beautiful little building. We owe it to the next generation to restore it to its former glory.’

‘That old bus shelter was a handy little building before it started leaking,’ said Thumper. ‘It’s quite close to the river. On a wet day I often popped in there to eat my sandwiches while I was out fishing.’ He looked around. ‘Sandwiches go all soggy in the rain,’ he explained.

‘My wife found it useful if she’d been into the village,’ said another one of the farmers. ‘If she had heavy shopping from Peter Marshall’s shop she would stop there for a sit and a rest on her way home.’

So the Bus Shelter Action Committee duly decided that we would erect, or arrange to have erected, a new wooden bus shelter with a thatched roof and that we, the Action Committee, would find a way to fund the building.

That’s the way we like to do things in Bilbury.

Just because there are no buses doesn’t mean that you can’t have a damned good looking bus shelter.

Just Before Dawn

I’ve never really worked out how many night calls I deal with. Sometimes I can go for a whole week without getting up at night. At other times, the night calls seem to come thick and fast. Occasionally, I have had to get up three or four times in a single night.

Night calls are often particularly memorable and, since the villagers of Bilbury are, by and large, a sensible lot who only call for help when they really need it, I genuinely don’t mind getting up in the middle of the night. It’s my job and I like doing it. Night calls can be enormously rewarding and I feel sorry for those doctors who, for one reason or another, don’t ever do them. (There are always one or two unreasonable patients who will request night time calls without consideration. But the annoyance caused by these patients is far outweighed by the genuine, professional satisfaction of being able to help someone in pain or fear.)

When I received a telephone call asking me to go and see Oliver Windle I knew that I needed to move quickly. Oliver suffers from asthma and as far as I am concerned if he has a fault it is that he tends to wait too long before calling for help. He takes tablets and has an inhaler but sometimes his wheezing just gets out of control.

It was, I suppose, about two in the morning, early one April, when the call came in from his wife. She told me that Oliver was wheezing badly and that he’d been in trouble since the early evening. He’d refused to let her call me earlier but now she felt that he definitely needed help – and needed it rather urgently. He’d tried everything that normally did the trick – even drinking two cups of very strong black coffee.

I got dressed quickly, picked up my black bag and a small oxygen cylinder which I keep in the surgery for such emergencies, and set off out into the night.

Most of the time we never really know people the first time we meet them because we probably only see the person they want us to think they are. But Oliver was different. What you saw was what you got for he never changed.

Oliver had been named after the fat half of Laurel and Hardy because his mother, who had clearly not done enough research into the matter, mistakenly thought that Oliver was the name of the thin half of the duo, the one who had been born in the Lake District in the North of England. In fact, of course, Oliver was the plump one who was born in Georgia, US.

Oliver’s parents had enjoyed a very pleasant honeymoon in the Lake District and that was where Oliver had been conceived. If Oliver had been born a girl he would have probably been called Beatrix after Beatrix Potter, the author who lived in the Lake District. And if his parents had paid closer attention to the identities of the two stars of the Laurel and Hardy movies, he would have been named Stan.

Oliver was not, it is fair to say, the brightest of God’s creatures and Thumper, who knew him well, always said he had a brain power which put him somewhere between that of a ferret and a cockatoo. Patchy said that his literary skills were such that he would have had a hard time if faced with a one letter anagram. None of this was said unkindly or with malice. Oliver himself readily admitted that he could never tackle a sum involving a total larger than his available complement of fingers and thumbs.

For most of those who are limited to using digital help with their arithmetic, this limitation means that sums of up to ten are perfectly possible, but in Oliver’s case the limit had been reduced to eight. He had lost the middle and index fingers of his right hand while endeavouring to remove a tuft of grass blocking the blade of a petrol-driven lawnmower. Sadly, he had attempted to carry out this simple procedure without taking the precaution of turning off the engine. The moment the blockage was removed, the blade had resumed its twirling faster than Oliver had been able to remove his hand.

It is perfectly possible that it would have been feasible to reattach the severed digits had Oliver had the presence of mind to seek medical help with some degree of urgency. However, he delayed for nearly 24 hours before seeking advice. This was some time before he married and he alone must take full responsibility for the delay.

After the accident, Oliver wrapped his hand in a grubby handkerchief and put the two severed fingers into the hip pocket of his jeans. By the time he finally arrived in my surgery, it was all that medicine could do to save his infected hand. The fingers, which had been crushed (he had sat on them while watching television) were almost unrecognisable as human and the vicar and Oliver later gave them a Christian burial in an unused corner of the churchyard.

I should mention, as an aside, that losing fingers is something of a local pastime in North Devon. My guess is that the average complement of fingers and thumbs in the area is something only slightly larger than nine.

When I asked him why he hadn’t come to see me sooner, Oliver explained the delay by pointing out that there had been a football match on the television that evening and that he had been looking forward to watching it for the best part of a week.

Oliver is a tireless hard worker who never seems to feel pain or weariness in the way the rest of us do. Although he doesn't work on a farm, he is good with animals and I once saw him intimidate an enraged and aggressive bull simply by standing and staring at it. He is brave and kind and does not have a malicious thought in his head. But he is certainly not a man you would hire to take an IQ test for you if success at that endeavour were important to you. I cannot think of anyone else I have ever known who would put two severed fingers into their pocket and then forget about them for 24 hours.

Oliver is, for reasons lost in the mists of time, known to everyone as 'Boy'.

It is how he still refers to himself, even though he is now a married man in his early sixties. He always refers to himself in the third person as in 'Boy doesn't like damsons' or 'Boy had a good win on the horses last week'. I've no idea why he does this. It certainly isn't out of affectation or arrogance, as it is with some of the celebrities who do it.

Boy had an informal training as a car mechanic (no paperwork was involved at any stage) and he works for Tolstoy's, the local garage, where he looks after many of the vehicles in the village. Dr Brownlow was an enthusiastic supporter and always asked that Oliver take care of routine servicing of his elderly Rolls Royce. I continue that tradition.

'When you take your car to the garage for a service the first thing they do is fiddle with everything,' Dr Brownlow once complained. 'They change the seat position, move the driving mirror, retune the radio and generally make a real mess of everything. Boy never does any of that.'

When seatbelts were introduced, Oliver was reluctant to fit them unless ordered to do so. He claimed it was because he couldn't work out how to fix them to the bodywork but I never believed that story. I think he thought they were unsightly. He and I were at one about seatbelts. I know I should have had seatbelts put into the car when they were introduced but I get in and out of the car all day long and I know I would get all tangled up, and probably break my neck, if I had belts in the car. I'm sure they'll make them compulsory eventually and when they do I'll have them fitted. Maybe very old cars such as the Rolls will be exempt.

When he was 52-years-old, Oliver got married to a lovely lady called Sheila. He and his new bride sold the house he'd inherited from his parents and Oliver explained that the stairs were getting too much for him. He has arthritis in both knees as well as the asthma. He and Sheila bought a bungalow which he said would be much easier to manage. I remember being rather surprised at his choice of bungalow, for the property he bought could only be accessed after climbing a long flight of steps from the lane.

'Won't the steps be a problem for you?' I asked him.

He shook his head. 'It's only stairs I have trouble with,' he said. 'I can manage steps outside with no bother.'

When I arrived at the bungalow in response to Sheila's urgent telephone call, the front door was open and Sheila was standing waiting for me. She'd seen and heard my car approaching and she had the front door open before I'd started climbing the steps.

Oliver was sitting in an easy chair in the front room and he was definitely struggling. He was in the early stages of status asthmaticus – a dangerous and potentially deadly condition for asthma sufferers. Status asthmaticus is always unresponsive to all the usual bronchodilators. Sometimes the air passages go into spasm and, when narrowed, become plugged with mucus. It is a frightening condition – frightening for both sufferer and observers alike.

Oliver was clutching an inhaler in one hand and holding his chest with the other. A bottle of the tablets he used was on a small table by his side. He looked like death and my first thought was that I was going to have a fight on my hands to keep him alive.

'Has anything unusual happened recently?' I asked his wife.

'He had a bad cold,' she told me, 'but you know what he's like. He doesn't like to bother you. He always thinks he can deal with things by himself.'

'Next time he's poorly you decide whether or not to call me,' I told her firmly.

Sheila nodded and promised that she would.

I got the oxygen cylinder set up and fitted a mask on Oliver's face. I hoped that the oxygen supply would help reduce the hypoxemia from which he was suffering.

'He'll be all right won't he, doctor?' asked Shelia. I knew that she had never seen him in such a bad way.

'Of course he will,' I said, with more confidence than I felt. 'But it's a good job you didn't wait any longer to call me.'

I opened my black bag and took out a syringe, a needle and a vial of a powerful corticosteroid.

'Oliver wanted me to wait until daylight to call you,' said Sheila.

I looked at her. 'Well, I'm glad you didn't.'

I didn't tell Sheila, of course, but if she had waited then we would have had to call the undertaker.

I quickly found a vein and injected the steroid straight into Oliver's arm. The oxygen was already beginning to make a difference and his colour was improving.

As I knelt beside him, waiting for the steroid to start to work and the wheezing to be reduced, I couldn't help thinking how often it is that really serious health problems occur at this time of the night.

All living things operate according to an internal clock and human beings are no exception. It has been known for centuries that the leaves of some plants regularly open during the daytime and close at night. It was always assumed that this phenomenon was a response to sunlight. But over two 250 years ago, in 1729, a French astronomer called Jean-Jacques de Mairan, conducted a very simple experiment which showed that this assumption was wrong. He discovered that this phenomenon occurs even if a plant is kept in the dark. The only possible explanation was that the plant opens and closes in response to some sort of 24-hour internal clock. That was the first experiment in chronobiology.

Since then, chronobiology (the study of temporal patterns related to biological phenomena) has become an acknowledged science. It is now known that just about every living organism, from a nucleated single cell to a human being, follows a 24-hour or circadian rhythm.

So, for example, a human being's pulse rate and blood pressure are highest first thing in the morning (with the result that the incidence of heart attacks and strokes is highest at that time of day). In the evening, the pulse rate and blood pressure will naturally fall. The human body temperature rises during the day and falls at night. The body's blood platelets, which help with blood clotting, are stickier in the morning than at any other time of day. A man is, therefore, likely to have less trouble with bleeding if he nicks himself shaving in the morning than if he nicks himself in the evening. The human tolerance for alcohol peaks at five o'clock in the afternoon. And finally, most babies are born, and most people die, between the hours of midnight and dawn.

Our bodies respond in a cyclical way because we have evolved on earth, and the amount of light and heat, and the level of electromagnetic and gravitational forces, all vary in a rhythmic way.

The important thing, still widely ignored by doctors, is that the abnormalities associated with disease also vary in a cyclical and circadian way.

Whether a patient is suffering from asthma, cancer, heart disease or arthritis, their disease will change during the day and, consequently, whatever is done to tackle the disease should also be arranged according to a circadian rhythm.

For example, the body's ability to absorb drugs varies a good deal throughout the day. When given at the right time of day, a drug will have a powerful and positive effect on an illness. But when given at the wrong time of day, a drug may prove toxic. All this is known but surprisingly few doctors take no notice of any of it.

I find the way the body changes during the day and the night truly fascinating, and I was thinking about this unrecognised branch of medicine while I waited for Oliver to recover. I was confident that if I could keep him alive until daybreak then he would make a good recovery.

Asthma is one of the commonest diseases in the world. And it is getting commoner. The disease has been so widely investigated that we know that because of the circadian rhythms associated with a number of normal physiological processes (such as airway size and breathing patterns) the majority of asthma attacks take place between 2.00 a.m. and 6.00 a.m. in the morning. The airways are naturally open widest during the day and there is a reduction in airflow after midnight.

Knowing all this, I firmly believed that if I could keep Oliver alive until sunrise then he would be over the worst, and he would survive.

Slowly, steadily and undeniably I watched Oliver's condition improve.

As the minutes ticked by so the wheezing eased and his colour improved. Soon he was able to speak. His wife felt comfortable enough to leave the room to fill the kettle and to make us all a cup of tea.

Typically, the first thing Oliver said, when he finally had enough breath to talk, was to apologise for my being called out.

'I wanted to wait until the morning,' he said.

It's funny how some people are like that. Some patients will call the doctor out at the drop of a hat, telephoning at 3.00 a.m. on Christmas morning because they've run out of cream for their athlete's foot. But others will refuse to call for help, waiting for morning, waiting for Monday, waiting for things to get better by themselves.

I told Oliver that his wife had been right to call me. And I told him firmly that I had given her authority to call me whenever she thought I was needed – and not to wait until he was ready to call.

As the minutes ticked by, so Oliver grew stronger. Soon he was out of danger. I told him I would leave the oxygen cylinder with him but that I didn't think he would need it again. I also told his wife that she had to call me if there was any deterioration but that I would call in later that day to see how he was. There was some sign of infection in his chest and I decided to start him on a week's course of an antibiotic. Drugs in the antibiotic group are, in my view, prescribed far too often. It is one of the reasons why there are now so many dangerous infections which are immune to antibiotics. But there are times when antibiotics are essential and this was one of them.

I left Oliver and Sheila just after dawn.

The drive back home was magnificent.

The sun was rising over the hills and the sky was showing signs that we were going to have a good day.

My route took me past the new Bilbury bus shelter which had been finished just that week. It had a thatched roof and a wooden seat inside. No buses stopped there but we had the best damned bus shelter in Devon. Looking at the shelter which Mr Trelawney had designed and the village had built, made me smile with pride.

The drive home was made all that much better because I knew that I had actually made a difference. You can't often say that in life so the moments when you can are worth cherishing.

I made a slight detour and drove past the Little Hampton cricket ground on my way home. As I went past, I slowed for a few moments to look at the empty pavilion and the neatly mown square. I felt that winter was truly over and spring was definitely here.

When I got back to Bilbury Grange I was feeling good.

Patsy was still asleep and there was no point at all in waking her.

I paused for a moment; unsure whether to go back to bed or to make breakfast.

Eventually, I decided that I wouldn't sleep if I did go back to bed, so I fed Ben and made myself breakfast.

When the kettle had boiled and the eggs were ready I put on a coat, arranged my feast on a tray and took the tray outside to eat in the early morning sunshine. Two boiled eggs with slices of fresh bread, buttered and cut into 'soldiers', a plateful of toast, lashings of home-made marmalade, a glass of pineapple juice and a huge pot of coffee.

Outside, it wasn't warm but it wasn't cold either. I sat on a wooden chair at our wooden garden table. Ben, who had finished his breakfast and had found an old bone, chewed happily beneath my feet. There was a mist over the garden and I could see the sun starting to shine through it. The grass was wet with dew. The birds were already up and about and were singing merrily to welcome another day.

I'd missed my sleep but it didn't matter a damn for life felt very, very good.

For the umpteenth time I told myself how lucky I was to be working in Bilbury.

There really is no place quite like it.

Appendix 1

The Doc's List of Things People Achieved After the Age of 65

At the age of 66
Colonel Sanders started Kentucky Fried Chicken and by the time he was 70 had 400 franchise restaurants; John Betjeman became Poet Laureate; Edgar Rice Burroughs, author of the Tarzan books, became a war correspondent

At the age of 67
Josephine Baker, the dancer, made a return to the Broadway stage; Tolstoy rode a bicycle for the first time in his life; John Dryden, the poet, agreed to supply a publisher with 10,000 verses for £300; Simeon Poisson discovered the laws of probability (after studying the chances of French army personnel being killed by mule kicks)

At the age of 68
Queen Victoria started to learn Hindustani; Sir C Aubrey Smith, the former England cricket captain, made his first movie in Hollywood; Mrs Patrick Campbell, the actress, also made her first film

At the age of 69
Ronald Reagan was elected President of the United States of America; Noah Webster published his eponymous dictionary; Gilbert White published the *Natural History of Selborne*

At the age of 70
Francis Galton invented the science of finger printing; Alfred Wallis, a Cornish fisherman in St Ives, began to paint and duly made both himself and St Ives world famous; Copernicus published *The Revolutions of Heavenly Bodies*; Enid Blyton wrote 11 books in the year; Hilda Johnstone became a competitor in the Olympics, taking part in the equestrian dressage competition; Maurice Chevalier starred in the film Gigi.

At the age of 71
Coco Chanel designed the Chanel suit; Leni Riefenstahl, the filmmaker, took up scuba diving; Katsusuke Yanagisawa, a retired Japanese schoolteacher, climbed Mount Everest

At the age of 72
Karl Wallenda walked a tightrope between the top floors of two hotels in Miami; Colette wrote Gigi; Jomo Kenyatta became Prime Minister of Kenya; Charles Blondin was still walking tightropes; Dame May Whitty made her first film.

At the age of 73
Dr Roget finished compiling his thesaurus (which he began at the age of 69); Konrad Adenauer became Chancellor of Germany; dog trainer Barbara Woodhouse began a world-wide dog training crusade

At the age of 74
S.J.Perelman, the humourist and scriptwriter for the Marx Brothers, drove from Paris to Peking in an old MG; Jean Cocteau decorated the church of Saint Blaise-des-Simples in Milly La Foret

At the age of 75
Ed Delano rode his bicycle 3,100 miles in 33 days to a reunion meeting; Nicholas Hawksmoor designed the towers of Westminster Abbey

At the age of 76
August Rodin married the girl with whom he had lived since he was 23; John XXIII became Pope

At the age of 77
Mahatma Gandhi took India to independence; Clara Burton served in Cuba in the Spanish-American war; John Glenn went into space and flew as a payload specialist on the Discovery mission

At the age of 78
H.G.Wells successfully submitted his doctoral thesis; Thomas Beecham, the conductor, started a foreign tour; Mae West, the American actress after whom the inflatable life vest was named, appeared in the film Myra Breckinridge; Dame Edith Evans asked that her age be removed from reference books because she feared that it might prevent her getting work; Chevalier de Lamarck proposed a new theory of evolution, suggesting that acquired characteristics can be transmitted to the next generation

At the age of 79
Admiral Lord Cochrane volunteered for active service at the start of the Crimean War; Dame Edith Evans was still appearing on stage in New York; George Cayley invented a glider capable of carrying a man (in 1853)

At the age of 80
Grandma Moses had her first solo art show; Levi Burlingham, American jockey, rode in his last race; Marc Chagal created the sets for the Metropolitan Opera's production of Mozart's 'Magic Flute'; Leopold Stokowski founded the American Symphony Orchestra (in the same year he broke a leg playing football)

At the age of 81
Benjamin Franklin helped to write the American constitution; Johann Goethe finished writing *Faust*; Marcus Cato decided to destroy Carthage before it became a threat to the Roman Empire

At the age of 82
William Gladstone became British Prime Minister; Winston Churchill published the first part of his four volume *A History of the English Speaking Peoples*; American cowboy Bill Kane was still riding in rodeos (though he won his last event at the age of 80).

At the age of 83
Charlie Chaplin received an Oscar; Dr Benjamin Spock was fighting for world peace

At the age of 84
American comedian and actor George Burns had his first hit record; Henri Matisse and Claude Monet were still painting; Somerset Maugham was still writing books

At the age of 85
Carl Jung finished work on *Man and his Symbols*, his best known work; Mae West made the film 'Sextette'; Theodore Mommsen received a Nobel Prize

At the age of 86
Louise Weiss was elected an MEP; Francis Rous received the Nobel Prize for identifying a virus which caused tumours in chickens; Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman doctor, was still working; Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres was still painting

At the age of 87
Frank Lloyd Wright proposed building a skyscraper one mile high; Mary Baker Eddy founded the Christian Science Monitor; George Burns, comedian was still performing and telling jokes which he admitted were older than he was

At the age of 88
Michelangelo worked on the Rondanini Pieta; ex German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer started work on his memoirs; Pablos Casals, the cellist, was still giving concerts

At the age of 89
Philip W Whitcomb, a mature student, was awarded a degree from the University of Kansas; Dr Albert Schweitzer was still running his hospital in West Africa; Arthur Rubenstein, the pianist, was still giving concerts

At the age of 90
Leopold Stokowski, now recovered from his broken leg, recorded 20 albums, P.G.Wodehouse wrote the last Jeeves

and Wooster book; Pearl Taylor was chosen as Campus Queen at Long Beach City College where she was a student; Marc Chagall became the first living artist to be exhibited at the Louvre museum; Pablo Picasso was still drawing and engraving

And I could go on for much longer for many nonagenarians have achieved remarkable things. So, for example, at the age of 91 Alexander Baldine Kosloff was still teaching ballet, Thomas Hobbes was still writing books and Adolph Zukor was still chairman of Paramount Pictures. Antonio Stradivari was still making violins at the age of 93. George Bernard Shaw wrote his play *Why She Would Not* in seven days, just before his 94th birthday – he died at the age of 94 after falling from a tree he was pruning. Comedian George Burns was still performing at the age of 94. Bertrand Russell was still campaigning for peace at 94 – and he was in his 94th year when he set up the International War Crimes Tribunal in Stockholm. Japanese mountaineer and explorer Teichi Igarashi climbed Mt Fuji when he was 99. He did it again the following year, though he did carry a cane. He wore thick socks but no shoes.

Appendix 2

Granny Kennett's Pudding Club Recipes

With the permission of those named, I have included here a cluster of recipes for the most popular puddings served at the Duck and Puddle in Bilbury. These are traditional recipes which have been handed down through the generations. I take no responsibility for the accuracy of these recipes or the wisdom of making the puddings so described in the quantities listed here which, I confess, seem to me to be rather asking for trouble. Please note that all these puddings should be made from fresh ingredients (except for the two-day-old bread used in Mother Kennett's bread pudding) and cooked properly in some sort of oven.

1

Granny Kennett's Marmalade Pudding

(This recipe has been in the Kennett family for longer than anyone can remember.

Mix together a pound of breadcrumbs, a pound of sugar, eight eggs, a pound of finely chopped suet, chopped peel from three lemons and two jars of thick cut orange marmalade. Place the whole mixture in a pan and boil for several hours. When the mixture is nearly ready to serve, prepare a sauce with half a pound of butter, four ounces of sugar, two dozen almonds which have been chopped and ground and a third of a bottle of a good brandy. Beat the butter, sugar, almonds and brandy into a stiff creamy texture. When you serve the pudding, add the sauce around it. The pudding should be served with a good chunk of stilton cheese on a side plate and a glass of a decent port.

2

Mother Kennett's Bread and Butter Pudding

(Bread pudding recipes are two a penny and no old-fashioned recipe book is complete without one. There are probably more bread pudding recipes than there are recipes for cock-a-leekie soup. This recipe is recognised as having been the handiwork of Patsy's mother.)

Cut a loaf of two-day-old bread into thick slices and remove all the crusts. Make sure that there is no mould on the bread before cutting. It is important that the slices of bread should be cut quite thickly. Butter the bread on one side only, but very generously, making sure that the butter is rubbed well into the bread, and then spread lavish quantities of orange marmalade (preferably home-made but failing that any good brand will do) on top of the butter. Cut the bread into slices as though making soldiers for dipping into soft-boiled eggs and lay the slices in a buttered pudding dish. Beat three eggs into a pint of milk, pour the egg, and milk mixture on top of the slices of bread. The pudding should then be baked in the oven for half an hour or so. The pudding should be served with a very generous dollop of treacle gracing each portion. This pudding should serve two hungry people or four fussy eaters.

3

The Duck and Puddle Christmas Plum Pudding

(This recipe was specially created by Mrs Kennett (Patsy's Granny) for the Duck and Pudding some years ago and is now regularly served by Frank and Gilly at the pub. A decent plum pudding requires a good deal of work and preparation. Although this pudding was originally created to be served during the Christmas season, it is now so popular that it is served at the Duck and Puddle from the 20th September onwards. Just why the pudding is served from the 20th September is not known but it is commonly believed that it was probably the birthday of a villager who asked for the pudding to be served as a special treat.)

The Duck and Puddle Christmas Pudding requires two pounds of bread crumbs, two pounds of flour, two pounds of raisins, two pounds of currants, two pounds of suet, five ounces of freshly ground almonds, four ounces of grated lemon peel, four ounces of grated orange peel, a whole nutmeg which has been ground, half a pound of sugar, one and a half dozen large eggs, a pint of cream, a bottle of decent claret (it is always a mistake to use cheap wine when preparing a pudding) and a large wine glass full of a decent brandy. The ingredients should be mixed together in a large bowl and then placed in a pan and boiled for at least five hours. The pudding should be served with copious amounts of custard. A pudding of this size should provide sufficient portions for a medium sized family. If the pudding is being prepared for two or three people then the quantities can be halved. During the Christmas season, the Duck and Puddle serves this pudding every day for the Twelve Days of Christmas. In one recent year, Granny Kennett prepared 84 of these puddings for consumption by Duck and Puddle regulars over the Christmas holidays. (It should perhaps also be mentioned that during that same record period, Peter Marshall sold 67 bottles of proprietary indigestion medicine. The doc did not keep a record of the amount of indigestion medicine he prescribed.)

4

Patsy Kennett's Apple Pudding

(This recipe was handed down to Patsy by her mother. Its origins are lost in the mists of Old Bilbury.)

A dozen and a half decent sized apples should be cut, sliced and macerated as though being prepared for an apple pie filling or for a sauce. A plain tin should be buttered and into it should be placed slices of bread which have been cut into small sections. The bread should line the whole of the pan, including the internal sides. Raisins, sultanas and chopped dates should be scattered over the bread. Melted butter should then be poured over the bread until it is well soaked. The macerated apple mush (as it is known locally) should be very well mixed with three quarters of a pound of sugar and the finely cut rind of two large lemons or three small ones and boiled for half an hour. The mush should then be poured into the bread-lined mould and put into the oven for three quarters of an hour or so. These quantities will serve four people with healthy appetites, six people with poor appetites, two very hungry farmhands or one Thumper Robinson. The apple pudding should be served with a sparkling white wine or, if the means are available, champagne.

5

Thumper's Favourite Tea-Time Snack.

(This pudding was originally prepared by Thumper's grandmother for her husband, Norris, a well-known North Devon farmer and accomplished trencherman. Norris went to London just once in his life (to deal with a legal problem concerning boundaries) but is still remembered at the Garrick club. Norris went there for lunch as a guest of his solicitor, who had travelled up to London with him, and proceeded to impress the other members by eating his way through the entire menu – including large portions of five different hot puddings.)

Chop up four apples, place them in a basin and add several large handfuls of breadcrumbs, a quarter of a pound of sugar, eight ounces of mixed currants and raisins and six beaten eggs. Add the finely chopped rind and the juice from two lemons and stir in two glasses of brandy or another alcoholic drink of choice. Tie a cloth over the top of the basin and boil it and the contents for several hours. The snack should be served with copious quantities of custard, thick slices of bread and butter and a pint of beer. This recipe serves one when prepared for Thumper Robinson but may serve more ordinary diners.

6. Granny Kennett's Spotted Dick

Political correctness means that in some recipe books and some eating establishments, this dish is now known as 'Spotted Richard'. However, the Kennett family in general, and Granny Kennett in particular, will have nothing to do with this nonsense. A spotted dick pudding is a spotted dick pudding is a spotted dick pudding and, for the Kennetts, and the rest of us in Bilbury, that will never change.

The basic ingredients for this version of spotted dick are one pound of plain flour, half a pound of well-shredded suet, a third of a pound of caster sugar, a tablespoonful of baking powder, three quarters of a pound of currants, the shaved peel of three lemons, four or five cloves and some milk. The suet, sugar, flour, baking powder, currants and lemon should be placed in a bowl and mixed very well. Milk should be added in sufficient quantity to turn the mixture into a soft and squidgy dough. The dough is then decanted into an ordinary pudding basin which has been greased with butter. A piece of muslin or greaseproof paper should then be placed over the top of the basin and tied in position with parcel string (not baler twine). A piece of cloth should then be tied on top of the muslin or greaseproof paper. Again, the cloth should be tied with parcel string. The pudding basin should be placed in a large saucepan which is then two thirds filled with water, brought to the boil and simmered for quite a while. Granny Kennett always says that the simmering should last for at least an hour and a half, though some in the family claim that one hour should be enough. Water which is lost from the pan should be replaced as necessary. The cloths and string should then be removed and discarded. The pudding should be served on large plates (not in bowls) with huge quantities of freshly made custard poured on top so that it almost reaches the edge of the plate. To avoid spillage, the custard should be poured onto the spotted dick pudding when the plates have been placed on the table. These quantities should be sufficient to provide enough pudding for three or four people. If more guests are expected, then several puddings should be prepared. A spotted dick pudding should always be served with custard and never with cream or, heaven forbid, with ice cream.

Important Note from the author:

Please note that several of these puddings contain ingredients (such as alcohol) which might be unsuitable for some individuals. It should also be noted that those with weak digestive systems or modest appetites might find themselves over-faced by these dishes. These puddings are offered here in what are known in Devon as ‘Bilbury quantities’. Some people, of a healthier and more sensible disposition, may prefer to reduce the quantities used in order to make smaller puddings.

Note from the author:
‘If you have enjoyed this book I would be genuinely grateful (and forever encouraged) if you would be kind enough to leave a positive review on the Amazon product page.’ – Vernon Coleman

There is more information about the author on his Amazon author page and at www.vernoncoleman.com

The Young Country Doctor Book 10

BILBURY MIXTURE

Vernon Coleman

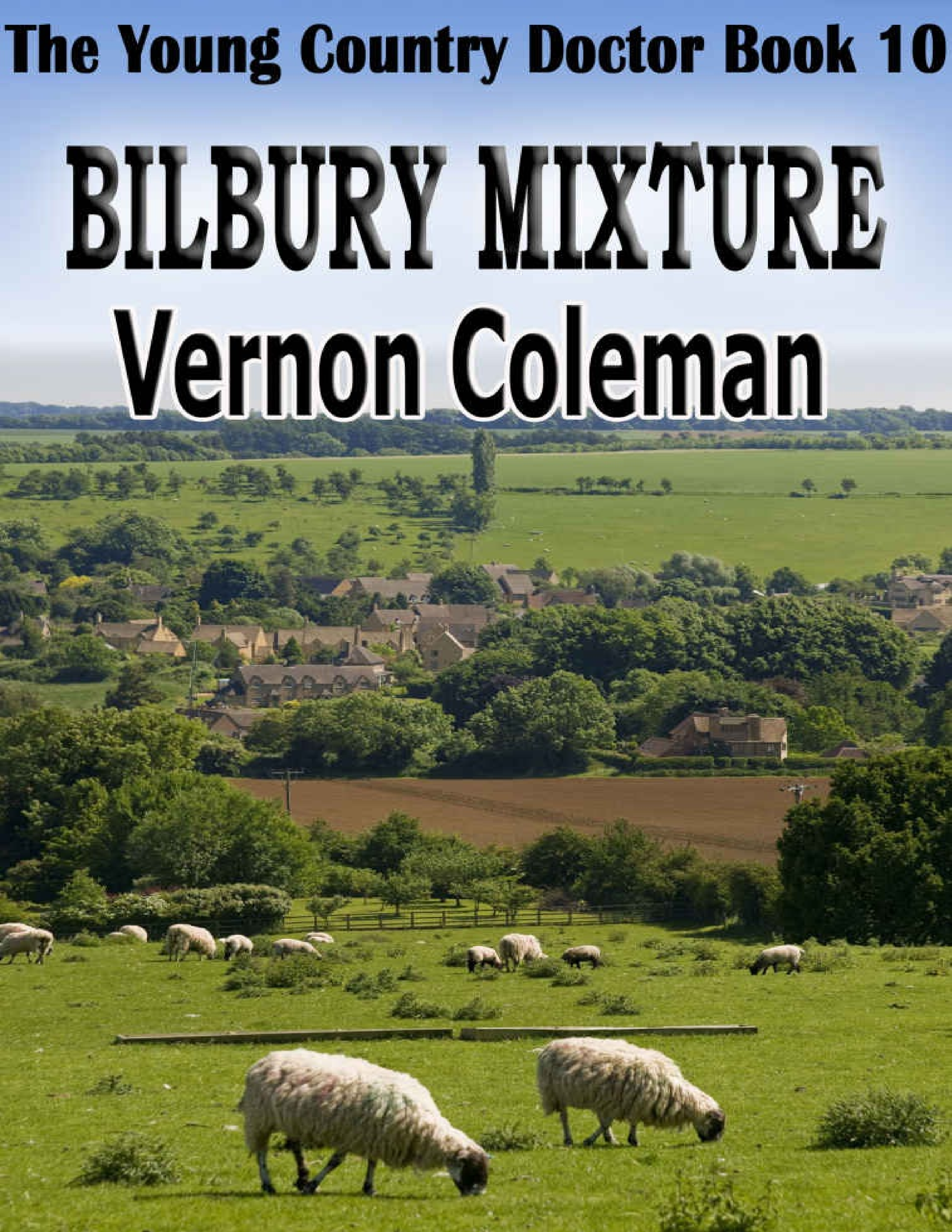

The Young Country Doctor Book 10
Bilbury Mixture

Vernon Coleman

Another collection of memories relating to the village of Bilbury, and its inhabitants.

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Note: Names and details of individuals and establishments have been altered to protect the innocent, the guilty and, in Peter Marshall's case, the not quite sure but whichever it is there will be a 5% discount on alternate Thursdays when there is a 'Q' in the month.

To Antoinette

You are the only past I remember, the only present that matters and the only future I want.

Foreword

I decided, a few months ago, to write a new book about Bilbury – simply because I still love the village and the villagers and I find it immensely enjoyable and relaxing to write about my experiences with friends such as Thumper Robinson and Patchy Fogg.

The Bilbury books are, of course, merely a peep into a continuum; a glimpse into a world that lives brightly in real life as well as in the mind and the memory.

In real life, the villagers are there all the time, doing whatever they are doing when I'm not writing about them and no one is reading about them.

And although I have changed the name to protect the village's privacy, Bilbury still exists, unchanged.

It is the village where Antoinette and I still live.

Here is yet more proof that life is stranger than fiction. I doubt if anyone could make up some of the stories in this book and I certainly wish that I were a good enough writer to do so.

The fact is that there are far more secrets around us than most people think. As a GP in a small, confined community I was privy to far more secrets than most people.

Country general practice is a drama that never ends.

I hope you enjoy reading this instalment of Bilbury history as much as I enjoyed remembering it. The stories are set at slightly different times and in varying seasons.

Vernon Coleman
Bilbury

Tickety Tonk

A cassette tape was playing on a small portable machine and the operating theatre was full of the sound of *My Fair Lady*.

Mr Berkeley Frampton, the surgeon, was clearly a fan of musicals.

I have always found surgeons to be rather unusual people.

For a start, the men and women who train to become surgeons work for six or seven years to acquire the right to call themselves ‘Doctor’ but then spend another few years training to be surgeons so that they can lose the title ‘Doctor’ and revert to calling themselves ‘Mister’, ‘Miss’, ‘Mrs’ or ‘Ms’.

This curious habit dates back more than a century to the days when medically qualified men were all members of the Royal College of Physicians. These eminent physicians confined themselves to taking pulses, using leeches and prescribing drugs.

On the other hand, the men (and in those days they were all men) who wielded sharp knives and performed operations were barber surgeons who had no real medical qualifications. A barber surgeon would have found himself in the stocks (or worse) if he’d dared to call himself ‘doctor’.

So Berkeley Frampton was Mr Frampton (unless he wanted to book a restaurant table, in which case he would swallow his pride and become Dr Frampton again).

A young student nurse, who had probably dreamt of higher things, had been put in charge of changing the tapes and we’d just finished listening to Julie Andrews working her way through the surgeon’s cassette copy of *The Sound of Music*. We were now listening to Miss Andrews and the Ensemble singing ‘Wouldn’t it be loverly’.

Which, indeed, it would have been if I had not been listening to it in an operating theatre.

The operation hadn’t yet started but I was already dripping with sweat.

Some doctors find the operating theatre a peaceful, congenial place to work but I never have. Even when I was a medical student I had known that I did not want to spend my professional life dressed in a mask and gown.

(A pal of mine always claimed that surgeons didn’t really wear masks to prevent the spread of infection but so that the patient wouldn’t know who had operated on them and wouldn’t be able to sue them afterwards.)

To be perfectly honest, I do not find hospitals to be congenial places.

I worked in hospitals for several years but never really felt comfortable in them.

It’s the smell, I think: that strange mixture of antiseptic, air freshener, polish, talcum powder, fear, sorrow and anaesthetic gases.

And the fact that, although the damned places always look clean enough, I know (because a pathologist told me) that the average hospital ward contains more deadly bugs per square inch than the average toilet bowl.

My day had not started well.

In the mail, before I left Bilbury Grange, I had received a set of laboratory results from the hospital. One of the reports gave me the startling and awful news that a patient of mine, Hamilton Murray, had lung cancer.

I had sent Hamilton to the hospital for an X-ray because he had a persistent cough and a pain in his chest. My first thought was that the cough was partly a result of a bout of flu and partly a result of the fact that he smoked at least 40 unfiltered cigarettes a day. I wanted an X-ray just to make sure that there was nothing more sinister going on. He’d been unwilling to go to the hospital and it had taken me nearly a month to persuade him to have the X-ray. In the end, he’d only agreed to go as a favour to me.

But the X-ray report made it clear that my worst fears were justified. Hamilton Murray had lung cancer.

On the way to the hospital, I called in to his home to tell him the news, and to promise that I would arrange an appointment for him to see a consultant to discuss all the therapeutic possibilities.

Hamilton has never married and lives alone in a tiny, one bedroom cottage which, for absolutely no good reason and with a false grandiosity based entirely upon a delightful sense of humour, he has renamed Barrington Court.

Visitors who are expecting to find a large, listed Elizabethan manor house, surrounded by a moat and mentioned in the appropriate volume of *Pevsner’s*, are invariably startled to find that the tiny hovel they assume to be a lodge house is, in fact, Barrington Court.

Hamilton has a beard which bears a resemblance to a moth-eaten merkin and his clothes fit him a mite too soon. His wardrobe does not contain much in the way of elasticated beige and he tends to dress in colours which are what Jeeves, Bertie Wooster’s butler, would have described as ‘sudden’. He does this quite deliberately. He spends a lot of his time in woodlands and after an unfortunate accident when he was shot by a myopic marksman who thought he’d spotted a deer, he made a deliberate decision to wear brightly coloured clothes.

He gets his water from a well in his garden and his 'facilities' consist of a cesspit which is situated rather too close to the well for my liking. The cesspit is housed within a ramshackle wooden shed. The acre of land which surrounds the cottage has been completely stripped of anything that could possibly be used or sold as winter fuel. The bees whose hives decorate Hamilton's land have to travel into neighbouring woodland to collect nectar. It was Hamilton who taught me that it is important not to take all the honey from a hive. Bees need some of their honey to preserve and protect their own immune systems, and they will die if all their honey is taken.

Born in Edinburgh, but of English parentage, he went to Eton and trained as an architect, intending to follow in his father's footsteps.

His public school background, and an intense affection for the stories of P.G.Wodehouse has given him a delightfully old-fashioned vocabulary. His conversations are spattered with phrases such as 'Odds bodkins', 'Toodle pip', Tally ho' and 'Tickety tonk'.

Most remarkably, he has an extraordinary talent which enables him to imitate bird sounds with great skill. Every February he does cuckoo impersonations and on two separate occasions, visitors to North Devon have had letters published in *The Times* newspaper claiming that they've heard the first cuckoo of spring, when in truth they'd heard Hamilton having a little harmless fun with them.

After three months working in his father's practice, Hamilton decided that he hated the profession for which he had trained so assiduously and, after receiving a very small legacy from a distant relative, he travelled south in search of an escape from modern living and those aspects of civilisation which he regarded as oppressive and uncivilised.

When he quit his job he was low, miserable, almost depressed by a life which seemed to him to be too full of disappointments and frustrations.

He and his family did not see eye to eye and, from what I had learned, I suspect that the separation was as welcome to the one side as to the other.

I am always fascinated by the way individuals make vital, life-forming decisions on a whim. On simple, relatively unimportant issues we take advice, we read, we study, we consider before making our choices. We spend hours looking at the various options before buying a washing machine or a motor car. But the important things are often decided without any great thought at all. We all reach many crossroads in our lives and often choose the road we will take without any real thought about where it might take us.

Hamilton once admitted to me that he had ended up in Bilbury as a result of a series of chance encounters.

When leaving Edinburgh, he had taken a train to Leeds because he had thought he'd seen a girl he knew buy a ticket for that train. In fact he had been mistaken; the girl merely looked slightly like someone he knew.

After two days in Leeds, he had headed south because it hadn't stopped raining and the small hotel where he'd been staying was cold, dark and dismal.

He'd taken the first train south, and the train had led him to Birmingham.

He had stayed in Birmingham for a week and then, after seeing a poster advertising holidays in Devon, had decide that if he was going to be miserable he might just as well be miserable somewhere beautiful.

So he had taken a bus to Exeter.

From Exeter he'd taken the small train north to Barnstaple for no better reason than he wanted to spend another hour or so in the company of a woman he'd met in the railway buffet.

The additional hour had demolished any prospect of romance and after a week in Barnstaple, Hamilton had headed east, meaning to visit the twin towns of Lynton and Lynmouth.

But he never reached Lynton or Lynmouth.

He'd got off the bus when he had seen a signpost for Bilbury, confusing the name with Bibury, a famously picturesque village just north of Cirencester in Gloucestershire. Bibury stands on the river Coln, a tributary of the Thames, and Hamilton had seen many photographs of the famous Cotswold stone cottages on Arlington Row.

And it was in Bilbury that his journey had ended.

Hamilton had fallen in love, not with a girl or a woman, but with a village and a lifestyle.

He had, he once told me, decided that he would stay in Bilbury because he had had his best night's sleep for weeks at the Duck and Puddle. It wasn't the bed, he said, but the feeling of peace he felt. He told me that there is an old Irish saying that the beginning of a ship is a board, the beginning of a kiln is a stone and the beginning of health is sleep.

I like Hamilton very much.

He had a gently mischievous sense of humour.

A few years ago, he spent a summer working at a holiday camp in Ilfracombe and when one large family of holidaymakers turned out to be unpleasant, aggressive and consistently rude, both to the staff and to other holidaymakers, he dealt with them by throwing cold chips onto the roof of their caravan late at night.

He obtained the cold chips from the rubbish bins outside the mobile fish and chip van which parked in the campsite every evening.

Throwing bits of food onto a caravan roof is a favourite trick among those who work on caravan sites. It is the one good reason for never annoying the locals when you're spending your nights in a vehicle with a thin metal roof.

The bemused holidaymakers realised that the noise that woke them at 6 a.m. every morning was the sound of seagulls walking, pecking and squabbling on the thin metal roof of their holiday home, but they never realised that the seagulls were on their roof because of the chips. And they certainly never knew that Hamilton had been the cause of their early morning wake up calls.

I'd been lucky to catch Hamilton at home.

Actually, 'lucky' wasn't the right word. As things turned out, it certainly wasn't lucky at all.

Like many people in Bilbury, Hamilton doesn't have one job (in the way that people in towns and cities usually have one job) but earns his living in a variety of different ways.

In the autumn and the winter, he wanders around the countryside on a bicycle with a small trailer attached to it. He doesn't own a vehicle which has a motor, though he drove a tank during the Second World War and his driving licence, which he once showed me, entitles him to drive one still, if he can ever find one available.

Whenever he sees a fallen tree or branch, Hamilton stops his bicycle, takes an old bow saw out of his trailer and cuts up the tree or branch into logs suitably sized to fit an ordinary hearth or log burner. I've known him take a week to cut up and cart away a small tree.

He has a number of regular customers to whom he delivers logs and kindling. The fallen trees and branches are sometimes on bits of wasteland and sometimes on land that belongs to someone who isn't bothering to do anything with it. No one ever objects to Hamilton chopping up the dead wood; on the contrary he is regarded as a useful scavenger, cleaning up and tidying the countryside and providing the villagers with an essential supply of fuel.

He once told me that willow trees (famous as the original source of aspirin and as the raw material from which cricket bats can be made) are his favourite source of kindling for they constantly shed small branches which can easily be snapped by hand into stove and hearth sized lengths.

In the summer, Hamilton sells newspapers, magazines and snacks to holidaymakers on the beach at Combe Martin.

He fills his trailer with suitable reading matter, nibbles and drinks at Peter Marshall's shop and rides his bicycle down to the beach. There he sells what he can before riding back to Peter's shop and unloading the unsold impedimenta. Peter pays Hamilton a small commission, a very modest percentage of the takings, for his labours.

I doubt if any of Hamilton's customers guess that the oddly dressed cyclist from whom they have bought their paperback, crisps and fizzy drink has a first class from Oxford University and is an Eton educated, qualified architect.

As a result of this healthy outdoor lifestyle, I have always thought Hamilton to be one of the fittest men I know. In a village where many of the residents lead healthy outdoor lives that is some distinction.

Sadly, however, Hamilton smokes.

In order to keep down his expenditure, he rolls his own cigarettes and smokes far too many of them a day. I sometimes think that by putting high taxes on all cigarettes, including the filtered ones, the Government is actually doing more harm than good.

Quite a few of my patients who smoke, buy their tobacco in tins and make their own cigarettes. Naturally, this means that the cigarettes they smoke are often far worse for their health than the cigarettes manufactured in bulk.

'I'll do everything I can,' I promised him when I'd told him the bad news about the X-ray.

'How long have I got?' he asked. 'Tell me the truth, doctor!'

Do people really want to know when they say this?

It is a question I have fought to answer since I became a doctor. Many patients say they want the truth but they don't. They cannot and do not deal with the truth. Would any of us really like to know when we will die? Should the doctor lie a little, perhaps? Should the doctor, at the very least, leave some hope – even though he may know, in his heart, that there is none?

Or is it true, as some would say, that there is always hope? After all, miracles do happen.

When I worked in hospital, I once had a patient who insisted that he be told the truth about his condition. The consultant, after a moment's hesitation, told him. It was not good news. The man became gloomy, depressed and obsessed with death. He made no plans for his family. He did nothing to tidy up his affairs. He merely sank into a state of paralysis. And he stayed that way until he died three months later. Would he have been better off not knowing? Should the consultant have sanitised the truth, lightened the prognosis a little, given some hope?

The one thing for sure is that there are no simple answers.

Every time the question is asked the doctor must, I believe, make a fresh decision; analyse all the evidence and everything he knows about the patient, his circumstances, his state of mind, his family and friends and so on. It is for this reason that I believe that an old-fashioned GP is the best person to answer the question, and to decide whether or not the truth should be told and if so how much of it should be shared.

I remember a patient of mine, a woman, who was dying of cancer.

From the start her husband, who had guessed the truth, begged me not to tell her. He said that she would not be able to cope with the truth. He insisted that he would shoulder the burden. And so I had kept the truth from her. I had accepted his advice.

But towards the end of her life, she had held my hand and she had smiled and she had told me that she had known all along, right from the moment when the diagnosis had been made, that she was dying.

'I appreciate you not telling us,' she said. 'My husband would never have been able to cope with the truth.'

She was convinced that I had kept the truth from her to protect her husband!

After that conversation I decided that I had, perhaps, made a mistake. I should have told her and then we could have talked more. Maybe I could have offered her more help.

And after she died, I knew that I had made an error. I had been wrong.

The minute she died, before the funeral took place, her husband began to wallow in a sense of martyrdom. He had, he told everyone who would listen, shouldered the burden of his wife's diagnosis by himself because she would not have been strong enough to deal with the truth. He was submerged in waves of sympathy; for being a widower and for having borne the burden by himself; for having protected his 'weak' wife from reality.

But the truth was that they had both known.

And she had suffered alone and in silence to protect her husband.

After his wife's death he enjoyed the sympathy of their relatives, friends and neighbours for three months and then, suddenly, he announced that he was marrying his ex-wife's best friend.

I told Hamilton Murray the truth about his illness. I told him everything I knew.

I've known him for years and he has always seemed to me to be a man who likes straight talk. He is not the sort of man to tiptoe round a difficult topic or to be put off by the prospect of embarrassing a friend or a neighbour.

I told him that according to the X-ray report, the prognosis was not good but nor was it dire. 'I'll get you an appointment with a surgeon,' I told him. 'If, as the X-ray suggests, the lump in your lung hasn't spread, then it may be possible for a surgeon to operate and remove it. It's a large lump but it might be possible to remove it.'

I tried to be as upbeat as it is possible to be when telling a man who smokes that he has cancer of the lung. I promised I would do everything possible to help him.

He was not impressed by the prospect of an operation. He told me point blank that he would rather die than have an operation.

'I hate hospitals,' he said, with a shudder, taking out his tobacco pouch and starting to roll a fresh cigarette. I remembered how difficult it had been to persuade him to go to the hospital to have an X-ray.

And I kept thinking of Hamilton as I stood waiting for the operation to begin.

'She's all yours,' said Alston Churchill, the anaesthetist, who was sitting at the head of the operating table, no more than eighteen inches away from the patient's head. He seemed very young, in his late twenties, but he already had that quiet, calming confidence which is a hallmark of the professional anaesthetist. He was a keen walker and I'd seen him in the Duck and Puddle a couple of times.

'Right!' said the surgeon. He looked around. 'Do you know who this is?'

Puzzled, the anaesthetist looked up at him.

'Singing,' explained the surgeon. 'Who's singing?'

The anaesthetist thought for a moment. 'Audrey Hepburn?'

The surgeon laughed. 'You're a bloody Philistine, Churchill! This is the sound track of the stage version and Julie Andrews is playing Eliza Doolittle.' The surgeon paused and wagged a gloved finger at the anaesthetist. 'Interesting mistake though,' he said. 'Miss Hepburn took the part in the film version but apart from the first verse of 'Just You Wait, Henry Higgins' her singing was dubbed by a woman called Marni Nixon who was a very interesting and talented singer who did the singing for Deborah Kerr in *The King and I*, for Sophia Loren in *Boy on a Dolphin* and for Natalie Wood in *West Side Story*. She also did the high notes for Marilyn Monroe in *Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend*.'

All this information was greeted with murmurings as we all showed how impressed we were. The last thing anyone in an operating theatre wants to do is to upset the surgeon.

'Funnily enough,' said the surgeon, now thoroughly warmed up in his temporary role as an expert on musicals, 'Marni Nixon actually appears on screen in *The Sound of Music*. She plays one of the nuns.'

'Golly', said the anaesthetist, trying to sound interested.

'Are you all set?' asked the surgeon, reverting to his day job. 'Everyone comfortable?'

No one spoke.

'Are we all ready to go?' asked the surgeon, slightly irritated by the lack of response to his previous question.

To be honest I couldn't tell when his questions required an answer or were simply rhetorical. He had that odd habit of allowing his voice to rise at the end of every sentence, turning everything he said into a question. So when there was a question which required an answer I didn't reply straight away. He probably just thought I was a little slow-witted. I was, however, slightly reassured by the fact that no one else had replied to him.

The theatre sister standing beside me then muttered something which I took to be an assent.

She had been built by the same firm which built the concrete block houses which were erected during the Second World War, and which still decorate the English coastline. She had a bust which looked large enough and firm enough to support a couple of anti-aircraft guns.

She didn't seem quite as full of jollity as the surgeon. In fact, she looked as if she'd eaten something which had disagreed with her and was now winning the argument.

Another nurse stood at the head of the operating table, with a tray full of surgical implements at her side. The instruments, neatly laid out and all fresh from the autoclave, were shiny and all carefully positioned so that the nurse could pick out whatever the surgeon requested.

A third nurse, who was not scrubbed, was standing a yard or two away ready to turn lights on or off, fiddle with the air conditioning system or fetch bits and pieces which might turn out to be necessary. It was also her job to collect discarded equipment and swabs and to keep a count of them as they were used.

The nurse who was in charge of operating the cassette player was clearly very junior and was, I assumed, simply there to observe, to learn and to try not to faint.

The patient, Miss Barley, was lying on her tummy and most of her back was covered with sterile green towels. The only part of her that was visible was her bottom which looked very pink and which was indubitably of the economy sized family pack variety.

I had only been in the operating theatre for a few minutes but I had already developed an itch at the back of my neck and, because the white rubber surgical boots I had borrowed were two sizes too small, my feet were complaining bitterly about their incarceration.

I was in the operating theatre because Miss Barley, one my patients, needed surgery, and had refused to go to the hospital unless I promised to be present during the operation.

'I trust you doctor,' said Miss Barley. 'I'd feel safe if I knew you were performing the operation.'

I had explained that I could not possibly perform the operation she required.

'I'm a GP,' I told her. 'The surgeon to whom I referred you is very competent. He will be the one who'll do the operation.'

'But if you're there, you'll be able to keep an eye on things won't you? You're a doctor, you'll be able to take over if you think he's doing something wrong.'

At that time it was the case that once a doctor was qualified he could, without any additional training or qualifications, take on any post or responsibilities for which he felt himself adequately prepared. There was nothing in law to stop me performing the operation myself.

I had explained to Miss Barley that although there was no legal reason why I couldn't perform her operation it would be quite inappropriate of me to do anything other than be there to hold her hand when she was anaesthetised, and to be there when she came round after the operation was over.

My original plan had been to fulfil my promise by putting on theatre scrubs and a surgical cap and mask and standing quietly in a corner but when I had asked the surgeon if he minded if I joined him in the theatre, he had insisted that I go the whole hog; scrub up, put on the rubber gloves and join him at the table as his assistant.

'My house surgeon is down with some nasty bug,' he had told me. 'If you scrub up then my registrar can cover the out-patients list.'

I had protested that it had been some time since I'd been in an operating theatre, let alone done any holding, pulling and snipping (the three basic tasks of the assistant surgeon are holding bits of the patient that are in danger of getting in the way, pulling organs and tissues which are interfering with the field of play and snipping bits of tissue or sutures as and when required) but the surgeon had dismissed my reticence as irrelevant.

'You can't do worse than my bloody house surgeon. He's a handsome looking devil but between the aquiline nose and the receding chin at the front and the cascade of golden curls at the back there is a complete vacuum. Heaven knows how he got through medical school. I only took him on as a favour to his father. I can't even trust him with a pair of scissors, let alone a scalpel.'

'They say Napoleon liked to surround himself with lucky men,' continued the surgeon. 'I seem to get lumbered with unlucky bastards as house surgeons. The last three I've had have all been clumsy, stupid and unlucky. If they'd won the pools they'd have lost the coupon. Just keep your elbows out of my way and remember to laugh at my jokes,' he said merrily. 'I like a bit of banter in the operating theatre. It helps to keep me awake.'

This was not, I confess, the best of news.

Some surgeons like to concentrate on the work in hand. They approach their work with all the earnest caution of bomb disposal experts.

But others regard the second word of the phrase 'operating theatre' as an invitation to display their talent as stand-up comedians with the certain and doubtless comforting knowledge that there is one huge difference between the professional stand-up comedian.

The professional comedian is a fellow who must take his life in his mouth every time he steps out on stage. He is constantly desperate for the first laugh.

The surgeon, on the other hand, knows damned well that he is in charge and can expect his audience to laugh and titter at all the appropriate moments.

The junior doctor who is hoping for a good reference when he applies for his next job will know that it is his job to lead the rest in providing suitably appreciative noises when the consultant cracks what he think is a joke, or allows a witty remark to escape.

'What do you think, shall we give her a nice tattoo?' asked the surgeon. 'Something tasteful, of course. A little extra? A memento for our lucky patient.'

The theatre sister ignored him. The junior nurses giggled. I couldn't believe what I'd heard. Was he serious?

'What's our patient's name?' the surgeon asked the theatre sister.

'Miss Marigold Barley,' replied the theatre sister, rather coldly. 'She's 57-years-old and has no listed allergies.'

The sister didn't know but Miss Barley is, not unnaturally, known in the village as 'Pearl'. I don't think I've ever heard anyone call her Marigold.

Miss Andrews had now been replaced by Stanley Holloway, who was playing Alfred P.Doolittle, and he and an impromptu choir of his fellow dustmen were all heartily singing 'With a Little Bit of Luck'.

The surgeon looked over his mask at me. 'Is Miss Barley married? Engaged? Suitor? String of ardent boyfriends?'

'None of those,' I replied. 'She's a rather prim and very proper maiden lady who does a lot of good works in the village and for the local church.'

'So the only organ she's familiar with is the one in the church, eh?'

'Probably,' I agreed.

'Then no one will ever know if we give her a tattoo, will they?' said the surgeon. 'And unless she's in the habit of examining her very fine rear in a mirror she'll certainly never know. What do you think, doctor? You're her GP. You know her well. Should we decorate her with a nice tattoo of a sailing ship, disappearing over the horizon of the left buttock? Or a fox, perhaps, going to earth? Or do you think a nice, single red rose would be more appropriate?'

He paused, as though in thought.

'No, the fox would be best; a handsome Mr Reynard disappearing to safety, with a large bushy tail waving behind him.'

I looked at the surgeon.

I still wasn't entirely sure just how serious he was being.

The suggestion was, to say the least, outrageous, unprofessional and illegal and I was not prepared to allow him to tattoo one of my patients. Even though they might never see the tattoo, I would know it was there and that I had been there when the evil deed had been done.

Could he really be serious?

Although Mr Frampton had a reputation as an excellent and skilful surgeon, he also had a reputation for being a trifle unconventional in his approach to life but I did not know him well enough to know whether or not he was joking.

Although still only in his thirties, he had been married three times and after being caught by the local police for driving while under the influence of alcohol he had managed to keep hold of his driving licence only by hiring an expensive, skilled QC.

The barrister had flattered the local magistrates by his very presence and had argued that if the surgeon lost his licence, he would be unable to attend to his patients in emergency situations.

'The inevitable delay engendered by waiting for a public taxi to arrive could well prove fatal to some unfortunate patient,' the QC had argued. 'My clients skilful hands are required on demand, not five or ten minutes hence.'

The magistrates, putty in the barrister's very capable hands, had charged the surgeon £10 and politely asked him not to do it again.

'Where's the tattoo kit, sister?' asked the surgeon. 'My needles and coloured inks!'

'I don't know,' replied the sister, rather huffily. 'Maybe they're in your rooms at the private hospital.'

She was clearly neither amused nor impressed by Mr Frampton's irreverent banter.

The surgeon, like most of his colleagues, kept a suite of rooms at a local private hospital where he performed the same sort of operations as he performed at the NHS hospital. The only real difference was that at the private hospital the surgeon was allowed to charge very sizeable fees.

The surgeon sighed. ‘Ah well, another good idea bites the dust. Better get on with what we’re here for. What does Miss Barley want from us today? A Caesarian section to deliver a surprise bouncing boy? A breast enhancement operation to boost her chances at the church social? Twenty minutes of liposuction to turn her thighs sylphlike and girlish?’

‘She’s got internal haemorrhoids,’ said the theatre sister, in a very matter of fact voice. ‘I think she would like you to get rid of them for her.’

She had been busily painting Miss Barley’s buttocks with an antiseptic solution which had temporarily stained them reddish brown. She had painted with great care and delicacy, gently moving the draped green towels so that every square inch of exposed skin was sterilised.

‘Ah, piles!’ cried the surgeon merrily. ‘Let’s take a look at the field of play!’

He reached down, parted the cheeks of Miss Barley’s buttocks and peered at the spot the tattooed fox would have been aiming for had the surgeon continued with his plan.

‘How’s your yacht, Alston?’ he suddenly demanded.

‘It’s not exactly a yacht,’ said the anaesthetist.

‘He’s got a bloody yacht, you know!’ said the surgeon, addressing me. ‘They earn a fortune these bloody gas men. Wish I could afford a yacht.’

The surgeon stuck a gloved finger into Miss Barley’s anal sphincter and moved it around, stretching the sphincter muscle before adding a second finger.

It had been a while since I’d been in an operating theatre, it all seemed to be a strange mixture of the impersonal and the humiliating. Some surgeons do tend to see their patients as little more than collections of tissue and organs. Poor Miss Barley; she would have died of shame if she hadn’t been unconscious.

‘It’s 17 foot long for heaven’s sake,’ said the anaesthetist. ‘It’s really no more than a rather grand dinghy. It’s got a tiny cabin and an outboard motor. If I lie down in the cabin my feet stick out through the door.’

‘I think he uses it for smuggling,’ said the surgeon, speaking to me and ignoring the anaesthetist. ‘I’ll bet he sails in at the dead of night in order to avoid the customs people. He doubtless has the thing packed to the gunwales with Italian wine, Belgian chocolates and French cigarettes. I bet he makes another fortune out of it all.’

He bent closer to Miss Barley’s bottom and poked at it with a gloved finger. ‘There are just two rather nasty little chaps here. I think we’ll get rid of them both with the rubber band machine. Have you seen the rubber band machine in action? Did they have them when you were a student? Give me the anal speculum and the rubber band machine please, sister.’

The surgeon had segued so fast from talking about the anaesthetist’s boat to discussing Miss Barley’s piles and requesting the equipment to deal with them that I was in danger of losing the plot.

‘Yes, oh yes, they had the rubber band ligator,’ I said.

I remembered one of the consultant surgeons at the teaching hospital where I trained showing us the ligator.

It was a brand new invention at the time and he was unnaturally proud of it.

It consisted of a specially designed pair of forceps which enabled the surgeon to fire a rubber band around the base of the haemorrhoid. Once in position the rubber band cut off the blood supply to the haemorrhoid, causing it to shrivel up and drop off in a day or two. Prior to the invention of the rubber band ligation technique, the annihilation of haemorrhoids was a rather crude business which, to put it bluntly, simply involved hacking them out with a sharp knife and then sewing up what was left over.

‘We could have done this in out-patients,’ said the surgeon. ‘Didn’t need a full anaesthetic and all this folderol.’

‘Miss Barley is very nervous,’ I reminded him. ‘And she lives alone. She really wouldn’t have been a suitable patient for out-patient surgery. And you did say to her that if she came into the hospital you’d be able to deal with everything in one go.’

‘Hmm,’ said the surgeon, taking the anal speculum, (a piece of equipment which is also known as an anoscope and which is, in reality, little more than a very expensive short metal tube) and the rubber band machine off the theatre sister.

He put them both down on the sterile green cloths covering the patient’s lower back.

‘It’s crowded with two people in the cabin,’ said the anaesthetist, wearily and defensively. ‘My wife and I never take it out of the Taw estuary. We use it for bird watching.’

He didn’t seem to realise that the surgeon had been teasing him.

‘Birds, eh?’ said the surgeon, with a guffaw. ‘I wager it’s bloody cold on that estuary of yours. I bet all you see are blue tits, eh, what do you think sister?’

'I wouldn't know Mr Frampton,' said the sister, rather coldly.

She was clearly accustomed to the surgeon's manner and was not going to allow herself to be drawn into his rather bizarre world of imagination, double entendre and insult.

'My wife paints them and I take photographs,' explained the anaesthetist wearily.

'You play golf?' the surgeon demanded, suddenly switching targets and subjects. He was still dealing with Miss Barley's piles.

It took me a moment to realise that he was talking to me.

'I tried once,' I said.

'I thought all GPs played golf. Couple of chaps I know play all the time. They have trainees or assistants or whatever you call them and leave them to do all the work while they bugger off and play golf.'

'I don't have an assistant,' I pointed out. 'And I don't have any partners.'

'So no golf, eh?'

'A chap I know lent me some clubs and I played a round when I was at medical school,' I told him. 'But I think they'd put all the greens in the wrong places. I found them far too small. Added to which the balls they sold me were fitted with some sort of homing device which took them straight into the long grass every time I hit them. I decided golf wasn't for me. I seem to remember the chap I was playing with and I both ran out of balls and we just walked back to the clubhouse after the 12th hole.'

The surgeon made a snorting noise.

I could not tell whether he approved or disapproved of my failure as a golfer.

Mr Holloway and his chums finished celebrating as the surgeon picked up the anal speculum.

As Rex Harrison started to sing 'I'm an Ordinary Man' the surgeon held the speculum up so that the theatre sister could add a blob of grease, so that it would enter the target area more readily.

She did this without a word being exchanged.

I remembered noticing that a good theatre sister who has worked with a surgeon for a few years will know instinctively what he wants without anything being said.

In films about hospitals, the operating theatre banter is all of the 'Scalpel, nurse', 'Mop my brow nurse', 'Forceps, nurse' variety, but in real life the conversation is more likely to include phrases such as 'Did you see that bizarre television programme about pearl fishermen?' or 'Do you think England should play Peter Shilton in goal on Saturday?'.

The surgeon placed the speculum in position and the theatre sister, unbidden, ordered the nurse who had not scrubbed and who was not wearing rubber surgical gloves, to direct a theatre light in such a way that Mr Frampton could see what he was doing and what needed to be done. This wasn't brain surgery but any sort of surgery can be dangerous. There is no such thing as 'minor surgery'.

The surgeon, who had joined in with Mr Rex Harrison and clearly knew all the words to this particular song, then picked up the rubber band ligator and fired a rubber band around one of the internal haemorrhoids. When that was done he did the second haemorrhoid. The whole procedure was over in considerably less time than it takes a kettle to boil.

'There we are,' said the surgeon. 'All done and dusted.'

He pulled the anal speculum from Miss Barley and handed it to the sister who handed it to the nurse who was looking after the discarded instruments.

He looked at me. 'Are you sure she wouldn't like a tasteful tattoo?'

He traced an area on Miss Barley's left buttock cheek. 'There's room here for something quite wonderful: a bucolic country scene, complete with a few sheep, a wind shaped tree and a raggedy shepherd. Or I could manage a three masted sailing schooner disappearing off across calm seas and heading towards a distant horizon.'

'I don't think she'd be properly appreciative,' I told him, rather nervously.

'Neither of those?'

'Neither.'

'No dragons, skulls, roses or memorials to 'Mother'?'

'No, I really don't think so.'

'Ah well,' sighed the surgeon.

I didn't think he was being serious but it was difficult to tell.

Mr Harrison finished talking his way through his song and after a momentary pause, Miss Andrews reappeared with a spirited rendition of 'Just You Wait'.

'You were wonderful,' said the surgeon, looking at me. 'I couldn't have managed without you.'

The theatre sister pulled the towels from the patient and handed them one by one to the nurse who was keeping score of all the bits and pieces of equipment which had been used during the operation. For a theatre sister there is nothing worse than getting to the end of an operation and discovering that a clamp or a sterile towel is missing. I've known a surgical team to spend the best part of an hour scouring an operating theatre for a missing swab and, in the end, having to open up the patient to search for the missing item.

The anaesthetist started to bring the patient back into the land of the conscious.

I hadn't done a single thing.

I hadn't held anything, pulled anything or snipped anything.

To be honest I felt a bit disappointed. I felt like a substitute who sits on the bench throughout a match and then doesn't quite know how much he should celebrate when his side is victorious.

'What's up next, sister?' asked the surgeon, pulling off his gloves.

'You've got Mr Wilkins, who needs his appendix removing and then you have Mrs Fanshaw for a cholecystectomy,' replied the theatre sister who appeared to have memorised the entire surgical list.

The surgeon turned to me. 'You know how to do an appendectomy, don't you?'

'I suppose so,' I said, hesitantly. 'I did a couple when I was a house surgeon.'

'Splendid,' said the surgeon, 'in that case you can do the appendix for me.' He tossed his gloves towards a waste bin, missing by several feet, and turned away. 'And I'll go and have a nice cup of tea and a bun. I didn't have time for breakfast and I'm starving.'

I stared after him, hoping that this, like the tattoo, was another of his jokes.

'He was joking wasn't he?' I said to the anaesthetist, who was supervising the removal of the patient from the operating table onto a trolley.

My mind started to whirl as I tried to remember precisely what I had to do.

Removing an appendix is one of the easiest operations there is, but things can and do go wrong. The appendix is very small, no bigger than a little finger, and it can sometimes be difficult to find.

'No, I don't think so,' replied the anaesthetist. 'I think he's gone for something to eat. He said he was going for a bun and a cup of tea. He never jokes about food.'

Rex Harrison, Julie Andrews and the actor who played Henry Higgins's chum started singing 'The Rain in Spain'.

'You'd better go and get re-scrubbed,' said the theatre sister, who had picked the surgeon's gloves off the floor and dropped them into the waste bucket. She then removed her own gloves and added them before reaching behind her and unfastening the ties on her gown.

I pulled off my gloves, walked across to the bin and dropped them in. 'Does he ever actually tattoo anyone?' I asked her.

'Good heavens no,' said the theatre sister. 'It's just one of his little jokes. He always does the tattoo thing whenever there's anyone new in theatre.'

The nurse who hadn't scrubbed up wheeled away the trolley containing all the used instruments and green drapes and as soon as she had left the operating theatre, another nurse wheeled in a replacement trolley upon which a fresh set of instruments had been laid out. The instruments were all covered with a sterile cloth but I could see them lying there, waiting for me.

I could also see the next patient, the one with the unwanted appendix, lying on a trolley in the small ante room to the operating theatre. I could hear the anaesthetist asking him to count down from one hundred.

Julie Andrews was now singing 'I Could Have Danced All Night' to Professor Higgins's housekeeper who was sensibly urging her to go bed.

The patient managed to count down to 96 before his voice tailed off. In my experience no one ever gets down to 90.

I had been nervous before. I was now utterly terrified. I could suddenly remember all the things that can go wrong with any operation. I tried to remember what vital blood vessels are located in the lower right quadrant of the abdomen where the appendix usually resides.

A jolly porter arrived pushing a trolley upon which lay the anaesthetised young man with the faulty appendix.

The anaesthetist, the same one who had just left the theatre, followed the trolley. He was wheeling a drip stand.

'Here's your new patient!' said the anaesthetist, brightly announcing the patient's arrival in the same jolly, optimistic sort of way that a restaurant waiter might announce the arrival of a special dish: a soufflé or a Christmas pudding covered in flaming brandy. 'Hadn't you better get scrubbed?'

Julie Andrews, presumably exhausted by now, had finished dancing all night and the show company were well into the Ascot Gavotte.

I hurried out of the theatre to get scrubbed.

And there I found the surgeon waiting for me.

'You still here?' he said, looking surprised.

'I thought you wanted me to…,' I stuttered.

He laughed. The theatre sister, who was standing nearby did not exactly laugh. But she smiled.

'You don't?' I said.

'Have you looked at the date today?'

'It's April…' I said, and then the penny dropped.

'…the first,' said the surgeon.

The sense of relief was extraordinary.

I felt as though I had been standing on the steps to the gallows and had received a last minute pardon from the Home Secretary.

'Of course if you'd like to remove an appendix…' he said.

'No, no, no!' I said quickly. 'That's fine. Thank you for asking but I think my operating days are over.'

I felt too strong a sense of relief to feel any sort of a fool.

We all have our strengths and our weaknesses.

I could cope well enough if faced with a badly injured patient in a field, in the rain, in the dark and with help more than an hour away.

But put me in a sterile, neat hospital operating theatre and ask me to perform a simple, routine operation and I start to fall apart.

Strange isn't it?

My only comfort was the vague and possibly simply self-serving thought that maybe even the skilled hospital surgeon might occasionally find the life of a lone GP to be a challenge too far.

'Come and say hello to your patient,' said the surgeon.

I followed him out into a corridor.

All British hospitals have wide corridors.

When they were built, the idea was that the corridors had to be wide enough for two trolleys to pass without colliding. These days, there is such a shortage of space that corridors are used for storing patients. And the corridors approaching an operating theatre are invariably clogged with patients who have been parked. Some are waiting to go into the operating theatre and some have just left.

Miss Barley was awake lying on a trolley.

'How are you feeling?' I asked her.

'Woozy,' she replied, sounding woozy. 'When am I going to the theatre to have this problem dealt with?'

She still didn't have her teeth in, and that and the anaesthetic resulted in her sounding quite unlike her normal self.

'It's been done!' I told her.

'Your doctor did a terrific job,' said the surgeon.

'I didn't actually…' I tried to interrupt.

'Marvellous work,' said the surgeon. 'I just stood there and watched. But he didn't need me at all. I could have stayed at home and had a leisurely breakfast.'

Miss Barley looked delighted.

I felt embarrassed.

The surgeon winked and headed back to theatre to remove an appendix.

In the distance, I could hear the sound of Freddy Eynsford-Hill, who has followed Eliza home, lustily singing 'On the Street Where You Live'.

I said goodbye to Miss Barley, told her I would pop in to see her the following day and headed for the exit door on my way back home and back to being a general practitioner.

Just as I was about to climb into the Rolls Royce, a woman in a white coat came running out towards me waving a piece of paper. I didn't recognise her but she wore a white coat with one of those little blue badges that people wear when they work in the radiology department, so that their exposure to X-rays can be monitored. Since I knew the two radiologists at the hospital she was obviously one of the radiographers.

'We posted you an X-ray report about Mr Hamilton Murray,' she said, rather breathlessly.

'I got it this morning,' I said. 'It was very sad news.'

'You haven't said anything to the patient, have you?'

'I called in on my way here and told him,' I said. 'I want to get on with fixing up a treatment programme as soon as possible.'

'Oh no, that's awful,' she said. She looked as if she were about to burst into tears. 'I'm afraid there's been a mistake. A terrible mistake.'

She told me that the report I had received had been written by one of the radiologists at the end of a long, tiring day and that he had mistaken an old tuberculosis scar for a new, cancerous lesion.

'Dr Clutterbuck always asks Dr Lloyd to take a look at the X-rays on which he has reported – just to check that there haven't been any mistakes. The two doctors check each other's X-rays to minimise the risk of error.' Dr Clutterbuck and Dr Lloyd were the hospital's two consultant radiologists.

'Mr Murray hasn't got cancer?' I said, delighted but wishing I had waited before breaking the news to him.

She shook her head. 'Dr Clutterbuck and Dr Lloyd are quite sure about it,' she said. She handed me a revised X-ray report. I looked at it. They were both certain that the lesion seen on the X-ray was an old tuberculosis scar and of no consequence.

I thanked her, put the report into my pocket and started the car, determined to get back to Bilbury as quickly as I could to give Hamilton the good news.

And then I got out of the car and rushed back into the hospital and went to the first telephone I could find.

It seemed to me that this was not news that could or should wait a second. Not for the first time in my life I found myself wondering if the telephone people would ever succeed in inventing a mobile telephone which could be used anywhere.

First, I had to telephone Bilbury Grange and obtain the correct phone number for Johnny Douglas, who has the cottage nearest to Hamilton. (Hamilton Murray does not, of course, have a telephone of his own.)

I rang Johnny's number.

There was no reply.

I let the phone ring for over a minute.

But no one answered.

I put the phone down, checked the number Miss Johnson had given me and dialled again, hoping that I had perhaps misdialled.

Again there was no reply.

I felt cold inside.

I don't know why but I had an awful foreboding.

I remembered a patient of Dr Brownlow's who had been given a diagnosis of cancer. He had been a veterinary surgeon and he had gone home and killed himself with a humane killer. He'd put the awful device to his temple and shot himself. His wife had found him slumped on the desk in his study.

I rushed out of the hospital, climbed back into the Rolls and headed back to Bilbury as fast as I dared go.

Why, I asked myself every few seconds, had I stopped to tell Hamilton about the X-ray report on my way to the hospital that morning?

It could have waited.

I thought about it and thought I knew the answer.

If it had been me I would have wanted to know as soon as possible so that I would have time to plan for the future. There are always so many things to think about and to do at such a time. Again and again I remembered Hamilton making me promise to tell him the truth the minute I knew it.

'No prevaricating,' he said. 'No clever, fancy language that tiptoes around the truth.'

I found a little comfort only in something which my predecessor Dr Brownlow had once told me to ask myself.

'When something goes wrong,' he said, 'you must ask yourself this question: 'Do I believe that I did the right thing?' It doesn't matter what happened, or even what other people think. What matters is your own answer to that question.'

As usual, I found the words of the late and much missed Dr Brownlow to be comforting.

When it was built, half a century earlier, the Rolls Royce 20/25 I had inherited from Dr Brownlow had not been designed to be hurled around narrow country lanes. Age had not made it any more suited to fast driving along the curling lanes of Devon with their high banks and blind corners. It was unseasonably cold too and there was still some frost on the road on shaded corners.

But the Gods were with me, and I got back to Bilbury without colliding with any oncoming traffic or sliding into a ditch or hedge.

I drove straight to Hamilton's tiny cottage and slid to a halt on the wet and muddy grass patch outside it.

The cottage, which is very small, was quite empty.

Like most of the people who live in Bilbury, Hamilton never locked his front door (indeed, I suspect that if you'd asked him to find the key he would have been hard pressed to do so) and so I walked in through the front door unhindered. I don't think anyone in Bilbury locks their doors. As far as Patsy and I are concerned, this is just as well since our iron front door key is 14 inches long and our back door key is slightly longer. Both weigh enough to make excellent paper weights – which is what we do with them.

There was no sign of my patient or his bicycle, though his small and ancient trailer, the one which he usually tows behind his bicycle, was still standing by the front door, half full of kindling.

I went through the rooms slowly, for a second time.

I don't know why I had expected a second search to be more productive but there was still no sign of him.

I even found myself looking on the kitchen table and on the sideboard in the small living room. I didn't like to admit it to myself but I was looking to see if he had written a note.

Hamilton is a man who lives a simple and structured life. If he is not at home then he will either be out collecting wood, delivering wood, selling stuff on the beach at Combe Martin or doing his shopping at Peter Marshall's shop. That's it. He doesn't frequent the Duck and Puddle, he doesn't go to church, he doesn't go visiting and as far as I know he never leaves North Devon. And whether he is in or out he always has his trailer fixed on to the back of his bicycle. I had never before seen the two separated. The weather was too cold for him to be selling anything on the beach. He clearly wasn't out collecting or delivering wood.

I began to have a very bad feeling.

Why, oh why could he have not been out when I had called at his cottage before leaving for Barnstaple? If he had been out I wouldn't have been able to tell him the false bad news.

But I had seen him.

And I had told him that he was dying when he wasn't.

My mind was racing as I tried to think where he could have gone and what he could be planning to do.

Actually, I thought I knew what he was planning to do.

I had a powerful suspicion that he had decided to end his life.

When you work as a country GP you get to know your patients well. City doctors measure their patients in the thousands, and they often live miles away from their consulting rooms and their patients. I measure my patients in the hundreds and I live amongst them.

When I'd seen him that morning, and had told him what I thought was the result of his X-ray examination, I had told Hamilton that I would see him later that day so that we could discuss possible forms of treatment. I had been as upbeat as possible. I had implied that a diagnosis of cancer was not the death sentence it sounded. I had tried to be optimistic.

But the corollary of my knowing my patients well is that they know me well too.

Maybe I hadn't been as clever as I thought I had been. Maybe Hamilton had suspected that I had been covering up the truth. Maybe he suspected that he had only a few weeks, even days, to live. What if he feared that the end would be painful and difficult?

Again and again I cursed myself for calling at his cottage that morning. And I cursed my bad luck in finding him in. Strangely, it never occurred to me to curse the radiologist who had made the mistake. No one makes mistakes on purpose.

Eventually, after a minute or two of this nonsense, I managed to pull myself together. There was no point in wasting time berating myself.

The task was simple: I had to try to find him. I had to work out where he might have gone, hunt him down and stop him harming himself. The fact that he wasn't in his cottage, and that he had left behind his bicycle trailer, strongly suggested to me that he'd gone somewhere quiet and peaceful where he could end his life.

He would want to be away from people. He didn't much like people. He would want to be somewhere quite alone. And how would he do it? Slit his wrists? Hang himself from a tree? Throw himself off a cliff? There are a hundred ways for anyone to kill themselves. I didn't think he would take tablets because I hadn't prescribed any for him and I didn't think he would have been able to get a supply from anyone else.

But what if he'd bought some aspirin tablets from Peter Marshall's shop? Some city pharmacists limit the number of aspirin tablets their customers can buy but Peter has never taken much notice of such bureaucracy. If he knows someone, and thinks them sane and sensible, he has always sold them as many tablets as they have asked for. If you have bad arthritis in your knees or hips and you have to walk three miles to the shop you don't want to have to go there three or four times a day.

And there was another possibility.

Maybe Hamilton had just popped down to Peter's shop to buy a loaf of bread.

I jumped back into the car and drove through the village to Peter Marshall's shop. It took me no more than five or six minutes.

'Have you seen Hamilton Murray today?' I asked Peter. He was arranging parsnips on a tray.

Peter looked at me. 'Funny you should ask,' he said, 'he was in here this morning. About three hours ago.'

'What did he buy?' I demanded.

'I'm not sure I should tell you that,' said Peter, with mock indignation. 'It's a question of shopkeeper-customer confidentiality. Would you like me to tell everyone what you buy?'

'Peter!' I shouted. 'What did Hamilton buy? I need to know. It's important.'

'That's another funny thing,' said Peter, immediately abandoning his high moral position. 'He bought a bottle of whisky. I can't remember when he last bought whisky. He bought one of the blended whiskies. I've got a special offer on several blended whiskies and he bought the Haig. He just stuffed the bottle in his jacket pocket.'

I felt hollow. I knew immediately what Hamilton was planning.

The weather was cold and the forecast was for a freezing cold night.

Just a month earlier a man in a nearby village had committed suicide by going into a field, drinking a bottle of whisky, or as much of it as he could get down him, and lying down on the grass in his shirt and trousers. He had died of the cold. The story had been on the front page of the local paper. The man had been 98-years-old at the time and he had been suffering from Parkinson's disease.

And that, I felt sure, was what Hamilton was planning.

I now had to find him before it was too late.

No one in the village knew Hamilton better than Peter Marshall.

Hamilton did all his shopping at Peter's shop; he went there two or three times a week.

I didn't like doing it but I had no option. I swore him to secrecy and then told Peter my fear.

'Where would he go if he was planning to do anything silly?' I asked.

We always call it 'doing something silly' but it's a daft thing to say because to the person planning suicide, the action is anything but 'silly'.

Peter thought for a moment.

'He'd go somewhere on the cliffs between Combe Martin and Heddon's Mouth,' said Peter. 'That's always been his favourite part of the coast. And he loves the sea. Does he have his bike with him?'

'Yes, but not the trailer.'

'If he took his bike but left the trailer then he's planning to go on the footpath above the cliffs,' said Peter. 'I think he'd go down to Combe Martin and then up the hill to Hangman's Point and along the coast. He wouldn't go as far as Heddon's Mouth. Even at this time of the year and in this unseasonably cold weather there would probably be too many tourists there.'

I looked at my watch. It was just a few minutes shy of two o'clock. 'What time does it get dark?'

'Around half past seven,' replied Peter. 'I can tell you exactly…' he turned away, presumably intending to consult a calendar or newspaper.

'We've got no more than five hours,' I said. 'It'll be impossible to find him in the dark.

'I'll shut the shop and come with you,' said Peter immediately. I felt eternally grateful to him. Peter rarely shuts his shop in the middle of the day. He is too frightened that he might miss a sale. It was, for him, a great sacrifice.

'Thank you,' I said. 'I'm going to drive down into Combe Martin to start looking for him. You speak to as many people as you can find and get them to help. Try ringing people up first – Thumper, Patchy, Frank and so on. Explain that Hamilton thinks he is dying but he isn't. The hospital made a mistake. Explain everything and tell them where we think he's gone. We don't have enough people and there isn't enough time to spread the effort anywhere else. We have to hope he's gone along the coastal path.'

'He will have done,' said Peter, confidently.

Hoping that he was right, I climbed back into the car and hurtled off down the lane into Combe Martin.

Thirty minutes later I was climbing the steep hill which leads from the picturesque coastal village of Combe Martin and following the coastal path which meanders along the cliffs between Hangman Point and Blackstone Point. My heart was pounding, partly from the physical effort and partly from anxiety. I was desperate to find Hamilton before he did anything I knew I would regret to the end of my life.

We all make mistakes, hospitals are no exception, but the consequences of this simple error were too awful for me to contemplate.

The cliff path is steep and rocky but you can, if you are a fit and accomplished cyclist, and your machine is sufficiently low geared, ride up most of the hill. But you travel slowly. I kept my eyes open but I did not expect to see any sign of Hamilton yet. If he had come this way he would be further along the path. And he would have probably moved off the path to find a quiet niche where he could lie down and drink his whisky.

Overhead a hawk was circling. On the ground a solitary pair of fantail doves, probably refugees from some nearby comfortable dovecote, were walking round in circles looking rather lost. There is nothing a hawk likes better than a plump, domesticated, settled, peace loving dove.

During the warm summer months the coastal path which runs along the North Devon coast is crowded with hikers and walkers. Some are carrying tents and food and are intent on walking the whole way around the coast, either heading west down into Cornwall, past Land's End, and then along the southern coast of Cornwall and Devon or heading east towards Lynton, Lynmouth and Porlock. Others, the vast majority, are just out for the day, carrying little more than a bottle of water, a candy bar and a map.

But today the path was deserted.

Very few people walk along the coastal path on freezing cold days when the ground is already frozen and there is a real possibility of snow in the air. The weather in North Devon doesn't pay much attention to the seasons.

When the weather is cold and there is a wind coming in from the south west, as there was, the cliff top is pretty well deserted. A few hardy dog walkers venture up to Hangman Point with their animals but even if they reach the top they soon turn back and head back home or to one of the village's many public houses.

I reached the top of the hill and headed east along the path which leads to Heddon's Mouth, Woody Bay, Lee Bay and then, eventually, to Lynton and Lynmouth. Normally, it is a beautiful walk, with stunning views across the Bristol Channel to the Welsh coast. But today I didn't have time to enjoy the view. I was looking for a patient, a friend and a fellow villager. I was looking for Hamilton.

Every now and then I called his name; hoping that he would hear me and respond. A lone walker, well wrapped up against the cold, passed by and asked if I was calling for a lost dog. I shook my head and told him I was looking for a friend I had lost. He said he had walked from Woody Bay but hadn't seen anyone other than a couple of young hikers on the path.

I carried on walking and calling for Hamilton. I was desperate to find him before it went dark. At night, on the cliffs, he would, as I was convinced he had planned, freeze to death. The sky was dark, heavy with rain clouds, and it seemed as though night was falling several hours early. The deteriorating weather was making our task more difficult by the minute. I was wearing just my sports jacket and flannels and I was freezing cold.

As I walked I was shouting his name; shouting my name; shouting that everything was fine; begging Hamilton to call out and tell me where he was.

Every time I saw a likely patch of rocks, I crossed over to them to check them out.

If Hamilton had already drunk all or some of the whisky he'd bought he might already be sleeping or semi-conscious; unable to hear me or, even if he heard me, unable to respond.

Suddenly, I heard the sound of a high revving engine. I turned, looked behind me and saw a motorbike scrabbling and racing along the cliff top path. I wondered who on earth could be crazy enough to do such a thing. Motorbikes are, of course, banned from the path, not just to protect the integrity of the path itself, and the safety of other walkers, but because riding a motorbike along a narrow trail just inches away from a drop of several hundred feet down onto the rocky coves of North Devon is not a particularly safe activity.

'What idiot could that be?' I asked myself, as I hurried along, constantly searching for signs of my lost patient.

'I thought this would be quicker!' I heard someone shout, above the sound of the motorbike.

I turned.

It was Patchy Fogg, my brother-in-law and local antique dealer extraordinaire. He had turned on the motorbike's headlight and the lamp shone brightly in the early gloaming. Patchy had adapted the bike himself, putting on thick, heavily studded tyres. The mudguards are suspended on long stays.

'Peter's got us a dozen people here,' said Patchy. 'He explained what's happened.'

Patchy reached behind him and patted the pillion seat. 'Jump on, this will be quicker than walking. We can cover more ground.'

'Where are all the others?'

'They're following behind. They'll spread out and cover all the land on both sides of the path.'

I climbed onto the back of Patchy's trial motorbike. I'd forgotten he had it. He doesn't often use it these days.

'I'll steer the damned thing, you keep a look out,' said Patchy. 'But hold on tight. It's a bit bumpy along here and it won't help if you get thrown off.'

I didn't need to be told twice. I put one arm round Patchy's waist and clung to him for dear life. The sky was very black and the headlight on Patchy's motor bike was now essential.

We found Hamilton fifteen minutes later, just as it was really going dark.

I spotted the front wheel of his bicycle, half hidden behind a huge rock on the cliffs overlooking Elwill Bay, just short of Trenishoe. Hamilton had settled into a grassy nook, just above the cliff edge and since he was on the left, or seaward side of the path, it was lucky that I spotted the bicycle wheel. I had been paying most of my attention to the inland side of the path. I shouted to Patchy to stop the motorbike, and leapt off the minute the bike skidded to a halt.

Hamilton was unconscious. The bottle, which he was still clutching, was three quarters empty. I wrapped my coat around him and cursorily checked him over. Apart from the fact that he was clearly drunk and semi-comatose there didn't seem to be anything wrong with him. He mumbled something but he wasn't in a fit state to understand anything. He was cold, very cold. Alcohol dilates the blood vessels and exacerbates normal heat loss.

'Ride back along the path,' I told Patchy. 'I can't carry him and we can't put him on your bike but two of us can carry him between us. Tell anyone you see that we've found Hamilton and we need help.'

Five minutes later, Patchy came roaring back along the path with Thumper riding pillion. As Thumper jumped off, Patchy sped back along the track.

‘You and I will carry him for as far as we can,’ said Thumper. ‘Then Patchy will bring more help on his bike.’

Hamilton was too drunk to walk, too incapable to put one foot in front of the other with any hope or expectation that the result would be a move in the required direction. So Thumper and I lifted him together and carried him between us.

While I’d been waiting for help, I’d hidden Hamilton’s bicycle more effectively behind the rocks. It would be safe enough until the next morning. It was quite dark now and difficult to see where we were walking. The rain had started and, blown by the wind, it was sharp and stinging. Thumper and I stumbled along the path, cursing whenever we caught a foot on a fixed stone.

After another five minutes, Patchy appeared again. This time he had Peter Marshall riding pillion. And so we managed a sort of impromptu rota system, carrying Hamilton bit by bit, yard by yard, along the coast path. From time to time, I checked his pulse. It was fine.

When we got to Combe Martin we put Hamilton into the back of the Rolls Royce and took him to the cottage hospital in Bilbury. I didn’t want to take him all the way to Barnstaple. Besides, suicide had been illegal in England until just a few years earlier and I thought it best that we keep the knowledge of what had happened to ourselves. When something like this happens in Bilbury then we make sure that it stays in Bilbury. We are a village where we like to look after one another and we don’t like having to risk other people making judgements.

Officially, and for administrative reasons, our village hospital is known as the Brownlow County Hotel. But in reality it is an excellent cottage hospital. We undressed Hamilton and put him into bed. I stayed with him until he woke a couple of hours later. By that time Patchy had ridden back along the path, taking Thumper with him, and the two of them had retrieved Hamilton’s bicycle. Patchy knew that Hamilton would worry about it.

‘The hospital made a mistake,’ I told him. ‘Your X-ray is clear. You don’t have cancer. You’re not dying.’ I struggled hard, and failed, to stop myself shivering. I was still soaked to the skin because I hadn’t been able to go back to Bilbury Grange for fresh, dry clothes.

Hamilton stared at me for a moment and then nodded his understanding.

‘I’m so terribly sorry,’ I said. I was soaked but I was very, very happy.

‘Not your fault,’ said Hamilton. He looked at me, frowned and thought for a moment. ‘Where’s my bicycle?’

‘Back at your cottage,’ I told him. ‘Patchy Fogg and Thumper Robinson collected it and took it back home.’

‘Good,’ said Hamilton. ‘If that had gone missing I wouldn’t have forgiven you. That would have been your fault.’

I smiled at him and nodded.

‘I know,’ I said.

‘Tickety tonk,’ he said, with the beginnings of a grin. And then he closed his eyes and went back to sleep.

Hamilton was going to be absolutely fine.

Blue Peter

‘On a cold day 90% of body heat is lost through the head,’ said Peter Marshall, suddenly and without provocation or encouragement.

Peter, Thumper Robinson, Patchy Fogg and I were sitting in the snug at the Duck and Puddle.

Englishmen have enjoyed good companionship in public houses since the days of the Mermaid Tavern in London in the 17th century. Regulars there included Sir Walter Ralegh, John Donne and William Shakespeare. I’m prepared to admit that their conversation was probably slightly more sophisticated than ours, but the principle is the same. As, indeed, it has been for centuries.

After the Mermaid Tavern came the London coffee houses, as favoured by Dr Samuel Johnson. Then came the coffee houses of Vienna and Paris and, in the 20th century, meeting places such as the Round Table at the Algonquin Hotel in New York. Thus it always was and, hopefully, always ever will be.

It was lunchtime, or, to be honest, a little after lunchtime. We had been discussing what makes a gentleman. Outside, temporarily escaping from the cold, a pair of companionable wood pigeons were sitting on a branch directly above the chimney from the Duck and Puddle’s ancient boiler. The boiler is situated in one of the Duck and Puddle’s rickety out buildings and works only when the fancy takes it. The fancy had clearly taken it for it was working.

The pigeons were clearly enjoying the rising smoke and would occasionally lift a wing so as to take full advantage of the warm air. The boiler provides occasional hot water for washing and bathing and heats a few radiators upstairs so that the pub’s occasional guests don’t freeze to death. Downstairs, the public and private rooms in the pub are heated by log fires.

Predictably, Peter Marshall said that a gentleman is a fellow who always pays his bills on time and preferably in cash. Thumper mentioned the fact that Peter had frequently expressed a reluctance to pay his income tax bills on time and Peter responded, not unreasonably we all thought, by pointing out that giving money to governments of any hue is sinful and should be illegal. ‘The money they are given is invariably spent and always wasted,’ he said. ‘They use it to start wars, oppress the indigent and treat themselves to endless slap up dinners and bottles of expensive claret.’

No one could find fault in this and we all agreed that in view of all the bad things politicians do with the money we give them, it would make sense for the Government to punish tax payers and give honours and medals to those upstanding citizens who refuse to contribute to war mongering and oppression.

Bringing the subject of bill paying closer to home, I pointed out to Peter that he still owed Patsy and me a very ungentlemanly £22 for three peck of apples and a bushel of potatoes which we had supplied to his shop a couple of years back, in 1971. Peter responded, predictably I suppose, by pointing out that he had never claimed to be a gentleman and that if indeed he did owe us any money he would render payment if we resubmitted an appropriate invoice.

(Regardless of what the rest of the country does, or may do in the future, we still use old-fashioned imperial measurements in Bilbury. We live by pounds and ounces and feet and inches and pecks and bushels and, however much the bureaucrats may huff and puff, those fiddly metric things they favour on the continent of Europe will never find favour in our part of North Devon. Men in suits, carrying clipboards, are rarer than Montagu’s harrier in our part of the world.)

Thumper said that in his view, a gentleman was someone who always put an old cloth on top of the kitchen table before working on bits of his truck engine. He said that his good lady, Anne Thwaites, always said that it was the one thing which had convinced her that underneath his rough exterior lay the heart, soul and spirit of an English gentleman.

It was agreed by the company present that putting a cloth on the table before working on parts of your truck engine was a pretty gentlemanly thing to do.

And then Patchy said that he had heard that a gentleman was a fellow who if he opened the door to a bathroom and saw a lady in the tub, would back out, close the door, and say ‘Excuse me, sir, sorry to have bothered you.’

We all laughed and agreed that Patchy’s definition pretty well finished that particular discussion.

‘Talking of people coming into the bathroom,’ Patchy continued, ‘reminds me that Adrienne came into the bathroom this morning and asked if I knew I had a bald patch.’

Adrienne, his wife, is my sister-in-law and a graduate with honours from the Captain Bligh School of Diplomacy’. She is not known for her tact. In the unlikely event that she ever becomes Foreign Secretary we will, within weeks, be at war with every other country on the planet.

Thumper stood up so that he could look down on Patchy's head. 'She's right,' he said. 'But, never mind, your hair probably just lost its way.'

'What do you mean, it lost its way?' demanded Patchy.

'Well, it's growing out of your ears now,' explained Thumper.

Patchy stuck a finger in each ear in turn. 'I can't feel any hair there.'

'There is,' said Thumper.

'He's right,' said Peter. 'You need to get one of those electrical gadgets for cutting ear hair.'

'I don't suppose you've got some for sale, have you?' said Patchy.

'Oddly enough I had some come in the other day,' said Peter. 'Brilliant value. Guaranteed to get rid of ear and nose hair in seconds.' Peter always has something to sell to everyone.

Patchy did not look particularly excited by Peter's remarks about ear and nose hair. He has not, I suspect, been properly prepared for the many tricks fate plays on the maturing male.

We all sat in silence for a few moments, contemplating our ageing bodies. Baldness, deafness, deteriorating eyesight, liver spots and worse all beckoned.

Gloomily, I glanced out of the window and watched a seagull stamping on a stretch of grass in the hope of convincing a worm that it was raining and that he should emerge from his lair. As the seagull stamped, it moved slowly backwards. For a moment I wondered why it was going in reverse, and then I realised that if it went forwards it wouldn't see any of the worms which its stamping had tricked into emerging.

I didn't mention this to anyone because I found it slightly embarrassing to realise that I had come second to a seagull in a simple intelligence test.

Twenty minutes earlier we had all finished vast platefuls of Gilly's vegetable soup (so rich it is a meal in itself) and had mopped up our plates with thick slices cut from one of her home-made farmhouse loaves. Frank, who is a huge fan of his wife's cooking (and, despite having lost a good deal of weight recently, still has the waistline to prove it) always says that if you've never eaten one of Gilly's home-made farmhouse loaves then you have never tasted bread as God intended it to taste.

The soup is named 'Thumper's Bellyfiller', in recognition of my dear friend Thumper Robinson, who is renowned throughout North Devon for having a trencherman's appetite. Even Thumper admits that he cannot possibly eat more than one bowlful of the stuff.

Gilly is constantly looking for ways to enhance the appeal of the Duck and Puddle and she has taken to naming several of the dishes on the pub's menu after local citizens. There is a dish involving three slices of toast and four scrambled eggs which is named after her husband, Frank, and a four sausage version of Toad in the Hole which is named after Patchy Fogg. My own name is immortalised in the form of a version of treacle pudding of which I am unreasonably fond.

Peter then took advantage of the momentary silence to try to sell us all one of his new thermally insulated Chapeau Watch Caps. He told us he had bought a consignment from a wholesaler who had, in turn, purchased the entire stock from a Canadian manufacturer who had gone bankrupt. Peter always has something to sell. Just the other day I noticed that he was selling leftover hazelnuts, unsold after Christmas, with the promotional slogan 'Grow Your Own Kindling' stencilled on a piece of brown cardboard torn from a delivery box. When I queried this, Peter pointed out that hazel grows very quickly and that within ten years of planting there would be kindling to harvest.

'They're wind-proof and rain-proof and they absorb the sun's rays, thereby protecting the head in all weathers,' Peter said, describing his hats with great enthusiasm and drifting automatically into patter mode. 'I'm selling them at lower than retail price as a service to the village.'

If Peter specialises in anything it is in buying bankrupt stock.

He would think himself in nirvana if he could buy cheese and milk from a bankrupt farmer, bread from a bankrupt baker and apples from a bankrupt fruit grower.

The watch caps, which apparently came in a curious shade of dark purple (without the option) were, Peter told us, with the unfettered enthusiasm of a man in search of a profit, guaranteed to fit any head and to keep it warmer than any other headgear.

Hats for men are going out of fashion rapidly and I fear that by the start of the 1980's they will be remembered as nothing more than a historical oddity. They were, however, once a sign of a man's status, individuality and fashion sense. Would Napoleon have conquered Europe if he had worn a woolly hat with a bobble on the top? Would Wellington have won at Waterloo if he'd favoured one of those deerstalker hats, complete with ear flaps, favoured by costume directors dressing up an actor to play Sherlock Holmes? Would Abraham Lincoln have been Abraham Lincoln if he'd worn a blue beret?

I was, I admit, tempted by one of Peter's watch caps for the winds in North Devon can be ferocious. They come, predominantly, from the South West and they scour the cliffs and heathland with unremitting, unforgiving anger; seemingly determined to remove every last shred of vegetation or habitation from the county.

I have found, by experience, that when you live in an area heavily populated by seagulls it is wise to wear a hat whenever possible. I have a rather nice tweed fishing hat, a soft slouch hat and a couple of rather splendid pieces of headgear, both made by Bates, a hatter who has a shop in Jermyn Street in London. One of my hats, known as a Grosvenor, was bought for the winter and the other, a Panama, for the summer.

I do not favour cloth caps of the style favoured by the politician Keir Hardie. It is difficult to persuade a stranger to have faith in you as a doctor if you turn up looking like an off duty bookmaker. Baseball caps, which are now beginning to find much favour, are excellent at providing shade for the eyes but seem more suited to a younger head. And nor, generally speaking, do I favour woolly hats. They are fine for walkers and hikers but it is impossible to look dignified, wise or even adequately competent if you are wearing a woolly hat, especially if it has an attached bobble bouncing around.

But the winds of North Devon are no respecter of seasons and there is, more often than not, a wind capable of removing almost any hat from almost any head. It occurred to me that a watch cap, tightly fitting and with no parts likely to catch the wind, might be persuaded to stay in situ on even the stormiest of days.

‘The human body loses 90% of its heat through the head,’ insisted Peter again, with all the definitive confidence of a man who has read something somewhere, and who has a vested interest in it being accepted as the truth.

‘How on earth do you know that?’ asked Thumper who is not normally a sceptical man but who is always prepared to give Peter the sticky end of the doubt.

‘I read it,’ said Peter. ‘In a book,’ he added, in the clear understanding that he felt that this would give the assertion added gravitas.

‘You’ve never read a book in your life,’ said Patchy with a laugh.

‘I did,’ responded Peter indignantly. ‘I read one of those books on the table in the hairdressers.’

Peter lets out an old shed to a variety of local businesses. The hairdresser is one of the businesses renting the shed. And, inevitably, on the days when hair is being snipped, a rickety old table is piled high with tatty, old magazines.

‘Those are magazines not books,’ Thumper pointed out.

‘Well I read it in one of those,’ said Peter, defiantly. He looked around, defying us to contradict the power of the printed word. ‘So it must be true. It was written by a doctor and you can’t argue with medical science.’ He looked at me when he said this, defying me to argue with medical science.

I kept quiet. I find it is far more fun to allow Peter’s assertions to explore their limits.

‘So if you went outside on a cold day and you wore nothing but one of your hats you’d still be quite warm?’ said Thumper.

‘You’d lose a little bit of heat,’ said Peter.

‘Ten per cent,’ said Patchy.

Peter looked at him.

‘That’s what left when you take 90% from 100%,’ Patchy explained. ‘You said that the body loses 90% of its heat through the head.’

‘Exactly!’ said Peter, with a nod. ‘Ten per cent.’

‘It’s pretty cold today,’ said Thumper.

‘Freezing,’ said Patchy. ‘Unseasonably chilly.’

We all looked out of the window.

The road outside the Duck and Puddle had been white with frost that morning. And the hills in the distance were still white. The sun was shining, but up on the higher fields and moorland the temperature still wasn’t warm enough to melt the frost. It was, in truth, unseasonably cold and Bilbury looked very Christmassy.

‘So are you going to prove it?’ asked Thumper.

‘Do an experiment,’ suggested Patchy.

Peter looked at them. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Take your clothes off and go outside in just a hat,’ said Patchy. ‘See if you stay warm.’

Peter looked out of the window at the white on the distant hills.

It was very warm in the snug at the Duck and Puddle. Frank had lit a log fire, built with well dried logs from one of the dead apple trees Patsy’s father had cut down in his orchard. The fire was crackling and comforting. Central heating is all very well but it only keeps you warm. A log fire provides visual and auditory delights as well as keeping you warm.

‘Have you got one of your hats with you?’ asked Thumper.

‘One of the Chapeau Watch Caps,’ said Patchy.

‘I came in one,’ said Peter proudly, pulling a hat from his jacket pocket. Except for the colour, which was, as advertised, a unique shade of purple, it looked pretty much like any other woolly hat.

‘I’ll buy one if you really can stay warm wearing nothing else,’ I told Peter. I took the hat from him and examined it. ‘Are you sure you don’t have any other colours?’ I asked, before handing the hat back to him.

It was, in truth, a rather sorry looking thing but I thought it would serve as suitable headgear for working in the garden.

‘This is the only colour,’ said Peter. ‘It’s next year’s fashionable colour.’

Peter’s idea of ‘what is in fashion’ is exactly the same as ‘what he can buy cheaply because no one else wants it’.

Thumper and Patchy, who have never knowingly worn anything fashionable, except by accident, promised that they too would buy hats if Peter’s experiment proved successful.

‘If I wear one of these hats will I be able to play tennis?’ asked Patchy.

‘Oh yes,’ said Peter instantly.

‘That’s terrific,’ said Patchy drily. ‘I’ve always wanted to be able to play tennis.’

Peter sucked his teeth and tried to smile.

‘Right,’ said Thumper. ‘Strip off and pop outside for half an hour.’

‘Half an hour?’ said Peter. ‘What am I going to do for half an hour?’

‘Shiver?’ suggested Patchy.

‘Just stand there being warm and cosy,’ I suggested. ‘Proving that your Chapeau Watch Cap keeps you warm. And while you’re out there you can look forward to selling three hats when you come inside.’

It was cold outside but it wasn’t cold enough to do him any harm. And since Peter rips us all off mercilessly we feel obliged, from time to time, to have a little fun at his expense.

Peter stood up and removed his jacket. It is sometimes said that everyone has a little touch of genius hidden inside them. If this is true then Peter’s genius is his ability to demean himself in any way necessary if doing so might help him make a profit. He would swim naked through a pool full of piranha fish in order to sell a can of beans or a box of matches. It is the Peter we all know and sort of love. I wouldn’t have him any other way.

‘How much do I have to take off?’

‘Everything,’ said Thumper. ‘It’s the only way to do the experiment.’

‘If you’re going to do it then you might as well do it properly,’ I said.

Peter removed his shoes, his socks, his trousers, his shirt and a grey string vest. We allowed him to keep his underpants on. They too were grey. None of us felt we could cope with the consequences of his removing them. I couldn’t help admiring his socks which had been darned many times by someone (probably Peter himself) using odds and ends of coloured wool.

I couldn’t help wondering whether people will still be darning socks in a few decades time. It seemed more than likely that socks with holes in them will simply be discarded and replaced. We are developing into a ‘throw-away’ society. When I was a boy the word ‘thrifty’ was used as a compliment. Today it is used in a rather critical, almost derisory, way.

‘You must stay in view,’ said Thumper. ‘Go outside and stand by the window so that we can see you.’

‘If you turn blue we’ll call off the experiment and come and fetch you,’ I told him. ‘We don’t want you to die for a hat.’

‘I’ll be as warm as toast,’ insisted Peter. He sounded defiant and confident but I know him well enough to know that an element of doubt had crept into the forefront of his mind.

Two minutes later Peter was standing on the forecourt outside the Duck and Puddle. We could see him clearly from where we were sitting.

‘Shall we order another round?’ suggested Patchy.

‘Good idea,’ said Thumper. He called for Frank.

‘What’ll be?’ asked the landlord.

‘Three hot whiskies,’ said Thumper. He looked round. Patchy and I both nodded. There’s nothing more comforting than a hot whisky when you’re watching a fellow human being shivering in the cold.

‘Where’s Peter?’ asked Frank.

We all looked to the window.

‘What the blazes is Peter doing outside?’ asked Frank. He walked closer to the window. ‘Why is he naked?’ he asked, shocked and horrified in equal proportions.

‘He isn’t quite naked,’ said Patchy.

‘He’s wearing a hat and his underpants,’ I pointed out.

‘It’s an experiment,’ explained Thumper. ‘Peter says that a human being loses 90% of his body heat through his head. So he’s proving that he can stand outside in the frost and stay warm while wearing nothing but a hat.’

‘I’ve not had so much fun since I had measles,’ said Patchy, staring out of the window.

Frank looked at us, one by one. ‘Is he mad? Or am I mad?’

We looked at him but none of us said anything. There are some questions which don’t need to be answered.

‘Silly question,’ said Frank with a sigh. ‘I’ll get the whiskies.’

Three minutes later he returned with a tray upon which were standing three Russian tea glasses, each one containing a generous portion of malt whisky, and a jug of hot water.

‘I’ll let you add your own hot water,’ he said, putting the tray down on our table.

‘Why is Peter standing on our forecourt wearing only a woolly hat and a nasty looking pair of baggy underpants?’ asked Gilly, Frank’s wife, who had accompanied him back into the snug.

‘It’s an experiment,’ explained Frank.

‘Oh,’ said Gilly, apparently satisfied by this explanation. ‘Is he going to be there long? It’s just that I don’t think he’s much of an attraction for the passing trade.’

‘Do you get much passing trade at this time of year?’ asked Patchy.

‘None whatsoever,’ admitted Gilly. ‘The hikers and walkers stop hiking and walking when the weather gets cold.’

‘Wise folk,’ said Thumper.

‘He’s jumping up and down,’ said Frank.

We looked out of the window. Peter was indeed now jumping up and down.

‘We did stuff like that when I did my National Service,’ said Frank. ‘We had to go outside in our shorts and do jumping up and down exercises. I think they thought that if we ran out of ammunition we could do it to scare the Germans.’

‘Sounds like a good strategy to me,’ said Thumper. ‘The Germans would have run a mile if they’d seen you jumping up and down in a pair of shorts.’

‘Shrivels up the essential bits,’ said Frank. ‘Everyone went into the showers with their hands over their parts after we’d done star jumps in the snow.’

Gilly looked at him and raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

‘Was he that colour when he went outside?’ asked Thumper, nodding in Peter’s direction.

‘I don’t think that is a natural colour for a human being,’ said Patchy.

‘They’re usually dead when they’re that colour,’ I said.

Thumper poured a little water into his whisky. Patchy and I followed suit.

‘I think I’ll join you,’ said Frank.

‘That’ll be your daily ration,’ Gilly said to him sternly. ‘And bring the bottle so that I can pour.’

Gilly understands Frank. And as Frank himself admits she has been an angel as well as a wife. Frank had a stroke a few months earlier and Gilly was keeping an eye on his eating and drinking in order to keep his blood pressure under control.

‘OK dear,’ said Frank meekly. He sounded disappointed but resigned to his fate. ‘But the doc’s here,’ he added, as though that made a difference.

‘I’ll pour,’ repeated Gilly firmly.

Frank went off and returned moments later with another glass and the bottle of Laphroaig.

‘He’s changed colour again,’ said Patchy.

We all looked out of the window once more.

‘He’s still alive anyway,’ said Patchy. ‘He’s moving a bit.’

Peter had gone from pink to white. If you’d stuck three pieces of coal in a row down his chest he’d have been a dead ringer for a snowman.

‘I’d better go and fetch him,’ I said, not wanting to wait until he suffered frost bite. He had only been outside for about ten minutes but Peter is not a man for whom the word ‘fortitude’ was invented. He looked pretty miserable. I took a sip from my hot whisky and then turned to Frank. ‘You’d better get him a glass,’ I said. ‘I think Peter will need something to warm up his cockles.’

‘Is that what they’re called?’ said Gilly, smirking. She had acquired a glass of her own. She doesn’t drink whisky. Her glass contained hot, mulled red wine. As I walked past her I could smell the nutmeg and the cloves. If I hadn’t been drinking hot Laphroaig I’d have been envious.

‘You’d better come in,’ I said to Peter, from the pub’s front doorway. ‘You look a bit on the chilly side.’

‘I’m as w-w-w-warm as I w-w-w-would be if I’d h-h-h-had m-m-m-my c-c-c-clothes on,’ he stuttered.

I realised at that point that our experiment had been not well designed since it made no allowance for cheating on the part of the experimental subject.

Peter, moving gingerly, as befits a man with frozen limbs and bits and pieces, moved as rapidly as was possible and headed towards me. His teeth were chattering.

‘I n-n-n-need the loo!’ he whispered.

It was no doubt the cold. Men of Peter's age need the loo every two hours and every twenty minutes in cold weather. (In contrast, women can hold out for a day or two but they then take an hour to empty their bladder so the procedures pretty much even out.)

I waited for Peter. He emerged from the Gents a few minutes later and then followed me into the bar. He was still shivering.

'Put your clothes on,' said Thumper. 'I can't drink whisky sitting next to a man in those underpants.'

But Peter's fingers were too cold to do anything involving buttons. Gilly, the most thoughtful landlady in any public house in Britain, found him a blanket and wrapped it around him.

'I don't think the hat was big enough,' said Patchy.

Peter opened his mouth to speak but his teeth were now chattering too much for words to escape unhindered.

'I can tell you the problem,' said Frank. 'There's no bobble on the hat.'

'I think there was a bobble when he went out,' said Patchy. 'But it's shrivelled up in the cold.'

Peter, who looked very miserable, pulled the blanket round him and moved to a chair nearer to the fire.

'Don't sit too close to the fire or you'll get chilblains,' warned Thumper, who had clearly been taught about such things by someone who believed that sitting on cold stones causes piles and that you can't get pregnant if you do it standing up.

'Can you get chilblains on your bits and pieces?' asked Patchy.

'Only on your feet,' said Frank, as though he knew what he was talking about. 'And that's rubbish about sitting near to the fire. You just get them if you get cold. If any part of your body becomes too cold it'll just drop off. The blood supply stops and the next thing you know your bits are all lying on the floor. I read that somewhere.'

'Actually you can get chilblains on all sorts of extremities,' I said quietly, thinking that I perhaps ought to add a little real science to the conversation. 'Fingers, toes…' I paused, leaving the rest to the imagination.

Thumper and Patchy both shivered at the unspoken thought.

Peter cautiously opened the blanket and looked inside his underpants. When he closed the blanket again he seemed relieved.

'What about frostbite?' asked Patchy. 'I remember reading one of those books about explorers walking across the Antarctic and the author said that if you get too cold your toes and fingers are likely to fall off.'

'You'd better stand on the rug,' said Frank to Peter.

Peter looked at him, puzzled.

'In case any of your toes fall off,' explained Frank. 'There are big gaps between our floorboards. We don't want your toes falling down into the cellar. It'll take ages to find them down there.' He paused. 'And I'm not entirely sure that there aren't some little creatures living among the barrels,' he added.

Peter shuddered and leapt onto the safety of the rug. He then looked down at his toes which were now regaining a little of their natural colour.

We sipped our drinks and watched Peter shiver. I suppose it was very irresponsible of us to have let him get so cold but it was Peter after all. Peter is pretty well indestructible. And no one had forced him to stay outside.

'I think we can safely say that the experiment was a failure,' said Patchy.

'Well, it wasn't really a failure,' I pointed out. 'It simply proved that Peter was sort of wrong. You can't keep warm wearing nothing but a hat and a pair of ropey old underpants.'

'So much for medical science,' said Patchy.

'Everything I've got is painful and itchy,' complained Peter, standing up and rubbing his hands over his body.

'You've got frostnip,' I told him. 'Everything is painful and itchy because you're warming up.'

'Will he live?' asked Frank.

'He'll live,' I told him. 'No one ever died of frostnip.'

Peter, at least, looked relieved.

'I'm definitely going to buy one of Peter's hats anyway,' said Thumper. 'As a memento of the day.'

Patchy, Frank and I confirmed that we'd all buy one too. I think we all felt sorry for Peter and wanted to cheer him up. But Patchy, the only true businessman among us, insisted that we would only buy the hats if, as bulk buyers, we were all given a decent discount.

Peter, who had suddenly and miraculously recovered from his bout of frostnip and had perked up considerably, immediately offered us a measly 5% discount. Patchy demanded 10%. They settled for 7.5%.

Despite the modest discount (usually something which always causes him great distress), the sale of four of his hats cheered Peter up considerably.

'I'll pop to the shop and get them now that I've warmed up a bit,' he promised, probably unwilling to wait too long in case we changed our minds.

'Then we'd better stay here a bit longer,' said Thumper. 'And wait for you to get back.'

'It's a hard life,' I said, sipping at my malt. I looked at my watch. There was plenty of time before evening surgery was due to start. Patsy had gone into Barnstaple with her sister but Miss Johnson knew where I was and would ring the Duck and Puddle if there were any calls for me.

'Someone's got to live it,' said Patchy, with a sigh.

'Might as well be us,' said Thumper.

'Without you lot Frank and I wouldn't have any customers in the winter,' said Gilly, with disarming honesty.

'I suppose we'd better have another round of hot whiskies,' said Thumper.

'Jolly good idea,' said Frank. 'I'll put another log on the fire when I've poured the whiskies.'

'You can have hot lemonade,' said Gilly to her husband. 'You've had your alcohol allowance for the day.

To my surprise and delight Frank did not say a word in protest. I was proud of him. I quietly wished that all my patients were as sensible, and had such loving and determined spouses.

Then, as we sat and waited for Peter to return. Thumper said he was glad that he was buying one of the hats Peter was selling because now he'd have something to give me for Christmas. I told him it was funny that he'd said that because I had similar plans for the hat I was buying.

That took us onto talking about presents and Patchy said that a cousin of his, who was not a romantic man, once told his wife that he was giving her 'something for her pretty neck' for Christmas. The wife, who was expecting a string of pearls, or a pretty necklace of some kind, was heartily disappointed when she received a box containing two bars of soap. Patchy said that his cousin told him that for three months, bedroom activity fell away to the sort of level common in the more strictly run monasteries and nunneries.

Thumper said he'd learned his lesson about presents several years earlier when he'd given his good lady, Anne, a two-speed hammer drill for Christmas. He realised that he hadn't been as clever as he'd thought he'd been when she gave him a pair of hair curling tongs for his birthday three months later.

Just then Peter returned with our hats. We all tried them on and agreed that we looked pretty much like a bunch of Alaskan crabbers on shore leave.

Patchy said he would give his hat to Thumper for Christmas. Frank said he rather liked his hat and that he would give it to Gilly so that she could give it to him for Christmas. Gilly said that if she got one for Christmas she would hit the giver over the head with a saucepan as a 'thank you'.

Peter, who doesn't believe in giving presents or sending cards but who is not averse to receiving either or both, and who regularly encourages his customers to buy and send gifts and cards at every possible opportunity, said he hadn't thought of the Chapeau Watch Cap headgear as suitable to be sold as Christmas presents but that since we'd all indicated that the hats had 'present potential' he would prepare a window display with half a dozen of the hats decorated with a piece of tinsel which he'd found in a cupboard.

'Christmas is months away!' Frank pointed out.

'You can never be too early to take advantage of the Christmas rush,' said Peter.

It was April.

Surprise, surprise!

Carole and Gordon Singer had been married for years, and I had always thought of them as a loving couple. But they came to see me separately.

And they both had strange stories to tell.

Their stories were very different but although they were different they were also the same.

‘About a year ago, Carole told me she wanted to start going to an exercise class,’ began Gordon. ‘She started off by just going to a class on Friday evenings. It was held in Barnstaple because there is nothing like that in Bilbury. But after a few weeks, she said she felt so much better for it that she thought she’d go to a class on Saturday lunchtimes as well.’

‘I thought she looked good when I last saw her,’ I said. ‘She’s lost some weight.’

‘She’s lost half a stone,’ agreed Gordon. ‘And she looks marvellous. She’s thirty nine next birthday but you’d never guess. She’s always made a real effort to look good but in the last year or two she seems to have really put in an effort to keep her figure. I think she’s got a wonderful figure but she always says she thinks her bum is too big’ He paused, thinking. ‘But most women seem to think their bum is too big, don’t they?’

He was clearly proud of his wife but there was also a strange sort of sadness in the way he spoke; and that rather surprised me for I didn’t understand where the sadness was coming from. Why would a man be proud and pleased that his wife was still making an effort to look good but at the same time be sad about it?

And then I realised.

Maybe, Gordon had found out that Carole was having an affair. Or maybe he suspected that she might be having an affair.

I was, at that moment, beginning to think that this story had the makings of a family tragedy.

‘I only found out the truth by accident,’ said Gordon. He shuffled about on the chair for a moment or two, as people often do when they aren’t quite sure how to proceed with the conversation, and they want to delay things for as long as possible.

I waited.

There is no point in hurrying people when they want to tell you something but they don’t really want to talk about it. If you try to rush things then they tell you something else, usually of little consequence, and leave the important things unsaid.

‘I don’t much like being in the house on my own,’ said Gordon when he was finally comfortable, ‘and so once or twice recently I’ve met up with a few pals for a drink. We usually go somewhere local – the Duck and Puddle, the Old Station House Inn at Blackmoor Gate or the House of Cards in Combe Martin. But last week, a group of us went to a pub in Barnstaple, a place called the Gravedigger’s Rest. Do you know it?’

I shook my head. I knew the other three pubs he’d mentioned, of course. But I didn’t know the Gravedigger’s Rest in Barnstaple. It’s a popular name for pubs in North Devon. I suspect that there must have been a good many tired gravediggers in our part of the world.

‘A bloke I’ve known for years was having a sort of stag do. He’s getting married for the third time but he still wanted a bit of a party. Anyway, he wanted to go to the Gravedigger’s Rest because they had a couple of strippers advertised and he thought it would be a laugh. To be honest, that sort of thing is not really my cup of tea, actually to tell you the truth I’ve never even been to a strip club, not a live show, but I went along just to be sociable and to have a laugh and because I didn’t have anything else to do – with Carole being out at her exercise class.’

At this point I thought I knew what was coming next. I thought he was going to tell me that while he was sitting there, watching the strip show, his wife had walked in for a drink after her exercise class. And that she’d been accompanied by a man. The class instructor, perhaps. That, I thought, was going to be his story.

I tried to work out what I should say to him.

But as Gordon continued I soon realised that my supposition was absolutely, 100% wrong and that the not very wise words I’d already begun to put together were entirely useless.

‘To cut a long story short, my wife was the second stripper,’ said Gordon.

I managed an ‘Ah’ and an ‘I see’ but that was the extent of my contribution at this revelation. And I was quite proud that I’d managed that much.

My first thought was that I had never thought of Carole Singer as the sort of woman who would work as a stripper.

My second thought, proved entirely accurate by the facts, was that I had no idea what I had meant by that thought.

What, after all, was the stripping sort of woman?

'She was very good at it,' said Gordon. 'Fortunately, I was sitting at the back of the pub so I'm pretty sure she didn't see me. When I saw her I sort of crouched down behind a couple of rowdy big blokes who were sitting directly in front of me.'

'It must have been quite a surprise,' I said.

'You can say that again,' said Gordon.

I didn't.

'She came on in a see-through blouse and a sort of flouncy skirt which I'd never seen before and a pair of red high heeled shoes. She was wearing a curly blonde wig. There was some music being played on a tape machine and she did the bump and grind act that strippers always do in films and stripped off the skirt and the blouse and the blokes in front of me were jumping up and shouting and there was a lot of cheering and the usual sort of comments being made. She was wearing a black bra, a suspender belt and stockings and a pair of very tiny panties, one of those G-strings, less material than you'd need to make a yard of dental floss, so thin and flimsy that to be honest it was difficult to be sure whether she wearing anything at all, especially because the thing she was almost wearing was flesh coloured and almost invisible. I have to admit she looked pretty good. She's quite short as you know, only a tad over five foot tall, but she's very curvy and I got the impression that the customers in that pub liked their strippers to have a bit of meat on them; a bit curvy I suppose you might say; decent breasts and hips if you know what I mean. It wasn't difficult to see why the blokes in the pub were all egging her on. She took off the bra, wiggled her bosom about, kicked off the shoes and then peeled off the stockings until all she was wearing was the G-string. It was all done very slowly to the usual sort of musical accompaniment – provided by a tape recorder. I couldn't help noticing that she'd trimmed her pubic hair quite short; very short, actually. I hadn't noticed that before. Then she pranced around pretty well stark naked for a few minutes, weaving in and out of the blokes at the front of the crowd and trying to dodge their groping hands – not always successfully if the truth be told. I saw one bloke grab her bum and another one managed a good squeeze of one of her breasts before she wriggled away from him. She slapped his face but not too hard; just sort of letting him know he'd gone a bit too far. The other blokes laughed at him and gave him a bit of a ribbing. It was all fairly good natured.'

'Did any of the blokes you were with recognise her?' I asked him.

I felt I was swimming in a rough sea, well out of my depth and out of sight of land.

If, when I'd been at medical school, there had ever been a course on what doctors should say to husbands who have found out that their wives are taking their clothes off in public houses then I must have missed it.

'I thought one of them might have. He looked at me a bit quizzical but didn't say anything. The wig made her look quite different so I think he probably just thought it was some bird who looked a bit like Carole.'

'Then what happened?'

'She was looking out into the crowd, smiling and waving when she suddenly stopped, turned round, bent down and picked up her clothes and then darted back out through a door at the back of the pub. She didn't come back out again. A bit later there was another girl who stripped and did an act with a snake. I'm probably biased but I didn't think she was half as good as Carole. She was much younger, no more than 19 or 20 I'd say, and one of the lads said she'd had that stuff injected into her breasts to make them bigger. They certainly didn't look very realistic.' He shuddered. 'I can't stand snakes anyway. I can't even bear to pick up a grass snake.'

'So you think she might have seen you?'

'She might have. I can't be sure.'

'Have you said anything to Carole?'

'Good heavens, no! What on earth would I say?'

'You're going to have to talk about it sometime,' I told him. 'Otherwise, she'll be going out of the house telling you that she's going to her aerobics class and you'll know that she's going to a pub to take off all her clothes.'

Gordon nodded. 'I wouldn't mind so much if she hadn't lied to me about what she was doing,' he said. 'Now I'm not sure what else she's getting up to.'

'You're wondering if she's been unfaithful?'

'Well, I don't know how these things work,' said Gordon. 'But do these strippers sleep with the customers? Is she taking one or two of the blokes up into a back room after the show?'

'Oh, I'm sure she isn't,' I said, though I don't know why I'd said this. Half an hour earlier I would have probably sworn on oath that Carole Singer wasn't the sort of woman who would take her clothes off in public; appearing in a strip show in a public house. I suddenly realised that as much as I thought I knew my patients there was probably a good deal about them that I really didn't know; and would probably never know. It was quite a revelation; like having a professional cold shower.

'If it's just the stripping she does, and if she'd talked to me about it, and if it is something she really wants to do, then I wouldn't object,' said Gordon suddenly. 'She looked so alive when I saw her taking her things off. I know her well enough to know that she was clearly enjoying the attention she was getting; having all those men staring at her body. I suppose it made her feel good about herself. It would, wouldn't it?' He cleared his throat. 'She was very good at the stripping,' he said. 'She was much better than the other girl they had. And the funny thing is that I was very proud of her; proud that she could do it and proud that she was good at it. And, to be honest, I felt proud to be married to her. I think anyone would be proud to be married to her. She looks terrific. All those blokes would have been green with envy if they'd known I was married to her.'

'I'm sure,' I agreed.

I wondered if Carole was, perhaps, going through some sort of premature mid-life crisis. Maybe she no longer felt attractive. Could it be that she felt that Gordon was no longer giving her enough attention? I had suddenly found myself in the position of an agony aunt rather than a family doctor.

'So, what should I do?' asked Gordon. 'Should I tell her that I know where she goes?' He swallowed hard. 'And ask her what else she gets up to?'

'Let me think about it for a day,' I told him. 'Come back and see me this time tomorrow.'

'Do you think they get paid?'

I looked at him.

'The strippers,' he said. 'Do you think they get paid?'

'I'm sure they do,' I said. 'It's a profession isn't it? There will be expenses. Special clothes. Petrol. The girl who has the snake will have to feed it.'

'I wonder how much,' said Gordon, to himself more than to me.

'I'll think about what you've told me,' I told him again. 'Come and see me tomorrow morning.'

Gordon said he could wait another day before deciding what to do. And so off he went.

After he had gone, I sat there silent and alone for so long that Miss Johnson knocked on my consulting room door to see if I was all right.

I was still puzzling over what to say to Gordon several hours later when it was time to start the evening surgery.

And the first patient who came into the surgery was Carole Singer.

She was wearing a calf length grey tweed skirt, a grey woollen jumper and a dark blue hand-knitted cardigan. She had a single string of pearls around her neck and wore pearl earrings. There were a few streaks of grey in her hair. It was almost impossible to believe that this was the woman who, on Friday nights and Saturday lunchtimes, could be seen removing her clothes in a saloon bar. She was a good looking woman and she had a fine figure.

I know that one shouldn't entertain preconceived notions about people but I still couldn't help thinking that she just didn't look like a striptease artiste.

I suddenly wondered if she ever glued tassels to her nipples and if she could make one tassel go round clockwise while making the other go round anticlockwise.

'I've got a confession to make, doctor,' she said, when she had sat down. 'And I need your advice.'

I waited, as though I didn't know her secret.

'Gordon was put on part-time work a year or so ago,' she said. 'You know he works at the timber yard outside Barnstaple? On the road out to Bideford?'

I nodded.

'Well, things haven't been too good at the yard and all the workers were put on a three day week.'

'I had heard something about it,' I said. Several of my patients work at the timber yard.

'So we had difficulty in paying the rent and making ends meet,' said Carole. 'I look after the money, I always have done because Gordon doesn't like dealing with paperwork and the cheque book, and it's been a real worry. The electricity company threatened to cut us off a few months ago and we're still behind with the payments. I offered to get a job to help out but Gordon wouldn't hear of it. He's a bit old-fashioned in that respect. And, besides, the sort of jobs I could get wouldn't have helped much. There's nothing in the village and if I got a job cleaning in Barnstaple I wouldn't earn enough to pay the petrol and car parking charges.'

I didn't say anything; I just sat and listened and waited.

It was strange to listen to the beginning of the story when I already knew the end of it but I couldn't tell Carole that Gordon had been to see me. I think that doctor-patient confidentiality is the foundation of the relationship between doctors and patients. And so I didn't say anything.

Carole swallowed hard and plucked at her cardigan. 'I don't know how to tell you what I've been doing,' she said. 'But I need to tell someone because I don't want my marriage to be at risk.'

'Just tell me,' I said. 'I can't help you unless you tell me what you're worried about.'

'You won't judge me?'

'Of course not!'

'I've got a sister who lives in Wolverhampton,' said Carole. 'She's three years younger than me and a single mother with two kids. Her husband walked out on her a few years ago. I talked to her about my worries about money and she confessed that for several years she had been working as a stripper in a pub near where she lives. She said that they paid really well for a few hours work a week.' Carole started to blush. 'I was shocked when she told me what she'd been doing because I always thought strippers were, well, you know, what we used to call 'scrubbers'.'

There was a pause. Carole had started to cry.

I reached across the desk and silently handed her a box of paper handkerchiefs.

'I thought that she meant that she was on the game, you know, working as a prostitute, but she said she wasn't. She said it was nothing like that. All she did was go to the pub three or four evenings a week and take off her clothes. She said it was easy to learn how to do it in a sexy sort of way. You have to wear something a bit special, of course. You can't strip when you're wearing a pair of old jeans and a jumper. She told me that she got paid more for three or four evenings than she could earn working full-time in a factory or a shop. And she said the customers weren't much trouble. Occasionally, one would ask her to go home with him but she'd just politely tell him 'No thank you' and that would be the end of it. The pub owner didn't let the customers harass the girls because he didn't want to lose them and, more importantly, I suppose, because he didn't want to lose his entertainment licence. I think the police and the magistrates can be quite severe about things like that.'

'Did she suggest that you tried something similar?'

'Not directly,' said Carole. 'But when I'd spoken to her I rang Gilly and asked her if she knew of any pubs in the area which employ strippers.'

'Gilly Parsons at the Duck and Puddle?'

Carole nodded and then blew her nose. I got up, moved the waste basket so that it was next to her chair, and then sat down again. Carole put the used tissue into the basket and took a fresh one from the box. 'Yes, I thought she'd be bound to know if any pubs in North Devon had work for strippers. She told me of a pub that she knew and she gave me a name and a telephone number to ring.'

I waited.

'The owner of the pub was very nice about it,' she said. 'He said he had a couple of young girls but wanted a more mature woman because he'd heard on the grapevine that the customers in other pubs sometimes liked to see an older woman taking her clothes off. He arranged for one of his regular girls to give me a few tips, lessons I suppose, and I passed an audition. That was the most embarrassing thing, really; taking my clothes off on a wet Wednesday morning with just this fat bloke watching me. But he was very professional about it. It wasn't as sordid as it sounds. He said he'd give me a trial and that obviously went well because I've been working there ever since.'

'As a stripper?'

Carole was now bright red. She nodded. 'We get paid more than the barmaids get for working the whole week and I just work Friday evenings and Saturday lunchtimes.'

'So you do it just for the money?'

'Oh yes.'

'Everything is fine between you and Gordon?'

'Oh, absolutely! I love him very much. And I think he loves me. I know he does.'

'What did Gordon say about it?' I asked her.

I knew, of course, that she hadn't told Gordon. But I couldn't tell her that I knew that. This whole thing was getting very complicated and I was having a job remembering who knew what and what I was supposed to know.

'I didn't tell him,' said Carole. 'I told him I was going to exercise classes.' She half smiled. 'It is a sort of exercise, I suppose. Dancing about on a tiny stage and taking off your clothes without falling over or bumping into someone. I've actually lost some weight.'

I nodded. 'And that's all that's involved?'

She looked at me.

'Taking off your clothes? That's all you do?'

She blushed an even deeper red. 'Oh, I see what you mean. Oh yes, I just take off my clothes. I don't sleep with any of the customers if that's what you mean. I wouldn't anyway, not in a million years. I'm a very loyal and faithful wife, but Geoff, the fellow who owns the pub, was very plain about that. He doesn't allow any of the girls to have sex with the customers – especially not for money. He says he'd lose his licence and probably end up in prison so he's very strict about it.'

'And Gordon doesn't know anything? He doesn't know where you go?'

'Well, that's the thing,' said Carole. 'He didn't. He used to think I was going to exercise classes. I wasn't sure how he'd take it so I thought an innocent fib wouldn't do any harm. He has never liked the idea of my working and although he's no prude, I didn't know how he'd feel if he found out that I was stripping to pay the bills. To be honest we really do need the money. As I say, I look after the finances and I don't think Gordon realises just how short things have been since he went on to working part-time. I didn't think there was any chance of him finding out. He doesn't really go to pubs, except to the local ones. But he found out.'

'Ah.' I said.

I was using up a year's supply of monosyllabic responses.

'He was at the pub last Friday,' she said. 'I didn't see him at first but I know he was there and I know he saw me. Well, he could hardly not see me, could he? And he could hardly not recognise me. He's seen me naked often enough. And all I was wearing was a wig and a lot of make up.' She swallowed and started to play with the pearls around her neck. 'But what was he doing there anyway?' she asked indignantly. 'What was he doing at a strip club?'

I was, I admit, a bit surprised by the speed with which she had switched from guilt to questioning Gordon's presence in the pub where she was stripping.

But it was a fair enough question.

'Did you tell him that you'd seen him there, in the pub?'

She shook her head. 'I think we both sort of pretended it hadn't happened.'

'Very English!' I said.

She looked at me, puzzled.

'A man goes to a strip show and sees, to his surprise, that his wife is one of the strippers. He doesn't say anything when they both get home. And the wife, who saw her husband in the audience, doesn't say anything either. They both pretend they weren't there. I think that's a pretty English sort of response.'

Carole smiled. It was the first smile since she'd come into the surgery. 'I see what you mean,' she said. 'You can't imagine two Italians behaving like that, can you?'

'You two have to talk,' I told her. 'You have to tell him what you're doing. And you have to explain why. And you have to assure him that all you're doing is taking off your clothes. And you have to let him explain to you why he was there. He may have a perfectly innocent explanation.'

'How can he have an innocent explanation for going to a strip show?'

'You have a fairly innocent explanation for stripping,' I pointed out. 'You haven't exactly become a stalwart member of the sex industry. You're just doing your bit to help make ends meet.'

She thought about this for a moment. 'I suppose so,' she admitted at last. She stopped playing with her pearls and started picking at her tweed skirt.

'So you have to tell him why you've been taking off your clothes,' I repeated.

'Would you tell him?'

Crumbs, I thought, this was getting complicated.

How could I tell him something that he already knew? And I couldn't tell Carole that he already knew.

'I want you both to come and see me tomorrow evening,' I told her. 'I'll make sure I've spoken to Gordon by then. I'll tell him what you told me. But then you both have to talk this whole thing through.'

'The problem is that if I give up the stripping we won't be able to afford to live,' she said.

'Can I ask you a personal question?'

She laughed. 'It can hardly be any more personal than the stuff we've already talked about!'

'Do you enjoy what you do? Taking off your clothes in the pub?'

'Well, I do it for the money.'

'I understand. But do you enjoy what you do? Some people like their work, some hate their work and some put up with it. How do you feel about what you now do for a living?'

There was a long pause. 'I do enjoy it,' said Carole at last. 'It's a real ego booster. Especially to a woman my age. I don't even mind when one or two of the punters try to grope me. They're easy enough to stop. But it's flattering to know that they want to.' She paused and played with her pearls again. 'I'm being painfully honest with you, doctor.'

'I know you are,' I said. 'I appreciate that. But it's important that you know how you feel about what you're doing. And it helps if I know too.'

'Tomorrow evening then?' she said, standing up.

'Tomorrow evening,' I agreed.

I was, by now, beginning to see the light. There wasn't a lot of light, it is true, but there was enough for me to see that there might a solution to this seemingly intractable problem involving the ecdysiast and her husband.

When Gordon next appeared in the surgery I told him that I wanted him to come to the evening surgery later that day. 'Bring Carole with you,' I told him. 'And we'll talk this through together.'

I could not, of course, tell him that I had already spoken to Carole and nor could I tell him that she had seen him watching her in the pub where she worked.

After Gordon had left, I dealt with a pile of paperwork which Miss Johnson had placed on my desk when she brought me my post-surgery cup of tea.

I then went out on my visits.

It was, to be honest, a relief to be out and about in the village, and to deal with straightforward medical problems.

It was autumn, and it was an autumn I can remember vividly.

Frank Parsons, who has a unique way with words and who was, in his heavy drinking days, known to make the occasional faux pas, once famously said that autumn was one of his four favourite seasons. It's certainly in my top four.

The autumn we had that year was so spectacular that I suspect that even Frank, who is not easily impressed, would have put it into his top three seasons.

We were enjoying the sort of rare collation of colours which Americans enjoy every year; particularly those Americans who live in New England; in Vermont, Massachusetts, Maine, Connecticut, Rhode Island and New Hampshire.

The spectacular colours which are a feature of autumn (or fall) in those parts of the United States are a result of very unusual circumstances. There is usually an early cold spell at the very end of the summer, followed by an extended period of sunshine in October. As autumn develops, the sap is prevented from entering the leaves by the growth of new, hard cells at the base of each twig. The result is that the leaves start to die and the green colour fades.

The glorious reds, yellows and oranges which make autumn so spectacular, only appear when there is the right mixture of cold, warmth and sunshine. In areas where the weather is too cold, too soon, the leaves fall quickly and never have a chance to develop those stunning colours, let alone to show them. In parts of the country where the weather is too warm, the leaves are already breaking up and falling from the trees by the time the sap has risen.

In Devon, and in England in general, there is usually too much rain for those marvellous autumn colours to develop properly. The soil in our part of the world, is too rich and moist and as a result the leaves stay green until the moment they are killed by early winter frosts. Moreover, the colours of an English autumn are not usually properly visible because the skies are too grey and gloomy and oppressive; the trees are likely to be hidden behind curtains of mist and rain.

The sort of autumn which the locals take for granted in New England occurs so rarely in Old England that when it does happen it inspires motorists to stop their cars, pull onto the verge and just sit and stare at an orchestral symphony for the eyes; a symphony conducted by nature, displaying every red, orange, yellow and brown imaginable.

And that's what happened that day.

Everywhere I looked there were trees which looked as though they had been painted with the aid of Turner's palette: silver birch, alder, hornbeam, beech, poplar, sweet chestnut, ash, hazel, huge English oaks, slightly smaller sessile oaks, wych elms and red oaks with their brilliant orange-red leaves. Everywhere I looked there was colour. Woodlands and copses and spinneys were ablaze. For once the fruits of autumn, conkers, acorns, beechnuts and hazelnuts took second place to the leaves of the trees.

Fifteen minutes after I left the surgery I was standing beside the car, parked no more than half a mile from the surgery, admiring the scenery.

The weather was unseasonably warm and it was the most spectacular autumn I had ever seen. As I stood there, enjoying the rare sight of an autumn in full glory, I went over what Carole and Gordon had told me and I felt my mind clearing. It seemed to me that the Singers' problem wouldn't take too much sorting out.

There were five visits to do that day.

Three of them were routine visits to elderly patients whom I liked to check on once every week or two.

It only took me a few minutes to call in and check that all was well and while I was there I always delivered whatever routine prescriptions might be necessary. Actually, I usually delivered whatever pills or creams might be needed, rather than taking prescriptions. It was far easier for me to do this than to expect the patients to find someone to call at the surgery on their behalf to turn their prescriptions into medication.

The other two calls I made were also fairly straightforward. Compared to the Singers they were very straightforward calls.

The first of these visits was to a couple called Sam and Evelyn Polger.

People who know their names but have never met them assume that he is called Sam and she is called Evelyn. But they're wrong if they do make this assumption because Mrs Polger is called Sam and Mr Polger was Christened Evelyn. (This is not as confusing as it could be. The author Evelyn Waugh was at one time married to a woman who was also called Evelyn. That must have led to some real confusion – especially with the morning mail.)

Whenever I see the Polgers, I am reminded how often I make erroneous judgements based on the names of people we meet. We all have preconceived notions about names and these notions are fed by our previous experiences. If, when we were at school, we knew a Cuthbert who was a bit wet we will assume that anyone called Cuthbert must be a bit wet. If we knew a Nigel who was the Captain of Sport, and a great hero, then we will tend to have respect for people called Nigel.

Sometimes, of course, our prejudices are fed by characters we've met only in books and films.

So, for example, the only Bertie I've ever known is Bertie Wooster, the character in P.G.Wodehouse's books about Jeeves. And so I tend to assume that anyone called Bertie must be a bit like Bertie Wooster.

The only Guy I've heard of was Guy Gibson, the World War II dambusters hero, and so to me anyone called Guy must be a heroic sort of fellow.

To others these names will, of course, probably mean something entirely different.

Anyway, Mr Polger is called Evelyn and Mrs Polger is called Sam and they have three dogs called Pickles, Chutney and Relish.

Mrs Polger is a naturalist who writes books about the countryside. She wrote one called *Squirrels in the Attic* and another called *Pheasants on the Lawn*.

Mr Polger, who did something incomprehensible at a bank in the City, presses flowers and creates pictures which he frames. He also plays the euphonium and has an extraordinary collection of Victorian pocket knives. They're a lovely couple, both in their late sixties. The two of them are terrified of hospitals.

It was Mr Polger who had asked me to visit.

After apologising for not being able to come to the surgery at Bilbury Grange, he told me that he hadn't been able to pass urine for more than 24 hours and that he felt that there might be something wrong with his bladder.

'It isn't your bladder,' I told him, when I had examined him. His bladder was massively enlarged and easy to feel. 'It's your prostate gland. It's enlarged and it has compressed your urethra – with the result that the urine can't get out of your bladder.'

'Is there anything you can do?' asked Mr Polger. 'It's a terribly uncomfortable feeling.'

I told him that he needed to be catheterised, a simple process which involves pushing a thin tube up the urethra into the bladder so that the bladder can be emptied. It's a quick and easy solution but, unfortunately, only a temporary one.

'I'd prefer to send you into hospital to have this done,' I told him. 'But I know you absolutely hate those places and if you really don't want to go into hospital I can do it for you here. I've got a catheter in the boot of the car.'

'Oh, do it here, please, doctor,' said Mr Polger.

I told him that I would do the catheterisation myself but warned him that he might, in due course, have to go the hospital to have his prostate gland checked.

'Is it cancer?' asked Mrs Polger, clearly trying to be brave.

I told her that I had absolutely no reason to suspect that her husband had cancer. 'I think his prostate is just enlarged,' I said. 'It happens often in men over the age of 60.'

'Does it mean I need to have an operation?' asked Mr Polger, who was clearly terrified of the prospect of surgery.

'Maybe,' I admitted. 'But maybe we can get away without troubling the surgeons.'

I told him that I had read reports showing that it was sometimes possible to reduce an enlarged prostate gland by taking the herb saw palmetto. I told him that he could obtain a supply from a local health food store and that I'd seen evidence that it could reduce the size of an enlarged prostate and help reduce the symptoms caused by a prostate gland which had grown too big. I also suggested that he might benefit from eating sunflower seeds which are a good source of zinc – another substance which is essential for a healthy prostate gland.

It took only a few minutes to fetch the catheter from the car and to perform the simple procedure.

When I left the Polgers half an hour later, they were both much relieved and much less fearful than they had been when I'd arrived.

Practising medicine as a country doctor can sometimes be quite simple but enormously satisfying.

My second visit was to a couple called Dawn and Jack Atkins. In their case, her real name is Phyllis but everyone calls her Dawn. His name is Jack and he is called Jack. They, like the Polgers, are retired.

When she was younger, Dawn was a singer and a member of a quartet called the Dawn Chorus. I made a fool of myself when she first told me this. 'How did they manage to find four girls all called Dawn?' I asked. She raised an exquisitely manicured eyebrow, didn't say anything but just looked at me.

'Were any of you called Dawn?' I asked as the truth dawned on me.

'We had an Elspeth, a Lettice, a Joan and me, a Phyllis,' she replied. 'We didn't actually have a Dawn. But we had a manager whose mother was called Dawn. He thought up the name and we thought it was clever so we became the Dawn Chorus.'

'We nearly had a recording contract once,' she told me. 'But things went wrong, I never did find out what the problem was, but instead of signing us, the recording company signed some fellow with a ukulele called George

Formby.' She grinned. 'I bet they regretted that mistake!'

'Instead of George Formby, they could have had the Dawn Chorus?'

'They could, indeed!' She had laughed uproariously. 'Four Dawns for the price of one.'

Jack had been a sales representative for a company which made light fittings. He had travelled regularly around Europe and the Far East. He was one of those people who had a natural facility with languages and he spoke French, German, Spanish and Italian fluently and could 'get by' in Mandarin and Russian.

When I called at the Atkins's cottage I found Jack waiting for me at the front door.

'It's Dawn,' he told me, clearly agitated. 'She's got a terrible pain in her leg.'

I followed him up the stairs of their tiny but immaculate cottage. Dawn was lying on top of the bed. She was fully dressed and perfectly made up. She looked frightened and was not her usual ebullient self, though she smiled and tried to joke when she saw me.

'At last I've managed to get you into my bedroom,' she said.

'But our luck's not with us,' I said, carrying on with the joke. 'Jack's here too.'

'Foiled!' said Dawn.

And then she burst into tears.

'Damn!' she said, taking an embroidered handkerchief from her sleeve and dabbing at her eyes. 'I was going to be brave.'

I sat down on a dining chair which Jack had already placed beside the bed and took her hand. 'What's the matter?'

'I've got this absolutely terrible pain in the calf of my left leg,' she told me. 'I'm worried that it might be a deep vein thrombosis.'

'Let the doctor have a look at it before you start leaping to conclusions,' said Jack softly, from somewhere behind me.

I examined Dawn's leg. It was red and clearly tender. 'Does it hurt when you move it?'

She nodded.

'It hurts if you walk?'

'Yes, walking is painful.'

I took a tape measure and a felt tipped pen out of my black bag. I measured six inches below the bottom of her left patella and made a small mark on her leg. I then did the same thing on her right leg.

'What's that for?' asked Dawn.

'I'm going to measure both calves to see if one is bigger than the other. I want to see if there is any swelling. The pen mark helps make sure that I measure both calves at the same point.'

She nodded.

I measured her calf and found that the left calf was nearly an inch bigger than her right calf.

'I'm afraid I think your diagnosis is right,' I told her.

She probably knew this anyway, but I explained that a deep vein thrombosis is a blood clot which forms inside a vein and which may completely block the flow of blood. The danger is that the clot, or a part of it, may break free and travel up to the lungs or the heart.

I didn't tell Dawn and Jack (though I suspect that they already knew) that a deep vein thrombosis can be dangerous – even fatal.

'What's caused it?' asked Dawn.

The risk of developing a deep vein thrombosis is greater among people who have varicose veins, smoke, are overweight, have recently had surgery, have heart disease, are bedbound or are taking the contraceptive pill.

None of those things applied to Dawn.

'It can sometimes just happen, particularly in people who are over 60,' I told her.

'We've just come back from Milan,' said Jack. 'Do you think that being on the plane could have caused it? Aeroplanes seem to be very cramped these days.'

'That's because we fly in the cheap seats and when you flew for business your company always paid for the expensive seats,' said Dawn.

'The expensive seats are three or four times the price,' said Jack apologetically.

'I know, dear,' said Dawn. 'I was just explaining why the aeroplane seemed so cramped.'

'Being stuck on the plane could have caused it,' I agreed. 'Next time you fly, make sure that you wriggle your feet and massage your lower legs and feet regularly. And clench your calf muscles every quarter of an hour or so to stimulate your blood circulation.'

'I don't think we'll be flying again,' said Dawn. 'Will we Jack?'

'I'm happy to stay at home from now on,' said Jack firmly. 'Airports are so busy these days that flying has become a bit of a nightmare.'

‘So, what can you do about it, doctor?’ asked Dawn.

‘I’m afraid I’m going to have to send you into the hospital in Barnstaple,’ I told her. ‘You need to have treatment to dissolve the clot. And you really need to be in hospital so that the doctors can give you exactly the right amount of the drug needed to dissolve the clot.’

‘I thought as much,’ said Dawn quietly.

‘I’ve got your case packed,’ said Jack. ‘Two clean nighties, dressing gown, slippers, soap bag, a purse with some money in it, those two new magazines you bought but haven’t read yet, a paperback from your ‘Not yet read’ shelf, and a box of paper tissues.’

‘Don’t forget to put in my make-up bag,’ said Dawn. ‘But wait until the doctor’s gone and I’ve tidied myself up.’

‘How long will she need to be in hospital?’ asked Jack.

‘Just a few days,’ I told him.

I turned to Dawn. ‘But you’ll have to take medication for a while after you get home.’

I then borrowed their telephone and rang the ambulance service to request an ambulance. When I’d done that I rang the hospital, spoke to the house physician on duty and arranged for Mrs Atkins to be admitted.

Theoretically, I should have telephoned the hospital first to make sure that there was a bed available. But Bilbury is a good distance from the ambulance station in Barnstaple and I wanted to have the ambulance on its way without any delay.

I spent what was left of the afternoon writing the first part of an article I had promised to produce for a magazine I worked for occasionally. Mrs Singer was making ends meet by taking off her clothes in a pub in Barnstaple. I was making ends meet by writing books and articles. When you stop and think about it there isn’t all that much difference. We all do what we can to keep a roof over our heads and food in our larders.

And then it was time for the evening surgery.

I had asked Gordon to come along fairly late on so that I could see him and his wife at the end of the evening surgery. I had a feeling that we might take some time to talk through the couple’s problem and I didn’t want to have a lot of patients sitting in the waiting room wondering what was taking so long.

Once they had both sat down, I asked Gordon to begin by explaining to Carole how he came to be in the pub on the evening when his wife was performing.

When he’d done that, I asked Carole to explain how she came to be taking off her clothes in public.

‘You should have said,’ said Gordon after a while.

‘I know,’ said Carole. ‘I’m sorry I didn’t say anything.’

‘I wouldn’t have minded.’

‘They pay very well,’ said Carole. ‘And I’m only taking my clothes off.’

‘You looked wonderful,’ said Gordon. ‘You’re very good at it.’

‘Do you think so?’

‘I was very proud of you.’

‘You weren’t ashamed?’

‘Why on earth should I be ashamed?’

‘Because I was taking my clothes off in front of all those men.’

‘So what? They cheered you. They loved you.’

‘Would you like me to stop?’

‘We need the money don’t we?’

‘We’d be in a bit of trouble without it.’

‘Do you enjoy it?’

There was a silence.

‘Yes, I do,’ said Carole, softly. ‘It makes me feel young again.’

‘Would you like to carry on?’

‘Do you want me to?’

‘Would you like me to drive you there and back?’

‘You’d come with me?’

‘I could be your chauffeur and a sort of road manager.’

‘That would be nice.’

‘And if you want we could perhaps even take on another night if there’s another pub in North Devon needing a stripper.’

‘Well, I was asked to do Tuesdays at the Mott and Bailey, that pub in South Molton, but I turned them down because I didn’t think you’d believe that I was taking three exercise classes. I could ring them up and see if they still need someone.’

‘Well, Tuesdays would be fine. And South Molton is no further than Barnstaple.’

At this point I decided that my presence was no longer necessary and so I coughed lightly.

They both thanked me and left holding hands.

Apart from starting things off I don’t think I had said a word during the entire consultation.

There had been times during the previous 24 hours when I’d been convinced that things were going to end up badly.

But in truth, it isn’t often that things end up so happily.

When the surgery was over I poured myself an extra-large malt whisky as a small celebration. It felt as though it had been a long day.

I then telephoned the Polgers to see how Mr Polger was getting on. His wife told me that he was fine; he was passing urine again normally and he felt much more comfortable than he’d been that morning.

I’d hardly put the telephone down before it rang again.

It was the duty doctor from the hospital in Barnstaple.

My heart jumped when I knew who was calling. I only had one patient in the hospital and hospital doctors don’t ring GPs to give them hourly updates on what their patients are eating.

The doctor was ringing to tell me that Dawn Atkins had died a few minutes earlier.

They had put up a drip and she had been receiving anti-clotting medication for several hours. Everything should have been fine but the clot, or a piece of it, must have broken off, travelled upwards and lodged in her heart.

She’d had a massive heart attack and despite all their efforts she had died.

‘Does Mr Atkins know?’ I asked.

‘That’s why I’m ringing you,’ said the doctor. ‘He went home about an hour ago. Everything seemed fine and we told him to come back in tomorrow. We were hoping you could tell him.’

I put the telephone down and could feel tears in my eyes.

In a small village, where the doctor knows all his patients and regards them as friends, the death of a patient is a very painful business.

I went into the kitchen to tell Patsy that I had to go out. She was making dinner.

‘Can you hold our meal for an hour?’

‘What’s wrong?’ She knew from my face that this was no routine call.

I told her. We hugged for a few moments. I then went out to the car and drove to the Atkins’s cottage.

There are some aspects of being a country doctor which I hate very much indeed.

The Case of the Wobbly Film Star

The whole thing had started eight or nine weeks earlier.

Patsy and I had just finished dinner and we had sat down to listen to the fifth in a series of long playing records of choral work by Thomas Tallis. Patchy and Adrienne Fogg had given us a set of records by the composer for our anniversary. Until we had received the gift, neither Patsy nor I had ever heard of him but Patchy is something of an expert on old English music. Thomas Tallis was a 16th century composer who produced an enormous number of pieces of music in his 80 years. Patsy and I had decided that Tallis's music is divine in both senses of the word.

And then the telephone rang.

The caller was Mrs Whiffle who was ringing to say that her mother had tripped and fallen. She apologised, admitted that she didn't think her mother had broken any bones, but said she would be grateful if I would pop along and give her mother a quick check up – just to make sure that everything was all right.

Dr Brownlow, my predecessor and erstwhile employer, once told me that nothing good ever happens at 4 a.m. He was right about that, of course. (Dr Brownlow was a wise old owl who was rarely wrong about anything). But, I would go a little further for in my experience as a country doctor nothing good happens between the hours of 7 p.m. and 7 a.m. If the telephone at Bilbury Grange rings during those twelve hours, then the problem is usually significant. It may not be critical or even threatening, but it will be significant to the patient or to the relative or friend who has made the call. My patients tend to be thoughtful; they don't bother me out of hours unless they think the problem is a serious one. They aren't always right, of course. Sometimes the problem is relatively trivial and can be easily conquered with the aid of an injection, a tablet or a few words of quiet explanation and a good sized healthy dollop of country comfort.

I learned early on in my career in general practice that at no time does the reassurance of a doctor count for more than in the dark, small hours of the night, for it is in the darkness of the night when reality is of least significance.

I have noticed, indeed, that when a call is made at 9 p.m. in the dead of winter, the caller is almost certain to be more agitated than when a call is made at 9 p.m. in the summer. The very fact that the world is dark can be enough to accentuate, even exaggerate, our quite natural fears.

When we are nervous and frightened, and possibly alone with our apprehensions, suspicions and imaginations, what matters is not what is really wrong but what we think is wrong and what we think is likely to happen next. As with ghouls and evil spirits, ghosts and banshees, we are alarmed by the unknown and we worry, inevitably, about what may be happening and what might happen next.

Patsy turned off the record player (I asked her to carry on listening but she said she didn't want to listen by herself and would do some housework until I returned) and I put on my coat and picked up my black bag.

Olga and Algernon Whiffle have only been in the village a couple of years but they have already established themselves as well-liked inhabitants; they both have time for the elderly in the village and they always express an interest (without being nosy or gossipy) in the history of the village and its inhabitants.

In rural areas it is often said that it can take decades, if not generations, for newcomers to feel part of a village community and that is often true. I suspect that it is particularly in parts of Devon and Cornwall where communities often feel isolated and cut off from the world and where the geography, the geology, the weather and the absence of main roads or railway lines mean that the isolation is often very real rather than merely conceptual.

However, if the newcomers make a genuine and polite interest in the community where they have chosen to make their home, and they are prepared to put themselves out a little and to learn a little about their neighbours and the environment in which they have chosen to place themselves, then the process can be speeded up dramatically.

Mr and Mrs Whiffle were good examples of how it is perfectly possible to move into a community and then, within a relatively short space of time, succeed in becoming part of it.

The Whiffles have a curious history which is not unique but is rare enough to be unusual.

Before they moved to Bilbury, they lived in a village just outside Bristol and they were neighbours.

Mr Whiffle, and the woman who was then his wife, lived in a smart, modern detached house on a small estate of a dozen newly built homes. The woman who is now Mrs Whiffle was then called Mrs Hambledon and she lived in the house next door with Mr Hambledon, the man to whom she was then married.

Mrs Whiffle (the former Mrs Whiffle) worked in Bristol where she had a good job as an artist in an advertising agency. Mr Hambledon, who also worked in Bristol, was an architect. Since both the woman who was then Mrs Whiffle and Mr Hambledon worked in the centre of Bristol, no more than a quarter of mile away from each other, it was agreed that they would travel into work together. This would enable them to make a considerable saving on petrol, car parking charges and so on. Mr Whiffle and Mrs Hambledon agreed that it was a sensible idea.

Mr Whiffle worked as a journalist on a small newspaper in Taunton and the woman who was then Mrs Hambledon didn't have an outside job but kept herself fully occupied with a variety of responsibilities and obligations in the village. She was secretary of the local Drama Society, chairwoman of the Wives Group at the church and an active member of a national charity which delivered meals to lonely, elderly folk who lived in the area.

And then both families were hit by a thunderbolt.

Mrs Whiffle and Mr Hambledon announced that they had fallen in love with each other, that they had indeed been having an affair for some time, and that it was their intention to move into Bristol and live in a spacious new apartment which they had agreed to purchase together. There were, inevitably, many tears, the inevitable accusations of betrayal, and, in due course, some rather acrimonious negotiations and two divorces.

In due course, Mr Whiffle and Mrs Hambledon, finding themselves alone and thrown together as solitary neighbours, began to socialise a little.

Neither of them had children at home and so there were no impediments to what began as a purely social relationship; a practical and convenient way of dealing with their inevitable loneliness.

They went to the cinema together. They went shopping in Bristol together. At the weekends they ate out at village pubs. They discovered that they shared a good many interests and enthusiasms. And, thrown together by these stressful and unusual circumstances, the friendship turned into something more. They cried together, they laughed together, they held hands and just under a year after their partners had left, the two became lovers.

After that, they decided that it would make perfect sense to live together and to marry. After all, there were no legal or moral constraints to prevent their doing so.

As the former Mrs Whiffle had become the present Mrs Hambledon, so the former Mrs Hambledon became the present Mrs Whiffle. It all sounds strange but I suspect that this variety of wife and husband swapping is much commoner than is generally believed. It is something I had come across once or twice before.

Once they had agreed to marry, the new Whiffles realised that there were practical problems to be overcome.

Both of the Whiffles had large mortgages which they found difficult to meet.

But which house should they keep and which one should they sell?

After some discussions they decided to make a clean break; to sell both houses and to move away from the area.

They decided that they would retire and move to Devon, a county for which they had both always had an affection. They did their sums and decided that they could make a go of things.

And Mrs Whiffle (the new Mrs Whiffle) asked her new husband if it would be too much of a burden if her mother, who was a widow and in her early eighties, came to live with them.

Mrs Whiffle's mother was a retired actress and, like all actresses who have appeared in at least one film, she liked to describe herself as a former film star. This seemed to me to be an entirely understandable, eminently reasonable and utterly harmless conceit.

Mrs Whiffle's mother had appeared in several films made in the 1930s, when she had rather specialised in playing gay young widows and divorcees, but in her later years she had, I believe, been better known for her work in the London theatre. Her real name (which had for years taken second place to her stage name and the use of which even now was confined to communications with the Inland Revenue, the Passport Office and all parts of the National Health Service) was Mathilda Ruthvens.

She once told me, with the sort of pride people always exhibit when they have a name with a deal of history attached to it, that Ruthvens was the family name of the Earls of Gowrie who, in the year 1600, kidnapped James VI of Scotland, who was later to become James I of England. She said that the Scots were so annoyed by this insult that they had passed a name banning the use of the name of Ruthvens for evermore. However, like all silly laws which are passed in perpetuity, the law was eventually forgotten and ignored. Her husband, the source of the name, had died in 1956 and Mrs Ruthvens had lived alone ever since.

Mrs Ruthvens had a cottage in Sussex which she agreed to sell and she said that was very happy to put the proceeds towards the purchase of a suitable home with her daughter and new son-in-law.

Mr Whiffle said he wouldn't mind at all having his mother-in-law sharing their home. As he said, the world can be a dreary, dull place; it needs more former film stars wandering about the place and, in his words: 'If you are offered a chance of sharing your home with a film star you'd have to be mad to turn it down'.

This apparent superficiality hid a genuine affection.

When I arrived at the Whiffle's house, Mrs Ruthvens was lying on a sofa, though since it had a backrest at only one end I expect she would have preferred to think of it as a chaise longue, and she was looking distinctly irritable about being treated like an invalid. She was, as usual, wearing enough make-up to satisfy the requirements of the audience in the seats at the back of the Dress Circle at one of the large London theatres. Her false eyelashes were the biggest I'd ever seen. She wore a splendid wig to disguise the fact that her hair, having been permed and curled and brutalised for decades, was now thinning and no longer the crowning glory it had doubtless once been.

'I just fell, doctor,' she said, rather crossly. 'There was no need to call you out. There's nothing whatsoever wrong with me. My daughter fusses too much. I'm just another old lady getting a bit unsteady on her feet.' She winked at me; a gesture for which she had once been rather famous. 'I probably had too many glasses of sherry before dinner.'

'She had no sherry before dinner,' said Mrs Whiffle, who seemed both apologetic and worried. 'And she had no wine with dinner. And no brandy after it.'

I carefully examined Mrs Ruthvens but happily found no sign of any injury. I took her blood pressure. The systolic was raised a little, but nothing worrying. I listened to her heart. Everything was ticking along nicely; better, indeed, than might be expected in a piece of equipment which had been functioning perfectly for the best part of a century. I looked into her ears, checked her eyesight and performed other simple tests which might have offered a hint of any underlying abnormality.

I found absolutely nothing wrong.

'Do you ever suffer from dizziness?' I asked her.

'Never!'

'Have there been any changes in your eating or drinking habits?'

She shook her head.

'Have you found anything wrong?' asked Mrs Whiffle.

'You're as fit as a fiddle!' I told Mrs Ruthvens.

'That's good to know.'

(I know that nothing annoys an elderly patient more completely than the doctor providing information to relatives, as though the patient were a motor car or a piece of antique furniture and the doctor an assessor offering an opinion to an owner or a would-be purchaser. And yet it is surprising just how many doctors do this.)

'Have you fallen before?' I asked Mrs Ruthvens.

'Good heavens no,' replied the actress. She stopped and thought for a moment. 'I fell off a horse in around 1937,' she said. 'I was making a film called *Robin Hood* with Errol Flynn and Olivia de Havilland and the horse they gave me was rather lively for my liking.' She stopped and allowed a small smile to appear. 'He was a devil!' she said and then, allowing three beats for the timing, added: 'Errol not the horse.' She smiled as though there was a good deal that she could tell me if she were the sort of person inclined to share such secrets.

'Would you like a cup of tea, doctor?' asked Mrs Whiffle, unexpectedly and rather loudly. 'I'm so sorry, I should have offered you something before.'

'Oh, I could tell you a few stories about Errol!' said Mrs Ruthvens, ignoring her daughter. 'Everything you've heard about him was absolutely true!'

'Or maybe a whisky?' said Mrs Whiffle, who clearly didn't want her mother telling me the secrets of her adventures with Mr Flynn. 'Doctors always drink whisky, don't they?'

'That's very kind of you,' I said. 'But no, thank you.'

'Yes, she has fallen several times quite recently,' said Mrs Whiffle, before her mother could continue with her reminiscences. I decided that she had perhaps already heard her mother's Errol Flynn stories and thought them not suitable for the occasion. 'She'll tell you that she hasn't but she has. She's fallen a number of times in the last month and almost daily in the last week or so. On Wednesday, she fell in the garden and badly grazed her arm. I nearly called you then because I thought she might have broken her forearm.'

'I tripped on a daisy,' said Mrs Ruthvens, addressing me. 'It's just my age, dear,' she said, directing the comment at her daughter. She reached out and took her daughter's hand. 'It's sweet of you to worry about me but I do wish you wouldn't fuss so.' She suddenly turned and looked at me as though she had never seen me before. 'You must think I'm absolutely ancient,' she said.

'Not at all,' I said, smiling at her. In truth she looked very good for her age. She was, I knew, 87-years-old. She looked at least fifteen years younger and the compliment was well deserved.

Age is a funny thing. It is always relative. At the age of six we think that anyone who is 14 is absolutely ancient. At 14 we consider anyone who is 20 to be aged and possibly bordering on infirm. At 70 we think that anyone who has died in their 70s must have died very young. And although some of those who are fortunate enough to wander into the 80s tend to glory in their longevity, others, like Mrs Ruthvens, regard themselves as merely having tiptoed gracefully into full maturity.

'Is it normal for older people to start falling over?' Mrs Whiffle asked me.

Mrs Ruthvens muttered something in what was clearly a stage whisper. It was clear that she objected to her daughter's use of the phrase 'older people'.

'No, it isn't normal,' I told Mrs Whiffle. 'There's no intrinsic reason why age itself should make us unstable and there is no more reason for someone in their 80s to fall over than there is for someone in their 30s to fall over – unless there is something wrong with them.'

'What sort of things?' asked Mr Whiffle, who had been sitting quietly until this moment. 'What types of illness cause someone to fall?'

'It's quite a long list,' I said. 'Joint pain and weakness, such as occur in osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis, can result in falls. So can muscle weakness, often a result of a failure to do enough exercise, and foot problems which might make someone unstable.' I thought for a moment, mentally making a list of the other disorders which can result in falls. 'Obviously, a stroke can result in unsteadiness, so can poor vision, balance problems, disorders such as Meniere's disease, low blood pressure, which is usually a result of a patient taking too much medication for high blood pressure, side effects caused by prescription drugs and disorders such as Parkinson's disease.'

I paused again, to think.

'You've missed one,' said Mrs Ruthvens.

I looked at her and waited.

'Booze!' said Mrs Ruthvens. 'I've known a good many people who fell over after drinking too much.'

'Mother!' said Mrs Whiffle.

'It's true!' said Mrs Ruthvens. 'I should know. I've worked with Peter O'Toole, Oliver Reed and what was the name of that one who was married to Elizabeth thingy. They made that film Cleopatra together.'

'Richard Burton,' said Mrs Whiffle. 'He was married to Elizabeth Taylor.'

'Richard. Richard. Of course it was. Richard was very sweet,' said Mrs Ruthvens. 'I had a small part in Cleopatra. Did you know?'

I admitted that I hadn't known.

'I was some sort of handmaiden,' said Mrs Ruthvens. 'We were just there as decoration. Miss Taylor made me stand at the back every time I was in a scene with her. She said she thought my bosom was too luxurious and would attract attention away from her.'

'Mother!' said Mrs Whiffle.

'It's true,' said Mrs Ruthvens. 'I had a quite splendid bosom when I was younger. I used to do what were called 'cheesecake' photographs. When we made Cleopatra, the props men used to shout into my cleavage to see if an echo came back.' She laughed.

Mrs Whiffle exchanged glances with her husband.

'You're right about the alcohol, of course,' I said. 'But as far as I can see you don't have signs of anything to make you likely to fall over.'

'There is something else,' said Mrs Whiffle. 'Mother won't like me mentioning this but her memory has been getting poor recently.'

'That's nonsense!' said Mrs Ruthvens. 'Stuff and nonsense. My memory is as good as it ever was.'

'You forget names more often than you used to,' said Mrs Whiffle.

'Just because I forgot the name of that Burton woman,' protested Mrs Ruthvens. 'And Richard.'

'It isn't just that,' said Mrs Whiffle. She turned to her husband. 'She has been more forgetful recently, hasn't she?'

Mr Whiffle nodded his agreement. 'You forgot the name of the man who runs the village shop,' he said.

'It's Johnson,' said Mrs Ruthvens. 'Something Johnson. Robert Johnson?'

'It's Peter Marshall,' said her daughter gently.

'Well I can't be expected to know the names of everyone who runs a shop,' said Mrs Ruthvens, rather defensively.

I asked Mrs Ruthvens a few simple questions, just to check out her memory. She said that Sir Alec Douglas-Home was still Prime Minister. I asked her about money. She didn't seem aware that Britain had introduced decimalisation. She said that Brighton was the nearest large town.'

I didn't want to embarrass her by telling her that the Prime Minister's name was Harold Wilson or that Barnstaple, not Brighton, was the nearest town, so I just nodded.

'Maybe we need to do a few tests,' I told her. 'I'll fix up for you to see one of the consultants at the hospital.'

'Tests!' said Mrs Ruthvens, derisively. 'What good are tests going to be?' She sounded cross and this I found surprising, partly because it was unlike her to be so aggressive and partly because of the sudden change in her mood. She pushed herself up, stood for a moment as she steadied herself with a hand on the back of a nearby chair, and then walked away. She walked slowly and rather nervously, as though afraid that she might fall, and I could not help noticing that she had a strange sort of gait, unsteady and wide legged as though she were walking along the promenade deck of a liner in a storm.

An individual's gait can tell you a good deal about any underlying pathology.

For example, the patient with Parkinson’s disease will often shuffle along, failing to lift their feet more than an inch or two off the ground, and a patient with tertiary syphilis and tabes dorsalis may have a more dramatic, stamping gait.

But although the strange gait which Mrs Ruthvens exhibited seemed to suggest something specific, something I had never seen but had read about, I couldn’t remember what it was.

As I headed out to my car, Mr Whiffle came with me. ‘She’s suffering from dementia isn’t she?’ He spoke softly, though the front door was closed and there was no way that his mother-in-law could hear him.

‘It would seem possible,’ I agreed. I was more worried about her failing to remember Richard Burton’s name than her inability to remember Peter Marshall’s name. ‘But it’s not something I’d like to diagnose after one short visit. We all have good and bad days and the elderly seem particularly prone to having their ups and downs.’

‘Is it that disease beginning with an A?’ asked Mr Whiffle. ‘I can’t remember the name of it. But I read about it in a magazine.’

‘Alzheimer’s?’ I said.

‘That’s the one. Do you think that’s what she has?’

‘I’m really not sure,’ I said. ‘Not until we have some tests done.’

The surprising truth was that my only previous experience with patients with Alzheimer’s disease had been when I had been a medical student, working in hospitals in and around Birmingham. In Bilbury, I had seen several patients who had dementia in varying degrees, usually fairly mild and manageable, but I had never seen a patient with Alzheimer’s disease.

‘Could dementia make her fall?’

‘No, I don’t think so,’ I told him. ‘That may be something else.’

With younger patients I always tried to find one diagnosis to explain all the possible signs and symptoms. But with older patients it is not uncommon for there to be more than one underlying problem causing different symptoms.

I drove back home feeling very sad. I liked Mrs Ruthvens. She was undoubtedly a ‘character’ and it was difficult not to be charmed by her. But there was something else that none of us had mentioned. I knew the former actress well enough to have noticed that there had definitely been a change in her personality. Her mood had changed very quickly and she had become more aggressive than she had ever been before. So there were three things going on that I needed to tie together. She was falling down a good deal, her memory was fading and her personality seemed to be changing.

The problem was that I had no idea what the underlying pathology could be. Was there one disorder responsible for everything? Or were there two or even three things going on? I knew I needed help from someone who could help me solve this particular puzzle and, if possible, point the way to a single diagnosis that would explain all Mrs Ruthven’s problems.

I managed to arrange for Mrs Ruthvens to see a consultant in Exeter; a physician who specialised in the care of the elderly. The plan was that he would talk to her, examine her and subject her to a few tests in order to find out what was going on.

Two weeks later he wrote to me and told me that in his view, Mrs Ruthvens was developing the type of dementia known as Alzheimer’s disease.

‘There is,’ he wrote, ‘no way of testing for this condition (though I understand that experiments are under way which will, maybe in the 1980s, enable us to visualise what is going on in the brain). More disappointingly, there is currently no treatment for this condition.’

I telephoned the consultant and after three or four attempts I managed to speak to him. I asked him if he thought it possible that the Alzheimer’s disease might be making her unsteady. He said he had never come across such a thing but that, yes, he thought it possible.

And, as far as he was concerned, that seemed to be that.

His prognosis was, to say the least, rather gloomy. He told me that he thought that Mrs Ruthvens would deteriorate steadily over the coming months and that eventually she would probably need to be admitted to a home which specialised in the care of patients with dementia.

‘It’s a gloomy business,’ he told me. ‘Worrying for the patient and distressing for the relatives and friends. Once the disease has gone past a certain point, I always think that it’s the relatives who suffer most. The patient often doesn’t know what’s happening to them but the relatives have to stand around and watch their loved one deteriorate and gradually fall apart before their eyes. A pretty terrible thing all round.’

His solitary, practical suggestion was that Mrs Ruthvens should be fitted with some sort of address tag, containing the name and telephone number of her daughter, so that, anyone who found her wandering away from home could get in touch. When he told me this, I could feel tears forming in my eyes. I knew it was a sensible idea, and something we should eventually consider, but to think of Mrs Ruthvens, so full of life, to be labelled like a parcel was just too much.

I visited Mrs Ruthvens at home and talked to her, to her daughter and to her son-in-law.

Not surprisingly, they were all very upset by the consultant's diagnosis though I wasn't sure that Mrs Ruthvens realised precisely how awful the news really was. She seemed to be deteriorating remarkably quickly and although I could find no explanation for the new symptom she was now also complaining of headaches.

I still felt that we were all missing something.

I vaguely remembered having read something in a medical journal that was relevant. But I couldn't for the life of me think what it was.

I was desperate to find the correct diagnosis. Being close doesn't count in sport and it doesn't count in medicine, either.

After wracking my brain for a week, I mentioned the problem when I was speaking to Will, the GP in the English Midlands with whom I had studied and who was still a good friend. We spoke once a week, usually on a Saturday or a Sunday, to discuss problems we had encountered during our week's work. I found these conversations enormously helpful since, as a general practitioner working alone in a fairly remote Devonshire village, I had almost no contact with other members of the profession.

Even when we couldn't help each other, we could usually help with details of a scientific paper we had read somewhere, or the contact details of a physician or surgeon who might be able to offer a useful opinion.

I told Will about Mrs Ruthvens.

'The odd thing is,' I said, 'that she has a rather peculiar way of walking. I've never seen anything quite like it before.'

I explained that she walked with her feet wide apart, as though she were walking on an unstable surface.

'She's developing dementia and has some personality changes,' I told him. 'But the gait, and the falls, don't fit in with the consultant's diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease. I know that there could be something else going on but I'd like to try to find a single diagnosis that fits all the symptoms.'

'It couldn't be Parkinson's disease? You can get some bizarre variations?'

I had already considered Parkinson's disease but at Will's suggestion I thought about it again.

Patients with Parkinson's do sometimes suffer from a form of dementia and they do have difficulty in walking. But the gait is a shuffling one; patients cannot lift their feet off the floor properly and so steps and uneven pavements are especially dangerous. And they also have difficulty in managing hand to mouth coordination and can, for example, have problems coping with cutlery.

I thought about Mrs Ruthvens.

She just didn't look as if she had Parkinson's disease.

In my experience, patients with Parkinson's tend to have a blank face, sometimes with a ghost of a smile, and dull eyes, not focussed, apparently looking into the distance.

'No,' I said. 'I'm sure she hasn't got Parkinson's.'

'Well I haven't the foggiest what it could be,' Will admitted. 'But why don't you speak to Bussage Hill?'

I couldn't for the life of me remember knowing anyone called Bussage Hill, or why I should speak to him. I said so.

'He was in our year at medical school,' said Will. 'He had a twin brother called Chalford who was also studying medicine. They both married nurses while they were still students. You must remember them! They weren't really part of our crowd because they both lived fairly well-ordered, sensible lives. The four of them shared a terraced house in Handsworth and the Hills were the only students in our year who always wore freshly ironed shirts.'

Suddenly it came back to me. 'Was Bussage a rotund little guy with bottle glass spectacles and a funny, high-pitched giggle? He drove something small and very sensible. A Hillman Imp I think it was.'

'That's Bussage! His brother looked almost identical but didn't have the giggle.'

'So why do I want to speak to Bussage Hill?'

'He's a neurologist at Oxford. After he qualified he did a PhD in cerebrospinal fluid dynamics and now he's doing research work into dementia. I only know all this because the other day I saw a research paper written by him in one of the medical journals. I'll get a photocopy made and post it off to you. It's pretty incomprehensible stuff to be honest but the paper has all his contact details.'

And so three days later I found myself talking to Bussage Hill.

We had never been friends at medical school. Students tend to form into small groups with similar interests and Bussage and his brother had, as Will remembered, lived very different lives to the rest of us.

The one thing I could remember about Bussage was that if he had been a bicycle he would have been one of those battered old bone shakers that the owners never bother to padlock because they know that no one in or out of their right mind would have bothered to steal it.

Imagine a bicycle with two soft tyres, no working lights, a rusty frame, handlebars slightly askew and a well-worn, lopsided saddle and you'll have a good idea what Bussage would have looked like if he had been a bicycle. He may have always worn clean and neatly ironed shirts but he nevertheless managed to look as if life had given him a good battering.

Fortunately, Bussage remembered me.

It helped that he had seen some of my articles and that he'd read a couple of my books.

'Normal pressure hydrocephalus,' said Bussage, when I'd finished detailing Mrs Ruthven's symptoms. He sounded excited. 'That's what she's got.'

'What the devil is normal pressure hydrocephalus?' I asked him.

'Oh, I'm not surprised you haven't heard of it,' he said, in that rather dismissive way common among men and women who have specialised in some esoteric branch of anything. 'A couple of guys called Raymond Adams and Hakim Dow wrote a paper in the *Journal of Neurological Science* back in 1965. It's still pretty cutting edge stuff.'

He then proceeded to explain the condition to me.

'You remember that the space between the brain and the skull is filled with cerebrospinal fluid – there to protect the brain in case of injury?'

'Yes,' I replied.

I have often found that in addition to being rather superior, super specialists have difficulty in differentiating between the stuff any medical student should know and the stuff that only specialists are likely to know. The result is that they can sometimes be unintentionally patronising.

'Normally, the cerebrospinal fluid is produced, circulates and is then reabsorbed,' continued Bussage. 'Occasionally, things go wrong and the fluid isn't reabsorbed as fast as it is produced. So then the liquid accumulates in the ventricles – the spaces within the brain – and the brain is put under pressure.'

'But why is it called 'normal pressure hydrocephalus?' I asked, puzzled.

This wasn't making much sense. If there was too much cerebrospinal fluid it would make sense for the pressure to be high – not normal.

'Ah, logically, you might expect that with there being too much fluid in a confined space there would be an increase in the fluid pressure,' agreed Bussage. 'But this doesn't happen with normal pressure hydrocephalus. The intracranial pressure remains normal and the fluid pressure squashes the brain.'

'So, where does the excess fluid go?' I asked, still puzzled.

'The ventricles dilate in order to accommodate the extra fluid. And since there is only so much space within the skull the expanding ventricles, full of fluid, damage the brain.'

I was beginning to understand. This was a very strange disease indeed. 'What are the symptoms?' I asked.

'It usually starts with a funny wobbly walk and then patients show signs of dementia. After a while they start to show signs of urinary incontinence. Has your patient got urinary incontinence?'

'No,' I replied. 'No, I'm pretty sure she hasn't.'

'That's good. Then if I'm right, and I'm sure I am, then she's still in the early stages.'

'It sounds rare. Is it?'

'That's the thing. Some of the guys doing research into this reckon that it probably affects thousands of people who have been mistakenly diagnosed as suffering from Alzheimer's.'

'Is there any treatment?'

'Ah, well that's a good question,' said Bussage. 'There isn't a cure available in this country. But there's a surgeon I know in the States who's been getting amazing results by putting in a little plastic tube which he calls a shunt. The shunt helps by draining away the excess fluid. His problem is finding patients to operate on. Because no one knows about the disease he doesn't get any referrals. And he needs patients who haven't been too badly affected. If the brain has been squashed for too long then the operation doesn't really help. Can your patient come and see me? I could do a few tests and if I think that's what she's got and she's game I could ask this guy in America to include her in his trial. I've got a fairly decent grant and I might be able to swing the price of a couple of air fares to send her and a relative over there.'

He sounded terribly excited and I agreed to get in touch with the family straight away and to get back to him that same day.

When I went back to see them, the Whiffles sounded just as excited as Bussage Hill had been, though I tried to downplay expectations as much as I reasonably could.

And within an hour I had arranged for Mr and Mrs Whiffle and Mrs Ruthvens to visit Bussage at the hospital just outside Oxford where he had privileges as a visiting consultant of neurology.

From that point on things happened very quickly.

Bussage Hill's examination and tests convinced him that Mrs Ruthvens was, indeed, suffering from normal pressure hydrocephalus and four days later, Mrs Ruthvens and her daughter flew to America where the American physician repeated Bussage's tests and doubtless added a few of his own.

Less than a week after that, Mrs Ruthvens had an operation to insert a shunt to drain away the excess cerebrospinal fluid which was accumulating and putting pressure on her brain.

I have to confess that I shared their excitement.

It isn't often that a country doctor, lost in the 'sticks' as town-dwellers call the countryside, becomes involved in the discovery and treatment of a new disease, let alone manages to play a very small part in a new advance in medical science.

Mr Whiffle telephoned me every day when he had heard from his wife and he kept me fully informed.

The news of Mrs Ruthvens's trip across the Atlantic had spread around the village like wildfire (it is quite an event in Bilbury if a villager goes as far as Exeter, a trip to London is regarded as an adventure and although a few villagers do travel widely, it is a fact that for most Bilburians anything which involves passports and an aeroplane is generally considered to be on a par with space travel) and Mr Whiffle confided that he had a dozen people to call whenever he had news from our erstwhile colony.

The dozen villagers who were called with the news direct then passed it on along a telephone chain which seemed to cover most of the village.

Almost every day, several villagers would ring Bilbury Grange to let me know how Mrs Ruthvens was getting on. Patsy, who usually answers our telephone, dealt with these calls and thanked each person for their kindness in keeping us informed. I myself kept my friend Will fully informed of the progress which was made.

I had been a keen student of medical history for some years (and had for some years harboured a desire to write a small tome on the subject myself) and I had long ago become aware that major developments in medicine occur at very infrequent intervals.

It was back in the first half of the 19th century that improvements in clean water supplies, and the provision of efficient sewage facilities, helped cut down the incidence of infectious diseases which were killing millions. Infectious diseases such as cholera had a devastating effect on infant mortality rates and it was the reduction in the incidence of such disorders which had such an impact on general mortality rates.

Then, in the second half of the same century, Joseph Lister and Louis Pasteur explained the principles of antisepsis and helped show how mortality rates in the operating theatre could be cut dramatically. Ignaz Semmelweiss showed how puerperal fever could be avoided, and his work helped make pregnancy less of a life or death lottery. William Thomas Morton and John Snow developed the first anaesthetics and Rontgen introduced X-rays. Florence Nightingale revolutionised nursing and the medical profession began, at last, to impose scientific methods upon the use of age old drugs such as aspirin, morphine and digitalis.

I was conscious that, in comparison to the century which had preceded it, the 20th century had proved disappointing.

Alexander Fleming had been alert enough to spot the importance of penicillin, and the introduction of steroids and oral contraceptives had changed the world in a number of ways.

But the big steps forward in the development of medicine as a science had undeniably been taken in the 19th century. And it seemed that all we could hope for now were incremental steps; the identification of diseases which had hitherto been unknown and the discovery of new therapies.

It seemed to me that Bussage Hill and his colleagues had, doubtless through the usual mixture of hard work and good fortune, made as vital a breakthrough as had been made in my lifetime.

And when, two weeks later, Mrs Ruthvens returned home to Bilbury, I felt proud to have seen, almost at first hand, a medical development which seemed to me akin to a miracle.

Mrs Ruthvens now walked easily and confidently. Her gait was, I suspected, every bit as distinguished and as ladylike as it had been when she'd been in her theatrical prime. And the symptoms of early dementia had disappeared completely. And so, she reported with delight, had the headaches. She was, to resort to a cliché, back to her old self.

It is, I think, a fact that when you have read a book that has touched you, and has meant something to you, then that book will be with you always; never forgotten and always influencing your life in sometimes small but memorable ways.

Similarly, when you meet a character who touches your heart or soul in some way then he or she will live forever inside you.

Mrs Ruthvens had charmed me before her illness. But that, I suspect, had, although doubtless genuine, been a superficial sort of theatrical charm. Now, however, I felt blessed to know her and to have seen her resurrected from a fate which many regard as worse than death itself: the wasting of the mind while the body still thrives.

There are many within the medical profession who rather look down their noses at family doctors in general and at country doctors in particular.

We are, they say with their often condescending manner, stuck in our old ways, dealing with coughs and colds and aches and pains and relying on hospital specialists to deal with anything more than a little out of the ordinary.

But, for an hour or so at least, I felt as if I too were at the cutting edge of medical progress.

It was not, of course, a feeling which lasted for long.

An hour after I had welcomed Mrs Ruthvens back home, I had an evening surgery to conduct.

My first patient of the surgery had scabies. My second had indigestion. And my third had ears full of hardening wax which needed softening and syringing out with the aid of nothing more sophisticated than a jug full of warm water.

But I like to think they all needed me just as much as Mrs Ruthvens had done.

Two Long Screws and a Saggy Mattress

I don’t think people would be queuing up to protest if I said that I was not exceptionally skilled at doing odd jobs around the house. Nor would there be any disagreement if it were alleged that I tend to make a good deal of noise and fuss when performing simple do-it-yourself tasks.

All I can say in my own defence is that in my experience, thumbs and fingers are exceptionally sensitive and respond poorly when battered by hammers, screwdrivers or other implements. It is a known anatomical fact that all ten digits are well supplied with nerves, and it seems to me to be perfectly natural to say ‘Ouch’ (or more) when one or other of these sensitive parts is hit with a hammer.

Indeed, I think it’s probably fair to say that when there is a small job to be done at Bilbury Grange (a task around the house which is too small for me to feel comfortable about calling in a professional) there is much holding of breath and covering of ears among those who may be within a quarter of a mile or so.

The cats disappear en masse and huddle together on the bed or in the airing cupboard, the sheep run to a far corner of their field, our pig (donated to our small menagerie by kindly American visitors who won him in a skittle competition but realised they could hardly put him on an aeroplane and take him home with them) retreats into a corner of his sty and goes to sleep, and even Ben, my old and faithful Welsh sheepdog keeps his distance. Miss Johnson shuts herself in the room where she keeps the patients’ files or, if she thinks things are likely to get really bad, she climbs onto her elderly sit-up-and-beg bicycle and pedals home to her cottage until she thinks the danger period is over. If we had neighbours, they would doubtless close their doors and windows and hide under the stairs. Patsy alerts the plumber (in case I puncture a pipe), the electrician (in case I put a nail through a wire), a plasterer (to repair holes in the walls), a painter and decorator (to tidy up) and the emergency services lest I set fire to the house or remove a limb in error.

Of course, if the job is a big one then I have absolutely no qualms about calling in a professional.

If there has been a gale and we have lost a few slates from the roof then I call for Mr Yates, the roofer, a fine fellow who is half man and half monkey and who finds it so easy to climb up onto our main house roof that he rarely bothers with a ladder. He jumps up onto the water butt just outside the boiler room, uses a window sill as a launching pad to climb up onto the boiler room roof, tiptoes along a valley and, within considerably less time than it would take me to find a suitable ladder, let alone put it into place, he is leaning up against one of our rather grand chimneys surveying his private world.

If the boiler stops working (it works perfectly well throughout the summer when its reliability is of little consequence but always breaks down several times during the winter months partly, I suspect, just to show that it can and partly because it enjoys the attention), then I call on Mr Bucklebury who knows precisely where to give it a thump and which of his fine collection of wrenches to use for the operation.

I have tried thumping the boiler with a wrench but this never works for me. I have watched Mr Bucklebury carefully and have concluded that this is either because I was using the wrong sort of wrench or because I didn’t know the precise part of the boiler to hit.

But I always feel rather shy about calling in an expert when it is clear that the job which needs to be done would not be much of a challenge for the average ham-fisted ten-year-old child.

Tradesmen often have advertisements and visiting cards which promise ‘No job too small’ but that, to be blunt, is a plain old-fashioned lie. Most of the local tradesmen who live in or around Bilbury and are patients of mine but even they will sometimes baulk if asked to come out to oil a barn door or unstick a sticking letterbox.

And, to be honest, there is always the embarrassment of calling someone to deal with a trivial problem that I know, and they know, could have been dealt with by anyone who possessed a hammer, a screwdriver and a decent complement of fingers and thumbs. I feel mortified when I have to call someone out to deal with something so trivial that any reasonably capable granny could sort it out without hesitation.

It is true that I could, of course, always phone Thumper or Patchy or any one of a dozen other friends in the village. But that seems too much like taking advantage of our friendships. They would come round and sort out whatever needed sorting out. And there would be no murmur of protest or complaint or criticism. But I’d feel guilty.

The trouble is that Bilbury Grange is an old house and, like all old houses, it is prone to developing problems. There is always something that needs doing.

I used to allow small jobs to accumulate so that when I needed to call someone in I could give them a list of problems to sort out. But the trouble with that policy is that you end up having to live with something which really needs to be dealt with sooner rather than later.

A dripping tap may seem trivial, and you may think you can wait until another tap starts to drip or a radiator starts to leak or a drain gets clogged. But a tap which drips for months on end can become surprisingly annoying and instead of simply being ignored as it drips away, the constant sound of water falling onto porcelain may become a domestic form of Chinese water torture.

A door which sticks because it has warped, and which needs a little work with a file or a plane rather than a squirt of oil, can become intensely irritating.

'I'll just wait until a window gets jammed or we need a new shelf putting up and then I'll call the carpenter,' I think to myself. And for a while this seems a sensible course of action. We get used to pulling the door to and fro or we leave it open all the time.

But then something happens and the irritation returns.

We realise that there is a draft because the door is open all the time. Or someone carrying a tray of food tries to kick the door open, fails, falls and spreads crockery and sandwiches all over a large area of carpet.

It is then that we realise that the door needs dealing with now and not in three, six or twelve months' time when we have acquired a list of small jobs which will make a visit from the carpenter worthwhile.

And so, nervously and reluctantly, I have tried to learn how to deal with a few of the simplest odd jobs myself.

I have long been the proud possessor of a bow saw and an axe (for removing small branches from trees in the garden and chopping up bits of fallen timber) but there aren't many household jobs which can be tackled with a bow saw or an axe so I recently expanded my repertoire by visiting Peter Marshall's emporium and buying a few additional tools: a hammer, a set of screwdrivers (the little ones for screwing in small screws and the big ones for taking the lids off pots of paint), a pair of pliers (which I find useful for pulling out nails when they haven't gone in quite as straight as might be preferred), a file, a chisel and half a dozen spanners which, Peter Marshall assured me, would come in very handy if I ever wanted a spanner.

He wanted to sell me a spirit level and a metal tape measure but I rejected these on the grounds that I would be happy to deal with a problem and that I didn't much care about fine tuning.

He did, however, also sell me a rather fine metal tool box which, he assured me, is an essential piece of equipment for every handyman.

The box, which has space for enough equipment to build a full scale model of the Eiffel Tower, weighs around three tons when quite empty but it does look very professional.

Peter assured me that bright orange tool boxes are very fashionable though knowing him I had, and still have, a grave suspicion that the bright orange tool boxes were obtained cheaply from a wholesaler who couldn't find enough colour blind customers.

When I dig out my orange tool kit to tackle a job around the house, Patsy and I have a well-established routine. We both know that any task, however small, requires two of us.

I retrieve the tool box from wherever it is hiding and check that the hammer, the saw or the screwdriver are all in situ (these items have, I have discovered, a strange habit of escaping from captivity and hiding themselves somewhere around the house or the garden). And I also find a pair of tough gardening gloves to help protect my fingers and thumbs. The gloves don't provide a great deal of protection but they do help stop the blood from spreading everywhere.

Patsy's role is to collect together a large bottle of antiseptic, a box of fabric sticking plasters, a packet of gauze and an assortment of crepe bandages. And, as I have already suggested, to make the precautionary telephone calls: putting various experts on stand-by.

I had found the tool box, checked the contents and was psyching myself up to tackle the latest small problem (a loose doorknob) when my concentration was disturbed by the ringing of the telephone.

'Saved by the bell!' said Patsy, who sounded genuinely relieved at the interruption. 'I'll see who it is.'

She darted off, leaving me to stare at my task for the day: a wobbly doorknob.

Of course, as I knew well, no workmen worth his salt would use the word 'doorknob' these days. He would, instead, doubtless prefer to use the phrase: 'Portal Control Mechanism and Ingress/Egress Mobility Enhancement Device'.

And he would not say it was wobbly, he would say it 'required securing and restabilising'.

The object of my attention was an old-fashioned brass knob that looked as if it had probably been originally screwed into position by the skilled workmen who had first built Bilbury Grange. Queen Victoria had doubtless been on the throne when the doorknob had been fixed into position, and Tom King and Jem Mace were doubtless contesting the English Bare Knuckle Boxing Championships.

There were no visible signs that the knob had ever been moved, amended or even fiddled with during the century that it had been in situ.

I bent down and wiggled the knob.

It was quickly clear that it had become loose because one of the two screws which should have held it in position had come loose. It was so loose that it fell on the floor when I jiggled the knob. I picked up the screw. It looked as if it had been hand carved by a skilled 19th century artisan. I wondered, idly, if they had screw making machines in those distant days or if patient workmen produced the things one at a time in an atelier in Clerkenwell or some forgotten corner of Wolverhampton.

I put the screw back into the hole from which it had fallen, picked out a suitable screwdriver, and tried to tighten it.

It just went round and round.

It seemed that the hole into which it had originally been secured had, for some bizarre reason of its own, expanded and become too spacious for the screw which had been doing a difficult and important job calmly and without fuss for a century or more.

I undid the other screw and removed it. The doorknob now came off in my hand, leaving just a spindle behind.

I was staring at the loose knob wondering how I could fasten it more securely and wondering if filling the screw hole with glue would do the trick, when Patsy returned.

'It's Ethel Fairfield,' she told me, rather wearily. 'She says she needs you to go round to see her.'

'Did she say what was wrong?'

'She wouldn't tell me,' replied Patsy. 'She just said that she wants you to visit and that what she needs can't be dealt with at the evening surgery.'

I sighed and put the doorknob down on the floor.

Mrs Fairfield is, I'm afraid, a rather difficult patient.

She genuinely enjoys poor health and enjoys it far more than anyone else I've ever known.

A very distinguished 19th century French neurologist called Jean-Martin Charcot, who was one of the world's pioneering neurologists and, as though that were not enough, also a professor of anatomical pathology, described patients who have a long list of signs, symptoms and ill-defined complaints as suffering from 'le maladie du petit papier'.

The name was well chosen since, in addition to requiring their doctor to maintain a massive medical record, most such patients bring with them a long list of their problems.

As I have explained before, it is a traditional medical practice, and a primary tenet of good diagnosis, to try to find a single disease to explain all of a patient's health problems. But it has to be said that with patients such as Mrs Fairfield this is rarely, if ever possible.

In addition to her wealth of ill-defined illnesses, Mrs Fairfield enjoys and wallows in the injustices of fate. She clutches every misery she can find to her bosom with great enthusiasm. She loves the attention and the sympathy that she gets and as a result she considers a day without disasters, disappointments and frustrations to be a wasted day. On those rare occasions when she cannot easily locate a source of anguish, she will do everything she can to find one or, preferably, two.

'The knob has come loose,' I told Patsy, quite unnecessarily. Since it was on the floor at the time this was a considerable understatement.

My wife did not seem surprised by this. Indeed, it had been Patsy who had originally drawn my attention to the problem.

'Ah,' she said, nodding wisely. 'Do you have a remedy to go with the diagnosis?'

'I do!' I said, proudly.

She could not have appeared more impressed if I had announced that I'd managed to find a way to split an atom with nothing more than a soup spoon and a nutcracker.

'One of the screws has fallen out,' I explained. 'So I thought I might try filling the hole with glue and then putting the screw back into place.'

'Ah,' said Patsy.

I felt that she did not seem as impressed by the specifics of my proposal as she had been by the generality, when the plan had been nothing more than a promise.

'Or I could move the knob round so that both the screws go into fresh wood.' I suggested. I looked at the spindle. 'I really don't think we want to fiddle around with the lock. It looks a bit complicated.'

'We definitely don't want to fiddle around with the lock,' said Patsy, quite firmly. 'That's definitely not an option.'

'We could just leave the knob off and use my plier thingies to turn the spindle if we wanted to open the door from this side,' I suggested. I tentatively tried gripping the spindle with my plier thingies. It wasn't as easy as I had thought it ought to be. 'We could keep the plier thingies on this shelf so that they were always handy.'

Patsy did not look too thrilled by this suggestion. She has, in the past, accused me of being something of a 'bodger' when it comes to doing chores around the house. I think this probably stems from the time when I glued a piece of glass taken from a picture frame over a large crack in a window pane in the kitchen. My claim that this would act as an area of double-glazing, and therefore preserve heat during the colder months, did not seem convincing even to me. When I start looking for quick, easy solutions to complicated problems she calls me Mr Bodger.

(This reminds me of a time when I asked Thumper for the name of a plumber who would be able to deal with a small problem in Bilbury Grange without re-plumbing the whole house. 'I know just the fellow,' said Thumper, scribbling a phone number down on a scrap of paper. 'Call old Bodgett. He'll sort you out.' I duly rang the number and asked to speak to Mr Bodgett. Unfortunately, the man's name was Birkenshaw. He was not amused by the nickname he had been given. Indeed, he was so not amused that he refused to come out and deal with our problem. He even rang several of his colleagues and told them not to do any work for us. Thumper thought the whole thing was hilarious.)

'Then, when we get fed up with using the plier thingies to open the door, we could ring someone up and ask a professional to take a look.'

'That's a very good idea,' said Patsy, who has never made any secret of the fact that she believes that all do-it-yourself chores around the house are best tackled by professionals.

'But who?' I asked. 'Do we need to call the carpenter or the locksmith?'

Patsy looked at me and frowned. 'I doubt if it matters terribly much,' she said. 'But meanwhile, you'd better get off and see what Mrs Fairfield wants.'

Mrs Fairfield lives in a neat, thatched cottage no more than a mile away from Bilbury Grange and I have visited her so often that I suspect that, if I had a little more faith, the car would take me there by itself if I just told it to take me round to Mrs Fairfield.

When my predecessor, Dr Brownlow, first started in practice, he did his rounds and visits on horseback and he once told me that his horse knew the locations of his most regular patients so well that on getting onto his horse's back, or into the dogcart, he claimed that he simply had to say the patient's name and then sit back and wait to be taken to his destination.

I didn't believe this but Dr Brownlow's former butler, who is now the practise nurse and matron of the Brownlow Country Hotel, insists that the tale was true.

Mrs Fairfield is a woman who probably regards the word 'unfashionable' as a compliment. Her cottage is furnished in such a way that if a Victorian of either sex were ever transported by time machine to the 1970s and, by chance, found him or herself a guest of Mrs Fairfield, he or she would feel very much at home.

Like many ladies of her age she still eschews electricity, which she regards as an untrustworthy modern invention. She says that we may consider her old-fashioned but insists that in due course, when we have all been blown up or poisoned by allowing electricity into our homes, we will wish we too had refused to allow the electricity board to fill our homes with wiring. She has a telephone, but no electrical appliances.

Her home is lit by paraffin lamps and heated by a coal fire in the drawing room. She cooks on a huge four oven coal fired AGA which dominates her kitchen. After a couple of glasses of sherry she once told me that she regarded electricity as being nothing more than the work of the devil. This may sound strange to those who live in towns and cities but it is not an uncommon view in North Devon.

When I first told my medical friend Will that many of the patients I look after live in homes without electricity he, like our other friends who live in towns and cities where street lighting is commonplace, was astonished. 'But this is the 1970s!' he said. 'I didn't think anyone lived in a house without electricity!'

One day, when he and his family were having a short holiday in Bilbury, I took him round to see Mrs Fairfield.

He was, he admitted, utterly enchanted by seeing a cottage lit by lamps and heated by an open fire and he later admitted that he thought it would be dangerous if he ever practised in my part of the world.

'To my astonishment, I sympathise with your eccentric patients,' he confessed. 'I rather envy their old-fashioned lifestyle and I fear I could quite easily adopt some of their suspicions and fears – particularly the one regarding electricity.'

He said he could cope very well without television or telephone answering machines and I do not think he was joking.

I noted, however, that he did not tell his wife of his secret affection for a 19th century lifestyle. I think he knew that she would not be keen to give up modern appliances such as the washing machine and vacuum cleaner.

'Ah, do come in doctor,' said Mrs Fairfield when she opened the door of her cottage. She was wearing a pink gingham frock with lots of stiff petticoats and had her hair in side bunches. She looked as if she had been dressed by the costume designer for a local dramatic society trying to find a 'look' for a 1950s teenage girl. Mrs Fairfield hadn't been a teenager since the 1930s.

I know she saw me arrive because I can always see her peering out through the net curtains but she never opens the door until I use the big, solid, iron knocker (which is made out of a shire horse's shoe). I think this is partly because she doesn't want me to know that she has been spying through the net curtains and partly because she thinks it rather improper to open the door until a caller has knocked upon it.

She led me into her drawing room and invited me to sit down. 'Would you like a glass of sherry?' she asked.

I politely declined, explaining that I was driving and that the authorities were now taking a dim view of drivers who drank alcohol.

'Oh, that's so silly,' she said. 'My father wouldn't drive his car unless he had drunk at least half a bottle of port. He said the car did 15 miles to the gallon and he did the same to the half a bottle of port.' She always told me this and I suspect that she was being honest. What she didn't mention was that as a result of his affection for port, her father suffered terribly from gout and spent the last decade of his life in an old-fashioned bath-chair, unable to walk more than a couple of yards because of badly swollen big toes. I remember him well. He had a very old set of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which he claimed to have read from Aard-vark to zymurgy and, as a result, he liked to think of himself as something of an intellectual. When I first met him he described himself as a 'suppository of wisdom'.

Ignoring my refusal, which she seemed to regard as of no consequence and nothing more than a sign of a good upbringing, Mrs Fairfield poured me a large dose of sherry, using a schooner glass that would have been more appropriate for beer than for wine of any description. In Britain, a schooner is a large sherry glass but at some point in her life Mrs Fairfield had been given a set of half a dozen Australian schooners, designed for beer, and she had confused the British measure with the Australian one. When she wasn't looking, I would always pour my half pint or so of sherry into a large earthenware pot which contained an aspidistra plant. The aspidistra clearly loved sherry for it was the healthiest plant in the village. If you sat within a yard of it you could smell alcohol. I think that Mrs Fairfield probably thought that all aspidistra plants smelt of sherry. This ritual followed the same pattern every time I visited.

'What can I do for you?' I asked her.

'I need you to turn my mattress,' said Mrs Fairfield. 'I bought a new mattress three months ago and the man who delivered it said that I should have it turned every three months.'

I looked at her, not quite sure what to say.

I have, in my life, been asked to do many strange things. I've helped a patient build a lawnmower (my contribution consisted mostly of holding nuts and bolts and cursing myself when I dropped them in the long grass). I have cut a budgerigar's claws. I have driven a patient to the railway station. I have helped to extricate a cat trapped behind an oil tank. And I have liberated a mouse from inside a radiator. But I had never before turned a mattress.

'It's gone a little saggy on one side,' said Mrs Fairfield, when she had led me upstairs, peeled back the bedclothes and moved a surprisingly skimpy satin nightdress from the pillow.

What she said was absolutely true.

One side of the bed looked as though it had long been the nocturnal resting place for one of the larger mammals, a hippopotamus or a rhinoceros for example.

'Couldn't you simply sleep on the other side of the bed for a while?'

'Oh no, certainly not,' said Mrs Fairfield, quite shocked. 'That was always my husband's side of the bed. I have always slept on the left side of the bed.'

Mrs Fairfield has been a widow for several years. Her husband died of a heart attack while still quite young. He was fond of food, a gourmand rather than a gourmet, and after his untimely demise, he had to be moved out of the house through an upstairs window because his corpse proved to be far too large to manoeuvre up and down the narrow staircase. Heaven knows how he had managed to get himself up and down the stairs when he had been alive.

Patsy's father loaned and manipulated a tractor with a forklift attachment and while Mrs Fairfield was distracted and comforted at a neighbour's house, her erstwhile spouse was pushed and shoved onto a pallet placed upon the two forks, lowered out of the bedroom window and transferred to the back of one of Mr Kennet's trailers.

The problems didn't end there.

Poor Mr Fairfield was too big to fit inside the undertaker's hearse.

The undertaker had covered him with a tarpaulin and the late Mr Fairfield had been transferred to his premises on Mr Kennet's tractor. At the workshop behind the funeral home, a suitably extensive coffin had been built around him.

I don't think we have more than our fair share of deaths in Bilbury but we certainly have more than our fair share of trouble with bodies and coffins. There was, I remember, one incident when a coffin ended up being washed down a river during a storm.

'Have you thought about investing in a new mattress?' I asked her.

‘This is a new mattress!’ said Mrs Fairfield. ‘I bought it last year. Peter Marshall ordered it in especially for me. It was made by a company which makes mattresses for royalty.’ She pulled back the sheet and proudly showed me a label which contained the crest of a European monarch I did not know existed. ‘It came in a very large lorry,’ she announced, as if this gave the mattress extra kudos. ‘A pantechnicon I think they call them. The lorry was so big that the driver got stuck and the road past the Duck and Puddle was blocked for several hours.’

I remembered the incident well. Thumper, Patchy and I had been having lunch when the vehicle had got stuck. The driver, exhausted and bad tempered by his attempts to persuade his vehicle to go round a corner designed for dog carts and pony traps, had come into the pub for a break. As a result of the vehicle being stuck Thumper, Patchy and I had been trapped and stranded and had had to remain in the bar far longer than we had intended.

After some lubrication, the driver had succeeded in extricating his vehicle. He had then parked it in a ditch and gone to sleep.

It was two days later when the now sober but also embarrassed driver had finally left the village, aided by two breakdown trucks and Mr Kennet’s second best tractor.

I lifted one corner of the mattress. It seemed very heavy. In my experience, mattresses are always heavier and more cumbersome than you think they ought to be.

‘I’m not really sure that moving mattresses around is part of my job as your GP,’ I said hesitantly.

Mrs Fairfield stared at me, as though I’d made an indecent remark or an improper suggestion.

‘Good heavens, doctor!’ she said. ‘I am surprised at you. I always thought of you as a friend.’ She paused. ‘Besides,’ she continued, ‘I have a bad back. If the mattress isn’t just right then my back will give me a lot of trouble. I thought you doctors were very keen on preventative medicine. Isn’t it supposed to be the ‘in-thing’ these days?’

I know when I’m defeated; outflanked, out manoeuvred and out gunned.

I bent down and removed the sheets from the bed. The mattress was equipped with two handles on each side. I took hold of the two handles nearest to me and lifted. Just raising the mattress a foot off the base took an enormous effort. I let go and the mattress thumped back onto the base.

‘You’ll have to do better than that!’ said Mrs Fairfield. ‘It’s only a mattress!’

‘It’s a very big mattress,’ I pointed out.

‘It’s called a king size,’ said Mrs Fairfield proudly, ‘though Mr Marshall said that may be because of the endorsement.’ She pointed to the label with the royal crest.

‘I think ‘king size’ is just one of the sizes they make,’ I said, though you could write what I know about mattresses on a crumbly aspirin tablet.

I made another attempt to lift the mattress. This time I managed to lift the mattress several feet into the air. I dragged it towards me and then raised it to a vertical position. It was very heavy. I have not done a great deal of mattress turning in my life, it has never been a speciality of mine, but I remembered, at that moment, that it is terribly easy, while wrestling with a mattress, to become confused and to forget which way the mattress was lying when you started out. It is perfectly possible to move a mattress about on a bed and get so confused that you end up with it back in exactly the same place it was when the whole business started.

‘You need to turn it round and over,’ said Mrs Fairfield. ‘You must make sure that the bottom is at the top and the top is at the bottom and the left is on the right and the…’

‘…and the right is on the left,’ I finished.

‘And be careful of the bedside tables,’ said Mrs Fairfield. ‘I don’t want them damaging.’

‘Of course,’ I said.

‘And the light shade. It’s very close to the top of the mattress, the way you’ve got it at the moment.’

I closed my eyes and tried to summon up my energy for the next part of the procedure. I remembered her late husband, Mr Fairfield, was a smoker and was known to have bitten through the stems of seven or eight pipes. When questioned about this, Mrs Fairfield always insisted that he bit through his pipe stems because he had a bad temper and used to get very angry. But I never believed her. Mr Fairfield himself told me that he used to bite his pipe whenever his wife annoyed him with one of her silly sayings or opinions. If that had truly been the case then I’m surprised that he only bit through seven or eight pipes.

‘I long ago learned not to argue with her,’ he told me in a rare moment of candour. ‘I usually just keep quiet. I only ever bite through my pipe when I feel an almost overwhelming desire to strangle her.’

Mrs Fairfield said that Mr Fairfield died of an excess of prejudices and too much impatience but I always suspected that in truth her husband died of too much tolerance and a great desire to avoid confrontation. It was suppressing his feelings that did the damage. If he’d shouted occasionally, or thrown some crockery from time to time, he might have lived a little longer.

Of course, weighing slightly north of 30 stone didn’t help much.

I always remembered him with great understanding and some fondness.

I remember that he had on several occasions tried to lose weight. He had once gone to a hotel for a month. ‘The food there is terrible,’ he told me, ‘I thought that if I went somewhere with rotten food I’d be bound to lose some weight.’

But it hadn’t worked.

He had come back weighing half a stone more than he’d weighed when he’d left home. It turned out that he had persuaded the hotel chef to serve him a cooked breakfast three times a day. Huge piles of sausages, bacon, fried eggs, grilled tomatoes, baked beans and fried bread had done the damage.

I had pretended to be cross with him but what can you do with someone who thinks up such a sure fire plan for losing weight and then thinks up a sure fire plan for getting round it?

Inch by inch I pulled the mattress across the bed towards me. I wondered why they hadn’t included ‘mattress turning’ in the medical school curriculum. It was becoming clear my medical education had been sadly lacking in a number of areas.

‘I see that Mrs Oswald is having trouble with her knees again,’ said Mrs Fairfield. ‘She has a lot of trouble with them. I’ve told her that you won’t be able to help her and she should go and see my osteopath in Taunton.’

‘That’s very kind of you,’ I said, through gritted teeth. I fervently wished I had a pipe to bite through. The mattress, standing upright, was now balanced almost on the edge of the bed.

‘Professor Entwhistle, that’s my osteopath, has a wonderful manner,’ said Mrs Fairfield. ‘And he’s a very talented man. He has many diplomas in frames on his consulting room wall. He’s cured many patients.’

‘Hmph,’ I said, still clutching the mattress. I was beginning to perspire and wished I’d taken off my jacket. Actually, I was beginning to wish I’d had the telephone disconnected. Or maybe I should have taken that job as a ship’s doctor that I’d seen advertised in the *British Medical Journal*. Patsy could have come with me and we could have sailed around the world. I was pretty sure that no ship’s doctor would be expected to turn a mattress.

‘He’s been so successful that you people are always trying to shut him down,’ said Mrs Fairfield. ‘It’s just jealousy, of course. I really think you should leave him alone.’

‘I haven’t done anything to him,’ I gasped. ‘I don’t even know the fellow.’

‘You people are always saying bad things about him,’ said Mrs Fairfield. ‘You doctors and the police.’

‘The police?’

‘That business with the young girl was wildly exaggerated,’ said Mrs Fairfield. ‘Professor Entwhistle told me the truth about that. And the pills from Mexico are perfectly legal in Mexico so I can’t see why he should get into so much trouble for prescribing them over here.’

I muttered something and tried to scratch my nose which was itching.

‘I hear that Frank is dying,’ she said. ‘It’s just a matter of time now. Poor Gilly.’

‘Frank Parsons? At the Duck and Puddle?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where on earth did you hear that?’ I demanded, rather crossly. ‘He’s doing very well.’

‘Oh,’ said Mrs Fairfield. She actually sounded disappointed.

‘Don’t just let it flop down,’ said Mrs Fairfield. ‘You’ll make a lot of dust if you do. My cleaner came in to clean yesterday and she did this room from top to bottom.’

It suddenly occurred to me to wonder why, since Mr Fairfield had been dead for quite a while, the fairly new mattress had acquired such a huge dip in one side. Mrs Fairfield looked to weigh no more than a hungry sparrow. Who had been sleeping on that side of the bed? Why wasn’t he moving the damned mattress? It was his fault it had a dip in it.

I tried to lower the mattress steadily but suddenly found that as the mattress fell, it was taking me with it. The mattress landed back on the base with a crash, with me lying on top of it. Any remaining dignity I had brought with me when I had arrived had now evaporated.

‘Where’s Fluffy?’ demanded Mrs Fairfield suddenly.

‘Fluffy?’ I asked.

‘My Pekinese,’ explained Mrs Fairfield, her voice raising towards the sort of level associated with hysteria. ‘Have you crushed him? You have, haven’t you? You’ve killed Fluffy!’

I scrambled off the mattress as quickly as I could, lifted it a little and peered underneath. To my intense relief there were no crushed dogs to be seen. I looked for Mrs Fairfield to give her the good news but she had disappeared. I wondered idly if crushing a dog while moving a mattress was an offence for which I could have been struck off the medical register. I thought that, on balance, I would probably get away with it since it would have been a first offence.

I was now beginning to lose the plot.

I was pretty certain that I had succeeded in turning the mattress so that the top was now the bottom and the bottom now the top. I looked for the label with the royal crest. It was nowhere to be seen. I was therefore satisfied that part one of the operation had been completed successfully. All I had to do now was turn the mattress so that the part which had been next to the headboard was at the other end of the base. If I could manage that then I was pretty certain that the bottom end of the bed would end up at the headboard end.

I regretted, for the first time that I could remember, that I hadn't done much mattress turning in my life. It is not a subject in which I have ever shown any real interest or for which I have ever felt any enthusiasm.

I pulled at the mattress and with considerable difficulty, succeeded in moving it around the bed. On reflection, I suppose that the collision with one of the bedside tables was inevitable. The mattress was large and heavy and the bedside tables were relatively light and well stocked with delicate, fragile objets d'art.

Fortunately, the crash was not a particularly noisy one since the falling object landed onto a thick pile carpet. I put the two largest pieces of the broken model lighthouse under the bed. It was cream, a hideous piece of 1950s kitsch, and had the words 'A Present from Cornwall' inscribed around the base. I hoped that its very hideousness did not make it unique and irreplaceable.

'He was hiding underneath the sofa,' said Mrs Fairfield, returning with a smug looking Pekinese.

'That's a relief,' I said. No one wants to squash a dog while turning a mattress. I kicked another piece of the broken lighthouse under the bed.

Mrs Fairfield ignored me but the dog barked.

'Did the nasty man frighten you?' she asked the dog. It somehow managed to look smugger than ever.

'I think that's it,' I said, standing up and feeling my back. I was soaked with sweat and ached in every muscle. 'Do you need anything else doing while I'm here? Lawn mowing? Roof rethatching? A bit of ironing, perhaps? Maybe I could clean the windows or service the washing machine.'

I didn't say any of the last bit, of course. Perhaps I should have done. Would Dr Brownlow have moved the damned mattress? I'm pretty sure he wouldn't. Actually, Mrs Fairfield wouldn't have dared ask him. It occurred to me that I needed to acquire a little more gravitas. But how did one do that? I had been in the village for a while now. I had a wife, a family, a pig and lots of friends. What else did I need? I decided that perhaps I ought to start wearing a waistcoat and sporting a pince nez.

'There was a telephone call for you,' said Mrs Fairfield.

I thought she might have said thank you. But she didn't. She wasn't the sort of person who ever said 'thank you'.

'For me?'

'Your wife called.'

'Why didn't you tell me?' I asked. 'It might be urgent.'

'You were turning the mattress,' said Mrs Fairfield. 'I told your wife you couldn't come to the telephone.'

'Do you mind if I call her back?' I asked, biting my tongue and trying not to show how cross I was.

Mrs Fairfield pursed her lips. 'Since it's just a local call I suppose it will be all right.'

I rang Bilbury Grange from Mrs Fairfield's telephone. Like most people in Bilbury she has just one extension, and a telephone which sat in her hallway, on a little table with a chair next to it. Only the wealthiest have a second telephone in their bedroom. (Patsy and I do not class as wealthy by any means but we have a telephone in our bedroom for obvious, practical reasons.)

'What on earth is going on?' asked Patsy stifling a giggle. 'Mrs Fairfield said you were busy in her bedroom.'

'I'll tell you when I see you.'

'What on earth were doing in her bedroom when she clearly wasn't in her bedroom?' asked Patsy, clearly puzzled.

'It's a bit complicated,' I said. To be honest I didn't want to admit that I'd been turning Mrs Fairfield's mattress. It didn't really sound very professional. I wasn't even sure how I'd got tricked into doing it in the first place.

'Mrs Fresnel rang,' said Patsy. 'She wondered if you'd pop in. I thought you could go there on your way back.'

'I'm leaving now,' I said. 'I should be home soon. Then I'll have a cup of tea, change my shirt and then finish that doorknob.'

'Change your shirt?'

'I got a little sweaty.'

'In Mrs Fairfield's bedroom?'

'Exactly.'

There was a silence. 'I look forward to hearing about it when you get back,' said Patsy, suppressing another giggle.

We said goodbye and I put down the receiver.

As I got to the front door it opened and a huge figure appeared in the doorway. The figure was Bill Blake, one of

Mr Kennet's labourers. Bill is about six foot six inches tall and built like a stone statue of Goliath and just as no one ever calls Mrs Fairfield 'Ethel' so no one ever addresses 'Bill' by his surname. He is vast and can never find clothes to fit him. Thumper once said that the only suit that has ever fitted him properly was the one he was born in. A couple of years ago, I had to examine Bill for a medical and found to our mutual embarrassment that I could not weigh him because my surgery scales only measure up to 20 stone. He must weigh at least three times as much as Mrs Fairfield. He is a pleasant fellow but a genuinely clumsy man who always looks as though he got dressed in the dark. Buttons are always in the wrong holes and socks never match. He smelt, as he always does, of a cheap aftershave but underneath that there was a strong, lingering smell of silage and manure. I suspect that Bill always smelt of silage and manure in the same way that trawler-men always smell of a mixture of diesel oil and fish.

'Hello, doctor!' he said. 'What are you doing here?'

He seemed a little embarrassed.

I couldn't think why and then I suddenly remembered that he had been to the surgery a couple of weeks earlier.

He had ostensibly turned up to ask for something for a slightly sore back. This had surprised me because Bill is a tough fellow who, like most farm labourers, won't ask for medical advice unless a limb is actually hanging off.

On his way out of the surgery, with his hand actually on the doorknob, he had turned to ask if I could put his mind at rest about something relating to his sex life. This had clearly been the main reason for his visiting the surgery.

'The lady I'm with has quite unusual demands,' he told me, blushing bright red. I'd asked him to sit down again and he'd confessed that although the new lady in his life (he had named no names) had expressed no dissatisfaction with the size of equipment on offer, or the quality of the performance provided, she had rather startled him by her activities in the bedroom and one or two of the requests had caused him some concern.

It was clear from what he said that she knew a few tricks which he had never come across before. He had been delighted and relieved when I had assured him that the activities in question were commonplace and that the positions he was being required to favour were by no means exceptional.

'The doctor came to turn the mattress,' said Mrs Fairfield. I was, I confess, delighted to see that it was now her turn to go bright red.

Bill's appearance had clearly been slightly unexpected.

I realised now why half of Mrs Fairfield's mattress had a dip in it. To say that Bill is huge is like saying that the Sahara desert is sandy.

Mrs Fairfield and Bill Blake seemed an unlikely couple. I couldn't help smiling to myself. It seemed that Mrs Fairfield had a penchant for large men.

'Hello Bill,' I said. 'I've not seen you for ages. How are you?'

He looked greatly relieved at my tactful and anodyne remark. We exchanged greetings as though we had not seen each other for some considerable time. Tact, trust and discretion are vital parts of a GP's daily armoury. It saddens me to know that many people want to chip away at doctor-patient confidentiality. Politicians, policemen and even some senior members of the medical establishment believe that doctors should spill the beans on their patients' activities whenever required to do so. I suspect that they will eventually get their way. Meanwhile, I'm glad that I'm practising in the 1970s. I hope that my medical career will be over by the time it becomes illegal for doctors to regard patient confidentiality as sacrosanct.

'You should have said about the mattress,' said Bill to Mrs Fairfield. 'I could have done that for you. No need to have bothered the doctor.'

'I didn't like to ask you, dear,' said Mrs Fairfield. 'It's not the sort of job for a man like you.'

I thought it was actually very much the sort of job for a man like Bill. He could probably pick up a mattress with one hand, twirl it over his head, turn it over and throw it back onto the bed while holding a cup of tea in his other hand.

Without another word, Bill strode into the house, squeezed past us both and marched up the stairs. 'I'll do the mattress,' he said.

Slightly startled, Mrs Fairfield watched him go upstairs but did not say anything.

'It's OK, I've done it,' I called after him. But Bill didn't hear me. He's always been slightly deaf. He drives a very noisy tractor and it has, over the years, affected his hearing. One day, someone in authority is going to have to suggest that men who drive tractors and other noisy machinery need to wear ear defenders.

'We met at a Church picnic last summer,' said Mrs Fairfield, though I had not asked for any explanation. 'He saved me from a creepy crawly.'

There was the sound of strenuous activity in the bedroom.

'Ah,' I said.

'It was sitting on a piece of Mrs Butterworth's apricot flan.'

A moment or two later Bill appeared at the top of the stairs. 'I've done it!' he called down. 'I've turned it upside down and top to bottom.'

'Thank you, dear,' said Mrs Fairfield.

Bill had, I realised, put the mattress back where it had been before I'd started. I don't think Mrs Fairfield realised quite what had happened.

I said goodbye to Mrs Fairfield, shouted goodbye to Bill and left. I didn't like to say anything about the mattress.

The visit to Mrs Fairfield had taken well over an hour but the call on Mrs Fresnel took only three or four minutes. She wanted another prescription for a bottle of the tonic I give her. The bottle contains absolutely nothing with pharmacological qualities but it is green, tastes rather bitter and is in Mrs Fresnel's view the most important development in pharmacology since Fleming discovered penicillin.

Since she is the patient and the 'Mixture' which I prescribe and dispense keeps her well and happy, I will not hear a word said against it.

As I approached Bilbury Grange, I remembered the darned doorknob. I wasn't looking forward to trying to fix it.

'I've got some crumpets,' said Patsy when I had taken off my shoes. 'If I toast a few how many could you eat?'

'Dripping with butter?'

'Of course.'

'Three?' I suggested. 'Would three be greedy?'

'Not at all,' replied Patsy.

'I'll have three, then.'

And then I remembered the doorknob.

'I suppose I'd better do the doorknob first,' I said, feeling sorry for myself. My day seemed to be made up of doorknobs and mattresses.

'Oh, that's done,' said Patsy dismissively.

'Done? Who did it?'

'I did it,' said Patsy with a modest grin.

'How…?'

'I just used longer screws,' she replied. 'I'll put the crumpets under the grill.'

The toaster may do both sides at once but crumpets never taste the same as when they have been toasted under the grill. Besides, our toaster seems to have been designed by a former aerospace engineer. When it has finished toasting it throws the toast upwards with the velocity of a V2 rocket. Unless I stand near enough to catch the toasted bread as it flies out it usually ends up on the floor.

'No, not the grill,' I said. 'I'll do them on the fire. That was brilliant! Mending the door like that.'

'I know.'

I went and checked the door. The knob worked perfectly and seemed as solid as a doorknob should be.

'You're marvellous!' I said to her.

'I couldn't have done it with you,' she said with a mischievous smile.

I'd have chased her round the kitchen if I hadn't been so exhausted.

'Next time I'll stick to holding the sticking plasters and the antiseptic,' I suggested.

'I think that would be a good idea,' said Patsy brightly. 'It's what you do best.

I took a plateful of crumpets into the living room and skewered one on the end of our extendable brass toasting fork.

Crumpets may taste better when toasted on the grill then they do when browned in the toaster but they taste better still when prepared on an open fire. And for that you need a long handled, preferably extendable, toasting fork. Anything, crumpets, pikelets or bread, smells and tastes so much better when prepared on a real fire. It's true that some bits get burnt, and it's true that you're likely to burn a finger or two as well. But none of that matters for crumpets, toasted on a real, log fire, are every bit as much a part of England as are costermongers and knife grinders, curds and whey, pecks and bushels and Toby jugs and singing glasses.

Patsy came carrying a wooden tray upon which she had placed a teapot, a tea strainer, a milk jug, a sugar bowl, two cups and two saucers, two plates, two knives and a butter dish.

'What sort of tea have you made?' I asked.

'Lapsang souchong,' replied Patsy.

Bliss. A heavenly repast: slightly burnt crumpets, generously buttered, and a cup of lapsang souchong – the only tea which smells of bonfire. Ambrosia never tasted half as good and the Greek Gods never knew such glories.

'Now are you going to tell me how you got sweaty in Mrs Fairfield's bedroom?' asked Patsy, putting the tray on a small table and settling herself in one of a pair of old and comfortable easy chairs beside the fireplace. A cat immediately jumped up onto her lap.

'I think I can do that,' I said. 'I don't think the principles of medical confidentiality are relevant in this particular case.’ We both take patient confidentiality very seriously. Some doctors will talk to their family and friends about their patients. I have never felt comfortable doing that. Both Patsy and I feel easier if I regard the sanctity of the consulting room as inviolable. Besides, it is easier for Patsy if she can talk to villagers without knowing things she isn’t supposed to know.

‘Oh good,’ said Patsy. ‘That will save me the effort of attacking you with a red hot toasting fork.’

It’s a long and complicated story,’ I said, changing the toasting fork from my right hand to my left because my fingers were beginning to get rather hot.

‘Splendid,’ said Patsy, with a sigh of contentment. ‘I like long and complicated stories.’

‘You may, or may not, know but Mrs Fairfield has a large and saggy mattress…’ I began.

And for some inexplicable reason Patsy started to laugh.

I looked at her sternly. ‘You may well laugh,’ I admonished her. ‘But Mrs Fairfield didn’t find her saggy mattress in the slightest bit amusing.’ I checked on the crumpet I was toasting. It needed another minute. ‘The basic problem was that the mattress was only half saggy…

A Trip to the Farrier

I got up one morning and discovered that both constituent halves of my favourite pair of brown brogue shoes were coming apart. The sole on one shoe flapped as I walked, making me look rather like a circus clown, and the sole on the other was, when I took a close look, also clinging onto the upper part of the shoe without much hope of staying in close contact for very much longer. This had clearly happened overnight.

'You need to get that mended,' said Patsy, when she saw me flapping my way along the hall, heading for the front door, the car and my morning visits. 'Haven't you got another pair you could wear today?'

I do not own a large collection of shoes.

I have a brown pair and a black pair. That woman from the Philippines, the one with the impressive footwear collection, would not find my morning shoe choice satisfactory. I tend to find a pair of shoes which I like, and which are comfortable, and then to wear them until they fall apart. 'My black shoes have a hole in the sole,' I said. 'They're in an even worse state than these.'

'Haven't you got anything else you could wear?'

'The choice is between a pair of Wellington boots or a pair of rather down at heel slippers,' I told her. 'I'll have to wear these until I can get into Barnstaple and go to the cobbler's.'

This was not a thought which filled me with delight. I couldn't for the life of me remember the location of a shoe repairer in Barnstaple.

But I did remember my last attempt to find one.

'Go down past the old church,' said an old man whom I asked for directions. 'It's either St John's or St Marks; one or the other. Then cross the road by the Post Office, well what used to be the Post Office, I think it's a pet shop now. Take the first right after the laundry, though I think it might have been turned into a Chinese takeaway, and go down a little alley which leads to the Bowchester warehouse which was converted into a nightclub two or three years ago. Anyway, go down the alley unless it's blocked with garbage bins which it sometimes is, and when you get to the end you'll see the traffic lights. There's a baker's on the corner. It's a video shop now, I think. Go straight across, but a bit to your right, and you'll see Cross Street or Croft Street, one of the two, and when you get to the end you'll see where the old bus station was. Go right where the old bus station used to be and walk along the bank of the estuary and look for a right hand turn that has a pub on the left hand side, the Duke's Head or the Swan's Nest I think it is. Then take the third or fourth turning on the left and look for a narrow road that needs repairing. There used to be an optician somewhere down there but it closed. I don't think anyone could ever find it. Go about a hundred and fifty yards up that road and there are three shops in a row. I think one of those is the cobbler's. No, I tell a lie. I think they closed that down too. I think they knocked down all three shops and built some flats.'

Is it only me who meets people like that?

Is it any wonder that I am always reluctant to stop and ask for directions?

Suddenly, I realised that Patsy had said something.

'I'm sorry,' I said, 'I was day dreaming. What did you say?'

'Go and see Albert Ross,' said Patsy. 'He'll repair them for you.'

I looked at her, puzzled. 'But Albert is a farrier,' I said. 'He puts shoes on horses and makes iron gates as a side line.'

'He'll mend your shoes,' insisted Patsy. 'He's been mending my Dad's shoes for years.'

'I'd feel embarrassed, asking a farrier to mend my shoes,' I said.

'Don't be silly!' laughed Patsy. 'He mends a lot of shoes. He won't mind. And he'll only charge you a pound a pair. Take the black ones with you.' She opened the hall cupboard where we keep boots and shoes and rummaged around among tennis rackets, umbrellas, walking sticks, miscellaneous old boxes, bits and pieces that looked as if they probably fitted a vacuum cleaner we have never owned and a variety of shopping bags. As she buried deeper into the cupboard I could not help noticing that none of the things in the cupboard is ever used.

'Why do we keep all that junk?' I asked her.

'You never know,' Patsy replied, from deep inside the cupboard. 'If we throw anything away then tomorrow we'll find that we need it.'

I knew she was right.

Suddenly Patsy emerged from the dark of the cupboard holding first one and then the other black shoe aloft in mock triumph.

'We must get someone in to fit a light in that cupboard,' she said.

‘If I had the skill and the tools I could probably do it myself.’

She looked at me.

‘Sorry. I’ll ask the electrician to put a light in.’

We both knew that I wouldn’t and that the cupboard would remain darkened. There are a dozen jobs around the house which need doing but somehow I always manage to put off doing anything about them. I mean to get things mended, repaired or improved but there are always other things which need doing. Finding a tradesman able to turn up on the approximate date and do the work he’s been invited to do, seems to become more difficult by the year. There are, however, some tasks I can manage by myself. Sitting in the garden, for example, seems to take up an increasing amount of my time in the summer months. That is something I can cope with perfectly well by myself.

‘Do you know where Albert lives?’ asked Patsy.

‘Turn left a quarter of mile after Softly’s Bottom, then take the lane on the right and the second track on the left,’ I said. ‘There’s a dead elm just on the corner and two huge ruts running all the way along the track.’ I was proud of my knowledge of the geography of Bilbury and the surrounding district and sometimes I liked to show off a little. Patsy had lived in the village all her life but even she admitted that I knew my way around Bilbury even better than she did. ‘I’ll call in to see him when I’ve done the morning calls.’

‘And don’t forget to take these with you,’ she said, handing me the pair of black shoes that needed repairing. I took the shoes, flapped my way along the hall, still in the style of a circus clown with size 18 boots, climbed into the Rolls and drove off to do the morning visits.

As luck would have it, I left the Bilbury Grange driveway just as a tourist was driving past. I know most of the local vehicles and I always dread being caught behind a car being driven by a tourist driving along our narrow, one car width, country lanes. Most occasional visitors find it difficult to get used to driving along narrow lanes which have grass growing through the tarmacadam in the middle of them and brambles hanging over the road at the sides. As a result, they tend to drive at the sort of speed favoured by the men who drive undertakers’ hearses for a living. Thumper once pointed out that he regards people who drive slower than him as idiots and people who drive faster than he does as lunatics. I can see the sense in that.

Still, I eventually got where I was heading.

And, just as importantly, I managed to do so without allowing my blood pressure to rise to dangerous levels. I did this by singing an aria from the Barber of Seville. I didn’t know many of the words and I wasn’t terribly sure of the tune but since I can’t sing and am pretty well tone-deaf none of that mattered terribly much. I entertained myself, aired my lungs and kept my stress levels down to acceptable levels.

(If I want music in the Rolls, I have to provide it myself. In the days when our Rolls was manufactured, in-car entertainment was confined to counting the pimples on the back of the chauffeur’s neck.)

My first call was to Mrs Lily Colefax, a rather bad-tempered widow of indeterminate years, who lives in a semi-detached cottage on the road leading to Ilfracombe.

It is, I think, quite fair to say that her husband Cyril had been something of a rogue. Technically, and as far as the boys and girls at the Inland Revenue were concerned, he earned his living as a bookie’s runner. But the money he was paid for that particular obligation barely covered his costs of attending the seventy or eighty horse race meetings which he graced with his presence each year. His real income, not declared to the Inland Revenue for obvious reasons, was derived from lifting wallets, purses and watches. He was, in short, a professional pick pocket; a dip, a wallet lifter, a cutpurse.

Mr Colefax was extraordinarily keen on knitting and in the pursuit of this unusual hobby, he used to make seemingly endless supplies of scarves, woolly hats and jumpers. The vast majority of these invariably colourful and always well-made items were given to charity.

He once explained to me that he liked to knit in order to keep his fingers supple for his ‘day job’.

Mr Colefax died of a massive heart attack while at the races in Exeter. That was about five years ago. The police took quite a while to identify him because they found seven wallets in his jacket and weren’t sure whether he was Mr Pilkington of Plymouth, the Reverend Wilkins of Taunton, Mr Napton of Torrington, Mr Kennedy of Exmouth or Mr Jackson of Torquay. They were pretty sure that he wasn’t Adebowale Akachi from the Serengeti or Mrs Pauline Twomely of Honiton.

Mrs Colefax is not clinically depressed but she is always miserable and if it is possible to find a pessimistic viewpoint to clasp to her bosom, she will assuredly find it and clutch it to her as tightly and as jealously as a little girl with a favourite doll or a dog with a much-loved bone.

Ever since I have known her, she has spent all her days looking backwards. However, instead of looking backwards and enjoying happy memories, she looks backwards and spends her days regretting all the bad things that have happened to her, the misfortunes which have troubled her, the rancour she has encountered, the mistakes other people have made (she has made very few, if any, of her own, of course), the disappointments she has endured and the frustrations she has faced.

I have always thought it something of a tactical error to spend your whole life looking backwards, over your shoulder. All you end up with is a sore neck. And, of course, you will never see the tree you bump into.

Mrs Colefax has, I suspect, always been a true pessimist; someone who has from childhood regarded life as a game which she was always destined to lose, and lose badly. There must have been occasional glimpses of hope, success, comfort and peace but these glimpses have to her always proved to be as illusory as heat haze mirages in the desert.

She spends a lot of time in bed, not because she needs to but because it enables her to gain the maximum amount of sympathy from relatives and neighbours (I think it would be stretching a point to include 'friends' in that list for I doubt if she has any) and because she is constantly rehearsing her dying moments and, indeed, her final words. She always speaks slowly and distinctly and once admitted to me that she did this so that if she died immediately, the witness would be able to tell the world what her final words had been. I have never been quite clear as to the purpose of this determination for I never heard her say anything which anyone could possibly regard as worthy of remembering and it doesn't seem likely that her last utterance would find its way into one of those strange little books of deathbed wisdom which appear on the bookshop shelves from time to time.

The one fun thing about her is that she fills her hot water bottle with whisky so that she can take generous nips throughout the day without anyone being any the wiser.

'Doesn't it make the whisky taste rubbery?' I asked her once.

'A little,' she admitted. 'But it's worth it not to have my neighbour nagging me about the perils of alcohol. Besides, regardless of the taste, it's still alcohol.'

'How much whisky do you put into the bottle?' I asked, assuming that she perhaps mixed the whisky half and half with water.

'The whisky is neat,' she said, with some pride.

Despite her faults, it is difficult not to admire and respect a woman who is prepared to put up with rubbery whisky for the sake of appearances.

'I'm going to die,' she announced, the moment I walked through her front door.

'It'll come to us all in the end,' I responded, cheerily.

'I'm going to die soon,' said Mrs Colefax.

'Why do you say that?'

'I'm 89-years-old, I have a weak heart and both my parents died when they were in their sixties.'

'You're not in bad condition,' I told her cheerily. 'With a bit of training you could be playing football for England next year.'

I know that it is never possible to make her smile but I always try.

She has been on the verge of death ever since I first came to Bilbury and I have for some time had a strong suspicion that she will outlive us all and that it will be my successor who eventually writes her death certificate when she finally meets her own dire expectations at the age of 153.

'I don't like football,' said Mrs Colefax, whose lack of a sense of humour is legendary.

I thought for a moment. 'Well, alternatively you could be dancing with the Royal Ballet company if you practise your arabesque and perfect your plie.'

'I don't like ballet.'

I gave up, as I usually do. 'What can I do for you today?' I asked.

'I have a pain just here,' she said, putting a hand on her right breast.

'In your breast?'

'Yes, if you must be so vulgar.'

'Breast isn't a vulgar word. It's an anatomical description of a part of the body.'

'It's rude. It's not a word which one would expect to hear in polite society.'

'I agree it's not a word one would bandy about if taking tea with the vicar's wife and the ladies of the Vicarage Sewing Circle,' I admitted, 'but I think its use is permissible in the sanctity of your own bedroom.'

'Hrmph!' said Mrs Colefax.

'Sit up, slip off your nightie and let me have a look.'

'I will do none of those things, young man!' said Mrs Colefax, defiantly. 'I'm not going to sit here looking at you while you're ogling my naked body.'

'I promise not to ogle. Close your eyes first. Then sit up, slip off your nightie and let me have a look.'

With obvious reluctance, Mrs Colefax closed her eyes, sat up and struggled out of her nightie.

'You'll have to remove your bra as well,' I told her.

She opened one eye and scowled at me.

‘I need to look at the part that hurts.’

With even greater reluctance, and more of a struggle, Mrs Colefax succeeded in slipping her bra straps off her shoulders and pulling down her brassiere to release the contents.

‘Do you always wear your bra in bed?’

‘I certainly do,’ she said. ‘In case of emergencies.’

‘What sort of emergencies?’

‘In case of fire, for example.’

‘How is your bra going to protect you against fire?’

‘It will protect my modesty. If the house catches fire and a fireman climbs up a ladder to rescue me I don’t want to be making an exhibition of myself.’

‘You’ve got your nightie.’

‘Young man, a woman with my attributes requires more support and protection than can be provided by a piece of unstructured flannel!’

I could see what she meant. Her breasts, milky white and decorated like a map with a network of blue veins, were voluminous.

‘And then there are the burglars.’

I frowned. ‘Burglars?’

‘I don’t want to be without my bra if burglars force their way into my bedroom.’

‘No, I can see that,’ I agreed. ‘Where’s the pain?’

‘Just at the side here,’ she said, rubbing the outer side of her left breast. ‘But I have to confess that it seems to have eased a little.’ She seemed puzzled, even saddened by this.

I leant forwards, and very gently plucked a small leather purse from inside her bra. There was a red mark on her skin where the purse, compressed by her bra, had pressed into the soft tissue of her breast. I showed the purse to her.

‘Oh, good heavens!’ she said. ‘I usually keep that in the front of my bra, in what I think they call the cleavage area. It must have slipped round in the night.’ Her cleavage would have provided enough storage space for the Bank of England to keep the nation’s gold reserves safely hidden.

‘And the pain has definitely eased?’

‘Oh yes,’ she said. ‘I feel better now.’

I put the purse down on the bed beside her, told Mrs Colefax she could put her bra back into a more useful position and left as she struggled to re-confine her magnificent and generously proportioned superstructure.

My second visit had been requested by Frank, the landlord at our local public house, the Duck and Puddle. A year or so earlier Frank had a stroke and very nearly died. However, he made an excellent recovery. Under the careful and eagle eyed supervision of Gilly, his wife, he lost weight and learned to deal with stress more effectively. As a result, his blood pressure, which had previously been quite horrifyingly high, had come right down to levels approaching normality. I was very pleased with Frank’s recovery and the progress he had made.

Frank usually visited me at the surgery but when he rang that morning, he had apologised and asked if I would call in at the Duck and Puddle to visit a customer who was staying in one of the rooms they rent out to visitors.

When I arrived I let myself in, since the front door was open, and found Frank and Gilly in the kitchen. They were having what some might call a blazing row but what they would call a slight disagreement about the way their dishwasher should be stacked.

The dishwasher was a brand new addition to the equipment at the public house and was widely believed to be the first in the village. No one else I knew had a dishwasher.

‘The cups should all be up here,’ insisted Frank, pointing to a portion of racking on the top level of the machine.

‘That’s silly!’ said Gilly. ‘It makes far more sense to put them down here.’

This looked likely to turn into one of those domestic discussions which have no end. ‘I hate to interrupt and I hate to be a bore,’ I said, ‘but is there a chance you could discuss the planning procedures for the dishwasher when I’ve gone?’

I didn’t particularly mind listening to their discussion, which promised to be quite entertaining, but I was keen to finish my calls and get the farrier before the sole of my shoe fell off completely.

They both apologised.

The Duck and Puddle has a couple of bedrooms which are let from time to time to tourists and others whose business brings them to Bilbury. I had stayed in one of the bedrooms myself when I had first arrived in the village. Indeed, I had, I remembered, been fortunate enough to occupy the only bedroom with its own bathroom.

As I followed Frank up the ancient, narrow staircase, I couldn’t help remembering the day when, as a young, innocent and freshly qualified doctor, I had come to Bilbury to take up my position as assistant to Dr Brownlow. Frank and Gilly had been Mr and Mrs Parsons to me then.

I could even remember my first breakfast in the pub.

Most important of all, it was at the Duck and Puddle that I had first met Patsy, my wife. She'd been working at the pub, helping Gilly and Frank. Her father, Mr Kennet, had been poorly, I remembered, and she'd been so worried that she'd burnt my traditional English breakfast to a crisp.

The breakfasts at the Duck and Puddle were designed to satisfy the calorific requirements of men who spent their days doing hard physical labour rather than driving round the countryside listening to people's chests and examining their feet. I had put on a stone in weight while I'd been a resident at the Duck and Puddle. I still hadn't got rid of all of it.

'Our guest is on a three day walking holiday,' said Frank, plodding slowly up the stairs ahead of me. 'He's an old-fashioned gentleman. In his late fifties, I would say. Solitary but well-mannered. He gets a lot of wind but always apologises if there's a particularly noisy eruption.'

'Eructations, borborygmi and flatulence,' I said.

'Pardon?' said Frank.

'Technical terms for wind coming up, wandering around inside or going out through the back door.'

'Ah!' said Frank, with an understanding nod. 'I always think that apologising for wind noises is the sign of a gentleman,' he murmured confidentially.

'You always do have a better class of customer here,' I said drily.

'We certainly do,' said Frank, slightly out of breath. 'We don't get the sort of people who steal the coat hooks from the back of the lavatory cubicle doors. Do you know, I heard at the last meeting of the Licensed Victuallers' Association that there are pubs in Barnstaple and Exeter where people do that?'

'Do you actually have coat hooks on the doors of your lavatory cubicles?'

'Well, as you well know, we only have one lavatory,' admitted Frank. 'And it doesn't have any coat hooks, as it happens, but if it did then I'm confident that our customers wouldn't steal them.'

The Duck and Puddle is still quaint and undamaged by progress with plastic. In most of England, the only places still quaint are the ones which are too poor to afford to modernise and too far off the beaten track to be troubled by intrusive health and safety busy bodies. And thus it is with the Duck and Puddle.

'Right,' I said. 'I'm glad we've got that cleared up.'

I didn't feel the need to remind him that most of the male customers of the Duck and Puddle use the laurel bush outside the pub's back door as a distribution centre for their waste beer. The bush is growing at an impressive rate and always seems greener than any other laurel bush in Devon.

I also didn't think it polite to point out that the last time I'd looked, the solitary lavatory at the Duck and Puddle had been entirely bereft of a proper door. Those using the facility had to make do with an old blanket nailed to the lintel. It would be difficult to fix a coat hook to a blanket.

Frank stopped in the narrow corridor upstairs and paused outside the door to one of the bedrooms. It was not the room where I had spent my first days and weeks in Bilbury. He knocked on the door, waited until he'd heard the occupant call 'Come in', opened it, led the way into the room, and introduced me. He then left.

'Sorry to bother you, doctor,' said the room's occupant.

He was, as Frank had said, a man who looked to be in his late fifties or possibly early sixties. He was lying in bed, dressed in heliotrope pyjamas buttoned up to the throat, he was pale, he was sweating slightly and, to put it mildly, he did not look like a man who was about to set off to run a marathon. The good news was that he was breathing quite normally and his pulse, though a little fast, was otherwise quite normal for an overweight, unfit man who had probably over-indulged. His waistline had probably last been seen circa 1957 and had, since then, been on the missing list.

He was, he told me, the manager of a large store in Leamington Spa but he was not, as he had indicated to Frank, on a walking holiday.

He had, to be blunt about it, run away from a job which he did not enjoy and which he found enormously stressful, from a marriage which was no more than a partnership of cold convenience, from grown-up children who demanded nothing from him but money (and plenty of it) and from neighbours whose main purpose in life seemed to be to slam car doors, use noisy garden machinery and breed uncontrollable offspring.

The fiction that he was on a solitary walking holiday was something he had used as an excuse before he had left and it was one which he had sustained for no other reason than that it seemed an easy explanation for his presence in Bilbury and at the Duck and Puddle.

His name was Elmore Hardwicke and, contrary to impressions, he was just 48-years-old. As already indicated, he was what used to be described as well upholstered and would now probably merit a rating of 'plump'. The cruel would have classified him as 'obese'. He did not look like a man who has an active gym membership.

Since Mr Hardwicke had run away from his life, you might have thought that fate would have given the poor fellow a break; a chance to enjoy his few days of escape.

But, sadly, fate does not work that way.

Since he was on holiday, Mr Hardwicke had decided to indulge himself and for each of the three mornings that he had been a guest at the Duck and Puddle, he had enjoyed the traditional English breakfast which has always been a keynote meal at Bilbury's finest, oldest and only eating establishment.

'You had the bacon and egg?'

'Four rashers and two eggs.'

'And the sausages?'

'Three of them. Cooked to perfection.' He closed his eyes, enjoying the sausages for a second time.

'Tomatoes and beans?'

'Of course.'

'Fried bread?'

'Two slices.'

'And toast?'

'Three slices, each covered with a thick layer of butter and blessed with handmade thick cut orange marmalade.'

'To drink?'

'A large glass of orange juice and a pot of English tea.'

'What do you eat for breakfast when you are at home?'

'A cup of tea and a bowl of cereal.'

'Your choice?'

He shook his head. 'At my wife's insistence.' The cereal looks like the sort of stuff people use to insulate their lofts. I suspect it tastes much the same too. She says it is a healthy breakfast, designed to keep me regular and to supply 87% of my daily vitamin requirements.' He shuddered. 'I hate cereals.'

'So your breakfast here is not the sort of thing you would eat at home?'

He shook his head. There was much sadness in the shaking and in his eyes. 'I've overdone it a little, haven't I?'

'A little, perhaps,' I agreed. 'What happened?'

'I got this terrible pain about an hour and a half ago,' said Mr Hardwicke. 'I thought I was going to die.'

'How long did the pain last?'

'No more than five minutes. It faded off quite quickly. It's pretty well gone now. But it's left me a little shaken.' He smiled ruefully. 'Like toothache going when you get to the dentist's surgery.'

'Where was the pain?'

'Just here,' he said, rubbing just underneath his ribs on the right hand side of his body. He did so gently and cautiously.

'Then what happened? After the pain had gone?'

'I just lay here for a while. The pain had gone but I was worried it might come back. I thought I ought to see someone and when Mrs Parsons came in to collect my tray I asked her if there was a local doctor I could see. She said she'd ring and ask you to come and visit me.'

'Have you ever had anything like this before?'

He shook his head. 'A little indigestion,' he admitted. 'And I do suffer with wind. I get a lot of wind. But this wasn't the same sort of pain as I get when I have indigestion.'

'Have you seen anyone about it? Your GP?'

'No.'

'Do you take anything?'

He opened the top drawer of the bedside cabinet and took out a packet of a proprietary indigestion remedy. 'I eat quite a lot of these.'

I nodded, told him to lie down a little flatter and peeled back the bedclothes. I didn't really need to examine him. I knew what was wrong with him. I estimate that at least 50% of the people who stay at the Duck and Puddle develop exactly the same symptoms and have the same underlying problem. I felt his tummy, checked his blood pressure and looked to make sure I wasn't missing anything else.

'I suspect that you have gall stones,' I told him.

'Do I need to go into hospital?'

'Not at the moment. You need to rest. And I'm afraid you need to avoid fatty foods for a while.'

'No more of Mrs Parson's breakfasts?'

'Just the toast and the tea I'm afraid.'

He looked very downcast.

'You can have marmalade.'

‘Oh good. They have splendid marmalade here. Did you know that Gilly makes her own marmalade?’

I said that I did indeed know this. I told him that many Bilburian women made their own marmalade, using just about every fruit available. Patsy makes a wonderful cherry marmalade. Her grandmother once told me that the original marmalade was made with quinces.

‘It’s a funny word, isn’t it? Marmalade. I wonder where the devil the name comes from?’

‘There’s a wonderfully silly tale that Mary Queen of Scots would ask for a fruit concoction whenever she felt a trifle queasy. ‘Marie malade’ the courtiers would call it. Hence the word ‘marmalade’. People have been making marmalade for centuries. In the 17th century, a sophisticated traveller would pack his lunch box with a packet of macaroons, a jar of quince marmalade and a bottle of wine.’

‘Golly!’ said Mr Hardwicke.

‘My wife’s mother and grandmother make a good deal of marmalade,’ I told him. ‘It’s also claimed that the word ‘marmalade’ comes from the word melimelum, the honey apple. But I prefer the Mary Queen of Scots story. And there’s no reason you shouldn’t have some baked beans and tomatoes.’

‘How about a boiled egg?’

‘OK. But just one.’

He looked much cheerier. ‘Is that pain going to come back?’

‘Probably not. But if it does you must ask them to telephone for me straight away.’

‘And you’ll come?’

‘Of course.’

‘Can I get up?’

‘Definitely. There’s no need for you to stay in bed. A leisurely walk wouldn’t do you any harm.’

‘But avoid rich foods?’

‘Avoid fatty foods,’ I told him. ‘And when you get back home you should definitely avoid any breakfast cereals which look like insulation material or soundproofing.’

He brightened up. ‘Can I tell my wife that?’

‘Definitely. You can tell your wife that I advised you against eating breakfast cereals of any variety.’

‘Oh good,’ he said. ‘May I really? That’s rather splendid news.’ He hesitated. ‘I don’t suppose you could…’ He made the writing gesture that diners use when indicating to waiters that they’re ready for the bill.

‘Of course,’ I said. I fished a piece of notepaper out of my black bag, took out my pen and wrote a short note confirming that Mr Edward Hardwicke of Leamington Spa was not allowed to eat breakfast cereals of any kind. I folded the note, placed it inside an envelope which I took from the pub’s writing desk, and handed it to him.

‘Thank you!’ said Mr Hardwicke. ‘Do you think I need to stay here a little while? In order to complete my recovery?’

‘I think that would be wise.’

Mr Hardwicke seemed pleased by this. ‘When do you think I’ll be fit to travel?’

‘Not for a week at least,’ I told him. His eyes lit up. ‘Come and see me in a week’s time.’ I told him.

I took a pad of certificates out of my bag, wrote out a sick note and handed that to him. ‘Post this to your employer,’ I told him. Mr Hardwicke definitely seemed to me like a man who needed a week’s rest. And Bilbury is the perfect rest cure for those who have been battered by life.

He looked much brighter and more cheerful than he’d been when I’d arrived. A country doctor on his morning rounds cannot ask for much more than that.

When I left the pub, Gilly and Frank had completed their negotiations over the stacking of the dishwasher and were discussing their new menu.

They have, for reasons which escape most of their customers, recently taken to renaming some of the food items they sell in the bar in the style of one of those pretentious Chelsea wine bars. They still have a few items named after regular customers but the other items on their menu have been upgraded.

And so, the Duck and Puddle no longer sells ‘crisps’ (with cheese or onion being the choices) but offers a choice of either ‘sodium infused ultra-crispy amuse-bouche pommes de terre fabrique avec fromage’ or ‘sodium infused ultra-crispy amuse bouche pomme de terre fabrique avec oignon’. Bottles of cola are now listed as ‘hand selected, carbonato avec beaucoup des bulles dans l’eau’.

The translations were all done by Adrienne, my sister-in-law, whose claim to mastery of the French language is based on the fact that she once spent three whole days in Paris on a school trip.

Gilly and Frank were trying to decide whether they should add ‘pain avec confiture’ to their menu.

‘Just stick with ‘jam sandwich’,’ I told them. ‘Otherwise no one in Bilbury will ever order one because they’ll worry that it’s something containing snails or frogs’ legs.’

The Duck and Puddle is, I suspect, the only eating establishment in England which serves jam sandwiches. And it is definitely none the worse for it. When made with crusty farmhouse bread, cut thick and covered with lashings of home-made plum or strawberry preserve, a jam sandwich can be just as much of an epicurean delight as anything requiring a clutch of quail's eggs or a sauce which has taken a team of four trained chefs six hours to prepare.

'You know how to take the ground from beneath someone's feet!' said Frank.

'And the wind out of their sails!' added Gilly.

'Not to mention the clichés out of their conversation,' I said, managing, for once in my life, to produce a moderately bon mot which didn't wait three days to arrive.

Mr Hardwicke did come to see me a week later and he was much better than he had been when I'd seen him at the Duck and Puddle. He told me that he was ready to go back to work.

'You seem a lot more cheerful than you were a week ago,' I said.

'Oh I am, I am, doctor!' He moved forward a few inches in his chair, as though what he was about to tell me was both confidential and important. 'I have booked my room at the Duck and Puddle for another week. I shall be returning in three months' time,' said Mr Hardwicke.

'Splendid!' I said. I knew that Frank and Gilly would be pleased. They like to have what people in the hospitality trade refer to as 'repeat business'. 'You'll be coming by yourself again?'

'Oh yes. My wife and I live very separate lives. She enjoys pottery and likes to go on courses in East Anglia, Yorkshire, Provence and places like that.'

I couldn't help wondering what East Anglia, Yorkshire and Provence had in common but it seemed an irrelevant quibble so I merely nodded wisely.

'I have decided that I can cope perfectly well with my life as it is, if I know that every three months I can escape to Bilbury, to the peace and quiet and sanctity of the Duck and Puddle.'

'I understand,' I said, for I did, though I hoped that Mr Hardwicke would not be too disturbed if his stay happened to coincide with one of the Duck and Puddle's rather raucous skittle evenings.

'In fact I have given Mr and Mrs Parsons a series of dates when I believe I shall be able to partake of their hospitality, and they have agreed to reserve the room for me for a total of twelve periods of one week over each of the next three years. Mrs Parsons was kind enough to say that they will think of it as 'my' room.'

'So you'll be coming to Bilbury every three months?' I said, doing the sums in my head and feeling quite proud of myself at having done so without my head exploding.

'Exactly, doctor!' said Mr Hardwicke. 'I believe I shall become a regular in the village.' He smiled, and looked very pleased with himself. 'Mr and Mrs Parsons have told me that I may call them Frank and Gilly.'

'That's wonderful,' I agreed.

I have rarely seen anyone quite so happy. Mr Hardwicke had given himself something to live for and he was a contented man.

But that was a week ahead.

My third and final visit of the day was to Mr Warburton.

Mr Jason Warburton and his family live outside Bilbury. Indeed, they live outside the usual area I cover. Their home is close to South Molton.

The Warburton family had been patients of Dr Brownlow for longer than even he had been able to remember. The old man, Jason's great granddad, the patriarch of the family, had an unusual hobby. He used to enjoy going to funerals. Most of the time he didn't know the person who had died or any of the mourners. But he did know all the undertakers and most of the local clergy. He used to check out upcoming funerals in the local newspapers and he'd usually go to three or four funerals a week. It was his strange version of train spotting. He was 96 when he had his own funeral. His son, Jason's grandfather, was 75 when his Dad died but he was still known to everyone as 'Young Mr Warburton'.

When the younger branch of the family moved away from Bilbury, Dr Brownlow had, as a favour to the parents, agreed to keep them on as patients even though they were rather outside his catchment area. The agreement was that whenever possible they would visit the house for a consultation, only asking for a home visit when one was really needed. I had seen the latest Mrs Warburton once or twice, and I'd seen both of their children but I had never seen the youngest Mr Warburton before. And today it was young Mr Warburton who needed medical attention.

'I'm sorry I couldn't drive to your surgery,' said Mr Warburton, who is a plumber by trade and who didn't sound in the slightest bit apologetic. 'But when I woke up this morning I couldn't open my eyes. The lids were stuck. My wife bathed them open but they're sticky and itchy and watery and I really can't see well enough to drive the van. My wife doesn't drive.'

'That's fine,' I told him. I looked at his eyes. Both were clearly infected.

'I had a busy day ahead of me,' he said, full of self-importance. 'I was booked to do some plumbing for that bloke who does the cooking on the television. Whatsisname. The one with the beard and the glass eye. He's ever so famous. His name is on the tip of my tongue…'

When he talked, his dentures bobbed about as though dancing on independent suspension and it was easy to see that in addition to being something of a cockalorum, he was at least five times older than his teeth.

I didn't have the faintest idea who he was talking about. My knowledge of television cooks is limited. I remember once seeing a determined woman called Fanny Craddock doing something energetic with a bowlful of dough but that's about the extent of my knowledge in this area.

'Do you know how your eyes got infected?' I asked him.

'Rubbing them with dirty fingers probably,' said Mr Warburton. 'The wife is always telling me off for rubbing my eyes. And my fingers get dirty in my job. Toilets and such like.'

'Ah,' I said, taking out my prescription pad. 'Do you prefer ointment or drops?'

'Which do you recommend?'

'It's personal preference really,' I said. 'Personally, I prefer the drops because I find the ointment just tends to stick the eyelids together again. But some people don't like putting drops into their eyes.'

'I'll have the drops then please doctor. I've done plumbing for a lot of other celebrities.'

I wrote out the prescription for eye drops that would deal with his conjunctivitis.

'I sorted out a dripping tap for a cousin of that David Bowie,' he said. 'And I put in a new sink for a man who used to live in the same town as the drummer for The Who when he was growing up. He said he knew him quite well.'

'Really,' I said. 'That's very impressive.'

'I did some central heating work for Vince Hitzinger,' he said. 'Nice fellow. He gave me a copy of his last but one album.'

'My word,' I said. I hadn't heard of Mr Hitzinger but I assumed he was probably a musician of some kind and my knowledge of popular music is as limited as my knowledge of celebrity chefs. We do have one major rock star celebrity living in Bilbury but although he tours and sells records all around the world, no one recognises him and very few people know his identity. On stage he is wild, unkempt and rather alarming. He wears a good deal of make-up and a very impressive amount of hair. Off stage, without the hair or the make-up, he is shy and remarkably inconspicuous. It is difficult to reconcile the two.

'I thought of calling myself 'Plumber to the Stars',' said Mr Warburton. 'Have it painted on the side of the van. What do you think of that?'

'Very good,' I said. I suddenly remembered that six months earlier I had asked Mr Warburton to come out to Bilbury Grange to deal with a ball cock which had stuck and had flooded the downstairs lavatory. Our usual plumber had been in Torremolinos on a month's holiday. Mr Warburton had refused to come to Bilbury Grange on the grounds that Bilbury was too far for him to travel. 'But,' I added, 'I think most people would be happy if they just found a plumber prepared to come out and deal with their leak.'

My comment was wasted. Mr Warburton either didn't remember or didn't care. He just took the prescription from me. 'How do we get hold of the drops?' he asked.

'The chemist in South Molton will have the drops in stock,' I said.

'You wouldn't fetch them for me, I suppose? It would save the wife a journey.'

'Afraid not,' I said. 'I'm a little busy. And South Molton is rather outside my catchment area.'

'Oh,' said Mr Warburton, clearly disappointed. 'I suppose I'll have to get the wife to go in and get them.'

'Your wife does drive then?'

'Oh yes.' Mr Warburton either didn't remember that he had lied about his wife not driving. Or, perhaps, he just didn't care. 'But she's out today. Since I didn't need the van she's gone into Barnstaple to do some shopping. There's a sale on at one of the shoe shops. They advertised it in last week's newspaper.' He shrugged. 'Anyway, better for me to use your petrol than mine, eh?'

I was furious. Mr Warburton could have easily asked his wife to drive him in to the surgery but instead he'd made me drive all the way to South Molton just to write a prescription for some eye drops.

'You might feel more comfortable with a doctor closer to home,' I said. 'There are plenty of good doctors in the South Molton area.'

'Oh no, we'll stick with you, doctor,' said Mr Warburton. 'The wife trusts you and says you're quite good with the kiddies. Myself, I liked old Dr Brownlow, of course. He looked after me when I was a nipper and I got used to him.'

'Of course,' I said.

'While you're here, would you give me a prescription for something for my stomach? One of those anti acid things. I never know which one to buy at the chemists. And if you give me a couple of packets, your stuff will be cheaper won't it? Give me something not too chalky but with a nice pepperminty taste.'

‘Do you get a lot of stomach trouble?’

‘Oh no, only on Saturdays if I go out with the lads. We go and have a curry and half a dozen pints of lager.’

‘And you get an upset stomach?’

‘Yeah. Sometimes. Not always. Sometimes.’

‘Maybe you should stay at home on Saturdays,’ I suggested. ‘Or drink less lager.’

The plumber looked at me as if I were mad.

‘Come and see me in the surgery if the stomach problem gets any worse,’ I told him as I headed to the car.

‘Hope you don’t mind my mentioning it,’ called Mr Warburton, as I left. ‘But you want to get those shoes sorted out. Your sole is flapping. It’ll trip you up if you’re not careful.’

I thanked him and absquatulated without further delay.

God sends trials and tribulations in many strange forms and today He had sent him in the form of Mr Warburton the Plumber to the Stars.

But, finally, I was free to make my visit to get my shoes repaired.

Mr Albert Ross, the farrier, has lived in Bilbury all his life. His father and grandfather were both farriers. I have little doubt that his great grandfather was probably a farrier too. Indeed, I have no doubt that some member of his family was hard at work in Bosworth putting shoes on stallions, mares, fillies, ponies, hacks, geldings, chargers and nags back in the days while Richard III was wandering around offering to exchange his kingdom for a (doubtless nicely shod) horse.

Bilbury has at least one other professional farrier but Albert Ross is, as far as I know, the only one prepared to do a little human shoe cobbling on the side.

I found him in his smithy hammering a shoe onto one of the hind legs of a large beast which was standing quite still and seemed not in the slightest bit perturbed by what was happening at the far end of his body. A bored looking woman stood by the horse’s front end, holding its head and looking on. She was, I remembered, the wife of a local farmer. I knew I had seen her recently but for the life of me I couldn’t remember why or for what. I know I ought to remember every patient’s name, ailment and treatment but I see dozens of patients every week and occasionally I simply cannot remember whether the tall, balding man is Mr Merriweather with the dermatitis or Mr Berryham with the swollen testicles.

I wondered if I should ask her how things were going but decided against the idea. I have found that when I can’t remember why I’ve seen someone it is better not to refer to the consultation in any sort of social situation.

‘Sorry to bother you,’ I said, when the farrier paused and looked up. I suddenly realised that he and I had never met. ‘I’m the doctor,’ I said, introducing myself. ‘My wife is Patsy, she was Patsy Kennet before we married.’

‘I know Patsy,’ said the farrier. He had the biggest eyebrows I’d ever seen on a human being. They looked like those big furry caterpillars which one occasionally sees around the place.

‘The sole has come off my shoe,’ I said, ‘I know it may seem a bit of a cheek, but Patsy said you’d be able to mend it for me.’

‘Let me finish this and I’ll see to you,’ said the farrier. He did not have much of a bedside manner but then I don’t suppose there’s much call for a bedside manner in his line of his work.

I sat down on a tree stump and watched the farrier at work. It occurred to me that it probably wasn’t such a daft idea to expect a farrier to mend a pair of shoes. After all, the basic requirements are much the same: a hammer and a pocket full of nails.

It took the farrier no more than five minutes to finish putting fresh shoes onto the horse. The woman who had been holding the horse’s head, handed the farrier a couple of folded notes which he slipped into the pouch at the front of his leather apron and then led the horse over to where I was sitting.

‘Excuse me, doctor,’ she said.

Not sure what she was excusing herself for, but aware that she needed me to move I stood up.

She then put one foot onto the tree stump which I had been using as a seat and which clearly had a primary function as a mounting block, and leapt with surprising agility up into the saddle still fastened to her doubtless trusty steed. As she did so, her surprisingly large bottom, encased in a pair of very tight riding jodhpurs, reminded me that on our last encounter I had treated her for a rather ripe case of external haemorrhoids. The jodhpurs she was wearing on this occasion were so tight that I could have probably made the diagnosis without asking her to undress.

I was now grateful that I hadn’t asked her if her problem was any better when we’d met a few moments earlier. Even farmers and their wives (who all tend to have a very high level of embarrassment where bodily parts and functions are concerned) have been known to show signs of incipient shyness where piles are concerned.

The woman settled her well-built rear into the saddle and rode off with much clattering of hooves.

‘Stand just there and put your foot up here,’ said the farrier, indicating his leather covered lap.

Startled and slightly puzzled, I looked at him.

‘Didn’t you say you wanted your shoes mended?’

‘Yes, please,’ I said. I undid my shoelace and started to slip off a shoe.

‘Don’t do that!’ said the farrier, rather crossly. ‘You need to keep your shoes on.’

I looked at him.

‘And come over here. I can’t mend them unless you put your foot up on my lap, can I?’

I continued to look at him. ‘You want to mend my shoes while I’m still wearing them?’

‘Of course I do,’ said the exasperated farrier. ‘How else am I going to mend them?’

Patchy, who claims to have moments of raw brilliance, once said, life is like a game of crazy golf.

And I suddenly realised that he’s absolutely right.

You just never know when you’re going to come across a little windmill with three doors or a magic tower with a helter skelter leading directly into a sunken bucket filled with water.

Or a farrier wanting to hammer nails into your shoes while you’re still wearing them.

I approached, turned away from him, bent my knee and put my shoe clad foot onto his lap.

‘Is this going to hurt?’ I asked, nervously, hoping that he was aware that the human foot is rather different in configuration, and pain susceptibility, to that of the horse.

‘Not if you keep still,’ he said.

I turned my head, nearly falling over as I do so, and watched him pick up a box of small cobbler’s tacks. I was grateful he was going to use those, rather than the longer nails he used to affix metal shoes to horses.

‘Did you know that the patron saint of cobblers is St Crispin?’ he asked.

I said that I did not know this but that I did know that the patron saint of colic is St Erasmus while the patron saint of coin collectors is St Eligius. I knew this because Patchy, my favourite source of irrelevant but fascinating information, had told me.

To my astonishment and delight, the farrier successfully repaired both of my brown brogues. And after I’d changed my shoes, and put on my black pair, he mended those in precisely the same way. He did a damned good job on all four shoes and charged me a fraction of the price I’d have paid at the cobbler’s shop in Barnstaple. I couldn’t help wondering how many other people in Devon had enjoyed the delight of having their shoes repaired by a man who shoes horses for a living.

‘You might have told me that he’d want to mend my shoes while I was still wearing them,’ I said to Patsy when I got home.

‘Would you have gone if I had?’

‘Not likely!’

‘That’s why I didn’t tell you,’ said Patsy.

Ignorance is sometimes by far the better part of valour.

‘Well, it was a strange experience but I feel great,’ I said. ‘In fact, I’m rather proud of myself and since there’s a point to point meeting at Blackmoor gate next week, I think I’ll perhaps enter. I’ll see if I can find a jockey.’

Patsy laughed. ‘I’m going to make myself a cup of tea,’ she said, ‘I’ll get a bucket of water and fill a nosebag for you.’

I sometimes feel that I’m not always given the respect which is due to an established member of an ancient and dignified profession.

It Isn’t Over Until the Fat Lady Slims

It was Peter Marshall who heard about it first.

Peter knows everything that happens in Bilbury for the simple reason that unless they fancy a round trip of over 20 miles into Barnstaple and back, everyone who lives in the village visits his shop several times a week. If you want a loaf of bread, a pint of milk, a postage stamp, a pair of shoelaces, a light bulb or a packet of goldfish food you have no choice but to visit Peter’s excellent emporium. You can get beer, whisky and excellent sandwiches at the Duck and Puddle and you can get spiritual salvation at the village church, but for everything else you need to go to see Peter Marshall.

‘Have you heard what Archie Meads is planning?’ Peter asked me one afternoon about two months ago. I had popped in to pick up a couple of torch batteries, a new broom handle, a pair of socks and a bottle of shampoo for Patsy.

(It is difficult to think of any item that cannot be obtained from Peter’s shop and I have, in the past, deliberately tried to stump him by asking for items which I did not think he would stock. These attempts have always proved unsuccessful and, as a result, we now own, but never use, a xylophone, a faux ivory back scratcher, a wine making kit and a six inch high model of the Eiffel Tower in a snow globe. I no longer try to catch him out for I have learned that it is better, safer and less expensive, to assume that Peter stocks at least one of everything ever made.)

Archie Meads is a local farmer. He doesn’t live in Bilbury itself but he owns several hundred acres of farmland and a number of his largest fields are within the village boundary so what he does sometimes has an impact on our lives.

Mr Meads (he is so pompous that I doubt if his wife dares to call him ‘Archie’) lives in Monaco where he resides in exile in order to avoid paying any tax. Mr Meads has, over the years, experimented with various ways of adding to the fortune which he originally made from buying, selling and renting out small properties in the North of England. He was exposed several times, both in the newspapers and on television, and acquired something of a reputation as a ‘slum landlord’. I don’t think anyone in the area regrets that he chooses to live in Monaco.

Four years ago Mr Meads turned one of his fields into a caravan site, built a loo and shower block and invited the owners of touring caravans to stay there. There was some opposition from locals who felt that the Bilbury infrastructure was not capable of coping with an influx of summer visitors. We had already had considerable experience of the problems which too many tourists can have on a small community. A clutch of local councillors, were, however, wildly enthusiastic (and insistent that their enthusiasm had nothing whatsoever to do with the holidays they had enjoyed at Mr Meads’ villa in Marbella) and the caravan park had been approved.

Sadly for Mr Meads, but luckily for the rest of us, the venture was woefully unsuccessful.

There were two problems which had been overlooked.

First, the field was on such a slope that caravanners found that whatever they did they simply could not make their temporary homes level.

Second, the lanes around Bilbury are very narrow and winding and are simply not well-suited for wide vehicles such as caravans. On at least three separate occasions, caravans actually got stuck and had to be removed with the aid of a tractor. Two of the caravans were destroyed completely.

The whole commercial experiment was not helped when persons unknown took to lighting large and smelly bonfires at weekends. A number of old carpets and unwanted car and tractor tyres were burnt and the caravan site eventually acquired an unpleasant reputation and a very poor rating in the Caravan Touring Society’s brochure of sites.

‘What’s he planning this time?’ I asked Peter, warily. Like most people in the village I am not a fan of Mr Meads or his activities.

‘He’s organising a three day music festival!’ said Peter.

‘A what!’ I exclaimed.

‘A festival with musical entertainment,’ explained Peter. ‘Like that thing they had in Woodstock a couple of years back.’

‘When is it going to be?’

‘In a couple of months’ time I think. I’m glad I heard about it. I’ll need to put in extra orders for food and drink. What sort of things do you think will sell best?’

‘I should stock up well with marijuana,’ I told him. ‘But I suspect you might be in competition with some on-the-spot dealers.’

Peter looked shocked. ‘I don’t think my wholesalers sell that,’ he said. ‘Do you think I should just buy in some extra cans of cola and a few hundred boxes of crisps?’

‘You might do better with bottles of lager and a few thousand hot dogs,’ I said.

‘Do you think so?’

‘I don’t have the foggiest, Peter,’ I said, with an exasperated sigh. ‘I have no idea what sort of things the people who go to music festivals are likely to buy.’

To be honest, I was cross because I knew that a music festival in Bilbury would create chaos, block all the lanes and bring most of the unpleasant qualities of the 20th century into our unworldly village. Peter, as usual, was thinking only of the money he could make.

When I got back to Bilbury Grange and told Patsy what was being planned, she too was appalled. ‘They’ll bring dogs with them,’ she said. ‘And their dogs will run loose and attack my Dad’s sheep. There’s bound to be a lot of noise and that will keep the children awake. And there are bound to be loads of people needing medical help. You’re going to be rushed off your feet.’

I knew she was right. But after a couple of telephone calls I also knew that there was nothing we could do to stop the Festival happening.

When I telephoned the local council offices, I was told that the Festival still had the council’s whole-hearted support. I wondered how many councillors were looking forward to enjoying more free holidays in Mr Meads’ Spanish villa.

After a couple of months of waiting, the Festival was finally held last weekend. And it was every bit as awful as we had all feared.

I first became aware that the allotted fields were being prepared for the Festival when a man in jeans and a dirty T-shirt knocked on the door at Bilbury Grange.

‘Are you the local quack?’ he demanded brusquely.

I said that I was indeed the Bilbury doctor.

‘You’re needed at the Festival site,’ he said. ‘One of the scaffolders has cut himself. You’ll have to sew him up.’

‘How badly is he cut?’ I asked. ‘Does he need to go to hospital?’

‘No time for hospital,’ said the man in the grubby T-shirt. ‘He’s needed here. I’m in charge of the work gang. I’ve only got six guys and we’ve got to erect a stage, two lighting posts and a refreshment tent by the day after tomorrow.’

I checked my bag, to make sure that it contained a suture kit and a plentiful supply of suitable bandages, and followed the man in the grubby T-shirt to the site of the Festival.

Mr Meads had, to save money, decided to hold the event in the field where he’d already built a lavatory and shower block. And to take advantage of the natural slope of the field he had decided that the stage would be built at the bottom of the field, ensuring that all the spectators would be sitting in a very rough sort of amphitheatre.

Mr Meads hadn’t bothered to cut the grass in the field, which was nearly a foot long, and the three huge lorries which had brought the scaffolding and boards for the stage had clearly been having some difficulty finding traction on the grass. There were huge gouges in the field where the lorries had skidded, stuck and been extricated.

My patient, who said his name was Duane, was sitting on the back of one of the lorries. He had a badly cut forearm and there was blood on his trousers, on his shirt and on the lorry.

‘I thought I’d let it bleed a bit to wash out any of the dirt,’ he said with a grin.

‘Always a good idea,’ I agreed. A little blood can go a long way but I still reckoned he must have lost half a pint. ‘But it isn’t really necessary to allow quite so much blood to come out.’

‘Oh, I’ll soon make that up again,’ said Duane. ‘A few lagers tonight should see me right. Where’s the nearest pub?’

I told him how to get to the Duck and Puddle and couldn’t help thinking that Frank and Gilly would probably welcome the extra business. Council rates, insurance and maintenance bills mean that they struggle to keep the pub alive. At least someone in the village would benefit from Mr Meads’ latest business venture.

For the rest of us, with the exception of Peter Marshall, of course, the Music Festival would doubtless turn out to be a huge nuisance. We choose to live in Bilbury because we enjoy peace and quiet and because we want to avoid as much of the 20th century as we can.

I sewed up Duane’s arm without too much difficulty but as I was about to drive away, I found myself facing a girl of about 20 and a man who looked considerably older. She was wearing a bikini top and a pair of cut-off jeans. She had tattoos of what looked like dragons on the visible parts of her chest. I didn’t like to look too closely. He was wearing a pair of old suit trousers, a pink shirt and an embroidered waistcoat. He had tattoos over most of his face. His tattoos appeared to be of satanic symbols and gave him an alarming look. I don’t think he would have come high up on anyone’s list of suitable candidates to play Father Christmas at a seasonal party.

‘You the doc?’ demanded the man.

I confirmed his diagnosis.

‘I’ve left my contraceptive pills at home,’ said the girl. ‘I need another pack of pills.’

‘You’ll have to come to the surgery,’ I told her.

‘Why?’ demanded the man aggressively. He moved closer to me, as though attempting to intimidate me. ‘Can’t you just give her some pills?’ He pointed to my black bag. ‘Haven’t you got some in there?’

‘I don’t carry contraceptive pills,’ I told him.

‘Why do I have to come to the surgery?’ asked the girl.

‘Because I need to examine you and check your blood pressure and I can’t do either of those standing in a field,’ I told her.

‘Just give her a prescription,’ said the man. He took a roll of money out of his back pocket and peeled off a £10 note. ‘Here,’ he said. ‘We can pay.’

‘There’s no need for you to pay me,’ I told him.

I turned back to the girl. ‘But I’m afraid you’ll have to come to the surgery so that I can examine you. Then, if there aren’t any problems, I can give you a prescription.’

‘Where do we cash a prescription round here?’ demanded the man.

‘You’ll have to go into Barnstaple.’

‘Where’s that?’

‘About ten miles from here. If you drive west you can’t miss it.’

‘She needs the pills today,’ insisted the man.

I looked at my watch and shook my head. ‘She can come to my surgery this evening but the chemists in Barnstaple won’t be open until tomorrow morning.’

‘Are you prepared to take responsibility if she gets pregnant?’

‘I don’t think that would be my fault,’ I told him.

‘I need something for crabs as well,’ said the girl.

‘I’ll need to examine you before I can give you anything,’ I told her. I made a mental note to take a vaginal swab.

‘She needs something now,’ said the man, now threateningly. ‘We can’t wait until tomorrow.’

‘Having trouble, doc?’

I turned and saw the man who was in charge of the work gang. He and Duane had come over to see what was going on.

‘This bastard won’t give Trace the stuff she needs,’ said the man in the embroidered waistcoat. He wasn’t so aggressive now. Indeed, there was a whine in his voice.

Duane, the man whose arm I had stitched looked at me, obviously expecting me to give my side of the story.

‘I need to examine her,’ I explained. ‘And she needs to come to the next surgery if she wants me to treat her. I’ll treat her if she comes to see me but I’m not going to perform an intimate examination and take the blood pressure of a perfectly healthy patient while we are both standing in a field.’

‘Sounds fair enough to me,’ said the man in charge. He turned to the man with the tattooed face and the waistcoat. ‘Do as the doc says.’

The man with the tattooed face started to say something then nodded and turned away. The girl went with him.

‘Sorry about that, doc,’ said the man in charge.

‘Who are they?’ I asked.

‘Just parasites. He’s a small time dealer and pimp. She works for him.’

‘They’re not with you?’

‘Bloody hell, not likely. I wouldn’t employ either of them to clear up dogshit. He turns up at most of the festivals. Bad penny. Always has a girl or two with him. They’ve got a small tent in the next field.’

‘Thanks for your help,’ I said. ‘He looked as if he was about to get a bit nasty.’

‘Don’t you worry about him, doc. If you have any trouble with him or anyone else you find me. My name’s Rob. I’ll be here until we all bugger off on Monday. Thanks for sewing up Duane.’

I went home. The girl didn’t turn up at Bilbury Grange and I never saw her or the drug dealer again.

But that was just the beginning of my involvement with the Bilbury Music Festival.

Over the next few days I saw a seemingly endless stream of people requiring medical attention.

Mr Meads had made no provision for first aid treatment and I was the only person for miles around who was able and willing (albeit with, it has to be said, steadily increasing reluctance) to provide treatment for the staff, the musicians, the festival-goers and everyone else in attendance.

Most of the people I saw simply needed treatment for cuts and bruises and for coughs and colds and sore throats. A dozen or more needed contraceptive pills. There were a few with serious chest infections and, inevitably, quite a number with food poisoning. Three of the people I saw had problems caused by illegal drugs and several were suffering from alcohol poisoning. I saw a dozen or more with indigestion and several with sexually transmitted diseases. One girl who had a venereal infection wanted me to do tests on the six men whom she thought might have caused her problem. One girl wanted to know if you could get pregnant if you did it standing up and two wanted to know if you could get pregnant on the day when you lost your virginity. A singer with one of the bands wanted treatment for a sore throat and an ear infection. A guitarist who fell off the stage broke his wrist and had to be taken half way to Barnstaple by tractor because no ambulance could get anywhere near the Festival site. He was transferred to the ambulance about three miles away. The same procedure had to be followed when one of the men who had helped put up the stage was hit on the side of the head by an errant Frisbee. I feared that he might have a middle meningeal bleed, a type of brain haemorrhage which can be fatal, and insisted that he too go to hospital. He went with great reluctance but three hours later I was telephoned by one of the doctors at the hospital who told me that my diagnosis had been accurate and that if the young man hadn't been admitted to hospital he would have certainly died.

I made a mental note to insist that if the Music Festival was repeated then the organisers would be required to provide their own medical and first aid service – complete with a helicopter capable of taking patients to hospital.

I spent nearly an hour with an eight-year-old girl who was hysterical when I first saw her. She lived with her parents in Chelsea in London and had never been to the country before. After a long conversation I discovered that she was terrified that she was going to be eaten by the huge dog which she was convinced was roaming the countryside. It turned out that she had seen a pile of horse droppings in the lane and, never having seen a horse, had assumed that the not inconsiderable steaming heap had been produced by a wild dog of some variety. Under the circumstances, I think I too would have been terrified. I managed to settle her by arranging for her to see, and feed a chopped up apple to, a local horse in its field.

I syringed enough wax to make a candle from the ears of a drummer who suddenly discovered, to his delight, that he wasn't deaf after all.

I could and should have claimed payments from the National Health Service for treating all these patients but there was no time to fill in the necessary forms and so at the end of a hard weekend I had received a grand total of £1.75 in cash, three signed T-shirts and tickets for a rock concert in Berlin. I donated the T-shirts and the tickets to a raffle organised to raise money for our cottage hospital. The T-shirts and the tickets raised the princely sum of £7.47 for the hospital funds.

Since the roads were blocked with traffic I could not even use my bicycle, let alone the car, and I spent most of my time walking between Bilbury Grange and the site of the Festival.

I don't think anyone, not even Peter Marshall, had realised that in addition to providing almost non-stop musical entertainment, Mr Meads had also arranged for a small fair to set up in a neighbouring field. I saw several of the fair professionals over the next day or two, but I can only remember one of the patients I saw.

And for me, the story of that patient made the whole miserable weekend worthwhile.

'I need something to help me put on weight,' said a woman whose real name was Prudence Gaitskill but whose stage name was 'Fat Gertie' and whose advertising posters claimed that she was the fattest woman in Europe. She was certainly overweight; so rotund that she had considerable difficulty in walking and before she sat down she carefully put two dining chairs side by side, explaining that she didn't think one chair would be enough to hold her weight. Even with two chairs to sit on, her bottom overflowed at the sides of the chairs.

'You want to put on weight?' I said, rather startled, and assuming that I had perhaps misheard.

'Lord Snooty says that if I go under 30 stones he'll fire me and get another fat lady.'

'Lord Snooty?'

'That's what we all call him. He's the boss of the fair. His real name is Bernie Carrington though for show business purposes he calls himself Sir Bernard Carrington.' She laughed. 'He's no more a 'sir' than I'm the fattest woman in Europe.' She sighed and looked down at her hands which were clasped in her lap. 'I know for a fact that there are two women in France who are fatter than me. And I've heard that there is a woman in Scotland who could give me five stone.'

'You're losing weight?'

She nodded.

'How much have you lost?'

She looked down at her hands, still clasped in her lap, and mumbled something.

'How much?' I asked her. It was clear that she was reluctant to tell me. 'I need to know. You can tell me; I promise not to tell anyone else.'

'Five stone,' she whispered. 'Maybe six. I have to pad myself out a bit. But it means I can't wear the bikini. Lord Snooty is really nasty about that. But if I wear the bikini I can't pad myself out so much.'

‘You wear a bikini?’

‘When I’m working, yes. I sit in a cage in a bikini. The kids poke me with sticks.’

‘How much do you weigh at the moment?’

‘Just under 27 stone. A friend who has a haulage business weighed me on his lorry scales.’ She paused. ‘Actually, that was two months ago. I think I weigh less than that now. Probably no more than 24 or 25 stone I would guess.’

‘How old are you?’

‘Twenty two last birthday.’

I looked at her questioningly.

She blushed. ‘Thirty three.’

‘How long have you been a fat lady in a fair?’

‘Ten or eleven years now.’

‘Have you always been overweight?’

‘Yes. I was a fat kid. I was going to do all sorts of things but I kept putting on weight and people never took me seriously. When I left university, no one would give me a job so I ended up working in a Fair. A man saw me in the street and offered me a job because his former fat lady had died on him. She was sat in a cage and they didn’t know she was dead until the show closed that evening. She just died sitting on her throne.’

‘Throne?’

‘It’s a sort of big chair. It looks a bit like a throne. It’s more comfortable than an ordinary chair. If you have to sit in a cage for hours at a time, you need a comfortable chair. I have a bit of a bladder problem so I catheterise myself and wear a urine bag.’

‘What did you study at university?’

‘English literature. I wanted to be a teacher. But who’d hire a teacher who weighed 30 stone?’ She shrugged. ‘No one,’ she said, answering her own question. ‘No one, that’s the answer.’

It all seemed so tragic that I didn’t know what to say.

‘I thought for a while it might be a hormonal problem,’ she said. ‘I had all the tests done but they couldn’t find anything wrong with me. In the end I realised the doctors were using me as a sort of freak show too. They kept inviting me to appear at conferences and sit on the stage at lecture halls. They paid my expenses but never paid me a fee. So in the end I gave up on the doctors.’

‘How do you get about? How did you get here today?’

‘A friend brought me. His name is William Pears. He’s the dwarf. He’s got a tattoo of a lion on his chest and a tattoo of Queen Victoria on his back. He does a bit of juggling and fire eating and sits in a chair while people pay five pence to throw wet sponges at him. I’ve got a little van with a lift at the back. I sit on this sort of sling thing and he hoists me into the back of the van. He drives. I can’t drive because I couldn’t fit in the driving seat and even if I could I wouldn’t be able to get behind the steering wheel and press the pedals, would I?’

‘Where’s your friend now?’

‘He’s outside, sitting in the van. He’ll wait for me.’

‘And you want to put back all the weight you’ve lost?’

‘And a bit extra if possible. There must be something you can give me.’

‘Do you want to be a fat lady in a fair for ever?’

‘No, of course I damned well don’t!’ she said, crossly. A tear appeared in the corner of one eye. ‘Do you think I like sitting on a stupid throne, in an iron cage, and having kids poke me with sticks? Do you know Lord bloody Snooty rents out the sticks so that the kids can poke me? And you wouldn’t believe where they do the poking. They’re always trying to pull off my bikini top. The girls are the worst. You wouldn’t think that, would you?’

‘Do you have any idea why you might have lost so much weight?’

‘I’ve lost my appetite a bit.’

‘Do you have any pain?’

‘More a discomfort. Not really a pain.’

‘Whereabouts?’

‘In my lower abdomen.’

‘How are your bowels?’

She blushed.

‘Any problems?’

‘Some bleeding.’

‘You lose blood rectally?’

She nodded.

‘For how long?’

‘A month. Maybe two months.’

‘Much?’

She nodded. ‘Quite a bit.’

‘And how have your bowel movements been?’

‘I’m sorry I lost my temper with you a bit earlier. When I said that about people poking me with sticks.’

‘That’s OK,’ I said. ‘Have you had any diarrhoea? Constipation?’

‘The only thing is that when I’ve been to the toilet I always feel as if I haven’t finished.’ She was now blushing deep red through embarrassment.

I tried to help her. ‘As though there’s more that needs to come out?’

‘Exactly. That’s it.’

‘But there isn’t?’

‘No, there isn’t.’

‘I need to examine you.’

‘You could save us both a lot of bother and just give me a prescription for something to help me put on weight.’

‘I need to examine you.’

She sighed.

‘I really do need to examine you,’ I said again.

She looked at me and then glanced at my examination couch but she didn’t say anything.

I looked at her and spoke softly. ‘You’re not going to be able to get up onto the couch are you?’

‘No.’

‘Then you’ll have to lie down on the floor and I’ll examine you there.’

She thought about it for a moment or two and then nodded. ‘OK,’ she whispered.

It took half an hour to get her undressed and lying down on the floor. Patsy brought a fresh sheet and laid it down on the floor so that Miss Gaitskill didn’t have to lie down on the carpet. And it was Patsy who helped her undress.

I’m sure that I am not the only person to have noticed that small, even trivial, seeming incidents in people’s lives can sometimes lead directly to momentous, life changing consequences.

For example, a friend with whom I was at medical school suffered serious damage to his hearing when he was a boy. He was away on holiday at a resort in a relatively unpopulated part of North Africa with his parents when he developed mumps. The non-availability of doctors meant that the infection wasn’t properly treated and, as a result, he developed a type of deafness which steadily got worse as he got older. When he qualified as a doctor, my pal realised that he was never going to be able to take a job working with patients directly. His worsening deafness made it impossible for him to talk easily to patients or colleagues. And so he deliberately chose to become a radiologist. He could sit in silence studying X-rays and didn’t need to talk to anyone. Everyone who worked with him claimed that he was the best damned radiologist they’d ever come across. My pal claimed that if he was good at reading X-rays it was because of, rather than in spite of, his deafness. Because people tended not to talk to him about the patients whose X-rays he was studying, he could look at the pictures without any preconceived ideas.

But the fact is that he almost certainly only became a radiologist because he’d been on holiday, caught mumps and not been properly treated. His whole life was changed by his parents’ choice of a holiday destination.

I think Miss Wakefield would agree with me that her visit to my surgery for help in putting on weight was one of those apparently minor incidents which eventually lead to life changing consequences.

As I had feared, I couldn’t find anything when I examined her abdomen. She was so obese that there could have been a football hiding inside her and I wouldn’t have been able to feel it. But I found out what was wrong with Miss Gaitskill when I finally managed to turn her on her side so that I could examine her rectum.

As I had feared and expected, she had cancer. The only good news was that I could find no sign that the cancer had spread into her lymph nodes.

When I had finished examining her and had cleaned up the blood which had come from her back passage, I helped her dress and sit back on the two chairs.

‘It’s cancer, isn’t it?’ she said.

‘I think it is,’ I agreed.

She sighed. It was a sigh of weariness, rather than sadness. The sigh of a woman who has been fighting life for so long that she no longer feels anything very much.

‘I’m going to fix up for you to see someone at the hospital tomorrow,’ I told her.

‘Tomorrow? So quickly?’

‘Tomorrow,’ I insisted. ‘If you leave North Devon and go somewhere else you will probably never get this sorted.’

‘Is it something that can be sorted?’

‘Yes, I think so.’

‘Lord Snooty will have a fit.’

‘Do you care?’

She smiled. ‘Not really.’

I helped her up off the chairs and told her to get herself to the hospital by 9 a.m. the following morning. ‘You may have to wait to be seen,’ I told her. ‘But I will fix you an appointment with one of the surgeons.’

She promised that she would do as I had asked.

And she did.

The surgeon confirmed my, and her, suspicions. He said that he would not normally have operated on anyone so vastly overweight but in view of the position of the tumour he thought he could reach it without waiting for her to lose weight. He said he wanted to operate quickly before the cancer spread.

The operation was a success.

Miss Gaitskill left the hospital two weeks later and came back to see me.

‘I’m going to try to lose weight,’ she said. ‘I want to go into hospital where I can have help controlling what I eat. While I was in hospital in Barnstaple I heard a lot about your hospital here in Bilbury. I have some savings and I want you to let me stay there. I’ll pay the same as I would have to pay a private hospital and you can use the money to help keep your hospital going.’

I told her I would have to think about it. I explained that she had to come back to see me the next day after I had spoken to Bradshaw, my practice nurse. Bradsaw, a genial octogenarian, also runs the Brownlow Country Hotel where he is officially the manager.

(I explained to Miss Gaitskill that our local cottage hospital is so named to avoid administrative complications with NHS bureaucrats. I also explained that although the hospital is called a hotel it is run efficiently and effectively by Bradshaw, who is in every practical sense the matron, together with his team of local volunteers.)

Miss Gaitskill stayed the night at the Duck and Puddle and when my surgery opened the following morning, she was standing on the doorstep.

I told her that we would initially take her for a month at the hospital and that she could stay there for as long as she continued to lose weight unless there was some sort of dire emergency and we needed her bed in which case we would expect her to move into the Duck and Puddle. I told her that I expected her to lose a quarter of a stone a week for the first month and, therefore, a stone in the first month. And I told her that she had to obey Bradshaw’s every instruction and, indeed, his every whim relating to her diet. She accepted these rules without protest.

William Pears, the dwarf, who had given up the Fair to stay with her, took a room at the Duck and Puddle and a job as a counter assistant in a shop in Combe Martin. He stood on a box behind the counter and was popular with everyone. It was, he said, the most dignified work he had ever done. It was the first time he’d been treated as a human being rather than as a freak.

Miss Gaitskill lost a stone in the first fortnight and a stone and a half in the first month. After three months she weighed under 20 stone and I could weigh her on the scales in my consulting room. It was the first time she could remember being able to weigh herself on ordinary household weighing scales. She stayed on at our hospital for six months and while she was there she applied for a place at a teacher training college. She was successful and she eventually trained as a teacher of English language and English literature.

Half way through her training, Miss Gaitskill became Mrs Pears and the couple got married in Bilbury. She weighed just over 11 stone at the time and Patsy and I, who were invited to the wedding, cried almost all the way through. They made a lovely couple.

Every Christmas, Patsy and I receive a card and a long, hand-written letter from them. And every summer they visit Bilbury and stay in the Duck and Puddle for a week.

‘I have travelled around the country a good deal,’ she once told me, ‘and there are desolate parts of Devon and Cornwall where newcomers are regarded as strangers unless their families have lived there for three or four generations. Bilbury is different in that the welcome it gives to newcomers reminds me more of one of those inner city areas in the English Midlands where life is harsh but the people are invariably kind and welcoming to strangers.’

Her words have stayed with me for they were, I think, honest and well earned. Everyone I’ve ever spoken to, says that Bilbury is, for those who choose to live there, the most welcoming place they’ve ever visited.

As far as the villagers were concerned, the Bilbury Music Festival (and the Fair which accompanied it) was a total disaster.

The lanes were clogged with traffic and no one could sleep for three nights because of the noise. Peter Marshall sold less food and drink than usual because the folk attending the Festival either brought their food with them or bought everything they needed at the stall on site. And the residents of Bilbury, who were marooned in their homes and unable to reach the shop because of the traffic jams, couldn't buy anything either. The Duck and Puddle sold some beer to the men putting up the scaffolding but none of the Festival goers visited the pub, and the scaffold erectors were such a fearsome looking bunch that the pub regulars stayed at home; locking their doors, drawing their curtains and existing on whatever food and drink they could find at the back of their larders.

The only good news was that the event proved to be a financial failure too.

The cost of paying the bands, the stage erectors and the other assorted folk required to organise the event was far greater than the money raised from ticket sales and from the sale of food and drink. Many of those who came to the Festival did not bother to buy tickets, realising that if they camped in nearby fields they could see and hear what was happening almost as well as if they were in the field where the event was being held.

And so, it was with considerable relief that the villagers heard that Mr Meads would not be holding another festival.

Paula Temple

'What evidence is there for your claim?' I asked.

I thought for a moment.

'The available evidence in support of my argument goes back a decade to the early part of the 1960s,' I replied.

'But a good many people have been helped by these drugs,' I argued.

'On the surface that appears to be true,' I agreed. 'But will that still be true in the long term?'

'There are some who would say that you are simply scaremongering.'

'That's unfair. I'm merely trying to draw attention to a very real problem.'

I have always tried to keep the talking to myself internalised, or at the very least sotto voce, but on this occasion I seemed to have spoken out loudly enough for other people to hear.

I was practising for a meeting that I was due to attend later that evening.

I was pretty sure that I was going to be given a rough time and I wanted to try to prepare myself.

I couldn't help noticing that a couple of visitors who were sitting in a far corner of the pub were looking across at me. They had clearly overheard the two halves of my conversation, and realising that there was no party of the second party, were, to say the very least, a trifle perturbed. To be honest, I couldn't blame them. I always tend to look with suspicion on individuals who have lengthy discussions with themselves.

The male half of the couple called over Frank.

'Who's that?' I heard him ask. He made no attempt to lower his voice.

'Does he need a doctor?' asked the female half of the couple.

'Oh, that is the doctor,' said Frank cheerily. 'Can I get you another drink?'

'Just the bill, please,' said the man, standing up. He looked across at me, rather nervously.

I heard the woman say something to Frank but couldn't make out what it was. The man paid and they left.

'What did that woman say to you?' I asked Frank, who was picking up their empty glasses.

Frank grinned and walked across to where I was sitting. 'She said she was glad they don't live here and have you as their doctor,' he said. He looked down at my empty coffee cup. 'Do you want a refill?'

I looked at my watch and sighed. 'I'd better be going,' I said.

I had stopped in at the Duck and Puddle on my way to a meeting of our local medical society. The meeting was being held in a hotel halfway to Exeter. I had been persuaded to give a talk about the dangers of a group of drugs known as benzodiazepines – the best known of which were a number of enormously successful products with names such as Valium, Librium and Ativan.

The main problem I faced was that almost all other members of the medical profession were uncritically enthusiastic about benzodiazepines. The drugs were rapidly becoming the world's most popular medicines.

The Valium story began in the 1930s when a Dr Leo H Sternbach was working as a research assistant at the University of Krakow in Poland. He was investigating the benzophenones and heptoxdiazines. Little happened until 1954, when Dr Sternbach was working in the New Jersey laboratories of a company called Hoffman La Roche. The result of his last experiment was called Ro5-0690 and was initially shelved as being of little interest.

However, a couple of years later, in 1957, Ro5-0690 was submitted for testing by Roche's Director of Pharmacological Research and a report was published showing that the drug was a hypnotic, a sedative and a muscle relaxant. It was a new chemical substance and the company thought it rather promising. In late 1958, Roche did more tests on the drug and found that it was effective at treating anxiety and tension. The drug was called chlordiazepoxide. The next step was that on February 24th 1960, the American Food and Drug Administration approved the drug for human use. A few weeks later, the drug was launched under the brand name of Librium.

Before the end of 1960 other drug companies, Include Wyeth Laboratories had introduced benzodiazepines of their own. In no time at all, GPs and other doctors were prescribing these drugs for an enormous range of physical and mental problems. It is difficult to think of a medical condition for which benzodiazepines were not prescribed. If you went to see a GP in 1970, you had a better than one in twenty chance that you would come away with a prescription for a benzodiazepine. A little later, one in five people who was given a prescription was given a prescription for one of these drugs.

However, I was not a fan of benzodiazepines.

What worried me was the fact that even in those early days there was evidence that these drugs might cause problems.

In 1961, a clinical report appeared in the journal *Psyschopharmacologia* which warned that patients were becoming addicted to chlordiazepoxide. In 1968, a paper in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* showed that benzodiazepines caused depression and suicidal thoughts. Then in 1970, in a book called *Discoveries in Biological Psychiatry*, edited by Ayd and Blackell, Frank Ayd wrote: 'Although vast quantities of minor tranquillisers have been prescribed, it must be stated that not all have been dispensed judiciously by some practitioners. Such misuse is indicative of physicians who unwisely accede to the demands of patients or who supplant sound clinical judgement or expediency'.

And in 1972, the *American Journal of Psychiatry* published a paper describing how patients on diazepam (the generic name for Valium) had exhibited symptoms which included apprehension, insomnia and depression. The patients had previously been emotionally stable. When the patients were taken off the drugs, their symptoms disappeared.

During the early 1970s, I had written a number of articles about the dangers of benzodiazepines. My articles, written from my little country practice, had caused something of a stir and I was rapidly becoming a 'hate' figure among doctors all over the country.

History is full of examples of original thinkers who have been scorned, laughed at, ruined and imprisoned for daring to be creative and original and (most heinous a crime of all) for having the temerity to question (and therefore threaten) the status and authority of the establishment.

Socrates was condemned to death for being too curious. Dante was condemned to be burned at the stake. The works of Confucius were still banned in China two and a half thousand years after his death. Spinoza was denounced for being independent and every schoolchild knows about Galileo's battles with the Church. Aureolus Philippus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim (better known to his chums as Paracelsus) was the greatest influence on medical thinking since Hippocrates but the establishment regarded him as a dangerous trouble maker and persecuted him all around Europe. (He is still regarded with considerable fear and distaste by the medical establishment which, on the whole, prefers not to acknowledge his existence or his importance.)

Ignaz Semmelweiss, the Austrian obstetrician, was ostracised by the medical profession for daring to criticise filthy medical practices. He was ridiculed for his views on puerperal fever, and so depressed by the opposition from the medical establishment that he became insane.

The incomparable Henry David Thoreau was imprisoned for sticking to his ideals. Wilbur and Orville Wright were dismissed as hoaxers by the US Army and most American scientists. When Wilhelm Rontgen discovered X-rays, his achievement was described as an elaborate hoax by one of Britain's most eminent scientists. Michael Servetus, the Spanish physician who discovered the circulation of the blood to and from the lungs, was executed.

The relationship between a diet low in vitamin C and the development of scurvy was first described in 1636 by John Woodall. James Lind reintroduced the idea in 1747 but it wasn't until 1795 that the British Admiralty decreed that that lemon juice should be part of every sailor's diet. Only God can possibly know how many sailors died as a result of this appalling example of cooperative prejudice.

And then there was Dr John Snow.

In the years 1848 and 1859, cholera killed thousands of people in London. Snow decided that people were contracting the disease from their drinking water and argued that the solution was to keep the sewage away from the drinking water supplies. Because the commonest symptoms, diarrhoea and vomiting, both involved the alimentary tract, he decided that the disease must be transmitted by something which had been ingested rather than something carried in the air.

In 1849, when a fresh cholera outbreak hit London, Snow gave up his general practice in order to investigate his theory. His first conclusive proof came from a survey of the district around Golden Square in the centre of London. At that time, piped water was not supplied to all houses in the area, and most people took their water from pumps and wells. A pump in Broad Street supplied the majority of the local inhabitants, and Snow's enquiries persuaded him that a cholera epidemic in the area was directly linked to the use of that particular pump. (A later investigation showed that the brick lining of a cesspool about three feet away from the well was cracked and that the leaky cesspool was contaminating the drinking water.) To prevent the further spread of the cholera, Snow had the pump's handle removed so that water could no longer be drawn from the contaminated water. Snow was not exactly the flavour of the month among his colleagues.

The original inventors of turbine power, the electric telegraph, the electric light, television and space travel were all laughed at or ignored by the scientific establishment. William Reich's books were considered so dangerous that they were burned by the Nazis in Germany in the 1930s and by the Federal Food and Drug Administration in the United States in the 1960s.

My own campaign (for that was what it had become) was a comparatively modest one. But it was, nevertheless, quite real and to me it seemed important.

The problem, of course, was that even in the 1970s, all parts of the establishment were pretty well stocked with men and women who had an aversion to anything which threatened the status quo – and which were, in particular, a threat to the medical profession's very close and undeniably self-serving relationship with the pharmaceutical industry.

And the medical establishment was (and to a large extent still is) particularly hide bound and especially reluctant to accept new theories or challenges to the accepted 'norm'.

The rather sad truth is that I was discovering that keeping an open mind, and being prepared to question existing ways of doing things, are not likely to do a young doctor's career much good at all. When I once commented on a radio programme that it was important to keep an open mind about new developments, one of the other guests, a very eminent member of the medical establishment, snorted and then remarked, in a rather contemptuous tone, that in his view, open minds were empty minds.

My interest in benzodiazepines had been aroused when a patient called Paula Temple had moved to Bilbury.

Miss Temple had come to Bilbury from Finchley, a suburb in North London. She had spent most of her life working in a pharmacy and had never been married. She had been engaged in 1939 but her fiancé, who had been a navigator on a Royal Air Force bomber, had died during a raid on Germany during World War II. Miss Temple and her fiancé had been due to marry the week after he had died and, like many women in similar circumstances, she had remained steadfastly loyal to his memory.

When I asked Miss Temple why she had chosen to retire to Bilbury she told me that, although she hadn't been to North Devon for over a half a century, she had spent many happy childhood holidays in a cottage in Bilbury. Her parents, clearly creatures of habit, had rented the cottage for two weeks every summer. Miss Temple decided that since the happiest days of the first part of her life had been spent in Bilbury, she might like to spend the final part of her life in the same place – in the hope that she might be able to rediscover some of the sense of peace and happiness she had enjoyed as a young girl.

She told me that when she had spent a few days in North Devon looking at cottages in and around the village, she had been struck by the fact that very little had changed while she had been elsewhere.

'The cars look different, and there are far more of them, and fashions have changed,' she said, 'but apart from that there really doesn't seem to have been much change. London and other cities have changed enormously in the last half a century. But Bilbury has remained as I remembered it.'

Two years before retiring, and choosing to move to Bilbury, Miss Temple's mother had died.

It had been a difficult time for the younger woman.

Mrs Temple had died of cancer and had required a good deal of nursing. In the last year and a half of her life she had also developed some form of dementia.

Looking after her aged mother had, for Miss Temple, been an exhausting experience in every way. It had been physically exhausting. It had been mentally exhausting. And it had been emotionally exhausting.

In a doubtless well-meaning attempt to help Miss Temple cope with the task of looking after her mother, while holding down a full-time job in order to pay the bills, the family doctor had prescribed Librium capsules.

And Miss Temple had been taking the drug for over four years. When I first met her she had come to the surgery to request another prescription for her Librium. She was quite insistent that I should give her the drugs.

'After my mother died I decided that I wanted to try without the pills,' said Miss Temple. 'So, foolishly, I just stopped taking them. As a result I became very ill.'

I asked her what symptoms she had noticed when she'd tried giving up the capsules.

'I started to shake, I was dizzy, I couldn't rest or relax or sleep,' she told me. 'I couldn't concentrate, I started to suffer from nausea and headaches and I felt very depressed. When I told my doctor about my symptoms, he said they showed that I needed to keep taking the capsules. So I started taking them again and the worst of my symptoms disappeared within a day or two. So I thought the doctor was probably right and that I should just keep on with the capsules as he advised.'

'What made you feel that you should stop taking the Librium?' I asked her.

'I felt that the drug was making me feel numb and fuzzy,' she said. 'I realised that I was sort of sleep walking through life, not properly aware of everything about me. It was as though I was seeing life through a thick veil of cotton wool.'

'But when you stopped them you became more anxious?'

'I felt terribly anxious; as though I were going to die.'

'And how do you feel now that you're taking them again?'

'I feel calmer than I did when I tried to stop them. But I still feel fuzzy and slow. I feel as though I'm drugged – as though I'd been anaesthetised ready for an operation but the anaesthetic hadn't properly taken effect. I feel like that all the time.'

I didn't know much about benzodiazepines at the time.

I had never prescribed them for my patients because I had felt unhappy about them.

But it was pretty obvious that Miss Temple was addicted to the drug she was taking and that if she was going to stop taking it then she would have to withdraw slowly over a period of weeks, possibly even months, rather than immediately or even over a period of days. I told her this and she asked me if I would help her through the withdrawal process.

And for the next three months I helped her cut down her daily dosage of Librium.

I read a few books and research articles on the subject and decided that it would be sensible to halve her dose every two weeks or so. To make things easier I switched her from Librium to Valium (an expert in drug addiction problems whom I consulted seemed to think that the products were pretty well interchangeable) because Valium was available in smaller dose tablets – and the low dose tablets could be cut in half with a knife in order to lower the dose even more.

The addiction expert to whom I spoke reminded me that what was happening with benzodiazepines had happened twice before. In the 1950s, huge numbers of patients were addicted to barbiturates which had been wildly over-prescribed as panacea drugs by enthusiastic doctors. And in the early part of the 20th century, there were similar problems with widespread addiction to potassium bromide. Once again these drugs had been over-prescribed by doctors.

I also talked to my friend Will, who is a GP in the English Midlands.

He has a steady turnover of patients, since people move in and out of his practice area far faster than they do in Bilbury, and he had seen many patients hooked on large doses of Valium, Librium, Ativan and other brands of benzodiazepine.

Will told me that he considered that benzodiazepine addiction was going to be a huge problem in the future – largely because so many doctors still didn’t recognise that the drugs were addictive. Sadly, he felt that other doctors didn’t recognise the size of the impending problem. His partners were still happily doling out benzodiazepines to a high proportion of their patients and using them to treat every disease imaginable – and certainly everything for which there wasn’t already a specific drug.

Gradually, Miss Temple re-discovered her old self.

It was a difficult few months but eventually she told me that everything in the world seemed to be improving: she enjoyed music more, the colours around her seemed brighter and she enjoyed reading books again.

It was a very slow process and there were some very bad days. It seemed to me that the drug had suppressed the feelings that she’d had when her mother was ill and that as she came off the drug those old, hidden feelings all came out from where they’d been temporarily packed away. There were days when she cried and nights when she couldn’t sleep. She went through the mourning process which had been numbed by the Librium she had been taking and she had to endure again the anguish of her mother’s prolonged illness.

‘I’m sure my doctor in London thought he was helping me,’ said Miss Temple. ‘He was a kind man. But I think he just accepted what the drug company told him. I wish he had just allowed me to deal with the feelings I had at the time I had them. Numbing me with the pills has just delayed things and it is now much harder to deal with those hidden emotions.’

But she did succeed in ‘kicking’ her prescription drug addiction. It took slightly more than three months but after that time she was a different woman. She looked brighter and more alert. She took a much more active interest in the world around her.

It was my experience with Miss Temple which had inspired me to do so much research into benzodiazepine drugs. And, although I did not mention her name, of course, she was the patient whose problems I described when I gave my lecture.

Sadly, the audience’s response was not good.

Most of the doctors who were present at the meeting were enthusiastic prescribers of drugs such as Valium and Librium and they found that their patients welcomed them.

‘I don’t think I could run my practice without these drugs,’ said one GP. ‘I find them the most useful multi-purpose drug available. Vast numbers of my patients take them without any noticeable side effects.’

‘But have they tried stopping the drugs?’ I asked.

‘Why on earth would they want to stop the drugs?’ he demanded. ‘They like the drugs. They need them. They don’t want to give them up.’

Another GP told me that he believed that I should be struck off the medical register for even suggesting that the drugs should be controlled.

And so it went on.

Every doctor who spoke attacked my views. No one agreed with me that benzodiazepines were, or ever could be, any sort of problem.

Eventually, as my colleagues sipped their coffees, nibbled their biscuits and pocketed the free gifts which they'd been given by the drug company representatives who are always present whenever three or more doctors meet, I slipped away, climbed into the old Rolls and drove back to Bilbury.

I remember being angry, frustrated and keen to get away from the damned place.

Spreading the word about benzodiazepines was clearly going to take a long time, and be a hard battle. But it was, I felt, a battle that had to be fought.

'How did it go?' asked Patsy, when I arrived back at Bilbury Grange.

She had offered to accompany me to the lecture but I'd had a feeling that things would not go well and I'd advised her to stay at home. She always gets upset when she sees or hears me being attacked. Besides, someone always has to be at the house to answer the telephone and Miss Johnson, who usually comes in to take messages and babysit the children, was away at her sister's home for a short holiday.

I didn't say anything in response to Patsy's question but simply put my arms around her and held her tight.

'Bad?

'Pretty bad.'

'Do you want to talk about it?'

'Later. Much later. Tomorrow, maybe.'

'I've got a hot apple pie in the oven.'

'Custard?'

'Take me five minutes.'

Comfort food.

While Patsy prepared the custard for the apple pie I put on my old, comfortable slippers, poured myself a malt whisky, sat down in my favourite chair in front of the log fire and welcomed Ben, my elderly but ever-faithful dog, up onto my lap.

The cats were curled up on the rug in front of the fire.

The logs in the fireplace were from an old apple tree which had been cut down in our orchard the year before. Apple wood smells sweet when it burns.

I picked up a copy of our local parish newsletter, which is always a joy, and looked through the small advertisements at the back. Mrs Younger was advertising her sock darning service. Mr Pershore was advertising his tractor for sale. ('Nearly new. Only 260,000 miles'.) Mrs Williams had an advertisement offering to exchange a wedding dress ('worn only once but has small red wine stain on the back') for a cot ('Must be sturdy'). Peter Marshall had a small advertisement for tinned goods ('Some tins slightly dented and rusted but contents almost certainly quite safe to eat. Sold at 10% off official price'). Mr Quinlan had tried to save himself an estate agency commission by putting in an advertisement for his cottage. ('Very small place. Indoor lavatory needs attention but outside lavatory functional, needs emptying once weekly or twice weekly if curry eater. Tin bath included. Stairs very narrow and steep. No view to speak of because of trees.') I wondered whether he might not have been wiser to pay the estate agent's commission after all. Mrs Tunnicliffe was advertising her late husband's collection of pipes. ('Some brand new. Mouthpieces of all used pipes wiped clean with Dettol.')

'I think I'm going to start smoking a pipe,' I said to Patsy when she appeared with two bowls of custard covered pie. I put down the parish newsletter.

She frowned.

'Mrs Tunnicliffe is selling her husband's old pipes. I thought a pipe would go nicely with the slippers, the dog and the log fire.'

Patsy smiled. 'Great idea,' she said. 'Maybe she'll have one of those curved Meerschaum pipes.'

'The sort that Sherlock Holmes used to smoke?'

'Precisely! Appropriate since Conan Doyle was a doctor. My uncle Roger used to smoke one of those. He was always setting fire to his cardigan.'

'If I get one with a big enough bowl I could have indoor bonfires. Burn old socks and unwanted magazines.'

Patsy looked at me.

'Of course, we'd have to keep the whole pipe smoking thing a secret from the patients – since I'm always telling them not to smoke.'

Patsy ignored me.

I picked up the spoon Patsy had handed me and dug into the apple pie.

I would go back to fighting the medical establishment tomorrow. Tonight I would enjoy a quiet evening with Patsy. I would enjoy the pie, the fire and my dreams.

The cats, smelling the custard, woke up. Emily was the first to move. She jumped up onto the arm of my chair and looked up at me expectantly. Ben, alerted by Emily's presence, raised his nose and also looked at me, eyes full of hope.

One of the few things I’ve learned in life is that when you’ve got a nice bowl of custard and a house full of animals, you need to keep a close eye on your custard.

The Curious Case of Mrs Groynes's Unmentionables

'We've got a pervert in the village,' said Mrs Groynes. 'One of those men who steals women's under garments.'

It had, she said, started a couple of weeks earlier.

'I noticed it when I went out into the garden to get the washing in,' she told me indignantly. 'I could see straight away that two or three bits of clothing were missing. There was a gap on the line where they'd been hung. The clothes pegs were still there but the clothes had gone. The thief had just snatched them off the line and run off with them.'

'What was missing?' I asked her.

'One of my bras and two pairs of my knickers,' she answered. 'It was my best bra. A new one. Well, nearly new. And it cost me over a pound. And he'd taken two pairs of my knickers as well.' She announced all this with some defiance; as though daring me to dispute her allegation.

'Did you see anyone take them?' I asked her, wondering why she was telling me all this.

'No, of course I didn't! If I'd seen someone take them I'd have chased him. He'd have got what for and I'd have got my things back.'

The thought of Mrs Groynes chasing someone and catching them seemed unlikely but I nodded as though this seemed the approved and likely course of action.

Sybil Groynes is a heavily built woman; put together for sturdiness and comfort rather than speed and manoeuvrability and she was probably designed by the same people who did the pyramids. She has a very small head, a huge top half and an absolutely vast bottom half. Women who are put together in these proportions are usually described as being 'pear' shaped but Mrs Groynes did not look remotely like a pear. She looked, at best, like an artist's imaginative impression of a pear. I suspect that if she did manage to run a 100-yard sprint she would probably need to start at first light in order to complete the distance before dusk.

On the other hand, I would not like to have been a thief in possession of Mrs Groynes's unmentionables if I had been caught by her. I would imagine that she probably has a good right hook. And if she threw herself on top of you then you'd be squashed flat like a cartoon character.

In contrast, her husband Mr Sidney Groynes, is a very modestly proportioned fellow.

He has a small holding and somehow manages to scratch a living from five or six acres of fairly rough pasture land. He keeps a few pigs, a few geese, a few turkeys and a good many chickens.

The family from which Sidney Groynes comes is a remarkably large one but they have very little to do with one another.

Sidney once told me that he and the rest of the family have had so many arguments (most of which have ended in violence) that they have prepared a list of subjects they will never broach in one another's company. I once saw a copy of the list. It was seven pages long and included so many topics that I cannot imagine there was much left for them to talk about other than, perhaps, brass rubbing, slalom skiing and canoeing.

Sidney is not the brightest of God's creatures. Thumper once estimated that on the evolutionary scale he probably comes somewhere between goats and sheep. The shortage of grey matter is hereditary.

Sidney's grand-father, Evan, was born in Wales and came across the Bristol Channel on a ferry in the late 19th century; at a time when ferries commonly linked Swansea and Ilfracombe and carried thousands of tourists and workers between the two towns on a daily basis. Unfortunately, Evan was so seasick on the relatively short crossing that he vowed never to use the return half of his ticket. And nor did he. He sold it to a man from Barnstaple.

I have heard it said that Evan grew up thinking that Wales was an island and that it was not until he was in his 70s that he discovered that Wales and England are connected at the hip or, more accurately, at the northern end of the Bristol Channel and that he could, had he so wished, have made the return journey by road.

Still, long before he had made this no doubt startling and unnerving discovery, Evan had met a nice North Devon girl, got himself a job as a farm labourer, for he was by all accounts, a hard and willing worker, and started a family. They were, by all accounts, a well-matched couple for the bride, like the groom, was not an intellectual.

Sidney is Evan's grandson.

He and Sybil met at a dance in Ilfracombe. She was 16 and a bit years old and on holiday with her parents. She was, I believe, a big girl then. When her parents left to go home to Bristol, she stayed behind and moved in with Sidney. The pair married a year later when Sybil mistakenly thought she was pregnant. They never did have children and I suspect that particular ship sailed some time ago.

'Have you told the police?' I asked Sybil.

‘Oh, they won’t be interested,’ said Mrs Groynes dismissively and, to be frank, rather contemptuously.

We used to have a policeman stationed in Bilbury but we hadn’t had one of our own for a year or two. If we need a policeman we had to telephone Barnstaple. And I understood what she meant. It didn’t seem likely that the Barnstaple police station would send a patrol car all the way to Bilbury to investigate the theft, or alleged theft, of three small items of feminine underwear.

‘How did you think I might be able to help?’ I asked.

‘You know everyone in the village,’ said Mrs Groynes. ‘If you know any perverts just tell them that I want my undies back. If they put them back on my washing line or post them through my letterbox I won’t say any more about it.’

‘I’m afraid I don’t know any perverts,’ I told her. ‘As far as I know we don’t have any in Bilbury.’

‘Not one?’

‘Not one.’

‘What about that Montgomery Hall?’ demanded Mrs Groynes. ‘He dresses up in women’s clothes. I went past their house last summer and saw him out in the garden as large as life and twice as bold. He was sitting in a deckchair reading a book. He was wearing a frock and a straw hat. Can you imagine?’ Mrs Groynes sniffed disapprovingly.

‘Montgomery wouldn’t steal your undies,’ I told her.

The Halls live in a house called ‘Dunmoanin’. He is a retired fireman and a crossdresser. He retired from the fire service suffering from stress and on his best day, he is as nervous as a kitten playing in the garden on a windy day. Montgomery Hall wouldn’t have the courage to steal a bar of soap from a hotel bathroom let alone creep into someone’s garden and raid her washing line.

‘How do you know he wouldn’t?’ demanded Mrs Groynes.

‘He’s not your size,’ I replied immediately. God could make three Montgomery Halls out of one Mrs Groynes and have enough material left over to make a five-year-old child, a small dog, a couple of cats and a handful of field mice.

Mrs Groynes thought about this. ‘No, I suppose not,’ she agreed reluctantly.

‘I’ll keep my eyes peeled,’ I told her, though I didn’t fancy the idea of wandering around the village demanding that every woman show me her underwear and produce the appropriate receipts.

‘Hmm,’ said Mrs Groynes. She folded her arms underneath her stately bosom as though she had suddenly decided that it needed more support. ‘Well, if you catch them, you let me know. I’ll tell my Sidney and he’ll give them a good seeing to.’

I didn’t think Sidney could give a ‘good seeing to’ to a blind tortoise but I nodded politely. ‘What colour were the missing items?’ I asked. I suddenly realised that I was beginning to sound like a policeman.

‘The bra was white,’ said Mrs Groynes. ‘A size 48DD.’

What, I wondered, would a thief do with such a gargantuan item of lingerie. The thief would have to be the same size as Mrs Groynes to take full advantage of the proceeds of the crime and I doubt if there is anyone in North Devon who is the same size as Mrs Groynes.

‘And the other items?’ I asked.

‘Both red.’

I noticed that Mrs Groynes had gone rather red herself.

She didn’t give me the size of the missing knickers but it seemed reasonable to assume that they would not have found them on the rack marked ‘Petite’.

‘Was there anything else?’ I asked. ‘Anything else you need while I’m here?’

I’d driven several miles to visit Mrs Groynes at home and I hadn’t expected to find myself being invited to turn into Sherlock Holmes and solve the Case of the Missing Lingerie.

‘No,’ said Mrs Groynes. ‘Nothing else. I didn’t think it was something worth bothering you about in the surgery.’

‘Of course,’ I said. ‘Thank you.’

‘Don’t mention it,’ said Mrs Groynes.

I got back into the Rolls and drove away.

I did not, I confess, give much thought to Mrs Groynes’s missing unmentionables. I assumed that they had probably blown away in one of the gales which affect the North Devon coastline throughout the year. Or that Mrs Groynes had maybe mislaid the absent items.

Indeed, I had completely forgotten about the visit and the missing bra and undies until I happened to be passing by the Groynes’s smallholding early one morning a week or so later.

I had been to visit Harry Burrows, an elderly man who lives in a cottage on the edge of Woolley Wood. Mr Burrows suffers from a dictionary of medical ailments including asthma, back trouble, high blood pressure, gallstones, early Parkinson's disease, gout, athlete's foot and chilblains. He'd called me out because he'd had a bad attack of gout.

Gout is a type of arthritis which causes severe pain. It is widely believed to affect only the big toes of elderly Colonels who have drunk too much port wine. This is nonsense, of course. In practice, I have found gout to be quite common. It affects far more men than women and it usually affects men over the age of 35 years of age. Most sufferers are overweight and a good many of them also seem to suffer with high blood pressure. Gout develops when the levels of uric acid in the blood rise too high and uric acid crystals accumulate in the joints. Any joint in the body can be affected and although it is true that the big toes are often affected, other joints which can be involved include the wrists, knees, ankles, elbows and all the joints in the fingers.

In a healthy individual, uric acid is excreted in the urine but in gout sufferers this doesn't happen properly. There are several possible reasons for this failure. In some individuals the kidneys may be damaged, and failing to get rid of uric acid properly. In others there is an inherited tendency to develop high levels of uric acid. And in a third group, which included Mr Burrows, the gout is triggered by eating too many foods which tend to produce high levels of uric acid. Foods which are particularly likely to cause gout include game, herring, whitebait, salmon, strawberries, asparagus, spinach and rhubarb. Drinks likely to cause gout (or make it worse) include port and sparkling wines such as champagne.

Mr Burrows lives on a strange diet which consisted mostly of pheasant, partridge and rhubarb. He obtains the pheasant and the partridge by trapping them in his garden (quite illegally I'm afraid) and he obtains the rhubarb by growing it next to a huge manure pile which he keeps topped up with the help of a few ponies in a neighbouring field. I had repeatedly warned him that his diet was making his gout far worse but he was stubborn and reluctant to change his diet.

'I've got a bad attack of the grout,' complained Mr Burrows, when I arrived at his cottage. He steadfastly insisted on referring to his problem as though it were a form of filler used to fill gaps between tiles or bricks. I had long ago given up trying to explain the difference.

Mr Burrows already had a supply of a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug and he also took allopurinol to help control the production of uric acid. It was, as usual, his left knee which was affected. I don't know why it always affects his left knee. It just does. I don't think he has ever had any trouble with his toe joints.

The knee was swollen and I injected him with a steroid. In the past this has always proved effective at reducing the swelling and the pain. I also prepared an ice pack for his knee and told him to drink plenty of water to try to flush out some of the uric acid.

I had done everything I could to help Mr Burrows and was on my way back to Bilbury Grange when I found myself driving past the Groynes' smallholding. The part of their land which they use as a garden area runs along beside the road and the hedge there is very thin and poorly kept. As I drove by, my eye was caught by something in the garden. I slowed down, came to a halt and could see that Mrs Groynes's washing was hanging on the line. She must have left it out overnight. And a huge crow was busy plucking at a large piece of red material which, when I looked more closely, was pretty obviously another pair of Mrs Groynes's knickers.

Suddenly, the crow succeeded in pulling the item of underwear from the wooden clothes peg which had been holding it on to the clothes line.

I watched in amazement as the crow then flew off, carrying Mrs Groynes's knickers.

I opened the glove compartment of the Rolls and took out a small pair of binoculars which I keep there for watching wildlife. To my astonishment, the crow took the knickers high up into a nearby sycamore tree. I could see that the bird's nest, which was largely made with the usual mixture of sticks and twigs, also contained something white and several red items. I'd heard of the red kite taking items of laundry to line a nest but I hadn't previously realised that crows had a penchant for decorating their homes with such items.

I got out of the car and knocked on the Groynes' front door.

It was Mrs Groynes herself who eventually answered my knock. She was wearing a vast and rather tatty dressing gown and had pink plastic curlers in her hair.

'I've identified the thief who took your underwear,' I told her.

'Who?' she demanded. 'I'll skin the pervert.'

'Not easy to do,' I told her.

I explained that her bra and knickers had been stolen by a crow who had used them to line a nest in a nearby tree.

She stared at me, disbelievingly.

'You can see it for yourself,' I told her. I explained where she should look. I turned to leave.

'And I'm afraid the bad news is that you've just lost another pair of your knickers,' I added. 'The crow just took a pair from your washing line.'

Mrs Groynes's immediate response was unprintable.

‘Sidney!’ she shouted. ‘Fetch the ladder!’

I hurried back to the car, before I too was ordered to climb up the tree to retrieve the stolen undergarments.

I am proud to report that I succeeded in hiding my smile until I was out of sight.

The Mortgage Application

I know most of my patients by name. I know where they live, what they do for a living and their social circumstances. Even the individuals who haven't been to the surgery are usually well known to me because I have seen them in the village; usually at the Duck and Puddle public house or at Peter Marshall's shop.

However, I didn't recognise Mr Woodbury when he came into the surgery. And yet I could see from his medical records that he lived in the village and had done so for longer than I had. I recognised the address and I had seen Violet Woodbury, who was his wife, on a number of occasions.

Violet Woodbury is a tiny woman, if she stood on tiptoes she would probably just about measure five foot tall, and she looks rather like a neatly dressed Victorian doll. Whenever I've seen her she has always been dressed in rather old-fashioned clothes; blouses with ruffled sleeves and long skirts which reach almost to the ground. She wears her hair in those strange, old-fashioned buns – one on each side of her head so that it almost looks as if she is constantly wearing ear muffs.

Violet is a nervous, gentle woman who embroiders hand-made greeting cards which she sells to a woman who has a stall on Barnstaple Market. Peter Marshall stocks a few of her cards in his shop and I believe they sell quite well. I can't imagine how Mrs Woodbury makes any money out of the cards because the materials alone must cost her more than the prices charged for the finished articles. Each card is a small work of art and must take her several hours to complete. I've always thought it is more of a hobby than a job; something with which she keeps herself occupied when her husband is away.

I've seen her in the surgery quite a few times because she has psoriasis on her arms and legs. That is, of course, why she always wears long-sleeved blouses and long skirts.

But Farley Woodbury, her husband, was a stranger to me.

Looking at him I would have said that he was in his mid-fifties but the almost empty cardboard envelope which contained his very skimpy medical records told me that he was actually still in his mid-forties. He was, to be more precise, just 46-years-old. His face rather reminded me of Clark Gable, the film star, and he even had one of those little moustaches which Gable wore. But from the neck down he looked more like Luciano Pavarotti, the bulky Italian opera singer.

'I waited until the end of the surgery because I've got a form for you to fill in, doctor,' he said, taking a form out of his briefcase and holding it out towards me. I immediately recognised it as an insurance company document.

'My wife and I are buying a flat in London and so I've got to take out a loan from the bank,' he explained. 'The bank wants to be sure that I'm not to drop dead next week.' He shrugged and smiled. 'Or, at least, they want to feel comfortable with the odds against my dropping dead next week.'

I took the form from him and examined it. I'd seen quite a few of them.

Different companies have different forms but they're all much the same.

The first part of the form consists of a series of questions designed to elicit evidence of existing or impending ill health. The second part of the form requires the doctor to perform a number of fairly basic physical tests: pulse rate, blood pressure, weight and so on.

At the end of the whole thing the examining doctor must sign the form, either confirming that the patient is a good risk or warning the company that there is or might be a health problem which could result in a higher premium or their refusing to provide insurance cover at all.

In recompense for this work, which does not fall within a GP's commitments and responsibilities with the National Health Service, the company sends the doctor a cheque for his services. I don't see many of these forms, mainly because my practice is very small and most of the residents in Bilbury aren't about to purchase new properties or take out large loans for other purposes, but doctors with large practices in towns or cities fill in two or three of these forms a week and can make quite a bit of money out of them. My friend Will who works in general practice in the English Midlands earns enough from insurance company medicals to pay for the running of his motor car.

I do so few of them that I could probably make just about enough to keep my bicycle on the road. In practice, I give all my insurance company earnings to our local village hospital.

I am not complaining. I wouldn't swap my practice in Bilbury for a job anywhere else. And I didn't qualify as a doctor in order to fill in insurance company forms.

My questioning of Mr Woodbury didn't produce much information likely to be of interest to the insurance company. He told me that he worked as a salesman for a company making expensive yachts. His job took him all around the world and he usually spent between six and nine months of the year travelling. He had no history of serious illness, no symptoms of respiratory or cardiac problems, no joint pains and no other significant signs of illness.

'Do you have any problems with your stomach?' I asked.

'No,' he replied. 'Nothing of any great significance.'

I looked up from the form, upon which I had been putting ticks in the little boxes. I didn't say anything, just raised an eyebrow. I knew there was more.

'I get a lot of wind,' he admitted. 'I sometimes have to let my belt out a couple of notches.'

'Does the wind come up or go down when you get rid of it?'

'Both. If I'm having dinner with a client I sometimes have to excuse myself and go to the lavatory – just to let out some of the wind.' He shuffled in the chair, clearly embarrassed.

'Do you have any pain?'

'I get bad pain when the wind is at its worst. It sometimes feels as though my guts are blown up like a balloon. And the pain seems to be a result of the gut wall stretching. That's what it feels like anyway.'

'Does any particular type of food make things worse?'

'Fatty food,' said Mr Woodbury immediately.

I'd heard this before from patients. I don't think anyone knows precisely why but it seems that fatty food causes the muscles of the bowel to go into spasm. The muscular spasms then push the food through very quickly and result in the production of a mixture of mucus and diarrhoea. Patients have told me that if they eat something bland, or drink a glass of water, this sometimes helps to relieve the spasms. I suspect that the bland food merely fills up the bowels and gives the muscles something to squeeze when they go into spasm.

'Does anything help relieve the pain?'

'Eating and drinking seems to help,' said Mr Woodbury. He looked embarrassed and patted his stomach. 'Sometimes, if I've eaten a big meal and my bowels are playing up I'll make myself a sandwich – something bland and not containing much fat. A jam sandwich or something like that – together with a glass of water. If I'm staying in a hotel I'll order a salad sandwich.' He looked at me. 'It's a funny thing,' he said, 'but big hotels don't seem to stock any jam. Either that or the chefs don't know how to make a jam sandwich.'

'How often do you get the pain?'

Mr Woodbury thought for a moment. 'It varies,' he said at last. 'Sometimes I get it almost consistently for a couple of weeks. Just about every day. And then it will disappear for a few weeks.'

'Does anything else ease the pain?'

'A warm bath helps,' said Mr Woodbury. 'And I find that if I lie on my side when I'm in bed I get some relief.'

'Have you noticed whether anything makes the pain worse?'

'If I'm very stressed it can get bad,' he admitted. 'When I was young I had nerves of steel. These days the slightest aggravation seems to upset me. A friend of mine, a fellow I work with sometimes, has a theory that human beings can cope with only so much nervous strain. His idea is that the capacity for stress varies from one individual to another, but the principle remains the same for everyone. Once you've taken as much stress as you can cope with that's it – there isn't any room for any more stress.' He laughed. 'Probably sounds daft to you, doctor!'

'I've heard much dafter ideas,' I told him.

'The problem is that my job involves me meeting with some very strange people. My company sells yachts that cost £200,000 and have helicopter landing pads.' He smiled. 'Who was it who said that the rich are different to us?'

'I think it was F.Scott Fitzgerald,' I replied.

'Well, he was right,' said Mr Woodbury. 'They are different. The people I deal with are used to getting their own way. They expect you to fly half way round the world to meet them and when you get there you find that they've moved and they've flown back to where you were a day earlier. They have their own private aircraft and can fly in comfort and style but I'm flying economy on scheduled services. Plus I then have to explain to my boss why my expenses are so high and I'm not selling any boats.'

'I can see that would be very stressful,' I agreed.

He grimaced and nodded. 'Actually,' he added, 'the pain in my belly often gets worse when I'm flying – particularly if the plane is a small one. I've noticed that. I can't imagine why flying should make it worse except for the fact that when I'm in an aeroplane I'm usually rushing to be somewhere else. And for me that's a pretty stressful activity.' He looked down at his waistline. 'My size doesn't help,' he admitted. 'I don't know whether I'm imagining this but the seats on aeroplanes seem to get smaller and smaller.'

'How are your bowels?' I asked. 'When you go to the loo?'

'Fine,' he replied. 'Well, most of the time.'

I waited for him to elucidate.

‘I get a bit of diarrhoea occasionally,’ he explained. ‘At other times I’ll be constipated for a day or two.’

‘Do you pass any blood with the diarrhoea? Or at any other time?’

‘Oh no, nothing like that.’ He paused, and looked down.

‘You’ve looked for blood?’

‘Oh yes. With all this pain I thought of the obvious.’

‘Anything else?’

‘It’s a bit embarrassing really.’

‘Go on. I’m not going to be embarrassed and you don’t need to be.’

‘I sometimes pass some mucus type of stuff.’

‘Does that relate to the pains you get?’

‘Yes, I usually get the mucus after I’ve had the pains.’

‘Have you taken anything for the wind and the pain?’

‘I’ve tried various over-the-counter medicines. I’ve bought several medicines recommended for flatulence. I’ve been to a few pharmacists and asked them for stuff. I’ve tried stuff in the States, in Japan, in Germany and here.’

‘Has any of it helped?’

‘A little bit. But not a lot.’

‘But you do find that the wind and the bowel problems are caused or made worse by what you eat?’

‘Oh yes, definitely. If I eat something that is very fatty then I’m usually bad for a few days afterwards. I try to avoid fatty foods as much as I can but in my job it isn’t always easy. I have to eat out with clients and because the people who buy the sort of yachts I sell are pretty rich I have to take them somewhere expensive. And posh restaurants and hotels seem to serve a lot of very fatty food.’

I nodded, made a few notes on a notepad which I keep on my desk but I didn’t write anything on the form for the time being.

‘Pop behind the screen and undress down to your underwear,’ I told him. I looked at the form. ‘I need to examine you and this particular insurance company seems to want a pretty thorough examination.’

‘The bank is lending us quite a chunk of money,’ explained Mr Woodbury. ‘We’re buying a flat in Kensington. It’ll mean that my wife can stay in London with me when I have to see clients in the city. She prefers staying here in Bilbury but at the moment I sometimes go for a month or six weeks without seeing her. Having a flat in town will mean that we can spend a few days together when I’m seeing potential customers.’ He pulled a face. ‘Property in London is ridiculously expensive but we’re hoping it will be an investment.’

‘I’m sure it will be!’ I said.

‘We’re having to pay £20,000 for quite a small flat!’ said Mr Woodbury. ‘One bedroom, living room, dining room and bathroom and kitchen.’

I looked at him, astonished. ‘£20,000 for a flat!’

‘I know,’ he said. ‘Ridiculous, isn’t it? You can buy quite a large house in Bilbury for less than that.’

I couldn’t help wondering if property prices in London could go much higher than they had already reached. In my innocence and ignorance, it seemed impossible that Mr Woodbury would be able to make money on his investment. But that, of course, was not my problem.

He stood up and went behind the screen.

While he undressed I looked at the rest of the form, and thought about what I’d learned.

I was convinced, from the story he’d told me, that Mr Woodbury was suffering from a disorder known as irritable bowel syndrome.

Back in the 19th century, irritable bowel syndrome, or IBS, used to be known as ‘spastic colon’. Back then no one really knew what caused it or why the bowel muscles went into such painful spasms. A hundred years later, in the 1970s, and still no one knew what caused it or why the bowel muscles went into such powerful and painful spasms.

It is a debilitating and underestimated disorder and the name, which makes the disorder sound almost insignificant, really doesn’t do it justice. Because it doesn’t kill those who suffer from it, doctors don’t tend to take it very seriously and researchers have generally avoided doing any work to find out more about it.

Doctors also tend to be suspicious about diseases which produce only symptoms – they tend to think of really serious, deadly diseases as producing lots of measurable signs.

But my experience as a GP had taught me that IBS can wreck people’s lives. And there is certainly no doubt that the pain caused by the muscle cramping associated with IBS can be among the most incapacitating of all pains.

But IBS is not considered to be a life threatening disorder and the insurance company form contained no box for me to report this condition.

‘Do you want me to lie down on the couch?’ Mr Woodbury asked, now wearing just his vest, underpants and socks. He was clearly grossly overweight and I suspected that either his suit had been handmade to try to disguise his weight or else he had been wearing some sort of corset to hold in his tummy. If he'd been female I'd have suspected that he was about to deliver a brace of bouncing new twins.

Apart from his being considerably overweight, my physical examination didn't produce anything much of interest. His blood pressure was surprisingly normal. His lungs were clear. His heart was ticking away very nicely. His joints all worked perfectly well. There were no signs of any neurological problems. His eyesight was normal. His hearing was excellent. He had no enlarged glands. His teeth and mouth were fine.

When I examined his abdomen I could feel nothing abnormal, though to be honest he was so overweight that the examination was a little difficult to do thoroughly. I put a finger into his back passage and found no signs of an enlarged prostate or any other abnormality. He had no enlarged lymph nodes. His temperature was entirely normal. His skin was free of serious blemishes and except for a rather bad fungal infection between the toes and on the nails of both feet, I could find nothing wrong there. As far as I know, no one has ever died of athlete's foot so I didn't consider that discovery to be of any great significance.

I gave him my usual little talk about the need to lose weight. I told him that I understood why he ate too much but I warned him that if he didn't lose weight then the excess he was carrying would have a long-term damaging effect on his heart, his joints and just about every other part of his body. I gave him a calorie booklet I'd had printed. It contains details of how many calories different foods contain. And I gave him another leaflet which contains my dieting tips.

Mr Woodbury looked suitably contrite and promised to make a real effort to lose some weight.

Finally, I told him that I needed a urine sample. I told him to get dressed, gave him a sample bottle and told him where he would find our downstairs cloakroom.

While I waited for him to produce a sample, I continued to fill in the form the insurance company had provided. I have never been very good at filling in forms. I don't know why it is but I often find myself rushing and missing a box here or there. And then, two weeks later, the form comes back to me with a note explaining what I've forgotten and asking me to finish the job I've started.

And so I always take special care when filling in an insurance medical form for a patient. I know that an error can lead to a delay in them obtaining the money they need and, consequently, a delay in completing their property purchase. I am very well aware that the whole property buying chain is complicated enough without me making it any worse.

Moments later Mr Woodbury returned, handed me the usual, warm plastic bottle and sat down. I took the bottle over to the sink in the corner of my consulting room where I perform tests of this type. I dipped one of the little indicator sticks into the urine. These little paper sticks have revolutionised medical practice. They were the one aspect of medical practice which my predecessor Dr Brownlow found most useful. He claimed that as far as he was concerned nothing, absolutely nothing, had revolutionised his life quite as much as the little paper testing sticks. In his earlier career, the testing of urine had involved much glassware and a good deal of expertise.

In the old days, a doctor would need real laboratory equipment to test to see if there was any blood or sugar in a urine sample. And testing to see if a woman was pregnant would require a good deal of patience.

These days a doctor can tell if there is sugar or blood in a urine sample within a couple of minutes.

I really didn't expect to see any abnormality when I tested Mr Woodbury's urine. There was absolutely no reason to suspect that there might be any positive result at all.

And so I was startled when the little slip of paper I was using showed that there was a trace of blood in Mr Woodbury's urine sample. To be honest 'startled' is not a strong enough word. I was actually quite shocked and horrified. It was not something I expected and I was pretty sure it was not something that Mr Woodbury could have suspected.

I was so shocked that I repeated the test with another testing stick.

This too produced a positive result.

The amount of blood in his urine wasn't great. But the test was nevertheless definitive. Mr Woodbury had blood in his urine. And blood in the urine is not something that can, or should, be ignored.

I poured the rest of the urine down the sink, threw the empty bottle and the two testing strips into the pedal operated waste bin underneath the sink, and went back to my chair. The diagnosis of IBS which I had already made now seemed very insignificant.

'Everything OK, doctor?' asked Mr Woodbury. Like me he clearly did not expect the test to produce any evidence of importance.

'I'm afraid your urine isn't quite as clear as I would like,' I told him. 'I need to arrange a couple of tests at the hospital in Barnstaple.'

Mr Woodbury looked at me and paled noticeably. 'What sort of tests?' he asked. 'What's the problem?'

It is bad enough when a patient visits a doctor with signs or symptoms and then is told that the symptoms of which he has complained, or the signs which he has noticed, are as significant as he may have feared.

(Symptoms, of course, are the physical or mental features of a disorder which are apparent to the patient whereas signs are the physical or mental features which usually have to be elicited by the doctor. So, for example, a headache or blurred vision is a symptom whereas a heart murmur or an exaggerated neurological reflex is a sign.)

But it is, I suspect, worse when a patient who feels perfectly healthy visits a doctor for an entirely routine examination and is told that there is a problem with his or her health. To hear that there is a problem, under these circumstances, must be quite a shock. There has been no time for the patient to prepare himself, or herself, for bad news.

‘There was a tiny amount of blood in your urine,’ I told him.

I prefer to be honest with patients when I can.

I think it can sometimes be worse if a patient is left in the dark and allowed to imagine all sorts of strange scenarios. Unless there are obvious signs to the contrary, I like to assume that my patients are not stupid. And I am certainly aware that if a doctor tries to hide the truth then there is a real risk that the patient will go away convinced of the worst. It is not unknown for patients who have very curable problems to commit suicide because they were allowed to harbour unnecessary fears.

‘There wasn’t enough for me to see any sign of blood in the urine with the naked eye,’ I told him. ‘But the testing strip found a small amount of blood.’ I paused. ‘A very small amount,’ I added.

‘What do you think the problem could be?’ asked Mr Woodbury.

‘I don’t know,’ I told him honestly. ‘There are lots of possible causes of blood in the urine. You haven’t had an injury recently, have you? Been hit or kicked in the kidneys?’

‘No, definitely not,’ said Mr Woodbury.

‘You don’t do any strenuous exercise?’

Mr Woodbury laughed rather wryly. ‘Do I look like a man who does any strenuous exercise.’

I smiled my understanding. ‘Do you have any stinging when you pass urine?’

‘No, nothing like that.’

Blood in the urine can be caused by a urinary tract infection but this seemed unlikely. The testing strip I had used had shown no sign of any infection and the urine sample had looked perfectly clear.

‘Have you had any discharge from your penis? Any signs of an infection there?’

Mr Woodbury shook his head.

‘Let me take a look,’ I said, standing up.

Mr Woodbury stood up too, and unbuttoned his trousers so that I could examine his penis and scrotum. There were absolutely no abnormalities. No lumps, no rash, no sores and no visible bleeding.

‘Could it be cancer?’ asked Mr Woodbury bluntly, after he’d sat down and while I was washing my hands.

‘It’s a possibility we have to exclude,’ I told him.

‘What sort of cancer could it be?’

‘Cancer of the bladder is one possibility and cancer of the kidney is another,’ I told him. ‘But there is probably a much simpler explanation. And even if there is a cancer, it is clearly very early on because the amount of blood in your urine is very, very small.’

‘How soon can you arrange the tests?’ asked Mr Woodbury.

‘I’ll fix it up now,’ I told him.

Patients who live in big cities invariably have access to much bigger and better equipped hospitals than the ones available in rural areas. But there are more likely to be waiting lists for essential tests in big hospitals.

One of the advantages of being in a fairly lowly populated area such as North Devon is that it is often perfectly possible to arrange an appointment for tests to be done the same day or the next day.

I picked up the telephone and telephoned the local X-ray department.

‘Can you get to the hospital in Barnstaple this afternoon?’ I asked Mr Woodbury, holding my hand over the telephone.

‘Today?’ Mr Woodbury seemed shocked by the speed of the appointment.

‘Yes.’

I took my hand off the mouthpiece, fixed a time and then replaced the telephone.

‘Be at the X-ray department at three o’ clock this afternoon,’ I told him. ‘They’ll do some tests for me. And then come back to see me at this evening’s surgery. I’ll speak to the radiologist when he’s seen you and I should have some news for you by then.’

‘I don’t need an appointment to see you this evening?’

‘No, of course not – you just have to turn up at the surgery. I don’t have an appointments system for any of my surgeries.’

Mr Woodbury thanked me and, still looking rather pale, left.

I looked at my watch. Mr Woodbury's insurance medical examination had taken quite a while and it was now nearly 1 p.m. I checked the list of home visits which Miss Johnson had put on my desk before Mr Woodbury's consultation.

There were just two visits to do and neither of them was urgent. I decided to have my lunch and then do the visits after I had eaten.

One of the many things I have learned as a GP working in a solitary practice is that it is always wise to eat when you can.

On too many occasions I have put off having my lunch, spent the whole afternoon doing fairly routine home visits, returned to Bilbury Grange to do the evening surgery, had to go out on an urgent visit when I should have been eating my dinner and found myself eating my first food for more than twelve hours at 10 o'clock at night.

So I joined Patsy and we had a light lunch of soup, and a couple of sandwiches made with fresh home-made bread and some excellent local cheddar cheese. The cheese is made by a farmer who is a patient of mine and who brings us a block of the stuff every weekend as a 'thank you' for services rendered.

In the afternoon, I completed the two visits and then caught up on some paperwork. Even back in the 1970s, general practitioners spent a good deal of their lives dealing with paperwork.

Mr Woodbury returned to Bilbury Grange that evening.

He came to the surgery with his wife, Violet, and explained that after the morning consultation he had gone straight home and told his wife that he needed to go to the hospital. She had gone with him and waited while he was in the X-ray department.

Unlike the morning, when he had generously waited until the end of the surgery because he suspected that his appointment was going to take longer than everyone else's, he was the first to appear in the surgery. He wanted to know the news. And who wouldn't?

I had got off the telephone to the radiologist just half an hour earlier and I had spent that thirty minutes thinking about Mr Woodbury's condition.

Hospitals are bound up with a lot of red tape and there are frequently long administrative delays in getting the results of X-rays and laboratory results to the GP. The result can be that patients sometimes have to wait weeks to find out whether or not they have a serious disease. This delay inevitably means that starting essential treatment will necessarily be delayed. And that can be fatal. I have always preferred to telephone the hospital and speak to the doctor who did the tests and who can give me the information first hand, without waiting for it to come through the post.

For both the doctor and the patient this is one of the advantages of living in a fairly remote rural village. A city GP, with two or three thousand patients to look after, probably wouldn't have time to ring the hospital. And even if he found the time he would probably have great difficulty finding the doctor who had conducted the tests.

Our local Barnstaple hospital has a small number of staff. I know most of them personally and so I can ring up, speak directly to them and get the information I need.

Just ten minutes earlier I had suddenly realised that I had had, all the time, two valuable pieces of information which I'd missed.

The Woodburys came into the surgery holding hands. They were both white with anxiety.

'You can stop worrying,' I told them both, before they had even sat down. I hate doctors who behave as though they are conducting a quiz show, and who make patients wait for ages before they give them the news they have been waiting for. I once worked for a hospital consultant who would make patients wait four or five minutes before giving them the important information which they had been so desperate to receive.

'The radiologist is certain that there is no cancer in your bladder or either of your kidneys,' I told Mr Woodbury.' As you know, the hospital did X-rays of your bladder and both kidneys and they looked at everything with their ultrasound equipment. They also did some blood tests. And the radiologist, who is an excellent doctor, is quite certain that you don't have cancer of the bladder or cancer of the kidneys.'

Mrs Woodbury burst into tears. Mr Woodbury put his arm around her and gave her a hug.

I busied myself with some paperwork on my desk, giving them both time to take in the good news and settle a little.

'Do they have any idea what caused the bleeding?' asked Mr Woodbury. He coughed to clear his throat. His voice was wavering.

'No, they don't,' I told him. 'We've ruled out all the usual, obvious causes. There is no growth and no infection. But just before you got here I was thinking about everything you told me and I think I know what caused the blood in your urine.'

They both looked at me, expectantly.

‘When we talked this morning you told me that your abdominal pain and swelling got worse when you were travelling in aeroplanes,’ I said.

Mr Woodbury nodded. ‘That’s right.’

‘I’m pretty sure that the swelling and the pain are symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome,’ I told him. ‘And the pain in your abdomen gets worse when you’re flying because the gases in the intestinal tract expand at higher altitudes.’

They both nodded.

‘That makes sense,’ said Mr Woodbury.

The radiologist had inadvertently helped with the diagnosis because he had told me that when he looked at the X-rays of Mr Woodbury’s kidneys, he could hardly see anything because of the amount of gas in the intestine. No X-ray report would have contained such valuable information.

‘Irritable bowel syndrome often seems to get worse when sufferers eat fatty food,’ I explained. ‘I have no idea why. But it is, nevertheless, a fact. For most people this is actually quite good for their health because folk who eat less fatty food are less likely to develop circulatory problems – heart disease and strokes – and are also less likely to develop cancer.’

‘But how does that relate to the blood in my urine?’

‘When the wind inside your intestine expands it presses on the other organs inside your abdomen,’ I explained. ‘And my theory is that it is the pressure on one or both of your kidneys which has caused the bleeding.’

‘But could wind do that?’ asked Mrs Woodbury.

‘I don’t see why not,’ I replied. ‘If the kidney is bruised or knocked hard then it is quite common to find blood in the urine. So if the kidney is under pressure from a wind-filled length of intestine, it makes sense to me that there might be some bleeding. Don’t forget that there were only microscopic amounts of blood in your husband’s urine.’

‘That sounds as if it would be good news,’ said Mr Woodbury.

‘Certainly,’ I said. ‘It then leaves us with the problem of dealing with your irritable bowel syndrome – rather than the problem of dealing with a kidney problem. And that’s much simpler because IBS is far less threatening than a kidney cancer.’

‘Is there a test that you can do to check this out?’ asked Mr Woodbury. ‘To see if your diagnosis is the right one?’

‘There isn’t a specific test,’ I told him. ‘And I have to tell you that this is my own theory. I’ve never seen it discussed by other doctors as an explanation for blood in the urine.’

‘But you’ve thought of a test?’

I nodded. ‘There’s a very simple test we can do,’ I said to Mr Woodbury. ‘You come back and see me when you haven’t got much wind in your intestines – on a day when your irritable bowel syndrome isn’t causing you any trouble.’

‘And you’ll test my husband’s urine?’ said Mrs Woodbury.

‘Absolutely right.’

‘And if there’s no blood in my urine then the chances are that your diagnosis is the right one?’

‘Yes.’

‘How can I get my irritable bowel syndrome under control?’ asked Mr Woodbury.

‘Try to avoid stress for a few days, take things easy and make sure you avoid foods which you know tend to give you wind. Do you have to go flying off anywhere over the next few days?’

‘No,’ said Mrs Woodbury. She was very definite. ‘Farley is taking some time off. While he was being X-rayed, I used a pay phone at the hospital and telephoned his boss. I told them that Farley wouldn’t be at work for a while. They were very good about it and told him to take as much time off as he needed. He’s got a month’s holiday that he hasn’t used and he hasn’t been off sick for years.’

‘Splendid,’ I said. ‘Then you come back and see me again in a few days when you’re happy that there isn’t so much wind in your abdomen.’

‘And you’ll do another urine test,’ added Mrs Woodbury.

‘Exactly,’ I agreed.

They both stood up and Mrs Woodbury thanked me for getting the results so quickly. ‘My friend lives in Birmingham,’ she said, ‘and she had to wait three weeks for the results of her X-ray. She was on tenterhooks the whole time. So we both appreciate what you’ve done.’

I pointed out that it is much easier to get hospital results quickly when you live and work in a small community. And I told them that I looked forward to seeing Mr Woodbury as soon as he felt that he was ready for another urine test.

It was five days before Mr Woodbury returned to Bilbury Grange.

He and his wife came into the evening surgery. They were holding hands again.

‘As you suggested, I’ve come to have another urine test,’ said Mr Woodbury, after they had sat down.

‘No wind?’ I asked.

‘None,’ said Mr Woodbury. ‘But I had a bad 48 hours after that day when I saw you and went to the hospital. The pain was as bad as it has ever been.’

‘I wanted to call you,’ said Mrs Woodbury, looking at her husband. ‘His tummy was terribly swollen. But Farley said he just wanted to rest and wait for the wind to subside.’

‘It may not look as if it has, but my tummy has gone down a lot,’ said Mr Woodbury, patting his abdomen.

I stood up and fetched a urine bottle from the cupboard where I keep such things. I handed the bottle to Mr Woodbury who stood up to take the bottle from me. His wife didn’t want to let go of his hand. ‘You know what to do,’ I told him.

‘Do you think everything will be all right?’ asked Mrs Woodbury when her husband had left the consulting room to put a sample of urine into the bottle. Her voice was quavering. She was clearly very nervous.

‘He hasn’t got cancer,’ I told her. ‘All this is going to do is show us if my guess is correct. If there isn’t any blood in your husband’s urine then I was almost certainly correct in thinking that the bleeding was caused by the swollen bowel pressing on one of his kidneys. But if there is still some blood there then my guess could still be right – and we’ll just have to repeat the test in a few more days’ time. Either way, I really don’t think there is any reason for you to be worried.’

Mrs Woodbury licked her lips and nodded. She didn’t say anything.

‘So remember: even if there is blood in his urine, there really isn’t anything for you to worry about,’ I told her. ‘We all tend to put too much emphasis on tests. The important thing is the way your husband feels and how he looks. And there are absolutely no important signs of anything for us to be worried about.’

Mrs Woodbury nodded again. I have to say that she did not look convinced by my attempt to reassure her.

A moment later Mr Woodbury returned carrying the little plastic bottle which contained his sample. I told him to sit down while I did the necessary with one of my little testing strips.

I did it twice. Just to make sure.

‘It’s clear,’ I told them both. ‘Perfectly clear. There’s no trace of any blood in the urine sample.’

Mrs Woodbury started to cry. Mr Woodbury put his arm around her and looked very relieved.

‘So you were right about the wind in my bowel pressing on my kidneys?’

‘I think so,’ I said. I opened the top drawer of my desk and took out the insurance form I had almost completed. ‘I hope you don’t mind,’ I said, ‘but I kept this back for a day or two so that I could put in a note about your urine being clear. I don’t think there’s any need for us to mention the other test or the X-rays. The insurance company doesn’t ask about things like that. They’re only interested in things that are wrong; problems that might cost them money.’

Mr Woodbury and his wife looked at each other. ‘We aren’t going ahead with the purchase,’ said Mr Woodbury. ‘So I’m afraid we won’t need the mortgage, or the loan or the insurance company form.’

I looked at them and raised a questioning eyebrow. I have to admit that I was surprised.

‘Farley has given in his notice,’ explained Mrs Woodbury. ‘He’s found a job at a small boatyard just outside Bideford. They make small sailing boats for weekend sailors and they’ve been looking for a marketing manager. It’ll involve a little bit of travel, but only in the West Country and there won’t be any foreign travel or trips to London.’ She looked very pleased with the way things had turned out.

‘I feel very good about it,’ said Mr Woodbury.

‘So we won’t need that ridiculously expensive flat in London,’ said Mrs Woodbury. ‘We’ve rung the bank and cancelled the arrangement. They were very understanding about it.’

‘It’ll mean quite a cut in my salary,’ said Mr Woodbury. ‘And there are no big bonuses. But there’s a possibility of a seat on the board in two years’ time and if things go satisfactorily for us all then they’ll let me put a little of our money into the business. The owner is in his 70s and his children aren’t in the slightest bit interested in running a boatyard.’

There are quite a few boatyards in North Devon and I have patients working in several of them. I knew the boatyard he was talking about and I thought he was probably right: the owner’s children didn’t live in Devon and I couldn’t imagine them ever wanting to make boats for a living.

‘We think it’s the right thing for us,’ said Mrs Woodbury. ‘Farley can come home every evening and I can make sure he sticks to his diet and cuts out any foods that upset his tummy.’

‘None of those rich, fatty sauces,’ said Mr Woodbury.

‘Absolutely not!’ said Mrs Woodbury.

‘So, I’m sorry to have wasted your time with the form,’ said Mr Woodbury.

‘But it all turned out for the best,’ said Mrs Woodbury.

I congratulated them both on their decision, told them I thought that they'd done a brave and wise thing and wished them well for the future.

They stood up, still holding hands.

'One final thing,' I said to Mr Woodbury. 'Now that you're living in the village full time, I want to see you once a month so that I can weigh you.'

'We've got some scales in our bathroom,' said Mrs Woodbury.

'I'm sure you have,' I said. 'But the scales won't tell your husband off if he isn't losing weight. Knowing that he has to come here once a month might just add a little extra bite to his incentive to lose weight.'

Mr Woodbury smiled and nodded.

When they'd gone, I picked up the now unwanted insurance form. It was completed and ready to go off to the company which had commissioned it. They'd even provided me with a stamped addressed envelope so that I could send it back to them. I dropped the form and the envelope into my waste basket.

The waste basket looked a suitable resting place for it.

And then I looked at the form for a moment and thought about it.

The insurance company had commissioned the report. It only seemed fair that they should pay me for the work I had done. The cheque would, after all, go into our cottage hospital's bank account. It wasn't my fault that the insurance report was no longer required.

It was the work of a moment to sign the form, slip it into its envelope and put it into the 'Out' tray on my desk.

Miss Johnson would give it to the postman to take away.

I pressed the buzzer for the next patient to come in.

One of the joys of general practice is that you never know who is going to walk through the door – and what their problem is going to be.

One thing is certain: life as a country GP is never dull.

Finally…

I hope you have enjoyed this book. If you did so then I would be enormously encouraged if you would spare a moment to write a short review.

Thank you

Vernon Coleman

Appendix One

The Freedom of Bilbury

It was decided at the last meeting of the Bilbury Parish Council that readers who have read all ten Bilbury books are entitled to hold the Freedom of Bilbury, North Devon, England and to list this honour on their curriculum vitae, visiting cards and proclamations.

Those who hold the Freedom of Bilbury are also entitled to:

Ride a horse through the lanes of Bilbury on the first Tuesday in Lent.

Graze up to 12 sheep or goats on Bilbury Common for up to 60 days a year.

Be an honorary Life Vice President of Bilbury Cricket Club. Vice Presidents are guaranteed a deckchair at all home matches and unlimited supplies of tea, sandwiches and cake (three varieties usually available but not guaranteed). They are also entitled to describe themselves (on CVs, biographies, etc.) as being a Life Vice President of Bilbury Cricket Club.

Hold honorary life membership of Peter Marshall's Vegetable of the Month Club. Members are entitled to purchase the Vegetable of the Month with a 2% discount on shop prices. Members will receive a free brown paper bag with their first order. For full rules and conditions please see the notice pinned up at the back of Peter Marshall's shop (just behind the shelf containing the tinned apricots and the tinned dog food).

Vote in all elections held in Bilbury.

Enjoy a guaranteed reserved seat in Bilbury Church on the occasions of both the Harvest Festival and the Christmas Carol Service. (Not behind a pillar.) No large, wedding style hats, please.

Enjoy a 10% discount on the price of all sandwiches and beverages (alcoholic and non-alcoholic) served at the Duck and Puddle public house in Bilbury.

Attend the Annual Guy Fawkes Celebration Fireworks Night Party on November 5th every year and receive a complimentary baked potato with full access to the condiments tray.

Receive two tickets for all productions staged by the Bilbury Amateur Dramatics Society and two back stage passes to the After Show 'Meet the Cast' Drinks Party. (Drinks to be paid for separately).

Purchase a family plot (suitable for 4 lying or 8 standing) in Bilbury graveyard. For details of prices and full terms and conditions please contact Peter Marshall (official agent for the vicar). A 6% discount on all funerals and headstones arranged through Peter Marshall is also available.

Appendix Two

Bilbury Parish Newsletter: Classified Advertisement Section

At the end of the memory entitled 'Paula Temple' I mentioned the Bilbury Newsletter. Here is a sample selection of advertisements taken from the Classified Advertising Section of the Newsletter.

* Chiropodist: for all your foot problems. Specialities include warts, veruccas, dry skin, athletes foot. All dealt with while you wait. No appointments necessary unless I am busy. Fees very reasonable. Discount for pensioners. Contact Gladys Periwinkle at Rose Cottage. If you call and I am out just let yourself in, make a cup of tea while you wait.

* Antique Victorian Ottoman. Unique. Rumoured to have been sat on by Conan Doyle and Prince Albert (though not at the same time). Last three available. Contact Patchy Fogg on Bilbury 127.

* Bilbury Garage: We have a repaired second-hand exhaust pipe from Ford Poplar for sale. Probably has a few miles left in it. Can adapt and weld to just about any make of car. £8.10 including fitting. Telephone Bilbury 114.

* Odd Jobs: Man with experience prepared to tackle difficult jobs involving grass and similar. Do you have grass which needs cutting or hedge which needs trimming? Contact Harry Burrows in bar at Duck and Puddle any morning, afternoon or evening. Will also cut hair, clean drains and shampoo dogs which do not bite.

* Peter Marshall: Sandwiches special offer for busy people. Let me make your sandwiches for you. You pay only for the slice of bread on the bottom. The slice of bread on the top is FREE. Choose any filling you like from fish paste, raspberry jam or cheese. Please note: despite malicious rumours being spread by certain parties who know who they are I do wash both hands before preparing sandwiches. Note: Bilbury doctor has confirmed that last month's unfortunate outbreak of food poisoning could have been a result of mistaken use of fishpaste from old stock.

* Church Sewing Group: meets every Monday except when choir is practising.

* Women's Institute: Next meeting will be on 3rd Wednesday of month as usual. Mrs Bertha Aldridge will again give talk on her 1962 visit to 'The Belgian Industrial Heartlands' and Mr Charles Aldridge will once more show his prize winning slides. Admission free.

* Choir: rehearsals every Monday except when Church sewing group is meeting.

* Bell ringing: The Bilbury hand bell ringing group will meet at the Duck and Puddle on the last Thursday of the month. Unfortunately, but understandably in view of the unfortunate incident last month, Frank and Gilly Parsons have, on the advice of their insurers, ruled that we can no longer ring our bells inside the pub. If the weather is clement we will therefore ring bells in field across road from pub. The one with the black and white cows in it. Permission has been requested, reply is pending. Ringers (especially Elspeth Jackson) are requested to keep firm hold on their bells at all times. (We are pleased to say that Albert Treadwell is reported to be making a good recovery from his unfortunate injury.) Please tread carefully when in field. If weather is inclement we will meet in Duck and Puddle and do silent bell ringing with noises made orally (by mouth). Those whose surnames begin with A to M do 'dongs'. Those with surnames beginning N to Z do 'dings'. For more information contact Olive Robinson (Hon Sec) Telephone: Bilbury 109

* 11 jars of fishpaste for sale. Unused. Apply Peter Marshall shop.

* Television for sale. Does not work at moment. But vet in Combe Martin (whose cousin has similar model) says it probably only needs new valves. All buttons still present and nice cabinet in fair condition. Stain on top of cabinet can easily be covered with medium sized doily. Looks impressive. Sensible offers considered. Telephone: Samuel Houghton on Bilbury 82 and ask for message to be taken to Josh Wilkins. (No messages delivered after 8 p.m.)

* Gravedigger's Rest public house, Barnstaple: Entertainment Thursday evenings and Saturday lunchtimes. Birthday groups catered for but no celebrations for over 60s without medical certificate please. Please note that patrons who catch items of clothing discarded by artistes are requested to return them to the management.

* Duck and Puddle public house. Food available at mealtimes or between if necessary. Fire lit when weather cold.

* Memorial service for Fred Pilbury (who celebrated 65th birthday at the Gravedigger's Rest, Barnstaple last Tuesday and died suddenly and unexpectedly) will be held next Wednesday at the Gravedigger's Rest, Barnstaple. 'He went with a smile on his face'.

* Windows cleaned : Price 10 pence per window. Ground floor windows only please as a result of recent fall. Phone Bilbury 45 and ask for Edward.

* Sweep: Telephone Bilbury 73 to book a good luck sweep to attend your next wedding. Will pose for photographs and kiss bride (and bridesmaids) if required. Ring same number for appointment to sweep your chimney.

* Cottage for sale: Parlour, kitchen, two bedrooms. Tin bath. Water from well in garden. Well has never dried up except in 1934, 1957, 1965, 1966 and 1967. Outdoor water closet. No electricity. Low ceilings so property probably suit smaller person. Barn suitable for small horse and very small cart. Strawberry patch produces fruit annually if netted. Telephone Bilbury 87 for details and appointment to view.

* Long wooden ladder for sale. Suitable for cleaning first floor windows, gutters, etc. Most rungs still present. Phone Bilbury 45 and ask for Doreen. Buyer to collect.

* Stop Press: Choir practice is moved to Tuesdays until further notice unless alternative arrangements made.

* Stop Press: Church sewing group is moved to Tuesdays to avoid clash with choir. However, we would like to point out that we had been meeting on Mondays for longer than the choir.

Appendix Three

Benzodiazepines: a little background

I first started drawing attention to the horrors of benzodiazepines (drugs such as Valium, Ativan and Mogadon) back in the early 1970s. I drew attention to the problem in my book *The Medicine Men* in 1975 and was vilified by the medical profession for doing so.

In the two decades which followed, I wrote hundreds of articles about these drugs. I also spoke widely to warn doctors and patients of their addictive nature. I made scores of television programmes and in the early 1980s I recorded a series of special radio programmes dealing with benzodiazepine addiction. At the same time I also wrote and distributed a newsletter on benzodiazepine addiction. Mail from readers was arriving at my home in grey sacks.

Thousands of patients wrote in to me to say that their lives had been ruined by benzodiazepines.

At that time (and I remember this very well) the British Medical Association seemed able to find an endless parade of doctors prepared to go on radio or television and tell the world that I was a dangerous, scaremongering lunatic. The BMA and the medical establishment stood shoulder to shoulder with the pharmaceutical industry in defence of these awful medicines. This is perhaps not surprising – after all, the BMA's in-house journal (the *British Medical Journal*) was earning zillions in advertising revenue from the drug companies.

I have dealt with benzodiazepines at some length in a number of my medical books (notably *The Medicine Men* (1975), *Life Without Tranquillisers* (1985), *Addicts and Addictions* (1986) and *The Drugs Myth* (1992).

Sadly, many doctors still refuse to accept that these drugs are a real problem. And so here, below, is a short analysis of the history of benzodiazepines and a list of some of the evidence which illustrates the size of the problem. The material on the list below is taken from my own books.

The Valium story began in the 1930s when Dr Leo H Sternbach was working as a research assistant at the University of Krakow in Poland. He was investigating benzophenones and heptoxdiazines.

Dr Sternbach continued work on these substances in 1954 in the New Jersey laboratories of Hoffman La Roche. The result of his last experiment was called Ro5-0690 and was shelved as of little interest.

In 1957, Ro5-0690 was submitted for testing by Roche's Director of Pharmacological Research and a report was published showing that the drug was a hypnotic, a sedative and a muscle relaxant. It was a new chemical substance.

In late 1958, Roche did more tests on the drug and found that it was effective at treating anxiety and tension. The drug was called chlordiazepoxide.

On February 24th 1960, the American Food and Drug Administration approved the drug which was launched a few weeks later as Librium.

Before the end of 1960 other drug companies, Include Wyeth Laboratories had introduced benzodiazepines of their own.

In 1961, a clinical report appeared in the journal *Psyschopharmacologia* which warned that patients were becoming addicted to chlordiazepoxide.

By the early 1960s, GPs were prescribing these drugs for an enormous range of physical and mental problems. It is difficult to think of a medical condition for which benzodiazepines were not prescribed.

In 1968, a paper in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* showed that benzodiazepines caused depression and suicidal thoughts.

In 1970 in a book called *Discoveries in Biological Psychiatry*, edited by Ayd and Blackell, Frank Ayd wrote: 'Although vast quantities of minor tranquillisers have been prescribed it must be stated that not all have been dispensed judiciously by some practitioners. Such misuse is indicative of physicians who unwisely accede to the demands of patients or who supplant sound clinical judgement or expediency'.

In 1972, the *American Journal of Psychiatry* published a paper describing how patients on diazepam had exhibited symptoms which included apprehension, insomnia and depression. The patients had previously been emotionally stable. When the patients were taken off the drugs, their symptoms disappeared.

In 1973, I organised a symposium at the Royal Society of Medicine. It was stated that when patients were taken off their benzodiazepines they often felt much better than they had felt for years. The symposium was organised on behalf of the *British Clinical Journal* which I was editing. I immediately began writing articles about benzodiazepines for the national press.

In 1975, the *British Medical Journal* published an editorial referring to an article published in the *Lancet* in 1960 which had reported that a patient taking chordiazepoxide had assaulted his wife – the first sign of aggression in 20 years of marriage.

In 1979, the WHO estimated that there were 700 different benzodiazepines on the market. These drugs were the most widely prescribed in the world. It was generally agreed that there was no real difference in any of the drugs – they were all equally effective and equally troublesome.

In 1979, the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* published a report showing that poisoning with tranquillisers and sleeping tablets accounted for 61,000 hospital admissions each year.

If you went to see a GP in 1970, you had a better than one in twenty chance that you would come away with a prescription for a benzodiazepine. By 1977, one in five people who was given a prescription was given a prescription for one of these drugs. Among women in the 45 to 59 age group, one in three was given a tranquilliser of some sort.

In my first book *The Medicine Men* (1975) I predicted that doctors would end up trying to wean patients off benzodiazepines.

In 1975, three doctors from the Drug Dependence Treatment Center at the Philadelphia VA Hospital published a paper entitled *Misuse and Abuse of Diazepam: An Increasingly Common Medical Problem*. The paper referred back to papers published as far back as 1970 which had documented instances of physical addiction to benzodiazepines. The paper concluded: ‘All physicians should know that diazepam abuse and misuse is occurring and careful attention should be given to prescribing, transporting and storing this drug.’

In 1979, a psychiatrist testifying to a US Senate health sub-committee claimed that patients could become hooked on diazepam in six weeks. Another witness said it was harder to kick benzodiazepines than to get off heroin. A third witness said that tranquillisers were America’s second biggest addiction problem – after alcoholism.

In 1979, the *British Medical Journal* reported a study involving over 40,000 patients. The paper showed ‘a highly significant association between the use of minor tranquillisers and the risk of a serious road accident’.

In 1981, at a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, it was suggested that diazepam might be linked to cancer. It was argued that women whose breast cancers had developed more quickly had been taking diazepam.

In 1982, a British Professor of Psychopharmacology reported that brain scans showed that patients who had been taking diazepam for some years had damaged brains.

In 1982, the *Journal of Psychology* reported that if a patient takes diazepam, he won’t be able to remember things he learns while taking the drug unless he takes it again. This discovery had massive implications for those patients taking the drug – and attempting to stop it.

In 1982, a report in *Digestive Diseases and Sciences* showed that diazepam may cause liver damage.

In 1983, a report in *Drug Reaction Bulletin* showed that between 11% and 20% of drivers involved in traffic accidents were taking tranquillisers.

A report in *Medical Biology* in 1982 showed that the calming effect of diazepam is counteracted by caffeine.

Between 1964 and 1982, the Committee on Safety of Medicines in London received reports of well over 100 different side effects said to be related to the use of diazepam.

In my book *Life Without Tranquillisers* (1985) I wrote: ‘if you are looking for a crutch and you intend to choose between tobacco and benzodiazepines then you’ll probably be better off choosing tobacco.’

In the 1980s, when I was the medical columnist for *The Star* newspaper in the UK, I ran a long campaign about benzodiazepines.

In 1988, speaking in the UK’s House of Commons, the Parliamentary Secretary for Health, introduced stricter controls for benzodiazepines and changed the classification of the drugs in an attempt to force doctors to treat them with more respect. She said: ‘Dr Vernon Coleman’s articles, to which I refer with approval, raised concern about these important matters’. It had taken 15 years of campaigning to force through these changes.

Appendix Four

Normal Pressure Hydrocephalus

In the memory entitled *The Case of the Wobbly Film Star*, I describe how my patient Mrs Ruthvens was diagnosed as suffering from a disorder called Normal Pressure Hydrocephalus. This disorder was first described in 1965 by Hakim and Adams but even now, over half a century later, it is still wildly under-diagnosed. As of 2017, it was estimated that thousands of patients who have been diagnosed as suffering from Alzheimer's disease or another untreatable form of dementia were, in fact, suffering from normal pressure hydrocephalus and could be cured with a simple operation. The disorder is officially described as 'rare' but it has been reliably estimated that up to 4% of all those over the age of 65 are suffering from it. Normal pressure hydrocephalus is undoubtedly the commonest, treatable cause of major disability and mental incapacity among the elderly. Readers who would like to know more might like to take a look at my website www.vernoncoleman.com where there are articles dealing with the disorder and explaining why it is still so rarely diagnosed or treated. My monograph *Millions of Alzheimer's Patients Have Been Misdiagnosed (And Could Be Cured)* is available as an ebook on Amazon.

Appendix Five

The Story of Medicine

In the memory entitled *The Case of the Wobbly Film Star* I mentioned that it was my ambition to write a book about the history of medicine. I eventually managed to do this. My book *The Story of Medicine* is available as an ebook on Amazon.

And finally…
I hope you have enjoyed this book. If you did so then I would be very grateful if you would spare a moment to write a short review.
Thank you
Vernon Coleman

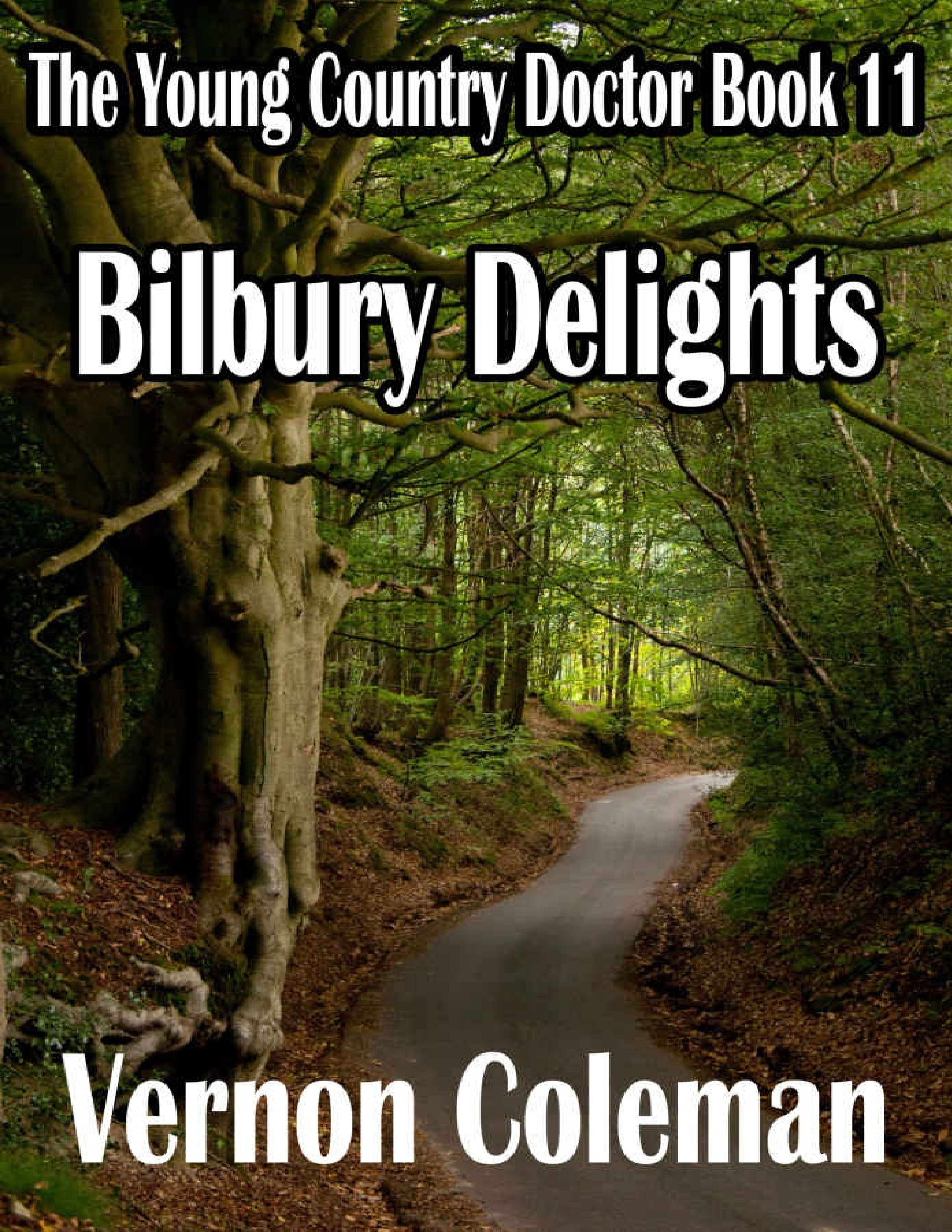

The Young Country Doctor Book 11

Bilbury Delights

Vernon Coleman

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Another collection of memories of Bilbury and its inhabitants.

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Note: Names and details of individuals, animals and establishments have been altered to protect the innocent, the guilty and the somewhere in-between.

The Author
Vernon Coleman is a *Sunday Times* bestselling author. He has written over 100 books which have been translated into 25 languages and sold in over 50 countries. His books have sold over two million copies in the UK alone. Vernon Coleman is also a qualified doctor. He lives in Bilbury, Devon, England. He is an accomplished bar billiards player (twice runner up in the Duck and Puddle Christmas competition) and a skilled maker of paper aeroplanes. He is a long-term member of the Desperate Dan Pie-Eater's Club (vegetarian section). He does not speak any foreign languages and cannot knit.

The Young Country Doctor series
This is the 11th book in the series. All the books in the series are available as ebooks on Amazon.

Dedication
To Antoinette, for whom my heart beats.

Foreword

It is one certainty that everything changes in life and another certainty that much of what is classed as progress is, in reality, nothing of the sort. Dodgem cars move around a good deal but they never actually get anywhere.

A third, and less widely appreciated, certainty is that in Bilbury things change so slowly that the changes are hardly noticeable.

In the last few years, for example, the only really big change I can think of is that (on my advice and under his wife's management) Frank Parsons of the Duck and Puddle has lost some weight and Peter Marshall has, for absolutely no discernible reason, moved the sardines from a shelf on the left of the shop as you enter to a shelf on the right. He has also moved the tinned rice pudding from the front of the shop to the back.

These are the sort of changes I can live with.

It is a constant delight to know that many other people around the world share our joy in the knowledge that there is still at least one village remaining where old-fashioned concepts such as honour, integrity, responsibility, tolerance, dignity, compassion, loyalty, respect (both for oneself and for others) and kindness are as much a part of daily life as the rain and the winds which regularly scour the North Devon coastline.

It is my belief that kindness (offered for its own sake rather than in the hope of reward or glorification) is the most fundamental and important human quality. It is the source of all other good qualities.

Like people everywhere, the villagers who live in Bilbury are sometimes bullied by Fate and tossed from one misfortune to another. They are, inevitably, exposed to their fair share of disappointments and frustrations. Nevertheless, to a man and a woman, they never become soured or vindictive or evil-minded. There is a decency about the citizens of Bilbury which transcends all else.

It is a comfort to know that such decency still exists in a world where intolerance, spite and selfishness are all too often regarded as inevitable and commonplace.

The stories in this book, and the others in this series, are as always all set in the 1970s but Bilbury today has not changed one whit.

Physically, the village is virtually the same as it was back in the 1970s.

The lanes are still narrow and, in the summer, they are overgrown so much that it is impossible to drive a car along them without scratching the paintwork on both sides.

The trees and hedges are notably higher than they were back in the 1970s, and the houses and cottages a little more weather-beaten.

But that's about it.

For this, we can probably thank the fact that our village is too small and too far off the beaten track to have attracted developers or planning officials.

Most of those who have had Bilbury in their sights have got lost, given up and gone home long before they could do any lasting damage.

(I have to confess that the absence of road signs (itself no accident) has made it difficult to navigate the local lanes.)

On the rare occasions when development plans have materialised, the villagers have always found a way to protect their history, culture and environment. We in Bilbury can be a difficult lot when it comes to protecting our culture and our environment.

The village is also unchanged both culturally and spiritually, and for this we can thank the villagers themselves.

Bilbury is run for and by people who are kind, who do unto others as they would be done unto themselves and who have (on the whole) the saving grace of a good sense of humour.

Most important of all, I am pleased to report that the principal human individuals who appear regularly in these stories are still alive and reasonably well, though I have to admit that a few waistlines (including mine I'm sorry to say) are rather larger now than they were back in the 1970s. The consequences of too many good lunches at the Duck and Puddle are widely visible.

Frank Parsons, who has now reached an age where he feels he is entitled to be grumpy, is still fighting his appetite and his waistline and Gilly is still watching his alcohol consumption like a hawk. Thumper Robinson is still tickling trout and maintaining and mending machinery that should have been thrown onto the scrap heap a long while ago. Patchy Fogg is still hunting for rare and valuable antiques and selling items which are neither rare nor valuable. His customers are tourists who will hopefully never know that 'the desk at which Shakespeare sat while writing his plays' was knocked up in a shed in Torrington by an old carpenter, with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of old timber and a knack for making it look even older.

Patsy is as beautiful as ever and still the best cook in the world.

It is difficult to believe that it is over 40 years since the events in this book took place. I suppose those of us who were present should be grateful that we're still here!

In this collection of memories, I have included an account of two Americans, Alston and Esme Church, who came to Bilbury to visit Cedric, the pig who was won in a skittle competition by previous American visitors Edgar and Delphinium Rathbone.

'Yours is a community in the true sense of the word,' wrote Esme, when they had returned home. 'It was an inspiration to visit Bilbury. There is more kindness shown in your village than in any town or city we have ever visited.'

With Esme's permission, I pinned her letter up on the noticeboard which hangs in the porch of the Duck and Puddle. The letter is still there, weathered and sun-faded. Some time ago, Patsy put it into a small photo frame to give it some protection.

There is a P.S. at the bottom of her letter, and this often produces a smile on the faces of visitors.

'We will always have Bilbury,' she wrote, paraphrasing Rick in Casablanca.

Underneath the framed letter from Esme, a visitor has pinned up a postcard upon which they have written the words: 'Bilbury will live forever in our hearts.'

So say I.

It is a privilege to call Bilbury 'home'.

It can be your home too.

After all, as they say, home is where the heart is.

Vernon Coleman, Bilbury 2017

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Cedric's Admirers

'Frank is on the phone,' said Patsy. 'He wants to know if you know anyone called Church?'

I racked the remains of my brain and thought hard. I couldn't think of anyone called Church. Bells were not ringing loudly. Patsy handed me the telephone.

'Do you have a first name available?' I asked Frank.

'Alston,' said Frank. 'He says his name is Alston Church. He's American. His wife is called Esme. They're sipping Martinis and munching their way through Gilly's 'Fromage Anglais sur Pain Blanc avec Deux Cornichons Marine et Un Oignon au Vinaigre'.They want to know where to find Bilbury Grange.'

The Duck and Puddle is constantly tinkering with its menu and trying to make its offerings sound intriguing and slightly continental. Fromage Anglais sur Pain Blanc is a massively thick sandwich (sometimes known colloquially as a 'doorstep') which is made with cheddar cheese and white bread and served with two pickled gherkins and a pickled onion. Frank has never mastered the French language (there are some who say, rather rudely, that he has never mastered the English language either) and you need to know the Duck and Puddle menu to be able to guess the dish he is describing.

'Do they look dangerous?' I asked.

'He's wearing plaid trousers and a lemon coloured blazer,' replied Frank. 'And Mrs Church has blonde hair and a lime green jacket with yellow piping. The hair is fluffed up like candyfloss and there seems to be quite a good deal of it.' He paused. 'I think that perhaps they might be foreign; maybe American.'

'So you don't think they look as if they are likely to be planning to shoot me or beat me over the head with an iron bar?'

These may sound odd questions. But there was a reason for them.

It's not unusual for readers of my books and columns to turn up in Bilbury. Most of these visitors are courteous, friendly and kind and simply want to take a photograph or to have a book signed. But there have been a few angry callers who have turned up looking for an argument. One man, a keen hunter, turned up carrying a shotgun and I had to spend an hour talking to him before he would agree not to shoot me. He disagreed strongly with my views about shooting wild animals and argued vehemently that anything which walked on four legs was, by his definition, vermin and fair game. Another angry visitor, a woman who had believed that Bilbury and its inhabitants were all figments of my imagination, had come to complain after losing five shillings in a bet with a friend. She carried a large, multi-coloured golf umbrella which she brandished as though it were a sword and she were Errol Flynn about to turn the Sheriff of Nottingham into a pincushion.

'Oh no, I wouldn't think it very likely,' said Frank with damp reassurance. 'Shall I ask them what they want?'

I said I thought that would be an excellent idea.

Frank put down the telephone and I could hear him talking to the visitors and asking them why they wanted to visit Bilbury Grange.

'They say they'd very much like to see how Cedric is doing,' said Frank, upon his return and the resumption of our conversation. 'They've brought him a large bag of bananas. They say they're friends of the Rathbones.'

'Cedric!' I exclaimed. 'Cedric the pig? They've come to see Cedric? That's wonderful.'

Cedric is a very friendly pig who lives in one of the outbuildings at Bilbury Grange and who loves having visitors.

'Who is Cedric and who are the Rathbones?' asked Frank, clearly puzzled.

'The night you had your stroke,' I reminded him, 'the Duck and Puddle was running a Bowling for a Pig competition. Cedric was the pig and the Rathbones were the lovely Americans who won him.'

The Rathbones hadn't been able to take Cedric back to Idaho with them and so they'd asked Patsy and me to look after him. We had suitable accommodation for him at Bilbury Grange and we had happily accepted Cedric as part of our extended family. Patsy regularly sent letters and photographs across the Atlantic to the Rathbones. The fact that the visitors knew that Cedric liked bananas was as good as a password. We had only discovered Cedric's penchant for this particular fruit fairly recently and Patsy had sent the Rathbones a picture of Cedric munching his way through two pounds of bananas – peel and all.

To be honest, I had always thought that pigs would eat anything without much preference but when we took on the responsibility of looking after Cedric, Mr Kennet, my father-in-law, explained to us that pigs are far fussier than most of us realise.

So, for example, pigs cannot safely eat meat or fish and they should avoid sugar-rich foods.

Most surprisingly, Mr Kennet told us that pigs can be made ill by eating parsnips, turnips, cabbage, broccoli or cauliflower, though he admitted that in small quantities the chances of there being any problems are slight.

Citrus fruits can upset pigs and so, sometimes, can potatoes.

The good news is that pigs are intelligent and sensible creatures, with a strong sense of self-preservation, and they won't usually eat anything which is likely to upset them.

'Oh, yes!' said Frank, as the light suddenly dawned and he remembered Cedric the pig and the skittle competition.

Frank's stroke had put him into our Bilbury hospital and his recovery had taken weeks. He had been seriously ill and I wasn't surprised that he didn't immediately remember the name of a pig who had been the prize in the pub's skittles competition, or the name of the people who had won him. 'I'll give them directions and send them along when they've finished their…'

'…cheese sandwiches,' I interrupted, to save Frank the problem of having to struggle once again with the mysteries of the French language.

'Exactly!' said Frank, clearly grateful.

Alston and Esme Church turned up less than half an hour later.

As advertised by Frank, Alston Church was wearing plaid trousers and a lemon yellow jacket and Esme, who was wearing a pale blue pleated skirt and a slightly fluorescent lime green jacket with yellow piping was the proud owner of a good deal of blonde hair which looked casually styled but which had, I rather suspected, taken a considerable amount of time to prepare.

The Churchs were driving a bright orange Saab which they later told us they had rented from a company at Heathrow Airport. They both seemed enormously friendly and likeable. Patsy and I took to them immediately. They were excited at having met Frank and Gilly. 'I felt I already knew them so well from your books,' said Esme, who seemed as full of energy and expectation as a child at a birthday party.

'While we were having lunch, a fellow called in for a pint of a beer called Old Restoration,' said Alston. 'He was tall and very broad and he was driving a huge and very battered truck which had what looked like steel girders strapped to the front and the back.'

'That would have been Thumper,' said Patsy. 'I don't think anyone else in the village drinks Old Restoration. It's a particularly potent brew. I once drank half a pint, just to see what it tasted like, and I was squiffy for a week afterwards!'

Esme and Alston looked at each other. 'I told you it was him!' said Esme, very pleased with herself.

They both seemed thrilled that they'd seen Thumper Robinson.

'He's much bigger than I'd expected!' said Esme. 'He's quite a giant!'

I promised to introduce them to Thumper and to Patchy before they left Bilbury.

'I've got some scones warming in the oven,' Patsy told them as soon as they arrived. 'Would you like tea, coffee, beer, home-made lemonade or a glass of wine?'

They both asked for home-made lemonade and asked if they could perhaps tackle the scones after visiting Cedric.

'I've never been served a sandwich as big as that one I was given at the Duck and Puddle!' drawled Alston. 'It must have had half a pound of cheese inside it! I couldn't eat more than half of it and even so I'll need to do a little serious digesting before I can tackle anything else in the food line.' He shook his head. 'Not like me not to be able to finish a good lunch. But my appetite has been down a little recently.'

'You're really Patsy?' said Esme, standing back and looking at my wife, as though assessing her. 'I've read all the books your husband has written about the village. I thought it was so sweet how you two first met. It seems extraordinary to be here talking to you and finding for sure that you're a real person.'

'I'm real!' said Patsy, with a big smile.

'Our friends, Edgar and Delphinium told us so much about Bilbury,' said Esme, 'but I couldn't believe that one day I'd actually be standing here in your lovely village. It's just as beautiful in real life as it sounds in your husband's books!'

'We were confused by the fact that we couldn't find anywhere called Bilbury on the map,' said Alston. 'We found a village called Bibury but that was miles away in Gloucestershire.'

'That's because I changed the name of the village when I wrote the first book,' I admitted. 'I thought the villagers might not be too pleased with me if I printed the real name of the village and the book then became popular. Besides, the General Medical Council doesn't take kindly to doctors advertising or promoting themselves.'

We showed them around the house and introduced them to Miss Johnson, the children and the cats. Ben, our ever-friendly dog, introduced herself, of course. (We had to remind them that Ben, despite her name, is a lady.)

As we walked around the garden, I apologised for the number of weeds.

'Naturam expellas furca, tamen usque recurret,' said Esme, who turned out to be a schoolteacher responsible for guiding teenage Americans through the intricacies of Latin and Greek.

I studied Latin at school but after a short struggle, I admitted defeat and asked Esme for the translation.

'Even though you drive out nature with a pitchfork, she will always return,' said Esme, explaining that the quotation originated with Horace, the Roman poet.

We all agreed that it was remarkably apt, and something of a comfort in a strange sort of way. Later on, Esme gave us a list of other wonderful quotations – suitable for all sorts of odd happenings. At my request, she wrote them down and the list appears as an appendix at the back of this book.

And then we took them to meet Cedric.

'My oh my!' said Esme, in astonishment. 'I've never seen a pig as big as that. How much does he weigh? Do you know? Do you have any idea?' She tentatively fed one of the bananas to Cedric. He ate it in seconds and happily looked up at her, clearly waiting for a second helping.

'They have weighing scales for lorries at the local garage,' I said, 'so I walked her round there one day. She weighs 232 pounds. Or at least she did a couple of months ago. I suspect she's put on a few pounds since then.'

Cedric, like all pigs, seems to have an insatiable appetite, and like P.G.Wodehouse's creation, Lord Emsworth, I find myself taking great pride in his size, though unlike his Lordship I draw the line at dragging Cedric from his sty to make an appearance in any of the local shows. Mind you, I have been tempted. The local branch of the Private Pig Breeders Association gives a magnificent silver plate cup to the owner of the largest pig in Devon. But I don't think Cedric would like being put on display. It's all a question of dignity, isn't it? Dignity and respect.

Esme and Alston continued feeding bananas to Cedric who munched his way through all that they'd brought as quickly as they were offered. It is no exaggeration to say that Cedric has a 'good appetite'.

'Did you say you walked him round to the weighing scales?' asked Alston, who sounded surprised.

'He likes going for a walk,' I told him. 'Once or twice a week we take him for a stroll through the village. Sometimes we take him down to the village shop and Peter gives him a few leftover vegetables.'

'That's Peter Marshall's shop?'

'It is indeed,' I agreed.

'And sometimes, as a special treat, we take her to the Duck and Puddle,' said Patsy. 'She is particularly fond of one or two of Gilly's cheese sandwiches.'

'But what sort of lead do you use?' asked Alston. 'You'd need a hell of a chain to hold a pig that size. And how do you hold him if he decides he wants to go another way.'

'He's as good as gold,' laughed Patsy.

'And this is his lead,' I told them, lifting up a long piece of ordinary string which I keep looped on a nail on the outside of her sty.

Alston and Esme stared at the string in astonishment.

'This is his collar', I added, picking up a vast leather collar which a friend of Frank's had made for us. 'He did have a ring in his nose but we had it taken out. It looked painful and certainly wasn't dignified.'

'You can really take him for a walk with that piece of string as a lead?'

'He doesn't really need a lead,' said Patsy. 'He enjoys going for a walk and he follows us everywhere we go. If he stops too long, nibbling something he's found by the wayside, we just give a gentle tug on the string and along he comes. But if we called him, he'd come without the string.'

'If anyone ever makes a film of your books, the story about Cedric will surely be one of the highlights!' said Esme.

'Maybe Cedric could get to play himself!' suggested Alston.

'I think he'd like that!' laughed Patsy. 'He loves getting lots of attention.'

After admiring Cedric, being astonished at the feebleness of his lead and taking an enormous number of photographs with a still camera and a short piece of film with a movie camera, Alston and Esme allowed us to lead them into the drawing room at Bilbury Grange. Patsy served home-made scones, which had been warmed in the Aga, together with bowls of rich, whipped cream from her father's cows and two varieties of home-made jam.

As they enjoyed Patsy's Devon cream tea, our American visitors told us that they were approaching the end of a tour which had taken them on a six week trip around Europe. They had begun their holiday in Paris, spent a few days in Germany, visited Italy, gone to Spain and spent a few days in each of Holland, Belgium and Switzerland.

'We kept the best to last,' said Esme. 'Visiting England was always going to be the highlight of our trip. And coming to Bilbury was very much the icing on the cake.' She told us that they were both feeling tired and that Alston, in particular, was feeling the effects of a long and arduous vacation. They had done some of their travelling by aeroplane and some of it by train but they had hired cars in several European countries and Alston had done all of the driving. 'My appetite has really gone south,' said Alston, rather apologetically. 'Not like me at all.'

'Still, I think you've lost a few pounds in the last week or ten days,' said Esme. 'And your doctor at home wanted you to lose a little weight.' I secretly agreed with Alston's doctor in America. Alston was not tall, probably no more than five foot eight, but he was a big man and if he'd been a cake in a weight guessing contest at a summer fete, I'd have guessed he probably weighed 180 pounds.

Alston said that although they had only been in Britain for less than a week, they had already learned two new things about the British.

'First,' he said, 'I am amazed at the length of time for which the British will hold a grudge. Don't get me wrong, I love Britain and I love the British but my, oh my, some people in your country know how to hold a grudge, don't they? I'm surprised that there aren't people in your country who still feel resentment at the Boston Tea Party and the American Revolution!'

Patsy and I both laughed. 'There probably are!' said Patsy.

'We stayed in a pub in a little village in the Cotswolds,' continued Alston, 'and while we were there, this fellow came into the bar for a drink. The trouble was that the barmaid refused to serve him. Apparently this happens every time he goes into the bar – which is in the only pub for miles around, so if the poor fellow wants a drink he doesn't have a whole lot of choices.'

'We thought that perhaps there was some personal history between the fellow who'd come in for a drink and the barmaid,' said Esme, taking up the story. 'You know, maybe they'd had a relationship which had ended badly.'

'But it wasn't that at all,' said Alston. 'The pub landlord came in from the pub's small dining room and he served the fellow his pint of mild and bitter.'

'We talked to the landlord later,' said Esme, 'and being a rather inquisitive sort of person I asked about the history between the barmaid and the customer she wouldn't serve. We were astonished when the landlord told us that the problem was family not personal and that it apparently went back over a century! Can you believe it?'

'The great great grandfather of the barmaid was once sold a horse which wasn't everything it was made out to be,' explained Alston. 'And the person who sold it to him was some long-dead, distant relative of the fellow who'd come in for a drink. Ever since, there had been a feud between the two families. They all lived in the same village but they wouldn't have anything to do with one another.'

'Some grudge, eh?' said Esme. 'I don't believe any other people hold grudges for so long. The Americans certainly don't. Not even the Sicilians can hold a grudge as tightly as the British.'

Patsy told them that she wasn't surprised and that she knew of similar feuds, vendettas and grudges in Devon. 'These things tend to go on in rural communities,' she explained. 'In towns and cities the people move away and feuds get forgotten. But in the countryside, a good grudge can last centuries. No one can really remember what the grudge is about, only that the Bagshaws and the Hetheringtons have always despised one other, still despise one another and will always despise one another.'

'Sometimes, young members of each family fall in love and get married and when that happens the wedding is usually something to avoid,' I added.

Esme seemed shocked at this. 'Surely they suspend their hostilities for the wedding ceremony? For the sake of the loving, young couple who are getting married.'

'I'm afraid not!' said Patsy. 'There was a wedding in South Molton six months ago and the two families involved had hated one another for longer than anyone could remember – though naturally no one could remember what the disagreement was about. At the reception afterwards there was a massive fight and 17 people were arrested.'

'Five of the people arrested were women, weren't they?' I said to Patsy. She nodded.

'Five or six of them,' she agreed.

Esme and Alston both looked shocked.

'What was the other thing you've learned?' I asked our American visitors.

'Oh, just that you British are so polite!' said Esme. 'We've never been to Britain before and no one warned us about it, but my you are so wonderfully polite!'

'Back home,' said Alston, 'someone who accidentally treads on your foot will usually apologise profusely. But in Stratford-upon-Avon I trod on a man's foot and he actually apologised to me.'

Patsy and I both laughed at this.

'If an Englishman is bitten by a dog he will apologise to the dog, the dog's owner and the ambulance crew that comes to take him to hospital,' agreed Patsy.

'Most sensible people who've been bitten by a dog would sue the dog's owner,' said Alston. 'But I get the feeling that in Britain, the person who has been bitten is likely to be sued for upsetting the dog and its owner by allowing himself to be bitten.'

We admitted that this wasn't too far from the truth.

Alston and Esme stayed with us for the evening.

Patsy cooked a meal, I opened a couple of bottles of claret which a grateful patient had given me, and we shared a splendid few hours.

They told us about their home in Ohio where Alston ran a garage with a convenience store attached to it and about their love of hiking and rafting. It was, they told us, while rafting on the Boise River in Idaho that they had met

Edgar and Delphinium Rathbone, who had been friends of theirs for nearly 25 years.

‘This was some years ago,’ admitted Esme. ‘These days we all stick to hiking.’

‘And we tend to do that fairly slowly,’ said Alston. ‘I’ve had surgery on my knee and Edgar has had a hip replacement operation. So we don’t push ourselves.’

It was nearly midnight when our two visitors drove back to the Duck and Puddle where they had booked a room for three days.

We didn’t see the visitors on the following two days. They wanted to take a drive around North Devon and visit some of the other towns and villages in the area. They were quietly amused to discover that there really are places called Parracombe and Kentisbury as well as Combe Martin, Lynmouth and South Molton. They drove in to Barnstaple, so that they could take a look at Devon’s biggest town and do a little shopping for souvenirs. Patsy had told them of several suitable and reasonably priced shops and had advised them not to miss the local market stalls.

It was an afternoon three days after we had entertained them at Bilbury Grange when we next heard from them.

I received a telephone call from Esme. She sounded anxious.

‘I’m sorry to bother you,’ she said. ‘I hope you don’t mind, but I’m afraid I need your medical expertise.’

She explained that Alston had woken up that morning feeling very weak and rather tired and had said that he’d spend the morning in bed, having a little rest. He said he just thought he was paying the price for a good deal of travelling. Esme had said that she would sit and write a final few postcards and spend an hour or so packing up her purchases to ensure that they didn’t get damaged on the flight home.

But at lunchtime, Alston had been no better.

‘He says he feels too weak to move,’ said Esme, who sounded worried. ‘He didn’t have any breakfast and he hasn’t eaten any lunch either. That’s just not like him, doctor. Alston enjoys his food and he loves the meals here.’

She also told me that she’d taken his temperature and that he had a slight fever.

Less than ten minutes later, I was sitting beside their bed listening to Alston tell me that he’d never felt quite so weak and washed out.

Esme, clearly desperately worried, sat in a chair by the window.

‘Have you passed any urine yet this morning?’ I asked Alston.

The minute I’d sat down by the side of the bed I had decided on a provisional diagnosis. I had noticed that the sclera, the whites of Alston’s eyes, had acquired a yellowish tinge. There had been no yellowing of the sclera when we’d met a few days earlier. I would have noticed.

‘I had to get up at about six for that,’ he said. ‘But that’s normal for me, these days. I usually wake about then to visit the bathroom. My doctor says my prostate is a little enlarged.’

‘Did you notice anything odd about your urine?’ I asked him. I didn’t think his enlarged prostate had anything to do with his current health problem.

‘It was very dark,’ replied Alston immediately. ‘The colour reminded me of that dark beer that comes from Ireland.’

‘Guinness?’

‘That’s the one.’

‘How long has your urine been dark?’

‘A few days. Maybe a week. Yes, nearly a week. I think I first noticed it getting darker when we were in Amsterdam. That was also when I started to feel a bit tired. I put it down to too much travelling. We’d driven around 600 miles in two days. Do you think the colour change is significant? I assumed it was something I’d eaten. You know, in the way that urine goes red when you’ve been eating beetroot.’

‘Have you had any other symptoms?’

‘As I think I told you, I’ve been off my food a little. My appetite has gone and I’ve been feeling nauseous. I thought perhaps the nausea was putting me off my food but I don’t know what’s been causing the nausea. We came across the English Channel on the ferry and the sea was a little rough that day. I put the nausea down to a little sea sickness.’

‘Have you had any abdominal pain?’

‘Not really pain. Just a bit of discomfort.’

‘How have your bowels been? Any change?’

‘I’ve had a bit of diarrhoea,’ said Alston, who seemed embarrassed.

‘And the colour?’

‘Colour?’

‘The colour of your stools, your faeces?’

‘Oh, that’s strange because although my urine has definitely been darker my faeces have definitely been lighter. Clay coloured, I’d say.’

I pulled down the bedclothes and, having asked Alston to undo the cord of his pyjama trousers and to pull up his jacket, I examined his abdomen. I could find nothing of any note. I certainly couldn't find any sign of an enlarged liver.

'What do you think it is, doctor?' asked Esme.

I turned. She was sitting on the edge of her chair, twisting a handkerchief between her fingers.

I refastened the pyjama cord and rearranged Alston's bedclothes. 'I'm pretty sure you've got infective hepatitis,' I said, talking to Alston but also replying to Esme. I hate it when doctors talk about a patient as though he isn't there; discussing a diagnosis and treatment without addressing him directly.

'Oh my God!' cried Esme. She started crying.

I reassured them both that this probably sounded worse than it was. I explained that I felt sure that Alston had an infection of his liver, in particular a type of hepatitis known as 'infective hepatitis A', and that he had probably picked it up somewhere on their journey around Europe.

'It is not at all uncommon for travellers who've visited Paris to pick up hepatitis,' I explained. 'There seem to be a good many restaurants in the city where the kitchen staff are infected. And if hygiene isn't terribly good then the food they serve can be infected too.'

'We were in Paris about six weeks ago,' said Esme.

'That would fit perfectly,' I agreed. 'The incubation period is about six weeks – that's the usual sort of time interval between contracting the infection and showing symptoms.'

'But isn't hepatitis dangerous?' asked Esme.

'Some types can be quite nasty,' I agreed. 'But given all the circumstances I'm confident that Alston has a type of liver infection known as hepatitis A. And that's inconvenient and unpleasant rather than dangerous.'

'Should Alston be in hospital?' asked Esme.

Alston, lying back in bed looked exhausted and seemed happy for his wife to take over the questioning and the decisions.

'I think it would be a good idea,' I said. 'I'll take some blood samples which I'll send along to the laboratory in Barnstaple but I'm pretty confident about the diagnosis.

'Where's the nearest hospital?' asked Esme. 'What do you recommend? Should we take him up to London? We took out good health insurance for this trip. I'm sure our insurers will pay for the best treatment available.'

'It's up to the two of you,' I told them. 'If my diagnosis is correct then Alston simply needs nursing care. There isn't any treatment. Alston will slowly recover and the only important thing is to keep him comfortable and well hydrated. There's a hospital in Barnstaple and a private hospital in Exeter. And there are, of course, plenty of private hospitals in London.' I also explained that we had a small, cottage hospital in Bilbury.

'How long am I going to be ill?' asked Alston.

'A few weeks, possibly even a month or two,' I told him. 'There isn't any way to hurry up the recovery – other than to make sure that you rest and give your body a chance to deal with the infection.'

'Oh dear,' said Esme. 'When do you think Alston will be fit to travel back to the States?'

'Not until he feels a little better,' I told her. 'I wouldn't want him to make a long journey for a few weeks – probably a month at least. He needs to get his strength back and that will take time.'

I took out a syringe and needle and a couple of blood sample bottles. And I took samples of Alston's blood to send to the laboratory.

'How infectious is the disease?' asked Esme.

'It's fairly infectious,' I told her. 'We need to make sure that Alston is properly nursed in such a way that the infection doesn't spread to anyone else. It's called barrier nursing. It just means making sure that the bug which has affected Alston doesn't get a chance to affect anyone else.

'Is Esme going to get this?' asked Alston. 'We've been together all the time.'

'Have you had any symptoms at all?' I asked her. 'Any of the problems Alston has described?'

Esme shook her head.

'And your urine is a normal colour?'

'Oh yes.'

'Then I don't think you're going to get it,' I told her. 'I would have expected you to have shown symptoms or signs by now.'

I left Esme and Alston to discuss hospitals while I went downstairs to arrange for the blood samples I'd taken to be sent over to Barnstaple. A van from the hospital comes round every morning and brings test results and takes away samples but we'd missed it for the day and I didn't want to wait until the next morning's collection. Fortunately, Gilly was going into Barnstaple to do some shopping and she happily agreed to drop off the blood samples at the hospital laboratory.

‘You’re going to lose your guests a little early,’ I told her and Frank. I explained that they should make sure that Alston’s room was well cleaned without any delay. I knew that all the crockery and utensils that are used at the pub are cleaned in their dishwasher so that wasn’t a problem. I told them to make sure that the bed sheets and pillowcases were all washed at a high temperature. ‘And it’s important to make sure that the toilet and bathroom are well cleaned. Wear rubber gloves when you do the cleaning and burn the gloves afterwards.’

When I went back upstairs, I found that Esme and Alston had decided that they would go to London where there was a large, private hospital which their insurance company recommended. I would have been happy for Alston to stay at our cottage hospital in Bilbury (and that’s certainly where I would have preferred to stay myself) but to be honest, I was a little relieved at the choice they’d made. Barrier nursing a patient with infective hepatitis requires a lot of work and our small hospital doesn’t have the staff for that sort of work – particularly since Alston would probably need to be kept in bed for a month or six weeks.

A private ambulance arrived two hours later and took Alston and Esme off to London. I promised to telephone the hospital with the results of the blood tests as soon as they were available, though I knew that the hospital in London would repeat the tests.

Esme telephoned us several times during the next month. The doctors in London confirmed my diagnosis and they kept Alston in hospital for just over four weeks. When they gave Alston the ‘all clear’ the couple flew back to America.

Happily, neither of them had bad feelings about Bilbury – despite the fact that it was in our village that Alston had been taken poorly.

Both insisted that their visit to see Cedric and the rest of us in the village had been the highpoint of their vacation. And Cedric’s North American fan club has now doubled in size.

Alston and Esme were not, however, quite so fond of their trip to Paris.

The doctors in London had confirmed that the chances were that Paris was where Alston had acquired his unwelcome souvenir.

The good news was that Alston made a complete recovery and five months later he, Esme and our good friends the Rathbones sent us a postcard from another of their hiking adventures in the Rocky Mountains.

The Orang-utan

Al Packer works as an insurance salesman during the week but on Friday and Saturday evenings he turns himself into 'Darley Dale', a performer who appears in pubs and clubs throughout the West Country. He sings a mixture of traditional Devon folk songs (which he writes himself) and traditional country and western songs (which he also writes himself).

The traditional Devon folk songs are invariably rather sad and usually involve a young shepherd and his unrequited love for a farmer's daughter.

The country and western songs are about a cowboy who regrets the men he has shot and the cattle he has rustled.

In real life, neither Al nor 'Darley' has ever been further west than Bideford and I doubt if either of them has ever sat upon a horse. To be honest, I don't think Al knows anything much about horses. It is reputed that he once saw half a dozen llamas in a field on the way to Combe Martin and asked several people what sort of horse they were.

Al, who has never married, lives alone in a room which he rents from Samuel Houghton, a local farmer. To be honest, I don't think Al is a very good insurance salesman and I strongly suspect that he would give it up in a moment if he could earn enough money from his singing career.

'Darley' has a regular gig at a pub in Ilfracombe called The Dog and Two Ferrets. He appears there twice a month and the arrangement is that he receives a very small fee but is also allowed as much free beer as he can drink.

Sadly, the result of this (and similar arrangements at a pub in North Molton called The Nell Gwynn and a working men's club in Lynton called 'The Working Men's Club') 'Darley' (or should it be Al) has acquired a taste for alcoholic beverages which doesn't have much to do with thirst.

When I was a medical student, I was taught that the human liver removes alcohol from the bloodstream at a rate of around an ounce an hour and that, as a result, it is in theory perfectly possible to drink an ounce of alcohol every hour without ever showing any signs of being drunk.

The snag, of course, is that a steady consumption of alcohol means that the liver, which has the job of metabolising the stuff, tends to become rather worn out and bloated considerably sooner than might otherwise be the case.

And this, sadly, is what has happened to Al Packer's liver.

He came to see me complaining of nausea, continual tiredness, abdominal pain and swelling in his feet and ankles. His skin and eyes had a yellowish tinge. As a result of the blood tests I'd ordered and received, I'd had no choice but to read him the general practitioner's equivalent of the riot act. I pointed out to him that he was without doubt a fully-fledged alcoholic and that if he didn't change his ways then his future wouldn't be a very long one.

I told him to return to the surgery once a week so that I could keep an eye on his progress by repeating the blood tests.

Whenever he arrived for his check-up, he had obviously been chewing sweets which I recognised as Palma Violets. However, the sweet aroma of the traditional English delicacy failed entirely to mask the smell of the alcohol.

I must say, though, that although his face was always a little flushed, there were no other overt signs that he had been drinking; he did not seem to be in any way dangerously over-lubricated. Like a lot of heavy drinkers, he managed to give the impression of sobriety even when he had drunk enough alcohol to turn any normal person into a wobbly wreck.

The big problem was that Al had not yet accepted that his drinking was damaging his body. Indeed, on the contrary, he was convinced that a few drinks helped him perform much better when he was working as 'Darley'.

Lots of drinkers, particularly motorists, claim that their drinking makes them more confident and less hesitant.

Generally speaking, I've always found this argument to be rather specious and self-serving. It is, for example, well known that although motorists always think they drive better after a couple of drinks, their skills and judgement are invariably worse than they would have been if they had been sober. Alcohol increases confidence but reduces performance.

On the other hand, is the consumption of alcohol one of those areas of life where it is possible to separate the black from the white?

Maybe not.

I worked with two heart surgeons during one of my hospital jobs as a house surgeon and although they worked in the same department, and both did the same sort of operations on the same sort of patients, they were completely different characters.

One of the two surgeons, the younger, was very slow, very methodical and very cautious. If he had owned a powerful motor car he would have been the driver settled in the slow lane, following pantechnicons and fourteen wheelers at 40 mph. If he'd been a house painter he would have taken three weeks to paint a modest sized house but he would have done a perfect job and there wouldn't have been a drop of paint spilt anywhere. He was very straight-laced and liked everyone to call him 'sir'.

The other surgeon, the older of the two, was very fast but rather slapdash and if he had been a house painter there would have been paint on the windows, on the carpets and on the wrong bits of wall. He would have taken less than a week to complete the job and another day to clean up the mess he'd made. He was great fun and liked everyone he worked with, even or perhaps especially the junior nurses, to call him by his Christian name. His one big flaw was that he was rather excitable.

When I first started to work for him, the surgical registrar told me to 'watch his hands'.

'To learn?' I said, naively. 'Is he very good?'

'He is good,' said the registrar, 'but you need to watch his hands because if things aren't going well he has a tendency to throw things – including scalpels.'

While working with that surgeon, and standing on the other side of the operating table, I became very good at dodging knives.

The older surgeon lived in a massive old country house with a pool, a miniature golf course and its own maze. (He did a good deal of private work and made a lot of money from work at a local private hospital.) I remember that one Christmas, a group of us took his car apart and then reassembled it at the centre of his maze. He had to get a crane to lift it out of the maze but he thought it was a hysterically funny jape. I've never known anyone else who had their own maze. I've known several people who had their own boating lakes and two who had their own golf courses but only one who had his own maze. The hedges of the maze were made of leylandii which he had used because it is the fastest growing hedge material known to man. The snag, of course, was that a gardener had to trim the hedge once every few weeks during the summer. It was, I suspect, like painting and repainting the Forth Bridge.

Now, with surgeons, as with most professionals in most areas of life, the best way to measure skill is to match the success rate of one with another. And the ultimate way to measure the skill of surgeons is to measure the percentage of patients who leave the hospital alive and well and compare it with the percentage who leave the hospital encased in a wooden box. The only real way to judge a surgeon's skill is to measure his success rate when compared to colleagues performing similar operations on a similar group of patients.

You might have thought that of the two surgeons I've mentioned, the slow, methodical surgeon would have had the better success rate but you would have been wrong.

The fast surgeon, the one who attacked his patients as though he were tackling the undergrowth in an overgrown garden, wielding his scalpel with gusto, had a far better success rate. His patients were far more likely to live and more likely to get better quickly. The scar he left them with wasn't always neat but they lived. Knowledgeable GPs in the area usually sent him their patients. Even among the public it was quite widely known that he was the man to go to if you needed to go under the knife.

On the other hand, the patients who had been operated on by the slow surgeon had very neat scars, the sort that fade to a thin almost indiscernible white line, but too many of them did not live to parade their scars upon the beach.

There was a simple reason for this.

When a patient is on the operating table they are, inevitably, under an anaesthetic of some kind and their bodies are subjected to a whole series of abnormal physical insults. The risk of a patient faring badly, and developing complications or dying, depends to a very considerable extent upon the length of time an operation takes.

If one surgeon routinely completes his work in two hours and another surgeon takes four hours for the same operation then, all things being equal, the surgeon who completes his operations in the shorter time will have by far the better success rate. His patients will make a quicker recovery and they will be more likely to survive.

I was in the hospital mess when the slow and methodical surgeon, aware of the fact that too many of his patients were dying, asked his older colleague what he thought he could do to improve his success rate.

I knew that the careful surgeon was in a bad way; even talking of giving up surgery completely and retraining as a pathologist. His argument was that if he did post-mortems for a living then at least his patients would be dead when he began work on them. At the time, five of his last six patients had died on the operating table and the sixth was still seriously ill in the Intensive Care Unit.

That is a heavy burden to carry with you when you next scrub up and approach an unconscious patient lying on your operating table.

'Ah that's easy,' said the fast surgeon with a laugh. 'You're a damned good surgeon but you're far too uptight. You fuss too much, you're too nervous and you take too long over your cutting and stitching. Because you're too methodical and slow, your patients are under the anaesthetic for too long. You need to speed things up a bit.'

'But what can I do about it?' asked the methodical surgeon. 'I'm just a naturally cautious sort of fellow,' he added unnecessarily.

‘Have a drink before you start work. Not enough to make you drunk, of course; but enough to get rid of some of your inhibitions; a glass of something to loosen you up a little.’

And so the slow surgeon started having a modest sized glass of port before he put on his operating mask and gown. The nurses and other staff were scandalised for the surgeon made no secret of his new habit. He kept a bottle of good port and an appropriate crystal drinking glass in his locker. I don’t know why he chose port. I think he was probably nervous about drinking spirits because of the higher alcohol content.

But what is it that they say about the proof of the pudding?

And the fact is that the glass of port did its job.

The young surgeon’s operations didn’t take quite as long and his patients started to do well. Most important of all they survived.

As long as I was working for him, the surgeon never exceeded his one glass of port. And everyone, doubtless not least the patients and their relatives, was delighted that his terrible run of failure came to an end. No one who worked with him complained. Everyone was relieved.

And what difference does it make whether you relax a little by taking a pill or by taking a single glass of alcohol?

However, there is no doubt that not all those who drink are able to control their drinking so precisely.

Alcohol is an addictive substance and many heavy drinkers only discover that they have lost control when it is far too late.

I had absolutely no doubt that Al Packer was no longer in control of his drinking. On the contrary, the drinking was clearly in charge of him.

‘Maybe I should just cut down my drinking,’ suggested Al on one of his visits to the surgery. ‘I could easily do that.’

‘No!’ I told him firmly. ‘You need to cut out alcohol completely. You need to talk to a specialist and you need to join Alcoholics Anonymous.’ I gave him the telephone number for Alcoholics Anonymous and explained how they could help him.

Al eventually left my surgery promising that he would keep the appointment I had made for him at a specialist clinic in Exeter.

I was not confident that he would attend the clinic. In my experience, alcoholics only start on the road to recovery when they acknowledge that they need help – and ask for it.

And so I felt rather gloomy when I set out on my morning rounds later that day.

I like Al Packer.

Some folk would undoubtedly regard him as a rather odd fellow but the word ‘odd’ can be used as a synonym for ‘unusual’ or ‘fascinating’ and I don’t for a moment think that the world is a worse place for having a generous sprinkling of ‘odd’ folk around.

My calls that day took me from one end of the village to the other and as I was driving along the lane which leads past the Duck and Puddle, I went by the cottage belonging to Olive Robinson, Thumper Robinson’s aunt. As I drove along, my eye was caught by a figure sitting on a wooden kitchen chair just a few feet from the edge of the roadway. I slowed down to a fast walking pace, because it seemed that the chair was dangerously close to the lane, and to my astonishment saw that the figure sitting on the chair was far too orange and hairy to be human: indeed, it wasn’t a human at all. It was an orang-utan.

And it waved to me.

It waved to me!

I’d never seen an orang-utan before but I knew what this was just as surely as I would have recognised an elephant, a giraffe or a camel. I’ve seen plenty of pictures and there is no other creature in the world which can be mistaken for an orang-utan.

I was tempted to stop to find out why Miss Robinson had acquired a friendly orang-utan as a houseguest but I had one last call to do, to a Mr Rawlinson.

My receptionist, Miss Johnson, had stressed to me that it was important to arrive before lunchtime. I didn’t know why the timing was so important but when Miss Johnson tells me something, I always listen and try to do what she suggests. I don’t always understand why I am doing what I am doing but I have learned that she not only knows what she is doing but usually also knows what I should be doing.

Mr Rawlinson is a curious fellow. When I first met him, I assumed that he was in his 70s or 80s but in fact, he was only 52-years-old. He is, without a doubt, the laziest man I have ever met. His idea of exercise is turning on the television set in the morning and off again late at night. The muscles of his right forefinger and thumb must be especially well developed; honed within a fraction of an inch of muscular perfection.

Mr Rawlinson once told me that his main claim to fame lies with an ancestor of his called Thomas Rawlinson; an

Englishman who invented the kilt back in the early 18th century.

The 18th century Rawlinson was an industrialist who reportedly invented the kilt because it was cheaper to make than a pair of trousers – and the Scots who worked for him were poor. He also thought the kilt was safer and easier to wear than the sort of complicated garments the workmen had previously favoured.

So he persuaded them to wear kilts – which were cheap and easy to manufacture.

However, about two decades later, in 1746, the British Parliament banned the kilt (in the 1746 Dress Act) because it was considered an embarrassment and too different to be acceptable form of attire. The Highlanders had just been defeated at the Battle of Culloden and Parliament also wanted to make it clear who was in charge.

Before Parliament banned the kilt, it had been worn only by very poor workmen who couldn't afford to buy trousers. No laird would be seen dead in one. But, naturally, as soon as the kilt was banned, every contrary Scotsman wanted one. The richer and more Patriotic Scots definitely wanted the outlawed kilts. And because they had more money, they made the kilts more complicated – adding belts and pleats and so on. The sporran was added because the kilt had no pockets and there was nowhere for the Scotsman to put the 18th century equivalent of his mobile phone and car keys.

And so the kilt became the national costume of Scotland.

Bizarrely, each clan chief claimed that his tribe should wear a kilt with its own distinctive plaid pattern.

The myth about the kilt was carved into stone by Sir Walter Scott, the Scottish romantic author, who claimed that the kilt's history could be traced back to the third century.

This, of course, was imaginative nonsense.

For the kilt was invented in the 18th century by an Englishman called Rawlinson, whose descendant was now unbuttoning the top two buttons of a rather grubby flannel shirt.

Mr Rawlinson had asked for a home visit because he wanted me to listen to his chest.

'Do you have any breathing problems?' I asked.

'Oh no,' he replied, seemingly surprised by the question. 'I feel fine. I just want to make sure that I'm not about to fall ill. I can't afford to be poorly this week.'

'Ah!' I said, feigning wisdom. 'What's happening this week?' I thought that maybe he was about to tell me that he was having a job interview.

'It's the Cheltenham Festival,' he replied.

'Horse jumping?'

'That's right. It starts this afternoon and it's on all week.'

'You're off to Cheltenham?'

'No, no. I'm going to watch it on the television.'

And that, I realised, explained why Mr Rawlinson had told Miss Johnson that it was important that I visited him before lunch.

I listened to his chest, confirmed that all was well and assured him that he was fit enough to sit and watch the horse racing for the rest of the week. He seemed enormously relieved.

Outside his cottage, I stood for a moment and admired the acheiropoietoi which stands on the hill behind his garden.

An acheiropoietoi is, of course, a pictorial image which was not made by human hand and there are many of them in our part of North Devon. This particular acheiropoietoi is a stone which, thanks to a freak of nature, looks like a huge dog.

I have no doubt that not having motor cars, telephones or televisions to complicate their lives meant that the Greeks had plenty of time to wander around the countryside spotting bits of nature masquerading as old men, barking dogs or shapely young women.

And so that is why they had a name for this particular art form. They probably had special acheiropoietoi clubs and weekend acheiropoietoi festivals.

Anyway, the acheiropoietoi behind Mr Rawlinson's cottage is one of the best in our part of the world and certainly the best in Bilbury.

When I had finished admiring the stone dog, I drove away from Mr Rawlinson's home, and headed back towards Bilbury Grange.

The lanes in our village are usually quiet and I can often drive around for an hour or more without seeing any other traffic.

But half a mile away from home, I saw Thumper's truck approaching.

Now, the lanes in Bilbury are narrow and there isn't often enough room for two vehicles to pass each other. Most of the lanes are no more than seven or eight feet wide and because vehicles are restricted to travelling along the tracks made by other vehicles, the lanes have grass growing in the middle. This particular lane, which doesn't have a name, is, however, wide enough for two cars to pass if the drivers are cautious and don't mind tangling their nearside wing mirrors in the hedgerows either side of the road.

Thumper's truck looks as if it has been in a 15 round fight with a couple of large bulldozers and Thumper, who never worried about acquiring new dents and scratches, moved in a little so that his vehicle would rub along the hedge, leaving the Rolls a couple of inches of space to spare its paintwork. We both slowed to walking pace.

As our vehicles approached each other, I noticed that there was a passenger sitting in the front seat of Thumper's truck.

And as we got closer and closer I could see that the passenger was an orange-utan.

It seemed a fair bet that it was the same animal which had been sitting on a chair outside Miss Robinson's cottage.

And once again, the orang-utan was waving.

It was definitely, without a doubt, waving to me.

A long, reddish brown arm was raised in an impromptu salute and the animal was, without a doubt, waving in my direction.

It is always difficult to see precisely what is going on inside Thumper's truck because the windows are thick with several years' worth of accumulated grime and mud. I don't think Thumper has ever washed his truck. He has most certainly never subjected it to a polish.

But I could definitely see that the orang-utan was staring in my direction. And I could definitely tell that it appeared to be pleased to see me.

I blinked and looked again. The orang-utan was still there. If I had been to the Duck and Puddle I would have feared that I must have had too much to drink. Moreover, as a final, bizarre touch, the animal was clearly wearing its seatbelt.

As our vehicles came alongside, I brought the Rolls to a halt and looked across into the front of Thumper's truck. Thumper slowed and he too stopped.

I wound down my window. The orang-utan now began to wave with even greater enthusiasm – as though it had recognised me and was pleased to see me.

'Where…' I shouted, intending to ask Thumper where he had found an orang-utan. But I stopped myself. It seemed an inadequate question. What do you say to someone who is driving around with an orang-utan in the front passenger seat? 'Why have you got an orang-utan with you?' 'Where did you find that animal?' 'Is it dangerous?'

Thumper grinned across at me and rubbed the orang-utan's head with his left hand. The animal seemed to like this a good deal. Its head bobbed up and down and it moved across to be closer to Thumper.

'Wind down your window!' I shouted.

Thumper wound down his window.

'Is that what it appears to be?' I managed at last.

'It's an orang-utan,' replied Thumper with a big grin.

'I saw it a little earlier sitting outside your aunt's cottage.'

'I'm taking it for a ride,' explained Thumper. 'Showing it the neighbourhood.'

I stared at him and then at the orang-utan.

And then I noticed the piece of orange baler twine which was attached to the orang-utan's wrist. The baler twine merged into the creature's fur and was almost invisible.

Thumper saw me notice the string and, unable to contain himself any longer, he started to laugh.

'It's a stuffed toy!' I shouted.

'Took you long enough!' cried another voice, and Patchy Fogg suddenly appeared from his hiding place on the floor at the back of the truck. Patchy, I noticed, was holding the other end of the piece of baler twine which was tied to the creature's wrist.

'Patchy bought a job lot at an auction in South Molton,' explained Thumper. 'As part of the lot there was a large trunk filled with stuffed toys. This one is life-size.'

'You fooled me,' I admitted.

'We could have fooled anyone with it,' said Patchy with a laugh. 'We strapped it into the front seat with the seatbelt and tied bits of string to both arms so that I can sit in the back and make it wave to people.' He pulled at the two strings and the orang-utan raised both arms. It really did look very convincing.

I congratulated them both on the best practical joke I'd seen for months and then drove back to Bilbury Grange for my luncheon.

I'd finished eating and was sitting having my coffee when the doorbell rang. I put down my coffee but hadn't moved out of the chair when the doorbell rang again. It rang another four or five times before I got to the door.

'Someone is very impatient!' shouted Patsy from the kitchen. 'Who is it?'

It was Al Packer. He looked terrified. His yellowing skin was now deathly pale. He was sweating and seemed close to hysterics.

‘Do you have the details of that appointment?’ he asked me. ‘The appointment with the hospital specialist? And have you got the phone number for Alcoholics Anonymous? I lost the piece of paper you gave me before.’

I knew he had probably thrown the paper away but I took him into the surgery, found the details he had requested and wrote them down for him again.

‘I need help,’ said Al. ‘And I need it now.’

‘What’s changed your mind?’ I asked him, pleased that he’d seen the light.

‘I was just driving through the village when I saw Thumper in his van,’ said Al. ‘He had a big orange ape with him. And I swear the ape waved to me.’

‘An orang-utan?’ I asked.

‘Yes, that’s it,’ said Al. ‘Have you seen it?’

‘An orang-utan in Thumper’s van?’

‘Yes. I saw it. The damned thing waved to me.’

‘It doesn’t seem very likely,’ I said.

‘No,’ said Al. ‘It doesn’t does it? That’s why I know I must have been having a hallucination. It’s a sign that I need help.’

‘You’ll keep that appointment and you’ll ring Alcoholics Anonymous?’

‘Oh yes,’ replied Al. ‘I certainly will. You don’t have to worry about that, doctor.’

Al left clutching the piece of paper I’d given him.

It takes on average 15 years to convince an alcoholic to put up a hand, admit they have a problem and ask for help.

For Al, the orang-utan in Thumper’s truck speeded up the process considerably.

When he’d gone, I telephoned Thumper who had just arrived home for his standard 5,000 calorie midday meal.

‘Does anyone else know about your jape?’ I asked him.

‘We only saw you and Al Packer,’ said Thumper. He sounded rather disappointed.

‘Do me a favour,’ I said. ‘Don’t tell anyone else about the orang-utan. And put the damned thing away for a while.’

‘That’s a lot to ask,’ said Thumper, sounding disappointed.

‘I know it is. But it’s in a good cause.’

There was a short silence. ‘Ah,’ said Thumper, seeing the light. ‘Al thought he was having hallucinations, didn’t he?’

I didn’t say anything. I take patient confidentiality very seriously though obviously I couldn’t prevent Thumper reaching the truth by himself.

‘Got it,’ said Thumper. ‘If we drive around with the orang-utan, Al will know that it’s a stuffed toy, realise that he wasn’t having hallucinations and decide he doesn’t need to ask for help.’

Once again, I didn’t say anything.

‘No problem at all,’ said Thumper. ‘I’ll have a word with Patchy.’ I could almost feel him wink at me. Thumper, like most people in the village, is fond of Al but knows that his drinking is out of control and he desperately needs help.

‘Thanks,’ I said.

‘It turned out to be an ever better jape than we thought,’ said Thumper, justifiably sounding rather pleased with himself.

And he was right.

You don’t often come across a practical joke that does someone a good turn.

The Birthday Girl

Since I had taken over my medical practice in Bilbury, I had got into the habit of regularly visiting all my elderly patients, whether they were ill or not.

I had far more elderly patients than might have been expected from the size of the practice (there is, say the locals, something in the sea air that encourages good health and longevity) but even so, I could visit all my elderly patients on a regular basis simply by calling in on two or three most days.

If I was passing the home of a patient I hadn't seen for a few weeks, I would call in just to make sure that all was well.

I always had a supply of drugs in a locked bag in the boot of the Rolls, and if a patient was running out of a medicine they took regularly then I could provide them with additional supplies. Since Bilbury was some considerable distance from the nearest town, I had been granted the right to run what was called a 'dispensing practice'. This meant that I could keep supplies of drugs at Bilbury Grange – and locked in the boot of my car.

I was able to visit my elderly patients, even when they hadn't requested a visit, because I had a small practice and looked after no more than a quarter of the number of patients cared for by a doctor working in a large town or city.

It also helped that there wasn't anyone in the village who wasn't my responsibility.

I could be confident that behind every door I passed, the residents within were on my list of patients. And it was, of course, much easier for me to visit elderly, infirm patients than it was for them to visit me. We see charabancs in Bilbury from time to time but the last time I saw an ordinary bus driving round the lanes of Bilbury, it was only there because the driver, trying to get from Barnstaple to Lynton for the first time, had lost his way. Villagers who want to catch a bus must walk a considerable distance to a bus stop on the main road. There is no bus service within Bilbury itself.

My friend Will, who is a partner in a large practice in a town in the middle of England, has between 2,500 and 3,000 patients on his list. The numbers vary because in the town where he practices there is quite a good deal of movement among the population. People move into the town, or away from it, because they have married, taken jobs in the area or gone away to study at a university or college elsewhere.

In contrast, my practice in Bilbury consisted at the time of around 600 patients. There were sometimes one or two more, and there were sometimes one or two less, but the total didn't change very much.

The one big disadvantage of having such a small practice was that my income was considerably lower than that of a doctor working in a big city practice.

The National Health Service pays doctors a fee for each patient on their list and although I received some additional income from the NHS (including an extra fee because I looked after a small practice in a rural area) my total practice income was much lower than that of a city doctor with several thousand patients.

GPs working in towns and cities also have the opportunity to earn additional money by taking on extra jobs. Will, for example, was one of the local police surgeons and he earned substantial fees for being the medical officer for a couple of large, local factories.

Patsy and I were not complaining. I was earning extra money by writing books and articles and although I'd had to abandon my burgeoning career as a television doctor simply because I wouldn't hire a locum doctor and so could not leave the village to go to studios in London or elsewhere, we were managing very well. We grew much of our own food and in theory, we also had a small income from selling excess fruit and vegetables to Peter Marshall at the village shop. (In practice, there was sometimes a little difficulty in persuading Peter to part with the money he owed us.)

Miss Minchinhampton was one of the elderly patients whom I visited regularly at home.

Indeed, since I had taken over from Dr Brownlow I don't think she had ever visited the surgery at Bilbury Grange.

There was nothing really wrong with her apart from the fact that she was, in her own words, 'beginning to wear out a little'.

Her heart still did what it was paid to do. But it did so with increasing reluctance. And who can blame it or, indeed, complain? How many machines can go through a complicated cycle of activity, 70 times a minute, for hour after hour, day after day, year after year, without a day off or a chance for a little light servicing?

Her lungs struggled to get enough oxygen into her blood.

Her arteries and veins were no longer examples of clean, efficient piping.

Her sight was no longer quite as sharp as it had probably once been and she had a pair of developing cataracts.

Her hearing was still working but if Peter Marshall had been offering her ears for sale even he would have had to mark them down as 'well used by previous owner'.

(Her hearing was not, however, quite as bad as she sometimes led folk to believe. I knew from personal experience that when she wanted to hear something she could do so with surprising clarity. She used an old-fashioned ear trumpet and first-time visitors were always required to subject themselves to the embarrassment of shouting into the business end of the device. I refused to use the ear trumpet.)

And her joints were, predictably, as well worn as might be expected after a good many years of use.

But Miss Minchinhampton did not take any medication and she didn't want any.

She moaned a little, she complained occasionally, she let it be known that she did not enjoy getting old and I think she took great pleasure from expressing her dissatisfaction with the world in general and her life in particular.

But she would not even consider taking medicines.

She regarded drugs as the work of the devil and saw no distinction between illegal drugs such as heroin and cocaine and the sort of medicaments that a doctor might prescribe.

Her state of good health was, in some ways, a minor miracle, for Miss Minchinhampton did everything she shouldn't do, and she had done everything she shouldn't have done for a very long time indeed.

She smoked cigars and she drank copious amounts of brandy and she had done so for so many years that her whole house smelt like a gentleman's club at midnight on a busy Saturday. The combination of cigar smoke and brandy fumes gave the house a unique smell of cedar wood which was, I have to confess, not entirely unpleasant and far preferable to some of the aromas present in homes occupied by elderly ladies and gentlemen.

The funny thing was that I had no idea just how old Miss Minchinhampton really was.

She talked occasionally about her parents and her grandparents and although it was clear from her conversation that her grandparents were no longer with us, I had never been quite clear about whether or not her parents were still in the land of the living. It seemed unlikely but one of the lessons you learn as a general practitioner is that few things are as impossible as they may appear to be. I once had a patient who was 81-years-old but who would not make a decision without asking his parents' permission. His father was 98-years-old and his mother was a year younger. In Bilbury, the elderly often still have their parents around and when they do, they always treat them with the utmost respect.

Miss Minchinhampton could have been in her 70s, her 80s or her 90s. I suspected that her true age was somewhere towards the top end of that range but she had smoked and drunk heavily all her life and these 'vices' can accelerate the ageing process.

As her physician I was, of course, the keeper of Miss Minchinhampton's medical records but these consisted of no more than an aged and very scruffy cardboard folder and a few equally scruffy pieces of cardboard on which Dr Brownlow and I had scribbled rather unhelpful remarks such as 'Surprisingly robust but complains that she feels she is wearing out', 'Not in bad condition for her age – whatever that is' and 'Much the same as last time'. This last comment had been written many times and had eventually become written as shorthand – MTSALT.

She had suffered a bout of tonsillitis just after the end of the Great War and in the 1920s she had sprained an ankle, though the records did not explain which ankle had been the unfortunate one, how it had been sprained or what treatment, if any, had been applied.

Under normal circumstances, a patient's medical records contain details of their date of birth, written in ink on the cardboard folder, but in Miss Minchinhampton's case, this portion of the folder had been torn off and had long ago disappeared.

I had always assumed that Miss Minchinhampton, who steadfastly refused to discuss her age with me, must have got hold of the folder and vandalised it herself. It didn't seem important. If she was so desperate to hide her age then what did it really matter?

'Would you like a cup of tea?' asked Miss Minchinhampton.

I said I would.

I have found, from experience, that Miss Minchinhampton is one of the patients I have who takes offence if I say 'no' to the routinely offered refreshments.

'I'll make you one,' said Miss Minchinhampton, with a sigh. 'I never drink tea at this time of day. I suppose you'll be wanting a biscuit too.'

She levered herself up out of her chair, moaning a good deal and muttering something to herself, and shuffled into the tiny kitchen at the back of her cottage. The kitchen was cramped and crammed with out-of-date equipment. There was a huge Belfast sink, a massive iron mangle, a wooden scrubbing board and an old-fashioned, black-leaded range. Everything in the kitchen looked as if it ought to have been in a museum. Or a scrapyard.

Her cottage had been built at some time in the early 19th century, and several attempts had been made to modernise it but none of the improvements had been done later than the early 1950s. There was an indoor lavatory and a sink with plumbing in the kitchen but there was no water upstairs and, indeed, there was no bathroom at all. There was an electricity supply, with sockets in the living room and the bedroom, but there was no central heating of any kind. The only heat came from an open fireplace in the solitary downstairs room. If hot water was required it had to be heated on the range.

Several minutes later Miss Minchinhampton returned, carrying a tray upon which she had placed a teapot, a cup and a saucer. The saucer was decorated with a teaspoon. There was also a milk jug and a sugar bowl. There were three digestive biscuits on a plate. One of them had a small portion missing.

She put the tray down on her dining table; a huge oak monstrosity which took up nearly a third of the room. I sat down on one of the four upright chairs positioned around the table. She sat down on one of the other chairs.

'It's my birthday soon,' said Miss Minchinhampton. She poured tea into the solitary cup and added a little milk. She then added two spoonfuls of sugar and stirred the resulting mixture.

I asked her the date.

'Two weeks today,' she replied.

'Do you want to tell me how old you'll be?'

'I certainly do not!'

'Are you going to have a party?' I asked her.

'I've never had a birthday party.'

'Never?' I asked, surprised. 'Not even when you were a girl?'

'Never,' said Miss Minchinhampton. She picked up the cup and tasted the tea. It seemed to pass the test. I didn't like to mention that she had made the tea for me. Indeed, to be honest, I was rather relieved. I'd seen inside her kitchen.

My older patients do sometimes forget things. It doesn't always mean that they're developing Alzheimer's disease, or any other form of dementia.

'My parents were very religious,' she said. 'They belonged to a rather strange sub-sect of the Quaker movement and they didn't believe in parties. Not even for children.'

'So there were no balloons, games or trifle in your house?'

'Certainly not,' replied Miss Minchinhampton. She sounded wistful and it wasn't difficult to tell that she was rather sad not to have had a childhood adorned with balloons and trifle. I felt rather sorry for her.

'Would you like to have a party?' I asked.

There was no reply so I repeated the question.

She sighed.

I repeated the question for a third time.

'I suppose so,' she said, feigning reluctance and disinterest.

'Maybe we could organise one.'

'If it would make other people happy.'

'I'm sure it would.'

'I don't leave my home,' she told me, with some certainty.

'I know that.'

'I haven't been out of this house since 1952.'

'Is it really that long?'

'It certainly is.' She paused and then looked me straight in the eye as though daring me to defy her. 'And when I do leave I will be travelling in a wooden box.'

I was accustomed to Miss Minchinhampton's unique mixture of determination and gloominess and so I simply smiled and nodded.

'Do they still make those coloured bits and bobs they put on the top of cakes?' she asked, unexpectedly/

'I think they do. I think they call them 'hundreds and thousands'. Some people call them 'sprinkles'. People also put them on the top of trifles.'

'I saw some once on a cake in a shop,' said Miss Minchinhampton wistfully. 'The cake was in the window. I thought the coloured bits and bobs looked very pretty.' She paused and didn't speak for a moment. I could tell that she was lost in a memory. There were tears in her eyes. 'My mother pulled me away from the window and said the cake was indecent and that the coloured bits were very frivolous and quite decadent.'

'They're certainly frivolous,' I agreed. 'But I don't think there's anything particularly decadent about putting coloured bits of sugar on top of a cake or a trifle for a party.'

Miss Minchinhampton pulled a handkerchief from her sleeve and dabbed at her eyes. 'I think I've got a fly in my eye,' she said. I noticed that she had dabbed both eyes.

'How old would you have been then?' I asked. 'Approximately?'

'I was seven,' replied Miss Minchinhampton, without hesitation. 'We were living in Wolverhampton. The shop with the cake in the window was a bakery and the man who ran it had a port wine stain on his right cheek. I know it is not right to say so but as a child I found him rather alarming. We never bought anything from the shop because we had a cook who made our bread. We weren't wealthy, just ordinary middle class, but people like us had cooks and maids in those days. My father was an assistant bank manager. It was quite a large branch. He used to wear a frock coat to work. He always looked very smart. I remember I had on a blue coat and a blue beret at the time. I used to have ribbons in my hair but I can't remember what colour they would have been. The ribbons would have been under the beret. My mother didn't approve of folderols but she allowed me the ribbons.'

We sat in silence for a while.

'Would you like me to ask Patsy to make you a trifle and put on some hundreds and thousands?' I asked her, quietly.

There was a long, long pause. 'Would it be possible to put them on the top of a cake?' asked Miss Minchinhampton. 'I think people might like that.' She closed her eyes. 'A sponge cake. With jam in the middle and white icing on the top.'

'And coloured sprinkles scattered on top of the icing?'

'Exactly. Quite a good number of them. And sprinkled right up to the edge of the cake. The jam was squeezing out of the side of the cake. It was definitely strawberry jam. I could see a strawberry.'

'Would you like candles on the cake?'

'No.' Miss Minchinhampton was quite definite. 'It didn't have candles.' There were tears forming again and she used the handkerchief to dab them away. This time she didn't mention the fly. 'I wouldn't want candles,' she said. 'There weren't any candles.'

'I'll see what we can do,' I promised her. 'But put it in your diary. Two weeks today. Miss Minchinhampton's birthday party.'

'I don't keep a diary,' said Miss Minchinhampton. 'Why would I keep a diary? No one ever comes to see me and I never go anywhere.' This was said with defiance, rather than self-pity. I had known her for some years and she had never seemed to be a woman to seek out or enjoy the company of others.

'Just a figure of speech,' I said softly. I stood up, put a hand on her shoulder for a moment and let myself out.

As I drove back to Bilbury Grange, I marvelled at the way we cling to some seemingly irrelevant memories and the impact tiny things can have on our lives. I suspect that Miss Minchinhampton had completely forgotten many of the things that had happened to her and which had, at the time of their occurrence, appeared to be life-changing. But she had remembered vividly the sponge cake which had strawberry jam squeezing out of the sides and the white icing covered with brightly coloured hundreds and thousands.

Planning the birthday party took Patsy and me much of the following fortnight.

We decided to invite just a small group of people with whom we knew that Miss Minchinhampton would be familiar: a few of her neighbours, Thumper Robinson and his lady, Anne, Patchy and Adrienne Fogg and my receptionist Miss Johnson. Thumper had done a good many odd jobs for Miss Minchinhampton and Patchy had purchased several pieces of china from her when she had been running low on funds.

We wrote out invitation cards and told everyone to bring balloons, birthday cards and small, wrapped gifts.

I decided that since Miss Minchinhampton was having a birthday party, her very first birthday party by her own account, then I would damned well make some effort to find out just how old she really was. I made a few telephone calls, hustled my way through a good deal of National Health Service red tape, and spoke to a variety of administrators in departments up and down the country. Since I was legally and morally responsible for Miss Minchinhampton's health and welfare, I had a good reason for desiring this simple piece of information. And eventually, I obtained the facts I needed.

Miss Minchinhampton was quite correct about the date in the calendar when her birthday should be celebrated but I was staggered to find out precisely how old she was – and which birthday she was due to celebrate.

When I checked the information I'd received, I talked things over with Patsy and she agreed with me that we should make a little bit of extra effort to commemorate the day.

Thanks to a friend on one of the national newspapers to which I contributed articles and columns, I got hold of a rather difficult-to-obtain telephone number in London. The very important gentleman to whom I spoke was, at first, reluctant to help. He explained that his office usually required several weeks' notice and it was only after a considerable amount of pleading that I succeeded in persuading him to bend the rules, make an exception and push through the arrangements I had requested.

Patsy herself had been responsible for preparing the jam filled sponge cake, icing it and covering it with hundreds and thousands. Peter Marshall had tried to sell her a packet of little silver balls as decoration but Patsy had insisted that she wanted coloured sprinkles and eventually Peter had found a couple of boxes of these. Patsy had managed to use up both boxes on the one cake – making sure that the hundreds and thousands were spread right to the edge of the icing. Patsy's mother, Mrs Kennett, had prepared a magnificent looking trifle (laced in honour of Miss

Minchinhampton with generous helpings of brandy). And the two women had, between them, prepared a wide range of sandwiches, a collection of vol au vents and enough little sausages on sticks to feed a small army.

At last, the big day came.

Patsy and I drove to Miss Minchinhampton's cottage before the others. We were the advance party. We took a large supply of balloons, a boxful of silly hats and some paper plates, plastic glasses and plastic knives (all provided at a surprisingly reasonable price by Peter Marshall). Patsy had very sensibly decided that we would avoid a good deal of washing up if we used disposable plates and cutlery.

We also took a box of Miss Minchinhampton's favourite cigars, supplied by Peter Marshall, and two bottles of an excellent brandy which Frank Parsons of the Duck and Puddle had obtained for us at a very special price. These were the presents which Patsy and I had decided would be most gratefully received.

Miss Minchinhampton did not lock her front door and, like all those who visited her, I was in the habit of knocking and walking in without waiting for an invitation. Miss Minchinhampton said she preferred this because it saved her the effort of having to get up out of her chair.

When Patsy and I entered, carrying all the goodies, the old lady burst into tears.

They were not the easily disguised tears that I had seen before. These were not tears which could be passed off as 'I think I've got a fly in my eye'.

'Whatever is the matter?' asked Patsy, putting the tin in which we had brought the cake down on Miss Minchinhampton's dining table. She moved a chair and sat down beside the old lady.

Miss Minchinhampton did not reply but picked up an envelope, which was lying on the table in front of her and handed it to Patsy. It was a very smart blue envelope, well-made, much thicker and larger than the sort of envelope usually employed for sending letters or greetings, and the outside was marked with a message addressed to the Officer in Charge at the Delivery Office, commanding him in particular and the Royal Mail in general to deliver the item on the first available delivery on that very day. There was a note ordering the Officer in Charge to telephone Buckingham Palace to confirm that the letter was about to be delivered. Underneath this note there was a warning which would, I suspect, have curdled the blood of any Royal Mail employee: 'Failure to do so by 09.30 will initiate an enquiry from The Palace.'

I had never seen anything quite so impressive.

If an envelope could have come with a fanfare this one would have brought its own arch of trumpets.

'Open the envelope,' instructed Miss Minchinhampton.

We both knew what was inside the envelope, of course, and so it was no surprise to see a card, addressed to Miss Minchinhampton and congratulating her on reaching her 100th birthday. The card was signed 'Elizabeth R'. On the front of the card, there was a portrait of Her Majesty the Queen – wearing a tailored dress, three rows of pearls and a beautiful smile. The card even came with its own golden tassel.

It was well worth all the effort. Oh, it was well worth the effort.

'I didn't know it was my 100th,' said Miss Minchinhampton. 'I've never taken much notice of birthdays.'

'You really didn't know?' said Patsy.

Miss Minchinhampton shook her head. 'I knew it was close,' she said. 'But I've never kept track.' She pulled out her handkerchief and blew her nose. 'Did you arrange this?'

'The doctor did,' said Patsy.

Miss Minchinhampton looked at me. 'However did you know?'

'Aha!' I said, grinning at her. 'You'd be surprised what a doctor can find out if he puts his mind to it.'

'And it really is my 100th?'

'Really,' I said.

Just then the rest of the guests started to arrive. We waited until everyone was present, and Miss Minchinhampton's tiny cottage was filled with people, balloons and food. Everyone had brought presents.

Finally, Patsy took the cake out of the tin in which it had been transported.

Miss Minchinhampton burst into tears again. 'It's my cake!' she managed to blurt out before the tears started.

And it was, I have to admit, a dead ringer for the cake Miss Minchinhampton had described to me: the strawberry jam so thickly spread that it was oozing out of the side of the cake, the icing covered with a very generous quantity of hundreds and thousands.

Miss Minchinhampton lit one of her cigars. On her instructions, Patchy opened the brandy and served out generous portions, albeit in plastic glasses. Sandwiches were nibbled, trifle was much enjoyed and finally the cake was cut and slices were distributed.

'Happy Birthday' was sung with much gusto by the assembled choir.

We all stayed for a couple of hours, until it was clear that Miss Minchinhampton was tiring. I then had a quiet word with the other guests and they tactfully withdrew. Patsy collected together all the used plates, glasses and cutlery and put them into a rubbish bag. It took only a few minutes to clear away the debris.

'It was my first ever birthday party,' said Miss Minchinhampton. She was crying and smiling. I don't think I have ever seen more pure, unalloyed happiness than there was in her eyes. 'How did you know about the cake?' she asked me.

'You mentioned something about it,' I told her.

'Did I?'

I nodded.

'It was my cake,' said Miss Minchinhampton. She looked at the remains of the cake. There wasn't much left. 'Definitely my cake.'

'I hope it tasted as good as you'd imagined it would,' said Patsy.

'Oh, better,' said Miss Minchinhampton. There was the beginning of a new tear in one eye. 'Much better.'

'Not too decadent, was it?' I said.

She shook her head, looked up at me and smiled. 'No,' she said softly. 'It wasn't decadent at all.' She brushed the tear away with the back of her index finger. Another replaced it.

It was only seven o'clock in the evening but she was tired so we helped her up to bed. Patsy helped her undress and together we helped her into bed.

'I've had the best day of my life,' said Miss Minchinhampton quietly. She closed her eyes and nodded, as though agreeing with herself. 'I had to wait 100 years for it. But I want you both to know that it was the very best day of my life.' She held each of us by the hand, in turn, and smiled at us. I had known her for years but I had never seen her that way.

'I can die happy, now,' she said.

'But not yet,' I told her sternly.

She opened her eyes, looked at me and smiled. 'No, perhaps not quite yet,' she agreed.

Patsy and I stayed with her until she went to sleep.

And then we crept off downstairs, put the remains of the cake, complete with its hundreds and thousands, back into the old biscuit tin in which it had come, fastened the lid tightly and put the tin in Miss Minchinhampton's larder.

I picked up the rubbish bag which contained the debris from the party and Patsy and I went home.

It had been a good day in Bilbury.

A very good Bilbury day.

Cyril's Petard

Thumper Robinson, Patchy Fogg and I were sitting in the snug at the Duck and Puddle. It was one of those cold winter days that are a speciality of North Devon. Outside, a stern south-westerly wind was troubling the trees and doing nature's pruning; scattering dead branches and twigs far and wide.

Three workmen in yellow high visibility vests had, for reasons that were never entirely clear, dug a hole in the road and, having done this, they were now doing something that required flasks of tea and much standing around and chatting. They were warming their hands on their mugs of tea and probably deciding what to do with the hole.

An old man in a grubby mackintosh, who certainly wasn't local and whom I had never seen before, was standing nearby. He was watching them drink their tea and admiring the hole. I don't know where he had come from but I have noticed on many occasions that whenever workmen dig a hole there will always be a spectator or two available.

'I saw Cyril this morning,' said Thumper, sipping at his pint of Old Restoration; an unusually strong local brew which is reputed to have the alcoholic content more like that of a spirit than that of a beer. 'I tried to pretend I hadn't seen him but he collared me before I could get the truck started.'

Patchy and I immediately groaned in sympathy.

Cyril's full name is Cyril Rodney Arthur Player and he is our local pessimist. He has an unnatural ability to see the gloomy side of everything. And he delights in sharing his gloom. Frank, the landlord of the Duck and Puddle, went to school with him and reckons that Cyril never recovered from having parents who thought they were doing him a favour by giving him three Christian names but who did not realise that at the local school, it was common for pupils to be known by their initials. Going through your school years known to pupils and teachers as C.R.A.P. must have had an impact on a developing boy. I knew a boy called Samuel Andrew Dennis and to be S.A.D. was bad enough. To have been known as C.R.A.P. must have been torment.

'He asked me if I was worried that Mrs Kendall's cottage might attract squatters,' said Thumper.

'Is it still empty?' I asked. Mrs Kendall had died two months earlier. Her cottage was cold, dark and damp.

'I don't think even squatters would want to live in it,' said Thumper. 'There were rats living there for a while but they left. Probably too cold and dirty for them.'

'Why would squatters settle in Bilbury?' asked Patchy. 'Don't squatters want to live in places where there are clubs, bars, pubs and drug dealers?'

'It was just Cyril being Cyril,' said Thumper, dismissively.

Cyril is, without a doubt, the gloomiest person I know or have ever met. He is unremittingly pessimistic. He has an unerring capacity for finding the blackest cloud in any sky and a quiet determination to share the knowledge with the person most likely to be depressed by it. Mrs Kendall's former cottage stands no more than a quarter of a mile from the home which Thumper shares with Anne and their children.

Patchy, who was drinking a double Sheep Dip, sighed and shook his head. 'Someone should put Cyril on a spit and cook him over a slow fire,' he said, rather bitterly.

Patchy has never forgiven Cyril for asking him if he knew that the wall alongside his property was 'about to fail'.

Cyril claimed that he had noticed that the stone wall, which was something over six feet high, had a worrying looking bulge in its middle. 'Would you be able to live with yourself if it fell on a woman with a pram?' he had asked, before drawing a vivid word picture of the awful consequences.

Patchy, who had never noticed anything amiss with his wall, had been so worried by Cyril's foreboding that he had commissioned a surveyor to prepare a report on the wall's safety. The surveyor, who had confirmed that the wall was perfectly safe for another century or so, had presented Patchy with a bill for £60.

I should, at this point, perhaps remind readers that Sheep Dip is the name of a blended whisky made from 16 separate types of malt whisky. It is much favoured in Devon where farmers buy the stuff by the crate and then put it down in their accounts as an expense. They are helped in this slightly crooked endeavour by the fact that one of the large wholesalers, which specialises in selling animal feed, fertiliser and genuine sheep dip, also has this particular brand of whisky in stock. The result is that their customers can order twelve bags of sheep pellets, nine bags of fertiliser and two crates of Sheep Dip without anyone being any the wiser. As far as I know, the taxman has not yet worked out that the stuff the farmers are buying never gets close to a sheep's foot.

I don't think there is anyone in the village who doesn't suddenly discover an urgent appointment somewhere else if they see Cyril coming.

Mr Kennet, my father-in-law, was once asked by Cyril if he worried about his spring water drying up. Since the spring which supplied Mr Kennet's farm was also the main source of water for his livestock, this thought was a source of considerable distress for some weeks. In the end, Mr Kennet forked out several thousand pounds to have a dowser find a supplementary water source and for a drilling engineer to fit a water pump and an underground tank. What particularly upset him was the fact that he knew that the spring had never dried up in over a hundred years. And yet when Cyril had put the pessimistic thought into his head, it had kept him awake for a week.

Cyril had got under my skin on three occasions.

He once spent half an hour warning me about the stream which travels through our land. He pointed out that if the stream flooded it would almost certainly affect the cellars and ground floor at Bilbury Grange.

On another occasion, he took considerable delight in warning me that if the massive and wonderful copper beech which stands a few yards from our dining room window were ever to decide to prefer lying down to standing up then the trunk and upper branches would doubtless destroy that part of our house. That's the trouble with Cyril: his warnings always appear to be well-intentioned and based on logic.

The third occasion concerned the Rolls Royce which I had inherited from Dr Brownlow, my predecessor, and which was my mechanical pride and joy. 'Those old cars look very good,' he said, 'but you can't possibly think it's a suitable motor vehicle for a country general practitioner with a large rural practice. Old cars are far more likely to break down than modern ones and when they do break down, the chances are that the garage will have a hell of a job finding spare parts.'

As usual, the thing that really annoyed me was the fact that he was absolutely correct in everything he said. I didn't need anyone to say it.

Thinking about Cyril is always depressing so we ordered another round of drinks. Another pint of Old Restoration for Thumper, another double dose of Sheep Dip for Patchy and another small glass of 25-year-old Bunnahabhain for me. Bunnahabhain is a golden coloured malt whisky which I could ill afford to drink but could not afford to miss. Bunnahabhain is, I believe, the sweetest of all Scotch whiskies; smelling and tasting, as it does, of caramel, treacle toffee and Christmas. Patsy introduced it to me when she bought me a bottle one year as a Yuletide present.

'So how did you get rid of Cyril?' asked Patchy, when Frank had brought the drinks to our table and, after obtaining Gilly's permission, poured himself a small port. Gilly, who is Frank's wife, controls every aspect of the landlord's diet, for a little while ago he had a stroke which very nearly killed him. She has, without a doubt, saved his life and him from himself.

Thumper grinned. 'Got him hoisted high on his own petard!' he replied.

Patchy and I looked at him.

'I told him that you'd been to see a lawyer about that nonsense he said about your wall,' said Thumper. 'I said the lawyer told you that he thought you'd have a good case against him for wilful and deceitful misdirection.'

Patchy and I both frowned.

'What the devil is 'wilful and deceitful misdirection'?' I asked. I was still recovering from the fact that Thumper had known, and used, the word 'petard'.

'Buggered if I know,' replied Thumper with a shrug. 'I made it up; on the spur of the movement.' He grinned at us. 'It sounds good though doesn't it?'

We both agreed that it sounded very convincing.

'I told him the lawyer had said that you could sue him for damages and that unless you were in a very magnanimous mood he would probably be served with a summons any day now,' completed Thumper with a big smile.

'What did Cyril say?'

'He asked how much I thought you would be asking for.'

'What did you say?'

'I said I thought you would be demanding £5,000 plus costs.'

'£5,000!' exclaimed Patchy. 'Did he believe you?'

'He certainly did,' said Thumper. 'He went pale and scurried off home, muttering something about putting everything he owned into his wife's name.'

I suppose I should have felt sorry for Cyril, but I didn't. For years now, he has spread worry and stress and caused many people in the village to have sleepless nights. He has also caused many villagers to incur unnecessary expense. And I know of three very splendid and perfectly healthy trees which were taken down because the owners were worried that they might fall and crush their homes. Maybe Cyril would now be a little less anxious to cause unwarranted anxiety.

We all sipped at our drinks in silence for a while.

'You don't suppose there's anything in this 'wilful and deceitful misdirection' thing, do you?' Patchy asked me. 'I wouldn't expect £5,000, and I don't suppose Cyril has got that much anyway, but £1,000 would be fair, wouldn't it?'

I looked at him, to see if he was being serious. He was.

'Thumper made it up,' I reminded him quietly.

'Ah, yes,' said Patchy. He looked rather downcast. 'That would make a difference, I suppose.'

I ordered him another large Sheep Dip as consolation for the disappointment.

But Patchy is an antiques dealer. He never stays disappointed for long. He knows there is always the chance of another bargain discovery behind a worm-ridden wardrobe.

And since I couldn't order Patchy a drink without ordering one for Thumper, I asked Frank to bring another pint of Old Restoration.

'Another glass of Christmas for yourself, doc?' asked Frank who agrees with me that the Bunnahabhain smells of yuletide.

'Oh, I think so,' I said. 'It looks cold outside.'

'Do you think I ought to have another small port?' asked Frank.

I told him he had to ask Gilly.

He hurried away to consult the management.

While we waited for our drinks, I looked out of the window.

Outside it was still windy and the sky was overcast. The three men in high visibility jackets were still contemplating their hole. The man in the grubby mackintosh had been joined by two other spectators. I didn't recognise either of them. They weren't locals. I wondered where they had come from and how they had known there was a hole waiting for them to look into.

Life is full of mysteries.

But sometimes I think it's best to leave them for someone else to worry about.

On Their Holidays

Doctors who work in towns which deliberately make an effort to cater for holidaymakers and tourists have reported that their workload can double in the summer months.

During the winter, when the hotels and boarding houses are closed or nearly empty, doctors in a tourist area will find themselves living fairly leisurely lives. They have only to look after a relatively small population of locals. Hotels will be closed or near deserted and many owners of boarding houses will have closed their doors and their shutters and fled to Spain for a winter of rest and sunshine.

People who have holiday homes in the area will have gone back to their main homes, leaving their cottages, bungalows, chalets and caravans closed and shuttered for the winter. Seaside resorts can be empty, lonely and damp in the months from November to March.

But in the summer months, when the hotels are packed and the local caravan and camping sites have opened their gates, the very same doctors will work long days and nights providing medical services for patients whom they have never seen before, and whom the National Health Service officially describes as ‘temporary residents’.

Most of the problems these patients bring with them are fairly easily treated. Sunburn, summer colds, cuts and bruises, insect stings, food poisoning and sexually transmitted infections are top of the list of ailments at any holiday resort.

In Britain, doctors who treat patients who are temporary residents can fill in a form and claim a fee for their work, and in areas of the country where holidaymakers are commoner than wasps at a picnic these sums can add up to a considerable part of the doctors’ income.

Bilbury is close to some of England’s most popular tourist areas, and it has many attractions of its own, of course.

But the village is not easy to find and apart from the village pub, the Duck and Puddle, there is no accommodation available for holidaymakers. No attempt is made to attract visitors to the village and Peter Marshall, who runs the village shop, admits that he sells no more than a few dozen postcards every year. He does a little bit of business selling soft drinks, biscuits and fruit to walkers, cyclists and motorists who have got lost, but he would never claim that selling to holiday makers makes a serious contribution to his bottom line.

Bilbury has had its moments, of course, and it has, without doubt or enthusiasm, toyed with tourism from time to time.

There was, for example, a period, now pushed to the backs of most minds, when the village was overrun with people responding to an article in which a writer had described Bilbury as Britain’s healthiest village – and the ‘perfect place to live’. For a while, the lanes had been clogged with visitors keen to see for themselves what made Bilbury so special.

And, more recently and perhaps most notably, there had been the ill-fated and never-to-be-repeated Festival which was held in a couple of fields and which drew huge crowds to Bilbury. I don’t think it is an exaggeration to say that when the Festival’s organiser decided that the event had been a commercial failure, and would not be repeated, there were celebrations in just about every house and cottage in the area.

But, on the whole, Bilbury is too far off the beaten track to see many strangers wandering through. We always welcome tourists who do come, for we are proud of Bilbury, but we don’t promote ourselves in the way that some seaside resorts are prone to do.

As a result, it is a fact that some weeks I would see no tourists at all in my surgery.

But during the month of August, one year I saw four holidaymakers in as many days.

And the strange, and memorable, thing was that three of them had serious health problems. None of the three was simply a case of providing a simple treatment for a summer cold, blistered feet or a bout of hay fever.

Two of these case histories confirmed my theory that it is often so much easier for a doctor who has never seen a patient before to make a diagnosis than it is for a doctor who sees a patient regularly to make the same diagnosis.

The first patient, Mrs Danielle Studl, had come to the surgery complaining simply that she felt ill and inexplicably under the weather. She told me that she was in her early 30s but she looked ten years older. She was lined and seemed worn out. She wore a print summer frock that hung on her so loosely that it looked as if it were on a clothes hanger.

She had, she admitted, been poorly for some months but her symptoms had become worse since she’d arrived in North Devon a few days earlier. She and her family, one husband and three young children, had been staying in a caravan at a holiday park near to Combe Martin.

‘Has the heat made things worse?’ was my first question. The weather in Bilbury had been exceptionally warm for a week or more.

Mrs Studl admitted that it had. ‘I can’t stand this hot weather,’ she told me. ‘I feel bad about it but I keep hoping it will rain. The children are having a lovely time in the sunshine but it just seems to make me feel ill. I feel tired and weak and I’m constantly sweating.’

‘Has your weight changed recently?’ I asked her.

‘It has,’ she agreed. ‘I’ve lost nearly a stone in the last six months.’

‘Have you been trying to lose weight? Have you been dieting? On a slimming diet?’

‘Oh no! I know you probably don’t hear this often but I’d like to be a little heavier. My husband is always telling me I need to put on a bit of weight.’ She subconsciously touched her chest.

‘What’s your appetite like?’ I asked her.

Losing weight without trying is always a symptom that needs to be taken seriously. But some causes are more serious than others. And I was already beginning to feel that I knew what was wrong with Mrs Studl.

‘I eat like a horse,’ admitted Mrs Studl. ‘I’m always hungry. And I eat more than my husband.’

‘But despite this you’re losing weight?’

She nodded.

‘How do you sleep?’

‘Badly! It takes me ages to get to sleep. And I wake up a lot. Do you think it’s the sleeplessness that is making me tired?’

‘It isn’t helping,’ I told her. ‘Do you get palpitations?’

‘Sometimes, I do, yes.’

‘How are your bowels?’

‘I have to go more often than used to be the case. I’ve had diarrhoea for a few days now. That comes and goes.’ She leant forward in the chair and lowered her voice. ‘Is it cancer, doctor? My neighbour’s sister lost a lot of weight and she had bowel troubles. She had cancer. She was dead in six months.’

‘No,’ I told her firmly. ‘I don’t think you’ve got cancer.’ I was now even more certain that I knew what was wrong with her.

‘Hold out your hand, please,’ I told her.

‘Which one?’

‘Either.’

She held out her right hand.

‘Keep it as steady as you can.’

There was a clearly visible tremor in her fingers.

‘I can’t help it, doctor,’ she said, almost apologetically. ‘I just can’t stop the trembling.’

I asked her to climb up onto my examination couch.

Two minutes later I was certain of the diagnosis.

Mrs Studl had very moist, warm skin and she had a fast pulse. Her heart was beating irregularly and she had a very wide pulse pressure – in other words, there was a massive difference between her systolic and diastolic blood pressure readings. I examined her neck but could find no abnormality.

‘Are you sure it isn’t cancer?’ she asked, when she was sitting back in the chair on the other side of my desk.

‘I’m pretty certain that you have a condition called thyrotoxicosis,’ I told her. ‘It’s also known as hyperthyroidism. It isn’t cancer.’

Mrs Studl looked puzzled. ‘I thought people with that had swollen necks. My mother had a friend with thyroid trouble. She had a very swollen neck.’

‘Sometimes patients have a goitre – a swelling in the neck,’ I agreed. ‘But not always.’

‘And you think that’s what is wrong with me?’

I nodded. ‘I do. And the good news is that it can be treated.’

Mrs Studl started to cry.

I handed her the box of paper tissues which I always keep on my desk.

‘I thought it was cancer,’ she said quietly, when she’d wiped her eyes and blown her nose.

‘No,’ I said.

‘What’s the treatment? Do I need surgery? An operation?’

‘Your doctor will need to give you some tablets,’ I told her. ‘He’ll want to organise some tests and may send you along to the hospital to see a specialist. But the treatment will be medicine.’

I asked her how long she and her family were staying in Combe Martin.

‘We go back on Saturday,’ she said.

‘Then there isn’t much point in my organising tests here,’ I told her. ‘The results won’t be back before you’re on your way home. What is your doctor’s name?’

She told me.

I picked up a piece of my notepaper and wrote a letter to her doctor. When I'd finished, I put the letter into an envelope and handed it to her.

'I've left the envelope unsealed for now,' I told her. 'So, you can read the letter and show it to your husband. Once you've both read what I've written put it back into the envelope and seal it. Then, as soon as you get back home, go and see your doctor and give him the letter.'

Mrs Studl took the letter, put it into her handbag and smiled. 'It's funny, isn't it? I feel much better than I did when I came in. And you haven't really done anything, have you?'

'It's thyrotoxicosis,' I told her again. 'Thyroid trouble. Not cancer.'

She smiled, nodded and left.

Thyrotoxicosis, caused by an overactive thyroid gland, is one of the easiest diagnoses for a doctor to make because the signs and symptoms tend to be so clear.

But, funnily enough, the opposite condition, one caused by an underactive thyroid gland, is also an easy diagnosis to make – especially if you have never seen the patient before and have not slowly got used to the patient's appearance.

Mrs Ethel Pelham came to the evening surgery the day after I'd seen Mrs Studl and I knew the minute she walked through the door, spoke to me and sat down exactly what was wrong with her. At least, I was pretty sure that I knew.

Mrs Pelham was in her early 60s. She moved slowly and was noticeably overweight. She had no expression on her face. It's a look you sometimes see with Parkinson's Disease but also with one other condition.

She did not, however, come to the surgery complaining of the problem I had so quickly diagnosed.

'I've got something in my eye,' she told me. 'It's been driving me mad but I couldn't see it to get it out and my husband is useless with medical things.'

It took me less than a minute to remove the very small fly from her eye. Her conjunctiva was red because she had rubbed it so much. I told her to blink a few times. While I extricated the fly, my hand touched her hair and that small contact confirmed my diagnosis.

'Oh, that's wonderful!' she said when I had taken out the fly. 'Such a relief.' Her voice was hoarse and her speech slow. She sounded like an old man who has smoked 60 a day for half a century.

'Another happy customer!' I said.

'Definitely, doctor.' She thanked me and started to get out of the chair.

'Before you go,' I said, 'do you mind if I ask you if you are being treated for anything by your doctor?'

She looked puzzled. 'No, doctor. I haven't seen my doctor for years.'

'Do you smoke?'

'Oh, no.'

'Have you been putting on weight in the last year or so?'

'I eat too much,' she said, defensively. 'Do you think I need to diet?' She seemed a trifle offended. I cursed myself for being so clumsy.

'I apologise,' I said. 'I asked you that for a reason. Do you get numbness and tingling in your hands or feet?'

'My hands, yes, I do. I get tingling in my hands.'

'Have you noticed that your skin is very dry?'

Now Mrs Pelham was looking puzzled. 'Yes, I have. How did you know that?'

'And have you noticed that your hair is very dry?'

'Yes. It's also getting thin and coarse.'

I nodded.

'You knew?'

I nodded. 'Do you suffer with constipation?'

'I do. You don't do magic tricks as well, do you? How did you know all this about me?'

'You dislike the cold weather more than ever?'

'Oh, I do. I can't stand the cold weather. Last winter my husband went mad because I had to have the heating on quite high all the time.' She looked at me and raised an eyebrow. 'You've spotted something, haven't you?'

'I think you have a bit of a problem with your thyroid gland,' I told her. 'It isn't working properly.'

'How on earth do you know that without doing any tests?'

'The things I've asked you about are classically signs and symptoms of an underactive thyroid gland,' I told her. 'The condition is called myxoedema or hypothyroidism and it can usually be treated fairly easily with some thyroid tablets.'

'You mean that if I take some tablets, my skin and hair will feel better?'

'Yes.'

‘And that tingling, funny feeling in my wrists will go?’

‘Yes.’

‘And I won’t need the heating so high in the winter?’

‘Yes.’

‘My husband is going to be very pleased.’

‘Good.’

‘And I’m going to be very, very pleased. When do I start taking these magic tablets?’

‘When do you go home?’

‘Tomorrow.’

‘Then you need to go and see your own GP.’ I reached for the notepaper again. ‘I’ll give you a letter to take to him. He’ll want to do some tests. And then he’ll prescribe some tablets.’

I wrote out the letter, put it into an unsealed envelope and handed it to Mrs Pelham. I told her she could read the letter and show it to her husband but that she should then seal the envelope and hand it to her doctor when she got back home.

‘I’m glad that fly got into my eye,’ she said, as she left.

The third call came two days and it was from a couple who were staying in a caravan site near Mortehoe.

I’m not sure why they called me because there were several doctors practising in the immediate locality. Maybe they just found my name in the local telephone directory and picked me out at random.

When I eventually found their caravan (not an easy task since there were several hundred identical caravans in a single very large field) I knocked on the door and found the couple were struggling to feed their baby.

They looked to be in their early 20s. Their name was Roberts.

He was called Peter. He was rather overweight and pasty looking and wore khaki, knee length shorts, a white T-shirt and one of those multi-pocketed gillets which are popular with photographers and fishermen. I couldn’t see any cameras but there was a collection of fishing equipment stored in a corner of the caravan.

She was called Mary and she too was on the generous side of rather plump. She wore a pair of white shorts and a flowered bikini top which was rather overfaced. A large roll of fat hung over the front of her shorts.

The caravan, which seemed quite large, was crowded with the three of us and the baby inside. Part of the problem was the fact that every flat surface, including the seats, had things stored on them. There were piles of clothes everywhere. There were so many clothes on display that the caravan looked like the site of a jumble sale. I couldn’t make my mind up whether taking a small baby away on a caravan holiday was brave or foolhardy, courageous or reckless.

‘She keeps being sick,’ said the young mother, who looked worried half to death. The baby was lying in a huge pram. The pram was so large that it took up much of the available space. I have no idea how they got it into the caravan. There were several used and greasy fish and chip wrappers around the place. Every last chip and piece of fish had gone. Even the little crunchy bits of batter had all been Hoovered up. All that remained were the fat stains on the paper, a couple of fish bones and a nauseating smell. There was also a rather unpleasant smell of baby vomit in the air. I looked around. All the windows were firmly shut.

‘You need to give her some medicine to stop the sickness,’ said the young father. He looked to me to be a rather aggressive, demanding sort of fellow.

‘When did the vomiting start?’ I asked.

‘Two days after we got here,’ replied the mother.

‘And when did you get here?’

‘Four days ago,’ answered the father who sounded very fed up. ‘The whole holiday has been pretty much ruined.’

‘How old is the baby?’

‘Six weeks,’ said the mother.

‘What’s her name?’ I asked.

‘Tabitha.’

‘That’s a lovely name,’ I said.

‘I liked that television programme with the character called Tabitha.’

I must have looked rather blank.

‘Bewitched.’

‘Is that the name of the programme?’

‘Didn’t you ever see it?’

‘I’m afraid not.’ I was surprised that a couple had named their child after a character on a television programme. It wasn’t something which I had come across before.

‘Crumbs,’ said the mother, pulling a disapproving face. I got the impression that my status and credibility had disappeared through the caravan floor.

‘She needs some medicine to stop her being sick,’ said the young father. He did not seem to me to be a man whom fatherhood became.

‘Can I see her being fed?’ I asked.

‘She’ll just be sick,’ said the young father. ‘It’s a waste of milk.’

‘I’ll get the bottle,’ said the young mother. She fetched a feeding bottle that was sitting in a saucepan of what I assumed was warm water and offered the teat of the bottle to the baby.

‘You’re not breastfeeding?’ I said.

‘Oh no,’ said the young mother. ‘Breastfeeding ruins a woman’s figure.’ The baby was now feeding with great enthusiasm. She looked well.

It seemed to me that fish and chips had already done a certain amount of damage to the woman’s figure. Breastfeeding would not have caused any more damage.

‘But breast milk is very good for babies, you know,’ I said, not wanting to miss the opportunity for a little education.

‘She’s going to be sick now!’ said the young husband. He sounded pleased in an ‘I told you this would happen’ sort of way.

And sure enough the baby was sick.

But this was no ordinary sickness.

The baby’s vomit flew across the caravan with force, just missing me. The husband had craftily moved out of range.

‘Ah,’ I said, for now I was pretty sure that I knew what was wrong. ‘Just undress the baby for me, please.’

The mother undressed the baby.

‘And now feed her again.’

‘She’ll just be sick again,’ moaned the husband. `That’ll mean more mess and more wasted milk. Can’t you just give her something to stop the sickness?’

I ignored the husband and watched the baby’s abdomen as she fed.

I could see a wave of peristalsis moving across the abdomen from left to right. I felt the baby’s tummy and could feel a mass on the right side. It was the size of an olive. Now I definitely knew what was wrong.

‘We’re going to have to take Tabitha into the hospital,’ I told the parents. ‘She has a condition called pyloric stenosis. It is quite common and it can be cured.’

‘What is it?’ demanded the mother, who seemed genuinely concerned, though to say that she was worried might have been something of an exaggeration.

‘Bang goes our holiday,’ mumbled the father, with a sigh. He did not seem in the slightest bit concerned.

‘The opening between the stomach and the bowel has become narrowed and so, as a result, food can’t get through,’ I explained. ‘If she isn’t treated, Tabitha will become dehydrated and not gain any weight. For some unknown reason, this condition usually affects boys but it can affect girls too.’

‘How will they cure her?’ asked the mother.

‘A small operation,’ I told her. ‘It only takes about half an hour to do.’

‘And then she’ll be well again?’

‘Yes.’

‘Isn’t there any medicine you can give her?’ asked the father, who had clearly not been listening to anything I’d said.

‘I’m afraid not,’ I said. ‘Do you have a car you could use to take Tabitha to the hospital?’

‘Can’t you ring for an ambulance?’ asked the father. ‘Aren’t we entitled to an ambulance?’

‘I could ring for an ambulance,’ I said. ‘Do you know where there’s a telephone I could use?’

‘There’s one at the shop on the campsite,’ said the young mother. ‘A red phone box. But it doesn’t work. It’s been vandalised.’

‘In that case I’ll have to go back to my surgery and telephone from there,’ I told them. ‘Are you sure you don’t want to take Tabitha to the hospital yourselves? I’ll give you a letter to take with you and telephone them to let them know you’re coming.’

‘We’re entitled to an ambulance,’ said the young father.

‘I’ll send an ambulance,’ I told them. ‘Please look out for it so that you can meet them when they arrive. It took me nearly half an hour to find you.’

I then drove back to Bilbury Grange and telephoned the local hospital.

I never heard from the parents again but a couple of weeks later when I spoke to one of the paediatricians at the hospital. He told me that baby Tabitha had been treated quite successfully.

‘I remember them,’ said the paediatrician. ‘The father was forever demanding things and going on about his rights. I thought he was a rather unpleasant fellow. I remember he wanted us to pay for his petrol when he came to the hospital to visit the baby.’

Finally, that week I saw a honeymoon couple who had come to North Devon on a camping holiday. Back in the 1970s, not every young couple went to the Maldives or the Caribbean on their honeymoon. Most were prepared to rough it, enjoy each other’s company, and save a little extra money towards the deposit on a home.

These were the fourth (and fifth) patients I saw who weren’t resident in the village. But, unlike the others, their problem was simple rather than serious.

They had spent a whole day sunbathing in the field where they’d camped. The new wife told me, with a delightful blush, that they had slept very little the previous night. The result was that they had both fallen asleep in the sunshine and they had, rather inevitably, ended up with unpleasant burns on their backs. Their skin was so tender that they couldn’t bear to touch it or to have it touched.

They didn’t need to go to hospital and they didn’t need to have anything more complicated than some soothing lotion in the way of treatment.

But, sadly, I had to point out the obvious: that they would both have to lie on their fronts for a few days while their skin recovered.

‘You mean you can’t do anything to speed things up?’ asked the new husband. ‘You can’t give us something to take away the soreness?’ He sounded appalled and indignant at the same time.

‘I’m afraid not,’ I said, sympathetically but not very helpfully.

‘But we’re on our honeymoon!’ complained the new wife who was clearly equally disappointed and, dare I say, frustrated by my inability to offer a speedier solution to their problem.

It would, I thought, be a honeymoon they would remember with rueful smiles and a little embarrassed laughter in future years.

But for the moment there were no smiles and definitely no laughter.

And not a lot of ‘how’s your father’ or ‘rumpy pumpy’ either.

Shop Talk

‘I think I might need a stitch in this, doctor,’ said Archer Woodnutt, limping into the surgery.

He sat down, pulled up his right trouser leg and displayed a knee that was covered with a blood stained bandage.

‘What on earth have you done to yourself?’ I asked, when I’d unwound the bandage and revealed the damaged joint. There was a nasty looking, ragged cut in the skin over the upper end of his tibia, an inch or so below the bottom edge of his patella. I was relieved to see that the damaged area looked clean, and there were no signs of any infection.

‘It’s a bit embarrassing, to be honest,’ said Mr Woodnutt. ‘I was scrabbling around on the floor in the village shop when I caught my knee on a nail.’

I told him to climb up onto my examination couch. I then put on a pair of rubber gloves. Once he was comfortably settled on the couch I started to clean the wound, wiping away the dried blood. The two sides of the wound were a quarter of an inch apart and as I cleaned away the debris, the bleeding started again. There was clearly a need for a little sewing to be done. ‘You’ll need four or five stitches in that,’ I told him.

‘That many!’ said Mr Woodnutt, clearly surprised. He looked down at his knee, examining it as though he were an expert in such matters. ‘I thought one stitch would do it.’

‘If I put in several stitches and keep them small and fairly tight then you shouldn’t have too much of a scar,’ I explained.

I filled a syringe with a local anaesthetic and injected a little around the wound. In my experience it is the biggest, strongest and youngest male adults who yelp the loudest if stitching is done without an anaesthetic.

‘Oh, I’m not bothered about a scar,’ said Mr Woodnutt. ‘In fact, a nice scar is always a good talking point in bed.’

Mr Woodnutt is a 30 something bachelor with what Mrs Kennet, my mother-in-law, would describe an ‘active social life’. He works as a freelance photographer, specialising in taking pictures of North Devon. His work regularly appears in most of the local Devon newspapers and magazines and occasionally in national publications. His photographs have also been used to illustrate the jackets of several books about the Devon countryside. Two of my books about my life in Bilbury have his photographs of the village adorning the dust jacket on the hard cover editions.

(Mr Woodnutt was not a little put out when it was drawn to his attention that a photograph on the cover of one of the earliest books had been taken by my good friend Thumper Robinson. Thumper takes what he usually calls ‘snaps’ and uses a camera which probably costs considerably less than the bag which Mr Woodnutt uses to carry his collection of expensive and impressive equipment. It was, I suspect, for this reason that we had never become friends. I arranged for Thumper’s photograph to be used simply because I liked it.)

An endlessly optimistic man, Mr Woodnutt used to play football for the village football team.

(This was not a particularly praiseworthy achievement since the village usually had difficulty in finding eleven men under the age of 90 who could be described as ‘fit’ and who were prepared to wear shorts and run around in a muddy field for 90 minutes.)

I remember the occasion when, to his and everyone else’s surprise, Mr Woodnutt scored a goal. It was his first goal in a dozen matches and only the second time the team had scored a goal in the whole season.

During the celebrations in the Duck and Puddle that evening, Mr Woodnutt, who had spent several hours describing his achievement in ever-growing detail, was overheard telling a comely companion that he had only needed two more goals for a hat trick.

‘I never know what to talk about after doing it,’ said Mr Woodnutt, whose life seemed to revolve around his adventures in the bedroom. ‘I reckon that even a scruffy little scar should be worth five or ten minutes of idle chit-chat. How did you get that? Did it hurt? Were you very brave? That sort of thing. I’ll have to work up a nice little story about being injured while taking pictures in a war zone somewhere.’

‘There’ll be a scar,’ I promised him. ‘But it will be as neat as I can make it.’

When stitches are placed very close to one another, there is a better chance of the two edges of a wound coming together smoothly and considerably less chance of a large scar developing.

‘You didn’t have to bother with any anaesthetic,’ said Mr Woodnutt, who had carefully, and probably wisely, waited until I had finished giving the injections before announcing that he didn’t need them.

‘What on earth were you doing scrabbling around on Peter Marshall’s floor?’ I asked as I threaded a needle with a length of black silk.

‘Peter has reorganised his shop and put all the cheapest products on the bottom shelves,’ explained Mr Woodnutt. He shrugged. ‘The stuff on the eye level shelves is much the same but it costs more.’

'Oh dear,' I sighed. It seemed that this was yet another building block in the legend that is Bilbury's solitary retailer; another contribution to the Peter Marshall story.

It has been said that the average shopper knows the prices of only a very small number of grocery items – milk, bread and eggs for example.

This may be true in big towns and cities but it isn't true of Bilbury. Most of the village's inhabitants don't have much money and they tend to be careful and more knowledgeable. There is a constant battle between Peter, on the one side, who is forever trying to keep his prices high to maximise his profits, and the rest of the villagers, who are forever looking for lower priced items so as to reduce their bills.

Everyone, including Peter, knows that if the prices in the local shop rise too high then villagers will decide that it is worthwhile making the long and expensive trip into Barnstaple to do their shopping.

However, I confess that I never fail to be surprised by Peter Marshall's skills at finding new ways to part his customers from their money without actually losing their custom to the supermarkets in Barnstaple.

For as long as I can remember he has kept all the necessities, items such as bread and milk, right at the back of his shop so that customers who want basic comestibles must walk through the entire shop and resist the temptation to purchase a can of quail's eggs, a new mousetrap or a brand new hand crafted rolling pin.

There are some in the village who believe that Peter acquired his ideas about retailing by studying the successful American supermarkets but there are also some who believe, rather whimsically it has to be admitted, that Peter is the originator and that other retailers around the world have copied his ideas for maximising profits.

Since I once saw Peter studying a copy of an American magazine produced for retailers I am, sadly, a realist in this matter and a believer in the former viewpoint.

'Do you remember that time when Peter read that shops which played music sold more stuff?' I asked Mr Woodnutt.

Mr Woodnutt laughed heartily. 'He only had a wind up gramophone and a recording of that chap who had a hit with the Laughing Policeman,' he remembered. 'Peter spent all his time winding up the gramophone and his customers got so fed up with the laughing policeman that they got out of there as fast as they could – often without bothering to buy the thing they'd gone in for in the first place.'

I put in the first stitch and Mr Woodnutt winced.

'Did that hurt?'

'No, not really hurt,' he admitted. 'But I felt it going in.'

I looked at him.

'Well, just about felt it,' he said. 'It didn't hurt though.' He looked a trifle pale.

'Do you feel faint?' I asked him.

'Just a bit queasy,' he said.

'Then don't look.'

He looked in the direction of the window. The wisteria which grows up around my consulting room window was in full bloom and the lilac flowers looked magnificent. My small lemon tree, which stands on the windowsill had its first fruit and the lemon was nearly ripe. There were also a couple of new flowers visible. They smelt wonderful. It was my first lemon. I had been watching it develop for weeks.

'Is this really a lemon tree?'

'It is.'

'Marvellous. I've never seen one before. Does it produce much fruit?'

'That's its first lemon. It's taken two years to get to this stage and Patsy reckons that one lemon has cost me a fiver in special plant food.'

'Crumbs!' said Mr Woodnutt. 'It smells wonderful doesn't it?'

It was true. The small lemon tree gave the consulting room a wonderful fresh smell, especially when there were flowers on it.

'Do you remember that time when Peter Marshall had a theory that if his shop smelt good then people would feel good and buy more stuff?' asked Mr Woodnutt.

'That idea he definitely picked up from one of those trade magazines he reads!' I agreed. 'But instead of making sure his shop smelt of ground coffee or baking bread he opened a huge bag of a particularly toxic smelling brand of fertiliser and left it just inside the doorway.'

'He'd bought two tons of garden fertiliser,' remembered Mr Woodnutt. 'But the stuff wasn't selling very well because everyone around here knows a farmer with a horse or two and so good manure isn't actually in short supply. Peter thought that if people smelt the stuff they'd want to buy it.'

'But for three days hardly anyone went into the shop to buy anything!'

'Mrs Todmorten stood outside in the rain, refused to enter the shop and handed Peter a list of what she wanted.

She made him bring it all out to her and she wouldn't even go into the shop to pay her bill. She said the shop smelt worse than the public lavatory at the bus station in Barnstaple.'

'Do you remember that time he decided to charge shoppers sixpence in old, proper money to enter the shop. It must have been in around 1965 – well before the currency was decimalised. He said he'd had tourists go into the shop and just look around and that they were wearing out his floor boards without spending any money.'

'Am I right in thinking that the sixpence was refunded if a purchase was made?' asked Mr Woodnutt.

'Absolutely!' I agreed. I tied off the third stitch in a rather neat knot. Mr Woodnutt seemed pleasantly distracted and was no longer even wincing when the needle entered the skin on one side of the gash and left it on the other side.

'I seem to remember that your mother-in-law organised a boycott of the shop in protest,' said Mr Woodnutt.

'She certainly did! We were very proud of her. Peter Marshall stuck his heels in and for a day and a half I don't think he sold anything. Then he relented and withdrew the sixpence charge claiming that it had only been an experiment.'

'And then there was the Christmas when he organised a Lucky Dip,' said Mr Woodnutt. 'Peter filled an old barrel with sawdust, wrapped some holly around the edge of the barrel and buried prizes in the sawdust.'

'I remember that!' I said. 'He charged 50 pence a go but all the prizes were worth far less than 50 pence. I remember pulling a very small can of beans out of the sawdust and being very disappointed. Peter said that he had to charge 50 pence to cover the cost of the sawdust and the barrel and that we should be grateful because we were paying for the experience and the excitement.'

'Then there was the time when he started selling foods in pairs. I remember you could buy a jar of coffee and a bottle of pickled gherkins together.'

'But the price for the two items was never any cheaper than it would have been if you'd bought them separately,' I said. 'Sometimes he rounded up the price and so if you bought his 'special offer' you ended up paying more than if you'd bought the things separately.'

Just thinking of Peter's little tricks always made me smile. Everyone in the village was wise to his money-making scams. And I very much doubt if many tourists were taken in by them.

'I remember pointing out to Peter that there was never any logic to the pairing of items he was selling together. One week he had what he called a 'very special triple offer'. If you bought a packet of custard, a packet of envelopes and a jar of lemon curd you could get the lot for exactly the same price that you'd pay if you'd bought them all separately. I couldn't help wondering how many people went into his shop looking for a packet of custard, a packet of envelopes and a jar of lemon curd. I asked him why he didn't sell tea and milk together as one of his special offers and he replied that if people bought a packet of tea they would probably buy a bottle of milk anyway.'

I knotted the last stitch, put some antibiotic cream onto the wound to prevent any infection developing and then sat back to admire my handiwork. Even if I say so myself, it wasn't a bad bit of suturing. I'd managed to squeeze in six stitches.

'You'll need to come back in a week or ten days,' I told my patient. 'I'll check that it's healing properly and if it is I'll take out the stitches. But come back sooner if the area around the wound goes red or you develop a temperature.'

'Don't the stitches just dissolve and disappear?' asked Mr Woodnutt. 'I read somewhere that they make stitches that just get absorbed into the body.'

'Those suture materials are great for internal suturing, but these stitches are made of silk and have to be removed,' I told him. 'The suture materials that are absorbed can cause more scarring because they tend to cause local inflammation.'

'Silk, eh?' said Mr Woodnutt, impressed. He looked down at his knee for the first time since I'd finished. 'Not bad! You've made a neat job of that, doctor.' He jumped down off the couch and pulled down his trouser leg.

'Careful!' I told him. 'No football, no cycling and nothing too strenuous. I don't want you tearing my nice, neat stitches.'

Mr Woodnutt, repaired and ready again for the world, thanked me again, waved a cheery goodbye and tottered off.

I couldn't help noticing that he was now affecting an even more pronounced, and definitely unnecessary, limp than the one he'd had when he'd arrived in the surgery, and I suspected that by the time he reached the Duck and Puddle that evening his tangle with a nail in a dark corner of Peter Marshall's shop would have become a considerably more substantial confrontation; a dive to escape from a moving car or an encounter with a dangerous dog while attempting to snatch a photograph of some celebrity visiting the bright lights of Ilfracombe.

My next patient, Miss Harriett Wilson was blushing bright red when she entered and I suspected that Archer Woodnutt, who is known in the village and the surrounding area to be an outrageous flirt, had probably said something to her as they had passed; him on the way out and her on the way in to my consulting room. I noticed that she was walking very gingerly as though the very act of putting one leg in front of the other was painful.

I said ‘good morning’, pointed to the now vacant chair and invited her to sit down.

‘I think I’d better stay standing if you don’t mind, doctor,’ said Miss Wilson. She bent her knees slightly and put her shopping bag, an ancient raffia thing down on the floor. The shopping bag seemed quite full of groceries. Though she had put down her shopping basket, Miss Wilson kept hold of her handbag. ‘I’m a little worried that if I sit down I might not be able to get up again.’

Miss Wilson is a skinny little thing in her late forties; she is as pale as a country snow bank, though I know for a fact that she is not anaemic. She always reminds me of a sparrow and she can’t weigh much more than a small bird. Certainly, two of her would have not weighed as much as the average, modestly sized adult.

She used to be a shorthand-typist working for the Inland Revenue but she resigned from her post when her grandfather died and left her a tiny, thatched cottage on the outskirts of Bilbury. She now lives on the income she receives from her savings and the little money which her grandfather left her along with the cottage. It is, I suspect, a rather meagre income which doesn’t leave much room for treats and extravagances.

She once described herself to me as ‘a bit of a virgin’. At the time, I had not found the courage to ask her for a definition of ‘a bit of a virgin’ and it still seemed to me to be a rather improbable, not to say impossible, concept. Still, I am sure she knew what she meant by it.

I could hardly believe my ears when she told me that she had done something to her back while scrabbling around on the floor at the back of Peter Marshall’s shop.

‘He’s put all the lower priced items at floor level, hasn’t he?’ I said with a sigh.

Miss Wilson seemed surprised that I knew about Peter’s latest trick. ‘His prices are always a little on the high side,’ said Miss Wilson, when she had confirmed the information I’d been given by Archer Woodnutt. ‘But the bus fare to Barnstaple is quite expensive and the buses aren’t very regular. So it’s no more expensive to shop at Mr Marshall’s.’ She moved from one foot to the other. ‘My mother, God rest her soul, taught me the value of money.’ She paused, stretched, rubbed her back and fiddled with her watch for a moment. ‘It’s just as well,’ she continued, ‘for I have to watch my pennies.’ I knew that this admission wasn’t easy for her to make. She is a proud woman, always immaculately turned out. Today she was wearing a flowered summer dress, a light blue cardigan with pockets and a straw hat with a yellow ribbon around the brim and two red cherries attached to the ribbon. There was a ladder in the knee of one of her stockings, almost certainly a result of her having had to kneel on Peter Marshall’s rough, wooden floorboards.

I hoped that her scrabbling around on the floor had saved her some money and I decided that when I had finished my morning surgery, I would drive to Peter’s shop and have a stern word with him. I’d had an idea which would, I rather thought, prove effective at forcing him to abandon his latest profit boosting wheeze.

I know that running a village shop isn’t an easy way to make a living (around the country many have closed and there are now thousands of English villages and hamlets which have no village shop at all) but I happen to know that Peter does better than most shopkeepers and from to time he needs to be reined in a little.

It didn’t take long to discover that Miss Wilson hadn’t done anything serious to her back. ‘Go home, take two soluble aspirin tablets every four hours, rest and put a hot water bottle against the part of your back where the pain is at its worst.’

‘What have I done?’ she asked. ‘Is it a slipped disk?’

‘No, no, it’s not a disk. You’ve just strained muscles in your back. They’ll feel sore for a day or two but you’ll soon feel fine.’

‘The best value tinned pears were in a very difficult position,’ said Miss Wilson. ‘I had to stretch to reach a tin.’

‘I’ll have a word with Peter,’ I promised her. I went into my small dispensary, filled a bottle with soluble aspirin tablets and took them out to her. I repeated the instructions I’d given her. ‘How are you going to get home?’ I asked her.

‘I’ll have to walk, doctor,’ said Miss Wilson.

I looked at the single medical records envelope on my desk.

‘No, you won’t,’ I told her. ‘Go back into the waiting room, make yourself as comfortable as possible, and when I’ve finished the surgery I’ll take you home. I’ve only got one more patient to see.’

‘Oh I couldn’t put you to that much trouble!’ protested Miss Wilson.

‘Miss Wilson!’ I said sternly. I gave her my sternest look. It always makes Patsy laugh but some people find it slightly intimidating. ‘If I find that you’ve gone when I come out of the surgery I’ll be very cross.’

‘I’ll wait, doctor!’ said Miss Wilson timidly.

My final patient of the morning was a woman called Hilda Musbury.

Mrs Musbury is a lonely widow who likes to talk.

She is built in the shape of a duck and, through her own brand of queue management, always manages to arrange things so that she is the last patient I see. She is convinced that I enjoy our conversations just as much as she does and she arranges to be the last patient, so she frequently tells me, so that we can both enjoy a good, long chat without being interrupted.

The truth is that I find our little chats about as much fun as root canal surgery but I feel rather sorry for her and usually talk, or more accurately, listen to her for a while. However, on this occasion I really didn't have the time for a chat about the weather and her garden. I have long believed that doctors should listen, rather than just talk, to their patients but sometimes there have to be limits. And this was one of those occasions when I really didn't have time to sit and listen to Mrs Musbury's commentary on the state of her lawn, the vicissitudes endured by her brother in New Zealand (it wasn't difficult to understand what had driven him to emigrate to the other side of the world) and the plots of her favourite television soap operas.

I couldn't sit around because I had promised to take Miss Wilson home, I had several home visits to do and I wanted to call in on Peter Marshall.

'It's lovely to see you, doctor!' said Mrs Musbury, breezing into the surgery as though we were old friends. She wandered over to the windowsill and examined my lemon tree. 'Your lemon is ripe!' she said. And before I could stop her, she had plucked the lemon from the tree. She held it up, as though it were a prize. 'You don't mind do you, doctor?' she said. 'I expect you've had hundreds of lemons from it already. I'd love to take this one home. I love a slice of lemon in my Earl Grey tea.'

I was horrified and very cross.

It was my first ever lemon.

I'd been watching it grow for an inordinate length of time. But what could I say that wouldn't sound mean or churlish? Besides, it was now too late for the lemon had been plucked.

I had been looking forward to making a sort of ceremony out of plucking the lemon. I'd thought that Patsy and I could say a few words, praise the lemon tree and then twist and pluck the lemon jointly.

I muttered something that probably sounded like approval, though to be honest I would have happily throttled Mrs Musbury if I had thought it likely that I'd have been able to get away with it. I sometimes think that the parameters for justifiable homicide ought to be expanded and on this occasion, I definitely felt that the crime of unauthorised lemon plucking ought to be on the allowable list.

'I do enjoy our little chats,' said Mrs Musbury. 'But I sometimes think I need more of a challenge in my life. Something to get my teeth into. Maybe I should learn a language? What do you think? Hindi, perhaps? Or take up the banjo? Or do some mountaineering? Something like that. I could go to the Himalayas. Or join an orchestra of some kind. They call them bands these days don't they?'

I didn't reply. I was struggling to get my head round the idea that there might be some connection between Hindi, banjo plucking and climbing snow clad mountains.

'I bet your Patsy wonders what we get up to in here, chatting away about things,' said Mrs Musbury, settling into the patient's chair and making herself comfortable. She sniffed my lemon and then dropped it into the dark and impenetrable recesses of the massive black leather handbag she took with her everywhere she went.

'I'm afraid I can't stop and chat,' I told her, rather brusquely. 'I've got some urgent things to do this morning.'

'Oh!' said Mrs Musbury, clearly rather annoyed. 'Oh, well, never mind. You go off and do whatever it is that needs doing. I expect you'll be doing something with that Miss Wilson. Taking her home, perhaps? She was in the waiting room looking rather under the weather and just a little sorry for herself. I'll just make myself comfortable here and wait until you get back.'

Mrs Musbury can be a little poisonous occasionally; especially when she feels put out.

'No good I'm afraid,' I said firmly. 'I have no idea when I'll be back.'

I stood up, helped her out of the chair and ushered her towards the door.

'I need a bottle of my special tonic,' she said quickly. 'That tonic you make up just for me.'

The tonic for which she has such affection is not as special as she imagines. It's a mixture which I make up and prescribe for quite a number of neurasthenic patients. It is dark green in appearance, it smells rather toxic and it has a bite that promises effectiveness. I hurried into the dispensary, found a bottle of the stuff and hurried back out with it clutched in my hand.

'Here you are!' I said. 'I thought you'd probably be in today and so I made this up for you earlier.' I hoped that my nose wouldn't grow too long.

Mrs Musbury put the tonic into her bag, alongside my lemon, and after telling me that she'd back for a chat that evening, departed in rather a bad mood.

I read, checked and signed a couple of urgent letters which Miss Johnson had left on my desk and picked up the details of the home visits which had been requested by telephone while I'd been doing the morning surgery. I then gathered the medicines I knew I'd need for the patients I had to see, popped into the kitchen to say goodbye to Patsy who was busy making vegetable pasties and then collected Miss Wilson from the waiting room.

'I've never been in a Rolls Royce before,' said Miss Wilson, climbing rather cautiously into the front passenger seat.

'It is a very old one,' I pointed out.

'Oh yes, but it's beautiful!' said Miss Wilson. She winced as she tried to get herself comfortable. 'It used to belong to Dr Brownlow, didn't it? I remember seeing him driving it when I visited my grandfather as a girl.' She gently ran her fingers over the beautifully matched walnut fascia.

'She's been the official practice car for the best part of half a century!' I said proudly. 'And apart from the old banger I drove when I first came to Bilbury the only official practice car. Before he bought this car, Dr Brownlow used to do his calls by horsepower.'

'Really? He rode a horse?'

'Sometimes. Especially at night and for emergencies. But he also had a trap which he would ride in when doing his routine daily visits.'

We had reached Miss Wilson's cottage. I stopped the Rolls, parked it on a small stretch of neatly trimmed verge and climbed out so that I could help Miss Wilson out of the car and into her cottage.

'Take the aspirin, fill a hot water bottle and move about as much as you can,' I told her when we were inside. 'But move gently.'

'You don't think I should go to bed?'

'Oh, no! You'll stiffen up if you do. Don't sit in one position for too long. And keep moving and bending your back as much as you can without doing anything painful. Nothing has been damaged. Ring me if it doesn't gradually improve.'

I left Miss Wilson in her kitchen boiling a kettle so that she could fill a hot water bottle and make herself a cup of tea. I have great faith in both these remedies. A hot water bottle is the best way of applying heat directly to an area of muscle which is sore. And a cup of tea is, of course, the traditional English way of responding to any sort of crisis.

Neither of the two visits I had to do was particularly urgent.

One request was to visit Enid and Harry Burrows who required fresh supplies of their medications. The other was from Olive Robinson, Thumper's much loved aunt, who simply wanted another bottle of the pills she takes to control her slightly raised blood pressure.

Since the practice had started dispensing medicines, my workload had increased considerably but there was no doubt that as far as the patients were concerned it was a much more convenient way of doing things.

In the old days, I would hand out a prescription and the patient would have to arrange to obtain the prescribed medication from a pharmacy in Barnstaple. Now that I had managed to persuade the authorities to allow me to dispense my own medicines, I could simply hand over the required medicines and the patient could start their treatment straight away. Once a day a van would come from a pharmaceutical wholesaler in Exeter and would bring fresh supplies of basic drugs together with supplies of anything unusual which we need. Patsy had taken on the responsibility of maintaining the records of the drugs we had in stock. She kept two large notebooks. In one she had a list of all the standard medicines, the antibiotics, contraceptive pills, painkillers and heart medication, and in the other she listed unusual or special requirements. I also kept a third, smaller notebook in which I kept a record of the drugs such as morphine which were controlled under the Dangerous Drugs Act. I had to make a note every time I used a drug of this type, detailing the date, the name of the patient, the drug and the quantity prescribed.

When I'd finished the calls, I drove around to Peter Marshall's shop where I found the proprietor sorting through a huge pile of old crossword puzzle books. He was putting some of the books onto one pile and some onto a second pile.

'What on earth are you doing?' I asked him.

He explained that he had bought a huge pile of old crossword puzzle books from a charity shop in Barnstaple. All the books had been filled in, the crosswords completed, and the charity had wanted to get rid of them since they had no perceivable resale value.

'That doesn't answer the question,' I pointed out. 'What are you doing with them?'

'I'm sorting them into two piles,' he explained. 'The ones on this pile have all been completed in ink and they're no good at all. They'll have to be sold as scrap paper. But the ones on that pile have been completed in pencil and if I rub out all the pencil entries I'll be able to resell the books as new.'

I stared at him. 'But it'll take you hours!'

'What else is there to do in the evenings?' asked Peter. 'If I go to the Duck and Puddle it will cost me money. If I stay here and rub out crossword book entries I'll be making money.'

I just looked at him in astonishment.

'I can rub out all the entries in a puzzle book in just under half an hour,' he told me. 'So if I start at seven and go on until midnight, I can clean ten books in an evening and then put them on sale in the shop the next morning.' He looked at me quizzically. 'I don't suppose you and Patsy would like to earn a little extra in the evenings?'

'No thank you.'

'I'll provide the rubbers. I've got some new soft erasers that don't tear the paper.'

'No thank you.'

'Suit yourself. Let me know if you change your mind.'

I told him that I didn't think it very likely.

'You don't know of a decent ink solvent, do you?'

'Ink solvent?'

'For the crossword books which have been filled in with ink.'

'No, Peter. I don't know of an ink solvent you could use.'

'I tried some bleach but unless you dab out each letter very carefully, you remove the printed lines of the crossword. And if you put on too much bleach, the stuff burns a hole in the paper. I tried that white stuff typists use to cover up their mistakes but the people who print these crossword books use very cheap paper which is grey and the white blobs stand out and I think people might know that the books weren't new. Some of these publishers… '

'I saw two patients this morning who'd been injured while crawling around at the back of your shop looking for the low priced items you've hidden down at ground level,' I said, interrupting what threatened to be a tirade against publishers who used cheap grey paper for cheap paperback crossword books.

Peter stared at me and frowned. 'Who?'

'Can't tell you,' I told him. 'Medical confidentiality. But one of them has a badly cut knee.'

'Oh that was that Woodnutt fellow. He wanted me to pay for the rip in his trousers. I sent him packing. I can't be expected to make sure all the nails in my floorboards are hammered down nice and smoothly just so that people like him don't snag their trousers.'

'Peter, I really came to see you as a friend,' I said softly, leaning towards him as though I didn't want anyone to overhear. There wasn't anyone in the shop but Peter leant towards me, as though eager to share confidential information. 'You're going to get sued,' I told him.

'Sued!' said Peter, looking startled and leaping back a couple of feet. 'Why would he sue me? It was just a little tear. They weren't new trousers And a bit of blood. Nothing much.'

'No, no, I don't mean that he is going to sue you,' I said. 'Not yet.'

'Not yet?'

'But someone will sue you.'

They will? Who will? I'll ban them from the shop.'

'If you keep the lower priced stuff on the floor at the back of the shop where people have to crawl around in the dark then someone is bound to sue you. Not a villager, perhaps. But a stranger. A visitor. Maybe a rich German just passing through.'

'You think so?'

'I'm sure so,' I said, nodding.

'What do you think I should do?'

'Bring all the cheaper brands back to the front of the shop where people can find them easily without having to scrabble around on the floor.'

There was a long pause, during which Peter examined my face carefully. He was, I knew, trying to tell if I was pulling some sort of fast one. 'You think someone might sue me?' he asked at last.

'I'm certain they will,' I assured him. 'As sure as eggs are eggs.'

'As sure as eggs are eggs?'

'Definitely.'

'Hmm. I'd better move the stuff round again.' He thought for a moment. 'I'll put the tinned rice pudding down on the floor at the back of the shop. No one ever buys that stuff anyway.'

'Good idea!' I said. And to show that there were no hard feelings, I bought one of the resuscitated and rejuvenated crossword books from which he had erased all the answers.

'See!' said Peter, proudly. 'I told you there'd be a market for them. You were about to scoff weren't you?'

'Not in a million years,' I said.

It occurred to me that at the rate I was going, my nose would be three feet long before I got back to Bilbury Grange. I slipped the crossword book into my pocket. It would, I knew, amuse Patsy when I told her the story of Peter's latest wheeze.

‘Oh, before you go,’ said Peter suddenly, as I strode towards the Rolls.

I turned back.

‘I’m opening an estate agency,’ announced Peter.

‘Splendid!’ I said. ‘The village could do with one. But I’m afraid Bilbury Grange isn’t for sale.’

‘No, no, no,’ said Peter impatiently. ‘I didn’t think for a minute that it was. But I’m looking for an estate agent to handle the agency for me. I need someone who is easy going and bubbly bordering on talkative; someone with time on their hands and prepared to work on commission. I’d do it myself but I’m too busy looking after the shop. I want someone who can move around the village, putting up signs, showing houses to prospective buyers, that sort of thing.’

‘Not my line,’ I said firmly.

‘Don’t be so damned obtuse!’ said Peter crossly. He is renowned for having had a humour extraction some years ago. ‘You know just about everyone in the village. I just wondered if you might know someone suitable.’

I thought for a moment and then shook my head. ‘No one springs to mind.’

‘I need someone who’s a bit pushy and who won’t take no for an answer,’ continued Peter, warming to his theme, ‘someone who can persuade both the seller and the buyer that they’re on their side.’

I shook my head.

‘Well let me know if you think of anyone suitable.’

I headed for the car when suddenly it came to me: the perfect solution – the answer to Peter’s problem! Who could possibly fit the bill more snugly than the patient who only that very morning had told me that she wanted a challenge in her life? I turned back.

‘Mrs Musbury!’ I cried.

‘Mrs Musbury?’

‘You must know her!’ I said. ‘Mrs Musbury, the widow who lives on the other side of Softly’s Bottom. Striking looking woman. Always wears a hat. She could talk the hind leg off a donkey.’

‘Oh that Mrs Musbury!’ exclaimed Peter, as though the village were awash with Mrs Musburys. He thought for a moment. ‘Do you know I think you could be right. I’ll pop round this afternoon and have a word with her. Do you think she’d take the job without a salary? Just a commission on every house she sells?’

‘You could try,’ I told him. ‘I rather think she’d like the job. It would give her a chance to go in and out of everyone’s house and measure every available bathroom.’

I left Peter rubbing his hands with delight at the thought of signing up the first employee for his burgeoning estate agency.

I drove back to Bilbury Grange, had my lunch, did a couple more visits, sat in the garden and wrote a few words for the Bilbury book I was working on, and then it was time for the evening surgery.

It was only when I sat down behind my surgery desk that I realised that I had been so busy that I hadn’t had the time to have a cup of tea and a couple of digestive biscuits.

To my astonishment, Mrs Musbury was the first patient to enter. I was startled because she had acquired a habit of hanging back so that she could be the last patient and stay for a long chat.

‘I can’t stop long, doctor,’ she said, entering the surgery in a rush. ‘But I did say I’d call in this evening and I thought I ought to just drop by and tell you that I won’t be able to pop in quite as often as before.’

‘Oh dear,’ I said, feigning a little (but not too much) disappointment.

‘Mr Marshall has appointed me the new general manager of his estate agency,’ she announced with great pride and in something of a rush. ‘And he wants me to go round this evening to help him plan the business. So I’ll have to be on my way. We’re going to have a brainstorming session while we do something together with crossword books.’

‘Congratulations!’ I said. I couldn’t help congratulating myself on my newfound matchmaking skills. ‘So, Peter is going into the real estate business is he?’ I don’t know why but I didn’t want Mrs Musbury to know that I’d suggested her for the job.

‘Oh yes!’ said Mrs Musbury. ‘Isn’t it exciting? It will be Bilbury’s first estate agency. And I’m to be the general manager. Mr Marshall is going to print up some visiting cards for me.’

‘Marvellous,’ I agreed.

‘If you ever decide to put Bilbury Grange on the market you will think of me, won’t you?’ She looked around the room as though measuring it up ready to write the particulars.

‘Of course,’ I agreed. ‘But Patsy and I don’t have any plans to sell the house.’

‘You wouldn’t like me to just wander around and measure up?’ she asked. ‘Just in case you change your minds?’

‘No thank you. I don’t think so.’

‘You have very nice mullion windows. Quite a feature, I’ve often thought. A very sought after element in a property. Do the fireplaces all work?’

‘Thank you. You’ve very kind. Yes, they do.’

‘Well, I’d better be off. If you know anyone who does want to sell their home you make sure they get in touch with me straight away. I’ll bring in a few of my cards when they’re ready.’

I thanked her but it seemed that the sudden storm was over and Mrs Musbury was half way out of the room.

Just then, the door opened and Patsy appeared holding a cup of tea. There were, I was delighted to see, two digestive biscuits in the saucer.

‘Is that for me, dear?’ said Mrs Musbury, eyeing up the tea. ‘That’s very sweet of you but I’m afraid I don’t have the time. I have to hurry off to a business meeting.’

‘That’s all right,’ replied Patsy, not missing a beat. ‘I’m sure the doctor will be happy to drink it.’ She walked across and put the tea down on my desk.

‘I won’t be able to come in as often as before,’ Mrs Musbury said to Patsy. ‘I’ve taken a position under Mr Marshall. I expect your husband will miss our little chats.’

‘Oh, I’m sure he will!’ said Patsy.

And then Mrs Musbury was gone.

‘A position under Mr Marshall?’ said Patsy, raising a querulous eyebrow. ‘Did she really say that?’

‘I’ll explain later,’ I assured her. ‘It’s probably not as exciting as it sounds.’

I picked up one of the digestive biscuits and dunked it gently into the cup of tea.

‘Do you remember the character played by Barry Fitzgerald in *The Quiet Man*?’

‘The matchmaker who brought John Wayne and Maureen O’Hara together?’

‘That’s the one,’ I confirmed. ‘Well, that’s me, now. I’m the Bilbury matchmaker.’

‘You haven’t set Peter Marshall up with Hilda Musbury!’

‘Only in a business sort of way.’

‘That sounds even worse.’

‘I’ll explain later,’ I repeated.

‘You’d better!’ said Patsy.

The Parisians

I was sitting in the snug at the Duck and Puddle.

My companions were Thumper Robinson, poacher, dealer and general fixer upper, Patchy Fogg, antiques dealer, and Frank Parsons, our ever genial landlord. Thumper had his usual pint of Old Restoration. Patchy was drinking a glass of Jack Daniels. Frank was sipping a small glass of port (his intake of alcohol is strictly regulated by his wife). And I was nursing a glass of an 18-year-old malt whisky called Tullibardine.

We sit at the same table, in the same places, and get quite upset if Gilly Parsons changes the beermats too often. What is wrong with comfort and routine?

There can be no doubt that our conversations are always intellectual, always provocative and always illuminating. I like to think of us as the natural descendants of the literati who favoured the famous table at the Algonquin Hotel in New York.

Outside Bilbury, the world rushes along like an out of control Express train; forever whistling and screaming and jumping off the tracks. And it seems to me that most of the alleged progress on offer produces little more than noise, confusion, frustration and disappointment. Indeed, much of what passes for progress is little more than a nod in the direction of fashion for although we think of fashion as merely affecting hemlines and button configuration, it invades far more of our lives than that. In Bilbury, we like to move along at a more sedate pace; accepting such items of progress which promise to make our lives better in some way.

But then, that's why I like Bilbury and I recognise that our leisurely pace of life would not suit everyone.

'You've got a bit of competition in the making-people-better business,' said Thumper.

I looked at him, surprised to hear this. I hadn't heard of any other doctor setting up in the village.

'Someone called a complementary health specialist has opened up a clinic in Combe Martin,' said Thumper. 'Anne found a leaflet pushed half-way through our letterbox.'

'Like the little sachets of shampoo and soap you get in posh hotels?' asked Frank.

We all looked at him.

'Complimentary,' explained Frank. 'They're complimentary. It means you don't have to pay for them.' He paused for a moment and then a puzzled and worried look appeared on his face. 'But we don't pay you, do we?' he said to me. 'The National Health Service is free.'

'The NHS isn't really free,' I pointed out. 'It's paid for out of taxes.'

'Oh, is it?' said Frank, with a shudder. 'I don't have anything to do with any of that stuff. Those chaps in grey suits come round occasionally and Gilly shows them the books and they look at her pityingly and go away shaking their heads and muttering.'

I noticed that Thumper was examining his glass of beer very carefully; in the manner of a man who is pretending to be elsewhere; studying one thing in an effort to make it clear that he has nothing whatsoever to do with another.

I have noticed the same thing with our cats.

If they fall off a piece of furniture, or knock a vase off a shelf, they will instantly start cleaning themselves, making it abundantly clear that they have nothing to do with whatever may have happened in the vicinity.

'Oh, gosh, has a vase jumped off the mantelpiece? How shocking! Me? No, I didn't see anything.'

I happen to know that Thumper, like Frank, doesn't pay any tax. I'm not even sure that the authorities know he exists these days. He had an unfortunate encounter with the constabulary a few years ago when there was a slight misunderstanding involving a river, half a dozen trout and a 'missing' licence and he has, since then, kept a low profile as far as the authorities are concerned.

'It's not that sort of 'complimentary',' said Patchy. He looked at me, waiting for me to say something. But I just smiled at him.

Frank looked at him and thought for a while. 'What other sort is there?'

'Well, there's the sort when you tell Gilly that her hair looks nice and you like her hat,' said Thumper, looking up and returning to the conversation. He spoke with the quiet but slightly surprising confidence of a man who can tickle a trout and tease a pheasant out of a thicket but who has never seen a dictionary, let alone consulted one.

Frank stared at him and frowned. When Frank frowns it usually means that he's thinking hard. 'I don't think I've ever seen Gilly in a hat,' he said at last.

'She wore a hat to our wedding,' I reminded him. 'It was a very smart one; a big white one which had a large brim. It had a yellow ribbon, a huge bow and lots of flowers. I seem to remember that there were half a dozen red cherries on it too.' The ladies of Bilbury like cherries on their hats. Patsy's mum has a hat which is festooned with a whole bunch of cherries.

‘Oh yes, I remember,’ said Frank. He laughed. Frank has a wonderful deep laugh, created by years of smoking cigars and cigarettes and drinking rough liquor.

Patchy looked around nervously, making sure that Gilly wasn’t within earshot. He knew that she wouldn’t have liked the idea of Frank laughing at her hat.

‘It was a splendid hat!’ I said, defending Gilly’s choice of headgear. Ever the gentleman.

‘Someone sat on it and crushed it,’ remembered Frank. ‘I mended it with some sticky tape and then it blew off and we never saw it again.’

‘It was Patsy’s Aunt Edna from Cornwall,’ I said, remembering the incident. ‘She doesn’t have terribly good eyesight. She said she thought it was a cushion.’

‘I think I saw it on a scarecrow in a field just outside Parracombe,’ said Thumper. ‘It wasn’t quite so white but it still had most of the flowers. It was definitely Gilly’s hat.’

Frank looked shocked. ‘Don’t for heaven’s sake tell Gilly.’ He shuddered. ‘So that’s what this complimentary medicine is all about then? You tell them they’re looking good and you like their hat? It doesn’t sound much like medicine to me.’

I felt I ought to say something and so I started to explain precisely what the phrase ‘complementary medicine’ really means. But Thumper was determined to say something and spoke over me.

‘I’d bet it works well,’ said Thumper, speaking with enthusiasm. ‘I remember there was a song when I was a kid. It was sung by Stanley Holloway, the chap who played the dustman in *My Fair Lady*. There was this one chap who had been ill and was feeling much brighter. He went for a walk and kept meeting people who said to him ‘My word, you do look queer’. The result was that the poor fellow became depressed and decided that he was finished. Then up came one final fellow who said to him ‘My word you do look well!’ That’s all it took. The chap who was feeling down was so cheered by this that he suddenly felt full of life. In the song he decided that ‘There’s life in the old dog yet’. So there you: complimentary medicine can work!’

I tried once more to speak. But this time it was Patchy who spoke.

‘I can see that it would work,’ said Patchy. ‘Saying something nice to a person always makes them feel better. Congratulate them on a nice tie or hairdo and you’re bound to make them feel better.’

I was confident that Patchy knew the difference between complimentary medicine and complementary medicine but to be honest I wasn’t so sure about Thumper and I was pretty sure that Frank didn’t suspect that there was any difference at all. And so I didn’t make another effort to contradict anyone. It seemed a pity to spoil the fun.

Indeed, I rather hoped that Thumper and Frank would one day be able to use their new knowledge somewhere else.

‘Do you think that maybe this complimentary person lets you eat and drink as much as you like?’ Frank asked me.

Frank had had a stroke, caused by high blood pressure, and he had, for some time, been on a diet as well as having his alcohol consumption strictly controlled. I had made the rules but Gilly enforced them.

‘I’m afraid I rather doubt it,’ I told him. ‘They’ll probably want you to eat a good deal of seaweed while they stick needles into you.’

Frank managed to look startled and not a little disappointed at the same time. It is not often that Frank manages to do two things at once.

Just then, the door swung open and two visitors walked in. It was clearly still raining outside for the minute they entered the snug they both stood for a moment and shook themselves, like dogs who’ve just had a swim. I don’t think any of us had noticed that it was still raining. The truth is that it rains a good deal in North Devon and we only really notice the weather when it isn’t raining.

The visitors were wearing waterproof trousers, waterproof jackets, waterproof hats and boots that were also doubtless waterproof. Everything they wore was shiny with water. It was difficult to be certain but it seemed likely that one of the visitors was equipped with two X chromosomes while the other was having to make do with one.

‘Good morning!’ said the taller of the two visitors. ‘We would like to purchase provender at your café. We wish first to divest ourselves of our vestments.’ He unzipped his jacket as he spoke.

Frank, who is always a welcoming and genial host, got up from his chair and strolled over to where the two newcomers were standing. I would have bet a month’s income that he didn’t have the faintest idea what they were talking about but he showed no sign of failing to understand them. ‘Hang your gear on the hat stand,’ he said, pointing to a huge brass coat rack which stands in a corner of the snug. Come far?’

‘Yes, please,’ said the shorter of the two. ‘We have come for comestibles.’

This was clearly going to be fun.

The two strangers removed their waterproofs and hung them on the coat rack. The man had a bit of a struggle with his and the zip on his jacket caught in the jumper he was wearing underneath. Water dripped from every item and soaked into the carpet. If Gilly had been around she would have made them leave their soaking gear in the porch.

Underneath their waterproofs, they were dressed identically. They both wore blue jeans and red sweaters. I noticed that their jeans and sweaters both appeared to be soaked. The battle with the elements in North Devon had clearly been lost.

The two of them were much smaller than they had appeared to be in their waterproofs. They were both very slim and they looked to be in their late 20s. She had very short hair. He had shoulder length hair.

The man examined his jumper where it had been snagged by the zip. 'I'll get a pair of scissors and cut that off for you,' said Frank, kindly. He tottered over to the bar, returned with a pair of scissors and snipped off the offending piece of wool. The man did not say anything but accepted this service without thanks.

For no reason whatsoever, I found myself wondering why we refer to scissors as being a pair. It's like trousers, spectacles and binoculars. It makes sense to talk of a pair of shoes or a pair of socks because there are two of them. But why do scissors, trousers, spectacles and binoculars always come as pairs? It really doesn't make any sense since none of them is a paired items in the sense that two matching candlesticks can be described as a pair; a set of two things used together and regarded as a unit.

I have these thoughts quite often and I worry about myself sometimes. Still, I try to keep the thoughts to myself.

'You wish to drink, yes?' said Frank. 'And eat food?' He picked up an imaginary glass and took an imaginary gulp from it. He then mimed eating a sandwich.

In addition to the Marcel Marceau impersonation, he had, I noticed, raised his voice since he knew he was speaking to foreigners and he wanted to make it easier for them to understand what he was saying.

'Where are you from?' asked Patchy, speaking very slowly. He too spoke a little louder than usual.

'We are coming out of Lynmouth,' said the woman. 'We are heading into Ilfracombe.'

'A walking voyage,' said the man.

It seemed to me that, judging by the weather, the word 'voyage' was probably appropriate. It also occurred to me that they were slightly mad. The distance between Lynmouth and Ilfracombe is at least 20 miles. And since they were now undeniably in Bilbury, it was pretty clear that, either by design or accident, they weren't taking the direct route.

'No, I meant, what country are you from?' said Patchy.

'From France, of course,' said the woman, as though it were a stupid question. 'We are habituated at Paris.'

'Ah,' said Frank, nodding wisely. 'You are French?'

'Yes!' said the man, as though he were talking to an idiot. 'Of course we are French.'

'You speak very good English,' lied Patchy.

In England we always do that. When a foreigner speaks our language we always congratulate them and tell them how well they speak it. I don't why this is. If we meet someone who knows three words of English we pretend to be astounded and tell them how fluent they are. This, of course, gives them false confidence and in the end usually results in misunderstandings, confusion, bewilderment, disappointment and, quite often, a few tears.

'Oh yes,' said the woman. 'We are beyond dispute talking in the perfect English.'

'What can I get you to drink?' asked Frank. He made the drinking sign again.

'We would desire to be quaffing coffee,' said the woman.

'Coffee?' said a rather startled Frank, for whom coffee is something to be drunk after a meal and not as an alternative to alcohol. He had probably expected the woman to order a bottle of wine to drink while they decided what to have to drink.

'Coffee,' agreed the woman.

'Both of you?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'You both want coffee?' Frank pointed at the woman and then at the man.

'Yes,' said the woman, rather impatiently. 'Do you have a carte?'

Frank looked puzzled. 'No,' he said, 'but Thumper has an old truck.'

'A carte,' repeated the woman. 'A directory of your foods.' She looked at her companion and raised an eyebrow. I got the impression they both wished they had chosen to eat somewhere else. Since the Duck and Puddle is the only eating establishment for miles in any direction, this was a pointless regret.

'Oh, you mean a menu!' said Frank, understanding at last.

'Yes. A menus. Are you having one of those?'

'I bet they'll want snails,' whispered Thumper to me. 'If they do I could easily pop outside and collect a few dozen.' Thumper's version of sotto voce is most people's idea of a full throated roar.

'No, not at the moment,' admitted Frank in response to the menu question. 'We did have one. Well, actually we had three. But one fell into the fire, one was stolen by a tourist and I can't find the other one. But it doesn't matter because I know what we've got.'

‘Do you have any crudités?’ asked the woman.

‘No, no,’ said Frank looking shocked. ‘This isn’t that sort of place. We’re a family pub. Very old fashioned. No entertainment. No crudities.’

‘She means chopped vegetables,’ I murmured to Frank. ‘Crudites is a French dish. Raw vegetables sliced and served with some sort of sauce.’

Frank looked at me. ‘Raw vegetables?’

I nodded. ‘Raw.’

‘Bloody hell,’ said Frank with his own version of sotto voce. ‘They eat raw veggies? No wonder the Froggies always lose every damned war they fight.’

‘What is that?’ asked the French woman.

‘Mon ami a dit qu’il pleut beaucoup aujourdhui,’ said Patchy, with a big smile. The smile he usually reserves for the moment when he’s closing on a deal to sell Shakespeare’s writing desk to a gullible tourist. ‘My friend said that it rains a good deal today.’

‘Your pronunciations en Francais are not very up to the marker,’ said the woman with a very superior and quite natural sneer. She turned to her companion. ‘The English, like the Americans, never well speak the langue,’ she said to him, with a Gallic shrug of her damp shoulders.

The Frenchman curled a lip in attempted disdain.

It occurred to me that apart from Elvis Presley, who has always done it with great charm, I’ve never seen anyone do that successfully. Lip curling is obviously an acquired skill.

In the interests of international relations, and out of a sense of wild adventure, I had been preparing to share with them the knowledge that my uncle’s pen resides in the bureau of my aunt but I decided to keep this knowledge to myself, and to hide my own multilingual light under a bushel. I had, to be honest, thought Patchy’s accent to be pretty good. But then, in my experience, the French like to think that they are the only people who can speak their language properly and will criticise foreigners whatever they say and however they say it.

I long ago learned never to say ‘yes’ when I am asked by a Frenchman (or Frenchwoman) if I speak French. It is much better to force them to rack their brains trying to speak English. They will invariably become confused, lose control of the conversation and provide considerable amusement.

Frank and Gilly once had a French fellow staying at the Duck and Puddle. He was on a tour of West Country follies (there are many) and on his first night at the pub he announced that he would like a ‘night hat’. Frank, ever helpful, said they didn’t have one of those traditional caps to lend him but he could provide a woollen watch cap with a bobble on the top as an alternative.

When the Frenchman seemed surprised by this, we all tried alternative suggestions.

Patchy even went back home and fetched his Sherlock Holmes style deerstalker in case the fellow wanted to keep his ears warm.

In the end, it turned out that the chap wanted a ‘night cap’ rather than a ‘night hat’.

I remember that the fellow was quite humourless, as most of the French are, and very full of his own sense of importance, as they tend to be.

I remember he told us repeatedly that he was due to have dinner with the county’s Lord Lieutenant, and Patchy, rather fed up with the name dropping, told him that when meeting the British aristocracy it is the usual practice to bow slightly, click your heels and say: ‘Watcha cock, how are they hanging.’

We still like to think that he followed Patchy’s advice.

The funny thing is, of course, that although they like to criticise us when we try to speak French, those French folk who speak a word or two of English always believe they are fluent.

Patchy once pointed out to me that no Frenchman has ever learned to speak English properly, though they all think they have. Out of politeness, we never tell them that they’re making zillions of mistakes every time they open their mouths. They tell us if we get a tense or a conjugation or a pronunciation slightly wrong. But we never tell them because we are too damned polite.

But, as Patchy says, the French are quite nice sometimes, when you consider that they live on a diet of onions, snails, smelly cheeses and frogs’ legs.

‘I could get you a raw vegetable if that’s what you want,’ said Frank. ‘What would you like? A potato? I could cut up a raw potato into little pieces and serve you raw chips if you like. Or a carrot? A cabbage? A whole cabbage would be a bit much, perhaps. The ones we’ve got at the moment are quite big. Maybe half a cabbage? Or how about a nice plateful of Brussels sprouts? They named them after Brussels and that isn’t far from France is it? Or is it in France? I can never remember. It’s certainly foreign. So, perhaps you’d like half a dozen raw sprouts? Maybe with a little tomato sauce? Or we’ve got brown sauce? Both sorts: Daddy’s and HP.’

You have to give Frank points for attempting to be helpful. But when he gets a little agitated, Frank tends to lose control of his brain. I had an awful feeling that he was going to serve up a whole, raw potato on a plate. Or, perhaps, bring in half a dozen Brussels sprouts covered in HP sauce. Wars have probably been fought over less.

But, fortunately, this wasn't going to happen. The French woman screwed up her nose and looked at her companion. He shook his head. 'Not on your Nellie,' he said.

It took us all quite a while to realise what he'd said. Frank was shocked and rather upset. He doesn't like rude people and saying 'Not on your Nellie' when your host has been bending over backwards to meet your peculiar dietary requirements is, in our book, definitely on the rude side of polite.

'I can do you a sandwich,' said Frank, through gritted teeth. 'Cheese, ham, beef or tomato and salady stuff.' Frank is not a fan of what he calls 'salady stuff'. He regards lettuce as being an unsuitable food for a human being.

'Do you have the Roquefort?'

'Is that the smelly goat cheese?'

'It is being made from the milk of the goat, yes.'

'No.'

'You are not having this one?'

'No.'

'You are having the Camembert?'

'No.'

'The Brie?'

'No.'

'What do you have?' The question was asked with a sneer of gladiatorial proportions.

'The Cheddar.'

The Frenchman screwed up his nose in distaste. 'You are having only the Cheddar?'

'Yes. Only the Cheddar.'

Frank would serve the man because he was a customer and customers are there to be served. But he would now not be polite to him. Serving food to customers is Frank's job. He doesn't believe there is a rule that he has to be nice to them if he doesn't like them.

'Pouf! The Cheddar is for mices,' said the Frenchman, screwing up his nose in disgust.

'I'll go and feed the mices then,' said Frank, who had had enough. 'You pair can bugger off.' And with that he turned on his heel and disappeared.

'I will take the ham sandwich,' said the Frenchman, addressing us. 'With a cappuccino with extra milk.' He turned to his companion who thought for a while. 'I'll have the same,' she said at last. She sniffed and did not seem very happy.

'Afraid not, mate,' said Thumper. 'You've upset the landlord and he's gone. But there's a shop in the village and the bloke there will sell you a couple of packets of crisps and a can of something fizzy.'

The couple stared at us in disbelief.

'We are not to be a serving?' she said, astonished.

'Doesn't look like it,' said Thumper. 'No Frank, no food is the general rule here. He always allows foreigners a little extra leeway, on account of the language and so on, but I think you overstepped the mark with that remark about the mices.'

'Huh!' said the Frenchman. 'What is this with the 'foreigner'? Huh! In France you would be the foreigner.'

Thumper laughed. 'Don't be daft, sunbeam' he said. 'There's no way I could ever be a foreigner. I'm English!'

Empty of food but full of indignation, the French folk struggled back into their waterproofs and headed back out into the rain.

They discovered, I am sure, that it is not easy to be dignified when climbing back into still damp waterproofs.

'Toodle pip,' said Thumper, as they left.

The woman turned back, blank faced and bewildered. 'What is this 'toodle pip'?' she demanded.

'Oh, it's English, love,' replied Thumper. 'You wouldn't understand. You being foreign.'

The woman followed her companion and tried to slam the door. Unfortunately, the door she tried to slam had a powerful spring attached to it and cannot be slammed.

'I'm never going to bother trying to speak French again,' muttered Patchy. 'They can speak English like proper, educated, civilised people do. The Americans speak English, the Canadians speak English, the New Zealanders speak English, even the Australians speak a type of English. Why do the French insist on speaking their own funny little language?'

Thumper and I laughed rather nervously. Patchy can sometimes get a trifle upset if people are rude to him.

'If you make an effort to speak their language,' said Patchy, 'the French will criticise everything you say. They will delight in picking holes in your grammar and they will constantly correct your pronunciation. And what's the point? If you speak French to a Frenchman you will always be searching for the appropriate word. You will be forever on the back foot, struggling to make sure that you aren't making a mistake which will result in your listener collapsing to the floor and holding his stomach as he struggles to contain his laughter.' Patchy made a passable imitation of a stage Frenchman laughing. He did sound a bit like Maurice Chevalier. 'On the other hand, if he has to try to speak your language you can chuckle merrily and raise eyebrows occasionally. So I shall insist on having all my future conversations in English, putting the French person on the back foot. They will have to put a lot of effort into struggling to cope with a foreign language and they will have less brain available to deal with the problem at hand. And I shall destabilise them by constantly correcting their English. I shall distribute idioms at random and when correcting a foreigner who is attempting to speak 'the English' I shall always appear to be understanding and patronising. I shall tell them they are doing really well and I shall ask them if they learned their English at school. If they seem fluent, I shall ask them how many weeks they have been learning English. This will doubtless make them feel inferior and intimidated and will drive them insane. I shall pretend not to understand what they are saying. If they say 'I am unhappy with the gilding on this frame', I shall reply 'I'm sorry, did you say you want to wrap the picture so that you can take it away with you now?'

Thumper and I looked at each other and then at Patchy.

'Finished?' I said.

Patchy sat back, smiled and nodded. 'I feel better now.'

There was something close to silence for a while. Only the crackling of the fire and the sound of the rain on the windows could be heard.

'All that talk of food has made me peckish,' said Thumper, breaking the silence at last.

'Me too,' I agreed.

'Frank!' called Patchy, who had recovered completely now and clearly felt better after his rant. 'Don't give the Cheddar to the mice. We'll have three large cheese and onion sandwiches and another round of drinks.'

I got up and put a log on the fire. It was very wet and cold outside and the wind was now howling with slate tearing determination. For a moment, I wondered how much guttering we would lose at Bilbury Grange. But only for a moment. The vicious winds which scour the North Devon coast are an integral part of our lives and a small price to pay for living in such a beautiful and deserted part of England.

I wondered how the couple from Paris were getting on, out there in the rain and the wind.

It was warm and cosy in the Duck and Puddle snug.

Mind you, it is always warm and cosy in the snug at the Duck and Puddle.

The False Widow

It is a fact of mechanical life that all motor cars have their off days and it is, I suppose, not unreasonable to suspect that a motor car built in the early 1930s, and well on its way to its first half century, would probably be more vulnerable to the work of gremlins than any other mechanical device, particularly one built within the last few years.

It is also a fact of life that when things go wrong with anything mechanical, they usually do so at the most inconvenient moment.

This is, I suppose, inevitable, in that when, for example, a motor car breaks down the driver is, by definition, always trying to get somewhere, and to be somewhere that he isn't, when the breakdown takes place.

This is rather similar to the inconvenience of a light bulb going 'pop' when you press the 'on' switch. When you try to turn on a light, you are doing so because it is dark and you need the light. You are always going into another room or about to do something which requires light. So light bulbs always 'go' at an inconvenient moment.

But sometimes, it does seem as though fate is having a laugh.

The Rolls Royce 20/25 which I had inherited from my predecessor, Dr Brownlow, had always been entirely reliable. Indeed, I took her reliability for granted. And I was, therefore, enormously surprised when she broke down for the first time since she had been in my possession.

Naturally, I was out on a night call when she let me down.

There was no moon so it was pitch black. The nearest street lights to Bilbury are the ones in Wales, on the other side of the Bristol Channel and the village is, therefore, entirely reliant upon the heavens for all illumination.

There was no visible moon and no stars and, therefore, no illumination.

And it goes without saying that it was raining.

It was, indeed, raining with so much enthusiasm that it appeared as if the sky must have found itself with several hundred thousand tons of excess water which had to be got rid of as quickly as possible.

The call I was answering had sounded urgent and in my rush, I had gone out without a raincoat or a hat. I had simply slipped an old sweater and a pair of trousers over the top of my pyjamas.

And, to make things even worse, the call was to a house which was several miles away from Bilbury Grange. The house to which I had been called wasn't actually even in Bilbury but was in a small hamlet called East Morton, several miles away.

I didn't have any patients in East Morton but the caller had stated that her husband was ill, that they were staying in a house, called The Castle, which they had rented and that their own doctor was in Harley Street. The woman who called told me that she had given my name and telephone number by their live-in butler. He wasn't a patient of mine either and I never did find out why he chose to recommend me to his mistress.

I know nothing whatsoever about motor cars and when the Rolls spluttered to a halt, I had absolutely no idea what to do. There was no point in my lifting the bonnet. Indeed, although I am rather ashamed to admit it, I didn't even know how to lift the bonnet.

So, when it was clear that the car wasn't going to respond to my attempts to restart it I picked up my black medical bag, climbed out into the rain and started the long trudge along the lanes to East Morton.

Naturally, I discovered that the torch I kept in the car had a flat battery.

Isn't it always the way?

The small pen torch which I use to look down patients' throats was the only illumination I had and although its tiny beam was absolutely fine for examining tonsils, it turned out to be utterly useless for helping me find my way along the Devon lanes.

After trudging along for a quarter of a mile, I was totally soaked. My hair was plastered to my head and my jumper and trousers were drenched. In my haste to get up and out, I had slipped my feet into a pair of canvas deck shoes. I kept them ready for night calls because they were quicker to put on than decent, sturdy shoes which required lacing. The deck shoes too were soaked and kept slipping off my feet as I made my way along the now muddy lanes. And still the rain came down.

After around half a mile, I lost a shoe.

I stopped for a while to hunt for it but eventually gave up and plodded on without it. The lanes in that part of the world are rough and uneven and the puddles which form are consequently huge. I've seen smaller garden ponds.

A little further along the road, I stumbled in a pothole and fell sideways into a water filled ditch. In a way, it didn't really matter because I was already as wet as I could get but I ripped a huge hole in my jumper as I scrambled out and caught a sleeve on a huge bramble.

Instead of just being bedraggled, I was now wet and bedraggled. And still the rain came down.

When I finally arrived in the hamlet of East Morton, I realised that I didn't have the foggiest idea where to find The Castle. I walked round and round the lanes, desperately peering at gateposts and the front doors of the odd cottage. The night was so dark and the rain so heavy that I had to get within a couple of feet of a sign to see what it said.

At this point, I was feeling very sorry for myself and I honestly wanted to just sit down on the lane and give up.

But I persevered.

Eventually, I came across a gateway guarded by two stone pillars, both of which bore the name The Castle carved into stone blocks. Inevitably, the driveway was long and lined with horse chestnut trees. By now, the wind had joined the party and the air was thick with leaves and small branches which had been torn from the trees. I'm sure that in the daylight, sitting in a comfortable motor car or carriage, the driveway would have looked imposing and stylish but in the rain and the wind the darned driveway simply seemed interminable.

Somewhere along the drive, I lost my one remaining shoe.

Since I hadn't bothered to waste time putting on any socks before I left the house, I was now barefoot. Every now and then I trod on a sharp stone. I did a good deal of yelping. On one occasion, I shouted rude words at the top of my voice. Sadly, no one heard them for my words were lost on the wind.

The house, when I finally got there, was large and imposing and looked as if it would make a good film set for a horror film. I couldn't see the extent of it but it seemed vast; stretching to left and right as far as I could see in the darkness of that foul night. It was the sort of house which has a gun room, a game larder, a flower room and a wrapping room. My night vision had improved by now and my pupils must have been enormous. I found the front door, discovered the door bell and pushed a huge porcelain button marked 'Bell'. While I waited for someone to answer, I looked at my watch. It was 1.30 am. I had set out from Bilbury Grange just before midnight.

'Yes?' said the large and imposing man who opened the door. He was wearing evening dress and looked as if he had been dusted and polished.

'I'm the doctor,' I explained. 'I've forgotten who telephoned me but I was asked to call.'

'You're the doctor?' said the man. It occurred to me that he must have been the butler.

I told him my name and realised that I was shivering. I was drenched to the skin. My hair was plastered to my head. My jumper was unravelling. And I was standing there in bare feet. But I was holding a black medical bag. If I hadn't been holding the bag I think he would have just shut the door on me.

'My car broke down,' I explained. 'I had to walk.' I looked down. 'I lost my shoes somewhere along the way.'

The butler opened the door wide and stood aside to give me room to enter.

'Who is it, Beddowes?' demanded an imperious voice belonging to an invisible woman.

'It's a person who says he is a doctor, madam,' said the butler.

The owner of the voice appeared. She was wearing an evening dress and holding a glass of champagne. She looked to be in her 50s but I suppose she could have been older.

'You're the doctor?' she said, making little effort to hide her disbelief and contempt.

'Yes,' I said.

'You've taken your time,' she said.

'My car broke down,' I explained.

'You should have something a little more reliable,' was her answer.

'It's usually very reliable,' I said, defending my car's reputation.

'You're dripping wet.'

'It's raining.'

'Don't you have a coat you could have worn? Or an umbrella?'

'Not with me, no,' I said. I wanted to say that if I had a coat I would have been wearing it. And that if I'd had an umbrella I would have used it. But she wasn't the sort of woman who takes it kindly when the help speaks back. I couldn't help feeling rather intimidated. I hate it when I feel intimidated. I hate the person intimidating me and I despise myself for being intimidated. 'Where's my patient?'

The woman looked me up and down. 'I'll take you to him,' she said. 'But try not to walk on the carpets. You are dripping wet and your feet are filthy.'

I looked down. My feet were very grubby. And I was standing in the middle of a puddle which I had created. I was about to take off my jumper when I realised that all I had on underneath it was my pyjama jacket. It occurred to me that it might have been kind of her to have offered to lend me a towel. Or even some dry clothing. I knew that poorer patients living in a run-down cottage would have definitely offered me towels and a dressing gown.

'Sir Felix was taken very poorly this afternoon,' said the woman as she led the way down a long corridor. As instructed, I walked on the wooden floor at the side of the carpet. 'I couldn't telephone you until after dinner because we had very important guests. Lord Braunton and Sir Percy Liverage were here.'

‘What are Sir Felix’s symptoms?’ I asked. I had never heard of Lord Braunton or Sir Percy Liverage and didn’t give a fig for them. We were now making our way up a very impressive marble staircase. The carpet stretched from one side of the staircase so I had no choice but to walk on it. However, my feet were not quite as dirty as they had been. And I was no longer dripping water like a tap turned full on. I wondered if the woman I was following was Sir Felix’s wife.

‘I expect he’ll want to tell you that himself,’ said the woman. She turned left at the top of the stairs and led me along another corridor. This one was long enough for an archery contest.

She stopped at last and knocked on a door. There were no numbers or other identifying marks on any of the doors so I have no idea how she knew that this was the correct door.

‘This man says he is the doctor,’ said the woman, standing to one side to let me past.

We were in a bedroom.

The sole occupant was a large, red-faced man who was sitting up in bed reading a newspaper. He was wearing spectacles perched on the end of his nose and looked very bad tempered. There were a dozen suitcases stacked up against one wall. The suitcases all carried the Louis Vuitton brand markings. The man looked up and peered at me over the tops of his spectacles.

‘He says his car broke down and that it is raining,’ said the woman to the red-faced man. It was clearly offered as an explanation for my appearance.

The man in bed examined me and glowered as though I were a sick animal and he were deciding whether or not to have me put down. ‘You’re late and you look very disreputable,’ he said. ‘We rang for you hours ago.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, for I was.

‘Damned good job I’m not dying,’ said the man. ‘What if I’d been dying, eh?’

‘I couldn’t get here any quicker,’ I apologised. ‘You’re actually well outside my practice area.’

‘Then you shouldn’t have come.’

‘I was asked to come,’ I replied, feeling rather cross. ‘What’s the problem?’ I put my black bag down on a chair near to the bed.

‘That’s what you’re here for,’ snapped the man. ‘No good asking me what the problem is. If I were the doctor I’d know and I’d deal with it. But I’m not.’ He had a discomforting way of looking through me – as though he were looking at something a foot behind my head. It was very intimidating and I felt certain that he was doing it on purpose.

I tried again. ‘What symptoms have you got?’

‘Aching, sweating, shaky,’ he replied. ‘Nauseous. I feel awful. Tired and washed out. Not usually like this at all.’

I opened my bag and took out my stethoscope and my sphygmomanometer. The rain had somehow got into my bag and everything inside was soaked. His heart was a little fast and his blood pressure was a little high but I couldn’t find anything else wrong. I started to pull back the heavy eiderdown and the sheets beneath it.

‘What on earth are you doing?’ screamed the woman who had brought me to the bedroom. I still didn’t know who she was but in my innocence I thought it was a fair bet that since he was Sir Felix something then she was probably Lady something.

‘I need to examine Sir Felix,’ I explained. ‘I can’t do it while he’s covered up.’

‘Wait!’ ordered the woman. ‘I’ll call for someone.’ She rang a bell by the door. A minute or two later a woman in a black uniform arrived. She looked to be the wrong side of 50 and had the put-upon stoop of a woman whose life is not and never has been her own and who is accustomed to taking orders without thought. I wondered if the poor woman had to stay up until her master and mistress went to bed, just in case they needed something. I’d never seen her or the butler before.

‘Turn down the bedspread so that the doctor can examine Sir Felix,’ said the woman.

‘Sir Felix’s pyjamas are soaked,’ I said. ‘He has been sweating rather a lot. He needs some fresh ones.’

When the bedspread had been properly turned down (so neatly that I half expected to see a neatly wrapped chocolate placed on the pillow just as they do in posh hotels) the woman giving the orders pointed to the suitcases. ‘Look in those,’ she said to the woman in the black uniform. ‘You’ll find new pyjamas in one of them.’ She turned to me. ‘We’re only down here for the week,’ she explained. ‘We did some shopping in Monaco and brought some stuff with us but there hasn’t been time for the staff to unpack yet.’

I examined Sir Felix.

I couldn’t find anything wrong with him except for some purple, puffy patches on the skin of his left foot. There was also a raised area around a tiny bite.

‘Ah, forgot to tell you about that skin thing,’ he said. ‘Rather clever of you to find it. The bite thing burns like stink. I’ve also had a stabbing pain up my leg.’

‘It looks like a bite,’ I said.

‘It was. I was putting on my boots to take the dogs for a walk and I was bitten. I looked inside my boot and there was a damned spider there. It bit my foot.’ He was clearly still shocked that anyone or anything should dare to bite him.

‘What sort of spider was it? Did you recognise it?’

‘Damned stupid question,’ said Sir Felix. ‘I’m not on first name terms with all the spiders in the house. There are thousands of them around – especially when it rains.’

I noticed, out of the corner of my eye, that the woman in the black uniform had now opened six or seven suitcases. She was being supervised by the woman who had shown me up into the bedroom. The contents of the suitcases, all clothes, were all brand new and still wrapped in cellophane or tissue paper. Some were still in the carrier bags in which the shops had sold them. There did not appear to be any sign of any pyjamas. It was clear that none of the clothes had ever been worn. Blazers, jackets, suits, dresses, evening gowns, shirts, trousers – there was enough clothing there to stock an expensive store. I got the impression that Sir Felix and his lady rather liked shopping. It was all like something out of an Edwardian drama; the curmudgeonly old man, the immaculate butler, the snooty woman and the put upon maidservant. It was difficult to believe that this was England in the 1970s.

‘No, of course not,’ I apologised, ‘I’m sorry; I meant to ask if you recognised the type of spider.’

‘Are there different types of spider?’ he asked. He thought for a moment. ‘I suppose there are,’ he admitted. ‘This was one of the little ones with a big body and short legs rather than one of those with a tiny body and long legs.’

‘How big would you say?’

‘Small. The whole thing was no bigger than my little fingernail. Some white markings on the body and I seem to remember that it had orangish legs.’

‘You should address Sir Felix as Sir Felix,’ interrupted the bossy woman.

I looked at her. I was getting fed up with the rather feudal atmosphere in the house. ‘And I should be addressed as ‘doctor’,’ I told her.

I’m delighted to say that she went bright red.

I looked closely at the skin around the bite. Although Sir Felix had been sweating profusely, the area of skin around the bite was quite dry.

‘There’s a patch of anhydrosis around the bite,’ I told him.

‘What’s that?’ he demanded.

‘No sweating,’ I said. I confess I had deliberately used the medical term because I was fed up with being treated like a half-witted criminal. ‘That rather suggests that you were bitten by a false black widow spider.’

‘Good God!’ said the woman I assumed to be Lady something or other. ‘A black widow spider? Do you mean to say that there are black widow spiders in Devon?’

‘Not a black widow,’ I said. ‘There are spiders called false black widows. I think there are quite a lot of varieties. Over a hundred, I believe. This was probably one of those. I’ve seen one or two. They’re said to have come over from Madeira in a bunch of bananas back in the 19th century and they’ve been here ever since. I don’t think they usually bite but if it was tucked away comfortably in Sir Felix’s boot and then a foot suddenly appeared it probably felt rather threatened.’

‘I bet it did!’ said Sir Felix. ‘And it had good reason to feel threatened. I squashed it. The damned little thing had the audacity to bite me!’

‘Most people in North Devon cover up their boots and shoes, especially if they leave them in a garage or an outhouse,’ I said. ‘An old tin lid will do fine to keep the spiders out.’

‘Should Sir Felix go to hospital?’ asked the woman. She frowned as something awful occurred to her. ‘Is there a hospital around here?’ she asked.

‘A hospital isn’t necessary,’ I said. ‘The symptoms will die down in a day or two.’

‘What about treatment?’

‘We’ll just wash the area and put on some antiseptic cream,’ I said. ‘And I’ll give you some antihistamine tablets to take away the discomfort.’

‘My valet has already washed it,’ said Sir Felix.

‘Fine,’ I said, ‘then I’ll just put on a little antiseptic cream.’

I cleaned the skin around the bite with some antiseptic wipes and then put on a little antiseptic cream. I found some antihistamine tablets in my bag and put them on his bedside table. I wasn’t surprised when he didn’t thank me. These were not thanking people.

‘I’ve found the pyjamas ma’am,’ said the woman in black, holding up several pairs of expensive looking striped pyjamas. She sounded relieved, as though she might have expected to have been beaten if she hadn’t managed to find them.

I helped Sir Felix remove his sodden pyjamas and replace them with a new pair. I told him that I’d visit again the following day. And then I headed for the door and back downstairs. No one said thank you. I wondered if anyone might offer to give me a lift back home but no one did. Nor did anyone offer to lend me a pair of shoes or boots. The slightly mysterious, and massively superior, lady of the house, who had stayed behind for a moment at the behest of Sir Felix, followed in my footsteps down the stairs.

'Sir Felix said to give him two pounds,' she said to the butler when we reached the hallway downstairs. The butler, still dressed immaculately, had appeared as if from nowhere.

The butler removed a wallet from his inside pocket and removed two brand new one pound notes. They looked as if they had been ironed. He held them out to me. I held up a hand. 'No thank you,' I said. The butler who seemed shocked looked to his mistress for advice.

'Sir Felix was treated as an NHS patient,' I told him. 'I'll bring a form with me tomorrow.'

The lady of the house seemed startled by this. But before she could speak, I opened the front door and walked back out into the night. It was still raining and it was still windy but I was glad to be out of there.

When I got back to Bilbury Grange it was dawn and I was freezing cold, weary and footsore. I checked that no more calls had come in and then I washed, shaved and dressed in dry, warm clothes. I then made myself breakfast. Fresh grapefruit, egg on toast and four slices of toast with marmalade. Patsy was still asleep. When I'd eaten my fill, and drunk two cups of coffee, I telephoned Tolstoys, the local garage, and asked one of the mechanics to retrieve the Rolls Royce. I told him where he could find it.

The mechanic knocked on the door 30 minutes later.

'Have you mended her already?' I said, delighted.

'Wonderful car, doctor,' said the mechanic.

'It is,' I agreed proudly.

'But marvellous as it is,' he said gently, 'I'm afraid that it still needs regular doses of petrol in order to function at its best.'

He explained that the Rolls had shuddered to a halt because it had run out of petrol.

'The spare two gallon container that you had in the boot was enough to get it moving again,' he said.

I made him promise not to tell a soul.

When I turned up at The Castle later that day, I tooted the horn to announce my arrival. And when the butler opened the front door and saw the Rolls Royce standing there, he actually called me 'sir'. I had a feeling that there was a slight forward inclination of the body, too. Not quite a bow, you understand, but a movement heading in that general direction.

I still thought that the wretched fellow might have done the decent thing and found me a towel the previous evening.

Sir Felix was a good deal better, though still as snotty and as bad tempered.

And two days later he had made a complete physical recovery.

Mentally and spiritually he was quite beyond my help.

I never did find out who he was or the nature of his relationship with the woman who had told the butler to offer me two pounds for my services.

I asked Frank, who tends to know everyone in North Devon, even if they're just passing through the county on their way from or to somewhere else, and he said he thought Sir Felix was a millionaire who had made his money out of property development and running a chain of shops. Frank said he had heard that Sir Felix had allegedly been given his knighthood for 'public services', but everyone knew he had bought it, having made several large donations to one of the large political parties. Moreover, the money he had given had not been his own but belonged to the companies of which he was a director. According to Frank, a number of angry shareholders felt that the knighthood was theirs as much as his and one aggrieved pensioner had made this point at a rather heated Annual General Meeting.

Frank also said that Sir Felix had a number of honorary degrees which he had purchased from British universities. I didn't know this but Frank assured me that if you gave a few quid to a university, they would reward you with an honorary degree of your choice.

Frank said he thought that Sir Felix and his mistress lived in Monaco and came to the mansion in East Morton for no more than one week a year. He said they brought their own servants with them from Monaco and left the house shut up when they weren't using it.

The world we live in never fails to surprise me.

As a country GP, I see people living in grand houses and I see people living in tiny two room cottages.

In my experience, the people in the grand houses are, on the whole, likely to be self-obsessed, mean and thoughtless while the people in the tiny cottages are far more likely to be thoughtful, kind and generous.

No small cottage owner would have let me walk out into the rain without insisting that I borrow a coat or an umbrella or both. If they'd had a car or a cart, they would have insisted on taking me back home.

Life's funny like that.

The Austrian Émigré in Smithy-on-the-Moor

When I was 18-years-old, I spent a year working in a part of Liverpool called Kirkby as a Community Service Volunteer. A man called Alec Dickson, the charismatic founder of the organisation, had persuaded me to give a year of my life to help a community where people were struggling to survive. It sounds terribly twee but it wasn't. My parents had worked and saved hard and, as a result, I had spent my formative years in a comfortably middle class environment. My waking hours had been dedicated to the acquisition of the certificates required to make the next move up the academic ladder. I had finished school and had acquired the pieces of paper necessary to go to university to start my medical studies but I was tired of textbooks and examinations and I wanted to spend a year in the real world before I plunged myself into another five or six years of academic life.

Alec Dickson made duty and responsibility sound necessary and invigorating and inspired me to give the time to do something to help in a community which was, to say the least, troubled.

The local buses always had a police car escorting them and the windows of all the shops and public buildings (including the police station) were protected by thick steel mesh.

Violence was a way of life and the area was controlled by a series of gangs. Just the place for an 18-year-old who arrived wearing an old school blazer partly because he didn't know any better, partly because he didn't have anything else to wear and partly because there was a lot of wear left in it.

I did many things in Liverpool (including form an army of young volunteers prepared to give their evenings and weekends to improve the lives of their elderly neighbours by decorating, gardening and shopping) but one of my more mundane responsibilities was to drive a Meals on Wheels van.

Once a twice a week, I would climb behind the wheel of a clapped out old vehicle (which would have never passed a road test if they'd been invented then), roll it down an incline in order to get it going and drive around Kirkby delivering hot meals to the elderly, the frail and the sick; people who had been pretty much abandoned by society in general and the welfare state in particular.

Everyone who received those meals welcomed them with open arms and big smiles and I had absolutely no doubt that a good many of the recipients did not eat hot food on the days when the Meals on Wheels van didn't arrive.

The Meals on Wheels service in Bilbury was organised and run by Patsy (my wife), Mrs Kennet (Patsy's mother), Adrienne (Patsy's sister), Anne Robinson aka Thwaites (Thumper Robinson's partner in life) and a dozen other locals.

The fact that the meals were cooked and delivered by women was not something that was done by choice or some sort of sexist division of labour. It just happened that way and in the 1970s, it was not considered strange in any way.

The meals were provided free of charge and the delivery drivers used their own vehicles and provided their own petrol. The women running the service took turns to prepare the meals (all of which were made from fresh, home grown ingredients which were served in very generous portions) and they had a more than adequate collection of metal serving dishes, complete with covers, which had been acquired by Patchy Fogg when a hotel in Taunton had closed its doors and there had been a sale of furniture, crockery and kitchen equipment.

It had once been suggested that the women might apply to the local council for a grant to help defray their costs but they had unanimously rejected the suggestion on the grounds that once the council got involved, men with clipboards would be following them around checking to see how much gravy was poured onto Mrs Fretwell's potatoes and how many sprouts had been put onto Mr Barton's plate.

At Christmas, at Easter and on their birthdays, the recipients of these meals each received a half bottle of wine, and these extras were paid for by an annual summer fete and bring-and-buy sale and an equally annual winter jumble sale.

No one thought any of this was exceptional and neither donors nor recipients regarded the Meals on Wheels service as demeaning or patronising in any way.

A visitor from London, who found out about the service, said that it was a very Victorian thing to do, that it smacked of soup kitchens and that such services should be provided by the State.

However, no one in Bilbury could quite understand why food handed out by the State would be any more satisfying than food handed out by warm-hearted, generous individuals who did what they did because they wanted to rather than because they had to.

One of the advantages of having such a service in the village was that the women delivering the meals could keep an eye on villagers who were elderly, frail or vulnerable in some way. And they could, of course, pass any concerns on to me.

‘My Mum saw a man called Axel Heidberg today,’ said Patsy, one evening. ‘We only put him onto our rota for meals this week. I don’t know where she got his name from but she said that he cried when she delivered his meal. She had a look in his kitchen and said it looked as though he’d been living on a diet of dry, stale cornflakes and packet soup. We’re going to deliver meals to him every day. And Mum took him a bag of groceries, tea, bread, milk, sugar and so on, which she bought from Peter Marshall. Peter also gave her half a dozen badly dented tins of fruit and soup – the ones that he usually sells at a discount.’

‘Peter gave her some tins? Gave her as in ‘without charging for them’?’

‘Yes!’

‘Peter Marshall? The man who once tried to charge me double for a packet of biscuits because he said they were so old that they could be classified as antiques and were an investment?’

‘He didn’t!’

‘He darned well did!’

‘Yes, but he can be generous sometimes.’

‘So it seems,’ I said, unable to hide my surprise at discovering this hidden side to Peter Marshall.

‘And my Mum can be very charming when she wants to be.’

‘Indeed, she can.’

‘Anyway, Mum wonders if you’d pop in and see him. Just give him a bit of a check-up.’

I took the address and promised to visit him the following day. Neither the name nor the address was familiar.

And, the next day, to my quiet astonishment, I discovered why: I had never met Mr Heidberg before and Dr Brownlow had never met him either.

Mr Heidberg, who had been born in Austria, had been living in the village for half a century and was living like a hermit. He had quite slipped through the cracks of the State’s welfare programme.

I had no idea how Mrs Kennet had found him. He lived on the outskirts of a hamlet called Smithy-on-the-Moor, which is four or five miles away, on the Barnstaple side of Bilbury.

I have always been fascinated by how villages develop and acquire their names.

Villages and towns sometimes develop in one particular spot through convenience. So, for example, London originally became a settlement because a gravel bottom to the river meant that it was the best place to cross the Thames. Spots which are sheltered or easily defended were popular sites for a small development in the Middle Ages. In England, it is common for a village to develop around a farm which opened a public house in a room or outbuilding. (It used to be very easy to open a pub in England. All you needed was a room, something alcoholic to sell to customers and a barmaid or barman to serve the stuff.)

Some villages get their name from a prominent landowner or from a topographical oddity.

Lynmouth, a little way to the east along the coast from Combe Martin, got its name because the word ‘lyn’ means torrent. Those who named the village got it right; on the 15th of August in 1952, ten inches of rain fell on Exmoor in 24 hours, two branches of the river flooded down steep sided narrow valleys, gathering boulders and destroying cottages in Lynmouth. The river drowned 34 people that night. History books show that similar things happened in 1607 and 1770. It is clear that the Saxons, who named the river, knew what they were doing.

Ilfracombe, the largest tourist resort in North Devon, is the valley belonging to someone called Alfred, though just who Alfred was is a mystery now. It almost certainly wasn’t Alfred the Great, the monarch renowned for his cake burning escapade.

Other villages acquire their name because there is a shop or business of some kind in the locality.

And so I have no doubt that Smithy-on-the-Moor was, as the name makes it clear, named because there used to be a blacksmith on the site and the site is on Exmoor.

There certainly isn’t a blacksmith there now and the hamlet is so small that it’s not surprising that its name no longer appears on modern local maps.

If the keeper of the local electoral roll ever did a census, they would probably find that there was only one name to put on the register under the name Smithy-on-the-Moor. And that name would be Axel Heidberg.

It wasn’t easy to find Mr Heidberg’s tiny, run down cottage.

Following the instructions given to me by Mrs Kennet, I took a small, pretty well unused track between two fields and eventually had to give up, stop the car and walk the rest of the way on foot. The track was rough and narrow and so uneven that I could hear the bottom of the Rolls scraping along on bits of rock and stone. Mrs Kennet drives her husband’s elderly Land Rover, which is built for such rough terrain.

Mr Heidberg, when I finally reached his home, told me that he wasn’t quite sure how old he was but that he was pretty sure that he had been born in February in Austria and that in England, Queen Victoria had been on the throne at the time.

He told me that his father had been a doctor who had worked in Germany and that the family had moved to

England at some point shortly after the end of the First World War. He couldn't remember precisely why the family had emigrated but said that although he was, by that time, living alone in an apartment in a building in Heidelberg he had accompanied his parents to England because they were both rather elderly and frail.

His father had been in his sixties when Mr Heidberg was born and his mother was what doctors tend to refer to as a 'mature' mother.

The family's modest fortune, which had been invested in German banks, took a steep dive when the German Mark was destroyed by the dramatic rates of inflation which characterised the early 1920s.

A small amount of money had been raised by the sale of Mrs Heidberg's jewellery but she and her husband died within a few years of each other and the house they had been renting, and which Mr Heidberg had been sharing with them, was repossessed when there was no money left to pay the rent.

'I miss them still,' said Mr Heidberg. 'They were both quite old when they died and I remember there were some who dismissed their deaths with the cruel comment that they had both enjoyed 'a good innings'. But I did not understand that attitude. It is, perhaps, a peculiarly English way of looking at things. Dying when we are old is no less a tragedy than dying when we are young. We feel sadness for the young who die unfulfilled, their lives just starting, but we may miss the elderly just as much if not more for we have known them for longer and we miss their wisdom, their experience, their knowledge.'

Mr Heidberg had sold the small amount of furniture which remained and had kept only an old accordion which had belonged to his father and which he had, as a boy, taught himself to play. He had toured England's coast giving performances on beaches and at hotels. When the accordion was damaged by vandals who disliked his German accent, he had become a 'gentleman of the road', sleeping rough and doing odd jobs at farms to earn enough money to buy a little food.

And he had ended up in Smithy-on-the-Moor, where, after sleeping under hedges and in barns for a fortnight, he had discovered the empty, derelict cottage he had adopted as his own.

No one had ever tried to throw him out but he still lived in constant fear that one day the owner would turn up and he would be evicted.

I don't think he could quite believe me when I told him that according to English law the cottage now belonged to him and nobody could throw him out.

I gave Mr Heidberg as good a check-up as I could. I couldn't weigh him because I didn't have any scales with me and he certainly didn't have any but he was clearly not overweight. I couldn't test blood or urine samples (I didn't have any blood or urine specimen bottles with me) but I checked his heart, his lungs and his blood pressure and I gave his nervous system a fairly comprehensive test.

I couldn't do a proper eye test but I looked at his fundi with my ophthalmoscope and checked his visual acuity by scribbling some letters on an old piece of cardboard. My informal examination showed no abnormalities. His joints all seemed to be in excellent condition too.

'You're pretty fit for whatever your age is,' I told him when I'd finished.

'You don't have to be ill just because you are old,' said Mr Heidberg wisely.

'Indeed not,' I agreed.

Looking around, it was clear that although Mr Heidberg himself was in pretty good condition, the same could not be said for his home which was, to say the least, rather primitive. There was no electricity and no gas, of course, and the only water supply came from a spring in the garden. Long, long ago someone had connected a piece of lead piping to a collecting funnel in the spring in order to feed a tap in the kitchen. The pipe had developed a leak and there was a bowl underneath the pipe to catch the water which dripped from it constantly. A privy which sat over a cesspit completed the amenities.

The house was packed with bits and pieces of furniture and crockery, most of which looked as if it had probably been salvaged from a rubbish heap. There were five wooden dining chairs in the living room but four of them were so badly broken that they were useless except as fuel. Indeed that was probably why Mr Heidberg had them there for the only heating in the house came, as was so common in Bilbury homes, from an open fireplace.

Water had come in through a hole in the roof and had damaged the ceiling in the downstairs living room and one of the downstairs sash windows had jammed open with the result that an icy cold draught swept through all the downstairs rooms. I could not begin to imagine how cold the house must have been in the winter. 'When there is snow outside then I also have snow in my living room,' said Mr Heidberg.

I pushed and pulled at the window and eventually managed to move it. Once it was freed, I could close it.

I then went upstairs with him into one of the bedrooms.

The hole in the roof, which had caused all the damage inside the house, was about two feet square and I guessed that at least half a dozen slates must have come loose and disappeared off the roof and into the overgrown garden beneath.

‘The first thing to do is to mend the roof,’ I told him.

‘I agree,’ said Mr Heidberg. ‘I tried to climb up there myself but I have no ladder and when I tried to climb onto a water butt by the back door, I fell onto the ground and hurt my arm.’ He showed me a healing bruise on his forearm. I told him that he had been lucky not to break anything and he agreed with this assessment.

I was, as I have so often been, quietly astonished at the way people will survive in adverse circumstances. The young believe they are immortal and they have not, in any case, been around long enough to have acquired a real and lasting affection for life; but it is the elderly, who know only too well that they are mortal, and who have seen the consequences of mortality, cling to life with the ferocity of a bargain hunter who has taken hold of her prey in a department store sale.

Suddenly, looking up at the hole in the roof, I had a brainwave.

‘Do you have an umbrella?’ I asked him.

Mr Heidberg went downstairs and rummaged around in the cupboard under the stairs. A couple of minutes later he re-joined me; this time he was clutching a large, colourful golf umbrella which advertised a well-known Scottish bank.

I took the umbrella from him, climbed onto a stout and rather ugly looking chest of drawers and then stuffed the umbrella up through the hole in the roof. Once the umbrella was through the hole, I put it up and then pulled down on the handle so that the umbrella sat on the roof, covering up the hole very effectively.

‘But won’t it blow away when there is wind?’ asked Mr Heidberg.

‘It would,’ I agreed. ‘But it isn’t going to if you’ve got some stout string somewhere.’

Mr Heidberg went back downstairs, revisited the cupboard under the stairs and returned clutching a ball of blue baler twine. Most things in Bilbury are held together with baler twine and as far as I am aware, there are only two colours available: blue or orange. I then used several lengths of baler twine to tie the handle of the umbrella to the handles on the stout and ugly chest of drawers.

Mr Heidberg was delighted.

‘I don’t know how long it will last,’ I warned him. ‘But I’ll try to find someone who can come and put on some new slates for you.

‘Why do you all do these kind things for me?’ he asked. There were tears rolling down both cheeks.

‘In Bilbury, we like to help each other out,’ I explained. ‘I’m just so sorry that we didn’t know you were here. But now that we have found you, we won’t forget you.’

‘Kind and beautiful ladies now bring me food,’ said Mr Heidberg. ‘Hot food, every day!’

‘I know,’ I said. ‘One of the beautiful ladies is my wife, Patsy. Another is her mother. And a third is my wife’s sister.’

‘But I have no money!’ said Mr Heidberg. ‘I cannot pay them.’

‘They don’t expect you to,’ I assured him.

He seemed overcome with what was happening and opened his mouth but did not say anything.

‘I’ll try to find someone to come and mend your roof,’ I told him.

‘No, no!’ said Mr Heidberg, shaking his head. ‘That is too much. It is all too much. I cannot accept all these kindnesses. I have no money.’

I thought for a moment and then looked around. ‘Maybe there is something in your house which is of value,’ I suggested. ‘Would you like me to ask a friend of mine to come and take a look? Maybe there is an old chair or piece of pottery that would raise some money for you.’ I knew that a proud old man like Mr Heidberg would feel better if he thought that he was paying his way.

‘That, I would like very much!’ said Mr Heidberg.

We shook hands, and I promised to return in a day or two’s time with a friend who would, hopefully, be able to find something which could be turned into cash.

And so, two days later, I returned to Smithy-on-the-Moor with Patchy Fogg, my good friend, my brother-in-law and the best antique dealer in Devon.

Patchy was still flush with cash after having identified and sold a marble-topped table at a house auction sale. He had made a small fortune from the sale of the table which the auctioneer and every other dealer had completely missed. The table had been sitting in a conservatory, in plain view, but it had been covered with pot plants. Since then he has, on several occasions, shown himself to be enormously generous to needy Bilburians by purchasing small items for rather more than their true value.

‘The doctor says you’d like me to see if there’s anything in the house worth a little money,’ said Patchy.

‘I would like that very much,’ said the old man.

‘Is there anything here of sentimental value?’ asked Patchy. ‘Anything that you wouldn’t want to part with?’

‘Nothing,’ said Mr Heidberg.

And so Patchy took a look around. Mr Heidberg and I watched him anxiously.

'Aha!' said Patchy eventually, spotting the bowl which was being used to catch the leaks from the lead pipe which brought water in from the spring outside in the garden. He picked up the bowl, replaced it with an old saucepan he took off a shelf, and examined it carefully.

'Would you sell this bowl?' Patchy asked.

'You can have it,' replied Mr Heidberg.

'No, no,' said Patchy. 'I would like to buy it. Would you sell it to me?'

'If you think it is worth anything I would very happily sell it,' said Mr Heidberg. 'It is only an old bowl.'

'I think it might fetch £100 at auction,' said Patchy. 'How about I give you £90 for it?'

'That is too much,' replied Mr Heidberg. 'If it is worth £100 at auction then you should pay me no more than £50. That is very fair.'

They settled on £75.

Mr Heidberg thought that too generous but Patchy insisted that he would not give any less. He counted out the notes and handed them to Mr Heidberg.

We got into the Rolls to leave and Patchy tossed the bowl into the back of the car.

'Crumbs!' I said. 'Do you always treat valuable bits of porcelain in such a debonair fashion?'

'It's not valuable and it's not porcelain,' laughed Patchy.

I started the car and we drove away. 'How much is it really worth?' I asked him.

'It's not worth tuppence,' said Patchy. 'It was made for Woolworths and sold there by the lorry load in the 1950s.'

'You're an old softy!' I told him.

'That's what my wife says,' replied Patchy.

A fortnight later, I returned to Smithy-on-the-Moor to check on Mr Heidberg. He was looking good. His roof had been repaired and he was still getting his hot meals every day. The leak in the pipe in his kitchen had been repaired too.

'I have found another of those bowls,' he said, as I was about to leave.

'Which bowls?' I asked, having forgotten.

'The same as the one your friend liked so much,' said Mr Heidberg. There was a sparkle of hope in his eyes. 'Do you think he would like to buy another?'

'I'll have a word with him,' I said, hoping that Patchy was still feeling flush and generous.

He was.

Three months later, Patchy had three worthless bowls and his wallet was £225 lighter.

'I hope that old man of yours hasn't got too many more of those damned bowls,' said Patchy, after he'd paid for the third one.

Mrs Leeson's Leg

Margaret Leeson and her husband Henry live in a splendid old manor house that is hidden away behind the highest yew hedge I have ever seen.

The house has been in Mrs Leeson's family for generations and her father served as a Minister in Winston Churchill's war time cabinet.

Henry Leeson was described to me as being 'something in the City of London' and when I asked what this meant I was told that it meant that he sat on the boards of half a dozen large, well-established companies where his job was to nod, munch biscuits and say 'harrumph' occasionally whenever anything unconventional was proposed.

I thought this sounded rather oppressive until I realised that there was probably some commercial value in having someone on the board of directors who questioned change in case it was being proposed for the sake of it, rather than to improve the company's prospects and profits.

The Leesons could, I suppose, have been described as eccentric in some of their ways, though they certainly wouldn't have said that there was anything remotely eccentric about any aspect of their lives. Indeed, they would have doubtless been affronted if they had ever heard the word 'eccentric' used to describe them.

Both well into their seventies but perfect examples of both agerasia and ataraxia, they saw themselves as stalwarts of the English countryside, solid patriots of the Old English variety; unbending, unchanging and reliable in their honest affection for tradition and traditional values. Today, they would be dismissed as feudal, anachronistic and embarrassingly out of their time, but back in the 1970s they were widely respected and admired for their determination to stick to standards which had long been regarded as having little or no relevance.

They dressed every evening for dinner.

He wore a dinner jacket with a bow tie and cummerbund. The bow tie was, of course, self-tied. He would have no more dreamt of wearing a ready-made bow tie on a piece of elastic than he would have dreamt of wearing a red cummerbund or a pair of gold hoop earrings in pirate style.

She always wore a posh frock and jewellery which other women might have kept in a bank vault.

They had a butler called Cecil, a housekeeper called Mary, a valet called George, a lady's maid called Jane, a cook called Edith, two kitchen staff both called Perkins and three gardeners all called Jim. They also had a groom/chauffeur who was called Wallace.

When I expressed some puzzlement about their ability to find gardeners all with the same name, Mr Leeson told me that they always called their servants by the same names. So, their butlers were always called Cecil, their housekeepers were always called Mary and, so on and so on. All their gardeners were always called Jim. Mr Leeson did not seem to think that there was anything unusual, exceptional or demeaning in this curious domestic ritual and the staff didn't seem to mind either. 'It makes it easy to remember their names,' explained Mr Leeson, when I asked him why they did this. 'And it avoids the potential embarrassment of getting a name wrong.'

At Christmas time, the Leesons held a carol service in their hall (which was big enough to fit the average sized cottage with room to spare for a garage and a garden shed) and in June every year, they held a fete in their garden in aid of the local church. (Bilbury has a good many summer fetes, all well attended.)

Mrs Leeson travelled around the village in a tilbury gig, pulled by a splendidly active grey mare which had a high stepping gait and a turn of speed which would, I suspect, have worried many a race horse. The horse pulling the gig was always called Gigi which seemed unusually appropriate.

Whenever I heard Mrs Leeson's gig approaching along one of the Bilbury lanes (and you could hear the clip clop of the horse some distance away), I would pull into the nearest gateway and wait for her to pass.

I saw them as patients only occasionally for they were, on the whole, an exceptionally healthy couple.

But early one evening I received a telephone call from Cecil the butler who, after apologising for the call and what he described as 'the inevitable inconvenience', then asked if I would be kind enough to visit Mrs Leeson as soon as might be convenient. Cecil was himself well past the customary retiring age and age had given him all the dignity and aloofness of a butler appearing in a story by P.G.Wodehouse. He had a way of talking that was all his own. I could not imagine him ever panicking or finding himself in a situation which he could not manage without breaking a sweat.

'Would she like me to visit in the morning or this evening?' I asked.

'Mrs Leeson would probably say that she would be happy to see you tomorrow morning but, to be honest with you, sir, and I hope you don't mind my mentioning it, I have talked briefly to Jane, Mrs Leeson's personal maid, who is, of course, more au fait with Mrs Leeson's present condition, than myself and we both feel that this evening would be preferable, sir,' replied Cecil.

I told him that I would leave straight away and should be knocking on the door within fifteen minutes at the very most.

Cecil said that that would be both most agreeable and much appreciated.

'I'm so sorry that Cecil bothered you,' said Mrs Leeson, who was lying in a four poster bed, propped up on four or five pillows. She was wearing a peach coloured nightdress and had a thin shawl around her shoulders. She was having difficulty in breathing and her skin was red and clearly flushed. A woman of about 30 or 35, whom I did not recognise, was standing on one side of the bed. Henry Leeson was standing at the other side of the bed. Both looked very concerned. The young woman was wearing what I took to be the standard, traditional uniform of a maid and I assumed that she was Jane, Mrs Leeson's personal maid.

I asked Mrs Leeson what had happened.

'I really don't know, doctor,' she replied. She spoke with some difficulty because her breathing rate was fast and she was clearly short of breath. It was an effort for her to produce each word. She seemed rather slow, even confused. She had to look at me for quite a while before finally recognising me.

I put the back of my hand on her forehead, which was red. She was very hot. Her skin was mottled. I checked her pulse. It was racing.

'Actually, I feel rather awful, doctor,' she said. 'I feel as though I am about to die. Do you think I'm about to die, doctor?' Her speech seemed slurred.

'You appear to have an infection,' I told her. 'But there's absolutely no reason to believe that you're going to die.'

At this point, I really didn't have the faintest idea how ill she really was. But there was clearly no point in making things worse by making her worry. I firmly believe that a doctor should, whenever possible and appropriate, try to reassure and comfort his patients. The curative powers of a reassuring, confident doctor have been shown to be just as good as those of quite significantly large doses of the most powerful medication.

'How long have you been feeling poorly,' I asked her.

'Most of the day,' she replied. 'Actually, I was rather poorly yesterday. So I suppose it started yesterday.'

'We thought it was just a bit of a bug, at first,' added her husband. I guessed he probably wanted to help his wife avoid having to answer too many questions. 'She's been going hot and cold.'

'Has she vomited at all?'

'Twice.' Mr Leeson looked across at the maid who nodded.

'Any bowel problems? Diarrhoea for example?'

'No.' This time it was the maid who spoke.

I rolled up the sleeve of Mrs Leeson's nightdress and took her blood pressure. It was low.

'Do you have any pains?' I asked her.

'Everywhere,' she replied. 'My legs and my arms and my back.' She paused to take a deep breath. 'I have pains everywhere.'

'She's been shivery and at one point she felt quite cold,' said Mr Leeson.

'And Mrs Leeson has been sweating quite a lot,' added the maid.

'Glowing, dear,' corrected Mrs Leeson. 'Only horses sweat.'

'I'm sorry, ma'am,' said the maid. But she smiled. 'Horses sweat, men perspire and ladies glow.'

'Exactly,' said Mrs Leeson.

'Have you had any tingling in your hands?'

Mrs Leeson thought for a while. 'No,' said. 'No, I don't think so.'

'Any tingling in your feet?'

'No, I haven't.'

'That's good,' I said.

I was pretty sure that Mrs Leeson had sepsis – a rather serious, sometimes deadly, condition in which the body reacts badly to an infection of some kind. The whole body sometimes overreacts and shuts down, sometimes reducing the blood flow to vital organs. It is, indeed, a real emergency which needs to be taken very seriously. I was glad to hear that neither her hands nor her feet were tingling because when that happens it rather suggests that they are being starved of oxygen and that the muscles and the skin are starting to die. It's not a good sign.

Many different types of infection can trigger a reaction of this type. A chest infection or a urinary infection can sometimes result in one of these nasty shock reactions.

'Have you had any sort of chest infection?' I asked Mrs Leeson.

She shook her head.

'Any urinary infection?'

She thought for a moment, as though the question were a difficult one. 'No, I don't think so,' she said. She turned towards her maid. 'Have I?'

'No, ma'am,' replied the maid, who clearly knew her mistress very well.

'You haven't had to go to hospital at all recently? Even as a visitor?'

'No,' she replied. 'I haven't been away from Bilbury for more than a month. I've been busy helping in the garden.'

'My wife likes to help prepare some of our flowers, fruits and vegetables for the village show,' explained Mr Leeson.

'Have you cut yourself at all? Scratched yourself?'

'I don't think so,' replied Mrs Leeson. She turned to her husband. 'Have I dear?'

'Not that I know of,' replied her husband.

'Actually,' said the maid, speaking softly and clearly rather embarrassed at contradicting both of her employers at the same time, 'if you don't mind my saying so, ma'am, you did scratch your leg on the rose bushes. You had a nasty scratch about two inches long. It bled a little. I had to throw away your stocking.'

'I didn't know that,' said Mr Leeson.

'It was a very small scratch, sir,' said the maid, who now seemed rather apologetic about mentioning it.

'Can I see the scratch?' I asked.

'I'll just pop outside,' said Mr Leeson, speaking softly and tip toeing towards the door. 'Call me when you're finished.'

I watched him go with some surprise.

The maid pulled back the bedclothes so that I could see Mrs Leeson's leg. There was a nasty looking scratch on the back of her left calf.

'Do you think that could have anything to do with it?' she asked.

'I think that is the cause of it,' I replied firmly. I quickly checked to make sure that there were no signs or symptoms of tetanus or lockjaw – jaw muscles in spasm, difficulty in swallowing, muscle stiffness and spasms elsewhere. There weren't.

'Do you think Mrs Leeson will need to go to hospital?' asked the maid when she had replaced the bed clothes. She then went to the door to tell Mr Leeson he could come back into his wife's bedroom.

'I'd rather treat her here,' I said. 'It's a long way to travel in an ambulance. And I'm afraid hospitals are full of infections.'

'What sort of treatment?' asked Mr Leeson.

'Antibiotics,' I said firmly. 'I'm going to start Mrs Leeson on a strong antibiotic straight away.' I took a packet of antibiotics out of my black medical bag and handed them to Mr Leeson. I told him how they had to be administered.

'You must call me if there is any new symptom or any change, particularly any deterioration,' I told him and the maid. 'Don't wait – call me immediately. If I need to visit I can be here within 15 minutes.'

They promised they would do so.

When I visited after the surgery the next morning, I was massively relieved to see that Mrs Leeson was slightly better. She wasn't completely restored to health, but she was looking and feeling better than she had been the night before. The antibiotics had clearly started to do their work.

It took nearly a week for her to make a recovery.

At the time, I remember being grateful that we were able to use good antibiotics to tackle such infections.

What I feared at the time, and wrote about in numerous articles and medical books, was that the overuse of antibiotics (both by doctors and by farmers) would result in many bugs acquiring resistance.

These days, many patients who have acquired sepsis as a result of an infection die because antibiotics no longer work.

But, that is now and this was then.

Mrs Leeson made a complete recovery and was able to see several items from her garden win prizes at the Bilbury Village Show.

Ironically, the roses which had nearly killed her only managed third place.

The Bicyclists

Thumper had been to the hairdresser.

‘Anne has been nagging me for months to get it cut,’ he said. ‘She said I looked disreputable.’

‘You are disreputable,’ Patchy pointed out with unarguable honesty.

‘You look younger,’ I told Thumper.

He ignored Patchy and glowered at me. ‘That’s what Anne said. I don’t want to look younger. I want to look older.’ He grinned. ‘I was hoping to look old enough to be able to get into the cinema to see the saucy movies.’

‘You could always find an adult to go with you,’ I suggested.

‘I don’t know any adults,’ responded Thumper quickly.

There was no sensible answer to that so nobody said anything.

We were sitting in the snug in the Duck and Puddle.

Thumper had his usual medicine, a pint of Old Restoration; a brew so toxic that it burns permanent marks if spilt onto a wooden table top. Patchy was drinking a glass of very dry white wine. I had a glass of Glenfarclas, one of my top ten favourite of all the Scottish malts. Frank, who had drunk his daily allowance of alcohol, was sipping a ginger beer, a beverage for which he has recently professed a great and surprising liking.

‘Adrienne was watching television when I got home yesterday evening,’ said Patchy, obviously triggered by Thumper’s reference to the cinema. ‘She was watching some programme about hospitals. They were showing an operation.’ Patchy shuddered. ‘Awful.’ He shuddered again. ‘Adrienne had prepared a mixed grill for dinner. Sausages with a nice piece of liver, a couple of kidneys and some fried onions. I don’t know how she can watch these programmes. It nearly put me off my food.’ He shuddered again.

‘They have these medical programmes on the television all the time,’ said Thumper. ‘Anne was watching a programme about childbirth the other day. This Irish woman called Murphy was having triplets. Who could possibly be interested in that?’

‘Mr Murphy?’ I said.

‘We should all be grateful for small Murphys,’ muttered Patchy.

I looked at him and raised an eyebrow in acknowledgement and appreciation.

Patchy smiled modestly.

One of these days they’ll have a channel devoted to this sort of thing,’ said Thumper deliberately ignoring Patchy’s bon mot. ‘They’ll set up a camera in an operating theatre and just show whatever is happening – 24 hour operating theatre.’

‘A lot of the time there isn’t anything much happening,’ I pointed out. ‘Except for someone scrubbing the walls and floor.’

‘People would watch that,’ said Thumper without hesitation. ‘It would be better than that potter’s wheel they show.’

‘Do they still show that?’ asked Patchy.

Suddenly the door burst open and the peace of the early afternoon was shattered by two youths who came into the snug as though they were being chased by wild dogs. They looked to be in their early 20s. One was tall and the other was not. The tall one had shoulder length hair tied back in a ponytail. The short one, who seemed to have had his mouth sewn into a scowl, had one of those standard short-back-and-sides haircuts which customers got in the 1960s when they forget to tell the barber how they wanted him to cut their hair. It was a hairstyle popular with schoolteachers and parents. The two newcomers were both wearing khaki shorts and open-necked, short-sleeved shirts.

‘Shop!’ shouted the tall one in that rude way some impatient people shout when they walk into a shop, find it temporarily empty, and want to be served.

The short one laughed a good deal as though this were the funniest thing he’d ever heard. It may well have been. He was young and looked as if his experience of life was probably limited to the twin excitements of getting up in the morning and going to bed at night.

‘We’ve cycled from Barnstaple,’ said the tall one, answering a question no one had asked and giving an answer which was, I fear, of little interest to anyone present.

I looked out of the window and there were two racing bicycles leaning against a wall outside the pub.

I looked to check because I was once in the Duck and Puddle with Frank and Thumper when two Austrians turned up. One, a male, looked to be in his 40s. He had grey hair and a grey beard and wore a tweed jacket, which had a little belt at the back, and a pair of bottle green corduroy trousers. His companion, a woman, looked to be slightly older. She had red hair which stretched down to her waist and she wore what we later discovered was traditional Austrian costume: a dirndl and a white blouse.

They each ordered a glass of red wine, and a dish of Gilly's famous hotpot, though they probably didn't know at the time that it was famous.

We all chatted a little and Thumper asked them what they were doing in Devon. They said, or we thought they said, that they were cyclists and that they had been attending a festival in Glastonbury. They were now taking a few days holiday. Neither of them looked as if they were cyclists, and they certainly weren't dressed for cycling, but appearances can be deceptive and, as Thumper pointed out afterwards, they were Continental Europeans and you can never tell with people who come from the other side of the Channel. After all, it is a place where men wear leather shorts and slap their thighs at the drop of a hat.

It was summer at the time so it was raining heavily.

'Do you want to put your machines under cover?' asked Frank, who has a more generous heart than is sometimes appreciated.

The Austrians looked at him, puzzled. (We didn't know then that they were Austrian, although we knew that they were certainly foreign.)

'Your bikes,' said Frank. 'Do you want to put your bicycles in my shed?'

'Bicycles?' said the man, frowning and looking puzzled. 'What is it with the bicycles?'

'You said that you were cyclists,' Frank pointed out.

'Not at all,' said the man, now even more puzzled. 'I have a bicycle never ridden. Not once in my life have I a bicycle ridden.' He turned to his companion and spoke to her in what I now assume must have been German. She, looking quite indignant, shook her head.

It turned out that they were both psychics, which explained, I suppose, why they had been to Glastonbury. There's a lot of that sort of thing going on there.

Once everything had been sorted out, they were friendly enough in a cold, distant and rather superior sort of way. Frank, Thumper and I laughed about it. We thought it was quite a funny mistake. But the two foreigners, being Austrian and therefore not having an English sense of humour, didn't laugh at all, of course. And they didn't understand why we had laughed about it.

We hadn't seen a car outside, or heard one arrive, so we assumed that since they weren't on bicycles they must be on a walking holiday.

We were, therefore, astonished when they told us that they had started off from Glastonbury only that morning. They both then looked slightly puzzled when we congratulated them on their achievement. We told them that they must be very fit because they showed no signs of tiredness after their long journey.

'It was almost nothing,' said the man, with a shrug. 'We are a car very good German having. And I a skilful driver am.'

It turned out they had left their car in a farm gateway while they took a walk around the village; and that they had travelled no more than a quarter of mile on foot when they turned up at the Duck and Puddle.

We all felt very foolish and we were glad when they left. Frank, I remember, was particularly relieved to see the back of them.

'I felt nervous having them in the pub,' he whispered, checking to make sure that they'd really left the pub and were out of earshot.

We all looked at him, puzzled.

'Mind you,' he said, 'they were upfront about it. You've got to give them that.'

We were all still confused.

'They didn't look dangerous but I suppose you can never tell, can you? Some of these people get very good at hiding it.' He pulled an imaginary knife across his throat and shivered. 'And then all of sudden you find them slitting your throat for no reason at all. Just for them thinking you'd looked at them a bit funny.'

'Frank, how much have you had to drink?' asked Patchy.

'No more than the usual,' said Frank defiantly. This was back in the days when his 'usual' would have been enough to put most people into a coma.

'So, what the devil are you talking about?' Patchy asked.

'Them psychopaths,' said Frank. 'I'm talking about having that pair of psychopaths sitting in my pub.'

I remember, it took us nearly 20 minutes to explain to Frank that they weren't psychopaths or cyclists but psychics.'

'Oh, right,' said Frank, eventually. There was a long silence before the inevitable. 'So, what's a psychic do? Is there any future in it?'

But that was then and the two youths who were wearing khaki shorts had definitely arrived on bicycles. They each ordered a still lemonade and a ham sandwich. Frank tottered off to the Duck and Puddle kitchen to fulfil their order.

‘It’s quite a ride from Barnstaple,’ said Thumper in a kindly tone. ‘Where are you headed next?’

‘We’re going on to Lynmouth,’ replied the tall cyclist. He managed to sound both defiant and defensive.

‘That’s some journey,’ said Thumper. ‘Are you staying there for the night?’

‘No, no,’ said the tall cyclist. ‘We’re going back to Barnstaple today.’

‘Crumbs,’ said Thumper. ‘I’m very impressed.’

‘Quite a round trip,’ I said. I too was impressed. The distance between Barnstaple and Lynmouth might not be all that vast but the roads are not good and there are quite a number of hills to be climbed. I couldn’t help wondering if the two youths knew what they were letting themselves in for. ‘That road is very hilly,’ I pointed out

‘It won’t be a problem for us,’ said the tall cyclist, with a careless shrug. It seemed to me that he had all the false confidence of someone aged 13 or 14.

‘If you are young and you believe in yourself you can do anything,’ said the small youth with the scowl, now adding a sneer to the scowl. ‘The trouble with older fogies like you lot is that you all think negatively.’

I thought this was a trifle unfair, ageist and inaccurate; and particularly inappropriate since my remarks had been well-intentioned.

Frank reappeared, carrying two large plates, upon each which lay a ham sandwich. ‘Mustard?’ he asked.

‘No,’ said the tall youth rudely. His smaller companion said nothing.

‘You can do anything?’ asked Patchy, putting the stress on the word anything.

‘Of course!’ replied the youth with all the confidence of a young man who has done very little and knows even less. ‘Nothing is impossible if you simply have the will.’

‘Really?’

‘Of course!’

Frank returned with the two lemonades.

‘Lift Frank up over your head while standing on one leg,’ said Thumper.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘You said you could do anything if you put your mind to it, so lift Frank over your head while standing on one leg.’

Frank looked rather alarmed at this but it was never going to happen. The youth with the scowl looked confused and then sniggered derisively.

‘If that’s too difficult then sing one of the arias from La bohème. Sing it in the original Italian, please.’

‘Why?’ demanded the youth.

‘You said you could do anything,’ Patchy pointed out quite accurately. He paused and held up two fingers. ‘But you can’t can you? So that’s two things you can’t do. We could go on all day thinking up things you can’t do.’

I looked at Patchy. ‘If La bohème has Italian lyrics, which I’m sure it has, why is the title of the opera in French?’

‘Ah, that’s a good question,’ replied Patchy. ‘The Italian libretto, which was written by two Italians, was sort of loosely based on a book called *Scenes de la vie de Boheme* which was written by a bloke called Henri Murger who was French.’

I was glad I asked.

The youth with the scowl was staring open mouthed at Patchy.

‘The world premiere was held in Turin and conducted by a young fellow called Toscanini, of whom you may have heard,’ said Patchy.

‘So there was never much chance of the whole thing being written in another language, English say? Or Dutch?’

‘Not really, no.’

‘What’s all that got to do with anything?’ demanded the youth with the built in scowl. I got the feeling that he was aggrieved because he was now no longer the centre of attention.

‘Absolutely nothing,’ beamed Patchy.

The young cyclists turned their backs on us and concentrated on their sandwiches.

Half an hour later, having consumed their ham sandwiches (without mustard) and drunk their lemonade, the demon cyclists remounted their metallic steeds and set off to continue their journey to Lynmouth.

Sadly, it turned out that they had bitten off rather more than they could chew. Two days later, I heard that they had sought refuge at a bed and breakfast establishment in Parracombe and that on the following morning they had hitched a ride to Barnstaple on the back of a tractor drawn trailer. They and their bikes had been spotted by Thumper who said they looked like a very poor entry in the annual carnival at Withymoor.

‘I used to ride a bicycle,’ said Frank, when the pair had pedalled away.

We looked at him and stared in astonishment. I would, I think, have been less surprised if he’d told me that he’d seen a giraffe cycling around the Devon lanes.

‘Get away with you!’ said Thumper.

‘No, I did,’ insisted Frank. ‘When I was a lad. It didn’t have gears but it had a mudguard on the back and a little wire basket at the front. I used to deliver newspapers, groceries and pigeons.’

We stared at him, still struggling to come to terms with the idea of Frank riding a bicycle.

‘I can understand the newspapers and the groceries,’ said Patchy. ‘But why pigeons?’

‘A mate of my Dad’s bred racing pigeons. I used to have to pedal out into the countryside and let the pigeons go at a particular time so that the bloke who owned them could see how long they took to get home. I was quite good on a bicycle,’ continued Frank. ‘I could ride for a little way without holding onto the handlebars.’

We were impressed.

‘Not ridden one for years,’ said Frank, thoughtfully. ‘Not since the day I fell off. It’s bloody painful when you fall off.’

‘Did you hurt yourself?’ asked Patchy.

‘Landed on my head,’ said Frank.

‘Ah, that was probably the safest thing to do,’ said Thumper, apparently solicitously.

Frank looked at him, slightly puzzled.

‘Least likely to do any damage,’ Thumper explained.

Frank frowned, thought for a moment and then threw his bar towel at Thumper’s head.

Caleb’s Ankle

Of course, not all visitors to the Duck and Puddle were as rude or as ungracious as the demon cyclists or the psychic Austrians.

The same day that the two demon cyclists called in on their way to Lynmouth, we had a visit from two of Frank’s most long-standing customers: Bunty and Caleb Theodore.

Mr and Mrs Theodore were both in their late 80s and had been occasional regulars at the Duck and Puddle for donkey’s years. They say they come for the sandwiches but I suspect they just enjoy our sparkling conversation and intelligent repartee.

(Frank defines an ‘occasional regular’ as someone who patronises the pub at intervals of more than a month between visits. Someone who visited the pub in 1957 and came back in 1972 would, in Frank’s terms, be described as an ‘occasional regular’. And so there are holidaymakers and tourists who visit Bilbury on an annual or biannual basis who can properly describe themselves as ‘occasional regulars’.)

The Theodores live in West Bugford and to be honest they both looked their age when I first met them.

Caleb, who was reputedly once a Governor in one of Britain’s few remaining colonies, had had two heart attacks and suffered a mild stroke which has left him with a hardly noticeable limp. He had recovered from cancer of the lung 20 years earlier and suffered from emphysema.

Over the years his wife, Bunty, had parted company with one breast, her uterus and both her ovaries. (‘It’s a damned effective way to lose weight,’ she once said. On another occasion, she complained that there would soon be so much of her in the hospital incinerator that she would have to give that as her permanent address.) In her 20s, she developed diabetes and in her 70s she developed macular degeneration.

Caleb had a wobbly right leg and she had a dodgy left leg. They both used walking sticks, and for the past nine years had taken first prize in the three-legged race at the village sports day.

But they didn’t think or behave like people who were within hailing distance of their century and they certainly didn’t think or behave like people who were inclined to be aware of their mortality.

They were as full of life as anyone half a century younger.

Their attitude seemed to be: ‘Come here, Life! You’ve given me as good as you can. Now, it’s your turn. Take this, that and this.’

The lives of too many of the older folk I have met have been dominated by their things they meant to do, wanted to do, never got round to doing or did and now regret.

Caleb and Bunty, on the other hand, had filled their lives with so many ideas, plans, hopes and ambitions that any failings and fears which might have defined their lives were effectively smothered and unable to take a hold on their memories.

For most of us, it is our fears and regrets which define the people we become; it is our fears which come back in the night, like ghosts, and which terrorise our lives. It is our regrets which interfere with our ambitions so that instead of looking forward we are forever peering over our shoulders at the past. Caleb and Bunty were so occupied with tomorrow that they never had time for yesterday.

They had interests and enthusiasms galore.

For example, they were both keen gardeners and on one occasion when I visited them, they showed me around their amazing garden. To my astonishment, they pointed out a number of plants which were named after parts of the human body. I remember they showed me lady’s-tresses (a type of orchid) liverwort and navelwort. (At the end of this book, there is an appendix in which I have, with Caleb’s help, listed some of the many plants which are named after bits and pieces of the human body.)

Despite their advanced years and their frailty, Caleb and Bunty were always full of ideas and energy and over the months, they used to come to the Duck and Puddle to sit in the Snug and discuss their latest plans. Retirement is, of course, an entirely artificial concept and it was not an idea which Caleb and Bunty had given any consideration; they were serial entrepreneurs and risk was in their blood.

Some of their plans were quite fantastic and wildly unworkable. But several of them were definitely practical.

I learnt a great deal from them – not least the best way to deal with administrators and bureaucrats.

It was Caleb who taught me that it was possible to cause great chaos in government departments, utility companies and large multinational organisations by carefully preparing your correspondence.

So, for example, you could say (see page 2) at the bottom of page 1 but then just put page1 into the envelope all alone. The recipient would think they had lost page 2 and would eventually write back asking for the missing information. Or you could put in a reference to a Mr Harrison who ‘in his letter referring to his matter pointed out that…'. There would, of course, be no Mr Harrison.

These small tricks added a frisson of entertainment to tedious correspondence and, Caleb pointed out, often helped to derail a bureaucratic investigation.

Sadly, these tricks don't work these days. No one working for a government department, utility company or large multinational organisation ever reads any mail – let alone bothers to reply to it.

Still, they were fun while they lasted.

I've forgotten the details of many of the business proposals put forward by the Theodores, but I do remember that we all got terribly excited when they talked to us about setting up a gambling ship in the Bristol Channel. They believed, quite wrongly as it turned out, that if they anchored a ship in the middle of the Channel they would be far enough outside territorial waters to be able to avoid all the relevant legislation. They had seen a movie in which American gangsters had organised a similar scheme with great success and they'd rather hoped to try the idea in the waters off Ilfracombe. Sadly, this was an idea which was not of its time.

And then there was the theme park they wanted to set up to celebrate Sherlock Holmes and his loyal companion Dr Watson. Their plan was to purchase and renovate a tumble down manor house on Dartmoor. They hoped to build a museum and a library and to hire actors to play Sherlock Holmes, Dr John Watson, Professor Moriaty, Mycroft Holmes, Inspector Lestrade, Mrs Hudson and Irene Adler. And they also intended to hold 'mystery' weekends where visitors could join Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson as they attempted to solve 'a case'. They planned to dress up a Great Dane to play the part of the Baskerville's notorious hound.

That project got quite close to realisation but fell quite late on when planning officials refused to countenance necessary changes to the old manor house they were hoping to restore. In the end, no one could think of anything else to do with it and so the old manor house had to be demolished so I suppose we can chalk that one up as another 'victory' for planning nonsenses. I never got round to visiting the Manor House but I saw photographs and it was a marvellously scary looking place.

Caleb once told me that most people assume that the folk in authority know what they are doing. This, he said, is wrong. 'The people in authority may know what you are doing and they almost certainly know what I am doing but they don't have the faintest idea what they themselves are doing.'

On another occasion, the Theodores got quite close to opening a nightclub in Ilfracombe. Their plan was to create a club which looked like a pirates' hideout, complete with seating designed to look like fake treasure chests and a bar selling many different varieties of rum. The nightclub failed at a late-stage hurdle when the Theodores were gazumped and the empty building they were hoping to purchase was bought by a hungry supermarket chain looking for a site where they could sell tins of baked beans and boxes of washing powder.

At one time, the couple wanted to open a pub in South Molton.

Their marketing ploy was to give the pub a name that would give businessmen and businesswomen a chance to go and have a drink without their colleagues knowing what they were getting up to. And so they planned to call their pub something like 'The Gym' or 'My Accountant's Office', thus enabling customers to say, with perfect honesty, 'I'm just off to the gym' or 'I must pop along to my accountant's office'.

Bunty planned to dress the barmaids in low cut blouses and high cut skirts (designed to be just low enough and high enough to delight the male customers without upsetting the female ones) and to dress a couple of barmen in sailor outfits, even equipping them with little sailor hats. Her plan was that these would prove an attraction for female customers though, as Thumper pointed out, there was an excellent chance that the sailor boys might turn out to attract a certain sort of male customer rather than to prove a magnet for heterosexual women.

None of this mattered, however, for this brilliant plan failed at the last minute not because of the sailor hats but because a brewery chain opened a new pub next door to the site where the Theodores had intended to open their public house. The brewery called their pub 'The Smuggler's Rest', (a name which should have won them some sort of prize for unoriginality) and equipped it with half an acre of red plastic and two dozen old hunting prints. 'The Smuggler's Rest' was a success only because the brewery sold its own beer at half price in order to undercut, and destroy, the competition.

Not all of Caleb and Bunty's proposed business schemes ended in failure.

On the contrary, a number of their projects managed to get all the way to fruition and were astonishing successes.

So, for example, they opened a novelty miniature golf course in Westward Ho! This turned out to be enormously popular with holidaymakers and was for many years something of a money spinner for them, helping to pay for them to pursue some of their other dreams.

And they opened the first new cinema to be built in North Devon for as long as anyone could remember. They converted a warehouse which had stood empty for years and had it fitted out with second-hand seats and an old screen which they had brought down from somewhere in Scotland. Their 'unique selling point' was that the cinema would show old classic movies; mostly shot in black and white. That too proved to be very popular with holidaymakers, particularly on rainy days.

I remember Bunty, Caleb, Thumper, Patchy, Gilly, Frank, Patsy and I all spending a Sunday afternoon discussing names for the new cinema.

Caleb had a wonderful old dictionary which enabled him to tell us that the word Odeon was originally devised to describe a theatre for musical contests in ancient Greece and Rome, that the word Hippodrome was originally used to denote an open air course for horse and chariot racing and that the word Alhambra described a palace built for the Moorish kings in Granada and Spain.

We took a vote on what the cinema should be named and agreed on The Alhambra. We all thought the name had the gravitas required to give status to a crumbling warehouse.

Six months later, the cinema was up and running and showing the marvellous *Thin Man* films, starring William Powell and Myrna Loy. The Theodores followed this with a season of Bogart movies.

Sadly, the cinema eventually had to close.

I never knew why but Thumper always reckoned it was because someone on the local council found out that locals and visitors had been spotted enjoying themselves. I suspect there may have been some truth in this. I doubt if Caleb and Bunty made any money out of the cinema but they certainly had a lot of fun with it.

'So, what's new?' asked Thumper, when the Theodores walked in.

(I suppose, if I am honest which I always am, I have to admit that to say that they 'walked in' is rather misleading in that it implies a sense of certainty, determination and speed and none of these could be used to describe the Theodore's progress. There was a certain amount of hobbling and limping involved whenever the Theodores (particularly Caleb) chose to move from A to B, and progress was always on the stationary side of slow.)

As usual, despite their years, neither of them was wearing anything beige or made with useful Velcro attachments or elasticated sides.

Bunty was wearing a flowered print skirt in yellow and green, a beautiful yellow blouse and green shoes. She had her hair cut in what is, I think, called a pageboy bob. It was dyed blonde and had a purple streak on one side which gave her a gaily piratical air.

Caleb was wearing bottle green cavalry twill trousers and a stylish jacket in red corduroy. He wore a multi-coloured shirt and a Marylebone Cricket Club tie which clashed with the shirt and everything else he was wearing, though, of course, it is an acknowledged fact of sartorial life that a bacon and egg coloured MCC tie clashes with most colour schemes. The tie was perfectly tied in a Windsor knot, with the two ends nicely aligned. Whenever I try to tie a Windsor knot, I end up with one end of the tie three or four inches longer than the other. This never seemed to happen to Caleb.

'We came to pick your brains,' said Bunty.

They didn't bother to order drinks because Frank new exactly what they wanted: a small cherry brandy for her and half a pint of Guinness for him. In addition, she would have two packets of salted peanuts and he would have a packet of pork scratchings. Then, half an hour later, they would each have a couple of Frank's enormous sandwiches.

'In that case, are you sure you came to the right place?' asked Frank, over his shoulder.

Bunty ignored him. 'Caleb is having trouble with his foot,' she said. 'His own GP has made an appointment for him to go back to the Prosthetics Clinic but there's a nine week waiting list.'

'We wondered if you fellows had any bright ideas,' said Caleb.

Frank brought their drinks, together with the peanuts and the pork scratchings.

I think I forget to mention earlier that during the Second World War, Caleb lost his right leg below the knee. Ever since then he's used a rather old-fashioned and very heavy prosthesis; partly made of metal and partly made of wood. The experts had on many occasions tried to persuade him to upgrade to a more modern, lighter prosthesis but Caleb was attached to his old, faithful foot and calf. He said he'd got used to it and, at his time of life, didn't want to spend time breaking in a new prosthesis. He certainly got around moderately well with it.

At his suggestion, I took a look at the faulty leg.

'One of the bolts holding my foot onto my shin has sheared,' said Caleb. 'The result is that the whole foot wobbles about a bit.' He waggled his foot and for a moment I thought it was going to fall off. He had effected a very temporary repair with a piece of metal which looked as though it had been taken from a broken door bolt.

'I got the temporary piece of metal from a broken door bolt,' said Caleb, when he saw me examining the repair.

'We've got a wedding next Saturday,' said Bunty. 'Our granddaughter is getting married. Caleb's terribly worried that his foot will fall off at an inopportune moment.'

It occurred to me that I couldn't think of an opportune moment for a foot to fall off. But I didn't say anything.
'This should be in a museum,' I told him, poking at the faulty prosthesis. It really was very old. There were signs of rust on the metal parts and what looked like woodworm holes in the wooden part.

‘That’s where it’s going when I’ve finished with it,’ said Caleb rather proudly. ‘When I snuff it, the hospital people are going to put the whole caboodle into their collection of ancient prostheses.’

‘Meanwhile,’ I said, ‘it seems absurd that you should have to wait more than two months to have your dodgy joint mended.’

‘Reggie,’ said Thumper suddenly.

We all looked at him.

‘Reggie Westbury,’ explained Thumper. ‘At Tolstoys.’

Tolstoys is, for reasons far too complicated to explain, the name of our local garage.

‘A garage?’ I said. ‘How can the garage help?’

‘Reggie makes a lot of car parts,’ explained Thumper. ‘I bet he could easily make a bolt for Caleb’s ankle joint.’

Five of us went round to Tolstoy’s garage together. Thumper, Patchy and I led the way in the Rolls and Caleb and Bunty followed in their Morris Minor. Frank had to stay in the Duck and Puddle in case any other customers turned up.

It took Reginald less than 30 minutes to make a new bolt for Caleb’s ankle joint.

I’ve rarely seen anyone quite as delighted. It is no exaggeration to say that Caleb was tickled pink, over the moon and as pleased as Punch. ‘That’s marvellous!’ he said. ‘I’ll ring the doctor tomorrow and tell him to cancel the appointment at the clinic. How much do I owe you?’

‘Five shillings will cover it,’ said Reginald, who had not at that time adapted to Britain’s decimal currency. Five shillings was 25 pence.

‘Cheap at twice the price,’ said Caleb, taking out his wallet.

‘Ok, ten shillings then,’ said Reginald.

Caleb, clearly surprised, looked at him.

‘Don’t be daft,’ said Reginald. ‘Five bob is fine.’

Caleb then insisted on taking us back to the Duck and Puddle to celebrate.

He didn’t mind a bit that the celebrations cost him rather more than the repair.

The Bathroom Cabinet

I looked at the pieces of chipboard laid out on the drawing room floor and scratched my head. There were, and I had counted them, 18 pieces of artificial wood, 28 funny little bits of metal of a size and variety I had never seen before, and a large, mixed plastic bag full of screws and catches. There was an exploded diagram which looked as if it were a map of the Tokyo transport system after a successful air raid attack. And there was a small tube of glue which had printed on the side a warning not to get any of the stuff on your skin. 'In event on skin contacting telephone doctor straightway.' This rather alarmed me since 'in event on skin contacting' I would be consulting myself and I didn't have the foggiest idea what I should tell myself. There was no information on the tube about the nature of the contents.

Oh, and there was an instruction booklet too.

Not that the instruction booklet was much good. It had either been written in a foreign language and then translated into English by a first year language student or else it had been written by a half-witted sadist with an unusual sense of humour.

I looked again at the paragraph I had been attempting to understand.

'Place the rocheted console bracket under PIECE AA and connect PIECE G to PIECE HH with the aid of one of the small congealant screws and wash with connection adjustable type OO using the tool provided and then while holding PIECE AA and PIECE EE with PIECE M put bracket lock against console base and use fixator clip to console PIECE F on side of left side of cabinet with fixator screwings against wall connection bracketing to adjust the PIECE MO towards back of side of cabinet against fixed lock with securing tool with fixator clip and adjust screwings against door at point JJ on plan with screwing tool before adjusting to match width of PIECE R.'

I read the paragraph silently, I read it aloud and then I held it on its side and tried to read it with one eye closed. I then read it to Ben, the dog, who listened attentively but who didn't seem to understand it any better than I had. I then wandered around the house until I found Patsy and I read it to her. She laughed and thought I'd made it up but then I showed her the booklet and she knew I hadn't made it up and she got quite cross and said how very silly it was that anyone should print such rubbish.

The bits and pieces laid out on the drawing room floor were supposed to be a bathroom cupboard but I didn't see how they could ever become a bathroom cabinet or, indeed, anything more sophisticated than a basket of kindling.

I went back downstairs, found the advertisement which contained the telephone number of the company from which I had purchased the cupboard, and rang them up.

'In the advertisement which I saw, and to which I responded, the cupboard looks like a cupboard,' I said when someone finally answered the telephone. 'But you've sent me a construction set. Is my cupboard supposed to be all in bits or did it fall apart in the mail?'

'We send out all our furniture in a consumer friendly deconstructed format. This enables us to maximise product functionability and to minimise cost.'

'I wish you'd told me that I was going to have to make the thing myself.'

'If you look carefully at our advertisement you will see that we state in the small print that we believe in package minimalisation and so, as a result, we offer all our furniture in a user friendly deconstructed format.'

I looked at the advertisement and there it was, in the small print at the bottom of the page. 'We believe in package minimalisation. For the convenience of our customers, all our furniture is supplied in a user friendly deconstructed format.'

'How is it more convenient for me to have to build it myself?' I demanded.

'If it arrived ready-made it would be a very large and cumbersome package and because of the weight you might have difficulty lifting it.'

'It would weigh exactly the same!'

'Yes, but it would be larger and more cumbersome.'

'If I'd known I was going to have to build it myself I wouldn't have bought it!' I said rather crossly.

'Do you have a reference number for the item in question?' asked the woman with a weary sounding sigh.

I looked at the box and found the reference number, which was stamped on the outside of the package. 'The reference number appears to be DEGM483736.'

'Was that BCEN483736?'

'No, no. It's DEGM483736.'

'B for Bravo?'

'No! D for Diarrhoea.'

‘Oh, you mean D for Delta?’

‘D for Diarrhoea will do.’

‘Oh no! It should be D for Delta. And then it was C for Charlie?’

‘No, it’s E for Earache.’

‘You mean E for Echo?’

I was getting fed up with this. ‘Why can’t it be E for Earache?’

‘It has to be E for Echo.’

‘But Earache also begins with an E. And Earache is just as good a word as Echo. In fact I don’t mind betting that people use the word Earache more than they use the word Echo.’’

‘It has to be E for Echo. It cannot be E for Earache. I have Echo written down on a special list. Everyone has to use the special list.’

I wrote down E for Earache on the back of the leaflet that had come with the bathroom cupboard.

‘Well, I’ve got E for Earache written down here,’ I said.

‘No, you have to use the same list as I use,’ she said sniffily. ‘And the third letter of your reference number is E for Echo?’

‘No, the third letter of my reference number is G for Gastritis. Or, if you prefer, it could be G for Gallstones.’

‘G for Golf,’ said the woman.

We argued about this for a while.

‘And the fourth letter,’ said the woman, who was beginning to sound slightly hysterical. ‘Would that be N for November?’

‘No. It would be M for Metatarsophalangeal.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘M for Metatarsophalangeal.’

‘Is that rude? It sounds rude.’ She was clearly preparing herself to be offended. Some people like to be offended so that they can take offence.

‘No, it’s certainly not rude. It refers to the joints between the metatarsal bones of the foot.’

‘Well, it should be M for Mike.’

‘Who is Mike?’

‘I don’t know who Mike is. But it should be M for Mike.’

‘Why not M for Michelle? Or M for Miranda? Or M for Maurice?’

‘I don’t know. But it’s M for Mike.’

‘It could just as well be M for Muscles. Yes, definitely. It is M for Muscles.’

Eventually, we agreed on the reference number although not on what the letters stood for. The numbers were easy.

‘Is the product you purchased the two-seater, foam cushioned garden swing seat with adjustable springs?’ she asked, presumably having compared the reference number on which we had agreed with her product list.

‘No. It’s a bathroom cabinet.’

‘Are you absolutely certain it isn’t a garden swing seat?’

‘Pretty sure. It doesn’t look much like a bathroom cabinet but I’m pretty confident you could never make a garden swing seat out of these bits and pieces.’

‘Well, according to our records your product is a garden swing seat. You must be mistaken. Never mind, it doesn’t matter. All our products have the same five year guarantee and customer friendly policy regarding returns. You can take advantage of our returns policy for this product by following the instructions on the back page of the construction leaflet accompanying your item.’

I looked at the back page of the leaflet.

‘It says that I can return the item as long as the packaging is complete and unopened.’

‘That’s correct.’

‘But if I hadn’t opened the package I wouldn’t have been able to get hold of the leaflet telling me your returns policy.’

‘If you have opened the package in which your garden swing seat came, then I’m afraid you will have damaged the packaging and so you can no longer return it for a refund.’

‘Even though I had to open the package to discover your returns policy? That’s utter madness! And it’s a bathroom cabinet not a garden swing seat.’

‘It is our policy, to protect customers in this way.’

‘How does this protect customers?’

‘If we allowed people to return damaged goods our prices would have to rise and customers would suffer.’

‘And it’s not even painted!’ I protested. ‘In the photograph on your advertisement the cupboard is clearly painted white.'

'We like to give our customers the freedom to paint their cupboard in a colour of their choice.'

'Is it safe to burn it?' I asked.

'I beg your pardon?'

'If I burn the bits and pieces will they produce toxic fumes?'

'Are you intending to burn your garden seat?'

'Yes, I think I am.'

'Your warranty will not be valid if you have damaged it in any way. Burning it would definitely invalidate the warranty.'

'But the warranty is invalidated because I opened the packaging.'

'Yes. That is to protect our customers.'

I put down the telephone receiver and then I counted to ten. When I had counted to ten I screamed, stamped on the disconnected bathroom cabinet and ripped the instruction leaflet into shreds.'

'What's up?' asked Patsy, suddenly appearing, attracted by the noise I was making. 'Are you all right?'

'This is our new bathroom cabinet,' I explained, pointing to the bits and pieces which were now scattered across the drawing room floor. 'I'm going to burn it.'

'Oh,' said Patsy. 'That's nice.'

She looked at the scattered bits of artificial wood and the strange pieces of metal. 'My cousin used to have one of those building sets when he was little. He once made a small windmill with little vanes that went round if you gave them a push.'

'This is all going on the bonfire,' I told her. 'Heaven knows what chemicals this stuff contains. I'll set fire to it and then run for safety.'

'I don't know why you didn't just ask Patchy,' said Patsy, with great common sense. 'He could probably find us a very nice bathroom cabinet for half the price and none of the effort.'

As usual, she was right, of course.

After I'd thrown the bits and pieces onto my bonfire site, I went round to see Patchy. The assorted screws and bits of metal I threw into the dustbin.

I found my friend and brother-in-law in his workshop at the back of the garage he uses as a gallery. He was busy bending over a large painting of a woman on a chair. He had a paintbrush in his hand.

'I'm just putting the wedding ring back,' he said, stepping back and examining the painting from further away. 'What do you think?'

'It's not a terribly good painting, is it?'

'No, but what do you think of the wedding ring? Convincing?'

'Very,' I agreed. 'She definitely looked married.'

'Good.'

'May I ask why you are painting on a wedding ring and turning a maiden lady into a married woman?'

'She originally had a wedding ring on but I painted over it.'

'Why on earth did you do that?' I asked. 'Is that usual? Would you paint a wedding ring on the Mona Lisa?'

'Probably not,' said Patchy. 'But this isn't exactly the Mona Lisa.'

'No, I suppose not.'

'I bought it cheap at an auction in Taunton and I had a couple of possible buyers but they didn't like the wedding ring. A lot of people who buy paintings of women prefer to think of the woman in the picture as being a young girl, a spinster. Men want to fall in love with her and women want to treat her as a daughter.'

'So you painted out the wedding ring?'

'Yes. But they still didn't buy it. One said he'd never be able to forget that she was really married and the other decided he didn't like the look of her after all.'

'So, why are you putting the ring back in?'

'Because I've got a buyer who collects paintings of famous women and I'm going to tell him that this is Mrs Pankhurst. So she obviously needs a wedding ring.'

'Is it Mrs Pankhurst? It doesn't look a lot like her.'

'It doesn't look anything like her,' admitted Patchy. 'But a lot of Victorian portraits don't much look like the people they are supposed to represent. I'll explain that she was having a bad day. Or that the artist was having a bad day.' He picked up a small, brass coloured plaque engraved with the words 'Mrs Emily Pankhurst' and began to screw it to the bottom of the gold frame.

'Where on earth did you get that?'

'Thumper had it made for me. He's got a pal who does engraving.'

Patchy put the second screw in and stood back. The picture now did look convincing, and with the nameplate in place, I would have believed that it was a portrait of Mrs Pankhurst.

'Have you got any bathroom cabinets for sale?' I asked.

'What's that got to do with Victorian portrait paintings and Mrs Pankhurst?'

'Nothing whatsoever. But I want to buy a bathroom cabinet. Somewhere to put toothbrushes and soap and stuff like that. I bought one of those modern things they advertise in the newspapers. But now that it's arrived I've got to build it.'

Patchy looked at me and shuddered. 'I wish you wouldn't tell me things like that,' he said. He thought for a moment, mentally going through his stock I suppose, and then shook his head. 'I haven't got anything that would serve as a bathroom cabinet. But there's an auction in Lynton starting in about 40 minutes. There's a lot of Victorian and Edwardian brown furniture in the sale. They're bound to have a bathroom cabinet or something that will serve as a bathroom cabinet.'

'Did the Victorians have bathroom cabinets?'

'Of course they did. Old bathroom furniture tends to go quite cheaply. You can probably get one for a fiver.'

I rang Patsy to tell her where I could be found, and off we went to Lynton.

On the way, Patchy told me about an auction he had been to in Exeter.

It had been what is known as a 'time auction', in which the auctioneer allows a specific amount of time for the sale of each lot. Patchy told me that auctioneers sometimes do this simply to add excitement to a sale. So, for example, the time limit might be three minutes. At the end of the three minutes, the item being sold is marked down to the person who is the highest bidder at that moment. The 'time auction' can apparently produce some very hectic bidding as the time runs out. Patchy said that auctioneers in France have a variation on this type of auction. They light a candle at the start of the auction and the proceedings end when the candle goes out.

The prize lot in this particular 'time auction' was a rusty, old car; an ancient vehicle which had been found in the barn of a house on the Devon-Cornwall border. The owner of the car had become a recluse and hadn't left his home for nearly 40 years. His abandoned motor vehicle, which was spattered with bird guano, was a Bugatti Type 37and Patchy had, of course, dreamt of buying it for a song. Rare cars found in barns seem to come up at auction with monotonous regularity.

Sadly, Patchy's hopes were dashed by the fact that the auctioneer had done his job properly and had promoted the car to the motor trade. As a result, there were two specialist car dealers at the auction. Patchy's top bid had been passed without the two dealers getting out of first gear and the final selling price had been five times Patchy's potential top price and three times the estimate listed in the catalogue.

'Still,' said Patchy, with a smile, 'at least I can say that I got to bid on a barn find Bugatti. And I was the second under-bidder too.'

The auction in Lynton was held in what looked like, and probably once was, a shed. It had corrugated iron walls and a corrugated iron roof which appeared to be held in place by hope and bits of baler twine. The place was packed to where the rafters would have been if there had been any. There were wardrobes, tables, chairs, sideboards and bookcases galore.

'Where does all this stuff come from?' I asked Patchy, surprised, as always, at the amount of stuff that was on sale.

He shrugged. 'Most of it just goes round and round,' he admitted. 'One dealer will buy a job lot of stuff and then sell it to another at a second auction, hoping to make a few quid. Or hoping that an American buyer will take the lot and send it over to the States. An awful lot of the stuff that appears in auction rooms is never bought by a house owner and probably never used. But it's all good, solid furniture and, sadly for us, the Americans seem to appreciate our heritage more than we do.' He pointed to a dark oak cabinet, about four feet high and the same in width. 'There you are,' he said, 'one bathroom cabinet in good condition.'

We checked out the cabinet and I had to agree that it was perfect for our purposes. Patchy wrote down the lot number on his catalogue and then examined what looked to me to be a rather ropey old long case clock – the sort I usually think of as a grandfather clock.

'It doesn't seem to be working,' I pointed out. 'And there's a hand missing!'

'I know a man who can probably get it working,' whispered Patchy. 'And it only ever had one hand. Early clocks only had one hand. It was common as late as the 17th century and the early 18th century for clockmakers to produce clocks with just one hand. People who lived in country areas didn't really need a minute hand. A single hour hand was perfectly satisfactory. This clock has a brass dial which means it was probably made between 1680 and 1770 and from the spandrels on the dial I can tell it was made outside London, probably at the end of the 17th century or the very beginning of the 18th century.'

'What's a spandrel?'

‘The fancy markings at the four corners of the clock face,’ said Patchy, peering at the dial which was black with dirt. ‘There you are,’ he said pointing to a word on the dial, ‘it was made in Newport.’

‘Is it valuable?’

‘It’s probably worth more than I’ll have to pay for it,’ said Patchy, looking around the auction room. ‘I can’t see anyone here who deals in clocks. Most of the people here will be looking to fill their vans with a consignment of brown furniture. Some of it will end up in a dealer’s shop in London, some of it will end up in an auction house in New York and some of it will end up at another auction here in the West Country.’

Patchy also found a box containing a collection of old books and he became surprisingly excited by one of the oldest books, a particularly scruffy item, which had a metal ring fitted to one corner.

‘That’s not what I think it is, is it?’ I said.

As a bibliophile I knew a little about the history of books. I had seen chained books in the library at Hereford Cathedral but I hadn’t ever picked one up before.

‘It certainly is,’ murmured Patchy, picking out the book and carefully opening it. ‘It’s a book which used to be on the shelf in a chained library.’

Up until the end of the 17th century, it was rare to find a printed book in an English household. William Caxton, who ran the Caxton Press in Westminster is famous for having been the first ever printer in England but he only produced just over 100 books during 15 years of work between 1477 and 1491. You’d have thought a busy monk could have written out that many by hand. The inevitable result was that books were scarce and even second-hand ones were extremely valuable. Only the biggest churches, universities and wealthy gentlemen could afford libraries and it was, therefore, the usual practice to keep books chained up. This allowed readers to consult the books in a library but it made it difficult for anyone to steal them. The books were stored with their spines at the back of the shelf, so that they could be taken out and read without the chain getting into a tangle.

‘So how old is that one?’ I asked.

‘It’s not that old,’ said Patchy, rather disappointed. ‘It’s a dictionary and according to the copyright line inside, it was printed in 1871. Chained libraries were dying out by then.’

‘Valuable?’

‘Not as valuable as if it had been printed in the Middle Ages!’ laughed Patchy. He put the book back into the box from which he had taken it and then covered it with some other old books – most of them reprints of 19th century novels and cookery books. ‘We’ll bid on the boxful,’ he said. ‘Probably get the whole lot for a quid.’

Thanks to Patchy we both had a good day.

Patchy got the clock for £55, I got the sturdy bathroom cabinet for £4.50 (less than the do-it-yourself cupboard I had abandoned) and Patchy bought the box of books for 50 pence. When we got back outside the auction room, he presented me with the chained book as a present.

And when we got back to Bilbury, he helped me carry the bathroom cabinet up into the bathroom. It looked far better, and far more in keeping with the house, than the wretched piece of flimsy make-it-yourself nonsense which I had failed to build.

Returning the compliment, I then went back to his gallery cum showroom cum garage to help him unload the grandfather clock from his truck.

We had just successfully moved the clock into the workshop at the back of the gallery when the buyer who had expressed an interest in the painting of Mrs Pankhurst arrived to take a look at it.

‘That’s not her!’ said the woman instantly.

‘No?’ said Patchy. ‘How can you be so sure?’

‘That woman is wearing a wedding ring,’ said the woman sternly. ‘Emily Pankhurst did not wear a wedding ring. I’ve seen many photographs of her.’

‘Maybe the artist made a mistake,’ said Patchy.

‘That picture is a fake!’ said the woman. And with that she stormed out.

‘Bugger,’ sighed Patchy, when she’d gone. ‘If I hadn’t painted the wedding ring on her finger I’d have sold the damned thing.’

‘Never mind,’ I said. ‘You’ll think of someone else she could be.’

Patchy brightened up. ‘Of course I will! Do you think the woman in the picture looks anything like Florence Nightingale?’

‘But you’ll have to paint out that wedding ring.’

‘Easily done,’ said Patchy, reaching for his paints and his brush.

The woman in the picture would soon become a maiden lady again.

Caught in the Rocks

It was a good afternoon for staying indoors, lighting a log fire, toasting some muffins and settling down with a good book.

The day had started with promise. The sun had been out, the sky had been blue, decorated with just a few fluffy, white clouds, and a gentle breeze, a veritable zephyr in poetic terms, had promised to keep the day a pleasant temperature.

I'd finished the surgery earlier than usual and done the day's home visits by lunchtime. Patsy and I had eaten in the garden, where we have a huge, solid oak table and half a dozen matching chairs. The table and the chairs came from an auction and Patchy reckons they are at least 75-years-old. Occasionally, when I look at them, I find myself wondering how much modern garden furniture will still be functioning and looking good in three quarters of a century time.

But shortly after lunch the weather had changed, and it had changed rapidly.

The first sign of the impending change had come when our pet sheep had suddenly started to run for the barn, where they are accustomed to shelter from hot sun, rain, wind, snow and any other weather they don't like.

A good many animals, both small and large, can predict the weather.

The common or garden woodlouse may be small but he is remarkably prescient. He knows it is going to rain 24 hours before the first spots of rain start to fall, and he will respond by coming indoors to shelter. I don't believe that sheep know what the weather is going to do that far in advance but they certainly know a good 20 to 30 minutes before humans do.

'We'd better move everything indoors,' said Patsy.

I looked up from the magazine I was reading.

'It's going to rain.'

And then I too saw the sheep running for the barn.

We moved everything into the kitchen and Patsy put the coffee percolator onto the stove. When we'd done this I looked outside. The sun was still shining but there were now a few more clouds in the sky and it was clear that they were moving with a little more enthusiasm than had previously been the case. When I looked to the west, I could see a couple of large, nasty looking grey clouds on the horizon. The sheep had, as usual, been accurate. I settled down in the drawing room with my magazine, though I was close to nodding off.

I'd had a long, hard night and hadn't slept at all.

One of my patients, Mrs Daisy Marsh had an asthma attack and I stayed with her for an hour and a half while she gradually recovered.

When I go out on calls at night, I always leave the address and phone number of where I'll be on a pad by the telephone. This means that if another emergency call comes in, Patsy can telephone and pass on the message.

Just as I finished dealing with Mrs Marsh, Patsy phoned and told me I was needed at a cottage on the other side of the village. Mr Arthur Moe had woken up with muscular spasms in his back.

I managed to sort out Mr Moe's problem but ten minutes after I got back to Bilbury Grange there was a request to visit Fanny Murray, a small child who had woken up with earache. It took me no more than a minute to make the diagnosis, and less than five minutes to hand out the necessary medicines and reassure the parents. But by the time I got back home it really wasn't worth going to bed. I had breakfast, sorted through some correspondence and then did the morning surgery and visits.

Thankfully, I don't often have so many calls in one night.

And so, as a result of a night without sleep, I was now having difficulty in keeping my eyes open. The smell of the coffee Patsy was preparing was the only thing keeping me awake. Outside I could hear the first sounds of rain hammering on the windows. This was clearly going to be quite a storm. I was relieved to be tucked safely and cosily indoors. And I had two wonderful, free hours before the evening surgery was due to start; plenty of time for a leisurely coffee, a look at the book I was reading and maybe even a little proof reading of the book I had just finished writing. The two hours stretched out ahead of me welcomingly.

And then the telephone rang.

Oh, how I sometimes loathed that damned machine and how I cursed Alexander Graham Bell. Why couldn't he have invented something that didn't interrupt my life with such a savage and imperious urgency? There are lots of other things he could have invented instead: a machine for picking apples without bruising them; a motor car tyre that never punctures; a pen that never runs out of ink.

Most people can, of course, switch on their telephone answering machine if they wish to escape from the demands of their telephone. But the country GP has no access to such a simple luxury. He might as well be tied to the telephone by an umbilical cord. Whenever I go anywhere, I have to tell Patsy or Miss Johnson where I am going to be.

I have never for an instant wished for another life.

I am forever conscious of the joy of living and working in Bilbury. I regard myself as being the luckiest man alive, and having the very best job in the world.

But occasionally, just occasionally, I did find myself wishing that Mr Bell had invented something other than the telephone. It had already been one of those days which are several sizes too small.

I picked up the telephone receiver and answered with the number.

‘Thank heavens you’re there, doctor,’ said a breathless voice which I immediately recognised.

The voice belonged to Bertram Brimstone who, in the summer months, when there are plenty of walkers, hikers and tourists about, runs an ice cream van in a car park near to Heddon’s Mouth. In the winter he helps make and find the stock which his wife, Bertha, sells on the market stall she has in Barnstaple’s famous Pannier Market. She sells home-made greeting cards, old postcards, second-hand books (mostly cheap paperbacks), old vinyl records and just about anything else which isn’t too heavy. Everything they have on their stall has to be carried there from the back of the ice cream van which they use as a transport vehicle.

Surprisingly, Bertram (never Bertie) makes the home-made greeting cards himself. He buys old birthday and Christmas cards from nursing homes, hospitals and other similar institutions (paying just pennies per dozen) and then cuts up the cards so that he can use the pictures to create new cards. He sticks the pictures he has cut out onto pieces of thick paper. I don’t honestly see how this time consuming activity can possibly be profitable but they’ve both been doing it for years so I suppose they must be able to make it worthwhile. Indeed, this bizarre form of recycling seems to be a small cottage industry in North Devon.

Bertram used to have a small boat which he kept at Combe Martin. In the summer, he would take visitors for a short, 30 minute trip along the coast. But, sadly, it wasn’t very profitable. Bertram is living proof of the adage that for boat owners, the second happiest day of their life is the day when they bought their boat and the happiest is the day when they’ve finally managed to sell it and begin the long, slow journey back towards becoming a landlubber again.

Patsy and I have often thought of buying a small boat but the madness has fortunately always left us before it could turn into reality. Boats look good and seem fun until you have to wash them, ream the gribble worms out of the keel, caulk the windlass, splice the spinnaker, keelhaul the main brace, varnish the bulwarks, clean out the bilges, grease the propeller shaft, polish the brass and clear away the barnacles.

A friend of ours who had a boat for five years, reckons he spent 20 hours scrubbing and polishing and scraping, and five hours trying to remove grease from his hands, for every hour he spent at sea.

Bertram, who is usually a calm and laid back sort of fellow, sounded to be in a panic. He was certainly out of breath.

‘Can you come quickly, doctor.’

‘What’s up, Bertram?’ I asked. I had never before heard him so distressed.

‘There’s a man stuck in the rocks,’ he said. He sounded breathless. ‘And the tide is coming in.’

‘Whereabouts?’ I asked. The North Devon coast extends for some miles.

‘Heddon’s Mouth.’

‘Oh,’ I said.

This was bad news. Heddon’s Mouth is a small, attractive cove which can only be reached by a meandering footpath which runs alongside the River Heddon through the Heddon Valley. The river ends at a small rock strewn beach, where the river flows into the sea. The route to the beach is a couple of miles long and usually takes walkers an hour or so. Even if you hurried, it would take a good half an hour. There is no road access at all and it is probably the worst place on the coast to be stuck in rocks. ‘Have you called the fire brigade?’

‘They say they can’t get here for an hour,’ said Bertram. ‘All their engines are at a fire in Torrington. A pub is ablaze and they’ve still got people trapped. But they’ll send someone as soon as they can.’

‘The ambulance service?’

‘They said they’ll be three quarters of an hour at best,’ said Bertram. ‘And even if they get here, they can’t get down to the cove in one of their ambulances. The poor devil is going to drown. You can hear his screams half a mile away. He’s just screaming and sobbing. His wife and kids are all down there too. They’re screaming and sobbing as well.’

‘How did he get stuck?’

‘He was scrambling across some wet rocks quite a way out and he slipped. His foot is jammed between two huge rocks. He can’t pull it free. People have tried pulling him out but he’s stuck fast.’

‘OK,’ I said. ‘And the tide is coming in?’

‘It’ll be high tide soon. The poor bugger will be underwater at high tide. And there’s a storm beginning to blow. The sea is getting rougher. Come as quickly as you can, doctor.’

‘Where are you now?’ I asked him.

‘I’m at the Hunters Inn,’ replied Bertram. ‘I had to run all the way. Well, as much of it as I could.’ He paused for a moment to get his breath. ‘It’s damned near done me in.’

The Hunters Inn is a wonderfully quaint, and rather gothic, Victorian building. It is now a popular pub and hotel which has for years been a magnet for tourists looking for a base from which to explore Exmoor and the North Devon Coast.

‘I’ll be there in at Hunter’s Inn in 10 or 15 minutes,’ I told him. ‘Find someone with a motorbike who can take me down to the cove.’

‘They don’t allow motorbikes on the footpath,’ said Bertram.

To me it seemed an unexpectedly silly thing to say. Under the circumstances, the rules didn’t seem terribly important.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, Bertram started to cry. ‘It’s heart breaking to hear him. I don’t think he can possibly have more than an hour at the very most.’

‘See if you can find a motorbike. I’ll be there as soon as I can.’

I picked up my black bag, went to the surgical supplies cupboard behind my desk and threw in some additional supplies – including a couple of scalpels, some extra suture materials and a couple of additional vials of morphine. As I did so, I shouted for Patsy.

‘Please ring Patchy,’ I asked her. ‘Beg him to drop what he’s doing and meet me at the Hunter’s Inn, the pub at the start of the path down to Heddon’s Mouth. If you can’t get hold of Patchy find someone, anyone, with a motorbike and ask them to meet me there. A bloke is stuck in the rocks and I need to get down to the cove as quickly as possible.’

Patchy Fogg has a specially adapted motorbike, suitable for driving across quite rough and rocky terrain. He used it to very good effect when we were looking for Hamilton Murray on the North Devon Cliffs. I still believe that Patchy and his motorbike helped save Hamilton’s life.

I kissed her, picked up my supplemented bag, took one last look at the surgical supplies cupboard to make sure there wasn’t anything else I might need, and then ran out to the car. On the way to the car, I dashed into the garage and added another item to my drug bag. I looked up at the sky. It had suddenly occurred to me that maybe it would be possible to arrange for a helicopter to hover over Heddon’s Mouth and help lift the poor guy to safety. But one look at the sky, and the storm already building up, and I knew that there was no chance of a rescue helicopter being able to help.

My heart was racing as I drove to down to Heddon’s Mouth.

It seemed clear that neither the ambulance nor the fire service could possibly get to the man in time to be of any use.

It also seemed very clear that if the man’s foot was stuck fast then I might have to amputate if his life was going to be saved. I had seen a leg amputated. But just once; when I’d been studying orthopaedics at medical school. But that had been some years ago. It had been a neat, below the knee amputation, performed in the sterile conditions of an operating theatre. If I had to amputate this poor man’s foot, I would have to do so in awful conditions. But maybe we would be able to pull him free of the rocks. The storm was getting heavier by the minute and the sky was now nearly black. Although it was still afternoon I had to switch on the car’s headlights.

I drove as fast I dared, hoping and praying that I wouldn’t come across any other vehicles in the lanes. And God must have been listening because I didn’t see any cars, lorries, coaches or, worst of all, any tractors or cars towing caravans.

The only delay occurred as I drove up a short hill leading from a lane in Bilbury to the road which winds down to Heddon’s Mouth.

I found myself behind a cyclist, his machine weighed down with saddlebags, who steadfastly refused to move from the centre of the road as he pedalled merrily along, quite selfishly.

I tooted.

He ignored me.

I tooted again.

He just continued on his way, meandering from one side of the road to the other as he struggled to ride up the hill.

I tooted again.

By now I could feel my heart banging in my chest and my blood pressure starting to rise. I knew that every minute, every second, could make the difference between saving this man from the worst imaginable sort of death.

Even if I couldn't save his life, I could at least give him an injection of something to put him to sleep.

All I could think of was this poor fellow, stuck fast in the rocks, watching each new wave reach higher. And his family were watching.

The damned cyclist still continued to ignore my tooting. He was now travelling at a slow walking pace.

Suddenly, I slammed on the brakes, leapt out of the car, pulled on the handbrake and ran up the hill until I was in front of the cyclist.

He was a man in his 40s; red-faced and now rather breathless.

'Please pull over to the side of the road and let me through,' I begged him.

He just stared at me.

He was travelling so slowly that I was able to stand in front of him and grab his handlebars. I held his bicycle. 'I'm a doctor,' I told him. 'There's a man trapped in the rocks and I need to get to him quickly. Please park your bicycle by the side of the road and let me come past.'

The man mumbled something rude and ungracious and then reluctantly and very slowly moved his machine to the side of the road.

I ran back to the car, jumped in, started up and drove past him.

Four minutes later, I slid into the car park at the inland end of the trail to Heddon's Mouth. Bertram, who was waiting there, rushed over to the car as I opened the door.

'Thank heavens you're here, doctor! What took you so long?'

'Did you find anyone with a motorbike?' I asked him.

'No,' said Bertram. 'But the man from the National Trust heard me asking and he told me what I told you: that motorbikes aren't allowed on the path down to the sea.'

'Did you tell him why I need to get there quickly?'

'Yes, but he said that's the rule. No bicycles or motorcycles on the path.'

A bearded fellow who looked to be in his late sixties or early seventies, wearing a tweed sports jacket and horn-rimmed spectacles, marched over to me. It seemed as though it were a day on which I was destined to have problems with men with beards.

'Motorbikes aren't allowed on the path down to the cove,' he said firmly and pompously.

Just then, Patchy screamed into the car park on his trails bike.

I picked my bag out of the car, locked the car and hurried over to him, ignoring the man from the National Trust.

'Thank heavens you're here!' I said. I rapidly explained the situation. 'If I walk it'll take me at least 30 minutes to get down to the sea. If you take me down there on the back of your bike we'll be there in a few minutes.'

'Motorbikes aren't allowed on the path!' said the elderly gentleman from the National Trust, shouting to make himself heard about the roar of Patchy's motorbike. He stood in front of us to block our way.

'Hop on,' said Patchy.

I climbed on, clutching my bag, and Patchy swung round the human obstacle and sped off with me clinging to the back of the bike for dear life.

Somewhere behind me, I could hear the man from the National Trust shouting at us. He seemed to be repeating his mantra that motorbikes weren't allowed on the footpath down to Heddon's Mouth. And I think he was threatening to call the police.

Patchy got me to the cove in less than five minutes.

It was the scariest and bumpiest and most uncomfortable journey of my life. There were dozens of people on the path, most of whom seemed quite oblivious of the fact that a man was stuck in the rocks just a short distance away. Patchy kept his finger on his horn and drove brilliantly, always giving walkers plenty of room and slowing down appropriately whenever we came across children or elderly walkers.

I was carrying a black medical bag and I would have thought it would have been obvious that we weren't joy-riding, but many of the people we whizzed past shouted angrily.

One young man grabbed my jacket and nearly pulled me off the bike; fortunately, the pocket he managed to catch hold of simply ripped free of the coat.

As we approached the sea, the sky seemed to grow steadily darker. The rain was now lashing down and the sky was split by flashes of lightning.

Without doubt, it was an afternoon to be tucked up with a log fire and a plateful of hot, buttered crumpets.

I assumed that the people we had passed on the path had been caught out by the sudden change in the weather. An hour or so earlier the sky had been blue and the sun had been shining. That fine weather was now but a distant memory.

When we finally reached the cove and I climbed down from the bike, I was shaking. I stood unsteadily for a moment or two. There were a dozen or so people standing around. None of them was doing anything. They were just looking out to sea. I could vaguely make out some figures on the distant rocks.

A woman in her late 20s or 30s was screaming and sobbing. Two children with her were sobbing quietly. One was a boy, one was a girl. The boy looked to be about six or seven-years-old. The girl was a year or two younger. A couple of older women were trying, in vain, to comfort the woman and her children.

The sea was wild and, driven by the wind, it was crashing onto the rocks with great ferocity. Above the sound of the sea and the rain and the wind, I could hear a man screaming.

From time to time, the black sky would be lit by flashes of lightning. It was a storm of biblical proportions; truly a tempest.

'Are you the doctor?' asked an ashen-faced man in a T-shirt and a pair of ragged shorts. I guessed from the colour of his limbs that underneath the pallor, a healthy suntan probably lay hidden.

I confirmed that I was indeed the doctor they'd been waiting for.

'He's over here,' said the ashen-faced man. 'Follow me and I'll take you to him. I know the best way to get to him.' He scrambled up onto a rock and began to make his way out towards the sea.

'I'll wait here,' said Patchy. 'If you need me to fetch anyone or organise any help just come and tell me, or send someone to let me know.'

I promised him that I would, and I set off after the pale-faced man. The rocks were wet and slippery and because I only had one hand free, I had difficulty keeping up with him.

After a few minutes of struggling across the rocks I could, at last, clearly see the man who was stuck. He looked to be in his early 30s. He was naked from the waist up and I could see, through the water, that he was wearing a pair of blue jeans. I couldn't see either of his legs below the knees. The water was well above his waist. I didn't know how fast the tide might come in but I knew from experience that in some of these small coves, when the weather is bad, the sea seems to come in very quickly.

The trapped man was alternately shouting and crying. Occasionally, he started to thrash around as though trying in vain to free himself. I'm not surprised. I doubt if anyone could have faced almost certain death in such awful, blood-curdling circumstances with any equanimity.

There were two men standing on the rocks nearby. One was tall and was, incongruously, wearing a light blue suit which was now soaked, ruined and sticking to him while the other man, much shorter and tubbier, was wearing shorts and a yellow anorak.

A third man, a youth really because he was no more than 19 or 20-years-old, was sitting on a rock next to the man who was stuck. I didn't recognise any of the three. I assumed they were all holidaymakers who were on the beach, or nearby, when the man got stuck. Locals don't tend to go down to Heddon's Mouth very much. The beach is very small, there's no fishing or surfing, it's a long walk and the place is usually crowded with tourists.

The tide was now so high, and the sea so rough, that when each new wave came crashing in the spray covered us all.

'I've got the doctor!' shouted my guide. The three men all looked in my direction.

The man who was trapped half turned 'Come and get me out,' he shouted. 'I'm going to drown.'

I bent down next to him and put my black bag down on a flattish piece of rock. The tide was now so high that the man's trapped right foot and lower leg were all under water. As I bent down to feel for his foot, to try to work out how badly he was stuck, a new wave arrived and crashed over us all. Not having had time to turn my face away I found myself with a mouth full of sea water. I spat the water out, and rubbed the salty water from my eyes.

'What's your name?' I asked him.

'Jeffrey,' he replied. 'Jeffrey Deacon.'

'Is it OK if I call you Jeffrey?'

'Yes.'

'I'm the doctor,' I told him. I told him my name. 'You're going to be fine. Can you move your foot?'

I tried to keep my voice as calm as I could, though I had to shout to make myself heard above the sound of the wind and the rain and the sea.

It isn't easy to sound calm when you're shouting.

Heddon's Mouth is a beautiful, quiet, peaceful spot on a calm day but when the weather turns bad it can, like much of the North Devon coast, be a truly inhospitable place.

Jeffrey nodded. He had stopped screaming and shouting. His eyes were red with crying.

I reached down into the sea water, felt his shin and then his ankle. I could not feel anything underneath his ankle. His foot had slipped down between two huge rocks and was now invisible. The gap between the rocks was so narrow that I definitely couldn't reach through to touch his foot.

Another huge wave crashed over us, soaking us again.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my black bag pushed off the rock where I had placed it. I just managed to grab it before it disappeared. I asked one of the men to hold it for me.

‘Do something!’ shouted the trapped man. ‘I’m going to die.’

‘You’re not going to die,’ I told him. ‘You’re definitely not going to die.’

He looked at me. There was a faint glimmer of hope in his eyes. But the hope did not last. ‘You’re lying!’ he suddenly shouted. He made another effort to move himself but he was well and truly jammed. ‘You know I’m going to die! You’re going to let me die.’

I looked down into the water at his free leg to see what sort of footwear he was wearing. He had a fairly thin slip-on deck shoe. I was hoping that he might have been wearing a boot that might slip off. But the deck shoe on his trapped foot could not possibly make any difference.

Another huge wave crashed over us. The wind was getting stronger. The rain was now lashing down with ever greater fury. I was soaked to the skin and wondered momentarily why I had come out without any waterproofs. The sea level was rising every time another wave came in. The water was now up to the man’s chest. I remember thinking that even if we got him free we would have to carry him all the way up Heddon’s Valley. I remember wondering if a boat could come and take him to Barnstaple. That was my craziest thought. There was no chance whatsoever of any boat approaching the rocks in that weather. When you’re desperate you have some daft ideas, don’t you? Well, I do anyway.

‘I’m not going to let you die,’ I promised him and I damned well meant it.

I took my bag off the man who was holding it, opened it and took out a vial of morphine. It was raining so hard that within seconds, the inside of my bag was soaked and there was a growing puddle in the bottom. I don’t think I’ve ever seen or felt such rain.

‘I’m going to give you something to numb the pain,’ I told him. He looked at me, puzzled. ‘I’m not really in pain,’ he said. I didn’t tell him but I knew he was going to be and that whatever happened he would need the injection. I gave my bag to the short, tubby man in the yellow anorak and asked him to hold it for me. I found a vein in the trapped man’s arm, swabbed it with a little cotton wool swab soaked in alcohol and wondered, not for the first time in my life, at the way we find ourselves sticking to our habits, however inappropriate the circumstances might be. I then injected a good dose of morphine.

I was giving him the morphine not to abolish any pain at that moment but to control the pain he was going to have in the not very distant future. I was also trying to put him to sleep for a while so that we could do whatever we needed to do to free him from the rocks.

‘Are you putting him to sleep, doctor?’ asked the tubby fellow who was holding my black bag. I suddenly noticed that he had enough chin for two people. It was an utterly irrelevant observation but I can remember his chin more than I can remember anything else about him. He hadn’t shaved for a while and he reminded me of a cartoon character. It is strange how our minds latch onto minor irrelevancies. I have noticed that we often remember truly significant events by the smallest thing; a chance observation, an unusual smell, a startling sound.

‘Just for a while,’ I murmured.

‘Poor devil,’ muttered another one of the men, the tall one in the suit. I looked up. He crossed himself and I realised that he thought I had just killed the man so that he wouldn’t have to die of drowning. The words ‘putting to sleep’ are widely used by vets when they euthanize animals.

‘I’ve just sedated him so that we can get him out without causing him too much pain,’ I explained. I was rather cross that they would think I would abandon the man’s life so easily. I shivered and realised that I was very, very cold. Even today, years later, I can still feel that damned cold. It was a combination of the wind, the rain, the crashing sea and the fear.

‘Let’s try pulling him out,’ I said. I looked round. My pale-faced guide had disappeared, gone back to the beach. ‘There are four of us. Two to each arm and we just pull as hard as we can.’

‘We tried pulling but he’s jammed fast,’ said the man in the suit.

‘Of course you did,’ I said. ‘But he was fully conscious then and that probably stopped you pulling as hard as you can. Let’s hold him and pull.’ Another wave crashed over us.

The youth and the tubby man took his right arm and shoulder. And I and the man in a suit took his left arm and shoulder. I had to hold my black bag with my free arm so that it didn’t get washed away.

‘If we pull too hard we might pull off his foot,’ said one of the men nervously. ‘We shouldn’t pull too hard.’

‘If we can’t pull him free I’m going to have to cut his foot off,’ I thought. ‘So it doesn’t make much difference does it?’ I didn’t say this.

‘We won’t pull his foot off,’ I assured them all.

I thought, but didn’t say, that if we were going to save Mr Deacon from drowning then the whole business was going to be messy.’

We pulled. Oh how we pulled.

The main problem was that it was terribly difficult to get our footing on the slippery rocks. They were covered with seaweed and constantly being drenched with new clouds of spray and rain. Only the limpets and other shelled creatures clinging to the rocks helped to give our feet any traction.

We pulled so hard I thought we would dislocate Jeffrey Deacon's shoulders. But his foot was so tight that we could not pull it free. It occurred to me that the foot must have become swollen with all the pulling. I thought that maybe we could have pulled him out if we'd had ropes and some sort of hoist.

'Let's try again!' I told the others.

It did not seem possible that we could not pull Jeffrey's foot out from between the rocks. I knew that we would probably damage the skin and soft tissues, almost certainly damage the joint and possibly break a bone, but the alternative was much, much worse.

But we couldn't budge the trapped man.

'It's no good,' said the man in a suit. I didn't know his name. I didn't know any of their names. They were all brave to be out there on the rocks. The sea was very rough and the rain was lashing down. 'He's stuck fast. Give him a big injection, doctor. We're not going to be able to get him free. You've done your best.'

The water was now up to the top of the trapped man's chest. When a wave came in the spray reached over his head. In a few minutes time the man would be drowned and we would have to stand there and watch it happen.

'Hold him tight and pull him as upright as you can,' I told them. I opened my black bag and took out a scalpel, a strong cord and the hacksaw I'd taken from the garage. 'I'm going to have to amputate his foot.'

I suddenly realised that in my hurry, I hadn't brought a spare hacksaw blade with me. I hoped the blade that was in the saw would be strong enough to do the job. I then handed my black medical bag to one of the men and asked him to hold it for me. The rock upon which I had previously stood the bag was now under water. It was a perfect storm; a concatenation of difficult circumstances.

When he heard what I planned to do, the tubby fellow turned away and was sick.

'Should we ask his permission?' asked one of the men. I didn't know which one of them it was.

'He's unconscious,' I pointed out.

'We could ask his wife for permission,' he pointed out.

'I'm not sure whether a wife can give permission for a doctor to remove her husband's foot,' I said. 'But more importantly, by the time you've got back to the beach and asked her it will be too late to do anything.'

The sea now seemed to be rising even faster. The wind had whipped up the waves. When I looked out to sea, I could see that the breakers coming in looked to be seven or eight feet tall. Even at rest, the sea was now at the level of the trapped man's chin. I reckoned we only had another two or three minutes before he drowned. I had just two or three minutes to remove his trapped foot.

I rubbed the salt water out of my eyes with my sleeve, reached down into the water and felt for the lowest part of the man's leg. I then used the cord to tie a tourniquet around the man's leg, as low down as I could reach but allowing me room to cut through the leg.

I knew that when I cut through his leg there would be a good deal of bleeding. I needed to minimise the amount of blood loss. And I needed to work fast.

When I was a young hospital doctor, there was a surgeon who could perform amputations in world record time but not even he had been as fast as surgeons 100 years ago.

I remembered reading that in the 19th century, before anaesthesia had been invented, surgeons used to be able to perform amputations in seconds. One surgeon is said to have taken off a patient's arm while a colleague turned round to take a pinch of snuff. A Scottish surgeon called Robert Liston was timed at 33 seconds for an operation to remove a patient's leg at the thigh. Unfortunately, he was so fast that his assistant could not get his fingers out of the way in time. In addition to the patient's leg, three of the assistant's fingers succumbed to the saw and ended up in the waste bucket. Surgeons had to work fast if their patient was going to have a chance of surviving.

All this went through my mind in a flash.

Now, years later, I can still remember all these thoughts; slowed down in the way that the mind sometimes slows things down when we remember a bad accident.

As I tied the tourniquet, I called out to the young man and asked him to go back to the shoreline and to gather as many able bodied men and women he could find. I had to shout and repeat myself to make myself heard and understood.

'Tell them we're going to need people to carry Mr Deacon up to the road,' I told him. 'And find the man with the motorbike. His name is Patchy Fogg. Ask him to go back to the Hunter's Inn and to use their telephone to ring the ambulance people. We need an ambulance waiting at Hunter's Inn. If the ambulance people can't get here quickly then find someone with an estate car, a van or a small lorry. They'll need to take Mr Deacon to the hospital in Barnstaple.'

The young man nodded. I made him repeat what I'd told him. Then he hurried off.

I really didn't want him around when I cut off Mr Deacon's foot. I knew it was likely to be a sight likely to give birth to a hundred nightmares.

Cutting through bone isn't easy at the best of times.

Orthopaedic surgeons, who cut through bones and joints for a living, tend to be big beefy fellows. But cutting through bone you cannot see, when it is a few feet under water is considerably more difficult than cutting through bone in a nice, neat, aseptic operating theatre. And when the sea is crashing around and on top of you, the tide is coming in and the wind and the rain seem determined to wash you away, then it is, believe me, immeasurably more difficult.

And, of course, it was all made considerably more difficult by the fact that I had never, ever amputated a foot before. That was just a small, extra complication to add to all the others.

I took the hacksaw in my hand, crouched and reached down into the sea as far as I could stretch. I couldn't reach far enough down. The tide was coming in horrifically fast and I couldn't reach down to the man's ankle. I took a deep breath and put my head down under the water. It was freezing cold. I don't think I had ever been so cold, so scared and so anxious. I was now performing my first amputation and I was doing it under water, quite unable to see what I was doing.

I couldn't see anything but I could now feel the bottom of Jeffrey's leg, where it disappeared between the rocks.

I reached as far as I could and then used the hacksaw to cut through his jeans, his skin, his soft tissues and finally his bone. I worked frantically, against the clock. Sawing through his jeans wasn't easy. Sawing through his leg was brutally difficult. Butchers who chop up animal carcasses use nice sharp hatchets and knives and need a lot of force if they're going to chop through bone.

When I lifted my head to take another breath, I heard the man who had been sick say that we were all going to drown and he was going back to the beach. He sounded as if he were a thousand miles away. I think he was crying.

Most people really don't realise how hard it is to cut through bone.

If your dog finds an old bone sometime, try cutting through it with a saw. You'll be amazed at how difficult it is. Bone is a very hard substance.

I put my head back into the water, cut a little more, raised my head to take another breath, then went back under the water, trying to find where I'd started cutting so that I could carry on in the same spot.

By the time I'd finished cutting and Jeffrey Deacon was free from the rocks, I was utterly exhausted and I was nearly drowned myself. I had swallowed far more sea water than is good for anyone.

'He's free,' I gasped, to the remaining two men, as I harnessed my last remaining strength and dragged Jeffrey Deacon free of the gap between the two rocks, terrified he would slip and slide back into the crack where his detached foot now remained.

I looked down into the water, wondering if I could see his foot and ankle. But I couldn't, of course. I couldn't see anything but water. I heard thunder crashing. It sounded close. I'd missed the lightning.

'Help me carry him to the beach. Don't try and rush it.'

I didn't want us dropping him and cracking open his skull on a rock. And I didn't want one of us sliding between two slippery, seaweed covered rocks and getting stuck. That thought went through my mind. Later, I would have a recurring nightmare in which all of us were stuck in the rocks with huge, 20-foot high waves bearing down on us.

Before we began to carry him to comparative safety, I sat for a couple of moments on a barnacle encrusted rock and tried to get my breath back.

The life of a country GP sometimes seems stranger than fiction.

A huge wave crashed over us all and the man who was holding my black bag let go of it.

I watched in horror as the bag disappeared into the sea. I prayed Mr Deacon didn't wake up because now I had no more morphine to give him and nothing with which to give it to him. This rescue was now beyond being a nightmare.

I'd got the trapped man free of the rocks and I'd saved him from drowning. Now we had to get him all the way up the Haddon Valley and to a hospital as soon as possible.

And there was now something else; something more personal.

Deep down I knew that I would probably have to cope with the wrath of the man and his wife when they discovered that I'd had to remove his foot. It occurred to me that he might sue me. Would he have a case? Would others say I should have done things differently? It is always so much easier to make decisions when sitting, quietly in an air-conditioned courtroom than when facing a real life crisis in unbearable circumstances, with the clock ticking ever faster and ever louder. I could not think of anything I could have done differently. But would a judge think differently? I knew damned well that there would be a doctor somewhere who would, for a fat fee, be happy to pass judgement on what I had done, why I had done it and how I had done it.

Meanwhile, I was physically and mentally exhausted and we still had to drag and carry Mr Deacon to the beach. I could see people waving to us, beckoning to us. Two or three men started out across the rocks towards us, scrambling, sliding and falling but gradually getting closer.

Somehow, the three of us managed to carry and drag Mr Deacon across the rocks and to the shore. The men who had scrambled out to meet us helped enormously. The three of us were exhausted. Simply staying on the rocks, as the sea and the storm fought to wash us to our deaths, had taken an enormous amount of energy and will.

On the beach, the man's wife was waiting. She still had her children by her side. You might have thought that someone would have spotted that her husband had no foot, and would have taken the children away. But no one had done anything.

The woman was sobbing with relief. Then she saw her husband's bloody leg. And the children saw it too. The small boy saw it first. He told his sister. They were shouting and crying and pointing. The woman tried to get to her husband. We had to hold him up because he was unconscious and he couldn't stand.

'We have to hurry!' I shouted. 'We have to get him up the path to the car park. God willing there will be an ambulance waiting for us. But we have to get him there quickly.'

The tourniquet I'd tied was preventing serious blood loss but there was still blood seeping out from the ugly wound I'd made.

I asked two of the men to hold him upright while I knelt down and unfastened the tourniquet for a moment, to let some blood into the remaining tissue, to keep it alive and healthy.

I saw a large pram that someone had pushed down the path and wondered if we could use it to wheel Mr Deacon to the ambulance. I decided it would be more trouble than it was worth. I looked around and counted. There were nine able-bodied men there. 'Carry him in relays,' I shouted. 'A couple of hundred yards at a time.'

'What have you done to him?' demanded Mrs Deacon. She was a big, tough, brawny woman who looked as if she could have hefted hundred weight coal sacks for a living. She stuck her face a foot from mine. She had long, black hair which was plastered to her head. Her dress was soaked. She had been crying endlessly. She was distraught and I understood. 'You've made him into a cripple!' she shouted at me. I could only just hear her above the sound of the wind and the rain. 'You bastard! What have you done to him? What have you done to him?' She lashed out at me and caught me quite a painful blow on the arm.

'I had no choice,' I told her. 'He was trapped. He would have drowned.'

'You could have pulled him out!'

'We tried but we couldn't. He was stuck fast. He would have died.'

'You should have waited!'

'I couldn't wait!' I told her.

'I told him not to go scrambling over those rocks,' she said, sobbing.

Mrs Deacon needed support and help but I didn't have the time and this was not the place. I turned away to the men who were still waiting. 'Get moving!' I told them urgently. 'We have to get him to the ambulance.'

We moved as a convoy.

I led the way, followed by the men who were carrying Mr Deacon. Mrs Deacon hurried along beside them, dragging her children. She kept getting in the way and slowing them down. I could totally understand her concern, anguish, agony and desperation but she was making things worse for her husband who was, in any case, still unconscious. The men who weren't actually carrying followed behind.

Half way along the path, I heard a motorbike and Patchy appeared through the darkness and the rain.

'There's no ambulance yet but I've got a guy with a Dormobile ready and waiting to take your patient to the hospital,' said Patchy. 'With any luck the ambulance will be waiting by the time you get there.'

And, thank God, it was.

I told the ambulance men how much morphine I'd given so that they could tell the doctors in Barnstaple. Mrs Deacon insisted on climbing into the back of the ambulance with her husband. Naturally, she insisted on taking the children with her. The ambulance men weren't happy but they couldn't keep her out. I decided that Mr Deacon no longer needed me and, given Mrs Deacon's anger, that it would be best if I stayed behind.

'Looks like you've had a busy day,' said Patchy, as the ambulance sped off to the hospital in Barnstaple.

I just looked at him and shook my head in dismay and weariness. I was mentally and physically exhausted. I couldn't help but hope that there were no more calls for a while. I looked at my watch. I was nearly an hour late for the evening surgery. I hoped that the non-urgent patients would have gone home, to return tomorrow.

I remember looking around for my drug bag and realising it had been lost at sea. I'd have to get another. And there was quite a good deal of expensive equipment to replace too.

I thanked Patchy, climbed into the Rolls and drove slowly home to Bilbury Grange. I was confident that Mr Deacon would now live. He would obviously have to come to terms with having lost his foot and I knew there would be difficult times ahead for him and his family. But he would be alive.

Would Mrs Deacon still be angry in the morning? Would she report me to the General Medical Council? Would she want to sue me?

The drive home, though only a couple of miles or so, seemed endless.

When I got back to Bilbury Grange I pretty well fell out of the car.

'There are just six patients still waiting for you,' said Patsy, throwing a blanket around me for I was starting to shiver. 'Do you want me to ask them to wait while you have a hot bath or do you want to see if you can deal with them now, and then have a hot bath?'

I said I'd try to deal with the evening surgery straight away. Patsy made me a hot coffee, laced with whisky. I sat in the surgery, dripping wet and with a huge blanket thrown around my shoulders.

I must have broken all records for conducting a surgery. There were no urgent or serious problems and I finished the entire evening's work in under ten minutes.

And then I collapsed into a warm bath with a glass of hot whisky to keep me company. There I stayed, repeatedly topping up with hot water until the water went so cold that topping it up with hot would have resulted in the bath overflowing. I wanted to relax but I couldn't. I kept asking myself if I could have done anything differently. Was there anything that I could have done to save the man's foot? Could I have somehow rescued the amputated foot in the hope that surgeons might be able to sew it back on?

In the end I knew, just knew, that I couldn't think of anything I could have done that would have saved his foot. And I was satisfied that I could not possibly have rescued the amputated foot.

But I was still worried about the consequences.

No doctor wants angry patients or relatives attacking him.

Would the Deacons attack me? The rescue was bound to attract some publicity. Would the Deacons vilify me in public? Would they sue me? The questions kept recurring; going round and round in my mind.

I dressed and went back downstairs. Patsy had lit a roaring log fire.

We sat in front of the fire and ate egg and chips. There is much comfort to be had from watching a log fire crackle and spit. There is comfort for the eyes and for the ears. And I enjoy the smell of a log fire, too.

Afterwards, I talked to Patsy about what had happened. I told her how I'd had to cut off a man's foot while he was trapped and about to drown. I told her how absolutely terrified I had been and how I had, for quite a while, been convinced that the man was going to drown. I told her of the bravery of the strangers who had stayed with him on the rocks.

I told her, in the end, that whether I had done well or badly, I knew I'd done the best I could. And you can never do more than that.

We had one nasty moment that evening.

At about 9.00 pm, a reporter telephoned and asked if I'd heard that the Deacons were going to sue me for damages.

But it turned out to be a hoax. The reporter had merely been trying to stir up a story.

The men who had stayed with me on the rocks all confirmed that if I had not amputated Mr Deacon's foot then he would have died.

They said kind things which I much appreciated.

And in the end, the Deacons were very kind, gracious, forgiving and, yes, grateful. They both understood that if I had not amputated then Mr Deacon would have died. And they considered the loss of a foot a relatively small price to pay for life.

I was relieved and delighted when the rescue didn't get much coverage in the media. It had apparently been a busy news day. A celebrity had said something controversial, a member of the Royal family had done something curious, a film star had been caught in an affair and there had been a political row in Westminster.

A storm in Devon, and the near drowning of a man caught in the rocks, could not compete with these big news stories. Mr Deacon's brush with death made just a few inches in the local papers. There were no cameras there and so there was no coverage on television.

A week afterwards, a delivery van turned up and the driver presented me with a parcel and asked me to sign for it.

The parcel contained a new medical bag. It was a 'thank you' from the Deacons who had somehow heard that I'd lost my previous black bag during the rescue.

I've still got the bag.

It is one of my most treasured possessions.

And finally…

I hope you have enjoyed this book about my adventures in Bilbury. If you did so then it would mean a great deal to me if you would spare a moment to write a short review.

Thank you

Vernon Coleman

Appendix 1

My Favourite Latin Phrases

Here is the list of Latin phrases which Esme Church compiled for me (as described in 'Cedric's Admirers').

Aegrescit medendo – the remedy makes things worse
Aequam servare mentem – to keep a calm mind and, as Kipling suggested, to treat success and disaster equally
Aut vincere aut mori – either conquer or die
Compos mentis – having control of one's own mind
De mortuis nil nisi bonum – say nothing but good of the dead
Diem perdidi – I have lost a day (Suetonius allegedly said this when once at dinner he remembered he had done nothing for anybody all that day)
Dum spiro, spero – while I breathe I hope, where there is life there is hope
Ex ovo omnia – every living thing comes from an egg (attributed to William Harvey, the discoverer of the human circulatory system)
Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas – there is happiness for the man who is able to discover why things happen
Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto – I am a man and there is no human problem which does not concern me
In articulo mortis – spoken at the point of death
Icundi acti labores – completed labours are pleasant – from Euripides who meant, I think, that it is good to look back on trials and hardships when one has come through them safely
Mens sibi conscia recti – knowing within oneself that one has done the right thing
Naturam expellas furca, tamen usque recurret – even though you drive out nature with a pitchfork, she will always return
Nescit vox missa reverti – a word once published cannot be recalled
Nullum magnum ingenium sine mixtura dementiae fuit – all great geniuses have some madness in them
Possunt quia posse videntur – they can because they think they can (the power of the mind)
Senex bis puer – the old man is twice a child (in old age)
Taedium vitae – weariness of life, extreme ennui
Venienti occurrite morbo – run to meet disease as it comes, don't wait for sickness to develop and get worse

Appendix 2

The Tilbury Gig and other Horse Drawn Conveyances

In ‘Mrs Leeson’s Leg’, I described how Mrs Leeson drove around in a Tilbury gig. With the aid of Patchy Fogg and Mrs Leeson’s groom/chauffeur, I have compiled a short dictionary describing the various types of carriage which were used in England in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Barouche: a four-seater carriage, half covered; the two front passengers face the two back ones

Brougham: a closed carriage with 2 or 4 wheels, pulled by one horse

Cabriolet: two wheeled carriage with an open hood pulled by one horse (usually offered for hire, hence the abbreviation ‘cab’ which is used to describe a taxi)

Chariot: originally a two wheeled vehicle drawn by horses and used in racing and warfare; more recently the term was sometimes used to describe a four wheeled open carriage with a coachman’s seat at the front.

Clarence: a four-seater carriage

Curricle : a light two wheeler which was popular in the 18th century and which is the father of the Victorian dog cart (early dog carts were actually drawn by dogs)

Dennet: a light two-seater gig

Dicky: a folding outside seat, usually fixed at the back of a carriage and used by a servant

Fly: similar to phaeton, also called a rat

Four wheeler: a large hansom cab; also known as a ‘growler’

Gig: a light two-seater carriage pulled by one horse

Hansom: known as the gondola of London; a hansom cab is a low, two wheeled cabriolet for two passengers. The driver sits behind his passengers and with the reins going over the top. Named after Joseph Hansom who was an English architect. He patented the design in 1834.

Landau: a four wheeled enclosed carriage which has a removable front cover and a back cover that can be raised or lowered. Named after the town of Landau in Germany, where it was first produced. Popularly used by monarchs and others who need to be seen by the public but who need some protection lest the weather turn bad.

Phaeton: a four wheeled pleasure carriage which has all the seats facing forward

Rumble: a dicky seat for less regarded passengers or servants (when John Brown rode with Queen Victoria in her Sociable he took the rumble seat)

Sociable: a rather genteel phaeton with four wheels and a collapsible hood. The two main seats face front and there is a pull out stool facing them. A ‘sociable’ was used by Queen Victoria when not on State business and came to be known as a Victoria

Stanhope: a light one-seater open carriage with two or four wheels; named after Fitzroy Stanhope who was an English clergyman.

Tilbury gig: a light two-seater, pulled by a single horse

Trap: a light, simply made, two-wheeled carriage which is usually pulled by a small horse or pony

Victoria: see ‘sociable’

Appendix 3

Plants Named After Parts of the Human Body

During one conversation in the Duck and Puddle (described in ‘Caleb’s Ankle’), Thumper, Patchy and I spent some time chatting to a local man called Caleb Theodore.

Caleb told us that a surprising number of plants are named after parts of the human body.

With his help, I compiled this list. All these plants are real!

Black maidenhair
Bladder campion
Bladderwort
Dead man’s fingers
Eyesbright
Heartsease
Hounds tongue
Kidney vetch
Lady’s tresses
Liverwort
Lords and ladies
Lungwort
Maidenhair
Miller’s thumb
Naked ladies
Navelwort
Nipplewort
Old man’s beard
Open arse
Prick madam
Priests ballocks (sic)
Shitabed
Skullcap
Stinking willy

Finally, but certainly not least, I must give an honourable mention to a plant which doesn’t really fit on this list but which has, in my view, the best name ever given to a plant: the ‘welcome-home-husband-though-never-so-drunk’.

Caleb tells me that the name is popularly used to describe sempervivum tectorum (apparently known to its chums as the common houseleek and to its posher chums as sedum acre) which is a flowering plant found on high ground in southern Europe.

Appendix 4

Types of Auction

In ‘The Bathroom Cabinet’ I mentioned a ‘time auction’. With the aid of Patchy Fogg I have compiled a list of the most popular types of auction.

Ordinary English auction: the auctioneer invites bids and the bidders push up the prices bit by bit.
A Dutch auction: this type of auction works in reverse. The auctioneer starts at a high price and the price falls until a bidder says he’ll pay that price.
Paper or silent auction: the auctioneer announces a minimum price and the bidders write down their bids and the highest wins.
Ring auction: dealers agree not to bid. One of them buys the item. They then all meet and have the auction between themselves.
Market auction: bidders bid on a bunch of similar items and can take as many items as they like at that price.
Time auction: the bidding stops at a pre-arranged time. This type of auction is invariably pretty chaotic. The French have a version which is commonly used when selling wine. The auctioneer lights a candle and bidders can bid for as long as the candle remains alight. When the candle goes out, the highest bidder gets the item.

Appendix 5

D is for Diarrhoea, F is for Flatulence, P is for Piles

Air traffic controllers, policemen and telephone operators all use an official alphabet aid which includes such items as 'W for whisky' and 'G for golf'. The idea is to avoid misunderstandings. But the official alphabet aid (created by NATO) is quite boring so I have created a less po-faced alternative on a medical theme. The list was created after the conversation I described in 'The Bathroom Cabinet'.

A for Abscess
B for Breast
C for Cramp
D for Diarrhoea
E for Earache
F for Flatulence
G for Gall stones
H for Hernia
I for Indigestion
J for Jaundice
K for Kidneys
L for Liver
M for Muscles
N for Nipple
O for Ointment
P for Piles
Q for Quinsy
R for Ringworm
S for Sphincter
T for Tonsils
U for Uterus
V for Verucca
W for Waterworks
X for X-ray
Y for Yellow-fever
Z for Zit

I have donated this new alphabetical aid free of charge to the English speaking world.

Please pass it on to your friends, neighbours and colleagues so that they can stop using the old, banned, boring system and ensure that they are using the up-to-date medical alphabet nomenclature.

And finally (again)…

I hope you have enjoyed this book about Bilbury and the people who live in and visit the village. If you did so, then I would be very grateful if you would spare a moment to write a short review. This is the 11th book in the series entitled The Young Country Doctor.

Thank you
Vernon Coleman

The Young Country Doctor Book 12

BILBURY JOYS

Vernon Coleman

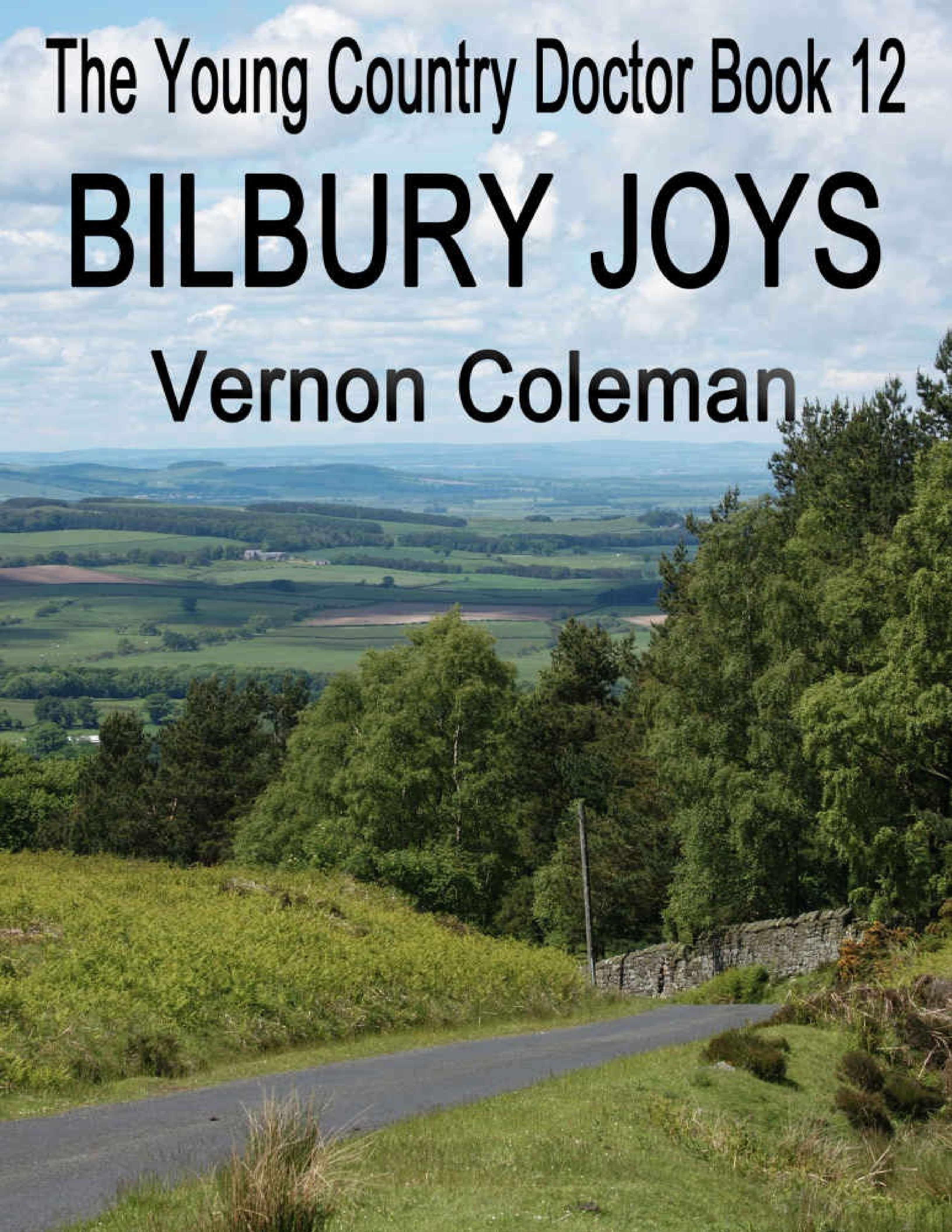

The Young Country Doctor Book 12

Bilbury Joys

Vernon Coleman

Another collection of memories from the English village of Bilbury.

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Note: As usual, names and details of individuals, animals and establishments have been altered to protect the innocent, the guilty and the somewhere in-between.

The Author

Vernon Coleman is a *Sunday Times* bestselling author. He has written over 100 books which have been translated into 25 languages and sold in over 50 countries. His books have sold over two million copies in the UK alone. Vernon Coleman is also a qualified doctor. He lives in Bilbury, Devon, England. He is an accomplished bar billiards player (three times runner up in the Duck and Puddle Christmas competition), a keen but surprisingly ineffective skittle player and an accomplished maker of paper aeroplanes. He claims to be one of the best stone skimmers in North Devon. (Nine bounces are by no means unheard of, and he once spent forty-five minutes diving in chilly coastal water in an attempt to find the beautifully proportioned flat stone with which he had achieved a personal best of 12 bounces.) He is a long-term member of the Desperate Dan Pie-Eater's Club (vegetarian section). He does not speak any foreign languages and although he can juggle, he cannot knit. He has never jumped out of an aeroplane (with or without a parachute) but he has, on several occasions, lit bonfires in the rain and is particularly proud of the fact that he once managed to light one in a snowstorm. He is tall and must still be growing for he has now burst through his hair and has a rapidly developing bald patch. He has not yet availed himself of the opportunities offered by social media but details of his surgery opening hours can be seen on the noticeboard outside Peter Marshall's shop in the village.

The Young Country Doctor series

This is the 12th book in the series. All the books in the series are available as e-books on Amazon.

Dedication

To Antoinette: then, now and eternally.

You are the only past I remember, the only present that matters and the only future I want.

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Foreword

I can't imagine not living in Bilbury.

I've lived in quite a number of cities and towns, both in and outside England, and I have visited and stayed in a good many more.

Some of those places have been beautiful, some striking, some full of vitality and some almost frightening in their intensity. And in all of them, of course, there have been many fascinating, exciting and kindly people. (Of the others, we will say nothing.)

But, although I have done a little travelling, I cannot now imagine living anywhere but Bilbury. Occasionally, people from outside the village say things like 'Don't you get bored living in the same place all the time?' or 'Isn't life in a small village rather dull?' or 'Don't you miss having theatres, opera houses, museums and galleries on your doorstep?'

The answer is always a simple and honest 'No'. I never get bored in Bilbury and life in our village is anything but dull. It's true that we don't have theatres, museums and all those other places but, as a rule, we also don't have large and endless traffic jams, constant noise or air so thick with pollutants that you could cut it into cubes and store it in a cupboard.

In Bilbury we have time to think, to reflect and to look around at our wonderful world. Trees can spread their roots, plants can bloom without being choked and at some times of the year you can, if you know what to look for, pick a snack from the hedgerow as you walk from one place to another. I always think the same is true for people: we can spread our roots and bloom without fear of being choked. Living in Bilbury, I always feel that I am at home and on holiday at the same time.

The fact is, of course, that we were all originally country dwellers. We lived in hamlets and villages or, sometimes, in isolated communities which consisted of no more than one or two houses and which could not, therefore, be described as hamlets.

When the writer Daniel Defoe toured England in 1724, researching his book, *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, the whole country was mainly rural. At least eight out of ten people lived in hamlets and villages – most of which had only a few hundred people living in them.

(Incidentally, at the time of Defoe's travels, the North Devon town of Barnstaple was spelt Barnstable – just like the town in the United States which shares the same name. It is, it seems, the American spelling which is the correct version. According to Defoe, the town which is now known as Bideford used to be called Biddiford and the seaside resort known as Ilfracombe was known to him as Ilfar-comb.)

Towns and cities are a relatively new development and, in historical terms, most of us have very little real cultural experience of town life. Most of us are, at heart, country dwellers who have still not properly adapted to the restrictions of town or city life. Despite this, most of us live in towns and cities. We are crammed together in blocks of flats and in rows of terraced houses. The only bits of greenery most people see are the few plants growing in window boxes, the neat, little parks and gardens where the trees are grey, the weeds ripped out before they have a chance to flower and the grass stunted and brown.

Even in the suburbs, we are often closer together than we like to be. Gardens are over-tended and anything resembling a wild flower is torn up. Nettle patches have been replaced with summerhouse decking, and patios and hedges have been ripped out and replaced with factory made fencing that doesn't need trimming. Wildlife stands no chance. The absence of wild flowers means that butterflies and bees are a rarity. Grey Squirrels are caught and bludgeoned to death because they are officially regarded as pests.

The people who designed our towns and cities used to plant trees along the roadside edges, so that we would be reminded of our rural roots by the sight of an occasional leaf. Today's planners and councillors are ripping out the trees. They say that leaves and roots are a health and safety hazard, that clearing away the leaves in autumn costs money and that dripping sap from trees damages car paintwork. Oak trees drop acorns and horse chestnut trees drop conkers – more health and safety hazards.

But we have always been basically country dwellers and most of us are, in our hearts, still country dwellers. And even if our daily lives require us to live and work in towns and cities, humans still harbour a fondness for rural living.

I know I am lucky to be able to spend my days in Bilbury, where nettles grow freely, where butterflies still flutter, where the sight of a raven is nothing unusual and where wild orchids grow freely on the untrimmed verges beneath the hedgerows.

And where the people still have time to stop and say ‘hello’ to one another, where door keys are lost and never missed, where cold winter days are warmed by the smell of wood smoke and where we have the time, the freedom, the patience to enjoy one other’s idiosyncrasies without the instant judgements which seem to be a part of modern life.

I hope you enjoy this new volume of memories from Bilbury. These tales are all set in the 1970s but, I promise you faithfully, Bilbury has not changed since then; and I know it never will. Bilbury is forever, and, whether you are passing through, staying a while or planning to join us here permanently you will be forever welcome.

Living in Bilbury is a real joy.

Vernon Coleman, Bilbury

The Dinner Party

The Pinchbecks live in a 15th century house which was built by one of North Devon's early mine owners. It has, inevitably, been extended on many occasions and is now a large, comfortable house which offers a number of different architectural styles. From many of the rooms, and the extensive grounds, there are splendid views of the Severn Estuary and the southern coastline of the proud and independent nation of Wales which lies across the water.

At the time of which I write, Mr Pinchbeck, who was in his 50s, was a bank manager in Barnstaple. He exuded calm, dignity and presence. His wife was in her 30s and the headmistress of a local primary school. They had twins, who were aged seven or eight-years-old.

Their one weaknesss, if weakness it was, was that they shared an affection for parties. It didn't seem to matter what sort of party it was as long as it was a party. They threw parties for their children, for their relatives for their friends and for themselves. They threw parties to show off, they threw parties to celebrate good news and they threw parties to help them forget bad news. Some people believe that arnica is a cure for all ills. Others have faith in yoga. The Pinchbecks put their faith in parties. If they had been on the Titanic on its final and fatal voyage, they would have doubtless spent their last hours organising a party.

And one spring they decided to host an extravagant dinner party for a select group of friends from around the country.

It was not to be an ordinary dinner party. It was to be something they would all remember for years to come. It was to be a dinner party for gourmands; people who could eat for England; trenchermen and women who knew when they had eaten enough but never let that stop them eating more. This was not, and there was never any doubt about it, a meeting of gourmets. These were not individuals who could taste a sauce and tell you whether it contained enough basil or needed a pinch more horseradish. These were people who liked to eat and who liked to eat to excess. These were definitely gourmands, rather than gourmets; they were the sort of people who would complain that the chips are too greasy but would, nevertheless, happily chomp their way through the lot (and probably eat some of yours too). A gourmand is someone who can keep eating when he is no longer hungry. Indeed, for a gourmand, hunger and food have nothing whatsoever to do with each other.

I knew about the party long before it happened. When you live in a small village, there are always rumours, and secrets don't last very long – they tend to have the sort of life expectancy that would make a mayfly feel rather ancient.

Much of the food that was going to be served at the Pinchbecks' party had been ordered from Peter Marshall's shop and I wouldn't like to say that Peter is a gossip, not in the unpleasant sense of the word, but he does sometimes enjoy sharing information; indeed, I rather think he regards it as a duty to act as our local news provider. Moreover, there was no doubt that his newly appointed estate agent specialist, Hilda Musbury, shared his view on this.

Peter himself told me that Mrs Pinchbeck was planning to serve a number of dishes based on recipes devised by the world's greatest chefs including Brillat-Savarin, La Chapelle, Marin, Nicolas de Bonnefons and le Marechal de Richelieu. Peter said that he'd had to import 70-year-old oysters, known as pieds de cheval, from Cancale on the Brittany coast. The gourmands were, after all, going to give their taste buds a treat.

There were to be five guests at the party; all of whom had very highly developed and well-tended egos. They were individuals who had no doubt whatsoever that they were exceptional, human beings. They had, like their male half of their hosts, all motored comfortably into their fifties.

Balfour Morrison, was a schoolteacher at a well-known public school and considered himself widely known for his role as a regular guest on a BBC arts programme. He had cultivated a rich, mid-Atlantic bass voice which he felt suited his position as an arbiter of highbrow taste.

Topham Beauclerk ran a small bookshop in Exeter and specialised in dealing in old maps. He had written and self-published a small guidebook for those eager to enter this rather esoteric field. He was also an enthusiastic amateur dentist who had invented a type of rubber crown which he claimed would revolutionise life for bruxism sufferers. Sadly, however, the dental profession, fearful of losing a good deal of repeat crown work, had refused to accept his invention and Beauclerk remained embittered and rather resentful.

Both Morrison and Beauclerk were life-long bachelors.

The third guest, Claude Templeton, managed a bank in Somerset, and was a keen but inexpert golfer who was so accustomed to losing to his wealthy customers that even when he was playing alone he still managed to play rather ineptly. He considered himself to be an expert on Conan Doyle's books about the adventures of Sherlock Holmes. Templeton was married to a magazine editor who, when not working, spent most of her life tucked into a small flat in the Paddington area of London. She spent her evenings working as a Marriage Guidance Counsellor. Neither the

Pinchbecks nor the other guests had ever met her and she was, indeed, something of a stranger to Claude.

The other two guests were the Chattertons; another two halves of a married couple.

Constance and Elmore Chatterton ran a small chain of sporting goods stores which were distributed throughout the West Country. They lived in a small manor house on the outskirts of Taunton. Elmore's grandfather, an expert toboggan enthusiast, who had won cups in St Moritz, had founded the first store back in the 1920s and Elmore's father had built up the business. Constance, a keen horsewoman, had won rosettes, medals and cups in dressage events. She was also an enthusiastic singer who knew and could sing the entire canon of work produced by Gilbert and Sullivan (including the male roles). Elmore, who had weighed 12 stones when he was 12-years-old could have won medals and cups if any had been available for eating. (When younger he had, indeed, won prizes in a couple of pie eating competitions.)

The Pinchbecks had at one point considered including a stranger in their dinner party (according to some old customs it is good luck to have a stranger at the dining table since there is always a chance that the stranger might well be an angel) but they had reluctantly abandoned this idea when they realised that they could not think of any strangers they wanted to invite to their home. (There had, of course, never been any chance of their inviting an actual real stranger to the party.)

To the astonishment of everyone in the village, it was rumoured, quite accurately, that the dinner party was designed to consist of a single meal that would last for a minimum of 12 hours and would consist of 55 separate courses. The number of courses had apparently been chosen to celebrate the fact that Mr Pinchbeck was about to celebrate his 55th birthday. Mrs Harrison, a cook from Combe Martin who usually worked at one of the local public houses, had been hired to help with the cooking and her 19-year-old son, Eric, had been hired to help with the waiting on and the washing up.

Each guest had been invited to pay £20 each towards the cost of the feast and to bring three bottles of wine to help with the digestive processes. Elmore Chatterton had, uninvited, brought with him a 12-gauge shotgun with which he was determined to 'bag a pheasant, a partridge or a couple of plump pigeons'. He had not made it clear what he intended to do with anything he succeeded in shooting.

On the Saturday of the Pinchbecks' party, I decided to sort through the old paperwork cluttering up the cupboards and shelves in my consulting room. I have always found that dated and unnecessary paperwork accumulates terribly easily. If I kept every receipt, guarantee and warning I am told to keep, I would need an aircraft hangar for storage.

I enjoyed the clear-out so thoroughly that when I had finished tidying my study, I moved around the house, doing the same thing in the drawing room, the kitchen, the butler's pantry, the cupboards in the hall, the bedrooms and even the garage. I extended my spring-clean to cover other items; not just bits of paper. Having checked with Patsy that the selected items were surplus to requirements, I sorted them into three piles. Some items I put aside for the next village jumble sale, some I put into our dustbin, so that they could be collected by the weekly bin-men, and some, by far the greatest quantity, I piled up in cardboard boxes and old shopping bags to take down the garden to our bonfire site.

By the time I'd finished, it was late morning and I had accumulated a modest amount of rubbish for the dustbin, a decent amount of unwanted stuff which I could donate to the jumble sale and a huge pile of burnable rubbish.

As I carried the boxes and old bags down the garden, I found myself looking forward to the bonfire I would have later. I had, as always, a good pile of old garden clippings and there was no doubt that I would be able to have a pretty spectacular blaze.

I sometimes suspect that I must have been an arsonist in a previous life because there are few things I enjoy more than a good bonfire. I don't know why. I can't explain it. But it is a fact of life. Some men like collecting Spode china. Some become excited if they catch a trout. I get a kick out of setting fire to a large pile of rubbish and watching it reduce to a pile of ashes. It is a bonus that the ash so produced makes an excellent contribution to the garden.

I had piled up the first bundle of rubbish, a mixture of paper and garden cuttings, and had crumpled up a few sheets of old newspaper which I had placed at the bottom of the pile when I heard Patsy calling me.

With some reluctance, I left the bonfire and hurried up the garden. I assumed at first that Patsy was calling me because luncheon was ready.

But it wasn't lunch.

'Mrs Pinchbeck called,' said Patsy. 'She wants to know if you'd pop over to their house. Their dinner party is well under way and one of the guests has been taken ill.'

I looked at my watch. 'It's only quarter to twelve!' I pointed out. I followed her back towards the house.

'I know,' agreed Patsy. 'Mrs Pinchbeck explained that because they're having a 55 course meal, they started it with a sort of brunch at 10.00 this morning. Apparently, the plan is that they will eat their way right through until 10.00 tonight. They're going to have a 30 minute break at 2.00 p.m. and another 30 minute break at 6.00 p.m. but otherwise they'll be eating for twelve hours.'

'Fifty five courses in twelve hours? That's nearly five courses an hour!' It seemed a long time to sit down eating. You could travel half way around the world in that amount of time. I shuddered at the thought of it all. In the days when I used to spend time away from Bilbury, touring round the country visiting radio and television stations, I used to get impatient if I went to a restaurant and had to sit and spend an hour on a meal. My friends Frank and Gilly Parsons, who run the Duck and Puddle, our local public house, always try to serve up my food within five minutes of receiving my order.

'I gather some of the courses are quite small,' said Patsy. 'Appetizers and sorbets and so on.'

'Strewth!' I said, with an involuntary shudder. The very idea of having to munch my way through 55 separate courses made me feel positively unwell. 'Did Mrs Pinchbeck say what the problem was?'

I took off my Wellington boots and found a pair of more respectable shoes which weren't coated with mud. As I did so, I remembered that there had been a narrowly averted disaster at the Pinchbecks' home a short time earlier. Guests at a children's party the Pinchbecks had organised, had found some giant hogweed stems and turned them into peashooters. Quite a number of the children had suffered severe allergy reactions. Fortunately, none of them had died.

'She said she thought that one of their guests might have developed some sort of allergy,' said Patsy. She didn't seem to think it was terribly urgent but I said I thought you'd want to go now. I'll keep lunch until you get back.'

'They seem prone to allergy problems down at the Pinchbecks!' I said, still thinking of the children's party that had gone wrong. 'What are we having for lunch?'

'Cheese and onion rolls with pickled gherkins on the side. Followed by a banana au naturelle and a cup of something made from hot water and ground Arabica beans.'

'That sounds like four courses.'

'If you have a chocolate from that box Frank and Gilly gave us for our anniversary then it'll be a five course meal.'

'Marvellous!'

I kissed my wife, picked up my black medical bag from my consulting room and set off for the Pinchbecks'. I was still wearing my gardening clothes but I had at least changed my shoes.

A few minutes later, I drove into the driveway of the Pinchbecks' house. Since I'd been there last, they had extended the driveway and laid down an expanded and generous version of one of those large circular, gravel areas which enable visitors to drive around a centre point. In this case the centre point was, as is so often the case, a large old-fashioned fountain. This one was well equipped with nymphs and cherubs and fish. Sadly, none of them was spouting water. Either the water had not yet been connected to the fountain or the Pinchbecks hadn't turned on the pumps required to make the fountain work. Few things seem sadder or more pointless than a fountain with no water coming out of it – especially if the fountain has been well equipped with potential water squirting sites. The cherubs and nymphs and so on, all designed and poised to spout water, now looked merely sad and redundant. Maybe the Pinchbecks liked it that way.

Mrs Pinchbeck met me at the door and took me into the dining room where her husband and her guests were all busily working their way through their next course. Dirty dishes and cutlery were piled high on the sideboard and through an open doorway, I could see into the kitchen where a young man, presumably Eric Harrison, was bent over the sink. He had a pink, frilly edged pinafore tied around his waist. I didn't envy him and hoped the Pinchbecks were paying him well for 12 hours of washing up. From the pile of dirty dishes stacked and waiting their turn, it was pretty clear that he was going to have his work cut out to keep up with the rate at which crockery was being used. A pleasantly plump, middle-aged woman in a white uniform was dashing about with steaming pans of something. She, I assumed, was Eric's mum.

The patient was Topham Beauclerk, the bookseller.

He was sitting at the table with the other guests. They were all busily munching their way through what looked like small sausage rolls which were swimming in a rich, red sauce of some kind.

'Shall we go somewhere a little more private?' I asked him.

'No, no, I'm fine sitting here,' said Mr Beauclerk. 'I seem to have developed some sort of allergy. Can you give me an antihistamine or something?'

He pulled back his right shirt sleeve and showed me his right forearm. There was a red allergy rash clearly visible. He wheezed a little as he spoke.

'Where else is the rash?' I asked him.

'Pretty well everywhere,' he replied. He put a forkful of sausage roll into his mouth and chewed at it noisily.

I thought him rather an odd and unpleasant fellow; packed to the gills with oodles of self-esteem, far more than was necessary, good for him or quite polite.

'Do you always have a wheeze?'

'Good God, no!' he said, without bothering to stop chewing. 'I assumed it was part of this damned allergy thing.'

'It probably is. Do you have any other symptoms?'

'I've been sneezing a bit. And I feel a trifle nauseous.'

'Do you have any difficulty in swallowing?'

'A little,' he admitted. 'My throat may be swollen slightly.'

'Do you have any known allergies? Any food allergies?'

He said he hadn't.

I asked him what he had eaten that might have caused his symptoms. He said he couldn't remember what he'd eaten and that it was surely my job to decide what had caused his symptoms. As he spoke, he sprayed food around. He didn't seem to care about this, or to be embarrassed.

Mr Pinchbeck, looking rather embarrassed by his guest's rudeness, and coming to my help, said they had all eaten smoked salmon and scrambled eggs. It had been their third course. He mentioned this because he wondered if the fish might have been the cause of the problem.

I said I thought that the salmon was probably the culprit.

'Have you ever had anything like this before?' I asked.

His mouth was full so he shook his head. He seemed to be coping quite well with the nausea from which he claimed to be suffering.

'I'll give you an antihistamine injection,' I told him. 'But you'd better keep away from fish in the future.'

'Just salmon you mean?'

'No, you need to avoid all fish dishes. If you have an allergy to one type of fish it is perfectly possible that you will be allergic to other types of fish. And it's quite possible that you could develop an allergy reaction simply by being in the same room as fish being cooked.'

'Never had trouble with fish before,' said Mr Beauclerk, as though this made it impossible that he should have trouble with it now. 'And I do a little fishing myself,' he added inconsequentially. 'Fly fishing, don't you know.'

I turned to Mrs Pinchbeck. 'Do you have any other fish courses planned?'

She consulted a well-thumbed sheet which she took from a pocket in her skirt. It was clearly the menu for their seemingly never-ending feast. 'We have smoked herrings as course no 11 and trout with almonds as number 24.' She showed me the menu. Just looking at the list of dishes they had planned made me feel queasy. I had a powerful feeling that it would be something of a miracle if the diners all managed to get to the end of their feast. Why, I couldn't help wondering, didn't Mr Pinchbeck celebrate his birthday by taking his chums along to the Duck and Puddle to enjoy one of Gilly's steak and kidney pies. They could, if they'd had any room left, follow it up with a slice of treacle tart or a helping of spotted dick with plenty of custard.

'You mustn't eat those courses,' I told Mr Beauclerk. 'And while those dishes are being cooked, prepared and served you must keep out of the kitchen and the dining room.'

'Absurd!' said Mr Beauclerk. 'I've never had any problem with fish until you came along.' He said this as though as I were the cause of his symptoms. He swallowed. 'And why do I have to keep out of the way when fish is being cooked? Are you worried that the fish might jump out of the dish and nibble my nose? Do you think it is going to leap off the plate and bite me?' He laughed and looked around the table. There were some titters and a guffaw from his fellow guests.

'Well, I'm afraid I think you probably have a fish allergy now,' I told him. I really didn't much care for this fellow. 'And if you are allergic to fish and you eat it again then there is a chance that you could have a full-blooded anaphylactic shock reaction. You also need to avoid vapour produced when fish is being cooked because that could produce a reaction.'

'What does that mean, in English?' he demanded, his rudeness growing.

'It means there is a chance you could die if you ignore what I'm telling you,' I said.

'Oh, well, we're all going to die eventually!' said Mr Beauclerk, with a wave of his hands. 'You're not frightening me that easily.'

'I'm not trying to frighten you,' I told him firmly. 'I'm merely warning you what might happen if you aren't careful.' I was tempted to tell him that I really didn't give a damn whether he listened to my advice or not.

Mr Beauclerk refused to leave the dining room for me to give him an injection. Instead, he stood up and lowered his trousers and told me to swab the skin and jab the needle into his thigh while everyone else carried on eating.

Giving in to his stubbornness, I opened my black bag and took out a syringe and a vial of an antihistamine. Suddenly, he pulled up his trousers and sat down again. 'I don't feel as bad as I did,' he said abruptly. 'The incident has passed.'

It was true that the rash seemed to be fading and the wheezing was nowhere near as bad as it had been. 'I still think I should give you an injection,' I said. 'Or at the very least you should let me give you a couple of antihistamine tablets.'

'No, no, no!' he said, waving a hand imperiously. 'On your way, doctor! My body has healed itself. Your services are no longer required.' He then laughed loudly. He seemed to be playing to his audience and they responded with more titters and, I have to say, some rather uncomfortable laughter. The Pinchbecks both looked deeply embarrassed.

Under the circumstances there was nothing else I could do. I could hardly force the man to allow me to treat him. I said goodbye to everyone and drove back home to have my lunch. I was looking forward to my cheese and onion rolls and my coffee. And then, with a little luck, I was hoping that I could get back to my bonfire.

But my luck was out.

Just as I finished the last of my coffee, the telephone rang. It had, at least, had the decency to wait until I'd finished my lunch.

It was Mrs Pinchbeck again. She sounded panicky.

'You must come quickly, doctor!' she shouted. 'It's an emergency.'

'What's happened?' I asked.

'It's Mr Beauclerk,' she said.

'Did he eat more fish?'

'He insisted on eating the herrings.'

'And what's happened?'

'He's having difficulty breathing. His face is all swollen.'

'Lie him down, on his side and make sure his airway is open.'

'My husband has done all that. He went on a first aid course at the bank.'

'Good. I'm on my way. And I'll ask my wife to call an ambulance.'

I put down the telephone receiver, asked Patsy to ring for an ambulance to go to the Pinchbecks' address, picked up my black bag and was in the car and on my way within a minute and a half of receiving the call.

Life is a constant near death experience but Mr Beauclerk was frighteningly close to taking the final curtain when I arrived at the Pinchbecks'.

He had suffered an anaphylactic shock reaction and the ferryman was preparing to take him on that final journey across the Styx. He was still breathing, but with considerable difficulty; his heart was still beating, but hardly healthily; and when I checked his blood pressure, I found it had collapsed.

'We told him he shouldn't have eaten any more fish,' said one of the other guests. I didn't notice which one it was.

'He wouldn't listen,' said Mrs Pinchbeck who was close to tears.

I took out a syringe, a needle and a glass vial of adrenalin. I broke the top off the vial, filled the syringe with adrenalin and squirted the stuff into the foolish dinner guest.

Gradually, the adrenalin did its work. Mr Beauclerk began to breathe a little more easily, his blood pressure rose a little and his colour began to return.

'He'll need to go into the hospital in Barnstaple,' I told Mr Pinchbeck, who was kneeling beside me.

'Could he have a relapse?'

'I hope not. But he needs to be in hospital for a few days just in case.' I took some notepaper out of my bag and wrote an explanatory note for the hospital doctor who would have to admit Mr Beauclerk. I put the note into an envelope.

The ambulance arrived twenty minutes or so later. The driver had done well since they'd had to come from Barnstaple. The journey from the ambulance station to the Pinchbecks' home is only about 11 miles but it's a difficult 11 miles; all twists and turns and bad bends.

By the time the ambulance had arrived, Mr Beauclerk had more or less recovered and naturally, though he felt and looked weak, he didn't want to go to hospital.

'You're going,' I told him firmly, feeling that this was not the time for arguments or discussions.

'You can't make me,' he said, defiantly. He tried to get up but he was as weak as the proverbial kitten and he fell back down again immediately.

'I think Mr Beauclerk is a little confused,' I told one of the ambulance men. 'He definitely needs to be in hospital.' I handed over the envelope containing the note I had written.

'No problem, doctor,' said the ambulance man. He slipped the envelope into his jacket pocket. The two of them lifted a protesting Mr Beauclerk onto a stretcher, wrapped a blanket around him and fastened him to the stretcher with straps.

Mr Beauclerk tried to lift himself up but failed. 'Maybe you're right, doctor,' he said, when he found he was unable to move. ‘I do seem to be rather weak.’ I don’t think he realised he was strapped to the stretcher. He turned his head. ‘I’ll want a refund of part of my £20,’ he said, not addressing anyone in particular but clearly speaking to the Pinchbecks. ‘And I’ll pick up the bottles of wine I brought with me when I’m feeling better.’

The ambulance men took him away.

I don’t think anyone was sorry to see him go.

I put the used syringe, together with the needle and the remains of the glass vial into my bag, locked it and said goodbye to the Pinchbecks and their other guests. And as the ambulance roared off to Barnstaple, bells ringing and lights flashing, I headed steadily back to Bilbury Grange.

I thought I might treat myself to a second cup of coffee before I lit my bonfire. I had, it seemed, been looking forward to that bonfire for a week. It was difficult to believe I had only built it a few hours ago.

I had restocked my bag and finished the coffee and was reflecting on how fortunate I was that Patsy had no more affection for dinner parties than I did, when the telephone rang again. Some days are like that. It was, by now, about three o’clock in the afternoon.

This time it was Mr Pinchbeck, rather than his wife, on the other end of the telephone.

‘I’m so sorry to bother you again, doctor,’ he said, sounding genuinely apologetic. ‘But we’re having a problem with another of our guests.’

‘What seems to be the problem?’ I asked, doing my best to hide my weariness and resorting to a favourite medical cliché. With the amount of food being consumed at the Pinchbecks’, I half expected to be told that the entire dinner party cast had collapsed with digestive upsets. If I had eaten a quarter of the meal they had planned, it would have been me, not the table, which would have been groaning.

‘It’s Constance Chatterton’ said Mr Pinchbeck. ‘She’s having a bit of a funny turn.’

‘What sort of funny turn? What symptoms? Do I need to call an ambulance for her?’

‘Oh no, I don’t think she’ll need an ambulance,’ said Mr Pinchbeck. ‘Indeed, I sincerely hope not.’

I told him I’d be there as quickly as I could. Once again, I said goodbye to Patsy, told her where I was going, picked up my black bag and headed for the car. If the Rolls had been a horse it would have doubtless found its way to the Pinchbecks’ without any help from me.

Mrs Chatterton was still sitting at the Pinchbecks’ dining table. The other guests had not stopped eating but Mrs Chatterton seemed to be taking a breather.

‘What’s the problem?’ I asked her, more breezily than I felt.

‘My vision is blurred,’ said Mrs Chatterton. ‘And I’ve got an itchy rash.’ She was slurring her words and it was clear that she had been drinking. I wasn’t surprised to hear that she had been drinking. The guests would definitely need a good deal of fluid to help wash down all that food.

‘Where is the itchy rash?’

‘Pretty well everywhere.’

‘Is there anything else?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Did the symptoms come on suddenly or slowly?’

‘Rather slowly.’

‘Do you have any food allergies that you know of?’

‘No, no I don’t think so.’

‘What have you had to drink?’

‘Just a couple of gin and tonics. I don’t drink wine. I’m not terribly keen on it.’

‘How many gin and tonics?’

‘Two or three,’ she replied.

‘Seven or eight,’ whispered her husband. ‘But they were very weak. They contained far more tonic than gin.’

‘Are you sure there aren’t any other symptoms?’ I asked her.

She frowned, thinking hard. ‘I don’t think so,’ she said.

‘You said you had a ringing in your ears,’ her husband reminded her.

‘Oh yes. I forgot that. I have a ringing noise in my ears.’

And it was that which gave me the clue. I asked Mrs Pinchbeck to fetch one of the bottles of tonic water so that I could look at the label. And sure enough the tonic contained a fairly hefty quantity of quinine.

There had for some time been an on-going campaign to get a reduction in the amount of quinine in tonic water. But back in the 1970s, some brands of tonic water still contained an unhealthy quantity of the stuff.

‘How many bottles of this has she drunk?’ I asked Mrs Pinchbeck.

She went out into the kitchen to check on the collection of bottles which had accumulated.

‘Seven,’ she told me when she returned.

‘Seven bottles of tonic water?’

‘Yes.’

And then I was sure of the diagnosis.

‘I think your problem is caused by the quinine in the tonic water,’ I told Mrs Chatterton. ‘It happens sometimes. And your symptoms are fairly classic ones.

She laughed. It was a strange, almost hysterical sort of laugh. ‘Not the gin, then?’

‘No, not the gin.’

‘I should have had more gin and less tonic water.’

‘That would have caused a different set of problems.’

‘I suppose so.’

‘What’s the treatment?’ asked Mr Chatterton. ‘Can you give her anything?’

‘I’m afraid I’m going to have to send her to hospital,’ I told him.

The Pinchbecks’ dinner party was beginning to resemble their children’s party which had resulted in most of the guests ending up as patients in the local hospital.

‘Is that really necessary?’ asked Mr Chatterton.

‘I’m afraid so,’ I told him. ‘I’m sure she’ll be fine but I want them to do some tests and keep an eye on her for a day or two.’

‘We’ll soon have to move what remains of our dinner party to the hospital!’ said Mr Balfour Morrison, the school-teacher and broadcaster. He seemed to think this was funny. ‘Still, there’s more food for those of us still here, eh?’

The Pinchbecks both looked at him. Mr Morrison seemed unaware that the sick woman’s husband was not two yards away from him. If anyone had spoken like that when Patsy was being sent into hospital, I would have been unable to resist the temptation to see whether my fist was made of sterner stuff than his nose.

The appalling Morrison grinned and raised a wine glass in a callous salute. I really wasn’t terribly impressed by the Pinchbecks’ choice of friends.

‘Have you got a phone I could use?’ I asked Mr Pinchbeck.

He showed me into a tiny room which he used as a study. It was barely big enough for a desk and a chair but there was a telephone on the desk.

I shut the door and rang for an ambulance. When I’d done that there was time for me to ring the hospital in Barnstaple.

I explained the situation to the young doctor to whom I spoke. It turned out that he was the doctor who had admitted Mr Beauclerk. He sounded astonished that he was about to receive another guest from the same dinner party.

‘How many more people have you got there?’ he asked.

‘Just five more to go,’ I told him.

‘Some dinner party! Try not to send them all in,’ he said. ‘We’re getting a bit tight on beds.’

I said I would do my best then I hung up and went back out into the dining room.

Mrs Chatterton was comfortable enough and clearly not deteriorating. The damage had been done but it would not, I was sure, leave any permanent damage.

I left the Pinchbecks’ before the ambulance arrived and then I headed back to Bilbury Grange. As I left, Mrs Harrison was serving another course and her son was still washing dishes. The Pinchbecks had clearly decided to continue with their decimated dinner party. The show must go on. I heard someone say it was course 42. I didn’t stop to find out what the course consisted of as it was nearly time for my dinner.

I had just about finished my evening meal, a chunky slice of home-made vegetarian pizza accompanied by a very refreshing glass of home-made lemonade, when I received the next call from the Pinchbecks. Somehow, it wasn’t a complete surprise. When a group of people eat so much food and drink, and wash it down with so much alcohol, there are almost certain to be problems. The human body isn’t built for 55 course meals.

This time, it was Mr Pinchbeck who telephoned. I wondered if he and his wife were now drawing lots to see who made the call.

‘I feel so embarrassed to be ringing you again,’ he said.

And, to be fair, he did sound embarrassed.

Actually, I felt embarrassed for him. How many patients have had to call their doctor four times in a single day?

Job had his boils to deal with. Dante had the nine circles of hell to pass through. And now I had the Pinchbecks’ dinner party. Sorting out their darned dinner party guests was beginning to feel like my life’s work. I began to sympathise with that bloke Sisyphus, the chap who was forever pushing a boulder up a hill. Actually, the way things were going, I seemed to be forever pushing the wrong damned boulder up the wrong damned hill.

'One of our guests has been shot,' said Mr Pinchbeck.

I could hardly believe it.

Sometimes, things just go one way. The lucky gambler has a surprising streak of luck. The businessman has a run of bad luck. You can't manage these things: they just happen.

'I'm on my way,' I told him. 'Do I need to ring for an ambulance? Do you need to call the police?'

'I think we probably need both,' he said. 'Actually, two of our guests have been shot. Both Balfour Morrison and Elmore Chatterton have been shot in the leg.'

'Have you controlled the bleeding?'

'Yes, more or less.'

'Who shot them?'

'Our Labrador puppy.'

'Your Labrador puppy shot both Balfour Morrison and Elmore Chatterton?'

'Yes.'

The day was becoming stranger by the minute.

'Whose gun was it?'

'Elmore Chatterton's.'

'I'll be there as soon as I can,' I told him. I wondered if the dog had shot the two men separately or if he'd shot them both with a single blast of the gun. The latter seemed more likely. It was difficult to imagine the Pinchbecks' playful Labrador puppy having some sort of brainstorm and going on a wild shooting rampage. But the way the day was going, I wouldn't have regarded that as impossible. 'I'll ask Patsy to telephone for an ambulance,' I told Mr Pinchbeck. 'I'll leave you to telephone the police if you think they should be there.'

'You won't be ringing the police?'

'I need to get into the car and get down there as soon as I can. I'll leave calling them to you.'

To be honest, I'm a bit old-fashioned and I don't think it is a doctor's job to call the police if a patient is injured.

Once again, I asked Patsy to send an ambulance to the Pinchbecks' and then I put my black bag back into the car.

I really felt that by now the Rolls probably could find its way down to the Pinchbecks' house without my help. We slid into the Pinchbecks' driveway and it felt strangely like coming home.

It turned out that Mr Morrison and Mr Chatterton had been shot in the calf while sitting at the table.

The remaining diners had taken their statutory 30-minute break from eating, and Mr Chatterton had gone outside to shoot some birds. He'd wandered around outside for twenty minutes or so, firing into the woods where he thought he'd seen a few crows and pigeons, and when he had come back into the house he had left his shotgun leaning against a chair. He said he thought that the gun was unloaded. Tragically, it wasn't. The Pinchbecks' dog brushed against the gun, knocking it over, and then, as it stumbled, the poor beast trod on the trigger. The pellets had scattered across quite a large area but miraculously the only victims had been Mr Morrison and Mr Chatterton himself. Surprisingly, it is not at all unusual for people to be shot with their own guns, with the trigger having being pressed by a dog. I wondered if Mr Pinchbeck had called the police. I wondered whether they would decide to arrest the poor dog. Actually, I couldn't help wondering whether I'd been told the whole story. Mr Chatterton seemed to me to be a pretty unpleasant character. Maybe one of the other guests had fired the gun and hit Mr Morrison by accident. Maybe someone had shot them both. There was no butler available as a possible suspect but there was always Eric Harrison. Maybe a day spent washing interminable dishes in the Pinchbecks' kitchen had deranged him.

I decided it was nothing to do with me and I didn't really care terribly much if he had shot them both so I dismissed all these strange thoughts. The day was strange enough as it was. And I was rapidly losing sympathy with this unpleasant bunch of bezzlers.

There were quite a few pellets embedded in Mr Harrison's calf and the pellets were huge. From what I could see they looked as if they were made of lead. They were the size of small marbles. Mrs Pinchbeck was holding his leg in an attempt to staunch the bleeding. Unfortunately, she wasn't making a terribly good job of it. Blood was still pouring out from the wounds the pellets had made and from the position of the wounds, I hazarded a guess that the posterior tibial artery had been damaged. Mr Harrison was moaning; partly in pain and partly, I suspected, as a result of the shock. When you are sitting at a dinner table working your way through a 55-item menu, you may reasonably expect to find yourself coping with indigestion, heartburn and an attack of wind but you probably don't expect to be hit by some chunky sized lead pellets fired from a fellow diner's resting, and seemingly harmless, shotgun.

'Press harder on the wound,' I told Mrs Pinchbeck.

With some obvious reluctance, she did as I had asked.

When I was satisfied that the bleeding had been staunched, I left Mr Harrison while I took a look at Mr Chatterton's injury.

Mr Chatterton's injury wasn't as bad because he had been hit by just two or three pellets. But he too was bleeding badly. A smallish artery, probably the peroneal or fibular artery, a subsidiary branch of the posterior tibial artery, had been severed and blood was pumping out at quite a rate. It was some time since I'd studied anatomy but it's amazing how these bits and pieces of information drift back into the conscious mind when they are needed and appropriate.

Mr Chatterton was attempting to stop the bleeding by pressing on it but he wasn't pressing hard enough. Unlike venous blood, which just trickles out, arterial blood comes out of the vessel under pressure and can spurt feet or even yards into the air. The spray of blood from both legs made it quite clear that both Mr Harrison and Mr Chatterton had suffered significant arterial damage. It was, I thought, a good thing that I had managed to get to the Pinchbecks' without much delay. And it was a good thing that I had asked Patsy to call for an ambulance.

GPs don't usually find themselves treating more than one patient at a time. When it happens, you have to use the triage system utilised in military hospitals such as American MASH units. The patient who is most seriously wounded must be treated as a priority, though you do what you can to stabilise the less seriously wounded.

It seemed pretty clear that Mr Chatterton's injury was less serious than Mr Harrison's. But he seemed to be losing more blood than Mr Harrison. It seemed clear that the arterial damage to Mr Chatterton's leg was more severe than the damage to Mr Harrison's leg. They were both going to need surgery but my job was clearly simply to limit the loss of blood and keep both men alive until they could be taken to the hospital.

'Do you have something I can use as a tourniquet?' I asked Mrs Harrison, who had stopped cooking to watch the excitement.

'What sort of thing?' she asked.

'Something I can tie around Mr Chatterton's leg.'

'I don't think you should put on a tourniquet,' said someone. I looked up. Mr Pinchbeck was standing over me. 'Our first aid teacher taught us that tourniquets can be dangerous. He said that simply putting pressure on the site of the wound can be safer.'

'Sometimes,' I agreed. I wondered why Mr Pinchbeck, who looked very pale, wasn't doing something useful instead of merely offering theoretical advice.

It is true that tourniquets can be problematical if they are left on for too long but when you have two patients who are bleeding badly, it is vital to stop the flow of blood. And since I only had one pair of hands, and none of the others present seemed prepared or able to staunch the flow of blood, a tourniquet seemed to me to be the only solution. In fact, a tourniquet is only really a problem if it is left on for too long and the tissues are deprived of essential oxygen. If the tourniquet is loosened every few minutes, to allow blood to flow into the tissues, then no damage will be done.

'Excuse me,' I said to Mr Chatterton, 'do you mind if I use your tie to stop your bleeding?'

Mr Chatterton looked at me, then at his tie. It was a hideous thing in blue and orange. He shook his head. I unfastened the tie and then tied it around his thigh with a good knot so that I could unfasten it easily and quickly.

'I really, really don't think you should do that,' said Mr Pinchbeck.

'The alternative is to let the poor fellow bleed to death,' I pointed out, speaking softly so that only Mr Pinchbeck could hear me. There was already a large puddle of blood on the floor. It is always difficult to estimate how much blood has been lost from a wound but I thought that Mr Chatterton had already lost at least half a pint of the good stuff. If we left his leg to bleed then he would be dangerously exsanguinated by the time the ambulance arrived.

'Have you got a watch?' I asked Mr Pinchbeck.

'Yes, of course.'

'Then please tell me when ten minutes have passed. I'll then unfasten the tourniquet and let some blood through.' I checked the wound. The flow of blood had slowed almost to a standstill.

Mr Pinchbeck nodded.

He was, I hoped, learning fast that there is sometimes a difference between what makes sense in the classroom and what makes sense in a real emergency situation.

Once I'd tied a tourniquet round Mr Chatterton's leg, I went back to Mr Harrison. I had thought that I might be able to move at least one of the pellets but I decided not to move anything. There seemed a good chance that the pellet I could reach most easily was compressing a small blood vessel. If I moved it then there was a real chance that the bleeding would intensify. And Mr Harrison, like his fellow dinner party guest, had already lost a good deal of blood.

Thanking the sartorial gods that both men had been wearing ties, I obtained Mr Harrison's permission to remove his tie from around his neck and used it to tie a tourniquet above his knee. His tie was just as hideous as that belonging to Mr Chatterton. It was yellow and had little blue squares on it. I wonder who designs these things. Do they do it as a joke, perhaps?

Once the tourniquet was in place, the blood flow slowed to a trickle and then stopped.

Mr Harrison was enormous and his leg as thick as a telegraph pole. The tie was only just long enough.

He told me that he weighed a sixth of a ton and he seemed quite proud of this. The other man who had been shot, Mr Chatterton, later also boasted that he weighed several hundredweight. They both seemed proud to be indecently obese.

The particular act of eating is, like most human experiences, a transient experience. Sleeping, washing, listening to good music, sex, looking at good art – all these things are as transient as the enjoyment of good food, well prepared and served with panache.

But the consequences of eating are not transient and these two men were proof of that fact. Their weight had, I suspected, been rising steadily for the last 40 odd years.

‘Will this do?’ asked Mrs Harrison, holding out a tea towel. She was presumably offering it for use as a tourniquet. It was, of course, quite useless for that purpose.

‘It’s OK,’ I told her, as kindly as I could manage. ‘We’ve got what we need.’

‘Am I going to die?’ Mr Harrison asked.

‘Not from this,’ I replied.

I told both men that they would have to go to the Barnstaple casualty department so that the pellets could be removed safely and the damaged arteries stitched up. I reassured them both that although their injuries looked bad neither of them was in any serious danger.

‘Will they be able to save my leg?’ asked Mr Harrison.

I assured both men that there was no danger of either of them losing a limb.

‘How did the gun come to be loaded?’ I asked Mr Pinchbeck.

‘Mr Chatterton had been out shooting,’ he replied. ‘We were taking one of our 30 minute breaks and he’d gone outside to see if he could find some birds to shoot.’

‘Where was he shooting?’ I asked.

‘In the fields just beyond the end of our garden,’ replied Mr Pinchbeck. ‘And in the woodlands just over the fence. He was just having a bit of fun. Shooting a few birds.’

I find it difficult to understand why anyone would shoot wild birds for no reason other than that they are there – especially when those birds are no threat to him or his crops and are not going to be eaten or used in any way. What sort of person kills animals just for fun?

‘Have you got permission for your guests to shoot in there?’ I asked him.

I was furious that he would think it ‘fun’ for one of his guests to wander around the countryside shooting birds for absolutely no reason other than the fact that he could.

‘No,’ said Mr Pinchbeck, rather defiantly. ‘Am I supposed to get permission before allowing my guests to shoot in the countryside?’

‘Of course you are! All sorts of people walk in those woods. Children play in the woods. Ramblers and hikers walk in them.’

‘I didn’t know that. How was I supposed to know?’

‘You could have asked someone,’ I said.

‘Well, it didn’t occur to me.’

‘Let’s hope no one was hit by a stray shot,’ I said.

I suddenly realised that I was interrogating Mr Pinchbeck like a policeman. In addition to the fact that his guest had been shooting birds for ‘fun’, I was angry because I knew he could have easily hit an innocent rambler or a dog walker or a child. Or even a poacher passing through in search of game for food. I realised that it wasn’t my place to decide whether or not he had been behaving badly. I shut up and walked away.

The gunman seemed to me to have all the moral character, and sense of responsibility, one might reasonably associate with the sort of creatures you find when you lift a small rock in the garden.

‘What’s the time? Is the ten minutes up?’ I asked him.

Mr Pinchbeck looked at his watch. ‘Oh, yes. Just about.’

I released both tourniquets and let some blood into the tissues. After a minute or so, I retied the tourniquets.

While I waited for the ambulance to arrive, I rang the hospital and spoke to the young doctor on call. He actually laughed when I told him I was sending two more of the Pinchbecks’ dinner guests to the hospital. ‘They’ve both been shot,’ I told him. ‘You’ll have to dig out some lead shot but they aren’t too seriously injured.’

‘It sounds to me as though you’ve wandered into an Agatha Christie novel!’ he said. ‘The last one standing will be the guilty one.’

The ambulance crew were the same pair who had taken Mr Beauclark to the hospital. ‘Shall we just come back here when we’ve delivered this pair?’ asked the driver.

I felt sorry for the two of them, having to lift such obese creatures into the back of their ambulance.

‘I hope the springs will cope,’ said the driver, after he’d closed the back doors.

I hoped so too. I told them I sincerely hoped they wouldn’t be needed again. I also told them about the tourniquets and the guy who was going to travel in the back of the ambulance promised to keep an eye on things and to unfasten the ties every few minutes.

When I left the Pinchbecks’, a very weary Mrs Harrison was serving item no 55 on Mrs Pinchbeck’s absurd menu. It had seemed absurd when they’d started the meal but now, for some reason, it seemed even more absurd, self-indulgent and utterly pointless.

Miraculously, Mrs Harrison still had a genuine and jolly smile on her face though the dinner party now seemed to me to be a rather sad affair. Most of the blood had been mopped up but the dining room still looked as though a battle had been fought there. Blood, especially when squirting out of damaged arteries, tends to travel quite a distance and just before I left I noticed that some had reached a picture hanging on the wall.

I got the impression that the two remaining guests and the Pinchbecks were now simply going through the motions of enjoying themselves. Why they didn’t abandon their ill-fated dinner party was quite beyond me. The only people left at the dining table were Claude Templeton and the two Pinchbecks. I could only imagine that they were all suffering from shock and were carrying on without really realising what they were doing.

If you looked around and didn’t realise that there should have been five guests you’d have thought that everything was really quite normal. Mrs Harrison’s son, young Eric, was still washing dishes and his equally long-suffering mum was still cooking and serving.

I felt sorry for the Harrisons. They were hard workers. I wondered if Mrs Pinchbeck had thought to offer them anything to eat or drink.

As I drove slowly home I realised there had been no sign of the police at the Pinchbecks. I wondered if they realised that the hospital would have to call the police. No hospital doctor can treat a gun wound without informing the authorities. I supposed that I should have advised the Pinchbecks to leave the gun where it had fallen – and not touch it. But I had been rather too busy dealing with the wounded to worry about the cause of their injuries. The Labrador who had inadvertently fired the gun had been nowhere to be seen.

Back home I parked the car in the driveway and sniffed the now cool evening air.

I could smell smoke.

I could definitely smell smoke.

I hurried into the house and found Patsy. I didn’t have to ask her what was burning. From the kitchen window, I could see a curl of smoke rising at the bottom of the garden.

‘My bonfire!’ I cried. ‘What’s happened to it?’

‘I’m so sorry,’ said Patsy, who looked and sounded genuinely upset for she knew how much I’d been looking forward to lighting my bonfire. ‘Mr Parfitt happened to it.’

Mr Parfitt is our gardener. He has been helping me look after our garden for years. But he has one, singular weakness: he does not understand my penchant for garden bonfires. He sometimes pretends to understand and share my passion for lighting fires. But deep down I know he has never properly understood.

‘Mr Parfitt came by while you were out,’ explained Patsy. ‘He said he had to do something in the greenhouse.’

‘But while he was here…’

‘Exactly! As he left, he said he’d lit the bonfire for you. He said he thought it was likely to rain later on and that if you were delayed you might have difficulty lighting the fire.’ Patsy touched my arm. ‘I’m sorry, my love.’

I looked out silently at the plume of smoke. It had clearly been a very good bonfire. Unbeknownst to Mr Parfitt, there was so much paper packed underneath a weatherproof cover of old branches that it would not have been difficult to light even if it had been pouring with rain.

‘I’ll just wander down the garden and take a look at it,’ I said to Patsy. ‘Make sure everything is OK.’

‘It’ll be chilly in an hour or so,’ said Patsy, who knew that I would be disappointed by the fact that my putative bonfire was now just a pile of smoking ash. And she certainly knew that I’d had a long and arduous day dealing with the Pinchbecks’ party guests. ‘So I’ve laid a fire in the drawing room.’ She smiled at me. ‘Perhaps you’d light it when you come in?’

Patsy can light a fire just as well as I can, of course.

A fire in the living room hearth wasn’t quite the same as an enormous bonfire. But it would make an excellent substitute.

‘They’re showing *The Thirty Nine Steps* on the television,’ continued Patsy. ‘The Hitchcock version with Robert Donat and Madeleine Carroll. And afterwards, they’re showing the 1938 Hitchcock version of *The Lady Vanishes*; the one with Margaret Lockwood and Michael Redgrave and May Whitty as Miss Froy. We could watch them both, if you like. And you could make some toast. Use the brass toasting fork and toast the bread in front of the fire.’

I perked up noticeably. *The Thirty Nine Steps* is one of my favourite films. And I love Basil Radford and Naunton

Wayne as Charters and Caldicott in *The Lady Vanishes*. And with most of the Pinchbecks' dinner guests already in hospital there was a good chance I would be able to watch both films all the way through. Hot buttered toast, made with a toasting fork in front of a blazing log fire, would be a huge and welcome bonus. Toast never tastes as good as it does when it has been made in front of a log fire.

Belatedly, and with some shame, I noticed for the first time that while I'd been out, Patsy had changed into one of her prettiest and most alluring frocks. There was just a promising hint of cleavage. She'd done something to her hair too. And I could smell the enticing smell of an expensive perfume which Gilly had bought Patsy for her birthday.

'You look very beautiful!' I told her.

And then we kissed.

'You've had a long day,' she said, a few minutes later. 'I'll open that new bottle of malt whisky, and put it with a glass by your chair.'

A beautiful wife. A log fire. A couple of favourite movies. A comfortable, old armchair and a glass or two of something good.

Heaven takes many forms.

I called to Ben, our faithful dog, and together we tottered down the garden to check on the remains of the bonfire, and to sniff the slightly smoky evening air.

And after that there was still a great deal to look forward to.

For the Pinchbecks, a strange and painful day was doubtless coming to a close.

But at Bilbury Grange, the best part of the day was yet to come.

The Poacher: A Man of Quiet Integrity

I knew him from the Duck and Puddle.

He supplied Frank and Gilly, the landlord and landlady of the Bilbury village pub, with a steady supply of rabbits, pheasant and trout. Unlike Mr Chatterton, the Pinchbecks' guest, he never shot or caught anything which wasn't going to be eaten. Frank and Gilly paid him with whisky and sandwiches and with essential provisions such as salt, cheese and a loaf of bread. I'm pretty sure that no money ever changed hands. Toby was not a man for whom money meant a great deal, though he would occasionally get paid in cash when doing odd jobs for local farmers and landowners.

Toby was a patient of mine, by which I mean only that he lived in the village of Bilbury and since there were no other doctors in the area, he was registered as a patient of mine. But he had never once been to the surgery, or asked me to visit him at home. If he had a problem, any sort of problem, he dealt with it himself. He was someone who took the phrase 'self-sufficiency' very seriously. It was the way he lived his life.

Lots of people play at self-sufficiency. Town folk go out into the woods to pick mushrooms and berries and end up picking stuff that makes them ill. My friend Will, who practises as a doctor in a town practice, told me that he has a patient who has a hazelnut bush in his garden and who rushes out and digs up nuts he has seen the squirrels burying. Will also has a patient who keeps a pig in his compact, suburban, back garden and who spends much of his life repairing fences, both literally and figuratively. Will says that he is sure that these folk mean well and that they think that keeping half a dozen hens or a couple of geese means that they are living the good life. In truth, of course, they are merely playing at simplicity and self-sufficiency. Toby was living it.

I had known Toby for years. He always looks rather worn out, and reminded me of an old car which has never been repaired, restored or fussed over. An old car may have a few dings in the bodywork and some cracks in the leather seats. But it still does what is expected of it.

Winter or summer, he wore an old waxed raincoat over a thick jacket and a pair of corduroy trousers. If it wasn't actually raining, the top few inches of a roll necked jumper could just be seen. The belt of the raincoat had long since disappeared and had, inevitably, I suppose, been replaced by a piece of dark blue baler twine. (He used blue rather than orange because it was less visible in the countryside.) Two more lengths of baler twine, also blue, were tied around the legs of his trousers, just above ankle height. When I asked him about these, he said they were there to stop snakes and vermin crawling up his trouser leg when he was lying in the woods or on a riverbank. He never removed the raincoat, and only rarely removed the old tweed cap which he wore rather rakishly to one side. Even when he was sitting in the snug at the Duck and Puddle, he still wore his outdoor coat. However, he had the manners of a gentleman and he always lifted the cap if a woman entered the room. His hair was thin, unkempt and grey and looked as if it had been cut by someone wielding a pair of scissors, possibly in front of the mirror and possibly without the aid of a reflection. I'm confident he always cut it himself. He wore fingerless, knitted gloves which were beginning to unravel.

Generally speaking, the only parts of him which were visible were his face and fingertips but these told the story of a man who has lived his life out of doors, and had never fussed with moisturising cream. Surprisingly, perhaps, he was clean-shaven, though he did sport a pair of rather extravagantly bushy sideburns.

His eyelids were red rimmed with chronic blepharitis and both his conjunctiva red veined from constant exposure to the North Devon wind. His left eye had a ptosis. His skin was rough and his cheeks red veined from a mixture of wind and whisky. He had eyes which had seen a great deal. He was a quiet man who knew a good deal more than he told, unlike the noisy folk who tell more than they know.

Thumper, who revered him, said Toby knew everything there was to know about the countryside; he knew nothing that was not worth knowing and not worth learning.

Toby had hardly ever left Bilbury.

As a young man he had visited Exeter once; delivering a horse for a local farmer. Once the horse had been delivered, he had turned the horse box round and driven straight back. It had, I suspect, never occurred to him to stay and take a look at the city. His world was in Bilbury and the boundary of his world was probably the distance a man could walk from the Duck and Puddle in half a day. (Allowing the other half a day for the walk back.)

He owned just one book, an old family Bible, nearly six inches thick and fastened with a brass clasp which was fitted with a stout lock.

His one luxury was the *Sporting Life* newspaper which he collected every Saturday from Peter Marshall's village shop, though as far as anyone knew he never placed a bet. He paid for the newspaper, and any other essentials he occasionally purchased, with a freshly caught pheasant or rabbit. As with the Duck and Puddle, it was very rare for money to ever change hands.

From afar, Toby always seemed to be rather stern and sad and earnest. There was a strange mixture of innocence and worldliness about him and although it is probably an exaggeration to say that he was much loved, he was certainly admired and respected for his independence and his skills.

He was a religious man, a firm believer in a benevolent God who could, if the occasion warranted it, express a profound fury. He never went to church, however, and had probably never been in a church in his life. He would have been embarrassed to sit there in his raincoat, tied up with baler twine, alongside worshippers in their Sunday best.

His one weakness was that he took everything he heard at face value. He was an honest and straightforward man himself and tended to believe what he heard others say. He once sat in the Duck and Puddle and heard some tourists discussing religion. One of them, an obnoxious academic well-known to television viewers but unknown to Toby, loud-mouthed and arrogant and full of his own self-importance, stated that God did not exist, and made the statement with such force that it appeared that he had inside information confirming his belief. Toby was deeply depressed for a month afterwards. ‘How did that man know the truth of what he said?’ he asked Frank Parsons weeks later. Frank assured him that the visitor was, in his view, an unpleasant lunatic who existed only to shock and to startle and to disconcert and who had mistaken his television persona for his real one. Eventually, Toby accepted Frank’s reassurance. But the man caused much unhappiness and I doubt very much if Toby was the first or last person to be so distressed by his unsupported, and unsupportable, allegations.

When he moved, Toby walked cautiously, in that way people walk on frost-hardened rutted earth or an ice slippery pavement. He wore well-worn and well-oiled boots and he could move without making a sound. He kept the leather greased so that it remained waterproof and never squeaked.

Quite a few people in the village were frightened of him though he was one of the gentlest and least threatening people I knew. Children used to keep out of his way and sometimes referred to him as the ‘Bogeyman’. One villager once told me that his son, who was 22-years-old and a corporal in the British army, was still so terrified of the ‘Bogeyman’ that he wouldn’t take the dog into the local woods in case they met.

Toby didn’t smile often but when he did it was a revelation. It wasn’t one of those ‘celebrity smiles’ which involve a lot of teeth but nothing in the eyes. His smile would take over his whole face. His eyes lit up and broad creases appeared around his mouth. For some reason he always smiled and nodded when he saw me. I felt strangely privileged.

Visitors who saw him tended to look down their noses, often mistaking him for a tramp or a beggar. He would gently but politely and firmly reject offers of food, drink or money. It was because he was a proud and independent man that he had chosen the life he lived.

I once asked Thumper, who knew him well, better than anyone in the village, how Toby had become a poacher.

I had, I think, entertained silly and romantic notions that he had perhaps run away from some city job, tired of the rat race. Had his wife left him? Had he lost his job or his driving licence and come to North Devon to forget, as a man might join the Foreign Legion?

Thumper laughed when I suggested these explanations; he explained that Toby had been an orphan, brought up by his grandparents. His mother had run away, no one could remember to where or for why, and his father, a farm labourer, had died in a tractor accident – a commoner countryside tragedy than most town folk realise. His grandfather had been a poacher and had taught young Toby the trade, just as any man might pass on his valued skills to a youngster.

Toby’s grandfather had, said Thumper, been quite a rogue. He had owned a mongrel dog which he had sold half a dozen times. On each occasion the dog had returned home immediately, finding his way home from Taunton, Exeter and, so Thumper swore, even from as far away as the village of Widecombe-in-the-Moor; the place which is famous as the home of Uncle Tom Cobleigh and all. The old man’s dog had been trained so well that he could slip into a farmyard and bring a chicken out to the owner without disturbing the farmer or his dogs.

Toby had no dog but he kept a ferret in a capacious poacher’s pocket which he had sewn into the inside of his waxed coat. Sometimes he carried the ferret in a trouser pocket. The ferret was rather old and, I suspect, kept more as a companion than as a hunting aide.

Poachers often keep ferrets for they are useful for hunting rabbits, as long as you don’t over-feed them and let them get too fat and lazy. Some poachers put a muzzle on their ferret before putting it into a rabbit burrow, and some crueller ones will even sew up the ferret’s lips so that it cannot eat or spoil the rabbit it catches. Some poachers starve their ferrets, to keep them keen, but Toby would never do that. And Toby had never muzzled his ferret in case the animal got lost in an extensive burrow. He explained to Thumper he couldn’t bear the idea of a ferret of his dying of starvation because it was muzzled. He never sent a ferret down a hole with a collar on or a lead, either. He said that if you did this the ferret could get caught up in an underground root and die, alone, starving and in the darkness. If his ferret didn't emerge from a warren, Toby would put gorse into one rabbit hole and light it, smoking out the ferret and catching it as it left another hole. Rabbit burrows can sometimes be a maze of paths, linked to other burrows and threading through roots and other underground obstacles. A ferret, even an experienced one, can easily get lost when there may be over 100 yards of tunnel underground.

One evening in the Duck and Puddle, Thumper had told me that it had been Toby's grandfather who had taught him how to use his hands to tickle a trout out of a stream, how to make a simple snare to catch a rabbit, how to pick up a hedgehog without pricking yourself on the creature's spines and how to catch a hare with nothing more than two hands and an old coat.

It was Toby's grandfather who taught Thumper how to catch a pheasant with his bare hands (put the dregs from a whisky bottle onto some corn and lay the corn down on a path used by the pheasant, then put a sack over the pheasant when it becomes drunk).

And he taught him how to set a gate net for hares. (Throw a net over a five-barred gate leading out of a field in which a hare has been spotted. Put stones on the top of the gate to keep the net in place, then use bits of stone or gorse to block up all the holes in the stone wall which surrounds the field. Finally, walk across the field, with the hare ahead of you. The hare, finding its usual escape routes blocked, will head for the gate and get caught in the net.)

The old man, said Thumper, had been proud of his simple skills and happy to pass them on to a boy who wanted to learn.

'The single most important thing he taught me,' said Thumper, 'was that when you are walking in strange woods you should always look behind you every twenty yards or so, because what you see then will look different to what is in front of you. And when you make your way back out of the woods that will be the way you'll be looking.'

In a town I don't doubt that Toby would have been regarded as a fool; a silly old man with no knowledge or value. But Toby understood country ways better than anyone. He could use a knapped flint to light a bonfire in the rain and somehow it would smoke away merrily. He could forecast the weather better than any meteorologist and he could make a catapult or a bow with the makings he carried in his pocket.

There is no doubt that city folk, visiting Bilbury, frequently looked down on him, patronised him and regarded him as someone who was, in their terms, 'a loser'.

'He wouldn't last a minute in London,' I heard a visiting banker sneer. I think it was the blue baler twine around his raincoat and trousers which they couldn't quite understand.

It was probably true that Toby would have struggled to survive in London.

But would that banker and his posh pals have been able to go into the woods armed only with a penknife, a piece of string and a couple of knapped flints, and then catch a trout and a rabbit before building a wood fire and preparing a three course meal?

Somehow, I rather doubt it.

The key to survival anywhere is to live with the environment, to respect it, to understand it and to prepare and plan for the inevitable vicissitudes of the locality. The key to living comfortably is to understand the delights and the dangers, the advantages and the disadvantages; to be satisfied that you are where you want to be, and to adapt your lifestyle to the environment in which you have chosen to spend your years.

Toby, like my friends Thumper, Patchy, Frank and Peter, had adapted to his surroundings perfectly and he was entirely comfortable with the world in which he found himself when he woke each morning.

I wonder how many London bankers can say that about themselves.

Thumper told me that he once had a meal with Toby which consisted of poached trout served with freshly picked and sliced almonds, followed by rabbit cooked on a spit over a wood fire and served with wild sage and mushrooms. For pudding, Toby served a handful of wild strawberries and black raspberries.

Contrary to appearances, Toby was certainly no tramp and no beggar. He was a professional poacher and a proud one; it would have doubtless surprised many town dwellers to know that he was well tolerated by local landowners.

In some areas, poaching is a real nuisance, for greedy and unthinking poachers cause a great deal of damage and spoil the local hunting and fishing. Gangs of professional poachers come from towns and cities to collect game which they can sell to wholesalers. They arrive at night in trucks and four-wheeled drive vehicles, armed with guns and traps and nets and they indiscriminately take huge quantities of rabbits, hares, deer and pheasant. They catch geese, salmon and trout too. I've even heard of them taking swans. Worst of all, these city poachers cut through fences with wire cutters, they damage gates and then leave them open and they churn up fields with their vehicles. A proper countryman poacher, such as Toby, can travel through the countryside without leaving a trace of his passing but the gangs leave devastation behind them and are, understandably, loathed both by landowners and by poachers such as Toby who regard them as giving the trade a bad name.

But Bilbury was too far away from what some folk like to describe as civilisation for the poaching gangs to bother coming and local landowners had no trouble with them.

Toby, one of few professional poachers in North Devon, was accepted and even respected by the people from whose land he took what he needed. As he travelled around the local countryside, he mended broken fences and gates and layered hedges which were becoming thin and had developed gaps through which stock might wander. If a smallholder needed help then Toby would turn up, as if by magic, and spend a day digging or layering a hedge or clearing rough scrub-land. He would neither expect nor accept payment above and beyond a simple meal, usually at the Duck and Puddle; and he would simply melt away at the end of the day.

I have never mastered any of the poacher's skills, nor have I had any desire to do so, but I understand that to be a successful, professional poacher (that is to say one who succeeds in taking game enough for his own needs, with a few extra to sell, without being caught himself) you need a fine turn of speed, an ability to disappear into the undergrowth at the first sign of danger, even when there doesn't appear to be any, an understanding and a knowledge of your prey's habits and weaknesses and a unique ability to maintain a working relationship of some sort with local landowners, game-keepers and fish wardens.

If there was something which needed attention, but which required machinery or equipment, Toby would leave a message at the Duck and Puddle for the landowner concerned. If he found a blocked ditch or a dangerous dead tree, he would leave a message describing the site of the problem. He knew who owned every field, every hedge, every gate, every ditch and every stream in and around Bilbury.

It was hardly surprising that everyone in the area turned a blind eye to his activities. Mind you, it wouldn't have mattered if they hadn't condoned his presence: Toby had lived all his life in the country and knew every copse, every brook and every path. Even if someone had wanted to catch him they would have found it an impossible task.

Thumper once asked me how it could be considered stealing to take wild, living creatures from a field or a stream and I have to confess that I could see what he meant.

Much to the puzzlement of some of the locals (and for a long while to Patsy's parents), Patsy and I don't eat meat and I don't like the idea of animals being hunted and killed but, putting that aside, the fact is that rabbits and deer don't respect boundaries and it is difficult to see how they can possibly belong to a landowner in the same way that a tree or a blackberry bush can belong to someone.

As I have already said, I had never seen Toby professionally. He had never been to my consulting room in Bilbury Grange and I had never visited him. I didn't even know where he lived. I assumed, I think, that he lived in a hideaway somewhere in the woods; sheltering under some sort of rough concoction of old sacking and branches. If I had thought about it, I would have realised that it was a silly notion.

And then one day, Thumper came to see me at Bilbury Grange.

It was about 3.00 p.m. on a Sunday afternoon and the weather was foul. The sky was so dark with rain clouds that it could have been night. You could hear thunder occasionally and our animals, Ben the dog and our cats, were all crowded into a comfortable corner behind the sofa. Outside the house, the sheep were all gathered in the barn where they had been sheltering against the storm which they had known for a while was on its way. Sheep can smell bad weather coming long before you or I would know anything was amiss.

'Will you come and see Toby,' asked Thumper. He sounded upset and worried. 'I was in the woods an hour or so ago, passing his place and I thought I'd call in to see how he was. I hadn't seen him for a while.'

'What's happened to him?'

'He's been shot.'

I stared at Thumper disbelievingly. Who on earth would shoot Toby? 'Who shot him? What with? When? Why?'

'He was hit with a shotgun load. Last Saturday. Not yesterday, the Saturday before that. He doesn't know who shot him but he says he knows it wasn't deliberate. He says a fat man with a 12 gauge was blasting at everything in sight and that as he tried to get away from the area he was hit by a load from the gun. He says he thinks the man either fired low, because he'd seen a low flying bird, or that he tripped and the gun went off accidentally. His back is peppered with shot and there is at least one buckshot pellet in his neck and another hit the back of his head. A couple of the damned things have come out. They're lead buckshot. I'd say they're size O or maybe even OO. Who the hell is using buckshot around here?'

I knew enough about shotgun cartridges to know that lead shot comes in a number of different sizes. Most hunters who are shooting rats or birds use small sized shot, and buckshot is usually kept for shooting big game animals such as deer. Buckshot which is size O is huge. Each lead ball is a third of an inch in diameter. Buckshot sized OO is even larger. The pellets are so large that a standard O gauge cartridge will contain only nine pellets.

And I realised immediately who had shot him.

Mr Chatterton, the idiot guest at the Pinchbecks' party who had been shot by his own gun, fired by a Labrador puppy, had been using a 12 gauge shotgun and he'd been using buckshot. He was as fat as they come; he had boasted to me that he weighed several hundredweight.

'How is he?'

‘He’s in a bad way, doc. If I hadn’t happened to call in he would have just died there. He wouldn’t go to the hospital and he wouldn’t even come and see you. He certainly won’t tell the police that he was shot.’

I picked up my bag. ‘Did you tell him that you were going to fetch me?’

Thumper nodded.

‘Was he OK about it?’

‘He said he’d see you. But no ambulance. And he won’t go into hospital. Not even the hospital in Bilbury. He said that if he’s going to die then he wants to die at home.’

‘Why won’t he go into hospital?’

‘He went into one once, a few years back. He said he heard them laughing at him. The nurses and the doctors treated him with contempt. He can’t cope with being treated without respect.’ Thumper paused and thought for a while. ‘He’s a man who has very little in his life. His dignity and his knowledge are important to him.’

It was, I think, one of the deepest and most sensitive things I’d ever heard Thumper say. He is usually a man of action rather than contemplation. I felt great sadness when Thumper told me this. I understood what he meant. And I felt sad that I knew that Toby’s fear was probably justified.

‘And he picked up a bad infection too,’ said Thumper.

‘He picked up an infection in the hospital?’

‘Yes. Several actually. He nearly died from some bug he acquired while he was there. He had a bad time.’

‘OK,’ I said. ‘So hospital isn’t an option.’

Thumper insisted that we went in his truck. ‘I can’t get all the way to the cabin where he lives,’ he explained. ‘But I can get you much closer than you’ll be able to get in your darned great Rolls Royce. It will still mean a half mile hike through the woods. So you’d better put on some boots and something warm and waterproof.’

I told Patsy where I was going and Thumper and I set off in his truck; a massive, beast of a four wheel drive vehicle which looks ungainly on ordinary roads but which can be driven over rougher ground than just about any other vehicle in North Devon. Thumper has put extra-large wheels onto the truck and this helps to increase the ground clearance. The exhaust pipe is connected to a pipe which blows waste gases out a foot above the roof of the cab. The truck can be driven through mud and water and can, I suspect, go places that would prove impassable even for a tractor.

It took us no more than fifteen minutes to reach the furthest spot in the wood that the truck could reach. From then on, we had to travel on foot. There was no easy path. Toby, a man who valued his privacy, had made sure that there was no clear track to his cabin. Every time he moved in or out, he took a slightly different route. There were roots and brambles everywhere. It occurred to me that if Toby needed to go to hospital, and could be persuaded to go there, we would have a hell of a job getting him out through the wood.

As we walked to Toby’s cabin, Thumper explained that his friend had built the cabin himself, using a huge shipping crate as the basis for a structure which now blended into the forest so well that a wanderer could pass by just yards away without even knowing it was there. Toby had, said Thumper, taken the crate apart and then rebuilt it in a small clearing which he had made with nothing more than a handful of small tools and an old but sharp axe (a tool which Toby could use with such skill that he was able to make fence posts far quicker than men equipped with far more suitable equipment) and a folding knife (a tool with which he could layer a hedge at a rate which even Thumper regarded as superhuman).

I discovered, rather to my surprise, that the crate was erected on land which belonged to Mr Kennet, Patsy’s father, and that my father-in-law had happily given Toby permission to live on his land. In return, Toby repaired fences and gates throughout the Kennet acres. A month later, when I mentioned Toby to him, Mr Kennet admitted that he hadn’t seen the poacher for eighteen months but that during that time he had never had to mend a fence or a gate or have a hedge re-layered.

Thumper had been right about Toby’s tiny home. I don’t know what I had expected to see; probably something along the lines of the cabin which Henry David Thoreau had built overlooking Walden Pond, on land owned by his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson. The very word ‘cabin’ carries notions of its own.

But this was nothing like Thoreau’s cabin. It was so well hidden, so disguised, that I didn’t see it at all until we were just yards away.

Toby had rebuilt the shipping crate and then grown ivy and other creepers around it and over it so well that it was as well hidden as any bird watchers’ hide. There was no electricity and no water and no sewage, of course, but Toby didn’t want the first, used a small, clear stream for the second and had a small shovel and several acres of woodland for the third.

Toby was lying on his face on a camp bed in his home, which was surprisingly roomy and tidy. There was a desk, a chair, an easy chair and a wash bowl and jug – the sort which used to be provided by small hotels and boarding houses before hotel rooms came with their own bathroom facility. The famous waxed coat was hanging on a hook which had been fastened to the back of the door. The place was dark, with the only light coming from the open doorway, until Thumper lit a couple of hurricane lamps which hung from hooks fixed into the walls. Pictures cut from magazines had been carefully pinned up. They were all of woodland scenes. The room stank of infection.

When Thumper announced our presence, Toby lifted himself onto one elbow and spoke, so quietly that I could hardly hear a word.

I leant closer.

He repeated what he'd said.

'Thumper shouldn't have brought you, doc,' he said. 'There's nothing you can do.' He sounded tired and resigned but not unhappy.

'Can I look?' I asked him.

'If you wish. Mind the ferret.'

I looked at Thumper.

'His ferret lives in his trouser pocket at the moment,' said Thumper. 'It won't bite if you don't disturb it.'

I carefully peeled the shirt from Toby's back. It must have been an incredibly painful process for him. His back was peppered with half a dozen holes. The pellets, I could see, were all still in his body. There was another one in his neck and a hole in the skin at the back of his skull showed where another of the shotgun pellets had smashed into his head. There was a piece of cord wrapped around Toby's neck. A brass key was hanging from the cord.

'The key to his Bible,' explained Thumper, without my having to ask. He sounded faint. Toby's back was certainly not a pretty sight. Every hole in Toby's back and neck was surrounded with dried blood and pus and the wounds stank of infection. I felt instantly that there could be no hope for him unless I could get him into hospital. And I knew that even then the chances of his recovering were slim. His body was feverish and he was intensely dehydrated. I suddenly realised that I didn't have the faintest idea how old he was. Like many folk who live rough in the country, it was difficult to tell. He could have been anywhere between 40 and 80.

When I looked at this brave lion of a man, my eyes were filled with tears of compassion and tears of hatred for the arrogant, ignorant, careless idiot who had done this to him – and who didn't even know what he had done.

'What can I do to help?' whispered Thumper. It was brave of him to offer. He had gone white.

For a while I didn't answer. I felt overwhelmed by a sense of sadness but there was much anger too. And most of all I didn't want to see him die.

I didn't know what I could do, let alone what Thumper could do to help me. I couldn't possibly clear out all those wounds without being able to give Toby a general anaesthetic. And how could I do that? And he needed antibiotics, that was clear.

'He has to go to hospital,' I whispered back.

'No hospital,' said Toby, who had heard my whisper. 'They'll call the police.'

'But you haven't done anything wrong,' I told him. 'The police won't do anything bad to you.'

'No police,' said Toby. I felt, rather than saw, Thumper leave the cabin.

'But I have to get you to hospital,' I repeated. I didn't mean to but in my desperation I put all the stress on the third word. 'If you stay here…' I didn't finish the sentence. It sounded too much like a threat.

'I'll die,' said Toby, finishing the sentence for me. He sounded frighteningly matter-of-fact about it. There was a fatalism about him which I found calming and disturbing at the same time.

'Yes, I'm afraid you will.' I said. The doctor in me felt that he had to know just how serious his condition was. The man in me knew that he was well aware that he was dying. He had spent all his life in a private world where death is a daily occurrence.

I could hear Thumper retching outside in the woods.

'Will you come to the hospital in Bilbury?' I asked him. 'Our little cottage hospital. I promise we won't call the police.'

'No hospitals,' said Toby again.

At that point, I really did not know what to do. I stood and looked and thought for what seemed an age. I heard Thumper come back into the cabin because the boards which made up the floor creaked underneath him.

'Sorry about that,' Thumper said softly.

I damned well didn't know what to do.

I felt full of sadness and frustration and rage and I felt utterly impotent and useless.

The trouble was that I understood why Toby wouldn't go into a hospital; I understood why he didn't trust hospitals, any hospital. I sometimes think that too many people are ready to go into hospital when they really don't have to. And there are, without a doubt, too many operations which aren't essential. But that may be because I know only too well how many things can go wrong. Back in the Middle Ages, people were genuinely afraid of hospitals. They knew that if they went into a hospital there was a very good chance that they would never come out again.

Hospitals were places where people went to die. Even in the 19th century, things weren't much better; surgeons operated in frock coats and sharpened their scalpels on the soles of their boots.

Maybe it would be better if more people still felt more scepticism about hospitals.

There are a thousand reasons why hospitals can kill; patients die on the operating table, they contract serious infections and so on and on. Like many doctors, I am always astonished at how many people willingly submit themselves to the surgeon's knife for treatment which is optional or cosmetic.

And I think I understood why Toby was frightened of the police. His grandfather, a professional poacher and the man who had been Toby's mentor, had doubtless taught him that the police were his enemy.

But I knew that if Toby's wounds weren't cleaned then he would die. I knew that the huge lead buckshot pellets in his back had to be removed. His wounds needed to be dressed. He needed to be anaesthetised. He needed to have fluids and antibiotics administered through a drip. He needed to be in a sterile hospital, with fresh clean sheets on the bed. Damnit, he needed caring nurses looking after him 24 hours a day. He needed things I couldn't do for him. He needed help I couldn't give him. I could feel tears in my eyes. I admired Toby. I respected him. I liked him. I didn't know how old he was but it seemed clear to me that he had so much life left to live. He was a good, kind man who had probably never hurt any human being in his life. I couldn't help thinking of the fat oaf Chatterton; the careless, selfish, stupid, obscenely greedy man who had shot him.

And I wanted to call the police myself.

But I couldn't do that. Toby wouldn't want me to do that.

And even if I did tell the police, what would they do? Even if they managed to tie the incident to his gun, Chatterton would claim the shooting was an accident. He would probably say he tripped over a root. He would doubtless produce a licence and character references from half a dozen eminent members of the community. And Toby? They would dismiss him as an unlucky poacher. If it went to court, the defence counsel would probably argue that Toby deserved what he got. He shouldn't have been in the woods. What was he doing there? Poaching? Stealing pheasant? The end result would probably be that Chatterton would go scot-free and the police would arrest Toby.

Now it was my turn to go outside the cabin; out into the woods. I had never done anything like it before. Never walked out on a patient; albeit temporarily.

But I didn't go outside for the same reason as Thumper. I didn't feel nauseous. Already in my life I had seen too much, smelt too much, known too much, to be nauseated by the sight and smell of Toby's wounds.

But I felt I was about to burst with anger.

It was now dark. And it was pouring with rain. The forest seemed desperately unfriendly. I walked away a few yards, tripping over brambles and fallen branches. I kicked at one tree and then I punched another so hard that I hurt my hand. That knocked some sense into me. I walked back to the cabin.

I bent down and opened my black medical bag. I took out a pair of sterile rubber gloves and examined Toby's back as thoroughly as I could. He flinched when I touched him. I wasn't surprised. I'd have done more than flinch if my back had been that way and someone had touched it. Anyone would have flinched.

There were seven bullets still in his back. I could see all of them. There was one embedded in his neck. The one that had hit the back of his skull had bounced out. Shotgun blasts tend to produce most of their damage when the target is fairly close. Toby had clearly been standing almost at the extent of the gun's range. Dressed as he always was he would have been damned near invisible. That was no excuse for Chatterton firing a gun into the woods. But it was an explanation.

I took a scalpel and a pair of tweezers out of my bag and tried to remove one of the pieces of shot. It was tantalisingly close but I couldn't remove it. And the skin around the wounds was so damaged that there was nowhere for me to inject a local anaesthetic. I stood up. There seemed no alternative. If Toby was going to be saved then he would have to go into hospital.

Perhaps I could sedate him and then, with Thumper's help, carry him out of the cabin and out of the woods and take him, unknowing, to our cottage hospital. I could keep him sedated while I treated his back. And then we could take him back to his cabin when all the buckshot had been removed.

But that wasn't going to work.

For a start, it was technically a kidnapping.

And I couldn't just take Toby out of the woods against his will. He had already made it perfectly clear that he would rather die than go into hospital.

Could I certify him and have him taken to hospital regardless of his wishes?

That might work.

The authorities would certainly agree with me that a man who preferred to die than to be treated was not in his right mind.

But once again, I had to face the fact that Toby didn't want to go to hospital. He knew why. He knew what he was doing.

I took some dressings from my bag and bandaged his damaged back as best I could. And then I injected him with a large dose of a powerful antibiotic. I also gave him a modest dose of a decent painkiller.

As I did this I considered Toby's situation.

The main problem was clearly the need for an anaesthetic. If I could anaesthetise Toby then I could remove the buckshot from his back and neck. And I could clean out the wounds and dress the wounds properly. I could then put up a drip and give him regular blasts of antibiotic.

But how the devil could I anaesthetise him?

I couldn't anaesthetise him and manage the surgery he needed as well. I didn't even know much about anaesthesia. I'd never had any training in anaesthesia and never worked as an anaesthetist. I didn't have any equipment. I could inject him with a big dose of a tranquilliser. But that would be dangerous.

Or would it?

Maybe I could just inject him with something powerful enough to put him to sleep for a while, and then work on his back while he slept.

But I didn't like that idea very much. In fact, the more I thought about it the less I liked it.

It would be difficult to give him a big enough injection of a sedative without getting to the edge of a safe dose. And if I killed him with the anaesthetic I wouldn't be doing him much good. I wouldn't be doing myself much good, either. I'd probably find myself in front of a disciplinary tribunal at the General Medical Council. I'd be lucky not to be charged with manslaughter.

I needed outside help.

That was the big problem. I needed real help. I needed someone to manage the anaesthetic while I treated the wounds in Toby's back. And I needed someone to look after the drip and the antibiotics.

'Is there anything I can do?'

It was Thumper.

I turned to him. 'There might be.'

'Anything,' he said. 'I'll do anything you need me to do.'

'I need to go back to Bilbury Grange,' I told him. I'd had an idea. 'I need to make a phone call.'

'OK,' said Thumper.

'But I don't want to leave Toby here by himself.'

'I'll stay with him,' said Thumper immediately.

'I've given him a painkiller. He'll probably sleep for a while.'

'Good. That's good. Is there something you can do for him?'

'I'm working on it,' I told him. 'Fetch some water from the stream and if he wakes, try to get him to drink. He's terribly dehydrated.'

'OK.'

'Can I borrow your truck keys?'

Thumper took out the keys to his truck and handed them to me. 'Can you find your way to it?'

'Only if you tell me which direction to take when I leave the cabin. Otherwise there's a risk I'll be going round and round in circles for the rest of my life.'

Thumper came out and pointed out where the truck was parked. I could just see a corner of it through the trees.

'It'll be easier to back it out,' he told me. 'There's no room to turn it round.'

A short while later I was back at Bilbury Grange ringing my friend Will.

Will works as a GP in the English Midlands. I've known him for years and I would trust him with my life. We were at medical school together. He and his family come down to Bilbury from time to time. Before becoming a GP, Will took a postgraduate course in anaesthetics and for a while he considered becoming a professional anaesthetist. He still worked as an anaesthetist for a local emergency service which helped the police deal with road accident casualty victims.

'I need a favour,' I told him. 'A big favour.'

'You've got it,' said Will without hesitation.

I explained the problem. I told him how I thought Toby had been injured. I explained who he was. I explained why he wouldn't go into hospital.

'I can remove the buckshot,' I told him. 'But I need a good gas man.'

'And you don't know one so you're asking me?'

'Something like that.'

'When do you need me?'

'As soon as you can get here.'

'I've nearly finished my evening surgery. I'll be done in twenty minutes. I can be there in three or four hours. Do you want to do it tonight?'

'The sooner the better.'

'Can we do it in the dark?'

'It'll be a bit tricky getting through the woods but there are a couple of hurricane lamps in the cabin.'

'Is it raining there?'

'Yes.'

'Good. I wouldn't want to feel let down. It always rains in North Devon.'

'Bring your waterproofs.'

'Will do. I'll also bring some hefty torches and a couple of heavy duty outside floodlights. We use them for roadside accidents. The batteries are pretty heavy though.'

'I can find someone to help carry the stuff,' I told him.

'I'll be with you as soon as I can. Do you want me to come to Bilbury Grange or do you need me to find this cabin in the woods?'

'Come to Bilbury Grange. You'll never find Toby's cabin.'

Will told me he'd be with me as soon as I could.

It did not escape my attention that he had never even asked who would pay for his expenses.

I broke the connection and dialled Patchy's number.

When he answered the phone I told him I needed help.

'When and where?' was all Patchy asked.

How fortunate I was to have such friends. Toby was pretty lucky too.

I told him.

'OK. What do you need?'

'I need your body and do you have one of those field radio things the army is always flogging off?'

'A two-way radio?'

'That's it.'

'No, I don't have one. But I know someone who has.'

'Can you borrow it?'

'Of course I can.'

I arranged for Patchy to come to Bilbury Grange in three hours' time – equipped with the borrowed two-way radio.

I then rang Flora and Camelia, a couple of the youngest of the helpers who assist in looking after patients at the Bilbury cottage hospital. Neither of them were professional nurses but they give their time freely and they are never flustered. We have a fine team of nurses helping out at the hospital. We have one regular nurse who is 82-years-old. If you met her you'd swear she couldn't be a day over 60. Most of our volunteer nurses give just one morning or afternoon a week but that's all we need from them. I asked the two I rang to ring others on our list to see if anyone else would help. I told them that I'd need them to work in two hour shifts. I told them I wanted them to stay in the cabin in pairs and explained that they would have a two-way radio so that they could stay in touch with me.

Flora and Camelia both promised to do everything they could to help. Everyone in the village knew Toby and although he was a loner, and perhaps not the easiest person to know, let alone to like, they all respected him and his chosen way of life.

If Toby wouldn't go into hospital then I would have to take the hospital to him.

I would have liked to ask Bradshaw, my ancient but indomitable practice nurse, and the matron of the Bilbury cottage hospital, but I didn't dare take him away from his regular work. He runs the hospital pretty well single-handedly. We had a couple of patients in the hospital at the time – one suffering from a nasty chest infection and the other recovering from a major operation performed at the big hospital in Exeter. I couldn't jeopardise their safety.

I asked the helpers I'd rung to come to Bilbury Grange.

If I was going to treat Toby in his cabin then someone had to be there 24 hours a day until he started to recover. And since I had surgeries to do, and the rest of the village to look after, that someone could not be me. I was going to need a rota of helpers. I just hoped that my part-time nurses would not find Toby's cabin in the woods too scary a place. The two-way radio would at least mean that no one staying there would feel completely isolated.

Finally, after explaining to Patsy what I'd arranged, I drove round to the cottage hospital, still in Thumper's truck and picked up all the equipment I thought I would need: a drip stand, saline drip bottles and more antibiotics. I also picked up a variety of swabs and some more sophisticated equipment than the sort of things I usually carried in my medical bag.

When I'd done all this, I drove Thumper's truck back to the woods where Toby's cabin was situated. I carried all the stuff I'd collected with me through the woods. It was now pitch dark and still raining heavily. I had also taken with me a scythe I'd picked up from Bilbury Grange. I used it to help clear a rough path through the brambles.

'Sorry I left you so long,' I said to Thumper. 'How is he?'

I piled the stuff I'd brought with me into a corner of the cabin.

'He's been sleeping most of the time. He's sort of woken up a couple of times. He doesn't seem any better I'm afraid. He's been confused and a bit delirious.'

I took Thumper outside into the rain and explained what I was planning and who I had recruited to help me.

'You and Will are going to operate on him here?'

'Can you think of an alternative?'

'No, but…'

'If I don't do this then he will die. So we don't have anything to lose, do we?'

'No, I guess not.' Thumper paused and looked at me. 'But are you allowed to do this? Is it legal?'

I shrugged. I didn't have the faintest idea whether or not my planning to operate on Toby in his cabin was legal or not. I suspected that 'not' was probably the answer. But I couldn't see an alternative and laws are often made by people who cannot possibly know whether or not they are always going to be 'right'.

I asked Thumper if he could wait at the cabin for a little longer because I had to go back to Bilbury Grange to wait for Patchy, my part-time nurses and for Will. We couldn't do anything until Will arrived.

'Give me the scythe,' said Thumper. 'While you're gone I'll clear a proper path to the cabin. When Toby finds out what I've done he will hate the idea of having a path through the woods but he'll just have to put up with it!'

I thanked him, hurried back to his four wheeled drive truck and then drove again to Bilbury Grange. I liked Thumper's confidence. Privately, I thought my chances of saving Toby's life were considerably less than fifty-fifty.

On my way back, the rain slowed a little and I think it even stopped for a couple of minutes. But the clouds soon thought better of it and within another five minutes the damned stuff was coming down as though God had realised he'd made too much rain and had decided to deplete his stocks a little. There was so much cloud that there was no moon visible. The night was pitch black – just perfect for carrying equipment out to a cabin in the woods when there was no discernible path to follow.

Still, I thought, if it were easy where would be the challenge?

I couldn't help smiling as that thought occurred to me.

That was a favourite saying of Dr Brownlow, my predecessor, my friend and my mentor. Always delivered tongue in cheek with a twinkle in his eyes.

Will arrived just before 9.30 p.m. that evening. We quickly fed and watered him, for the poor soul had come straight from his evening surgery, and then he, I, Patchy and two of the Bilbury cottage hospital's finest young amateur nurses (Camelia, the younger one was 44 and Flora, the older one, was in her 70s) piled into Thumper's truck. Will had brought two boxes full of equipment, which turned to be even heavier than it looked, and Patchy had the field radios which had probably been state of the art cutting technology in 1941 but which we tested and which still worked perfectly well.

Thumper had carved an approximation of a path through the wood. He was soaked, scratched and starving hungry. I handed him the packet of sandwiches and the thermos flask which Patsy had made up for him.

'I told her she was treating you like a big softie,' I told him as I handed over the packet and the flask. He thanked me and said that when he'd finished helping us carry the equipment to the cabin he would sit in his truck for a while and eat his supper. Thumper is surprisingly queasy when it comes to blood. Patchy, who is also not wild about the goriest aspects of medical care, said he would keep him company.

By the time we had set up Will's lights, and spread out our equipment, the inside of Toby's cabin looked like a field hospital.

Poor Toby, who was still woozy from the injections I had given him, awoke and looked around. I explained that he was going to be anaesthetised and that I was going to remove the buckshot from his body. He didn't really seem to know what was going on or why.

Will erected a drip stand, put up a drip and started pumping saline into Toby's veins. Anaesthetists can slip a needle into a vein far more skilfully than anyone else. When I was at medical school, I remember that a crowd of us spent over an hour one Saturday afternoon trying to put a needle into an infant who needed a drip. Three students, a house physician, a house surgeon, a junior registrar, two senior registrars and a consultant paediatrician had all tried and failed. There didn't seem to be a vein left that hadn't been temporarily ruined by all the bodging and piercing. In the end, we telephoned for a paediatric anaesthetist to come and see if he could succeed where we had all failed. He came in wearing appalling golfing garb. He had been standing on the first tee when he'd been given our message. He walked up to the patient and within fewer seconds than it takes to write this sentence, he had slipped a needle into a vein. 'Is that all?' he asked, looking round. When no one spoke, he marched back out again. His playing partners were probably still playing their approach shots to the green when he returned to his game.

Just as I was about to start washing Toby, and everything else in sight, with vast quantities of a heavy duty antiseptic solution, Thumper pushed open the door.

'Have you moved the ferret out of Toby's pocket?'

We hadn't, of course.

'How could you forget?' asked Will with mock indignation. 'I seem to remember that de-ferreting the patient was the first thing they taught us at medical school.'

After explaining to Toby that he would look after his ferret, Thumper removed the animal from the trouser pocket which, judging by the way it clung to the lining, it had adopted as its temporary home. Judging by the yells and curses which were involved, I thought it fair to assume that Thumper had received a couple of nips. The two nursing aides who were in the cabin with us backed up to the edge of the cabin as the ferret was being extracted. I would have done the same if I hadn't been worried that everyone would think me a townie wuss if I did.

'I'll keep him safe for you,' Thumper promised Toby. I'm not sure that Toby heard or understood him. 'I've got a box in the back of the truck,' he told me. 'I'll look after the ferret until Toby is better.'

I liked Thumper's quiet confidence that Toby would get better. I was still nervous and full of doubts. The infection which we had to treat had taken a real hold and we would only succeed if the antibiotic I'd selected proved to be effective.

When Will and I had gone outside to discuss our plan of attack, he had agreed that he wouldn't put Toby's chances at much better than 50:50.

'What antibiotic have you started him on?' asked Will.

I told him.

'Good choice. That's the one I'd have picked. Excellent broad spectrum drug. What dose?'

I told him.

'Let's pile some more into the drip bottle. He's going to need buckets of the stuff if we're going to kill this infection. If anything kills him it will be the bugs not the bullets.'

I have to say that it was a pleasure to work with Will. He was a marvel. Calm, never fussy, never panicky; he skilfully anaesthetised Toby and kept him under while I worked.

The battery run emergency lights which he had brought with him were marvellous too. As far as the lighting was concerned, it was like working in a proper operating theatre.

Camelia and Flora, the two nursing aides, gloved and masked, were also wonderful. They may not have received any formal nursing training (I didn't tell Will until later but Camelia was a former hairdresser and Flora had been a teller in a bank) but they did everything I needed them to do and they did it with surprising efficiency and with good grace.

It took me half an hour to remove all the buckshot (Will was right to call the damned things bullets for they were so big they looked more like bullets than shot) and ping them into the metal kidney dish which Flora, one of the aides, held out for me.

Actually, no, I am going to call them 'nurses'. They may not have been trained 'nurses' but they did the work of nurses and they did it calmly and professionally.

And then it took another twenty minutes to sew up the holes the bullets had made. I then poured on more antiseptic solution before taping some dressings over the wounds. The cabin now reeked of antiseptic. It was preferable to the smell of infection.

By the time I'd finished, I was soaked with sweat and beginning to shake from the tension of concentrating so hard. Not even country GPs do a lot of extensive surgery. We sew up cuts and so on but the stuff that needs a proper surgeon usually needs a proper hospital.

'You can bring him round when you're ready,' I told Will wearily.

'I thought you were going to be here all night!' he said. 'Have you finished at last? What have you been doing? Liver transplant was it?'

It is a common and traditional conceit of anaesthetists everywhere to appear to have absolutely no interest in what the operating surgeon is doing.

'Simple sex change op,' I told him. 'All finished now.'

The two nurses, who were busy tidying up the instruments and counting the swabs I had used (to make sure that I hadn't left any inside Toby when I had sewn him up) looked up and seemed shocked. I realised that neither of them had ever worked in a proper operating theatre.

'Sorry,' I apologised. 'It's been a bit tense.'

'Is he going to be all right?' asked Flora.

I looked at her, wondering what the hell to tell her.

And then I realised that she and her colleagues would be looking after Toby for the next few days. I needed them to believe that Toby would get better. I wanted them to be optimistic and upbeat.

'He's going to be fine,' I told her with false confidence. Camelia, who was shaking noticeably, smiled with relief.

Will looked at me and then, understanding, nodded almost imperceptibly.

It was so good to have him there.

Will and I agreed that it would be best to keep Toby sedated for 48 hours or so while his body recovered a little. Toby was tough but his body needed plenty of rest in order to recover properly. I was also worried that if he woke up and found strangers in his cabin he might try to get out of bed and disrupt the drip tube which was feeding him essential fluid and medication. I catheterised him so that his bladder could be kept drained.

We fixed up a rota system so that there would always be someone in the cabin with Toby. Thumper, Patchy and I divided up the night time into three sessions and the nurses we had recruited stayed with him in pairs during the day time. I needed the nurses to be in pairs because Toby was a strong fellow and if he awoke, confused and frightened, I didn't want one of them to be there alone.

Will and I showed the others how to change the drip bags so that Toby was kept hydrated and we showed them how to inject the antibiotics and sedatives directly into each new bag of fluid. We set up the two-way radio so that whoever was in the cabin would always be able to contact the outside world. Apart from changing the fluid bottles, adding drugs to the fluid bottles and occasionally emptying the bottle into which the catheter was draining, there wasn't much for anyone to do.

It was just a question of waiting.

Waiting to see if Toby's body would recover from the massive insults it had received.

And waiting to see if the antibiotic I had prescribed would do its job and kill the bacteria which had invaded his body.

Will stayed at Bilbury Grange for the rest of what was left of the night. After no more than a couple of hours rest, he got up at 5 a.m. to drive back to the Midlands in order to conduct his morning surgery. He refused point blank to allow me to pay for the petrol his car had consumed. I promised to ring him later in the day to let him know how Toby was doing. Patsy packed him up some sandwiches and a flask of hot coffee and told him he had to stop at least once en route for a short break.

I went back to the cabin at the end of my morning surgery and again in the middle of the afternoon. Without Thumper's truck to take me deep into the woods, I had to leave the Rolls Royce parked some distance away and walk further along the rough track that led into the woods. Thanks to Thumper's work with a scythe, there was now a decent path to the cabin. I couldn't help thinking that Toby wasn't going to be at all happy when he discovered that there was now a walkway through the woods. Still, if he was unhappy about the pathway, he would at least be alive. And the woodland brambles and other undergrowth would soon grow back. On my trip that afternoon I realised that I was beginning to know my way into the woods.

Toby was still sleeping.

And I was delighted when I realised, when I changed the dressings on his back, that I could not smell any infection. Indeed, I was excited to see that the wounds looked a little better. The redness around the entry holes made by the buckshot was beginning to fade. We weren't 'out of the woods' as people say in such circumstances, but I really believed that Toby now stood a real chance of making a full recovery. I rang Will and told him that I thought Toby's chances were now 75% rather than the much less optimistic 50% we had previously estimated. He sounded tired but elated. He had a right to be tired. In addition to acting as unpaid anaesthetist for Toby's operation, he had spent nearly eight hours driving. It was quite a relief to know that he had got home safely and without a speeding ticket.

The following day, I was so pleased with how things were going that I removed the catheter and stopped the sedative. I removed the drip and made sure that Thumper and I were the only two people in the cabin when Toby awoke. Toby would still need the antibiotics, of course, but he could take these by mouth instead of via a drip bottle.

'Where's my ferret?' asked Toby, when he woke. Those were his first words.

'He's at my place,' said Thumper. 'I'm looking after him for a few days.'

'Why?' demanded Toby.

I tried to explain that having a ferret in a hospital recovery room was not generally accepted to be a good idea. Naturally, Toby neither understood nor accepted this. Rather than see my patient become unduly agitated I told Thumper that he could take the ferret back to the cabin.

I had planned for Toby to stay in his cabin for another two or three days. I wanted his body to have a proper chance of recovering before he went out into the big, wide world.

I shouldn't have been surprised when Toby rejected this advice.

We were able to abandon the nursing rota far sooner than I had expected. I made Toby swear that he would take the antibiotics I had prescribed, and twice a day I changed his dressings.

It had been quite a medical adventure.

Two weeks later, Will brought his family down for a weekend. I took Will round to the woodland cabin to see how our patient was recovering.

Toby didn’t know who Will was, of course, but when I explained that Will had driven a round trip of nearly 400 miles in order to help with his operation, there were tears in the poacher’s eyes.

‘You did that for me!’ he said. ‘But you don’t know me…’

‘No,’ said Will. ‘I don’t know you.’ He then pointed at me. ‘But I know him.’

‘I’ve never had a friend like that,’ said Toby softly.

‘Oh, I think you’ve got more friends than you thought you had,’ said Will with a smile.

King Charles II's Bed

Patchy was celebrating the sale of King Charles II's bed and was treating us all to champagne. We had one opened bottle in an ice bucket and another bottle cooling in Frank's refrigerator. Frank always keeps a few bottles of decent champagne in his cellar, though I suspect we are the only people in the village who ever drink the stuff. And we only ever drink it when Patchy has made a good sale.

A Japanese buyer had paid the asking price for the bed and had handed over the cash up front in a smart pigskin briefcase. Patchy had come to the Duck and Puddle immediately after supervising the packing of the purchase into a crate, the loading onto a lorry and the start of its journey across the world.

He had, he said, made a 'satisfactory' profit.

'Why the dickens did someone in Japan want to buy a bed that Charles II had slept in?' asked Thumper.

'I don't have the foggiest notion,' replied Patchy with disarming honesty. 'It's as much a puzzle to me as it is to you.' He raised a glass. 'But I drink to the Japanese! Wonderful people and connoisseurs of objects d'art.'

We drank to the Japanese.

Even Frank, whose alcohol intake is strictly monitored by his wife, was allowed to drink champagne. Gilly had agreed that champagne, consisting largely of bubbles, cannot be considered a proper alcoholic beverage and should, rather, be classified as a sort of upmarket fizzy pop.

'Is it a particularly handsome bed?' I asked.

'No, not really,' admitted Patchy. 'To look at, it's a fairly ordinary four poster bed. But it's made out of solid oak and it weighs a ton. Fortunately, it comes apart so two or three hefty fellows can move it. I've sent instructions on how to put it all back together so, hopefully, they'll be able to turn the bits into a bed without too much difficulty when it finally gets to Japan.'

'Is it an especially comfortable bed?' asked Thumper. 'Goose feather mattress? That sort of thing?'

'The mattress had long since expired so I had to have one made up by a mattress craftsman,' explained Patchy. 'It's a very short bed, of course, because the people weren't very tall in the days of Charles II. The mattress had to be specially made.'

'It'll be fine for the Japanese, though, I guess,' said Frank.

We looked at him.

'Them being smallish sized people,' explained Frank. He held a hand about five feet off the floor to indicate what he meant. 'On the whole.'

'Yes, I suppose they are,' said Patchy. 'I hadn't thought of that. Actually, I hadn't really thought that anyone would ever sleep in it. To be honest they could have bought a really nice, brand new bed for a fraction of the price. Given the historical connections, it's more the sort of thing you have on display in a museum. I think the chap who bought it has a small private museum. He's in banking, absolutely loaded, and I've sold him one or two other things: a desk that Shakespeare wrote on, an axe that was used by Henry VIII's executioner, a pen that was used by King John, the monarch who signed the Magna Carta.' He waved his glass about airily. 'And a few more things of that ilk.'

Thumper and I nodded.

We all knew the truth.

Patchy knew we knew the truth.

And we knew that he knew that we knew the truth. But some things are best left unsaid.

Patchy is very careful these days. When he says that King Charles II has slept in a bed he doesn't say how many nights he spent in it. When he says that Shakespeare used a desk he doesn't say it was the only desk Shakespeare ever used. The axe wasn't necessarily the one that Henry VIII's executioner used when decapitating Queens of England. The pen that was used by King John wasn't necessarily the one with which he signed the Magna Carta.

This caution has solid business reasoning behind it. If you sell King Charles II's bed, implying that it was his only bed, then you can only sell it once. If you simply claim that the bed was one in which the King spent a night then your opportunities are almost endless. With 365 nights a year, and a King who was known to have wandered the country about a good deal, there must be hundreds of beds around which can rightfully claim to have provided comfort and support for the Royal personage.

To be honest I was in awe of Patchy's skill, and I suspect that Thumper and Frank were too. I do not for one moment believe that I would ever have the courage to do what he did and although it might, I suppose, be considered morally rather dubious by some people, I found it impossible to criticise him or think badly of him.

And this was not just because Patchy was my good and loyal friend, and my brother-in-law, but because I knew him to be a quiet benefactor who unostentatiously helped many in the village. Some philanthropists like to be very public about their good deeds; often promising far more than they ever give. But Patchy was the opposite; invariably giving far more than he ever promised. He has far more of the Robin Hood about him than he would ever lay claim to, or even admit to.

I knew that if I ever came across a patient who was in genuine need, but who had fallen between the support lines of the State, I could appeal to Patchy on their behalf. Right from the start, he had been a generous donor to the Bilbury Cottage Hospital.

‘Don’t you have any difficulty getting this sort of stuff out of the country?’ asked Thumper, disingenuously. ‘I thought the authorities were pretty firm about keeping national treasures in the country.’

‘Ah, well, there’s a way round all that,’ said Patchy. ‘I don’t actually put down what the item is on the customs forms. With the bed, I just said it was a second-hand bed. With Shakespeare’s desk, I always put it down as a ‘desk’. And similarly the axe is just an axe and the pen is just a pen. I never have any problems.’

‘That’s quite handy,’ said Thumper with a grin. ‘If, heaven forbid, anyone were to claim that the bed hadn’t been slept in by Charles II, you could just point to the customs form which says it’s just an old, second-hand bed.’

‘Gosh I suppose so,’ said Patchy, as though this were a thought that had never crossed his mind. He sipped more of the celebratory champagne. ‘I hadn’t thought of that.’

We sat for a while and drank several toasts to the bed and to the Japanese banker who was paying for our champagne. Frank said that when a dear friend has had a piece of good fortune it is only gentlemanly to help him celebrate.

Frank had just tipped the final remains of the second bottle of champagne into Patchy’s glass when we heard a commotion on the forecourt outside the Duck and Puddle. We looked out to see a coach discharging its cargo: a team of Morris dancers. They were all dressed in white trousers and white shirts and wore surprisingly hefty looking boots. They had red handkerchiefs around their necks and rings of bells strapped to their lower legs.

Moments later, a dozen or more hefty looking men, all in their middle years and all obviously on the well-fed side of hungry, jingled and jangled their way into the pub. Some of them collected around the bar. Most sat down here and there wherever there were spaces. One, I noticed, started shouting orders to Frank.

‘We’re on our way to South Molton,’ one of the dancers told me. ‘But we thought we’d stop off on the way for something refreshing.’

He was red faced, notably overweight and already sweating with the exertion of climbing down from the coach and walking into the pub. I had no idea how he was going to dance his way through an energetic Morris dancing set without collapsing. If he’d been an old shirt you would have torn him up to use as rags.

‘Where have you come from?’ I asked the red-faced dancer, expecting to hear that they had travelled from Cornwall or Somerset.

‘Combe Martin,’ came the reply.

‘But that’s only a couple of miles down the road!’

‘Indeed, you are right,’ said the red-faced dancer. ‘And it is, to be almost exact, just under 19 miles from Combe Martin to South Molton. But we have been advised that, given our age and physical condition, we should take the risk of dehydration very seriously. So whenever we see a pub we always stop for a drink.’

‘Quite wise,’ I nodded. And then, after thinking about it for a moment, I added: ‘But the Duck and Puddle isn’t really on the road you’d normally take if you were set out to drive from Combe Martin to South Molton.’

‘You are undoubtedly correct about that too. But Edgar, our driver, has no sense of direction,’ said the red-faced dancer rather sadly. ‘He’s 93 and been known to get lost in his own house.’

I looked out of the window and could see the driver, who was still on the coach, pouring himself a cup of tea from a thermos flask. He had a bad tremor and seemed to be spilling more of the stuff than he managed to decant into the cup.

‘He looks frail,’ I said.

‘He is, he is,’ said the red-faced dancer. ‘He’s had a hard life. More bad breaks than that bloke Job in the Bible – you know, the one with the boils and so on. You name the disease and he’s probably had it, got it or sickening for it. But he says he likes working for us because if he’s working he knows he’s not dead yet. He’s not a member of our club but he’s the only person we know who’ll do the driving without the drinking. We buy him a pie and a bottle of pop at lunchtime and a bag of chips and a nice piece of haddock at the end of the day and he’s as happy as Larry to get out and about a bit. The only thing is that his eyes are pretty terrible and he broke his glasses a couple of months ago so we take it in turns to sit up at the front and give him instructions. We tell him when to turn and warn him if there’s any traffic around or a bend coming up. It works very so well.’

I looked at him, wondering if I was having my leg pulled. I must have looked a little startled.

‘Don’t look so worried! He’s pretty well perfectly safe,’ protested the red-faced dancer, who was clearly not joking. He gratefully accepted a pint of traditional ale which was handed to him by one of his colleagues. I watched in astonishment as the pint disappeared in a single gulp.

‘My brother-in-law used to do the driving for us,’ continued my new and temporary companion. ‘He’s an alcoholic so he tries not to drink too much booze – just beer and cheap wine. But he and I don’t always see eye to eye so he now dances with some Morris Dancers over in Lynton. Anyway, as they say, relations are like cow’s muck – best when well spread around.’

I sipped at my own drink.

Suddenly a group of his fellow dancers started to sing. It was, I quickly realised, the first verse of a popular choral work known as Eskimo Nell. I wondered if the Morris Dancers knew the other 75 unauthorised verses.

These were men whose days were doubtless full of rates demands, blocked plumbing, hedges which required trimming and 14-year-old daughters who needed to be transported to their ballet class.

But for the time being, they were clearly content to live for pleasure alone.

And who could blame them?

The proceedings of the day had begun and the day was now well and truly set in motion.

‘Last month we set off to dance at some fete or show or something in Cornwall but we never got there,’ continued my red-faced companion. ‘Our intentions were good but we were so careful to make sure that we didn’t get dehydrated that we didn’t get any further than the Red Lion in Bideford. Someone worked out that we were 112 miles short of our destination when we turned back.’

The member of the troupe who had been handing out the beers now handed out home-made pasties. He was carrying a tray piled high with them. It occurred to me that Gilly must have known that the Morris dancers were due to stop in for light sustenance and dehydration prevention.

‘Paul is our designated orderer,’ explained the red-faced man, taking his pasty. ‘We find it makes life easier if one of us does the ordering in pubs. We all eat and drink the same. We’re not fussy eaters.’

It certainly seemed to be an efficient system.

‘Aren’t those boots a trifle heavy for dancing?’ I asked him, looking down at what looked like ex-army boots. The leather had clearly been well treated with dubbin and both boots were equipped with heavy steel toecaps.

‘You could well be right about that,’ said the red-faced dancer, taking a large, hungry man’s bite out of his pasty. ‘Excuse me having a bit of a snack,’ he said, spraying crumbs about, ‘but I’ve not eaten since breakfast.’

‘You go ahead,’ I told him. ‘The engine must be fuelled.’

The red-faced dancer nodded and took another large bite of his pasty. At this rate, a baked delicacy the size of a normal dinner plate would be gone in three bites. For normal people, one of Gilly’s pasties requires a knife and a fork and twenty minutes of careful slicing and eating.

‘The boots is a mite heavy for dancing,’ admitted the red-faced dancer, going back to my previous question. ‘But they’re just right for kicking.’

‘Kicking?’ I asked, puzzled. I knew that in Gloucestershire the locals are particularly fond of a sport called ‘shin kicking’, a curious activity in which, as the name suggests, protagonists kick one another’s shins until one admits defeat and is trundled off to the first aid tent for sympathy and a warm poultice. But I had never before heard that shin kicking was a favoured part of the Morris Dancer’s repertoire.

‘Sometimes, on our travels around, we finds that we gets clever clogs who likes to take the mickey,’ he said. ‘Likes to have a bit of a laugh at our expense.’

‘Not something you favour?’

He laughed. ‘Definitely not something we favour. We have a tendency to discourage that sort of thing.’

‘And the boots come in handy?’

‘The boots definitely come in handy. They have their disadvantages in that they weigh a bit more than a nice dancing slipper, say, but they has their advantages in that when you get one of those colliding with your shin, your inclination to have a bit of a laugh at someone else’s expense tends to dissipate.’

‘Dissipate?’

‘That’s it. That’s the word. Dissipate. We may look simple folk but deep down we is educated peoples you know.’

‘I definitely don’t doubt it,’ I said. ‘I wouldn’t even doubt it if you weren’t wearing those boots. But since you are wearing those boots I most definitely don’t doubt it.’

‘I can see you’re a wise man, sir,’ said the red-faced dancer.

The man who was handing out drinks and food brought my new friend another pint of beer and another pasty. These were accepted eagerly, as though they were the first sustenance to be seen for some days. I have to say I was impressed. When I have eaten one of Gilly’s pasties I don’t usually need, or want, to eat again for 24 hours. The Morris Dancers’ choral group now moved on to another verse in the seemingly endless saga describing the activities of Eskimo Nell. I reckoned they were on about verse seven.

‘We’ll be off soon, and we’ll leave you and your friends in peace,’ said the red-faced dancer. He took a swig from his pint mug and a bite from his second pasty. ‘We’ve four more refreshment stops to make before we get to South Molton.’

I stared at him in admiration.

‘We have to keep in shape,’ he said.

‘Absolutely,’ I agreed.

‘Bertie jogs for us twice a week.’

Puzzled, I looked at him.

‘Bertie,’ he nodded towards a tall, unusual thin dancer near the bar.

‘He jogs for you?’

‘Sure. He’s our nominated jogger. You know how people going out to a pub have a nominated driver? The poor sod who agrees not to drink so that he can drive back home.’

‘I’ve heard of it,’ I admitted. It was not, I’m afraid, something that had caught on in Bilbury.

‘Well, Bertie is our nominated jogger. He jogs for us. It saves the rest of us having to do it.’

‘That’s a splendid idea,’ I said, for I truly thought it was.

‘It wouldn’t be safe for a man like me to go jogging.’

‘No, you’re right, it wouldn’t.’

‘People fall dead while jogging.’

‘They do. Indeed they do.’

‘So by having a nominated jogger we avoid all that risk. It’s safer all round. You could say it saves lives.’

‘Absolutely. I understand.’

‘Mind you, I do a little exercise myself occasionally,’ said my new chum. ‘I did a press up a few months ago. It was for a bet.’

‘Just the one?’

‘It’s not one of those things you want to do more than once is it?’

‘I guess not.’

My new chum suddenly noticed that there was still a chunk of pastry on his plate. ‘Pity to waste that,’ he said. He picked up the pastry and popped it into his mouth.

Suddenly, without saying anything, he leapt to his feet and rushed off, heading for the gents. This was clearly not the first time he and his companions had visited the Duck and Puddle.

I watched him go, assuming at first that he needed to get rid of some of his beer.

But something hadn’t seemed quite right.

So, after a few seconds delay, I hurried after him.

I found him in the pub’s back yard, on his knees, struggling for breath. He had gone a rather nifty shade of blue and he was clearly choking. I guessed that the last piece of pie had stuck in his windpipe.

I opened his mouth and looked inside; hoping that I might be able to reach the obstruction and pull it out. But I could see no blockage. I was about to reach for my penknife to perform an emergency tracheotomy, in an attempt to bypass the blockage, when I suddenly remembered that a year or two earlier I met a doctor at an anti-vivisection conference who told me about a technique he had devised for helping individuals who were choking. I couldn’t remember the doctor’s name but I remembered his enthusiasm for his new technique.

I decided that now was the time to try it out. I desperately tried to remember what the doctor had told me.

‘Can you get to your knees?’

The Morris Dancer struggled up to his knees.

‘Can you now stand up?’

Holding onto a conveniently placed drainpipe, he pulled himself up to his feet.

I then stood behind the Morris Dancer, who looked like death warmed up and was definitely no longer red faced, put my arms around him, grasped one fist with the other hand, put the two joined fists into the space just below his sternum and pulled sharply.

Nothing happened.

I tried it again.

And this time the piece of pie crust came flying out of the man’s mouth, freeing his windpipe for its proper purpose.

He coughed, coughed again and then took a deep breath.

I remembered the name of the man who had taught me this technique: it was Dr Heimlich. I decided that I should send him a note to tell him that his technique had worked and saved the life of an English Morris Dancer.

‘Crumbs,’ croaked the dancer. ‘That was a close call. Thank heavens you came outside and found me. If you hadn't happened along I'd have been dead.'

'Why did you go outside?' I asked him.

'I thought I was going to have to bring up that piece of pastry that had got stuck. I didn't want to do it in a room full of people.'

'But you should never leave the room if you're choking!' I told him.

We stayed outside for a few minutes while he recovered. A seagull swooped down and picked up the piece of pie crust. By the time we went back into the pub, the rest of the troupe of Morris Dancers were heading for the door. They were still singing lustily about the awesome exploits of the hardworking Eskimo Nell.

'Thank you, friend,' said the man who'd been choking.

'Pleasure,' I told him.

A minute later, their coach pulled away from the Duck and Puddle. There was much crunching of the gears as the 93-year-old driver found one which the engine considered suitable for starting off on the next leg of its journey. I noticed that a member of the dancing troupe was sitting beside Edgar, clearly giving him directions and guiding him from the Duck and Puddle forecourt.

'Crumbs!' said Frank, wiping his forehead with the tea-towel he used to wipe up the bar counter. 'The pub feels empty and quiet without that lot.'

'That's probably because it is empty and quiet,' Thumper pointed out.

'Hadn't thought of that,' said Frank. He started to collect the empty glasses. 'Still, we do good business when the Morris Dancers stop by. They're always thirsty and hungry. It must be all that dancing around waving their hankies.'

From the conversation I'd just had, I wasn't convinced that the Morris Dancers who had just called in at the Duck and Puddle ever got round to doing much dancing.

Now that it was quiet, we could hear that Patchy was on the telephone.

'I need another two of those Charles II's beds,' said Patchy to the person on the other end of the line. 'I've sold the next one to a Russian customer who has bought it sight – unseen and I've got three customers from Hong Kong fighting for the right to buy the next one.'

The person at the other end of the telephone said something I didn't hear.

'I need the first one by next Friday, and the other one by the end of the month,' said Patchy, putting down the receiver. He suddenly realised I was there and looked a trifle embarrassed. He called to Frank who was in the Duck and Puddle kitchens with Gilly. 'How much do I owe you for the call?'

'Local, national or international?'

'Birmingham.'

'That sounds like 'international' but it's on the house,' shouted Frank.

'Why not sell a bed to each of the customers in Hong Kong?' I asked Patchy.

'Oh no, no,' said Patchy. 'I have a simple rule. Never sell the same seemingly exclusive, almost entirely unique historical artefact to more than one person in a country.' He paused and then a slight smile crossed his lips. 'Not at the same time anyway.'

'What's the time?' asked Thumper.

Frank squinted at the clock – which is still not working. 'It's probably a quarter to something,' he said. 'I find it's often quarter to something. Or sometimes quarter past something.' He announced this as though it were useful information. In Bilbury, it is generally thought that the 'something' rarely matters as much as people think it ought to.

'Just time for another round then,' said Thumper.

'And maybe a cheese and onion roll,' suggested Patchy.

We all decided we'd each like a cheese and onion roll.

'They were nice blokes, those Morris Dancers,' said Thumper.

'But I prefer them when they're not here,' said Patchy.

'They're very noisy,' I said. 'What with those bells they wear tinkling every time they move and those boots they wear being a bit on the clunky side, they make more noise than a crowd of school kids.'

'And they're all so big they seem to fill the place,' said Patchy.

'Good for business, though,' said Frank. 'I take more when they come in than I normally take in a month of Sundays.'

We all looked at him.

'Sundays are our best day,' explained Frank. 'People go out for a drive or a walk on Sundays. And since someone took down all the road signs, they get lost. They come in to find out where they are and while they're in here they usually buy something. Even if they're not hungry or thirsty they feel they ought to buy something because I've been so nice and helpful.'

‘Are you nice and helpful?’ asked Thumper.

‘Of course,’ said Frank. ‘I’m always nice and helpful.’

‘Where are our drinks?’ asked Patchy.

‘Get ‘em yourselves,’ said Frank. ‘You know where everything is. What do you think I am? A bloody slave or something.’

And so while Frank tottered off to make the cheese and onion rolls we all helped ourselves to drinks and Thumper, who said he’d pay for them, put an IOU into the till.

A Guest Called Spike

Thumper was at Bilbury Grange collecting manure which he intended to sell to a market garden the other side of Barnstaple. Farmyard manure is regarded by gardeners as the best fertiliser for plant growth. It contains minerals and trace elements and many bacteria and fungi which help plants grow. It also contains auxins from urine and nitrogen and phosphoric acid. People who know about these things tell me that no garden is complete without a steady supply of auxins, nitrogen and phosphoric acid.

Large farm animals produce fairly impressive quantities of manure.

A cow or a horse will produce around five tons of manure a year each and Cedric, the pig which we look after for our American friends who won the 'Bowling for the Pig' competition at the Duck and Puddle, produces about a ton of manure every year. That's a lot of manure, and although we use quite a bit of it ourselves, we cannot possibly use a ton of manure in every 12 month period.

Thumper gets rid of the excess manure for us, and the price he receives from the market garden covers his petrol costs and leaves him with a modest profit. Thumper earns his living via a huge variety of schemes which earn him a little profit here and a little profit there. If he worked in the city, he would say that he had a portfolio of jobs. Since he works in Bilbury, he just has a number of little jobs which earn him a bit here and a bit more there.

I was helping shovel some of Cedric's food waste into the back of Thumper's truck when he asked me if I'd heard the latest wonderful story about our mutual friend Peter Marshall, who runs the village shop in Bilbury.

Thumper told me that Samuel Houghton, a local farmer, has a regular order for a magazine called *Tractor Times*. This is, as the name rather suggests, a periodical devoted to the study of tractors. There may be the occasional feature about ploughs in the magazine but it is a magazine in which the tractor plays a starring role. I have seen several copies, and as a country doctor with a rural practice, I usually have one or two recent editions on the table in my waiting room. The magazine contains many photographs of tractors, detailed stories about old tractors which have done extraordinary things and anecdotes about tractor owners. There are advertisements for second-hand tractors, details of companies which provide tractor tyres and pictures of farmers who have done unusual things with their tractors. It is, not to beat about the bush, the sort of publication which appeals to a rather exclusive readership.

Samuel, as you may have surmised from his reading habits, has a great affection for tractors; an affection which far outweighs his regard for them as utilitarian vehicles. Samuel collects them and, having the space to indulge himself, has a couple of barns full of fine examples of the breed. He claims tax relief on them all on the grounds that he is a farmer buying pieces of farm machinery. It is, he once told me, his ambition to open North Devon's first tractor museum.

This week there was, so it appeared, some sort of problem with the supply of Samuel's favourite reading matter and instead of finding *Tractor Times* on his hall carpet, Samuel found that the delivery boy had pushed a copy of *Angling Weekly* through his letterbox. The magazine contained, as the title rather suggested, a good deal of information, some timely and some historical, about angling. There was nothing at all about tractors in its pages.

Samuel, who has about as much interest in angling as I have in tractors, which is say somewhere between very little and none at all, assumed at first that the delivery boy had made a mistake and that somewhere in the village there must be another one of Peter's customers staring miserably at a copy of *Tractor Times* and wondering what could have happened to his *Angling Weekly*.

So he rang Peter to report the error.

'Oh it wasn't an error,' said Peter merrily. 'The wholesaler didn't have a copy of your magazine so, rather than leave you without something to read, I thought I'd send you a copy of *Angling Weekly*. It was, to be frank, a toss-up between that and *Railway Modeller's Gazette*.

'Why the hell did you think I'd want a magazine about angling?' demanded Samuel rather abruptly.

'Well tractors and fish are both hobbies, aren't they?' replied Peter indignantly.

The fact was, of course, that Peter didn't want to miss the commission on the sale of a magazine and had sent along a replacement more in hope than expectation. However, if he had hoped that Samuel would not bother to return the unwanted magazine he had seriously underestimated Samuel's dislike of wasting money.

According to Thumper, Samuel was not terribly impressed by Peter but it was, said Thumper, not the fact that he had been sent the wrong magazine which had upset him, so much as the fact that Peter had referred to his obsession with tractors as a hobby.

As far as Samuel is concerned, tractors are not a hobby so much as a religion.

We finished loading Cedric's excess manure into Thumper's truck and then went into the house.

'Would you two like a cup of tea?' Patsy asked us. She seemed distracted and rather agitated. Normally Patsy is calm and easy going. She takes most things in her stride. But she definitely wasn't her normal self.

'Can we have one each?' asked Thumper.

Patsy looked at him, puzzled.

I asked her what was worrying her.

'Oh, it's those damned beetles!' she replied suddenly and sharply. 'They're absolutely everywhere. I can't walk around in the kitchen without treading on them. I hate doing that but I can't walk around looking down at the floor all the time. I just trod on another one.

'We'll have to get someone in,' I said. 'I'll ring one of those pest exterminators who advertises in the local paper.'

'Oh I hate the idea of doing that!' said Patsy. 'And he'll want to put poison down everywhere. We can't have that – not with Ben and the cats wandering around the house.'

'Beetle trouble?' said Thumper rather unnecessarily.

'I don't know where they've all come from but we've been invaded by the darned things,' I told him. 'I don't mind one or two but there are dozens and they're all over the place.'

'You need a hedgehog,' said Thumper firmly. 'He'll snuffle and grunt his way round downstairs and get rid of your beetles faster than an exterminator. And you won't need to put any poison down. Just close the door if you don't want him to go into a particular room.'

'Where on earth am I going to find a hedgehog?'

'There's bound to be one in your garden. They hibernate during the winter but it's a nice sunny day so they'll wake up and have a wander about looking for something to eat. When he's had a nibble, and satisfied his appetite, he'll just go back to sleep again. Just pick one up and bring him into the house for a while. He'll get rid of the beetles for you. Then, when he's done his job, just leave the backdoor open or put him outside again. With all those beetles around you won't need to worry about feeding him.'

'That's a brilliant idea!' said Patsy. 'You two go down the garden and find a hedgehog and I'll put the kettle on – if it isn't full of beetles.'

So Thumper and I tottered down the garden on an impromptu hedgehog hunt.

'I don't know much about hedgehogs,' I confessed as Thumper used a stick to poke carefully at a pile of leaves.

This was something of an understatement. All I knew about hedgehogs was that they were prickly and clearly didn't have much road sense since there were nearly always one or two squashed flat on the lanes in Bilbury. 'What are we looking for? How do we find one?'

'They make very messy nests,' said Thumper. 'There's no real structure to a hedgehog's nest – it will be just a pile of grass, moss and leaves. They're untidy creatures – not very house proud.' He poked at another pile of leaves without any luck. 'Hedgehogs like snuggling into the bottom of bonfires that have been piled up but not lit and you can sometimes find them inside compost heaps.'

'What do they eat?'

'Just about anything you're likely to find crawling about in the garden. Insects of all kinds, slugs, mice and worms. They'll eat baby mice and voles and I've even known one to eat a snake.'

'A snake!' I cried. It seemed unlikely. 'What sort of a snake could a hedgehog eat?'

'Anything that takes their fancy. Grass snakes are usually too big for them but they'll eat an adder if they can find one. They eat it from the tail end and leave the head.'

I was astonished. 'Do they have any predators – apart from cars?'

'Foxes will kill them and eat them if they're hungry enough. A hedgehog will use its muscles to bend its spine and roll itself into a ball if it's threatened but a fox can usually force it open again. If it can't, the fox will roll the spiny ball into a puddle or a pond and that will usually make the hedgehog unroll voluntarily.'

'Clever!'

'Oh, foxes can be very crafty. They know all the survival tricks. Mind you, there are all sorts of old tales about hedgehogs being crafty too. My granddad once told me he'd seen a hedgehog climb up a plum tree, knock off a pile of the plums and then roll over onto the fruit until the plums were impaled on its spike. It would then toddle back to its nest where its partner removes the plums for them both to eat.'

I laughed. 'What a wonderful story! Worthy of Baron Munchausen!'

'My granddad swore it was true,' insisted Thumper. 'And he never had much of an imagination that I know of so it probably was true. He was sober too when he told me that. I've certainly seen a hedgehog climb a tree though it didn't have any plums on it. It was an old stunted oak, with a very bent trunk, easy to climb. The hedgehog climbed up the tree, stayed up there for a while, just having a look around, and then rolled itself into a ball and fell twelve feet to the ground. The spines took the shock and he just walked away. I saw him do it again so he must have enjoyed it.'

All this time Thumper was poking gently at every pile of leaves and moss he could find.

At the far end of our main lawn there is a huge, unusually defined fairy ring; a natural phenomenon which I have always found fascinating.

Because I was frequently embarrassed when visitors who saw our garden wanted to know what caused fairy rings and I couldn't provide any sort of answer other than 'they're some sort of fungus thing, I think' I did a little research into the phenomenon. To start with, I looked at some books in Barnstaple library but in the end, I learned more from our gardener who is a walking encyclopaedia on all garden topics.

Fairy rings are, he told me, caused by a species of fungus and there are three zones. The outer zone is the area of grass into which the fungus is spreading in search of fresh nutrients. Here the grass and other vegetation is stimulated by the action of the fungus on the humus. It is in the middle zone that the fungus is active and here the growth of vegetation is largely suppressed and the grass, therefore, is short and rather unhealthy looking. In the inner zone, the residue left by the dying fungus provides food which enables the grass to grow vigorously. And so you end up with three clear zones – looking like a bull's eye target on a dart board or an archer's target board. The rate at which a fairy ring grows is pretty slow, of course, usually only a few inches a year. Our gardener once told me that he has heard that some fairy rings are hundreds of years old.

Just on the edge of the outer circle of our fairy ring there was another pile of leaves. It looked for all the world as though the leaves had simply been blown there. Thumper had a gentle poke with his stick and the leaves moved. Slowly, a sleepy hedgehog emerged from the pile and looked up at us. He seemed, not unnaturally, to be slightly annoyed at having been woken for no apparent purpose. Anyone would feel the same.

Thumper took off his jacket, an old waxed cotton thing that had seen better days back in the 1950s, and used it to lift the hedgehog up off the grass. He then carried it back to the house while I followed carrying the stick which he'd used to find the hedgehog in the first place.

Once in the kitchen, I shut the back door and Thumper put the hedgehog down on the floor. 'When it's eaten all your beetles just put it back outside where we found it,' he told me.

'Is it a he or a she?' asked Patsy.

Thumper looked at her quizzically. 'Does it matter?'

'I expect it matters to the hedgehog!'

'But not so much to you?'

'No,' agreed Patsy. 'Probably not.'

'You can tell the sex by looking underneath,' said Thumper. 'But to be honest I don't much fancy picking it up to find out. Those prickles are nasty.'

'OK,' said Patsy. 'What shall we call him? We need a name that will do just as well for a girl as for a boy.'

Thumper looked at her as if she were mad.

'Well, if he's going to live with us for a while then he, or she, must have a name,' said Patsy.

'There are lots of names that work for boys or girls,' I pointed out. 'Leslie, Jules, Stevie, Frances, Jamie, Hilary, Adrian, Aubrey, Evelyn as in Evelyn Waugh. There was a male editor of *Punch* magazine called Shirley.' At this point I ran out of steam.

'Let's call it 'Spike',' said Patsy. 'That works either way.'

'I don't believe I'm hearing this!' said Thumper. He looked at Patsy. 'And you a farmer's daughter!'

'It's been all downhill since she married me,' I told him.

'You're not kidding,' replied Thumper. 'You're a bad influence.'

'So, what do we do now?' I asked.

'What do you mean? Take a look at him! Sorry, take a look at her. That's what you wanted isn't it?' He pointed to the hedgehog which was gobbling up a beetle.

'Poor beetle!' murmured Patsy.

'The hedgehog is having his lunch!' cried Thumper.

Just then Ben, our dog, came into the kitchen from the hall. She took one look at the hedgehog, approached gingerly and sniffed. The hedgehog, which had started to earn its keep by finishing off its first beetle with a discernible and slightly unnerving crunching sound, sensed danger and rolled itself into a ball. Ben went closer, caught her nose on one of the hedgehog's spikes and pulled back rapidly. She then stared at the hedgehog and retreated, disappearing back into the hallway.

Thumper drank his tea, ate two home-made cheese scones and left.

By the time he'd gone, the hedgehog had munched its way through an unknown number of beetles. There were already far fewer crawling around on the kitchen floor and it looked very much as though the introduction of the hedgehog was going to be a success.

As indeed it was.

Just over a fortnight later, I gingerly used an old towel to pick up the hedgehog, took it back outside and placed it carefully where Thumper had found it. I picked up a couple of handfuls of dry leaves and sprinkled them over Spike.

He (or she) seemed happy enough for he (or she) didn't move away from where I'd put him (or her) down. There was just some wriggling as he (or she) made himself (or herself) comfortable.

I saw Thumper in the Duck and Puddle that evening and thanked him for finding us a beetle exterminator. I bought him and Patchy a drink and settled down next to the fire. Frank was in the middle of telling a long and rather complicated story which had been told to him, second hand, by the drayman who delivers the beer to the Duck and Puddle.

Apparently another drayman, not the one who had told the story to Frank, had been driving a dray which had collided with a furniture lorry on the narrow, steep road down to Combe Martin. As a result of the collision, a dozen barrels of the brewery's best bitter had rolled off the back of the dray and had rolled down the hill. The drayman had seen them go. None of the barrels had burst open but when another dray arrived to collect them, the two draymen had discovered that every single one of the barrels had a small and surprisingly neat hole through which all of the contents had leaked. Curiously, there was absolutely no sign of any leakage around the barrels for the ground nearby was still firm and baked hard from a week or two of sunshine.

The other odd thing was that three barrels had disappeared completely – never to be found.

Frank said the drayman said he thought something supernatural must have happened. And added that he had always thought that Combe Martin was not the sort of place anyone would want to be after dark.

In the middle of the story, I found myself scratching an itch on my left leg. A few moments later, I had an itch on my right leg. As the story reached its conclusion, I had another itch.

'Have you caught something?' asked Patchy, when I scratched for a third time.

'I don't know what it is,' I confessed. 'Both Patsy and I have been itching and scratching like mad these last few days. I must have picked up a flea from somewhere.'

Suddenly, Thumper started to scratch his arm. And then, a few moments later, he scratched his leg. Then he rubbed his arm again. He looked down, slapped his forearm hard with his other hand and then held up a small creature. He put it onto the palm of his hand. 'Flea!' he said.

The flea, which had been merely dazed by Thumper's blow, leapt away. Patchy and I both jumped away from where we thought it had landed.

'You did sprinkle flea powder onto that hedgehog of yours, didn't you?' said Thumper.

I looked at him. 'Flea powder?'

'You didn't did you?'

'I never thought,' I said. 'You didn't say anything about flea powder.'

'So now it's my fault!' said Thumper.

'No, no. I'm just saying…'

'Well, you've got rid of your beetles and now you've got fleas!' said Thumper. 'You'll have to go home and put flea powder on Ben and your cats. And you'll have to wash all your clothes.'

'Meanwhile, you're barred!' said Frank firmly. 'Drink up and go home.'

I looked at him, open-mouthed. 'Are you serious?'

'You heard me!' said Frank. 'We don't want fleas in here. You're banned.' He looked at me sternly and then started to smile. And then the smile turned into a guffaw.

'Seriously, you'd better go home and have a hot bath,' said Thumper. 'And put your clothes into the washing machine. If you don't, you'll find that all your patients are going to have fleas.'

I left.

Behind me I could hear the three of them laughing at my discomfort.

Friends can be very cruel.

It really was very embarrassing. As I hurried to the car a second flea, or quite possibly a third flea, bit me on the back of my neck.

I found myself wishing we had the beetles back.

Alfie!

I'm sorry to have to call you out,' apologised Carole Singer. She was sitting on the sofa in the living room. She'd left the front door open and I'd just walked in when I'd arrived. Most people in Bilbury don't bother to lock their doors. The door to the living room was shut but when she'd heard me arrive, Mrs Singer had called out to tell me where she was.

'Shut the door, please, doctor,' she said. 'Alfie is around in here somewhere and I don't want him slipping out without my noticing.'

Even lying down her chest was screaming for attention; not for an array of campaign medals or an impressive collection of jewellery but for a cleavage so vast, so endlessly deep, that if I had called down into the depths I would have been able to have a leisurely cup of coffee and a croissant before the echo came bouncing back. I assumed she was wearing some sort of bra designed to boost, promote, exaggerate and advertise. I remembered that Mrs Singer, a villager who could accurately be described as both bustluscious and callipygian, had recently taken up a new profession as a stripper. It seemed as though she was bringing her work home with her.

I didn't know whether Alfie was a cat or a dog but I shut the door as requested.

'I've done something to my ankle. Hopefully I've just sprained it but it hurts so much I'm worried it might be broken,' she said. 'I'm afraid I couldn't walk to Bilbury Grange and I couldn't drive. Gordon would have brought me along to the surgery but he's up in Manchester on business. He's seeing a man in the film industry who is looking for girls to appear in the movies he makes.'

'Congratulations!' I said, for it seemed that congratulations were in order.

'Oh, I know it's not going to be for 'Gone with the Wind' or `The Quiet Man' or one of those big productions. I'm not going to be getting out of a limo in Leicester Square, walking along a red carpet, posing for photographs and waving to crowds.'

She said this as though she thought it might be; just might be. She had a dreamy look in her eyes; full of hope, suddenly alive with dreams that deep down she must have known would never be realised.

'Still it's the movies,' she said, cheerfully. 'And I am excited; even though I expect I'll have to take my clothes off and bounce my boobs a bit. But I do that two or three times a week anyway.' She blushed lightly and lowered her voice. 'Deep down I know the chances are that it will just be to make blue movies and if that's the case then they'll expect me to do more than just take off my clothes. But maybe it will be something better than that.' She paused and brightened up a little. 'And Gordon's excited about it. He said they'd offered to make him an executive producer and might allow him to invest a little of our money in the production.'

It all seemed a bit dodgy to me but I'm not in the business of bursting dreams. I had my doubts about the type of movie the man in Manchester was making but I had to assume that Gordon and Carole, both being considerably over the age of consent, knew what they were contemplating.

'Nothing wrong with hope,' I said. 'Nothing at all.'

'Who am I kidding?' she asked, suddenly deflated. She was speaking to herself as much as to me. 'The title of one of the films is *See Nipples and Die*. It hardly sounds like Oscar winning material, does it?'

I hadn't seen Carole Singer for a while – not since she told me that she was working as a stripper in one or two local public houses. It was a job she had originally begun in order to make ends meet but she had eventually come to terms with the idea of taking off her clothes in public and, I suspect, had actually grown to rather enjoy the attention she received. To her surprise, her husband Gordon hadn't minded when she'd told him where she was going on her evenings out. He'd thought she was attending an exercise class but hadn't been too upset when he'd discovered the nature of the exercise.

She had put on some weight since I'd seen her last.

She was one of those women who seems to be forever putting on weight, dieting and losing it, then putting it back on again. I have a number of patients who have lost 20 stone or more in their lifetime. She now had a definitely Rubenesque look; indeed, she looked as though she had been designed by Peter Paul Rubens on one of his more generous minded days.

She was dressed differently too and the mountainous shires of her bodily kingdom were tightly encased in a figure hugging skirt and a figure hugging jumper.

'How did you hurt your ankle?'

She laughed. 'I fell off a table.'

'Off a table?' I repeated, incredulously. 'What on earth were you doing on a table?'

'Dancing! The landlord thought it would be a good idea if I did my strip while standing on one of the tables in the middle of the pub. He thought the punters would be able to get a better view. So I climbed up onto one of the tables. I'd got my bra off and was just taking off one of my stockings when it happened. There was a puddle of beer on the table that no one had wiped up and on one leg I was a bit wobbly anyway.'

'I would imagine you were,' I said, trying hard not to imagine Mrs Singer, almost naked, standing on one leg in a puddle of beer on a table in the Mott and Bailey or the Gravedigger's Rest.

'Anyway, when I fell, one of the punters half caught me, very kind of him it was too, but I landed a bit funny on the leg which had the stocking half off.'

'And hurt your ankle?'

'Yes. Would you have a look, doctor?' She removed a bag of frozen peas from her ankle and then pulled down and removed her skirt. She tossed it aside in the debonair manner of a practised stripper. She then unfastened the stocking on her left leg, rolled it down and tossed that after the skirt. Underneath the skirt, she was wearing very skimpy, pink, silk panties, a black suspender belt and one remaining stocking.

I examined her ankle. Nothing was broken. 'It's just sprained,' I told her. 'Keep the frozen peas on it, or anything icy, and just rest the leg. Have you got a bandage you could put on?'

'There's one in the bathroom cabinet,' she said.

'Do you want me to fetch it for you?'

'If you don't mind, doctor.'

I popped upstairs to their bathroom, found the bandage and was half way back down the stairs when I came face to face with an adder. Well, more accurately, I came foot to face: my foot and the snake's face.

As is common in many old houses in Bilbury, the Singers have a door at the bottom of their staircase. When I'd gone upstairs I had left the door open.

And there was the adder: half way up, or down, the stairs.

The stair carpet had a pattern on it and the snake was almost invisible.

Almost invisible, but not entirely.

I froze. I have never been over-fond of snakes.

He stuck his tongue out at me, which I thought was rather rude since we'd only just met.

'There's a snake on your stairs!' I called.

'Oh, sorry,' Mrs Singer called back. 'That'll be Alfie I expect.'

'Alfie?'

'My snake.'

'Your snake?'

'I wanted a snake for my act. Lots of the girls use snakes. I don't know why but people find them sexy. You let the snake wind itself round you as you dance.'

'But this is an adder!'

'No, it's just a grass snake. I couldn't afford a snake from a pet shop. Have you any idea what they charge for a snake these days? So Gordon went onto the moor and found me a grass snake. It's a bit small but I'm hoping it will grow.'

I started to say something but Carole hadn't finished.

'It's funny how things change,' she said. 'When Gordon and I got married we were both virgins. We didn't know what we'd got until we got to the hotel after the wedding and unwrapped each other. Now, here's me thinking nothing of dancing round in public, stark naked. And now I'm planning to do it with a snake wrapped round me.' She laughed.

'What made Gordon think this was a grass snake?'

'Oh I don't know. He just picked up the first snake he found. Aren't all the snakes round here called grass snakes?'

'Grass snakes have yellow and black markings round their necks,' I told her. I was still standing on the stairs. The adder was still staring at me. 'And this one isn't going to grow much more because I think it's already pretty well fully grown.'

'You really think it's an adder? Aren't they poisonous?'

'It's definitely an adder. It's a female. And it's poisonous. And it's curled up nice and comfortably on your stair carpet.'

'Oh my God! Oh my God! What are we going to do? How do you know it's female?'

'Because it's light brown and has a dark brown zig zag stripe. The males are grey with a black stripe. Grass snakes are a sort of greeny olive colour. You have to believe me when I tell you that this is definitely not a grass snake.'

'Oh that fool Gordon. It could have bitten me. I could have died. If I hadn't been laid up with my ankle I would have been practising with it.’

‘Has it bitten you?’

‘No. I haven’t been near it. Gordon brought it in before he went off this morning and he let it out so that it could get used to the house – and to me.’

‘Your sprained ankle has saved you from a nasty bite.’

‘It could have killed me!’

‘Adder bites don’t usually kill but it wouldn’t be very nice to be bitten by one.’

‘What are we going to do?’

I peered at the snake. ‘It now seems to have gone to sleep on the stairs,’ I told her. ‘Do you have a telephone in your bedroom?’

‘No, I’m afraid not.’

‘That’s a pity,’ I said. ‘I was hoping I could ring someone to come and catch it.’

‘You could climb out of our bedroom, onto the porch roof,’ said Mrs Singer. ‘And then you could climb down off the porch roof.’

‘OK,’ I said. ‘I’ll try that. Can you hop to the door at the bottom of the stairs and shut it?’

‘Oh yes!’ she said. I got the impression that she would have happily hopped out of the house and half way to Barnstaple if it had kept her away from the adder.

I waited until I saw the door close. There was no space underneath for the snake to wriggle back down into the living room. I then made my way upstairs, found the Singers’ bedroom and climbed out onto the flat roof of the porch. I then jumped down onto their lawn. As I did so, I sprained my ankle slightly. I hobbled back into the house.

‘What are we going to do?’ demanded Mrs Singer. She was standing on one leg, holding onto the back of a chair to stop herself toppling over.

‘I’ll ring Thumper Robinson,’ I told her. ‘May I use your phone?’

‘Of course!’

I rang the Duck and Puddle and asked Frank if Thumper was there. He was. I explained that Mrs Singer had an adder on her staircase and asked him if he could come over and rescue it, and us. He said he would be with us in a couple of minutes. It felt good knowing that Thumper was on his way. Thumper is the sort of man who will walk across a field full of cows without looking about him nervously, breaking into a cold sweat or imperceptibly increasing his pace so as to get to the other side of the field before one of the cows becomes aggressive or, worse still, turns into a bull. While we waited, I thought I might as well do something useful so I put the bandage on Mrs Singer’s ankle.

‘It’s on the stairs,’ I told Thumper when he arrived. He had with him a forked stick, a sack and a broom handle to which was attached a wire loop. He explained that the idea was to put the loop around the snake and to lift it into the air so that it would have no firm foundation if it decided to strike. Thumper was wearing a pair of thick gauntlets – the sort which used to be favoured by motorcyclists in the 1950s but which went out of favour for some reason. I didn’t blame him at all. I wouldn’t tackle a poisonous snake unless I was wearing armour. He looked at me and then at Mrs Singer. She still hadn’t got round to putting her skirt back on.

‘Hello, Carole!’ he said. Carole simpered rather coyly.

‘Mrs Singer has sprained her ankle,’ I explained.

‘Sorry to hear it,’ said Thumper. He cautiously opened the door at the bottom of the stairs and two minutes later, he had the snake in the sack.

‘I’ll release it on the moor,’ he said to Mrs Singer. ‘I assume you don’t want to keep it?’

‘Oh no, please take it! Get rid of it!’ said Mrs Singer without hesitation. ‘But don’t hurt it!’ she added.

‘I’d better be off,’ I said, when Thumper had gone. I looked at my watch. My evening surgery was due to start in ten minutes time. ‘You haven’t got any more snakes around the place, have you?’

‘No,’ said Mrs Singer, laughing rather nervously.

I hobbled to the car.

‘Oh doctor,’ called Mrs Singer who had followed me to the front door. ‘Could I have a sick note for the pub? I don’t think I’ll be able to strip for a couple of days.’

I went back and wrote out a sick note. She was still not wearing her skirt. ‘And when you do go back to work it might be a good idea to keep off slippery tables,’ I told her.

When I’d done that I headed back to the car.

‘Hello!’ said Patsy when I got back home. ‘You seem to have had a busy afternoon!’

‘Don’t ask,’ I said.

‘I don’t need to,’ she said. ‘Mrs Rathbone called to let me know that she saw you climbing out of the Singers’ bedroom window and then ten or fifteen minutes later she saw you and Mrs Singer standing on the doorstep.’

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘She said Mrs Singer wasn’t wearing a skirt and had only one stocking on.’

‘She’s sprained her ankle.’

‘Why are you limping?’

‘I sprained an ankle when I climbed out of the bedroom window.’

‘Golly! Is it catching?’

‘I’ve just got time for a cup of tea and a biscuit before surgery starts,’ I said wearily. ‘I’ll tell you about it later. Believe me, I’ve had a tough time.’

‘It sounds as if you have,’ said Patsy with a grin. ‘I can’t wait to hear all about it. The bit about you climbing out of the bedroom window should be particularly worth hearing.’

The Man in the Hat

I had, over the years, seen Dyfed Steele a good many times.

He wasn't Welsh, though his Christian name sounded more Welsh than English.

He had, so he once told me, been conceived while his parents were on their honeymoon in Port Talbot. He didn't know if there was any significance to the choice of the name Dyfed, but he said his mother had seen the name on a lorry and had rather liked it; thinking it stylish, manly and a little different.

Apart from having a slightly less than usual Christian name, the most immediately notable oddity about Dyfed was that he always wore a hat. He wore it outdoors and indoors. He wore it while eating and he wore it when sitting in my consulting room. It was a flat cap, a piece of headgear that had definitely seen better days, and I don't think he ever took it off. There were rumours that he wore it when he took his bi-monthly bath and rumours that he wore it in bed. There were some in the village who wondered whether anyone, including his lady wife, had ever seen the top of his head at all.

Dyfed lived in a small, red brick two up and two down which had once been a farm labourer's tied cottage and he had lived there for as long as I could remember, sharing the house with his wife, a normally pleasant, friendly woman called Emily.

The two of them used to row a good deal and occasionally china would be thrown, though usually, I am pleased to say, with more passion than accuracy. He once came to me with a nasty bruise on his right cheek, apparently from a flying cup, and she once had a slight cut and a bruise on her shoulder from a tea plate which had shattered on impact. The arguments never lasted very long, however.

Mrs Kennet, Patsy's mother knew them well and said that the two of them 'always buried the hatchet quickly but always dug it up again before the day was out'.

Emily, who was not the brightest bulb in the chandelier, was the most enthusiastic slimmer I can remember ever meeting. Both she and Dyfed had been on diets ever since I'd known them and I once noted that according to the medical records I collected, Emily had, over the years, lost a total of 2,200 pounds.

As a general rule, they each weighed somewhere between 250 and 300 pounds.

That means that whether you measured them in Imperial tons, American tons or Metric tons, they weighed around a quarter of a ton together. (What a wonderful tribute to diversity it is that a simple word like 'ton' should mean so many very different things according to where it is measured.)

As Thumper once said, it was a good job the Steeles didn't ride a tandem bicycle together.

Dyfed Steele was one of those patients who seem to be a trifle unlucky and his weight didn't seem to help his luck.

Take, for example, what happened in the depths of a winter when most of Bilbury was covered in a foot of snow and the parts that didn't have a foot of snow were covered in drifts several feet deep.

The snow fell so consistently and so heavily that every morning I had to traipse around the garden at Bilbury Grange, knocking the snow off our trees and bushes so that the weight of it didn't break the branches. It is, of course, the evergreens which suffer most; their larger surface area means that the weight of snow on them can be extraordinary.

The house itself was festooned with icicles, which the locals call frost candles, and when moving in and out of the house we kept a watchful eye on the icicles above us. It is no fun to be speared by a falling icicle. A few years earlier a man the other side of Bideford had been killed by an icicle which had landed on his neck and cut through his spine and spinal cord. It never fails to surprise me just how many strange ways there are for men to die.

Now, there is in Bilbury one particular pond which is always popular with ice skaters.

The pond (it would be exaggerating its size and importance to call it a lake though many in the village refer to it as such) is just west of Softly's Bottom and doesn't cover much more than a third of an acre in total.

As a general rule, locals usually regard three inches of clear black ice as safe for skating. More is better. Less is risky. When the ice is clear and fairly thick then it can be safe even if cracking can be heard and cracks can be seen.

Much less ice than three inches is suicidal.

If the ice isn't black and seems to contain snow, then even twice that thickness isn't enough.

Of course, the risk also depends very much upon the nature of the water underneath the ice. If the water is shallow then the biggest risk is that any skaters who go through will get a soaking. But if the water is deeper and fast flowing, with a noticeable current, then the risks can be very serious. The most dangerous situation is a river which has fast running water in the middle and slow running water at the sides. The danger is that whereas the ice at the edges of the river seems solid and safe, the ice in the middle may be very thin and a skater who goes through there may be swept along by the current and unable to escape from their icy roofed grave.

And, of course, everything changes if a bunch of people are skating – especially if they keep close together.

Well, during the winter about which I am writing, a dozen people had been happily skating on the pond, with nothing untoward happening, when Dyfed saw the fun they were having. Not unnaturally, he decided that he wanted to join in. So he borrowed a pair of skates.

And within three minutes he had gone through the ice and was standing up to his waist in cold water.

The problem, of course, was getting him out of the pond.

Dyfed didn't have the upper body strength to raise himself up out of the water and no one else could possibly lift him. Attempts to pull him out of the pond failed miserably when poor Dyfed complained that he was being pulled into the raw ice edge of the hole he'd made.

In the end, the only way to rescue him was to break a path in the ice all the way through to the point where Dyfed had gone through. Once this had been done, Dyfed was able to wade to the shore, safety and the blanket being held by the ever faithful Emily.

Unfortunately, to make things worse for Dyfed, a reporter from the local paper happened to be present and his adventures found their way onto page three of the next week's issue.

'Too Much Weight –Too Little Ice!' was the headline.

Dyfed was more than a little unpopular with those who had wanted to carry on skating for it took another few days for the ice to repair itself sufficiently for more skating. Not surprisingly, Dyfed was banned from going onto the ice any more.

I suppose you could say that the ice skating thing could have been put down to a lack of insight, or a lack of common sense, but if strange things were going to happen then they tended to happen to Dyfed.

The truth was that the only sort of luck he ever had was bad luck. If he had ever won the lottery he would have lost the ticket.

Whenever I saw him, I was reminded of Dante Alighieri, the woeful Italian poet who was one of the first package tourists in history and who in his Divine Comedy described how he went on a guided tour through the nine circles of hell.

I sometimes thought that Dyfed had set out on his own version of Dante's endless trial. He was always in and out of my surgery, invariably with something out of the ordinary to report.

Take the bees, for example.

Now, quite a few people in Bilbury keep bees. I can, off the top of my head, think of half a dozen keen apiarists within two miles of Bilbury Grange. Like all the others, Dyfed kept bees and collected his own honey. It was splendid stuff too for their garden, whence from the bees collected their pollen, was well stocked with a wide variety of clovers, the sort of plants which honey connoisseurs claim produces the finest tasting honeys.

Dyfed told me that David, the chap with the sling who had beaten Goliath in single combat, had reported that he had found, when pursuing the Philistines, that honey was the original 'super food' in that it revived, restored, healed and invigorated. David should have known for few people needed more reviving, restoring, healing or invigorating.

But Dyfed was the only bee keeper I knew who was regularly stung by his bees.

Most of those who keep bees seemed to develop some sort of rapport with their swarms. Even though they are, technically at least, stealing the honey the bees have made, they manage to build up something approaching a relationship.

They took the honey, it was true, but they took it as a sort of rent on the fine properties and sense of security they provided in the form of well-made and well looked after hives.

Most of the apiarists I knew did not even bother to wear the usual protective clothing favoured by beekeepers. I thought them quite mad, and braver than I could ever be, but they didn't often get stung.

Dyfed, on the other hand, did not have any sort of relationship with his bees.

Or rather, I suppose he did have a relationship but it was distinctly and exclusively antagonistic.

When collecting honey, he wore all the gear: the hood with see-through facemask, the one-piece suit, the thick gauntlets and the boots. Wandering down the garden path, he looked for all the world as though he had just landed from Mars and was hunting around for a suitable decompression chamber. You would not have thought it possible that anything could have snuck into that suit. And underneath the beekeeper's guard he wore a long-sleeved, woollen vest and long-legged, woollen underpants – the sort favoured and heartily recommended by men and women who climb Everest or explore the icy wastes of the Arctic or Antarctic. On warm days he must have been roasting. But still the bees managed to sting him. Every pound of honey he collected resulted in half a dozen stings and he would come in from the garden, make sure all the doors and windows were shut, strip off and sit in a kitchen chair for half an hour while Emily, armed with the pair of tweezers Dyfed had used to handle his stamps when he was a boy, and had a fine collection of British Commonwealth Commemoratives, would gently remove the stings which the hapless bees had left behind. It always seemed to me to be a rather high price to pay for a pound or so of honey.

And then there was the whisky still.

I really don't know what possessed him to set up a whisky still. He wasn't a heavy drinker. He had no intention of selling the stuff he made. And for the money he spent on equipment, he could have bought himself a case of good malt whisky. I sometimes think he just started the still to see what would happen; to see whether he could get away with it.

As far as I understand it (and I am no expert) you need several things to make a whisky still.

First, you need a pile of potatoes which are surplus to normal requirements, or some grain that has started to sprout. This is the 'whatever'.

Before it can be turned into something drinkable (and probably toxic) the 'whatever' you choose to use has to be mixed with loads of hot water, stirred a good deal and then filtered.

And then you need something with which you can heat the liquid from which you intend to obtain the alcohol, something else to help the vapour condense before it escapes and disappears, and another something else that will cool and then trap the alcohol you hope you have produced.

And you also need a thermometer.

It is, as you can see, a good deal more complicated than just wandering into the Duck and Puddle and asking Frank to pour you a snifter.

Now most people who set up illicit stills (and I don't think even Dyfed was ignorant of the fact that it is illegal to make your own alcohol) put together all the bits and pieces they need from stuff they have lying around the house or in a shed. Or they collect the necessary impedimenta a bit at a time so that no one supplier knows precisely what they are doing. I assume that burglars follow the same basic principle: buy the sack with 'swag' written on it from one supplier, the mask for disguising one's appearance from a second, the striped jumper from a third and the jemmy from a fourth. Only a fool would choose to buy all four items from same emporium.

This was not the way for Dyfed.

He had a glut of King Edward potatoes one year and after deciding that he might try his hand at converting the excess into something more useful than chips, mash and jacket potatoes he sent off for a Home Distillation Kit which he saw advertised in one of those funny little underground magazines that were so popular in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

And, you will not be terribly surprised to hear that he had hardly finished unpacking the kit before there was a knock on his front door and a bunch of policemen stormed in and arrested him. This was the most exciting thing to have happened to the police of North Devon in a generation or more and they weren't about to miss the opportunity to get their man banged to rights.

At this point, Dyfed did have an unusual stroke of luck in that the policemen who had burst through his front door had moved a little too eagerly. And because Dyfed hadn't even unpacked the bits and pieces he'd bought, let alone put it all together, let alone found out what he was supposed to do, let alone actually manufactured anything illicit, there wasn't much of a case for the prosecution to get their teeth into. Dyfed could, I suppose, have claimed that he just wanted to see what the equipment looked like. He could have argued that he had ordered the stuff by mistake.

You can arrest people for all sorts of strange things but the prosecution decided in the end that you really can't expect to convict someone for being in possession of a pressure cooker and a few bits of tubing and glassware.

The other bit of good fortune Dyfed had lay in the fact that the supplier had forgotten to include the instruction booklet which had supposed to be a part of the package. In the end, the authorities had to let him go with a stern warning. But they nevertheless confiscated all the stuff he'd bought – on the dubious grounds that they could.

That was the whisky still fiasco.

And, of course, there was the time that Dyfed, who was old enough to know better, decided to emulate Evil Knievel, an American stunt rider who was at the time very famous for riding his motorcycle over rows of double decker buses and who a year or two later tried to jump the Grand Canyon on some sort of crazy motorcycle fitted with wings.

Several local boys had injured themselves trying to do tricks on their bicycles.

Two, I remember, had arranged a couple of planks, a packing case and a variety of other bits of waste wood in an attempt to create a stunt scenario of their own. They had persuaded a young sister to lie down at the end of the ramp they'd made and it was more by the grace of God than through any skill that they both managed to miss her. Indeed, it was their complete lack of skill which saved the girl because they both fell off the plank before they could do the leap they had hoped to execute. One had a sprained ankle and a bruised knee and the other knocked out two milk teeth which were about ready to come out anyway.

None of the children who hurt themselves did anything which a little Dettol and some sticking plaster couldn't put right.

But Dyfed, of course, had to have a go at being Evil Knievel.

He was well into his 30s at the time, the age at which a man can reasonably be expected to be at least on nodding terms with maturity.

Not owning, or having access to, a motorbike, Dyfed was forced to use a pedal cycle for his record breaking attempt. And, to make things worse, the bike he chose to use, because it was the only one in the Steele household, was an old sit up and beg machine which belonged to his wife and which was equipped with one of those neat, little woven baskets fitted to the front handlebars.

Unlike the young boys who had tried a similar exploit, Dyfed did not build himself a ramp. Oh no. Nothing so rational would do for Dyfed. Instead, he chose to attempt to leap over a local stream by riding the borrowed bicycle as fast as he could across a field. He turned his hat back to front, so that the peak lay behind him and would not slow him down, and he made his attempt with an audience of one: the long suffering Emily.

Predictably, the attempt proved to be quite beyond his skills and the machine's capabilities. When the bicycle, with Dyfed on board, reached the nearside bank, it had failed to attain sufficient speed to enable it to become airborne. It is, perhaps, important to remember that at the time of the accident, Dyfed weighed considerably in excess of his usual 250 pounds. And he wasn't fit enough to peddle a bicycle at a decent speed on the rough ground of a grassy field. So, instead of flying through the air with the greatest of ease, the bicycle merely plunged front wheel first into the stream, throwing the hapless rider into the mud of the opposite bank.

It could have been worse. It could have been much worse.

As it was, Dyfed broke his collarbone, cut his hand and suffered a number of stings from the bed of nettles into which he crashed. The bicycle, which was even less fortunate than its rider, landed on a rather large stone, and ended up with a buckled front wheel. It now resides with an old iron bedstead and a retired mangle at the bottom of the Steele's garden.

It was the evening when Dyfed came to the surgery to have the stitches removed from his hand that I finally plucked up the courage to seek the answer to the question I had harboured since the ambulance had taken him off to the hospital.

'I hope you don't think it rude of me to ask,' I said as I carefully removed the first of the stitches, 'but did you take your cap off at the hospital?'

'They wanted me to,' he said.

'But did you?'

'Certainly not.'

'Why not?' I asked.

It was probably impertinent but I was, I confess, curious to know why he wouldn't remove the damned hat. I confess I had wondered if it could simply be that he was bald, or balding, and embarrassed about his hairless pate. There was, however, plenty of hair poking out at the sides and the back of the hat so I knew he was not entirely bald.

'It's embarrassing,' said Dyfed, going slightly red.

'I'm not going to find it embarrassing,' I told him. 'And it might be something I can help you with.'

He thought about it for a while while I continued to snip away and remove the stitches in his hand.

'Would you draw the curtains, please?'

'Draw the curtains?'

'Yes, please. But don't put on the light.'

I removed the last stitch. Everything looked clean and healthy. I then drew the curtains.

'There you are,' said Dyfed, removing his cap.

The top of his head was surprisingly bald and sitting in the middle of his scalp was a lump about an inch high and an inch wide.

'Can I put my hat back on, now?'

'No, no, wait a moment. Let me look at it, first.'

'Be quick then, doctor.'

I examined the lump. It was a fairly ordinary cyst.

'I have to put my hat back on,' said Dyfed. He seemed quite distressed.

'Why?' I asked him. 'Why do you need to put your hat back on so quickly?'

'Because if the light gets to it then it will turn cancerous and I'll have to have the top of my head taken off.'

'It's a perfectly harmless lump,' I told him. 'You could shine a light on it all day and it wouldn't turn cancerous. Who told you that nonsense?'

'Mrs Hathaway.'

'Who is Mrs Hathaway?'

‘The woman who lives next door but one to my aunt Brenda.’

‘Where does your aunt Brenda live?’

‘In Giggleswade.’

‘Has Mrs Hathaway seen your lump?’

‘No. But Emily described it to my aunt Brenda on the telephone. And my aunt Brenda then told Mrs Hathaway. And Mrs Hathaway said that it was pre-cancerous and that I should keep it out of the light and away from the air as much as possible.’

‘So you keep your hat on?’

‘It seemed the best thing to do.’

‘When was this?’

‘Six years ago.’

‘Well she was talking rubbish,’ I told him. ‘And that’s why you have been wearing your hat all these years?’

‘Yes. And it hasn’t turned into cancer, has it?’

‘No. And it hasn’t and won’t. It’s just an ordinary lump: a lipoma.’

‘A what?’

‘A lipoma. It’s just a fatty lump. It won’t do you any harm. They don’t usually develop on the head but there it is, it has.’

Dyfed looked at me doubtfully. ‘You mean it really won’t hurt for the sunshine to get on it?’

‘No. Do you want it removed?’

‘Removed?’

‘Taken away?’

‘Can you do that?’

‘Certainly.’

‘And it would disappear completely?’

‘Just a little scar to show where it had been.’

‘I’d need to go to the hospital wouldn’t I?’

‘If you want to go to the hospital I could make an appointment for you to see a surgeon. But there are long waiting lists in the NHS these days. He’ll see you in three or four months’ time for a preliminary consultation. And then he’ll put you on the waiting list and eventually, if you’re lucky, he’ll remove the lump in another twelve or eighteen months’ time. You won’t get it done much sooner because it’s not life threatening in any way. If you’re lucky, you could probably have it removed in just under two years – that’s if all goes well and the waiting lists don’t grow any longer.’

‘Oh.’

Now that he had found out that he could have the lump removed, Dyfed sounded disappointed at the prospect of having to wait so long.

‘Or you could take your jacket off, lie down on the couch and let me remove it now.’

‘You can take it off?’ said Dyfed. He sounded startled; as though I’d offered to shine his shoes or change his sparking plugs.

‘Of course. It’s a small lump and I’m a doctor and you’re my last patient.’

‘But you said it would take the hospital two years to take it off.’

‘It probably would. But I’m quicker than them. I could take it off in a quarter of an hour.’

‘Do you do things like this?’

‘I do,’ I told him. ‘I did a few of them when I worked as a house surgeon.’ I took my Swiss Army penknife out of my pocket and opened the largest blade. ‘This should be plenty big enough.’

Dyfed looked at me with terror in his eyes.

‘Just kidding,’ I told him, putting the penknife back into my pocket. ‘I’ve got a proper scalpel and some anaesthetic stuff I can inject so that you don’t feel a thing.’

And so three minutes later Dyfed was lying on my examination couch with his head positioned so that I could get at his scalp.

I cleaned the whole area, wiped it down with a strong antiseptic solution, and then injected a local anaesthetic into the skin all around the lipoma.

Five minutes after that I started work removing the lipoma.

Less than twenty minutes later, I was sewing up the wound I’d made and Dyfed Steele no longer had a lipoma sitting in the middle of his largely bald head.

When I’d finished I was, to be frank, quite proud of the job I’d made. It had been a year or two since I’d removed a lump that big. I taped a dressing over the stitches where the lump had been.

‘You’ll have to come back and see me to have these new stitches removed,’ I told him. ‘But come back tomorrow and let me have a look at it so that I can change the dressing.’

It occurred to me that it was rather surreal that he should come into the surgery to have one lot of stitches removed and leave with a fresh lot in a different part of his body.

‘Can I put my hat on now, doctor?’ asked Dyfed.

I stared at him, disbelievingly. ‘You don’t have to wear your hat now.’

‘Oh, I think I’ll keep it on, if you don’t mind, doctor,’ said Dyfed. ‘It would feel odd not to be wearing my hat. Besides, when my missus last saw my head, there was more hair on it.’

‘So are you just going to keep the hat on all the time?’

‘Oh, yes, I think so.’

I might as well have left the damned lump where it was. It hadn’t been doing any harm.

Gwladys Gwilliams

Gwladys Gwilliams, who was well into her 80s when I first met her, lived in a small house by the river. She lived with Bobby, a small dog of an indeterminate make whom she loved very much. She was an elegant, noticeable and easily remembered woman. She always wore make-up, meticulously applied. Her hair was always neatly done. She always dressed smartly. And a charming smile was never far from her lips. I had no doubt, that she had once been both toothsome and eesome.

She once explained to me that her parents had christened her Gwladys (which was, apparently, a common spelling variation at the time of her birth) and that she had later paid a few pounds to a solicitor who had arranged to have her surname adjusted to match. She said she was in show business at the time and felt that a catchy name might help her move up the ladder a little easier. Unfortunately, it didn't.

Miss Gwilliams's home was called River Cottage. It was a very small house which had just two rooms upstairs and two downstairs. It was just over a 100-years-old but it was still one of the youngest properties in the village.

When the last cottage had been finished in the 19th century, and the last builder had fitted the last slate in position, it seems to have been decided that that was that; that Bilbury was pretty much complete, in the same way that a suit of clothes is complete when the last button has been sewn into place.

There had, of course, been a number of attempts to extend the size of the village and not a few individuals had applied for permission to build a house here, a house there. Most of the applications had been rejected. Attempts to build housing estates had been defeated.

Since the house in which Miss Gwilliams lived was known to get flooded almost every winter, she paid a very modest peppercorn rent to live there.

The owners, who lived in London, had bought the house in the summer a few years earlier and had not realised that their new holiday home would be flooded during the colder, wetter months. I don't think anyone actually lied to them. I just don't think they were sensible enough to ask the right questions. The river, boosted by rain from the nearby hills, brought down by dozens of tiny tributaries, invariably burst its banks in November and the ground floor of the house would stay wet, if not completely under water, until late March.

There wasn't a good deal of sympathy for the owners in the village.

'You would have thought,' said Patchy Fogg, 'that they would have seen the high water mark, two foot six inches above the top of the skirting boards in all the rooms downstairs.'

The Londoners had tried to sell the house but no one else had been daft enough to want to buy it. They didn't want to use it themselves because the first flood had not only destroyed their lovely rugs, their smart, new television set and their kitchen equipment but it had also broken their hearts. They couldn't bear to return to the site of their Great Mistake.

In the end, they allowed a local estate agent to offer it as a rental property. After being on the market, and empty, for nine months, the agent managed to rent out the property to Miss Gwilliams on the understanding that she would be responsible for all the local taxes and for some basic maintenance. In addition, she paid just £20 a year as a peppercorn rent and she had an agreement that gave her the right to live in the property for as long as she liked. The owners, tired of their North Devon cottage, had effectively washed their hands of it and considered themselves lucky to be free of the associated responsibilities and liabilities.

Miss Gwilliams didn't mind that her house flooded.

She got round the problem by ignoring the ground floor completely. She hired Thumper Robinson to put up a small partition on the top floor and with this he divided one of the two rooms into a tiny bathroom and a tiny kitchen. Thumper installed a sink, a bath and a lavatory in the bathroom and a cooker and a couple of old cupboards in the kitchen.

The other upstairs room she used as a bed-sitting room. Every surface in that room was covered with photographs of her. In some of the pictures she was alone, dressed in costumes – most of which were revealing. In some of the photographs she was in a group or with another performer – some of them very famous. There was one photograph of her sitting on Peter Sellers' lap. She had an arm around his neck and was wearing nothing but a feather in her hair. He was wearing a suit and was pretending to be startled; somehow surprised to find that he had a naked girl on his knees.

The cottage was, in truth, all very cosy.

Miss Gwilliams had all the downstairs electrics disconnected and bought herself a decent pair of fisherman's waders.

If the river water came into the house for the winter well, it would go away again, wouldn't it?

‘It’s not as if it’s sewage or drain water,’ she said. ‘It doesn’t smell or leave anything nasty behind. I get a bit of weed left downstairs and once I found a dead trout stuck in the fireplace. But the water level never goes up too high for my waders.’

No one else wanted to be a tenant of River Cottage but maybe that was because no one else had the imagination to see that by turning the cottage into a home on stilts it would become a quite desirable property.

For a very modest outlay, Miss Gwilliams had turned an unwanted property into the home of her dreams. She had a splendid view up and down the river and marvellous views across the moors to the East.

In her youth, Miss Gwilliams had performed in various revue bars in London and had been a member of a variety troupe which had travelled around the country performing in provincial theatres and music halls.

She didn’t have many visitors and whenever I saw her she always told me a little more about her life.

‘Maybe you’ll write about me in one of your books,’ she once said. ‘I’d like that.’

Bit by bit I learned about her extraordinary experiences.

She had spent her early and middle years on the fringes of show business and now she lived as much in her memories as in the world around her.

As my friend Will once put it, talking about someone else, ‘she spoke about her vicissitudes with veritable and verifiable verisimilitude’.

People sometimes sneer at older folk for living in the past but it has always seemed to me that we belittle our lives if we forget the past and, besides, hers were remembrances rather than longings. Even the young will look at a photo album or a souvenir with affection.

In most decent lives, the regrets of omission (the list of things we could and should have done but didn’t do) far outweigh the regrets of commission (the things we did do but need not have done and should not have done) and Miss Gwilliams was no exception. From time to time, as she told me of her life she would halt and look away for a moment or two. When she looked back I could see moistness in her eyes and I knew the tears were there because of a disappointment remembered or an opportunity missed.

I visited her regularly because after she came to Devon she developed bronchitis and emphysema. I don’t think the damp helped. Living by a river can be especially bad for you if you have problems with your lungs. And it doesn’t help, of course, if the river has a habit of coming indoors for a while during the winter months.

The chest problems were the most serious of her health troubles but she had, over the years, managed to collect quite a library of ailments. She used to ask me to visit a bit more often than was really necessary and I think she was probably just lonely.

If she asked for a visit in the winter when her house was flooded, she would sometimes ask me to take her a basket of shopping from Peter Marshall’s shop. She always insisted on paying me for the groceries. When I visited her between November and March, I always put a pair of fisherman’s waders in the boot of the Rolls Royce.

It was Miss Gwilliams who taught me the art of dunking a biscuit.

When she gave me a cup of tea she always produced a plateful of biscuits.

‘Dunk if you like, doctor,’ she said one day.

I picked up a bourbon cream and dipped it into my tea.

‘Oh no, no, doctor!’ she said, laughing and waving a finger in mock admonishment. ‘You’re doing it all wrong.’

She explained that there is quite an art, and a bit of science maybe, to dunking a biscuit properly.

For a start, there’s the choice of the biscuit. Speciality items such as custard creams and bourbons aren’t the best for dunking. Digestive and rich tea biscuits are more suitable.

Next, you must be careful not to put too much biscuit into the tea.

‘Between half an inch and three quarters of an inch is plenty,’ she said. ‘And then, when you’ve dunked, you should quietly count ‘one, two’ before withdrawing. If you put a biscuit in too far, or leave it submerged for too long, it will become soggy and break and that’s disastrous!’

She told me that she had it on the very best authority that Queen Elizabeth II was a secret dunker. (‘A friend of mine has a daughter who works at the Palace. She insists she’s often seen the Queen dunking the royal biscuit.)

She also said that Cary Grant was a keen dunker. ‘I knew him when he was known as Archie Leach and working in vaudeville. He was an acrobatic dancer but also a very funny man. He toured the same music halls that I did for a while. He didn’t emigrate to America until later.’

I promised her that I would tell her story in one of my books about the village of Bilbury and the people who live there.

Miss Gwilliams was, I think a romantic. Romantics always find failure much easier to cope with than success. And although no one could say that her career was a great success, there is absolutely no doubt that Miss Gwilliams enjoyed her life in show business.

She told me that she had, at various times, been a singer (‘I wasn’t terribly good but I wore a rather daring gown and so I got away with it), a magician's assistant ('He was called The Great something or other and he used to cut me in half every night, and twice on Wednesdays and Saturdays, but I left that job when he started to drink and nearly did cut me in half one night.'), a juggler's assistant ('He was lovely. He was Italian and I thought I'd found true love. Unfortunately, he wasn't a terribly good juggler and he wasn't a terribly good boyfriend. He was fired and ran back to Italy with a toffee-nosed soprano who was at least twice his age and six inches taller than him. I don't mean to be catty but I'd still scratch her eyes out if I saw her now.')

And she became the girl who looked after the costumes and the props and she made herself indispensable by making endless cups of tea and fetching packets of fish and chips at the end of each show.

When the Windmill Theatre opened in London, Miss Gwilliams became one of the famous nude models in the 'tableaux vivants'.

'I was older than all the other girls and some of them knew that and they treated me like a mum. I was more experienced than any of them because I'd been on tour around the music halls. I'd been in show business for years and I knew how things worked. I'd worked with some big music hall stars.'

'I told the management that I was 29 but I was 12 years older than that. Fortunately, I'd kept my figure and I've always had good skin and they believed me. I'd learned how to do really good make-up from a lady I worked with on the music halls. Her name was Kate Carney and she was hugely successful. She had a huge eleven bedroom house, expensive cars and race horses. In the 1930s, she used to be accompanied on the piano by a man who was her butler. Well, at least he pretended to be her butler. I don't think anyone really knew for sure. She did three Royal variety shows back in the days when a Royal variety show really meant something. During the Second World War, she was still working and she would often ignore the air raid warnings. She loved being on stage so much that she never wanted to end a show. I've known her carry on with a show until four o'clock in the morning. She's forgotten now but she was a big star in her day and she was very kind to me. It's funny, isn't it? Even the big stars get forgotten as their day goes and their names fade. They think they're immortal but they aren't, of course. You have to be a very special sort of star, a Marie Lloyd, a George Formby or a Stanley Holloway to last after you've died.'

'Actually, when they started with the nude shows I think the Windmill had a bit of a job finding girls who'd perform naked. They wanted actresses; young ladies who could be elegant even without wearing costumes. We had to go onto the stage stark naked and stand perfectly still. We tried to get into a comfortable position that you could hold for as long as possible because we were warned that the show would be closed if we moved. A lovely man called Vivian Van Damm was the manager and he was in charge of creating the nude scenes. He came up with some right corkers. Once, we all had to pretend to be mermaids. Another time we were supposed to be Red Indian squaws with feathers in our hair. The only thing the scenes had in common was that the girls were damned near naked. And the important bits were always on show. If you had long hair you had to keep it off your chest. 'The punters want to see nipples,' said Mr Van Damm.

The Lord Chamberlain, who was in charge of censoring all theatre shows in London, said: 'If you move, it's rude.' So that was that. We didn't move.'

'Later on Mr Van Damm had this idea for a fan dance. One of us would go on stage naked but holding a fan. There would be four other girls, in skimpy costumes, and they would hold fans too. The naked girl would dance about with her body concealed by the five fans. At the end of the dance all the fans would be pulled away revealing the girl's body. She had to stand stock still because the rule was still the same as before: 'If you move, it's rude'.

'One or two of the girls didn't like dancing around nude, usually because they'd acquired boyfriends or fiancés who didn't mind them posing nude if they kept still but didn't approve if they bounced around a bit behind a fan. I never understood that. I never minded being naked and I was very popular. These days I would have been considered too plump but in those days the gentlemen who came to the Windmill liked their girls to have curves in the right places. Gentlemen regularly used to wait for me outside the stage door. Most of them were in town for business. If I liked them, I used to go to dinner with them. If I really liked them and they seemed to be real gentlemen, I'd go back to their hotel with them, though I always had to leave before morning so that the hotel management didn't get upset. The little presents I was given helped me buy my luxuries; nicer frocks, pretty hats and shoes. Some of the gentlemen used to give perfume or bits of jewellery but I always preferred cash. Some of the hotels were a bit sniffy and I had to sneak out the back way through the kitchens.'

'We had all sorts of other tricks to get round the rules about not moving on the stage. We used to sit naked on a swing seat and a couple of girls in costumes would push us. The Lord Chamberlain said that was all right because it was the seat that was moving. Can you imagine anything so daft?'

'In the end, I had to leave the stage because someone told the boss how old I was. I never knew who told on me but I had my suspicions because not many people there knew the truth. Mr Van Damm didn't believe it when he knew my real age. He was in tears when he told me I'd have to go. I think he was frightened people would find out they had a woman my age on the stage. They liked to give the impression the girls were all young and virginal! I'd have gone on there forever if it had been left to me. Still, I had a good run for my money.'

'They let me work there behind the scenes for a while and I was there after the War when Mr Van Damm started hiring young comedians. I remember we had Tony Hancock, Harry Secombe, Peter Sellers, Tommy Cooper, Bruce Forsyth, Arthur English, Michael Bentine and Jimmy Edwards working there. They were all lovely young lads. I remember more than one or two of them liked watching the girls from the wings but Jimmy Edwards wasn't so interested. We didn't find out until later why that might have been, bless him. Peter Sellers was my favourite. He was a lovely man. Michael Bentine was funny. Tommy Cooper was nervous to start with but I knew he was going to be a star. He worked harder than some people thought. But they were all lovely. I thought of them as my lovely boys.'

'But then there was a bit of a fuss with the police. I got into trouble for talking to a gentleman outside the stage door. I thought he wanted to be friendlier than he wanted to be and he turned out to be a spoilsport and a sneak. He called a policeman who arrested me. Then I lost my job completely.'

'I found myself a little room in Soho and earned a living giving French lessons. I was the first to think that one up. I had a little card pinned up in a newsagent's shop in Wardour Street. Sometimes I used to get people come up really wanting French lessons. I used to tell them I was full up with students and send them away. I also had a card up for a while that said 'Chest for sale'. That was another girl's idea and it didn't work as well as the French lessons card. I used to pay the newsagent £1 a month to have my card in his window but then I found I didn't really need it. I just thumb-tacked a small advertisement next to the bell where I was living There were six girls living in the building and there were six adverts tacked next to the six bells.'

'And then I met Lionel. He was a lovely man. He was a cobbler who had a little shop just off Wardour Street. He'd inherited the shop from his father. It had been in the family for three generations. He worked really hard and he could do anything with shoes and boots. However badly they were worn, he could make them look like new. He was wonderfully clever with his hands. He used to do embroidery and he made lovely kneelers for the local church. He also made little lead soldiers. He had these little moulds which he'd made himself and he made soldiers which he painted himself and displayed on the shelves in his shop. Occasionally he would give one to a special customer. He was quite a lot younger than me but he asked me to give up my work and move out to Isleworth where he had a nice little house with three bedrooms and a garden. He knew how I'd earned my living, of course, and he was never judgemental. But he didn't think it dignified for a woman of more mature years to have to work in that profession.'

'So I lived in Isleworth for quite a few years. It was very nice but a bit dull, to be honest. Lionel didn't enjoy good health. He smoked too much and suffered badly with his heart. His face and hands were more blue than pink and he used to get a lot of chest pains. He retired early and sold the shop and invested the money. He didn't have a pension but he put the money into the building society and we lived on a bit of interest for a while but we had to dig into the capital as well. Then when that ran out we sold the house in Isleworth and we moved out to a flat in Peckham. Lionel always knew that he'd go first and he told me that he'd put a bit of something aside for me so that I'd be all right. He said he'd put it in my trunk. I still had my trunk from when I'd been touring the music halls. I kept old stuff in it, rubbish mainly. I couldn't throw the trunk away. Not with being it so full of old memories. We aren't much more than the sum of our memories are we? Not really.'

'When he died, the flat had to be sold. I thought I'd be able to use what was left to pay rent but this couple turned up out of nowhere. I'd never known this because he hadn't mentioned it, but Lionel had been married and had a son. The son's wife saw something in the paper about Lionel having died and they came round and wanted whatever there was. Lionel and I were never married so they got everything. They said I could take Lionel's bits and pieces if I wanted them but that was only because they didn't want anything of his. I gave his clothes to a charity shop and most of the rest went out in the rubbish. All they wanted was the money. A nasty pair they were. He did something for the council and he thought he was very important. She was worse. She looked down her nose at me as though I were a bit of something she'd found stuck to the sole of her shoe.'

'Anyway,' said Miss Gwilliams, 'I packed up my stuff and the bits that Lionel had left and put it all in storage. He had a few bits of silver which they didn't know about and I sold those to keep me going for a while. Then I decided to come to Devon because I thought it would be cheaper and that the weather might be better. This cottage was the only place I could afford.'

That was her story.

Or, rather, it was her story up until the time she moved to Bilbury.

There was, however, something else.

A couple of weeks after she arrived in Bilbury, I visited and found her scrabbling on the floor of the room she used as a bed-sitting room. It was the sort of fussy room that Dr Brownlow would have described as crinkum-crankum. She was wheezing terribly as she did so for she had quite a nasty chest infection. A large metal bound trunk was open and she was surrounded by papers, boxes and all sorts of ephemera. Bobby, her much loved dog, was sitting on a chair looking down. 'If I'd made that mess, I'd be in all sorts of trouble,' he seemed to be saying.

Miss Gwilliams explained again that Lionel, the man with whom she had spent the last few years but to whom she had never been married, had assured her that he would ensure that she was looked after in her old age.

'He would never lie to me,' she said. 'And he must have suspected that his son would pop up out of the woodwork and take whatever money there was from the sale of the flat. He said he'd put something into my trunk and he made me promise not to look until I'd buried him.'

'What are those?' I asked, pointing to the gallimaufry of boxes, fal-lals, costumes and papers which were strewn across the floor.

'They were the things that were in my trunk,' said Miss Gwilliams. 'Some of it is my old rubbish. I'd forgotten about most of it. I haven't had this stuff out for years. But somewhere here there must be something valuable.'

I helped her look through the miscellaneous ephemera of her life. Old theatre bills and programmes were stuffed in an old brown envelope. One or two theatre posters bearing her name were rolled up and stored in a cardboard tube. There were some programmes from the Windmill Theatre and a few old perfume bottles; empty but still smelling faintly of the perfume they had contained, and, for Miss Gwilliams, no doubt reeking of memories. There were several brief and well-worn costumes, faded but neatly folded, and a number of items of lingerie which obviously bore memories.

She held one of the costumes up against her. It was boned like an old-fashioned corset, though smaller and more revealing, and covered with sequins.

'I used to wear this when I worked with the magician. When I was with him he called himself 'The Great Lugarno'. Magicians always called themselves 'The Great Something' in those days. Sidney, that was his real name, saw the name Lugarno in a travel agent's window. He didn't realise it was the name of a place. He just thought it was a good, foreign sounding name. My job was to distract the audience while he did something they weren't supposed to see. He used to make me lace my costume very tightly so that my bosom was bursting out of the top and looking as if it was about to escape. If he was having trouble with a trick, which happened very often I'm afraid, he used to whisper 'Bend'. I was then supposed to find some reason to bend forward so that the audience had a better view of my cleavage. I got into the habit of leaving little things on the stage – feathers usually – so that there was something for me to pick up when I'd bent forward. I was very flexible in those days so I could pick something off the stage without bending my knees.'

I picked up a tin box. It had once contained coffee. It was very heavy; so heavy, indeed, that I could hardly lift it. 'What on earth is in here?'

'Haven't the foggiest. It's not mine. It must be something that Lionel put in the trunk. Open it.'

I took off the lid. The tin was full of soldiers, all neatly painted. I carefully shook them out onto the floor. They looked to me as if they were soldiers from Napoleon's army at Waterloo. There were two types of soldier. One species was standing still and holding a rifle. The other type of soldier was marching. They were as heavy as lead soldiers always are.

'They're not worth anything are they?' There was hope in Miss Gwilliam's voice. But not much hope.

'Did Lionel make them?'

'Yes. Those are his. And look – this is in his handwriting.' She pulled a piece of paper out of the tin. It contained a few lines in a neat, compact writing. The handwriting of a craftsman. She showed it to me.

'To Gwladys: to keep you safe. My love, Lionel.'

That was all.

'To Gwladys: to keep you safe. My love, Lionel.'

It seemed an odd gift and an odd message.

'What are they worth?' she asked.

'I'm afraid they're probably not worth anything much. A few shillings.'

She picked up one of the soldiers, examined it and then threw it down; full of frustration and despair. A large flake of paint came off the soldier's back.

'Oh damn,' said Miss Gwilliams. 'Now look what I've done. Poor Lionel. He was so proud of his soldiers.'

I picked up the soldier, looking to see if it could be repaired. To my surprise, I saw that the soldier was not, after all, made of lead. Underneath the paint, the soldier was yellow not grey. But it was heavy: as heavy as lead or as heavy as…

'I think the soldier is made of gold,' I told her, holding up the damaged soldier for her to see.

She looked at me, then took the soldier from my hands.

'Gold? Really?'

'I'm sure it is,' I told her. 'They're heavy and yellow. At least this one is.'

'Knock the paint off another one!'

I hesitated. The soldiers were beautifully made.

'Go on!'

I took out my pocket knife and scratched a piece of paint from the second soldier. More yellow metal beneath the paint. I scratched the paint on a third soldier. Underneath the red and the blue there was yellow.

'I think they're all gold,' I told her. 'They're worth a small fortune.'

'Oh Lionel, you old darling!' said Miss Gwilliams. 'Bless your heart.' She started to cry.

Lionel had clearly poured gold into his moulds and made little gold soldiers. Then he had painted them to disguise what they were made of. I wondered why he'd felt the need to hide the gold. Maybe it was to deceive the relatives he knew might appear. Maybe it was to deceive someone else. Maybe Lionel was worried about death duties. Maybe the gold had not been acquired in an entirely legal manner. Lionel had, after all, worked in Soho and there have always been some rather dodgy people in that part of London.

'This is my legacy,' whispered Miss Gwilliams. 'He wasn't lying when he said he'd look after me.'

I took one of the soldiers to Patchy. He took it to a friend of his called Athol who deals in precious metals. Athol confirmed that the soldier was made of 22-carat gold.

We worked out that Miss Gwilliams could live comfortably for the rest of her life by just selling a soldier every now and then. And that's exactly what she decided to do. I think she enjoyed her final years in Bilbury.

She became quite delightfully feisty in her late 80s. On her 90th birthday party I remember her getting quite cross with a visitor who, having told her that she 'looked good for her age' said something patronising about it being 'nice to see older people still taking an interest in life'.

Miss Gwilliams, who did not like being talked down to as though she were a stupid child, told the visitor that she did not consider herself to be old.

'Oh!' said the visitor, clearly rather startled. 'So, what do you consider old?'

'Anyone who is at least ten years older than I am,' snapped Miss Gwilliams.

When she died of pneumonia, the indomitable Miss Gwilliams was 92-years-old and she had just four soldiers left in the old coffee tin. Bobby, her loyal, little dog, had died a year earlier.

In her will she left everything she had to the Bilbury Cottage Hospital though apart from the soldiers (which were very gratefully received and which enabled us to purchase several useful pieces of equipment including a hoist to help our not-so-young nursing staff and a ripple bed to help with nursing bedbound patients) there wasn't much to leave: just a trunk full of mementoes without the memories to keep them alive.

And after she had gone, River Cottage, the damp house by the river, was empty again.

The Lunchtime Robbers

It was lunchtime and we were sitting in the snug at the Duck and Puddle.

There were four of us: Patchy Fogg, who is our local antique dealer and whose visiting card describes him as a 'specialist in the sale of items of historical interest to discerning collectors from around the world', Frank Parsons, the genial landlord of the Duck and Puddle which, since it is the only hostelry in the village, he safely and accurately advertises as the oldest and the most welcoming inn in the village of Bilbury, Thumper Robinson, whose interests and professional activities could not possibly be listed on a visiting card small enough to fit into a pocket (and who would never consider having any cards printed even if they could), and myself.

There had been five of us but the fifth member of our company, Peter Marshall, the local village shopkeeper, had been called away on urgent business and had left us just a few moments earlier.

Peter would not tell us what it was that had necessitated him leaving the pub. It was, however, clearly something important for he had been looking at his watch every few minutes for the previous half an hour. And he had blushed a rather disconcerting shade of red when Patchy asked him where he was going. None of us had ever seen Peter blush before. I don't think any of us had even suspected that a retailer who advertises potatoes at five pence per pound, or 30 pence for five pounds, would know how to blush.

'It must be a woman,' said Thumper firmly.

'You mean Peter has an assignation?' said Patchy, sounding as astonished as I felt. Peter has been a bachelor ever since I first arrived in Bilbury and there has never been any hint that he might be interested in any human activity that did not involve the purchase, display and subsequent sale of a wide variety of popular comestibles.

Thumper shrugged, picked up the beer glass in front of him and drained what remained of his pint of Old Restoration.

'Crumbs,' said Frank. He frowned and then shook his head at Thumper's suggestion. Frank sometimes takes a little longer than other people to process new information. It is not unknown, for example, for Frank to laugh at a joke several minutes after everyone else has moved onto something else.

'Can't be possible,' said Patchy. 'He looked too miserable to have been planning an assignation.'

He was right. Peter had seemed preoccupied and rather depressed.

Patchy looked at his wrist, realised that he wasn't wearing a watch and then peered at the clock over the fireplace. 'Is that the right time?'

'It was half an hour fast when it stopped,' replied Frank with quiet certainty. He then thought for a moment. 'Or half an hour slow. I'm pretty sure it was one or the other. Gilly did tell me but I've forgotten. And there was a reason for it but I've forgotten what that was too.'

Patrons in a more conventional public house might have wondered how Frank could call 'Time' if he didn't know what the time was. This, however, was not something which concerned any of us since Frank usually called 'Time', and threw out any remaining customers, only when he was tired and decided he wanted to go to bed. I have known him close the bar at 2 a.m. and I have known him close it well before 8.00 p.m. in the evening.

Just then, the door burst open and three men tumbled into the snug.

One was carrying a pickaxe handle, one was carrying a cricket bat and one was carrying one of those cheap plastic guns which shoot dried peas. I recognised the gun because my flat mates and I all had similar weapons when I was a medical student.

The three men were all wearing balaclavas.

'This is a hold up!' shouted the one carrying the cricket bat.

We all looked at him and then at one another. We were all, I think, confused rather than alarmed. I could tell from their faces that my three companions were, like me, wondering why anyone would bother to raid the Duck and Puddle.

'Be careful with that thing,' I said to the man with the gun. 'If you fire it at someone's face you could blind them. A dried pea in the eye can be very nasty.'

He looked at me, then at the gun and then back at me. He scratched at the balaclava as though it were rather itchy which I suspect it was. It was cold outside but it was warm in the snug at the Duck and Puddle.

'Empty your pockets!' ordered the man with the cricket bat, who was either in charge or wanted to be in charge. He turned to Frank, who was sitting on a stool the other side of the bar. 'Are you the landlord?'

'It's my pub,' replied Frank.

'Open the till and give me everything you've got,' said the man with the cricket bat. 'But I don't want any small change. Just notes.'

‘Haven’t got any notes except a couple of old IOUs,’ said Frank. He pressed the button which opened the till and then scooped out the contents which he laid out on the bar counter. ‘Here you are,’ he said. He counted it. ‘There’s 32p but I think one of the 10p coins is a bit dodgy to be honest. It looks to me as if it might have been made in someone’s shed. I’ve been trying to get rid of it for weeks but we don’t get a lot of people paying with real money so I don’t get many opportunities to hand out change.’

‘Is that all there is?’ said the man with the cricket bat. He sounded terribly disappointed, as well he might have been. When you put on a balaclava, pick up a cricket bat and burst into a pub you don’t expect to find yourself going home with just 32p more than you had when you set out.

‘Afraid so.’

‘What sort of pub is this?’ demanded the robber.

‘Not a very profitable one,’ admitted Frank. ‘Most of our customers put their drinks on the slate.’ Frank reached below the counter and produced a small notebook which was his 1970s version of the old-fashioned slate upon which pub owners had traditionally kept score. He showed the robber the notebook and flicked through the pages. I felt rather guilty. My name was in there. But then so was Patchy’s name and Thumper’s name. The fact is that pretty well everyone in the village was in there. We tend to write out IOUs and leave them for Frank to write in his little notebook.

The man with the cricket bat raised his weapon above his shoulder, as though preparing for a drive through the covers, and turned away from Frank. ‘You three!’ he shouted. ‘Empty your pockets.’

‘Money, keys and fluff or just money?’ demanded Thumper.

‘Just money!’

Thumper reached into his pocket and a moment later spread a few coins on the table. ‘There you are,’ he said. ‘Nine pence.’

‘I can beat that,’ said Patchy. He spread out the contents of his pockets. ‘One penknife, a set of keys and 22p, much of it in copper I’m afraid.’

‘I’m afraid I haven’t got any cash with me,’ I confessed. I don’t usually bother carrying money unless I’m going outside Bilbury. I have a slate at the Duck and Puddle and run tabs with Peter Marshall at the village shop and with Reggie, at Tolstoy’s, the local garage. There isn’t anywhere else in the village where I need to buy anything. Actually, there isn’t anywhere else where I could buy anything.

‘This is bloody ridiculous!’ said the man with the cricket bat, who seemed terribly upset.

‘Take that bloody silly mask off, sit down and have a drink,’ said Thumper. ‘What would your Maureen say if she saw you poncing around looking like an extra in a cheap gangster movie.’

‘What do you mean ‘my Maureen’?’

‘Your wife, you idiot,’ said Thumper.

‘How do you know who my wife is?’

‘Because she works in the Post Office in Barnstaple. She’s worked there for years. Everyone knows Maureen.’

‘Oh.’ He thought for a moment. ‘How do you know she’s my wife?’

‘Because your name is ‘Bone’ Idol and you work at the timber yard in Bideford and you and I used to play football together when we were both younger and had nothing better to do than spend our Saturday afternoons running round in a muddy field.’

‘Oh. How did you recognise me?’

‘Well, a few things tipped me off,’ said Thumper, who was clearly enjoying himself. ‘First, you have a tattoo on your right hand which says ‘Maureen’, second you can’t say your ‘r’s properly and third the timber yard van is parked outside.’

‘I told you we shouldn’t have come in the van!’ said the man with the gun loaded with dried peas.

Frank scooped up the change from the bar counter and put it back into the till. Thumper and Patchy put their change back into their pockets. I would have put my change back into my pocket if I’d had any.

‘Well how the hell else were we going to get here!’ said the man with the cricket bat, whom I now knew to be Maureen’s husband. It somehow changed things when I knew that he had a wife called Maureen who wouldn’t approve of him robbing hostelries. ‘We couldn’t all climb on your bloody bicycle!’

‘We could have come on the bus.’

‘The buses only run on alternate Thursdays when there’s a ‘q’ in the month,’ snapped Maureen’s husband.

The man with the plastic gun looked rather doleful at this.

‘What months have got a ‘q’ in them?’ asked the man with the pickaxe handle. Despite the balaclava mask he managed to look confused.

‘Those balaclavas must be horribly itchy,’ said Thumper.

‘They’re not balaclavas,’ said the man with the pickaxe handle. ‘They’re ski masks. My Doreen knitted them from a pattern in her magazine.'

'Why don't we just tell them all our names?' demanded the man with the plastic gun.

'What do you mean?' demanded the man with the pickaxe handle.

'They already know who 'Bone' is, now they know your wife is called Doreen!'

'And your wife is called Thelma,' said Thumper. 'So just take the damned ski masks off,' he said. 'You all look like complete idiots. And if someone comes in they might get the wrong idea.'

The man with the cricket bat tore off his ski mask and stuffed it into his pocket. Underneath the mask he had a glum looking face. He was unfortunate in having exceptionally floppy ears. If you're planning a career as a hold-up man you don't want to have any instantly recognisable physical qualities but his ears were unique. If you were describing him to a policeman you would have just said, 'He had very floppy ears' and that would have been that. 'Oh yes,' the policeman would have said, 'we know who that is!' The glum looking man was red and clearly hot and appeared to be rather sticky. The other two took off their masks. They too looked red, hot and sticky.

'The one with the cricket bat is 'Bone' Idol,' said Thumper. 'The one with the pickaxe handle is Bill something and the one with the toy gun is Cedric Littlehampton. They all work at the timber yard.'

'Bill Blake,' said Bill something. 'My name is Bill Blake.'

'Can I try your pea gun?' I asked Cedric Littlehampton.

'Sure,' he replied, handing over his gun. 'You just aim and pull the trigger.'

'I remember,' I said. I aimed the gun at Frank and hit him in the chest with a dried pea.

'Oi!' said Frank, rubbing his chest. 'I manage to survive an armed raid and then I get shot by one of my customers!'

'Let me have a go!' said Patchy. I handed him the gun and he too shot Frank. Then Thumper had a go. He shot Frank twice and then shot me three times.

'This is brilliant!' said Patchy. 'We could organise an indoor shooting competition. We could get four of these and have a battle.'

'I hope someone is going to pick up all these bullets,' said Frank.

'They're dried peas,' I reminded him. 'If you collect enough of them you could make a soup or put them in a stew.'

'Gilly makes a lovely soup with dried peas,' said Frank, who was justifiably proud of his wife's cooking. 'She just puts the peas into a pan, pours in some water, adds a few carrots and half a dozen bay leaves and then throws in a handful of her croutons when she serves it. It's one of our most popular soups during the winter months.'

'One of my favourites,' agreed Patchy with a nod of approval.

'Pretty good,' agreed Thumper. 'But I prefer the cock-a-leekie. Gilly makes the best cock-a-leekie I've ever tasted.'

'Please don't use all my ammunition,' begged Cedric. He crawled around, picking up all the peas he could find. 'I borrowed the gun and the ammunition from my boy Jason and he counted the peas before he handed them over.'

'You won't tell anyone about this, will you?' begged the man called 'Bone'.

'You haven't done anything to tell anyone about,' said Thumper, with a shrug.

'They came into the pub waving weapons!' Frank pointed out with unarguable accuracy. 'It was an armed robbery.'

'For God's sake don't tell Maureen,' pleaded 'Bone', the ring-leader, who was still holding his cricket bat. 'If you're going to tell Maureen I'd rather you called the cops. I'd rather do ten years in the nick than explain this cock-up to our Maureen.'

'I didn't know your timber yard had started making pickaxe handles,' said Thumper.

'Oh yes, we've been making them for a few months. How did you know we make them?'

'The handle is stamped with the company logo,' explained Thumper.

The man examined the handle. 'Oh,' he said. 'So it is.'

'So is one of you going to buy us all a drink?' asked Patchy.

The three intruders all looked at him.

'You've come all the way from Barnstaple,' said Patchy. 'You must be thirsty. And if you're going to have a round of drinks you ought to include us. It would be rude not to.'

'I'll have another pint, please,' said Thumper. 'Old Restoration.'

'Glass of Chablis, if you don't mind,' said Patchy. 'Better make it a large one. I've just had a terrifying experience. I'm suffering from that thing…' he turned to me. 'What is it?'

'Shell shock,' I said. 'I'll have a Laphroaig.'

'I'll just take a large gin,' said Frank.

'No you won't,' said Gilly, who had appeared from nowhere and who is looking after Frank's health with great attentiveness to detail. 'You'll have a nice tonic water with a big, thick, juicy slice of lemon in it.'

'These gentleman are paying,' muttered Frank. 'They're buying a round of drinks. With real money.'

'Then you can charge them for a large gin but give yourself a tonic water,' said Gilly. 'I'll have a port and lemon.'

'Yes, dear,' said Frank glumly.

'I'll have a beer,' said the man with the plastic gun.

'Me too,' said 'Bone', the man with the cricket bat. 'Give the man some money,' he said to Bill, the man with the pickaxe handle.

'Why me?' demanded Bill.

'We'll settle up with you later.'

'No, you won't,' said Bill. 'You always say you will but you never do. I paid for the petrol we put in the van and you said you'd settle up with me later. I paid for the wool for these bloody silly balaclavas. I'm always the one who gets lumbered with the bill.'

'They're ski masks.'

'No, they're not. They're bloody balaclavas. And it's not fair!'

'Well, I haven't got any money with me.'

Bill, the man with the pickaxe handle took out a wallet, removed a £5 note and put it down on the counter. 'Give me a receipt with my change,' he said wearily. 'And I'll have half a shandy.'

Frank poured the drinks and put a few coins and a till receipt on the counter. He then reached down into a box on the floor by his feet and, one by one, counted out twenty seven packets of crisps and eleven packets of pork scratchings. He then added two boxes of matches to the pile.

'What are these for?' asked Bill, staring at the packets of crisps and pork scratchings and the boxes of matches.

'I haven't got any more change,' explained Frank. 'You'll have to take those in lieu of what I owe you. Or I can put you down in the book as having a credit of two pounds and thirty seven pence.'

'I'll take the crisps and stuff,' sighed the unhappy robber. He leant the pickaxe handle against the wall, picked up the snacks and started stuffing them into his jacket pockets. When his pockets were full, he looked at Frank and waved a hand over the remaining pile of crisps and pork scratchings. 'Do you have anything I can put these in?'

Frank reached down, lifted up the empty cardboard box from which he had taken the crisps and put it down on the bar. 'You can have this for free,' he said. 'Compliments of the management.'

'Thanks,' said Bill. He didn't sound terribly grateful.

'Can I have a packet of those?' asked Cedric, the ersatz gunman. 'Salt and vinegar preferably. I'm a bit peckish, but the cheese and onion ones always give me wind.'

'No, you can't!' snapped Bill, who was clearly not happy. 'Buy your own bloody crisps.' He transferred the crisps, the pork scratchings and the matches from the bar counter to the box and then added the packets he had already stuffed into his pockets.

'I hope you don't mind my mentioning it but I think you need a better plan if you're going to do this again,' said Thumper. 'And maybe you need to go somewhere you aren't likely to be recognised.'

'I'm not doing this again,' said the man with the pickaxe handle and the box of assorted snacks. 'I can't afford to be a robber.'

'Nice beer,' said the man with his boy's toy gun. He spotted another dried pea on the floor, bent down, picked it up, brushed off a bit of fluff and put it into his pocket with the rest of his ammunition.

'Does anyone want a sandwich?' asked Gilly. 'We've got ham or cheese.'

'No thanks, love,' said the man with the cricket bat. He looked at his watch. 'We came over in our lunchtime. We'd better be getting back.'

'The Lunchtime Robbers!' said Thumper, writing an imaginary headline in the air.

The man with the cricket bat growled and muttered something.

The three robbers drank up, said goodbye and left.

'They seem like nice fellows,' said Patchy, when they'd gone.

'But perhaps not too bright,' said Thumper.

'No, perhaps not too bright.'

'I've got a £5 note in the till!' said Frank excitedly. He took the note out and examined it carefully as though it were the first time he'd ever seen a £5 note. Come to think of it, it may well have been the first £5 note he had seen for quite a while.

'I'd better take that and put it somewhere safe,' said Gilly, taking the note from between his fingers.

'And I'd better get back to my showroom,' said Patchy. 'I've got a customer coming to look at another bed that King Charles II slept in. It's the last bed he slept in before he climbed up into that famous oak tree.'

'How do you know Charles II slept in it?' asked Frank, who can sometimes show flashes of surprising naivety and still doesn’t entirely understand the extent of the grey area in which Patchy operates. ‘How can you really prove it? Did he carve his initials on a bedpost?’

Patchy, who has to my knowledge sold eight of the beds in which King Charles II is alleged to have slept, looked at Frank slightly disbelievingly and then turned to Gilly. ‘Is that clock over the fireplace 30 minutes fast or 30 minutes slow?’

Frank, abandoning hope of an answer to his question, picked up a tray and started to collect the empty glasses left by our trio of armed robbers.

Gilly frowned, thought for a moment and then shrugged. ‘I can’t remember,’ she said. ‘No one has ever asked me that before. But I’m pretty sure you’re right: it was either 30 minutes fast or 30 minutes slow when it stopped, if that’s any help.’

‘That’s OK,’ said Patchy, with a sigh. He looked out of the window. ‘It’s light out so it must still be afternoon.’

And with that he wandered off to sell another bed which had been slept in by King Charles II. If Patchy could have found a decent ringer for the Boscobel oak tree which the King climbed in order to escape Oliver Cromwell’s Roundhead soldiers, he would have happily sold that too. Patchy has an antique dealer’s approach to historical truth; it is one based more on hope than fact, more on belief and expectation than vanilla flavoured verisimilitude.

‘Where’s Peter?’ asked Gilly. ‘I thought I heard him here earlier.’

‘I think he had an assignation,’ said Thumper. ‘He hurried off a while ago.’

‘Ah,’ said Gilly. ‘That’ll be an assignation with his fiancée. I think she wanted to see him to discuss the wedding. Her mother is staying with her to help with the planning. She came down on the train yesterday. Jake, who brought her over in his taxi, says she’s apparently a pleasant enough woman, if you like overbearing, domineering women with lots of blue hair.’

‘What!’ exclaimed Thumper and I simultaneously.

‘What did you say?’ demanded Frank.

‘Pleasant woman, if you like overbearing, domineering women with lots of blue hair,’ repeated Gilly. She paused for a moment, clearly thinking. ‘She looks a bit like one of those carved figureheads you see fixed to the front of sailing ships; acres of hair and a solid-looking, rather menacing bosom.’

‘No, no, not that bit,’ said Frank. ‘The bit about Peter having a fiancée.’

‘Didn’t you know?’ asked Gilly. ‘Hasn’t he told you? He and Hilda Musbury are getting married. He hired her to run the estate agency for him and they seem to have hit it off together.’ She smiled. ‘Or maybe she just made him an offer he couldn’t refuse.’

Thumper, Frank and I stared at her.

We were speechless, so we said nothing.

It occurred to me that, when he had left us, Peter hadn’t looked like a happy bridegroom off to meet his beloved. He’d looked more like a man with a fixed date with an executioner.

I was pretty sure that the same thought had occurred to Thumper and to Frank.

Peter's Great Escape

Within less than 24 hours of my hearing that Peter Marshall and Hilda Musbury were engaged to be married, Patsy and I received a letter, addressed to us both, which contained a list of 'acceptable wedding presents' for the happy couple. The letter was signed by Hilda but not by Peter.

Patsy opened the letter and passed it to me without saying a word.

I looked down the list. Every item on the list had the price beside it. To my astonishment there wasn't anything on it which cost less than £10!

That was a good deal of money for us and for most people living in Bilbury.

Back in the early 1970s, you could buy a gallon of petrol for 33p, a pound of potatoes for 5p, a ticket for the Cup Final for £2 and a long-playing record for £3.

You could buy a Mini Cooper, an excellent and powerful new car for £600. And even in expensive parts of the country, a very decent family house wouldn't set you back much more than £5,000. In Bilbury, you could buy a cottage for £3,000. And Tolstoy's, our local garage, had a variety of cars for sale for between £30 and £100. It is true that they all had a few dings and there was a bit of rust here and there on the bodywork, but they all ran reasonably well and the four tyres, while perhaps not in the first flush of youth, still had a few miles left in them. Reggie always put a bit of black paint over very bald bits of tyre where the canvas was showing through.

(Reggie, who runs the garage, has never believed in providing a spare wheel. He says that not having a spare wheel means that there is more luggage space in the boot.)

Apart from the expense, the other odd thing about the list was that everything on it seemed to have been chosen by Hilda.

I really couldn't see Peter making out a list which included: ice cream maker, home perm kit, sandwich maker, waffle maker, food mixer, coffee machine, hot plate, hostess trolley, home bust enlarging course (audio tape and book), electric wok, Chinese rug (dimensions supplied), Cartier tank watch (ladies), telephone answering machine, chair covers (measurements supplied), Polaroid camera, electric hair curlers, pearl necklace with matching earrings, two way stretch girdle in white or mocha (size supplied on request), combination alarm clock and tea maker, matching luggage from Louis Vuitton and a vanity case in alligator hide.

'Do you think Peter knows what is on this list?' asked Patsy.

I said I didn't think Peter had even seen the letter let alone the list that accompanied it.

Now, it is perfectly true that Peter has been justifiably described as greedy and as a bit of a skinflint. And there is no doubt that he is always on the lookout for ways to gouge another penny or two from his customers.

For example, just the other day I bought a pack of three green peppers from him and it was only when he told me the price that I realised that he was charging more for the package of peppers than he would have charged if I had bought three loose peppers.

'But I had to put the three peppers into a pack,' Peter explained indignantly. 'So it is entirely reasonable to charge more for the convenience.'

I put the pack back on the shelf, picked out three peppers and bought those for 5p less.

Peter then told me that he was charging 5p for every brown paper bag a customer took. I stuffed the peppers into my pockets and stuck my tongue out at him.

I confess I rather enjoy these silly little battles with Peter. You can't have that sort of fun when shopping in a supermarket.

But knowing all this meant that I couldn't help thinking that Peter knew the value of money far too well to expect his friends and customers to put their hands quite so deeply into their pockets.

We were still talking about the wedding list, and wondering what on earth we should do about it, when the telephone went. It was Adrienne, Patsy's sister and Patchy Fogg's wife. She was so cross that I could hear her side of the conversation as well as Patsy's.

'Have you had one of these wedding lists from Peter Marshall?' Adrienne demanded, shouting so much that we didn't really need the telephone to hear her. She and Patchy only live a couple of miles away and if we'd opened a window we would have heard her without it.

'I think it came from Hilda rather than Peter,' said Patsy.

'Is she mad?' asked Adrienne who is renowned for having a short fuse and speaking her mind. 'Have you seen the prices of some of the things on her list? When Patchy and I got married, Peter gave us a 5lb sack of potatoes as a wedding present!'

Patsy said that at least the potatoes were useful and pointed out that when we got married Peter had given us a large box of fly papers. The fly papers were those sticky streamers that you hang from the ceiling but they were so old that they had lost their stickiness and were entirely useless.

'Who does she think is going to buy her a Cartier tank watch?' demanded Adrienne, who sounded as if she had steam coming out of both ears.

'Do you know how many people have had one of these letters?' asked Patsy.

'Mum and Dad got one,' said Adrienne. They get their post earlier than we do and Mum was on the telephone twenty minutes ago.'

'I feel sorry for Peter,' said Patsy.

'And what does Hilda want with a bust enlarging and firming course?' demanded Adrienne. 'I would have hardly thought she would have needed assistance in that department!'

'Maybe it's for Peter,' suggested Patsy.

There was loud laughter and some snorting from the other end of the telephone.

At this point, I decided that I would pop into the consulting room and start the morning's work. I kissed Patsy, made my silent excuses and left.

But if I thought I had heard the last of the wedding list saga, I was making a huge mistake.

Peter turned up at my evening surgery that day. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen him professionally.

'I need help,' he said, before he'd even sat down.

'O.K. Tell me what help you need and how I can help.'

'I suppose you've seen that letter that Hilda sent out?' he said, moving the patient's chair around before sitting down.

'The one with the list of recommended wedding presents?'

'That's the one,' said Peter. He sighed wearily. 'That list is making my life miserable.' He paused and blew his nose. 'Your friend Thumper Robinson wanted to know if a bag of gold sovereigns would be satisfactory as a present – even though they're not on the list.'

'There's bound to be some teasing,' I said. 'You're getting married for the first time.'

'I can't bear the thought of being married to that damned woman,' said Peter suddenly.

'Ah,' I said. 'All things considered I can see that could be a bit of a problem.'

'I've started wondering whether I should kill her or kill myself.'

'Hmm,' was the best I could manage in response to this gloomiest of gloomy thoughts.

'At first I thought she'd make a great estate agent,' said Peter. 'You recommended her to me.' He paused and thought for a while. 'So really it's your fault that I'm in this mess!'

'Oh, wait a minute, Peter,' I said, rather defensively. 'You were looking for someone to run your new estate agency. I suggested Hilda and you thought she'd be right for the job. I didn't recommend that you married her!'

'She hasn't sold a single house since she started work,' said Peter miserably. 'Not one! She annoys the sellers by telling them why she doesn't like their taste in furniture and decorations and puts off the buyers by telling them what's wrong with every house they look at.'

'How did you come to ask her to marry you?' I asked him.

'I didn't ask her to marry me!' said Peter, indignantly.

'So what happened?'

'I suppose she sort of asked me.'

'She asked you to marry her?'

'Well, she didn't so much ask me as tell me we were getting married.'

'She told you to marry her?' I said, incredulously.

'She said it would be best if we married.'

'Best? Best for whom? Best for what?'

'That's what I wondered. But that's what we she said.'

'Hang on a minute, Peter,' I said. 'Can we go back a step or two? You hired her to run your new estate agency. What happened between that and her telling you that it would be best if you got married? There must have been something in between.'

'We seemed to be getting on well,' said Peter, closing his eyes as he remembered. 'One day we were having lunch together, just a tin of oxtail soup and some out-of-date crackers that needed eating up, and I said I would like to see more of her.'

Peter then moved his chair around a little before returning it to its original position. I waited. I had known him since shortly after I had arrived in Bilbury but I had never before seen him so utterly beaten.

'I said I'd like to see a little more of her,' he said. 'I thought we could go to Ilfracombe and watch the fishermen. Or take a walk down to Heddon's Mouth.'

‘That sounds fine to me. What happened then?’

‘She got all coy and looked at me as though she was a bit shocked and then she giggled a lot and unfastened the top two buttons of her blouse and said: ‘How much more of me would you like to see, Peter?’ Peter gulped, clearly still horrified at what had happened. ‘When I said I wanted to see more of her I was speaking in general terms. But she, er, interpreted my remark in a very literal sort of way.’

‘Oh. Oh dear. I see.’

‘She kept unfastening buttons and then she pulled the two sides of her blouse apart and asked me if this was what I wanted to see.’ Peter paused. ‘She was wearing a bra but she’s a big woman, doctor, and there was a lot of, well, bosom, flowing over the top of it.’

I made an encouraging noise to keep him going.

‘I didn’t know what to say or where to look,’ said Peter, who was now blushing. ‘So I put down my soup and held out both hands to try to cover her up a bit and to stop her unfastening anything else.’

I thought I could see what probably happened next.

‘She thought I was trying to touch her and she grabbed my hands and sort of put them onto her, you know…’

‘Breasts?’

‘Yes. Those.’

‘Then what happened?’ I asked.

‘Nothing! Absolutely nothing. I managed to get free and I rushed off to unpack a case of cat food that had come in that morning.’

‘Did she come after you?’

‘She wouldn’t leave me alone! She kept rubbing up against me and breathing funny and saying my name a lot and whenever we were alone together she would try to put my hands onto her chest.’

‘So when did she suggest that the two of you got married?’

‘A couple of days after the unbuttoning thing happened. She was helping me lay out some parsnips and radishes when she suddenly said she thought it would be best, all things considered, if we got married.’

‘And what did you say?’

‘I don’t think I said anything. I was horrified! I didn’t want to marry the woman then and I even more don’t want to marry her now – not after that letter and all those things she put on the damned silly list.’

‘Have you said anything to her? Have you told her that you don’t want to get married?’

‘I’ve tried!’ said Peter. ‘Heaven knows I’ve tried. But she takes no notice. She just tells me I’ve got the usual bridegroom nerves and asks me where I want to go for the honeymoon. As if I can go off on a honeymoon? Who will look after the shop if I go off on a honeymoon? I told her she’d have to go on her own.’

‘You told her she’d have to go on the honeymoon by herself?’

‘Yes. Yes. I did.’

He shuffled on the chair and looked embarrassed, as if telling the truth was a slightly shameful exercise. Maybe he also thought the truth was scarcely believable and felt bad because it was all he had to offer.

‘What did she say to that?’

‘She said I didn’t mean that and that we’d have a wonderful time and she sort of winked at me and said it probably didn’t really matter where we went because we wouldn’t be going out much anyway because I’d probably be wanting to have my wicked way with her all the time.’

‘That’s what she said: ‘you’d be wanting to have your wicked way with her’?’

‘Yes,’ said Peter glumly. ‘Exactly that.’

Peter had never struck me as the sort of person likely to want to have his wicked way with anyone. He was the more the sort of fellow who regarded a ‘good time’ as synonymous with ‘a healthy profit’.

‘And now she’s moved into my flat above the shop and her mother has come to stay,’ said Peter who has lived in a small flat above the village shop for as long as he or I can remember.

‘Hilda is living with you?’

‘She announced that she was moving into my place so that we could save money,’ said Peter. ‘She said it was silly for her to pay rent on a cottage when I had a spare room.’

‘So you haven’t, er, been sleeping together?’

Peter stared at me as if I’d gone mad. ‘No! No! Certainly not.’

‘Of course not,’ I agreed. ‘And why did her mother come to stay with you?’

‘Hilda said that since she was living in my flat and we weren’t married she needed her mother to stay as a chaperone.’

‘Ah.’

‘Exactly. And her mother is just like Hilda only more so. She’s called Hilda too.’

‘When is the wedding fixed for?’

‘I’ve no idea,’ said Peter. ‘She went off this morning to fix a date with the vicar. Her mother went with her.’ Peter swallowed and looked at me. The look reminded me of the look I get from Ben the dog when I’m eating something he wants to share. ‘Together, they’re an unstoppable force.’

I pitied Peter. The idea of living with two Hildas was not something I could contemplate without trepidation. The world was not a big enough place for two Hildas.

‘Have you told Hilda that you don’t, er, want to get married?’ I asked him.

Peter looked at me as if I were out of my mind.

‘You can’t tell Hilda anything,’ said Peter glumly. ‘She never listens.’

‘You’re going to have to find a way to make her understand,’ I told him.

‘Can’t you help?’ asked Peter. He sounded rather pathetic – like a small boy who is being bullied at school and wants his Dad to sort things out.

‘I’ll try to think of something,’ I told him. ‘But I don’t think you should pin your hopes on me.’

‘Thanks!’ said Peter, with a smile. ‘That’s great.’

It was clear that he’d heard my first sentence but had completely ignored the second. He stood up, nodded and left, looking much brighter than he’d looked when he’d arrived.

I spent much of the day thinking about Peter’s problem and getting absolutely nowhere. I really couldn’t think of a way out – other than encouraging Peter to find the courage to sit Hilda down and explain to her that he didn’t want to get married, had never asked her to marry him and had absolutely no intention of marrying her.

That seemed a remote possibility.

Poor old Peter.

And then, to my astonishment, Hilda Musbury turned up at my evening surgery.

‘I’m getting married,’ she told me, as if this were news to me. ‘And naturally I’m going to need some sort of contraceptive advice.’ She smiled sweetly. ‘I told Pete that I’d pop along and talk to you about contraceptives. I don’t think we want to be using those rubbery things.’

Although she is a widow, Mrs Musbury somehow managed to sound as if she were a virginal bride who had no idea what thrills and spills might await her in the marital bed. Nevertheless, Hilda did not appear to me to be a nervous maiden; waiting for the moment when she would blossom into womanhood; anticipating a ceremonial deflowering with great anxiety.

Actually, considering Peter’s lack of enthusiasm, it seemed to me that there were unlikely to be any large waves crashing onto her rocky shoreline and nor were there likely to be any steam trains vanishing into long, dark, smoky tunnels.

I didn’t think Peter would much like being called ‘Pete’ either. I’ve never known anyone call him ‘Pete’.

‘How old are you, Mrs Musbury?’ I asked her, pretending to look through her medical notes for the information I already had.

‘Forty two,’ she said immediately.

I looked at her and waited.

‘Forty nine?’ she tried, half pleading, half wheedling.

‘Have another attempt.’

‘Fifty five,’ she said flatly, cross to have been found out, though she should have known I would have the correct figure somewhere in her medical notes.

‘And you went through the menopause four years ago I think? I seem to remember there was…’ I flicked through her medical records.

‘Oh that, yes,’ she said flatly.

‘That’s good!’ I said. ‘In that case I don’t think you’ll be needing any contraceptive advice. You can just…er… well enjoy each other au naturel.’

‘Oh, that’s a nice surprise!’ said Hilda, as though delighted by this revelation. ‘I’m sure Pete will be thrilled. I know what men are like about these things.’ She tried to wink but failed miserably. The failure made her look gauche and sly at the same time.

‘Are you going on a honeymoon?’ I asked her.

I’d suddenly had the germ of an idea.

‘I haven’t been able to tie him down yet,’ she said. ‘He cares so much about his shop.’ She said this as though she were in competition with the shop for his affection though she probably did not realise that in truth she was and had already lost the contest. ‘He says he can’t take time away from it. But everyone knows that little shop must be a goldmine. I want us to go to a smart hotel somewhere. Venice, Rome or Paris perhaps. We’ll perhaps take mother along for a treat.’ She smirked. It was a very unpleasant smirk. ‘He can afford it.’

‘Really?’ I said.

‘Oh yes. Pete’s a very wealthy man.’

‘Who told you that?’ I asked. I knew Peter wouldn’t have said anything of the sort.

‘Everyone knows he’s wealthy. Don’t they?’ She began to look just a little bit concerned.

‘Gosh! I don’t think so. Have you thought that he may be reluctant to fix a honeymoon because he can’t afford to take time away from the shop,’ I said. ‘And maybe he can’t afford an expensive honeymoon. He did say something about a possible three day camping holiday in Cornwall. Patchy has a small tent which I’m sure he’d be happy to lend the pair of you.’

Hilda paled and looked shocked.

‘A tent?’

‘Quite roomy for two,’ I said. ‘And pretty well waterproof unless the weather is really bad.’

‘Oh.’

‘And I think he did mention to me that he wondered if it would be all right if he asked your mother for a loan.’ I said. I then hesitated. ‘You mustn’t mention any of this to anyone,’ I said.

She promised she wouldn’t.

I had my fingers crossed under the desk. I didn’t feel bad about the fib. This marriage was clearly going to be a disaster for both parties. It would be as much of a disaster for Hilda as for Peter.

‘My mother? He wanted a loan from my mother?’

‘Just £500 or so to tide him over. He’s going through a bit of a bad patch, I think. I heard one of the wholesalers was chasing him over some long overdue unpaid bills. I don’t think they’ve threatened to send the bailiffs in yet but I suppose it’s only a matter of time.’

‘Unpaid bills?’ said Hilda. She had gone very pale.

Since I had been the one to bring the two of them together I felt I owed Peter this bit of help.

‘Still, having a loving wife will be good for him,’ I said. ‘You can share the burdens. A trouble shared is a trouble halved, don’t they say? If your mother can come up with a loan then I’m sure everything will be fine. And if things do go bad I’m sure you’ll both be happy living in a caravan – or even in Patchy’s little tent. True love conquers all, doesn’t it?’

Hilda got up, said goodbye and sped from the room as though she’d suddenly realised she’d left the gas on at home.

An hour after I’d finished the surgery, I was sitting with a cup of coffee and a small glass of malt whisky when the door-bell rang.

It was Peter. He was holding a paper bag and a small parcel wrapped in brown paper. The parcel was tied with string and a little loop had been created so that the holder of the parcel could carry it on one finger. He thrust the bag and the parcel at me before he’d crossed the threshold.

I opened the paper bag. It contained four pears. I untied the string on the small parcel. Inside the parcel there were two small bottles of shampoo.

‘What are these for?’

‘A thank you! A big thank you. Hilda came to see you this evening didn’t she?’

‘She did.’

‘What did you say to her?’

‘Oh you know, just a bit of this and a bit of that. We had a chat about you and weddings and honeymoons and contraceptives.’

‘She’s broken it off!’

‘The wedding?’

‘Of course, the wedding. She said she’d had a chat with you and she realised that maybe we aren’t quite right for each other. She and her mother packed and were out of the house within an hour.’ He suddenly stopped. ‘Contraceptives? Why did you talk about contraceptives?’

‘Can’t talk about these things,’ I told him. ‘Secrets of the consulting room.’

‘What did you tell her?’ demanded Peter.

I grinned at him. ‘Nothing for you to worry about, I promise. But don’t do anything flashy to celebrate your escape,’ I told him. ‘Just remember, you’re broke and want to borrow £500 from her mother.’

Peter is many things but he isn’t slow.

‘Thank you,’ he said. He nodded at the bag of pears I was holding. ‘They’re ready to eat straight away,’ he said. I looked into the bag. The pears were certainly on the downward slope side of ripeness. ‘And the shampoo is excellent stuff. Patsy will love it.’ I looked at the bottles of shampoo. The word ‘Sample’ was printed on each bottle. I thanked him.

As he started to leave I called out.

'Peter!'

He turned round.

I grinned at him. 'What are you doing about the estate agency?'

'I'm closing it,' he said brusquely. 'Shut and gone for ever.'

And he shuddered visibly as he walked to his van.

I took the overripe pears and the shampoo samples in and showed them to Patsy.

'Where on earth did you get those?'

'Peter brought them. As a gift.'

'It's not your birthday, is it?'

I laughed. Peter is not renowned for his generosity.

'These pears are very soft.'

'Cedric will like them.'

And indeed Cedric the pig munched his way through them in no time at all.

We're planning to give Peter the shampoo as a Christmas present. I hope he recognises it and welcomes it back home.

The Reluctant Jumper

Ephraim Hardstaff is a cautious, careful, meticulous man.

It is said that when he was a lad he was the only boy in the village who would walk round puddles so that his shoes never got wet or muddy. He would, it is said, do this even if he was wearing Wellington boots.

He is the sort of person who always does crossword puzzles in pencil and will only fill in an answer in ink when he is absolutely certain that he's got the right solution.

But Ephraim is also a good hearted, kindly and gentle man.

He is the sort of fellow who moves snails off a path or roadway so that they don't get accidentally trodden on or run over. He rescues injured birds and once nursed a young deer back to health after it had been hit by a delivery lorry. Whenever a good cause needs a volunteer or a donation he is at the front of the queue: always ready to give whatever he can to help other people. There is no doubt that if the world contained more Ephraim Hardstaffs it would be a better, warmer place.

He was sitting on the other side of my consulting room desk. And he looked worried.

'I can't sleep,' said Ephraim. 'Could you give me something to help me?'

'How long has this been going on?' I asked.

'About three months.'

'Is it getting better or worse or just the same?'

'It's getting worse. I used to get off to sleep eventually but now it takes me hours to drop off. And then I wake up again after about half an hour.'

'Do you have any pain?' I asked. Surprisingly, perhaps, pain is one of the most important causes of insomnia.

'No, no, no pain,' said Ephraim.

'How well did you sleep up until three months ago?'

'No problem. Never any problem at all.'

'So what's happened to change things? What's different in your life? Is there anything different about your bedroom? New bed?'

'No, no,' said Ephraim. 'Same old bed, same old bedroom.'

'Is Daphne sleeping all right?' I asked him. Daphne is his wife. She too is a sweet, kind, gentle individual.

'Not very well,' said Ephraim. 'I think she's probably going to come and see you about it.'

'So both of you are having trouble sleeping?'

'Yes, that's right.'

'What is it?'

'What's what?' he asked.

'Something is worrying you both, something is keeping you awake. I can't help you unless you tell me what it is.'

'Can't you just give me some sleeping tablets?'

I shook my head. 'Not until I know why you're not sleeping.'

There was a pause for a moment. 'I've signed up for something,' said Ephraim suddenly. 'When I said I'd do it I just said 'yes' without really thinking about it. And at the time the whole thing seemed a long way away. But now it's getting closer and I'm worrying a lot about it.'

'And Daphne is worrying about it too?'

'Yes. She is.'

'So what did you sign up for?'

'A parachute jump.'

'You signed up for a parachute jump?'

'Yes.'

Internally I sighed.

I am always amazed at the way so many people misunderstand risk. Indeed, the world seems to be full of people who have no real concept of what is risky and what is not as risky. People worry about all the wrong things and often fail to understand just how significant some risks can be. People assume that boxing is a dangerous sport but in fact it is probably safer than riding a horse or playing rugby. The risks associated with eating the wrong sort of foods are actually far greater than the risks involved in drinking a modest amount of alcohol. The risk to your health of being overweight is far greater than most other risks and yet it is a risk many still tend to ignore. Health and safety rules often fail to take into account the significance of some risks when compared with others.

And parachuting out of an aeroplane is an enormously risky activity – especially for individuals who are inexperienced and who are neither trained for it nor particularly fit.

A few hours of on the spot training, really doesn't make much difference. The number of people who jump out of aeroplanes in the hope of raising money for charity, but who end up in hospital is frighteningly high.

'When?'

'In a month's time. A charity in South Molton organised it. They're raising money to help children in India.'

'And how will you jumping out of an aeroplane help children in India?'

'I'm supposed to find sponsors. People who will give money if I jump out of an aeroplane.'

I'd heard of this bizarre way of raising money for charity. It had become very fashionable. Quite a lot of charities were encouraging their supporters to raise money by jumping out of aeroplanes.

'Have you got any sponsors?'

'Not yet,' admitted Ephraim.

'Have you tried?'

'Not really. Well, no, to be honest, not at all.'

'Why not?'

'Because I was worried that I might panic and not want to jump out of the aeroplane and then I wouldn't raise any of the money I'd said I'd raise. And it would be very embarrassing too.'

'And it's because you've been worrying about the parachute jump that you haven't been able to sleep?'

'Yes,' admitted Ephraim. 'And it's been keeping Daphne awake too. She's worried that I'll break a leg or an arm or even my back.'

'So why don't you just tell them that you've changed your mind?'

'Oh, I couldn't do that,' said Ephraim. 'I'd feel that I was letting them down.'

'But you don't have to jump out of an aeroplane to raise money for them? Do something else? Stand in Barnstaple High Street with a collecting tin. Sell pictures of the children they're saving. There must be a hundred ways you can help them without risking life and limb by jumping out of an aeroplane. '

'The person who is organising it all is someone I work with,' said Ephraim. 'They already think I'm a bit of a wimp. If I tell them I'm backing out they'll tell everyone I was chicken.'

'And that worries you?'

'Yes. I know it shouldn't do but it does. I'm a bit sensitive like that.'

'Are you still working at that shoe shop in Barnstaple?' I asked him.

'Yes.'

'And that's where the organiser of the jump works?'

'Yes. Dicky is the organiser. There are six of us working in the shop and Dicky is one of the other five.'

'Dicky is the organiser of the jump?'

'Yes. I don't think he cares much about the children to be honest. But he wanted to jump out of an aeroplane without having to pay for it. So he signed up to jump and then said he'd recruit some more people to do it.'

'And you said 'yes' because you always say 'yes', because you didn't want to disappoint him and because the day of the jump seemed so far away that you weren't worried about it because you thought the day might never arrive?'

Ephraim smiled. 'That's about it, yes.'

I had an idea.

'Will you be working next Wednesday?'

'Oh yes. I work every day.'

'And Dicky will be there?'

'Yes.'

'OK. Here's what's going to happen. I'm going to come in to your shop to buy some shoelaces. When you see me, you come over, you tell me about the jump and ask me if I'll sponsor you.'

'How will that help?' he asked.

'Trust me,' I said.

I was due to go into Barnstaple the following Wednesday so when I'd finished my business at the bank I went into the shoe shop where Ephraim worked.

As soon as I had bought my shoelaces Ephraim, as arranged, came over to me, showed me some sponsorship forms and asked if I would sponsor him to jump out of an aeroplane.

'I most certainly will not!' I said, raising my voice so that everyone in the shop could hear. 'Are you mad? There was a paper in the *British Medical Journal* the other week proving that the cost of treating all the people who jump out of aeroplanes and injure themselves far outweighs the money that is raised by people jumping out of aeroplanes. I know of people who are paraplegics, permanently paralysed, because they jumped out of aeroplanes. Hundreds of people have broken hips or shattered their spines. You must be mad. And you must think I'm mad if you think I'm going to encourage such stupid behaviour.'

'But…' began Ephraim, who seemed a little startled by my outburst.

I took the forms from him, ripped them up and put them down onto the counter. 'I suggest you put these into the bin,' I told him. 'If you go ahead with this daft jump I'll have you certified insane.'

'Oh. All right, doctor,' said Ephraim, who still looked surprised. 'If you really think so.'

'I know so!' I said loudly. 'The people who do this are ignorant idiots. And the people who organise these damned parachute jumps are ignorant idiots too.'

I couldn't help noticing that one of Ephraim's colleagues had gone bright red.

I then stalked out of the shop clutching my new shoelaces.

As I left, I heard one of the assistants say to Ephraim. 'Who on earth was that?'

'My doctor,' said Ephraim.

'Golly,' said the assistant. 'He's a bit frightening isn't he? I'm glad he's not my doctor.' From what I could gather as I left, this viewpoint seemed to be greeted with some approval.

Late that evening, Ephraim came round to Bilbury Grange to see me.

'Thank you, doctor,' he said, smiling rather wanly. 'I didn't see that coming!'

'I thought it best that you didn't know what to expect,' I told him. 'Hope I wasn't too rough on you!'

'Oh no! It was brilliant. When you'd gone even Dicky said he wasn't going to do the jump. I think he was worried that he might end up in a wheelchair – or worse. Everyone in the shop thought you were terrifying and that I was very brave to have you as my doctor.'

'Jolly good!' I said. 'I think.'

Ephraim held out something to me. 'Since I'm not doing the parachute jump, I said I'd help the charity by selling these,' he said.

'What are they?'

'They're raffle tickets,' he said. 'Would you buy one, please? They're 10 pence each.'

'What can I win? Don't tell me I win a chance to make a parachute jump?'

'Oh no, nothing like that,' said Ephraim quickly. 'The prize is a pig, donated by a local farmer.'

I thought of Cedric, the pig we look after for its American owners: the pig which eats vast quantities of food and which produces a ton of manure every year.

The prospect of looking after two pigs was just too much.

'I tell you what,' I said, taking a 50 pence coin out of my pocket. 'I'll pay for five tickets but I don't want them. Don't give me any tickets. Just put the 50 pence into your collecting box.'

Ephraim looked surprised. 'Oh, all right, doctor.'

I gave him the 50 pence and bade him goodnight.

In the end, it all worked out quite well.

But I did make a mental note to go into a different shop the next time I went into Barnstaple for shoes or shoelaces.

I didn't want to wander in and find all the assistants rushing away from me in fear.

Sir Ebenezer's Statue

Visitors to Bilbury occasionally wonder why a small and unimposing triangle of land not 200 yards from the Duck and Puddle is adorned with a surprisingly impressive statue of an imposing looking man with a pipe in his mouth and a sword by his side.

Every village has these odd triangles of wasteland – too small to do anything with and usually suitable only for the erection of a signpost.

But I doubt if there is another village in England which has a full sized statue on one of its little triangles of unwanted land.

I doubt if many visitors to Bilbury know the true story behind the statue. So, here it is.

The story began when Cuthbert Potts, who sits on our Parish Council, decided that we ought to have a floral clock.

Cuthbert, who is obviously known to everyone as 'Chimney', said that places like Blackpool and Torquay have floral clocks and so he didn't see why Bilbury shouldn't have one.

He said that he thought it was terrible that Bilbury had neither a Jubilee Watering Trough (complete with dedication plaque and the word 'Horse' etched into the stone for the sake of literate equines) nor a floral clock, and that although he had no idea how to make a commemorative water trough he didn't think that making a floral clock could be too difficult.

It is true that at first, some of us weren't entirely sure that we actually needed a floral clock. After all, Bilbury doesn't go out of its way to attract visitors. Most of the tourists who wander into the village do so by mistake.

But Chimney said that he would create the clock himself and when he had a whip round to help pay for the cost of the bedding plants we all contributed according to our means.

And though it is true that we had not originally shown great enthusiasm, it is equally undeniable that there was much excitement during the months prior to the clock's unveiling.

As the weeks passed by, we became increasingly excited at the prospect of having our own floral clock. When we passed the site of the clock, many of us often stopped for a few moments and watched Chimney working away on his creation. Passers-by would say things like 'Look, it's twenty past a primrose' or 'Crumbs, it's nearly five to cyclamen!'.

In due course, notices were put up around the village inviting us all to the formal unveiling of Bilbury's first floral clock.

The official unveiling was fixed for 12.30 p.m. so that all those present could all repair to the Duck and Puddle afterwards for a champagne celebration. (The notice warned that only one bottle of champagne had been provided, courtesy of Frank and Gilly, the landlord and landlady of the Duck and Puddle respectively, and that additional supplies of alcohol would be available only at the expense of those present.)

And so at 12.30 p.m. on the appointed day, we were all there. Patsy and I were there. Miss Johnson was there. Frank and Gilly were there. Thumper and Anne were there. Patchy and Adrienne were there. A couple of dozen others were there too. It was quite a decent crowd. Maybe not the sort of crowd they get in London for a coronation or a royal wedding, but for Bilbury it was quite a decent crowd. There were even mumblings from some, who shall remain nameless, that we should have arranged for crowd barriers to be erected and for the local constabulary to have been invited to provide some sort of official protection detail. But these were, of course, remarks made in jest.

With a flourish, Chimney's wife and his mother lifted the tarpaulin from the clock. (They did it very gingerly to avoid damaging any of the blooms.) And then we stood and looked at the clock. It was, in many ways, a very fine clock. There is no doubt about the fact that it had been very nicely done. A good deal of work had been done in creating a clock out of small bedding plants. There was much to admire. No expense had been spared. The numbers 1 to 12 were made out of yellow primroses. The hands were made out of purple primroses. We all clapped and there is no doubt that we were proud of the clock.

The time according to the clock was 2.30.

We stood and waited and watched.

'It's telling the wrong time,' said Adrienne, looking at her watch. 'It's 12.15 but the clock says it's 2.30.'

'It'll be right in a little over two hours,' said Chimney, who seemed a little peeved at the complaint.

We stood around for a while. I don't know what we were waiting for, or what we expected to happen. The purple primroses clearly weren't going anywhere.

'Is it going? Can you wind it up?' asked Frank. 'Have you got the key?'

'What do you mean 'wind it up'?' asked Chimney. 'It's a floral clock. It's made of flowers.'

‘He hasn’t put a mechanism in it,’ whispered Thumper, who was standing next to me.

I think we had all realised the problem with the clock at the same moment.

‘It doesn’t actually tell the time,’ said Adrienne, who is not a tactful person by nature. She is the one person in the village who could be relied upon to tell the Emperor that he wasn’t wearing any clothes. ‘We’ve got a floral clock which doesn’t tell the time!’

Chimney looked at her as if she were a one legged horse. ‘Of course it doesn’t tell the time!’ he said. ‘How can it tell the time? It’s made of flowers.’

We all looked at one another. Slowly, it dawned on us that Chimney, bless him, hadn’t realised that a floral clock is supposed to contain a mechanism so that it can tell the time.

Patchy looked at me and I looked at Thumper and Thumper looked at Frank.

None of us was prepared to tell Chimney that although his flower clock was a magnificent looking piece of ornamental horticulture, it was missing the one vital ingredient which would have set it off to perfection: a clock mechanism.

‘I shall come here twice a day to check the time,’ said Frank.

Gilly looked at him with her best ‘you wait until I get you home’ look. ‘Three cheers for Chimney for creating a marvellous clock!’ she said.

We cheered lustily.

And then we all retired to the Duck and Puddle to celebrate the clock’s arrival in the village.

Unfortunately, the clock became famous, but not quite in the way that Chimney had hoped. Someone wrote a short piece of doggerel which was pinned up on the village notice board:

Bilbury has a floral clock
Those who looked tried not to mock
At half past two the clock was right
Whether it was day or night
Both men and women came from afar
In coaches and, of course, by car
They looked and stared without a laugh
At Bilbury’s strange and well known gaffe

Things were made much worse when this rather cruel little rhyme appeared in the *North Devon Bugle*, a well-read local newspaper.

That was a while ago.

Within a year, the clock had pretty much disappeared. The weeds had taken over. You can still see the odd halves of one or two numbers if you know precisely where to look between the groundsel and the sheep sorrel, the buttercup and the stinging nettles, the hogweed and the hemlock, the cow parsley and the teasel.

And, if you look carefully, half of the minute hand can still be seen.

But Chimney had, not surprisingly, lost interest in his floral clock after the realisation that he had forgotten to include anything which would enable the clock to tell the time.

He had not, however, lost his feeling that Bilbury needed a focal point and he was tireless in his determination to put Bilbury on the map. One day in autumn he came into the Duck and Puddle and announced that what Bilbury needed was a statue.

‘Why?’ asked Patchy, not unreasonably. ‘Why not an obelisk or a water trough with the words ‘Horse Trough’ chiselled into the stone in case anyone mistakes it for a boating pond for youngsters?’

‘Everywhere has a statue!’ said Chimney, who had clearly set his heart on a statue.

‘We don’t have a statue,’ Frank pointed out. ‘We’re somewhere but we don’t have a statue.’

Off the top of his head, Thumper then rattled off an impressive list of towns and villages in Devon which didn’t have statues.

‘All the more reason why Bilbury should have a statue!’ said Chimney, who is not a man who is easily put off his stride.

‘Who?’ asked Frank.

‘Who who?’ asked Chimney.

‘Who do we want a statue of? Or of whom do we want a statue?’

The pub fell silent while we all thought about this.

‘Nelson,’ said Chimney at last. ‘Admiral Nelson.’

We looked at him.

‘He’s good enough for Trafalgar Square,’ Chimney pointed out. ‘So he should be good enough for Bilbury.’

‘Was he born in Bilbury?’ asked Thumper.

‘Did he ever come to Bilbury?’ asked Frank.

‘Did he ever even come to Devon?’ asked Thumper.

‘Does it matter?’ asked Chimney, defiantly. ‘Without Admiral Nelson we would all be speaking Spanish.’

‘I think I’ve got an old statue at the back of my workshop,’ said Patchy suddenly.

Patchy Fogg, an antique dealer with an insatiable appetite for ‘stuff’, has at least one of almost everything you can think of tucked away at the back of his workshop.

We all looked at him.

‘What of?’ asked Chimney. ‘Who is it a statue of?’

‘Haven’t the foggiest,’ admitted Patchy.

‘Is he on a horse?’

‘No. But he looks very stern and he’s got a sword. He’s a very distinguished looking fellow with a slight military air to him. It’s a decent looking bronze statue. And it will save us the trouble and expense of having one made.’

‘But we can’t just have a statue,’ complained Chimney. ‘It has to be a statue of somebody!’

‘We could make something up,’ suggested Frank, whose insurance claims are said to be such good works of fiction that a representative for a major insurance company suggested that he enter one year’s claims for the Nobel Prize for literature.

‘We couldn’t possibly do that!’ insisted Chimney, who can be a little straight laced at times.

This led to some silence.

‘We should have a statue to General Sir Ebenezer Warwick,’ I suggested, thinking I ought to say something useful.

‘Who?’ said Chimney.

‘General Sir Ebenezer Warwick.’

‘Who the devil was he?’

‘Chap who was born in Bilbury and who fought in the Boer War. He was not well known, and he was ignored by history but he won loads of medals and led a famous, if rather unfortunate, charge at the Battle of Bloemfontein.’ I turned to Patchy. ‘Does your statue have a pipe?’

Patchy frowned. ‘Don’t think so.’ He thought for a moment. ‘No, no pipe.’

‘We must give him one,’ I insisted. ‘General Warwick always smoked a pipe. Never went into battle without it. He would ride his horse at the head of a line of cavalry with clouds of smoke puffing out of his pipe. It must have been a marvellous sight.’

We all sat quietly for a few moments, contemplating General Warwick in full flight with a stream of tobacco smoke trailing behind him.

‘We could get Reggie at the garage to make a pipe and then weld it on to the statue,’ suggested Thumper.

‘Perfect,’ I said. ‘And remember, he wasn’t just a successful soldier. After the war he became a successful manufacturer of fine linoleums and high quality underlay. Linoleum was invented by an Englishman called Walton but it was General Warwick, the boy from Bilbury, who really put the stuff on the map. ‘When they find themselves walking on our underlay, your feet will think they’ve died and gone to heaven’ was one of the most popular slogans of the 19th century and Warwick was reputed to have written it himself. He had a huge factory in Walsall and was known to thousands as ‘The Linoleum King’.’

‘I remember hearing about him at school,’ said Thumper, with a wise looking nod. The only things Thumper learned at school were acquired from lessons conducted behind the bicycle sheds.

‘And he was a philanthropist too,’ I continued. ‘At every equinox he used to give offcuts of linoleum to the poor. For decades there wasn’t a back-to-back kitchen in Walsall which didn’t contain a free piece of linoleum, donated by the enormously generous General Warwick. Modern philanthropists make a big fuss about giving away a few quid and having a crematorium named after them but for them it’s just a tax fiddle. General Warwick was a real philanthropist, driven by simple, honest-to-God generosity. The people loved him for it. When he died, the streets of Walsall were lined with mourners. I like to think that the people of Bilbury held a memorial service for their forgotten son.’

‘But how do we know that Patchy’s statue looks like this General Warwick?’ asked Chimney whose lack of imagination is definitely a drawback in village life.

‘No one alive knows what General Warwick looked like,’ I told him. ‘Not even the Imperial War Museum has any pictures of him. There are just the handwritten reports of him riding into battle with his pipe belching out more smoke than the Flying Scotsman. He has been sadly forgotten by the world. The Bloemfontein campaign is now considered by some to have been politically incorrect. ’

‘All the more reason why we should have a statue to commemorate his life,’ said Thumper.

‘So, that’s agreed then, is it?’ said Frank, who doubtless wanted the discussion over so that he could have his lunch. ‘We get Reggie to weld a pipe onto Patchy’s statue, stick on a label saying the statue is of General Thingy Warwick and plonk him down somewhere pretty central.’

‘We could put him where the floral clock used to be,’ suggested Thumper. ‘We need something there, now that the clock has been overtaken by nature.’

That’s what we decided.

And it is why, if you ever find the time and the inclination to visit our village, you will find that there is a large and very imposing statue of the immortal General Sir Ebenezer Warwick, complete with specially, hand-crafted pipe, peeping above the giant hogweed and the cow parsley on the corner of the unnamed lane leading down to Softly’s Bottom.

Reggie at, Tolstoys, our local garage made the pipe and it was he who, with the crane on his breakdown truck, helped us to move the statue into position.

On warm, summer afternoons, Chimney can often be found loafing around in the vicinity of the statue.

And if someone passing through stops and asks for directions, as tourists often do, Chimney will, before he does anything else, insist on telling them the story of General Sir Ebenezer Warwick, a forgotten hero who led the famous charge at Bloemfontein and a man who bestrode the linoleum industry like a colossus.

Let no one say that we in Bilbury do not take our village history and our culture very seriously.

Charcoal and Geese

I first noticed Bevan Jeffrey early one morning when he was driving geese along the road that leads out of Bilbury and towards Barnstaple.

I didn't know who he was at the time; I'd never seen him before, but he was an imposing figure. From a distance, he looked to have been made at the same time as the pyramids, out of the same material and to the same sort of design; with strength, stability and an air of easy permanence taking precedence over folderols and artistic merit.

He was carrying a quarterstaff, the sort of weapon favoured by Little John, and he used it firmly, but with surprising gentleness, to nudge errant geese back into line. He wore an old black leather coat which came down to his calves and which had clearly seen much better days, though it doubtless still served its purpose, and there was a piece of blue baler twine wrapped round his waist.

I sometimes wonder how many miles of baler twine are used as fashion accessories in North Devon. The stuff, invariably bright orange or blue, is intended for use in binding up quantities of hay or straw, but in our part of the world, where it is relatively cheap and very easily available, it is used to fasten coats and to hold up trousers. It is used as shoelaces and, in windy weather, to hold on hats. I've even seen a woman using the stuff as a replacement strap for her handbag. The side view mirrors on Thumper's truck are both held in place with copious amounts of baler twine and I reckon that half the dog leads in North Devon consist of pieces of baler twine.

There seemed to be hundreds of geese in the flock being driven along the lane though in reality I doubt if there were more than three dozen. It's just that geese are very noisy, rather threatening birds and they move about a good deal. Whenever there are a few of them gathered together, it always seems that there are more of them than there actually are. Trying to count them must be a nightmare. If counting sheep is supposed to put people to sleep then counting geese must surely keep them awake. Sheep tend to stay in a flock, huddled together for security. Geese like to do their own thing.

I got stuck behind those darned geese for the best part of an hour. The road was just about wide enough for my car, so I couldn't turn round, and a tractor following behind me meant that there was no chance of my reversing away from the mobile blockage.

In the end, rather than pootle along behind the geese, and risk the inevitability of the engine overheating, I just parked the car, switched off the engine and read a book for a while. I never go anywhere without a paperback or a small, old hardback stuffed into a jacket pocket. Victorian and Edwardian publishers invariably produced hard books which were small enough to fit easily into a jacket pocket but these days travellers who want a book easily to hand have to rely on paperbacks. I can't remember the title of the book I had with me that day but I think it may have been one of H.V.Morton's travel books. Or maybe it was one of James Agate's magnificently gossipy 'Ego' diaries. As I settled down, I noticed that Willie, the driver of the tractor who was stuck behind me, had pulled out his copy of a tabloid newspaper. I'm not the only road user in Bilbury to travel around prepared to have to wait for the road to clear. It is, however, usually cows or sheep, rather than geese, which cause the blockage.

You don't often see a gaggle of geese travelling about these days but I know enough about country customs to be aware that geese driving used to be a common sight on English roads. Back in the 18th century, you couldn't go anywhere to see geese being moved from one place to another and it was common to see flocks of two or three thousand geese passing through towns and villages. The largest accumulation of geese ever seen was probably the drove of 9,000 which are said to have passed through Chelmsford in 1783. The geese in these huge flocks were built up a few at a time with geese being contributed by farmers and cottagers who wanted to send their birds to market.

I remembered reading somewhere that in 1740, an Englishman called Lord Orford made a big bet with the Duke of Queensbury 'that a drove of geese would beat an equal number of turkeys in a race from Norwich to London.'

Orford won the bet because his geese plodded steadily along the road which led to London whereas, as the evenings approached, the turkeys would fly up into the trees at the side of the road. And there they would insist on staying for the night. The drovers, responsible for moving them along, found it extremely difficult to get them down in the morning.

The result was that Orford's geese, which didn't stop to sleep, got to London two days earlier than Queensbury's turkeys.

Despite the delays on the roads, I sometimes think it is a pity that you don't see sights like that these days; maybe modern gamblers just don't have the style and imagination of their predecessors.

When I found myself stuck behind his flock, I didn't know that the man driving the geese was called Bevan Jeffrey and I didn't know anything at all about him.

But, purely by coincidence, I saw him again much later that day when I was driving in the opposite direction along the same stretch of road.

Since I had started running my own dispensary, a van came to Bilbury Grange every day with a delivery of essential drugs. But on this occasion I'd had to drive into the town to collect an oxygen cylinder and mask which had been sent on the last afternoon train to the local railway station. I had a patient with chronic bronchitis and emphysema who needed a home oxygen supply.

About half way back from Barnstaple, I saw a man striding along the road. The long leather coat was distinctive and I immediately recognised him as the fellow who had been driving the geese earlier that day. I stopped and asked if he wanted a lift back to Bilbury.

'How did you know I was heading for Bilbury?' he asked, when he'd settled into the passenger seat of the Rolls, and had admired the car.

He spoke in a surprisingly cut glass accent, in what used to be called BBC English, but there were no fancy airs or graces about him. He was not the sort of man I could ever imagine wearing spats or a flower in his buttonhole. His shirt probably never had a collar attached to it and if he ever wore a waistcoat there would probably be no shirt underneath it.

I told him that I'd seen him with his geese earlier in the day. 'I assume you were taking them into Barnstaple,' I said.

'It's market day,' he explained.

'It's a good long walk.'

'It's pleasant enough. And once you're used to them geese aren't too difficult to manage; surprisingly easy, in fact. I walk them into town because if I hired a lorry to take them into Barnstaple, the cost of the lorry, the petrol and the driver would take up most of my profit.'

He told me that it took about six hours to drive the geese to Barnstaple and that the walk back took him about three to four hours, depending on whether he stopped off along the way for refreshment.

As we drove back to Bilbury, he told me a lot about geese. I always enjoy listening to people talk about their work. And country folk always seem to have fascinating stories to tell about how they spend their days.

Bevan explained that geese are simple to manage and breed quite easily; a goose producing 12 to 16 eggs at a time and the eggs taking only around a month to hatch. He told me that he helped feed the goslings by giving them bread and milk and, later on by supplementing their diet with mash and grain. He said he fed the flock in the evenings and so he didn't ever have to worry about them coming home. He smiled when he told me that his geese always cleared up the windfalls in his small orchard and that later in autumn there were invariably one or two birds who ate too many of the over-ripe apples and became a little drunk.

'You don't keep them in some sort of pen?' I asked.

'No, I let them roam free in the woods where I live and work.'

He told me he had a cottage and five acres of woodland just a couple of miles away from Bilbury Grange. I knew the cottage. I had passed it hundreds of times, without realising who lived there.

'You don't have any trouble with foxes?'

He laughed. 'No! No fox would dare come near one of my geese. I've got one gander who would frighten away a bear let alone a fox.'

He told me that a gander is usually a good husband and father. 'They are usually very protective of their geese and goslings. I've seen a gander take a sitting goose to the pond for a swim and then get a spare goose, who had no eggs of her own, to sit on the eggs during the mother's absence.' He paused. 'I have a few swans who fly in occasionally. They seem to like being with the geese. They crossbreed occasionally. Do you know what we call the result of a mating between a goose and swan?'

I laughed and admitted that I didn't.

'It's a swoose! Honestly. A swoose.'

He said that the word came from a popular song called 'Alexander the Swoose' which had been written by a bandleader called Kay Kyser about a bird that was half swan and half goose. He confessed that he had only ever seen one swoose but that he knew a fellow in Hampshire who had bred quite a few of them. 'I sometimes wonder what their lifespan is,' he said. 'A swan can live to be 100-years-old but I've never heard of a goose living to much more than 20. Maybe a swoose manages somewhere between the two.'

He told me that he took a gaggle of geese to the market several times a year, that five times a year, when the geese moulted, he collected their flight and body feathers and sold them to a London buyer who used them for decorations, and that if he had what he thought was a glut of eggs he sold the eggs to local hoteliers and restaurateurs.

'I can't make a living out of geese alone,' he said, 'they're a bit of a sideline, and a pleasant one, but they contribute their share to my living expenses.' He said that the geese were also good company. He told me quite a bit about geese. It was Bevan who told me that although they are known as a gaggle when they're on the ground they're usually referred to as a team, a wedge or a skein when they're flying. And if they are flying close together they're known as a plump.

However, to my surprise Bevan told me that his main activity was charcoal making.

When I confessed that I didn't know there were still any charcoal makers still in business he told me that there was still a small but certain demand for charcoal and that if I wanted to see his charcoal making business I would be welcome at any time. I thanked him and said, quite truthfully, that I would be fascinated to see a charcoal burner at work.

'You don't come from round here, do you?' I said, when I'd stopped to drop him off at his cottage.

'The accent gives me away?' he said, with a laugh.

'It rather does.'

'Eton and Oxford,' he said, not boasting but simply explaining. 'Got a first in English. I used to have a job in public relations in London. Hated it. The damned job made me ill – gave me a stomach ulcer. It was an awful job which involved my being terribly nice to people I couldn't stand, but it paid well and at the time I thought that was important. Then my wife ran off, with our vicar actually, which was a bit of a shock to the system and made me look at my life a little more closely – what I was doing, what I wanted to do and so on. The sort of questions I'd never had time to think about let alone to try to answer. When we sold our flat and split the proceeds, I gave up my job and used the proceeds to buy the cottage down here. I didn't have the foggiest what I was going to do but I had enough money to last me six months. The previous owner of the cottage had at one time been a charcoal burner and since I didn't have anything better to do I thought I'd try my hand at it. The cottage came with a few acres of woodland which was pretty handy, of course.'

'I found it surprisingly simple, and a very pleasant change from what I'd been doing in London. It gave me plenty of time to read and study and to pursue my hobby of compiling crosswords.'

Bevan then told me that in addition to rearing geese and making charcoal, he also devised crosswords for *The Times* newspaper. He told me, without boasting, that he could create a complete crossword, complete with the grid, all the clues and the answers, in his head.

'So, you've got three jobs!'

He grinned. 'Pretty unusual combination, eh?'

I dropped him off, meaning to take him up on his offer to see how charcoal was made, but things were so busy for the next few weeks that I completely forgot the invitation.

The next time I saw him was about six months later.

He came to an evening surgery at Bilbury Grange and told me that he thought he had perhaps been made ill by his work making charcoal.

'Why do you think that?' I asked.

'What do you know about charcoal?' he asked in return.

'You can assume I know nothing.'

'It's a very old business. It would be pompous to describe it as a profession because the aim is simply to manufacture charcoal by carbonising wood in a kiln or a charcoal pile. Originally, people made charcoal because it could be burnt to produce the high temperatures required for smelting iron, glass making and a host of other industries. It's no longer used for that because other fuels are available, but there's still a market – making charcoal for suburban barbecues for example. Quite a few artists still use charcoal for drawing.'

I nodded to show that I was listening and understanding.

'Building a charcoal kiln is extremely simple. You arrange some logs in a conical heap and then build a sort of chimney in the middle and fill it with bits of kindling and brushwood. You then cover the whole thing, the kiln, with grass, moss and earth to keep the air out. You light the kindling in the middle of the kiln and the whole thing starts to slowly burn. The temperature goes up to about 300 degrees Centigrade and you have to control the amount of air going into the kiln by making holes and then sealing them up. The trick is to make sure that the wood is still on fire without allowing it to go up in flames. You can tell how well things are going just by looking at the smoke which comes out of the chimney in the centre of the kiln. When the smoke gets rather blue and thin then you know that you've nearly finished the process. Each kiln takes about a week. When you've finished you will, if all has gone well, have a nice pile of charcoal to sell.'

'It sounds hard work!'

'No, it isn't really hard work. It's more time consuming than it sounds because you have to hang around while the wood is burning. You don't want to waste all the wood. And you don't want the fire to go out. It's just a question of knowing how to control the burning.'

'So there's a lot of sitting around and waiting.'

'Precisely.'

‘So that’s when you create your crosswords!’

He laughed. ‘You remembered!’

‘I don’t know anyone else who makes charcoal, breeds geese and writes crosswords!’

‘No, I don’t suppose there are many of us around.’

‘So is all this dangerous? You think it’s made you ill?’

‘The problem is that making charcoal produces quite a lot of carbon monoxide.’

‘And you think you might be suffering from carbon monoxide poisoning?’

He nodded. ‘I’ve had the symptoms of it,’ he said. ‘When I started making charcoal I read a couple of books about it and the authors warned that it is possible to develop carbon monoxide poisoning from spending too much time in close proximity to the kiln.’

I asked him what symptoms he had.

‘Tiredness, dizziness, nausea, confusion and feeling a bit faint,’ he said. ‘I also have difficulty breathing properly sometimes. And I’ve noticed that my heart seems to be beating unusually rapidly sometimes.’

‘All of which are symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning.’

‘Exactly. Is there a test you can do?’

‘I can take some blood and get it tested,’ I told him. ‘The laboratory people can measure the amount of carboxyhaemoglobin in your blood – a measurement of the amount of your haemoglobin that has bonded with carbon monoxide.’

I listened to his chest, checked his pulse and blood pressure and then took some blood and got it ready to send off to the laboratory in Barnstaple. I told him to come back to see me in a couple of days’ time. Meanwhile, I suggested that he might be wise not to start a new kiln for a while.

But when the test result came back, Bevan didn’t have any sign of carbon monoxide poisoning. There was no carboxyhaemoglobin in his blood at all.

‘So, what do you think it could be?’ he asked.

‘I know what it is,’ I told him. ‘You’re anaemic.’

‘Anaemic!’

‘Your haemoglobin levels are very, very low. And the symptoms of anaemia can be exactly the same as the symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning: breathing problems, a rapid heartbeat, nausea, faintness, tiredness and dizziness.’

‘But why on earth would I have anaemia? I eat well. Lots of meat, green vegetables and fruit.’

‘That’s what we need to find out,’ I told him. ‘I can treat your anaemia easily enough – just giving you some iron tablets will probably result in an improvement. But we have to find out why you are anaemic. It certainly doesn’t sound as if your diet is short of iron.’

I asked him to undress so that I could examine him properly.

‘What was this for?’ I asked him, about a scar in his upper abdomen. I hadn’t seen it when I’d listened to his lungs and heart and taken his blood pressure.

‘I had a gastrectomy a few years ago.’

‘What for?’

‘For a stomach ulcer. I had a high pressure job which I hated. I ended up with an ulcer.’

I went back to my desk and picked up his medical records. ‘There’s no mention of it here?’

‘My company paid for private medical insurance for me and the company doctor sent to me to a private specialist who organised everything.’

‘They really should have sent a letter to your GP.’

‘I think they liked to keep everything to themselves,’ explained Bevan.

‘Do you know what sort of gastrectomy it was?’

‘I think the surgeon said it was a total gastrectomy.’

‘For an ulcer?’

‘Actually, I seem to remember them telling me that I had two or three ulcers.’ He paused and smiled ruefully. ‘I never have been one to do things by halves.’

‘Did they tell you that you might need vitamin B12 supplements?’

Bevan frowned. ‘I don’t remember anyone mentioning that.’

‘The stomach produces something called intrinsic factor,’ I told him. ‘And intrinsic factor is essential for the absorption of vitamin B12.’

‘So I’ve not been absorbing vitamin B12 properly?’

‘Probably not.’

‘And could that cause the symptoms I’ve been having? The symptoms I thought were caused by carbon monoxide poisoning?'

'Vitamin B12 is essential for the production of haemoglobin,' I told him. 'So that's why you are suffering from anaemia. Removing your stomach meant that your body had no intrinsic factor. The absence of intrinsic factor meant that your body couldn't absorb vitamin B12 and the shortage of vitamin B12 resulted in anaemia.'

'Am I right in thinking that the doctors I saw should have realised all this? And should have warned me that I would need to take vitamin B12?'

'Er, well, yes,' I admitted.

I have never liked criticising other doctors but it is sometimes difficult to avoid criticism when doctors have been so egregiously incompetent.

'Can you give me some vitamin B12 tablets to take?'

'I could but they wouldn't help.'

'Why not?'

'Because without the intrinsic factor your body won't absorb the vitamin B12.'

'No, of course not. So what's the answer? Do I have to remain anaemic for the rest of my life?'

'No. Certainly not. I'll have to give you the vitamin B12 by injection. And then you'll need to have regular B12 injections.'

'For how long?'

'The rest of your life.'

'Oh. Is that all?'

'It should cure your anaemia,' I told him.

'Worth it then.'

'I think so.'

'When can I have the first injection?'

'I'll have the injection I need sent here tomorrow,' I told him. 'Come back tomorrow evening and I'll give it to you.'

'You're going to stick a needle in me?'

'I'm afraid I am.'

He took a deep breath. 'I hate needles but if it makes me feel better you can stick in as many needles as you like,' he said.

'One at a time will do the trick.'

He turned up a day later and I gave him the first of the injections which he would need to have for the rest of his life. He was kind enough to say that he hardly felt it. I have always found that when injecting into tissues such as muscle, rather than into a vein, the key to giving as painless an injection as possible is to jab quickly, squirt slowly and then move the tip of the needle round a little to reduce any possible swelling. Injections which are given tentatively always seem to cause more distress than injections which are given confidently and quickly.

Within a remarkably short time, Bevan Jeffrey was as fit as a fiddle.

Being a GP can sometimes be very satisfying.

I did get to see Bevan's charcoal kilns a week or so later. Patsy, who said she was interested, came with me. The charcoal making process was fascinating but I don't think we'll be going again. The geese hissed a good deal and chased us both around Bevan's stretch of woodland.

And yes, geese do bite.

Mrs Sinclair Returns

I hadn't seen Joyce Sinclair for two years when her daughter, Julia Johnstone, came bustling into my evening surgery. She was, I suspect, the sort of woman who bustled everywhere. She looked aggressive and she was aggressive.

'Do you remember my mother, Mrs Sinclair?' asked the daughter who was a very skinny, nervous sort of woman who never seemed able to keep still. She fidgeted constantly; playing with her earrings, her necklace, the buttons on her frock and the clasp of her handbag. I remembered that she was an administrator working for the council while her husband was (in Joyce Sinclair's memorable words) 'something big in sewage'.

I told Mrs Johnstone that I certainly did remember her mother.

Joyce Sinclair had been only 62-years-old when her daughter and son-in-law had insisted on putting her into a care home near Exeter. She was in the late afternoon of her life; still young enough to worry about overdue library books and the price of tea in China.

Joyce hadn't wanted to go anywhere. And I didn't see why she needed to. Indeed, I had pleaded with the daughter to let her mother stay where she was.

'She's comfortable in her own home,' I pointed out. 'She's got her own furniture and her own belongings – her books, her photograph albums, her ornaments. She seems to me to look after herself very well. She cooks good meals and her house is easy to manage. She's careful going up and down the stairs. The garden is small enough for her to manage. She knows all her neighbours. It's only a ten minute walk to the village shop. And I call in to see her once a fortnight. If she needs more help we can sort something out.'

'But she's getting to an age when things happen,' insisted the son-in-law who was big in sewage. He was hugely overweight and carried a folded copy of *The Guardian* newspaper as though it were a talisman. He looked like a particularly bad tempered version of one of those Old Testament Prophets; all wild grey hair and a grey beard long enough to fly about in the slightest of breezes. 'We'd never forgive ourselves if something happened.'

'Something terrible might happen,' said Mrs Johnstone.

'She might fall down the stairs,' said Mr Johnstone.

'She could very well fall down the stairs,' echoed his wife. 'Break a leg or a hip. Old people have very fragile bones.'

'Well, anyone could fall down the stairs,' I pointed out. 'And your mother isn't old. She's only 62. She could live another 40 years.'

'We think it's much better to arrange things as early as possible,' said Mr Johnstone. 'Before anything happens.'

'Silly to leave things until the last minute,' said Mrs Johnstone. 'Then everyone gets into a panic and things aren't done for the best.'

'We don't want any panic,' said Mr Johnstone firmly. He said this sternly, as though I had spoken out in support of panic.

'Old people can develop signs of dementia almost overnight,' said Mrs Johnstone.

'Oh no, I don't think so,' I said.

'Overnight,' said Mr Johnstone. 'I've heard of it happening. I read about a man who went to bed one night and woke up the next morning not knowing where he was.'

'Maybe he had a stroke?' I suggested.

'And that's another thing!' said Mr Johnstone. 'What if she had a stroke? With no one there. She lives alone, you know.'

'If you're worried about that then you install some sort of alarm system,' I suggested.

'Oh, I don't think we want to start down that road,' said Mr Johnstone.

'That's a long and rocky road,' said Mrs Johnstone.

'You'd have to knock down walls and put wires everywhere.'

'Mother would hate all that mess and trouble.'

'You don't have to knock down walls,' I pointed out. 'They make these alarm buttons that are connected to the telephone.'

'But what if she's unconscious?' said Mr Johnstone.

'Your alarm button wouldn't be much use then, would it?' pointed out Mrs Johnstone.

'She'll be much safer in a home,' said Mr Johnstone firmly. 'Somewhere properly run; with caring staff available day and night.'

I remember getting slightly dizzy as the pair continued their double act. Whatever one said the other would immediately leap in to endorse it. I really didn't like either of them.

In the end, of course, I could do nothing to stop Mr and Mrs Johnstone putting Joyce Sinclair into a nursing home.

Mrs Sinclair didn't want to go anywhere. She wanted to stay in her home. But she was frightened of her daughter and her grim husband. And by alternately bullying her and terrifying her, the pair succeeded in convincing her that she had to move. She seemed as powerless as I was to prevent the inevitable.

There was, of course, a reason for the Johnstones' determination to move Mrs Sinclair out of her home. And it wasn't concern for Mrs Sinclair's safety.

Through their connections with the local authority, the Johnstones had arranged for Mrs Sinclair to move into a council owned and run nursing home. Moreover, they had managed to fix things so that the council would pay for Mrs Sinclair's room and board.

And, naturally, the Johnstones had plans for Mrs Sinclair's cottage.

Within a day of moving her mother into the nursing home, Mrs Johnstone had arranged for a letting agent from Barnstaple to come out to Bilbury, to take photographs and measurements and to print up smart looking leaflets offering the property for rent to holiday makers. They'd arranged for a man from Barnstaple to come out and give the outside of the cottage a lick of paint. And they'd put up some new curtains too.

I had no proof that they were doing anything dishonest but I strongly suspected that the income from the cottage was going into their bank account rather than into Mrs Sinclair's account.

And Mrs Johnstone now seemed very much more smartly dressed than she had been when I'd last seen her. She was wearing a Rolex watch and carrying a handbag that looked as if it had probably cost a small fortune.

'How is Mrs Sinclair?' I asked.

Mrs Johnstone paused, as though not quite sure what to say. 'She won't see the official doctor,' she said, with some reluctance. 'She insists that she wants to see you. She's got quite difficult about it.'

She said this as though it were my fault, as though I must have somehow persuaded her mother to demand to see me.

'The official doctor?' I said, not quite sure what she meant.

'The nursing home has a doctor who looks after all the residents. He calls in once every month and signs prescriptions and so on.'

'What's wrong with your mother?' I asked.

'No one seems to know,' said Mrs Johnstone. 'She's put on a little weight and she seems to have gone downhill a bit recently.'

'I can't just pop in and see someone else's patient,' I explained.

'How about if we brought her to see you?' asked Mrs Johnstone.

'Not really,' I said. 'I could get into trouble. The establishment takes a dim view of doctors who poach patients.'

'I saw another doctor when we were on holiday in Scotland,' said Mrs Johnstone. 'I had a chest infection and I saw this doctor in Inverness. He gave me antibiotics.'

'That's different,' I said. 'If a patient is on holiday, he or she can see a doctor wherever they are in the United Kingdom.'

'There you are, then,' said Mrs Johnstone. 'I'll bring mother out to see you tomorrow evening. She can be on holiday in Bilbury for the day.'

This seemed to me to be stretching the rules paper thin but I didn't want to be awkward – particularly since Mrs Sinclair had asked to see me. 'OK,' I agreed. 'But when I have seen your mother I will need to write to the doctor who looks after her at the nursing home where she lives.'

'Oh, that's all right,' said Mrs Johnstone.

So, the following evening Mrs Johnstone turned up pushing her mother in one of those folding wheelchairs which can be fitted into a car boot. The two women were accompanied by Mr Johnstone. His hair and beard were longer than ever and he was still carrying a copy of *The Guardian* newspaper. For all I knew it could have been the same copy.

I could hardly believe the change that had taken place.

When I'd last seen her, Mrs Sinclair had been lively and very active.

She took long walks through the village and along neighbouring paths and bridle paths. She was perhaps a few pounds overweight, but nothing very much. Now she seemed to be seven or eight stones overweight. I wasn't surprised that she needed to be moved about in a wheelchair.

We said hello to each other.

'She's looking well, isn't she?' said Mr Johnstone.

I remembered that he was something big in sewage and wondered if he had some of his employer's product packed inside his skull instead of brains.

‘Very fit,’ said Mrs Johnstone.

‘They feed the inmates very well,’ said Mr Johnstone.

‘Inmates?’ I said, slightly puzzled.

‘Residents,’ said Mr Johnstone, correcting himself. ‘The patients.’

‘Oh.’ I had always thought of inmates as people in prison. And there was no reason why people in a nursing home should be thought of as ‘patients’ unless they were actually ill.

I asked Mr and Mrs Johnstone to leave me alone with Mrs Sinclair so that I could talk to her and examine her.

‘Oh we’ll stay with her,’ said Mrs Johnstone.

‘Better if we stay,’ said Mr Johnstone. ‘The people at the nursing home think she might be developing dementia. She gets confused about things.’

I looked at Mrs Sinclair. She looked at her daughter and then at her son-in-law and then back at me. She shook her head so slightly that it was almost imperceptible.

‘You can sit in the waiting room,’ I said to the Johnstones. ‘We’ll call if we need you.’

‘So, what’s been happening?’ I asked Mrs Sinclair when they’d gone. ‘You’ve put on a little weight.’

‘There’s nothing to do but eat,’ she said. She spoke slowly and indistinctly and sounded drugged. ‘They won’t let us go outside. Not even into the garden. We either sit in our rooms or in the lounge.’

‘What’s your room like?’

‘It’s about the size of a toilet cubicle and I share it with a man who had a stroke. He shouts and thrashes about all night. And he’s very confused. Sometimes he tries to get into bed with me.’

She spoke very slowly and it took her a long time to tell me this.

‘Have they got you on any drugs?’ I asked. I remembered that Mrs Sinclair had always been a reluctant pill-taker and that when I had last seen her she had been on no medication at all.

She reached into her coat pocket and took out a piece of paper torn from a cheap notebook. She handed me the piece of paper. ‘I got one of the nurses to write everything down for me,’ she said.

I looked at the paper. It was immediately obvious why Mrs Sinclair sounded drugged. She was taking two different tranquillisers four times a day and a strong sleeping tablet every evening. She was also taking oral hypoglycaemics, used for treating type II diabetes mellitus and a variety of other drugs for heart disease and high blood pressure.

‘Crumbs!’ I said. ‘How many pills do you take a day?’ I started to add them up.

‘Thirty seven,’ said Mrs Sinclair. ‘I counted them. Plus my vitamins.’

‘Vitamins?’

‘They like us to take vitamin tablets. They tell us they keep us healthy.’

‘How many of those do you take?’ I asked.

‘They give us two every hour.’

‘Two every hour! That’s 24 a day.’

‘The nurse in charge says that if one is good for us then two an hour must be better.’

I frowned but didn’t say anything. It is widely assumed that vitamins are harmless. They aren’t. Too much of a good thing can cause serious problems and can even kill. Some vitamins are water soluble and excess quantities can be excreted in the urine. But some are fat soluble and stay in the body – building up to toxic levels. And vitamins can sometimes interact badly with prescription drugs such as those which are used to treat heart and high blood pressure problems.

‘What symptoms have you got?’ I asked.

‘I feel nauseous all the time. I have an upset tummy. And I have a rash I can’t get rid of. They’ve given me creams but they don’t help. I get tingling in my hands and feet and I get headaches too.’ She paused and sighed. ‘I never used to have headaches.’

‘Can you undress and get up onto the examination couch?’

Mrs Sinclair pushed herself up out of the wheelchair and stood, still holding onto one arm of the chair. She was very shaky. ‘If you help me.’

I helped her undress and climb up onto the examination couch.

There really wasn’t anything much wrong with her. Her heart was beating too fast but it was regular. Her blood pressure was too low.

‘Do I need all these pills?’ she asked.

I looked at her for a while, wondering what to say. Doctors aren’t supposed to criticise other practitioners. But I was too angry to care too much about protocol. It seemed that the nursing home where Mrs Sinclair was residing was definitely one of those places described as a ‘happy tablet farm’.

‘I don’t think you need any of the stuff you’re taking,’ I told her. ‘You need to lose a lot of weight and you need to start exercising again.’

‘I want to come back home,’ said Mrs Sinclair. ‘Back to Bilbury.’

‘Has your daughter sold your house?’ I asked.

‘No. They can’t sell it without my permission. They’re still renting it out to holiday makers. They do very well out of it.’

‘Your daughter and her husband won’t want you to leave the nursing home.’

‘I know. But they can’t stop me, can they?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘They can’t.’

‘Will you tell them?’

‘Do you want me to?’

‘Yes, please.’

I helped Mrs Sinclair down off the examination couch and I helped her get dressed and settled back in the wheelchair.

And then I called her daughter and son-in-law back into the room.

‘You’ve been a long time,’ complained Mr Johnstone. ‘The doctor at the nursing home sees thirty patients in the time you’ve spent on one.’

‘He’s probably much cleverer than I am,’ I replied. ‘I’m a bit slow sometimes.’

‘Yes,’ said Mr Johnstone. ‘You wouldn’t get any prizes for productivity, would you?’ He looked at his watch, to drive home the point.

‘Your mother wants to leave the nursing home and come back home,’ I said.

If I’d said that she wanted to run away and join a circus the Johnstones could not have looked more shocked and appalled.

‘Oh no, that’s quite impossible,’ said Mr Johnstone. ‘Have you seen the state of her? She’s physically incapable of looking after herself. And she’s pretty well senile.’ He said this with his mother-in-law sitting three feet away from him.

‘Oh, I think she could manage quite well,’ I said. ‘If necessary, we could find a home-help in the village who could do things around the house.’

‘No, no,’ said Mrs Johnstone firmly. She looked at her mother and then at me. ‘Whose idea was this?’

‘I expect it was the doctor’s idea,’ said Mr Johnstone. ‘Don’t you doctors get paid according to the number of patients on your list?’

‘We do,’ I agreed.

Mr Johnstone turned to his wife. ‘He just wants to boost his income,’ he said. ‘Greedy, bloody doctors. You can’t trust them.’

‘Just plain greedy,’ said Mrs Johnstone. ‘Taking advantage of a senile, old woman.’

‘Your mother isn’t senile,’ I told her. ‘And she wants to come back home.’

‘Impossible,’ said Mr Johnstone. ‘We’ve let the house for the whole of the year.’

‘Then I’m afraid you’ll have to cancel the bookings.’

‘Cancel? We can’t do that.’

‘I want to come home,’ said Mrs Sinclair, very quietly.

‘To whom does the house belong?’ I asked her daughter.

‘Technically, it’s still mother’s house,’ admitted Mrs Johnstone, rather reluctantly.

‘We can’t cancel the bookings, and that’s that,’ said Mr Johnstone. ‘And we both had to pull in a lot of favours to get mother into that nursing home.’

‘Could I have a word with you outside?’ I said to Mr Johnstone, who seemed to be the driving force in the relationship.

‘No need,’ he replied. ‘No secrets here.’

‘OK,’ I said. ‘May I ask who gets the money from the rentals?’

Mr and Mrs Johnstone looked at each other.

‘I don’t think that’s any of your business,’ said Mr Johnstone.

‘Maybe, maybe not,’ I said. ‘But if the income from renting Mrs Sinclair’s home has been going into your account that could seem like fraud to some people.’

Mr Johnstone went very pale.

‘Who’s been paying the income tax on it?’

Mr Johnstone went even paler.

‘I really do think your mother would be much better off if she were at home,’ I told Mrs Johnstone.

Mr and Mrs Johnstone looked at each other. They leant together and there was some whispering. I busied myself unnecessarily with some papers on my desk and then started to make some notes about Mrs Sinclair's medical condition.

'If you really think mother would be better off at home then that's what we want too,' said Mr Johnstone.

'Perhaps some of the rental income you've received could be used to put a stairlift into the cottage,' I said. 'It would help until Mrs Sinclair loses some of that weight she's gained.'

They said they thought that could be managed.

And so it was agreed.

Two weeks later Mrs Sinclair was back living in her cottage in Bilbury.

Within two months, she was free of most of the tablets she was taking, though still cutting down the addictive tranquillisers she had been given. And she had started to lose weight and begun walking, very slowly, around the village again. A change in diet, and a reduction in weight, meant that Mrs Sinclair no longer needed to take drugs for her type II diabetes which was now almost cured. And we'd found a home-help (whose wages the Johnstones had, with some initial reluctance, agreed to pay).

Being a lone GP in a rural practice can sometimes be tiring, lonely and even frightening. Support may be an hour away or, in bad weather, impossible to reach.

But sometimes being a country GP can be exceptionally satisfying.

It was a joy to have Mrs Sinclair back in the village.

Sporting Heroes

My friend Will, who is a GP in the Midlands, has some glamorous and famous patients. He looks after a television presenter who reads the news on a local station and an actress who appears regularly in a soap opera.

But it is the sports stars on his list of patients who have proved most challenging – probably because they are the highest profile and the most valuable in raw commercial terms.

Six months ago, a patient of Will's who plays football for a leading club was about to be transferred to another team when a routine medical, performed by a doctor acting for his new club, showed that the player had a heart problem.

There was much panic. The team which was buying the player's contract decided that they wouldn't go ahead with the purchase. The team which was selling the player announced that they would take legal action. The player, who was naturally upset by the revelation, frightened everyone by talking of early retirement. The player's personal manager threatened to sue the doctors who had made the diagnosis. And the media had a field day.

Will was involved because he was the player's GP.

'Why didn't you spot this?' the club manager demanded.

Will pointed out that the heart problem, which was so mild that it might well have been better for everyone if it had remained undiscovered, had only been found after the player had been subjected to an angiogram – a fairly complex and high risk investigation which is usually only performed when a patient has symptoms of heart disease.

The player had absolutely no symptoms, and tests on the pitch and in the laboratory showed that he was perfectly capable of satisfying the significant physical demands of his profession. Every test showed that he was, in fact, one of the fittest and healthiest players in the League.

Eventually, the player solved the problem by announcing that he wanted to stay with his existing club and that he definitely didn't want to move to the club which had questioned his health.

Will was unhappy because he felt that there had never been any need to subject his patient to such an invasive procedure. Angiograms, which involve pushing a tube through a vein into the heart, are dangerous procedures which result in a number of deaths every year. Will felt that the abnormality which was unearthed was trivial and of no practical significance and that if the same level of examination was applied to other workers no one would ever be declared fit for employment of any kind.

Another patient of his, a well-known and moderately successful tennis player, arrived at Will's surgery one day carrying a form for an insurance company medical. The player had for years carried insurance to cover him against accidental damage to a limb, and the company which provided the cover had decided that it was time that they had another medical report so that they could evaluate their risk.

Unfortunately, when Will performed the medical, he found that the player (who like many professional sportsmen, had a very slow resting pulse rate, in his case of 32 beats a minute) had some very strange symptoms – particularly since he was a professional athlete who was expected to be super fit. He had an irregular heartbeat, rapid breathing, poor balance and decreased reflexes.

It turned out that the player, who suffered from the symptoms of an ulcer, almost certainly brought on by the stress of knowing that his ability to progress far enough through tournaments to earn a living depended on his winning his next match, had for months been treating himself with a proprietary brand of antacid which contained fairly large quantities of calcium carbonate and magnesium. The symptoms he was showing were all caused by the medicine he had bought over the counter. Many people assume that medicines bought from a pharmacy or a supermarket cannot possibly be dangerous but, sadly, that is not the case. If you take too much of anything the results can sometimes be catastrophic.

Will had to write a letter to the player's own doctor, explaining the situation and recommending that a safer treatment for the ulcer problem be provided. He also had to tell the player that he wouldn't be able to renew his insurance policy.

Bilbury doesn't have any high profile sporting residents (though we do have our fair share of celebrities, mostly retired, from the entertainment business) but that doesn't mean that I do not sometimes find myself dealing with amateur sportsmen who have medical problems.

And, as I have frequently discovered, amateur sportsmen and sportswomen can suffer just as much as the professionals. The amateur player may take his game just as seriously as the professional.

I have, for example, seen a number of patients with what I call 'skittle bowler's elbow', some with 'skittle bowler's shoulder' and several with 'skittle spectator's ankle'. The first two disorders are caused when a player hurls his skittle with too much force – or plays too many games. The third disorder is caused when an inattentive spectator does not see the heavy wooden ball used in skittles jump the boards at the side of the alley before bouncing out into the spectating area.

Ten pin bowling, the modern, domesticated version of the sport which is popular in the United States, is much safer in that spectators aren't allowed to stand around in the direct line of fire.

In a traditional skittle alley, there are invariably spectators linking up alongside the alley itself and when a ball bounces over the low wooden wall (as it invariably does at least once or twice in an evening) it is almost certain that someone will be hit. Indeed, I have, on two separate occasions, seen spectators injured by flying skittles. I bet that's an injury that is completely unknown in ten pin bowling!

And I will never forget that in 1970, a girl called Beatrice Jones insisted on a trial for Bilbury's rugby team.

Beatrice, who weighed just over 14 stone, was a big girl in every department and when she ran, she bounced a good deal. Indeed, there were parts of her which didn't stop moving for a minute or so after she had stopped running. She was luxuriously upholstered by a God who had chosen not to stint in any of the popular departments. She was also as tough as a rhinoceros. If she had chosen to be a boxer instead of to play rugby, she would have fought as a heavyweight and there would have been much trembling of the knees among all other contenders.

Since a rugby team needs 15 players and there were only 14 playing members in the Bilbury rugby club, the trial was something of a formality.

'Can you walk about under your own steam?' asked the team captain, who was also the selector and groundsman.

Beatrice said that she could.

'Can you catch a ball?'

Beatrice said she could do that too.

'Good, you're in the team.'

'I will play in any position except hooker,' she told him firmly, for she was a sensitive girl who did not wish to see her family embarrassed by seeing their daughter described as a hooker on the sports pages of the local paper.

The captain was doubtless happy to have found his 15th player but her inclusion resulted in much discussion, some controversy and, at first at least, a good deal of merriment.

Opposition players wanted to know how and whereabouts they should tackle her. Which did she prefer: above or below the waist? When she threw the ball in for lineouts there were complaints that not all of her body was behind the line. On one occasion, opposition players, theoretically there as defenders, stood mesmerised as she ran towards them, turned and watched agape as she ran past them and then stared motionless as she ran on to the line to score a memorable try. She was the heaviest player on the pitch and apart from not knowing precisely where to tackle her without offending the bounds of public morality, opposition players were wary of taking her on lest they find themselves simply being towed behind an unstoppable force. No red-blooded young male wants to be seen being towed along by a female rugby player.

Attempts were made to have her banned but the league administrators eventually reported that they could find nothing in the rules to stop her playing.

And the controversy didn't end when matches finished.

Since it was clear to players, officials and management that she could not possibly be expected to share the team bath, the captain decided that she should be allowed to take her bath first.

After standing in the rain for 25 minutes waiting for Beatrice to finish using the facilities the rest of the team rebelled, marched into a changing room smelling of lavender and plunged into a large bath of water which was now tepid and smelling of rose water. Beatrice, who was inadequately wrapped in a hand towel and busy doing her hair, refused to leave until she'd finished titivating. When the team wives and girlfriends found out about this incident, a delegation marched on the club president's home and demanded action. They weren't quite sure what sort of action they wanted but they wanted some of it and they wanted it fast.

In the end, disaster was averted only when Beatrice announced that she was pregnant and that she and the full-back would be marrying as soon as the season was over and a Saturday afternoon would be available for the necessary ceremony and celebrations. The full-back was at least six inches shorter than his bride-to-be and four stones lighter. She felled an opposing team member who said something rude about him; floored the man with a single punch.

The full-back said that he would continue playing but that his wife was retiring from competitive rugby due to her condition. Beatrice told a reporter from the local newspaper that she believed that in due course women would be playing rugby regularly and that in order to accommodate this eventuality, clubs would have to provide extra bathing facilities. She said she could see the day coming when there would be rugby and football teams made up entirely of women. No one was rude enough to say that they did not take her prediction seriously but it was generally agreed that it was an unlikely prospect since, as one club member put it, 'they don't make rugger boots small enough for women'.

Of course, the saga of the female rugby player wasn't my problem. It was a social and sporting dilemma rather than a medical one.

But other sporting difficulties did come within my remit and during one short week period I saw two local sporting stars who needed help or advice.

First up came Charles Crowcombe; a mountain of a man who was known to everyone as Charlie.

I think it was safe to say that Charlie was a character. He was so much of a character that I cannot imagine how I have managed to write eleven other books about Bilbury without once mentioning him. Charlie was 79-years-old and as full of beans as a cheap hotpot. He was a big man in every sense of the word and if there were a lion anywhere running around without a heart then Charlie had that missing organ.

I think the phrase 'larger than life' was invented for him.

The first thing that struck you about him was that he had a giant forehead. It always seemed to me that this was a bit of a fraud because it suggests, quite falsely, that great quantities of brain lie hidden behind it. In truth, the bony edifice reminded me very much of one of those fake fronts which Hollywood used to favour as a cheaper alternative to building a saloon, a row of shops or a chateau. 'Just build the front and don't let anyone peep around the sides.' Charlie had a big forehead but there wasn't much of anything on the other side of the bone.

I can still remember when I first met Charlie.

He came into the surgery because he had stuck a fork into his foot and needed a little light repair work. He refused point blank to go to the hospital in Barnstaple so I ended up dealing with the injury myself. Fortunately, he made a good recovery and there was no permanent damage.

(I am, incidentally, amazed at how many people stick forks into their feet. If more farm workers and gardeners wore stout boots, the world would be a safer place for feet.)

That was three years earlier than the problem which I now remember as 'the darts incident'.

'I'm 76-years-old,' I remember Charlie telling me with a fierce sparkle in the eye that didn't have the cataract. 'I have a long family history of heart disease. Both my parents died of heart trouble. I had three brothers and they all died of heart trouble. I eat four rashers of bacon and three eggs for breakfast every morning and I've done that since I was 16-years-old. I eat steak three times a week. I drink five pints of beer every evening and smoke 40 cigarettes a day – the ones without the girly filters stuck on the end. You may be able to conclude from this that death is not something I worry about a great deal. And nor do I take much notice of you medical people. I had a cousin called Earnest who was a keen athlete and a dedicated vegan. He never touched booze or cigarettes and never ate fatty food. He ate one egg a week but only the white bit. He wouldn't eat ice cream or chocolate but ate vast amounts of kale and spinach. Despite all this, he had a heart attack while out jogging. He was just 44 when he died. What sort of life was that for a fellow to live? He left a wife and a white poodle that had a pink collar. I had another cousin called Victoria who was knocked off her bicycle when she was 32-years-old. She used to cycle 200 miles a week. She broke a leg, had a fat embolus in hospital and died. My wife, God bless her, was a good woman. I loved her dearly. She made the best pies and I always had seven clean shirts a week. Nine years ago, she went into hospital for what they said was a routine operation down below. They were going to take everything away and send her home to me a bit lighter but as good as new. She never came home. She had the operation but she died. I never knew why. No one told me and I didn't ask. It didn't matter, did it? It didn't make any difference. She was a healthy woman, other than that bit of feminine trouble she had down below. So don't tell me to change my diet or to go to the hospital because I won't do either; not for you and nor for anyone else.'

So, I cleaned up his foot, scraped out the bits of shoe and sock and dirt that had got into the wound, courtesy of the fork prongs that had skewered him, sewed him up, gave him antibiotics and prayed that he would heal successfully. Fortunately, he did.

When he came back to have his dressing changed, I offered him an appointment with an eye specialist for the cataract. He looked at me as if I'd suggested he might like to adopt a vegetarian diet and shook his head pityingly as he hobbled off.

Charlie has a good many hobbies.

He is too slow to play football for more than five minutes at a time but he still coaches the village team. In matches he acts as a linesman, though he usually sits on a chair positioned in the middle of the touchline, rather than running up and down as the play ebbs and flows.

He has a small boat which he keeps in Combe Martin and he fishes regularly for mackerel. He catches more than he can possibly eat and he sells the rest to Peter Marshall who sells them on to a fishmonger who had a shop in Combe Martin. (I never understand why Charlie didn't just sell the fish direct to the fishmonger.)

And he plays darts.

Actually, to say that Charlie plays darts is like saying that Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus and Gary Player played golf. Or like saying that Rod Laver and Ken Rosewall played tennis.

Charlie may have other interests but he lives for darts. It is his passion.

And, despite the cataract, he is very good at it, too.

He has been a member of the Duck and Puddle darts team since the team had been founded and when the team sheet is pinned up on the noticeboard, his name is always top of the list. This may, of course, have something to do with the fact that he is President, Chairman and Secretary of the darts club and captain and sole selector of the team. If there were a treasurer he'd be treasurer too.

Bilbury doesn't have a lot of league or cup winning teams.

Neither the cricket team nor the football team has had a great deal of competitive success. But our darts team has won so many trophies that they are stacked two deep in a specially made display cupboard standing at the back of the snug at the Duck and Puddle. Admittedly, some of the trophies had to be purchased by the darts team players themselves because in some of the tournaments where they were victorious, the organisers didn't have any money to pay for a trophy. (From time to time, the players had purchased second-hand trophies. And so the cabinet contained one trophy awarded to the Winners of the South West of England Netball Championship and another originally awarded to the winner of the Ladies' Match play Championship at the Kentisbury Golf Club.) But a trophy is a trophy is a trophy, as Gertrude Stein would have doubtless said if she'd thought of it or been interested in darts, and all the trophies in the cupboard had been won fair and square.

So when Charlie turned up in my surgery and told me that he was having a problem in letting go of his darts, I had to take him very seriously.

It was not a problem I had encountered before and I had to ask him to explain what he meant.

'When I've got the dart in my hand, like this,' said Charlie, picking a pen up off from the desk and holding it like a dart, 'It seems to stick to me. I can't let go. It's just like it's stuck to my fingers.'

'Ah,' I said.

'Ah,' is what doctors always say when they don't have the foggiest idea what is going on.

I am pretty sure that they never taught us about sticky darts at medical school but they didn't teach us about 'Ah,' either. That comes naturally. There is no exclamation point after it, by the way. That would be a very different sort of 'Ah'.

'How long has this been going on?' I asked.

'Three weeks,' replied Charlie as though this were a lifetime and a half. 'It started during a league match against King George. It got worse when we played King Charles. And last week, when we played Duke of York I could hardly let go of the dart. It's messing up my timing and my accuracy has gone all to pot.'

'Those are all pub darts teams?'

'They are.'

'Let me see your hands?'

He showed me his hands. They didn't seem to be unduly sticky. I didn't want to spend hours trying to find out why he couldn't let go of his darts and then find out that his fingers were covered in a thin but still sticky layer of all-purpose glue. Charlie used to be a carpenter and it was he who made the trophy cabinet in the Duck and Puddle. He still does a little sawing and hammering and doubtless messes around with the sort of glue that is nigh on impossible to remove. Personally, I hate it when my hands get sticky. There's nothing worse than examining a patient and finding after a couple of moments that your fingers are firmly stuck to whatever part of them you were palpating.

Charlie paused and frowned; deep furrows appearing across his massive, bony forehead. 'Do you think I might have been thinking too much?' He said this as though he were embarrassed by the very thought; as another man might ask if I thought he might have been smoking too much or drinking too much or eating too many chips.

I told him that we might have to consider this as a real possibility.

'Do you practise?' I asked. I know there are some sportsmen, usually not very good ones it has to be said, who regard practising as a form of cheating. I should have guessed that Charlie wasn't one of them.

'Of course I do!'

'And what happens when you practise? Can you let go of the dart?'

'No problem at all, doc,' said Charlie firmly. 'I can throw a mean dart when I'm practising. But when it's a competition, the darts go all over the place. I missed the board and hit the wall twice the other week. The other team were all laughing at me.'

Charlie was not, I suspected, a man who found it easy to be the butt of someone else's mockery.

'The more I try to deal with the problem the worse it gets. I concentrate hard, really hard, and when I eventually manage to let go of them the darts just fly off as though they have minds of their own. One stuck in a woman's foot last Friday. Fortunately she was a bit tiddly and she laughed so much that she didn't get cross.'

'Ah,' I said again, speaking as much to myself as Charlie. 'So it's a psychological problem rather than a physical problem.'

It didn't seem likely that Charlie had a physical problem, a neurological problem for example, if he could throw darts when it didn't matter. The fact that the problem only arose under pressure was quite a clue.

Charlie frowned. 'A psychological problem?'

He paused, and frowned, and half closed his eyes and repeated it, playing with the word as though it were something he'd come across but couldn't quite remember where or why.

'Psychology? That's to do with the head isn't it? The inside of the head?'

'It is,' I agreed. `It's to do with what goes on in the mind.'

He looked at me rather suspiciously. 'Are you saying I'm off my trolley, doc? Ready for the loony bin?'

'No, no,' I said quickly. 'I'm just saying that the problem is clearly in your head rather than in your hand.'

Charlie kept his frown in place. 'What does that mean?'

'It means that we have to find out what's changed,' I said. 'Something is clearly putting you under extra stress.'

'I don't suffer with stress,' said Charlie immediately, firmly and irrevocably. He shook his head as though to confirm this. 'Never have, never do, never will. I've heard of it. There was an article about it in the paper. People in London get stress. People with suits and briefcases. Not me. Stress is for namby pambies.' He scowled at me. 'Are you saying I'm a namby pamby? '

'No,' I said quickly. 'Of course not.' Charlie may be a septuagenarian but he is a large septuagenarian.

'So, if it's not stress, what is it? What's wrong with me?'

I thought for a moment. 'I suspect that idiopathic muscular tension is impeding your flechette release mechanism,' I told him.

'Oh,' said Charlie, appeased. He seemed quite impressed. Actually, I was pretty impressed too. 'Would you write that down for me, doc?'

I tried to remember my diagnosis, carefully wrote it all down and handed him the piece of paper on which it was written.

Charlie looked at it and tried to say it. He didn't do very well. 'So that's what you think it is?'

'That's definitely what it is.'

'Can you cure me, doc?'

'Of course I can,' I said.

It seemed to me that I would never be able to cure Charlie's problem unless he believed I could cure his problem. In circumstances like this, confidence is all.

'You can give me some tablets?'

'No,' I said. 'I don't think tablets are necessary.'

I had a few weeks earlier read about a book in which the author suggested that most skilled sportsmen rely upon muscle memory to achieve success and that extraneous thoughts can interfere with the ability of the muscles to do what they have been trained to do. It was, I think, a new theory but to me it made complete sense. The author of the article suggested that whether they play golf, tennis or billiards, sportsmen or sportswomen do their best when they don't allow their conscious mind to interfere too much with what their hands, arms, legs are doing. I didn't see why this theory shouldn't apply just as well to darts.

'When is your next match?'

'We've got a home match next Wednesday. We're playing The Gravedigger's Rest.'

'You have to learn to stop concentrating on what you're doing,' I told him. 'You're trying too hard and as a result your muscles are becoming tense. That's why you can't let go of the dart.'

'How do I not try too hard, doc?' asked Charlie, puzzled. He was, I suspect, a man who always tried too hard.

'When you're about to throw your dart you have to concentrate on something else.'

'You mean, not concentrate on the shot?' Charlie seemed sceptical.

'Exactly,' I told him.

'So what do I concentrate on?'

'Concentrate on your breathing,' I told him, after a moment's thought. 'Tell your arm where you want the dart to land and then forget about the process of throwing the dart. Your body can manage that part perfectly well without your brain interfering. Instead of concentrating on hitting the triple twenty or whatever it is, just concentrate on taking slow breaths. Tell yourself to breathe in. And then tell yourself to breathe out. Do that just before you throw the dart and right up until the moment when the dart leaves your hand.'

Charlie looked at me as if I had gone mad.

'Really,' I told him. 'Try it. What have you got to lose?'

He thought for a moment. 'Not a lot,' he admitted.

The following Wednesday I made sure that I was at the Duck and Puddle for the darts match.

When it was Charlie's turn to play, I couldn't help noticing that the spectators, the members of the other team, and even the members of his own team, tried to stand behind him. They obviously all knew of Charlie's problem and thought that they would be safer there. One or two of the visiting team called out comments and advice to one another. 'I wish I'd borrowed a suit of armour from the museum!' 'Put your hands over your private parts when he throws!' 'Shall we go outside and watch through the window?' and 'Watch out for the ricochets!'

Charlie, it was clear, was not taking this well. His face was red and he was perspiring heavily. I couldn't help thinking about the family history of heart disease, the daily eggs and bacon and all those steaks.

Charlie's first attempts were a disaster. He was clearly still having difficulty in letting go of his darts. And when he did finally manage to launch them on their journey, he was hurling them towards the board as though he wanted to get rid of them. None of them stuck in the dartboard. They all bounced back quite a distance.

When he moved away from the oche, the line on the mat where players stand when it is their turn to throw their darts, I moved over to him, grabbed his elbow and led him away from the crowd of spectators and other players.

'I did the breathing thing like you said!' complained Charlie. 'But when I looked at the board I found myself thinking about the last match I played, when that dart hit that woman's foot.'

'So, the next time it's your turn, you must shut your eyes before you throw your darts.'

'Shut my eyes? So that I can't see?' Charlie sounded incredulous.

I nodded.

So he did. He didn't score well but he managed to let go of all three darts and they all hit the board point first and stayed where they had landed.

'Next time, concentrate on your breathing and just squint a bit,' I told him. 'Almost close your eyes – but not quite.'

And, to his delight and astonishment, his darts all went where they were intended to go. I was delighted and astonished too.

I didn't tell him this, of course, but I think that having to concentrate on breathing and on almost closing his eyes meant that he didn't have enough brain left to worry about what he was doing.

After that, Charlie soon got back to his winning ways. It had all been a little unorthodox, to say the least, but it had worked. With his return to form, the Duck and Puddle team succeeded in defeating the team from the Gravedigger's Rest.

'Thanks, doc,' said Charlie afterwards. 'And it's good to know that my problem wasn't caused by stress. Not like one of those namby pamby types in suits, eh?'

Later, as the team celebrated, I heard one of the other players ask Charlie what his problem had been. Charlie took out the piece of paper on which I had written the diagnosis and everyone in the pub looked at it and nodded wisely, as though they understood what it meant.

That did make me smile.

My second sporting patient had a more serious problem in that it affected his health and, it is no exaggeration to say, threatened his life.

Farley Woodbury was 42-years-old when his wife, Petronella, brought him to see me.

Farley is a shy, quiet man; not the sort of fellow who ever rushes into things.

He certainly didn't rush things when he was courting Petronella, the daughter of a dentist in South Molton. She had a couple of horses of her own which she rode at meetings and they met at a Point to Point meeting held on a farm just outside Bideford. Petronella once told me that she and Farley were courting for three weeks before they progressed to Christian name terms. And it was another three weeks before they held hands in the back row of the cinema in Boutport Street in Barnstaple. Farley and Petronella went out together for two years before he proposed – once again in the back row of the cinema in Barnstaple. Petronella once told me, with some pride, that Farley still had the tickets stubs from that important evening and that he kept them in a matchbox in the top drawer of the bedside table on his side of their bed. It was not until eighteen months after the engagement that they married. Once married, Farley moved out of the accommodation he shared with two other single labourers, and Petronella left home. They moved into a small, tied cottage owned by my father-in-law and provided for married employees.

As a couple, they are a strange reversal of nature's usual allocation of colours. The male peacock is far more flamboyant than the female. The male pheasant is the one who has the flashy tail. But with Farley and Petronella, things were the other way around. She always wore bright, primary colours while he invariably wore earthy colours – dark greens and dark browns.

Although he works as a labourer on my father-in-law's farm, Farley has been a keen amateur jockey since his teens. He originally had hopes of becoming a professional jockey but he is nearly six feet tall and he finds it nigh on impossible to get down to the weights required by owners and trainers.

Jockeys who appear at National Hunt meetings, where nearly all the races are over fences, are allowed a little more leeway than flat race jockeys but a jockey's weight is still a vital factor in deciding whether or not he is given enough rides to make a living out of the sport of King's.

Farley's constant struggles with his weight meant that he had to abandon all his hopes of a career as a professional and, instead, to embrace the idea of a more modest career as an amateur jockey, racing very occasionally at larger meetings and quite often at Point to Point meetings where the requirements are slightly less stringent.

The problem was that as he grew older, Farley found it more and more difficult to get down to the weight required for even these lesser meetings. Professional jockeys sometimes spend hours sitting in a sauna in order to lose weight and it was not at all unknown for some to take amphetamines or other drugs to help them get down to the required weight. Neither of these options was available to Farley. He had a full time job as a farm labourer and couldn't afford the time to spend hours sitting in a sauna. On a farm labourer's wages, he couldn't afford the money to pay for illegal drugs.

'There's something wrong with Farley,' said Petronella.

Farley sat beside her, on the other side of my desk, and examined his fingernails.

I normally prefer patients to talk to me about their health problems but I knew that Farley was probably too shy to tell me anything so I allowed Petronella to speak for him.

'What sort of something?'

'He's losing a lot of weight.'

'How much weight has he lost?' I asked.

'A stone,' replied Petronella. 'He's always been terribly skinny but now he's just skin and bones.'

'How much do you weigh now?' I asked Farley, speaking to him directly for the first time.

'A little over ten stone,' replied Petronella. 'And that's when he's fully clothed and soaking wet. At a race ten days ago he weighed in at exactly ten stone.'

'And how tall are you?'

'Six feet two inches.'

'How is your appetite?'

'He eats very well,' said Petronella. 'He's not eating any less than he was. In fact I don't think I've ever known him eat more.'

'But you're losing weight?'

'A stone in the last six weeks,' said Petronella.

'Do you have any other symptoms?' I asked him.

Petronella looked at him and this time Farley did speak. 'No,' he said, without looking up.

There was clearly something more than I could see going on here. If Farley was eating properly but losing weight at such a dramatic rate then there was something seriously wrong with him.

Unless.

There was, I realised, another possibility.

Farley was a jockey and jockeys are always fighting to lose weight. Some lose weight by spending time in a sauna. Some take drugs. But there is another, very effective, way to lose weight which is often used by jockeys. If Farley was using this method then it seemed clear that Petronella didn't know about it and hadn't guessed what he was doing. Before I did anything else I needed to talk to Farley alone.

'I need to examine you,' I said to Farley. 'Take your clothes off and jump onto the examination couch.' I turned to Petronella. 'Would you pop back into the waiting room for a few minutes?'

She didn't want to go. I understood and sympathised. But I needed to talk to Farley without his wife by his side.

'So, is there anything else you should tell me?' I asked Farley when he was lying on the examination couch and his wife was out of my consulting room and back in the waiting room. Wearing just his socks and underpants he looked like a skeleton.

'No, I don't think so,' said Farley, so quietly that I could hardly hear him.

I examined him carefully. Inside his mouth, I could see the marks made by his fingernails. On the backs of his knuckles, I spotted the tell-tale sign where his skin had rubbed against his incisors. The skin on the back of his hands showed that he was seriously dehydrated. And when I listened to his heart I found that it was beating abnormally. I didn't need any more evidence.

'How long has it been going on?'

'What?'

'Making yourself sick.'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' said Farley, defiantly.

I looked at him and said nothing but just waited.

Suddenly he started to cry.

‘It’s my last chance,’ he told me.

I waited.

‘I’ve been offered a ride at the Cheltenham Festival. A trainer I know has offered me a ride if I can make the weight he wants me at.’

‘So you’ve been making yourself sick?’

‘Yes.’ The tears were now rolling down his cheeks. ‘But I’m always hungry. My job is quite physical. I’m always famished so I eat decent meals. And then I go and make myself sick; get rid of all the food.’

‘You’re making yourself ill.’

‘I know.’

‘When’s the race?’

‘At the Festival?’

‘Yes.’

‘Three months.’

‘If you go on at this rate you won’t be fit to race anyway.’

‘I’m not getting any younger. There won’t be any more chances.’

I listened to him for a while. His dream had always been to be a jockey but God had not been kind to him in making him so tall. It’s difficult for young jockeys to make the weight when they are close to six feet tall. He knew, as well as I did, that a man who is over six feet tall and in his 40s can only make a good riding weight by making himself seriously ill.

‘You have to tell Petronella.’

‘I can’t.’

‘She’s worried sick about your health. You can’t not tell her. I suspect she probably thinks you’ve got cancer and that you’re going to die.’

Farley looked at me in disbelief.

‘Honestly,’ I said. ‘That’s what she probably thinks.’

‘Will you tell her?’

And so I called Petronella back into the consulting room and I told her that her husband had bulimia; that he was deliberately making himself sick so that he vomited up the food he’d eaten and didn’t put on weight.

‘Is this for that bloody race?’ she asked me. ‘That one they offered you at Cheltenham?’

He nodded. ‘And there was talk of a ride at Aintree. In the Grand National.’

‘You wouldn’t have the strength to ride a horse round Aintree,’ she told him. ‘I’ve seen you struggle to get up the stairs.’

‘Your heartbeat is irregular,’ I told him. ‘You really are making yourself ill. I very much doubt if the course doctors would let you ride. They’ll see the same signs I’ve seen.’

Farley looked at me.

‘How can you do this to yourself?’ demanded Petronella. ‘And to me? You’re my whole life. If you kill yourself you’ll leave a young, grieving widow. All over a bloody horse race.’ The words came tumbling out, driven more by passion than anything else. And all the time Farley wept.

‘It’s what I always wanted to do,’ he said at last. ‘It was my dream.’

‘I know it was,’ said Petronella. She too was now crying. ‘You’re a great jockey. I know you are. I’ve seen you ride often enough. But you can’t make the weight without making yourself ill. You’re too tall, Farley. Lots of men would give their eye teeth to be six foot tall.’

‘None of them jockeys,’ said Farley, wryly.

I didn’t expect that we would be able to persuade Farley to stop making himself vomit there and then. With commendable honesty he refused to give his word that he would stop. I offered to make him an appointment with a special clinic where he could see an expert. But he said he wouldn’t go. He said he was too ashamed of what he was doing; too embarrassed to talk to a stranger about it.

So I told them both to come and see me together, twice a week. And twice a week I weighed him and checked his heart and looked at his hands and his teeth and his skin.

And I talked to a race course doctor I knew who told me that bulimia was a common problem among jockeys and that they were good at spotting it and that if a jockey was ill they would never let him climb aboard half a ton of thoroughbred horse and race over fences and hedges sometimes too high to see over.

When I told Farley what I knew, I also told him that I hadn’t told the doctor the name of my patient. ‘They don’t know who you are. But race course doctors won’t let you race in your condition.’

And slowly Farley came to terms with the fact that he could have a good life without risking his health trying to recapture something that had once seemed possible. He could still ride at Point to Point race meetings without making himself painfully thin. He had a wife who loved him dearly, a good home and a decent job.

One day the pair of them came in and Farley told me that he hadn't made himself sick for a month. He said he felt much better and that he had accepted that he was now never going to be a top jockey. He said that knowing that it was just his height that had thwarted his ambitions made it easier to accept.

'I'm a good jockey,' he said with quiet confidence. 'I could have been a winner.' And then, for the first time in weeks, he smiled and did a passable imitation of Marlon Brando. 'I could have been a contender,' he said, quoting Brando from the film *On the Waterfront*.

Petronella, smiling with him, put her arm around her husband and it was her turn to cry. 'I know you could,' she said softly. 'But if it's any consolation you won my heart long ago.'

'You're the one I always wanted to win,' said Farley.

I left them alone for a minute or two while I popped out to fetch a fresh box of paper tissues. I always keep a box of tissues on my desk but sometimes one box isn't enough.

Damnit, I needed a tissue myself.

Just to blow my nose you understand.

Tranny by Gaslight

I saw Donyard Hill most days when he cycled along the lane past Bilbury Grange.

He was usually headed to Peter Marshall's shop, to buy a pint of milk and a loaf of bread, though sometimes he cycled down into Combe Martin to treat himself and his wife to two pieces of cod and two bags of chips. He used to wrap the cod and the chips in an old coat to keep them warm before stuffing them into his saddlebag.

At the time, the chip shop in Combe Martin still wrapped the fish and chips in pieces of greaseproof paper which were then folded inside pages from old newspapers. To be honest, I don't think chips are really chips unless they are wrapped in old newspaper. To me they taste much better with a little newsprint wrapped round them than they do when sold in any of the alternative wrappers.

Moreover, I have always found that newspapers make fascinating reading when they are used as chip wrappers. Most chip shops used tabloid newspapers for the wrapping (the pages of a broadsheet were generally considered far too large) and many is the nugget of odd 'hey, listen to this' items of news I have found and enjoyed while eating my chips.

There's absolutely no entertainment value in plain, white wrapping paper or one of those hideous, plastic trays that are now considered acceptable by the health and safety gestapo.

Donyard is one of those people who were born well-equipped with silver spoons. He had one in his mouth and one in each of his little fists.

He seemed destined for greatness but, somehow, he never quite fulfilled the expectations of either parents or schoolteachers. He went to one of the top public schools and followed that with three years at Cambridge University where he read Politics, Philosophy and Economics.

'My tutors thought I'd have a career in politics but it never happened,' he told me with a shrug. 'I was the head boy at school so I was doomed. Someone once told me that the majority of head boys and girls either end up as estate agents or in prison.'

Instead of a high-flying career in politics, Donyard decided to become a racing driver. That didn't turn out too well. His father wouldn't give him the money he needed to buy a good car and he never quite had the talent to obtain the sponsorship he needed. For a year or two, he worked as a press officer for one of the smaller racing teams. And then, when the team for which he was working went bust, he got a job as a car salesman. Customers liked the fact that he could talk about racing drivers he had met and circuits he had visited.

That career didn't last too long. Donyard was arrested for speeding and careless driving and lost his licence. The job went too. And so did his girlfriend he had met when he'd been a racing driver.

He told me all this one lunchtime in the Duck and Puddle, where he became a regular when he and his new wife, a lovely lady called Cynthia-Anne, moved into Bilbury and rented a small cottage just two hundred yards or so from the pub.

Donyard had managed to get himself appointed Club Secretary at the Kentisbury Golf Club. Cynthia-Anne, a gracile mignon, was at least one, and possibly two, generations younger than Donyard but they seemed very happy together. They had been married for a couple of years and had met at a Rock Music Festival on the Isle of Wight. They had a baby called Herman and a daft Dalmatian dog called Spot. Their tiny cottage had running water but no other utilities. In lieu of electricity, they had lamps and a cooker which all were fed with fuel from a liquefied gas cylinder. Their cottage was heated by a log burning stove which also provided them with hot water.

'Donyard's on the phone,' said Frank Parsons, landlord at the Duck and Puddle. 'He appears to have been arrested.'

It was early evening and Thumper Robinson, Patchy Fogg and I were having a pre-prandial libation while we discussed plans for the Bilbury Bonfire Night Party.

We take Bonfire Night very seriously in Bilbury. Mind you, we take most opportunities for celebration quite seriously. We celebrate the rise and fall of Guy Fawkes with a huge bonfire, as many fireworks as we can afford and a huge barbecue. It is never allowed to rain on bonfire night and if it does then we ignore the damp and carry on regardless.

I'm in charge of the bonfire since I have a well-earned reputation of being able to light a fire, and keep it burning, even if it is pouring with rain. One of my most magnificent bonfires was lit in a snowstorm. The fire burned steadily for several hours and I watched it from the comfort of my armchair in Bilbury Grange, popping out only occasionally to throw another pile of prunings onto the blaze. Patsy told her father about that bonfire and he told his wife and she told just about everyone else. My reputation as a maker of bonfires was sealed by that conflagration.

Startled, we all looked across at Frank.

‘Arrested?’ I said. ‘What on earth for?’

Donyard was a breezy and colourful character but he wasn’t the sort of fellow likely to get drunk, start a fight or steal sweets from F.W.Woolworth’s emporium.

‘He didn’t say,’ said Frank. He seemed slightly uncomfortable. ‘I didn’t like to ask him.’ He muttered something about it not being the sort of thing you asked a fellow.

It seemed to me unlikely that Donyard would have telephoned just to let us know that he had been arrested. He obviously needed help of some sort. I jumped up, walked across to where Frank was standing and took the telephone from him.

‘What’s happened?’ I asked.

‘I’ve been arrested,’ said Donyard. It didn’t really sound like him. But it definitely was him. He sounded extremely nervous and frightened.

‘What for?’ I asked, cutting right to the chase, as I believe they say when making cowboy movies.

‘Well, I wasn’t actually doing anything,’ said Donyard.

‘They must have arrested you for something,’ I said.

‘It wasn’t so much what I was doing,’ he said, ‘as what I’m wearing.’

‘Why? What are you wearing?’

There was a long pause. I could hear someone in the background shouting to Donyard, telling him to hurry up and finish his call.

‘A pink and lilac floral frock with a matching pink cardigan,’ he said. ‘Pink shoes and a little pink hat with two small feathers in it.’

‘Pretty well covered the pink angle, then?’

‘Pretty much.’

‘And they’ve locked you up?’

‘I was looking at the blouses in Marks and Spencer. A woman saw me and guessed I was a bloke dressed up. She went outside, found a copper and complained.’

‘You weren’t doing anything odd? Dancing around and singing something merry from Porgy and Bess for example?’

‘No, no, not at all,’ said Donyard, who was sounding a little more confident by the second. ‘I was just there, looking at the blouses. You don’t seem too shocked.’

‘Why should I be shocked?’

‘The woman who complained was shocked. The policeman who arrested me was shocked. Incidentally, the ironic thing is that the woman who complained about me was wearing jeans, Doc Martin boots and a plaid, woollen lumberjack shirt in orange and brown. If we’d swapped clothes no one would have said anything.’

‘Tight-laced idiots the lot of them,’ I said.

‘Can I crave a boon?’ said Donyard.

‘Am I close if I guess you need bailing out?’

I wasn’t in the slightest bit surprised to hear that there was another cross-dresser living in Bilbury. There are far more men who dress in feminine clothing than is generally realised. (Women can, and do, dress in male clothing without anyone noticing or thinking it in the slightest bit strange.) I had already met a villager called Montgomery Hall who liked to dress in the sort of clothing more commonly associated with women. He fell off his exercise bicycle and I helped his wife undress him, and clean the nail varnish off his nails before he went to hospital.

Since around one in ten men cross-dress from time to time, some wearing only feminine underwear and others dressing completely in feminine clothing, there were always bound to be numerous other cross-dressers or transvestites in the village.

I remember Montgomery Hall telling me that he had started by just wearing silky, feminine panties. ‘I had no intention of ever wearing a bra,’ he said. ‘I just thought the panties felt better, more comfortable than itchy boxer shorts. But then, after a few months, I started to wear stockings and then I did add a bra and a slip and then, because I was a bachelor at the time, I started wearing a nightie. I had no intention of wearing a dress. After a while, I wouldn’t go out of the house unless I was wearing a bra underneath my shirt, I felt half-dressed without one. And then I bought a skirt and a blouse in a charity shop and before I knew, I wondered where I could find a wig and some shoes that would fit.’

Another cross-dresser I spoke to said that he wore feminine clothing in the same way, and for the same reason, that Winston Churchill liked laying bricks. Churchill didn’t want to be a bricklayer. He was just escaping from the stresses of his everyday life by being something else. Many transvestites feel like this and find that when wearing something flimsy and feminine they can allow themselves to be caring, emotional and gentle in a way that men aren’t usually supposed to be. (I discovered from Donyard, by the way, that ‘cisvestism’ is the habit of dressing only in the clothes of one's own sex.)

'I'm afraid so,' said Donyard. 'Cynthia-Anne is at home looking after Herman but I couldn't ring her because we don't have a phone at the cottage. We've been waiting six months for British Telecom to install one.'

'Do you want me to tell her where you are?'

'Would you mind?'

'Of course not. Does she…er…know?'

'Know that I dress in women's clothing?'

'Yes.'

'Oh yes. She bought me the frock I'm wearing. It was a birthday present.'

'Good. That's good.' Suddenly, a thought occurred to me. 'What have you told the police?'

'I haven't told them anything.'

'You haven't made a statement?'

'No. I did mention that one day it will be just as reasonable for a man to walk round in a frock as it is for a woman to walk round in trousers.'

'What did the police say?'

'The snotty copper who arrested me said, 'Maybe, but this is the 1970s and it isn't legal now.'

'You didn't say anything else?'

'No. They haven't got round to asking me any questions yet. They just arrested me, giggled, and said a few rude things.'

'So they haven't charged you with anything?'

'No, not yet. I don't think they're quite sure what to charge me with. Do you know a good solicitor? '

'Don't tell them anything,' I told him. 'Just be indignant. We'll be with you shortly.'

'We?'

'Thumper and Patchy are here with me.'

'Of course,' said Donyard.

'And Donyard?'

'Yes?'

'A hat with two feathers in it?'

'It looks better than it sounds. Honest.'

'I hope so,' I told him. 'We'll be there shortly. Don't say anything and don't sign anything until we get there.'

I put down the telephone and turned to Thumper and Patchy. Thumper was finishing his pint of Old Restoration.

'Am I right in thinking that we are going somewhere?' said Patchy.

'We are,' I said. 'We're riding to the rescue of Donyard.' I explained why he had been arrested. Neither Thumper nor Patchy seemed shocked or even particularly surprised.

'Can't come with you, I'm afraid,' said Frank. 'Gilly is in Exeter. There's a meeting of the Licensed Victuallers' Association and it's her turn to go.'

'You stay here and hold the fort,' I told him. 'We will need refreshments when we return.'

Cynthia-Anne did not seem particularly surprised when we called in and explained what had happened to her husband. She was, however, clearly upset to hear that Donyard had been arrested. I'd have been worried if she hadn't been.

'He's been cross dressing for years,' she told us. 'But today was his first venture out in a dress. I did ask him not to go. Barnstaple doesn't look like a very broad-minded town to me.'

'Parts of it clearly aren't,' I told her.

'Will they send him to prison?' she asked, with tears in her eyes.

'Good heavens, no!' I replied. It seemed extremely unlikely.

'But it'll be in the local paper,' said Cynthia-Anne. 'And he'll lose his job. I can't see the committee at the Kentisbury Golf Club keeping him on as the Club Secretary, can you?'

'They probably wouldn't be over the moon about having a secretary in a pink hat with two feathers,' I agreed. 'But there may be a way out. Does Donyard have other feminine items in his wardrobe?'

'Oh yes,' replied Cynthia-Anne. 'He's got more feminine clothes than male clothes. When he's Donyard he only has a sports jacket and a couple of pairs of corduroy trousers. But when he's Molly he has a dozen dresses and skirts to choose from.'

'Molly?' said Patchy, puzzled. 'Who's Molly? Where did Molly come in?'

'Molly is what I call Donyard when he's dressed in feminine clothes,' explained Cynthia-Anne. She looked at us. 'Well, I can hardly call him Donyard when he's wearing a twin set and pearls can I?'

'No, I suppose not,' I agreed. 'But why Molly?'

‘I don’t have the foggiest idea why. I asked him and he doesn’t know either. He’s never known a Molly. I always thought it a rather pretty name.’

‘And he has a twin set and pearls?’

‘Oh yes. He looks lovely in it. It’s a heather mixture in a tweedy sort of material. We found it in a charity shop in South Molton.’

And this a man whom no one could possibly describe as a pantywaist!

‘Could you pop upstairs and collect some of Donyard’s clothes?’ I asked her. ‘We’ll need everything you can find. Including bras and stockings.’

Cynthia-Anne looked at me, puzzled.

‘There’s one way out of this,’ I told her. ‘If we turn up at the police station dressed as women and tell the police that we were all going to a fancy dress party they’ll either have to arrest us all or let Donyard go.’

‘You’d do that for him?’ said Cynthia-Anne.

‘We’re going to do what?’ demanded Thumper and Patchy simultaneously, as they realised what I’d just said.

‘We just put on some of Donyard’s gear and drive into Barnstaple and go to the police station,’ I said. ‘How hard is that? Not a lot to do for a chum, is it?’

Thumper and Patchy looked at each other.

‘Actually, it’s quite a lot,’ said Thumper.

‘Quite a lot,’ agreed Patchy with a resigned sort of sigh.

‘Fetch the clothes,’ I told Cynthia-Anne. ‘The quicker we get to Barnstaple, the quicker we get Donyard home.’

Cynthia-Anne disappeared up the stairs.

‘I’m not wearing pink or anything too revealing,’ called Thumper after her.

Two minutes later Cynthia-Anne was back downstairs with an armful of clothes and suitable underwear. By the time she returned, the three of us had stripped off down to our underpants. The Dalmation, clearly confused, had retreated and disappeared into the kitchen.

‘I can’t believe you’re doing this for Donyard,’ said Cynthia-Anne, laying the clothes out across the back of the sofa and two armchairs.

‘Nor can I,’ said Thumper.

‘Oh, I like that one!’ said Patchy, picking up a knee length frock in a darkish sky blue. He held the frock up against himself. ‘Do you think it’s my colour? I hope it will fit. You don’t have anything in a powder blue, do you?’

Cynthia-Anne said she was sorry but that was the only blue frock that Donyard had in his wardrobe.

Fifteen minutes later, we were all dressed. Cynthia-Anne had showed us how to fasten stockings to our suspender belts, had fastened our bras for us and had provided rolled up socks and stockings to fill up our empty bra cups. Doing all this by gaslight was trickier than I would have imagined.

‘Do you mean women have to go through all this every time they get dressed?’ said Thumper, looking behind him to check that the seams on his stockings were straight.

‘Do I look big enough?’ demanded Patchy, adding another pair of socks to his bra. ‘I don’t want to go into town looking flat chested.’

‘We’d better have some make-up on,’ I told Cynthia-Anne. ‘Give us some lipstick and a bit of stuff on our eyes.’

‘Oh, come on!’ said Thumper. ‘Do we have to?’

‘No point in spoiling the ship for a halfpenny’s worth of tar,’ said Patchy.

Cynthia-Anne made us up speedily. When she’d finished, I hardly recognised the other two.

‘Lilac suits you,’ I said to Thumper.

‘Blue really is my colour,’ said Patchy.

‘Hair!’ said Cynthia-Anne suddenly. ‘You all need wigs.’

‘Has Donyard got three spare wigs?’ I asked her.

‘No,’ said Cynthia-Anne. ‘He’s only got one other wig. But I’ve got two party wigs. One in green and the other one in bright red.’

‘I can’t wear a green wig,’ said Patchy instantly. ‘Not with a blue dress.’

We squeezed our feet into three pairs of Donyard’s shoes and eventually, gowned, made-up and wigged, we were ready to leave.

The three of us climbed into the Rolls-Royce and headed off for Barnstaple. ‘The game’s afoot!’ cried Patchy, who seemed surprisingly confident considering our state of dress.

When we got to our destination, I parked the car next to a large No Unauthorised Parking sign in the police station car park and the three of us trooped into the reception area. I have always found that you can park an elderly Rolls-Royce almost anywhere you like without getting into much trouble.

The sergeant on the desk stared at us as if three Martians had landed and walked in.

‘Good evening, sergeant,’ I said politely. I made no effort to speak in a feminine voice. I’d tried doing that in the car as we drove to Barnstaple and I’d found that it was quite impossible.

‘Evening, Madam,’ said the sergeant. He swallowed and corrected myself. ‘Er, Sir. Er, Sirs.’

I introduced myself and then introduced Thumper and Patchy. ‘Four of us were on our way to a fancy dress party and I understand there’s been some sort of silly mistake and you’ve accidentally arrested one of our number – Mr Donyard Hill.’

‘A fancy dress party, doctor?’

‘That’s right. Haven’t you heard about it? I think your Chief Constable is going to be there. I heard he was going as one of King Henry VIII’s wives. Can’t remember which one, though. Our wives have all gone ahead in another car. They’re all dressed as vicars. Our friend is called Donyard Hill. He telephoned a little while ago to say that you’d arrested him for looking at blouses in Marks and Spencer’s store.’

‘Arrested him for looking at blouses?’

‘I believe so,’ I said. ‘It seems a trifle heavy handed but maybe there’s a new law come in about blouse browsing.’

A drunk who had been sitting on a chair in the reception area stood up, unsteadily, and came over to us. He tried to put his arm round Thumper.

‘You’re a pretty girl,’ he said. ‘Give us a kiss.’

Thumper glared at him. Patchy, guessing what was in Thumper’s mind and thinking that it might not be a good idea to floor a stranger in a police station, held onto his arm.

‘Sit down, sunbeam!’ hissed Thumper. ‘Or you’ll be digesting your teeth.’

The drunk quickly edged away and sat down on the floor. He then crawled back to the chair on which he had been sitting and tried to look as small and as insignificant as possible.

‘This is a shocking thing,’ said Patchy. ‘Mr Hill is a very eminent member of the community. A very distinguished man, you know.’

‘He didn’t say anything about a party, sir,’ said the police sergeant, defensively.

‘Probably thought it wasn’t any of your business,’ said Patchy.

‘I expect he just wanted to see how far you’d go with this,’ I said. ‘He’s probably planning to make a formal complaint about how the police in Barnstaple harass ordinary members of the public.’ I paused. ‘Can I have your name, sergeant?’

‘Evans, doctor,’ said the sergeant. ‘Sergeant Evans, sir. I think there’s probably just been a bit of a mistake, sir. Just give me a minute, please, doctor.’

He hurried off. I noticed him talking to a young police constable who was trying to grow a moustache. It looked as if it was hard going.

A minute or so later, he returned with Donyard following him.

‘Ah there you are,’ I cried. ‘We lost you in town. But we’re still not too late for the party.’

‘Thank heavens for that,’ said Donyard, catching on fast. ‘I’d have hated to miss the party.’

‘The chief constable said he’d reserved the first dance with you,’ said Thumper to Donyard. ‘Your left boob has slipped. They haven’t been molesting you, have they?’

Donyard looked down and adjusted the contents of his left bra cup.

I glowered at Thumper. ‘Are there any charges, sergeant?’ I asked the policeman. ‘The three of us haven’t been looking at blouses but do you perhaps want to arrest the rest of us?’ I have always found that it pays to be polite but firm when dealing with the constabulary. And a little arrogant sarcasm, delivered from a height, never seems to do much harm.

‘No, no, there are no charges at all,’ said the sergeant quickly. ‘Apologies, sir, for the inconvenience and the misunderstanding.’ He lifted the flap in the desk so that Donyard could leave.

‘Saved by the three Paladins!’ murmured Donyard.

We walked out of the police station, our heels click-clacking on the linoleum, and made our way to the car. I realised that my hands were shaking.

‘Is this your car, sir?’ asked a policeman who was standing next to it. It was the young policeman who was trying to grow a moustache. He looked about 15 and I realised I was getting old.

I said it was.

‘I’ve just been looking after it for you, sir,’ said the policeman. ‘Some of our drivers are a bit careless when they’re parking. The sergeant didn’t want anyone denting your vehicle.’

We climbed in and settled ourselves. I managed to stop my hands shaking before I backed out of the car park. The 15-year-old policeman with the junior moustache held up the traffic so that we could leave the car park without having to wait for a break in the flow of cars, vans and lorries. I waved an imperious thank you. Thumper, who always likes to push things as close to the edge as he can, blew the policeman a kiss. Patchy said the policeman looked embarrassed and swore that he was blushing.

And then we drove home to Bilbury.

After telling Cynthia-Anne that we had rescued her husband, and that there were to be no charges, we retired to the Duck and Puddle where Donyard was in charge of buying drinks for the evening.

Frank said that he thought that blue really suited Patchy and that my green hair and off the shoulder red dress were really eye catching. When Frank didn't say anything about him, Thumper got quite upset. Frank then told Thumper that he had the most impressive bosom but that if he had to make a criticism he would say that the whole construction did look to be rather on the lumpy side. Thumper said that this might be because in order to obtain the best possible effect, he had stuffed each bra cup with three pairs of rolled up socks and a woollen glove.

'Why are you wearing eye make-up?' asked Patsy when I got home later that evening.

'It's another long story…'

'I would imagine it is!'

'You're not going to believe it…'

Patsy smiled and looked at me. 'Most people probably wouldn't. But I know I will because more odd things happen to you than anyone else I know.'

'Well,' I began, 'Thumper, Patchy and I were sitting quietly in the snug at the Duck and Puddle…'

'That's how most of your bizarre stories start.'

'Be quiet and listen…'

'OK. Sorry.'

'Thumper, Patchy and I were sitting quietly in the snug at the Duck and Puddle…'

Appendix 1:

More Obscure Medical Words

In my book ‘The Young Country Doctor Book 8: Bilbury Tonic’ I included a list of obscure medical words which my GP friend William and I had compiled.

William and I have always been fascinated by words – especially medical words and quasi medical words – and when we were students together we would waste rare evenings in the local pub looking up and memorising examples of obscure medical terminology.

As far as we were concerned, the more obscure the word the more we liked it. William had a Victorian dictionary which we scoured for new examples. And since I am a bibliotaph and suffer from chronic bibliolatry I have, over the years, acquired an embarrassingly large collection of dictionaries, books of quotations and thesauruses.

The first rule was that although the words which we selected had to be heard or read only rarely, they had to be quite real – proper words rather than made-up words.

The second rule was that a word would not count unless the person offering it could both spell it and pronounce it.

Here is another list of obscure (mostly) medical words which William and I compiled together during one of his regular and welcome visits to Bilbury:

Adscititious – supplementary, additional
Agerasia – youthful appearance in old person
Ataraxia – serene calmness
Bezzle – (traditional) to drink and to behave sottishly
Bifarious – facing both ways, someone who will support anything
Braxy – meat taken from a sheep that has fallen dead or had an accident
Bustluscious – having shapely breasts
Callipygian – having shapely buttocks
Cisvestism – habit of dressing only in the clothes of one’s own sex
Cockalorum – little man with a high opinion of himself
Coryza – runny nose, common cold
Cotquean – a man doing a woman’s work
Crapulous – hangover
Crinkum-crankum – fussy, over decorated things
Curmudgeon – bad tempered or surly person
Daphlean – shy and beautiful
Dander – a show of temper
Dandiprat – anything small
Demergature – death by drowning
Demi-lass – a polite word for a trollop, slut or slag
Demirep – someone with no reputation at all
Doliochocnemic – having long legs
Doliochoproscopic – having a long and narrow face
Ecdysiast –a snake sloughing its skin but also a strip tease practitioner
Eesome – pleasing to the eye
Exoptable – very desirable
Fettle – to mend, repair
Frample – peevish or sour
Franion – licentious person,
Fushionless – insipid, feeble
Gallimaufry – a jumble or medley of things
Galliard – man of fashion
Gangrel – loafing lout
Gracile – slender and graceful
Gripple – mean or stingy
Gruntle – continuous lamentation

Hirple – to limp, slow and painful motion
Hornswoggle – to cheat
Horbgorble – to putter about in an ineffective way
Imposthume – a boil
Kittle – to tickle
Leesome – lovable
Leptosome – having a pleasingly slender body
Lungis – a tall and clumsy man
Lusk – sloth
Lubricious – slippery or intended to arouse sexual desire
Macromastia – very large breasts
Maltworm – a drinker
Megrim – headache, migraine
Miffy – a fit of peevish ill humour
Mignon - dainty
Moonling – a dreamy fool
Muckender –handkerchief
Muffish – soft and effeminate
Mugwump – someone who backs down, withdraws
Mulligrub – a depression
Mumchance – silent or tongue tied
Myrmidon – unscrupulous follower
Oddling – the lonely, strange
Oleaginous – oily
Pantywaist – effeminate or feeble
Poculation – drinking alcohol
Poltroon – a coward
Pulchritudinous – comely
Scobberlotcher – an idler
Scurryfunge – an old-fashioned toothbrush, stiff hooked article
Slaister – to slap on make-up in a wanton sort of way
Slammerkin – slattern, and the loose covering she may wear
Sloomy – spiritless and dull
Spawling – a noisy clearing of the throat
Tiddle – to fidget
Tittup – someone with a mincing, prancing gait
Titivil – a knave or a trivial piece of gossip
Toralium – eiderdown
Toilet – was originally the cloth used for wrapping clothes, or a towel placed around the shoulders by a barber, then it became the linen covering of a dressing table, then the word was used to denote the dressing table and all the stuff on it and, finally, it became an alternative to ‘lavatory’
Toothsome –voluptuous and alluring
Tretis – well-proportioned and graceful
Trollop – sluttish woman
Trollope – loose garment, a carelessly worn wrapper
Uncumber – disencumber (St Uncumber – was a bearded woman and benefactress of wives, according to Sir Thomas More – for a peck of oats she would provide a horse upon which an evil husband could ride to the devil)
Usky, usquebaugh – whisky
Vapours – supposed to be exhalations from the organs rising to affect the brain and agitating the nervous system (in Victorian times individuals, usually female, who were upset, faint or nervous were said to be suffering from an attack of the vapours)
Venust – beautiful and elegant
Venecund – shy and bashful
Vilipend – to hold cheap or think poorly of someone
Viritoot – a spree or jaunt
Wanhope – despair

Wanton – ungoverned, rebellious
Zenonian – obstinate
Zest – eagerness

If the organisers of the Olympics are looking for a new and slightly more intellectual attraction than weight lifting or pole vaulting, maybe they could introduce an event requiring competitors to squeeze a selection of the words above into a single sentence. The gold medal would go to the individual who managed to get the most words between an initial capital and a final full stop. But the sentence would, of course, have to be grammatically acceptable and to make (some sort of) sense.

Appendix 2

Are You A NOD Or A BOAJ?

Doctors often use a private code when writing medical notes about patients.

They do it partly to save time and partly so that patients won't know what they have written.

Just in case you get a chance to look at your medical records here are some of the abbreviations which are most commonly used these days.

(Though do remember that not all these abbreviations are used by all doctors or in all hospitals).

NOD – Nice old duck
ACD – A complete dickhead
FAS – Fat and silly
NQOC – Not quite our class
RATTPO – Reassured and told to piss off
SITH – Soft in the head
BOAJ – Bit of a jerk
KSI – Knows someone important
PITB – Pain in the bum
SAD – Smelly and demented
GOK – God only knows

If you find these abbreviations as offensive as I do why not fight back.

Here are two sets of abbreviations that you could try scribbling against your doctor's name in retaliation:

JUSLTIAWC – Jumped up spotty little twerp in a white coat
POFIAS – Pompous old fart in a suit

I'm sure you'll be able to think of more...

Appendix 3

A Hamper of Assistants

In the piece in this book entitled *Charcoal and Geese*, I explained that a flock of geese on land is known as a gaggle but that the geese mysteriously become a wedge or a skein when they start to fly. Everyone knows that a collection of fish is a shoal and that a group of birds a flock. Most people know that groups of dogs, horses and cattle are collectively known as a pack, a string and a herd. It's quite well known that a group of spiders are known as a smother. Collective nouns for goldfish, ravens and doves are a trembling, an unkindness and a pitying.

But, over 30 years ago, it occurred to me that no one had previously created collective nouns for specific, groups of people.

And so I constructed an original list of collective nouns for a book I wrote under the pen name of Edward Vernon.

I have been constantly adding to my list.

A few years ago, I included a list in one of my published diaries. But the list is forever growing.

So, here is my new, improved and expanded list of collective nouns for humans:

A hamper of assistants
A congregation of clergymen
A galaxy of actresses
A pride of expectant fathers
A knot of scouts
A shower of weather forecasters
A swarm of heating engineers
A congestion of children
A clump of labourers
A drove of chauffeurs
A clutch of car mechanics
A collection of philatelists
A ring of proctologists
A batch of cooks
A press of laundrymen
A girdle of corsetieres
A quantity of surveyors
A parcel of postmen
A cast of sculptors
A band of rubber workers
A tuft of trichologists
A wealth of publishers
A stream of urologists
An embarrassment of parents
A flourish of magicians
A cluster of diamond cutters
A ring of jewellers
A posse of vets
A flounce of divas
A bunch of florists
A nest of mothers
A stack of booksellers/librarians
A corps of pathologists
A cup of bra makers
A congress of prostitutes
A concentration of students
A body of undertakers
A chest of transvestites

A company of representatives
A set of osteopaths
A dossier of policemen
A sheaf of administrators
A pile of gastroenterologists
An aggregation of biochemists
An association of psychologists
A drift of skiers
A clutch of physiotherapists
A school of nurses
A meeting of social workers
A herd of audiologists
A convergence of opticians
An issue of journalists
A brood of midwives
A community of public health officials
A cell of cytologists
A branch of foresters
A line of geneticists
A chain of chemists
A growth of endocrinologists
A cloud of spiritualists
A catch of obstetricians
A smear of laboratory technicians
A promenade of chiropodists
A gathering of dress makers
A camaraderie of photographers
A host of bacteriologists
An order of waiters
A pyramid of archeologists
A giggle of teenage girls
A gawp of teenage boys
A hold of sailors
A grip of luggage handlers
A slump of economists
A grievance of defendants
A whinge of consumers
A bore of mining engineers
A pot of painters
A nerd of IT workers
A bosom of strippers
A blush of nudists
A strut of models
A welcome of receptionists
An embarrassment of drunks

Appendix 4

Medical Abbreviations: how to read your prescription (and your medical notes)

Doctors like to use a good many Latin abbreviations when writing prescriptions or medical notes. The truth (speak it softly) is that most don't know much Latin and probably don't understand the real meaning of the abbreviations they use with such brio.

But here are the commonest dog Latin medical abbreviations and their meanings. Refer to this list if you need to translate your medical notes or the break the code doctors use when writing prescriptions.

Ac – before meals
Ad lib – freely
Alt die – alternate days
Bd – twice daily
C – with
Cap – capsule
c/o – complains of
dc – discontinue
ddx – differential diagnosis
dnr – do not resuscitate
dol urg – when the pain is severe
-ectomy – any word ending in ectomy suggests a removal operation (such as appendicetomy or tonsillectomy)
fx – fracture
gutt – drops
hs – bedtime
im – intramuscularly
in vitro – in the lab
in vivo – in the patient
iv - intravenously
jt – joint
lbp –low back pain
llq – left lower quadrant of the abdomen
luq – left upper quadrant of the abdomen
m – mix
n/v – nausea and or vomiting
npo – nothing by mouth
od – right eye
om – every morning
on – evening evening
os – left eye
- oscopy – a word ending in oscopy suggests having a looking at something inside the body (as in bronchoscopy, which means having a look inside the lungs or laparoscopy which means taking a look inside the abdomen)
- ostomy – a word ending in ostomy suggests that an artificial hole has been made (as a colostomy, in which a hole is made in the colon)
-otomy – a word ending in otomy suggests that an incision will be made (as in laparotomy, which means an incision in the abdomen)
ou – both eyes
p – pulse
-plasty – a word ending in plasty suggests a plastic surgeon operation (such as mammoplasty, which means a redesign of breast shape or size)
po – orally
prn - as required
qd – four times daily

qid – four times daily
qam – mornings
qhs – bedtime
r – prescribe
rlq – right lower quadrant of abdomen
ruq – right upper quadrant of abdomen
sob – shortness of breath
sos – if necessary
sq – subcutaneous
stat – immediately
t – temperature
t&a – tonsillectomy and adenoidectomy
tab – tablet
td – three times a day
tds – three times a day
tid – three times a day
thr –total hip replacement
tkr –total knee replacement
ua – urine analysis
ung – ointment
uri – upper respiratory tract infection
uti –urinary tract infection
vss – vital signs stable (pulse, temperature, blood pressure are stable)
wt – weight

And finally (once again)…

I hope you have enjoyed this book about Bilbury and the people who live in and visit the village. If you did so then I would be very grateful if you would spare a moment to write a short review. This is the 12th book in the series entitled ‘The Young Country Doctor’.
Thank you
Vernon Coleman

The Young Country Doctor Book 13

Bilbury Tales

Vernon Coleman

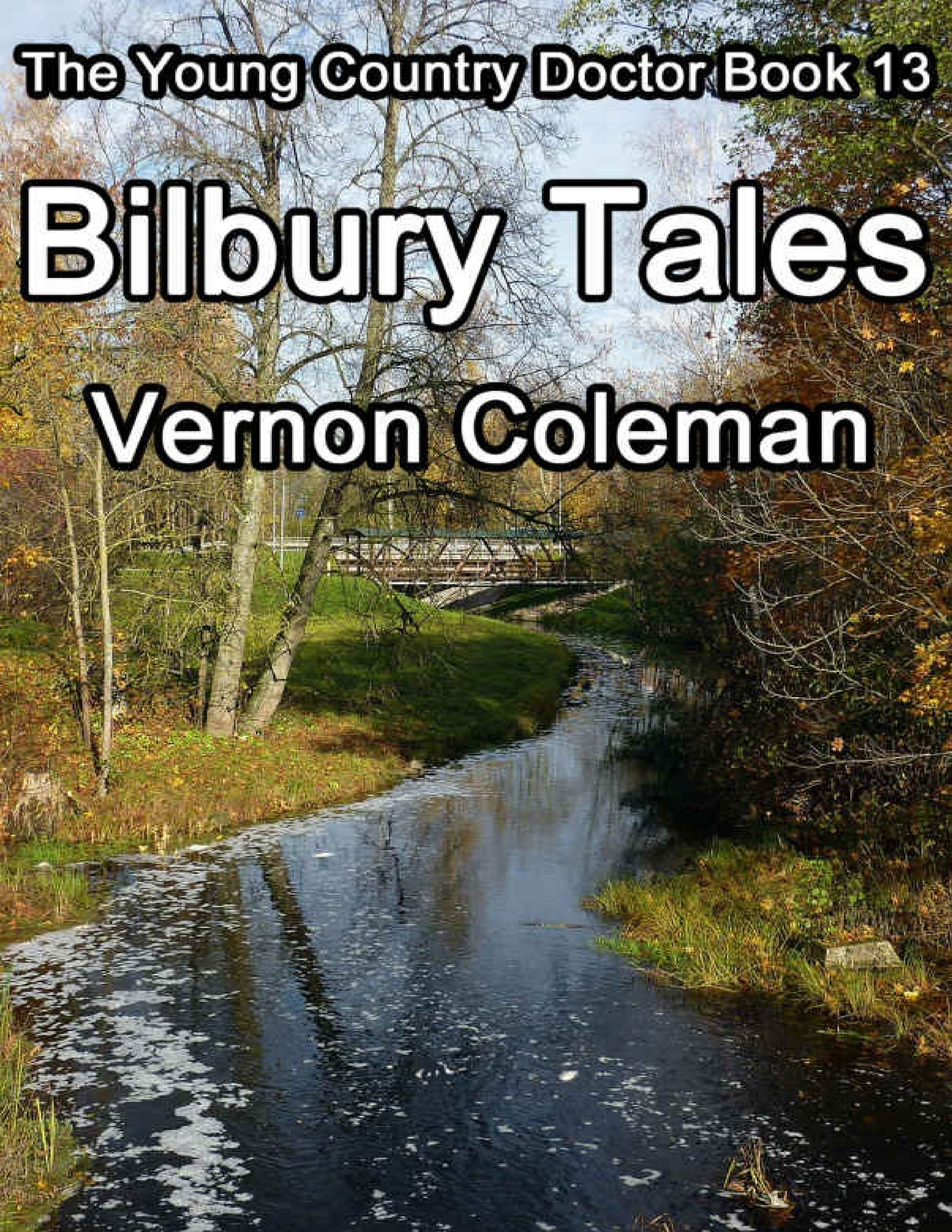

The Young Country Doctor Book 13

Bilbury Tales

Vernon Coleman

Another collection of memories from the English village of Bilbury.

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ISBN: 978 1 898146 96 4

Note: As usual, names and details of individuals, animals and establishments have been altered to protect the innocent, the guilty and those who aren't quite sure where they stand.

The Author

Vernon Coleman is a *Sunday Times* bestselling author. He has written over 100 books which have been translated into 25 languages and sold in over 50 countries. His books have sold over two million copies in the UK alone though no one is sure whether two million people each bought one book or one person has a very large library. Vernon Coleman is also a qualified doctor. He and his wife (whose real name is Antoinette) live in Bilbury, Devon, England. He is an accomplished bar billiards player (three times runner up in the Duck and Puddle Christmas competition), a keen but surprisingly dangerous skittles player and an accomplished maker of paper aeroplanes. He claims to be one of the best stone skimmers in North Devon. (Nine bounces are by no means unheard of and he has a personal best of 12 bounces.) He is a long-term member of the Desperate Dan Pie-Eater's Club (vegetarian section) and although he can juggle three balls at once, he cannot knit. He has never jumped out of an aeroplane (with or without a parachute) but he has, on several occasions, lit bonfires in the rain and is particularly proud of the fact that he once managed to light one in a snowstorm. He has not yet availed himself of the extensive opportunities apparently offered by social media (he says he is waiting to see if the idea catches on) but details of his surgery opening hours can be seen pinned on the noticeboard outside Peter Marshall's shop in the village and he has had a website (www.vernoncoleman.com) since the day after King Alfred burnt the cakes. Entrance to the website is free of charge and there is ample parking space. Visitors to the site are requested to wash their hands before entering and to wipe their feet before leaving. There are no advertisements or refreshment facilities. The Author is Grade II listed and is also registered as an Ancient Monument.

The Young Country Doctor series

The author claims that this is the 13th book in the series and so, if he has done his sums right, there are probably around twelve other books about Bilbury. All the books in the series are available as e-books on Amazon. A few hardback editions of the first seven books were published but these are all now out of print. There have not yet been any paperback copies of any of the books and the author is patiently waiting for a large international publisher to make him an offer he cannot refuse. Film companies should know that my good friends Thumper Robinson and Patchy Fogg are both happy to play themselves if a movie is made. Frank and Gilly are prepared to make the Duck and Puddle available to filmmakers. Peter Marshall would like to talk money before making a decision about his participation.

Dedication

To Antoinette, the Princess of Bilbury: Who is My True and Gentle Love

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Foreword

Here is another collection of memories from the village of Bilbury.

As we age we all tend to see the past more clearly than we sometimes see the present and these memories from the 1970s are to me now as clear as day; and considerably clearer than many of the things which happened last week.

We are encouraged by some to think of nostalgia as some sort of sin. We are told that it is sad to cling to a past that can never return and that was probably never as joyful as we remember it. We are told that nostalgia is the antithesis of progress and that progress is all that matters.

But none of that is true.

I believe that our memories can heal us, bring us peace and allow us to escape from the rigours of modern life. I do not believe that all that happened in the past was inherently good or bad, any more than I believe that all progress is good or bad.

Incidentally, the word 'nostalgia' originated in the late 18th century and was devised to define an acute sense of homesickness. The word itself was created from two Greek words: 'nostos' which means 'return home' and 'algos' which means 'pain'.

Today, there seems no doubt that we can be nostalgic for a time as much as for a place.

My purpose in my books about Bilbury is to bring back the flavour, romance (and shortcomings) of a time before computers and mobile telephones. Life was very different then. I am not suggesting that it was all necessarily better (it clearly wasn't) but I strenuously oppose those who say that it was all necessarily worse. I do not share the view that all change is necessarily progress or the idea that everything new must be 'better'. I rather favour the view of Lord Melbourne, a 19th century British Prime Minister and a favourite of Queen Victoria, whose daily creed was said to be: 'Why not leave it alone?' Why not, indeed.

Back in the 1970s, I would not have believed anyone who had told me that the time would come when GPs would not be available for their patients 24 hours a day and seven days a week. I would have been appalled if I had been told that GPs would regularly make diagnoses over the telephone or by using a computer. I wrote articles suggesting that computers would be useful for doctors as a source of up-to-date information and a way of sharing new information – particularly about drug side effects – but it never occurred to me that doctors would actively urge their patients to check their symptoms by consulting a computer website.

The fact is that life was simply different then. And in those very different times, a lot of things happened that could not possibly happen today.

If we ignore and suppress the past then we ignore and suppress much of that which we cherish in ourselves, our friends and our world.

I find that by revisiting things that happened half a century ago, I learn a good deal about human nature.

In *Bilbury Tales* I have tried to describe people and day-to-day occurrences, as well as illnesses, because I find people to be endlessly fascinating and their foibles and eccentricities to be forever enchanting and illuminating. As a doctor, I learned early on in my career that until you understand people a little you will have no chance of helping them get better.

And there are more than a few digressions.

In the real world, digressions are dismissed as 'wandering off the point'. But in literature, however lowly the form, digressions have form.

'Digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine; they are the life, the soul of reading,' wrote Laurence Sterne in *Tristram Shandy*. 'Take them out of this book for instance – you might as well take the book along with them.'

Who am I to disagree?

How accurate are my memories?

Well, that's a tricky one to answer since I have to rely on the collective memory of myself, my wife Patsy and my friends in Bilbury. As Frank Parsons said to me the other day: 'We are none of us as young as we were when we weren't as old as we are now'.

Since I am retired from general practice, I no longer have access to any medical records, of course, but I did keep fairly comprehensive diaries and those have been enormously helpful in triggering my memory. My friend Will, who retired some years ago and who now lives in France, has also been very helpful. As regular readers know, he was a frequent visitor to Bilbury and, although this may now sound unlikely and scarcely believable, the fact is that for many years he was the only other doctor I saw or spoke to regularly. Being a sole practitioner back in the 1970s could be a professionally isolated business. Patchy Fogg once reckoned that when you were in Bilbury, the nearest traffic lights were actually in Wales – across the Severn Estuary.

Readers sometimes express wonderment at the variety of characters and strange incidents in Bilbury. And, as a result, there are still some who question the existence of the village and the individuals about whom I write! (This, I confess, bewilders, confuses and even hurts my friends in equal measure.)

There are several explanations for the fact that my world in Bilbury seems to be full of incident.

First, in a small village, one tends to get to know far more about one's neighbours than is possible in a town or city. A GP working in a small village gets to know everyone who lives there.

Second, as a general practitioner, I was privileged to learn more about my fellow villagers than anyone else in the village. And, in addition to the villagers, there were many strangers who came to my surgery seeking treatment, advice or a disconnected, unprejudiced, unbiased hearing from someone whom they would probably never see again.

Third, the period in which the Bilbury stories are all set was the 1970s – and that's a decade worth of unusual events.

Some years ago, when I finally retired from general practice (largely because the strain of working 24 hours a day and 365 days a year was beginning to result in my body showing some signs of wear) Patsy and I moved away from Bilbury. We did this very reluctantly but we moved because it was nigh on impossible to stop the villagers knocking on our door or ringing for me on the telephone. And, of course, when I was called, I found it impossible not to answer.

Technically, a practice in Barnstaple had taken over my medical responsibilities. But that practice involved a number of doctors and they were at least half an hour away from the village. Moving away was the only way we could have some quiet and privacy. Naturally, we kept in close touch with all our friends there.

But we did something that, at the time, seemed to some people to be rather strange. We did not sell Bilbury Grange.

We didn't let it out either – although we had many offers and I have no doubt that we could have increased our income by letting the house to holiday-makers. In our hearts, Patsy and I both knew that we would be back in Bilbury before long. We lived in other parts of the English countryside and for quite a while, we had an apartment in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower in Paris. But when we decided that we wanted to return to Bilbury, we had no worries about finding somewhere to live.

We simply moved ourselves and our belongings back into Bilbury Grange.

And that is where I am writing this.

It is good to be back. Patsy (whose real name is Antoinette), and I love Bilbury for many reasons. We love the good friends we have there and we love the unique character of the countryside; even the harshness of the winters can be attractive.

But we love Bilbury most of all, I think, because it is a truly civilised community; in the old-fashioned sense of the word: polite, good-mannered and innately gentle. It is a community where, I think, everyone wants to make a difference.

As I get older, it seems to me that many of the standards upon which our civilisation was built have been brushed aside and forgotten. This seems to be particularly true of life in our large towns and cities. Maybe this is just a consequence of my age. But I think not.

Finally, I would like to thank you for allowing me to share more of my memories with you.

American bestselling author Dean Koontz once wrote that the joy of writing books is that the writer has a chance to leave his fingerprints on the reader's soul. 'It's not an invasion of privacy, but a small crime of kindness, a breaking and entering with the intention of giving rather than taking.'

And that is the spirit in which I write.

I love the village of Bilbury very much and it is a joy to share its history with you.

I very much hope you will enjoy this new batch of memories.

Vernon Coleman, Bilbury, Devon, England
2018

The Vet

‘Got you a present!’ said Patchy Fogg, handing me a large cardboard box.

Patchy, a good friend, is an antique dealer who lives in Bilbury.

‘Thank you!’ I said, accepting the gift and looking at the printing on the side of the box. ‘However did you know I wanted 48 tins of baked beans? Are you coming in? The coffee is on.’

It was 8.30 in the morning. I was just finishing breakfast and we were standing on the doorstep.

‘Open the box, you idiot,’ said Patchy, grinning. ‘I can’t stop. I’ve got to get to a house clearance sale in Taunton.’

I put the box down on the hall table, opened the flaps on the top and looked inside. I still wasn’t quite sure what I’d been given. I was, however, pretty sure that it wasn’t 48 tins of baked beans. I reached into the box and pulled out something that looked like a wireless set.

‘There are two of them,’ said Patchy.

I looked back into the box. Patchy was right. There were two of them. I wasn’t sure why I wanted one of whatever they were. At first glance, two of them seemed to be one too many.

‘They’re ex-army radio sets,’ explained Patchy. ‘Walkie talkies.’ He plucked the other one out of the box and held it up to show me. ‘They’re two-way radios – the things that soldiers use when they’re in the middle of a war. You know the sort of stuff. You’ve seen the films. ‘This is General Headquarters calling Z Victor Pansy Quinsy. Put down mortar fire on SO 886040. Over and out.’ And then Victor Pansy Quinsy puts down some heavy mortar fire on the old farm house and the hero rescues the girl, recaptures the missing code book and defeats the Germans single handed. You and Patsy can talk to each other when you’re out visiting patients.’

‘Why do I want…,’ I began.

And then suddenly it dawned on me and I couldn’t believe how slow I had been not to see what Patchy had seen so clearly.

When I had been out visiting a patient, I sometimes got back to Bilbury Grange only to discover that I had another visit to make only a short distance from where I’d just been.

If Patsy or Miss Johnson could reach me when I was out visiting a patient, they would be able to give me details of the new visit I needed to make. I would save the time consuming nonsense of driving back and forth unnecessarily and the patient would be seen more quickly.

The more I thought about it the more I realised that having two walkie talkie radios would revolutionise my life. There were still homes in Bilbury which did not have a telephone. If I were visiting a house with no telephone and I needed to organise an ambulance, I could simply call Patsy or Miss Johnson on the radio and ask them to arrange for an ambulance to be sent.

As things were then, I either had to return to Bilbury Grange to make the phone call or I had to drive round the village until I spotted a house which I knew to have a telephone.

‘What a brilliant idea! Where did you get these? How much do I owe you?’

‘You don’t owe me anything,’ said Patchy. ‘I got them from an auction in South Molton. They were part of a pile of junk I didn’t want but had to buy in order to get a 19th century commode chair I had my eye on.’

‘Why on earth did you want a 19th century commode chair?’ I asked. I turned a switch on one of the radios and produced a good deal of hissing and crackling.

‘It’s a convenience that was almost certainly used by Queen Victoria,’ answered Patchy. ‘The china pot, the business end of the chair, is missing but I’ve got a lovely one that will fit very nicely. It’s got a wonderful, clear picture of Gladstone on the target area and Victoria hated Gladstone didn’t she?’

I had to admit that I had no idea how Queen Victoria felt about Mr Gladstone. I knew that she had been fond of Lord Melbourne, her first Prime Minister, a wise man who flattered her endlessly, and also rather fond of Benjamin Disraeli who was clever enough to do the same, but I didn’t have the foggiest idea whether or not she liked Gladstone.

‘She hated him!’ said Patchy. ‘I looked it up in a book I’ve got about her. She absolutely hated him. She said he addressed her like a public meeting and she thought him arrogant, half-crazy and a fanatic. She’d have been absolutely delighted at the chance to take her revenge when using a commode.’

‘But no one else at the auction realised that Queen Victoria had used that particular commode?’

I fiddled with a dial on the front of one of the wirelesses. The hissing went away and the crackling grew fainter.

‘No provenance,’ said Patchy. ‘The seller didn’t have any provenance. And no one else there had the china pot with Gladstone’s mug grinning up at the royal behind!’ said Patchy with a wink.

‘But you’ve got the pot and you know where to find the provenance?’

‘Absolutely,’ said Patchy who always seems to know where to get hold of the essential piece of provenance that will turn a fairly ordinary piece of pretty worthless furniture into a rare and must-have rarity. He sells a good deal of the stuff he buys to Japanese collectors who already own every bed used by William Shakespeare and every desk and pen set belonging to Charles Dickens or Conan Doyle. (Patchy once managed to sell Sherlock Holmes’ second best deerstalker hat to a Japanese banker.)

‘And the radios came with the commode?’

‘In with a pile of junk,’ agreed Patchy. ‘It was the end of the auction and the bloke with the gavel was getting tired, so he lumped the last four lots into one and I got them all for two quid: a 19th century commode, a complete set of encyclopaedias from 1910, a watering can with a hole in the bottom and two ex-army field radios in working condition.’ He looked at his watch. ‘Must go,’ he said. ‘You’ll have to play around with the radios to see how they work.’

And with that he was back in his van.

Moments later, he had disappeared in a flurry of gravel and dust.

At the end of the morning surgery, and before I set off for the day’s home visits, it took Patsy and me half an hour to find out how the radios worked. They were set on matching frequencies, which was handy, and the batteries for both of them had been charged by the seller or the auctioneer. To our astonishment and delight, they seemed to do exactly what they were supposed to do. Patsy worked out that we had to press the button marked with a ‘T’ if we wanted to say something and be heard by the person with the other radio.

When we were both satisfied that the two radio transmitters were working, I went down to the bottom of the garden.

I pressed the button marked T and spoke.

‘Come in Bilbury Grange!’ I said into the microphone area on the radio.

I have to confess that I felt rather embarrassed doing this.

I don’t mind talking to the animals and I sometimes say encouraging words to struggling trees or bushes in the garden but talking into a radio transmitter felt suspiciously akin to talking to myself.

I waited to hear Patsy’s reply.

And I waited.

And waited.

But there was no reply.

Feeling rather disappointed, I walked back up the garden to where Patsy was standing with the other transmitter.

‘They don’t work!’ I complained.

‘I could hear you,’ said Patsy.

‘I couldn’t hear you at all.’

‘Did you remember to press the R button?’

‘No. What’s the R button?’

‘You have to press the R button when you want to hear what the other person is saying. I suppose it stands for ‘receive’.’

Now feeling thoroughly embarrassed, I hurried back down the garden and tried again. I did my bit of broadcasting and then pressed the R button and waited. This time I could hear Patsy fairly clearly. There was some hissing and crackling but I could definitely hear her voice.

‘This is Bilbury Grange calling the Flying Doctor!’

‘Got you!’ I said and waited.

Nothing.

And then I remembered the T for ‘transmit’ button.

I pressed the T button and repeated my response.

It was clearly going to take longer to master using these radios than I had anticipated. I was so accustomed to using a telephone, with which you can listen and talk at the same time, that I found it difficult to remember that I had to press a button to speak and another button to listen. Patsy, on the other hand, seemed to find the whole thing very easy to master.

Having tried them out, I was absolutely convinced that the two radio transmitters were going to revolutionise my working life. I left one of the field radios in the hall at Bilbury Grange, right next to the telephone, and put the other one into the 1920s Rolls Royce which I inherited from my predecessor, Dr Brownlow, and which was our only form of motorised transport.

As luck would have it, we didn’t need to use the radios at all for four days.

And then, on the fifth day, Patsy and I had just finished dinner and were sitting down in front of the fire when the telephone went.

‘Come at once, doctor!’ said a panicky voice I vaguely recognised. ‘It’s urgent. My husband is going to die.’

‘What’s the problem?’ I asked, trying to take the panic out of the caller by remaining calm. In a real emergency, there is no point in everyone starting to panic.

‘My husband was putting our dog down,’ said the caller. ‘And he’s injected himself by mistake.’

‘What with?’

‘I don’t know. The usual stuff he uses when he’s putting an animal to sleep, I suppose. His breathing has gone very strange.’

‘Have you called an ambulance?’

‘Yes, but they said they’ll take at least half an hour to get to us from Barnstaple.’

I was pretty sure I had now worked out who was on the other end of the telephone. ‘Is that Mrs Gaskin?’

‘Yes.’

‘You live on the Lynton road? Just before Blackmoor Gate? On the left?’

‘Yes, yes. But my husband isn’t at the house. Our dog is so big and heavy that Tom didn’t think he’d be able to carry him down to the top of the hill so he took him up there to put him to sleep.’

‘Which hill?’

‘If you come to the house I can show you,’ said Mrs Gaskin. ‘I had to come back down to use the telephone.’

‘You had to leave your husband on the hill?’

‘Yes, I hated to leave him but I had to get to the telephone. And there’s only the two of us here.’

‘Of course,’ I said. ‘Do you have a big torch?’

‘Yes.’

‘Go back up the hill to where your husband is,’ I told her. ‘And take the torch with you. Keep the torch pointed down the hill towards your house so that I can see where you are.’

It was dark and getting darker.

I don’t know why it is but I have noticed that tricky emergencies often seem to take place in the dark or the rain. Sometimes it is dark and raining.

‘I understand.’

‘I’ll be there as soon as I can,’ I promised, but I wasn’t sure that she had heard me because the telephone had gone dead. Mrs Gaskin had clearly put the telephone receiver back onto the rest.

Thomas Gaskin was, I remembered, a veterinary surgeon who had a practice in South Molton.

I seemed to remember that he dealt mainly with large farm animals but also dealt with a few domestic animals – cats and dogs and so on.

I picked up my black bag, told Patsy where I was going and leapt into the Rolls. At the last moment, almost as an afterthought, I told Patsy to make sure that the other radio was turned on.

Less than five minutes later, I skidded into the Gaskin’s farmyard. When I got there, the smell and the sounds reminded me that they kept horses. I could hear horses stamping and whinnying in the stable block. Animals always seem to know when there is something wrong. Hearing the animals, I remembered that Mrs Gaskin did some point to point racing and I also recalled that they had a daughter who was away at university but who had won several show jumping cups.

I climbed out of the car and looked around. I could see a bright light some distance away at the top of a hill. The front door of the house was open and all the lights were on but the house looked as empty as it undoubtedly was. How is it that it is possible to tell that a house is empty just by looking at it?

I picked up my medical bag, and one of the radios which Patchy had given me, and made my way up to the bottom of the hill where Mr Gaskin had taken his dog to die. There was, I thought, no little irony in the fact that he might die there himself. I assumed that the top of the hill was a favourite spot; a place where man and dog had sat and shared the silence and the view across North Devon.

I climbed the hill.

That damned hill was longer and steeper than I wanted it to be under the circumstances. I had a small torch with me but with my bag in one hand and the radio in the other, I had to hold the torch in my teeth. Several times I nearly dumped the damned radio which seemed to get heavier by the second. It was, I suppose, built to survive rough and tough conditions and the casing seemed to have been carved out of a solid ingot of iron.

Mrs Gaskin, who was undoubtedly trying to be helpful, kept her much powerful torch directed down the hill. I think it was her intention to light the way but in practice all that happened was that she blinded me. I nearly fell twice when I put a foot into rabbit holes. There must have been a good many rabbits around for there were a good many rabbit holes.

I found Thomas Gaskin slumped on a wooden bench on the grass at the top of the hill. The bench had been placed underneath a small, gnarled oak tree. It was clearly a favourite spot. The vet looked at first as if he were dead or dying. A Great Dane was lying on the floor beside him. The dog was breathing and panting but it too looked moribund. Of the two, however, the dog was definitely in the better condition.

A grave had been dug in the ground about five or six feet away from the bench. There was a pile of soft earth next to it. I supposed that the plan had been to drag the dog's body across to the grave when the deed had been done. If you have to die then it wasn't a bad place to be buried. The damned grave was almost big enough for the dog's owner, let alone the dog.

'That's Nelson, our oldest dog. He has cancer,' explained Mrs Gaskin. 'Tom has been treating him for weeks and tonight he decided that there wasn't anything else he could do and that it was time to put Nelson out of his misery.'

I put down my bag and the radio and picked up a syringe that was lying on the grass. It was around a third full. I then looked around for the ampoule which had contained whatever had been in the syringe. I guessed it was probably pentobarbital – it's a short acting barbiturate and the drug which vets usually prefer when they have to euthanize an animal. Mr Gaskin would have used a hefty dose because the dog was a large one. My guess was correct. The pentobarbital ampoule was nearby, on the bench. And it was empty. A large dose of pentobarbital can stop the heart and shut down the brain within minutes. A single gram of the drug can produce serious poisoning and two grams can kill.

'Were you here when it happened?'

'Yes. We wanted to say goodbye to Nelson together. Thomas put Nelson right next to him, with his head and chest on his leg.'

'How long ago did it happen?' I asked, opening my black bag and taking out my portable sphygmomanometer.

'Oh, just a few minutes before I called you,' replied Mrs Gaskin. 'I ran down to the house and called the ambulance first and they said to call you as well because you would be able to get here quicker.'

I tried to roll up Mr Gaskin's jacket sleeve but I couldn't move it. I then tried to pull his arm out of the jacket but I couldn't do that either. The vet, in his late fifties, must have weighed 20 stone. I had met him a couple of times and knew he was a bear of a man. I'm well over six feet tall and he was as tall as I am but much broader and more strongly built. I doubted if he had ever worked out in a gym but a man who deals with sheep, cows and horses on a daily basis soon develops some serious quantities of muscle. I knew I wouldn't be able to lift him in order to undress him.

Thoughts raced through my mind.

A pentobarbital overdose can be fatal in minutes even when the drug has been taken orally. This hefty dose of the drug had been given straight into a muscle and would act faster. I could only hope that Mr Gaskin hadn't hit a blood vessel by accident and injected the stuff intravenously. His size and weight would work in our favour, of course. A small person, weighing 100 pounds would be in a lot more trouble than a tall, well-built man weighing over 200 pounds. I took out my penknife and cut through his jacket. I then cut through the jumper he was also wearing and ripped open the front of his shirt. Buttons flew everywhere.

'What are you doing?' asked Mrs Gaskin, who seemed rather shocked.

'I need to check his blood pressure and I need to listen to his heart. And I'm going to need to set up a drip.'

There isn't all that much that can be done to treat a patient who has had a pentobarbital overdose. But I did know that I needed to push some fluids into his blood stream. It's the only way to push up the blood pressure and improve the working of the heart. And it is the only way to dilute the drug in the patient's body. I couldn't stop thinking about how crazy it was for a man to die this way.

'Oh gosh, yes,' said Mrs Gaskin. Her voice wavered but she wasn't crying. That, I guessed, would come later. Whatever the outcome there would be tears.

'Tom had Nelson lying on his lap and he was about to give him the injection but he was crying when he had the syringe in his hand. He loves that dog so much. We've had him since he was a puppy. He's 16-years-old and part of the family. Tom was sobbing and at the moment, when he aimed the syringe at Nelson, the dog moved. Tom's hand with the syringe missed Nelson's body completely and went into his own thigh.'

Mr Gaskin's blood pressure was absurdly low for a man of his size.

His systolic pressure was around 85 and his diastolic was only just over 60.

His pulse was feeble; very weak. It felt very thready and unsatisfactory. I didn't bother to count it. I didn't have a minute or even half a minute to waste.

I didn't want to waste time taking his temperature either, but he felt cold. His pupils were constricted and he was drifting in and out of consciousness. Mostly, he was unconscious. Occasionally, he managed to say something though I couldn't tell what it was he was saying.

Suddenly he started to retch and then he vomited a little food.

'Won't that help?' asked his wife. 'They say that when people have had an overdose it can help to make them vomit.'

'It won't help at all, I'm afraid,' I told her. 'Your husband gave himself an intramuscular injection so the drug went straight into his tissues and completely bypassed his stomach.'

In fact, though I didn't tell Mrs Gaskin, I now had a new problem.

Unconscious and semi-conscious patients often choke on their own vomit. It's why patients are put on their side, into the classical recovery position.

But I couldn't get Mr Gaskin onto his side and I needed to make sure that his airway remained open. If he vomited and then inhaled the vomit, we would be in real trouble. His head was slumped to one side too and that wasn't helping his airway.

I did think of dragging him off the bench and onto the grass so that I could put him into the recovery position. But that wouldn't be easy. I had a nightmare thought that if I rolled him off the bench he might just continue rolling down the hill. It wasn't impossible. It was a steep hill. It was dark and getting darker by the minute. I couldn't lift him and I would have to drag him off the bench. Mrs Gaskin didn't look strong so I didn't want to ask her to help. If she tore something or had a heart attack, I would be in even more trouble.

Up until this moment, there had been a little moonlight to help me see what I was doing. The moon now chose to go behind a cloud.

I remembered seeing an advertisement for a new and very powerful torch that could be worn on the head – like a miner's lamp. I'd sworn that I would buy myself one but had never got round to it. I used to have one but it was so weak that it was pretty well useless and I threw it into a drawer. It's astonishing how these incongruous thoughts slip in and out of the conscious mind at the most inappropriate moments.

I opened my black bag and took out an endotracheal tube. I asked Mrs Gaskin to direct her torch onto her husband's face. If I could slip the tube down his throat and into his trachea it would help ensure that his airway remained open. It would provide protection and stop him breathing in anything he vomited. Then I would be able to concentrate on putting up a drip so that I could push in some extra fluids to keep him alive. He was a big man and his blood pressure was already absurdly low and his pulse terrifyingly weak.

And as he drifted back into unconsciousness, I managed to get the tube into place.

Now I had to put up a drip so that I could push some fluids into him.

I looked at my watch. There was still at least fifteen minutes to go before I could expect to hear the ambulance coming. Living in the middle of nowhere is very nice until you have an emergency. And then you're very much on your own.

I suddenly remembered the time I'd had to amputate a man's leg because he'd got stuck between two rocks when the tide was coming in. I had lost my black bag to the sea on that occasion and the bag I was now using was one which the man whose life I'd saved had bought for me as a thank you gift.

I took a needle and some tubing out of my bag and suddenly realised that since we were out of doors, I didn't have anywhere to hang the bag of fluid. In hospitals, the staff always have a drip stand handy – a special device upon which the bag of fluid can be hung. Indoors there is nearly always something you can use. A standing lamp, a bookcase or a doorway will all do very well.

But I was out in the open at the top of a hill. And sometimes the impossible situations simply keep getting more and more impossible.

Then I realised that the bench upon which Mr Gaskin was sitting was underneath a tree.

Thank heavens that Mr Gaskin liked to sit under a tree. Thank you, God, for putting a tree on top of a hill.

It was a small, lonely, windswept, stunted oak. You could see which way the prevailing wind blew by the way the branches had been shaped.

Of course, the tree could not have been put there by God.

There were no other trees around.

And why would a squirrel plant an acorn on top of a lonely hill?

The tree must have been deliberately planted there by Mr Gaskin or some previous owner of the land. It had struggled to thrive but it had survived. Once an oak gets its roots into the ground, it will not easily give up the struggle.

Why the devil were all these unwanted, irrelevant thoughts wandering through my head?

I looked up and could see the silhouette of a perfectly positioned and solid enough branch right above the vet's head.

It took me only a moment to find a vein, slam in a needle and then connect the needle, the tubing and a bag of saline. It felt good to know that I had fluid flowing into his body. It was the only thing I could do to help. I reached up and hung the bag on the branch above us. The branch bowed but held.

And then I had a brilliant thought.

Why didn't I put up two drips?

If I put a drip into each arm then I could push fluid into his body twice as quickly. I'd never seen anyone do that before but I couldn't see what was wrong with the idea.

Mr Gaskin's breathing seemed to be getting weaker and shallower. I didn't like that at all and wondered if I would have to start giving him mouth to mouth respiration.

In an accident and emergency unit in a hospital, a patient with a serious drug overdose of this type would be surrounded by skilled, specialist doctors and nurses. There would be at least half a dozen people checking on his vital signs, giving him fluid, checking his breathing and so on.

Here there was just me.

And I was on the top of a hill in the middle of nowhere.

And it was dark.

At least it wasn't raining.

And then the radio barked at me.

Honestly, that was what it sounded like.

I jumped, Mrs Gaskin jumped and the dying dog jumped. The only one of us who didn't jump was Mr Gaskin.

'What on earth was that?' asked Mrs Gaskin.

'It was my radio,' I explained.

I found the radio (not as easy as it might have been since the radio was the same colour as the grass and in the dark, it was perfectly camouflaged), picked it up and remembered to press R to receive.

It was Patsy.

This was, I suppose, not surprising since there were only two radios on this frequency and she was the only other person to have one.

The reception was quite good though it occurred to me that this might have been because I was standing on the top of a hill.

'The ambulance people just telephoned,' she said. 'They can't get an ambulance to you quite as quickly as they'd hoped. There's been a bus crash in Bideford and everyone is tied up over there. Apparently they did send an ambulance out to Bilbury but unfortunately it went into a ditch.'

'OK,' I said. I then pressed the T button and said it again.

'Can you manage? Is everything OK?'

'I'm going to need more fluid,' I told her. 'Another two or three litres of saline.'

'Anything else?'

'No. I just need more saline. I'm going to try putting up two drips to push through more fluid. But I've only got one litre of saline with me. I'd have been OK if the ambulance had turned up as planned but…' I let the rest of the sentence drift off into nothing.

'Do you want me to bring it round to you on my bicycle?' asked Patsy. She wasn't joking. We only had one motor car and I had it with me.

'No,' I told her. 'That would take too long. I'm going to ask Mrs Gaskin to come and collect the stuff. Put three bags of saline into a box and give it to her when she arrives. No, wait. If the ambulance doesn't arrive, I might need more than that. Put all the bags of saline we've got into the box. That big cardboard box that Patchy used when he brought us the radios is still in the hall. Use that.'

We then did the over and out thing and I turned to Mrs Gaskin.

'I urgently need more bags of saline,' I told her.

'I heard,' she said.

'You know how to get to Bilbury Grange?'

'Yes,' she said. 'But our Land Rover broke down this morning…'

I couldn't believe it.

'But don't worry. I'll ride. It will be quicker anyway. I'll go across the fields. I'll leave you the torch.'

And with that she was gone; running down the hill.

I used the radio to tell Patsy that Mrs Gaskin was travelling by horse. 'She won't be able to carry a cardboard box. Put the saline into a rucksack,' I told her. 'There's an old one in the hall cupboard.'

While she was gone, I monitored Mr Gaskin's vital signs. He was now completely unconscious. His blood pressure was still frighteningly low and his pulse was still weak.

Astonishingly, Mrs Gaskin was back in minutes. She even managed to ride up the hill to where I was struggling to keep her husband alive. She passed me the rucksack which Patsy had packed for me.

By the time the ambulance arrived an hour and three quarters later, Mr Gaskin was conscious and talking and I'd used up all the saline his wife had brought from Bilbury Grange.

I still sent him over to the hospital, though.

I wanted them to check him over and keep him under observation for a day or two.

Thankfully, miraculously, he made a full recovery.

And by then one of his partners had given poor Nelson an injection to put him to sleep.

The next time I saw my chum Patchy, I told him that I had no doubt that the radios he had given me had saved a life. If I hadn't known that the ambulance wasn't coming I would not have known to send Mrs Gaskin to Bilbury Grange to fetch more saline.

Sadly, the Gaskin case was something of an exception for the radios didn't turn out to be quite as useful as I had hoped.

The problem was that North Devon is a very hilly part of England, full of hills and valleys, and as a result, radio reception was extremely patchy and unreliable. In the end, we pretty well gave up using the two radios which Patchy had found.

But I have absolutely no doubt that they helped save Mr Gaskin's life.

The Tree Surgeon

For a few weeks we'd had a problem at Bilbury Grange; the house in Bilbury where Patsy and I lived, and where I had my consulting rooms.

The problem was that a branch of a beautiful silver birch tree was blocking the chimney of our dining room at Bilbury Grange.

On several occasions, charred bits of twig from the tree had fallen down the chimney and I really wanted to have the offending branch trimmed away. I was worried that a bigger piece of the branch would fall down and cause a fire.

But several attempts to deal with the problem had proved unsuccessful.

First, I'd tried to reach the top of the tree by ladder. That had proved entirely unsuccessful and even when I'd climbed up to the topmost rung of our longest ladder, I had still been a long way from being able to cut the branch from the tree.

Second, our usual tree surgeon, Mr Rate, who runs a business called 'Special Branch', was away doing something important and no doubt profitable for the Forestry Commission and was working in another part of Devon. Although I had been able to speak to his wife, Amelia, I had not been able to get any idea of when he would be back and available for small, domestic work.

One Sunday, when we were having lunch together, I mentioned our problem to Patsy's father, Mr Kennet. He told me that he was hiring a large JCB digger for a few days. He needed the digger in order to excavate some blocked ditches on his farm, and to dig out the bed of a lake which had become a final resting place for a couple of dead sycamore trees, demolished by a recent storm.

'The model I've hired has a massive reach,' he told me. 'I'll drive it past the Grange on my way to one of my fields. You can climb into the excavator bucket and I'll lift you up to the top of the tree that needs trimming.'

'Will it really go up that high?' I asked him.

'No problem,' he assured me.

'Is the bucket thing big enough to hold me?'

'They're enormous. You could organise a dance in one of those buckets.'

'Is it safe?' asked Patsy.

Mr Kennet, who had a traditional farmer's attitude towards risk, laughed and assured her that I would be completely safe standing in his JCB bucket.

'The last time I rented one of these things I put Mick into the bucket and he cleaned out all our gutters for me. I got him up there and down again without any problems.'

Mick is one of Mr Kennet's farm labourers. He has, over the last few years, broken his right leg once, both arms (once for the left and twice for the right) and his left shoulder blade.

I was not, I confess, entirely happy about the plan but I could hardly say 'No' to my father-in-law's generous offer. We get on well enough but I don't think he's ever entirely got used to the idea of his daughter having married someone who insists on wearing gloves when working in the garden. Mr Kennet has skin the colour, texture and thickness of leather and I've seen him pick up a bunch of heavily thorned rose stems without flinching.

Still, his kind offer was a way to get rid of our little tree problem.

And what could possibly go wrong?

I'd climb into the bucket on the end of the JCB digger's arm. Mr Kennet would pull a lever or press a button or whatever you do with these things, and I would be raised up to the top of the tree. I would cut off the branch that was hanging over our chimney. Mr Kennet would then bring me back to earth. I would climb out of the bucket, thank him and wave goodbye as he trundled off to clear ditches and dredge lakes.

I had half forgotten about the offer when the telephone rang at 6.15 a.m. one morning.

'I'll be with you in five minutes,' said my father-in-law. 'You can trim that little branch that's giving you trouble. Get your loppers ready. Oh, and you'll need some wellington boots because the JCB bucket is still a bit muddy.'

He rang off.

I leapt out of bed.

'Who was that?' asked Patsy, sleepily.

'Your father. He's bringing his JCB round so that I can cut that branch over the dining room fireplace.'

'When?' demanded Patsy, sitting up in bed.

'In less than five minutes!'

'Oh crumbs! Don't be late! You know what Dad's like.'

Unlike most other farmers in Bilbury, my father-in-law tends to do everything at top speed, and he gets terribly upset if he has to hang around and wait. Since he had doubtless hired the huge JCB by the day, and had probably paid a small fortune to do so, he would not, I knew, want to waste a minute.

I looked around the bedroom for my clothes. I normally keep a set of clothing by the side of the bed, ready for emergency calls during the night.

'Where are my trousers and shirt?' I asked Patsy.

'Didn't you have to go out during the night?'

And then I remembered. Patsy was absolutely right. In fact I'd been out twice.

First, I'd had an emergency call to visit the Southams. Mr Southam had cut himself with a saw. His wife had bandaged it up but the bandage had come off and the wound had started bleeding again. I'd put in a few stitches. It had been raining heavily and since I'd had to park the car and walk a quarter of a mile to their cottage, I'd got back home soaked to the skin and muddy up to my knees. I had thrown all my clothes, including the pyjamas I had been wearing underneath, straight into the washing machine.

The second call had been a false alarm.

Mrs Watson, who was having her first baby, thought she was going into labour. But she had been merely suffering the painful consequences of eating half a jar of pickled onions.

Once again I'd come home soaked, and those clothes had also gone into the washing machine.

'Where's my dressing gown?' I asked.

'I put it into the wash yesterday. It was covered in dog and cat hairs.

I opened my wardrobe, wondering what else to wear. This was, I suspected, going to be a dirty job and I keep my gardening clothes in the potting shed. There really wasn't time to go and fetch them. I have never been someone who acquires a lot of clothes. All I had left in the wardrobe were my best jacket and trousers. If I got those muddy, I wouldn't have anything to wear for the morning surgery.

'Just put on my dressing gown,' said Patsy. 'It's due for a wash anyway. And it'll keep you decent. You can't go out there naked.'

This seemed sensible. It would take no more than five minutes for Mr Kennet to lift me to the top of the silver birch, for me to cut off the branch that needed removing, and for him to lower me back to the ground.

Patsy threw me her dressing gown and then started rummaging in her dressing table. 'And put these on,' she said, handing me a bright blue pair of swimming goggles.

'Swimming goggles? Why do I need these?'

'Because we had a fire in the dining room last night and for some reason you put on a huge log not long before we came to bed. The fire will still be smoking. And if you're hanging around a couple of feet away from the chimney, you'll get smoke in your eyes and you won't be able to see what you're doing. I don't want you falling out of that digger bucket because you can't see anything.'

Patsy was clearly still unhappy about the plan.

I must admit that I wasn't too keen on it either. I'm not one of those unfortunate souls who freezes if they have to go half way up a stepladder but I've never had much of a head for heights.

The swimming goggles seemed a good idea.

I put them on.

And then I rushed downstairs, found my tree loppers, put on my green Wellington boots (I'd have preferred black but Peter only had green ones when I'd bought that pair) and dashed outside. I got there just in time because Mr Kennet was parking the JCB close to the Grange and to the tree which he had correctly guessed needed attention.

'What the hell have you got on?' demanded Mr Kennet.

He seemed surprised to see me wearing a pink, fluffy dressing gown and a pair of bright blue swimming goggles. The dressing gown was clearly several sizes too small for me. The sleeves finished six inches before they got to my wrists.

'It's Patsy's,' I explained.

'I'm pleased to hear it,' said Mr Kennet, drily.

'It'll only be for five minutes,' I assured him. 'And there won't be anyone about at this time in the morning.' I didn't bother to explain about the swimming goggles.

With some difficulty, I climbed into the JCB bucket. It was, as I had been warned, very muddy and wet.

And just then it started to rain again.

It wasn't one of those light showers that you can ignore. It was heavy, serious rain which came down as suddenly as if someone up in the heavens had turned on a shower tap. And the wind, an easterly, was strong and gusting stronger. I am never much good at guessing the speed of a wind but this was moving the trees – not just the smaller branches and the twigs but the larger branches too.

‘I am always conscious of an uncomfortable sensation now and then when the wind is blowing in the east,’ said Mr Jarndyce in Bleak House.

I knew what he meant.

‘You’d better put this on!’ said Mr Kennet, rummaging around behind him and then tossing me a shiny, bright yellow sou’wester. ‘It’ll go nicely with that dressing gown.’

I caught the waterproof hat and put it on. At Mr Kennet’s suggestion, I tied the string under my chin to make sure it didn’t blow off. The item might have its uses but whoever designed the sou’wester had a malicious sense of humour for there is no more comical piece of headgear in the world.

Mr Kennet then played around with the machine’s levers and a minute or two later, I was up at the height of our chimney and able to cut off the branch which was causing the problem. While I was there, I also removed one or two smaller branches which looked as though they might become problematical at some time in the near future. Patsy had been right. The chimney was still smoking and I was glad I was wearing the swimming goggles. The smoke made me cough. Up at tree top height, the wind seemed even more noticeable, though I suppose that this was because sitting in the JCB excavator bucket, I felt exceptionally vulnerable.

However, everything had gone perfectly to plan and I called down to Mr Kennet to let him know that I’d finished what I had needed to do.

A couple of minutes later, I called back down again to remind him that I was ready to go back down.

‘Can’t work out how to bring you down!’ yelled Mr Kennet. ‘Getting you up there was easy enough but Pete, one of my guys, usually operates this thing and I’m buggered if I can bring the bucket back to earth. It’s one of these levers but I can’t remember which one. I don’t want to just take my chances in case I tip up the bucket and throw you out by mistake.’

I thought at first that he was joking.

I called to tell him that it was the best joke I had ever heard while stuck in an excavator bucket in a high wind but that having enjoyed the gag I would be able to appreciate it more if he would take me back to earth as quickly as possible. It was, however, so windy that I doubt if he heard more than half of this.

‘I’m serious!’ he shouted. ‘I can’t for the life of me remember which lever brings the bucket back down.’

Feeling very vulnerable and now utterly soaked, I peered down at him in disbelief.

‘The quickest thing to do will be to drive to the field where we’re due to be working,’ shouted Mr Kennet. ‘Pete will be there. He’ll get you down in a jiffy. No problem.’

I couldn’t help thinking that these things always happen to me.

However, there wasn’t much point in worrying about it because I could do absolutely nothing about my situation. Stuck in the bucket of a JCB digger, suspended chimney pot high, I was entirely in the hands of my father-in-law. I could only hope that I hadn’t done anything to annoy him too much.

When we had been stationary, the bucket in which I was now stranded had been extremely stable. But once the JCB started to move along the Bilbury lanes, the bucket began to sway rather alarmingly. In fact, it was swaying so much that I actually began to feel a little seasick. I had to crouch down, half kneeling, half sitting in the muddy water at the bottom of the bucket, and gripping the sides of the bucket as if my life depended on it, which I suppose it probably did.

And still the rain kept coming down. And the level of the muddy water in the bucket kept rising noticeably. Since I was crouching, the water poured into my Wellington boots and soon the only part of me that was dry was my head; safely ensconced in my father-in-law’s sou’wester.

From time to time, I popped my head out of the bucket in order to see where we were.

We travelled slowly, of course. Large JCB diggers aren’t designed to race and they don’t exactly break any speed limits.

The difficulties were compounded by three things.

First, our lanes in Bilbury are very narrow and have high hedges which make it difficult to manoeuvre or, indeed, to see where you are or what is coming.

Second, Mr Kennet wasn’t a very experienced JCB driver.

Third, with the bucket up in the air, Mr Kennet had to keep swerving around tree branches.

Oh, and did I mention that it was raining?

Actually, it wasn’t just raining – it was the sort of weather that would have made King Lear sit up and take notice. And I was just thinking that all we needed was a clap of thunder and a flash of lightning, when the Good Lord obliged by providing more than ample quantities of both – treating the whole of Bilbury to a free son et lumière spectacle.

It must have taken us half an hour to cover a mile.

It was on one of the occasions when I had my head out of the bucket, trying to see where we were, that I noticed that we were passing the Duck and Puddle, Bilbury's only public house.

Frank Parsons, the landlord, was outside the pub supervising an unusually early delivery of best bitter from the brewery. The driver of the dray was skilfully rolling the barrels to the chute leading down into the pub's cellar.

Frank, noticing a huge JCB passing by, looked up and saw me. He immediately yelled at Mr Kennet and asked him to stop.

'Is that you, doc?' Frank called, peering uncertainly through the rain.

I confirmed that I was, indeed, me.

'What the devil are you doing up there? Is it carnival week? Why are you in fancy dress?'

'It's a long story,' I explained.

'While you're up there,' said Frank. 'Can you see if we have a slipped slate on our roof? Water has been coming into one of the guest bedrooms.'

I looked at the pub's roof. There was, indeed, a slipped slate. The slippage had left a gap about four or five inches wide, plenty big enough to enable water to enter the pub and do a considerable amount of damage to a bedroom ceiling. The roof was not lined with wood or with felt and I could see clearly into the loft.

'I can see it,' I said.

'Can you push the slate back into position?' yelled Frank.

I reached out of the bucket as far as I could but I couldn't quite reach the slate that needed repositioning. 'I'd have to climb out and onto the roof,' I told him. 'And the roof looks very wet and pretty slippery.'

'Oh, you'll be fine,' said Frank, offering all the reassurance of a confident man standing on terra firma.

'You climb out onto the roof and sort out Frank's slate while I go and get Pete to show me which levers to pull to get the bucket back down again,' shouted my father-in-law, who had climbed out of the cab to see what was happening.

Gingerly, I clambered out of the JCB bucket and crawled onto the flat roof of one of the pub's dormer windows. From my vantage point on the small area of flat roof, I could fairly easily reach the slate that had slipped. I really didn't like being up on Frank's roof very much at all but Frank is my friend and I wanted to help.

As I listened to the JCB trundling away along the road, I pushed and pulled at the slipped slate and gradually managed to jam it back into position. You can do that sometimes with slates. Of course, they only stay where they've been put until they decide to slip out again but you can sometimes manage a repair this way that lasts years. Frank doesn't tend to think in terms of years, anyway. He'd be happy if the water stopped coming through the guest bedroom ceiling for a month or two. It's difficult to rent a room when there's a bucket by the side of the bed and a steady drip, drip of rain water interfering with the bucolic peace and quiet which the visitor was expecting.

When I'd got the slate as firmly fixed as was possible, I sat on the flat roof of the dormer window and waited for my father-in-law or Pete to return with the JCB and its bucket.

And I waited.

And I waited.

Realising that Patsy would wonder where I had got to, and why it was taking me so long to cut a small branch off a silver birch tree, I asked Frank to ring Bilbury Grange and let my wife know that I'd hit a bit of a snag but would be home soon.

And as I sat on Frank and Gilly's roof, it soon became clear that the JCB was being used for whatever it had been hired to do and I had been forgotten. Meanwhile, the rain was getting heavier again. And the wind now seemed to me to be something between a gale and a hurricane. I decided that my account with my father-in-law was well in credit.

Meanwhile, the village of Bilbury had woken up and people were moving about.

By half past eight, Thumper Robinson and Patchy Fogg had appeared on the road below my perch.

'Why are you sitting up there?' asked Thumper.

'It's the only flat piece on Frank's roof,' I replied. 'If I sit anywhere else I'll slide off and come to a very sticky end.'

Soon both Thumper and Patchy were offering advice and a commentary on my costume. I guessed, correctly as it turned out, that they had both been telephoned by Frank.

And it seemed from what they said that it was the first time they'd ever seen anyone sitting on the flat roof of one of the dormer windows of the Duck and Puddle public house wearing a pink but soggy dressing gown, green Wellington boots, blue swimming goggles and a yellow sou'wester; although by this time, the blue swimming goggles were dangling round my neck and I had untied the cord holding on the yellow sou'wester since I seemed to remember once laughing at someone who had his hat tied under his chin with a piece of string. It's not a dignified look.

Summoning up every last vestige of my badly damaged dignity, I told the pair of them, and the rest of the crowd which had gathered and which was growing by the minute, that if they really hadn't ever seen anything similar then they'd led insular and sheltered lives and needed to get out more.

It occurred to me that in a town or a city, a man sitting on a roof would probably attract little or no attention. Unless there seemed to be a chance that he might jump to his death, passers-by would simply assume that he was some sort of eccentric; perhaps a harmless lunatic; perhaps a madman who, for some unexplained reason, preferred to sit on the roof rather than in an easy chair in front of the television set. The green Wellington boots, the blue swimming goggles, the yellow sou'wester and the fluffy, pink dressing gown would have confirmed all suspicions of any combination of lunacy and eccentricity.

Frank brought out the longest ladder he could find but it wasn't long enough. The top rung was about four feet below me and there was absolutely no way I was going to accept his suggestion that I dangle off the edge and wiggle my feet about until I felt the ladder with my toes.

To be honest, I wouldn't have climbed down that ladder even if it had reached the roof. It was a wooden ladder and at least a quarter of the rungs had been eaten by woodworm and some of them were missing completely. The remainder of the rungs would probably turn to powder if anyone trod on them. Frank only keeps the ladder so that he can tell the local council that he has suitable emergency equipment available for the rescue of any paying guests who might be trapped as a result of a fire.

Thumper suggested that Frank open the window just below me so that I could swing down off the flat roof and into the bedroom. I laughed at this suggestion and as I did so, I sincerely hoped that the laugh was capable of being described as 'derisory'. A monkey could have probably managed the manoeuvre but I was already worrying about how I was going to get back into the JCB bucket if my father-in-law ever remembered to come back for me. Any manoeuvre which required more in the way of gymnastic skills was way outside my limited repertoire.

At twenty to nine, Frank threw up a metal weight with a piece of strong cord attached. He had to do it four times but eventually I managed to catch the weight. Frank told me to take hold of the string and let down the weight, which I did. He then tied a small wicker shopping basket to the other end of the cord and told me to haul up the basket. I was quite delighted when I found that the basket contained several slices of buttered toast and half a mug of coffee. The mug had been full of coffee when it had started its journey but all the jerking on the cord had resulted in a considerable amount of spillage. I didn't really mind that half the coffee had been spilt because I was conscious of the fact that if I drank too much my bladder would need emptying and although part of me found the idea of emptying it over the small crowd below distinctly attractive, the more rational part of my brain told me that this would not be something that would be easily erased from village memory. Mind you, I was pretty sure that it was going to be some time before I lived down the story of how I came to be marooned on the pub roof wearing green Wellington boots, a bedraggled, pink dressing gown, blue swimming goggles and a yellow sou'wester which I no longer really needed because it had finally stopped raining. If I'd been wearing anything underneath it, I would have taken off the pink, fluffy dressing gown which was soaking, very absorbent and extremely uncomfortable.

I heard someone down below, I think it was one of the Beresford brothers, say that I was up on Frank's roof as a bet. Someone else said he had heard that it was a forfeit I was paying in lieu of a gambling debt.

And then I heard Mrs Trenchmore say she knew for a fact that I was up there for charity and that I had only chosen to sit on Frank's roof because I didn't have a long pole with a barrel fixed to the top of it.

I remembered those pole sitters.

The fashion started in the United States in the 1920s. A stuntman climbed up a flagpole and stayed there for hours, though no one seems certain just why he did it. Within days, there were people up flagpoles all over America. It must have seemed as though half the nation was sitting at the top of poles. The idea never really caught on outside the United States though the practice did have something of a revival in the 1950s when one or two exhibitionists competed to see just how long they could sit up on top of their poles. They didn't actually sit on the top of the poles, of course. They had little platforms built, about the size of the dormer roof on which I was sitting. They had food and drink sent up to them and usually tied themselves to the pole so that they could sleep without dropping off.

Mrs Trenchmore's certainty about my being up there for charity, quickly became the default diagnosis and soon people were not trying to decide what I was doing on Frank's roof but what charity I was doing it for. It quickly became accepted wisdom that I was raising money for our local hospital and Frank, showing a surprising turn of speed, darted indoors and came out three minutes later with a yellow, plastic bucket and a large piece of brown cardboard upon which he had written the single word 'Donations'.

Mrs Harrod said she wasn't going to give a penny and didn't care who knew it because she thought it was rather irresponsible of me to be sitting on the roof of the Duck and Puddle when it was time for me to be doing the morning surgery, and did I really expect her to climb up onto the roof just so that she could obtain a new prescription for her two way stretch, double strength, flesh coloured, elastic stockings.

Peter Marshall, proprietor of Bilbury's only shop, turned up and wanted to know why I was sitting where I was.

I told him what I'd already told Thumper, that it was the only flat area on Frank's roof and that if I tried sitting on the bits that sloped, I would slide down and that I didn't really want to do that.

Peter then wanted to know if I would take advertising.

He said he'd heard that someone had telephoned the local television station and that they were sending someone round to film me. He said he would make a generous donation to my charity if I held up a sign promoting his special offer on hand-cut kindling. The discovery that if I stayed where I was, my discomfort would end up as the light relief item at the end of the local television company's evening news programme added a new layer of panic to my discomfort.

By ten past nine that morning, the crowd included quite a few people who would have been at Bilbury Grange for the morning surgery if I hadn't been sitting on Frank's roof, and to my astonishment I found myself giving medical advice to people down below.

Miss Broderick showed me her elbow and wanted to know if her psoriasis looked any better to me. Since I could hardly see her elbow, let alone her psoriasis, I had to tell her that I needed to see her at the surgery. Mr Lincoln told me that his ankle still wasn't better and would I give him another sick note. He said a week would just about do it nicely. I had to tell him that I didn't have any sick notes with me. Mr Nightingale wanted to know if I would syringe the wax out of his ears if he shinned up the drainpipe. And Mrs Oliver told her nine-year-old to say Ahhhhh and wanted to know if I thought his tonsils were inflamed.

'Do you want me to go to Bilbury Grange and collect your prescription pad?' asked Thumper who was having difficulty not laughing.

'I've got forty feet of rubber tubing in the garage,' said Patchy. 'Shall I fetch your stethoscope? I could use my rubber tubing to extend the length of it and you could listen to people's hearts and chests while you're up there.'

This suggestion occasioned considerable amusement and many ribald comments which I ignored with as much dignity as I could muster. Two workmen who had rested their bicycles against the pub wall wanted to know if I was expecting to have to examine any interesting chests.

And then Mrs Wilkins said she wanted to know what I was wearing underneath the dressing gown and Mrs Oliver said she would have thought a doctor would have owned a dressing gown that fitted him properly and Mrs Jones said that for what it was worth she could pretty well confirm that she'd been keeping a close eye on me, especially when I moved my legs to avoid getting cramp, and was certain that I hadn't got on anything at all underneath the dressing gown.

I told my pal Thumper that if he didn't go and fetch Mr Kennet and his ruddy JCB digger to get me down very soon, I would certify him as suffering from an unpleasant communicable disease; something deadly which would require men wearing white suits and breathing apparatus taking him away and keeping him in an observation room for at least three months.

And so Mr Kennet and his JCB machine rescued me just moments before the television crew arrived.

It was a messy, ungainly and woefully undignified business.

Once the bucket on the digger was back down at ground level, I clambered out and accepted Thumper's offer of a lift back to Bilbury Grange in his truck.

'It's been blowing a gale up there,' I said to Thumper, as I got into the truck.

Thumper looked at me. 'It didn't seem much more than a stiff breeze,' he said.

'Well it was at least a gale up on the roof,' I insisted. 'It may have been a hurricane.'

He had the sense not to argue with me.

'Where on earth have you been?' asked Patsy when I walked in through the front door. 'Why did Frank ring me? What were you doing at the pub at this time in the morning?'

She then burst out laughing.

'What are you laughing at?' I demanded.

'You look a fright!' said Patsy.

I took off my green Wellington boots, removed the yellow sou'wester and unslung the blue swimming goggles from around my neck.

'That dressing gown is about ten sizes too small and the colour doesn't suit you,' said Patsy. 'Let's get you upstairs to the bathroom before any of the patients see you.' She laughed again. 'What on earth would people say if they'd seen you dressed like that?'

I didn't like to tell her the truth just then.

I thought I would explain later how that particular horse had long ago bolted from the stables.

Not So Trivial

I was sitting having a cup of coffee at the end of a long surgery and Patsy, who was preparing our lunch, had the radio switched on.

An eminent doctor was talking on the wireless about medical problems.

I don't remember much of what he said (he was very boring and long-winded) but I do remember that he stated quite categorically (and rather pompously) that doctors should not waste their valuable time on trivial medical problems.

He was, as you might imagine, a doctor who hadn't held a stethoscope, a syringe or a sphygmomanometer for the best part of a quarter of a century. He was one of those doctors who earns a very good living sitting on committees and boards and acting as a consultant and advisor to a wide variety of groups.

His argument was that the sort of problems which he described as trivial should be dealt with by nurses, auxiliaries or even clerical assistants.

When I heard this doctor talking, I was reminded of my predecessor, mentor and friend Dr Brownlow, who said that he thought it was a crying shame that all the really important decisions in medicine were being made by administrators, bureaucrats and politicians – people who had absolutely no day to day practical experience of what patients need, or how they are best diagnosed and treated. He said that there were far too many people in the medical establishment who spent their days running round in circles, never looking where they were going, but always pretending to be making progress.

When I heard that eminent practitioner, who was doubtless a stalwart of the medical establishment, pontificating about the insignificance of selected medical problems, and then sniffily dismissing them as 'trivial', I almost threw my coffee cup at the wireless.

I disagreed violently for several reasons; but mainly because I believed that it was a very dangerous attitude.

The truth is that there are no trivial problems in medicine.

Problems which a doctor might regard as relatively insignificant, and definitely not life-threatening, might still be a real worry to a patient.

And a problem which might appear to be trivial may be hiding a really important health problem.

Moreover, I believe that by attending to relatively simple medical tasks, things which could perhaps be handed over to a nurse, a doctor is able to build up his relationship with his patients. This is important because, in due course, the strength of that relationship might prove to be vital if the patient acquires a serious or life-threatening disorder. The relationship between doctor and patient is all about trust.

I was able, without much thought, to come up with several incidents which proved my point that it is foolish for doctors to hand so called 'trivial' problems over to nurses or auxiliaries.

So, for example, there was Mr Oliver Padgett.

Mr Padgett came into the surgery complaining of indigestion.

'I wonder if you could give me something stronger than the stuff I can buy at the chemist?' he asked.

Now, indigestion is almost certainly one of those health problems which the eminent practitioner on the wireless would doubtless be inclined to dismiss as 'trivial' – easily within the remit of an assistant who could hand out a packet of antacid pills or simply arrange for a prescription to be written out. But is it always so easily dismissed?

I asked Mr Padgett, who was in his forties and rather overweight, how long he'd had indigestion.

'Oh, a few months,' he told me. And he proceeded to give a perfect medical history of a man with indigestion. His pain only came on after he had eaten. It seemed to go away if he swallowed a little antacid. And so on and so forth.

I was tempted to succumb and write out a prescription for something to ease his indigestion pain.

But some instinct told me that things might not be quite as simple as they appeared to be.

'Do you get any other symptoms?' I asked him.

'I get a bit breathless,' he said. 'But I put that down to wind in my stomach.'

'Anything else?'

'A bit sweaty occasionally. But the pain is pretty bad sometimes so it's not surprising that it makes me sweat.'

'Whereabouts is the pain?'

'Right across my chest,' he replied, without hesitation.

And at this point, the warning bells began to ring because the pain of indigestion is usually much more specific. Patients sometimes point to their stomach with one finger to show just where they feel the pain.

'Does the pain go anywhere else?'

'I get a pain in my arm sometimes.'

And now the alarm bells were ringing so loudly that they were probably audible in the next county.

'Do you only ever get the pain when you eat?'

'Well, actually, I get it several times a day. It is sometimes when I'm eating.'

'But sometimes when you're not eating?'

He nodded.

'And the antacid medicine helps the pain?'

'Oh, yes.'

'Do you do anything else to ease the pain?'

'I sit down and take things easy for a while.'

'And then the pain goes?'

'Oh yes.'

'But it could be sitting down and resting that helps get rid of the pain – rather than the antacid?'

'I suppose it could.'

And, indeed, so it proved to be.

Mr Padgett was suffering from angina and heart pain. His problem was anything but trivial.

If he had simply been given a bottle of antacid and sent on his way then there is a good chance that within a few weeks, or possibly months, he would have probably had a huge heart attack and died.

Miss Kenshaw was another patient whom the eminent doctor would doubtless have preferred to pass onto an aide or some kind.

A gentle, maiden lady in her mid-50s, Miss Kenshaw came to my surgery complaining that she could no longer hear very well.

'I work as a telephonist in Barnstaple,' she told me. 'And having good hearing is vital for my work.'

She was clearly worried about losing her job. It was obvious that her work was terribly important to her.

A peep into her ears showed that both of them were pretty well blocked with wax. I got out the brass tray and the large brass syringe which I was at the time using to syringe wax out of ears, and I managed to remove an enormous quantity of the stuff from her external auditory canals. To be honest, I was surprised that Miss Kenshaw had been able to hear anything at all.

A lot of doctors tell their practice nurse to do the ear syringing.

They consider such simple work to be beneath them. But I always preferred to do these things myself. A doctor can build up a good relationship with a patient by helping him or her to hear again. It's one of those simple jobs which produce a large dividend in terms of goodwill and a good relationship.

But, when I'd finished clearing out Miss Kenshaw's ears, I could tell that there was something else still worrying her.

I sat her down and told her I wanted her to wait a while before leaving the surgery. Patients can sometimes feel a little dizzy after they've had warm water squirted into their ears.

And while she was sat there, I asked her if there was anything else she wanted to talk to me about.

I was hoping that she tell me what I sometimes think of as the 'sting'.

(The sting invariably comes at the end of a consultation. After discussing some relatively minor problem, something which eminent practitioners would probably dismiss as 'trivial', nervous patients will often say 'by the way' or more commonly 'while I am here' and then introduce the problem they've really been worrying about all along. This second problem will invariably be something complex which will involve a full medical examination and a good deal of brain work. The doctor, who thought he was ready to go on to the next patient, will find himself starting the consultation all over again. This sort of thing often happens because the patient is nervous and too frightened or embarrassed to discuss their 'big' worry. The 'trivial' problem is introduced as a 'foot in the door', an opening gambit, designed to 'warm' up the relationship between doctor and patient.)

At first, Miss Kenshaw denied that she was worried about anything else.

But I knew her well enough, and I'd been a GP long enough, to know that there was something she wasn't telling me.

Family doctors need to get as good at ferreting information out of some patients as parents are at squeezing the truth out of their children.

And how people say things can be just as important as the things they say.

Dr Brownlow, my predecessor and the man who taught me more about general practice than anyone else, explained this to me. He called it listening to the mood as well as the words and he argued that with some people the mood can be even more important than the words.

And, sure enough, Miss Kenshaw eventually told me what was worrying her.

'I think I might perhaps have asthma,' she said. It came out as a confession as much as anything. 'Several times recently I’ve suddenly noticed that I get short of breath. It happens quite suddenly.’ The words came out in a rush and the relief was almost palpable.

‘There are no pains?’

‘Oh no.’

‘How long does the shortness of breath last for?’

‘It varies. But usually just a few minutes.’

‘And how often has it happened?’

‘A dozen times, I would say. I think it’s asthma because my brother used to have asthma when he was small. He’s gone now, God bless him. He died in a motor car accident.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. I remembered seeing in her notes that her brother had died. His accident had happened long before I’d come to work in Bilbury.

‘It was some time ago.’

‘Have you noticed anything else abnormal?’

‘I get clammy and sweaty sometimes. It can’t be the change of life because I went through the menopause a few years ago.’ She paused and looked at me. ‘I get very tired when this happens.’

‘But you don’t have any pain.’

‘Well, I do sometimes get a pain in my shoulder and my neck. But that could be arthritis. I injured my shoulder when I fell while hiking last summer. I went to the Lake District for a fortnight.’

‘Do you get any pains in your chest?’

She smiled. ‘Oh no, doctor. There isn’t anything wrong with my heart.’

‘And do you get the pain in your shoulder and neck at the same time as you’re clammy and sweaty?’

She thought for a moment. ‘Yes, I think so.’

‘Do you have the shortness of breath at the same time?’

‘Yes, sometimes I do. But sometimes I get the shortness of breath by itself without the pain or the sweating. Although then my pulse does feel as though it’s racing.’

I took her blood pressure and I listened to her heart. I couldn’t find anything wrong.

‘I want you to go to the hospital and have an electrocardiogram,’ I told her. ‘Just to check out your heart.’

‘Do you think I might have a heart problem?’ She sounded surprised and anxious.

‘I can’t find any signs of heart disease,’ I assured her. ‘But those symptoms could be signs of heart trouble. We need to check it out.’

‘But I haven’t had any chest pains at all!’ she said, clearly puzzled.

‘Men usually get chest pains when they have heart problems,’ I told her. ‘But women are sometimes different. They can have heart attacks without any chest pains. It may well be that there’s nothing wrong with your heart. But it would be safer to check it out.’

And it turned out that it was well worthwhile sending Miss Kenshaw to the hospital.

The electrocardiogram showed that Miss Kenshaw did have some heart abnormalities, and the consultant who saw her concluded that she had suffered a number of minor heart attacks. The consultant and I worked out a gentle diet and exercise regime to improve her heart, and slowly the symptoms stopped troubling her.

But if I hadn’t syringed her ears, I would not have known about her heart trouble until she’d had a major heart attack.

And that could well have been too late.

I honestly doubt if any of that would have come to light if Miss Kenshaw had merely come to the surgery, seen a nurse and had her ears syringed in a routine sort of way.

Doing relatively small things for patients (syringing ears, removing stitches, checking on blood pressure, taking blood, weighing patients who are on a diet) are tasks which are often delegated to nurses, aides or even to completely untrained staff.

I think this is a terrible mistake.

It is my belief (and I know this is probably very old-fashioned and certainly out-of-date) that a doctor who is prepared to look, to listen and to be patient can learn an enormous amount about his patients when performing these small and often routine tasks.

The Bridle Path

The area in and around Bilbury is criss-crossed with footpaths, tracks and bridle paths. Some of these pathways are old and have been used for hundreds of years. Some were created by sheep or wild goats wandering hither and thither, not always knowing where they were going (or why) and not always taking the shortest route between here and there.

Some of the old tracks and paths have fallen into disuse because they no longer mark a route which is used regularly or used at all.

But, as old tracks and paths disappear, so new ones appear.

Some paths are new and are created for new and often personal reasons.

So, for example, when the Ponsonby-Futtocks moved into Willow Tree cottage, the family's eleven-year-old son, Darren, developed a friendship with Edward Teach, a boy of the same age, who lived with his parents in Laurel Cottage. Now, these two cottages are a mile and a half apart if you go from one to the other by road but less than a third of a mile away if you go across the fields. During the summer holidays, the boys ran across the fields so often that they eventually wore a new path of their own and no one objected or would have dreamt of objecting. The farmer who owned the land didn't mind as long as the boys kept to the sides of the fields and shut any gates they opened.

(Neither of the boys opened any gates, of course. What eleven-year-old boy opens and shuts a gate when he can climb over it or clamber over the fence alongside? And both boys knew enough about the lore of the countryside not to make gaps in hedges. Sheep, in particular, are good enough at doing that on their own; they don't need any help from humans.)

And both sets of parents preferred their sons to cross the village through the fields rather than along the lanes.

We don't get much vehicular traffic in Bilbury but the lanes are narrow, giving pedestrians very little room to get out of the way, and it is a regrettable truth that many drivers, particularly those from outside the village, drive far too quickly.

A trip across the fields was both quicker and safer.

And when Pamela Lightner and Edgar Branson were courting, they wore a distinctive pathway between their parent's homes. However, when Miss Lightner and Mr Branson became Mr and Mrs Branson, and set up home together, the pathway was no longer used and within a year, it had disappeared from view.

For years, no one in Bilbury had bothered to make a proper up-to-date map of all the paths and bridleways. Paths which were not used just disappeared and new paths which were needed just appeared. I don't think any landowner ever objected to a new path appearing as long as crops weren't damaged, livestock weren't endangered and gates were not left open.

Occasionally, someone from one of the organisations which represents walkers and ramblers, usually an earnest, rather self-important enthusiast from a city such as Bristol or Exeter, would wander into the village and, with unwelcome officiousness, demand that we produce a proper map of all the historical pathways in, through and around the village. They would come armed with photocopies of old deeds and ancient maps and, sometimes, old minutes of council meetings and planning reports and they would also forcefully demand that we clear all the unused paths and then maintain them in good order.

I'm afraid we never really welcomed these folk.

We thought our rather fluid and informal system worked very well.

As villagers, we didn't see the point in re-opening any path which was now covered in brambles and nettles and which didn't connect any two places which needed to be connected. It seemed a lot of work and disruption for no real purpose.

We welcomed the strangers' enthusiasm for the countryside and we were delighted that they showed an interest in our village but their requests (which were usually phrased more in the style of demands) were less welcome. Pedantry does not always benefit the people it is supposed to benefit.

Things changed for the worse when Mr Cinnamon Brooke came to live in the village.

Mr Brooke was a retired company director who had, we were regularly informed both by him and his wife, been a Very Important Person in the city. He had sat on numerous boards and chaired many meetings and had met and socialised with many other Very Important People. He had attended charity auctions and had spent much of his shareholders' money on making charitable contributions to 'good causes'. He had also arranged for considerable sums of company money to be given to all the leading political parties. It was, so it was widely said by Mr Brooke and his wife, only a matter of time before his generosity with other people's money was rewarded with a knighthood or maybe even a peerage.

When they arrived in Bilbury, Mr and Mrs Brooke bought ‘Combe House’, a rather splendid but dilapidated old house on the edge of the village and they imported builders and decorators from Bristol to do the necessary renovation work.

Not surprisingly, this did not go down too well with local workmen and not a little complaining was done in the Duck and Puddle and other North Devon hostelries.

Still, the work got done, and the restored house (which was, with a staggering lack of imagination renamed ‘Four Winds’) did look very smart.

When the various workmen eventually left the scene of their various fiscal crimes, ‘Four Winds’ had a new roof, working electrics, efficient plumbing, central heating (for the first time in its life), a brand new, state of the art burglar alarm, a conservatory and an indoor, heated swimming pool complete with a Jacuzzi and a Scandinavian steam room.

Mr Brooke quickly made it clear that although he was a newcomer to the village, he regarded himself as someone we should all listen to and within two months of moving into the newly refurbished ‘Four Winds’, he had submitted a number of recommendations both to the Parish Council and to the County Council.

The most important of his recommendations was that a full map of footpaths and bridleways in the village of Bilbury should be compiled and that all footpaths and bridleways should be cleared and well signposted. ‘There should,’ he said, ‘be plenty of signs throughout the village, showing visitors just where footpaths began and where they ended.’

Locals complained that they liked the village as it was and didn’t want it covering with metal signs which would, if Mr Brooke’s instructions were taken to their conclusion, make the village look like a motorway junction.

One of Mr Brooke’s first demands was that a sign be placed at the two ends of a bridleway which goes between fields near to but not belonging to the Duck and Puddle public house. The local council, keen for an easy life and eager to shut up Mr Brooke, agreed to have large signs installed.

It has to be said that the signs were not, however, entirely successful and their erection not entirely without incident.

On the Saturday immediately after they had been erected, I drove past the end of the bridleway and noticed that two Japanese tourists, a man and a woman, were sitting on a weather battered wooden bench which has been there for as long as I can remember. They each had a rucksack and a camera. Since there was no cinema in the village, the bench has long been popular with courting couples and the oak slats were well decorated with carved initials. I remember once noticing that someone had carved ‘HB loved GA hear’ on the top slat of the back of the bench and being mildly amused by the fact that one of the protagonists had later added the word ‘Twice’ to this simple declaration. The specificity of the initials and the spelling error meant that most of us knew the names of the two protagonists.

Three quarters of an hour later, as I drove back from the visit I had made, I noticed that the couple were still sitting on the bench. They had taken out a packet of sandwiches and a flask but they seemed to be waiting for something. There is a bus stop close to the bench and since I was worried that they might not be aware that in Bilbury buses are slightly rarer than green woodpeckers, I stopped to ask if I could help. (In fact, on most days of the year anyone who wants to catch a bus from Bilbury has to walk to Blackmoor Gate and then catch the Lynton bus into Barnstaple. The bus stop in Bilbury is more ceremonial than practical.)

‘Do you knowing when the next wedding people is due?’ asked the Japanese woman brightly.

‘Wedding?’ I said, rather stupidly.

‘We like take photos of weddings,’ said the woman. ‘They very romantic occasions.’

I must have looked as puzzled as I felt for the woman then pointed at the newly erected sign, just behind my head. I turned round to look at it. ‘Bridle way’ it said.

‘Ah,’ I said. ‘I think you may have misunderstood.’

I tried to explain the difference between a bride and a bridle. ‘You may see a horse pass by but you are unlikely to see any brides,’ I said.

They clearly did not understand for they just nodded and smiled and when I left them, they had resumed their picnic lunch.

I hope they didn’t stay there too long waiting for the bride who would never appear.

Mr Brooke’s enthusiasm for properly signposted footpaths and bridle ways continued unabated.

In an interview with a local newspaper, Mr Brooke insisted that he had no interest whatsoever in going into politics. (‘I am particularly uninterested in entering politics on a local level,’ he was quoted as saying, ‘for there is no doubt that my talents and my experience would be wasted on a small stage.’) However, it was widely suspected that Mr Brooke was still desperate for some sort of recognition in the New Year’s Honours List, or the Queen’s

Birthday Honours List (or possibly both) and that his misplaced enthusiasm to make his mark on village life was designed to boost his chances of becoming Sir Cinnamon Brooke or, possibly even, Lord Something or Other.

And so, as a result of Mr Brooke's efforts, there was a far larger turnout than usual at the next meeting of the Parish Council.

These events are usually rather desultory affairs, attended by no more than half a dozen people and a stray dog or two, but this one was different. Just about everyone in the village was crowded into the St Dymphna's Church Hall for it had been announced that the Clerk to the Council would publish a new, interim map of all the paths and bridleways found to date within the village boundary and that photocopied maps would be distributed at the start of the meeting. (There are three churches in or close to Bilbury: St Dymphna, St Damian's and St Crispin and St Ermentrude. The only one with a church hall is St Dymphna.)

The details of the new map had been kept surprisingly confidential and we all turned up for the meeting feeling rather nervous.

Would any of us discover that a previously unrecognised path ran across our land? Would we be required to put in stiles or kissing gates?

It was expected that the meeting would be, to say the least, 'rather lively' and that there could well be some protests and a little more noise than is usual.

Patsy's father, who is one of the largest landowners in Bilbury, was extremely concerned. He has always made sure that those pathways which are used regularly are kept clear and suitable for use. And he has always repaired stiles and so on at his own expense. He readily admits that there is some self-interest in this for if walkers use the stiles and follow the proper pathways, far less damage will be done to his fields and fences. But he was worried that more paths and bridleways might have been discovered.

The meeting had not even started before the first protest was made.

And it came from an entirely unexpected quarter.

A bald, fat man in a brand new three piece Harris Tweed suit walked to the front of the hall and waved one of the newly printed maps at the Clerk to the Council. Many of us had never seen him before but we all knew who it was.

'What is the meaning of this?' demanded a very red-faced Mr Brooke, pointing at something on the map he was holding.

We all examined our maps to see if we could spot what had got him so excited.

The Clerk to the Council looked at the map which Mr Brooke was holding.

'Oh yes, Mr Brooke,' said the Clerk. 'That's an old bridleway which we discovered.'

'But this is a nonsense!' cried Mr Brooke. 'This isn't on our deeds or any of the paperwork we received when we bought Combe House.'

'No, that's the problem with some of these old pathways,' said the Clerk, regretfully. 'They appear on some old documents but not on others.'

As more of us managed to find our place on the map, and see what it was that Mr Brooke was complaining about, the hall became full of titters. Gradually the tittering segued into giggling and then the giggling turned into outright laughter.

'But this is absurd!' complained Mr Brooke, who was now so red-faced that he looked as though he might burst into flames or even explode.

'It's certainly inconvenient,' said the Clerk. 'I can see that it is an inconvenience.'

'Bah!' said Mr Brooke, so furious that speech seemed to have deserted him. 'Bah and balderdash!' I'd never heard anyone say 'balderdash' before. But he did. And with that he turned round and stalked out.

The meeting never really recovered after that and those of us with an inclination to do so repaired to the Duck and Puddle.

We all agreed that it was one of the most wonderful things any of us had ever seen.

The new map showed that a centuries old bridleway passed straight through the middle of Mr Brooke's conservatory and his new swimming pool.

Mr Brooke complained to anyone and everyone, and his protests were reported so widely that it was generally agreed that any chance he might have had of appearing in one of the honours lists disappeared entirely. He became a laughing stock in the tabloid press and columnists and cartoonists had great fun at his expense.

In the end, the Council agreed to allow Mr Brooke to put a bridle path around the side of his conservatory and swimming pool. But the path enabled walkers to look into both buildings, and destroyed the privacy that Mr Brooke claimed was so important to him.

No other significant or unduly inconvenient new paths or bridleways were found and the rest of the village rested easy.

And, after Mr Brooke's disaster, it seemed clear that there would be no more investigating of hidden or forgotten footpaths. Mr Brooke was certainly not in the mood to encourage any more investigations. Who knows what else would turn up on some old piece of long-forgotten parchment?

There was, however, some continuing surprise at the route taken by the bridleway which went through Mr Brooke's garden. No one in the village could remember ever hearing of such a path and it was difficult to see why it would exist – since it did not connect any two points in the village which could possibly need connecting.

'I didn't know about that bridleway, did you?' said Thumper to Frank one day when we were all sitting in the snug at the Duck and Puddle.

'No,' said Frank. 'I'd never heard of it. And I thought I knew everything about this village.'

'Who found the map showing that old bridle path going through Brooke's land?' asked Thumper.

'Oh that was me,' said Patchy Fogg, who had kept quiet until that moment.

We all looked at him.

'You found a map with that old bridle path on it?' I said.

Patchy nodded.

The important document had, he said, been hidden amidst a pile of old maps and mortgages and it dated back to around 1860.

He had, he admitted, slipped it into a folder of maps and documents at the council offices.

Now Patchy has for many years been able to lay his hands on all sorts of useful, old documents. He has, for example, always been able to 'find' old documents showing that a bed was once the property of William Shakespeare or that a desk was a favourite piece of furniture once owned by Charles Dickens.

In addition to being a very good friend of mine, Patchy is my brother-in-law. He is married to Adrienne who is Patsy's sister and Mr Kennet's other daughter.

And Mr Kennet had been very relieved when the search for paths and bridleways came to a sudden and fortuitous halt.

It was probably wise of Patchy to slip the map into that folder of documents at the council offices – thereby hiding its source.

Privately, I couldn't help wondering if my brother-in-law might not have been earning himself some brownie points with his father-in-law.

The Cadwalladers

Their names were Brenda and Binky Cadwallader. They were both in their 60s and they had been together virtually all their adult lives.

He was called Binky, and he had the wide-legged gait of a man who has spent his life working as a sailor; constantly bracing himself against the rolling deck. However, the gait was misleading. As far as I knew, he had never been to sea. He had certainly never worked as a sailor. The fact was that he had a wide-legged, cautious way of walking because he had a large inguinal hernia which he steadfastly refused to have repaired. He wore a truss only on Sunday mornings, and on those important Christian festivals, such as Christmas and Easter, when he attended church. (I had another patient, Paddy Fields, who walked the same way. He had a massive hydrocele which he refused to have treated.) Apart from the hernia, Binky was in good health; a wiry, agile, muscular man. He was a good man, a good husband and a good friend. He was the sort of fellow who would turn out at 3.00 a.m. to help a friend and think of it not as a favour done, a tick on some celestial score sheet, but a genuine pleasure.

She was called Brenda and she was built on generous proportions. She had started life as a skinny little girl with a noticeable limp. But she had blossomed and grown into what is sometimes known in the politest dressmaking and corsetry circles as a ‘full-figured woman’.

When she laughed, which was often, she wobbled all over, rather like a blancmange which needed more time to set or required more of whatever it is that gives blancmange its firm and sturdy qualities.

She stood and walked like a woman who had spent a good deal of time riding horses, or who was, perhaps, no stranger to the obstetrics ward and the delivery room. But I don’t think she had ever ridden a horse and she had certainly never had any children. Her gait was the result of a congenital hip problem which had never been properly treated.

All things considered, she was a woman who was built for comfort rather than speed.

When they went for a walk together, the Cadwalladers were an ungainly looking couple.

However, their meeting and courtship was a romantic story in itself.

At the age of 16, he had run away from home, a cruel place by his account, not worthy to be called a ‘home’, and had become a roustabout with a travelling circus. From what Binky told me I gather that his father was a cruel man through stupidity. On the other hand his mother was cruel not because she didn’t know any better but because she enjoyed being cruel; she apparently used to take a strange pleasure from her cruelty.

Binky told me several things about his parents which appalled me.

For example, his parents ate fish and chips for tea every evening but Binky and his sister had dripping sandwiches for their evening meal on six days a week and they had sugar sandwiches on Sundays.

At weekends in the summer, the two parents used to send Binky and his sister to the shops to buy two ice creams. But the ice creams were for the parents, not for the two young children. Binky and his sister would be expected to hurry home before the ice creams melted and hand them over; one to their mother and one to their father. They would then sit and watch as the ice creams were consumed.

I thought that was one of the saddest stories I’d ever heard.

Binky once summed up his parents by saying that his father used to blow his nose with his fingers and his mother didn’t mind.

At the circus, Binky slept rough, lived rough and worked hard but it was, he said, a million times better than his home life.

Brenda, on the other hand, had been brought up in a very traditional, middle class home in South Wales. Her parents had great ambitions for her.

When Brenda was a young girl, it was fairly unusual for girls to go away to university but both her parents and her school teachers had encouraged her to think of taking a degree.

Binky and Brenda had met when the circus had visited the town where she lived.

He had been a worldly wise 18. She had been an innocent, naïve girl, two years younger.

There had been no broken hearts and contrary to what you might expect, the girl had not been used and discarded. The boy and the girl fell in love and then the circus left town. He was illiterate and so there was no chance of their staying in touch. There were no letters and no telephone calls. Those were, remember, days when the telephone was used only on very special occasions.

But the romance did not die.

Surprisingly, perhaps, this unlikely couple stayed true to each other.

And when the circus returned to her home town the following year she was waiting for it to arrive.

The roustabouts always arrived first, of course, because they had to erect the Big Top and make things ready for the animals and the performers.

And when the lorries which carried the roustabouts, the canvas and the poles rolled into town, Brenda was there to meet them. The young couple had one more week of each other's company. Fortuitously, it was a school holiday, the last summer of Brenda's school days.

The circus toured all year round (in the winter it went to Southern France and Italy) and since the roustabout hadn't had a proper holiday for two years, his boss allowed him as much time off as he could. The boy and the girl went for long walks in the local parks. They held hands. They had exquisite picnics. She lent him her brother's bicycle and they took day trips to local landmarks. And she taught him to read and write so that they could keep in touch.

It seems almost unbelievable now but this strange courtship went on for another two years.

She made sure she went to a university in a town which was on the circus's itinerary. And while she was at university, she spent the whole of her summer holidays travelling round the country with the circus.

When she graduated, the first girl from her school to go to university, the first to receive a degree, she had only one ambition: to marry Binky, her true love.

The inevitable objections which her parents had raised at the outset of the romance had long since disappeared.

And so the young couple married.

She obtained a post as a school teacher in Exeter and he gave up the circus and took a job as an apprentice plumber. He had learned some circus skills. He could ride a horse bareback, he could juggle and occasionally he put on white paint and baggy trousers if one of the clowns was ill. But he had seen enough of circus life to know that it was not for him, and it was not what he wanted for his new bride. He wanted a house and a garden for Brenda. It was important that the house had an upstairs. Everyone who worked for the circus lived in a caravan. And caravans don't have an upstairs.

He was still young and he was keen to learn the plumbing trade. He did well. When his boss retired, the young, former roustabout started his own plumbing business. There is always a demand for good plumbers who do honest work at fair prices. In the evenings, Brenda looked after the books for him, for although he could read and write he was hardly numerate.

When they reached 60, they both retired. They had worked hard and they decided they had earned some years of autumn sunshine. They bought a cottage in Bilbury, a village they had first discovered a decade earlier when they had been on holiday in nearby Berrynarbor. They lived there, with two cats called Hither and Thither, and hardly ever spent even half a day away from their home.

Binky grew flowers. They were his passion. 'We can buy all the vegetables we need,' he said. 'But we can't buy all the flowers I want. I want a garden and a house filled with flowers. I want our lives to be filled with colour and perfume. I want to be able to give my wife armfuls of flowers.'

While Binky cultivated flowers, and did so with gusto, vigour and justified pride, Brenda kept bees.

When she bought her first hive, she knew nothing about bee keeping. But within two years, she had become an expert apiarist. She had three hives and got on so well with her bees that she never wore the mask, gloves and gown which are usually regarded as an essential part of the beekeeper's kit. Amazingly, she was rarely stung.

A normal hive will produce between 25 and 30 pounds of excess honey in a season but Brenda Cadwallader's hives each produced well in excess of three times that, and her three hives produced nearly 300 pounds of honey a year. A garden full of flowers made sure that the bees were well supplied with pollen.

She and her husband used honey for all their baking and cooking needs where most of us would use sugar.

Every time I saw her, Brenda reminded me of the benefits of honey over sugar. It is, she said, far less likely to cause stomach problems, it provides energy and supplies iron, calcium and many other essential minerals which aren't in sugar. She pointed out that fruits stewed with honey keep for longer and that cakes made with honey stay moist for longer. And she offered to help Patsy and me set up a hive or two if we wanted to produce our own honey. I talked to Patsy about it, we were convinced and later on we did, indeed, have a couple of hives of our own.

The Cadwalladers were a lovely couple, still very much in love; so close and committed to each other that they were rarely separated. Since their marriage, they had not spent one night apart.

They both had good health and professionally I saw them only rarely. Binky had his hernia, which had become like one of the family, and Brenda had her limp. But they coped well.

And then, at the age of 62, Brenda had a nasty scare.

She came to see me complaining of a chest infection and while listening to her lungs, I found a small lump in her left breast. It was very small, had clearly defined edges and it wasn't attached to the tissues beneath or to the muscle. There were no lymph nodes to be felt in her axilla. I was convinced it was a harmless fibroadenoma, sometimes called a breast mouse, but some things in medicine are always worth a second opinion and a breast lump is high on the list. The surgeon whom she saw in Barnstaple agreed with my diagnosis but because Brenda Cadwallader was still worried, he agreed to remove the lump.

If an operation can ever be described as ‘minor’ then this was that operation.

Mrs Cadwallader was in hospital for less than half a day and the laboratory confirmed that the lump which had been removed was, as both the surgeon and I had surmised, entirely harmless.

This should have been the end of it.

But Mr Cadwallader was deeply troubled and he came to see me a week or so after his wife had been to the hospital. He had done a little reading about breast lumps and he wanted to know what they could do to help spot any lumps which might appear in his wife’s breasts in the future.

I explained to him that it would be perfectly easy for his wife to examine her own breasts once a week and, at his request, I explained precisely how she should do this. I pointed out that each quadrant of each breast should be examined in turn and that both axillae, the armpits, should also be checked for enlarged lymph nodes. I even wrote out some notes so that Binky wouldn’t forget what to do when he got home.

At first, Brenda Cadwallader was reluctant to examine her own breasts. I gather she told him that she would feel embarrassed to lie down on the bed quite naked and palpate her own bosom.

And so Mr Cadwallader had a bright idea. He suggested that to make the whole thing more fun he should lie down beside her and they should both palpate their breasts. If either of them found anything odd, he said, the other could be called in to provide a second opinion; an amateur opinion it is true, but a second opinion nevertheless.

Mrs Cadwallader laughed at this suggestion and pointed out, with considerable accuracy, that Mr Cadwallader didn’t have much in the way of breast tissue to examine. Mr Cadwallader readily agreed with his dear wife that in terms of the scenery being offered to view, he would definitely be getting the best of the bargain. Having conceded this point, he added that they could add a little spice to the proceedings by going ahead with examining each other’s breasts anyway, regardless of any need for a second opinion. She laughed again and was won over. And so they started examining their breasts.

Since these things are best done as a regular ritual (or else they are put off or forgotten completely) the pair set aside a few minutes every Sunday, after luncheon, for their weekly lump check. They undressed, lay down on the bed and went through the programme I had outlined and they did it with deliberate care.

It was on the third Sunday that a lump was found.

It was a very small lump, hardly anything more than a pea, but they both agreed that it was something. They decided that they would make a note of the exact position of the lump and check it again the following week.

The following week they both agreed that there was still a lump to be felt that, moreover, they thought that the lump had grown in size. And it did not feel anything like the fibroadenoma which had been excised from Mrs Cadwallader’s breast so recently. It was harder and it did not move about so easily.

There was another difference, too.

The new lump was not in either of Mrs Cadwallader’s breasts and nor was it in either of her axillae.

The new lump which they had found was underneath Binky Cadwallader’s left nipple.

The following morning, the Monday, they were in my surgery.

‘Do you think it’s cancer?’ asked Mrs Cadwallader. She had tears in her eyes and a tremor in her voice.

‘It could be,’ I told them. ‘We need to get it checked out. The good thing is that you’ve found it very early. The lump is still tiny. I’ll ring one of the surgeons and get you seen as soon as possible.’

‘Can men get breast cancer?’ asked Binky. ‘I thought only women got breast cancer.’

‘Men can get breast cancer,’ I said. ‘But it’s nowhere near as common as it is in women. For one thing, women have much more breast tissue than men. And for another thing, breast cancer can be influenced by the amount of oestrogen hormone circulating in the body – and that is a hormone which is found in much greater quantities in women than in men.’

I pointed out that most men who develop breast cancer seek help only when the cancer has really developed and is very difficult to treat.

I picked up Mr Cadwallader’s medical records and looked through them, trying to see if there might be a clue as to why or how the cancer had developed.

‘When you were young they thought you had tuberculosis,’ I said, spotting something I hadn’t seen before.

‘One of the men working in the circus had TB and I shared a caravan with him for a year. I had my chest X-rayed loads of times but they never found anything.’

‘How many times did they X-ray you?’

‘Oh, for a year or so I was X-rayed every month. The circus boss was paranoid that everyone in the circus was going to get TB. One of the big attractions, a trapeze family, left when they heard about Billy’s tuberculosis and the guy who looked after the elephants was threatening to leave. So the boss insisted that the two of us who had lived with Billy, the guy who had TB, should be X-rayed regularly. Every time we went to a big city, we went to the local hospital and had X-rays done. Doctors used to do a lot of X-rays in those days.’

‘That would have been in the 1930s?’

‘Yes, I suppose so.’

‘But you never had tuberculosis?’

Binky shook his head.

‘Could all those X-rays have caused the lump?’ asked Brenda. I could not help noticing that she didn’t want to use the word ‘cancer’.

‘It’s possible,’ I agreed. ‘The notes don’t say how many X-rays were done. But having too many chest X-rays can cause breast cancer. Indeed, it’s one of the reasons why I’m not terribly fond of women having too many mammograms. There’s a risk that the very process of X-raying the breasts could actually cause breast cancer.’

Binky Cadwallader was seen two days later by the same surgeon who had operated on his wife. The surgeon thought that the lump was cancerous and less than a week later, Binky went into the hospital to have the lump removed.

To everyone’s relief and delight, the operation was a complete success. Histology showed that the lump was cancerous but there were no signs at all that the cancer had spread.

At the hospital, the surgeon offered to repair Binky’s inguinal hernia while he was under the anaesthetic (an unusual two for one offer if ever there was one). Binky thanked him but turned him down, saying that the hernia had become a friend and he would miss having it around. Actually, it probably wasn’t a bad decision. Inguinal hernias don’t usually kill anyone, but the treatment of them sometimes does.

I couldn’t help wondering whether Binky would have ever spotted the lump behind his nipple if he and Brenda hadn’t begun examining their breasts as a routine. If he hadn’t found the lump for, say, six months then the outcome could have been very different.

And there’s an odd thought: Brenda Callwallader’s harmless breast lump had saved her husband’s life.

Gilly's New Cupboard

Gilly Parsons, the landlady at the Duck and Puddle, had ordered a new cupboard and four of us were sitting around in the bar staring at it. There was her husband, Frank Parsons, Patchy Fogg, the antique dealer, Thumper Robinson (whose job description is impossible to summarise in a few words) and myself.

'When she said she'd bought a new cupboard for the kitchen, I stupidly thought she'd bought a new cupboard for the kitchen,' said Frank rather sadly.

When he is unhappy, Frank looks rather like a bloodhound – one of those dogs with long faces, floppy ears and sad, sad eyes though of course, Frank doesn't have floppy ears.

'She showed me a picture in the catalogue and it looked very much like a cupboard.'

'That doesn't look much like a cupboard,' said Patchy, nodding in the direction of the stuff Frank had emptied out of the box in which it had been delivered. 'It looks like a box of kindling and a packet of screws. Why does everyone keep buying this rubbishy stuff? I could have found you a solid, wooden kitchen cabinet for a fiver. Any size you like, beautifully fitted doors, shelves and real dovetail joints – proper craftsmanship.'

'What sort of wood?'

'Any wood you like: pine, mahogany, walnut, oak. I've got a really nice oak cabinet in the van. Suit you perfectly. Gilly would love it. You can get really nice, old furniture for a song these days. No one wants old-fashioned brown furniture. But it's lovely stuff. Ask the doc.'

'It's true,' I confirmed. 'Patchy has helped Patsy and me buy tons of furniture. Proper stuff that looks like it's supposed to look when you buy it. Decent furniture that you can kick or walk into without it falling apart,' I said. I looked at the pile of bits on the floor and shuddered. 'I hate those things that you have to build by yourself,' I added.

I had tried on more than one occasion to put one of these fabricated pieces of furniture together.

'Though, I'll say one thing for the people who make this flat pack furniture,' I added, 'they do give you loads of spare bits.'

Frank, Thumper and Patchy all looked at me.

'Spare bits?' said Thumper.

'Every time I've tried to put one together there have been tons of bits left over,' I said. 'Bits of that thick cardboard stuff they use instead of wood, little knobbly things, screws and loads of little bits of plastic. The last time I tried to put one of these things together, there was probably enough left over to make something else. I think they always give you spare bits as a sort of 'thank you' for expecting you to finish making the thing yourself.'

'What were you making?'

'Patsy said it was another bathroom cabinet,' I said. 'I tried one some time ago and it ended up on the bonfire, so Patsy persuaded me to buy another one from a different company. It was a disaster. I'm pretty sure that what they sent me wasn't a bathroom cabinet at all. I think they'd sent something else by mistake.'

'So, what was it?'

'I'm not sure. We never did work out what it was supposed to be. It didn't have a bottom or a door and the bit where I put the knob wouldn't open. I followed the instructions to the letter but that bloody knob was a real nuisance. It stuck out of the back and made it impossible to fix the whole thing to the wall.'

Thumper laughed. I have no idea why. Thumper isn't perfect. He once tried to cut his own hair. He ended up wearing a woolly hat for a month.

'At least they gave you extra bits,' said Frank. 'I wonder if we've got spare bits with this one?'

'I bet you have,' said Patchy. 'As the doc says, everyone always has bits left over.'

'It says here that all you need is a screwdriver and this little metal tool thingy,' said Thumper, who was reading the sheet ambitiously labelled 'Instructions'. He held up a piece of metal which looked like a bent nail.

'And you always need a hammer,' I said. 'You definitely need a hammer. I always use a hammer whenever I'm putting anything together. We bought a photocopier for Miss Johnson to use and I had to use a hammer on that.' Miss Johnson is my receptionist and secretary. She was also my predecessor's receptionist and secretary and can remember him doing his rounds in a horse drawn doctor's buggy or on horseback.

'Did it work?' asked Patchy.

'The hammer? Yes, the hammer worked perfectly well. It's one of those hickory shafted hammers which Peter sells. I've never had any problems with it.'

'What about the photocopier.'

'No, the photocopier didn't work properly. Actually, it didn't work at all let alone properly. I think they sent us the wrong lead or perhaps it had a faulty circuit board. And there was a big crack in the plastic where two bits were supposed to fit together.’

‘That wouldn’t have been where you used the hammer, would it?’

‘Possibly,’ I admitted. ‘But you had to use a hammer because the bits didn’t fit together unless you hit them. It doesn’t matter, though. The thing has got a flat top and so Miss Johnson uses it to display her cyclamen plants. We didn’t really need a photocopier anyway. I let Miss Johnson order it because she’d been on about needing one for months.’

‘Who the hell had the idea for selling cupboards and stuff in bits?’ asked Frank.

‘I read about a company which sells houses in a kit,’ I said. ‘You order a house and they send it round in bits on the back of a lorry. It probably saves postage costs. They sell cars in bits too – sports cars mostly. You order a flashy new sports car and the postman brings it round in his van. I expect they’ll be selling babies in bits before too long. You just flick through the catalogue and order whatever sort you fancy.’

‘And then you glue it all together when it arrives,’ said Thumper.

‘Precisely!’ I agreed. ‘Just think of the mess and pain it will save. I don’t expect they’ll use glue, though. There will probably just be bits that connect together. You’ll slot the legs into the pelvis and then click the head onto the neck. Like putting together one of those Lego kits.’

We were all quiet for a while as we thought about the future. To be honest, it was not a future with which we felt particularly comfortable. In Bilbury, we still sometimes struggle to accept that the 20th century has arrived and seems absolutely determined to make its mark on our lives. We don’t like to think of what the 21st century might bring.

‘You probably won’t believe this but the Normans brought over a castle in kit form when they first came to England,’ said Patchy.

‘The Normans?’ said Frank, frowning. ‘Who are the Normans? I don’t think I know the Normans. Are they local?’

‘The Norman Normans,’ said Patchy, patiently.

Since his stroke, Frank sometimes has difficulty in remembering things. But there are, of course, many things which he hasn’t forgotten but doesn’t know because he never knew them. Gilly reckons that once he’d learned to read and write, Frank stopped concentrating at school. She says he’d have come top in firing ink pellets and pulling pigtails but was probably bottom in everything else. Frank says he can’t remember.

‘Is that the Normans who came over for the Battle of Hastings?’ I asked.

‘Ah, that would be 1066,’ said Thumper, showing off. He looked very pleased with himself. I would bet that Thumper couldn’t name a single other famous date in history. This is a man who can’t even remember his wife’s birthday or their anniversary. In December, he only knows it’s Christmas because he makes a few quid delivering Christmas trees and cutting mistletoe out of the trees on my father-in-law’s farm.

‘That’s the ones,’ agreed Patchy, as though Normans had been coming over every couple of years. ‘The Normans who came over in 1066.’

‘Long before my time,’ muttered Frank. ‘I told you I didn’t know any people called the Normans. I hate it when people boast about when their ancestors came here. It’s like people boasting about coming over from America on the Mayfly.’

‘Mayflower,’ I said. ‘And it went the other way.’

‘What do you mean ‘it went the other way’?’

‘It went from Plymouth to America,’ I explained. ‘It was full of pilgrims.’

‘Was it? Did it? Are you sure?’

‘Pretty sure.’

‘Crumbs,’ said Frank. ‘You live and you learn, don’t you? I could have sworn it was called the Mayfly and came over from there to here.’

‘The Mayfly was a British airship,’ said Patchy. ‘It was like the German Zeppelins. I once bought some photographs of it.’

‘Crumbs,’ said Thumper. ‘I didn’t know we had any Zeppelins of our own. So what happened to the Mayfly?’

‘It never flew,’ said Patchy. ‘It fell apart before they could get it into the air.’

We all sat quietly for a moment, reflecting on this long-ago failure.

‘Still we beat the Germans in two wars and in the 1966 football World Cup,’ said Frank cheerily.

Thumper decided that we should celebrate these victories by ordering more drinks. Thumper ordered a pint of his usual. Patchy had another white wine. And I reluctantly agreed to take another small malt whisky.’

‘A single?’ asked Frank.

‘Not that small,’ I told him. A single whisky hardly covers the bottom of the glass.

Frank poured us all drinks and was about to pour himself a whisky when Gilly, his wife, appeared. I don’t know how she does it. She always knows when he's about to pour himself a drink.

Gilly didn't say anything but just looked at him.

Since Frank had his stroke, Gilly had made it her responsibility to look after his health. She limits his consumption of alcohol and fatty food and his blood pressure had stayed low for some months.

Frank put the whisky bottle back but kept the whisky glass and poured in half an inch of concentrated orange juice. He hates the taste but sips it and says he can convince himself it's whisky.

Just as she was about to leave, Gilly turned back. 'How's that cupboard coming along?' she asked.

She knew darned well how well it was coming along. The bits were all spread over the carpet in the snug.

'We're working on it, love,' said Frank. 'The boys are giving me a hand.'

'So I see,' said Gilly. 'Very good of them.'

'It needs a lot of thinking about,' I explained. 'These build it yourself cupboards can be tricky.'

'Yes, doc,' said Gilly. 'Patsy did tell me about your talents in this field.' She looked at me and half smiled. 'I'm sure your experience will help Frank enormously. But perhaps we could have the knobs on the front this time?'

She then disappeared.

'I don't know what she was talking about,' I protested. 'I put the knob exactly where the instructions said to put the knob. Mind you, it didn't help that the instructions were in Swedish. I think it was Swedish but it might have been something else.'

'The Normans who first landed at the English town of Hastings on the southern coast came over the Channel from Normandy in Northern France,' continued Patchy when Gilly had gone. Patchy is not easily distracted from a tale he is determined to tell.

'Aha! Don't tell me,' said Thumper. 'That's why we call them the 'Normans'.

'Spot on!' said Patchy. 'But the odd thing is that the Normans were originally Vikings who lived in Scandinavia. They only became Normans because a French King called Charles the Simple had given a big chunk of Northern France to a Viking chief called Rollo. Charles hoped that if he gave the Vikings a bit of France then they might stop attacking the rest of it.'

'This is all taking us somewhere, I hope,' said Frank, who has the attention span of a butterfly on a sunny day.

'It is,' Patchy assured him. 'When the Normans arrived at Hastings, the archers were first off the boats. They were followed by the knights, all armed and mounted on their war horses, and finally the carpenters disembarked.'

'Did you say the carpenters?' I said, not sure that I'd heard properly. 'How do you know all this stuff?'

'The carpenters,' confirmed Patchy. 'I read a book about it. Creasy's *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World*.'

'Must be a new book,' said Frank. 'I haven't come across it.'

'Published in about 1850,' said Patchy.

'Before my time,' said Frank.

'Is this all true?' asked Thumper.

'I promise,' said Patchy, crossing his heart with the hand containing his white wine. A little of the wine slopped out onto his trousers. 'It's all true. Each archer carried a bow and a quiver full of arrows. The knights were wearing their hauberks and had their shields slung round their necks. They had swords at their sides and carried raised lances.'

'What the devil is a hauberk?' asked Thumper.

'Armour,' replied Patchy.

'I hope this is going to get somewhere soon,' said Frank. 'What about these damned carpenters of yours?'

'They all had axes and planes and adzes,' continued Patchy.

'They'd need hammers,' said Thumper.

'You can't build anything without a hammer,' I confirmed.

'They had all their tools fitted onto their belts,' said Patchy. 'They probably had hammers too.'

'One of those leather belts with pouches Peter Marshall sells?' enquired Thumper. 'They look good but he bought them from a wholesaler who went bust and they're all sized 'very small'. I think they were designed to fit little Japanese workmen.'

'Those are the things,' continued Patchy. 'And while the archers and knights looked for people to shoot or slice, the carpenters looked around for a good spot to put up a castle.'

'This will eventually get us back to furniture, won't it?' said Thumper.

'It definitely will,' laughed Patchy. 'Because the thing is that when I said that the carpenters were looking for somewhere to put up a castle, that's exactly what I meant because they'd brought their castles with them. On board their ships they had three ready-made castles.'

'You're kidding!' said Frank. 'Like that ruddy build-it-yourself furniture?'

'Exactly!' answered Patchy. 'They brought with them three flat-pack castles in bits, all in wooden pieces, shaped and ready to be put together. And, as soon as they'd found a nice flat piece of land, they carried all the bits ashore and put them together with the aid of the pins they'd also brought with them. Packing must have been a nightmare. But, of course, they didn't have customs people in those days. You sailed up to the shore, got off the boat and there you were.'

Patchy explained that the castle walls and so on were all pierced so that they could be connected together.

'And they had barrels full of pins – all cut and ready to use. Before evening had set in, the carpenters had finished. They then put their stores away before they sat down and had dinner in their cosy new castle.'

'Are you pulling our legs?' asked Thumper.

'I'm not,' said Patchy. 'It's all in the history books.'

'I wonder if they had bits left over,' I asked.

'Almost certainly,' said Frank.

'And I wonder if their castles fell down,' I said. I turned to Patchy. 'Is there any history of their castles falling down after they'd put them up?'

'Not that I know of,' said Patchy.

'They probably brought some glue with them,' said Frank. 'There probably weren't any decent glue shops in Hastings in those days.'

'Did they have glue in those days?' asked Thumper.

'Of course they did,' said Frank. 'The Egyptians must have had glue when they built the pyramids.'

'Yes, but that was in Egypt,' Thumper pointed out. 'We're talking about southern England.'

'I think the pins probably worked just fine,' said Patchy. 'They just banged them into place and built their castle.'

'Using hammers,' I said.

'Almost certainly,' agreed Patchy.

'So they had hammers as well as the axes and whatever else you said.'

'I'm sure they did.'

'So,' said Frank. He took a sip from his concentrated orange juice and pulled a face.

'So,' said I.

'What are we going to do with all this stuff?'

We all knew he was talking about the bits and pieces of the unassembled cupboard.

'I've got an oak cupboard in the van,' Patchy reminded us. 'Much nicer than this one will ever be. Two shelves, two doors and proper handles. Why don't I bring it in?'

'How much is it going to cost me?' asked Frank.

I'll give it to you,' said Patchy. 'As long as you throw that boxful of junk away,' he nodded in the direction of the prefabricated cupboard. 'Do something useful with it.'

'Like what?' said Frank.

'Burn it,' said Patchy as he disappeared through the door.

Three minutes later, Patchy came back into the snug carrying a cupboard.

'It looks heavy!' said Thumper, as Patchy struggled in.

'It's a well-made Victorian cupboard,' I said. 'The Victorians made furniture to last. And oak is a heavy wood.'

'Don't bother to help,' said Patchy, breathlessly. 'Just sit there and watch me struggling.'

'OK,' said Thumper. 'Thanks. We will.'

'You seem to be managing fine,' I said.

Patchy put down the cupboard and bent forward, hands on knees, gasping.

'You're not as fit as you were,' I told him.

'Thanks,' said Frank, examining his new cupboard. 'It looks nice.' He opened the doors. 'Bit dusty inside.'

'Nice?' said Patchy. 'Dusty? I'll take it back if you don't want it.'

It was, I have to admit, a very good looking cupboard.

'No, no,' said Frank quickly. 'I'm just kidding. I'm not heavily into cupboards but as cupboards go it looks really good. Very smart. I'll give it a wipe with a damp rag and it'll be perfect.'

'Can I burn this lot?' asked Patchy, picking up some of the make-it-yourself cupboard that was lying on the floor.

'Certainly,' said Frank.

Patchy tossed a small armful of compressed cardboard onto the fire. Thumper picked up all the screws and bits of metal and gave them to Frank who put them into his pocket. Not wanting to do nothing, I picked up more compressed cardboard and added it to the blaze.

'This faux wood burns quite well,' said Patchy.

'Foe wood,' said Frank. 'What's foe wood? You mean it's an enemy of the real stuff?'

'Something like that,' said Patchy.

Frank fetched some crisps from behind the bar. We opened the little blue packets and salted our crisps and then we sat and munched and sipped and enjoyed the blaze.

'I like these little packets of salt they put in with the crisps,' said Thumper. 'Opening them and salting your own crisps is a nice thing to do.'

'I hope they don't ever stop putting them in with the crisps,' I said. 'Crisps wouldn't be the same without them.'

Ten minutes later, Gilly appeared. 'How's my cupboard coming along?' she asked us.

'It's all done,' said Patchy.

'It's finished, love,' said Frank. 'It looks good doesn't it?'

Gilly looked at the cupboard on the snug rug and frowned. 'Is that it? It doesn't look like the picture in the catalogue.'

'It's good solid oak,' said Thumper. 'Last you for a lifetime. You'll never need another cupboard.'

'It's got a few dents in it,' said Gilly.

'They were there when we unpacked it,' said Patchy. 'They put them in to age the item. It's like faded jeans and distressed leather. But we've varnished it for you. The varnish is still a bit tacky so don't examine it too closely just yet.'

Gilly frowned. 'Are there any bits left over?'

'Left over?' I said.

'You four would have bits left over. You always have bits left over.'

'I've got some spare screws and things,' said Frank. He pulled a small handful of screws and metal things from his pocket and showed them to his wife.

'Is that all you had left?'

'Nothing else,' said Frank. 'We managed to use up everything they sent.'

'It looks very solid,' said Gilly. 'It's better than I'd expected to be honest. These items of furniture that come in bits are usually flimsy and a bit rubbishy.' She turned to leave.

'Glad you like it,' said Patchy.

'The fire is going nicely,' said Gilly as she left. 'Something is burning well.'

'Do you think she knows?' asked Thumper, after she'd gone.

'Of course she knows,' said Frank.

'Women always know everything,' said Patchy. 'And they only pretend they don't know when it suits them.'

We finished our crisps.

We all knew he was right.

But it was nice of Gilly to pretend.

The New Barmaid

It was early afternoon and Thumper, Patchy, Frank and I were sitting around a blazing log fire in the Duck and Puddle. I'd done my house calls for the day. The practice receptionist, Miss Johnson, was holding the fort back at Bilbury Grange and knew where I was if she needed me. Patsy was at her mother's where they were busy bottling pears. Thumper, Patchy and I were doing what we did best: nothing much.

I did, however, have a notebook on my lap because in theory I was trying to prepare a short talk on pigs which I'd promised to give to the local Women's Institute.

My supposed expertise on matters porcine was founded entirely on the fact that we were the adopted parents of Cedric, the largest pig in the village. Cedric belonged to a lovely American couple who had won him in a 'Bowling for the Pig' game of skittles at the Duck and Puddle. They had wisely decided not to try to take him back with them to the United States and Patsy and I had happily agreed to look after him.

Patsy had also been roped in to give a short lecture to the Women's Institute. She had agreed to give a talk entitled 'Parsnips – and their round the year role in the kitchen'. I didn't know much about pigs but I knew less about parsnips, so I was glad she was doing that talk.

So far, my notebook contained the word 'PIGS' written in block capitals at the top of a fresh page. The date of my talk was still far enough away for me to be quietly confident that if I waited long enough, either the rest of the talk would materialise without my having to think too much about it. Either that or the invitation would, for some reason, be cancelled.

Both Patsy and I had been roped into talking to the Women's Institute by Patsy's mother, Mrs Kennet. It was her turn to be secretary of the Institute and her major responsibility as holder of this important position was, it seemed, to arrange speakers for the Institute's once a month get-together.

I don't know what these meetings are like in towns and cities but in Bilbury, the Women's Institute meetings usually turned out to be a bit of a knees up. It had for years been the custom for attendees to bring with them bottles of home-made wine, and home-made wine in Bilbury tends to be capable of loosening the top of your head if you drink too much of it.

Members of the Institute who attend meetings in other parts of the country probably content themselves with a slice of seed cake and a cup of tea. In Bilbury, the meetings ended up with a fairly extensive wine tasting. And the wine certainly seemed to make things go with something of a swing. A year earlier, an illustrated lecture on traditional Russian dancing had ended rather dramatically. The speaker, an estate agent from Exeter, had brought swords with him so that he could demonstrate the memorable sabre dance which enlivens the final act of Khachaturian's ballet Gayane. Unfortunately, sabres and home-made wine do not mix well. The estate agent had removed a large bunion from his right foot, and three traumatised members of the Institute had required lengthy bed rest.

My mother-in-law is a wonderful woman, kind and always thoughtful, but she has a way about her that means that I find it difficult to say 'No' when she asks me to do something – such as giving a talk on pig keeping.

So I had a notebook on my knees in case anything occurred to me.

Thumper, who was definitely not attempting to prepare a lecture for the Women's Institute, was drinking a pint of a new beer from a local brewery. The beer was called 'Old Harrison's Anticipated Strong Bladder Water' and Thumper reckoned it was 'distinctly passable' but that he would need to try a few more pints before he would be able to give a properly considered opinion. Thumper doesn't like to rush into things.

Most of the beer sold in North Devon is potent stuff and this brew did not appear to be any exception.

Visitors from towns and cities where the beer is often watered down and frequently not very strong to start with are sometimes surprised by the strength of our local beer.

'Alcool hash no effect hat haul on me,' insisted an insurance and pension fund salesman from Middlesex. He had come to Devon in the hope of persuading locals to give him regular chunks of money in return for insurance policies. He'd have done better to try to persuade the cormorants on the coast to hand over their fish. He had tried to drown his sorrows in local beer. He had, I remember, chosen a brew called 'Old Restoration' which was Thumper's standard choice.

'Get down off the table before you fall and break a leg,' said Frank.

'Hime purfickly safe,' insisted the insurance salesman.

'No, you're not,' said Frank. 'Not with your trousers round your ankles like that.'

It was only at this point in the conversation that the salesman realised that he was in a state of dishabille. He never did remember that he had climbed onto the table to perform an impromptu striptease. He did not seem to be a bright fellow and Patchy, who had at the time been reading a biography of the Duke of Wellington, suggested that if the man had entered an IQ contest with a shop window mannequin, then the competition would have been a 'damned nice thing – the nearest run thing you ever saw in your life'.

Patchy was drinking a tumbler of 'Sheep Dip' (a Devon delicacy which looks and tastes like whisky but which appears on the business accounts of many a North Devon sheep farmer without, as far as I am aware, ever coming anywhere near to a sheep's foot) and I was, for a change, nursing a glass of Wellington Brandy (promised, by the proudly English distiller to be stronger and more palatable than Napoleon Brandy). This had been recommended to me by Patchy. Frank was sipping a glass of a lemon cordial. Frank has high blood pressure, which is pretty well controlled at the moment, and he had a stroke a little while back. To protect his health, Gilly, his wife, allows him just one alcoholic drink a day and she is very strict about this. Generally speaking, Frank prefers to have his one allowed drink in the evening rather than at lunchtime.

Gilly had just passed through the snug on her way to the kitchen at the back of the pub. She'd been into Barnstaple and was carrying several bags of shopping. She had stopped to show to Frank a boxful of new china mugs. They looked unusually delicate and expensive for a public house. 'But we've already got dozens of mugs!' complained Frank when he saw them. It wasn't a real complaint. Frank worships Gilly and loves her so much he said nothing when she put up new chintz curtains in the snug. He didn't even mutter a protest when she made half a dozen cushions with the leftover material. 'Yes,' replied Gilly, 'but these are for showing and not for drinking. Aren't they smart? I thought I'd put them onto the top shelf of the Welsh Dresser.'

And then she was gone.

When Gilly had disappeared to unpack and arrange her mugs, the three of us returned to watching Frank, who was sorting through a pile of mail which he had on his lap. He had already placed a small number of items of mail in a neat pile on the brass bound Captain's table before us. There was still ample room for us to stand our glasses, on the rare moments when we weren't actually drinking from them. Frank was tossing the rest of the mail, most of it unopened, into the fire.

'Did all that mail come today?' asked Thumper, incredulously.

'Good Lord, no!' answered Frank. 'There is a month's mail here. I always like to let it build up a bit. If you look at the stuff every day, you end up spending most of your time reading letters and then answering them. I'm a bit soft like that. Once I've opened an envelope, I always feel obliged to reply. This way, most of the mail is out-of-date before I get to read it so I don't have to bother with a reply.' This was quite a long speech for Frank.

He tore open an envelope and showed us a letter from his bank manager in Barnstaple. 'See, look at this one,' he said. 'He wanted me to go to a meeting with him two weeks ago. It's now out-of-date so I can throw it away.' He screwed up the letter and the envelope and tossed them both onto the fire which consumed them hungrily.

'Bright thinking,' said Patchy. 'I always used to try to deal with the mail before I did anything else in the day. But then suddenly, one fine spring day, I realised that if you give priority to all the crap in your life then you never have a chance to get round to the good things or the fun things, do you? I used to go sea fishing a lot and I'd promised myself that the next time we had a fine day, I'd go off and drown some bait. But at 11.30 in the morning, I was still on the phone trying to sort out some problem with an electricity bill. I'd been on hold for 20 minutes so I put the phone down, collected my rod, put together a picnic and buggered off down to the beach for the rest of the day. The thing is that the crap never ends, does it?'

No one bothered to reply to these rhetorical questions.

I too shared Frank's dislike of paperwork.

The problem is that the inconsequential and the unimportant have a tendency to take over our lives and you need to be constantly alert to make sure that they don't. If humans are wiped off the face of the earth, I believe that all that will remain will be cockroaches, bindweed, nettles, ivy, brambles and paperwork. The administrators who create the paperwork will survive anything – even a nuclear blast. The fact is, however, that no one ever received thanks or achieved greatness for keeping neat accounts (or, as Patsy says, for plumping up their scatter cushions).

'It's bills I hate,' said Thumper with the quiet status of a man who has never in his life paid a bill that wasn't printed in red. He was so emphatic that he waved his beer mug around and spilt some of it. He frowned for he hated spilling beer as much as he hated paying bills.

'I like getting letters from my brother,' I said. 'Opening a letter from him is like opening the front door and having the sun burst in. He's always rather jolly and he writes marvellous letters. He only writes once or twice a year, mind you.'

'I didn't know you had a brother!' said Thumper.

'I haven't seen him for years,' I said. 'He's quite a lot older than me. He emigrated to Canada years ago.'

'Is he a doctor, too?' asked Patchy.

'Oh no,' I said with a laugh. I don't really know why but I found the idea of my brother being a doctor rather comical. ‘He was never in the slightest bit academic.’

I sipped at my brandy and thought about my long lost brother. Patchy poked the fire, provoking a flurry of sparks. Frank continued to sort through his mail. It occurred to me that although I was fond of my brother in a co-sanguine, standard sibling sort of way, my real brothers in life were sitting within a few feet of me.

‘I can’t stand bills,’ muttered our landlord. ‘I get loads of them. I suppose everyone does.’ He held up an envelope on which was stamped the logo of the TV licensing people. The envelope also carried a message which appeared to be intended to intimidate. ‘Look at this!’ he exclaimed in disgust. ‘I’ve already put three more of these on the fire. These people don’t seem to have anything to do except send me threatening letters.’

‘What is it?’ asked Thumper. ‘Who’s it from?’

‘The TV licensing people,’ explained Frank.

Thumper looked at him and frowned. ‘The who?’

‘You know,’ said Frank, ‘those people who threaten to come round to make sure you’ve bought a TV licence.’

‘I bought our TV,’ said Thumper, clearly puzzled. ‘I paid £4 for it. You can get colour on it when the wind’s blowing hard from the south west.’

Knowing that the prevailing winds in North Devon are from the south west, and can have a powerful effect on television aerials, we all nodded.

‘You still have to buy a licence,’ said Frank. ‘At least you’re supposed to.’

‘A licence for the television? They make you buy a licence if you have a television?’ He laughed at the absurdity of this.

‘I think they do,’ said Patchy. He looked at me. ‘Have you got one?’

‘Television?’

‘No. Yes. But have you got a licence for it?’

I shook my head. ‘They send me a lot of those letters and I keep meaning to,’ I said. ‘But the letters demanding money are so aggressive that I always feel I have to ignore them.’

‘They’re never going to come round to Bilbury to see if we’ve got licences,’ said Frank.

‘I never answer the door unless I know who it is,’ said Thumper, who didn’t. ‘How many times have you opened the door to an unexpected visitor and had a pleasant surprise?’

‘I bought a television licence once,’ said Patchy. He looked around, saw our looks of astonishment and lowered his head. ‘It was years ago,’ he explained, embarrassed. ‘I was very young and naïve then.’

‘I still can’t get my head round this,’ said Thumper, leaning forward. ‘You’re serious? We’re supposed to buy a licence to watch television? We are supposed to buy a licence even when we own our television set? And with all the adverts they put between the programmes these days?’

‘Don’t the licensing people send you letters?’ asked Frank.

Thumper shook his head. ‘I don’t think so,’ he said. ‘Mind you, the dog eats most of our mail before I get to see it.’

‘That sounds like a good excuse for not paying bills,’ I said.

‘So it is. I never thought of that!’ grinned Thumper.

We all sipped at our drinks.

‘I can’t get used to life in the 1970s,’ muttered Thumper.

‘I think they’ve had TV licences for quite a while,’ said Frank.

‘Bloody outrageous,’ said Thumper. He took a man sized sip of his beer. ‘This is good stuff, Frank,’ he said. ‘I’m pretty sure I’m definitely going to like this one. What’s it called again?’

Frank nodded and told him, pleased that the new beer was getting the seal of approval. Frank always reckons that Thumper has taste buds which reflect the taste of the average man in Bilbury. If Gilly makes a new pie, she always makes sure that Thumper tries it first before she puts it on the menu.

‘I was in my early twenties,’ explained Patchy. ‘We all do stupid things in our early twenties, don’t we?’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ I told him. ‘We’ll forget about it eventually.’

‘Everywhere you turn they want money for something or other,’ said Frank. ‘They’ll be making us buy licences for our cars soon.’

We all looked at him.

‘They don’t, do they?’

We all looked at him, wondering if he was taking the piss. But he clearly wasn’t.

‘I’m afraid so,’ said Patchy.

‘Don’t for heaven’s sake tell Gilly,’ said Frank. ‘She’ll worry about it.’

We promised we wouldn’t. I sometimes think what a good thing it is that Frank long ago grew through and way beyond any manifestation of embarrassment.

As Frank continued to sort through his mail, we chatted, as friends will, of this and that, of cabbages and kings.

Patchy told us that a fellow in Lynton who operated a small removal company had been hired to move a Bechstein grand piano out of a cottage in Lynmouth and to take it to a terraced house in Plymouth. None of us could imagine why anyone would want to move anything from Lynmouth to Plymouth but we agreed that the explanation had to be either love or money.

The basic problem they had was that the front door to the cottage was narrow and the hall leading to the front door had a bend in it. The difficulty was exacerbated by the fact that the piano was, of course, exceedingly large. The removers decided that instead of merely moving the piano in a suck it and see sort of way (the usual method favoured by removers everywhere), they would have a plan. They would hire a local carpenter to make a plywood replica, reproducing not the detail of the piano but merely the size, and then work out a way to take the piano out of the cottage without doing any damage to the valuable piano or the cottage.

‘What happened?’ I asked him. ‘Sounds a good plan. Did it work?’

‘Unfortunately, not,’ said Patchy. ‘They carpenter made a plywood replica of the piano but it was so large that he couldn’t get it out of his workshop. The removers gave up and knocked a hole in the cottage wall.’

Thumper told us that a pal of his, who is an undertaker, was driving through Ilfracombe recently, on his way to pick up a customer in Combe Martin, when an elderly woman ran out into the road and waved for him to stop.

‘Ernest isn’t dead yet,’ she screeched at him. ‘But I’m pretty sure he will be ready for you to collect next Wednesday. If you’re around this way then just call in. It’ll save me the price of a phone call.’

Temporarily chastened by this reminder of our own mortality, Patchy emptied his glass and decided it was time to order fresh drinks. It was not necessary for Frank to take a break from feeding the fire with unwanted mail (of which there seemed to be an inexhaustible supply) because he and Gilly had hired a barmaid to assist them in running the Duck and Puddle and she had now reappeared behind the bar.

It is, I think, fair to say that Arcadia Blanchardine did not look like a barmaid. Mind you, she didn’t look much like an ‘Arcadia’ either.

If you were a film maker in Hollywood and you’d asked Central Casting to send along a barmaid, you would have been disappointed if they’d sent Arcadia Blanchardine. She had none of the qualities which were traditionally regarded as standard equipment for a barmaid in the 1970s. She was not charming, seductive or voluptuous. She was not a woman for whom the words ‘buxom’, ‘flirtatious’ or ‘friendly’ had been coined. More appropriate adjectives would have been ‘forbidding’, ‘harsh’, ‘grim’, ‘starched’, ‘chilly’ and ‘hostile’. These are not qualities which were usually associated with the welcoming nature of an English hostelry. Ms Blanchardine did not have a winning smile and she and badinage were ‘strangers who had never met ‘ere in passing cross the distant moors’. Merry quips were not her forte and the general attractiveness of the Duck and Puddle was not enhanced by the thick, baggy, mustard coloured polo neck jumper which she wore every day, whatever the weather and however warm it was in the snug at the Duck and Puddle. She wore the jumper, which did not appear to have ever been washed, together with a pair of industrial strength blue jeans which were about four or five sizes too large for her.

‘This Englishwoman is so refined she has no bosom and no behind,’ wrote Stevie Smith and, apart from the ‘refined’ bit, it might have been Ms Blanchardine of whom she was writing.

‘Give her a break,’ said Frank, when Patchy commented that he would like to see her smile occasionally. Frank always tries to see the best in people. ‘I think she would probably be a really nice person if she wasn’t such a mean, self-centred and rude individual,’ Frank added, not meaning to be critical.

Frank would have probably described Nero as a nice chap, who played a pleasant tune with his fiddle but was perhaps a bit careless with matches. It was Frank, bless him, who told me that Mussolini had a pet lion, of which he was inordinately fond, that Hitler was devoted to a pet dog called Blondi and that without Stalin’s enthusiasm, the AK47 would have probably never been made.

It was nigh on impossible to estimate Ms Blanchardine’s age.

She wore her hair in a style which was more commonly associated with squaddies in the army and if she wore any make-up it was in such small quantities that it was not visible to the naked eye.

That is all in the way of setting the scene and introducing you to Ms Blanchardine. Most of it didn’t matter a damn, of course and none of this is intended as criticism for, like Frank, I always try to see the best in people, but merely as an introduction to an important addition to village life.

The only thing that did matter was that instead of greeting customers with a welcoming smile, she met them with a sour look.

‘What do you want?’ was her standard salutation and it was delivered with all the emphasis on the third word. The result was that the customer, whether a regular or a stranger, was made to feel something of a nuisance.

Ms Blanchardine somehow managed to make it clear to all and sundry that she had more important things to be doing with her time than serving customers. These crucial, private and confidential activities were not detailed but their existence was implicit.

‘May I ask how you selected your new barmaid?’ I asked Frank a few days after she had arrived at the pub. The object of my enquiry was down in the cellar reconnecting a new barrel of Old Restoration to the tap which brought beer to the thirsty. The Duck and Puddle does not have a large clientele when measured in numbers but those customers for which it caters are renowned for their proclivity for feather spitting.

Frank sighed and shook his head rather sadly. ‘We advertised in the local paper and asked the Labour Exchange to send us details of suitable applicants. We said we’d prefer someone with experience in the hotel or pub trade but that we would, if necessary, hire someone without any knowledge of the business. Do you know how many people wanted the job?’

‘No idea. A dozen? Half a dozen?’

‘One,’ said Frank. ‘Ms Blanchardine was the only one who was interested. She had no experience and admitted that she only wanted the job because she thought it would help her find a husband.’

I stared at him in disbelief.

‘That’s what she said,’ said Frank with a shrug. ‘Gilly interviewed her and Ms Blanchardine told her that she had been single long enough and that she had decided to marry.’

‘But why did you hire her at all?’ I asked him.

‘Gilly said we needed help in the bar,’ said Frank. ‘She doesn’t want me working too hard because of that stroke I had and at meal times she has to be in the kitchen preparing food.’

Sure enough, Ms Blanchardine quickly made it clear that she had not been joking when she’d told Gilly that she was in Bilbury on a husband hunt.

Apart from her standard ‘What do you want?’ her only other question to customers was ‘Are you married?’ This query, of course, was reserved for male customers. Female customers received only the ‘What do you want?’ and a glare. Ms Blanchardine didn’t like having other women in the bar. She clearly regarded them as unwelcome competition.

Whenever she found an unmarried male customer, Ms Blanchardine would attempt to smile. Unfortunately, smiling was not a skill she had mastered and the result was a tooth-baring grimace which exhibited years of dental malpractice for no useful purpose. Invariably, she would accompany the ‘smile’ with another of her favourite lines which was: ‘I’m single too’.

Peter Marshall, our local shopkeeper, became a prime target for her smile and mildly implied promise but Peter, who had only recently avoided a rather unpleasant matrimonial affiliation with a predatory mantis, who had got as far as making a unilateral decision to distribute around the village an extensive wedding present list, was more than a match for her clumsy wiles. After her inquiry as to his marital status, Peter glared defiantly and added: ‘And I shall make damned sure I remain that way, too.’

Ms Blanchardine’s other main target had been the newly appointed vicar of St Dymphna.

Frank reported that when she discovered that the Reverend Michael Micklemass was married, and had seven and two thirds children, she went into a moody decline which lasted for the best part of a week. She had, apparently, rather set her heart on becoming a clergyman’s wife. She told Frank that she thought she was well suited to the role of becoming a pastoral guide for lost souls of Bilbury, though Frank said he thought she perhaps underestimated the wider demands of the role and might find herself stretched if required to give lessons on jam making to the Young Wives Group or required for ‘bonniest baby’ judging duties at the summer fete.

When Frank told me of Ms Blanchardine’s ambition I was, I confess, reminded of an entry in Arnold Bennett’s diary for August 10th 1899.

‘I have just remembered a saying of Mrs Dunmer, our new housekeeper at Witley,’ wrote Bennett. ‘She said to me: ‘There’s a lot of old maids in this village, sir, as wants men. There was three of ‘em after a curate as we had here, a very nice young gentleman he was, sir. No matter how often the church was opened, those women would be there, sir, even if it was five times a day. It’s a sign of a hard winter, sir, when the hay begins to run after the horse.’’

‘Could we have four refills, please?’ asked Patchy politely. Patchy is always polite to everyone and claims he has even been known to address traffic wardens with a respectful finger to the brim of his hat. (No one has seen evidence of this and there are some who suspect that two fingers may be involved.)

‘What do you want?’ asked Ms Blanchardine, who, unlike Frank, never made any effort to remember what her customers were drinking.

Visitors who called in to the Duck and Puddle once a year would be astonished when, as they walked through the door, Frank would greet them and then ask if they wanted their usual. Ms Blanchardine either didn’t have much of a memory or didn’t believe in exerting it overmuch.

As usual, Ms Blanchardine managed to make her inquiry sound like an accusation. She spoke in the manner of a harassed mother addressing a troublesome six-year-old or an irritable and irascible head teacher responding to an infant pupil's request for information.

Patchy told her what we were drinking. Normally he would have invited her to have a drink herself but we had all abandoned that custom since Ms Blanchardine would invariably reply 'I'm not thirsty so I'll take mine directly from the till.' And she would duly add the price of a triple malt whisky to the bill. None of us actually saw her drink anything though we did see and hear her eat for she had an insatiable fondness for pork scratchings. She would, said Frank, get through a dozen large packets a day without paying for any of them.

In due course, Ms Blanchardine announced that our drinks were ready.

'Your drinks are here,' she shouted.

Even when the bar was quiet and she had nothing else to do, she would never take drinks to a table.

'I was hired as a barperson,' she told Frank, when he suggested that it might be a good idea if she were to put drinks onto a tray and take them over to customers. 'I have bad feet and I wasn't hired to cart drinks about the place like a skivvy.'

The result was that if he was in the bar (and where else was he going to be?) Frank would be the one who would take the drinks across to the table where the customers were sitting.

There was no doubt that life in the Duck and Puddle wasn't anywhere near as joyful now that Ms Blanchardine was behind the bar. We tried to ignore her dark and looming presence but it wasn't easy. 'I always feel she's watching to make sure we don't misbehave,' muttered Thumper, when Frank collected our drinks from the bar and put them down on the captain's table.

Patchy and I nodded agreement and picked up our fresh drinks.

'This is good stuff,' said Thumper, as he began his fresh pint of Old Harrison's Anticipated Strong Bladder Water. He savoured the liquid, allowing it to remain in his mouth for a while in the same way that a wine or whisky drinker will hold a favourite tipple on tongue and palate. 'Do you know,' he said to Frank, 'I think I would definitely put this one into my top three favourite beers.'

Frank, who still chose the stock for the bar and always took great care when selecting new beers for his customers to enjoy, nodded his appreciation of Thumper's vote of confidence. 'What would the other two be?' he asked. 'Old Restoration would be one, I assume?'

'Oh yes,' said Thumper, who claims he has probably drunk enough Old Restoration to fill the Estuary at Bideford. 'The Old Restoration would definitely be in there. And I'd have Wilkinson's Prize Double Pigman's Drench as my third.' He thought for a moment. 'If I were allowed a reserve it would be 'Charles Wells Bombadier'.'

Thumper is, we all know fond of this particular brew as much for its name as for its malty taste. The beer is named after Bombadier Billy Wells who was, as a boxer, the first British holder of the Lonsdale belt but who is now more widely remembered as the well-muscled fellow banging an oversized gong at the start of the wonderful British films which were made by the J.Arthur Rank organisation.

'I'd have the Old Restoration and this new one from Old Harrison,' said Frank. 'But my third would have to be Rudman's Singular Stout.'

'Ah yes,' said Thumper. 'So many beers…'

Patchy said that if he had to choose three drinks for the rest of his life he would choose any decent claret from the Chateau Mouton Rothschild, Sheep Dip whisky and a nice cup of tea. Thumper immediately told him that this was cheating since he was only allowed alcoholic drinks in his top three. Patchy then said he'd have a decent bottle of Dom Perignon as his third choice.

No one was much surprised when I chose three malts as my favourite alcoholic drinks: Laphroaig, Bunnahabein and The Macallan (always preceded by the definite article); with Cardhu a very respectable reserve.

'If you could only have one meal for the rest of your life what would it be?' asked Patchy. 'It doesn't have to be nutritional or balanced or any of that stuff. What would you not like to live without?'

'Gilly's steak and kidney pudding with buttered mashed potatoes and sliced carrots,' said Frank instantly.

'A fried breakfast,' said Thumper firmly. 'Bacon, sausage, egg, tomatoes, mushrooms and hashbrowns.'

'Pancakes covered in sugar and liberally splashed with lashings of lemon juice,' said Patchy, unexpectedly.

'Your turn,' said Frank, looking at me.

'Hot buttered toast,' I said, after some thought. 'Using a toasting fork on a sparking log fire.'

There were groans at my rather unimaginative contribution.

'What about you, Ms Blanchardine?' asked Thumper, turning towards the bar. None of us, not even Frank, had been given permission to call her by her Christian name. Frank had tried once but had been heartily reproved.

'I don't like silly games like that,' she said sniffily. 'We all need a properly balanced diet. There's no point in just picking one meal. You're grown men, you should be able to find better ways to spend your time than playing silly games.'

That rather put a stop to our silliness and so we sat quietly and watched the logs blazing in the fireplace. A two-foot long piece of silver birch was now burning very nicely and looked set to last for an hour or so.

‘Have you nearly finished sorting through your damned mail?’ asked Patchy, looking across at Frank who had just tossed a bunch of advertising circulars and a water bill onto the fire.

‘Nearly done,’ said Frank, holding up the handful of mail which remained. ‘And then I’m finished with the mail for another month!’

It seemed an excellent policy.

I found myself wishing I could do the same.

Unfortunately, medical reports and laboratory investigations tend to require rather more urgent treatment.

Still, I respected Frank’s method of dealing with his mail and admired it greatly from afar.

‘Hot buttered toast,’ mumbled Thumper, looking in my direction.

I grinned at him and shrugged.

‘We could make paper aeroplanes with some of those leaflets,’ Patchy said to Frank.

Thumper and I looked him. I picked out a leaflet advertising central heating and quickly made a very decent dart. I tossed it across the room and watched with pride as it floated behind the bar.

Ms Blanchardine made a loud tutting sound and stalked out of the snug.

‘It’s better without her in here,’ muttered Patchy.

We spent the next fifteen minutes making paper darts.

Ms Blanchardine, who could hear us having a good time, did not return.

Beneath us, down in the Duck and Puddle cellar, we could hear Ms Blanchardine doing something noisy. She also appeared to be shouting abuse at a barrel of beer. I couldn’t help thinking that this was all going to end in tears.

‘Bit of a spoilsport, isn’t she?’ said Thumper.

‘Into each life some rain must fall,’ said Patchy.

‘The Ink Spots,’ said Frank. ‘Great song.’

‘Henry Wadsworth Longfellow,’ said Patchy. ‘Great poem.’

We sat and watched the fire for a while. When the flames began to die down, Frank threw on another assortment of circulars and final demands.

The Bilbury Snitch

We had not had a policeman living in the village of Bilbury for several years.

The problem (if that is how you want to describe it) was that the crime levels in Bilbury were not high enough to merit our having our very own resident constable. During the last year when we had a resident constable, there had been very little major crime.

A bucket had been reported stolen but was later found to have been blown into a ditch during one of our not infrequent winter storms.

And Mr Brooke, a newcomer to the village whom we have already met, complained that, although admitting he had no proof of the theft, he believed that some of his apples had been taken.

Mr Brooke, a former Very Important Person in the City of London, was a pompous and self-important fellow whose small but bountiful orchard produced far more apples than he could ever eat. He claimed that he believed that his apples had been stolen by a gang which was working for a cider maker in Taunton. When the police investigated the theft, it was found that the two dozen apples which Mr Brooke claimed were missing, were rotting quietly in the lush undergrowth beneath the trees in question.

And then there was the case of Mrs Banbury and her failing memory.

I don't know whether this happens in other villages but in Bilbury, people seem to hide all sorts of stuff in all kinds of odd places for a variety of different reasons.

I once had a patient called Hodgson who was a retired accountant who kept a sizeable hoard of gold sovereigns packed into a bird box at the bottom of his garden. He chose sovereigns because, since they officially count as currency, there is no capital gains tax to be paid when they are sold. You'd be surprised at how many sovereigns you can cram into a bird box. The thing was so heavy that it had to be supported with a piece of wood nailed onto the tree underneath it. The ex-accountant was so worried about forgetting that he had put them there that he told everyone he knew what he'd done. The coins were still there when Mr Hodgson died and his executors emptied the box.

And then there was Hilda Perkins. Mrs Perkins was a sweet, old lady who kept her jewellery in a hollowed out loaf which she kept in her freezer. She was a widow and lived alone and when she became bedbound in her late 90s, I visited her once a week, just to check on her and to make sure she was eating and breathing satisfactorily. She had terrible arthritis and a heart which misbehaved whenever the weather changed. Two neighbours took it in turns to take her food.

Every time I visited Mrs Perkins, she asked me to fetch the hollowed out loaf so that she could check that the jewels were still safely hidden. The jewels were all paste and almost worthless but they were important to her. I never let on that I knew that they were paste. On the contrary, I always treated the jewels as though they belonged to the Queen and were on loan from the Tower of London.

And another patient of mine, the aforementioned sweet, old lady called Mrs Banbury, persuaded her nephew to stuff bits of jewellery and a few gold coins into the hollow pole which suspended the curtains in her living room.

It was, I suspect, an idea she'd got from one of the many crime novels she read.

When the nephew emigrated to Australia, Mrs Banbury completely forgot where her treasures had been hidden and there was no one around to remind her.

After being unable to find them in her underwear drawer (the 'safe' place she had used for over 50 years) she called in the police and reported that she had been robbed.

It took Constable Hobbling (who was our local representative of the constabulary at the time) three days to discover that the jewels had not been stolen at all. However, before the happy conclusion to the enquiry, the investigation caused some considerable concern in the village. I know of two people who, as a result of the investigation, actually started locking their doors at night and carried on doing so for the best part of a month.

(Hollow curtain poles, the sort that carry curtains on large rings, have been used to store all sorts of strange things. I heard about a family in Barnstaple who were so upset at being thrown out of their rented accommodation that they hid bits of fish in the hollow curtain poles they left behind. They had been thrown out of their home because the landlord believed he could make more money by doing some renovation work and then renting out the property to wealthier clients. The stale fish did what stale fish tend to do and, as a result, the house stank. The landlord, whose renovations had not included replacing the curtain pole, couldn't find the cause of the offensive odour, or anyone prepared to live in the smelly house. After a weary and disappointing six months, he gave up the struggle and decided to sell the house cheaply. By this time, the family who had been thrown out had managed to scrimp and save enough money for a deposit. They bought the house from which they had been evicted and threw out the curtain poles. As far as I know, the landlord never found out what they'd done. I only found out about it because the man who had hidden the fish was a cousin of Gilly's and she delighted in telling the story.)

The only other crime problem of any significance we had in Bilbury was a spate of thefts which were so small and insignificant that the duty sergeant at the police station in Barnstaple insisted that they didn't even warrant labelling as petty crime.

But at the time there is no doubt that the thefts were worrying.

I should, perhaps, point out that these crimes were not directly involved in the main theme of this account but are included here because, as I believe experienced and accomplished authors are wont to say, they help to set the scene and they provide essential background embroidery. As you will have already noticed, this chapter is exceptionally well embroidered.

The thefts had two things in common.

First, the items which were stolen were all taken from outhouses, barns, sheds, garages and so on.

Second, the items were pretty well worthless and it was the fact that someone had taken the items which was the worry, not the disappearance of the things themselves. None of us likes the idea of a malfeasant stranger wandering onto our property and fingering our possessions – worthless though they might be.

The thief had had an easy time of it.

Most rural properties are well served with what are, I believe, known as 'storage facilities' and this is as true of Bilbury as anywhere else.

Space is not at a premium in a village, in the way that it is in town and suburban gardens, and whereas the average town dweller has to store his lawnmower, garden tools, old suitcases, malfunctioning electrical equipment and boxes of old accounts at the back of his garage or, maybe, in a small garden shed, rural properties are usually so well served with storage space that nothing is ever thrown away.

Bilbury Grange, for example, is blessed with 17 barns, outhouses, stables, linhays and sheds. I know this because I once counted them.

If you added in coops and field shelters and the buildings which have crumbled away and are now little more than foundations, then the number would be even greater.

Many of these buildings had been of little or no practical value for some years.

I think that our predecessors at Bilbury Grange had a policy that when a barn or stable was beginning to look ropey, and had lost a good part of its roof, they would simply build a new one. It was, to be fair, probably cheaper and easier to build something else rather than to attempt to do repairs to a structure that had been weakened by woodworm and wet rot (and possibly even a touch of dry rot) and then battered into submission by the storms and gales which are as much a part of North Devon as the moors, the combes and the rock-strewn coastline.

Some of our outbuildings were more or less empty but several were stuffed to the rafters with bits of old machinery, rotten coils of rope and unopened bags which contained heaven knows what because the labels had long since rotted away.

The one thing all these edifices had in common was that, whether sound or not, they remained forever unlocked.

House dwellers in a town or a city will almost certainly lock their garage, if they have one, and most probably have a stout padlock on their shed. Even in the suburbs, house owners are apprehensive and cautious through necessity and experience. But I don't think any garage in Bilbury was ever locked, and the idea of putting a padlock on a shed door would have caused much merriment had it been mooted in the Duck and Puddle.

Given this, and the fact that the items which disappeared were of little or no value or consequence, it was, in its own small way, a miracle that anyone noticed that things were disappearing.

It was, I think, my dear friend Thumper Robinson who first mentioned that something of his had gone missing.

We were sitting in the snug at the Duck and Puddle one day when he mentioned, out of the blue, that someone had stolen a rusty bucket with a hole in the bottom which he had been planning to use to help force some rhubarb. He wasn't concerned about the loss of the bucket, it would have been impossible to put a monetary value on it, but about the fact that someone had snuck into a shed in his garden and taken it.

Patchy then mentioned that he had experienced a similarly strange theft.

In his case, an intruder had entered a store shed he used for unsaleable junk and had taken an old bicycle saddle which had been sitting on a shelf. Patchy has an encyclopaedic knowledge of every item in his inventory and he'd noticed the absence of the saddle instantly. It had, he said, been the space on an otherwise crowded shelf which had attracted his attention.

Frank said that he'd lost an old, plastic milk crate which he kept in an alleyway behind the pub. He regularly used the crate to help him reach up and un-block a stretch of guttering on a low roof. Because of its position, the guttering was regularly filled with leaves and other debris. Frank said he couldn't understand why anyone would steal a scruffy, old milk crate which was of little value to anyone who didn't have guttering which needed un-blocking.

Listening to these tales of modest woe, I remembered that I had noticed that an old trowel had been taken from our greenhouse. I'd only spotted that the trowel had gone missing because the handle had been loose and I had put the trowel to one side, intending to bind the handle back into place with some baler twine. The blade, the scoopy shaped metal part of the trowel, was perfectly serviceable so it had seemed a pity to throw it away. Having lived in the country for some years, I had acquired country ways and was always reluctant to throw away anything which might still be serviceable. I had filled a barn and a half with bits and pieces which didn't appear to have any future use but which I had kept simply because 'you never know when it might come in handy'.

None of us cared about the items which had disappeared. They had neither sentimental nor monetary value. But we cared very much about the fact that someone had entered our properties and taken them. No one likes to feel that the sanctity of their home, albeit a peripheral part of it, has been invaded.

Even so we wouldn't have bothered to report the thefts if it had not been that, by coincidence, the local constable, P.C. 'Peculiar' Clarke, was in the Duck and Puddle at the time, enjoying a lunchtime pie and a pint. (P.C. Clarke had taken over from Constable Hobbling who had retired to grow organic mushrooms in a large, dark barn in the Black Mountains.)

'Peculiar' had removed his helmet so that he could honestly claim that he was not in uniform, and therefore could not be accused of drinking while on duty. He overheard us talking and, since he hadn't had any crime to deal with for nearly nine months, became quite excited by what he described as a 'serial thief'.

A rural policeman without any crimes to solve will grasp at anything which allows him to convince his superiors that he is needed where he is and should not be shunted off to do something which requires daily confrontations with villainous individuals carrying knives, bludgeons and shotguns. 'Peculiar' Clarke was no coward but he had enough brain underneath his helmet to know which side his bread was buttered.

('Peculiar's real name, when he squeezed his size 8 helmet onto his oversized cranium, crammed his size 12s onto his bicycle pedals and rode around the village looking for crime, was P.C. Archibald Clarke. For reasons lost in the far distant mists of time, he was known to everyone as Peculiar. No one, least of all Archibald, was offended by this and local youngsters regarded him as a fierce upholder of the law and a stern protector of low-hanging fruits and nuts. Scrumpers, if caught and recognised as established recidivists, could expect to have their ears boxed, regardless of age or size. In those days, it was perfectly legal and proper for police officers to box the ears of minor miscreants. This saved the courts a good deal of work and enabled offenders to continue with their lives without having to contend with the burden of a criminal record.)

P.C.Clarke finished his pie, put his helmet back on, took out his notebook, licked his pencil and took our statements.

He then began his enquiries.

To begin with, P.C. Clarke's prime, and indeed only, suspect was a local man called 'Nutty' Slack, who lived in a tin shack on Exmoor and who had a fine collection of utterly worthless items stored under a tarpaulin next to his home.

Operating on the principle that a collector, however simple his tastes, however mean his ambitions, will be innately ruthless and greedy, will stoop as low as is required, and will stop at nothing in order to enhance the size and quality of his agglomeration, P.C. Clarke visited Mr Slack's abode and, although not armed with a search warrant, requested permission to 'take a look at the stuff what you got tucked under that tarpaulin'.

The items which had disappeared were not, however, in Mr Slack's collection and genuine and fulsome apologies were proffered and accepted.

Constable Clarke was so stumped that he had to issue a verbal announcement (in the Duck and Puddle) that he 'was pursuing enquiries' and that 'an arrest was expected imminently'. As Thumper pointed out, this clearly meant that Constable Clarke didn't have the foggiest idea where to look, or whose collar to feel.

And then, to everyone's surprise, the culprit confessed.

And to everyone's even greater surprise, the culprit turned out to be the Reverend Micklemass, the new vicar of St Dymphna's church.

According to P.C.Clarke, the vicar explained that he was depressed because the church needed essential repair work doing to the roof and he had no idea how he was going to pay for it. His depression had deepened when the grave digger had retired and the Church Council had decided to hire a man with a motorised digger to dig graves. What had doubtless seemed a good idea at the time, quickly turned into a disaster when the man with the digger succeeded in digging up a couple of yards of the sewer pipe which served the vestry washroom and lavatory.

With no prospect of ever finding the funds to repair all these structural problems, the vicar had sunk into what John Bunyan might have described as 'a slough of despond'. He had, he reported to P.C. Clarke, been told by one of the Bishop's aides that the diocese had no funds to spare and that if he could not raise the money himself then the church would have to be closed, shuttered, abandoned and deconsecrated.

The vicar had taken this badly for it seems that, for a clergyman to lose his church, is a disaster on a par with a captain losing his ship. The vicar had, it seemed, chosen to distract himself from his predicament by wandering around the village taking things that did not belong to him. His story was so strange that it was clearly true. All the purloined items were found, neatly stacked, in a corner of St Dymphna's crypt.

At a meeting held in Constable Clarke's front parlour, all those who had been victims of the vicar's pointless kleptomania agreed that they were not interested in asking the police to pursue the case. We agreed, indeed, that we would not give any evidence if the case were taken to court.

Constable Clarke was, of course, slightly disappointed by the disappearance of his case but even he agreed that there was absolutely nothing to be gained by locking up the vicar.

Moreover, now that the problems of St Dymphna were out in the open, it became clear that we needed to club together to find some help. Cedric 'Bill' Stickers, the part-time grave digger, was persuaded out of retirement by the promise of a small pay rise and he was given a modest bonus to repair the damaged sewer pipe. We persuaded the vicar to set up a roof restoration fund and to plan a series of fund raising events. With hope filling his heart, the vicar became a changed man.

Nine months later, Constable 'Peculiar' Clarke retired, left the police force and moved out of Bilbury. The Chief Constable decided that there was no need for him to be replaced.

P.C. Clarke took early retirement and purchased a delightful cottage and a small market garden of around seven acres in South Bugford, a tiny hamlet of no more than a dozen houses. There, in peaceful isolation, he and his wife grew cabbages and kept a small flock of llamas and alpacas. I gather that neither activity kept them in champagne and caviar (not even the Polish champagne sold by Peter Marshall) but they were fortunate in that a police pension, while not providing for luxury, is reliable in that it arrives every month, come rain or shine, and in a part of the country where prices are relatively low and expensive distractions fairly uncommon, the Clarkes were, I gather, extremely happy with their lot. I kept in touch with them, since South Bugford is so small that it does not have its own resident doctor and both Peculiar and his wife, Lucy remained on my list of patients. Indeed, I was rather flattered by the fact that Mr and Mrs Clarke came to see me before they bought their cottage and told me that they did not intend to move to South Bugford unless I was able to assure them that they could remain on my list. It was for them a big step for they had both lived in Bilbury all their lives. Before they took the plunge and bought the cottage in South Bugford, they had rented a terraced cottage on the Barnstaple road.

We had thought nothing much of it when Peculiar chose to hang up his handcuffs and truncheon and the Chief Constable decided that Bilbury would no longer have a resident policeman.

None of us thought of Bilbury as a suitable location for gangs of Train Robbers to hide out and plan their next heist. And we had little concern that outsiders would swoop on the village and systematically work their way through local properties. Our experience was that visitors usually got lost even in daylight and we were quietly confident that if burglars swooped on Bilbury after dark they would probably be found, two days later, wandering around the lanes, lost, bewildered and disorientated.

We knew that it would take at least half an hour for a police car to reach us from Barnstaple but we had, I suppose, grown rather complacent and we weren't in the slightest bit worried by this.

And then another batch of problems started.

These were different.

This time there were no thefts involved.

And my chums and I all found that we had become the lawbreakers.

Over the centuries, the British Parliament has continually added new laws to an already adequate stockpile. But they have put nowhere as much effort into getting rid of old and useless laws as they have put into drafting and enacting new and useless laws. As a result, Britain is packed to the courtroom ceiling with daft laws which have accumulated over the centuries and never been repealed.

It would, perhaps, have been a good idea if someone had introduced a law insisting that every time a new law was introduced, one of the old ones would have to be discarded. But law-makers like making laws and don't like unmaking them, and so Britons have been left with an almost endless conglomeration of bizarre and trivial legislation.

So, for example, there is a law which forbids women to eat chocolate on public transport and there is another which makes it perfectly legal to shoot a Welsh person with a longbow in the Cathedral Close of Hereford as long as you do the shooting on a Sunday.

It is illegal to fly a kite in London but perfectly legal to do it outside London. And it is illegal to clean your doormat in the street or to clean it after 8 o'clock in the morning. (It is, one assumes, a hanging offence to clean your doormat in the street and to do it after 8 o'clock in the morning.) It is illegal to be drunk or tiddly in charge of a horse or cow and it is illegal for a landlord to allow someone to get drunk in their pub. It is illegal to carry a plank along a pavement and illegal to 'handle salmon in suspicious circumstances' (though the law is woefully unhelpful about the nature of the circumstances which might be regarded as suspicious). It is Illegal to slide on ice or snow in the street (a law which must surely mean that virtually every child in the country is a criminal). And it is illegal to have a pigsty in front of your house though perfectly legal to have one around the back.

You get the idea.

By the 1970s, England had become awash with rules and regulations and with laws and statutes.

It is sometimes difficult to see where a rule ends and a law begins but since anything the Government defines as 'not being allowed' is usually punishable in some way I always find it safer to regard all rules and regulations as laws and to leave the semantics to those who live in ivory towers and only write about these things rather than having to live with them.

And if breaking a law is a crime, and the person doing the law breaking is a criminal, then Bilbury suddenly became a hotbed of criminal activity.

The crimes of which we were accused had two things in common.

First, they were all rather trivial.

Second, the criminals were all individuals who might reasonably be described as seemingly respectable members of the community.

I write from first-hand experience for I was one of the alleged criminals, though my crime, and my encounter with the very long arm of the law, comes a little later in this account.

The first strange thing that happened was that my father-in-law, Mr Kennet, received a visit from P.C. Gerald 'Squeaky' Dors, a constable sent by the police station in Barnstaple.

The constable, who was as embarrassed as he should have been by the nature of his errand, told Patsy's father that the station sergeant had received a report complaining that Mr Kennet had (and here the constable referred to his notebook so that he could read the charge as it had been given to him by the station sergeant) 'knowingly allowed nuts of several varieties to fall onto the road thereby endangering the lives of members of the public'.

After he had checked his diary to make sure that this wasn't an April Fool's Day joke, Mr Kennet asked who had made the complaint and exactly what nuts were involved and why their presence on the highway might be considered a menace to traffic.

'I'm afraid I am not at liberty to identify the identity of the complainant,' said P.C. Dors, using the jargon of his profession, (a jargon which means that policemen always 'give chase' when criminals flee, and never 'run after' them), 'but I gather that the nuts in question are predominantly of the hazelnut variety though according to the complainant there may also have been nuts of the walnut variety and nuts of the horse chestnut variety involved.'

Mr Kennet, who is as law-abiding a citizen as I have ever met, and a man whom I have seen run for a quarter of a mile to chase down a used sweet paper which had slipped from his hand, insisted on accompanying the constable to the lane in question so that the nature of the offence could more accurately be assessed.

And there they were.

The offending nuts, generously scattered on a road surface which was more weed than tarmacadam, were largely hazelnuts though in patches there were also walnuts and horse chestnuts to be seen.

'But the trees overhang the road,' explained Mr Kennet. 'How am I supposed to stop the nuts falling from the trees when they are ripe?'

Mr Kennet went on to explain that the entire field was protected by a Tree Protection Order and that the order had been imposed when the local council employee whose job was protecting trees, had decided that the field contained too many notable trees for him to mark them with individual Protection Orders.

'It is a criminal offence for me to cut down any of these trees,' said Mr Kennet. 'It is a criminal offence for me even to cut a branch off a protected tree.'

'Indeed it is, Mr Kennet, sir,' said the constable. 'I am cognisant of these circumstances and it would, as you say, be quite against the law for you to interfere with these protected trees. But unfortunately, sir, littering is also an offence and since the trees clearly belong to you and the nuts which they have dropped have fallen onto the public highway, there is no doubt that you are, technically at least, in breach of the law as it stands.'

At this point, Constable Dors, not a bad fellow and one of the best skittle players in North Devon, removed a large, red handkerchief from his trouser pocket and mopped his brow. He would have felt much more comfortable boxing ears or talking firmly to an individual who had been riding a bicycle without the appropriate illumination than he felt discussing the legal implications of fallen nuts.

'The tree protection officer wanted to protect the beech trees, the horse chestnut trees and the walnut tree,' explained Mr Kennet. 'But since there were so many trees involved, he thought it simpler to slap the protection order on the whole field. This means that even the hazel trees are now covered. I can't cut any of them any more than I cut any of the beech trees or the horse-chestnut trees or the walnut tree.'

‘Exactly, Mr Kennet, sir,’ said P.C. Dors.

‘So what do you suggest I do?’

‘I can’t rightly offer you legalistic advice on that point,’ admitted the constable. ‘But there seems no doubt in my mind that the presence of the nuts on the highway must be considered an offence. Normally, it is not something we would bother about but since there has been a formal complaint made by a complainant it is out of our hands as you might say.’

‘But the squirrels will move all the nuts and bury them,’ pointed out Mr Kennet.

P.C. ‘Squeaky’ Dors agreed with him but said, with some sadness it has to be admitted, that this did not alter the fact that an offence had been committed and that there would have to be a trial and since there couldn’t be a trial without a prisoner, well, Mr Kennet could probably see where this was going, couldn’t he?

Indeed, Mr Kennet could.

And so the majesty of the law proceeded on its way as it is wont to do and in due course Mr Kennet was fined £5 and reprimanded by magistrates who probably wondered privately why the hell the police didn’t spend their time on more worthwhile activities but who, in public at least, had little choice but to express their dismay that an English highway should have been besmirched in such a way by a man whom they all agreed was old enough to know better.

A junior reporter from the Barnstaple paper managed to get seven inches of copy from the story, though this was doubtless only to justify the work of the subeditor who was responsible for writing the paper’s headline and who was probably quite pleased with the caption ‘Police Go Nuts’.

An editorial, written by someone with a large amount of tongue and a small amount of cheek, suggested that Mr Kennet, and all other tree owners in the county, might now feel the need to hang nets underneath their trees in order to catch the falling nuts.

‘Moreover,’ wrote the editorialist, ‘there will be much concern throughout the region during the next few weeks since several million leaves are likely to be falling onto roadways, pavements and other public areas without giving warning and with, apparently, no regard for the requirements of the law.’

Within less than a week of Mr Kennet’s bizarre encounter with the local constabulary, it was the turn of Frank Parsons, the landlord of the Duck and Puddle, and as genial and kindly a fellow as you could hope to find were you to wander the length and breadth of the country in search of geniality and generosity.

Frank’s crime was, so he was told by another police constable from the same station, was that he had allowed customers in his public house to sing rousing choruses of ‘Happy Birthday’ and verses of several other assorted songs during what was described by the authorities as ‘a noisy evening on licensed premises where there was no licence for public entertainment’.

To say that Frank was shocked by this complaint would be like saying that Red Riding Hood was startled when her granny took off her bonnet.

Frank’s astonishment was exacerbated by the fact that the Duck and Puddle has no neighbours close enough to have been disturbed by the singing. Moreover, all the customers who had been in the pub at the time had been singing lustily. So, wondered Frank and Gilly, who on earth had complained?

Once again, the authorities, in the person of the rather weary police constable from Barnstaple could offer no name. ‘I’m afraid I can’t divulge that information which is of a confidential nature,’ said the police officer who had, like his colleagues, been well trained in the art of using 12 words when two would do.

Frank’s crime was rather more serious than Mr Kennet’s since Frank had a licence to lose.

However, the police wisely decided that since this was Frank’s first known offence, and that a conviction in the magistrate’s court would inevitably lead to his licence being investigated and possibly suspended, they would let him off with a warning.

The relief was tempered by the thought that whoever had complained once could easily complain a second time.

Moreover, it was quickly decided within the village that the complainant who had reported Frank was very probably the same complainant who had reported Mr Kennet’s errant nuts.

And so identifying the complainant became a priority.

Before we could do this, however, things quickly became farcical and complaints fell upon the village like autumn leaves.

Someone complained that Olive Robinson, Thumper’s aunt had a chimney which smoked occasionally, and the police were dispatched to warn her that failure to abate a smoky chimney is an offence. She was sternly warned that something needed to be done before the fire was lit again.

Thumper, who had a set of chimney cleaning brushes and who had already intended to sweep his aunt’s chimney, was furious. He was extraordinarily fond of his aunt, a sweet and gentle lady, and he was enraged that someone would report her to the police.

Two householders were warned for lighting bonfires in their gardens and someone reported Sidney 'Skinny' Arbuckle for riding a bicycle after dark without a working front lamp. Skinny's response, that he ate a lot of carrots and consequently had excellent night vision, although regarded as imaginative and original, did not protect him from a stern talking to and an official warning.

On two separate occasions, Peter Marshall, the proprietor of the Bilbury village shop, found himself being quizzed by men and women representing various departments of the local council.

A man in a blue suit, who had six coloured pens clipped securely into one of those funny little pen holders fixed onto his breast pocket, announced that there had been a complaint about Peter's opening hours.

For as long as anyone can remember, Peter has had a sign above his shop door which promises that his emporium is 'Open all Hours'.

However, the man from the council reported that his colleagues had received a complaint that the shop was only open between 7.00 a.m. and 12.00 midnight.

Peter had protested that if a customer rang the doorbell at 3.00 a.m. he would open the shop, even if it were only to sell a parsnip or a packet of budgerigar seed. Amazingly, this is quite true.

In the end, the man from the council only went away when Peter changed the notice to read 'Open all Hours (Between midnight and 7.00 a.m. by appointment)'.

A woman in a grey trouser suit, who carried a clipboard and a plastic briefcase and was accompanied by a male assistant in the sort of white coat usually associated both with laboratory technicians and dentists advertising toothpaste on television, announced that the Trading Standards department had received a formal complaint that the weighing scales which Peter used to measure out produce he was selling were out-of-date and therefore likely to be inaccurate.

The woman and her assistant had brought with them a set of digital scales and they proceeded to test Peter's Victorian weighing scales (which relied on the items being purchased being placed in a metal bowl on one side of the scale, and metal weights being placed on a platform on the other side of the scale).

To everyone's astonishment, and to Peter's delight, the test showed that the Victorian scales were perfectly accurate.

Peter, who was about to celebrate by putting up a large sign announcing to the world that his scales had been tested, checked and approved 'by the appropriate authorities' was slightly startled when he was subsequently visited by another two representatives of the same council department,(who were, on this occasion, accompanied by three police officers), and served with a summons for selling produce in imperial weights rather than in the metric weights which the EU had ordered the United Kingdom to adopt.

Peter protested that it was the first he'd heard of any such law but the council officials were adamant and, in due course, the local newspaper reported that a Mr P Marshall of Bilbury had been ordered to pay a £10 fine for selling parsnips by the pound instead of the kilogram.

Peter was told that although his imperial scales were still in excellent working order, he had to purchase new scales measuring goods in metric units. Peter duly bought the scales but used them only when selling fruit and vegetables to strangers. When selling fruit and vegetables to locals, Peter continued to weigh and sell in imperial units.

And then it was my turn.

My offence, it turned out, was that I had allegedly attempted to chop down a fully grown beech tree without having first obtained permission from the council to remove said tree from our land.

The police, in the person of P.C. Dors, told me that the complainant had seen me up a ladder and that I had been observed attempting to cut through the trunk and fell the tree without obtaining the necessary authority.

'Is this the tree I am accused of trying to chop down?' I asked 'Squeaky' Dors who was, once more, the constable delegated to drive to Bilbury and to investigate the crime.

'I believe it is, doctor,' agreed the policeman, consulting a small map with which he had been supplied. The map, which seemed surprisingly accurate, contained details of Bilbury Grange and all the trees in the vicinity. The constable counted the number of trees in the lane, repeated the calculation, and then confirmed that the tree to which I was referring was the tree which I had allegedly attempted to remove.

'Would you like to take a look at the tree and see if you can find any damage?' I suggested.

'Squeaky' Dors examined the tree.

'I can see no sign of any damage to said arboreal item,' he admitted, at last. He took a notebook and a pencil from his tunic pocket. 'The trunk appears to be unharmed.' He licked the lead end of his pencil and wrote laboriously in his notebook. (Why, I wonder, are policemen the only people on the planet who feel it necessary to lick the business end of a pencil before using it?)

'Exactly,' I agreed. 'But you will be able to see that the ivy which was climbing the tree has been cut.'

I explained that the ivy which had climbed up the trunk of the beech tree had begun to cover the crown of the tree. I pointed out that when that happens the ivy can stop the tree from breathing and the weight of all the ivy can bring down weakened branches.

And so, with some reluctance, I told 'Squeaky', I had cut through the ivy.

I don't like cutting ivy because it provides food and home for an enormous number of insects. But there are times when surgery is necessary.

'Yes, doctor,' said the policeman. 'I can validate that there is evidence showing that the ivy has clearly been severed. I would surmise that the severing was, all things being equal and on the face of it, probably performed with a sharp implement of some kind. A knife perhaps? ' He licked the lead of his pencil again and made another note.

'Secateurs,' I said. 'And I think it is not illegal to remove ivy from a tree.'

'No, doctor, it is not at this time considered felonious to remove ivy from a plant of any kind, up to and including a plant of the arboreal family.'

'I cut through the ivy with a pair of secateurs,' I told him. 'It would, you will agree I am sure, be difficult to cut through a fully grown beech tree with a pair of secateurs.'

I would have produced the secateurs as evidence but sadly I had dropped them while completing the task of cutting through the ivy. And the makers of my secateurs had cleverly made their products in green. This ensured that if they were dropped then they were easily lost in the undergrowth. I always felt that they did this on purpose, in the same way that potato peelers were made in 'potato peeling brown' so that the peelers got thrown away with the peelings.

'It would indeed, doctor,' said the policeman. 'I wouldn't like to try it.' He put the pencil and the notebook back into his tunic pocket and then buttoned the pocket to make sure that the notebook remained secure.

And that was the end of my short lived career as a criminal. The case against me was dismissed for lack of any supporting evidence that I had attempted to chop down the tree.

There was, however, no escaping the fact that for me, as for Frank, this could have been a difficult business.

The General Medical Council, the body which regulates doctors working in Britain, does not take kindly to doctors being found guilty of criminal conduct – however minor or unrelated it may be to their professional responsibilities.

And, bizarre as it may sound, there is no doubt that if I had been found guilty of attempting to cut down a tree without permission, I would have been reported to the GMC and the consequences could have been dire.

I have it on good authority that neither logic nor good sense is a quality which is highly valued in the decorated halls of the medical profession's disciplinary body.

All had ended well on this occasion.

But there was no escaping the fact that, in the same way that the village had previously harboured a very petty thief, it was clear that we now had a petty sneak in Bilbury.

And the sneak was turning out to be far more trouble than the thief – and far more dangerous. Losing an old trowel with a wobbly handle isn't quite in the same category as losing your livelihood.

Understandably, and quite properly, the police were not going to tell us the identity of the sneak who was making our lives so difficult and so Frank, Patchy, Thumper, Peter and I decided that we had to do something about this particular problem ourselves.

'We must all hang together or, most assuredly, we shall all hang separately,' said Patchy, quoting Benjamin Franklin. Patchy could borrow an apposite quote as easily as he could 'borrow' a history for a desk or a double bed.

We decided to meet at Bilbury Grange one afternoon in order to discuss how best to expose the sneak.

'There's no point in meeting at the Duck and Puddle,' Patchy had pointed out. 'If the sneak is sitting there in the corner, or pops in to the pub for a pint, they'll overhear us. We need to discuss this in privacy.'

And so Patsy made three dozen sandwiches and two dozen large vegetable pasties and did some extra cake baking.

My friends all have what are usually known in polite circles as 'hearty appetites' and although Frank had been on a diet since he had his stroke, he still had an appetite which qualified him as a doughty and determined trencherman.

Patchy, Thumper, Peter and Frank always eat well at Bilbury Grange.

This is largely because Patsy is an excellent cook who also understands the need for quantity, but also because the three of them are so polite that they rarely, if ever, refuse an invitation to 'have another' and would all feel that they had offended the hostess if they left anything uneaten. The result is a competition between, on the one hand, my friends who are determined to eat everything that is available in order to prove that everything available was excellent and, on the other hand, Patsy who is eager to make sure that the comestibles are supplied in more than adequate quantities and who would, I suspect, only really be pleased if she could defeat the appetites of the devouring horde.

For the record, when I told her about the planned meeting, my wife made, in addition to the sandwiches and pasties previously mentioned, a fruit cake, a sponge cake filled with cream and homemade raspberry jam and a seed cake. She also baked four dozen rock cakes, four dozen butterfly cakes filled with cream and covered with little bits of chocolate, and four dozen almond macaroons (a particular favourite of Patchy's).

'There are going to be six of us!' I exclaimed, when I saw how much food she had prepared. 'You, me, Frank, Peter, Patchy and Thumper!'

'I know,' said Patsy, looking worried. 'Do you think I should have made more?'

I smiled and gave her a hug.

'The sneak is clearly someone in the village,' said Patchy, when our informal meeting began.

The very thought made us all deeply miserable. But what alternative explanation could there possibly be?

'And probably someone with an axe to grind,' said Thumper.

'It could just be someone with a nasty, vindictive streak,' said Peter. 'We need to stop them before they dob one of us in to the tax people.' He shuddered, visibly. Peter does not harbour great fondness for the tax authorities.

There was silence for a few moments as we contemplated this possibility; something that was, for Peter and Frank in particular, if not exactly a fate if not worse than death then a fate more daunting than walking ten miles without shoes on a stony road. Patchy was investigated by the tax authorities a couple of years ago, and the tax inspector was so confused by Patchy's accounts that he was reported to have been off work for six months. Thumper does not trouble the income tax authorities who do not seem to be aware of his existence.

The silence was broken only by the quiet munching of sandwiches and vegetable pasties. I can't think of anything much that would put my pals off their food. The cakes had yet to appear.

'So, what's the plan?' asked Frank, taking a temporary break from demolishing a six inch long pasty.

'We need to think of something that would excite our sneak,' said Thumper. 'And then perhaps give us a clue to his identity.'

'No,' said Patsy quickly. 'We need a number of 'somethings' that would excite the sneak. And we need to leak these 'somethings' to one suspect at a time.'

'What do you mean by 'somethings'?' asked Frank.

'A false accusation, a bit of gossip, a rumour – anything that our sneak can report to the authorities,' explained Patsy. 'So, for example, we could tell one suspect that Peter was selling mouldy parsnips and we could tell another that he was selling rotten turnips.'

'There's nothing wrong with my parsnips!' said Peter immediately. 'And I've never sold a rotten turnip in my life!' He paused and looked around the room. 'Not knowingly anyway,' he added.

Frank put the rest of his vegetable pasty into his mouth.

'Not deliberately anyway,' said Peter. 'Definitely not deliberately. I'm surprised at you Patsy – making accusations like that.'

'It wasn't an accusation!' said Patsy. 'It was merely an illustration of what we could do – just a suggestion. You would, of course, be able to show that you weren't selling mouldy parsnips or rotten turnips but the nature of the complaint would tell us the identity of the sneak. We could say that Patchy was selling fake Shakespearean beds or that my husband had been speeding on the road to Barnstaple.'

'Maybe we need to think up accusations that are a little less dramatic,' I said gently.

We all agreed that Patsy's idea was a good one though it was generally agreed that we'd tone things down a tad so that there was no talk of faulty parsnips, fake beds or speeding motor cars.

So over the next hour or so, we worked out a host of false rumours, tittle-tattle, gossip, scuttlebutt and bits of hearsay that we thought might trigger the Bilbury Snitch to continue their nasty sneaking – and invite the attention of the local constabulary without there being any risk of what Peter called 'consequences'.

And then, once the sandwiches and vegetable pasties were gone, we worked our way through Patsy's wonderful collection of cakes.

By the time we'd finished, and it was the hour for me to get ready to start the evening surgery, we were well pleased with our plans and we were confident that we'd soon identify and expose the Bilbury Snitch.

'I didn't prepare enough food,' said Patsy, when everyone had gone.

I looked at the plates on the two low tables in our drawing room. They were all empty. Only crumbs remained.

'Frank could hardly move when he left,' I pointed out. 'And the others were absolutely stuffed. They eat everything you make because they worry you'll be hurt if they don't.'

'I'll make more next time,' said Patsy firmly. 'Maybe I'll do a chocolate cake as well. And some of those coconut and cherry cakes that Thumper likes. I didn't have any cherries this time.'

'However much food you make, they'll eat it all,' I warned her.

'Oh no they won't!' said Patsy firmly. 'I'll get my mother to make a few cakes as well. Perhaps I can persuade her to bake a couple of her caraway seed cakes and a batch of her special rock cakes.'

'There will definitely be some of those left,' I promised.

Patsy's mother is an excellent cook but when she makes 'rock cakes' she has a tendency to take the first half of the name rather too seriously. I have seen three people break teeth on her rock cakes. And I don't think it is unfeeling of me to say that Mrs Kennet's caraway seed cakes, although undoubtedly made with love and a good deal of caraway seed, are what might reasonably be described as 'an acquired taste'.

I didn't mention any of this but, nevertheless, Patsy threw a cushion in my direction.

I ducked.

But I need not have bothered.

The cushion missed me by miles but missed Ben, asleep on a chair, by less than a foot.

Ben opened an eye, looked around to see what had happened, closed the eye again and went back to sleep.

And so we began what Patchy insisted on calling 'Operation Snitch Exposure'.

Thumper, Patchy, Frank, Peter and I spread silly rumours far and wide in the vain hope that someone would take one of them seriously and make a complaint to some authority or other.

But nothing happened.

Absolutely nothing happened.

We knew that the Bilbury Snitch was someone who either lived in the village or who visited Bilbury regularly.

At our meeting at Bilbury Grange we had, with great reluctance, compiled a short list of possible suspects.

It wasn't pleasant to think that someone we knew could be responsible, and that the Bilbury Snitch could be someone living in our midst, but there was no alternative explanation, and no other way to deal with what had become a very serious threat.

But none of our rumours triggered a call from the authorities.

We were close to despair, waiting to see who next in the village would be the victim.

In the end the snitch was uncovered by a serendipitous accident; a fortuitous happenstance. And all our clever scheming proved to be quite unnecessary.

It was Gilly Parsons, Frank's wife, who unmasked the snitch. And the snitch was not one of the suspects we had put on our list.

Gilly was walking from the kitchen to the bar when she happened to hear someone on the telephone.

'She was talking very quickly and she was whispering,' said Gilly. 'And that attracted my attention because I'd never heard her whisper before. It sounded very strangely conspiratorial.'

The snitch was, as you will have doubtless guessed but we did not, Arcadia Blanchardine, the newly hired barmaid.

Gilly overheard her telephoning the local police to report that the landlord of the Duck and Puddle public house was growing marijuana plants in his back garden.

It was nonsense, of course. There were no marijuana plants anywhere near the Duck and Puddle though there was a large amount of mint, which looks like cannabis to an uninitiated eye, near to the back door. Gilly has several varieties of mint growing in her herb garden.

But because the accusation was a serious one it had to be taken seriously and it meant another journey to Bilbury for Constable Dors.

This time, however, Frank and Gilly were forewarned, forearmed and ready for the visit.

Once Constable 'Squeaky' Dors had established that the garden was free of illegal plants, Frank and Gilly told him the identity of the caller who had made the false claim and Ms Blanchardine was formally warned for wasting police time.

'I don't like this place,' she told the Constable and the Parsons when she was confronted. 'The people are all so damned nice to one another.'

'But don't you think that it makes everyone happier if people are kind to one another?' said Frank.

'Kindness and happiness aren't all they're cracked up to be,' snapped Ms Blanchardine very sourly. 'There's more to life than being nice to people and having a good time. Besides, I like complaining about people. It's sort of my hobby. I think of it as a public service.'

Frank and Gilly then suggested that Ms Blanchardine might like to continue practising her hobby in some other part of the country. Frank took out his cheque book and gave her a month's salary in lieu of notice.

Ms Blanchardine was apparently quite surprised at being fired. 'You're letting me go just because of this?' she said.

'Yes,' said Gilly, through gritted teeth.

'Hrmph!' said Ms Blanchardine as she headed upstairs to pack. 'Rotten place anyway,' she was reportedly heard to mutter. 'There's not one man here that I'd choose to marry.'

The Duck and Puddle was once again without a barmaid.

But Bilbury was without its snitch.

There was some noisy celebrating in the Duck and Puddle that evening. We sang loudly and Frank stayed open thirty minutes after his official closing time.

The Psychiatrist Who Ran Away (Part 1: The Awakening)

I'd had a busy morning and the last patient of my extra-long morning surgery was a man in his fifties whom I was pretty sure I had never seen before. He certainly wasn't a local resident and I was pretty sure that he wasn't anyone who had been to see me in the past.

He was a spindle-shanks, he had a prognathous chin and he came into the surgery wearing a dark purple watch cap.

I'd seen several of those hats before and I knew where he'd bought it.

When he removed the hat, I could see that he was balding, but had a bushy and rather unkempt ring of hair remaining. He looked as though he hadn't shaved for a day or so. It didn't look like one of those skimpy, little beards that are sometimes fashionable among those who want to look wild and reckless without actually being wild or reckless, it simply looked as though he hadn't shaved. He was also wearing a pair of what are, I believe, called 'aviator shades'. He took these off and placed them in his breast pocket.

I don't know anything about fashion but even I find that it isn't difficult to differentiate between cheaply and shoddily made clothes and well-made and probably expensive clothes. Although I could tell that he was dressed in what had been quite expensive clothes, he somehow managed to look like a tramp. His tweed jacket had burn marks down the lapels on both sides and his tie was covered in a variety of food stains. A quick glance enabled me to identify egg yolk and tomato ketchup. The buttons of his matching waistcoat had been pushed through the wrong buttonholes, giving him a uniquely lop-sided sort of look. And when he'd walked into the consulting room, I couldn't help noticing that the trousers of his tweed suit showed signs of his having knelt in something oily.

The funny thing is that despite all this, he still managed to look as though he was accustomed to having a certain amount of authority over his life. It wasn't difficult to guess that he had a job which gave him a certain amount of power.

I said good morning and invited him to sit down.

He sighed, looked around the room, nodded to me, moved the chair reserved for patients, for no apparent reason that I could discern other than that he wanted to establish some degree of control over his surroundings, and sat down.

I didn't have the faintest idea what was wrong with him but I got the distinct feeling that he hadn't come in to see me because he had a twinge in his knee or a slightly annoying tickle in his throat.

'My name is Eckersley, Pelham Ronald Eckersley,' he said. 'I am 56-years-old, I am a consultant psychiatrist and I have run away.'

I was rather startled by this introduction and I'm afraid I just rather stared at him for a moment. It was, of course, the admission that he had run away that had rather surprised me.

'Where have you run from?' I asked.

'London. I have a consultancy at one of those mildly snotty teaching hospitals and a private practice in an extraordinarily snotty part of Harley Street,' he said. 'I've been sat in your waiting room for several hours, by choice I would add. I arrived early but, realising that my requirements would probably need a good chunk of your time, I instructed your receptionist to allow all your other customers to take their turn ahead of me.'

I looked at him. I had seen runaways before but they had invariably been under the age of twenty. I had never before seen a grown man who'd run away. I had certainly never before seen a psychiatrist who had run away.

'I have committed no crime,' he went on. 'And I have no close family or, indeed, close friends and so there was no one to lie awake last night wondering whether I was safe.'

'But, it is presumably reasonable to assume that people will have noticed that you've disappeared, and that at least one of them will report your disappearance to the police.'

'Oh, yes, I expect they will. But they won't report my disappearance because they care about me or are concerned for me. If there is a search, it will be because my colleagues feel that my absence could embarrass them and adversely affect their plans to restructure the hospital's administration and management. We are in the throes of reorganising ourselves. My colleagues reorganise things every few years. I'm on the restructuring committee. I can't imagine why or how it happened but I'm the chairman of the committee. The rest of the buffoons on the committee are the sort of idiots who believe in rules. Believe me, the place where I work is packed to the ceiling with bifarious pettifoggers. There are more humbugs working there than you'd find in an old-fashioned sweet shop.'

'Bifarious pettifoggers?'

'Laughably crooked shysters.'

'Thank you.'

‘Have you ever noticed that people who are over committed to regulations spend their whole lives teetering on the very brink of absurdity? In practical terms, my position means I am the restructuring committee. I can choose the builders we appoint and the competitors for the work would, no doubt, be happy to reward me handsomely. I have already had to return several generous bribes. They didn’t call them bribes, of course, but that was what they were. One major building company wanted to me give me a five year contract as their Mental Health Advisor. I would, of course, have been given an absurdly generous honorarium and no responsibilities whatsoever.’

‘Is that why you’ve run away? The stress of the committee work?’

‘Good heavens, no! There’s an awful lot of cobblers talked about stress these days. Many of the patients I saw in my practice were locked in fear of torment by their own paranoia. They had no idea about the real nature of stress. There was an Australian cricketer called Keith Miller who was the best all-rounder Australia ever had. In the 1950s, after a pretty gruelling Test Match, he was asked at a press conference whether he had found the day stressful. Miller, who flew planes for the Royal Australian Air Force during the Second World War, laughed at the suggestion. ‘Stress?’ he said. ‘I was playing cricket! Stress is when you’re flying over Germany with a Messerschmitt up your arse.’’

I smiled. I remembered the quote.

‘Myself, I prefer to live in a comfortable state of ataraxia,’ continued Dr Eckersley. ‘The truth is that I don’t give a damn how they restructure the hospital. In my not unlimited experience, these reorganisations take place every few years at all similarly sized institutions. They are usually a result of one faction’s attempt to gain power over existing managers or over another faction. I have no idea how or why I became chairman. I suspect it was probably because too many other people wanted the job and I was lumbered with it because I was the only person who didn’t want it.’ He pulled a pipe out of his pocket, examined it, thought about it, and then put it away. ‘The big problem these days is that it is impossible to tell the good guys from the bad guys. Indeed, in public life there don’t seem to be any good guys any more. I can’t name one politician alive today whom I respect and whom I regard as entirely, or even mostly, decent and honourable. I don’t mind betting that you can’t either. Can you name one public figure you regard as a leader and whom you would follow into war, comfortable in the knowledge that you were doing the right thing?’

I didn’t say anything, partly because it seemed clear that the question was rhetorical but also because I couldn’t think of anything to say. The conversation seemed to be continuing quite well without any input from me.

‘Difficult, eh?’

‘Difficult,’ I agreed. ‘But you didn’t run away because of the lack of honour among modern politicians. Why did you run away?’

‘Excellent question, doctor! I thought you’d get round to asking me that. I ran away because I am fed up with my life. Or should it be ‘fed up of my life?’ I really don’t care. I realised that my life was utterly pointless and without joy. There I was, enjoying the present and still thinking that I was the future and then suddenly I woke up and found that I was the past. And none of it was any fun!’

‘Ah!’ I managed to squeeze into the conversation. I also managed a nod.

‘I have been meandering through life for a long time,’ continued Dr Eckersley, ‘and yesterday evening I suddenly realised, at long last, that if you wait for the right time and the right place to make a change then whatever you are planning or hoping for will never happen because the right time and place will never coincide. And so I seized the moment and fled. Carpe diem, as our old friend Horace used to say. Memento mori as someone else said.’

There was a superficial brashness about him but it wasn’t difficult to see that underneath the brashness he was very glum.

‘But what were you fleeing from?’ I asked. I seemed to be asking the same question time and time again without getting anything resembling an answer.

‘I was running away from my life. I’ve had enough of it. I am, to put in popular parlance, fed up to the back teeth.’

‘In what way are you fed up?’

‘If you knew my life then you would not be foolish enough to ask that question. But you don’t know my life, do you?’

‘No,’ I agreed.

‘All day long people come to me with their problems,’ he complained. ‘I know you could say that your job is the same but it isn’t. You sit here in your rather wonderfully old-fashioned consulting room and you see a parade of real people with real problems. You know most of the people you see because you live amongst them. Sometimes you can help them. You stitch them up, or you give them some antibiotics or you give them a diet sheet or an exercise programme to follow. You can make a difference. I envy you for that.’

‘But you see patients with psychiatric problems,’ I pointed out. ‘You see people with real mental health problems

– depression, anxiety and so on. You can help them get better. Doesn't that make you feel good?'

'Oh no, no, no, no!' said Dr Eckersley emphatically. 'I don't have a normal practice. I have, for some reason, become known as a doctor who deals with fashionable neuroses. Celebrities of all kinds come to see me in their droves. Actors, actresses, film producers, film directors, television personalities, politicians – they all stumble through my door, weighed down by self-concern. Most of them seemed to live in an uncomfortable hinterland which lies between their memories, which are full of fear and inevitably decorated with regrets and recriminations, and an equally forbidding mixture of fearful anticipations. They rarely seemed to live in the present. And while they generously shared with me their eternally maudlin and self-obsessed thoughts, their chauffeur driven limousines clogged the hospital car park or were double parked outside my rooms in Harley Street.'

'The wonder of my job was that I was not only allowed to ask these celebrities all sorts of impertinent questions but it was also tacitly understood by all parties, even the politicians, that I was entitled to honest answers. If a journalist from *The Times* or *The New York Times* had dared even to imagine asking questions of such impertinence, he would have been blackballed by Hollywood for a lifetime and a half without the option.'

'But couldn't you see some patients with real problems?' I asked.

'Not a chance. The hospital administrators loved having all these celebrities in the hospital. They were convinced that some of the glamour rubbed off on the institution and, indeed, on them. And since I was the jam pot which attracted these wretched people, I was regarded as unique and irreplaceable. I was constantly pressured to see more and more celebrities. The tabloid newspapers described me as 'The Shrink to the Stars'. When the broadsheets mentioned my name in connection with one of my celebrity patients, they invariably described me as 'the world renowned celebrity psychiatrist'. As a result, I myself became a little bit famous. And within the upper reaches of my own speciality, I was renowned for inventing a disorder which I described as 'justifiable rational paranoia'. No psychiatrist is worth his salt until he has invented a new disease. And my disease is 'justifiable rational paranoia'.'

'I'm sorry to have to ask,' I said hesitantly, 'but what exactly is 'justifiable rational paranoia'?'

'It is a condition resembling paranoia but based on genuine and reasonably based fears and suspicions,' said Dr Eckersley. 'All my celebrity patients suffered from it. The nub of it is the concept that it isn't clinical paranoia if the bastards really are out to get you. I saw a lot of politicians who suffered from it. And I saw company chairmen and chief executives with it. They had to pay more to see me because they weren't famous and did not bring kudos to the hospital.'

'It all sounds very…' I began, and then realised that I wasn't sure what I had intended to say.

'That sums it up very accurately,' said Dr Eckersley very quickly. 'It is very something.'

'Important? Satisfying?'

'Sadly, it is neither of those. It is lucrative, yes. No one ever paid their own bills, of course, so I put a nought on the end of what would be absurd. Film studios paid the bills for the celebrities. Companies paid for the executives. And taxpayers paid the bills for the politicians. But the work was neither important nor satisfying. Nor, I fear, would I describe my work with medical students as important or satisfying. Did I mention that I am an Emeritus Professor of Clinical Psychiatry at the teaching hospital next door to the godforsaken place where I work?'

'No,' I said. 'I don't think you did.'

'Well, I am. Maybe I live too many lives. Do you remember that Oscar Wilde quote?'

''For he who lives more lives than one, more deaths than one must die.' Do you mean that one?'

'That's the one. Maybe I'm dying bit by bit. I hate my work as a psychiatrist. And I have grown to hate the whole educational process.'

He stopped for a minute and just stared at me. It was rather disconcerting. 'How long did your education last?'

I frowned and thought. 'About twenty years, from start to finish.'

'A quarter of a decent lifetime?'

'I suppose so.'

'And how much of the stuff you learned has been of any use to you?'

I laughed. I knew what he meant. I remember the years I spent being educated with mixed feelings.

'You think that the entire educational process was pretty much a waste of time, money and energy, don't you?'

'Sometimes, I do.'

'What were the two most important things you learned?'

'How to read and how to write,' I said, without hesitation.

'Exactly, and once you had managed to learn how to read and write you were force fed information which you were made to digest and then regurgitate. Much of that information was of limited or negligible value. You will have spent much of your two decades of formal education learning and repeating information which has been of absolutely no value to you in your life. The modern educational process exists to filter and grade students in order to decide whether or not they are suitable to be promoted to the next level of the process. The final result is a certificate which is supposed to provide the owner with a ticket into the world of well-paid employment. But the whole irrelevant nonsense could be replaced with a single well devised intelligence and personality test and our education could be over by the age of six at the latest. We could then begin an apprenticeship for our chosen career.'

'But at medical school I learned a great deal.'

'Did you? Did you really? I'm willing to bet that you have already forgotten most of the stuff you were forced to learn at medical school. You were, were you not, taught the names of every bone, nerve, artery and vein in the human body?'

'Yes, it was an important part of the syllabus.'

'Can you remember all that stuff now?'

I thought for a moment. 'No, I don't suppose I can. No, I definitely can't.'

'And you learned reams of stuff about physiology and chemistry and masses of information about pharmacology that was out of date before you qualified.'

I nodded.

'Most of this stuff we learn is taught to us simply so that we can be made to jump through hoops. We are taught stuff, we are tested to make sure we've learned what we've been taught and then we're allowed to forget it all. I doubt if five per cent of the stuff you were taught at medical school was of any practical value. It was a long memory test; an obstacle course for the brain. Am I not right?'

I was feeling rather uncomfortable. 'I think you probably are,' I agreed.

I remembered that the stress of learning all the information we were fed was debilitating. By the end of my second year at medical school, around a third of my student colleagues were receiving treatment from psychiatrists. Nervous breakdowns and suicides were common. I didn't mention this.

'The two important attributes for a doctor are a more than average dollop of common sense and a questing mind,' said Dr Eckersley. 'Students are taught to believe what they are told. This is wrong. They should be taught to question everything they are told. They should be taught to develop their common sense.'

'I don't imagine that way of thinking goes down too well with the rest of the faculty at the university.'

Dr Eckersley laughed and slapped his hand on my desk. 'No, no, it doesn't, doctor. Indeed it doesn't. Worse still, modern education has become wedded to technology. I am encouraged to use visual aids and computers in my teaching. If I don't make use of their latest gadgets, some nerdy fellow comes round to tell me off. Did they have computers when you were a toddler?'

'My education took place in a low technology era,' I told him. 'At my infant school I wrote on a slate with a slate pencil. I had a damp cloth constantly at the ready so that I could, literally, wipe my slate clean. At grammar school, we had real inkwells filled with real ink. We used the ink and blotting paper to make rubber band pellets and we wrote with wooden pens with interchangeable nibs which seemed to start life already crossed. The technological high point of my education was reached when I was in the sixth form and one of our teachers started writing on the blackboard with yellow chalk.'

Dr Eckersley beamed. 'And look at you!' he said. He grinned broadly. 'You worked out fine, didn't you?'

'I'm not sure about that,' I said, smiling back at him. 'There are a few people who would probably disagree with you.'

'Oh, I would hope so! And if so then that'll be because you don't fit into one of those nice, little cookie cutter shapes they like people to fit into these days.'

'Perhaps,' I agreed, though I suspected that he was right. I still didn't seem to be getting anywhere. 'But what can I do to help you?' I asked.

'I don't know,' he said. 'Probably bugger all. Probably just listen to me for a while. That's maybe all I need.' Dr Eckersley paused and took a deep breath. 'Do you know, I have suddenly realised that it irks me that no one ever asks me how I feel. No one cares about me. On Mondays to Fridays, I spend eight hours a day listening to enormously rich people whingeing about their lives when ninety nine per cent of the time they've got bugger all to complain about it. Some of them want a bottle of happiness pills, but I haven't got any magic happiness pills. Most of them have absolutely bugger all wrong with them apart from oversized egos.' He sighed wearily. 'They wouldn't last five minutes if they tried to live my life.' He looked at me. 'They probably wouldn't last five minutes if they tried to live your life, either.'

'My life is fine, thank you. What's so bad about your life?'

'Everything you can think of. My wife left me for a man who runs a carpet shop. He is a franion and a deipnosophist, he drives an Aston Martin, is vice-captain of his golf club and pays £90 once a fortnight to have his hair crimped and dyed.'

'What's a franion and a deipnosophist?' I asked.

'Don't you speak English?'

‘I thought I did.’

‘A franion is a licentious person and a deipnosophist is someone who is skilled at making dinner party conversation.’

‘Right,’ I said.

I made a mental note of the two words, hoping that I could perhaps squeeze them into a conversation of my own. I was beginning to think that if I spent much more time with Dr Eckersley, I’d need to buy myself a bigger dictionary.

‘My daughter lives in America,’ continued the runaway psychiatrist. ‘She works for a drug company and when I heard from her last, she’d just helped invent a new drug that does nothing but is much admired because it has no side effects. They’re apparently very excited about it because they can create all sorts of needs for it. I haven’t heard from her for months, though I have no doubt that I will hear from her when she needs more money. She’s paid well but, like my ex-wife, seems to regard money as something that should be unloaded as soon as possible. My son Edgar does something with computers. He’s also in America, living in somewhere called Silicon Valley wherever that is. I told him that it sounds like a stripper’s cleavage but he has no sense of humour. He always needs money too. He’s got a job working for a company run by two fellows who are both called Steve. I think he said something about them selling apples. He says they’re going to make a fortune and he’s got a chance to get in on the ground floor. What a silly bugger. He wants me to put some money into the company. He says I’ll get rich beyond my wildest dreams if I buy £1,000 worth of shares. How can you make a fortune out of apples? I know a cove in the country who inherited a fruit farm. He tells me it’s a constant struggle to break even. I keep telling Edgar to get a proper job. He should sell carpets. That seems to me to be where the money is. I haven’t got any money. My wife and my children have been spending more than I’ve been earning for decades. All I’ve got to show for 30 years of slavery is an overpriced house. I think I may own my car and the suit I’m wearing. And I’ve got rotten health. I’ve suffered from gastritis for years but now I’ve acquired gout and gall stones and I seem to be working my way through the ‘G’s’ in the medical dictionary. Any minute now I expect to find that I’ve got a goitre and German measles. What else is there that begins with G?’

‘Glomerulonephritis?’ I suggested.

‘Oh splendid, I’ll have some of that,’ said Dr Eckersley gloomily. ‘I’ve probably got it already. I’ve got everything else beginning with ‘G’. I’ll probably get gangrene next. And gastroenteritis and gynaecomastia. And Gaucher’s disease. Have you heard of that one?’

‘Vaguely,’ I said. ‘I’d have to look it up.’

‘Me too. Not my line of country. And then there’s gingivitis and glossitis. And Gilbert’s disease and Gilchrist’s disease. Why do all these bloody people want diseases named after them? Goldenhar’s syndrome. What the hell is that? I’m buggered if I can remember. Guillain-Barre syndrome. Was that two people or one bloke called Guillain-Barre? And why do some of them have a disease named after them and some have a syndrome? If there’s an Eckersley’s something, I’d want it to be a syndrome rather than just a mouldy old disease.’

‘You seem depressed,’ I said.

‘Do I? Is that your diagnosis, doctor?’

‘Maybe. You’re the expert.’ Actually, he seemed to have remarkable mood swings. I wondered if he was suffering from manic depression.

He sat for quite a while, staring at his knees, and then he once again took his pipe out of his left hand jacket pocket and a leather pouch out of his right hand jacket pocket. ‘Do you mind?’ he asked.

‘Well,’ I began, ‘I’m afraid…’

‘Of course you do. Everyone does. My wife would never let me smoke in the house.’ He put the tobacco pouch away but kept hold of the pipe. He paused and thought for a moment. ‘Mind you, she’s gone now, hasn’t she? Good riddance. I can go home smoke in bed if I like.’ He thought for a moment. ‘But I don’t want to go home,’ he added sadly.

‘You can smoke in here,’ I said suddenly, changing my mind. I felt sorry for him though I wondered how I would get rid of the smell of tobacco afterwards.

‘May I? Really?’ He seemed childishly delighted by this.

I nodded.

‘Do you know, they even want to stop me smoking in the hospital? Some snotty little bastard administrators came waltzing into my consulting room and demanded that I put out my pipe. One of them was called Entwhistle and I think the other was called something else. They said someone had complained about the smell. Why do people have to complain about everything? It’s not as if I was smoking in an operating theatre. I would never do that. Not with all those explosive gases around.’ As he spoke, he packed the bowl of his pipe with tobacco from his pouch. ‘I sometimes think that half the people who give up smoking end up taking tranquillisers to calm them down, and although it’s heresy to say so, I’m not entirely sure that the cigarettes weren’t doing them less harm than the drugs we give them. It wasn't a patient who complained about my smoking. I'm pretty sure about that. I think it was Doctor Bloody Phillips. He's a righteous do-gooder who strongly objects to anyone enjoying themselves. He complained about one of the nurses – said her skirt was too short and she was wearing seamed stockings. Apparently, they have rules about things like that. At Christmas, he insisted that we all drank fruit punch without any alcohol in case we upset any Muslims in attendance. The only Muslim working at the hospital is an anaesthetist and he drinks like a fish.'

'How long do you think you have been feeling depressed?'

'How long is a piece of string?'

'But you would agree that you seem depressed?'

'I'm a bit under the weather, maybe. But to be honest with you I would say I was confused and angry rather than depressed. Wouldn't you agree? It's a tricky diagnosis – depression. My problem is that I have no life. Oh yes, of course, I have a life. I have a job. I am paid intolerably well. I have a car with six galvanised iron buckets in the boot. But I don't feel that I am living my life. I'm not in control. I'm playing a part. I'm an actor playing this fellow Eckersley but as the actor I have no other life; no life of my own. I've given myself over completely to this creature. Does any of this make sense?'

'It does,' I said. 'Have you any history of depression or mental illness?'

'I'm a bloody psychiatrist! Have you ever known a sane psychiatrist?'

I smiled. I had to admit I couldn't think of one. I once knew a GP who worked as a part time psychiatrist. He went a bit potty and put a big bowl of drugs on his waiting room table. He then put a notice by it saying 'Help Yourself' and went out to play golf. Another psychiatrist I knew went very potty and refused to prescribe any drugs that didn't come in the form of red tablets or capsules. No one noticed anything odd about his prescribing habits for three months and then the hospital pharmacist noticed that he'd prescribed copious quantities of red iron tablets for 42 patients in a row. The psychiatrist's legal representative claimed that his client had prescribed the iron tablets because he'd believed his patients to be suffering from anaemia. This argument rather fell apart when it was shown that the doctor had done no blood tests on the patients he had diagnosed as suffering from anaemia. In mitigation, the psychiatrist claimed that the iron tablets he had prescribed had probably done less harm than the tranquillisers and antidepressants which any other psychiatrist might have prescribed. A third psychiatrist, who was a good friend of mine, once invited me to lunch at a smart hotel where he was staying. As we studied the menu, he was called to the telephone. He never came back to the table and I was left with a bill which pushed my credit card into dangerous territory. Four months later, the doctor who had disappeared suddenly remembered our luncheon and telephoned me from Dubai to apologise. I told him that if he hadn't been a psychiatrist, he would have probably been prescribed happy tablets and put into some sort of institution. He agreed with me.

'What made you come into my surgery today?' I asked Dr Eckersley.

'You're the only damned doctor in the village,' he replied with disarming honesty.

'That's true,' I agreed, though his blunt response didn't answer the question. 'But what I really meant to ask was, why did you come to see me? What did you want me to do for you?'

'Dunno, really. Funny you should ask that. I suppose I wanted someone to talk to – just to help get things straight in my own mind. That chap at the shop was all right for a while, though more of a talker than a listener, but he kept selling me things. I left him and his shop when he tried to sell me half a hundred weight of beetroot. What was I going to do with half a hundred weight of beetroot? The chap said they'd keep and I could use them in salads, but I told him that I doubted if I could eat enough salads to use up half a hundred weight of beetroot before they went off. He said I could pickle them and he could sell me six gallons of vinegar and two dozen pickling jars which would doubtless do the job very nicely. I think it was when he offered me the vinegar that I realised I had to get away. Still, it was nice of him to offer them to me. He said that he was able to let me have them at half the normal retail price because I was such a valued customer. I didn't expect you to sort my life out and I don't want pills. That's the last thing I want. I wouldn't take anything so it would be a waste of time prescribing pills for me. The rubbish doctors prescribe for patients who are mentally ill is astonishing. You need to be bloody fit and healthy to survive the stuff that's handed out these days.' He stopped for a moment and then added: 'You should perhaps get down to that shop and stock up on some of that beetroot while it's still on offer.'

'Are you staying in the village?'

'No.' He pulled out a little silver tool and packed down the tobacco in the bowl of his pipe. 'Well not yet. I might though if I can find a room somewhere. Seems a pretty out of the way spot. Do you get much through traffic?'

'No, not really.'

'Just people like me who are lost?'

I laughed. 'How did you come to be here so early this morning? You said you'd been in the waiting room for a couple of hours.'

‘I ran away last night and drove west. Isn’t that what they used to say in America? ‘Go west young man!’?’

‘I think so,’ I smiled. ‘What time did you leave London?’

‘Dunno. About midnight I think. I had a pizza and half a bottle of red wine in an Italian café near my house and then just got into the car and set off.’ He finished packing down his tobacco and put away the silver tool.

‘You didn’t bother to pack anything?

‘I didn’t even have a toothbrush until the chap at your village shop sold me a few.’

‘A few?’

‘He only had them in packs of twelve. He said he wasn’t allowed to split up the packs. Something to do with the Common Market.’

‘And then, after the pizza, you just drove west?’

‘Yes. I went to Bournemouth but it seemed shut so I didn’t stop there for very long.’

‘What time did you get to Bournemouth?’

‘About three I suppose. It was all dark. Everyone seemed to be asleep. I found an all-night petrol station and bought some petrol and a cheese sandwich. I think it was supposed to be cheese. It smelt of petrol and tasted of chipboard. Not that I’ve ever eaten chipboard. But it tasted as I suspect chipboard might taste. And then I decided to go to Lynmouth. I went there once when I was a boy. I remember I was happy there. It was a nice little village with a river and a beach.’ He took out a box of matches. ‘I expect it’s changed a lot,’ he added.

‘Lynmouth hasn’t changed at all,’ I told him. ‘And I doubt if it ever will. But Bilbury is quite a few miles away from Lynmouth. Did you lose your way or change your mind about Lynmouth?’

‘What’s Bilbury?’

‘The name of the village where you are now.’

‘Oh. Is it? I suppose I got lost. The lanes around here all look the same and there aren’t many signposts. I parked in a gateway and slept in the car for a while. Then I woke up with backache and stopped at the little shop and bought a pie and a box of aspirin. Actually, I only wanted a pie, some aspirin and a cup of tea but the man in the shop managed to sell me a box of six pies and some other stuff. He hadn’t got any tea but he sold me some tins of soup though I didn’t have anything to heat them up with. I’ve never much liked cock-a-leekie soup but it was all he had. I must say he seemed a very good salesman. I do remember him telling me that the buckets were a once-in-a-lifetime bargain.’

‘You bought a bucket?’

‘Yes. No. Well, actually, I bought six buckets. All galvanised, whatever that means. Doesn’t it mean they have zinc on them? To stop them going rusty I suppose. I have no idea what I’m going to do with six galvanised iron buckets. Would you like them? I can let you have them at a very reasonable price. They come with a five year guarantee. Nothing written down you understand but I expect it’s a transferable guarantee. He seemed the sort of bloke you could trust with your life.’

‘I think we’re OK for buckets, thank you. And Mr Marshall directed you here?’

‘Who’s Mr Marshall?’

‘He’s the man who runs the local shop. His name is Peter Marshall.’ I was still smiling inside at Dr Eckersley’s description of Peter as ‘the sort of bloke you could trust with your life’. I couldn’t wait to tell Thumper, Patchy and Frank.

‘Ah, you know him? Yes, I suppose you would; you both being local. He’s a wonderful fellow that Marshall. He sold me the hat.’ He pointed to the watch cap which he’d placed on my desk. ‘Marvellous hats those are, you know. You should get yourself one. They’re waterproof, windproof and everything else proof. If you stood underneath a nuclear bomb, the only thing left would be the hat. Mr Marshall told me that they’re guaranteed not to blow off your head even in a hurricane. And he said they float if they land in water. I’ve always been keen on hats. When I was a boy, the other kids spent their pocket money on marbles, comics and sweets but I used to save my coins and then buy hats whenever I could afford them. By the age of 10, I had a fine collection of headgear: a bowler, a trilby, a flat cap or two, a sombrero, a ten gallon cowboy hat which was my pride and joy, a top hat which I found in a junk shop, a fedora and a deerstalker with flaps. I used to keep them all under my bed and try them on in my bedroom. I never wore them when I went out, of course.’ He paused, apparently slightly embarrassed at how much he had told me about himself. He coughed and then continued. ‘But I have to admit that these are pretty damned special, don’t you think? You really ought to buy yourself one. One thing that has puzzled me though – if they never blow off, how would one ever land in water and float? I suppose if you were at a regatta and you took off your hat and threw it in the air while cheering, the thing might land in the water.’

‘I’ve got one,’ I told him. ‘Everyone I know has got one of those hats.’

We’d all bought our watch caps from Peter when he’d brought them into the Duck and Puddle. I vividly remembered the day we’d bought our hats. In an attempt to prove that his headgear helped the body retain heat, Peter had stood outside wearing little else but one of his hats. When he'd come back into the pub he'd been blue with cold and shivering.

'Mr Marshall told me that they're called Chapeau Watch Caps and that they are thermally insulated,' continued Dr Eckersley. 'As far as I can remember 'chapeau' is French for hat but I suppose that's probably the name of the manufacturer, eh? French, I assume. Or they might as well call them Hat Watch Caps which would be a pretty damned stupid name. I can't stand the French – they're humourless and nauseatingly self-important. Disorganised too – most of them couldn't organise a piss up in a vineyard.'

I didn't tell Dr Eckersley but Peter had bought the hats from a wholesaler who had, in turn, purchased the entire stock from a Canadian manufacturer who had gone bankrupt. It was, I assumed, the Canadian connection which explained the French name.

'Apparently these hats are wind proof and rain proof and they absorb the sun's rays, thereby protecting the head in all weathers,' said Dr Eckersley still enthusing about his new hat. 'They retain more heat than any other hat ever made. I really think everyone should have one. Apparently, they automatically adjust to fit the size of the head of the wearer. I suppose it's something special to do with the material. Mr Marshall said they were very reasonably priced too. I bought three though, I'm not sure why since I've only got one head and he said they are guaranteed never to wear out.'

'Are you taking any medication?' I asked him, trying to drag the conversation away from hats.

'Never take anything,' he said. 'If I took pills I'd have to stop drinking alcohol and I don't want to do that. Besides the pills they make for treating loonies are all complete rubbish.'

'How much do you drink?' I asked.

'Alcohol, you mean?'

'Yes, alcohol.'

'I drink. Probably more than I should. I think I'd become an inveterate worrier if I didn't drink occasionally. I wasn't always a worrier but I think I could become one.'

'What would you worry about?'

'Everything. I would worry about everything. I would worry about my patients. Bloody silly thing to do. None of them worries about me. I pretend that I don't worry but I do. I try to give the impression of being a 'devil take me to the hindmost' sort of rogue. But I'm not. I'm a sham; an actor playing myself. I want to be a rogue but I'm not.'

'So how much do you drink?'

'Ah, you're being a doctor again!'

'Yes. How much do you drink?'

'Not a lot. I never drink until the sun's over the yardarm.'

'When is that? I've never really understood what it means. It sounds nautical.'

'It's about 11 a.m. in northern latitudes, so I'm told. That's the time when the sun rises up above the upper mast spars of a sailing ship floating around in the North Atlantic.' He struck a match and lit his pipe. It took him a couple of minutes to get it going. 'Mind you, I've never been on a sailing ship so it's all a bit moot, wouldn't you say?' Thick smoke curled from the bowl of his pipe. To my surprise, it smelt rather sweet and not at all unpleasant.

'I bought some dog food too,' he said suddenly. 'And a basket of radishes. And tins of custard. About 36 tins of the stuff, I think.

'From Peter Marshall?'

'It's the only shop round here. So it says on a notice outside. I don't think he'd lie about that, do you?'

'No. It is the only shop in the village. Do you have a dog?'

'No, not actually, no I don't have a dog per se. No, I don't have a dog. But you never know. I might get one. Or one might attach itself to me. Or I might find a hungry stray. Or if the economy falters we might all find ourselves bartering with dog food instead of money.'

'How much dog food did you buy?'

'I think there were 24 tins in a crate. Your Mr Marshall wanted me to take two crates but I was running a bit short on cash and he said he preferred cash. He said cash was better for the economy in some way. I didn't understand his argument but he seemed convinced by it and I didn't like to argue with him.'

'So, how much alcohol do you drink?'

'I have a glass of beer with my lunch in the pub – maybe two. To be honest, I need them to get me through the afternoon. And then in the evenings I drink martinis but I like them without any damned vermouth in them. And I certainly don't have damned fruit and vegetables floating on the top.' He stopped for a moment and then added, as though in explanation: 'No lemon and no olives.'

'How many very dry martinis do you drink in an evening?'

'Oh, no more than two or three,' said Dr Eckersley. 'But I like them in a tumbler not one of those fancy little lady's glasses.' He squinted at me. 'I wouldn't mind a drink now if you have one. A glass of beer would be nice if you're having one yourself.'

'I haven't got any alcohol with me,' I said. 'Seriously, how long have you been depressed?'

'Have we decided that I'm depressed? I must have missed that part of the conversation.'

'Well you do seem rather low.'

'Would you say so? I'd describe myself as euphoric to be honest. But then you don't know me from Adam so it's probably tricky for you to make a judgement. I think if I were making a diagnosis I'd probably be inclined to go for something along the lines of what I've always thought of as manic depression but which some of my younger colleagues now insist on calling it bipolar disorder.'

Dr Eckersley puffed at his pipe and thought for a while. 'But if we make the assumption that I am depressed then I'd say I've been that way for about 30 years,' he replied at last. 'I was happy enough in my 20s when I was working as a registrar in general medicine. But then I did an idiotic thing and decided to specialise in psychiatry.'

'And you've been depressed since then?' I asked, incredulously.

'I would say so,' he said firmly. He thought for a moment. 'I would definitely say so. It was my wife's idea, don't you know. She used to read the British Medical Journal – not the juicy bits but the job adverts at the back. She noticed that there were very few posts for consultant physicians but loads of jobs for consultant psychiatrists. If I'd stayed in general medicine, I'd have been a registrar until I was 40 or more. But as a psychiatrist, I got a job as a consultant when I was just 30. More money and status, you see. That's what the wife wanted. Her sister was married to a neurosurgeon. There were no consultant jobs for neurosurgeons so her husband was a registrar and I was a consultant. All the difference in the world. It meant that my Clarissa could lord it over her sister. Funny isn't it how our lives are influenced by the strangest things? I've always admired those people who plan their lives. Mine has just lurched from one crisis to another leaving me exhausted by experience, weary of a world of never ending confusion and bewildered by a litany of frustrations, disappointments and injustices. Do you know, when I was young, younger than you are now, I once believed that if I worked hard I would one day be able to clear away all the crap and concentrate on the important aspects of life: doing good work and having fun. Ha! Now I just feel twice as old as time itself.'

'Clarissa is your wife?'

'Huh? What?'

'I asked if Clarissa is your wife?'

'My ex-wife, thank the Good Lord. She's the wife of the carpet fellow now. She's Mrs Whateverhisnameis. He's welcome to her. I expect she gets all her shagpile carpets at a good discount. She went off me when her sister's husband finally became a consultant. She'd lost her edge then, you see. Socially a consultant neurosurgeon is a bit grander than a consultant psychiatrist. So she thought, anyway. I remember her saying that among the ladies at the golf club it was generally agreed that psychiatrists were only one rung above dermatologists and orthopaedic surgeons, so in her eyes I'd let her down. She blamed me for not hanging on and becoming a consultant physician. She had an affair with a barrister and then went off with a weather forecaster for a while. But although she thought he was famous because he was on the telly, he didn't have any money. They don't pay weather forecasters much, you know. Then she found the carpet guy at the golf club.'

'The one with the Aston Martin and the expensive hair?'

'You know him then? I wouldn't have thought you'd have known him. I don't think he comes round this neck of the woods.'

'No, I don't know him. But you mentioned him before.'

'Oh yes, I suppose I did. He's an obnoxious little runt. He has to sit on two cushions to see over the steering wheel in his Aston Martin. I'm not obsessed with him but I do think of him from time to time.'

'Wasn't your wife impressed by your status as the psychiatrist who looks after the celebrities?'

'Oh she was, indeed she was. But she left me seven years ago and it was only three years ago that I began to achieve my current notoriety. It began when an American movie star had a well-publicised nervous breakdown and came to see me because my consulting rooms happened to be close to his hotel. In fact, he hadn't had a nervous breakdown at all. He'd had a hissy fit and wasn't sure how to go back to work without losing face. I sat and listened to him whinge for three hours and he left my consulting room a healed man. The producers of the film he was making at Pinewood were so thrilled that they sung my praises to the media. It was generally assumed that I must have been able to offer some mystical words of wisdom. But the truth was that after the three hours of whingeing, I stood up and told him what a pathetic, self-obsessed, ungrateful little twat he was. I pointed out that millions of people envied his lifestyle, his wealth and the trail of starlets queuing at his dressing room door. I then told him to grow up, piss off and get back to work.'

'And that did the trick?'

‘He congratulated me, paid me the biggest fee any psychiatrist in the world has ever received and told me that he would tell the world that I had restored him to perfect mental health. He explained that by healing him I had saved him from embarrassment since he could now explain that his unforgiveable behaviour on the film set had been a result of a mental illness. He told the world I had helped him conquer his problems by unveiling his inner demons, exposing them to the light and thereby exorcising them completely. It was all absolute bollocks, of course.’

‘And after that other celebrities wanted to see you?’

‘I became the fashionable psychiatrist who understood how celebrities worked, or did not work. My working hours were block booked by producers and agents and managers and lawyers who wanted their celebrity clients restoring to health and good working condition. I had, entirely by accident, invented a new medical speciality: healing people who had nothing wrong with them. They didn’t need treatment. All they really needed was slapped legs and to be sent to bed without any supper.’

‘And now you’re fed up with it all?’

Dr Eckersley looked at me, ‘Wouldn’t you be? Wouldn’t anyone be fed up? I am a fake doctor who sees fake patients. I earn more in a day than you probably earn in a year. Funny thing is that I always seem to be broke. I have an accountant who stuffs all the money into some sort of offshore scheme. At least he says he does. He pays my bills and gives me £500 a week in spending money. My wife, as you will have surmised, is now desperate to come back to me. She rings me five times a week to tell me that she misses me terribly.’

I stared at him in astonishment. How, I wondered but did not ask, could a doctor earn so much money that he received £500 a week in spending money. And with all the important bills paid for you how could anyone get through £500 a week? Dr Eckersley was clearly living in another world. Actually, he seemed to be living on a different planet. I was not envious in any degree but my surprise was simply engendered by the fact that I had never in my life been overcome with such riches. A country GP and author of books does not find gold raining down upon him in embarrassingly large quantities. I had known what I thought of at the time as real wealth only three times in my life. At the age of 14, I won £3 in a writing competition organised by the *Sunday Times* newspaper. (That was in the day when £3 to a 14-year-old boy seemed to offer an interminable supply of marbles, comics and bottles of dandelion and burdock.) At the age of 15, I had won £10 with a £1 premium bond an aunt had bought me for Christmas. I had not been thrilled by the gift of the premium bond but the £10 win was joyfully received. And at the age of 20 I had been so excited at passing an examination at medical school that I had rushed to the nearest bookies and put 10 shillings on a horse called ‘Notachance’ (I was a contrarian even in betting terms) which had romped home at 12 to 1 and left me wishing I could bottle the day and cart it around with me for the rest of my life, dipping into a minute here and an hour there whenever the need arose.

‘Couldn’t you just give up the celebrities and start seeing real people again?’ I asked. ‘Real people with real problems?’

Dr Eckersley laughed. ‘Oh, I tried that,’ he said. ‘But it proved to be quite impossible. The hospital administrators had instructed the secretarial staff to book only rich and important people into my clinic. They like having the place littered with celebrities. Besides, the agents and managers and other hangers on made huge donations to the hospital and the administrators didn’t want to give up all that lovely lolly. One of my patients paid for a new X-ray unit. It’s all peanuts for them, of course, and they get yards of wonderful publicity. The amount of money slopping around looking for a good home is quite scary. None of that really matters because no ordinary doctor refers real patients to me anymore. They all assume I’m too busy, too important and too expensive to deal with any patient who doesn’t have a stache of multi-million pound contracts in their Louis Vuitton briefcase.’

‘So you’re stuck with your life?’

‘I was indeed, as you say, stuck with my life. And I didn’t like it.’ He puffed at his pipe and then smiled at me. It was a strange, rather appealing, lop sided smile. ‘And so I ran away.’ He puffed at his pipe again. Plumes of sweet smelling smoke drifted up towards the ceiling. ‘Now do you think I’m just depressed?’

I thought for a while and then shook my head. ‘No, I suppose not. But why did you come and see me?’ I’d asked him this several times because I still wasn’t sure what he wanted me to do.

‘Needed to talk to someone,’ he said bluntly. ‘I’d have stayed and talked to that shopkeeper chum of yours but if I’d told him my problems he’d have just sold me more buckets and another crate of dog food. He’d have probably sold me the shop.’

‘I’m not sure I know what to do to help you,’ I told him.

‘You’ve already done what I needed,’ said Dr Eckersley. ‘You’ve lent me your ears. It was what Caesar wanted and it was what I needed.’ He stood up. ‘You’ve given me good advice and I know what to do.’

‘But I haven’t given you any advice!’ I protested.

‘Exactly,’ said Dr Eckersley. ‘That’s the best sort of advice there is. Is there a pub in the village? Somewhere I can stay for a few nights while I have a look around and decide what to do with the rest of my life?’

‘You want to stay in Bilbury?’

‘I have a feeling that no one will ever find me here,’ said Dr Eckersley. ‘So now that I’ve run away I’ll stay run away for a while. Who knows I might run away permanently and stay around here. It seems a good place. And if I need to buy dog food or buckets I know where to go.’

‘What about your celebrity patients? And your hospital committee? And your medical students?’

‘Nuts to them all,’ said Dr Eckersley. ‘Nuts to them all with double knobs on.’

I picked up the telephone on my desk and rang the Duck and Puddle.

‘Have you got a room free?’ I asked Gilly, who answered the call.

She said they had.

I told her that the room was now let and that the occupier would be with her in a few minutes.

‘You’ve got a room at the Duck and Puddle,’ I told Dr Eckersley. ‘When I introduce you to Frank and Gilly I shall tell them your real name for these are my friends and there is no way I’m going to lie to them about you.’ I assured him that if you told Frank and Gilly a secret then it remained a secret.

Dr Eckersley accepted this without a murmur of protest. ‘Quite understand,’ he said. ‘You can’t have a stranger sailing into harbour under false colours.’

‘It’s up to you whether or not you tell everyone else your real name. If you think people are really going to be looking for you…’

‘I think I shall be Dr Crippen,’ said Dr Eckersley. ‘Dr Hawley Harvey Crippen from Michigan in the United States.’

‘People may suspect you are travelling under an alias,’ I said.

‘If they ask, I shall tell them that the original Dr Crippen was my great uncle and that although I have spent my life trying to live down the connection, I steadfastly refuse to change my name simply to avoid the unwanted and associated notoriety. I shall add that my father was intensely proud of the family connection, that he believed my great uncle to be innocent of the crime for which he was hung, and that he gave me my great uncle’s Christian names as a sign of respect for the only member of the family to be famous for anything other than hog stealing. If I am pressed I shall add that my great uncle on my mother’s side was a notorious hog rustler who was hung for stealing three hogs and a bushel of fresh beetroot.’

‘Isn’t there a risk that people will then become curious about you, and take an interest in you because of your infamous relative?’

‘Indeed there is,’ agreed Dr Eckersley. ‘But no one looking for Dr Eckersley would think him stupid enough to register as a guest in a pub under the name ‘Dr Crippen’, would they?’

I laughed.

‘Anyone seeing the name will believe my story because it is too absurd not to believe.’

‘I’ve got some house calls to do,’ I told him. ‘I’ve got to go past the pub so follow me in your car and you won’t get lost.’

Dr Eckersley, soon to metamorphose into Dr Crippen, thought this was a splendid idea. He put on his Chapeau watch cap and we left.

Before we set off in our two car convoy, he opened his boot and insisted on giving me the six galvanised buckets which he had purchased from Peter Marshall. He refused my attempt to pay for them.

The Psychiatrist Who Ran Away (Part 2: The Metamorphosis)

Dr Eckersley settled in well at the Duck and Puddle.

Indeed, he settled in so well that when I called in at the pub a couple of days later, I found him standing behind the bar reading a copy of *The Times*, which was spread out on the counter in front of him, and clearly settled as comfortably and as confidently as if he had been stationed there for a decade or more. He was puffing happily at his pipe, which was stuck in the corner of his mouth as though it had been welded into position. We were the only people in the snug.

'You look well established,' I said.

'I am the new barman,' said Dr Eckersley. 'On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays I stand behind the bar and provide the world with refreshment. I am, I believe, on approval. I sound like a packet of stamps supplied through the mail but I feel as though I have come home. My only complaint is that the post of barman does not come with a uniform.'

'Why on earth do you want a uniform?

'It would help me establish my new position in my mind. As a psychiatrist, I was always conscious that whatever advice was likely to be followed. As a barman, I can offer advice with absolutely no sense of responsibility. A uniform would remind me that I can talk to people without having to feel any responsibility at all and it would help me remain aware that if I feel bored by a conversation, I can wander off and do something else saying something like 'Please excuse me, I have to go and rebore the limitation pipes connecting the spygot to the pump handle. If I don't do it regularly the spygot pipe gets crapsulated and Mr Parsons gets terribly upset.'

'Do people accept that sort of rubbish?'

'Of course they do! As long as you say it earnestly and with utter conviction then people will believe anything. It's jargon, do you see? People expect jargon and they respect it. These days everyone has their own jargon. Social workers, policemen, lawyers, doctors – all have jargon. A uniform would help people accept the fact that I am, as a barman, a person with jargon at his disposal.'

'What sort of uniform would you like?'

'Oh, I don't know, something simple but at the same time distinguished. The barmen at the best London establishments are all togged out in snazzy waistcoats, usually in some bright colour, with matching bowties. They're not as smartly done out as the doormen, of course, for the fellows burdened with the responsibility of opening and closing the door are invariably dressed in the sort of ceremonial uniform usually worn by the Commanders in Chief of the Ruritarian Army Forces. But a bright waistcoat would be acceptable and would give my position the gravitas it deserves.'

'Have a word with Gilly,' I suggested. 'I'm sure she could run you up something from a nice piece of old curtain material.'

Dr Eckersley sniffed at my comment and then leant forward and lowered his voice to a sotto voce stage whisper. 'I must say,' he said, 'that my work has been made easier by the fact that my predecessor was, I gather, an unmitigated frample. As a barman, I find that I am free to offer simple words of advice and comfort without expectations or responsibility. I like to argue the bad side of an argument; to put forward and then sustain the illogical, apparently indefensible and perverse point of view.'

I laughed at this.

'You may laugh! You may sneer. But I spent a very pleasant hour yesterday evening arguing that the Government should give everyone daily coupons for free cake. I managed to persuade a couple in matching puce anoraks that it is cake not bread which is the staff of life. I knew I'd got them when one of the pair, I think it is was a woman but it was difficult to tell, asked me what sort of cake I thought was most beneficial. I told her a triple layer sponge cake with cream and raspberry jam filling had been proven to be nutritious and to contain elements proven to combat a wide range of mental health disorders.'

I stared at him in astonishment. Just a day or so earlier, this man had been a Professor of Psychiatry and an eminent Harley Street consultant.

'In my previous life I had to attempt to be rational and sensible but I have now realised that these are not my natural inclinations. You cannot begin to imagine the sense of freedom which I now feel.' He blew out a great cloud of smoke and leant across the bar towards me. 'I was born to be a barman,' he confided.

'I know what unmitigated is, but what's a framble?'

'A frample, you ignoramus, not a framble! A frample is a sour or peevish person.' Suddenly he stood upright and hit himself on the forehead with the palm of his hand. 'My apologies, doctor. I am forgetting my duty as the on approval bartender in this establishment. What can I get you to drink?'

'Nothing at the moment, thank you. I just popped in to see that you'd settled in well. And I'm delighted to see that you have.'

'I love it here!' he said. 'My host and hostess are good people. The food is excellent, the accommodations are a little cramped but satisfactory and there is ample room to store my radishes, my custard, my dog food and my new hats. The work is convivial to say the least. I have, as they say, landed on my feet. There are things which are vital to our lives; absolutely crucial things which we could not easily live without. In this category I put breathing, fresh drinking water and sewage pipes. All these are essential. We could not live without them. But they are not things which give our lives excitement; these things are not important to us personally. Oxygen and sewage pipes are vital but they aren't important to me as an individual.'

'So what is important to you?'

'Peace, honesty and a chance to live a simple life,' he said. 'I needed to get away from the hypocrisy and superficiality of metropolitan life.'

I leant across so that I could whisper to him. 'By the way, are you now Dr Eckersley or Dr Crippen?'

'Neither,' he replied in what I think he thought was a sotto voce comment but would, I believe, have more accurately been described as a stage whisper. 'My name is now Gengolphus Stottle. I am reborn. With age comes cynicism and weariness and the old Dr Eckersley was as cynical and as weary as you can get. However, the newly born Gengolphus Stottle is alive and full of enthusiasm. I have changed my name, my mind and my life.'

'Gengolphus Stottle?'

'But you can call me Harry.'

'Harry?'

'Do you have to behave like an echo chamber? Or is this annoying habit of yours a ploy?'

'A ploy?'

'There you go again!'

'No, I'm curious. What sort of ploy?'

'It's a ploy favoured by those of my patients who were in politics. They repeat whatever you say so that they have time to catch up with the conversation, look for any loopholes or swampy bits, assess the risks and then think up a suitable lie in response.'

'No, no, it wasn't a ploy. I just didn't understand.'

'If you're going to question everything I say, we won't get anywhere very quickly.'

'No, I can see that. But why are you called Harry if your name is Gengolphus?'

'Harry' is a name which was given to me by Mr Parsons.'

'Mr Parsons?'

'Mr Parsons is the landlord of this esteemed establishment and, of course, my employer.'

'Ah, you mean Frank.'

'As a mere employee, and a junior one at that, in terms of employment if not of years, I do not feel it behoves me to refer to my employer by his Christian name.'

'No one will know who you mean if you call him Mr Parsons. He's Frank. Everyone calls him Frank. And try not to talk like that. You sound like a Professor of Psychiatry who's run away to the country to escape from himself.'

The new barman looked concerned. 'Do you really think so? I thought I sounded like a friendly man of the people; a man born to turn on the taps which release the elixir of life. By the way, the beer sold in this pub is like nothing I've ever tasted. They don't sell stuff like this in London, you know. We sell a beer called 'Old Restoration' which must have a higher alcoholic content than vodka.'

'Yes, I know about 'Old Restoration' and I'm afraid I do think you still sound a tad like a Professor of Psychiatry. And I don't understand why Frank calls you 'Harry' when you told him your name was Gengolphus? And where on earth did you get the name Gengolphus Stottle anwyay?'

'Mr Parsons seemed to think it a good jape to call me Harry. I think he liked the name 'Harry Stottle'. If you think about it, I'm sure you'll see why. Try saying it loud. I rather like it myself. Besides, the name Harry has for centuries been a good, solid English name though it is, of course, of German origin. I may change my name by deed poll. Get rid of Gengolphus and replace it with Harry.'

'Can you do that? Change your name?'

'Oh yes! I had a patient who did it. You go and see a solicitor, fill in some forms and change your name,' explained Harry. 'Once you've changed your name you can get a new passport and driving licence in your new name. You can do this as often as you like. And if you keep your old passport and driving licence but tell the authorities that you've lost them, you can have several identities. As far as the world at large is concerned, there is nothing to link the various names. You can open new bank accounts with your new name and keep your old bank accounts under your original name. You can then write yourself a cheque in your old name and put the money into an account in your new name. You can open an account abroad and then go back to the UK and change your name yet again. As soon as you have a new name and bank account, you rent a property and acquire some utility bills. Bingo! You've got brand new identities.'

'How on earth do you know all this?' I asked him.

'Patient of mine did it all the time,' said Harry. 'In books and films the characters who want a new identity always go rooting around graveyards. They find the name and birth date of a child who died early in life, someone who would now be approximately their age, and they get hold of a copy of the birth certificate. They can then use the information they've got to apply for a passport and so on. It's all very complicated and risky. Simply changing your name by deed poll is much easier.'

'But there's no need to change your name by deed poll because Gengolphus isn't your name!' I pointed out.

'No, but I could change my name from Eckersley to Stottle,' said Harry. He thought for a moment. 'I think I might do that.'

'Why did you call yourself Gengolphus Stottle in the first place?' I asked him. I was clinging to the edge of the conversation by my fingertips. 'Where the devil did you get that name?'

'Oh, that's easy. I once had a patient called Gengolphus Stottle. He was a film star; a most interesting fellow with an endless series of hang-ups. They were for me very profitable hang-ups. He was very famous and whenever he was in my consulting rooms, there would be a crowd of screaming girls gathered outside. For months, I assumed the girls had somehow managed to follow him to my rooms but he confessed one day that the girls were all unemployed actresses who had been hired by his management team. The girls were paid film extras' day rate to stand around, shout the star's name, demand autographs and hurl items of underwear in his direction. At the start of each day, they were all issued with three assorted items of underwear which the management team obtained wholesale from a store in the East End of London. All this nonsense worked and everyone assumed that my patient was hugely popular. You would recognise the stage name by which everyone knew him but his real name was Gengolphus Stottle. I find that Americans in show business often have very strange real names. That is probably why so many of them adopt a nom de guerre when they are working. You can't imagine the name Gengolphus Stottle lit up on a cinema marquee, can you? It's difficult to picture a crowd of screaming girls shouting out 'Gengolphus, I love you Gengolphus. I want you to have my baby, Gengolphus!' However, I always rather liked the name so I appropriated it. He won't mind because he's dead. One of his many peccadilloes was that he liked to spend his evenings dressed as a baby and he always slept with a dummy in his mouth. Unfortunately, the rubber nipple came off the pacifier and he choked on it. His managers told the fans that he'd died of a broken heart after his pet dog had been run over. A medical colleague of mine signed the appropriate certificate and arranged for a speedy cremation. His management agreed that was the only way to ensure that his back catalogue continued to churn out decent profits.'

'How awful! Had his pet dog really been run over?'

'Whose pet dog?'

'Gengolphus's.'

'Oh, Gengolphus didn't have a dog. He couldn't stand animals of any kind. He hated anything on four legs. There were wild rabbits on his land in Arizona and he used to mow them down with a souped-up Uzi. He was a terrible shot and wounded two assistants, though he did once put a very neat line of bullet holes in a Buick which was driving past. His managers had to buy the family a new car and pay all the little girl's hospital expenses. The family were very nice about it. Gengolphus sent them all signed photographs and tickets for the premier of his next movie. The little girl couldn't make it but the parents were taken there in a stretch limousine and they were thrilled. I think the appropriate phrase is that they were 'over the moon'.'

I stared at him uncomprehending.

'It's a different world,' he explained with a shrug.

I just nodded. I was actually quite shocked. I suppose I was naïve in those days. 'It all sounds very manipulative and deceitful,' I said at last.

Harry laughed. 'Film stars are no more dishonest than politicians or company bosses. The world I see is full of spin and misdirection; corruption is endemic and democracy is just a word that used to mean something.' He sighed. 'I just got tired of it all. I want to find an oasis of peace; somewhere as yet untouched by the 1970s. I'd like to go back 50 years but I'll settle for a lifestyle stuck in the 1950s.' He waved a hand around. 'And so here I am happy. I have found contentment.'

It was my turn to laugh. 'Are you suggesting that Bilbury is stuck in the 1950s?'

'Are you suggesting it isn't?'

'Peter Marshall has acquired a new set of weighing scales that measure in grams and kilograms,' I pointed out. 'And the local garage mechanics are now happily servicing post-war cars. Well, some of them.'

‘And you drive around in a Rolls Royce that should be in a museum!’

‘Touché!’

‘This is the 1970s but you are living in a community which is naturally isolated and therefore self-reliant. Living here is more like living in a village in the Middle Ages than living in a village in the middle of the 20th century. I hope it never changes. Mr Marshall, the fellow who runs the village shop, told me yesterday that all the fruits and vegetables he sells are grown locally. What happens in a snow storm? I wager you cope very well.’

‘We do,’ I agreed. ‘Nothing much changes. Peter runs out of something after a few days, usually beetroot or spinach, but we never run out of bread because people make their own and we never run out of milk because we have cows. The pub might run low on one type of beer but there is always something else to take its place. If all else failed we could drink home-made wine.’

‘There you are, you see! In the city, everything comes to a halt when the first flake of snow hits the ground. The buses and the trains stop running. The drivers of motor vehicles panic. Shops run out of food and schools close. Everywhere you look, people are panicking. City life has much to recommend it. There are theatres, museums and opera houses. But I never had time to visit any of them. If I wasn’t working I was threading my way through the traffic.’

I thought about it and knew he was right. Most of the people I knew who lived in London never visited any of the cultural centres which were supposed to be the reason they wanted to live in London in the first place.

‘A little earlier we were talking about animals,’ continued Harry.

‘Were we?’

‘The film star’s imaginary dog.’

‘Oh yes.’

‘Is it true that you keep a pig? Is that really so?’

‘Oh yes. Patsy and I have a pig called Cedric.’

‘A pet pig?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you have no intention of turning him into the filling for a mountain of bacon sandwiches?’

‘None whatsoever.’

‘Delighted to hear it! People usually do things with their pets. They fuss over them, stroke them, teach them tricks and exhibit them. What do you do with your pig? Why do you keep him?’

‘Does there have to be a reason?’

‘Of course! In London no one does anything without at least one very good reason.’

‘Well, we feed him. And we admire him a great deal. He’s a very fine specimen. And like all pigs, he’s a very intelligent animal. He actually belongs to a very lovely American couple. I like Americans. My father was on destroyers during the Second World War. He was torpedoed three times and on the last two occasions he was rescued by American ships.’

‘How did an American couple find themselves the owners of a pig?’

‘They won him in a Bowling for the Pig competition at the Duck and Puddle. I think they were a little surprised. Normally people win a big silver cup if they win a competition but the winner of the skittles competition at the pub always collects a pig. Cedric was a bit smaller when they won him but he just keeps growing.’

‘I take it they didn’t want to take him back home with them.’

‘They’d have liked to but…’

‘…they worried he wouldn’t fit into the overhead luggage lockers.’

‘Or onto an aeroplane seat. Even when he was young he was still quite a size.’

‘So you and your wife are in loco parentis?’

‘Exactly. We’ve adopted him and we send his real owners pictures of him.’

‘But what do you do with him apart from feed him? Do you take him to shows and then pin up rosettes on the wall of his sty?’

‘We talk to him and we take him for walks. He’s got a lovely personality. But, no, we don’t exhibit him. We don’t think he’d appreciate being prodded and poked by strangers with stout sticks. He’s a very sensitive pig.’

‘You take him for walks?’ Harry, the former Dr Eckersley, seemed surprised by this, as though I had said something odd.

‘Oh yes, he loves going for a walk. I suppose it’s the opportunity to sniff some strange smells and nibble at a few bits of unusual hedgerow.’

‘On a lead?’

‘Well, we tie a piece of string around his neck. But it’s not really a lead. It isn’t like taking a dog for a walk. You can’t pull him back or make him go where you want him to go.’

‘I didn’t know people took pigs for walks.’

‘Oh yes, as long as the pig is properly registered with the Government. And as long as the owner has a licence.’

‘What sort of licence?’

‘You need an annual licence if you want to take a pig for a walk.’

Harry laughed. ‘Now you’re pulling my leg. You think I’m a silly city fellow and you’re laughing at me!’

‘No, no, I’m not. Honestly, you need a licence if you want to take a pig for a walk in England. I think it’s probably the same everywhere in Britain. And you have to carry the licence with you at all times.’

‘You’re serious?’

‘I am. Moreover, an inspector must approve the route that the pig is going to take. And the pig has to have a tattoo or a tag or a mark of some kind.’

‘In case he gets lost?’

‘Presumably.’

‘Is your pig tattooed?’

‘No. He’s not the sort of pig to have a tattoo. He has a collar.’

‘A dog collar?’

‘Well, it’s much bigger than a dog collar. But it’s like a dog collar. A chap in the village made it for him out of a leather belt. It’s got his name on a little, metal disk and there’s a hook on the belt to which I can attach his lead.’

‘And how much does he weigh?’

‘About 700 pounds, give or take a turnip or two.’

‘How the devil do you weigh him? Not on the bathroom scales I assume.’

‘My wife’s father is a farmer. He’s got a weighing machine for farm animals. We walk Cedric round there occasionally.’

‘Has he ever escaped?’

‘Who, Cedric?’

‘Yes. I don’t mean your father-in-law. I assume he is safely settled in captivity.’

‘Cedric got away from me once, early on in our relationship. We were in the lane and he just sort of bolted and I lost him. I couldn’t keep up with him. He was missing for nearly two hours. Patsy and I were in quite a state. We had just about everyone in the village looking for him.’

‘But there’s a happy ending?’

‘Oh yes. He’d wandered off to the Duck and Puddle where there was a coach parked outside. The passengers weren’t staying there – there aren’t enough rooms for a coach party – but they’d stopped for Devon cream teas. Gilly makes a splendid cream tea, by the way. The coach driver had opened the luggage compartment so that he could reorganise some of the luggage. Apparently, he’d heard some of the cases moving around as he drove round the lanes. When he’d finished doing the rearranging, he’d gone into the pub for his cup of tea and had left the door to the luggage compartment open.’

‘And that’s where they found Cedric?’

‘The coach driver had a fit when he came out of the pub and found a pig comfortably settled among the suitcases.’

‘I hope none of them was pigskin.’

‘Hmm. I hadn’t thought of that. Anyway, the coach driver fetched Frank who recognised Cedric. And ten minutes later, I coaxed him out of the luggage compartment with an apple.’

I looked at my watch. ‘I must go,’ I said. ‘I’ve got several home visits to do before lunch.’ We said our goodbyes and I hurried off.

It was good to see Dr Eckersley/ Dr Crippen/Gongolphus Stottle/Harry so comfortably established at the Duck and Puddle.

During his first month in the village, Harry Stottle became a regular visitor to Bilbury Grange.

Although he was happy to be away from London, and was enjoying his new, less stressful existence, Harry was not a natural loner. It is, I suppose, rather difficult to switch from being a busy and important psychiatrist, fawned over by celebrities of all kinds, to being a part-time barman living in a pub. The Duck and Puddle can sometimes be very busy but it can also be deserted for hours at a time.

On the days when he wasn’t working at the Duck and Puddle, Harry would often wander around the village. He liked to chat to anyone and everyone and as I drove around on my visits, I would often see him leaning up against a farm gate chatting to a farm labourer. When he wasn’t working behind the bar, Harry became a Duck and Puddle stalwart.

‘Do you know the food here tastes better than anything I’ve ever eaten in my life! The air is like wine. I stand outside, drink it in and feel alive. The gardens and hedgerows are full of wild flowers. Nature is unconfined and spreads herself around with an easy grace. Do you have butterflies in the summer?’

‘Yes, loads of them.’

‘What sort? Not just the white ones which are reputed to be so fond of cabbages?’

I reeled off the names of a few that sprang to mine. ‘Red admirals, skippers, orange tips, peacocks, brimstones, small coppers, fritillaries – all sorts, including the white ones which are reputed to be so fond of cabbages!’

‘I haven’t seen a butterfly since I was a boy! What about conkers. Do you see conkers?’

‘Of course! In late September we’re up to our knees in them.’

‘In the street where I live the council has pollarded all the trees. Residents complained that the fruits of the horse chestnut trees, the conkers, fell onto their motor cars. There was talk of bonnets being dented and lawsuits being initiated. Have you ever heard such nonsense? So the trees were pollarded and there are no more conkers. Now, the hapless trees stand naked and pointless, as decorative as telegraph poles.’

A few days after arriving in Bilbury, the erstwhile Dr Eckersley decided that he didn’t want to go back to London at all. He decided that part of his life was over for ever. He sent letters resigning from his consultancy post and his teaching position and telephoned the firm of accountants which looked after his financial affairs and instructed them to sell his house and offshore holdings and put the proceeds into his bank account. I don’t know how much money was involved but I rather suspect it was a considerable sum. The house apparently sold in days to a Greek shipping millionaire.

And, as he had discussed, he went to a solicitor in Barnstaple and had his name legally changed to Gengolphus Harry Stottle.

As soon as the name change had been completed, he used a cheque book for his old account to move all his money into an account in the name of Gengolphus Harry Stottle.

Moreover, the newly minted Harry Stottle opened a Post Office Box in Barnstaple to ensure that no one from his past would be able to find him. All his correspondence went there.

It would not, I suppose, have been impossible for anyone to find him if they’d been really determined but, after the first week or so (and a few headlines such as ‘Celebrity Psychiatrist Goes Missing’ and ‘Psychiatrist Goes Potty?’) the world had pretty much lost interest in his disappearance.

Before the first month was over, Harry decided that he wanted to use some of his money to buy himself a cottage.

‘I want somewhere small, cosy and unpretentious,’ he said. ‘It must be detached and it must have some land because I want to keep animals. And it must be close to a river because I intend to take up fishing.’

I asked around and telephoned a few relatively reputable estate agents and managed to find him a couple of possibilities. And so it was that just a few weeks after leaving London, and running away from all his responsibilities, the newly minted Harry moved out of his room at the Duck and Puddle and into a traditional, detached residence called Bread Cottage which was just a quarter of a mile from the pub and which he bought for cash with a chunk of the money his accountant had sent him.

Bread Cottage had acquired its name as a result of the fact that it had, back in the 17th century, been the village bakery. In those days, home owners who ran small businesses from what are now rather stuffily known as residential premises, didn’t give their homes unoriginal names such as ‘Chez Nous’, ‘Wee Nook’, ‘The Willows’ or ‘Honeysuckle Cottage’. Indeed, they didn’t give their homes names at all. Why should they? There was no postal service and no delivery drivers with parcels to deliver. Cottages and houses were given names according to the occupation of the person living there. So, in an ordinary sort of village, there would be a Mill House, a Vicarage, a Smithy and, of course, a Bread Cottage or a Bakery Cottage.

Harry had become a resident of Bilbury and although I was delighted, for he was good company, I was rather surprised.

I had suspected that after a few days, a week or ten days at the most, he would tire of country life, hanker after the bright lights and excitement of London, and return to his old life, his professorship, his consultancy and his lucrative private practice.

But he didn’t.

Indeed, he got on so well at the Duck and Puddle that Frank and Gilly told him that his period of approval could be considered at an end. His working hours were increased and he became the resident barman during daytime hours throughout the week. Gilly still did the cooking, of course, and Frank could be found behind the bar during the evenings and at weekends but having a reliable barman on weekdays made life much easier for them both.

Harry was absolutely fascinated by our animals and whenever he came to Bilbury Grange, he insisted on saying hello to all our creatures. We introduced him to Ben (our dog), Emily, Sophie and Jeremy (our cats), Lizzie, Petula, Cynthia, Sarah-Louise and Miss Houdini (our sheep) and Cedric (the pig we were looking after for Edgar and Delphinium Rathbone). Harry was particularly taken by Cedric and told me that his ambition was to have a pig of his own.

‘When I lived in London, I longed to have a dog,’ he said. ‘But that pig of yours is wonderfully intelligent and I swear he understands me when I talk to him. Once I've settled in and got my new place sorted out, I'll have a sty built and find myself a decent sized pig to put in it.

'Just remember that you have to check on the site if you're building a pig sty,' I told him.

'There are rules about that?'

'Oh yes. Keeping a pig near a street 'so as to be a common nuisance' is illegal, under the town Police Clauses Act of 1847.'

'There seem to be a lot of laws about pigs.'

'There are.'

And inevitably, Harry wanted to take Cedric for a walk.

Before I even considered letting him take Cedric out by himself, I insisted that he came out with Cedric and me on a couple of occasions. I tried to give him some simple lessons in 'How to Take a Pig for a Walk'. This may sound rather silly but in practice, the human walker has to remember that taking a pig for a walk is entirely different to taking a dog for a walk.

'The first thing to remember,' I told him, 'is that the lead is there purely as a formality. It's partly psychological and partly for appearance's sake. It's not so much a lead as a sort of friendly reminder to which Cedric responds as a courtesy. With a good strong lead, even a big dog can be pulled back or pulled along if he's misbehaving. But you can't use the lead to control Cedric. If you get into a battle with a pig then either the lead will break or your arm will come out of its socket – probably the latter. Always remember that a pig tends to go where a pig wants to go. All we can do is try to make him want to follow us and encourage him to want to go where we want him to go.'

'And you say he weighs 700 pounds?'

'That was a month or so ago when we last weighed him. He's probably put on a bit of weight since then. Whatever the precise figure might be, there's no doubt that he weighs four or five times as much as you or me and so even if we both tried to control him, we'd fail. If he really wants to go to the left, he will go to the left, and if he wants to go right, he will go right.'

'Right!'

'The second thing to remember is that pigs like to trot occasionally. And they can keep up the trotting for a long time. Cedric managed to get away from me once and I couldn't keep up with him. I eventually found him eating the flowers in Mrs Winchcombe's front garden. I think it's fair to say that Cedric was considerably happier than Mrs Winchcombe.'

'How fast can a pig run?'

'About 11 miles an hour is pretty good for a pig. But they have surprising stamina and can keep up that speed for a long way. At 11 miles an hour, Cedric could run a marathon in just over 2 hours – which is as fast as the fastest human athlete could run it and probably faster than you or I could manage it.'

'Ah! So if Cedric makes a break for it I'll have a job to keep up with him?'

'You will.'

'So how do you keep him under control?'

'Apples,' I replied. 'Cedric knows our voices and he'll usually come when we call him but as a backup, I stuff my pockets with apples and use them to keep him on the straight and narrow if he gets tempted to stray too far.'

'You can use them for steering?'

'Absolutely! But if he's stopped because he's admiring the view or has found something tasty to eat on the roadside, it's probably best to leave him be for a while.'

'Use the apple as an incentive. Like carrots and donkeys?'

'Exactly?'

'Any particular brand? Does he prefer Granny Smiths or Red Delicious?'

'I don't think Cedric much minds what the variety is. Just hold the apple where he can smell it. And then let him eat it. Hold the apple on the flat of your hand so that he doesn't accidentally munch his way through your fingers. He probably won't notice but you might.'

'That sounds like good advice.'

'It is.'

'Does he respond to his name?'

'He does when Patsy or I call him. But that's probably partly because he recognises our voices. He won't know your voice yet so you'll have to rely on the apples.'

And so one Saturday, about six weeks after he'd arrived in the village, Harry turned up at Bilbury Grange to take Cedric for a walk. I gave him the pig walking licence and several pounds of apples in a shopping bag and warned him to dole them out sparingly. 'The first time I took Cedric for a walk, I used up all my apples before we'd covered 200 yards. So be a bit mean with them to make them last.'

And off they went.

Patsy and I stood in the driveway and watched them go with beating hearts.

'I feel as though I'm watching my teenage daughter go off on her first date,' I said.

'I think Cedric will be fine,' said Patsy.

'It's not Cedric I'm worried about,' I said.

Two hours later, when the pair of them had not returned, I started to worry. After two and a half hours, I climbed onto my old bicycle and started riding along the lanes, looking for them. Eventually, I wondered if Harry had taken Cedric along to the cottage he had just bought and so I pedalled off in that direction.

The guess paid off.

They were both there, in the rather overgrown orchard that was part of the property. Cedric was flat out on the grass. He looked asleep. Harry was standing next to him, calling to him, telling him to get up and occasionally poking him with what looked like a branch broken off an apple tree.

'What on earth's happened?' I asked.

'I thought Cedric would like to come and see my place,' explained Harry. 'The orchard is full of windfalls and knowing how much he likes apples, I thought he could have a little party all by himself – a sort of apple crunching feast.'

I looked down into the long grass and kicked at one of the apples. 'These are rotting!' I said.

'Yes, I suppose some of them are,' agreed Harry. 'But they're obviously still edible. He ate quite a few and seemed to enjoy them. Do you think he's upset his tummy by eating too many?'

'I don't think pigs get upset tummies,' I told him. 'Cedric certainly doesn't.'

'Good. That's a relief!'

'But they do get drunk.' I bent down beside Cedric. He was breathing perfectly well but his breath was a giveaway. 'He's been drunk before. I don't let him into our orchard at Bilbury Grange.'

'Drunk? He can't be. I haven't given him any booze. Honestly! Not a drop.'

'You didn't need to. He's eaten half a bushel of fermenting apples. What do you think happens when apples start to ferment?'

'They turn into alcohol?' said Harry, very quietly. 'Oh, whoops. I'm so sorry.'

'Oh whoops indeed. Poor Cedric is as drunk as a lord.'

'Oh damn. I really am sorry. Now what do we do? Can we move him back to your place? Maybe we could get a truck and take him back home.'

'How do you suggest we get him into the back of a truck?'

'Lift him?'

'We'd need a forklift truck to do that. And it's Saturday. And the ground in your orchard is so rough and overgrown that I doubt if we'd get a forklift truck through to where he is lying.' I looked up at the sky. 'The trouble is that it's clearly going to rain.'

'And Cedric doesn't like rain?'

'He absolutely hates rain.'

'Do you think he might get a cold?'

'I don't want to risk it.'

'So what do we do?'

'We need to cover him up with something.'

'A tarpaulin? There are some old sheets of corrugated iron at the bottom of the orchard. Maybe we could put up some sort of shelter.'

'No.'

'No, I suppose not. Rotten idea. So what do we do?'

I thought for a while. 'We borrow a tent from Frank.'

'Does Mr Parsons have a tent?' Harry seemed surprised. 'I really don't see him as a camper.'

'I doubt if Frank has ever been camping in his life. But he and Gilly have a couple of tents which they use for weddings and so on. I think they're more small marquees than tents. They put them up on their back lawn to provide overflow accommodation.'

I walked round to the Duck and Puddle and half an hour later Frank, Harry and I had erected the Duck and Puddle's smallest and second best marquee over and around Cedric who was sleeping off his fermented apple binge. We took the marquee round to Bread Cottage in an old-fashioned hand-cart of Frank's. Cedric never budged as we worked, though he did keep on snoring and snuffling. There is something surprisingly soothing about a snuffling pig. God timed things well and the rain only started about ten minutes after we had finished putting up the marquee.

'Phew!' said a relieved Harry. He turned to Frank. 'You saved my bacon, Mr Parsons!'

‘If you keep addressing me as Mr Parsons I’ll sack you,’ said Frank sternly.

Once Cedric was safely settled, and safe from the rain, Harry invited us back to his cottage for a drink and a packet of crisps. Bread Cottage was a good walk from the orchard. Before we left the orchard, I made sure that the entrance gate to the field was firmly shut. If Cedric woke up and started wandering, I didn’t want him wandering too far. A quick check confirmed that there was a good, solid post and rail fence around the rest of the orchard.

‘This is all I’ve got,’ Harry said, apologetically, when we were comfortably settled in the lounge at Bread Cottage.

He had produced a crate of Old Restoration and a large box full of packets of crisps.

‘I’ve not had time to do any proper shopping yet so it’s either a packet of salt and vinegar crisps or a tin of dog food.’

Once he’d produced the beer and the crisps, he lit a fire in the cottage’s huge log burner. The fire had already been laid when we’d entered Bread Cottage and there was a fire burning in the log burner in the other main downstairs room. There was no central heating in the cottage and without the two stoves, the place would have been terribly cold.

‘I didn’t know you’d got a dog,’ said Frank.

‘I haven’t,’ replied his new barman.

Frank looked puzzled. ‘But you said you’d got dog food.’

‘Harry visited Peter’s shop when he first arrived in Bilbury,’ I explained. ‘When he was still Dr Eckersley.’

‘Ah,’ nodded Frank, understanding.

‘I called in at the shop because I wanted to buy a bar of chocolate and a drink,’ explained Harry.

‘Did Peter sell you anything else interesting?’ asked Frank. ‘Apart from the dog food for the dog you don’t have.’

Harry, obviously embarrassed, looked at me.

‘One of his watch caps and a few galvanised buckets,’ I interspersed. The fire was by now burning very brightly.

‘Golly, you got away lightly,’ said Frank. ‘One of the purple caps made in Canada? Guaranteed waterproof, windproof and safe from nuclear explosion?’

‘Yes, that’s right. An absolutely brilliant hat.’

‘They shrink. The material tightens up if it gets wet but don’t worry because it stretches if it gets hot. Mine fits me like a vice in the wet but comes down over my eyes if it’s sunny. How much dog food did he sell you?’

‘A tray full of cans.’

‘And nothing else?’

Harry looked more embarrassed.

‘Go on,’ said Frank. ‘You can tell me. Peter does it to everyone.’

‘A rather embarrassingly large quantity of radishes and rather more custard than I’m ever likely to eat. And, of course, the galvanised buckets.’

‘Not bad,’ said Frank. ‘Everyone ends up with the custard and the buckets. But I have to confess that the radishes are a bit unusual.’

We each drank a bottle of Old Restoration and ate a packet of crisps. The beer was fine but the crisps were soggier than is usually considered preferable in snacks of that nature. Peter tends to buy his crisps from a wholesaler who specialises in vintage stock – usually obtained from retailers who’ve gone bankrupt. The result is that the crisps tend to lose some of those qualities such as taste, crunchiness and freshness which are traditionally regarded as integral.

‘Another bottle?’ asked Harry. ‘Another packet of crisps?’

Both Frank and I thanked him and said that since it was getting late, we thought we’d better be getting home.

‘I’ll pop round early in the morning and collect Cedric,’ I told Harry. ‘He should have sobered up by then. If you could possibly keep him in the marquee, and away from the fermenting apples, that would be splendid.’

‘I’ve got some radishes I could give him if he fancies a snack,’ said Harry.

‘That would be marvellous,’ I agreed. ‘Just keep him off the fermenting apples.’

‘I’ll just have another couple of bottles of this Old Restoration, then before I bed down for the night, I’ll totter along to the orchard and check that he’s OK,’ promised Harry.

Frank and I looked at each other. Old Restoration is a potent brew and the only local beer I know of which is capable of stripping paint. The local church of Saint Dymphna (named after the patron saint of various degrees of insanity) once had a curate called Murgatroyd who was the politest, neatest, most cautious man I ever met. He was a dedicated belt and braces man who rode around Bilbury on an ancient sit up and beg bicycle which had once belonged to the wife of a previous vicar. In order to prevent his flapping trouser legs from catching in the chain, he wore bicycle clips and tucked his trousers into his socks. After one pint of Old Restoration, I saw him throw a soft boiled egg, a packet of pork scratchings and a large portion of spotted dick (complete with custard) into an electric fan and then laugh merrily at the mayhem which ensued. I always thought it was a pity that he took the incident to heart and left the village so shortly afterwards.

‘Don’t worry about me!’ said Harry, with city-born confidence that was a couple of hundred miles misplaced. ‘I can handle a couple of pints of beer!’

And so Frank pushed his empty hand cart back to the Duck and Puddle and I climbed aboard my rusty but trusty old bicycle and pedalled my rather weary way back to Bilbury Grange.

It was at exactly twenty seven minutes past one in the morning, that the telephone went.

I know the time because I looked at the clock and wrote down the time the minute I had the telephone receiver tucked between shoulder and ear. It was my habit to keep a record of the time when emergency calls came in. I also used to write down where the call had come from so that Patsy would know where I had gone. She always woke when the telephone rang but she wasn’t always completely awake if you know what I mean.

It was Frank on the telephone and he sounded only slightly short of hysterical.

‘Bread Cottage is ablaze!’ he shouted. ‘I closed up ten minutes ago and Thumper passed that way on his way back home. He just came racing back to tell me he’d seen flames licking out of the thatched roof. I’ve rung the fire brigade but they won’t be here for half an hour. Gilly suggested I should ring you in case we get Harry out and he has any burns.’

Patsy, alarmed by Frank’s voice, was now as awake as I was.

I told her where I was going, pulled on my trousers, a shirt and a jumper and was in the car on the way to Bread Cottage less than five minutes later. I stopped only to put my black bag into the boot.

I could see the flames almost as soon as I left Bilbury Grange.

The roof, of Bread Cottage was, of course, a thatch and thatched roofs may look very pretty, and make wonderful photographic images for tourists, but they tend to burn with great ferocity. A thatched roof will be fully ablaze in a fraction of the time that a slate or tiled roof will take to catch fire. And the result is too often that the entire building is destroyed.

I parked the car as close to the cottage as I could and ran to the small crowd of people who had gathered to do what they could to help. Thumper was there and so were Frank and Gilly.

The trouble was that there was absolutely nothing that anyone could do.

We all tried. Heaven knows, we tried.

Frank had brought three buckets with him and since there was a stream near to Bread Cottage, we thought we could organise a human chain, taking water from the stream and throwing it onto the flames.

But there was no way we could make a difference.

Not even a fire engine would have been able to dowse those flames.

We threw buckets of water over the blazing cottage but the water turned immediately into steam. We tried to get into the cottage but we were beaten back by the flames while we were still yards away from the front door.

Few things are more terrifying than a blazing house fire – apart from a blazing house fire when there is someone inside it.

‘He’d be drunk and dead to the world by now,’ muttered Frank to me. ‘If he had three bottles of Old Restoration he’d be unconscious.’

I nodded agreement.

Old Restoration is sold as beer but those who know it well and who love it drink it more like a spirit than a low alcohol beverage.

‘It was those damned log burners,’ said Thumper Robinson glumly. ‘I begged Archie not to put in a log burner at all. But the old fellow ignored me and put in two! He did promise me that he’d only light one at a time but I bet Harry didn’t realise the danger. And I never thought to warn him.’

Thumper, bless his heart, likes to give the impression that he is a hard man, and in truth he can be when required, but at heart he is a kind and gentle soul who cares enormously about those around him. He was, I could tell, seriously upset.

Archie Jarvis had been the previous owner of Bread Cottage. He had died six months earlier in a nursing home in Barnstaple. Archie had been 97-years-old when eight decades of heavy smoking and drinking had finally killed him. For at least two decades, he had drunk a full bottle of whisky a day and he had been smoking 60 unfiltered cigarettes a day for much of his life. He had been the only person I knew who wore a monocle. He told me that his father, who had begun life as a police constable in London, had worn a monocle all his life even though his eyesight had been perfect. A police constable with a monocle must have been quite a sight. Unusual eyewear was not unusual in Bilbury. Several elderly, female residents favoured lorgnettes, and the pince nez could be seen regularly throughout the village and the environs.

Archie had run an ironmongery shop in Barnstaple. It was one of those gloriously old-fashioned shops which sold screws singly, rather than in plastic blister packs. The counter staff used to put every item purchased into its own suitably proportioned brown, paper bag. Archie retired at the age of 80 and his son, who was 58 at the time, took over. The business, which had been called Jarvis and Son was then officially renamed Jarvis and Father. I rather liked that. I remember Archie telling me, with a cackle of laughter, that the doctor who looked after him at the nursing home, and who had diagnosed heart failure and severe bronchitis, had told him sternly that he was now, at the age of 96, paying the price for a dissolute lifestyle.

I've always taken an interest in the houses in the village of Bilbury and so I already knew that Bread Cottage had, back in the 17th century, been half of a pair of matching, attached cottages. When the bakery started to do very well, and provide bread to the citizens of surrounding villages, the baker and his wife bought the cottage next door and knocked the two houses together. The upwardly mobile couple also took advantage of the need to expand to knock the two properties into one to combine the two chimneys into one in order to reduce their liability to the chimney or hearth tax. This much hated tax had been introduced in 1652 and it meant that property owners had to pay a tax for every chimney their property contained. Knocking two chimneys into one obviously reduced the liability to the chimney tax by half. The snag was, of course, that it meant that all the heat from two fireplaces, the fireplace in what had been the bakery and the fireplace in their living room, went into a single chimney. Knocking through the wall between the two chimneys had been done very crudely and was, it seemed, a very early example of what was later to become fairly widely known as the Bilbury Bodge.

And then, as Thumper had pointed out, the problem had been exacerbated when the owner before Harry had installed not one but two wood burning stoves into the two hearths.

Combining the two chimneys into one had been the first step towards disaster for it meant that the one chimney got twice as hot as it should have. Putting in two log burning stoves had been the second, and final, step towards disaster. Wood burning stoves dramatically increase the heat in a chimney. Having two wood burning stoves both using a single chimney was an accident waiting to happen, though the cottage might have survived if it had not been for the thatched roof.

And so, since there was nothing, absolutely nothing, we could do to stop what was happening, we stood there and we watched.

I could not believe that the unfortunate Dr Eckersley had found peace and happiness only to have it snatched away from him after so short a time. It seemed so cruel.

As Professor Eckersley, the teaching hospital professor and the consultant psychiatrist, he had spent all his working life in London; living and working in a world populated almost exclusively by poltroons, galliards, gangrels and myrmidons.

Reborn as Gangolfphus 'Harry' Stottle he had been about to begin a new life and was already settling comfortably into the quiet, respectable community of Bilbury.

I stood there dreading the moment when I would have to go into the burnt out wreck of a house and identify Dr Eckersley's remains as being all that was left of a human being. I would, I supposed, have to tell the police the real identity of the burnt cadaver.

The police and the fire brigade always need a doctor to certify a body as dead. Even when it is painfully obvious to the most inexperienced eye that someone is dead, the authorities must have confirmation from a doctor before they can move the body. Officially, the police would need a police surgeon to confirm that the burnt out carcass was that of a human being. The nearest police surgeon was in Barnstaple but I suspected that he would ask me to stand in for him.

I had, only once before, been required to view the remains of someone burnt in a fire. And it had been an awful, awful business. The body I had seen had been a tramp who had died in a barn fire. The coroner ruled that he had probably lit a cigarette and gone to sleep without extinguishing the nub end properly. He had been burnt so badly that it had been impossible to identify him.

There wouldn't be any difficulty in identifying the corpse in Bread Cottage. We knew who was in there.

Authors who write books in which bodies are burned, usually describe the awful sight of a charred body but forget to mention the smell. If they had ever been within a quarter of a mile of a burnt human body they would know that the acrid, sharp smell of burning flesh can be smelt a long, long way away and will stick in the nostrils for days afterwards.

The fire engine arrived less than half an hour after I had driven up to Bread Cottage. The driver had done well. I am always impressed at how quickly the drivers of ambulances and fire engines can take their huge vehicles through the North Devon lanes. It is always much quicker at night, of course, when there is not much oncoming traffic and that which there is can see, and be seen, a mile or so away.

Bread Cottage was still blazing when the fire engine arrived and the firemen dowsed the flames surprisingly quickly. Frank, Gilly, Thumper and the others wandered off because there was nothing else to be done. The fire chief told me that it would be hours before it would be safe for me to go into the remains of the cottage and identify the owner.

Before I drove off home, I decided to walk around to the orchard to see how Cedric was doing. I was feeling very depressed. I was devastated that Dr Eckersley was dead. He was a fascinating character and I had been looking forward to getting to know him better and to learning more about him and his life in London.

It would, I thought, be impossible to make up an individual like Pelham Ronald Eckersley. He had enough personality for a regiment. There had hardly been time for me to get to know him but I knew that I would miss him. I was so sad that he should find some peace and then have his life snatched away from him. It was yet another cruel reminder that not all dreams come true and not all dogs have their day. There were tears in my eyes and on my cheeks.

I unfastened the ties on the doors of the marquee. I wasn't quite sure why we had bothered to knot them together. If he had wanted to leave the marquee, Cedric could have walked through the side of the canvas tenting as if it hadn't been there, pulling out the tent pegs we had driven into the ground as though they were nothing more than dressmaker's pins.

But Cedric was still fast asleep, snoring and snuffling and still sleeping off the fermented apples he had eaten.

I was relieved to see that he was fine; absolutely fine.

And I was startled but relieved to see that sharing the marquee with him, curled up inside a thick blanket and wearing his purple Chapeau watch cap, lay Gengolphus 'Harry' Stottle.

I stared for a moment at the sleeping barman and then bent down and shook the erstwhile Professor Eckersley.

'What is it?' he demanded. His eyes were red and he was still sleepy and clearly fairly drunk. 'What the hell are you doing here?'

'I came to see Cedric. What are you doing here?' I asked him.

He sat up, rubbed his fists into his eyes and looked around. 'I felt so bad about letting Cedric get drunk that I decided to sleep with him in here so that I'd know when he woke up,' replied Harry.

'He could have rolled on top of you!' I told him.

'I never thought of that,' said Harry. 'But I thought I might be able to stop him eating more fermenting apples.'

'We thought you were dead!' I cried, suddenly angry in the way that mothers are when they discover that the child they thought was lost was in truth merely asleep in the airing cupboard. 'We thought you were done to a crisp!'

Harry sat up, suddenly awake. 'What do you mean? Why should I have been done to a crisp? What the devil are you talking about?'

I bent down and put a hand on his shoulder. 'I am so pleased to see you,' I said softly. 'You'd better come with me. I'll take you to the Duck and Puddle. I think they'll be able to find you a bed.'

'I can go to my cottage,' said Harry. 'I've got a very nice second-hand bed there. I bought it from a pal of yours, a lovely fellow called Patchy Fogg. I got the bed at a bargain price. It was apparently the only bed in Stratford-upon-Avon that the bard did not sleep in so he let me have it cheap. '

'I'm afraid you don't have a cottage or a lovely bed,' I told him. 'I'm sorry to have to tell you this but your cottage burnt down.'

'Has it?' he said. He slowly hauled himself to his feet. 'Oh, that's a bit of a bugger,' he said.

Cedric snuffled and snorted, lifted one trotter and then put it back where it had been. He seemed to be dreaming but was definitely happy enough. I found myself wondering, for a moment, if pigs do dream. And if they do dream, of what do they dream?

I drove Harry to the Duck and Puddle where Gilly and Frank were absolutely delighted to see him alive and well. Frank rang Thumper to give him the good news. I went to Bread Cottage to tell the firemen that there were no charred bodies in the house.

I picked up Cedric the next morning and Frank and I took down the marquee which was no longer needed.

I honestly expected that the burning down of his cottage would result in Harry going back to London.

But I was surprised, and delighted, when the Duck and Puddle's new barman announced that he still intended to stay in Bilbury. He said he intended to rebuild the cottage and that he would instruct the architect to try to stick to the original design – except that there would be two separate chimneys and a slate roof.

Harry said that until the cottage was rebuilt he would be living at the Duck and Puddle and he was thrilled when Gilly presented him with two maroon and gold brocade waistcoats which she had fashioned from a spare piece of curtain material. She'd also made him a matching bow tie.

'It isn't far to go to work,' Harry told me. 'I just totter down the stairs. And my cottage is only a short walk away so I can keep an eye on the builders.'

As the builders recreated the burnt down cottage, Harry told me that since the place had been called 'Bread Cottage' for three centuries he thought it was about time for a change. After toying with various names, including 'Bacon's End', Harry decided to call his rebuilt cottage 'Cedric's Cottage'; in a permanent tribute to the pig who had unwittingly saved his life.

‘Thank God I was sleeping with the doctor’s pig! I would have fried if I hadn’t been tucked up with Cedric in Frank’s second best marquee,’ the elegantly costumed barman explained to anyone who would listen.

I couldn’t help wondering what a certain Dr Eckersley, psychiatrist to the stars, would have had to say if one of his celebrity patients had made a similar confession.

A Hectic Day in Bilbury

Bank holidays were usually an especially busy time for me in Bilbury and it was not unknown for the morning surgery to last so long that it pretty well ran into the evening surgery. On not a few occasions, I found myself doing my non-urgent home visits in the evening. When I had seen the last of the patients in the waiting room, I would usually grab some supper (having missed luncheon completely) and then set off around the village to see those village residents who needed to be seen in their homes. Sometimes I would wait for my supper until I'd completed the visits.

These days, most GPs do very few home visits. But back in the 1970s, I saw many of my patients in their homes. Indeed, I don't think there was a patient on my list whose home I had not entered on business on at least one occasion, either to see them or to visit a relative. I found that by visiting my patients in their own homes I learnt a good deal more about them. It is so much easier to know how to treat a patient when you know a little about them, their lives and how they live. Sadly, home visits seem to be rare and getting rarer. Many doctors seem to be too busy filling in forms and attending meetings to make house calls.

The popular North Devon holiday resorts of Ilfracombe and Combe Martin are not far away from Bilbury and the famous twin villages of Lynton and Lynmouth are also relatively close by. There are numerous hotels and boarding houses in these resorts, and a variety of caravan sites and campsites cater for many thousands of additional holidaymakers.

Cheap flights and ridiculously cheap hotel accommodation meant that in the 1970s, it was often cheaper to take a holiday in Spain, France or some other destination than to have a holiday in Britain but there were still millions of Britons who preferred to have their holidays nearer home – and a holiday in England invariably meant a holiday by the seaside. Young parents, with happy childhood memories, wanted to recreate the joy of their own family holidays. And they were perhaps a little nervous of taking their small children abroad. Many did not enjoy the prospect of having to travel to a suitable airport, deal with customs officials and then sit for a few hours in a cramped, budget aeroplane packed with hundreds of other tourists and harassed airline staff. And, of course, many genuinely enjoyed and preferred the traditional North Devon holiday experience: fishing for shrimp in rock pools, huddling under a sun umbrella on one of the inevitably rainy days, shivering while making sand castles, surfing on the vast sandy beaches at Croyde and Woolacombe, enjoying fish and chips on the sand, taking a boat trip out to Lundy Island and sipping warm beer at a traditional Devon pub with a thatched roof and a wasp infested garden. And then, of course, there were the joys of pasties and scones covered in Devon cream. As a visitor once said to me: 'You can't buy a decent cream tea in Torremolinos'.

It is true that the lanes in North Devon tend to be on the restricted side of narrow and they tend to wind and wriggle rather a lot too, and are as a result sometimes rather daunting to motorists who are accustomed to driving on roads where there is, at the very least, room for a line of traffic going this way and a line of traffic going that way.

The result of the nervousness created by the narrowness of the roads, means that the traffic queues can be exhausting – particularly if a car towing a caravan comes radiator to radiator up against a tractor towing a trailer loaded with half a hundred bales of hay.

But North Devon was still a popular destination for holidaymakers; particularly those who came from the English Midlands; from the urban sprawls of Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Walsall and so on.

It is true that not many visitors chose to stay in the village of Bilbury itself (there were, in any case, only a few cottages which were rented out to visitors and the only residential accommodation was in Bilbury's only pub, the Duck and Puddle, an inn which has only a few bedrooms for guests) but a good many tourists passed through the village on their travels through North Devon or chose to visit for the day. And, of course, holidaymakers staying on campsites, under canvas or in caravans, were often as close to Bilbury as to anywhere else. It was also not unusual for holidaymakers to get lost and find themselves in Bilbury by mistake.

The result is that at the height of the holiday season, I often saw quite a number of strangers.

I vividly remember one August bank holiday that seemed to go on and on forever.

It possibly wasn't the busiest day I've ever had but it was certainly the strangest and by the end of the day, when I eventually settled down to enjoy two slices of buttered toast and a glass of Bunnahabein malt whisky, served in a tea glass with a little hot water, I was pretty well drained.

There are, incidentally, few English delicacies in quite the same league as hot, buttered toast.

I usually prefer making toast for Patsy and myself on a long handled, brass toasting fork held in front of a log fire, and I still feel disappointed if we have to make our toast under the grill in the kitchen because the weather is too warm to light a fire.

I remember that at the end of that particular day, Patsy and I listened to ‘At the Drop of a Hat’, a long playing recording of a comedy duet called Flanders and Swann. Michael Flanders and Donald Swann were the two halves of a popular musical comedy act and they had been at their most popular in the 1950s and 1960s. They were responsible for a number of comic songs such as ‘The Gasman Cometh’, ‘The Hippotamus’ (with its wonderful chorus of ‘mud, mud, glorious mud’) and ‘The Gnu’.

By the time side one of the record had finished playing, I was beginning to feel relaxed and I poured myself a second glass of Bunnahabein malt whisky to complete the relaxation process. Patsy, who has never liked whisky, had a cup of hot chocolate. By the time side two of the album was finished, we were both ready for bed.

But that was later, much later.

Before we got to the buttered toast and to the joys of Flanders and Swann, there was quite a good deal of the day to get through.

And it really was one of those days that I’d like to forget but which sticks in my memory and probably won’t ever fade away. It was, without doubt, an unusual day.

The first outsider I saw was a boy of about fourteen. I can’t remember his exact age but I’ll call him Phillip Nixon for the very good reason that his name was something quite different and if I were to tell you what it was you would probably recognise it.

(I saw ‘Phillip’ again a couple of decades later. We met in a rather gloomy, unprepossessing BBC radio studio in Leeds. I didn’t remember him since he had grown up considerably, of course. But he remembered me and introduced himself. I was in the studio to talk about a book I’d written. He was there because he was a Junior Minister in the Government of the day.)

Phillip had come to the surgery with his father but he came into the consulting room by himself. Ostensibly, he came because he had fallen playing cricket on the beach and had bruised his leg on a half-hidden rock. The skin had not been broken and neither had the bone. I knew the moment I saw him that he had come to see me for some other reason. No healthy 14-year-old visits a doctor to complain about a bruise.

‘Is there anything else worrying you?’ I asked, when I’d taken a look at the bruise, offered the usual expression of sympathy and told him what he already knew – that there was no need to do anything about it since it would doubtless go through the usual variety of colours and then disappear.

‘Well there is, actually, sir,’ he replied, apparently surprised that I had seen through his stratagem.

I waited.

It was clear from the ‘sir’ he had added on to the end of the sentence that he was a pupil at a fairly posh school. I remember it occurred to me that I could not remember the identity of the last person who had called me ‘sir’. It may have been a tailor, selling me a made-for-measure ill-fitting, ill-made jacket. Or perhaps it was a traffic warden, slipping a parking ticket under one of my windscreen wipers. If it had been the latter then it was doubtless said with more than its fair share of irony.

‘At school I play in the second eleven at cricket,’ he told me. ‘I’m very young for the second eleven and the cricket master is pretty confident that one day I’ll play for the firsts.’

(The cricket master’s prediction was modest. Young Phillip eventually played cricket for his university. The word was, he told me decades later when we met in that BBC radio station in Leeds, that if politics hadn’t taken over his life he could have made a career as a professional cricketer.)

I nodded, said nothing and waited again.

‘The thing is,’ he confessed, ‘that I did something pretty dreadful during the last match of the term.’

I sat still and waited.

‘I’d scored 49, which was a pretty decent effort on that pitch, and then I hit a slow ball into the air over mid-on. I thought it was going for four but the fellow at mid-on ran backwards and it was pretty clear that he stood a good chance of catching it. I really wanted that 50 because boys who score a 50 or take five wickets have their names read out at morning assembly. Besides, I knew that a 50 would push me up to second in the batting averages.’

He paused and I said nothing. I wondered what on earth he was going to tell me.

‘And then,’ he said, ‘I did a pretty caddish thing. A very caddish thing actually.’

I raised an eyebrow and leant forward an inch or two, as though emphasising that whatever he told me would go no further. In those days, doctors were allowed to keep patients’ secrets. These days there is really no such thing as patient confidentiality. But back then, the doctor’s consulting room was like the priest’s confessional.

‘I prayed that the fellow at mid-on would drop the catch,’ he said, his voice now not much more than a whisper. The other batsman and I had run the single and so I would get my 50 if the fielder didn’t hold the catch. If he held onto it, of course, I’d be out for 49 and I’d miss my half century.’

‘You prayed that the fielder wouldn’t hold onto the catch?’

‘I know,’ said Phillip, now blushing bright red. ‘I know it’s an awful thing to say, sir. But I really wanted that half century.'

'What happened?' I asked.

The boy looked puzzled.

'Did he hold onto the catch?'

'Oh, of course. No, he didn't.'

'And now you feel guilty that you prayed for something so selfish and relatively trivial?'

Phillip paused and swallowed. 'Well, it wasn't actually trivial, sir,' he said. 'It was pretty important. But it was totally selfish. I realised immediately afterwards.'

'Have you told anyone else about this? Your father? A teacher at school? The cricket master? The school chaplain?'

'No, sir. I'm afraid I haven't.'

'You told me because you needed to tell someone, the bruise was a good excuse to see someone in some sort of authority and you knew that you'd probably never see me again and so it doesn't really matter what I think?'

He looked embarrassed.

I waited.

'I suppose I did, sir. Yes, that's about the size of it.'

I looked at him. It was a trivial thing but it was clearly important to him. I was impressed that he had worried about the praying. But less impressed that he had chosen to confess to a stranger, someone he had never seen before and would probably never see again, rather than to someone whose authority and opinion he would doubtless respect more deeply. It is sometimes easier to confess to someone you don't know than to confess to someone you do know.

'Would you describe yourself as fairly religious?' I asked him.

'Fairly,' he said. 'About average, I would say, sir.'

'Do you really think that the praying had any effect on the fielder's ability to catch the ball?'

'I don't know, sir. I can't really say. That's the thing, isn't it? If I knew that it had no effect then I wouldn't worry about it. But, you know…' His voice trailed off.

'Your school cricket is over for the year, I suppose?'

'Oh yes, sir. We'll be playing rugger in the autumn.'

'Do you play for any other teams? Do you have any other cricket matches this summer? Apart from beach cricket, of course.'

'They've asked me to turn out for the village side,' said Phillip. 'My father plays for them.'

'And obviously you'd like to do well?'

I couldn't give him Hail Marys or extra homework or lines or keep him in after school but a thought had occurred to me. I clearly needed to punish him in some way or the boy would nurse this guilt for the rest of his life.

'Oh yes, sir. Very much so.'

'It was a pretty caddish thing to do,' I told him. 'Praying for the other chap to drop the catch.'

'Yes, sir. I've been worrying about it quite a bit.'

'When you bat for the village you can score 20 runs,' I told him. 'But when you've got 20 you must give away your wicket.'

Phillip swallowed hard. 'Just 20, sir?'

'You can score 20 runs. If you score less, then that's fine. The praying is cancelled out. But if you score 20 then you give away your wicket. Doesn't matter how you do it. Let a straight ball hit your wicket or your pad. Or scoop a return catch to the bowler.'

'And you think that would do it? That would be a just penance, sir?'

'Definitely,' I told him, as though I were an expert on religious punishments.

'Thank you, sir,' he said. He looked glum but strangely relieved. He stood up.

'And don't worry about it anymore.'

'No. Thank you, sir.' He headed for the door and then stopped and turned. 'You won't say anything to my father, will you, sir?'

'Not a word,' I assured him.

When he'd gone, I sat for a few moments trying to think how else I could have handled a problem that was more theological than medical. Eventually, I gave up. I couldn't think of anything better. And although I suspect that you can probably think of a more suitable way to handle it, I still cannot think of anything more appropriate or effective.

It was, to say the very least, a unique problem and a tailor made solution. And a pretty good example of the sort of non-medical problem that country doctors sometimes find themselves facing.

My second patient of the day had also fallen down.

But instead of a simple bruise, Edna Biddulph had a small cut on her hand. The cut, more of a graze to be honest, was on the thenar eminence, the part of the hand at the base of the thumb. It was the sort of injury that most people would be happy to deal with by running it under the cold tap for a few minutes, to wash away any dirt, and then slapping on a sticking plaster. I doubt if the cut was as much as half an inch long. The cut had bled a little and the blood had long ago dried. It appeared that she had made no effort to wash it.

'How did you do this?' I asked, as I cleaned the small wound as gently as I could. I was, I thought, merely making polite conversation. It was a question along the lines of 'Where did you go on your holidays this year?'

But if I had been expecting a simple 'Oh, I tripped over the dog' or 'I fell while playing with my youngest' I was sadly mistaken.

Ms Biddulph (when she introduced herself, she was most insistent that I should refer to her as 'Ms' Biddulph – a form of address which was quite unusual at the time in my part of the world) was a neat woman in her early thirties; there wasn't much of her but you could tell she was pleased with what there was and regarded herself as having been hewn by a sculptor of talent using materials of the very best quality. The term Ms has been in use since the 17th century but it was the first time I'd ever heard anyone use it.

Sadly for the world, she was, I think, a woman who lived to complain.

You know how some people eat to live and others live to eat, well there are some people who complain to make their lives better and there are some people who complain because they like doing it. She was definitely one of the latter group.

'I fell on your cliff path,' she said accusingly.

'I'm afraid I don't have a cliff path,' I said, perhaps rather defensively. She had said it as though she were about to announce that she was planning to take legal action against me. Some people can turn a simple statement into the beginnings of a tort.

'Where did you fall?' I asked her.

'Just outside Padstow,' she replied.

'That's in Cornwall,' I pointed out. 'It must be nearly 100 miles from here!'

'That's as maybe,' she said. 'It's all the same thing.'

'Why didn't you go and see a doctor in Padstow?'

'My partner and I were out for the day,' she said. 'We took the children down to Cornwall. I didn't have time to go looking for doctors. But we're staying in Combe Martin.'

'When did you fall?'

'Yesterday,' she said. 'You should insist that they have all the loose stones removed from the path,' she told me as I finished cleaning the small wound. She examined her injury critically. 'Does that need any stitches?'

'No, I don't think so,' I said. 'A sticking plaster should suffice.'

'I think it might heal better with a few stitches,' she said. 'Stitches would bring the edges closer together and there might be less chance of a scar.'

So I put in a stitch. The customer is always right. The cut was so small that I could only manage to put in one stitch.

'I don't need a tetanus injection,' she told me. 'So don't think you're giving me one of those. I had a series of tetanus jabs last month. And I'm not taking antibiotics either. I always get thrush and diarrhoea if I take antibiotics.'

'You'll need to see a doctor in five days to have that stitch removed,' I told her. I didn't think she needed antibiotics.

'I won't be able to get an appointment see my doctor for a week or so,' said Ms Biddulph. 'He's a very busy doctor.'

'Well, you must explain to the receptionist that you need to see him urgently,' I said.

'I could have easily fallen off the cliff. If I had fallen off the edge I would have gone down onto the rocks,' complained the woman. 'You should put a fence along the edge of the path.'

'But there are miles of footpath along the cliffs,' I pointed out. 'It would cost a fortune to put up fencing along the whole coast.'

'Well, it doesn't matter what it would cost, you should put up some fencing,' said the woman. 'You should insist that it's done.' She still seemed to be holding me responsible for the absence of fencing.

'Don't you think that having fencing all along the cliff path would rather spoil the view?' I asked.

'You'll wish you'd put up fencing when someone falls,' she insisted.

'I think there are already some warning signs on the cliff path,' I said. 'There are signs asking people to be careful and to keep away from the edge.'

'Well, that's not good enough,' said the woman. 'What's your name?'

I told her.

'I shall be writing to the authorities to complain,' said the woman. 'I don't think you have a very good attitude.

It's your responsibility to protect members of the public. And I will also complain about the fact that I had to sit in your waiting room for forty minutes before you would see me.'

With a weary heart, I explained that I had been seeing other patients and that I did not have an appointment system.

The only complaints I ever received about not having an appointment system came from visitors who had never been to Bilbury before and would probably never visit again.

Ms Biddulph wasn't the first visitor to complain about the fact that I ran open surgeries where patients were seen on a first come first served basis, and she probably wouldn't be the last.

'My GP has an appointment system,' she said tartly.

'Many GPs do,' I agreed. 'And in fact I lose money by not having an appointment system. If I had one I would be paid more because the National Health Service pays a bonus to GPs who have them.'

I then pointed out that I had conducted an informal survey among my patients to see what they wanted me to do. I had, I explained, told them that the choice was simple. If I organised an appointment system they would have to visit or telephone Bilbury Grange to make an appointment to see me. Because of the way these things always work there would, I pointed out, probably end up being a waiting time of a few days before they could be seen. And I pointed out that even the best run appointment system tends to run late occasionally. If I had a patient with a complicated problem, or I had to go out to see a patient with an emergency, then the patient with a 10.00 a.m. appointment could still have to wait an hour or more to be seen. On the other hand, if we stayed as we were then anyone could walk into Bilbury Grange during the hours of any weekday morning or evening surgery and be seen without making an appointment. They would probably have to wait a while for other patients to be seen but they would be seen on the day they wanted to be seen and, with some delay, at roughly the time of day they wanted to be seen. Complications and emergencies would still delay things, of course, but patients would have the choice of coming back to the next surgery – a choice probably not available if we had an appointment system.

I told her that my regular patients had made it pretty clear that they felt that they were better off without having to make an appointment. Patients turned up at my surgery, sat in the waiting room and waited. If there was a long queue they would pop out, do some shopping at Peter Marshall's shop, and come back half an hour later. I explained that the system worked well and that because everything was fairly simple to run, Miss Johnson my secretary and receptionist managed quite well by herself. All she really had to do was to take each arrival's medical records out of the filing cabinet and give the records to me as patients turned up. I pointed out that GPs who ran appointment systems usually ended up with teams of receptionists and that patients often had to wait three weeks to see a doctor. In addition, the telephone line was usually blocked with callers making appointments and so patients needing a home visit would have to ring several times to get through.

I didn't tell Ms Biddulph but I had long suspected that appointment systems were introduced not to please doctors or patients but to please bureaucrats and to give a sense of order to a service that could never be ordered because there are too many variables. I also did not point out to her, though perhaps I should have done, that if I had run my practice with an appointment system then she would have probably not been able to see me for two, three days or more days – and she would have probably been back home by then. And I really didn't want the argument to continue so I didn't mention to her that she had told me that she would have difficulty in seeing her own doctor in less than a week – because he ran an appointment system!

Ms Biddulph then left.

For the record, over the next three months I received letters from the local council, the local administrators for the National Health Service, the General Medical Council and several other organisations. Ms Biddulph's complaint to the GMC was that I hadn't wanted to put a stitch in her wound until she had demanded that I did so. All of these organisations wrote to let me know that they had received complaints about me. And eventually all told me that I had done nothing wrong. The bit of the NHS that administers general practice told me what I already knew, which was that they would have liked me to have an appointment system but that I didn't have to have one. The General Medical Council took six months to decide that I had not done anything wrong. These things are worrying even when you know that you haven't done anything wrong.

After Ms Biddulph had left, I saw half a dozen Bilbury residents. None of them was difficult to deal with. There were a couple of patients who needed to have their blood pressures taken. One or two required repeat prescriptions. And Mrs Walthamstow simply came to be weighed and to be encouraged. She was trying to lose weight and had managed to reduce her weight by half a stone in two months.

When Mrs Walthamstow had left, duly encouraged and, hopefully, inspired to cutting down her consumption of cream buns still further, I had to pop into the hallway to deal with a King Charles Spaniel which was choking on a tennis ball.

The dog's owner, not a Bilbury resident, had thrown the ball and the dog, being over-enthusiastic in its effort to retrieve it, had half swallowed it. Since the nearest vet was some miles away in Combe Martin, the owner of the dog had brought it to the surgery in the hope that I could help.

The good news was that the ball was still visible and although it was clearly stuck, and causing the dog a great deal of discomfort and distress, I didn't think there was any immediate risk that it was going to go any further down the animal's throat. A King Charles Spaniel has a fairly small mouth and throat. A bigger dog would have doubtless posed a bigger problem.

I contemplated trying the canine equivalent of the Heimlich manoeuvre and was trying to decide whether this would work when Patsy, who had heard the commotion and knew what was happening, appeared clutching a large adjustable pipe wrench which she had found in the shed where I keep my tools.

I knew immediately what she had in mind and while the owner of the dog held the animal still, I took hold of the ball with the wrench and pulled it out of the dog's throat. The dog gasped and coughed and shook himself but within a moment he was fine.

I tossed the wrench and the ball on the floor and beamed at the owner thinking that he would be pleased. It was my first operation on a dog and it had been entirely successful.

'You've ruined this ball,' said the owner, who had picked up the ball I'd removed from the dog's throat. He seemed uninterested in the dog, now that it was no longer in danger, and showed the ball to me.

When I'd applied the wrench to the ball, I'd tightened it as much as I could to make sure that I had a good grip. I was frightened of pushing the ball further down the dog's throat. And the wrench I'd used had punctured the ball.

'This won't bounce,' complained the man. He tried to bounce the ball on the hall floor but the puncture meant it had no bounce left in it at all.

I apologised.

'You owe me for a new ball,' said the man.

I opened the cupboard where we keep our croquet set, some old tennis racquets and a variety of old balls. I selected a tennis ball which looked to be about the same age and condition as the ruined one and handed it to the man. He looked at it and sniffed. 'I suppose this will do,' he said. He had clearly been expecting me to give him the money to buy a new ball. Or perhaps he had been expecting me to give him a box of new balls.

He and the dog then left without so much as a bark or a grunt of thanks. I didn't even know his name. The only thing notable about him was that he wore a tie which had clearly been bought for him by a female relative; possibly one with poor eyesight. The fact that he wore it suggested that his filial duty was more powerful than his taste in neckwear.

'Some people are so ungrateful!' said Patsy who was still standing in the hallway.

'I think it's going to be one of those days,' I muttered wearily.

It was still only morning but I had an awful feeling that the day had not yet got into its stride. Some days in general practice are like that.

The next patient was a girl of 16. She too was a visitor to the area. She had come with her mother who was, she told me, sitting in the waiting room. The girl, I noticed, had what is sometimes called a monobrow but is known in medicine as synophrys; a condition in which the two eyebrows are joined in the middle and which can be associated with a variety of genetic faults. Some of these produce noticeable abnormalities – such as a shortage of fingers or toes, a malformed limb or a facial abnormality. But most commonly, the monobrow is just what it is. Some people shave the middle bit. Some are proud of having a single eyebrow. I understand that like hairstyles and skirt lengths, single eyebrows go in and out of fashion.

'Would you squeeze my pimples please,' she asked.

I looked at her, not quite believing my ears. The girl had terrible acne and her face and neck were covered in spots.

'You want me to squeeze your pimples?' I asked, slightly stunned by the request.

'Yes, please,' said the girl.

The girl had at least 50 visible pimples. I thought it a pretty safe bet that if she undressed I would fine another 100 or so on her back.

'I don't think that would be a good idea,' I told her. 'Squeezing pimples can be dangerous and can cause the infection to go into the body.'

The girl began to cry.

She didn't wail or scream or sob. She just began to cry; quite noiselessly. They were the tears of someone who is overcome by hopelessness and despair. I felt desperately sorry for her.

'Where do you live?' I asked.

She told me. I had heard of the town. It was in the English Midlands, not far from where my friend Will had his practice.

‘Have you seen your own GP?’ I asked her.

She nodded.

‘What has he done?’

‘He won’t do anything,’ she said. ‘He says that they’ll go as I get older.’

‘He hasn’t prescribed anything?’

‘No. He says he won’t give me anything because they’re just teenage spots and I will grow out of them.’

To describe the girl’s acne spots as ‘just teenage spots’ was, I thought, a bit like describing Mount Everest as ‘a bit of a hill’. I had never seen such bad acne. It seemed to me that for a doctor to refuse to treat the girl’s condition just because it was almost certainly age and hormone related was as close to professional neglect as it is possible to get.

‘Your doctor hasn’t referred you to anyone else? He hasn’t arranged for you to see a skin specialist?’

‘No. My mother asked him to arrange an appointment for me to see a skin doctor but he refused. He said he wasn’t going to waste a specialist’s time with some teenage spots.’

I closed my eyes and counted to ten to stop myself saying something wildly uncomplimentary about my unseen colleague.

‘How far do you live from Birmingham?’ I asked.

‘Not far,’ said the girl. ‘My dad works in Birmingham.’

I then asked the girl to wait for a few moments while I rang my pal Will. He too was in the middle of his morning surgery but I was lucky enough to catch him between patients. Will and I studied medicine together at Birmingham University.

‘What was the name of that dermatologist we studied under at the Birmingham General?’ I asked him. ‘The slightly dotty one who admitted that he’d only become a dermatologist because dermatologists never had to attend emergency night calls!’

‘Oh, yes, I remember,’ said Will laughing. ‘He is the best skins guy I know. I send patients to him occasionally if they’ve got difficult problems.’

I explained that I had a girl in my consulting room who had terrible acne and that her own doctor wouldn’t treat her or refer her to a specialist.

‘Do you think he’d see her if I referred her to him?’ I asked.

‘Of course he would.’

Will gave me the specialist’s phone number. I asked him when he was bringing his family down to Bilbury for a weekend, and he promised it would be soon.

I then asked the girl to pop into the waiting room to fetch her mother.

While she was gone, I telephoned the skin specialist’s secretary at the General Hospital in Birmingham. A moment later, the girl and her mother both returned. I noticed that the mother also had a monobrow and couldn’t help wondering if anyone else in the family had the same condition. Synophrys is sometimes inherited but it can also just happen. Indeed, it is so common that it was perfectly possible that it was merely a coincidence that both the girl and her mother had the condition. It clearly wasn’t relevant to the problem with the spots so I said nothing about it.

I pointed to the two chairs near my desk and while they sat, I asked the secretary at the Birmingham hospital how soon the specialist could see a patient with very bad teenage acne. The secretary gave me a date just a week ahead. I told the girl’s mother the date and asked if she could take her daughter to Birmingham on that day. The girl’s mother, who looked rather surprised, said she could. I confirmed the appointment and then wrote a letter of introduction which I gave to the teenager.

‘Go to the hospital and take this letter with you,’ I told her. ‘The doctor you’ll see is one of the best skin specialists in England. He’ll help you.’

The girl took the letter from me and thanked me. The mother thanked me. The girl thanked me again. They were now both crying.

‘Do we have to tell our GP about the appointment?’ asked the mother.

‘You can if you like,’ I said. ‘But you don’t have to. The specialist will write to him and he’ll simply explain that your daughter was seen by another doctor when she was on holiday in Devon.’

‘Will he make trouble over it?’ asked the mother.

‘I don’t think so,’ I said. ‘Not for you.’

I thought their doctor might well complain that I had interfered with his treatment of his patient. But I really didn’t care about that. I was tempted to tell the mother that they might like to consider finding another GP but I thought that would probably be pushing my luck. The GMC did not take kindly to doctors criticising other practitioners, however indirectly and however much the criticism might be deserved.

The girl and her mother were effusive in their thanks. I was rather embarrassed. The truth was that I had done absolutely nothing that any decent doctor wouldn't have done.

Miss Johnson, taking pity on me then popped in before the next patient to bring me in a cup of lemon tea and two digestive biscuits.

I thanked her and took a bite from one of the digestives. I told her that if she'd known what I had been through already that morning she would have brought me two custard creams. Or maybe even a couple of bourbon biscuits. (I had given up eating chocolate covered biscuits in the surgery after an unfortunate incident involving a chocolate biscuit which had melted and covered my hand, my pen and my tie in an unfortunate looking brown stain.)

Miss Johnson looked at me over her spectacles. She's still never sure about my sense of humour. 'You've got a busy day ahead of you, doctor,' she said. 'The waiting room is still crowded. There are quite a lot of holidaymakers here today.'

She then hurried out.

I remember I found myself wishing I could follow her and hide in the filing cabinet where we keep the medical records.

For me one of the joys of a quiet rural practice was always the fact that I had time to talk to my patients, understand their problems and deal with them as people rather than as symptoms and diseases. Doctors working in busy hospitals or city practices are forever rushed; never having enough time to listen properly. Now I was beginning to feel as though I were working in a busy inner city practice. I almost wished I had an appointment system so that I could at least control the number of patients attending a single surgery.

The next half a dozen patients were all fairly straightforward. There were three with summer colds, one with blistered feet and I can't remember what the others had wrong with them.

And then came a woman in her forties called Madge Compton. She complained that she was suffering from nausea and frequent stomach cramps. She was definitely an unhealthy colour and my first thought was that she might be slightly jaundiced.

'I'm feeling very weak and tired,' she said.

She also told me that she needed to urinate more often than usual and that she was suffering from occasional attacks of palpitations.

Her condition sounded complex and since she was only in the area for another two days (she was staying with her husband in a guest house in Ifracombe) I didn't think I would be able to solve her problem. I would, I thought, need to have some blood tests done and it was unlikely that I would get back the results before she left.

'How long have you had all these problems?' I asked.

'About two months,' she told me.

And for the umpteenth time that summer, I wondered why on earth she had chosen to come and tell me about her problem.

'What made you come to my surgery?' I asked her.

'It's difficult to see my own doctor,' she said. 'He has an appointment system and he's very busy. I have to wait two or three weeks to see him.'

I couldn't help wishing that Ms Biddulph were sitting in a corner of my surgery.

'Have you lost any weight?' I asked her.

'Oh yes,' Mrs Compton replied. 'I've been on a diet. I go to a slimming club and they've been advising me.'

'How long have you been dieting?'

'Around six months.'

'And how much weight have you lost?'

'A stone,' replied Mrs Compton. 'I was fifteen stone but I'm down to nearly fourteen. My slimming adviser has put me on a strict diet. I eat lettuce and tomato on brown bread with plenty of fruit juices.'

That was, I remembered, the diet originated by a 19th century music hall chorus singer called Florrie Forde. She used to sing songs like 'Down at the Old Bull and Bush', 'Pack Up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit-Bag' and 'It's A Long Way to Tipperary'. Miss Forde started her career at 8 stone but built her way up to 15 stone and decided she needed to lose weight if her career wasn't going to founder. So she found or created a diet which consisted of tomatoes, lettuce, brown bread and orange juice. She stuck to it and lost weight. Amazingly, the diet still had its enthusiastic supporters three quarters of a century later.

I remember reading that she was so pleased with the diet that Miss Forde had copies of it printed and sold them. This was, in effect, the first commercial diet book. I also remember that the book was very successful but that one woman failed to lose weight and turned up at the theatre to complain.

'Did you follow the diet I gave you?' asked Florrie.

'Oh yes, I followed it to the letter.

'You ate the lettuce and the tomatoes and the brown bread and you drank the orange juice?'

‘Yes, but I haven’t lost any weight.’

‘Did you eat anything else?’

‘Well, only my ordinary meals, of course.’

And that is where the gag came from.

‘Have you tried taking anything for your symptoms?’ I asked, hoping this question might produce a clue, but not honestly expecting that the answer would provide all the information I required.

‘Oh yes,’ said Mrs Compton. ‘I’ve been taking some tablets that my slimming adviser recommended.’

‘What sort of tablets?’

‘Supplements,’ said Mrs Compton. ‘They contain ingredients which are essential for the human body – vitamins and minerals and so forth.’

‘Have you got the bottle with you?’

She had. She took it out of her handbag and handed it to me.

She was, I saw, taking a vitamin and mineral capsule that contained enough vitamins and minerals to satisfy the body’s entire daily requirements.

‘Marvellous,’ I said, handing back the bottle. ‘How often do you take them?’

‘I take 40 a day,’ she replied.

I thought I had misheard.

‘Sorry,’ I said, ‘how many did you say you took each day?’

‘I take 40 a day,’ she said again.

I pointed to the bottle she was still holding. ‘You take 40 a day of those capsules?’

‘Yes,’ she said proudly.

‘Did your slimming adviser tell you to take that many?’

‘Oh no, she said to take one a day. But I thought that if one a day was going to be good for me than 40 a day would make me super fit!’

It took me ten minutes to persuade her that the tablets would kill her if she kept taking them in such huge quantities. ‘Vitamins and minerals are essential for the body to function,’ I explained. ‘But they can be toxic if you take them in excessive quantities.’

I told her that all the symptoms she had described to me were probably a result of her body being poisoned by the pills she was taking. I took her blood pressure, listened to her heart and did all the other tests I could easily conduct in the surgery. I even thought about having her admitted to the hospital in Barnstaple so that she could be properly investigated but I eventually decided that she didn’t seem to be in immediate danger. I did, however, make her promise to stop taking the capsules and to see her doctor as soon as she got home. I told her that he would probably want to have some tests done.

Mrs Compton wasn’t the first patient I’d seen who had been poisoning herself by overdosing on vitamin and mineral tablets. I suspected this was going to be a big problem in the years ahead.

The next patient was also a visitor to the area and she was staying in what sounded as if it was a very overcrowded caravan on a site near Combe Martin. I wasn’t sure why she ended up in my consulting room. A doctor in Combe Martin, who had some sort of contract with the proprietor, usually looked after people staying at the caravan park.

The patient, who introduced herself as Miss Jennifer May, was in in her late twenties and she came into my consulting room with an entourage of two very small children and three adult males. Miss May looked very pregnant. She was short, plump and had sideburns and a nicely developing moustache. She wasn’t wearing very much and what she was wearing had either been bought when she was a stone lighter, or had been bought for someone about six sizes smaller. There wasn’t enough spare room inside what she was wearing for her to be able to fit a goose pimple. Looking at her, I thought it safe to assume that she would be as easy to embarrass as a fan dancer with twenty years’ experience.

I asked the three men if they would mind going back into the waiting room or, if it was crowded in there, if they would perhaps be kind enough to wait outside.

‘I want them to stay with me,’ said Miss May firmly.

‘Why’s that?’ I asked.

‘Because I’m pregnant and I think I’m about to go into labour,’ said Miss May.

‘I don’t understand,’ I said. I looked at the three men. ‘Are any of you medically qualified?’

‘Oh no,’ said Miss May with a laugh. ‘They’re not doctors – they are the fathers.’

It took me a moment to realise what she meant but when I finally understood it was immediately clear that a more appropriate name for Miss Jennifer May would have probably been Miss Jennifer Does.

This was one woman whose eyes had probably never been full of maybe and this was, I confess, a situation I had not come across before.

I had, of course, known mothers who weren't sure of the identity of the father. But I had never before had a mother walk into my surgery with three putative fathers. Moreover, the three men all seemed quite relaxed about the situation. One of them was very short and rather stout. He was considerably older than the rest. He was balding and had a fringe of red hair. The second was tall, black and powerful looking. The third was no more than a youth. He looked to be twenty at the most. He was of middle-eastern origin and had acne and long, straggly, black hair. It occurred to me that there was a chance that when the baby was born we might not have too much difficulty in uncovering the identity of the real father. We might, at the very least, be able to exclude one of the men from the final shortlist.

'You'd better climb up onto the examination couch,' I told her. 'Are the two children yours?'

'Oh no!' replied Miss May, laughing again. She stood up and walked over to the couch. One of the men, the big, black fellow, helped her up onto the couch. Actually, he just lifted her up and put her down, very gently. 'They're my sister's kids. She's got another four with her but I said I'd look after these for her. I didn't know then that I'd be going into labour today.'

'If one of you men would stand on the other side of the couch, one on this side and one at the head that would be useful,' I said. 'That way you can make sure Miss May doesn't roll off and onto the floor. The examination couch is a little on the narrow side for giving birth.'

I didn't really think it was too narrow, and to be honest I didn't really think Miss May was about to give birth, but I wanted to do something with the trio of expectant fathers because they were rather cluttering up the surgery.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see that the two small children Miss May had brought with her were trying to open a glass-fronted bookcase wherein my collection of medical textbooks were stored.

'It'll be a relief to get my body back,' said Miss May. 'I feel like I've loaned it to this monster inside me.' She paused. 'I hope I get my figure back,' she said, rather plaintively. She caressed her swollen abdomen. 'This little fellow is a guest who's outstayed his welcome!'

'Or a little girl!' said the short, stout father.

Miss May looked at him.

'It might be a girl,' he pointed out.

'Oh I don't think so,' said the mother-to-be. She turned her attention back to me. 'You know, it's funny. I never really thought about having children. I spent a lot of time considering whether or not to keep a goldfish. I spent hours thinking about that and eventually decided that I didn't want the responsibility. But I didn't spend a minute thinking about whether or not I wanted children. It just happened.' She laughed again. The two small children were still trying to open the bookcase. Fortunately, they hadn't yet realised that there was a key. And they weren't tall enough to be able to reach it.

Despite my instinctive scepticism I was, at this point, still taking Miss May at her word that she was pregnant. She looked pregnant and I assumed that a woman of her age would probably know whether or not she was going to have a baby.

But it is easy to make sloppy assumptions when you're busy.

There are lots of reasons why a woman might appear to be pregnant when she isn't – and probably even more reasons why she might falsely believe that she's pregnant.

For example, idiopathic pseudo-cyesis (a fake pregnancy of unknown origin) is far more common than most people might imagine.

'If there's any stitching to do when the baby's out will you make me nice and tight,' said Miss May. She looked at the three fathers-to-be. Two of them blushed and looked at the ceiling. The third, the one who looked Middle Eastern, grinned at her. 'But don't sew her up completely!' he said. She giggled.

'How many months are you?' I asked, as I slipped on a pair of rubber gloves.

'I'm not really sure,' said Miss May.

'When was your last period?'

'Oh, a while ago,' she replied. 'I can't really remember.'

'How long have you been putting on weight?'

'Oh, for about a year, I think.'

It was at that point that I knew that Miss May's swollen abdomen wasn't big because she had a baby in her uterus. I should have realised earlier. The sideburns and moustache were pretty good clues.

'Have you been to your own doctor?'

'No, I haven't had the time. My sister never goes to antenatal classes. She says that with her it's like shelling peas.'

'But she's had a lot of children?'

'Oh yes, loads.'

‘So you haven’t been seen by your doctor or at the hospital?’

‘No. I just thought I’d wait until something happened and then find a doctor.’

‘And what has happened today to make you think that you’re in labour?’

‘Oh, you know, I had a bit of pain when George and I were doing it this morning.’

I wasn’t going to ask which one was George. It didn’t really seem important. By now I was no longer thinking of any of the men as fathers-to-be. Indeed, I was wondering how I was going to tell the four of them that they didn’t need to be working out a babysitting rota or deciding which one of them was going to knit the bootees.

Examining a woman with her three lovers standing inches away was a peculiar experience though I think the three lovers probably found it even stranger than I did.

The stout fellow went bright red and started to sweat profusely. The Arabian chap giggled a lot and didn’t know where to look. The black lover, who was standing on the far side of the couch, stood to attention as though on parade. He didn’t move a muscle and as far as I could tell he didn’t even blink.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see that the two small children were now trying to open the bookcase with a wooden tongue depressor they’d taken out of a box they’d found. Since their hands looked none too clean, I made a mental note to throw away the box of tongue depressors when they’d gone.

When I had finished my examination, I removed my rubber gloves and threw them into the bin where I put disposables that needed to be burnt.

And then I told Miss May the truth.

Since she had insisted on having her entourage with her, I told them too.

‘I’m afraid you’re not in labour,’ I told her. ‘In fact, you’re not pregnant.’

‘I’m not expecting?’

‘No.’

‘Then how do you explain this?’ she demanded, indicating her swollen abdomen.

‘There are several possible explanations,’ I said. ‘I suspect that you may possibly have a condition called polycystic ovary syndrome. It’s fairly common among women in their 20s and 30s.’

I really should have made the diagnosis earlier.

When I was at medical school, I saw a woman who was the bearded lady in a travelling fair. The initial diagnosis had been that the woman was suffering from hyperandrogenemia, a condition in which the androgen levels are raised and the patient acquires hair growth in a male pattern. However, tests showed that her hirsute condition was a result of the fact that she had polycystic ovaries. I remember the consultant who was looking after her telling her that he could cure her and that her beard would disappear after an operation. The woman had refused surgery, pointing out that without her beard she wouldn’t have a job.

I remember that she was married to a man who had been a hairdresser working in a salon in the suburbs of Reading in Berkshire. They had met when she visited the salon to have her hair and beard permed. ‘Just because I have a beard it doesn’t mean that I don’t like to look well presented,’ she told him. He had given up his job at the salon and they had married. He had become her travelling hair and beard dresser and, I think, her manager too. The woman had not come to the hospital because of her beard but because she had gallstones. And so instead of dealing with her polycystic ovaries, the surgeons had removed her gall bladder and sent her and her beard on their way.

So Miss May’s moustache and sideburns really should have been all the clues I needed.

‘How common is it?’ asked the black former father-to-be.

‘Some studies suggest it affects one in ten women.’

‘Is it cancer?’ asked the stout man, rather bluntly and tactlessly I thought. ‘It’s cancer, isn’t it?’

‘No, no,’ I said, as emphatically as possible. ‘It isn’t cancer.’

I was actually grateful that he’d asked the question, rather than merely kept the thought to himself and then, perhaps, shared it later with Miss May.

I have found that most patients can be put into one of two categories: the optimists and the pessimists.

The optimists always assume that even the most serious symptoms are a sign of nothing that cannot be put right with a packet of pills or a tube of ointment and, maybe, a week of some sort of abstinence – giving up alcohol or chocolate perhaps.

The pessimists, on the other hand, assume that any trivial sign or symptom, a hangnail or a slightly sore throat, must be a precursor of some deadly disease; an early warning sign of impending doom.

Clearly relieved, the pessimist sighed and blew out a few cubic yards of air.

‘You need to have some tests done,’ I told Miss May. ‘Your own doctor can organise them when you get back home.’

‘Well, I think that’s all nonsense,’ said Miss May. She swung herself off the couch, moving much easier now that she was no longer in labour. ‘I still think I’m pregnant. And I should know. Anyway we did it often enough.’

I didn’t like to point out that infertility is quite common in women suffering from polycystic ovaries.

‘I’m going to see my own doctor when we get back home,’ said Miss May. She said this as though it were a threat. ‘I’ll tell him to fix me an appointment with the antenatal clinic.’

‘That’s fine,’ I said. I was happy enough that she was at least going to see her doctor.

She took the two children by the hand and stormed out of the consulting room. One of the children was clutching the wooden tongue depressor. The other child was clutching the box complete with all the wooden tongue depressors it still contained. At least I wouldn’t have to bother throwing the box away. I glanced over at the bookcase. It remained firmly shut and locked.

Two of her lovers went with Miss May. The third fellow, the stout one, stopped behind for a moment. ‘She’s really not pregnant?’

I shook my head.

‘But you don’t think its cancer?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘There’s absolutely no reason to think it’s cancer.’

‘Good,’ he said. He thought for a moment. ‘That’s good.’

And then he left too.

I looked at my watch. It was now lunchtime. I used my internal telephone to ask Miss Johnson how many more patients there were in the waiting room.

‘A few, doctor,’ she replied tactfully.

I knew her well enough to know that she meant that there were still too many for her to count.

‘You’d better warn Patsy that I’ll be very late for lunch,’ I told her. I pressed the buzzer for the next patient.

The next four patients were all locals.

None of them had complicated problems.

One needed her blood pressure checking (it was fine).

One needed to have a repeat prescription for diabetes medication.

Bevan Jeffrey, who had pernicious anaemia, came for his B12 injection.

And the other had stitches which were ready to be removed.

None of them took very long. And although I would have probably chatted more if things had been different, all realised that it was a busy day and that it wasn’t a time to talk about the weather or the forthcoming vegetable show.

The next non-resident I saw was in a bad mood when she came into the consulting room.

‘I’ve been waiting for over an hour,’ she snapped.

I had no idea how old she was but I thought she looked very business-like for a holidaymaker. This was perhaps not surprising since she turned out not to be a holidaymaker but a cosmetics representative who was travelling through the area. Her name was Mrs Winifred Wendell. She was wearing a grey trouser suit and had on more make-up than Patsy uses in a year. She told me that she lived in Newbury in Berkshire, and worked for a company which had its offices near Reading. She was the West Country representative and had to cover every county south of Bristol and west of Reading. She reeked of tobacco smoke.

I thought she was about to complain about the absence of an appointment system but that wasn’t her problem.

‘I telephoned and spoke to your receptionist,’ she said. ‘But she refused to put me through to you. I could have saved myself an hour if you’d been prepared to talk to me on the phone. I really just wanted a prescription.’

‘I don’t like to do consultations over the telephone,’ I said. ‘Especially not for patients I don’t know.’

When I first started in general practice my mentor, Dr Brownlow, taught me that although it is often tempting to make a diagnosis on the telephone, it is often dangerous to do so. He told me that a good family doctor will make diagnoses by feel, by sight, by touch, by smell and by instinct – and the telephone excludes all those senses.

‘What did you want a prescription for?’

‘I don’t know! You’re supposed to be the doctor aren’t you?’

I looked at her and then looked down at my blotter and waited a moment while I bit my tongue. Most of the patients I saw were thoughtful and polite. But I seemed to be having all my rude and aggressive patients in one day. Still, I thought, maybe it’s better to get them all over and done with at once.

‘Do you want a prescription for a medicine you already take?’ I asked, thinking that perhaps she had run out of a medicine she usually took for some chronic condition of which I was not aware.

‘No, of course I don’t!’ she snapped. ‘If I already took it then I wouldn’t need a prescription for it, would I?’

‘So, what symptoms do you have?’

‘I have very dry eyes and a dry mouth,’ she said. ‘I’ve tried drinking lots of water and sucking peppermints but nothing helps. My eyes and mouth are always very dry.’

‘How long have you had these problems?’

‘Oh, for months and months; I can’t remember for how long precisely. But the symptoms seem to be getting worse. And I feel so tired all the time. I don't know why that should be.'

She suddenly started to cough. I fetched a glass of water which seemed to help.

'Does anything make your symptoms worse?'

'Stress!' said the woman instantly and pointedly, as though I were the cause of all her stress and all her problems. 'Can't you just give me a prescription so that I can get on my way? I have to be in Taunton this afternoon. I have three important appointments.'

I don't know why but I got the feeling that all her appointments were important ones.

'I'm a bit old-fashioned,' I said. 'And I like to make a diagnosis before I recommend a treatment.' I didn't mean to say something quite so sarcastic. It just sort of came out that way. And the sentiment was, at least, an honest one.

And then she burst into tears.

Three paper tissues later I asked her why she'd come to see me, instead of waiting to see her own doctor when she got back home.

Before she could answer, she started coughing again. It was a strange, nervous sort of cough: the sort of cough you get with an uncomfortably dry throat. It certainly didn't suggest that she had a chest infection. And although she was clearly a smoker, it definitely wasn't a smoker's cough.

'I just felt I needed to speak to someone about it today,' she confessed. 'I'm hardly ever at home so I never get much chance to see my own GP.'

'But these problems have been getting you down? Worrying you?'

She nodded.

'How many cigarettes do you smoke?'

'Oh, not many,' she said far too quickly. 'Ten a day I suppose.'

I said nothing but looked at her and waited.

'Thirty to forty,' she admitted at last.

I still didn't say anything. It is, perhaps, surprising but it is true that patients will often conceal the truth when talking to a doctor – maybe in the hope that the lie will, in some way, protect them from the consequences of the truth.

'Sometimes more I suppose.'

'How old are you?'

'I'll be 50 on my next birthday.'

'You don't look it,' I said, because she didn't.

'You wouldn't say that if you saw me without my war paint.'

'Do you have any other symptoms?' I asked her.

A redness appeared on her neck and spread to her face. 'I've noticed that sex is rather uncomfortable,' she confessed, clearly embarrassed.

'Because your vagina is dry?'

She nodded.

I examined her eyes and looked into her mouth and down her throat. I checked her blood pressure and auscultated her heart and lungs. I could find absolutely nothing wrong with her except that her salivary glands seemed slightly swollen. Her eyes and throat were fine.

But, despite this relative absence of physical signs, I thought I knew what was wrong with her.

'I think you've got a condition called Sjogren's syndrome,' I told her. 'It's pronounced just like that – 'showgrin'. It's an autoimmune disease which causes all the symptoms you've got.'

'What on earth is 'showgrin'?' she asked. 'Why has it got such a funny name?

'The doctor who first wrote about it was a Swede called Sjogren, though another doctor called Mikulicz had written about something similar in the 19th century so it really ought to be called Mikulicz's syndrome.'

I don't know why I remember these titbits of fairly useless information. And I'm not entirely sure that patients are much interested. Still, I think some patients like to know as much about their condition as they can find out.

'Is it fatal?' she asked immediately.

'No, no!' I said quickly.

'Is there a cure?'

'Not a specific cure, no, but there are lots of things you can do to ease the symptoms. You must go and see your GP. I'll write you a note explaining the things you've told me and telling him what I've told you.'

I reached for a piece of notepaper and started to write out a letter to her doctor, explaining my findings.

'OK,' she said. She seemed calmer now that she knew what was wrong.

People are often like that. Once they have a label they can put on their symptoms then things become easier to accept and manage. 'What causes it?'

‘Your immune system is working against your body,’ I told her. ‘No one knows why it happens. It affects those parts of the body which produce fluids – tears, saliva and vaginal secretions for example. What’s the name of your doctor?’

She told me her doctor’s name and address. I wrote it at the start of my letter and then put the name and address onto an envelope.

‘But there are things I can do?’ she asked.

‘The first thing is that you must stop smoking. The cigarette smoke is making your mouth and throat worse – and it’s responsible for that cough of yours.’

She nodded and sighed. ‘I know,’ she said.

‘This is important,’ I told her. ‘The cigarette smoke will also irritate your eyes. Your body doesn’t produce enough tears so the smoke just irritates your eyes and makes things worse. You can also help by buying some artificial tears from a pharmacy. Drop the artificial tears in when you need them. And also ask about sprays that might help keep your throat moist.’

I put the letter into the envelope and handed the envelope to her, unsealed.

‘I haven’t stuck down the envelope,’ I told her. ‘You can read what I wrote and then seal it afterwards.’

She looked at me, slightly puzzled.

‘That way you’ll know that I’ve told you the truth; and that I haven’t held anything back from you.’

She smiled and I guessed I had probably read her mind.

‘Thank you.’ She put the envelope into her handbag.

When she’d gone, I glanced at the clock. It was now well after lunchtime. I rang through to Miss Johnson to ask her how many patients I had left.

‘Just the two,’ she said. ‘Are you ready for the next one?’

I tried to stifle a weary sigh.

‘It’s a boy of seven,’ said Miss Johnson. ‘His name is Bismore Thrupp and he’s here with his mother and father.’

I told her to send them all in.

‘And Mrs Thrupp has got four other children with her,’ said Miss Johnson.

It seemed to be a morning for large families.

I closed my eyes for a moment.

‘Send them all in!’ I said, after a pause. I couldn’t help hoping that these would be better behaved than the previous two.

Seconds later the door burst open and I was invaded by a band of marauding, mini-Visigoths.

Well, that is what it sounded like, looked like and definitely felt like from my vulnerable position by my desk.

For a few moments, I began to wish that I were armoured, armed and able to defend myself. A lance, a pike and a broadsword would have made me feel a little more comfortable.

These were not, to put it as politely as I am able, well-behaved children.

And since it seemed unlikely that they were all suffering from hyperactivity (a diagnosis which was very common in the 1970s and, I seem to remember, blamed largely on the red additive commonly used to dye sweets sold to children) it seemed not unreasonable to assume that they were, perhaps, simply badly behaved.

They came in at such a speed, and attacked my furniture and belongings with such ferocity, such wild enthusiasm, that I could not, at first, decide how many of them there were. I did, however, wonder how much of the waiting room remained intact now that they’d finished with it.

Patsy always tried to keep the waiting room clean, tidy and well equipped with comfortable chairs. I hated to think what damage this marauding tribe must have done.

The parents who had accompanied them seemed quite oblivious to the mayhem they were causing.

I looked around as the children rampaged from one corner of the room to the other. Doctors’ surgeries are not the best places for rampaging children. There are drugs, syringes, instruments, ‘dirty’ bins and many other potential hazards and it is difficult to keep an eye on four uncontrolled children while also trying to listen to a patient’s history and make a diagnosis.

It is impossible to keep everything which could be dangerous locked up and out of reach. Instruments such as auriscopes (aka otoscopes) and ophthalmoscopes are as delicate as they are expensive to replace.

I am sure that there are many, many parents who go on holiday with well-behaved children. Indeed, I have seen many such children myself. But Miss May’s sister’s pair of children, and this small crowd of young Thrupps, definitely did not fit into the ‘well-behaved’ category.

‘How can I help you?’ I asked the couple who had accompanied the children. It seemed a fair assumption that these were Mr and Mrs Thrupp.

‘Bismore’s got very sore skin,’ said the woman. She looked around the room, clearly trying to spot Bismore. I followed her eyes. Bismore was, it appeared, crawling underneath the examination couch. He was the only child who had red hair. The other children all had jet black hair, as did Mrs Thrupp and Mr Thrupp.

'Come here, Bismore!' she shouted.

I must admit that she had a powerful pair of lungs.

This surprised me somewhat since she was a weedy-looking little woman who looked as if she would run a mile if she'd spotted a spider. She was, I suppose, no more than an inch over five feet tall and I doubt if she weighed more than eight stone after a big meal. Nevertheless, her voice was so powerful that I'd have been able to hear her if I had been at the bottom of our garden. Damnit, I'd have been able to hear her if I'd been sitting in the snug at the Duck and Puddle.

Mr Thrupp seemed accustomed to his wife's enthusiastic manner. Looking at him, I suspected that the people who had built King Kong for the movies had kept the plans and persuaded God to build a human with the same dimensions.

It was, I thought, a good job that the child in question was not called something like 'John' or 'David'.

If she'd called out 'John' or 'David' with that sort of volume and enthusiasm the surgery would, I suspect, have been inundated with visits from boys and men of that name responding urgently to the call from all over Devon. Most would have doubtless brought with them guilty faces and sheepish looks because when a boy or a man is called in such a way, and with such volume, he invariably knows that he has done something he should not have done.

Bismore arrived at my side.

He had jam on his face, on the fingers of both hands, on his short-sleeved shirt and in his hair. You didn't need to be Sherlock Holmes to deduce that he had recently been eating something with jam in it. I glanced around. The other children who had accompanied him into the surgery were similarly decorated with jam. I had no doubt that everything in the surgery would by now also be covered in jam. Experience tells me that jam shares with blood the ability to spread itself over an unreasonably large area. A tablespoonful of jam or blood is enough to smear twenty square yards of human, upholstery or carpet.

'Take your shirt off!' commanded his mother.

It seemed that everything she said was produced at the same ear-shattering volume. I wondered if her loving blandishments to her husband were issued with the same complete absence of decibel control. 'I love it when you nibble my ear, darling,' must lose something when it is issued as loudly as that.

Young Bismore had by now removed his shirt. He had simply grabbed it by the collar at the back of his neck and yanked it upwards. He threw the now jammy shirt onto the floor. I couldn't help wondering what the Thrupp household looked like at bedtime.

The poor child's chest and back were burnt bright red. I could see that underneath the burns lay a large number of freckles. The burns looked sore. There were several blisters.

'He looks as if he's been playing in the sun,' I suggested. 'Without a shirt.'

Mrs Thrupp looked at me rather pityingly. 'Ten out of ten for the diagnosis, doctor,' she said drily. Or, rather, she shouted drily.

Mr Thrupp, who had still said absolutely nothing, just sat quietly and listened. He might have been a stranger who'd come into the surgery by mistake.

I felt embarrassed. 'Are they all sunburnt?' I asked, trying to recover my dignity. I waved a hand to indicate the other children.

'Oh no,' said Mrs Thrupp. She had a stentorian voice and gave loud instructions for the other children to remove their tops. After she had repeated the instructions three times they obeyed. These were clearly not children who believed in hierarchical government. The funny thing was that although she spoke loudly, her voice was curiously indistinct. I could hear her well enough but I wasn't entirely sure what she was saying. This wasn't due to any speech impediment but, rather, due to the fact that she spoke quickly and carelessly and never bothered to finish her words or sentences. The end result was that it was like listening to a Tannoy announcement in a railway station. You know you can hear something, you know that something has been said, but you're not quite sure what it was that you heard.

The other children were sunburnt. But they were brown and looked healthy. They looked like children who had been playing in the sunshine for several days. They were not burnt in the way that Bismore was burnt. Bismore looked as if he'd be ready to eat if you gave him another five minutes and then added a little mustard.

'This one always burns,' said Mrs Thrupp. 'The others don't.'

'You don't put any sunscreen on him?'

'The others don't need it.'

'Bismore is red-headed and pale skinned,' I pointed out.

‘Do they teach you this observational stuff at medical school or were you born this way?’ asked Mrs Thrupp. ‘Have you got any suggestions as to what I might do about it? Put on something creamy and soothing, perhaps?’

I found myself blushing. ‘I can prescribe some lotion that will ease the soreness,’ I told her. ‘But you should keep him covered up when he goes out in the sun. Keep him indoors for a few days. And if he doesn’t have a hat then you should get him one.’ As I spoke, I wrote out a prescription for a soothing lotion. ‘Actually, they should all wear hats if they’re playing in the sun.’

‘Well, if he has a hat they’ll all want one. Have you any idea how much children’s hats cost these days?’

‘The village shop sells hats,’ I pointed out. I knew that Peter was selling a new line in floppy, broad brimmed summer hats made out of white cotton. ‘They aren’t made in Jermyn Street but they have broad brims and they’ll keep the sun off.’

‘Why does Bismore suffer in the sun?’ demanded Mrs Thrupp. ‘His brothers and sisters can stay out all day without burning.’

‘Bismore is red-headed,’ I pointed out. ‘Red heads are always more liable to burn than brunettes.’

‘My husband thinks I had an affair with the man who delivers our nutty slack,’ said Mrs Thrupp.

I looked at her. This wasn’t a joke or a light aside. She was deadly serious.

‘Nutty slack?’

‘Cheap coal. Tiny bits of coal mixed in with coal dust. It’s cheap. It’s all I can afford.’ I noticed that she said ‘I’ and not ‘We’. It seemed clear that Mrs Thrupp was in charge of everything including children, housekeeping and the purchase of nutty slack.

‘And am I right in thinking that the man who delivers your nutty slack has got red hair?’

‘He looks like a carrot. But he’s ugly, he smells and I don’t fancy him. I’ve never been unfaithful but Ernie thinks I had it off with Kelvin and that’s why Bismore is red-headed.’

‘Ernie is your husband?’

‘Of course.’

‘And Kelvin is the man who delivers the nutty slack?’

‘Well, it’s not the milkman is it? He’s as bald as a coot,’ said Mrs Thrupp. She looked at her husband. ‘And I don’t fancy him either,’ she said, with all the emphasis on the word ‘him’.

‘You always smile at Kelvin when he delivers,’ said Mr Thrupp. It was the first time he’d opened his mouth since he’d entered the room. He said this rather defensively.

I realised that this was why they had come to see me. Bismore’s sunburn was merely an excuse. They both knew damned well why Bismore burnt so easily. I had an awful feeling that they had deliberately allowed him to burn so that they’d have an excuse to come to the surgery. They were in my surgery because they wanted me to adjudicate on a long simmering family dispute. I suspect it was something they didn’t want to discuss in front of their own family doctor.

‘If I’d had it off with him I’d have been scrubbing coal dust off my skin for a week!’ said Mrs Thrupp. ‘His hands are as black as the ace of spades!’

‘He always looks at you like he’s already had you,’ complained Mr Thrupp. ‘He leers.’

‘He doesn’t leer. He’s a bit stupid and he’s got a wall eye. He can only see out of one eye. He told me that. Otherwise he’d have been a pilot. That’s what he wanted to be. He wanted to join the RAF but they wouldn’t have him.’

‘You know a lot about him!’ said Mr Thrupp.

‘We talk for a minute or two when I pay the bill!’ said Mrs Thrupp.

‘Are there any red-heads in either of your families?’ I asked, tired of the family dispute.

‘What’s that got to do with it?’ demanded Mr Thrupp, suddenly surprisingly belligerent. ‘I haven’t got red hair and neither has she.’ He nodded towards his wife.

‘We all have two genes which decide our hair colour,’ I explained. ‘We get one gene from our mother and one from our father. Red hair is a recessive gene – it is always dominated and overruled by any other hair colour gene. That means that a child needs to have two red-hair genes to have red hair. If both of you have only one red-hair gene, then your children will probably have black or blond hair unless you each pass on your red-hair gene to a child.’

‘You mean that we could have made a red headed baby – like Bismore?’

‘Yes.’

‘Even though we’ve both got black hair?’

‘Yes. If you both carry the red-hair gene but neither of you has red hair then there still is a one in four chance that you’ll have a child with red hair.’

‘My uncle Douglas had red hair,’ said Mrs Thrupp very quickly.

'I didn't know you had an uncle called Douglas,' said Mr Thrupp.

'He died before we met,' said Mrs Thrupp. 'But you've got red hair in your family, haven't you?'

'My grandmother had reddish hair,' admitted Mr Thrupp.

'Ah, there you are then, so there's a good chance you both carry the red-hair gene,' I told them.

'But I think she might have dyed it,' added Mr Thrupp.

'Don't be daft,' said Mrs Thrupp. 'She had red hair. She just put a bit of henna on it to liven it up.'

'So we could have produced a red headed baby?' asked Mr Thrupp. There was incredulousness and hope in his voice.

'Of course we did,' said Mrs Thrupp. She folded her arms across her chest and stared at her husband defiantly. 'You can apologise now.'

'I'm sorry, love,' said Mr Thrupp. 'I'm very sorry.'

I suspected that he did a lot of apologising.

The Thrupp parents stood up and collected their jam-covered offspring.

I handed over the prescription for the lotion for the unfortunate Bismore. They then headed for the door. When the others had disappeared into the waiting room, Mrs Thrupp turned back and walked across to me. 'Thanks very much for that, doctor,' she whispered. 'He's been going on about Kelvin for years. I only did it with him the once and I didn't enjoy it. He was very small and not very good at it. I should have known – he had small feet. It was all over in two minutes and it took me an hour to scrub off the coal dust. What sort of bad luck was that, eh? Me catching for Bismore after that one time!'

Having made this strange confession she then hurried off.

I looked around.

Everywhere I looked there was jam.

There was jam on my desk, jam on my sphygmomanometer, jam on the examination couch – there was jam absolutely everywhere. Judging by the seeds, I could see it had probably been raspberry jam.

Wearily, and with a rather annoyed feeling that Mrs Thrupp had played us all rather well, I rang the buzzer. The morning surgery had by now lasted through the day and had become the evening surgery.

My next patient was a nine-year-old boy called Thomas Gaskin who was complaining of stomach ache. He and his parents were staying in the caravan park just outside Combe Martin. The boy was in so much pain that his father had to carry him into the surgery. I told the father to lay his son down on my examination couch so that I could examine him.

'Do you think he needs his appendix taking out,' asked his mother. She and her husband were clearly and understandably very worried. They were, I suppose, both in their early thirties.

'How long has he been ill?' I asked.

'It started a couple of hours ago,' replied the mother.

'It's gradually got worse during the day,' added the father.

I palpated the boy's abdomen. There was no sign of any tenderness or stiffness and although he was clearly in pain, I could find absolutely no signs of any serious pathology. However, I already knew what was wrong.

'Has he eaten anything that might have upset him?' I asked.

'No, I don't think so,' said the mother. 'We had fish paste sandwiches for lunch. We'd been blackberry picking this morning and I was going to make a blackberry pie this afternoon.' She looked at her watch. 'It's too late to do it now.'

'Did you have any pudding?'

'Thomas had a chocolate biscuit. One called a 'Wagon Wheel'.'

I looked at the boy. 'Did you eat any other sweets today?'

He shook his head.

'Blackberries?'

Another shake of the head.

'You didn't eat any when you were out picking blackberries?'

'Only a couple.'

'Just a couple?'

This time I got a nod of the head.

'What about breakfast? What did he have for breakfast?'

'Just a bowl of cornflakes with milk and sugar,' said his mother.

'And to drink?'

'A glass of milk.'

I turned back to Thomas. 'And you ate no more than a couple of the blackberries you picked this morning?'

Thomas nodded but as he nodded he suddenly sat up, made a strange noise, looked at me with horror in his eyes, half moved off the examination couch and then, unable to stop himself, vomited enthusiastically over me and my desk.

Everything on my desk was covered with purple vomit.

Some of the second-hand blackberries were half digested and some of them were hardly digested at all. It looked as though he had eaten half a pound of fruit. It was hardly surprising that he had stomach ache.

Within minutes, Thomas was feeling a little better.

He then managed to bring up another couple of mouthfuls of half-digested blackberries.

And then the excitement was over.

And he was feeling pretty fine.

His parents were very apologetic and the mother insisted on helping me start to clean up the surgery. There were second-hand blackberries almost everywhere.

I decided that used blackberries share the bizarre quality enjoyed by jam and blood: a little goes a long, long way.

‘So you ate just one or two blackberries, did you?’ said Thomas’s father. He managed to sound cross but it was obvious he was really just relieved.

‘I thought I’d only eaten one or two,’ said Thomas.

Despite the mess, I couldn’t help smiling to myself when they’d gone. It hadn’t been a difficult diagnosis to make. The clues had been the blackberry stains around his mouth and the stains down the front of his shirt. You don’t get stains like that from eating just one or two blackberries.

Finally, there was just one patient left; an elderly clergyman called Canon Gatling.

‘You seem to have had a busy day, young man,’ said Canon Gatling.

‘It has been rather busy,’ I agreed.

‘I’m not a patient of yours,’ said the clergyman. ‘I’m staying down here on holiday with some friends.’

‘What can I do for you?’ I asked. ‘What symptoms do you have?’

‘Oh, I don’t have much in the way of symptoms,’ said Canon Gatling. ‘I just thought I should have a check-up. My friends pushed me along and said I should have a medical. I’m 89-years-old.’

‘You look good for 89,’ I told him.

And he did. If you’d seen him in the street you would not have thought him a day over 88. Of course, I didn’t know if he was a man of 90 who had to date lived a hard life or a man of 87 who had lived a bland, blameless life. Or, indeed, the other way round. The fact that he wore his collar turned round the wrong way strongly suggested that his had not been a life devoted entirely to the pleasures of the flesh.

‘I thought maybe if you checked out my heart and other essential bits and pieces, that would put my friends at peace.’

I tried not to sigh. ‘Is there any reason why you haven’t been to see your own doctor for a check-up?’

‘Well, he’s a very busy man,’ said Canon Gatling. ‘And I’m rather busy too when I’m back at home. I have a busy social life, you know. So my friends thought it would be easier all round if I came to see you.’

You can’t snarl at an elderly clergyman, can you?

I asked him if he could climb onto the examination couch. He said he thought he could. I told him to slip off his jacket, shirt and trousers and to lie down so that I could take a look at him.

I then gave him a pretty thorough examination.

‘How am I?’ he asked when I’d finished. ‘Did you find anything wrong?’

‘Well, there are one or two signs of wear and tear,’ I explained.

‘So tell me what you’ve found, doctor! Please don’t be coy.’

‘Would you not prefer me to write to your doctor with my findings?’

‘No, no! I want you to tell me what you’ve found. I insist.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Of course!’

And so I told him.

‘You have a heart murmur,’ I said. ‘And your blood pressure is raised. There’s a little fluid in your lungs and your liver is enlarged. Your spleen is enlarged too. You have cataracts in both eyes and your hearing is severely diminished on the left side – though that may be a result of the wax in that ear. You seem to have osteoarthritis in both hips and knees and rheumatoid arthritis in your hands. You have signs of gout, your prostate is enlarged quite considerably, though I am happy to say that the enlargement appears benign, you have inguinal hernias on both sides and your left testicle appears to be slightly swollen and tender. You have the beginnings of an umbilical hernia and you have quite severe prolapsed haemorrhoids and what appears to be a small anal fissure. You have a severe fungal infection of your toenails and you have psoriasis on both elbows and your left knee. You appear to have some sinus trouble and you have quite severe gingivitis. You have bunions on both big toes and on the left side you appear to have housemaid's knee.'

'That's it?'

'I think so.'

'You didn't find anything serious then?'

'Just the things I outlined. I will write to your own doctor and you and he can decide whether you want to treat any of the problems I've described.' It took me nearly a quarter of an hour to write the letter for him to give to his own GP.

'Well, that's all quite a relief,' said Canon Gatling, when I had handed him the letter. 'My friends will be comforted, I'm sure.' He stood up, shook hands with me and left.

I watched him go and found myself smiling and shaking my head in wonderment.

A man of 60 would have been horrified if I'd recited such a lengthy list of ailments. But to Canon Gatling, a man of nearly 90, my list of faults and failings were virtually a clean bill of health. After the Canon had disappeared, Patsy came in to tell me that there were no more patients. It was after seven o'clock. I'd been in the consulting room for over ten hours. Miss Johnson had gone home.

'Do you want something to eat now?' she asked.

'How many visits need to be done?'

'Three.'

She told me what they were. They were all patients who were locals and the locals were very local in that they all lived nearby. I said I'd have a quick wash and then do the calls immediately so that when I'd finished I could, hopefully, sit down and relax for a while.

By eight o'clock, I was kneeling by the fire making toast while listening to the delightful comic songs of Flanders and Swann. I was feeling hungry and had sliced up a whole loaf of fresh bread.

As I made the toast, so Patsy buttered it.

Ben, our rather ancient and loyal dog was sharing the hearth rug with me and the cats. When I sat down, Ben would insist on settling on my lap.

'I bet these fellows were excellent deipnosophists,' I said suddenly.

Patsy looked at me querulously.

'Flanders and Swann,' I said. 'I bet they were excellent deipnosophists.'

'Deipnowhats?'

'Deipnosophists,' I said.

'What the devil is a deipnosophist?'

'Oh, someone who is skilled at making dinner party conversation,' I explained. 'I'm expanding my vocabulary.'

'Why? When can you possibly use a word like that?'

'I just used it,' I said, trying not to sound too pleased with myself. I didn't mention that it had taken me ten minutes to think of a way of easing it into the conversation.

'How long did it take you to work out a way to wriggle it into the conversation?' asked Patsy, who knows me rather too well.

'Wriggle what into the conversation?' I asked. I knew I was blushing and it wasn't the heat of the fire.

'That word deipnowhats.'

'It just seemed to be the whatchamacallit,' I said. 'Fitted in rather nicely, I thought.'

Patsy laughed. 'How long?'

'No more than ten minutes,' I said.

When I'm talking with Patsy it is as though I have a little glass window in my skull. She knows what I'm going to say before I say it, what I mean to say when I'm struggling to say it and what I meant to say when I've almost said what I wanted to say.

'Well, maybe you ought to put the big words away and concentrate on the toast,' said Patsy. 'The piece you're making is black and burnt to a crisp.'

I looked at the end of my toasting fork. She was right, of course. I tossed the piece of charcoal I'd created onto the fire and replaced it with a fresh piece of bread.

I have to confess that Patsy and I didn't really need to have lit an open fire for it was still late summer and the weather wasn't cold at all. In fact, it was quite warm.

But I do find that when I am really exhausted, a log fire is an essential part of the relaxing process.

Besides, if I hadn't lit a fire, we would have had to put the bread into the toaster. And where on earth is the fun in that? Toast which has been made by putting a slice of bread in between two electrically heated wires does not taste anywhere near as good as toast which has been made in front of the naked flames of a log fire. And it doesn't smell as wonderful either.

Who cares that you're almost certain to burn some of the bread and that it is nigh on impossible to avoid ending up with a very hot hand. No one ever said that the really good things in life came without just a little pain.

By any standards it had, I think, been a busy day.

But it ended well.

I know there are people who believe it is impossible to have a good evening unless you hand over hundreds of pounds for a meal out in a posh restaurant where a self-important chef and a band of scurrying acolytes fuss over the food and the waiters fawn over the diners. Many people seem to drool over the prospect of dressing up, driving 50 miles and handing over a fistful of bank notes for a meal consisting of stuff which they probably cannot pronounce and which is almost certain to give them indigestion afterwards. I wonder how many of them would rather have a packet of fish and chips from their local chip shop? 'Generous with the vinegar and plenty of salt, please!'

I realise that Patsy and I probably stand alone in this but in our view, a dinner out in a posh restaurant is no way to enjoy an evening.

We prefer the simple life.

And how can you possibly beat sitting in front of a crackling log fire, nursing a glass of something agreeable and sharing a plateful of hot buttered toast with the one you love?

You Won’t Let Him Die, Will You, Doctor?

Looking back, the whole thing began with a fairly innocuous visit to an evening surgery in late August.

Abigail Barnes was 10-years-old and had, like her parents, been born in Bilbury.

I could see from her medical records that my predecessor, Dr Brownlow, had delivered her at home.

Unless there were very exceptional circumstances, Dr Brownlow always delivered babies at home. He thought it was better and safer for both the mother and the baby if the birth could be managed in the mother’s own bedroom. He insisted that the risks were much lower if a baby could be delivered away from the variety of dangerous infections which are inevitable in hospitals. And he once told me that one of the great joys of his life was watching the children he had delivered grow up and start families of their own.

‘We have to be with our patients when their time on earth is ended,’ I remember him saying to me one evening. ‘And that’s a sad, sad time. So it’s good to be able to balance those melancholic moments with the enjoyment of the glorious moments when new faces are brought into the world.’ At that time, none of the babies I’d delivered was old enough to have even thought about starting their own families but I had always followed Dr Brownlow’s example and looked after my pregnant patients in their own homes. It seems to me, that a family doctor who delivers the babies in his practice has a much stronger bond with his patients and the community he serves.

‘I think Abigail’s got the flu starting,’ said Mrs Barnes. ‘I wouldn’t have bothered you but she’s got a terrible cough.’

I asked Abigail when her symptoms had started.

‘This morning,’ answered Abigail. She did look poorly.

It seemed odd that a patient who was developing the flu should have started a cough so quickly. The cough that is so often a symptom of influenza usually develops later on in the illness.

‘What other symptoms have you got?’

‘I ache a lot,’ said Abigail.

‘Whereabouts?’

‘My chest and my arms and my legs.’

I touched her forehead with the back of my hand. She was hot. ‘Have you got a headache?’

‘Yes. It started with the headache.’

‘This morning?’

‘Yes.’

I took out a thermometer and took her temperature. It was up a couple of degrees. I listened to Abigail’s chest and palpated her abdomen, just to make sure I wasn’t missing anything else. In children, diseases can develop quite quickly and they don’t always follow the pattern the text books describe. But I could find nothing odd or worrying. Abigail’s tummy was soft and there was no pain when I examined her. I had been worried for a few moments that she might be developing appendicitis. It isn’t unknown for young patients to present with really unusual symptoms and signs.

‘Well it seems like the flu,’ I agreed, talking now to Mrs Barnes. I explained that there wasn’t anything I could do other than tell her to keep her daughter warm and well hydrated. ‘Make sure she drinks lots,’ I told her. And I gave Mrs Barnes a suitable painkiller from our pharmacy.

I honestly didn’t think I’d have to see Abigail again for this problem. I thought her mother was right and that she had the flu. It was a slightly odd presentation and it had come on very quickly but these things happen and common things do happen commonly. You can make an awful fool of yourself, and, more important, worry your patients unnecessarily, if you are forever assuming that every ache is a sign of some deadly, rare muscular disease or that every cough suggests the start of tuberculosis.

The second patient with similar symptoms arrived in my surgery a day and a half later. His name was Barnaby Fothergill and his mother, who brought him to a morning surgery, reported that he had been up all night complaining of pains in his chest and a stubborn headache that just wouldn’t go away.

I remembered that Abigail Barnes had complained of similar symptoms and asked Barnaby if he knew her.

‘Oh yes,’ replied Mrs Fothergill, answering for him. ‘They’re both members of a little gang. There are five of them in the gang and they call themselves the Bilbury Five.

I thought the name made them sound like the defendants in an important trial of some kind but I was told that they had named themselves after a series of books by children’s author Enid Blyton. The books described the adventures of a group of children known as the Famous Five.

Mrs Fothergill mentioned the names of the three other children who also lived in the village and who were members of the same gang: Amber Lane, Judith Barker and George Dickson.

All five children were much the same age, though George Dickson was probably a couple of years younger and was, I remembered, much smaller than the others. He might have been smaller but he was no less lively. He once broke his leg falling out of a tree down near the pond on the edge of Softly's Bottom.

I told Mrs Fothergill what I'd told Mrs Barnes and assumed that the two children had caught the same infection. I wondered if the other three in the gang would develop similar symptoms.

I was right about the two children having the same infection.

And I was right to wonder if the other three would develop the same sort of symptoms.

But I was completely, woefully, dangerously wrong about the nature of the infection.

The third child I saw was Judith Barker.

At eleven and a half, she was the oldest of the gang and she was undoubtedly the leader. I knew her and her parents, of course. All the five members of the gang were long-term residents of the village and I was well acquainted with all the families.

I saw Judith at home rather than at Bilbury Grange and she was rather more seriously ill than the first two. She was in bed when I arrived. She had been one of the children who had been ill after using Giant Hogweed stems as peashooters at a children's party organised by Mr and Mrs Pinchbeck. Judith was coughing and complaining of pains in her chest and in her shoulders.

'How long has she been coughing?'

'Only since this morning.'

'Has the cough been very bad?' I asked.

Mrs Barker thought for a moment. 'I wouldn't say so,' she said. 'It is the pains in her chest that seem to trouble her most. That's why I asked you to visit rather than taking her along to the surgery.'

'Was there any warning?' I asked.

'None at all. She was absolutely fine last night when she went to bed. But she woke up this morning looking and feeling awful. Do you think she has the flu that the others have got?'

I said I thought it was the most likely explanation but asked her mother to telephone me at once if there was any change.

My next visit that same day was to Abigail Barnes, the girl I'd first seen at Bilbury Grange a couple of days earlier.

Her mother had telephoned the surgery and asked me to visit because she was worried about her daughter.

'She seems to be getting worse,' said Mrs Barnes. 'And she's now developed red eyes. It looks like conjunctivitis but she insists that her eyes weren't sticky when she awoke this morning.'

The conjunctivae of Abigail's eyes were clearly both red. Abigail looked very miserable and she had quite a fever.

'The aches seem to be getting worse,' said Mrs Barnes. 'And she's complained of some soreness in her tummy.'

I examined Abigail and there was some tenderness in the area of her spleen. I thought it was slightly enlarged. I was now beginning to suspect that my original diagnosis was wrong. It seemed that something else was going on but I didn't have the foggiest idea what it could be. The reddening of the conjunctivae wasn't normal. But how did it fit in with the enlarged spleen?

George Dickson was the last patient I saw that morning.

Once again, he had the same symptoms as his friends. He was coughing and he had aches and pains in his chest and in his shoulders and his arms. His legs were aching too. And he had one symptom that the other's had not exhibited: a symptom which rang very loud alarm bells. He had coughed up some blood.

I had never before seen a child coughing up blood and this startled and rather frightened me.

'How many times has he coughed up blood?' I asked Mrs Dickson, trying to sound calmer than I felt.

'Twice,' she said. She moved out of George's bedroom and onto the landing. She lowered her voice to a whisper I could hardly hear. 'My grandfather used to cough up blood. But he was a heavy smoker and he died of lung cancer.' There were tears and fears in her eyes.

'George hasn't got lung cancer,' I told her firmly.

'You won't let him die, will you doctor?' she said.

There was a fierce desperation in her voice.

George was her only child. She and her husband had been to an infertility clinic for three years before she had conceived.

No child is, or should be, any more special than any other child. But when George had broken his leg Mrs Dickson had, I remembered, been hysterical and inconsolable. Patsy had stayed with her until her husband had managed to get back from work.

I confess I had not always seen eye to eye with Mr Dickson.

I once had a patient called Jack Driver who was an alcoholic and was struggling to deal with his addiction. Mr Driver drove a removal van and was, inevitably, known to one and all as 'Laurie'. He and his wife were separated and he knew that as a result of his drinking problem he was in danger of losing his job.

After being dry for four months, he had received a setback when his wife had told him that she was leaving him permanently.

Broken hearted, Mr Driver had bought a bottle of wine at a supermarket in Barnstaple and had been arrested for drunk driving while on his way home.

I remember that it was a strange case. He hadn't been in an accident but the police had stopped him because they'd noticed that he was driving too slowly and too carefully.

Mr Driver came to see me at the time to ask if I could request the *Bugle*, the local newspaper, not to print his name when his case went to court. He wasn't worried about his job (he knew that he would lose his licence and therefore his job so that was a lost cause) but he didn't want his children to read about his disgrace, or for their friends at school to have ammunition to fire at them. I did ask the editor, Mr Dickson, not to print the report but he said that Mr Driver should have thought of the consequences of his actions before he'd drunk the wine. It was the second time in my life I'd asked for the same favour and on both occasions my request had been rejected.

And so the court case was duly reported in the local paper and for the sake of an inch and a half of fairly dull newsprint, what was left of Mr Driver's life was ruined. Twelve months later, Mr Driver was found dead in a shop doorway in Exeter. He had died of alcohol poisoning. When I'd heard the news, I'd telephoned Mr Dickson at his office. I don't know what I expected. I think I was probably just angry.

'I was just doing my job,' said Mr Dickson rather gruffly. 'We all have our jobs to do. You do your job, doctor and I'll do mine.'

I hadn't seen or spoken to Mr Dickson since then, though he and his family were all still patients of mine. And now his son, George, was ill.

'I won't let him die,' I promised Mrs Dickson. And I meant it. There was no way, no way on earth, that any of these small children, so full of life, were going to die if I could do anything to prevent it. I didn't know what the hell was going on but I would find out. My brain was buzzing with ideas, thoughts, diagnoses, prognostications and fears.

I knew that coughing up blood used to be horribly common, of course.

When consumption (aka tuberculosis) was endemic, children often coughed up blood.

But long before the 1970s came, tuberculosis had become rare; it was not something which was often seen in children.

Coughing up blood happens in bronchitis and it occurs among heavy smokers. It can be a sign of lung cancer, a lung abscess or pneumonia. There are dozens of possible causes.

But I couldn't get away from the knowledge that it isn't something that occurs often with children.

I began to wish that I were working in a large hospital where I could call upon expert help from consultant paediatricians. A general practitioner works alone and a country doctor, who works in a fairly isolated village, must work more on his own than any other doctor.

It was obvious now that these children didn't have influenza. It was also pretty clear that all five of them had the same thing wrong with them. But what the devil was it? I thought for a moment of simply sending all five of them to the hospital in Barnstaple. I even considered sending them to a larger hospital, maybe the one in Exeter. But sending children to hospital is traumatic for the children themselves and for their parents. I decided I could wait an hour or two while I tried to work out what was going on.

I carefully moved some children's comics and half a dozen toy soldiers out of the way and sat down on George's bed. 'What have your gang been doing this summer?' I asked him.

I remembered the time when I had seen him and the other children who had been using Giant Hogweed stems as peashooters. I wondered if they had perhaps all eaten berries that had poisoned them. It could certainly explain their symptoms.

'Just playing,' said George, defensively.

'Did you eat anything you picked?' I asked.

'Just blackberries,' said George. 'And some wild strawberries.'

'That's all?'

George nodded.

'It's important,' I said quietly. 'You won't get into trouble but I need to know if you ate anything else? Something that all of you ate?'

'There wasn't anything else,' said George. There were tears in his eyes.

'Honest injun?' said his mother. She was sitting on the other side of his bed and holding his hand.

‘Honest injun,’ whispered George, with a nod.

‘He’s telling the truth,’ his mother said quietly.

‘We built a swing,’ said George. ‘Barnaby’s dad put a rope over a big branch on a tree over the pond. He tested it and said it was safe.’

‘The pond by Softly’s Bottom?’

George nodded.

I knew that pond. It was actually quite large as ponds go. It was fed by a small stream so the water wasn’t entirely stagnant. It was also believed to be quite deep. Villagers sometimes fished there and it was rumoured that there was a large pike living in the pond. I always took this story with a pinch of salt for in every village in England there is a pond which is said to have a large pike living in it.

‘What did he do with the bottom of the rope? Knot it or tie on an old tyre?’

‘He tied on an old tyre,’ said George.

Barnaby’s father, Ted Fothergill, works at a garage in Combe Martin. He wouldn’t have any difficulty finding an old tyre.

‘And you swung across the pond on the tyre?’

‘Sometimes,’ said George. ‘Sometimes we let go when we were over the pond.’

‘And landed in the water?’

George nodded.

‘Did you swim in the water?’

Another nod.

‘All of you?’

‘Amber can’t properly swim but we always helped her and she did the dog paddle. We didn’t let her fall into the water if one of us wasn’t already in the pond. Judith said we had to do that to make sure she didn’t drown.’

‘So you probably swallowed some of the pond water?’

George nodded. ‘But we all spat it out again.’

‘What’s wrong with him?’ asked Mrs Dickson, as I prepared to leave.

‘I don’t know yet,’ I told her. ‘But if I don’t have a good idea by his evening then I’ll arrange for George to go into hospital. Have a bag ready for him. I’ll speak to you later.’

‘You won’t let anything happen to him, will you?’

‘I won’t,’ I told her.

How the devil could I know that nothing would happen to him? I didn’t even know what was wrong with him.

But what good would it do her, or George, for me to tell her the truth?

I drove from their house to a lane which leads down to the area where Softly’s Bottom can be found. I managed to park the Rolls in a field gateway, climbed over the fence and walked down the hill to the pond. In truth, I didn’t have the faintest idea why I was there or what I hoped to discover. Maybe I would see some plants that might have caused the children’s symptoms. Maybe there would be some berries growing on a bush. George’s mother had been convinced he was telling the truth. But maybe he was frightened and had told a white lie.

I sat down on the trunk of an old tree and stared at the pond. It was quite an idyllic spot. I could see why the children loved playing there. The rope that Barnaby’s father had slung over the tree was there; the old tyre hanging down over the water. Mr Fothergill or one of the children had tied another, thinner rope to the tyre and then tied the thinner rope to the tree. The thinner rope enabled them to pull back the tyre so that they could climb onto it, or into it, and swing over the water. It was, I could see, an old tractor tyre. There was a small, rough shelter made in one of the bushes. It was, I guessed, where they hid when it rained or if they heard pirates coming. They doubtless had picnics there. I looked around. There were no old cartons or tins or paper litter. They were good kids. They had taken their rubbish home with them. They would close gates, respect crops and do no damage to fences. They were country born and bred with good country manners.

And then I heard it.

Splash.

I didn’t see anything but I definitely heard a splash.

I sat stock still for a while longer.

And then I saw it.

A rat.

It was swimming in the water.

I watched it swim around the edge of the pond and then disappear into a hole in the bank.

I don’t like rats.

I love all animals but I have never been able to like rats. They always seem to me to be dirty, sneaky, cruel creatures. And, of course, they spread diseases to humans.

And now I knew what the problem was.

I knew, damnit.

I was certain I had the diagnosis I needed.

I raced back up the hill to where I had parked the car, climbed in and drove back to Bilbury Grange as quickly as I could. I slid to a halt in front of the house, leapt out of the car and raced into my consulting room where I plucked a copy of a standard medical textbook off the shelves. I knew exactly what I was looking for.

Leptospirosis.

I checked the symptoms and the signs and the incubation period.

They all matched.

I had five small children with leptospirosis.

'Leptospirosis,' I read, 'is a biphasic disease. In the first phase of the disease, sufferers will have acute febrile episodes. Headache, chest pains and severe muscular aches are common. Conjunctival bleeds sometimes develop and haemoptysis may occur in some patients.'

Haemoptysis is the coughing up of blood.

The bug that causes leptospirosis usually originates with an animal, typically a wild animal and most commonly a rat, and can get in to the patient's body through the skin or mucous membranes, through the eyes, nose or mouth and through cuts and grazes. You don't have to drink infected water. It is not a terribly difficult disease to catch – which explained why all five of the children who had swum in the infected pond had become ill – all you have to do is be in contact with water contaminated with leptospira bacteria. Sewage workers sometimes catch the disease even though they are wearing protective clothing.

I read on.

'In the second phase of the disease there may be hepatic, renal and meningeal involvement. The second phase usually develops between one and two weeks after the first.'

I closed my eyes and uttered a prayer of thanks to God. The children were all in the first phase of the disease. They had the preliminary symptoms. The potentially deadly involvement of the liver, the kidneys and the brain would come later unless I stopped it happening.

I looked through the book to find out what tests I needed to do to confirm the diagnosis. But in my heart I didn't really need the tests. I was certain they had leptospirosis. How the hell did I treat it? I had never seen a case of leptospirosis before. Most doctors never see one. Now I had five.

'Antibiotic therapy is most effective,' said the book. It gave the recommended type of antibiotic and the recommended dosage. 'Patient isolation is not necessary but urine must be handled and disposed of carefully.'

And that was the beginning of the end of a truly scary day.

I took blood samples from all five children and sent them off to the laboratory in Barnstaple with a request that they telephone me with the results.

And even before I got the results back I started all the children on powerful doses of penicillin.

I told all the parents how to look after their children and warned them about the danger of their children's urine.

Thanks be to God, it was the right diagnosis. The children all made a full recovery.

And afterwards, Mr Fothergill took down the rope and the tyre so that no one would play over the pond again. And the farmer who owned the pond put a stout fence around it with several, large, red-lettered signs attached to the posts.

I went down to the pond before the fence went up and, after saying a quiet prayer to God for guiding me to the right diagnosis, I added a quiet 'thank you' to the rat whose splash had led me to the diagnosis.

Author’s Note

I hope you have enjoyed this book about Bilbury and the people who live in and visit the village. If you did so then I would be very grateful if you would spare a moment to write a short review. This is the 13th book in the series entitled ‘The Young Country Doctor’. I hope you will also enjoy the appendices which follow.

Thank you
Vernon Coleman

Appendix: 1
Wind: Official Types.

Here are the types of wind as classified on the Beaufort scale. Different types of wind are given different names and since there are still people around who do not carry wind meters with them all the time, there needs to be a system that depends on less scientific measurements. Here is my version:

Calm: smoke from chimneys, bonfires and pipes rises vertically in nice, little twirly patterns

Light air: chimney and bonfire smoke drifts a little but flags and weather vanes are pretty well immobile

Slight breeze: leaves rustle and flags start to flutter

Gentle breeze (around 10 mph): a smallish, light flag will be extended and leaves (whether still on the tree or not) will be in constant motion; most hat wearers are still confident although those wearing wide brimmed confections and delicate fascinators may feel some concern

Moderate breeze (around 15 mph): this amount of wind will mean that small branches move around; all hat wearers may feel nervous

Fresh breeze (around 20 mph): small trees which are in leaf will sway a little and wavelets can be seen on lakes, ponds and swimming pools; hats which are blown off can be caught even by those whose mobility is limited to gentle lumbering; wide brimmed hats and hats which are light and flouncy should be nailed on or taken indoors

Strong breeze (around 25 mph): large branches will be moving, it will difficult to control an umbrella and people wearing hats should take them off and put them somewhere safe because a hat blown in a strong breeze will only be caught by a well-trained athlete capable of changing speed and direction very quickly

High wind (around 35 mph): even quite large trees will now be moving and pedestrians will find it difficult to walk; umbrellas will fly away, most golfers will probably give up and loose slates, and tiles will start flying around; hats will blow off and will probably never be seen again

Gale (around 40 mph): twigs and small branches will be broken off trees and car drivers will feel their vehicles being moved about; toupee wearers should prepare for embarrassment

Strong gale (around 50 mph): there is likely to be slight structural damage with chimney pots and slates flying through the air with the greatest of ease; summerhouses and greenhouses may suffer

Whole gale (around 60 mph): whole trees may be uprooted, garden benches will be blown about and there is likely to be serious structural damage to even sturdy buildings

Storm (around 70 mph): widespread damage is likely with cars being blown over; seaside promenades are likely to be deluged with sea water and eager amateur photographers risk being swept out to sea

Hurricane (above 75 mph): if there is a basement or cellar handy this is probably the time to be in it

Appendix 2
Flat Pack Castles

Patchy's tale of how the Normans who landed in England in 1066 brought with them flat pack ready to build castles is absolutely true. Patchy obtained his information from a book entitled *Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World* written by Sir Edward Creasy and first published in 1851. Creasy's book is widely regarded as the definitive history of war prior to the 20th century.

I purchased a copy of Creasy's book from a bookseller in Hay-on-Wye. As a single handed GP, I found it difficult (for which read 'impossible') to leave the village and so I bought my books from catalogues which arrived through the post.

Sir Edward describes the arrival of the Normans in his account of the Battle of Hastings – using the accounts put together by Norman chroniclers. He explains that the first ship to arrive belonged to Duke William. The ship was called the Mora and had been given to him by his duchess, Matilda. On the prow of the ship, according to the Normans, 'there was a brazen child bearing an arrow with a bended bow. His face was turned towards England, and thither he looked, as though he was about to shoot.'

And here is how Sir Edward quotes from the old Norman chroniclers describing the landing from the Mora:

'After the archers had thus gone forth, the knights landed all armed, with their hauberks on, their shields slung at their necks, and their helmets laced. They formed together on the shore, each armed, and mounted on his war-horse: all had their swords girded on, and rode forward into the country with their lances raised. Then the carpenters landed, who had great axes in their hands, and planes and adzes hung at their sides. They took counsel together, and sought for a good spot to place a castle on. They had brought with them from Normandy, in pieces, all ready for framing together, and they took the materials of one of these out of the ships, all shaped and pierced to receive the pins which they had brought cut and ready in large barrels; and before evening had set in, they had finished a good fort on the English ground, and there they placed their stores. And then ate and drank enough, and were right glad that they were ashore.'

Appendix 3
How Fast Can They Go?

In ‘The Psychiatrist Who Ran Away: (Part 2: The Metamorphosis)’ I explained how Cedric (the pig Patsy and I were looking after for our friends in America) had managed to put on an impressive turn of speed while being taken for a walk around the village.

Although a good human middle distance runner could eventually probably catch a pig in full flight, I doubt if many ordinary humans could catch a fleeing pig.

The odd thing about pigs is that they have tremendous acceleration and can reach their top speed within a couple of strides of a standing start. And their four trotter drive propulsion means that they can dodge and swerve far more skilfully than most humans – particularly when the ground is soft or slippery.

The table below gives the speeds of a few arbitrarily chosen animals and insects. These speeds were measured over fairly short distances by scientists with nothing better to do and although it is undoubtedly possible that even faster speeds might be attained for a second or two (or when travelling downhill or with a following wind) it would appear that these are pretty well the limit for the species listed. It should be noted that although some animals may appear to have a limited top speed, they may nevertheless have other qualities which make up for this shortcoming. So, for example, sheep, like pigs, may appear to be relatively slow moving creatures but their ability to change direction suddenly is unsurpassed and is a vital asset when they are attempting to avoid capture.

Cheetah 75 mph
Racehorse 50 mph
Hare 45 mph
Kangaroo 43 mph
Fox 42 mph
Hyena 40 mph
Deer 40 mph
Greyhound 35 mph
Rabbit 35 mph
Dragonfly 30 mph
Horsefly 30 mph
Bee 25 mph
Hippopotamus 25 mph
Man 24 mph
Cow 20 mph
Sheep 15 mph
Grey squirrel 12 mph
Wasp 12 mph
Pig 11 mph
Bluebottle 6 mph
Snail 0.07 m

Appendix 4:
Imperial Weights and Measures

Imperial weights and measures were introduced in Great Britain in 1824 and the systems of weights and measures used in the United States is derived from the Imperial system.

After 1965, the European Union forced Britain to adopt the metric system used on the Continent of Europe and it became illegal to use Imperial measurements when selling packaged or loose goods.

Nevertheless, Imperial measurements were still used in some Commonwealth countries and some Imperial measurements, notably the inch, were still used in Europe, particularly in France.

In Bilbury, however, Imperial measurements were still widely used in the 1970s and the villagers preferred their traditional measurements to the new-fangled type of measurement which was popular elsewhere. Throughout the 1970s, Peter Marshall was still using Imperial measurements when weighing out vegetables, etc.

I confess I have always found the descriptions and idiosyncrasies used in the Imperial system far more attractive than the bald, cold and very scientific metric system.

Imperial length measurements
4 inches = 1 hand (for measuring horses)
12 inches = 1 foot
3 feet = 1 yard
22 yards = 1 chain
10 chains = 1 furlong
8 furlongs = 1 mile
3 miles = 1 league

Imperial length measurements at sea
2.02667 yards = 1 fathom
100 fathoms = 1 cable
10 cables = 1 nautical mile

Imperial measurements for surveying
7.92 inches = 1 link
25 links = 1 rod

Imperial measurements for area
1 perch = 1 rod x 1 rod
1 rood = 1 furlong x 1 rod
1 acre = 1 furlong x 1 chain

Imperial weights
7000 grains = 1 pound
256 drachm = 1 pound
16 ounce = 1 pound
14 pound = 1 stone
28 pound = 1 quarter
112 pound = 1 hundredweight (cwt)
2240 pound = 1 ton

Appendix 5:
Mad Taxes

In 'The Psychiatrist Who Ran Away (Part 2: The Metamorphosis) I described how a cottage had been turned into a death trap when, in the 17th century, a baker had responded to the introduction of the chimney tax by merging her own chimney with the chimney of the adjacent property. This was not an uncommon practice at that time but it frequently caused problems – sometimes leading to multiple deaths as well as the destruction of property. Dr Eckersley's experience was by no means unusual.

British governments have, over the centuries, introduced some pretty bizarre taxes and the chimney tax (or hearth tax) was only one of many dotty ways of raising money.

One of Britain's first taxes was the scutage tax which was introduced by King Henry I in the 12th century. This allowed knights to opt out of their duty to fight for their country by paying money to the King. When King John raised the tax massively, and craftily started charging knights not to fight even when there weren't any wars, he was considered to be behaving badly.

Indeed, this low trick was one of the reasons for the signing of the Magna Carta. The Scutage tax died off under Edward III in the 14th century.

Back in the 18th century, curious taxes were introduced with great enthusiasm. There were, for example, special taxes on almanacs, wine, perfume and rock salt.

Here, below, is a selection of a dozen of the oddest taxes which existed in Britain prior to the 20th century. I have, of course, included the chimney tax – which is at the top of my list simply because it appears in the text of this book. The other entries are in no particular order.

A list of daft taxes introduced in the 20th and 21st centuries would, of course, fill several thousand pages and would be enormously boring, probably even for tax collectors:

Chimney tax 1662, repealed 1689

The chimney tax, which was also known as the hearth tax, was introduced by Parliament in 1662 so that money could be raised to pay for King Charles II's lifestyle. After the monarchy had been restored in 1660, the Parliament reckoned that the King needed an annual income of £1,200,000 and a tax was needed to pay for all his necessary extravagances. Parliament decided it would be easier to count the number of chimneys than the number of heads since the former kept still whereas the latter tended to move about a good deal, particularly if they were about to be taxed. When introduced, the tax was set at two shillings a year per fireplace or stove. To begin with, everyone had to pay the tax but amendments were eventually introduced which made the really poor exempt. However, if a house had more than two chimneys, there were no exemptions. The owners of big houses which had lots of chimneys were faced with fairly huge bills. However, the main objection to the tax was not the money involved but the fact that the officials responsible for collecting the taxes had the legal right to enter every property in the country. Large numbers of chimneys were blocked up to try to avoid the tax but if the owners were found out, they had to pay double taxes. The tax didn't last very long. It was repealed by Parliament in 1689 because it was regarded as offensive that homes should be entered and searched by strangers.

Window tax of 1696, repealed in 1851.

This was a property tax on house owners. The size of the tax bill depended upon the number of windows a house possessed. To keep their taxes down, people had windows bricked up and there are many old houses around in Britain which still have bricked up windows. The property tax was a flat rate of two shillings per house, regardless of the number of windows. Houses which had between ten and twenty windows paid an extra four shillings and those which had more than twenty windows paid an extra eight shillings. The window tax was introduced under King William III because there had been much opposition to the idea of an income tax. The people objected to taxes on income because they didn't think the Government had the right to know what they earned – it was considered intrusive and a threat to personal liberty.

Wallpaper tax of 1712, repealed 1836

In 1712, patterned, printed or painted wallpaper was taxed at 1d per square yard. By 1809, the tax had risen to 1 shilling per square yard. Rich people bought plain paper (because there was no tax on plain wallpaper) and hired artists and people who thought they were artists to paint designs and pretty pictures on the plain paper. The result was that rich people avoided the tax completely and only the poorer people paid it. This tax was abolished in 1836.

Brick tax of 1784, repealed 1850

The brick tax was introduced in 1784, during the reign of King George III. The tax was introduced to help pay for the wars in the American Colonies. Bricks were taxed at four shillings per thousand. To get round the tax, brick makers increased the size of their bricks. To squash this crafty move, which enabled builders to put up a wall using no more than a dozen bricks, the Government introduced a maximum size for brick production. The result was that house builders started to avoid the brick tax completely by using more timber in the houses they built. The Government eventually gave up and the brick tax was abolished in 1850.

Glass tax 1746, repealed 1845

The glass tax was introduced in 1746, in the reign of King George II, and existed until it was abolished by Robert Peel’s government in 1845. The glass tax, combined with the window tax, meant that houses were built with small and inadequate windows. And since lighting was poor, barely adequate and expensive, the result was that many homes, particularly in towns and cities, were depressingly gloomy. Ireland was exempt from the glass tax for a while and as a result, a number of famous glass factories were set up there.

Hat tax 1784, repealed 1811

The hat tax was introduced in 1784 and lasted until 1811 and was unquestionably sexist since it affected only hats worn by men. The tax was introduced by the Government of William Pitt the younger, and it was thought that since rich men tended to have more hats than poor men the tax would affect the rich more than the poor. Each new hat had to have a revenue stamp pasted on the lining inside. The amount of the tax depended upon the price of the hat. So, the tax on a hat costing under four shillings was three pence. For expensive hats, costing more than twelve shillings, the tax rose to two shillings. Anyone caught trying to avoid the tax would be fined or hung.

Dice and playing cards tax 1711, repeated 1862

The playing card and dice tax was introduced in 1711 and lasted until 1862. Every pack of cards produced in England had to be stamped by a government official to show that the tax had been paid. Those who tried to cheat the Government (by, for example, producing fake stamps) were hung. Quite a lot of hanging went on in the 18th century which was a good period for rope makers and professional hangmen.

Wig powder tax 1786, repealed 1869

The wig powder tax was introduced in 1786 and repealed in 1869. Unlike other taxes there was no actual duty on the powder itself but anyone who wanted to use hair powder had to buy an annual licence for a guinea. Exemptions included the royal family and their attendants, soldiers and lower ranking army officers and lowly paid clergymen. In the end, the tax pretty well killed off the use of hair powder.

Gin tax 1736, repealed 1743

The gin tax of 1736 was brought in by Act of Parliament in an attempt to curb the consumption of gin. The average citizen in England (including children and the moribund) was at the time drinking 18 pints of gin a year. Even children were drinking the stuff in vast quantities, and gin consumption was blamed for much crime. Gin distillers and sellers had to pay the new tax and small gin shops were driven out of business. However, although the tax reduced the enthusiasm for legally produced gin, the inevitable result was that bootleg gin became popular. Some of the bootleg gin contained turpentine spirit and sulphuric acid and the results were often devastating. Blindness was a common side effect and death not uncommon. The Gin Act was repealed after protestors rioted in London in 1743, but another Gin Act was passed in 1751 which was again designed to control the consumption of gin. The introduction of healthier alternatives such as tea and beer was encouraged but rather a lot of people simply drank the beer and the tea and carried on with the gin as well.

Soap tax 1712, repealed 1835

The soap tax was introduced in 1712 and repealed in 1835 by which time much of the country undoubtedly stank to high heaven. The tax put small soap makers out of business and didn’t do much for the cleanliness of the British in that period.

Beard tax 1535, quietly abandoned

A beard tax was introduced in 1535 by Henry VIII (who himself had a beard but presumably didn’t tax himself). The tax gradually died out, partly because it was silly but also because it was difficult to collect. (‘No, this isn’t a beard. I just haven’t bothered to shave today.’) The tax was, however, reintroduced by Henry VIII’s normally sensible daughter, Elizabeth I. Under Elizabeth I, every man with more than two week’s growth of beard had to pay the tax. No one seems to know precisely when the beard tax was withdrawn but it seems it was still found difficult to enforce and it probably just fizzled out and was eventually abandoned.

Clock tax 1797, abandoned same year

The clock tax was introduced in 1797 and covered watches as well as clocks. An ordinary watch attracted a tax of two shillings and sixpence. A gold watch was taxed at ten shillings. Clocks costing more than twenty shillings were taxed at five shillings. The inevitable result was that people stopped buying watches and clocks and everyone was late for everything. The tax was, therefore, abandoned after just nine months.

Author’s Note

I hope you have enjoyed this book about Bilbury and the people who live in and visit the village. If you did so then I would be very grateful if you would spare a moment to write a short review. A few seconds of your time will mean the world to Patsy (Antoinette) and myself. This is the 13th book in the series entitled ‘The Young Country Doctor’.

Thank you

Vernon Coleman

The Young Country Doctor Book 14

Bilbury Days

Vernon Coleman

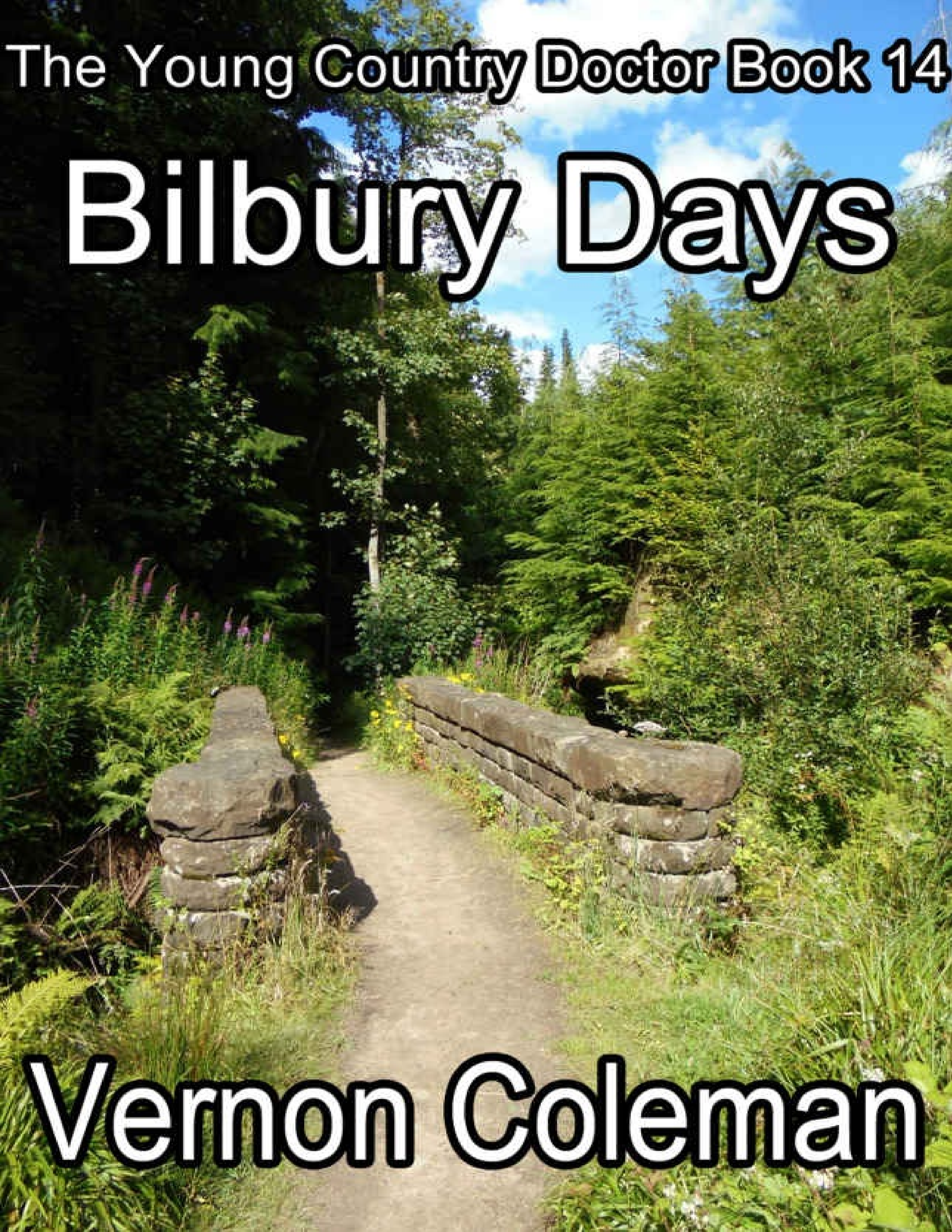

The Young Country Doctor no 14

Bilbury Days

Vernon Coleman

Another collection of memories from the English village of Bilbury.

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Note: As usual, the names and details of individuals, animals and establishments, except the Duck and Puddle and Peter Marshall's shop, have been altered to protect the innocent, the guilty and those who aren't quite sure where they stand but would like to think about it for a while. The events in *Bilbury Days* occurred in the 1970s.

The Author

Vernon Coleman qualified as a doctor and practised as a GP. He is a *Sunday Times* bestselling author who has written over 100 books which have been translated into 25 languages and sold in over 50 countries. His books have sold over two million copies in the UK alone though no one is sure whether two million people each bought one book or one person has a very large bookcase. Vernon Coleman is also a qualified doctor. He and his wife (whose real name is Antoinette) live in Bilbury, Devon, England. Vernon is an accomplished bar billiards player (three times runner up in the Duck and Puddle Christmas competition), a keen but surprisingly dangerous skittles player and an accomplished maker of paper aeroplanes. He has a certificate proving that he once swam a mile for charity. He was, at some point in the early 1960s, second in the Walsall Boys Golf Championship and was awarded with three brand new golf balls in a smart, cardboard box. He claims to be one of the best stone skimmers in North Devon. (Nine bounces are by no means unheard of and he has a personal best of 12 bounces.) He is a long-term member of the Desperate Dan Pie-Eater's Club (vegetarian section) and although he can juggle three balls at once, he cannot knit. He has never jumped out of an aeroplane (with or without a parachute) but he has, on several occasions, lit bonfires in the rain and is particularly proud of the fact that he once managed to light one in a snowstorm. He has not yet availed himself of the extensive opportunities apparently offered by social media (he says he is waiting to see if the idea catches on) but notes about important events are pinned on the noticeboard outside Peter Marshall's shop in the village and he has had a website (www.vernoncoleman.com) since the day after King Alfred burnt the cakes. Entrance to the website is free of charge and there is ample parking space. Visitors to the site are requested to wash their hands before entering and to wipe their feet before leaving. Sadly, there are no advertisements or refreshment facilities. The Author is registered as an Ancient Monument and selected parts of him are Grade II listed.

Vernon Coleman's novels include: *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War*, *Mrs Caldicot's Knickerbocker Glory*, *Mrs Caldicot's Easter Parade*, *Mr Henry Mulligan*, *The Truth Kills*, *Second Chance*, *Paris in my Springtime*, *It's Never Too Late*, *The Hotel Doctor*, *My Secret Years with Elvis* and many others. All of these books are available as e-books on Amazon as are the 14 volumes in The Young Country Doctor series.

The Young Country Doctor series

This is the 14th book in the series and so, if the author has done his sums right, there are probably around thirteen other books describing the Devon village of Bilbury and its inhabitants. All the books in the series are available as e-books on Amazon. A few hardback editions of the first seven books were self-published in modest runs but these are all now out of print. The first few books are sequential but after about the third book you can read them in any order you like without getting into a tangle. There have not yet been any paperback copies of any of the books and the author is patiently waiting for a large international publisher to make him an offer he cannot refuse. Film companies should know that Thumper Robinson and Patchy Fogg are both happy to play themselves if a movie is made. Frank and Gilly are prepared to make the Duck and Puddle available to filmmakers, and I can confirm that they make excellent sandwiches and serve wonderful beer. Peter Marshall, who runs the Bilbury village shop, would like to talk terms before making a decision about his participation but no one in Bilbury doubts that he would jump at a chance to promote his shop on the big screen. Publishers and film companies wanting to get in touch with the author should pop a note into a bottle, throw it into a nearby waterway and wait for a response.

Dedication

To Antoinette: You will forever fill my heart and nothing will ever change that truth. Everything else is just noise.

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Foreword

I made a catapult the other day. I don’t know why. I didn’t need a catapult. I didn’t even want one. Not really.

What happened was that after cutting some dead birch branches and some coppiced hazel sticks into kindling, I found myself left with a forked piece of wood that was simply crying out to become a catapult. It was far too nicely shaped to end up on the fire. So, I found a thick piece of elastic that had once been something else and five minutes later I had a simple but effective catapult.

I obviously then had to make a bow and arrow.

And for that I needed a suitably sized branch of ash, a few nice straight pieces of bamboo and some bird feathers (willingly donated by various visitors to our garden). The only other requirement was a reasonably sharp penknife.

Looking back, it is astonishing how much of our time at school was spent in pastimes which would be considered unacceptably violent today. Every boy I knew carried one or two strong rubber bands in his blazer pocket. These were used to fire paper pellets at terrifying speed. When soaked with ink from the inkwell in the top right hand corner of every desk these pellets left their mark in more ways than one.

As I looked at my newly made catapult, I found myself drifting back to another world, another life, another era and it occurred to me that although many older readers of my Bilbury books will recognise and understand the world I am describing, younger readers may find it difficult to believe that there was a time, not so long ago, when the world was very different and was, in many ways, a more dangerous place.

At the grammar school which I attended, school teachers were frequently violent; smacking pupils around the head so hard that the victim would be dazed and semi-conscious for most of the rest of the lesson. Even at the age of 14, I spotted that there didn’t seem to be much point in shouting at a boy for not paying attention and then hitting his head so hard that he didn’t know where he was. Some teachers used their hands as weapons while others preferred to use special, long, steel edged rulers. All those practitioners of the backhand and forehand head-slap were probably excellent tennis players. One, I remember, specialised in a backhand, forehand, backhand triple slap. The unfortunate recipient would be dizzy for the rest of the day.

Other teachers liked to throw things. Heavy, wooden board rubbers were especially popular weapons and would be hurled at maximum velocity. The teacher’s desk contained a box of sticking plasters for those boys who were too slow or too distracted to duck. This sort of steady bombardment was considered normal, and an essential part of the school day. In every classroom where I studied, the plaster of the back wall was pock marked as though it had been subjected to machine gun fire.

Toy manufacturers made most of their products out of lead and then coated them with lead paint so that when children sucked the toys, they could get their daily dose of lead without doing too much damage to the toy itself. I always preferred the blue lead myself but this was just a personal preference. A chum of mine used to like biting the heads of lead soldiers but I think this was a private idiosyncrasy and I have no knowledge of it being widespread. Just about every toy made in the 1950s was sexist, racist or dangerous. Boys had guns and soldiers, and girls had dolls and prams and everyone thought that was right and proper and what else could you possibly expect. Sharp edges were so common that I now suspect that toy makers were instructed to build in the sharp edges so as to ensure a steady supply of business for sticking plaster manufacturers. When, as a small boy, I went surfing at Treyarnon Bay in Cornwall, my parents rented for me a surfboard made out of a plank that had not been properly planed. The edges were rough and splintery and at the end of a day in the sea, I would go back to our caravan bleeding from a thousand cuts. Fortunately, the Cornish sea was clean enough in those days to sterilise the wounds. I’m not sure I would trust myself to its cleansing nature these days. Today, anyone renting out such equipment would be dragged through the streets by appalled health and safety officials. But I bet I had as much fun on my plank as any surfer has today on one of these specially made and contoured boards.

When I was a boy, in the 1950s, I spent my summer holidays exploring, making camp sites, lighting fires, tearing my trousers on barbed wire and falling off my bicycle. My mother must have spent a good chunk of housekeeping on plasters, bandages and iodine.

But at least I was out of doors and most of the games we played were free and some of them really did grow on trees. Old bits of string and shoelace were kept for stringing conkers from September through to December.

Pocket money was spent on comics, marbles, small metal cars, little packs of balsa wood, bottles of dandelion and burdock and bizarre confections which were fizzy or sticky and largely composed of additives. These were sold from huge jars kept on the shelf behind the newsagent’s head. The shop assistant would pick them out by hand and, if you bought enough of them, pop them into a small, white, paper bag. Otherwise he or she handed them to you and you put them into your pocket to pick up a little fluff.

Comics contained many pages of uninterrupted type with authors such as Charles Hamilton (who as Frank Richards was the inventor of Greyfriars School, Billy Bunter et al) producing endless, long stories for both boys and girls. And the strip cartoons were well written and educational (both in terms of style and life). If you doubt me, just take a look at a child's comic from the 1950s and compare it with a modern comic. Those few children's comics which remain are brash and require little in the way of literary skills.

Playground fights involved fists and feet and were always widely advertised by shouts of 'Fight' for several minutes before they started. Spectators would gather around in a wide circle, giving the protagonists plenty of room to punch, kick, bite, gouge and pull hair. These fights were rarely, if ever, halted by a teacher, they never led to anything more than a nosebleed and they usually cleared the air between the protagonists. Proper battles involved small stones fired from home-made catapults, metal tipped arrows fired from home-made bows and bullets fired from air rifles and air guns. The number of children requiring plasters and dowsing with antiseptic was probably higher but the number of children requiring hospitalisation was far smaller than it is today. Most of the diseases from which children suffer today had not been discovered and so no one suffered from them.

Not all hobbies were as deadly as battles with catapults and bows and arrows. One summer, when I was around six or seven, I started to collect car numbers. It seems a strange thing to do now but there weren't many cars around in the early 1950s and car number plates were easily identified with the town where they were issued. A couple of pals and I kept notebooks in which we wrote down all the car numbers we could find. I gave up when my parents took me out for the day and parked in a crowded car park. I was overwhelmed and took to collecting stamps instead.

There were still plenty of working horses around and my father would go out into the middle of a main road with the garden shovel (the big one with built up edges which he used for clearing the snow which fell every winter) and collect the droppings left by the horses. I would stand and hold the bucket, unworried by the traffic or the idea that someone might see me. The manure was good for the roses in our front garden. That was the same garden where I cut the grass with a push mower. It took all my strength to move the mower if the grass was more than half an inch high but it was a privilege not a duty for I felt very grown up and it makes me now appreciate having a mower with a petrol engine which devours grass whatever the length.

When I was small, we lived in a prefab; a prefabricated building designed to ease the post-war housing crisis. I remember it as being quite well made. Each prefab had its own garden, complete with a wooden fence and a garden gate. I went back a few decades later and found that the prefabs had all been knocked down and replaced by a 20 storey block of flats. I had a look around and was astonished to see that the prefabs had been better built, sturdier than the new apartments, and they had those little gardens. The high rise flats looked gloomy; dirty, dark and depressing.

It was an innocent time in many ways.

And here's another odd thing I've noticed.

Back in the 1950s and as recently as the 1970s, children were still children but at some point they metamorphosed, sometimes overnight, into grown-ups. It was not a gradual process. Take a look at photographs of school children and then look at the team photographs for professional football or cricket teams from the 1970s and you'll see what I mean. Sports players in their late teens or early twenties looked like adults. And, by and large, they behaved like adults, too.

Today, children aren't children in the sense that they were half a century ago (there are a variety of reasons for this, which I have explored in other books) but nor do they metamorphose into adults when they reach a point in their lives when adulthood might seem appropriate. Grown men and women in their 20s and even 30s still look and behave like children. Just think of the way modern professional sports players behave if you don't believe me.

Young people born in the last decade of the 20th century and the first two decades of the 21st think that they are experiencing rapid change as social media changes daily but in truth they aren't experiencing anything like the change which their parents and grandparents had to face. All that is happening today is that life is becoming more complicated and technology is ever more intrusive.

My parents had no radio, no television, no telephone, and a motorbike with a sidecar was an incredible luxury. Motor cars were only for the very rich. My Dad made a television set in the kitchen of our prefab and, when Queen Elizabeth was crowned queen, our living room was packed with people who came in to watch because we were the only people anyone knew who had a set on which to watch it. Our set had a screen that was smaller than a modern laptop screen. There was only one TV channel and that only operated for a few hours a day. (When I say that my Dad made our first television set I mean exactly that. He bought a magazine which contained instructions and then purchased the valves, knobs and bits and pieces from a local shop.)

Traffic wardens hadn't been invented and anyone who'd been on an aeroplane was probably either a business executive or an adventurer. Families who wanted to explore the continent travelled by train and boat or put their car onto the ferry; both provided a rewardingly slow and gentle introduction to foreign parts. Central heating was unusual and computers were as big as a grand piano and took half a day to struggle to add two and two. There was much whirring and crossing of fingers before the answer was spewed out.

You might imagine that all the technology we have at our disposal these days would have dramatically improved our productivity (in the widest sense of the word).

But it hasn't.

Despite the lack of technology, people in general always seemed to manage to get a lot more done before computers became widespread.

How many modern authors, pecking away at their laptops, can ever hope to match the output of Charles Dickens who wrote with a quill pen and died at the age of 58 – an age at which most modern writers would consider that they were just getting into their stride? How many can match the output of Mark Twain? And, remember, Frank Richards used to write 10,000 words a day on an old sit up and beg typewriter. (How his fingers must have hurt.) P.G.Wodehouse turned out a whole library of books on an old Royal desktop machine which was so big that I doubt if he could lift it without help.

How many modern film stars now make as many films as James Stewart or John Wayne?

Technology has slowed us down and it has certainly had a damaging effect on every aspect of productivity. The intrusive telephone started the rot. And today we are obsessed with our emails and, for those who choose to play that game, with the relentless, hourly demands of social media.

Things started to change in the 1970s but villages like Bilbury were still hanging on to a simpler way of life.

Even by the end of the 1970s, not all homes in Bilbury were supplied with electricity, mains water or mains drainage. In the big cities, it was commonplace to find houses which had gas supplied by pipe but in Bilbury, in the 1970s, anyone who wanted gas had to buy it in bottles which were collected from the local shop or, for a small extra fee, delivered to their door. Heating and cooking were mostly done with wood and, occasionally, with coal.

In towns and cities, most people had telephones, and television sets and washing machines and dishwashers: technology had tiptoed into the world and was, generally speaking, made very welcome.

In rural areas, however, things did not move quite so quickly. Even by the 1970s, there were a good many houses in villages such as Bilbury which were without telephones or television sets, and though a few homes had wireless sets, the equipment they had was large, cumbersome and reliable. I remember too that they all had a setting for something called Hilversum. No one knew where or what it was.

Every decent sized town had a department store, usually family owned and family run, where you could buy furniture, bed linen, crockery, clothing for all the family, sensible underwear (including iron clad corsets with straps strong enough to dangle a carthorse), hats and haberdashery. And, of course, every town had a Woolworths store; these were always fun to explore and full of colourful and useless joys – the perfect shops for children of all ages but absurdly over- stocked. At one point, Woolworths carried over 50 different types of pencil case. Woolworths was a store where people bought what they wanted rather than the stuff they needed. It was a store for the spur of the moment purchase but at least everything cost pennies.

In Bilbury, we had Peter Marshall's shop and though there were stores in Barnstaple selling things most of us could manage perfectly well without, it was to Peter's well-stocked emporium that most of us headed when we needed something.

As recently as the 1970s, many motor cars still smelt of leather and petrol instead of plastic and diesel, and if bits fell off (which they did from time to time) they could be fitted back into place by anyone who owned a wrench and a screwdriver. Cars were owned only by the rich and the ambitious middle classes and seat belts had not been invented. Windscreens were made of the sort of glass which splinters into sharp shards. Car owners expected vehicles to last for decades and even someone without skills or tools could replace a windscreen wiper or a broken wing mirror. Most car owners tinkered with their vehicles on Sunday mornings, sometimes removing the entire engine and working on it after lovingly placing it on the kitchen table. Washing and polishing the car was, for many enthusiasts, merely the end of the process rather than the process itself.

Back in the 1950s, drivers had regularly broken their wrists starting their cars with the handle provided but by the 1970s, cars were equipped with self-starters. A device called the choke, which had to be pulled out prior to starting the car on a cold morning and then pushed back into position when the car had begun to operate, had pretty well disappeared too. In the 1950s, a foot operated pedal dipped the headlights and if the car was posh, another foot operated the pedal oiled the chassis at 100 mile intervals. By the 1970s, cars no longer had bits which needed oiling quite so regularly and they didn't have a chassis either. But in Bilbury, most local people still drove vehicles which had been built in the 1950s and the local garage knew more about starting handles than cars without gear sticks. My first car, a Humber, was held together with sticky tape and bits of wire.

Despite all the dangers, it was safe to walk through the streets after dark and in small, rural communities, people really did leave doors and windows open without worrying that they would be burgled.

So, that was the 1970s – the time of which I write: The Bilbury Years.

Welcome, to those who remember some of this, and welcome too, to those who think I must have come from another planet and that the world I describe must be imaginary.

People used to say that things were better 'then' and when the 'then' was 100 years ago everyone knew it was nonsense. Things were only better in Victorian and Edwardian times if you were rich and had good, strong teeth.

But thinking about it as objectively as is possible, I do think things were better 'then' if 'then' was just half a century ago.

Back in the 1970s, we had anaesthesia, antiseptics and antibiotics (antibiotic resistant bugs were unknown) and roads you could drive on with a reasonable expectation of getting where you were going before the seasons changed. Women wore frocks and dresses and skirts and hardly ever owned a pair of trousers and men wore hats and took them off when greeting people. On buses, men would offer their seats to women without being abused. Obesity was far less common and infant mortality rates had fallen dramatically. Life expectancy was much the same in the 1970s as it is now though women generally lived a few years longer.

This difference is fading fast as women acquire bad habits such as smoking, and drinking and overeating which were previously almost exclusively male. The wider availability of household gadgets powered by electricity means that women take less natural exercise and the women's liberation movement has helped to ensure that the killer stress is shared more equally between the two sexes.

There is, by the way, a popular myth, sustained and promoted by some who don't understand and by some who have a vested interest in selling the idea, that doctors and drug companies have together been responsible for conquering disease and improving life expectancy. But it is a myth that life expectancy has increased dramatically in the last hundred years and another myth that any improvement is a result of doctors becoming wiser and drug companies producing better drugs. What most observers do not realise is that when historians say that life expectancy was around 45 in the year 1900, they don't mean that most adults died at or around the age of 45. The figures are skewed by the fact that lots of babies died at birth or in infancy. Those tragic, early deaths dragged down the average life expectation. If a baby dies when it is a few months old and a woman dies at 90 then the average age of death is 45 years. Infant mortality rates have dropped dramatically and so average life expectancy appears to have risen dramatically.

What doctors and drug companies won't tell you is that infant mortality rates did not fall because of vaccines or drugs – they fell because communities separated their sewage from their drinking water, because overcrowded tenements were pulled down and because better farming methods meant that healthier, cheaper food became available. It isn't difficult to argue that doctors and drug companies have carefully and deliberately built their reputations on a well-sustained myth.

I have rambled enough.

I sincerely hope you enjoy this trip back to the 1970s and this latest collection of Bilbury memories.

Vernon Coleman
Bilbury, Devon, England

Boris and Belinda Bickerson

That variety of medical treatments sometimes rather patronisingly dismissed as ‘alternative therapies’ have, of course, been around for far longer than orthodox medicine. For many centuries what we now call ‘alternative’ or ‘complementary’ remedies were the only forms of treatment available.

Only in the last century or two have ordinary people been able to consult trained and qualified doctors, or expect to be looked after by nurses who have been given formal training.

Back in the 19th century, and before, the absence of properly qualified practitioners meant that communities everywhere, but perhaps particularly those in rural areas, were looked after by a wide variety of individuals who had some knowledge, or claimed to have some knowledge, about remedies which might be used to combat illness.

Some of the remedies which were used relied heavily upon the power of the healer’s personality and upon the effectiveness of the placebo effect.

Other treatments, the secrets of which were sometimes passed down through the generations, usually from mother to daughter, relied on herbs – many of which were extremely effective.

The drug digitalis, still one of the most powerful remedies used in the treatment of heart disease, was first used by ‘wise women’, ‘mydwyfes’ and ‘witches’ who obtained the herb from the foxglove plant. It was only when an observant doctor noted the efficacy of the remedy, that digitalis was introduced into burgeoning mainstream medicine. There are hundreds of powerful medicines which come from plants – aspirin comes from the willow tree and morphine from the opium poppy. And, of course, penicillin is a lowly mould – penicillium – which had been used for centuries before being ‘discovered’ by Alexander Fleming in 1928. It is perfectly true that it was Fleming whose research, serendipity and observational skills helped turn the mould into a powerful drug for the treatment of infection but what many people still don’t know is that penicillin was known and used by the ancient Egyptians. They used rotten bread in several remedies for the treatment of infected wounds and although they did not have laboratories in which to investigate and define the nature of the treatment they were using, they had the imagination to take advantage of the healing properties of the mould itself. It would be millennia before Fleming gave the mould a name and a scientifically approved purpose. The Egyptians also used scopolamine from the mandrake plant, cathartics from the castor oil plant and painkillers from the opium plant.

I doubt if there is any substance known to man which has not at some point been tried and used as a remedy for illnesses. Some of the substances which have been tried have proved ineffective, some have turned out to do more harm than good, sometimes even killing rather curing, but many have turned out to be effective and safe enough to be used.

I have, in my time, met a wide variety of healers.

Some, sadly, were charlatans.

For example, I once met a woman who claimed she could cure cancer with little rubber bands. If you had cancer of the lung, she put the rubber band on the little finger of your left hand. If you had breast cancer, she put a green rubber band on the ring finger of your right hand. If you had brain cancer, she put a red rubber band on the index finger of your left hand and a blue rubber band on your thumb. And so it went on. Gullible and desperate patients gave her money to tell them where to put the rubber bands and even paid her more for supplies of the appropriately coloured bands. (Naturally, ordinary rubber bands did not work as well as the expensive ones which she sold.) She had absolutely no medical training and no knowledge of human anatomy or physiology but she earned large sums of money by selling her ‘cure’ to vulnerable patients. When she died in 1971, she left her astonished relatives a fortune and a large, comfortable house in a fashionable London suburb.

It is, of course, possible to argue that even the most outrageous charlatan can do good if they are charismatic enough and if they clearly believe in the remedy they are promoting. The effectiveness of the placebo response has been well documented and it has been shown many times that a doctor who convinces his patients that the remedies he is offering will be beneficial will cure far more effectively than the doctor who simply tosses a prescription across the desk with a desultory, and rather disinterested: ‘try these, they might help’.

The big, unanswered and unanswerable question, is: ‘Is it better that someone should hobble about in pain, untreated and untreatable by orthodox physicians or that they should be given some relief by an unqualified quack?’

The problem is that there is no doubt that charlatans and quacks who know little or nothing about the human body and mind and who do not understand their own strengths and limitations, can do an enormous amount of harm.

The main danger, of course, is that by promising much and delivering little or nothing, the greedy charlatan may discourage the genuinely sick from seeking advice which could prove thoroughly advantageous.

(Incidentally, those who practise quackery are often accused of doing what they do for money but how many expensive practitioners, working in luxurious Harley Street consulting rooms, fail to provide their patients with a bill after treating them? And how many GPs do what they do without expecting to see money appearing in their bank account?)

I once saw a patient who was visiting North Devon on holiday and who had been 'treated' for nine months by a ruthless, money-grabbing quack in Bristol.

I was called to see the patient when he collapsed while driving on the road between Blackmoor Gate and South Molton. It was a miracle none of his passengers was seriously hurt for, when he was suddenly taken ill, he unavoidably drove off the road and into a ditch.

The man was emaciated and jaundiced, and I was astonished that he had managed to drive down from Bristol. The man's wife told me that her husband had a long-standing fear of doctors and of hospitals and had been treated by a local quack who had diagnosed constipation and had promised to cure him with a cocktail of liquid paraffin and senakot together with two hourly doses of methyl cellulose. I was called by a passing farmer and when I got to the scene of the accident, I was just in time to watch him die.

The autopsy showed that the unfortunate fellow had cancer of the kidney which had metastasised and, as a result, he had secondary deposits in just about every organ of his body. His liver was swollen, solid and lumpy.

It may not have been possible to cure the man but he would have most certainly received better medical and nursing care, and he would have had a much better chance of surviving, if the self-appointed 'expert' treating him had managed to put his hubris to one side, accept that his diagnosis and treatment might be wrong and find the courage to ask for help.

It was inevitable that there should be several practitioners of alternative medicine working in the North Devon area where my practice was situated. Most of them practised their versions of medicine as a hobby and all of those who I came across were, I'm pleased to say, as conscious of their limitations as they were of their strengths.

(My sister-in-law, Adrienne, had given up her own ministrations after various unfortunate attempts at healing. She had once taken a three day course in iridology which had proved rather less than successful and when I first arrived in Bilbury she was a keen practitioner of herbalism. She abandoned the herbalism after poisoning her father with hawthorn tablets. Her attempts to persuade Anne Thwaites to deal with the pain of childbirth with extract of nettles had proved equally unsuccessful.)

Some of the local practitioners were complete amateurs (not in the sense that they were unprofessional in the way they worked but in the sense that they neither asked for nor accepted any monetary reward). And some specialised and offered only remedies for particular conditions.

So, for example, a local farmer called Mr Hornbeam had a cure for ringworm which was quite remarkable. He simply drew a circle around the ringworm with his finger and within a week the skin would be clear and there would be no sign left of the problem. Mr Hornbeam was a man of few words and he could appear brusque. He was certainly not a man who could ever be accused of dilly dallying, shilly shallying or any other variety of prevarication. He was a man of action, a man who could comfortably be described as a doer not a thinker, but his treatment for ringworm was remarkably effective. I have absolutely no idea how or why it worked but work it certainly did.

Then there was Gilbert Carmody of Barbrook who had a very strange and curiously effective remedy for indigestion, particularly when caused by over-indulgence. He would, with the aid of his wife Hetty and his two huge sons, dig a man-sized hole in the largest manure heap on their farm. I saw the family at work on this task and I have to say that Hetty did as much work as the three men.

To say that Hetty was a big woman would be like saying that Mount Everest was a trifle on the hilly side. She was reputed to start each day with two kippers and a tumbler of green chartreuse and to end it with two more kippers and another tumbler of green chartreuse. She ate the kippers, bones and all, as a sandwich, positioned between two pikelets and always followed the kippers with a Chorley cake. I did once see her having her early morning kipper sandwiches and her tumbler of green chartreuse (and it was a large tumbler, the sort more normally used for serving lemonade) but although I never saw her finish the day with the same menu, I have no reason to disbelieve the tale. I have often come across strange dietary habits and I subsequently found out that Horatio Bottomley, the journalist, businessman and orator, used to start his day with kippers and champagne, but Hetty's preference still seems to me to take the biscuit, and to be well on the odd side of unusual.

Hetty's brother was a clergyman in Wakefield who was quite famous in ecclesiastical circles for having constant rows with his Bishop and who was more widely renowned for having written and self-published an apparently rather indiscreet tell-all autobiography entitled *Altar Ego*. His book, which Hetty said was extensive, revealing and rambling, was subtitled *A Candid Look behind the Vestry Door*. It quickly went out of print (I always suspected that the Bishop bought all the copies and burnt them) and Hetty promised to find me a copy but, sadly, never could.

Gilbert was quite a religious man whose favourite saying was: 'As a tree falls so it must lie'. He managed to make this biblical saying sound deeply enigmatic and apparently he used to say it whenever an indigestion sufferer disappeared into the manure heap. Mr Carmody would encourage the groaning sufferer to climb naked into the hole that had been prepared and the sons would shift and compress the manure so that the patient was buried in it up to his neck. Hetty, who had done much of the hole digging, took no part in the burying process. The sons were built along the lines of rather plain Corinthian pillars. This bizarre treatment produced a cure within a day and I can only assume that the heat of the manure heap promoted digestion. In the early days, they used to provide this service at no cost but in later years their remedy became so popular that they used to charge £2 per person. Their remedy was a little more expensive than a bottle of antacid, and required a good deal of bathing afterwards, but it seemed to work just as well.

I have certainly heard it said on several occasions that a hot bath is the best remedy for digestive troubles and a steaming manure heap would probably work on much the same principle.

It was a hell of a cure, though and I think I would have had to have pretty awful digestion before agreeing to climb into the depths of one of Mr Carmody's manure heaps. I often wondered if Mrs Carmody ever needed to take the manure heap remedy as a result of her unusual diet, but I never dared to ask. They were, to say the least, a forbidding family and the sons, who were very, very large, were rather humourless and easily offended.

Although they were really some way outside my normal catchment area, the Carmody family were long-term patients of mine (they had been looked after by Dr Brownlow) and I once visited them in winter. Mrs Carmody had a kipper bone stuck in the back of her throat and, fortunately, I was able to remove it with a long pair of forceps. It was so cold in their house (a 19th century farmhouse that had been rebuilt, redesigned and added to so often that it looked as if it had been designed by two architects who hated each other and their client in equal measures) that I suggested, not entirely as a joke, that if they had anything they wanted warmed up they should put it into their fridge. The sons scowled and one of them had pointed out that they didn't have a refrigerator. Indeed, they had no mains electricity: just a small, petrol driven generator which fed a couple of lights in their barn. They did their cooking on an old Aga which they fed with wood and bits of rubbish.

Oliver Hudson, who lived on the Barnstaple road and whose mother's maiden name was also Hudson, was another local practitioner. He claimed to be able to cure mumps by leading the sufferer three times around a well in his garden. He always told his patients about his mother's maiden name though I was never quite sure whether this was because he felt it was significant or simply because it was a curiosity of which he was proud. When not curing mumps, Mr Hudson was an income tax inspector with very personal views about history. He once told me that the Great War had been fought after the King, the Kaiser, the Emperor of Austria and the President of France had a private meeting and decided there were too many people in the world and that a few million ought to be killed (or, presumably, culled) in an attempt to keep the numbers down. Mr Hudson also assured me that whenever faced with a dilemma of any kind he would always ask himself what Napoleon Bonaparte would have done. I always found this a rather strange way to seek a solution to any problem since from what I knew of Napoleon, he always solved every problem either by invading somewhere foreign or by putting another one of his relatives on a throne somewhere. I was never sure whether Mr Hudson consulted Napoleon Bonaparte when dealing with tax dilemmas but my own experience of the Inland Revenue convinced me that this was not an unlikely prospect – though as a taxpayer I would have been startled if I had been advised to deal with a tax issue by invading Russia.

And then there was Absalom Cadell, who specialised in treating acne. He was in his late fifties when I first met him but he looked much older. He lived in a very scruffy cottage near Tolstoy's garage and was a quietly spoken man who had once worked on the railways. He had retired after an accident which had left him not with any physical abnormality but with a morbid dread of a number of things – including leaves, blood and, for some unexplained reason, hats of any description. Everywhere he went he walked slowly, with his hands behind his back. He reminded me greatly of an earnest undertaker pacing steadily and respectfully behind a hearse containing the mortal remains of a valued customer and knowing himself to be in sight of relatives who knew that tipping the undertaker's men was the right and proper thing to do if the deceased was to ascend to heaven with the proper level of dignity.

Mr Cadell had very fixed views on a range of subjects. 'Man or woman's determination to adhere to their understanding of the obligations of humanity is their only inviolable and fundamental responsibility,' he insisted. 'All personal and social loyalties, duties and roles are built upon that determination.' I never really understood what he meant by this but it sounded impressive and he said it often and loudly.

'It is the free man's right, nay his duty, to resent authority and to do everything he can to undermine the conceit of those who enjoy the trappings of the power they claim on its behalf,' was another of his favourite sayings. I understood that one and could see the point.

He was, to say the least, an unusual man.

But he was undeniably a miracle worker when it came to treating acne – his sole speciality.

He would give each of his patients a bottle containing a colourless liquid which was characterised by the dark-red sediment lying at the bottom. The ingredients were kept quite secret. The bottle had to be shaken vigorously and although I never tasted it myself, the stuff was reputed to taste quite foul. Patients had to take a tablespoonful in water three times a day and they had to drink three bottles of the stuff. Mr Cadell did not charge a penny for his remedy but simply asked that the bottles be returned to him when empty. He would only dispense one bottle at a time, so to obtain the second bottle the patient had to take back the first bottle. The stuff was reputed to be so acidic that it would gradually eat away the spoon which was used to dispense it. But the truth is that Cadell's Potion, as it was known locally, worked better than any medicine I was able to prescribe at the time and those who took it all said that their acne had gone away leaving no scars. To this day, I have no idea what the mixture contained or where the recipe came from.

Apropos of absolutely nothing, Mr Cadell once showed me an asbestos jacket which his grandfather had bought in 1944. He apparently bought the jacket not, as you might have thought, to protect himself against incendiaries, but because he liked to smoke in bed and had a habit of falling asleep and setting fire to himself. The jacket looked immensely uncomfortable and given what we now know about the perils of asbestos, it was probably not the healthiest piece of clothing ever designed.

And then there was Wayne Wellard, the farrier with the dog called Kamir. Mr Wellard was the man to go to if you had sore or strained muscles and although he had received absolutely no training, he specialised in massage and could ease troubled muscles in just one visit. My mother-in-law, Mrs Kennet, had visited him on several occasions and she swore that he was more skilful and more effective than any physiotherapist. To his patients he was known as 'Mr Fingers'. Although he struggled to make ends meet, Mr Wellard never charged anyone for his services. He said that if he charged he wouldn't feel so good about what he did and that if he didn't feel so good about it then it wouldn't be so effective.

The best known, and undoubtedly the most successful, alternative practitioners in the Bilbury area of North Devon were the Bickersons – Belinda and Boris Bickerson. They both earned a modest living by charging small fees and they always referred patients to me if they felt they were unable to help. I always felt that we had a good relationship.

Belinda and Boris were not husband and wife, they were brother and sister and neither of them had ever married. There was no little sadness behind their situation. Belinda had been engaged to an American soldier who had fought in the Korean War. I cannot remember how on earth she had met him and, indeed, I may never have known. Tragically, he had died within a month of arriving in Korea. Since then she had shown no interest in marriage or, indeed, in beginning any sort of romantic relationship. Boris had remained entirely unattached until he was in his 30s and then he had become engaged to a girl who was ten years his junior. When the girl got cold feet, changed her mind and gave him back his ring, Boris had been heartbroken. He too had abandoned romance. 'I've tried that, it didn't work and I won't be trying it again,' he told me once and in his voice you could hear the sadness and the disappointment in his heart.

The pair lived together in the rambling old house where they had both been born. They had inherited a decent sum from their parents and although they had their small incomes from their work as alternative practitioners, the dividends from their investments had for years provided them with a small but regular income which pretty well made them independent. Their father, who had been a dentist with consulting rooms in Exeter, had been a keen investor and had, apparently, put together a portfolio of solid, blue chip investments which the Bickersons refused to change in any way. He had also left them shares in a company which had been set up by his own father to sell potted meats both in cans and in small jars. When I heard about the potted meat company, I was reminded of a character in Oscar Wilde's play *Lady Windermere's Fan* who says, rather patronisingly, about an Australian businessman: 'Mr Hopper's father made a great fortune by selling some kind of food in circular tins.'

The Bickerson potted meat company had, in its day, been enormously successful but sadly, for the young Bickersons, it had fallen by the wayside, through changing tastes and a failure to move with the times I suppose, and one or two of their father's investments had turned sour and the companies, destroyed by the hubris and greed of management, had expired. Despite this, the Bickersons retained great faith in their father's selections and they steadfastly refused to accept outside advice or to sell any of the remaining share holdings. And, to be fair, their investments seemed to enable them to maintain their modest lifestyle.

In their garden, the Bickersons had the tallest and oldest oak trees in Bilbury. Every autumn since Patsy and I had been looking after Cedric the pig, the Bickersons collected up all the acorns they could find and brought them round to Bilbury Grange in a sack. I'm not sure why it is but pigs certainly love acorns. You might have thought that with a pig being so large and an acorn being so small there wouldn't be much pleasure in scoffing a mouthful of acorns but you'd be wrong, and there is no doubt that for Cedric the fruit of the oak tree was one of the greatest delights available: a delicacy to be chewed, appreciated and savoured. I'm sure the Bickersons would have brought Cedric their acorns in any case, but they were keen to collect up every one they could find because they had half a dozen Exmoor ponies and, of course, for ponies acorns can be quite deadly.

At the time of which I am writing, Belinda was in her mid-fifties and Boris was a couple of years older. She was well-built and heavy-breasted and had the biggest bottom I've ever seen on a woman or, indeed, a man. You wouldn't want her sitting on any delicate 18th century furniture. He was tall and rather thin and wore his hair in a ponytail. They had a strong but volatile relationship which seemed to bounce between love and loathing. If they had been brothers you would have said they oscillated between a loving David and Jonathan propinquity and a toxic Caine and Abel relationship. Some of their disagreements were almost comical in a strange way. So, for example, Boris smoked and Belinda did not. 'I will be very annoyed if I die before you,' I once heard her shout at him. On another occasion, when he was ill with bronchitis, she told me, with tears in her eyes, that she knew she would not bear to be alive without him. I suspected that the truth lay somewhere between these two extremes and I had no doubt that they were as close and as interdependent as most married couples.

The two Bickersons practised quite different forms of alternative medicine.

Belinda was what would sometimes be called a healer, though she preferred to describe herself as having 'the gift' or holding `the cure in her fingers'. She wasn't a 'midwife' (or mydwyfe) in the old-fashioned, traditional sense of the word; she wasn't a purveyor of old wives' tales; she wasn't a herbalist and she didn't practise any of the orthodox forms of unorthodox medicine. I had heard it said by some that she must have been the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter but I know from my knowledge of her family history that she wasn't that either.

Whatever it was that she did, patients from all over Devon, and further, visited her and paid her with whatever they could. Some patients paid her with a few eggs or a chicken. I know that one man paid her with several square yards of turf. A vet from South Molton, who could have easily paid her in cash, paid her by looking after her ponies. A couple from Taunton gave her a small motor car after she healed their daughter. The girl, who was suffering from severe neurological symptoms, had been seen by doctors in Bristol and London. None of them had been able to make a diagnosis. Belinda had spent an afternoon with the girl and the symptoms which had baffled the doctors had completely disappeared by the end of the day. The parents later gave an interview to a national newspaper and insisted that Belinda had not even touched their daughter, other than to kiss her on the forehead when the two first met and again when they parted. Belinda refused to speak to the reporter and Boris chased a photographer down their drive, throwing sticks and stones at his posh German motor car. The couple had tried to give Belinda a cheque but she wouldn't take it, saying that it was far too much money for an afternoon's work. And so, noticing that Belinda didn't have a motor car, they had arranged for a brand new Mini to be delivered. It was one of the estate models, decorated with real wood on the outside and it was fully taxed and insured and it sat unmoving in an empty barn because neither Belinda nor her brother could drive.

Belinda had been born at a good time.

If she had been born a few centuries earlier, she would have been put to death as a witch. They'd have put her on a ducking stool and submerged her in the village pond. If she had survived the experience, then they would have known that she was a witch and they would have built a huge bonfire and burned her to death. If she had drowned then they'd have known that she was innocent. Everyone in the village would have breathed a sigh of relief because they hadn't been living with a witch as a neighbour. Poor Belinda would, of course, have been dead either way.

If she'd born a couple of decades later, and lived in the 21st century, she would have doubtless been barred from practising her skills by legislation which demands that everyone be able to show the requisite pieces of paper before practising their chosen profession. She would, I suspect, have been investigated by the police, irritated by social workers and exposed by the media.

But in the 1970s she was not just tolerated; she was respected and admired.

Her brother, Boris, was a bonesetter. He was not, he insisted, an osteopath or a chiropractor. He was insistent about that for, he pointed out, osteopaths and chiropractors are trained and have qualifications and he had neither. He was a bonesetter in the old traditional sense of the word and in a way, I suppose he too was lucky that he was born when he was. If he had been born thirty or forty years later he would have doubtless been hounded out of business by a society controlled by professional associations, civil servants and bureaucrats; a society which frowns on anyone claiming to have healing skills but not having the necessary certificates and paperwork.

As a child, Boris used to smash up rabbit skeletons with a hammer and then put them back together like a jigsaw. By his mid-teens, he could set bones. A girl in the village had a motor cycle accident and her ankle and lower leg were shattered. Several hospitals did their best but the bones were so badly broken that they told her she would always walk with a limp and never dance or run. The young bonesetter, who was still at school, turned up, uninvited and asked if he could help. He didn't say another word but just touched the girl's ankle and gently manipulated the bones. He visited every day for a fortnight and the mother, naturally sceptical and doubtless suspicious, sat and watched. In two months, the girl was walking normally. In four months, she was dancing.

How do you explain it?

I cannot.

But there are many things in this world which I cannot explain and just because I am unable to explain something it doesn't mean that it isn't happening.

Like his sister, Boris did not have a formal practice. He did not have a formal list of fees. But patients came to see him from miles away and he always saw anyone who turned up. He once had a patient, a boy in his early twenties, who had been brought down from Scotland by his parents. The parents had heard of Boris's skills through a relative who lived in the seaside resort of Ilfracombe. The three members of the family stayed in the Duck and Puddle for a fortnight. When they arrived, the boy had a terrible limp. When they left, he was walking normally. Gilly Parsons, the pub's landlady, told me that when the trio left, the parents both had tears of joy rolling down their cheeks. It was rumoured that a patient, a solitary man in his 40s, had travelled from Germany especially for a consultation but I did not see him myself.

Occasionally, a reporter would turn up and ask Belinda and Boris for an interview. A television crew turned up once too. But the brother and sister would never speak to anyone about what they did. This was not particularly out of a sense of modesty or a fear that they would be besieged by more patients than they could deal with. Belinda told me once that they did not like talking about their gifts because they were given to them by God. 'It would be disrespectful for us to take credit for our gifts,' she said. They both believed that if they gave interviews and talked about their work then God would take away the gifts He had given them. 'The people who need us will find us,' said Boris, quite simply.

The Bickersons had both enjoyed good health until one day when I had had a telephone call from Belinda asking me to call round to see her brother. She told me that he had a terrible pain in his right temple and double vision in the eye on that side. When I questioned her, she admitted that he also had difficulty opening his mouth.

I'd never seen a patient with the problem before but even before I saw him I was pretty sure that Boris was suffering from a disorder called temporal arteritis; a problem also known as giant-cell arteritis. It's a disease that usually attacks older people, most commonly those in their 60s and 70s, and it affects more women than men. But in medicine, statistics are of limited relevance and even though a problem may be commoner in a particular age or ethnic group that doesn't mean that it cannot affect others outside the usual range.

When I arrived at their home, I realised that it was the first time I'd ever been inside the house. I knew them both well and we always stopped and spoke when we met in the village but they didn't mix socially with anyone in the village and I don't think either of them had ever been in the Bilbury village pub, the 'Duck and Puddle'.

Belinda took me upstairs. As we climbed the staircase, I couldn't help noticing that it was decorated on each side with beautifully framed prints by Hogarth which looked to me to be very early and probably very valuable. I wondered if they were original, prints actually made by Hogarth and his wife from the famous copper plates, and I couldn't help wondering if Patchy Fogg, my friend the antiques dealer, had ever seen them or even knew the prints were there.

'I can't do anything for him myself,' Belinda told me, as we climbed. 'I'm too close to him.'

Boris was lying in a huge four poster bed and he looked as ill and miserable as anyone would look if they had a bad headache and double vision and couldn't open their mouth properly. Actually, to be fair, he looked much more cheerful than I would have looked in those circumstances.

He had a slight temperature, the skin on his forehead and scalp was tender to the touch and he had double vision. When I talked to him, it was clear that he also had symptoms of polymyalgia rheumatica – a disorder which often goes hand in hand with temporal arteritis. He had severe pains in his shoulders and his pelvis which had started only that day. There was absolutely no doubt about the diagnosis. In large hospitals in London and in other big cities, temporal arteritis was being confirmed by taking a biopsy of the artery. I didn't think that would be available locally and I knew Boris wouldn't want to travel to the hospital. Besides, a negative biopsy result doesn't mean that the patient doesn't have the disease.

The treatment for temporal arteritis and polymyalgia rheumatica was the same then as it is now: quite high doses of corticosteroid. I took some blood to send off to the laboratory in Barnstaple and told Boris that I would come back with some tablets I wanted him to take. I explained that the corticosteroid would need to be taken in quite high doses to start with and then gradually tapered off over the period of a year or maybe even a little more.

'Do you mean he has to take these pills for a year!' said Belinda, horrified.

'I'm afraid so. If he doesn't take them then the eye problem could get worse – and maybe even end up with Boris losing the sight in that eye.'

'But Boris hates pills,' said Belinda. 'And so do I!'

'I do too,' I told her. 'I wouldn't prescribe anything that wasn't essential.'

Belinda looked at me and then nodded.

As I turned to go, I noticed a cream silk nightdress neatly folded on the other pillow. I said nothing but headed back down the stairs followed by Belinda.

'It's just for the comforting,' she said, as I prepared to leave.

I looked at her, slightly puzzled.

'I saw you notice my nightdress,' she said. 'I forgot to move it.'

I put my arm around her shoulder. 'It's none of my business, nor anyone else's for that matter,' I told her softly.

She looked up at me and sort of half smiled. 'It's just for the comforting,' she repeated softly in an explanation I did not ask for or expect.

Incest happens a good deal in North Devon, especially in the more remote villages where in-breeding was common, but it was the first time I had come across it in Bilbury. If incest it really was. Maybe, as Belinda said, it was just for the comforting. But why should I interfere? I knew that Miss Bickerson had a hysterectomy many years earlier and so there wasn't any chance of there being any notable consequences even if they went a step or two beyond 'the comforting'.

I told her that I would be back with Boris's pills within twenty minutes or so, and that I would send the blood sample off to the laboratory in Barnstaple so that the diagnosis could be confirmed.

For the next month or so, Boris's condition improved steadily.

The laboratory confirmed that the diagnosis was the correct one and the corticosteroids I had prescribed did their job well. After a month or so, all of Boris's symptoms either disappeared or were dramatically reduced and the pains in his shoulders and other big muscles had completely disappeared.

And that is when the trouble started.

Patients are often unwilling to carry on with a course of treatment when the symptoms and signs of their illness improve.

'I talked to a friend of mine about these steroids you're giving Boris,' said Belinda one day. 'And she said these drugs have a lot of nasty side effects.' She pulled a piece of paper out of the pocket of the ancient cardigan she invariably wore. 'I wrote down some of the side effects,' she said.

'I know about the side effects,' I said gently. 'But the drug is curing Boris's condition.'

'High blood pressure, weight gain, cataracts, glaucoma, a swollen face, insomnia, nervousness, osteoporosis, stomach bleeding, swollen ankles, muscle weakness, increased chance of developing an infection…' Belinda read out a list of the known side effects.

'All that's true,' I agreed, interrupting the recitation. 'That's one of the reasons why I call in to see Boris every week. I want to see that he's still improving but I also want to look for any side effects. It's dangerous and irresponsible to give steroids to someone who doesn't really need them but when a patient has a serious disorder there is no doubt that steroids can be life-saving.'

'And the dose Boris is taking is very high,' said Belinda, who seemed to give more credence to what her friend had told her than to what I was trying to explain.

To be honest, I was not surprised by her attitude.

Belinda was proud and protective and apprehensive and not a woman who felt entirely at home in the latter part of the twentieth century. They did not have central heating, a modern stove, a washing machine or a television set. They cut their grass with a scythe and a strange-looking Victorian lawn mower which was pulled by one of their horses. She was, I think it is fair to say, nervous about anything invented since electricity and the telephone. Actually, I'm not sure that she was happy about either of those.

I tried to explain to her that I agreed with her that doing nothing is sometimes the best and safest option. 'There is a tendency these days for everyone to want to do something when the best results are often obtained by doing nothing – but doing nothing with a judicious mixture of caution, understanding and awareness – with a pinch of fear thrown in to keep everyone on their toes. But in Boris's case doing nothing would be dangerous and possibly fatal.'

I could tell by the way she looked at me that she still didn't believe me or accept that her brother needed treatment.

'The dose has come down dramatically,' I told her. 'And over the next twelve months I'll slowly taper the dosage until he can stop taking them.'

'Twelve months!' cried Belinda.

'I'm reducing the dosage already,' I told her. 'And it will come down a good deal over the next few months.'

But I could tell that Belinda wasn't happy.

When I returned a week later they were both unusually quiet and although Boris was still improving I knew that something was wrong.

'We've stopped the pills,' Belinda announced suddenly.

'We're very grateful to you,' said Boris. 'But I'm better now. My symptoms have all gone and there really doesn't seem any point in my still taking the drugs.'

I had been half expecting this.

As I have already pointed out, patients who feel well often don't want to take the medicines which they need. So, for example, patients who have high blood pressure may have no symptoms at all. They often wonder why it is necessary for them to take drugs. And if the drugs cause unpleasant side effects, as they often do, then patients may simply stop taking them with disastrous results. Patients with diabetes sometimes have very few symptoms and wonder why they need to carry on with their treatment. It is easy to persuade a patient who is in severe pain to take a painkiller but it can be difficult to persuade a patient who has a hidden infection to take an antibiotic which they need and which may cause nasty side effects.

'The symptoms went very quickly,' said Belinda. 'The drugs are very powerful and there is no doubt that they worked.'

Boris seemed embarrassed. 'But it seems silly to take the risk of continuing with them,' he said.

'You really do need to keep taking the steroids,' I told him. 'There's a lot the experts still don't know about temporal arteritis but the inflammation that caused your symptoms is probably still there and there could be a risk of it coming back.'

'Well if it does come back then I can start taking the tablets again,' said Boris firmly, as though this settled the question.

'It's not that simple,' I told him. 'For one thing the inflammation can affect a number of arteries in different parts of the body. If the condition flares up again you could lose your sight permanently.'

'Oh, I don't think so!' said Boris. 'I only had double vision last time. And the corticosteroids soon dealt with that.'

'I can't promise it would be that easy to deal with another time,' I pointed out. 'If we don't deal with this problem it could make you blind. And I don't know what's happening to your other arteries.'

I explained that the inflammation which had caused his earlier symptoms could affect arteries elsewhere in his body. 'There's even a risk that your aorta could be involved,' I said. 'And if your aorta becomes affected then the consequences could be terrible.'

'What sort of terrible?' asked Boris.

'An aortic aneurysm can develop,' I pointed out. 'The aorta is the biggest and most important artery in your body. If it develops an aneurysm then the aneurysm could burst. Or you could have a split or a tear in the wall of the aorta – a dissecting aorta.'

'Is that bad?' asked Boris, now a little quieter.

'It's very bad,' I told him. I saw no point in trying to hide things from him. I felt it was vital that he kept taking the corticosteroid tablets. 'If the wall of the aorta splits then blood can flow into the split and the whole aorta can rupture.'

'Can they treat that?'

'If the rupture isn't too big and you're close to a good hospital when the aorta splits, and there is no delay in getting you into the operating theatre and there is a skilled, experienced surgeon available to repair the split then it can be treated,' I said. 'That's rather a lot of 'ifs'.'

'My friend Matilda says that steroids are very dangerous drugs,' said Belinda suddenly. She'd been listening to what I had told them but she didn't seem to have heard anything I'd said. Maybe she just didn't want to hear what I'd told them.

'Is Matilda the friend who gave you the list of side effects associated with the steroids?'

'Yes. She has several medical books which she bought from her doctor when he retired.'

'Is she a doctor?'

'Not exactly a doctor, no.'

'A pharmacist?'

'No, she's a herbalist,' said Belinda defiantly.

'You know that I have great respect for all forms of medicine,' I told her, trying to remain patient. 'And I know that herbalists can help a lot of people. You must also know that I don't prescribe drugs unless I really think they're necessary!'

Both Boris and Belinda looked a little sheepish.

'You have to trust me when I tell you that the corticosteroids are necessary,' I said. 'I know it's difficult to believe that they're necessary now that Boris's symptoms have more or less disappeared but if you stop them then the consequences could be disastrous.' I agreed that steroids are powerful drugs which can cause a good many side effects, agreed that they obviously need to be treated with great respect but pointed out that when they are really needed there is no doubt that they can be life-changing.

‘I don’t believe in over-treating patients,’ I told them. ‘I don’t treat patients when they don’t need it or when they won’t benefit from them. I do believe in trying to assess the risks against the gains. So, I wouldn’t give a potentially lethal drug to a patient suffering from hay fever. The disease doesn’t justify the risk. And I don’t believe in recommending treatments which aren’t sensible. So, for example, I wouldn’t advocate an operation to treat varicose veins on a 97-year-old woman with heart failure, kidney failure, liver failure and septicaemia. But giving steroids to a patient with this condition isn’t over-treatment. There are risks, of course there are risks, but the risks of taking the drug are much lower than the risks of not taking the drug.’

Boris and Belinda said they would think about it and Belinda said she wanted to talk to her friend the herbalist before making a decision. They said they’d come and see me in the surgery and tell me their decision. I asked if they would speak to a consultant in Barnstaple but they both refused.

It was three days before they came to a morning surgery at Bilbury Grange, and I knew the minute they walked into my consulting room that they had decided that Boris would not be taking any more of the steroid tablets.

I tried again to persuade them that it was important that he carried on with the drug. But I’m afraid I failed. I think Boris would have taken the corticosteroids if he had been alone. But Belinda, advised by Matilda, her friend the herbalist, was adamant that he should stop taking them.

And there was nothing more that I could do.

I suggested again that they speak to another doctor. I offered to make an appointment for them to see a consultant in Barnstaple or Exeter. I offered to speak to their friend Matilda to try to change her mind and to explain to her just how dangerous untreated temporal arteritis can be. But nothing worked. They were adamant. All that was left was for me to say a silent prayer that Boris would not suffer a relapse. I felt that it was not really the way I wanted to practise medicine.

Prayer has its place in healthcare but I prefer to use it alongside other remedies or as a sole remedy when there is nothing else that can be done.

For a while, I thought Boris had got away with it.

Another three months went by and in that time, I saw them several times, occasionally individually and sometimes together. Boris didn’t come to the surgery but I called in when I was passing their home.

‘I’m fine, doctor,’ said Boris with a big smile. ‘I didn’t need those pills of yours after all!’

‘You have to admit that Matilda was right and you were wrong!’ said Belinda. She said it as though she were teasing but I got the feeling that there was also an element of seriousness about what she was saying. She seemed to enjoy the fact that the orthodox trained doctor appeared to have wanted to prescribe a powerful drug unnecessarily.

I didn’t say anything.

I was not convinced that they had been right to stop the pills. I was still desperately worried that the inflammation might still be affecting Boris’s arteries. And I was still concerned lest he suddenly lost his sight or suffered a major crisis if his aorta started to split.

It was his aorta.

You never know when these things are going to happen.

In a small way Boris was lucky, I suppose.

The problem with an aortic dissection is that the symptoms are easily confused with the symptoms of other disorders.

Patients who have a dissecting aneurysm in their aorta may have severe chest pain, severe abdominal pain or severe back pain. They may be short of breath, they may have difficulty in walking or, they may have the symptoms of a stroke. And so a dissecting aneurysm can be mistaken for a heart attack, a severe chest infection, a back problem or a stroke. It isn’t always easy to make the diagnosis.

But with Boris, I knew when I took the telephone call what was wrong with him.

It was three o’clock on a Sunday morning. There was no moon and it was pitch black outside. It was raining heavily. I consoled myself with the thought that it wasn’t too cold outside and it wasn’t snowing!

‘It’s about Boris,’ said a voice I recognised instantly.

‘What’s happened?’

‘He’s got a pain in his back,’ said Belinda. ‘It came on suddenly.’

‘Did he say what sort of pain?’

‘He said it felt as though something was tearing open inside him.’

‘Can he sit?’ I asked.

‘He’s half sitting up in bed,’ said Belinda. ‘He’s sweating and pale and he looks awful.’

I didn’t need to ask any more questions. I told Belinda that I would be at their house as soon as I could.

‘Get him ready for me to take him into Barnstaple,’ I told her.

‘Are you going to call an ambulance?’ she asked.

‘There isn’t time,’ I told her. ‘I’ll take him there in my car. You can come with us.’

As I climbed into my clothes, told Patsy where I was going and told her that I would have to take Boris into Barnstaple myself, because there wouldn’t be time to wait for an ambulance to arrive. I found myself wondering why medical emergencies so often seem to take place at night when the weather is bad.

‘Why don’t I call the hospital?’ asked Patsy. ‘I could tell them what’s happened and that you’re on your way.’

I kissed her, told her she was brilliant and asked her to tell the duty house surgeon that I was bringing in a patient with a dissecting aortic aneurysm. ‘They’ll need to get a theatre ready,’ I told her. ‘Tell them it’s a patient who has temporal arteritis so there’s really no doubt about the diagnosis.’

When I got to the Bickersons’, I didn’t bother examining Boris. I didn’t even take his blood pressure. I told Belinda to help me carry him down to the car and we lay him on the back seat. Belinda squeezed in alongside him. It was one of many times that I was grateful that I had a large car with room for a patient on the back seat.

It was, I think, the longest journey I’ve ever made. On the way there, the weather gods decided to add a little lighting and thunder to the mixture they’d already prepared and to turn the night into a fully-fledged, full-dress rehearsal for the Day of Judgement and the arrival of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. If those gloomy future hours turn out to be anywhere near as full of flashes and bangs as were the thunderstorms which ravaged North Devon that night, we will all be in for a shocking surprise.

The road to Barnstaple twists and turns. It goes up and it goes down and there are scores of blind bends. Fortunately, at that time of night there is usually little traffic and with the storm in full spate, I managed to drive all the way to Barnstaple without seeing any other motorist. I was convinced that Boris wouldn’t make it to the hospital. I could hear him groaning with the pain, and Belinda told me time and time again that he was in distress and looked very ill. All I could do was to tell her to comfort him and to use every ounce of her healing power to keep him alive until we reached Barnstaple.

We made it.

The house surgeon, bless him, had believed what Patsy had told him and was standing in the hospital doorway with two nurses, two porters and a trolley.

They helped me put Boris onto the trolley and then whisked him straight to the operating theatre where the surgical registrar and a team of nurses were already scrubbed and waiting.

The anaesthetist later told me that if we’d taken five minutes more for the journey, Boris would have definitely been dead. If I’d called an ambulance and waited for them to take him into Barnstaple, he would have been dead. And if Patsy hadn’t thought to ring ahead and tell them that I was bringing in a patient with a dissecting aneurysm, he would have been dead. Once again, that is a lot of ‘ifs’. I was so very grateful that the hospital had believed me and had accepted the diagnosis which Patsy had relayed to them.

It was nearly 5 a.m. when I got back to Bilbury Grange and fell into bed for a couple of hours sleep before another day started.

It’s easy to criticise Belinda and her friend Matilda for insisting that Boris stop the corticosteroids but I understand why they felt that way.

I just wish I had been able to persuade them that the drugs were truly necessary.

Still, Boris survived and so the whole affair had a happy ending.

And when Boris came out of hospital some time later, I had no trouble in persuading him (or Belinda) that he should take the drugs which had been prescribed.

Iolanthe and Bertie in River Cottage

River Cottage remained empty for nearly a year after the delightful Miss Gwilliams died.

No one wanted to live there because it was so close to the river that the ground floor was either wet or under water for most of the winter months.

The owners, a rather naïve couple from London, had bought the cottage in the middle of a hot summer, thinking it would make a splendid (and rather cheap) holiday home. They had apparently not noticed the high water mark on the internal walls downstairs. When their carpets, television set and furniture had twice been ruined by the uninvited river water which had entered their home, they decided they'd had enough. They tried to sell the cottage and this time were naïve enough to hope to recover a good part of the price they had paid. They were, I suppose, hoping to find another couple of innocent buyers. It was never going to happen.

In despair, they had offered the cottage a peppercorn rent of £20 a year. Their only stipulation was that the person renting the cottage would be responsible for all the outgoings such as repairs and local taxes. A lovely lady called Miss Gwilliams had rented it, perfectly aware of the watery drawback, and had turned the place into a home on stilts. She lived upstairs and hardly bothered with the downstairs rooms.

And then, when she had died at the age of 92, the Londoners had made another attempt to find a buyer.

This time they had been far less ambitious in their asking price and they had managed to sell the property to a couple from Ilfracombe, a seaside resort just a few miles away, who wanted to get away from the busy excitement of a town with a population that was, at the time, close to 10,000 in the winter and double that in the summer holiday season.

The village of Bilbury, with a modest year-round population of around 600, seemed perfect.

And there was no doubt that, if you were prepared to accept that the downstairs was pretty well uninhabitable, River Cottage was a pretty good buy. The average price of a property in Bilbury in the mid-1970s had, like property prices elsewhere in England, begun to accelerate and was already around £10,000 to £12,000.

In contrast, the asking price for River Cottage was just £3,500.

This was, I suspect, considerably less than the previous owners had paid for it. But they were, I think, relieved to get rid of the cottage which was for them undoubtedly a constant reminder of their mistaken enthusiasm.

And for that now modest sum, the buyer received the cottage, the river bank and half a stretch of river (the boundary line of the property ended in the middle of the river), five acres of rather scruffy woodland, three acres of pastureland and an old two storey hay barn. The cottage, which was just over 100-years-old, was one of the newest properties in the village. The barn was a youngster; no more than sixty or seventy-years-old.

Neither the Londoners nor Miss Gwilliams had ever done anything with the barn. And I doubt if they had ever intended to do anything with it. Miss Gwilliams was quite happy with the accommodation provided by the cottage. The barn held no attractions for her. The London owners had not seen the barn as an asset but rather as an unsightly excrescence, cluttering up a small portion of their landscape.

But, neglected and unwanted as it had been, the barn was a solid structure, built out of good stone and with walls which were two or three feet thick. The roof appeared to have been fairly freshly supplied with new, red tiles. If you had to have a barn in your life then it was a good barn to have.

Like the cottage itself, the ground floor of the barn flooded when the weather was bad and the river running high but the top floor, tucked under its newly tiled roof, was dry and rather cosy. There were, it is true, a few families of woodworm munching away at the rafters but they not been greedy and they had left plenty of wood behind to help hold up the stuff above them. Someone, at some stage, had even put four skylights into the roof so that the area wasn't at all dark or gloomy.

The couple who had bought the cottage, the barn, half a stretch of river and everything that went with them, were Iolanthe and Bertie Fielding. There are few secrets in North Devon and it was widely known that they had obtained it for the fairly bargain price of £2,750.

For several years, the Fieldings had paid a rent of £5 a month for a neat two bedroomed white-washed cottage with a decent sized garden and spectacular sea views. The rent was low because although the house had been on the market for three years, with an absurdly low asking price, there had been no takers.

Most people who buy houses like to think that their new home will pretty well stay where it is and won't move about much. One or two London buyers had shown interest, thinking that they had perhaps spotted the bargain of a lifetime, but when they saw that the two neighbouring cottages had already fallen down onto the rocks below, they quickly withdrew their offers and hot-footed it back to the big city where accommodation may not have such splendid views but can usually be relied upon to be where you left it when you arrive home from work in the evening.

All had gone well until one day when Bertie Fielding had come home from a hard day emptying septic tanks and found his beloved, Iolanthe, sitting in the kitchen looking out of a large hole where a wall had previously been quietly keeping out the weather. The wall was now scattered among the rocks and the surf some distance below.

Fortunately, all was not lost.

The extraordinarily low rent which they had been paying for their cliff top cottage meant that the Fieldings had been able to put away a little money into their joint savings account at the Barnstaple and Ilfracombe Building Society and so, in due course, when their own cottage became uninhabitable and River Cottage became available, they were able to make a substantial down payment on River Cottage. The manager of the Barnstaple and Ilfracombe Building Society, who regarded the Fieldings as good customers, had been happy to make up the shortfall.

It is always nice when serendipity does a nice couple a good turn and in this instant there is no doubt that serendipity had done its business in spades.

I don't think I have ever known a couple to be so delighted at having bought their own home. They didn't care that the downstairs got a little wet from time to time. All they cared about was the fact that the house was theirs. 'So, our damp patch is bigger than most people's damp patch!' said Iolanthe, who was an ebullient woman with a laugh that could crack plaster. The jest always produced a jolly response and Iolanthe, never one to resist a jolly response, repeated it on every available occasion.

And to those who argued that living in a damp house must be unhealthy, Iolanthe pointed out that the previous tenant, Miss Gwilliams, had been 92-years-old when she had died.

It was good to see River Cottage occupied again.

I saw it shortly after Miss Gwilliams died and it looked a very sad place; almost entirely empty, with nothing in it except an old-fashioned, black, bakelite landline telephone sitting on the floor like a large toad.

The Fieldings were unusual in a number of respects and the most obvious was, perhaps, their age difference.

When Bertie and Iolanthe married, she was 67-years-old and he was just 20. Bertie's parents, a phlegmatic pair who were, generally speaking, regarded as pretty well impossible to shock, were nevertheless slightly surprised to find that they were a quarter of a century younger than their daughter-in-law.

Iolanthe had what can safely be described as an interesting past. She had been a nun, a librarian, a chorus girl in a troupe of entertainers which worked the cruise ships in the Mediterranean and the Caribbean, and a belly dancer in what sounded like a rather seedy nightclub in Cairo where, I confess, I always rather suspected that dancing was only one of her responsibilities.

She was an optimistic woman. When she and Bertie became engaged, she came to see me to ask if I thought she was too old to start a family. Disappointed by my discouraging reply she founded the North Devon Belly Dancing Association and started teaching belly dancing on Wednesday evenings in the Kentisbury Village Hall. Several of my patients became enthusiastic members of Mrs Fielding's class. Adrienne Fogg, my sister-in-law and Patchy Fogg's wife, was a regular student too.

Iolanthe's husband, Bertie was definitely not a belly dancer. He was well equipped in the belly department but not known to be keen on forcing it to undulate in public.

Bertie drove and operated a tanker which emptied cess pits and septic tanks and he was widely known, with searing and cruel accuracy, as Bertie the Stink. If you met Bertie dressed in his Sunday best and reeking of aftershave, you would still know what he did for a living.

(At the time there were, in and around Bilbury, four Berties and to avoid confusion they were all known by a qualifying addition to their names. This practice was imported from Wales, which is only a few miles away from the North Devon coast, where approximately 90% of the male population are called either Evans or Davies. To help villagers identify one another, Mr Evans the butcher will be known as Evans the Butcher, Mr Evans the baker will be called Evans the Baker and Mr Evans the taxi driver will be known as Evans the Taxi. And so, the Bertie who once worked at the garden centre on the road to the village of Westward Ho! was still known was Bertie the Plant even though he left the garden centre some years previously to take up employment as a butcher's assistant and part-time fireman. The Bertie who had been pool champion at the Duck and Puddle for as long as anyone could remember was known as Bertie the Balls. And the Bertie who delivered buns and pies for a baker who had a shop in Combe Martin was known to everyone as Bertie the Pie. Our Bertie, however, was Bertie the Stink. It is no relevance whatsoever but I cannot help pointing out that there used to be a Welsh undertaker in South Molton who was known to everyone as 'Dai the Coffin' and a Welsh vicar in Howbury St Mary's whose Christian name was Evan. I was always amused by that for has there ever been a more appropriately named clergyman?)

Once they had purchased their property, and its accompanying appurtenances, its barn, land and half a river, the Fieldings set about turning their new purchases into a home to suit their requirements.

Iolanthe and Bertie put a false floor onto the large ground floor of the barn so that Iolanthe could run her belly dancing classes at home. This, they decided, would save them a goodly sum of money for it would mean that they had no need to rent the Kentisbury Village Hall. It would also enable Iolanthe to expand the size of the class since the new ground floor of the barn was considerably larger than the nearby Village Hall. The false floor was carefully designed to sit a few inches above the high water level of the river in winter.

Upstairs in the barn, Bertie began to build the trestle tables which would carry his model railway layout. He was a remarkably patient man. He knew that it would be some years before his dream would be finished. ‘It’s something to get my teeth into,’ he explained. ‘A proper, big project!’

Bertie did not actually have a model railway but ever since he’d seen a railway modelling magazine, he had dreamt of owning a scale model railway; complete with stations, sidings, mountain passes, tunnels and little people standing around on platforms and in fields. I once had a patient who had a wonderful model railway in the loft of his home. He used to run trains according to a time table and when he died his widow carried on making sure that the trains ran on time – darting up the stairs to the loft to make sure that the 4.35 p.m. passenger train from Paddington to Truro left bang on time. When she went on holiday, she recruited a friend to keep the trains running.

Since Iolanthe and Bertie had decided to use the barn as part of their home it was, perhaps, not surprising that one or the other of them came up with the idea of building a bridge between the two buildings at first floor level. The bridge was designed to enable them to pass from their cottage to the barn during the winter months without having to put on waders.

It was not, of course, the sort of covered bridge which department stores commonly use to connect various departments which are separated from each other by road. It wasn’t even the sort of solid bridge which railway companies build to connect the Up platform with the Down platform.

It was, to be honest, more the sort of bridge that is seen on those television documentaries which describe the lifestyle of fairly primitive people living in mountain areas – the sort of people who regard themselves as well dressed when they are sporting a loin cloth and a few feathers. The bridge consisted of two pieces of thick rope which were at one end tied firmly to bolts drilled into the cottage bedroom and at the other end to bolts fixed to the first floor of the barn. The two ropes were fixed about three feet apart, with one above the other, and to pass from one building to the other you walked along the lower rope, effectively a tightrope, while using the second rope as something to hold onto.

Both Bertie and Iolanthe were surprisingly nimble at crossing from the cottage to the barn, and vice versa, by means of their home-made bridge. I tried it once and twice and have to confess that I did not feel entirely comfortable doing so. These days, of course, planning officers, health and safety busybodies and regulation watchers or one sort or another would have put their feet down firmly and would doubtless have outlawed the scheme. The 1970s, particularly the 1970s as enjoyed in Bilbury, were a little less encumbered by such outposts of officialdom.

Iolanthe and Bertie had been living at River Cottage for about three months when Iolanthe came to see me complaining of what seemed a rather confusing collection of symptoms.

‘I’ve got a terribly irritating cough,’ she told me. ‘And I’ve got a headache that just won’t go away.

She was wheezing too, and clearly short of breath.

‘I feel weak and I sweat a lot at night,’ she continued. ‘And I’ve got aches and pains everywhere. It’s not like me.’

And it was not, I knew, at all like her.

Iolanthe Fielding may have been in her 70s but she was remarkably fit. All that belly dancing had kept her lithe and healthy.

‘How is your appetite?’

‘Gone. I used to eat like a horse. But now I hardly touch my meals.’

Put together, the symptoms rather reminded me of farmer’s lung, a disease that wasn’t particularly rare in my part of the world but seemed rather unlikely since Iolanthe wasn’t a farmer and never had been. I checked her pulmonary function with a small gadget I had purchased after seeing an advertisement in the back of a medical journal. The reading I obtained proved what I already knew – that Iolanthe’s breathing was poor. I then took some blood samples and sent her off to the hospital to have her chest X-rayed. It seemed possible that she had asthma or a chest infection – maybe even pneumonia. If it hadn’t been October I’d have even considered the possibility that she had hay fever. But October is definitely not the hay fever season in North Devon. I wasn’t convinced that Iolanthe had an infection so I didn’t start her on antibiotics.

And then the next day Bertie came to the surgery with exactly the same symptoms.

‘I don’t know what Iolanthe’s got,’ he said. ‘But I’ve caught it. The darned thing must be catching.’

And for a moment I thought perhaps it might be a chest infection after all. I took some blood from Bertie and sent him along for a chest X-ray.

I seriously considered starting them both on antibiotics but, and I don’t know why, I was still convinced that they had some sort of allergy problem rather than an infection.

I tentatively made the diagnosis the following day when Mrs Pearce, a local spiritualist whose claim to fame in the village was that she had the most extensive collection of cacti in North Devon, came into my surgery complaining of pretty much the same symptoms as Iolanthe and Bertie.

And the bells started to ring deafeningly loudly when Adrienne Fogg came in complaining that she too was short of breath, sweating and had a cough and a headache.

I then realised that, unlikely as it had seemed, my first diagnosis had been the right one.

None of them was a farmer but they all had farmer's lung.

Now, farmer's lung doesn't sound terribly threatening.

It appears, at first, to be in the same category as housemaid's knee or tennis player's elbow – an unpleasant disorder that produces symptoms which are usually temporary and not too difficult to treat.

But farmer's lung is a terrible disease and very threatening. It's a horrid disease. It is also known as hypersensitivity pneumonitis and, like all diseases with an – 'itis' at the end of its name, it is an inflammation. In this case, it is the lungs which are inflamed.

Farmer's lung is an allergic disease which is caused by inhaling mould spores which lie in the dust of old hay, straw or grain.

In the same way that plants produce seeds, so moulds produce tiny spores. These are so tiny that around a quarter of a million could sit comfortably on a pin without fear of being overcrowded. The mould spores become attached to air born dust particles and wander about in the air. It is, therefore, easy for anyone in an area contaminated by mould spores to inhale three quarters of a million in a minute. And so someone who spent an hour in a mould-contaminated area could easily end up inhaling around 50 million spores. That's a lot of mould spores.

Normally, the body gets rid of dust particles and spores by sneezing or coughing. But mould spores are inhaled in huge numbers and they are very small so there is a real risk that a good many of them will get through the body's defences.

When they do manage to travel into the body, the spores settle into the lower part of the lungs and produce toxins which travel into the bloodstream. The body's reaction to the toxins produced by the spores cause permanent damage to the lungs and that's why the patient finds it increasingly difficult to breathe. The whole reaction of the body is a huge allergy reaction which produces symptoms rather like pneumonia. However, the condition is not in the slightest bit infectious or contagious. The only reason that several people may all suffer from the condition together is that they have been living or working together in a contaminated area.

The acute form of farmer's lung tends to develop quite quickly after exposure to the mould spores – usually within a day or two at the most. The symptoms may then hang on for a week or two.

The problem becomes serious when the patient is repeatedly exposed to mould spores. And then the symptoms just get worse. Farmer's lung can often become chronic, causing damage to the lungs and leading to serious long-term consequences. Eventually, the disease is irreversible and sufferers have increasing shortness of breath. They become exhausted by any exertion, they are physically weak and they cough pretty much constantly. It is a very, very unpleasant disorder. A good many farmers have lived out their final years incapacitated and unable to do anything other than sit in an armchair.

The cause of the problem was obvious, of course.

I hurried round to River Cottage and found both Iolanthe and Bertie sitting upstairs in their small living room. They were in a bad way.

'You stay here,' I told them. 'Do you mind if I have a look around your barn?'

They obviously didn't mind.

Not fancying their rope bridge (which I had tried and found a little too exciting for my taste) I went downstairs and across the short distance to the barn.

The barn appeared to have been cleaned – both downstairs and upstairs – but when I managed to crawl underneath the false floor which had been installed downstairs for Iolanthe's belly dancing classes I found that there were huge amounts of old hay and straw under the new floor boards. Iolanthe and Bertie had never bothered to clean out that part of the barn, assuming, I suppose, that no one would ever see that it was rather untidy.

Now I knew why they and some of their students had farmer's lung.

I went back to the cottage and told them both that they were not to go into the barn for the time being. I told Iolanthe that her classes had be cancelled for a while and I told Bertie that he would have to put his model railway on hold until the barn had been properly cleaned.

I then got in touch with Adrienne and Mrs Peace and other members of the belly dancing class.

Fortunately, none of them had developed severe symptoms and it was clear that within a week or so they would all make a complete recovery.

My own symptoms, which developed the evening of the day when I'd crawled under the false floor in the barn, included nasal congestion, itchy eyes and a nasty skin rash. Thankfully, all those annoying symptoms disappeared within 48 hours. I was lucky: I didn't get any of the breathing problems. But that may have been because I had the knowledge and the foresight to wear a dust mask when I went into the barn.

Iolanthe and Bertie wanted to put on masks and to clean the old hay and straw out of the barn themselves but I persuaded them that this would not be a good idea. Instead, they brought in a specialist firm from Taunton. Men wearing decontamination suits went under the false floor with huge, powerful vacuum cleaners and removed all the bits of hay and straw and all the old dust. It wasn't cheap but it was the most efficient way to clean the barn and make it safe for everyone.

Until this had been done, the barn was closed to everyone.

It took a little while, but everyone made a full recovery and when Bertie, Iolanthe and the belly dancers went back into the barn, there were no further problems.

Within a month, the River Cottage barn was full of life.

Downstairs, Iolanthe and her ladies were busy cramming themselves into suitably uplifting bras and Middle Eastern looking skirts on which they had sewn lots of sequins. Several of the dancers, including Adrienne Fogg, fixed fake rubies into their belly buttons. (Adrienne used a rather strong glue to fix hers and it remained there for two weeks before it fell out when she was in the bank in Barnstaple.)

And upstairs, on the first floor of the barn, Bertie and his father (whose name was also Bertie) were busy building what promised to be the foundations for the largest model railway layout North Devon had ever seen. They had not yet bought any trains or any track, let alone those wonderful little model railway porters and passengers which always help to make a model railway look lived in, but they had made good progress with the tables upon which the whole structure would depend and they had built the backboards upon which the diorama would be painted.

For Iolanthe and for Bertie, business at River Cottage was back to normal.

Dear Miss Gwilliams, a gloriously lively lady, had been very happy in River Cottage and she would, I felt sure, have been delighted to see how much fun Iolanthe and Bertie were having in their new home.

The Celebrity

At first I couldn't remember who he was or, indeed, if I knew him at all. If I did know him then I couldn't remember his name or where I had met him.

I smiled at him and took his outstretched hand.

Patients, even temporary ones from outside the village, don't usually want to shake hands. They come in, sit down and tell me what's worrying them. That's the way the ritual works.

But he definitely wasn't a patient of mine and I knew he didn't live in Bilbury. The population of Bilbury was, at the time, no more than 600 or so and I knew everyone in the village by sight and by name.

That was one part of the puzzle solved.

I was also pretty sure that he didn't live anywhere else in North Devon.

I'm not sure why I knew that but people who live in the wilds of North Devon are somehow distinguishable from visitors from the rest of the world.

Even the resident incomers who have moved into North Devon from other parts of the country, and who have retained their own regional accents are, after a while, fairly easy to identify as 'locals'.

I couldn't tell you why.

Maybe it's the windburn on their faces and hands.

Or maybe it's the slightly relaxed way they meander through life.

'You're looking very well!' the stranger said, when he'd let go of my hand and had sat down. He had a very limp, rather moist handshake and a suntan that had either been obtained from repeated trips to the Caribbean or from long hours lying on a sunbed. He was wearing a rather posh pair of aviator glasses which, I suspected, had probably cost more than the total cost of everything I was wearing. He didn't remove them. He was also wearing a stunningly unconvincing hairpiece which sat on the top of his head like a small, furry animal with its nose tucked under its tail. His waist had gone to the same place as his hair and in its place there was a bulge that would have looked startling on a woman who was carrying triplets and about to deliver them.

'You too,' I said, playing for time and desperately racking my brain in the hope that my inbuilt computer would throw up a name to match the face.

The thing was that his face and voice were both familiar but I wasn't sure whether I really did know him or if he was perhaps someone famous whom I knew only from films or the television. When we meet people we have watched a good deal on the screen, it is natural to think that we know them – and that they must necessarily know us too.

His cheery manner and friendly smile rather convinced me that I did actually know him.

I obviously did not know him well but maybe I had met him somewhere. Maybe, I thought, he was someone I had met when I was making television programmes; a minor celebrity, perhaps: an actor, a television 'personality' or some such. Maybe he and I had chatted in the green room while waiting to go on a television chat show. I used to do the rounds of such things when I did book promotional tours: a radio chat show in the morning, a newspaper interview at lunchtime, a television news programme in the afternoon, a chat show in the evening and a late night radio talk programme to round off the day. A day in day out routine which for me never lasted more than two or three weeks, thank heavens, but for actors, promoting films could go on for long, tiring months. I once met the actor Simon Ward when he had been on the road for six months promoting a film called *Young Winston*. How anyone could cope with answering the same questions for six months was quite beyond my ken.

My patient had the tired, forced and slightly overeager smile of the minor celebrity who knows that if he is not to disappoint then he must constantly sparkle, and that if he is to rise up the ladder of show biz success then he must always be on show, always willing to do whatever it takes to gain another fan, another admirer.

In my experience, such individuals manage to convince themselves that every glance is a glance of certain recognition. When they go out into the world they pretend to do so in disguise so that they aren't photographed by the paparazzi, but the disguise is never difficult to penetrate and they are always disappointed (and sometimes rather cross) if they go to an 'opening' or a fashionable restaurant and no one bothers them.

There is, in practice, only a relatively small divide between the minor and major celebrity and it is a gap which is invariably crossed only as a result of the whims and tyrannies of fate. To the struggling would-be star, the gap must sometimes seem at the same time both tantalisingly small and depressingly unbridgeable. When I made television programmes, I always felt slightly sorry for those who were desperate for fame; so desperate that they would, if necessary, readily accept notoriety as an acceptable alternative and, hopefully, a stepping stone to glory. Most were, in my experience, far more interested in fame than they were in riches.

(One friend of mine, a radio presenter, once confessed that his only aim in life was to be recognised in the supermarket and that he would do pretty well anything to achieve that ambition. But would he have been happy? It's a moot point. Maybe he was lucky not to achieve his ambition for if he had succeeded then he would have doubtless discovered the disappointments, frustrations and fears which are an inevitable part of being a star, and there is a chance that he would have been just as unhappy but without the hope to keep his spirit warm.)

But the fact that the new patient had spoken to me as though we were acquainted, seemed to confirm that we really had met and that he wasn't just someone I'd seen on the television or a magazine cover.

'I'd heard you'd tucked yourself in the wilds of Devon!' he said. 'Lost to the world and hidden away in a tumble-down mansion with your beautiful wife and a host of favoured animals. It's been said that you've abandoned us all so that you can minister to the local sick and needy; a veritable Dr Schweitzer with your own little cottage hospital. That's what I hear.'

'It's hardly a mansion,' I said. 'Though I agree it is rather tumble-down; in parts at any rate.'

'You live a long way from anywhere, don't you?'

'Not really. We're here and this is where we want to be, so we're not a long way from anywhere that we want to be.'

'I got my Chief of Staff to find your address,' he said, as though finding me had been a monumental task. In reality, it wouldn't have taken a serious researcher to find me. I was, after all, listed in the local telephone directory.

'You have a Chief of Staff? That sounds very impressive!'

I really was impressed for I honestly thought that only American Presidents had a Chief of Staff.

'Oh yes,' he said. 'She's a sort of glorified personal assistant. But if you allow them to call themselves your Chief of Staff you can get away with paying much lower wages. They regard the title as status and the status is worth money – they think of themselves as having a foot in the door of show business.'

'Like washing the elephants?'

'Exactly! Or playing the rear half of a pantomime horse. You should get a Chief of Staff for yourself. Don't you get troubled with fan mail?'

I laughed. 'The last reader who contacted me got my name wrong. She wrote to my publisher saying 'I'm a big fan of Veronica Carter. I've read all her books about Bilbury.' So I don't think I need anyone to help me deal with the fans.'

'I was talking to Terry Wogan about you the other day. I asked if you'd died but he said you couldn't be because he'd seen in one of the papers that you'd written another book. I said that maybe you'd died but had left behind a cupboard full of manuscripts which were now being released one at a time to a desperate public. But here you are and I must say you don't look in the slightest bit moribund. Indeed, you look a lot younger than I remembered.'

'No,' I agreed. 'I'm pretty sure that I'm not dead yet.'

'Are you still writing those books of yours?' he asked. 'And are you still writing for the newspapers? I haven't seen your by-line recently.'

'I'm still writing,' I said. 'But these days I don't write for newspapers or magazines. I just write books.'

'One thing I must tell you,' he said, not terribly interested in my answer, 'I came out here yesterday, just to check out the lie of the land, and I called into your local pub for a pie and a pint.'

'The Duck and Puddle?'

'That's the one.'

'An excellent pub; a proper village pub!'

'Brilliant pub,' he agreed. 'Wonderful pies. Marvellous beer. But the fellow behind the bar was the spitting image of that very famous celebrity psychiatrist Professor Eckersley. You must have heard of him?'

'Ah,' I replied, immediately. 'I'll tell 'Harry' the barman. I'm sure he'll be amused.'

I knew that Professor Eckersley didn't want people in London knowing that he was pumping pints in the Duck and Puddle under a nom-de-plume. He wasn't ashamed of his job. But, like Greta Garbo, he just wanted to be left alone.

'For a few minutes I thought it really was him. And then I thought about it and realised what a daft idea it was. Why would London's most famous psychiatrist be pulling pints in a pub in rural Devon?'

'Why, indeed?' I said.

'Must be a doppelganger.' He sounded rather disappointed.

''Harry' will be tickled pink,' I said. 'Is this Professor Eckersley famous?'

'Famous, my love? Oh he's famous all right! He treats all the film stars. He must be worth a fortune. I've met him several times myself.'

He said this as though he were scoring points and I realised that he was one of those very competitive people who seeks every opportunity to express superiority over others. At some point they usually say something like 'This isn't going to be a competition' in a tone which makes it clear that as far as they are concerned everything in the world is competitive.

I was reminded of a slyly competitive boy called Humphrey whom I knew at school.

'Your watch is fast,' I told him one day.

'Faster than yours?'

'Well, yes,' I replied, slightly puzzled.

Humphrey beamed. 'That means it must be better, doesn't it?'

There's really no way to deal with such people other than to agree with them and to express undiluted admiration.

'I'm impressed,' I told the stranger who, after purring for a moment or two, looked at me, holding his head on one side, and examined me as a bird might contemplate a prospective meal.

'You don't remember me, do you?' he said suddenly, rather sharply, on the edge of being offended.

'Of course I do!' I replied, offering a smile of recognition as a token of our apparent friendship.

It wasn't a proper fib because I knew I'd seen him somewhere. I just couldn't quite remember where or when or precisely who he was or what his name was.

'Do you remember making a television programme usually presented by Eamonn Andrews?' he asked, mentioning a programme which was broadcast on the television from London. 'It was only a few years ago,' he added.

And then I remembered.

'Of course,' I said. 'You interviewed me about *The Medicine Men*.'

The Medicine Men was my first book – it was a polemic about the over-close links between the medical profession and the drug industry.

'That's right!'

'You're Logan Berry!'

'That's me!' he agreed. He showed me a huge expanse of sparkling white teeth in what I am sure he believed was a smile. Sadly, the teeth were as convincing as his hair. They were sparkling plastic and designed to be seen from the back row of the circle, rather than from three feet away.

'I was the guest host for that programme. Eamonn was off somewhere else and they hired me as the stand-in.'

Logan Berry was not his real name, of course.

His real name, I remembered, was Percy Braunschweiger but like many celebrities he worked under a more memorable name. You can't become a star if your name is Percy Braunschweiger. I suspected that the name 'Logan Berry' had been selected by his agent or manager. When renaming a prospective star the aim is always to find a name short enough to fit on the front page of a tabloid newspaper. It helps enormously if the name is unusual enough to be memorable. And if the first name can be unique that helps because a newspaper sub editor can then put 'Logan' as a headline (as in 'Logan Eats Mouse for Bet' or 'Logan Spends Night in Nunnery') and everyone will know to whom it refers. If your first name is 'John' or 'David' this simply doesn't work for there are far too many Johns and Davids around.

Suddenly I remembered it all.

In fact, I remembered more than I wanted to remember about Logan Berry.

Meeting him had not been a particularly jolly experience and after our meeting I'd wanted to give him a black eye. Patsy had threatened worse, far worse and I seemed to remember that her threats had involved a pair of hedging shears and a garden hoe.

Logan, I remembered, was one of those people who earns a living on the fringes of show business and who acquires a sort of indistinct fame without having any definable or discernible skills. He couldn't juggle, do magic tricks or dance. He wasn't particularly good at telling jokes and he wasn't a very convincing actor. He couldn't write or play any musical instruments and he certainly couldn't sing. He didn't even have much charm.

What he did have, however, were a fake smile, which he could turn on and off like a light bulb, an ability to promote himself shamelessly, and a willingness to do anything a producer or an editor wanted him to do. Embarrassment was to him as alien as shame. He had, I seemed to remember, once spent a day lying in a bath full of baked beans. For a children's television programme he had sat in pretend stocks while children threw jelly and blancmange at him. In the pantomime season, he happily played an ugly sister or a cruel landlord. In the summer, he worked in theatres at the end of the pier where he made a fool of himself wearing outrageous costumes and merrily prancing about the stage. Offer him a cheque and an audience and he would do and say whatever you wanted him to do and say.

We had, as he reminded me, met on a television chat show.

I had been on tour promoting my first book.

Dr Brownlow had still been alive then and in those days it was not impossible for me to take some time off to promote my books. Logan, who had no medical training and as far as I know no skills or knowledge of anything other than himself, had been hired by the producer to present a programme on which I was booked to appear. One of Logan's tasks was to provide a review of my book live on air.

He had duly launched into a toxic attack in which he had argued that drug companies were doing life-saving work and that I, as a doctor, should be grateful to them rather than critical of some of their methods. He had pointed out that the British Medical Association did not approve of my book, or my criticisms of the drug industry or its influence on doctors. He had added spice to his review by suggesting that as a country GP I really didn't know what I was talking about, had got above myself and should go back to dealing with, as he so memorably put it: 'varicose veins and pimples'.

I had very little experience of television at that time and my attempt at a response was smothered with sneers and laughter from Logan and the programme's other guest and when I pointed out that I had done two year's research for the book, the pair of them dismissed this as irrelevant. I can't remember who the other guest had been. Logan then added that he had been told I had been struck off the medical register for unprofessional conduct and that I wasn't really entitled to call myself 'doctor'.

I was so astonished and horrified by this outrageous lie, a shocking libel, that for a moment I couldn't think of anything to say other than a bald and simple: 'That's not true!'. Logan, prompted in his ear by a message from a terrified studio director who was doubtless worried about lawyers and lawsuits, had immediately offered an ill-tempered apology but the damage had been done.

I remember that I left the studio feeling drained and with an empty feeling in the pit of my stomach.

And now the author of my pain was sitting in my consulting room in Bilbury.

'We had a lot of good fun with your book, didn't we?' said Logan. He frowned, as though in thought. 'Remind me: what was the book about?'

'You may have had good fun,' I said rather more coldly than I intended. 'I don't remember it as being particularly jolly.'

'Oh, you mustn't take these things personally!' Logan said dismissively. He waved his hand, in the casual manner of a man brushing away a cobweb.

I quietly counted to ten, picked up some paperclips and made a short chain. I hate it when people dismiss unfounded criticism as 'not personal'. How could I not take his attack personally? Any book written with heart and passion is a part of the author; as much a part of him as a leg or a kidney. Criticising a book and saying 'don't take it personally' is like criticising a new hairdo and saying 'don't take it personally'. Of course you're going to take it personally. It is personal.

I didn't say anything in reply and was quietly proud of my restraint. The man, though unwelcome, was in my consulting room as a patient.

'What can I do for you?' I asked him. I put the paperclip chain to one side. I was tempted to add: 'Is it varicose veins or pimples?', but I didn't.

'As I thought you would know,' he said, 'I'm appearing in a show in Barnstaple. I'm playing the Wicked Witch in a very wonderful production, and while I was in the area I thought I'd call in and ask you about a little something that's been worrying me.'

'But why come all the way out to Bilbury?' I asked him.

'I remembered you worked in the area and I thought you'd be the man to see,' said Logan, lowering his voice. 'I wanted to see someone I knew but not my usual chap in London. He can be very indiscreet. It's a very confidential problem and with you being in the business, as it were, you'll understand that we need to keep this under our hats.'

'In the business?'

'Show business, of course, dearie!'

'Ah.' I really didn't think of myself as being in show business though it was true that I had for a few years held an Equity card.

I wondered why on earth he had sought me out after being rude to me on the radio. And then I realised that he didn't think of himself as having been rude. To me it was an important subject, something worthy of serious debate, but to him it was just a knockabout few minutes on the wireless and a nice cheque from the broadcaster at the end of it.

'A boyfriend noticed it,' said Logan. He lowered his voice again. I could hardly hear what he was saying. 'It's a little something in a very delicate place,' he added.

Three minutes later he was lying on my couch, with his trousers neatly folded and hanging over the screen. His stomach was so huge that I had to ask him to hold it up out of the way while I examined the target area. Every inch of his skin appeared to be tanned.

'It's in the left one,' he said.

And it was.

There was a palpable swelling on the left side of his scrotum.

‘Is it the big C?’ asked Logan, hardly able to breathe.

‘Do you get any pain with it?’ I asked.

‘Occasionally I do. Sometimes it’s a sharp pain and sometimes it just aches.’

‘Does anything make it worse?’

‘It hurts most after a performance,’ said Logan. ‘I’m always very energetic on stage and we have matinees on Wednesdays and Saturdays. By the evening it really aches.’

‘What about at night? Does it hurt at night?’

‘No. It seems better when I lie down. Is it an infection? I’m very careful who I go to bed with but you never really know, do you?’

‘It’s a varicocele,’ I told him.

‘What on earth is that?’ he demanded, sitting up with some difficulty. I wondered how on earth he managed to prance about on the stage. He really was very fat.

‘It’s like varicose veins inside your scrotum,’ I explained.

‘Not the big C?’

‘No.’

‘Not an infection?’

‘Do you have any symptoms of an infection? A discharge from your penis? A rash anywhere? Urinary troubles?’

‘Nothing at all except this silly lump. Actually the fellow who spotted it said he thought it might be worms living in there. I did a gig on the Isle of Wight last year and you never know what you can get when you go to foreign parts.’

‘I don’t think the Isle of Wight is foreign.’

‘Well it might as well be. You have to go across to it on a ship.’

‘A ferry.’

‘Well I thought we were never going to get there. I’m not good on ships.’

‘It’s just swollen veins,’ I told him. ‘Not worms, not cancer and not syphilis or gonorrhoea.’

‘Will it turn into anything else?’

‘No,’ I told him. ‘It might get a little worse. It could affect your fertility.’

He laughed. ‘Oh, I’m not bothered about that!’ he said. He lay back again, gasping. He looked like a beached whale but he sounded like a fish out of water. He had obviously spent a lot of time sunbathing. The tan was so complete that I thought he had probably been using a sunbed.

‘Do I need to have it removed?’ he asked.

‘Not unless it’s causing you a lot of trouble,’ I told him.

‘Oh, not that much,’ he said quickly. ‘I try to keep away from surgeons whenever possible.’ It appeared that the pain which came on the days when he did two shows was suddenly not quite so troublesome. I have found that this often happens. When a patient discovers that something they thought was serious is not, after all, either deadly or threatening, then the symptoms associated with it somehow become a little less troublesome.

I told him that he could get dressed and he started to pull up his underpants, which he had pushed down to his knees, instead of taking them off completely. They were boxer shorts covered with little pictures of ducks. As he pulled them up, I suddenly saw a small, dark patch on the outside of his left knee. It was about half an inch across, with irregular edges. The area around it was red, as though it were inflamed.

‘How long have you had that?’ I asked him, pointing to the patch on his skin. I had gone quite cold.

The moment I saw it I knew exactly what it was. Tests would need to be done. A histology report would be required. But there was really no need for any investigations. I knew exactly what I was looking at. There was, I thought, no little irony in the fact that Logan had come into my surgery worried about one problem when the real danger lay in another area entirely.

‘Oh that’s been there for years,’ he said dismissively, pulling up his duck covered boxer shorts. ‘It’s probably been there all my life. It’s just a mole thingy. I’ve got rather attached to it. Jeffrey calls it my beauty spot.’

‘Jeffrey?’

‘Jeffrey is my young friend, the one who found that wretched, little lump in my scrotum.’

I nodded. ‘Has it changed at all?’ I asked him.

‘It may have got a bit bigger,’ he said. ‘I don’t really notice it much.’ He peered at it. ‘The edges used to be round,’ he said.

The edges were not now round; they were irregular.

‘Does it itch?’

'Sometimes it does.'

'Does it ever bleed?'

'No, I don't think so. No, I'm pretty sure I've never seen any blood coming out of it.'

I looked at it closely and I could see a drop of bright red blood at one corner. Logan was so obese that he probably couldn't see his knees properly without making a real effort to do so.

'Do you use a sunbed?'

'Oh yes, I hate pasty white bodies,' he said. 'I usually go to a sunning parlour in London, one of the best, a very fashionable place, but I found one down here that works just as well.'

'I think you need to get that looked at,' I told him, trying not to alarm him too much. 'I want you to see a skin specialist.'

'Really?' said Logan, much more cheerful now that he knew that the lump in his scrotum was no more than a lump of varicose veins. He was clearly not in the slightest bit concerned about the skin problem I had spotted.

'Really,' I said.

'I'm not very bothered about it,' he said. 'I think of it as a sort of beauty spot,' he added again.

'It's something you should have looked at,' I insisted.

'Do you think it's something to worry about then?' he asked, starting to get off the couch.

'It's something that needs to be checked,' I told him.

I held out a hand, like a traffic policeman. 'Just stay on the couch for a moment or two.'

I then checked his groin, looking to see if any of his lymph nodes were swollen; to check if the cancer had spread. I got him to undress completely and checked around the rest of his body. I couldn't find any signs that the regional lymph nodes were affected.

'You've got me worried now, doctor,' said Logan. 'You're not playing with me because you're upset about that business in London, are you?'

'I' m not playing with you,' I told him, rather offended that he would even think that, but realising that Logan was such a malicious fellow, untethered by the restraints of good intentions, that he probably imagined everyone else to be the same. 'But you need to get that patch of skin checked out.'

I picked up the telephone, rang the hospital in Barnstaple and spoke to the dermatologist's secretary. She managed to fit Logan into an appointment in two days' time.

Logan, now rather more subdued than he had been on his arrival, left my surgery clutching the piece of paper on which I had written the date and time of his appointment and the name of the doctor he was due to see. I always tried to write such things down for patients. When you are worried it's easy to forget things you've been told or instructions you've been given.

'Will I need to see you again, doctor?' asked Logan, before he left.

'Probably not,' I said. 'The dermatologist at the hospital will look after you now. When do you go back to London?'

'The show has another fortnight to run.'

'Well, I've no doubt that the hospital in Barnstaple will write to your doctor with all the necessary details.'

'Thank you,' said Logan.

He looked at me and bit his lip. He clearly wanted to say something else. I waited.

'On reflection I think I was a bit unfair about your book,' he said.

I didn't say anything.

'I think I owe you an apology,' he continued. 'The producer told me to give you a hard time. I think someone gave him a few quid to make sure that you and your book got roughed up a bit.'

I nodded. I had guessed that he hadn't been rough on me of his own volition.

'But I was impressed with you,' he said. 'You seemed to me to be an honest doctor – someone I could trust. That's why I came to see you rather than just finding a doctor in Barnstaple.'

'Thank you,' I said. It meant a lot. We shook hands. And then put his hand into his inside jacket pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. He handed it to me. 'Take this with my compliments,' he said, as though he'd just handed me the deeds to Buckingham Palace.

When he'd gone I examined the piece of paper he'd given me. It was a ticket for the show he was in – just one ticket. I put it underneath my blotter. Two months later, I found it and threw it away.

I sat there for a few moments and thought about the vanity, the fear and, possibly, the sense of inadequacy which drives people to spend hours lying underneath a suntan lamp. Skin cancers are dramatically greater among individuals who desperately work on their tans. I realise that other people think very differently but it seems to me to be a potentially high price to pay for a relatively small benefit.

And it occurred to me, not for the first time, that vanity, fear and inadequacy have always been a significant cause of problems of many different kinds.

Many people start smoking because they want to look ‘cool’ and sophisticated. Others drink too much alcohol because they are frightened to say ‘no’ when drinking with friends in a pub. And some people, both men and women, have plastic surgery which they really don’t need simply because they want to improve their attractiveness to others.

Vanity, in all its forms, can cause big problems. It has, throughout history, led to many a disaster. And Logan’s vanity very nearly led to his death.

I never heard from Logan again but the dermatologist later told me that he was almost certain that Logan’s melanoma (for the diagnosis was confirmed) had been triggered by the long hours he spent lying under a sunlamp. Sunlight, whether real or artificial, can cause an apparently harmless mole to turn nasty.

Luckily, the cancerous growth had not spread.

Logan’s lymph nodes were not affected and after the patch of skin had been removed, his prognosis was excellent.

But if Logan had not come to my surgery because he’d met me in London and was worried about his harmless varicocele, and if I hadn’t happened to notice the dark growth on his skin, then things could have been very different, and there is no doubt that the outcome would not have been anywhere near as successful.

Once again: so many ‘ifs’.

Funny how things turn out, isn’t it?

He Who Laughs Last

Unless you count the time when he came to help me deal with hungry wasps which had built a nest within the old walls of Bilbury Grange and were munching their way through my consulting room ceiling, I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen Thumper Robinson in my surgery.

'Sorry to bother you, doc,' said Thumper. 'But I've got a bit of a problem.'

'Tell me,' I said.

It was strange having to treat one of my best chums as a patient.

This is, of course, one of the drawbacks of practising in a small village. I knew all my patients well. Some were friends and some, like Thumper, were very close friends.

'My pee has turned blue,' he said bluntly.

My first thought was that the blue colouration must have been caused by something he had eaten. And the only food I knew of which caused urine to turn blue is turkey meat, which contains a substance called tryptophan.

'How blue is it?' I asked.

'Very blue,' replied Thumper.

'Do you have any other symptoms?'

'No. Just the blue pee.'

I gave him a small glass bottle and sent him out to the downstairs lavatory so that he could provide me with a specimen. A couple of minutes later he returned clutching a bottle of urine that was very definitely blue.

I asked him all the relevant questions such as 'Have you ever noticed this before?' and 'Have you eaten any unusual foods?'

The answers were all negative.

I was now becoming concerned. The only disease I could think of which can cause urine to turn strange colours, including blue, is porphyria. And porphyria, of course, is the disease which is believed to have been the cause of George III's madness. (As an aside, it was the king's madness which is reputed to have resulted in America becoming independent and breaking away from British rule.)

Trying not to show my concern, I then started to quiz Thumper about other symptoms which can occur in porphyria. He had none of them.

And, since porphyria is usually inherited, I asked him if anyone in his family had the disease. I didn't expect him to answer in the affirmative and he didn't.

Thumper wasn't at all keen but I insisted on taking a blood sample, which I put aside with the urine sample. I told Thumper that I would send them both off to the laboratory in Barnstaple.

Thumper thanked me but did not seem especially concerned. It occurred to me that he probably didn't realise just how dangerous porphyria could be.

Fifteen minutes later, I was astonished when Patchy Fogg came into the surgery.

'I thought I'd better come and see you because my urine has gone green,' he told me after we'd chatted about this and that for a couple of minutes.

He insisted that he hadn't eaten any unusual foods and that he wasn't taking any medicines that I didn't know about – even ones bought over the counter from a pharmacy. He had not, he said, eaten any asparagus for weeks. He said he knew that asparagus could make urine go green but he said he also knew it gave urine a funny smell and his urine didn't smell that way at all. He had no other symptoms at all. He had no stinging and no urinary frequency. Once again, I sent him out to the downstairs loo to fill a sample bottle with his urine. And when Patchy came back there was no mistaking it: his urine was green.

Now, there aren't many problems that can cause green urine and the only one I could think of is an infection caused by a pseudomonas bacteria. I told Patchy that I'd send the sample off to the laboratory and that as soon as I'd got the results I'd be in touch to tell him whether he needed any treatment – and if so, what. I also took a blood sample. Patchy clearly hadn't expected this and he wasn't very happy about it. But I insisted that it was necessary.

Twenty minutes after Patchy had left, I could hardly believe my eyes when Frank walked into my consulting room. He was, he said, the last patient of the morning surgery.

'Sorry to bother you, doc,' he said. 'But I've got a bit of a problem with my wee.'

I may not always be the brightest star in the firmament but even I was now beginning to suspect that something strange was going on.

'What's the problem with it?'

'It's gone orange,' he said.

My suspicions were now soaring high above the clouds.

Frank, like Thumper and Patchy had absolutely no symptoms of any kind. And he hadn't been eating anything unusual. Blackberries and rhubarb can cause the urine to change colour but he hadn't eaten either of those.

And since I prescribe all the drugs that Frank takes, I knew he wasn't taking any medicines that could cause his urine to turn orange. My first fear was that he had some sort of hepatitis. Infections of the liver can cause the urine to go orange and then dark. I checked Frank's sclera because they usually become discoloured in jaundice but they were fine.

And for the third time that morning I sent a patient out to the downstairs loo to pee into a little glass specimen bottle.

'I need a blood sample too,' I told him.

He seemed strangely reluctant. 'Oh, there's no need for that, doc,' he said, standing up and backing away.

'I need to send a sample to the laboratory,' I insisted.

'I'll come back tomorrow if it isn't any better,' he said, heading for the door.

'I'll get this off to the lab today,' I told him. 'But I really need a blood sample.'

But he'd gone.

I sat in the surgery for a while, wondering what on earth was going on. It was clearly quite impossible for my three friends to have all developed diseases which resulted in their urine changing colour.

And then two things happened which helped me to understand.

First, I looked at the calendar because I had to sign some letters which Miss Johnson had typed for me.

Second, Patsy came into the consulting room and told me that Thumper, Patchy and Frank were all standing around outside Bilbury Grange. In fact, she said, they weren't actually standing but, rather, they were leaning against the side of Thumper's truck. And, she added, they seemed to be very happy about something because they were all laughing their heads off.

'Do you know what the date is?' I asked her.

'Something towards the end of March? '

'Close,' I said.

I pointed to the calendar.

'Ah,' said Patsy.

'They're waiting until I go out to do the visits,' I said. 'Then they'll tell me that I've been April fooled. And they'll have a good laugh at my expense and tell me not to bother sending their urine and blood samples to the laboratory because there is nothing wrong with them.'

'The rotters!' laughed Patsy.

It was, of course, the first day in April. And the day on which, traditionally, people play jokes on one another. But it was still only 11.30 a.m. and there was plenty of time left for a little more entertainment. Traditionally, in England practical jokes can only be carried out before noon on April 1st so I had thirty minutes left in which to try to turn the tables on them.

I went out and feigned surprise at seeing my chums all standing around. Patsy came with me.

'April fool!' my three chums cried in unison.

They then explained that they had all eaten some food dye to change the colour of their urine.

'It was Harry's idea,' said Frank. He was referring to 'Harry' Stottle, the barman at the Duck and Puddle. 'Harry' Stottle's real name was Professor Eckersley and in a previous life he had been a professor of psychiatry and a fashionable Harley Street psychiatrist.

'He had a hunt around in Gilly's kitchen and found three dyes we could use,' said Patchy. 'We were going to come in all with the same coloured urine but 'Harry' thought you might think it was the water supply, telephone the Water Board and start a major panic.'

I congratulated them all on the gag and told them that they'd well and truly had me fooled. 'I expect you used a special non-toxic food dye, didn't you?' I said.

They looked at one another.

'What do you mean, a special non-toxic food dye?' asked Patchy. 'We used food dyes from the kitchen at the Duck and Puddle.'

"Harry' said we'd be fine in a day or so,' said Thumper. 'The dye is just excreted in the urine. It doesn't do any harm.'

'As long as you used a special non-toxic dye,' I said. 'The stuff which chefs and cooks use is toxic if you consume it raw. It only loses its toxicity when it's in something that's cooked at over 100 degrees Centigrade. But if you have enough of the stuff to produce a change in urine colour it can be pretty deadly.'

'What sort of toxicity?' asked Patchy who was not laughing any more. He wasn't even smiling.

'How deadly?' asked Frank earnestly.

'Is it dangerous?' asked Thumper.

All three of them were now very pale.

'It can very nasty,' I told them. 'The toxins used in the dye preparation are destroyed by heating but if you eat the stuff raw then the toxins will affect your livers and kidneys. It can produce necrotising relapsing hepatitis and long-lasting impotence. The only way to prevent the stuff causing permanent damage is to drink lots of water and flush the toxins out of your body. Oh, and you mustn't drink any alcohol for at least a month until your livers have recovered.'

'What sort of hepatitis?' asked Thumper, who was panicking. 'And how long-lasting is the long-lasting impotence?'

'How much water did you say we need to drink?' asked Frank.

'Two or three pints of water straight away,' I told him. 'That would probably be enough. There are some pint mugs in the cupboard next to the sink.'

The three of them rushed into Bilbury Grange, heading for the kitchen.

Patsy and I followed and found all three of them busily gulping down glasses of water from the tap. Thumper hates drinking water but he was swilling the stuff down as if it were his favourite beer. They drank at least three pints of water each.

'Do you think we'll be OK now?' asked Patchy, breathlessly. Water dripped from his chin. The three of them stood there exhausted, still holding their empty pint mugs.

I looked at my watch. It was one minute to twelve noon.

'You'll be fine now,' I said. 'But I'm afraid you'll spend most of the afternoon dashing to the loo.'

They looked at me. They'd noticed me checking my watch.

And suddenly the penny dropped.

'Food dyes aren't really toxic if they aren't cooked, are they?' asked Patchy quietly.

'I wouldn't think so,' I replied. Now it was my turn to grin.

'You've all just been April fooled!' said Patsy, smiling.

The three of them groaned.

'Do we really have to avoid alcohol for a month?' asked Thumper.

I shook my head.

'Thank heavens,' said Thumper, sounding very relieved. 'That was the scariest bit.'

Too Much of a Good Thing?

Donyard Hill is a transvestite.

His day time job is as the Secretary of the Kentisbury Golf Club but he has what would be called a secret if it weren't so widely known.

When he isn't chasing up members who have forgotten to pay their subscriptions, or who have broken on the club's many and constantly changing rules (the club committee even has a rule about the type of socks which male members can wear if they are wearing shorts), Donyard dresses in the sort of clothing usually worn by members of the opposite sex. He turns from Donyard into 'Molly', his alter ego. His gracile wife Cynthia-Anne helps do Molly's hair and make-up and seems to enjoy the whole experience just as much as Donyard himself.

Thumper, Patchy and I once had to rescue Donyard after he was arrested by the police for the great crime of walking around Barnstaple while wearing a frock. Since thousands of women do this every day without being arrested, or even worrying that they might be arrested, this seemed a trifle high handed to say the least. The three of us dressed up in some of Donyard's spare dresses, blouses and so on and drove to Barnstaple. When we got there, we told the police sergeant in charge that we were all on our way to a fancy dress party which was due to be attended by the Chief Constable. The sergeant, embarrassed and alarmed, duly released Donyard and apologised profusely.

Other than that unexpected and definitely unplanned hour or two of excitement, I had not seen Donyard very often. He and Cynthia-Anne tend to go into Exeter or Taunton for their adventures together and it is rare to see either of them in the Duck and Puddle.

He turned up at an evening surgery looking very different to how I'd seen him on the night of his arrest.

This time he was wearing a three piece tweed suit, a check shirt and a club tie that would not have gone well with any jacket or shirt but that presumably meant something to Donyard and to the people who had designed it.

'I've been a bit under the weather,' said Donyard.

I hadn't liked to mention it but he didn't look too good. Patients don't expect to walk into their doctor's surgery and hear him say: 'My word you do look poorly!'

Donyard had put on weight and he was showing some of the muscular rigidity associated with Parkinson's disease. He was also twitching and the muscles I could see all seemed to be going into and out of spasm.

He then suddenly closed his eyes, fainted, keeled over and fell off the chair.

I leapt up from my own chair and hurried round my desk but by the time I'd got to him, the fall had woken him.

'Golly,' he said. He looked around, as though confused. 'I don't feel too good,' he said. 'I've got this damned headache. I've had it for days. I simply can't get rid of it.'

I took off his jacket and his waistcoat and then helped him up onto my examination couch. Once he was lying down, I took off his tie and unbuttoned his shirt. Underneath his shirt he was wearing a very pretty corselette in lilac. There were lots of bows and a good many pieces of fancy lace. I also undid his belt and unfastened his trousers. Underneath those he was wearing a very fancy pair of lace edged panties in lilac silk. Stockings were attached to the straps on the bottom of the corselette, which was fancier than anything I'd ever seen before.

The truth is that folderols were not commonly worn in our part of the world.

Stockings were still the normal leg covering in Bilbury in the 1970s but only because they were available, normal and generally accepted as regular leg coverings. They were seen as functional rather than as exotic, special or sexy. Occasionally I saw women wearing pantyhose or tights but these were usually visitors from big cities such as London and Birmingham or tourists from America. Peter Marshall, our village shopkeeper, had tried selling tights for a while and had given up because there was simply no demand for them. Little did any of us know that within a year or two, stockings would be worn mainly by transvestites and bank robbers who pulled them over their heads to disguise their features (tights are just no good for robbing banks unless you work in very close pairs). Nor did we have any idea that women would soon be routinely wearing trousers and jeans – with surprisingly large numbers looking as though they were members of the Women's Land Army who had worked so hard on British farms during the First and Second World Wars.

Over the years I found that, as far as underwear was concerned, the ladies of Bilbury could be divided into three groups.

The ones under 30 years of age all held up their stockings with suspender belts. The ones between the ages of 30 and 60 generally held up their stockings with the aid of simple corsets or girdles fitted with suspender attachments. And the ones over the age of 60 generally wore corsets so complicated and robust that they took twenty minutes to remove and just as long to put back on again. The corsets favoured by this age group appeared windproof and probably bulletproof and were possibly stronger than some of the material used for modern house construction.

Only occasionally did I see patients wearing anything which could be described as lingerie, and any emporium selling flimsy folderols would have found life difficult in North Devon.

Donyard did not, of course, fit very neatly into the usual categories and his fancy underpinnings were, I gather, largely purchased on trips to the metropolis.

When I finally got down to skin, I couldn't help noticing that the Golf Club secretary had grown a very decent sized pair of breasts. They were not, perhaps, in the topless dancer category but they were of a very respectable size and seemed certainly large enough to impede his back swing, not to mention his follow through.

'Pretty damned good, eh?' said Donyard, who had now recovered from his collapse and who seemed enormously proud of his newly enhanced figure.

I definitely got the feeling that he had been waiting to see my reaction when his new breasts were uncovered. He was full of eager expectation; desperate to share his delight. He reminded me of a little boy with a new penknife or a little girl with a new doll.

It was clear to me that Donyard must have been taking a drug of some kind.

Gynaecomastia, the enlargement of the breasts in a male body, is not a particularly unusual occurrence but although it can occur in men who put on a good deal of weight and it can occur in some medical conditions, it is almost invariably a side effect of taking prescription drugs. There are quite a few medicines which can cause the male breast tissue to swell – sometimes to a quite appreciable extent. I had, over the years, seen quite a few men who had very decent sized breasts; mammary glands that would have delighted many a woman and would have certainly thrilled all those teenage girls who examine themselves each morning for signs that business in the chest area is booming.

'Remarkable!' I said drily. 'What have you been taking?'

Healthy men of his age don't usually grow breasts unless they develop a hormone imbalance resulting in the production of too much oestrogen and too little testosterone. Given the fact that Donyard was a crossdresser, I thought the most likely explanation was that he was taking something he should not have been taking.

'Aren't you going to congratulate me?'

'Congratulations,' I said drily.

'I'm a 38C,' said Donyard, proudly telling me his bra size. 'I reckon in another month I'll be a 38D.'

'What have you been taking?' I asked him again.

There was silence for a moment. 'I took some of my wife's birth control pills for a while,' confessed Donyard at last.

I remembered that Cynthia-Anne had come to see me one month with a strange and rather convoluted tale of having left her pack of birth control pills in her cardigan pocket and then having put the cardigan into the washing machine. She had a reason for putting the birth controls into her cardigan pocket but I can't remember what it was. I have found that when an explanation becomes too complicated it is probably fabricated.

'But she couldn't think of any other excuses for getting more pills,' said Donyard. He paused. 'And, to be frank, she felt bad about lying to you.'

He was still twitching. And although he was reasonably coherent he still seemed more than a little confused.

'So what have you been taking?'

I tried to remember what drugs can cause gynaecomastia. The list is surprisingly long. Anything which contains oestrogen will cause breast enlargement, of course, since one of oestrogen's main actions is to produce breast tissue growth. Quite a few antidepressants and tranquillisers can cause gynaecomastia. And so can steroids of various kinds. Amphetamine, heroin and marijuana can all cause breast growth.

'I got some pills from a Canadian magazine,' said Donyard suddenly. 'They were guaranteed to cause breast tissue growth.' He looked down at his chest. 'And damn me, they've worked haven't they?'

'Have you got the pills with you?'

'They're in my jacket pocket.'

I went over to his jacket.

'Left hand outside pocket.'

I reached into the left hand outside pocket. There was nothing in there but a comb and a penknife.

'Try the other one.'

I tried the other one and found a packet of pills. I looked at the side of the box. The name on the side of the box was Haloperidol.

I could hardly believe my eyes and I felt cold inside. Haloperidol is a powerful antipsychotic medicine which has dramatic actions on the brain. It is a drug which is used to treat schizophrenia. And it can cause a mass of side effects – including gynaecomastia.

I now understood why Donyard was twitching and had so many muscle spasms.

'How long have you been taking these?' I asked him.

'Six weeks or so.'

'How many have you been taking a day?'

'Three. They said you needed to take three a day for maximum effect.'

'Donyard, you're an idiot,' I told him.

I do not usually abuse my patients. But on this occasion it seemed entirely justified.

'Will they do me any harm?' he asked, suddenly worried. 'The magazine which sold them to me said they were perfectly safe and would just give me nice boobs.' He showed the mixed emotions of a man who has been told, on the same day, that he has just won the lottery but has only three weeks to live and enjoy it.

'They are not safe,' I told him. 'They can cause a lot of side effects. Breast enlargement is one of the least dangerous side effects. If you need to take them to deal with a serious health disorder then the side effects are probably acceptable. But you don't have anything wrong with you, you don't need to take them and so the side effects are definitely not acceptable.'

'I suppose you think I should stop them?'

I looked at him.

'You definitely think I should stop them.'

I glowered at him.

'I think I'd better stop them.'

I put the packet of pills I'd taken from him into a drawer in my desk.

'Will the twitching and confusion go away if I don't take the pills?'

'Yes, I hope so. But it may take a while.'

'I've been a bit stupid haven't I?'

'No.'

'No?'

'You've been a lot stupid.'

'Oh.'

'Unbelievably stupid.'

'Yes, I suppose I have,' he admitted. 'What will happen to my new breasts?'

'I don't know.'

'Can you ask someone? Or look it up in one of those big books in your bookcase?'

'No one can tell you. And no book can tell you.'

'Oh.'

'All I can tell you with any certainty is that they will either stay as they are, or they will disappear completely or they will shrink a little.'

'Ah.' He was clearly disappointed. 'Is there anything I can do to stop them disappearing or shrinking?'

'Wear a good bra, preferably something underwired, to give them plenty of support. That might help preserve the breast tissue – and it will certainly help stop your new breasts from sagging.'

'Oh, I can do that,' said Donyard, a little cheerier now that he was talking about preserving his new breasts. 'I have some very good bras. I've got more bras than Cynthia-Anne. I am to the bra industry what Imelda Marcos is to the shoe industry. Do you realise that without crossdressers the bra industry would collapse? We keep the lingerie makers in business.'

He explained that, according to figures he had read, the average woman thinks she is being rash if she buys one new bra every six months but the average transvestite buys a new bra every two weeks. 'And since one in ten men is a crossdresser, this means that there are almost certainly more men buying bras than there are women buying bras!' said Donyard triumphantly.

'Wear a pink one with a frilly edge,' I said, still trying to get my head round Donyard's astonishing claim.

'Really? Will that make a difference?'

'And make sure it has a little bow at the front – where the two cups meet.'

'Are you serious?'

I looked at him.

'Sorry.' He laughed. 'You were teasing me, weren't you?'

'I was.'

'Any bra will do I guess.'

'I would think so.'

I told him to try not to worry about them disappearing but to enjoy his new breasts for as long as they were there.

‘You’ve risked your life to get them so you might as well take advantage of them.’

‘Do you mean that? That I risked my life taking those drugs?’

I nodded.

He paled and said he would make sure that he enjoyed them.

And I did not doubt him for an instant for he was, as I have said, like a boy with a new toy.

Well, to be accurate, he was like a boy with two new toys.

Mr Gibbons

Mr Ezekial Gibbons came in, greeted me and sat down with a sigh.

A general practice surgery is like a lucky dip at a Christmas bazaar in that you never know what you're going to get next. I had been in general practice for some years but I always found a surgery exciting.

Although Mr Gibbons had his 80th birthday a couple of years ago (there was quite a knees-up in the Duck and Puddle to celebrate the occasion) he was very well preserved and really didn't look much over 65.

A keen, amateur historian, he had for nearly 20 years been writing a book on the history of the Corn Laws. The last time we spoke about it he told me that he had written three and a half million words and thought he still had a good deal of work to do before the book would be ready to offer to a publisher. The longest book I'd ever written had been no more than a quarter of a million words and I couldn't imagine how anyone was ever going to understand or edit a book that was over three and a half million words long. If published in full it would, I thought, need to be printed in at least twelve volumes. It seemed a lot of research and writing for one subject.

Mr Gibbons always felt the cold and even when the weather was warm he wore quite a few layers of clothing and it was, for example, quite customary for him to wear two jumpers or waistcoats underneath his suit jacket. He always wore a suit, an old-fashioned hard collar, and a club tie. I had never seen him in casual clothing.

A relatively new resident in Bilbury, Mr Gibbons previously worked as a stockbroker in the City of London and lived in Surrey where he and his wife had a rather large and splendid house – a home big enough to have a billiard room, a library and three staircases. He and his wife were, I believe, members of what was usually referred to as 'The County Set' and their dinner parties had always been reported in society magazines such as *The Tatler*. In the summer, the gardens and grounds of their home were opened to the public. They had several live-in servants, a garage of five luxury cars and a full-time chauffeur.

When his wife died, Mr Gibbons decided he could no longer bear to live in the house they had bought together, decorated together and shared and enjoyed so much and so he took the unusual step of selling it complete with all the contents. Many people sell a house with the carpets and curtains but Mr Gibbons sold his house complete with all the pictures, the furniture, the books, the linen, the crockery and the ornaments. He even left behind most of his clothes and personal items such as old photograph albums.

He once told me that when he left the house he did so carrying an overnight bag containing only a change of clothing, a portable leather chess set which he had carried around with him since boyhood, an old compass which his grandfather had given him, an incunabula which he cherished and a copy of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim Progress*.

He drove to North Devon where his parents had frequently taken him for caravan holidays when he'd been a boy. It was an area of which he had fond and simple memories: days on the beach, surfing on a clumsy wooden board, building sand castles, eating ice cream, fish and chips wrapped in paper.

Memories of places we have visited years before are often a disappointment, of course. Sometimes the place will have changed. Buildings will have been demolished and new ones erected. Roads will have been widened. And sometimes our memories mislead us. We remember things through the eyes of the person we used to be. Our childhood memories in particular are likely to be distorted by time and by affection. We remember only the sunny days. We forget the thunderstorms and the cold winds. We remember the sunshine but we forget the sunburn. We remember the sand dunes but we forget the flies and sharp, spiky grass. We remember the soft sand and we forget the sharp pebbles.

But Mr Gibbons was not betrayed by his memory.

Everything was just as he remembered it. The countryside and the small towns along the North Devon coast had hardly changed in more than half a century. In the small resorts of Ilfracombe, Combe Martin and Lynmouth, a good many of the small pubs and shops which he remembered from his boyhood were still in business. He found a shop where his father had bought him a bucket and a spade. The shop seemed exactly the same as it had been so many years earlier. The man behind the counter could not possibly have been the same man who had served the very young Ezekial Gibbons but he looked exactly the same. Mr Gibbons told me he thought he may have been the son of the man who had sold him that original bucket and spade. There was an ice cream van parked on the cliffs in exactly the same spot where there had been an ice cream van half a century earlier. It is a fact that over the years, few parts of England have changed as slowly as North Devon.

And then, one dark November evening, Mr Gibbons rediscovered Bilbury.

He found the cottage which his parents had rented when they had a little more money and could upgrade from the caravan they'd usually hired for their annual week by the seaside. And to his astonishment the cottage was still for rent. There had been a faded card stuck to the glass inside the porch and on the card had been a local phone number for prospective tenants to ring. Mr Gibbons rang the number and contacted the owners, who lived in Suffolk, but instead of renting the cottage, he bought it.

Lavender Cottage was an old timber building which was made up of massive beams, measuring around six inches by four inches. Those very old cottages, built on a wooden framework, were all put together in much the same way though heaven knows how the builders moved those massive, enormously heavy beams. I suppose they must have used hand operated winches of some kind. Grooves were cut in the sides of the timbers and hazel rods were fixed into them and then thinner hazel rods were woven in and out, as though a hurdle were being made. The resulting panel was filled with clay or plaster and covered with plaster mixed with animal hair to give it strength.

The cottage had latticed windows, and where a brickwork porch had been added on at some early stage the work had been supported with buttresses. The three granite steps up to the front door were well worn in the middle. An old climbing rose had clambered up the ivy growing on the front and sides of the cottage and, like many ancient rose bushes, it still produced a mass of exquisite flowers in the summertime.

In the reverse of the way that he had sold his old home complete with the contents, so Mr Gibbons bought his cottage complete with all the furniture and other contents. Since the cottage had always been rented to holidaymakers none of the furniture was valuable or even in particularly good condition. Mr Gibbons was convinced that much of the stuff in the cottage was the furniture that he remembered from all those years ago. There was a battered, scarred table in the kitchen and an old Welsh dresser that looked to be almost as old as the cottage. The leather chairs in the sitting room were losing their horse hair stuffing and looked awful but they were still enormously comfortable, and the rug in front of the fireplace was one of those hand-made affairs created out of hundreds of bits of spare material. The iron bedstead in the main bedroom was huge and solid and although the mattress had been renewed many times, there was little doubt that the bedstead had been in situ since Victorian days. In old cottages, with tight winding staircases, the bedframe tends to stay in place for a long time.

'I think my time is nearly up,' said Mr Gibbons. 'I've got one foot in the grave and the other on a banana skin.' He seemed as weary as he sounded and every word seemed to be an effort. 'It's a bugger, isn't it?' He had to stop to take a breath after each sentence. 'As we get old we learn something about the world, we acquire a little knowledge and, hopefully, a touch of wisdom, and then, just as we feel that we are ready to take on the world we find ourselves about to check out. I never really rated him as a critic, I thought him too savage, but old Ruskin was right you know!'

All this was spoken with great effort, as though simply finding the breath was a struggle.

'What did Ruskin say?'

'He said: 'How disgusting it is to find that just when one's getting interested in life one has got to go!''

'You don't look to me as if you are about to go anywhere!' I told him.

And despite the problem he was having with his breathing he didn't look ill. He looked a good colour and he seemed healthy enough. The only change I had noticed was this problem he was clearly having with getting his breath.

'Of course it's different with women,' he said, struggling still. 'Women mature much younger than men, and they're blessed with much more common sense and a greater ability to acquire wisdom at a young age.'

'Mention that to Patsy and Miss Johnson as you leave!' I suggested. 'They'll be fans of yours for eternity.'

'The funny thing is that these days, people are electing younger and younger politicians and company bosses,' said Mr Gibbons. 'And yet it's a strange and unobservant man who knows no more at 70 than he knew at 30!'

'Have you got your list?' I asked him.

Many of my patients came into the surgery with a list of symptoms, signs, worries and medication they needed. Mr Gibbons was one of these. Some doctors objected to patients bringing in a list of symptoms or worries but I never understood why. On the contrary, I rather welcome it and, like Dr Brownlow, I always encouraged patients to write down everything they wanted to tell me and, during the conversation, to write down everything I told them. In fact, I always left a notepad and a pencil on the patient's side of my desk so that they could jot down advice or instructions. It's far too easy to leave the doctor's surgery and subsequently to have to struggle to remember whether the tablets are to be taken before meals, after meals or with meals.

Mr Gibbons, whose memory was still first class, took a small slip of paper out of his inside jacket pocket and handed it to me across the desk. There wasn't much on the paper.

Pain in knee is improving with the aspirin
Varicose veins better now that I'm wearing the elastic stockings
Hearing better after the wax removal

'Splendid!' I said, when I'd read the list. I handed the paper back to him.

He screwed it into a ball and tossed it into my waste paper basket.

'You seem a bit breathless,' I said.

‘That’s why I think I should be preparing myself for the voyage across the Styx,’ he said. ‘I’ll never finish my book on the damned Corn Laws. I need another six months at least.’

‘You didn’t put breathlessness on your list?’

‘I didn’t think there would be anything you could do about it,’ he said rather glumly.

I asked him to take off his coat and waistcoats and to let me listen to his chest.

This was not an easy procedure and involved several stoppages while Mr Gibson got his breath. It occurred to me that either both the waistcoats he was wearing had been made for a slimmer man or that maybe Mr Gibbons was no longer the owner of the svelte like figure of which he had once been proud. Simply undoing the buttons took a good deal of effort.

‘Two waistcoats?’ I said.

‘I feel the cold these days,’ he explained.

‘You could wear a vest or a jumper,’ I suggested. ‘It would save you a good deal of buttoning and unbuttoning.’

Mr Gibbons agreed that this seemed a moderately good idea. He then wriggled out of his shirt. This came off a lot easier than the waistcoats.

When he had finally managed to undress, I listened to his heart and his lungs.

To my surprise, everything seemed fine. His heart was ticking when it should have been ticking, and tocking when it needed to tock.

And, as I had rather suspected it might be, his breathing was considerably easier than it had been a few minutes earlier.

‘Put on your things,’ I told him.

Mr Gibbons got dressed. This took quite a while. The shirt wasn’t too difficult but the waistcoats were tricky. They were both so tight that Mr Gibbons had great difficulty in buttoning them up. When he’d finished, he was exhausted and sat for a while before putting on his jacket.

‘Are those new?’ I asked him, suddenly realising that there was another possible explanation for the fact that the waistcoats were so tight.

‘I bought them recently,’ he told me, looking down, clearly rather pleased with them. ‘They’re a bit snug and the shop assistant agreed they were probably a size too small but he insisted that the well-fitted look is fashionable this year.’

Once he was dressed, Mr Gibbons started to strain for breath.

‘Have you not noticed that your breathing gets more difficult when you are wearing those two waistcoats?’

He nodded. ‘I hadn’t. But, do you know, you’re right!’

He was having so much difficulty in breathing that it was clearly quite a trial for him to say anything.

‘If you were to leave off the waistcoats then you would feel a lot healthier,’ I told him. ‘The waistcoats are so tight they are squeezing your chest and making it difficult for you to breathe properly.’

Mr Gibbons, clearly surprised, looked at me.

‘Really!’ I said. ‘I’ll prove it to you.’

I took a simple and rather primitive peak flow meter off my desk and asked Mr Gibbons to breathe into and out of the device. I then wrote down the measurements.

‘Now undo those darned waistcoats!’

With a rather weary sigh, Mr Gibbons unbuttoned the two waistcoats.

I then got him to breathe into the peak flow meter and took a fresh set of measurements.

And once that was done I showed him the results. Without the waistcoats the readings were much, much better. Actually, I didn’t really need the peak flow meter. Mr Gibbons was breathing much more easily now that the waistcoats were unbuttoned.

‘Those waistcoats are too tight for you!’ I explained. ‘They’re preventing your chest from expanding properly. If you leave them off, or at least unbuttoned, then you’ll be able to breathe much more easily.’

‘I can’t believe it!’ said Mr Gibbons. He took a really deep breath and smiled with delight. ‘You’ve cured me by removing my waistcoats!’ He immediately took them off.

I told him it was the first successful double waistcoatectomy ever performed in South West England and gave him a jumper of mine to wear under his jacket while he went home. In return, he assured me that I could keep the two waistcoats (which were expensive and fancy) for the next Bilbury Hospital Bring and Buy sale.

A Bring and Buy sale is the rich Aunt of the Jumble Sale and, as such, the goods on offer are generally required to be either of superior quality or rather close to new. These two waistcoats fitted into both categories.

It was one of the strangest ‘cures’ I ever effected.

But, in its own, strange way, it was one of the most pleasing.

The Peripatetic Poet

Thumper Robinson, Patchy Fogg, Frank Parsons, ‘Harry’ Stottle and I were sitting in the snug of the Duck and Puddle one chilly, late autumn day when a stranger walked in.

We didn’t get many strangers in the Duck and Puddle outside the summer season and the newcomer, something of a rarity on a miserable day, was greeted warmly.

‘Harry’ Stottle, the newly hired barman (who had, in a previous life, been known as Dr Eckersley and had been employed as a Professor of Psychiatry at a London teaching hospital) levered himself out of his chair, walked over to the bar, raised the hatch and stood waiting for the newcomer’s instructions.

‘What do you recommend?’ asked the man, who was a tall, thin fellow with a headful of black, curly hair and a couple of days’ growth of a dark beard. He was, I suppose, in his mid-60s and had a nose which looked as though it had been broken at least twice. He was wearing well-worn, bottle-green, corduroy trousers and a very well-worn sports jacket with leather elbow patches. Neither the trousers nor the jacket was a good fit and it seemed a fair guess that both items had been acquired second hand. He had an old, worn rucksack hanging from one shoulder. Judging by its shape, there didn’t seem to be a great deal inside it. He had no other luggage with him but when I looked out of the window I saw that outside, in the pub car park, a very old Sunbeam Talbot was parked. Behind the Sunbeam, a huge car of indeterminate colour and blessed with many dents, there was the smallest caravan I’d ever seen in my life. The newcomer was accompanied by a large, weary looking dog.

‘If you like beer then you won’t be disappointed by a pint of ‘Old Restoration’, said ‘Harry’.

‘How much is that?’ asked the newcomer, taking a very small handful of coins from his trouser pocket and fingering them carefully.

‘Harry’ told him the price.

If Frank hadn’t been present, ‘Harry’ would have probably given the stranger the beer without charge. ‘Harry’ regarded himself more as a host than as a barman and frequently poured drinks for people without asking them to pay. When he had abandoned his life in London, ‘Harry’ had sold an expensive house and cashed in all his investments. He was, by Bilbury standards, extremely well off. When Frank became aware that ‘Harry’ was giving beer away (after three whole days had gone by without him finding a single penny in the till he could hardly not notice) he talked to ‘Harry’ about the basic, commercial principles of running a pub. To Frank’s surprise, ‘Harry’, after promising to do his best to break himself of this bad habit, suggested that he pay £50 a week into the till to cover any occurrences which slipped through. Frank immediately accepted the very generous offer. It did not seem to occur to either of them that ‘Harry’ was effectively paying for the privilege of working at the Duck and Puddle.

‘Just a half then,’ said the newcomer.

‘Give him a pint on the house,’ said Frank.

Patchy, Thumper and I looked at him, astonished. Frank was not normally a plenitudinous man, though it occurred to me a little later that ‘Harry’s’ £50 a week had probably made him more comfortable about such random acts of generosity.

The newcomer, surprised, looked across at the landlord.

‘We don’t like people drinking halves in here,’ said Frank. ‘Especially travellers who appear to be a bit down on their luck.’

‘Ne’er comes the night ere leaves the day!’ said the newcomer, as though this meant something. ‘Could I borrow a bowl or a saucer from you?’ He nodded towards the dog. ‘For my companion.’

‘Water?’ asked ‘Harry’ producing a saucer from behind the bar. Frank always kept a couple of bowls there so that he could give water to visiting dogs.

‘If you have no objection I will share this excellent looking beverage with my friend,’ said the newcomer.

When ‘Harry’ had handed him the saucer he poured in as much beer as the saucer would take. It is not easy to pour liquid from a beer glass but he somehow managed it without spilling one drop. He then put the saucer down on the floor. The dog looked up, the man nodded his permission, and the dog started lapping at the beer.

‘And what’s your name, stranger?’ asked Frank.

I thought it sounded like a line from a cowboy movie; the sort of line that might have been uttered by John Wayne holding a frontier rifle and stern look. ‘What’s your name, stranger?’

‘My name, the one I carved on my desk at school, is Sid Fish,’ came the rather strange reply. ‘And my companion is called Bismark.’

Mr Fish’s dog, an appropriately shaggy beast, seemed to have had parents of very different origins. One parent had clearly been a German shepherd and the other may have been a collie. ‘He’s German so when he barks he goes voof voof,' said Mr Fish later.

The dog was deaf, had poor eyesight, and was lazy and friendly with everyone. Later that day, when Bismark was lying in front of the fire in the Duck and Puddle, I saw a ginger cat sleeping on the dog's back – as though he were a large rug. I have no idea where the cat came from or to whom he belonged.

The man and his dog seemed to share everything.

If Mr Fish slept in his caravan (which was, I discovered later, so small that he had to sleep with his feet sticking out of the back window) then Bismark slept in the caravan with him. If Mr Fish slept in a bed then the dog slept on the bed. If Mr Fish slept rough in a barn then the dog slept alongside him on the straw. If Mr Fish had a sausage or a pie then the dog would get a neatly, fairly divided half of what had been served. If someone bought him a beer than Mr Fish would pour a goodly portion of it into a saucer for the dog. The dog had an affection for beer and at one point sat and drank the drips from the tray under the taps in the Duck and Puddle. Mr Fish said that only once had he seen the dog too drunk to walk in a straight line.

Thumper, speaking with affection and no rancour, described the animal as a mongrel and Mr Fish insisted that if the dog were to be described at all it should be called a 'dog of indeterminate, mixed breeding heritage'.

Bismark, we were to discover, may have been lazy but he was doubtless intelligent. If he wanted to go out he would sit and bark but if no one came he was perfectly capable of opening a door himself. He would reach up and hang on the handle until the door opened. Amazingly, I even saw him open a door which was fitted with a knob rather than a handle. Mr Fish said that Bismark could open the door to the Sunbeam Talbot (to get in or to get out) and the door to the small caravan.

After Frank had introduced us all, Mr Fish told us that he originally came from Manchester where his family ran a plumbing business, that he had skilfully side-stepped attempts to persuade him to enter the plumbing trade and that he had worked for a while as an estate agent and a taxi driver.

'I went to London at the age of 28 with a return railway ticket in my pocket. I never used the return half. I have lived by my poetry, my prose and my wits and survived by turning every disappointment into an opportunity. Today,' he said, 'I am a travelling poet and epitaphist. While I am here in Devon, I shall call myself Devonshire's Peripatetic Poet. When I was in Somerset, I was Somerset's Peripatetic Poet. If I go to Cornwall, I shall be the Cornwall's Peripatetic Poet. Devon, of course, is my very most favourite part of the world.'

He smiled and winked as if to say that he knew that we knew that he made these complimentary remarks about every county he visited but that he knew that we would forgive him because of his curiously disarming honesty.

'If I stay here you will find out that I am full to the brim with catarrh, wit and bullshit.' He said this and then laughed loudly and smiled at us all, pleased to share with us his gentle deceits.

We looked and listened. I don't think any of us, not even 'Harry' Stottle, had ever come across anyone quite like him.

'Did you say you wrote epitaphs?' asked Patchy.

'Indeed, I did say that. I am proud to be England's only travelling epitaphist.'

'You write epitaphs for gravestones?'

'Exactly.'

'Is there much of a market for that?'

'Not a big market,' he admitted. 'But more of a market than you would perhaps envisage. Writing inscriptions for graves has always been a well-known occupation for travelling poets.'

'How do you find your customers?' asked Frank.

'I pop into local churches and chapels and have a word with the vicar. I keep my ears open and sometimes if I hear of someone who is very old and frail, I will ask them if they'd like their epitaph writing so that it's ready for the sad moment.'

'That's a bit ghoulish isn't it?' said Patchy.

'Not a bit of it,' said Mr Fish. 'I think of myself as offering an essential public service. It can ease the mind of a dying patient to know that when they have passed on to a better place the bereaved ones they have left behind will not be forced to struggle to find a few suitable words for the gravestone.'

'I always thought I'd just have my name and my dates on mine,' said Thumper. 'It would save a lot of money. Those gravestone people charge an arm and a leg for every letter they chisel on a gravestone.'

'I think it gives a person some comfort to know what will be said about them when they are gone,' said Mr Fish. 'We all worry about how we'll be remembered. It's only natural.'

For a few moments we amused ourselves by thinking up epitaphs for people we knew.

'His parsnips were often a bit woody but they were never cheap,' Thumper offered, as an epitaph for Peter Marshall.

'Here rests Thumper,' suggested Patchy. 'It was the thing he did best.'

‘Give us an example of one of your recent epitaphs,’ suggested ‘Harry’.

‘Oh, they are all personalised,’ said Mr Fish with apparent, rare modesty. ‘I talk to family members and friends and find out a little about my subjects. If they’re still alive I talk to the subject themselves and find out how they’d like to be remembered.’

‘Give us an example,’ insisted ‘Harry’.

Mr Fish rummaged in the pocket of his jacket and pulled out an old envelope. ‘Here’s one I did for a woman in Porlock,’ he said, explaining unnecessarily that Porlock is a small village on the North Somerset coast.

The poet and peripatetic epitaphist then read out the epitaph he’d written.

Herein lies old Mother Kent
Time to go so off she went
Made fine cakes and excellent bread
Always did just what she’d said
And paid on time what she’d been lent

When he’d finished, Mr Fish put the piece of paper away in his pocket. ‘That’s just an example,’ he said modestly. ‘I must have written hundreds of epitaphs over the years.’

‘Very impressive,’ said Frank, who is not a literary man and who did seem genuinely impressed.

‘She sounds to have been a woman with really good qualities,’ said Patchy, who was clearly struggling to keep a straight face.

‘Do you ever find that your customers are disappointed with your efforts?’ asked ‘Harry’.

‘Indeed she was. Very, very rarely,’ said Mr Fish, answering Patchy and ‘Harry’ at once and creating a little confusion by so doing. ‘But I never give up. Unless, of course, the going gets too tough to be comfortable and then I endeavour to be somewhere else.’ He smiled at his remark. There were lots of teeth in the smile. Although they didn’t look real, they really were well-made, well-kept teeth. They rather reminded me of Logan Berry’s teeth. Actually, I suppose that if you can tell that they’re well-made then they can’t be, can they?

Mr Fish sighed. ‘But, generally speaking, there’s no point in letting things get you down, is there?’

Despite the presence of rather too many teeth, it was, I thought, a superficially charming smile and I suspected that wherever he went Mr Fish probably did well with the local ladies. I don’t know why but I also suspected even then that it was his charm for the ladies which probably explained his peripatetic way of life.

‘And your poems? Do you sell those, too?’

‘Oh yes! I have little books of my poems printed and I sell them for half a crown each wherever I go.’

‘Recite one of your poems for us!’ said Patchy.

‘I’ve already written one for North Devon,’ said Mr Fish.

‘What’s it called?’ asked Frank.

‘It’s called *North Devon*.’

‘Good,’ said Frank. ‘That’s a good start. Good title! Say it out loud for us then.’

Mr Fish cleared his throat, as people do when about to start a recitation in public.

‘Stark, rock-strewn coves
Wind-swept, sunburnt moors
Hedges high as a tall man’s head
In a storm tossed land ruled by nature’s laws
Granite cliffs and majestic skies
Seas that pound on empty shores
Narrow paths fit only for goats and sheep
Ferns and bracken decorating bold, stark tors.’

It was generally agreed that this was rather good, though Frank said he had been rather expecting more rhyming.

‘Oh, I’ve got rhyming ones,’ said Mr Fish. And he proceeded to recite three more of what he called poems but which I suspect most people would describe as limericks.

‘This one is called *A New Bloke* said the poet.

‘A randy young woman from Wales
Bought a new bloke in the sales
He had only one eye
But was quite a nice guy
And the best of available males’

‘And this one is called *Tears*.’

‘A girl with no teeth and small ears
Had a lot of suppressed inner fears

She worried a lot
Whether worth it or not
And often she burst into tears'.

'I say,' said Thumper, who likes limericks, though usually prefers them to be about vicars' daughters and to conclude with a rude punch line, 'that's rather good!'

Encouraged, Mr Fish recited another of his poems. He told us that this one was called *The Burglar*.

'There was a young burglar called Lynn
Who was most unusually thin
She could slide under doors
And slip down through floors
So the police locked her up in a tin

At the conclusion of this short recitation, Mr Fish opened his rucksack and took out a small bundle of booklets. Each booklet bore the title *The People's Poet*, with Sid Fish below it in large letters and the price (2 shillings and 6 pence) clearly printed in the bottom right hand corner. Mr Fish then handed one to each of us.

He called them books but they were no more than 16 pages in length which made them a little on the skimpy side for books and rather generous for leaflets.

'These are first editions and will be valuable if I ever become Poet Laureate,' he assured us.

'You haven't gone decimal then?' said Frank. He pointed to the price marked on the cover.

'Oh no! I prefer to stick to old-fashioned money,' said Mr Fish. 'My customers are mostly older folk and they're accustomed to thinking in terms of half crowns, ten bob notes and so on.'

'I haven't got half a crown,' said Patchy, pulling some coins out of his pocket. 'Will 50 pence do?'

'That will be fine,' said Mr Fish, taking the coin and slipping it into his jacket pocket with the ease of a magician performing a parlour trick.

To be honest, I don't think any of us really wanted his books of poems but we all bought one and we all paid 50 pence which had, thanks to Patchy, become the going price. I suspected that Mr Fish, now richer by a modest but doubtless tax-free £2, had been clever in pricing his booklets at 'half a crown'. Since no one would actually have half a crown to give him, and since 20 pence looked far too mean (even though it was actually the equivalent of more than half a crown) most people would pay him 50 pence or even a pound. It is, of course, possible that the books had been printed before the introduction of the decimal currency for they bore no date.

'Splendid stuff!' said 'Harry', who had opened his book and was reading the first poem.

'Some of my poetry is autobiographical,' said Mr Fish. He told us that he had lived a life of quiet but unending disappointments, frustrations, failures, rejections and broken promises but that he always tried to remain cheerful.

'I'll read mine later,' said Thumper, slipping his booklet into his pocket. He sounded very convincing but the idea of Thumper ever reading a book of poetry, however slender the book might be, made me want to laugh.

'A chap in Wales told me that any fool could have written these,' said Mr Fish. 'And I told him that though what he said was probably true he had to agree that it would take a clever man to sell them to other fools.'

And then the smile was there again.

'I can see that you are all gentlemen of learning, intellectuals of discernment,' he said. 'And I am sure that you could all write better verse but could you sell it?'

'Almost certainly not!' I agreed, looking through Mr Fish's small book. The poems were a mixture of limericks and doggerel with a few one-liners and epitaphs thrown in for good measure. We all read quietly for a few moments, then put our booklets away. We all offered polite congratulations.

'Harry' Stottle, the barman and exiled psychiatrist, later said that Mr Fish rather reminded him of Mark Tapley, the wonderful character in Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit* who regarded every setback and disappointment as a challenge, and who took great pride in his ability to hold his head up high when things went badly.

I remembered Mark Tapley, with great affection for he is one of my favourite fictional inventions.

'There's no credit in being jolly' protests Mr Tapley, when he is staying in a comfortable inn. 'There might be some credit in being jolly with a wife, especially if the children have the measles and that and was very fractious indeed'.

Even when he is desperately ill, Tapley remains remorselessly upbeat and incorrigibly upbeat. Asked how he is, Tapley, on his sick bed, replies: 'Floored for the present, sir, but jolly!'

'Where are you heading after Bilbury?' asked Patchy

'Oh, I'm on a mystery tour,' said Mr Fish. 'And it's as much a mystery to me as it is to yourselves.' He paused, sipped a little of his beer and sighed contentedly. I got the feeling that he would have liked to drain the glass but that he wanted to savour the beer and wasn't sure that he would be offered another. 'People search constantly for something without ever knowing what it is they are looking for and I am no exception. But maybe I have already found that which I seek but have not yet realised the extent of my discovery. Did you know that, according to legend, the musk deer wanders the forests constantly searching for the source of the beautiful odour it can smell, but never realises that the scent is its own?'

He had a beautiful speaking voice and the voice managed to give some semblance of good sense and meaning to the bits of pieces of cod-philosophy he produced. It was the voice of an actor or broadcaster. He had picked up bits and pieces of accents from his travels and you would never guess that he originally hailed from Lancashire. There were tastes of Gloucestershire, hints of Ireland and occasionally a word or a phrase would remind me of the Midlands, London or Wales.

'Do you enjoy writing poetry?' asked Frank.

'Oh, I do,' said Mr Fish. 'Don't you remember sweet Alice, Ben Holt, Sweet Alice whose hair was so brown, who wept with delight when you gave her a smile, and trembled with fear at your frown.'

'That sounds like Thomas Dunn English,' said 'Harry' immediately.

Mr Fish, clearly startled, looked at him.

'The American politician and poet,' explained 'Harry'.

'Indeed it is, sir, it is a poem from that much loved man and I congratulate you on your knowledge and your memory! I carry so much poetry in my head that I sometimes forget which is mine and which is another's. But, of course, I simply quoted that particular poem to give you the flavour of a style which I myself aim to emulate. My poetry is my madness.'

He had, I thought, escaped reasonably well from the mild charge of attempted plagiarism.

'I understand,' nodded 'Harry', magnanimously. 'Perhaps no person can be a poet, or even enjoy poetry, without a certain unsoundness of mind.'

Mr Fish looked at him. 'I beg your pardon?'

'Macaulay,' explained 'Harry'.

'Oh, of course,' said Mr Fish. 'I'm not too hot on American writers.'

'Not exactly American,' said 'Harry'. 'He was an English poet, essayist historian and politician. He lived in the 19th century and perhaps better known as Baron Macaulay.'

'Oh, that Macaulay!' said Mr Fish. 'Oh, yes of course. He's one of my favourites.'

He tried to make it look convincing but he overdid it and we all knew he'd never heard of Lord Macaulay.

We all sat in the Duck and Puddle for another hour or so and I bought a round of drinks. Then Mr Fish said that he'd better see about finding somewhere to park his caravan and Frank said that he could leave it where it was if he was only staying for a day or two.

All that happened on the Saturday.

I next saw Mr Fish on the following Tuesday when I was driving into Barnstaple to visit the dentist for my annual check-up.

I was just heading out of the village when I spotted Mr Fish standing by the side of the road. He had his thumb out, in the class hitchhiker pose, and his dog by his side. I confess that I almost didn't stop. I knew that he had been going door to door around the village, selling his poems and trying to sell his unwritten epitaphs. Some of the people to whom he'd sold poems really couldn't afford to buy them – and certainly didn't want them – but I had heard one or two tales of him using sales techniques which even Peter Marshall would have found questionable. He told two people that he was in the village at the invitation of Frank and me and that he was selling his poems for charity. I don't believe he ever gave a penny to any charity other than himself. Worse still, I heard that he had harassed a couple of people whose relatives had died recently. He had, I think, got their names from the church burial register. He certainly didn't get the names from me. He hadn't sold either of them one of his epitaphs – mainly because everyone in the village knows that every letter and number carved on a headstone costs money. 'Harry' told me, in confidence, that he didn't like Mr Fish one little bit, that he no longer reminded him of Mark Tapley and that he thought the bonhomie was entirely fake. 'He is a chancer,' said 'Harry'. 'I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw him.'

But I knew that there was no bus to Barnstaple that day and I felt sorry for Mr Fish and so I stopped.

As man and dog climbed into my 1930 Rolls Royce 20/25, with Mr Fish sitting in the passenger seat and his dog curled up at his feet, the poet explained that his car was rather short of petrol and he was a little low on funds.

'Where are you headed?' I asked.

'I'm going into Barnstaple.'

'No problem. I can take you and drop you wherever you like.'

He looked around, searching for something. 'Where's the seat belt?'

'I'm afraid there isn't one. Cars this age don't have to have them fitted.'

He didn't seem bothered by this and just sat back. 'This is a lovely old car!'

I explained that the car had been bequeathed to me by my predecessor, Dr Brownlow and that although it was too large for the lanes and very heavy on petrol I kept it largely for sentimental reasons.

'I'm going to see an old flame,' he told me, as we motored along. 'Well, she was more than an old flame. She was my first love and we were going to get married.'

'She's local?'

'Oh yes. She's a Devon girl through and through.'

'I didn't know you'd been down in this part of Devon before.'

'It was quite a few years ago. And there aren't many parts of England I've not visited. I don't know why so many people take all their holidays abroad. There are so many wonderful places to see in England. If I want to go abroad I go to Wales or Scotland!'

I agreed with him.

'Her mother refused to let us marry,' said Mr Fish. 'She said that her daughter was too young and that I was too unreliable.' He paused, deep in thought. 'Charlotte was 18 so I don't think she was too young.'

'Charlotte was your girlfriend?'

'Yes. Lovely name isn't it?'

'She won't be too young now!' I pointed out.

'No, she won't!' Mr Fish laughed. 'And her mother died a few years ago so that won't be a problem. Believe me, I wouldn't be going there if her mother was still alive! She was a huge woman, quite short but weighing in at least twenty stone. She was an old battle-axe; a wild woman, forever screaming and shouting and threatening to do terrible things to everyone around her. I never saw her without her hair in curlers and food stains down the front of her pinafore.' He stopped, remembering times past. 'I never understood how such a hideous harridan could have possibly mothered such a sweet and gentle girl.'

'How do you know Charlotte isn't married?'

'I spoke to a chap I know who lives nearby and managed to find her phone number. I rang her up last week.'

'So she knows you're coming to see her?'

'Oh yes. I said it would be sometime in the afternoon but I'm sure she won't mind if I get there an hour or two early.'

'And she's not married?'

'She's divorced with one kid – a daughter. The husband was a wastrel who buggered off years ago. They were only married for eighteen months or so. He went off with a woman from the local chip shop.'

I didn't say anything but I couldn't help thinking that for Mr Fish to describe another man as a wastrel might be construed by some as fitting into the category of 'the pot calling the kettle black'.

'And how long is it since you saw her?' I asked.

Mr Fish thought for a while. 'It must be nearly twenty years.'

As I drove along the lanes, Mr Fish told me a little more about the woman he was going to see. Charlotte was, he said, a pretty, slim girl with blonde, shoulder length hair and blue eyes; gentle and quiet and always laughing and full of fun. 'She would never hurt a flea,' he said. 'I very much liked that about her. She found a mouse in the kitchen once. She was terrified of it but she managed to catch it in a cardboard box and put it outside in the garden. She was so gentle with it.'

I couldn't help wondering how Mr Fish had known about the business with the mouse. I rather suspected that he had probably been standing a yard or two away, watching from a safe distance.

When I eventually managed to park the car in Barnstaple (never easy since the car is so huge and the spaces so small that I have to try to find two spaces and then buy two tickets – ideally I need four spaces but that never happens) a by now excited Mr Fish got out and asked me if I knew where he could find Barbican Road where Charlotte lived. We were so close I could point to where he could find it.

'Do you want a lift back or will you be staying in Barnstaple?' I asked him. 'I shouldn't be more than an hour. After I've been to the dentist I just need to pop into a stationery store to pick up some bits and pieces I need for the surgery but I'll be heading back to Barnstaple in about sixty minutes or so.'

'If I'm coming back to Bilbury I'll be here by your car in an hour,' replied Mr Fish. 'If I'm not here then you can assume I'm staying and I'll be back in Bilbury tomorrow to fetch my car and caravan.'

And so off I went to the dentist.

To my delight, all was well. No extractions and no fillings. There are few simple joys to exceed the joy of walking out of a dental surgery with a clean bill of tooth. I immediately wandered across the road to a small, conveniently situated sweet shop and bought a quarter of a pound of old-fashioned humbugs, sold loose in a small, white paper bag. The woman behind the counter, who looked as though she had sampled everything on her shelves and whose figure had paid the price, told me that having a dentist's surgery across the road was wonderful for business. She said that patients either came to her shop to celebrate or to cheer themselves up after being told that they needed to have treatment. I told her that she should pay the dentist a commission and she said that he too was a regular customer and that she always gave him a discount.

I then wandered into the town, sucking on a tooth rotting humbug but not giving a damn because my teeth had just been given a clean bill of health, and bought a new typewriter ribbon, a large packet of envelopes and half a dozen cheap ball point pens for Miss Johnson to use. I don't know where they all go but we seem to get through more cheap ballpoint pens than makes any sort of sense. If I saw drug company representatives I would doubtless be provided with an endless supply of ballpoint pens decorated with advertising slogans. But I don't see any drug company salesmen and I happily buy my own pens.

When I got back to the Rolls Royce, Mr Fish was sitting on the passenger side running board waiting for me. He looked as if he had been there some time.

'You're coming back to Bilbury?' I said, rather unnecessarily.

He just nodded.

I opened the car and we both got in. I took the packet of humbugs out of my pocket and offered him one. He shook his head but said nothing. He looked like a man in shock; as though he had seen a ghost. There was no point in asking him how things had gone since they had obviously not gone to plan.

'I had a bit of a surprise,' he said, ten minutes into our journey.

I didn't say anything but just waited for him to continue.

'I knocked on the door and I had the shock of my life,' he said. 'It was opened by Charlotte. I couldn't believe my eyes.'

I looked across at him. He seemed dazed.

'She hadn't changed. She was exactly the same: slim, beautiful, blonde hair, blue eyes and a wonderful figure.'

There was a long silence. He was obviously still coming to terms with what had happened.

'She looked eighteen. She hadn't changed a bit. Not a bit. She was still the same. Nothing had altered. I nearly fainted when I saw her. It did not seem possible.'

Mr Fish's story was now fascinating me. Was there a picture in the attic? Was this a female version of Oscar Wilde's 'Dorian Gray'? Had Charlotte undergone plastic surgery? Or was the truth, perhaps, that Mr Fish had 'seen' not what he really saw but what he'd expected or hoped to see?

'When she opened the door the girl was smiling,' continued Mr Fish. 'She was clearly expecting someone and for a brief moment I thought it was me that she was hoping to see. But, sadly, I quickly realised that I wasn't the person for whom she was smiling. Within a second the smile had faded, there was disappointment in her eyes and a frown had appeared. She asked who I was and what I wanted but before I could reply there was a scream from the back part of the house, from the kitchen probably.'

'A scream?'

'Well not so much a scream, I suppose. It was more of a screech. It was a woman shouting abuse. The only bit I managed to hear was: 'If that's your bastard fancy man you can tell him to bugger off!''

I swerved around a cyclist who was wobbling all over the road as though he'd had a little too much to drink.

'I looked at the girl standing in the doorway,' continued Mr Fish. 'And suddenly she looked tired and downtrodden. The joy had completely gone from her eyes. 'That's my mother,' she explained. 'She thinks you're my boyfriend.'

Mr Fish said the girl told him that her mother didn't approve of her boyfriend, that he was in a band and that he was a bit older than she was. He told me that the girl said that the two of them wanted to get married but that her mother disapproved of her even seeing the man.

'I asked her why she didn't just leave home and go off with her bloke,' said Mr Fish. 'Do you know what she said?'

Naturally, I said I didn't.

'She said she didn't know why but she just couldn't. It was exactly what Charlotte said to me 20 years ago. She didn't know why but she just couldn't.'

Belatedly, I was now beginning to realise what had happened. Charlotte didn't have a picture hanging in the attic. And she hadn't had cosmetic surgery.

'The girl's mother was your Charlotte?'

'Yes.'

His voice was so quiet I could hardly hear what he said.

'Did you see Charlotte?'

'I caught a glimpse of her for a brief moment. She suddenly appeared in the hallway behind her daughter.'

'Her hair was in curlers?'

‘Oh, yes. Her hair was in curlers and I’d swear she had egg down the front of her jumper. She’d doubled in size and she had a face just like her mother’s: full of hatred.’

I didn’t say anything.

‘The hatred and loathing and disappointment were all that were left. The girl was the spitting image of her mother and Charlotte had become her own mother – even down to interfering with her own daughter’s relationship.’

‘Did you speak to Charlotte?’

‘No, no! I muttered something about having called at the wrong house. I said I was looking for a man called George who had an old Ford Popular for sale.’

‘And you left?’

‘I scurried down the path and went straight to your car. I was back in the car park within ten minutes of leaving it.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said.

There was silence for another couple of miles.

‘Never mind,’ said Mr Fish at last. ‘It wouldn’t have worked out anyway. I’ve been footloose for too long. A girl in every port, that’s me.’

I turned and saw him grinning at me. ‘Did you say you had some humbugs?’

I took the white bag out of my pocket and handed it to him.

When we got back to Bilbury, I dropped Mr Fish off at the Duck and Puddle where his car and caravan were still parked. He was jolly and seemed cheerful but I could tell he was rather miserable and desperately disappointed. He had, I suppose, been hoping he could recapture and revitalise some lost memories. And because I felt sorry for him I gave him a few pounds to buy petrol.

That was on the Tuesday.

On the Saturday of that week, the sixth day of Mr Fish’s stay in Bilbury, I discovered why he never stayed long in one place and why his nose looked such a mess.

Patsy, Anne (Thumper’s wife), Thumper and I were all standing at the bar in the Duck and Puddle. Patsy and Anne had called at the pub on their way into Barnstaple, where they both intended to buy hats for a wedding, and they had called into the pub to let Thumper and me know where they were going. Patsy had a small glass of white wine and Anne was drinking half a pint of shandy (which contained considerably more lemonade than beer). Patsy was wearing a wonderful frock made by a fairly new company called Laura Ashley. Anne who is notably zaftig was wearing a very tight jumper and a very tight skirt.

Suddenly, Mr Fish appeared as though from nowhere, wandered up to the bar and stood beside Anne. Since I knew he wouldn’t have any money or not want to spend whatever he had, I told ‘Harry’ the barman to give him whatever he was drinking. He had already shown that he had an uncanny knack of turning up when he thought there might be a free drink available.

But even before ‘Harry’ could finish pouring the pint of Old Restoration which Mr Fish had requested, Anne jumped and yelped. Without pausing, without any hesitation at all, she backed away from the bar and slapped Mr Fish on the cheek.

It was all very impressive and she had moved with astonishing speed. It was a hell of a slap, too.

‘He pinched my bum!’ she cried, explaining to the rest of us why she had reacted so sharply and dramatically. ‘The cheeky old bugger pinched my bum!’

‘I’m sorry!’ said Mr Fish, rubbing his cheek rather ruefully. ‘Force of habit. I didn’t think you’d mind.’

Frozen in disbelief we all looked at him.

‘Come over here,’ said Thumper quietly. He didn’t raise his voice and he didn’t look or sound particularly angry. He pointed to an area in the pub where there was more room. He thought for a moment and then moved a table and a couple of chairs so that there was even more space available.

Mr Fish looked at Thumper, who was the best part of a foot taller than him, considerably heavier and far more menacing. ‘I’m so sorry,’ he said, apologising again. ‘I think maybe it’s time I moved on.’

‘It is time you moved on but before you go I’m going to punch you,’ said Thumper. ‘You can fight or you can defend yourself or you can just stand there. But I’m going to punch you.’

‘I am so sorry,’ said Mr Fish, apologising yet again. ‘I didn’t mean to cause offence.’

‘I’m not sure that I like you,’ said Thumper. ‘I think you’re probably a liar and a bit of a crook but you’re not a young man. You’re smaller than I am and you’re not in good shape. Superficially, you’re an amiable, likeable, cheeky sort of fellow and in a strange sort of way it will be a pleasure to see you when you come back to this part of the world. Nevertheless, I’m going to punch you and then you’re going to leave Bilbury and head for Cornwall or wherever else you fancy. And if and when you come back you’ll remember the lesson and you’ll behave yourself a little more like a gentleman.’

This was one of the longest speeches I'd ever heard from Thumper.

'But your wife has already slapped me!' protested Mr Fish. 'It was a good slap, too!'

He was right about it being a good slap. The red palm print was still visible. I got the impression it wasn't the first time he'd been slapped.

'I don't want to do this,' said Thumper, who looked as if he genuinely didn't want to hit Mr Fish. 'But I have no choice. I have to punch you or you might tell people you disrespected me and I did nothing about it. More importantly, I will feel deeply offended for a long time and that won't be good for me.'

'I've apologised,' said Mr Fish.

'Come over here,' said Thumper, pointing to the empty area of the pub again. 'I don't want you banging your head on the bar when you go backwards.'

'Why am I going to bang my head on the bar?' asked Mr Fish, rather weakly.

'My wife gave you a good slap because you offended her and she can and does look after herself,' pointed out Thumper. 'But she's my wife and so this is for offending me.'

And since Mr Fish showed absolutely no sign of wanting to fight, or even any inclination to defend himself, Thumper then hit the poet and epitaph writer plumb on the nose. He hit him with a rather gentle right hook which was delivered with such quiet, controlled efficiency that everyone who saw it winced. Thumper's elbow went no further back than the side of his chest and he put very little effort into the punch. Mr Fish's dog, Bismark, watched the whole episode and clearly had no intention of interfering.

I now knew precisely how and why Thumper had acquired his nickname.

Mr Fish fell backwards and landed, spread-eagled, on Frank and Gilly's rug.

Instinctively, I strode across to where he lay but by the time I'd knelt down to see if he was still alive, he had already raised himself up off the floor. He sat up and gently took hold of his nose between the forefinger and thumb of his right hand. There was surprisingly little blood.

'Is it broken?' he demanded. 'It's broken again isn't it?'

'No, it's not broken,' I told him, a couple of moments later. I was glad about that. I didn't want to have to call an ambulance, and send him to the hospital so that he could have his nose X-rayed.

'Oh good,' said Mr Fish. 'That's OK then.' He wiggled his jaw and massaged his nose. It clearly wasn't the first time he'd been punched on the nose. And on the previous occasions the nose had obviously been broken. He touched his nose again and winced. 'I'll have a good bruise. It'll make me look like an old prize fighter.'

He looked at Thumper, then looked at Anne and then looked at the rest of us.

'I could sue you!' he said to Thumper, quite unexpectedly. 'Assault. I could get damages.'

'What could you sue him for?' I asked.

'For punching me!' said Mr Fish.

'I didn't see anyone punch you,' I told him. I turned to the others. 'Did anyone see Thumper punch Mr Fish?'

'Definitely not,' said 'Harry'.

'No,' said Patchy.

'Absolutely not,' said Patsy and Anne together.

'No one punched you,' said Frank. 'You were a bit tiddly and tripped over your own feet.'

Mr Fish stared at us and then turned on the smile. 'Of course I did,' he said.

At least Mr Fish knew when he was beaten.

He picked up his rucksack and, with Bismark following, he hurried off. He didn't even say 'goodbye'.

For a while, at the beginning, it had been amusing to have him around. But, to be honest, none of us was sad to see him go.

'I only tapped him,' said Thumper.

'Only tapped him!' I said.

'Just a little tap to teach him a lesson,' said Thumper. 'Anne hit him harder than I did.' He finished his pint and held out the empty glass to 'Harry' for a refill.

'Would you have done that, if Mr Fish had pinched my bottom?' Patsy asked me, putting her arm through mine.

'Of course I would!' I replied.

Patsy gave me a squeeze.

We all had another drink and then Patsy and Anne went hat shopping in Barnstaple while Patchy, Thumper, Frank, 'Harry' and I stayed in the cosy snug at the Duck and Puddle and did what we did best: watching logs sizzle and talking about nothing very important.

Crash, Bang, Wallop!

Patsy was the first to wake up.

'Did you hear that?' she whispered?

'Hear what?' I asked, struggling to remember where I was and who I was. I'd been just about to go out and open the batting for England in a Test Match against Australia and I'd been having difficulty in fastening my pads which were, for some strange reason, made of sponge cake. In my dream, having pads made of sponge cake hadn't seemed such a big problem. After all, the ball was made of chocolate and my cricket bat was made of something that looked remarkably like pink marshmallow.

'Behind the wall,' whispered Patsy. 'There's someone on the other side of the wall.'

I woke up suddenly, reached out a hand and switched on my bedside light. Then we lay and listened. Ben, our elderly dog, growled as though he too felt upset by something. He had been sleeping on the bed, next to and sometimes on top of my feet.

After a few moments of lying quietly, listening carefully, I could hear what had woken Patsy but I didn't have the foggiest idea what I was hearing.

'What's behind that wall?' asked Patsy

'Nothing,' I replied. 'It's an outside wall.'

'It sounds as though someone is trying to get through the wall. Do you think it could be a burglar?'

'Why would a burglar try to break through our bedroom wall?'

'I don't know. People do funny things these days.'

'But if it was a burglar wouldn't he try to come in through a downstairs window?' I asked. 'A door would be even easier.'

'Is the front door locked?'

'No, I don't think so. It wasn't windy. And anyway I left the back door wedged slightly open so that the cats can come in and out.'

We only usually locked the front door when the weather was particularly windy, with the wind coming from the south east. This didn't happen too often because our prevailing wind was generally from the south west. We did lock the door when the weather was bad because the catch no longer worked properly and with a south easterly wind the door swung to and fro and banged a good deal. Although I'd tried to mend the catch, my attempts had been notable only for their lack of success. We never locked the back door.

'Why did you leave the back door open? The cats have got a cat flap so that they can come in and out whenever they like!'

'I know. But Jeremy's arthritis is playing up.'

Jeremy is the oldest of our cats. We inherited him from Mrs Arnott-Toynbee who was dying, and who wanted me to put him to sleep so that he could be cremated and buried with her. Her reasons were entirely selfish: she didn't want anyone else to have him. She gave him to me to take home with instructions that I was to put him to sleep and take him back to her in a neat, little, wooden box which she had provided. I'm afraid I cheated. When Mrs Arnott-Toynbee was buried a few days later, she went to her grave clutching the small, wooden box containing ash from our bonfire site. Jeremy was twelve when we acquired him and already had early signs of arthritis in his left leg. Despite our best efforts to treat him, the arthritis has got steadily worse. He can manage the cat flap, in an ungainly sort of way, but if the weather isn't too cold, I leave the back door open for him. Naturally, Emily and Sophie, our other cats, are also happy to avoid the cat flap which I think they find rather undignified and, in truth, a little beneath them.

'I hope we don't get any mice or squirrels wandering in.'

'I don't think we need worry about that,' I assured her. 'Not with three living mouse traps prowling around the kitchen.'

'There! I heard it again,' said Patsy, suddenly sitting up in bed.

I heard it too. It was difficult to describe. There was some scrabbling and some scratching and there was, too, something that sounded as if bits of masonry were falling. The sound definitely reminded me of something but I couldn't remember what.

'Do you think the wall is falling down?' asked Patsy.

'No!' I said, with a definitiveness I did not entirely feel.

'It's a very old house,' Patsy reminded me.

'But it's solid,' I said.

‘There’s definitely something outside trying to get in through the wall,’ insisted Patsy.

And I found it difficult to disagree with her.

‘I’d better go outside and have a look,’ I said, clambering out of bed and pulling on my clothes. Fortunately, I always kept a pair of trousers, a shirt and a jumper next to the bed so that I could dress quickly in a medical emergency. I looked at the clock. It was a quarter to seven.

I pulled the curtains back an inch, just to see what the weather was like. Dawn had broken and the day was well under way. The weather looked fine: no wind and no rain. I picked up the torch from the bedside table but I put it back realising that I didn’t need it.

‘Can you see anything?’ asked Patsy, after I’d looked out of the window.

‘There are no signs that Bilbury has been invaded by fifteen foot tall creatures from outer space,’ I assured her. I kissed her and tottered downstairs, closely followed by Ben who was brave enough to come along to help but intelligent enough to realise that hiding behind my legs made better tactical sense than running on ahead.

Outside there was absolutely nothing to see. There were no burglars around. There was no ladder leaning against the side of the house. The flower bed which ran along the side of the house was pristine and untouched. There were no damaged plants and no footprints in the soil. I went back indoors and took a look around. There were no signs that anyone had been into the house. I went back to the bedroom.

‘Did you see anything?’ asked Patsy.

‘Absolutely nothing!’

‘I can still hear the noise,’ said Patsy, who was now also out of bed and dressed.

I stood and listened for a few moments and then I suddenly realised why the noises seemed familiar.

‘It sounds just like that time that Sophie climbed up the chimney, got stuck on a ledge and wouldn’t come back down!’

We stood still and listened again.

‘You’re right,’ said Patsy. ‘It does sound as if there’s something stuck in a chimney.’

‘There’s only one problem,’ I said.

‘There’s no chimney here!’ said Patsy, finishing off the thought for me.

Puzzled, we went downstairs and had an early breakfast.

By the end of the day, when we were still no nearer to thinking of a solution, I telephoned Thumper Robinson to ask if he could think of an explanation.

‘Those old houses have massive walls,’ he explained. ‘Bilbury Grange’s walls are nearly three feet thick but when they built houses like yours they usually made the walls with a gap in the middle – just like modern houses. The difference was that a century or two ago, the builders usually filled the gap in the middle with all sorts of leftover rubble. They did this because they believed that filling up the middle of the wall helped keep the cold out and the warmth in. And the walls they built were so thick that they didn’t worry much about the damp getting through.’

‘Presumably, it also gave them somewhere to dump all their rubble,’ I suggested. ‘To save them carting the stuff away and then having find somewhere to dump it where they weren’t going to get done for fly tipping. I doubt if they called it fly-tipping in the 19th century but they were probably no more enthusiastic about it then than we are now.’

Thumper laughed. ‘Exactly!’

‘So do you think that’s what we heard? Some bits of rubble slipping down the inside of our wall?’

‘Probably,’ agreed Thumper. ‘I’ll pop round and have a look. I’ve got to pass your house because I’m delivering a couple of dozen bales of straw to Tom Gaskin’s wife.’

‘How is Tom?’ I asked.

Tom was a vet who had accidentally injected himself with a lethal dose of pentobarbital intended for his Great Dane. The dog was dying of cancer and Tom had decided to put it to sleep. Unfortunately, Tom was crying so much that he completely missed the dog and injected his own leg with the stuff. I had to climb a hill on their land and put up two saline drips to save his life. His wife had ridden across country to Bilbury Grange to fetch the extra saline that I needed. It had been a dramatic evening.

‘He’s fine now!’ said Thumper. ‘Except he was obviously brain damaged by the drug he injected himself with, because he’s still suffering from delusions. Actually, they are both deluded because they constantly sing your praises. I told Tom that if he survived your ministrations then it was doubtless more luck than judgement.’

‘Thank you,’ I said drily.

‘Don’t mention it,’ said Thumper. ‘I’ll call in on my way back and have a look and then you can give me a glass of something refreshing. I’ll need it by the time I’ve unloaded 24 bales of straw.’

By ‘something refreshing’, Thumper didn’t mean a nice, cool glass of lemonade. And he certainly wasn’t referring to ‘a nice cup of tea’. What he meant by ‘refreshing’ was a glass of Old Restoration – then, as now, still his favourite beer. I don't usually drink the stuff but we always keep a crate of it in the larder.

And so later that day, we took Thumper upstairs to listen to the sounds in our bedroom wall. Naturally, by this time the strange sounds had stopped. There was nothing whatsoever to be heard.

'It sounded like a scratching or scrabbling noise,' said Patsy.

'Maybe a mouse or a rat had got into the wall,' said Thumper. 'If they can find a way into the middle of an old wall then they sometimes make a nest there. Nice and dry and sheltered. It could have been a squirrel. Or a bat.'

'Oh dear!' said Patsy. 'You don't think it could be trapped, do you?'

'It won't be trapped,' Thumper assured her. 'But if it was scrabbling about then it might have started a small landslide among the rubble.'

Then we all heard another slight noise. It sounded feebler than before. Thumper heard it too.

'Can I borrow your stethoscope?' Thumper asked me.

Not bothering to ask why, I went downstairs and fetched my stethoscope.

Thumper then put the earpieces into his ears and the business end, the diaphragm, of the stethoscope, against the wall.

'What could you hear?' asked Patsy, when Thumper removed the stethoscope and handed it back to me.

'There's definitely something in there,' he said.

Unexpectedly, he then started tapping the wall. It's a technique all doctors use to see if there is fluid in a chest. You can diagnose the extent of any fluid in the lungs by measuring the change in the sounds. It's a technique that was originally used by beer and wine makers to measure the amount of fluid left in a cask or barrel. Thumper's tapping showed clearly that a piece of the wall about four feet wide and three or four feet high was hollow.

'What is it?' asked Patsy.

And then suddenly she gasped.

'A chimney? Do you think there's a chimney in there?'

'When you bought this place how much work did you do in this room?' asked Thumper.

'We just papered over the existing paper,' I admitted.

'It was dark blue with a gold stripe and looked as if it had been there for about 40 years,' said Patsy. 'We tried to scrape it off but it didn't want to leave.'

'Let's go and have a look outside,' said Thumper.

The three of us trooped downstairs, followed by one dog and two cats, and trotted out into the garden. Thumper then walked around the house counting chimneys. Patsy and I followed him.

'How many fireplaces have you got?' he asked.

'Three,' I replied. 'One in the drawing room, one in the kitchen, one in my consulting room and one in the dining room.'

'That's four,' said Patsy.

'Four,' I agreed.

'You've got sixteen chimney stacks,' said Thumper. 'And since they didn't usually build chimneys without there being a fireplace at the other end there is a fairly good chance that you've got twelve hidden fireplaces.' He looked at me, grinned and leant towards me confidentially. 'That's sixteen minus four,' he said.

I thanked him for the maths lesson.

'So if there is a chimney behind that wall then something could be inside it and trying to get out?' said Patsy.

'Yes,' agreed Thumper. 'The funny thing is that usually when a fireplace has been blocked up there will just be something stuck over the fireplace itself and the chimney breast will still be visible – with an alcove remaining each side. In fact, if a room has an alcove and a chimney breast but no visible fireplace, it's pretty certain that behind the chimney breast there will be a fireplace – quite probably a rather nice, old one. The odd thing with your bedroom is that if there is a fireplace then they covered over the chimney breast and the two alcoves as well – probably with huge pieces of plaster board.'

'So we could have a chimney in our bedroom?'

'Absolutely! And if you took off the plaster board, or whatever is covering up that side of the room then your bedroom would be bigger because you'd regain the two alcoves – one on each side of the chimney breast. Heaven knows what they used to fill the two alcoves.'

'So, how do we find out?' asked Patsy.

'Simple,' said Thumper. 'Where's the biggest hammer you've got?'

Now, at this point it would, of course, have been wise to stop, think and plan our next move. We should, at the very least, have spread some dustsheets over the bed, the carpet and the rest of the furniture in the bedroom. That is doubtless what normal, sensible people would have done. It is certainly what we should have done.

Instead, I hurried downstairs and fetched a sledge hammer from one of the barns.

The sledge hammer I fetched was so huge and so heavy that I hardly ever used it. To be honest, I had a job to raise it up above waist height without toppling backwards and I don't think I ever managed to raise it above shoulder height. I can't even remember how we came by it but I rather suspect it came in with a job lot of elderly garden tools which I purchased at a monthly auction in Lynton; the small holiday resort which is twinned with Lynmouth and which can be found just a few miles eastwards along the coast.

A year or two earlier, I had bought quite a number of our garden tools at two separate auctions – both of them in Lynton. Victorian gardeners had specific tools made for just about everything and some of the tools were very clever and marvellously well designed. So, for example, we have seven different garden forks, seven different types of spade and shovel, five different hoes and four different types of rake. Most people think a spade is a spade is a spade and Gertrude Stein would have doubtless agreed with them, but in our collection we had a digging shovel with a pointed tip (for digging in soft soil), a digging shovel with a square blade (for digging in hard packed soil), a trenching shovel with a sharp tip and square sides, a narrow spade with a rounded tip for transplanting shrubs or planting flowers, a scoop shovel for moving coal, snow or grain, a scraping spade for removing ice or weeds from paths, an edging spade with a half-moon blade and a hinged post hole digging spade. The whole lot cost us no more than a couple of pounds.

Many people who go to auctions are looking for elegant pieces of furniture, impressive paintings or potentially valuable pieces of silver, pottery or jewellery but it is often possible to find really good pieces of ordinary furniture on sale. Patsy and I furnished Bilbury Grange with a good many splendid pieces of furniture which we had bought at auctions and for which we had paid quite modest sums. Patchy, however, had once explained to me that the best and most exciting items are often the things which are sold at the end of an auction. These are usually assorted items which the auctioneer has dismissed as being of no great value. So, for example, a collection of old books may be dumped in a box and sold as 'box and contents'. (Sometimes, the box will be a rather nice old trunk or a useful wine crate rather than a boring cardboard box.) And garden equipment is usually left to the end of the auction and then sold without many people showing interest. Many of the buyers will have drifted off and those who are left will be in a hurry to pay their bills and claim their purchases. It's often easy to pick up garden statues, old benches and tools for very little money.

Anyway, I found the old sledge hammer, took it upstairs and handed it to Thumper who took hold of it as though he knew what he was doing which I'm sure he did.

Patsy and I both winced as he swung the head of the hammer against our bedroom wall. I confess that as he started his backswing, I began to have second thoughts about what we were doing but by then it was too late.

Moments later, we had a huge hole in our bedroom wall and it was clear that Thumper was correct.

Someone had covered up a large fireplace with a false wall made out of old boards.

As we all leant forward to see exactly what had been revealed, and what lay behind the boarding which the blow had shattered, we had the shock of our lives as a large bird flew out of the hole and started flying around the bedroom.

In the excitement of trying to find out whether or not we had a bedroom fireplace, I had completely forgotten that our interest in the wall had arisen because Patsy and I had heard something scrabbling and scratching behind it.

Within a minute, the bird had flown round the room at least five hundred times (I know that's an exaggeration but that's what it seemed like) and there was soot absolutely everywhere. The bird, poor thing, was so covered in ancient soot from the inside of the chimney, and was so frantic, that it was impossible to say exactly what it was. It could have been a crow, a rook, a magpie or a jackdaw. For a moment, I even thought that it could have been a pigeon. It could have been almost any medium to large sized bird though it wasn't big enough to be a seagull or a raven.

At that point Patsy screamed.

She did not scream because she was frightened (she is a farmer's daughter and does not scare easily) she screamed because the bird was turning our bedroom into a complete mess.

To be fair, I think that her response was fairly muted. Many women would, I suspect, have become overtly hysterical at the sight of a soot covered bird flying around a neat bedroom, depositing soot here, there and everywhere.

It is no exaggeration to say that within seconds the bed, the carpet, the curtains and all the furniture were covered in a layer of soot. We quickly discovered that a fairly modest amount of soot shares with blood and jam the capacity to cover a far larger area than might seem possible.

Our first task was to catch the bird.

This proved easier than expected since the bird's wings were heavily caked with soot and the creature was, therefore, slower in its movements than it might otherwise have been. Nevertheless, Patsy, Thumper and I spent several minutes diving around the bedroom before we caught it.

Modestly, I saw that 'we' caught it.

Surprisingly, perhaps, I was the one who eventually managed to grab the poor bird.

Realising that if I caught it in my hands there was a real risk that I might damage a wing, I caught the bird in a shirt I took from the laundry basket in the corner of the bedroom. Thumper had been using a towel and Patsy had been using a blouse; both items had been taken from the same laundry basket.

The bird was a crow and once I had it gently but firmly wrapped in the shirt, I carried it downstairs with Patsy and Thumper following closely behind. I took the 'parcel' to the kitchen and then through the back door into the garden.

The big question was what should we do with it next?

I was worried that if I let the bird go it would be vulnerable to predators.

'It'll be fine,' said Thumper. 'Just let it go and then stand back because there's going to be another cloud of soot!'

I unfastened the bundle, placed it on the ground and retreated in the way one does after lighting a firework.

Slowly, the crow emerged from the folds of the shirt. It looked a lot livelier than I had feared. It shook itself, fluttered its wings and produced a small cloud of soot. It then repeated the process several times. Each time it shook and fluttered, the cloud of soot was smaller.

'It'll be fine,' said Thumper. 'It'll go and have a wash in a minute.'

And sure enough, a minute or so later the bird walked about a little, fluttered into the air, came back to earth, tried again and then, delighted that everything seemed to be working satisfactorily, it took off and flew off towards our bird bath. Moments later it was splashing and fluttering and using its beak to clean and preen the remains of the soot from its wings. It was good to know that we'd succeeded in rescuing the bird though the price of the rescue had, perhaps, been a little higher than we might have liked.

'I suppose we'd better go back up and look at the damage,' sighed Patsy.

I could tell that she really didn't want to go back upstairs at all. I wasn't too keen either.

'I think you've got a pretty nice looking Victorian fireplace surround behind that board,' said Thumper, offering us hope that releasing the crow might leave us with something to be pleased about.

And he was right.

It took several hours to clear the sooty mess in the bedroom but there was a reward. When we had removed the partition which had been put up, we unearthed a magnificent, Victorian hearth with a surround consisting of beautiful and largely undamaged tiles. Whoever had put up the partition had even left the cast iron dogs in place inside the fireplace. The fireplace was full of twigs and it was clear that several nests must have been built in the chimney over the years.

'I have no idea why they built the partition wall across the whole of one side of the bedroom. It was a very solid affair, constructed out of real wooden boards. Patsy and I had rather hoped that we might find something valuable hidden in what would have been the two recesses if only the fireplace itself had been boarded up.

But we didn't find anything valuable.

There was nothing there but a large pile of old magazines and newspapers from Edwardian times. The owners of the property must have been well read because there were copies of *The Times*, *The Morning Post* and *The Devon and Exeter Gazette*. There was also a huge pile of magazines such as *Punch*, *Illustrated London News* and *The Strand*. It was clear from the newspaper dates that the partition must have been put up in around 1909. Still, as Thumper remarked: it could have been worse; we could have discovered a couple of human skeletons sealed up behind the partition.

The serious downside was that, as a result of our breaking down the partition, we had to completely redecorate the bedroom.

One upside was that much of our bedroom was now two and a half feet longer than it had been before. I don't think anyone really objects to having their bedroom extended a little at no real cost to themselves.

And the other upside was that we had a file collection of several hundred old newspapers and magazines. Some people might have regarded this as a nuisance, just rubbish to be disposed of. Some might have simply carted them off to an auction house in the hope that the haul would produce enough of a profit to pay for the wallpaper we had to buy. But I'm afraid I kept them all and I'm still reading them. Indeed, I have to admit that I get far more pleasure out of reading newspapers and periodicals dated 1909 than I could possibly get from reading contemporary publications.

I don't know what happened to the crow after he'd cleaned himself off and flown away. But Patsy and I both felt we were in his debt and we still regard all crows with great affection.

The Student

At the entrance to the drive into Bilbury Grange there were two rather elderly gates; these were obviously much older than I was and considerably more distinguished and impressive looking.

We never shut the gates but they were oak and nicely made, with some rather fancy bits and pieces of carving, and Patsy and I thought they look rather splendid so when I noticed that some of the wood was beginning to show signs that it had been standing out in all weathers for many years without anyone paying it much attention, I bought a large tin of clear yacht varnish from Peter Marshall, who runs the village shop, and decided to give the gates a protective coating.

The label on the tin said that 'for best results four coats should be applied' but I didn't love the gates that much so I decided that one thick coat would do just as well.

'That's the stuff they paint on ocean going yachts,' Peter had assured me. 'I think they use it on the America's Cup contenders. The last four winners all used it so it must be good.'

I don't know how Peter knew any of this, and knowing him as well as I do I suspect it was all part of his sales patter, but it sounded convincing and it was reassuring so I believed him. We all tend to believe things we want to believe more readily than we believe things that we find unacceptable.

I was always telling myself to try to be more sceptical where Peter was concerned. After all, as Patchy Fogg once put it: 'If Peter had his way, the famous soliloquy from Mr Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' would read: 'To buy or not to buy, that is the question'.' Peter always did his best to convince his customers that buying something was the only sensible answer, whatever the question might have been.

Still, the varnish was clear and sticky and those seemed to me to be vital and admirable qualities in a varnish.

(It was Peter, incidentally, who once told me that William Shakespeare was a ruthless and sharp entrepreneur who made money by storing foodstuffs until there was a shortage and then selling them for huge profits. When Peter found this out he decided that Shakespeare was his hero. He also told me that the Bard was frequently summoned to court for failing to pay his taxes.)

I started to clean the gates at about nine o'clock one evening and since it was summer and the days were long, I honestly believed that I would be able to finish the job in the gloaming and be done long before it went too dark to see what I was doing.

It was, as Patsy pointed out later, a fairly silly time to start varnishing a pair of gates but I have never been put off doing sensible things at silly times or, has been pointed out on more than one occasion, doing silly things at sensible times.

I had not, however, allowed for the fact that Mrs Tempest would decide to go into labour at a few minutes before 10.00 and although she shells babies with an ease which makes professional assistance almost completely superfluous, both she and I would have considered it the height of bad manners if I hadn't been there, standing at forward short leg to take the catch, cut the cord and congratulate everyone concerned. (Her husband, who created this analogy, is a keen cricketer who plays for the Bilbury team.)

And, after the baby had been born, I'd had to drink a glass of malt whisky (from a bottle which they kept especially for my use on such occasions and can you think of a more splendid way to know that you're considered to be a proper 'family doctor'?) and take a couple of puffs from a cigar which her husband always insisted on giving to me because he knew that was what they always did in books and films. He knows that I don't usually smoke but he doesn't know, because I have never told him and I try to hide it, that the taste of a cigar makes me feel nauseous.

So, by the time I got back to Bilbury Grange it was dark and since there wasn't much of a moon the gates were just a blur in the night.

I tried to finish the varnishing but quickly found that I couldn't see (or remember) which bits I'd already done. I tried parking the Rolls Royce in such a way that by switching on the car headlights I could illuminate the work area. That would have worked, I think, if Patsy hadn't come out and reminded me that the lights on the Rolls Royce use a good deal of electricity and that when I'd once accidentally left the lights switched on for an hour the battery had gone completely flat.

All of this explains why I was finishing off the varnishing at 8.30 a.m. the following morning and telling all the patients who arrived for the morning surgery that I would definitely be starting the surgery at 9.00 a.m. sharp and that I would make sure I washed all the varnish off my fingers.

'I don't want to have all my best bits varnished,' said Mrs Hardy with a laugh that drove the birds from the trees and startled Ben so much that he ran into the porch and hid behind the aspidistra that Patsy's mother gave us for our anniversary three years ago.

At ten minutes to nine, I narrowly avoided being run over as a sports car slid to a halt in the lane outside.

'Where can I find Bilbury Grange?' demanded the driver, a plump, red-faced young man in a sports jacket. I use the word 'demanded' advisedly. He wore an old school tie which I knew I ought to recognise and, sparkling in the early morning sunshine, a gold tiepin. If he had been admitted to prison the tiepin would be recorded as 'gold metal' but I was pretty confident it was gold. He looked like the sort of person to have the best and most expensive of everything. He doubtless had a silver spoon tucked away somewhere. He was wearing an expensive looking flat cap; the sort that you see a good deal of at point-to-point meetings throughout the English countryside.

'You've found it!' I told him, assuming that he was a visitor to the area who needed medical assistance. He certainly didn't look like a meter reader or an income tax collector.

He stared at the gate and then at me and then at the gate again. 'Is it worth it?' he asked. 'It looks a pretty old gate and a pretty boring job!'

'It's enormous fun and very satisfying,' I lied, suddenly remembering Tom Sawyer white- washing his Aunt's fence.

'Really?' He sounded very unconvinced.

'You can finish off what's left if you give me your apple core,' I told him.

'I beg your pardon?'

I repeated what I'd said.

'What apple core?'

'Or maybe just lend me your hat for an hour.'

He now looked at me as if I was an escaped lunatic.

'Tom Sawyer,' I explained.

'Who?'

'Don't you know 'The Adventures of Tom Sawyer'? Have you never read the 'Adventures of Huckleberry Finn'?'

If I had suddenly started speaking Mandarin he could not possibly have stared at me in more confusion.

'Mark Twain?' I suggested.

'Sorry, no, doesn't ring a bell,' he said.

I was, to be honest rather shocked that the visitor, whoever he was and whatever he wanted, had never heard of Tom Sawyer or Mark Twain and it seemed rather sad.

The famous Twain story of Sawyer and the fence painting had popped into my mind because my chum Patchy Fogg, a local antiques dealer, had recently acquired a very old typewriter which he believed was one which Twain had owned. The typewriter, made by the 'Ohio MfgCo' was so old that the keyboard was arranged in the original, old-fashioned, straightforward abcdefhijk fashion rather than the more familiar qwertyuiop design (which was introduced to slow down typists who were typing too quickly and getting their keys all in a tangle.)

The keyboard on the old typewriter which Patchy had acquired was enormous for it had separate keys for all the capital letters and all the letters were on very long stalks. What made Patchy so excited was the fact that the machine had the letters SC neatly scratched on the base. Now Twain was, of course, one of the first people in the world to use a typewriter and his real name was Samuel Clemens. Patchy was completely convinced that the typewriter was genuine and a real collector's item. He was so convinced that it was an antique that he said he was going to keep it. 'I couldn't sell this,' he told me excitedly. 'It's the first real antique I've ever found!'

I had intended to embellish my comment about Mark Twain with this local story, but before I could say anything else the stranger had put his foot on the accelerator, sprayed me with gravel and swung into the driveway where he parked his tiny sports car in front of my Rolls Royce 20/25 – blocking me in completely.

Most of my patients know not to park in front of the Rolls Royce because if I have an emergency to attend to I always need to get out of the driveway quickly. It is for that reason that I always park the car facing the exit of the driveway. I moved to ask the driver to shift his car but I was too slow for he had disappeared into the house. Looking at my watch I realised that I had better finish the varnishing, go indoors, get cleaned up and put on a tie and a jacket if I intended to start the surgery on time.

Four minutes later I finished the varnishing, popped the sticky brush into the empty tin and headed for the house. The young man who had driven the sports car was waiting inside the hall. He was still young but he was now also clearly short and surprisingly chubby.

'Where can I find the doctor?' he demanded in the sort of tone that Victorian and Edwardian landowners used to favour when addressing the servants.

I looked at him and, with the hand holding the empty can and the paint brush, pointed to the room in which patients usually wait to be seen. 'The waiting room is in there,' I told him.

'No, you misunderstand,' he said. 'I'm not a patient. I'm Mr Munton.' He said this as if I should have recognised the name.

'Mr Munton?' I said, racking my brains and wondering why I was expected to know who Mr Munton might be.

'From Birmingham University,' he explained. 'I'm here as an observer.'

He made it sound as if he were visiting in an official capacity; to check up on me in some way.

'To observe what?'

He sighed with obvious exasperation. 'Just tell me where I can find the doctor?' he demanded, rather more brusquely this time. The tone had hardened into something that might be used with a recalcitrant and somewhat half-witted servant who needed putting in his place.

'I'm the doctor.'

He stared at me in astonishment. 'You're the doctor?'

'Yes. Can I help you?'

'I'm Franklin Munton,' he said. Foolishly I shook it, forgetting that my hand was still rather sticky with varnish.

And as he grimaced and reached into his pocket for a linen handkerchief (which, I didn't mind betting, was probably embroidered with his initials) I remembered who he was and why he was standing in the hall of Bilbury Grange.

A few months earlier I had received a telephone call from one of the lecturers at my old medical school in Birmingham. He told me that he was trying to arrange what he called 'one day professional experiences' for final year medical students.

'We're ringing up doctors who qualified here and asking if they would allow a student to sit in with them for a day. Just to observe what goes on. We think it might help the students make good, sound, career choices.'

Partly to get the lecturer off the phone, partly because the date he had offered was a long way away (and you can always kid yourself that the awful day will never arrive) I had agreed to take a student for the day.

I had also thought, I suppose, that I might be able to help a young doctor in the same way that Dr Brownlow had helped me when I had first entered general practice. At the back of my mind lay the thought that I might be able to offer a little guidance. Students at medical school are taught a great deal about glanders, the ague and the Black Death and quite probably botts disease too (though, come to think of it, I have a suspicion that is something which mainly afflicts sheep) but they are taught nothing very much about the sort of ailment commonly seen in a GP's surgery, where patients wander in suffering with butterflies in their stomachs and frogs in their throats and where attempts to heal them are too often complicated by the presence of unexpected flies in the ointment.

And this was the student I had agreed to allow into my surgery; my 'observer' for the day.

When I'd deposited the empty varnish tin and washed my hands (and the student had washed his hands too) I introduced him to Patsy and then to Miss Johnson, the venerable practice receptionist. I told Miss Johnson to advise patients that I had a medical student with me and that if they didn't want him to stay in the consulting room all they had to do was to tell her.

'If they'd rather you weren't there, you can pop out through the French windows,' I told him. 'That way it won't be embarrassing for you or the patient.'

'The patients aren't given that option at any of the hospitals attached to the medical school,' said Mr Munton, rather crossly.

'But that's what's going to happen here,' I told him. It did not seem to me too unreasonable that I should be allowed to set the house rules, since we were in my consulting room.

I too was now rather cross and beginning to regret the whole exercise. The day hadn't really got off to the best of starts. I had an awful suspicion that although the day had begun with some fairly common or garden pique it could well end up with more than its fair share of high dudgeon on display.

I showed Mr Munton a spare chair in my consulting room, put it up a corner so that he could sit quietly and out of the way and showed him the French windows through which he could make his escape if Miss Johnson told me that a patient who was coming in didn't want the student to stay in the room.

'I think it's probably best if you sit quietly,' I told him. 'If you have any questions or comments keep them until the patient has left.'

He said he would do this and took a smart leather notebook out of an outer jacket pocket and an expensive looking fountain pen from an inner pocket. The notebook, the pen and the bad-tempered scowl that seemed to be a fixture made him look like a traffic policeman. I felt it likely that no one had ever described him as a hypergelast or a cachinnator and made a mental note to put these words onto the next list of oddities I compiled with my pal William.

A minute or so later the first patient came in.

'It's his second attack of tonsils in eighteen months,' said Beryl Bussage before she'd even sat down. She sounded rather cross about it, as though she'd bought the tonsils in good faith and was now rather disappointed in their performance.

I told her small son Reginald to open his mouth wide so that I could take a look inside. His tonsils were certainly inflamed and swollen. I took a look at his medical records.

‘The antibiotic did its job very well last time,’ I said. ‘I’ll prescribe the same thing again.’ I reached for my prescription pad and my pen.

I knew that most cases of tonsillitis went away without any treatment but an antibiotic helped to ensure that there weren’t any complications. Besides, although I steadfastly refused to prescribe antibiotics for patients with colds or the flu (both caused by viruses which aren’t affected by antibiotics), I didn’t fancy being the first doctor in the world to tell a mother that I wasn’t going to write out a prescription for an antibiotic for her child’s tonsillitis.

‘I want them taken out,’ said Mrs Bussage firmly.

I looked at her.

‘Most of the children in his class at school have had their tonsils taken out,’ said Mrs Bussage. She sat back and folded her arms as though defying me to fail to agree that this was a sound argument for surgery.

‘Surgeons used to rip out every child’s tonsils,’ I told her. ‘The operation to remove the tonsils and another twin patch of lymphatic tissue called the adenoids was for years the most common surgical procedure performed. In some parts of the world a T and A operation – a tonsillectomy and adenoidectomy – was done as a routine when a child reached a certain age.’

‘Well, there you are then, they must have known what they were doing,’ said Mrs Bussage, with admirably misplaced faith in the medical profession.

‘Ah, but doctors haven’t always done sensible things,’ I told her. ‘Sadly, the history of medicine is littered with misconceptions, misapprehensions and misinterpretations and medical history is full of examples of doctors doing things or saying things which they later regretted and which have been proved pointless or dangerous or both. During the First World War, for example, it was argued that workers in gunpowder mills were made healthier by breathing in dust containing charcoal, sulphur and salt petre. At the same time, it was customary for doctors to chop out great lengths of bowel simply because they could and one or two eminent surgeons said it was a good idea to do so. Doctors used to bleed their patients because they thought it would help make them stronger. Lots of my predecessors used leeches. Surgeons removed bits of brain from patients who were mentally ill. Others gave their patients massive electric shocks. Patients who had syphilis were treated with mercury without anyone realising just how dangerous it was. In the 1920s, doctors regularly removed all of their patients’ teeth to protect them from infections such as tuberculosis. You don’t have to go very far back to find yourself in an era when doctors thought that smoking was good for people. Doctors enthusiastically recommended cigarettes to all their nervous patients and, in addition, to men who seemed to be a bit undersized and ‘weedy’. By the 1950s, a few outspoken nutters were just beginning to claim that smoking was dangerous but most people thought the cranks were just being as silly as those who said that fatty foods were bad for you. When I was a small boy everyone ‘knew’ that fat was good for you and that dripping spread on bread was as healthy a meal as, well, a sugar sandwich; and that both were as good for you as any meal any dietician or nutritionist could devise.’

I paused.

Mrs Bussage did not look convinced by anything I’d said.

‘There are fashions in medicine,’ I concluded, ‘just as much as there are fashions in anything else. And it was, for quite a while, fashionable to remove the tonsils!’

My eye caught Mr Munton, sitting quietly in a corner. He looked shocked at my gentle criticisms of the medical profession.

‘Well,’ said Mrs Bussage. ‘All that is as maybe but all I’m saying is that I think you should arrange for Reginald to have his tonsils taken out.’

‘Let me tell you four things,’ I said. ‘And then if you still agree that Reginald should have an operation I will refer him to a surgeon.’

‘First, the tonsils are there for a purpose. They aren’t just a nuisance. They are the first line of the throat’s defences in catching infections and preventing them going deeper into the body. If the tonsils are removed then they can’t swell up but the infection might go deeper into the body and cause other problems.’

‘Second, surgeons used to remove swollen tonsils because they had no other way of treating them. Today, we have penicillin and most of the time it is a drug which really works at curing tonsillitis.’

‘Third, there is a risk with any operation. There is, for example, the risk of having an anaesthetic. If an operation is life-saving then the risk is usually worth taking. But Reginald’s tonsils are not threatening his life. What a tragedy it would be if we arranged for an operation which he didn’t really need and something terrible happened.’

And fourth, there is no doubt that removing the tonsils is still a fashionable operation. It is something doctors arrange because they think it ought to be done. In New York City, a group of American doctors examined 1,000 schoolchildren to decide whether or not they needed an operation to remove their tonsils. None of the children was ill. They were healthy, normal children. The team of doctors recommended that 61% of the children should have their tonsils removed. The remaining children were then examined by a second group of physicians. These doctors examined the children who were left and decided that 45% of these children needed to have their tonsils removed. A third set of doctors then examined the fairly small group of children who were left and these doctors recommend that 46% should have their tonsils removed. Finally, a fourth examination was made of the minute number of children who remained. On this occasion another 45% of the children were told that they needed to have their tonsils removed. At this point in the experiment just 65 children of the original 1,000 remained. The four groups of doctors had between them decided that 935 children needed to have their tonsils removed.'

Mrs Bussage reached out and took hold of Reginald. She put her arm around him. 'I didn't know there were any risks with the operation!'

'There are always risks with an operation,' I told her. 'If the operation is vital then the risks will be worth taking. But…'

I didn't get to finish the sentence.

'Does he have to have the operation?' asked Mrs Bussage. 'Can't you just give him more of those antibiotics that cured him last time?'

I said I thought that would be a good idea. 'If he gets a good deal of trouble with his tonsils we can always think again,' I told her. 'If we all think it's necessary for him to have the operation then I'll certainly fix it up.'

'Oh, I think we're a long way from that point, don't you, doctor?' said Mrs Bussage.

I wrote out a prescription and told her to give it to Patsy or Miss Johnson who would turn the prescription into medicine.

'Golly,' said Mr Munton, when Mrs Bussage and young Reginald had gone. 'You were a bit tough on the medical profession weren't you?' He clearly disapproved.

'I wanted to make a point,' I explained. 'And I thought it was important to help Mrs Bussage understand that medicine can sometimes get things wrong.'

'You certainly did that. Do you dispense your own medicines?'

'Yes. Otherwise it's a long way to the nearest pharmacy and many of my patients don't have cars or even bicycles.'

'Aren't there any buses?'

I smiled. 'If you relied on the buses around here you'd probably never go anywhere. And if you did manage to go somewhere you'd have a hell of a long wait before you get back.'

'Is it profitable?'

'Is what profitable? The bus service?'

'No. Is it profitable to run your own dispensary?'

I was puzzled. Naively, I hadn't ever thought about this. 'I wouldn't think so,' I replied. 'But I think it probably pays for itself so it doesn't actually cost us anything.'

Mr Munton looked at me as if I were mad. I got the feeling that the suspicions which he had harboured when he saw me varnishing our gate had been crystallised.

Mrs Ermintrude Trump was my next patient.

'I've got swollen knees,' she said, before she'd sat down. She pulled up her dress and showed me her knees. They certainly were swollen. She then turned and showed Mr Munton, to whom I had, of course, introduced her.

'Have you been doing a lot of praying or housework?' I asked her.

She laughed. 'I've probably not done as much praying as I should have done,' she admitted. 'But I've been giving the house a good spring-clean and nothing cleans a floor like a bit of old-fashioned elbow grease.'

'It looks as if you've got housemaid's knee,' I told her. 'If you'd been doing too much praying then you'd have parson's knee.'

She wasn't wearing stockings so I could easily examine her knees. It wasn't difficult to see that there was some fluid on both knees. When human knees spend a lot of time in contact with hard surfaces there is a tendency for the skin to get squashed and stretched and as a result a bursa develops. I told her this.

'My niece is a bursar in a school in Surrey,' said Mrs Trump, frowning.

'That's a b-u-r-s-a-r,' I explained. 'What you've got is a b-u-r-s-a.'

'And what is it?' asked Mrs Trump. 'It feels all squishy. Why is it squishy?'

'It feels squishy because it is squishy. It's just some fluid that has collected as a protective mechanism – to protect your knees. It can happen to other parts of the body too. Students and scholars sometimes get student's elbow. And believe it or not there used to be a condition known as weaver's bottom which affected weavers who spent a lot of time sitting down at their looms.'

'Oh I don't think I'll get that!' said Mrs Thump with a loud, throaty laugh. Her whole body shook when she laughed. ‘I’ve got far too much fat on my bottom. So, doctor, what can I do about my housemaid’s knee?’

‘Have you finished your spring cleaning?’

‘I certainly have! My floors are spotless.’

‘Then I don’t think either of us needs to do anything about it. The fluid will slowly disappear and so will the swelling. If it hasn’t gone in a couple of weeks come and see me again and I’ll fix you up with an appointment to see a surgeon at the hospital. He’ll put a needle into the swellings and remove the fluid. But I don’t think it will come to that.’

‘That’s an unusual name, isn’t it?’ asked Mr Munton when Mrs Trump had gone.

‘Oh I don’t think so,’ I replied. ‘There are quite a few Trumps about in this part of the world. There’s a family of them in a hamlet called Churchill Barton. I suppose it’s fair to call it a hamlet. Someone told me that officially a hamlet is a village without a church and there’s certainly no church in Churchill Barton.’ I thought for a moment. ‘Come to think of it I think just about everyone living in Churchill Barton is called Trump.’

‘I meant Ermintrude,’ said Mr Munton.

‘Oh no, that’s not an unusual name. I know of three Ermintrudes in our village. It used to be a very popular name. It’s usually shortened to Emma or Emmy but Mrs Trump doesn’t like her name being abbreviated.’

‘Living here must be like living in another century,’ said Mr Munton with a quiet sigh.

It was, I thought, a sign of disapproval and disdain. I got the clear impression that Mr Munton was not a great fan of country life.

‘I think you’re probably right!’ I said. ‘But we like to think that we are tiptoeing gently towards the front edges of the 20th century. Working in a village community is very different to working in a town or a city. The environment is different, the relationships are different and, of course, there is a greater sense of community here than you will ever find in places such as Birmingham or London.’

Mr Munton took the top off his fountain pen and wrote something down in his notebook. I assumed that his tutor had told him to write a report on his impressions of a country doctor working in a practice in Devon. When he’d finished writing he looked at it, thought for a moment and then underlined it with his pen. Maybe, I thought, I was getting through to Mr Munton. Maybe he might learn one or two things after all.

‘I’ve just remembered I’ve got to telephone a chap I play squash with,’ he explained, when he saw me looking at his notebook to see if he’d finished writing. ‘I had a game fixed for this evening but I’ll have to reschedule it.’

I always like to learn something new every day but I rather got the feeling that Mr Munton felt that he was already full to the brim with all the knowledge he was likely to need in life. I, on the other hand, had reached the age when I was far more aware of the things I didn’t understand than the things I knew. I still struggled to explain to myself why the cap doesn’t stick when you put it back onto the open end of a tube of glue. It occurred to me that Mr Munton was perhaps not mature enough to have acquired an interest in people. Or maybe he was so concerned with himself, and his own narrow world, that he would never be interested in the wider world.

Dottie McTavish, may have had a Scottish sounding name but as far as I know, she had never been as far north as Bristol, let alone Glasgow or Edinburgh and she was as English as it is possible to imagine anyone to be.

Miss McTavish was 14, gracile, daphlean and leesome and before she came into the surgery, I had ushered Mr Munton out through the French windows.

I had no idea whether or not Miss McTavish would have consented to my having a medical student in the consulting room but I had never met a girl between the ages of 12 and 16 who wasn’t shyer than she liked people to know.

‘Miss Johnson said you had a student with you,’ said Miss McTavish, looking around.

I’d watched her grow up from a small, freckly gamine with a penchant for climbing trees and playing cowboys and Indians (both activities leading to regular scrapes and grazes but, fortunately, nothing more substantial) into the early makings of a beautiful, young woman; caterpillar into butterfly. She had red hair and green eyes and would soon be leaving broken hearts strewn behind her like rose petals after a summer wind.

‘He’s popped out. And he won’t be coming back in while you’re here.’

‘Oh!’ she said. I could see the relief. It was almost tangible.

‘What’s the problem?’

‘I’ve got a lump,’ she whispered. ‘I think I’ve got cancer.’

‘Where is it?’

‘Just here!’ She touched her side, at the bottom of her rib cage. ‘It feels hard.’

‘How long has it been there?’

‘I only found it last night; when I was getting ready for bed.’

I gave thanks, for the umpteenth time, that I did not have an appointments system which meant that patients had to wait a week, a fortnight or a month to see a doctor in order to share a concern.

It occurred to me that if she'd been a couple of years older I would have suspected that a boyfriend had found it for her. Spouses, partners and lovers are often the one to find a physical abnormality.

'Pull up your blouse and let me look.'

Blushing, she stood up and pulled her blouse out of her skirt.

'Now show me. Where is the lump?'

She put her finger on it. 'Just here.'

I examined her and then told her she could pull down her blouse. She did so and then sat down.

'You haven't got cancer,' I told her immediately. 'You haven't got anything wrong with you. Your lump is perfectly normal and healthy.'

They probably heard her sigh of relief in distant parts of Cornwall.

'It's a rib,' I told her. 'It's been there all your life but you never noticed it before.'

'But it doesn't seem attached to anything!'

'Well it's attached to your spine at one end but it's not attached to your sternum, your breastbone, or to any of the other ribs. So it seems to be loose at the front – it's sometimes called a floating rib. Lots of people have them.'

'I feel a fool!' she said, and she did look embarrassed.

'Why on earth do you feel a fool?'

'Just finding a rib that I'd never noticed before!'

'It happens often. You're not foolish.'

'And it's not anything to worry about?'

'Absolutely not! It is perfectly healthy and it's not in the slightest bit dangerous.'

She stood up, beaming. 'That's such a relief, doctor!' She moved towards the door and then turned back for a moment. 'Thank you for sending the student out,' she whispered. 'I'd have felt even more of a fool if someone else had been in the room.'

When she'd gone I went to the French windows and called Mr Munton back into the consulting room. I was glad I'd sent him out when Miss McTavish had been in the surgery.

He had, he told me, been watching some young squirrels playing on the lawn.

'They look like rats with bushy tails!' he said.

'They do. But they don't behave in the slightest bit like rats. Rats are aggressive and greedy but squirrels are nervous, gentle and playful.'

'Well, they still look like hairy rats to me.'

My next patient, Amelia Cartwright, had hurt her arm.

'Have I broken it, doctor?' she wanted to know. She rolled up the sleeve of her cardigan and held out the arm for inspection

It didn't take more than a couple of moments to confirm that she hadn't broken anything.

'Did you fall?' I asked her.

She looked rather embarrassed.

'I fell off a space hopper.'

'Ah!' I said, as if this was entirely predictable. I had heard of space hoppers for they were at the time, all the rage. I had seen pictures in newspapers and magazines of children bouncing about on board brightly coloured, plastic 'hoppers'.

In reality, this had not been top of my list of possible causes of Mrs Cartwright's injury. It had occurred to me that she might have tripped or slipped on a loose rug but it had not occurred to me that she might have fallen off a space hopper.

Mrs Cartwright was in her 70s and not, perhaps, the prime target market for space hopping.

'I was doing quite well but suddenly I overbalanced,' she said. 'I think I got a bit over-confident.'

'What on earth were you doing on a space hopper?'

'My grandson wanted to try one and so he had his fifteen minutes on it and then he wanted to see his gran having a go. So I bought my fifteen minutes and had a go to please him.'

'What do you mean by you bought your fifteen minutes?'

'Oh Peter is renting them out,' said Mrs Cartwright. 'He's only managed to get hold of two and I've no doubt that he's realised he can make more money out of them by renting rather than selling them.'

I thought that sounded like Peter Marshall. I also thought it showed his entrepreneurial instinct to the full. Who else but Peter would have thought of renting out space hoppers for fifteen minutes at a time?

Peter Marshall, who runs the village shop and is rumoured by Thumper Robinson to have run it since the days when Alfred the Great was busy burning cakes, always claims that he makes a real effort to keep up with the times. 'You have to face the changes head on,' he says. 'You have to embrace new trends so that you can conquer them!'

And although it has been argued by some that Peter is usually a year or so behind the times with new ideas, he does usually get there in the end. Peter Marshall's village shop is the Bilbury department store; stacked to the rafters with turnips, drain cleaner, potatoes, dog food, tinned pears, tap washers, yacht varnish and a cornucopia of very useful stuff that you never know you want until you suddenly find you need it and can't manage without it.

Peter did not start selling plastic hula hoops until the mid-1960s when they had been largely abandoned in England's larger towns and cities – though this lengthy delay may have been as much a result of his enthusiasm for buying cheaper products, and waiting for over-stocks to become available at the warehouse than a failure of awareness. There is no doubt that when hula hoops did finally appear in Bilbury, they had been bought by Peter at a wholesale price which reflected their fall in popularity elsewhere in the country. Naturally, the retail price did not fall in a similar way. No one would have expected it to do so.

With space hoppers it was different. Peter had managed to get hold of two of them right at the height of the craze.

'Could I have a bandage, do you think?' asked Mrs Cartwright.

'I don't think…' I began.

'I know it doesn't really need one,' said Mrs Cartwright. 'But my grandson is staying with me for a few days while his parents have gone to Cornwall. To be honest, he's wearing me out and he wants to go back for another go on the space hopper tomorrow. If I have a bandage on one arm it might give me an excuse to take it a bit easier for a day or so. I can just stand there and offer him encouragement.'

I got up, fetched a bandage from a drawer and started to wrap it around Mrs Cartwright's arm. 'Tell him he can have your fifteen minutes on the space hopper as well as his own,' I suggested. 'He'll be thrilled by that and so not too disappointed that you're not having another go.'

'What a splendid idea!' said Mrs Cartwright beaming.

I finished the bandaging and fixed it all in place with a safety pin and lots of impressive looking strapping.

When Mrs Cartwright left she was quite content.

'Another satisfied customer!' I said to Mr Munton.

'It's not exactly proper medicine, is it?' said Mr Munton, who was a little uppity for my taste.

It occurred to me that our relationship (such as it was) had never acquired the essential ingredient of respect which is pretty much a standard requirement for the pupil-teacher association. I did wonder if perhaps things had been marred by the fact that Mr Munton still thought of me as a gate-varnisher rather than a man of medicine. Or, more likely, it was my fault. It takes special skills and an unusual type of patience to be a teacher. The truth is that my hands were full looking after my practice and I had neither the time nor the inclination to acquire teaching skills.

Mrs Isabel Outhout had been a patient of mine since I had taken over the practice from Dr Brownlow. And before that she had been a patient of Dr Brownlow's. She was a nervous, shy woman in her mid-30s who hurried everywhere she went. An inch short of five feet tall and weighing less than seven stones she always wore long Victorian dresses together with old-fashioned button up ankle boots and a shawl.

On reflection, I am sure that Mrs Outhout was the only woman under 60 whom I had ever seen use a shawl and she wore one all the time; summer and winter. It certainly seemed to be a useful and versatile piece of clothing. In the winter she wore a thick, woollen shawl which she used as a coat, scarf and hat and in the summer she wore a thin, silken one which she used to shade her face and neck from the sun. She had jet black hair and brown eyes but was terrified of burning in the hot weather. Her skin was as white as paper and she wanted to keep it that way. Her husband was called Dwayne Outhout.

The Outhouts lived in Bilbury but Isabel Outhout worked in Barnstaple, where she was a shop assistant in an old-fashioned millinery and haberdashery store. The bus service in North Devon was woeful and she couldn't afford a car so she travelled between Bilbury and Barnstaple on a 50cc Honda moped. There were no rules about helmets in those days and she rode her moped flat out with her hair flying free in the wind behind her. She once told me, with some pride, that she regularly hit 28 mph on the downhill stretches, though she admitted that she managed considerably less on the uphill stretches. When it rained she carried a clear umbrella, jamming the handle between her left arm and her chest so that she could keep both hands on the controls. It was one of the strangest sights I've ever seen but it was apparently extremely effective at keeping her relatively dry. I saw her once come back from Barnstaple in a snow storm. It was a sight I shall never forget. The moped, the umbrella and Mrs Outhout were all white and apart from the phut phut phut of the moped engine, it appeared as though a strangely angelic ghost were riding along the lane.

'I'm terribly worried, doctor,' Mrs Outhout told me, settling down and adjusting her shawl. 'I had to see a doctor while I was on holiday in London. Dwayne and I went up to have a week doing the sights: the Tower of London, Buckingham Palace, Madame Tussauds and so on. While we were there, I developed an ear infection. The doctor the hotel recommended gave me some antibiotics which have cleared up the infection, thank heavens because it was very painful, but he insisted on doing some blood tests. He said he thought I had a thyroid problem.'

‘Did he say why he thought that?’

‘He said that being thin and very nervous are well-known signs of thyrotoxicosis.’

‘They are,’ I agreed. I didn’t bother to mention, however, that lots of people are thin and nervous without having anything wrong with their thyroid glands.

‘I had to go and see him after five days and he told me that according to the results from the laboratory, I have something called euthyroid.’

I frowned, slightly confused. ‘What exactly did he say? Can you remember his precise words?’ I looked at her husband who had accompanied her into the surgery.

‘He said the tests showed that Isabel was euthyroid,’ replied Dwayne. He took a small diary out of his pocket and showed me the word ‘euthyroid’ written on the back inside cover. ‘I asked him how to spell it,’ added Mr Outhout.

‘Did he tell you what it meant?’

‘No,’ said Mr Outhout.

Mrs Outhout shook her head, agreeing with her husband.

‘Did he tell you that you needed to come and see me?’

‘No. He didn’t say anything about any more treatment,’ said Mrs Outhout. ‘But when he said that I was euthyroid I thought I’d better come and see you as soon as I could.’

I started to say something but Mr Outhout talked over me. He wasn’t being rude. He was simply desperate to explain to me how urgently he thought his wife’s condition should be treated.

‘We’ve been worried sick since we had the diagnosis,’ said Mr Outhout. ‘We cut our holiday short and came home because Isabel wanted to talk to you about it. We wanted to make sure we started any treatment as quickly as possible.’

‘Does it need an operation?’ asked Mrs Outhout. There were tears in her eyes. ‘I don’t think I could bear going into hospital for an operation. I don’t know why but I do worry so. My mother was in hospital for six weeks before she died and it affected me quite a lot.’

‘We have some money saved for a rainy day,’ said Mr Outhout. ‘We can pay for private treatment if it would help; if it would speed things up or help us find a better surgeon.’

I held up a hand in an attempt to silence them both. ‘There’s nothing wrong with your thyroid gland,’ I told Mrs Outhout.

‘We could travel to Exeter or Bristol if you thought it necessary,’ said Mr Outhout.

I repeated what I’d just said.

The two of them heard me this time and were clearly stunned for they were silent for a moment or two.

‘How do you know?’ demanded Mrs Outhout.

‘The doctor in London did the tests and said Isabel was euthyroid,’ said Mr Outhout. ‘Surely that must mean that something is wrong.’

‘It means exactly the opposite of that,’ I told him. ‘The word ‘euthyroid’ is just a medical term for ‘normal’.’

They both stared at me, disbelievingly.

I stood up, walked over to the bookcase where I keep most of my medical books and pulled out a large, medical dictionary. I flicked through the pages until I came to the word ‘euthyroid’ and showed it to them both.

‘It says that euthyroid means having a normally functioning thyroid gland,’ said Mr Outhout, having read from my book. He looked at his wife, then reached out and took her hand.

He was the first one to start to cry.

And then she too started crying.

I pushed the box of paper handkerchiefs across my desk.

To be honest, just seeing them cry made me want to cry too.

‘That’s such a relief,’ said Mr Outhout eventually.

‘We’ve been worried sick,’ said Mrs Outhout. ‘We thought perhaps it was some sort of cancer of the thyroid gland.’

‘It means there’s absolutely nothing wrong with your thyroid gland!’ I repeated.

There were then a few more tears and a bit of a cuddle before they stood up to leave.

‘What a stupid doctor that man was!’ said Mrs Outhout, pausing on her way out of the surgery. ‘He made our lives miserable.’

‘It doesn’t matter love,’ said Mr Outhout.

At that moment he was merely relieved that his wife was not ill. I suspected that he might feel differently a little later on.

‘And he ruined our holiday!’ Mrs Outhout pointed out.

I did not say anything. Doctors aren’t supposed to criticise individual doctors – though I’ve always felt it’s fair enough to criticise the profession as a whole when things are done badly.

But privately I had to agree with Mrs Outhout. Some doctors are so addicted to using posh words that they forget that not everyone understands medical terminology.

When they'd gone I looked across at young Mr Munton. He looked a trifle uncomfortable and I guessed that he too had never come across the word 'euthyroid'. But I knew he wouldn't say anything.

'They're a nice couple,' I said. 'It seems so unfair that their holiday was spoilt. I happen to know they'd been saving up for that trip for a year.'

'Well, at least she knows now that there's nothing wrong with her,' said Mr Munton with a rather careless shrug.

I really didn't like Mr Munton very much. He didn't seem to be overfilled with empathy; something which I have always felt is an essential quality for a doctor.

The next patient was Buxton Longwoody.

Mr Longwoody was 92-years-old and physically he was not in bad condition. If he'd been a car he would have been advertised as being 'in good running order'. He lived about three quarters of a mile away from Bilbury Grange but he always walked to the surgery and he always walked back again afterwards. Whenever I offered him a lift home he always declined; very graciously explaining that he enjoyed the exercise. Nevertheless, he did wobble a little and I always found that watching him set off towards home was always a little worrying. Miss Johnson always telephoned his neighbour around thirty minutes after he had left the surgery, just to make sure that he'd managed to get home safely.

His problem was that his memory was not what it had been when he'd been younger. He couldn't always remember precisely what he'd done the day before, though he could remember a good deal about things which had happened earlier in his life. He left school at 14 (his parents took him out of school, arguing that since he had learned how to read and write there wasn't much point in his staying on) and as a boy he had joined the army and he had travelled all over Africa in his country's service. He had risen through the ranks and when he left the army, he had attained the rank of Captain.

During the Second World War, he tried desperately to enlist so that he could serve again but after numerous rejections (on the basis of his age) he became a keen and vital member of the Civil Defence force. After the end of the Second World War, he decided he needed an interest and so he taught himself Greek. He learned the language well enough to read *Plutarch* in the original.

Mr Longwoody's memory was now so poor that when I gave him instructions of any kind I had to write them down on a piece of paper and pop the piece of paper into his left hand jacket pocket. Mrs Barker, his neighbour, called in every morning and every evening to check on him and when he had been to the surgery she always used to look for the piece of paper so that she could see what pills he needed to take or stop taking. We had tried giving Mr Longwoody the note to take charge of but he usually managed to lose it. Mrs Barker, the Good Samaritan, used to put a note in that same pocket if she wanted to tell me anything about her neighbour.

Despite his poor memory, he always took a keen interest in his surroundings and on his walks to and from Bilbury Grange he would often simply stand, look around and enjoy the countryside. There was no doubt in my mind that he got great pleasure from his walks through the village.

As an aside, I sometimes wondered why dementia had become so common, and seemed to be getting commoner. Some of it, I knew, was caused by tranquillisers, sleeping tablets, sedatives and so on – all of which can cause a real sense of confusion as well as memory loss. Some of the increase in the incidence of dementia was a result of doctors being more aware of the problem, and diagnosing it more frequently. But I couldn't help wondering if some of it might not be environmental. I remember having the thought that toxins in our world, in the air, in our food or in our drinking water, might be damaging our brains.

But I could never avoid the suspicion that part of the problem was that a generation or two ago older citizens were looked after by their families. When those older folk became forgetful and confused it didn't matter too much because there was always someone around to look after them; to make sure that they ate, drank, exercised, rested and came to no harm. By the 1970s, family units had broken down and the elderly were often living alone, relying on neighbours rather than relatives. And so the problem of dementia became more apparent.

It wasn't always easy to do but I tried to make sure that Mr Longwoody only ever needed to take tablets in the morning and in the evening so that his neighbour, the Good Samaritan, could supervise the tablet taking and make sure he took precisely what had been prescribed and nothing more or less.

When Mr Longwoody had sat down, I introduced him to Mr Munton, something I was careful to do with all my patients that morning.

'Did you have a good walk here?' I asked.

'Splendid!' he replied crisply. 'I saw half a dozen rabbits, a squirrel and a hen partridge. And a pair of busy blackbirds racing about getting food for their young.'

'Any butterflies?'

Mr Longwoody had always been keen on butterflies and knew a good deal about them

'Not one,' he replied rather sadly. 'They should be around by now. Maybe I'll see some on my way home.'

I asked him if he had anything for me. Sometimes he remembered he had a note for me. Sometimes he had to be reminded. And sometimes I had to ask his permission and dip my hand into his pocket myself to retrieve the note.

He frowned in thought.

'Do you have a note for me from Mrs Barker?' I suggested, offering the question as a hint. 'It might be in your jacket pocket.'

Mr Longwoody stuck his right hand in his jacket pocket and produced a neatly folded square of blue Basildon Bond writing paper. He handed the paper to me with a slightly guilty smile. He still had all his teeth and they looked to be in fine condition. 'Sorry, doctor,' he said. 'I nearly forgot. Damned memory of mine gets worse every day. I'd forget my head if it wasn't nailed on. Mrs Barker asked me to give you this.' He handed me the note which I unfolded and read.

This is what it said:

'Mr Longwoody has been eating well but his varicose eczema is playing up a little. He won't talk to me about it but he always goes to bed much earlier than we do and I've seen the lights go on in his cottage at midnight or even later so I think his prostate is still playing up. I worry about this because he has to walk across the landing and pass the stairs to get to his bathroom. As you know, he is a bit wobbly. If you approve and can persuade Mr Longwoody that it's a good idea, I'll ask Thumper Robinson to pop round and put a wooden gate at the top of the stairs. He needs some more of his blood pressure pills. Thank you (signed) Daphne Barker.'

'I hear you're having to get up several times in the night,' I said, putting down the note.

'Just to go to the lavatory,' said Mr Longwoody. 'The bladder doesn't seem to hold so much fluid these days. Or maybe it's that gland thing. What's it called?'

'The prostate gland. It tends to get larger with age – and that can cause problems. I examined you last time you were here and yours is bigger than it should be but it's nothing to worry about and I wouldn't recommend an operation. But I'm worried about you walking along your landing at night. Will you let Thumper put a gate at the top of your staircase?'

'A gate? What for?'

'It would stop you falling down the stairs when you get up to go to the toilet in the middle of the night.'

'Ah, that's a good idea,' said Mr Longwoody. 'But how will I get downstairs in the mornings?'

'The gate will have a catch and a spring,' I said. 'When you want to go downstairs you just open the gate. But if you fall against the gate it will stop you going down the stairs involuntarily.'

'Oh yes, that's a splendid idea! Will you arrange that or shall I?'

'Thumper Robinson will do it for you.'

'Oh fine. I know Thumper. He's a good, reliable lad. I'd have liked to have had him with me in Africa.'

I couldn't help smiling. The idea of Thumper Robinson serving in any army was quite a thought. Thumper is not someone who regards discipline as a 'good thing'.

'I'll ask Mrs Barker to fix it up,' I told him.

'What about the cost?' asked Mr Longwoody. 'Shall I settle up with you now?'

'No, no,' I said. 'There won't be any charge. The NHS will provide the gate for you.'

I checked Mr Longwoody's blood pressure which was fine, checked his heart and lungs, which were in good condition and looked at his varicose eczema, which wasn't as bad as I'd feared. I told Mr Longwoody that I would prescribe some more cream for the eczema.

I then picked up the telephone and asked Miss Johnson to put another two packets of his blood pressure pills and a tube of steroid cream into Mr Longwoody's jacket pocket when he left. Finally, I wrote a reply to Mrs Barker and gave it to Mr Longwoody who put it into his jacket pocket.

He then stood up, we shook hands and he left.

'Will the NHS really pay to put a gate at the top of his stairs?' asked Mr Munton, when Mr Longwoody had left. This was the first time he had asked a question or, to be honest, shown any interest in the patients I had seen.

'I'm afraid I don't think they will – not that I know of anyway.'

'So how will you arrange to have it done? You did tell the old chap you'd fix it up for him.'

'Oh, it won't be a problem. I've got plenty of bits of suitable wood in our barn and my pal Thumper Robinson will put up the gate. Or a friend of mine who is an antiques dealer might have an old gate that we can use. Mr Longwoody lives on a small army pension and a state pension and I fear that even when put together his pensions don't leave anything over for luxuries such as safety gates.'

'Oh,' said Mr Munton. 'The old chap did seem a little wobbly. And quite senile. Didn't anyone come with him?'

‘No. He walked here by himself. He always does; winter or summer. Last winter he came here when there was two feet of snow on the road.’

‘But he’s suffering from dementia isn’t he? He’s clearly a bit confused. Aren’t you worried that he’ll get lost or run over on the way home?’

‘He’ll be fine,’ I said. ‘And his freedom and independence are important to him. He enjoys walking along the lanes, looking at the flowers, watching the animals.’

‘Don’t you think the old fellow should be on a geriatric ward or in some sort of home where he could be looked after?’

‘No. He enjoys life. His neighbour helps look after him. He pays another villager to do his cleaning and his washing. He goes down to the village shop and does his own shopping and he does his own cooking though his neighbour takes him some meals. There are quite a few keeping an eye on him and he manages surprisingly well. And he isn’t ‘the old fellow’ or ‘the old chap’ he’s Mr Longwoody.’

Mr Munton looked at me, slightly puzzled. ‘In hospital all old people are referred to by their Christian names. It makes them feel more at home.’

‘How do you know? Have you asked them?’

‘Well, no, not personally I haven’t. Of course, I haven’t.’

‘Calling people by their Christian names is a way of talking down to them,’ I said. ‘It’s demeaning and it turns them into subordinates. Are patients in the teaching hospital encouraged to address the consultants by their Christian names?’

‘No, of course they aren’t!’ he laughed. He seemed greatly amused by the very idea of an old lady calling her surgeon ‘Freddie’ or referring to the ear nose and throat specialist as ‘Ernie’.

‘So, why should it be acceptable the other way round?’

‘Well, it’s rather different, isn’t it?’

‘No, I don’t think it is different.’

‘But the old chap, sorry Mr Longwood, could get run over,’ said Mr Munton, abandoning this discussion and going back to the danger of an old and slightly demented man living in his own home, walking along the lanes and living a fairly independent life. ‘And if he does his own cooking he might burn himself.’

‘His name is Longwoody,’ I told young Mr Munton. ‘And it is true that he might get run over or burn himself. But look at the alternatives. I really don’t think he would be happy sitting on an incontinent pad in a plastic chair in a home for old folks. He had an amazing life and he’s entitled to live it out in dignity and in the way that allows him to feel comfortable, at peace with himself and with the world. He’s lucky, I suppose, to live in a village where people have time to care for one another.’ I didn’t mention it but even Peter Marshall helped Mr Longwoody whenever he could. And although Peter usually had his eye on the bottom line, he would never cheat his older customers by giving them rotten fruit or vegetables. I knew for a fact that if they were short of money he would knock a few pence off his prices.

‘I never think of old people as having had ‘interesting lives’,’ said Mr Munton with a half-hearted chuckle. ‘They always just seem old. It’s as though they’ve always been old.’

‘Every old person I’ve ever met has had an interesting life,’ I told him without exaggeration. ‘When he was a boy, Mr Longwoody met Cecil Rhodes in Africa. He served for a while with Baden Powell and he also served with T.E.Lawrence. He has some amazing old photographs which were taken in Lawrence’s cottage in Dorset. He remembers all those people very well and I’ve had some amazing conversations with him. Astonishingly, he was present when T.E.Lawrence saved Winston Churchill from an angry mob. He was in a group of soldiers who were inspected by Dwight D.Eisenhower.’ I paused. ‘To be honest, Mr Longwoody had enough adventures in his life to provide scripts for a string of war movies and for a long running soap opera.’

‘Is that the Baden Powell who founded the boy scouts?’

‘That’s the one. He was also a General in the army.’

‘I didn’t know that,’ said Mr Munton.

‘Didn’t they teach you about the Siege of Mafeking at school?’

‘No, I don’t think so. And I haven’t heard of the other two you mentioned.’

‘You’ve not heard of Lawrence of Arabia?’

‘Oh yes, I’ve vaguely heard of him. Didn’t he live in the 18th century or something?’

‘Lawrence of Arabia was T.E.Lawrence. Mr Longwoody knew him well.’

‘Oh, really?’

Mr Munton sounded very bored so I called for the next patient.

I was beginning to get the feeling that Mr Munton was not a young man whose heart was calling him towards a career in general practice. The one thing I know for certain is that no doctor can possibly make a decent family doctor unless he is interested in people. (It also helps, I suspect, if in addition he enjoys doing what he can to make their lives a little easier.)

After Mr Longwoody had set off on his journey home, I saw half a dozen patients who simply needed repeat prescriptions. Two or three patients needed to have their blood pressure checked. A couple of patients needed notes to confirm that they needed to stay off work for a little longer. And the last patient was a young woman called Ginny Whales.

Mrs Whales worked as a cashier and general assistant in a petrol station on the Lynton Road. Her husband was an AA patrolman who spent his days driving around the countryside rescuing stranded motorists, mending cars and helping people get on with their journeys. In those days a man with a screwdriver, a spanner and battery charging leads could solve most of the roadside problems he encountered. The couple lived in one of the cottages near Blackmoor Gate. Mr Whales grew prize winning carrots and Mrs Whales had the most extraordinary collection of small model lighthouses. I'd never done a formal count but Mrs Whales must have had 40 or 50 model lighthouses. They all appeared to be made out of granite. Some of the lighthouses had little clocks fitted into the granite and others had thermometers. Most had the name of the resort etched into the base. I remember that there were, among many others, 'A Present from Llandudno', 'A Present from Margate' and 'A Present from Torquay'. Some people collect old cars, some collect stamps, some collect Victorian photographs and Mrs Whales collected small, granite models of lighthouses and it is a good thing, is it not, that we are all different in our tastes and interests. If we all wanted to collect Victorian photographs then the prices would go through the roof and many collectors would be forever doomed to disappointment.

When I first saw all these little model lighthouses when visiting the Whales's home, I couldn't help thinking that they were the ugliest souvenirs I'd ever seen. And there were so many of them! They seemed to be on every available flat surface. I could understand someone receiving one as a gift from a friend or a relative and then putting it on display out of a sense of duty, but I couldn't help wondering why on earth anyone would deliberately collect so many of the darned things.

Indeed, it did occur to me that Mrs Whales had perhaps been given one of the things and had, out of politeness perhaps, foolishly thanked the donor rather too effusively before putting it out on display. Under these circumstances it is very easy for the donor to be convinced that the gift was more successful than it was. And so she (it is, I believe, usually women who are responsible for choosing souvenirs or small thank you gifts) buys another and before you know where you are the house is full of them. When there are two of these things sitting on the windowsill, it is easy for other relatives and friends to suspect that they have spotted an answer to their present buying dilemmas. Instead of buying bath salts, talcum powder or toilet roll covers made in the shape of Spanish dancers, the well-informed friends and relatives hunt for, buy and bring back small model lighthouses which appear to be made out of granite and which have little clocks or thermometers built into them – and the name of the resort engraved on the base. They do this out of kindness, of course. I had a patient who had a massive collection of small elephants. She confessed to me one day that she absolutely hated them all but that it was far too late to throw them out or to stop new ones coming.

I am forever grateful that I kept these thoughts to myself, and did not make a joke or a clever remark about the collection, for it quickly became apparent that, apart from a few which had been purchased for her by her husband, Mrs Whales had bought all the little lighthouses herself. She and I would have been forever embarrassed if I had made the tactless remark which had been sitting on the top of my tongue ready to be dispatched into the world. Moreover, she told me that she continued to collect them despite the fact that most of her friends and relatives thought they were daft things to collect. 'I'm very determined,' she said, 'My mum always said I was very stubborn. Once I've decided to do something it would take an Act of God to change my mind.'

A year ago, Mrs Whales had her second baby and, as with the first child, which had been born a couple of years earlier, she refused point blank to breast feed the baby.

Rather surprisingly for those days, Mr and Mrs Whales were, pacing their family. This really was relatively unusual in Bilbury at the time. Other young wives in the village simply had a sequence of babies, producing them with great efficiency and very little fuss.

Indeed, in those pre-sex education days, it was not uncommon for young unmarried girls to find themselves in the same situation. Contraception was still something of a hit and miss affair and there were more than a few sad stories told by girls who found themselves suddenly putting on a great deal of weight, not realising that they would lose it again in nine months' time. 'I didn't know he'd done it until he started to pull up his trousers and told me he had to go so that he could catch his bus,' was perhaps the most poignant summary of a romance that produced a permanent souvenir of the occasion.

When I pressed Mrs Whales for a reason for her reluctance to breast feed she said that she was worried that she might lose her figure.

‘I don’t want to have droopy boobs and nipples like chapel hat pegs,’ she confessed. ‘I’m only 26! My friend Elspeth breast fed her baby and now she’s got boobs down to her waist. Her nipples point at the floor and are as big as thimbles! She can’t wear a bikini and if she wears a posh frock and wants a bit of cleavage she has to wear a bra with enough wire in it to hold up that big bridge in San Francisco, what’s it called, the Golden Gate Bridge.’

I tried to convince her of the value of breast feeding.

I patiently explained that the fluid which comes from the breast in the immediate aftermath of pregnancy, the colostrum, contains protective substances which help to guard the new born baby against infection. I explained that cows’ milk, however it is formulated or presented, can never be as healthy for a baby as a mother’s milk. In short, I tried to ‘sell’ the idea that ‘breast is best’.

Mrs Whales’s husband joined my campaign and he tried in vain to persuade her that he really didn’t mind at all if her breasts changed in shape, size, position or all three.

But Mrs Whales was absolutely adamant.

And as she herself had confessed, she was a woman who, once she had made up her mind, could be very stubborn indeed.

For example, when her two children were born, she had made it very clear that she was a member of a substantial but overlooked minority of women who didn’t want their husbands to be present at the births. ‘I don’t want him to see me sweating and with my hair all over the place and my make-up a complete mess,’ she said. ‘To be perfectly honest,’ she had added, ‘I’d really not be there myself. If I had a choice, I’d prefer to be a mile away having a pleasant, romantic dinner for two in a decent restaurant. But I don’t suppose that’s possible. I have to be there. He doesn’t.’

Mrs Whales had brought her two young children to the surgery with her and it was the second baby who was the patient. He had a horrid rash on his face and was clearly in some distress.

‘My mum says it’s a milk allergy,’ said Mrs Whales, who had clearly been crying.

‘And she’s right,’ I said.

I explained that an allergy to cows’ milk is quite common and that it affects as many as one in fifteen of all babies under the age of a year.

‘Has he had any tummy problems?’ I asked her.

‘He’s had diarrhoea, awful diarrhoea,’ said Mrs Whales. ‘Nothing else. Just the rash and the diarrhoea.’

‘Then it’s an allergy to the cows’ milk,’ I told her. ‘I can prescribe a replacement milk that won’t cause an allergy reaction.’

‘My mum suggested that I try goats’ milk. Do you think that would be a good idea?’

‘No, I’m afraid not. Babies who are allergic to cows’ milk are often allergic to goats’ milk too. Just stick with the milk I’ll prescribe.’

‘Will he get better?’

‘Very quickly. The rash will disappear and the diarrhoea will stop. I can give you some cream to ease the rash but it will go away anyway quite quickly once the cows’ milk is stopped.’

‘It’s my fault, isn’t it?’ she said suddenly.

‘What on earth do you mean?’

‘If I’d fed him myself then he wouldn’t be ill, would he?’

‘Not unless you’d been drinking milk yourself.’

‘Can I start breast feeding now?’

‘I’m afraid it’s a bit late now.’

Mrs Whales nodded.

‘Please don’t worry about it,’ I told her. ‘He’ll be better very quickly. And he’ll be absolutely fine.’

I wrote out the necessary prescription and told Mrs Whales to give it to Miss Johnson who would give her what she needed.

‘We’re going to have three and I’ve decided that with the next one I’m going to breast feed,’ said Mrs Whales, as I handed over the prescription. She said this quite defiantly; as though it were something she had decided to do despite my advice.

‘Splendid!’ I said.

And I knew that if she had decided to breast feed her next baby then it would most certainly be breast fed.

There are, without doubt, times when stubbornness can be a virtue.

As the door closed behind Mrs Whales, who was my last patient of the morning, Patsy came into my consulting room carrying a tray upon which were two cups, a pot of tea, a bowl of sugar, a milk jug and a large plate of assorted biscuits.

‘I thought you might need these!’ my wife said, putting the tray down on my desk.

Mr Munton, who had been sitting quietly in the corner, brought his chair over and helped himself to tea and one of those biscuits which have the jam in the middle. Patsy perched on the edge of the desk.

'Hope you weren't too bored!' I said to Mr Munton.

'Bored? Oh not too much. It was rather dull in places, I suppose. There's no real drama in general practice is there? If there's a real problem I suppose you just pass the patient onto the experts in the local hospital.'

'Do you want to come with me when I do the home visits? You can see a few patients in their home environments. It's really the best way to get a feel for general practice.'

'Always remembering that it's much easier to find them on a nice sunny day than at 3.00 a.m. in the middle of a thunderstorm!' said Patsy with a light laugh. 'Especially if the patient lives at the end of a long, muddy farm track.'

Mr Munton looked at his watch. 'Oh, I'm afraid I think I'd better be getting back,' he said. 'I promised to meet my fiancée in Exeter. She's spending the morning with friends of her people. That's where we stayed last night. And then we're going straight up to London. We've got a party in Hampstead to go to this evening.'

'Fine,' I said.

To be honest I was relieved. I hadn't enjoyed having a stranger sitting in my surgery. It didn't feel right. And I didn't want him coming on my rounds with me. I know young doctors and medical students need to have a chance to see medicine 'in the raw' but there are family doctors who enjoy teaching and training young colleagues and I had already decided that I preferred to leave such work to them.

'You seem to be doing everything today!' said Mr Munton. 'The surgery and the home visits.'

'Well, there isn't anyone else to do them.'

Mr Munton thought for a moment, clearly considering something. 'So what days do you work and what days do you have free?'

Patsy looked at me and I looked at her.

'There isn't anyone else. There aren't any other partners,' I told him. 'This is a single handed practice.'

'But don't you have an arrangement with another local practice so that you can have some time off?'

'Oh no,' I said. 'The other local practices are too far away. And besides, the truth is that a doctor from outside would never be able to find some of my patients. A doctor from Lynton or Ilfracombe would be driving round all night if they tried to find some of the cottages in Bilbury. When I first came here it took me a couple of years to find my way round the village.'

'It doesn't seem big enough to be a village.'

I looked at him, a little confused.

'It seems more of a hamlet.'

'No, we have a pub and a shop and several churches so technically we're a village.'

'Is that so?'

'I believe so. As I mentioned earlier, a hamlet is a village without a church.'

'Really?' He sounded remarkably disinterested. 'And what do you do about the weekends? You surely aren't on call at the weekends as well as during the day and at night during the week!'

'Oh, yes, I'm on call at the weekends too.'

'All of the weekends?' He sounded astonished.

'All of them! There isn't anyone else to do them.'

'But if you want to go to a show in London? Or to a party?'

'We don't go to shows or first nights or to parties.'

'Mr Munton paled. The very idea of not having an endless row of neatly engraved cardboard invitations dropping through the letterbox obviously appalled him.

'So what do you do for entertainment?' he asked.

'We have each other,' said Patsy. 'My husband is always entertaining. Not long ago he managed to get himself stuck on the roof of the local public house wearing nothing but my fluffy dressing gown, a pair of wellington boots and some swimming goggles.' She laughed at the memory.

If I live to be 100, people will still be reminding me of the time when I got stuck on the roof of the Duck and Puddle wearing Patsy's dressing gown, a pair of wellington boots and some damned swimming goggles. At the time, it had all happened quite logically.

Mr Munton stared at her, obviously not sure whether she was joking.

'It's a long story,' she said.

'I was wearing a yellow sou'wester too,' I pointed out, as though this made a difference. 'But only because it was raining quite heavily at the time,' I added.

'And we have loads of videos and long playing records,' added Patsy. 'And my husband has put together a marvellous library so we're never short of books to read.'

‘A library?’ said Mr Munton, who obviously considered that an evening spent with a book would be an evening wasted.

‘Isaac Asimov once wrote that a library is a spaceship that will take you to the ends of the universe,’ I said. ‘A time machine that can take you far into the past, a teacher who knows everything and a friend who can amuse and console.’

‘Isaac who?’ said Mr Munton, puzzled. ‘I don’t think I know the name.’

I was beginning to feel very old. Mr Munton, it seemed, had not heard of any of the people I’d mentioned.

‘Isaac Asimov is a very successful American writer,’ I pointed out. ‘He’s best known for his science fiction novels but he’s also a professor of biochemistry.’

‘Oh,’ said Mr Munton, clearly unimpressed. ‘But for holidays you must hire a locum from outside. How does the locum manage? How do you arrange things if you want to go abroad? Do you get someone local to chauffeur the locum around the village?’

‘Oh no,’ laughed Patsy. ‘It’s much simpler than that. We just don’t have holidays!’

‘To be honest I don’t think the practice could afford a locum and a chauffeur,’ I added.

Mr Munton looked at us both as if we were mad.

‘And why would we want to go anywhere else?’ I asked. ‘It’s beautiful here. We have a lovely house and a marvellous garden. All our friends are round here.’

‘Besides,’ Patsy added, ‘we’ve got too many animals to look after to even think of going away.’

‘There are local boarding kennels surely?’

‘For dogs and cats,’ said Patsy. ‘But where could we take Cedric?’

‘Who is Cedric?’

‘Our pig.’

‘You have a pig?’

If we’d said we had a pet Martian in a cupboard he couldn’t have been more obviously surprised.

‘Well he’s not exactly our pig,’ explained Patsy. ‘He belongs to some very nice Americans who won him in a skittle competition at the Duck and Puddle.’

Mr Munton looked at us as if we were stark raving mad.

‘We look after him for them,’ said Patsy. ‘We send them photographs and tell them how he’s doing.’

There was an embarrassed silence. Mr Munton was obviously not comfortable to be in the home of people who took photographs of a pig to send to people in America.

‘So what do you do with your spare time?’ Patsy asked him.

‘Oh, I’m bit of a party animal,’ laughed Mr Munton. ‘My fiancée’s family are very musical,’ he went on. ‘Her brother is an actor so we go to a lot of parties and openings and that sort of thing. We know all sorts of really famous and important people.’

‘Oh how exciting!’ said Patsy. ‘What’s your fiancée’s brother’s name?’

‘Ludovic Parsons. You might not have heard of him. He avoids cheap publicity and just concentrates on making good connections in the theatrical world.’

Patsy looked at me. We both shook our heads.

‘He mainly does stage work,’ said Mr Munton. ‘He’s appeared in several London shows.’

‘Ah,’ I said, trying to sound respectful.

‘Of course he knows quite a few people who’ve been on television,’ he said. ‘The girl in that washing powder advert that everyone is talking about will probably be there at this evening’s party. And her boyfriend plays the giant duckling in that toilet roll advert that the experts all say is pretty well guaranteed to win all the advertising awards this autumn.’

Patsy and I nodded and tried to look awed.

There was something about Mr Munton which made me feel slightly uncomfortable.

Maybe I was just feeling slightly paranoid, but I got the impression that he was sitting in judgement on me and, indeed, on my patients and their lives. Looking back, I think that the problem was that he was just so damned superior.

‘So what brought you to Bilbury?’ I asked. ‘Do you see yourself working in a rural, single-handed practice one day?’

It didn’t seem very likely but I couldn’t help wondering why he was in Bilbury for the day.

Mr Munton looked a little startled. ‘Oh, good heavens no!’ he said. ‘I was only here because the Dean said we all had to have some outside experience. I suppose I might go into general practice if all else fails but I was planning on a career as a hospital consultant of some kind.’

‘Right,’ I said.

‘If you manage to combine an NHS career with a decent, private practice you can make quite good money,’ said the man whose girlfriend was related to a man who knew a girl whose boyfriend played a duck in a commercial for toilet rolls.

‘Yes,’ I agreed. ‘I believe so.’

I was exhausted by him and was quietly hoping that he would leave as soon as possible.

‘Actually, I didn’t ask to spend time in a general practice,’ said Mr Munton. ‘I was rather hoping to be able to spend the day with one of the chaps in Harley Street. But it was all rather arbitrary. They didn’t let us choose what we did with our day’s practical experience. I think they put our names into a hat and then just allocated us according to chance.’

‘Couldn’t you say ‘No’?’ asked Patsy.

‘Oh no, it was one of those voluntary experiences that are compulsory.’

‘Well, I’m sorry you were disappointed with what you were given,’ I said.

‘That’s OK,’ said Mr Munton. ‘Not your fault at all.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I don’t think it was.’

‘Oh, one thing I meant to ask you, was that a normal surgery?’ said Mr Munton, helping himself to another biscuit. This time he took one of the biscuits with cream in the middle. ‘I have to write some sort of report. And you seemed to spend a lot of time with old people. Do you think they’re worth all that effort?’

I thought for a moment. ‘Oh yes, I think it was a fairly normal surgery,’ I replied. ‘It was shorter than most of my surgeries and in the summer the surgeries are much, much longer, of course.’ I really didn’t want to respond to his comment about my older patients though I confess it rather alarmed me that a final year medical student should think that way. I was actually rather glad that he didn’t want to go into general practice.

He frowned. ‘Why are the surgeries longer in the summer?’

‘Because we have a lot of visitors in the area; people come in with sunburn, cuts and grazes, insect stings and food poisoning.’

‘Insect stings? People come to you after they’ve been stung by an insect?’

‘Of course they do. A horse fly bite can hurt a hell of a lot. And people get rather worried.’

‘A horse fly? What’s one of those?’

‘Large, stoutly built flies which live on blood. Well, I think it’s only the female which does the biting. They get their name because they take bites out of horses. But they also rather enjoy munching on people.’

‘Oh,’ he said, obviously quite bored by this short dissertation. ‘I see.’ He still seemed puzzled. ‘Why would people come to this part of the world for their holidays?’

‘Beautiful countryside and coast, lots of walking, wild birds to be seen, beaches and, even in bad weather, the majesty of the sea!’ I said. I could see that Patsy was amazed that anyone could not see the attractions of a part of the world where she had been brought up and had spent all her life.

‘Oh, I see,’ said Mr Munton, who obviously didn’t see at all.

‘What did you think of the surgery you saw?’ asked Patsy.

Inside I winced but I wanted to hear what he had to say.

‘It all seemed rather simple,’ said Mr Munton. ‘I don’t think there was anything that a third year medical student couldn’t have dealt with.’ He paused and thought for a moment. ‘I think maybe a good many of the patients could have been dealt with by a nurse. And to be honest, I think the whole thing could have been finished in half the time. I don’t think I’d have allowed patients so much time to talk about their problems. You could speed things up quite a lot.’

Patsy and I exchanged glances.

Our rather smug medical student sounded very, very bored. I didn’t think I had ever come across anyone quite so self-satisfied. He was not, I thought, the sort of person to suffer unduly with the burden of a conscience or a sense of responsibility. I was, however, slightly surprised that he was not only confidently prepared to teach me my business but also confident that he could do so. And I got the feeling that he thought I should be grateful for his advice.

But the bottom line was that I felt quite sure that Mr Munton had ahead of him a meteoric and unstoppable rise to the very top of the profession; halting only when he had become President of at least one of the Royal Colleges and collected a knighthood or a peerage. And it occurred to me, for the umpteenth time, that worldly success often comes to those who have done nothing to deserve it and who live in blissful ignorance of the world around them and the other people in it.

I didn’t remember ever feeling quite so confident when I was a medical student. I wondered whether Mr Munton was unique or a typical example of his generation. I was not, I confess, very much interested in finding out.

‘So you’ve not been convinced that general practice is for you?’ I said.

He looked up at the ceiling as though he might find the answer written on the plasterwork. ‘No, no, certainly not. I really don't think a country practice would do for me,' he said. 'To be frank, I think I'm perhaps looking for more of a challenge. I have always rather fancied a career in dermatology. Or maybe I might consider psychiatry as a speciality. There was a psychiatrist in London who looked after all the celebrities. He was rumoured to be making a fortune. His name was Eckersley but I gather he disappeared rather suddenly. I don't know what happened to him. I think I'd like a career in some area which allowed me to earn decent money but left me plenty of time to enjoy other activities.'

He made it pretty clear that whatever speciality he chose to grace with his professional presence would be expected to be damned grateful to be chosen.

He slurped some tea and helped himself to another biscuit; a bourbon. I noticed that he was eating all the fancy ones, leaving Patsy and me the plain digestives and the rich tea biscuits.

'If I do agree to go into general practice, I would be looking for a partnership in London somewhere.'

He mentioned Kensington and St John's Wood as being more his cup of tea.

Both are parts of London where the residents all have butlers, maids, chauffeurs and au pair girls. But I didn't think Mr Munton would be prepared to deal with the health problems of the butlers, maids, chauffeurs and au pair girls.

'Must be going,' he said, putting his cup down on top of a small pile of correspondence on my desk. He gave us both a wave and headed for the door. A few moments later, I heard the sound of his sports car firing up. Daddy, I thought, must be quite rich.

I moved the cup off my pile of letters and put it back on the tray.

'He appears to be looking for more of a challenge,' said Patsy. 'I'm afraid he obviously found your morning surgery rather dull and undemanding.'

I looked at her.

'Are you going to have to entertain any more of these young almost-doctors?'

'No.' I looked at my watch. 'My teaching days started two and half hours ago and finished a minute ago.'

I was actually rather depressed. I had been patronised by a very supercilious young man and I felt vaguely dissatisfied with my professional self. It had not been an exciting surgery. I hadn't saved any lives but as far as I was aware I hadn't killed anyone either. On balance, I thought I had probably made a couple of people's lives a little easier, which is often all a country doctor can hope to do.

'Oh goody,' said Patsy.

'He ate all the best biscuits.'

'I know. He ate three jammy dodgers. There were only three in the box.'

'What are jammy dodgers?' I asked.

'The round biscuits with the jam in the middle.'

'Oh, I like those.'

'Me too. Did you know that they're named after that character Roger the Dodger in *The Beano* comic?'

'I didn't know that,' I said. 'If I'd strangled Mr Munton I could have buried him in the garden. We could have said he'd left as planned but had talked about driving up to Scotland to shoot some grouse. I don't think the world would have missed him very much.'

'Are you allowed to strangle snooty medical students?'

'Oh I think so. As long as you don't strangle more than two a year.'

Patsy sighed. 'Too late now. He's gone. Another missed opportunity.'

Just then the telephone went.

I listened for a while, made a few noises of appreciation, said 'thank you' and 'thank you very much' and then put the telephone receiver back on its rest.

'Do you have to go out?' asked Patsy.

'No. That was Mr Longwoody's daughter. She lives in Scotland and she'd been down here a couple of days ago just to see how her father was doing. She apologised for having to rush back without seeing me but just rang to say thank you to me for looking after her father. She wanted to tell me that she was pleased to know that he was in such good hands.'

Patsy gave me a hug.

The telephone call from Mr Longwoody's daughter could not have come at a more opportune moment for it banished the strange feeling of discontent and professional dissatisfaction which had lingered after Mr Munton's departure.

We all need a little reassurance from time to time.

The Detective

The summer was in full swing when my friend William brought his family down to Bilbury for the weekend.

William is a GP who works in a large, modern practice near to the town of Wolverhampton, right in the heart of the English Midlands. He is probably the brightest person I have ever met. When we talk he always seemed to be giving me his full attention, but I could never quite dismiss from my mind the thought that he only needed to use one part of his brain to concentrate fully on our conversation. I was always conscious that while talking to me his brain was dealing with half a dozen other issues at the same time, and that he was giving them his full attention too, in the way that Grand Masters such as Bobby Fischer could play two dozen games of chess simultaneously and, if asked to do so, play them all blindfolded.

When William got married I was his best man. His wife, Brenda, was Patsy's best friend outside Bilbury. I think the friendship helped them both a great deal; since they were both married to family doctors they had some understanding of the strange and sometimes demanding world in which we live.

The fact is, however, that although William and I were both GPs, and theoretically did the same jobs, we lived completely different lives and practised in very different ways.

William worked with a number of other doctors and a vast support staff. Most of his patients lived in neatly labelled houses or in blocks of flats. The streets where he worked were well lit and everywhere he went the roads were wide enough for cars to travel in two different directions at once. William had 2,500 patients on his personal list, and he and his partners and their medical assistants looked after a huge practice of 15,000 patients. The practice was so big that it even employed its own accountant and the accountant had an assistant!

I worked by myself with Patsy and Miss Johnson helping to answer the telephone, organise the pharmacy and generally do everything that in William's practice was done by a team of receptionists and ancillaries. I had only around 600 patients (all of whom I knew by name) and they lived in around 250 houses and cottages scattered around a fairly large area of countryside. None of the homes I visited had numbers and some did not even have names. The roads on which I drove were hardly ever wide enough to allow traffic to travel in two directions at once and without passing places and gateways it would have been impossible for anyone to go anywhere. When I went out in the car, I spent almost as much time in reverse gear as in a forward gear.

Our practices were, in every imaginable way, quite different.

But in the end our work was, of course, exactly the same.

In William's surgery, a patient would enter his consulting room, sit down and present a history of his symptoms, signs and worries.

And in my surgery in Bilbury, a patient would enter my consulting room, sit down and present a history of his or her symptoms, signs and worries.

No difference.

The day was still warm and William and I were sitting in the summerhouse, enjoying the remains of another wonderful day. Patsy and Brenda were in the house getting the children ready for bed. William's son, Peter, was old enough to believe that he should be allowed to stay up with the grown-ups so William and Brenda let him stay up for an extra half an hour. Fortunately, Bilbury Grange, a rambling old house, had enough bedrooms for William's two children to have one each.

William and Brenda come to see us as often as they could and they were always welcome. Benjamin Franklin, writing in his *Poor Richard's Almanack*, wrote that 'fish and visitors both stink after three days' and as far as many visitors are concerned he was undoubtedly right. But William and Brenda, and their children, never 'stank', never annoyed and never outstayed their welcome.

I had taken a bag of sunflower hearts out with me and I put a couple of handfuls on the ground just outside the summer house. William and I watched as a tame pheasant wandered up the garden, headed straight for the sunflower hearts and proceeded to take his fill. When he'd finished, he wiped his beak carefully on the grass, first this way and then that way, and then headed for the stone bird bath which I kept filled with water throughout the year. When he'd drunk to his satisfaction, he hopped down off the bird bath and again wiped his beak on the grass. He always wiped it half a dozen times.

As the pheasant wandered away, one of our tame squirrels arrived outside the summer house. He finished off most of the remaining sunflower hearts and then he too wandered off to the bird bath. He leapt up and took a long drink. Experts on squirrel behaviour sometimes claim that squirrels never drink water. Well ours did. Maybe the squirrels hadn't bothered to read the textbooks.

Finally, a robin appeared and finished off the few remaining sunflower hearts before he too flew to the bird bath for a drink.

‘Does that happen every evening?’ asked Will, who had been watching this display in quiet astonishment.

‘Most evenings,’ I said. ‘Sometimes there are two or three squirrels and a couple of blackbirds.’

We sat in silence for a while longer; looking out at nothing in particular. A few rabbits appeared at the far end of the lawn. They chased each other around and ate a good deal of grass and some daisies.

‘I had a medical student here for a day last month,’ I said.

‘From Birmingham University?’

‘Yes.’

Will and I both attended the same medical school at the same time. That was how we met.

‘They managed to persuade you to take one, did they?’

‘Only because they were clever enough to give me several months’ notice. I said ‘yes’ because the date they suggested seemed to be a long way away.’

‘They’re crafty like that,’ said Will.

‘Did you have one?’

‘Oh no! Good heavens no! We had one last year.’

‘Didn’t go well?’

‘Absolutely bloody disaster! They sent us some girl of about fourteen. Well, she looked fourteen. She knew everything. She was so full of herself that there wasn’t any room for anything else.’

‘Maybe we’re getting old,’ I said.

‘We are. But it wasn’t just that. They seem to be giving them ‘confidence pills’ these days.’

‘I’m afraid I won’t be having another student.’

We sat in silence again and watched the midges doing what midges do in the early evening.

‘Do you mind?’ asked Will, taking his pipe out of his jacket pocket and holding it up for approval. The request was a courtesy. He knew that I would never say ‘No’. When he is at home he smokes only in the garden shed, in the greenhouse or on the patio.

‘Of course not,’ I said. ‘Is Brenda still nagging you to give it up?’

‘Brenda and everyone at the surgery,’ confessed William with a sheepish grin. ‘Even Peter has a go at me now.’

I watched as he took out the paraphernalia which smokers always carry with them. The tobacco pouch, the box of smokers’ matches, the little silver gadget used for pressing down the tobacco and cleaning out the bowl – all came out of his pockets and were placed carefully on the wooden table in front of him. It’s the one thing I always envy pipe smokers. ‘That’s a new pouch, isn’t it?’ I asked, nodding towards the tobacco pouch he was using.

‘Brenda bought it for my birthday,’ said Will. ‘The old one had a hole in it and was looking a bit ropey.’

‘But Brenda doesn’t approve of you smoking!’

‘No, she doesn’t. But she knows that an occasional pipe full of tobacco helps me to relax.’ He paused, opened the pouch and took out some tobacco. ‘Did I tell you that Jerry had another heart attack? It was quite a severe one this time.’

I said he hadn’t and that I was sorry to hear it.

I had never met Jerry but Will had talked about him. He was one of the partners in William’s practice. ‘How old is he?’

‘Forty six. He doesn’t smoke but he drinks too much beer and he’s hugely overweight. He has always rather reminded me of a character out of a novel by P.G.Wodehouse. It is difficult to say ‘Tchah!’ without sounding like a bad actor playing the villain in a Victorian melodrama but Jerry manages it perfectly. I think it is his favourite saying. And he is the only person I’ve ever heard using the word Egad!’

‘Forty six is young. That’s too young; far too young.’

Whatever your age it is always rather alarming to hear of people in their 40s becoming seriously ill.

‘It certainly is,’ agreed William. ‘That’s his third heart attack in two years. They’ve scheduled him for heart surgery and he’s going to retire. We’re looking for a replacement partner.’ He packed some of the tobacco into the bowl of his pipe, pressing it down first with his thumb and then with his little silver gadget. ‘I don’t suppose you’d be interested?’

‘No thank you,’ I said immediately. ‘But thank you for asking.’

‘I told the others I would ask you first. They all agreed. We’re making quite good money now. We have quite a bit of insurance work and we look after the staff in a couple of large, local factories so we get extra money for that. And you’d only be on call for one or two nights a week – instead of the seven nights a week you’re on call now.’

‘I’m flattered by the offer.’

‘Talk it over with Patsy before you give me a definite ‘No’. Brenda would love it if you two moved up into our area. There are some lovely houses on the market. You won’t find anything as big as this place, of course. And you don’t get such big gardens in the town. But you could get somewhere pretty nice near to us. One of the biggest estate agents is a patient of mine and we play golf most Sundays. He’d be happy to help you find something suitable.’

I said I would talk to Patsy. I knew what she would say but I said I would tell her about the offer all the same.

We sat in pleasant silence for a while. You can do that with old friends. I sometimes think that silence is the true sign of friendship. Will puffed at his pipe and I enjoyed the aroma second hand. The smoke kept the midges away, for which I was very grateful. All insects seem to regard my body as a fast food restaurant. The smoke from William’s pipe even kept the horse-flies away.

‘We had a break-in at the surgery two weeks ago,’ said Will suddenly and apropos of absolutely nothing. I like conversations which veer from one topic to another without any warning. Most of the conversations which I had with William were like that.

‘Drugs?’

‘Yes, someone broke into the main part of the building, by-passed the alarm and stole our stock of morphine.’

‘Did they just steal the morphine?’

‘No, that was the odd thing. When the police came, it was the dangerous drug cupboard that we checked first, of course. But then our senior pharmacist checked the rest of the stock and discovered that some other stuff was missing too. The petty cash hadn’t been touched but there were some other pills missing.’

‘Your senior pharmacist! How many pharmacists do you have?’

‘Two and a trainee.’

‘Good heavens!’

‘We have a special manager to look after the staff now. She’s called a Personnel Manager. She organises the rotas and holidays, supervises wages, bonuses and so on. She even handles the recruitment process when we need new receptionists, cleaners and so on. She’s very good. She used to work for one of the big car companies. She wants us to buy one of these new office sized computers and keep all our staff records in it. She says we ought to be able to keep the accounts on the computer too. My partners are a bit sceptical but I think I’ll be able to talk them round. Mrs Bird, that’s the new personnel manager, reckons that one day doctors will keep their patients’ records on computers.’

‘But not yet, surely?’

I must have sounded terrified for William laughed. ‘No, I don’t think we’ll be doing that for a few years. But it would certainly be good to keep the accounts on a computer. They make special software now that deals with all the financial stuff.’

‘Crumbs.’

‘Is Miss Johnson still your entire staff?’

‘Yes. And she only works part time. She keeps my accounts in a little black notebook. She buys a new one each year from F.W.Woolworth in Barnstaple and she keeps the old ones on a shelf in the cupboard under the stairs. Did the police catch your thief?’

‘They did. And I’m proud to say that I had a Sherlock Holmes moment which contributed to them catching him.’

‘Tell me more!’

‘In addition to clearing out all our morphine, the thief also took 200 diuretic tablets, 200 digitalis tablets, 400 blood pressure tablets and four bottles of a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory for arthritis.’

‘Aha!’

‘Exactly! You’ve guessed. It seemed a reasonable supposition that the thief might be a patient of ours who was taking pills. I talked to my partners and the reception staff and we decided we only had half a dozen patients who took that combination of pills.’

‘And five of them were little old ladies who were wheelchair bound?’

William laughed. ‘Not a bad guess. We managed to name them and it turned out that five of them were old aged pensioners who seemed unlikely to have been able to squeeze through a small window, let alone disable a fairly sophisticated alarm.’

‘And the sixth?’

‘The sixth was a bloke in his mid-40s who had heart disease and arthritis and was taking all the pills which were stolen. We knew he had a rather dodgy history. He’d been inside for drug dealing and he had a bit of a history of breaking and entering. He tries to look respectable but, sadly, he somehow manages to look like 90% of all police photo-fit pictures and he is without a doubt the sort of fellow the police are always ‘anxious to interview in connection with their enquiries’.’

‘You keep all that sort of information in your files?’

‘No, no! We’re not that efficient. But one of our receptionists lives in the same street as this chap. She was the one who spotted his name on the list of possible suspects.’

‘Together with the five pensioners?’

‘Exactly. Our suspicions were confirmed when we looked for his medical records. The idiot had taken his records out of one of the filing cabinets, presumably to check on the names of the drugs he was taking, and then he’d just left his notes on the counter in the pharmacy. None of us would ever do that. The practice manager is very strict about making sure that all the records go back into the proper filing cabinet when they’re finished with.’

‘So what did you do?’

‘It was a bit tricky, really. We had a meeting but couldn’t decide whether it was ethical to give his name to the police as a suspect. We rang the lawyers at the Medical Defence Union and we asked someone at the British Medical Association and everyone we spoke to said it would be a bit dodgy to give his name because we’d only identified him by looking at his medical records. One of my partners thought we could perhaps just sort of suggest the idea of the burglary being done by a patient to the police and let them get a warrant to check our records but none of us liked that idea. It seemed totally unethical.’

‘So, what the devil did you do?’

‘I went round to his home that evening, banged on his door and told him we wanted our drugs back or else we’d tell the police.’

‘You did what?’ I was astonished.

‘What else could we do? We couldn’t let him get away with it. And we certainly didn’t want all that morphine on the local market. We have a big enough drug addiction problem as it is. We don’t carry all that much morphine in stock but these drug dealers cut the stuff and turn a few dozen doses into a few hundred doses.’

‘What did the chap say?’

‘He was a bit threatening at first but I told him that everyone at the practice knew I was calling on him and that if anything happened to me the police would be called.’

‘Did he admit taking the stuff?’

‘Oh, he mumbled about being at a football match but I just stared at him and waited and eventually he confessed.’

‘Did you get it all back?’

‘Everything. Every last phial and tablet. And I told him he had to pay for the broken window and the call out fee to the alarm people. I even got him to recommend a better alarm system.’

‘And the police?’

‘We told them that the thief had returned everything. We said he must have felt guilty. The police were happy enough to be able to put it down as a solved case.’

I congratulated Will and told him I thought he was a braver man than I would have been.

‘Oh, I wasn’t worried too much,’ he said. ‘The fellow is just a lobcock. He has no myrmidons and I guessed he’d turn out to be a mugwump.’

I laughed out loud.

William, who was also laughing, then admitted that before coming down to Bilbury he had spent some time finding odd, old-fashioned names for individuals with slightly dodgy habits.

‘I know a myrmidon is an obedient follower, but what the devil is a lobcock and who on earth is a mugwump?’ I asked him.

‘A lobcock is someone who is a blundering fool, someone a bit stupid, and a mugwump is someone who backs down when they’re under pressure.’

I liked William’s new words so much that I dug out a notebook and together we began to create a new list of slightly archaic words which we thought deserved to be revived.

After that, we sat for another half an hour in the summerhouse talking about everything and nothing, as friends will when they have a little time and haven’t seen each other for a while.

When it became chilly we went indoors.

I lit a log fire and I insisted on William telling Patsy the story of his Sherlock Holmes moment.

Patsy was as impressed as I had been. And rather startled at William’s courage in going round to the fellow’s house to confront him.

I then dug out all the dictionaries I could find and William and I went through them searching for more odd words to put into our latest list. (The resultant list is at the back of this book.)

That evening, as we got ready for bed, I told Patsy about William’s offer of a partnership in his practice in the Midlands.

‘Do you want to accept it?’ she asked.

I looked at her and raised an eyebrow but didn’t say anything.

‘Thank heavens,’ Patsy said. She paused and thought about it for a moment. ‘But it was very kind of him to ask.’

‘He asked me to mention it to you and I said I would.’

‘Will he be upset at your turning him down?’

‘No, I don’t think he seriously expected us to take the offer. He’s asked before and always had the same answer.’

‘Point out that if we moved up to the Midlands, he and Brenda wouldn’t be able to come down to Bilbury for the weekend,’ said Patsy.

‘Good idea,’ I said. ‘If he’d thought about that he probably wouldn’t have offered me the job in the first place!’

The Carpenter

Mr Horace Berry walked into the consulting room like a man with too many legs and sat down with a thump which I feared would break the chair. He was massively overweight and he managed to look miserable and bad tempered at the same time.

Mr Berry was a descendant of the famous hangman, James Berry. He told me this, apropos of absolutely nothing, but with obvious pride, within minutes of our first meeting. He told me that James Berry had achieved unwanted notoriety in the 19th century for attempting three times to hang James Lee, the Babbacombe murderer, and failing every time. The fiasco had taken place at Exeter prison and after the third attempt had proved unsuccessful, the hanging had been cancelled and Mr Lee's sentence had been commuted to life imprisonment. (In view of the connection with my patient, there is a brief account of the attempted hanging, why it failed and the prisoner's subsequent life, in one of the appendices at the back of this book.)

In addition to having such a distinguished ancestor, Mr Berry was a combative sort of person; the sort of fellow who, if he saw a fight (whether physical or verbal) would probably not be able to resist the temptation to get involved.

And he believed, quite firmly, that all his health problems were as a result of his having given up work.

'I was perfectly healthy until I was forced to stop working,' he complained baldly and quite bitterly.

Puzzled, I looked at him. Retirement can sometimes cause depression and a sense of worthlessness but I hadn't heard of it causing physical health problems.

'I was as fit as a fiddle when I working,' continued Mr Berry defiantly. 'It was having to give up work that made me ill.'

He spoke with great certainty, as though he had been given official confirmation, in triplicate, of his suspicion.

His wife, who was sitting next to him, nodded slightly, as if in confirmation.

I knew Mrs Berry, his wife, quite well. She had been to see me several times because she suffered from chronic blepharitis, a condition affecting her eyelids. The tiny oil glands at the base of the eyelashes become clogged and the result can be irritation and red eyes. To make matters worse, Mrs Berry often developed small but annoying infections which affected her eyelids.

After I had shown Mrs Berry how to use cotton buds to clean the edges of her eyelids, she usually managed to deal with these problems herself but occasionally she needed help. On the day about which I write, however, she was in my surgery in a supporting role.

'So, what can I do for you?' I asked him.

'I get pains in my knees and my hips and in my back too. I want you to do something about that. You need to give me something to take. And I get tired and out of breath if I do much walking.'

'When did you retire?'

He answered instantly. 'I stopped work in the autumn of 1963,' he said. 'My last day of work was Friday 25th of October.'

His wife nodded her agreement. 'Friday the 25th,' she confirmed.

'Is it not possible that the health problems you've acquired might simply be a result of your getting older?' I asked, hoping that the enquiry sounded moderately tactful.

'Oh no,' he said quite definitely.

'Have you put on weight since you retired?'

'Of course I have! I wasn't always this fat. When I was working I was busy all the time.'

'Do you eat more now than you did when you were working?'

'A little, I suppose.' He shrugged, defiantly, defensively. 'There's nothing much else to do, is there?'

I suspected that Mr Berry had always been a well-built man. But I guessed that during the years of his retirement he had gradually grown beyond well-built, gone at quite a pace through overweight, raced through outsized and finally, settled comfortably into obese.

'When I was working I was fine. I had no aches or pains. I could run a mile and climb a tree,' insisted Mr Berry. He sighed. It was a long, sad sigh that ended with a whistling wheeze. I rather doubted the claims he had made about his ability to run a mile and climb a tree. I suspected that it had probably been quite a few decades since he'd been able to run anywhere or climb anything more than a stepladder. 'Now I have a job to get up and down the stairs,' he complained. He turned to his wife for support. 'Isn't that so mother?'

Mrs Berry, who looked as though her mind was somewhere else, nodded her agreement.

I wondered how she felt about being called 'mother' since they had no children.

‘Mind you, I’m not complaining,’ said Mr Berry who seemed to me to be doing exactly that. He moved his bulk on the chair and the chair’s legs creaked in distress. In horse racing terms they were carrying top weight. ‘I’ve had a good life and the missus and I have had a long and happy life together.’ He turned to his wife and patted her on the knee.

‘A long and happy life together,’ repeated Mrs Berry. She then thought for a moment before looking at him and then at me. ‘Happy for him and long for me.’

Having delivered this unexpected bon mot, she cackled, sounding remarkably like one of Macbeth’s not so jolly witches sitting round the cooking pot and enjoying the warmth of their camp fire.

Mr Berry who looked as though he’d left his sense of humour somewhere but couldn’t remember where he’d put it, looked at her sternly.

‘What did you do for a living?’ I asked him, thinking it was time to change the subject a little.

‘What was my job?’

‘Yes. What was your job?’

‘I was a carpenter. I was a very good carpenter wasn’t I, mother?’ He even managed to sound combative when making a bald statement such as this.

His wife nodded.

‘Where did you work?’

‘I worked for a kitchen fitting company. We did bespoke kitchens. We used all the best materials and made beautiful kitchen furniture: cupboards, worktops and so on. I even used to make free standing tables that were designed to match the work surfaces and to fit into available spaces.’

I could hear the pride in his voice and I thought that I was, for the first time, beginning to understand him a little. I have always believed that it is often impossible for a general practitioner to treat his patients well unless he understands a little about their lives, their hopes and their fears.

‘What happened?’

‘What do you mean, ‘what happened?’?’

‘Why did you lose your job?’

‘Oh. The company I worked for went bust. We were destroyed by these companies which sell ready-made kitchens. They sell rubbish. All their stuff is made out of plastic and hardboard and plywood. Unskilled workmen just glue it all together. Superficially it looks good and it’s a lot cheaper than hand-made furniture built out of real wood so they sell a lot of it. We couldn’t compete so we went bust and I lost my job. They should line up all those bastards and shoot them.’

‘And you haven’t worked since?’ I asked. I assumed that the bastards he wanted shooting were the men putting together the cheap kitchen furniture.

‘There’s no work in North Devon for a carpenter,’ said Mr Berry. ‘I applied for a job at one of the shipyards but they weren’t hiring skilled men. They just had openings for apprentices. I tried for a place at one of the local builders but they weren’t hiring either. They don’t have enough work. These days, people prefer to buy that Swedish rubbish you put together yourself. It’s a hell of a lot cheaper than proper stuff.’

‘So you haven’t worked since 1963?’

‘No.’

I looked at Mr Berry’s medical records. ‘And you’re 61 now?’

‘Yes.’

He looked a lot older than 61. If I’d had to guess I’d have put him at nearer 70-years-old. I told him to undress so that I could check him over.

Apart from the excess weight, there wasn’t much wrong with him. To my surprise, his blood pressure was fairly normal. The systolic pressure reading was a little high but the diastolic was fine. His heart was beating fine and I could not hear any abnormalities. It seemed to me that all his problems were caused by his weight. It was all that excess weight that was putting a strain on his back and his hips. It was all that excess weight that made it difficult for him to move about. The excess weight made it difficult for him to breathe and he even had nasty patches of eczema in the skin folds caused by his excess weight.

‘Have you tried to lose weight?’ I asked him. ‘You’d feel a lot better and be able to move about much easier if you lost a couple of stones.’

I was tempted to explain to him that knee and hip joints are designed to carry the weight of one body, not two but I thought he might explode if I did so. He seemed to be a man who was permanently angry. The fact that he could still remember the exact date when he’d finished work suggested that he was still brooding about it.

‘That’s easy for you to say!’ snapped Mr Berry.

‘I put him on a diet I found in one of my magazines,’ said Mrs Berry. ‘You eat nothing but fruit and vegetables on three days of the week, nothing but protein on Wednesdays and nothing but carbohydrates on the other days.'

I stared at her in disbelief.

'That's the diet?'

'Oh yes. They say that people lose huge amounts of weight on it. You can choose which days you eat the fruit and vegetables and which days you eat the carbohydrates.'

I turned to Mr Berry. 'How long have you been on this diet?'

'Six weeks.'

'And have you lost any weight?'

'I've lost a pound,' said Mr Berry. He said this proudly, and clearly expected a round of applause though I guessed he would probably make do with a word of praise.

'Congratulations!' I said, trying not to sound in the slightest bit sarcastic.

It occurred to me that at the rate he was going it would be at least another four or five years before he managed to get his weight down to an acceptable level. Looking at him I wondered if he was going to live long enough to lose the weight he needed to lose.

'What hobbies do you have?' I asked him, still trying to find out more about him and his life.

'I don't have time for hobbies,' he said. 'Never have. I've always worked hard and just wanted to sit down in the evenings and at weekends.'

'He's always read the newspaper and watched the television in the evenings,' said Mrs Berry.

'I've not been one of those who spends his time in the pub,' said Mr Berry. 'I prefer to stay at home, with the wife, and save my money.'

'We have a job making ends meet these days,' added Mrs Berry. 'I make a little extra by doing a little book-keeping for one or two people. I help Gilly with her accounts.'

'Gilly Parsons at the Duck and Puddle?' I enquired. Gilly and her husband Frank are the joint landlords of the village pub.

'Yes,' nodded Mrs Berry.

'You don't do any gardening?' I said to Mr Berry. Many retired men in the village are proud of their gardens. I know quite a few who grow most of their own vegetables and produce more than their families can eat.

'Never been keen on it,' said Mr Berry. 'Mother looks after the garden. Cuts the grass and so on. I'd do it if I could but my hips won't let me.'

'I think you need a better, more effective diet,' I told him. 'You need to lose more than a pound a month.'

Mr Berry looked at me rather fiercely. 'How much more?'

'I think you ought to be able to lose two pounds a week. That would mean you would be losing half a stone in a month. And in six months you'd be much fitter and healthier.'

'Half a stone a month!'

'Absolutely!' I said.

But I really didn't think that just losing weight was going to be enough to make Mr Berry feel more content and I rather suspected that just being fitter and healthier weren't going to be enough to give him the incentive he needed. He needed something else to aim for. He needed a purpose. We all need a purpose in our lives and since he had lost his job, Mr Berry's life had been pretty well without any purpose. He'd just been marking time and there was no real meaning to his life.

'We'll try your diet,' said Mrs Berry firmly.

I took one of my diet booklets out of a drawer in my desk and handed it to her. When I first took over the practise, I knew that I would be faced with quite a few patients who needed to lose weight. I therefore prepared a booklet containing advice on losing weight and had a thousand printed at a shop in Barnstaple. Since I'd been in practice, I had distributed a fifth of them – with quite a number of those going to visitors and holidaymakers. Patsy thought that I'd perhaps printed rather too many and I agreed with her that I had, perhaps, been rather ambitious when ordering a thousand copies for a practice that had only 600 patients.

'Have you thought about doing a little carpentry again?' I asked Mr Berry.

'I told you – there are no jobs,' he snapped. 'If there had been any jobs going I'd have applied.' I got the feeling that if we had been sitting in a pub he would have stood up and invited me outside.

'I realise that there aren't any jobs,' I said. 'I wasn't suggesting that you try working for someone else. I meant working for yourself.'

Puzzled, he looked at me. It was obviously something he had never considered. 'My working days are over,' he said, as though he were 98-years-old and had already been measured for his coffin. This was clearly something he had told himself and come to believe.

Robert Browning encouraged us to believe that 'the best is yet to be' but there is a certain breed of Englishmen (and women) who sometimes feel more comfortable assuming that the worst, not the best, is yet to come. It is, I suppose, easier to deal with the inevitable exigencies and disappointments encountered in life when you are not expecting too much.

'Do you still have your tools?' I asked him. I was pretty sure of the answer since I knew that most skilled workmen had their own tools and guarded them rather jealously.

'Of course I do. They're in a box in the shed. I haven't touched them for years. But I wrapped them in oiled cloths.'

'And do you have somewhere that you could work?'

'We have the shed,' said Mrs Berry. 'It's got a workbench.'

'It's full of junk,' said Mr Berry. 'There's no room to move.'

'We could easily clear it out,' said his wife. 'It's mostly filled with rubbish. We could have a big bonfire.'

'But who am I going to get to tell me what to make? And who will pay me?' demanded Mr Berry.

'There's always a demand for decent furniture,' I told him. 'A lot of people buy old furniture because it's better made than the new stuff. If they knew a carpenter who could make decent tables, wardrobes and beds then they might commission him to make exactly what they wanted.'

'People buy antiques,' said Mr Berry. 'But that's all they're interested in.'

'I don't agree with you!' I said. 'Lots of people prefer to buy old furniture that was made back in Victorian and Edwardian days and most of that stuff isn't classified as antique but it's better made than the new flat pack stuff that seems to be so fashionable.' I waved a hand around my surgery. 'There's nothing in here that's antique but it's old and it's all good, solid furniture.' I rapped my knuckles on my desk. 'This is a good solid desk but it certainly isn't an antique.'

'There you are, you see!' said Mr Berry. 'Proper wooden furniture lasts for years. That new stuff that people build themselves won't last ten years.'

'No, it probably won't,' I agreed.

'But how would we find people who wanted to have new furniture made for them?' asked Mrs Berry.

'Advertise!' I said. 'Peter Marshall has a noticeboard at his shop. You could pin up a card there. And you could advertise in the Parish Newsletter. It costs hardly anything to advertise there and you'd be reaching the very people you need to reach.'

Mr Berry looked uncertain. 'You mean I should start my own business?'

'Exactly!'

'I'm a bit old for that, aren't I?'

'Don't be daft!' I said. 'I bet there are a lot of people in North Devon who would jump at the chance to have some bespoke furniture made. You could make tables and cupboards to fit those odd little corners that most old houses seem to have.'

'The doctor is right,' said Mrs Berry. 'Having something to do would do you a power of good. You'd be doing something you enjoy. You've always said that you miss your work. This is a chance to get your tools out and make some more good furniture.'

Mr Berry looked brighter for a moment and then his face clouded. 'I could never run my own business,' he said. 'It would mean keeping books and accounts and doing taxes and that sort of thing. That sort of stuff was never my strong point.'

'You've got the answer sitting next to you!' I pointed out. 'Your wife is a bookkeeper. I'm sure she'd be happy to handle the finances for you.'

'Of course I would!' said Mrs Berry. 'I'd love to. We would be running our own little business and doing it together.'

Mr Berry did not look convinced.

I have found that on the whole, the elderly tend to be less enthusiastic about taking risks than the young. The young are reckless risk takers because the only thing they know for sure is that they are immortal. Older folk are far more conscious of death and their own mortality than the young. They are cautious because they know that death is hanging around, leaning on the next lamppost, waiting for them, scythe at the ready, and they are anxious to cheat the inevitable for as long as possible. They prefer to keep their heads down and to leave plenty of room in their lives for the problems and the emergencies which they know are an inevitable part of life. Older folk worry more because they are aware how easily things can go wrong and just how much life likes to bowl a googly right at the moment when you're expecting a straight ball.

Eventually, when he left the surgery, Mr Berry had agreed that he and his wife would write out a few advertisements and see what happened. And he had agreed to give up the magazine diet that wasn't working and to try my diet sheet.

Within six months, Mr Berry had lost three stones and he was looking like a different man. He was no longer complaining about his hips or his knees and he had far less difficulty in getting about.

I saw Mr Berry driving his new (but second hand) truck a year or so later. There was a brand new oak wardrobe in the back of the truck. I was just coming out of a cottage down near Softly's Bottom and I waved him down.

'How's business?' I asked him.

'Fantastic!' he replied, winding down his window. 'I can't keep up with the orders. I've got a pair of bedside tables and a television cabinet to make before the end of the month. I'm even getting work from outside the village. Last week we had a phone call from someone in Exeter who wants me to make a kitchen table for them.' He grinned and patted his now much flatter stomach. 'Being back at work has made me healthier too!' He obviously still believed that it was working that kept him fit. In a way he was right, of course.

'I'm glad things are going well!' I said.

'Brilliant, absolutely brilliant!' said Mr Berry. 'I'm so glad I had that idea to start out on my own. I often tell mother that it was the best idea I've ever had and the best thing I've ever done – apart from marrying her, of course.'

I told him I was very pleased to hear his good news.

'I've rather proved my point, don't you think, doctor?'

'What point was that?' I asked, rather puzzled.

'I said I was ill because I'd lost my job,' said Mr Berry. 'I don't think you believed me, did you?'

'Well…' I began.

'You can't argue with the facts! I'm working again and now I'm as fit as a fiddle,' he said, proud of himself. 'When I was working I was well. When I stopped working I was ill. Now I'm working and I'm well again. Proof of the pudding, eh? Isn't that what they say?'

'Proof of the pudding!' I agreed, with a nod.

He grinned, winked and put the truck into gear all at the same time. 'Must go – I've got to get this delivered before lunch.'

And with a slight crashing of the gears he was off.

Carlton and Hermione Thorley

‘Oh, and there was a call asking you to visit Mr Thorley at home,’ said Miss Johnson, when she’d finished giving me the list of my morning calls. ‘It’s not urgent but they’d like you to call in sometime.’

‘Thorley?’ I said, puzzled. ‘I don’t think I know anyone called Thorley. Is he a patient of ours?’

‘He’s not on our records so he isn’t registered as a patient. But I believe they’ve been living in the village for nearly three years now. Mrs Thorley very occasionally helps with flower arranging at St Dymphnas.’

‘And they’re definitely living in Bilbury?’

‘Yes, I believe so.’

‘They moved here three years ago?’

‘I think it was about that long ago.’

I frowned. ‘I don’t remember hearing of anyone called Thorley.’

‘I believe they’re very shy,’ said Miss Johnson. ‘They tend to keep themselves to themselves. I’ve not seen them out and about in the village. I’ve not seen them at all – apart from Mrs Thorley helping with the flowers from time to time.’

‘Whereabouts do they live?’

‘Buttercup Cottage.’

‘Is that the little pink cottage on the road to Barnstaple?’

‘That’s the one. It’s set back from the road a little way and a lot of people go past without noticing that it’s there. It used to be painted yellow. I think the people who lived there before the Thorleys were fond of yellow. And because they’d painted it yellow they called it Buttercup Cottage.’

‘And now it’s pink?’

Miss Johnson nodded.

‘And the Thorleys are not just there on holiday?’

‘Oh no, I think they live here in the village. Peter Marshall says that Mrs Thorley pops into his shop quite regularly. Peter says she buys a lot of mincemeat.’

‘Mincemeat?’

‘She buys it every week apparently. At this time of the year, Peter gets it in just for her. And Peter says she also buys a lot of icing sugar and parsnips.’

When you live in a small village there isn’t much that the other villagers don’t know. And Miss Johnson is a news gatherer par excellence. If I were ever to run a local paper I would hire her to write the gossip column. ‘And so they’ve definitely moved into the village?’

‘I would think so.’

‘Right.’ I sighed. ‘Well, maybe they just like a lot of roast parsnips and have mincemeat instead of marmalade on their morning toast.’

Miss Johnson gave me that look she gives me when she thinks I’m being silly. Miss Johnson isn’t entirely sure that she approves of frivolity but she’s far too polite to say anything.

To be honest, I was slightly surprised by her news about the Thorleys.

Most people who move into the village like to register with their local general practitioner within a month or so at the most. It was definitely unusual for people to move into the village and live there for three years without popping in to sign up with their GP.

‘OK. I’ll call in and see what they want.’

And so three quarters of an hour later I drove up to Buttercup Cottage (in all its glorious pinkness) and realised that there was absolutely nowhere to leave the car. The 1930 Rolls Royce 20/25 which I inherited from my predecessor, Dr Brownlow, does eight miles to the gallon when it wants to and rather less when it doesn’t, and, as my friend Patchy Fogg once said, it is a car which was definitely built for travelling rather than arriving. It is an absurdly impractical vehicle for a country doctor and it was certainly not built for parking anywhere other than, possibly, on an aircraft runway. I purred along the lane and eventually found an unused gateway where I managed to squeeze the car onto the verge.

After I’d got out of the car I leant, for a few moments, on the five barred gate. The one thing I really like about five barred gates is that, whatever their size and however they are hung, they always seem to be a perfect height for leaning on. I watched the sheep playing in the field and I recognised the paint marks some of them bore – they belonged to Patsy’s father, Mr Kennet. I hadn’t realised the field was his. Mr Kennet owns a good deal of Bilbury.

As I watched the sheep peacefully grazing and occasionally playing ‘hide and seek’ and ‘king of the castle’, it occurred to me that animals never start wars. You never hear of a dozen sheep starting a revolution, breaking away from the flock and announcing that they are taking over the left hand side of the field because it has the lushest grass, do you?

Overhead, jackdaws were swooping and playing in the sky and in the middle distance I could see a raven perched on a fence post. Unlike other members of the crow family, ravens never seem to make much of a fuss about anything. And a dozen seagulls had found something to interest them on the far edge of the field. Seagulls are a part of seaside life, along with the sound of the surf breaking on the shore, the feel of bare feet on warm sand (and even the pain of bare feet on shingle or a rocky beach) and although they make a good deal of mess, and there are those who would like to eradicate them completely, I firmly believe that we would miss them if they were somehow banished.

Like many other Bilbury residents, I like to stand and stare when I have a moment to spare. I couldn't help thinking that when I was a small boy, in the years immediately after World War II, life was extraordinarily simple. It seemed simple then, and in retrospect it is clear that, compared to life today, it was astonishingly simple. In those now distant days, happiness meant a patch of grass, a few hours sunshine, a bottle of dandelion and burdock, a bar of chocolate and a library book.

In the 1950s television broadcasting hours were strictly limited, the telephone was for emergencies and most games involved boards, counters and dice. There was no social media and group activities were limited to conkers in the autumn, slides and snowball fights in the winter, marbles in the spring and swimming and cricket in the summer. The total financial cost of all these activities was insignificant. Electricity was something that gave us lights and very little else, and the absence of central heating meant that on cold, winter days the inside of my bedroom window was covered with magical Jack Frost patterns.

Back when I was a boy, I always enjoyed being outside; riding a bicycle, climbing trees and watching animals. These activities involved a good deal of falling over. Between the ages of 6 and 14 there was barely a day that went by that I didn't have a scab on one or both knees and one or both elbows. Modern children don't do anything to collect scabs, let alone have time to pick at them. It is a matter of record that as a boy I always had at least one scab worth picking (knee or elbow, it didn't matter).

By the 1970s I had matured a little. I didn't play conkers or marbles quite as often and if I created a slide in the snow then I did it surreptitiously, when I didn't think anyone was looking. But I retained my affection for nature; for the countryside, for animals, for birds and for everything alive whether it was running, flying, crawling or swimming.

And so living in Bilbury was a constant delight.

The countryside in North Devon was (and still is) wild, untamed, and as unspoilt as any area in England. In the 1970s, one or two farmers still used horses to pull their ploughs. The air was clean, fresh and healthy (it still is) and although a local hunt occasionally strayed into Bilbury in a usually unsuccessful search for a fox, the local wildlife had a pretty good time of it.

I strolled back along the lane, opened a small, wooden gate in the hedge and walked up a neat path to the front door of Buttercup Cottage. To my surprise, there was a holly wreath hanging from the door knocker. I wondered if the occupants knew the wreath was still there or if they had grown so accustomed to its presence that they didn't actually see it any more – in the way that someone might spend half an hour looking for their spectacles without realising that they were wearing them. I once spent twenty minutes looking for my car keys, and even enlisted Patsy's help, until she pointed out, with surprising patience, that I was holding them in my hand.

'Oh thank you for coming, doctor,' said a tiny woman who looked to be in her 60s. She had white hair, neatly done in a bun at the back, and wore silver framed reading glasses which were perched on the end of her nose. She was wearing a red and white dress with a floral pattern and over it she wore one of those old-fashioned pinafores which have a loop which goes over the head and ties which can be knotted at the back of the waist. Her hands were covered with flour and she had a streak of flour on her left cheek. The pinafore had a picture of Father Christmas on the front. He was a very jolly, red-faced Father Christmas with a lot of white hair and a huge, white beard. I didn't really know why but she rather reminded me of a sparrow.

'Please excuse me, I didn't expect you to be here so quickly,' she said. 'I've been doing a little baking.' And then I realised why I had thought of a sparrow. She reminded me of Edith Piaf, the diminutive and legendary French singer.

I introduced myself, though this was clearly not really necessary since she obviously knew who I was. 'Mrs Thorley?'

'That's right. But it's my husband you've come to see.'

She opened the door wide and stepped back a couple of paces so that I could enter the cottage. It was one of those cottages which has low ceilings and very low doorways. I nearly always managed to bang my head at least once every time I entered one of those cottages.

As I entered the room, I could see that the Thorleys did not appear to have taken down any of their Christmas decorations. The holly wreath on the door was not an aberration. There were paper chains hanging from the ceiling (and making the ceiling appear even lower) and there were Christmas decorations on the mantelpiece. There was a beautifully decorated artificial tree in a corner of the room and a bunch of artificial mistletoe hung from the light fitting in the middle of the room. I was pleased to see a small crib, containing beautifully carved and painted, wooden figures, standing on a side table. The Thorleys had clearly not forgotten the purpose of the celebration which they had extended and appeared to be enjoying.

All this was made especially surprising since, at the time of my visit, it was a lovely, warm day in late May. The birds had done their nesting and were busy chasing about collecting food for their ever-hungry young ones.

It was surprising, and startling I suppose, because we tend to live by our traditions and habits because those give our lives a framework upon which to hang new experiences. When the traditions and habits are turned inside out, there is, for a moment or two, a tendency to feel rather lost.

Nevertheless, despite the incongruity, I couldn't help feeling a warm glow inside. Patsy and I always feel sad when twelfth night comes and it is time to put away the bits and pieces which help us to celebrate the festival period. We both love everything about Christmas.

'Would you like a mince pie and a glass of sherry?' Mrs Thorley asked. She pulled a tea towel out of the huge pocket on the front of her pinafore and wiped the flour off her hands. The tea towel was decorated with holly and little golden bells and other signs of Christmas.

'That's very kind of you. But maybe I should see your husband first?'

'Of course, doctor. He's in bed so I'll lead the way. Mind your step because the staircase is a little steep.'

Mrs Thorley opened what looked like a cupboard door and revealed one of those incredibly narrow and steep staircases with which small, old cottages often seem to be equipped. The stairs went almost straight up – more like a ladder than a normal staircase and the doorway into it was no more than five feet high and two feet wide. At the top of those tiny staircases, there are invariably just two rooms: one to the left and one to the right. Going up I found I always had to go sideways because the treads were no wider than the rungs of a ladder. Coming down, I always found very tricky – especially if I was holding something such as a black, medical bag. I found that the only safe way to descend was to treat the stairs just as I would have treated a ladder, and to come down backwards.

Thankfully, in the Thorley's cottage, someone had fixed rope bannisters on both sides of the staircase. The ropes were fixed to the wall at intervals of a yard and a half or so. I find rope bannisters rather fun and much more useful than old-fashioned wooden ones when climbing a steep and narrow staircase. The other advantage of rope bannisters is that in a narrow passageway they take up less room than traditional wooden bannisters.

Back in the days of Queen Elizabeth I, access to the upper floors in small cottages was via an ordinary ladder. When they were ready for bed, the occupants of the cottage would climb up their ladder and wriggle through a tiny hole in the ceiling. They would sleep in what would today be regarded as the attic or loft. People were smaller in those days, and more capable of scrambling up into small spaces. In the daytime, when it wasn't in use and would get in the way, the ladder was put out in the yard.

Some of the furniture used in those days was built in the bedroom and some, such as large wardrobes and four poster beds, came apart and had to be put together like large, three dimensional jigsaw puzzles. I have seen four poster beds that came apart and ended up as three or four dozen pieces of wood.

The big problem came when a patient died in their bedroom. I have known it to be necessary to remove a bedroom window and to take the deceased out that way. Windows which were big enough to take a coffin were known as 'coffin windows'.

I followed Mrs Thorley upstairs, banging my head on the top of the door frame as I did so. Someone, presumably Mrs Thorley, had tacked a piece of carpet to the door frame so the bang did me no harm and made no noise whatsoever. I couldn't help noticing that Mrs Thorley, who was scampering up the staircase like a mountain goat, was wearing slippers with a seasonal motif and ankle length socks which had little reindeers prancing about on them.

'Mind your head, doctor!' Mrs Thorley said, over her shoulder. She wasn't even bothering to hold onto the rope and did not seem to notice that the staircase was damned near vertical.

I promised, belatedly, that I would.

Mr Thorley was lying in bed reading.

I couldn't see all of him, of course, but he looked to be about the same age and same general size as his wife. It occurred to me that if you live in a small cottage, with low ceilings and a very narrow staircase, it helps if you're not too tall and not too wide.

The bedroom hadn't escaped the Christmas decorations.

Numerous, colourful streamers were stretched across the room, tied to picture frames and to tacks which had been hammered into walls and window frames. And although the bedroom was very small, there was another artificial Christmas tree in there. It was smaller than the tree downstairs but beautifully decorated with dozens of exquisite Victorian ornaments.

'We like Christmas,' said Mrs Thorley.

'I guessed!'

'It seems such a pity to take all the decorations down on twelfth night,' said Mr Thorley.

'We always hated putting them into their boxes and then packing them away into a cupboard,' said Mrs Thorley.

'So one year we just decided to leave them up,' continued Mr Thorley.

'I know it's supposed to be bad luck to leave them up after twelfth night,' said Mrs Thorley, 'but we've found a way to get round that.'

'We don't think of ourselves as leaving them up,' explained Mr Thorley. 'We think of ourselves as putting them up early for next Christmas.'

'We always take the fairies off the top of our trees on twelfth night,' said Mrs Thorley. 'And then we put them back on the next day.'

'We both like mince pies,' said Mr Thorley. 'And Christmas pudding.'

'And Christmas cake,' added Mrs Thorley. 'And sausage rolls.'

'Oh yes, I do like a sausage roll,' agreed Mr Thorley.

'A splendid idea!' I said. It seemed extraordinary that they weren't both hugely overweight.

I already liked the Thorleys. I liked them very much. Actually, it was pretty well impossible not to like them. They rather reminded me of a pair of children playing at life.

Mr Thorley made a fuss of wiping his cheek with his hand.

'What can I do for you?' I asked him.

'He's been very wobbly,' said Mrs Thorley.

Mr Thorley repeated the gesture. I guessed that he was quietly trying to tell his wife that she had flour on her cheek.

'For how long?'

'A month,' said Mrs Thorley. 'It seems to be getting worse.'

'Your cheek!' whispered Mr Thorley to his wife. He repeated the cheek-wiping gesture again.

Mrs Thorley realised what he was trying to tell her but she wiped the wrong cheek with the tea towel.

'Other one,' whispered Mr Thorley.

This time Mrs Thorley managed to wipe the flour off her cheek. 'Oh I'm so sorry, doctor,' she said. 'I'm really embarrassed now. What must you think of me?'

'Please don't give it a thought!' I said. 'When my wife bakes she usually ends up with flour on her face and in her hair. Actually, there is usually flour on the dog too. And I've been known to end up with flour on my face even if I've been out doing visits when she was baking.'

'Really?'

I smiled at her and nodded. 'Sometimes, people who are just walking past our house end up with flour on their noses.'

She laughed and relaxed a little.

'Apart from the wobbliness, do you have any health problems I should know about?' I asked Mr Thorley. 'Since you aren't actually a patient of mine I don't have any medical records for you.'

'He has high blood pressure,' said Mrs Thorley, who seemed to answer a lot for her husband. He didn't seem to mind that she did this.

'But who is treating that?' I asked, suddenly alarmed that I had seen Mr Thorley and forgotten him.

'We're still registered with our doctor in Exeter,' explained Mrs Thorley. 'That's where we used to live. Exeter.'

I was surprised by this. Exeter is the county town of Devon. It is over 60 miles away from Bilbury and it would take at least an hour and a half to drive from one to the other. That's quite a trek for a doctor to make in order to visit a patient.

'Does your doctor in Exeter still look after you both?' I asked.

'Well, we've been on his medical list since we left Exeter,' said Mrs Thorley. 'But when Mr Thorley was taken a bit poorly I telephoned his surgery and the receptionist told me that the doctor wouldn't visit us here because we are too far away. He told me that I had to telephone you.'

I wasn't surprised. 'Do you take any tablets?' I asked Mr Thorley.

'Oh yes. I have the pills for my blood pressure. But I've always had those.'

'You get them from your doctor in Exeter?'

‘I do. Every three months I send in a request together with a stamped addressed envelope and the doctor sends me a prescription for another supply of my pills.’

‘I take the prescription into Boots the chemist in Barnstaple,’ said Mrs Thorley.

‘When did you have your blood pressure taken last?’ I asked Mr Thorley.

‘Just before we moved from Exeter.’

‘Not since then?’

‘Oh no. Our doctor told us that I would need to keep taking the tablets for the rest of my life so there didn’t seem any need to have it taken again.’

‘Ah,’ I said.

This was rather startling news.

Patients who have high blood pressure need to have readings taken regularly since it is not at all impossible for blood pressure to change quite dramatically over a few months – let alone three years. And a change in circumstances can have a tremendous effect on the blood pressure. It wasn’t difficult to guess that the Thorleys lived a rather different life in Bilbury to the life they’d lived in Exeter.

I opened my black bag and took out my sphygmomanometer and my stethoscope. ‘Roll up your pyjama sleeve, please, Mr Thorley.’

Mr Thorley rolled up his sleeve. It was very loose and rolled up out of the way quite easily.

‘You’ve been dizzy?’ I asked, as I wrapped the cuff around his upper arm.

‘Oh yes, doctor. Very dizzy.’

‘And when he gets out of bed he falls down,’ said Mrs Thorley. ‘With our stairs it’s very dangerous. I’ve made him stay in bed.’

I took Mr Thorley’s blood pressure.

I then took it again.

And I then took it for a third time.

Now, usually, when a doctor or a nurse takes a patient’s blood pressure the reading is a little higher than it is normally. The very presence of the doctor or nurse, and the fact that they are taking the blood pressure, can push it up quite noticeably.

But Mr Thorley’s blood pressure as he lay in bed was 90 over 65. For a man of his age that was very low and meant that his systolic pressure was 30 points lower than the normal for a young, healthy man. And since his blood pressure would fall when he stood up I could see why he was falling down every time he got out of bed.

‘Could I see the pills you are taking?’ I asked.

Mrs Thorley picked a bottle of pills off the nearest of the two bedside tables and handed the bottle to me.

They were a popularly prescribed and powerful drug for high blood pressure.

‘I think you may need to reduce your drug dosage,’ I told him, tactfully. ‘It seems that the pills you are taking have reduced your blood pressure rather too far.’

‘Oh I don’t think my doctor would like that,’ said Mr Thorley, rather nervously. ‘He did say that I would need to take the pills for the rest of my life.’

‘Maybe Mr Thorley needs to take a higher dose?’ suggested Mrs Thorley, clearly trying to be helpful.

‘Am I right in thinking that you are retired, now?’ I asked her husband.

‘Oh yes,’ said Mr Thorley. ‘Very definitely.’

‘We came here when Mr Thorley retired,’ added Mrs Thorley. ‘We wanted to get away.’

‘Too many people knew me down there,’ said Mr Thorley. His wife reached out and patted his hand.

‘May I ask what you did for a living?’ I asked Mr Thorley.

He looked at his wife and she looked back at him. They were both obviously reluctant to tell me.

‘Would you say it was a stressful job?’ I asked.

They looked at each other.

‘Oh yes, very much,’ said Mrs Thorley.

‘Quite definitely,’ said Mr Thorley.

I waited, assuming that one or the other would tell me what the job had been. But this clearly wasn’t on the agenda. ‘But now that you’re living here that stress has gone?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Mrs Thorley. ‘We like it here very much. We don’t go out much, of course, but we like it here.’

‘Because of my job,’ said Mr Thorley, as though in explanation.

‘You don’t go out much because of what you did for a living when you lived in Exeter?’

‘That’s right.’

I began to wonder what on earth Mr Thorley had done for a living when they were living in Exeter. What on earth had attracted such opprobrium? What sort of employment could have possibly affected them so much that they were, even now, frightened to show themselves? I couldn't think of anything that could be as bad as they seemed to think it was. There hadn't been a hangman in England for decades.

'Well, whatever it was, it's all over now,' I said to Mr Thorley. If they didn't want to tell me what he did for a living then that was fine with me. 'And it's a reasonable guess that your job caused, or at least contributed to, your high blood pressure.'

'Oh yes, that's what our doctor in Exeter told us,' said Mrs Thorley. 'But he…'

'…said that Mr Thorley would need to take the blood pressure tablets for the rest of his life,' I said, finishing the sentence for her.

'That's right.'

'Well, I'm sure that your doctor in Exeter would agree with me that since Mr Thorley is now retired, and is free of the stress associated with his former job, then he won't need to take as many pills for his blood pressure. In fact, he may be able to stop the pills completely!'

'Oh, the doctor wouldn't like that!' said Mrs Thorley firmly.

I couldn't help feeling that the conversation wasn't getting me anywhere.

'May I ask you why you asked me to call today?'

'Because Mr Thorley is very dizzy,' explained Mrs Thorley, rather patiently. 'When he gets out of bed he falls over.'

'And remind me, please, why your doctor in Exeter didn't come to visit you.'

'He says we live too far away.'

'Didn't he suggest that you should register with another doctor?'

'No!' said Mrs Thorley. 'He said he would keep providing us with pills but that if we needed a visit we should call a local doctor.'

'And you did call me and I have suggested that Mr Thorley needs to cut down his pills.'

'Yes, but you're not our proper doctor,' said Mrs Thorley, with the definitiveness of a woman who has produced the ace of trumps.

I took a deep breath and waited a moment before continuing. 'I think you are going to have to telephone your doctor,' I said at last. 'You need to speak to him and ask him if he wants to continue looking after you both in your new home. If he is going to continue to dictate your treatment then he really needs to be in charge of doing things like taking blood pressures and so on.'

'All right, doctor,' said Mrs Thorley. She scuttled off to the top of the stairs and a moment later I heard her going down to the living room where, I assumed, the telephone was situated.

'I was a traffic warden,' said Mr Thorley, suddenly.

I looked at him.

'That was my job.'

'Ah,' I said, beginning to understand.

'I wasn't always a traffic warden,' he said. 'When I was young I worked as a human cannon ball in a circus in Blackpool. Just for a season.' He managed a small smile. 'I was fired every day and twice on Saturdays.'

'Not a job you could rely on, then?'

'No. In the end, I was fired permanently. The manager said I wasn't any good at it. Apparently I always used to look relieved after I'd been shot out of the cannon and had landed safely. He said they wanted someone who smiled a bit more and waved to the crowd. I was always too relieved to do much waving and smiling.'

'Seems a bit much,' I said. 'Expecting you to be fired from a cannon and to smile about it afterwards.'

'That's what I thought,' said Mr Thorley with a sigh. 'They hired a girl to replace me. She was very curvy, well-built in the bosom department, and she managed to arrange it so that her top always fell off when she landed. That went down very well with the audience. She always managed to make it look as though it were all accidental and had embarrassed her. I was demoted to working on the candy floss stall.'

'And did the new human cannon ball smile as well as lose her top?'

'Oh yes, very much so.'

'So then you became a traffic warden?'

'Eventually, yes. I had a few other jobs in between. I worked on a trawler but discovered I got seasick. I parked cars for a five star hotel in the West End of London and I worked as a messenger for a firm of solicitors. I was a chauffeur too, for a while. But after I met Mrs Thorley I needed to settle down. And being a traffic warden seemed a good, steady, reliable job.'

'Just the ticket, eh?'

He looked at me, puzzled.

'But it didn't turn out very satisfactorily?' I said, moving on quickly.

‘No, the people in our street knew I was a traffic warden and they gave us both a hard time about it.’

‘How did they find out?’

‘I went to work every morning in my uniform.’

‘Ah. I suppose that would give it away. And your neighbours didn’t like traffic wardens?’

‘No. My boss sent me to work in our street on a couple of occasions.’

‘I see.’

And I did. I hadn’t always been appreciative of the work done by traffic wardens. It must have been very difficult for Mr and Mrs Thorley. It seemed particularly unfair to send the fellow to give out parking tickets in the street where he lived.

‘The neighbours were especially unpleasant after I had to give several of them parking tickets.’

‘I can see why that wouldn’t make you the most popular man in the street.’

‘It didn’t.’

‘And did you like anything about the work?’

‘No. I hated it. But I couldn’t find any other employment.’

‘But you’re not a traffic warden now,’ I said.

‘No. I’m retired. I came back from work one day, took off my cap and told Mrs Thorley that I couldn’t do it anymore. A woman had screamed at me and said some awful things. I told Mrs Thorley that I’d get another job. I said I’d rather clean lavatories than be a traffic warden.’ He swallowed and there were tears in his eyes. ‘But Mrs Thorley said I had worked hard all my life and that I should retire and that we would move away and buy a cottage in the country. I said we didn’t have enough money put aside to retire but she said she’d been saving hard out of the housekeeping and putting aside as much as she could from her wages from cleaning in the supermarket and that there was enough for us to retire if we cut our cloth according to our means. She said we would get a good price for our little house because Exeter had become quite an expensive place to live, and the area where we lived was quite fashionable, and she was right and we sold the car too and we looked around and found this little cottage here in Bilbury. And we’ve never had expensive habits so we’ve been able to manage.’

‘Do you feel less stressed now that you’re no longer a traffic warden?’

‘Oh yes, I do. Oh yes, I most certainly do.’

‘And the people in Bilbury don’t know that you were a traffic warden and since you are no longer a traffic warden they wouldn’t give a fig if they did,’ I pointed out.

Mr Thorley accepted these words with some surprise. And then slowly, very slowly, a smile crept across his face. ‘Do you think so?’

‘I’m sure so,’ I said.

‘Oh,’ said Mr Thorley. ‘Well, that’s quite a relief. Can I tell Mrs Thorley that? I think she’ll be relieved too.’

‘Of course you can!’

I really did like the Thorleys. They were what used to be called a ‘sweet couple’. I find that if you talk to older people they always, but always, have fascinating stories to share. The young frequently dismiss the elderly as boring but they would learn a good deal if they had the patience to listen occasionally.

Just then Mrs Thorley reappeared. She looked rather cross.

‘Well,’ she said. And then she repeated it with an exclamation mark after it. ‘Well!’ Finally, she said it again with two exclamation marks. ‘Well!!’

‘What did your doctor in Exeter have to say?’ I asked her.

‘He was very rude!’ said Mrs Thorley, who seemed quite surprised at this. ‘He said he wasn’t going to visit us up here in North Devon and that he’d only kept us on his list as a favour but that if I was going to be difficult then we could find another doctor and good riddance to us!’

I didn’t point out their doctor in Exeter might, just might, have kept them on his list because in the National Health Service a doctor is paid according to the number of patients who are registered with him. Their Exeter doctor was earning money for doing nothing more than sign repeat prescriptions occasionally.

‘So what do you want to do?’ I asked them both.

‘Well, we have to find another doctor,’ said Mrs Thorley. ‘We need a doctor so that we can obtain Mr Thorley’s prescriptions.’

‘Mr Thorley might not need his prescriptions,’ I pointed out.

Mrs Thorley looked at me rather suspiciously.

I smiled at her. ‘You must choose a new doctor,’ I told her. ‘There are doctors in Barnstaple and Combe Martin who would probably take you onto their lists.’

‘But you’re the only doctor in Bilbury,’ said Mrs Thorley.

‘That’s not a very good reason to choose a doctor,’ I told her.

‘No, I suppose it isn’t,’ she agreed.

‘Can we try you on approval?’ asked Mr Thorley, rather nervously.

‘You mean, can you sign up with me and then change to another doctor in a week or two if you’re unhappy with me?’

‘That’s sort of what I meant,’ said Mr Thorley.

‘Of course you can,’ I said.

‘You wouldn’t mind?’

‘Not at all! I don’t want to look after patients who aren’t happy with having me as their doctor.’

‘Well, that’s settled then,’ said Mrs Thorley. She looked at her husband. He nodded. ‘We’ll take you on approval.’

I thanked them both and said that since I was now their doctor, albeit ‘on approval’, I wanted Mr Thorley to cut his pills down by a quarter.

‘That’s almost certainly not going to be a sharp enough cut to make the dizziness go away,’ I told him. ‘But if we’re going to make changes than we need to do them slowly. I’ll pop in to check Mr Thorley’s blood pressure in a couple of days and we’ll see how things are then.’

They seemed unhappy about this but said they’d try it.

‘Meanwhile,’ I told Mr Morley. ‘You must be very cautious when getting out of bed. And when you walk about you must hold onto things. And when you go down the stairs you’d probably better go down on your bottom; just bumping your bottom from one step to the next.’

‘Oh dear,’ said Mrs Thorley. She looked at her husband. ‘Are you happy about all this, Mr Thorley?’ she asked him.

He said he was.

Mrs Thorley then nodded her approval.

‘Would you like that mince pie now, doctor?’ she asked. ‘And a glass of sherry, perhaps?’

‘I’d be delighted to try one of your mince pies,’ I told her. ‘And I’d be very pleased to celebrate our new partnership, albeit on approval, with a very small glass of sherry.’

Mrs Thorley hurried off again to the stairs.

‘We like Christmas very much,’ said Mr Thorley rather unnecessarily.

‘So I gathered.’

From the bedroom window I could see a camellia bush. It was laden with beautiful pink camellias. And on a bird table down below, a robin was feeding what looked like sunflower hearts to a hungry youngster. The sun was shining and spring was already in full swing. I could hear a blackbird singing its heart out somewhere in a rhododendron bush.

Downstairs Mrs Thorley switched on a record player and I could hear the wonderful, if slightly anachronistic, sound of Harry Belafonte singing *Mary’s Boy Child*.

‘Mrs Thorley is going to be very pleased about our not having to hide away,’ whispered Mr Thorley.

And I am delighted to report that everything turned out well.

Five weeks later, to my delight, I was finally able to wean Mr Thorley off the last of his blood pressure pills.

And two days after that a very healthy Carlton and Hermione Thorley came to see me at Bilbury Grange to tell me that they had decided that I was no longer on approval. They brought me a dozen mince pies and two large slices of Christmas cake.

The mince pies and the Christmas cake were very tasty and most enjoyable, although Patsy and I agreed that it did seem a little strange to be eating mince pies and Christmas cake in the middle of the summer.

Author’s Note 1:
Thank you for your company. I hope you have enjoyed this book about Bilbury. If you did so then I would be very grateful if you would spare a moment to write a short review. It really helps a lot.
Thank you
Vernon Coleman

Author’s Note 2:
Mr Fish’s poems, quoted in the text of this book, are reproduced with permission. A fee has been paid to Mr Fish’s estate and the proceeds distributed, according to his will, to Charlene Jackson (nee Walkinshaw) of Barnstaple. Charlene is the daughter of Charlotte, the former girlfriend mentioned in the memory about Mr Fish. Although Mr Fish met her only once, and then just for a few moments, he left his entire estate to her.

The Appendices

Appendix No 1: Tea-Time Treats

1. Bakewell Pudding is an English dessert which consists of a flaky pastry base upon which has been placed a layer of jam and a filling made out of egg and almond paste. There are probably as many local variations on this theme as there are local cake shops but it is generally agreed that the Pudding was first made by accident in the 1820s by a cook who was or was not working at a hostelry which might or might not have been called the White Horse Inn. (As with most such bits and pieces of social history, the only certainty is that there is no certainty.) The cook was allegedly told to make a jam tart but, according to legend, instead of stirring the eggs and almond paste mixture into the pastry (as she might have been expected to do) she put the jam onto the pastry base and placed the almond paste on top of the jam. She was probably pleasantly tiddly at the time. When the whole thing came out of the oven, the cook found herself an unexpected heroine and her serendipitous creation became a popular dish at the inn. Incidentally, no other town in England has both a tart and a pudding named after it and in that respect Bakewell is unique.
2. Bakewell Tart is a thoroughly English confection which consists of a short-crust pastry base or case filled with a layer of jam and a sponge which is made with ground almonds (known to aficionados as frangipane). A Cherry Bakewell is a commercial variation of the traditional tart and has the frangipane covered with a layer of white, almond-flavoured fondant blessed with half a glace cherry.
3. Banbury Cake: First made by Edward Welchman in the 17th century, Banbury cakes are made with currants, mixed peel, brown sugar, rum and nutmeg.
4. Bath Bun: First produced in 1763 by Dr Oliver, a doctor who treated patients at the Bath Spa. The bun, created to be eaten in the baths, was so popular that patients who ate too many put on weight. And so the Bath Oliver biscuit was invented as a substitute.
5. Chelsea Bun: Chelsea buns were first sold at the Chelsea Bun House in central London. Both Jonathan Swift and Charles Dickens bought buns there. (The shop is mentioned in Dickens's books *Barnaby Rudge* and *Bleak House*.) A Chelsea Bun is made of a roll of raisin-spotted dough which contains cinnamon. The roll of dough is made into a square bun but can be unrolled to be eaten.
6. Chorley Cake: First made in Chorley in Lancashire a Chorley Cake is similar to an Eccles cake but is made with currants between two layers of unsweetened short-crust pastry and commonly served with butter on top.
7. Crumpet: The original crumpets were small, oval cakes made with unsweetened batter which contained water and flour. These were also known as picklets or pikelets. From Victorian times onwards, crumpets or pikelets contained yeast and bicarbonate of soda and became soft and spongy.
8. Eccles Cake: Originated in Eccles, near Manchester and was first made in 1796. The ingredients are squashed, juicy raisins in a flaky pastry.
9. Gloucester Tart: Made in Gloucester on the edge of the Cotswolds. It is identical to a Bakewell Tart except that ground rice is added to the ingredients.
10. Muffin: There are two types of muffin. The original muffin was a flatbread bun dating back to before the 18th century. These are known in the US as English muffins. The cupcake muffin originated in North America in the 19th century.
11. Teacake: In the UK, a teacake is a yeast based sweet bun containing dried fruit and usually toasted and served with butter. In the US, a teacake can be a biscuit or a small cake. There are many different types of English teacake – varying from the manchet (or Lady Arundel's Manchet) which is popular in Sussex and made with nutmeg, cinnamon and rose water to the huffkin (which is made in Kent and flavoured with hops).
12. Welsh cakes: Traditional snacks from Wales. The ingredients are flour, sultanas and raisins. Welsh cakes look like scones but are smaller, flatter and softer.

Appendix 2: Ten Diseases Related to Occupations

In the memory entitled *Iolanthe and Bertie in River Cottage* I describe Farmers' Lung, a dangerous and sometimes deadly condition known to be an occupational hazard of those working on farms. Farmers' Lung still occurs and is still as deadly as ever. There are, of course, many other disorders which are, or were, associated with particular trades and professions. Here are ten of the best known:
1. 'Hatter's Shakes' was not something invented by Lewis Carroll for the Mad Hatter. It was a very real condition which affected those working in the hat trade. The symptoms were caused by the mercury which was used in curing the felt from which hats were made.
2. 'Painters colic' was a condition affecting house painters. It was caused by the lead which was a common ingredient of many paints.
3. 'Miner's nystagmus' was a condition affecting those who spent long hours working underground.
4. 'Glassblower's cataract' was a form of cataract caused by exposure to the glare from molten glass. Modern glassblowers avoid the problem by wearing special goggles.
5. 'Grocer's itch' is a type of dermatitis caused by mites in the grain handled by those in the grocery trade.
6. 'Asbestosis' was a lung condition commonly found among those working with asbestos. Regulations now control the use of asbestos.
7. 'Office worker's sinus' – is a name given to sinus troubles caused by working in air conditioned offices where the air is over-dried by the air conditioning.
8. 'Typists' Mastitis' was a condition which affected female typists. The condition, an inflammation of the breast, was caused by the constant operation of the carriage lever on a manual typewriter. Since manual typewriters are now used only rarely, the condition is also rare.
9. 'Lorry Drivers' Gastritis' is a stomach condition caused by the enthusiasm of lorry drivers for 'greasy spoon' cafés. Lorry drivers also tend to suffer a good deal from bad backs.
10. 'Dentist's Veins' – dentists, shop assistants and others who spent much of their day standing up used to be exceptionally likely to develop varicose veins. Today, many dentists sit down while they are working – as do many shop assistants.

Appendix 3: The Battle of Naseby

In my chapter about Logan Berry, I mentioned that vanity has often had a great impact on history. Few events in history illustrate the dangers of vanity as much as the Battle of Naseby.

The Battle of Naseby took place on the 14th June 1645 near to the village of Naseby in Northamptonshire. It was the decisive battle in the English Civil War. On one side was the Royalist army of King Charles I and on the other was the Parliamentarian New Model Army which was commanded by Oliver Cromwell and Sir Thomas Fairfax.

The King himself had insisted on being present on the battlefield and, vain to the point of lunacy, he had turned up clad in a gilt plated suit of armour. Naturally, he was the only person on the battlefield wearing golden armour and he was a clear target for the Parliamentarians who were attacking and winning the battle. One of the King’s attendants, realising the vulnerability of his monarch, forced Charles to wheel his horse to one side to escape the fighting. Unfortunately, this fairly innocent movement was misinterpreted as a signal to the whole front line of the Royalist forces. When they saw the King’s golden armour on the move, everyone else followed.

The result, as the Royalist army struggled to wheel in order to follow the King, was a very fatal chaos and confusion. Cromwell led his army forward in a final, glorious charge and the King’s forces were in such disarray that they had no choice but to retreat. The Royal losses were massive for a battle at that time. Around 1,000 men were killed and five times as many were captured. More importantly, perhaps, the King’s private papers were captured. These papers revealed the King’s attempt to bring foreign mercenaries into the war and helped to strengthen support for the Parliamentarians. The King never again managed to put a sizeable force into the field and within a year, Cromwell and Fairfax had won the Civil War.

It is no exaggeration to say that one man’s vanity, and that silly golden armour, changed English history.

Appendix 4: Slobberdochers, Slammerkins and Cachinnators

While my friend William was staying at Bilbury Grange he and I created another one of our lists of unusual words.

The list that follows is as comprehensive a list as we could compile of colourful words, many of them rather Rabelaisian, which describe various types of individual.

It should be noted that since this list was created in the 1970s, it does not include any terms which came into use after that decade.

Bawdy – an obscene or lewd individual
Blockhead – a stupid or foolish person
Braggard – a boaster
Cachinnator – someone who laughs loudly
Changeling – a fairy child left in the place of a real child
Cockalorum – little man with a high opinion of himself
Cotquean – a man doing a woman’s work
Curmudgeon – a bad tempered old man
Dandiprat – anything (or anyone) small
Daphlean – a shy and beautiful person (usually female)
Deipnosophist – someone skilled in making dinner table conversation
Dell – a girl
Demi-lass – a polite word for a trollop, slut or slag
Demirep – someone with no reputation at all
Doxies – morts who are neither married nor virgins
Druggel – a mangy rascal
Flaneur – someone who saunters and observes
Franion – a licentious person
Fraters – fraudulent collectors for charity
Freshwater mariners – bogus old sailors
Galliard – a man of fashion
Gangrel – a loafing lout
Goosecap – a silly person (especially a flighty, young girl)
Gripple – a mean or stingy person
Grouthead – a stupid fellow, a blockhead
Hobbledehoy – a clumsy youth
Hooker – a woman who sells her body
Horbgorbler – someone who potters about in an ineffective way
Hornswoggler – a cheat
Hoydon – a romping girl
Hypergelast – someone who laughs excessively
Jarkman – a sham clergyman, someone who specialises in false marriages
Jejune – naïve, simplistic
Jezebel – an immoral, dishonest woman
Jolthead – a stupid or foolish person
Kinching morts – female juvenile delinquents
Knave – a deceitful or tricky fellow
Larrikin – a maverick; a boisterous, badly behaved person
Lobcock – a stupid, blundering person
Lob-dotterel – a gullible fool
Lout – an uncouth or aggressive man
Lungis – a tall and clumsy man
Lusk – a sloth

Maltworm – a drinker
Mangie – a rascal
Marmalade madam – a strumpet
Marmulet – a strumpet
Meacock – an effeminate man; a man without spirit
Miffy – a fit of peevish ill humour
Mignon – dainty
Milksop – an indecisive individual, lacking courage
Mizzling – sauntering, moving slowly
Moonling – a dreamy fool
Moppet – a peach or kitten of a girl
Mort – a girl
Mountebank – a charlatan, a deceiver
Muffishness – soft and effeminate
Mugwump – someone who backs down, withdraws
Mumchance – silent or tongue tied
Myrmidon – an unscrupulous follower
Necromancer – a wizard or magician
Ninnyhammer – a fool or simpleton
Oaf – a rough or clumsy man (usually also unintelligent)
Oddling – a lonely, strange person
Ombompom – well bosomed
Palliard – a beggar, usually rather scruffy
Panegyrist – someone who speaks or writes in praise of another
Pantywaist – an effeminate or feeble person
Patrico – a sham clergyman
Pimp – a man who manages prostitutes and lives off their earnings
Poltroon – a coward
Popinjay – a vain or conceited person who dresses extravagantly
Prancer – a horse thief
Pretty – a gallant; an alert, prompt fellow always ready for action
Prigger – a horse thief
Rogue – a dishonest or unprincipled man
Roly poly – a short, plump person of either sex
Ruffler – someone pretending to be an old soldier, etc.
Scobberlotcher – an idler
Shill – a confidence trickster’s accomplice
Slag – a worthless person (usually female)
Slaister – someone who slaps on lots of make-up
Slammerkin – a slattern
Slubberdegullion – a dirty, worthless, careless fellow
Slut – a woman who has many casual sexual partners
Spindle-shanks – a person with long thin legs
Tart – a woman who is obviously sexually available
Titivil – a knave
Tittup – someone with a mincing, prancing gait
Toothsome –voluptuous and alluring
Tretis – well-proportioned and graceful
Trollop – a sluttish woman
Uncumber – a bearded woman with holy attributes (St Uncumber was a bearded woman and the benefactress of wives; according to Sir Thomas More she would, if given a peck of oats, provide a horse upon which an evil husband could ride to the devil)
Uprightmen – top rogues
Vagabond – a wanderer
Vamp – a seductress or femme fatale
Venecund – shy and bashful

Venust – beautiful and elegant
Virago – a bad tempered, violent, domineering woman
Walking mort – a female vagabond
Wanton – ungoverned, rebellious
Whore – a woman who sells her body
Zaftig – having a pleasantly plump figure

Appendix 5: The English Spirit

Many of my memories contain examples of ‘the English Spirit’ – a refusal to be bowed by disappointment and adversity.

The determination to remain cool in trying or dangerous circumstances, is of course, a very traditional English response to the exigencies of life. Oddly enough, a French word (sangfroid – which literally means ‘cold blood’) is often used to describe it. Since sangfroid is not usually regarded as a French virtue this is rather inexplicable.

There are many examples of The English Spirit (or the stiff upper lip) in history. Here are a few:

Samuel Pepys, the diarist, wrote about seeing Major General Harrison remaining cheerful and jolly when he was about to be hung, drawn and quartered at Charing Cross. Only a true Englishman could make jokes as he waited to have his intestines dragged out of his body and burnt before his very eyes.

(The first part of the triple punishment known as being ‘hung, drawn and quartered’ involved the hanging of the prisoner until he was almost dead. The poor devil would then be taken off the scaffold, still alive, and put on a table. His intestines would be surgically removed and burnt on a bonfire close to him so that he could watch them burning. Only then would he be chopped into five pieces – the four quarters of the body and the head – so that the bits could be displayed in different parts of the town.)

And then there was the Earl of Uxbridge who, on the battlefield of Waterloo, turned to the Duke of Wellington and said: ‘Begad, Sir, I’ve lost me leg!’ To which the Iron Duke replied: ‘By God, Sir, so you have.’

Thirdly, there was Captain Lawrence Edward Grace Oates.

Oates was a member of the Terra Nova expedition led by Robert Falcon Scott and intended to reach the South Pole. During the ill-fated expedition, Oates developed frostbite and gangrene. Realising that his ill health was compromising the chances of his three companions surviving, he walked out of their small tent into a blizzard and died on his 32nd birthday.

Scott, who also died on the expedition, wrote in his diary that as Oates left the tent, heading for certain death, he turned to his companions and said: ‘I am just going outside and may be some time.’

As an example of the English Spirit, it is impossible to beat.

Appendix 6: Epitaphs: Genuine Gravestone inscriptions

If you wander around old English graveyards you will often find old headstones which bear long inscriptions. (Either it was a lot cheaper to find a mason to do the chiselling or else people were prepared to spend a good deal of their savings on paying for the work to be done.) Here are a few epitaphs taken from English churchyards and revealed in W.H.Hudson's book *Traveller in Little Things*, which contains an essay on epitaphs entitled *A Haunter of Churchyards*.

1
(Taken from a churchyard at Maddington in Wiltshire and dated 1843)
These few lines have been procured
To tell the pains which he endured
He was crushed to death by the fall
Of an old mould'ring, tottering wall.

2
(Taken from a churchyard at Mylor, Cornwall, undated)
His foot it slipped and he did fall
Help! Help! He cried, and that was all

3
(Taken from a churchyard in Lynn, dated 1712)
He hath gained his port and is at ease,
And hath escapt ye danger of ye seas
His glass is run, his life is gone

4
(Taken from a churchyard in Minturne Magna, Dorset, dated 1805)
Neighbours make no stay,
Return unto the lord,
Nor put it off from day to day,
For Death's a debt ye all must pay.
Ye knoweth not how soon,
It may be the next moment,
Night, morning or noon.
I set this as a caution
To my neighbours in rime,
God give grace that you
May all repent in time.
For what God has decreed
We surely must obey,
For when please God to send
His death's dart into us so keen
O then we must go hence
And be no more here seen

5
(Taken from a churchyard in Kew, dated 1728)
At Tyre they were born and bred
And in the same good lives they led,
Until they come to married state,

Which was to them most fortunate.
Near sixty years of mortal life
They were a happy man and wife
And being so by Nature tyed
When one fell sich the other dyed,
And both together laid in dust
To await the rising of the just.
They had six children born and bred,
And five before them being dead,
Their only then surviving son
Hath caused this stone for to be done.

6
(Taken from a churchyard in St Just, Cornwall, dated 1771)
Life's but a snare, a Labyrnth of Woe
Which wretched Man is doomed to struggle through.
Today he's great, tomorrow he's undone,
And thus with Hope and Fear he blunders on,
Till some disease, or else perhaps old Age
Calls us poor Mortals trembling from the Stage.

7
(Taken from a churchyard in Lelant, Cornwall and undated)
What now you are so once was me,
What now I am that you will be,
Therefore prepare to follow me

Appendix 7: John 'Babbacombe' Lee: The Man They Couldn't Hang

For a while, a pub in London had a placard on the wall inviting patrons 'to be served by the man they could not hang'.

The man serving ale in the pub was John Henry George Lee, otherwise known as John 'Babbacombe' Lee, and he was famous for surviving three attempts to hang him for murder.

Born in Devon in 1864, Lee was employed by Miss Emma Keyse as a footman at her home at Babbacombe Bay, near Torquay in Devon. Although the evidence was weak, Lee, a known thief, was convicted of robbing Miss Keyse, beating her to death and then setting fire to the house in order to wipe out all traces of his crime. Lee claimed that he was innocent but he was not believed and he was sentenced to be hung.

On February 23rd in 1885. Three attempts were made to hang Lee at the prison in Exeter. All three attempts failed because the scaffold trapdoor failed to open on each occasion. Between attempts, the hangman, James Berry tested the scaffold with a bag of sand which was the same weight as the man to be hung. And with the bag of sand the scaffold worked perfectly well.

In the end, the medical officer, Dr T Wilson Gaird, refused to have anything more to do with the proceedings which were then halted. The Home Secretary later commuted Lee's sentence to life imprisonment.

There was much confusion about why the execution failed.

Lee claimed that he was saved by divine intervention but later investigations showed that there was a more earthly explanation.

There was no proper scaffold at Exeter (or indeed at any other provincial prisons in England) and all the paraphernalia required was kept at Pentonville prison in London and moved to Exeter beforehand. A special flooring was created with a pit below which allowed a drop of eight feet and an experienced hangman.

When everything was ready, Lee was taken into the execution room together with the usual impressive array of officials, observers and notables: the Governor, the chaplain, the doctor, representatives of the press and so on. And, of course, the experienced hangman whose name was James Berry. (Incidentally, Berry used to make extra money by cutting up the ropes he used and selling the pieces to those who collected such grisly relics.)

The noose was put around Lee's neck and a white bag was put over his head.

But when the lever was pulled, the trapdoor did not open and Lee was left standing on the trap with the noose hanging loosely around his neck.

Everyone was ushered out and carpenters were called in. They shaved some wood from the side of the trap. Lee was brought back, together with all the officials, and the noose was put around his neck again. The hangman then pulled the lever.

Once again, nothing happened. Lee stood there, on the trap, immobile.

So once again, the noose was taken from around Lee's neck and everyone was ushered out of the room.

This time, the hangman tested the apparatus with the sandbag.

Everything worked perfectly.

And so Lee was brought back for a third time, together with all the officials. Once again, the noose was put around John Lee's neck and the hangman pulled the lever.

And for the third time the trapdoor failed to open.

It was at this point that the medical officer walked out and the condemned man was sent back to his cell while the Governor used the new-fangled telephone to communicate with the Home Office. The Home Secretary decreed that Lee should be reprieved but kept in prison. And so Lee was put into a uniform with broad arrows on it and eventually sent to Dartmoor.

The subsequent investigation showed that the trap worked perfectly well when there were no spectators gathered around but that when the Governor, the doctor, the chaplain, members of the press and various other dignitaries crowded onto the platform, the floor expanded and prevented the trapdoor from opening.

Naturally, Lee insisted that he was an innocent man. He repeatedly petitioned successive Home Secretaries, demanding that he be released and eventually, after 21 years, he was released. Physically and mentally he showed signs of his experience. After his release, Lee went to London where he worked in a pub – promoted as 'the man they couldn't hang'. For a while, Lee made a living out of his notoriety (giving talks and even appearing in a silent film) but eventually he married a nurse and made his way to the United States where, apparently tiring of the notoriety, he lived quietly. He died in 1945 at the age of 80 and is believed to be buried in Forest Home Cemetery in Milwaukee.

The only other man to have survived three hanging attempts was called Joseph Samuel. He was English but was transported to Australia in 1801 for robbery. A couple of years later Samuel was convicted of murdering a policeman (a crime he denied) and, like Lee, he was sentenced to be hung. In Australia, they used a slightly different method for hanging. Nooses were fastened around the prisoners' necks and tied to a gallows while the prisoners stood on a cart. The cart was then driven away and the prisoners were left hanging and slowly strangling. (The English method was designed to be quicker; to produce a sudden drop which broke the neck.)

On the first attempt, the rope (made of five cords of hemp and designed to hold 1,000 lbs without breaking) snapped and Samuel fell and sprained his ankle. On the second attempt, the noose slipped off Samuel's neck. The third attempt was equally unsuccessful since as the cart was driven away the rope snapped and Samuel again fell to the ground.

An angry and boisterous crowd called for Samuel to be let go. The governor, when called to the scene, decided that God had intervened and commuted Samuel's sentence to life imprisonment. The local doctor looked after Samuel's sprained ankle, which was all he had to show for three hanging attempts. Samuel survived only another three years.

The Author
Vernon Coleman is an author and doctor. His novels include: *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War*, *Mrs Caldicot's Knickerbocker Glory*, *Mrs Caldicot's Easter Parade*, *Mr Henry Mulligan*', *The Truth Kills*, *Second Chance*, *Paris in my Springtime*, *It's Never Too Late*, *The Hotel Doctor*, *My Secret Years with Elvis* and many others. All of these books are available as ebooks on Amazon. All the books in 'The Young Country Doctor' series are available as ebooks on Amazon.

Before you go…
Thank you for your company. Sorry to go on about it, and apologies if you already have done so, but if you have enjoyed this volume in The Young Country Doctor series, I really would be very grateful if you would spare a moment to write a short review.
Thank you
Vernon Coleman

The Young Country Doctor Book 15

BILBURY MEMORIES

VERNON COLEMAN

The Young Country Doctor no 15

Bilbury Memories

Vernon Coleman

Another collection of memories from the English village of Bilbury.

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Note
As usual, the names and details of individuals, animals and establishments, except the Duck and Puddle and Peter Marshall's shop, have been altered to protect the innocent, the guilty and those who aren't quite sure where they stand but would like to think about it for a while before committing themselves (or being committed).

The Author

Vernon Coleman qualified as a doctor and practised as a GP. He is a *Sunday Times* bestselling author who has written over 100 books which have been translated into 25 languages and sold in over 50 countries. His books have sold over two million copies in the UK alone though no one is sure whether two million people each bought one book or one person has a very large bookcase. Vernon Coleman is also a qualified doctor. He and his wife (whose real name is Antoinette) live in Bilbury, Devon, England. Vernon is an accomplished bar billiards player (three times runner up in the Duck and Puddle Christmas competition), a keen but surprisingly dangerous skittles player and an accomplished maker of paper aeroplanes. He once had a certificate proving that he once swam a mile for charity and this may well still be in that box in the attic that contains all those bits of old rubbish which ought to be thrown away but which have managed to hang around until the next spring clean. He was, at some point in the early 1960s, second in the Walsall Boys Golf Championship and was awarded with three brand new golf balls which were wrapped in cellophane and presented in a smart, cardboard box. He claims to be one of the best stone skimmers in North Devon. (Nine bounces are by no means unheard of and he has a personal best of 12 bounces.) He is a long-term member of the Desperate Dan Pie-Eater's Club (vegetarian section) and although he can juggle three balls at once he cannot knit. He can fly a two string kite without mixing up the strings but cannot stand on one leg without toppling over. He can ride a bicycle without holding the handlebars but cannot write a note of music or hum the simplest tune. He has never jumped out of an aeroplane (with or without a parachute) but he has, on several occasions, lit bonfires in the rain and is particularly proud of the fact that he once managed to light one in a snowstorm. He has not yet availed himself of the extensive opportunities apparently offered by social media (he says he is waiting to see if the idea catches on) but notices about important events are pinned on the noticeboard outside Peter Marshall's shop in the village and he has had a website (www.vernoncoleman.com) since the day after King Alfred burnt the cakes. Entrance to the website is free of charge and there is ample parking space. Visitors to the site are requested to wash their hands before entering and to wipe their feet before leaving. Sadly, there are no advertisements or refreshment facilities. The Author is registered as an Ancient Monument and selected parts of him are Grade II listed.

Vernon Coleman's novels include: *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War*, *Mrs Caldicot's Knickerbocker Glory*, *Mrs Caldicot's Easter Parade* and *Mrs Caldicot's Turkish Delight*. All these books are, oddly enough, about a character called Mrs Caldicot. Other novels, which are not about Mrs Caldicot, include: *Mr Henry Mulligan*, *The Truth Kills*, *Second Chance*, *Paris in my Springtime*, *It's Never Too Late*, *The Hotel Doctor*, *My Secret Years with Elvis* and many others. He is also the author of three books under the pen name 'Edward Vernon'. All of these books are available as e-books on Amazon as are the 14 other volumes in 'The Young Country Doctor' series. There is a fairly full list of other books available as eBooks on Vernon Coleman's biography page on Amazon.

The Young Country Doctor series

This is the 15th book in the series and so, if the author has done his sums right, there are probably around fourteen other books describing the Devon village of Bilbury and its inhabitants. All the books in the series are available as e-books on Amazon. A few hardback editions of the first seven books were self-published in modest runs but these are all now out of print. The first few books are sequential but after about the third book you can read them in any order you like without getting into too much of a tangle. Bilbury and its residents are, of course, still firmly and comfortably ensconced in the 1970s and will doubtless remain there indefinitely.

Dedication

To Antoinette: You are the point of everything and everything else is merely decoration. Every minute I spend with you is worth a lifetime. Every minute I am away from you lasts a lifetime.

Another Note

Bilbury books now contain a number of ‘bits at the back’ – in which I have provided a little more background to some of the memories in the book. I have described these extra pieces as appendices since that seems suitably medical.

Foreword

Welcome to Bilbury!

Whether you are a resident, a regular visitor or someone wandering into the village for the first time I bid you welcome and thank you for sharing my life and my memories.

Kind readers sometimes ask if the Bilbury stories are real. It’s a fair and reasonable question and one which I have asked myself more than once.

There is one thing we can agree on: there is no village with the name of Bilbury. No real village with that name exists. We know this because if we look up ‘Bilbury’ in a Gazetteer or a map of Devon, we won’t find it. We will end up in a place called Bibury, which is in Gloucestershire and has nothing to do with Bilbury, or we will end up with a reference to one of the Bilbury books which means that we have ended up back where we started and are absolutely no further forward.

So, that much we know: the name ‘Bilbury’ is fake.

I admit it: I made it up.

But that doesn’t mean that the village doesn’t exist. It just means that if it does exist then it must be called something else.

And you have to make your own mind up about just how true the memories are and, indeed, whether I exist or am a figment of my own imagination.

My only hope is that you will enjoy reading these memories. After all, that’s what really matters. Isn’t it?

Vernon Coleman, Bilbury,
Autumn 2018

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The Bucket Lists

It is widely believed that the idea of making a list of things to do before you die is something new. It is known colloquially as preparing a ‘bucket list’ (as in making a list of things to do before you ‘kick the bucket’).

The idea isn’t new.

Not many notions in life are brand new – and this one certainly isn’t.

I have a suspicion that if I spent a few days studying the Greek classics I would probably find evidence that the Greeks were aware of the idea. And I daresay that some 16th century gentleman had a little bucket list of his own tucked away safely inside his doublet or stuffed unceremoniously down his hose.

But in modern times the idea was first introduced into the public domain by a man called Sir Hilary Blood.

Sir Hilary was a former British diplomat who was, at various times in the 1940s and 1950s, Governor of the Gambia, Governor of Barbados and Governor of Mauritius. He did a lot of governing. And, of all the odd places where the notion of making a ‘list of things to do before you die’ might have been published, it was in the 1956-57 Winter Annual of a sports magazine called *The Cricketer* that Sir Hilary originally aired his thoughts on what we now call a ‘bucket list’.

‘I keep a list of things to be done before I die,’ wrote Sir Hilary with the unaffected simplicity common among that small group of mid-20th century English gentlemen who managed to keep a straight face while wearing hats with ostrich plumes in them and who were happy governing foreign people in foreign parts.

He may not, of course, have been the first to have the idea.

But, in relatively modern times at least, Sir Hilary appears to have been the first person to put the idea down on paper. So, in my book, he should get the credit.

Everyone’s idea of what to put on their list will vary, of course. And to a large extent the contents of each individual’s list will depend upon their age, their health, their wealth and their life expectation.

A young, fit, well-off individual may have ‘climb Everest’, ‘ski down a black run’, ‘drive a car at 150 mph’, ‘take a boat trip up the Amazon’, ‘run a mile in under six minutes’ and all sorts of other active and expensive activities on their list.

Someone older and very slightly less well-off might be happy with a desire to feed the pigeons at St Mark’s Square in Venice, take a boat ride on Loch Ness and have dinner at Maxim’s restaurant in Paris.

Someone with severely limited financial resources might be happy with hoping for a bag of chips a bottle of beer and a copy of the evening paper.

And even quite elderly individuals may still harbour hopes; albeit perhaps less dramatic aspirations than those nursed by those who are still young in body as well as in spirit.

For example, I still remember the surprise Mr Thomas Pidgeon gave me just after his 90th birthday.

Mr Pidgeon was an extremely likeable old man, utterly honest and as straight as a die: an old-fashioned gentleman in the real sense of the word. He wasn’t a rich man but I had long ago learned that you don’t have to have a big house and a lot of money in the bank to be a gentleman. His eyebrows went sharply upwards as they approached the centre of his forehead, with the result that he looked constantly startled, not unpleasantly so, but just startled; as though he had just seen or heard something rather surprising.

‘I have had a comfortable life,’ he had told me when we first met. ‘I always found life too easy so I never tried hard enough. And so now I don’t suppose I can complain about never having achieved anything very much. I’ve always been too careful; I’ve always been too well behaved. The funny thing is that although I never worried much when I was young, I now worry more than I ever did. I worry about everything, because I know how easily and frequently things can go wrong. If I have to go somewhere I worry whether the taxi will arrive and if the train will be cancelled.’

I remember he shrugged resignedly at this and added: ‘So I solved those particular fears by staying at home. These days I don’t go anywhere.’

Like most of the people I talked to who were in their 90s or over, Mr Pidgeon had a recipe for his longevity.

Mr Pidgeon’s explanation (and implicitly his recommendation) was that he ate a pickled egg every day for his breakfast and a pickled onion before he went to bed.

These days, only individuals who are 100 or over are asked for the secret of their long life but back in the 1970s it was generally considered that anyone aged 90 or over had definitely ventured out of middle age and was entitled to be regarded as ‘mature’.

I used to write down some of my favourite explanations for having reached a ripe old age. Here are a few:

a) ‘I owe my longevity to smoking. I have been smoking a pipe since I was 21. I find that it settles my nerves.’

b) 'I wouldn't have lived this long without drinking a glass of whisky every day. Whisky kills germs and bad cells.' (I think that by this he meant that it killed cancerous cells. For all I or anyone else knows he could be right.)

c) 'I never drink water.' The old man who offered this piece of advice told me that when Humphrey Bogart and John Huston were making 'The African Queen', most of the crew fell victim to water born infections. Katherine Hepburn was very ill for much of the film-making. However, Humphrey Bogart and John Huston stuck to whisky and avoided the water. Both remained healthy throughout the duration of the shoot on location.

d) 'I have never touched fruit or vegetables.' The elderly lady who told me this insisted that in her opinion both fruit and vegetables were full of poison.

e) 'I have never exercised. Exercise wears out the body.'

f) 'I ate a lot of fat, suet and dripping.' The 97-year-old woman who told me this claimed that plenty of fat would keep out the cold and help fight off infection. Surprisingly, she wasn't at all overweight and at the time her heart was in tip top condition. She died a year short of her 100th birthday. She fell, broke a hip and was taken to hospital in Barnstaple. Unfortunately, she caught a nasty bug in the hospital and never came out.

I'm not sure that I believed any of those recipes for a long life. I've always rather believed that for most of us our longevity (or otherwise) is a result of a mixture of genes and luck.

'I'm sorry to have called you out,' said Mr Pidgeon, when I arrived at his cottage one Monday morning. 'But I've been thinking about things over the weekend and I've decided that I probably haven't got all that long to go, doctor.'

Mr Pidgeon lived in a small two up and two down cottage but because of his joints he never went upstairs. His bed had been moved into the living room downstairs. Everything in the room was old-fashioned. There was a hand-made antimacassar on the back of a faded and lumpy sofa and two more on the matching easy chairs. Two black and white china dogs sat on the mantelpiece and a rather dusty aspidistra plant stood in a large pot in the corner of the room. A lovely little china cat and an old-fashioned, wooden clock with a loud tick sat between the two dogs. The cat, which had green eyes and a lovely smile, had the words 'A Present from Padstow' inscribed in red around the base. There were three old Victorian framed prints on the walls. Two showed women collecting flowers in a sunlit field. The third, which hung over the fireplace on an iron chain, was a religious scene. There was no bathroom upstairs and when Mr Pidgeon washed and cleaned his teeth (possibly not daily activities), he did so in the kitchen sink. His only lavatory was outside, a few yards from the backdoor. At night he used a chamber pot, which he, like many of his generation, called a 'gusunder' – because it went under the bed when it wasn't actually in use.

'Oh, I'm sure you've got a good few years ahead of you,' I assured him.

He looked at me rather sceptically. 'I've never understood why,' he carried on, 'but they say that you should put your affairs in order when you get to my age.'

'Oh, you've got a long time to go yet,' I told him cheerily. 'But if you've sorted things out then it'll doubtless put your mind at rest. Made your will and burnt any documents tying you into the Great Train Robbery – that sort of thing.'

He looked at me, not entirely sure whether or not I was joking, and picked a piece of paper off the small table beside him. He hesitated for a moment and then handed it to me. It was folded in two. I didn't open it but looked at it, slightly puzzled.

'That's it,' he said. 'My affairs. All in order. You can look if you like. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do with it. It didn't seem right to leave it for my sons to find.'

I opened the piece of paper. It contained the following list of names:

Norbert
Josceline
Cynthia
Kay
Unknown but had dark hair
Sylvia
Sybil
Hilda
Daphne
Evelyn
Melba

'It's just a list of names,' I pointed out, quite unnecessarily.

'It's a list of all my affairs,' he explained. 'I married Sylvia and Melba. I wasn't sure whether or not I should put them down but I included them for completeness.'

I looked at the list, wondering what on earth I was supposed to do with it.

'I tried to put them in order,' said Mr Pidgeon. 'But I'm not sure about Hilda and Daphne.' He thought for a while. ‘I think there was an overlap,’ he confessed.

‘And Norbert?’

‘I was at public school. I wasn’t sure whether or not to put him down. But I thought the list ought to be complete.’

‘Ah.’

‘I can’t remember the name of the one between Kay and Sylvia. Do you think it matters? I’ve put her down as ‘unknown’.’

‘I’m sure it doesn’t matter at all,’ I said, reassuringly.

‘So, what do I do with it now? The list, I mean. I can’t leave it for my sons to find. Julian would be shocked and Geoffrey would probably find it terribly disappointing.’

I looked at him. I didn’t know his sons well enough to know why they would feel the way Mr Pidgeon expected them to feel.

‘Julian is a vicar up in Lancashire,’ he explained, before I could ask. ‘He’s very straight laced and rather uptight. When he was little he always wanted to keep his trousers on when he had a bath. I doubt if he’s changed much. And Geoffrey is quite a different kettle of fish; he’s a bit of ladies’ man. He’s been married four times.’ He paused, thinking. ‘He’s been divorced four times too.’

‘Aha,’ I said, understanding. I refolded the piece of paper and put it back on the little table beside his elbow. The table also contained a whisky decanter, an empty tumbler and a nicely bound hardback copy of Plutarch’s *Greek Lives* with what looked like a shopping list being used as a bookmark. ‘I think maybe the best thing you can do with it is to burn it.’

‘Do you think so?’

‘Oh, I do.’

He thought about it for a while. ‘Probably for the best,’ he agreed, screwing up the list and tossing it in the general direction of the fire burning in the hearth.

‘Close,’ I said.

I picked the ball of paper off the carpet and threw it into the fire.

‘Still,’ he said with a fond sigh, ‘it was fun writing it out. It brought back some happy memories. That Cynthia was quite a girl. Well, she was more of a woman, really. I was only just out of my teens and she had a daughter older than me. Funny thing was I never fancied the daughter.’ He closed his eyes for a moment. ‘It was fun remembering it all; all except for that Norbert.’ He paused for a while. ‘I don’t know why I put him on the list.’

I smiled at him but didn’t say anything. I was already opening my bag to take out the portable sphygmomanometer I keep in there.

‘Still, it’s kept me busy and out of mischief for a week,’ said Mr Pidgeon. ‘It was the last thing I needed to do; the last item on my list.’

‘Your list?’

‘Things to do.’

‘You’ve done everything?’

‘Everything I can do,’ he said. ‘I don’t think it’s realistic for me to go swimming with sharks or taking up pole vaulting, do you?’

‘Probably wise to leave those for the time being,’ I agreed. ‘Maybe in another lifetime.’

‘So that’s pretty well it,’ said Mr Pidgeon with a deep sigh.

He sounded tired and rather sad and this worried me.

We all need ambitions, hopes, and items on our personal list of things to do. Too often I have known people give up and die just because they no longer have anything to live for.

‘There must be things you still want to do!’ I said.

‘The problem is that I can’t get out much,’ he pointed out. ‘Even with your pills my damned heart is only working on two cylinders and my joints are so damned rusty that my sweat is brown these days.’

I looked at him, puzzled. ‘Your sweat is brown?’

‘It’s the rust,’ he said. ‘I must be rusty inside. The rust must be coming out of my body.’

I was so puzzled by this that I asked him to show me. With some difficulty he pulled up his shirt and showed me his vest. It was one of those thick, woollen ones with half sleeves. And, rather to my surprise, he was absolutely correct. A garment which had pretty obviously been white when purchased now had rusty, orange marks on it. Mr Pidgeon did indeed seem to be sweating rust.

‘Have you ever seen anything like that?’

I had to admit that I hadn’t.

‘It’s rust, isn’t it?’

‘It looks like it,’ I had to admit.

I really hadn't heard or seen anything like it. It really did look as though there were rust particles in his sweat and it wasn't difficult to see why he thought he was going rusty. If I hadn't known that it was quite impossible I'd have honestly thought he was going rusty.'

'Let me look into it,' I told him. 'I'll see if I can find out what's happening.'

'It's just rust,' said Mr Pidgeon, wearily.

'Let me find out for you.'

I took his blood pressure, checked his heart, examined his ankles and gave him two bottles of pills that I'd brought with me. I was still enjoying the fact that I was allowed to prescribe for my own patients. If I hadn't been able to take Mr Pidgeon his pills, but had had to give him a prescription he would have either had to make his way to the nearest pharmacy (at least five miles away) or try to find someone to make the journey for him.

'Carry on as before, doctor?'

'Exactly as before,' I agreed. 'I'll find out what I can about those rust stains. And I'll pop back as soon as I can find out what it is.'

'It's just rust,' said Mr Pidgeon, glumly. 'At my age it's just another one of those things. I think I'm getting pretty close to my final sell-by date.'

His general air of gloom alarmed me. Too often I'd seen patients go into a rapid decline when they lost any reason for living. We all need something to excite and inspire us.

'What hobbies did you have when you were younger?' I asked him, hoping that I could find something that might trigger a little enthusiasm.

He thought for a moment. 'Nothing much,' he admitted. 'When I was young I played a little football in the winter and some tennis in the summer. And when I got into my sixties I took up bowls. I can't even manage that now.'

'No more sedentary activities? No indoor hobbies?'

'Well, there was that Cynthia,' said Mr Pidgeon. 'I suppose you could call her an indoor hobby – though we did sometimes have a little fun al fresco.' He winked. 'She lived near to a piece of woodland and occasionally we took a rug into the woods.'

I laughed. 'Nothing else? Chess? Bridge? Stamp collecting? Collecting coins? Shells? Old bottles? Bus tickets? Puppets? Postcards? Musical boxes?'

Back in the 1970s, a surprisingly large number of people in Bilbury were keen collectors and I used to learn a great deal from talking to them. Collecting is often surprisingly educational. Moreover, you can be a keen collector without having a deep pocket. I had patients who used to go round all the local auctions picking up treasured items for little more than pennies. In those days it was fairly easy to pick up a box of assorted curios, mixed jewellery or unwanted old books for £1, 50 pence or even 25 pence. Auctioneers would often knock down miscellaneous items for next to nothing just so that they didn't have to arrange for the stuff to be taken into storage.

The fact is that an enthusiasm for collecting things is ingrained within us and long established; men and women were collecting before they started farming and were acquisitive long before they could really spare the time or the energy.

It is no exaggeration to say that collecting stuff was the original preoccupation of the hunter-gatherer; it is a hobby that dates back further than painting on the sides of caves. And as soon as men started to build temples they filled them with the treasures they had acquired.

And, as I have already said, I learned an enormous amount of stuff from patients who collected things. Doctors working in towns and cities rarely have time to sit and listen to their patients. One of the joys of having a rural practice in the 1970s was that I did have the time to listen. I earned a fraction of the salary a city doctor could earn but I always thought I enjoyed my work more and got to know my patients better.

So, for example, it was a patient of mine who collected old pennies who told me that pennies had been first introduced as English currency back in 755, and that pennies were always made of silver except in 1257 when henry III experimented with a solid gold penny. When the price of gold rose most of the solid gold pennies were melted down and it was, apparently, widely believed that only eight examples had survived. My patient had spent much of his life searching for a ninth example of one of these solid gold pennies. He knew darned well that his search would almost certainly be unsuccessful. But he also knew that there was a chance, a small but real chance, that he might be the lucky individual who found the ninth example of Henry III's gold pennies!

Another patient, a retired banker, had a collection of penny black stamps which he had built up over his lifetime. The penny black was, of course, the very first stamp in the world and my patient took great delight in showing me just how many different versions of the stamp there were, and how the different printings could be identified. My patient even had a sheet of unused penny blacks. In those early days, stamps were printed in sheets without perforations and when a customer wanted to buy a stamp, it had to be cut out of the sheet with a pair of scissors. There was no gum on the back of the stamps so the stamp had to be glued onto the letter. (Envelopes weren't used –

the letter was folded and sealed with wax before the stamp was stuck on.)

I had one patient who collected plum and cherry stones which had been carved by a 17th century craftsman called Philippe Santa Croce.

And another patient, an elderly lady whose brother had been a cabinet minister, who had a fine collection of rare knives – including one made in 1606 which was a mere two and a half inches long but which had hidden within it 13 incredibly tiny drawers. Inside those tiny drawers were even tinier rolls of parchment upon which the Psalms were inscribed in 21 languages. You really can't get much more esoteric than that.

I learned that people who collect cheese labels are called tyrosemiophils and those who collect cigar labels are known as vitophilists. I even knew a man who collected old tractors. He was terribly proud that his collection included a tractor called a 1903 Ivel, built by an Englishman called Daniel Albone.

It seemed to me that almost everyone in Bilbury had at least one hobby. There certainly weren't many individuals in Bilbury whose lives revolved around the television. (This was largely because there was too much else to do, partly because so much absolutely needed to be done and partly because television reception in North Devon was worse than appalling. On windy or stormy nights our television at Bilbury Grange showed nothing but a lot of white lines and produced nothing but hiss and crackle).

Things were different, I knew, in other parts of the country. My friend William, who was a partner in a large medical practice, told me that there were tower blocks in his part of the West Midlands where there were, every day, hundreds of people sitting, usually alone, staring at television screens. William and I studied together as medical students and he was a GP in a town where he worked in a large, modern practice. Many parents, he told me, used the television set as a sort of electronic babysitter and patients who were sedentary through ill health used to spend their days watching the goggle box in the corner of the room.

Mr Pidgeon thought about my question for a while and then shook his head. 'No, I didn't really have any hobbies or play any indoor games. Mind you, I used to play pontoon when I was in the army during the War. But I was no damned good at it. I was always the sap who lost his money. I was never a lucky fellow. If I'd won the lottery I'd have lost the damned ticket.'

He thought for a little longer.

'I collected cigarette cards,' he said a few moments later. 'I used to have a pretty good collection.'

'I used to collect cigarette cards!' I told him. 'An uncle used to smoke quite heavily and he always gave me the cards in the packs he bought.'

When I was a boy I'd been fascinated by cigarette cards. Towards the end of the 19th century tobacco companies began putting small, collectible cards into packets of cigarettes. The cards were usually made of cardboard but sometimes made of silk. One side of the card would usually have a picture and on the other side there would be information about whatever was pictured. So, for example, if a card had a picture of a film star on one side then on the other side there would be biographical details of that same star.

Some series of cigarette cards provided practical information and advice. So, there were series of cards on gardening and on first aid.

Cigarette cards were a promotional gimmick, produced to create brand loyalty and they were incredibly popular in the early decades of the 20th century. The cards were always part of a set of 25 or 50 cards and the tobacco company hoped that smokers would stick with one brand if they were collecting a particular type of card.

I remembered that my uncle would sometimes smoke cigarettes made by a company called Players and sometimes smoke a brand manufactured by W.D & H.O.Wills. He would switch brands if he wanted to collect a particular type of card.

As it slowly became increasingly clear that cigarette smoking was a major cause of serious illnesses such as cancer and heart disease and clever marketing programmes became unfashionable, so the manufacturers stopped putting cards into their packets of cigarettes. I suppose the companies might have also stopped putting in the cards as collecting began to lose its appeal. New generations were more likely to be interested in pop groups and television programmes than in details of 25 different types of crustacean or 50 different facts about railway equipment.

'What happened to your card collection?' I asked Mr Pidgeon.

I was desperately keen to find something to provide his life with some purpose and meaning.

'I've no idea,' admitted Mr Pidgeon.

'Did you give them away?'

'No, I wouldn't have done that.'

'Did Melba throw them out?' Melba Pidgeon had been his second wife. She had died of cancer about eight or nine years earlier.

'Oh, no, no, she wouldn't have done that. They're probably upstairs somewhere.'

'Do you want me to take a look?'

Mr Pidgeon thought for a moment. ‘Do you know, doctor, I wouldn’t mind if you did. I seem to remember I had a pretty good collection.’

I found his cigarette collection in an old, green suitcase that had heavy leather corner protectors. It looked like one of the suitcases that were issued to service personnel during the Second World War. Inside the case there were dozens of albums and a tin box full of loose cards. With some difficulty I managed to carry the suitcase downstairs. I placed it on the floor beside him and opened it.

‘Ye gods!’ said Mr Pidgeon, astonished. ‘Quite a collection! Pass me that tin box, would you, doctor?’

I lifted the tin box out of the suitcase and handed it to him. He put it on his lap and opened it. ‘I never got round to sorting these!’ he said. ‘I should do that.’

Before I left I helped him move from his chair to the table and I put the contents of the suitcase on the table.

‘This is going to take me forever!’ he said. ‘I need to sort these out.’ He rummaged around and then looked up at me. ‘I remember now, I’d started a collection of cards about English customs and traditions. I’d really like to finish what I’d started.’

‘Can you still find old cigarette cards?’ I asked.

‘Oh yes! They come up at auction quite often. I can ask Patchy Fogg to look out for cards for me. And there are still a couple of shops in London selling cigarette cards – they used to send out catalogues. I’ll have to find out if they still do. And there’s a magazine for cigarette card collectors. I’ll have to subscribe to that again.’ Patchy Fogg, one of my closest friends and an antique dealer, will always look out for specific items if requested to do so by villagers. Sometimes he charges a small commission but more often than not he doesn’t even accept payment for the item he’s bought on their behalf.

‘It sounds as if you’re going to be busy!’

‘Oh yes!’ he agreed.

When I said ‘goodbye’ he was so preoccupied with the cigarette cards that he hardly lifted his head.

‘Have you ever come across a patient who produces orange sweat?’ I asked my friend William that evening. Because his medical practice was fairly close to the medical school where we both trained, he occasionally went to meetings where he met medical researchers, and sometimes he heard of new discoveries and theories which hadn’t been described in the medical journals.

‘Maybe he’s going rusty?’ suggested William immediately.

‘Too late,’ I said. ‘The patient got there before you with that theory.’

William apologised. ‘Seriously, I’ve never heard of anything like that.’

I explained exactly what I’d seen. ‘The only thing I could think of is that one of the drugs he’s taking could be affecting the colour of his secretions.’

‘I suppose that’s possible,’ agreed William. ‘I’ll have a word with Atholl if you like.’

I said that would be great and asked him to let me know if he came up with any useful information or ideas.

Atholl, an Australian, had trained as an anaesthetist but now worked as a General Practitioner in the practice where William was a partner. More importantly as far as my query was concerned, Atholl’s brother, whose name was Dennis, worked as a research biochemist specialising in drug side effects.

In medicine, as in so many other areas of life, finding the answers isn’t just a question of knowing what questions to ask, it is also often a question of knowing the right people to whom to put the questions. I gave William the names of the prescription drugs that Mr Pidgeon was taking.

I’d rather expected it to take a few days before I heard anything but I heard back from Will less than 24 hours after we had spoken.

‘It’s called chromhidrosis,’ said Will, the moment I picked up the receiver.

‘Chromwhat?’

‘Chromhidrosis,’ repeated Will. ‘Coloured sweat. Hidrosis is Greek for sweating.’

‘And chrom is the Greek word for colour?’

‘Absolutely. Well, I think the word is chroma, but chrom is the root which is used when making up new words.’

‘OK, well I’m pleased it’s got a name but did Dennis have an explanation for my patient’s rusty sweat?’

‘He certainly did. It’s caused by those damned pills his mad doctor prescribed for him.’ Will laughed.

‘Which one?’

‘You!’

‘No, which drug?’

Will told me.

‘I’ve never known anything like this happen before,’ I said. ‘There’s no mention of it in the drug company’s information sheet.’

‘I know there isn’t,’ said Will. ‘And I’ve prescribed the same drug hundreds of times without seeing anything like this.' He paused. 'Of course, I suppose it's possible that patients who had rust coloured sweat just didn't mention it. Or maybe they didn't notice it.'

'Did Dennis say how common it is?'

'He said it's rare. And if he says something is rare then it really is rare. In some patients it's apparently caused by a substance called lipofuscin being deposited in the sweat glands but whether that's what happened with your patient is a bit of a mystery. Dennis says he's heard of people producing both red and blue sweat. He said he did hear of a woman in America who produced pink sweat.'

'Had he come across rust coloured sweat before?'

'No, he was quite excited about that. He wondered if you could send him some samples of the sweat and maybe a photo or two. I think he's planning to do a short paper for some obscure medical journal and he's collecting pictures of different coloured sweats.'

I promised that I'd send off what Dennis needed. 'Is it dangerous? Do I need to do anything other than switch the patient's pills? These control his condition very well but I could find something else to give him.'

'Dennis says there is no danger and that if your patient doesn't mind producing coloured sweat there is no need to stop the drug he's taking. There's no treatment other than stopping the drug. All he knows is that it's caused by the drug, it's not a life-threatening condition and it's very rare.'

As soon as I'd finished talking to William, I hurried off round to Mr Pidgeon's home to give him what I thought was good news.

When I got there he was sitting at his dining table, which was covered with piles of cigarette cards. Some of the cards were in albums, some were stacked together in little piles, fastened with rubber bands, and some were loose, spread around and clearly being sorted into categories.

'So I'm not rusty inside?' said Mr Pidgeon. I didn't really get the impression that he was bothered much either way.

'No, you're not. It's just a side effect of one of the drugs you're taking.' I handed him a new bottle of pills. 'I'm going to change your medication and you should stop producing rust coloured sweat in a few days.'

I then retrieved the bottle of pills that had caused the problem and, with Mr Pidgeon's permission took some samples and photographs of his sweat and sweat stained clothes. I popped the bottle of pills, the samples and my camera back into my black medical bag.

'Am I going to be famous?' he asked me, when I explained what the photographs were for.

'I'm afraid not; not really,' I said. 'You won't be identified and the photos will appear in some very obscure journal with no more than a few hundred readers.'

'Oh,' said Mr Pidgeon. For a brief moment he sounded disappointed.

'How are you getting on with all those?' I asked, nodding towards the pile of cigarette cards on the table.

Mr Pidgeon's face lit up. 'I can't believe how much stuff there is here!' he said, proudly.

He showed me sets of cards showing radio stars, film stars and music hall stars, reminding me just how transient fame can be. 'Some of these people are forgotten now,' he said, 'but they were huge stars just a few decades ago. Gracie Fields was the best paid film star in the world in the 1930s, and probably one of the most famous women on the planet, but how many people have heard of her today? Have you heard of Fred Archer, Tom Sayers or Dan Leno?'

I had to confess that I knew the names but couldn't remember what they did or what they were famous for.

'Fred Archer was an English flat race jockey. For a long time he was described as the best jockey the world had ever known. Tom Sayers was a very successful bare knuckle prize fighter. Dan Leno was a music hall comedian and a huge star.' Mr Pidgeon held up a card showing a portrait of Dan Leno. 'And in America, there were Clara Bow, Louise Brooks and Lillian Gish – three of the greatest movie stars of the 1920s. But now they're almost forgotten!'

Mr Pidgeon showed me a set of cards showing the English counties and the industries for which they were famous; cards illustrating and describing famous escapes, paintings, ties and ships' figureheads; a set of cards showing different birds' beaks; a complete collection of cards showing photographs of English seaside resorts; a set describing popular superstitions; a small pile of cards with pictures and biographical details of American baseball players, and sets illustrating traditional London cries and unusual jobs. I picked up one of these latter cards and was astonished to see that before alarm clocks became popularly available, there were women in the capital whose job it was to go around the streets waking up their customers. According to the card I had picked up, one woman used a peashooter and a pocket full of dried peas and used to shoot peas at the windows of her regulars until they opened the window to let her know that they were awake and that she could move on to her next customer.

'These are amazing!' said Mr Pidgeon, his eyes wide open with delight. 'I've got a couple of thousand that need sorting into categories. And then I'm going to try to complete my collection of English customs and traditions. This is going to keep me busy for years!'

I was delighted to see that his old hobby had rejuvenated him.

'I found an old, out-of-date catalogue in with the cards,' he said. 'So I've written off to the company asking them to send me a copy of their latest catalogue.' He picked an envelope up off the table. 'Would you post this for me, please, doctor? I'll give you the money for the stamp.'

I happily took the envelope from him, grinned and told him that I had a supply of stamps at Bilbury Grange.

It was good to see that Mr Pidgeon had been revitalised by rediscovering his old, long-forgotten hobby. He didn't actually say 'I've got a reason to live now' but it wasn't difficult to see that was how he felt. Like Sir Hilary Blood, Mr Pidgeon now had something real on his 'list of things to do before I die'.

This age-old phenomenon was something which I often noticed among my patients.

In particular, I can remember Jack Rutherford and Maisie Peters.

The two weren't related and the only thing they had in common was that they both lived in Bilbury and were both patients of mine.

Both had slightly unusual ambitions on their lists and at first glance it seemed unlikely that they would ever succeed in achieving them. (Though that is not, and should never be, a reason for not having something on your 'to do' list.)

Mr Rutherford was quite young; he was in his late sixties at the time of which I am writing, and he was still quite sprightly. He was still active and played skittles and shove halfpenny at the Duck and Puddle. He had played table tennis for more years than most people could remember. He had been the North Devon champion six times in his lifetime. For most people this would have probably been enough but for Mr Rutherford it was merely frustratingly close to satisfying. His brother, Jeffrey, who had died a year or two earlier, had been the area's table tennis champion seven times and Mr Rutherford's ambition was to equal his brother's record. He didn't want to beat it, he merely wanted to equal it. He definitely didn't want to beat his brother's record; they had been very close. And when he'd equalled his brother's table tennis record, he wanted to win the skittles and shove halfpenny championships. He'd been pretty near to winning those on several occasions. But he would be able to play both those games well into his seventies while for the table tennis his time was running out.

The problem was that for the last two years Mr Rutherford had been beaten in the final by a young man from Combe Martin called Colin Tudgel. And as Mr Rutherford got older and slower, as the inevitabilities of age took their toll, so the much more agile Mr Tudgel gained in experience and got faster and increasingly adept. It really looked as though Mr Rutherford was never going to match his brother's record.

'I'd happily retire from table tennis and concentrate on skittles and darts,' said Mr Rutherford. 'If only I could just get that one more win to match Jeffrey.'

Mr Rutherford was the oldest member of a large family. He and his wife Elsie lived in a cottage in Bilbury which had the most beautiful and colourful small cottage garden. It was one of those traditional English cottage gardens which are so crammed with flowers that there is literally no room for weeds to grow.

When I first came to live in Bilbury, I assumed that the flowers in a cottage garden were there simply for their beauty but over the years I learned that the flowers were originally planted not so much for their beauty as for their usefulness.

Most of the popular flowers traditionally associated with a cottage garden were thought to have medicinal or culinary uses and though there is still no scientific evidence supporting many of the traditional beliefs, you'd have to be brave to bet against the popular plants having real value. After all, digitalis, still the most valued drug in the treatment of heart trouble, is derived from the foxglove plant.

Marigolds could be used to add colour to butter and cheese; the leaves and flowers of pansies and violas were regarded as rich in vitamins A and C and were used to flavour honey and garnish salads; cowslip flowers and roots were used to treat blocked noses and throats and for bronchitis, for headaches and muscle problems; mignonette was used both as a laxative and as a diuretic; the hollyhock plant was used for breathing problems and for digestive troubles and some claimed that applying the hollyhock directly to the skin could help heal inflammation; the oil from lavender was believed to be an antiseptic and an anti-inflammatory and was used in the treatment of pains and digestive problems; lily of the valley was used to treat strokes, heart irregularities and urinary tract infections and Sweet William was used as a relaxant. And of course, parsley, sage, rosemary, thyme and many other herbs were used both for cooking and for medicinal purposes.

In the days before medicine became something approaching a science, the cottage garden was far more than just pleasing to the eye; it was the householder's private pharmacy.

I wouldn't swap my modern pharmacy for these traditional remedies, and I wouldn't recommend any of these floral cures, but there is no doubt that for many years the cottage garden was more than just a treat for the eyes.

Although Mr and Mrs Rutherford lived in our village, their three children, two sons and one daughter, all lived in or around Barnstaple. The Rutherfords had a total of eight grandchildren, the oldest of whom was twenty and the youngest was still not at school.

The parents of the three youngest grandchildren had taken to giving their children names according to where they had been conceived.

'I think they got the idea off the television,' said Mrs Elsie Rutherford. 'I gather it's fashionable for celebrities to call their children after the place where their parents think they were conceived. So you get all these children called 'Paris', 'Rome', 'London', 'Brooklyn' and 'Dallas'.'

'I've heard of it happening,' I agreed. I confess that it had always seemed to me to be a pretty cruel thing to do. What child wants to be constantly reminded of their intimate origins?

'Well, it seems a bit daft to me when you've never been further south than South Molton, further north than Combe Martin, further east than Taunton and further west than Bideford!' said Mrs Rutherford. 'I've got one grandchild called Barbrook, one called Patchole and one unfortunate granddaughter who is going to have to go through life known as Tattiscombe – you can tell what she's going to be called when she starts school!' She laughed. 'George and Jenny seem to be keen on making love al fresco and we live in fear that they'll start a baby in Mattock's Down, West Burford or Little Witton.'

Fortunately, Mrs Rutherford's other two children had been more traditional in naming their offspring.

The oldest grandchild, a girl, was called Fiona and she was single. She worked as a waitress in a café in Ilfracombe and although I didn't know her, Mrs Rutherford had told me that she was very popular with the male customers. 'She's very well shaped,' said Mrs Rutherford, explaining this with a simple movement with her hands. 'And she's not shy. Her boss is very fond of her because she always dresses to please the customers.'

'Are the family coming to the North Devon table tennis final?' I asked Mrs Rutherford, when she came in for her monthly weighing. She had been slowly losing weight for two years and having lost four stone she was now down to 12 stone. The final was, as usual, being held in the skittle room at the Duck and Puddle. Because Bilbury had one of the finalists and because it was pretty well-known that Mr Rutherford was desperate to win, it was an event causing much interest in the village.

'Oh we'll all be there,' said Mrs Rutherford. 'Except for our Fiona – I don't think she'll be there. It's a bit embarrassing really because she's set her cap at that Colin Jones, the chap her grandfather will be playing in the final. She won't be there because she knows how much her Granddad wants to win. She's a bit torn you see.'

'I bet it would help her Granddad if she did turn up,' I said. 'Try to persuade her to be there – especially if she sits right at the front where she can be clearly seen.'

The table tennis tournament final was being held in the skittle alley, the only room at the Duck and Puddle that was big enough to hold a table tennis table together with fifty or sixty spectators, while ensuring that the players had room to move about freely. The spectators at the front sat down on chairs or wooden benches so that the spectators behind them could look over their shoulders and watch what was happening.

'You mean that if Fiona sat there making cow eyes at him she might distract that young Colin?'

'It did occur to me. Colin will have plenty of chances to win in the future – especially if your husband wins this one last tournament and retires.'

'I'll have a word with her,' said Mrs Rutherford, with a wink.

Things turned out even better than the two of us had dared hope.

Young Fiona Rutherford turned up in a low cut dress that was so short that it was only just on the legal side of decent. It occurred to me that I could have given her a pretty comprehensive medical examination without her removing it.

'I don't think I've ever seen a cleavage quite that deep,' said 'Harry' Stottle, the former Dr Pelham Ronald Eckersley of London, now known semi-officially as Gengolphus Stottle and informally known as Harry. Now employed as the barman at the Duck and Puddle, Harry who had constructed a close alliance with a young woman who earned her living taking off her clothes, was a man who considered himself something of an expert on such matters. 'If you yodelled into that cleavage you would have to wait a day and a half for the echo to bounce back.'

Fiona, who had been invited to the tournament ostensibly to give her grandfather support, was clearly so keen to attract the attention of Colin, the other finalist, that she smiled at him constantly. Whenever possible she picked up the ball and handed it back to him. This, inevitably, always seemed to entail a good deal of bending forwards and giggling.

It was really no surprise when Mr Rutherford won the tournament, received a seventh small trophy (to put into the bookcase with the other six) and duly retired.

Colin Jones, who had something of a reputation as a bad loser, was surprisingly good natured in defeat when Fiona generously agreed to allow him to take her to the cinema the following Friday. It was clear that Mr Jones's prize was not the sort that would fit into a bookcase.

'I don't know what was wrong with young Colin this evening,' said Mr Rutherford afterwards. 'He didn't seem to be playing as well as I've seen him play. He missed a lot of easy shots.' He sighed, accepting a complimentary pint of Old Restoration handed to him by Frank. 'Still, I'm not grumbling.' I don't think I'd ever seen him quite so happy. 'Now that I've got that out of the way I can concentrate on my darts and my skittles!'

There was no doubt that Mr Rutherford still had plenty to live for and that removing that last driving ambition had been good for him.

'That was an excellent idea of yours, doctor!' whispered Mrs Rutherford afterwards. 'I think everyone's going home happy tonight.' She took hold of my wrist and squeezed tightly. 'It means a lot to him,' she added in a voice that was trembling. I looked down at her. There were tears in her eyes. With her other hand she took a handkerchief out of her handbag and dabbed at her eyes. 'Silly me,' she said to no one in particular. 'What will you think of me?' I put my arm around her and hugged her. I had to make quite an effort to ensure that there were no tears in my eyes.

At 92-years-old (or, as she preferred to put it, 92 years young) Maisie Peters may have looked old, and she was certainly frail, but she still had a sharp mind, an excellent memory and a rather wicked sense of humour.

A bishop's daughter, and the widow of a clergyman who had looked after a rural parish in Cornwall, she had lived in Bilbury since the death of her husband around 15 years earlier.

When Mrs Peters spoke to me it was always in the manner I had previously associated with a certain Miss Hwfa (pronounced Hoofa) Dervish, a primary school teacher of some certain years, who had been given the responsibility of supervising a good part of my early education, and who had, I remembered, taken the responsibility exceedingly seriously. She always spoke as though I were guilty of some heinous crime. Mrs Peters reminded me of Miss Dervish, though there was an impishness about Mrs Peters that I was never aware of when Miss Dervish was talking. When not in her classroom, Miss Dervish had always worn a hat with, it appeared, more flowers than could be seen in any cemetery, even after a big funeral. I'm not sure how I knew but I instinctively felt that Mrs Peters would have never worn such a hat. She had far too well-developed a sense of humour to have worn anything quite so comical.

Decades before, Mrs Peters's father had been a famous climber. He was one of the few men to have climbed both the west face of the Eiger and the Matterhorn and Mont Blanc. I remember her once telling me that he had, 'of course, climbed the west face of the Eiger, since the north face had not been conquered until 1938'. I suspect that by 1938 her father's climbing days had long been over. Mrs Peters once told me that although her father had never injured himself while climbing, he had broken a leg while ascending a rather rickety set of wooden steps to a pulpit in Barnsley.

Mrs Peters and her late husband had lived in a vicarage provided by the church and when the Reverend Peters had, as she put it, 'headed upstairs to meet the Boss', she'd had to leave the vicarage.

She'd come to Bilbury more by accident than design.

She'd been on holiday in Lynmouth, just along the coast, when she had seen an advertisement for Spider's Web Cottage in the window of an estate agency in the neighbouring village of Lynton. The cottage had been in a village she'd never heard of – Bilbury.

I don't think I will ever forget the first time I met Mrs Peters.

She'd had a bad attack of influenza and was lying in bed, alternately coughing and sneezing. She had the beginnings of pneumonia and I had tried to persuade her to let me send her into the small cottage hospital we ran in Bilbury. (Our hospital, in the home of Dr Brownlow, my predecessor, was official known as the Brownlow Country Hotel in order to avoid a variety of unbearably strict regulations which would have required us to build up an impossibly expensive administrative structure, but it was run most efficiently by Dr Brownlow's former butler and a number of caring volunteers, many of whom were themselves well into their 80s.) But Mrs Peters was adamant that she wanted to stay at home.

'I'm sure your hospital is an excellent place,' she said, 'but I'll be far more comfortable here, thank you, doctor,' she said. 'And if I'm going to die then I want to die in my own bed, thank you very much. I've got all my books here, and my wireless.' She pointed to an overladen bookcase in her bedroom and to an old, wooden wireless set which was on a bedside table within easy reach. The back of the set had been lost and the valves were now quite visible. 'All the greats have been on that wireless,' she said with some pride. 'That old set has heard them all.' She looked at it admiringly. 'All the great comedians have been on it. I've listened to 'ITMA', 'The Goons', 'Hancock's Half Hour', 'Educating Archie' and 'The Navy Lark' on that set. And the great singers too – Gracie Fields, George Formby and Vera Lynn – they've all sung on that old wireless. And the wonderful concerts I've enjoyed! Goodness, I wonder how many of those Promenade concerts I've listened to over the years.'

And in the end I had, of course, given in and let her stay at home, in her own bed.

'You probably think I'm old,' she said, rather firmly. 'But when I reached 70 I decided that however many birthdays I had, old age would always be a good ten years older than me. So as far as I am concerned, I am now just firmly established in my middle years and although old age is always approaching, I will never quite reach it. You have to remember, young man, that ageing is the only available way to live a long life.'

She made me laugh a good deal.

'I have no time to grow old,' she once said. 'Shakespeare wrote about the elderly being sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste and sans everything but I am not sans anything.'

Tucked into the mirror in her bedroom she had a postcard upon which was written this quote from Cicero: 'It is not by muscle, speed or physical dexterity that great things are achieved, but by reflection, force of character and judgement; in these qualities old age is usually not poorer but richer.'

Later, when she was recovered from her chest infection, she told me that she remembered that in his later years her father's great joy had been reading the obituary page in *The Times* newspaper. 'He was constantly looking to see who had died and how old they were when they had gone. When he spotted that someone five years younger than him had died he was full of beans for the whole day; as though he had just won some sort of competition.' She added that her father also tried to keep up with the health of everyone he knew. "He won't last long,' he would say with relish. 'He can't have more than three months to last. I can beat that easily.'' She laughed uproariously when she told me all this.

When she was ill I promised that I would call in every day and I arranged for a couple of neighbours to sit with her when they could, to take in meals, change her bed linen and help her to and from the bathroom.

On the second day of her illness I noticed when I visited her that there was a piece of string tied to one of the posts of her iron bedstead. The other end of the string appeared to disappear through the window. When I asked Mrs Peters what the string was for she gave it a sharp tug and outside I could hear what sounded like the clatter of a great number of tin cans.

'What on earth…?'

Mrs Peters tried to laugh but started to cough. I handed her a glass of water and waited for the coughing to stop.

'The other end of the string is tied to a pile of old cans,' she explained. 'It's to scare off the birds.'

She explained that she loved seeing and hearing the birds but that she objected to them stealing all the fruit on her cherry tree.

'When I see the birds in the tree I just pull my bit of string and frighten them off,' she explained. 'There are bird feeders by the back door so they can help themselves to seeds and nuts. A kind young man put them up for me and he fixed up the string and the tin cans.'

'Who was that?' I asked.

'His name is Mr Robinson,' she said. 'Do you know him?'

'Oh yes,' I said. 'I know Thumper Robinson very well.'

'He seems a nice young man,' she said. 'I don't know how he heard I was poorly. But he came and offered to do my shopping for me.'

I didn't know he'd heard. I hadn't mentioned Mrs Peters to him. But I wasn't surprised. Thumper knew just about everything that was going on in the village and he was always ready to do what he could to make life easier for older villagers. I always felt (and still do) that he was the sort of person who really should have appeared on the Queen's honours lists instead of politicians and pop stars.

'Does Mr Robinson have a bad leg?' she asked.

'No, why do you ask?'

'When I was out in the village I saw him from his truck and he seemed to be limping.'

'Ah,' I said. 'If I tell you why then you must keep it to yourself.'

'Of course I will.'

I explained that Thumper occasionally appeared to walk with a stiff leg because he carried a gun inside his trousers.

'Goodness gracious! Is he a gangster? Does he rob banks?' asked Mrs Peters. She sounded more excited than critical.

'Good heavens, no! But I'm afraid he does do a little poaching from time to time.'

'So is it because of the gun he's got stuffed down his trouser leg that he has the bottom of his trousers tied with string? The string is there to make sure that the gun doesn't fall out?'

'That's part of it. But if he has shot a rabbit, a hare or a pheasant he'll put the corpse down his trouser leg if his pockets are full.'

'But you couldn't get a pheasant into a pocket!'

'You could if you had Thumper's pockets. He has two of them inside his jacket and they're called poacher's pockets. You could easily get quite a large animal into one of them.'

'Oh. I see. Do you approve of poaching, doctor?'

I laughed. 'Thumper says that birds and animals all belong to God. His argument is that they can't be considered to belong to the person who owns the land they're living on.'

'You didn't answer my question.'

'Patsy and I are vegetarian. But Thumper is my friend.'

'A very good friend, I should think. He seems a very kind fellow.'

'He's a very good friend and a very kind fellow,' I agreed. 'You aren't the only villager he's helped. You could travel a long way on a fast horse without finding a kinder, more generous man.'

I told her that it was Thumper who, with my predecessor Dr Brownlow, had first made me welcome in Bilbury. It was Thumper who helped me find my first car.

'Do you think I should pay him something for helping me?' she asked.

'No,' I said. 'Definitely not.'

'But he doesn't look terribly well off. He looks very scruffy and that old truck of his has obviously seen better days.'

'He likes doing things for people,' I told her.

'Maybe I'll let him have some cherries when they're properly ripe – if the birds have left me some.'

'I'm sure he would be grateful. Or just let him pick up the fallen branches in your garden. He'll cut them up for you. And you've got a couple of fruit trees that are dead and need taking down. Apple, pear and cherry all make good firewood. You can then share the logs with Thumper.'

Mrs Peters agreed that this sounded an excellent idea and a perfectly equitable arrangement.

She made an excellent recovery and after that I called in to see her once or month or so. She had fewer ailments than most people half her age and apart from that initial illness she was never ill.

It was a couple of weeks after her 93rd birthday that Mrs Peters admitted to me that she had one regret.

'I have always been a careful woman,' she told me. 'When I was a young girl I was always frighteningly well-behaved. I suppose I didn't have much choice – since my father was a bishop. I could hardly go round throwing stones through greenhouses, could I? And then I married a vicar and I remained discreet and law abiding. I never drove above the speed limit, I was always polite to shop assistants, even when they were terribly annoying, and I don't think I ever once lost my temper in public. In the Post Office I was always the one customer who stood there quietly and uncomplaining, however long the queues were and however slowly the counter clerks seemed to be working.'

'I have always been a rather trusting person, rather naïve even,' she continued. 'When I was a girl my parents took me to the theatre. It was, I think, what they used to call a variety show. The star, I remember, was a comedian called Jimmy Wheeler. When he came onto the stage he began his act with the line: 'A funny thing happened to me on the way to the theatre'. I'd never heard the phrase before, and I didn't realise it was a fairly traditional way for a comic to introduce a joke. I assumed that he was telling the truth and I was terribly impressed. I wondered just how far from the theatre this strange thing had happened and, most of all, I was impressed that he had arrived at the theatre without any material but had relied on observing something comical as he walked to the stage door. It seemed to me to show tremendous calm and confidence. When I mentioned this to my parents they looked puzzled, and a little sad, as though they had produced a daughter who was, to put it politely, a little slow. I don't think I was slow – just rather unworldly.'

'I never yearned to travel the world, I never had a need for a life filled with great excitements,' she said. 'I had a lovely, loving husband and although I've never been rich, I've always had a nice home. I always had plenty of books to read and I've always enjoyed the programmes on the wireless. I've had a wonderful life. No complaints.'

'I rather think there is a 'but' or a 'regret' waiting around the corner!' I said, when she paused. There was a faraway look in her eyes.

'Oh, I always hated that word 'but',' said Mrs Peters. 'I hated it especially when it came after a compliment. 'I really like your dress, but…' 'Your hair looks nice but…' 'How lovely the room looks but…'.' She laughed.

'So, what's the 'but'?'

'It isn't so much a 'but' as a 'regret',' said Mrs Peters. Suddenly, she seemed shy, as though she were worried that I might think what she was about to say rather strange.

'And so what's the regret?' I asked, pushing her a little.

'You're going to laugh.'

'No I'm not.'

'It's a really silly thing – and probably quite impossible.'

'Tell me and then I'll help you if I can.'

'I always wanted to climb a tree.'

I looked at her, not sure that I'd heard properly.

'I always wanted to climb a tree,' she repeated, clearly aware that I was having difficulty believing what I was pretty sure that I'd heard.

'A tree?'

'A tree.'

'Any particular tree?'

'When I was nine or ten I used to watch the other children climbing a tree that was visible from our house. Well, technically our home was a palace. Bishops live in palaces as you know. But there was a wonderful old oak tree just inside our gates. Lots of children used to climb it, girls as well as boys. And from my bedroom window I used to watch them.'

'Is the tree still there?' I asked.

'Oh good heavens, I don't know. I don't have the faintest. The palace has probably been turned into offices or converted into flats and the tree is probably a nice table and a dozen chairs. It doesn't matter because I don't want to climb that particular tree.'

'So, which tree would you like to climb?'

She looked shy and even rather coy but didn't reply.

'Which one?'

This time she answered. 'That cherry tree outside my bedroom window.'

I thought about it. And then I walked to the window and looked out. The branches of the cherry tree looked as if they could be climbed but the first branches didn't leave the trunk until about four feet from the ground.

'What are you thinking?' she asked. But there was a twinkle in her eye and I think she knew what was on my mind.

'You'll need a little help to get off the ground,' I told her.

She looked at me and this time, for the 92-year-old widow of a clergyman, she was definitely looking coy.

'Oh, I'll certainly need a little help!' she agreed.

'When do you want to try it?'

'If it were done when 'tis done then 'twere well it were done quickly!' She raised both eyebrows and put her head to one side, as though asking for my approval.

'Macbeth.'

'Of course. Macbeth talking to himself. In act one, scene seven. Inside the castle.'

'You know your Macbeth.'

'I love Shakespeare. I've read all the plays several times.'

'Shall we make tomorrow afternoon tree climbing day?'

'Not today?'

'It's been raining and the tree will be slippery. Also you'll need some help. I want to ask Thumper to come and give me a hand.'

'Thumper Robinson?'

'There's only Thumper!'

'Yes, I suppose so. He won't laugh will he?'

'No. He won't laugh.'

I telephoned Thumper straight away and asked if he could meet me at Mrs Peter's house at three o'clock the following afternoon. He could.

And so, the following day there were four of us standing at the base of Mrs Peters' cherry tree. Mrs Peters was, on my advice, wearing a pair of good stout shoes, a pair of corduroy trousers, a thick shirt and a pair of her thickest gardening gloves. I was very conscious of the fact that elderly skin can easily tear and, once torn, can be slow to mend. I didn't want her to get a skin infection. Thumper and I had put Mrs Peters' kitchen stepladder at the base of the tree. The fourth person there was Patsy. I had asked her to come along to help.

'Isn't that cheating?' Mrs Peters asked, when she saw the stepladder.

'Not at all!' said Thumper. 'Climbers use all sorts of aids – ropes, crampons and ice axes. You need a small step ladder to give you a helping hand – or foot – into that nice fork of the tree.'

'OK. So what do I do?'

'You climb up the stepladder until you're standing on the top step. And then you put a foot onto the fork in the tree.'

'And then?'

'Then we'll see!'

With Thumper and I standing one each side of the ladder, Mrs Peters climbed up the steps and then, rather gingerly, stepped onto the fork in the tree.

'Oh this is fantastic!' she cried, clearly delighted. 'Can I go higher?'

‘If you think you can?’

‘Oh I do!’ she said. And she stepped onto the next fork a foot or so higher up the tree.’

‘Hold the tree tightly and smile!’ I told her, as Thumper moved the stepladder away so that it wouldn’t appear in the picture. I then took my camera out of my pocket and took some photos of Mrs Peters up the tree.

‘Oh that’s marvellous!’ she said, at this unexpected bonus. ‘Can I have copies to send to all my friends?’

‘Have the picture put on your Christmas cards!’ suggested Thumper.

‘That’s a wonderful idea!’ agreed Mrs Peters.

I then put the stepladder back into position and Patsy went up a few rungs to help Mrs Peters climb down.

It took rather longer for her to get down than it had taken for her to get up into the tree. Patsy came down holding onto her. Thumper and I held the stepladder to make sure that it didn’t wobble.

When we were back indoors we celebrated the adventure with a bottle of champagne and a chocolate cake bought especially for the occasion from Peter Marshall’s excellent emporium.

‘This was the most exciting thing I’ve done for a long time,’ said Mrs Peters, posing for more photographs with a glass of champagne in one hand a large slice of cake in the other.

‘You can tell your friends that you went up the tree to pick your cherries,’ said Thumper. ‘Make it sound as if you climb a tree every day.’

Mrs Peters laughed. ‘Oh, could I do that?’

‘Of course you could.’

‘I feel so very naughty,’ she said. And she giggled. ‘I don’t think I’ve ever giggled before.’

It seemed a bit of a pity that she had to wait until she was 92-years-old before she could have a giggle in her life. But I was pleased that I helped to make the day that gave her the giggle.

The True Story of How the Duck and Puddle Got Its Name

It was Sunday and Patsy had gone off early to help her mother make jam.

Making jam is something the two of them do every autumn. It's a real family tradition and it usually takes them a couple of days of work to convert our home-grown strawberries, gooseberries, plums, raspberries, apples and other fruits into jam. Patsy's sister Adrienne, now Mrs Fogg, usually goes along to help though I gather from Patsy that her main role is that of taster.

I had been left alone with Ben, our faithful and now elderly dog, our trio of cats, the sheep and Cedric the pig to sort out a few things around the house.

The two tasks on my list were: first to clear out a blocked drain and second to try to do something about the washing machine which had developed some sort of obstruction.

We'd noticed the blocked drain only when waste water started to form a large puddle outside the back door. And we'd noticed that the washing machine wasn't draining properly when a large puddle appeared in the room which an estate agent would probably describe as our 'utility room' but which we prefer to think of as 'that funny little room with a cobble stone floor and a door which is so full of woodworm that bits fall off it if you shut it too hard'.

Finding workmen to come in and do such seemingly trivial chores is never easy. Even the handymen who have advertisements which promise 'No Job Too Small', and who, if they ever answer their telephones, do so with great enthusiasm, mysteriously seem to find themselves fully booked when you explain that you don't want them to put on a new roof, install a new kitchen or build a two-car garage with granny flat and workshop attached.

I had first of all tried ringing a man who is known locally as Dirty Dick. He is a drain specialist who is reputed to have been cleaning out drains in North Devon since drains were first invented, though this may be something of an exaggeration. He never wears gloves or overalls and doesn't seem to spend a great deal of money on soap. His real name is Cyril Hornby-Smythe and, surprisingly perhaps, he has a degree in Ancient Languages from Cambridge University. He lives in a huge, tumble-down house in Barnstaple. His wife teaches domestic science at a local secondary modern school.

Sadly, Dirty Dick wasn't available. His wife told me that he was in hospital having a hernia repaired and wouldn't be available for cleaning out drains for at least a month.

I told her I didn't think we could wait that long, asked her to pass on my best wishes to her husband for a speedy and uneventful recovery and tried another couple of drain specialists.

One of them said he could probably manage to do something in six weeks and the other had an answering machine with a message saying he was on holiday in the Seychelles for two months. I made a mental note to consider a career in drain cleaning if I ever found myself struck off the medical register and unable to continue practising medicine.

So, rather than waste any more time making useless calls on the telephone, I decided to try to clear the drain myself.

I did have a set of old drain rods, which I had found in a barn a few months earlier. I had no idea how old they were but they seemed serviceable so I fitted the rods together, pulled the drain cover off the nearest inspection point and set to work.

I didn't have the faintest idea what I ought to be doing but it seemed to me that if I stuck the rod with the little brush fixed on the end into the drain, and then used the other rods to enable me to push it into the drain as far as it would go, I might have a chance of clearing the blockage and sorting out the problem.

I pushed and pulled and eventually a great bundle of roots came out of the drain with the brush. As I did so there was much gurgling and eventually, after sounds which alarmed me so much that I actually stood up and moved back a few paces, the contents of the pipe started to move. Moments later the blockage had obviously gone for the sewer pipe was empty. I hadn't felt so pleased with myself since I managed to pass O level Latin at the first attempt.

To my absolute delight I then discovered that the drain which was blocked was the one into which the washing machine emptied, and that it was the blockage in the drain which was preventing the machine from draining effectively.

I had solved both problems at once.

I was so pleased with myself that for a very brief moment I considered putting an advertisement in the local paper and advertising my services as a handyman. If a drains specialist could earn enough to have a two month holiday in the Seychelles maybe I could earn enough to buy a new rear tyre for my bicycle or, at the very least, arrange to have the existing one mended. (The rear tyre had a slow puncture in it which meant that I either had to pump it up every time I used the bicycle or else bump along uncomfortably on a flat tyre.)

I have to admit that clearing out a blocked drain, and seeing the backed up water drain away out of the washing machine, was strangely satisfying. It reminded me of the time I catheterised Mr Edgar Turner and emptied two and a half pints of stale, second hand beer from his bladder.

When I'd done my chores I had a bath, put on fresh clothes and wandered down the garden for a while.

It had been a long, hard and rather difficult week.

The most significant, and saddest event, had been the death of George Meddlecott who had died during the week in extraordinary circumstances.

George, had been in his mid-40s, and had worked as a shepherd.

There really aren't any specialist shepherds around these days but back in the 1970s there were quite a few men (all the shepherds I knew were male) who spent their lives looking after sheep.

On the Tuesday of that week, George had been found dead in a field just a mile and a half away from Bilbury Grange. He had been stabbed three times in the stomach, and when his body was found by two walkers, I was called. I was, therefore, the one who saw the body and confirmed both that it was George Meddlecott and that he was dead. I called the police because it seemed rather suspicious to say the least.

Within two hours there were two dozen policemen in the field, including a Chief Superintendent, and murder was pretty obviously their first diagnosis.

However, this view was rather weakened by the discovery that the knife was George's own and that the only fingerprints on it belonged to him.

On Thursday the police talked at length to George's brother and found that George had for weeks been suffering from pain caused by terrible wind.

George's brother lived in Barnstaple and worked in a bank. He said that George had steadfastly refused either to come and talk to me about it or to take any of the remedies his brother had offered in an attempt to find a solution. He had also refused point blank to amend his diet in any way. (I knew that George lived on a strange diet, which seemed to consist largely of food he had scavenged from fields, hedgerows and the waste bins outside the Duck and Puddle and Peter Marshall's shop. He spent most of the pittance he earned on pipe tobacco and bottled beer.)

On Friday, the police concluded that George hadn't been murdered but had accidentally killed himself. Because he was a shepherd he knew that a common, old remedy for sheep which were swollen with wind was to stab them in the stomach in order to release the accumulated gas. (If you don't release the gas the bloated sheep may fall over and be stranded on its back, vulnerable to birds who will peck out its eyes and then peck it to death.)

George had apparently mentioned this to his brother and had asked if he thought it might work on a human being. Amazingly, the brother had failed to mention this to anyone and had simply replied that he didn't know.

The conclusion was that poor George had tried to save himself from the pain by stabbing himself in order to release the awful wind he was experiencing. (The pain of trapped wind is widely and massively underestimated). He had then bled to death and died, alone and in the middle of a field.

Other than seeing the dead body, and confirming that George was dead, I hadn't really been involved since I had never seen him as a patient, but the police had been to visit me at least half a dozen times to ask for information. I found it difficult to imagine how desperate poor George must have been to take such drastic action.

And so, after successfully clearing both the drain and the washing machine blockage, I wandered down the garden in search of a little peace.

Ben, the three cats (Emily, Sophia and Jeremy) and the sheep (Lizzie, Petulia, Cynthia, Sarah-Louise and Miss Houdini) all followed me.

It was difficult to walk about in our garden without becoming part of a procession and I sometimes used to feel that I needed a stick to twirl or a big drum to beat.

It was fortunate, I suppose, that Cedric, the pig we had on loan from his American owners, was fast asleep in his sty, having just finished an enormous breakfast of his favourite fresh fruit and vegetable platter. I'm afraid that Cedric, like all the animals who lived with us, was rather spoilt. He used to enjoy going for a walk

I picked an apple off one of the late fruiting trees and tossed it to Percy, our tame pheasant. There were plenty of windfalls from the trees which had already produced their crop but Percy was a fussy bird. He ate a third of the apple and then wandered off. The minute he'd gone, a crow pierced the remains with his beak and flew off with it. Then a squirrel and two rabbits appeared on the lawn and sat there looking rather pathetic and starved.

Feeling rather as though I'd wandered into a Walt Disney movie, I plucked three more apples and threw them in their direction. Rabbits and squirrels love apples – or at least our rabbits and squirrels did. In the really bad weather I sometimes used to pop an apple down a rabbit hole so that the rabbits snuggling together down below have a little something extra to munch.

Then Percy returned, looking for his missing apple. So I gave him another. This time he ate just a third of it before wandering off for a drink of water. A seagull swooped and picked up the two thirds of an apple in his beak and flew away to enjoy a quiet feast somewhere else in the garden. It occurred to me that at the rate I was going I would soon have to explain to Patsy why we had such a poor apple crop. Another crow flew down and started to peck at a windfall apple. Then a seagull appeared and clearly wanted to take the apple away from him. (There were scores of other windfalls on the ground which the badgers hadn't yet eaten but the seagull wanted that apple and no other apple would do. Birds are just like small children.) I then watched in astonishment as a bunch of other crows flew down and stood around their chum so that he could eat his apple in peace. That was truly altruistic behaviour for the guard crows got nothing out of the exercise except the knowledge that they were looking after their pal.

I watched all this happening in awe and I truly felt lucky to be living in such a wonderful home in such a marvellous part of the world. North Devon is the coldest part of the county, raw with wind and rain in the winter, but there is a wildness about it which seems to produce a sense of family among the residents – both human and otherwise.

In my early years in Bilbury, when Dr Brownlow, my predecessor, had still been alive, I had travelled a fair amount – mainly to London or to towns and cities where there were television studios or radio stations. On several occasions Patsy and I had gone to London together. Our greatest joy had been merely walking through the streets of London, looking in shop windows and being astonished by the speed at which life was lived. Our favourite walk was to start at Trafalgar Square, walk up Charing Cross Road (calling in at one or two of the second hand bookshops en route), then turn left at Cambridge Circus and go along Shaftsbury Avenue to Piccadilly Circus. When we got to Piccadilly Circus we would walk along Piccadilly, turning right into the Burlington Arcade and then up Bond Street. We usually then took a taxi back to Paddington Station rather than struggle along Oxford Street. We liked this walk best at dusk on a slightly drizzly autumn evening, and we did it many times. I don't know why we liked that route or why we liked walking it when it was drizzly and going dark. I suppose it just seemed more romantic. Sometimes we would stop off for afternoon tea at Fortnum and Mason where a pot of tea for two and a couple of toasted tea cakes would cost us a small fortune but make us feel rich for a few moments.

During those years I had made a considerable number of television programmes (most of which had been of the instantly forgettable kind) and had spent rather too much time promoting my books by doing interviews with young presenters who didn't have the faintest idea who I was, hadn't bothered to look at the book I was promoting (let alone actually read it) and who clearly cared more about whether their make-up was perfect, their hair just so and their smile was offering just the right mixture of charm, humour and integrity than they did about the subject we were supposed to be discussing.

But within a year or two my travels outside Bilbury had been strictly limited by my solo responsibilities for the health of the village.

After the death of Dr Brownlow, it was no longer really possible for me to leave the village – for the very simple reason that there was no one else to take my surgeries, do my visits or answer my emergency calls. I could, and occasionally did, pop into Barnstaple, Combe Martin, South Molton, Ilfracombe or Lynton but expeditions further afield were impossible. Even Exeter, the county town of Devon, had become a foreign country to me. There was a relatively brief period when my practice was shut down by the NHS because it was considered inefficient to have a solitary doctor providing medical care for a relatively small village. For a while I earned my living solely from my writing. But after protests from the villagers, things soon went back to normal and I was soon working as a GP again. And there were no more trips to London or, indeed, to anywhere else. The village of Bilbury was so spread out and confusing that it would have been impossible to find a locum doctor who could find Myrtle Cottage at three o'clock in the morning on a rainy night. And if we'd gone away from Bilbury Grange, who on earth would have looked after our menagerie?

And the truth was that I really didn't mind at all that I had to stay in Bilbury.

By the time I stopped going there, London had seemed to me to have become dirty, over-crowded and just too busy.

The last time I'd been there, I had found it difficult to believe that on the 6th of October, 1897, the author Arnold Bennett had walked through Green Park, just yards from Buckingham Palace, and, looking through an October mist, had seen sheep grazing in the park. By the early 1970s, a visit to London left me coughing and wheezing (and with a grime-encrusted shirt).

I'm happy to accept that my attitude to London said far more about me than it did about London. It is perfectly possible that London was no different to the way it had always been and that it was me, not England's capital city, who had changed. I had fallen in love with country living and I felt that I would be quite happy if I never again had to board an aeroplane, climb onto a train or struggle through a bustling crowd of commuters and shoppers.

Meanwhile, I stood in the garden and looked around.

Our resident pheasant, the one whom we had Christened Lord Percival (but knew as Percy – he didn't seem to mind this familiarity), was now standing beside our summerhouse flapping his wings and calling loudly. He did this for a few minutes and then wandered off up the garden to the spot among some rhododendron bushes where he roosts. Ten minutes later a hen pheasant appeared, clearly attracted by Lord Percival's attractive courting calls. Unfortunately, Lord Percival was now nowhere to be seen. The hen waited a while, wandered around on the lawn and then, looking sad, doubtless disappointed and frustrated, she wandered off again.

I watched three rabbits munching away at the grass and thought how good it was of them to help keep the lawn under control. Rabbits make excellent lawn mowers. I reckoned that I had to cut the grass only half as often as I would have had to cut it without them. And for the first time I saw a rabbit doing what is called a binky. When a rabbit suddenly jumps into the air and twists about before landing, it is doing a binky. When a lamb or a sheep does it this is called pronging.

It is said in books that squirrels never drink water but this is not true. We have several squirrels who regularly drink from our bird bath. The wild creatures use the bird bath for all sorts of things in addition to drinking and washing. I once saw one of the squirrels who lived with us take a hazelnut which had fallen in some mud over to the bird bath and give it a good wash before eating it. I've also watched a robin pull a worm out of the grass, take it to the bird bath and wash it and then gave it to another robin perched in a tree nearby.

Those who study animal behaviour insist that we must never anthropomorphise. But I find it difficult not to and I am quietly convinced that animals have far more complicated lives than some would imagine. It has for years been assumed that only human beings are capable of thought processes. I believe that this is hubristic nonsense. My own studies of animals have convinced me that they are capable of very complex behavioural patterns which could not exist without complex thought processes.

I don't think I am alone in this. Thousands of individuals who have shared their lives with dogs and cats, for example, will confirm that animals are not the simple mechanical creatures that Descartes would have us believe them to be. And why on earth should they be? After all, primates such as orang-utans share 97% of our own DNA. They can communicate with one another and they show skills with tools – as well as having a sense of humour. Elephants and chimpanzees display compassion, treat themselves with medicines when they are ill and mourn their friends and relations. And there is plenty of evidence that animals can love.

Birds too are capable of extraordinary thought processes. All members of the corvid family (which includes ravens, crows, rooks, magpies, jays and jackdaws) have much more complex brains than most people imagine and many studies have shown the wisdom of these creatures. Ravens and rooks, for example, have been shown to maintain long-term relationships with other birds, and their social and political systems are often as complex as our own.

I wandered around the garden for the best part of an hour, just looking and watching and learning.

When I first came to live in Bilbury I would walk through the lanes quite quickly, more intent on where I was going than on where I was. And I now knew that most of the visitors, hikers and walkers, who wandered through the village did so at such a pace that they actually saw very little of the world around them. To see and understand the countryside, and the creatures in it, you have to be prepared to stand and lean on a five barred gate occasionally; and to be prepared to look and to listen. And there are so many fascinating things to see. I had learnt so much in my years at Bilbury Grange. I'd learned that ants move around far more speedily when the weather is warm. You would think it would be the other way round and that they would run around when it was cold. But they don't. They speed up when it's warm. I found myself fascinated by the woodlouse too. You can find woodlice in crumbling old logs and, when the weather is bad, they come indoors. The woodlouse used to be called the 'pill woodlouse' because if threatened they roll themselves up into a ball. Doctors used to prescribe them for a variety of ailments. Can you imagine being told by your doctor: 'Go home and take two woodlice every four hours. Send a boy with a message in the morning if there is no improvement'.

As soon as the sun told me that it was approaching noon I wandered back up to the house, climbed onto my rather rusty old bicycle (after pumping up the back tyre) and pedalled slowly along the lanes to the Duck and Puddle where I had arranged to meet Thumper and Patchy for a little light luncheon. Ben wandered along behind me. She knew exactly where we were heading and, like most of the inhabitants of our village, was content to get there at her own pace.

When I arrived at the pub I found my two pals already there, settled beside the usual log fire and already topping up their blood alcohol levels. They had not yet started to do anything to contribute to their blood cholesterol levels. Frank, who was sitting with them, was sipping a glass of bubbly tonic water. Harry, the more than slightly over-qualified new barman, was standing behind the bar polishing glasses with a tea towel. Whenever I saw him there, I wondered if there were any other barmen in North Devon with a medical degree. I wondered how many of the men and women polishing glasses and pulling pints had once held an eminent position at a London teaching hospital.

To my surprise there were two other customers in the Duck and Puddle. He was short and thin with very short hair. She was shorter and thinner and also had very short hair. They were clearly motorists rather than walkers or cyclists. I knew this from their smart, clean clothing, their neatly combed hair, their un-flushed faces and the fact that there was a smart, little motor car that I'd never seen before parked outside in the Duck and Puddle car park. I hadn't noticed what make it was. When I was a boy I used to be able to identify most of the cars on the road but by the early 1970s I found that most cars looked much the same as one another and unless I was looking at something exotic, exceptionally expensive or vintage, I wasn't able to tell one from the other.

'Stanley and Stiffy Sidwell,' said the male stranger, introducing both himself and a woman whom I assumed was his wife as I entered. He had that way of speaking that I had only before heard from the mouths of former diplomats. Maybe it's a style that is also taught to health and safety specialists for that is what he turned out to be. It's an odd way of speaking: strangely formal, flat, superior and condescending. I suppose it's taught as a way of talking down to the natives; calming them when trying to persuade them to put down their spears and abandon the idea to pop you into the hot pot. I didn't know why he introduced his wife as well as himself, though it did occur to me, quite wrongly, that maybe she couldn't speak, or had a sore throat. Still, she didn't seem to mind this modest act of lese-majeste so I didn't see why I should mind. At first glance, I thought he looked rather miserable; along the lines of a man who has just discovered that while he was having a nap some miscreant had snuck in and nicked his liver and mischievously replaced it with one of those little models of a lighthouse filled with layers of different coloured sand.

He was drinking what looked like coffee and she was drinking something that was probably tea. The Duck and Puddle specialises in alcoholic beverages and filling food and does not pretend to be a coffee house. If it ever appeared in one of those guide books which provide marks and criticisms, the Duck and Puddle would not receive anything more than two stars for its hot beverages and even then one of the stars would doubtless be for the fact that when someone asks for a warm cup of something they are invariably served something that is unquestionably hot. 'We might not make the best cup of coffee in the world,' Frank had once told a customer, 'but we make the hottest.'

I told Stanley my name, took his outstretched hand and shook it. He had a small, toothbrush sized moustache, only slightly bigger than the one favoured by A. Hitler Esq and one of those limp, slightly moist handshakes that always make me want to wipe my hand down the side of my trousers afterwards. I managed to resist the temptation to do this. Stiffy also held out her hand and hers, too, was one of those insipid handshakes that makes you wonder if it has actually taken place at all. He told me that I should call him Stanley and that his wife answered to Stiffy.

'I'm a Health and Safety Inspector,' said Stanley. 'But we're on holiday at the moment. We're on a tour of English inns and taverns. This is our third inn of the day.'

I was clearly expected to be impressed by this and, not wanting to be churlish or unwelcoming, I did my best to look impressed. At the same time Ben pushed open the front door, wandered over to the rug by the fire and lay down. She used to race around Bilbury. But she had become much more stately and measured. Frank immediately stood up and fetched her a bag of her favourite pork scratchings.

'I thought you'd like to try this, for a change,' said Harry, handing me a tumbler containing Laphroaig whisky. 'I'm sure you'll prefer it to your usual brand of lemonade.'

Stanley looked across at me, nodded and smiled. He and Stiffy had remained standing at the bar, rather than sitting down and making themselves comfortable. The pair of them looked as though there were a pair of lecturers about to start giving a lecture. Little did I know how accurate this appraisal was going to prove to be.

'Dandelion and Burdock,' Harry explained to Stanley. 'It's made locally according to a 17th century recipe.'

I hoped that Stanley didn't have a particularly well-trained sense of smell. Laphroaig malt whisky doesn't smell much like Dandelion and Burdock.

'You shouldn't give those to a dog,' said Stiffy pointing at Ben and the pork scratchings. 'I'm a supervisor.' She didn't say what she supervised and none of us liked to ask.

Frank looked at her and then at me.

'They contain too much fat for dogs,' the woman explained. 'And I've read that they can cause problems in the dog's pancreas.'

'They contain too much fat for people,' said Thumper.

'She only has them occasionally,' I said, feeling rather guilty. I looked across at Ben to see if it was too late to take the pork scratchings away from her. It wasn't too late but I couldn't bear to do it. Like all of us she likes an occasional treat – even if it is bad for her. I wondered if I should mention to Stanley and Stiffy that the caffeine in tea and coffee can cause cancer of the pancreas. I decided not to bother.

'My husband is an expert on inn signs and names,' said Stiffy. 'We're writing a book about them.'

'Stiffy takes the photographs,' added Stanley.

And for the first time I noticed that Stiffy had a camera slung round her neck. It was something fancy with lots of levers and dials and a complicated looking lens. 'I hope you won't mind my mentioning it,' he said, talking to Harry and moving the fireside rug with the toe of his shoe. 'But this rug is loose. Rugs in establishments where the public are allowed access are required to be fastened down to avoid accidents.'

‘Ah,’ said Harry, without hesitation. ‘I wish we could do that. We’ve been asking them for years to let us fix it down. Unfortunately, the rug has been designated a floor covering of outstanding natural beauty and of significant historical interest by the Government’s Ancient Rugs and Artefacts Department. They won’t let us move it, nail it down or even put any sticky stuff on the back.’

‘Not allowed to impede its movement in any way, was the phrase I think you mentioned,’ said Patchy who had, for some reason known only to himself decided to deliver this in a rather broad country yokel accent. Patchy is one of the best educated and best read men I knew. He had what used to be called a cut-glass accent.

‘It’s not been moved for years,’ said Frank. ‘It’s been here longer than I have. I wouldn’t dare move it for fear of what we might find underneath it.’

‘Blood stains, probably,’ added Thumper. ‘From that murder.’

We all looked at him.

‘Sorry,’ Thumper said. ‘I know no one likes to talk about that.’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ muttered Frank. ‘I know I’ll have to talk about it one day.’

‘It really wasn’t your fault,’ said Thumper.

‘Everyone agrees they both asked for it,’ said Patchy. ‘I don’t know what they were thinking of – behaving like that in front of your very eyes.’

There was a long silence. We all sipped our drinks. Ben continued crunching her pork scratchings.

It was Stiffy who eventually spoke.

‘Yours is a very interesting establishment,’ she said. She looked around as she spoke. She clearly wasn’t quite sure who she should be addressing. ‘Are your beams real?’

Frank frowned and looked at her sternly. Asking him if his beams were real was about as tactless as asking a bathukolpian woman you’ve just met if her breasts were real. ‘Real?’ he said. He managed to stretch the word out until the elastic seemed certain to break. He reminded me of Dame Edith Evans playing Lady Bracknell in Oscar Wilde’s ‘The Importance of Being Earnest’ – the famous bit where she is shocked about John Worthington’s provenance and she says: ‘A handbag?’

‘Or are they just glued on?’ continued Stiffy. ‘A lot of public houses have their beams glued on. We saw one in Exeter which had polystyrene beams.’ Stiffy did not seem aware that her initial query had upset the landlord and that her supplementary remarks were just making things worse.

Frank glared at her. ‘The Duck and Puddle is a very old and original pub. The only stuff in here that’s false is in my mouth and they’re called dentures!’ he said. Frank was rightly proud of what he and Gilly had built. I could understand why he was feeling aggrieved.

‘They sometimes do it to make the place look old,’ explained Stanley, unthinkingly making things worse.

‘My husband is something of an expert on many aspects of public house presentation,’ said Stiffy who, it seemed to me, could probably win prizes for insensitivity, indifference and an inability to tell when someone was upset. ‘The publishers expect my husband’s tome on inn signs to be a seminal work. And it is bound to be an international bestseller.’

‘Seminal,’ said Patchy, nodding. He said it again and looked at Thumper who also nodded.

‘You can trace public house names back to the Crusades,’ said Stanley. ‘The people commemorated the crusades with names such as ‘The Saracen’s Head’ and ‘The Trip to Jerusalem’. There are still public houses in Britain with such names.’

‘Some public houses are named after the occupation of the proprietor,’ said Stiffy. ‘So drinking houses were called ‘The Wheatsheaf’ if the owner was a baker, ‘The Horseshoe’ or ‘The Three Horseshoes’ if he was a farrier and ‘The Three Compasses’ if he was a carpenter.’

“The Green Man’ denoted that the pub was kept by a game keeper, ‘The Woodman’ that the publican was a forester and ‘The Coach and Horses’ made it clear that the pub was originally run by a coachman,’ said Stanley. “The Blacksmith’s Arms’ and ‘The Cobbler’s Arms’ are pretty explanatory.’

I got the impression this wasn’t the first time that Stanley and Stiffy had recited these names. They seemed to have worked up a little double act. The Stanley and Stiffy Show. ‘Of course some pubs were named for other reasons, so a pub called ‘Bag o’Nails’ would be named after the ancient Greek ceremony celebrating the bacchanals,’ said Stanley.

‘The seven most popular pub names are all expressions of support for royalty,’ said Stiffy. ‘Stanley has determined that there are over 600 pubs in the United Kingdom called ‘The Red Lion’ because that was the badge favoured by James the First. He made it a law that premises selling alcohol should all stick up pictures or models of a lion. He insisted that when he travelled from Edinburgh to London he wanted to see lions everywhere he went.’

‘There are scores of pubs called ‘The Crown’, ‘The Rose and Crown’, ‘The Crown and Anchor’, ‘The King’s Head’ and ‘The Queen’s Head’,’ Stanley informed us. ‘Pubs called ‘The Royal Oak’ are so named because Charles

II hid in an oak tree in 1651 after the disastrous battle of Worcester.'

'Some pubs were called 'The White Hart' because that was the badge of Richard II, and some were called the So and So Arms after the name of a local bigwig. And then there are public houses which were named directly after the coat of arms of a local dignitary. So many inns and taverns in Warwickshire were called the 'Bear and Staff' because that was the coat of arms of the Earl of Warwick.'

Looking around I could see that I wasn't alone in thinking that we'd pretty well reached our limit on this particular subject. But Stanley and Stiffy weren't finished yet. They told us that some pub names were either simply fantastic or comical, and based on old wives' tales and local legends. So, said Stanley, there are pubs called 'World Turned Upside Down', 'Cat and Mutton', 'Castle of Comfort', 'Merry Month of May', 'Labour in Vain', 'Tippling Philosopher', 'Darby and Joan', 'Baker and Basket', 'Magnet and Dewdrop', 'The Old Friends', 'Mrs Grundy's Arms' and 'Who'd Have Thought It?'.

'Of course some pubs get nicknames,' said Stiffy. "The White Swan in Stratford-upon-Avon, next to the Shakespeare theatre, is known to everyone as The Dirty Duck and is regularly patronised by actors, fans and hangers on.'

'My own particular interest is the pub sign,' said Stanley. 'In mediaeval days there was no bigger advertising space than the local pub sign and inn keepers spent a good deal of money on their signs. 'The White Hart' at Scole in Norfolk had a famous sign which stretched right across the road and consisted of 25 life-size, classical and mythological figures. The sign cost over £1,000 which was a lot of money in the 17th century. Many other pub signs were painted by famous artists. So, for example, Hogarth did a sign for a pub called 'The Man Loaded with Mischief'. Some old pub signs are now so valuable they've been taken down and are displayed under glass or have been sold to collectors and museums.'

'Tell the nice people about how the Duck and Puddle got its name,' said Stiffy, addressing her husband.

I glanced around and could see that none of my chums seemed particularly happy at being described as 'nice people'. It seemed to me to be almost as insulting as being described as 'little people'.

Before her husband could say anything, Stiffy turned back to address us. 'Before we came in Stanley did a little research work, using the reference books he carries in the car, and explained to me where this public house got its name.'

'Oh, I doubt if these good people would really want to hear my opinion,' said Stanley.

'Oh but we would!' insisted Harry immediately.

'Absolutely!' agreed Patchy.

The rest of us muttered our slightly muted encouragement. Only Ben, who had now finished her pork scratchings, remained silent. I know that my encouragement was entirely fake. To be perfectly honest I just wanted Stanley and Stiffy to finish their double act, climb back into their little car and chug off to the next stop on their itinerary. I knew from the way they spoke that Thumper, Patchy, Frank and Harry all felt as I did.

'Well, it's just my supposition, of course,' said Stanley, with unexpected modesty. 'One can never be entirely certain about these things, particularly where history is involved. But I would think that the word 'duck' is merely a bastardisation of the word 'Duke', and the word 'puddle' is probably taken from the verb 'to puddle' which was used to describe the manufacturing process which enabled an iron foundry to turn molten iron into malleable iron. Do any of you know if there was ever an iron foundry in the area?' He looked around enquiringly.

'There's never been anything like that round here,' said Thumper who was born and brought up in Bilbury. There is no doubt that if there had ever been an iron foundry in the area he would have known about it.

'Well, if there really wasn't a foundry,' said Stanley, making it clear he didn't accept Thumper's assurance that there hadn't been, 'then there should have been one. Maybe there were plans for one but the foundry never materialised.'

No one said anything.

Stiffy picked up her cup, emptied it and put it back down on the bar counter.

'Of course, the Duke concerned was probably not the Duke of Devonshire, whose seat is, of course, Chatsworth House in Derbyshire, but the Earl of Devon,' continued Stanley with a doggedness you had to admire. 'The first Earl of Devon was Baldwin de Redvers, whose seat was Carisbroke Castle. He was driven out of England to France where he joined the Empress Matilda. And it was the Empress Matilda who gave Redvers the title Earl of Devon. Locally, among the citizens, it is quite likely that he would have been known as the Duke though we do also know that a man called James Askew-Herrington, who lived in Devon in the 19th century, was known to describe himself as the Duke of Devon and so we must bear him in mind as a possibility.'

'So, you think the pub got its name from a Duke and an iron foundry?' said Frank.

'I think that is the most likely possibility,' said Stanley with a sage nod. 'I think we can ignore the possibility that the word 'puddle' is a bastardisation of the word 'paddle', which was the common name for a lump fish in the 16th century. But there is one other possibility which I can't entirely rule out.'

'And what's that?' asked Frank.

I think it is fair to say that I could tell that he didn't seem entirely convinced by Stanley's analysis of how the pub had acquired its unusual name.

'Well, although it isn't entirely well-known, poodles were at one time regarded as excellent hunting dogs – particularly where there was water nearby. They had quick reflexes, were renowned for being able to spot where a bird had fallen and were widely used by huntsmen as early as the 17th century. So it's easy to see that the pub's name could describe the type of bird that was commonly hunted in the area and the type of dog used to collect the bird.'

Stanley leant back, folded his arms and assumed a classic 'What do you think of that, then?' pose.

We all looked at Frank. Frank looked at the floor.

'Marvellous!' said Harry Stottle with enormous enthusiasm. Actually, he didn't so much say it as boom it. 'That was quite exceptional; the apotheosis of obscurantism! You cut through the embranglements of history with exoptable and magniloquent obnubilation!'

Stanley, frowned, as though trying to decide whether this was, or was not, a compliment. . 'Thank you!' he said eventually, clearly preferring to assume that the barman had congratulated him. It was, perhaps, not the language he had expected to hear coming from the other side of the bar in a country pub. He was not to know the concatenation of circumstances which had led the former Dr Pelham Ronald Eckersley, a psychiatrist, to abandon his private Harley Street consulting practice, and a teaching post at what he himself called a 'snotty' London teaching hospital, and to run away to the West Country, to Devon, to Bilbury and finally to the Duck and Puddle.

'It's so nice to find people who are able to understand and appreciate Stanley's work,' said Stiffy.

'It's very kind of you, I'm sure,' said Stanley. He smiled and lowered his eyes modestly. I thought he looked like a young, teenage girl who has been told that her hair looks nice or that the dress she is wearing is very pretty. Well, as much as a Health and Safety Inspector with a toothbrush moustache can look like a teenage girl.

Suddenly, Stanley looked at his watch. 'Is that really the time? We ought to be getting on.'

'We have a time table, you see,' said Stiffy. She took a piece of card out of her pocket and examined it. She then put the card back into her pocket and checked her watch. 'We were due to be at 'The Pack of Cards' in Combe Martin ten minutes ago,' she said to her husband.

'Good heavens!' said Stanley. 'Time flies when you're enjoying good conversation with good company, doesn't it?'

We all murmured, the way people do when they want to seem to agree with something but don't want to come right out and agree with it with real words.

And so Stanley and Stiffy left and a moment later we heard their little car chug away from The Duck and Puddle, from Bilbury and, quite probably, out of our lives for ever.

'They've gone the wrong way,' said Patchy, who had stood up to watch them go. 'They're taken the lane down to Softly's Bottom. If they're lucky they'll end up in Lynmouth. If they're unlucky no one will ever see them again.'

'Lucky for 'The Pack of Cards',' said Thumper.

'What was that you said to Stanley?' Frank asked Harry. 'That apotheosis stuff?'

'Oh, I just congratulated him on his spirited balderdash,' replied the barman. 'It was a load of old bollocks wasn't it Frank?'

Frank nodded.

'I asked how the pub got its name two months ago,' admitted Harry. 'So I knew that our Stanley was talking gibberish. But he was enjoying himself so much that it seemed a pity to tell him the truth.'

'So, how did the Duck and Puddle get its name?' I asked.

It occurred to me, with some shame and not a little embarrassment, that I'd never asked this before. I could tell by the way Thumper and Patchy leant forward with interest that they also didn't know how the pub had acquired its unusual name.

'Our pub used to be called 'The White Hart',' said Frank. 'When Gilly and I bought the pub, half a lifetime ago, it was run down and in an even worse state than it is now. The sign had fallen into the road and, the pub had no customers. When we took over we discovered that there are hundreds of pubs in Devon called 'The White Hart' so we wanted to start afresh, call it something different.'

'So where did the name come from?' I asked.

'When we got here it was winter and it had been raining and there was a huge puddle in the space that is now the car park.'

We all groaned.

'Is this true?' asked Patchy.

‘Honest, it’s true,’ said Frank. Harry, who had heard the story already, nodded his agreement. ‘You can ask Gilly. She’ll tell you the same.’

‘And there was just the one duck on the pond?’

‘A mallard,’ said Frank. ‘A duck. Nice girl. I don’t know what happened to her. I like to think she just buggered off one day; that maybe a handsome drake flew in and they went off together to find a bigger puddle somewhere and fill it with ducklings. When they’d gone we had the hole filled in and now it’s the car park.’

‘Just one duck on a pond,’ said Thumper reflectively. He frowned. ‘You know, I grew up with this pub being the Duck and Puddle. I don’t remember it as anything else. And I always thought there was some wonderfully complicated reason for the name.’

‘It’s a pity you didn’t tell Stanley the truth,’ said Patchy. ‘I’d loved to have seen his face.’

‘Oh no,’ I said. ‘It was much better to let him go away and put his theory into his book.’

Patchy thought about it and laughed. ‘You’re right! It was much better that way.’

‘I think it’s a pretty wonderful way to name a pub,’ said Harry.

And, without having to think any more about it, we all agreed with him.

‘I’m glad Stanley and Stiffy have gone,’ said Thumper. ‘There was a horrid smell in here.’

‘Yes, I could smell something funny,’ agreed Patchy. ‘I thought it was Stanley and Stiffy though I didn’t really notice it until they’d been here a while. I thought perhaps they’d trodden in something or maybe eaten too many Brussels sprouts.’

Everyone sniffed, in the way that people do when they think there’s a funny smell in the air.

‘The smell hasn’t gone,’ said Harry. He looked at his watch, lifted the bar flap and came out from behind the bar. ‘I’ve got to get a move on,’ I said. ‘Mildred’s got a gig in Combe Martin and I’ve promised to drive her down there. She’s in a bit of state now that she’s lost her licence. Besides, I promised to be there to cheer her on.’

Mildred Snodgrass (whose stage name is ‘Melina Melons’) is a friend of a local stripper called Carole Singer, and like Mrs Singer she earns a living taking off her clothes in public houses.

Gengolphus (or Harry) and Mildred (or Maisie on Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday afternoons and Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday evenings) were, as people used to say, ‘going steady’ and they certainly seemed extremely fond of each other.

I knew that Harry Stottle had not yet confessed to Mildred that his real name was Dr Eckersley and that in a previous existence he had been an eminent psychiatrist with a flourishing celebrity practice in Harley Street. Harry, who appeared to have mellowed enormously after finding love, had admitted to me that he was worried that Mildred might be disappointed, or even critical, when she found out that he hadn’t always been a barman. ‘She likes me being a barman,’ he said. ‘She seems to think it’s a good, solid, respectable job for a fellow. She says you know where you are with a barman.’

Since I happened to know that Mrs Snodgrass had previously been married to a man who stole cars for a living I was not as surprised by this as some folk might have been. When you’ve spent a few years living with a man who carries a bent coat hanger in his jacket pocket and has an impressive collection of spare car number plates hidden in the garage, then any man with a job which involves working hours and a weekly wage packet must seem to be an enviably respectable alternative. Still, I didn’t think she would object too much when she found that Harry hadn’t always pumped pints for a living.

‘Crumbs, do you need a licence to do that now?’ I asked.

‘Do what?’

‘To take off your clothes in public?’

‘Why would you need a licence to do that?’

‘I’ve no idea. You seem to need a licence for just about everything these days. You have to have a licence to take a pig for a walk so it doesn’t seem entirely unreasonable that you’d need a licence to take your clothes off in a pub. I suppose the authorities might think that if you didn’t have to have a licence then everyone would be doing it.’

‘No, you idiot!’ said Harry. ‘Mildred has lost her driving licence. She tried driving home after two glasses of port and lemon and did her best to flatten a lamp post.’

‘It still smells a bit like drains in here,’ said Thumper. He turned to Frank. ‘I thought it was that pair of walkers, but they’ve gone now. Have you got a blockage somewhere down below?’

Frank frowned, thought for a moment and then shook his head. ‘Not that I know of.’

Tentatively, I sniffed. I too could smell drains. And even after a bath and a change of clothes, I knew where the smell was coming from. I looked at my watch.

‘Gosh, is that the time! I must fly. I’ve got a pile of paperwork to get through.’

And I hurried home to have another bath before Patsy got back from the preserve-making jamboree.

Blanche Manders

Mrs Blanche Manders came into my surgery, sat down, looked at me for a moment and burst into tears. She didn't just cry; she sobbed.

Mrs Manders lived on the outskirts of Bilbury, on the road leading out towards Barnstaple, and although I knew her by sight and by name, I knew I'd only rarely seen her as a patient. She had been taking the contraceptive pill since her marriage five years earlier but that was the only thing for which I had seen her. The only other entry on her cardboard medical file was in Dr Brownlow's handwriting and dated nine years earlier – before I'd first moved to Bilbury. She'd been to the surgery complaining of a sore throat. Dr Brownlow had prescribed an antibiotic. She hadn't returned so it seemed fair to assume that the antibiotic had worked and the sore throat had gone. She had been in her early twenties then and she was now just 29-years-old.

I pushed the box of paper tissues across the desk towards her and then moved my chair so that we were a little closer. I waited for the sobbing to subside before I said anything. At first the tears were pouring down her cheeks but slowly the crying slowed, as though she'd run out of tears. And then the sobbing was dry; her whole body wracked with the pain of whatever it was that was tormenting her. I coughed a little because the perfume she was wearing tickled my throat. She seemed to be wearing an awful lot of perfume for a trip to the doctor's surgery.

'What is it?' I asked. I spoke softly. She looked as if she had been crying all night; as though she hadn't slept a wink.

She tried to speak but she couldn't get any words out because when she tried, the sobbing got worse. It was dry now, no tears, but her whole body was wracked with every sob. I wondered what on earth it was that was causing her so much pain. I thought about what I knew of her family. According to her medical records, her parents were both dead and she had no brothers or sisters. There were, I was sure, no children. Just a husband called Harry. He was a few years older than her and worked for the council in Barnstaple. He was something in the planning department. As far as I could remember he was fighting fit. He was, I remembered, a keen cross country runner and like all long distance runners he was small, slightly built and thin.

'Has something happened to Harry?'

She shook her head.

'You have to tell me what it is.'

Still, she didn't speak.

'Have you been in pain? Have you found a lump? Are you bleeding?'

I thought that if I just asked her questions I might eventually trigger a response.

There was silence; a very loud, painful silence.

I asked more questions, searching for a key that would unlock the secret that was causing her so much pain.

'It's awful,' she whispered suddenly. 'I'm so ashamed.' She took a paper tissue from the box and blew her nose. Then she took another tissue and dried her eyes. Her eye make-up was smeared all over her cheeks by the crying. Wiping her eyes just made it worse.

'Talk to me,' I said.

'They say I smell.'

It was whispered so quietly that I wasn't sure I had heard properly. I asked her to repeat it.

'They say I smell.'

'Who says you smell?'

'The people I work with.'

Very tentatively, desperate not to make it obvious, I sniffed.

All I could smell was her perfume. I didn't know what brand it was but it was potent stuff. And she seemed to have used a lot of it.

And suddenly the floodgates opened. This time releasing words not tears. There was some pain, some anger, some frustration and some resentment.

'I bathe every day. I wash my hair twice a week. I go to the dentist regularly. I put on fresh clothes every day. What is wrong with me? What else can I do? I have never felt so ashamed in my life. Never!' She looked at me for the first time. 'What's wrong with me, doctor? Is there something wrong? You have to help me. You have to do something.'

'Who said that you smell? When did they say it?'

'Yesterday. My boss. I work in a clothes shop in Barnstaple and just before closing time he asked me to go into the office. I knew it was something bad because he wasn't his usual jolly self. He's normally very chatty and a bit flirty. He's the only man in the shop. Five women and him and he rather enjoys it, I think. I thought he was going to fire me and now I wish that was all it had been because I could have taken that. And anyway he might just as well have fired me because I can't ever go back there again.'

It took me another ten minutes to get the full story out of her.

It appeared that her boss had called her into his office, told her to sit down and then closed the door. He had then, rather bluntly and with absolutely no finesse, sympathy, understanding or care, told her that the other women in the shop had asked him to have a word with her because they said that she smelt. The boss, the shop manager, said that the other assistants had complained that they found her smell to be unpleasant and that they'd seen customers walk out of the shop when they'd smelt her.

And so then I understood the tears and the sobbing.

Many people would, I suspect, rather be told that they were stupid, or even accused of dishonesty, than be told that they smelt badly. To be told that you smell strikes at the very core of your being as a person; it is your very essence. To be told that you smell because you've trodden in something unpleasant is one thing, an irrelevance, but to be told that your body smells is a blow at your person. And for a woman it is, I suspect, even worse than it would be for a man. A man can laugh off such accusations and might even put it down to manliness – in the same way that a certain type of man might burp or fart in front of his workmates and laugh about it. He would probably be amused by a critical response. He would be unlikely to be broken in the way that Mrs Manders was broken.

'Did they say what the smell was like?' I asked her. 'All I can smell at the moment is your perfume.'

'Fish,' she said. 'They said I smelt of fish.'

She paused, took another tissue and blew her nose again. She put the used tissue into her handbag with the others. 'I used nearly a whole bottle of perfume before I came to see you.'

There are all sorts of disorders which can cause unusual or strong body smells. And as soon as Mrs Manders had told me her problem I started to go through them in my mind.

If a patient has diabetes then high levels of blood glucose can increase the incidence of bad breath and body odour. If diabetes gets out of control then a condition called diabetic ketoacidosis can develop. The body isn't getting enough insulin and so there is a shortage of the sugar the body needs for energy. One well-known sign of ketoacidosis is breath that smells rather fruity. It is a fairly easily identified smell.

But I didn't think that Mrs Manders had diabetes and if she had then I was sure it wasn't out of control. Besides, she had been told that she smelt of fish. Still, I could easily do a urine test that would tell me if she had diabetes.

'Have you lost weight?' I asked her.

'No. I've been dieting but I haven't lost any weight yet.'

'Do you feel unusually thirsty?'

'No.'

'Are you always hungry?'

'No, not more than usual. I've always had a good appetite.'

'Do you pass urine more often than usual?'

She thought for a moment. 'No.'

'Any tingling or numbness in your hands or feet? Do you find that bruises take a long time to heal?'

'No, no, not at all.'

'Have you been more tired than usual?'

'No, I don't think so. I feel tired now but I didn't sleep much last night.'

It seemed that I could rule out diabetes. But I still made a mental note to do a urine test nevertheless.

An overactive thyroid gland can cause excessive sweating and that can result in an unpleasant body odour. But patients with an overactive thyroid aren't difficult to diagnose. They are usually underweight, nervous and twitchy. Even if they don't have visibly enlarged thyroid glands or the slightly bulbous eyes which are classical symptoms of thyrotoxicosis they don't smell of fish. Still, I had to check.

'Have you been unusually nervous or restless?'

'No.'

'Hold out your hands for me, please.'

She held out her hands. There was no tremor, a common sign with thyrotoxic patients. I took her pulse which was absolutely regular, though a little fast.

I didn't think she had a thyroid problem.

I knew that malfunctioning kidneys could result in a build-up of toxins, and that a liver which wasn't working properly could do the same.

'Have you been short of breath? Nauseous? Any pains anywhere?'

'No.'

‘Do your ankles well?’

‘No.’ She paused and thought for a moment. ‘I suppose they do a little bit in the very hot weather. But they’ve always done that.’

‘You don’t feel tired all the time?’

‘No. I was feeling fine until yesterday evening.’

‘And you pass the usual amount of urine?’

‘Oh yes.’

I leant forward and looked at her eyes carefully. There was no yellowing of her sclera. ‘What colour is your urine? Is it darker than usual?’

‘It’s just the usual colour.’

‘And your faeces – are they the usual colour?’

She looked puzzled. ‘The what, doctor?’

‘Your stools, when you open your bowels. Any change in colour?’

She looked a trifle embarrassed though whether this was because of the question or her original failure to understand I didn’t know. ‘Oh, no, nothing unusual.’

‘And your periods are normal?’ I asked.

Mrs Manders was far too young to be going through the menopause but I had to ask because odd things do happen. And during the menopause there can be an increase in sweat production and a change in body odour. There can also be a change in the acidity of the vagina – leading to a change in vaginal odour.

‘They’re as regular as clockwork.’

‘You have no trouble with incontinence?’ I asked. Urinary incontinence is uncommon in young women. But, again, I had to ask.

‘Oh no,’ she replied.

I had now pretty well run out of questions.

It is surprising how much you can learn simply by asking questions.

Lots of big city doctors have a tendency to send their patients off for loads of blood tests, X-rays and so on when they’re trying to make a diagnosis. But for country doctors this can take a lot of time and be very inconvenient for patients. So I always preferred to find out as much as I could by asking questions.

‘I want to test a sample of your urine,’ I told her. ‘Normally, I’d ask you to pop into our loo and pee into a bottle for me. But I need you to go home and have a bath and remove all your perfume so I’ll give you a bottle and you can take it home with you. I’ll call in and see you this afternoon and I can do the test then.’ I took a sample bottle out of a tray on the trolley behind me and handed it to her.

I had another reason for doing this. In order to reach our loo, Mrs Manders would have to go through the waiting room and I knew that she wouldn’t want to do this with her face still streaked with tears and her make-up looking awful. She’d already suffered enough embarrassment. It would save her two trips through the waiting room if I let her leave my consulting room through the French windows.

‘You want to see if I smell?’ she asked.

‘Of course,’ I replied.

She nodded.

I’d asked a lot of questions but I’d got nowhere near to making a diagnosis that would take me any closer to finding a solution to Mrs Manders’s problem. I had to know what she smelt like.

I let her out through the French windows and rang for the next patient.

It was just before three o’clock that afternoon before I rang the doorbell at Mrs Manders’s home. To my surprise, her husband Gerald answered the door. He didn’t invite me in straight away but stood on the doorstep.

‘I came home at lunchtime and took the rest of the day off,’ he explained. ‘She was so upset that I wanted to stay at home this morning but she told me that there was nothing I could do and that I should go to work.’

‘But you’ve been worried all morning?’

He nodded. It was clear from his eyes that he too had been crying. ‘I hate to see her like this,’ he said. ‘How could anyone have been so cruel?’

‘The manager?’

‘Yes. He broke her, doctor. She’s usually a strong woman but even if it had to be said he didn’t have to say it like that, did he?’

It occurred to me that Mr Manders was trying to tell me something.

‘She’s always been a good employee,’ he said. ‘She often worked extra hours and did more Saturdays than anyone else.’

‘Have you noticed something?’ I asked him.

‘Maybe,’ he said. ‘Just a little bit.’

‘For how long?’

‘For a month or maybe six weeks at most. But I didn’t say anything.’

‘Has it been getting worse?’

‘No, not really. No, I don’t think so. She wears a lot of perfume but I can still smell something odd.’

‘How would you describe it?’

‘Not very pleasant,’ he said. ‘Sort of rotten eggs and a garbage sort of smell more than just fishy like they said.’

‘Not very nice?’

He looked over his shoulder, obviously looking to see if his wife could overhear him. ‘No,’ he agreed. ‘Not very nice.’

‘But you didn’t say anything?’

‘No, of course not. How on earth do you tell someone you love that they smell a bit funny?’

It was a good question.

‘Where is she?’

‘She’s upstairs in the bedroom. She was in the bath for over an hour.’

‘Can I go up?’

‘Of course.’

He stood aside so that I could go past him into the house.

Mrs Manders was sitting in a chair in their bedroom. She was wearing a nightie with a dressing gown on top of it. She had clearly been crying again. As I approached her she pointed to the sample bottle I had given her. It was standing on her dressing table. ‘I’ve done the sample, you wanted.’

‘Well, let’s test that first,’ I said. I was desperately hoping that I’d find something that would give me a clue.

I don’t think I have ever before hoped to find a sign of a problem when testing a patient’s urine but this time I was hoping that I would either find a sign of an infection or maybe clear evidence of sugar in the urine.

I took a testing strip from a bottle in my black bag and checked the urine.

It was absolutely normal. There wasn’t any sign of any abnormality at all.

‘Have you found anything, doctor?’ asked her husband who had followed me into the bedroom.

‘It’s perfectly fine,’ I told him.

‘Nothing wrong?’ asked Mrs Manders, and it was clear that she too had been hoping that I would find some abnormality.

‘No. There’s nothing wrong.’

I moved across the room and sat on the end of the bed so that I was only a couple of feet from Mrs Manders.

And now I knew that we really did have a problem.

There was a faint smell of soap but the overpowering smell was one of a mixture of rotten eggs and rotting fish.

‘Can you smell anything?’ whispered Mrs Manders.

I nodded. What else could I do? There was absolutely no point in my denying that there was a problem.

Mrs Manders started to cry.

‘We’ll find out what it is and deal with it,’ I told her. I then asked her to lie down on the bed so that I could examine her. Tactfully, Mr Manders excused himself and left the bedroom. I heard him clatter down the stairs.

Fifteen minutes later, after I had checked her heart, her lungs, her abdomen, her limbs and everything else I had found absolutely nothing wrong with her. I would have given her a completely clean bill of health if I’d been performing the strictest of health insurance examinations.

‘Has your diet changed at all recently?’ I asked her, suddenly wondering if the smell might be caused by something she was eating. Eating asparagus, for example, can cause a dramatic change in the way a body smells – and, in particular, in the way that urine smells.

‘No,’ she replied.

‘You aren’t eating anything different? You haven’t started eating a food you’ve never eaten before?’

‘No.’

‘Am I right in thinking that you don’t want to go back to work?’

She shook her head vigorously. ‘I could never go back there,’ she said.

I took a pad of sick notes out of my black bag, wrote one out and handed it to her. ‘I’ve put you down as having a bad throat,’ I told her.

She thanked me and put the sick note on the bedside table.

‘I don’t know what is causing your problem,’ I told her. ‘I can find absolutely nothing wrong with you. In fact, you seem to be in perfect health. But this evening I will do some research and I’ll telephone you as soon as I know anything.’

‘Do you think you’ll be able to do something about it?’

‘I’ll do something about it,’ I told her.

I never like making promises to patients but it seemed that there had to be a cause for Mrs Manders’s problem and, if there was a cause, there had to be a solution. She was, or appeared to be, a perfectly healthy woman.

That evening, after my surgery, I sat down beside the fire with a pile of medical textbooks on one side of me and a pile of medical journals on the other side. Because we lived miles from any medical library, I kept all the journals to which I subscribed and I had built up my own small but quite comprehensive library.

‘What are you looking for?’ asked Patsy, as I flicked through one journal after another.

I told her.

‘Oh the poor woman!’ said Patsy. ‘How could that manager have been so damned thoughtless and cruel? Surely he could have found a better way to tell her.’

‘You would think so, wouldn’t you?’ I said. ‘But when you stop and think about it what on earth do you say to someone in those circumstances? Her husband noticed the smell but he didn’t say anything because he couldn’t think of what to say or how to say it.’

‘I suppose you could criticise him as much for not saying something as you can criticise the shop manager for saying something,’ said Patsy. ‘Crumbs, what a horrid dilemma. Can I help you? What are you looking for?’

‘I don’t know,’ I admitted. ‘I’m hoping I can find a disease that causes a nasty smell. Maybe there’s a paper in a medical journal that will help.’

So for an hour or so we ploughed our way through the books and journals.

‘Are you looking for anything that can cause a funny smell?’ asked Patsy.

‘Yes. Have you found something?’

‘There’s a short piece in this journal,’ said Patsy. ‘It was published a year or two ago, back in 1972.’

She handed me the journal, opened at the page where she’d found a short abstract of a paper published in an unusual American medical journal. The paper dealt with a substance called trimethylaminuria – something I’d never heard of – and referred back to another paper published just a year or so previously.

‘All this was published after I’d qualified,’ I said.

I tried to keep up-to-date by regularly reading medical journals and new textbooks but it’s impossible for one doctor to keep up with all the new research published around the world. And I had definitely missed this piece of research.

The abstract I read had a short list of references attached to it – these gave the details of three scientific papers which dealt with the problem in more detail. The description of the disease exactly matched Mrs Manders’s symptoms.

I looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was twenty past ten.

‘I’m going to telephone Mrs Manders,’ I said, getting up and heading for my surgery. It seemed to me that although it was late she and her husband would want to know my news sooner rather than later.

It was Gerald Manders who answered the telephone. He sounded short-tempered, even angry, at being disturbed. I told him who it was, apologised for calling so late and asked if I could speak to his wife.

‘I think I’ve found the cause of your problem,’ I told Mrs Manders. ‘If I’m right, and I think I am, then you have a rare condition called trimethylaminuria.’

‘What’s that?’

‘It’s a metabolic condition which has developed because your body is unable to break down some substances which contain nitrogen and which are in the food you eat. One of the compounds is called trimethyalmine.’

‘Can you cure it? Can you make it go away?’

‘I don’t know how to do that yet,’ I told her. ‘But there are some more scientific papers I need to study. Tomorrow morning I will telephone a big medical library in London and I should have the information I need the day after that.’

‘Is it a dangerous disease?’

‘No, I don’t think so. It results in an unpleasant odour but nothing else. It isn’t going to affect the functioning of your body’s organs or threaten your long-term health.

‘But do you think you’ll be able to stop it making me smell badly?’

‘I believe so,’ I told her.

‘What made it start?’ she asked. ‘I haven’t changed my diet.’

‘I don’t know that,’ I told her. ‘Look, I just wanted to ring you to let you know that I now have an idea of what is causing your problem. I wanted to share my hope with you. I’ll ring you in two days when the postman brings these papers I need to look at.’

‘I’m very grateful,’ said Mrs Manders.

And then she started crying again. A moment later I heard her husband's voice. He apologised for his brusqueness, thanked me for calling and asked me what I had found.

I told him what I'd told his wife. And I repeated that I would telephone when I had more news to tell them.

The following morning I telephoned a big medical library in London, spoke to one of the librarians and arranged for them to post me copies of the scientific papers I needed to read. I hadn't even heard of the obscure journals which had published the papers but, fortunately, the library had subscribed to them and was able to promise to send me what I needed in that day's post.

The day after that, when I'd read the papers I had been sent, I telephoned Mrs Manders again and told her that I'd go round to see her that afternoon.

'Trimethylamine has an extremely unpleasant smell, reminiscent of fish and rotten eggs, and it's produced in the intestines when certain types of food are eaten,' I explained. 'Normally, the trimethylamine is dealt with by the body. But when things go slightly wrong with the metabolic processes the trimethyalmine accumulates and is released in the sweat, the urine and the breath. For some reason this condition seems to affect women more than men. One expert has suggested that might be because the different hormones in women's bodies might aggravate the symptoms.'

'Is his trimethylwhatsit catching? Will my husband develop it?'

'No, definitely not. It's not infectious or contagious.' I wrote the name of the condition down on a piece of paper and handed it to her.

'But what has suddenly caused this to happen?' asked Mr Manders. 'Or is that a stupid question?'

'It's a very sensible question,' I told him. 'The theory seems to be that it is caused by changes to a gene in the sufferer's body. It's very rare and it's something that appears to be inherited.'

'Is there a remedy?' asked Mrs Manders. 'Is there anything you can give me?'

'I'll come onto that in a moment,' I said. 'But there are things that you can do to help yourself and they may be more important than anything I can do. First, you need to avoid too much stress or exercise – anything that makes you sweat.'

'Sweating can make it worse?'

'It can.'

'Then that's probably why it got worse in the shop,' said Mrs Manders. 'A couple of the other assistants had complained of the cold and so the manager had increased the heating and put up the temperature. They liked it hot but I did find it uncomfortable.'

'And you were sweating?'

She nodded.

'Second,' I said, 'I think you should stop taking the contraceptive pill. We'll need to discuss some other form of contraception for you.'

'Well, I'm not going back to work and so once this problem is sorted maybe we can think about starting a family,' said Mrs Manders.

'Let's try to get this under control first of all,' I suggested.

'Do you think that the contraceptive pill has caused the problem?' asked her husband.

'It might have made it worse,' I explained. 'If the condition is related to hormone levels then taking the pill would change those levels and might exacerbate the problem.'

'So stopping the contraceptive pill would help?'

'I think it could.'

'Is there anything else I can do?'

'Definitely. I think you could try cutting out the sort of foods that contain trimethylamine.'

'What are those?'

'I've made a list for you,' I told her. 'Eggs, milk, liver, kidneys, beans, peas, peanuts, cabbage, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts and broccoli. Oh, and seafood and shellfish.'

'Seafood?'

'It apparently contains trimethyamine,' I agreed.

Mrs Manders looked at her husband. 'When you asked me if my diet had changed I forgot about that,' she said. 'My brother recently started to work at a fishmonger in Ilfracombe. He's been bringing us mackerel, crab and other fish and shellfish and so we've been eating more seafood than before.'

'I'm afraid that you should probably cut fish out for the time being,' I suggested.

It was beginning to sound as if we had encountered a perfect storm; a cornucopia of circumstances just right for this condition to become apparent.

'You said there was also something you could probably recommend as a medicine,' Mr Manders reminded me.

‘There are a few things we could try,’ I said. ‘But to start with I suggest that you try taking something called activated charcoal. I don’t have any in the pharmacy at Bilbury Grange but you can buy it over the counter at chemists and health food shops. Taking vitamin B2 supplement might also help because vitamin B2 seems to help break down trimethylamine in the body.’

‘You really think that all this will help?’

‘I definitely do,’ I said. ‘Both the charcoal and the vitamin B2 It should help by decreasing the concentration of trimethylamine in the body. It seems that charcoal might help by converting the trimethylamine into something that is harmless and doesn’t smell.’

‘And all this is very rare, did you say?’ asked Mr Manders.

‘It is. In fact the condition was only first reported a couple of years ago. Before that no one knew it existed.’

‘So if I’d come to you with this problem five years ago you wouldn’t have heard of it?’

‘No. To be honest I hadn’t heard of it anyway until a couple of nights ago. But five years ago no one else would have heard of it either because no one had discovered it.’

When I left their home both Mr and Mrs Manders looked happier than they had done for days. They had quite a few things to try and I was quietly confident that the approach would work.

Happily, my confidence was well placed.

Within a week Mrs Manders was back in the surgery to tell me that her husband had told her that the unpleasant smell which had caused so much distress had now gone completely.

‘I haven’t put on any perfume today,’ she said. ‘Please tell me if you can smell anything unpleasant.’ She stood just a couple of feet away from me.

I sniffed.

It seemed a rather rude thing to do but what alternative was there?

‘Perfect!’ I told her quite honestly. ‘You smell as fresh as a spring garden.’

With a big, beaming smile she told me that for two days she and her husband had talked of leaving North Devon and going to live in another part of the country.

‘To be honest I was terrified of going back into Barnstaple and seeing any of the other girls working in the shop – let alone the manager. But eventually we decided that it was silly to run away. I don’t have to go into Barnstaple much anyway. I can do most of my shopping at Peter Marshall’s shop and if we need anything else that has to come from Barnstaple then my husband can collect it – or we can go to Taunton instead.’

I told her that I was very glad that they had both decided to stay in the village and added that Peter would undoubtedly be delighted!

After the evening surgery I told Patsy just how valuable her detective work had been.

She looked at me. ‘I’ve been meaning to ask you this since you first told me about this disease. Do I smell at all funny?’

‘No. Definitely not.’

‘Do you promise?’

‘I promise. Do I smell funny?’

‘Well, I didn’t like to say anything…’

‘But?’

‘You do smell of bonfire a lot of the time.’

Mrs Manders’s problem wasn’t a laughing problem but I had to smile. Sometimes it is too easy to allow a patient’s problem to get into your mind, dampen your spirit and poison your soul. A little black humour is sometimes an essential part of the armoury of a doctor and his nearest and dearest.

‘I don’t think there’s a cure for that,’ I said. ‘I can’t possibly stop having bonfires.’

‘I didn’t think you could,’ said Patsy.

The Flagpole

I don't think I have yet mentioned how we came to have a flagpole decorating our garden.

Well, the whole flagpole thing was Patchy Fogg's fault

Patchy and I were at an auction in South Molton when he noticed that there was a flagpole for sale.

'You should buy that,' he said. 'It would look good in your garden.'

Naturally, I told him not to be daft, that I didn't want a flagpole, particularly not one that was 30 feet tall. 'I've got absolutely no intention of buying a flagpole,' I insisted. I continued to rummage through a large box of old books that was almost certain to be knocked down for 50 pence. Hardly anyone ever wants to buy the mixed box of books at a country auction but there are always some fascinating finds to be found therein. In among the Victorian novels by long forgotten authors and the inevitable farming Almanacs (full of remarkably dull and completely out-of-date stuff about crop yields and weather) and out-of-date books on mechanical engineering (full of incomprehensible diagrams of cogs and flywheels) there will invariably be a few bound volumes of old *Punch* magazine, *Windsor Magazine*, *The Captain*, *The Strand* and so on. These old volumes make marvellous reading.

'Your lot is up now,' said Patchy, nudging me as I continued to rummage.

I leapt to my feet, thrust my hand in the air and kept it there. I have never mastered the business of rubbing my nose, winking or tugging on an ear lobe – the little visual ticks which seem so popular among the professional dealers who dominate most auction rooms.

And two and a half minutes later I found myself being congratulated by Patchy on having purchased my very own flagpole for £4 excluding commission.

'I thought I was bidding for this box of books!'

'Haven't I always told you that you should pay more attention when you stick your hand up at an auction?' asked Patchy, whom I had until then always thought of as a good and dear friend.

'How on earth am I going to get a flagpole home?'

'Oh, don't worry about that. We'll tie it to the top of the van. It's an absolute bargain at £4. It would have cost twenty times as much if you'd bought it new.'

We tied the flagpole to the roof of Patchy's van and got the darned thing back to Bilbury Grange safely eventually, though we agreed that it was a good job we didn't see any policemen on our way home. The pole, which was a solid piece of Douglas fir and far heavier than either of us had expected it to be, overhung both ends of the van by quite a few feet and although Patchy managed to find a couple of old rags to tie to the two ends, I feel sure that our journey home wasn't exactly legal. My mood wasn't lightened by the fact that I had been so busy berating Patchy for tricking me into buying the flagpole that I'd missed the box of books I'd coveted. The box had been knocked down to a farmer from Countisbury who had paid 25 pence for the whole lot and, judging by the way he tossed the box into the trailer on the back of his tractor, probably intended to use them as fire-lighters.

'It looks like a flagpole,' said Patsy, when we got home and lifted it off the top of Patchy's van. 'But it can't possibly be a flagpole because why would you buy a flagpole?'

'It's an absolute bargain!' Patchy said to her. 'You could sell this next week and make a profit.'

'Can't we sell it this week and just get whatever it was we paid for it?'

'It was only £4,' I pointed out, rather weakly using the traditional fact that it hadn't cost very much to justify having bought it. 'Plus commission.'

'The only other bidder was going to chop it up for firewood!' said Patchy. 'That would have been a crime.'

'It was a crime to buy it,' said Patsy. 'Where are we going to put it?'

'I thought we could put it up just down beyond the summerhouse,' I suggested. 'There's a big patch of grassland down there that needs livening up a little.'

'I'd rather thought of having a camellia bush there,' said Patsy.

'We can still have a camellia bush,' I pointed out. 'Maybe we should have two or three.'

'Did you get a hole and a flag with the flagpole?'

'A hole?'

'Well, presumably you can't just stand it up without putting one end into a hole.'

Patchy and I had, of course, completely forgotten that when you have a flagpole you need a hole to put it into and neither of us had expected that purchasing a suitable hole could prove to be considerably more difficult to organise, and more expensive, than buying the flagpole.

Who would have thought that a hole could cost so much?

Our first thought had been to bang in a fencepost (approximately the same width as the flag pole) and then use the grab on the back of a tractor to pull the fencepost out of the hole. We would then insert the flagpole into the empty hole.

That, at least, was our plan and it sounded easy so, naturally, it didn't work.

In the end we had to hire a specialist flag pole hole maker to come from somewhere up near Bristol. He made the hole, put in a special metal sleeve to protect the wood and to make sure that the flagpole didn't rot, and presented us with a bill that was so large that I am still too embarrassed to mention what it was. Patsy and I don't like to talk about it. All I can say is that I assume that the man who made the hole lives in a mansion and has loads of servants.

It was the flagpole hole borer, a weedy fellow with ginger hair who pointed out that if we wanted to fly a flag we would have to equip it with pulleys, clips, toggles and halyards and that it would be considerably easier to fix these essentials to the flagpole before we erected it. Fortunately, he happened to have all the necessary bits and pieces with him and was able and willing to sell these items to us at a very reasonable price. Since it seemed unlikely that Peter Marshall would have everything we required available in his shop we felt had little choice but to purchase what we needed there and then.

(Just for the record, it turned out that we were, of course, quite wrong about Peter Marshall's shop not having what we needed. I later discovered, purely by chance, that Peter had everything we needed in stock. Indeed, he had a surprisingly comprehensive supply of both new and second hand flagpole accessories. And he even had a flagpole for sale, though it wasn't quite as tall as the one I purchased. I learnt, once again, that one should never underestimate the ability of a village shopkeeper to supply the unusual. Even more surprising was the fact that Peter's prices were considerably lower than the prices charged by the professional flagpole hole borer.)

Arranging for the man to come and make our hole took about a month. It seems that you can't just rush the business of having a hole bored for a flagpole.

But then, at long last, came the fun part: picking a flag, finding a way to fix it the halyard, and flying it!

Our first flag, purchased at Thumper Robinson's suggestion, was a Jolly Roger; a good old piratical skull and crossbones on a black background. We flew that flag for six months or so until the wind finally tore it to shreds.

'I liked the skull and crossbones,' said Patsy, as we contemplated a replacement. 'But now I fancy something a little more dignified as a replacement.'

(Patsy, I am pleased to say, had grown to like the idea of our having our own flagpole.)

We replaced the Jolly Roger with a traditional England flag – the one with the three golden lions, rampant on a maroon background, just as they are displayed on England cricket, rugby and soccer shirts.

The flag with the three lions goes back to the 12th century and predates the flag of St George, the familiar one showing a red cross on a white background. The cross of St George has only been used as an England flag since 1606 when it was used in the design of the Union Flag. (Some flag experts do say, however, that the red cross was used by English soldiers from the late 13th century onwards. This still means that the three lion flag is the original flag of England.)

It was Henry 1st (known as 'the lion of England') who first had a lion on his standard. He then added a second lion because his first wife had a lion on her family crest. Finally, he added a third lion because his second wife also had a lion on her standard.

Later, in the 12th century, Richard III (aka Richard the Lionheart) also adopted the three lion flag and it then became the official flag of England.

So that's the flag which we chose and which has, ever since then, flown on our flagpole.

Patsy agrees with me that it looks rather smart.

We leave the flag flying all the time, unlike a chap I know who has a union jack flying on a pole fixed on his front lawn. He takes his flag down on windy days because he says that it gets frayed when the wind blows and then has to be replaced too often. Personally, I can't see much point in flying a flag only on calm days but it was his flagpole and he was paying for the flags so I didn't say anything when he told me what he did.

Now, Patsy agrees with me that there is something wonderfully invigorating about watching a flag fully stretched in a high wind.

And so, all things considered, I have no doubt that sometime soon we will probably find it possible to forgive Patchy.

But not yet, of course.

I still have far too much fun seeing him squirm when I remind him (and anyone who is listening) of the day I wanted to buy a box of old books and ended up buying a flagpole.

The Painter

'I've developed this terrible trouble with my right arm,' said Auberon Lambert, slumping down in the chair. He rubbed his right hand and wrist with his left hand as he spoke.

Mr Lambert was a tall, slightly overweight, dignified looking man in his middle fifties. He and his wife lived in the village before I arrived but they were people who kept themselves to themselves. I had never seen either of them in the Duck and Puddle, in the local church or at any social events. I had seen Mrs Candida Lambert at Peter Marshall's shop occasionally.

Mr Lambert was a painter. I knew of his reputation for he was something of a local celebrity and his paintings of seascapes and of wild moorland over Exmoor had won him many fans. Both Patsy and I liked his work very much indeed and Patsy, in particular, was hugely enthusiastic. A year or so earlier she had bought a print of one of his paintings, a wonderful picture of a rocky cove called Heddon's Mouth, and it hung in our drawing room.

'What sort of trouble? A pain? A weakness?'

'I don't really know how to describe it. There is some pain and weakness and some numbness and some tingling too. And my grip is weak. I've been dropping things. I can't extend my arm properly. I can't straighten my wrist and fingers. It's all a devil of a nuisance.'

'Do you have the pain and the other symptoms only in your hand and wrist?'

'No. The pain starts in my thumb, and the fingers next to it, my index and middle fingers, but it goes up the underside of my arm and seems to affect this muscle at the back of my upper arm. Not the biceps muscle, the other one. I forget what it's called.'

'The big muscle at the back of your upper arm is your triceps.'

'That's the one,' he said. 'I should know that for heaven's sake. I studied anatomy for long enough.'

'Why did you study anatomy?' I asked, slightly puzzled.

'I did it when I was at college. I spent three years studying art and we had to learn about the human body – bones, muscles and so on.'

'Of course. So the pain and tingling affect your hand, your wrist and your arm – all the way up to your triceps?'

'Yes, that's about it.'

'How long have you had the symptoms?'

'Just a couple of days. I left it yesterday because I thought the symptoms would just go away by themselves – as mysteriously as they arrived. But it's no better today than it was two days ago. It's no worse, but it's no better.

'It sounds as if it's your radial nerve that is affected.'

'Yes, I remember the radial nerve. It goes all the way up the arm doesn't it? I suppose it does sound as if that's the cause of the trouble. But, good heavens, how on earth have I damaged my radial nerve? Does this mean I'm always going to be like this?'

'I didn't say that you'd damaged it!' I said quickly. I had deliberately not used the word 'damaged'. 'The word damage suggests something that might be permanent or at the very least something serious. You can traumatise the nerve without damaging it. And sometimes the symptoms are very short lived.'

He looked extremely relieved.

'I'm a painter,' he explained. 'And at the moment I can't paint. I can't even hold a damned paint brush. And if I could hold a brush I wouldn't be able to control it properly.'

'Have you fallen or knocked your arm?' I asked.

He didn't have to think before replying. 'Neither,' he said.

'Have you been doing anything unusual? Working in the garden? Using a hammer? Digging? Using garden tools more than usual?'

He shook his head. 'I don't do any of that stuff. I'm afraid I'm utterly useless in the garden and I wouldn't know which end of a hammer to hold. My wife looks after the garden and if we need something doing around the house we call in a handyman.'

I nodded. His wife Candida Lambert had, over recent years, won numerous prizes in the various local flower and vegetable shows. Her Hollyhocks were said to be among the best in Devon, let alone North Devon. She sold quite a lot of her vegetables through Peter Marshall's shop and although Patsy and I grew most of our own vegetables, we sometimes bought stuff that she'd grown. Peter used to sell her vegetables from a separate box and he charged a little more for them. Mrs Lambert seemed to have a knack with carrots and parsnips, and though she insisted that this was simply a consequence of having really suitable soil, I found this difficult to believe. It is difficult to grow root crops without them splitting or producing bifurcated tap roots. It is, in particular, easy to grow carrots and parsnips that taste rather woody. I've been told that it's a question of preparing the soil with the right amount of water and manure. Mrs Lambert always managed to grow vegetables which tasted as good as they looked.

'You haven't cut yourself?' I asked him.

He shook his head, pulled up his sleeve and held out his arm. There were no signs of any injury; no cuts and no bruises.

'Do you play any sport?'

'Chess. I play chess. But just with a chap I know who lives in Canada. We post each other our moves.'

'So it's hardly what you'd call a hectic activity?'

'I make about one move a fortnight. Our current game has been going on for eighteen months. Our last game lasted for two and a half years. The chap I play with is in his 80s and he's left instructions in his will that if he dies in the middle of a game then his moves should be completed by his son. It's not exactly a dangerously fast sport.'

'No other sports?'

'No. I walk around the village occasionally. But I'm not much of a walker I'm afraid. I only go out occasionally. We have a lovely cottage with a terrific view. To be honest, we don't go out much at all. We're rather reclusive.'

I nodded. Their home, which was called Woodworm Cottage, was one of the many small but beautiful cottages in the village. It had a thatched roof and a beautiful wooden porch. In the summer, pink climbing roses adorned the porch and the front of the house.

I had seen Mr Lambert walking around the village once or twice. He weighed several stone more than he should have done and if he were making a list of his favourite hobbies it was a reasonable guess that eating would be higher on the list than walking. 'Have you slept in a funny position at all recently?'

He frowned, seemingly rather puzzled. 'No,' he said.

'You haven't slept in a chair, for example?'

'Good heavens above! No! I haven't slept in a chair since I was a student. Why on earth do you ask me that?'

'Sometimes people fall asleep in a chair, with their arm hanging over the side or back of the chair. Their radial nerve gets temporarily crushed and they end up with the symptoms of nerve damage. It's only very temporary.'

'Ah. No. I definitely haven't slept in a chair.'

I was beginning to feel puzzled. I had excluded all the common causes of radial damage.

'I was getting rather desperate in my search for a cause. You can't really cure a medical problem like this without knowing why it has happened. I was beginning to wonder if the problem might not be a poisoning of some kind.

'Did the symptoms start suddenly or slowly?' I asked.

'Oh suddenly,' he replied. 'I woke up with them.'

'Your wife hasn't noticed any symptoms?'

'No. She is fine.'

'You don't have lead pipes in your cottage?'

'No. We had the cottage completely re-plumbed when we bought it. Actually, there really wasn't much in the way of plumbing. It was one of those cottages with just a cold tap in the kitchen and an outside loo. We had a bathroom put in upstairs and when we had the kitchen fitted out we had a proper sink with modern hot and cold taps. The piping is all that copper stuff.'

The beauty of old cottages is that you can do things like this to them. The walls of an old cottage tend to be thick enough and tough enough to handle some banging and hammering. If you tried to put new plumbing, fresh electrical wiring or central heating into a modern cardboard house the building would probably fall down at the very sight of a hammer. A relative of Patchy's, who lives near London, purchased a newly built home. He took down a thin, internal wall which was not a load bearing wall and the house developed some frightening cracks. Patchy said that the whole house darned near collapsed around him.

So it didn't seem as though Mr Lambert had been poisoned by lead in the drinking water. I flicked through his medical records envelope. There wasn't much in it. He'd broken his fibula playing football at the age of 16 and he'd had ringworm when he'd been in the army. Otherwise, he had enjoyed a very healthy life – until now. I put the medical records envelope down.

'Do you have any other illness or symptoms that I don't know about?'

'No. I'm lucky in that I have quite good health. I'm a bit overweight,' he said patting his tummy. 'But that's about it.'

I decided I'd better give him a pretty full examination. Diabetes and kidney disease can both cause inflammation and fluid retention which can lead to nerve compression. There were no signs of any fluid retention. But I had to check.

Twenty minutes later I was still no further forward. There were absolutely no signs of any problem with his kidneys and he definitely didn't have diabetes. His blood pressure was perfectly normal and I could find nothing wrong with his heart.

I was beginning to think that I would have to refer him to the hospital where they could do some tests on his nerves and muscles. At least the hospital would be able to organise some physiotherapy to help deal with the symptoms. Massage, physical therapy or even a splint can often prove helpful. The only thing I could think of for the moment was to prescribe a painkiller with an anti-inflammatory action. And the best drug available was aspirin – good, old-fashioned aspirin.

Many doctors didn't think much of aspirin because it wasn't new, it wasn't expensive and it wasn't heavily promoted by a drug company with a busy marketing department. There were many alternatives available but, taken in the soluble form, I still thought that aspirin was still the most effective and safest drug for the treatment of pain and inflammation.

And then suddenly, quite unexpectedly, a hint of a possibility of a clue appeared.

'All this couldn't have happened at a worse time,' he said. 'A week ago I started work on a new commission, something a bit outside my usual line, and now I can't work on it at all.'

'In what way is it different?' I asked him.

'I usually paint in a fairly loose, easy style,' he said. 'I suppose you could describe me as an impressionist.'

I smiled. 'I know your work,' I said. 'We have a print of one of your paintings hanging in our drawing room. It has pride of place.'

'Really? Which one?'

'I can't remember the name of it but it's a painting of Heddon's Mouth. It's a beautiful painting which shows the sea crashing over the rocks.'

'Ah, that one is called simply 'Heddon's Mouth',' said Mr Lambert. 'I can never think up clever titles. You were involved in an amazing rescue there a year or two back weren't you?'

'I was,' I agreed. 'A man slipped between two rocks and got stuck.'

'And the tide was coming in.'

I nodded.

I have to admit that just remembering that day made me shiver slightly. I had to amputate the man's leg so that we could drag him out from between the rocks.

'That was quite a rescue. The tide comes in very quickly along this bit of coast and Heddon's Mouth can be quite scary when it's windy. It was pretty rough that day, wasn't it? Candida's brother was down there fishing that day. He said it was quite an impressive rescue and he's not a bloke who is ever easily impressed.'

'Thank you,' I said, feeling slightly embarrassed and not really knowing what else to say. 'Let's get back to your painting. In what way is this new commission different to your usual work?'

'I usually sell my work through two galleries, one in Barnstaple and one in Exeter, and the owner of the gallery in Exeter recently put me in touch with a family in Exeter. The guy runs a factory, I can't remember what they make, and he wanted someone to paint a portrait of his extended family. You know the sort of thing, a big picture of all the family – including the children and the grandparents. Heaven knows why but they wanted it to be like one of those pictures Rembrandt used to do – with everyone standing in a line looking as if they've just had some really bad news.'

'I've never really been a huge fan of those formal pictures,' I said.

'Nor me,' said Mr Lambert. 'To be perfectly honest, paintings such as 'The Nightwatch', 'The Anatomy Lecture' and 'The Draper's Guild' always left me cold. I know I shouldn't say it but to me they always seemed to be nothing more than corporate portraits done to hang on the wall somewhere and impress visitors. Rembrandt also did family groups and they always looked to me to be a bit wooden. Rembrandt was a master but he was also the early forerunner of the family photographer – the chap who comes in and takes a picture of everyone looking at the camera and saying 'cheese'.'

I laughed. I felt the same way.

'Anyway, for some bizarre reason this chap in Exeter wanted me to paint the family members all in a line and to make it look like a photograph. He is apparently quite a rich fellow so he was prepared to pay a big fee for the painting. The gallery owner didn't know any portrait painters he could ask, most of the well-known ones seem to work in London, and he didn't want to lose his commission, so he asked me if I'd do it. I used to do a few portraits many years ago – before I found I was able to earn a decent living painting impressionist pictures of the sea and the countryside. So I agreed to do it. I took loads of Polaroid pictures and, as I say, I started work on the picture a week ago.'

'Presumably, you have to paint in a different style to do something like that?'

'Oh yes. My usual style of painting is very fluid, very easy.'

'And with this portrait? It's a very different way of painting?'

‘Oh, yes, it’s completely different; it’s very precise, very accurate. Every tiny brush stroke has to be just right. I know a fellow in Yorkshire who does landscapes and he paints in every blade of grass and every leaf. When you look at one of his pictures you think you’re looking at a photograph. I call it ultra-realism and to be honest I’ve never been a fan of that type of painting either. If you’re going to paint something that looks like a photograph then why not just take a photograph?’

I smiled, and nodded for him to go on. I began to think that we might be getting close to an explanation.

‘So I accepted the commission, purely out of greed I’m afraid.’ He grinned. ‘The fellow was prepared to pay a pretty huge fee for what he wanted.’

‘And doing something like this completely changes the way you paint?’

‘Oh yes, very much so.’

‘You hold the brushes in a different way?’

‘Definitely! My normal style of painting is, as I say, rather loose and fluid. But to do this sort of very realistic painting you have to grip the brush very tightly. Well, I do anyway. Other painters might do it differently but I found that I had to keep a really tight grip on the brush in order to get the precise sort of result that I need.’

‘Are you finding it stressful to change your way of painting?’

‘Massively. Absolutely massively. Candida didn’t want me to take the commission. She said that she didn’t see why I should accept it at all. I make enough money out of the sort of painting I do and Candida grows all our vegetables and makes a little more money by selling the surplus.’

‘So when you started to do this portrait, you gripped the brushes very tightly and you were tense.’

‘Yes, that’s right.’ He stopped for a moment. ‘Oh, golly, I see what you mean! You think that in changing my style of painting I might have done something that caused this problem with my radial nerve.’

I nodded. ‘Gripping anything very tightly can cause trauma to the muscles. Doing it while you’re gripping something small, like a paint brush, can probably make it worse. And doing it for long periods is almost certain to cause problems. It can cause what’s called a mononeuropathy, damage to a particular nerve – in your case the radial nerve.’

‘Is the damage going to be permanent?’ he asked anxiously.

‘Certainly not! Take a few days off from painting to give your muscles a rest. The problems should disappear quite soon if you can stop gripping too tightly. And you need to put down your brushes every 15 to 20 minutes and make sure that the muscles are relaxed. Just massage them gently, or shake them as if you were trying to get rid of droplets of water. And it probably goes without saying that you need to try not to get so stressed about it all. To speed up the recovery I suggest you take a couple of soluble aspirin tablets every four hours.’

‘And that’s all?’ That will do the trick?’

‘Yes.’

‘I won’t need an operation?’

‘Good heavens, no.’

I had never seen anyone with Mr Lambert’s symptoms caused in this way. But I was confident that between us we had isolated the cause – and found the solution.

‘And once the problem has gone I’ll be able to go back to my normal style of painting?’

‘Definitely.’

Mr Lambert took in a deep breath and let it out again quite quickly. He nodded at me, as if I’d just given him some valuable advice. ‘I’m going to tell them I can’t do this painting,’ he said. ‘I was a fool to take it on. It’s not the sort of thing I like doing, it’s not the sort of thing I want to do and it’s probably not the sort of thing I’m best at.’

‘Will that cause problems for you?’

‘Oh no. I haven’t been paid anything so I haven’t got to give any money back. And the gallery owner will find someone else to do the painting. I’ve wasted a bit of time preparing the groundwork – the Polaroids and so on – but that doesn’t matter and it’s been a pretty valuable lesson. Mr Lambert suddenly looked considerably happier than he had when he’d entered the surgery. ‘Once my radial nerve has recovered, I’ll go back to painting my usual stuff.’

‘I can give you a sick note if you like, confirming that this style of painting has created a real physical problem for you.’

‘Could you do that?’

I nodded, scribbled out an appropriate note and handed it to him. He put the note into his pocket, stood up and gingerly offered me his other hand to shake.

‘Give me a ring and let me know how things go,’ I told him. ‘It’ll probably take a few days for the nerve and your muscles to settle down.’

When Mr Lambert left he was smiling. His physical symptoms weren’t any better than they’d been when he came into the surgery. But I was confident that we had found the cause and he seemed very happy about the decision he’d made.

Mr Lambert didn’t ring but three days later I got home from doing my afternoon calls and Patsy showed me a large parcel wrapped in brown paper that had been delivered.

‘What on earth is that?’ I asked.

‘I haven’t got the faintest. But Mr Lambert brought it round.

I carefully tore open the brown paper.

And inside, beautifully framed, was the original of the print we’d got hanging in our drawing room.

It was one of the nicest, unexpected and most welcome gifts I’ve ever received from a patient.

Card Skimming (1970s style)

Thumper Robinson and I were in the Duck and Puddle, sitting in our usual seats beside the fire. Frank Parsons, who was, with his wife Gilly, the co-proprietor of the pub and who was sitting with us, had positioned himself nearest to the fire so that he could keep the fire well fed. It is Frank's boast that no one goes hungry or cold in the Duck and Puddle. The new barman, Gengolphus 'Harry' Stottle (formerly known in London to his celebrity patients as psychiatrist Dr Pelham Ronald Eckersley but now known to one and all as 'Harry' the barman) was behind the bar, leaning on the counter and looking happier than I'd ever seen him look. And why shouldn't he look happy – he had in front of him a pint of Old Restoration, a huge ham and pickle sandwich on fresh, crusty white bread and an hour or so of stimulating conversation with the brightest brains for yards around.

As Harry himself once said: 'A man who isn't smiling when he has a pint of the best and a decent sandwich in front of him is clearly suffering from a serious malady affecting his body or his nature.' Harry it has to be admitted, was no advertisement for temperance or sobriety or, indeed, for political correctness.

Harry, now firmly settled in Bilbury and living in a cottage which he had rebuilt after a disastrous fire, had recently acquired a new cat which he had called Hardy. I had made the mistake of asking him 'Why?'

And Harry had explained that when Thomas Hardy died at the age of 87, his will had stated that he was to be buried at Stinsford in Dorset, a mile or so away from the town of Dorchester, unless the nation strongly desired otherwise, and required him to be buried in Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey.

A compromise was reached.

It was decided, by the people who decide these sort of things, that Hardy's ashes would be interred at Westminster but that his heart would be buried in Stinsford. However, when the pathologist removed Hardy's heart in order to accommodate the unusual requirements of the nation's need for a double burial, the urn in which the heart was supposed to have been placed had not arrived.

'So the pathologist wrapped Hardy's heart in a tea towel and put it into a metal biscuit tin,' explained Harry. 'But, unfortunately, he didn't put the lid on properly. And when the undertaker entered the bedroom he found one of Hardy's pet cats sitting next to the open box and licking its lips. The heart, or most of it, had gone and was, it was safe to assume, was now tucked away inside the cat.'

'The undertaker, whose name was Charles Hannah, grabbed the cat, wrung its neck and put it in the urn with what was left of Hardy's heart. And then the heart, mostly now inside the cat, was placed into the polished wooden casket which was to be buried in Stinsford.'

'So that's why you called your cat Hardy?'

'It seemed as good a name as any and an excellent way to commemorate a wonderful and true story,' explained Harry with a shrug.

Like Harry, Thumper was also drinking a pint of Old Restoration. It had been his favourite beverage for a long time ('ever since man crawled out of the primordial soup', he once claimed in what was for him a rare foray into the world of academia) and if Frank served it in glasses big enough to hold a quart he would have drunk it from quart glasses to save time.

Frank himself was sipping a small whisky and water (Gilly Parsons, pleased with her husband's weight loss and my medical report on his blood pressure, which was now well under control, had recently increased his alcohol allowance to three single whiskies; one each on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays).

'Have you been down to Peter's shop lately?' Frank asked me.

'Not for three or four days.'

Peter Marshall, who runs the Bilbury village shop, was famous throughout North Devon for the slogan 'Buy One And Get What You Pay For', which was painted above his shop doorway, for the slogan 'Good things aren't cheap and cheap things aren't good' which he had embroidered on the breast pocket of the brown warehouseman's coat which he wore in the shop and for his numerous business plans.

'Oh, you should definitely go down and take a look,' said Frank.

'The caravan?' I asked.

'That's the one,' agreed Frank.

Peter had recently started something he called a 'time share' opportunity. Having read of developers who sold what they called 'time share' opportunities in Hawaii, Peter had decided to introduce the idea to North Devon. He had bought an old wreck of a caravan and instead of simply renting it out by the week to holidaymakers, he was selling shares in the caravan. Would-be holidaymakers could, for a sizeable sum of money, buy the right to spend a week in the caravan every year. Peter had bought a small advertisement in a magazine called *Exchange and Mart* and his promotional copy offered city-dwellers ‘the chance to own their very own home in the country for a modest one-off payment’.

Peter once explained to me that any new and great enterprise requires two quite different human skills. First, it requires the vision, the imagination, to see an opportunity where no one else has seen one. Second, it requires a systematic, logical mind able to turn the dream into reality.

Peter modestly claimed to have both skills.

‘How is the time share thing going?’ asked Harry.

‘The last I heard Peter had managed to sell 37 weeks,’ I replied. ‘I don’t think the poor devils know what they’ve bought. Peter’s advert was illustrated with a picture of the caravan lifted from the manufacturer’s brochure. But the caravan they’re buying has mould and leaks and looks as if it’s been sitting in a field for a decade.’

‘That’ll be because it has been sitting in a field for a decade,’ said Thumper. ‘And it was pretty clapped out when it was dumped in the field.’

‘Well the ‘time share’ project was last week’s miracle business opportunity,’ said Frank. ‘He’s now getting ready for Christmas.’

‘But Christmas is weeks away!’

‘Peter says that in the big towns they sell Christmas stuff in July.’

‘Has he put up his decorations?’

‘No, he hasn’t done that yet. But he’s got Christmas hampers for sale.’

‘Hampers?’

‘Well, that’s what he calls them. He’s selling old cardboard boxes filled with a variety of what he calls Christmassy items. The boxes he calls hampers have all got advertisements for soap powder printed on the side.’

‘What sort of Christmassy items is he putting in them?’

‘Well, for £5 you get a tin of baked beans, a tin of spaghetti hoops, three turnips, a bottle of beer, a bottle of lemonade, a tin of pilchards, a box of budgie seed, a little bell and mirror for hanging in your budgie cage, a small bottle of horseradish sauce, a large bottle of Tizer, a medium sized bottle of Vimto, and a standard sized bottle of Liebfraumilch. If you bought the £10 hamper you got all that lot plus a packet of Fisherman’s Friend lozenges for coughs and sore throats, a bottle of anti-dandruff shampoo, a bottle of castor oil, a box of dates complete with a little, wooden fork, a bottle of antacid, a packet of aspirin tablets, a packet of custard, a two pound bag of caster sugar, an orange, a small bag of crystallised ginger, half a pound of butter, a two pound bag of mixed dried fruit, a sprig of plastic holly, a bag of flour, a bag of rice, a bottle of bleach and a packet of lemon puffs.’

‘I thought a Christmas hamper was supposed to contain stuff like a Christmas pudding,’ I said.

‘I asked him about that. Peter said that his hamper has got all the ingredients to make your own Christmas pudding. He said that if you make your own pudding you’ll feel a greater sense of pride than if you just buy the pudding ready-made.’

We sat and thought about this for a while. Peter never fails to surprise any of us.

Five minutes later Patchy arrived. He was walking slowly and clutching his head.

‘What would you like to drink?’ Harry asked him.

‘I don’t think I can manage anything alcoholic,’ whispered Patchy. ‘Adrienne and I had a romantic little dinner party to celebrate something. Don’t ask me what because I can’t remember. Adrienne bought a bottle of ouzo, that Greek stuff that tastes a bit like pastis and a bottle of brandy that she insisted had to be drunk immediately before it went bad. I drank too much of both and woke up with a hell of a hangover.’

Adrienne, who is Patchy’s wife is also my sister-in-law. She used to be keen on natural remedies but had in recent years discovered that she preferred alcohol to herbal teas and liked to buy wines and spirits that no one had ever heard of but which seemed a bargain. As many people knew from bitter experience she believed that once a bottle had been opened the cork should be thrown away. No one could convince her that some varieties of alcohol, such as spirits, did not inevitably go ‘off’ and turn dangerous if not consumed within an hour of opening.

We had all looked at him, slightly shocked. It wasn’t the fact that he had a hangover that was so surprising, but the fact that he appeared to be refusing an alcoholic drink. This was like a dog turning his nose up at a bone or a politician eschewing a photo opportunity.

‘No hair of the dog?’ asked Harry. ‘What did you say you were drinking?’

It is widely believed, by those who drink alcohol with enthusiasm, that anyone who has imbibed too heavily can soothe their troubled body and spirit by drinking a glass of the same type of alcohol the morning after. The theory may sound self-serving but there is some historical basis for it. Both Hippocrates, the father of medicine, and modern homoeopaths believe that ‘like cures like’ and many historical figures (such as Rabelais) backed the notion of treating an ailment caused by one substance with a cure consisting of the same stuff. The expression comes from the idea of treating a bite from a rabid dog with a potion containing some of the dog’s hair.

‘I don’t think I could cope with anything too alcoholic,’ said Patchy. He held his head in his hands for a moment, as though checking to make sure that it was still there. ‘Maybe I’ll just have a glass of white wine,’ he agreed, overcoming his reluctance with surprising speed. ‘If that’s what you all recommend. Maybe a large one would be better. Just leave the bottle.’

Harry removed the cork from a bottle of Patchy’s favourite dry, white wine, poured a portion into one of the large glasses which are kept for his use and crunched the bottle down into an ice bucket, which he just happened to have prepared when he’d seen Patchy entering the bar.

I was nursing a glass containing a modest and entirely medicinal dose of Laphroaig malt whisky.

And, we all had one of Gilly’s magnificent Duck and Puddle sandwiches before us.

In some hostelries where sandwiches are served, it is customary for the staff to serve a plateful of delicate little sandwiches, more suitable for photographing than for eating and adequate only for dainty nibbling by elegant ladies wearing white lace gloves. I have even heard of pubs and inns serving damp triangles of bread which were made a hundred miles away and which were served up enclosed in little, plastic containers. I shudder at the thought.

The Duck and Puddle’s landlady much preferred to produce sandwiches which were meals in themselves. Indeed, Gilly’s sandwiches always remind me of those magnificent doorstep sandwiches which the friendly wife of an innkeeper serves up to Robert Donat and Madeleine Carroll in Hitchock’s original version of ‘The Thirty Nine Steps’.

Moreover, Gilly usually served each sandwich with a large, pickled gherkin and a pickled egg.

The Earl of Sandwich himself could have sat on his horse, munched one of Gilly’s magnificent creations and been well prepared for battle. My local dog Ben had, over the years, acquired a taste for a pickled gherkin and Gilly always put two gherkins onto my plate if Ben was with me, making it clear that there was one gherkin for me and one for Ben. ‘She deserves one of her own,’ Gilly would say, as Ben demolished the gherkin in a few happy bites.

As an aside, I should mention that a couple of days earlier a sales representative had called at the Duck and Puddle and had left behind, as samples, a selection of the new foods his company was offering for sale. These had, apparently, all been ‘designed’ by one of those famous television chefs who seem to think of food as gustatory wallpaper. There were half a dozen different types of flavoured crisps including: pickled shrimp with mustard; curried salmon with beetroot; mackerel and marmalade; lamb with paprika; beef and custard and mutton with peanut jelly. There were also some teacakes which contained bits of beetroot and radish. None of us had felt brave enough to test any of these items and so I had taken them all back to Bilbury Grange, emptied them out of their packets and offered them to Cedric, our pig. Cedric was never what you would call a picky eater but he rejected the whole kit and caboodle and I ended up having to put the lot onto our bonfire. I didn’t even want to put them onto the compost heap.

As we ate our sandwiches, we ruminated on the history of the English public house. No one can possibly deny that the English have always been partial to a bevy or two, especially if accompanied by good food, all consumed in warm and congenial circumstances.

Our ruminations started when Frank raised his glass (happy that it contained something more spiritually enlivening than tonic water, his usual abstemious tipple) and suggested that we drank a toast to Jake Porter, a villager who had recently died.

Jake had been a mere stripling of 96 when he’d tottered off, exchanging his comfy fireside chair and harmonica for a fluffy, white cloud and a harp, and his early death had been something of a surprise to him and to all of us in the village. Both his parents and his brother had all received telegrams from Her Majesty the Queen congratulating them on reaching their centenaries. ‘I’ll reach 100 easily,’ Jake had insisted at the celebrations for his 96th birthday. ‘I’ve always had a full English breakfast, never smoked more than 40 a day and since I reached my 80th birthday, I’ve limited myself to half a bottle of whisky a day.’

When we’d drunk to Jake’s memory, Patchy suggested that we drink to one another – wishing ourselves many years more in the comfort of the Duck and Puddle.

‘Do you know where this habit started?’ asked Harry.

We all looked at him. Harry is a mine of both useful and trivial information. You never know which sort you are going to get when he begins to tell a tale. And since he had started work as a barman, he’d been studying the history of drinking and of British public houses.

‘What habit?’ asked Thumper.

‘Drinking a toast or pledge.’

We all thought for a moment, muttered various half-hearted nonsenses and then admitted that we didn’t.

‘It began in Saxon times,’ said Harry. ‘The Saxons were hard drinkers who enjoyed English ale and a glass of mead but they were always a bit nervous when knocking back a horn full of their favourite tipple.’

‘Why a horn full?’ asked Thumper.

‘In those days, they drank from horns not glasses. Drinking glasses hadn’t been invented.’

‘Like a horn from an animal? A dead animal?’

‘Exactly.’

‘What the devil was mead?’ asked Frank.

‘A sort of beer sweetened with honey,’ explained Harry, who was getting a little exasperated.

‘I never knew that,’ said Frank, surprised to discover that there was something about beer which he didn’t know.

‘May I continue?’ asked Harry.

We all gave permission.

‘The Saxons were always nervous when they drank,’ continued Harry. ‘They lived in fairly dangerous times and a bloke about to empty his horn would ask a pal to pledge him. The pal would then take out his sword, or his knife, and stand guard while the drinker took a good gulp of his mead, or whatever it was that was in his horn. Obviously, when a fellow was emptying his horn he couldn’t look out for people creeping up on him, intent on stabbing him and robbing him, and so the pal who was guarding him helped make him feel safe. When the drinker had quenched his thirst he would then pledge or promise to stand guard while his pal took a slurp from his own horn. As the business of pledging became less necessary so drinkers simply got into the habit of drinking to each other’s health.’

‘Where the devil do you learn all this stuff?’ demanded Thumper.

‘Haven’t the foggiest idea,’ admitted Harry. ‘I must have read it somewhere.’

We then segued comfortably into a discussion of the history of drinking and, more particularly, a history of English drinking establishments.

Harry explained that if you looked as far back in English history as the 10th century, you would discover that the English were such enthusiastic topers that King Edgar (who was known to his best chums as Edgar the Peaceful) felt he had to follow the advice of Dunstan, who was the Archbishop of Canterbury at the time, and close down a good many alehouses in an attempt to cut down the nation’s drinking.

‘Edgar decreed that there was to be only one alehouse per village,’ said Harry. ‘When that simply resulted in everyone piling into the one legally approved drinking place he ordained that pins or nails must be fixed into drinking horns at stated distances. Anyone who drank beyond the allowed mark could be punished.’

And, according to Harry, as the years tottered by, new rules were introduced to separate those establishments which catered to travellers and those which specialised in just providing drinks for the locals.

The former, those drinking places which specialised in looking after travellers, had to be open day or night, and they were known as inns while the latter, the places which only provided refreshments during the daytime, were known as taverns.

The inns weren’t allowed to cater for locals who had just wandered in for a drink but they were legally bound to provide food and refreshment for any traveller – at whatever time of night they arrived.

The taverns were not allowed to accept overnight guests and had to close before midnight.

Over the years taverns became known as pubs and inns morphed into country hotels – though many still liked to describe themselves as inns. The drinking places which were classified as inns were usually smarter and a little more upmarket than taverns – which tended to cater to the local lowlife.

(Since the Duck and Puddle in Bilbury provides food, drink and overnight accommodation for travellers it is, strictly speaking, an inn rather than a pub. This means, of course, that it can provide refreshments for its bona fide guests at any hour of the day or night. Although this would not, of course, ever happen at the Duck and Puddle, where Frank, the landlord, has been described by his friends and drinking companions as both a paragon of virtue and a walking advertisement for probity, it is, from time to time, rumoured that country establishments may occasionally take advantage of the absence of immediate and local constabulary oversight to write the names of favoured regulars into the inn’s official register of overnight guests. Those listed on the register as guests are, of course, entitled to purchase whatever refreshments they might feel appropriate. And, even in taverns, where there are no overnight guests, it is an open secret that if the doors are barred and shuttered at the official closing time then there is nothing to prevent the landlord from inviting friends to attend a private party, and to make merry for a little longer than the official opening hours might officially allow. This, I am told, is known as a ‘lock in’. On Holy Island, otherwise known as Lindisfarne, it has been reputed that pubs stay open for an extra eight hours when the tidal causeway is flooded. Drinkers who are marooned on the island can imbibe for as long as they like as long as police officers, and those inclined to tittle-tattle, are all safely ensconced on the mainland.)

‘Gradually, the traditional English inns acquired reputations for being the centre of their local community,’ Harry continued. Once he warms to a theme it is nigh on impossible to deflect him. ‘In addition to providing warmth, shelter, food and entertainment for travellers, local inns were often used as the local courtroom, the polling station and a meeting place for the local council.’

‘We still do that,’ said Frank. ‘We were the village polling station at the last election and the council has often met here.'

Harry then explained that before the onset of the railways made travel comparatively easy, and relatively cheap, anyone who wandered more than 20 miles or so from home would need somewhere to stay and he would look for somewhere homely and welcoming.

'The average traveller wasn't interested in folderols,' said Harry. 'He just wanted a pint of something cheering, a bowl of good soup, a hunk of bread and a chunk of cheese. In those early days no one travelled for pleasure; they travelled because they had to.'

He told us that most people never left their home village and travellers were usually either pilgrims or salesmen (known as drummers). It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the oldest inns were called Pilgrims' Inns. And the posher inns, the ones where the landlord knew a word or two of French, were known as the local 'Maisons Dieu'.

'By the end of the 16th century, England's inns had never looked better,' continued Harry, who was clearly on something of a roll. 'And they had never provided their customers with better service or better fare. Many had tapestries on the walls and carpets on the floor and the food was invariably good to excellent. Popular dishes were brawn, neat's tongue, capon, goose, swan, venison, kid, hare, plover, snipe, larks, boar, sturgeon, crayfish, carp, pike, trout, elvers, lampreys, pigeons and rooks which were usually served in a pie. Popular puddings included saffron cake, gingerbread, marchpane, nectarines, custard, warden pie and olive pie. The customers drank sherris sack, malmsey, beer and a variety of wines which had been imported from France or Germany. A fairly ordinary meal in a travellers' inn would consist of eight or nine heavy courses. People ate a lot because there wasn't much to do apart from eat and drink. And travelling was hard work – If you wanted to get somewhere you either walked or you rode.'

'Wait, wait a minute!' interrupted Thumper. 'What on earth are elvers?'

'Baby eels.'

'And sherris sack? What is sherris sack?'

'Oh, that's just an old word for sherry.'

'And malmsey? I've always wondered what malmsey was.'

'Malmsey is madeira – a fortified white wine from the island of Madeira.'

'And what was marchpane?' asked Thumper.

'I know that one!' said Frank, to his own surprise. 'It's an old word for marzipan – almond paste.'

Harry then explained that by the 17th century, travellers could move about in coaches, and the inns where they stayed had become increasingly fancy.

'By the end of the 18th century, inns were offering previously unimaginable luxury,' he said. 'A traveller dining in a roadside inn would typically eat spitch-cocked eels, a whole roast pigeon, a loin of pork, a variety of tarts, jellies and custards and then finish with a few chunks of cheese.'

'Stop!' said Patchy. 'You've done it again. What the devil are spitch-cocked eels?'

'Eels cooked on a skewer.'

'What, like a kebab?'

'I suppose so,' agreed Harry.

According to Harry, coach and post-chaise travel was popular by the 19th century and so inns were crowded. They were still open 24 hours a day, of course, and the kitchen fire was never out. Travellers staying the night would expect to sleep in four poster beds. The beds would be equipped with curtains all the way round so that the maid or groom who came in to make up the coal fire, or bring in the tea and crumpets, couldn't see what was going on in the bed. Sirloin, mutton joints, Cheshire and Stilton cheeses were washed down with ale and travellers would expect to have a copy of *The Times* delivered with their breakfast. As inns competed with one another, meals got more and more extensive. A pretty ordinary meal for two would consist of a four pound turbot, two roast ducks, an apple pie and cheeses. Breakfast for two, served in the bedroom, would be cold ham and beef, Cambridge sausages and fried eggs, followed by a roast mallard. It was by no means unusual to have a tankard of ale with breakfast, and beer makers were experimenting with adding honey, yarrow, bog myrtle and ground ivy (nicknamed alehoof) to their brews.

Over the years, inns became an increasingly important part of English social life.

Oliver Cromwell and his officers began their plotting in a variety of pubs, including 'The Bear' in Cambridge, the 'Red Lion' in Barnet (where the future protector of England reported that he had eaten the best cheese cakes he'd ever tasted) and the 'George' at Norton St Philip. Admiral Horatio Nelson said goodbye to Emma Hamilton for the last time at the inn at Burford Bridge and Keats and Stevenson both wrote in the same establishment. Hazlitt and De Quincey both wrote their most famous lines in pubs, as did Charles Dickens. Indeed, Dickens was a huge fan of inns and many of his novels include vignettes of well-known taverns and inns. It is also now a matter of record that many newspapers were planned and put together on inn tables

In addition to being known for their food and drink, there is no doubt that English inns and taverns have always been places where sports and games could be played with great enthusiasm. Some of the favoured activities were, to say the least, a trifle on the esoteric side of eccentric. Apart from drinking and eating, people do all sorts of odd things in pubs – especially in country pubs which are, to a certain extent, a law unto themselves and which are quite unlike the pubs in towns and cities.

Urban folk usually went to their local public house because it was somewhere to drink and meet their pals. Pub customers drank, ate, chatted, smoked (if they were allowed to), made new friends, gossiped and flirted. To be honest there often wasn't much room for anything else because the pub owner, usually a large brewery or a company with a chain of similar establishments, had to cram in as many chairs and tables as it could in order to make the enterprise profitable.

The result was that in most town and city pubs the television set has taken over the task of providing entertainment, and the bar billiards table and dart board have been put down into the cellar to gather dust and cobwebs. Customers sat and drank their beer, munched their chicken in the basket or their scampi and chips or their bag of cheese and onion crisps, and they watched the football on the large-screen television set which was fastened high up on a wall and which dominated the room in every possible way. The only other source of entertainment was the local stripper who would usually have to climb onto a table to take off her clothes. There isn't room to do anything else – even if the customers had the inclination or the equipment. Worse still, was the fact that in large town pubs, the landlord and the bar staff were usually too busy for idle chatter and probably had too many customers to remember the names even of their regulars. There were, I'm pleased to say, many honourable exceptions but too many modern town and city public houses looked out-of-date the minute they'd been built; they were dull, uninviting and shabby. There was too much concrete outside and too much fake wood and red plastic inside. In the 1970s, there was an unforgiveable tendency for pub chains to equip their newly built premises with fake horse brasses and fake beams and to adorn the walls with cheap hunting prints.

Things were different in the countryside; in villages and hamlets such as Bilbury, pubs and inns such as the Duck and Puddle had for hundreds of years been the centre of the village. In small settlements, where there were no cinemas, theatres, bowling alleys or nightclubs the pub was all there was. It was a home from home and the village meeting place. Regulars had their own mug hanging over the bar and a chair by the fire that was respected as theirs every much as their own armchair at home was respected as theirs. In places of this ilk, the customers drank, ate, chatted and gossiped but they also played games. They played cribbage, poker, bridge and whist. They played shove h'penny and table skittles, dominoes, cribbage, pool, bar billiards and snooker.

And where there was enough room available (as there was in the Duck and Puddle, of course) they could play skittles – a sport which, when played the way it was played in English village pubs, was undoubtedly one of the most spectacularly dangerous of all sports whether played indoors or outdoors.

I knew from personal experience that a wildly thrown wooden bowling ball could do a good deal of damage to anything which got in its way. Skittles was the precursor of ten pin bowling but it was a much cruder, faster game and it caused far more injuries – largely because the spectators stood alongside the skittle alley and were therefore likely to be hit by balls which were misdirected or which bounced off the side boards or the skittles.

Where there wasn't enough room to play proper, old-fashioned skittles, the drinkers played a game called table skittles – which had the nine pins, or men, standing on a table or a board. A small wooden ball tied to a fixed stick was whirled around to knock down the pins.

Patchy said that table skittles was very popular in Northamptonshire where the table upon which the pins were stood had a leather padded back and sides and the skittles were knocked down with wooden disks called 'cheeses' which were skimmed at the target. Patchy said he'd seen it played and it was pretty deadly. 'Woe betide anyone who got in the way of one of the skimming 'cheeses'!'

Egg dancing was another sport which was popular in country inns. A dozen eggs would be laid out on the floor and a dancer would be blindfolded and told to perform a hornpipe jig without treading on any of the eggs. Bystanders would bet on how many eggs he would crush. Daft dances like this were very popular and could be extremely profitable. Men who could dance well were often rewarded with quite generous tips by rich publicans or benefactors – especially if they had helped someone win a large bet.

People danced on ropes too. In 1547, when King Edward VI rode through the city of London prior to his coronation, a rope was stretched from the battlements of St Paul's to an anchorage point in front of the Deans Gate house. When his Majesty was seen approaching a Frenchman, imported especially for the occasion, slid down the cable. He was lying down, with his head forwards and his arms and legs spread as though he were flying. When he had landed, he kissed the King's foot and then walked back up the cable and did a variety of tricks upon it. This sort of thing was quite popular and innkeepers would organise their own variations. Sadly, inevitably, things didn't always go as perfectly as planned. A later exponent of the sliding down the cable trick lost a leg. Undaunted, he had a false leg made out of wood and filled with lead so that it weighed pretty much the same as his real leg and wouldn't unbalance him. He went one further than the Frenchman because he carried a pistol in each hand and discharged them both as he came down the rope.

The imagination of performers and innkeepers seemed inexhaustible.

In one pub in Devon an acrobat, whose party trick was to hang from a beam by his toes, couldn't get down. He went black in the face and died because onlookers, all cheering merrily, thought the whole thing was just part of his act. A pub in North Devon once ran an Indoor Olympics Event which involved some very strange events. Contestants had to try jumping backwards up onto a mantelpiece (a favourite party trick of Corinthian C.B.Fry when he was over 70-years-old); kicking as high as they could manage (to leave a shoe mark on a white board) and performing a standing broad jump (the competitor stood perfectly still at a setting off point and had to jump as far as he could).

All this stuff was told to us by Harry who seemed to me to know enough about old pubs and inns and taverns to write a book about them.

At the Duck and Puddle we had, of course, always taken the game of darts quite seriously and over the years we've had a number of top players representing the club in county games. But history shows that darts was very nearly banned as a sport.

Harry explained that in 1908 the authorities in Leeds wanted to have the game banned because they said it was a game of chance and that those who played it were gambling. A player called Mr Annakin, who had a pub in Yorkshire, went to court to defend his sport. He played a court clerk who had never played the game before and thrashed him. After Mr Annakin had thrown three 20s for a score of 60, the clerk missed the board completely. The magistrate then insisted on having a go himself. He too missed the board. And so the court had no choice but to conclude that darts is not a game of chance but a game of skill.

The English love inventing games and, as a nation, have undoubtedly invented more games than any other people. It is actually quite difficult to think of a game that wasn't invented by an Englishman. Sadly, of course, the English usually turn out to be far better at inventing games than at playing them.

On the day of which I am writing we had all recently started playing a game which involved skimming a playing card into a hat. I have no idea who thought up the game but the rules were quite simple. A hat, usually my brown Fedora which had the widest brim of any of the hats we had available, was placed on a table and each player would stand five feet away with a full pack of 52 playing cards. The game would be to skim the cards, as one might do when skimming a flat pebble on a lake, so that they landed in the hat. A card which landed inside the hat scored one point. A card which landed on the brim of the hat, and stayed there, scored half a point. A card which missed the hat completely scored no points whatsoever. When one player had used all his cards his score would be recorded (usually on a beer mat), the cards would be collected up and the next player would take his turn.

For a while, we had experimented with scoring points according to the number of pips on a card. So, if the seven of hearts landed in the hat then the player would score seven points. If the three of clubs landed in the hat the player would score three points. If the eight of spades landed on the brim, the player would score four points. We gave up this version of the game because the scoring proved far too difficult.

We had finished our sandwiches and were busy playing our new game when two newcomers walked in. Judging by their boots, anoraks, haversacks and thumb sticks they were hikers and they both appeared to be in their 30s. Their gear looked expensive and brand new. Their thumb sticks bore little brass plates bearing the name of the maker and had clearly been purchased from an expensive store. I always think it's rather a pity that people buy walking sticks in preference to making their own. All you need is a stick and a penknife. If you want a fancy top for the stick, but don't want to carve your own then you can easily buy what you need. If you want a ferrule, whether metal or rubber, you can usually find what you need without too much difficulty. Peter Marshall's shop always sold ferrules and stick tops.

The distaff half of the pair was tall and slim and had obviously had her hair cut somewhere other than North Devon. Though perfectly competent with a pair of scissors, the woman who had taken over the hair dressing franchise in the hut next to Peter Marshall's shop had a limited repertoire of styles.

Similarly, I thought it fair to bet that her companion, the spear side of the duo, had been snipped and shampooed somewhere other than in North Devon. The chap whom I usually visited when my hair required trimming was a pleasant fellow, and on both of the occasions when he'd cut one of my ears he had apologised, but he had but two styles to offer: 'a light trim' and 'the military option'. This haircut was neither.

And judging by the map one of them was holding, not to mention the rather concerned looks on their faces, they were lost.

It is easy to get lost in Devon, very easy to get lost in North Devon and very, very easy to get lost in the lanes and on the footpaths and bridle paths of Bilbury.

Harry, relishing his new role as 'mine host', greeted the pair cheerily, looked at their map and told them where they were. They seemed surprised, apparently having thought themselves to be approximately 12 miles away to the East. He then complied with their orders by serving them one glass of tomato juice, one glass of lemon barley water and two packets of salt and vinegar crisps. They had asked for 'something organic in the snack line' but, sadly, Harry had had to disappoint them. Frank did mutter something about it being a pity that the curried salmon and beetroot crisps were no longer available. They were both exceedingly slim and it wasn't difficult to see why. If you've walked for half a day across the Devon moors and all you eat is a packet of crisps then your calorie intake is clearly not going to be excessive.

The hikers seemed intrigued by the game which we were playing.

'What's the game you're playing? What are the rules?' asked the male half of the couple, when he'd finished his lemon barley and eaten his crisps. He ate the crisps daintily, one at a time.

I couldn't help looking at Thumper when I saw the way the visitor was eating his crisps. Thumper's method of eating crisps is quite different. He pours the packet of crisps into the palm of his left hand, transfers the contents of his palm into his mouth and then crunches for about a minute before swallowing. We measured him once. He managed to get rid of a packet of cheese and onion crisps in 49 seconds flat. When I asked Thumper why he ate crisps so quickly, he explained that he always wanted to get back to the serious business of drinking his beer. Thumper had clearly also seen the way that the newcomer had eaten his crisps and had been rather hypnotised by the sight.

When he'd finished them, the stranger asked Harry if it would be all right if he put the empty packet into the fire. Harry said he thought it probably would be.

Patchy, whose turn it was to skim or flick the cards, explained the rules to the visitors.

'It's more difficult than it looks,' said Frank. 'If you aren't careful the cards tend to skim off the brim of the hat and land on the floor. You have to get them just right if you want them to land in the hat and stay there.' He explained how the secret of the game lay in the way that the card was flicked. 'It's all in the wrist movement,' he told them.

When we had finished the game, Patchy had scored 32, Thumper had managed 37 and a half, Frank had scored 18, Harry had scored 29 and I had scored a rather disappointing 25 and a half. I can usually do better than that but I always do badly when there's an audience. I'd have made a useless sports professional. Thumper picked up the 50 pence he'd won. (We had all put down a 10 pence stake.)

'It looks great fun!' said the woman.

'Don't be fooled by how easy we make it look!' said Frank.

'We've been playing for a week or two now,' I explained, preparing her for disappointment.

'The doc has written to the people who organise the Olympics suggesting that skimming cards into a hat be made an Olympic sport,' said Thumper, nodding in my direction to indicate that I was the one responsible for this. 'The game is more entertaining than synchronised swimming, requires more skill than weight lifting and is extremely adaptable.' he explained.

'It can be played by men and women,' I added. 'And you can play it indoors or, if the weather is good and there is no wind, you can even play outdoors. We don't think there is much chance of competitors doping themselves. I can't think of any drugs that would prove useful. We're rather hoping that the Olympics Committee might regard this as a plus point.

'The cards can carry advertising so there are immense commercial possibilities,' said Frank, who was clearly rather hoping that the newcomers might turn out to be associated with some company which would take up the game and make us all rich. 'I think we could easily make card skimming extremely attractive to money motivated organisations.'

'Would you like to try?' Patchy asked the newcomers. 'We won't expect you to put money on the table. Just try it for fun.'

The man said he didn't think he would bother, thank you very much, but the woman said she'd like to have a go – just for fun.

Patchy patted the cards together and handed them to her. She took them, looked at them, rather critically I thought, and then positioned herself behind the chalk line we'd drawn on the floor.

She then proceeded to put 51 cards straight into the hat. She threw them so quickly, and with such accuracy, that two of the cards collided in mid-air and one of them stayed on the brim. If it had not been for this fluke incident she would have achieved the maximum score of 52. As it was she had to make do with 51 and a half.

When she'd finished there was silence.

'It's a brilliant game!' she said, trying not to look as pleased with herself as she doubtless felt.

'Have you played before?' asked Harry quietly.

‘Oh no,’ said the woman. ‘I didn’t even know the game existed until today.’

None of us said a word.

‘We’d better get a move on,’ said the man, looking at his watch. ‘We’ve got quite a walk ahead of us.’

They smiled, said goodbye and left.

A minute after they’d gone we were still sitting there in silence. Suddenly the door opened and the man put his head into the room. He was grinning.

‘I didn’t want to leave you too confused,’ he said. ‘I thought I should explain that my companion is a croupier in London.’ He named a well-known casino. ‘She deals cards for a living – spends her evenings dealing cards to Poker players. She can land a card on a sixpence from six feet away.’

And with that he was gone.

We sat in silence for several minutes.

‘I suppose we should be grateful we didn’t try to persuade her to put some money on the table,’ said Thumper, breaking the silence.

Diggory Cholmondelay: Doing the Right Thing

There are all kinds of recognisable, easily defined family traits. Large noses run in some families. Some families specialise in receding chins. In other families the members are all very tall. Sometimes all the family members are very short. And in some families it is large, floppy ears which give the game away.

But the recognisable trait in the Cholmondelay family was eccentricity. By this I don't mean the sort of artificial, manufactured eccentricity which has become popular among individuals who are desperate to create for themselves a career on television, or in some branch of the entertainment business, but the sort of natural, unconscious eccentricity which was once so common among the British middle and upper classes; the sort of wild, unfettered eccentricity displayed by that great Victorian John 'Mad Jack' Mytton.

Diggory Cholmondelay's grandfather, Ambrose, was certainly eccentric.

As a relatively young man, Ambrose Cholmondelay had been a keen cricketer. Sadly, his enthusiasm far outweighed his talent and he had never been able to achieve the representative honours which he sought. Nevertheless, he did everything he could to tip the scales in favour of his playing for some sort of representative team.

In 1887, C Aubrey Smith (later to be knighted and to achieve eternal glory by playing stern patriarchs in Hollywood movies) captained a cricket team which visited Australia. Smith was a good player, a fast bowler, who had played for Cambridge University and Sussex and who later captained the England side in South Africa. When Cholmondelay was omitted from the players selected for Smith's tour he paid his own fare to Australia and, entirely at his own expense, followed the team around in the constant hope that injuries or illness might one day result in the captain inviting him to play. After six weeks, his dream was fulfilled. A broken leg, a bad case of the pox and a seven day prison sentence for punching a policeman meant that Smith lost three players and had only ten fit men when he needed eleven. Cholmondelay finally had his chance. In the first innings he scored three runs and in the second innings he scored nought. He didn't bowl in the match and he didn't play again on the tour. But he had achieved his ambition.

In their middle years Ambrose's wife, Fanny, achieved some notoriety of her own after cutting up a painting that experts had described as a masterpiece and valued at over £20,000 – a huge sum at the time.

The painting, by J.M.W.Turner had been titled 'Shipwreck in a Gale' and had been purchased by Ambrose's father. It hung above the mantelpiece in the dining room and Fanny hated it. She said it was horribly gloomy and made her feel depressed whenever she looked at it. Instead of simply moving the painting to another room, or selling it, she told two servants to take it down and remove it from the frame. She then cut the canvas into squares and had her personal maid make two cushions from it. They must have been the most valuable cushions ever made. It was an appropriate error of judgement for Fanny Cholmondelay herself admitted that her greatest claim to fame or admiration was that she always had well-plumped-up cushions in her home. 'You won't go into a room anywhere in this house and find a squashed cushion!' she once told an astonished Dr Brownlow.

In later life, Ambrose Cholmondelay's main hobby was rearranging the caskets in the family vault. Every Sunday evening he would go down into the vault, accompanied by the head gardener and a terrified pot boy and move the coffins around.

'Let's put the my great, great uncle Norbert Cholmondelay on the top shelf and move my grandmother over there by my great aunt Noreen Cholmondelay,' he would say, and the three men would then spend an hour or two lifting, pushing and pulling heavy, lead-lined coffins.

I gather that there never seemed to be any reason for any of this.

It was, according to Diggory, all done according to whim; it was like a huge three dimensional game of chess but without any plan or logical conclusion.

Even when he himself was mortally ill, the frail Ambrose insisted on being carried down into the vault so that he could supervise the final arranging of the caskets. Terrified that someone might come down and carry on the shuffling after he had chosen everyone's final resting place, he had the estate blacksmith come in and fix the coffins where he wanted them. The blacksmith put huge iron bands around the coffin and fixed them to the stone walls of the crypt with iron pegs. Naturally, Ambrose left the most prominent position vacant ready for his own coffin. And he made sure that there was no chance of his final resting place being moved. He left instructions that when his coffin had been placed in position it too should be fastened in place with thick iron bands.

Finally, two more things seemed to me to cement his reputation as an eccentric. First, it was Ambrose who devised a new family motto and had the words 'Nullum Crimen Neque Unguento Fugit Noster Escutcheon' ('no flies in our ointment, no blots on our escutcheon') carved on the stone arch above the driveway to the house and then repeated on the stone portico. Second, Ambrose, who was 102 when he died, always carried a walking stick made from a bull's penis (known in country areas of England as a pizzle stick). And he delighted in telling strangers the origins of his stick.

My predecessor, Dr Brownlow, told me that as a courtesy he called in to see Ambrose on the day of his 100th birthday but was told by the butler, that Mr Cholmondelay Senior was in London attending a celebration lunch. Dr Brownlow asked if he could call round to see him that evening, on his return, but was told that it would not be possible since Mr Cholmondelay had an appointment to play tennis with the vicar when he got back from London.

Ambrose's son, who was Diggory's father, was called Roderick, and he exhibited his eccentricity in an entirely different way. I met him only once or twice but he was unforgettable. He insisted on being addressed as 'General' though he had never served in any of the armed services. He would get very cross if people addressed him as anything else and in his later years he would simply ignore anyone who addressed him as 'Mister'.

Roderick and his wife both had flamboyant, well-groomed moustaches though hers was slightly more luxurious than his.

While the hair on her upper lip was growing well, the hair on the top of her head appeared to have pretty well abandoned the struggle to survive. The general's wife had responded to this not, as some women would have done, by spreading the remaining hair over the whole of her scalp, but by having her hair cut very short, militarily short. The result was that she had a head partly covered in the sort of steel grey bristle which was once popular with the more mature officers serving the Kaiser Wilhelm. If it had not been for the fact that she had given the general three children and had, in the luxury of the uppermost reaches of middle age, developed a bosom of such impressive proportions that she looked rather like one of those figureheads which used to be attached to the prows of sailing ships back in the days when ships had rigging and sailors had scurvy, I would have wondered what would have been found if a geneticist had taken a close look at her chromosomes.

The general also had a shortage of scalp hair and he disguised this by wearing a toupee; a rather threadbare hairpiece which, he once told me proudly, had originally belonged to his father and, before that, had adorned the balding pate of his father's older brother.

I don't know what colour the wig had been when it first saw the light of day, but it had been dyed many times and it had reacted badly to the various dyes and chemicals with which it had been assaulted, and by the end it had taken on a rather alarming hue; a sort of pearlescent henna with flecks of maroon scattered about. The 'General' seemed to feel that the significance of the heritage and antiquity of the hairpiece far outweighed its rather bizarre appearance. Indeed, I think he had been wearing the wig for so long that it no longer looked in the slightest bit odd to him. He kept it on his bedside table so that he never needed to be seen without it. It was not uncommon for him to put it on back to front and to wear it that way all day, blissfully unaware of the consequences and quite certain in his mind that the glances he received when out and about were entirely of recognition and admiration. ('Golly, there goes the General. Doesn't he look smart!' And not: 'Look at that old fool. He's got his wig on back to front.') The effect of eccentricity was enhanced by the fact that although he had shrunk considerably in his later years, he insisted on wearing the clothes he'd worn when he had been younger, despite the fact that they were several sizes too big for him. His shirt collar gaped so much around his neck that he looked rather like a friendly and inquisitive tortoise peering out of his shell.

The 'General' might have appeared to some to be a couple of sandwiches short of a good picnic but I always found him to be full of clever ideas.

'Always buy good hats and good shoes,' he once told me. 'They'll look better and last longer. In the long run they'll save you money and people will treat you with more respect.'

I once stood with him in the house when he was locking his back door. Most people in the village never locked their doors but the 'General' did so. He said it was necessary because he'd acquired a good many enemies in his life. He never explained who these might be. There were two locks on the door, both operated by huge, iron keys. He turned one key and closed one of the locks but left the other unlocked.

'Aren't you going to lock the other one?' I asked him.

He turned and looked at me, very sternly. 'If you have two locks on a door you should always leave one of them undone,' he told me. 'Then if someone tries to get in he will always be locking one of the locks and unlocking the other.'

Once he'd locked the door, he set a fierce looking man trap to catch anyone who did manage to get through his defences. He told me that he'd done this for at least thirty years and that his staff were always forbidden to leave their rooms after he'd locked up for the night. Since they undoubtedly knew about the man trap I doubt if he had any difficulty persuading them to obey this instruction.

The man trap, which had been specially designed to grip an intruder's leg without actually breaking it, was one of a number of items which the General had either invented himself or which he had taken an interest in developing or marketing.

He had, for example, taken a special interest in a machine to speed up eating which had been devised in 1879 by a French physician. The invention (which had been described as an 'electrical dining machine') was originally designed for a patient who could not swallow because of a paralysis but it was promoted as useful for those who wanted to get through meal times more speedily.

To use the machine the patient filled his mouth with food and then gave himself an electric shock in his jaws and throat. The food, it is said, then went down the oesophagus at the rate of 4,000 miles per second. (The General could not explain how the speed had been measured). It was reported that a man using the electrical dining machine could consume an entire, exquisite French dinner, including all the season's delicacies, wine, coffee and dessert in one minute and fourteen seconds.

The General, who was a committed gourmand, had worked out that this machine could save him 1,200 hours a year – time which he could spend more fruitfully on his various enthusiasms. More significantly, he reckoned that the machine could reduce the amount of time his employees spent eating. The Cholmondelay family fortune rested upon the efforts of a factory in the West Midlands which made a variety of hinges for doors and windows and, after some work with a pencil and a large piece of paper, the General had concluded that productivity could be increased by 12% if all employees were instructed to consume their meals with the aid of the 'electrical dining machine'. Sadly, his aims were thwarted by the trade unions who (inexplicably and in his view unforgiveably) objected vehemently to the proposal.

As if all this wasn't enough to merit him being described as eccentric, the 'General' had insisted on filling the gardens of the family home with a number of statues. The really odd thing was that the statues were all identical. They consisted of a woman who was standing on a stone plinth, who had clearly lost her bath towel and appeared to be reaching out expecting someone to hand her another. The statue was based on the General's wife. I never counted the statues but the butler, a long-serving family retainer, assured me that there were over ninety of them spread around the grounds. Many of them were almost hidden and it could, I gather, be quite startling to see one of these statues suddenly coming into view from a position behind a tree. The butler told me that since the statues had been put into place, the amount of poaching had fallen considerably.

In a way, you could argue that all this history is irrelevant to Diggory, the patient with whom I am here concerned. But I don't think it is irrelevant because it helps to set the scene and, in a small way, explains and defines why he was the man he became. (To this I must add the rider that if we ever think we truly understand another human being, or how they were changed by life and circumstances, then we are almost certainly deluding ourselves.)

Young Diggory (as he was called, right until the day of his death) was an unusual man with massive eyebrows which looked like two tangled collections of those big spiders you often find in the darkest corner of the garage. He once told me that the only thing he considered important was to try to do the right thing. And I do think he always tried to do the right thing, though it is possible that doing the right thing as he saw it probably wasn't always necessarily what other people might have regarded as the right thing.

Diggory himself had his own mild eccentricities which had slowly developed through the years and which had blossomed when his father, the General, had died and he had inherited the house.

First, he was writing a history of the house where his family had lived since the 16th century. He had been working on it for seven years and had got as far as 1843. He reckoned he needed another 35 years to finish it. When he told me this he was 78-years-old. He gave me these details without any suggestion that he felt that there might be a chance he would not succeed in finishing the book. At the time he seemed to assume that if he needed another 35 years then God would give him another 35 years. And at the time it seemed by no means impossible for I don't think I'd ever known anyone in their 70s to be as determined to defy their age. He had a heart condition which had been diagnosed thirty years earlier but he still marched around the estate as though he were setting off on a route march and he could still do a full day's work in the gardens. I had warned him that he should take special care when the weather was really cold.

'Stay inside if it's freezing!' I warned him. 'Your heart will have to work extra hard when the weather is really cold. And you mustn't try working in the garden when it's very cold. In fact you shouldn't even go walking round the garden when the temperature is really low.'

Despite my warnings, I knew that all the year round, whatever the weather, he drove an open car, an old Bugatti which must have been worth a fortune but which he treated as just another, ordinary vehicle. He never wore an overcoat a hat or a scarf. Even if it was pouring down or snowing he would drive around without any protection against the elements. He always wore a version of the same suit, a three piece tweed creation which was so thick that it would doubtless keep him warm and cosy in a snow storm but which must have been unbearably hot in the summer. (He never wore the suit without the waistcoat.) He had a new suit delivered to him on the 1st of January each year. A tailor from Savile Row in London came to the house in November to take the measurements. When the new suit arrived, Diggory always burnt the old suit.

Thinking about Diggory's Bugatti reminded me that he once told me that he always put a chocolate into the car radiator every 1,000 miles. When I asked him why on earth he did this he told me that his father had done the same thing and had never had any trouble with the radiator.

'What sort of chocolate?' I asked him.

'Oh, I don't think it matters much as long as it's something with a soft centre. I wouldn't put in one of those toffee ones.'

I was tempted to try this in the radiator of the Rolls Royce which I had inherited from Dr Brownlow but I never managed to find the courage.

Diggory's only concession to his age was to wear a hearing aid. However, the hearing aid was, to say the least, a little unusual. Diggory had made it himself and it consisted of nothing more than a bit of plastic covered wire. One end of the wire was fixed into his ear with a small piece of rubber cut from an eraser and the other end was stuck into the top pocket of his jacket. 'Does it work?' I asked him one day. 'Of course it does,' he said. 'When strangers see it they naturally assume that I'm deaf and so they talk more loudly and more clearly.'

Oh, and one other thing: like his father, Diggory had an impressive collection of walking sticks. Like his ancestors, Diggory didn't do anything by halves. I suspect that he had the largest collection of walking sticks in Britain. Come to think of it, I suspect that it was probably the more comprehensive collection in Europe. He had a stick which he claimed a Zulu had cut out of a knobkerrie and had used at the Battle of Rorke's Drift; a stick which had been used by the Emperor Franz Joseph and a very fine ebony and silver stick which had been carried by the famous actor Sir Henry Irving. Altogether he had over 500 walking sticks. I used to tell him that if he ever injured a leg he'd be so spoilt for choice that by the time he'd decided which stick to use, he would have recovered. In the event, when he did sprain an ankle, and found that he needed a stick, he insisted on my providing him with a plain common or garden stick provided by the National Health Service. When he'd recovered, I had a devil of a job to persuade him to hand it back. He wanted to keep it for his collection.

Even without these fairly overt signs of eccentricity, Diggory would have qualified as a keeper of the family's sacred flame for his eating habits.

I didn't discover his dietary habits until I gave him a medical when he was 73-years-old. He needed the medical because he was taking out a mortgage to buy a farmhouse that was a couple of miles from his house. Every time any property remotely close to him came onto the market, he insisted on buying it. He was terrified of anyone infringing on his privacy. The company making the loan was insisting on a full medical because Diggory weighed slightly over 20 stones.

Now, I don't think it is an exaggeration to say that the English have always been fond of having a good time. Over the centuries, England has had plenty of gourmets, more than enough gourmands and, without a doubt, a good many old-fashioned gluttons.

Back in the 14th century, Edward III had made a valiant effort to get things under control. He laid down strict rules for eating and drinking. He ruled that commoners were forbidden to eat dainty dishes or consume costly drinks and he limited the main meal of the day to two courses with each course to consist of no more than three dishes. And he prohibited servants from eating fish or flesh more than once day.

Naturally, however, his son Lionel (known as the Duke of Clarence) wasn't affected by these silly rules and at his wedding feast there were no less than 30 courses. The leftovers fed 1,000 people. And his grandson, King Richard II, didn't take much notice of Edward either. For his Christmas dinner in 1399 the cooks butchered 28 oxen, 300 sheep and too many chickens to count. A total of 300 servants were needed to carry the food about.

From then on the rules were ignored – as long as you were rich enough to buy all the food you wanted to eat. Richard Neville, the Earl of Warwick, required six oxen to be killed every day for breakfast, though to be fair I don't suppose he ate them all himself.

In England, the royals, the aristocracy and the plain old stinking rich had always had big appetites. And they had invariably washed down their huge meals with fairly vast quantities of ale. The aim was always to have bread as fresh as possible but preferred to drink beer that had been brewed at least a year earlier. Both Henry VIII and Elizabeth always started the day with a beef steak and a cup of ale for breakfast.

The Cholmondelays may not have been royal or aristocratic but they followed the aristocratic style when it came to eating.

'What did you have for breakfast?' I asked Diggory Cholmondelay at the beginning of my examination.

'A whole grapefruit, a haddock, sautéed chicken liver served in claret with mushrooms, kedgeree and fresh strawberries. I finished up with three toasted muffins served with fresh butter and black cherry jam.'

'And for lunch?'

'Well, before I got to lunch I had my elevenses.'

'And what did you have for your elevenses?'

'A bowl of lobster bisque and a selection of patisseries.'

'Right,' I said, making a note of all this.

And so it went on. He had his luncheon at 12.30 pm, at 2.30 he had coffee and cakes, at 4.00 he had afternoon tea consisting of scones, crumpets, sandwiches and a pot of tea and at 7.00 pm sharp he had an 8 course dinner. At 10.00 pm he had supper which always consisted of Welsh rarebit and cocoa.

It was not difficult to see why Diggory weighed considerably more than might be considered optimum for his five feet seven inches.

'And I have kickshaws constantly available between meals,' he told me.

'What is a kickshaw?'

'Oh, a little something foreign, fancy and rather insubstantial. The ones we have served here are always pastry parcels with something like a bit of chicken or some chopped dates inside. They're a bit like deep fried samosas. We have them stuffed with gooseberries, raspberries, shrimp, fresh tomato and mozzarella, salami and anchovy. The thing is that the kickshaw should always provide a gustatory surprise. You don't know what you're going to get until you bite into it. I' m surprised you've not heard of kickshaws, doctor. Dear old Samuel Johnson was a great kickshaw enthusiast.'

'Do you eat any vegetables?' I asked.

'Oh yes,' he told me quite proudly. 'I have a packet of cheese and onion crisps at least twice a day. So that's four vegetables isn't it?'

'Four?' I said, puzzled.

'Two helpings of potato and two helpings of onion,' he replied quite seriously.

I honestly didn't know what to say to that.

The other thing I remember about Diggory Cholmondelay was that his dog went to Peter Marshall's shop every morning to fetch his copy of *The Times*.

Peter had stopped delivering newspapers (he claimed it was never possible to break even on delivering papers) and so several people in the village had trained their dogs to go to Peter's shop to collect their daily papers. At one point there were three people who did this and occasionally the three dogs would arrive together and queue politely to be served. Diggory's dog was, however, the only one which was equipped with a special satchel strapped to his back. Diggory didn't like having his morning newspaper with a wet patch on it where it had been in the dog's mouth. Peter would put *The Times* into the satchel and if Diggory had any extra order, he would enclose a note asking for a packet of pipe tobacco, a box or matches, a magazine or whatever it was that he wanted. Peter would then put the requested items into the satchel along with the newspaper. I had thought about sending Ben along to fetch my papers but Miss Johnson, my receptionist, had to pass Peter's shop on her way to Bilbury Grange and so she'd always called in and collected our newspapers, fresh bread and milk.

Diggory was single until he reached his 78th birthday and half way through the year to his 79th birthday, he abandoned his bachelorhood and married Edna Beveridge, a woman who had been a maid in the Cholmondelay household since her 14th birthday and who had eventually risen through the ranks to become Diggory's housekeeper. She had worked for the family for over 60 years when she eventually accepted the final promotion available to her and became the chatelaine.

'It doesn't make much difference to me,' she told me a month after the wedding when I met her at the Cholmondelay's house.

I'd been called to attend an under gardener who'd stuck a fork in his foot. This was no rarity in Bilbury. At least twice a year I saw someone who had stuck a fork through a foot. Hector O'Malley, a retired railway engineer who had an extensive vegetable garden successfully speared his right foot an average of once a year for at least a decade.

'I've been Mr Diggory's mistress since two years after I arrived at the house and my work hasn't changed one jot over the years,' she told me. 'I still warm his bed and supervise the staff, same as I've always done. I still organise the meals and run the household. As far as I'm concerned nothing has changed. I emptied his bedpan before we were married and I still empty it now. I'm not having anyone else emptying his bedpan.'

'Do you still call him Mr Diggory?' I asked her, slightly surprised.

'Oh yes, of course I do. That's his name. What else am I going to call him? He's been Mr Diggory to me since I was a slip of a girl.'

Diggory Cholmondelay had been her life and, it turned out that she had been his life too.

Six months after the wedding, Edna came to see me.

'I think there's something wrong with me,' she reported.

I waited.

I knew her well enough to know that she would eventually get round to telling me what was troubling her but that

I would not get there any quicker if I tried to hurry her by asking questions.

'It's very personal,' she began.

I nodded and waited.

'It's a problem down below.'

'Ah.'

'But not what you're thinking.'

'No.'

'The other.'

'Right.'

'Trouble with my waterworks.'

'Oh dear. I'm sorry to hear that.'

'It's painful to pass.'

'Water?'

'Exactly, doctor. I knew you'd understand.'

I waited.

The temptation to ask for more information was powerful. But I resisted. My first thought that Mrs Cholmondelay was perhaps suffering from honeymoon cystitis, though this seemed relatively unlikely given that the relevant activities could have hardly changed as a result of her marriage.

'It's very cloudy.'

'Oh.'

'And there seem to be little pieces of something floating in it.'

'Little pieces of something?'

'Yes. Quite definitely.'

She opened her handbag and took out half a bottle of Bell's whisky. But the bottle didn't contain whisky. It contained something that was obviously a urine sample but which looked more like soup. She handed the bottle to me. I put it down on my desk. This was clearly more than a mere urinary tract infection.

'And I can't hold it in as I used to be able to.'

'Incontinence?'

She shook her head. 'I've never been abroad. We were going to have a honeymoon in Paris but we didn't go. Mr Diggory decided he wouldn't like flying.'

'Have you been leaking?' I asked, realising that Mrs Cholmondelay must have misunderstood me.

'That's exactly it.' She nodded.

She also told me that she had been suffering from back pain and that she thought she had a temperature.

'I need to examine you,' I told her.

'Oh I don't think that will be necessary,' she said, slightly shocked.

I insisted that to make a diagnosis I needed to examine her.

'With my clothes off?'

'Some of them, at least,' I said.

And so with some reluctance she removed a few layers and climbed up onto my examination couch.

The examination didn't tell me very much other than that Mrs Cholmondelay had a slightly unexpected fever and very high blood pressure, but her next remark startled me and led me to an alarming diagnosis.

'I've had to increase my tablets but they don't seem to stop the pain,' she said.

'What tablets are you taking?' I asked her.

I knew I hadn't prescribed anything for her for years.

She reached into her handbag and pulled out a packet of painkillers. 'I never go anywhere without them,' she said.

I looked at the packet and my blood went cold. The tablets were phenacetin.

Now, back in the 1970s, phenacetin was still used as an enormously popular painkiller.

First introduced in the 1880s by the same German company which had first introduced aspirin tablets to the market, phenacetin had been popular for years. There was never much logic to its popularity but some people preferred it to aspirin. The one thing it had in common with aspirin was that it could be used to bring down a temperature. It was also cheap. Paracetamol was the third of the really popular and widely used over-the-counter painkillers. All three were made widely available because it was thought that they were perfectly safe. They did not have the addictive qualities of the opiate painkillers such as morphine and heroin and, back in the 19th century and early 20th century laudanum. (Laudanum had been widely available without a prescription since it was a major constituent of a whole range of inevitably popular and well-thought of patent medicines. It was not long ago that it was possible to buy cough syrup for children that contained a morphine derivative. It was very popular.).

By 1970, however, it had become known that the regular use of phenacetin could cause serious kidney damage – serious enough to result in death. Like a good many doctors I had stopped prescribing the stuff and I had always tried to dissuade patients from buying it if they needed an over-the-counter painkiller from the pharmacy. The symptoms and signs of poisoning caused by phenacetin damage creep up on you slowly. By the time you notice them it is too late to do anything.

'How long have you been taking these?' I asked.

I had decided I needed to intervene. I could no longer rely on Mrs Cholmondelay telling me her story.

'Oh, a long time. At least twenty years.'

'And how many do you take?' I heard myself asking.

'No more than sixteen a day. They're quite expensive.'

'Where do you get them from?'

'A pharmacy we use sends them over to me once a week. We have a delivery of medicines and toiletries every Friday.'

'Don't they ever ask why you order so much phenacetin?'

'Of course not! Why should they? It's nothing to do with them, is it?'

'Do they know how many phenacetin tablets you're taking?'

'They certainly don't. They mind their own business.'

'How often do you take sixteen a day?'

'Oh, every day. They stop me having pains.'

'What pains?'

'I don't know – any pains. I just know that if I take the tablets then I don't have any pains. People my age always get pains.'

'But you've been taking them for twenty years?'

'To ward off the pains I might have got if I hadn't taken them,' she said. 'And they worked! I didn't have any pains.'

I now suspected that Mrs Cholmondelay was in serious trouble.

Phenacetin can and does cause serious kidney disease. It can produce renal papillary necrosis and interstitial nephritis – both of which are pretty deadly disorders. The fact that Mrs Cholmondelay had acquired very high blood pressure and had the symptoms and signs with which she had presented, made me suspect that she already had very serious kidney disease.

'I need to get some tests done,' I told her. 'And to get the tests done I need you to go to the hospital in Barnstaple.' As I told her this I reached for the telephone.

'When?' she demanded, clearly unhappy.

'Today, straight away.'

'Oh, I can't go today. We're having a delivery of quails' eggs this afternoon. I have to be there to receive them. And the wine merchant is bringing this month's delivery. I can't possibly not be there when he arrives.'

'Someone else will have to deal with the quails' eggs and the wine,' I told her. 'You need to go to the hospital. I'll ring your husband and ask him to come here to take you over there straight away.'

Mrs Cholmondelay looked as if she were about to protest but I was already on the telephone. I rang the hospital first and spoke to one of the consultants. He agreed to see her in his out-patient department. I then rang Mr Cholmondelay and asked him to come and take his wife over to Barnstaple.

'What's wrong with her?' asked Mr Cholmondelay.

I told him that I wasn't yet sure but that I needed to get some tests done.

Three quarters of an hour later, Mr Cholmondelay turned up in his Bugatti to take his wife over to the hospital.

And three hours after that I had the telephone call I'd suspected I would get – but had, nonetheless, hoped I wouldn't.

'I'm afraid we're pretty sure that your Mrs Cholmondelay has end stage kidney disease,' said the consultant. 'We're keeping her in for some more tests. But it looks as if both her kidneys are pretty well destroyed. She tells me that she's been taking 16 phenacetin tablets a day for years.' He sounded rather angry and critical.

'Yes,' I said. 'That's what she told me.'

'You didn't prescribe them?'

'I certainly didn't!' I said, rather defensively.

'I'm pleased to hear it,' said the consultant, rather less gruffly now.

Mrs Cholmondelay lasted another three weeks.

She never came home from the hospital.

Diggory Cholmondelay was destroyed by her death.

I don't think I have ever seen anyone more clearly devastated by the loss of a partner. He was quite lost without her. Although they had married only recently they had been together for virtually the whole of their lives. They had certainly been together for all their adult lives. It must have been difficult for them both for many of those years. When Diggory Cholmondelay's father had been alive, the pair had for years tried to keep their relationship secret from him. I suspect that just about everyone else in the house knew about it but for several decades the General either didn't know or he pretended not to know. During the Second World War, Diggory Cholmondelay had served his country in London, working in the Ministry because he'd been considered too old for active service and had, in any case, failed a service medical because of his heart condition. When he had returned from London at the end of the War he'd insisted that Edna should move into his bedroom on a full-time basis and although his father had resisted this, his objections had been easy to dismiss since he himself had bedded several members of the female staff and was suspected to have had at least two illegitimate children as a result of productive liaisons with chambermaids.

'I am simply too full of years and sadness,' Diggory Cholmondelay said to me. 'Can you put me down, please.'

At first I didn't realise that he was serious. But he was.

'I have absolutely nothing to live for,' he said. 'Edna and I were together so long that it is quite impossible for me to exist without her. I have no reason to be.'

'Your book,' I reminded him. 'You have to finish your history of the house. You need to live to finish that.'

He shrugged. 'She was the only one who would have cared,' he said. 'If I finish it who will I tell?' He wiped his eyes with his handkerchief. 'We used to share everything,' he said. 'And apart from that time during the War, we were never apart. She wanted to come to London with me but I wouldn't let her. I thought it too dangerous. I felt safer with her down here. But I've always shared things with her. If I found something special in a junk shop or at an auction I would want to rush home to show it to her. If she saw a bird in the garden doing something unusual she would tell me about it. If I found a good bit in a book I was reading then I would read it out to her. And she'd do the same for me.'

He really did want me to end his life.

'I can't do that,' I told him gently.

I offered him pills to help him over the next few days.

He didn't want anything.

I talked to him for hours. Or, rather, I listened to him talk about Edna and the things they'd done together. I'm not sure that it helped him. In fact, in a strange way, I think it may have made things worse for him.

'I can't,' I said again and again when he repeatedly asked me to give him something to end his life.

'Then if you can't do anything just tell me how to do it,' he pleaded.

'I can't do that either,' I said.

He nodded, got up and left the surgery without another word. I can still remember the way he walked away the last time I saw him in my surgery; head bowed, a broken human being.

It was winter when Edna died and it was one of the hardest winters we'd had for some years. There was deep snow everywhere and for a while the village was cut off from the rest of the world. The snow was so thick, and the roads so bad, that I couldn't get around in the Rolls Royce. I used one of Patsy's father's tractors instead. In most places the snow was three to four feet deep; in the hedgerows there were snowdrifts that were six feet deep. At Bilbury Grange we had Jack Frost patterns on the inside of our bedroom window and in the yard at the village school the children had made a slide that was over thirty feet long. The local television weather forecaster, sounding like a Victorian do-gooder had warned all old people to wrap up warm and to drink lots of hot soup. Two nights earlier, Thumper and I had blocked up the front door of the Duck and Puddle with a snow wall. The following day we realised that we'd sealed ourselves out of the pub and we had to spend an hour chipping away at what had turned into a wall of ice before we could get inside. Most of the wildlife was sheltering but I saw a redwing in the snow, puffed up, alert and searching for food. The redwings are unlike most birds in that they come to Britain for the winter. Most migrating birds travel in the other direction as autumn comes. Redwings come in search of the cold weather.

I'll never forget that bad winter.

I was driving round the village, checking on some of my older patients, and I was passing by the end of the driveway to Diggory's home one day when I saw a figure shovelling snow off the drive. It was about two months after Edna's death. It was snowing at the time and shovelling the snow seemed to me to be a rather pointless activity – like sweeping up leaves as the wind is blowing them from the trees. I could just make out the family motto 'Nullum Crimen Neque Unguento Fugit Noster Escutcheon' carved into the stone archway above him.

Whenever I saw it I couldn't help wondering how long it had taken skilled masons to carve that nonsense into the stone.

When I looked more closely I could see that it was Diggory doing the shovelling. To my astonishment he was naked to the waist and he was wearing old khaki knee length shorts. He appeared to be wearing a pair of ordinary shoes. I stopped the tractor, climbed down and waded through the snow to him. The snow was so deep that it came up higher than the tops of my Wellington boots. It didn't really matter because my trousers and socks were already soaking wet. I could see the clouds of mist created by his breath.

'What the devil are you doing?' I demanded. 'You'll catch your death of cold!'

Diggory just looked at me and nodded. He stuck his shovel into the snow and lifted up another pile of the stuff, tossing it carelessly to the side of the driveway.

I remembered then that he had a bad heart. And I remembered my warning to him. 'Don't do anything energetic in the cold weather,' I told him.

'You'll kill yourself!' I said.

He stopped again for a moment, looked at me and smiled. 'What are you going to do about it?' he asked.

And I didn't know what I was going to do about it.

I thought about grappling with him and trying to carry him up to the house. He guessed what I was thinking.

'I'm older than you but I'm strong and I'm determined,' he said. 'If you try to drag me up to the house I'll fight you and the minute you're gone I'll be out again.'

'I could have you taken to hospital,' I told him.

He shrugged. 'I've got lawyers,' he said. 'You'd never keep me locked in.'

'But…'I began.

'It's the best way,' said Diggory. 'It'll look natural. There will be no shame. It'll be put down as an accidental death.' He stared at me and then added: 'Unless you insist on speaking up.'

I turned, walked back to the tractor, climbed aboard and eventually finished my visits. Every few minutes I had stop to dry my eyes.

Diggory Cholmondelay died at 5.45 pm that afternoon. He was found in the snow by one of the gardeners who'd been sent to look for him. They called me straight away but when I got to the house he was dead. Since he had no children, the estate and all the family holdings went eventually to a distant relative who lived in Yorkshire.

I put 'heart attack' on the death certificate, which I wrote out myself.

There was no inquest. I decided that there was no need to trouble the police or the coroner.

And I still think I did the right thing.

Actually, I think that both Diggory and I did what we thought was the right thing to do.

Mr Forester’s Bad Tempered Bowel

Although they lived little more than a quarter of a mile away from Bilbury Grange (in our part of the world that makes them close neighbours) I had seen very little of Sally and Algernon Forester.

They were, like most people in the village, rather quiet folk who preferred to keep ‘themselves to themselves’ as the saying goes. I don’t mean to imply by this that they were unfriendly because they certainly weren’t. If you passed by their house and they were in the garden they would wave and exchange a word or two about the weather. (If you made a list of the things that country folk discuss most commonly, the weather would always be at the top of the list. This was not because we didn’t have anything else to discuss but because when you live in the middle of nowhere, and your village can get cut off overnight, the weather can have a huge impact on your life.)

If they heard that a neighbour was in trouble they would be there offering to help as soon as anyone in the village. So, for example, when Ollie Ruttle fell out of a tree in Barnstaple, broke his leg in three places and wasn’t able to work, the Foresters were among the first to offer help. Ollie Ruttle was a self-employed gardener and one of his regular jobs was to cut the grass and keep the hedges tidy at the Foresters’ place. The Foresters had a large garden and cutting, clipping and pruning took up two days a week. Mr Tuttle had only gone up the tree in order to try to rescue a kite for two small children, and he fell when a branch broke and deposited him unceremoniously on a patch of rock hard ground.

Legally, Mr Ruttle wasn’t entitled to any sick pay and there was no doubt that he, his wife and their three children would have been in dire straits without outside help. Quite a few people took round parcels of food but, realising that you can’t pay electricity and rates bills with apples and potatoes, Mr and Mrs Forester insisted on paying Ollie in full even though he wasn’t able to do any work for them. Mrs Forester put two £10 notes into an envelope every week and popped the envelope through the Ruttle’s letter box. It was a month before Mrs Ruttle saw who was delivering the envelopes.

Mr Forester was 74-years-old at the time. He was a large, imposing and elegant man who had impeccable manners and was invariably impeccably dressed. He always wore a jacket and a tie, whatever the weather, and could have been an ambassador to a small country, a head waiter or perhaps a judge. He had not, however, been any of those things. He had been an architect and a partner in a firm which had offices in the North of England but which had an international reputation. He had specialised in designing large buildings including, I believe, at least one opera house and a government building.

Whenever I talked to Mr Forester, I always thought he appeared a little distant, as though his body was present but his mind was somewhere else. And for a man who had earned his living designing buildings, he always seemed to me to be a bit disconnected from the world and remarkably unworldly. I had once stopped to talk to him and been astonished at how cut off he was from the world outside Bilbury. I don’t think he could have told you the name of the current Prime Minister or answered any of those questions which doctors commonly ask when they are trying to decide whether or not an individual is suffering from dementia.

But Mr Forester was not in the slightest bit demented. He didn’t really have the time to live in our modern world because he lived in the world of books: old books. He knew more about books, especially first editions, than anyone I’ve ever met.

His wife, Sally Forester, who was five years younger than her husband, was a sweet, diminutive lady who always dressed in the sort of long, down to the floor dresses once worn by Victorian ladies. She wore her hair, which was long and blonde, in ringlets, long, corkscrew shaped curls of a type usually only seen in those days in historical dramas shown in the cinema or on television, and she was the only woman I have ever seen carrying a parasol. She did this as though it were the most natural thing in the world to do. In fact, I believe she had at least three parasols. One was lemon coloured, one was light, dusky pink and one was white. They were all fringed and delicate, and Patsy said she thought they were the most beautiful things she’d ever seen.

Mrs Forester smoked cigarettes which she had especially made for her by a specialist tobacconist just off Jermyn Street in London. She smoked six of them every day. She never smoked more and she never smoked fewer. The cigarettes were made of a very smoky type of tobacco known as latakia and she smoked them through a six inch long holder made of jade and equipped, apparently, with a very early filtration system. The holder she used seemed extraordinarily long but she told me that it was exactly twelve inches in length and would be described by a tobacconist as being of ‘theatre length’. (She told me that shorter holders are known as being of cocktail or dinner length but that it was apparently possible to purchase cigarette holders which were well over a foot long – these were apparently known as being of ‘opera length’ though I would have thought that if you went to the opera with a cigarette holder nearly two feet long there would be a risk that you would set fire to the hat or hair of the patron sitting in the row in front of you.) Mrs Forester explained that she used a holder because she hated having little bits of tobacco stuck to her lips and because it kept the smoke well out of her eyes. She also insisted that she was in good company since Jayne Mansfield, Audrey Hepburn, Rita Hayworth and Princess Margaret had all used cigarette holders.

Every time I talked to her I tried to persuade Mrs Forester to give up the smoking habit and every time we spoke about it she told me, with an engaging smile, that she understood that as a doctor it was my responsibility to admonish her for smoking but that she never believed anything that researchers or governments said and that she was quite certain that research would soon be published showing that smoking a modest amount of tobacco was good for your health. 'Moderation in all things,' she would say sweetly.

Alcohol was the only other drug either of them took. She had one glass of sherry every evening and he had one glass of whisky. Neither of them drank during the daytime. I do not think I am the first doctor to have noticed that many older people drink alcohol regularly but in very modest quantities. Indeed, most individuals who live to celebrate their 90th or even their 100th birthday say, with some pride, that they take a very small amount of alcohol every day. I sometimes wondered whether this modest, characteristic combination of self-indulgence and self-discipline might not be at least partly responsible for their longevity.

Not that the Foresters were particularly old. At the time of which I write he was just 74 and she was in her late sixties. They were a happy couple; contented and fulfilled. They had each other and while she looked after the garden, he collected books.

Collecting can become a mania, a mental illness in a way, and Mr Forester was well aware that his hobby had long since got out of control. Fortunately, he had clearly been successful in his profession and he could afford to indulge himself.

I have to say that in my experience it is by no means uncommon for a collector to spend more time and money on their obsession than they can really afford to spend.

A bookseller I knew once told me that one or two of his customers (they were nearly always men for it is, it seems, invariably men who become obsessive collectors) were so ashamed or embarrassed by their mania that they would go to extraordinary lengths to hide their new purchases. He said he had one customer who always asked for parcels of books to be sent to his club or sent to his home when he knew that his wife would be away. Another had piles of books parcelled up and sent to him labelled 'Rose Fertiliser'.

Over the years I had a number of patients who were keen collectors. For example, another patient of mine, whom I will call simply Paul, was an enthusiastic collector of rare coins. He spent far more on his collection than he could afford and he was extremely proud of the coins he had acquired. I remember he once came into my surgery with a small, wooden box containing an extraordinary collection of silver coins from the days of Queen Elizabeth I. He had bought them from a dealer in London. He asked me to take the box and to then sell it to him for £5, giving him a note of ownership which he could show to his wife. He had clearly paid far more than that, and far more than he could afford. I told him that since his wife was also a patient of mine I could not possibly take part in such a deception, but in truth I would not have taken part in it even if she hadn't been one of my patients. I think Paul managed to persuade Peter Marshall to agree to take part in the deception.

Over the years I learned so much from my patients.

I don't think doctors working in towns and cities ever had the time to spare to listen to their patients. The urban physicians undoubtedly earned far more money than country doctors but I thought then, and still think now, that those of us who worked in the remoter parts of the country were richer in the real sense of the word.

I digress.

My apologies.

Let's get back to the Foresters.

They were, as a couple, like two halves of a pair of scissors, to use a phrase coined by Benjamin Franklin. They'd been married for the best part of half a century and they had, over the years, grown ever closer to each other.

The Forester's home, a beautiful Georgian house which they had lovingly restored, was full of books. I don't think there was a room other than the kitchen (and I suppose the bathrooms) that didn't have floor to ceiling bookcases on at least one of the walls and although he had a library of over 20,000 books, Mr Forester knew where every single book was positioned. He looked after them all as though they were rare orchids and once told me that he had, for a while, considered keeping his books upside down so that their upper spines would not be damaged when they were removed from their shelves. Fortunately, he decided against this and avoided any risk of damage by making sure that his books were stored fairly loosely on the shelves and weren't crammed in tightly.

Both the Foresters enjoyed good health and I did not often see them in the surgery.

Mrs Forester had some mild varicose veins for which I prescribed elastic stockings. These were not to cover the veins, since her long dresses did that very adequately, but merely to prevent the ankle swelling which can accompany swollen and inadequate venous drainage.

Mr Forester had once had a sore throat and he'd been to see me with an attack of indigestion which had come on after Christmas and had continued to annoy him well into January. The symptoms had disappeared after treatment with an antacid and had not returned. He had also suffered from irritable bowel syndrome for many years and the symptoms of this, bloating, a painful abdomen and occasional diarrhoea, had been with him for over three decades. He knew that both diet and stress could make his symptoms worse. If he ate too much fat or too much fibre then the symptoms would get worse but they would also worsen if he found himself in a stressful situation for any reason.

So, when Mr Forester came into the surgery I had no idea what his complaint might be. If I'd had to guess I would have guessed that he was having trouble with his irritable bowel syndrome again. IBS (which was in the 1970s still sometimes called by its original names of 'spastic colon' or 'mucous colitis') had for years been one of the most underestimated diseases there is. The pain caused by a bowel in spasm can be excruciating. And why shouldn't it be? It is well known that pain which is caused by muscle spasm is often the worst sort of pain. The pains caused by gall stones, kidney stones and child labour are all caused by muscle spasms. So why shouldn't the spasm of the huge muscles of the bowel be taken more seriously? It had long seemed to me that the medical profession (and the pharmaceutical industry) had more or less abandoned millions of patients simply because they underestimated a problem which they couldn't properly understand and couldn't think of a way to treat successfully.

Doctors, relying on what they had been taught, supplemented by what they had read in medical journals and medical textbooks, still believed that IBS was best treated with a diet heavy in roughage. To be honest, I had always felt that this was like trying to treat diabetes mellitus by telling patients to eat more sugar. I knew that it was often roughage that caused irritable bowel syndrome and that encouraging patients to take more roughage was more likely to exacerbate the problem than to cure it.

The professions didn't take IBS very seriously because there was no effective pharmacological remedy available. The healing professions were, I am afraid to say, dominated by the needs of the pharmaceutical industry and modern medical care was dominated by, and run for, interventionists in general and drug companies in particular. As a result, doctors could be hidebound and worryingly unimaginative. And, because IBS was neither a dramatic disease, nor a fashionable one, nor one that usually killed sufferers, the majority of doctors remained blisteringly ignorant about it. It was, I am afraid, a disease that was more likely to result in sniggers than sympathy.

Back in the 1970s, I had lost count of the number of patients who had told me that their doctor has told them that their symptoms could not be caused by IBS because 'the tests had come back negative'.

That was clever of them because I knew of no comprehensive and truly effective tests for IBS. The diagnosis had to be made on the basis of the symptoms and signs.

All this was all the more remarkable when you realised that IBS was one of the commonest of all chronic disorders. It was, for example, just as common as all the forms of arthritis put together and much commoner than many well-known and highly investigated diseases.

After the usual pleasantries, Mr Forester explained that he had recently suffered from a rather alarming series of what he called 'palpitations'. It seemed that it wasn't his IBS which had brought him to the surgery.

'It started two days ago,' he said. 'I had been pottering in the garden, not doing anything very strenuous, and I came indoors to sit in the conservatory for a while before dinner. Suddenly, I felt rather strange. I don't know how to explain it really but I felt weak and dizzy and it was rather alarming. I checked my pulse, which I do from time to time as a routine, just to check that my heart is beating and that I'm still alive, and I found that it was going so fast that I couldn't even begin to count it.'

'Do you know if your pulse was regular?' I asked him.

'I don't think it was,' he said. 'It seemed to be all over the place. There didn't seem to be any rhythm to it at all. I was so alarmed that I checked my blood pressure with a machine we have. An American friend bought it for me and sent it over. According to the machine my pulse was 156 and upwards and my blood pressure alternated between absurdly high and absurdly low. The machine lit up with all the little warning lights with which it is fitted.'

'Did you have any nausea?'

'No, no, nothing like that.'

'Were you sweating?'

'No, I wasn't really sweating. I got a bit nervous for a while and that made me sweat a bit. But I wasn't dripping with sweat. I've seen people sweat with heart trouble and I had nothing like that. I wasn't clammy for example.'

'But you didn't call me!' I said. 'Why on earth didn't you ring me? I could have been with you in five minutes!'

'I don't really know,' he admitted. 'After the initial shock I started to get used to the fact that my heart was all over the place and since I didn't have any pain in my chest or my arm or my jaw I didn't think I was having a heart attack.'

'You can have a heart attack without any real pain,' I pointed out.

‘Yes, I had heard that,’ he said. ‘But to be honest I just wanted to sit and rest.’ He took a big breath and paused before continuing. He seemed to have difficulty in taking in air. ‘Actually,’ he went on, ‘there was another reason for not calling you.’

He seemed embarrassed but I urged him to continue and to explain what he meant.

‘I was worried that if I turned up as an emergency you might think I needed to go to hospital. And I worried that if you sent me into hospital I would probably find myself being treated for heart disease. I’ve got several friends with heart disease and I know the regime. They’re all taking drugs to control their heart beat and they’re also all taking warfarin to stop their blood clotting.’

I nodded. ‘But?’

‘I know that there can be big problems with those drugs,’ he said. He held up a hand. ‘Before you tell me that they can save lives, I do know that. And I understand that people with serious heart trouble need to take drugs to keep them alive. But everyone I know who takes digoxin and warfarin has some problems with them. Their heart rate never seems to be normal and once you start on these drugs it seems impossible ever to stop them. And making sure that they aren’t taking too much warfarin can be difficult.’ He thought for a moment. ‘There was something else that occurred to me,’ he said. He struggled to remember. ‘I should have written down all the things I wanted to say.’ I waited for a moment or two. ‘Oh yes,’ he continued. ‘I was also worried that I might end up being taken in for an angiogram. You know, that test where they stick needles into you and put tubes into your heart and then do tests and take pictures. I understand that can be a pretty risky procedure.’

‘It can,’ I agreed. ‘I understand your fears. So, that’s why you didn’t want to go to the hospital? You didn’t want to end up taking drugs to control your heart rate or being over-investigated. Is that right?’

‘Well, yes, in a way, but also, no,’ he said. He paused and swallowed. ‘I’m finding this difficult to explain but I’m trying to be honest.’

‘OK,’ I said. ‘Take your time.’

‘The thing is,’ he said, ‘that I didn’t think that my irregular heart beat was due to a problem with my heart. I know that sounds crazy but I’ve always been pretty in tune with my body and I didn’t think my heart was failing me. You might think that I just didn’t want to accept what was happening but that was very much how I felt at the time.’

‘So, what did you think was causing the problem with your heart – if your heart itself was fine?’

‘I had an enormous amount of wind that day,’ he said. ‘I want to talk to you about that, and to try to find out why, but for whatever reason I had massive amounts of wind in my abdomen. And the wind was pressing up on my diaphragm. I could feel it!’

I was beginning to understand what he meant. And I was also beginning to think that he might have been right not to want to go hospital. He had been absolutely right in his assumption that I might well have sent him to hospital. And he was certainly right in guessing that if he had been to hospital he would have been treated with an anti-arrhythmic drug such as digoxin and probably also an anti-coagulant such as warfarin.

‘So, tell me what happened? You were sitting in the conservatory and your heart rate was all over the place and your blood pressure was going up and down like a yoyo. What happened next?’

‘I just sat there for ages,’ said Mr Forester. ‘I had awful wind. I don’t like to be vulgar but I couldn’t stop burping. I felt that the only way that I could get relief from the discomfort I felt was to bring up the air in my stomach. I felt as though the air in my stomach was pushing up my diaphragm and, you’ll probably think I’m mad, compressing my heart.’

‘So you thought that maybe the wind was causing your palpitations, fibrillations, whatever they were?’

‘Yes. Actually, what’s the difference between palpitations and fibrillations? I’ve never understood that.’

‘When you have palpitations you notice an irregular and rapid heart rate. It’s sometimes said that palpitations are just fast and regular but that isn’t really the case. Palpitations can be irregular. They can be caused by a problem with the heart itself but they can also be caused by agitation, by too much exercise or even by stress. Actually you can get palpitations from something you’ve drunk or eaten. For example, coffee is a common cause of palpitations. Most people will get palpitations if they drink enough strong coffee.’

‘And fibrillations?’

‘That’s when the heart is quivering. The contractions are uncoordinated and rapid and irregular. There are two sorts of fibrillation: atrial fibrillation which involves the heart’s upper chambers or atria, and ventricular fibrillation which involves the ventricles.’

Mr Forester frowned. ‘It doesn’t sound as if there’s all that much difference.’

‘There isn’t. The difference is in the cause rather than what you feel. A fibrillating heart is usually beating fast and irregular but you can have palpitations that are fast and irregular. The main difference, I suppose, is that fibrillations usually signify some more fundamental problem. Palpitations can be serious but they can also be caused by something that isn’t as serious.’

‘I see.’

‘Did you know that there is a theory in medicine that wind can be caused by heart problems?’ I asked him.

‘I didn’t,’ said Mr Forester. ‘Do you believe that?’

I smiled. ‘No, I don’t really. I know that in medicine, just about anything is possible. But I don’t think that heart disease is a direct cause of massive amounts of wind – the sort of quantities of wind that you can get with IBS – though I do suspect that heart disease may cause some burping. However, I do think that things can happen the other way round and that massive amounts of wind can be an apparent cause of heart problems.’

‘Such as palpitations?’

‘Such as palpitations.’

‘So, you think I might have been right in assuming that the enormous amount of wind which I had was pressing on my heart?’

‘Ah. No, not really. I don’t think that the wind was pressing directly on your heart. But I do think it was possible that the wind was pressing on your vagus nerve.’

‘What the devil is the vagus nerve?’

‘The stomach and the heart share a common nerve supply – through something called the vagus nerve. Technically, the vagus nerve is also known as the tenth of the twelve cranial nerves.

‘And if the wind pressed on the vagus nerve, it could cause palpitations?’

‘That’s my theory,’ I told him. ‘The trouble with the medical profession is that it is sometimes over-influenced by whether or not a treatment is available. If palpitations are caused by a heart problem, then those palpitations can be treated with wonderful, expensive drugs or by even more expensive, and profitable, surgery. But if the palpitations are caused by wind pressing on the vagus nerve then there isn’t anything that doctors can do about it.’

‘So, doctors prefer to assume that all palpitations are caused by heart disorders?’

‘I suspect so. But remember this is just my theory. The medical establishment wouldn’t agree with me and many doctors would think I’m being a heretic even to suggest it. New ideas and new ways of looking at things have never gone down well with the establishment. Doctors and nurses are dedicated to the interventionist philosophy. Doing something is their default. And most patients are eager to accept whatever treatments are offered.’

‘So you don’t think I was mad not to ring you? Sally was desperately keen to ring you and get you to come racing round.’

‘How have you been since that bad attack of palpitations?’ I said, unashamedly avoiding the question.

‘I felt a bit weak for a few hours the next day but gradually I started to feel better. It took about six hours for the fibrillations to slow and for my heart to start beating normally again and afterwards I was exhausted. Oh and I yawned a lot too.’

‘The vagus nerve also triggers yawning,’ I told him.

I felt as though my diagnosis was coming together at last. ‘If something is pressing on your vagus nerve then you’ll probably start yawning. However, to the orthodox professional, yawning is just another sign that a patient is having a heart attack. Actually, just to make things even stranger, the vagus nerve can also cause pains in the left arm –mimicking a heart attack.’

‘Gee,’ said Mr Forester. ‘I wonder how many people are being treated for heart disease when their real problem is wind caused by their irritable bowel syndrome?’

‘I have no idea,’ I admitted. ‘Absolutely no idea.’

‘And how many people have died because they were given drugs such as digoxin or warfarin which they didn’t really need but which can kill people occasionally?’

‘Again, I have no idea.’

‘I am right in thinking those drugs can kill?’

‘You are, I’m afraid. They can and do save lives but they can be lethal. For example, if the doctors or nurses get the dosage of warfarin wrong then a patient can have a bleed – resulting in a deadly stroke. And the whole problem gets worse because the drugs commonly used to treat an irregular heartbeat can also cause an irregular heartbeat.’

‘So, a patient who has palpitations may be given a drug which causes more palpitations and so the doctors increase the dosage of the drug without realising that the drug they are giving is causing the problem?’

‘I’m afraid so,’ I said.

‘Hmmm,’ said Mr Forester, not entirely unreasonably.

I didn’t say this to Mr Forester, but even then, back in the 1970s, I was beginning to realise that the older I got, and the more I knew, the more I had begun to realise that medicine really was still in the dark ages. We have to remember, I suppose, that it wasn’t all that long ago that doctors claimed that smoking was good for the lungs, that cutting out long lengths of the intestine was a great way to cure all sorts of health problems and that deliberate blood-letting was a wonderful cure for many of the things that couldn’t be cured by chopping out a dozen feet of bowel.

Generally speaking, doctors find it next to impossible to do nothing. This is partly because if they do nothing that rather suggests that they know nothing and partly because the best, easiest and quickest way to end a consultation is to hand over a prescription for something. Doctors also have a terrible (and frequently fatal) tendency to treat symptoms, or consequences, rather than causes.

'I've noticed something else recently,' continued Mr Forester. 'If I have a lot of wind then I find I have to get up at night to go to the loo. I thought it was my prostate gland at first. But do you think the wind could be responsible for my having to get up at night?'

I told him I thought it was about time I gave him a thorough examination. Having checked with my receptionist, Miss Johnson, that there were no more patients sitting in the waiting room, I told him to undress, and to lie down on my examination couch. I then gave him the full ten guinea examination (as my predecessor and mentor Dr Brownlow used to call it when he gave a patient as thorough and as exhaustive an examination as he could).

I even told Mr Forester to lie on his side, pull his underpants down and pull his knees up so that I could check out the size, shape and feel of his prostate gland.

At the end of half an hour, I told Mr Forester that I could find absolutely nothing wrong with him apart from some wax in his left ear, a long-standing case of athlete's foot, a very early cataract in his right eye and some small and insignificant varicose veins in both legs. His systolic blood pressure reading was raised slightly but his diastolic, the lower figure, was perfectly normal. His heart was perfectly regular and I could find no sign of any abnormality.

'You're in tip top condition for a man of 50,' I told him, when he was dressed and sitting again. I never liked to talk to patients about my findings while they were getting dressed.

'I'm 74!' he reminded me quickly.

I often found that patients who were over 70 were proud of their age. A child will tell you their age in an instant. And so will someone of retirement age.

'I know you are. But you're in tip top condition for a man of 50. It was a compliment.'

He smiled. 'Oh. Thank you! What about my prostate gland?' he asked. 'I take it that it was my prostate gland you were checking when you put the rubber glove on?'

'Your prostate is absolutely fine,' I told him. 'It isn't enlarged and it isn't hard or misshapen.'

'So it isn't because of my prostate that I've had to get up at night to pass urine?'

I shook my head. 'No, it isn't because of your prostate.'

'And it does only happen when I've got a lot of wind.'

'So I think we can safely assume that it's the wind in your bowel pressing on your bladder that makes you get up and go to the loo.'

'Crumbs. This damned IBS gets everywhere, doesn't it?'

I agreed with him. 'In my experience, IBS can cause a whole range of symptoms, including tiredness, muscle aches, an inability to concentrate and gastritis – to name just a few. In your case I think your IBS has caused your heart problems and your bladder problems.'

'You definitely think that it was my IBS which triggered all those heart problems?'

I nodded. 'I do.'

'It's a bugger of a disease,' said Mr Forester. He sighed. 'Still, I should be grateful I suppose. I could have something far worse wrong with me.' He stopped for a moment. 'Do you ever think that maybe there is an angel up there who makes all the life and death decisions? Maybe tossing a coin to decide who has a heart attack, who falls off their bike and breaks a leg or who develops irritable bowel syndrome?'

I didn't know what to say to that. I hadn't actually thought of angels handing out diseases, like Father Christmas handing out presents at a children's party.

'Do you doctors have any idea what the devil causes irritable bowel syndrome?' asked Mr Forester. 'Haven't any of those bright research blokes worked it out yet?'

'I'm afraid no one has yet worked out what causes IBS,' I told him. 'There are all sorts of theories but there's still no real evidence to show precisely why the bowel can misbehave so badly. There are a few researchers trying to find solutions but from what I've seen I doubt if anything that helps us is going to be published before the 1980s at the earliest. By the early part of the 21st century I have no doubt that there will be a good many new theories, some hard evidence and some real remedies available. I have a suspicion that some of the alternative medicine therapies being put forward might work. And I know people are looking at the complex relationship between bacteria and IBS and there is even a theory that there is a possibility that fungal infections might interfere with the bacteria living in the bowel. However, we're still living in the 1970s and for the time being we have to go with what we've got!'

'Trust me to get a disease which no one understands!'

'Sadly, there are still a lot of things doctors don't understand,' I confessed. 'As a profession, doctors always like to pretend that they know more than they do! I think the theory is that if the doctor is confident then the placebo effect will work well and there will be a better chance of the patient recovering.'

'I understand that,' agreed Mr Forester. 'But sometimes it helps to know the truth rather than to be deceived with a load of waffle!'

'What you and I need to do now,' I said, 'is to try to work out together why your IBS has suddenly flared up and has been affecting you so badly. If we can find out what's triggered this recent trouble then hopefully we can stop it happening again.'

I always found it wise to try to work with a patient when dealing with a chronic disorder – particularly one which was a bit of a puzzle. Traditionally, most doctors preferred to do things 'to' their patients. Rightly or wrongly I preferred to do things 'with' them. I suspected that many doctors in the medical establishment would disapprove of my approach.

'Well, I've been very careful with my diet,' said Mr Forester. 'After all the years I've had it, I know which foods make my IBS worse and I've carefully avoided those. I know that I can't eat lots of fatty food, that I can't eat lots of food with roughage in it and that I can't eat too many sweet dishes – so I've been careful with all of those. I drink loads of fluids because I've found that my symptoms are worse if I'm a bit dehydrated. I've tried all the medicines you can buy over the counter and none of them has made the slightest difference.'

I was reminded, yet again, that human beings can get used to almost any chronic health condition; adjusting their lifestyle in some appropriate way and then just getting on with their life as best they can.

'So, the chances are high that your current problem must have been caused by something other than diet.'

'I agree. But why has it affected my heart and my bladder for the first time? Usually my IBS causes muscle cramps and quite a lot of pain but the pain is usually down here,' he said, rubbing his lower abdomen.

'Your problems have been worse because there's been more air in your bowel than ever before,' I explained. 'And the symptoms have changed because there is so much more wind.'

I explained that the pain that is so typical of irritable bowel syndrome appears to be caused directly by wind inside the bowel.

'Normally, the muscles of the bowel wall move food along the intestine by compressing and squeezing and pushing it. It's a process called peristalsis. My theory is that when there is a lot of wind inside the intestines, the bowel wall is stretched with the result that the bowel automatically contracts in an attempt to move along the food that it mistakenly believes is there. But there isn't any food there, just wind, and so the bowel keeps contracting and relaxing and then goes into spasm.'

'So if my diet hasn't changed, and I have been avoiding all the specific foods which I know can make my IBS worse, what the devil has changed?'

'There is one other huge factor that we've ignored so far,' I told him. 'Stress.'

'Oh, I don't think that could be my problem,' said Mr Forester. 'I've been retired for a few years now. I don't commute, I don't have clients to worry about, I don't have to rush around the world to check on projects. I just live a quiet life, at home with my wife, my books and the garden.'

I knew by the way he told me this that there was something he wasn't telling me; some significant problem that he was either not acknowledging or that he didn't want to tell me about. I didn't say anything, but just waited.

I knew that remaining silent was often the quickest way to obtain information. Witnesses in court, interviewees on television, job applicants and patients in a surgery or a clinic will invariably reveal more, and often divulge information which they might otherwise have kept to themselves, if they are allowed to think during a period of silence. In those circumstances most people feel uncomfortable if a silence goes on too long. They feel a need to fill the empty space and unless they are extremely imaginative, and good liars, they will, more often or not fill the gap with truths which have been suppressed or hidden or just forgotten.

So I just looked at Mr Forester and waited. It seemed as if the silence lasted an hour or so. Actually, it lasted less than half a minute.

'There is one thing that has been worrying me a little,' he said at last.

Again I said nothing and waited. I just nodded, hoping that it would appear to be a nod of encouragement.

'There is something that has been on my mind.'

I still said nothing. Even then I knew that if you spoke too soon when someone was about to reveal something they'd previously tried to hide then you could spoil the moment. So I just sat and looked at him and waited.

Mr Forester sighed.

'I have a brother,' he said. 'Or, rather, I had a brother.'

'I didn't know that,' I said.

'His name was Simon and he was two years younger than me.'

'You speak of him in the past tense.'

‘Yes. He died.’

‘When was that?’

‘About two weeks ago. I had a letter from a solicitor.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that.’

‘He wasn’t a good man,’ said Mr Forester. ‘In fact he was pretty much a bad egg I’m afraid. He went to prison once or twice.’

And slowly, with considerable difficulty, Mr Forester told me the story of his brother. He hadn’t seen him or spoken to him for over a half a century. The brother had been expelled from school at the age of 16 for running some sort of primitive protection racket. Mr Forester’s parents had found him a job with a shipping company but after six months he lost that job because he was caught stealing. And on and on it went. He was given chance after chance but he always managed to mess things up. He always promised to make an effort but he never quite managed to ‘do the right thing’, as Mr Forester put it. At the age of 19 he was sent to prison for theft. And in prison he’d killed a man with a home-made knife.

‘The family pretty much disowned him when he was sent to prison,’ said Mr Forester. ‘I always felt guilty about it but there wasn’t anything I could do. When he came out of prison he contacted me at my office and I sent him money. He didn’t want to meet me and I didn’t want to meet him. He just asked for money. So I sent him what I could afford. Actually, I sent him more than I could afford. And that went on for years. I would forget about him and then I’d suddenly get a scribbled note demanding money. He always gave a Poste Restante address somewhere. Occasionally it was in London. Sometimes it was in the Far East. I don’t know what he was doing but I think it had something to do with drugs. He bought a boat and I think he was using it to smuggle drugs. I know he bought a boat because I paid for it. He didn’t want to see me any more than I wanted to see him. Several times he threatened that if I didn’t send him money he would find some way to embarrass me. He always demanded cash. I had to go to the bank, parcel it up and post it off to whatever address he was using. He obviously knew what I did for a living and he said he’d turn up at the opening of a building I had designed or come to my offices; he threatened to stand in the lobby and tell the clients that I wasn’t properly qualified or that I was a thief or a drug dealer or whatever came to his mind. What sort of person does that?’

‘Why didn’t you tell the police? Call his bluff?’

‘I couldn’t do that because I was frightened of him. He’d always been dangerously unpredictable. I was worried what he might do. And there was something else.’

He looked down at his hands and grimaced. He then caressed his lower abdomen. I guessed that he was having an intestinal spasm. I now knew why his IBS had got worse so suddenly. It had nothing to do with what he was or was not eating.

‘What was the something else?’

‘Sally didn’t know he existed. I’d never told her about him. I don’t know why. Well, yes, I suppose I do. I was ashamed of him as well as frightened of him – and of what he might do.’

‘Does she still not know about him?’

He shook his head. ‘I never wanted her to know about him. I wanted to protect her. I am, was, ashamed of him and everything he did with his life, but it was more than that. I never wanted him in our life in any real way. I always felt he would, I don’t know, just dirty things. Do you understand?’

‘I think so. Yes, I think I do. So, what did the solicitor want?’

‘He’d traced me as the sole relative. It can’t have been difficult. I’m not difficult to find. He said there was no one else to pay the funeral costs. And there were some small debts. Not much, nothing I can’t easily manage.’

‘So, what’s the problem? Can’t you just send the solicitor a cheque?’

‘Yes, of course. I can do that. And I don’t feel I need to go to his funeral. I loathed my brother and he wasn’t part of my life.’

‘But Sally doesn’t know? Does she have to know?’

‘When I stopped working I closed my business account. Sally and I only have a joint account. And Sally does our accounts.’

‘So, she would wonder why you were sending a cheque to a solicitor she’d never heard of?’

‘Exactly.’

‘I understand. That’s something of a dilemma.’

‘The worry of it has been making me feel quite ill.’

‘It’s also the cause of the problem with your IBS.’

‘Do you think so?’

‘Definitely.’

‘I suppose I must have known that his day would arrive eventually,’ said Mr Forester. ‘And I’m glad that he died first. I wouldn't want him to have approached Sally after I'd gone. That would have been awful.' He swallowed hard. He seemed to be having difficulty in getting his breath.

'Are you OK?' I asked him.

He nodded. 'I can feel my bowel griping,' he said. 'And the wind feels as though it's pushing up on my diaphragm again. I didn't mention that before but I could feel it pushing up.'

'You have to tell Sally,' I told him. 'You have to explain everything to her today. You have to tell her that you have a brother you've never mentioned and you have to tell her why you never mentioned him. You have to tell her about the demands for money and you have to tell her about the solicitor's letter and this last request for money.'

'Do you think so?'

'Definitely. My predecessor, Dr Brownlow, once said that worry is interest on a debt that needs to be paid. Until you've dealt with this, and brought the secret out into the open, then you'll be worrying. Besides, you don't have much choice. You need to send a cheque to the solicitor and to do that you have to tell Sally.'

'How the devil do I do that?'

'Just tell her. She'll understand. And then it will all be over. And I can pretty well guarantee that your IBS will go back to being an annoyance instead of the terrible burden that it has become. You are anxious now not because of your brother – he's gone and cannot hurt you again – but because of the secret. And as secrets go it's not a particular potent or toxic one.'

Mr Forester stood up. 'You're right!' he said firmly. 'And if I'm going to do it then I need to do it now.'

He shook my hand and left.

Three hours later he telephoned me.

'Sally knew about him,' he said. 'She said my mother told her all about him. She never said anything to me because she thought it would upset me to talk about him. But she knew all about him. She's written the cheque to the solicitor.'

'Do you feel any better?'

Mr Forester laughed. 'Better?' he said. 'I feel as if a ten ton weight has been taken off my head. For the first time in a fortnight I feel alive.'

He promised to call me if the palpitations ever came back.

But I didn't hear from him for six months. And then he just came in because he needed the wax syringing from his left ear. I'd forgotten to do it before.

I am not saying that my theories were correct, of course. You can't draw conclusions from a single case. But Mr Forester had no more palpitations and didn't have to get up at night to pee.

Well, not for five years anyway, and then it was a completely different story.

The Christmas Eve Surgery

Christmas was always a special time for Patsy and me at Bilbury Grange. We enjoyed the usual trappings – including stockings hanging from the mantelpiece, candles on the dining table, a huge yule log ready to slide into the hearth so that it would provide heat for the whole day, a bowl of nuts and, of course, a beautifully decorated Christmas tree.

We didn't like to have a live tree in the house, not because they tend to drop their needles on the carpet but because they invariably die afterwards. Even if you have a tree which still has its roots, and you keep it well watered, the chances are high that it will die when you have transplanted it into the garden. So, rather than a live tree, we had a large, artificial tree which we had purchased from Peter Marshall. It cost us £5 and just fitted into our drawing room. We always decorated it with Victorian baubles and coloured fairy lights.

It is often said that the idea of having a Christmas tree brought indoors and decorated with candles and other finery was introduced into England by Prince Albert but strictly speaking this isn't true. Prince Albert didn't so much introduce the habit of having a Christmas tree as reintroduce it back into the country where the idea had originated.

Having a tree in the house had been a common custom in England for many centuries before the miserable, humourless Puritans purged Christmas of all the jollity, frivolity and exuberance.

The really odd thing is that it was an English missionary called Boniface who introduced the Christmas tree to Germany back in the 8th century. Saint Boniface, to give him his proper honorific, was originally called Wynfrith and started out his religious life as a Benedictine monk. Then, when he became a priest, Pope Gregory sent him to Germany with papal orders to convert the heathens living east of the Rhine. After he'd taken time out to introduce the Christmas tree into his adopted land, poor old Boniface was killed by a band of Frisians (islanders from the Frisian isles rather than misspelt black and white cows from Friesland) while he was reading the Bible to a bunch of recent converts. Feeling pretty bad about things, the authorities tried to make up for the unhappy ending by making him a saint.

The other odd thing is that at the time when we gave the Christmas tree to the Germans, the tree was always an oak. When Prince Albert, who travelled to England from Germany to marry Queen Victoria, reintroduced the idea of the Christmas tree, the oak tree had somehow turned into a fir tree. Still, it made sense. It is, after all, a darned sight easier to find a small fir tree than it is to find a small oak tree. And unless you live in a castle with massively high ceilings, it is considerably easier to fit a fir tree into your home than it would be to squeeze in an oak tree.

And so, on Christmas Eve, while Patsy finished preparing for Christmas Day, I did a final surgery before the holidays.

Unless there was a flu epidemic in the area, Christmas was usually a fairly quiet time for country doctors in the 1970s. I'm not really sure why this should have been, other than the feeling that most people were probably too busy to bother the doctor with anything trivial, or with anything which looked or felt as though it would comfortably wait until the New Year. At Christmas, no one came into the surgery wanting a medical for a job or an insurance company. Not many people turned up wanting to have repeat prescriptions for their regular medicines. Hardly anyone arrived to check on the results of an X-ray or a blood test. And, of course, there were very few holidaymakers in the area, so the population of the village was pretty well limited to the residents.

My friend William, a GP with a practice in the English Midlands, always used to say that most people were just too busy to be ill over Christmas and it wasn't as daft a thought as it might sound.

In order to minimise the number of people ringing me on Christmas Day, I always used to do one last surgery late in the afternoon on Christmas Eve, whatever day of the week it came on. Even if Christmas Eve fell on a Sunday I would do my Christmas Eve surgery. Things were sometimes so quiet that I found myself sitting in the consulting room catching up with my correspondence or sorting through other assorted paperwork. I remember I once did a Christmas Eve surgery that was attended by just three patients – and two of those only turned up to bring in bottles of home-made wine. (Home-made wine was always a very common and popular gift in the village. Some of the wine Patsy and I were given tasted far superior to any of the expensive stuff bottled in France and sold by expensive wine merchants. Bilberry wine was always one of my favourites.)

But by no means all Christmas Eve surgeries were quiet. I remember one in particular which seemed to last for ever.

The first patient to totter in was Edward Low, a dusty and diffident old man who had celebrated his 97th birthday just three weeks earlier. There were still people in the village who referred to him as Young Mr Edward.

I always found Mr Low fascinating to talk to.

Since he was born in the 1880s, he could remember Queen Victoria's reign quite well. He was one of the few people left in England who had seen W.G.Grace play cricket. Astonishingly, Mr Low's father, also called Edward, had been born in 1802, before the battle of Trafalgar and before the battle of Waterloo. Mr Low senior had been 78-years-old when young Edward was born. His wife, young Edward's mother, had been the fifth woman to hold that obviously well-sought after position and she'd been just 29-years-old when she'd given birth. Before her marriage she had been a barmaid at the Bilbury village pub, which had been called 'The White Hart' in those days. Curiously, all of Mr Low senior's wives had been barmaids and all of them had been much younger than their husband. Three of them had died in childbirth and the fourth had died of cholera. I don't know what the fifth had died of but Mr Low was a widower when I met him.

Mr Low collected old silver and earlier in his life his enthusiasm had become an obsession, a mania which affected every aspect of his life.

He could still look at an old piece of silver, examine the hallmark and, without reference to any book of marks, tell you who had made the piece, when they had made it and where they had made it. He may have been in his 90s but he knew that for all of us it is the struggle, the competition, the hope and, perhaps the occasional success, which gives meaning and real satisfaction to our lives. He was, he once said, far too young to retire. He loved looking at old silver.

I once showed him a table spoon which Patsy and I owned and he pointed out the lion mark which proved that it was sterling silver, the initials which showed that it was made by a famous silversmith called Paul Storr, the letter 'b' which showed that it was made in the year 1817, the leopard's head which showed that it was made in London and the head of George III which showed that the duty had been paid on the spoon.

Mr Low's own impressive collection included a variety of silver items which had been discovered by a man ferreting for rabbits in a field between Bilbury and South Molton. The most prized item was a tiny bottle in a silver cage. The bottle had a small a spoon attached and was, he explained, a snuff bottle for ladies to use. They used the small spoon because it enabled them to take the snuff without getting their hands or gloves soiled or stained with the snuff powder.

I have no idea why (and nor did he) but it was apparently not at all uncommon for old silver treasures to be found in rabbit burrows. No one suspected that the rabbits had collected the items themselves and the only realistic conclusion was that thieves who were desperate to hide their 'swag' had sometimes thrust it into a rabbit hole and then been arrested or died before they could rescue it. At a place called Stoke Prior in Herefordshire a man who had been ferreting for rabbits on 16th December in 1891 found a remarkable collection of 16th and early 17th century silver. All the silver was a little dusty and tarnished but in otherwise perfect condition.

The piece de resistance in Mr Low's collection was something called a 'wager cup', a silver cup made in 1619 that was about nine inches high but which was elaborately designed and decorated. At the top of the cup there was a tiny windmill with a step ladder and upon the step ladder there was a tiny miller who was carrying a sack on his back. The cup also had working sails and a tube. The odd thing about the cup (which Mr Low told me was sold at auction as a model windmill because the auctioneer didn't recognise it for what it was) was that it could only be set down when it was empty.

'Do you know what it is?' he asked me when he showed me the item. At the time it was standing on a table and looked for all the world like a very expensive model of a windmill.

I said that I thought that it was perhaps a toy for a young aristocrat.

'It's a wager cup,' Mr Low explained. 'To fill the cup you turn it upside down and pour in your chosen beverage. You then blow down the tube. Blowing down the tube starts the sails going round. The idea is to fill the cup, blow down the tube and then empty the cup before the sails stop going round. The drinker and his companions would bet on whether or not he would succeed in doing this – and that is why it's called 'a wager cup'.'

Not surprisingly, Mr Low hadn't brought his wager cup with him when he came to my Christmas Eve surgery. I have no idea what it was worth but it wasn't the sort of thing you carted around with you for no good reason.

After sitting down and apologising for troubling me on Christmas Eve, Mr Low held out his right hand. It wasn't difficult to see what the problem was. His right thumbnail was black and there was clearly a good deal of blood gathering underneath it.

'I bet that hurts!' I said, taking a look at the thumbnail. I'd never seen anything quite so nasty looking.

'It does,' replied Mr Low, who was not a man to use 11 words when two would do just as well. (Unless he was talking about old silver.)

'How on earth did you do that?'

'Hammering.'

'What were you hammering?'

'Nail.'

‘Why were you hammering a nail?’

‘Put a picture up.’

‘And clearly you missed.’

‘I did. I intended to hit the nail.’

‘When did you do it?’

‘This morning.’

This was clearly not going to be one of those consultations which goes on and on. I picked a paperclip out of the little glass dish on my desk and straightened it out. I then took a lighter out of my pocket. (I always carry three things in my pockets: a penknife, a small torch and a lighter. If you light as many bonfires as I do then you always need a lighter handy.) I used the lighter to heat the end of the paperclip. This wasn’t to sterilise it; I just needed the metal to be red hot.

‘Give me your hand, please.’

Mr Low held out his hand.

I took hold of it, to make sure he didn’t move, though I rather suspect that he wouldn’t have moved whatever I did, and then I held the end of the heated paperclip against the bulging nail. The paperclip burnt quickly through the nail and the blood inside slowly trickled out, relieving the pressure inside almost instantly. I used a sterile wipe to clear away the blood and then, when the bleeding had stopped, I put a small dressing on the thumb.

‘That’s better,’ said Mr Low with a happy smile.

‘Good.’

‘Merry Christmas to you and your family.’

‘And a merry Christmas to you, too,’ I said.

I did like Mr Low. He was very much at ease with his age; more so, I think, than any of my other patients.

‘Death smiles at all of us eventually,’ he once said to me. ‘All we can do is smile back.’

I will always remember something else he said to me.

‘It is life which so often takes away and destroys our memories,’ he said. ‘Death, usually considered the enemy, safeguards our memories and seals our real treasures for eternity.’

That must have been on one of his loquacious days.

He smiled, stood up and left. He was a little uncertain, and wobbled a little occasionally, but he was more alive than many people I knew who were a fraction of his age.

Amazingly, the whole consultation, including the small operation, had taken less than five minutes.

My second patient was Carlile Bentham, a man in his forties whose main problem was his weight. Well, that was his main health problem. He may well have other problems. He may have had Japanese knotweed in his garden. He may have had termites chewing up his beams.

Mr Bentham weighed as much as two ordinary men of his height and the result of effectively carrying around a spare human being was that his joints were in quite a bad way. He had terrible osteoarthritis and suffered terribly from back pain. I tried for years to help him lose weight but he was, I’m afraid, a lost cause. Whenever I tried to persuade him to follow some sort of diet, he insisted that he had abnormal glands or argued that since both his parents and both his brothers were also vastly overweight he must have been born with some genetic predisposition to obesity. He didn’t seem to think it relevant that throughout their lives his parents and brothers all consumed around 6,000 calories a day a piece. Nor did he seem to be inclined to regard the knowledge that his parents both died in their 50s while his brothers didn’t live to get out of their 40s as a warning.

Mr Bentham was in my surgery because he had just been discharged from hospital.

Six weeks earlier, our village postman had called in at the surgery to tell me that he’d gone to Mr Bentham’s home to deliver the mail and had heard someone shouting for ‘help’ from an upstairs room. Not having the faintest idea what was going on I telephoned the police. Unfortunately, our resident representative of the constabulary, Police Constable Peculiar Clarke, was away on a training course in Exeter and so I had to ring 999 and ask an operator sitting in a room somewhere in Yorkshire to send someone as soon as they could.

Since I knew that it would take at least half an hour for a policeman to drive to Mr Bentham’s house, I drove round there myself.

I knocked on the front door and waited. There was no response.

‘Hello?’ I called, rather nervously. ‘Is anyone there?’

Again, there was no response.

Since the door was unlocked I took my courage in my hands and walked into the house. I called out again. Once more there was no answer.

I looked around downstairs and could find no signs of life.

So I went up the stairs, half expecting a burglar to start firing a shotgun at me as I did so.

Mr Bentham lived in one of those tiny cottages which were built in the days when people were much smaller. The staircase was one of those very steep and narrow staircases which were popular with cottage builders in the 17th century and the early parts of the 19th century. This cottage, I knew, had been built in 1834. This was not because I had any architectural expertise but because I had noticed that the date 1834 was carved into a stone block above the front door. On a long, urban road that might have been the house number. In Bilbury it was clearly the date when the cottage had been built.

There was no one in either of the bedrooms.

But I found Mr Bentham in the bathroom.

To be more precise, I found him in the bath.

He was naked, badly scalded and almost unconscious. The hot tap was still running but the plug was out and there was very little water in the bath. The only occupants were Mr Bentham and a small, yellow, rubber duck lying on its side at the tap end of the bath. I immediately turned off the tap.

This had all the makings of a real life mystery.

Why was Mr Bentham lying naked in his bath with the hot tap running but very little water around him? The water coming from the hot tap was still blisteringly hot so I assumed that instead of having a hot water storage tank, he had one of those boilers which heats up the water indefinitely.

It was the sort of puzzle that Sherlock Holmes would have welcomed on a wet, wintery afternoon.

It was clear, however, that finding the explanation would have to wait. The first thing to do was to get him out of the bath, into an ambulance and off to hospital. It was immediately clear that the scalds on his body would need professional, specialist treatment.

The only difference between a burn and a scald is that a burn is caused by dry heat (such as a fire or a hot plate) whereas a scald is caused by something wet and hot such as, well, hot water. Both burns and scalds have to be treated carefully and patiently and one of the biggest risks is the danger of infection. If I managed to get Mr Bentham out of his bath tub I feared that I would do more damage to his skin and I would dramatically increase the chance of his developing a serious infection. I did not have any of the things I would need to deal with a large scald. For a start I would really need a couple of acres of a suitable, sterile dressing. But in my bag I had a triangular bandage and a packet of sticking plasters.

But it was also clear that I would have absolutely no chance of being able to lift Mr Bentham by myself.

So that was the second problem.

I checked Mr Bentham's pulse. It seemed fine. His heart was ticking away. Apart from the scalds I could find no other signs of problems. However, he felt cold. I plucked a large towel from a rack and lay it over his body. It didn't come anywhere to covering him. I fetched an eiderdown from a bedroom and put that over him. I then telephoned for an ambulance.

'You don't need to send the police car now,' I told the operator, when I'd asked for an ambulance to be sent.

'They're already on their way,' she said. 'Someone called them a short while ago.'

'That was me,' I said. 'But I don't need them now.'

'But they have to come out if they've been called,' insisted the operator.

It occurred to me that we would probably be able to use their muscle in helping to move Mr Bentham from his bathroom to the ambulance so I just thanked her very much and replaced the telephone receiver.

Now that I knew what the problem was, I was beginning to worry a good deal about the logistics of how we were going to move a badly scalded 25 stone man out of his bathroom and down his very narrow, very steep stairs. Those cottage stairs used to cause me a lot of problems. Mr Bentham's stairs were, if anything, narrower and steeper than the stairs in the cottages belonging to any of my other patients.

I hoped that the police might send a car with two occupants. Maybe the two police officers and the two ambulance paramedics might manage to lift him.

'Mr Bentham?' I said, for the umpteenth time. 'Can you hear me?'

It had occurred to me that he might have got into the bath, slipped and banged his head. Or that he might have suffered a stroke.

Suddenly, Mr Bentham opened his eyes. He looked at me and frowned.

'Is that you, doctor?'

I asked him what had happened and he slowly explained that he'd prepared his bath, half filling it with water, and then climbed in. Deciding that the water wasn't hot enough he had reached forward and turned off the cold tap and, at more or less the same time, turned the hot tap on full.

It was while doing this that his back had gone into spasm. Unable to move he had lain there in the bath, immersed in water that was getting hotter and hotter by the minute. When the bath was full, the excess water flowed out through the overflow but since the hot water was still coming in, the result was that the temperature of the water just increased until it was unbearable.

Unable to lean forwards to reach the taps, he had had the presence of mind to use one of his feet to pull at the chain holding the bath plug in place. And he had succeeded in removing the plug.

Unfortunately, by this time he was badly scalded.

And since his back was in spasm he couldn't get out of the bath to walk into his bedroom to telephone for help. In fact, he hadn't been able to get out of the bath at all.

'Can you stand up?' I asked him.

He made a feeble attempt to stand. It was a failure. Moreover, when he tried to move, it was clear that the badly scalded parts of his skin were stuck to the bath. When he moved he was pulling skin away from the enamel.

'I'm in far too much pain, doctor,' he said. He had tears in his eyes and I don't blame him. If I'd been in his skin I'd have had tears in my eyes too. The scalds I could see looked incredibly painful. His feet, legs, and bottom were the worst.

I stayed with him while I waited for the police and the ambulance crew to arrive and while I waited I telephoned Bilbury Grange to explain where I was and that I was likely to be there for some time. I also asked Patsy to ring her father for me. It seemed to me that we were likely to need his help too.

It took the emergency services just under an hour to get to Bilbury and those sixty minutes seemed interminable. Mr Bentham was clearly in a good deal of pain, both with the original back trouble and with the scalds from the hot water and so I gave him an injection of morphine. He relaxed then and drifted off to sleep. While he slept I used an indelible felt tip pen to write a big M on his forehead. I wrote beside it the dosage I'd given him. I needed to be sure that the doctors at the hospital knew that Mr Bentham had been given morphine. I could have written the details on a note, or simply told the ambulance crew. But this way there was no bit of paper to lose and no need for me to worry about someone forgetting to pass on the message.

The ambulance arrived first (in my experience if you ring for the police and for an ambulance at the same time it is nearly always the ambulance which arrives first) and the police arrived about two minutes later. There were two men in the ambulance crew and two men in the police car. All looked to be fairly strong, meaty looking fellows. I went down, met them, explained what the problem was and then led them upstairs.

'So, how do we get him downstairs?' asked the older of the two ambulance men. 'Is there a coffin window anywhere?'

The younger ambulance man looked at him as if he were stark raving mad. 'What the devil is a coffin window?'

'In those old cottages with steep, narrow staircases they used to have one window that was big enough to get a coffin through,' explained the older ambulance man. He wandered into the two tiny bedrooms and came back a moment later looking very glum.

'There isn't one,' he announced.

I already knew this because I had looked, but in my experience it is, in such circumstances, always better to let the professionals find such things out for themselves. I had also had time to work out that if we were going to take Mr Bentham out through a window then we were probably going to have to remove the window frame and, quite possibly, a row or two of bricks.

The younger ambulance man lifted the eiderdown which was covering Mr Bentham and shook his shoulder. 'Can you stand up?'

Mr Bentham didn't wake up and didn't respond.

'I gave him some morphine,' I explained. 'He's badly scalded.'

'How the devil did it happen?' asked the older ambulance man.

I explained.

'Is there any question of foul play?' asked one of the policemen. It was the first time either of them had spoken. If they were wondering why they'd been called neither of them said so. The two policemen looked to be approximately the same age but one of them had long, bushy sideburns and a moustache and the other didn't. The one who spoke was the one without a moustache.

'No, I don't think so,' I said.

'But you don't know so?'

'I'm pretty sure there is no question of foul play.'

'Nevertheless, with respect doctor, maybe we should treat this as a crime scene,' said the policeman without a moustache.

'I think we ought to get my patient to hospital before we worry about anything else,' I pointed out.

The policeman, who looked unconvinced and a trifle unhappy, eventually agreed that moving Mr Bentham out of his bathroom should take precedence over everything else.

'So how are we going to move him?' asked the policeman who did have a moustache.

‘Can we lift him?’ asked one of the ambulance men. He bent down and tried pulling Mr Bentham up out of the bath. Mr Bentham groaned but didn’t wake. ‘Strewth,’ he said. ‘He’s stuck to the bath!’

‘How much does he weigh?’ asked the other ambulance man.

‘Around 25 stone,’ I replied.

The two ambulance men then tried to lift Mr Bentham up so that they could put him onto a stretcher. One side of the bath was up against the wall and so the two men had to stand on the same side of the bath to do their lifting. I squeezed in alongside them and we all tried to lift together. We couldn’t budge him. And it was clear that because his skin was stuck to the bath we were pulling off skin every time we tried to move him.

There was much tutting and shaking of heads. The policeman with the moustache mentioned that he had a bad back and had been told by his doctor not to do any heavy lifting.

‘Maybe it would be easier to move him and the bath together,’ I suggested.

The four men looked at me as if I were mad.

‘Well, I don’t think we are going to be able to lift him out of the bath without some sort of hoist’,’ I pointed out. ‘And we don’t have a hoist. Do we?’

They all shook their heads.

‘If we could drag the bath to the top of the stairs we could perhaps sort of slide him and the bath down the stairs,’ suggested the policeman with the moustache and the bad back.

We all contemplated this suggestion.

‘He’d be travelling at a fair old lick by the time he reached the bottom of the stairs,’ said the policeman without a moustache.

‘Probably go straight through the floorboards,’ said the younger ambulance man. ‘Straight down into the cellar. Then we’d have to get him out of the cellar.’

‘These cottages don’t have cellars,’ pointed out to his colleague. ‘Solid floors.’

‘It’ll have to be the window,’ I said, indicating the small bathroom window. The window was about two feet square.

‘Nowhere near big enough,’ said the policeman with the moustache.

‘We’ll have to take the frame out and remove some bricks,’ said the older ambulance man. ‘I remember we did something similar with a chap in Barnstaple a few years back. He weighed 30 stone and needed to go into hospital. He was sleeping in a big chair downstairs but we couldn’t lift him so we took out some bricks and drove a fork lift truck into the room to lift him up and carry him out. We lifted him and the chair together.’

‘We’re on the first floor here,’ the younger ambulance man reminded his colleague.

The four of them were still considering the situation when I heard what sounded like a tractor approaching. I had never before been so pleased to hear the sound of a tractor. I went to the little window and looked out. Down below, parked behind the ambulance and the police car which were blocking the lane, was Mr Kennet, my father-in-law. He was driving a huge, red tractor which was equipped with two large forks or prongs at the front. Normally used for moving hay bales these prongs would, I thought, be perfectly capable of moving a bath containing a large man.

And that is exactly how we moved Mr Bentham out of his bathroom.

The two policemen found a sledge hammer and an axe in Mr Bentham’s shed (I idly wondered how long it had been since Mr Bentham himself had been able to use either of those) and the policeman who didn’t have the bad back and the younger ambulance man used them to remove the window, the window frame and several rows of bricks. Eventually, they created a hole big enough to allow the bath and Mr Bentham to pass through. While they did this, the policeman with the bad back and the moustache managed to find a wrench. He turned off the water and then disconnected the two taps and the pipe which took dirty water from the bath to the cottage drains.

It took nearly three hours to extricate Mr Bentham and his bath from the bathroom and before then I had to give him another morphine injection to keep him comfortable.

‘We’re going to take you to hospital in Barnstaple,’ I told him, when he had woken up, jolted by the ambulance men and the policemen pushing and dragging the bath and its human contents a little closer to the window.

‘Is it all right if we make some necessary structural amendments to your bathroom wall?’ shouted one of the policemen who was clearly one of those people who assumes that all people who are elderly, ill or in some way incapacitated are also deaf. I did wonder why he had bothered to ask this since the amendments had already been made.

Mr Bentham, who was in a considerable amount of pain and heavily drugged, didn’t know where he was or even who he was and probably couldn’t have given a sensible response to any question he was asked. He stared at the policeman, mumbled something incomprehensible and closed his eyes again.

Eventually, Mr Kennet managed to get the forks at the front of his tractor safely underneath the bath. We then watched, with some apprehension, as he backed the tractor away from the hole in the bathroom wall, over the flower bed and rhododendron bush (which the tractor had already flattened on its way in) and back towards the lane. We continued to watch nervously as the tractor wobbled over the now rutted garden, and for a moment I thought the weight of the bath and Mr Bentham was going to prove too much for it. But tractors are sturdy vehicles and we breathed a little easier as Mr Kennet slowly managed to wobble and sway through the remains of the small wall and the wooden gate (which he had pretty well destroyed on his way in towards the cottage) and out into the lane.

It proved impossible to manipulate the bath into the back of the ambulance without first lowering it onto the ground and then lifting it so that it lay across the prongs in a north and south direction, rather than an east and west direction. And despite his skills Mr Kennet wasn't able to put the bath into the back of the ambulance without accidentally removing one of the vehicle's doors and damaging the other one beyond repair. Tractors aren't built for fine work – particularly when they are operating on uneven ground.

Four and a half hours after the postman had called in at Bilbury Grange, we finally managed to send Mr Bentham on his way to hospital in Barnstaple. The two policemen, the two ambulance men, Mr Kennet and I were all absolutely exhausted.

And when the ambulance arrived at the hospital it apparently took the staff there another two and a half hours to extricate the bath from the back of the ambulance and Mr Bentham from the bath.

The ambulance was too badly damaged to be repaired, the bath was destroyed and the police sent a firm of builders from Barnstaple to fix a tarpaulin over the hole in the wall of Mr Bentham's cottage. The damaged wall and the broken gate they left for another day. The poor rhododendron bush, which had fallen in the battle of Mr Bentham's Bath, was a permanent casualty and beyond hope.

But Mr Bentham, I'm pleased to say, made a complete recovery. His scalds were treated and when he left hospital six weeks or so later he was able to walk with the aid of nothing more than a walking stick. To everyone's surprise he managed to put on half a stone during his stay in hospital and he was said to be the only patient in history to have gained weight while eating hospital food.

And now he was back sitting in my surgery.

His scalds were more or less mended and he told me that the police and the ambulance service had agreed to pay for the repairs to his cottage and garden and that his lawyer had advised him against taking additional legal action for damages. He said that his lawyer had persuaded the NHS to install a stairlift into his cottage and had provided him with a specially adapted electrically powered invalid chair so that he could get about the village. He wasn't disabled but his immense bulk meant that he found it difficult to walk more than a few yards.

'And I decided not to sue you,' he told me, as though this were an immense favour.

'Thank you,' I said. 'That's very kind of you.' I tried not to sound sarcastic though it wasn't easy.

'My lawyer said you probably acted as you thought best.'

I nodded.

'And my solicitor says that it probably isn't worth suing a country doctor anyway.'

'That's good of him.'

'He says country doctors like you don't have much money.'

'Well, he's right about that.'

'So you might not even be able to pay his costs and I could end up out of pocket.'

I was surprised that the solicitor didn't know that all doctors have insurance to protect them against patients who turned into litigants. Still, I was glad I didn't have to deal with a lawsuit.

I idly wondered if Mr Bentham might get around to thanking me for getting him to the hospital.

'I'm having a shower put into the bathroom; instead of the bath.'

'That sounds like a good idea.'

'The NHS and the police are paying so I'm having the very best. And I'm having the bathroom retiled.'

I realised that the moment had long past. He wasn't going to say thank you because he didn't think he had anything to thank me for.

'I thought I might consider losing a little weight in the New Year,' he then added, as though he felt he were doing me a favour.

'That might be wise,' I said. I didn't have much hope that this would turn out to be anything other than yet another empty hope.

The Daily Express newspaper wants to run a series of articles about my weight loss. They've hired a famous dietician to be my personal adviser.'

'Splendid!'

'So can you weigh me, please? They need to know how much I weigh now.'

'I'm afraid I can't.'

He frowned. 'Why not?'

‘Because my scales only go up to 20 stone and according to the letter I had about you from the hospital you now weigh nearly 26 stone.’

‘Then how do I get weighed?’

I suggested that he might contact the hospital to see if he could get weighed on their scales. ‘Otherwise,’ I said, ‘you could just lose some weight and then when you’re a bit thinner we could start weighing you here.’

He didn’t look very happy about this.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, though I wasn’t quite sure why I was apologising.

‘And I need a sick note,’ he said. ‘The doctor at the hospital gave me one but it expires tomorrow.’

Mr Bentham had not been to work for as long as I’d been in Bilbury. As far as I knew he had never worked. Since it was clear that he was never likely to look for a job, let alone find one, I usually gave him a sick note for six months.

‘And tomorrow is Christmas Day, so you need the note today?’

‘Yes.’

I wrote out a sick note for six months and handed it to him.

He stood up, and waddled towards the door.

‘Happy Christmas!’ I said.

He turned, looked at me and nodded his thanks. He didn’t say Happy Christmas or anything else seasonal. ‘I could have demanded that you visit me at home to give me a sick note,’ he said. ‘But since it’s Christmas I thought I’d come to the surgery. I drove here in my invalid chair.’

I found myself thanking him again.

‘And anyway I needed to go to Peter Marshall’s shop to buy some supplies,’ he added. ‘I’ve ordered a couple of his Christmas hampers.’

And then, without another word, he left.

I hoped he enjoyed making his Christmas pudding and playing with the little budgie bells I knew he’d find in his Peter Marshall hampers.

I confess I felt relieved that I didn’t have any other patients like Mr Bentham.

My next patient was Miss Brunehilda Tyneham; a woman who was in her late 60s and something of a celebrity in the village.

Miss Tyneham was renowned for the column she wrote for a local paper called the *Barnstaple, Bideford and Bilbury Herald*. When the editor had originally commissioned the column he had, I suspect, asked Miss Tyneham to send in reports of events in the village which might otherwise have been missed by the paper’s reporting staff. Local newspapers often fill their columns with reports of this type – usually detailing meetings of the Women’s Institute, flower and vegetable show results and the successes or failures of the local sports teams.

However, Miss Tyneham’s column had slowly changed and now, two decades after its inception, it had become a very personal account of her life in the village. Miss Tyneham described her garden, her experiences with local builders, her dissatisfactions with the council and so on. There was very little space left for details of jam making competitions or other local events. Miss Tyneham was famous for her strange use of words, for her mistakes and for her misprints. Once, in an obituary she published about an elderly villager, she had included the line: ‘She pissed away peacefully in her sleep’. Miss Tyneham, mortally embarrassed, blamed the printers. They claimed the error was hers. The misprint became a classic and was widely quoted in books about journalism.

Although still relatively young in Bilbury terms (I had a number of patients who were well over 80, quite a few who were in their 90s and one or two who had already celebrated their 100th birthdays and had received their congratulatory telegrams from Her Majesty the Queen constantly on display on their mantelpiece) Miss Tyneham had not allowed her relative youth to delay her acquiring the occasionally impatient and acerbic manner sometimes observed among those who have reached an age where they, quite rightly, feel that they have earned the right to speak their mind.

‘The old are different to other people,’ Miss Tyneham once said to me. ‘They have mostly experienced stresses, frustrations, failures and disappointments for many years. Some have begun to expect disappointment and most realise that each day will invariably bring another round of unexpected hazards into their lives. Moreover, they see the next generation, and the generation after that, making the same silly mistakes that they made and that can be damnably infuriating. At a certain age most people realise that no one ever learns from the past and that can be quite exhausting.’

Having marched into the surgery as if she were going to war, Miss Tyneham pointed her black, silk umbrella at me. ‘I require to have full and discursive intercourse with you, doctor,’ she said. For a moment I thought she was about to poke me in the chest with the umbrella. ‘And I shall require your full attention throughout.’ I noticed that although she had marched into the room she had limped slightly. And I could see that there was a bandage around her left ankle.

'I am at your service, Miss Tyneham,' I replied.

Whenever I spoke to her I always felt as if I had been dragged back into Victorian times. I knew that whatever it was which had brought her to the surgery would have to wait until she had had a little rant about something which had annoyed her. I didn't mind. To be honest, I always found her rants quite entertaining.

'I had a social worker come to see me this past week,' said Miss Tyneham, and it was immediately clear that this was not the prelude to a complimentary remark but the beginning of a complaint.

'Ah!' I said. I knew better than to commit myself to an opinion on the event at this early stage in the conversation.

'She wanted to help me!'

I knew immediately that this was going to be a complaint.

'She told me that loneliness is bad for one. She said that being lonely is as harmful as smoking a pack of cigarettes a day. Do you agree with that?'

'I'm not sure,' I replied, rather taken aback.

'She wanted to send people in to talk to me occasionally! Me!'

'Ah.'

'She wanted to send round volunteer visitors. Strangers to talk to me, drink my tea, eat my biscuits and meddle. Can you imagine?' She leant forwards and glowered. 'Did you send her?'

'No, certainly not. I didn't send her.'

'I told her that I don't smoke so I'll take my chances with the loneliness,' said Miss Tyneham. 'I like being alone.'

'I understand,' I said. 'I didn't ask anyone to call.'

'Why do people under 40 always assume that anyone over 60 must be senile, and then act surprised and delighted when they turn out not to be?'

'I don't know.'

'And why am I invisible in shops?' she demanded.

Miss Tyneham was now in full flow.

'I stood at the counter in the Post Office the other day,' she said, 'and a girl of about 18 came up, completely ignored me, and asked for a book of stamps. She and the fellow behind the counter behaved as though I were completely invisible. They just chatted away as if I weren't there at all. When the girl had finished and had tottered off, I asked the man behind the glass if I could have my turn. I said 'I'm sorry I'm not 18 and wearing a tight top but am I still allowed to buy stamps?' He looked at me as if I were barking mad, closed his partition and disappeared so I obviously really was invisible.' She leant forwards and raised her voice. 'Can you see me sitting here?'

'I certainly can.'

'Good. That's good.'

I waited. I knew that she would tell me why she had come when she was ready.

'I knocked my ankle,' she announced.

'Let me see.'

'You want to see it?'

'Yes, please.'

'To look at my leg?'

'Yes.'

'Here it is.' She moved her leg to show me the bandaged ankle.

'I'll need to see it without the bandage.'

'I would have to remove my stocking.'

'Yes, you would.'

'Look away.'

'You can go behind the examination screen.'

'There's no need for that if you look away.'

I turned my head and looked out of the French windows. Two squirrels were chasing each other round and round on the lawn. I watched them for a while.

'Well, are you going to look at my leg or not?'

I turned back.

Miss Tyneham had rolled her stocking down and had removed the bandage from her ankle.

'What happened?'

'I knocked myself on a table leg.'

She had clearly been bitten by a dog. There were distinct signs of two teeth marks in her skin. The wound was infected.

I looked at her and raised an eyebrow. She went red. And then a tear slowly formed in her left eye and started to roll down her cheek.

'Did Fluffy do that?' I asked.

I knew that she had a small Dandie Dinmont terrier called Fluffy. She and the dog were inseparable and had been partners in life for years.

'Was it Fluffy who bit you?' I wanted to ask why she hadn't come to see me before. But I knew the answer to that. She was worried that Fluffy might get into trouble.

'Will they destroy her?'

'Will who destroy her?'

'The authorities. The police.'

'Why should anyone destroy her?'

'She bit me. I trod on her paw by accident. She didn't mean to bite me. I know she didn't mean to bite me.' She paused and cleared her throat. 'They put dogs down if they bite people, don't they?' The last bit came out as a whisper.

'Are you going to tell the police that Fluffy bit you?'

'Of course not!'

'Is Fluffy going to confess? Get tiddly in the pub and tell his mates about it?'

'No, of course he isn't. He's not that sort of dog.' Another tear joined the first one.

'Does anyone else know she bit you?' I handed Miss Tyneham a paper handkerchief. She dabbed at her cheeks.

'No!'

'Well, I'm certainly not going to tell them,' I assured her. 'So it seems as though Fluffy's secret is safe with us.'

I gave a suitable injection, cleaned up the wound, dealt with the damage and put in a couple of stitches. I told Miss Tyneham to come back to see me in five days so that I could take a look at how the wound was healing. Finally, I handed her a packet of antibiotics and gave her instructions on how to take them.

'Bless you, doctor,' she said. She wiped away more tears. 'Thank you.'

She rolled up her stocking and fastened it while I scribbled a note in her records. When we had both finished I showed her what I'd written.

'I haven't mentioned Fluffy in my records,' I said. 'It just says 'bitten by unknown dog'.'

She didn't say anything for a moment. She put the antibiotics and the tissue into her handbag and then, when she had composed herself she stood up and headed for the door. 'Happy Christmas, doctor!'

'Happy Christmas, Miss Tyneham.'

'Thank you,' she whispered.

And then she left.

My next three patients weren't ill at all. They had all brought small gifts. And all the gifts were home-made.

Iolanthe Fielding had brought Patsy and me a Christmas gift of home-made mince pies. She stressed that although she had made the pies, the gift came from both her and her husband.

Mrs Westingham, who was waiting patiently for an operation on her bilateral cataracts, had brought a card which she had embroidered herself. The words on the card seemed to be 'Merry Cristmos and a Hoppy New Year' but although there might have been some question about the spelling the sentiment was beyond dispute.

We were lucky enough to receive an enormous quantity of cards from patients (including one from Mrs Peters with a photo of herself half way up her cherry tree on the front) but there could be no doubt that Mrs Westingham's contribution would have pride of place in the middle of the dining room mantelpiece. She must have spent hours working on the embroidered message.

And Mr and Mrs Fothergill had brought a bottle of their home-made elderberry and carrot wine. I once made the mistake of drinking two glasses of their elderberry and carrot creation when Mr Fothergill was at home in bed recovering from a haemorrhoid operation. I was woozy for several hours afterwards. It is a potent but palatable brew.

And so the Christmas Eve surgery finished in fine style.

But Christmas had one more surprise for me.

Sitting in the kitchen, with Patsy and a good part of our menagerie were Harry Stottle and Mildred Snodgrass (aka 'Melina Melons').

'We have received gifts,' I said, when I'd greeted everyone. I put the box of mince pies, the bottle of wine and the hand embroidered card down on the table. 'The pies are from Mr and Mrs Fielding, the wine is from Mr and Mrs Fothergill and the card was handmade by Mrs Westingham whose cataracts are clearly just about ready for removal.'

Patsy told me that the children were already safely tucked up in bed and so after saying a quick 'hello' I hurried upstairs to say goodnight and to suggest, quite pointlessly, that they didn't burst into our bedroom before 6.00 am if at all possible.

And then I head back downstairs.

Patsy and our visitors looked as if they had eaten all the cream – including the cat's share. Harry, normally a fairly phlegmatic character, too cool for the icebox, looked as if he were about to burst with excitement. Mildred, who was, as one might expect from her choice of profession, a well-built and shapely woman with an ebullient personality, was holding his arm as though frightened that he might otherwise blow away. She was wearing a tight, red dress which was trimmed with faux, white fur and, just in case the seasonal references were to be missed, she had a sprig of mistletoe in her hair. The gods had definitely not skimped when they had glued her together. Patsy was smiling and clearly had a secret to share.

'We have news,' said Harry.

'The good variety, I hope,' I said.

'Absolutely!' said Mildred. She let out a little yelp of excitement, as though someone had just pinched her bottom. But they hadn't. I knew this because I could see both of Harry's hands.

'Mildred and Harry have an announcement to make,' said Patsy. She and Mildred went to school together and had remained chums.

'Mildred has consented to be my wife,' said Harry with a huge grin. 'We're planning a big wedding with the reception at the Duck and Puddle.'

'And afterwards I expect I shall have to just lie back and think of England!' said Mildred, with a giggle. She rolled her eyes in mock horror.

'In that case, I shall address you as 'Your Ladyship',' said Harry.

Puzzled, Mildred looked at him.

'Lady Hillingdon was the woman who first mentioned lying back and thinking of England in the bedroom,' explained Harry.

Mildred looked delighted. 'My Harry knows all sorts of stuff!' she said proudly. She looked at me. 'Isn't it amazing that my Harry is a doctor too, like you! You could have knocked me down with a feather when he told me that! I thought he was a barman but he's a psychiatrist as well. He can probably look right into my mind and know exactly what I'm thinking.' She giggled and stuck an elbow into his ribs. 'You keep out of my mind you dirty old devil!'

'We're going to see the vicar of St Dympnas after Christmas,' said Harry, who was, to my astonishment, now looking slightly embarrassed. I'd never seen him look nonplussed let alone embarrassed. Mind you, I'd never heard him described as 'a dirty old devil' before. And it probably wasn't a phrase commonly used about him either by his celebrity patients or the medical students he taught.

'Patsy is going to be my maid of honour,' announced Mildred. 'And I'm going to ask Adrienne, Gilly, Anne and Carole to be my bridesmaids.'

Adrienne was Patsy's sister and Patchy Fogg's wife. Gilly Parsons was married to Frank and they ran the Duck and Puddle together. Anne, the former Anne Thwaites, was married to Thumper Robinson. And Carole was Carole Singer – and, as far as I knew, Bilbury's only other professional ecdysiast.

This was clearly going to be a wedding and a half.

'It's time I gave up work so I'll be hanging up my nipple tassles,' said Mildred. 'I can't be 19 much longer. When I got to 35 I said I'd push my age up to 25 but there's a limited market for 25-year-olds so I slipped down a rainbow and went back to 19.' She giggled.

'And I'd like you to be my best man,' Harry said to me.

'Oh, please say 'yes'!' said Mildred. 'You have to say 'yes'!'

'Would you like the mince pies cold?' I asked. 'Or shall I pop them in the oven?'

'Oh, let's put them in the oven,' said Patsy. She put the mince pies onto a suitable plate and popped them into the ever warm AGA.

'Say 'yes'!' said Mildred. 'Please, please, please! I can't tell you how excited I am. I'm going to wear a big, puffy, white dress and a veil and I'll be able to have photographs taken with my clothes on! It's positively ages since anyone took my picture with me wearing undies and clothes and everything.'

In addition to taking off her clothes in public houses, Mildred was also a popular photographic model, regularly starring in the type of men's magazines which tend to carry more photographs than text and wherein she was, of course, known by her stage name of 'Melina Melons'.

I looked at Mildred, then at Harry and then at Patsy. They were all looking at me, waiting for a response to Harry's question. I couldn't help wondering what excitements awaited us. Weddings in Bilbury always seemed to be rather more eventful than any I'd ever attended elsewhere. I suspected that the wedding of Mildred Snodgrass and

Ronald Eckersley (or was it Melina Melons and Harry Stottle?) was going to be quite an event.

'You get some plates and I'll get the glasses,' I said, taking out my penknife. I opened the corkscrew blade and started to remove the cork from the bottle of elderberry and carrot wine which Mr and Mrs Fothergill had brought. As I did this I looked around. Everyone still seemed to be waiting for me to say something else.

I slowly screwed the corkscrew into the cork and gently pulled. The cork slid smoothly from the bottle. 'This seems as good a way as any to celebrate my new position,' I said, with a grin, holding up the bottle and then putting it down in the middle of the table. I wandered to the cupboard where we keep our drinking glasses, found four that were almost matching, and put them down. I paused and smiled as I poured out the wine and handed round the glasses. 'I will be honoured to accept your invitation,' I said to Harry. 'I'll be thrilled to be your best man.'

And I absolutely was.

Much hugging was then done and congratulations were again offered and accepted and then we drank to Mildred and Harry and we munched mince pies and we talked of things past, present and future.

It wasn't a bad way to start our Christmas celebrations.

Author’s Note

Thank you for your company. I hope you have enjoyed reading about our life in Bilbury as much as I’ve enjoyed recalling these memories. If you did enjoy *Bilbury Memories* I would be very grateful if you would spare a moment to write a short review. It really does help enormously.

Thank you

Vernon Coleman

P.S. Five appendices follow. I very much hope you enjoy these too.

Appendix 1: “Wolverhampton’! Stop doing that to ‘Knights in the Bottom’!’

A number of media couples have named their child (or children) after the place (or places) where the conception (or conceptions) took place. In the memory entitled ‘The Bucket Lists’ I explained how this phenomenon had arrived in Bilbury.

This curious habit is undoubtedly now spreading and it is now increasingly common for parents to eschew traditional names and, instead, to name their offspring after the place where the child was conceived.

I don’t suppose many individuals will complain overly much if they grow up being called ‘Paris’, ‘London’, ‘Washington’ or ‘Dallas’.

But parents need to take care if they are to avoid giving their child a name which produces a lifetime of funny looks and giggles, and turns form filling into a never-ending nightmare. Here is a list of 24 places (12 in Britain and 12 in the United States) which couples intent on procreation might like to consider avoiding if they are planning to name their child in this way:

Wolverhampton, West Midlands
Stoke Mandeville, Buckinghamshire
Llandrindod Wells, Powys
Brown Willy, Cornwall
Cockup, Cumbria,
Nether Wallop, Hampshire
Pratt’s Bottom, Kent
Nob End, Lancashire
Scratchy Bottom, Dorset
Bullyhole Bottom, Monmouthshire
Bishops Itchington, Staffordshire
Boggy Bottom, Hertfordshire
Knights in the Bottom, Dorset

And here are a few places that American couples contemplating parenthood might like to avoid:

Toad suck, Arizona
Oral, South Dakota
Paint lick, Kentucky
Two egg, Florida
Suckerville, Maine
Gas, Kansas
Climax, Michigan
Embarrass, Minnesota
Concrete, Washington
Whynot, North Carolina
Uncertain, Texas
Colon, Michigan,
Pink, Oklahoma
Hooker, Oklahoma

Finally, romantic couples wanting to start a family in Wales would be wise to avoid the village of Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyndrobwillantysiliogogogoch.

Appendix 2: Loving Animals

Animal abusers argue that animals which seem to show love are merely acting according to their instincts. However, the evidence proves that animals are perfectly capable of feeling complex emotions. Animals are certainly capable of loving. Many animals are so loyal to one another that if one half of a couple dies, the other may die shortly afterwards – consumed by grief. This has been reported to happen with swans, wolves and oxen.

Here are some examples of loving animals:

1) A statue of a small Akita dog named Hachiko stands prominently in the forecourt of Japan's busiest railway station. Every morning, Hachiko would accompany his master to his train to work and arrive again at the end of the day to greet his master from his return journey. Sadly, Hachiko's master did not make the return journey one evening because he had suffered a fatal heart attack while at work. But Hachiko still waited patiently for his master to return. Hachiko returned at the same time the following day in the hope that his master would step off the train to greet him. Hachiko soon became well-known to local commuters who would often stop to lavish affection on the dog and give him treats. For an incredible nine years, Hachiko waited every evening in the hope that his master would return. When Hachiko died, the Japanese erected a statue of him in his honour to commemorate his love and devotion.

2) A Friesian cow called Daisy was sold for auction in Okehampton in Devon, England. Daisy was so upset about being parted from her new calf that she jumped over her enclosure and ran the six miles back home to be with her calf.

3) A cow called Emma was so distraught that her calf had been taken away from her that she made it her mission to find her baby. Just before milking time, Emma escaped from the field where she was kept and ran the four miles to the abattoir where her calf was about to be slaughtered. She made such a fuss when she got there that staff admitted to being afraid. Suddenly, one of the calves in line to be slaughtered recognised its mother's cries and ran frantically towards her. Emma was so happy to be reunited with her calf that she couldn't stop licking and nuzzling her baby. Touched by what had happened, the abattoir workers contacted Emma's owner who took pity on the mother and calf and decided to keep them both.

4) In 1988, Molly Parfett's husband died in hospital after suffering from a massive stroke. Shortly after the funeral, Molly noticed that their dog, Joe, would disappear for hours at a time. She discovered that Joe was to be found sitting by his master's grave. Molly had no idea how Joe knew where her husband was buried.

5) There is a monument near Derwent Dam in Derbyshire, England, with the following inscription: 'In Commemoration of the devotion of Tip the sheepdog who stayed by the body of her dead master, Mr Joseph Tagg, on the Howden Moor for fifteen weeks from 12th December 1953 to 27th March 1954.'

6) Farmer Alfred Gruenemeyer, who lived near Coburg in central Germany, treated his animals more like pets than livestock. And so when Gruenemeyer died, his animals were devastated. A young bull called Barnaby was so distressed that he left his field, walked for a mile, leapt the cemetery wall, found the farmer's grave and started a vigil which lasted for several days. Attempts to chase the young bull away failed when locals discovered just how unnerving an angry bull can be. It wasn't until several days later that the bull calmed down and could be led back to his pasture. Mr Gruenemeyer was said by neighbours to have allowed his animals to roam in and out of his house. 'He talked to them like Dr Dolittle,' said one neighbour. 'Mind you, his house smelled a bit.'

Taken from *The Wisdom of Animals* by Vernon Coleman and Donna Antoinette Coleman (which is available as an ebook on Amazon.)

Appendix 3: Patents

In the memory about Diggory Cholmondelay, I described how Diggory's eccentric father had enthusiastically tried to promote an eating machine. The history books are surprisingly full of unusual inventions – for all of which the inventors doubtless had great hopes (especially if they dreamt them up in the middle of the night when critical faculties tend to be at their weakest).

Here are a dozen more inventions which, when looked at in the cold light of day, don't perhaps quite have the hope of the paperclip or the commercial possibilities of a pencil with an eraser fixed onto the end:

In 1915, Frank Marcovsky obtained a US Patent for a suit of protective armour designed to be worn by cyclists. The armour, which was inflated with an ordinary bicycle pump, consisted of a suit which would ensure that if the cyclist fell off his machine he would bounce to safety without any harm having been done.

In 1927, a Frenchman called Pierre Leon Martin Victor Calmels obtained a US patent for an apparatus designed to make it easier for a moustache owner to trim his pride and joy and to produce a perfectly balanced moustache.

In 1903, Joseph Karwowski obtained a US Patent for his method of preserving the dead. The idea was to encase the 'recently deceased' within a block of molten glass so that the body could be preserved indefinitely without decaying. Poorer folk, or those with less display space available, could have just the head preserved.

In 1995, Nicole M Dubus and Susan Springfield obtained a US Patent for a fork with a built in timer which would tell the eater when to take their next mouthful of food. The fork had a small light and a beeper in the handle. Diners ate only when the light in their fork changed from red to green. (It occurred to me that a drinking glass similarly equipped with red and green lights might prove useful to those struggling to moderate their drinking.)

In 1896, J.C.Boyle obtained a US Patent for a 'polite hat lifting device' which would enable men to raise their hats to ladies even if they were carrying bags or parcels. If the hat wearer bowed forwards slightly, a spring-driven mechanism would gently raise the hat, rotate it once and then replace it.

In 1879, Benjamin B Oppenheimer obtained a US Patent for a device designed to enable men and women to jump to safety from tall buildings which were on fire. A parachute built into a helmet was designed to slow down the unfortunate individual's descent to the ground. The helmet and its parachute were attached to the body by a chin strap.

In 1923, C.G.Purdy obtained a US Patent for a tooth and gum exercising device which consisted of a strong spring with small plates at each end. To use the device two people sat or stood facing each other. Each placed one of the plates in their mouth. And then both pulled – as in a tug of war.

In 1895, A.Eustis obtained a US Patent for a device designed to help servants push infirm individuals up stairs. The device consisted of a large pad, which was placed against the back of the infirm person, and two rods, attached to the pad. A healthy, young servant would then take hold of the two rods and push. The device enabled the servant to help the infirm individual up the stairs without having to touch them in which might be considered indelicate.

In 1896, Martin Goetze obtained a US Patent for a device designed to produce dimples. The device consisted of a small massage knob, which was placed in the position where the dimple was required, and a massage cylinder which had to be manually turned around the place to be dimpled.

In 1915, Lili Aline McGrath obtained a US Patent for a pair of slippers to be used as a floor polisher. The soles of the slippers were suitable for polishing and the slippers themselves were connected by a cord which was long enough to enable the wearer to take a full stride, but not long enough to allow the legs to spread wide. The inventor asserted that her device would enable the user to polish the floor while 'dancing' without any risk of falling.

In 1913, Alfred Clark obtained a US Patent for a rocking chair fitted with an attachment which enabled the user to churn butter while idly rocking away the day.

In 1866, Julian A Fogg obtained a US Patent for an improved coffin. Mr Fogg's coffin was designed to enable mourners, and curious sight seers, to view the deceased through a window in the lid.

There are more details of these inventions in a book entitled *Patently Absurd* by Christopher Cooper.

Appendix 4: The Twelve Oddest English Eccentrics

Eccentricity is an essentially English phenomenon. It is something the English always seemed to do particularly well.

But true eccentricity is something innate, rather than manufactured.

Exhibitionists, and those hoping to break into some branch of show-business, will frequently adopt some carefully thought-out form of dress or behaviour in order to draw attention to themselves. That is not eccentricity and they are not eccentrics.

Nor are the individuals who dream up stunts to get themselves into the *Guinness Book of Records* 'eccentric'.

Simply being frugal, living way beneath or beyond your means or choosing to live the life of a hermit may be odd but it isn't truly eccentric.

Building a folly to provide employment for local workmen, or a focal point for visitors to admire, may be a trifle odd but it doesn't count as truly eccentric.

Wearing flamboyant clothes (in the mode of Beau Brummel) or collecting vast quantities of something don't necessarily make an individual truly eccentric (though bibliomaniac Richard Heber makes it onto our list).

There are, of course, many notable eccentrics who didn't make it onto the list.

The most notable of those who missed selection was probably the composer Lord Berners. (He used the name Gerald Tyrwhitt when composing but later, when decomposing, reverted to Lord Berners.)

Lord Berners hated company when travelling by train and in order to have the carriage to himself he used to check his temperature anally every five minutes. He carried a large thermometer for this purpose. This usually had the desired effect quite quickly.

And the 18th century connoisseur, gardener, aesthete, bibliophile and patron of the arts William Beckford, also missed the cut, though his behaviour was certainly unusual from time to time. Beckford hated hunting so much that when he found a pack of hounds trespassing on his land he gave orders that a seven mile long and twelve foot high wall be immediately built around his house to make sure that it didn't happen again.

The real eccentric behaves in a way that seems to him to be entirely natural, logical and sensible. He doesn't do odd things occasionally. He doesn't sit in a bath of spaghetti to raise money for charity or push a bed up a mountain for a university rag day stunt. He doesn't simply wear flashy bowties or dye his hair. He doesn't have an unusual hobby (restoring steam trains or dredging canals) because his whole life is unusual. The true eccentric sees nothing odd in what he does or how he does it. His behaviour is, to him, perfectly rational.

In other words the true eccentric, a breed of men and women with whom England has always been exceptionally well-endowed, never thinks of him or herself as eccentric at all.

Here is the list of the top twelve English eccentrics of all time. You will note the people on the list are all men. This is not because of any sexist bias. It is because most eccentrics have been men. And you will note too that most of the people on our list were either rich or well-off. That is because when poor people behave in an eccentric way they are usually regarded as lunatics and locked up for their own protection. Sadly, only the wealthy can truly enjoy the delights of being genuinely eccentric. The wealthy can be eccentric in great style and (in the past, at least) their wealth frequently enabled them to ignore the law and escape the consequences. Maybe, eccentricity is simply one of the very few things that men do best.

1. John Mytton (1796-1834)

John Mytton's extraordinary adventures and eccentricities deserve a separate entry and so there is a separate Appendix devoted to him in this book. If eccentrics were rated with little dog heads instead of rosettes (to give an idea of their 'barking' rating) then Mytton would have five little dog heads beside his name. His eccentricity took him right to the edge of madness. But he wasn't mad. He was just completely barking. All other eccentrics must be measured against him.

2. Byron, George Gordon Noel, 6th Baron (1788-1824)

Famously described by one of his many mistresses as 'mad, bad and dangerous to know', Lord Byron was a poet and philanderer and is remembered as much for his life as for his work. He was a leading poet of the 19th century English Romantic movement and his poetry has been expertly described as irreverent, ironic, impudent, high-spirited, satirical, elegant, contemptuous, humorous, burlesque, unconventional, generous, humane and reckless. The same adjectives apply, equally accurately, to his life. Born with a deformed right foot which made him the butt of school boy jokes, his mother had mood swings which made him distrust women in later life. His father had died when he was just three-years-old, but not before managing to spend his mother's entire, considerable fortune. A female servant didn't help his attitude towards women. She took a succession of male lovers with the 9-year-old Byron as a spectator. At the age of 10, he became the 6th Baron, and with the title he inherited considerable estates. He attended Harrow School and discovered homosexuality. His mother began an affair with a 23-year-old rake, Lord Grey de Ruthyn who had made advances to the young Byron.

When he went to Cambridge in 1805, Byron patronised prostitutes with steadfast enthusiasm and fell in love with a choirboy called Edleston. When he put on weight, he played cricket wearing six waistcoats so that he would sweat and lose weight. While at the university he published his first poems (Hours of Idleness) and took his first mistress, a girl called Caroline whom he dressed, and passed off as, a boy. The reviews of his first book were poor and so in 1809 he published ‘English Bards and Scotch Reviewers’, a satirical poem attacking the major literary figures of the time. He then left London and started a tour of Greece, Albania, Turkey and Spain with a friend called Hobhouse who was writing a book called *Sodomy Simplified* (which, not surprisingly, never found a publisher). When Hobhouse abandoned him in Greece, Byron acquired a 15-year-old Greek boy called Nicolo and spent a good deal of money on prostitutes. He returned to England in 1812 and John Murray published ‘Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage’. The poem, inspired by his journey, describes the exploits of a world-weary young lord who tries everything when he is young and finds later life boring. Byron became an overnight celebrity. Young men imitated his brooding manner and his limp. Young women, attracted by his passion and his pleas for liberty and justice, threw themselves at him (though possibly not literally). Byron’s new lovers included Lady Caroline Lamb and her mother-in-law Lady Melbourne.

When he returned to Cambridge, Byron began an incestuous affair with his half-sister Augusta. He was then seduced by a promiscuous woman called Lady Oxford. Byron and Augusta then moved to Newstead Abbey where she became pregnant. To silence the gossips Byron, by now aged 26, married Lady Melbourne's niece, a prim heiress called Annabelle. The marriage wasn’t much of a success, possibly because Byron continued to ‘flirt’ with his half sister and possibly because he was nearly always drunk. When his wife became pregnant, he sodomised her late into her pregnancy. Exhausted by Byron’s demands, by quarrels, and by giving birth, Annabelle ran away and went home. When her parents found out what had been going on they would not let her return to her wicked husband. Suddenly the great poet was unfashionable and unwanted. Byron quit England in 1816. Having sold Newstead Abbey for £94,500 he rented a palazzo in Venice where he initiated orgies which shocked even the previously un-shockable Venetians. Byron’s home soon became pretty much a brothel. The man himself was now fat and balding though still in his early thirties. While in Italy he wrote Don Juan, a long, witty poem about a handsome, young man’s adventures with women. A tempestuous affair with a married woman caused some problems and Byron left Italy in rather a rush. He became an enthusiastic supporter of Italian and Greek freedom fighters and joined a secret Italian nationalist society. In Greece he led troops against the Turks. While doing so he caught a fever and, in proper poetic fashion, died young at the age of 36. His family requested that he be buried in Westminster Abbey. Perhaps not entirely surprisingly, the request was refused.

3. Rev F.W.Densham (1870-1953)

When the Rev Densham was rector of the church in Warleggan, Cornwall, he painted the twelfth century church red and blue. The pillars were painted with black and white stripes. This decor didn’t go down too well with the congregation. In his final year as rector, the Rev Densham conducted most of his services in an empty church (on one occasion there was just one person attending a service, on all other occasions the rector was alone). To keep himself company, the Rev Densham filled the church with cardboard cut-out figures and name cards and then delivered passionate sermons to his cardboard flock. Why didn’t the parishioners go to church? Well, perhaps they were put off by the fact that if they turned up at all he would be incredibly rude to them. Or it might have been the fact that there was an eight foot high barbed wire fence around the rectory. Or perhaps they were put off by the fact that the rectory was bare of furniture and the rector lived on porridge and nettles. Saddest of all, behind the eight foot high fence, the garden was full of roundabouts and other games which the Rector had constructed for the local children. None ever visited and no one ever used the toys he made.

4. William John Cavendish Bentinck Scott, 5th Duke of Portland (1800-1879)

The Duke was mad keen on building things. He built pagodas, lakes, a skating rink and a huge stable for a string of race horses which never raced (or even ridden). He built the biggest indoor riding school in Europe. It was never used. He did however insist that all his staff learned to skate and skated regularly (whether they wanted to or not). His most remarkable building was an underground ballroom which was 174 feet long, and had a ceiling painted to represent a sunset and a thousand gas lights. He built an underground railway to connect his house to the ballroom but never used the ballroom. He also had fifteen miles of tunnel built under his estate so that he could move about without ever meeting anyone. Another underground railway enabled staff to take meals the 150 yards from the kitchen to the dining room. One of the tunnels was big enough for him to drive through in a coach and four. He loathed any sort of contact with people and when he had to travel he did so in a specially built coach which had low seats and blinds. He would be driven to the nearest station and the coach would be put onto a special flat car on the train. As well as the underground ballroom he also built an underground billiard room, big enough for twelve full sized tables, and several underground libraries. Like the ballroom these remained unused. All the underground rooms were painted pink. Many, like the rooms in the main house, had a plumbed in lavatory right in the middle of the room. At one point the Duke employed 15,000 workmen. Every one of them was given a donkey and an umbrella as a bonus and no one was ever sacked unless they acknowledged the duke's presence. Anyone who spoke to him, nodded, bowed, touched their cap or glanced in his direction would be fired on the spot. The duke wrote to his staff if he wanted to tell them to do something. He hated human contact so much that if he needed the doctor, he would make the physician wait outside the bedroom door and shout details of his symptoms through the door. He had a vast collection of wigs, false beards and false moustaches so that if he had to go out into the world he could do so without being recognised. However, since very few people knew what he looked like this was probably unnecessary. The duke gave away vast amounts of money to local charities and to poor families and despite his eccentricities was much loved.

5. George Hanger, later Baron Coleraine (1751-1824)

By the age of 22, George had married a gypsy, fought three duels, reached the rank of colonel and been wounded in the American War of Independence. He then retired to devote himself to gambling, drinking, racing and whoring. He wasn't terribly good as a gambler. He once bet £500 that 20 turkeys would beat twenty geese over a ten mile race course. He lost. He spent eighteen months in a debtors' prison and when he came out he went into business as a coal merchant.

6. Edward Wortley Montagu (1713-1776)

Montagu spent most of his life roaming around the Middle East, dressed in Turkish costume, but his eccentric life started before his travels. He ran away from Westminster School and exchanged places with a young sweep so that his disappearance wouldn't be noticed. After working as a chimney boy, he apprenticed himself to a fisherman and sold flounders in Rotherhithe. At the age of thirteen, he enrolled himself at Oxford University as a student of Oriental languages. He immediately seduced his landlady. He then dressed as a cabin boy and went to Portugal on board a merchant ship. In Portugal he became a mule driver. When eventually brought home, his parents sent him to the West Indies with a tutor. Montagu returned to London at the age of 17 and married a washerwoman. She was the first of many wives. He subsequently acquired additional wives in Egypt, Italy, Spain and elsewhere. In between marriage ceremonies, he became an army officer, a scholar in Oriental languages and MP for Huntingdon. In London, he wore an iron wig studded with diamonds (he changed the diamonds every day) and collected snuff boxes and debts. He had acquired another wife while visiting a highwayman in prison and with accusations of bigamy over his head he left the country again. At his first port of call, Alexandria, he met and eloped with the wife of the Danish consul, after falsely telling the woman that her husband had been drowned at sea. He wandered around the Middle East (papers relating his travels were read out at meetings of the Royal Society), put the Danish consul's wife into a nunnery and wandered off. He went back for her several years later (she was faithfully waiting for him) and married her. Things weren't perfect, however, and so Montagu changed his religion from Catholic to Moslem and married a black Egyptian serving girl. He ended up in Venice attended by a black African servant and two half naked eunuchs. He lived in a Venetian palazzo and flew the Turkish flag on his gondola. At this point his father died and Montagu discovered that in order to benefit financially he had to marry and have a son. So he put an advertisement in the London papers inviting genteel and pregnant women to apply to be his wife. Sadly, before he could travel back to London to select the winner (from a number of applicants) he died when a bone got stuck in his throat.

7. Richard Heber, (1774-1833)

Heber was born in Cheshire and by the time he was eight-years-old he had a sizeable library of his own, all properly catalogued. After his father died and he inherited the family fortune, he started collecting in earnest. He invariably bought three copies of any book he liked (one to store, one to read and one to lend) and filled two London houses, a house in Cheshire and houses in Paris, Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent with books. He would travel miles to buy a single book and in Paris once bought an entire library of 30,000 volumes in one go. In all his houses, the rooms, cupboards, passageways and corridors were choked with books.

8. George Osbaldeston (1786-1866)

George reckoned that any week in which he didn't spend six days in the saddle was a week wasted. His feats of sporting endurance are legendary. He once won a bet by galloping two hundred miles in under nine hours (he used 27 horses). At a ball in Lincoln he noticed one attractive woman admiring the orchid worn by another. The orchid wearer rudely snubbed the admiring woman and Osbaldeston was incensed. He leapt onto his horse and rode to a private conservatory 25 miles away where he bought the best orchid there. After four hours of hard riding he reappeared in the ballroom and presented the orchid to the snubbed woman. They reputedly danced until dawn though what happened then is not recorded.

9. Simon Ellerton (1695-1799)

Ellerton was a keen walker who often walked from Durham (where he lived) to London. He would happily do the journey to perform errands for the local gentry. While out walking one day, he picked up a stone for a cottage he was building. This soon became a habit and before long he had become accustomed to picking up one or two stones every time he went out. He would put them on his head to carry them, claiming eventually that he could walk more comfortably with a weight on his head than he could without. He carried on with this even after his cottage had been completed and until his death he always carried a heavy stone on his head when he left home. When asked why, he would explain that the stone was there to keep his hat on.

10. Thomas Gibson Bowles (known as Cap'en Tommy) (1842-1922)

Bowles was the founder and publisher of the magazines the *Lady* and *Vanity Fair*. When his wife died leaving him with four children under the age of 10, he decided to have his daughters clothed by the naval tailor who made clothes for his sons. As a result his two daughters, Sydney and Dorothy, wore thick, blue, serge naval uniforms and sailors' caps until they were seventeen. (Sydney would later become Lady Redesdale, the mother of the famous Mitford girls.) When the girls eventually managed to persuade their father that they should be dressed as young women, Bowles consulted an 'actress' friend. With her guidance, the girls were dressed in low-necked, black velvet gowns with red sashes. Bowles was MP for King's Lynn from 1892 to 1906 though in 1899 he announced to his daughter Dorothy, by then keeping home for him, that he was fed up with politics and intended to move to China. He told Dorothy to close up the house and pack. She did as she was told. All the furniture was covered in dustsheets and a caretaker hired to look after the house. She then sat outside the house, with the luggage, in a four wheeled carriage waiting for her father to join her. But as Bowles left the house, it started to rain. He lent into the cab and said: 'My dear child, it's raining. We won't go.'

11. Sir Thomas Barrett-Lennard (1857 to 1918)

Sir Thomas, the squire of Belhus in Essex, was a great animal lover. On muddy days, if he thought the going was too heavy for a horse to pull his carriage with him inside it, he would jump out and run alongside to save the horse the effort. He loved all animals, and his servants were instructed to keep a fresh bowl of water in the corn rick for the rats. When he saw a butcher mistreating a pony, he tore off his coat and thrashed the man. He cared about humans too. He would often answer his own front door to save his butler the trouble and dressed so scruffily that he was once given a tip for opening his park gates to a visiting carriage.

12. Francis Henry Egerton, eighth Earl of Bridgewater (1756- 1829)

The Earl loved his dogs and treated them like dinner guests. With an annual income of £40,000 a year he could afford to do pretty much what he liked. At dinner the dogs sat on chairs dressed in fashionable finery. They had handmade leather shoes on their feet and linen napkins round their necks. A footman stood behind each dog. If a dog didn't behave properly it would suffer the indignity of being dressed in yellow servants' livery and sent to eat in the servants' hall for a week. When the dogs were taken for a walk, a servant with an umbrella would accompany them to make sure they didn't get wet. Lord Bridgewater also had a passion for boots. He wore a different pair each day, never wearing the same boots twice and so never having the joy of wearing a comfortable pair. Each night the boots he had taken off would be placed alongside the previous day's boots and by the time he died, the house was filled with rows and rows of boots. They were not cleaned so that he could find out what the weather had been like simply by finding the boots for that day. His boots were his diary. Egerton lived in France for 30 years but never learned French. In later years he used to entertain guests by ordering his secretary to read out extracts from a long and constantly changing will. In the gardens of his Paris home he kept 300 rabbits, 300 pigeons and 300 partridges. The birds had their wings clipped. This menagerie enabled him to wander into his garden and shoot his dinner when the fancy took him. When he travelled he never did so lightly. Packing would take months. On one occasion he set off followed by sixteen carriages laden with luggage. He returned home hours after setting off having abandoned his trip after an unsatisfactory lunch at an inn. When he died each servant received a mourning suit, a cocked hat and three pairs of worsted stockings. A monument on his grave depicts a woman with a stork behind her, an elephant by her side and dolphin at her feet. Needless to say Egerton designed the monument himself.

(This list is adapted from *England's Glory* written by Vernon Coleman and Donna Antoinette Coleman – now sadly out of print.)

Appendix 5: Mad Jack Mytton

John Mytton (1796-1834) was the most eccentric Englishman of all time. (And he had a good deal of competition.)

Mytton crammed a good deal into his short life and was described by his family as ‘high spirited’.

Here are two dozen examples of his high-spirited nature.

1. He was asked to leave Westminster School after a year for ‘fighting with the masters’. He then went to Harrow where he lasted three days. After that he was taught at home by a series of tutors. He treated these to a series of practical jokes – including leaving a horse in one tutor’s bedroom.

2. When it was decided that he should attend Cambridge University, he arranged for 2,000 bottles of port to be ready for his arrival. In the end, he changed his mind and didn’t go to Cambridge. There is no record of what happened to the port.

3. On his 21st birthday, Mytton inherited £60,000 and vast estates. However, in the remaining 17 years of his life he got through more than £500,000 and ended up bankrupt.

4. He spent a year in the 7th Hussars. Most of the time he was gambling, drinking and racing horses. At a farewell dinner he persuaded his horse, Baronet, to leap the fully laden mess table.

5. In 1819, Mytton decided to seek election as MP for Shrewsbury. While campaigning, he walked round the constituency with £10 notes pinned to his hat. As the notes were taken so they were replaced. Mytton spent £10,000 in this way and won the election by 384 votes to 287.

6. When Mytton got to the House of Commons, he found the first debate he attended uninteresting. He left and never went back.

7. Every morning, Mytton drank five bottles of port before lunch. If the port ran out (not something that happened often) he would drink eau-de-Cologne or lavender water.

8. Mytton liked to drive his gig into rabbit holes at high speed to see if it would turn over. (It invariably did.) When a passenger complained that his carriage driving was reckless and might overturn the carriage, Mytton scoffed and said: ‘What? Never been upset in a gig? What a damned slow fellow you must have been all your life.’ He then deliberately ran the carriage up a steep incline and overturned it so that the passenger could experience an ‘upset’.

9. Mytton kept 60 cats which he dressed in liveries suitable to their breeds. He was even fonder of dogs and had 2,000 of those. When his favourite dog Tizer was losing a fight with a friend’s dog, Mytton bit the other dog’s nose and held on until the dog gave in. Some of the dogs were fed on steak and champagne. His favourite horse, called Baronet, was allowed to wander throughout Halston Hall and would lie with Mytton in front of the fire drinking mulled port.

10. On one occasion, Mytton rode into his dining room in full hunting costume. To the alarm of his guests he was riding his pet brown bear called Nell at the time. When Mytton dug his spurs in, the bear bit him on the leg.

11. In 1826, he rode a horse into the Bedford Hotel in Leamington Spa. He rode the horse up the grand staircase and out onto the balcony. He then jumped the horse over the diners seated in the restaurant below before leaping through the window and into the Parade, the main town’s main street. He remained seated on his horse throughout, and won the bet.

12. Mytton once replaced the last few pages of the local vicar’s sermon with pages from the *Sporting Magazine*.

13. He once got his horse dealer drunk and put him to bed with two bull terriers and Nell, the brown bear. Mytton sent the same horse dealer to a banker in Shrewsbury, ostensibly to collect money for him. He gave the dealer a note to hand to the banker, who was also a governor of the local mental hospital. The note read: ‘Sir, please admit the bearer, George Underhill, to the lunatic asylum. Your obedient servant, John Mytton.’

14. When a tough Welsh miner tried to head off his hounds, Mytton leapt off his horse and challenged the man to a fistfight. After twenty rounds the miner gave in. Mytton congratulated the man and gave him half a sovereign.

15. When his creditors became a little too aggressive, Mytton moved to France. In a hotel in Calais he developed hiccups and decided to get rid of the problem by giving himself a fright. He set fire to his nightshirt. This cured the hiccups (‘The hiccup is gone, by God!' he is reputed to have said.) but he was badly burned. Advised to stay in bed for a month he arranged to go out for dinner. But when his dining companion sent a two horse equipage for him, Mytton, covered in bandages, refused to get into it, claiming that he would sooner walk than ride in a carriage with less than four horses. Supported by two servants, he walked a mile and a half to dinner.

16. After being released from debtors’ prison in 1832, Mytton met a pretty, young woman on Westminster Bridge. (Mytton’s wife Caroline had run away two years earlier.) Mytton had never met the girl before but asked her name and where she was going. She said her name was Susan and she didn’t know where she was going. Mytton then offered her £500 a year to live with him. She accepted and spent the next two years living with him in Calais. She was with him when he died.

17. On separate occasions, Mytton fought both dogs and bears armed with nothing more than his teeth.

18. In winter he went duck hunting in his night shirt or, on occasion, completely naked – just to make things more exciting.

19. He invented a game which involved chasing rats across a frozen pond while wearing skates.

20. He bet a friend that he could give him a fifteen minute start and still beat him home. Mytton won easily by taking a short cut through a lake which he forced his horse to swim knowing that if he had been thrown from his horse he would have drowned because he could not swim.

21. When out riding in bad weather, Mytton would knock on a cottage door and ask if his horse could dry off by the fire. Since he owned most of the local cottages he was never refused.

22. His wardrobe contained 700 pairs of boots, 150 pairs of riding breeches, 1,000 hats and nearly 3,000 shirts.

23. He died, in prison, from alcohol poisoning. He was just 38-years-old. More than 3,000 friends and acquaintances attended his funeral.

24. For some undisclosed reason, John Mytton was known to his friends as ‘Mad Jack’.

(This list is adapted from *England’s Glory* by Vernon Coleman and Donna Antoinette Coleman.)

Appendix 6: Lady Hillingdon's Confession

The well-known saying 'lie back and think of England' (said to be favoured by ladies of breeding who regard sex as nothing more than an event necessary to keep England well populated with the 'right sort of people') originated with a woman called Lady Hillingdon.

Here is the relevant quote from her diary:

'I am happy now that Charles calls on my bedchamber less frequently than of old. As it is, I now endure but two calls a week and when I hear his steps outside my door I lie down on my bed, close my eyes, open my legs and think of England.' – Lady Hillingdon in her Journal for 1912

Charles William Mills, later the 2nd Baron Hillingdon, was a banker and politician who sat in the House of Commons at the end of the 19th century. He married Alice Marion Harbord in 1886 and became the baron when his father died in 1898.

The Author

Vernon Coleman is an author and doctor. This is the 15th book about Bilbury – all in ‘The Young Country Doctor’ series. His novels include the series about Mrs Caldicot. The titles in that series are: *Mrs Caldicot’s Cabbage War*, *Mrs Caldicot’s Knickerbocker Glory*, *Mrs Caldicot’s Easter Parade* and *Mrs Caldicot’s Turkish Delight*. Individual novels include: *Mr Henry Mulligan*, *The Truth Kills*, *Second Chance*, *Paris in my Springtime*, *It’s Never Too Late*, *The Hotel Doctor*, *My Secret Years with Elvis’* and many others. All of these books are available as ebooks on Amazon. All the books in ‘The Young Country Doctor’ series are available as ebooks on Amazon.

Before you go…

Thank you for your company. Sorry to go on about it, and apologies if you already have done so, but if you have enjoyed this volume in The Young Country Doctor series, I really would be very grateful if you would spare a moment to write a short review.

Thank you
Vernon Coleman

The Young Country Doctor: Book 1

BILBURY CHRONICLES

Vernon Coleman

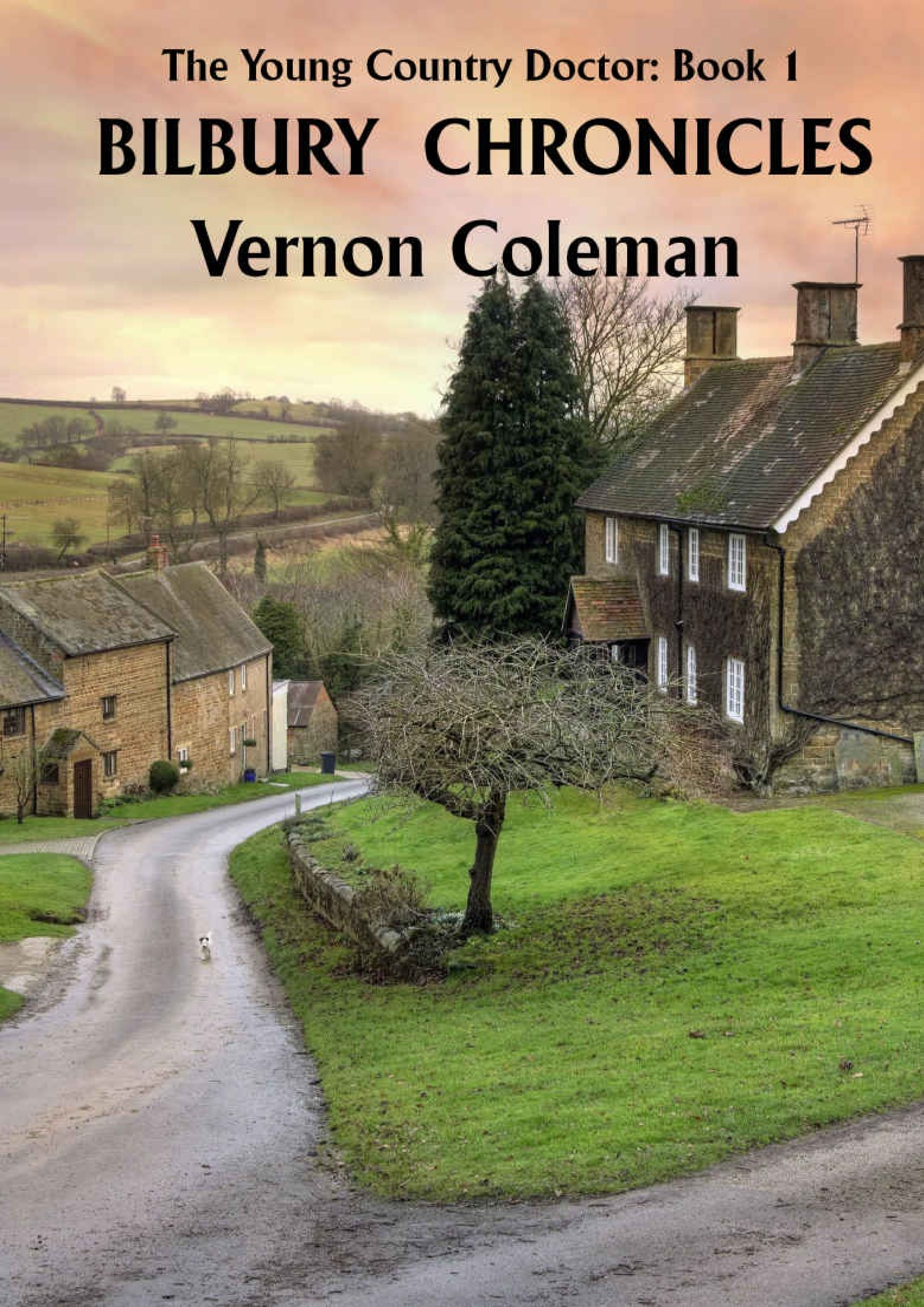

THE YOUNG COUNTRY DOCTOR: BOOK 1

BILBURY CHRONICLES

VERNON COLEMAN

Bilbury Chronicles

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Bilbury Chronicles is the first of Vernon Coleman's seven books about Bilbury – all available as Amazon Kindle Books. If you enjoy the Bilbury books you may enjoy other books by the same author – including 'Mr Henry Mulligan' and 'Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War'. For details of over 100 other books by Vernon Coleman please see his Amazon author page or visit www.vernoncoleman.com

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CHAPTER ONE

There can be few more beautiful railway journeys than the one between Exeter and Barnstaple. The train moves slowly and stops at a dozen small hamlets on the way but the view from the window is overpoweringly rural: oak and silver birch, hazel nut and walnut trees provide shade and shelter for foxes, badgers and deer; thick, untrimmed hedgerows border lush, dark green meadows; thatched roof cottages sit alongside streams and bridle paths; herons haunt the shallows of the river Taw; dippers and kingfishers decorate the banks, rocks and overhanging branches; and buzzards soar high overhead, unflapping and unflappable.

It was 1971 and an early autumn afternoon when I first travelled on that train and, as it chugged slowly and peacefully along the river valley, through Lapford, past Eggesford and into and out of King's Nympton, the glorious majesty of the scenery was the last thing on my mind.

You need to feel calm and relaxed to get the best out of this sort of journey. And I was feeling neither calm nor relaxed. I had no time for rich, red soils; plump hilltops crowned with copses or slowly swirling pools of meandering river water. I was on my way to my first job and to say that I felt nervous would be an understatement of grand proportions.

I had finally completed my training as a doctor just five days earlier. My registration certificate, collected by hand from the General Medical Council, lay unfolded and hardly dry in a large, sturdy brown envelope at the bottom of my brand new, black leather 'doctor's bag': a badge of office which had given me confidence and pride when I'd bought it but which now seemed, by its very shiny newness to advertise my inexperience and professional innocence.

I'd got the job as Dr Brownlow's assistant after a telephone interview that had lasted somewhere between a minute and a minute and a half. My conversation with his receptionist, who had told me which trains to catch, had lasted only slightly longer.

Then, surrounded by the hospital wards and university laboratories where I'd trained, I'd been full of self-assurance. Now, swaying gently from side to side on a train which was steadily lurching its way towards the unknown I felt almost overcome by great, cold draughts of incompetence and ignorance.

As the train took me nearer and nearer to my new job I gradually realised that practising medicine as a senior student in a ward staffed by experienced doctors and briskly efficient, starch fronted nurses was something entirely different to practising medicine out here in the wilderness. The real world was, I began to suspect, something that I might not be quite ready for.

In hospital my patients had mostly lain neatly in rows, dressed in their pyjamas and labelled with diagnoses and recorded symptoms. Advice and help was never more than a few moments away. Out here in the real world my patients were chopping wood, poaching trout, catering for holiday makers, driving trains and herding cattle. I looked around the unfamiliar faces sharing my carriage. Were any of these, I wondered, potential patients of mine? Did they have any idea how much I wanted them to stay well and healthy?

A large, red-faced man wearing a brownish tweed jacket, old-fashioned gaiters and a pair of heavy brown boots suddenly belched, temporarily interrupting his steady snoring to do so. A young woman wearing a dark blue overcoat and a small, blue felt hat looked across at him, sniffed and tutted, and then looked away. She clasped her gloved hands neatly in her lap and stared out of the window. She was in her late twenties or early thirties but her clothes made her look much older.

A young woman in her early twenties loudly shushed the two boys who were travelling with her. I supposed they were her sons. They seemed to find great humour in the sounds emanating from the fat man's body and had to struggle to contain their amusement. A man in a grey suit buried himself in his morning newspaper. An elderly woman wearing a black dress, black coat, black hat and black shoes glowered around at all of us, as though holding us all responsible for failing to protect her from these social insults, before folding her arms across her chest as though defiantly barricading herself against our world.

The train, slowing down, started to follow a long, gentle curve to the left. Looking out of the window I saw a sign on the platform which told me that we had arrived at the end of the line: Barnstaple. This was it. Grown up reality, responsibility and heaven knows what else lay just a few miles away from here. My mouth felt dry and I could feel a squadron of butterflies becoming airborne in my stomach.

Politely, I waited until the other passengers had left the train and then picked up my black leather 'doctor's bag' and my cheap but capacious blue cardboard suitcase and shuffled along the corridor.

I was clambering down onto the platform when I realised that something had happened a few yards in front of me, halfway between the train door and the exit from the platform. As I got closer to the crowd which had formed I realised that the fat man in the tweed suit, gaiters and heavy brown boots was the centre of attraction. He was lying flat on his back on the platform and even from a distance it was clear to a trained medical mind that all was not well.

'Excuse me!' I heard myself saying as I gently squeezed my way through between a tall, thin man in a brown trilby, and the elderly woman dressed all in black. I dropped my suitcase outside the circle but kept a tight hold on my 'doctor's bag'. It contained the instruments of my profession and without it I would have felt as vulnerable and as useless as a gunfighter entering the OK Corral without his pistols. 'I'm a doctor,' I explained diffidently, hoping that this confession would excuse my behaviour but not attract too much attention.

I had spoken quietly but the response was as immediate and as dramatic as if I'd shouted the words at the top of my voice. These magic words – 'I'm a doctor' – would, I was to discover in the fullness of time, part any crowd. The circle widened and I was aware of every eye being trained on me.

Every eye except two that is. The exceptions belonged to the young woman in the blue woollen coat and the blue felt hat who had sat across the aisle from me on the train. She was stooping beside the prostrate fat man in the tweed suit, having unbuttoned her coat to make kneeling easier.

'Give me a hand!' she said, without looking up but moving round so that she was behind the man's head. She nodded towards his feet.

I put down my black bag. 'Is he all right?' I asked, hesitantly. 'Shouldn't we do a few tests before we move him? He might have damaged his spine.'

'He's drunk,' said the woman in the blue coat firmly. As though anxious to confirm her diagnosis the fat man suddenly sat up. He opened his eyes and looked around him, lifted one hand as though he wanted to make a gesture of some kind and then collapsed flat on his back again with a loud burp. I found myself engulfed in a suffocating cloud of stale beer.

The woman in the blue coat sighed wearily as though none of this was new to her. 'Let's get him into a taxi.'

She lifted his head and shoulders and I lifted his feet and together we carried him out to the station forecourt. There were half a dozen taxis queuing there but the woman in the blue coat ignored the first three and headed straight for the fourth in line, a rather battered vehicle of indeterminate make that was heavily pockmarked with rust patches. To my surprise, the drivers who had been overlooked made no protests. The driver of the rust speckled car put down his newspaper, climbed out and opened the back door so that we could push our passenger in.

'Drunk again?' enquired the driver, helping us to manhandle the fat man into the taxi.

'It's the last Wednesday of the month,' answered the woman in blue as though this explained everything.

The taxi driver frowned.

'L.V.A. meeting in Exeter.'

The taxi driver grunted and nodded.

The fat man belched again.

I bent down, picked up one of the fat man's shoes that had come off as we had pushed him into the car and tried to fit it back onto his foot. Mysteriously, the shoe seemed several sizes too small. I dropped the shoe onto the floor beside the unshod foot, backed out of the car and stood up. The woman in the blue coat and the taxi driver were both standing waiting.

'His shoe had come off,' I explained, apologetically.

'If you're coming with us you'd better get your luggage,' said the woman in the blue coat.

I frowned. I didn't understand.

'You're Dr Brownlow's new assistant aren't you?' I nodded. 'How did you know...?'

'There can't be all that many new doctors arriving at Barnstaple station today.' She walked round to the other side of the taxi, opened the front door and got in.

'Do you need a hand with your luggage, doctor?' asked the taxi driver. He handed me a grubby visiting card upon which was printed 'Peter Marshall-Taxi Driver'. Underneath was printed 'Funerals and Weddings a Speciality'. There was a Bilbury telephone number. When I'd had a chance to read the card Mr Marshall reached out and took it off me.

'No, thank you!' I said. 'There's only one case and a bag.' I suddenly remembered that I'd left them both standing in the middle of the platform. I turned away from the taxi and ran back into the station. Both the suitcase and the black bag were standing exactly where I'd dropped them. I picked them up and carried them over to the taxi. Mr Marshall had opened the boot, which was full of old oil cans, dirty pieces of rope, old newspapers and a large quantity of shrink wrapped toilet rolls stacked neatly in two large cardboard boxes.

'Delivery for the Duck!' explained the taxi driver cryptically, pushing the toilet rolls to one side. He had, I noticed for the first time, a very thin moustache on his upper lip. He wore a flat cap that had a greasy mark on the peak where he'd touched it countless times with thumb and forefinger and a badly creased suit that had rather a lot of stains on it. He took my suitcase and carefully laid it down in the centre of the boot. Too late I noticed that much of the boot lining seemed to be soaked with oil. He then placed my black bag on top of the suitcase.

I still felt more than a little uncertain about all this. 'You are going to Bilbury?'

The taxi driver nodded. 'That's where we're going, doctor. Don't you worry about a thing.' He opened the nearside rear door of the taxi for me to get in but the fat man in the tweed suit had collapsed sideways and was now taking up the whole of the rear seat. After trying to push him upright, and failing, Mr Marshall scratched his head and walked to the front of the car. 'Would you mind sharing the front seat with Mrs Wilson?' he asked. He opened the front passenger door and in lieu of a smile showed me his gums. He didn't seem to have any teeth at all. Much later I discovered that he had a set of false teeth but that he only wore them on occasions which he deemed 'special'.

The woman in the blue coat looked first at him and then at me. I stared at him and then at her. Mrs Wilson could politely be described as having a fulsome figure.

'I'm Kay Wilson,' said the woman. She swung her legs sideways, showing an indelicate amount of stocking top and bare white thigh, and clambered out of the taxi again. 'I'll sit on your lap,' she offered. I climbed into the taxi and took her place.

As I have already mentioned Mrs Wilson was not a small woman and her weight was not insubstantial. Fortunately, the springs in the taxi's seat had long since lost all their resilience and our combined weight meant that the seat sank close enough to the floor for Mrs Wilson to get her head into the car. Once inside she fidgeted about as though trying to get comfortable. Even through her thick woollen coat I could feel the bony structure of her firmly structured supporting undergarments. The air around me was thick with her perfume to which I suspected I was probably allergic.

'Mrs Wilson is our district nurse,' explained the taxi driver, turning the ignition key in an attempt to start the taxi's ancient engine. I realised then that the clothes Mrs Wilson was wearing were her official uniform. I extricated my right hand from between the handbrake and the side of the passenger seat upon which we were sitting and offered it to Mrs Wilson, inspired by a sudden sense of professional courtesy. We were in the act of shaking hands when we were both projected forwards as the engine caught and the car, which was in gear, suddenly jerked forwards. The district nurse was crushed against the car's worn vinyl dashboard and I, the more fortunate of the two of us, was crushed against the infinitely more pliant district nurse.

'Maybe we should fasten the seat belt?' I suggested.

Mrs Wilson, her hat now resting at an unlikely angle, moved her head so that she could look at me and raised an eyebrow doubtfully. Behind us I heard the fat man in the tweed suit cursing noisily. Judging from the pressure on the back of my seat he had rolled forwards onto the floor. I felt a sneeze developing and in an attempt to distract myself from such a potentially hazardous incident I wriggled around so that I could reach the dangling seatbelt clip with my left hand. I then tried to pass the seatbelt clip from my left hand to my right but this wasn't quite so easy. The main consequence of my struggle was that I pulled Mrs Wilson even closer to me than before. Deep out of reach and trapped in my trouser pocket I could feel my Swiss Army penknife pressing into my leg.

'Let me help you doctor,' said Mrs Wilson, taking the seatbelt clip from my left hand and putting it into my right for me. She turned towards me when she'd completed this simple manoeuvre and I noticed that her face was looking distinctly flushed. She put her right arm around my shoulders and pulled herself even closer to me so that I could fasten the safety belt.

'Got it!' I announced proudly. This was no mean feat since the taxi was bouncing around like a fairground ride.

Mrs Wilson didn't seem too interested. Her eyes were closed and she was breathing heavily. My Swiss Army penknife was pressing even harder against my thigh and I could feel my leg going numb.

'Are you all right?' I asked the nurse.

Mrs Wilson smiled, nodded and murmured something inaudible. In the back of the car I could hear the fat man in the tweed suit talking to himself.

'What's an L.V.A.?' I asked the taxi driver.

Mr Marshall, hunched over his steering wheel as he urged his ancient taxi onwards past a touring caravan being towed by an underpowered motor car, turned towards me looking puzzled.

'I heard Mrs Wilson tell you that your other passenger had been to an L.V.A. meeting in Exeter.'

'Oh!' said the driver. He swung the steering wheel hard to the left and swerved back in front of the car, just in time to avoid crashing head on into a tractor that was coming towards us. 'The L.V.A. is the Licensed Victuallers' Association,' he explained. 'Frank is the landlord of the Duck.'

The Duck?'

'The Duck and Puddle. The pub.'

'Is that the Duck and Puddle in Bilbury?'

'That's the one,' nodded Mr Marshall. 'You'll be staying there, I expect.' He jerked his head backwards. 'That's your new landlord.'

* * *

The village of Bilbury lies about ten miles to the east of Barnstaple and about three miles south of the North Devon coast. Bilbury is one of the very few English villages that looks like a traditional village ought to look. The three most important buildings – the pub, the church and the village shop – all look out onto the village green; one and a half acres of lush, green grass that used to be kept closely cropped by the Bilbury goats but which is now cut six times a year by one of the local farmers working on contract for the County Council.

In addition to these three essential and conspicuous centres of public consumption and absolution the village green is overlooked by a couple of dozen cottages, while around its edge stand half a dozen towering oaks, two equally impressive horse chestnut trees and a single ash tree. A small stream meanders along one side of the green; at one end passing under the road in a hidden ditch and at the other flowing across the road to make a ford that in summer often dries to a trickle and sometimes dries completely but in winter has been known to flood to a depth of over eighteen inches.

When Mr Marshall's taxi drew up outside the Duck and Puddle public house I was in no condition to take in any of this. Inhaling concentrated draughts of Mrs Wilson's perfume for half an hour had left me rather light-headed and my Swiss Army penknife had by now succeeded in deadening one of my femoral nerves more or less completely.

The taxi driver disappeared in through the front door of the pub, leaving the district nurse and I to disentangle ourselves from the seatbelt as best we could. Neither of us had moved more than a couple of inches when Mr Marshall reappeared with a small, slightly built, worried looking woman in her early forties who was dressed in a pale pink jumper and a pair of very tight blue jeans. This, I was to discover, was Gilly Parsons, the landlady of the Duck and Puddle and the wife of the unconscious licensed victualler lying on the floor of the back of the taxi.

Mrs Parsons didn't seem surprised or alarmed to see her husband lying there. She reached in, took hold of a random handful of suit cloth and yanked him out of the car in a single, impressively smooth, movement.

Seemingly inspired by this, Mrs Wilson made a supreme effort and, by swinging open the car door and grasping hold of the top edge with one hand, succeeded in pulling her head and shoulders out of the car completely. Unfortunately, although her coat and dress made every effort to follow, her body and legs seemed unwilling to leave the taxi. I found myself flushing with embarrassment as I stared down at a mysterious and confusing vision of lingerie, buckles, silk stockings and white flesh.

By this time half a dozen villagers had left the pub and, all clutching pint or half pint glasses, were standing around watching. The tweed suited landlord of the Duck and Puddle had made a sudden and surprising recovery and was now standing looking doleful as his wife, hands planted firmly on her hips, told him what she thought of him. Three small and scruffy boys who had been throwing sticks up into a horse chestnut tree in vain attempts to dislodge early conkers abandoned their exhausting endeavours and joined the enthusiastic audience.

Eventually, the taxi driver came over and freed Mrs Wilson from his motor car by the simple expedient of taking hold of her shoulders and pulling hard. She shot out of the car like a cork out of a champagne bottle and the two of them landed on the dusty road in front of the pub.

'You must be the doctor,' said Mrs Parsons, the landlady, turning away from her husband, ignoring the sprawling Mr Marshall and Mrs Wilson, and approaching as I clambered out of the car.

'Yes!' I confirmed, standing up and then falling down onto the road alongside the taxi driver and the district nurse in one fluid and seemingly well-practised movement. My Swiss Army penknife had succeeded in arresting the nerve supply to my right leg so successfully that it had been blissfully unaware of its duties when I had tried to stand on it. My arrival in Bilbury had not been quite as dignified as I might have hoped.

* * *

My room at the Duck and Puddle overlooked the village green. Mrs Parsons, who seemed disappointed to discover that her new guest was as prone to falling over as her husband and the rest of her customers, performed the usual rituals without enthusiasm. She opened the window and then shut it again. She opened the wardrobe, rattled the row of wire hangers which hung on a single, wooden rail, and then shut it again. She pointed to the sink and told me what it was, showed me how the taps worked and pressed a hand on the bed to demonstrate its pliability.

She then pointed out the bedside lamp, the tiny child's desk and chair that stood beside the window, opened and shut the drawers of the dressing table and pulled the cord which dangled over the bed to turn on the main light. As she left the room she used the light switch just by the door to turn the light off again. She paused just before she left. 'Dr Brownlow asked if you would be kind enough to call on him as soon as you have settled in,' she announced rather formally. Having passed this message on she looked around, as though taking a last minute inventory, turned away and closed the door behind her.

I shook the worst of the dust off my jacket, brushed my trousers with my hand and shared the contents of my blue suitcase between the wardrobe and the dressing table. Then I placed my brand new 'doctor's bag' on the desk by the window and limped back down the stairs again. My leg still wasn't completely recovered.

The pub had either been built in some long distant era when customers were a good deal shorter than I am or when watching customers crack their skulls against solid wooden beams was considered good sport.

Whatever the explanation I counted six possible danger points between my bedroom and the pub's front door. At two of these sites the landlord had attempted to minimise the extent of possible damage by tacking an old piece of carpet across the beams. The gesture might have been more effective had the carpet not been threadbare. On my first descent I succeeded in banging my head on every possible impediment.

'Excuse me!' I said to Mrs Parsons, now standing behind the bar and pulling a pint of locally brewed beer for an eager customer. 'Could you tell me how to find Dr Brownlow's?' Mr Parsons, the landlord, was standing at the far end of the bar and although erect he did not yet look entirely conscious.

'Turn right out of the front door,' Mrs Parsons answered, without lifting her eyes from her work. 'And then follow the road around the village green. Take the first lane on the right. It's signposted to Combe Martin. You'll see the gates and the drive leading to Dr Brownlow's house a hundred yards on your right.'

Murmuring my thanks I followed her directions faithfully and less than ten minutes later found myself staring at the largest pair of iron gates I'd ever seen. The gates, which were painted black and which stood wide open were suspended from hinges built into two huge stone pillars upon each of which rested massive stone griffins. On either side of the pillars a nine foot high stone wall separated the road from the grounds within.

I studied the gates and the pillars looking for a name, an inscription or some sign that this was what I was looking for. But I could find nothing. I stood still for a moment and stared up the driveway. Flanked by seventy foot tall poplars the drive looked to be several miles long. I could see no sign of any house. I didn't know much about country doctors but this all looked a little grand to me. Maybe, I thought, Dr Brownlow lived in part of the house. Or maybe he had a cottage in the grounds. Whatever the explanation I was pretty sure that I was at the right place unless Mrs Parsons had deliberately sent me off on a wild goose chase. I was comforted by the thought that she didn't look like a woman who enjoyed sending strangers chasing off after wild geese.

After walking for what seemed like a modest eternity I finally saw the house. It looked like something out of a horror film; the sort of place that Dracula or Dr Frankenstein might have found 'homely'. Built entirely of grey stone softened slightly by several acres of dark green ivy it wasn't so much a house as a castle. There was no moat but there were towers, battlements and mullion windows. Apart from the ivy the only colour breaking up the grey of the stone was provided by a Union Jack flag flying from a pole which was fixed at an acute angle to the front of the central tower. Directly underneath the flag, and flanked by two huge stone lions, was the front door. It was about twelve feet high, and was decorated with scores of very solid looking metal studs. Incongruously, a large ginger tomcat lay curled up beside one of the stone lions.

I couldn't see anything that looked like a doorbell so I knocked on the door with my knuckles. The door, which from the sound my knuckles made seemed about three feet thick, soaked up the sound I made with ease. Certain that my knocking had been a waste of time and effort I raised my fist to give the door a more appropriate hammering. But before I could land my first blow the door surprised me by opening.

The man who opened the door wore a black frock coat, black trousers, a white shirt and a black bow tie. He was tiny, wizened and looked at least 80-years-old. Pulling the door open seemed to take up an awful lot of his remaining energy.

'I'm looking for Dr Brownlow,' I said hesitantly. 'Can you tell me where to find him, please?'

'This is Dr Brownlow's residence,' wheezed the old man, producing a silver card tray from behind his back. He held the tray out to me. 'Do you have a card, sir?'

I stared at the tray and then at him. I didn't have any visiting cards. I'd never been to a house where people asked you for visiting cards. I didn't think there were still any such homes in existence. The only people I knew who had visiting cards were salesmen for pharmaceutical products and life insurance policies.

'I'm afraid not,' I mumbled. I tried to look past the old man but it was impossible to see anything behind him except darkness. I told him my name and explained that Dr Brownlow was expecting me. The old man looked me up and down very carefully. 'I'll speak to Dr Brownlow,' he said. Then he shut the door.

Shortly after I'd decided that he wasn't coming back but just before I left the door opened again. 'Dr Brownlow will see you now, sir,' said the old man. He pulled the door wide open so that I could enter and then, the moment I was safely inside, closed it shut behind me. With the door shut it was so dark that I could hardly see anything and so cold that I shivered involuntarily.

The skinny old man turned left and shuffled along a corridor that looked long enough to park a train in. Since he walked slowly I had plenty of time to look around me. The corridor was about ten feet wide with a thin strip of threadbare red carpet running along its centre. On each side of the strip of carpet I could see the bare stone flags that made up the floor of the corridor. The walls of the corridor were decorated with huge old oil paintings, hung in battered but massive gilt frames.

We walked until I felt sure that we must be close to the county's border and then the skinny old man stopped, knocked on a huge oak door and put his ear to the panelling before opening the door and ushering me into an extraordinarily small room. The most remarkable thing about this room was that it was higher than it was wide or long. It was, I suppose, no more than twelve or fifteen feet square but the gap between the floor and the ceiling seemed to be at least twenty feet.

Sitting at a huge, scrubbed pine kitchen table in the centre of the room was a bald, plump man in his late sixties or early seventies who looked over his half-moon spectacles as I entered and beamed broadly. Apart from a window set high in one wall, the room was lined with shelves upon which stood rows of books and dusty, bound copies of old medical and scientific journals. Behind the seated occupant of the room stood an examination couch which was piled high with yet more books. Tufts of horse hair showed that the contents of the couch were making a determined effort to escape.

The room's occupant waved a hand in greeting. 'I'm Dr Brownlow. Thank you for coming.' He looked over my shoulder at the elderly manservant who was still hovering behind me. 'Thank you, Bradshaw,' he said. Then he looked at me. 'Would you like a cup of tea?'

'No, thank you!' I said. 'I'm fine.'

'Wise fellow,' whispered Dr Brownlow confidentially. 'Bradshaw has never got the knack of making tea and Ethel's out somewhere today.' He peered around me and raised his voice again. 'That's all, thank you, Bradshaw.'

I heard the door behind me click shut as Bradshaw left and realised that thirty square feet of solid oak makes a very different noise to the average modern door.

I looked around. 'Is this your study?'

'It's my consulting room,' answered Dr Brownlow. 'It used to be the gun room but it's one of the few rooms in the house that is small enough to keep reasonably warm in the winter.' He pointed the pen he was holding back over his shoulder towards two large electric fires which stood side by side behind him. Even though it was still only early autumn both fires were switched on. 'Sit yourself down,' he said, nodding to the empty chair in front of his table.

I sat down and suddenly had a bizarre vision of a long line of infirm patients struggling along the corridor down which I'd just walked.

'Patients come to the back door,' explained Dr Brownlow, as though reading my thoughts. 'It's a bit quicker.' He sighed. 'Hardly anyone comes to the front door any more. When they do Bradshaw always likes to give them the silver tray treatment'.

I nodded. 'I'm afraid I don't have any visiting cards.'

'No one ever has,' said Dr Brownlow. 'At least no one I ever want to see. The last man who put a visiting card on that tray was a double glazing salesman from Bristol. He was so excited by the prospect of double glazing this place that it took me half a day to get rid of him.'

'It's a spectacular house,' I said.

'I like it,' said Dr Brownlow simply.

I could feel a little cramp developing in my left leg again so I stretched my leg out in front of me underneath the table. As I did so I felt my toes hit something soft. I heard a growl and pulled my leg back quickly and instinctively. I looked down but could see nothing.

'Don't worry!' said Dr Brownlow, comfortingly. 'It's only Max.'

'Max?'

'One of my dogs,' explained Dr Brownlow. 'He gets nervous eczema if he's away from me for too long.'

'What sort is he?' I asked, brightly. I get anxious in the company of dogs but I didn't think I should be worried about a dog which suffered from nervous eczema.

'A Doberman,' answered Dr Brownlow. 'I've got two. They're lovely dogs'.

I felt myself going pale and my terror must have shown.

'They wouldn't harm a fly,' Dr Brownlow assured me. 'Are you settled in at the Duck and Puddle?'

'Yes. It seems very nice. Thank you.'

'Good. Ready to start work tomorrow?'

I swallowed hard. 'Yes.' I lied. I was beginning to have severe doubts about the whole thing. I tried to think of an excuse for running away but couldn't.

'I'd liked to have been here with you on your first morning,' said Dr Brownlow. 'But I've got to go to Exeter tomorrow.'

'What time does morning surgery start?' I asked with a voice I only half recognised.

'Nine. Then there will just be a few home visits afterwards. And the evening surgery is at five thirty. Simple. Miss Johnson will show you the ropes.'

'That's your secretary?'

'Secretary, receptionist, nurse – she does it all. Been with me for years. Knows everyone. Just ask her if you get any problems. She'll sort you out.' Dr Brownlow suddenly stood up. He was shorter than I expected he'd be. 'I thought perhaps you wouldn't mind doing most of the night duties,' he said.

'I'm getting a bit past it now to be honest.' He started to move around the desk. 'Bit of a dicky ticker you know.'

I started to say something sympathetic but Dr Brownlow waved the comment away with a shake of his hand. He moved towards the door. 'Where did you park?'

'Park?'

'Your car.'

'I haven't got one,' I admitted.

Dr Brownlow seemed startled. 'Haven't got a car? You'll need one for tomorrow. Can't be a GP without a car.' He looked at his watch. 'I've got to go to Ilfracombe. I'll drop you off at the Duck.' He smiled at me. 'I'll do the night duty tonight and then you can take over from tomorrow.'

I nodded weakly.

He opened the consulting room door and turned right, going in the opposite direction to the way Bradshaw had brought me. 'That's Miss Johnson's office,' he said, pointing to a door split horizontally in two. 'It used to be the boot room.' He nodded towards another room, painted white and decorated with colourful health education posters. 'The patients sit in there.' A mixture of wooden chairs were arranged in a circle around the walls. 'Used to be the flower room.'

'Flower room?'

'All big houses have them. Somewhere for the gardener to lay out flowers for the house.'

'Yes. Of course.'

'It works quite well,' said Dr Brownlow. 'We've managed to make a self-contained surgery suite down here.' He looked around, obviously proud of it all.

A moment or two later we were outside the back of the house. Dr Brownlow strode across towards a large coach house that had its own clock tower. He pulled open two huge wooden doors to reveal an elderly, black Rolls Royce.

'I bought it thirty years ago,' he said. 'It's a 20/25. The most reliable car ever built. I climbed in beside him and he drove me back to the Duck and Puddle. It was the first time I'd ever ridden in a Rolls Royce and, despite the car's age, I was astonished at its luxury and quiet, smooth power.

It seemed to me that general practice was going to be full of surprises.

* * *

I had a hundred things on my mind but my first task was to get hold of a motor car.

I'd passed my driving test when I was seventeen but had never owned a car of my own. I'd never had enough money and there had never been much need. When you're living, studying and working in a teaching hospital a car isn't exactly essential. I had £45 saved up in my bank account but Dr Brownlow's advertisement had promised to pay me £60 a week on top of my board and lodging at the Duck and Puddle so, for the first time in my life, I felt as rich as a king.

The problem was not so much finding the money to pay for a car but finding a car to buy. Innocently I thought that since £45 was a lot of money to me it would be a lot of money to a car dealer. Everything was made infinitely more difficult by the fact that I hadn't seen a garage since I'd arrived in North Devon.

Mrs Parsons had my evening meal ready when Dr Brownlow dropped me off and she seemed to have forgiven my rather bizarre arrival. Her husband, Frank, seemed to have made a miraculous recovery and was standing laughing and joking in the public bar.

'We usually serve our residents' meals in here,' said Mrs Parsons, showing me into the pub's small and totally deserted lounge bar. The main difference I could spot between the two bars was that in the lounge bar the red leather chairs and benches were a little less battered and scuffed and the ashtrays smaller though there was no dartboard, no bar billiards table and no fire in the hearth. Later, I discovered that the beer was a penny a pint more expensive in the lounge bar.

I can still remember my first meal at the Duck and Puddle. Someone, probably Mrs Parsons herself, had written out the menu in neat handwriting on a piece of white cardboard and had lent it up against the cruet.

There was no choice. I had minestrone soup, followed by home-made steak and kidney pie and chips and peas and I finished with a large bowlful of strawberry ice cream with a blob of Devon clotted cream balanced on top of it. Every mouthful was excellent; simple but nourishing pub fare. After the food I'd been used to eating in hospital I thought I'd died and gone to heaven.

When I'd finished I took the remains of my pint of beer ('You get one pint of beer with every meal except breakfast,' Mrs Parsons had told me. 'Anything more you'll have to pay for yourself.') into the public bar.

'Just passing through the village?' asked Frank Parsons, the landlord, when I asked him to refill my glass.

'I'm staying here,' I reminded him.

He looked at me, a frown on his face.

'I arrived this afternoon,' I explained. 'We came together from the station.'

'Oh, you're the doctor!' said the landlord, a broad grin developing on his face. 'I'm sorry about that!' he apologised, putting my refilled glass back down in front of me. He leant forwards a few inches. 'I never remember anything much that happens when I go down to an L.V.A. meeting,' he confided. 'All a bit of a blur you know.'

I wasn't surprised but didn't say so.

'Though from what I heard you must have had a few jars before you got here, eh?'

It was my turn to frown and look puzzled.

'The wife told me,' he said, 'Arse over cap before you got in through the door!'

'Oh that! I had cramp in my leg. It was my Swiss Army penknife.'

The landlord exploded in laughter. 'That's a good one!' he exclaimed cheerily. 'Must remember that one.

Cramp in the leg, eh? Swiss Army penknife?' He leant forwards again and touched the side of his nose with his forefinger. 'Don't you worry, doctor!' he assured me. 'The wife's the very soul of discretion and you can trust me.'

I handed him a pound note to pay for the drink. I had no small change in my pockets. The landlord pushed the note back across the counter towards me. 'I'll put it on the slate for you,' he said. 'You don't want to be worrying with money every time you want a drink.' He leant forwards across the bar counter again. 'And you don't need to worry even if word does get out that you like a drop,' he said. 'There's no one round here who's likely to take offence. Saving perhaps the vicar.'

'Do you know where I could find Mr Marshall?' I asked him, taking a sip from my glass. It was good beer.

'Mr Marshall?' repeated Mr Parsons, thoughtfully. He pursed his lips, screwed up his eyes and then shook his head. 'I don't think I know anyone called Mr Marshall,' he said sadly.

'The taxi driver,' I explained. 'Mr Marshall the taxi driver. I think he lives in the village.' I paused. 'He brought us all over from Barnstaple.'

'Oh, Pete!' said the landlord, grinning. 'I didn't know you meant Pete!'

'Does he come into the bar?' I asked.

'He does and he doesn't,' said the landlord enigmatically. 'But usually he does.'

'Do you know if he's likely to be in tonight?'

'I couldn't say precisely,' said Mr Parsons. 'Do you want a taxi then?'

'No!' I shook my head. 'But there are a couple of things I need to see him about. First, I never paid him for this afternoon's journey. And second I wanted to ask him if he knows anywhere around here where I could buy a car.'

'Oh, don't you worry about Pete's bill!' Mr Parsons reassured me. 'He'll run up a tab for you. No problem. You don't want to be finding cash every time you want to go somewhere do you?'

I suppose I ought to have been worried by all these tabs I was running up but to be honest I found it all rather pleasant. It made me feel part of the village.

'Excuse me,' said a voice I hadn't heard before. I turned towards it and saw a tall, well-built man in his twenties. 'I couldn't help overhearing you say that you want to buy a car.' The speaker was wearing a scruffy, brown leather jacket, a pair of well-worn, oil-stained jeans and a faded T-shirt that managed to look grubby even though it was black. He had an unruly mop of curly, jet black collar length hair that he was beginning to lose.

'That's right,' I nodded.

'What sort of car are you looking for?'

I don't know,' I confessed. 'Something second hand. Fairly cheap I'm afraid. But I need it urgently. Are you a dealer?'

'Me? A dealer?' He laughed. 'I wouldn't trust a car dealer as far as I could kick one.'

'No,' I said, 'I suppose not.'

'How much can you afford to spend?'

'No more than £45,' I told him. 'That's all the money I have.'

The man in the leather jacket sucked in air between his teeth. The sum didn't seem to impress him. He picked up his glass, which was empty, and stared into it as though reproaching it for being empty.

'Can I buy you a drink?' I asked, responding readily to the cue.

'That's very kind of you,' said the man in the leather jacket, seemingly surprised by my generosity. 'Very kind of you indeed. Be rude to refuse. I'll have a pint of special if that's all right with you.'

I turned towards the landlord who had been chatting to an elderly man who wore a grey mackintosh and a brown homburg and who was drinking half a pint of stout but he'd started to pull the pint of special before I had chance to pass on the order.

'My name's Robinson,' said the man in the leather jacket, holding out a hand. 'But people call me Thumper.' I shook his hand and introduced myself.

'You're the new doctor?' I nodded.

'Pleased to meet you!' said Thumper, taking my hand again and pumping it up and down.

I rescued my hand and massaged it gently in an attempt to get some blood flowing through the tissues again.

'You need something with a bit of class,' said Thumper. 'It wouldn't do for the new doctor to be driving round in any old wreck.'

'I don't think it matters too much what it looks like,' I said. 'The important thing is that it's reliable'.

'Reliable isn't enough!' said Thumper. 'Drink up. I know just the thing for you.' He picked up his glass, lifted it to his lips and slowly but steadily drank it dry. When it was empty he put it down on the bar, wiped the froth off his lips and walked towards the front door.

In an ancient Ford pick-up truck that had what looked like metal farm gates welded to the back and front, Thumper drove me to a farm in the nearby village of Parracombe. The truck shook like a fairground ride and sounded as though it had several terminal problems.

'Wait here a moment!' he told me, skidding to a halt in a muddy forecourt and sending chickens, cats and dogs flying and scurrying in all directions. He leapt out of the cab and disappeared into the farmhouse.

When he emerged a few minutes later he had a huge and rather bad-tempered looking man with him. Thumper smiled and waved for me to join them. I opened the cab door and jumped down into a deep mixture of mud and manure.

'Come and look at this,' said Thumper, letting the farmer go ahead and whispering to me conspiratorially. 'You'll love it and I can get you a terrific deal on it!' We followed the farmer into a large barn where two old tractors and a car were stored. The car was large and it had undoubtedly once looked very elegant. The bodywork had originally been painted pale blue but the chickens had redecorated it in their own unique and original style.

'Does it go?' I asked. I tried to sound optimistic but my doubt must have shone through.

'Does it go?' repeated Thumper. 'It's a classic! A masterpiece of engineering. These will be collectors' items in a few years time'.

'What sort is it?' I asked, peering at the inside of the car through windows that were grey with dirt.

'What sort is it?' Thumper asked the farmer.

The farmer shrugged.

Thumper climbed over two bales of straw and a few oil drums so that he could look at the back of the car. He reached out and rubbed at the car's name plate. 'It's a Humber,' he announced. 'Very smart.'

'Are there any keys?' I asked Thumper. 'Can we see inside?'

'Any keys?' Thumper asked the farmer.

The farmer looked confused.

'Keys?' repeated Thumper. 'To open the doors with.'

The farmer still looked puzzled. Thumper tried the driver's door. The catch was a little stiff but the door opened fairly easily.

'I think he must have mislaid the keys,' said Thumper. He bent down, fiddled about somewhere close to the pedals and produced two pieces of wire. 'Let's try it, shall we?' He twisted the two wires together but nothing happened. 'Battery might be flat,' he admitted. 'I'll bring my truck across. You get into the driving seat.'

Five minutes later the Humber coughed reluctantly into life, courtesy of two connecting leads and the battery in Thumper's truck.

'There you are!' shouted Thumper, above the clatter of the engine. 'Told you! No problem! When you want to stop it just pull those two wires apart. When you want to start it again just re-connect them'.

The farmer stared in surprise as the old Humber rattled and shuddered. I sat inside it, shaking and shuddering with it, and looked around. The inside of the car must have been very smart when it was new. The seats were real leather and the dashboard contained an impressive looking array of dials.

'Radio too, eh?' said Thumper, peering in through the door which I'd left open. He leant a little closer. 'I think I can get it for £75,' he whispered.

I looked at him in horror. 'I've only got £45!' I reminded him.

Thumper waved a hand. 'Don't worry about it,' he said reassuringly. 'I'll sort it out and you can owe me the cash.'

'But...' I began.

'No problem,' Thumper insisted. 'You can pay me next week.'

He unfastened the 'jump' leads from the Humber's battery, slammed the bonnet lid down and walked over to the farmer and gave him something. I didn't see what it was. The farmer looked disappointed but Thumper shrugged his shoulders and jerked his thumb in my direction.

I drove the Humber back to Bilbury behind Thumper's old Ford truck. It never even occurred to me that I needed road tax or insurance and if I'd thought to look at the state of the tyres I would have probably insisted on walking instead.

* * *

CHAPTER TWO

I was awake at seven the following morning. I got up, flung the curtains aside and gazed with undiminished delight at the sight of the Bilbury village green. On the far side of the green I could see Mr Marshall, in his capacity as village shopkeeper, laying out the fruit and vegetables in front of his shop. I discovered later that he rose at four every weekday morning to drive into Barnstaple to fetch fresh produce and to collect the mail for the village. While his wife sorted out the post, ready for him to deliver, he laid out the apples, oranges, bananas, carrots, onions, potatoes, cabbages, cauliflowers and sprouts in wooden trays outside the shop.

My room had its own private bathroom (it was the only bedroom in the pub to be so well served) and so while I shaved I ran myself a piping hot bath. This was a wonderful luxury to which I was totally unaccustomed. At the hospital where I'd worked most recently I had to share a bathroom with half a dozen others.

Scrubbed and shining I dressed carefully in my best grey flannel trousers and a woollen shirt with a fine red cross check pattern. My only jacket, a Harris Tweed sports coat had a large ink stain on the lining but as long as I kept it buttoned up no one would ever notice.

'Would you like a full breakfast?' asked Mrs Parsons when I stepped rather hesitantly into the lounge bar. There was a strong smell of beer and tobacco everywhere. It seemed strange to be in a pub so early in the morning.

I must have looked confused for Mrs Parsons spelt out exactly what she meant. 'Porridge or cornflakes; bacon, egg, sausage, tomatoes and fried bread; toast and marmalade; coffee or tea.'

I was impressed. I'd never had a proper English breakfast before. For six years, while I'd been studying as a medical student and then working as a junior hospital doctor, my breakfast had consisted of little more than a cup of warm coffee – usually made by putting a spoonful of instant coffee powder into a chipped mug and then adding hot water from the tap.

Mrs Parsons mistook the silence for dissatisfaction rather than joyful anticipation. 'I can always do you a couple of boiled eggs or scrambled eggs on toast if you'd rather.'

'No! No!' I said quickly. 'The full breakfast sounds terrific.'

'Porridge or cornflakes?'

I chose porridge.

'Coffee?'

'Yes, please. Black.' I'd never taken milk or sugar in my coffee since neither had ever been available when I'd been a student.

'I like to see a man have a good appetite,' said Mrs Parsons, looking satisfied with herself before she scurried back into the kitchen. She brought the porridge out to me within minutes. While I ate it, tantalising smells wafted out from the kitchen and overcame the smells of stale beer and cigarette smoke left over from the night before. Soon, bacon and coffee were the only smells I could detect while the only sound I could hear was the glorious sizzle of bacon cooking in its own fat.

'Did you enjoy that?' asked Mrs Parsons, half an hour later as she refilled my coffee cup for the third time.

I picked up the linen napkin from my lap, wiped toast crumbs away from around my mouth, smiled and nodded at her. 'It was lovely, thank you.'

'Good!' said Mrs Parsons, who looked genuinely pleased. She nodded towards the clock on the far side of the room. 'I don't want to rush you,' she said. 'But what time is Dr Brownlow expecting you?' You don't want to be late on your first morning, do you?'

I turned and looked at the clock. It was five minutes to nine. The morning surgery was due to start in five minutes time.

While I'd been concentrating on breakfast the weather had changed completely. This was, I eventually realised, typical of North Devon. One minute the sun would be shining and the sky would be blue and cloudless. Then, within minutes and with no apparent warning, the sky would turn black and it would be pouring with rain. I rushed upstairs, brushed my teeth and collected my black bag and my raincoat. I was half way down the stairs again before I remembered that I now owned a motor car.

The Humber was still where I'd left it, parked directly in front of the pub. I climbed in, put my black 'doctor's bag' on the front passenger seat and joined together the two wires that Thumper had arranged for me. It never even occurred to me that the old car wouldn't start and the car, whose battery had clearly been given a new, albeit temporary, lease of life by the previous evening's journey, justified my faith in it by bursting into life with just one touch of the wires.

Cautiously, I selected reverse gear and backed out onto the roadway. Once I was facing the direction in which I wanted to travel I realised that the windscreen needed wiping.

After turning on the headlights, the direction indicators and the cigar lighter I eventually found the switch which operated the windscreen wipers.

Unfortunately, the operation was only partly successful.

The windscreen wipers moved up from their recumbent position and swept the windscreen once but that was it. That was the successful part. At the end of their arc, when they should have returned to base, the wipers chose to make a break for freedom. One after the other they simply flew off to the right leaving tiny metal stalks to make the pointless return journey.

I toyed with the idea of stopping to look for them but I was late, the windscreen wipers had disappeared into a thick hedge and it was raining heavily. I decided to struggle on without them.

I suppose there must have been a time when motor cars didn't have windscreen wipers. But I can't imagine how drivers managed. Maybe the man who carried the red flag in front of all horseless carriages also carried a brush with which to wipe the windscreen clean from afar. Or maybe our motoring predecessors simply stopped and stayed wherever they were when it rained. Whatever the truth of the matter I got to Dr Brownlow's surgery in one piece only by opening the window, sticking my head out and navigating through almost closed eyes.

By the time I'd found my way round to the back of the house it was twenty past nine. I parked the Humber, picked up my black bag and rushed in through the back door to present myself at the receptionist's window.

'Sorry I'm late!' I said, breathlessly, poking my head into Miss Johnson's office.

The woman sitting at the desk in there was about fifty five, tall, slim and white haired. She wore a pink tailored suit over a white blouse with a high neck. A single row of pearls hung over the top of her blouse. She had a pair of gold rimmed spectacles perched on the end of her nose and a thin gold chain hung from each arm of the spectacles and was draped around the back of her neck

Miss Johnson looked at a small, wooden, framed clock on her desk, looked at me and then looked back at the clock. I still can't describe the look, though I got to know it well. It wasn't rude or even overtly critical. It was tinged with sadness, disapproval, disappointment and despair. But there was a strong element of contempt in there too.

I introduced myself. 'I'm Dr Brownlow's new assistant.' Water dripped off my head and I could feel my shirt sticking to my back but that was sweat rather than rain.

With a sigh Miss Johnson put down the thin, gold propelling pencil she was writing with. Gracefully, she stood up and walked across to a cupboard on the far side of the room. She took out a freshly laundered and neatly folded white towel and brought it across to where I was standing.

'I think perhaps you'd better dry your hair before you start your surgery,' she said.

Only after I'd dried and combed my hair would Miss Johnson show me into Dr Brownlow's surgery.

'Are there many patients waiting?' I asked her, opening my black bag, taking out my stethoscope and draping it around my neck.

Miss Johnson looked horrified. I suspected that Dr Brownlow, like most older doctors, used to let his stethoscope hang around his neck by the ear pieces, with the tubing dangling down the centre of his chest. 'One or two,' she replied, refusing to commit herself. 'I suspect they want to have a look at you.'

'Is there an appointments system?' I asked her. Miss Johnson looked puzzled.

'Are patients given fixed times when they'll be seen?'

'I should think not!' said Miss Johnson rather stiffly. 'They come and they wait and the doctor sees them when he's ready.' She turned her wrist and looked at her watch. 'Its a good job there isn't an appointments system isn't it?'

When she'd gone I opened the top drawer of the desk. It contained a bottle of blue-black ink, three golf balls, a box of paper tissues, a corkscrew, half a dozen drug company sponsored scrap pads and an old stethoscope with a very long piece of red rubber tubing separating the chest piece from the ear pieces. The rubber tubing had been repaired with two bicycle inner tube patches.

I felt very nervous and uncertain. In hospital all the patients lie in neat rows; sterilised, bandaged, wrapped and labelled. Every doubt or uncertainty can be tackled with the aid of expert, specialist advice. The community within the hospital is a closed one, governed by written and unwritten rules. Each professional is a member of the ruling team. Doctors wear white coats, nurses wear uniforms and patients wear pyjamas. Doctors stand upright and patients lie down flat on their backs. The rules are simple. Doctors do the doing and patients are there to be done unto.

I didn't know what rules governed life in general practice but I strongly suspected that there were none. I knew my patients wouldn't come in labelled. They wouldn't arrive at the surgery dressed in their pyjamas. They wouldn't lie down meekly and placidly, speaking only when spoken to. They might, I suddenly realised, have the temerity to ask me questions! What would I do if I didn't know the answers? What if they complained of strange symptoms which I didn't understand?

On a hospital ward a doctor knows what his patients are suffering from. He knows what needs to be done. Most of his patients come ready sorted by general practitioners. Now I was a general practitioner. I was going to have to do the sorting. All I knew was that the people I would see would be unhappy about their health.

I settled myself back in Dr Brownlow's swivel chair, an ancient and wonderful piece of furniture which was suffering from a noisy form of arthritis and which squeaked steadily whichever way I moved. I had not been in a doctor's surgery since I'd damaged my knee some fifteen years earlier. It felt strange to be sitting on the other side of the desk with only a few short years in medical school behind me and a pine desk in front of me.

Suddenly, I realised that I'd been sitting waiting for several minutes. Wondering where the first patient had got to I thought I'd better go and find out.

'I haven't seen any patients yet!' I said to Miss Johnson.

She was sitting at her desk again.

'Have you pressed your buzzer?'

'What buzzer?'

She explained that I would find a buzzer underneath the desk. She spoke in a tired voice, as though explaining something to someone very dim. She told me its whereabouts in a 'where else would you expect to find it' voice. 'When you press it a light comes on in the waiting room and the patients hear a sound. When they see the light and hear the sound they know that you are ready for them.'

'How do they know who's next?' I asked her.

Miss Johnson looked at me as though alarmed. 'They just know,' she said, her patience clearly wearing thin. 'Everyone knows when it's their turn.'

I nodded. I could feel beads of sweat breaking out on my face. 'Perhaps I'd better just start.'

'That would be a good idea,' agreed Miss Johnson. 'I did tell them that you had been delayed by an emergency on your way to the surgery this morning but I've no doubt that they heard you come in.'

'Right!' I said firmly. 'Thank you. Thank you very much.' I turned away. 'Oh, where are the instruments kept?' I asked before I left.

'The instruments?' said Miss Johnson. She gave me another one of her looks. This one would have been appropriate if I'd made an indecent proposal. 'What instruments?'

I shrugged. 'Auriscope. Ophthalmoscope. Electrocardiogram. Patella hammer. Tuning fork. That sort of thing.'

'Dr Brownlow's stethoscope is in his drawer,' said Miss Johnson. 'I don't think he needs any other instruments.' Her manner made it pretty clear that she felt that instruments were the refuge of less than adequate doctors. 'Anyway,' she said, nodding towards my own shiny new stethoscope, 'you seem to have brought your own instrument with you.'

I went back to the surgery, sat down, felt under the desk, found the buzzer and pressed it. I felt about as well prepared for the job I was supposed to be doing as I would have felt for a job driving a train or flying an aeroplane. I had spent several years studying the history and epidemiology of leprosy, schistosomiasis and a whole host of rare blood clotting disorders. I knew how to identify fat cells under a microscope and I'd spent long hours in the operating theatre pulling on retractors, snipping stitches and watching as surgeons pulled out gall bladders or amputated rotting limbs. I pressed the buzzer and changed my life.

These days I understand that young doctors going into general practice are trained for the work they are destined to do. It was not always thus. I realised with a sudden, cold wave of horror that I was a fraud. In hospital I'd felt secure in the knowledge that even when I didn't know something I could get help quickly. It had all been more of an intellectual game than anything else. When I got a diagnosis right I got points. Here it was all for real. Life or death.

Sitting there, in Dr Brownlow's chair in Dr Brownlow's surgery, I felt terrified, alone and totally incompetent. I was a qualified doctor but I had no idea what to do. I was legally entitled to ask these trusting souls to take their clothes off and subject themselves to the most intimate of examinations but I no longer had any confidence that I would know what to do if I spotted a symptom.

Pressing that button was the most courageous thing I'd ever done.

As the door opened the black bakelite telephone on Dr Brownlow's desk began to ring. I picked it up with my left hand.

'You can take your finger off the buzzer now,' said Miss Johnson, reverting to her 'talking to the idiot' tone. 'Unless you want them all to come in at once.'

'Thank you, Miss Johnson,' I said, taking my right forefinger off the buzzer and replacing the telephone on its cradle. I looked up at the figure who'd entered the surgery and who was now standing just inside the still half open door.

'Please sit down,' I said, standing up myself and at the same time pointing to the chair on the other side of the desk.

My first patient sat down.

He looked about 40-years-old, wore a smart though rather old-fashioned blue suit and a green and blue patterned tie that looked as if it had been a Christmas present from a female relative. He carried a tweed cap which he circled endlessly between his fingers. His hair was covered in cream to make it lie down neatly and a small piece of sticking plaster just in front of his left ear showed that he'd used a fresh blade in his razor that morning. He carried with him a small beige envelope. This, I realised, was his medical records envelope.

We stared at each other for a few moments. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to say. 'How can I help you?' sounded a bit too much like a shop assistant.

'What's wrong with you?' I asked him at last.

'The back!' replied my patient, economically. He reached around his chair and supplemented this supply of verbal information by rubbing what he could reach of his spine.

'Oh, dear!' I said. 'I'm sorry to hear that. Is it bad?'

The man nodded.

'How long have you had it?' I looked at the front of his medical record envelope and found his name. 'Mr Porter?'

There was a long, long pause. This was obviously not such an easy question.

'Quite some time, doctor,' said Mr Porter eventually.

It was my turn to nod while I desperately tried to think of something else that I could ask him. In hospital it was much easier. There were always other people around to ask questions if you ran out of things to say.

'I thought perhaps I ought to have a few days on the box.'

'On the box?'

'The sick.'

I still didn't understand.

'A week perhaps?' suggested Mr Porter.

Suddenly I realised what he wanted. 'You'd like some time off work?'

Mr Porter grinned and nodded. His false teeth parted from his gums as he smiled giving him a strange, rather frightening look.

'What is your job, Mr Porter?'

'Gardener.'

'And whereabouts is the pain worst?' I asked.

Mr Porter, who looked puzzled, reached behind him and rubbed at the bottom of his back again. 'And down me legs.'

The penny dropped. 'Sciatica!' I said triumphantly.

Mr Porter nodded happily.

'Rest!' I said firmly. 'You need to rest.'

Mr Porter smiled but didn't move.

'Perhaps I ought to examine you?' I suggested. I looked around. The horsehair stuffed examination couch was piled high with books and boxes. And the room was so crowded with furniture and books that there was nowhere to move them. The only immediately available flat area was the desk. I moved the leather edged blotter that sat in the middle of it. 'Just lie down for a moment, please!' I told Mr Porter.

He looked at me as if I'd gone mad.

'I want to examine you,' I explained.

'But it's my back!' Mr Porter protested.

After some cajoling he finally agreed to lie down on the desk. When he'd walked into the room he'd looked fit enough but climbing up onto the desk seemed to cause him tremendous pain. He groaned and held his back and generally made it pretty clear that he wasn't fit for any form of physical activity. When I tried lifting his right leg to see how much the nerve was being irritated Mr Porter groaned and rolled about on the top of the desk.

'It seems pretty bad,' I agreed.

Eagerly and with more agility than he had shown when climbing up Mr Porter climbed down off the desk and sat down again. 'Can I have a note now, doctor?'

'A note?'

'For the sick.'

'Of course!' I agreed. I looked around but could see nothing suitable upon which I could write a note. And what was I supposed to write? I wished my medical school lecturers had spent less time teaching me about trypanosomiasis and more time teaching me how to write sick notes.

'I shan't be a moment, Mr Porter,' I promised, heading for the door.

I went straight through to the office where Miss Johnson was busy filling in forms. She looked up and stared at me over the top of her spectacles. 'Is there a problem, doctor?'

'I need to write a sick note,' I explained. I no longer felt quite so embarrassed about the extent of my ignorance. I'd long since gone way past the point of no return. 'But I'm not sure what to write or what to write it on...' My confession tailed off into silence.

'You'll find a book of national insurance certificates in the top left hand drawer of Dr Brownlow's desk,' Miss Johnson told me. 'Just fill in one of the certificates and hand it to the patient.'

I rushed back into Dr Brownlow's consulting room, found the certificate pad and scribbled out a sick note for a month. Mr Porter seemed quite pleased. When he'd gone I felt exhausted. Being a GP was harder work than I'd expected. I went back out to Miss Johnson's office.

'That seemed to go OK,' I said brightly. 'Satisfied customer I think.'

'Good!' said Miss Johnson flatly.

'I suppose it must be nearly time for coffee?'

Miss Johnson didn't say anything but stood up and walked past me to the door. She walked along the corridor and opened the door to the waiting room. Having followed I peered past her. It was absolutely packed. There were at least thirty people in there. There was so much steam rising from so many coats that it was almost impossible to see the far corner of the room at all. No one was speaking but everyone looked up expectantly when the door opened. Without saying a word Miss Johnson shut it again.

I followed her back to the office feeling slightly faint. Thirty. *Thirty!*

'It took you fifteen minutes to deal with Mr Porter,' said Miss Johnson. 'At the rate you're going you won't have finished the morning surgery before it's time to start the evening surgery. And I've already got three home visits booked in for you.'

I worked it out. If I spent fifteen minutes on each patient it would take me seven and a half hours to work my way through the patients who were waiting. And that was assuming that no more came. Miss Johnson was right - patients would be arriving for the evening surgery before I'd finished the morning surgery.

Feeling weak I hurried back into the surgery and pressed the buzzer again.

'It's my Johnnie!' said a very large woman, striding speedily into the room. 'He's got his tonsils again.' She didn't bother to sit down but just stood in front of me blocking out the light. She had several chins and wore a rubberised riding cape which still had small puddles of water collected in folds around her neck. The cape had a hood attached to it which she had pushed back.

I looked around for Johnnie but I couldn't see him. Unless he was hiding underneath the cape he wasn't anywhere to be seen.

'Where's Johnnie?' I asked. It seemed a reasonable question but I hadn't been at the job long.

'I'm not bringing him out in this!' exclaimed the large woman defiantly. 'Not with his tonsils.'

'No!' I agreed quickly. 'Of course not.'

'I'll just take a proscription for penicillin.'

'A proscription?'

'For his penicillin. Dr Brownlow always gives him penicillin.' She handed me a medical records envelope with John Albert Saunders-Lee written on it. A quick glance showed me that Johnnie had been given several lots of penicillin in recent months.

'He's been waiting to have them out,' said Mrs SaundersLee. 'He's been on the waiting list for months.'

I honestly didn't know what to do. Handing over drugs for a patient I hadn't seen didn't seem quite right. But Mrs Saunders-Lee was quite right; it was absurd to expect her to bring her young son out in this weather. And if she stayed at home and waited for me to visit him he'd probably be waiting for days. I decided to start young Johnnie on penicillin. I carefully wrote down the word 'Penicillin' on Johnnie's medical records. As I did so I remembered that I hadn't written anything down on Mr Porter's medical records. I made a mental note to scribble something down later.

'Fine!' I said to Mrs Saunders-Lee. 'That's OK then.'

'Where's the proscription?' Mrs Saunders-Lee folded her arms defiantly. Her coat crackled.

'I've written it down on here,' I explained. I held up her son's medical records for her to see.

'Yes!' she said. 'But where's the proscription?'

I still didn't really understand. In hospital when I'd wanted to prescribe a drug for a patient all I had to do was write down the details on the medical notes. A nurse would come round later and give the patients whatever drugs had been ordered. It may sound unbelievable but no one had explained to me that in general practice the doctor has to hand the patient a piece of paper to take to the chemist. Remember, I hadn't even seen inside a GP's surgery since I'd been a child.

'Excuse me for a moment,' I said to Mrs Saunders-Lee. I darted out and found Miss Johnson again.

'Mrs Saunders-Lee wants a proscription for her son,' I explained. 'What do I do?'

Miss Johnson looked at me very suspiciously. 'Are you sure you're a doctor?'

'Absolutely!' I said indignantly.

Miss Johnson explained that what Mrs Saunders-Lee wanted was a prescription and that I would find a whole pad of virgin prescription forms in the same drawer in which I'd found the sick notes.

'Just write out the instructions for the chemist on the form and hand it over to the patient,' explained Miss Johnson, rather wearily.

'Thanks!' I said. I started to head back towards the surgery but stopped and turned. 'Are there any more forms I need to know about?'

Miss Johnson sighed and glanced towards her own desk. 'I once filled in 47 different types of form in a single day', she said. 'But you've discovered the two most important.'

I thanked her, went back into Dr Brownlow's consulting room and wrote out a prescription for Johnnie Saunders-Lee. I handed the prescription over to his mother.

'While I'm here,' said his mother, studying the prescription carefully before stuffing it into some deep, dark recess beneath her cape. 'I'd like a check-up. I'm going to see my sister in Carlisle next month and I want to make sure I'm all right before I go.'

* * *

Somehow I struggled through the morning surgery and eventually Miss Johnson came in to tell me that there were no patients left to see.

'Thirty!' I said proudly. 'I must have speeded up a bit.'

'Seventeen of them gave up and went home,' Miss Johnson explained.

'I managed to keep the home visits down to three,' she added handing me three medical record envelopes.

'Thank you.'

'I'd like to have you back in time for the evening surgery,' she explained drily. 'Now that word's got out that you've started there'll be a lot here.'

'Oh!' I said, blushing lightly. I must have looked rather pleased with myself.

'They'll know you're a soft touch,' explained Miss Johnson quickly. 'They'll want to take advantage of you before you learn the ropes.' She smiled sweetly at me. 'Will you be going back to the Duck and Puddle for your lunch before you start on your visits?'

I looked at my watch. It was quarter to two. 'I am a bit hungry. I'll just pop back for a quick bite.'

'Just as long as I know,' said Miss Johnson. 'In case anyone needs you.'

I suddenly realised that from now on I wasn't going to be allowed to go anywhere without telling Miss Johnson or the local telephone operator where they could find me.

I went outside to where I'd left the Humber. It was still pouring with rain. As I got in and bent down to reconnect the wires to start the engine I heard someone tapping on the side window. I looked up and tried to wind down the window. It moved about an inch before it got stuck.

'Sorry to bother you, doctor,' said a stern-faced man whom I half recognised. 'But I'd be grateful if you'd park your car a little further away.' He pointed to a muddy area behind the stables. The man was wearing a voluminous waterproof jacket and a pair of waterproof trousers.

'Certainly! I'm sorry,' I said, assuming that I must have parked in someone's way.

'It's the oil, doctor,' explained the stern-faced man, almost apologetically. He looked down. I opened my door and looked down. I could see a large patch of oil spreading out from underneath the car.

'Sorry!' I said again. Then I remembered where I'd seen the man before. It was Bradshaw - Dr Brownlow's butler.

I closed my door, heard a click as the window winder fell off onto the floor and bent down to reconnect the wires which would start the engine. Then, very slowly, I drove back to the Duck and Puddle for lunch. The absence of windscreen wipers and my inability to wind down my window so that I could look out meant that I had to lean forwards all the time and keep my nose pressed against the windscreen in order to see where I was going. Inevitably, this meant that the windscreen soon steamed up and by the time I reached the pub I could see almost nothing.

Mrs Parsons had, she told me with apparently genuine regret, sold my hot lunch to a commercial traveller from Bristol, but she made me a huge plateful of sandwiches. They were unlike any sandwiches I'd ever eaten before. The bread was soft and freshly baked. Inside it was doughy and moist and outside it was crisp. The ham was home cured and cut in half inch thick slices. The cheese was cheddar and tasted of cheese instead of plastic. And the chicken breast was succulent and tasty.

I ordered a pint of best bitter to help wash it all down and by the time I'd finished I felt truly refreshed and no longer in the slightest bit envious of the commercial traveller from Bristol. When I looked at my watch it was twenty to three. I had, I thought, plenty of time to do the home visits before the evening surgery started.

'Where is the nearest petrol station?' I asked Frank Parsons, after I'd drained the last inch of beer from my glass. As I'd driven back to the pub I'd noticed that the petrol gauge in the Humber was reading close to zero.

Frank drew in his breath and shook his head in that way people have when they know that they're about to give you bad news. 'That'll mean a trip to Combe Martin,' he announced, as though I'd asked him where I could buy rocket fuel. He told me to take the main Barnstaple road to Blackmoor Gate, to turn left and to follow the main holiday route into Combe Martin. 'There's a garage on the outskirts of the village,' he told me. 'By the way,' he added, 'judging by the amount of oil you left outside our front door this morning you might need some oil as well.'

* * *

'Do you think I ought to have it serviced?' I asked the petrol station attendant when he'd filled the tank with petrol and the engine with oil.

He looked puzzled. 'What's up with it?'

'Nothing much,' I said. 'Well, the windscreen wipers don't work - there aren't any to be honest - and I have to start it by twisting two bits of wire together but it seems to go all right.'

'So what do you want us to do with it?'

He had me there. 'I'm not sure,' I admitted. 'But don't you do routine servicing? Check the tyres and brakes? Stuff like that?'

He put the petrol pump back into its holster and walked round the car. It was still raining and the garage's narrow canopy provided inadequate protection against the driving rain. He kicked the front nearside tyre with the toe of his boot and scratched his head. 'You ain't got no tax disc,' he pointed out.

I followed his gaze to the corner of the windscreen where most cars carry a tax disc. Mine had none.

'I've only just bought it,' I said. 'I never thought about tax.' As I spoke I realised that I hadn't arranged any insurance either. I was beginning to think that I'd spent too long working in hospital where I didn't have to worry about any of life's unpleasant realities.

'The tyres are bald,' he added.

I bent down. There still seemed to be some tread on them.

'They aren't completely bald,' I protested.

The garage attendant shrugged. 'I've seen worse,' he admitted.

'Do you have any windscreen wipers you can sell me?'

'For this?'

I nodded.

He shook his head. 'I've got some wipers on a Ford Consul that you can have.'

'Will they fit?'

'Maybe.'

'Will you try?'

He turned away and walked over to a car wreck that was parked at one side of the garage. It was only vaguely recognisable as a Ford Consul. He reached over and tore off both windscreen wipers with his bare hands and then walked back with them.

'You want me to fit them?'

'Yes, please.'

The wipers would not fit, of course. But the garage attendant wasn't about to be put off by such a trivial difficulty. He pulled a length of wire out of his overall pocket and used it to bind the windscreen wipers to the stumps that were still attached to my Humber. He used a pair of pliers which he took from another overall pocket to twist the wire around the wipers securely.

'Try that.'

I tried it. To my astonishment it worked. It didn't look pretty and it didn't work perfectly but it was much, much better than having no windscreen wipers at all. I paid him for the wiper blades and the petrol and oil and set off to do my home visits.

Finding people in hospital is easy. Even if you don't know which ward they are on you can still find them within seconds by ringing up the administrators, who keep comprehensive files showing where all their patients are. It's quite rare for a hospital actually to lose a patient.

Finding people in a town is relatively easy. Most streets have names and most houses have numbers. With the aid of a good, local street map it is fairly easy to find your way around. And even if you do manage to get lost you can nearly always find someone prepared to give you directions.

But finding people in the country is not easy. The difficulty is increased when you're a stranger, when it's raining, when your car windows are steamed up and when you're in a hurry.

The first patient on my list was Keith Harper and he was, according to his medical records, six years old. His address was Mulberry Cottage, Bilbury.

Finding Mulberry Cottage wasn't made any easier by the fact that very few houses in the village had their names on them. There were no street signs and no house names for the simple reason that everyone in the village knew where everyone else lived. Buying and erecting expensive metal or wood name plates would, for them, have been a waste of money. The very few name boards that did exist had been allowed to fade, get dirty or become so overgrown with brambles that they were impossible to read.

After searching for an hour I ran out of petrol. The Humber stuttered, coughed and then died ingloriously in a lane so narrow that I couldn't open the doors to get out. When I checked the petrol gauge and saw it registering 'zero' I couldn't believe my eyes. I'd put ten gallons of petrol into the car and had done no more than thirty miles. Racing cars and jet aircraft probably do more to the gallon.

I was rescued by the arrival of a tractor which appeared behind me.

Even though I couldn't get out of the car I managed to squeeze my head out of the passenger window (mine didn't open) far enough to shout to the driver to tell him what had happened and to ask him to give me a push out of the lane.

'You want the garage?'

'Yes!'

I took off the handbrake and allowed the tractor to push me out of the lane towards the main road from Blackmoor Gate to Combe Martin. There, on a slight downwards incline, the tractor stopped. In my mirror I saw the driver jump down onto the road and walk forwards towards me. I pulled on the handbrake. 'I'm turning right here,' he said. 'But from now on it's all downhill.'

I thanked him, let off the handbrake and coasted down the hill to the garage. There I had the tank filled and I got the attendant to lend me three spare cans, filled with petrol, which I stowed in the boot.

'I don't suppose you know where Mulberry Cottage is, do you?' I asked the attendant as I paid him. 'It's in Bilbury.'

He told me. I'd passed it at least half a dozen times. It was a hundred yards from the Duck and Puddle.

I drove back, parked and knocked on the door of Mulberry Cottage.

A woman in her early thirties answered the door. She was wearing a housecoat covered in pink flowers and had her hair wrapped up in a matching pink scarf.

'Mrs Harper?'

She shook her head.

'Does Mrs Harper live here?' Another shake of the head.

'This is Mulberry Cottage?' A nod.

'I'm looking for Keith Harper,' I explained. 'He's six.'

'He's not here.'

'I'm the doctor,' I said. 'I'm told that Keith is poorly.'

'There's no one in.'

'Do you know where they are?'

'Mr Harper is at work.'

'Do you know where Keith is?'

'He doesn't live here.'

'Do you know where he does live?' It was hard work.

'He lives with his mother.'

'Doesn't his mother live here anymore?'

'No. They're separated.'

'Do you know where she lives?'

'Yes.'

'Could you tell me, please? Someone asked for me to call and see Keith. He's not very well.'

The woman folded her arms underneath her bosom and held her head to one side to stop the plume of smoke from her cigarette interfering with her view of me. 'You're a doctor?' It was my turn to nod.

'You're a bit young, aren't you?'

'I've just started work.'

'With Dr Brownlow?'

I nodded again. I was beginning to get the hang of the conversation.

'And you want young Keith?'

Another nod from me.

'They've split up.'

'Yes. You told me.'

'I work for him;'

'Mr Harper?'

'I wouldn't be here if I worked for her, would I?'

'It could be urgent,' I told her. 'I'd be grateful...'

'On the Combe Martin road,' she said. 'Called 'White Larches'.' A half inch length of ash fell from her cigarette and broke up on her apron. She brushed it away. 'She's renting.'

'Is it easy to find?'

'If you know where it is.'

'I don't know the area very well.'

'Down towards Combe Martin.'

'Is it anywhere near the petrol station?'

'If you get to the petrol station you've passed it.'

I thanked her, got back into the Humber and drove back towards Combe Martin.

To my surprise and relief I found the cottage without too much difficulty. Its whitewashed walls bordered the edge of the road and it had a large sign outside which read 'White Larches – Bed and Breakfast'.

I parked in a lay-by fifty yards down the road, took my black bag and went back to the cottage. There was no bell so I knocked on the front door with my bare knuckles. It was still raining and I was by now soaked to the skin.

'Yes?' I heard someone shout. I looked up. A woman's head was peering out of a window directly above me.

'I'm sorry, we aren't taking any holiday-makers,' she said before I could say anything. 'My little boy isn't well.'

'I know,' I shouted back. 'That's why I'm here. I'm the doctor. I've come for Dr Brownlow.'

'Dr Brownlow isn't here. I'm still waiting for him to arrive.'

'No. I mean I've come in place of Dr Brownlow.'

'Why hasn't Dr Brownlow come?'

'I'm his assistant.'

The head looked unhappy.

I swallowed hard. 'I'm sorry,' I said. 'But Dr Brownlow isn't available today.'

There was a loud sigh. 'I suppose you'll have to do then.' The head disappeared. 'The door's open.' I heard it shout.

I opened the front door and looked into the cottage. The front door led straight into the one large room that served both as a dining room and a lounge. The furniture was fairly new and cheap and although it was clean it was battered. It looked as though it had all been bought second hand in a job lot at a house auction. At the far side of the room one door led into a small, neat kitchen while another door, half open, revealed the beginning of a narrow staircase. Tentatively, I stepped into the room. It felt slightly strange to be walking into a stranger's home. Clutching my black bag I stood there, just inside the door, for a few moments. I've always been rather shy and I suddenly felt waves of terrible anxiety sweeping over me. I deliberately left the door open behind me because I felt that at any moment I would need to make a run for it.

'Are you coming up?' shouted a voice from upstairs.

I really did want to run away. I wasn't ready for any of this. What was up there? What was wrong with Keith? Suddenly the enormity of my responsibility loomed large in my mind. This was, I decided, even more terrifying than conducting a surgery. There I did at least have Miss Johnson to help me. Here I was utterly, completely and totally alone.

At last I managed to find the strength to move my legs towards the staircase. As I started to climb the narrow steps I looked up and saw Mrs Harper peering down at me. She was about thirty, was wearing a dark purple jumper, purple corduroy jeans and pale blue slippers and had long, dark brown hair drawn back into a ponytail. She looked worried.

When I got to the top of the stairs she led me into a small bedroom which contained a bed and a stripped pine chest of drawers. There wasn't room for any more furniture. Several colourful paper mobiles hung from the ceiling and a toy garage complete with a dozen metal toy cars took up most of the available floor space. A small, unhappy looking boy lay in the bed.

'Watch where you put your feet,' said Mrs Harper. 'There are toy cars everywhere,' she explained. 'I keep falling over them.' She tried to smile but her eyes still looked worried.

'What's wrong with him?' I asked.

Mrs Harper looked at me hard. 'I was hoping you'd tell me that,' she said, rather sharply I thought. I winced and cursed myself. (I should have learnt from that but I never did. I asked the same question and got the same answer ten times a day, every day for years.)

I tried again. 'What symptoms does he have?'

'He's been under the weather since yesterday,' said Mrs Harper. 'I thought he was putting it on but he was due to go to a party last night and he didn't want to go so I knew he must be poorly.'

I sat on the edge of Keith's bed, picked up his wrist and took his pulse. He smiled at me rather nervously and I smiled back at him. I tried not to look nervous though I'm not sure that I succeeded. His pulse was a little fast and he looked pale and rather sweaty. I pulled back the bedclothes and asked him to unfasten his pyjama jacket. I was hoping to spot a rash but there was nothing abnormal to see.

'How's his appetite?' I asked his mother.

'He hasn't eaten much.'

'Has he been sick?'

'No.'

'Any diarrhoea?'

'I don't know. Have you had any diarrhoea, Keith?'

Keith clearly didn't know what we were talking about. Clumsily I tried to ask the same question in nursery language.

He went red and shook his head furiously.

I listened to his heart and lungs, checked his glands and looked into his throat and ears. I could find nothing at all wrong with him apart from the fact that he clearly didn't look very well.

'I don't know what it is,' I said at last.

'When will Dr Brownlow be back?' asked Mrs Harper.

It was my turn to go red. 'I'm not sure,' I said. 'I don't think there's anything much we can do today. I'll call in again tomorrow and have another look at him.'

'Aren't you going to give him anything?'

‘I can’t think of anything useful that I can give him,’ I confessed. ‘I don’t want to prescribe a drug until I know what’s wrong with him.’

Mrs Harper sighed rather loudly.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. I could feel my face burning. I put my stethoscope back into my bag, made my way back down the narrow staircase and left. I had intended to ask Mrs Harper to give me directions of how to find the next house I had to visit but I didn’t dare display any more ignorance. What little confidence I had when I’d entered the ‘White Larches’ had now entirely disappeared. Outside it was, inevitably, still raining heavily. I pulled my collar up and hurried back to the car.

* * *

CHAPTER THREE

I arrived back at Dr Brownlow's surgery at fifteen minutes to six and hurried in to find Miss Johnson sitting in her office filling in forms.

'Are there many people waiting?' I asked her, breathlessly.

'Twenty. And they're getting rather restless.'

'I'm sorry I'm late!' I apologised. 'I got a bit lost.'

'Lost? But you only had three visits.'

'I know. I'm sorry.' I hurried off to get myself settled down behind my desk. As I looked around the by now almost familiar surroundings I felt a strong spasm of confidence breaking through. After all I now knew where the buzzer was and I knew how to sign someone off on the sick and how to write out a prescription. I felt that I'd learnt a lot.

To my surprise the evening surgery went quite smoothly. When I finished, at twenty minutes past eight, Miss Johnson told me that Dr Brownlow wanted to have a few words with me before I left. I found him in his dining room. He was just finishing his dinner. A huge round of stilton cheese stood in the middle of the table and a bottle of 1948 Taylor's port stood beside it.

'How did it all go?' he asked me. 'Good first day?' He told Bradshaw, now dressed in his butler's uniform again, to bring another glass and an extra plate.

I told him that I felt as though I'd done a year's work in a day. 'How do you cope?' I asked him. 'How does any GP cope without going insane?'

Dr Brownlow just smiled. 'Did Miss Johnson look after you?'

'Very well!' I said. 'I couldn't have managed without her. Though I'm afraid I don't think I impressed her very much,' I added.

'Don't you believe it!' said Dr Brownlow. 'She thinks you're wonderful. She'll be telling you about her feet before you know where you are. When she tells you about her feet you'll know you've got it cracked.'

'I've got a thousand questions to ask you,' I told him. 'I don't know where to start.' Bradshaw had brought another glass and a plate. Dr Brownlow poured me a glass of port and dug out a spoonful of cheese. I'd never seen anyone serve stilton with a spoon before.

It tasted good. So did the port. It was like drinking velvet.

Suddenly I remembered Mrs Harper. I asked Dr Brownlow if she'd rung him.

He snorted and refilled his glass.

'I'm afraid she didn't seem very pleased with me,' I said. 'I couldn't diagnose what was wrong with her son. I think she'd like you to see him.'

'She said that you'd told her that you'd go back in to see him again tomorrow?'

I nodded.

'I told her that you're an expert in children's diseases,' said Dr Brownlow with a twinkle in his eye. 'And that if you couldn't make a diagnosis then I certainly wouldn't be able to.' He picked up a lump of stilton from his plate and popped it into his mouth. 'There are always people who'll try to play one doctor off against another,' he told me. 'But I'm not having any of that.'

I realised that Dr Brownlow was protecting me and I felt grateful.

'Do you ever see a patient and find it difficult to know what's wrong with them?' I asked him.

'At least fifty per cent of the time I never know what's wrong with people,' admitted Dr Brownlow. 'Any doctor who says he can always make a diagnosis is either a liar or a fool.'

'Thanks!' I said quietly. He'd made me feel a lot better. I caught sight of a grandfather clock on the far side of the room. 'I'd better get back to the Duck and Puddle,' I told him. 'I think Miss Johnson has already arranged for any emergency calls to be put through to me there.'

Dr Brownlow nodded. 'Ring me if you need me,' he said suddenly and unexpectedly. 'I won't ever interfere but I'll always help you if I can.'

I'd started to move away from the table but I stopped for an instant, looked at him and thanked him. Then I moved towards the door. I was nearly there when Dr Brownlow spoke again.

'I know I said I wouldn't interfere,' he said. 'But I've just remembered. I already have.'

I waited.

'Frank Porter,' said Dr Brownlow. 'You signed him off sick.' I remembered. He'd been my first patient. He'd had a bad back.

'He's my bloody gardener!' said Dr Brownlow. 'He's had a bad back since he was a kid. He's always trying that one when the weather's a bit miserable.'

‘Oh,’ I said, weakly.

‘He’ll be back at work tomorrow,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘I made him tear up that sick note you gave him. My rhododendrons need looking after.’

I left him pouring himself another glass of port. The strange thing was that although he was alone in a huge dining room he didn’t seem alone at all. He was one of the first people I’d ever met who seemed totally self contained.

* * *

CHAPTER FOUR

Mrs Parsons made me gammon, egg and chips for supper and served it in the deserted lounge bar. ‘The locals never drink in here,’ she confessed. ‘The beer is too expensive.’

After supper I had a bath and then retired, exhausted, to bed. My bedroom at the Duck and Puddle didn’t have a telephone but there was a telephone in the landlord’s bedroom and Mrs Parsons had agreed to answer it and to fetch me if there were any calls during the night. I seemed to have been asleep for no more than a minute when I felt someone shaking my shoulder. I turned and found myself staring into the beam of a powerful torch. I reached up, found the long light cord that dangled above my bed and pulled it. I rubbed my eyes as the light came on.

‘Sorry to have to wake you,’ whispered Mrs Parsons. ‘But there’s a call for you. It’s Mrs Francis.’ My landlady was wearing a long, pink, flannelette nightgown with a paisley patterned dressing gown on top of it. The dressing gown was tied tightly at the front but it only came down to her knees and two foot of nightdress hung down below it. She had three curlers in the front of her hair and the absence of make-up gave her a pale, ghostly look.

I flung back the bedclothes only to remember, too late, that, as usual, I hadn’t been wearing any pyjamas when I’d got into bed. I swiftly picked up a pillow and used it to preserve what was left of my professional dignity. It’s very difficult to be dignified in the nude.

‘I’ll wait for you outside on the landing,’ said Mrs Parsons quietly.

I quickly pulled on the same clothes that I’d been wearing the day before.

‘Ssshhhh!’ said Mrs Parsons, when I joined her on the landing a few moments later. She put a finger against her lips. ‘Frank is still asleep!’ she whispered. ‘He hates being woken up.’

I nodded and she led the way to their bedroom. I tiptoed behind her. Frank Parsons was fast asleep and snoring loudly. I picked up the telephone.

‘Hello?’ I whispered. ‘What can I do for you?’

‘Who’s that?’ asked the voice at the other end. ‘I’m trying to get hold of Dr Brownlow.’

I explained.

‘It’s my husband,’ said Mrs Francis. ‘I’m not happy with the look of him.’

‘Would you like me to come round?’

She said she would so I got her to give me instructions on how to get there, put the telephone down, thanked Mrs Parsons and then went back to my room to get my coat and my black bag.

Two minutes later I was in my car, wiping the mist off the inside of the windscreen. It was still raining. To my delight the car started immediately when I twisted the two pieces of wire underneath the dashboard together.

I left the Duck and Puddle with an impressive, rubber-wasting squeal. My adrenalin was flowing for this was my very first emergency visit as a general practitioner.

Mr and Mrs Francis lived in a large house on the outskirts of the village and Mrs Francis had given me precise instructions on how to find it but I had nevertheless asked her to turn some lights on in the hope that this would help me find the house more easily. In my innocence I’d hoped that I’d be able to home in on the lights like a moth fluttering towards a candle. Being new to general practice I wasn’t yet aware of the extraordinary fact that even in the country there are lights burning in numerous houses well after midnight.

Fortunately, the instructions I’d been given proved accurate and it took me no more than fifteen minutes to get to the Francis’s home which turned out to be an old rectory, built in the nineteenth century. The English countryside is littered with large Victorian rectories. Clergymen a century or so ago must have been very wealthy and must have had very large families. I parked outside the front door and rattled the door knocker.

‘Come in, doctor!’ whispered Mrs Francis. People always whisper late at night, even in their own homes. ‘Do you know,’ she said, ‘I thought that your wife sounded just like Gilly Parsons at the Duck and Puddle.’

‘I’m not married,’ I told her, following her up the stairs to the master bedroom. ‘That was Mrs Parsons.’

Mrs Francis stopped on the step above me and turned round. ‘You were at the Duck?’ she said. She obviously hadn’t realised that her call had been automatically transferred from Dr Brownlow’s number.

I admitted that I had, indeed, been in the pub when we’d first spoken.

‘It seemed to take quite a time for you to get to the telephone.’

‘Mrs Parsons had to wake me,’ I explained.

‘Oh!’ said Mrs Francis, who looked rather more startled than seemed entirely reasonable under the circumstances.

She carried on upstairs and I followed her into the bedroom. Her husband was lying flat on his back, coughing and wheezing. He looked miserable. I put my black bag down, sat down on the edge of the bed and felt for his pulse. I put my stethoscope down on the bed, took out my pocket torch, aimed it down his throat and asked Mr Francis to say: ‘Aaaaarrhhh.’ It didn’t take long to discover that Mr Francis was suffering from asthma. I was about to tell him this when he looked up at me, wheezed, and, with some difficulty, told me that he had asthma and that he had suffered from it for most of his life.

‘Right!’ I agreed. I rummaged around in my bag and found a glass phial of aminophylline.

‘Dr Brownlow usually gives me aminophylline,’ wheezed Mr Francis noisily.

‘Does that help?’ I asked him.

He nodded.

I took the aminophylline out of my bag, filled a syringe with the fluid and started to roll up his pyjama sleeve.

Mr Francis grasped my wrist and shook his head furiously. I looked at him, stopped and waited.

‘Dr Brownlow usually puts it into the other arm,’ wheezed Mr Francis.

I rolled up the other pyjama sleeve and injected the aminophylline. Mr Francis’s breathing started to improve almost immediately.

‘Where are you going now, doctor?’ asked Mrs Francis who’d been standing silently at the bottom of the bed.

‘Back to the Duck and Puddle,’ I said.

‘Oh!’ said Mrs Francis, surprised. She recovered quickly, however. ‘Give my love to Gilly. And tell her not to forget the jam making competition.’

I said I would.

On my way back to the pub the Humber broke down.

* * *

I was asleep when Mrs Parsons came into my room the following morning but I woke when she put a cup of tea down on the bedside table. She was still wearing her night clothes but the curlers had gone. ‘It’s half past seven,’ she announced, drawing back the curtains. ‘Dr Brownlow did say that I wasn’t to let you oversleep.’

It was still raining and a harsh wind was driving the rain hard against the bedroom window.

I yawned, stretched, rubbed my eyes and did all the other things I do when I’m woken up. My bed was warm and soft and I felt tired and very comfortable.

‘Were you late getting in last night?’

I nodded. ‘It was after four o’clock. I had to get the garage in Combe Martin to come out. Something to do with the rotor arm.’

‘How was Mr Francis?’

‘I think he was OK when I left,’ I replied. ‘Mrs Francis sent you her best wishes and told me to tell you not to forget about the jam making competition.’

‘Bless her!’ said Mrs Parsons. ‘She’s got a heart of gold.’ She paused and I could tell that the compliment was about to be qualified. ‘Though she does love to gossip.’ She stood at the end of the bed with her arms folded across her chest and smiled at me. ‘I expect the reason she told you to remind me about the jam making competition was because she wants to make sure I’m there so that she can quiz me about you.’

I must have looked alarmed.

‘Don’t worry!’ Mrs Parsons assured me. ‘I won’t tell her anything too incriminating. Besides you’re lucky. Everyone in the village is talking about Mike Trickle. He’s just moved into Bilbury Grange.’

‘Mike Trickle?’

‘The man off the television,’ explained Mrs Parsons. ‘You must have seen him.’

I hadn’t. Long hospital hours meant that for several years I hadn’t had much free time. The free time I’d had I’d spent sleeping rather than watching television.

Mrs Parsons seemed a little disappointed by my ignorance. ‘Well, he’s very famous anyway,’ she assured me. ‘He has his own chat show and comperes a quiz programme too.’

‘What’s he doing in Bilbury? It’s a long way from London.’

‘Oh, I don’t expect he’s going to live here all the time,’ said Mrs Parsons. ‘It’ll be just a holiday home for weekends and such like.’ She glanced at the small clock on my bedside table. ‘Come on!’ she said suddenly. ‘There isn’t time for chatting. You’ve got to get up and off to the surgery. And I’ve got to get down and see how the new girl is doing.’

‘New girl?’

‘Patsy,’ explained Mrs Parsons. ‘She’s one of the girls from the Kennett farm. She should have your bacon under the grill by now.’

Mrs Parsons was right. As I hurriedly shaved and then dressed the smell of bacon cooking wafted upstairs and helped give me the strength to keep going. I felt exhausted not just because I hadn’t had much sleep but because of the endless series of problems I’d encountered. When I’d taken the job I had, I confess, rather thought that life as a country GP would be something of a leisurely business. I’d seen myself pottering about the countryside in an open topped Bentley, stopping here to pick up a brace of pheasant, there to accept a gift of a freshly caught trout. I hadn’t realised that it would be such hard work. I couldn’t help wondering if it was ever going to get any easier.

Still, not everything was bad and life at the Duck and Puddle did have its compensations. Breakfast was one of them. It was so good that I was almost late again. As I started my third cup of coffee I glanced at my watch and discovered that it was twenty to nine. I put down the cup, ran upstairs to collect my coat and bag and left the pub on the run.

'Good morning, doctor!' said Miss Johnson with a wry smile as I raced past her office. I looked in as I went past and saw with some relief that the clock on her desk said just two minutes to nine. 'Mrs Harper's been on the phone already,' said Miss Johnson following me into the surgery. 'She wants to make sure that you haven't forgotten that you said you'd go back and see her son again.'

'I haven't forgotten!' I promised. 'How many patients are there in the waiting room?'

'There were a dozen there at half past eight,' said Miss Johnson. 'I haven't counted since then.' She sighed. 'I sometimes wonder where all these ill people come from. Living in the country is supposed to be healthy but I think that's a myth.' She shuffled a pile of forms that she was holding. 'Have you heard that Mike Trickle has bought a house in the village?'

When I said I had she looked a little disappointed.

* * *

My first patient that day was a woman in her mid-twenties. She had shoulder length light brown hair, lightly freckled cheeks and astonishingly blue eyes. She took off her raincoat and draped it over the back of the chair before she sat down. She wore a pink cardigan with buttons all the way down the front and a loose red velvet skirt. She leant across the desk and handed me her medical records envelope.

'Miss Thwaites?' I said, taking the notes from her and reading the name printed across the top.

She nodded. 'Anne.'

'What's the problem?'

'I want to lose some weight.' She looked down. 'I've put an awful lot of weight on in the last few months. It's really depressing.'

'Have you changed your diet at all?' She shook her head.

'Exercise habits haven't changed?'

'No.'

'Have you tried dieting?'

'I tried a diet I found in a woman's magazine,' she told me. 'The grape and banana diet.'

'Did it work?'

She shook her head. 'I hate grapes and bananas give me indigestion so I hardly ate anything and got very hungry the first day.'

'Do you know how much you weigh?'

'According to the scales in the chemists I'm nearly eleven stones,' she said, and blushed. 'That's terrible isn't it?'

'How tall are you?'

'Five foot five. I was less than ten stones this time last year and I thought that was bad enough.'

'You haven't noticed anything else?' She looked puzzled. 'Like what?'

'Any other symptoms?' I wanted to make sure that there was no strange hormonal explanation for her increase in weight.

Miss Thwaites shook her head. 'Oh, no! I feel fine. In fact I don't think I've ever felt so healthy.'

'Right!' I said, with far more confidence than I felt.

No one had ever taught me anything about dieting. I had studied at medical school for six years but no one had ever so much as told me how many calories there are in a slice of bread. 'Just a moment,' I said. 'I'll see if we've got some diet sheets.' I rushed out to Miss Johnson's office.

'Diet sheets?' she said. 'Yes. I think there are some around here somewhere. Dr Brownlow usually just tells them to eat less but I think one of the drug company representatives did leave a pile of diet sheets a couple of years ago.' She rummaged around in a drawer that was packed with leaflets, booklets and drug samples. 'Here you are!' she said gleefully. She held up half a dozen crumpled diet sheets. 'How many do you want?'

I took two so that I'd have one spare.

'Does Dr Brownlow have any weighing scales?' I asked Miss Johnson, before I left.

'Oh yes!' she said.

'Do you know where they are?'

'Frank's got them for his vegetables.'

I must have looked puzzled.

'Frank the gardener,' explained Miss Johnson. 'He uses the scales to weigh the best produce.'

I took the diet sheet back to Miss Thwaites and suggested that she weigh herself again next time she was in Barnstaple.

'Come back and let me know how it goes,' I said.

* * *

The rest of the morning went fairly smoothly and at the end of it I congratulated myself. Maybe being a family doctor wasn't going to be all that difficult after all. I looked at my watch. It was only twelve o'clock. Shall we have a cup of coffee?' I asked Miss Johnson.

'Certainly!' she said, rather kindly. 'And I'll bring you a biscuit,' she promised.

While she was away getting the biscuits I busied myself reading some of the morning's mail. I was interrupted by a visitor. It was Mrs Wilson, the district nurse with whom I'd shared the taxi ride from Barnstaple station. She was wearing the same blue coat and she had the same small, blue hat perched on the back of her head.

'How are you settling down?' she asked me, sitting down.

'Quite a week for our village!' she said, before I could answer.

'Two of you coming in one week.'

'Two of us?'

'You and Mike Trickle,' explained the district nurse. 'Don't tell me that you hadn't heard?'

'Oh yes,' I said weakly. 'He's off the television isn't he?'

'Off the television!' said Mrs Wilson. 'He *is* the television in our house. My Len thinks he's wonderful.'

'Len?'

'My husband,' explained Mrs Wilson. 'He's a policeman.'

'That's handy,' I said. I meant nothing by the comment but it seemed to touch a raw nerve as far as Mrs Wilson was concerned.

'Handy!' she said. 'He does the washing up and the ironing but he couldn't put a shelf up if his life depended on it.'

'Still,' I said, 'it's nice that he does the washing and the ironing.'

'Only because he likes to wear my pinny,' said Mrs Wilson. I thought she was being cryptic or humorous. I was to discover that she was merely being incautious.

Just then Miss Johnson reappeared with a small wooden tray upon which sat a cup of white, milky coffee and a plate full of biscuits.

I thanked her. I did wonder whether I ought to offer Mrs Wilson a cup of tea but Miss Johnson had gone before I had time to say anything.

'Would you like a biscuit, Mrs Wilson?' I said, offering her the plate.

She took two. 'Less of the Mrs Wilson,' she said. 'It's Kay to you.' She winked at me. 'Especially after our ride in Pete Marshall's taxi.'

I studied the skin that was forming on the coffee that Miss Johnson had brought in. I wondered what on earth I was going to do with it. I certainly couldn't drink it.

'Don't you like it milky?' asked Mrs Wilson.

'Not really,' I admitted. 'How did you know?'

Mrs Wilson laughed. 'The look on your face!' she said. 'You'll have to become a better poker player if you're going to survive in general practice.' She reached across and took the cup of coffee off the tray and put it down on the desk in front of her. 'Do you want any of those garibaldis?'

'Garibaldis?'

'The biscuits with the dead flies in them.'

I looked down. 'Help yourself.'

'So,' she said, as she munched away at one of the biscuits, 'you've struck out with Mrs Harper already?'

I blushed. 'Oh. You heard?'

'Don't worry,' she said. 'There isn't much that goes on around here that I don't get to hear about.' She took a sip from the coffee. 'Still, don't worry yourself too much.'

'She and her husband are divorced I believe,' I said, feeling that I ought to contribute something to the conversation.

'Separated,' Mrs Wilson corrected me. 'She couldn't stand his carrying on.' She lifted the skin off the coffee and draped it over the edge of the saucer. 'He was never very subtle,' she said. 'He had affairs with the last two barmaids at the Duck and Puddle.' She sniffed and took the last biscuit. 'Still,' she said, 'they were no better than they looked.'

'Talking of Mrs Harper, I suppose I ought to get on and do my visits,' I said. 'I promised her that I'd call in again this morning.'

'When are you going to come and see us then?' she asked, her mouth full of biscuit.

'That's very kind of you,' I said. 'But...'

'They can put your calls through to us if old Brownlow has got you doing all his emergency work,' said Mrs Wilson.

'What are you doing tonight?'

'I don't think...'

'Good!' said Mrs Wilson. 'Don't forget to tell Gilly at the Duck and Puddle that you're having dinner with me. I’ll make us something special.’ She drained the rest of the coffee, took a small piece of skin from her tongue, smiled at me, winked and left.

* * *

Keith Harper was worse. He now had really bad diarrhoea and his mother still wasn’t happy.

‘I asked Dr Brownlow to come and see him.’ she told me as I examined Keith’s chest again. He was pale, his heart was beating rapidly and his eyes had a glassy look. I nodded.

‘He said you’re in charge,’ said Mrs Harper.

‘I’ll do the best I can,’ I promised. My store of confidence was draining away again. I gave up trying to find something wrong with Keith’s chest and rummaged around in my black bag. ‘I’d like to test your urine,’ I told Keith. ‘Do you think you could get to the toilet?’

It wasn’t easy but he managed it. I’d done the test in despair more than hope. I hadn’t expected to find anything. But the test showed that Keith’s urine was loaded with sugar.

‘Are there any cases of diabetes in the family?’ I asked Mrs Harper.

She thought for a moment and then shook her head. ‘Not that I can think of.’ She looked startled. ‘Is that what it is? Is Keith a diabetic?’

‘No!’ I said. ‘Not necessarily. But he does have some sugar in his urine.’

‘A lot?’

‘Quite a lot,’ I confessed. ‘I’d like to get him into hospital for some tests.’

‘Shall I go and call an ambulance?’ demanded Mrs Harper, beginning to panic. ‘What shall I pack for him? Will they let me stay with him? What will I do about the cats?’ The questions poured out.

‘Have you got a telephone?’ I asked her.

She shook her head. ‘There’s a public call box in Combe Martin.’

I thought quickly. ‘I’ll go back to the surgery,’ I said. ‘I need to ring the hospital first to arrange for Keith to be admitted. It’ll only take me a few minutes. You get a small case ready for Keith – pyjamas, soap bag, that sort of thing – and an ambulance will be here to pick him up. It won’t be here for half an hour so you’ve got plenty of time.’

‘Is he going to be all right?’ There were tears in Mrs Harper’s eyes.

‘Yes.’ I told her, with far more certainty than I felt. I drove back to the surgery as fast as I dared. The poor old Humber was developing more strange new rattles with every mile it travelled.

* * *

As a young, very junior hospital doctor I had answered calls from general practitioners many times and, like all young, inexperienced hospital doctors, I’d treated such telephone calls with some disdain.

Most hospitals are short of beds and junior doctors who do the admitting are expected to be selective. Senior consultants don’t like their beds to be blocked by elderly, infirm or chronically ill patients. They prefer interesting, dramatic patients. Besides, hospital doctors – even the youngest and most inexperienced – tend to look down on general practitioners. Doctors who work in hospital regard themselves as being on the frontiers of medicine. They regard general practitioners as old-fashioned, generally incompetent and troublesome. This contempt is enhanced by a certain amount of envy because most general practitioners earn more money than most hospital doctors.

This was the first time I’d been the initiator of a call designed to send a patient into hospital.

The doctor who answered the phone at the other end sounded about eleven-years-old.

I gave my name and explained that I wanted him to admit a patient.

‘How old is he?’

I told him.

‘What’s the diagnosis?’

Here I was not on such solid ground. ‘I’m not sure,’ I confessed. ‘But provisionally it’s diabetes.’

‘On what grounds?’

‘His urine is loaded with sugar.’

‘You’ve done a urine test?’ asked the eleven-year-old, apparently surprised at such a display of technical excellence.

I said I had.

‘Why can’t he attend the out-patient clinic?’

‘I think he needs to be admitted now,’ I said. Suddenly, I noticed that Dr Brownlow was standing just inside the door, grinning. He’d obviously been listening to my conversation. ‘Having trouble getting a patient admitted?’ he whispered. I nodded and put my hand over the mouthpiece of the telephone. ‘Keith Harper,’ I said. ‘I think he might have diabetes.’

‘Ask him if he’s prepared to take the responsibility if the boy doesn’t get admitted and dies,’ said Dr Brownlow, nodding towards the telephone receiver.

I lifted my hand from the mouthpiece. ‘Look,’ I said, as firmly as I could, ‘I’ve got a boy who’s ill. I think he needs to be in hospital. Are you prepared to take on the responsibility for refusing to accept him as a patient?’

There was a silence. ‘Send him in,’ sighed the junior hospital doctor, outflanked and outmanoeuvred by my employer.

‘What’s his name?’

I gave him the details and then rang the ambulance service and arranged for them to pick Keith up as soon as possible.

‘That was incredible!’ I said to Dr Brownlow, when I’d finished.

‘Responsibility is the magic word,’ explained Dr Brownlow.

‘It’s the only thing a GP has in abundance. Legally and morally we’re responsible for our patients for twenty four hours a day and for three hundred and sixty five days a year. The buck truly stops here.’ Dr Brownlow sat down on the edge of the desk. ‘The trouble with our society is that responsibility and authority have become separated,’ he went on, warming to his theme. ‘The people with the authority to do things no longer have any responsibility for what they do whereas the people like us who have the responsibility no longer have any real authority.’ He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. ‘Most of the people who have the power to make our lives difficult – social workers, policemen and so on – spend their lives trying to avoid any responsibility. When they do get any they do their level best to pass it on to the next person. For them it’s like a huge game of pass the parcel. No one wants to be stuck with the responsibility when the music stops. We’re stuck with so much responsibility that we can’t ever get rid of all of ours.’

I nodded. It all made sense.

‘So, when you can’t get someone to do something just tell them that you’re passing some of your responsibility onto them,’ said Dr Brownlow. He leant forward. ‘The ultimate weapon,’ he confided, ‘is to tell them that if the patient dies you’ll put them down as one of the contributing factors when you write out the death certificate.’

‘Can you do that?’

‘Of course!’

‘And it works?’ ‘Works?’ laughed Dr Brownlow. ‘I can get any hospital administrator eating out of my hands with that trick.’

I was still admiring Dr Brownlow’s manipulative skills when Miss Johnson knocked on the open consulting room door.

She looked worried.

‘What’s up, Doreen?’ asked Dr Brownlow. It was the first time I’d heard her first name used and it seemed strange. I hadn’t even thought about her having a first name.

‘There’s been a phone call from Anne Thwaites,’ said Miss Johnson. ‘She says she’s been getting bad tummy pains and would someone go and see her as soon as possible.’

‘Thwaites?’ I said. ‘Wasn’t she in the surgery this morning?’

‘That’s right,’ said Miss Johnson. ‘I think you gave her a diet sheet.’ She sounded disapproving.

Dr Brownlow looked at me, smiled and then looked at Miss Johnson. ‘What’s up, Doreen?’

‘Well, it’s not my place to say,’ replied the receptionist.

‘But I thought she looked pregnant.’

‘Pregnant?’ I said, sounding as astonished as I felt. I’d never even thought of the possibility of her being pregnant.

Dr Brownlow reached out and put a hand on my shoulder. At least he had the decency not to laugh at me. ‘You’d better go and have a look at her.’

* * *

To my astonishment it had stopped raining. The sun wasn’t exactly shining and the sky was still predominantly grey but it definitely wasn’t raining. I began to realise just how attractive the countryside in North Devon must be in the sunshine. The beech and hawthorn hedges were thick with blackberries hanging off laden brambles and the swallows were already massing together on the telephone wires. I couldn’t help wondering what they used before the telephone was invented.

Anne Thwaites lived in a tiny cottage on the edge of Exmoor. It could only be approached along a narrow, muddy track. The last few days’ rain had left huge puddles on the track and the huge, heavy Humber skidded and slid along sideways as it struggled to get some traction on the mud. Several times I thought I was stuck but each time I managed to keep the wheels moving by slipping the car into second gear and lowering the speed.

The cottage itself was surrounded by ramshackle sheds in which various rusting pieces of farm machinery were stored. Most of the sheds had originally had slate roofs but the slates had long since been replaced with pieces of corrugated iron, most of which had gone rusty. A lone oak tree stood just behind the cottage; its trunk and branches shaped by the wind. Half a dozen rhododendron bushes sheltered a small vegetable patch but the wind had pushed the bushes over until they stood at an angle of forty five degrees to the ground. On the windward side their leaves were burnt brown.

As I drove carefully into the courtyard I could tell by the bumps that it had at some time in the distant past been covered with cobble stones. Today, however, the cobbles were covered with a thick layer of mud and water. I looked for the highest piece of ground I could find so that I could get out of the car without sinking up to my ankles in mud. I realised that I would have to buy some wellington boots for the winter months, and keep them in the car.

Within minutes of my appearance three dogs appeared; two of them were Welsh collies and the third was an Alsation. All three dogs were filthy and they barked furiously, paying most of their attention to the side of the car on which I was sitting. I didn't stop the engine straight away but sat for a moment looking at the dogs and trying to pluck up courage to get out of the car. The two collies didn't look too frightening but the Alsation bared its teeth and growled rather than simply making a lot of noise and I got the impression that it meant business. The collies looked as if they just wanted to frighten me off; the Alsation looked as if it wanted to eat me.

Looking around in desperation I noticed that at the front of the cottage there was a large porch, built to provide some protection from the wind, rain and snow. I put the Humber back into gear and manoeuvred it as close to the porch as I could. Then I stopped the car, opened my door into the porch and stepped into a small, secure area. Ahead of me was the front door. On each side of me I was protected by the stone walls of the porch. And the entrance to the porch was blocked off by my car which protected my rear. As the three dogs howled and barked in protest I hammered on the front door with my fist.

No one answered but behind me the Alsation was trying to climb up over the Humber's front bumper. I decided not to wait to see if he made it but to go straight into the cottage. I opened the front door, let myself in and then closed the door firmly behind me. 'Hello?' I called. 'Anyone in? Miss Thwaites?' I was standing in a tiny hallway. On my left and on my right there were two solid pine doors, both shut. Straight ahead of me there was a narrow staircase. I stood still and listened carefully and then I heard a woman's voice. It sounded very weak. 'Is that you, doctor?' The voice came from the room on the left.

I opened the door and stepped into a tiny living room. A roaring log fire crackled in the fireplace and the room looked very neat and cosy. Miss Thwaites was sitting in an armchair. The chair had virtually no springs left and her bottom seemed to be no more than an inch or so off the floor. The room was boiling hot.

I said 'hello' and smiled at her.

'I'm sorry to have to call you out, doctor,' apologised Miss Thwaites. She grimaced and rubbed her hands on her tummy. 'But I keep getting these terrible pains.'

'When did they start?'

'Soon after I left the surgery. I caught the Lynton bus and got off at Darracott Farm. The pains came on while I was walking up the lane.'

She still had her shoes on and they and her legs were spattered in mud. I knelt down beside her chair and took hold of her hand. Her pulse was fast but quite strong. I felt her tummy and with some shame realised that Miss Johnson was absolutely right. Miss Thwaites was very, very pregnant.

'Are the pains getting worse?'

She nodded.

'And closer together?'

Another nod.

I opened my bag, took out a foetal stethoscope, pushed up her skirt and leant down so that I could listen to her abdomen. I could hear the baby's heart beating.

'What is it, doctor?'

'You remember that diet sheet I gave you?'

'Yes.'

'Well rip it up. You're not going to need it.'

She frowned. 'I don't understand.'

'You're about to lose all your excess weight very quickly.' She clearly still didn't understand.

'You're going to have a baby!' I told her bluntly. 'We've got to get you into hospital.'

'A baby!' She smiled. 'Oh, that's lovely!'

It wasn't quite what I'd expected her to say but at least she hadn't gone into hysterics and the fact that she wasn't married didn't seem to strike her as the slightest bit relevant. Just then she had another contraction. The contractions were coming thick and fast and I had to make a very rapid decision.

Should I telephone for – and then wait for – an ambulance or should I bundle her into my car and drive her to the hospital myself? I decided that it would take an ambulance at least half an hour to reach us and that we didn't have half an hour to wait. The car seemed the only sensible solution.

I told her what I was planning to do then rushed out to the porch to move the car forwards a couple of feet so that I could open the back door and get Miss Thwaites into it. Surprisingly, the dogs had given up and were standing on the other side of the courtyard looking miserable. Even the Alsation had stopped barking. When I went back into the house Miss Thwaites was on the telephone.

'I'm trying to reach my husband,' she whispered, putting her hand over the phone.

'I didn't know you were married!' I replied, thoughtlessly.

‘Well, I suppose we’re not really,’ she blushed. ‘Not in so many words.’ I heard someone answer at the other end. ‘Could you get Thumper, please?’ she asked. She put her hand over the mouthpiece again. ‘That’s my husband,’ she explained. ‘We live together so it’s all right to call him my husband, isn’t it?’

‘Yes!’ I said, emphatically. ‘I’m sure it is. Of course it is. That’s not Thumper Robinson is it?’

She nodded. ‘Do you know him?’ She seemed pleased. Before I could answer Miss Thwaites turned her attention back to the telephone. ‘Is that you Thumper?’

I could hear the voice at the other end of the phone confirming his identity.

‘It’s me,’ said Miss Thwaites. ‘I’m going to have a baby.’

Thumper said something and Miss Thwaites blushed and giggled. Then she grimaced and held her tummy as she had another contraction. She held the phone out to me. ‘Would you have a word with him?’

‘We must hurry up,’ I whispered to her, taking the telephone. ‘Hello?’ I said. ‘Is that you, Thumper?’

A voice I recognised said it was.

I told him who I was. ‘I’m going to take your wife into the hospital. Can you meet us there?’

‘Well, it’s a bit difficult at the moment,’ he said.

‘Why’s that?’

‘I’ve just set the balls up.’

‘Balls?’

‘Snooker,’ explained Thumper. ‘My mate’s put his money in now.’

‘Well, when you’ve finished that game,’ I said, getting rather exasperated.

‘We’ve agreed to play a best of seven frames match,’ said Thumper. I heard him call to someone else in the pub. ‘Dick!’ he called. ‘My floozy’s having a baby. Can we make it the best of five?’ There was a pause then he came back to me. ‘We’ve cut it down to the best of five,’ he said. ‘I’ll see you at the hospital later.’

‘That’s very good of you,’ I said, trying to be sarcastic.

‘Not at all,’ said Thumper who clearly didn’t appreciate the finer aspects of sarcasm. ‘A man’s got to take his responsibilities seriously.’ There was another pause as something obviously occurred to him. ‘You’re not driving Anne to the hospital in that Humber are you?’

I said I was.

‘Well you look after her!’ said Thumper. Then he said something else I didn’t catch and put the telephone down.

‘Come on!’ I said to Miss Thwaites. ‘Let’s go!’ I started towards the door.

‘The fireguard!’ she said. ‘Thumper goes mad at me if I go out without putting the fireguard up.’

I moved back and put the fireguard into position.

‘Should we feed the goldfish?’ she asked.

‘I think the goldfish will be all right for a few hours,’ I said.

‘Shouldn’t I pack some things?’

‘We’ll get Thumper to bring you some stuff in.’

‘But he’s playing skittles tonight!’ protested Miss Thwaites. I took her elbow and ushered her out to the car.

* * *

We got away from the cottage safely and successfully negotiated the muddy track without getting stuck. Our problems arose on the narrow lane which should have taken us straight on to the main road into Barnstaple.

Most of the lanes which traverse North Devon are single track. When they were created, a hundred years ago or more, farmers driving their carts to town were unlikely to meet much traffic coming from the opposite direction. These days when two vehicles do meet heap on there is usually a passing space or a convenient gate no more than a hundred yards away. Local traffic isn’t usually in too much of a hurry.

I was in a hurry. I’d delivered babies, of course. Every medical student has to take responsibility for at least ten pregnant women. But there is a vast difference between helping a woman deliver her baby in a sterile, purpose built suite which is packed with the very latest stainless steel equipment and staffed by experienced and skilled midwives, and delivering a baby in the back seat of a fifteen year old Humber.

When I saw the flock of sheep advancing slowly towards us along the lane my heart very nearly stopped. Desperately, I put the car into reverse and turned my head so that I could see where we were going. But we weren’t going anywhere. The Gods must have felt in a mischievous mood that morning for behind us there was a herd of cattle, advancing down the lane at a quarter of a mile an hour.

I’d been close to panic before. But not this close. A teacher of mine once told me that in times of absolute disaster you should try to think of how things could get worse. ‘It’ll help put things in perspective,’ he said. ‘Things are rarely as bad as they seem. Try to imagine the worst possible scenario and you’ll find that life isn’t so bad after all.’

I’d found a flaw in his theory. I’d reached the point where things can’t get any worse. And what do you do then?

The groans from Anne Thwaites in the back of the car convinced me that there was no point in trying to carry on.

We weren’t going to get to Barnstaple before the baby was born. The baby was going to be born here. I disconnected the wires under the dashboard and the engine stuttered to a halt. I got out of the car, opened the back door and looked in.

‘How are you feeling?’

Miss Thwaites answered with a groan. I tried to squeeze into the back of the car to examine her tummy but there just wasn’t room.

‘What’s up?’ I heard someone behind me ask. I backed out of the car and turned round. The man who’d been walking with the cows was standing behind me, peering over my shoulder. ‘She all right?’

‘She’s having a baby,’ I told him. ‘We were trying to get to the hospital but...’ I shrugged.

Behind the sheep the driver of the tractor had stopped and was climbing down onto the road. It was a girl. She too came over to talk to us.

‘Hello Anne!’ she said. It was an impressive piece of identification since all you could see of Anne were her legs and her knickers.

Miss Thwaites groaned.

‘I think we’ll have to get her out of the car,’ I said. ‘It’s a bit too cramped in there.’

‘Take her into the field,’ suggested the man who’d come with the cows. Every time he spoke his false teeth popped out and he had to pull them back into his mouth with his tongue. He nodded towards a nearby gate. One of his cows nuzzled me gently from behind. ‘Who are you then?’ asked the girl who’d got off the tractor. ‘Where’s Thumper?’

‘I’m the doctor,’ I said. ‘Thumper is playing snooker.’

Neither of them seemed at all surprised by this.

‘I’ll take the seats out,’ said the man with the mischievous dentures. He reached into the front of the car and pulled at the driver’s seat. The bottom part of the seat came away in his hands.

‘At least the weather’s fine,’ said the girl, looking at the sky. And I realised then that it could be worse. It could be raining. ‘I’ll get the seat from the other side,’ she said, clearly keen to do something to help.

Miss Thwaites, almost forgotten in the midst of all this energetic activity, groaned again. I reached into the car and pulled her gently towards me. ‘Don’t worry!’ I said. ‘Everything’s going to be all right.’

She looked up at me. Her face was pale and sweaty and her hair was plastered to her scalp. ‘I’m glad you’re with me,’ she said. ‘I feel safe with you.’

I silently wished that I had her confidence and I carried her down the lane to the gate over which the girl and the cowman had thrown my car seats. I had to tiptoe through the mixture of sheep and cows in order to get there. I wasn’t surprised at the smell but the noise did surprise me; I could hardly hear myself think for the baaing and the mooing.

‘I’ll get some hot water,’ said the cowman as I laid Miss Thwaites down on the impromptu couch. I bent down beside her and was goosed by a short but stout thistle.

‘Is she going to be all right?’ he asked in what he probably thought was a whisper. Even above the noise of the cattle and the sheep I could have heard him if I’d been standing a hundred yards away.

‘Of course!’ I said, emphatically. ‘Women have been giving birth for centuries. It’s perfectly natural.’

‘Won’t you need scissors and things?’ Miss Thwaites asked. ‘Something to cut the cord?’

‘There’s some in my black bag.’ I said. I ran back to the car to get them. As I did so I passed the girl from the tractor who seemed to be picking flowers out of the hedgerow. It seemed an odd thing to be doing. The Humber was full of sheep who seemed to be trying a variation on the old ‘how many students can you get into a telephone box’ routine.

As I left the car I noticed that the cowman’s legs were sticking out from underneath the front end. I hesitated for a moment, thought about stopping to see what he was doing, and then hurried back to my patient.

‘It’s coming!’ Miss Thwaites shouted as I approached. Then she cried out in sudden pain. I sprinted towards her and then threw my bag down onto the grass as I knelt beside her. I took out my foetal stethoscope and listened to the baby’s heart. It seemed to be fine. I picked up Miss Thwaites’ wrist and felt for her pulse. That felt fine too. I turned to get a pair of rubber gloves out of my bag and noticed that in my haste I’d left the gate open. Half a dozen cows and several sheep were already in the field, advancing steadily towards us. Just then it started to rain. It wasn’t heavy but it was rain.

I pulled on my rubber gloves and bent over Miss Thwaites. ‘Push!’ I told her. I hadn’t even examined her internally but there didn’t seem much point at this stage and even though I was wearing rubber gloves I wasn’t keen on introducing any unnecessary infections into the area.

Miss Thwaites pushed herself up onto one elbow and tried to say something. I couldn’t hear for the noise the sheep and the cattle were making so I bent my head and asked her to repeat it.

‘I’ve still got my knickers on,’ she told me. ‘Don’t they need to come off?’

‘I think that would help,’ I agreed, struggling to repress images of a baby bouncing up and down for eternity on its own private nylon trampoline. I helped her remove her knickers and took advantage of the opportunity to see what was happening down there. I could just see the baby’s head.

‘Push!’ I shouted. ‘It’s coming! Push!’ I put one arm around her shoulders and used the other to help keep her knees up and well apart.

The rain was pouring down now and the grass upon which I was kneeling was becoming soggier by the second. Just then the cowman reappeared holding a large plastic container that had at some stage contained fertilizer. Steam was coming from the open top.

‘Hot water!’ he said, proudly. His teeth nearly escaped from his mouth this time and he cursed vividly. ‘I’m sorry about the teeth,’ he apologised. ‘These aren’t mine. I borrowed them from my mother.’ He took the teeth out and grinned at me edentulously. ‘Mine broke,’ he explained. He stuffed the borrowed dentures into his jacket pocket.

‘Where did you get the hot water from?’ I asked him, nodding towards the steaming hot fertilizer container.

‘Your radiator,’ he said proudly. He didn’t bother to explain where he’d found the container. He beamed at me. ‘Hot water,’ he explained. ‘You need hot water for babies don’t you?’ He put the container full of hot water down beside me and then pulled a huge clasp knife from the same pocket into which the teeth had disappeared. ‘Knife for cutting the cord,’ he said.

Miss Thwaites screamed and grasped hold of my wrist with her hand. ‘It’s coming!’ she shouted. ‘I can feel it coming.’ I peeped. She was right. The baby’s head was very nearly out. It seemed a much easier birth than any of the ones I’d attended in hospital, where the mothers had invariably been surrounded by huge amounts of expensive, sophisticated equipment. Just then the shepherdess reappeared clutching a bouquet of flowers. It seemed a nice touch. She knelt down beside Miss Thwaites. ‘Chew on these,’ she said. ‘They’ll help with the pain.’ I stared at her, stared at the flowers and then looked at Miss Thwaites who now had her mouth wide open though no sound was coming from it. I peeped down in between her legs and could see that the baby’s head was entirely visible.

‘Keep pushing!’ I shouted uselessly. Behind me I could feel something warm and solid pressing against my back. I turned my head and saw that a sheep had come up to see what was going on. I tried to shoo it away but it wouldn’t go.

Attracted by the noise and the activity a large black and white cow wandered over. It urinated loudly and healthily, showing a remarkable bladder capacity, and then I jumped a yard into the air as I felt its rough tongue licking the side of my head.

‘I can see the baby,’ said the shepherdess, still clutching her bunch of wild flowers. Her hands looked red and swollen and I noticed with horror that the bunch included quite a few nettles. ‘It’s a boy,’ she said.

The baby delivered itself. All I had to do was cut the cord and help deliver the placenta. I tied the cord with a length of red twine that the cowman pulled out of his pocket.

‘Can I go home now?’ asked Miss Thwaites, when it was all over. It was still raining and we were all absolutely soaked but none of us minded. The new mother looked absolutely radiant.

‘I think you ought to go along to the hospital,’ I said. ‘Just for a check-up.’

‘I feel fine,’ Miss Thwaites insisted. She pouted. ‘I don’t want to go into hospital.’

‘The baby needs a check-up,’ I said firmly. I picked Miss Thwaites up and carried her back towards the car. She was carrying her baby and the cowman was carrying my black bag.

The Humber looked and smelt disgusting. Two sheep were lying down in the back and the car reeked of them. The front seats were still in the field. The shepherdess got her sheep out of the car and wiped up most of the mess with her bare hands. The cowman went back for the seats.

It took ten minutes for the two of them to clear the road of animals sufficiently for me to drive past and continue on towards Barnstaple but I had forgotten that the cowman had removed the contents of my radiator and despite the rain the Humber overheated and came to an ignominious halt just outside Shirwell, five miles from Barnstaple. We telephoned Mr Marshall, the Bilbury taxi driver and he took us the rest of the way.

As we drove up to the hospital entrance Miss Thwaites turned to me and whispered something. I didn’t catch what she said and had to ask her to repeat it.

‘I’ve just remembered,’ she said, giggling. ‘I left my knickers in that field.’ She giggled again. ‘Still,’ she added, ‘It isn’t the first time I’ve left my knickers in a field.’

I blushed heavily and helped her out of the taxi.

‘Don’t worry about the bill, doctor,’ said Mr Marshall.

‘I’ll put it on your account.’ He smiled. ‘I’ll wait for you,’ he promised

* * *

Thumper was waiting for us and he grinned broadly when he saw Miss Thwaites and his new son.

‘What a day!’ he said. ‘First I win £2 at snooker and now I’m a dad!’

I left them hugging one another and Mr Marshall drove me back to Bilbury.

‘Isn’t that your car?’ asked Mr Marshall, as we passed my sad looking Humber. Steam was still coming from the bonnet.

‘Yes,’ I said miserably. It hadn’t been a good investment. I wondered if it was worth bothering to get a garage to go out and collect it.

‘Back to the Duck and Puddle?’

‘Yes, please.’ I was soaked and my trousers were covered in mud. I smelt of cows and sheep. I wanted a bath and needed to change my clothes.

By the time I got back to the pub it was 4.30pm and all I had time for was a quick wash before slipping on some fresh clothes. Then it was time to take Mr Marshall’s taxi to Dr Brownlow’s for the evening surgery. I was physically exhausted, mentally drained and financially broke. I was so tired that when my first patient came into the surgery that evening I very nearly succumbed to the temptation to give him a bottle of cough medicine and to send him on his way unexamined.

* * *

Hubert Donaldson looked just like the classic English tramp is supposed to look. His navy blue raincoat was tied around the waist with a piece of parcel string and his straggly, greasy hair was long and out of control. He had a well-developed beard that looked as though it probably had a fair amount of wildlife living in it and a pair of shoes that looked as if they were designed to keep his feet cool in summer and wet in winter. He complained of a cough and a bit of pain in his chest. I told him to sit down and asked him a few questions about his medical history. He told me that he was in his late fifties, that he usually slept out of doors and that he had been perfectly fit and healthy for most of his life. He admitted that he smoked twenty or thirty cigarette stubs a day but insisted that most of the cigarette ends he picked up were tipped.

The smell from the other side of the desk was not encouraging and I had no real desire to explore beneath the raincoat but I felt duty bound to do so.

‘What?’ demanded Hubert. ‘You want me to undress?’

‘That’s right,’ I said.

‘I haven’t taken my clothes off for years,’ he insisted. ‘I can’t even remember what I’ve got on.’

‘Well, if you want me to try to get rid of that cough you’ll have to let me examine you.’

Beneath the raincoat were several thick wads of newspaper. As Hubert carefully laid these down on the floor I glanced at the dates and saw that most of them were eighteen months old. After the newspapers there came a couple of sweaters (full of holes) a few more newspapers and then, finally, a grey woollen shirt came into view. That concealed nothing more than an ageing yellow vest.

‘Can I keep my trousers on?’ asked Hubert, now beginning to shiver, despite the fact that the temperature in the surgery was comfortably warm.

I nodded. He grinned.

I smiled, nodded again and stood up to listen to his chest.

‘I’d like you to have a chest X-ray,’ I told him when I’d finished.

‘Do I have to go to the hospital for that?’ asked Hubert, beginning to dress himself again.

‘Yes. But they won’t keep you. It’ll only take a few minutes.’

Hubert looked suspicious.

‘They won’t keep you,’ I assured him. I wrote out the X-ray form and then helped him finish dressing. ‘Come back and see me in three days. I’ll have the X-ray report back by then.’

I suddenly had a thought. ‘How are you going to get to Barnstaple?’

Hubert looked at me as though surprised that I should even need to ask. ‘I shall walk,’ he said with dignity.

I took my wallet out and offered him some money. ‘For the taxi fare.’

He refused it.

But I did manage to save him the cost of a prescription for the antibiotic I wanted him to take by finding a sample bottle of something suitable left by a drug company representative.

‘Don’t forget!’ I told him as he left. ‘I’d like to see you in three days.’

‘I’ll be here,’ promised Hubert.

* * *

CHAPTER FIVE

'Good evening, doctor!' said the next patient. 'I'm Lionel Francis.' He held his hand out across the desk and gave me the benefit of a broad smile that must have paid for at least one dentist's summer holidays for several years. He clearly expected me to know who he was. He wore an expensive grey suit with a broad chalk stripe, a maroon shirt with a white collar and around his neck had something that looked like a Garrick club tie but wasn't. He was grossly overweight and his waistcoat looked uncomfortably tight. He had a small pink rosebud in his buttonhole and smelt very strongly of something so powerful that I decided that it was probably designed exclusively for use by men who are having affairs and want to smother the scent of their mistress's perfume.

I took the proffered hand and looked at him blankly.

'I'm a friend of Dr Brownlow's,' Mr Francis continued.

'We're in the same line of business. I run a small chain of pharmacies in the area.'

I murmured my congratulations and asked him what I could do for him.

'Don't you remember me? You visited me.'

I looked up and felt a flush of embarrassment as I recognised him. He'd had pyjamas on when I'd last seen him. 'How's your chest?' I asked.

'That's what I've come about. I've been asthmatic for years but it's been getting worse. I get breathless very easily and I've even coughed up a little blood a couple of times recently. I thought that perhaps the time had come to get you to do a few tests. Maybe an X-ray?'

'Sounds a good idea,' I agreed. 'Would you take your jacket and shirt off so that I can listen to your chest?'

Mr Francis stood up and started to undress. 'The wife wanted me to get Brownlow to send you round to the house but I thought you were probably busy enough so I thought I'd pop along here with the ordinary patients.'

'That's very kind of you,' I said. Quite unreasonably I decided that I didn't like Mr Francis very much. 'Have you had any other symptoms? Or is it just the cough?'

'Just the cough.' Mr Francis carefully hung his jacket over the back of the chair.

'Any pains in your chest.'

'Nothing to speak of.'

'Have you coughed up any phlegm?'

He shook his head and folded his waistcoat neatly.

'But you do get short of breath?'

'Especially when I'm on the golf course!' laughed Mr Francis, draping his tie over the chair. He looked down at his waistline as he unbuttoned his shirt. 'I need to lose a few pounds,' he admitted. He was being generous to himself. He needed to lose a few stones.

I examined the fat chemist's chest but could find nothing of any consequence, though he undoubtedly had an unpleasant and persistent cough.

'I can't find anything but I want you to have an X-ray,' I told him, filling in an X-ray request form. 'If you take this along...'

'Yes! I know what to do!' Mr Francis nodded. 'Charles Jarvis and I play golf together at Saunton Sands.' He looked across at me. 'Do you know Charles?'

I finished filling in the request form while he dressed. When he'd finished I held the request form out to him. 'No, I don't think so.'

'He's the top radiologist in the area,' Mr Francis told me. 'Very good at his job and a cracking good golfer.' He took the form off me and stood up. 'You must meet him sometime. Do you play golf?'

I shook my head.

'We must get you into the club,' smiled Mr Francis. 'You can't be a proper doctor until you play golf.' He finished tying his tie. 'When will you get the results back?'

I told him that I thought they'd be back in about three days.

* * *

My heavily solicited promise to have dinner with the district nurse and her husband hung over me like a large black cloud. At the end of the evening surgery that day all I really wanted to do was to go back to the Duck and Puddle, spend an hour soaking in a hot bath and then spend an hour in the deserted lounge bar eating a solitary evening meal. My quiet but perfect evening would then end with me falling into bed and sleeping for ten hours.

But there was little chance of any of that. As soon as the last patient left the evening surgery I said goodbye to Miss Johnson and walked outside to where my car should have been standing. Only then did I realise that the Humber was still standing helpless somewhere out on the road to Barnstaple. I was about to start the long and weary walk back to the pub when a figure appeared out of the dusk.

'Good evening, doctor!' said Mr Marshall. 'Can I give you a lift anywhere?' He waved a hand in the direction of his car which was, I could see now, standing just a few yards behind him.

A small voice at the back of my mind warned me that this was all getting very expensive but I was too tired to care. 'The Duck and Puddle, please, Mr Marshall!' I said, wearily walking round to the passenger side of his car and getting in. I was so tired that when the taxi drew up outside the pub a few minutes later I was very nearly asleep. We had been parked for several minutes before I realised that we'd arrived at our destination.

'Why didn't you tell me that we were here?' I asked the taxi driver as I staggered out of the car.

'You seemed tired, doctor,' said Mr Marshall. 'I didn't like to wake you.' He handed me my black bag which I'd forgotten. 'Are you going anywhere else this evening?' he asked hopefully.

I looked at my watch. 'I'm supposed to be having dinner with Mrs Wilson and her husband.' It was already ten minutes to eight. I didn't know what time dinner was due to start but it couldn't be long. 'Could you wait five minutes? I'll just have a quick wash and then I'll be ready.'

Mr Marshall beamed. 'Certainly, doctor,' he said. 'My pleasure.'

It would be a lie to say that I raced into the pub but I moved as quickly as I could. I didn't have another jacket to put on but I had one clean shirt left.

'Mrs Wilson tells me that you're having dinner with her,' said my landlady, whom I bumped into at the bottom of the stairs. For a moment I thought I detected a hint of something in her voice though I was too tired to decide whether it was surprise, disapproval or warning.

I nodded and smiled. 'But I won't be late back,' I assured her. 'To be honest I feel a bit tired.'

'What shall I do if there are any more calls for you?' asked Mrs Parsons.

'The telephone operator knows,' I said. 'They can put any calls through to Mrs Wilson's number.'

Mrs Parsons nodded. 'Don't forget to take your key. And if you're not coming in to breakfast I'd be grateful if you'd let me know.'

It seemed a strange thing to say but before I could reply she'd disappeared.

Outside, Mr Marshall was waiting for me. I climbed into the taxi, put my black bag down by my side and then sat quietly back as he drove me round the village green and stopped outside a cottage directly opposite the Duck and Puddle. We were no more than two hundred yards away from where we'd started.

'Why didn't you tell me it was so close?' I asked him, feeling rather aggrieved as I clambered out of the taxi.

'You didn't ask me!' protested Mr Marshall, indignantly. 'I'm just trying to provide a service,' he snapped rather crossly. 'And at night!' he added. Then he reached across, pulled the passenger door to with a bang and accelerated away to his shop, another fifty yards up the road. I felt rather guilty and tried to call after him to apologise but he'd gone.

Mrs Wilson's cottage was one of five that were all joined together and all painted white. They all had thatched roofs, all seemed to have pretty little gardens and all were protected from the road by a picket fence that was painted white. There were no street lamps around the village green so I could see all this only by the light of the moon. It was, therefore, with some difficulty that I eventually found the small gate in Mrs Wilson's piece of fencing. I walked up her narrow front path and knocked on a heavy oak door that was studded with iron work. No one in Bilbury seemed to have much faith in modern, flimsy doors.

* * *

At first I didn't recognise the woman who opened the door. She wore an extremely short blue dress that failed to come within hailing distance of her knees. But it was the top half of her dress which was most difficult to ignore. There were no straps and without any visible means of support the dress seemed to be offering Mrs Wilson's extremely ample bosoms for examination. I found myself unwillingly transfixed by the peculiar sight of what looked rather like two large, pink blancmanges served up on blue plates.

Mrs Wilson had also managed to build her hair up into some sort of strange and insecure looking edifice on the top of her head and she had glued a pair of massive but patently false eyelashes onto her upper eyelids. These artificial additions were so heavy that they pulled her eyelids downwards Mrs Wilson had to hold her head back in order to see. The effect of this was, of course, to push her startling bosom even further forwards.

'Hello!' she said. She'd even changed her voice, which was now quite a bit lower than normal. She held the door back and positioned herself in the doorway in such a way that in order to get into the cottage I had to squeeze through an impossibly small gap between the far door post and her menacing chest.

Once inside I stood nervously in front of a plump looking sofa covered in a bright chintzy material. A large mackerel tabby cat sat at one end of the sofa. A mixed tabby sat at the other end. The whole room had a definite woman's touch. Mrs Wilson closed the door and moved into the room towards me. Her skirt was so tight that it made movement exceedingly difficult. Things weren't helped by the fact that she was wearing black, patent leather shoes that were supported by huge stiletto heels. 'What can I get you to drink?'

'A tonic water would be very nice,' I replied.

'Come on now, you're not driving,' insisted Mrs Wilson.

'I saw you arrive in Pete Marshall's taxi.'

'But I'm on duty,' I reminded her, pointing to my black bag which I'd put down on the floor. 'I don't want to get reported for turning up to an emergency call smelling of alcohol.'

‘Round here they’re more likely to report you for not turning up smelling of alcohol!’ laughed Mrs Wilson. But she did pour me a tonic water. ‘I’ll just have to go and get some ice and lemon,’ she said, disappearing in the direction of what I took to be the kitchen. ‘Sit yourself down and make yourself at home,’ she called over her shoulder.

I sat down on the sofa, between the two cats, and looked around. Half the room was designed as a living room, with a sofa and a matching easy chair positioned around an open fire place, and part of it was designed as a dining room, with an oak dining table surrounded by four chairs. The table had been set but there was something odd about it that I couldn’t quite put my finger on at first. The walls were decorated with prints of wild flowers and there were two huge displays of artificial flowers on either side of the fireplace. The windows were covered with rich, red velvet curtains which hung right down to the floor. Several copies of a woman’s weekly magazine were stacked neatly on a coffee table which stood between me and the fireplace.

‘You’ve decorated the room beautifully,’ I called to the absent Mrs Wilson.

‘Oh, I can’t take the credit for it,’ she replied. ‘My husband is in charge of that sort of thing.’

‘Oh,’ I said. I was genuinely surprised. And then I realised what was wrong with the dining table – it was set for two not for three.

‘Where is your husband?’ I called. I could hear Mrs Wilson thumping noisily in the kitchen. I assumed that she was trying to get ice out of an ice tray. I remembered her saying that her husband was a policeman.

‘He’s on duty tonight,’ came the reply. ‘He won’t be home until tomorrow morning.’ There was a pause and then she reappeared in the doorway. ‘He does a lot of night duty,’ she said with quite a smile on her face. ‘It suits us both,’ she confided. She winked at me.

‘He won’t be joining us then?’ I asked, feeling rather like a fly who’s wandered into the middle of a web.

‘I’m afraid not,’ sighed Mrs Wilson, putting a silver plated coaster down on a small delicate looking table that stood near the sofa and then putting my drink down on top of the coaster. ‘Just the two of us, I’m afraid.’ She put her own drink down next to mine, placing it on another coaster. ‘I thought it might be nice for us to get to know each other,’ she said. ‘Since we’re going to be working together.’ She moved one of the cats out of the way and sat down beside me before I could say anything in reply.

As she sat down Mrs Wilson’s skirt rode up her thighs, displaying her stocking tops and an inch or so of naked thigh. She then crossed her legs, making things considerably worse. I tried not to look. She looked down and pulled pointlessly at the hem of her skirt. ‘This skirt is a bit short,’ she said unnecessarily. She shuffled a little closer so that our thighs were touching. I tried to move away but I had nowhere else to go. I didn’t like to move the other cat which seemed very comfortably settled. ‘But I like the colour,’ she said, stroking the material with her fingers. ‘And it feels nice too,’ she added. ‘Try it!’

Obediently, but tentatively, I reached out and touched the hem of her skirt, as though testing it to see if it was hot. Mrs Wilson giggled. ‘Don’t be silly,’ she said. ‘I’m not going to bite you.’

‘Thank you for reminding Mrs Parsons that I wouldn’t be having dinner at the pub tonight,’ I said, desperately trying to change the subject and tactfully trying to remind Mrs Wilson that we were supposed to be having dinner together. I was starving hungry.

‘Oh, that’s all right,’ said Mrs Wilson. ‘My pleasure.’ She made another useless attempt to pull down the hem of her skirt. ‘I know you’ve been busy today,’ she said.

‘Terrible day!’ I said. ‘I haven’t stopped. I didn’t even have any time for lunch.’

‘Don’t worry!’ said Mrs Wilson. ‘I’ve got some nice macaroni cheese in the oven.’ She leant against me and I felt myself starting to wheeze again as a cloud of her perfume enveloped me. ‘I expect you’d like to relax a little before you eat,’ she said. ‘I know I would.’

I couldn’t think of anything to say that wasn’t rude or didn’t sound greedy so I didn’t say anything. Even the meal promised to be a disappointment. I hate macaroni cheese. I was staring straight ahead but I could feel Mrs Wilson’s head leaning on my shoulder. ‘Isn’t this lovely?’ I heard her whisper. ‘So peaceful and relaxing.’ A thick strand of hair had escaped from her hair piece and was hanging over her left eye.

‘Very,’ I heard someone croak in a voice that sounded vaguely like mine.

‘Let’s drink to your future here,’ said Mrs Wilson. She leant across me, reaching for her glass. Everywhere I looked there seemed to be nothing but acres of pink chest. I felt physically endangered by it.

Mrs Wilson grasped her glass but instead of taking it back to her mouth she rested the hand that was holding it on my left knee. I felt her other hand resting on my neck. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest as though desperate to break free and I could feel beads of sweat beginning to break out on my forehead.

‘The countryside round here is beautiful, isn’t it?’ I heard someone say in a voice that no longer sounded even vaguely like mine.

‘My husband is a transvestite,’ said Mrs Wilson suddenly. ‘He likes dressing up in women’s clothes,’ she explained, as though I might not understand.

‘I bet it gets very windy in the winter,’ I heard someone reply.

‘Personally,’ breathed Mrs Wilson, ‘I like a man to be all man.’ Her left hand was now stroking my neck and her right hand, still holding her glass, had moved off my knee and onto my thigh.

‘There must be lots of nice walks here,’ someone said, in a squeaky voice that I did not recognise at all. ‘Especially if you like walks,’ they added rather lamely.

‘I came home one day and found him dressed up in my underwear,’ said Mrs Wilson, leaning even closer. ‘I like sexy underwear,’ she murmured. ‘But I prefer to be wearing it.’ She moved her lips closer to my ear. ‘You should see what I’m wearing now,’ she whispered throatily.

I know my mouth opened but I can’t remember what came out of it.

Mrs Wilson’s right hand moved further up my thigh and suddenly the contents of her glass were emptied over my trousers. I was so tense that the shock of the cold liquid on my leg made me jump.

‘Oh, silly me!’ said Mrs Wilson, glancing down. ‘Never mind,’ she said. ‘Take them off. I’ll dry them in the airing cupboard.’ She put her glass down and reached for my waist with her right hand.

I was desperately trying to catch hold of her hand, which seemed to have acquired the properties of a ferret, when I heard a sound which I had never thought I would be so pleased to hear. When people talk glibly of ‘being saved by the bell’ they have no idea how wonderful it is to be so saved. ‘The telephone!’ I cried, looking around for the responsible instrument. ‘Quick! It might be a patient.’

‘Oh damn!’ said Mrs Wilson crossly. ‘And just when we were beginning to enjoy ourselves.’ She reluctantly stopped struggling to unfasten my trousers and I took full advantage of the respite, firmly moving her hand to one side and then standing up. ‘Where’s the telephone?’ I asked her.

Mrs Wilson nodded towards a small, low table in a far corner of the room. Desperate lest the caller gave up before I could reach the instrument I flung myself upon it.

‘Yes?’ I cried, as though it was I who was in need of emergency help.

‘Can you come over to the Duck and Puddle straight away?’ asked a voice I recognised but couldn’t place. ‘Someone needs help.’

‘I’m on my way!’ I shouted, slamming the phone down and making for the door. ‘Emergency!’ I told Mrs Wilson who was still sitting on the sofa where I’d left her. ‘Must go I’m afraid. Terribly sorry.’

‘Damned patients,’ said Mrs Wilson crossly. Then she tried to smile. ‘Will you come back when you’ve finished?’ I shook my head sadly. ‘I’m afraid it sounds as if it could take a long time to sort out.’

‘But what about the macaroni cheese?’ I heard Mrs Wilson cry plaintively as I left.

I didn’t stop running until I reached the Duck and Puddle.

‘Where’s the patient?’ I demanded breathlessly, as I burst through the door into the bar.

I was greeted with cheers, cat calls and whistles.

I looked around, puzzled.

‘It’s Thumper,’ said Frank Parsons, the landlord. ‘He was taken a little queer.’

‘Who are you calling queer?’ demanded Thumper, who was standing at the far end of the bar and who seemed perfectly healthy, though perhaps slightly inebriated.

The landlord looked at me, shrugged and apologised. ‘He seems to have recovered,’ he said. ‘I hope we didn’t interrupt anything.’

‘You mean there isn’t an emergency?’

Frank shook his head and then started laughing. ‘I wish you could see your face,’ he said. ‘I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything quite like it.’

‘I do feel another turn coming on,’ said Thumper, pretending to faint forwards onto the bar.

‘Maybe you ought to stay in case he has another attack,’ said Frank.

‘I think perhaps I should,’ I said, to more loud cheers and whistles. And then I caught sight of Mrs Parsons at the back of the bar. ‘I know it’s a bit of a cheek,’ I said. ‘But I’m starving hungry. I’d be very grateful if you could rustle up a cheese sandwich or something.’

‘I can do better than that,’ promised Mrs Parsons. ‘I’ve got a lovely pie ready. Shall I serve it up in the lounge bar as usual?’

‘I’ll eat in here if that’s all right with you,’ I said. ‘I need to keep an eye on Thumper.’

‘What made you... er... how did you guess what... er...?’ I asked Frank, as his wife hurried off in the direction of the kitchen.

Frank leant forward. ‘Let’s just say that Kay Wilson has got a bit of a reputation for being rather a man eater.’

‘No offence to yourself,’ added Thumper. ‘But it didn’t seem hardly fair to leave the two of you together all evening.’

‘I’m very grateful,’ I said. And then I remembered that the telephone exchange was still putting genuine emergency calls through to Mrs Wilson’s number. Life was getting complicated.

‘I’ll get the wife to have a word with Phyllis on the telephone exchange,’ said Frank, when I’d explained the problem to him. ‘Leave it to me.’

‘Excuse me, doctor,’ said Mr Marshall the taxi driver, sidling over to me. ‘Couldn’t help noticing that you haven’t got your black bag with you.’

I looked down. He was right. I’d left it at Mrs Wilson’s.

‘Do you want me to pop back and pick it up for you?’ he asked.

‘I’d be grateful if you would,’ I said. ‘Perhaps you’d be kind enough to explain that I’m stuck here with an emergency.’

‘No problem,’ he promised with a sly smile. ‘You leave everything to me.’

I turned back to the bar. ‘Can I have a pint, please, Frank?’ I asked, no longer caring what patients might smell on my breath.

‘My treat!’ insisted Thumper, on my right. He raised his glass to me. ‘Just want to thank you for everything you did today. Very grateful, doctor.’

‘That’s OK,’ I said. ‘My pleasure. Are they both all right?’

‘Wonderful, the pair of them,’ replied Thumper. ‘The hospital want to keep them for a day or so but they’ll both be home soon.’ He shook his head in disbelief. ‘What a surprise. When I left home this morning my bird was going up to the surgery to get help with losing a bit of weight. Within a day you’ve got all her excess weight off her and given us a baby into the bargain.’

Frank put my pint down in front of me and I drank the new baby’s health with the father.

‘Actually,’ said Thumper, moving a little closer. ‘Anne asked me to ask you if you’d mind if we named the baby after you.’

‘After me?’

‘Well, you brought him into the world,’ said Thumper. ‘We thought it might be rather appropriate.’

‘I’d be very flattered,’ I said, blushing. Nothing like it had ever happened to me before.

‘Of course, it’ll only be a second name,’ said Thumper. ‘His first name will be Jack. We wouldn’t want to lumber him with a poofy name like yours for day to day use, would we?’ He paused. ‘No offence,’ he added quickly. ‘But what’s all right for a doctor isn’t really going to be any use to a son of mine, is it?’

‘Why not?’ I asked. ‘He might grow up to be a doctor!’

Thumper stared at me over his beer glass. ‘You’re right!’ he said firmly. He thought for a moment. ‘Jack can be his second name,’ he said.

‘There you are, doctor,’ said a quiet voice behind me. I turned round to see Mr Marshall put my black bag down on the floor by the side of my bar stool.

‘Thanks very much.’

‘No problem. Would you like me to pick you up in the morning to take you in to the surgery?’

‘Yes, please,’ I sighed. ‘Thank you very much.’

‘I’ll be outside at 8.30 then, doctor,’ said the unctuous Mr Marshall.

‘I heard about the Humber,’ said Thumper, leaning across and putting a hand on my forearm. ‘Sorry about that.’

I shrugged. ‘It was a bit expensive on petrol,’ I said.

‘Wasn’t the right car for you,’ said Thumper, shaking his head.

‘Best I could afford,’ I said miserably.

‘We’ll do better than that for you,’ insisted Thumper. ‘I’ll pick you up after morning surgery tomorrow and take you down to the car auction at South Molton.’

‘I haven’t got any money,’ I protested.

‘Don’t you worry, doctor,’ said Thumper. ‘We’ll sort something out for you. You’re as good as family now.’ It felt good.

* * *

Although she had served me my breakfast for two days I’d forgotten the name of the girl who was working at the Duck and Puddle. I hadn’t really taken all that much notice of her although I had noticed that she was very pretty. As she put my breakfast down in front of me the next morning I heard sobbing.

I looked up. She had light brown hair, cut quite short, and the most beautiful green eyes I’d ever seen. She looked a couple of years younger than me. Tears were rolling down her cheeks.

Then I smelt the burning. I looked down and saw that everything on the plate in front of me was burnt to a crisp. Someone had tried to scrape the burnt bits off the bacon and the toast but the damage was too great to be repaired.

‘Don’t worry!’ I said, cheerfully. ‘I like my breakfast well-cooked.’ I turned the blackened sausage over to discover that the underside was even worse. It made a solid, wooden sound as it rolled across the plate. The girl lifted up her apron, covered her face with it and then ran off towards the kitchen. I half stood up, uncertain about whether or not to go after her. Eventually, I decided it was probably better not to. I sat down again, picked up my knife and fork and started to cut a corner off a piece of crunchy fried bread.

‘You can’t eat that!’ said Mrs Parsons, sweeping up my plate off the table before I could do my knife any serious damage. She was still wearing her dressing gown and nightdress. The curlers were still in place too; once again there were just three of them, all at the front as though it was only the front that mattered.

‘It’s OK!’ I said, weakly. ‘Patsy’s a bit upset this morning,’ whispered Mrs Parsons, tipping her head in the direction of the kitchen.

‘What’s the matter?’ I whispered back.

'Her father's poorly,' explained Mrs Parsons. 'And she's worried about him.'

'Why don't they call the doctor in?'

'You're the doctor,' said Mrs Parsons. 'Well, Dr Brownlow is. But Patsy's sister believes in some sort of herbalism based on flowers and they won't have a doctor on the farm.'

Mrs Parsons looked down at the plateful of burnt food that she was holding. 'I'll go and do you some fresh,' she promised, and disappeared towards the kitchen.

As I sipped at my coffee I could hear whispering in the kitchen and a few minutes later Mrs Parsons reappeared carrying a plate containing two eggs, two sausages and two pieces of fried bread. 'I'm afraid that was the last of the bacon,' she apologised.

'Don't worry,' I said. I hesitated. 'If Patsy thinks her father will see me I'll gladly call in and see what I can do.'

Mrs Parsons put a hand on my arm. 'I hoped you'd say that,' she said. 'I'll have a word with Patsy.'

As I wiped up the last of my egg with a piece of fried bread Mrs Parsons emerged from the kitchen towing Patsy behind her.

'Go on!' urged Mrs Parsons to Patsy. She turned to me. 'She's shy!' she mouthed.

'Would you please come and see my father?' Patsy asked me at last. She had stopped crying but her eyes still looked puffy and red. 'I've just spoken to him on the phone and he says he'll see you.'

'Of course,' I said, wiping my mouth with my napkin. 'Where do you live?'

Patsy gave me the address of their farm on the other side of the main Barnstaple road and I promised to call in there as soon as I could.

* * *

I'd intended to go to see Patsy's father at the end of the morning surgery but I'd forgotten that I'd arranged to meet Thumper. To my surprise he hadn't. His battered old truck was parked outside the surgery when I'd finished.

'Pete Marshall was waiting for you,' said Thumper. 'So I sent him away.'

'I hope he wasn't offended!'

Thumper laughed. 'Pete? Offended? He'll probably charge you for the journey out here anyway.'

'I really haven't got any money,' I warned Thumper, as I climbed into his truck. 'This is very good of you but all my cash went on buying that Humber.' I paused and frowned. 'Do you think I ought to arrange for someone to move it?' I asked him as he accelerated away.

'Don't worry about it,' said Thumper. 'It's all under control.'

I looked at him. 'What do you mean?'

'A mate of mine drove his truck into it last night,' said Thumper. 'It's a write off now.'

'Thanks,' I said drily. 'How does that help?'

'It's an insurance job now,' explained Thumper. 'Simple. Car like that in good condition has got to be worth at least £150-£200.

'But it wasn't in good condition!' I said. 'It was in terrible condition.' And then a more important thought occurred to me. 'And I hadn't even had time to get it insured.'

'Don't worry about it,' insisted Thumper. 'You can claim off my mate's insurance.'

'But won't he mind?' I asked. 'He'll lose his no claims bonus, won't he?'

'He works for a big haulage company,' said Thumper. 'They always pay up on claims under £200. It's not worth their while to make a fuss about it.'

This was all getting a bit too much for me. 'Isn't this fraud?' I asked him, quietly, looking around to make sure that no one was listening.

'Fraud!' laughed Thumper, as the Ford bounced into and out of a huge pothole. 'You're just getting some money off an insurance company. That's not fraud.'

'But...' I began.

'Look,' said Thumper, 'I don't know of anyone round here who's ever had any house or car repairs done without making an insurance claim.' He looked across at me and grinned.

'You just leave it all to me,' he said.

I sighed and shook my head. Life in the real world was getting more and more confusing by the day.

'Are you hungry?' asked Thumper, as we hurtled southwards. He looked at his watch. 'We've got another hour before the auction starts and it's only ten minutes from here.'

'I could eat,' I agreed. 'If you know somewhere good.'

'Do you like trout?'

'Yes,' I answered, assuming that he knew of a good fish restaurant or, more likely, of a pub that served fish.

Thumper swung the steering wheel round and swerved off the road and into an open gateway. Then he drove straight on across a meadow. I turned and stared at him. 'Is this a short cut?'

'Sort of' he answered. 'The river's down here.' We bounced and jolted our way across the field and came to a halt a few yards away from a shallow, fast running river. As soon as the truck came to a halt Thumper jumped out. 'Let's catch ourselves some lunch, then!'

I climbed out and looked into the back of the truck. I could see no sign of a fishing rod or, indeed, a fishing line of any sort. I turned round and saw, to my surprise, that Thumper was taking his clothes off. 'What on earth are you doing?'

He looked across at me. 'Going fishing!' he replied, as though the question was daft. Naked, he walked across the grass and knelt down at the water's edge.

'But how?'

He turned round and put a finger to his lips. 'You catch!' he told me.

Puzzled but fascinated I crept up behind him and watched as he waded into the river, heading towards a large rock around which the water divided. Just underneath the rock there was a small, dark, still pool of water. Crouching, Thumper waded out into the river. It was quite shallow and hardly covered his knees. Slowly, he bent even lower until his body was parallel with the water surface and his hands were just below the surface. Then, steadying himself on his left leg he pushed his right foot forwards until it slid underneath the rock. Things then happened so quickly that I didn't have time to see anything properly. All I knew was that there was a splash and Thumper seemed to fall forwards into the water. Moments later he stood up with two fingers of his right hand stuck firmly into the gills of a large trout and with his left hand wrapped around the fish's tail.

'Catch!' he called, throwing the fish towards me.

I'd never tried to catch a flying trout before and it really is the sort of thing you need to practise. I got one hand to it but the fish was far too slippery to hold onto and it slid between my fingers and fell onto the grass where it threw itself from side to side in quiet desperation. Just in time I realised that it was making its way back towards the river. Knowing that I wouldn't be able to hold onto the trout with my bare hands I tore off my jacket and threw it over the fish. I turned round, hoping for a little applause from Thumper but he was bent down in the water again, clearly looking for a second fish. When this one came flying through the air I was ready for it and caught it in a piece of sacking that I'd retrieved from the back of the truck.

'That'll do, won't it?' asked Thumper, wading back towards the bank.

'How on earth did you do that?' I asked him, very impressed. I'd heard of people being able to 'tickle' and then catch trout with their bare hands but I'd never really believed it was possible.

Thumper grinned at me. 'Nothing like fresh trout cooked in the open,' he said, drying himself on his shirt. 'Shall we have them with some boiled potatoes?'

I laughed. 'Where are we going to get potatoes from?'

Thumper didn't answer but pulled on his underclothes and trousers and slipped his jumper back on. Then he killed the two trout neatly with a flick of his wrist, wrapped them in his wet shirt and put them carefully into the back of the truck.

We drove across and out of the meadow and then continued for another half a mile towards South Molton. Suddenly, Thumper jammed his foot on the brake and the truck squealed to a halt. 'Wait there! I won't be a minute,' he shouted, leaping out and sprinting across the road. He climbed over a fence and disappeared into a field. A couple of minutes later he reappeared with an armful of potatoes.

'New ones are better but at this time of the year you have to take what you can get,' he said, tossing the potatoes into my lap and then climbing back behind the steering wheel.

'Where now?' I asked him, laughing. 'Peas? Beans? Almonds?'

'No time,' said Thumper, shaking his head. 'There's a good place for a picnic a bit further along the road.' He drove on for another mile or so and then once again swerved into a field. This was bumpier and muddier than the first one and the truck skidded and slewed round as its wheels struggled to get a grip on the soft grass. We stopped at the far edge of the field and I found that we had met the river again a little further along its banks.

'Do you know what wild mint looks like?' asked Thumper.

'I think so.'

'There's usually some growing in that hedge. See if you can find some while I get some twigs together for a fire.'

When I got back, clutching two sprigs of freshly plucked mint, Thumper had lit a small fire by the edge of the river. The two trout were threaded on bits of wire that Thumper had taken from the back of his truck and the potatoes were boiling in one of the truck's hub caps that had been filled with river water.

It was one of the best meals I've ever eaten in my life. Fresh trout and fresh potatoes cooked in the open air. For pudding we collected blackberries from the hedgerow around the meadow.

'No coffee?' I asked, as Thumper pushed the hub cap back into place.

'No time,' replied Thumper, looking at his watch. 'We ought to get on to the auction.' He stamped on the fire and kicked the remaining smouldering twigs into the river. It wasn't until sometime later that I discovered that catching fish from the river without a licence is strictly illegal.

* * *

I drove back from South Molton in an elderly, pale blue Morris Minor convertible that seemed in good mechanical condition, though the bodywork showed a few signs of rust. Thumper had wanted me to buy a 1949

Bentley that was being sold very cheap but I had, with some reluctance, argued that I really needed something that was reliable and that could be driven around the village without having to be refilled with petrol more than once. Thumper had bid for the car for me. 'Don't worry about it!' he insisted, when I kept warning him that I didn't have any money. He said he had explained to the auctioneer (who was, I gathered, a friend of his) that I was a doctor who needed a replacement car urgently and that I was waiting for a cheque from an insurance company. 'Besides,' said Thumper, 'the guy owes me a favour.'

I couldn't think of any favour which would encourage a car dealer to allow a customer to take a car away without paying for it but I didn't want to know any more so I didn't ask.

And so we drove back in convoy. Thumper leading the way in his huge and powerful four wheel drive Ford and me following in the little Morris Minor.

* * *

My first task on getting back to Bilbury was to visit Patsy's father at his farm.

A small crudely made wooden sign, with the name of the farm painted on it in white, marked the long, narrow, heavily rutted lane which led down to the small valley in which the farm nestled. I drove down the lane carefully, wincing as rocks and stones crashed noisily against the underside of the car. The farm itself was one of the largest in the area. In addition to the farm house two small cottages and two huge stone barns helped to create a large courtyard area. A row of neatly painted bee hives stood alone in the corner of a nearby field. As I drove into the courtyard chickens, ducks and geese half flew and half ran out of my way.

'Thank you for coming,' said Patsy, opening the front door. She looked at the Morris. 'Is that a new car?' she asked.

I explained that I'd just bought it (with Thumper's help) and Patsy said suitably polite things about it. 'My father can be very difficult,' she warned, leading me into the hallway. 'Please don't take offence if he says anything rude.' She looked very worried.

I followed her from the hallway, which was cluttered with coats, sticks and boots, into a large, comfortable looking sitting room. The first thing I noticed was the heat. There was a huge, old-fashioned wood burning stove in the hearth and although there was no sign of burning fuel the heat was coming out of the stove in waves. Homes in North Devon didn't usually have central heating but they weren't cold. The second thing I noticed was a man in his mid-forties lying on a sofa. He was fully dressed, even down to his wellington boots, and he looked thoroughly miserable.

'I suppose you're the bloody doctor,' he said as I approached.

I admitted that he was right. 'Can't stand bloody doctors,' said Mr Kennett. 'They always think they know everything.'

Patsy blushed. 'The doctor has come to look at you,' she said. 'I asked him to come.' She looked at me and held her head on one side as though to say 'sorry'.

'What can I do for you, Mr Kennett?' I asked.

'You could try buggering off,' said the farmer belligerently. 'But I don't suppose you will.'

'Daddy!' said Patsy. 'Please!'

The farmer sighed. 'I've got a weak heart,' he said. 'But I'm not having any of your damned pills and I'm not going into hospital.'

'You might not need to take anything,' I told him. 'Do you mind if I examine you?'

The farmer sighed and with obvious reluctance started to sit up. 'I'm not peeing in no bottles!' he said vehemently.

'That's OK,' I agreed. Slowly I helped him unbutton his shirt and then I pushed his vest upwards so that I could get at his chest.

'Well?' demanded Mr Kennett, when I finally took my stethoscope away.

'You do seem to have mild heart failure,' I told him. I rolled his trouser legs up and pressed my thumb on each of his ankles in turn. Even though he'd been lying down for sometime fluid had accumulated in his legs.

'Are you taking anything at all at the moment?' I asked him. 'Any pills? Even anything not prescribed by a doctor?'

'Only my heart tablets,' said Mr Kennett, nodding towards the mantelpiece. I got up, walked across the room and picked up the small glass bottle of pills that he had referred to.

'Where did you get these from?' I asked him. The label on the bottle announced that the contents were made with an extract prepared from the hawthorn plant.

'I prescribed them for him,' said a voice I recognised. I turned and saw the shepherdess who'd helped me deliver Anne Thwaites' baby.

'This is my sister Adrienne,' said Patsy.

'They're hawthorn tablets,' explained Adrienne. 'For his heart.'

'How long has your father had heart trouble?' I asked her.

'I first diagnosed it about six weeks ago,' said Adrienne.

'I get breathless,' said Mr Kennett. 'That's a sign of heart trouble isn't it?'

‘How long have you been breathless?’

‘A month or so.’

‘He’s been getting worse,’ said Patsy. She looked across at her sister. ‘I know you’ve been doing everything you can, Adrienne,’ she said, apologetically. ‘But it’s true. Despite your tablets he has been getting worse.’

‘His chest pains have gone,’ said Adrienne. ‘You had pains in your chest didn’t you, Dad?’

Mr Kennett nodded.

‘What brought the pains on?’ I asked him.

‘Came on during the harvesting,’ said Mr Kennett. ‘I came home one evening with this terrible pain across my chest.’

‘And that’s gone now?’ He nodded.

I put my stethoscope on his bare chest again. His heart sounded strong but there was no doubt that he was in mild heart failure.

‘I’m not going into hospital and I’m not taking any damned drugs,’ said Mr Kennett emphatically.

·’OK.’

‘You’re stumped, aren’t you?’ he said, sounding almost pleased.

‘At the moment,’ I admitted. ‘But I’d like to come and see you again if I might.’

Mr Kennett started to object but Patsy intervened. ‘Please, father!’ she said. ‘What harm can it possibly do?’

Eventually her father agreed to see me again.

‘Thank you for being so patient,’ said Patsy as she saw me out of the house. ‘I did warn you!’ She really did have extraordinarily beautiful eyes. I smiled at her and said goodbye. I wanted to do some checking but I had an idea that I might be able to help Mr Kennett get better without sending him into hospital or prescribing any pills for him.

* * *

After that evening’s surgery had finished I went in search of Dr Brownlow and, on Miss Johnson’s advice, found him pottering in the dark in his large, walled vegetable garden.

‘How’s it going?’ he asked me, as he prowled between two large vegetable beds. He had a torch which he flickered from side to side as he walked, though the garden was quite well lit with moonlight.

‘It’s hard work!’ I confessed.

‘It never gets easy,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘But it gets easier.’ He pulled out a carrot that had been half eaten and tossed it onto a compost heap. Then he picked up a small snail and carried it carefully over to the side of the vegetable garden where he placed it in a ledge on the wall.

‘It’s daunting never knowing what you’re going to see next,’ I said.

‘That’s what makes it the most exciting job in the world,’ said Dr Brownlow quietly. ‘As long as you like people.’ He straightened up and looked straight at me. ‘Do you like people?’ I started to answer but he held up a hand. ‘I don’t just mean do you enjoy being with people you like,’ he said, correcting himself. ‘I mean, do you enjoy watching, listening to and even being with people that you don’t like?’

I thought about what he’d said for a moment. ‘Yes,’ I said eventually. ‘I do find people fascinating.’ I walked with him across to his greenhouse. ‘In hospital,’ I said, ‘I never really had a chance to develop any sort of relationship with my patients. Patients in hospital don’t really regard doctors as people – I suppose that’s why there is so much camaraderie between patients – it’s "them" and "us".’ I watched as Dr Brownlow picked up some cuttings and examined them carefully. ‘Here as a general practitioner I feel that everything is so much more real.’ I paused for a moment. ‘It’s very nice,’ I said. ‘I like it. But it’s also very frightening.’

‘No white coat to hide behind?’

‘Exactly!’ I agreed. ‘And no one else to help share the responsibility.’

‘The stakes are higher in general practice,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘People expect more of you but they’ll give more of themselves too. You have to risk more, you have to give more of yourself, but you get more in return. Satisfaction, I mean, not money.’ He picked a piece of parsley from a plant in a pot and handed it to me. Then he picked a second sprig and popped it into his mouth. ‘What did you dream of when you were a kid?’

I looked at him for a moment before answering. ‘It sounds a bit embarrassing, a bit too good to be true, but I wanted to do something to help people.’

‘I can believe that. It isn’t entirely altruistic to want to help people. If you want to do something then you’re doing it for yourself. Ultimately that’s selfish. It just happens that while you’re doing something selfish you’re also doing something useful.’

‘I’ve never thought of it like that before,’ I said. I put my sprig of parsley into my mouth. I’d never eaten parsley by itself before. I liked it.

‘Who was your favourite hero?’

It was such an odd question that I replied instantly, without thinking. ‘Robin Hood.’ I immediately felt embarrassed.

‘Mine was Don Quixote.’ Dr Brownlow sat down on the edge of a small wooden table. He looked thoughtful. ‘You’ve picked the right job,’ he told me. ‘I enjoyed being a family doctor.’

‘Enjoyed? That sounds final.’

‘I’m getting old. My best days are over. General practice is a job for a young man. Thirty years ago I could stay up all night delivering a baby and then spend the whole of the next day driving around from farm to farm.’ He paused. ‘No more,’ he said softly and rather sadly. ‘No more.’

There was a long silence. Eventually I broke it. ‘Talking of farms,’ I said, ‘I went to see Mr Kennett today.’

‘There you are,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘I looked after his father for thirty years. I delivered his two daughters. I’ve got old around here.’

‘His one daughter seems to be a bit of a herbalist.’

‘Daft business. Using crude, contaminated herbs doesn’t make any sense to me these days.’ He bent down, carefully picked up a moth that had got trapped in a spider’s web and gently freed its wings. ‘I told her off about it last year.’

‘Adrienne is treating him for heart trouble.’

Dr Brownlow looked at me. ‘Heart trouble? Kennett? No. He’s got a heart like a Rolls Royce engine.’

‘Not at the moment,’ I said. ‘His heart is beating irregularly, his chest is full of fluid and he’s got ankle swelling. Classic heart failure.’

‘When did all this start?’

‘Haymaking. He got a pain in his chest.’

‘What do you think?’

‘I think he probably tore a muscle hauling bales of hay about.’

‘And the heart failure?’

‘That’s what I wanted to ask you about. Adrienne is giving him something made out of hawthorn. Do you know what the toxic effects of hawthorn are? I think she might be poisoning him.’

Dr Brownlow looked at me sharply.

I smiled. ‘Accidentally.’

Dr Brownlow carefully carried the liberated moth over to the greenhouse door. Once he was outside he opened his hands and held them out in front of him. The moth paused for an instant, fluttered its wings a couple of times experimentally, and then flew away into the night.

‘Come with me,’ said Dr Brownlow, turning and heading for the house. He led me into the surgery where he headed straight for a row of books on a bottom shelf. He pulled out a large, blue bound textbook and blew a thick layer of dust off its binding. Then he handed me the book. ‘Have a look in there. I haven’t got my glasses with me.’

The book was a textbook of herbalism. I opened it at the index and then flicked through until I found the entry for the hawthorn bush. There was a clear warning there that preparations containing hawthorn could cause heart failure; the very disorder that Adrienne thought she was treating. I read the passage out loud.

‘Take him off the hawthorn and the chances are that he’ll get better,’ Dr Brownlow told me.

‘Do you want to have a word with him?’ I asked. I knew that there was a very good chance that Mr Kennett would make a fairly miraculous recovery if we stopped his pills. Most of the hospital consultants I’d ever worked for would have insisted on taking the credit.

‘No!’ said Dr Brownlow. He sounded surprised and looked puzzled. Then he understood. ‘It won’t do your reputation any harm if you can cure his heart trouble,’ he told me. He took the book off me and put it back on its shelf. ‘Do you know, I used to work with doctors who would have taken great advantage of a situation like this. They’d have prescribed some harmless sugar pills to replace the hawthorn and charged a fortune for them. Then they’d have told poor Kennett that it was their magic pills that had cured him. And they’d have carried on selling the damned things to him for years.’

‘I know doctors who’d still do that,’ I said quietly. I suddenly looked at my watch. It was ten to nine. ‘I ought to be going.’ I said regretfully. I liked talking to Dr Brownlow. I liked him. ‘Mrs Parsons will have my dinner ready for me.’

‘Are they looking after you all right?’

‘Very well.’

‘Good,’ said Dr Brownlow, who seemed genuinely pleased.

‘You must come and have dinner with me one evening.’

‘I’d like that very much,’ I told him. And meant it.

* * *

For the first time since I’d been in Bilbury the sun was shining brightly and it made a world of difference as my Morris Minor bumped and jiggled its way down the hill to the Kennett’s farm. High overhead a buzzard circled slowly and patiently, floating on currents of air as it looked for food. I was so busy watching the buzzard that I didn’t watch the road properly. The nearside of the Morris bounced down into a large pothole and then bounced out of it again; only with difficulty did I manage to hold onto the steering wheel and keep the car away from the stone walls which bordered the track. I drove a little more cautiously after that.

Seeing the farm ahead reminded me of Patsy. I liked Patsy. I wondered how she got to the Duck and Puddle every morning. I wondered why she was working at the pub when there must be lots to do at the farm. I wondered, idly, if she had a boyfriend.

It wasn't Patsy who answered my knock on the door. It was her sister, Adrienne.

'I've come to see your father,' I said. 'I promised I'd come back.'

'I know you did,' said Adrienne. She turned and walked back into the house. Silently I closed the front door and followed her.

Mr Kennett was sitting on the same sofa and in virtually the same position as the last time I'd seen him. But if anything he looked worse. His legs were more swollen and he was clearly having even more difficulty in breathing. I put my bag down on the floor, knelt down beside him and examined him.

I'm not going into hospital,' said Mr Kennett forcefully. 'And I'm not taking any damned pills.'

I thought he ought to be in hospital but I didn't say so. No one seemed to want to go into hospital these days. 'I think you could be reacting badly to the hawthorn,' I told him, trying to be as tactful as I could. 'It sometimes happens,' I said, half turning and half addressing Adrienne who was, I knew, standing behind me.

Neither of them said anything.

'The pills stopped the pains in my chest,' protested Mr Kennett.

I suspected that the pains in his chest had been muscular, brought on by throwing bales of hay around. But I didn't think it would help to tell him that. 'But you've been getting all sorts of other symptoms since the pains went, haven't you?'

Reluctantly, Mr Kennett nodded. The movement started him coughing and Adrienne had to come forward and push a couple of cushions behind his back. I waited until the coughing fit had passed.

'Just try managing without the pills for a few days,' I said. 'That's all I want you to do. If the pains come back then by all means try taking the tablets again.'

'Do you think his breathing will improve if he stops the hawthorn?' asked Adrienne suspiciously.

I nodded.

'You think he could be allergic to it?'

'Yes,' I lied. I thought he'd been poisoned by it but I didn't think they'd believe me if l said that.

Adrienne looked doubtful.

'People can get allergies to anything,' I reminded her. 'You must know that.'

'Yes, I suppose so,' she admitted with some reluctance.

'Then what is there to lose by stopping the hawthorn for a few days?'

'I think he's right, Dad,' said Adrienne at last.

'OK,' grunted Mr Kennett. 'If you say so.'

Before I left Adrienne insisted on giving me a jar of their home-made honey.·

* * *

CHAPTER SIX

The arrival of Mike Trickle, the television celebrity, had caused a good deal of excitement in the village, though no one had yet seen him.

Mr Trickle had bought a house called Bilbury Grange that was situated about halfway between Dr Brownlow's spacious home and the village green. It was impossible to see it from the road.

'Have you seen him yet?' asked Patsy, as I ate my breakfast. My mouth full of bacon I shook my head.

'We thought he might have rung the surgery to register as a patient,' said Mrs Parsons, who sounded disappointed.

'Has Mr Trickle been into the pub for a drink?' asked Miss Johnson half an hour later as I prepared to start the morning surgery.

I shook my head. 'Sorry. No sightings yet.'

I had little time for the exciting but invisible Mr Trickle because I was now discovering that one of the problems of general practice is that the number of problems to be sorted out seems to increase steadily with each new day.

I wanted to speak to Mr Kennett about stopping his hawthorn pills. I wanted to ring the hospital to find out what was happening to Keith Harper. And I was waiting for the X-ray results on Lionel Francis and Hubert Donaldson.

It was the two sets of X-ray results that came first, arriving at the surgery that morning in the same large, brown envelope.

The results, which surprised me, showed that Hubert, the elderly tramp, had no more than a chest infection, while Lionel, the pompous chemist, had an inoperable carcinoma of the lung. I did the surgery that morning knowing that afterwards I had to go round to tell the pharmacist that he was dying.

At the end of the morning's surgery, before I could leave to do any visits, a stout man in a tweed suit walked into the consulting room accompanied by a tall, elegant looking woman wearing an open fur coat over a white dress. The man looked vaguely familiar though I didn't realise why until a few moments later. He wore a pair of gold rimmed halfmoon spectacles, an old university tie which I couldn't identify and had a Rotarians badge in his lapel. She wore a single strand of pearls round her neck and had a silk scarf draped around her neck.

She had the sort of bone structure that most women claim to envy but she also had small, rather mean looking eyes which meant that she didn't look as attractive as she might otherwise have done. He had an old-fashioned hair cut that looked as if it had been done by an army barber and red, rather blotchy skin which suggested to me that he had a penchant for rich red wines. He looked like the sort of man who is never late for anything, the sort of man who always wears a clean shirt (and clean underwear), who always keeps his car clean and tidy (inside and out) and who always knows exactly how much change he's got in his pocket. He was a man I felt instinctively that I could safely distrust.

'I want to talk to you about my father,' said the man, shutting the door behind him. The woman with him, who was, I assumed, his wife, sat down without speaking.

I looked at him expectantly.

'We both think he's behaving irrationally,' said the stranger firmly. 'We think he needs to be looked after.'

I looked at the man and then at the woman, trying to remember if I'd ever seen them before. But although I half recognised the man I couldn't identify either of them. 'I'm sorry,' I said. 'Could you please tell me who you are? And who your father is? Do I know him?'

'My name is Simon Brownlow, Dr Simon Brownlow,' sighed the stranger rather impatiently. 'I'm a general practitioner in Barnstaple. You're working for my father.'

'Dr Brownlow?' It would be a fearsome understatement to say that I was surprised.

'This is my wife Dr Daphne Norman,' said Dr Brownlow junior, waving a hand airily in the direction of the woman in the fur coat.

'I'm an anaesthetist,' said Dr Norman. She spoke as though someone had rammed a large piece of fruit into her mouth.

I realised why I half recognised the man. He looked a bit like a younger and less cheerful version of his father. 'Oh.' I said. It was all I could manage.

'My father has always refused to register with another general practitioner,' said Dr Brownlow junior. 'So you are the closest thing he has to a family doctor.' I made one of those unintelligible, meaningless noises we all make when we want to indicate that we're listening but we don't want to commit ourselves. 'The thing is,' said Dr Norman, 'that we're worried about Simon's father. We're worried about him because he doesn't seem to be able to look after his own affairs properly.' 'This house is far too large for him,' interrupted Dr Brownlow junior. ‘It is quite absurd that he should continue to try to live here at his age.’

‘He seems to cope quite well,’ I said. ‘From what I’ve seen.’ I looked at them both in turn. ‘Have you noticed any specific problems?’

There was a silence and my two visitors looked at each other.

‘To be frank,’ said Dr Brownlow junior, ‘the problem is largely a financial one. My father simply can’t afford the upkeep of this enormous house but he won’t accept that he needs to move to more suitable accommodation. I’ve already spoken to a property developer who’s offered a very respectable sum for the house and grounds. The interest on the capital would give my father a good income. He would never have to worry about money again.’

‘Nor would you,’ I thought, wondering what plans the young Dr Brownlow and his wife had for the capital when old Dr Brownlow died.

‘If father keeps on selling off bits of land the value of the site will fall dramatically,’ said Dr Norman. ‘The developer Simon has spoken to is interested in developing the whole site and turning the house and grounds into a holiday complex: hotel, chalets, restaurant, caravan park, you know the sort of thing.’

‘There are some perfectly acceptable flatlets available in Barnstaple,’ Simon Brownlow told me. ‘My father would be much safer in one of them.’

‘What happens if he falls in the night and breaks a leg?’ demanded Dr Norman. She waved a hand around. ‘Who’d find him in this massive barn of a place?’

‘There’s Bradshaw and his wife,’ I reminded them. ‘And Miss Johnson and I come in every day.’ I didn’t like young Dr Brownlow or his wife. I didn’t like them quite a lot. They were talking about Dr Brownlow as though he had one and a half feet in the grave.

‘That’s another thing,’ said Simon Brownlow. ‘It’s quite absurd for my father to have staff. He can’t possibly afford them.’

There was another long silence. I looked at each of them in turn. ‘What did you want me to do about it?’

‘For a start you could have a word with him,’ said Dr Norman. ‘If he won’t listen to you then I think you ought to consider having him taken into care.’

I was aghast. She was suggesting that I use the law to have her father-in-law locked away.

‘It’s going to come to it sooner or later,’ she replied. ‘It would be better for everyone if it were sooner.’

I stood up. ‘This has all been a bit of a surprise for me,’ I said. ‘I’ll think about what you’ve told me.’

‘OK,’ said Simon Brownlow. ‘That’s fair enough.’

‘But don’t take too long about it,’ said Dr Norman.

They left without shaking hands or bothering with any of the other time wasting social niceties. I was glad. I didn’t want to shake hands with either of them.

* * *

When they’d gone I stayed where I was for several minutes wondering what on earth to do. I’d been in the job for just a few days and already I was under pressure to have my employer taken into care. As if all the other problems I’d got weren’t enough! What made the whole thing significantly more painful was the fact that I admired and respected Dr Brownlow. And I liked him. Eventually, I decided that I’d have to talk to him and tell him what had happened.

I found him in the billiard room.

‘I’ve never been able to make the cue ball swerve,’ Dr Brownlow complained, without looking up from the table. He drew back his cue and stabbed at the white ball which travelled the length of the table in a perfectly straight line. ‘Damn.’

‘I think perhaps your contact point on the cue ball needs to be a bit further to the side,’ I suggested. ‘And you need to hit down into the ball a bit more too.’

Dr Brownlow stood up and handed me his cue. ‘Show me.’

I bent down and, with that occasional spot of good luck that always fools me into believing that the fates aren’t entirely conspiring to destroy me, succeeded in sending the cue ball skidding down the green baize in a perfect curve.

‘I wish I could do that,’ sighed Dr Brownlow. He retrieved the cue ball, bent down and tried again. This time there was a hint of swerve in the ball’s path. ‘Did you see that?’ he asked, looking up with a broad grin on his face.

‘Once you can curve it a little bit it’s just a question of practising more and getting more power into the shot,’ I assured him.

‘I’m always frightened of jumping the cue ball off the table,’ Dr Brownlow confessed.

‘You won’t if you hit it in the right place,’ I said. It felt good to have found something about which I seemed to know a little more than Dr Brownlow. I reached over the table, picked up the cue ball, looked at it for a moment, wiped it on my sleeve and then put it back on the table and rolled it towards him. ‘I’ve just had a visit from your son and his wife.’

‘They came to see you?’ Dr Brownlow sounded surprised.

I nodded.

'What on earth for?'

I shrugged and tried to smile. 'They think you ought to be living in sheltered accommodation,' I told him. 'Apparently they've found somewhere in Barnstaple that they think would be suitable.'

Dr Brownlow went pale and then started to redden with what I suspected was suppressed rage.

'They suggested that I ought to consider signing a court order agreeing that you're not competent to manage your own affairs.' I felt embarrassed.

'Why you? You're not my doctor.'

'They say that since you're not registered with any other doctor and I'm looking after your patients I'm responsible for you.'

Dr Brownlow smiled at me. 'What are you going to do?'

I laughed. 'I'm not going to do anything.' I promised him. 'It's absurd.'

Dr Brownlow sighed. 'It isn't all that absurd,' he said sadly. 'At least, not from their point of view.' He picked up one of the red snooker balls and rubbed it against his waistcoat to get rid of a speck of dust that neither of us could see. He put the ball back down on the table. 'They've been nagging me for years to sell. this house to developers. It costs a lot to run and to pay for the upkeep I've been selling off bits of land.'

He picked up another ball and fingered it lovingly. 'I suppose they can see their inheritance slowly disappearing and they don't like it.'

I didn't know what to say and so I said nothing.

'I bought this house in the 1930s,' said Dr Brownlow. 'I didn't have any money but my wife had an inheritance and doctors were quite well paid in those days. My income paid the bank and her income paid the staff we needed.' He looked around the snooker room. The oak panelling was richly decorated with wooden carvings. Suddenly he looked old and frail and weak and vulnerable.

'When I was a boy,' he said after a long pause, 'my parents were very poor. We only ever had milk in our tea when there was a baby in the house.' He walked across the room to a large, leather armchair and sat down in it. The chair was one of a pair. I walked across and sat down in the other chair. 'My father was a farm labourer,' he said. 'When I was twelve he hurt his foot in an accident on the farm. The doctor said it was only bruised so he didn't get any compensation and he didn't get any sick money. So to get money for food he had to go to work. I watched him go out of the house limping. He had to walk six miles to work and six miles back again in the evening. That night he came back home and his foot was swollen up so much that he had to cut his boot off.'

There were tears in Dr Brownlow's eyes as he continued. 'He came into the living room and put his foot on the fender and got my mother to fetch him a hammer. Then he deliberately broke his big toe. He just smashed the hammer down on it right there in the living room. Then he went up to bed. Next morning the foot looked even worse and my mother called the doctor in. They gave him his sick money.' Dr Brownlow swallowed hard. 'He lost his foot two weeks later,' he said. He spoke so quietly that I could hardly hear. 'It got infected and they had to amputate it.' There were tears running down Dr Brownlow's cheeks as he looked across at me. 'He never worked again after that,' he said.

After a long, long pause he looked across at me. 'Have you ever known what it's like to be hungry? Really hungry?'

I shook my head.

'When I got a scholarship my parents were so proud they nearly burst with joy. But when I qualified as a doctor they wouldn't come to the university for my graduation ceremony. I begged them to but they wouldn't come. They said they had to stay at home to look after the chickens but they didn't. They stayed away because they thought I'd be ashamed of them. They thought they would let me down. They didn't want to risk damaging my career in any way.'

Dr Brownlow swallowed hard. 'When my wife and I bought this house I went and fetched them. I don't think they believed it for a while. I wanted them to stay here, to live with us, but they wouldn't.' The tears were rolling down his cheeks. 'Do you know,' he said quietly, 'they would never use the front door? They always insisted on coming round to the back.'

I looked around the huge billiard room. It was a wonderfully absurd room and a wonderfully absurd house. I tried to imagine how it must have looked to Dr Brownlow's parents.

'My wife and I loved it here. She's buried in the gardens,' said Dr Brownlow. 'There's a piece of consecrated ground that was used when the house had its own chapel.'

'When did she die?'

'Five years ago. March the 14th. She died upstairs in our bedroom.' He looked straight at me. 'When she was dying we talked about where she'd be buried. And I promised her that I'd be buried next to her.' He paused. 'If the developers buy the house and the land heaven knows what will happen to her.'

For a few moments neither of us spoke. It was Dr Brownlow who broke the silence. 'Logically Simon is right,' he said at last. 'I can't afford to run this place. It's crazy that I continue to live here.'

He stroked the leather of his chair. 'But this is my home. It contains all the things that make living worthwhile and it contains every happy memory I've got. I don't want to sell it. I don't want some barbarians turning it into flatlets or flattening it and covering the land with pre-fabricated chalets.'

I leant forwards. 'Doesn't your son understand any of this?' Dr Brownlow shook his head.

'Have you talked to him about it?'

Dr Brownlow thought carefully before speaking. 'I love my son,' he said slowly. 'I love him because he's my son.' He paused for what seemed a long, long, long time. 'But I don't like him,' he added. 'And I know I can't trust him.'

There was another long silence. 'And I neither like nor love nor trust my daughter-in-law.' He looked across at me. 'Sad, isn't it? Does it shock you?'

'No,' I said slowly, after a moment's reflection. 'But it is sad.'

'Simon has never been able to forgive me,' said Dr Brownlow. 'He's always been intensely materialistic. I think it was something he picked up at school. When he was young he decided he wanted to be a doctor. I thought it was for the right reasons but it wasn't. He wanted to become a doctor because he knew that we lived in a big house and had a Rolls Royce and people to help look after us. He assumed that all doctors lived the same way.'

'I bought the Rolls very cheaply,' said Dr Brownlow. 'My wife loved it. It's cost me less to run than if I'd bought ordinary cars.'

I waited. I felt very close to him.

Dr Brownlow stared thoughtfully at the floor. 'Simon feels cheated and frustrated and he blames me.' He took out a large handkerchief and wiped his eyes then blew his nose. 'I don't think it's conscious,' he said. 'But deep down he blames me for misleading him. Part of his desire to make me sell this house - and it's something he's been trying to do for years - is inspired by the fact that he wants the money - and wants me to stop spending it on running the place - but part of it is inspired by the fact that he wants to punish me. He doesn't like the idea of me living here when he can't afford anything larger than a very ordinary four bedroomed, detached house in Barnstaple.' The bitterness came through in Dr Brownlow's voice. 'Still,' he said sadly, 'there is one thing. I may not be able to trust Simon but at least he's predictable.' He smiled. 'Funny thing, isn't it? The people in this world that you can rely on most are the people you know you can't trust.'

There was another long silence. Once again Dr Brownlow blew his nose.

'I suppose I ought to be getting on and doing some work,' I said quietly.

'Do you think I should sell?' asked Dr Brownlow. 'Do you think I'm crazy trying to stay here?'

I didn't need to think about it. 'No,' I said without any hesitation. 'No. I don't think you should sell and I don't think you're crazy at all.'

He smiled at me. I thought he looked much older and much more weary. 'Thank you.' He spoke so quietly that I could hardly hear him.

I started to move towards the door. 'I think it's a lovely house,' I told him.

Almost imperceptibly he nodded. Then he looked up at me and smiled faintly. When I left him he was chalking his cue.

* * *

Telling Lionel Francis that he had cancer that couldn't be treated was no easier than I had expected.

'There must be some mistake,' said Mr Francis defiantly, his face white with fear and his body trembling.

'I'm afraid not.' I showed him the X-ray report with his name on it.

'But lung cancer,' said Mr Francis. 'It's not fair! I've never smoked a cigarette in my life.'

'I know,' I said quietly. 'It's not fair.' I really didn't know what else to say. No one had ever told me how to tell a man he was dying. Maybe there isn't any way to teach someone how to do that. Maybe it's something you have to learn the hard way.

'I want a second opinion,' insisted Mr Francis. Now there was anger in his voice. 'I want to see Charles Jarvis.'

'That's no problem,' I assured him. 'I'll fix it up for you.'

'Today!' insisted Mr Francis. 'I want to see him today.'

'I'll try,' I promised. 'Can I borrow your telephone?'

When I left him a few minutes later he was convinced that his appointment with Charles Jarvis later that day would confirm that he didn't have cancer after all.

* * *

I was far less apprehensive about my consultation with Hubert Donaldson that evening but in a way it was just as disturbing. Instead of being pleased when I told him that he simply needed to carry on with the antibiotics I'd prescribed for him Hubert looked glum.

'You don't seem pleased with the X-ray results?' I said.

'I'm not afraid of death,' he told me. 'Why should I be pleased?' He coughed painfully. 'What is there about death that makes it worse than life?'

I didn't know how to answer him. There were too many good things in my life for me to ever understand him.

‘There are three sorts of people in this world,’ said Hubert. ‘Those who are afraid of death. Those who are afraid of dying. And those who are afraid of living.’ He looked straight at me. ‘Once you know what someone fears most you’ll know a lot about them.’

I looked at him for a long moment before I spoke. ‘That’s sad.’

‘Life is often sad.’

‘Isn’t there anything you’d miss?’

‘My dog. I’d miss my dog.’

‘What sort of dog?’

‘Welsh sheepdog. I found her when she was a puppy. I was passing a farm in Shropshire. She was a sorry little thing then. I bent down to give her a pat and she’s never left me since.’

‘Where is she?’

He jerked his head towards the door. ‘Waiting outside.’

‘What’s her name?’

‘Ben.’

‘Isn’t that an odd name for a bitch?’

He shrugged.

‘Can I see her?’

He stood up and walked towards the door. I followed him. The dog, a young black and white collie was sitting patiently outside the surgery door. As soon as Hubert appeared the dog’s ears pricked up. Her whole body stiffened with excitement and her eyes seemed instantly brighter.

Tentatively, I bent down to stroke her but she backed away, her eyes fixed firmly on Hubert. I turned and saw him nod to her. That was all it took. Then she kept still and allowed me to make a fuss of her.

I liked Hubert’s dog. I wasn’t entirely sure what to make of Hubert. But I liked his dog.

* * *

CHAPTER SEVEN

Penelope was coming to stay for the weekend and Dr Brownlow had agreed to give me two days off duty. At half past nine on Saturday morning I drove over to Barnstaple to pick her up at the station.

'God!' she said when she saw me. 'What an expedition!' She was dressed in a white trouser suit and had had her brown hair cut very short in a page boy style. She was carrying a small green leather handbag and didn't seem to have any luggage. She looked more elegant and more full of confidence than I remembered.

'I had to leave Bristol at 6.30 this morning!' she announced. She looked around the station as though trying to decide whether or not to buy it. I leant forward to kiss her but at the last moment she turned her face so that my lips collided with her cheek.

'I must find my luggage,' she said, turning round and searching the platform behind her. She didn't have to look far. A man in his late twenties, dressed in a rather scruffy grey suit, was standing behind her holding two suitcases; one small and one quite large.

She thanked him and the stranger put the cases down but didn't move away immediately. To my embarrassment Penelope ignored him and turned back to me. 'Would you bring my cases, please? Where's the car?' The man who'd carried her cases from the train stood for a few moments more and then walked away looking strangely alone. I felt sorry for him.

'He kept trying to chat me up on the train,' Penelope confided. 'So I thought he could at least help with my cases.'

'What on earth have you brought with you?' The cases were difficult to lift.

Penelope shrugged. 'Just a few clothes.' She paused to flick a speck of dust off her jacket. 'It's difficult knowing what to bring to the country.' I looked at the white trouser suit and thought about the inside of the Morris. I wished I'd remembered to give it a bit of a clean.

I opened the boot and just managed to fit Penelope's two suitcases into it. 'This is it!' I said rather proudly.

'Oh,' said Penelope, clearly disappointed. 'How sweet.' She walked across to the front passenger door and looked inside. A look of clear distaste appeared instantly on her face. For the first time I noticed that she didn't look anywhere near as pretty when her face showed any expression. She opened the door, brushed at the seat with her handkerchief and then sat down. I closed the boot lid, walked round to the driver's door and jumped in beside her.

'I'm so glad that you could come,' I said. I leant across to give her a proper kiss and this time she let me kiss her briefly on the lips before pushing me away. 'Not here. Not in public. Not now we're both doctors.'

I put the key into the ignition and switched on.

'Before we set off do you think we could have the hood up?'

I looked up at the sky. It was clear and cloudless. It was winter but it was a superb day for topless motoring. I got out of the car and put the hood up. While I did so Penelope took a small mirror out of her handbag and checked her make-up.

It took no more than fifteen minutes to drive from the railway station in Barnstaple to the Duck and Puddle in Bilbury but during the journey I realised two things.

First, I realised that Penelope and I didn't seem to have anything much to talk about. At medical school we had, I thought, got on quite well. But now that all seemed a lifetime away. I tried to remember what we'd talked about then but could remember nothing that wasn't tied up with work. We had discussed difficult cases we'd both seen. We had talked about textbook problems we'd encountered. And we had moaned about consultants we didn't like. But it had all been practical work talk. We had never really bared our souls to each other.

Since moving to Bilbury I had begun to start to live and to enjoy my life in a way that had never really been possible when I'd been a student. Instead of working with cases and diseased organs I was working with people and it had made a difference to the way I looked at the world. I was working harder than ever but I enjoyed it.

Second, I began to realise that I might have made a mistake when organising the sleeping arrangements for the weekend.

'Will your girlfriend be sharing your room?' Mrs Parsons had asked me when I'd told her that Penelope was coming.

I'd blushed. 'I think so.'

But now I wasn't so sure. In the past we had fallen into bed together when we'd been too tired to think but had merely needed the physical release of making love and then falling asleep together. Somehow, things seemed different now. Going to bed together at the Duck and Puddle seemed cold-blooded and I wasn't sure that it was what either of us wanted or expected.

With all this on my mind it is perhaps hardly surprising that I didn't speak during the journey to Bilbury.

Penelope, too, was silent until I parked the Morris in the small car park outside the pub.

'Is this it?' she asked, looking around her at the village green, the cottages and the village shop. She sounded horrified.

'This is it! Home!' I looked round and tried to see it through her eyes; tried to remember how it had looked when I'd first seen it.

We got out of the car. I collected Penelope's suitcases out of the boot and we went into the pub. Gilly Parsons was hoovering the stairs. Frank was sitting in his trousers and vest in the bar drinking coffee and eating his usual bacon sandwich. In the kitchen I could hear Patsy singing. I put Penelope's suitcases down in the hall and introduced Penelope, Frank and Gilly to one another.

'Hello Penny!' said Frank, cheerfully. He held out his hand, thought about it, pulled it back and wiped it on his trousers. Then he offered it again.

'It's Penelope, actually,' said Penelope. Then she paused and corrected herself. 'Dr Shrewsbury.'

Frank looked as embarrassed as I felt. Penelope didn't take his hand so he withdrew it, sat down and picked up his sandwich again.

'Would you like a coffee, love?' asked Gilly. 'Travelling always makes me thirsty.'

'I'd prefer to freshen up a bit first,' Penelope answered.

'I've had an absolute nightmare of a journey. If you could show me to my room?'

Gilly looked at me and I looked back at her hoping that she had a spare room where she could put Penelope. She smiled at me and nodded to show that she understood. I was appalled at the way that Penelope was behaving. I thought of Frank and Gilly Parsons as my friends. Penelope was treating them as though they were servants.

Gilly didn't hesitate. 'I know how you feel, love. Follow me.' She lifted the vacuum cleaner out of the way and led the way up the stairs.

As she moved to follow, Penelope turned to me. 'Would you bring my bags up?'

It made me feel slightly better to have her treat me like a servant too. I picked up her bags and followed her. As I did so I looked across at Frank. I thought he might have been cross but he wasn't. He was grinning broadly now and he pulled a face at me as though he had just tasted something sour. Since Penelope was my guest I suppose I should have been offended but I wasn't.

It was twelve o'clock before Penelope reappeared. I was practising pool in the bar when she came down. She had changed out of the trouser suit and had on a blue pleated skirt, a white blouse and a white cardigan. At first sight I hardly recognised her because in addition to changing her clothes she had also changed her hairstyle and now wore a blonde, shoulder length wig.

The wig was so good that for a while I wasn't sure which was real: the short, page boy style brown hair or the shoulder length blonde stuff.

'Would you like to go into Combe Martin for lunch?' I asked her. 'There's a super pub down by the harbour?'

'If that's what you recommend,' she said. So we drove into Combe Martin, which she thought was rather tired and grubby looking, parked overlooking the beach which she thought looked distinctly unsavoury and ate fish, chips and peas, which she thought rather ordinary at a pub which she said she wouldn't go out of her way to visit again.

I didn't know what to do with her after we'd finished lunch so for a while we sat in the car and watched the tide coming in.

'It's very quiet here, isn't it?' she said at last. 'Don't you get bored?'

I said I didn't get at all bored and that I liked living in the country very much.

'I don't think I could cope with it,' said Penelope. 'Apart from the fact that it's so damned boring don't you worry about your career?'

I genuinely didn't know what she meant. I said so.

'You're so far out of things here,' she explained patiently. 'Are you going to stay in general practice?'

I said I thought I probably was.

'But don't you think it's a bit second rate?'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, you're hardly practising high technology medicine in Bilbury, are you?' she laughed. 'You always were a bit of a dreamer. But you have to think about these things.'

'I enjoy the job. And I like the people.'

'But that's not everything is it?' Penelope said that most of the consultants she knew regarded general practice as very much a backwater. 'It's for the drop outs,' she said. 'The people who can't cut it in hospital.'

I didn't say anything. I knew she wasn't right, whatever the hospital consultants said. I liked living in Bilbury. I liked the smell of the log fire in the Duck and Puddle. I liked the countryside. I even liked the rain. And I knew that working as a general practitioner was hard, exacting, worthwhile work. My only doubt was whether I was up to it.

'I'm going into radiology,' said Penelope firmly. 'I've done some research and there's a shortage of consultant radiologists. I should be able to get a good consultant's post by the time I'm thirty.'

She stared out of the car windscreen for a moment. 'I did think about geriatrics but I don't think I could put up with the smell all day long.' She wrinkled her nose with distaste.

'Do you enjoy radiology?' I asked her. 'Isn't looking at X-ray pictures all day long a bit tedious?'

Penelope shrugged. 'I'm staying in Bristol until the end of the year. And then I'm applying for a job in London. If you work in a stimulating city it doesn't matter too much if your job is a bit tedious.' She moved the driving mirror and checked her lipstick. 'Anyway,' she said, 'you can always come and work in the country when you're old if that's what you still want to do.'

I thought that she was wrong. I remembered a friend who wanted to get rich so that he could take off and ride his motorbike round the world. He didn't need to become all that rich. Just rich by our standards. He got a job with a small chemical company and made a fortune within five years. But by then he'd got so hooked by the system that he forgot his dreams. And he became just another man in a suit.

I started the car and we drove over to Lynton. I wanted to go for a walk on Lynmouth beach but Penelope didn't have any decent walking shoes with her so instead we walked along a cliff top path to the Valley of the Rocks. The path there clings to the cliff edge and there is a spectacular three hundred foot drop down to the sea below. It was a clear day and we could see the Welsh coastline in the distance. A family of wild goats stood on the path and stared at us in innocent curiosity as we edged our way past them. Suddenly something startled them and they fled up the rocky cliff face, springing from one small ledge to another with remarkable surefootedness.

We had a pot of tea for two and a plate full of buttered tea cakes in a cafe in Lynton. Penelope tried to persuade me to give up my job with Dr Brownlow and to go back to work in hospital. 'It may seem idyllic now,' she said. 'But you'll soon get bored with it. And how much money can you make in a place like Bilbury for God's sake?'

'I don't think I will get bored,' I told her. 'I've never done anything so challenging or so stimulating.'

'But you're not going to make any money, are you?'

'Enough.'

'But you're living in a pub!' said Penelope. 'You've got to get into the property market. Can you afford to buy a house on what you're earning? And what sort of houses are there round here, for God's sake?'

'I haven't even thought of buying a house,' I confessed. The truth was that I rather liked living in the pub. I wasn't ready for the responsibility of owning a house.

We drove back from Lynton to Bilbury in silence again. The relationship between us had changed. Both of us seemed to have changed. Penelope had become more professional and more ambitious. She seemed hard-hearted. I wasn't sure exactly how I'd changed but I knew that I had. At medical school we'd had simple, straightforward things like passing exams to worry about. There had been no real competition between any of us. We had been united in our fear of the senior consultants and our determination to survive the system. There hadn't been time to formulate career plans or to worry about money.

'You're going to stay down here, then?' asked Penelope as I took a short cut through Parracombe. It wasn't a question so much as a statement and I couldn't help detecting a certain finality in the way she spoke.

I thought carefully before I answered. 'I hope so. I like it here.'

A car was parked outside the general stores in Parracombe and the road was blocked. I slowed down, pulled in behind it and waited for the driver to come out.

'I've been seeing someone else,' said Penelope unexpectedly.

I was surprised to find that I received this news with relief rather than dismay. 'Anyone I know?'

She shook her head. 'He's a surgical registrar,' she said after a moment. 'He's Greek,' she added inconsequentially.

A man in a green oiled jacket came out of the shop clutching a loaf of bread, a bottle of milk and a brown paper packet. He smiled and waved, opened his car door, put his purchases down onto the front passenger seat, climbed in and drove off. I followed. 'Is it serious? Do you love him? Why are you here?' The questions piled up but I didn't ask any of them.

'Aren't you going to say anything?' Penelope asked me.

I still didn't say anything. I was startled to realise that I felt strangely relieved.

'I imagine it's come as rather a shock,' said Penelope. She reached out and touched my hand. 'I'm sorry,' she said.

'Why did you come?'I asked her at last.

She paused for a moment. 'I had to see you. I'm not really in love with him.

I slowed down as the car in front braked. It was dusk and his brake lights shone brightly. I switched on my side lights. There was another long silence. 'Won't you come back and work in hospital?'

I shook my head. 'I'm sorry,' I said.

'But there's no future for you here! Can't you see that?' She paused. 'I'll give him up if you come back to Bristol.'

Somehow it made everything very easy. I pulled the car into a gateway, put on the handbrake and turned to face her. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said, though I didn’t really know why I was apologising. ‘Shall I take you back to the station?’

‘I think that might be a good idea,’ said Penelope. Her face looked hard.

I hadn’t even switched off the ignition. I took the hand brake off and drove straight off again.

Five minutes later we were back at the Duck and Puddle. I waited in the bar while Penelope went upstairs to pack her suitcases. While I waited I telephoned the station in Barnstaple. The man who answered told me that there was a train in twenty five minutes time that would connect with a main line express from Cornwall to Bristol. Frank looked at me while I made the call but didn’t say anything. I went upstairs and knocked on Penelope’s door.

‘If we hurry you can just catch the last train to Exeter,’ I told her. ‘It connects with an express to Bristol.’

The door opened and Penelope came out. Her eyes were red and there were tear stains on her cheeks but she wasn’t crying any more. I looked behind her and saw that her bags were packed. ‘I can get a taxi.’

‘Don’t be silly. I’ll take you.’

We got there with five minutes to spare. The train was already standing in the station waiting. I put her cases on and then climbed off and let Penelope climb past me. I stood on the platform and she stood at the open window. ‘It didn’t have to end like this,’ she said. She took a small handkerchief out of her handbag. It had green and red embroidery around the edges. She blew her nose daintily and put the handkerchief away again. ‘You’re throwing everything away.’

‘I hope everything goes according to plan,’ I told her. ‘I hope the Greek looks after you.’ I felt bad about the fact that I couldn’t wait for the train to start. I felt that Penelope and I had nothing at all in common. I didn’t love her and I knew she didn’t really love me.

‘We had some good times, didn’t we?’

I nodded. There had been good times it was true. But the good times were now a part of the past. In the future our lives would, I knew, go in very different directions. Penelope’s was planned. I had no idea what was going to happen in mine.

The train started with a jerk and Penelope clutched at the door.

‘Bye!’ I said, waving a hand.

Penelope didn’t say anything and didn’t wave. Neither of us promised to write letters that we knew we’d never write. I thought she looked very sad and lonely and I couldn’t help feeling sorry for her as the train slowly disappeared down the line towards Exeter. I felt sorry for her because I thought that her life contained no passion. She was doing things because she thought she ought to do them rather than because she wanted to do them. I stood there for a few moments, watching the train until it was out of sight. It was like watching my last connections with the past disappear. Then I turned and went back to the car and drove back to Bilbury.

I am slightly ashamed to admit that I sang all the way home. I didn’t really know why but I felt happier than I had felt for a long time.

* * *

‘He came home the day before yesterday,’ said Mrs Harper.

‘I thought the hospital would have let you know.’

They hadn’t.

I followed Mrs Harper up the stairs to Keith’s bedroom. ‘What did they say when they let him come home?’

‘They did all sorts of tests and said that he definitely hasn’t got diabetes.’

‘What has he got then?’

‘They said they couldn’t find anything wrong with him at all. But this morning he’s as bad as ever.’ She was right. Keith was lying in bed looking just as ill as he had when I’d sent him into hospital. I sat down on the edge of his bed and picked up his hand. His skin felt clammy and his pulse was racing. He looked weak and there were tears in his eyes.

‘How did you feel when you came out of hospital?’

‘I felt OK,’ answered Keith. He spoke so quietly that I could hardly hear him and his voice shook, though whether it was with weakness or with anxiety I didn’t know.

‘He seemed right as rain when he came out,’ said Mrs Harper. ‘He was playing in the garden.’

‘What happened?’

‘It’s difficult to say. He came in at tea time, had his tea, had a bath and came downstairs to watch a programme on television...’

‘It was Thundercats,’ interrupted Keith.

‘That’s right,’ agreed his mum. ‘He came down to watch Thundercats. But he wasn’t his normal self and then by the time he was ready for bed he was beginning to look queasy again.’

I took out my stethoscope and listened to Keith’s chest. His heart was racing. I listened to his lungs, examined his abdomen, looked in his ears, tested his reflexes and asked him a hundred questions. At the end of it all I still didn’t have the faintest idea what was wrong with him.

‘I’m going to get you back into hospital, I’m afraid.’ Keith started to cry.

‘We’ve got to get you better,’ I told him. ‘They can do tests I can’t do.’ I got up off his bed and moved aside so that Mrs Harper could hug her son. ‘I’ll go and telephone the hospital,’ I said quietly.

* * *

‘A girl’s been on the phone after you,’ said Frank Parsons as I walked into the pub. ‘A girl called Kim,’ he added, concentrating hard on the pint of beer he was pulling. He took great pride in his work.

‘New one, eh?’ said Thumper who, as ever, was standing at the bar bent over a nearly empty glass. I once asked Thumper why his glass was nearly always empty and in a semi drunken moment he explained that it was a trick he’d learned from his father. ‘Always drink two thirds of your pint the minute it arrives and far more people will offer you a refill than if you’re standing there with a glass that’s almost full.’

‘I don’t know anyone called Kim. It must be a patient.’

‘It wasn’t a patient,’ said Frank. ‘I asked her about that in case it was an emergency.’ He handed the pint he’d just pulled to the customer who’d ordered it then reached behind him, took a scrap of paper from beside the till and handed it to me. ‘That’s her phone number.’

Curious, I rang her straight away. A male voice I half recognised answered the telephone and with bad grace agreed to fetch Kim to speak to me. A minute or so later a bright young female voice came onto the phone.

‘Hello!’ she said cheerily, when I’d told her my name. ‘Thanks for calling back. Do you believe in the use of animals in medical experiments?’

The question caught me off guard. I hadn’t expected it. But it wasn’t a difficult question to answer. ‘No!’ I answered firmly and honestly.

‘That’s marvellous!’ said Kim. ‘I’m the secretary of the North Devon Anti-Vivisection Group. We’re holding a public meeting in Barnstaple a week on Thursday. Would you come?’

‘I don’t know...’ I said hesitantly. ‘I don’t know if I can get away...’

‘Will you come if you can get away?’

I hesitated.

‘Good!’ said Kim firmly. ‘Can I put you down to say a few words to our group?’

‘Oh, I don’t know about that!’ I said, quickly. The thought of saying anything in public has always horrified me.

‘It’ll be a great boost to the group,’ insisted Kim. ‘You being a doctor.’ She paused. ‘And it would be a pity for you to be there and not to speak.’

‘I’m not sure that I can be there,’ I reminded her.

‘You work for Dr Brownlow don’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘He’s my grandfather,’ said Kim. ‘I’ll have a word with him and ask him to make sure that you aren’t on duty that evening.’

‘Dr Brownlow is your grandfather?’ I realised why I’d recognised the voice of the man who’d answered the phone. That must have been Dr Brownlow’s son, Simon.

‘Yes!’ said Kim brightly. ‘He’ll do anything for me. Absolutely anything.’

‘How many people will be there?’ I asked her, becoming more and more horrified as I realised my escape route had been blocked.

‘We usually get twenty to thirty,’ answered Kim. ‘But if they know we’re getting a doctor to speak we’ll probably be able to get more than that.’

‘What do you want me to speak about?’ Kim had totally out manoeuvred me and I had now accepted the inevitable.

‘Anything you like!’ said Kim brightly. ‘As long as it’s about why vivisection should be stopped.’ She said that she’d send the details of where the meeting was due to be held in the post, thanked me for agreeing to speak and put the phone down.

* * *

At the end of the evening surgery I had a telephone call from the hospital to tell me that they were sending Keith Harper back home again.

‘But he’s only been in for a few hours!’

‘He was ill enough when he came in,’ admitted the doctor who phoned me. ‘But he’s perfectly OK again now. We can’t find anything wrong with him at all.’

‘And you haven’t got any idea what made him ill?’

‘None whatsoever,’ said the hospital doctor cheerily. ‘Let us know if he gets ill again and we’ll take him back in.’

I thanked him, put the telephone down and wondered how long it would be before I heard from Mrs Harper again.

* * *

In the pub that evening Thumper handed me £20 in brand new notes.

‘What’s this for?’

‘The insurance company have paid up for the Humber. That’s your change.’

‘Change?’

‘After paying for the Humber and the Morris Minor.’

I looked at the four five pound notes and then I looked at Thumper. I was puzzled. ‘You mean I don’t owe you anything for the Morris?’

Thumper nodded.

‘I’ve got £20 and a Morris Minor and I don’t owe you any money?’

Thumper grinned. ‘That’s right.’

I didn’t understand but I put the money in my wallet and told Frank to fill up Thumper’s almost empty glass.

* * *

Lionel Francis had seen Dr Charles Jarvis but the radiologist had been unable to offer him the contradiction and comfort that he wanted. ‘The X-ray clearly shows a large cancerous growth which has already spread throughout one lung,’ wrote Jarvis in a letter to me. ‘I’m afraid that this man will probably not survive more than another six weeks.’

Every day Mr Francis’s condition seemed to confirm the accuracy of that diagnosis. Within a few days of the diagnosis being made Mr Francis was virtually unrecognisable. The corpulent, arrogant man who had visited me in the surgery complaining of nothing more than a persistent and annoying cough had become a weakened and pathetic shadow of his former self.

‘He won’t eat and he hasn’t got the strength to get out of bed.’ his wife told me when I visited him one morning. ‘He’s fading away before my eyes.’ I followed her upstairs to the spare bedroom which had been converted into a sickroom. The curtains were drawn and the room already smelt of death. I hardly recognised the grey skinned figure lying on the bed. His eyes were dull and full of fear and he looked like a man who has given up the fight to live. In my clumsy, untutored way I tried to persuade him to fight but he would have none of it. He had accepted the sentence of death that Charles Jarvis had pronounced and he had always been far too much of a believer in the power of the modern medicine man to give credence to the thought that there might be hope.

* * *

If Lionel Francis’s rapid deterioration was unexpected it was hardly inexplicable. The same could not, however, be said for the deterioration which had taken place in Hubert Donaldson’s health. The penicillin that I had given Hubert seemed to have made no difference at all to his condition. On the contrary, instead of getting better, as I had expected, he seemed to be getting worse. When I persuaded him to undress again so that I could listen to his chest it was impossible not to notice that he had lost even more weight and that his skin had acquired a greyish-yellow pallor.

‘I want you to have another X-ray. The antibiotic doesn’t seem to be working.’

Hubert didn’t seem too enthusiastic. ‘I don’t like hospitals,’ he said simply. He breathed in deeply and leant back. ‘But I’ll go for another X-ray if that’s what you want me to do.’

I wrote out a request for a repeat chest X-ray and handed him the form.

* * *

CHAPTER EIGHT

During the night I had been woken several times by the sound of rain lashing against my window. My room faced south west and the wind had clearly been coming from that direction. When my alarm clock went off at seven thirty I jumped out of bed, went over to the window and drew the curtains to see what damage the storm had done. I was glad I hadn't been called out to any emergencies; it sounded as if it had been a night for staying tucked up in bed.

The first person I saw was Frank Parsons. He was dressed in a green waterproof jacket, waterproof hat and wellington boots. The wind had died down but it was still raining fairly heavily. In his hand Frank held a large lump hammer and looking at the debris around him I assumed that he was struggling to do some emergency repairs. A wooden fence had been flattened and a small wooden tool shed had lost half its roof. Rubbish from an overturned dustbin was strewn around the garden. Across the road I could see Peter Marshall at the village shop. He too seemed to be struggling to do some basic repairs. I pulled on my clothes, shrugged into my waterproof jacket and hurried downstairs to see if I could help.

'It must have been pretty bad last night,' I said, approaching my landlord and picking my way through the broken fence panels. He turned and looked at me with some surprise.

'Didn't expect to see you out here!'

'I saw you out of the window,' I explained. 'I thought I'd come and see if you wanted a hand.' I looked around. A long ladder, brought out of the garage, had already been leant against the side of the house. 'Is there any damage to the roof?'

'Not yet.'

'It seems to have died down now,' I said, mistaking his meaning. 'It doesn't look as if the wind will be back for a while.' I looked around. The tree tops were still; though it was still raining hard there was hardly any wind and the heavy clouds hovering above looked to be almost stationary.

'You go and get your breakfast,' said Frank. 'There isn't anything out here that you can do.' He wiped his nose on the back of his hand. 'But thanks for the offer. Much appreciated.'

'I'll help you clear up some of this debris.' I bent down and lifted up a broken fence panel. 'Where do you want this putting?'

'It's OK,' said Frank. 'You can leave it there.'

'No, really!' I insisted. 'It's going to take you ages to sort this lot out.'

'I'd rather you left it where it is.' Frank seemed surprisingly firm and I still didn't quite understand. 'I've got the insurance assessor coming later on this morning.' He looked straight at me and winked. Before I could say anything he had started to climb up the ladder to the roof. I stood and watched.

'Stand clear!' he shouted, with the hammer in his hand. I stood back just in time as Frank brought the hammer crashing down onto the roof. A shower of broken slates crashed down to join the debris on the ground.

I still assumed that he was merely clearing away stuff that could be dangerous if it wasn't brought down, and so out of curiosity I moved back even further to try to see the extent of the damage to the roof. To my astonishment the roof looked to be in virtually perfect condition. There were one or two gaps where slates were missing but judging by the growth of moss on the underlying slates the missing ones had been gone for some time. I stood and watched open mouthed as Frank crawled higher up onto the roof and carefully and systematically broke slates in all the areas where the roof was already damaged. Then I watched as he deliberately dropped a slate onto the flat roof of an outside lavatory. The slate smashed instantly, leaving a great shard sticking up out of the flat roof.

'The main roof has been leaking for ages and that damned outside lavatory always leaks like a sieve,' explained Frank when he had climbed back down the ladder.

Slowly, it dawned on me that my landlord was simply taking advantage of the storm to get some essential repair work done at the insurance company's expense. 'Aren't you worried that they'll find out?' I asked him in a whisper, looking around to make sure that no one was listening. 'Insurance fraud is illegal!'

'Fraud?' said Frank indignantly. 'What are you talking about?'

I looked around at the debris, the broken slates, the broken pieces of fence and the rubbish from the upturned dustbin. There was, it was quite true, no sign of any fraudulent activity; merely signs of storm damage.

Frank smiled at me and nodded towards the other side of the village green. 'Look!' I looked and could see at least half a dozen householders. At first glance each one seemed to be busy trying to repair the damage that the storm had done. But a closer examination showed that most were doing exactly what my landlord had been doing.

'In a way we're helping the insurance companies,' said Frank with a smile that rapidly grew into a broad grin.

‘We’re all getting rid of structural weaknesses and having essential repair work done before anything serious happens. That’s just what insurance companies always advise people to do.’

‘I’ve no doubt they’ll be grateful,’ I agreed.

Frank looked across to where Peter Marshall was working. ‘OK Pete?’

The shopkeeper-cum-taxi-driver nodded cheerfully. ‘New shed roof, new back porch and some body repair work on the taxi!’ he shouted. He sounded very pleased. He waved and disappeared into the house. I’d never before seen people receive storm damage with such good grace.

‘Let’s get some breakfast,’ said Frank. ‘I don’t know about you but I’m starving.’ He led the way towards the back door, stopping only to pull a loose drainpipe away from the wall completely, letting it fall with a loud clatter across the tangle of broken wood and slate.

‘Bilbury is an insurance based economy,’ explained Frank as, for the first time, we ate breakfast together. Normally he didn’t get up until long after I’d left the pub for the surgery. ‘We can’t afford to get our properties repaired without help from the insurance companies.’ He took a huge bite of his perennial favourite, a bacon sandwich. ‘Insurance claims are second to tourism as a source of income round here.’ As he spoke he sprayed crumbs around in all directions. Eating with Frank was always a hazardous business. When Frank ate it was the people around him who needed napkins.

‘Don’t the insurance companies ever complain?’

‘They never notice anything,’ said Frank. ‘Apart from the fact that Bilbury seems to be a bit exposed to south westerly winds.’ He took another bite and brown sauce dripped out of his sandwich and onto the back of his hand. He licked the sauce off his hand. ‘They fix their premium rates for counties,’ he explained, ‘so as long as the people in other parts of Devon don’t get too much storm damage we’ll be OK.’

‘Don’t you have difficulty in finding workmen to do all the repairs?’

Frank shook his head and emptied his mouth before answering. ‘We do all the work ourselves,’ he told me. ‘I have some notepaper printed up as GB House Repairs. Thumper is North Devon Repairs and Pete Marshall is Devon House Restorations. I’ll quote for some of the work over the road and they’ll quote for my work.’

‘So you get the insurance companies to pay you for repairing your own houses?’

Frank nodded. ‘It’s the capitalist system and free economy working at its very best,’ he answered, pouring himself another cup of tea.

* * *

I had left medical school rich with the arrogance of youth; an arrogance that had been blessed by the provision of a medical diploma and endorsed by the might of the medical profession which assumes that it is possible to turn an irresponsible, callow medical student into a responsible, all-knowing medical practitioner overnight. But, as the weeks went by, I gradually began to learn the true extent of my ignorance. Gently, patiently and with a kindly sympathy Dr Brownlow’s patients taught me that the human spirit is bewilderingly complex and reliably unpredictable. If I learnt one sure thing it was that making premature judgements about people was almost certain to lead to some modest embarrassment at best and, at worst, to an unforgettable humbling.

Few patients helped to illustrate my ignorance of the human condition more effectively than Thomas O’Donnell.

Born in Dublin around the turn of the century Thomas O’Donnell had migrated to Liverpool in the late 1920s in search of employment and, continuing his fruitless search, had drifted further and further south throughout the bleak years of the following decade. After surviving a number of close brushes with various part of the establishment he had ended up in North Devon in the 1950s. There he had finally come to terms with the fact that having been unemployed for so long he had become unemployable.

‘If it’ll be all the same to you I’ll have another certificate for the sick, doctor!’ he said, when I first visited him. He beamed at me from his huge, old-fashioned, wooden posted bed. Like most ex-patriots he had become far more Irish in exile than most Irishmen ever are at home and his accent, demeanour and habits were all quintessentially Irish in flavour. His voice rose and fell throughout each sentence as though in constant search for some satisfactory level.

Having been asked to visit him in his bed I innocently assumed that there was something wrong with him. So I asked him what else I could do for him. This was, for me, a polite, rather roundabout way of saying: ‘What symptoms have you got?’

He looked at me uncomprehendingly, but with a growing look of alarm.

‘Apart from the sick note,’ I added quickly, realising the cause of his distress and wanting to reassure him that the sick note wasn’t under any sort of threat.

‘Nothing thank you, doctor,’ said Thomas.

I waved an arm towards the bed and bluntly asked him what was wrong with him. I had no nasty motive. I just wanted to know.

‘It’s the weariness, doctor,’ said Thomas, with a smile that would have charmed the devil himself. ‘I have the weariness.’ He paused, as though temporarily overcome by exhaustion. ‘And whatever can you do about the weariness?’

I opened my mouth but being unable to think of anything appropriate to say I simply wrote out the requested sick note, laid it on the edge of the bed with the reverence that seemed appropriate, replaced my fountain pen in my inside jacket pocket and closed my mouth. I did all this in silence. Thomas ignored the certificate in the same superior way that a waiter will ignore a tip. We nodded to each other and I left.

Gradually, I thought I was getting to know Thomas O’Donnell quite well. He seemed to have an insatiable need for documentary evidence with which to support his invalidity. Apart from the straightforward sick notes for the national insurance people he also seemed to have a variety of insurance policies which required some sort of paper work completing. Most of these certificates required me to confirm that Thomas was unable to work but one or two simply required me to confirm that he was still alive. ‘It’s the pension company,’ explained Thomas, in his rich and soothing brogue. ‘They’ll only pay out for as long as I’m alive.’

On none of my early visits to Thomas O’Donnell’s cottage did I ever see him out of his bed. Indeed, for all I knew there might not have been anything of him apart from a head and shoulders and two arms. The rest of him was invariably hidden beneath a double layer of heavy woollen blankets and a thick, richly embroidered red eiderdown. The front door was always open and a small sun-faded postcard thumb tacked to the front door invited all callers to climb the stairs if they wanted to speak to Mr O’Donnell.

‘What do you do about food?’ I asked him one day. ‘Shopping, cooking and stuff like that?’

‘I have the most wonderfully kind neighbours,’ explained Thomas, with a firm nod of his head.

‘People do your shopping and cooking for you?’

‘They do.’

‘And bring all your meals to you here in your bed?’

‘They do indeed.’

And they did too.

Mr and Mrs Broadstone, the kindly couple who lived in the next door cottage clearly looked after him devotedly. They shared the vegetables they grew in their garden. They picked up his groceries and his tobacco and his pensions at the corner shop and they even did his laundry for him.

‘Don’t you ever feel, well, guilty?’ I asked him one day.

‘Guilty?’ repeated Thomas, apparently genuinely puzzled. ‘Now, why ever should I feel guilty?’

‘Letting your neighbours look after you all the time,’ I explained. ‘They’re old too.’

But Thomas just smiled. He didn’t seem to know what guilt was. It was the first time I’d ever come across a Catholic whose life wasn’t regulated by guilt.

‘Don’t you ever get bored?’ I asked him on another occasion. ‘Just lying in bed all day. What do you do?’

Thomas raised a firm, white forefinger and tapped it deliberately against his temple. ‘I think!’ he told me. ‘I think.’

‘But what do you think about?’

‘I think about life, doctor,’ said Thomas. He paused. ‘And I think about death.’ He smiled at me as though challenging me to admit that I didn’t understand. The simplicity of his answer reminded me of the sort of alarming truth one comes across in dreams. It has happened to me several times. I wake up in half shock convinced that I have discovered the meaning of life. I write down the magic words and then I go back to sleep. When I wake up the following morning I find myself staring at a piece of paper upon which are written phrases such as ‘love is beautiful’ or ‘death is the end’.

I arrived one Friday to give Thomas his sick note, bounded up the stairs and found the bedroom empty. The heavy mahogany wardrobe was still there. The small pine dressing table was still there. The oval handbasin was still there, with a bright red towel neatly folded on the rail underneath it. And the heavy wooden posted bed was still there. But the blankets and sheets were turned back and of Thomas himself there was no sign.

I assumed that he must have slipped out of bed to answer a call of nature and so I sat down on the edge of his bed and gazed out of the window. The window was low and from the bed it was possible to see a vast stretch of countryside. A group of hens were scratching at a bare patch of soil in a very desultory fashion. A pair of geese were strutting around as though they had inherited the earth. And a large black and white cat was asleep on a small grassy knoll behind the chicken shed.

‘Hello, doctor!’

I recognised the cheery voice instantly and turned my head.

I had trusted my ears but now I doubted my eyes. The figure before me had definitely not just clambered out of bed. He was wearing a dark, three piece heavy worsted suit, a white shirt with a stiffly starched collar and a plain, dark green tie. Balanced on the top of his head was a smart black trilby hat. His feet were encased in a pair of plain black socks. And inside all this stood Thomas O’Donnell.

‘I’ve lost my shoes,’ he announced sternly. He knelt down with surprising suppleness and peered under the bed. Then he squeezed past me, moved round to the other side of the bed and did the same thing there.

‘Has the weariness gone?’ I asked him. I didn’t ask him the question with any mischief in mind and I don’t think Thomas mistook my genuine curiosity for anything other than what it was. He turned, looked up and smiled at me. 'It has not, doctor,' he said sadly but firmly. 'The weariness has not gone.' He moved away from the bed and continued his search within the mahogany wardrobe. The single, shaped wooden hanger upon which the grey worsted suit had presumably rested hung naked from the rail. Below it Thomas rummaged around among a collection of untidily piled cardboard boxes. Eventually he pounced with some visible relief upon a white cardboard box which he seemed to recognise. He closed the wardrobe door, opened the shoe box and put on his shoes.

'Where are you going?' I asked.

'It's the hurling, doctor,' explained Thomas, as though that answered everything.

'The hurling?'

'The hurling,' Thomas confirmed. 'In Dublin.'

'What hurling?' I asked him, puzzled. Though I had never heard of it at the time I later discovered that although it is a game that has some passing similarity to hockey, it is played, apparently, without rules and at the end of each match every man on the field is invariably bloodied for there seem to be no constraints on the hitting of opponents with sticks. Hurling is a game that makes rugby, American football and Australian Rules football seem effeminate in comparison and only the Irish seem to play it.

'It is the Championships, doctor!' explained Thomas, as though talking to a child. There was no doubting the fact that the word 'Championships' began with a capital letter.

'How are you getting to Dublin?' I asked. It seemed a long way to travel for a man who hadn't been out of bed since I'd been living and working in Bilbury.

'I shall take Mr Marshall's taxi to Barnstaple, then I shall take a train to Exeter where I shall catch the express to Birmingham,' explained Thomas. 'In Birmingham I shall take a plane to Dublin.' He turned his left wrist and looked at his watch. 'The taxi should be here soon.' It occurred to me, though I didn't mention it, that for a man who suffered so much from the weariness it was a fairly impressive itinerary.

'When will you be back?'

'I shall come back home on the Monday, doctor,' answered Thomas, knotting a shoe lace with precision.

'I hope you have a good time.'

'I shall do that, doctor,' said Thomas O'Donnell. 'Without doubt I shall do that.' He tied the second shoe lace with the same precision with which he had tied the first. 'Have you a sick note for me, doctor?'

I wrote out his sick note, laid it down carefully on the bed as usual and left him tying a luggage label onto a green leather suitcase.

The astonishing thing about Thomas O'Donnell was that no one seemed to regard him as unusual and no one uttered any criticism of his behaviour. Upon his return from the hurling Championships in Dublin he took off his suit, hung it up in the wardrobe and clambered back into his bed. He then stayed there while Mr and Mrs Broadstone continued to do his shopping, cooking and laundry and I continued to write out sick notes so that he could continue to lie in bed all day and think about life and about death.

* * *

'I've got Charles Jarvis on the phone for you!' said Miss Johnson, popping her head into the consulting room just as I was about to start the evening surgery. She had that air of excitement about her that she always had when someone important was telephoning.

'Jarvis? Who's Charles Jarvis?' The name rang a distant bell but that was all.

'The senior radiologist at the hospital,' hissed Miss Johnson, as though afraid that he would be able to hear her through two solid stone walls.

I remembered and picked up the telephone. The voice at the other end sounded only slightly less than hysterical. 'I don't know how it happened,' he said, speaking rapidly. 'I've checked and double checked and it really can't be blamed on us.'

'What? What's happened?'

'There's been a mix up with some X-rays,' said Dr Jarvis.

'It's never happened before. Never. I've been here for 27 years and nothing like it has ever happened.' He sounded very flustered.

'What sort of mix up? Which X-rays?'

'One of your patients. Hubert Donaldson.'

'I sent him along this morning for a repeat X-ray,' I confirmed.

'That's how we found out,' said Dr Jarvis. 'His last X-ray showed a little bit of infection but the X-ray we took today shows a disseminated carcinoma. He can't possibly have deteriorated that rapidly in a week.'

'So, what do you think has happened?'

'His first X-ray must have got mixed up with someone else's,' explained Dr Jarvis. 'It's the only explanation. Heaven knows how we're going to find the identity of the patient who's got Mr Donaldson's report in his files. We've got thousands and thousands of files here. It could take months. It's terrible. Terrible.'

I knew instinctively the name of the patient with whom Hubert Donaldson's X-rays had been confused.

'I've got a patient called Lionel Francis,' I said. 'I think you know him.'

‘Vaguely,’ admitted Jarvis, sounding slightly irritated at the sound of the name. ‘He’s a member of my golf club. He’s a bit of a pain to be honest. Didn’t he come to see me recently?’

‘He did. You said he’d got cancer. Could his X-ray have got mixed up with Hubert Donaldson’s?’

‘I can’t see how,’ said Dr Jarvis. ‘There isn’t much similarity between Donaldson and Francis, is there?’

‘They both had their initial X-rays on the same day,’ I pointed out.

‘How is Francis now?’

‘He’s dying.’

‘There you are then. His X-ray results must have been right.’

I hesitated. I didn’t like arguing with a hospital consultant. I’d been brought up to respect them. ‘Not necessarily,’ I said. ‘He could be dying because he expects to die. He has a lot of faith in doctors. Maybe his body is just doing what it’s been told it should.’

‘Poppycock,’ said Dr Jarvis baldly.

‘I honestly think it would be worth checking him out,’ I said. ‘If I get him along to the hospital can you arrange an urgent check X-ray?’

Reluctantly, Dr Jarvis agreed and so I rang for an ambulance to take Mr Francis to the hospital. Then I rang Mrs Francis to tell her that I wanted her husband to have another X-ray.

‘What’s the point?’ she whispered. Even two miles away, down a telephone line, the house smelt of death. ‘Lionel knows he’s dying and he knows that there isn’t anything you can do. It seems cruel to drag him along to the hospital.’

‘We mustn’t ever give up hope,’ I said and with some reluctance Mrs Francis agreed to let the ambulance men take her husband along to the hospital X-ray department.

* * *

Dr Brownlow caught me as I was leaving the surgery. ‘My grand-daughter rang me up last night,’ he said. ‘Only decent thing to have come out of my son. She says you want to have the evening off next Thursday to go and speak to some loony group in Barnstaple.’

‘Well, that isn’t exactly...’

‘No problem,’ said Dr Brownlow generously. ‘I’ll cover for you for the evening.’

He wasn’t really being as generous as he thought he was. But I didn’t like to say anything.

* * *

‘I’m afraid I’ve got bad news for you,’ I told Hubert Donaldson. ‘Your X-rays...’

‘I’ve got cancer,’ said Hubert bluntly.

I looked at him. ‘How did you know?’

He shrugged. ‘I just knew,’ he said. ‘It feels like I’m dying.’

‘There was a mix up at the hospital,’ I explained.

Hubert started to say something but began to cough. I gave him a handkerchief.

‘The hospital consultant who saw the X-rays says he doesn’t think there is anything they can do. But I’d like to arrange for a second opinion.’

Hubert shook his head. ‘No thank you.’ He looked at me. ‘But there is something you can do for me.’

‘What? If I can I will.’

‘Look after Ben when I’ve gone. I don’t want her put down.’

‘Of course,’ I promised.

‘Come and say "hello" again,’ said Hubert.

We went out together. Ben was sitting patiently waiting for her master. Her ears pricked up when she saw him.

I’d never before seen a dog so clearly devoted to a human being.

* * *

‘I feel like a duck!’ complained Mrs Tate, leading a line of small children into the surgery and settling herself down on the other side of the desk.

I raised an eyebrow.

‘I’m waddling like a duck and everywhere I go this lot follow me.’ She put one hand on her tummy and stretched her back with the other.

‘How many months are you?’ Not even I could mistake Mrs Tate’s pregnancy for a weight problem.

‘Only five,’ said Mrs Tate. ‘I always carry a lot of fluid. When I had Kevin I put on over two stones and Dr Brownlow was talking about renting me out as a barrage balloon.’

I flicked through her medical records. ‘Is this your first visit?’

Mrs Tate nodded.

‘You really should have come a bit earlier,’ I admonished her.

‘Didn’t seem a lot of point, I’ve had three so I know what to do.’

‘Slip your things off, climb up onto the couch and I’ll examine you,’ I told her, expecting her to slip off her skirt and any relevant underwear.

While I waited for her I studied her medical records. She certainly didn't seem to have had any real problems with her previous pregnancies. When I looked up I had quite a shock. Mrs Tate was sitting on the edge of the examination couch absolutely stark naked. Her clothes were piled in an untidy heap on the chair she'd vacated. Her three small children were standing by the side of the couch looking up at her. The eldest had produced a gobstopper on a stick from somewhere and was licking it furiously and noisily.

With four pairs of eyes watching my every movement I got up and went over to the couch.

'Why is that strange man touching you there?' one of the children asked as I examined Mrs Tate's breasts.

I blushed so much that I could almost hear the blood pumping into my face.

'They're breasts,' said Mrs Tate.

'Daddy touches you there,' said another small voice.

'No he doesn't.'

'Yes he does. I've seen him.'

'Does Daddy know this man is touching you there?'

'Why is he doing it?'

'Do you like it mummy?'

'I'd like to see you in a couple of weeks' time,' I suggested.

'I've brought you a sample,' said Mrs Tate. 'Get the sample will you Daphne?'

Daphne rushed over to her mother's bag and produced a pickle jar.

'I washed it first,' Mrs Tate assured me. 'Wouldn't a month do?'

'I think a month would probably do,' I agreed, taking the pickle jar off Daphne.

'Why did that man touch them?'

'To examine them.'

'Is that why Daddy touches them?'

'Don't be silly. Daddy isn't a doctor.'

I tested the urine sample as rapidly as I could. 'You can put your clothes back on now,' I told Mrs Tate. 'Your sample is perfectly OK.'

'Does that man touch everyone's breasts?' I heard Daphne ask in a loud voice as Mrs Tate and her brood disappeared down the corridor.

* * *

When I had first taken the job as Dr Brownlow's assistant I had been promised that I could have half a day off a week. But it hadn't worked out quite like that until, at the end of one morning surgery, Dr Brownlow suddenly appeared.

'Have you got any visits?'

'Not yet.'

'Take the afternoon off. I'll hold the fort and do this evening's surgery. Take a bit of a break. Have a look at the countryside.'

I didn't wait to be told twice. Ten minutes later I was sitting in my Morris, with the top down, driving along the lanes with absolutely nowhere to go and nothing special to do. It felt wonderful. About half a mile out of the village I joined the main road between Barnstaple and Lynton. I turned left and almost immediately I saw a pedestrian walking along the side of the road. I slowed and recognised Patsy Kennett.

'Where are you going?' I asked, slowing to a halt alongside her.

'Watersmeet!' replied Patsy. 'Just up the river from Lynmouth,' she added when I looked puzzled. 'I've got to take them some honey from the farm and I promised a friend I'd help out this afternoon.'

'Do you want a lift?'

She hesitated. 'Are you sure?'

I opened the passenger door. 'Jump in!'

She thanked me with a glorious smile that I'd never seen before and climbed into the front passenger seat.

'Do you walk everywhere?' I asked her.

'I walk a lot,' she replied. 'But I was going to catch the bus to Lynton and then walk along the river to Watersmeet.'

'I'd have thought you'd have been kept busy on the farm!' Patsy winced. 'Please don't you start! I get enough of that from my father.'

'I'm sorry! I didn't mean...'

Patsy smiled forgiveness. 'I know. It's all right. It's just that my dad is always moaning at me. He says I ought to work on the farm all the time.' She paused for a few moments. 'I like working on the farm but I like to get out a bit occasionally.'

'I nodded and nearly ran into the back of a large tanker which seemed to be stuck. Its front end was half way through the gates that led into the drive up to Mike Trickle's house and its back end seemed to be stuck in a hedge on the other side of the road. I braked hard, stopped and waited while the tanker driver struggled to extricate his vehicle. We both sat and watched him.

‘Do you like working at the pub?’

‘I only do mornings,’ said Patsy. ‘Gilly asked me to help out and she’s always been nice to me. I like her a lot.’ The tanker driver managed to free his vehicle and I moved ahead again.

‘You can take a short cut down there,’ said Patsy, pointing to a narrow lane on the left. I turned off the main road and drove down a steep hill. ‘How’s your father?’ I asked, driving slowly through a tiny hamlet. Half a dozen hens squawked and fluttered as I drove round a corner. ‘I was going to visit a few days ago but when I rang to make sure someone would be in Adrienne said he was a lot better and there wasn’t any need to call.’

‘He is a lot better, thank you!’ said Patsy. ‘He was better within a day of stopping the hawthorn. His breathing is fine now and all the water swelling has gone down.’

‘No more chest pains?’

‘No.’

‘Good.’

‘Do you think he’ll be all right now? He’s working on the farm again.’

‘I think so,’ I said. ‘Though I’d like to have a quick look at him sometime if you can persuade him.’

‘I think he and Adrienne were both a bit embarrassed,’ confessed Patsy. ‘I think we all know that the hawthorn was poisoning him.’

‘Possibly,’ I said cautiously. I swerved to avoid a rabbit that had run out onto the road.

‘I hope Adrienne learns from it,’ said Patsy. ‘She’s ever so keen on herbal remedies. I worry about it sometimes.’ She pointed to the left again. ‘If you turn down there we’ll be back on the main road again.’

I turned left and five minutes later we came to a fork in the road. The left hand branch was signposted to Lynton.

The right hand branch went down a narrow lane signposted towards Lynmouth.

‘Right?’

‘Yes, please!’ said Patsy. ‘Are you sure this isn’t taking you out of your way?’

I shook my head. ‘Dr Brownlow has given me the afternoon off.’ I suddenly had an idea. ‘You said you were going to walk up to Watersmeet. If I park in Lynmouth do you mind if I walk up with you?’

Patsy seemed surprised. ‘Of course not!’ she said. ‘There’s a car park right by the river. Turn right at the bottom of the hill.’

I hadn’t been to Lynmouth before and I immediately fell in love with it. As I drove down the hill the view across the harbour and out to sea was breathtaking. ‘Where does that go?’ I asked Patsy, nodding towards a road that climbed up a long hill in front of us.

‘That’s the road to Porlock.’

‘I wouldn’t like to try and get up there in the mist,’ I said. ‘It must be pretty dangerous.’ The road was unfenced and on the left there was a drop of several hundred feet down to the sea. I slowed down to wait for a coach to pass by before I turned right and then left into the riverside car park.

‘The men of Lynmouth once dragged a lifeboat up that hill,’ said Patsy. ‘There was a storm at sea and a foreign ship was in trouble. They tried to launch the lifeboat in Lynmouth but the sea was too rough so they decided the only thing to do was to carry it up the hill and all the way to Porlock.’

I turned into the car park and reversed into a space.

‘The lifeboat crew lashed themselves and all the horses they could find to the boat and dragged it right across the moors,’ said Patsy. ‘They even had to knock down part of a cottage because the road was too narrow for the boat to go through.’

We got out of the car, Patsy clutching her bag full of honey. I looked up at the sky. It was clear but I knew how fast the weather in North Devon could change. ‘I’ll just put the hood up!’ I said. ‘Can I get some lunch at Watersmeet?’

Patsy nodded.

Together we climbed down the narrow stone steps that led to the riverside path and started to walk along the banks of the river to Watersmeet. The rugged majesty of it all impressed me enormously and I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been for a walk with no purpose in mind. To spend a few hours doing nothing but walk alongside a beautiful river with a beautiful companion seemed exquisitely reckless.

As we walked on, in comfortable silence, I gradually began to relax more and more. The peaceful beauty of the river seemed to me to be a perfect antidote to the harsh realities of the real world. The river itself, tumbling over rocks and through fern and moss laden grottoes; the heavily wooded hills, laden with hundreds of silvery, stunted oaks; the wild flowers; the lichen; the fungi and the rays of golden sunlight which filtered through the branches of the trees all seemed soothing and relaxing.

Suddenly, Patsy reached out and touched me lightly on the arm. She stopped walking and pointed across the river. We had walked up a slight incline and the river was fifty to sixty feet below us. ‘Look!’ she whispered.

I stopped and looked in the direction she was pointing.

‘A heron,’ she said softly. ‘On the bank. Looking for fish.’ The tall, unlikely looking bird merged easily into its background of silvery oaks and stood with unnatural stillness. It looked more like a garden ornament than a real bird. Quietly and carefully the huge bird stretched its wings. Then, equally quietly and equally carefully, it folded them again and settled down to watch the river once more.

We walked on. Patsy pointed out a cormorant drying its wings, a dipper and a wild mink swimming silently and skilfully in a deep water pool. We both stood and watched two rainbow trout in a shallow pool.

A mile and a half up the river, as the path rounded a rocky outgrowth, I caught sight of a beautiful, fairytale house. 'Is that Watersmeet?'

Patsy nodded. 'The house was built as a fishing lodge but it's a tea room now. It was built at the point where two rivers merge.'

'It looks like something that Hansel and Gretel might have lived in.'

'I love it up here,' said Patsy. 'Even in winter when it's quiet.'

'What time do you finish work?' I asked her.

'Six o'clock.'

'Can I walk you back and then give you a lift home?'

Patsy blushed. 'You don't have to. I can easily get the bus.'

'I'd like to.'

She hesitated. 'Thank you,' she said. 'That would be nice.' She stopped as something occurred to her. 'But what will you do between now and then?'

'I'll walk further up the river!' She laughed. 'OK.'

'I'll see you at six then.'

Neither of us moved.

There was something else I wanted to ask her.

'It's very beautiful here.'

'Yes.'

Still she didn't move away.

'Very relaxing.'

She nodded.

'Do you have to go straight back home when you've finished work?'

Patsy looked down. For a moment I thought she seemed uncertain. 'No,' she said. 'Not necessarily.'

'Would you like to come out with me for a meal?' I could feel my heart pounding and my hands felt clammy. I desperately wanted her to say 'yes'.

'Where?' she laughed. 'There aren't any fancy restaurants round here, you know!'

'I don't care where. A pub. Fish and chip shop. Anything. Whatever we can find.'

She relaxed. 'I'd love to.'

I wanted to take her into my arms, hold her tight and kiss her on the lips. I held my hand out. She took it. We shook hands formally.

'I'd better go,' she said, not moving.

'OK.'

'Really,' she laughed. I loved the sound of her laugh.

'OK.'

'You'll have to let go of my hand.' I let go of her hand but still she didn't go.

'I'll have to ring my mum,' she said. 'To tell her not to expect me for my tea.'

I nodded.

Suddenly she turned and ran into the tea rooms. I stood still for a few moments and watched the door through which she'd disappeared. Then I followed her into the tea rooms and bought myself a Cornish pasty, a huge piece of home-made apple pie and a large glass of lemonade. Patsy had disappeared but it was good to know that she was close by.

* * *

'What's up?' asked Thumper in the bar of the Duck and Puddle much later that evening.

'Nothing.'

'You're quiet.'

'Just tired.'

But I wasn't tired. I wasn't tired at all. My mind was firmly fixed on the evening I'd spent with Patsy. And my memories of Patsy were dominated by my memory of our first kiss.

Some kisses are gentle and simply social; no more than a greeting, a brush on the cheek. Some exist only as a prelude to other activities. But our first kiss had a life and a meaning of its own. I felt that it marked the beginning of something important. I hadn't felt so excited by a single kiss since I'd been sixteen-years-old.

* * *

CHAPTER NINE

I had seen very little of Kay Wilson after our unconsummated evening meal but not long after that eventful evening I got an urgent telephone call asking me to go round to the cottage to see her husband.

'Come in!' I heard a voice call, when I knocked on the front door. I obeyed. Inside, the sight of all that chintz and all those dried flower arrangements made me feel quite nervous again.

'I'm over here, doctor,' said a gruff voice.

I walked further into the room and saw that the owner of the voice was sitting on the floor on the other side of the sofa. There was a blonde, curly wig, a lot of eye shadow, bright red lipstick and a heavy growth of beard. This was, I assumed, P.C. Wilson.

I introduced myself and tried not to look surprised.

'Thanks for coming, doctor,' said P.C. Wilson. 'I've got a bit of a problem, I'm afraid.' He was wearing a pale pink silk blouse through which a black brassiere was clearly visible, a very short black leather mini skirt, black stockings and a pair of bright red high heeled shoes.

'I've got my zip stuck,' the policeman explained. He moved slightly to one side so that I could see what he meant. A flouncy piece of material that hung in generous folds around the base of the sofa had become jammed in the zip of his mini skirt. P.C. Wilson and the sofa were as one.

I was proud of the fact that I didn't even blink. I bent down and tugged at the zip.

'It seems stuck,' I observed.

'Yes,' agreed P.C. Wilson. He looked as miserable as you might expect a man to look under such circumstances.

'How on earth did you get like this?'

'The skirt is a bit tight,' the policeman explained. 'I find it easier to get into it if I'm lying down.'

I poked at the zip with the blade of my penknife. 'I think you're going to have to choose between the skirt and the sofa cover.'

'Don't cut my skirt!' cried P.C. Wilson. 'I don't care what you do to the sofa but don't cut my skirt.'

Delicately, I cut a small hole in the chintzy material covering the sofa, enabling P.C. Wilson to stand up. He rubbed his back and examined the skirt zip ruefully.

'You should be able to mend it,' I assured him with entirely spurious confidence. My knowledge of zip technology has never been encyclopaedic.

'I'm very grateful,' said P.C. Wilson. 'If ever I can...'

I held up a hand, embarrassed. 'It was nothing,' I murmured.

Suddenly, P.C. Wilson seemed to remember something else. He hesitated, plucking up courage, and then spoke again. 'It's a bit of a cheek,' he said. 'But while you're here...', he paused and swallowed noisily. His adam's apple bobbed up and down in a rather startling way. 'I've got a rash...'

'Let me have a look,' I told him. 'I'll see what I can do.'

He took off his blouse, unfastened his padded bra and turned round to show me his back. 'It's very itchy,' he told me, reaching over his shoulder to point at a small red area in the middle of his back.

I leant forwards and looked closer. 'It's a small patch of dermatitis,' I told him. I bent down and picked up his discarded upper under-garment. 'It's the nickel,' I explained. 'The nickel on the catch at the back of your bra.' I took out my prescription pad and wrote out a prescription for a small quantity of steroid cream. 'That should get rid of the rash. And to stop it coming back paint the metal catch with clear nail varnish.'

P.C. Wilson took the prescription I held out to him and smiled. 'That's wonderful!' he said. Suddenly he seemed to notice the watch on my wrist. 'Is that the time?'

I told him it was.

'I must rush and get changed for work,' P.C. Wilson said, striding out of the living room and heading for the stairs.

'Would you like a cup of tea? Coffee? Put the kettle on, will you? I'll have a black coffee.'

I didn't really want anything but he'd disappeared before I had a chance to say anything so I wandered into the kitchen, filled the electric kettle with water and switched it on.

'Splendid!' said the same gruff voice a few minutes later. I had made two cups of black, instant coffee which were standing steaming on the kitchen table. I turned round and almost didn't recognise P.C. Wilson at all. He was wearing thick soled black shoes, smart blue serge trousers with a razor sharp crease up the front, a blue jacket with shiny silver buttons, a blue shirt and a black tie. Under his arm he carried a blue helmet with a shiny silver badge on the front.

I handed him his cup of coffee.

‘How are you enjoying life in Bilbury?’ he asked me.

‘Very much.’

My host attempted to drink his coffee, found it too hot and added a splash of cold water. ‘There’s a very low crime rate round here,’ he told me. ‘Good quality of life. That’s what it’s all about isn’t it?’

‘Absolutely,’ I agreed, trying to sip my coffee and burning my lips.

‘Must go!’ said P.C. Wilson, draining his cup and then rinsing it carefully under the tap before putting it down on the draining board. I followed his example and accompanied him out of the cottage.

* * *

Looking at Lionel Francis it was difficult to believe that he had ever been ill at all. He had regained all the weight he had lost and he looked as ebullient and as assertive as ever. His colour was still a little pale but he had lost the dreadful grey pallor that had made him look like a corpse in waiting.

‘How’s your chest?’ I asked him. ‘How do you feel?’

‘I rather hoped that you might answer the first of those questions,’ said Mr Francis with a sniff. ‘The answer to the second question is that I feel angry and aggrieved.’ He took off his jacket, pulled his tie to one side and started to unbutton his shirt.

I told him how sorry I was about the mix up over the X-rays.

Mr Francis said something that sounded like ‘Hrmph!’ and pulled off his shirt. He then pulled his short sleeved woollen vest up over his head. I picked up my stethoscope, moved round the desk and listened to his chest. It sounded good. I told him so.

‘My solicitor tells me that I should leave this to him,’ said Mr Francis, as he fastened up the buttons on his shirt. ‘But I thought I’d let you know that I’m taking legal action against you and the hospital radiology department.’

I stared at him in disbelief. ‘But why?’

‘Because you and the hospital very nearly succeeded in killing me. I’m not sure who should take the lion’s share of the blame but I’m happy to leave that to the lawyers and the courts.’ He held his head back while he tied his tie. It bore a pattern designed to induce nausea. ‘I know that your defence organisation will pay for your costs and for any damages that I may win,’ he went on, ‘so I won’t have your bankruptcy on my conscience.’

‘But it was all an accident,’ I cried in disbelief. ‘And things were sorted out in the end.’

‘An accident?’ Mr Francis sounded very bitter. ‘Your "accident" very nearly killed me. And it caused a considerable amount of emotional damage.’ He finished tying his tie and pulled his shirt collar back down. ‘This isn’t just a question of money,’ he said, leaning forwards as he pulled his coat on. ‘It’s mainly a matter of principle.’

Innocent though I was in the ways of the world I knew enough to shudder inwardly when I heard that word ‘principles’. When people start talking about ‘principles’ they invariably mean that they are about to start behaving in a pig-headed, short-sighted and self-destructive way.

Mr Francis glowered at me. ‘I hope that neither you nor Dr Brownlow take any of this personally. But this is something that has got to be done.’ He fastened his coat, patted his right hand on top of his head to make sure that his hair had not been disturbed too much and left me to my private fears and apprehensions.

* * *

As if waiting for Mr Francis’s writ to arrive wasn’t enough I was also constantly aware of the fact that I had to think of something to say to the North Devon Anti-Vivisection Group. I couldn’t think why I had agreed to speak to them (although I excused my folly to myself by arguing that I had been neatly and professionally outmanoeuvred) and as the date of my speech got ever closer I found myself hoping that I might lose my voice, break a limb or acquire some fearsome and outrageously infectious disease.

* * *

Nigel and Karen Woodlee both worked in London. He had a job as a currency dealer in the City branch of an American bank and she had an equally prestigious and presumably equally overpaid job with an English merchant bank. Each week they spent Monday to Friday in their smart flat in Pimlico and then spent their weekends at their cottage in Bilbury.

‘I’m sorry to call you out at the weekend,’ said Nigel Woodlee, genuinely apologetic. It was early one Saturday afternoon and I’d been playing pool with Thumper in the bar at the Duck and Puddle.

‘We’ve been decorating the bedroom,’ said Karen. She like her husband, was wearing an expensive pair of jeans and a pale, polo necked sweater. His was blue, hers was green. She wore yellow rubber gloves and held a wallpaper scraper in her left hand.

‘We want to try to retain as many of the cottage’s original features as we can,’ Nigel told me. ‘We had the old fireplace unbricked and we’re having a woodburning stove put into the kitchen.’

‘We’re doing as much of the work as we can,’ said Karen. ‘It’s very. therapeutic.’

‘The problem is,’ said Nigel, very seriously, ‘that we hit a bit of a snag in the bedroom.’

I nodded, put on my most experienced and unshockable look, put my black bag down on the floor, folded my arms and prepared myself for a torrent of personal secrets.

‘You heard it first, didn’t you darling?’ said Nigel to his wife.

‘I think I did,’ Karen confirmed.

Puzzled, I looked from one to the other. ‘Heard what?’

‘The buzzing,’ said Nigel. ‘We’ve got bees nesting in our chimney.’

‘Have you been stung?’

‘Not exactly,’ said Karen, emphasising the second word. ‘Not yet.’

‘Only by some of the local builders,’ said Nigel with a hollow laugh.

Karen gave him a dirty look and then turned back to me. ‘We really need your advice.’

‘The thing is that we had to move them,’ said Nigel. ‘But we didn’t want to hurt them.’

‘Bees are very social creatures,’ explained Karen.

I murmured something suitably appreciative. I’d won £2 from Thumper and was rather looking forward to getting back for another few games.

‘We did try ringing the council to see if they could offer us some advice,’ said Karen.

‘But there was no reply,’ added Nigel.

‘It’s the weekend,’ I explained. ‘They were probably closed.’

‘They were,’ nodded Nigel.

‘So then Nigel had a brainwave,’ said Karen. ‘We used the vacuum cleaner to suck the bees down the chimney.’

‘The vacuum cleaner?’

‘It’s an industrial one,’ said Nigel.

‘Got a very powerful suck,’ said Karen. ‘It’s German.’

‘So the bees are now in the vacuum cleaner?’

They both nodded. ‘That’s the problem,’ said Karen. ‘We’re not sure how to get them out without getting stung.’

‘We’ve tied a plastic bag over the nozzle to stop them escaping,’ said Nigel.

‘But we can hear them buzzing about inside the bag,’ continued Karen. ‘And to be honest they sound a little angry.’

‘Hope you don’t mind us ringing you,’ said Nigel. ‘But we thought that it might come under ‘preventive medicine’.’

‘Since if we don’t do it right we’ll get stung.’

I scratched my head. ‘It’s not really my field of expertise,’ I confessed.

‘We did try to find a vet,’ said Karen. ‘But we couldn’t find one prepared to come out for bees at a weekend.’ I nodded. ‘Maybe you could just poke the vacuum cleaner pipe out through the window, take the plastic bag off and then turn the cleaner onto "blow".

‘It doesn’t do "blow",’ said Karen sadly. ‘We had thought of that.’

‘Couldn’t you just put the vacuum cleaner out onto the lawn and let the bees come out when they’re ready?

‘We did think of that too,’ said Nigel. ‘But then we thought that they would probably just all come back into the chimney again.’

‘Where is the vacuum cleaner now?’ I asked.

‘Still up in the bedroom,’ answered Nigel.

‘I’d better go and have a look,’ I said bravely. I got half way up the stairs but the sound the bees were making melted my courage. To describe them as angry did not seem accurate. I retreated. ‘I can hear them,’ I confirmed.

Suddenly I had a useful thought. They don’t come all that often but when they do they’re always welcome. ‘Can I borrow your telephone? I’ve thought of someone who might be able to help.’

Nigel threw aside a dustsheet and revealed a telephone. I dialled Patsy’s number.

‘Is that you Mr Kennett?’ I asked, when Patsy’s father answered the telephone.

‘Yes. Who’s that?’

I told him. ‘Would you like a swarm of bees?’ I’d remembered that he kept bees and produced honey.

He grunted and sounded unenthusiastic.

‘They’ll pay you £5 to take the swarm away,’ I told him, adding an extra incentive to the prospect of a free swarm of bees. I looked at Nigel as I spoke and raised a questioning eyebrow. He nodded furiously.

Fifteen minutes later Mr Kennett arrived. He collected the swarm of bees with consummate ease and pocketed Nigel Woodlee’s five pound note with an equal lack of effort.

* * *

Hubert looked terrible. His face was pale and gaunt and the skin over his cheekbones looked paper thin. But although his eyes were sunk deep into their sockets they still seemed to be full of wisdom. I felt that I could learn a lot from Hubert if only I knew what to ask him.

‘You ought to be in hospital,’ I told him.

‘Why? What can they do for me if I go into hospital?’ I had no answer to that and he knew it.

‘I know you have to offer and I know you want to help but all I need is a prescription for more morphine tablets for the pain.'

In hospital Hubert would have been sedated and drugged and deprived of his dignity. He would also have been separated from Ben.

'How many morphine tablets are you taking?' I asked him.

'Enough and no more.'

I hesitated. 'It's just that they're addictive.'

Hubert shrugged. 'I'll be dead before I'm an addict so what does it matter?'

He was right again. I wrote out the prescription he wanted and handed it to him.

* * *

Keith Harper was out of hospital again. I couldn't keep up with him. This time the doctors had kept him in the hospital for three days before discharging him.

'We can't find anything wrong with him,' an extremely puzzled but slightly snooty senior house officer told me, making it fairly clear that he didn't appreciate having his time wasted by patients who didn't have clearly defined symptoms.

Two days after Keith was sent home Mrs Harper rang me up again. He was, she said, as bad as ever. And she was right. Not only did Keith look terrible but a couple of quick tests that I did showed that he had acquired all the signs of diabetes again.

'He didn't feel at all bad yesterday,' said Mrs Harper. 'So he got dressed and I tried to make him do everything as normally as possible. He even went out for a ride on his bike. But when I got up this morning he was lying in bed looking terrible.'

I said I would ring the hospital and get them to admit Keith again.

* * *

Hubert was gradually getting weaker and weaker but he never showed any signs of fear or despair. I asked him how he could be so brave in the face of death but he insisted that he was not being brave.

'People are only brave when they have something to lose,' he told me. 'It's easy to seem brave when you've got nothing to lose.' He told me that he thought that people who had no hopes and no dreams found it easiest to appear brave while people whose lives were full of ambition and hope found it much more difficult to show bravery in the face of adversity.

There were many answers I wanted from Hubert but I wasn't clear in my mind about the questions I needed to ask.

* * *

CHAPTER TEN

If Patsy hadn't come with me I think I might well have run away. We sat together in the Morris outside the British Legion Hall in Barnstaple where I was due to lose my virginity as a public speaker and while I tried to stop my knees knocking and my teeth chattering Patsy did her best to fill me with confidence.

'You'll be super!'

I tried to say something but instead made a sound that would have embarrassed a frog with laryngitis.

'They're on your side!' Patsy reminded me. 'They already believe in what you're going to say. They aren't going to "boo" or anything like that.' It wasn't any good. Nothing she said seemed to make me feel any better. I felt I knew just how the Christians must have felt while waiting to slip into the ring to do a Wednesday afternoon matinee with the lions.

Eventually, I decided that whatever happened inside the British Legion Hall nothing could be worse than waiting outside the British Legion Hall. I looked across at Patsy, crushed her hand in mine and tried to smile. Judging by the look that appeared on her face the attempt at a smile wasn't a total success.

'I think I'll go in.'

'You'll be fantastic,' Patsy assured me. She leant across and kissed me. 'Do you want me to come in with you?' She paused. Despite my terror, or perhaps because of it, I realised just how much I cared for her. 'Or would you rather I waited for you out here?'

'Come in with me!' I begged. 'Or stay out here,' I added, not wanting to sound too demanding. 'If you'd rather.'

'I'll come in with you,' said Patsy firmly. So we went in together.

The British Legion Hall was built largely out of asbestos; the walls having been clad in flat sheets of the stuff and the roof built out of corrugated sheets. The front entrance, two doors wide, led into a small vestibule. On the right there were ladies and gents lavatories. On the left a counter separated off a small area which was equipped with coat and hat racks.

As Patsy and I walked in through the doors, past a small handwritten notice which announced that I would be addressing a meeting of the North Devon Anti-Vivisection Group at 7.30pm, I began to feel a few blood corpuscles struggling to make their way round my body and the usual small army of heavy-footed butterflies getting into position in my stomach. I patted my inside jacket pocket to make sure that the speech I had worked on with such loving care was still there.

There were two people standing in the hallway. Both were about five foot eight inches tall; both had black shoulder length hair; both wore black corduroy jeans and black sweaters; both wore earrings. One wore a beard. The other wore black lipstick. They were deep in conversation.

'Hello!' I suspect that I sounded even more timid than I felt. 'I've come for the lecture.'

The black haired stranger with the beard took a long drag on a home-made cigarette and nodded towards another pair of double doors. 'There's plenty of room,' he assured me. 'Make yourself at home.'

I muttered 'thank you' and the two of us headed through the second set of double doors. These led directly into the main room – a surprisingly large hall that was filled with two large blocks of wooden, folding chairs. At the far end of the room there was a stage, complete with two rich velvet curtains. In the centre of the stage there was a table and half a dozen wooden chairs. I looked around. The room wasn't exactly full. There were seats for about 150 people but most of them were unoccupied. To be precise 143 of them were unoccupied. The audience consisted of just seven people. They were spread around as though determined to minimise the risk of cross infection.

'It's not too daunting a crowd, anyway,' whispered Patsy.

'I think I'd rather there were one or two more people in the audience,' I whispered back. 'It's a bit depressing isn't it?'

Still holding hands Patsy and I sat down at the back of the hall. I took advantage of the moment to take a close look at the audience. There were four men and three women. Three of the men were in their sixties and looked as though they'd probably come in to get out of the cold. Or maybe they thought it was a dominoes evening. The exception was a teenager who carried a large folder and a spiral bound notebook. Only one of the women looked as though she was there to escape from the cold. The other two were teenage girls who were giggling and nudging each other.

We sat there for what seemed like a short eternity but was in fact probably no more than about twenty minutes. I tried hard not to look at my watch more than once a minute. The other seven members of the audience seemed well endowed with patience. The only sounds to break the silence were the regular ticking of a large clock to the left of the stage and the intermittent giggling of the two teenage girls.

Suddenly, the peace was broken by the bursting open of the doors behind us. We all turned round and saw the girl and the man in black walking through. They walked straight down the centre of the room and climbed up onto the stage together. Once on the stage the man with the long hair tapped a microphone with his fingernail and when he was satisfied that it was working satisfactorily he leant forwards and spoke into it.

'Can you hear me?'

The words boomed and bounced around the hall. The acoustics were terrible. No one replied, of course, but he rightly took our silence as confirmation that he could be heard.

'I'm afraid we've been let down by our speaker,' said the man with the beard.

I looked across at Patsy at the same instant that she looked across at me. As I stood up the man with the beard was saying something else. 'I'm the speaker!' I said, raising my hand like a schoolboy who wants to attract the attention of the teacher. I spoke so quietly that I wasn't sure that I'd actually said anything out loud. The man with the beard didn't seem to be aware that I'd said anything. I felt Patsy reach up, take my hand and squeeze my fingers. I knew she was trying to give me strength. I coughed loudly. The man with the beard looked straight at me.

'Do you want to say something?' He frowned at me.

'I'm the speaker,' I said again. It came out much louder than I'd intended; uncomfortably close to a shout.

The small, slighter figure who had accompanied the man with the beard onto the stage, the one wearing black lipstick, got to her feet and moved to the front of the stage. 'I'm Kim!' She walked to the front of the stage and jumped down. Then she hurried up the central aisle to where Patsy and I were sitting. She held out her hand as she approached and I couldn't help noticing that her fingernails were also painted black. 'I'm so pleased that you could come! Why didn't you tell us that you were here?' She didn't wait for an answer but turned her head towards the man with the beard. 'That's Garth,' she said, nodding in his direction. 'He's our President.' She hadn't let go of my hand and she now started to pull me down towards the stage.

I turned to look at Patsy. She mouthed 'Good luck!' to me and blew me a kiss. I stumbled against one of the chairs in the row in front and only just managed to recover my balance. With the girl in black lipstick leading the way I followed. Suddenly, taken by a fresh moment of raw panic I patted my chest pocket to make sure that my speech was still there.

On the stage I shook hands with Garth who stared at me from underneath huge black bushy eyebrows and who seemed to me to have an almost demonic look. The only piece of pink flesh that I could see was his nose which was red rather than pink. The rest of his face seemed to be covered entirely by hair.

I can't remember much of what happened next. It all seemed to be over in an instant. One minute Garth was introducing me and I was pulling my speech out of my inside jacket pocket and the next minute I was refolding it and putting it back into my pocket, climbing down off the stage and walking back up the central aisle to where Patsy was sitting waiting for me. The only thing I was aware of was that most of the audience seemed to be clapping. There wasn't a lot of noise and they weren't exactly hysterical but they weren't booing either.

'Marvellous!' whispered Patsy as I sat down. 'You were terrific.' She leant across and kissed me on the cheek. It was what I wanted to hear and I believed every word of it. All the terror now seemed worthwhile.

After that Garth spoke for a while and then Kim read out a list of names and places and addresses and then the meeting was over.

'Was it really OK?' I asked Patsy, as the other seven members of the audience scraped their chairs across the wooden floor.

'It was wonderful!' said Patsy, beaming at me. 'Really,' she insisted. 'It was great.' 'I think the trick is to forget about the audience,' I whispered. Now that I was an experienced public speaker I felt I knew the tricks of the trade. We turned and started to make our way towards the exit and as we did so I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned to find the young man with the file and the notebook standing behind me.

'I'm afraid I'm not very good at shorthand,' he apologised. 'But would I be right in saying that you feel that animal experiments are a waste of money?'

'Absolutely!' I agreed vehemently. It never occurred to me to ask him why the fact that he wasn't very good at shorthand was of any significance. And I was too thrilled by the fact that a significant part of the audience was asking questions to ask myself why.

'How would you describe the sort of doctors or scientists who perform animal experiments?' asked the youth with the notebook.

'Barbarians!' I said instantly. 'These are the evil men of science.'

'Thank you very much,' said the young man, carefully writing all this down in longhand. He closed his notebook and scurried away and as he did so Kim, the girl with the black lipstick, appeared in his place.

'I just want to thank you for giving such a stirring speech!' She held out a hand. 'You're very brave,' she said. 'We very much appreciate it.'

'My pleasure!' I said. I didn't quite understand why it was brave but I wasn't going to duck any compliments.

'I'm sorry there weren't any more people here tonight,' Kim apologised. 'But we clashed with a secret meeting of the Freedom For Animals Campaign.'

I smiled and shrugged aside the lack of an audience.

Garth, Kim, Patsy and I then all shook hands with one another and Patsy promised that we'd try to attend next month's meeting. Then Patsy and I drove back to Bilbury and I didn't know whether I felt so good because I was relieved that it was all over or because it had all gone reasonably well but I didn't care why because just feeling wonderful was quite enough. And when I dropped her off at the farm Patsy let me kiss her and that made two in one evening and I was so excited that I didn't get to sleep until three in the morning.

* * *

The call from Mrs Harper came just as I was sitting down to my dinner.

'I'm sorry to ring you in the evening,' she apologised. 'But the hospital said that I was to ring you at the first sign of anything being wrong.'

'Absolutely right,' I told her. I asked Gilly to put my dinner in the oven and then raced over to Mrs Harper's cottage. When I got there I found Keith lying on the sofa in his pyjamas and dressing gown. He had been crying but was trying hard to be brave. His mother looked as though she too was struggling to hold back the tears.

'It was almost exactly the same as last time,' she told me. 'He was fine when he came out of hospital. I thought I'd keep him off school for one more day - just to make sure that he was all right - and he spent the day playing.' Suddenly, she started to cry. 'Can't you find out what is wrong with him, doctor? Please. It's worrying me sick.' She bent over the sofa and cradled her son in her arms.

I swallowed and leant forwards. 'Let's go through what you did today,' I said to Keith. It was clear by now that whatever Keith's problem was it was caused by something he did, ate or came into contact with at home. His symptoms weren't typical of an allergy reaction but I was beginning to think that this was the only possible explanation.

Painfully, slowly and in between moments when both of them were too tearful to talk, Keith and his mother detailed the day for me. I could detect nothing in what they told me that would explain Keith's condition and the more I looked at him and thought about it the more convinced I became that whatever Keith was suffering from it wasn't an allergy problem.

'Try to think back to the last time Keith came out of hospital,' I said to his mother.

She nodded to show that she was concentrating hard.

'Has he eaten or done anything today that he ate or did last time he came out of hospital?'

There were, of course, quite a number of similarities. Keith had eaten toast on both days. He had watched television. And he'd had his favourite meal of baked beans with a poached egg on top. But none of this explained his symptoms.

'I wore my new jeans,' said Keith suddenly. It was the first time he'd spoken for several minutes and both of us looked at him. 'My new blue jeans,' insisted Keith. 'I wore them both times.'

Mrs Harper smiled at her son and then looked at me and shrugged. Like her I wasn't immediately convinced that the jeans were relevant but then a question occurred to me.

'When did you buy the jeans?' I asked Mrs Harper. 'How long before Keith first became ill?'

'I bought three pairs on the market in Barnstaple,' said Mrs Harper. 'They were quite cheap and he gets through clothes very quickly.' She stopped and thought for a moment. 'I bought them two or three days before he first went into hospital,' she said. She looked at me sharply. 'Could that be it?'

'He's worn them each time he's been taken ill?'

She nodded.

'Could I see them?' I had no idea how a pair of jeans could have made Keith so ill but it was too much of a coincidence to ignore completely. Mrs Harper got up and disappeared up the stairs. Moments later she reappeared clutching three pairs of jeans. Two pairs were folded and still had the manufacturer's cardboard label attached to the back pocket. The third pair were creased and had clearly been worn.

'These are the pair that Keith's been wearing,' said Mrs Harper, handing me the crumpled pair. 'I haven't washed them yet.'

I looked at the jeans. They seemed like a perfectly ordinary pair of jeans. But they were the only possible explanation I could think of for Keith's symptoms. When I spoke to the hospital I suggested that they run some tests on the jeans to see if they could find anything in them that would explain Keith's symptoms. The doctor I spoke to sounded sceptical but agreed that they had nothing to lose by trying.

* * *

Hubert should have visited me but I hadn't seen him for over a week and I was worried. What made it worse was the fact that I didn't know where to look for him. And then Miss Johnson took a telephone call from a Mrs Roberts who had, she reported, discovered an old tramp lying half unconscious in her summer house. I went round there straight away.

'It was a terrible shock, doctor!' said Mrs Roberts. 'I only popped in there to check on some flowers I was drying.' Mrs Roberts did not have the demeanour of a woman who copes well with the unexpected. I think that she would have probably panicked if she'd found mildew on one of the stored deckchairs. She led the way down the garden path towards a small octagonal summer house that stood on the bottom of the lawn.

Inside the summer house, wrapped in a rug and curled up on a small pile of hammock cushions lay Hubert. His dog Ben lay by his side. Both looked exhausted.

'I didn't know whether to ring you or the police,' said Mrs Roberts.

'You did right to call me,' I told her. I reached out and touched her arm. 'Thank you.' I smiled at her. Mrs Roberts wasn't used to people smiling at her and she scurried away up the garden path. 'I'll be in the kitchen if you want me,' she called as she retreated.

I knelt down and put a hand on Hubert's shoulder. He didn't move. Gently, very gently, I shook him. Slowly, he stirred and opened his eyes. 'Are you OK?'

For a moment or two he looked confused, as though he wasn't certain where he was. He rubbed his chin, opened his mouth and licked his lips. Judging by the state of his beard and the smell coming from the rug he'd been wrapped in he'd been lying in the summer house for several days. He looked weak and dehydrated.

'I...' he began. But nothing else came out of his throat. His voice had apparently disappeared. He rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth and tried again. This attempt was no more successful than the first.

'Can you move?'

He tried to sit up but didn't have the strength. I put an arm behind his shoulder and helped him first to a sitting and then to a standing position. I was astonished to find out just how light and thin he was. It was like lifting a bird.

'I...' he tried again. I lowered my head so that I could hear better. 'I was tired. I had to lie down.' He tried to push me away so that he could stand alone but I held onto him. He would have fallen otherwise. I knew that however much he hated the idea he was going to have to go into hospital.

* * *

Just as I'd promised Hubert, I'd taken Ben home with me to the Duck and Puddle. When she wouldn't eat properly I decided to take her along to see the local vet.

While I was sitting waiting in the vet's living room Mrs Wilson, the district nurse, came in. She was carrying her two cats in a wicker basket.

'I didn't know you'd got a dog!' She seemed strangely subdued.

I told her about Hubert and asked her what was wrong with the cats.

She looked down at the wicker basket as though surprised to see that she had them with her. 'They're just old,' she answered.

The vet didn't have a proper consulting room since most of his work was done on the local farms so he saw Ben and I in his kitchen. It was the grubbiest room I'd ever seen. It looked like a lending library for germs. The vet, though, was rather jolly. He was bluff, huge and well built. He wore a rusty brown coloured thorn proof tweed suit with a matching waistcoat. His jacket had leather patches on the elbows and leather guards on the cuffs. He wore a pair of heavy brown brogues that were caked with dried mud and manure. He had a thin thatch of ginger hair combed across the top of a freckled scalp and a lot of darker hair growing out of his nose and ears. He had the bushiest eyebrows I'd ever seen.

After examining Ben carefully he took a thermometer out of his breast pocket and put it up her bottom. Ben looked at me sadly, as though asking me if such an indignity were really necessary.

'There's nothing wrong with her,' said the vet, shaking the thermometer and putting it down on the top of the fridge. He hadn't bothered to wash it. 'She's just a bit miserable. Missing her master I expect.' I had explained about Hubert.

'Lots of love and affection and a few long walks,' prescribed the vet. 'That's what she needs.' He picked up the thermometer and put it back into his breast pocket. He still hadn't washed it.

As I left I passed Mrs Wilson preparing to carry her basket of cats into the kitchen.

'I hope everything is OK,' I said.

She looked at me as though puzzled.

'With the cats.'

'Oh, thank you.'

Ben and I left and later that afternoon I took her for along walk around Dr Brownlow's estate.

* * *

It would have been an exaggeration to say that Patsy's father and I had become firm friends but he no longer treated me with the contempt he'd originally shown and I wasn't quite as frightened of him as I had been. Those were steps forward in the right direction as far as I was concerned. No one had ever mentioned the hawthorn tablets and Mr Kennett was now quite well again; there were no signs of his 'heart trouble'.

I sipped at the glass of homemade parsnip wine which he'd given me and listened as he told me about the case of shingles he'd had in 1963.

'The doctor was no bloody good at all,' Mr Kennett complained vehemently. Then he remembered who I was. 'No disrespect to yourself, of course.' For him that was quite a climb down.

'No offence taken,' I assured him.

'The rash was two thirds of the way round my waist,' continued Mr Kennett, pouring himself another glass of home-made wine and offering me a refill. I put my hand over my glass and shook my head. I'd already explained three times that I had to drive but Mr Kennett was either unconvinced by the research showing a relationship between alcohol consumption and impaired reflexes or else he wasn't listening to me.

'Do you know what happens if a shingles rash goes completely round your waist?' He drew an imaginary circle around his waist as he spoke and spilt a large measure of his parsnip wine onto his trouser leg. He gazed down at the growing damp patch and then decided to ignore it. But he did refill his glass. I said I didn't.

'Dead!' said Patsy's father emphatically. He slammed his fist down on the sofa and spilt more parsnip wine. 'When the rash meets you're as good as dead.' I nodded. He was convincing and I wasn't in the mood to start an argument.

'Dr Brownlow didn't know what to do!' insisted Mr Kennett. 'No idea!' he cackled. He seemed pleased at the memory. I half opened my mouth to defend my employer but thought better of it. I knew that Dr Brownlow would forgive me.

'Alf Watercombe got me better again,' insisted Patsy's father. 'He wrapped a fresh circle of bullrushes round my waist every morning exactly as the sun came up over Shapcott Hill.' He pointed towards the window but it was pitch black outside. As he pointed he spilt more parsnip wine. Suddenly he lunged forwards, eyes glaring. 'You wouldn't think that would work, would you?'

He had me on a hiding to nothing and we both knew it. Whatever I said the reputation of orthodox medicine was lost.

'No,' I said.

'Haaargh!' said Patsy's father. He shook his head and the combination of the sound and the noise made him look a bit like a horse. I didn't have the faintest idea what to say to that but I was suddenly saved by an angel walking into the room.

'Hello!' said the angel. 'I'm ready.'

I could hardly believe my eyes. I'd never seen anyone so beautiful.

'You look beautiful.'

'Do you like it?' Patsy lifted the dress a few inches and pirouetted. The dress was calf length pale pink satin. Below her waist it billowed like a cloud. At and above the waist it fitted her like a glove. There were no straps and I had no idea what was holding it up. I hadn't realised before what a perfect figure she had.

'I like the dress,' I said. 'And you look beautiful.'

Her mother, who'd been hovering in the doorway behind her, came forward looking as proud as only a mother can look. She leant forwards and whispered something in Patsy's ear. Patsy blushed. Patsy's mother then draped a silk scarf around her daughter's neck.

Patsy's father managed to suppress his romantic urges. 'You'll freeze to death. Going out half naked.'

'Dad!' pleaded Patsy. 'Don't spoil things.'

'I'll get your coat,' said Patsy's mother.

Patsy sighed. Her father repeated his impression of an unhappy horse.

Patsy's mother disappeared for a moment and came back with a dark grey woollen coat which she draped round Patsy's shoulders. Patsy looked embarrassed. I looked at her and smiled. She still looked radiant. But then I was biased. To me she would have looked good dressed in a cardboard box.

'Hadn't we better go?' asked Patsy.

I looked at my watch. There was plenty of time. 'Yes.'

Patsy kissed her mother and said goodbye to her father. I promised them both that I would look after their daughter. Patsy put her shoes into her coat pockets and put her wellington boots on to cross through the aromatic mixture of mud, silage and animal waste in the farmyard.

While she fastened her seatbelt I turned the key to start the car. Nothing happened. I tried it again. Nothing. A quick glance at the dashboard instruments showed that I had left the headlights switched on while I'd been parked. The lights had drained the battery.

Angry with myself I explained what I'd done.

'Never mind,' said Patsy. 'These things happen.' She leant across and kissed me on the cheek. Suddenly I felt better. I loved her more every moment I knew her.

'You should be shouting at me,' I said. 'It was a stupid thing to do.'

Patsy shook her head. 'It was my fault. I took so long.'

I heard someone tapping on my window, turned and saw Patsy's father standing there looking puzzled. 'What's up?'

'The battery's flat,' I confessed, miserably.

'Stay there!' he said unnecessarily. He disappeared back into the house. Moments later he reappeared holding a large key carried on a piece of bent and rusty wire. 'You can borrow the second best tractor.'

Patsy and I both got out of the car. I thanked Mr Kennett and we crossed the courtyard to the open barn where the second best tractor was stored.

* * *

'Bring Patsy if you like!' Dr Brownlow had said when he'd invited me to join him and a few of his friends. 'I hear you two are something of an item these days.'

'An item?' I laughed, blushing. 'What's that supposed to mean?' I knew exactly what he meant.

'Going out together. Dating.'

'We are going out together,' I agreed.

'She's a nice girl,' said Dr Brownlow. 'I delivered her.' He remembered the name of every child he'd ever delivered. He was proud of them all and loved them too.

'I'll ask her,' I said. 'I'd love her to come.'

'We usually dress,' Dr Brownlow told me.

* * *

The gardener had hung candles in jam jars from the lower branches of the corridor of trees that lined the driveway. It all looked like something out of a fairy tale. There were already half a dozen cars parked in the large, rectangular gravelled area in front of the house. There was a Jaguar, two Rovers, a Mercedes, an Aston Martin and a brand new Rolls Royce Silver Shadow which was coloured gold and had a gold plated silver lady mounted on the radiator cap. I parked Mr Kennett's second best tractor in between one of the Rovers and the Aston Martin.

Dr Brownlow's butler, Bradshaw, opened the front door. He didn't seem to recognise me though this was probably because of the hired dinner suit I was wearing. I don't think I would have recognised myself.

Patsy and I were the youngest there by at least a generation and a half. Apart from Dr Brownlow there was no one else in the room that I recognised. Dr Brownlow introduced us to everyone but I have never been very good at remembering a dozen names in one go and I was too busy trying to decide which of the guests owned the Rolls Royce to pay proper attention. I had never seen anything quite so gloriously tasteless and it had made a lasting impression on me. The last couple he introduced us to were Dr Charles Jarvis and his wife Carolyn. 'Are you the radiologist?' I asked, relieved to find someone whose name I knew.

He said he was. He looked even older than he sounded on the telephone but seemed no less bad tempered. His wife was much more fun. She seemed about fifteen years younger and wore a tight pink dress that looked expensive but that was far too small for her. The dress had lots of ruffs and flounces but there weren't enough of these to disguise the rolls of fat around her waist. She had well used laughter lines around her eyes and seemed to take to Patsy straight away. 'We've had a writ from that damned patient of yours,' said Dr Jarvis gruffly. He sounded as though he blamed me for it.

'Lionel Francis?'

Dr Jarvis nodded. 'Have you heard anything?' he wanted to know.

'Not yet. But he did tell me he was going to send a solicitor's letter.'

We talked for a while about the possibility of Mr Francis winning damages and the rising enthusiasm of patients for legal action. It was a dull conversation which, I suspect, probably bored Dr Jarvis as much as it bored me but we seemed to have little in common other than this one rather sad episode. We were eventually saved from one another when Bradshaw came in to announce that dinner was ready.

I found myself sitting between Carolyn Jarvis and a woman of about seventy whose name I couldn't remember. She had a large, old-fashioned hearing aid clipped to the front of a garment which looked as though it had been designed for bridal wear and she had brought with her to the table a large gin and tonic which Bradshaw refilled regularly and without being asked. Patsy was seated at the far end of the table, between Dr Brownlow and a grey haired old man whose slightly shabby evening wear was put into shadow by a bright red velvet bow tie.

Whatever financial problems Dr Brownlow was having there were no signs of poverty in the dining room. The room, which was as large as a barn, was warmed by a massive log fire in a great stone fireplace and lit exclusively by candles. The flickering lights and the smoke from the fire and the candles gave the whole room a romantic, mediaeval atmosphere.

Much of the meal is now but a blur in my memory. I tried to make polite conversation with the two ladies on either side of me but failed fairly miserably. The old lady with the deaf aid thought, for some reason, that I was her bank manager and spent most of the evening complaining about the quality of the bank's services and the unreasonable extent of its charges. I suspect that I probably added to her sense of confusion by agreeing wholeheartedly with all her criticisms of the banking system. The radiologist's wife, on my other side, seemed unwilling to talk about anything that didn't involve her children. These were, I gathered with some surprise, grown up with offspring of their own, but she talked nevertheless with genuine passion about playgroups, infant schools and the quality of modern education. What I had mistaken for laughter lines around her eyes turned out to be lines made by squinting. Through vanity she had refused to bring with her the spectacles which she clearly needed.

Eventually, in some despair, I struck up a conversation with a small, almost entirely bald man who was sitting quite near to me. He wore a smart, military style moustache and even while seated had an unmistakably military bearing. It was this conversation which led to something which was destined to change my whole life.

‘Do you live in Bilbury?’ I asked him.

‘Good God! No!’ he replied with some force. ‘I live in town.

I like the bright lights and the buzz.’

‘Really?’ I said. ‘Have you come here specially for this evening?’ I had assumed that by ‘town’ he meant London.

He, in turn, seemed surprised by my question but confirmed that he had indeed made the journey to Bilbury specifically to attend Dr Brownlow’s dinner party.

‘Are you staying the night?’

‘I’m driving back home.’

‘Isn’t it a rather long journey?’

‘Not particularly. It only takes twenty minutes or so.’

At this point I realised my mistake. ‘Oh, you mean you live in Barnstaple?’

He looked at me as though I were mentally deficient and nodded warily.

‘Do you work there?’

‘I’m Robert Wallace. I run one of the local papers. *The Barnstaple, Bideford and Bilbury Herald*.’

‘Oh, I know it!’ I said brightly, though my recognition of his product didn’t seem to excite him in quite the way I had hoped it would.

‘You’re the new apprentice, aren’t you?’

I nodded. I hadn’t thought of myself as an apprentice before but it wasn’t an inaccurate description.

‘Very pretty wife you’ve got.’

‘Oh, Patsy and I aren’t married,’ I said, automatically, though I realised a split second later that I rather liked the way he’d assumed that we were.

‘Very pretty girl anyway,’ said the publisher. He pushed a large piece of parsnip into his mouth and chewed on it thoughtfully. The parsnips weren’t very well cooked and the chewing took quite a lot of effort. ‘Do you fancy writing a column for us?’

I didn’t think I’d heard him properly. ‘I beg your pardon?’

‘A doctor column,’ explained Mr Wallace. ‘My wife’s always on to me about it. She’s been saying for years that we should have a doctor page.’ He cut a roast potato in two and put half into his mouth. ‘I did ask Brownlow,’ he confessed, speaking with some difficulty. ‘But he wouldn’t do it. Too damned lazy.’

‘I’m not sure,’ I said, rather hesitantly.

‘We’ll pay you,’ said the publisher. ‘But six pounds a week is all we can manage.’

‘Six!’ I repeated. It sounded quite a lot.

‘Eight then,’ agreed the publisher. ‘But that’s it.’

‘Would it have to have my name on it?’ I asked warily.

All the doctor columns I’d ever seen before had been written under pen names such as ‘Dr Goodnight’ or ‘Dr Helpful’.

‘Oh, I think so, don’t you?’ said the publisher. ‘People want to know who is writing the stuff they read these days.’

‘How many readers does the paper have?’

‘We sell 30,000 a week,’ replied Mr Wallace. ‘But you can multiply that by three or four.’

‘That’s 100,000 people a week!’ I said, horrified at the responsibility.

‘More than you’d meet in a lifetime working as a GP,’ agreed the publisher. He speared a piece of cauliflower and bit a chunk off. ‘You could do a lot of good with a column in our paper.’ He added two slices of carrot to the masticated cauliflower. ‘I’ll tell the editor to get in touch with you to fix things up.’

* * *

It snowed heavily while we were having dinner with Dr Brownlow and as we crowded together in the hallway staring out through the front door the night looked absurdly romantic. Everything was covered in a thick layer of soft snow and the silence seemed strange and all invasive. There was a full moon and the fluttering snowflakes were backlit by moonlight as they gently made their way earthwards. We’d only been indoors for four or five hours but already the snow was at least six inches deep. Trees, garden statues and cars were all outlined in snow.

‘It’s going to be a miserable journey home,’ moaned Dr Jarvis, staring out gloomily.

‘I hate snow,’ said the publisher emphatically. ‘Hate the stuff.’

I turned my collar up, slipped out into the snow and ran over towards Mr Kennett’s second best tractor. Walking was difficult since with every step I took, my feet disappeared entirely from view. I climbed up onto the tractor’s outside step, opened the cab door and picked up Patsy’s wellington boots. Then I ran back to the house. Moments later the other guests gazed in admiration as Patsy slipped off her delicate evening shoes and slid her feet into her boots.

‘What a wonderful idea!’ said Mrs Jarvis. ‘How did you know it was going to snow, dear?’

‘Do you want to borrow them?’ asked Patsy.

Mrs Jarvis laughed uncomfortably. ‘Oh, no thank you!’ she said emphatically, as though she found the idea very slightly offensive.

‘Is that yours? the publisher asked me, nodding towards the tractor.

I shook my head. ‘I borrowed it off Patsy’s father.’

‘How did you know it was going to snow?’ asked Dr Brownlow.

‘Just an old piece of country folklore,’ I told him. ‘When ducks sleep in groups of three or more it means it’s going to snow.’

Everyone seemed impressed. ‘I hadn’t heard that one before,’ admitted Dr Brownlow, which wasn’t surprising since as far as I knew it was entirely original.

‘Looks a bit glum, doesn’t it? said the old lady with the deaf aid. ‘Has it been snowing?’

‘Does anyone need a lift?’ I asked. ‘I’m sure Mr Kennett wouldn’t mind if I did a bit of ferrying when I’ve taken Patsy home.’

‘Oh, I don’t think that will be necessary,’ said Mr Wallace.

‘Our cars should be able to cope with a bit of snow.’ He tiptoed down Dr Brownlow’s stone staircase and stepped warily over towards the gold coloured Rolls Royce.

The rest of us took this as a cue and seconds later we were all tip toeing our way through the snow towards our vehicles (all apart from Patsy that is - she was able to stride confidently through the snow in her boots).

As Patsy and I drove away I turned back for a second to watch the chaos developing behind us, as one after another, Dr Brownlow’s guests discovered that expensive two wheel drive motor cars can be just as uncontrollable in the snow as cheap ones.

‘Well, you did offer to help them,’ said Patsy. ‘I thought it was very nice of you!’

* * *

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Most of Dr Brownlow's patients either lived in the village of Bilbury itself or in one of the nearby villages such as Patchole, Shirwell, Kentisbury or Combe Martin but one afternoon I received a call asking me to visit a patient in Barnstaple.

'He's apparently a patient of Dr Brownlow's,' said Miss Johnson, who had passed the message on to me. 'He has collapsed.'

I drove to Barnstaple as fast as my Morris would go and was quite breathless when I reached the address I'd been given. I leant against the doorbell and waited. The door was opened a few moments later by a young woman in a quilted dressing gown. At the neck of the dressing gown I could just see a few wisps of nightdress. Her attire surprised me a little since it was still early in the afternoon. 'He's in the bedroom,' she said, with tears in her eyes. I followed her down the corridor and found my patient lying on his back on a bed.

He would never again have to worry about finding a tie to match his shirt. He would never again curse as he struggled to find the partner to a single sock. He was beyond my help. Apart from the sheet which covered his body he was as naked as he had been at the other end of his life and although I didn't know exactly why, I thought he looked vaguely familiar.

The question I asked as I turned to the young woman in the doorway still haunts me occasionally. 'Had your father been ill?' That's all. Five words that at the time seemed to make a natural question. The man was clearly in his late fifties or early sixties. The woman could be no more than thirty. They both looked quietly respectable. The woman certainly looked more like a daughter than a lover. Or at least she looked more like I thought a daughter ought to look like. I was too inexperienced to know that appearances can be very deceptive; the Don Juan may turn out to be a grubby little man with a thin moustache and a spray of dandruff on his shoulders; the wife beater may turn out to be a plump, jovial fellow with bifocals and a slight stutter.

'He wasn't my father,' said the young woman, blushing bright red. She paused and looked away. I understood instantly. 'He used to come here two or three times a week.' She sat down on the other side of the bed and took the dead man's hand in hers. 'He was a client. A regular.'

'Had he been ill?'

She nodded. 'He'd been very ill recently. Something to do with his chest.'

'What happened?'

'We were making love. Suddenly he cried out in pain. He fell back clutching his chest. That was it. He didn't say anything or do anything else.'

'Had he had chest pains before?'

'I don't know. I don't think so.'

'But he had been ill?'

'He told me that he nearly died.'

I turned and, for the first time, stared properly at the dead body. Suddenly I knew who it was. I was looking at Lionel Francis. I was astonished that Lionel Francis should visit a prostitute. He hadn't seemed the type.

'What are we going to do?' asked the woman. She looked lost and very alone, like a child in a crowd whose mother has moved ahead too quickly. There were, I noticed, tears running down her cheeks. 'It was the first time we'd seen each other for some time,' she told me. 'I wanted to make things special for him because of that.'

'Where are his clothes?' I asked.

She opened the wardrobe and showed me. Lionel Francis had hung his suit up neatly on a hanger. Even his shirt was on a hanger, with his tie draped around the collar.

'Help me dress him!' I told her, pulling his suit out of the wardrobe.

When we'd finished I told her to get herself dressed while I rang for an ambulance.

'Man collapsed in the street,' I told the ambulance controller. 'A woman took him into her house but he was dead by the time I got here.'

* * *

I hadn't forgotten about the column I was supposed to be writing for the local newspaper but I had rather hoped that Mr Wallace had forgotten. Or that he and his editor had second thoughts when reconsidering the idea in the cold light of day. However, the newspaper editor who telephoned was in no doubt about the publisher's commitment.

'I gather you spoke to Mr Wallace and agreed to write a column on medical matters?' The caller sounded weary of life, weary of his job and especially weary of his publisher hiring inexperienced strangers to write columns.

'Yes. But I don't expect he intended me to take him seriously.' I thought I'd give them an easy way out.

‘Mr Wallace always expects everyone to take him seriously,’ said the caller very quickly. ‘I hope you haven’t changed your mind since the meeting.’

‘Well, no, not exactly.’

‘Good. We’re looking for 1000 words or so once a week. We’re going to put your column onto our Family Page so we’ll need the copy every week by 4.00pm on Thursday afternoon.’

The idea of writing a thousand words on anything startled me. And the idea of producing a thousand words every week sounded daunting beyond belief. ‘What did you want me to write about?’

‘We rather hoped you’d come up with the subjects,’ said the editor. ‘You’re the expert after all.’

‘But I’ve got no experience...’

‘Don’t you worry about it,’ the editor reassured me. ‘We’ll put all the commas in all the right places. You just deliver your copy on time.’ The phone went silent though I could hear him scrabbling through papers and talking to someone else. ‘Where is it that you live?’

‘Bilbury.’

‘Of course. I’ve got the address somewhere. Well, if you pop it in the post on Wednesday morning that should be fine.’

‘When do you want to start?’

‘Might as well start this week, eh? Get going with it.’

‘This week?’ It was Monday. I had less than two days to think of a subject and write a thousand words about it.

‘Great!’ said the editor. ‘I gather the publisher fixed a fee with you?’

‘Er... yes.’ I remembered him talking money but I couldn’t remember the fee we’d settled on.

‘I’ll get our accounts department to put you on the contributors’ list. If you haven’t started getting cheques in a year let me know.’ ‘In a year?’

‘Just joking. They’re not quite that bad. Look forward to getting your copy then. Cheerio for now.’ And he was gone.

* * *

Miss Thwaites sat down, leant across the desk and smiled at me. ‘I must say just how much I admire you for speaking out the way you did.’ I didn’t have the foggiest idea what she was talking about but I felt a strange, empty feeling in the pit of my stomach. ‘Needless to say I’m right behind you!’ she added.

‘I don’t want to appear too stupid,’ I said, cautiously, ‘but could you please tell me what it was that I said and where it was that you read it?’

Miss Thwaites looked surprised. ‘The story about the animals,’ she explained. ‘In today’s *Daily News*.’

Part of me didn’t want to know any more. But part of me knew that I had no option. ‘I don’t suppose you have the paper with you?’

Miss Thwaites shook her head.

Apart from me everyone in Bilbury seemed to have read the *Daily News* that morning. By the end of the first hour six people had congratulated me on my courage and had wished me all the best for the future.

‘I’m not sure I agree with you but there aren’t many people in your profession who’d have had the guts to say it,’ said Thumper Robinson who’d come into the surgery to have some stitches removed. He’d fallen off a ladder while doing some building repair work at the Duck and Puddle and he had gashed his leg rather badly.

Eventually, I could stand it no longer. I dashed out of the surgery and popped my head into Miss Johnson’s office. ‘I shan’t be a minute!’ I promised. ‘I’ve just got an urgent call to make.’ Miss Johnson, who knew that there had been no urgent requests for home visits looked at me as if I’d gone mad. ‘I’ll be back in less than ten minutes!’ I called over my shoulder, scurrying past the waiting room and out to where my car was parked. Ben was sitting on the front passenger seat. She pricked up her ears when she saw me coming.

‘I thought you’d be in for a copy!’ said Pete Marshall. He reached underneath the counter and produced a copy of the *Daily News*. ‘I put one on one side for you,’ he told me with a wink.

‘I took the paper from him and, discovering that I didn’t have any change on me, asked him to put the paper on my bill. ‘Must go!’ I said, desperate to open the paper and see what I’d said. I didn’t like to open it in the shop. I wanted to read it somewhere private.

The story was on page three. ‘DOC SLAMS RESEARCH BOFFINS’ screamed the headline. I hardly dared look any further but I forced myself to read on. To start with I couldn’t imagine how the *Daily News* could have possibly got hold of the story and then I remembered the scruffy youth who’d interviewed me at the end of my lecture. I closed my eyes and took deep breaths in an attempt to relax my body a little.

After a couple of minutes I felt strong enough to drive the rest of the way back to the surgery so I folded up the newspaper, put it into the glove compartment and started the car up again. I’m not sure how I managed to get through the rest of the surgery. It was all something of a blur. I had an awful feeling that I was going to regret giving that speech.

* * *

I was with Hubert when he died. I even managed to persuade the ward sister to let me smuggle Ben onto the ward. The two of them greeted each other with great joy.

‘God is waiting for you, my son,’ said the clergyman who had arrived uninvited at Hubert’s bedside.

‘Bugger God,’ said Hubert. ‘What did God ever do for me when I was alive and needed him? Why should I have anything to do with him when I’m dead?’ He tried to lift himself off the bed but fell back in a fit of coughing. Shocked, the clergyman retreated.

‘You will look after Ben, won’t you?’ I promised again that I would.

Hubert died with one hand clasping mine and the other hand resting on Ben.

I took Ben back to the Duck and Puddle with me and had great difficulty holding back the tears. I’ve always wondered where Hubert Donaldson came from and how he came to be a tramp.

* * *

With Ben curled up at my feet I sat down at the small table in my bedroom and positioned the new foolscap notebook I’d bought from the corner store neatly in front of me. Then I lined up the three pencils I’d bought. I’d decided to work in pencil so that I could rub out any mistakes I might make. The three pencils were all painted yellow and all had tiny rubbers attached to them. They looked very smart. I arranged them carefully so that the names stencilled in black along their sides were all facing upwards.

It was while admiring their neatness that I noticed that the lead of one of the pencils had broken. Deciding that it would be sensible to make sure that all my equipment was in good working order before I started I felt in my pocket for my penknife. But it wasn’t there. I got up from the table and looked in my jacket pocket. It wasn’t there either. Nor was it in my black bag. Then I remembered that I’d used it at the surgery to help Miss Johnson open a parcel. I got up from the desk and walked down stairs. Ben came with me. ‘Have you got a pencil sharpener?’ I asked my landlady.

‘A pencil sharpener?’

I nodded.

‘I’ll have a look.’

I thought that while I was waiting I might as well have a drink so I wandered into the bar and ordered half a pint of best bitter.

‘Sorry!’ said Gilly, when she returned a few moments later. ‘I can’t find a pencil sharpener anywhere.’

‘Thanks anyway,’ I said. It looked as though my column writing career was doomed before it had started. I wondered if I should ring up the newspaper editor now or if I should wait until the following morning.

‘But I’ve got a penknife,’ said Gilly. ‘Will that do?’

‘Thank you,’ I sighed. ‘That will do fine.’ I took the penknife off her, emptied my glass and went back upstairs. I sharpened my pencil, took the penknife back down to Gilly and then sat down again at my desk. Ben curled up by my feet.

I picked up one of the pencils and wrote my name on the first sheet in the notebook. Then I underlined it. Then I underlined it again. Then I wrote the date. Then I put the pencil down and went downstairs to the kitchen where I made myself a cup of coffee. Then I carried the cup of coffee back upstairs.

I stared at the sheet of paper and waited for inspiration to strike. I even picked up one of the pencils and held it ready in my hand so that I would be ready to write down the words when the muse decided to arrive. It seemed exhausting work. Within minutes I felt physically and mentally drained. My eyelids didn’t want to stay open and I had to prop my head up on my hands.

Then, out of nowhere, I had an idea. I picked up the pencil which had fallen out of my fingers and started to scribble my first column.

* * *

‘There’s a Mr Lister on the telephone for you,’ said Miss Johnson. ‘He’s rung four times already but I’ve told him you’re busy.’

‘Mr Lister?’

‘He says he’s from the *Herald*,’ said Miss Johnson suspiciously.

‘Oh, that Mr Lister! He’s the editor. I’d better speak to him.’ I picked up the telephone expecting to have to fend off the compliments.

‘We’ve got your first column safely.’

‘Oh good. I was a bit worried because I didn’t keep a copy. I’m glad it got there OK.’

‘It’s very good,’ said the editor.

‘Great. I’m glad you like it.’

‘There are just a couple of problems.’

‘Fine. I didn’t expect to get things absolutely spot on the first time out. What adjustments would you like to make?’

‘The first little problem is length,’ said the editor.

‘Did I do too much? I did get carried away a bit didn’t I? Still, you can always cut things down a bit can’t you?’

‘No, it isn’t too long at all,’ said the editor. ‘In fact we’ve got the opposite problem.’

‘It’s too short?’

‘It is a little. We need another 600 words or so to fill up the space we’ve given you.’

‘How much did I write then?’ I asked, puzzled. I hadn’t counted the words but there had been a lot of them.

‘Four hundred and seventeen.’

‘Oh.’

‘Never mind. It’s easily done.’

‘What’s the other problem?’ I asked him.

‘The subject,’ said the editor bluntly. ‘We discussed your piece at the editorial conference this morning and we felt that it was perhaps just a little bit too esoteric.’ I was startled by this. ‘Really?’

‘Afraid so. We felt that we might frighten some of our readers off if we devoted the whole of your first column to malaria.’

‘It’s a very important disease!’

‘But is it important in North Devon?’

‘Not very,’ I confessed. ‘It isn’t terribly common.’

‘That’s what we thought. We felt it might be better to tackle a more popular subject.’

‘Oh.’ I had difficulty in hiding my disappointment.

‘This isn’t a criticism.’ said the editor quickly. ‘Please don’t take it as such. Think of us as offering you constructive advice. We want to help you get this absolutely right. It’s going to be a very important column.’

‘Yes.’

‘What do you think about devoting the first column to the common cold?’

‘The cold?’ I said, very disappointed. ‘Isn’t that a bit ordinary?’

‘Ah. That’s the point, you see. It’s the sort of stuff our readers will love. Good solid, practical advice from you on how to treat a cold.’

‘OK.’

‘Do you think you could do something for us now?’

‘Now?’

‘It is Thursday,’ said the editor gently. ‘If you could dictate something to our copy takers before 4 o’clock this afternoon that would help us a lot.’

‘Of course.’

‘And we’ll need a photograph of you,’ said the editor. ‘To put on the top of the column.’

‘Is that absolutely necessary?’

‘Absolutely!’ said the editor, firmly. ‘The readers will want to know what you look like. Can we send a photographer round?’

‘Where?’

‘The surgery would be nice,’ said the editor. ‘A nice shot of you with your stethoscope round your neck and lots of good, medical equipment in the background.’

I said that I had a couple of calls to do but that when I’d finished I’d write my new column and wait for the photographer. The editor said he was very grateful and that he’d like to take me to lunch sometime.

* * *

‘Could I have a word with you about my feet?’ asked Miss Johnson.

‘Of course.’

Miss Johnson sat down in the patients’ chair.

‘What’s wrong with them?’ I asked her.

She carefully took off her shoe and rolled down her left stocking. ‘How do you think it’s coming along?’ she asked, lifting her foot up into the air.

I leant forwards and peered at it.

‘Just there,’ said Miss Johnson pointing. ‘My verruca.’ She gently prodded the sides of a large lump covered in yellow ointment. I leant a little closer. I’d never seen a verruca before. It looked like a small volcano.

‘I’m putting some ointment on it that I get from the chemist. Do you think it’s doing the job?’

I made some sounds which seemed suitably non-committal and nodded a lot. ‘We’d better have another look at it in another week. Bit early to say now.’

This vague endorsement seemed to please Miss Johnson.

She rolled her stockings back into place and then slipped her shoe on.

I felt quite pleased that she’d asked for my advice.

* * *

CHAPTER TWELVE

Followed by her three children and carrying the latest, Mrs Tate headed for the door. Her pregnancy had been entirely uneventful and she had come into the surgery for her postnatal examination. 'Goodbye, doctor!' she said cheerily. 'See you next time!'

When Mrs Tate had gone I went over to the basin to wash my hands. But when I turned on the tap nothing came out but a little steam. Some distance away I could hear pipes shaking and rattling under the pressure from the central heating boiler but no water came out into the basin. I tried the cold tap with exactly the same result.

'What on earth is going on?' asked Miss Johnson, putting her head around the door. 'It sounds as if the whole house is about to blow up!'

I waved my hands in the direction of the sink. 'There doesn't seem to be any water in the system.'

'We'd better tell Dr Brownlow! Someone ought to turn off the boiler before it blows up.' Miss Johnson seemed very worried so since I was near the end of the surgery and feeling like a bit of physical exercise I offered to go and find Dr Brownlow. I found him in the conservatory attending to his orchids. He paled when I told him the news.

'Don't look so worried!' I said cheerfully. 'The water board is probably digging up the pipes. They'll have you back on again before long.'

Dr Brownlow shook his head. 'It's nothing to do with the water board,' he told me glumly.

Puzzled, I just stared at him. Being city born I'd always assumed that everyone got their water supplies through the local water board. After all, who else was there?

'We've got a private water supply here,' explained Dr Brownlow. 'Our water comes from a stream fed well in the north field.

'A well?' I repeated incredulously, struggling with visions of men and women drawing water up with the aid of buckets.

'There's a pump,' explained Dr Brownlow, noticing my surprise. 'But it's got nothing to do with the water board.'

'So, what do you think could have happened?'

He shrugged. 'The pump could have stopped, a valve could be blocked...' he paused. 'Or the stream could have dried up.'

I was beginning to see why he was looking so glum. 'Streams don't dry up!' I said firmly. 'Do they?'

'They do sometimes,' said Dr Brownlow, miserably.

I went back to the surgery and left him setting off to try to find out what had happened to his water supply.

* * *

'You were right about the jeans,' said the doctor from the hospital. 'They were contaminated with phosphate. Keith has been suffering from phosphate poisoning. There's one patch of material on the right leg that's been soaked in a powerful industrial insecticide solution. Every time Keith put the jeans on his body absorbed more of the phosphate and his symptoms came back again.'

'But how on earth did the jeans get contaminated?' I asked. I'd never even heard of anyone suffering from phosphate poisoning before.

'That's what we hoped you could help us find out,' the doctor said. 'Do you think the jeans could have been contaminated at home? Maybe by a spillage from a can of insecticide?'

'I doubt it,' I told him. It didn't seem very likely that Mrs Harper would keep an industrial insecticide in the house. But when I rang her to tell her the good news that Keith's problem had been diagnosed I asked her if she had any insecticide stored in or near to the house.

'Good heavens, no!' said Mrs Harper instantly. 'I buy those sticky strips for flies in the summer but those are the only things I use.' There was a pause. 'When will Keith be able to come home?'

I told her that the hospital would probably let him home after another 24 hours observation. 'Have you still got the other two pairs of jeans that you bought?'

'Yes. Do you think I ought to throw them away? Or do you think it would be safe for him to wear them if I put them in the washing machine first?'

'I don't know. Do you mind if I get someone from the hospital to pick them up and have them tested?'

Mrs Harper said that she didn't so I rang the hospital back.

'Maybe the jeans were contaminated before Mrs Harper bought them,' I suggested. 'In which case it's possible that those aren't the only jeans that are dangerous.' I asked the doctor if he could arrange for someone from the laboratory to pick up the two remaining pairs of jeans and have them tested. He said he would. Then I told him the identity of the stallholder who'd sold Mrs Harper the jeans. 'It might be worthwhile getting someone to have a word with him,' I added.

* * *

I found Dr Brownlow standing in the middle of a large field to the north of the house. He was staring gloomily down a large hole in the ground. A large, metal manhole cover lay on the grass beside him.

'Have you found the problem?'

'The well is dry,' he said morosely, without looking at me.

'Have you checked the stream?'

'Not yet.'

'So it could just be a blockage?'

Dr Brownlow nodded but looked unconvinced.

'I'll come with you,' I volunteered. 'Where is the stream?'

We walked across to the edge of the field until we found a dry ditch running in the shade of a thick hawthorn hedge.

'There it is!' said Dr Brownlow, pointing to the ditch.

'That's your stream?'

'It was,' said Dr Brownlow. He walked along the bank for a dozen yards, then returned and walked a dozen yards in the other direction. 'It's unbelievable,' he said at last. 'That stream has kept this house supplied for a hundred and fifty years. I wouldn't have been surprised to see it running low but to see it completely dried up...' he shook his head as if he found it all quite unbelievable.

'Which way does it normally flow?'

Dr Brownlow looked at me as if I were simple minded and nodded to the left. I felt slightly embarrassed when I realised that the field was on a slope and that the stream would have found it difficult to flow in any other direction.

'Why don't we walk upstream a bit and see if it's dry all the way?'

Reluctantly, Dr Brownlow agreed and we walked in the direction that would have been upstream had there been any stream. After about two hundred yards we came to a point where the dry stream bed disappeared through a hedge.

'Whose land is that?'

'It used to be Lady Kentisbury's,' answered Dr Brownlow.

'Now it belongs to some fellow who works on the television.'

'Mike Trickle?'

'That sounds like it.'

'Not a very apt name if he depends on the same stream,' I commented.

Dr Brownlow looked at me sharply.

'Sorry.'

'He's got a different supply anyway,' said Dr Brownlow.

I jumped down onto the still muddy stream bed, bent over double and crawled forwards through the hedge. About a yard and a half into the hedge I came to a stop. 'Did you know there was a wall here?' I called back.

Dr Brownlow jumped down into the mud behind me and squelched his way forwards. 'Wall? What wall?'

I pointed through the hedge at a very solid looking concrete wall. Its foundations ran across the stream bed.

Dr Brownlow stared at the wall and banged his fist on it in frustration.

It looked as though he was going to be without water for some time.

* * *

'There are two registered letters for you this morning,' said Gilly, putting my breakfast down in front of me the following Saturday morning.

I looked up at her in alarm. I couldn't remember ever having one registered letter before. And I knew instantly that they were both bringing bad news. Why would anyone spend extra money on registering a letter to bring me good news. 'Where are they?' I croaked.

'I think I put them on the hall table,' said Gilly. 'I didn't think you'd want to be bothered with them until you'd had your breakfast.' I tried to forget about the mail and to concentrate on my bacon and eggs but I failed miserably. I got up from the table, went out to the hallway and collected the two letters. According to the franking marks one had come from a firm of solicitors in Devon and the other was from London. I picked the two letters up and carried them back into the bar. I put them down beside my plate and just stared at them for a few moments trying to decide which to open first and using the choice as an excuse to open neither.

'What's the matter?' asked Patsy, suddenly appearing from the kitchen and seeing that I had hardly touched my breakfast. 'Aren't you hungry?'

I lifted my head and tried to smile.

'What's wrong?' asked Patsy, immediately concerned. 'Bad news?'

I touched the two letters with the forefinger of my right hand. 'I think so.'

'What are they?'

‘Trouble.’

‘Haven’t you opened them?’

I shook my head.

‘Then how do you know that they mean trouble?’

‘I just do.’

Patsy sat down on the edge of the chair opposite me. ‘You’re going to have to open them sometime,’ she said quietly.

I nodded. After a moment or two I picked up the letter from London and used my knife to slit it open. My hands were trembling as I pulled out the letter that was inside.

‘Is it bad?’ asked Patsy.

‘Yes.’ I was still reading the letter but I knew that it was bad. ‘Someone has reported me to the General Medical Council.’

‘Why?’ asked Patsy, concerned. ‘Has a patient complained about you?’

I shook my head. ‘Not a patient. I’ve been reported for advertising and bringing the medical profession into disrepute.’

‘Advertising?’ Patsy looked puzzled. ‘What on earth does that mean? What have you done that’s disreputable?’

‘The complaint has come from another doctor,’ I told her. I didn’t really understand what it was all about either.

Patsy reached out and held my hand. For a few moments neither of us spoke. Eventually I handed Patsy the letter to read. I just couldn’t believe it. I’d only been qualified for a few weeks and already my whole career was threatened. My mind was a maelstrom of confused and confusing emotions. All my life I’d wanted to be a doctor. And now there was a very real chance that it was all going to be taken away from me. I wanted to know who had complained about me to the General Medical Council. I felt angry with myself for being so stupid as to speak at the animal rights meeting. I felt angry with myself for agreeing to write a column for the local paper. I felt myself drowning in anger and bitterness.

‘It doesn’t say who has complained about you,’ said Patsy, frowning. She was still reading the letter.

‘They don’t have to tell me who has complained,’ I explained.

‘So how do you know that the complaint came from a doctor?’

‘Because only a doctor would complain that I’ve brought the profession into disrepute or that I’ve been "advertising".’

‘But you haven’t been advertising!’ said Patsy.

‘Someone thinks I’m writing the newspaper column to try to attract new patients.’

‘But that’s daft!’

‘And someone – probably the same person – thinks that I gave that speech about animal experiments to try to attract patients too.’

Patsy shook her head. ‘It’s not fair!’ She looked at the letter again. ‘What do they mean about bringing the profession into disrepute?’

I shrugged. ‘That just refers to the speech about animal experiments.’ ‘But how did that bring the profession into disrepute?’ I shrugged. I didn’t know whether to scream or to cry. I felt desolate, angry and violent all at once. I felt pleased that the letter had arrived on a Saturday morning and that I didn’t have to do a morning surgery and grateful too that Dr Brownlow was on duty for the weekend.

‘I’m going to organise a petition,’ said Patsy. A tear was running down her right cheek.

‘No!’ I said sharply. ‘I’m in enough trouble already.’

Patsy reached out to me. ‘But I want to help you. It isn’t right. None of this is right.’

I stood up. ‘I know it’s not right!’ I said. ‘It’s bloody unfair. But organising a petition isn’t going to help.’ I could feel tears filling my eyes and suddenly I had a desperate desire to be alone. Like an animal who has been wounded I wanted to run away and hide. As I half turned to leave the table I remembered the second letter. I picked that up and tore it open. It was a letter from Lionel Francis’s solicitor informing me that his client was taking legal action against me and demanding £500,000 in damages. I threw the letter down onto the table and walked out of the bar with tears of frustration, sadness, anger and bitterness filling my eyes. Behind me I could hear Patsy crying. I wanted to go back to her; to hold her and comfort her; to share my sadness with her.

But I didn’t.

* * *

Outside the Duck and Puddle Ben and I got into the car. I felt as though I couldn’t breathe. Everything had happened so quickly that I couldn’t keep up. I felt as though I was running down an icy ski slope, totally out of control, with no idea how I’d got there and with no idea what was going to happen next. I felt lost, frightened and threatened. I felt as though my chest was in a vice.

For forty minutes I drove on automatic pilot. I drove without being conscious of anything else on the road. I drove without seeing any road signs and without knowing where I was or where I was heading.

I was awakened from this trance like state when I turned a corner, drove up onto a hump backed bridge and found myself bonnet to bonnet with a large Rover motor car that was towing a caravan. There was no room for our two cars to pass and the driver of the Rover, a blustery, red-faced man who was surrounded by a car full of wife and daughters, waved imperiously and angrily at me, indicating that I should go back and get out of the way.

I had my hand on the gear lever ready to put the car into reverse when I stopped. I'd had enough of people pushing me about. I just sat there and did nothing and stared out, unseeing, into the distance.

Slowly, I became aware that there was someone knocking on the side window of the car. I turned my head and saw the red-faced man from the Rover. The man's face was redder than ever and the veins on his forehead were pumped full of blood. The man's eyes were filled with frustration and rage and through the glass I could hear him shouting and swearing. I looked to the front. The Rover was still parked directly in front of me. In the front passenger seat I could see the man's wife. Her face was contorted with fury. She too was shouting but I couldn't hear what she was saying. Behind her I could see the faces of her two teenage daughters. Their faces, too, were full of anger.

If any of this had happened a day earlier I would have wound down my window, apologised profusely and backed my car up to a point where the Rover and its caravan could squeeze past. But I didn't. I switched off the ignition and took out the key. I then got out of the car. The red-faced man was still shouting but, strangely, I couldn't hear what he was saying.

Ignoring him I then locked the car door and put the key in my pocket. I left the car where it was, walked down the road a few yards, climbed over a stile and walked into a field that stretched so far into the distance that it seemed to meet the horizon. Suddenly I became aware of Ben. She was bounding along beside me, never straying more than a yard or two from my side though there were exciting looking rabbit holes all over the place. I bent down, stopped and hugged her, and then walked on.

A few moments later I reached the cliff edge. Several hundred feet below me the sea was crashing on the rocks and I could feel sharp, salty spray being blown against my face by the wind. I turned and looked behind me. The Morris was still parked where I'd left it. The red-faced man and his wife were standing on the road arguing. The man was pointing in my direction. I watched the scene dispassionately for a few moments. It didn't seem to have anything to do with me. Then I sat down on a rock and stared out at the sea.

Halfway across the Bristol Channel, maybe ten miles away, a tanker steamed slowly past. It moved with the grace that distance gives and I wondered what was happening on board. I wondered where the tanker was going. And I suddenly felt very small, very insignificant and very unimportant. Strangely, my problems felt small too and I realised just how little they mattered.

I closed my eyes and turned my head to face into the full force of the wind. The problems I had left behind seemed so insignificant that I couldn't understand why I had allowed myself to get so upset. I knew that I could live with whatever the lawyers and the General Medical Council did to me. I had done nothing to be ashamed of. I would not back down. I would not apologise. I would carry on doing what I felt was right. Ben, who was sitting by my side, rested her head on my thigh and I stroked her tenderly.

The wind got stronger and it started to rain. I shivered. I had no coat or jacket and I realised that I was cold. I stood and turned and looked back towards the road. It had taken them a long time but the bad-tempered family had managed to push their caravan out of the way and someone, presumably the red-faced man, had reversed and turned the Rover in a gateway.

Stuffing my hands into my pockets I strode back across the field to where my car was still parked on one side of the tiny bridge. By the time I got to it the red-faced man and his family had hitched their caravan up to their car and were about to start retracing their steps. I waved to them as they disappeared. Then Ben and I got into the car. I reversed quickly and easily, turned in a gateway and started the drive back to Bilbury.

Above all else I wanted desperately to get back to see Patsy. I felt bad because I knew that I had taken out my anger and frustration on her; I wanted to see her to tell her how much it helped to have her around. I wanted to tell her how much it helped to be able to talk to her and share things with her. I wanted to tell her that I cared for her and that she was more important to me than the lawyers or the medical profession. And most important of all I wanted to tell her that I loved her. This final realisation surprised me somewhat but I knew without a doubt that it was true.

The only thing that frightened me now was that Patsy might no longer want to have anything to do with me.

I need not have worried.

* * *

Like all doctors I had joined an insurance society the moment I'd qualified. The payment of regular premiums entitled me to legal advice and protection if ever I got into trouble as a result of practising my profession – in exactly the same way that motor car insurance protects a driver from financial ruin in the event of an accident. The next Monday morning I telephoned the Doctors' Defence Association in London and told them what had happened.

'Let me get this straight,' said the plum voiced stranger on the other end of the line. 'You have received a formal notice of complaint from the General Medical Council and a formal notification of impending legal proceedings from a solicitor?' He said all this as though anxious to make it clear that he regarded any doctor who required so much help as deserving everything that the might of the law could throw at him.

'That's right,' I admitted.

'You'd better see one of our solicitors,' sighed the man with the plum stuck in his mouth. 'I'll ring you back with a name and an appointment.' With that the phone went dead. It wasn't quite the support I would have liked but somehow that didn't matter. I had Patsy and Ben for love and support and needed only legal advice from the Doctors' Defence Association.

* * *

After the Monday morning surgery had finished I set off in search of Dr Brownlow. I found him in the walled vegetable garden examining some cuttings that he had taken a couple of months earlier. I showed him the two letters I'd received on Saturday.

'What rubbish,' he said when he'd read them. He handed the letters back to me with earthy fingerprints down both sides. 'You'll need the day off to see a solicitor in London.'

'I'm afraid so.'

'No problem,' said Dr Brownlow. He wiped his hands down the side of his trousers, put an arm around my shoulder and started walking towards the greenhouse. Once inside he sat down on the brick edge of one of the cutting beds. I sat down opposite him.

'The lawsuit is baloney,' he said. 'You can forget about that. Apart from anything else how can someone who's dead sue you? My guess is that the solicitor in Exeter is behind with his threatening letters. But the General Medical Council thing is a bit more serious. I suppose we'd better take that more seriously.'

I liked the way he said 'we'.

'Do you know who made the complaint?'

I shook my head.

'No idea?'

'None whatsoever.'

'Do you know if there are two separate complaints or if the same person has complained about the newspaper column and your speech?'

I shook my head again.

'My guess is that the two complaints came from the same person,' said Dr Brownlow quietly. 'And I think I know who it was.'

I was startled. 'Who?'

Dr Brownlow shook his head. 'I don't want to say anything yet. But I know who's likely to get up to tricks like this round here.' Suddenly he stood up and looked down at me. 'Remember this,' he said very seriously. 'Whatever happens I'm with you.' He held out his right hand for me to shake. I stood up and took it. 'Everything will be OK,' he said confidently.

I found his support and comfort very touching but 'thank you' was all I could think of to say.

* * *

Ben still missed Hubert, I knew that, but we were close friends. She came with me everywhere; sitting underneath my desk in the surgery, travelling in the car with me and sleeping on the bottom of my bed. I never used a lead. She always stayed with me and I couldn't imagine what life had been like without her.

* * *

I had a telephone call from the hospital to tell me that they had tested over a dozen pairs of jeans from the market stallholder who'd supplied Mrs Harper. In addition to the two brand new pairs that Keith had never worn they'd traced several other customers and tested their jeans too. None of them was contaminated with phosphorous. 'The only explanation we can think of is that someone walked past the jeans stall carrying a leaky insecticide container,' said the doctor from the hospital.

'And spilt some of the solution on one of the pairs of jeans that Mrs Harper bought?'

'Exactly. Once the spillage had dried out there wouldn't be anything to see,' the doctor went on. 'But the jeans would be soaked with phosphorous.'

I telephoned Mrs Harper right away and told her that the hospital would be posting the two new pairs of jeans back to her. 'How is Keith?' I asked her.

'He's fine!' said Mrs Harper. There was a long silence. 'I really can't thank you enough, doctor,' she said. 'You were marvellous.'

'I'm just glad that Keith is OK,' I said, self-consciously.

* * *

The receptionist was busy with her nails and her tongue peeped out between her lips as she concentrated on what she was doing. She finished painting the nail on the little finger of her left hand, held her hand at arm's length to examine her work and then blew gently on the nails a couple of times. Then she shook her fingers gently. Satisfied, she carefully transferred the brush with which she was painting her nails from her right hand to her left hand. She gripped it tightly but carefully between her thumb and forefinger so as not to smudge the polish that she had already applied. Then she started on the nails of her right hand.

I stood and watched her. I had been standing in front of her desk for what seemed like hours. It seemed to take her another hour to paint the nails on her right hand. Then she carefully screwed the cap back on the bottle of bright red nail varnish that she'd been using, waved both hands in the air a few times and looked up. She seemed genuinely surprised to see me standing there and raised a neatly manicured eyebrow.

I told her my name. 'I've got an appointment to see Mr Wellings.'

The receptionist carefully picked up the grey telephone on the desk in front of her and used a pencil to dial a three figure number. She held the telephone cautiously, taking care not to smudge her nails. It made her look as though she found the telephone offensive or distasteful in some way. She listened for a moment and then dropped the telephone back down onto its rest. 'He's got someone with him,' she said. 'You'll have to wait.' She nodded towards a pair of low black, imitation leather chairs on the other side of the narrow reception area. A low, glass topped coffee table stood in front of the two chairs. Upon it lay a pile of magazines and a single, slightly untidy copy of the *Financial Times*.

I wandered across and sat down. The building looked as if it had been converted from something much larger. The ceiling was high and vaulted and numerous tall partitions divided up the room into a number of small units. Whoever had organised the conversion had clearly had a limited budget. The partition walls were poorly made and all the furniture that I could see was cheap and slightly battered. I moved the *Financial Times* and flicked through the magazines. They were all, with a single exception, ancient copies of a legal journal. The exception was a copy of a giveaway magazine telling young couples how to get a mortgage for their first home. I flicked through it. It was full of photographs of luxury flats in central London and spacious country mansions with huge, colourful gardens. Real life.

Suddenly, I heard someone shouting my name. I looked across at the receptionist who was sitting staring at me. She had her arms folded in front of her. 'I've had to call you three times,' she complained. 'Mr Wellings is waiting for you.'

I stood up. 'Where is his office?'

'Through that door over there,' said the girl, pointing to a door at the far end of the reception area. 'Turn right and it's the second door on your left.' She sounded as tired and as bored as she looked.

The office was nine, maybe ten, feet square. It had no window and contained one filing cabinet, one artificial teak desk and three tubular metal chairs. That made it crowded. One of the chairs was behind the desk and sitting on it was a small bespectacled man in his late sixties. He wore a shabby, plain, grey suit, a faintly striped white shirt and a badly knotted brown tie with a swirling pattern in the material. This was Mr Wellings. The solicitor whom the Doctors' Defence Association had retained on my behalf.

'Sit down, sit down!' said Mr Wellings, lifting himself up a couple of inches from his own chair and waving a hand at the two chairs in front of his desk. An unpleasant cloud of aftershave almost suffocated me. I thought he looked very frail.

I pulled one of the chairs back and sat down. The office was bleak. On top of the filing cabinet there was a pile of papers and a dying cactus in a brown flower pot. The flower pot stood on a patterned saucer. There were more papers stacked up on the floor by the side of the cabinet. The floor was covered in dark green carpet tiles. There was no radiator but a small electric fire stood in one corner of the room. The room was lit by a fluorescent tube attached to the ceiling. The walls were painted white and the only relief came from a diploma in a black bordered frame that was hung on one wall. On top of Mr Wellings' desk there was a telephone, a blotter, a chipped mug used to store pens and pencils, a dirty mug that had had tea or coffee in it and now had a dark stain around the inside, a tray marked 'in', a tray marked 'out' and a small dictating machine. In front of him Mr Wellings had a foolscap pad of lined notepaper and a cheap ballpoint pen that advertised a firm of legal stationers. The 'in' tray was empty. The 'out' tray was full - though it contained but a single, thick, blue cardboard file. It looked a miserable place in which to work.

I introduced myself.

Mr Wellings looked up. 'You're a little late, aren't you?' I started to protest then decided that there wasn't any point and stopped. Mr Wellings had looked down again and was now studying a letter from the Doctors' Defence Association. 'How long have you been in practice in Devon?' he asked me without lifting his head.

'Four months.'

There was a long silence during which Mr Wellings incessantly clicked the retractor button on his ballpoint pen. 'And now you've received a complaint from the General Medical Council and a writ from a firm of solicitors acting on behalf of one of your patients?'

'Mr Francis wasn't actually my patient,' I corrected him.

'Dr Brownlow is the principal. I'm employed as his assistant.'

I said this not in an attempt to evade responsibility but merely because I felt I ought to put the record straight.

'And what does Dr Browning think of all this?" asked Mr Wellings. He put down his pen and started cracking his knuckles.

'Dr Brownlow has been very supportive.'

Mr Wellings snorted and picked up his pen again.

'Dr Brownlow doesn't think that I need worry too much about the letter from Mr Francis's solicitors,' I said, rather hesitantly.

'I see,' said Mr Wellings. 'Dr Browning is a qualified solicitor, is he?'

It's Brownlow,' I corrected him. 'No. He isn't a solicitor. But sadly Mr Francis is dead.'

Mr Wellings sat up sharply at this piece of news. 'Dead?

When did he die?' I told him.

Mr Wellings sniffed at this, pulled his legal pad towards him, picked up his pen and wrote something down. While he wrote I looked around. The room was small without being cosy, scruffy without being friendly and untidy without being relaxed. It looked as though it was a temporary office, borrowed for the day, though the nameplate on the door assured me that it wasn't. There were no signs of personal occupancy; no photographs; no knick-knacks; no souvenirs; no evidence of humanity. 'Is there any chance that the survivors may hold you responsible for the death?' asked the solicitor.

'I don't think so.'

'This other charge,' said Mr Wellings, 'the one from the General Medical Council. Do you have any idea where the complaint may have originated from?'

I shook my head.

'None whatsoever?'

'No.'

'It's a very serious charge,' said Mr Wellings sternly. He looked at me. 'You do realise that, don't you?'

My mouth felt dry. I tried to speak but my voice seemed to have disappeared. I nodded.

'If you are found guilty your name can be removed from the medical register.'

'Yes,' I managed to say. 'I realise that.'

'To all extents and purposes your career, your professional life, would be over.'

I swallowed hard. The solicitor seemed to be trying to frighten me but he was having the opposite effect. 'It all seems a bit daft,' I said. 'I had no intention of trying to attract patients. As I've already explained the practice isn't mine. It belongs to Dr Brownlow. I had no intention of advertising and I had nothing to gain by it.'

Mr Wellings sniffed. 'Are you still writing the newspaper column which features in the complaint?'

I nodded. I was getting slightly better at it too. I'd talked it over with Patsy and with Dr Brownlow. They'd both agreed with me that I shouldn't let myself be bullied. I wasn't doing anything wrong. 'There's no way that I could gain professionally by writing the column,' I insisted. 'It's a good way to help people with information. I've had a lot of nice letters from readers thanking me for the advice I've given.'

Mr Wellings frowned. 'That's not how the General Medical Council will see it,' he said. 'In their view you are enhancing your reputation among members of the public. You would, I think, be well advised to stop writing the newspaper column if you wish to remain on the medical register.' He glowered at me. 'And I certainly wouldn't advise you to tell anyone that you've received grateful letters from readers.'

I was beginning to wonder whether Mr Wellings was really on my side.

'Have I made myself clear?'

'Yes. Perfectly.'

'May I then write to the General Medical Council on your behalf to tell them that you apologise for your actions, you withdraw your allegations about animal experimentation and that you will cease to write your newspaper column?'

'Why do I have to apologise for my comments about animal experiments?'

Mr Wellings sighed. 'I understand that the official, establishment viewpoint is that animal experiments are worthwhile and important. Your views are likely to annoy and embarrass the establishment.'

'What are my chances if I fight?' I asked him. 'If I don't apologise or withdraw the comments I've made?'

'Very slim, doctor,' said Mr Wellings. 'Very slim indeed.'

He stood up. 'I suggest that you go back to Devon and that you think very carefully about what you're going to do. When you've made up your mind perhaps you'd be kind enough to give me a ring and let me know?'

He didn't shake hands but made it pretty clear that the interview was over so I stood up and left.

* * *

One thing I did learn from my visit to the solicitor's office was that I never wanted to work in London.

Living in the country for a few months I had forgotten just how noisy, dirty and inhospitable cities are. Everything seemed so grey, so dreary and so unreal. I had arrived at Paddington station and found it a deeply depressing experience. I had travelled from Paddington to the part of London where Mr Wellings had his cramped office by underground train and had found the journey had enhanced my sense of depression.

In Devon the air was clean and the pace of life was slow. In London the air was foul and everyone seemed to be rushing. Thousands spent much of their lives underground or in offices shut away from daylight. In Devon I could dawdle in the lanes and watch buzzards, swallows, badgers, foxes and rabbits. In London I had to keep my wits about me to avoid being crushed by the traffic.

In Devon there was time to think and to enjoy life. In London there was no time for thinking and no time for enjoying life. In Devon I felt alive and close to nature. In London I felt suffocated and too far from the things I had learned to value most. In Devon people smiled at one another and wanted to share their thoughts and experiences. In London people only seemed to scowl at one another and to covet one another's belongings.

* * *

When I got back to Bilbury, Dr Brownlow had had his well filled with a tanker full of water that he had bought from the water board. 'It's disgusting stuff,' he complained. 'It stinks of chlorine.'

In the surgery, water was strictly rationed and two house bricks had been put into all the lavatory cisterns together with notices requesting everyone to flush only when absolutely necessary. 'The water is cheap enough,' explained Dr Brownlow. 'But getting it here costs an absolute fortune. I had to get one of the local milk lorries to bring it in.'

'Did you find out why Mr Trickle had built a dam?'

It wasn't the wisest of questions for it turned Dr Brownlow bright scarlet and his face became unpleasantly contorted. 'Damn that Trickle!' he said angrily, banging his fist down on the nearest available surface which happened to be the desk. A half empty mug of coffee jumped two inches into the air and spilt most of its residue.

'He's building a trout pond in his garden,' complained Dr Brownlow. 'So he's diverted the stream.'

'Can't you stop him?'

'I might be able to if I could find him,' complained Dr Brownlow. 'No one ever sees him. And the workmen he's hired have come from London. They all seem to be staying in caravans.'

'But you must have some sort of legal rights! He can't just stop you using a stream that you've been using for years.'

'He can until I serve him with a writ,' growled Dr Brownlow. 'And I hate solicitors.'

'I'm sure Thumper would go in there one night and take the dam down,' I suggested.

Dr Brownlow looked truly horrified. 'That would be illegal. I couldn't countenance that.'

'So what alternative do you have? You can't keep hiring milk lorries to bring you tankers full of water.'

'I've got a dowser coming tomorrow,' said Dr Brownlow. My sense of puzzlement clearly showed.

'A dowser,' repeated Dr Brownlow. 'A water diviner.'

I nearly laughed but stopped myself just in time. 'Do you really believe in all that? Hazel twigs and unseen forces?'

'That was my first reaction,' sighed Dr Brownlow. 'But everyone I've spoken to says that the only way to find water is to use a diviner.'

'But how on earth can it possibly work?'

Dr Brownlow shrugged.

'Do you mean they haven't yet got machines that can find water underground?'

Dr Brownlow shook his head. 'They all say that the most effective way to find water is to use a good dowser.'

'What time is he coming?'

'It's a she and she's coming in two days.'

'Do you mind if I come and watch?'

'As long as there's no sniggering,' said Dr Brownlow firmly. 'I don't want her going off in a huff without finding me some water.'

'You really do believe in it, don't you?' I was astonished that a man of science should believe such mumbo jumbo.

'I'll tell you whether I believe or not in two days,' said Dr Brownlow. 'If they could find me water I'd believe in fairies.'

* * *

'There was a message for you from Mrs Francis,' said Miss Johnson. 'She asked if you'd be kind enough to give her a call.'

For a moment I hesitated. I felt sure that my lawyers would not have wanted me to telephone a woman whose late husband had started a legal action against me. That, I decided, was a good enough reason to call her.

'I'm glad you phoned,' said Mrs Francis. 'Really glad. I was afraid you might not want to speak to me. I wouldn't have blamed you.' She spoke in a rush.

'I was very sorry about your husband's death.'

'Thank you,' said Mrs Francis. There was a pause. 'I wanted to speak to you about two things,' she said. 'First I want to thank you for the tactful way you handled my husband's death.'

I started to say something then stopped.

'I knew all about his lady-friend,' said Mrs Francis. 'And I can guess how he probably died. I'm very grateful to you.'

I mumbled something.

'Second,' she went on, 'I want to let you know that I've instructed my husband's solicitors that they are to withdraw the lawsuit against you immediately and to pay any costs that you might have incurred. I didn’t want him to bring the case in the first place and I’m certainly not going to consider letting them carry on with any legal action now.’

‘Thank you,’ I said.

‘You don’t need to thank me,’ said Mrs Francis. ‘The case should never have been brought. You never did anything wrong and even if someone at the hospital was at fault it was never fair to drag you into it.’ She paused. ‘I’m instructing the solicitors to drop the lawsuit against the hospital too. I don’t care whether or not I could have sued them.’

As soon as she’d put the phone down I rang Patsy to tell her the good news. Then I rang Dr Brownlow to tell him the good news too.

They were both delighted.

Even Ben seemed to suspect that something good had happened.

* * *

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

‘I’m sorry to interrupt,’ said Miss Johnson, poking her head round the surgery door, ‘But there’s been an accident on the Barnstaple road.’

I stood up. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said to Mrs Jones, the vicar’s wife. ‘But I’ll have to go. If you’d like to wait?’

‘Don’t you worry, doctor,’ said Mrs Jones. ‘You go and see to the accident. I’ll wait here.’

I turned to Miss Johnson. ‘Where exactly is it?’

‘Near the junction with the road into the village.’

‘Do you know who’s involved?’

‘The caller just said that someone had been knocked off a bicycle.’

‘Have they called an ambulance?’

‘They said they had but I’ll ring and check when you’re on your way,’ said Miss Johnson. Her efficiency never failed to amaze me. Somehow she seemed to get calmer and more authoritative the more threatening the emergency.

The junction between the Bilbury road and the main Barnstaple to Lynton road was no more than three quarters of a mile from the surgery and I was there less than five minutes after Miss Johnson had interrupted the surgery.

I knew the moment I arrived that there was no hope. Young Keith Harper must have been killed instantly. Judging by the tyre marks on the road the car that had killed him had been travelling far too fast for the fairly narrow road. Keith was lying in the middle of the road: his chest was crushed and both his arms were clearly broken. His neck was broken too. Strangely, apart from a trickle of blood at the corner of his mouth and another trickle coming out of his nose his face was unmarked. His bright red bicycle, buckled into waste metal, was lying at the side of the road twenty yards away. I felt for a pulse but could feel none. Gently, I pulled up his jumper and then unfastened his shirt and tried to listen to his heart. But it was no longer beating. With tears in my eyes I knelt beside him and took hold of one of his hands. It seemed such a cruel, cruel waste.

Someone spoke behind me. ‘Is he dead?’

I turned round. It was Thumper. His truck was parked a few yards down the road.

I nodded.

‘Poor little beggar.’ Thumper had tears in his eyes too. ‘I wish I could get hold of the bastard who killed him.’

I nodded towards Keith’s body. ‘Did you find him?’

Thumper nodded and wiped his nose with the back of his hand. ‘I just came round the corner and there he was – lying in the middle of the road. There was no sign of any car.’

I looked past him. A small queue of vehicles had built up on the road out of Barnstaple. I turned round and looked the other way. Another small queue of vehicles coming from the Lynton direction had also built up. ‘Let’s move him to the side of the road.’

Thumper and I picked up Keith’s body and carefully lifted him over to the side of the road. We were about to lie him down on the grass when I heard a voice shouting. ‘Don’t you know you’re not supposed to move accident victims?’ The owner of the voice was a small, squat man in a three piece grey suit. ‘I trained in first aid!’ he announced firmly.

‘I’m afraid he’s dead.’

‘This is the doctor,’ said Thumper.

The stranger stared at me and then at Keith’s body. He paled. ‘Are you sure?’

I nodded. ‘I’m afraid so.’

The small man turned away and a few seconds later I heard him retching in the hedge.

‘Someone’s got to tell his mother,’ said Thumper. ‘I don’t envy anyone that job.’

I knew the moment he said it that I had to do it.

I waited until the ambulance came and I stood there while they loaded Keith’s body into the back. A police car and two officers from Barnstaple came with the ambulance. They took charge of everything with quiet efficiency; measuring tyre marks and taking a statement from Thumper. ‘Do you mind if I go?’ I said to one of them.

He looked at me.

‘I’ve got to go and tell the boy’s mother.’

Thumper looked at me but didn’t say anything.

‘Thank you, doctor,’ said the policeman, undoubtedly relieved that someone else was doing the job.

‘I want to go before she hears it from anyone else,’ I said quietly but I walked to my car with leaden legs. I didn’t want to go. I would have given anything in the world to have been somewhere else. I had told relatives in hospital that patients had died but I'd never done anything like this before and I knew it was probably going to be the most difficult thing I'd ever done.

Those next few minutes scar my memory. I can remember every instant, every feeling and every tear we shed together. I sat in my car for nearly five minutes outside Mrs Harper's cottage trying to pluck up courage to ring her doorbell and tell her that her son, the one person who meant anything in her life, was dead.

I can still remember the smell of the nearby fields where a farmer had been spraying fertiliser on his pastureland. I can remember the sound of seagulls perched on the roof of the house; seagulls which flew away when I shut my car door and walked across to the front door. I can remember Mrs Harper opening the door and smiling at me, unaware that I had called to draw the curtains on her life and cast her into a gloom and deep despair that might lighten but that would endure and to some degree be with her always.

I can remember making her sit down before I told her. I can remember the look on her face when she knew that I had called with bad news and I can remember the instant of realisation when she knew, even before I had told her, that Keith was dead. I can remember the primeval scream of anguish which leapt from her body when she understood what had happened. I can remember the tears and the sobbing and the time when there were no more tears left and she was crying silently and tearlessly.

I don't remember how long I was there with her but after a while there was a quiet knock on the door and I took my arm away from around her and went and answered the door. It was Thumper.

'I've been waiting across the road,' he said. I had never heard him speak with such gentleness before. 'You have to look after other patients but she can't be left alone.'

'No.' I said. 'She can't.'

'I'll take her home with me,' said Thumper. 'Anne and I will look after her.' It was an act of simple, thoughtful generosity which sealed forever my love for Bilbury and its villagers; people who would always look after one another, like members of some large, extended family.

I drove back to the Duck and Puddle, checked that there were no calls for me and then went around to the back of the pub where I could hear Frank chopping wood. He knew about Keith Harper and he knew where I'd been.

'Can I do that for a while?' I asked him.

He handed me the axe without question and for twenty minutes my unaccustomed muscles swung the heavy axe without skill but with a violence that would have frightened me if it had been expressed in any other way.

Only then did I remember that I still hadn't finished the surgery I'd been doing when Keith Harper had been killed. I hurried back and found Mrs Jones still sitting waiting patiently for me.

* * *

The death of Keith Harper cast a cloud of depression over the village. I had never lived in a small community before and had never before experienced this type of shared loss. It is one of the paradoxes of modern living that the larger a community is the fewer friends and acquaintances each individual will have. In the town where I'd been brought up there was no community spirit. There were people living less than a hundred yards away from us whose names we did not even know; there were people whom we saw every morning about whom we knew nothing. But in Bilbury everyone knew everyone else's name. The easiest place in the world to hide in is the busiest apartment block. In a village nothing is secret.

Everyone shared Mrs Harper's loss. Each man, woman and child suffered with her. In the Duck and Puddle that evening there was no laughter, no jolly banter and no cheerful exchange of gentle insults. A visitor from South Molton called in on the way back from delivering some sheep to a farm near Croyde and was insensitive enough to atmosphere to tell a joke he'd heard. The silence embarrassed him so much that he left with his pint virtually untouched.

The whole incident was made worse by the fact that the police had no idea of the identity of the hit and run killer. There was, therefore, a communal sense of frustration. There was no outlet for our anger. And without any outlet, anger built up and festered inside each one of us.

* * *

The dowser had arrived and was already at work when I found her, the mining engineer who had come with her and Dr Brownlow prowling around in a paddock near to the house. The mining engineer and Dr Brownlow were walking together, watching carefully, as the dowser, a rather good looking middle aged woman in a tweed skirt and a hand knitted jumper, walked slowly but steadily from one side of the field to the other. She carried a forked hazel twig in her two hands, was clearly concentrating hard and every few steps she would stop, hold her head to one side like a bird who thinks he may have heard something, and then carry on again.

'Any luck yet?' I asked Dr Brownlow in a whisper.

'No. Not yet!' muttered Dr Brownlow, who looked rather unhappy and embarrassed at the whole thing, as though he'd been caught at a black magic ceremony.

'Had a couple of false alarms,' said the mining engineer.

'Do you always use dowsers to find water?'

'Always use the same one,' said the engineer, nodding towards the woman with the forked hazel twig. 'She's marvellous.'

'How often does she succeed in finding water?'

The engineer looked at me as though surprised. 'She's never missed yet.'

'Never?' I said, emphasising the word. I assumed that he had been exaggerating in the way that people often do.

'Never!' said the engineer firmly. 'You wait and see.' Then he fell silent again. Dr Brownlow looked at me and frowned as though telling me to shut up so I said no more but I was still unconvinced.

It was another fifteen or twenty minutes before anything happened. And then quite suddenly we all heard the dowser cry out. It was as much a cry of pain as a cry of success. The mining engineer rushed over to where the dowser was standing, more or less in the centre of the field.

'It's a strong one,' she said confidently. Her face was contorted and she seemed to be struggling to hold the hazel twig horizontal. Her fingers were white with the effort.

'What do you reckon?'

'It's a gusher!' the dowser told him. 'Running at about 120 feet.'

The engineer turned to Dr Brownlow. 'You're in luck,' he said. 'You've got a good supply here.'

'What's a gusher?' asked Dr Brownlow.

'You won't need a pump to get the stuff up,' explained the engineer. 'When we drill into the supply the water will come shooting out of the ground.'

'Like an oil well?' Despite my doubts I was beginning to get excited.

'Like an oil well only it'll be water,' agreed the engineer patiently.

I turned to the dowser, who was still struggling to hold her hazel twig under control. She had dropped her scarf on the grass and was now walking across the spot in every possible direction.

'What are you doing now?' I asked her.

The mining engineer took me by the arm and pulled me away from her. 'In a minute,' he whispered. 'You can ask her questions in a minute.' I moved away with him. 'She's marking the exact spot for me to drill,' explained the engineer quietly. 'She needs to find the strongest force so that we can decide where to sink the shaft. If we get it six inches out we might miss the supply completely.'

This sounded to me like an excuse in the making and my cynicism flooded back. The engineer must have sensed this and he moved away from me. Dr Brownlow had said nothing but had been watching the dowser's activities with great interest. Suddenly, the dowser stopped moving and released her grip on her twig. It immediately bounced so that it was pointing straight at the sky and she dropped it onto the grass. She then massaged each of her wrists and fingers in turn. I noticed that most of her fingers were covered in bits of sticking plaster and that several of the plasters were blood stained. 'That's the spot!' she announced, pointing to a place on the grass with the toe of her shoe.

The mining engineer moved forward, took a small wooden stake out of his pocket and stuck it into the ground and then picked up her scarf and handed it back to her. 'Don't touch that whatever you do,' he said to Dr Brownlow and myself. Then he scurried off towards a Land Rover that was parked at the entrance to the field.

'It's all very impressive,' I said to the dowser. 'Do you mind if I try?'

'Impressive but you don't believe in it at all,' said the dowser, looking straight at me and smiling.

'I didn't say that!' I protested.

'I know you didn't,' said the dowser. She held her hand out to me. 'Come here,' she said. As I walked over to her she bent down and picked up her hazel twig with one hand. She then walked away from the spot she'd marked and beckoned to me to follow her. 'Hold this,' she said, giving me one of the forks of the hazel twig to hold in my right hand. 'Are you right handed?'

I confirmed that I was.

'Good,' she said. She took the other length of twig in her left hand. 'Now, walk with me!'

We walked together towards the site of Dr Brownlow's underground river and I must say I felt extremely foolish for about twelve paces.

Then, in an instant, I stopped feeling foolish and started to feel ashamed of my lack of faith. I couldn't believe what was happening. The twig I was holding had suddenly started to bend upwards so violently that I couldn't hold it down.

'Keep hold of it!' said the dowser firmly. I tried and looked across. Her hand, much smaller than mine, was white as she struggled to hold the twig horizontal. I was quite unable to stop my part of the twig from bending upwards.

'What on earth... ?' I began.

'It's the force of the water,' explained the dowser. 'Let me take the stick from you.' As she spoke she reached out and took hold of the stick. Then when she had it firmly in both hands she walked briskly away from the spot she'd already marked. She dropped the hazel stick onto the grass and massaged her wrists and fingers again. 'I'm sorry,' she apologised. 'But the stick was going to break.'

'Can I try it on my own?' I asked her.

'You can if you like,' she said. 'But it may not work for you.'

I tried and was very disappointed. However much I tried and however often I walked across the spot she'd marked I could get no response at all from the hazel twig. By this time the engineer had returned with a massive iron rod and a large sledgehammer. He hammered the iron bar into the ground at the exact spot that the dowser had marked.

'We'll be back to start drilling tomorrow,' said the engineer to Dr Brownlow.

I had never seen Dr Brownlow look so excited. He looked like a child who'd been told that he's going to have an unexpected birthday party.

'Well?' he said, as we walked back towards the house. The dowser and the engineer had left in the Land Rover.

'I don't know,' I said honestly.

'But you felt the force of the stick!'

'I know,' I admitted.

'Were you holding the stick firmly?'

'Yes.'

'She couldn't possibly be strong enough to make the stick move against your will simply by using her own strength.'

'I know. But I still can't believe that they're going to find water there when they drill tomorrow.'

'I do,' said Dr Brownlow. 'I believe they're going to find water at 120 feet and I'm quite certain that it's going to be a gusher.' And he beamed at me with delight.

* * *

The next day Dr Brownlow's confidence in the dowser was entirely justified. The engineer and his drilling team hit water at 115 feet and when the drill broke through the rock into the underground river that flowed beneath Dr Brownlow's field, water shot into the air like a fountain.

* * *

P.C. Wilson took off his helmet and put it down carefully on my desk. Then he stared at it as though he had never seen it before. His face was drawn and lined and there were large dark patches under both his eyes.

'What can I do for you?' I asked him, following the trite but necessary ritual designed to bring each consultation to life.

P.C. Wilson didn't seem to hear me. Instead of answering he reached out and picked up his helmet and held it in his lap, nursing it as a mother might hold her baby.

'You look depressed,' I said quietly. 'Do you want to talk to me about it?'

'I had a car crash,' said P.C. Wilson. He didn't look at me but kept his eyes fixed firmly on his helmet. 'It shook me about a bit.'

'What happened?'

'I lost control and crashed,' answered the policeman.

'Did you injure yourself?'

'No.'

'Have you been to hospital?'

'No. There's no need.'

'What happened to the car?'

'There's a big dent in the front?'

'Was this your car or a police car?'

'Mine.'

'The Ford?'

He nodded. He had a maroon Ford Zephyr.

'Was anyone else involved?'

A shake of the head. This time slightly more emphatic.

'What did you hit?'

'Just a grassy bank,' said P.C. Wilson. 'There was no damage to the bank. There's nothing to see.'

'When did it happen?'

'A day or two ago.'

'Are you insured?'

There was a pause. 'Yes. I suppose so.'

'Haven't you made a claim?'

P.C. Wilson seemed surprised at the question. He thought for a moment and then shook his head.

'It's not unusual to feel some shock after an accident,' I told him. 'It can come on several days afterwards and last for a week or so.'

Instead of answering P.C. Wilson picked up his helmet and turned it round, slowly and carefully examining it from all angles as he did so. Suddenly he asked me a question I wasn't expecting. 'Do doctors still have a rule of confidentiality?’

‘Yes. Nothing you tell me here will go any further.’ I wondered what new peccadillo he wanted to confess. I thought I knew all his secrets.

‘Like a priest?’

‘Exactly like a priest.’

There was a long, long pause. Suddenly, to my horror I knew what was coming next.

‘I’ve got to tell someone,’ he said. His face was etched with pain.

I didn’t want him to tell me. I didn’t want to know. I didn’t want to be drawn into his dark secret. I didn’t want to know what he wanted to tell me.

‘I killed Keith Harper,’ said P.C. Wilson and then he started to cry.

I waited for a moment but his tears didn’t stop. I stood up, walked round the desk, handed him a box of tissues and put my hand on his shoulder. He pulled out one of the tissues, wiped his eyes and then blew his nose. ‘I didn’t see him,’ he said.

‘But you didn’t stop,’ I said quietly. ‘Why?’

The tears started again. His body shook with the sobbing.

At last he said something that I didn’t hear. I asked him to repeat it. ‘I was frightened,’ he whispered. ‘I know it isn’t enough.’

‘Have you told anyone else?’

He shook his head. ‘No,’ he whispered.

‘You must.’

‘I can’t.’ He looked at me in sudden terror. ‘You said you wouldn’t tell anyone,’ he reminded me. ‘You won’t will you?’

I shook my head. ‘Of course not.’ It was not a responsibility I wanted. I knew that Mrs Harper desperately wanted to know who had killed her son. I knew that everyone in the village wanted to know. I knew that the police wanted to know. But P.C. Wilson had come to me as a patient. I owed him secrecy and I knew I had no choice in the matter.

‘What am I going to do?’

‘You won’t go to the police?’

He put his head in his hands. ‘I can’t,’ he whispered. ‘I can’t.’

‘Can you live with what you have done?’

He looked up, looked me in the eye for the first time. ‘No,’ he said simply.

‘You might feel better if you confessed,’ I told him. I honestly didn’t know if what I was saying was true or not. I didn’t know what else to say to him.

‘Maybe,’ he agreed. There was a long silence. ‘But perhaps my punishment is that I don’t have the courage to confess. I have to try to live with my conscience.’

It seemed a wise but sad thing to say.

Slowly, I moved back behind my desk and sat down.

‘Can you give me something to help me sleep?’

I nodded and wrote out a prescription for half a dozen sleeping tablets. I didn’t want to give him more because I was frightened that he might take them all.

‘What am I going to do?’

I hesitated before answering. ‘I don’t know!’ I said honestly.

I paused before continuing. ‘You aren’t going to do anything silly, are you?’

‘No.’ He spoke quickly and firmly, almost defiantly. He picked up the prescription and stood up. ‘Can I come and see you again? You’re the only person I can talk to.’

I nodded. ‘Of course,’ I told him. ‘Of course you can.’ I looked at him. ‘Can’t you talk to your wife?’

He shook his head. ‘Did you know my wife had my cats put to sleep?’

I looked at him, horrified.

‘There was nothing wrong with them. She just took them to the vet’s and had them put down.’ There was nothing but sadness in his eyes.

I remembered seeing Mrs Wilson and the two cats at the vets when I’d taken Ben along. ‘I’m sorry...’

‘I know it sounds silly but I loved them like children,’ he said and then he left.

* * *

It took the engineer and his team less than a day to cap the water geyser in Dr Brownlow’s field and to connect the supply to the system which supplied the house and surgery. Three days afterwards Dr Brownlow met me outside the surgery door with an enormous grin on his face. He was clutching an opened envelope and a large sheet of paper. ‘I’ve just had the report back from the laboratory,’ he said. He couldn’t have looked happier if he’d just won the football pools.

I didn’t know what he was talking about and I assumed that he was talking about a report concerning a patient. I asked him who he meant.

‘The water,’ he explained. ‘I had the water tested.’ He pushed the sheet of paper towards me. ‘Read it!’ he insisted. ‘We’ve got the cleanest, purest, best water they’ve ever tested!’ He was almost dancing for joy. ‘It’s got plenty of minerals in it but nothing to excess and no bugs at all.’

‘That’s good news!’ I agreed. ‘It’s nice to know that we won’t get poisoned when we drink our mid morning cup of coffee.’

‘You don’t understand, do you?’ said Dr Brownlow, impatiently. He snatched the laboratory report back off me and read it again though I suspected that he already knew the contents off by heart.

‘No,’ I admitted, ‘I don’t understand.’

‘Our geyser supplies 600 gallons a minute of pure spring water,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘We need less than a hundredth of that to supply the house and garden.’

‘So you’ve got nearly 600 gallons of spare water...’

‘Per minute!’ Dr Brownlow reminded me.

‘Per minute,’ I agreed.

‘I’m going to bottle it and sell it,’ announced Dr Brownlow.

‘But who will buy bottled water?’ I asked him innocently.

Dr Brownlow stared at me open mouthed. ‘Haven’t you heard of Perrier?’

Slowly the light began to dawn.

‘And Buxton Water and Malvern Water?’ Dr Brownlow went on.

‘You’re going to...’

‘Bilbury Water,’ said Dr Brownlow excitedly. He took a pencil out of his pocket and began to scribble feverishly on the back of the opened envelope. ‘Just look!’ he said, showing me the back of the envelope as he scribbled. ‘The water costs us virtually nothing and I reckon we can make ten pence a bottle profit. We’re producing 4800 pints a minute so that’s £480 a minute profit. In an hour that’s...’ he scribbled again... ‘£28,800.’

I stared at him open mouthed. He was still scribbling. ‘In a year that’s millions!’

‘But can you sell that much?’

‘Probably not to start with,’ admitted Dr Brownlow. ‘But if we can sell just 1% of what we produce I’ll be rich.’

‘Won’t you have to buy lots of expensive equipment?’

Dr Brownlow shook his head. ‘That’s the beauty of it,’ he said. ‘I can buy a second-hand milk bottling plant for next to nothing. With a little adjustment it’ll take the right sort of bottles and then all we have to do is get the labels printed and stuck on.’

I was beginning to see why Dr Brownlow was so excited.

‘Doctor!’ I heard someone calling. I turned. It was Miss Johnson. ‘Doctor!’ she said to me, ‘It’s a quarter past nine. You’ve got seven patients waiting already.’

I congratulated Dr Brownlow and started the morning surgery.

* * *

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The human spine is a truly remarkable structure. Made up of thirty three separate bones it supports and balances the weight of the trunk, the head and the arms; it acts as a shock absorber; it provides an anchorage for many of the body's most powerful muscles and it provides the delicate spinal cord with vitally important protection. The spine is as essential to the structure and shape of the human body as a tent pole is to the structure and shape of a tent.

There are many ways in which the spine can be damaged. A sudden movement or a blow may fracture one of the vertebrae and damage the spinal cord. The higher up the spinal cord that the damage occurs the greater will be the harm done. Of course, if the damage to the spine is serious enough then the owner of the spine may die. This is particularly likely if the damage occurs right at the very top of the spine, just below the base of the skull, just where a hangman's rope would sit if tied firmly around a man's neck.

I doubt if P.C. Wilson was aware of all this. But he knew that one of the most effective ways to remove the life from a human body is to tie a rope around its neck. A farmer found him on the cliffs above Combe Martin. Or, to be more accurate, the farmer found his head. Nearby, a noose and a long length of rope still hung from a massive oak tree. It took the police another three hours to find his body, still strapped inside what was left of his motor car, smashed into wreckage on the rocks below. And it took them several hours more to work out exactly what had happened.

Wilson had tied a rope around his neck. He had used a pale blue, nylon climbing rope with a breaking strain of 2,000 pounds. Since he had weighed well under 200 pounds he must have felt comfortable entrusting his death to the rope.

First, he had tied one end of the rope to the largest tree he could find, wrapping the rope around the trunk of the tree and tying it with a reef knot. Then he had brought the free end of the rope into the car with him and he had tied the other end around his neck. Again he had used a reef knot that wouldn't give under the strain. A long, loose length of rope had been left uncoiled in a free tangle on the grass between the car and the tree. Next the policeman had fastened his seat belt. Finally, he had started the engine. He had put his left foot on the clutch and slipped the car into first gear. His last action had been to wedge a three foot long piece of fence post onto the accelerator.

As the car accelerated towards the cliff edge so the climbing rope gradually uncoiled.

The police spent a long time trying to work out how fast the car had been going when their colleague had died. But in the end they gave up. Wilson's head had been torn clean off his body by the rope and the noose on the now loose length of rope was left lying on the grass, pointing in the direction that the car had gone; pointing like a long, accusing finger of fate.

The police had come to me afterwards.

'Do you have any idea why he might have killed himself?'

I asked them if they knew that he was a transvestite. They said they did.

And then I told them about Keith Harper.

In a way I felt guilty about breaking the confidence. But I thought I owed it to Mrs Harper and the rest of the village to tell the truth. And, rightly or wrongly, I felt that P.C. Wilson's death had freed me from my promise not to tell. I knew there was no one else I could ask for advice but in my heart I felt that my allegiance to the living had, in this case, to outweigh my allegiance to the dead.

* * *

An old unused stone barn behind Dr Brownlow's house had been cleared out and redecorated and the bottling plant was being installed. Labels had been designed and Dr Brownlow had signed a contract with a distributor who had already arranged a deal with a chain of up-market grocery shops. Bilbury Water seemed to be heading for success. The villagers were delighted. Apart from the employment prospects at the bottling plant, Dr Brownlow's discovery was attracting visitors to the village. Not too many, but just enough. An article in an up-market posh Sunday newspaper had described the discovery in glowing terms and the Duck and Puddle was having to turn away potential customers because of lack of room.

'I'm thinking of having an extension built,' Frank Parsons told me one evening. 'What we really need is a good wind to take some of the slates off the north side of the roof.'

I looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

'That's where the extension will have to go,' he explained. 'We might as well get the insurance company to help with the building costs.'

Every evening he settled himself down in front of the TV weather report like a man checking his football pool coupon.

Dr Brownlow himself seemed to have gained a new lease of life from the discovery. He looked younger and always seemed full of energy. Every day he could be seen bouncing around supervising the improvements in the bottling plant or showing people forecasts he had made on the basis of the latest orders his distributors had taken.

But as far as I was concerned one of the most important events occurred late one Thursday afternoon just as I'd finished the evening surgery and was about to go back to the Duck and Puddle for my dinner. 'Have you got a moment?' asked Dr Brownlow, as I said goodnight to Miss Johnson.

I said I had.

'Come and have a drink.'

I followed Dr Brownlow through the house and into his living room. The table was covered with trade journals and piles of paper.

'What would you like?'

'I'll have a whisky, please.'

'Glenmorangie?'

'Great!' I agreed. I'd acquired a taste for malt whisky but couldn't always afford it.

Dr Brownlow poured a generous measure into an antique cut glass tumbler. 'Water?'

'Yes, please. Just a drop.'

Dr Brownlow smiled with childish delight, walked across the room, bent down and took a bottle out of a cardboard box. 'Here it is!' he said, holding up the bottle with a flourish. 'The first bottle of official Bilbury Water!' He held the bottle out to me, holding it in the same way that an oenophile might hold an ancient and valuable bottle of port or claret.

I don't really know what I'd expected but I was immediately impressed by how professional the bottle looked. It was properly labelled and the screw cap was sealed with an impressive looking strip of paper and fake sealing wax. The label bore a drawing of Dr Brownlow's house and I think this was probably the first time I'd realised just how serious the whole venture was. With a flick Dr Brownlow opened the top of the bottle and handed it to me. I inspected the label carefully and then added a splash to the Glenmorangie in my glass.

'It's in production, then?'

'Not properly,' admitted Dr Brownlow, taking the bottle off me and adding a little water to his own whisky. 'Not until next Monday. But they've been trying out the machinery.' He sat down in a massive leather armchair near to the fireplace. Two huge logs had been burning for some time. He waved to the other chair and I sat down opposite him.

'I haven't felt so excited by anything since I first started out in practice,' he told me.

'You look well on it all.'

'It's exciting!' said Dr Brownlow. 'Not just because I can make money and keep the house going but for a dozen other reasons.' He waved a hand around airily as though uncertain which reasons to choose. 'It helps the village,' he said. 'I like that. And it's fun to see a new business growing.'

I nodded and sipped at my whisky.

'The thing is,' Dr Brownlow went on, 'that the water bottling is taking up all my time.'

'I realise that,' I said. 'It's OK. I seem to be able to manage now.'

'No!' said Dr Brownlow, shaking his head. 'I'm going to have to resign from the practice.'

It didn't sink in for a minute. And then, slowly, I realised that this meant that I was going to be out of work.

'It isn't fair to anyone for me to carry on pretending that I'm a GP,' Dr Brownlow continued. He stared into the fire for a moment, then drank half the remaining whisky in his glass. 'I've enjoyed it,' he said. 'But being a GP is a young man's job. And I'm too old for it.'

I started to protest but he raised a hand to stop me then got up and fetched the bottle of Glenmorangie and the bottle of Bilbury Water. He offered the whisky bottle to me first.

'I'd better not,' I said. 'I'm on duty. And I've got to drive home.'

'Sorry,' Dr Brownlow apologised. 'You're right.' But he took the stopper out of the whisky bottle. 'Do you mind if I have another?'

'No, of course not.' Although I didn't want to show it I was feeling empty inside. I had grown to love working in Bilbury. I liked the patients. I liked the job. I liked the practice. I liked the countryside. And I loved Patsy. A thousand questions were struggling for my attention but none of them was getting answered.

Dr Brownlow added water to the generous measure of whisky he'd poured himself and sat back down again. 'The patients like you very much,' he said. 'You care for them and they know that.' He sipped at his whisky and looked across at me. I didn't know what to say. It was a compliment I cherished and I felt myself blushing with surprise and embarrassment.

'So, there's only one solution!' said Dr Brownlow.

I looked across at him.

'You'll have to take over the practice,' he said. He raised his glass to me. 'What do you say?'

I opened my mouth and sat there for a few seconds giving a passable imitation of a goldfish.

‘Will you take over the practice for me?’ asked Dr Brownlow, repeating his offer.

Again, I tried to speak but again my throat seemed to have gone on strike. So I simply nodded furiously. Now another thousand questions were struggling for space in my brain. Again none of them looked like getting answered.

‘What about the General Medical Council?’ I reminded him at last. ‘I’ve still got to face that advertising charge.’

‘You can forget about that,’ grinned Dr Brownlow. ‘It’s being dropped.’

I stared at him uncomprehendingly.

‘It was that damned son of mine,’ explained Dr Brownlow. ‘He was trying to get at me by attacking you. I think he thought that if you had to leave I wouldn’t be able to cope and he’d be. able to get me into that retirement home.’ He paused and drank some of his whisky. ‘I guessed it was him and when I rang him up he confessed.’

‘But how can you be sure that he’ll drop the complaint?’

Dr Brownlow grinned at me. ‘I told him that if he doesn’t tell the General Medical Council to get off your back then he’ll be out of my will forever.’ He raised an eyebrow. ‘Can you imagine how much that frightened him now that I look like I’m getting rich?’

I had to smile.

‘So?’ asked Dr Brownlow. ‘What’s your answer?’

‘Yes!’ I said simply with a word that was to change my life. ‘Yes! Thank you!’

‘Good!’ grinned Dr Brownlow. He took another sip out of his glass and leant forwards. ‘I’ll send in my resignation tomorrow and with it I’ll send them a note telling them that you’ll be taking over.’

I nodded. Half an hour earlier I’d been a temporary assistant. Ten minutes earlier I thought I’d been facing unemployment. Now I was about to become self-employed with my own list of patients. It was all a little too much to cope with.

‘If you want to carry on using the surgery that’ll be fine,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘I’ll work out some extortionate rent and you can carry on just the same as you are now.’ He sipped more whisky. ‘But now that you’re staying in Bilbury you’ll probably want to find your own place to live and if you find somewhere big enough to house a surgery that’s no problem at all.’

‘They’ve been very good to me at the Duck and Puddle,’ I said. ‘I wouldn’t want to just go and leave them in the lurch.’

‘Don’t you worry about that,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘Frank and Gilly can let every room they’ve got these days – and for more than you’re paying them.’ He picked up the poker and gave the logs a shake, then he lifted a huge log out of the wicker basket that stood beside the hearth and threw it onto the fire. A cloud of sparks lit up the room. ‘Did you know that Bilbury Grange was on the market again?’

‘Mike Trickle’s house? Is he leaving?’

‘He’s apparently decided that country life isn’t for him,’ said Dr Brownlow.

My mind was buzzing with so many ideas that I couldn’t think about any of them clearly. I stood up. ‘I ought to be getting back to the Duck and Puddle,’ I told him. I fiddled with my watch. ‘Gilly will have my dinner ready.’

Dr Brownlow stood up too and held out his hand. ‘Thank you,’ he said, as I took his hand in mine. ‘I’m very fond of this village. I’m glad you’re going to look after it.’

I found myself blushing again. ‘I like it too,’ I said. I felt a lump in my throat. ‘And I’m honoured that you’re letting me take over your practice.’ It sounded corny but I meant it.

‘Just make sure that you ring Patsy and tell her the good news,’ said Dr Brownlow with a twinkle in his eye. ‘She’s a lovely girl. She’d make a great doctor’s wife.’

I wouldn’t have thought that my blush could get any deeper but I’m sure it did.

Dr Brownlow smiled at me. ‘You do love her, don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ I replied, without hesitation.

‘Do you like her? Do you get on?’

‘Yes.’

‘Marry her,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘If you’ve found someone you can like and love then grab her with both hands.’

* * *

Patsy and I sat in the Morris Minor staring through the windscreen. Two workmen were busy erecting a huge ‘For Sale – By Auction’ sign by the side of one of the two huge stone pillars which guarded the entrance to the drive up to Bilbury Grange.

I opened my car door. ‘Let’s go in and have a look around.’

‘But we can’t!’ said Patsy, horrified.

‘Of course we can,’ I told her, with a confidence that surprised me. ‘If we walk in as though we’re buying the place no one will dream of stopping us.’ As we passed the two workmen I nodded. One of the men waved a hammer in our direction and shouted a cheerful greeting.

Neither Patsy nor I had ever seen Bilbury Grange before. It looked as if it had been built in the last decade or so of the 19th century. Massive red brick chimneys towered high above the roof and two huge stone lions guarded the front door. Walking round to the side of the house we saw that the back part of the building made up one quarter of a cobbled courtyard. A derelict coach house, complete with its own clock tower, and a row of stables bordered the rest of the courtyard. 'I never knew any of this was here,' whispered Patsy. 'It's huge!'

The house and out buildings were all deserted and Patsy, Ben and I wandered around for the best part of an hour, trying doors and peering through windows. Inside the house the rooms were massive, with an impressive, swirling staircase and a beautiful stained glass window dominating the hallway.

Although Mike Trickle had owned the house for several months his workmen seemed to have done very little to restore the house to its former glory. The brickwork needed pointing, the window frames were rotten, many panes of glass were cracked and the whole of the outside of the house clearly needed decorating. Outside, the gardens, once landscaped, had been allowed to fall into terrible disrepair. The croquet lawn had been cut but the stable roof needed repairing and a small lake that we found in a copse behind the house was stagnant and choked with weeds.

But the house had enormous potential and the views across the North Devon countryside were magnificent. Hand in hand Patsy and I sat on a moss covered stone bench that overlooked the croquet lawn and looked out across the fields. We could see Dr Brownlow's house in the distance.

'It's wonderful, isn't it?' sighed Patsy. 'It would make a marvellous home.'

The coach house could be converted into a surgery,' I said.

'And there are enough bedrooms to take in paying guests during the summer,' said Patsy.

'I've always dreamt of owning a house with a billiard room.'

'I'd love to get the walled garden back into production.'

'I wonder how much it will go for?'

Patsy looked at me. 'You're serious, aren't you?' I nodded. 'Yes. I am.'

'But...' began Patsy.

'No "buts".' I said. 'Let's buy it. Let's make it work. It's a wonderful house.' I dropped onto one knee in front of her. 'Patsy, will you marry me?'

Patsy was in tears when she said 'Yes.' She threw her arms around my neck and held me so tightly that I could hardly breathe. Then, when I finally stood up and she saw the damp, muddy patches staining my knees she started to laugh.

'Can we afford it?' she asked me a few moments later.

I kissed away a leftover tear that was running down her cheek.

'Dr Brownlow has asked me to take over his practice.' I told her. 'My income will pay the mortgage and we can live on what we make from holiday-makers in the summer.'

Patsy started crying again. She kissed me full on the lips for what seemed like an eternity but still leant back from me far too soon. 'I love you!' she said.

'I love you too!'

* * *

An hour later we were parked outside the farm where Patsy and her family lived. 'Are you sure I've got to do this?' I asked her.

She nodded.

'I'm terrified.'

'He won't eat you.'

'Maybe not,' I said, unconvinced. I kissed Patsy, got out of the car and walked alone across to the front door. Patsy remained alone in the car.

'Could I have a word with you, Mr Kennett?' I asked. I probably sounded calmer than I felt. My heart was beating as fast as if I'd just run a mile. What, I wondered, would I do or say if he said 'No!'?

Patsy's father scowled at me. 'What have you done?'

'I haven't done anything.'

'You want to borrow the tractor?'

I shook my head. 'Not just at the moment, thank you, sir.'

He stared at me for a long few seconds. 'You'd better come in then.'

I followed him into the living room, which was empty.

'Sit down,' he said. It was an order, not an invitation. 'Do you want a drink?'

'I'll have whatever you're having,' I told him. I needed some Dutch courage but I didn't want to ask for an alcoholic drink if he thought it was too early in the day.

I needn't have worried. Mr Kennett poured us both very large whiskies.

'What do you want, then?' he demanded. He had huge, bushy black eyebrows which seemed to roam around his forehead without any planned direction in mind. I'd never noticed how mobile they were before. It was not, however, possible to make any accurate deductions about his mood by watching the position of his eyebrows.

I had, in my mind, a carefully rehearsed speech which was designed to win him over gently. On the journey over from Bilbury Grange I had thought up a number of strong reasons why he should say 'yes' and I had thought up a cleverly structured strategy to help me persuade him to say 'yes'.

'I'd like to marry Patsy,' I blurted out.

For a moment Mr Kennett looked startled. But he recovered quickly. 'I like a man who speaks his mind without beating about the bush,' he said. He sniffed at his whisky and then sipped at it cautiously. Then he looked directly at me. It was unnerving. 'Do you love her?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Can you look after her?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Have you asked her?'

'Yes, sir.'

'What did she say?'

'Yes, sir.'

Mr Kennett grunted, nodded, drained his glass and got up. He walked across the room to the cupboard where he kept his booze. He took out a bottle of 20-year-old malt.

'Drink up!' he instructed me as he walked back.

I emptied my glass and held it out. Mr Kennett half filled it. 'You're not a bad bloke,' he said. 'Considering you're a doctor.'

I didn't know what to say to that so I kept quiet and sipped at my whisky. I gathered that getting the expensive stuff out was his way of giving us his blessing.

Mr Kennett still hadn't sat down and now he walked over towards the door into the kitchen where he called for his wife. She appeared in the kitchen door almost instantaneously.

'Patsy and the doctor are getting married,' he told her bluntly.

Mrs Kennett said nothing but burst into tears and buried her face in her pinafore.

'Don't be so bloody silly, woman,' he told her but Mrs Kennett disappeared back into her kitchen. I realised that I still hadn't ever spoken to her.

'Where are you going to live?'

I swallowed hard. 'We want to try to buy Bilbury Grange,' I said. 'It's in a pretty terrible state. It's for auction on Friday.'

'Can you afford it?'

'I don't know,' I said honestly. 'It depends on how much it goes for.' I paused. 'But we both like it.'

When I left twenty minutes later the malt whisky bottle was nearly empty and I could hardly stand. I staggered out to the car where Patsy was still waiting.

'Well?' she whispered as I climbed in beside her. 'What did he say?'

I turned and smiled at her. 'I think he said it's OK.' I murmured before falling unconscious into her arms.

* * *

The auction of Bilbury Grange was attracting far more attention than Patsy and I had hoped it would. The auctioneers handling the sale for Mr Trickle put large advertisements in several national newspapers as well as in all the local papers and on the morning of the auction the lanes around the house were clogged with traffic.

The day before I'd visited my bank manager in Barnstaple to find out how much money the bank would lend me and had been startled to find out just how little we could raise.

'Do you want me to stand surety for you?' asked Dr Brownlow. 'I'm not exactly drowning in cash at the moment but I might be able to help gouge a few more thousand out of the bank.'

I shook my head. 'You've done quite enough for us, thank you. If I can't buy it with what the bank is prepared to lend us then we'll just have to accept that it's too rich for our blood.'

Dr Brownlow agreed to look after the morning surgery for me and although the auction wasn't due to start until 11.00 am Patsy and I and Ben left the Duck and Puddle with an hour to spare. We were both so nervous and excited that we knew very well that we wouldn't be able to relax wherever we were and whatever we were doing. Because we'd already heard about the heavy traffic we left the Morris parked at the pub and walked across the fields to the house. Ben thought it was marvellous fun.

We were climbing over a stile into a meadow that lay next to Bilbury Grange's gardens when, in the distance, between us and the house, we both saw building going on. I could just make out a couple of lorries, a tractor, a pile of wood, some massive sheets of corrugated iron and a group of workmen.

'What on earth is going on?' asked Patsy.

I shrugged. 'Maybe it's something to do with Mr Trickle,'

I suggested. 'He had been building a wall around the estate to protect his privacy.'

'If we get the house we ought to knock the wall down,' said Patsy.

But as we walked on I began to realise that what was going on was nothing to do with Mr Trickle. I could see men still working though I felt sure that Trickle would have called his men off.

When we got closer we could see that the work wasn't going on in the grounds belonging to Bilbury Grange but in another field and we could see that quite a crowd of prospective buyers were collecting in the Bilbury Grange gardens. We hurried to get closer and to take a good look.

'Look at the workmen!' said Patsy, putting a hand on my arm and pulling me to a halt. I stopped and looked hard. Ben's ears were pricked.

'Isn't that your father?' I asked her, screwing up my eyes.

'Yes,' answered Patsy. 'And several of his men are with him.'

'What the hell is going on over there?' called a large, red-faced man in a worn Barbour coat.

Patsy's father stopped what he was doing and stared at the man who had called. 'I don't know what business it is of yours,' he said sourly. 'But I'm building a barn and a slurry pit.

'How big is it going to be?' asked the stranger anxiously. 'I'm the auctioneer. I'm selling the property over here.'

'About eighty feet long,' answered Mr Kennett.

'You can't build it there!' complained the auctioneer.

'You'll ruin the view from the house. And a slurry pit will stink.'

Mr Kennett shrugged his shoulders. 'That's your problem,' he said. 'I'm not bothered about views.'

'I could have almost kissed him.

'But... but...' stuttered the auctioneer furiously. 'You'll ruin the value of this property.'

'I can put up whatever I like,' said Mr Kennett bluntly.

All around him the activity continued furiously, with men sinking posts into the ground and dragging corrugated iron sheets off the back of a flatbed lorry. Among the men working there I recognised Thumper Robinson.

'Doesn't he need planning permission for all this?' demanded a man in a grey suit.

Mr Kennett shook his head and glared at the man who'd interrupted. 'I don't need planning permission to do anything,' he said. 'I'm a farmer. I can put up whatever I like.'

'Is that true?' the man in the grey suit asked the auctioneer.

'I'm afraid it is,' admitted the auctioneer ruefully.

There was a murmur of dissatisfaction among the prospective purchasers of Bilbury Grange and many of them started to drift away back towards their cars.

'What on earth is my father up to?' asked Patsy in a whisper. 'I knew he was going to start work on a new barn today - but not here!'

'I think it's his way of helping make sure that we buy Bilbury Grange at a reasonable price,' I whispered back. I helped her climb around the impromptu building site. We both refrained from speaking to Mr Kennett, Thumper or any of the others and they ignored us.

'Watch out!' I cried suddenly, pointing to a large red painted sign that had been stuck on a post in the garden just outside the billiard room window.

'What's the matter?' demanded Patsy.

I read out the sign. 'BEWARE OF ADDERS NESTING'.

Patsy laughed. 'There aren't any adders around here. Besides it's not their nesting season.'

We walked on up through the garden towards the house that we'd both fallen in love with just in time to see the man in the grey suit and most of the other potential bidders getting into their cars and driving away. There was much unhappy muttering among those who were left behind.

Ninety minutes later Patsy and I bought Bilbury Grange for considerably less than we'd expected.

'There's even going to be some cash left over from the loan to pay for some of the repairs we need to do,' I told Patsy.

She threw her arms around my neck and kissed me firmly on the lips. 'Isn't it exciting?'

Exciting just didn't sum it up but I knew what she meant. I'd been in Bilbury for less than six months and I was about to become a fully fledged general practitioner, buy and rebuild my own house and get married!

'Let's walk round and plan what we're going to do first,' said Patsy.

'In a moment. There's just one thing I've got to do.' Patsy looked momentarily disappointed. 'What's that?'

'Tell your father and Thumper that they can stop putting up that barn!'

* * *

Bilbury Chronicles is the first of Vernon Coleman’s seven books about Bilbury – all available as Amazon Kindle Books. If you enjoy the Bilbury books you may enjoy other books by the same author – including ‘*Mr Henry Mulligan*’ and ‘*Mrs Caldicot’s Cabbage War’*. For details of over 100 other books by Vernon Coleman please see his Amazon author page or visit www.vernoncoleman.com

The Young Country Doctor: Book 2

BILBURY GRANGE

Vernon Coleman

The Young Country Doctor: Book 2

Bilbury Grange

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CHAPTER ONE

The two roofers seemed quite unconcerned about the fact that there was a gale blowing. They both wore dark green oilskins and had their hoods up. They stood, balanced in a small gulley in between the wet and slippery slates of two of the peaks of our multifaceted roof, and pointed at something I couldn't see. One of them cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted down to me. But the wind took his words long before they reached me and I couldn't hear a thing he was saying. The taller and stouter of the two, the one with the droopy moustache and straggly beard, knelt down on the edge of the roof and peered down. I felt dizzy just looking up but he seemed quite unconcerned.

'Climb up!' he shouted. 'I'll hold the ladder for you.' He must have noticed the look of apprehension on my face. 'It's perfectly safe!' he yelled. 'As safe as houses.' He laughed, though the joke came out so fluently that it clearly wasn't new.

I swallowed hard, pulled the zip on my green oiled coat right up to my chin, pulled my cloth cap down firmly onto my head and started to climb the ladder. It was difficult to believe it was May. I could feel the wind tugging at me as I climbed upwards and the rain, lashing against my hands and my face, was sharp enough to sting. The higher up I climbed the worse the wind got and I shivered involuntarily, though whether through fear or the cold I wasn't sure.

'Your nails have all rusted through,' shouted the taller roofer when I reached the top of the ladder. 'It's the salt in the sea air. Come on up and I'll show you.' He was crouching down with one foot resting on guttering which was, I noticed, clogged solid with last autumn's dead leaves.

'I am up!' I shouted. 'This is as high as I'm going.' Owning a big house had seemed a wonderful idea a few weeks ago but the attraction was rapidly beginning to pall.

'Please yourself,' shouted the roofer with a vague shrug of his shoulders. He stopped, as though he'd suddenly thought of something. 'You're not frightened are you?'

'Of course I am!' I yelled back. 'I'm terrified.'

'But you're still on the ladder!' laughed the roofer. He held out a hand. 'Come on, I'll give you a hand up.' I stayed where I was, with my hands gripping the top of the ladder as though my life depended on it which I suppose it did. The rain had found a way in between my neck and the collar of my coat and it was trickling down my back. Every few seconds the wind would howl a little louder and blow a little stronger and I wasn't sure whether it was my imagination but I was convinced that the ladder had moved at least twice. I realised that from where I was perched I could see the sea and I wondered if estate agents would count it as a 'sea view'. The roofer reached down, unhooked my fingers from around the top of the ladder and took hold of my right hand. He wore soft leather, fingerless driving gloves which were sodden with the rain. Suddenly my fear of looking foolish and cowardly rose above my fear of falling and, gripping the roofer's hand with all the faith of a drowning man clutching at a straw, I clambered up the last few rungs of the ladder and launched myself stomach first onto the edge of the house roof. As I wriggled my way further into the lead lined gulley between the two peaks of the roof I slowly realised that at some stage I had to do all this in reverse in order to get back down again. Up here I could taste the salt on my lips. It was what I imagined it would be like to be on a ship in a storm. I suddenly had a terrible mental picture of the two workmen having to remove a section of the roof in order to lower me back inside. I could feel sweat mingling with the rain running down my spine.

'See?' said the shorter roofer, a small, lithe fellow whose visible skin was burned mahogany brown by the sun, and whose confidence and agility on the roof had already reminded me more of a monkey than a man. He stabbed a podgy finger at the edge of a slate which obediently moved out of position.

Two other nearby slates, disturbed by the movement, slipped downwards and revealed the aged wooden laths to which they had been fastened. The roof was not lined and I could see straight through into the loft. I instinctively reached to push the slates back into position to stop the rain getting in but all I succeeded in doing was dislodging another half a dozen slates.

'The whole roof is rotten,' said the taller roofer with all the cheerfulness of a man who is not going to have to pay for the repairs but who, indeed, realises that he has found himself a couple of months' profitable work. 'You need new battens, new slates and new nails. Your valleys need new lead too.'

'Copper,' said the mahogany brown roofer. I looked at him quizzically.

'Copper nails,' he said. 'They're a bit more expensive but they last longer. Especially with the salt air.' He kicked at the roof in that idle sort of way that a motorist will kick at the tyres of a car he's thinking of buying and a dozen loose slates slid a little further out of position. 'Your coping tiles are loose too. The mortar has gone.' He steadied himself against a chimney stack as a strong gust of wind caught him unexpectedly. 'And you've got woodworm.'

'Thought it better that you saw for yourself,' said the taller roofer. He slid his fingers into one of the gaps that had appeared in the roof and, like a conjurer producing a rabbit from a hat, pulled out the top half of a nail and offered it to me. 'Rusted right through,' he said. 'Hand-made.' he added. 'This roof hasn't had any work done on it since the house was built.'

I took the nail from him, examined it and for no very good reason slipped it into my coat pocket. 'Thank you,' I said. 'I think I'll go down now.'

The taller roofer must have seen the look of apprehension on my face. 'Don't worry!' he said. 'If you fall you'll hit the ground before you have time to worry about it. He laughed and his partner laughed with him. I did not laugh but edged backwards towards the ladder and somehow wriggled round into a position from which I could swing my legs over the edge of the roof. I then gingerly climbed down the swaying ladder. As soon as I had my feet back on the ground I hurried round to the back door to see my wife, leaving the roofers to climb down and tidy up their ladders by themselves.

'The bad news is that we seem to need a new roof!' I told Patsy, who was standing in the kitchen of Bilbury Grange watching a saucepan full of cold water fail to boil on a small primus stove we had borrowed from Dr Brownlow. I pushed back my hood and wiped the rain from my eyes with the back of my hand. The only kitchen furniture we had was an old pine table and three unmatched dining chairs (two of which had, for some inexplicable reason got legs of uneven length). We had bought a second-hand cooker from a dealer in Barnstaple but, despite several promises, it had not yet been delivered. 'The good news is that if you stand in the right spot on the edge of the roof we've got a sea view.'

Patsy half smiled at my feeble attempt to make fun of our problems. 'Mr Naughton is here,' she said. 'He's down in the cellar. He says he thinks we've got woodworm.' Mr Naughton was a builder we'd asked to come and give us a quote for some essential restoration work. Patsy looked at me and swallowed hard. 'Have we done the right thing?' she asked.

Still dripping with rain I instinctively reached out and pulled her to me. 'Of course we have!' I insisted. 'Things can't get much worse can they?' She threw her arms around my neck and clung to me as though she were drowning and I were a life-raft.

Just then the door from the cellar burst open and a bald, burly man in a brown boiler suit marched in. He was holding a piece of wood that seemed to have mushrooms growing out of it. 'Dry rot!' exclaimed Mr Naughton with ill-disguised delight. He shook his head and sucked in air as though he were about to go pearl diving. 'You've got dry rot in your joists and your floorboards. Nasty. Very nasty. Do you want to come and have a look?'

'No, thanks,' I said, wearily. 'I'm happy to trust your judgement.'

I have noticed that builders always do everything they can to make house owners feel uncomfortable and anxious. I think it must be something they are taught when they are apprentices. I suspect the theory is that if you terrify the customer he will expect a bank shattering bill and feel happy and relieved when it turns out to be merely outrageous. (As I was to discover later, builders also have a habit of starting a job and then disappearing for hours, days or even weeks at a time. I am convinced that they do this so their customers don't ever dare complain about the things they do when they turn up. Customers are so grateful when the wretched builders arrive that they gladly put up with the mess and the chaos and they bite their tongues when the workmen settle down for their obligatory tea breaks at fifteen minute intervals.)

Patsy was so depressed by Mr Naughton's gloomy prognostications that she burst into tears. It was beginning to look as though the rest of 1972 wasn't going to be easy.

* * *

It may sound rather clichéd but things didn't seem quite so bad after we'd had a cup of tea. It wasn't so much that the tea worked miracles but simply that taking a few minutes to drink it gave us a chance to put things into perspective. When we had bought Bilbury Grange we had both known that it was going to need a lot of work. Although buying it had taken virtually every penny we'd been able to raise, we had bought it relatively cheaply and so we had a little money left over from the bank loan which we had set aside for repairs.

Right from the start we had known that we wouldn't be able to do everything at once. If we had wanted something small and neat and faultless we would have chosen one of the new semi-detached houses being built on the Barnstaple road.

It is true that we hadn't expected to have to replace the roof and the floorboards, and we hadn't known that the house had woodworm and dry rot, but when we thought about it we realised that by dealing with these fundamental problems right at the start we would at least be ensuring that we ended up with a solid building.

We wanted to turn Bilbury Grange, so long a derelict house, into a home and it would have been a lot more expensive if we had started to decorate and furnish the house and had then found out that it needed partly rebuilding.

These were the arguments we used to cheer each other up and to a very large extent they worked.

We sent Mr Naughton and the two roofers away with strict instructions to submit their estimates for the work they considered essential and I hung my still dripping coat up in the back lobby. Then Patsy had opened a can of beans, poured them into a pan and started to heat them on our small stove. I put two slices of bread into our only electrical appliance - an automatic toaster.

Bilbury Grange had been built in the last part of the 19th century for a rich businessman from the Midlands who had retired to Devon to spend his days hunting, shooting and fishing. We still hadn't found out the name of the architect who had designed the house but the businessman had clearly either had taste as well as money or else he had at least had the wit and intelligence to allow someone with good taste to make all the major building decisions.

The front entrance to the house was on the south side of the building with two short stone staircases, one from the right and one from the left, joining underneath a stone canopy which was held up by two massive stone pillars. Two large and fierce looking stone lions (one of which had, sadly, lost part of its tail) guarded the two halves of the front door which opened into a large reception hall. This was dominated by a massive stone fireplace which was so large that it had two stone seats built into its sides. On the western side of the house a second entrance door, this time guarded by two stone eagles, led into a corridor which passed a boot room, a gun room and a game room before entering into the reception hall area alongside the fireplace.

The main part of the house was square, with four large reception rooms on the ground floor and a beautiful swirling staircase leading up to the first floor. There were six main bedrooms, two small bedrooms, and a junk room in the attic. A smaller, far less impressive staircase twisted its way around the back of the house and led directly down into the kitchen. The door down into the cellars, which ran underneath the whole of the main part of the house, was also in the kitchen.

The back door of the house led out of the kitchen into a cobbled courtyard, the entrance to which was through the centre of a now almost derelict coachhouse which, despite its dilapidated appearance, still had its own clock tower. The other two sides of the courtyard were made up of stables and other outbuildings.

To get from the lane to the house you had to drive between a pair of rather tumble down stone pillars and a pair of rusting iron gates. You couldn't see the house from the lane because it was hidden behind a small copse and a clump of massive rhododendron bushes. The driveway which led up to it and which twisted in between the trees was no more than a quarter of a mile long.

The gardens around the house, which had clearly once been landscaped, had been allowed to fall into disrepair. We had a small stream and a lake with an island in the middle of it but although the stream was still running the lake had become choked with weeds. In the days when it had been built, the house had been in the centre of a small estate but the agricultural land had long since been sold off and all that now remained were two medium sized fields which contained more than their fair share of nettles and thistles.

All this may sound rather splendid but as we sat at our badly-stained pine table (we didn't have a table cloth) eating our baked beans on toast off paper plates we didn't feel very splendid. In fact we didn't yet feel as if it was our house.

We both felt more like intruders who had broken in and we half expected someone in authority to storm into the kitchen and throw us out into the cold and windy rain of a Devon spring.

* * *

We had just finished eating our single course meal when the telephone rang.

The only telephone point we had was in the hall about half a mile away, and at first I didn't hear the bell. But Patsy did. She ran off as quickly as she could while I put our empty bean tin and dirty plates into the dustbin outside the back door and started to wash our knives and forks. Patsy reappeared a minute or two later.

'It's the editor of your paper,' she said, breathlessly.

'What does he want?'

'He didn't say. But he sounded a bit cross.'

I had forgotten about the local paper, *The Barnstaple, Bideford and Bilbury Herald* but I shouldn't have done. For several months I had been writing a weekly medical column for them. The Editor was ringing to say that they didn't have any copy for the next edition.

'We need a column from you in an hour!' said the editor, crossly. 'Otherwise there will just be an empty space in the paper. 'I felt very bad about forgetting to send in a column and apologised profusely. I didn't get paid very well for writing the column but I enjoyed doing it and I tried to be as professional about it as I could be. Besides, with Bilbury Grange to restore, we needed every penny we could lay our hands on.

'I tried to ring you at the surgery but they told me you were on holiday,' said the editor. 'Your receptionist, a Miss Jackson, said you'd...'

'...Johnson.'

'Pardon?'

'Her name is Johnson. Doreen Johnson.'

'Johnson. She said you'd got married, and gone off on your honeymoon but that she thought you'd probably be at home.'

'That's right. We're having our honeymoon here.'

'Why the hell didn't you tell us you were getting married?'

'I'm sorry. It was a very quiet do - just family and close friends.'

'But you should have told us,' insisted the Editor. 'We could have sent a photographer along and put something in the paper.'

‘We didn’t really want anything in the newspapers,’ I said. ‘We’re both rather shy.’

‘Baaaah!’ snorted the editor, who clearly didn’t believe me, even though it was the truth. ‘You didn’t have to be in any other papers but you should have told us. You write a column for us, for God’s sake! Next time you get married you just make sure you ring us beforehand, right?’

‘There won’t be a next time!’ I laughed.

‘Hrrmph.’ snorted the editor. ‘That’s what they all say.’ He shouted at someone in the background. ‘Who’s looking after your patients?’ he asked me.

‘Dr Brownlow. He was my predecessor. He kindly offered to come out of retirement for a week.’

‘Having a good time?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Are you having a good time? You’re on your honeymoon aren’t you? People are supposed to enjoy themselves on their honeymoons.’

‘Yes, thank you!’

‘Ring in your copy within the hour, right?’

I promised I would, though I didn’t have the faintest idea what I would write about, but my words were wasted on an empty telephone for the editor had severed the connection without saying ‘goodbye’. He always put the telephone down when he’d finished saying what he wanted to say, or when he found a conversation beginning to bore him, and I still found it rather disconcerting. I hurried back to the kitchen, found Patsy and told her that I had to write a column. I then spent ten valuable minutes trying to find my typewriter and a piece of paper. In the end I gave up and wrote my column in pencil on two clean paper plates. By the time I had finished and had dictated the copy to a reporter at the paper there were just three minutes left of my allocated hour.

* * *

Patsy and I had been married for two and a half days.

When we had first met I had been living at the Duck and Puddle public house in Bilbury and she had been working there as a waitress. I had just qualified as a doctor and had taken a job as an assistant to a rather eccentric general practitioner called Dr Brownlow. After a few months Dr Brownlow had decided to retire when the chance discovery of an underground river on his land gave him the opportunity to set up a business selling bottled water. I had accepted eagerly when he had offered me his practice.

It hadn’t taken Patsy and me long to fall in love and when Bilbury Grange had come onto the market within a few days of Dr Brownlow offering me his practice the omens had seemed irresistible. I had a reliable, steady job and we had somewhere to set up home together. Patsy and I had decided to get married and had agreed to buy Bilbury Grange with money we didn’t have but had been told we could borrow from the bank.

We had decided to spend our week long honeymoon getting settled into the house, trying to find some cheap, basic furniture and organising the builders who would help us repair and rebuild the house. Although the house wasn’t really habitable we had decided to move into it straight away; partly to save money which we would have wasted renting somewhere else, and partly because we didn’t want to waste any time before getting started on the restoration, but mainly because we couldn’t wait to move into our new home.

* * *

CHAPTER TWO

Twenty four hours later the two roofers stood silently in the kitchen while Patsy and I read their estimate for re-roofing Bilbury Grange. They looked rather out of place standing, and steaming slightly, on our level kitchen floor. They both still wore their green rubberised waterproofs but their coats were unfastened and I could see that around his waist each man wore a worn leather holster which carried a hammer and a pouch full of nails.

The two men brought with them a smell of wet rubber. Through habit they both stood with their legs wide apart and this made them look as though they'd just climbed down off a pair of horses. The look of them rather reminded me of cowboys and I couldn't help hoping that there was no sinister significance in this.

'I think you must have made a mistake,' I said, turning the single sheet of paper around and putting my finger on the figure at the bottom. Apart from the amount we had paid for the house it was the largest single sum of money I had ever been forced to contemplate.

The taller and stouter of the two roofers, the one with the moustache and beard, who seemed to be in charge of financial matters, pulled a pair of spectacles out from somewhere underneath his waterproofs and peered at the paper as though he were looking at it for the first time. 'No,' he said. 'No mistake. That's the estimate. You've got a big roof. It needs a lot of work.'

'And a lot of slates!' added his partner, clearly accustomed to taking on a supporting role. 'You must have a quarter of an acre of roof up there.'

'That's another thing.' I said 'I'm a bit worried about the slates. Are you sure that new slates will look right on an old house?'

'Best asbestos!' said the stouter roofer, defensively. 'You won't be able to tell the difference.'

'Can't you reuse our existing slates?' asked Patsy. 'Surely they haven't all gone rotten?'

'Most of them will get broken when we take them off,' said the stout roofer. 'If we have to try to re-use them it'll take us much longer to get them off. And we'll never be able to get any slates to match the ones we do break.'

I accepted that the roof needed re-slating but I wasn't happy about any of this. 'I'm not sure.' I said. 'We'll think about it and let you know.'

'You've got our number,' said the thinner roofer. 'It's on the estimate.'

'You won't find a cheaper price anywhere else,' his partner warned us. They turned and left, leaving Patsy and I and the bill alone in the kitchen. I put the bill down on our stained old table and Patsy and I sat on two of our three mismatched dining chairs. I looked round at the chipped and fading cream paintwork on the walls and woodwork, at the huge floor to ceiling built-in china cupboards, at the massive glazed white sink and the huge old taps which were fed by piping which shook every time they delivered water and thought of the floorboards underneath us which had provided bed and board for rather too many woodworm. I thought of the dry rot spores growing merrily in the cellar and the slates slipping off our roof and I wondered, just for a moment, whether or not we might possibly have taken on more than we could cope with.

'Are things going to be all right?' asked Patsy, quietly.

'Yes.' I said, with far more certainty than I felt.

'How can you be so sure?'

'Because the worst that can happen is that we get thrown out of here and have to live in a tent in a field and even then we'd have each other and I wouldn't care so what have we got to worry about?'

Patsy smiled. 'I do love you,' she said.

'And I love you,' I said. 'And that's the only thing that really matters.' I stood up, moved around the table, lifted Patsy to her feet and kissed her.

'I think we're both mad,' she said. 'Stark raving, certifiably bonkers.'

'I think you're probably right.'

'Was that the front door bell?'

I said I thought it was.

With great reluctance I let Patsy go and then sprinted out of the kitchen, along the back corridor, through the doors into the huge reception hall at the front of the house and across the reception room. I was slightly out of breath when I pulled open the front door and couldn't help thinking that whatever else happened living in Bilbury Grange would help make me fit.

Thumper Robinson and his girlfriend Anne were standing there. Anne had their baby in her arms. Thumper was holding a bunch of freshly picked spring flowers. I noticed with delight that the rain had stopped, that the sky was blue and that the sun was shining for the first time in two days.

'Hello!' said Thumper. 'We thought we'd drop in and see how you were getting on. Tell us if it isn't convenient and we'll go away again.'

'Come in!' I said. I was truly delighted to see them both.

‘Isn’t this place amazing?’ said Anne, looking around her, wide eyed with astonishment. ‘Do you know I’ve never seen it before?’

‘It’s all a terrible mess,’ I apologised. ‘Patsy’s in the kitchen. Follow me.’ I led the way back through to the back of the house.

‘Shouldn’t you have put knife nicks in the door posts so that you could find your way back?’ called Thumper with a laugh. ‘This place is enormous!’ Our footsteps echoed on the bare wooden boards.

Patsy was as pleased to see our visitors as I was. Although we didn’t realise it at the time this was for both of us a moment we would always remember, for Thumper and Anne were the first visitors we had welcomed to our home.

‘Would you like a cup of tea?’ she asked when she’d made a fuss of the baby. I confess that I made a bit of a fuss of the baby too. He is, after all, named after me in memory of the fact that I helped to deliver him in a field.

‘I’ll have a cup in a minute or two,’ said Anne. ‘When you’ve shown us round.’

‘I’d better put the water on to boil now,’ said Patsy. ‘It takes rather a long time,’ she warned. She filled our only saucepan, our tiny camping stove and then balanced the former on the latter. Despite half a dozen telephone calls our new second-hand cooker still hadn’t arrived from the shop in Barnstaple.

‘Why are you using bottled water?’ asked Thumper.

‘It’s out of the tap,’ explained Patsy, ‘but it comes out a bit brownish so we filter it through some coffee filter papers we found in a cupboard.’

We ignored Thumper’s look of distaste and took our first visitors on our tour of Bilbury Grange.

‘You do like a challenge, don’t you?’ said Thumper, with a grin when we got back to the kitchen. The water in the saucepan was boiling and Patsy put tea bags into our only two mugs. ‘I’m afraid we don’t have any milk,’ she apologised.

‘Or sugar.’ I added.

‘I’m not surprised!’ said Thumper. ‘I’m amazed you can afford the tea bags!’

‘Thumper!’ said Anne, sharply but Patsy and I were both laughing. ‘Aren’t you having a cup?’ Anne asked us both.

‘Not thirsty,’ said Patsy.

‘Just had one,’ I said.

‘You’ve only got two mugs haven’t you?’ said Thumper, perceptively.

Patsy and I looked at each other and exchanged thoughtful glances.

‘I’ve never been in a house where they had more bedrooms than cups,’ said Thumper, with a grin.

‘How long has it been empty?’ asked Anne, who seemed rather embarrassed by Thumper. ‘Didn’t it used to be owned by someone who was in advertising?’

I nodded. ‘An American called Pironi owned it for a while but I don’t think he came here more than half a dozen times in as many years. Hardly anyone ever saw him. Then Mike Trickle, the TV personality, bought it but I don’t think he ever stayed here.’

‘So it must be several years since anyone has actually lived here?’

I nodded.

‘Where are you staying?’ asked Anne. ‘The Duck and Puddle?’

‘No,’ replied Patsy. ‘We’re going to live here.’

Anne blushed strongly. ‘I’m sorry!’ she said. ‘I just thought...’ she looked around the kitchen.

‘I know,’ said Patsy. ‘It’s all a bit of a mess. But we can’t really afford to pay money out for a room because we need every penny we can raise to repair the house. And anyway we want to be here so that we can keep an eye on things.’

‘It’s no worse than our place was for ages,’ Thumper reminded Anne. ‘Just bigger.’ He looked around the room and whistled. ‘Difficult to know where to start, isn’t it he paused. ‘Still,’ he said, ‘at least the fabric of the building is sound. Roof and stuff. That’s what really costs the money.’

‘We need a new roof,’ said Patsy.

This time it was Thumper’s turn to look embarrassed. ‘I thought you must have had it surveyed...’ he said. ‘And the roof *looks* O.K.’

‘The bank had a survey done, but it didn’t show up anything too bad,’ I told him. ‘We knew we wanted the house and it was an auction so we didn’t really have time to have our own done.’

‘When you say you need a new roof,’ said Thumper, ‘do you mean that you need a new roof? Or just that it needs an overhaul?’

‘According to the roofers the roofing nails that hold the slates in position have all corroded and our battens have all got woodworm.’ I said. ‘They say we need a new roof.’

Thumper scratched his head. ‘I hate to think what that’ll cost you.’

I picked the estimate up off the table and handed it to him. He looked at it and his mouth actually fell open. He stared at it for a few moments, showed it to Anne and then handed the piece of paper back to me. ‘You haven't agreed to this, have you?' he asked me, quietly. I'd never seen him look quite so serious.

'No. We said we wanted time to think about.'

'Where did you find them?'

'We just picked them out of the telephone directory.'

'Can you afford that sort of bill?'

'No. But do we have any choice?'

'Do you really want this place roofed with horrible, shiny blue artificial slates?'

'No. But they said they were a lot cheaper and the cost is important.' I was surprised to hear myself defending the two roofers.

'And they said we wouldn't be able to tell the difference between asbestos and the real thing,' added Patsy.

'Asbestos slates are a lot easier to work with and they'll be able to make a bigger profit if you let them use asbestos,' said Thumper. 'But they'll look vile.' He waved a hand around. 'This is a beautiful house,' he said. 'It needs restoring with love.' He paused. 'Love doesn't always come cheap,' he reminded us.

I trusted Thumper and I knew that he was right, but he wasn't telling me anything that in my heart I didn't already know. Our problem was that although we loved the house we neither of us knew very much about builders. And we were both frightened by the fact that restoring Bilbury Grange was going to cost us far more money than we had expected or that we had available.

'What do you think we should do?' Patsy asked him.

'Well, for a start, you should re-use the slates that are on the roof,' he told us. 'Slates don't really rot, though some of them will have weathered. And with a little care it should be possible to save at least two thirds of them, especially if the nails holding them in have corroded.' He picked up his mug of tea and drained half of it in one gulp. 'That was horrible,' he said, making a face and shaking his head.

I was puzzled. 'But the guys who left us this estimate said the slates would be broken when they took them off. Why would they lie?'

'What would you do with the old slates if you knew you were having new asbestos ones put on?' I shrugged. 'Nothing.'

'Exactly. You'd be grateful to let them take the old ones away, wouldn't you?'

'Yes.' I agreed.' I suppose so.'

'The crooks who gave you this estimate will sell your slates to someone else,' Thumper said. 'They've probably already got a buyer.'

'I'm glad you came round,' said Patsy, meaning it.

'So am I!' said Thumper. 'It makes me go cold inside to think that you might have let these crooks rip you off.' He grinned at us. 'I do the ripping off in Bilbury!' he said, only half joking. 'I don't like con artists coming into my village and I take a really dim view of it when I find that they're trying to rip off my friends.'

'You shouldn't say that,' said Anne.

'What?' asked Thumper.

'That about you doing the ripping off. I know it's all right with the Doctor and Patsy because they know you're only joking. But you shouldn't say that you rip people off.'

I couldn't help wondering just how much Anne knew of the things that Thumper did to earn his living.

Thumper laughed. 'Of course I do!' he said. 'It's just that most of the time I rip off insurance companies and people like that who don't count.'

'So you don't think it will cost us that much to have the roof done?' Patsy asked him.

'Not unless you want it covering in gold leaf,' replied Thumper. He looked across at me. 'Why didn't you give me a ring before you got these cowboys to give you a quote?'

'I didn't like to bother you,' I said, telling him the truth. 'I knew you'd help us but...'

'Have you had anyone else here giving you quotes?' Thumper asked us.

'A builder named Naughton came,' said Patsy. 'He says we've got dry rot in the cellars. We've got to have new floorboards.' Thumper held his head in his hands. 'Not 'Naughty' Naughton?'

'Do you know him?'

'Big, fat chap? Usually wears a brown boiler suit? Carries a briefcase with him?'

'Yes.'

'I know him.' said Thumper. 'Telephone directory again?'

Patsy nodded.

'You have been doing well,' he said. 'I'm surprised at you Patsy. Don't you remember that case that was in the papers five or six years ago about the builder who was accused of laying a tarmacadam drive so thinly that it cracked the first time the bloke drove his car onto it?'

'Vaguely,' agreed Patsy, after a moment's thought.

'That was your man Naughton,' said Thumper. 'Did he give you a piece of wood with your dry rot on it?'

'Yes.' I said. 'It's outside the back door.'

'Show me?'

I opened the back door, fetched the piece of wood with the dry rot growing in it and showed it to Thumper who examined it carefully. For the first time I looked at it closely too. There were small white clumps that looked like mushrooms, long strands that looked like thick strands of a giant spider's web and small orange pellets that looked like small orange pellets. The whole thing smelt strongly of mushrooms.

'He said he got this out of your cellar?'

'Yes.'

'How do we get down there?'

Patsy and I both jumped up and went over to the door that led down into the cellars.

'Bloody hell!' said Thumper a few moments later, walking around underneath our house and clearly amazed by the vastness of the cellars. 'How many rooms are there down here?'

'Nine,' I told him. 'Four wine cellars, one coal cellar and four storage rooms.' I was especially proud of the wine cellars which had brick wine storage bins built into them. They were so large that I still hadn't explored them properly. As I wandered about I saw the dusty neck of a wine bottle poking through a clump of cobwebs. I moved closer, brushed aside the cobwebs and realised that there were several other bottles lying alongside and below it. They had clearly been forgotten by some former owner. Most old houses that haven't been occupied for a while contain derelict beds, old sofas and vermin. Ours also had a few bottles of wine.

'Amazing!' Thumper walked about poking at the walls and sniffing at the floorboards above him.

'Is that dry rot?' I asked him, pointing to a huge white matted clump that looked like a bunch of old spiders' webs.

'No.' said Thumper, glancing at it. 'That's old spiders' webs.'

'What about that thing that looks like a mushroom?' 'It's a mushroom,' replied Thumper. 'Let's go back up into the kitchen.'

The three of us followed him back up the stairs into the kitchen. 'There isn't any dry rot down there.' said Thumper firmly.

'Are you sure?' asked Patsy, frowning. 'But what about that piece of wood Mr Naughton brought up? Hasn't that got dry rot?'

'That's got dry rot,' confirmed Thumper. 'But it's not out of your cellar.' He grinned. 'Get me some old newspapers and some matches.'

'What on earth for?' asked Patsy, puzzled.

'We're going to burn this,' said Thumper, picking up our piece of wood with dry rot growing in it. 'It's probably the only bit of dry rot around here. I don't want any of these spores infecting your house.' Patsy rummaged around in a cupboard and found some old newspapers. I handed Thumper the box of matches that Patsy used to light our camping stove and we followed him out into the courtyard where he built a small bonfire and burnt the piece of wood.

'But if that wasn't out of our cellar where was it from?' I asked Thumper when we were back in the kitchen again.

'Out of his briefcase,' replied Thumper. "Naughty' always carries a bit of dry rot around with him. He keeps a clump of it growing in an old barn he's got. Has he given you the estimate yet for putting new floors in?'

'No,' said Patsy. 'He said he'd post it to us.'

'Promise me you'll let me see it when it comes?'

'O.K. But why?'

'Because it'll be a wonderful work of fiction,' said Thumper with a grin. 'And it'll make your roofing estimate look like petty cash.'

'So we don't need new floorboards?' Patsy came across to me and hugged me.

'No. The ones you've got are absolutely fine. There's a bit of woodworm here and there but no more than you'd expect in a house this old.' Thumper shook his head with disbelief. 'What a prize pair,' he said. 'I can't wait to tell Frank about you two.' (Frank is the landlord of the Duck and Puddle, the Bilbury pub, and I knew I was going to have to put up with some teasing from him and the regulars.)

Patsy, her arms around my neck, whispered something in my ear. I didn't quite catch what she said and asked her to repeat it. She blushed, looked embarrassed and buried her head in my shoulders. She wouldn't tell me what she'd said but pushed me across to the far side of the kitchen so that we were out of earshot of Anne and Thumper. 'Excuse us, for a moment!' I called across to them, laughing.

'Why don't we ask Thumper if he can help us,' Patsy whispered. 'Maybe he'd help make sure we don't get cheated by builders and roofers.'

'I don't like to ask,' I whispered back. 'It's taking advantage of a friend.'

'We could pay him!' whispered Patsy. 'Hire him as a consultant or something. A sort of building supervisor?'

It was a marvellous idea. I told her so and turned back to Thumper and Anne.

'We've got a proposition for you!' I told Thumper. I explained what it was. 'But only if you've got the time and only if you'll let us pay you.'

Thumper seemed surprised. ‘I don’t want any money from you!’ he insisted. ‘I’ll be very happy to help. But I don’t want you to pay me.’

‘But don’t you see, we won’t ask you to do anything if we can’t pay you,’ I told him. ‘That’s why we nearly got into that terrible mess with the roofers.’

‘Not to mention Mr Naughton,’ added Patsy.

‘Have you got time to help?’ I asked.

‘Of course he has,’ said Anne, without hesitating. She turned to look at Thumper. ‘He’s been complaining that things have been quiet recently. And to be honest we could do with the money.’

‘Have you?’ I asked him. ‘Have you got the time?’

‘Yes,’ agreed Thumper. ‘Of course I have. And I’d love to help. It’s a wonderful house and I’d really love to help put it back together again. But I don’t want to take money off you.’

‘You must see it from our point of view,’ said Patsy. ‘We desperately need someone we can trust. Restoring this house is going to be a big job. But we can’t keep asking you for help if we aren’t paying you. You’ve got bills to pay...’

‘And Frank doesn’t give his beer away!’ I pointed out.

Thumper scratched his head.

‘If you won’t help us we’ll hire those roofers and get Mr Naughton to do all our building work,’ threatened Patsy.

‘O.K!’ agreed Thumper, holding up his hands in mock surrender. ‘O.K. I give in.’

‘Wonderful!’ I said. I held out a hand. ‘It makes great sense for all of us.’

‘You haven’t heard what I’m going to charge you yet,’ said Thumper. ‘And there are two working conditions I want sorting out before I start.’

‘O.K.’ I said. ‘What are they?’

‘I want milk and sugar in my tea,’ said Thumper firmly. ‘Not milk or sugar. Milk *and* sugar.’

‘You’re a hard negotiator,’ sighed Patsy. ‘But I suppose we can manage that.’

Thumper agreed to start work the following day after he had delivered a pile of logs to a hotel in Lynton.

* * *

After Thumper and Anne had gone Patsy and I spent the rest of the day cleaning and tidying up. It’s amazing how much rubbish accumulates in any house that is theoretically ‘empty’. There was a huge pile of unsolicited mail in the reception hall and there were half a dozen broken beds and old sofas lying around in the other rooms.

We carried and dragged everything we could find out into the courtyard at the back of the house. Getting rid of the stuff that we could burn was easy but getting rid of bedsprings and other bits and pieces of assorted metal promised to be more of a problem. There was a lot of it - an old water heater, a broken refrigerator, part of a cooker and, inexplicably, a broken car exhaust system that we found in a bedroom.

I put all the burnable items, the moth-eaten curtains, the threadbare carpets and the seemingly endless piles of old newspapers and magazines into several heaps and used some of the unsolicited mail to start a bonfire. I like lighting bonfires and this one seemed especially cathartic. Removing the debris left behind by former owners seemed to be an essential part of making Bilbury Grange ours. I was so preoccupied with what I was doing that I completely lost track of the hours, and the light evening meant that there was no darkening of the skies to remind me of the time.

‘Are you hungry?’ called Patsy, suddenly appearing from one of the downstairs rooms as I dragged a pile of old curtains down the main staircase and into the reception hall. At the sight of her I couldn’t help bursting out laughing. Her blue jeans, her once white T-shirt, her face, her hands and her hair were all covered in a mixture of dust from the house and soot from the bonfire. She had tied her hair back with a red ribbon and her forehead was smeared with black marks where she’d wiped away the sweat. ‘What are you laughing at?’ she demanded, rather indignantly.

‘Look in the mirror!’ I told her, nodding towards a massive gilt framed mirror that was still screwed to the wall opposite the fireplace. The frame was chipped in several places and the mirror needed new glass. Whoever had left it had clearly decided that it was worthless. They had, I thought, very probably been right.

Patsy dropped the piece of carpet she was carrying and walked across to the mirror. She looked at herself without any apparent surprise and beckoned to me to join her. I dropped my pile of curtains and walked across to the mirror.

‘Now you look!’ she said, grinning at me. I looked even more bizarre than she did. I had a huge spider’s web draped over one side of my head and my face was, if anything, even grubbier than hers. ‘We look a bit of a mess, don’t we?’ I laughed. Patsy reached up and removed the spider’s web from my hair with her hand. Then she wiped her hand on the back of her jeans. I put my arm around her and pulled her towards me. ‘You don’t have any regrets about buying this crazy house, do you?’

‘None whatsoever.’

We kissed. Somehow she still smelt sweet and her lips were warm and soft. Her kiss made me feel twelve feet tall. After what seemed like a lifetime we reluctantly parted.

‘Are you hungry?’ whispered Patsy, gently lifting her lips from mine, lifting her head backwards and pushing me away with her hands. ‘Because I’m absolutely starving.’

‘Me too!’

We washed in brown, cold water in one of the bathrooms upstairs. The bathroom was huge and had two massive cast iron white baths standing side by side in the middle of it. The baths were so large that Patsy claimed that she’d swum a full stroke underwater in hers. We left our dirty clothes soaking in the water and dried ourselves on two huge, white, fluffy bath towels that Frank and Gilly had given us as a wedding present. Then Patsy drove to the fish and chip shop in Combe Martin with strict instructions to make sure that my meal was well doused with vinegar and liberally sprinkled with salt, while I stayed behind to feed the bonfire and to make sure it didn’t get out of control - at the same time trying hard not to get so close to it that I covered myself in smoke and soot again.

By the time she returned twenty minutes later I had cleared away the last of the curtains and the carpets and the bonfire was belching forth clouds of black smoke. I sat down at the kitchen table with the back door safely closed and through the window watched the flames rising around an old wardrobe with missing doors which I had found in the attic.

‘Oh, darn it.’ said Patsy, unwrapping the two parcels she had brought back with her. The smell was wonderful. ‘I’ve forgotten to bring anything to drink.’

‘I think I saw a couple of bottles of wine abandoned in the cellar,’ I remembered. ‘I’ll go and fetch one. Do you have any preferences?’

‘Chateau Lafitte 1897!’ laughed Patsy.

‘No. I mean what colour? Red or white?’

‘I don’t mind. Anything you can find.’

I got up from the table and went down into the cellar. There were more bottles than I had at first thought - probably two dozen in all. Knowing nothing at all about wine I pulled out a few of the bottles and examined the labels. They all came from the same bottler. I plucked a bottle at random and took it back upstairs. Sadly, it seemed that whoever had left the wine had known what he was doing for it tasted rather bitter and we ended up pouring most of the bottle down the sink and drinking plain water with our chips. But fish and chips had never tasted so good, and whatever its original colour our filtered water tasted sparkling and fresh. I made a mental note to throw out the rest of the wine sometime.

By the time we had finished our meal the sun had set and it was dark outside. The bonfire had died right down to a few smouldering embers but when we took our dirty paper plates and the paper in which our fish and chips had been wrapped and threw them all onto the fire the flames flickered brightly for a few moments and lit up the courtyard in the darkness of the evening.

I don’t know whether it was the heat of the fire, trapped in the courtyard by the thick stone walls of the house, stables and coach-house, but the evening seemed warmer than the day had been. Leaving the debris of our meal to burn away Patsy and I walked out of the courtyard, past the walled vegetable garden and down to the lake, lit now only by moonlight filtered romantically through the towering trees around it. We found an old cast iron garden seat underneath what had been a rose bower and I kicked and pulled the brambles from it so that we could sit down. Above the lake we could see a thousand insects hovering and flitting and the occasional splash proved that there were still some fish in the water.

I put my arm around Patsy and we sat there wrapped together in the half dark, sharing our love and our dreams alone and silent. Despite all our problems I had never before felt such freedom, such contentment, such happiness and such hope for the future. I felt excited and apprehensive and incongruously suddenly remembered the first night I had slept under canvas when I was a boy. My father had erected a small tent on the back lawn and I’d slept there with the tent doors securely knotted against the night with double bows and with the moonlight shining so brightly through the canvas that I could see to read by it.

We sat and I thought how lucky I was to have found Patsy and how very, very lucky I was that she loved me as I loved her.

Suddenly, I felt her shiver as the cold of the night descended and I took her back into the house, tiptoeing through the lace-work of tripwire brambles laid across the paths giggling with fake alarm as bats swooped and pirouetted low overhead.

* * *

I was woken the next morning by bright rays of sunshine streaming through the uncurtained bedroom windows; the natural shafts of sunlight that had woken me clearly visible as they lit up a million specks of dust floating around the room. It seemed a far nicer way to be woken than to be yanked into awareness by the shrill, insistent, unforgiving ring of an alarm clock and I wondered why no one had ever invented an alarm clock which produced artificial shafts of sunlight instead of noise.

We had chosen a bedroom on the south east corner of the house, mainly so that we would wake every morning with a view of the rising sun, and we had slept on the one bed we had chosen to keep, an old iron bedstead with a soggy mattress.

I groaned as I struggled to sit up and rubbed my aching back. I wasn't sure whether it ached because of all the old furniture and debris I'd dragged out of the house the day before or because of the soggy mattress. I looked at Patsy, still sleeping, and couldn't help thinking that I had never before seen anyone so beautiful nor so innocent. Ben, the black and white collie I had inherited from an old tramp, had spent the night sleeping at the bottom of the bed. (Despite repeated questioning the tramp had never been able to tell me why he had called his dog Ben, despite knowing that she was a female). She stood up, stretched, yawned and went straight to the door when she saw me clambering carefully out of bed.

I stretched and then put my finger to my lips to tell her to keep quiet so that we didn't wake Patsy. She stood by the open door and waited; her ears pricked, her tongue hanging out and her tail wagging. Ben was clearly looking forward to the new day too.

Downstairs I opened the back door, which we hadn't even bothered to lock (we didn't have anything to steal and what, in any case, is the point of locking up a deserted house which has two dozen ill-fitting windows?) and watched as Ben scampered off into the courtyard. She stopped for a moment to sniff at the burnt-out embers of the bonfire and then disappeared at top speed through the archway underneath the coach-house clock tower. Moments later I heard her crashing about in the undergrowth. I filtered some water through the last of our coffee filter papers (making a mental note to see if Peter Marshall at the village shop had any more for sale), filled the saucepan and lit our camping stove (making another mental note to telephone the cooker supplier in Barnstaple to see if there was any chance of us receiving our cooker) hunted around for something to eat and realised that we had nothing (making a mental note to buy some bread and other supplies from the village shop) and put our one remaining tea bag into one of our two mugs (making a mental note to buy some cheap crockery).

Realising I already had so many things to remember that I was quite certain to forget most of them I fished a stub of pencil from one of the kitchen drawers and, in the absence of a notebook, started to write out a list of things to do on the yellowing paint on the wall above the sink. To the list of things we needed to buy I added 'notebook' since carrying the kitchen wall with us when we went to the shop seemed a little impractical. As I did this Ben reappeared, bursting through the back door, which I had left open, and depositing a live and apparently perfectly healthy baby rabbit at my feet.

The rabbit and I stared at each other and I'm not sure which of us was most startled. Ben sat and watched us both as though conducting some personal experiment. The rabbit recovered first. He sat bolt upright, his ears standing up and his nose twitching, and then scampered off around and around the kitchen. I opened the back door even wider to encourage him to escape that way, but either the rabbit wasn't about to fall for what he thought was a trap or else, like the rest of us, he had fallen in love with Bilbury Grange. He turned around through one hundred and eighty degrees, ran off in the opposite direction and disappeared into the corridor. I hurried after him but by the time I had got to the doorway he was nowhere to be seen. Ben, who hadn't moved a muscle, put her head to one side and raised an eyebrow quizzically.

I made Patsy a cup of black tea and carried it upstairs. I had hoped to wake her with a kiss but Ben clearly thought that was a sloppy idea. She leapt onto the bed, got a corner of the blanket in her teeth and pulled and pulled until Patsy woke up.

Just then I heard the sound of a vehicle in the driveway. I looked out of the window and saw that Thumper, who had already delivered his pile of logs, was arriving to start work.

* * *

CHAPTER THREE

Thumper had packed the back of his truck with tools and had brought his ladder too. We decided that while Patsy drove down to the village shop to buy some milk, sugar, bread and other essentials Thumper and I would take a look at the roof. 'There's no point in doing anything inside the house until we've got the roof sorted out,' he pointed out sensibly.

'You do need new battens,' he said, ten minutes later, as he peered through the gap the two roofers had left. I stood in comparative safety at the top of the ladder. He bent over and showed me a small piece of wood that crumbled in his fingers. 'But the beams all look sound enough. There are a few worm holes but they built this house with old ships' timbers and they're mostly too hard for woodworm to get into.'

'Ships' timbers?'

'Wood goes rock hard when it's in salt water for a long time,' explained Thumper. 'Woodworm prefer soft wood because it's easier to eat.'

'What about the slates?'

'We can reuse most of them. But we'll have to try to find a few thousand old ones to replace the ones that are already broken and the ones that break when we prise them off.'

We clambered down from the roof and Thumper said he knew of a place near Tiverton, about forty miles away, which would probably have the slates we needed in stock. 'Are you thinking of restoring the coach-house and the stables?'

'Yes. I suppose so. Eventually.'

'Then if you can afford it the sensible thing will be to buy more slates than you think you'll need. If you end up short you'll probably never be able to match the size and colour. If you buy too many we can always just store them and use them later.'

We climbed down from the roof just as Patsy got back from the shop and decided to go to Tiverton straight away. Thumper had brought down one of the loose slates so that he could make sure the ones we bought were the right size.

As we walked towards the front door Patsy climbed out of the Morris her arms laden with the old-fashioned, stout, brown paper bags that the village shop still used. 'Peter said we could put it all on your account,' she said. 'So it didn't cost me anything!'

I'd been living in Bilbury for over six months and I still hadn't had a bill from Peter Marshall, the local shop keeper, taxi driver, postman and undertaker. Occasionally, I worried about this unseen liability, but since we needed all the credit we could get I wasn't about to rush down to the shop and force Peter to let me pay cash.

I reached into the car and picked up the remaining bags. 'I've got some salad stuff,' said Patsy. 'Lettuce, tomatoes, spring onions and cheese. Plus two fresh loaves, a box of cornflakes and a couple of packets of biscuits.'

'Milk? Sugar?' asked Thumper, following us into the kitchen. 'Did you remember the milk and the sugar?'

'Yes!' laughed Patsy. 'I've got your milk and sugar. And I bought a couple of bottles of this in case it gets hot.' She pulled a large brown glass bottle of dandelion and burdock out of one of the bags.

'I haven't seen that stuff since I was a kid!' I exclaimed, as I helped Patsy stack the food she'd bought neatly on the kitchen table. I carefully wrote 'fridge' on the first page of the notebook she'd brought back. 'I didn't know they were still making it.'

'They probably aren't,' said Thumper drily. 'Just because Peter is selling it that doesn't mean that anyone is still making it.'

'That reminds me,' said Patsy. 'I managed to get these coffee filter papers very cheap. Peter says that no one in the village has got a machine that fits them.'

'How cheap is very cheap?'

'I don't know. He didn't say.'

'We'd better have a look at your water supply when we get back,' said Thumper. 'Though it's probably just some rust in the holding tank that's turning your water brown.'

The three of us squeezed into the cab of Thumper's truck, Ben made herself comfortable on my knees and we headed off for Tiverton in search of slates.

* * *

Just over an hour later we were driving gloomily back out of Tiverton. But instead of driving towards Bilbury we were heading north, out of Tiverton on the Bristol road. The sun had disappeared and the skies were grey and overcast.

'Sorry!' the man at the builder's yard had said. 'We don't have anything that size.' Ironically, there were tens of thousands of slates in dozens of different sizes stacked neatly all around the outside of the old caravan that he used as an office. 'They haven't made anything that size since I've been in the business.' Since he was in his late sixties and had already told us that he'd been in the building reclamation business all his life I found this distinctly depressing. He suggested that we try a builder's yard on the outskirts of Bristol.

'Do the slates we buy have to be the same size as our existing slates?' I asked Thumper as we started the drive back to Bilbury. 'They do really,' Thumper confirmed unhappily. 'Otherwise fitting them onto the roof will be like doing a jigsaw puzzle. And they'll look pretty odd too.' We were driving through Taunton when Patsy suddenly shouted at Thumper to stop. He put his foot on the brake so suddenly and so sharply that Patsy and I nearly went through the windscreen while poor Ben fell off my lap and landed on the floor at my feet. Fortunately, only her pride seemed to be hurt.

'What's the matter?' demanded Thumper.

'Back up a bit said Patsy, excitedly, reaching across me and winding down the window.

Thumper put the truck into reverse and backed up, narrowly missing a group of holiday-makers in a Ford Cortina.

'Say when!' he told her.

'When!' said Patsy. 'Here! Look!' She pointed out of the now open truck window at a large, derelict building that was being knocked down. There was a crane parked in front of it with a huge iron ball hanging from it on a long chain. The crane driver was swinging the ball backwards and forwards so that he could use it to knock holes in the structure of the building.

'What is it?' I asked her. I couldn't see why we'd stopped.

'Slates!' shouted Patsy, gleefully. She pointed in the direction of the disabled building. 'Look!'

Thumper and I followed her outstretched hand and stared at the building. It had a slate roof, and two men in shorts and vests were standing on it. They were systematically smashing the slates with a couple of sledgehammers.

'That building looks quite old,' said Patsy. 'Maybe their slates would fit our house?'

'It's a long shot,' said Thumper pessimistically.

'Quick, quick!' said Patsy. 'Before they smash them all up.'

We all climbed out of the truck and hurried onto the demolition site. Thumper was carrying the sample slate we'd brought with us.

'Hey!' yelled a large man. He had a huge stomach which hung over the leather belt around his filthy jeans. 'You can't come on here. This is private. And it's dangerous.' he added. Ben growled at him but kept her distance.

'We're looking for some slates like this,' said Thumper, holding up the slate from Bilbury Grange. 'We're prepared to pay you cash.'

'These slates won't fit anything,' said the man with the huge belly. 'We checked 'em out. They're an odd size.'

'Could we just compare one with ours?' asked Thumper. He took a grubby and crumpled five pound note out of his back pocket and handed it over.

'Don't suppose it will hurt,' agreed the man, pocketing the note and walking a little closer to the building. He yelled up to one of the men on the roof, asking him to throw down one of the slates. The man prised off a slate and threw it down. For a moment I thought that the man with the overhanging stomach was going to attempt to catch it in his hands but he wasn't quite that stupid. Luckily the slate didn't break when it landed on the ground. Up on the roof the two men who had been smashing the slates went back to work. The fat man picked the fallen slate up and brought it over to us. He handed it to Thumper. Thumper held it up against the slate we'd brought with us. Both were exactly the same size.

'Brilliant!' said Patsy, almost jumping off the ground with excitement. She pointed towards the roof of the building they were demolishing. 'Tell them to stop!'

'The colour's not right,' said Thumper casually and critically. 'But we can probably use them. How much?'

'How many do you want?'Thumper looked up. 'All that you've got left.' The two men on the roof were still smashing slates. Patsy looked across at me with agony on her face. I knew she wanted me to tell the fat man to ask the two men on the roof to stop smashing slates. But I knew Thumper didn't want the fat man to realise how much we wanted the slates. I reached for her hand and pulled her away.

'Cash?' I heard the man say.

'Cash.' agreed Thumper. 'On delivery.'

The man scratched his head.

I heard Thumper offering a price for every whole slate. Then the fat man made a counter offer. He wanted a fixed sum for all the slates they'd got.

I heard Thumper raise his offer, still insisting that he would only pay a sum for each individual, complete slate.

I thought Thumper was being very sensible in wanting to pay for individual slates.

To my surprise and delight the fat man agreed to Thumper's offer, turned round, walked towards the building and shouted to the two men on the roof to stop smashing up the slates that were now worth money.

'Great!' said Thumper, turning to us with a broad grin on his face.

‘Are they really the wrong colour?’ asked Patsy, anxious now.

‘No.’ said Thumper. ‘They’re perfect.’ He winked at us. ‘I’ll go and tell them where to bring the slates.’ He turned as he started to walk away. ‘All you’ve got to do is find the cash.’

‘Oh good,’ I said. ‘As long as that’s all.’

* * *

We drove back to Bilbury feeling very pleased with ourselves, and as we arrived home the sun, which had been hiding for most of the morning, shone brightly again.

‘I’ll make us a nice salad for lunch,’ promised Patsy. ‘We can eat outside in the garden.’

While she headed for the kitchen Thumper and I started to walk around the house. We needed to prepare a list of other essential work.

‘I’m glad to see that you’re keeping all your scrap metal,’ said Thumper, as we passed the pile of old boilers, bits of exhaust pipe, springs and other assorted pieces of unburnable rubbish.

‘I don’t really know what to do with it I confessed.

‘I’ll take it into Barnstaple,’ said Thumper. ‘I know a scrap metal dealer who’ll buy all that from you.’

I stared at him in amazement.

‘Never throw anything away,’ he said, very seriously. ‘Even the old battens off the roof are useful. They’ll make terrific firelighters.’

Suddenly Patsy came running towards us, holding two rather limp looking lettuce leaves.

‘Someone’s stolen the lettuce!’ she shouted. Thumper and I followed her back to the kitchen.

‘Are you sure there’s nothing else missing?’

‘Just the lettuce,’ said Patsy. ‘All except these two leaves.’ It was then that I remembered the rabbit that Ben had brought into the house that morning.

* * *

CHAPTER FOUR

Suddenly it was time for me to start proper work again; to put down my broom and pick up my stethoscope. I had almost forgotten that I still had to earn a living. Some people would have probably thought of it as a strange honeymoon but I couldn’t have wished for anything better.

In some ways Bilbury Grange now looked more of a mess than ever. There were piles of rubbish all around the outside of the house, and the scaffolding company that Thumper had hired had almost finished surrounding the house with rusty poles and brackets. Patsy said it made the house look as if it were in the intensive care unit and she was right.

Exactly a week after Patsy and I had moved into Bilbury Grange I got up at my usual time but, instead of clambering into my tattered and now rather stained shorts and going outside to help Thumper, I dug out my faithful old sports jacket, the one with the leather patches on the elbows and the large ink stain on the lining, and my only decent pair of grey flannels and tried to make myself look more like a general practitioner than a labourer. It wasn’t easy. The sun had shone for most of the week and had bleached my hair and tanned my skin, and the exercise had toned up my muscles and I definitely felt more like a labourer than a doctor.

At eight thirty I kissed Patsy goodbye, promised her that I would be home in three hours for my lunch if there weren’t any emergencies, and climbed into the Morris to drive to the surgery. One of our reasons for buying such a large house was that we wanted to use part of the building as a surgery, but for the time being it was obviously quite impossible to see patients at what was, to all practical extents, little more than a building site. Fortunately, Dr Brownlow had agreed to let me continue to see patients in the surgery at his home. At eight thirty five Patsy and I finally managed to drag ourselves apart and I started up the car.

I was driving slowly down the driveway away from the house when I heard Patsy shouting. I looked in the driving mirror and saw Ben bounding down the drive behind the car. I skidded to a stop, reached over and opened the front passenger door. Without breaking her stride Ben leapt straight into the car, settled herself down on the front seat and stared at me reproachfully, as though cross with me for forgetting her. I stuck my head out through the open window and looked behind.

‘Ben seems to be coming with me, I shouted back to Patsy.

If I run after the car can I come with you too?’ shouted Patsy, laughing.

I pipped my horn in a final goodbye and shot off down the drive, narrowly missed Thumper who was just arriving to carry on working on the roof, and headed for Dr Brownlow’s house and my first surgery as a full-time, self-employed totally-in-charge general practitioner. Although I had only been away for a week so much had happened that it felt strange to be back sitting behind Dr Brownlow’s massive old oak desk, with Miss Johnson fussing around giving me messages and trying to get me up-to-date with what had been happening in my absence. She was wearing her pink flecked two piece suit and her two rows of pearls, which I knew she only wore on special occasions, and I felt touched. I was pleased to see that absolutely nothing had changed. Even though it was early summer and clearly going to be another warm day the waiting room still smelt of rain-soaked mackintoshes and galoshes and the consulting room, unlit by natural light, still had a rather damp feel to it.

The first patient that morning was an elderly lady called Miss Phillips who had come to live in the village just a few days earlier and who had never been to the practice before. Neither of us had any idea just how much she was going to change my life.

Miss Phillips told me that she had moved to Bilbury because she found life in the city just too tiring. She said she had a long standing nervous condition and had suffered with a weak heart for most of her life. We had no medical records for her since she was not yet officially a patient of ours, but I guessed that she was probably in her mid sixties. She was slim and rather frail looking and wore a flowered dress and a pale pink cardigan. Her hair, which was white, was mostly hidden by a straw bonnet decorated with a small bunch of real daisies. She carried a rather large raffia work shopping basket, a folded parasol and wore white lace gloves. She looked like a refugee from another century.

‘How do you like Bilbury, so far?’ I asked her. Although I was still a newcomer to the village I thought of myself as a native and I wanted everyone to like it as much as I did.

‘It’s wonderful!’ murmured Miss Phillips. ‘So quiet and peaceful.’ She told me that she had lived in a flat in London where she had been a virtual prisoner; afraid to go to the shops, afraid to visit friends and afraid to go for a walk in the park. I thought she looked tired.

When I asked her what I could do to help her she reached into her basket and pulled out a small white cardboard box which contained half a dozen capsules. ‘My doctor in London insisted that I take three of these every day,’ she told me. ‘They are for my nerves.’ With some slight reluctance she handed the box over to me. Her movements were slow and she had a slight tremor when she moved.

I examined the box carefully. It bore nothing except the name of the company and a scribbled note saying ‘Take as directed’. I had never seen the capsules before though I knew the name of the manufacturer very well. I handed the box back. ‘Do you know what they’re called?’

‘I wrote down the name,’ said Miss Phillips. She smiled rather nervously. ‘My memory isn’t as good as it was.’ She reached into her bag again and took out a piece of paper. She handed it to me. It had the word ‘Angipax’ written on it.

‘How long have you been taking them?’ I asked. I had never heard of the pills.

She thought for a moment. ‘Six months or so. I think.’

‘Do they help? Do they make you feel better?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Miss Phillips, rather surprisingly. ‘But I’d like to stop them now that I’m living in the country.’ I said I thought that sounded a good idea.

‘I thought I should ask your permission first,’ said Miss Phillips. ‘My doctor in London never liked me doing anything without asking him first.’

‘Very sensible,’ I agreed. I reached behind me and took a large book off a shelf. ‘I’ll just check up to see what the manufacturers say about those pills of yours.’ I flicked through the index of the reference book but couldn’t find ‘Angipax’ listed anywhere.

‘I don’t expect they’ll be in there,’ said Miss Phillips.

‘They’re very new. My doctor used to get them for me specially.’

I plucked another book off the shelf, found the telephone number for the drug company concerned and rang the Medical Director.

‘Do you make a drug called ‘Angipax’?’ I asked him, when

I got through.

He sounded a little surprised but said that they did. I described one of the capsules.

‘That’s right. Are you one of the trial doctors?’

That explained why the doctor in London had given Miss Phillips the capsules instead of sending her to the chemist with a prescription. The doctor was being paid by the drug company to test the new drug on his patients.

I explained the situation. ‘Miss Phillips wants to stop them. Is it safe for her just to stop them overnight?’

‘Oh, yes!’ said the Medical Director immediately. ‘No problem.’ He paused. ‘Are there any capsules left?’

‘A few.’

‘I’ll send someone round to pick them up.’

I said he needn’t bother going to so much trouble and that if he wanted the capsules back I’d put them in the post, but he said he would rather send someone round. I put the telephone down and told Miss Phillips that the company making ‘Angipax’ had confirmed that it was safe for her to stop them.

‘That’s wonderful,’ said Miss Phillips. ‘Thank you, doctor.’ she smiled at me and stood up. ‘Do I pay you or your receptionist?’ She took out a rather plump looking purse.

I must have looked as puzzled as I was.

‘My doctor in London always liked me to pay him directly,’ said Miss Phillips. ’He said it made the accounting easier.’ She smiled again. ‘And I prefer to pay each time rather than allow a bill to build up.’

‘If you’re going to live in Bilbury and you would like me to look after you Miss Johnson will give you a form to sign,’ I told her. ‘There isn’t anything to pay.’

‘Oh!’ said Miss Phillips, clearly surprised.

‘This is a National Health Service practice.’ I explained. ‘We don’t have any private patients. The Government will pay me to look after you.’ I couldn’t help thinking that the doctor must be making a fortune. His patients were paying him for treatments which the drug companies were undoubtedly also paying him to try out. I asked Miss Phillips to leave her capsules with Miss Johnson and to tell her that someone from the drug company would be round to pick them up.

Miss Phillips thanked me profusely and walked slowly towards the door. I waited until I’d heard her footsteps disappear down the corridor before I pressed the buzzer underneath my desk to tell the next patient to come in. I didn’t know why, but Miss Phillips had worried me.

* * *

When I’d finished the morning surgery Miss Johnson said that Dr Brownlow had asked me to call in and see him. She told me that he would be in the converted barn where he was supervising the water bottling plant he had set into operation. Dr Brownlow had retired from general practice to run a business selling bottled water to restaurants and supermarkets.

‘Thank you for standing in for me last week!’ I said. ‘How’s the water business?’

‘It’s looking good!’ said Dr Brownlow. He looked ten years younger than he had when I’d last seen him.

‘So are you!’ I told him. ‘Running a business clearly agrees with you.’

‘I like it.’ admitted Dr Brownlow. ‘I like the challenge.’ He put down the sheaf of papers he was holding. ‘I just wanted to ask you how you were getting on with Bilbury Grange. How are you enjoying married life? And how is Patsy?’

‘I’m enjoying married life very much,’ I said. ‘And Patsy is very well. But the house is coming on slowly.’ I told him about the problems with the roof and about the dry rot in the cellar and about how Thumper had agreed to help us.

‘I heard that Thumper was helping you,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘I’m pleased. Not that you need a new roof but that you’ve got Thumper working with you. You can trust him.’

‘I know,’ I said.

‘A lot of people think he’s irresponsible and unreliable,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘A bit of what we used to call a wide boy. But I’ve always found him to be honest.’ He smiled at me. ‘But then I don’t run an insurance company.’

I smiled back. ‘I don’t think he’s the only person in Bilbury to regard insurance companies as fair game. I can’t really understand why they still sell policies in Bilbury.’

‘Simple,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘The Bilbury claims all go into the computer as Devon claims. And fortunately for us, the rest of Devon has got some pretty honest citizens.’ Unexpectedly, Dr Brownlow reached out and put a hand on my shoulder. ‘You’ll probably find it difficult for a while,’ he told me.

I must have looked puzzled.

‘Buying and trying to restore a large house.’ he explained. ‘But you’re doing the right thing. When I bought this place people said I was mad. But I’ve never regretted it. A small new house may be easy to run but it won’t have much soul. A big old house with character will give you a challenge, cement your marriage and repay your love. And you’ve bought it at the right time. As you get older and try to make decisions you’ll find it gets more and more difficult. Whenever you want to do anything challenging you’ll think of too many problems; you’ll know too much, you’ll know of so many things that can go wrong that you’ll freeze. You’ll find yourself more and more incapable of making decisions, more and more incapable of taking risks and increasingly content to sit back and accept things as they are.’

‘That’s hardly true of you!’ I pointed out. He had, after all, given up his medical practice to concentrate on building up a business selling bottled water.

‘Ah, that’s different!’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘When you get to my age you realise that time is running out and that if you don’t do something today then tomorrow may be too late. You learn to do things by instinct or not to do them at all.’ He stretched his neck first to one side and then to the other. He had bad arthritis in his neck, and although I knew it must have been painful he never complained about it. ‘Besides, when you get to my age you learn to let the future worry about itself.’

‘Would you like to come over and have a look at the house sometime?’ I asked him.

‘I’d love to!’ said Dr Brownlow instantly. ‘When would be convenient?’

‘We can’t invite you for a meal just yet,’ I apologised. ‘We don’t have a cooker. Or any crockery.’

‘That’s all right! I’d just like to see Patsy and the house.’

‘This evening then? About eight?’

* * *

Patsy had prepared a large pile of salad sandwiches for our lunch and we ate them outside, sitting in the garden. Ben sat down beside us chewing on a bone. Thumper had gone back home to have his lunch with Anne.

‘Thumper says we ought to get a proper roofing firm in to do the roof,’ said Patsy. ‘He says there’s plenty of other stuff for him to be getting on with but that if he tries to do the roof by himself we’ll never get all the essential jobs done before the winds start at the end of the summer.’ Bilbury gets a lot of strong south westerly gales, and properties which are not well prepared can suffer badly. ‘Oh, and he says there are half a dozen dead trees that need to come down too.’

‘Does he know anybody we can trust to do the roof?’

‘He’s suggested that we get three firms to come out and give us estimates,’ said Patsy. ‘He’ll talk to them and tell them exactly what we want. And he says could you have some cash ready for when the slates are delivered on Wednesday.’

‘Does Thumper have any idea how much it will cost us to have the roof done?’

Patsy told me. Thumper’s guess was much lower than the estimate we’d received, but it was still an awful lot and would use up most of the money we had set aside from the bank loan for doing other repairs.

‘It’s going to take us longer to get the rest of the house put straight,’ I told Patsy, as I took a large bite out of a tomato sandwich.

‘Because of the money?’ I nodded.

‘Are things going to be all right?’

‘Of course they are!’ I assured her, with far more confidence than I felt. Getting the roof done really had been an unexpected problem.

‘Honestly?’ said Patsy, who clearly didn’t believe me. I paused. ‘I don’t know.’ I admitted.

‘That’s better. I want the truth, you know!’

At five minutes to two I kissed Patsy and stood up. Ben stood with me and started to wag her tail. ‘I’d better get started with the afternoon visits,’ I told her. ‘Otherwise I’ll never finish this evening’s surgery.’

‘Are you sure Dr Brownlow isn’t expecting a meal tonight?’ asked Patsy, for the tenth time. She had looked very worried when I had told her that Dr Brownlow was coming.

‘Absolutely! He just wants to come and see you and look at the house. Talking of meals did you manage to speak to the cooker people?’

‘They promised to deliver it this afternoon,’ said Patsy, without much confidence.

* * *

I had five visits to do on my first afternoon back at work and I arrived at Dr Brownlow’s house with only a couple of minutes to spare before the evening surgery.

‘A man came to pick up those capsules Miss Phillips left,’ said Miss Johnson. ‘He’d driven all the way from Bristol!’

It seemed very odd that anyone should drive over a hundred miles each way to pick up a few capsules, but there was a full waiting room and I didn’t have time to think any more about it. Anyway, I’d always suspected that drug companies had more money than sense. Ben and I went straight into the consulting room. I pressed the buzzer to start the surgery and she curled up beside my feet and went to sleep.

It was an uneventful though rather long evening surgery. The first nine patients I saw were all early holiday-makers. There were four cases of mild sunburn, two children with insect bites and three patients with colds in the first thirty minutes. Most of the villagers would not dream of visiting the surgery with such trivial ailments and I was beginning to despair of seeing anyone I knew when in walked Nigel Woodloe.

Nigel and his wife Karen used to work in London and come down to their cottage in Bilbury at the weekends. He had a job as a currency dealer for an American bank in London and she had an equally important job with an old-fashioned England merchant bank. I knew that they had recently given up their jobs and had decided to live in Bilbury full time, though I didn’t know what they had decided to do to earn a living or whether they had earned so much money that they could retire.

‘I’ve got a terrible back,’ said Nigel, lowering himself into the chair on the other side of the desk with great caution and holding the right side of his back. ‘I wonder if you’d be kind enough to sign me off work so that I can collect some sick pay.’ He was still wearing the dark suit white shirt and red tie of a banker’s uniform, though whether or not this was in my honour I didn’t know.

‘Are you working, then?’ I asked him.

Nigel looked embarrassed. ‘Not exactly,’ he confessed. He lowered his eyes. ‘But I still have a valid sickness insurance policy which pays out if I can’t work for any reason.

‘And you want to make a claim?’

‘Things are a lot harder than we anticipated,’ admitted Nigel.

‘I’d better examine you!’ I told him. ‘Could you pop onto the examination couch?’

Nigel levered himself up out of the chair, took off his jacket, staggered across the room and collapsed onto the couch. Although he looked bad I couldn’t find anything wrong with him. I told him so. He climbed off the couch, walked back around my desk, put his jacket on and sat himself down again. This time he clutched the left side of his back.

‘We thought we’d be able to survive on what we could grow and what we could earn doing odd jobs,’ he confessed. He looked very guilty and was clearly not very good at taking advantage of the system. ‘But the slugs have eaten most of our seedlings, and apart from two days selling ice cream I haven’t been able to get any work at all.’ He bit his lower lip.’ Things are a bit desperate.

I wrote out a sick note. ‘It’s almost impossible to disprove backache, I told him. ‘But if by any chance you get examined by any other doctor try to remember which side of your back hurts.’

Nigel went very red.

‘When you came in it was the right side which hurt,’ I explained. ‘Now it’s the left.’

‘Oh.’ said Nigel, simply. ‘I’m sorry. Thank you.’

‘Do you regret coming down here to live? I asked him, handing him the sick note he needed.

‘No!’ Nigel replied without hesitation. ‘Absolutely not!’ He took the sick note. I held out and nodded his thanks. He stood up.

I waved a hand.

‘Really,’ he said. ‘I appreciate it.’ He folded the sick note up into four and put it into the inside pocket of his jacket.

After Nigel there were another twelve patients: three visitors and nine locals. The visitors included a child with a sore throat, a diabetic needing a supply of insulin and a girl who had come on holiday with her boyfriend and who rather belatedly wanted contraceptive advice and threatened to get herself pregnant if I didn’t help her immediately. The locals included three arthritics wanting prescriptions, a patient with high blood pressure needing a check up, a woman with early menopausal symptoms, two children needing injections, a woman who thought she might be pregnant but rather hoped she wasn’t, and a man with a genuine bad back.

I finished the surgery at 7.40 pm and Ben and I got back home just before 8.00 pm to find that Dr Brownlow’s elderly Rolls Royce was parked in the driveway and he was having a guided tour of the house with Patsy on his arm. Thumper had long since gone home for his tea, leaving behind a lengthy list of requests, queries and instructions. Two of the three roofing firms Thumper had recommended were sending men along to give estimates (the third firm said they were too busy) and it was no surprise at all to hear that the cooker still hadn't arrived.

'It's marvellous!' said Dr Brownlow, enthusiastically, when we'd shown him everything. It was now dusk and we were sitting by our rather stagnant ornamental lake being bitten by a variety of insects. 'There's no disputing that it's a challenge and a lot of people would say that you're mad, but it'll be worth it in the long run.'

Patsy reached out, took my hand and squeezed it. We both valued every scrap of encouragement.

'We'd better go in!' I said, unromantically. 'I don't know about anyone else but I'm being eaten alive.'

'Oh no!' said Patsy, putting a hand to her mouth as she suddenly remembered something. 'I'm sorry! You haven't eaten yet have you?'

'Not since lunchtime!'

'You can have a sandwich or I'll go and fetch fish and chips.'

'Let me treat you!' said Dr Brownlow, standing up. 'I haven't had fish and chips for ages. Is that good chip shop in Combe Martin still open? The one down near to the beach?'

We both nodded. 'I'll be back as soon as I can,' promised Dr Brownlow.

True to his word he was back before the saucepan had boiled on the camping stove.

'Come on!' said Dr Brownlow, excitedly. 'Make the tea afterwards. Eat these while they're still hot. They smell marvellous.' He handed us each a hot parcel of fish and chips and we ate them with our fingers out of the paper.

'That was the best meal I've had for years!' said Dr Brownlow sighing and sitting back with a broad smile on his face.

'I'd forgotten how good fish and chips taste.' He looked thoughtful for a moment. 'Do you know,' he said, slowly and deliberately, 'I think I get more real pleasure from eating fish and chips wrapped in paper than I do out of eating the most expensively cooked cordon bleu meal in the most elaborate surroundings.'

'I agree with you,' I said.

'And no washing up!' said Patsy, standing up and starting to make the tea. We had acquired two extra mugs that Thumper had brought with him and Patsy had declared her intention of going into Barnstaple and buying some crockery from a cheap store she knew.

'What do I do with this?' asked Dr Brownlow, holding up his empty fish and chip wrappings and looking around for a waste bin.

'There's a rubbish pile outside,' I told him. I got to my feet and headed for the back door. As I passed him I went to take his wrappers from out of his hands. 'No, it's O.K!' he said. 'I can manage my own rubbish. It'll make me feel virtuous.' He followed me to the back door and out into the courtyard. Ben, who thought we were all going for a walk, got quite excited.

'I thought you were poor!' said Dr Brownlow, tossing his chip wrapping paper into a half full cardboard box that I had earmarked for burning and picking a bottle from another box. It was the bottle that had contained the wine we'd abandoned the previous evening. Ben, who had run away towards the vegetable garden now turned and waited for me.

'Oh, it was just some stuff I found in the cellar,' I explained. 'It was undrinkable.'

But Dr Brownlow wasn't listening. He was carefully examining the label. 'You didn't buy this, did you?'

I shook my head. 'No I found it in the cellar.' Ben, who had decided I wasn't going for a walk after all, started to run back towards the house.

'Is there any more like it down there?'

'Yes. I'm not sure how many bottles, but they're all the same. But it's gone off otherwise I would have opened a bottle to go with our chips.'

'Show me,' said Dr Brownlow, suddenly very serious. He waved me into the house. With Ben following us I led the way down into the cellar and pointed out the bottles of wine that I had found. Dr Brownlow pulled each one out of its hole and carefully examined the label.

'Are these all yours?' he asked me.

'Yes. We bought the house and contents. But we've burnt most of the contents.'

'You're absolutely sure?'

'Yes!' I said, rather impatiently. 'Why?'

'You don't know what these are, do you?'

'No.' I had by now realised that something serious was going on.

'This is Chateau Lafite Rothschild,' said Dr Brownlow.

'Bottled in 1925.

'Is it valuable?'

'A few years ago half a dozen bottles of this went for over £500!' said Dr Brownlow, carefully replacing the bottle that he had been holding.

I was so shocked that I nearly fell over. When I had recovered I raced back up the stairs towards the kitchen. On the way up I met Patsy who was coming down to see what we were doing.

‘Do you want the bad news or the good news?’

Patsy looked startled. ‘What bad news? What do you mean?’

‘That horrid bottle of wine we threw away last night was worth around £100!’ I told her.

‘Oh no!’

‘But the good news is that we’ve got another eleven bottles of exactly the same wine down in the cellar!’

Patsy threw her arms around my neck, I lost my footing and we both stumbled down the stairs. We scrambled to our feet to discover that my best grey flannels had a tear along one leg, but I didn’t care.

‘That will help pay for our new roof!’ said Patsy.

Ben, attracted by all the excitement, came racing over towards us and started to lick my face excitedly.

‘I take it the news isn’t unacceptable, then?’ said Dr Brownlow.

‘It’s marvellous!’ I said, shaking him by the hand. ‘I’m really glad you came round this evening. I was going to dump that wine.’ Patsy, who had cobwebs caught in her hair, reached across and kissed him on the cheek.

Dr Brownlow grinned at us both. ‘Shall we have a cup of tea to celebrate?’

* * *

CHAPTER FIVE

The Sunday after we had moved into Bilbury Grange, Patsy and I went round to have tea with her parents at their farm. Patsy's sister, Adrienne, who was eager to start her own complementary medicine practice, had gone to London for a three day course in iridology and so, since it was the lambing season, Mr Kennett was extremely busy.

'Come and give us a hand Patsy,' he said, when we'd finished our salmon and cucumber sandwiches and our tinned fruit salad with fresh cream. 'I've got twelve lambs that need feeding.' He took his old blue coat down from behind the living room door, and put it on. It had long since lost both its buttons and its belt so he tied it tightly around the waist with orange baler twine. He then slipped his wellington boots on.

Patsy and I trooped outside in Mr Kennett's wake, calling in at the kitchen to pick up a pan of reconstituted powdered ewes' milk which had been warming. We left Mrs Kennett, who was, as always, as quiet as a mouse and who never seemed to have anything to do with the farm, to clear away the table. I left Ben sitting in the living room alongside Mr Kennett's two dogs and gave her strict instructions to stay where she was. Fortunately, the three dogs seemed to get on well together.

The lambs which needed feeding were huddled together on a thick bed of straw in one corner of an old barn. The corner of the barn had been fenced off with old wooden boards. As soon as they saw Mr Kennett the lambs leapt to their feet and started to make a tremendous noise. The strongest pushed to the front and tried to jump over the wooden wall of their temporary pen.

'Why do these need feeding?' I asked Patsy quietly. I knew nothing at all about farming.

'Some of them are orphans,' explained Patsy. 'We always lose a few mothers in childbirth. And if a ewe has more than two lambs she won't be able to feed them all so we have to take over.'

I watched as Mr Kennett decanted warm milk into four pint sized feeding bottles fitted with red rubber teats. He gave two of the bottles to Patsy and kept two for himself. Then he climbed over the fence and started feeding the noisiest and pushiest of the lambs. As he did so several others tried to suckle on his coat. 'That's where all my coat buttons went,' he explained to me with a gummy grin. Patsy stayed on the outside of the pen and fed two of the lambs through a gap in the wooden boarding. When the first four lambs had emptied their bottles Mr Kennett and Patsy rinsed the bottles and the teats, refilled them with milk and started to feed another pair each.

'Them last four aren't going to make it.' said Mr Kennett, without emotion, nodding towards the four lambs which had not yet been fed. 'They're always last.' Two of the lambs were clearly suffering from diarrhoea and all four were noticeably smaller and weaker than the others. Like their brothers and sisters they all had numbers painted on their sides. One, a pretty little thing which was completely black, could hardly stand and seemed to be shaking and shivering though whether with cold, fear or general debility. I did not know. 'They need two hourly feeds,' said Mr Kennett. 'And they need electrolytes. But they aren't worth the trouble.'

'Do you want to try?' Patsy asked me when it was the turn of the last four to be fed.

I hesitated for a moment before answering that I would. Without a word Mr Kennett rinsed and then refilled the four feeding bottles and then gave two to me and two to Patsy. 'I'll leave you to it.' he said.

'Just make sure that you keep the end of your bottle up in the air,' said Patsy. 'Otherwise they'll suck in air.'

I poked my two feeding bottles through the wooden boarding of the pen but the two lambs I was trying to feed were repeatedly pushed out of the way by stronger lambs which had already been fed. However much I tried to push the bigger lambs away they kept on coming back and the two weak lambs I was trying to feed seemed to get hardly anything to drink. Even when they did manage to get the teats into their mouths they were quickly nudged out of the way. I glanced to my right and saw that Patsy had managed to wedge her two runts into a corner so that she could make sure they were fed. The barn was filled with the sound of sucking and slurping and Patsy's best dress was covered with splashes of milk.

I climbed over the boarding, holding my two bottles high above my head, and found myself being nudged and buffeted from all sides. Even the lambs who had just been fed were desperate for more. Two of the fittest jumped up and left unpleasant looking streaks down the front of my only half decent pair of trousers. (The pair that Patsy had already had to repair after my fall down the cellar steps). Deciding that I now had absolutely nothing to lose, I crouched down with the two lambs I was trying to feed in a corner and protected them with my body while I fed them. Their tiny, bony bodies heaved as they desperately sucked at their bottles. When they'd finished I stood up feeling pleased with myself. Patsy, who had finished and had been watching me, started giggling when she saw the mess I was in. When I looked at her in surprise she pointed at the front of my jacket and trousers. I looked down and saw that both were covered with milk splashes. Two of the fitter lambs were butting each other and three others seemed to be playing a game of hide and seek under and around a rusty old piece of farm machinery.

'You haven't got another jacket!'

'I know.'

'And those are your only decent trousers!' I nodded.

‘So you’re going to work in those tomorrow?’

‘I don’t care!’ I told her. ‘Those two poor little chaps weren’t getting anything to drink.’

‘They’re girls not chaps,’ said Patsy.

‘Whatever. They weren’t getting anything to drink.’ I frowned and paused. ‘When your father said that these four weren’t worth the trouble, what did he mean?’

Patsy’s smile disappeared and she looked embarrassed. She shrugged. ‘You know...’

‘No... I don’t... Do you mean...’

‘He doesn’t think they’ll survive.’

‘They’ll die?’

‘Yes.’ said Patsy bluntly.

‘They would survive if they were fed properly and looked after?’

‘Probably.’

I turned round and looked down at the two lambs I’d just fed. They looked up at me and their eyes were full of trust and faith. I reached out a hand and they both lunged forward and took a finger each into their mouths. Their tails wagged furiously as they sucked hard, desperately trying to draw milk out of what they mistakenly thought were nipples. Strangely, they didn’t stop when no milk came but seemed to get some comfort out of what they were doing.

‘We can’t just let them die.’ I said. I could feel tears welling up in my eyes.

‘They’d die anyway,’ Patsy reminded me quietly. ‘That’s why they are here.’

To my shame it was something I hadn’t even thought of. I hadn’t related the tiny, woolly, loveable mischievous creatures in the barn with lamb chops on a plate. Suddenly, in that brief moment, deliberately breeding animals to kill and then eat seemed obscene beyond belief.

‘We’ve got to save these four,’ I told her. She looked at me, puzzled.

‘Take them home and feed them.’

I could see the uncertainty and confusion in her eyes.

‘Your father won’t mind, will he? He thinks they’re going to die anyway.’

‘But why?’

‘I don’t know why.’

But I did know. Because they had touched me. Because I felt guilty about the fact that I had eaten lamb and calf and pig and God knows what else. Because they seemed loving and loveable and they had looked at me with trust in their eyes. I did know why but I couldn’t explain it. I felt embarrassed and uneasy and uncertain and I didn’t want to upset Patsy.

‘They have to be fed every few hours.’

‘That’s O.K.’

‘It’ll mean getting up in the night.’

‘I don’t mind.’ I could feel tears on my cheeks. I hurriedly wiped them away and blinked my eyes.

Patsy saw and came to me in a rush and flung her arms around my neck. ‘You are a big softy,’ she said. ‘But I do love you. I’ll help you look after them.’

‘Do you think your Dad will let us take them?’

‘There’s only one way to find out.’

Hand in hand we walked slowly back to the farmhouse.

Mr Kennett, who had taken off his wellington boots and unfastened the orange bailer twine wrapped around his coat and was now settled back in comfort on the sofa thought about my request for a moment and then nodded. ‘Good idea.’ he said. ‘If you’re lucky you might make a few bob’. He paused, mulling something over in his mind. ‘I’ll let you have them at half price,’ he said. ‘Because you’re family.’ He reached out and shook my hand to confirm the deal then told me the price.

I reached into my pocket and handed over the coins.

‘Take four of the stronger ones,’ he said, with a sudden and unexpected burst of generosity.

‘It’s O.K., thanks,’ I said. ‘We’d like to take the four that were fed last.’

Mr Kennett looked at me as though worried that his daughter had married a man not suited to be let loose in the world of commerce and then shrugged, his anxiety for his daughter’s welfare overwhelmed by simple self interest. He offered to deliver the lambs the next morning but when I said we wanted to take them home with us now he helped us load the four of them into the back of the Morris Minor and then put a small sack of lambs’ milk, two spare teats and half a bale of straw into the boot. He wouldn’t take any money for these items but said we could replace them whenever was convenient. Ben lay on the floor at the front of the car beside Patsy’s feet and growled persistently all the way home. In the back the lambs ‘baaaaaed’ and ‘maaaaaed’ a lot and then fell asleep bundled up together on an old blanket in an incomprehensible mixture of legs and tiny tails.

* * *

The slates had been safely delivered and stored in a massive pile which almost blocked the front drive. The roofers recommended by Thumper had begun removing slates and rotten battens from huge sections of our roof.

Thumper himself had recruited a young man called Ernie to help him dig out bits of rotten wood from our window frames, soffits and door posts. Our four lambs, now christened Lizzie, Petula, Cynthia and Sarah-Louise, were happily ensconced in one of our stables, and although Patsy and I were both exhausted from giving them feeds every few hours (including throughout the night), we were getting great pleasure from their company. And a very excited wine dealer from a London auction house had rung to make an appointment to come to Bilbury to collect the wine ready to put it into a forthcoming auction. When Patsy had described the label to him he had, she said, positively drooled into the telephone. She said she didn't think she had ever heard anyone get quite so excited by anything. If his recommended reserve price did not prove to be unduly optimistic the money the wine would raise would pay for the roof repairs. There seemed some justice in the fact that although Bilbury Grange had given us a nasty financial surprise it had matched that with a pleasant financial surprise. We took it as a good omen. At the surgery things seemed to be going quite well. I hardly ever saw Dr Brownlow, partly because he was busy helping to organise his new water bottling plant which seemed to have developed more glitches than even he had anticipated, but mainly, I suspect, because he was conscious of the fact that it was now my practice and he didn't want to get in the way. Many of the patients still missed him, and his daily presence in or around the surgery would have probably caused more than a little confusion. Miss Johnson was a tower of strength and inexhaustible fund of knowledge and information about the workings of the National Health Service bureaucracy and the idiosyncrasies of our patients. Just as important she also knew where everyone lived. In a town or a city, general practitioners can usually rely on street names and house numbers to help them find their patients. But in Bilbury none of the lanes has names and none of the houses or cottages has numbers. Most of the buildings have names, but the signs are invariably covered up with ivy, rambling roses or weeds. Without Miss Johnson's instructions I would have wasted most of my days driving backwards and forwards and getting nowhere.

There was only one faintly grey spot on the horizon to darken our joy in living.

While having a drink in the Duck and Puddle with Thumper one evening I had heard a rumour that a London based property company was negotiating to buy several hundred acres of woodland and farmland to the west of the village and had applied for permission to build a large housing estate, a golf course, a holiday village, a hotel and a supermarket on the site. The rumour came from Frank Parsons, the landlord at the Duck and Puddle who said he'd heard it at one of his Licensed Victuallers Association meetings in Exeter. He said he had heard that the new hotel would have three bars.

However, none of us took this rumour very seriously. As much as we like Frank and enjoy his company, we know that sobriety and reliability are not his strengths and his trips to Exeter for the L.V.A. meetings cannot, in all honesty, be regarded as objective fact finding missions.

* * *

CHAPTER SIX

The following Tuesday was Patsy's birthday and I'd hoped for a quiet and uneventful day so that I could get all my work done a little early. I wanted to take her out to dinner at a new vegetarian restaurant in Ilfracombe which already seemed to have acquired an excellent reputation. I had taken my private and very personal vow to turn vegetarian seriously but rather to my surprise Patsy said that she too wanted to stop eating meat.

'You don't have to,' I told her when she announced that she too had decided not to eat meat again. 'It's just something that feels right for me.'

But Patsy was just as determined as I was. 'I used to cry myself to sleep at night when we had to send the lambs off to slaughter,' she told me while we were feeding our four lambs. 'I tried to harden myself to it by never getting to think of them as individuals.' She paused and for a long while neither of us said anything. 'That was one of the reasons I went to work at the Duck and Puddle,' she told me. 'I just wanted to get away from the farm.'

Much to the annoyance of Sarah-Louise and Petula, who were both vigorously enjoying their early morning feed at the time, I put down my two feeding bottles and gave Patsy a tremendous hug. It occurred to me that if Patsy hadn't gone to work at the Duck and Puddle I might never have met her.

But the day was anything but quiet and uneventful.

The first thing that happened was that just as I got home for my lunch Miss Johnson telephoned from the surgery with an urgent message for me to visit Miss Phillips, the lady who had recently moved to Bilbury from London and who had visited me a couple of days earlier wanting to know if she could stop her tablets. Miss Johnson didn't know exactly what had happened but said that she had received an urgent call from a neighbour, a retired army Major called Arnold Kineton, who was regarded locally as a bit of an old fuss pot (Frank Parsons claimed that all old soldiers were wimpy and effeminate and that retired officers in particular were invariably more like old women than old women), but whose concern for the health and welfare of his neighbours was undoubtedly genuine. I sometimes got the impression that he looked after the other villagers in much the same sort of way that he once looked after his men. I asked Patsy to put my salad somewhere safe (our visiting rabbit was back again and lettuces, in particular, were only safe in cupboards) and drove off as speedily as the Morris Minor would take me to the cottage on the outskirts of Softly's Bottom where Miss Phillips lived.

Major Kineton was waiting for me on Miss Phillips' front porch. Even though it was a warm, humid day he wore a smart Harris Tweed jacket with beige cavalry twill trousers which had razor sharp creases down the front, a yellow waistcoat and a paisley cravat. He had a neat little moustache and his grey hair (cut twice a week in Barnstaple) was parted immaculately on the left. Major Kineton always carried a walking stick made of a straight piece of young ash, though he never used it as a walking aid and usually carried it tucked under his arm like a swagger stick.

'I'm glad you've come, doctor,' said the Major, rather formally. 'I'm terribly worried about Miss Phillips.' He turned and led the way into the cottage as though it was his own and paused in the narrow hallway to show me into the living room. He stood to attention as I went through and then followed and stood behind me. There would have been some dispute about whether he or the doorpost was standing straighter.

The living room was neatly furnished with an expensive white leather three piece suite dominating the room. The suite was far too large for the cottage and was rather unexpected. After our first meeting I would have imagined that Miss Phillips would have chosen something floral. The walls were decorated with half a dozen hunting prints and a modern, imitation copper warming pan hung on a large nail over the slate topped fireplace. Every available surface in the room was covered with cats of all colours and all sizes. The only thing they had in common was that they were all made of porcelain or china. An elderly, exceedingly frail looking woman I had never seen before was slumped in one of the leather armchairs. She wore a red woollen dressing gown and underneath it I could just see an inch or two of an ankle length nightdress trimmed with lace. Her grey hair was uncombed and she was crying quietly. She was rocking backwards and forwards to comfort herself. As I entered the room another woman I didn't recognise came out of the kitchen. She wore a pair of smart charcoal grey trousers and a man's white shirt with what looked like a club tie. 'I'm Rachael Tweedsmuir,' she said, introducing herself. 'Miss Phillips and I live together.' She said this rather defiantly, as though half expecting me to make some comment of disapproval. I nodded and said I was pleased to meet her but this social nicety was ignored.

'She has been in a terrible state since she stopped her tablets,' said Miss Tweedsmuir, rather aggressively. She moved across the room, crouched down beside the older woman and took her hand in hers. 'She hasn't slept a wink and she hasn't stopped crying.' For a moment I was puzzled and then I suddenly realised that the woman in the chair must be Miss Phillips. I really hadn't recognised her.

'I spoke to the drug company,' I said, rather defensively.

'They said it would be perfectly all right for her to stop the tablets.'

'Well, look at her!' said Miss Tweedsmuir. 'Does she look all right to you?'

I had to admit that she didn't.

'She's certainly not herself,' said the Major, stepping forward. 'I can vouch for that.'

'Thank you, Major,' said Miss Tweedsmuir. 'I think we can manage now.' Dismissed, the Major backed out of the room and disappeared. He clearly knew his place. 'He came to bring us some mushrooms he'd picked,' she told me. It occurred to me that she wasn't a woman whose path I would have liked to cross.

I examined Miss Phillips carefully but could find no physical evidence of any abnormality. Her heart was beating strongly, her lungs were working well and her central nervous system seemed to be functioning reasonably well if rather sluggishly. But when I talked to her I could not get her to reply.

'She missed them once before and went like this,' said Miss Tweedsmuir. 'We were away with friends in Cheltenham and she'd forgotten her pills. She couldn't get any from the local chemist because her quack in London got them for her specially.'

'And she went like this?'

'Absolutely. Just the same. Crying. Depressed. Sleeping all the time. Wouldn't eat. Terrible.'

'What happened?'

'We went back to London early. She started taking the tablets again and she got better.'

'She didn't tell me about that,' I explained.

'She doesn't remember anything about it said Miss Tweedsmuir, very matter of fact.

'It sounds like a withdrawal syndrome,' I said. 'She'd better start on the tablets again.'

'I would have done that, doctor,' said Miss Tweedsmuir rather coldly. 'But Miss Phillips left the remainder of her tablets with you.' She was right, of course. I remembered that the drug company had sent someone down from Bristol to pick them up.

'I'll ring them back and ask them to let me have a supply,' I said. 'Then if Miss Phillips still wants to come off them we'll have to do it slowly.'

'That would probably be best,' agreed Miss Tweedsmuir. There was a hard edge in her voice that came quite close to sarcasm.

'Would you like me to arrange for Miss Phillips to go into hospital?' I asked.

'No! Certainly not.' said Miss Tweedsmuir very firmly. 'She's not well enough to go into hospital. That's the last place I'd send anyone in her condition.'

I didn't know what else to do and so I turned and headed for the door.

'Oh, one other thing, doctor...'

'Yes?'

'Do you like animals?'

'Yes. Very much.'

'That's what I had heard. Our cat Ophelia has just had kittens. Could you give one a good home?'

I was, to say the least, rather taken aback. 'Yes.' I said. 'I suppose so.'

'Where do you live?'

I told her.

'Miss Phillips and I will come round and have a look when she's feeling better. If your home is suitable you can have one.'

'Oh.' I said. 'Thank you.'

I drove home via the surgery so that I could telephone the Medical Director of the drug company and ask him to let me have some tablets for Miss Phillips. He was unwilling, at first, to let me have any, but when I told him that if anything happened to Miss Phillips I would make sure that his company was blamed he agreed to send me the tablets I needed. This was a trick I'd learned from Dr Brownlow and it always seemed to work. Then I drove back home and finished my lunch.

* * *

I had still not quite finished lunch when the telephone went again.

'I've got Mr Lister for you,' said a secretary who sounded as if she had a small rock in her mouth. I waited for a few moments and then a man's voice came onto the line. Mr Lister was the editor of the *Barnstaple, Bideford and Bilbury Herald* for which I wrote my weekly medical column.

'Got a bit of a problem with your column, doc!' said Mr Lister. 'Bit embarrassing really.'

'What's the trouble?'

'You seem to be causing a bit too much controversy. We've had a few letters from other members of your profession who object to some of your views.'

'Anything in particular?'

'Well you did a column for us warning about some of the problems caused by the whooping cough vaccine. That hasn't gone down too well.'

'But the whooping cough vaccine does cause problems! Everything I wrote in that article was absolutely accurate.'

'Maybe. But some members of your profession think you're making things worse by worrying the public.

They think these are problems that should be sorted out within the profession.'

I didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. 'But that's crazy!' I said. 'The profession isn't doing anything to sort these problems out. That was why I wrote about it in my column. Is that the only thing that's worrying you?'

'No.' said Mr Lister, drawing the word out. 'It isn't. You see, with a column like this you have to be very careful. Especially in a paper like ours.'

'I thought you told me that the readers liked the column?'

'They do,' agreed Mr Lister. 'Indeed, they do. At least the non-medical readers do.'

'But the doctors don't?'

'Exactly. We had a lot of complaints about that article of yours telling readers how to change doctors and how to complain when doctors do things wrong.'

'I thought those were important issues!'

'In a way I agree with you,' said Mr Lister. 'But we want something a bit less, well, aggressive. We're not trying to change the world here, you know!'

I didn't say anything. Patsy who had heard my half of the conversation had come closer and was now sitting next to me. She looked worried.

'The thing is,' continued the editor, 'that you have to decide whether you want to write about what happens or you want to try to change things yourself. Those really are two quite different things.'

'But surely a writer should try to change things that he thinks are wrong!' I said.

'Not at all,' said Mr Lister. 'A journalist is a witness. His job is to report what happens. You're making the mistake of trying to make the news. Your problem is that you make people think. That's not really what we want in a newspaper.'

'But this is a column. Surely that's different?'

'Not really,' said Mr Lister, wearily. 'You can be controversial occasionally. That's fair enough. But only if you tell people what they already think, and certainly not if you start upsetting the establishment. People like to have their prejudices sustained. But we can't afford to upset important people in the town. If you carry on being too honest you'll struggle to make yourself any sort of career as a journalist. And you certainly won't do your career in medicine any good. You need to learn to compromise a little. Try not to rock the boat quite so much.'

'Can I ask who I've upset?' I asked him, though I wasn't sure any more that I cared. I wanted to rock the boat. I wanted to make a difference. I wanted to change things. I didn't see any point in doing otherwise.

'Well I don't mind telling you that we've had three letters from one doctor alone.'

'That wouldn't be the young Dr Brownlow, would it?' I'd had a disagreement with Dr Brownlow's son a few months earlier when he had tried to persuade me to have his father, then my employer, taken into care. The young Dr Brownlow had been worried about the fact that his father was spending his inheritance and he hadn't been pleased when I had refused to help him.

'You know him?'

'Our paths have crossed.'

'He's a very influential figure. Besides, he plays golf with our advertising director.'

That really seemed to sum it all up. 'I take it you want to stop the column?'

'Well, I'm afraid that's about the size of it. Apart from our other problem I'm afraid that you've been undercut.'

'Undercut?'

'Another doctor has offered to write a column for us for less money than we're paying you.'

'Would that be the young Dr Brownlow?'

'Well, I don't suppose there's any harm in telling you. After all you'll see his column in the paper. Yes. It's Dr Brownlow.'

'Can I ask you what you're paying him?' I asked, out of idle curiosity.

There was a momentary pause. 'He's writing the column for nothing,' said Mr Lister. 'I think he rather sees it as a public service.'

'I don't think there's any danger that anyone else will undercut him,' I said drily. 'I hope your publisher doesn't get any phone calls from people prepared to edit the paper for nothing.'

'I don't think there's any need for that sort of attitude,' said the editor, rather sharply. He put his receiver down and I found myself listening to the sound of a disconnected phone, wishing I'd put my receiver down first. I stood up.

'What on earth was that all about?' asked Patsy, standing up and moving over towards me.

'I've been sacked,' I told her, rather bluntly.

Patsy didn't say anything but just put her arms around me and gave me a big hug. In a way I was rather sad. I had enjoyed writing the column. And although I wasn't paid very well we needed every pound we could find to help pay for the renovations at Bilbury Grange. But in a way I was, I confess, rather pleased. I quite liked the idea that I had been sacked because I had made people think.

* * *

After that, the day went a little more according to plan for a while. Miss Johnson telephoned to let me know that the drug company representative had turned up with a bottle of pills and that the district nurse, Kay Wilson, had taken them round to Miss Phillips.

In between visiting and stitching up a farm labourer who had cut himself while trimming a hedge and visiting Mrs Pettigrew who had, as usual, waited until she had completely run out of her high blood pressure pills to telephone and ask for help, I wrote some referral letters for patients who needed to see specialists at the hospital, filled in a lengthy and almost incomprehensible questionnaire from an insurance company which wanted to know whether a patient of mine was likely to drop dead before they had made a decent profit out of him, and tried to keep up-to-date by reading the comprehensible bits of a couple of medical journals.

Meanwhile, Patsy started work clearing the vegetable garden, the roofers carried on tearing slates off our roof and Thumper and young Ernie carried on replacing bits and pieces of rotten wood. Living at Bilbury Grange was a bit like living on a building site but I was getting used to having a great crowd of builders around. I had an awful feeling that when they had all gone I might even miss them.

Thanks to Miss Johnson, who agreed to babysit the telephone for us and to ring me immediately at the restaurant if there were any calls, Patsy and I did manage to go out for our celebratory meal.

We shared a plateful of wild mushrooms with a tomato salad and a mountain of garlic bread and drank half a carafe of white wine between us. We couldn't stay out late because we had to get back to give the lambs their ten o'clock feed (I already knew how trying it can be to be a general practitioner having to be available to patients for a full 24 hours in every day, but I was now beginning to discover just how tiring and trying a farmer's life can be) and so we were back at Bilbury Grange at approximately a quarter to ten.

At half past ten, just after Miss Johnson had gone back home and we had given the lambs their feed, the telephone rang. Patsy answered it but handed it over to me straight away. She looked pale and anxious and her hand shook slightly as she handed me the receiver. 'It's Anne,' she said. 'The police have arrested Thumper.'

I felt cold inside as I lifted the receiver to my ear. My mother always used to say that bad things happen in threes.

By the time Patsy and I had driven round to the cottage where Thumper and Anne live, and I'd taken Anne to Barnstaple, Thumper had been released. As Anne and I walked towards the police station we saw him leaving and heading in our direction.

'I was just going to find a telephone box to call you!' he said. He kissed Anne and smiled at us both, but underneath the smile he looked grey and worried. In a strange way he looked younger than I'd ever seen him look before. And for the first time he looked vulnerable.

'What happened?' I asked him.

'I drove over to the river on the way home from your place,' answered Thumper. 'I thought I'd pick up a couple of trout for tea.'

I frowned. 'But what's wrong with that?'

'I don't have a fishing licence,' explained Thumper. 'And I wasn't using a rod.' I remembered that when Thumper talked about 'picking up a couple of trout' that was exactly what he meant. Thumper was the only person I had ever met who could walk up to a river bank with nothing more than his bare hands, find a trout, use his fingers to hypnotise it and then pull it out of the water with hardly a splash.

'And they arrested you?'

'The Bilbury bailiff saw me tickling a trout,' said Thumper.

'He came up behind me and jabbed his stick in the back of my neck. I didn't know who it was or what the hell was going on so I rolled to one side and brought him down. He fell into the river.'

'So what did they charge you with?' asked Anne.

'Where's the baby?' asked Thumper suddenly.

'Patsy is looking after him for us,' answered Anne. 'What did they charge you with?' she persisted.

'I don't know,' said Thumper. 'Poaching and assault I think.' He shivered. 'I really hate those places,' he said, looking behind him at the police station. 'They put me in a cell!'

'But did you explain to them what happened?' asked Anne.

'Of course I did!' said Thumper. He shrugged. 'But the bailiff said I'd attacked him and deliberately thrown him into the river.'

'I still don't understand,' I said. 'If the bailiff fell into the river how did he catch you?' I'd seen Thumper run and I knew that there was no way a sodden water bailiff could have caught him on the tracks that run alongside the river.

'I fished him out of the water and then took him home,' said Thumper, rather shamefacedly. 'He was wet and looked really miserable.'

'And he still had you arrested?'

'He must have telephoned the police before he changed into dry clothes,' said Thumper. 'The police had two cars waiting for me at the top of our lane.'

‘Let’s get you home,’ I said. ‘Do you want to drive yourself and I’ll follow. Or do you want to come with me and leave your truck here?’

‘They’ve confiscated the truck,’ said Thumper. ‘Together with everything that was in it.’

‘What for?’ I asked him. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

‘If you’re caught poaching they can confiscate all your equipment,’ Thumper explained. ‘I didn’t have any guns or rods or anything so they took the truck. They said that was equipment.’ He stopped for a moment. ‘Look!’ he pointed to the car park just behind the police station. ‘There it is!’ His truck was parked in between two police patrol cars in the police car park.

‘When do you get it back?’ asked Anne.

Thumper shrugged. ‘If I’m found guilty I don’t get it back at all.’ He swallowed hard. ‘But that’s not the worst of it he put his arm around Anne. ‘They said that if I’m found guilty I could go to prison!’

* * *

CHAPTER SEVEN

Thumper's arrest cast a huge black cloud over everything.

He borrowed an old Ford van from a friend who ran a small haulage business in Ilfracombe and carried on working at Bilbury Grange as though nothing had happened. And he tried to act as though he wasn't worried. But I knew that he was.

It wasn't the possible loss of his truck that worried him (though he was extraordinarily fond of it) and even though he didn't have much money I don't think it was the prospect of being fined that disturbed him.

It was, I knew, the fear of being sent to prison that had put the grey into his cheeks and the hollow look into his eyes.

Some people worry about going to prison because they are frightened of the shame or the damage it might do to their standing in the community, or because they are frightened of the people they would come into contact with. Thumper wasn't frightened by any of these things. He wasn't worried about his standing in the community because he didn't have one; at least, not one that would be affected by a spell in prison. He knew that the people he cared about wouldn't give a fig for the fact that he had a prison record. He certainly wasn't worried about whether or not he would be able to look after himself physically in prison. And shame was not a concept to which he gave any credence. And even though I know that he loved them both dearly, I don't think he was even particularly worried about Anne or his baby. He knew that Anne could look after herself, and he knew that his friends in the village would see that she did not want for anything.

Thumper was frightened of prison for the very simplest of reasons: he was frightened because it would mean a loss of freedom. I had never before met anyone who was so completely at ease with nature as Thumper was. He was more at peace on the moors or along the river banks or in the woods than anyone I knew or had ever known. He could look at a patch of woodland and tell you which animals had passed through, which direction they had gone in, how long it was since they'd been there and what they had been planning to do. He could look at the river and tell you where the fish would be hiding and he could look at the sky and tell you, with far more accuracy than any professional forecaster, what the weather was going to be like for the next few hours.

It was the prospect of losing his freedom and the idea of being locked away from nature that had taken the steel from Thumper's soul. And I knew without him telling me that it was the waiting for his case to come to court, the uncertainty, that gave his fears strength and added vigour to his nightmares.

Some people need to talk about their fears and their anxieties in order to lessen the damage they do. Thumper didn't want to talk. But he didn't need to. All of us who knew him knew how he felt and what agonies he was enduring. There are probably some people who would say that by going poaching Thumper was breaking the law and was, therefore, exposing himself to whatever penalties the law might see fit to offer. But, for the first time in my life, I was beginning to have my doubts about the law and, in particular, doubts about the relationship between the law and its parent, justice. The problem was that I had always thought of prison as a place for bad people. And I knew that Thumper was not a bad person.

* * *

Meanwhile, life went on and occasionally there were bits and pieces of good news.

Our eleven bottles of wine were sold in London for slightly more than the wine expert had forecast, and far more than any sensible person would have paid. Patsy and I now had enough money to pay for our new roof and to replace the worst of our rotten window and door frames. Our four lambs had all survived the most difficult and most dangerous early days and had acquired quite definite personalities of their own. Sarah-Louise was coy and shy and loving; Lizzie was aggressive and playful and a born leader - it was she who would always start the others playing games; Petula was thoughtful, sensitive and very occasionally depressed and would look at us with huge brown eyes that were full of trust; Cynthia was full of mischief and seemed to get great pleasure from being difficult with us and with her half sisters. We loved them all.

There were, inevitably, many minor but annoying frustrations and disappointments too.

The work on our roof had come to a temporary standstill and for three whole days we didn't see the roofers at all. Then, while out visiting patients, I saw their lorry outside a hotel on the road to Combe Martin and found that they had started another job. They promised that would be back with us within a couple of days and they seemed to mean it and I believed them and was afterwards quite charmed by my own naivety. We discovered that the shop which had promised to deliver a cooker, but which had ended up by delivering nothing more substantial than a record number of excuses, was by no means unusual. A firm of electricians made three appointments to come and give us a quote for putting in some extra sockets but didn't keep any of them. The manager of a shop from which we had tried to buy a bed rang and said that there would be a five month wait and then seemed quite hurt when Patsy told him that we would like to cancel our order.

* * *

When Patsy and I had first bought Bilbury Grange we had hoped to increase our income by letting out rooms to holiday-makers during the summer months. Most of the people who live in Devon are, directly or indirectly, dependent on the tourist trade for a living and we did not think we would have too much difficulty in finding tourists ready to come and stay with us.

Frank and Gilly Parsons at the Duck and Puddle told us that they often had more guests than they could cope with and said that they would be very happy to send us their overflow.

In my experience, very few things in life ever work quite as well as expected, and if there is one thing that fate doesn't like it is something that is well planned. The more precise the plans you make the greater the chances that something will go very badly wrong. Our plans to let off rooms in Bilbury Grange were, therefore, doomed from the start.

Our main problem was a very simple one. We had a limited amount of money available and so, inevitably, we had to repair the essential fabric of the building - the roof, the walls and the windows - before we could start spending money on decorating inside the house and buying luxury furniture such as beds, tables and chairs. We had known all this when we had bought Bilbury Grange, but it had quickly become apparent that we had not been quite pessimistic enough in our expectations. The cost of the new roof we had needed had, of course, been covered by the profit we had made from the wine but there had been no such windfall to cover the cost of repointing essential brickwork and replacing woodworm infested beams and floorboards. The cost of all these repairs had been enhanced by the fact that nothing in the house was of a standard size. Every piece of wood seemed to need to be specially cut by hand. After a month of hectic building work had resulted in making the Grange less rather than more inhabitable we had decided that in order to try to boost our income we would convert the rooms above the coach-house into a self-contained holiday flat. We knew that it would be at least another year before the main house would be in a fit condition to accommodate visitors, but we thought that a small holiday flat would enable us to improve our cash flow dramatically.

The rooms we chose had been unoccupied for a long time (the drawers in an old dressing table which we found in the bedroom were lined with a newspaper dated 1924), but although dirty and dusty they were light and airy and the rooms were undeniably spacious. Two of the main rooms, the kitchen and the living room, overlooked the courtyard while a third, the bedroom, had a lovely view into the walled garden. The flat was approached by a sturdy, iron spiral staircase, though it was possible to move large items into and out of the flat through a door sized hatch on the first floor which was still equipped with a working hoist. Surprisingly, the woodworm had left the coach-house more or less alone and there was no major repair work to do. All we needed to do was to clear out the straw, old cardboard boxes and other miscellaneous bits and pieces of discarded rubbish, give the rooms a lick of paint and then fill them with furniture.

So that Thumper could continue to work on the main house, Patsy decided to do all the necessary decorating herself. Once she had started work she refused to let me go into the flat at all.

'I want it to be a surprise!' she insisted. And so I grew accustomed to finding Patsy, dressed in jeans and an old T-shirt and with her hair pulled tightly back away from her face in a ponytail, covered in dust and cobwebs, and exhausted from washing, cleaning, polishing and, eventually, painting. The jobs seemed endless, and for a while I worried that she had taken on too much.

* * *

Within thirty six hours of re-starting her pills Miss Phillips made a fairly spectacular recovery. But she still wanted to try to stop the tablets.

Once again I rang the Medical Director of the drug company which made the pills, and once again he insisted that since the drug was not addictive and did not produce any noticeable withdrawal side effects there was absolutely no need for patients to come off the tablets slowly or, indeed, with any special care at all. With scepticism born of experience, Miss Phillips and I decided to begin a month long reduction programme with her taking slightly smaller doses on successive days in an attempt to get her body accustomed to life without the tablets.

One evening, two days after the reduction programme had begun, Miss Phillips and Miss Tweedsmuir arrived on our doorstep entirely unexpectedly. I was busy cutting down brambles and nettles in a corner of the vegetable garden that had still not been reclaimed and so Patsy answered the door. She left the two spinsters in the reception hallway (where we still didn't have any carpets or furniture) and then ran through the house, through the courtyard and into the vegetable garden to fetch me. My heart fell when Patsy told me who had arrived, for my only thought was that something else had gone wrong. Wearily, and with a heavy heart, I followed Patsy back into the house. I was wearing a pair of tattered and stained jeans and an old and rather threadbare shirt that most tramps would have turned up their noses at. I had been wearing thick leather gardening gloves (our only really clothing extravagance had been to buy each other really good quality gardening gloves, and when I looked at how badly torn and tattered they had already become I thought they were worth every penny) but my hands were still filthy. I had bits and pieces of bramble sticking in my hair and I knew that I must have smelt of bonfire.

'Oh, I'm sorry!' said Miss Tweedsmuir when I walked into the hall and apologised for my appearance. 'You're gardening, aren't you?'

'Taking advantage of the light nights,' I explained. 'We've got a lot to do.' I frowned. 'Is there something wrong?' I asked. 'Has something happened?'

'No. There's nothing wrong. Can we look?' asked Miss Phillips, clearly genuinely interested.

'At the garden?'

She nodded.

'It's still a terrible mess. I'm afraid there really isn't anything to see yet.' said Patsy. 'It's been overgrown for years.'

'Please!' begged Miss Tweedsmuir. 'We both love gardening.' She bent down to pat Ben who had followed us back into the house. Ben closed her eyes, rolled over onto her back and let Miss Tweedsmuir tickle her tummy. If she had been a cat she would have purred.

'She's really a guard dog,' I said. 'But she's in plain clothes.'

We led the ladies through the house and the courtyard, which they loved, and into the walled vegetable garden. Miss Tweedsmuir actually clapped her hands together in girlish delight when she saw it

'Oh, how wonderful!' she said. 'How absolutely wonderful.' She turned to Miss Phillips. 'Isn't it going to be beautiful?' Miss Phillips looked just as excited and nodded. 'What a lovely greenhouse!' she said, pointing to the old Victorian greenhouse in a far corner of the garden. It badly needed painting and had several panes of glass missing.

'I'm afraid there isn't much else to see yet,' I said. 'We haven't bought any plants or seeds.'

'Would you like to see our lake?' asked Patsy. 'It's actually very small for a lake. But that's what it's called on the house deeds.'

We took them along the path we had partly cleared which led down to the still weed-clogged lake. We showed them where we had found a small stone bridge over the stream which fed the lake and where we had begun to explore the other side of the lake and we told them that we thought we'd found the front of an old summerhouse hidden under the brambles and nettles and we pointed out the statue of the little girl that was just poking up above the bulrushes on the tiny island in the middle of the lake and we talked about what we wanted to do and how we wanted to restore the garden and how we wanted to grow all our own vegetables and maybe make a little money to help pay for the restoration and replanting by selling vegetables to some of the local hotels.

We were walking back up towards the house, through a small copse of beech trees, when Miss Phillips suddenly stopped and dropped to her knees. 'Oh my heavens!' she said.

'What's the matter?' asked Miss Tweedsmuir.

'Look at this!'

Miss Tweedsmuir bent down beside her friend to examine a small red flower. 'It's a red helleborine!' she said, in awe.

'That's what I thought!' said Miss Phillips. 'Cephalanthera rubra.'

'What's a red helleborine?' asked Patsy.'

'It's an orchid and it's very, very, very rare!' whispered Miss Phillips. 'I didn't think there were any in the South West.'

'There were only thought to be two red helleborine plants in the whole of England,' said Miss Tweedsmuir.

'There are lots of them over here,' I said, unimpressed by this discovery. 'Look!' I pointed to a small, shady area where there were dozens of bright red flowers.

'Oh, good heavens!' said Miss Phillips. And she fainted.

* * *

'Would you like to take a few of the orchids back for your garden?' I asked her when she had recovered.

Miss Phillips was obviously very touched by this offer. 'That is so very kind of you,' she said. 'But the red helleborine will only grow in beech woods and it adores deep shade. We haven't got anywhere that would be right for it.'

'Well, any time you want to come and look at ours you'll be very welcome!' said Patsy. 'Should we tell anyone what we've found?' she asked. 'What about the conservation groups? Do you think we should tell them?'

'Oh, I don't think so,' whispered Miss Tweedsmuir. 'If you do you'll have all sorts of people traipsing over your garden looking at them and they'll do far more damage than good. The only reason for telling people about a plant is if its habitat is threatened in some way. And your red helleborine are perfectly safe.'

'Aren't they sweet?' whispered Patsy, as we walked back up the path to the house behind Miss Phillips and Miss Tweedsmuir. They had both been so excited by the discovery of a rare orchid in our wood that they had seemed reluctant to tear themselves away. They were now walking up the path arm in arm and they too were whispering about something.

When we got back into the courtyard Patsy asked them if they wanted a drink of anything but they said they didn't want to drag us away from the garden any longer.

'Would you let us give you some plants?' asked Miss Tweedsmuir. 'We've got quite a collection and we could easily take some cuttings for you.'

'That would be wonderful!' said Patsy.

'We'll start some cuttings as soon as we get back,' promised Miss Phillips. 'It'll be a joy to help you restore your garden.'

'When would it be convenient for you to come and choose your kitten?' asked Miss Tweedsmuir, quite unexpectedly, as they left. 'Tomorrow?'

Patsy looked at me, slightly puzzled. I was puzzled too. I'd forgotten that they had offered me a kitten.

'He's forgotten!' said Miss Phillips, smiling at her friend.

'We asked if you'd like a kitten!' Miss Tweedsmuir reminded me.

'Of course!' I said. I felt embarrassed. 'It was very kind of you.'

'We'd love to come round tomorrow,' said Patsy, who was clearly excited at the idea of offering a home to a kitten. 'What time would be convenient?'

'Any time you like,' said Miss Phillips, reaching out and touching her on the arm. 'We'll be in all day.' She turned to me. 'What a beautiful wife you have, doctor!'

* * *

When, at the end of the next morning's surgery, Miss Johnson told me that there was a policeman waiting to see me my first thought was that it was something to do with Thumper. But it wasn't.

'Sorry to bother you, doctor,' said a policeman I'd never seen before. He was surprisingly short, rather stout and looked very young. He had his helmet tucked underneath his arm.

We used to have a village policeman, a transvestite married to the district nurse, but he committed suicide after an accident in which he had knocked a local boy off his bicycle, and we now relied upon policemen from Ilfracombe and Barnstaple. It was a pity that we no longer had our village bobby. 'I'm looking for a Mr Keith Burrows.'

I knew who he meant straight away.

Keith Burrows is about sixty-years-old and lives in a ruined cottage on the road out towards Lynton. In the summer and early autumn he makes a living collecting elderberries and blackberries from the hedgerows and selling them to local greengrocers. In the winter he makes an even smaller living running errands for villagers who want bits and pieces fetching from the shops in Barnstaple. He rides a bicycle and tows a tiny cart behind it and can frequently be seen riding along the local lanes.

'What's he done?' I asked.

'I'm afraid he's wanted for non-payment of fines,' said the police constable.

'What were the fines for?'

'I'm not sure I can tell you that, sir.' said the policeman rather officiously.

'I won't tell you anything if you don't tell me what the fines were for,' I told him firmly.

'He's been fined twice for riding a bicycle without a light,' said the policeman.

'And you've come out hunting him for that?'

'The court takes a dim view of people not paying their fines,' said the policeman very officiously. 'If you are cognisant of his whereabouts I must tell you that you're legally obliged to pass on the information.'

It may not have been a wise thing to do but I couldn't help it. I laughed at him. 'Are you telling me that if I don't tell you then you'll arrest me? For aiding and abetting a bicycle rider without lights?'

The policeman began to look just a trifle uncomfortable.

'How much does he owe the court?' I asked.

'I beg your pardon?'

'What were the fines?'

'They come to two pounds in all.'

I reached into my trouser pocket, found the appropriate coins and put them down on the desk between us. 'There you are. Case closed.'

The policeman looked at the coins and then looked at me.

'I'm not sure I can accept this,' he said. 'It has to be paid into the court.'

'Take it.' I told him.

And to my surprise and my relief he slid the coins off the desk and put them into his pocket. Then he insisted on writing out a receipt. 'This is very irregular, sir.' he said, with a weary shake of his head. 'Very irregular indeed.'

* * *

Miss Tweedsmuir answered Patsy's knock on their cottage door. 'You've come about the kittens, haven't you?'

We confirmed that this was, indeed, why we were there.

'Come on upstairs,' said Miss Tweedsmuir with a twinkle in her eyes. 'You'll love them. They look absolutely adorable.' She called to Miss Phillips who appeared from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a pale green hand towel, and the four of us, in single file, then climbed up the narrow staircase to the bedroom at the front of the cottage. A large double bed, covered in a pale pink bedspread dominated the room. There was just about enough room left for a pine wardrobe, a pine dressing table and a pine bookcase that was packed with neat rows of paperback books. There were two nightdresses, one white and one in a floral pattern, neatly folded on the two pillows. Laid out neatly on the bottom half of the bed there was a large, fluffy white towel and on top of the towel there was an old-fashioned wicker cat basket: Inside the basket lay, asleep, a large mixed tabby cat and the two most beautiful little kittens I had ever seen.

'How old is the mother?' Patsy asked.

'She's seven,' replied Miss Phillips. 'She's lived with me since she was a tiny, tiny kitten but I don't think she's ever been happier in her whole life. I got her from a friend who lived in the Bayswater Road. In London I never dared let her out of the flat so she'd never been outside until we came here.'

'She loves the garden here,' said Miss Tweedsmuir.

'Oh, she does!' agreed Miss Phillips. 'I wish you could have seen her when we first came to Bilbury. She was so excited!' She smiled at us and the memory of it all made her so happy that tears appeared in her eyes.

'What's her name?' I asked. I knew she'd told me but I'd forgotten.

'Ophelia!' replied Miss Phillips. 'Don't ask me why I called her that because I really don't know any more.' She pulled a handkerchief out of her sleeve and blew her nose almost silently.

'It's a lovely name,' said Patsy.

'She looks like an Ophelia,' I agreed.

'Oh, do you think so?' said Miss Phillips. 'That is nice. So do I.'

One of the kittens, a mixed tabby with a white ruff around her neck, a white splash down her chest and white paws, noticed us, miaowed loudly and stood up. She shook slightly and then hesitated before backing away and cuddling up against her mother.

'That one's a bit nervous,' explained Miss Tweedsmuir quietly.

Patsy very slowly reached out and stroked the kitten's head with two fingers of one hand. The kitten, at first suspicious, tilted its head to one side. Then, very quietly, it started purring.

'Have you given them names yet?' I asked.

'No,' replied Miss Phillips. 'We thought that the people who take them would want to give them names so we just call them Kitty One and Kitty Two. She nodded towards the mixed tabby, 'That one is Kitty One.'

'They're both girls,' said Miss Tweedsmuir.

'Don't you want to keep them both?' asked Patsy.

'Don't tempt me!' said Miss Tweedsmuir with a tinkly, nervous little laugh. 'I'd love to keep them both but we've already got two cats and two is enough.'

The other kitten, a mackerel tabby and just as adorable, had a head that seemed far too large for its body. It woke up suddenly, pricked up its ears and clambered to its feet. Like its sister it stood unsteadily for a moment or two but, unlike its sister, then moved forwards towards us instead of backwards towards its mother.

'She's ever so curious!' said Miss Tweedsmuir. 'A real bundle of mischief.'

I tentatively held out my hand and the mackerel tabby kitten moved its head forwards and sniffed at my finger tips. Then it miaowed very loudly, jumped out of the basket and walked unsteadily across the towel towards me. When it reached the edge of the towel it stood still for a moment and then jumped onto my lap, catching its tiny claws on my long suffering flannel trousers.

'What do you think?' asked Miss Tweedsmuir. 'Which one would you like?'

'Oh this one!' said Patsy, pointing to the mixed tabby.

'This one!' I said, holding the mackerel tabby.

'That one!' said Patsy and I simultaneously pointing to the other's choice.

'Would you like a cup of tea?' asked Miss Tweedsmuir, suddenly and quite unexpectedly.

Patsy looked at me. 'Well, I'm afraid I mustn't stay too long,' I said. 'Just in case Miss Johnson is trying to get hold of me. But a cup of tea would be very nice.'

'I'll go and put the kettle on,' said Miss Tweedsmuir. 'Edith will you come and put some of your home-made biscuits out onto a plate?' Miss Phillips obediently followed Miss Tweedsmuir out of the bedroom and down the stairs.

'Aren't they gorgeous?' said Patsy, playing with the mixed tabby kitten.

'Miss Tweedsmuir and Miss Phillips?'

'The kittens, silly!' giggled Patsy. Reluctantly, she turned away from the kitten she was playing with. 'We'll take the one you chose.'

'No. Let's take the mixed tabby.' I said. 'I'm sure Miss Tweedsmuir and Miss Phillips will make sure that they both go to good homes.' The mixed tabby kitten, the one with the white paws, had huge eyes and it looked around at the world in wonderment.

The mackerel tabby kitten suddenly leapt off my lap and landed on my jumper. It then recklessly climbed upwards, miaowing loudly. Ophelia lazily opened an eye, saw that all was well, and then closed it again. Not to be outdone the mixed tabby kitten stood on the edge of the bed and looked across at her sister. She clearly wanted to jump too but she didn’t quite have the courage. Patsy picked her up and put her down on my lap and she climbed rather slowly upwards.

‘Tea’s ready!’ called a voice from downstairs.

‘What shall we do with the kittens?’ Patsy called back.

‘Just leave them in their basket. They’ll be fine.’

Reluctantly, we went downstairs.

‘We’ve been thinking about it said Miss Tweedsmuir. ‘And if you’d like to have both the kittens we’d like you to take them both.’

And so, half an hour later, we drove away with two beautiful kittens purring on Patsy’s lap.

‘What shall we call them?’ asked Patsy.

‘I think the mixed tabby should be Emily,’ I said.

‘And can we call this one Sophie?’ asked Patsy.

As we drove home along the narrow Bilbury lanes the sun was slowly setting at the end of a beautiful, warm summer’s day. The hedgerows were thick and lush in a thousand different shades of green. Sprinkled among the grasses and the brambles and the dock leaves were buttercups and foxgloves. There were thick clumps of grass growing in the centre of the lane and there was barely room to drive the car in between the hedgerows. Suddenly, a huge adult buzzard with his wings tucked tightly into his body dropped out of the sky in front of us heading straight for the tarmacadam. He pulled up with no more than a yard to spare, levelled out and then flew so that he was heading straight for our car. I braked to avoid crashing into him but I was wasting my time for he knew exactly what he was doing. No more than a dozen feet in front of us he swerved sharply to his right and disappeared into the undergrowth at the base of the hedge. Moments later, as the Morris Minor shuddered to an ungainly halt, he fell back out of the grass and onto the road clutching a rabbit in his beak. Taking just a moment to regain his composure he transferred the rabbit from his beak to his talons and then took off in a single, smooth, accomplished movement and soared effortlessly up and over the twelve foot high hedge at the side of the lane. The whole incident lasted no more than a few seconds and neither Patsy nor I had time to speak. Nature in the raw can sometimes be breathtaking.

* * *

CHAPTER EIGHT

It was early in the morning and I could already hear a thrush hammering a snail on a stone in order to break open its shell.

The day was still cool but the sun was already bright and it promised to be another untypically hot summer's day; the sort of day that makes living in the English countryside such a real treat, and the sort of day that all country dwellers survive on during the long, hard, cold, wet winter months that seem to drag on for ever.

Awakened by shafts of sunlight lighting up our bedroom, I had crept out of bed early, leaving Patsy to sleep for a few more minutes. A few yards away from me Emily and Sophie, our two new kittens, who had followed me out from the house, were playing hide and seek in and out of the greenhouse while Ben, lying sprawled out on one of the gravel paths, was watching them with a motherly eye. I had been worried about how Ben would take to the kittens but I need not have been. She loved them from the moment she saw them.

I had already watered the lettuce and left the wooden tops of the cold frames wedged open a few inches to allow a little air in, and although I was dressed ready for the morning surgery I couldn't resist pottering around in the vegetable garden, pulling out weeds that were about to start spreading their seeds and trying to decide exactly which part of the garden we should try to rescue next. I looked around, and although there was still a lot to do and a long way to go I was proud of what we had managed to achieve.

I stood for a few moments watching the butterflies: admirals and peacocks, blues and tortoiseshells as well as cabbage whites. I know a lot of gardeners dislike butterflies (or, rather, their plant eating predecessors) but both Patsy and I considered it a privilege to have them in our garden, and we were happy to accept as just payment the damage we knew they would do to our crops.

Although we still hadn't had the time or the money to repair the greenhouse, which had numerous broken panes of glass and a lot of rotten woodwork, and which was almost completely filled with an overgrown and totally out of control old grape vine, we had, after seemingly endless hours of work clearing away brambles and nettles and docks and couch grass and a thousand other species of weed, at last managed to clear a small area of ground in the walled vegetable garden so that we could start planting our first vegetable crop.

The walled garden had been built in Victorian times and it had clearly been designed by someone who had thought first and foremost of quality, convenience and style. Cost had clearly not been regarded as an influence of any significance. Although they were covered with a mixture of ivy, cultivated raspberries, yellow and green lichen and a wonderful pink climbing rose, the grey stone walls still seemed solid and sound. At its base, the wall around the vegetable garden was over two feet thick and at the top, to provide protection against the elements, the wall was covered by two double rows of grey slates topped with faded red coping stones.

The walled garden extended to about half an acre and included, in addition to the greenhouse which was attached to part of the garden's south facing wall, three large, wooden cold frames, a stone potting shed, a wheelbarrow and tool shed and, although the orchard (now consisting of elderly, unpruned trees which were almost entirely overgrown with the ubiquitous brambles and nettles) was outside the vegetable garden, a room that Patsy said was almost certainly an apple store.

Every building in the garden was equipped with cast iron guttering and downpipes which fed into water butts, and just in case that supply ever ran out there was a tap just outside the greenhouse which did not seem to be connected to the private water supply which fed the house, but which seemed to have a supply from some other source which we still had not identified. There was a stone seat built into an alcove in a shady corner of the wall, a small pond overgrown with lilies but teeming with tadpoles and a sundial on a small brick plinth. Everything in the garden had been so well built that it had survived years of neglect.

We did not have the time to plant the garden properly but we desperately wanted to grow something, and so while Patsy had resurrected an old cultivated strawberry bed, ruthlessly throwing out the old plants and rescuing only the younger, healthier looking plants I had sown three whole packets of lettuce seeds in the cold frames which still had unbroken glass. We thought it might be rather nice to at least be self-sufficient in strawberries and lettuce for our first summer.

Suddenly, there was a splash and a loud miaow from somewhere behind me. I turned and saw Emily, the mixed tabby kitten, floundering in the lily pond. Sophie, our other kitten, was standing on the edge of the pond where Emily had fallen in and was miaowing loudly and plaintively for help. I dropped the pair of secateurs I had been using to prune a climbing rose which was so heavy that it was threatening to pull itself away from the wall and raced to the rescue. Even so Ben got there before me. She leapt into the water without hesitating and gently took hold of Emily's neck so that she could hold her above the surface of the water. I knelt down at the edge of the pond, reached out and took Emily from her.

While Sophie continued to miaow and Ben clambered out of the pond, stood next to me and shook herself dry, I tried to dry Emily on my handkerchief. But even when I had done this she was shivering and she still looked very bedraggled, miserable and sorry for herself. So, I unbuttoned my shirt and slipped her down next to my skin where it was warm and dry. She soon started to purr.

As I walked back to the house, with Ben ambling along beside me and Sophie scurrying to keep up with me, I could hear the sharp 'knock knock' of a woodpecker in a nearby tree and I thought for the thousandth time how lucky I was to live in Bilbury. Many of my student colleagues would, I knew, still be working in hospitals struggling to acquire more and more academic qualifications, ingratiating themselves with elderly, cynical and exploitative consultants, growing to hate every moment of every day, wondering if this was all there was to life and constantly promising themselves something better sometime in the future. There was not a morning when I did not wake up wondering how and why I had been so fortunate to find myself living in such a wonderful, quiet village, in such a beautiful house and surrounded with good friends, a growing menagerie of animals and so much hope for the future. Every morning I would see and hear an endless variety of birds and wild animals. Best of all, of course, there was Patsy, and as I walked into the courtyard I could see her laying out breakfast on an old wooden table outside the back door. She was wearing a thin, sleeveless white cotton summer dress and a pair of white sandals. We had found the table in the stable where the lambs had been kept when they were being bottle fed. (They had begun to supplement their bottled milk by nibbling on grass and were now spending their days in the small paddock closest to the house.)

Patsy and I kissed. 'What on earth have you got inside your shirt?'

'Emily. She fell into the pond. Ben rescued her.'

Patsy gently pulled at the front of my shirt and peeped inside. 'Oh, the poor thing!' Emily looked up and miaowed loudly.

'She's drying off,' I explained.

'How long have you been up?' asked Patsy, letting go of my shirt front.

I looked at my wrist and shrugged. I'd forgotten to put my watch on. 'About an hour.'

'Why didn't you wake me?' Patsy poured me my first cup of coffee of the day. It smelt good. I could smell bread toasting in the kitchen. Why do all drinks and foods smell so much better out of doors?

I smiled. 'You looked too peaceful to wake.'

I frowned, remembering that I had to be at Dr Brownlow's to start the morning surgery. 'Do you know what time it is now?'

'It's well after eight. But you've got time for breakfast. I'll get the toast.' She went indoors.

I sat down, with Emily in my shirt, and Ben at my feet and sipped at my coffee. Using her claws as crampons Sophie climbed up my trouser leg and settled down on my lap. Somewhere in the distance I could hear the roofers arrive and start work. It was going to be another glorious day.

* * *

If I hadn't started the day realising just how lucky I was I would have quickly been reminded of my good fortune shortly after I had arrived at the surgery to start the day's work.

Mrs Blossom was the first patient I saw and I don't think I have ever seen anyone look less like her name. Although she looked as though she was still only in her middle thirties she already had that glum, dark, sour look around her mouth that so often mars even the prettiest of faces. I had only met her a couple of times before, and although I didn't really know anything at all about her as an individual I had unfairly labelled in her my mind as one of life's whingers, a dour pessimist forever looking for, and inevitably finding, the worst in everything. She looked sour and miserable, and I had unjustly assumed that this was her natural demeanour. Without much interest or enthusiasm I waited for her to tell me what she wanted from me.

(It is sadly true that the way doctors treat their patients is very often unfairly influenced by appearances. A patient who walks into the surgery with a smile on her face will gain a weary doctor's sympathy far more speedily than the patient who walks in gloomy and bad-tempered. It isn't fair and it isn't just, but it happens.)

Mrs Blossom slumped into the chair on the other side of my desk and stared glumly at me as though I had insulted her.

I smiled at her and asked how I could help her. The consulting room had no natural light and it was cool and gloomy. I struggled hard to acquire an interest in Mrs Blossom for a large part of me wanted to get through my patients as quickly as I could so that I could get back to the garden at Bilbury Grange.

'I want a tonic,' said Mrs Blossom.

She spoke in a dull monotone voice and it was neither a request nor a demand. She seemed angry and bitter and I didn't understand why.

'What symptoms do you have?' I asked, a little hastily perhaps.

Suddenly, and quite unexpectedly, Mrs Blossom stood up.

'You don't understand what it's like,' she snapped at me. 'It's all right for you, sitting behind your big desk. You don't know what real life is like. You don't have any problems. You're lucky. I wish you could have some of my worries for a day. That would take the damned smile off your face.' She turned and started to march towards the door.

I felt uncomfortable and did not understand what I had done to provoke this attack. But, perhaps justifiably, I nevertheless felt guilty and I knew that I had missed something. Somehow I felt that I had failed.

'Come back, sit down and tell me what's worrying you,' I said quickly. No one had ever prepared me for this.

Medical schools train doctors to deal with symptoms and illnesses not with the patients who have them.

Mrs Blossom looked over her shoulder at me and I realised that what I had mistaken for hatred and anger was in fact nothing more than sadness fuelled by despair. There were tears in her eyes.

'Please!' I begged. I stood up and with my left hand indicated the chair she had vacated. 'Please, sit down. Talk to me.'

Mrs Blossom hesitated for a moment and for a few seconds

I thought she was simply going to walk out of the consulting room. But she didn't. She turned round again, came back and slumped down into the chair I had indicated. I too sat down. I didn't speak because I didn't know what to say without offending her. She didn't speak, though this was probably because she was trying not to cry and knew that if she spoke she would not be able to hold back the tears. I waited and tried not to move, frightened lest any movement I might make be interpreted as a sign of impatience or boredom or not caring.

'I'm sorry,' she said at long, long last. She looked across at me and I wondered if the sourness of her mouth was simply a result of the fact that she had spent too little time smiling and too much time screwing up her face and trying not to cry.

'That's O.K.,' I said. 'Talk to me.'

But she didn't talk, she burst into tears. The dam opened and the tears flooded out of her and her body shook with great sobs and she looked at me with a deep sadness and overwhelming unhappiness that I had never seen before. I pushed a box of paper tissues across the desk towards her but it was like offering someone a paper handkerchief to stem the flow of the River Thames.

'I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.' she repeated, time and time again. It was as though it were a litany; an oft repeated prayer. She held a sodden, screwed up tissue so tightly in her fingers that her knuckles were white. And then she started to talk.

She told me that she had got married at seventeen not because she was in love but because she desperately wanted to leave home and knew of no other escape. She had three children in as many years and then her husband, a labourer, had gone out one night saying that he was going to the pub and had never come home again. For weeks she was frantic, convinced that he'd had an accident but then she had discovered that he had left her to live with a barmaid in Ilfracombe. To keep her children she had taken a job as a store assistant but after three years of that she had left suddenly. The manager had assaulted her one night when the store was in darkness and they were closing up. Unable to get a reference she had worked briefly as a maid in a hotel, a waitress in a seaside cafe and a counter assistant in a fish and chip cafe. But then her mother had died and her father had announced that he was coming to live with her. She had never liked nor got on with her father and had always found him rude and overbearing. Now that he was living with her and constantly critical she found his presence intolerable.

'I would rather be in prison,' she told me, and I could see that she meant it. 'When I was eight my mother used to make me do the housework and by the time I was fourteen I was doing the cooking and the shopping. I've spent my life looking after other people, not because I want to but because I have no choice. I don't like my kids and they treat me like dirt and I hate my father, but I spend my life looking after them. I've never done anything because I wanted to do it and never done a job I've enjoyed.' She stopped and looked straight at me. 'I don't feel like I'm a person any more,' she said. I listened to her and felt the tears forming in my eyes. I thought how different our lives had been, were now and promised to be in the future. 'Are your children still living at home?' I asked her, quietly. I had worked out that since the oldest had been born when she was seventeen or eighteen they must be nearly grown up by now.

She looked at me, puzzled. 'Of course,' she said. 'The oldest is only nine.'

I realised, with horror and some embarrassment that she was ten years younger than she looked. She was hardly any older than I was although I'd thought of her as belonging to a different generation.

'Of course,' I said, hurriedly. 'I wasn't thinking.'

'I look older than I am, don't I?'

'No!' I said, too quickly.

She smiled at me for the first time. She looked almost pretty when she smiled, though it wasn't a proper smile, the cracks were still there underneath it. 'I'm sorry,' she said. She stood up again. 'I shouldn't be telling you all this. There isn't anything you can do. You've got a room full of sick patients to look after.'

'Please, sit down!'

She looked at me, hesitated, and then sat down. 'I should go,' she said. 'Thank you for listening to me.'

Just then the telephone rang. It was Miss Johnson, the receptionist. 'Are you all right, doctor?' she asked. 'You've had that patient in with you for twenty five minutes now and the others are getting a bit restless.' She wasn't being critical but thought I might have been trapped by a loquacious patient and needed an excuse to end an interminable conversation.

'Tell them I'll be as quick as I can,' I told Miss Johnson, and put the phone down. 'Please sit down a minute,' I said to Mrs Blossom.

'You're in trouble, aren't you?'

‘The natives are getting restless,’ I smiled at her. ‘It’s O.K. It doesn’t matter. Anyone who is ill will wait.’ I instinctively knew that if she left now I would probably not be able to get her to talk again. But she needed help. And I wanted to help her.

She talked to me for another fifteen minutes, told me things she said she had never told anyone else before, told me that she had always wanted to be a painter and that she had been good at it at school but that she’d never had a chance to try again, told me that her father had abused her when she was a child, told me that she got through the days only by thinking of the different ways in which she could kill herself, told me that for her death was a friend, the only hope she had.

In the end I didn’t know what to do to help her. I told her I would arrange an appointment for her to see a psychiatrist and made her promise me that she would keep the appointment, although in my heart I didn’t know what any medical specialist could do to help her. I wanted to help but I felt desperately useless and I finished the rest of the surgery in a mood of deepening sadness and despair.

Deep down I knew that there would always be such patients, and I would always be unable to help them and I didn’t know how I would be able to cope with this aspect of general practice.

* * *

When I got back home Patsy had left a note to tell me that she had caught the bus into Barnstaple to try to find someone prepared to sell and deliver us a cooker and so I went round to the Duck and Puddle to get some lunch.

I was waiting for Gilly to cook the egg and chips I had ordered when Keith Burrows appeared as if from nowhere.

‘I’ve got a bone to pick with you, doctor!’ he said, rather aggressively. ‘Am I right in believing that you paid a fine for me the other day?’

‘That’s right!’ I agreed, slightly puzzled at Keith’s attitude. I hadn’t really expected him to be grateful but nor had I expected him to be so upset.

Keith shook his head as though exasperated by my stupidity. ‘What’s the matter?’ I asked him.

‘They were about to arrest me!’ complained Keith.

‘Exactly!’

‘If I’d been lucky I’d have been given two weeks in Exeter gaol,’ moaned Keith.

‘But... did you want to go to prison?’

‘Of course I did! I’ve got some good mates over there and the gaol is the coolest place I know of in the summer. All those thick stone walls.’ Keith sighed. ‘Besides,’ he said, ‘I can’t stand the roads in the summer. They’re always full of grockles in caravans and cars. It’s far too dangerous.’

I didn’t really know what to say. I don’t think I had ever come across anyone who actually wanted to be sent to prison.

‘I’m sorry!’ I said in the end.

‘I should think so,’ muttered Keith. ‘Next time you see a policeman with a warrant for my arrest just tell him where he can find me, will you?’

‘I will,’ I agreed. I apologised again. ‘Can I buy you a drink? To make up for it?’

‘I’ll have a malt whisky,’ said Keith without hesitation. ‘A Macallan preferably. Make it a double, please, Frank.’ he added. When the whisky came he raised his glass. ‘Here’s to a life of crime!’ he said, with a toothless grin.

* * *

The evening surgery seemed to go on for ever.

Although there were a few villagers calling in for prescriptions and advice, most of the patients were holiday-makers who were in the area for no more than a few days. Most of them had nothing more wrong with them than mild sunburn or insect bites. By the time I had finished I was exhausted, desperate to get back home, to have something to eat and to then spend an hour or so working in the garden. I had never before been a very keen gardener but since Patsy and I had moved into Bilbury Grange I had found it to be the most relaxing and soothing of hobbies. I found myself anxious to see if any of Patsy’s strawberries had started to redden or if any of my lettuce had started to grow.

When I got back to Bilbury Grange, keen for a quiet evening, I was dismayed and surprised to find the driveway blocked with cars I had never seen before. All of them were old, once expensive, covered in rust and clearly well past their best. My first thought was that they must all belong to campers who had taken the wrong turning and driven into our driveway by mistake. I had to park at the bottom of the drive and then walk up to the house through the wood.

‘What on earth is going on?’ I asked Patsy, who I found in the walled garden tending to yet another magnificent bonfire.

‘The cars?’

I nodded.

‘They belong to Thumper,’ explained Patsy. ‘He asked me if he could leave them here for the night.’

‘Did he say what he was up to?’ Patsy shook her head.

‘When is he going to move them?’

‘He said he’d have them all towed away tomorrow,’ said Patsy. ‘A friend of his from Ilfracombe is coming with a pick-up truck.’

‘Won’t they go under their own steam?’ I asked, horrified.

‘Well they were all mobile when they got here,’ said Patsy,

‘Because I saw Thumper driving them. But he says that they’ve all got water in their petrol tanks now.’

‘All of them?’

‘That’s what he said.’

‘But how? How have they come to get water in their tanks?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Patsy. ‘Do you want some tea? I bought a French loaf in Barnstaple. It smells lovely. I could make you tomato sandwiches.’

I forgot about Thumper’s cars and ate a pile of the best tomato sandwiches I’d ever tasted.

‘Did you find a cooker in Barnstaple?’ I asked Patsy, when I had finished.

She shook her head. ‘Well, I did and I didn’t,’ she confessed.

‘I found one but it’s only an old one and the man in the shop wants too much money for it. I looked again at the new ones but the prices are just horrendous.’

‘So what are we going to do?’I asked her. ‘It’s not so bad now but we’re going to need one for the winter.’

‘The man at the shop said we should go to an auction if we are prepared to take a chance,’ explained Patsy. ‘He said that at house auctions they sell all that sort of stuff at knockdown prices. He said they virtually give away the sort of things we need.’

‘That’s just as well,’ I said, gloomily. ‘We can’t afford to buy them.’

* * *

As soon as I heard Thumper arrive the following morning I rushed downstairs to catch him before he disappeared up a ladder. I was, I confess, extremely curious to find out why he had bought so many old and apparently useless motor cars. I also wanted to know how long he intended to leave them parked in our driveway.

‘Don’t worry about a thing!’ Thumper grinned. Although his case still had not come up in court Thumper had recovered much of his previous cheerful confidence.

‘What are you up to?’ I asked him. ‘How illegal is it?’

Thumper sauntered over looking rather sheepish. ‘That’s not a very nice thing to say!’ he said, pretending to be hurt.

I laughed. I could never be cross with Thumper for long. ‘How many are there?’

‘Seven.’

‘And how long are they going to be here?’ ‘A mate of mine is coming over from Ilfracombe about lunchtime,’ Thumper replied. ‘They’ll be gone by this afternoon.’

‘But if they don’t work why did you buy them?’

‘They were working when I bought them,’ said Thumper.

‘All of them?’

‘All of them.’

I must have looked very puzzled. Thumper laughed. ‘Did you hear about that garage just outside Bratton Fleming?’

I shook my head. ‘No.’

‘They had a petrol delivery yesterday morning but by mistake the tanker that did the delivering wasn’t full of petrol it was full of water. Every car driver who stopped there for petrol got a tank full of water.’ Thumper grinned at me. ‘Someone screwed up at the depot.’

I still didn’t understand.

‘The petrol company immediately announced that they’d pay for any damage done to customers’ cars and for any inconvenience caused,’ explained Thumper. ‘It was the least they could do to avoid bad publicity.’

I was beginning to understand. ‘So you bought a pile of old crocks and filled their petrol tanks with water?’

‘Exactly!’

‘And now you’re going to claim that all these cars were ruined when they were filled up at the petrol station?’

Thumper nodded. ‘My mate owns a tow truck. He’ll just tell them that he had to pick these up from where they’d broken down in the lanes.’

‘But won’t they get a bit suspicious when they discover that you took seven cars along to the same garage and had them all filled up with water?’

‘They would if my name was on all the claim forms,’ admitted Thumper.

I stared at him. ‘Whose names have you used?’ I asked him.

‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘I only put your name down on one of them.’

* * *

CHAPTER NINE

Two days later I arrived home for my lunch and found Patsy standing on the doorstep waiting for me and holding a copy of the local paper.

'There's one this afternoon!' she said, excitedly.

'One what?'

'A house auction. In Kentisbury. It's only a couple of miles away.'

'What time does it start?'

'Two o'clock.'

I looked at my watch. 'It's nearly half past one now,' I said. 'And I'm starving.'

'I've made you some sandwiches,' said Patsy. 'And I rang and checked with the auctioneer. There's a phone at the house and if Miss Johnson needs you they'll take a message.'

I started to say something because, in truth, I was nervous about going to my first auction and would have been happy to find an excuse to enable me not to go, but Patsy, who was already beginning to understand me well enough and was only too prepared for me to make excuses, was ready. 'I've spoken to Miss Johnson and given her the number. She says you only have one appointment this afternoon - for a life insurance medical - and she's sure she can move that to tomorrow.'

Realising that I had lost I picked up the basket full of sandwiches and the flask of coffee that Patsy had prepared, waved goodbye to the roofers who were now getting close to completing the re-slating and were cheerily working through their lunch hour, told Thumper and his assistant, who were both sunbathing on the front lawn, where we were going, opened the door for Patsy to get into the car, joined her and drove to the house auction in Kentisbury. I ate my sandwiches as I drove and drank a cup of coffee from the flask too.

Even Patsy nearly let me turn back when she saw the rows of cars that were parked on the verges around the house where the auction was being held. It looked as though everyone in Devon had turned up.

'There are a lot of dealers here,' whispered Patsy, as we climbed out of the Morris and followed the flow of potential buyers walking down the lane towards the house. I didn't bother locking the car doors because the hood was down.

'How do you know?' I asked her.

'Just look at all the vans and estate cars,' Patsy replied.

I looked around. A good half of the vehicles which had been parked were vans, trucks and estate cars. Many were equipped with huge and sturdy looking roof racks. 'Do you think it's still worth going?' she asked me, beginning to lose her nerve.

'With all those dealers bidding?'

'If we're bidding against dealers we will at least know whether or not we're getting a bargain!'

Patsy looked at me and frowned. 'What do you mean?'

'Well, when a dealer bids he knows he's got to make a profit when he resells. So if we just outbid him we're almost certainly getting whatever we buy at below the retail price.'

'But it means we're not likely to get any real bargains,' countered Patsy who had, I think, harboured hopes that we would be able to repeat our success with the bottles of wine. 'Not with all those dealers around!'

The house where the auction was being held was an old and rambling Victorian vicarage. The former owner, a farmer and local businessman who had made a considerable fortune out of cattle and sheep, had died in his nineties and had left his estate to his housekeeper.

A young man from the auctioneers sat behind a wooden trestle table just outside the front door to the house and sold us two neatly printed catalogues listing the items for sale.

Inside the house it was clear that the former owner had not spent too much of his money on doing any repair work. Even though it was a warm and sunny day the rooms were all filled with a musty, damp smell that seemed to cling to everyone who entered, and numerous damp patches on the walls showed where the roof was leaking. The paintwork was brown and the walls were covered in paper that had been past its best at least a decade earlier. The old farmer had, however, filled his house with well-built, antique furniture, and it was easy to see why the auction had attracted so many antique dealers. There were bookcases, display cabinets, desks, wardrobes, dressing tables and pieces of furniture which I didn't even recognise. He had clearly been a hoarder of Olympic standard too, and every single room in the house was packed with bric-a-brac: old magazines, sporting programmes, stuffed birds in glass cages and bits and pieces of classic motor cars. In one room I spotted a radiator from a 20/25 Rolls Royce. In another I saw a mascot from an old Bentley. In addition to being a hoarder, the old farmer had clearly also been something of a collector and every available surface was covered with clocks, porcelain cows and, rather surprisingly, old telephones. There were prints and watercolours hanging in vast numbers on every wall. There were also half a dozen shotguns on display. The auctioneers clearly regarded some of the items as valuable for they had stationed at least one representative in every room.

'Don't forget!' whispered Patsy, as we shuffled around among the crowds, 'Don't scratch your nose or sneeze during the bidding!' I felt her fingers reaching for mine and held her hand tightly.

I looked at her. 'Don't! I'm already terrified of moving. I'll be too nervous to breathe! What happens if we buy one of these expensive pieces of furniture by accident? Can they make you pay for it even if you don't want it?'

'If something is knocked down to you then you own it.' said an unshaven man in a pair of dirty jeans and a grubby T-shirt who was carefully examining a china cow that had a spout for a mouth and a hole in the middle of its back. He had a ponytail tied back with a small red ribbon. 'If you make the winning bid then it's a legally enforceable contract.' He turned and smiled. 'You're the new doctor from Bilbury, aren't you?'

I admitted that I was but I didn't recognise him. I didn't like to confess this, however. Not unreasonably, most patients are offended when their own doctor doesn't recognise them.

'You don't know me,' he said, with a grin. He had clearly read my discomfort accurately. 'My name is Fogg. You've treated my aunt. She thinks you're wonderful.' I felt myself blushing with embarrassment. He put the cow down carelessly. 'Fake.' he said.

'Fake? How do you know?' I was impressed.

'The maker's mark on the bottom is too neat.' He shrugged. 'And the piece doesn't feel right.'

'Is there enough money in those things to make faking worthwhile?'

The stranger looked at me and raised an eyebrow. 'Are you joking?'

I shook my head.

'If that had been real it would have been worth £700-£800.'

'What is it worth?'

'£20 to anyone who knows it's fake.'

'But if someone didn't realise it was a fake?'

'They'd probably pay £700 to £800 for it.'

I gulped and felt myself going cold.

'The old bloke who lived here thought it was real. He probably paid top price for it.'

'How do you know?'

'Because he's got real and fake stuff all mixed up. He didn't know which was real and which was made in Taiwan.' He looked at me. 'What are you looking for?'

'Cooker, fridge, washing machine - that sort of thing. We're furnishing a house.'

The stranger laughed. 'Really? Is that all?'

'Yes.'

'Have you looked in the kitchen?'

'No. We haven't even found the kitchen.'

He looked at his watch. 'Come on. I'll show you.'

'Don't you have things you have to look at if you're going to bid?'

'I've looked at the stuff I want to bid on. I've been here since ten this morning.'

We followed him along a dimly lit corridor and into a huge kitchen that looked as if it had last been decorated at the end of the nineteenth century. There were far fewer people in the kitchen than there had been in the reception rooms. I looked around but couldn't see any of the things we were looking for.

'The old man has his cooking done on the Aga,' said the stranger. He pointed to a huge cream coloured monster.

'They're wonderful,' said Patsy. 'My mother uses one.' She looked at me. 'I'm surprised there isn't one at Bilbury Grange.'

'Maybe someone had it taken out.' I suggested.

The stranger laughed. 'Unlikely,' he said. 'It's easier to move the house than to move one of those things.'

'So, no cooker,' I said sadly. I looked around. There was an old-fashioned washboard standing in a corner, a wooden clothes airer hanging from the ceiling and a meat safe standing on a pine table. 'And no washing machine and no fridge.'

'In here,' said the stranger, disappearing through a plank door into a stone floored scullery. We followed him. There, still wrapped up in the plastic in which they had been delivered, were a brand new cooker, washing machine and refrigerator.

'Any good?'

Patsy pulled at the plastic so that she could look at the cooker properly. 'It's never been used!'

'None of it has. The old man finally allowed his housekeeper to order these things a couple of weeks before he died. They never had time to have them installed.' He pointed to a lot number stuck onto the top of the cooker. 'No one will be interested in any of this stuff. You should be able to get it for a song.' I checked my auction list and saw, to my surprise, that all three items were in the same lot.

'The auctioneer doesn't want to waste his time with that stuff,' explained the stranger. I had been desperately trying, without any success, to decide whose nephew he was. He looked at his watch. 'Better get back,' he said. 'They'll be starting any minute now and there's some good stuff fairly near the top of the auction.' He moved towards the door. 'Why don't you come and watch? The things you want won't come up for at least an hour and a half.'

The three of us hurried back along the dimly lit corridor to what had been the living room and squeezed into a space between a massive dark oak bookcase and a long, mahogany sideboard. Patsy, who was standing on tip toes to try to see, clambered onto a pile of old farming magazines from which vantage point she seemed to have an excellent view of the proceedings.

The auctioneer, a tall fair haired man with a ruddy complexion and a luxuriant moustache, the ends of which had been waxed and twirled into neat curls, was already standing on a box giving last minute instructions to a couple of his assistants. He had a clipboard in his left hand and a small wooden hammer in his right. He was wearing a red and white striped shirt with a plain white collar and a red and white spotted bow tie. His grey trousers were held up with a pair of wide, scarlet braces. His jacket was draped neatly on a wooden hanger that was dangling from the picture rail.

Without warning the auctioneer slammed his small wooden hammer down against the back of his clipboard.

'Ladies and Gentlemen,' he announced in a loud, clear voice.' Let's start the auction!' He read out a short list of rules and regulations giving his firm's commission rates and, confirming the stranger's comment about the legality of any bid, told us about another auction that was due to take place in a few days time and then, without any more warning, asked for bids for the first lot - a watercolour print which was held up by one of two burly men whose job it was to identify and then display the items for sale.

'Cheap rubbish,' whispered the stranger. 'They always start auctions with something fairly cheap just to get things going before the big stuff comes on.' The print was bought by a thin man in a light grey suit who looked pleased with his purchase and carefully made a note on his catalogue. The auctioneer asked him his name and one of the assistants wrote it down on a sheet of paper.

The first half a dozen items were all fairly inexpensive. But when the auctioneer announced the seventh item the mood and atmosphere in the room changed noticeably.

'This is where the good stuff starts,' whispered the stranger. I was making a real effort not to make any discernible movement that might be mistaken for a bid. The auctioneer's burly assistants were pointing to a tall display cabinet and although I couldn't see where they were coming from the bids were coming thick and fast. Within a minute the bids, which had started at £100, were into four figures and rising rapidly.

'Come on now,' said the auctioneer, cajoling his audience. 'This is an excellent example of the period and in perfect condition.' One of his assistants stood on tip toes and whispered something to him.

'I'm told that there is one knob missing from the cabinet,' said the auctioneer. He frowned. 'Though I didn't notice it missing yesterday,' he added. The absence of a knob seemed to cool the enthusiasm for the piece and the bidding slowed. Eventually, the auctioneer lifted his hammer, slammed it against his clipboard three times and then pointed it straight at me! I felt my mouth go dry and my heart missed at least two beats. I was waiting for him to ask me my name when he turned to the assistant who was writing down the buyer's name and said simply 'Fogg.' I looked to my left, to the spot where the stranger was standing and caught his eye. He winked once but showed no other sign of knowing what was going on.

'Was that you?' I whispered.

He nodded.

'I didn't even see you bid!'

He half smiled.

'What about the missing knob?' Patsy whispered between us. 'Doesn't that affect the value?'

The stranger didn't say anything but slipped his hand into the left pocket of his jeans and pulled out a small wooden knob. 'Saved me at least two hundred quid,' he whispered, slipping the knob back into his pocket and allowing his smile to broaden a little.

I felt my palms sweating and I had to swallow hard.

The auctioneer didn't pause.

As soon as each item was sold his assistant wrote down the details and the auctioneer moved immediately onto the next lot. The man standing next to us bid on half a dozen items and bought three of them. Several times he smiled and whispered 'Fake!' as the bidding soared upwards.

Eventually, the auctioneer had sold everything in the living room and he and his entourage moved off speedily towards the next part of the house.

'It's you next!' said the stranger. 'They're doing the stuff in the kitchen now.'

'How much shall we go to?' Patsy asked me as we filed along the dimly lit corridor in company with the other potential purchasers. Many of the dealers had stayed behind in the main part of the house since they realised that there was nothing of interest to them down in the kitchen and scullery.

'I don't know,' I said firmly. 'What do you think?'

'I'm not sure.'

Nervousness and the cup of coffee I'd drunk in the car were beginning to have an effect on my bladder and as we shuffled past a lavatory I slipped inside in order to relieve the pressure and discomfort. I had, in my innocence, thought that it would be easy to rejoin Patsy afterwards but I hadn’t allowed for the narrowness of the corridor and the reluctance of other would-be buyers to let me through. To my horror I found myself standing in the doorway to the scullery, listening to the auctioneer announce the lot number that included our new cooker, fridge and washing machine. I couldn’t even see Patsy or the stranger in the ponytail and I had no idea where they were.

‘I have one bid only for this lot,’ said the auctioneer clearly.

‘£2.’ He paused. ‘Is that all I’m bid?’ I heard him slam his small wooden hammer down onto his clipboard for the first time.

‘£3.’ I shouted as loudly as I could. My voice was hoarse and dry and I didn’t recognise it. But that didn’t matter. The auctioneer heard me.

‘The bid is with the gentleman in the doorway,’ he said.

‘£3. Do I have £4?’

Something happened out of my sight.

‘£4.’ said the auctioneer. ‘Are you still in, sir?’

‘£5.’ I shouted back.

There was a moment’s silence. ‘I’ve got £6 here, sir.’

‘£7.’I could feel the sweat pouring down my back. I knew that this was still a ridiculously cheap price but bidding still made me nervous. Oddly enough I had found bidding for Bilbury Grange far less stressful, even though a much larger sum of money had been involved.

‘£8 here, sir.’ said the invisible auctioneer. ‘Are you still in?’ The auctioneer sounded amused and several people in the audience were beginning to giggle.

‘£9.’ I shouted back. We really needed a cooker.

There was a longer interval now. ‘I’ve got £10 in here, now,’ said the auctioneer.

Desperately I searched the sea of faces for Patsy. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t have the faintest idea what these things were worth. ‘£11.’ I shouted.

Another wait ‘£12, I’m afraid, sir.’

‘£13.’

‘£14.’

‘£15.’

‘£16.’

I panicked and this time I kept silent.

‘Going now for £16.’ said the auctioneer out of my sight. I heard him slam his wooden hammer down onto his clipboard. I had lost. Ours was the last lot in the kitchen. I stood back and let the people stream out of the scullery. The auctioneer and his colleagues shot past me, heading back up the corridor towards the study.

Suddenly I saw Patsy standing alongside our ponytailed friend. I hurried towards her. She was blushing and looked hot and flustered.

‘Where were you?’ she asked.

‘I got stuck outside,’ I told her.

‘I didn’t get them,’ I said miserably. ‘I’m sorry. I lost my nerve.’ I explained.

Patsy held out her hands to me. I took them and pulled her to me. ‘I got them,’ she said quietly. She sounded exhausted, as though she’d been running.

‘You were bidding against each other,’ grinned the ponytailed stranger. ‘I thought you were. But I couldn’t be sure.’

‘You mean we were the only two people bidding?’

‘We could have bought them for £2?’

‘Don’t worry about it.’ said the ponytailed stranger. ‘You still got a bargain.’

* * *

CHAPTER TEN

‘It’s someone called Harrison,’ said Patsy, holding her hand over the mouth piece of the telephone. ‘He says he’s from the *Sunday News*.’

I had never heard of anyone called Harrison but I had heard of the *Sunday News*. It was a tabloid West Country newspaper with a wide readership throughout Devon and Cornwall. ‘What does he want?’ I whispered.

Patsy shrugged. ‘I don’t know,’ she whispered back. She held the telephone receiver out towards me. ‘You’d better speak to him.’

I took the receiver off her. ‘Hello?’ I said, rather tentatively. ‘What can I do for you?’

‘My name is Harrison,’ said a rather brusque voice at the other end. ‘I’m editor of the *Sunday News*. Am I right in thinking that you are the doctor who used to write a column for the *Herald*?’

‘That’s right,’ I admitted, rather cautiously.

‘Have you got an agent?’

‘An agent?’ it seemed an absurd question. Why, I wondered, would I have an agent?

‘A literary agent?’

‘No.’

‘I can deal with you direct?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good. You’ve left the *Herald* now?’

‘Yes.’

‘Can I ask you why?’

I thought about it for a moment. It was a cheeky question but I didn’t see why I shouldn’t tell the truth. ‘I was sacked,’ I told him. ‘They complained that I made people think too much.’

The man at the other end of the telephone laughed loudly. He had a good, solid laugh and I warmed to him. ‘Did he really tell you that?’

‘Yes.’

‘Our readers like a bit of controversy with their Sunday cornflakes,’ said Mr Harrison. ‘Would you like to write a column for me?’

I hadn’t been expecting it and I didn’t reply for a moment.

‘Are you there?’

‘Yes!’ I replied. ‘That’s very kind of you,’ I mumbled. ‘Every week?’

Patsy, who had been busy washing salad ready for our evening meal, turned round and looked at me. She raised a thumb and asked the question with her face. I held the telephone receiver between my head and my shoulder and opened both palms upwards, indicating that I wasn’t sure.

‘That’s the usual arrangement with a column.’

‘I don’t know,’ I said cautiously. ‘What sort of column?’

‘Same sort of thing that you were doing for the *Herald*. Some advice. Comment. Straight talking. Good honest opinion.’

‘The *Herald* complained that they were getting lots of letters of complaint from doctors,’ I warned him.

‘Wonderful!’ said Mr Harrison. ‘I love getting letters of complaint. How much were they paying you to write for the *Herald*?’

Patsy stopped what she was doing and wiped her hands on a towel. Then she walked across the kitchen to where I was sitting.

‘Eight pounds a week.’ I said, without thinking.

‘God, you are honest, aren’t you!’ said the *Sunday News* editor. ‘I knew you were getting that but I thought you’d tell me twice as much. I’ll pay you twenty.’

‘Twenty?’ I said, astonished. It seemed a lot of money.

‘Plus half of whatever we make from syndication rights.’

I hesitated. I had no idea what he was talking about. I said so.

‘We’ll try to sell your column to other papers round the country. And you’ll get half of what we get.’

I was astonished. ‘Do you think other papers will want to take it?’ I asked, uncertainly.

‘I should think so,’ said the editor. ‘Our syndication man sells stuff all round the world.’ He laughed again. ‘We could make you famous!’

‘I’m not sure that I want to be famous!’ I said quickly.

‘But you like writing?’

‘Yes.’ I admitted. ‘I do.’

‘Well there isn’t much point in writing if no one reads your stuff,’ said the editor. ‘I can promise you a big audience.’

‘Right.’ I said, rather hesitantly.

‘Will you do it then?’

‘Well, it sounds quite exciting.’

‘Great. I’ll put you a letter of contract in the post. Twelve weeks contract O.K. for you to start with?’

‘Yes, fine.’

‘I’d like to start a week on Sunday. Twelve hundred words.’

‘Er... yes. When does that mean you’d need the copy?’

‘Tuesday morning. You can post it or phone it in.’

‘I’ll try to post it.’ I said.

‘Great. I’ll get someone from our picture desk to give you a call and fix up a time when they can come and take some mug shots.’

‘O.K.’ I said, though I hated having my photograph taken.

‘Good to talk to you. I’m sure you’ll enjoy working with us.’ I was about to say something back when I realised that the editor had put the telephone down. Gently, I lowered the receiver.

‘What on earth was all that?’ asked Patsy. ‘It sounded pretty exciting. Have they offered you a job?’

I nodded. ‘A weekly column. Twenty pounds a week and half of everything they make from selling syndication rights!’ Patsy frowned. ‘What does that mean?’

I explained.

‘That’s terrific!’ said Patsy. ‘Are you excited?’

‘I suppose I am,’ I agreed. ‘Yes, I think I am!’

* * *

After we’d eaten our evening meal Patsy and I went out into the vegetable garden. The strawberries were beginning to ripen, the gooseberry, raspberry and blackcurrant bushes that we’d freed a little of the nettles and brambles which had been choking them were spreading their branches gratefully and were already laden with fruit. The garden was beginning to look much more like the productive, working garden it had once been. The lettuce which I’d planted in the cold frames were growing rapidly too.

‘I think you were a bit overenthusiastic with the lettuce,’ laughed Patsy.

‘What do you mean?’ I asked her, indignantly. There were at least a hundred lettuce plants growing in the cold frames and they all looked very healthy.

‘The lettuces are all going to be ready at the same time,’ Patsy pointed out. ‘We won’t be able to eat them before they start to wilt.’

‘Oh,’ I said, rather sadly.

‘We should have put them in a few at a time,’ Patsy pointed out. She started to giggle. ‘It looks as if we’ve started a lettuce farm.’

Patsy’s light-hearted comment set me thinking.

‘Maybe we could sell the ones we don’t need?’ I suggested.

Patsy frowned. ‘Who to? Do you mean we should have a stall at the bottom of the drive?’

‘We could try the village shop!’ I suggested. ‘Peter Marshall sells lettuce. Maybe he’d buy them from us instead of from the wholesaler?’

Patsy looked at me thoughtfully and then nodded. Then she walked over towards the strawberries. ‘What about these?’ she said. ‘Do you think he’d take some strawberries too?’

‘Why don’t we ask him?’

* * *

The rumour that a construction company intended to start building houses in Bilbury had not gone away. Indeed, instead of going away it was gaining ground and credibility. I had been trying for days to find out more without any success. In the end it was Patsy who brought us news.

When I got back home for lunch the following day I knew at once that Patsy had something exciting to tell me. But I couldn’t tell from looking at her face whether she had good news or bad. That was not, perhaps, too surprising since it turned out that she had both good and bad news for me.

First, she was desperate to tell me that Peter Marshall had agreed to take as many strawberries and as much lettuce as we could supply him with. Patsy said he hadn’t offered a lot of money but had said that he knew of two hotels in Ilfracombe and one in Combe Martin which would happily buy fresh produce from us.

‘He wanted to know if we used any chemicals on our crops - fertilisers and weedkillers and so on,’ said Patsy. ‘And when I told him that we didn’t he seemed very excited. He said that there was a growing demand for fruit and vegetables that were free of chemicals and told me that if he could describe our produce as ‘organic’ he could charge a higher price for it.

‘That sounds like Peter,’ I laughed. ‘Charging more money for stuff that hasn’t cost as much to grow!’

‘It’s not that simple,’ Patsy told me. She explained that if we had used chemicals on our crops we would have undoubtedly produced an even bigger harvest. I had forgotten that her father was a farmer, and that although he specialised in sheep and cattle she would know about such things. ‘It’s not difficult to double the yield per acre if you use the right fertilisers and pest control chemicals,’ Patsy pointed out.

‘How much did he offer?’

‘Three new pence each for lettuce and seven new pence a punnet for strawberries,’ Patsy told me. ‘He’ll provide us with the punnets. I know it doesn’t sound much but I worked out that we could make a good profit next year if we used the whole of the vegetable garden and concentrated on the right crops. Peter said that the hotels were desperate for things like beans and peas and parsley and radishes. He’s going to give me a list of the produce the hotels want most so that we can make sure that we grow the right things.’ Patsy had worked out the size of the crops she thought we might be able to grow, and the sort of prices we might expect for them.

‘So we could probably grow all our own fruit and vegetables free of charge and make a small profit out of the garden too?’

Patsy nodded.

‘So, what’s the bad news?’ I asked her. I knew that despite this wonderful news there was something worrying her.

‘Peter also told me that he’d heard more about those plans to build houses in the village,’ said Patsy. ‘Apparently, the builder who has applied for planning permission has got some very good contacts locally. Peter says he’s very confident that he’ll get permission to start building.’

‘Does Peter know where he’s planning to build?’

‘The nearest house will be less than a mile away from here,’ said Patsy. ‘Peter says they’re also planning a shopping precinct.’

The news that Peter had agreed to buy our produce delighted me but this latest news about the plan to expand Bilbury depressed me enormously. In a way I felt guilty for I knew that it was selfish of me not to want Bilbury to grow. I wondered how many of the villagers would welcome the jobs and the increased prosperity that the development would bring, and I wondered how I could find out exactly what was planned for the village.

Strangely, I wasn’t going to have to wait long, for I had a visitor later that day who told me more than I really wanted to hear.

* * *

‘My name is Sherlock!’ said the taller of the two strangers who Miss Johnson showed into the consulting room at the end of the evening surgery. He was broad as well as tall and brought with him an enormous, seemingly unshakeable sense of self-confidence. He didn’t so much enter the room as take it over, and within seconds of his arrival I felt as though I was the visitor and he the host. He wore a lightweight summer suit made of beige silk, an open-necked silk shirt and dark brown moccasins, and as he came into the room he slipped a pair of expensive looking sunglasses into his top pocket. He was hugely overweight but he was light on his feet, and in some strange way he didn’t actually look fat. Behind him there walked a man of about my age. He was thin, immaculately dressed and carried a leather document case.

I stood up and took the fat man’s outstretched hand. He gripped my fingers so tightly that they hurt. He didn’t introduce his companion who was, I assumed, an assistant.

‘Have you got anything for hay fever?’ he asked me, as he sat down. The joints of the chair creaked in protest at his weight.

I asked him what symptoms he had, how long he’d had them and what he’d tried. Then I started to write out a prescription for a suitable anti-histamine.

‘What’s your full name?’ I asked him.

‘Sherlock,’ he replied ‘Jack Sherlock. I’m the managing director of Sherlock Homes,’ he added. ‘I’m going to revolutionise your life!’

I was rather taken aback by this. I didn’t really want anyone to revolutionise my life. ‘Oh.’ I said rather baldly. I carried on writing out the prescription. But Sherlock did not detect my lack of enthusiasm and was certainly not deterred by it.

‘I want a few words with you,’ he said.

I handed him the completed prescription form and nodded. Sherlock folded the prescription form twice and placed it in the breast pocket of his jacket. ‘I’m going to build five hundred new houses in Bilbury,’ he told me with pride. ‘I’ll more than double the size of the village.’ He took a cigar case from the inside pocket of his jacket, took the top off the case and offered a cigar to me.

I shook my head and held up a hand. ‘No, thank you.’

He took a cigar from the case and examined it carefully.

I hesitated. ‘If you don’t mind I’d rather you didn’t,’ I said.

Sherlock stared at me in disbelief.

‘This is my consulting room,’ I explained. ‘I’d rather it didn’t smell of cigars.’

Sherlock returned the cigar to its case and then carefully slipped the case back into his jacket pocket. The assistant, standing behind Sherlock’s chair, looked surprised and even slightly amused. ‘I’m going to build a shopping precinct, a community hall and a health centre,’ he said. ‘I’m going to offer you the chance to take over the health centre.’

‘Have you got planning permission yet?’ I asked him.

‘It’s just a formality,’ said Sherlock with a shrug.

‘How on earth can you be so sure?’ I asked him. I’d heard of people waiting years to get planning permission to build another bedroom over their garage.

Sherlock touched the tip of his right index finger on the tip of his nose and winked. ‘In this world it’s not what you know or what you own but who you own,’ he told me. He paused. ‘I’ll get planning permission,’ he said confidently. He raised his chin and stared at me as though challenging me to defy him or doubt his confidence.

‘Where are you going to do all this building?’ I asked him.

‘On the west of the village,’ replied Sherlock. ‘Between here and Kentisbury.’

‘Around Softly’s Bottom?’

He nodded.

‘And Bluebell Wood?’

Another nod.

‘I thought Lionel Francis’s widow owned that land?’

Sherlock shrugged. ‘She used to.’ He stared at me. ‘So...’ he said, after a moment or two. ‘What’s your answer?’

‘It’s very generous of you,’ I told him. ‘I’m very flattered.’

Lionel Francis had died a few months earlier and I wasn’t surprised that his widow had been willing to sell some of the land he had accumulated. She had probably needed some cash to pay his death duties. But it was a pity she’d sold out to Sherlock. I wondered how much he had paid her.

‘So you should be,’ said Sherlock quickly. ‘But I had you checked out and the villagers seem to like you.’

‘I’d like some time to think about it,’ I said. ‘I’d like to talk it over with my wife.’

Sherlock stared at me for a moment without speaking. He seemed surprised that I hadn’t jumped at his offer. ‘I’ll give you a week,’ he told me. ‘Then I’ll withdraw the offer and find another doctor.’ He glowered at me. ‘You’ll never make a go of it with another doctor in the village.’

It was my turn to shrug. I didn’t say anything.

Sherlock stood up, noisily pushing his chair back so aggressively that his assistant had to catch it to stop it falling over.

He then turned and walked towards the door. He left without looking back. His assistant, who hadn’t spoken a word, followed him still clutching the leather document case.

* * *

Patsy and I talked over Mr Sherlock’s offer when I got home. It didn’t take us five minutes to decide that I would not have anything to do with his plans to destroy Bilbury. I telephoned his office and left a message on his answering machine telling him of my decision.

* * *

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I came home one cloudy lunchtime and, failing to find Patsy anywhere in the house, went out into the courtyard and called to her.

'I'm up here,' she called, from an open window on the first floor. 'Come on up!'

'Are you sure?' For weeks Patsy had not allowed me into the coach-house flat, insisting that she wanted the restoration work to be a surprise.

'Yes!'

I climbed the spiral staircase, entered the coach-house and found Patsy sitting on the window seat in the living room looking rightfully proud and ever so slightly pleased with herself. The difference in the flat was extraordinary. The walls and the woodwork were painted white and the flat looked extremely smart and gloriously welcoming.

'It's marvellous!' I told her, looking round.

'All it needs now is some furniture,' said Patsy. 'And then we can start letting it!'

I looked around, making a quick mental inventory of the things we would need to buy: cooker; refrigerator; table; chairs; three piece suite; bed; wardrobe; dressing table. Most of these were, of course, items that we still had not bought for the house.

'We can get everything we need at an auction,' Patsy pointed out. 'It needn't cost the earth and there's still quite a lot of the summer left.'

She was right, of course. If we could let the flat to holiday-makers for the rest of the summer we should be able to cover the cost of the furniture and make a small profit as well. I hadn't really needed Sherlock's visit to remind me of our financial vulnerability.

'O.K.!' I agreed. 'When's the next auction?'

'There's one next Friday!' replied Patsy, enthusiastically.

* * *

Mrs Blossom came into the surgery that evening, but for a moment or two I hardly recognised her. She came with a stout man in a suit I had never seen him before but guessed that he was her father. He was almost bald but had a few long strands of dark hair combed right across the top of his head in that absurd way that vain men use to try to hide their baldness from the world. The last time I had seen her she had been agitated, nervous and tearful. Now she looked calm and at peace but she also looked even older than before. She had a look in her eyes which I knew I had seen before though I couldn't quite think where. I had, I remembered, arranged an appointment for her to see a psychiatrist.

'How did you get on?' I asked her.

There was a long pause before Mrs Blossom replied. 'Very well, thank you,' she answered, choosing each word carefully as though she were at a buffet and only had a small plate. She tried to smile but it was a thin, weak shadow of a smile that made her look haunted rather than happy.

'Did the psychiatrist prescribe anything for you?'

'He gave her some pills,' said Mr Blossom. 'She's got to go back in a week's time to collect some more.' I wondered why the psychiatrist didn't want me to write out the repeat prescription for him. Hospital consultants usually like to get general practitioners to do their routine work for them whenever they can.

I nodded my thanks to Mr Blossom and then turned my head towards his daughter. 'What are they?' I asked her. She looked at me blankly. 'What's the name of the pills he gave you?'

'I don't know.'

'Have you got them with you?'

'Yes.'

'Can I look at them?'

She opened her handbag, took out a small brown bottle and handed it to me. She seemed reluctant to let it go. The bottle had a small white label stuck to one side and the name of the drug was scrawled on the label. The pills were the same as the ones that Miss Phillips was taking. I knew now why the psychiatrist had not asked me to write out the prescription - he knew that the pills were not available at the ordinary chemist's shop and could only be obtained directly from the manufacturer.

'Did the doctor at the hospital tell you that the pills are very new?' I asked Mrs Blossom.

She looked at me for a few moments and then, very slowly, shook her head. 'No.' she said.

'They're very special,' said Mr Blossom. 'The consultant said that only a few selected doctors are allowed to prescribe them.' He said the word 'consultant' as though it began with a capital letter.

'So I believe,' I said.

'The consultant said we should come and see you for a sick note,' said Mr Blossom.

'A sick note?' I was puzzled. 'I didn't think that Mrs Blossom went out to work.'

'She doesn't. The sick note is for me. I'll have to stay at home for a few days to look after her.'

‘Ah.’ I said, nodding. A thought struck me and I frowned.

‘Why didn’t the consultant give you a sick note?’ I asked him.

‘I did ask him for one,’ said Mr Blossom. ‘But he said that sort of thing was your job.’

‘Very kind of him,’ I said drily, pulling my pad of sick notes towards me and muttering an unspoken, unheard curse on consultants who regarded themselves as too important to spend fifteen seconds writing out sick notes, thereby wasting everyone else’s time.

‘How long is this likely to go on?’ Mr Blossom asked me. He inclined his head towards his daughter as he spoke.

‘Do you mean how long will it be before your daughter gets better?’ I asked him.

‘Yes.’

‘I’m afraid I don’t know.’ I told him.

‘It’s damned inconvenient,’ muttered Mr Blossom to no one in particular. He took the sick note I held out, carefully read it folded it into two, creased it sharply between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand, took out a wafer thin leather wallet and slipped the sick note inside it. Then he put the wallet back into his inside jacket pocket.

As Mrs Blossom stood up to accompany her father out of the surgery I remembered where I had seen the dull and lifeless look that was in her eyes. I had seen it on the faces of the patients in a geriatric ward in a hospital where I had once worked; described by a cynical young hospital consultant as the ante room to death. And I had seen it more recently than that. I had seen the same dull, half dead look on Miss Phillips’ face too.

* * *

That afternoon Thumper was due to appear in court in Barnstaple, charged with whatever fancy word cocktail the judiciary chose to use when describing the unusual twin crimes of poaching and self-defence.

Patsy and I picked Thumper and Anne up and drove them into town. Anne and Thumper left their baby with Miss Johnson whom I told where I was going and Dr Brownlow, who had a soft spot for both Thumper and Anne, had promised to look after any urgent problems which came up while I was out of the village. Barnstaple is only ten miles away from Bilbury but in summer the heavy holiday traffic means that the journey can take as much as half an hour. We had arranged to meet Thumper’s solicitor, a Mr Suffolk, at the entrance to the court.

There were just five minutes to go and we had just decided that the solicitor wasn’t going to turn up when a tall, gangling young man wearing a suit that was several sizes too large for him around the waist and chest and several sizes too short for him in length came rushing up to us in a rare state of excitement.

He had a bulging briefcase in his right hand and a huge sheaf of papers and textbooks stuffed under his left arm.

‘Mr Robinson?’ he called, breathlessly.

We all turned to stare at him. Thumper frowned. ‘Yes?’

‘I’m Mr Colter of Mountfield, Briggs and Stratton. I’m afraid Mr Suffolk has been unavoidably detained.’ He brushed his long hair away from his eyes and smiled nervously. ‘But he’s handed your case to me.’ He suddenly realised that the smile wasn’t appropriate and banished it quickly. As he did so he looked at his watch. ‘We’d better get a move on!’

‘Right,’ said Thumper, drily, moving off.

I put my hand on the solicitor’s arm as we all walked towards the court. ‘You do know what Mr Robinson is charged with?’

‘Oh, absolutely!’ replied the young lawyer. ‘Mr Suffolk told me all about it this morning.’

‘That was the first time you heard about it?’

‘Half an hour ago.’

‘Shouldn’t you ask for a postponement or whatever you call it?’ I asked him, horrified. ‘Surely you need time to prepare a good legal case?’

‘No need to worry about that!’ insisted the young lawyer.

One of the textbooks started to slip out from underneath his arm. I removed it before it fell and carried it for him. I had absolutely no experience of the British legal system, and despite all this I still had faith that somehow justice would be done.

Somewhere between the entrance to the court and the court itself Thumper was separated off from the rest of us. Patsy, Anne and I were sent along a dull and dingy corridor and after opening two wrong doors by mistake eventually found ourselves sitting on uncomfortable chairs at the back of the courtroom. Moments later Thumper appeared in the court, accompanied by his youthful solicitor. The three undistinguished looking magistrates sat high on their bench scowling down at the court as though anxious to hand down punishments and get away to do something more interesting and profitable. They looked the very essence of smug, self-satisfied and sanctimonious middle class England.

I don’t know what I had expected but the next ten minutes seemed more like something out of Kafka’s imagination than any attempt to offer genuine justice. The absurdity and unfairness of it all became instantly apparent the moment the clerk had read out the charges. Thumper, when invited to tell the court whether he admitted his guilt or intended to defend himself, stood up and in a clear and unshaken voice declared his intention to plead guilty to poaching but not guilty to assault. The young and nervous Mr Colter was clearly surprised by this for he whispered urgently to his client. He was obviously trying to persuade him to change his mind. But Thumper was adamant that he wanted to plead not guilty to the assault charge. He did not, he insisted, mind being punished for the poaching. He was guilty and he had been caught and that was fair. But, he insisted, the assault charge simply was not right.

The prosecuting solicitor, a dour-faced man in his middle fifties who didn't look as if he had done anything enjoyable for at least twenty years, stood up and said such terrible things about Thumper that it was all I could do to stop myself from rushing up to him, taking him by the lapels and shaking some of the spite and malice out of his voice.

'This man is clearly a menace to human society,' said the solicitor who had never met Thumper before, pointing a finger directly at him. 'A nasty, evil and dangerous man who takes the law into his own hands and who has no respect for authority.'

The prosecution's only witness, the water bailiff, told such a sad and pathetic story that one would have had to have a heart of stone not to feel sorry for him. He did not bother to mention that when he had fallen into the water Thumper had rescued him.

Thumper's solicitor made a brave hash at offering some sort of defence but it was clear that his heart was not in it He had panicked and lost control when he had discovered that the case was not as simple or as straightforward as he had been led to believe and the result was that he produced an inelegant stream of such unconvincing and irrelevant nonsense that in the end even Patsy, Anne and I would have found Thumper guilty.

After passing an urgent note down to the solicitor I managed to persuade him to let me give evidence as a character witness, though by then I suspected that it was probably too late.

I explained that Thumper was a good friend, a reliable workman, a devoted husband and a caring father. It may have sounded a little over the top but, in essence, it was the truth. We were in the end relieved that Thumper did not get a prison sentence but was simply fined and put on probation. He was told that when his fine was paid he would be allowed to have his truck back.

'Thank you!' said Thumper, shaking my hand firmly as we met outside the court. 'I owe you.' He looked pale but relieved. His solicitor hovered nearby looking quite pleased with himself. 'If it hadn't been for you I think they would have sent me down.'

'I think that went quite well,' said the solicitor, with a nervous and hopeful smile. He was carrying his bulging briefcase in his right hand and clutching his sheaf of books and papers under his left arm. I hadn't seen him refer to any of the books while in the courtroom though he had shuffled the papers about quite a lot.

'You didn't even know Thumper wanted to plead not guilty to the assault charge!' I said to him, angrily.

'It was a little unfortunate that Mr Suffolk couldn't be here,' said Mr Colter. I couldn't help wondering if Mr Colter had ever appeared in court before by himself.

'Where is he?' I demanded. 'Mr Suffolk?' Mr Colter looked embarrassed and shuffled his feet nervously.

'Why couldn't he come?' I persisted. Patsy, Anne and Thumper had stopped and were waiting for an answer too.

'He had to go on a course,' muttered Mr Colter, defensively. He looked uncomfortable.

I knew instantly what he meant. I had heard the excuse too often before. 'He's playing golf!' I said angrily. 'Thumper could have gone to prison!'

'But he didn't!' said Mr Colter. He smiled thinly and waved a hand at Thumper. 'He's here, isn't he?'

'No thanks to you,' said Anne.

'Come on,' said Thumper quietly. We all turned and looked at him. 'Let's go home.' Mr Colter, looking relieved to have been let off so easily, scurried off.

We set off walking towards the car park and as we did so the prosecuting solicitor came out of a side door. In strange contrast to Mr Colter his suit was too tight for him. Because they were anchored around his hips instead of his waist his trousers were too long for him in the legs. But whereas Mr Colter's suit had never fitted him, the prosecuting solicitor's body had probably once been the same size and shape as his suit.

'Do you sleep at night?' I asked him angrily. 'Are your parents proud of you?' I was feeling very angry about what had happened in the courtroom. It seemed to me outrageous that a man could say things about another human being without having any idea about whether or not they were true. The prosecutor stopped, looked at me and instinctively backed away. He seemed nervous and looked around. 'I advise you not to say anything you're likely to regret,' he told me. He tried to walk away but I moved around and stood in front of him.

'Come on,' whispered Patsy. She took hold of my hand. 'He isn't worth it.'

'I doubt if your advice is ever worth taking,' I told him. I don't think I had ever before been so angry. 'How dare you describe a man as evil when you don't know anything about him?'

'I was just doing my job,' he said. Perspiration had formed on his brow.

'That's what the concentration camp guards said at Auschwitz,' I told him.

'That's an outrageous comparison!' said the lawyer. He looked around. 'Any more of that and I'll sue you for defamation.' His face had gone red and a vein on his forehead was bulging. (Two months later he died of a stroke).

I looked around. 'Don't you need witnesses for that?'

He looked at Thumper, Patsy and then Anne and unsuccessfully tried to walk round me again.

'You're worse than a prostitute,' I told him. 'You'll do anything for money, won't you?'

The lawyer blanched and pulled himself up to his full height. 'How dare you?' he remonstrated.

But I'd had enough of him. Still holding Patsy's hand I turned and walked away. Thumper and Anne followed behind and I could hear Thumper chuckling. After a few yards I started to smile. And by the time we were in the car driving back to Bilbury we all felt much better. We had all learned a lesson about the law. But at least Thumper wasn't in prison.

'Can you drop me off by the river?' Thumper asked, as we were about to turn off the main road and take the turning to Bilbury.

'O.K.' I said, puzzled.

'I just want to pick up a couple of trout on the way home,' said Thumper, laughing. Anne, who was sitting beside him on the back seat, hit him as hard as she could and that made him laugh even more.

* * *

CHAPTER TWELVE

As we approached the site of the auction Patsy and I recognised a number of the vehicles that were parked. We had seen them outside the house where we had attended our first auction.

Unlike that auction, which had been held in a private house, this one was being held in a village hall. As we drew closer to the hall we recognised many of the would-be buyers too. Among them I spotted Mr Fogg, the man who had befriended us at our first auction. He was dressed in exactly the same clothes.

We entered the hall and started to walk around. The larger items of furniture were all arranged around the outer walls of the hall. In the middle, piled in neat rows on top of wooden trestle tables, were the smaller items. The more valuable small items, silver spoons, old watches and bits and pieces of ivory, were laid out neatly in a glass fronted cabinet which was guarded by a broad shouldered man dressed in jeans and a thick, fisherman's sweater. He had his arms folded and did not look like a man who liked a laugh. The least valuable items, and things like stepladders and gardening tools, were lined up outside in the tiny car park. A hot dog van was also parked there, presumably to provide refreshments for those attending the auction.

'Hello!' I said, as we passed Mr Fogg. 'Fancy seeing you here!'

Fogg, who was carefully examining a particularly ugly toby jug, turned sharply when he heard my voice and then visibly relaxed when he saw who it was.

'Looking for more stuff for your house?' he asked us. He shook my hand and smiled at Patsy.

I nodded and said we were.

'The people who owned the house where all these things came from must have been very odd,' said Patsy. 'I've counted at least five complete sets of cutlery.'

Fogg laughed. He put down the toby jug and picked up a small porcelain model of a thatched cottage. 'All this isn't from one house!' He explained that the auctioneers had collected together furniture and belongings from three or four small cottages and had put all the bits and pieces together into one auction to save money.

'I keep seeing the same faces,' I said. A short, vaguely familiar man wearing a bright green jumper and a pair of shabby brown corduroy trousers walked past and nodded to Mr Fogg.

'At least half the people at an auction will always be regulars,' explained Fogg. He turned the thatched cottage upside down and carefully examined the maker's stamp. 'Antique shop owners looking for stock, junk shop people looking for bits and pieces, and dealers looking for things they know they can turn round quickly and fairly easily at a profit.' He sniffed and put the thatched cottage down.

'No good?'

'Pardon?'

'The cottage.'

Fogg shook his head. 'Looks older than it is,' he explained.

'Made in Hong Kong sometime in the 60s.'

'What about the other half?'

Fogg looked at me, puzzled.

'The other buyers at an auction. You said half of them were professionals.'

'Oh, a few of them will just be vultures who have come for a nose around. When someone dies the neighbours want to see what they've left behind and how much it fetches. But most of the rest will be people like you - people furnishing a house and looking for a few bargains. You can furnish a house for next to nothing and make a decent profit on it if you're careful.'

Patsy, puzzled, looked at him. 'How?'

'Buy good, solid furniture that isn't old enough to be antique but isn't new and made of cardboard. By the time you're ready to sell it there's a good chance that some of it will have become antique. But even if it hasn't it will probably still be worth more than you paid for it because the next generation of house owners will be looking for good, solid furniture of their own.'

Fogg pulled out a large grubby handkerchief and blew his nose noisily. 'I can't imagine why anyone buys new furniture,' he said. 'It's mostly made out of hardboard, it loses ninety per cent of its value the moment you take it out of the showroom, it's got no character, and when you find you can't sell it you won't even be able to turn it into firewood.' He turned his attention to an old mains radio in a Bakelite case. He fiddled with the four control knobs on the front of the set and then used a penknife to open the back. He sniffed, seemed satisfied, quietly slipped one of the knobs into his pocket and moved on to something else.

'Is that worth anything?' I asked him.

Fogg shook his head.

'Why do you want to get it then?'

He looked at me, puzzled.

'I saw you take the knob,' I pointed out.

'I'm going to listen to it he explained. He wasn't in the slightest bit embarrassed about my having seen him steal the knob. ‘It’s not worth much anyway but with a knob missing it’s virtually worthless. I should get it for a couple of shillings. These old radios have a beautiful tone and they’re so cheap that when they go wrong you can just chuck them away and buy another one.’

The auctioneer, a short, stout man in a three piece tweed suit climbed up onto the village hall stage. He was smoking a huge cigar and ash had dropped down both the lapel of his jacket and the front of his waistcoat. He was as bald as a billiard ball, and nearly as round. A heavily perspiring assistant in a grey woollen suit with a thin white stripe hurried to the back of the stage, found a lectern and put it at the front of the stage. The auctioneer rested his elbows on it, placed his catalogue on the lectern and then put his wooden gavel on the small flat area at the front of it. Moments later the auction started.

An hour and a half later Patsy and I had bid for and bought all the furniture we needed for the flat. We paid slightly more than we had expected, but that drawback was more than offset by the fact that we had managed to buy better furniture than we had expected.

We had arranged for a man with a removal van to transport our purchases back to Bilbury Grange and were standing by the hot dog stand drinking steaming hot mugs of tea when Mr Fogg hurried out of the back of the village hall. He stood there for a moment, clearly looking for someone or something. As soon as he spotted us he came straight over.

‘I thought you must have gone,’ he said. He looked agitated and relieved to have found us. ‘Did you get what you wanted?’

‘Yes, thank you.’ said Patsy. I had a large chunk of chocolate biscuit in my mouth and did not attempt to say anything.

‘Would you do me a favour?’ asked Mr Fogg. He spoke quickly and confidentially.

‘Of course,’ said Patsy. She looked at me. I nodded. ‘If we can,’ she added rather cautiously.

I swallowed the chocolate biscuit and washed it down with a swig of tea.

‘There’s a piece of furniture I’m rather keen to buy,’ explained Mr Fogg. ‘A burr walnut davenport. Victorian. Would you bid for me?’

I didn’t have the faintest idea what a davenport was.

‘Of course!’ said Patsy. ‘Do you have to go somewhere?’

‘What’s a davenport?’ I asked.

‘No. I’ll be here,’ said Mr Fogg, answering Patsy first. ‘But if the other dealers see me bidding they’ll know what I think the piece is worth and they’ll go higher than they might have done.’ He looked at his watch and hopped from one foot to the other. He was clearly anxious and impatient.

‘What’s a davenport?’ I asked again.

‘It’s a writing desk,’ Mr Fogg replied, speaking hurriedly. ‘It’s got a retractable writing surface, a couple of drawers and a secret compartment for hiding money and love letters.’

It sounded rather exciting.

‘How do we know how much to bid up to?’ asked Patsy.

‘Go up to £750.’ said Mr Fogg. ‘Not a penny more.’

Patsy looked at me and I looked at her. It was a lot of money.

‘Er... ‘I began, not quite sure how to say what we were both thinking.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Mr Fogg with a reassuring smile. ‘I know what you’re thinking. You’re worrying that if I disappear you’ll be left having to pay £750 for something you don’t want.’

Patsy and I, who had been thinking exactly that, protested that the thought had never crossed our minds. Mr Fogg held up a hand and took a thick roll of notes out from his jeans pocket. Without blinking an eye he counted out £800 in fifty pound notes and handed it to Patsy. ‘If you’re successful pay the auctioneer £750 and if you’re not give me £750 back,’ he said. ‘Either way you keep £50 for your trouble.’ Patsy handed the money to me. I put it into my trouser pocket and kept my hand on it. I had never handled that much cash before and it made me very nervous.

We both protested that we didn’t want paying but Mr Fogg was insistent. He looked at his watch. ‘I’m sorry to rush you,’ he said. ‘But it’s lot 137. And they’ll be there any minute now.’

We followed him back into the village hall. The auctioneer was taking bids for lot number 136

‘Who’s going to bid?’ whispered Patsy.

‘You can,’ I answered. Even though I had just drunk a pint of tea my lips were dry and my throat felt parched. The £50 commission we were being paid would more than cover the cost of the furniture we had bought.

‘I’d rather you did,’ Patsy whispered back.

‘The next item, lot 137, is a rather fine davenport,’ said the auctioneer. ‘Who’ll start me off with £300?’ One of his assistants pointed to a piece of furniture that looked like a cross between a school desk and an old-fashioned writing bureau.

I licked my lips and looked around for Mr Fogg. He was standing several yards away. I raised an eyebrow. He shook his head almost imperceptibly. I did nothing.

‘Come on now!’ said the auctioneer. He had a friendly, cajoling style which had worked well. ‘Who’ll give me £150?'

Still there was no response. Again I looked at Mr Fogg. Again he shook his head almost imperceptibly. I still did nothing.

'£100 then,' sighed the auctioneer. 'Let's do this the hard way.'

A voice from on my right shouted 'Here.'

'I have £150,' said the auctioneer, though I hadn't heard the second bid. 'Do I have £200?'

'£250,' said the voice from my right.

'£300,' countered the auctioneer.

I waved my hand to indicate that I wanted to join in the bidding. I was frightened that the davenport would be sold but not to me.

The bidder on my right must have responded in some way though I didn't hear or see anything.

'£350,' said the auctioneer. 'I have £350. Do I hear £400?'

I raised my hand as high as it would go and waved it about like a small boy trying to catch the teacher's attention but the auctioneer didn't seem to see me. I had always worried that I would end up buying something by mistake. Now I had discovered that it's sometimes possible not to buy something you want. The key to successful bidding is, I learnt later, simply to catch the auctioneer's eye.

Slowly the bidding crept up to £500 and still I hadn't made a bid. Then the bidder on my right pulled out.

'I have £500,' said the auctioneer looking around the room.

'Do I have any advance on £500?' The room had gone very quiet. This was by far the biggest bid of the day so far.

I had not lowered my hand and this time the auctioneer saw me. 'Are you bidding, sir?' he asked me.

'Yes.' I croaked.

'£550,' said the auctioneer. It seemed that everyone in the room was looking at me. Some of the dealers were whispering among themselves. I tried to catch a glimpse of Mr Fogg but I couldn't see him anywhere.

I nodded.

'I have £600,' said the auctioneer. He looked at me and raised an eyebrow. I nodded again.

'£650.'

And so it went on. Every time I made a bid the auctioneer met it with a higher one. I still couldn't see who I was bidding against but there was clearly at least one other dealer around who was convinced that the piece was worth buying. Eventually I reached my limit of £750. But it wasn't enough.

'£800,' said the auctioneer. He looked at me, expectantly.

For a moment I was tempted to carry on. I did, after all, have £800 in my pocket. I could see how people could get carried away at auctions. But common sense prevailed and, rather sadly, I shook my head. I felt I had failed Mr Fogg and I could almost taste the disappointment. I turned away, as sad as if I had failed to buy something I wanted for myself. Mr Fogg had reappeared. He nodded his head slightly towards the exit at the back of the hall and while the auctioneer continued with the next lot Patsy and I followed him out of the hall and back into the car park.

'I'm sorry,' I said to Mr Fogg, handing him his roll of notes. He didn't seem in the slightest bit disappointed.

'Have you taken your £50?' he asked.

I shook my head.

He grinned, peeled off a £50 note and handed it to me.

'Thanks,' he said. 'You did brilliantly.'

'I'm sorry I didn't get it for you,' I said.

'That's O.K.,' he said. And he disappeared back into the hall again.

'He took it very well,' said Patsy.

'We've got £50 we didn't expect!' I said, showing her the note that Mr Fogg had given me. 'Is there anything else you want to bid for?' I'd been bitten by the bug and I was keen to get back into the bidding.

Patsy laughed and shook her head. But we did bid. Twice. First, the auctioneer held up an old wedding gown which no one seemed to want.

'Oh it's beautiful!' sighed Patsy.

'Buy it if you like it.' I told her. No one was prepared to bid and it was obviously going to be very cheap.

'Oh I don't know,' said Patsy. She hesitated. 'I could alter it and turn it into a lovely dress, though.' The auctioneer was getting desperate and was now offering the dress for anyone prepared to make an offer for it. I knew we had to act fast and so I put up my hand and offered five shillings.

'You mean 25 pence, sir!' said the auctioneer sternly. The nation's currency had gone decimal the previous year and I still sometimes forgot.

'Yes, 25 pence!' I agreed.

'Done!' said the auctioneer, banging down his gavel. 'Sold to the gentleman over there. You'll look lovely in it sir!'

There was a ripple of laughter, but when Patsy took my hand and whispered 'thank you' I didn't care.

Then, right at the end of the auction, the auctioneer's assistant held up a tin bath full of all sorts of bits and pieces of assorted rubbish and, encouraged by me, Patsy bought the lot for 50 pence. It was hardly the big time, but not knowing exactly what we had bought added a considerable frisson of excitement to the deal.

As I queued in a small back room to pay for the furniture we had bought for the flat, for Patsy's dress and for the tin bath we had bought in a moment of wild extravagance, I felt someone tapping me on the shoulder. I turned round and saw the auctioneer standing behind me.

'Excuse me, sir,' he said quietly. 'Could I have a word with you?'

'Of course,' I said. I left Patsy to pay our bill and walked with the auctioneer to a quiet corner.

'I'm sorry you didn't get the davenport,' said the auctioneer.

I looked at him slightly puzzled.

'The davenport,' repeated the auctioneer. 'Lot 137.'

'Oh yes,' I said. I remembered the lot number but I had forgotten that it had been called a davenport.

'You were very keen to buy it,' said the auctioneer.

'Oh yes.' I said. I felt uncomfortable and hoped that he wasn't going to tell me that the higher bidder had dropped out and that I could now have it for £750. I wondered where Mr Fogg was and what my legal responsibilities were. Did unsuccessful bids still count?

'I hope you won't mind my asking,' said the auctioneer. 'But just for my own curiosity do you mind telling me if you were bidding for someone else?'

'Is that illegal?' I asked him anxiously.

'Oh good heavens no!' said the auctioneer. 'If it was I doubt if we'd ever sell anything.'

'Well then yes I was,' I said.

'For Patchy perhaps?'

'Patchy?'

'Patchy Fogg,' explained the auctioneer. I laughed. What a wonderful nickname.

'Yes,' I agreed. 'That's right.' I lowered my voice confidentially. 'I don't suppose there's any harm in telling you,' I said. 'But he was worried that if other dealers saw him bidding the price would go up.'

The auctioneer smiled. 'I thought he might have told you something like that,' he said. 'But the funny thing is that Mr Fogg was the seller.'

I didn't understand and I suspect that my confusion was quite apparent.

'No,' I said. 'You must be wrong about that. He gave me instructions to bid up to £750 for him. He wouldn't do that if he was selling it would he?'

The auctioneer put a hand on my shoulder, as though comforting an innocent in a harsh world. 'He might,' he said. 'If he knew that a London dealer had telephoned in giving me instructions to bid up to £800 for it.'

It took a moment or two for this to sink in. I remembered that the last bid I'd heard had been for £500. Without my bids the seller of the davenport would have received £300 less - the same £300 that the London dealer would have saved.

'But how would Mr Fogg - Patchy - know what the dealer had bid?' I asked.

'I don't know,' said the auctioneer quietly. He paused and then nodded at me. 'I'm sorry to have bothered you with this,' he said. 'I hope you didn't mind?'

'No.' I said, still rather shocked by it all.

'It's not that you've done anything illegal,' he said soothingly. 'But I always like to know what is going on at my auctions.'

'Of course.' I agreed.

The auctioneer melted away and after a few moments I wandered back to join Patsy who was now busy paying our bill and obtaining the necessary receipts. I didn't tell her about Patchy Fogg, the auctioneer, the davenport and the London dealer until we were in the car and on our way home.

* * *

When we got back to Bilbury Grange we were both in a slightly subdued mood. Not even the sight of the roofers dismantling their scaffolding cheered us up.

We didn't know how Patchy Fogg had found out what the London dealer's top price was, but it wasn't difficult to hazard a guess. Mr Fogg could have paid one of the auctioneer's own staff a few pounds for the information. Or since the telephone bids had to be written down somewhere maybe he managed to sneak a look. Whatever he'd done, it was fairly obvious why he needed us to bid for him.

'I'll put the kettle on,' said Patsy as Thumper and I staggered into the house behind her carrying the tin bath and its contents. The removal man had promised to deliver the furniture either that afternoon or the following morning. I couldn't help noticing that Thumper was moving cautiously and slowly. He put his end of the tin bath down and put his hand in the middle of his back.

'Are you O.K?' I asked him.

He nodded. And then immediately held his head.

'I take it you had a little celebration last night?'

'The human body has got a design fault,' he said, speaking quietly - and very slowly. I stared at him and waited. It is difficult not to feel self-righteous and pleased with yourself when you're talking to someone who has a hangover, but I tried.

'How are you supposed to know when you've had enough to drink?' he asked me.

I shrugged. It didn't seem like the sort of question I was expected to answer. It wasn't. Thumper answered it himself.

'You only start to notice that things are going wrong when you've had too much and you only really notice that you've had too much the next morning when it's far too late!'

I grinned at him. 'Give me a hand with this tin bath,' I said. 'Or I'll start whistling - loudly!'

'You should have been in the Gestapo,' he said, screwing up his face in misery. He bent down and picked up his end of the tin bath again.

'What the hell have you got here anyway?' he asked.

I explained that I didn't know yet, but that Patsy had bought the lot as a sort of lucky dip for 50 pence.

'You both seem a bit miserable,' said Thumper. 'What's gone wrong?'

I started to tell him the story of Mr Fogg and the davenport 128 and by the time I had finished we were indoors. We put the tin bath down.

Thumper laughed out loud and then held his head in regret.

'Not old Patchy!' he cried.

'You know him?' 'Of course I know him!' said Thumper. 'He plays in our football team. He's a great guy.'

'But he cheated a dealer in London out of £300!' I protested.

'Don't be silly,' said Thumper. 'The dealer was prepared to pay £800 so he was, presumably, convinced that he could get more than that from some other customer. Do you feel sorry for the customer who's going to buy it from the dealer?'

I thought about it for a moment. 'I suppose not,' I admitted.

'There you are then,' he said. Patsy handed us both mugs of tea.

'But I do feel used,' I said, after sipping at mine.

'Ah, now we're coming to it,' said Thumper with an admonitory shake of a finger and a muted laugh. He reached for the sugar bowl and dropped half a dozen lumps into his mug. He stirred it with a pencil he took from behind his ear and winced at the noise the pencil made when it came into contact with the sides of the mug.

I had to nod and grin. He was right, of course.

'Are you going to send your £50 to the London dealer?' asked Thumper. He took a noisy slurp from his mug.

I looked at Patsy. She looked at me. 'No.' we said simultaneously.

'Well then,' said Thumper. 'Don't begrudge Patchy his profit he paused. 'Don't forget he had to lay out money to buy the damned thing in the first place. He probably spent a few quid having it restored. He was taking the risk.'

'But the auctioneer was very upset,' I reminded Thumper. 'No he wasn't,' said Thumper. 'He might get a bit upset if someone on his staff is giving away information. But he won't mind the dealer in London getting ripped off for a few quid. And don't forget that the higher the selling price the bigger his commission will be.'

Auctions were clearly more complicated than I had thought.

'Oh, by the way,' said Thumper turning to Patsy and finishing his tea in one great gulp, 'your father called and asked me to give you his love.'

'My father?' said Patsy, surprised. 'Did he come for anything in particular?'

'He picked up those lambs of yours,' said Thumper. 'He said he was going into the market so he'd take yours along with his to save you a journey.'

'What!' cried Patsy. 'When was this?'

Thumper looked startled. 'I don't know,' he said. 'About an hour ago I suppose.' He turned to me. 'What's the matter?'

'The lambs are pets,' I said, putting down my tea and picking up the car keys. 'Which market have they gone to?'

'Pets?' said Thumper, puzzled. 'Lambs?'

'Yes.' I said.

'Which market?' asked Patsy. 'Blackmoor Gate?'

'I guess so,' said Thumper.

Patsy and I left him standing in the kitchen as we ran out to the car to get to our second auction of the morning.

* * *

The livestock market at Blackmoor Gate was in full swing when we got there with thousands of lambs, calves and ponies for sale and scores of farmers standing around. I had to swerve to avoid a huge lorry leaving the market. We could see at least a hundred lambs inside. The ones that were closest to the walls of the lorry were looking through the holes in the slatted sides and 'baaaaaing' and 'maaaaaing' unceasingly. Patsy and I looked at each other sadly.

The farmers all seemed to be dressed the same - in grubby faded jeans, checked lumberjack-style shirts with the sleeves rolled up and, despite the fact that it was sunny and had not rained for days, mud encrusted black wellington boots. Most of them carried wooden sticks of various shapes and sizes and nearly all of them wore flat caps. The sun was shining brightly but I noticed that none of them wore dark glasses. Several dozen dirty Land Rovers were parked haphazardly, and an almost equal number of empty livestock trailers were scattered about. There were nine or ten large lorries parked around the edge of the field.

There was a constant background of sound as lambs and sheep baaed and cows and their calves mooed, but above it I could hear the sound of the auctioneer shouting prices and taking bids from farmers, butchers and dealers of various sorts. It seemed a sorry place to be and a sorrier place to work, and I was sad that I didn't have enough money to buy all the animals and put them into green fields where they could nibble grass unthreatened by humans.

'Hello Patsy!' said a farmer whom I vaguely recognised.

He wore the usual uniform of faded jeans, checked shirt and dirty wellington boots but had no hat. 'It's a long time since I've seen you here!' 'Oh hello Uncle Charlie!' said Patsy. 'Have you seen my dad?'

'What's up, sweetheart?' asked Charlie, frowning.

I realised I'd seen him in the Duck and Puddle. He spoke unhurriedly and leaned on his stick. He didn't look as if he had ever panicked in his life.

'I need to see him urgently,' said Patsy. 'Please, Uncle Charlie, have you seen him?'

'He was over by the selling ring a few minutes ago,' said Charlie. 'He's got some lambs coming up for auction.'

'Thanks!' said Patsy, racing off. I hurried off after her.

'Can you see him?' asked Patsy desperately looking around.

I couldn't.

'Surely they won't do anything to them here?' I said. 'Won't they have to take them to the abattoir first?'

'But they could have gone already,' said Patsy. 'If they get put into a lorry we'll never find them.' There were tears pouring down her cheeks. I took her hand as we both searched the sea of faces around the selling ring, looking either for Patsy's father or for our lambs.

'Dad!' shouted Patsy suddenly. She pulled at my arm and dragging me behind her pushed her way through the crowd of farmers which had collected around the metal bars of the selling ring. I could see her father. He was standing with two other farmers on the other side of the ring. Mr Kennett stood out for even though the temperature must have been in the 70s he was wearing his faded and torn coat tied with orange baler twine. I had never seen him out of doors without it. We left behind us a trail of cursing and protesting farmers.

Two men with large sticks opened a gate and let a flock of fifty or sixty lambs out of a pen into the selling ring.

'Dad!' shouted Patsy again, stopping for a moment.

This time her father heard her. He looked up and waved.

'Where are our lambs?' shouted Patsy. I was desperately searching the faces of the lambs in the ring looking for our four. I had visions of having to bid for the entire flock if ours had got mixed up with some of Mr Kennett's lambs. But I didn't care. No one would outbid me this time.

But Patsy's father didn't hear and he wasn't even listening. He had turned back to the two farmers he was talking to.

Patsy started running again and I ran after her as quickly as I could. 'Dad,' shouted Patsy for the third time. Now that we were only a dozen yards away he heard her. He turned and looked and waved his stick. 'Where are our lambs?' she shouted.

Patsy's father excused himself and walked towards us.

'What's all the fuss?' he asked, frowning. He looked beyond us at the crowd of farmers who were all nursing their bruised shins and staring rather angrily in our direction.

'Where are our lambs?' asked Patsy again.

'Gone!' said Patsy's father, looking very pleased with himself. 'Sold 'em all half an hour ago. I'll pay you when I get paid.'

'Who to?' begged Patsy.

'What does it matter?' asked Mr Kennett. 'I got a good price for them. You can't go back on the deal now.'

'But dad!' cried Patsy. 'They were pets. We didn't want to sell them.' 'Pets?' said Mr Kennett, uncomprehendingly. 'But they were lambs.'

Patsy burst into tears and started to sob her heart out.

I felt like sobbing with her and put my arm around her shoulders as much to steady myself as to comfort her. I could feel the tears in my eyes. I had helped rear those lambs and now they were going to end up on someone's dinner table surrounded by new potatoes and mint sauce.

'What's the matter with her?' Mr Kennett asked me, genuinely puzzled. 'You've turned my daughter into a right funny one.’

‘I’m sorry Mr Kennett,’ I said, trying hard to be as polite as I could. ‘But I’m afraid there’s been a terrible mistake. We’d be very grateful if you could tell us who bought our lambs.’

Mr Kennett looked at me and saw that I was serious. ‘Come with me,’ he said, turning and heading towards the spot where the auctioneer was standing. ‘I’ll ask for you.’

* * *

We were told that our lambs, together with the others that Mr Kennett had sold, had been taken by lorry to an abattoir near South Molton, a village about ten or twelve miles to the south of Bilbury. The villagers call it a town but most townsfolk would call it a village.

Patsy and I leapt into the Morris Minor and set off southwards down the road from Blackmoor Gate. The road twists and turns and passes through some beautiful rolling countryside, but Patsy and I were concerned only with getting to the abattoir as quickly as possible. I thought for a moment of driving back home to try telephoning to tell the men at the abattoir that they had got four lambs by mistake but decided that this would probably be a waste of time.

We raced past Friendship Farm, across Bratton Down, through Brayford, down past the stone quarries at Charles, across the A361 at the roundabout near North Aller and down across the Common Moors to the village of South Molton. I stopped for nothing and no one, and drove like a man possessed. Fortunately God was with us. We left our stomachs and most of the rubber from our tyres on the road and took just under fifteen minutes for a journey that usually takes twice that long. When we got into South Molton I turned to Patsy in a panic.

‘Where is the abattoir?’ I shouted. Patsy didn’t know either so I screeched to a stop by an old lady trundling home with her weekly shopping in a small wicker trolley. She knew and gave me excellent directions though if she wondered why anyone needed an abattoir in a hurry she didn’t allow her curiosity to show on her face.

The man on the gate at the abattoir had a clipboard and because we weren’t listed on it he was reluctant to let us in. He listened to my explanation with no interest whatsoever but proved far more amenable when Patsy got out of the car and pleaded with him. Eventually, he agreed to let us park our car outside on the road and to walk into the abattoir on foot. Two huge lorries had already unloaded their live cargoes and a third was being emptied. The lambs which had been delivered for slaughter were crowded into tiny pens and they were clearly all terrified. The stench was terrible and the sounds coming from inside were blood curdling. Patsy gripped my hand so tightly that I felt my fingers going numb. Our four lambs had to be in one of those tiny pens.

‘What do you want?’ demanded a hugely fat man who wore a once white boiler suit that was covered with red splashes. Like the man on duty at the gate he carried a clipboard. The breeze rustled the sheets of paper that were attached to it and he smoothed them down with a blood stained hand.

‘We’re looking for four lambs,’ explained Patsy.

‘Not here you don’t,’ said the fat man aggressively. He held out a hand, rather like a traffic policeman on duty, and went as though to push Patsy backwards.

I moved in between them. ‘Our lambs were taken by mistake,’ I explained. ‘They shouldn’t have been sold to you.’

‘Too late now,’ said the fat man who was clearly uninterested in our predicament.

‘You could be charged with dealing in stolen property,’

I told him, clutching desperately at straws.

‘Prove it,’ sneered the fat man. ‘One carcass looks much like another.’

Suddenly, and I don’t know where it came from, I had an inspiration. I sighed. ‘I didn’t want to do this,’ I told him. ‘Because if it gets out I’ll be in as much trouble as you will.’

I turned to Patsy. ‘Go and fetch the police,’ I told her. ‘And then ring the public health department and tell them that I want this place closed down immediately.’

The fat man stared at me, startled. I didn’t want to give him time to think about what I was saying. I took out my small cardboard Bilbury Cricket Club pass and hoped he wouldn’t recognise it for what it was. It had my name written neatly in black ink on the front cover and, fortunately, my title was written there too. ‘I’m a doctor,’ I told him. ‘You’ve got four lambs here which have been used in a scientific experiment. They are infected with anthrax. Once those lambs get into your building you’ll have to be closed down permanently.’ I was relying on the fact that if there is one thing that everyone involved in the meat trade is terrified of it is anthrax. And it worked brilliantly. The fat man paled and stepped backwards as though to distance himself as much as possible from Patsy and me.

‘If you let us take our lambs away from here there won’t be any problem,’ I told him. ‘They aren’t infective while they’re still alive. But if any of their blood is spilt this whole place will be finished.’

‘Are they marked?’ asked the fat man.

‘We’ll recognise them,’ said Patsy.

The fat man led us across the courtyard towards the pens where the lambs were crammed together. For a brief moment I was worried that we wouldn’t be able to recognise our lambs.

But my worry was unjustified for the lambs recognised us. The moment they saw us walking towards them they began bleating noisily and desperately. They even struggled to climb out of their pen to get to us.

'There they are!' said Patsy.

The fat man waved to a colleague dressed in waders and a waterproof smock and pointed to our lambs. 'Get them out of there!' he shouted.

The man in the waders looked puzzled.

'Don't waste time!' shouted the fat man, now desperate to see the back of our lambs. 'Get them out of there.'

Seconds later they were bounding up to us like four puppies. They were wagging their tails and bouncing up and down like toys on springs. 'They don't look ill,' said the fat man suspiciously. 'If anything they look plumper and healthier than the rest!'

'It's the new test we're doing,' I lied. 'They've been injected with a drug which holds the disease at bay but unfortunately it doesn't kill it. They'll live but they're still infective.'

The fat man still looked doubtful.

I sighed and moved closer to him. 'We're working for Porton Down,' I told him. 'They want to breed apparently healthy sheep that carry anthrax.'

There was disgust in the fat man's face and for a moment. I feared that he was going to say that he didn't believe me. But he didn't.

'You people are disgusting!' was all he said, as he backed away from me again.

I shrugged. 'You have your job to do, we have ours.'

He just scowled at me. 'Anyway if you're from a government department how about some compensation?' I stared at him but didn't say anything.

'We bought those lambs in good faith,' he told me, belligerently.

I reached into my trouser pocket to see what money I had and found the fifty pound note that Patchy Fogg had given me. I pulled it out and handed it to him. 'Will this do?' I said. 'I don't want a receipt and I don't care whether you tell your boss you got it. Fifty pounds was a lot of money then. It was certainly more than the lambs were worth to a slaughterhouse.

I think it was the fifty pound note that finally convinced the fat man that my story was true. It certainly made him want to believe that my story was true.

Patsy and I walked out of the abattoir with our four lambs following us and I doubt if there have ever been four such gloriously happy lambs.

Farmers and butchers claim that animals are stupid and do not know what is happening to them when they are taken to the killing grounds of commerce, but my experience that day told me differently. Our lambs knew exactly what was going to happen to them, as did all the others that the abattoir had taken delivery of that day.

Outside the abattoir Patsy and I had the devil's own game to get our lambs into the back seat of the Morris Minor and we had to keep talking to them to calm them down and stop them getting agitated again.

As we drove back home, far more slowly than we had driven down to South Molton, I heard Patsy sobbing quietly beside me. I reached out a hand to comfort her and turned my head. Tears were running down her cheeks.

'It's O.K.,' I said quietly. 'We've got them back now.'

'It's not our lambs I'm crying for,' said Patsy sadly. 'It's the ones we left behind.'

* * *

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I had to call in to see Miss Phillips on my way to the surgery the following morning. Miss Tweedsmuir had rung me just as I was finishing my breakfast.

'I'm sorry to call you so early,' she apologised, 'but would you be kind enough to call round to see Miss Phillips as soon as you can?'

'What's wrong?' I had asked anxiously. I knew that Miss Tweedsmuir wasn't a woman to panic unnecessarily.

'It's difficult to explain on the telephone,' whispered Miss Tweedsmuir. She had spoken so quietly that I could hardly hear her and I had guessed that she had been frightened of Miss Phillips overhearing.

I drove round there as quickly as I could.

As I reached out to knock on the front door the door opened.

'Thank you for coming, doctor,' said Miss Tweedsmuir quietly, standing back to let me in. She sounded relieved to see me but looked drawn and tired and clearly hadn't slept. She wore an ankle length red velvet dressing gown and fluffy, pale pink slippers which I guessed had been a present since they certainly weren't the sort of thing I would have expected her to buy for herself. She signalled for me to precede her into the living room and then closed the door behind us and stood with her back to it. I stood with my back to the empty fireplace, still clutching my doctor's bag in my right hand.

'You must promise never to tell anyone what I'm about to tell you,' she said.

'Of course I won't!' I assured her.

Miss Tweedsmuir wet her lips and swallowed hard. 'Last night Miss Phillips tried to kill herself,' she said.

Of the several dozen questions which sprang into my mind the first one that escaped was: 'Is she all right?'

'She's fine, now,' answered Miss Tweedsmuir. She pointed up at the ceiling. 'She's sleeping.'

'What did she do? How did she, er...?'

'Pills,' replied Miss Tweedsmuir simply.

'The Angipax?'

Miss Tweedsmuir shook her head. 'I keep those,' she said. 'But I was very careless.' She blushed and looked embarrassed and started playing with the belt of her dressing gown. 'I have a small supply of barbiturates,' she said. The red flush on her cheeks spread to her forehead. 'I use them very occasionally when I can't sleep. I've had them for years.'

'She took those?'

Miss Tweedsmuir nodded.

'How many?'

'About ten. Less than a dozen.'

'I'd better have a look at her.'

'She's O.K. Really.' said Miss Tweedsmuir. 'I made her keep walking about the house for most of the night.' She did not move from her position behind the door and for a few moments did not speak at all. 'I don't know what to do,' she said at last, 'I just don't know what to do'. 'Let me have a word with her,' I said to Miss Tweedsmuir. We tiptoed up the stairs and I let Miss Tweedsmuir enter the bedroom they shared ahead of me. Miss Phillips was asleep and to my surprise looked angelic and carefree. Miss Tweedsmuir bent over her and gently put a hand on her shoulder.

Slowly, Miss Phillips awoke and I could see the lines of care and worry gradually returning to her face as she regained consciousness.

'The doctor has come to see you,' said Miss Tweedsmuir quietly.

'Hello.' I said, standing still at the end of the bed.

Miss Phillips opened her eyes wide and looked straight at me. She knew who I was straight away. 'I'm sorry you've been troubled,' she said. And then, without warning, she began to cry. Miss Tweedsmuir sat on one side of the bed and I sat on other and together we tried to comfort her.

'It's those tablets,' said Miss Phillips a few minutes later when the tears had stopped and she regained her composure. She sounded more sad than angry.

Miss Tweedsmuir looked across at me. 'I think she's been trying to cut them down too quickly,' she said.

Between them they told me that Miss Phillips had accelerated the rate at which she had been cutting down her tablets.

'They make me ill when I take them and they make me ill when I try to stop them,' said Miss Phillips plaintively. 'I wish to heaven I'd never heard of them.'

'If I ever see that doctor who gave them to you he'll get a good piece of mind,' said Miss Tweedsmuir angrily.

'That won't help,' said Miss Phillips quietly, reaching out and taking her friend's hand.

'How long will this go on for?' asked Miss Tweedsmuir.

‘I don’t know,’ I confessed.

‘Did you tell him about my silly episode last night?’ Miss Phillips asked her friend.

Miss Tweedsmuir didn’t say anything but looked at me.

‘I guessed,’ I said quickly. The lie didn’t worry me. ‘I made her tell me. But I won’t tell anyone else.’

I told them both that I’d see what else I could find out about the Angipax tablets and that I would return to their cottage later that day, then I got back into my car, drove to Dr Brownlow’s house and started the morning surgery forty five minutes late. Miss Johnson didn’t ask me why I was late and I didn’t tell her.

* * *

‘Would you have a look at these stitches for me?’ asked Mr Yardley. ‘I don’t know whether they’re ready to come out yet.’

He unwound a thick woollen scarf from around his neck and revealed the worst and most untidy piece of human repair work I had ever seen. A four inch long cut had been repaired with a series of stitches. Each stitch had been tied with a reef knot and the material used looked more like thick fishing catgut than anything I’d ever seen used in a hospital casualty department. The whole area around the cut was red and inflamed and clearly infected and there were trickles of yellowish fluid leaking out of each stitch hole.

‘Who on earth did that to you?’ I asked him.

‘I fell on a fence,’ said Mr Yardley simply. ‘Barbed wire.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I mean, who did that stitching?’

Mr Yardley fingered his neck cautiously, touching each knot in turn with his finger tips. ‘I did.’ he said, with a smile of pride.

I stared at him. Part of me didn’t believe him. But part of me knew that no professional could have ever done such a shoddy job.

‘Didn’t it hurt?’ I asked him.

Mr Yardley looked surprised at the question. ‘No.’ he said. ‘Not that I can remember.’

‘Were you drunk?’

‘I think so.’ He grinned an almost entirely toothless grin. ‘I can’t remember.’

I got up, walked round the desk and looked closely at Mr Yardley’s neck. He needed an antibiotic and the wound clearly needed cleaning and re-stitching. The smell that came from it was awful, overpowering even the smell of tobacco which emanated from his clothes. I noticed that there were several cigarette burns in his jacket.

‘You need to go to the hospital!’ I told him.

Mr Yardley frowned and shook his head firmly when I suggested this. ‘My father went into the hospital once and came out dead,’ he explained. ‘I’m not going into no hospital.’

‘But your neck needs resuturing!’ I insisted.

‘Can’t you do it?’ he asked me. ‘You’re a doctor aren’t you?’

I sighed and swallowed hard. ‘The hospital would be able to make a better job of it. I told him. ‘They’ve got better equipment and the doctors there are more skilled at surgery. They can give you a better anaesthetic too.’

‘I don’t mind you doing it said Mr Yardley firmly. ‘But I’m not going to the hospital.’

I felt quietly flattered.

‘You may be clumsier than they are,’ said Mr Yardley with disarming honesty. ‘But it’ll be more embarrassing for you if you kill me. You live round here.’

My newly raised self-confidence collapsed and I felt considerably deflated. ‘Take your shirt off, please,’ I said to him, getting up and walking over to the sink to wash my hands. It took me half an hour to cut through Mr Yardley’s thick and clumsy stitches, to clean out the wound and to replace them with my own stitches, to give him a tetanus injection and a shot of penicillin. By the time I’d finished, the sweat was pouring off the tip of my nose.

‘I’ll give you some penicillin tablets,’ I told him. ‘But you must come back and let me have another look at it tomorrow.’

‘There’s one other thing,’ said Mr Yardley. ‘While I’m here.’

‘What’s that?’ I asked him. I was back at the sink washing my hands again.

‘I keep getting nosebleeds,’ he said. ‘Have you got anything for that?’

As soon as I had washed and dried my hands I sat down and took a fuller history. Then, while Mr Yardley still had his shirt off, I took his blood pressure. It was very high.

‘It’s your blood pressure,’ I told him.

‘Why does that make my nose bleed?’ he asked.

‘When the pressure is too high it bursts open small blood vessels,’ I explained. ‘And the ones in your nose are the smallest there are. They act as a sort of relief valve. When your nose bleeds and some of the blood comes out, the blood pressure comes down.’

‘Are you going to give me pills?’ he wanted to know.

‘I can,’ I said. ‘But you could help yourself by giving up the cigarettes.’

Mr Yardley looked at me. ‘I’ll have the pills,’ he said.

Sighing, I wrote out a prescription for a drug designed to bring down his blood pressure and handed it to him. ‘If you have any unpleasant side effects with these you must come back and tell me.’

Mr Yardley looked at me suspiciously. ‘What sort of side effects?’

‘They do affect some people’s sex lives,’ I explained. ‘They can occasionally cause impotence.’

Mr Yardley stared at me and frowned. Then he stood up and started for the door. Just before he reached it he turned round, a puzzled look on his face. ‘How did you know I smoke?’ he asked me.

I touched the side of my nose with my forefinger. ‘I’m a doctor,’ I said. ‘We’re trained to spot these things.’ Mr Yardley showed no signs of being impressed and left.

* * *

‘I’m sorry to take up your time, doctor,’ said Mrs Francis. ‘But I had to come and see you.’

I asked her what was troubling her.

I liked Mrs Francis a lot more than I had liked her late husband. I know one should not speak ill of the dead but her husband had been a difficult, arrogant man. He had also been unfaithful and had died in the arms of another woman in Barnstaple. Mrs Francis, however, was a kind, patient and charming woman.

‘It isn’t my health doctor,’ she said. ‘I feel a bit of a fraud.’ She hesitated. ‘But it’s something I had to say; something I had to tell you.’

I waited.

‘When I sold Softly’s Bottom and Bluebell Wood to that Mr Sherlock I didn’t know he was going to build houses on it said Mrs Francis. ‘He told me that he wanted to set up a nature conservation area there.’ She bit her lip. ‘I’m so sorry.’

I reached across the desk and held her hand.

‘I desperately needed the money and I wanted to be sure that the land went to someone who would look after it said Mrs Francis. ‘I never dreamt...’ She burst into tears.

I let go of her hand, got up, walked around my desk, and put my arm around her. ‘It wasn’t your fault!’ I told her.

‘I love Bilbury,’ said Mrs Francis. ‘I feel so terrible.’ She looked up at me. ‘But he seemed so plausible. So nice.’ She cried a bit more. ‘I’ve always loved that part of Bilbury so much. It’s always full of wild flowers at this time of the year.’

‘He hasn’t started building yet,’ I said. ‘We haven’t lost yet.’

‘Oh but you can’t stop someone like him,’ said Mrs Francis, sadly. And I had an awful feeling that she was probably right.

* * *

At the end of the morning surgery I decided there was no point in telephoning the drug company again about Miss Phillips’ pills. Instead I rang Tom Parker, a friend I knew who ran the pharmacy at a large hospital in Bristol.

‘What do you know about Angipax?’ I asked him when we’d exchanged news and gossip.

‘Never heard of it,’ he told me.

I told him that it was new, told him the name of the drug company which made it, told him that it was being tested and told him that a patient of mine had become seriously addicted.

‘You want me to see if I can dig out anything about it?’

‘Yes, please.’

‘O.K.’ said Tom without hesitation. ‘I’ll see what I can find out and then I’ll ring you back this afternoon.’

* * *

‘How was Miss Phillips?’ asked Patsy when I got home for lunch. Patsy had answered the phone when I had taken the call from Miss Tweedsmuir that morning.

‘She’s O.K.’ I told her, with a smile. I didn’t tell her about the suicide attempt. I didn’t like not telling Patsy everything but we had talked about the problem of confidentiality before. ‘Patients tell me a lot of things in confidence,’ I had told her shortly after we had got married. Patsy understood instantly as I knew she would. ‘You mustn’t tell me anything confidential,’ she had said. ‘Apart from the fact that you shouldn’t tell me it would put me in a difficult position. It will be much easier for me if I don’t know anything I shouldn’t know about and shouldn’t talk about.’

‘Good!’ said Patsy, who, like me, was very fond of both Miss Phillips and Miss Tweedsmuir. She pulled apart a lettuce that she had clearly just taken from the garden. There were two small snails clinging to an inner leaf and she carefully lifted them off. Afterwards, I knew that she would take them outside and put them back in the garden. ‘There was a telephone call for you from an administrator from Withymoor. Miss Johnson gave them our number.’ She handed me a slip of paper with the details written on it.

I raised an eyebrow. ‘Did he say what he wanted?’ Patsy shook her head. I stuffed the piece of paper into my pocket and helped Patsy carry our salad lunch outside. After we had eaten we spent half an hour in the vegetable garden picking strawberries and lettuce. We were still selling to Peter Marshall at the village shop, and Peter had told us that the hotels were very satisfied with our produce and wanted to know what else we would have to sell them in the future.

Patsy spent at least two hours every morning working in the vegetable garden, and although there was a long way to go it was beginning to look more and more as it must have done in Victorian times.

As we carried our two baskets of produce back to the house Patsy tapped me on the arm to catch my attention. She pointed and I followed her outstretched arm. Emily was crouching down on the path and had clearly spotted something which she was now stalking. We both looked ahead of her and saw a young buzzard sitting on the bottom rail of the wooden fence around the meadow where our four lambs lived. The buzzard's head was poking through the fence on the field side and its tail was poking through on our side. It was watching something in the field. We stood in silence and watched as Emily carefully and quietly crept up towards the buzzard. We were both ready to pounce if either creature looked like harming the other.

When she reached the fence, Emily raised herself up on her hind legs and sniffed at the buzzard's tail. Very, very slowly the buzzard turned its head, looked down, saw Emily and then, still moving slowly, turned its head back to the front.

Emily was shocked by this. It was not the sort of behaviour she expected from what was very clearly a bird. She moved backwards a foot or so. Then, after a short delay, she moved forwards again and had another sniff at the buzzard's tail. This time the buzzard didn't even bother to turn round but ignored Emily completely. Poor Emily. She slunk away looking quite miserable about the whole thing.

Patsy and I quickly walked on, making sure that Emily had no idea that we had been watching her. She would, we knew, have been mortified if she had known that we had watched her being humiliated.

I only remembered the message from the administrator as I was about to leave the house to go back to the surgery. I'd put my hand in my pocket to pull out the car keys and the piece of paper had fluttered to the ground.

The administrator, a miserable sounding man called Perkins who had an annoying, whining voice, wanted to know if he could make an appointment to come and see me. He wouldn't tell me what it was about.

'When would you like to come?' I asked him.

'As soon as is convenient.'

'I can see you this afternoon,' I told him. 'But not until the surgery finishes.'

'What time is that likely to be?'

'Seven or seven thirty.'

'Good heavens, no!' said the administrator. 'I finish work at 4.30. I couldn't possibly see you then.'

In the end I made an appointment to see him at 11.30 the following morning.

As soon as I put the telephone down it rang again. This time it was my friend Tom the pharmacist.

'I've been doing some checking,' he said. 'I hadn't heard of Angipax because it doesn't come through our pharmacy, but there are patients in the hospital here who are taking it.'

He explained that the drug company which made it had done a deal with a couple of consultants, offering them sizeable cash inducements to test the drug out on a number of patients.

'It must be costing the company a fortune!' I said to Tom. 'The only patients who seem to be taking it are getting it free.'

'Oh it makes sound commercial sense,' said Tom. 'Don't you worry about that!' He laughed, presumably at my naivety.

He explained that the company making the drug was using the clinical trial as a marketing ploy. 'Within a few weeks,' said Tom, 'all the doctors who have been giving the drug away free will have got into the habit of prescribing it.'

It occurred to me that the company's profits would probably be enhanced by the fact that since the drug seemed to be addictive the patients who were taking it would probably have to keep on taking it. But I didn't mention this. I didn't think any drug company could possibly be unethical enough to take advantage of such a problem.

'One of the guys who has been prescribing it here has noticed that a couple of his patients do seem to have got hooked on it' said Tom. 'He says he reported it to the drug company but they said no one else had noticed it and so he thought it must have just been an isolated phenomenon.'

That, I thought, was exactly what the drug company's medical adviser had told me. I thanked Tom and told him I'd buy him a drink next time I saw him. He told me not to bother about the drink but to make sure I let him know what I found out.

After I'd finished the surgery that evening I drove round to Miss Phillips' cottage. As I drove I realised how hungry I was. I suddenly had a mouth watering vision of egg and cress sandwiches. I swallowed hard and tried to suppress the image.

When I got to the cottage I told Miss Phillips what I'd found out, warned her and Miss Tweedsmuir that no one seemed to have any firm answers, but said that if she carried on cutting down the drug slowly she ought, eventually, to find that the withdrawal effects began to diminish.

Miss Tweedsmuir said that it made her very angry that a drug company was allowed to put a drug on the market that caused so much unhappiness. I said it made me very angry too and I told her that I had thought of a way in which I might be able to warn other patients of the problem.

* * *

When I got home it was well after nine and I found Patsy on her hands and knees in the kitchen surrounded by the most astonishing variety of junk.

'Where on earth did you find this lot?' I asked, stepping over the most eclectic assortment of artifacts I had ever seen.

I could see at least half a dozen rusty rat traps, a pair of wooden boot trees, a dozen rusty spanners, three croquet balls, a wooden tennis racket with most of its strings either missing or broken, a metal money box with a large hole in the lid, a kite with a huge ball of string attached to it, a wooden box with no obvious purpose, half a dozen long playing records made by recording artistes who were popular during the Second World War, a bundle of clergyman's collars held together with a piece of orange baler twine, a large wooden scrubbing brush and a small leather gladstone bag with a broken catch.

'They were in the tin bath,' replied Patsy. 'There's some wonderful stuff here!'

'What tin bath?' I asked, puzzled. I didn't remember seeing a tin bath.

'The one I bought at the auction.' She stopped what she was doing and looked up at me. 'You must remember! It cost fifty pence.' She nodded towards the far corner of the kitchen where an almost empty tin bath lay incongruously on the floor. It had a large red, rusty patch on one side and I wouldn't have bet on it being watertight. I remembered. The last lot Patsy had bought after I had earned £50 bidding for Patchy Fogg's davenport had been a 'tin bath and contents'.

'What have you found?' I asked, kneeling down beside her.

Patsy was right. It did look rather exciting. The auctioneer had dumped all sorts of miscellaneous bits and pieces into the tin bath, turning it into a genuine lucky dip.

'This,' said Patsy, handing me an old photograph frame that looked as if it might be made out of silver and which contained a photograph of a stern looking old lady glowering at the camera. I examined the frame but couldn't see any sign of a hallmark. 'It might be silver,' I said.

'...and this!' Patsy handed me a very elderly looking teddy bear with one eye missing and an arm hanging loose. '...and this!' She handed me a rusty metal toy car which had one wheel missing.

'I wonder if it's valuable?' I asked her.

'I don't know!' admitted Patsy. 'That's what makes it so exciting!'

'I like the Gladstone bag!' I told her, putting the toy down and reaching across for the bag. 'I wonder if the fastener can be repaired.' I had always wanted a genuine old-fashioned Gladstone bag. I was surprised at how small it was.

'Probably!' said Patsy. 'There's an old-fashioned cobbler in Barnstaple who mends bags and cases. I'll take it in to him.'

'What are those?' I asked her, pointing to a small pile of about a dozen books.

'Oh, just novels,' said Patsy. 'I don't think there's anything very valuable there.'

'And what's that?'

'I don't know!' laughed Patsy, picking up a large, weird looking metal gadget. 'I think it might be a doughnut making machine.' She wound a wooden handle round and round and a thin wire moved up and down.

'What are we going to do with all this?' I asked her.

'I thought I might take some of it into Barnstaple,' said Patsy. 'To one of the antique shops. To check if any of it is valuable. We might be able to make some money out of it.'

I remembered the wine and wondered if we might be lucky enough to strike gold again. It was certainly worth trying.

Suddenly, Patsy sat back on her heels and clapped her hands to her mouth. 'Oh, darling!' she said. 'I'm sorry!'

'Why?' I asked, suddenly alarmed.

'I forgot that you hadn't eaten,' she said. 'You must be starving!'

I had been hungry but I'd almost forgotten about food. Patsy's reminder brought back the memory of hunger. She blushed a little and tiptoed through the bits and pieces on the kitchen floor to get to the fridge. She opened the fridge door, reached in and brought out a plate that was covered with a shallow dish. She shut the fridge door and brought the plate over to me. Then she lifted the dish off the plate. There was a pile of egg and cress sandwiches.

'I hope you like them!' she whispered. 'I made these for you a couple of hours ago. I don't know why but I just felt sure that you'd like egg and cress sandwiches for your tea.'

* * *

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

If I had seen him in the street I would know just from looking at him what Mr Perkins did for a living. He looked just like all the other Health Service administrators I have ever come across.

He was of medium height, slightly overweight and with receding hair. He wore a cheap, off-the-peg suit that had probably never fitted him properly, a white nylon shirt and a badly knotted red nylon tie which was decorated with a number of stains. He had three pens clipped into his outside jacket pocket and a fourth clipped into his shirt pocket. He had a thick layer of dandruff on both shoulders and had the sort of pallid face which gives meaning to the word nondescript. He brought with him a cheap black briefcase and, even though it was a gloriously hot day, he carried a raincoat.

He looked like a man who had never followed a dream or taken a risk in his life.

He sat down, opened his briefcase and took out a thick cardboard file. Then he took a plastic spectacle case out of his jacket pocket, removed a pair of steel framed spectacles and put them on. Ben, lying underneath my desk as usual, sat up and growled. She had only ever done that once before and that had been when Mr Sherlock the builder had come into the consulting room. I reached down and stroked Ben's neck to reassure her that everything was all right. I wouldn't have minded having someone to stroke my neck to reassure me. I wasn't at all sure that everything was all right. I didn't like the look of Mr Perkins and I had a feeling I wasn't going to like what he was going to say.

'I'm from the Planning and Rationalisation Department,' he told me in his annoying and whiny voice. 'We've been looking at your per capita throughput figures.' As he spoke he opened the file and pointed a stubby figure at a line of type. 'I'm afraid that your practice badly needs rationalising.'

I stared at him uncomprehendingly.

'Even allowing for the special circumstances of your rural position, the practice review group feels that there are clear indications for dramatically redefining your catchment area downwards.' Mr Perkins took a red pen out of his jacket pocket and pointed at another row of type. He made no attempt to turn his file around so that I could see what he was pointing at.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'But I don't quite understand.' I stole a look at my watch. I had three home visits to do before I could get home and I wanted to spend a few minutes helping Patsy pick the day's strawberries. Our strawberry plants were producing fruit with reckless enthusiasm. I also wanted to see how Patsy was getting on with our new paying guests. Frank and Gilly from the Duck and Puddle had telephoned to ask us if we could provide accommodation for a family of four who were coming from Essex, and so we were about to start our career in the tourist industry.

'To put things bluntly, doctor,' said Mr Perkins with a sniff, 'our group feels that your practice should be merged with another practice in order to maximise resource utilisation.'

'Which practice?' I asked, startled.

'I beg your pardon?' He sniffed again.

'Which practice do you want me to merge with?'

'Well, the nearest suitable practice is one on the outskirts of Barnstaple. And it just so happens that Dr Brownlow and his colleagues are advertising for a new junior partner. It would make excellent administrative sense if you were to apply for the post and take your present list of patients with you.'

'I don't think that would be a very good idea,' I said.

'May I ask why not?'

'Firstly, I prefer working here by myself. Secondly, if I closed down this practice my patients would have to travel several miles to get to see a doctor. And thirdly, I wouldn't work with the young Dr Brownlow if you paid me in gold bricks.'

'Ah.' said Mr Perkins. He didn't seem particularly surprised.

'Why can't I just carry on as I am?'

'I'm afraid it is largely a question of resource allocation,' said Perkins. He sniffed again and I had to fight back the temptation to offer him a tissue so that he could blow his nose. 'Our advisers feel that, as it stands, your practice is too small to be economically viable, and they have recommended that under Rule 49, Clause 17c of your contract of employment with the Secretary of State we withdraw your basic payment allowance, rural inducement allowance and per capita support payment.'

'But if you withdraw those allowances I won't be able to make a living!' I protested. General practitioners working within the National Health Service are technically selfemployed, and their income is made up of a vast number of allowances, fees and special payments. I knew that without the payments Mr Perkins had mentioned my practice income, already small because Bilbury was such a tiny village, would fall by well over half.

Mr Perkins looked very smug. 'That may be so,' he said. 'But there is another alternative which we are prepared to endorse and subsequently authorise.'

'What's that?'

‘There is, as I believe you know, a proposal to build a number of new dwellings in Bilbury.’ He looked at me and raised an eyebrow.

‘I do know about it’ I said. I wondered what sort of person chose to say ‘dwelling’ instead of ‘home’.

‘In the opinion of our study group the number of new dwellings proposed would raise the per capita quotient to an acceptable level,’ said Mr Perkins.

I was beginning to get a very uneasy feeling about all this, but to my own amazement I didn’t feel particularly surprised or angry about any of it.

‘Let me see if I’ve got this right,’ I said. ‘Either I agree to work at Sherlock’s new surgery and to welcome the new development in Bilbury; I close down this practice and apply for a job as a junior partner with another practice or I carry on working here and go bust because you withdraw my Health Service payments?’

Perkins, who had listened carefully to this, put his pen back into his breast pocket, shuffled uncomfortably and sat back. ‘That isn’t how I would choose to summarise things,’ he said. ‘But you wouldn’t deny that it is an accurate summary?’

‘There are no immediately apparent inaccuracies,’ he admitted. He spoke as though he had a sour plum in his mouth.

‘Well, thank you for making things so clear,’ I said, standing up.

Mr Perkins folded up his file, put it back into his briefcase and stood up. ‘Will you let us know what you decide to do?’

‘Naturally,’ I said, coldly. ‘You’ll be among the first to know.’

* * *

Our first paying guests had arrived and moved into the coach-house flat no more than an hour before I got home for lunch. Patsy had laid the kitchen table for lunch. We normally ate out in the courtyard when it was sunny, but the coach-house flat overlooked the courtyard and Patsy thought it might be better to have our lunch in private.

‘What are they like?’ I asked Patsy anxiously.

‘They seem quite nice,’ Patsy answered.

I can’t imagine why, because the coach-house flat was at least sixty yards away from where we were standing, but we were both whispering. ‘They’ve brought a lot of luggage with them.’ She told me that she had counted six suitcases being carried up the circular staircase from the Ford which was parked down in the courtyard.

‘For the four of them?’

‘Mr and Mrs Wakeham and their two teenage daughters,’ replied Patsy. ‘I don’t know any of their first names.’

‘How old are the daughters?’

‘They look about seventeen but they could be thirteen.’

‘I hope there’s going to be room,’ I said. There was only one bedroom in the coach-house flat, but the sofa in the living room did convert into a spare bed; and we had told Frank and Gilly that the flat would accommodate two adults and two children.

‘I thought we could perhaps take them some strawberries after lunch,’ said Patsy. ‘As a sort of welcome present.’

I said I thought that sounded a nice idea.

And then I told Patsy about Mr Perkins’ visit.

‘So it’s true that they want to turn Bilbury into a small town?’ said Patsy, sadly.

‘I don’t think the plans have been passed yet,’ I said.

‘But they want you to support it by agreeing to work with them?’

‘Yes. And if I don’t then they’ll close the practice down.’

‘That’s a nice choice,’ said Patsy. ‘Either we help them ruin the village or else they’ll ruin us.’

I hadn’t thought about it like that, but Patsy was right, and several thoughts started to appear in my head. Why, I wondered, were the National Health Service administrators apparently helping Sherlock and his plans? Was it just a coincidence?

My thoughts were disturbed by a knock on the back door.

I got up from the table where we had been having lunch and went to the door. A very large man and a very small woman greeted me. He was wearing a colourful short sleeved shirt and a pair of equally colourful Bermuda shorts. She was wearing a bikini top and a billowy, flimsy skirt.

‘Wakeham,’ said the man, holding out his hand. ‘Call me Dicky.’

I took it and introduced myself.

‘This is my wife, Doris.’

I introduced Patsy.

‘Thought we’d just come over and introduce ourselves.’ said Dicky.

‘Would you like to come in?’ said Patsy.

‘Not just now, thanks,’ said Dicky. ‘We’ve left the girls unpacking.’

‘It’s nice to meet you both,’ said Doris. ‘What a lovely home you have.’ She peered around us to peek into the kitchen.

‘Thank you,’ said Patsy. ‘We’ve still got a lot to do.’

‘I hear you’re a doctor,’ said Dicky.

I agreed that he had heard correctly. ‘Very handy to have a doctor on the premises,’ he laughed.

I laughed back, though my laugh was more forced than his.

‘We thought we ought to let you know that there isn’t a potato peeler in the kitchen or a toothbrush holder in the bathroom.’

‘And there’s no sharpener for the carving knife,’ said Doris.

‘Oh,’ said Patsy. ‘I’m sorry. Is the carving knife blunt?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Doris. ‘I haven’t tried it yet. But I thought you’d want to know.’

‘Thank you.’ Patsy and I said together.

‘Well. We’ll be getting back over there before the girls wreck the place,’ said Dicky. ‘We’ll be in most of the afternoon getting ourselves settled in so there’s no hurry for those bits and pieces.’

‘Right,’ said Patsy. ‘Thank you.’

‘Maybe we could meet for dinner one evening?’ suggested Dicky.

I looked at Patsy. ‘That’s a very nice idea,’ I said. ‘Unfortunately, it’s not easy for me to get out. I’m usually on call for the practice.’

‘That’s O.K.,’ said Dicky. ‘We don’t mind eating here.’

‘Of course.’ said Patsy.

‘Oh, and we could do with more coat hangers,’ said Dicky.

‘But not those wire ones, please,’ added Doris with a smile. She kept her jaw clenched when she smiled, in that uncomfortable way that people do when they have ill-fitting false teeth.

‘Right!’ I said. ‘We’ll see what we can do.’

Dicky and Doris, smiled, said ‘goodbye’ and then turned and walked back across the courtyard. Patsy and I exchanged glances and wondered if all our visitors were going to be like this.

* * *

‘You’ve got to do something to help her,’ said Mr Blossom insistently. He sounded angry rather than sad, aggrieved rather than depressed. He had rung me and demanded that I visit his daughter immediately, though he admitted that it was he and not she who could no longer cope.

We both stood and looked at his daughter and if I had been in his position I would have said something similar.

Mrs Blossom was lying in bed, and although she wasn’t asleep she didn’t really look as if she was awake either.

I sat down on the edge of a pale pink counterpane. ‘Hello Mrs Blossom. How do you feel?’ There were roses embroidered around the edges of the bed covering.

She slowly turned her head and stared at me. She tried to speak but although small bubbles appeared at the corners of her mouth no words came out. A look of recognition appeared on her face and in her eyes.

‘She’s hardly spoken for days,’ said Mr Blossom. ‘I think it’s those pills that doctor at the hospital gave her.’

‘I think you’re probably right,’ I said quietly. I couldn’t help noticing that there was far less respect now for the consultant psychiatrist.

‘So what are you going to do about it?’

‘Would you like me to fix up another appointment with the consultant?’

‘Certainly not!’ said Mr Blossom, without hesitation. ‘I want you to look after her.’ His faith in the consultant had melted and the respect was but a memory.

‘Then I think the best thing would be to stop the tablets.’

‘Right,’ said Mr Blossom emphatically.

‘But not suddenly,’ I said sharply. ‘She mustn’t stop them suddenly.’

Mr Blossom looked at me.

‘The pills are new,’ I told him. ‘They seem to be addictive.’

I gave Mr Blossom similar instructions to the ones I had given Miss Phillips and told him that I would call in to see his daughter again the following day.

* * *

We had a considerable amount of lawn to keep trimmed at Bilbury Grange. Cutting the lawns is, in some ways, a tedious chore but I confess that I find it a pleasing task in a simple sort of way. Nothing makes such a difference to the appearance of a garden as an expanse of newly cut grass.

Apart from the croquet lawn, which had once been an old tennis court, there were two large lawns at the front of the house and a number of grassy strips around the side of the house. There was also quite a lot of grass under and between the bushes in the shrubbery which shielded the house from the driveway.

When we had first moved into Bilbury Grange I had tried to cut the lawns with a small petrol driven mower that I had found in an old wooden shed to the left of the croquet lawn. It had not been a great success. The mower had cut the grass without too many problems, and left it looking smart, but it took me over eight hours to finish the lawns. I realised that I had to get something speedier and more efficient. In the end I had purchased a ten-year-old ride-on mower that Dr Brownlow needed to get rid of because his gardener found it too speedy and frightening for his taste. This may have had something to do with the fact that the mower had lost its two lowest gears and could now only be driven in reverse or at full forward speed. I drove the mower back to Bilbury Grange along the village lanes, and going up Bilbury Hill I travelled so fast that Dr Brownlow, who was driving behind me in his elderly Rolls Royce to make sure that I arrived home safely, couldn't keep up with me.

That evening was warm but there was just enough gentle breeze blowing to make it pleasant for working in the garden, and while Patsy picked strawberries I decided to cut the lawns. I slipped into my shorts and an old shirt, took the six, white metal croquet hoops and the coloured finishing peg out of the lawn, made sure that the mower was filled with petrol and set to work. One of the things about the ride-on mower is that it saves time. Instead of having a tiny grass box at the front that has to be emptied every few yards it tows a huge collecting box which holds an enormous quantity of grass cuttings and which only has to be emptied every quarter of an hour or so.

At that time I had not yet built a compost heap big enough to cope with the quantity of grass cuttings I was producing and so I simply dumped the grass cuttings in the field where our four lambs lived. This was a fairly tricky procedure. To get into the field I had to use a wooden, five bar gate which separated the field from the shrubbery, and every time I opened the gate the lambs tried to get through into the garden to eat our shrubs. I wouldn't have minded if the lambs had simply come into the garden and helped to keep the grass down. But they seemed to find fuschias, honeysuckle, hydrangeas, rhododendrons and flowers of all sorts far tastier than grass.

The theoretically simple procedure of driving the tractor into the field and unloading its cargo of grass cuttings was made infinitely more difficult by the fact that instead of running away whenever they heard me and the mini-tractor approaching (as normal sheep would have done), our four pet lambs would run towards the sound it made. They were as curious as cats and as reckless as kittens.

Despite this hazard, and the problem of keeping the lambs out of the garden, my first three grass dumping trips that evening were uneventful. The lambs sniffed and sneezed at the grass cuttings but I managed to stop them from squeezing through the gate.

By the time I arrived with the final load of grass cuttings, it was almost dark and I had to switch on the mower's two headlamps. As I opened the gate and manoeuvred the tractor through into the field I peered into the half darkness looking for the lambs but could see no sign of them. They had, I guessed, either gone foraging for sweet grass in another corner of the field or, more likely, had settled down for the night in their favourite spot underneath a huge, old ash tree. I dumped the grass cuttings onto the enormous mound I had made, shut the gate firmly, put the mower away and then went into the house for a cool drink, a piece of Patsy's carrot cake and a long, warm soak in the bath. Patsy, who had been turning some of the strawberries she had picked into jam, had put the jam down in the cellar to cool and set and was already upstairs in one of our twin baths. I shut the cellar door which Patsy had left open, shut and locked the back door and then went upstairs to join Patsy in the bathroom.

* * *

Patsy and I still hadn't bought ourselves a new bed, partly because we hadn't had time to get one and partly because we didn't have any money to spare. But we did have something to sleep on and we were comfortable enough.

I was fast asleep and enjoying a dream, which at the time seemed important but about which I can now remember absolutely nothing, when I suddenly awoke in a panic, unable to breathe. I tried to cry out but realised that there was a hand clamped firmly over my nose and mouth. As I struggled to free myself I heard Patsy's voice. I opened my eyes. It was pitch black but a tiny shaft of moonlight shone through a narrow gap in the curtains. Having spent the last couple of years of my life having to wake up suddenly and immediately to deal with medical emergencies I was quite good at waking up quickly.

'Sssshhhh...' said Patsy. 'Don't make a sound!'

I touched her hand gently to let her know that I was awake.

She moved her hand away from my mouth.

'What's the matter?' I whispered.

'I heard a noise!' whispered Patsy. 'Downstairs! There's someone downstairs.'

I had often wondered how I would react to such an event. Now I found out. I didn't panic. I didn't scream or shout. I didn't retreat under the covers. I simply froze for what seemed like a month.

'What do you mean?' I forced myself to whisper at long, long last. 'What sort of noise?'

'Just a noise,' murmured Patsy. She put her arm around me. 'Listen!' she said quietly, putting a finger over my lips.

We both lay there listening to the sound of our own hearts beating. It's surprising how much noise the human heart makes as it goes about its regular business. Mine had become so enthusiastic that it seemed determined to escape from my chest.

'Why would anyone want to burgle us?' I asked. 'We haven't got anything worth stealing!'

'Maybe they don't know that!' whispered Patsy. 'Sssshhhh! Listen!'

We continued to lie there, wrapped in each other's arms, lying in such total silence that I thought I could hear the hairs standing up on my arms.

'There you are!' whispered Patsy suddenly, holding me closer to her. 'Did you hear it?'

I had. Patsy was right. Someone was moving about downstairs.

'Maybe it's the people from the coach-house flat?' I suggested.

'The Wakehams? What would they want?'

'Perhaps they're looking for coat hangers?'

'They haven't got a key!' Patsy pointed out.

That was, I realised, the trouble. No one had a spare key. We had intended to give Thumper and Patsy's parents spare keys, just in case we ever got locked out, but we'd never got round to it.

'I'll go and have a look,' I whispered.

'No!' said Patsy. 'Stay here!'

'I'll be careful!' I promised. I don't know why I wanted to go and look. It certainly wasn't bravery. It was, I suspect, curiosity mixed with annoyance more than anything. I didn't want to go downstairs to see who was there but I couldn't stay where I was. In a funny sort of way, going downstairs to see who was there required less courage than staying in bed. 'You stay here and lock the door behind me.' All the rooms in the house were equipped with huge, solid-looking old-fashioned locks and keys.

'I'm coming with you!' said Patsy. 'I don't want to stay here by myself. Besides,' she added, 'I can help!'

Moving with exaggerated slowness I pushed back the bedclothes, as though the sound of sheets being moved would attract attention, and levered myself off the bed. My eyes had become accustomed to the dark, but even with the shaft of moonlight coming through the curtains I couldn't see very much. I tiptoed gently towards the door. We didn't have any carpets anywhere in the house and I knew from past experience that there were numerous nail heads sticking up through the floorboards. A loose board creaked noisily and I froze again.

'Aren't you going to put some clothes on?' asked Patsy. She had stood up and was busily trying to disentangle her underwear. It was only when I looked at her and saw how naked she looked in the moonlight that I realised that I was naked too. I tiptoed back towards the bed. I didn't want to confront a burglar without my trousers on.

'This might not be the most appropriate time to tell you but you're beautiful,' I whispered. 'And I love you.'

Patsy stopped what she was doing and peered through the darkness towards me. 'I love you too!' she whispered. She blew me a kiss as she struggled to fasten her bra.

We dressed as best as we could, put on our shoes and then tiptoed towards the door again.

I opened it a few inches and peered outside. I couldn't see anything unusual. The large window on the landing had stained glass panels in it and the moonlight was split into shafts of red, yellow and blue. But with the bedroom door open I could hear the sounds from downstairs far more clearly.

They sounded indistinct and strangely muffled.

'It sounds as if someone is moving furniture!' I whispered.

'But we haven't got any furniture!' Patsy pointed out.

'Maybe we've got burglars who are bringing furniture in!'

I started to tiptoe gently down the stairs, stopping on every step to listen. The noises down below didn't seem to diminish at all, and whoever was there didn't seem to care whether or not we heard them. At last we reached the bottom of the stairs and moved into the hall.

'It sounds as if it's coming from the cellars!' whispered Patsy, who was right behind me.

I listened again. She was right. I crept to the kitchen door, which was open, and peered through. The kitchen was empty and the noise, much louder now, was definitely coming from the cellars.

'It sounds as if whoever it is who is in there is banging on the door to be let out!' I said, not bothering to whisper now.

'Maybe it's a trick!' said Patsy, holding onto my arm.

I picked up a broom that was standing nearby and crept towards the cellar door, motioning to Patsy to stay where she was. The door to the cellar steps opened inwards. Gently, I turned the door knob to release the catch. But whoever it was that was on the other side simply continued to bang on it and the door remained shut.

Suddenly, I heard a sound which I recognised.

I put down the broom and bravely pushed on the door.

'Be careful!' shouted Patsy, behind me.

There was a scuffling sound on the other side of the door and then, as a gap appeared, first one lamb and then a second, then a third and finally a fourth came rushing out of the cellar and into the kitchen.

‘Our burglars!’ I said.

After we had made a fuss of them and escorted them back to their field, we returned to the kitchen to make ourselves a pot of tea. By this time the moon had almost disappeared and the first rays of the day’s sunshine were beginning to brighten the sky.

‘How on earth did they get down there?’ asked Patsy.

‘They must have slipped through the gate into the garden when I was dumping the grass cuttings,’ I explained. ‘Then they found their way through the back door and down into the cellar.’

‘You were very brave!’ said Patsy. She put her arms around my neck and kissed me. ‘My hero!’

* * *

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

'Your column on Angipax seems to have stirred things up a bit said the editor of the *Sunday News*.

I felt my stomach turning over. I'd had a busy morning and arrived back home to find that Patsy had spent two hours fielding increasingly excited telephone calls from the editor. I had written the column after Miss Phillips' suicide attempt, and although I had not mentioned him by name I had quoted my friend from Bristol too. I decided to telephone the editor before I had my lunch and was put straight through to his office.

'Oh dear,' I said. 'I'm sorry.' I felt certain I was about to be fired. It seemed a pity. Apart from the fact that we needed the money I quite liked writing a weekly column and having a chance to influence things a little.

'Don't apologise!' insisted the editor. 'It's great stuff!'

This was not what I had expected to hear. 'Oh!' was all I could say. 'Thank you,' I muttered after hesitating for a moment. Patsy, who was standing a few feet away waiting to hear what happened, raised a questioning eyebrow. I hesitantly lifted a thumb to suggest that everything might, after all, be all right. A smile of optimism lit up her face. We've had enough bad news.

'You've had a sackful of mail from readers,' said the editor, 'and we've had another sackful for the letters' page.'

'Is that good?' I asked him, tentatively.

'Marvellous!' said the editor cheerfully. I felt distinctly relieved at this.

'The really good news is that I've had two phone calls this morning from other editors who want to run your column in their paper.' He mentioned two quite large evening newspapers in the north of England.

'That's great!' I said, delighted. It was good to know that my column was gaining some approval from other editors. I liked the idea of having more readers and the additional income would be more than helpful.

We kept a notepad by the side of the telephone for recording details of patients who needed visits at home and I wrote a short message to Patsy: TWO OTHER PAPERS WANT TO BUY COLUMN! Patsy read the message and kissed me.

I tried to hold onto the telephone but dropped it. The handset bounced off the wall and then dangled a few inches above the floor. I stooped and picked it up. Ben found it all very exciting and jumped around barking furiously.

'Are you there?' I heard the editor saying.

'I'm sorry,' I apologised. Patsy put her hand over her mouth to cover up the sound of her giggling.

'What do you want to do about your mail?' asked the editor.

'Can't you just post it up to me?' I asked him. I'd had one or two letters from readers in the past when I had been writing for the *Barnstaple, Bideford and Bilbury Herald* and they had usually been posted onto me.

The editor laughed. 'You obviously thought I was exaggerating,' he said. 'You really have got at least one sackful of mail.'

'What sort of sackful?'

'A canvas post office mail sack,' laughed the editor. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'I'll wait a couple of days and then get one of our delivery vans to bring the mail up to you.'

'But what am I going to do with that many letters?' I asked him.

'I would have thought that rather depended on what they say,' said the editor. 'What are you writing about next week?' he asked.

I had one or two ideas but had not really chosen the topic.

I was still getting used to the fact that I could write about anything I chose and didn't have to worry about writing a column full of practical advice on how to deal with corns, colds and cystitis.

'I thought I might do a column on animal experiments,' I said.

'Are you for or against them?'

'Against!' I said, rather shocked that the editor should ask.

'Great!' said the editor.

'It may cause more trouble,' I warned him, hesitantly.

'That's good,' said the editor cheerfully. 'That's what I pay you for.'

* * *

If there had been any danger of us getting too excited by this news we were brought back to earth with a bump a few moments later when the Wakehams knocked on our back door.

Patsy had managed to borrow some extra coat hangers from Gilly at the Duck and Puddle and she had given the visitors our potato peeler but she had to drive ten miles into Barnstaple to buy a sharpening tool for the carving knife. Since then they had called at our back door at least twice a day with small requests, comments, complaints and suggestions; all of which had been delivered with unfailing courtesy. There was, they said, no brown shoe polish. Did we know, they asked with cloying niceness, that the tea towels had no loops on them and so could not be hung up securely on the hook we had provided?

'I'm sorry to bother you,' said Mr Wakeham, beginning with a familiar litany the honesty of which we were beginning to question, 'but the light bulb in the bathroom has gone.'

'Oh, I'm sorry about that,' I apologised. 'But there are some spares in the cupboard under the sink in the kitchen.'

'Oh good,' said Mr Wakeham. He paused. 'We'll be in for another half an hour. Would it be convenient for you to pop over now?'

It took me a moment or two to realise that he expected me to go over to the flat to replace the bathroom light bulb.

I started to say something about being rather busy but at the last moment I weakened. I wasn't entirely sure about the responsibility of a landlord. 'Right,' I said. 'I'll come back with you now.'

'Jolly good,' smiled Mr Wakeham.

I followed him back across the courtyard, up the staircase and into the coach-house flat. Mrs Wakeham was in the kitchen washing up and her two daughters were sitting on the sofa flicking through pop music magazines, eating chocolates and listening to the radio. Mrs Wakeham turned and shouted a greeting when she saw me. Her daughters sat sullenly, looked up briefly and then carried on looking at the pictures in their magazines. I returned Mrs Wakeham's greeting, said 'Hello' to the two daughters, who continued to ignore me, walked into the kitchen and opened the cupboard underneath the sink. I picked up a spare light bulb and then carried it through to the bathroom where I took out the old, useless bulb and replaced it with the new one. Mr Wakeham followed me around as I did all this, though I was not sure whether he was watching in order to learn or watching to make sure that I did the job properly.

'All done!' I cried, more cheerily than I felt.

'Jolly good!' said Mr Wakeham.

Mrs Wakeham came out of the kitchen drying her hands on a towel and hissed something at her husband. I couldn't tell what it was but he seemed to understand.

'Would tomorrow night be all right?' he asked.

I turned, about to leave, and waited. I didn't know what he was talking about. 'Dinner,' explained Mr Wakeham. 'You invited us to dinner. Tomorrow would be convenient for us. We wondered if it would be suitable for you.'

'Oh, well, yes,' I said hesitantly. 'I suppose so.' I added, rather ungraciously.

'Wonderful!' said Mr Wakeham, rubbing his hands together. 'We'll all look forward to that.'

I looked around at them all. Mrs Wakeham was still drying her hands and still smiling her thin, denture retentive smile. The two daughters hadn't looked up. 'So will we,' I said, hoping that I looked more enthusiastic than I felt but comforting myself with the thought that the Wakehams were too concerned with themselves to notice how I felt about anything.

* * *

I called in to see Mrs Blossom on the way to the surgery. There wasn't much change, but Mr Blossom was less belligerent and seemed happier. He said that his daughter had spoken a little more and had eaten two small meals. I told him to continue with the withdrawal programme I had outlined. Because I knew I was calling at the Blossom's, I had left Ben at home with Patsy. Mr Blossom had a large and very aggressive Alsatian which didn't like other dogs at all. The last time I had visited I had left Ben sitting peacefully in the car and had returned a few minutes later to find the Alsatian clawing at the paintwork and growling menacingly. I don't know which of us was most miserable about this enforced temporary separation. I liked having Ben lying at my feet and it seemed strange not to have her around. And she liked being with me. She barked furiously and angrily whenever I drove off without her.

* * *

Less than a quarter of an hour later I was sitting in Dr Brownlow's consulting room working my way through the evening surgery. Out of the first four patients I saw I knew only one; the other three were all holiday-makers. The fifth patient was a stranger too. Or at least that was what I thought when I first saw her. She was tall, slightly on the plump side and pretty in a pouty sort of way and I guessed that she was probably about eighteen or nineteen-years-old. She had shoulder length brown hair, cut in a fashionable style, wore a white T-shirt with a cartoon character on the front and a pair of blue denim shorts with frayed bottoms. She had an unusually well-developed chest and she wore a lot of make-up. I didn't know why, but there was something vaguely familiar about her. I guessed I had probably seen her somewhere around the village. She continually looked behind her at the friend who had accompanied her.

'What can I do for you?' I asked her.

'Is this all private?' asked the girl hesitantly.

'Yes,' I assured her.

'You won't tell my mum and dad?'

'Not without your permission.'

'I want to go on the pill,' said the girl.

'The contraceptive pill?'

'Yes,' said the girl. She looked behind her at her friend and they both giggled.

'Are you taking any other medicines?'

'No.'

'Are you on holiday here?

'Yes.' There was a noisy snigger from the girl behind.

'What's your name?'

'Anthea.'

'Anthea what?'

'Anthea Wakeham.'

I had written the name down before I realised why it was familiar. I looked up at the girl. 'Where are you staying?'

'The coach-house at Bilbury Grange,' giggled the girl. She looked behind her and she and her friend both giggled uncontrollably.

I felt myself blushing with embarrassment. 'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I didn't recognise you.'

'That's all right,' said the girl, still giggling.

I peered past her. 'Is that your sister?'

There was more giggling and much nodding of both heads.

'How old are you, Anthea?' I asked her.

'Seventeen,' she replied quickly. Even through her make-up I could see that she was blushing heavily.

I didn't say anything but just stared at her. She looked down at her lap and played with the cheap, gaudy ring which she wore on the third finger of her right hand.

'How old are you?' I asked her again.

'Nearly fifteen,' she told me, quietly.

'Fourteen.' I said firmly, writing her age down on the form I had taken out of my desk drawer.

'Have you asked your own family doctor to prescribe the contraceptive pill for you?'

Anthea shook her head.

'Why not?'

'He'd tell my mum and dad. I know he would.'

'And you don't want them to know?'

'Are you kidding?' she said. 'My dad would kill me!'

'Why do you want to go on the pill?' I asked her.

Anthea stared at me for a moment and then turned round and looked at her sister. They both started giggling again.

'Have you got a steady boyfriend?'

She shrugged but did not look at me.

'What does that mean?'

'Not particularly.'

'Do you have a sexual relationship with anyone?'

Anthea stared at me and frowned. 'What do you mean?'

I swallowed. 'Are you a virgin?'

'No!' she said indignantly. 'What sort of question is that?'

'When did you first have sex?'

Anthea turned round again and whispered to her sister. After a few moments she turned back. 'I was thirteen,' she said. She paused for a moment and played with her ring again.

'Nearly thirteen anyway.'

'How often do you have sex?' I asked her.

'Why are you asking me all these questions?' she demanded. 'You're just a dirty old man, aren't you?'

I'd never thought of myself as 'old' before. It was a unique experience to realise that in the eyes of these two young girls I undoubtedly was 'old'.

'No!' I said, probably rather indignantly. 'But before I decide whether to prescribe the contraceptive pill for you I need to know whether you really need it.'

Anthea didn't say anything but played with her ring again.

'What precautions do you take?' I asked her.

Anthea frowned and thought about this. 'I'll only do it in cars and at parties,' she said. 'I won't do it in doorways in case anyone sees us.'

It was my turn to think for a moment. I decided that as far as Anthea was concerned 'taking precautions' meant 'not getting found out'.

'Do you use a condom?' I asked her.

This caused another bout of giggling. 'That's up to the fella, isn't it?' said Anthea at last. 'Some do and some don't.'

'Don't you worry about getting pregnant?'

Anthea looked at me as though I were truly stupid. 'I'm here, aren't I?' she protested.

'Slip your things off,' I sighed. 'I need to examine you.'

'What?' said Anthea, blushing. 'Here?'

'I need to take your blood pressure and examine your breasts,' I told her. 'I can't do that unless you take your T-shirt off.'

Anthea still hesitated.

'Will it make you happier if I go out for a minute?' I asked. She looked at her sister for a moment, looked back at me and shook her head. She stood up, turned away from me and pulled her T-shirt up over her head. There was then some frantic activity, during which the two girls stuffed a number of paper tissues into their pockets, and then Anthea removed her bra and turned round again. Her chest now looked far less impressive. I took her blood pressure, examined her breasts and asked her some more questions then I told her she could get dressed again.

'Have you met anyone in Bilbury?' I asked her. Anthea stared at me uncomprehendingly.

'Are you having sex with anyone in Bilbury?'

'I'm not going to tell you who it is,' said Anthea defensively.

'I don't want you to,' I said quickly. 'I just wanted to know whether or not there was a risk that you could get pregnant while you're here.'

'That's why I'm here.'

I wanted to talk to her, to find out why she felt the need to have sex with virtual strangers and to try to help her, but I knew she wouldn't let me into her life in the few days she was staying in Bilbury. Instead I wrote out a six month's prescription for her to take to the chemist and then gave her careful instructions about how and when she had to take her pills.

'When you get back home you must visit a contraceptive clinic,' I told her. I looked up and then gave her the address of a clinic where they would, I knew, treat her request for help confidentially and where, I hoped, they might be able to help her tackle her sexuality with more maturity. 'What about you?' I asked her sister.

'Oh don't worry about her,' said Anthea, with a carefree wave of her hand. 'She's all right.' Anthea's sister, whose name I still didn't know, smiled demurely as though she'd been congratulated on winning a Sunday School prize.

I didn't think either of them was 'all right' but I didn't see what else I could do to help them.

* * *

Miss Phillips was the next patient and I was surprised to see her at the surgery.

'I feel a lot better today,' she said, when I told her that I would have been happy to visit her at home. 'And I'm determined to get myself off those pills.'

'You'll have to do it slowly,' I warned her.

'I know,' said Miss Phillips quickly. 'I will,' she added firmly.

I was pleased to hear that she was being so sensible, but I did suffer a shiver of apprehension, for although I was eager to help I still hadn't been able to find anyone who could tell me exactly how to help a patient withdraw from Angipax tablets. I had, however, prepared a withdrawal programme which involved a gradual cutting down of the pills which I felt fairly confident would be safe. I carefully explained to Miss Phillips exactly what I wanted her to do.

* * *

Patsy had spent the whole afternoon preparing the meal to which the Wakehams had invited themselves. She had bought a box of locally picked mushrooms, two dozen tomatoes and a large hunk of locally made cheese from Peter Marshall and had prepared two huge pizzas as the main course. They smelt very good.

'I wish you'd told them that we were vegetarian,' she said, as she straightened the table cloth for the umpteenth time. We still did not have any dining room furniture and so we had to entertain our first dinner guests in the kitchen. And since we didn't have half a dozen chairs, Patsy and I were going to have to sit at the two ends of the table on upturned tea chests.

'I didn't really have an opportunity,' I said. I was busy looking through the classified advertisements at the back of the British Medical Journal to see if I could find another job.

Neither of us wanted to leave Bilbury but we were getting increasingly anxious about our future. I didn't want to work in Sherlock's brand new consulting room on his new estate and neither of us wanted Sherlock to get planning permission to turn Bilbury into a town. However, it had become quite clear that if Sherlock was turned away, then the practice I had inherited from Dr Brownlow would either have to be merged with another practice in Barnstaple or else I would be forced to close down. And so, with Patsy's agreement, I had reluctantly started hunting for another job.

'What about this?' I said, reading out an advertisement.

'Thriving practice seeks fourth partner. Wonderful countryside within twenty minutes drive. Congenial companions. Modern, well-equipped consulting rooms.'

'It sounds very good,' said Patsy. 'Where is it?'

'In the Midlands.'

'Oh,' said Patsy, being careful not to commit herself.

'There's some lovely countryside around there.'

'Yes.'

'It is a long way from the sea, though.' I pointed out.

'That's all right,' said Patsy bravely. 'I've always lived near to the sea. It will make a nice change.' I knew that she didn't mean it but I didn't say anything. She stopped tidying the cutlery and turned to me. 'I don't mind where we go,' she said very seriously. She moved closer and reached out and touched my hand. 'As long as we're together it doesn't really matter.' I put down the journal, stood up and held her close.

'As long as we have some land for the lambs,' I said. 'And are quite a way from the road.' We knew of too many cats which had been run over and we wanted somewhere where Emily and Sophie would be safe.

I had just put an ink circle around the advertisement I'd read out when Patsy suddenly let out a small angry cry.

'What's the matter?'

'I meant to pick some watercress but I forgot.'

'Do you want me to pop down to Peter Marshall's shop to see if he's got any?' Peter Marshall never closes his shop.

Even if the front door is shut he will happily open up to sell a box of matches.

'There's no need,' said Patsy. 'There's some growing in the stream.' She picked up a large plastic carrier bag, walked swiftly to the back door and then hesitated for a moment.

'Do you think it's going to rain?'

I walked over to where she was standing and looked up. The sky looked heavy. 'I don't know,' I said. 'Probably.' I sniffed the air as I'd seen Patsy's father do. 'But not for ten minutes. Come on - I'll come with you!'

We darted out of the back door, through the courtyard, over the fence, across the field and down to the stream. I hadn't seen any watercress growing, but Patsy had and she went straight to it. We picked a couple of large handfuls and stuffed them into the plastic bag and then started back towards the house. It was at that point that the heavens opened and the huge black cloud that had been hovering over Bilbury decided to jettison its load of water. I don't think I've ever seen water come down so quickly.

Patsy was dressed in the wedding dress I had bought for her at the auction, though it was impossible to recognise it as the same dress now that she had altered it. It looked beautiful. We darted back under a huge ash tree for temporary shelter. But the leaves only provided shelter for a moment or two and the rain soon started to come through.

'We're going to get soaked!' said Patsy. 'And I haven't got anything else nice to wear. Oh damn these people!'

I took the plastic bag from her, tipped the watercress out onto the ground and held it open. 'Quick!' I said. 'Take your dress off and put it in here.' Patsy didn't hesitate and a few seconds later her dress was wrapped in a roll at the bottom of the plastic bag.

'Now you!' said Patsy, taking the bag off me.

I hesitated for a moment.

'That's your only jacket,' she pointed out unnecessarily. 'And your only half decent trousers.' I didn't need reminding twice. I took off my sports jacket, rolled it into a ball and stuffed it into the bag. Then I took off my shoes and trousers and socks and stuffed them in too.

'Take off your shoes,' I told her. Patsy took off her shoes and popped them into the bag. It was now almost full.

The rain was still streaming down. The only good thing was that it was at least quite warm. I twisted the top of the plastic bag to stop the rain getting in and picked up as much of the watercress as I could carry. 'We might as well take what we came for!'

Patsy picked up the rest of the watercress and together we ran back across the field and towards the house. The rain stopped as suddenly as it had started as we climbed gingerly over the fence onto the path leading back to the house.

We were about fifty yards from the coach-house when Patsy put a hand on my naked arm to stop me.

'What's the matter?'

'Sssshhhh! Look!'

I looked. The four Wakehams were clambering down the spiral staircase from the flat on the first floor. Mrs Wakeham, who was wearing high heeled shoes, came down first, treading very gingerly on the wet metal steps, her two daughters followed and her husband brought up the rear. I shivered involuntarily. The rain had been warm but now that it had stopped it felt quite cold. We crept towards the hedge on our right and watched in horror as each of them stepped off the spiral staircase and then strolled casually through the gateway and into the courtyard.

‘Give me my dress!’ whispered Patsy, covering as much of herself as she could with her hands.

‘No one can see you!’ I assured her. ‘You need to dry off before you put your dress on.’

‘But how are we going to get back into the house without being seen?’ asked Patsy. ‘We’ll have to get in through the front!’ I told her. ‘Quick! Follow me.’

I ran along the track towards the coach-house but instead of turning in through the gate and into the courtyard I ran straight past. When I was safely past the gateway I looked behind me. Patsy, naked and shivering, was standing on the other side of the gateway.

‘Come on!’ I hissed.

‘They might see me!’ mouthed Patsy. I suddenly began to see the funny side of things and had to struggle not to laugh.

I peered through the stone archway, into the courtyard. The Wakehams were walking slowly across the courtyard and had their backs towards us. I waved a furious hand beckoning Patsy to join me. She closed her eyes and ran across to where I stood.

‘Did they see me?’ she asked me, breathlessly, as I caught her in my arms.

‘No. Come on!’ We hurried around to the front of the house and went straight to the front door. It was, inevitably, locked.

‘I’m going to get dressed!’ said Patsy. ‘I don’t care whether I ruin my dress or not.’

‘No, you’re not!’ I said. ‘Look, there’s a window open upstairs.’

‘But it’s on the first floor. How on earth are you going to get in?’

‘Easy!’ I said. I pointed to a ladder that Thumper had left lying on the ground, bent down and manoeuvred it into position. Then I put the plastic bag containing our clothes on the ground and handed my watercress to Patsy. A few moments later I was climbing up the ladder.

I hate heights, but in an emergency it is astonishing what you can do.

Less than a minute later I was inside the house, with nothing more to show for my efforts than a rather large splinter in a very embarrassing place. I could hear someone banging on the back door and someone, I assumed it was Mr Wakeham, was shouting to try to attract our attention. I ran down the stairs, opened the front door and let Patsy in and then took the ladder away from the house and laid it back down on the ground. I didn’t see why burglars should have things handed to them on a plate. I ran into the house and shot upstairs to our bathroom. Patsy was already drying herself and when she had finished I took the towel from her while she dressed.

Three minutes later I raced down into the kitchen just as Patsy opened the back door and ushered the Wakehams into the kitchen.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘I hope you weren’t waiting there long?’ I pointed to my still wet and tousled hair. ‘I was in the bath and it’s impossible to hear anything up there.’

‘Oh, that’s all right!’ said Mrs Wakeham with a sweet smile.

Mr Wakeham was clutching a bottle of wine wrapped in tissue paper. He was wearing a beige suit a dark brown shirt and a light green tie. He had a matching green handkerchief neatly arranged in the breast pocket of his jacket and had been rather too generous with a particularly pungent aftershave. Mrs Wakeham, who followed him into the kitchen, was wearing a plain, navy blue pleated skirt and a tight blue jumper which had glittering sequins embroidered across the chest in the shape of a peacock. She wore pearl earrings and a pearl necklace and had her hair permed. She smelt strongly of hairdressers. Behind them came their two daughters. Both wore knee length summer dresses, white cardigans and sandals; neither wore make-up and both looked five years younger than they had when I had seen them earlier that day. I recognised Anthea only by the sullen look in her eyes and by the ring she wore on her right hand. I wouldn’t have recognised her sister at all and, for all I knew, she might have been a stand in.

‘Get the corkscrew out!’ said Mr Wakeham cheerily unwrapping the bottle of red Californian wine he had brought with him. ‘It’s been in the fridge so it’s ready to drink.’

Patsy took our corkscrew out of the cutlery drawer and handed it to him. Mr Wakeham took the cork out and stood there holding the opened bottle. ‘Have you got any glasses?’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Patsy, blushing. She glanced at me. We both suddenly realised that we didn’t have any wine glasses.

‘It’ll have to be tumblers,’ I apologised. I opened a cupboard and took out first our two drinking glasses and then our two coffee mugs. I handed the two drinking glasses to Mr Wakeham and then put the two mugs down on the table. ‘Would your daughters mind using these?’ I asked.

‘Oh, good heavens they don’t drink wine,’ said Mr Wakeham, slightly shocked. He poured two inches of wine into the two drinking glasses. ‘You have these,’ he said indicating the two coffee mugs.’ Have you got a couple of cans of something fizzy for the girls?’

Patsy opened the fridge and produced two cans of Coca Cola which she handed to the girls. They took them demurely.

'The girls both go to a convent school,' said Mr Wakeham.

'They get taught proper values.' He smiled at them but they didn't smile back.

'I've made pizza,' said Patsy. 'I'm afraid we don't eat meat.'

'Oh how sweet!' said Mrs Wakeham. 'You're vegetarians!'

'How do you make pizza without meat?' asked Mr Wakeham. He sounded genuinely puzzled.

'Cheese, mushrooms, tomatoes, onions,' said Patsy. She turned and opened the oven. 'They're ready to eat,' she said.

'If you don't mind sitting down?'

The four Wakehams sat down on our four chairs and Patsy served up the pizzas and a huge bowlful of salad. For a few moments there was silence as everyone helped themselves. 'Oh darn it said Patsy suddenly. 'I left the watercress in the bathroom.' Mr and Mrs Wakeham both looked at her.

'We keep it in the bath to make sure it's kept fresh!' I explained. 'It's a spare bath,' I added quickly. I stood up, excused myself and raced upstairs to retrieve the watercress. It had caused a lot of trouble I wasn't going to leave it there to go yellow.

'Dickie is very proud of our girls,' said Mrs Wakeham when I returned a few moments later with the watercress. 'Aren't you dear?'

Mr Wakeham, who had a mouthful of pizza nodded and hurried to finish so that he could speak. 'You have to know just how far you let your children go,' he said, warming to what was clearly one of his favourite subjects. 'They need some space to spread their wings, but they also need barriers so that they learn what's right and wrong.' He beamed at his two daughters who were giving a passable imitation of a pair of angels. Anthea glanced at me to see if I was about to say anything. I took a sip of the wine her father had brought. It tasted terrible.

'We sent our girls to a convent school so that they would get the same strong standards at school as at home,' said Mr Wakeham. 'There are too many schools where the children are allowed to do and say whatever they like.' He cut off a large piece of pizza, pierced it with his fork and popped it into his mouth. There was silence for a few moments while he chewed and then swallowed it. 'There are schools near us where girls no older than our two have got boyfriends and are off out every night to parties and pubs and heaven knows what else,' he said. He leant across the table towards me and pointed an empty fork in my direction. 'I've heard that there are some girls not much older than ours getting the contraceptive pill from doctors!' he said.

I looked across at Anthea and her sister. They both looked perfectly innocent. Anthea looked at me, defying me to say anything. 'I think you're embarrassing your daughters,' I said. Mr Wakeham looked down the table. 'They know how I feel about this,' he said. 'And they know I trust them.' He now stabbed his fork in their direction. 'Mind you,' he said, 'they know what would happen if they ever started behaving like that!'

'Would anyone like any more pizza?' asked Patsy, who was, of course, oblivious of the real significance of all this. Her offer was accepted with enthusiasm.

The Wakehams stayed for two hours and ate every piece of food we had in the house.

As they left one of the girls whispered furiously to her mother. Mrs Wakeham shook her head and said 'No.' The daughter whispered again.

'What's the problem?' Patsy asked, smiling and trying to be helpful.

'Oh, it's nothing!' said Mrs Wakeham. She seemed embarrassed. 'It's nothing at all.' She hesitated. 'It's just that Anthea... 'she stopped. 'No, really. It doesn't matter...'

'Go on...' said Patsy, encouragingly.

'Well, is there a nudist colony anywhere near here?'

'A nudist colony?' Patsy was blushing bright red. 'No. How odd. Why do you ask that?'

'Oh, Anthea thinks she saw two nude people running around in your garden,' said Mrs Wakeham, with an apologetic smile. 'But you know what young girls are like! Vivid imaginations!'

Patsy and I both smiled and agreed that young girls did sometimes have very vivid imaginations.

* * *

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The next morning I wrote out a letter of application to the practice in the Midlands and posted it on my way to the surgery. Neither Patsy nor I wanted to leave Bilbury but we both knew that we had to think seriously about it.

‘It’ll be a challenge to move somewhere different,’ Patsy lied.

‘We’ll find somewhere just as lovely as this,’ I lied.

‘It will probably turn out to be a blessing in disguise,’ lied Patsy. ‘These things often do.’

‘We’ll find another garden to restore,’ I lied.

‘And we’ll find someone we like to love this house,’ lied Patsy.

The truth was that we both knew we would never again find anywhere half as wonderful as Bilbury Grange. And we would certainly never be able to afford anything like it. We’d been lucky to buy the house fairly cheap because it had been run down and more or less derelict when we had found it. The chances of finding another house in a similar condition were remote indeed. And even if we did find somewhere we loved as much how would we cope without a Thumper to help us and to protect us from greedy or dishonest builders? I suddenly realised that I had made a lot of good friends in Bilbury. Frank and Gilly, Peter Marshall, Miss Johnson, Miss Phillips and Miss Tweedsmuir and Dr Brownlow.

I didn’t know whether or not Sherlock Homes were going to get permission to build in Bilbury, but from what I’ve seen and heard I strongly suspected that they were going to succeed. And even if they failed to get the permission they wanted it looked increasingly as though my professional future in Bilbury was limited. Whatever happened it now seemed certain that our stay at Bilbury Grange would be a short one.

* * *

‘I missed two of my tablets the day before yesterday,’ said Mrs Blossom. ‘I went out to a friend’s wedding in Bideford and completely forgot.’ She looked tired and pale. Mrs Blossom was trying to cut down on her Angipax and I had warned her that she had to do it very slowly.

‘What happened?’ I asked her.

‘I went all sweaty and I had this terrible panicky feeling,’ said Mrs Blossom. ‘I could hardly breathe and I had this awful headache.’

‘How long did all that last for?’

‘Most of the afternoon,’ said Mrs Blossom. ‘I had to get a friend to take me home early and when I got back and took a tablet the symptoms gradually disappeared.’

‘How do you feel now?’

For a few moments Mrs Blossom didn’t answer. ‘Tired,’ she said at last. ‘Very tired.’ She sounded tired and she spoke carefully and deliberately as though each word was an effort.

She licked her lips carefully and held her head for a moment. She looked at me for a few moments and frowned as though suddenly trying to remember who I was. ‘I’m very forgetful,’ she said. ‘Could that be the tablets?’ I nodded. ‘It could be.’

‘A friend showed me your article in the paper,’ said Mrs Blossom. ‘Is that all true?’

‘Yes.’

There was a long silence. ‘I can’t explain it said Mrs Blossom. ‘But I feel...’ she paused again and licked her lips. ‘I feel as though I am thinking through cotton wool.’ There was another silence. ‘My problems haven’t gone away,’ she told me. ‘But somehow I can’t be bothered even to think about them. And I know that’s not helping me.’

‘I’ll help you,’ I promised her. I reached out and touched her hand. Her skin felt dry and papery. ‘I’ll help you. But you must remember to come off the pills very slowly to minimise the withdrawal effects.’

* * *

Despite the fact that we did not know how much longer we would be able to remain in Bilbury or at Bilbury Grange we had arranged for the carpet fitters to come that day.

To anyone brought up in a town the phrase ‘carpet fitters’ usually implies a team of skilled workmen who are sent by a well-established firm, and who arrive in a large and wellequipped van. We had arranged something rather different.

When we had decided that we could afford to clothe one or two of our naked floors, Patsy told me that she knew of a man called Mr Liveridge who didn’t have a shop but sold and delivered carpets to remote farms and outlying cottages.

He had, she said, fitted carpets for her parents and they had been more than satisfied with his work. She had telephoned him (or, to be more precise, left a message with his sister at the tea rooms in Kentisbury) asking him to call round.

When he arrived that same evening we had explained that in due course we hoped to carpet the whole of the house, but that we would like to start with the reception hall, the living room and our bedroom. Since each of these three rooms had more floor area than the average cottage, the amount of carpet involved was not insubstantial and Mr Liveridge was enthusiastic. He was also able to offer us an extraordinarily low price.

Mr Liveridge had long grey hair pulled straight back over his head and tied into a ponytail with an elastic band. He wore luxuriant grey side whiskers, was in his mid 50s and had not always been in the carpet business. For the first thirty years of his life he had been a teacher of English Literature at a large comprehensive school in London. Then, in one fateful year, his wife had left him for a young woodwork teacher, his only daughter had married an electrician and moved to Australia and he had walked out of his job after a row with the school's twenty-eight-year-old headmaster who wanted the works of popular paperback authors to be introduced into the syllabus.

Enraged by what he considered to be an unforgivable erosion of standards, Mr Liveridge had left his chalk-stained grey suits in London and headed west.

For three months he had lived with his sister in Kentisbury and then he had taken a job as a carpet salesman at a store in Barnstaple. When the store went into liquidation just nine months later he had decided to go into business for himself.

These days he travelled the countryside in an elderly coach which had been built back in the days when such vehicles were known as char-a-bancs. This one had all except the front two rows of seats removed to make way for the storage of lengths of carpet, carpet samples, tacks, hammers and the other impedimenta of his trade. A piece of old carpet had been used to partition off, and turn into living quarters, the back six feet of the coach. The side windows had been covered with white paint in order to convince the licensing authorities that the vehicle had been turned into a commercial vehicle. The outside of the coach, which still had WESTON S'MARE on its destination board, was painted pale blue, as it had been, I suspect, when it was still being used to carry passengers, but Mr Liveridge's deliberately illiterate slogan 'U-CHUZE' had been painted on the side in maroon. Underneath this had been added, in script, 'In the comfort of your own home' but, for some reason, Mr Liveridge, who had done his own sign writing had made his 'fs look like 's's so that the message looked more like 'In the comsort os your own home' and as a result Mr Liveridge was known to his customers first as Os and, later, as Ossie.

In the winter Mr Liveridge lived in a small flat in Ilfracombe. In the summer, when holiday-makers could afford to pay a higher rent than he could, he lived in the back of his converted char-a-banc.

When not selling, delivering or fitting carpets, Mr Liveridge wrote poetry and stories, and although he would occasionally allow his customers to read some of them, nothing he wrote was ever published for the very simple reason that he would never submit anything to an editor or publisher.

Before I left home for the surgery I helped Patsy tidy up and move our few belongings out of the way so that Mr Liveridge could lay his carpets without too much delay. The tidying up didn't take long. Apart from our bed and an old wardrobe we had virtually no furniture.

'Do you think it's silly?' asked Patsy.

'What?'

'Having carpets fitted when we don't even know for sure whether or not we are staying?'

'No!' I said firmly. 'If we do stay then it makes sense to have carpets laid before we start buying furniture and if we can't stay then the house will be more attractive to potential buyers if its got one or two carpets in it. I had no evidence for this optimistic assumption but it cheered us both up a little, and because I liked him I desperately didn't want to have to tell Mr Liveridge that we didn't need his carpets after all. I took one last glance at our naked floors, kissed Patsy goodbye and left for work.

* * *

Miss Johnson came into the consulting room at the end of the morning surgery with a very worried look on her face. She had been subdued all morning and I knew that something was worrying her. She was normally the most self-contained and self-confident of people, but today she seemed strangely troubled.

'What's the matter?' I asked her, after inviting her to sit down. 'What's worrying you?'

'I don't really like to mention it,' apologised Miss Johnson.

'I'm not sure that it's really my place.'

'If it's worrying you and it involves me then you should certainly tell me about it.' I told her.

'It's just...' began Miss Johnson confidently; she faltered and then she took a deep breath and took her courage in both hands. 'It's just this business over those Sherlock building people.' She looked across at me and swallowed. 'Is it true what I've heard?'

'What have you heard?' I asked her, gently.

'People are saying that the Sherlock people are planning to build over a large part of Bilbury and to turn it into a town.'

'That's true,' I nodded.

'It's very unpopular in the village,' she said.

I nodded. But I knew that wasn't all that she had come to say. Miss Johnson looked down at her hands. Whatever else it was that she wanted to say was clearly the difficult part.

‘Go on,’ I said quietly, trying to encourage her to speak.

‘That isn’t all,’ she said, clearly prefacing something that she knew I wouldn’t like to hear.

I leant forwards a little and rested my arms on the desk. But I didn’t say anything else.

‘I think you should know,’ she began. ‘I don’t know whether it’s true or not and it isn’t really any of my business.’ She paused and looked up at me. ‘I hope you don’t mind my mentioning it?’

‘Mentioning what?’ I asked her, quietly.

‘They are saying that you’ve agreed to work for Mr Sherlock and that he’s building you a new health centre on his new housing estate.’ Miss Johnson looked straight at me and her eyes were full of sadness.

‘It’s true that Mr Sherlock has invited me to work in a new surgery on his estate,’ I said. ‘But I don’t approve of his plans to expand the village and I won’t be involved in any way.’ I looked down at my desk. ‘I’ll do anything I can to help stop him,’ I told her. ‘I think that if he does get permission he will ruin Bilbury. It will change beyond all recognition. I know people need houses, and I know that the holiday homes will provide employment, but Bilbury is a community and I want to see it remain unchanged.’ I felt embarrassed when I stopped speaking. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘I hadn’t intended to make a speech.’

Miss Johnson’s eyes said everything. One moment they were full of fear, suspicion and apprehension. The next they were filled with happiness, relief and tears.

I didn’t want to spoil what was clearly a happy moment for her. But I knew I had to tell her the whole truth now.

‘Unfortunately, there is a problem,’ I said.

Miss Johnson looked across at me and waited expectantly.

‘I don’t know whether it is simply because Mr Sherlock has a lot of power or whether it is just a coincidence,’ I told her. ‘But if the plans to expand Bilbury don’t get the go ahead then I think it is very likely that this practice will have to close.’

Miss Johnson frowned. ‘Close?’ she said. ‘Why?’

‘The administrators have decided that, as it stands, the village is too small to have its own practice,’ I told her.

‘But Dr Brownlow...’began Miss Johnson.

‘I know,’ I said. ‘Dr Brownlow had a practice here for years. They say that now that he has retired it’s an opportune time to reorganise the medical cover in the area.’

‘But they can’t just close the practice down!’ said Miss Johnson indignantly. ‘What are the villagers going to do?’

‘The administrators say that the village will be looked after by a practice in Barnstaple,’ I told her. I paused. ‘They’ve said that I can apply for a job there.’

‘But...what will happen to the surgery?’

‘The surgery in Bilbury will close. Patients will have to go into the surgery in Barnstaple.’

‘But that’s ten miles!’

‘I suppose that they might do a temporary surgery once a week in the village hall,’ I said. ‘That’s how it sometimes works with villages which are looked after by town practices.’ I shrugged sadly. ‘That would be up to the senior partners in the practice involved.’

‘Will you take the job in Barnstaple?’ asked Miss Johnson.

‘I don’t think I’d get it even if I applied for it.’ I told her.

‘But surely Dr Brownlow would have some influence?’

‘I don’t think so,’ I said. ‘The senior partner in the practice is Dr Brownlow’s son. Neither he nor I get on very well with him.’ I paused again. ‘I’m afraid I don’t know what all this will mean for you,’ I told her.

‘Oh, don’t worry about me,’ said Miss Johnson quickly. ‘I have a little inheritance and I can always take my pension.’

‘But you’ll miss the work...’

‘Of course,’ agreed Miss Johnson. ‘But I’ll find something else to do.’ She stopped for a moment and swallowed. I looked at her and saw that there were tears in her eyes. ‘What will happen to you and Patsy?’ she asked. ‘The house and the garden and everything?’

I shrugged. ‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘I’m afraid I just don’t know.’ I paused. ‘But if by any chance we do manage to stay in Bilbury I’d very much like you to carry on working with me.’

‘I’d love to,’ said Miss Johnson. She looked puzzled. ‘But doing what, exactly?’

‘I’ve started getting a lot of mail from readers of my column,’ I told her. ‘I need some help replying to them.’

‘Oh yes!’ said Miss Johnson, smiling. ‘That would be very nice! Oh yes. I’d like that very much.’

* * *

When I got home Mr Liveridge had finished laying the carpet in the living room and was busy laying the carpet in the reception hall. He worked alone but quickly. Patsy was warming up some soup and some home-made bread rolls. I went to ask Mr Liveridge if he wanted some.

‘No!’ he said firmly. ‘That’s very kind of you. But I’ve got my flask and sandwiches. I’ll eat when I’ve finished the carpet in here.’

‘It’s looking great!’ I told him. He was a good workman.

‘Thank you,’ he said.

I sat down on the floor beside him.

‘Do you ever miss teaching?’ I asked him suddenly.

He stopped what he was doing and looked at me. Then he resumed the hammer stroke he had interrupted and put another tack into place. ‘Never,’ he said firmly.

I believed him.

I watched him for a few moments.

‘I like what I do now,’ he said after a while. ‘At the end of a day I can see what I’ve done. I know I’ve done a good job. And because I always do the best I can, and always make sure that my customers are satisfied before I leave, everyone is happy.’ He smiled at me. ‘I don’t get much hassle or many complaints,’ he said. ‘If anyone does ever complain I just ask them what they want me to do about it and then I do it.’

‘Did you enjoy teaching?’ I asked him.

He thought for a while. ‘I was in love with the idea of teaching,’ he said. ‘But most of the children I taught didn’t want to learn. And I was constantly under pressure from the bureaucrats and the philistines.’ He smiled at me. ‘I ended up hating the job.’

He carried on fitting the carpet. I sat and watched him until Patsy called me to tell me that the soup was ready.

* * *

After lunch I had an hour and a half free so I telephoned Dr Brownlow and asked him to stand in for me while I drove Patsy over to Barnstaple. We wanted to see whether any of the things we’d bought in our tin bath job lot was worth selling.

The salesman in the antique shop, a man in his early thirties whose two most noticeable features were thick blond hair and a carnation in his button hole, did not hide his disappointment when we told him that we weren’t looking for anything to buy but simply wanted to know whether one or two things that we had brought with us were worth selling.

‘Do you think this is silver?’ asked Patsy, taking the little photo frame out of her bag and handing it to him.

‘No.’ said the salesman bluntly after a cursory examination of the frame. ‘It’s silver plate.’ He handed it back to Patsy with what I can only describe as a sneer.

‘What about this?’ said Patsy, taking out the teddy bear.

‘It’s a teddy bear,’ said the salesman. He did not take the bear and Patsy was left holding it out to him. After a few moments she lowered her arm.

‘But surely old teddy bears can be worth a lot of money,’ I said.

‘Sometimes,’ said the salesman. ‘But that one isn’t.’ Patsy put the bear away and took out the toy car. ‘What about this?’ she asked, hesitantly.

‘Scrap,’ said the salesman impatiently. He waved an imperious hand. ‘All junk my dear.’ He was a nasty little man. I wanted to hit him. We left quickly.

‘Never mind,’ I said. ‘We can’t win them all. But it’s worth looking. And who knows what we’ll find next time?’

‘It’s not the fact that they aren’t worth anything,’ said Patsy. ‘But he was so hateful!’

I put my arms around her. ‘Do you want me to go back and hit him?’

Patsy laughed. ‘No!’ she said. ‘Of course not!’

‘Then let’s forget all about him,’ I said.

‘Let’s go and see the cobbler about your Gladstone bag,’ said Patsy, cheering up. She led me down an alley I didn’t even know existed and into a tiny courtyard where there were just four small shops. One of them was a cobbler’s.

The cobbler put the smile back onto both our faces. He greeted the bag like a long lost friend.

‘Wonderful!’ he said, clearly delighted. ‘I haven’t seen one of these for years.’

‘Can you mend it?’ asked Patsy.

‘Of course I can,’ said the cobbler. ‘It’ll be a pleasure!’

He fondled the cracked leather with the eye and finger of a craftsman.

‘The lock has completely broken,’ said Patsy.

‘I can mend it said the cobbler with certainty. He smiled at her. ‘You won’t recognise it when I’ve finished with it.’

‘How much will it cost?’ asked Patsy.

‘No more than you can afford,’ said the cobbler. He looked at us and must have seen the apprehension on our faces. ‘It won’t be more than £2.’ he promised. He smiled as our looks of apprehension were replaced by looks of relief. ‘I told you,’ he said. ‘It’ll be a pleasure to work on it.’

He told us to call back for it in a few days time. We left his shop with smiles on our faces and a bounce in our steps and walked hand in hand to a tea shop in Bear Street which made wonderful cakes and served large cinnamon scones smothered in butter.

* * *

When we got back to Bilbury Grange the carpet fitter had finished. He had done a wonderful job. It was starting to get late, but when Patsy called the cats in for their tea only Sophie appeared. Emily, our cute young mixed tabby with the pure white paws and the soft, faraway beguiling look in her eyes, didn’t come.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Patsy, who could see that I was worried.

‘She’s probably out hunting and too busy to come back for tea.’

I knew she was probably right. But it didn’t stop me worrying.

* * *

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I woke up at six the following morning desperately hoping to find Emily asleep alongside us. Sophie was there, curled up by Patsy's feet, but of Emily there was no sign.

I climbed quietly out of bed, hoping that I could do so without waking Patsy. Sophie pricked up her ears and opened one eye.

'Is she back?' murmured Patsy, still half asleep.

'No.'

Patsy sat up and opened her eyes. Sophie jumped down off the bed and sat, expectantly, on the floor. I drew the curtains and opened the window and blinked at the bright morning sunshine. Normally the view from our bedroom never failed to fill me with wonder and admiration but this morning I just peered out looking to see if I could see any sign of Emily. I saw a rabbit hopping along one of the paths and there were birds sitting and twittering on trees and bushes everywhere. I dressed quickly in shorts and a short sleeved shirt for since it was a Saturday morning I did not have to go to the surgery until an hour later than usual.

'Where do you think she can be?' asked Patsy. She too had dressed quickly in shorts and a short sleeved shirt, but the effect on her was far more dazzling. Her legs, arms and face had already been burned a rich, even brown by the summer sun which had also bleached her hair an even lighter shade of brown. Her short white shorts and white shirt contrasted strongly with the brown of her body.

'I'm going to go through every room in the house and all the outbuildings,' I said. 'She might have got herself shut in somewhere.' I had checked everywhere the night before but she could, I still hoped, have got herself shut in and fallen asleep somewhere.

'Maybe we should check the coach-house flat,' suggested Patsy. 'She could have wandered in there.'

'I'll have a look,' I said. 'But I don't think she would go in there.' Our two young kittens had already developed clearly defined personalities. Sophie liked people and would rub herself up against any pair of human legs. But Emily was shy and nervous and usually ran away and hid if she heard footsteps or voices that she didn't recognise. I didn't think for a moment that she would willingly have gone into the flat with a party of complete strangers.

'You do the cellars and the outbuildings,' said Patsy. 'I'll do inside the house.'

So we split up for our search.

The cellars, which were as always a cool and dark refuge from the bright summer sunshine (I had noticed that the temperature down there never seemed to change whatever the weather outside was doing, and understood at last why cellars were regarded as such a good place to store wine) took quite a long time to search because there were lots of small and secret places where a kitten could hide. I was worried that if Emily had injured herself she might have crawled into a dark corner in the way that animals do when they are ill. By the time I'd finished down there and had emerged, covered in dust and cobwebs, Patsy had just finished searching the house. Neither of us had any luck at all.

Patsy came outside to help me search the outbuildings.

The sun was still low but it was bright and the day was clearly going to be warmer even than its predecessors, but to us it seemed flat, grey and glum. All we could think of was the fact that Emily could be lying somewhere frightened, cold, injured, hungry and alone. She had stolen our hearts since she had come to live with us and neither of us could bear the thought of her being in any sort of distress.

In one of the stables, the one where I kept the lawn mower, we found that a pair of swallows had built a nest where two cross beams met. I hadn't noticed it before. The tails of two baby swallows were sticking out over the sides of the neatly made nest and we closed the door of the stable quietly so as not to disturb them. I didn't know how they'd been getting in and out but there wasn't any point in leaving the stable door open now for they clearly had an entrance and exit of their own.

By the time we had finished searching the outbuildings around the courtyard nearly an hour had passed.

Patsy put her hand in my mine as we walked together out of the courtyard calling Emily's name. 'I thought we'd have found her by now,' she said. 'I keep having this vision of her lying somewhere cosy and comfortable and looking so pleased to see us.'

I knew what she meant. Every time I had opened a door, peered behind a pile of rubbish or looked into a dark corner I had been convinced that I would see Emily there.

'Let's try the vegetable garden,' said Patsy suddenly. 'She might be somewhere in there.' We both knew that she loved the walled garden because it was sheltered and warm and yet full of shady spots.

As we walked into the walled garden we both heard it at the same moment: a faint yet unmistakeably plaintive miaowing that was coming from the direction of the greenhouse.

We ran along the broad, hard dusty paths that lay between the ornamental brickwork which bordered the flower and vegetable beds, towards the greenhouse. Patsy got there first and pulled open the door. It creaked and grated and protested for its hinges needed oiling and the door had slipped an inch or so and was scraping on the flagstones which made up the floor.

Emily, who was sitting on a pile of old thick, brown, paper, compost sacks piled in a corner of the greenhouse, stretched a leg when she saw us and miaowed even more loudly before. It was a miaow of pleasure and protest: pleasure at seeing us and protest at the fact that she had spent the night locked in. Judging by the indentation made on the sacks she had spent the night sleeping in that very same place.

Patsy went over to her and picked her up. Emily snuggled against her chest and purred loudly, rubbing her head against Patsy's shirt. I stroked her neck and she held her head so that I could tickle her under her chin. She purred even more loudly.

'How on earth do you think she got locked in?' asked Patsy.

'I shut the door yesterday evening,' I said guiltily. 'But I didn't see her in here then.' I looked around and then found another kitten shaped indentation on a pile of straw underneath a length of wooden staging that ran the whole length of the greenhouse. Emily must have been sleeping under there out of the sun and out of sight when I had gone out to the vegetable garden to water the plants and shut up the greenhouse.

'I'm sorry, Emily!' I said. She purred at me and reached out with a white paw to touch my arm. It was as though she was telling me that everything was all right and that she forgave me.

'Let's get you back to the house,' murmured Patsy to Emily. 'I bet you're hungry.'

'I bet she is!' I agreed.

I suddenly realised that I was hungry too. We'd been searching for Emily for over an hour and I hadn't yet had any breakfast. I felt as happy as I had felt sad an hour or so earlier.

* * *

Our new set of paying guests arrived that morning and by the time I arrived back from the morning surgery they were settled into the flat and had spread themselves over much of the courtyard too.

Mr and Mrs Onions ('pronounced oh-ny-ans' insisted Mr Onions the moment we met) had driven from London in their BMW motor car, and although they had only booked in for a week's holiday they seemed to have brought enough to last them three months. Patsy said that she'd been in the kitchen when they had arrived and she had seen Mr Onions carry at least eight suitcases up the spiral staircase to the flat. She said that the back of the car as well as the boot had been filled with luggage and that they had carried their largest cases on their roof rack. Diving equipment, golf clubs, riding boots and capes and tennis racquets in profusion were stacked neatly against the walls at the entrance to the courtyard.

When Mr Onions came to knock on the back door Patsy and I were just finishing a quick salad lunch before going out to spend the afternoon in the garden.

'Nice place you've got,' said Mr Onions. 'We've got friends in Cornwall who've got a house rather similar to this.' He paused and looked around critically at the peeling paint and the cracks in the mortar on the outside of the house. 'Of course,' he added, 'their house is in much better condition.'

He looked around again and turned to his wife. 'Much better, isn't it?'

'Oh definitely,' agreed Mrs Onions.

Mr Onions, who was rather plump faced and portly was wearing a beige safari suit with a cream shirt and a paisley muffler, and looked as though he was in his late twenties. His wife, who was as thin as a stick insect was wearing a spotless white dress with a plunging neckline and no back, and looked a few years younger. She was clearly not wearing a bra and yet her breasts seemed suspended in mid air. I suspected the influence of silicone.

'Well, I hope you have a nice stay here,' I said, after what had threatened to be an embarrassing silence.

'Would you like to come in for a cup of tea?' asked Patsy.

'That's very kind of you,' smiled Mrs Onions sweetly. She didn't wait to see what her husband said but stepped past me into the kitchen. She wore white patent leather shoes with the highest heels I'd ever seen and they click clacked noisily on our floor. Mr Onions followed her quickly as though half afraid that we might change our minds. He saw Sophie asleep on a cushion on one of our chairs. Emily, always the nervous kitten, who had spent the morning staying as close to Patsy as she could, had run out of the kitchen into the hall and then upstairs the moment she had heard voices outside the back door.

'Oh,' he said. 'A cat.'

'That's Sophie,' I said.

'I don't like cats very much,' said Mr Onions. 'They bring on my asthma.'

'Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.' I said.

Sophie leapt down off the chair and walked over to Mr Onions. She began to brush against his legs. He recoiled as though she were a cobra.

'I'll put her outside,' I said. I didn't really like doing it since it was more Sophie's kitchen than Mr Onions' but I felt my responsibility as a landlord. I picked Sophie up and slipped her through the door into the hall. Then I shut the door.

'Earl Grey tea with lemon, please,' said Mrs Onions as Patsy put the kettle on. 'You have got that, haven't you?'

Patsy blushed. ‘I’m afraid we’ve only got this,’ she said, holding up a pack of a well-known proprietary brand of tea. She looked at me and then back at Mrs Onions. ‘And I’m afraid I don’t have any lemon.’

‘Oh,’ said Mrs Onions, looking rather shocked. ‘We always keep at least half a dozen kinds of tea, don’t we Simon?’

Mr Onions agreed that they did. ‘I expect it’s difficult to get much variety out here,’ he said. ‘Though you could always have groceries brought in specially.’

‘Our friends in Cornwall have all their groceries posted down from Harrods,’ said Mrs Onions. ‘They say it’s the only way they can live down there.’

‘Will ordinary tea be all right?’ asked Patsy. She sounded rather sad and embarrassed and I felt angry with the Onions.

‘Oh yes, it’ll do for now,’ said Mrs Onions, somehow managing to sound even more patronising than she had before.

‘Did you have a good drive down?’ I asked Mr Onions. ‘Very good,’ replied our guest. ‘Three hours twenty minutes.’

‘That’s very good,’ I agreed.

‘I’ve got the new 3litre fuel-injected model,’ said Mr Onions. ‘I like to change my car every two years but I always stick with BMW.’ He raised an eyebrow. ‘What do you drive?’

‘A Morris Minor,’ I said. ‘Convertible.’ I added.

Mr Onions did not seem impressed by this. ‘I suppose you find that convenient for the lanes,’ he said.

‘It’s really all I can afford,’ I said. ‘But yes it is very convenient.’

‘Have you got anywhere we can store our things?’ asked Mr Onions. ‘We’ve got some rather valuable sporting equipment out there and there isn’t room in the flat.’ He looked at me and smiled but it wasn’t really a smile. ‘It’s rather smaller than we expected.’

‘You can put it into one of the barns,’ I said. ‘I’ll clear out some space for you.’

‘Is it secure?’

‘Oh yes.’ I said. ‘I should think so.’

‘Simon has just bought some new golf clubs,’ said Mrs Onions. ‘They cost over £300.’

‘Gosh.’ I said. ‘That seems a lot. I didn’t think golf clubs cost that much!’ I frowned. ‘In fact I’m sure I saw some in a shop in Barnstaple that were much less than that.’

‘Oh you can buy cheap ones,’ said Mrs Onions. ‘But these have rather fancy shafts and they’re endorsed.’ She mentioned the name of a golfer who had apparently just won a major trophy.

‘Ah.’ I said, not really understanding how that could make a set of golf clubs worth so much more.

‘Tea’s ready,’ said Patsy. She handed Mr and Mrs Onions mugs of tea. ‘Do either of you take sugar?’

Mrs Onions looked at the mug she had been handed and was now holding in two immaculately manicured hands.

‘Good heavens!’ she said. ‘I don’t think I’ve ever drunk tea out of anything quite like this before.’ She giggled nervously.

‘I don’t think I can hold it’ she said. Her husband reached across, took the mug from her and put it down on the kitchen table. He then took a sip from his mug, grimaced and put it down too.

‘Perhaps you’d be kind enough to show us where we can store our things, then?’ said Mr Onions, standing up. ‘I don’t like leaving them out in the open longer than necessary.’

‘It’ll be quite safe!’ said Patsy. ‘We don’t have any thieves around here.’

Mr Onions looked at her pityingly. ‘There are thieves everywhere,’ he said severely.

I followed the two of them outside and then found them a place in one of the stables where they could store their sporting equipment. Mr Onions insisted that the stable be locked so I had to drive down to Peter Marshall’s shop to buy a padlock and chain.

* * *

We spent the rest of the day in the garden.

First, we weeded the strawberries, the lettuce and the other crops we’d sown. Then we continued clearing away the brambles and nettles, though for this we had to go indoors and change into thicker clothes. We were both soon soaked with sweat. I lit a huge bonfire and the heat and smoke from that made us even hotter.

When the thunderstorm came at a few minutes after five o’clock we were, I think, both secretly pleased. Apart from cooling us down, it also gave us a good excuse to stop. We had only been gardening for about three hours but we were both absolutely exhausted. We went into the house and slumped onto chairs in the kitchen. Patsy had made a pitcher of orange juice and we emptied it completely in just a few minutes. I was leaning back on my chair, with my bare feet resting on the edge of the table when suddenly my chair slipped and I crashed backwards into the wall.

‘Are you all right?’ cried Patsy, rushing over to help me up.

‘I’m fine!’ I said. I looked around. ‘But the wall isn’t!’ I said, extricating my elbow from the hole it had made in what we had both thought was a solid wall.

We both looked at the hole. The wall that my elbow had penetrated was merely a sheet of hardboard that had been covered in wallpaper and then painted white to match the rest of the kitchen.

'I wonder what's behind it said Patsy. 'What do you think they covered up?'

'It's probably just an alcove.' I said. I poked my fingers into the hole I'd made and could feel nothing but space. I looked around the kitchen, could see nothing useful and slipped outside into the courtyard. Moments later I returned with a short pea stick I'd found. I poked the cane through the hole, expecting to reach a solid wall within a few inches. But the cane just kept on disappearing. 'There's an enormous hole!' I said, astonished.

'Let's see what's there!' said Patsy, excitedly.

I looked at the hardboard wall and then at the rest of the kitchen. We still hadn't decorated the kitchen so it didn't really matter very much if we made a mess. And once we had decorated we would never find out what was hidden behind the hardboard partition wall.

'O.K!' I said. I poked a couple of fingers through the existing hole and pulled. A huge piece of thin hardboard came away in my hand and I could see that it had been nailed onto a wooden frame. It took no more than two or three minutes to strip away enough of the hardboard to make a hole big enough to climb through. Patsy handed me the torch that she'd fetched from a cupboard by the back door and I crept through the hole into a large alcove.

'What's there?' called Patsy, peering through the hole behind me.

'An oven!'I said. 'A huge old oven.'

Patsy climbed through the hole in the hardboard and joined me.

'It's an Aga!' she said.

We gazed in astonishment at the huge old stove that had been boarded up. It was covered in dust and there were massive spider's webs hanging all around it.

'Do you think it will work?' I asked Patsy, rather doubtfully.

'Of course it will!' said Patsy without a moment's hesitation. 'There isn't anything not to work. They're wonderful!' She sounded really excited and put an arm around my waist and hugged me. She looked up at me and her eyes were sparkling. 'You just wait she said, laughing. 'My mum's got one of these and I learnt to cook on it. You wait until you taste my bread and my rock buns!'

I hugged her back, brushed a wisp of hair away from her face and then lowered my head and kissed her softly on the lips. 'Have I told you yet today how much I love you?'

'Yes!' nodded Patsy. 'But I don't mind you telling me again.'

* * *

It took me less than half an hour to rip down the rest of the partition which had separated the stove from the rest of the kitchen. I piled up the broken pieces of hardboard in the courtyard and stacked the wooden laths in a corner of one of the stables where I had started to store bits and pieces of useful fire wood.

When we had bought Bilbury Grange I had been surprised at the amount of junk that had been stored in the barns, stables and outhouses. Much of it we had burned or thrown out. I had filled a skip with old chimney pots, unsorted lengths of wire, leaky wellington boots, bald tractor tyres, pieces of broken sewer pipe, neatly tied bundles of newspapers and magazines, empty paint cans, wooden apple boxes, lengths of half perished rubber hose, empty fertiliser and feed bags, panes of glass and empty wine bottles. But now those same barns, stables and outhouses were groaning again with our own variety of rubbish. When the roofers had taken off the old worm-ridden battens and replaced them with new, pressure treated timbers I had begun to throw the old battens onto our constantly burning bonfire but Thumper had stopped me. He had pointed out that if we broke up the battens into short, two foot lengths and then stored the short pieces of dry wood in an outhouse they would make excellent fire-lighting fodder. I had learned that in the country everything - however worthless it may seem to be - has its use. Old chimney pots can be used to force rhubarb. An old and rather rusty water tank made an excellent garden incinerator. Old seed sacks can be used to store potatoes. Leaky garden hose can be used to water plants in several parts of the garden at once and old newspapers can be converted into compost.

Even I could not think of a use for broken pieces of hardboard. But the wooden framework to which they had been nailed clearly was worth keeping. With nine working fire places Bilbury Grange was going to need a lot of fuel to keep it warm in winter.

By the time I had finished clearing away the useless broken hardboard and storing the useful wooden laths, Patsy had finished removing most of the cobwebs and the worst of the dust and our new, enlarged kitchen had begun to look much more respectable.

Patsy said that she wanted to give the Aga a final clean so I said I would go upstairs and start running a couple of baths full of hot water. My clothes were filthy so I stripped in the kitchen and put my jeans, shirt, socks and underpants straight into the washing machine. I left my shoes standing by the back door and tiptoed upstairs naked.

The twin cast iron baths in the bathroom next to our bedroom were both huge and they were fed by massive brass taps through which water gushed at a rate of several gallons a minute. These were no ordinary taps. These taps were well over an inch across at the point where the water came out. Even on a warm day water from the cold tap was icy. It would, I suppose, have been nice if water from the hot tap had poured out amidst scalding clouds of steam. But, rather disappointingly, it didn't. Our hot water was provided by an electric immersion heater which struggled to cope with the huge hot water tank. As I waited for the two baths to fill I wondered if our newly discovered Aga could be plumbed into the hot water system.

I went to fetch two towels from the airing cupboard above the hot water tank on the landing but decided that if I waited until Patsy came upstairs the towels would stay warmer for longer. I love drying myself on a new fluffy, warm towel. It is, I think, my favourite luxury.

A couple of minutes later, I turned off the four taps and clambered into one of the baths. I'd done a lot of work and every muscle in my body seemed to ache. A shower may be the most efficient, refreshing and hygienic way to cleanse the human body, but a hot bath is much, much more than a way of washing off the dirt. A hot bath is a chance to return to the womb for a few minutes.

I was floating on my back in the bath relaxing in the warm water, with just my face and my toes above water, when I heard a muffled shout from somewhere below me. With a splash I lowered my body and raised my head. I shook the water from my ears and listened again. I could hear Patsy calling my name. I shouted back to ask her what the trouble was but heard her shout get louder as she came closer. Moments later she burst into the bathroom. She had clearly finished cleaning the Aga for she too had taken off most, but not quite all, of her clothes.

'There's a... phone call... for you!' she said, rather out of breath through having run up the stairs.

'Oh damn!' I said, rather uncharitably. 'What's wrong?'

I had assumed that the caller was a patient and that I would have to abandon my bath. 'It isn't a patient,' said Patsy. 'It's a doctor.'

'A doctor?' I frowned. I couldn't think why a doctor should be ringing me at home.

'He said his name was Dr Robinson,' said Patsy. 'He said you'd know what it was about.'

I racked my brains trying to remember who Dr Robinson was. And then I remembered that Dr Robinson was the senior partner in the practice in the Midlands.

'It's the job!' I cried, leaping out of the bath onto the cold linoleum. Apart from the two baths, a wooden towel rail and a single, blue painted wooden chair, the bathroom was empty. There were lace curtains hanging over the windows on a wire and the floor was covered in a thin, cracked layer of green and blue patterned linoleum but that was about it. I instinctively jumped about as my feet hit the cold floor. Drops of water flew in all directions, leaving puddles everywhere. I looked around for a towel but couldn't see one and then remembered that I hadn't fetched them from the airing cupboard.

'The job in the Midlands?' asked Patsy, following me as I headed for the bathroom door, leaving clear wet footprints on the floor.

'Yes!' I cried, over my shoulder. In my heart I didn't really want the job. I didn't want to even think about leaving Bilbury.

But I didn't seem to have a lot of alternative employment possibilities to contemplate. Still naked and dripping I hurried down the stairs and into the reception room where our old-fashioned black Bakelite telephone sat in solitary splendour on an upturned packing case. I could hear Patsy running along the landing above me and wondered where she had gone.

I picked up the telephone receiver. 'I'm sorry to have kept you,' I apologised, hoping that the caller hadn't got fed up and cut the connection.

'Oh, hello,' murmured Dr Robinson. He told me his name.

He had a distinctive public school drawl which I found vaguely annoying.

'I was in the bath,' I explained, still rather breathless. I half turned my head as I heard Patsy coming down the stairs, looked up and saw that she was carrying a bath towel in her hand. She saw me and suddenly started to giggle. I looked up at her and raised an eyebrow. I didn't see why she was giggling. I was shivering.

'We'd like you to come for an interview,' said Dr Robinson.

'On Wednesday at noon.'

'Oh!' I said, surprised. 'Thank you.'

'You do have a wife, don't you?' He made the word 'wife' sound like a possession. A chromium plated, deluxe accessory. 'Oh yes.' I replied. My beautiful young wife was sitting on the stairs above me dressed only in her very revealing underwear. She was laughing so much that she had to stuff a corner of the towel into her mouth. I still didn't know why she was laughing but it was infectious and I was having difficulty in keeping a straight face.

'Can you bring her with you? We'd like to meet her. There isn't any need for her to dress up in anything formal. Just ask her to come as she is.'

'Certainly,' I agreed. I had to bite the inside of my cheek quite hard to stop myself from giggling. I wondered if Dr Robinson would have been so keen to meet us both if he had been able to see us at that moment. I just managed to stop myself laughing for long enough to say 'goodbye' and to remember to thank Dr Robinson for the invitation. The moment I put the telephone receiver down I burst out laughing.

When she saw that I had finished on the telephone Patsy pulled the towel out of her mouth and rushed down to throw it around my shoulders.

'I'm sorry!' she apologised, controlling herself for an instant. 'But you looked so funny standing there in the nude talking so seriously on the telephone.' She stood in front of me like a naughty school girl and then burst out laughing again.

'We've got an interview,' I told her. 'On Wednesday.' I paused. 'Dr Robinson says there isn't any need for you to dress up. You can come as you are.' Patsy looked down at herself and the giggling got so bad that we both had to sit down on the floor.

It was several minutes before we climbed back up the stairs to the bathroom and by then the water in our twin baths had gone quite unpleasantly tepid. Washing ourselves in cool water soon put a temporary stop to our jolly mood.

* * *

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Mr Yardley had a broken nose.

'What on earth happened to you?' I asked him, carefully examining his fractured and misshapen proboscis. There was dried blood all over him; on his face, on his shirt and on his jacket.

Mr Yardley looked embarrassed and clearly didn't want to tell me. 'Ith werry dithiculk do breeth,' he told me. 'Cad you do somefink adoud id?'

I told him I would have to arrange for him to see someone at the hospital. 'Your nose needs surgery,' I told him. 'But the doctors at the hospital will want to know how you did it.'

'I hid id,' said Mr Yardley suddenly.

I stared at him for a moment. '*You* hitit?'

He nodded.

'Why?'

'Do make id dweed.'

I decided that although, on the surface, the conversation seemed to be taking a distinctly surrealistic turn there was a certain almost acceptable logic in it all. After all, 'To make it bleed.' seemed as sensible an answer as one could expect to the question: 'Why did you hit yourself on the nose?'

'I didn'd mead do hid id thad hard,' explained Mr Yardley, clearly noticing my surprise. 'I didn'd thing id would dreak.'

'No,' I agreed. 'Of course not.' I stared at him for a few moments. 'But why,' I asked him slowly, 'did you want to make it bleed?'

Mr Yardley looked hurt as well as puzzled. 'I didn'd wand do dake dose dills you dave me,' he explained. 'Bud you said thad if I made id dweed thad would brink de pressure down.'

'Why didn't you want to take the pills I gave you?' I asked him.

'You said dey could addect my sex life,' replied Mr Yardley instantly and rather indignantly.

I nodded. 'But it's a fairly uncommon side effect,' I said.

'It doesn't happen to everyone.' I looked at him in amazement. He did not look like a man to whom an active sex life was a vital ingredient of life. 'Did it affect you?' I asked him.

He shook his head firmly. 'Oh do,' he said. He wet his lower lip with a tongue which was covered in a thick brown fur and which looked as if it needed Hoovering. 'Bud I didn't wand do dake thad risk.'

I resisted the instinctive temptation to recoil, raised a questioning eyebrow and waited.

'Id's twendy dree years since I had,' he paused and winked, 'you know.' He winked again to make sure that I understood and then wet his upper lip. 'Bud you neder know when id's going do be your luddy day do you?'

I just stared at him.' So you hit yourself on the nose?'

He nodded.

'What with?'

'A dlick.'

'You hit yourself on the nose with a brick to make yourself bleed so that your blood pressure would come down?'

He smiled at me, rather proudly.

'And you didn't want to take the blood pressure pills I prescribed because even though you haven't had sex for twenty three years you were worried that they might make you impotent?'

Mr Yardley smiled. 'Thad's id!' He nodded, clearly pleased that I understood.

I wasn't so sure that I did understand, but I knew that I would enjoy writing the referral letter which I would have to give Mr Yardley to take with him to the hospital.

* * *

'I really don't want to leave Bilbury,' I explained to Dr Brownlow. 'Neither of us does. But things are looking pretty glum. It looks as if Sherlock has got this fellow Perkins in his pocket.'

Dr Brownlow was sitting in his greenhouse tending to his tomato plants and I don't think I had ever seen him look quite so miserable.

'I feel really bad,' he said. 'If I'd known all this was going to happen I wouldn't have dreamt of offering you the practice.'

'Oh, please don't think that!' I said. 'If you hadn't I probably wouldn't have had the nerve to ask Patsy to marry me and I certainly wouldn't have bought Bilbury Grange.' I looked straight at him. 'I've got no regrets,' I told him. 'Nor has Patsy.' It was true, too. Neither of us had any regrets. We had shared a dream and we had, for a few magical months, lived our dream.

'But if you have to leave you'll have to sell up,' Dr Brownlow pointed out.

'I know. But at least we had a try...' I shrugged and tried to sound as if it didn't really matter too much, but it did, and I don't think I hid it very well. I had hesitated about telling Dr Brownlow the truth about what was happening in the village largely because I knew that he would feel guilty, as if it was somehow his fault, but now I could no longer keep the secret from him. I had to tell him that I was going up to the Midlands for a job interview at another practice. Apart from it being the courteous thing to do (I didn't want him to find out from someone else) I could only go if he would look after the patients for me for the day.

'I feel sorry for you and I feel sorry for the villagers,' said Dr Brownlow. 'And if the truth be known I feel sorry for myself too.'

I looked at him.

'I've heard these rumours about expanding the village,' he told me. 'I hoped they weren't true.' He shrugged. 'If that fellow Sherlock gets his way...' He shook his head.

'The new houses shouldn't interfere too much with you,' I told him. 'They're planning to build on the other side of the village.'

'They'll put me out of business,' said Dr Brownlow firmly. 'If they build all those new houses they'll need more water. And they're bound to put a compulsory purchase order on my underground supply. It would provide the whole village with water.'

We neither of us spoke for a few moments.

'I'm sorry,' I said at last. 'I hadn't even thought of that.'

Dr Brownlow shrugged. 'If I was younger I'd fight them,' he said. 'But...' He waved a hand around weakly and left the sentence unfinished. He put down his watering can. 'It's you and Patsy I really feel sorry for.'

Don't,' I said. 'We'll survive.'

'I know you will.'

'I don't want to run away,' I said. 'But I've got to think about looking after Patsy.' I swallowed. 'If I agree to stay, the village will be ruined and I don't think I'll be able to live with myself. So that's out. And if I oppose the new plans to expand the village they'll close down the practice and I'll be out of a job.' I shrugged and tried to laugh. 'It isn't a great choice... '

'I know,' said Dr Brownlow softly. He reached out and touched the back of my hand. 'Go up to Birmingham or wherever it is on Wednesday,' he said. 'Of course, I'll look after the practice for you.'

'Thank you.'

'And good luck,' said Dr Brownlow. He looked me directly in the eye. 'I really mean that,' he said. 'I'm sad that you can't stay here in Bilbury. But I do wish you well.'

I could feel tears forming in my eyes and I had to leave him quickly. I didn't even manage to say 'thank you.'

* * *

When I got back home Patsy had lit the Aga. The heat from it hit me as I walked into the house.

'Phew!' I said, taking off my jacket and tie and hanging them over the back of a chair. 'Isn't it a bit early for this?' 'I wanted to see if it worked properly,' Patsy explained.

'Does it?'

She nodded. 'It's brilliant!' she told me. 'And it does heat our hot water.' She crossed the kitchen to the sink and turned on the hot tap. 'Look!' There was a rumbling noise from somewhere else in the house and then, in a great rush, steam and boiling hot water burst out of the tap and splashed down into the sink. I had to dilute an inch of hot water with six inches of cold before I could bear to dip my hands into the sink to wash them.

'No more tepid baths?'

'No more tepid baths!'

'Does the oven work?'

'Ovens!' said Patsy, correcting me. 'There are two of them. And, yes, they both work.' She waved a hand towards the table. 'Sit down.'

I sat down and she brought me a wonderful piping hot potato and vegetable pie that she had made. For pudding she had prepared a gooseberry pie. When I told her that I hadn't ever eaten better cooking I wasn't exaggerating. I couldn't remember ever seeing Patsy look so pleased.

'Aren't you lucky!' she said, smiling. 'Some women get turned on by diamonds. Some want fur coats. All you have to give me to make me happy is an Aga cooker.'

I was delighted to see her so happy, but I couldn't forget the fact that in two days we were driving up to the Midlands and that if I got the job I had applied for, the Aga would be just another Bilbury memory.

* * *

I went outside afterwards, intending to cut the lawns. But the young swallows were still sitting in their nest in the stable where I kept the mower. I didn't want to frighten them by starting up the mower so I left it where it was. The grass would have to wait a while. I cared far more about the swallows than about having neatly manicured lawns.

* * *

At eight o'clock that evening Patsy and I attended the meeting in the Bilbury Village Hall to discuss Mr Sherlock's proposed development in the village.

Ever since the proposal had become public knowledge, conversation in the village shop and the Duck and Puddle had centred around little else. When Patsy and I arrived at five to eight the hall was bursting at the seams, and from the atmosphere in the hall it was clear that everyone in the village had strong views about the proposal. I could see Thumper and Anne, Dr Brownlow, Peter Marshall, Miss Johnson, Patsy's father Mr Kennett, Gilly from the Duck and Puddle and Kay the district nurse.

On the stage at the far end of the village hall a man and a woman sat on folding wooden chairs behind a wooden trestle table with a rather murky carafe of water and a single grubby looking glass in front of them.

The woman was Miss Turner, a retired school mistress and sportswoman who, despite the fact that she neither lived in nor had any great contact with the village, was now our official representative on the county council. She was well into her seventies; she wore a grey tweed suit and was as tall and as rigid in her thinking as she was in her posture. More importantly, she was also a member of the planning committee which seemed enthusiastic about Mr Sherlock's proposals. I suspected that she was keen on the new eighteen hole golf course he was planning.

The man was Mr Rutter, a rotund and likeable sheep farmer who owned fifty or sixty acres of land and rented another couple of hundred acres in and around the village. Mr Rutter, the father of five beautiful teenage daughters, was chairman of our local parish council. He wore, as he always did, the greasy peaked flat cap that he wore whatever the weather and almost wherever he was. I had once visited at home when he was suffering from a bad back during the lambing season and I'd found him in bed still wearing his cap. The only time I had seen him without it he had been in church at the funeral of an old friend.

Mr Rutter began the meeting by banging his fist on the table and very nearly upsetting the water carafe.

'You all know why you're here,' he said gruffly. 'It's this development they're planning.' Mr Rutter didn't believe in beating about the bush and although his honest and straightforward manner meant that he had no chance of ever succeeding in big time local politics he was immensely popular among the villagers. 'This fellow Sherlock wants to build a housing estate and holiday homes in the village. We have to decide whether we want it. I think we should have a vote.'

'Oh, just one moment!' interrupted Miss Turner, who sounded quite dismayed. 'Don't you think we should discuss the issue first?'

'What for?' demanded Mr Rutter, with a frown.

'To acquaint the people with the facts!' replied Miss Turner.

She had an unfortunately squeaky voice which made her something of a laughing stock in the village and she had attained her high political office largely through apathy as no one had ever bothered to stand against her.

'Let's have a vote!' insisted Mr Rutter, who clearly wanted to dispense with the formalities as speedily as possible.

'We can't possibly have a vote until the people have heard the facts!' insisted Miss Turner.

'The facts are simple,' said Mr Rutter, banging his right fist into the palm of his left hand. 'Fact one: this fellow Sherlock wants to build his damned houses all over our village.

Fact two: we don't want him here.' He stared out at the audience in the village hall as his words were greeted with great cheers of approval and support.

'That's quite outrageous!' said Miss Turner who had turned rather pale. 'The planning committee considered the economic effects of Mr Sherlock's proposals at considerable length and we came to the clear conclusion that his proposals were essential to the future prosperity of the area.' She stood up, fastened her jacket and cleared her throat. 'There is no doubt that if these plans go ahead the nature of Bilbury will change,' she said. 'But the village will benefit enormously...'

Mr Rutter, who had been listening carefully, shook his head violently.

'Yes it will!' insisted Miss Turner. 'And it would be foolish to deny it. She raised her left hand, and with her right hand took hold of her little finger. 'First and most important,' she said, 'the village will become far more prosperous. There will be more employment and more money coming into the village.'

'We don't want their bloody money!' shouted someone out of the audience. I couldn't see who it was but the comment was received with an approving cheer.

'You may not want their money but some people in the village probably need it,' said Mrs Turner, blustering on regardless. She paused and leant forwards with her hands resting on the trestle table. 'Most of you rely on two sources of income: farming and tourism. Making a living out of both of these is getting harder and harder.'

There were a few isolated murmurs of approval.

'Second,' said Miss Turner, taking hold of another finger, 'to all that, you have to add the fact that if Sherlock builds new homes then there will be better facilities. There will probably be a decent, regular bus service into Barnstaple and maybe into Ilfracombe as well instead of the twice a week service you've got now. There will be more shops and there will be a new petrol station built on the Combe Martin road. There will also be a new surgery.'

Mr Rutter stood up and interrupted her.

She paused and lifted her head a fraction higher. The cords in her neck stood out like hawsers. 'It is of paramount importance that the villagers be acquainted with all the facts if they are to make an informed decision.'

'Balderdash!' said Mr Rutter. I had never heard anyone say 'balderdash' before in real life. He stood up. 'Let's have a vote about whether we want to have to listen to any more of Miss Turner's facts.'

He turned and glowered at her. 'Do you have any objection to that?' He put a lot of emphasis on the word 'that'. There was another roar of approval from the villagers who took a certain simple pride in their capacity for bias and prejudice.

Miss Turner, who could hardly object to such a straightforward example of democracy in action, murmured something inaudible, pursed her lips as though she had mistakenly put a slice of lemon in her mouth and shook her head.

'Right!' said Mr Rutter. 'Hands up all those who are opposed to this fellow Sherlock's plan to build all over Bilbury and don't want to hear any more of Miss Turner's facts.' He looked around, with ill-concealed delight, at the forest of hands which filled the hall. 'Right. And now - hands up anyone who doesn't realise what a bloody disgrace the plans are and wants to hear more from Miss Turner.' This time not a single hand was raised.

'There you are!' said Mr Rutter. 'Now are you satisfied?'

Miss Turner, who had turned bright red, did not say anything but, instead, chose to take a close interest in the village hall ceiling.

'So now we can get down to the real business of the evening,' said Mr Rutter. 'Which is - how are we going to stop this bugger Sherlock from ruining our village?' He looked down into the audience, saw someone who brought a smile of recognition to his face, pointed and called him up onto the stage. With great reluctance, and a helping heave from a burly farmer whose name I couldn't remember but whose capacious brown corduroy trousers hid, I remembered, a fine collection of ripe haemorrhoids, Dr Brownlow clambered up to join him.

'I've invited Dr Brownlow onto the stage this evening because you all know him...,' began Mr Rutter.

'...he delivered most of us!' shouted an anonymous male voice in the crowd.

'...and probably wishes he hadn't!' said Mr Rutter, instantly, holding up a hand to stifle any further heckling.

'And because I know he's got something important to say.'

Dr Brownlow stood up and faced the audience. For a moment he said nothing, though his silence was, I felt sure, either inspired by emotion or by a determination to speak only when he knew what he was going to say. It certainly was not inspired by shyness. When he did speak his voice was low but the atmosphere in the village hall was electric and he could be heard easily. The people of Bilbury respected and trusted him and very much wanted to hear what he had to say.

'I am totally opposed to Sherlock's plans,' he said to loud and predictable cheers. 'But you have to understand that if we reject the Sherlock building project then there will be some pretty awesome consequences. For one thing Bilbury will no longer have a doctor of its own.'

This clearly came of something of a surprise to many and there were loud cries of 'Why?' from around the floor. 'I'm going to let my successor answer that,' said Dr Brownlow, holding up a hand.

He beckoned to me to go up and join him on the stage. I didn't want to go but the way things stood I knew that I really didn't have much option. Patsy gave my hand a squeeze and I threaded my way through the villagers and climbed up onto the stage. My heart was beating so loudly by the time I reached Dr Brownlow's side that I felt sure that everyone must be able to hear it.

I explained what I knew. I told the villagers that if I agreed to go and work in the new surgery that Mr Sherlock planned to build then the village would continue to have its own medical practice, but if the villagers successfully opposed plans for the new development then Bilbury would lose its doctor and the practice which Dr Brownlow had founded would be closed.

This news was received by the audience in silence.

After a moment or two Mr Rutter turned to me. 'May I ask you, doctor,' he began, speaking very quietly, 'about your own personal feelings. You have a considerable interest in the Sherlock plans - probably as great as any of us here even though you're a newcomer to the village - so what do you think?'

I didn't need to think about my reply. 'I think we should oppose the Sherlock plans,' I said firmly. 'If we allow him to go ahead and build all over Softly's Bottom and Bluebell Wood then the village of Bilbury will be ruined for ever. It will never, ever be the same again. But if we manage to stop Sherlock's plans then the village will stay the same, apart from the fact that it will lose its surgery and the villagers will have to travel into Barnstaple for medical attention.' I paused. 'That will be sad and it will be inconvenient but it won't ruin Bilbury.' I said. 'And that need not necessarily be a permanent problem,' I added. 'It is possible that at some future time it will be possible to re-open the surgery.' I paused again for a moment for something had just occurred to me. 'Under the Health Service regulations,'

I said, 'The practice in Barnstaple which takes over Bilbury will be responsible for providing night time and emergency cover. Villagers will still be entitled to call out a doctor if they need help and can't get into the surgery. It will be up to people in the village to decide how often they need to call a doctor out.'

'So,' said Mr Rutter who had understood exactly what I was getting at, 'if the practice in Barnstaple finds that it gets called out a great deal they may decide that they no longer want to be responsible for us?'

'Exactly,' I agreed. 'In which case Bilbury will probably get its doctor back. Or at the very least the practice in Barnstaple will start to do surgeries out here.' I looked around.

'Maybe here in the village hall. Or in the Duck and Puddle.'

'Doctor, can I ask you what you've decided to do?' asked Mr Rutter.

'I've told Mr Sherlock that I will have nothing to do with his plans,' I said. 'I will not work in his new surgery.'

'Even though that means putting yourself out of a job?'

I nodded.

'Thank you doctor! That's all good enough for me,' said Mr Rutter. 'Sit yourself down.' He pointed to a spare chair at the back of the stage. I sat down. 'No,' he said, 'bring it over here.' He waved me forwards to join him, Miss Turner and Dr Brownlow at the table. Dr Brownlow had already found a chair of his own. He winked at me as I sat down beside him.

'So,' said Mr Rutter, rubbing his hands together, 'now all we've got to do is make it clear to the authorities that we don't want that fellow Sherlock bringing his damned bulldozers and his bricklayers into Bilbury.'

Peter Marshall wanted us to dump tractor loads of manure on the council office steps in Barnstaple. Thumper thought we should simply park old vehicles around the village to create a barricade. And Gilly from the pub suggested that we withhold our rates until the council agreed to reject Sherlock's plans. Mr Rutter carefully wrote down all these suggestions on the back of a seed catalogue. Miss Turner just sat and looked cross, something at which she seemed to have had a lot of practice.

But while I had been speaking I had an idea which I thought would work quite well without any of us having to break the law. But a public meeting in the village hall wasn't the place to share my thoughts and so for the time being I kept them to myself.

* * *

CHAPTER NINETEEN

We left home at seven on the morning we were due to be interviewed for the job in the Midlands. (Theoretically I was the one who was going to be interviewed, but my conversation with the senior partner had made it pretty clear that my wife would be interviewed too).

We were both dressed for the occasion in our Sunday best.

I wore a woollen shirt with a faint red and brown check woven into the material, my faithful old sports jacket, best grey flannel trousers (I had put a little shoe polish onto the leather elbow patches on the sleeves of the jacket) and my old medical school tie (a blue, grey and yellow concoction which was the only tie I had which did not have any stains on it). Patsy wore her new, white dress - the one which she had converted from the old wedding gown. Because it was chilly she also wore a white cardigan which had two small patch pockets on the front and which was fastened with small pearl coloured buttons. On her feet she wore pretty white sandals and around her neck she wore, as she always did, a simple gold locket which I had given to her on our wedding day. Patsy brought with her a small box of Bilbury Grange strawberries and a bag of her home-made rock buns to eat on the journey.

We were both very nervous.

I had never been to a proper job interview before. When I had accepted the job as assistant to Dr Brownlow I had been interviewed by telephone and the whole thing had taken just a few seconds. And Patsy, I discovered, had never been outside North Devon before.

We drove westwards from Bilbury to Lynton and then took the coast road through Porlock and Dunster before turning inland and heading through Bridgwater towards Westonsuper-Mare. The traffic was light, and although our Morris Minor only had a rather small engine, which meant that it had seemed to take for ever to climb up the long, steep, Countisbury Hill out of Lynmouth, it seemed to love the twisting, turning lanes along which our journey took us.

Just before Bristol we stopped for breakfast at a roadside cafe where a jovial man in a red plaid shirt and dark green trousers served us both with plates full of scrambled eggs and mushrooms. We ate with great pleasure and followed it with plenty of fresh toast and marmalade. We washed it all down with huge mugs of tea. After breakfast I put the hood down and we drove on past Bristol, through Gloucester, where we filled up the car with petrol at a garage where a small, wizened man in a freshly starched white coat served us and told us that it was going to rain and that we should put our hood up, through Cheltenham, where we got lost and drove twice down the main street, and then through Evesham, where we each ate one of Patsy’s rock buns.

Our journey had taken us through some of England’s most beautiful scenery: rolling hills, fields full of ripening crops and hedgerows studded with huge oaks, sycamore and elm and dotted with dancing, scarlet poppies and massive, purple foxgloves. Patsy who had no idea what to expect had been more than pleasantly surprised by it all.

But after Leamington Spa the view from the Morris changed dramatically.

Instead of fields and hedgerows the road was lined with houses, shops and factories. Instead of cows and sheep, grazing in meadows which were yellow with buttercups, we were surrounded by pedestrians scurrying about their business and by businessmen hurrying to work. Instead of being fresh and clean, the air we breathed in became heavy with car exhaust fumes and factory smoke. For the first time we found ourselves sitting in long lines of slow moving traffic. Patsy had never seen anything like it. Even in Barnstaple, the biggest town in North Devon, traffic jams usually only happen in the height of summer and then usually consist of little more than half a dozen cars, a tractor and either a car towing a caravan or a coach full of holiday-makers. Eventually we stopped and put up the hood in a vain attempt to shut out some of the dirt and the noise.

‘What’s the name of this town?’ asked Patsy, as we drove on and on along endless roads which seemed to have no beginnings, no ends and no names.

I had to confess that I didn’t know. I knew only that we had now entered the industrial Midlands and were still heading for, and getting ever closer to, Mettleham.

In Devon the towns and villages are clearly separated from one another by fields and acres of green land. Here in the industrial wastelands there were no such natural separations. The villages had all grown into towns and the towns had all grown into one another.

Mettleham was a typical, small town. It had developed around a single coal mine in the nineteenth century, and in the twentieth century had grown around a car factory. The mine now employed no more than a couple of hundred men, but the car factory had continued to grow and had spawned a huge number of smaller but dependent factories where skilled workmen made tyres, lighting equipment, car seats and all the other bits and pieces which the big factory needed. Nearly everyone in Mettleham was dependent upon the car industry for their weekly pay packets, monthly salary cheques or twice yearly dividends. The high street had its own branches of all the big stores and was undistinguishable from all the other high streets in the area.

There was a statue of a long forgotten local hero sitting proudly on a horse in front of a sooty library; an ugly local council building in sixties block, steel and glass style and a small extravagantly gated park with neat but strangely subdued flower beds, tarmacadam paths and a long list of forbidden activities pasted up on a series of huge boards.

Apart from these inevitable and essential ingredients the town seemed to have dedicated itself to the internal combustion engine in general and to the motor car in particular. Every lamp post was decorated with instructions, exhortations and threats; every pavement was decorated with parking meters and the air was blue with carbon monoxide and the expletives of motorists. Pedestrians were prevented from interfering with the flow of the traffic by miles of grey steel tubing.

With helpful advice from a woman with a pushchair containing a fractious child we arrived at our target, the Mettlesham Health Centre, at fifteen minutes to twelve. The original building had been a fairly ordinary Victorian terraced house but an ugly two storey extension in concrete had been added where a garage or conservatory had once been. There was a brass plate attached to a wooden board beside the front door to the house.

I parked the Morris in a small space between a huge Volvo and a Rover, but before I had chance to turn off the engine a woman in a white coat came hurrying out of the front door.

She had blue hair and wore the largest pair of spectacles I had ever seen. She had a row of pens in her top pocket and carried another pen in her hand. I wound down my window as she approached.

'You can't park there!' she said. 'Can't you read?' She pointed to a huge red and white sign fastened to the wall which said 'DOCTORS ONLY'.

'I am a doctor,' I explained.

The woman in the white coat glowered at me. 'You're not one of our doctors,' she said firmly. She had a large wart an inch to the right of her mouth and a thin but clearly visible moustache.

'No,' I agreed. 'I've come for an interview. We've just driven up from Devon.'

'Well you can't park here,' snapped the receptionist. 'Dr Evans will be here in a minute and you're in his space.'

'Where can I park?' I asked.

'Anywhere but here,' she said. She waved a hand at me, indicating that I should reverse out of the space in which I had parked, and that I should do so as quickly as possible. Wearily, I put the car into reverse, backed out of the tiny car park and, with difficulty, out into the never ending stream of traffic. A lorry driver banged his fist on his horn and an elderly woman in steel rimmed spectacles and a Hillman Minx mouthed what seemed like obscenities at me. Only when I had gone did the woman in the white coat turn and disappear back into the building.

As I drove out I saw a second Volvo turn into the car park and sweep into the space I had just vacated.

'She wasn't very nice,' said Patsy. She reached out and put her hand on my arm. I looked across at her. She looked as frightened and as out of place as I felt. Not for the first time since we had left Devon I began to wonder if I had been hasty in turning down the job that Sherlock had offered me.

'No,' I agreed. 'She wasn't.'

It took us twenty minutes to find a parking space in a multistorey car park and ten minutes to walk back to the Health Centre.

'I've come for an interview,' I told the receptionist who eventually answered my knock on the small hatch in the waiting room. She was in her early twenties and underneath her white coat, which was unfastened, she wore a tight, lemon coloured sweater with a polo neck. Her hair was puffed up making her head look twice as big as it was, and was held in place with so much lacquer that it looked solid. She sat in a cloud of sickly, cheap perfume which wafted out through the hatch and made me start to wheeze. There was no sign of the receptionist who had thrown us out of the car park. I told her my name.

'You're very late,' she said, looking at a large appointments book which lay before her and finding my name with the aid of a long and lethal looking fingernail that might, in some circumstances, have been classified as a dangerous weapon.

'Fifteen minutes,' I said. 'We couldn't find anywhere to park.'

'The doctors are in a meeting,' said the receptionist. 'I'll check if they'll still see you.' She gave me what I suppose she might have thought was a smile and then shut the hatch firmly in my face. I turned back to Patsy, who was standing behind me, and smiled to try to reassure her. I don't think I had ever felt quite so uncomfortable and ill at ease. Patsy came closer and reached out for my hand. I held it tightly and looked around. The waiting room was in the new part of the house and it was painted all in white. There was a large, wooden table in the middle of the room which was piled high with magazines. Someone had neatly arranged them into categories. Around the walls stood uncomfortable looking metal chairs which, I noticed with some surprise, were fastened to the floor with chains.

I was about to suggest to Patsy that we might as well sit down when the hatch doors flew open and the receptionist's head appeared. 'The doctors will see you now,' she said.

Patsy and I started to walk towards the door.

‘Just you,’ said the receptionist, nodding towards me. ‘Mrs Jackson will be here in a few minutes for your wife.’

I looked at Patsy. I didn’t want to leave her alone.

‘It’s O.K!’ she whispered. She squeezed my hand, kissed me on the cheek and then moved away from the door and sat down. ‘Really,’ she said.

‘Where do I go?’ I asked the receptionist.

‘Dr Robinson’s room,’ said the receptionist. ‘Turn right and it’s second on your left.’

I thanked her and went off in search of my future.

* * *

There were three of them in the room, which was surprisingly spacious and had, presumably, once been the living room when the building had been used as a house. Although it was blocked up, there was still a large fireplace on one wall. On either side of the fireplace there were alcoves which were lined with bookshelves. Most of the shelves were piled high with journals and decorated with ornaments rather than stacked with books. There were three large and rather gloomy oil paintings hanging from the picture rail.

Dr Robinson, the senior partner to whom I had spoken on the telephone, looked to be the eldest of the three doctors and sat behind a large oak desk with his back to the window.

He was tall, balding, about fifty five and despite the heat wore a dark green heavy tweed three piece suit. He wore it with a pale green woollen shirt and a dark green paisley tie. He wore heavy brown country brogue walking shoes. It was Dr Robinson who spoke first and who introduced me to his two partners, the other two thirds of the interview panel.

Dr Jackson, whose wife had been deputed to collect Patsy, was in his early forties and looked a jovial sort of fellow. He had a full head of tight curly hair which was going grey and wore a neatly trimmed beard which was darker in colour. He sat in a leather easy chair in shirt sleeves with his suit jacket draped over the back of the chair behind his head. The third member of the inquisitorial panel was Dr Evans. He looked to be no more than four or five years older than me. He sat in the second easy chair and looked very serious. He was balding and wore blue rimmed spectacles and a pale brown silk suit. I don’t know why but I took an instinctive dislike to him. He had cold, cruel eyes and seemed to have an arrogance about him which I found strangely disturbing rather than just annoying.

‘Tell us about yourself,’ said Dr Robinson, when he had introduced his colleagues and we had all shaken hands. He hooked his thumbs into his waistcoat pockets and leant back in his chair.

I told him how I had started work for Dr Brownlow, about Bilbury and about Patsy and explained why I had to leave Bilbury.

‘Have you ever practised in this sort of area?’ asked Dr Evans, when I had finished.

‘No,’ I confessed.

‘How do you think you’ll like it?’

I said that I thought in any practice the people were probably more important than the surroundings. This seemed to go down quite well.

After talking together for between half and three quarters of an hour Dr Robinson unhooked his thumbs, looked at his watch, a large, old-fashioned thing which he hauled out of his waistcoat pocket with the aid of a silver chain, and announced that it seemed like to him to be a good time for us to go and get some lunch.

‘Are you hungry?’ he asked me.

I said I was and then suddenly remembered that I had forgotten to tell him that Patsy and I did not eat meat. The whole interview had rather startled me for no one had seemed interested in my medical knowledge, and the conversation had largely centred around politics and sport.

We drove in a convoy of four cars from the Health Centre to Dr Robinson’s home which was situated in what was clearly one of the most expensive areas of the town. The house was surrounded by about an acre of gardens and looked as though it had probably been built in the 1930s. As we parked our cars in the driveway I could see a swimming pool in the garden at the back of the house. Dr Robinson went to the front door, opened it and waved me through. The other two partners followed me and Dr Robinson brought up the rear.

Patsy and the doctors’ three wives were already there and were sitting in the living room sipping sherries and nibbling small cheese biscuits. Dr Robinson’s wife was plump but definitely not jolly. She had neatly permed grey hair, cold eyes and lips that turned downwards at the corners. She wore a pink and grey checked suit with a white blouse which was buttoned up to the neck and fastened with a brooch in the shape of a butterfly. Dr Jackson’s wife was about ten years younger than her husband, tall, slim and quite pretty. She had long brown hair that looked as if it got brushed a lot and wore a very short black dress that had virtually no back to it. Dr Evans’ wife, who was dressed in the uniform of either a midwife or a district nurse (I wasn’t sure which) was short, plumpish and looked as sour and as unpleasant as her husband.

Dr Robinson introduced me to the three wives and his wife then introduced Patsy to the three doctors. We then all sat around making polite, dull but safe conversation about the weather, the state of the nation and the soaring cost of private education. It seemed that the two younger partners both had children at private schools while Dr Robinson's children were now grown up and graduated from university. After a quarter of an hour, a round, homely looking woman dressed in a flowered pinafore came in and told us that lunch was ready. This, Mrs Robinson told Patsy and me, was Mrs Yates, her daily help without whom her life would be unbearable.

Lunch was something of a disaster, though this was entirely our fault. Neither Patsy nor I had dared to explain to either our host or our hostess that we were vegetarians and so we had to try to hide the fact that when we had finished eating, our plates were still very nearly as full as they had been when we had started. We both discovered that it is not easy to hide thick slices of roast pork with a few peas and a brussels sprout. I would have gladly eaten more of the vegetables I was given but I needed them to help hide the pork.

Afterwards all six of us retired to the living room again where Mrs Yates served coffee and Mrs Robinson offered us chocolates out of an expensive looking box. After twenty minutes of insignificant chatter, which seemed largely to centre upon the iniquities of the tax system, the comparative advantages of supermarket versus delicatessen shopping and the soaring cost of private education, Dr Robinson hauled his watch out of his waistcoat pocket and announced that he had an ante-natal clinic to attend.

The interview was over.

* * *

'How do you think it went?' asked Patsy, as we queued to get out of Mettleham. I could hardly see the lorry in front of us for the clouds of smoke that were belching out of its exhaust pipe.

I didn't answer straight away. 'I don't know,' I said eventually. I looked at her and shrugged. 'I really haven't the faintest idea.'

The truth was that I had found it all deeply depressing. No one had asked me anything about my hopes and fears for general practice in the last quarter of the twentieth century. None of the partners had shared their own ambitions with me. If they had opened up their hearts and at least confessed to having one or two prejudices I might not have agreed with them but at least I would have known where I stood with them. I know that I could have asked them questions, but somehow it hadn't seemed right to do that. Being thrown out of the car park and then kept standing in the waiting room had made me very conscious of the fact that I was applying for a job.

'Can I say something?' asked Patsy.

'Of course!'

'You won't be cross?'

'No!'

'I didn't think any of them were very nice people,' she said, hesitantly.

'No.' I agreed. 'I thought they were awful.'

'Mrs Jackson told me that if you got the job I would have to smarten you up a bit.' said Patsy.

I turned and looked at her. 'When did she say that?'

'When you were talking to her husband and Dr Robinson after lunch.'

'What did you say?'

'I didn't know what to say,' said Patsy.

'But what on earth *did* you say?'

'I think I muttered something about doing my best.' said Patsy. She looked very unhappy.

'What a cheek!' I said. I looked down. Patsy had made a good job of mending my trousers and I could still smell the polish I had put on the elbow patches on my jacket. I couldn't understand how wearing a suit could make me a better doctor.

A car driver somewhere behind us started banging on his horn and within a couple of seconds half a dozen other drivers were doing the same thing. I looked in front of us. The lorry had moved forwards a couple of yards. I put the car into gear and edged forwards.

'Mrs Evans wanted to know whether I had any medical training,' said Patsy. 'She said that doctors' wives needed an understanding of medicine in order to support their husbands properly.'

I turned my head. Patsy was crying. I slipped the car out of gear, put on the handbrake and put my arms around her.

'Hey! Come on now!' I said. 'Don't let them get to you.'

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I think I let you down.'

'Don't be silly,' I murmured. 'You could never let me down.'

I felt a strong desire to turn round, drive back and tell them all what I thought of them.

'I wish we didn't have to leave Bilbury,' said Patsy.

'I know.' I said. A driver behind tooted his horn again. I looked forwards, through the windscreen. The lorry had moved on another couple of yards.

'All the wives seemed to care about was school fees and shopping,' said Patsy.

'The men were almost as bad,' I said. 'But they were interested in cars, golf and income tax as well.'

The driver behind tooted again. Through the back window of the Morris I could see him waving a small number of fingers at me. I waved back at him. I looked at my watch. It was not quite three o'clock.

‘Are you hungry?’

Patsy looked at me. ‘I’m starving.’

‘So am I. Why don’t we stop at the next shop we see, buy some bread and cheese and a bottle of something cheap and fizzy and have a picnic as soon as we get out of all this traffic?’

‘Yes!’ said Patsy, delightedly.

‘It’s a pity to waste the whole day,’ I said. ‘Have we got any of your buns left?’

‘Oh, yes! I packed a large bagful and we’ve only eaten a couple.’ She reached over into the back of the car and found the brown paper bag. It was one of Peter Marshall’s stout grocery bags from the village shop. ‘There are the strawberries as well!’

Suddenly, the day didn’t seem quite so miserable.

* * *

When we got back to Bilbury I dropped Patsy at The Grange and stayed just long enough to peep cautiously into the stable where our family of swallows were nesting. The two young swallows had now clambered out of the nest and were standing on the edge of one of the beams. As we watched, first one and then the other jumped off the beam out into the unknown, swooped and dived around with only the slightest uncertainty and then landed back on their beam where they rested, slightly wobbly, rather like trapeze artists who had successfully accomplished a difficult manoeuvre. They seemed to be waiting for applause so Patsy and I, both as excited as young parents, murmured words of appreciation before we backed quietly away from the stable. How could we possibly have dreamt of moving away from the country?

While Patsy went into the house I got back into the car because although it was late I wanted to visit two patients, Miss Phillips and Mrs Blossom, at their homes.

I was truly delighted to find them both looking far happier and considerably more content than they had been when I had seen them last. Although it was clearly going to take some time before either of them made anything close to a real recovery, the gentle withdrawal programme I had devised seemed to be working.

Mrs Blossom was out of bed and was sitting watching television. She looked considerably brighter and more alert than she had the last time I had seen her.

‘Hello,’ she said.

Her father looked at me with pride, like a father whose baby has just spoken its first word. ‘She’s a lot better than she was,’ he said. He seemed genuinely relieved.

‘How do you feel?’ I asked her.

Mrs Blossom licked her lips which were dry and cracked.

‘I wish I’d never started taking them,’ she told me. She rubbed at her left forearm with her right hand. ‘My skin is very dry,’ she told me. ‘Could that be the pills?’

I nodded. ‘It could.’ I remembered that Miss Phillips had complained of something similar.

‘I won’t ever moan again,’ said Mrs Blossom. ‘I didn’t know how lucky I was before.’ She licked her lips and smiled at me. ‘Do you think I’ll get better?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Yes, I do.’

I was, however, still appalled at the way that the drug company making Angipax was encouraging doctors to prescribe the drug for long periods to unsuspecting patients, and at the way that doctors were handing out the drug unquestioningly.

Miss Phillips was much better too. She had spent the day in the garden and was anxious to tell me everything she had done.

Although it was nearly dark we went outside and walked around and inspected her vegetable patch and her flower gar den.

In her vegetable patch she had runner beans, carrots, beetroot, swede, potatoes, radishes, lettuce, tomatoes, peas and, something I had never before seen in a garden, petit pois, tiny little peas that tasted sweeter than any I’d ever tasted before. She was also growing peas called mange tout that Miss Phillips told me could be eaten complete with their pods.

In her flower patch she specialised in natural, wild Exmoor plants such as gorse, heather, red campion, sweet violets, huge armies of foxglove, cranesbill and silver ragwort. Underneath a small tree grew yellow pimpernel, wood sorrel, nightshade and a dozen different types of fern. By a small stream down one side of the garden grew orange montbretia, marsh ragwort and yellow flag. As she walked with me around the garden she pointed out each plant and talked to it by name, offering each one comfort and encouragement in the cool of the summer evening.

‘Do you like flowers?’ she asked me.

I smiled and nodded. ‘But I’m afraid I don’t know very much about them.’

‘Miss Tweedsmuir and I would be delighted to teach you anything you’d like to know,’ said Miss Phillips. ‘We both love flowers.’

‘I’d love to learn more,’ I said. ‘Ever since you found that red helleborine in our beech wood my enthusiasm has been growing. Just how rare is that orchid, by the way?’

'Oh, very!' said Miss Phillips. 'Very rare indeed.'

'Am I right in thinking that if a plant like that was found on land that was earmarked for building the authorities would have to withhold planning permission?'

'I'm sure they would,' said Miss Phillips. 'When a clump of military orchids or orchis militaris were found in the path of a motorway two years ago the contractors had to go round them.'

She held her head on one side and looked at me as though she'd read my mind. 'I'm afraid that was the first thing Miss Tweedsmuir and I thought of,' said Miss Phillips. 'We know Bluebell Wood very well and there aren't any protected species of anything in there.'

'No red helleborine?'

'No,' said Miss Phillips. 'The woodland is very similar to yours, beech trees and lots of shade, but there aren't any red helleborine plants there.'

'That's a pity,' I said.

'It certainly is,' said Miss Phillips. 'A clump of cephalanthera rubra growing in Bluebell Wood would have stopped Mr Sherlock's bulldozers for good.'

On the way home I stopped at a public call box and rang Thumper.

* * *

CHAPTER TWENTY

When we arrived back from Mettleham we were much more cheerful than when we had left. The long drive south had made us both tired, but we had enjoyed a glorious picnic in a field just outside Cheltenham and somehow, after that, the day had seemed much brighter.

'There must be other jobs,' I had said to Patsy, as we drove very slowly up Porlock Hill in the early evening. A hare sat up in the middle of the road washing its face. It looked directly at us as we approached and then carried on with its evening ablutions. Just as I was about to put my foot on the brake the hare stopped washing and darted off up the road at top speed. We had both laughed and Patsy rested her head on my shoulder as the Morris Minor struggled up the hill in first gear.

'Something will turn up,' Patsy murmured. 'And if not it doesn't matter as long as we have each other.'

'And as long as we don't have to move to Mettleham,' I added.

It wasn't Mettleham that I particularly disliked (though I confess I hadn't been too keen on it), but the people we'd met. I had meant every word when I had told Dr Robinson and his colleagues that it was the people who were more important than the place.

I had gone to bed late, determined to spend the next day looking through the situations vacant section of the British Medical Journal. It may have been because they had missed us, or because they knew that we had a trying day, but Ben, Emily and Sophie spent most of the night sleeping on our bed.

I was woken up the next morning at a quarter past seven by the ringing of the telephone. It was a woman from London who was staying in Bilbury and wanted to know what time the surgery started. She said she had run out of pills and wanted me to prescribe some more for her. It wasn't worth trying to go back to sleep and so I slipped out of bed and peeped through the curtains to see what the weather was like. It was gloriously sunny; the garden at Bilbury Grange looked spectacularly beautiful and everywhere I looked there were flowers in bloom. My eye was attracted by a movement just below the window and I watched with amusement as Sophie, who had risen early, hurried across the lawn with her head held high and a very aloof look on her face. Behind her, protecting some unseen nest, marched two huge and belligerent looking magpies. I glanced behind me and was glad for Sophie's sake that Emily was still asleep on the bed.

We breakfasted on toast and coffee after Patsy and I checked that the lambs were all right.

'You were late getting in last night,' said Patsy.

'I know,' I said. 'You were asleep.'

'I rang Miss Phillips but she said you'd left,' said Patsy.

'I tried to stay awake but I was exhausted.'

'I went for a walk with Thumper.'

'A walk! It must have been nearly midnight!'

'It was.'

Patsy looked at me and frowned. 'What's going on?' she asked. 'What were you doing?'

'Just a bit of gardening,' I said and kissed her goodbye. Outside in the front driveway I had just lowered the hood of the Morris Minor to take full advantage of the summer sunshine when I heard a car approaching from behind me. I turned and saw our visitors approaching in their smart German car.

Mr Onions stopped his car no more than a yard away from me and pressed a button. His window hummed downwards smoothly. He waited until the window had disappeared down into the door, smiled at me and held out a hand.' I'm glad I caught you,' he said. The smile didn't look so much like a smile as an opportunity to display his expensively capped teeth. His hair was neatly combed and freshly washed and he wore a lime green suit and a multi-coloured shirt with the collar folded over the suit jacket collar. His handshake was limp and his palm felt soft and clammy. I noticed that he wore a loose gold chain around his right wrist. He looked down. 'That's a rather nice bag!'

I was carrying the Gladstone bag that had been repaired in Barnstaple. I followed his glance downwards. 'Yes.' I agreed. 'It is nice isn't it?' The cobbler had done an excellent job and I was extremely proud of the bag. It was, in truth, rather too small for all the things I had to carry but I liked it so much that I put up with that and kept some of the bulkier items in another bag in the boot of the car.

I had taken a rather strong dislike to Mr Onions and for some odd reason I didn't trust him. I felt myself instinctively taking a firmer hold on the bag as though afraid that he might somehow try to take it from me.

'Have you got a moment?' he asked.

I admitted that I had.

'It's about the books in the flat,' said Mr Onions. 'Could I buy them from you?'

For a few seconds I couldn't think what he meant. Then I remembered. When Patsy had bought her tin bath and contents at a recent auction (the same tin bath that had contained the Gladstone bag I was carrying) the bath had contained a few books. Because most were still wrapped in their colourful paper jackets and looked rather bright, and because we still didn't have any bookshelves of our own in Bilbury Grange, Patsy had put them into the flat, standing them up on the mantelpiece and using them to hide a rough patch on the wall.

'I don't know,' I said. I had never bothered even to look at the books. I had no idea what they were.

'I'll pay you ten pounds for them,' said Mr Onions. He smiled again. 'My wife started reading one in bed at night and I'm reading another and there are several there we both like the look of.' His wife, who was sitting beside him, and who had not said a word turned her head slightly and almost smiled. She wore a white tank top and a tight and rather short white skirt and had a broad brimmed sun hat on her head. She wore dark glasses with heavy black frames.

Alarm bells had started to ring in my head. Ten pounds seemed an awful lot of money to pay for a row of old, secondhand books. Above us and slightly to our right I noticed our family of swallows sitting together on a telephone wire. Suddenly and noiselessly a sparrowhawk swooped out of the sky heading for one of the baby swallows. Instantly it was surrounded not just by the parents of the baby swallow but by a dozen other swallows which I hadn't even noticed. The sparrowhawk flapped its wings angrily and then headed off over the fields, followed by a crowd of swallows. I watched them shoo it away until they felt it had learnt its lesson.

'I'll need to have a look,' I said. 'Do you mind if I pop into the flat this afternoon?'

'Of course not!' said Mr Onions, giving me another chance to view his dentist's handiwork. 'By the way, I hear you sell strawberries. Do you have any we can buy from you?'

'Oh just help yourself!' I said, generously. 'The strawberry bed is in the walled garden.'

'Very kind of you,' said Mr Onions. He gave me what looked like a last flash of expensively capped and polished teeth and then paused and nodded towards the lowered hood of the Morris.

'You ought to get a car with air conditioning,' he said, nodding towards a complicated looking device on his dashboard. 'Then you wouldn't need to bother with a hood that came down.'

'I like a convertible!' I said.

'All those flies and all that wind?' said Mr Onions, pulling a face and shaking his head. Then he pressed a button and his window hummed upwards. He put his foot down on the accelerator and sped off down the drive, narrowly missing Sophie who darted out of the shrubbery in front of him.

I really didn't like Mr Onions one little bit.

* * *

I was surprised when Miss Johnson told me that there was a telephone call for me from a Dr Robinson in Mettleham. I had expected him to write rather than to telephone to tell me that I had not been successful in my application for the job.

'Did you get back to Devon safely?' asked Dr Robinson. 'It must have been a long day for you.' I could envisage both him and his office as he spoke.

I told him that we had arrived home without mishap and thanked him and his wife for their hospitality. Patsy and I had agreed that she would telephone a florist in Barnstaple to arrange for a courtesy 'thank you' bunch of flowers to be delivered to Mrs Robinson.

'We very much enjoyed meeting you both,' said Dr Robinson. 'We had a partners' meeting yesterday evening and decided unanimously that we would very much like to accept you as our new junior partner.'

This was not at all what I expected to hear, and when my mouth opened to reply my brain still hadn't decided what to say. The end result was an almost inaudible and certainly incomprehensible mumble.

'I'm sorry...' said Dr Robinson, '...I'm afraid I didn't quite catch what you said.'

'That's very kind of you,' I managed to stutter. 'And I'm honoured that you should have chosen me...'

'Well, to be perfectly honest you didn't have an awful lot of competition,' said Dr Robinson, adopting his best and most confidential bedside manner voice.

'We'd like you to come on a six months trial contract to start with. We'll arrange rented accommodation for you in the town during your probationary period which will give you a chance to look around to see what's available on the housing market.'

I tried to interrupt him, to tell him as politely as I could that I didn't want his job, but he was in full flow now and without being rude I just couldn't get a word in. I really didn't want anything more to do with him or his practice, and I certainly didn't want to work with him. I knew that Patsy didn't want to move to Mettleham either.

'As the junior partner you will be responsible for the weekend emergency rota and we'd also expect you to be on call for the practice on alternate nights,' continued Dr Robinson.

'I'm sure you'll agree that the arrangement is a fair one.'

I was by now finding it slightly difficult not to laugh. In addition to expecting me to be on call every weekend Dr Robinson and his two partners were expecting me to be on call every other night - which meant that they would each be on call less than one night a week.

'It's very good of you, but...' I began.

'To begin with you will receive ten per cent of the net practice profits,' continued Dr Robinson. 'Your share will go up by one per cent every year until you reach parity with the rest of us.'

I was glad I didn't want the job and relieved that I didn't need it. His terms were getting more and more outrageous by the minute. I opened my mouth to speak but Dr Robinson hadn't finished yet.

'You will, of course, expect to buy your share of the practice premises,' said Dr Robinson. 'But we realise that you may have difficulty in raising the sort of money involved. We will arrange for a surveyor to work out your liability and then we will make deductions from your income over the next ten years, charging you interest at five per cent over base rate.'

'It's very kind of you...' I began.

'Not at all,' said Dr Robinson. 'We want you and Patricia to feel welcome here in Mettleham.'

'Patsy.' I said firmly. 'My wife's name is Patsy.'

'We think Patricia is more suitable for a doctor's wife,' said Dr Robinson, rather starchily. 'We'd like you to start on the first of next month. Is that convenient?'

'I'm sorry,' I said sharply, relieved to have a chance to speak. 'But Patsy and I won't be coming to Mettleham at all.'

'I beg your pardon?' said Dr Robinson. He sounded shocked and outraged. 'What do you mean 'you won't be coming'?'

'We talked it over and I'm afraid we decided that we wouldn't be happy in Mettleham,' I told him.

'Oh.' said Dr Robinson. 'Well in that case I can offer you a starting salary of 12% of the net practice profits and we'll charge you interest on your loan at three per cent over base rate.'

'That's very kind of you,' I said. 'But I'm afraid it really isn't a question of money. It's just that neither Patsy nor I think that we would be happy in Mettleham.'

There was a long pause while this sank in. 'Well!' said Dr Robinson. 'I do think you've got a cheek. What do you think you were playing at? We're all very busy people. We don't have time to waste you know!' I was tempted to explain to him that, just as he and his partners had been interviewing us, we had been interviewing them, and that they had failed miserably. But I didn't. I did, however, point out that I had gone to Mettleham because I was seriously interested in taking the job if it was offered to me. However, Dr Robinson did not seem very interested in anything I had to say. 'I think your behaviour is quite outrageous!' he said. And he repeated the last two words to emphasise them.

'I'm sorry you feel like that,' I said.

But Dr Robinson wasn't listening. He was threatening to report me to the General Medical Council and the British Medical Association, though what for I couldn't begin to imagine. I gently put the telephone receiver back onto its base.

I couldn't help thinking that I could do quite well without people like Mr Onions and Dr Robinson in my life.

* * *

When I'd put the phone down I telephoned Miss Phillips.

'Would you do me a favour?'

'Of course!'

'Would you pop out to Bluebell Wood one more time and check to make sure that there aren't any protected species growing there? It's the only chance the village has got.'

'We have checked it very thoroughly,' said Miss Phillips. 'But if you'd like us to we'll go there again.'

'I'd be grateful,' I said. 'You never know. Something might have grown since you were last there.'

* * *

There were eleven books on the mantelpiece.

'Can you remember how many there were?' I asked Patsy, who'd come across to the coach-house flat with me as soon as we had eaten our lunch after I'd got back home at lunchtime. We wanted to look at the books that Mr Onions had asked if he could buy.

'I can't remember how many there were but I know they're all there,' said Patsy. 'They just fitted on the mantelpiece between those two pieces of stone.' She had used two large and rather colourful stones out of the garden as bookends.

I immediately thought that was rather odd, but I couldn't think why. I picked out one of the books at random and examined it. The jacket and the book were both in surprisingly good condition. The book was a historical romance and the cover showed a stunning brunette in the arms of a rakish looking fellow dressed in an officer's uniform. I had never heard of the author. I didn't know much about books but it seemed unlikely that this one was valuable. I carefully worked my way through the rest of the books but could not see any which seemed likely to be worth much money. Most of the books, and all of the ones which still had jackets, were novels. There were just two non-fiction books, one about trains and a large one about gardening.

'Do you think we should let him buy them?' asked Patsy thoughtfully. 'Ten pounds seems quite a lot. It's twenty times as much as I paid for the whole tin bath.' She replaced one of the books which she had been examining. 'It would mean that we bought your Gladstone bag, got it repaired for nothing and still made a profit!'

I thought about it for a moment and I suddenly realised what was odd about what Mr Onions had said. He had said that he wanted to buy the books because his wife was reading one of them in bed at night and that he was reading another. And yet Patsy had confirmed that all the books were still in the same place. It seemed strange and extremely unlikely that they should put the books back onto the mantelpiece every morning. ‘No,’ I said. ‘I don’t think we should.’

When we had finished in the flat we went round to the vegetable garden. At once both of us noticed that someone had been picking strawberries. There was hardly a strawberry in sight. Someone must have picked at least ten or fifteen pounds of them. Even worse when they had put the netting back they hadn’t made it taut and the magpies that had landed on it had been able to reach through and peck at the few fruits which were left. I’d seen them do that before. Normally we stretched the netting across the strawberry bed about two or three feet above the plants, keeping it in place with pea sticks and allowing the excess netting to hang down at the sides. It proved a very attractive bird barrier. But if the netting wasn’t stretched tightly enough the birds landed on it in a group and weighed it down so that they could feed through the holes in the netting.

‘Who on earth has done that?’ asked Patsy crossly.

‘It was the Onions,’ I sighed. ‘I’m sorry. It was my fault.’

I explained that I had told Mr Onions that he could help himself to a few strawberries. I hadn’t imagined that he would take everything we had.

We walked rather miserably back through the courtyard and into the kitchen. One of us would have to speak to Peter Marshall and tell him that there wouldn’t be any more strawberries for a few days.

‘Oh, I forgot!’ said Patsy, as we got back to the house. ‘There was a letter for you this morning.’

Our local postman had a large rural round and usually delivered the mail just before lunch. Not that we received much mail. Most of what we did get was bills. (Though the *Sunday News* had started sending me fairly huge amounts of mail in one of their vans).

Patsy reached behind the kettle and produced a long white envelope which was post marked London. I stared at it for a moment before opening it. I didn’t like getting letters from London. The envelope felt heavy and expensive.

‘I wonder who it’s from?’ I asked.

‘I have no idea,’ said Patsy. ‘Why don’t you open it. Maybe you’ve won some money on the premium bonds!’ She filled the kettle with water.

I looked at my watch. ‘That’ll be a surprise! I haven’t got any premium bonds.’ Come to that I didn’t have any savings at all. I stuck my thumb under the flap, tore open the envelope and pulled out the contents.

‘What is it?’ asked Patsy a moment or two later. I looked up. She was staring at me with a worried look on her face.

She reached out a hand and put it on my arm. ‘Is it bad news?’

‘No.’ I said. ‘It isn’t bad news at all.’ I handed her the letter. A London publisher had written to tell me that he had seen a copy of my article about Angipax. He wanted to know if I would write a book on the subject for his firm.

‘They want you to write a book!’ said Patsy; having read the first few lines she lowered the letter.

‘Maybe!’ I felt cautious.

‘That’s marvellous!’

I said that I agreed with her. She kissed me. I kissed her back. Then Patsy pulled herself away from me for a moment.

‘Will they pay you money as well?’

‘I suppose so. If they agree to do the book.’

And then, with some reluctance, I realised that it was time for me to go back to the surgery.

* * *

When I got there Miss Johnson was waiting for me. ‘Would you ring Miss Phillips,’ she said. ‘She’s rung three times in the last fifteen minutes. She says it’s very urgent.’

I picked the telephone up immediately and dialled Miss Phillips’ number.

‘It’s a miracle!’ said Miss Phillips, excitedly. ‘Miss Tweedsmuir and I found a clump of red helleborine in Bluebell Wood!’

‘Wonderful!’

‘What shall we do?’

‘Telephone the newsdesk on the *Sunday News*,’ I told her. ‘And ask to speak to the news editor.’ I gave her his name and telephone number. Tell him what you’ve found and I’m pretty sure that they will send a reporter and a photographer along. Don’t tell anyone else yet. Once the photographer and the reporter have been then you can start ringing round as many conservation groups as you can think of.’

‘Right!’ said Miss Phillips. ‘Do you know,’ she said. ‘I think this is the most wonderful news I’ve ever had. Miss Tweedsmuir says that we must go to church on Sunday to give thanks. It must be a miracle. We’re both sure the flowers weren’t there the last time we looked.’

I promised that Patsy and I would go to church with her.

* * *

By the time I got back home the telephone lines around Bilbury had been buzzing, and everyone seemed to know about the discovery of the rare orchid growing in Bluebell Wood.

'It's amazing news!' said Dr Brownlow. 'I spoke to a man in the planning department who says that there's no chance of Sherlock Homes getting their planning permission now.'

'That's wonderful!'

'But I'm still sorry for you,' said Dr Brownlow. 'Really I am. It doesn't seem fair.'

'Don't worry,' I insisted. 'Patsy and I are very happy that Bilbury is going to be saved.'

'I still can't believe it said Dr Brownlow. 'Isn't it an amazing piece of luck?'

'Astonishing!' I agreed.

* * *

'Did you have a chance to look at those books of yours?' asked Mr Onions that evening. He had called round at the back door as Patsy and I were enjoying a wonderful vegetable hot pot. He held out a crisp, brand new ten pound note.

'I did,' I said. 'But they're my wife's books and there is one or two that she's especially fond of so I'm afraid I can't let you have them.'

Mr Onions looked disappointed but didn't say anything.

He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a roll of bank notes. He peeled off another ten pound note.

'What about for £20?'

'No. I'm afraid not.'

He peeled off another note.

'£30?'

I shook my head. He peeled off two more notes.

'£50?'

I felt myself beginning to sweat but shook my head again. I was now certain that Mr Onions didn't want those books just to read them. 'I'm afraid not,' I said. 'My wife doesn't want to sell them.'

Mr Onions stared at me and shrugged. 'Please yourself,' he said and walked away.

* * *

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

A few days later Patsy and I went to London. I had written back to the publisher to tell him that I would very much like to accept his suggestion, and the next day his secretary had telephoned to ask me if I would go up and have lunch with him in London. She said that the firm would pay all my expenses, including a first class rail ticket. She also said that the publisher was keen for me to sign a contract as soon as possible because he wanted to have the book on his list.

'Why don't you come with me?' I said to Patsy. 'You could have a look around while I'm at my meeting - and then we could have tea together.' I knew that Patsy had never been to London before and I thought she might find it exciting. At first Patsy said she didn't want to go, but then she admitted that it wasn't so much that she didn't want to go as that she didn't think we could afford the railway ticket.

'But it won't cost us anything!' I pointed out. 'The publishers will pay for a first class ticket for me but we can buy two second class tickets for the same price, or even less.' Patsy looked worried. 'Isn't that fraud?'

'Of course not!' I told her. It took me a few minutes, but eventually I was able to persuade her that there was nothing dishonest in using the publisher's money to pay for two cheaper tickets. Once she had agreed I telephoned the station and reserved two seats for us before she could change her mind.

'What will I do while you're in your meeting?' Patsy asked me. 'You could go shopping.'

'Oh, I don't think so,' said Patsy, shaking her head. 'Not in London.'

'You could see some of the sights. Buckingham Palace. Saint Paul's Cathedral. The Tower of London. Trafalgar Square. That sort of thing.'

'Not without you,' said Patsy. 'Maybe you could show me around it all if there's time after your meeting?'

I smiled. 'We won't get to see much of London in a few hours.'

'That's all right. I don't mind.'

'You could take those books out of the flat to a book dealer.' I suggested. 'To see if any of them really are worth anything.'

'Oh yes!' cried Patsy, excitedly. But then a worried look replaced the momentary thrill. 'But where would I find a book dealer in London?'

'There will probably be one or two near to the offices where I'm meeting the publisher,' I told her.

We got up at five o'clock and drove to Barnstaple station where I parked the car in the almost deserted car park. We then caught the early morning stopping train from Barnstaple to Exeter. Patsy carried a bag filled with salad sandwiches and I carried our books wrapped up in two brown paper parcels tied with string. It was the first time I had been on the train since my very first trip to North Devon nearly a year earlier and I had forgotten what a beautiful journey it was.

At Eggesford they were getting ready for their annual Revels and the whole station was decorated with flowers and brightly coloured bunting.

At Exeter we caught the fast, main line express from the West Country to Paddington Station in London. It was a good thing that we had reserved our seats, for the train was bursting with holiday-makers going home and men in suits going up to the City on business. The overhead racks and the narrow spaces between the seats were packed with bulging suitcases, brightly painted tin buckets and wooden handled metal spades, huge raffia work baskets packed with souvenirs for friends and neighbours, and straw hats that would be pushed to the back of a cupboard and never be worn again. Fathers sat in their shirt sleeves reading their newspapers. Mothers sat nursing shopping baskets packed to the top with sandwiches wrapped in greaseproof paper or packed in small, air-tight plastic boxes, vacuum flasks full of hot tea, and bottles of ready mixed orange squash. Children, gloomy at the prospect of the long journey home and another fifty week wait for the next seaside adventure, scribbled with brightly coloured crayons on colouring books, table tops and each other, hunted underneath the seats for dice and counters lost from board games and fought endlessly and noisily.

Dotted amongst all this colour and noise sat dark-suited, dandruff-shouldered men dourly struggling with tedious looking sheaves of correspondence, pocket calculators and accounts which they took out of their black plastic briefcases. I felt sorry for them as they struggled to concentrate on their work amidst such chaos.

The train stopped just three times; at Taunton, at Westbury and at Reading. We ate our sandwiches between Taunton and Westbury. And then, less than two and a half hours after we had left Exeter, we were in London.

As we left the train at Paddington Station, Patsy clutched at my hand and gazed about her in astonishment. Not even the bustle of Mettleham had prepared her for this. Although I had been to London several times before, my last visit had been some time ago and I too felt overwhelmed by it all. The noise, the bustle, the dirt and most of all the fact that everything seemed so enormous.

In Barnstaple the single platform at the railway station is covered by a small glass awning. At Paddington the whole station is covered by a glass roof which could cover half the town of Barnstaple itself. In London everything - crowds, traffic jams and noise - was a hundred times bigger than either of us was used to.

The publisher's office was at an address no more than five minutes walk away from the British Museum, but too far away from Paddington for us to walk in the time we had available (even if we had been confident about finding our way there) and I decided that he wouldn't mind paying for a taxi ride. I wanted Patsy to be able to see as much of London as possible and you don't see much of a city when you travel deep underneath it on an underground train.

We sat together in silence in the back of a black cab and Patsy, sitting on the edge of her seat and staring out of the window like a child outside a toy shop window, held onto my hand as though frightened to be alone for even an instant.

'What's your first impression?' I asked her, as the cab crawled along in one of London's never ending traffic jams.

Patsy turned towards me. 'It's all so dirty!' she whispered, as though worried that the taxi driver might hear her and be offended. I followed her gaze out of the window and stared at the huge, grimy old buildings and the rubbish littered streets. I nodded but had to laugh. This was Patsy's first impression of London, and sadly it wasn't the splendour of the buildings or the buzz and excitement on the streets which she would remember most vividly but the dirt and the rubbish.

'So you don't want to come and live here?'

Patsy looked at me. 'I will if you want to,' she said quietly. But there was horror in her eyes.

'It's all right!' I laughed. I put my arm around her. 'I was joking.' Patsy pretended to be cross with me but looked relieved.

A few moments later the taxi driver stopped outside the British Museum gates.

I had half an hour to spare and so we went for a cup of coffee at a small cafe in a narrow side street. The coffee was strong, thick and served in cups that were about the size of thimbles. We drank it in a dark, tiny, empty room the walls of which were lined with travel posters.

Afterwards, I pointed out two antiquarian bookshops to Patsy and said I'd meet her at a nearby public house called, quite appropriately, The Devon Arms at three o'clock. I asked Patsy if she would be all right by herself. She said she would and wished me good luck.

* * *

The publisher's offices were not at all what I had expected. (Although to be honest I don't really know exactly what I had expected. Probably something rather larger and more extravagantly furnished.)

At street level the only sign that the publisher existed was a small rectangular metal plate with the publisher's name printed on it screwed to the wall by the side of a scruffy looking door. Two plastic bags full of rubbish stood to the right of the door and an overflowing metal dustbin stood on the other side. The door was open, and although it was dark inside I could see that the tiny hallway was almost completely blocked with cardboard boxes. From the labels which they bore I assumed that these were full of new books. Abandoned 'free' newspapers were littered around on the floor.

I walked cautiously through the doorway, looked for a moment at a tiny lift at the end of the corridor, decided not to risk it and started to climb slowly up the stairs.

An advertising agency had the offices on the first floor, a firm of accountants shared the second floor with a financial services consultant and a glamour magazine had the offices on the third floor. A series of small hand printed cardboard notices told me that the publisher I was looking for had offices on the fourth and uppermost floor.

Every door and every wall desperately needed painting. The stairs were uncarpeted and were littered with old newspapers, discarded envelopes, promotional cards which had fallen out of magazines and crumpled cigarette packets. I knocked on the door to the publisher's office and, in response to a distant cry of 'Come in!' opened the door and entered.

A buxom woman of about forty, dressed in a violet dress and, despite the summer warmth, a grey cardigan, sat behind an old and battered typewriter with her hands clasped in her lap. She wore a pair of old- fashioned half moon spectacles and had a single string of pearls around her neck. Her desk was piled high with papers, files and books and manuscripts. Behind her a dark haired girl of about seventeen, dressed in a rather grubby white T-shirt and a pair of torn blue jeans, sat hunched over another small desk licking envelopes. Her desk, too, was piled high with books and papers and files and manuscripts. Two filing cabinets, also piled high with books and papers and manuscripts and files, stood in a corner. The room was smaller than our bathroom at Bilbury Grange. I nervously and hesitantly introduced myself.

'Mr Inchmore is expecting you,' smiled the woman. She had a lovely smile. 'I'll tell him you're here.' She swung around on her chair and knocked on a door to her left. The black-haired girl did not look up but just carried on licking her envelopes.

Out of sight there was a crashing noise and a half stifled curse and then a huge mountain of a man burst through the door with a fistful of papers in his left hand and a pair of horn rimmed spectacles in his right. He wore a badly fitted dark grey suit a blue shirt and a bright red tie. When he saw me he slipped the spectacles into place. I couldn't help noticing that they were repaired in two places with bits of pink sticking plaster.

We shook hands and then he backed into his office and indicated that I should follow him. It wasn't an easy manoeuvre because I had to squeeze through a narrow gap between the chairs occupied by the buxom typist and the teenage envelope licker.

Mr Inchmore's office was slightly larger than the outer room but, if possible, even more crowded. There were piles of books and papers everywhere. There was not one clear square inch of desk top visible.

'I loved your article about Angipax,' said the publisher.

I tried to tiptoe around a huge pile of books that had fallen over and which had, presumably, been the source of the crash I had heard. 'I've got a copy here somewhere,' he said. He rummaged around on his desk and, much to my surprise, produced a cutting which I instantly recognised. He handed it to me either for me to look at or, more likely, simply to prove to me that he was not quite as disorganised as he seemed to be.

'Have you ever written a book before?' he asked me.

I shook my head.

'Completely different business to writing newspaper columns,' he said. 'A newspaper piece is like a sprint but a book is more like a marathon.'

I swallowed hard and nodded. I had fallen in love with the idea of writing a book without stopping to realise that I didn't know how to begin, let alone finish the task.

'What I want is a book about the way doctors and drug companies give people pills without really knowing what's going to happen,' said the publisher. 'Lots of names. Tough. Can you do that?'

'I think so,' I agreed. 'I'll need to do some research, of course...'

'Great,' said Mr Inchmore. 'I thought you could.' He fiddled with his spectacles and took them off again. 'I go by instinct,' he told me. He looked at me. 'I think you'll make an author.'

'Thank you,' I said.

'I can't pay you much,' said Mr Inchmore. 'Did I suggest a figure in my letter?'

'No.'

'Would £750 be acceptable?'

'£750?'

'As an advance against royalties, of course. I ought to get you to write an outline,' he said. 'But since you've never written a book before you probably won't be able to write an outline.' He grinned at me broadly. 'Writing an outline is harder than writing a book. To write an outline you've got to know what the book is going to look like when you've finished it.'

I was beginning to get cold feet.

'Just write the damned thing and then I'll show you what's wrong with it and we'll make a book out of it,' said Mr Inchmore with a laugh.

'The drug companies won't like it.' I said. 'Nor will a lot of doctors.' I thought I ought to warn him.

'Don't worry about libel,' said Mr Inchmore. 'We'll take out the most dangerous stuff. If you don't put anything dangerous in it to start with it won't be worth publishing!' He squeezed past me to the doorway. 'Norma!' he called.

The buxom woman in the grey cardigan came in. Mr Inchmore introduced us to each other.

'Do one of our standard contracts for the Angipax book, will you?' He said to her. 'Then pop it in the post when it's ready.'

Doris promised to do it right away and then backed out of the room.

'Fancy some lunch?' asked the publisher. I said that would be very nice.

'Great!' said Mr Inchmore. 'Follow me!'

In the outer office he introduced me to the girl with the black hair whose name was Helena and who had a beautiful face but the worst case of acne I think I had ever seen, borrowed two pounds off Norma and promised to be back within an hour. We then went down to the ground floor via the staircase. 'I never use the lift,' said Mr Inchmore. 'It gets stuck at least once a day.'

We walked around the corner, bought sandwiches at a baker's shop and ate them in a tiny park.

'I bet you thought publishers always took authors to posh lunches in fashionable restaurants,' said Mr Inchmore with a mouthful of beef sandwich.

I muttered something indecisive.

'I can't stand wasting money on restaurants,' he said. 'Food is just fuel. You don't spend a fortune on buying your petrol in a posh looking garage with expensive wall paper, do you?'

I agreed with this, though I didn't really think any comment was expected.

Ten minutes later we shook hands in the street outside Mr Inchmore's office. 'Norma will send you a contract,' he said.

'You send it back with your expenses and then she'll send you a cheque for your advance and your expenses all together.'

'Fine,' I said. 'Thank you very much.'

'I'm looking forward to this one,' said Mr Inchmore, rubbing his hands gleefully. He winked at me and then disappeared into the tiny hallway, squeezed past the boxes full of books and scurried up the stairs back to his office. I looked at my watch. It was a quarter past two.

I walked on along the street towards The Devon Arms to wait for Patsy.

I might not have yet written a book but I almost felt like an author.

* * *

Patsy was already waiting for me, sitting on the pavement outside the pub on a wooden bench at a wooden table with a long, cold drink in front of her.

I noticed, with some disappointment, that she had two crudely tied parcels of books sitting on the bench beside her. She was busy reading a magazine she had bought and didn't see me approaching.

'Excuse me,' I said. 'But can I join you?'

Patsy looked up and smiled. 'I'm so pleased to see you! How did you get on?'

'Great!' I told her. 'The publisher is quite a character. He's sending me a contract and he wants me to write the book.' I told her briefly about my meeting with Mr Inchmore.

'That's wonderful!' said Patsy.

'They're paying me £750 in advance,' I told her. 'If the book sells well I'll get even more!'

Patsy looked at me. 'We could nearly live on that!' she whispered.

'Plus, we've got my income from the column, and whatever fruit and vegetables we can sell to Peter Marshall and the rent from the coach-house flat!'

'Does that mean we might be able to stay in Bilbury?' asked Patsy, excitedly.

'Yes!' I told her. 'And how did you get on?' I nodded towards the parcels of books. 'No luck with the bookshops? Maybe we should have accepted Mr Onions' money after all.'

'Oh no we shouldn't!' said Patsy, with a broad smile on her face. 'You were absolutely right!'

I nodded towards the two parcels of books. 'But...'

'They aren't all there,' said Patsy quickly. 'We brought eleven books with us but there are only ten left now.'

'You managed to sell one?' Patsy nodded.

'That's wonderful! Which one?'

'Guess!'

'A novel?' I said, thinking I was being clever. Most of the books were novels.

'No.'

I tried to think what alternatives there were.

'The railway book?' I suggested, picking the least unlikely volume.

'No!' said Patsy, triumphantly. 'The one on gardening.'

'Why on earth was that one valuable? How much did they give you?'

'It was apparently a rare first edition by someone called Gertrude Jekyll. A very nice man in a very smart bookshop gave me £75 for it all in brand new £5 notes!'

'Who on earth is Gertrude Jekyll?' I asked.

'Was,' corrected Patsy. 'She's dead now. She was a famous garden designer and gardening writer. Apparently people who collect gardening books think a lot of her.' She reached into her cardigan pocket and pulled out her purse. 'You'd better have this,' she said, handing it to me. 'I don't like carrying all that money around with me.' She told me that the bookseller had shown her a picture of the book she had sold him in one of his catalogues. It had been priced at £150.

'Brilliant!' I said. I slipped the purse into my inside jacket pocket. 'Where else have you been?'

Patsy looked down at her drink. 'I didn't go anywhere else,' she said quietly. 'I just came straight here when I came out of the book shop.'

'Why?' I asked her. 'Why didn't you go exploring?'

'I was frightened that I'd get lost,' confessed Patsy. 'I don't really like London very much,' she said apologetically. 'But I'm glad I've seen it.'

She paused and took a sip of her drink. She seemed hesitant and so I waited for her to continue. 'I've got some more good news,' she said. 'The man in the bookshop asked me if I went to many auctions. He said he would be keen to see any more old books I found and he gave me a catalogue listing some of the books he's looking for.' She moved a little closer and whispered. 'He said he'd pay hundreds of pounds for some books!'

Patsy went on to tell me that the bookseller had explained that most country house auctions a long way from London were attended only by furniture dealers who often didn't know anything about books. He had told her that if she went to auctions and junk shops she would probably find quite a number of valuable editions and that he would give her half the catalogue price for anything she found in good condition.

'I can't wait.' she whispered excitedly. 'It'll be great fun. We could make a bit more money that way. And we could go together if you're not working as a doctor any more.'

I said I would like that very much indeed.

'What else would you like to see while we're in London?' I asked her.

'I don't know. What is there?'

I told her about the changing of the guard, the shops in the Burlington Arcade, the National Portrait Gallery, the Science Museum, the stores in Knightsbridge and Oxford Street, the parks, Fleet Street, the Bank of England and Piccadilly Circus.

Patsy did not look very impressed. In fact she looked a little sad.

'What's the matter?' I asked her. 'Is there something else you'd rather do?'

'Well...' began Patsy, shyly.

'What is it?'

'Whatever it is we'll do it.'

'No, you'll think I'm silly...'

'I won't. Honestly.'

'You will.'

'I won't.'

'Honestly. Whatever is you want to do we'll do it.'

'Even if it's silly?'

'However silly it is.'

'I'd like to go home to see the lambs and pick the strawberries. And look in the local newspaper to see what auctions there are. And you could start work on your book.'

I laughed out loud. I couldn't help it. But, as I quickly told Patsy, I wasn't laughing at her. I was laughing because I too couldn't think of anything I would rather have done.

'We're just a pair of country bumpkins,' I told her as we walked hand in hand back towards Paddington Station.

It wasn't as far or as difficult to find as I had feared, and an hour later Patsy and I were sitting beside each other on the train home, with our two parcels of worthless books beside us and Patsy's £75 in crisp, brand new £5 notes tucked safely in my jacket pocket.

As the train pulled out of the station Patsy sighed, tucked her arm in mine and leant her head on my shoulder.

'I'm glad we live in Bilbury,' she murmured. 'So am I,' I whispered back. 'So am I.' I looked down at her and saw that her eyes were closed.

She slept all the way back to Devon.

I didn't know exactly what the future held but I was looking forward to every minute of it.

Bilbury Grange is the second of Vernon Coleman’s seven books about Bilbury – all available as Amazon Kindle books. If you enjoy the Bilbury books you may also enjoy other books by the same author including ‘*Mr Henry Mulligan*’ and ‘*Mrs Caldicot’s Cabbage War’*. For details of over 100 books by Vernon Coleman please see his Amazon author page or visit www.vernoncoleman.com

Press reviews of ‘The Bilbury Chronicles’ by Vernon Coleman

‘Entertaining and amusing full of humour and sharp characterisation.’ *Sunday Independent*

‘Coleman handles the humour with the assured touch that comes from having already written a string of successful titles (and) manages to retain a heartwarming affection for his fellowman.’ *Yorkshire Evening Post*

‘Very readable, funny and full of richly drawn characters.’ *Southern Evening Echo*

‘You can sniff the clean Devon air and, despite the fiction, hear and recognise characters indigenous to any West Country village Dr Coleman harnesses the essence of village life with a wealth of characters and strings them along on a tide of gentle humour. One of the pleasures of this tale is that so many people will recognise Bilbury under a different name.’ *Western Morning News*

‘A charming novel...a wealth of anecdotes and some nice touches of humour make this forerunner of a promised series worth reading.’ *Sunderland Echo*

‘Beautifully captures the essence of village life, portraying the daily routines and tragedies experienced in a rural community. He weaves together a wealth of characters and anecdotes with humour and sadness in a really entertaining offering.’ *Western Evening Herald*

‘A cornucopia of colourful characters helps to weave a rich tapestry of village life subtly tempered with the gentle humour which hallmarks this author‘s work. Set in 1971, the mixture of rural beauty, human nature and the odd whisper of nostalgia combine to make this book a real delight.’ *Western Gazette*

‘The stories have moments of poignancy and tragedy as well. And how splendidly he mixes all the ingredients to produce a startling, but still credible tale about the local bobby and his man-eating wife. Dr Coleman’s book is a real delight from cover to cover. As the first in a series, it holds out the promise of entertaining things to come.’ *Huddersfield Daily Examiner*

The Young Country Doctor: Book 3

BILBURY REVELS

Vernon Coleman

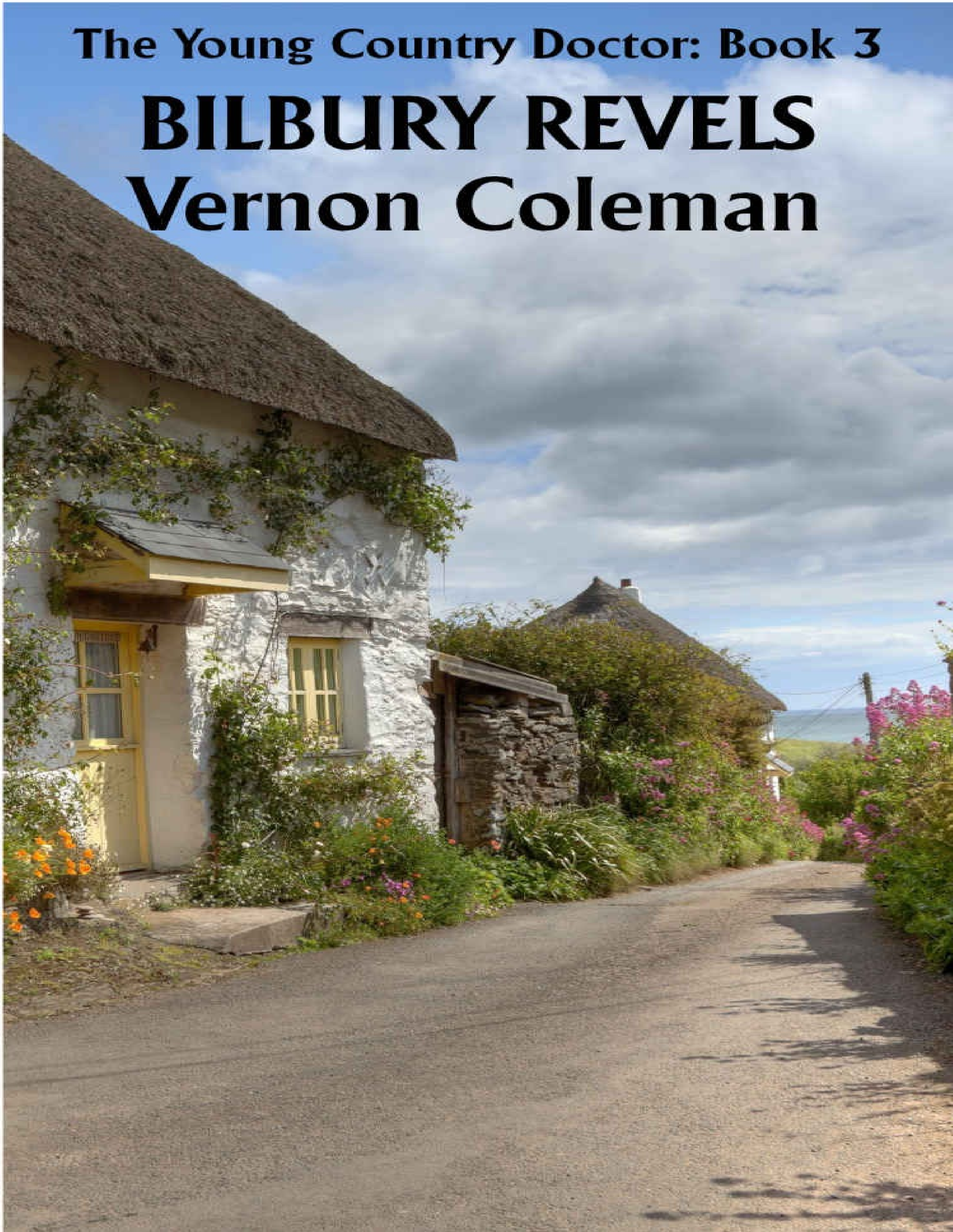

The Young Country Doctor Book 3

Bilbury Revels

Vernon Coleman

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Bilbury Revels is the third of Vernon Coleman's seven books about Bilbury. These are: *Bilbury Chronicles, Bilbury Grange, Bilbury Revels, Bilbury Country and Bilbury Village.* There are two books of short stories called *Bilbury Pie* and *Bilbury Pudding*. All will be available as Amazon Kindle Books. If you enjoy the Bilbury books you may enjoy other books by the same author including '*Mr Henry Mulligan'* and '*Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War'*. For full details of over 100 books by Vernon Coleman please see his author page on Amazon or http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

CHAPTER ONE

The snow in Bilbury was deep and crisp but it definitely wasn't even. The wind had seen to that. The wind that scours the North Devon coast, shaping trees and moulding hedgerows, removing roofs and whipping up the sea, isn't one of those balmy south coast breezes. It's a tough, unwavering, unrelenting, real god of a wind. In my first autumn in Bilbury I had noticed that the moment the leaves on the trees started to turn brown and die the wind whisked them off to the East. Even our walled garden was magically emptied of leaves within days. The wind is so fierce that rain in Bilbury doesn't fall vertically; it comes in from the West, driven horizontally and finding its way through invisible hair line cracks in door and window frames.

It had started snowing late the previous evening, just as Patsy and I were getting ready for bed. I'd gone outside to take Ben, our Welsh collie, out for her customary late night potter around the garden and had seen the first few delicate flakes floating gently down out of the moonlit blackness above. (I'm not sure how a female collie came to be called Ben. But that's her name.)

It had clearly not been snowing for more than a few minutes for there were still no more than a few flakes on the ground, and no sign as yet that this was going to be serious snow. I checked that our four pet sheep were safely tucked up in their stable, laid down extra straw, gave them enough hay to see them through the night and then shut the bottom half of their stable door and dropped the kick bolt. I left the top half of the door open. They hated being shut in the dark and the moon was their nightlight. They had grown good, thick fleeces since the summer and snuggled down in the straw, protected from the wind and the wet, they looked warm and content.

* * *

The snow must have fallen heavily all night for when we awoke the following morning the whole world had turned white. I tied the cord around my dressing gown, pulled back the bedroom curtains and stared in amazement at the view. It had been a long time since I'd seen such a heavy snowfall. It was impossible to see where the lawn ended and the driveway began and the small stone sundial we'd bought at an auction in Hatherleigh was now just a snowy white lump. Tree boughs, laden with snow, were bent down with their burdens and I made a mental note to go outside after breakfast and clear as many of them as I could before they broke.

Ben, who had as usual slept at the foot of our bed, came over to the window, jumped up on the window seat, rested her front paws on the window sill and stared for a moment at the curious world outside. She looked up at me, looked outside again and barked twice, clearly asking me what on earth had happened. One of our two cats, Sophie, ears pricked at the sudden noise, looked up from where she was curled at Patsy's feet, contented herself that she wasn't missing anything and yawned lazily before burying her nose back underneath her tail and going straight back to sleep.

I stroked Ben's head to reassure her that there was nothing for her to worry about and then lit the fire I'd laid the previous evening in the bedroom fireplace. Although we had an AGA in the kitchen which kept us supplied with endless quantities of hot water and which produced so much heat that it kept the whole house above freezing, we didn't have any central heating at Bilbury Grange, and certainly couldn't afford to have any installed, so we kept ourselves warm by lighting wood fires in the rooms we used most: the living room, the hall, our bedroom and the bathroom. We were still burning the old wooden laths that Thumper had taken off when he had repaired our roof and they made excellent fire lighters. To supplement this store of wood I had spent much of the autumn collecting, sawing and storing branches that had been blown down in the fields that surrounded our home. The wind that brought the cold, the rain and the snow had also given us much of our firewood. The breath of god which took away warmth and comfort also gave us back those things.

I had grown well accustomed to our idiosyncratic fireplaces and each has its own peculiar likes and dislikes. Give one too much paper and it will blaze into a moment of glory but give out little or no heat. Put too large a log onto another before it's ready and the promise of heat will disappear in an instant.

The bedroom fireplace was easy to satisfy and so efficient that we could even burn wood with the sap in it if we wanted to, though most of our firewood was well dried. Three or four sheets of crumpled newspaper topped with two layers of roofing laths were the basis of a good fire. I lit the paper with a match in two opposing corners, stood back for two or three minutes and then dropped a small well-seasoned ash log onto the flames; just big enough to keep the fire going until we were both washed and dressed. The ash tree had stood in a corner of one of our fields for nigh on sixty years before it had finally succumbed to the executioner wind.

'Why was Ben barking?' asked Patsy, pushing herself up onto one elbow but keeping the quilted counterpane up around her shoulders.

'It's been snowing.'

'Are we snowed in?'

'Yes. At least I think so. It looks pretty thick.'

Patsy's response might have sounded strange to a city dweller. 'Wonderful!' she said, meaning it. We had good stocks of food in the larder and cellar and plenty of logs in the shed. Even if the electricity went off, which it usually did two or three times a week in winter when the wind brought down overhead cables, we could stay warm and well fed. We had plenty of hay and straw for the sheep, a good supply of books to read and Bilbury Grange had a strong roof. We were well prepared for snow or storm.

'I'm going to have to go outside and knock the snow off some of the evergreens,' I told her. 'A couple of the conifers already look as if their branches may have broken under the weight.' The deciduous trees, their branches stark and leafless, were in no danger but the conifers, the rhododendrons, the yew, the laurel, the holly and many others needed help.

'I'll cook us a decent breakfast first,' said Patsy, throwing back the eiderdown, getting out of bed and walking over to the window. She stood for a brief moment or two then shivered. You could feel the cold through the glass. She ran back to warm herself at the now blazing fire, picking up her dressing gown as she did so. Then she knelt down, stared at the flames and rubbed her hands together while I filled the bedroom sink with hot water, stripped off to the waist and washed and shaved. When I'd finished and before I started dressing I filled the bowl with fresh, hot water for Patsy. The steam rose from the sink in great clouds and I blessed the AGA for the umpteenth time. Huge, solid and imperturbable the boiler asked only that we fed it regularly on its twice daily diet of coke. In return it worked quietly and efficiently to protect us from the worst of the cold. Steam condensed on the windows and the beautiful snowy landscape outside gradually disappeared from view.

I pulled on a pair of thick jeans, a woollen work shirt which I'd bought from a farm supply shop in South Molton and a thick jumper which Patsy's mother had made for me with wool she'd spun herself from their own sheep. The wool was still coated with the sheep's natural oils and the sweater was heavy but cosy and waterproof.

Downstairs I pushed my feet into Wellington boots and pulled a floppy, old tweed fishing hat down over my ears. I didn't fish but had found the hat in a cupboard underneath the stairs. It was slightly too large for me but I didn't mind because that meant that it covered more of my head than a more fashionable hat would have done. I then opened the back door and went out to check that the sheep were all right.

* * *

A few minutes later, back in the kitchen, I took off my sweater and boots and padded around in my stockinged feet. Sophie and Emily, our two cats, had both finished their breakfasts and were curled up together on the rug in front of the AGA. In the winter they avoided the cold by finding somewhere warm to sleep, curling up together and shutting out whatever horrors the weather might bring. In the summer, if the sun was out, they avoided the heat by finding somewhere cool to sleep. They had a simple but effective way of dealing with whatever problems life threw at them.

'Are the sheep O.K.?'

'They're fine. They want to know why they can't go out but they're fine.' They had baaared at me and playfully butted me when I had refused to open up their stable door to let them out. Their protests hadn't lasted long, however. They had soon tucked into the fresh supply of hay I'd given them.

I fed Ben, who wagged her tail in thanks and then immediately started eating. I had had to bite my tongue not to laugh at her antics in the snow; the first she'd ever encountered. She had rubbed her nose in it, licked it, spat it out, tried again and swallowed some. Then she had run round and round in tiny circles, kicking up great fluffy clouds of snow and finally spluttering to a halt in a small two foot thick drift.

Sophie and Emily had been far more circumspect. Sophie had poked her head through the cat flap which Thumper had fitted for us and had taken a long hard look at the white world on the other side of the door before gingerly poking a front leg through to test the temperature of the outside world. With her three other legs still in the house, and her head and body sheltered by the cat flap from the lightly falling snow, Sophie had paused, frozen in mid movement, before carefully retreating back into the kitchen. She had obviously decided that whatever it was she was planning to do outside could wait until the world had returned to normal.

'I've made us porridge to start with,' said Patsy, putting two huge bowls onto the table and ladling porridge out of an old iron pan which her mother had given her, and which had been warming gently on the AGA top. 'There's syrup on the table.' Two huge mugs of steaming tea were already poured.

I used the handle of a tablespoon to open the syrup tin and then put two huge spoons of syrup into the centre of my bowl of porridge. Whatever the Scots may say I like syrup on my porridge. I can't abide the thought of eating it laced with salt.

'Mushrooms?' asked Patsy, a few minutes later as I tipped a hod of coke into the AGA.

'Yes, please!'

'Eggs?'

'Two.'

'Poached, fried or scrambled?'

'Scrambled, please.'

'Tomatoes?'

'Oh, yes please!'

'How many slices of toast?'

'One with the eggs on, one with the tomatoes on and two to have with marmalade afterwards.'

Patsy had made her own marmalade in the autumn, using a recipe handed down from her grandmother, and it was much thicker, tangier and tastier than any mass-produced competitor I've ever tasted. She had made a minor mistake with the quantities and had made 54lbs of it but I wasn't complaining, although there had been quite a run on jam jars in the village at a time when every woman in every house and cottage was busy making jam. (In addition to the marmalade Patsy had made 17lbs of gooseberry jam, 44lbs of strawberry jam, 38lbs of blackberry and apple jam, 67lbs of blackcurrant jam and 45lbs of rhubarb and tomato chutney plus smaller quantities of other jams! Only the discovery of a large cache of jars in a dark corner of the cellar had solved our jam jar shortage).

I put the empty coke hod down by the back door so that it was ready for refilling after breakfast, picked up the cats' bowls, which were empty, and rinsed them in the sink, and then got two large plates out of the crockery cupboard, two knives and two forks out of the cutlery drawer and a jar of Patsy's rhubarb and tomato chutney out of the larder. Breakfast didn't usually consist of anything much more than toast and marmalade and tea or coffee but I was looking forward to this morning's feast.

Twenty minutes later, I sat back with a sigh and wiped a few remaining crumbs from around my mouth. I glanced out of the kitchen window into the courtyard. It was still snowing. The sky was now as white as everywhere else and the snow was now clearly here to stay for a while. Just then the kitchen light went out. It didn’t really matter, it was now light enough to see quite well without it, but we were now really on our own. The electricity had just failed.

* * *

It took the two of us an hour and a half to go around the garden using long sticks to knock the worst of the snow off the bushes and the lower branches of all the evergreen trees. There were still a few conkers left clinging to the upper branches of one of our largest horse chestnut trees and periodically the additional weight of the ice with which they were coated brought these crashing down through the snow laden boughs. Sophie and Emily had sensibly stayed indoors but Ben had, of course, come out with us. Nothing would keep Ben indoors if Patsy and I were going out. She danced around barking and snapping at the falling snow, dodging first this way and then that to avoid each fresh mini avalanche.

We checked the vegetable garden, the greenhouse and all the outbuildings and then walked around the house to make sure that the wind had not done any damage. It hadn’t, though it was still blowing hard. The snow had been blown into deep drifts on the windward side of every wall and Ben had great fun throwing herself into each fresh, virginal snow-bank.

Using an old pick axe I started to break the ice on the water butts, the pond and the lake. Around the lake I had to help a dozen gulls free themselves from where they had settled down the night before to sleep. The birds’ feet had frozen to the ground around the edge of the lake. The ice on the lake was no more than half an inch thick but it still took quite a lot of hammering to break. I used a long handled pick axe to clear an area about ten foot long and three foot wide on the lake and nearly fell in trying to reach out further. In the vegetable garden the water butts seemed to have frozen solid and the ice was impossible to break. The snow there was crisscrossed with animal tracks: the large, five toed track of a badger, the bizarre, jumping track of a squirrel and the tracks of a dozen other animals: moles, rabbits, mice and maybe (I wasn’t sure) even a hedgehog.

I had lined two old wooden seed trays with newspaper and was filling them with earth from inside the greenhouse so that the cats could use them as litter trays when Patsy, who was rummaging around at the far end of the greenhouse, suddenly produced two large, old, shallow metal trays.

‘What on earth do you want those for?’ I asked her. The trays had once been painted green and were too shallow for any practical purpose I could think of.

Patsy grinned at me, rather sheepishly.

‘How long is it since you went tobogganing?’ she asked.

‘Tobogganing? I can’t remember. Years and years.’

‘Come on then!’ cried Patsy. She came up behind me and pushed me towards the greenhouse door. ‘These’ll make terrific toboggans.’

We stopped off at the house to leave the two litter trays for Emily and Sophie (both of whom poked their noses through the kitchen doorway, sniffed again at the snow, and then ran back indoors to the rug in front of the AGA) and then carried our tin trays over to the long, steep hill in Tumbrill’s Meadow. We spent the next two hours playing in the snow like a couple of carefree children.

We went back to the house as the wind started to blow stronger and the snow came down heavier than before. The sky was heavy and dark and from past experience I knew we were in for a long and bitter night. Before we went in I walked round the house and closed the shutters over all the windows, fastening them tightly against the coming storm.

* * *

Our bathroom at Bilbury Grange has two huge, cast iron baths side by side. While water gushed out from the four huge taps I lit a wood fire and threw on some twigs of rosemary. The bathroom fireplace works well and within minutes there was a blaze big enough to take the chill off the room. Patsy and I undressed and, as the fire crackled and roared and the air filled with the fragrant smell of burning rosemary wood, we each climbed into a bath and soaked our aching bodies in water so hot that we could only just bear it. Our wet clothes lay tumbled together in a soggy mass on the bathroom floor while huge bath towels (bought at a sale when a country house hotel went bankrupt and the receivers sold the contents at auction) warmed in front of the fire on a Victorian wooden towel rail.

Outside the wind was beginning to build up again and it was clear that the sky had told the truth. It was going to be another stormy night. The window panes were now opaque with condensed steam.

There was, I felt, something strangely, irresistibly decadent about having a bath in the middle of a Monday afternoon when all decent God fearing men and women should be at work, hunched over desk or machine, brows anxiously furrowed and eyes forever glancing towards the clock.

A spark shot out from the fire, landed in the puddle of water that had seeped from our clothes and expired with a hiss. Ben, lying a yard or two away from it, lifted her head and pricked up her ears. Satisfied that nothing had happened for her to worry about, or to protect us against, she lay her head back down again between her paws and rested, with one eye half open, half on guard. Sophie and Emily, curled together as usual, didn't move a whisker. I lay back, closed my eyes and floated in my bath.

* * *

It seemed a lifetime ago since I'd first arrived in North Devon and although, in truth, it was no more than a few years, I could hardly remember the life I'd had before I'd found Bilbury.

I had come to the village in 1971, soon after I'd qualified from medical school, to work as an assistant to Dr Brownlow, the ageing and much loved local general practitioner. I had exchanged asphyxiating traffic fumes, endless rules, regulations and restrictions, and a glass and concrete skyline for country air, real responsibility, and a skyline dominated by trees, hills and storm-tossed, white-crested waves.

When Dr Brownlow had unexpectedly decided to retire (after a water diviner had discovered an underground stream on his land and Dr Brownlow had decided to open a bottling plant) I had, with some initial diffidence, taken on the practice myself and by the time bureaucrats and administrators made the decision to close the practice down and amalgamate it with a bigger medical practice in Barnstaple I had met and married Patsy.

By then we had bought and started to renovate Bilbury Grange. Bilbury had become my home and I loved the village and the life we had started to create for ourselves there more than the medical career I'd originally chosen. Without hesitation I had made the decision to stay in Bilbury and to try to earn my living as a writer.

I was nervously waiting to receive the finished copies of my first book. With the books should come the final instalment of my advance royalty. The £250 cheque, a third of the total advance, would be very welcome. The first third had been paid when I signed the contract to write the book. The second instalment, another £250, had been paid when I had delivered the typescript of the book.

Since I had retired from general practice our only regular income had come from the weekly medical column I wrote, which was syndicated to several local newspapers in different towns around the country. We had supplemented this modest income by selling fruit and vegetables from our garden, by renting out the small flat in our courtyard to holiday-makers during the summer months and by going to local house clearance auctions, finding old books and selling them on to a dealer in London. I had hoped to be able to earn a little more money by writing articles, features and stories for other newspapers and magazines but I had found it harder going than I had anticipated. Although I'd written a dozen pieces I'd sold only two: a short story to a local paper in London and an article about infectious diseases to a woman's magazine.

Outside Bilbury Grange the incoming snow was now being hurled against the house by a constantly increasing and ferocious westerly wind. The bathroom, lit only by the flickering flames from the open log fire, was cosily romantic. The wind whistled through the slits in the shutters and through a tiny hole it had found under the eaves and I remembered someone once telling me years before that although they may look soft, large and fluffy snowflakes can find their way through the meanest of gaps. I wondered whether I ought to find a ladder and go and check out the loft. After a moment's thought I decided that I would leave this chore until the next morning.

'What do you want for tea?' asked my wife, lazily lifting her right leg out of the water and soaping it.

I turned my head and could only just see Patsy's eyes and the top of her head, peeping over the top of her bath. 'I don't know,' I confessed. 'I hadn't even thought about tea.'

'I thought we might perhaps have crumpets and jam in front of the fire in the living room,' suggested Patsy. She finished rubbing soap on her leg and lowered it gently back down into the water without so much as a splash.

'Sounds absolutely splendid,' I murmured. I lifted my right foot out of the water, turned on the hot tap with my toes and topped up the bath with more hot water. Exhausted by this simple effort I sank even lower into the water. In the fireplace a flaming log slipped an inch or two, sending a small shower of sparks out over the hearth. Ben, ever vigilant, raised her head and pricked her ears, checked out the noise, reassured herself that all was still well and settled herself back down again. Sophie and Emily, happy to leave all watchdog duties to Ben, didn't even stir.

A log fire. Hot buttered crumpets thickly covered with home made jam. Bilbury Grange battened down against the storm and all our animals locked up safely. Life seemed good and I felt grateful. I thought that perhaps I might mix a bowlful of hot punch to drink with our crumpets.

* * *

CHAPTER TWO

The storm raged for two days and two nights. On the second night I had just managed to get to sleep when I was woken by the telephone. Still at least nine tenths asleep I picked up the receiver and spoke. ‘Hello?’ I couldn’t hear anyone at the other end and assumed that the caller, whoever it was, had given up at the very moment that I’d picked up the receiver. It’s amazing how often that seems to happen. I was about to put the telephone down again when I heard a familiar voice. It was Frank, the genial licensed victualler who, with his wife, Gilly, runs the village pub, the Duck and Puddle. He sounded faint, as though he was calling from the other side of the world, and I could hardly hear him. Deciphering what he had to say was made even more difficult by the fact that the wind was rattling the shutters and whistling through the loft above us.

‘...lines aren’t... very well... hear me?’

‘Frank?’ I sat up in bed and reached out to switch on my bedside light.

‘... storm... school..!’ I heard him say. There was clearly some sort of intermittent fault on the line.

My fingers found the switch on the lamp. Click. Nothing happened. No light. I had forgotten that we had no electricity. Only much later did I find out that a huge old oak tree on the corner of Parsonage Lane and Frog Road had been uprooted by the gale and had brought down all the incoming electricity cables.

‘I can’t hear you properly,’ I told Frank. ‘Can you say it again?’

As I spoke the storm grew steadily more powerful. I was glad we had wooden shutters across our windows. When we had restored the house we had thought seriously about having the old, slatted wooden shutters taken off but Thumper Robinson had insisted that the wood was quite sound and simply needed painting.

‘... tree... roof... cottage,’ was all I heard from Frank’s next sentence. I sat up straighter, pressed the receiver more firmly against my ear and concentrated hard.

‘Sorry, Frank,’ I said. ‘I can’t hear you properly. Can you say it again? Keep on saying it.’ I repeated this rather tedious litany three or four times so that Frank, who was, I presumed having as much difficulty in hearing me as I was in hearing him, would stand a chance of hearing what I was saying. Inevitably, Patsy woke up.

‘What’s the matter?’ she asked, sleepily. ‘Who is it?’

I put my hand over the mouthpiece. ‘It’s Frank,’ I answered in a whisper. ‘From the Duck and Puddle,’ I added rather unnecessarily for at the time I don’t think either of us knew anyone else called Frank. ‘There seems to be some sort of emergency but there is something wrong with the phone line.’ Patsy nodded knowingly. She’d lived in Bilbury all her life. She knew from past experience that the telephone and electricity cables were often affected by Bilbury’s fierce south westerly gales.

Frank repeated his message several times and each time I managed to hear a few different words.

‘I’ll be there as soon as I can!’ I said the moment I understood what Frank was saying, throwing back the sheets and blankets on my side of the bed as I spoke. I winced as the cold hit me. Downstairs the old AGA must have been furiously pumping out its heat but the weather was so cold that the boiler didn’t seem to have made much difference to the temperature in the bedroom. I put the telephone handset down on its rest, opened a drawer in the top of the bedside table and took out a candle, an old fashioned candle holder and a box of matches. Working entirely by feel I put the candle in the holder and then lit the match. The sudden flare of the match lit up the room. I lit the wick and waited for the candle to settle down to a steady flame. Then I put down the candle holder on the bedside table, climbed out of bed and rapidly started to dress. Ben, her ears pricked, jumped down off the bed and sat expectantly on the carpet by my feet. Neither Emily nor Sophie moved.

‘What’s wrong?’ asked Patsy, sleepily. ‘Where are you going?’

‘The storm has blown a tree down onto School Cottage,’ I explained, taking a fresh, thick, woollen shirt from a drawer and pulling it over my head. ‘Frank says they think Miss Hargreaves is still inside the wreckage. The road from Barnstaple is blocked with snowdrifts so they want me to go over in case they find her and she’s injured.’ Miss Hargreaves, a formidable looking but kind hearted spinster in her fifties was the village schoolmistress. She had, I knew, come to the school in her early twenties, fresh from teacher training college, and for thirty years had dedicated her life to educating the young people of Bilbury.

Little more than a year earlier I had been Bilbury’s general practitioner and had borne the sole responsibility for the health and physical wellbeing of the villagers. Now I no longer had any official responsibilities in the village but the villagers knew that I was a doctor and they still called on me from time to time whenever there were emergencies.

Patsy managed to slide out of bed without disturbing the sheets and blankets on her side of the bed too much. Gently, she lifted Sophie, pulled her dressing gown from where Sophie had been lying on the bed, and then replaced the still sleeping cat. She shivered involuntarily, pulled the dressing gown around her and tied it tightly.

‘You don’t need to get up,’ I told her, rummaging around in the drawer where I kept my socks. The dim light from the candle, barely enough to see by at the best of times, flickered as an extra strong gust of wind found its way through a gap somewhere in a wall or window frame. Eventually I found what I was looking for: a pair of really thick knitted socks. I put them on. They came up almost to my knees.

‘You’ll have to walk,’ said Patsy. ‘You won’t be able to drive in this. I’m going to put up some food for you.’ She took her own candle out of her bedside drawer, lit it and used it to light her way around the bedroom and to the door.

I took my black Gladstone bag out of the bottom of the wardrobe, followed her out onto the landing and down the stairs to the kitchen. Ben padded down behind me. The Gladstone bag contained my medical equipment. I always kept it ready packed and handy for emergencies.

The kitchen was much warmer than anywhere else in the house and I pulled my jeans and sweater down from the line above the AGA where I had left them to dry the night before and put them on. They were as warm as fresh toast. Patsy put a saucepan of home-made tomato soup on top of the cooking plate. Then she opened the white enamelled metal breadbin which stood by the side of the oven and took out half a loaf of bread. She cut eight thick slices of bread and made me a huge pile of sandwiches: two with egg, cress and home-made rhubarb and tomato chutney and two with home-made strawberry jam. By the time she had finished, the soup pan was boiling. She carefully poured the contents of the pan into a vacuum flask. Then she wrapped the sandwiches in greaseproof paper. While she was doing this I took a small, sturdy knapsack from a hook just behind the cellar door and put it down on the kitchen table. Then I opened my Gladstone bag and carefully tipped out the contents onto the table alongside it. I wanted to have both hands free so needed to put everything I wanted to take with me into my knapsack. I packed my stethoscope, small sphygmomanometer, thermometer, suture kit, scalpel, syringes, needles and a small supply of essential medicines including painkillers. When I had finished, Patsy took the knapsack from me and packed the wrapped sandwiches into one side pocket and the flask into the other. Before she fastened the haversack she filled a brown paper bag with dog biscuits and popped the bag into the knapsack.

‘I’m not taking Ben,’ I told her.

‘I don’t think you’ll be able to stop her,’ said Patsy quietly, nodding in Ben’s direction. The collie was sitting patiently by the back door, ears pricked and obviously ready to go. ‘Take her with you,’ said Patsy. ‘I don’t know why but I’ll be happier if you do.’

Half reluctantly I said I would. I was only half reluctant because, selfishly, I knew that I would welcome her company.

‘Take care,’ said Patsy.

I said I would.

‘I hope she’s all right,’ said Patsy.

‘Ben?’ I asked, puzzled.

‘Miss Hargreaves,’ said Patsy. ‘She taught me to read and write. When I was a kid we all loved her. She used to be very pretty you know when she was young.’ I sometimes forgot that Patsy had grown up in the village.

I gave Patsy a big hug and told her that I would do whatever I could. Then I pulled on a pair of waterproof leggings and my green, oiled coat and stuffed a large rubber torch into one of the pockets. I pulled a thick woolly hat firmly onto my head (my usual hat would have been blown off within seconds and would, in any case, have done nothing to keep my ears warm), slipped my feet into my boots, put my arms through the straps of my haversack, pulled on a pair of woollen gloves and then added a pair of thick thornproof gardening gloves that were slightly too large for me and would, therefore, allow me to wear the woollen gloves as well, kissed Patsy goodbye, chose a five foot long hickory stick from the stand by the back door and grinned at Ben. These preparations may sound a little ‘over the top’ but if you have ever experienced a snowstorm on Exmoor you will know that they were not. Finally, I unbolted the back door, and cautiously peered outside.

I knew it had been snowing hard for a long time and I knew that the wind was fierce but I had not expected the conditions to be quite as dramatic as they were. The snow in the courtyard had drifted up against the back door and was nearly four feet high and the wind sent clouds of thick snow whirling into the kitchen. I shut the door with far more difficulty than I had opened it. I hadn’t even stepped outside and yet my eyes were already smarting from the wind and the icy sharp flakes of snow.

‘I need some goggles,’ I told Patsy, pulling off my thick gloves and rubbing at my sore eyes. It seemed an impossible hope. Where on earth could I find goggles?

Suddenly I had a brainwave. I opened the cellar door, took the torch out of my pocket and went down the stairs. There, hanging on a rusty nail, I found the light plastic goggles Thumper Robinson had used when he had sprayed the loft with a chemical mixture designed to kill woodworm and dry rot. When he had finished with them I’d washed them and kept them, convinced that they looked too useful to throw away. I dusted them off and put them on.

With virtually every inch of me now protected against the wind and the blizzard I half walked and half fell out into the drift which had accumulated against the back door. Ben, doing an undignified but effective variation on the dog paddle, half walked and half swam through the snow.

A yard or two away from the back door I turned round and peered through the thick white curtain of snow which surrounded me. I could just make out the kitchen door and the faint, yellow light of the candle I knew that Patsy was holding. Doubting whether Patsy could see me I hesitated for a moment, waved my stick and then turned to head for the gateway out of the courtyard.

* * *

The village school in Bilbury is situated about half a mile along the road from the Village Green and the Duck and Puddle. It is about two, maybe two and a half miles away from Bilbury Grange if you follow the road round; though as the crow flies the distance between Bilbury Grange and the school is no more than a mile and a half at the most.

The Bilbury village school was built in the 1930s by a millionaire from the north of England who had made a considerable fortune out of exploiting hordes of poorly paid women and children in textile factories all over the world. When he retired he bought a house and came to live in Bilbury and was clearly determined to purge his soul of the evil he had done. Driven, I suspect, by guilt his final two decades were spent performing what are usually referred to as ‘good works’. He was never shy about his generosity and both the school and the village hall (a much repaired, weather scarred, wonderful neo-gothic creation which must be the only building in England to have four stained glass windows and a corrugated iron roof) which was also built with his money, have his name carved into the brickwork. The School Cottage, much photographed by visitors to the district, and traditionally occupied by Bilbury’s resident schoolteacher, had a thatched roof and its walls were totally covered with a fine mixture of ivy, rambling roses and clematis.

There is a little known footpath between the Grange and the village which Patsy and I often used in the summer when we needed something from the village shop but weren’t in too much of a hurry and wanted to walk rather than drive. I didn’t intend to waste time following the road for I was pretty sure that the road itself would be blocked with snow and that the route that way would certainly be no less impeded than the path.

The path runs across three of our fields, down the valley to the small stream which runs along one of our boundaries, through the small wood which provides Elijah Huttlecombe with wood for charcoal burning and thin stakes for wattle fencing, and up the long hill that is a sort of small, unofficial local nature reserve to rejoin the main road through the village. The path comes out onto the main road alongside the school playground.

It was my simple plan to follow this path.

I turned right out of the Bilbury Grange courtyard, walked along the track and climbed the wooden post and rail fence into the field where we keep our four sheep. The torch I had brought with me was a good one but the snow was falling so thickly and the night was so black that I very nearly walked into the gate. I could see no more than a yard, maybe a yard and a half, in front of me. The sheep, tucked up in their stable, must have heard me walking by for they all started to baa very loudly. One of them, probably Lizzie, started to bang one of her front feet against the closed, lower half of the stable door.

Our four sheep all had quite distinct personalities. Lizzie was brash, domineering and demanding. She always wanted to be fed first if there were any treats to be had. She was the undoubted leader of our small flock and it was invariably she who seemed to decide when it was time to lie down and rest and when it was time to get up and start eating again. She took her leadership responsibilities seriously and if one of the other sheep was not well Lizzie would always stay with her and keep her company. Cynthia was the prettiest of the bunch and she knew it. She had a naturally haughty air which sometimes led casual observers to suspect that she felt that she was really rather too good, rather too special, to be living in a field and sleeping in a stable. If anyone ever went into the field with a camera Cynthia would always pose willingly to have her picture taken. The other three would back away rather nervously but Cynthia would present her best profile and hold it until the shutter had clicked. Petula was always in trouble. It was Petula who got foot rot first when there was a wet spell. It was Petula who caught orf when half a dozen infected sheep from a neighbouring farm got through a thick hawthorn hedge and into our field. It was Petula who always knocked over the water bucket. It was Petula who got locked in the tack room and knocked over six bales of straw. And it was Petula who wandered into the kitchen garden and ate a whole row of foot high runner bean plants when a gate was accidentally left open. (The other sheep had stayed behind in the field and when I returned Petula to the fold in disgrace I just knew that the moment my back was turned she would have to put up with the other three telling her that they knew she would get into trouble).

Sarah-Louise was the worrier of the four. She worried about anything and everything. She had huge, sad, brown eyes and loved nothing more than having her neck massaged. She was quiet and polite and always last to be fed. If one of the other three tried to push in front of her she would always back out of the way. She was, without a doubt, the most loving of the four. Whenever I left the stable at night she would always come after me, her big brown eyes looking up at me, pleading with me to stay and stroke her neck for just a little while longer.

I shouted to the four of them and couldn't help wondering how many sheep and other animals there were seeking shelter out on the moors, huddling together for warmth behind small, inadequate stone walls and underneath windblown gorse bushes. I thought for a moment about going over to the stable to close the upper half of their door but decided against it for they always hated being shut in completely. The wind was blowing from the west and the stable door was on the east side of the building. This was no coincidence, of course. The farmer who had originally built the stable knew very well that the prevailing winds always came from the west. The only door on either Bilbury Grange itself or any of the numerous outbuildings which surrounded it that faced due West was the kitchen door, which was normally protected from the wind and the rain by the fact that it opened into the courtyard.

* * *

Neither time nor distance are the constants we usually think they are. Both vary according to circumstances. An hour of pleasure always passes far more speedily than an hour in the dentist's chair. In summer, a mile and a half, walked along a grassy path, is a pleasant half an hour stroll. But given different circumstances that same mile and a half walk can become a difficult and even life threatening journey.

Of course, it didn't help that once I started to walk across our first field and head down towards the stream I had no way of knowing exactly where I was nor in which direction I should go. The path, normally so easy to follow even in the dark, was completely buried under several feet of snow. I could see no more than three or four feet in front of me: there were no landmarks by which I could set my course. And above me the sky was so full of falling snow that I could see neither moon nor stars. I could have done with a compass. All I knew was that in order to reach the stream I had to keep on heading downhill.

I quickly realised that I had made an important mistake: although it would have entailed a longer journey I should have followed the road instead of trying to take a short cut across the fields. On the road the presence of the hedges on either side would have meant that I would have not have been able to get lost.

Every step I took was a tremendous effort and although I thought of myself as reasonably fit I soon felt exhausted. I tried to walk with my face turned away from the wind but it didn't help much. Within a few minutes my face was burning with the cold and stinging with what felt like an endless barrage of driven needles of ice. Even though I was wearing two pairs of gloves both my hands felt like blocks of ice. The cold had seeped through my boots and my thick woollen socks and I couldn't feel my feet. Every step was a real effort and the further I went down the hill the deeper the snow seemed to get. Soon I found myself struggling to get through snow that came up past my knees, snow that crept in through every opening and then, melted by the warmth of my body, soaked into my clothes. Never straying more than a foot or so away from me Ben continued bravely and silently to battle on alongside me. Half of me wished she had stayed behind, safe and warm in the house; but half of me was glad to have her company. She never flagged and never complained though I could tell by the way her head drooped that she was cold and weary.

At the bottom of the field the path goes across a small wooden bridge before climbing upwards again. Each end of the bridge is guarded with an old fashioned wooden stile. A thick, layered hedge marks the boundary on each side of the stile. Because I hadn't been able to follow the path when I reached the bottom of the field I found myself face to face with the top few feet of the hedge instead of the stile. The stile and the bridge were, I guessed, buried deep beneath the snow. I lay still and listened hard; trying to tell whether or not the stream was still running or if it had frozen up completely. I couldn't hear anything except for the wind whistling through the nearby treetops.

I somehow managed to drag myself through the hedge and up the hill into the small wood. Here there was some slight shelter from the wind and the blizzard. I took off my haversack and sat down with my back against a huge oak tree. Ben, totally exhausted, lay down close by my side. I sat in such a way that I was protected from the worst of the wind by the tree trunk. The trunk was at least two feet thick but when the wind reached its peak I could feel the whole tree shudder.

Gingerly I parted the cuff of my glove and the sleeve of my coat and used the torch to look at my watch. It had taken me an hour and a half to travel little more than half a mile, though to be honest I was so exhausted that if I had had to guess I would have said that I had been walking for four or five times as long. I desperately wanted to rest, even to sleep, but knew that if I did it could well be fatal for us both. I knew that Ben wouldn't leave me and if I went to sleep and didn't wake up there was a real chance that we would both freeze to death. We both had to keep moving.

But first I needed to eat. I took off my thickest pair of outer gloves and opened the haversack. I fed Ben first, giving her a handful of biscuits to eat. Then I poured myself a cup of warm soup and ate a sandwich. I felt so much better with the warm, thick, liquid inside me that I poured a cupful for Ben too, holding the cup while she licked up the soup. Then I screwed the cup back on the thermos flask, put everything back into the haversack and scrambled wearily up onto my feet.

* * *

Walking through the wood seemed to be the easiest part of that terrible journey, for the snow there was no more than two feet thick. Because the branches of the trees acted as a filter, thinning out the falling snow, I could see quite a lot further than I had been able to see out in the field. Once I had found my way back to where I thought the path ought to be I managed to keep to it simply by walking along the narrow passageway which ran between the trees. I found the going so easy that I picked Ben up and carried her; holding the torch in my left hand so that I could look out for the many branches which had been brought down by the snow and the wind.

Suddenly, I went crashing down. The torch flew one way, Ben flew the other and my long hickory stick snapped as it took my weight. Ben yelped as she landed in thick snow. I had tripped over an unseen tree stump and the moment

I tried to get up again I knew that I was in trouble. I had badly twisted my ankle. It was all I needed to make my night complete. I limped onwards, using what was left of my stick as a support and for the first time in my life I think I was seriously afraid.

The wind had blown the snow into drifts and forcing a way through the snow was a tremendous struggle. I had never before felt so cold. My whole body ached with it. My joints seemed to have seized up. My leg, back, chest and arm muscles were sore and aching from fighting through the snow drifts and my cheeks, nose and mouth were all raw from the biting, burning cold wind and the endless, searing of the icy blizzard. My ankle was swelling and though it was frozen with cold it hurt like hell to walk on it. I knew I couldn’t be far from the road or the school but I could neither hear nor see anything. I might as well have been a million miles away.

In the end I could go no further. In desperation I looked around but there was no shelter to be seen anywhere. I collapsed where I stood and curled myself into a tight ball. Dimly I could hear Ben barking furiously. I reached out to comfort her but before my frozen fingers could find her I blacked out.

* * *

CHAPTER THREE

Frank and Thumper told me that Ben had almost certainly saved my life.

‘She wouldn’t leave you,’ said Frank. ‘You were curled up in the snow and she was standing beside you, ears pricked, barking away as loudly as she could.’

I sipped again at the cupful of hot, sweet tea that Frank had forced into my hands and looked around. I was sitting in a chair in the sole classroom at the village school. There was no electric light but two hurricane lamps had been lit and in the soft yellow light I could see that the walls around the classroom had been decorated with paintings of kings and crusaders and colourful, carefully drawn plans of castles, keeps, moats and drawbridges. There was hardly an inch of wall that wasn’t decorated in some way with these childish paintings. It wasn’t difficult to see which period of history Miss Hargreaves had been teaching the children in her class.

The hot tea almost burned my mouth but I could feel the warmth from it circulating through my body as I drank. The rescuer had become the rescuee. I had, they told me, been less than a quarter of a mile from the school and the schoolteacher’s damaged cottage when Frank, Thumper and the others had heard Ben’s insistent barking and had come out to look for me. They had found me semi-conscious in the snow and had carried me back to the village school.

‘I wouldn’t have given you much of a chance if you hadn’t had Ben with you,’ said Thumper. ‘We could have searched all night and not found you.’ He nodded down, somewhere in the direction of my feet. I looked down. Someone had removed my clothes, presumably because they were soaking wet, and had wrapped me in a blanket. Ben, ever faithful, was lying by my feet looking up at me. I bent down and stroked her head. She reached up, touched my leg gently with one paw and held her head on one side. She looked exhausted and bedraggled. Her coat was still soaked.

‘Have you got a towel?’ I asked. ‘She’s wet through!’

Frank nodded, disappeared for a moment and reappeared a few seconds later clutching a large, freshly laundered towel. I put down my cup, took the towel from him, bent down, and wrapped Ben in it. She let me dry her.

‘Could you get her some warm milk?’ I asked.

Frank nodded again and disappeared. When I’d finished drying Ben I stood up, opened the blanket for a moment and looked inside. I was wearing my thick woollen shirt, socks and underpants. ‘Where are the rest of my clothes?’ I asked Thumper. My ankle still hurt likes blazes.

‘Behind you,’ he said. I turned round. My jeans and sheep’s wool jumper were draped over two huge old iron radiators. My oiled jacket and waterproof trousers were hanging up on a peg. A large puddle lay on the floor beneath them. ‘We managed to get the boiler going,’ explained Thumper. ‘Thank heavens it’s an old-fashioned one that doesn’t rely on an electric motor.’

Frank returned with a bowl full of warm milk. He put it down on the floor in front of Ben. She looked up at me. I nodded and she hungrily started to drink. Outside I could hear the wind battering at the windows and I suddenly remembered why I was there.

‘Miss Hargreaves...,’ I began. ‘How is she?’

‘She’s still trapped,’ said Thumper quietly. ‘We’ve been working all night to get to her. The storm brought her chimney crashing down on her cottage roof. The timbers under the thatch smashed under the weight and she’s stuck in her bedroom.’

‘Has anyone managed to get a message through to Barnstaple? To the fire brigade? The ambulance?’

Thumper shook his head. ‘All the phone lines are down now and the roads out of the village are totally impassable. I tried to come in by tractor but I had to abandon it and walk.’ He shook his head. ‘I’ve never known anything like it before.’

‘I’ll go and see if l can do anything,’ I said, looking round. ‘I brought some drugs with me.’ I paused and looked around. ‘In my haversack,’ I added. ‘You don’t know where it is, do you?’ Thumper walked across the room, picked up my haversack and brought it across to me. ‘I’ll see if I can find you some dry trousers,’ said Thumper. ‘Your jeans are still soaking. Wait there for a few minutes.’

I still felt weak and shivery. I wrapped the blanket around me, although it really wasn’t cold in the classroom, and sat down. Ben, who had finished her warm milk, edged a little closer to me and rested her head on my foot. I wondered how Patsy was and wished that I could telephone her. I was glad that Bilbury Grange had a good, strong roof. I picked up my still unfinished cup of tea and emptied it. It tasted as though it had at least half a dozen spoons of sugar dissolved in it. I thought how odd it was that although I never normally have sugar in tea or coffee the sweet tea tasted good. My body, exhausted by the efforts of the last few hours, clearly needed a quick boost of instant energy.

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, dressed in a pair of Frank’s old suit trousers and my own jumper (the oil in the wool meant that a quick shake got rid of most of the water that had found its way through my oiled jacket) I pulled on my waterproofs and followed Frank and Thumper outside. Frank’s trousers (heaven knows where they’d come from) were several inches short in the leg but considerably larger than I needed around the waist and I had to tie them up with a length of orange baler twine taken from my jacket pocket. My ever faithful companion, and now saviour, Ben, dry, rested and full of warm milk and dog biscuits, trotted along behind me.

To my astonishment I discovered that the snow still hadn’t stopped and nor had the wind, though the sky was lighter now and dawn had started to break. I had forgotten to put on my hat and the bitter cold wind sparked off sharp pains in both my ears. I pulled my coat collar up as high as I could and hobbled along behind Thumper. He, Frank and the others had walked along the footpath between the village school and Miss Hargreaves’ cottage so often that they had left a trail of footprints into which I could tread. I picked up Ben and carried her.

In front of me Thumper stopped so suddenly that I almost bumped into his back. He said something to me but I couldn’t hear him because of the wind. Instead of repeating himself he just pointed upwards. I shaded my eyes against the blizzard and looked up into the sky. The whole of the roof of Miss Hargreaves’ cottage seemed to have disappeared. Where once there had been a neat thatch and a high chimney stack (chimneys are always built tall on thatched cottages to keep sparks from the fire away from the highly inflammable thatch) there was now nothing but a mess of broken rafters, pieces of stone and tufts of thatch sticking out at crazy angles. The whole chaotic mess was covered with a thick layer of snow. A downstairs window had been flung open and underneath, half buried in a snow drift, lay bits and pieces of debris which had been jettisoned through the window. A large, triangular chunk of plaster stuck out of the drifted snow like a massive pink sail. Miss Hargreaves’ neat, picture book cottage, over the years the target of a thousand tourist cameras, had become a ruin overnight. Thumper pulled a face. I grimaced back. Thumper opened the front door to Miss Hargreaves’ cottage and walked in, automatically but pointlessly wiping his feet on the doormat. I entered behind him, put Ben down onto the carpet and told her to stay where she was and shut the door firmly behind me. I too wiped my feet on the doormat. Miss Hargreaves was a very particular woman. It was almost as cold inside the cottage as it was outside but at least inside we were protected from the wind.

There were five people working inside the cottage and judging by the amount of rubble and thatch and snow they had moved they had been at it for a long time. I recognised Gilly Parsons, the landlady from the Duck and Puddle, Peter Marshall, the village shopkeeper and Jack and Ollie two farm labourers who lived in adjoining cottages two hundred yards along the road into the village. It was Jack who had heard the crash of Miss Hargreaves’ chimney and who had alerted Frank at the Duck and Puddle. The only light came from three hurricane lamps: one on the mantelpiece, one hanging from the picture rail and one dangling from the top of the door frame.

When the chimney had gone through Miss Hargreaves’ roof it had landed directly on top of her bed and the weight of the chimney, the rafters, the thatch, the snow and the ceiling plaster had then taken the bed, the chimney and Miss Hargreaves herself crashing down into the living room. The result was that Miss Hargreaves’ living room was filled to where the ceiling would have been with rubble, thatch and, somewhere in the middle of it all, Miss Hargreaves and her bed. I looked up and found that I was staring out through a massive hole in the cottage roof at the early morning sky. Thick snow fell steadily onto the wreckage and onto Miss Hargreaves' rescuers.

'How's it going?' Thumper asked no one in particular. A tall figure in a yellow oilskin, who was tugging on a long piece of wood, half turned. For a moment I couldn't see who it was.

'She's alive,' whispered the man in the oilskin. He gently freed the wood from the wreckage and turned a little further. It was Patchy Fogg, the antique dealer. Patchy doesn't normally live in Bilbury but I guessed that he had probably been stuck at the Duck and Puddle when the snow had started. 'We reached her about half an hour ago.'

'Do you mind not talking about me as though I wasn't here?' demanded a voice I recognised immediately. It was Miss Hargreaves. Although I did not have much experience of talking to people who were trapped in house wreckage she sounded far brighter than I had expected. I had to strain a little to make out what she was saying but even through several feet of assorted rubble there was no mistaking her voice.

'The doctor's come to see you, Miss Hargreaves,' said Patchy.

'About time too!' replied the school mistress, with a slight snap in her voice. 'When are you boys going to get me out of here?'

Patchy turned to me and smiled.

'How are you, Miss Hargreaves?' I called down into the debris.

'How do you think I am?' demanded Miss Hargreaves testily.

'Are you in any pain?' I asked her.

There was a long silence.

'Are you in any pain?' I asked her, again.

'Don't hurry me!' she said sharply. 'I'm thinking about it.'

Patchy, who was busy filling a bucket with small pieces of plaster, turned and winked at me.

I waited, bent down and started to help Patchy fill his bucket with bits of plaster and broken wood. When the bucket was full Patchy walked over to the window and emptied the rubbish out into the snow, throwing it as far out onto the snow covered lawn as he could. I couldn't help remembering that Miss Hargreaves had been extraordinarily proud of her garden. It had been full of traditional 'cottage' flowers and had always been a blaze of colour in the summer months. It was going to take a long time to restore the cottage and its garden to their former glory.

'No! I don't think so,' said a disembodied voice which belonged to the buried Miss Hargreaves. 'Everything seems to work.'

'That's great!' I said.

'I seem to be lying on my sofa,' said the invisible Miss Hargreaves. 'What am I doing on my sofa?'

I looked across at Patchy. He shrugged, making it clear that it was up to me to decide how much to tell her.

'There's a storm,' I explained. 'Your roof was brought down. But you're going to be all right. That's the important thing.'

'Well just you people make sure you don't make a mess,' said Miss Hargreaves. 'I cleaned my carpets yesterday.'

I looked around at the mess in Miss Hargreaves' cottage.

‘Have you wiped your feet?’ she demanded.

‘Yes,’ I shouted back. I looked around. The others all nodded. ‘We’ve all wiped our feet.’

‘Good!’ said Miss Hargreaves firmly. ‘Well, just you remember that if there’s any mess I’ll hold you personally responsible.’

‘Yes, Miss Hargreaves,’ I said. ‘We’ll clean up any mess for you,’ I promised. There was a half reluctant grunt of acknowledgement from somewhere in the middle of the debris.

We carried on digging away at the debris, throwing rafters, bits of stone, chunks of thatch, bits and pieces of plaster and broken pieces of furniture out through the window into the garden in our battle to free Miss Hargreaves. We talked steadily to her; offering encouragement, telling her bits of gossip (which she claimed very loudly that she was not the slightest bit interested in) and asking her advice on just about every subject under the sun. I didn’t know much about how to care for patients buried deep under debris. It wasn’t something they had taught us at medical school. But common sense told me that we should do our best to keep Miss Hargreaves awake, alert and distracted from her predicament. Every twenty minutes or so two of us would go outside to move some of the debris away from the area directly underneath the window. And every half an hour or so we took it in turns to pop into the school house for a few minutes to get warm, drink more sweet tea and eat cheese and pickle sandwiches made by Frank. Once Frank came into the cottage to help with the digging but I made him go back into the school house. Frank is desperately overweight, suffers from high blood pressure and is a prime candidate for a heart attack. Cold weather made the risk much greater and I didn’t want any more dramas. Besides we needed someone in the school house to make sure the boiler didn’t go out, to keep the kettle boiling and to make a constant supply of cheese and pickle sandwiches. Frank made a good cheese and pickle sandwich.

* * *

The sun had risen and the snowstorm was showing signs of having started to blow itself out when Gilly cried out, with unmistakeable excitement in her voice, that she could see Miss Hargreaves’ leg!

‘Goodness me!’ called Miss Hargreaves. ‘Has someone left the door open? My leg is freezing cold.’

We all looked at one another.

‘The heating isn’t working,’ I told the schoolteacher, quite truthfully. I didn’t want to tell her what had happened to her cottage, and that her leg was cold because her cottage had no roof, until I could be with her. The shock wouldn’t do her any good at all and I didn’t want her to faint into unconsciousness while she was still buried under the rubble of her cottage.

Gilly disappeared and came back a moment or two later with a large white bath towel that she’d brought from the kitchen, the only room in the cottage that had not been destroyed. I assumed that Miss Hargreaves must have had an airing cupboard in the kitchen. Gilly carefully reached into the rubble and covered Miss Hargreaves’ leg with the towel. Then we carried on, carefully digging away at the rubble.

Gradually, it became clear that when Miss Hargreaves and her bed had fallen through the floor the bed had tipped over and was now lying on the top of its former occupant. I could only assume that the falling chimney stack must have landed on a corner of the bed and flipped it over. Whatever the truth was about the way it had happened there was little doubt that the bed springs and the mattress had saved Miss Hargreaves’ life. When we eventually found her she was lying in a small space between her living room sofa and her bed.

Peter, the shopkeeper, Patchy, the antique dealer and Jack and Ollie, the two farm labourers, and I took hold of one side of the bed and pulled and pushed upwards with all the power we could muster between us. Slowly, we managed to lift the bed up into the air. Gilly Parsons peered in under the bed.

‘Who’s there?’ demanded Miss Hargreaves, warily.

‘It’s Gilly, Miss Hargreaves!’ said Gilly. ‘Can you move?’

‘Who else is there?’ demanded the schoolteacher.

‘The young doctor, Patchy Fogg, Peter Marshall and...,’ began Gilly. The villagers still referred to me as the ‘young doctor’ even though I had been living there for a while, and was no longer practising medicine. The ‘old doctor’ was Dr Brownlow, my predecessor, who still lived in his huge old house in the village. ‘Can you move?’ she asked.

‘Get me my dressing gown!’ demanded Miss Hargreaves sharply. ‘I’ve only got my nightie on.’

‘It’s a bit difficult, Miss Hargreaves,’ apologised Gilly. She knelt down and started to crawl underneath the bed. There was still quite a lot of rubble on top of it and even though the two farm labourers were very strong it was quite a strain holding it up.

‘Where has all that snow come from?’ demanded Miss Hargreaves. ‘Is my front door still open?’

‘Can you move?’ Gilly asked again.

‘Of course I can move!’ insisted Miss Hargreaves. ‘But I’m not moving out of here until you’ve got me my dressing gown. Not with all those men in the house.’

Gilly crawled back out from underneath the bed and shrugged her shoulders. ‘What shall I do?’ she asked me in a whisper. ‘I don’t have the faintest idea where her dressing gown is!’

‘It’s hanging up behind the bedroom door!’ said Miss Hargreaves, though I don’t know whether she had heard what Gilly had said.

I looked upwards. The snow fell lightly on my face now. The wind seemed almost to have stopped. Through the shattered floor of Miss Hargreaves’ bedroom I could see her bedroom door. Sure enough her dressing gown was hanging up behind the door.

‘Go on,’ I said to Gilly. I looked at Patchy, standing next to me. There were beads of sweat on his forehead. Peter Marshall, the shop keeper, was looking very red faced. The two farm labourers nodded to indicate that they could hold on for a little longer. ‘But be quick!’ I told her.

Gilly clambered over some broken rafters and started to climb up the staircase.

‘Be careful!’ I called to her.

‘Yes!’ cried Miss Hargreaves, misunderstanding my warning to Gilly. ‘You be careful! I don’t want dirt and snow treading into my carpets.’

I looked upwards and watched Gilly open the bedroom door, edge cautiously into Miss Hargreaves’ bedroom, peer down through the hole in the floor, and then take the dressing gown off the hook on the back of the door.

Two minutes later an ashen faced Gilly returned clutching Miss Hargreaves’ dressing gown. She brushed the worst of the snow off it and then crept under the bed and helped Miss Hargreaves drape the garment around her shoulders. A minute or so after that Miss Hargreaves emerged from her unusual prison. The five of us let the bed and the rubble it was holding crash back down onto the sofa. Miss Hargreaves looked around her at the ruin that had been her home, opened her mouth, said nothing, and then fainted very neatly into Peter Marshall’s arms.

* * *

Miraculously, Miss Hargreaves wasn’t badly hurt. Her cottage was a ruin and would clearly need rebuilding but, trapped as she had been between her chintz covered sofa and her bed she had been well protected from the debris which had buried her. We carried her out of her cold and roofless cottage and across into the school where Frank had kept the boiler alight and the kettle on the boil. I gave her a quick but thorough examination but could find nothing physically wrong. When she came round I explained what had happened to her cottage and then I gave her a full check-up. Her heart seemed as sound as a ship’s engine and her blood pressure was excellent. She didn’t even have a bruise! To say that I was relieved would be an understatement of heroic proportions. When I had first seen the wreckage I had for a few awful moments feared that I might need to amputate a trapped limb or, at the very least, administer a series of pain killing injections.

We wrapped Miss Hargreaves in a couple of blankets and lay her down on a small camp bed that Frank had found in a store room. The wind and the snow had stopped and everywhere seemed strangely still, calm and quiet. The storm had raged for so long that the peace around us now seemed unreal and ghostly.

All around the classroom weary bodies were stretched out in repose. Peter Marshall, wearing his ever present cap, the one with the finger marked peak, was curled up in a ball and snoring in the far corner of the room. Patchy Fogg, who had been up into Miss Hargreaves' bedroom and had brought down a selection of warm, winter clothing for her to wear when she was ready, was also snoring loudly. I felt tired and my ankle hurt but it felt good to be part of a village where the inhabitants worked so willingly and so hard to help one another.

Through the steamy classroom window I saw something fluttering outside in the small garden which Miss Hargreaves kept for her pupils. She had spent years, and much of her own money, stocking it with a huge variety of shrubs, flowers and herbs and every summer the children were encouraged to grow their own vegetables too. I leant forward, cleaned a small area of the glass so that I could see through and watched a red breasted robin fly down and land on a snow covered gate post. I wondered where he had been hiding for the last few days. Although his feathers were fluffed up I couldn't help noticing how thin and hungry he looked.

Wearily, I limped into the small kitchen where Frank, who had worked as hard as any of us, was washing up a pile of dirty mugs and plates. 'Have you got any bread crusts?' I asked him.

'Still hungry?' he asked, putting down the tea towel he was holding and reaching for the bread knife. 'Let me make you a sandwich!'

'It's not for me,' I told him. I nodded towards the window. 'I thought I'd throw a few crusts out for the birds.'

Now it was his turn to rub at the glass. 'They'll need more than a few crusts,' he said, looking out at the white of the garden for a moment and then picking up an almost untouched loaf from the small, green work surface on his right. 'Here,' he said, 'catch!' It was a kindly and unexpected gesture. I'd never thought of Frank as having any great love for the non-paying customers of this world.

I put a hand on his shoulder. 'Thanks, Frank!'

Outside the back door of the school I trod down a few square feet of snow and then spread small lumps of bread around on the surface of the hardened snow. When I'd done that I walked over to what looked like a massive white snowball. Tentatively, I brushed away at the snow. As the snow fell away to the ground beneath I could see scores of moist red berries glistening in the thin winter sunshine. Working quickly because my ungloved hands were soon uncomfortably cold I shook and brushed the snow from the bush. Then I hurried back into the kitchen. Frank had poured me another cup of hot tea.

'Do you want sugar?' he asked as I leant against the wall and stamped my good foot and rubbed my hands to get the blood circulating through them.

'No thanks,' I answered with a smile.

Outside, in the garden, the cock robin had returned and was hungrily chopping crumbs from one of the small pieces of bread I had thrown down. Within a couple of minutes there were twenty or thirty birds feasting on Frank's loaf and the berries on the uncovered bush.

'Makes you feel good, doesn't it?' whispered Frank.

I looked at him, slightly surprised.

'I always feed the birds at the back of the Duck and Puddle,' he said. He frowned, as though suddenly alarmed that this unexpected sign of tenderness might adversely affect his hard drinking image. 'But don't you dare tell anyone!' he added, with a nervous smile.

* * *

We waited there for six hours until Samuel Houghton, who has a farm on the road to Little Mitcham and has a contract with the local authority to keep the smaller, single track roads clear of snow, fought a way through the snowdrifts, reached us on his tractor and reconnected us with the rest of the world. We heard him coming, and saw stuttering bursts of black smoke long before we could see either Samuel or his tractor. He had an enormous snow moving attachment fixed to the front of the ancient red monster and behind him left two huge, high, parallel mounds of chunky, tumbled snow.

Samuel, who won't be celebrating many more birthdays with a seven at the front, had his pipe jammed in his mouth and wore the rusty brown tweed jacket which I've never seen him without. A length of baler twine was tied around his waist. He wore no coat, no hat and no gloves and told us that the storm had left behind it a trail of terrible destruction. All over North Devon the wind had removed the roofs from scores of hotels, houses, cottages and farm buildings. A silage bin had been spotted three miles from home. A sixty foot long corrugated iron barn roof had been seen twenty feet off the ground resting in the branches of neighbouring oak trees. Samuel insisted that a small car, whisked from a car park outside a public house on the outskirts of Shirwell, had flown over a hedge and had finished up, upside down, in the middle of a field a quarter of a mile away. Later I was to discover that this story was not only quite true but that the car, which had landed in thick snow, was virtually undamaged after its adventure and, almost unbelievably, started first time when it had been tipped the right way up by its owner and a couple of passing strangers.

By the time we were reconnected with the rest of the world Miss Hargreaves had woken up again, dressed herself ('What a terrible selection of clothes! Who brought me this old pink sweater?') and had bravely and forcefully started to make plans for the rebuilding of her shattered cottage.

'I'll have to get Mr Lathwell booked straight away,' said Miss Hargreaves, making a mental list of things to be done. Mr Lathwell, the thatcher, doesn't live in Bilbury but has over the years repaired, restored or rethatched most of the thatched roof cottages in the village. He is regularly booked three or four months ahead, especially through the summer. It was good to hear Miss Hargreaves making positive plans. There would, I suspected, be plenty of sadness to come, and probably a few tears and sleepless nights, but Miss Hargreaves' determined attitude seemed to augur well for a quick recovery from her terrible ordeal.

I was more concerned with the immediate problem of where Miss Hargreaves was going to sleep for the next few nights.

'Do you have any friends you could stay with?' I asked her.

Miss Hargreaves thought for a moment. 'I've no doubt I could stay with Miss Anderson or Miss Jilks,' she said. She pulled a face and shook her head. 'But I wouldn't want to. Miss Anderson is a terrible worrier and she'd drive me potty, always wanting everything in just the right place. And Miss Jilks is a congenital gossip. I can't abide gossip.' She thought for a moment. 'I'll rent somewhere,' she said, firmly.

It might have sounded a good idea but a few moments thought quickly made it clear that finding somewhere for Miss Hargreaves to rent wasn't going to be as easy as it sounded - particularly since she insisted that she would only rent somewhere in the village, so that she could reach the school on her cycle each day. Bilbury is rather light on available rental accommodation. In the end it was agreed that as a temporary measure Miss Hargreaves would go back to the Duck and Puddle with Frank and Gilly Parsons and would spend the next night or two with them. Samuel Houghton agreed to give all three of them a lift to the pub on the back of his tractor.

'But it's only temporary!' Miss Hargreaves insisted, firmly.

We all agreed that it was what Patchy described as an 'interim measure' and promised that we would do our best to help her find somewhere of her own to stay. And then we all set off to our respective homes. I was keen to get back to Bilbury Grange to make sure that Patsy and the animals were all unharmed by the storm. Limping slightly, and with Ben bounding along by my side, it took me little over thirty minutes to walk back along the road to the Grange.

* * *

CHAPTER FOUR

I was relieved and delighted to find that Bilbury Grange had survived the snow storm without suffering any damage. Now that the wind had dropped and the blizzard had stopped the house and garden looked calm, peaceful and immensely beautiful. Everywhere I looked there were trees and bushes and fields draped in huge expanses of smooth, virginal, white snow. It was as though the countryside had been put into storage by some cold handed celestial super-being. I stood for a moment in the lane and stared up our driveway. Ben barked once and wagged her tail and then looked up at me to check that it was all right for her to run up to the house. ‘O.K.!’ I said to her and then couldn’t help laughing out loud as she struggled to fight her way through several feet of powdery snow. I limped after her, picked her up out of the snow and carried her up to the house.

I gave Patsy a hug, said ‘hello’ to Emily and Sophie and fed Ben. Then, while Patsy put the kettle on to boil, and went upstairs to start running a bath for me, I went out to the stable to check on the sheep. They all made an enormous amount of noise when they heard me walking through the snow. When I opened the stable door Lizzie and Cynthia both edged past me and slipped out into what they thought was the field; and what had been the field the last time they’d been there. When they discovered that the tasty, fresh green grass they expected to find had turned into cold, tasteless snow they both looked up. Their faces were a picture. First there was simply surprise, then there was puzzlement, next there was horror and finally there was absolute disgust.

Lizzie and Cynthia stared at me, as though it was my fault that all the grass had disappeared and had been replaced by snow, and made lots of loud and very complaining ‘baaarring’ noises. Then, giving me another look of disgust, they turned round, and walked back into the stable. I went into the tack room next door, picked up half a bale of straw and spread it around on the stable floor. Next, I took down the hay net which was now empty, and hung up another full one. Finally, I broke the ice on the water butt outside the stable and replenished the sheep’s supply of fresh water. The four of them gathered around the hay net and furiously began to drag out clumps of tasty hay. Quietly, I crept out of the stable, closed the bottom half of the door, bolted it shut and walked back through the snow to the house.

* * *

An hour later, having lain soaking, half asleep, in a hot bath until my skin had gone all white and wrinkly, I was sitting in the kitchen drinking my third cup of hot tea and wolfing down slice after slice of hot buttered toast, liberally spread with Patsy’s home-made orange and rhubarb marmalade (the oranges were from the twelve old orange trees in Dr Brownlow’s conservatory and the rhubarb was from our garden), when Patsy suddenly announced that she had had an idea.

She sounded so excited that I stopped my hand midway between my plate and my mouth. ‘What?’ I asked her.

‘Why don’t we let Miss Hargreaves stay in the flat over the coach-house?’

It was such an obvious idea that I couldn’t understand why I hadn’t thought of it myself. Patsy had restored and renovated the coach-house flat soon after we had bought Bilbury Grange. The idea had been to earn a little extra money by letting it to holiday-makers during the summer months but during the winter there weren’t any tourists and so the flat stayed empty. At the end of October Patsy, who was in charge of this venture, had cleaned the flat thoroughly, turned off the water, emptied the pipes, removed any bedding which might have got damp, firmly closed all the windows and doors and shut up the flat until April the following year. The flat was, therefore, quite empty and would provide Miss Hargreaves with a perfect home for a few months.

I told Patsy that I thought this was a terrific idea.

‘You don’t mind the idea of her staying there?’

‘No, of course not!’

‘She can be a bit, well, sharp occasionally.’

I said I knew this but that I didn’t mind in the least.

‘She can easily ride her bicycle to school from here.’

‘Absolutely. Less than ten minutes on a bike.’ I agreed. I looked at Patsy and then at the toast. The conversation seemed to be over. I took a bite from the toast.

‘Shall I go and ring her now?’ asked Patsy.

With a mouthful of freshly inserted hot buttered toast impeding any further attempt at speech I nodded.

‘She’s staying at the Duck and Puddle?’

I nodded again, thought about saying something, realised that there wasn’t anything useful to add to my nod and so instead took another bite from my slice of toast. Patsy disappeared into the hall to ring the pub. She came back less than a minute later.

‘The telephone lines must still be down,’ she said. ‘I can’t get through. I’ll try again later.’

* * *

It was lunchtime the following day before the engineers could get through to repair the phone lines and Patsy was able to ring the pub to speak to Miss Hargreaves. By then the main road between Barnstaple and Bilbury had been cleared too and although there was only enough room for traffic to travel in one direction at a time it did at least mean that we were once again fully reconnected with the outside world. Inevitably, perhaps, the postman was the first to get through, delivering several days’ worth of accumulated bills and with them the news that a dozen even more outlying villages were still cut off.

The snow had stopped falling but the weather was still freezing cold and the snow which had fallen before and during the blizzard had not yet started to disappear. In towns and cities fallen snow soon becomes slushy and messy and starts to look horribly dirty and unattractive. Traffic, air pollution and endless streams of pedestrians all help to turn clean, crisp, white snow into a brown, unwholesome looking sludgy mess. But out in the country we had no such problems. Our Bilbury snow still looked as white, as pure and as thrilling as it had when it had fallen. The snow on our driveway was disturbed only by a narrow, foot trodden trail.

Being cut off entirely from the world had, I have to confess, been rather fun. It certainly wasn’t a trial. Our old AGA boiler served us proud, keeping the kitchen warm, providing us with a constant supply of hot water and enabling us to have hot meals. Some people might have found the absence of television difficult to live with but we had books to read, candles to read them by and plenty of logs with which to light fires to keep us warm in the rest of the house.

I didn’t miss having a television at all - and neither did Patsy. I fear that television has become a repository for quiz shows, soap operas and situation comedies that may amuse the man operating the canned laughter machine but which never seem to amuse me very much. Some people I know spend three hours a day watching television. That means that in a year they will spend over a thousand hours watching other people do things. That is the equivalent of roughly twenty five full working weeks a year, slumped in front of the TV set. You could write a book, learn to play golf or grow prize winning onions in that much time. Television, the oh-so-easy way to entertain yourself, is wrecking companionship, friendship and conversation and smothering the imaginations of millions. Television is blancmange for the mind. How can a child who watches three or four hours of television a day grow up into a balanced, intelligent human being? A child who watches that much television every day will, by the time he or she is 18-years-old, have watched twenty thousand hours of TV. That’s nearly twice as much time as he or she will have spent at school. The child’s imagination will have been allowed to wither and decay. I once read a survey in which a group of four to six year olds were asked so say which they preferred - daddy or television. Around half said they preferred television.

Snowbound but with no television to distract us from real life Patsy and I got on with living. We looked after our animals and made sure that the house stayed in good condition and we both managed to get a considerable amount of work done. I wrote a short story (which I never managed to sell but which I much enjoyed writing) and two practical articles (which were less fun to write but which, I was delighted to find, found a ready market). Patsy ploughed her way through several huge, rather daunting seed catalogues which had arrived with the first post-blizzard mail delivery. Peter Marshall sells seeds at the village shop but his selection is small and sometimes he accidentally conceals the ‘sell by’ dates on his packets of seeds with his little price stickers.

Most important of all, of course, Miss Hargreaves arrived from the Duck and Puddle and set about settling into the flat overlooking the courtyard. Frank brought her over in his rather ancient and battered Land Rover and stopped off at her cottage to pick up her clothes and as many of her other belongings as could conveniently be carried. In some parts of the world a half derelict cottage would have been looted of all its valuables within a few hours but I’m pleased to say that things like that don’t happen in Bilbury.

While Patsy showed Miss Hargreaves round the flat, apologised for the fact that it didn’t have a garden, and helped her put away her clothes in the wardrobe and the dressing table, Frank and I made three trips back to the cottage to rescue what we could of Miss Hargreaves’ furniture. None of the curtains or carpets was worth saving.

‘It’ll do me until my cottage is ready for me to go back into,’ said Miss Hargreaves, when we’d finished, Frank had gone back to the Duck and Puddle and the remaining three of us were sitting around in her tiny flat. There were those in the village who claimed that graciousness was not Miss Hargreaves’ strong point and it wasn’t always too difficult to see why she had acquired this reputation.

‘Have you contacted your insurance company, yet?’ I asked Miss Hargreaves. With the rooms filled with her furniture (Frank had helped me move most of our furniture down into one of the empty stables underneath) Miss Hargreaves looked very much at home. It is surprising what a few square yards of chintz, half a dozen Victorian water colours, and a packing case full of assorted knick knacks and bric-a-brac can do to a room.

Miss Hargreaves looked surprised. ‘Insurance company?’ she said, as though I had suggested that she might have a bookmaker. ‘I’m afraid I don’t really know anything about insurance. I let the School Board look after that sort of thing.’ She wrinkled up her nose as though she found the conversation rather distasteful. To be honest, I rather suspect that she did find the conversation unwholesome in a sweet, rather old fashioned sort of way. Other people, ordinary people, had insurance. Miss Hargreaves had an annual subscription to the National Geographic magazine and considered that to be rather adventurous and modern of her.

‘Who’s the Chairman of the School Board?’ I asked Miss Hargreaves. ‘I’d better ring him and make sure that he’s put in a claim for you. We’ll need to get the insurance company to look at things as soon as they can so that they can give the go-ahead for the repair work to start.’

Miss Hargreaves was clearly and quite genuinely surprised at this apparently unexpected complication. I have a feeling that she rather expected that the repair work would have started automatically the moment her belongings had been removed from the battered building. She ignored my question. ‘How long do you think it will take?’ she wanted to know. ‘I’d like to be back in the cottage in two weeks’ time.’

I looked across at Patsy. Patsy looked back at me. Neither of us really wanted to say what clearly had to be said. But, it had to be said. So I took a deep breath and said it.

‘I’m afraid I don’t think the cottage will be ready in two weeks,’ I told Miss Hargreaves, rather warily. She raised an eyebrow. ‘Well, not completely,’ I added, instinctively backing away. If Miss Hargreaves’ eyebrow had been at Neville Chamberlain’s disposal Adolf Hitler would have never dared try anything on in 1939. I have never known another human being able to express so much emotion, disapproval and contempt with a simple flicker of an eyebrow. ‘I don’t think you should actually, positively *bank* on being back in the cottage in a fortnight,’ I said rather weakly. Secretly, I rather thought that we would be lucky if we’d got the go ahead from the insurance company by then. And I rather thought that the rebuilding work could take four or five months or maybe, perish the thought, even longer. And even that was assuming that we could find builders who were prepared to start work straight away. With all the damage the blizzard had done both in Bilbury and in neighbouring villages I had a feeling that builders would suddenly find themselves in the enviable position of being greatly in demand. Every dog has his day, so the saying goes, and builders have their days when lots of people want their roofs putting back on straight - away - and - a - little - bit quicker - if - you - can - manage - it - please - don’t - worry - too much - about - the - price - the - insurance - company - is - paying.

Miss Hargreaves didn't say anything but she had a way of not saying anything. Some people can say a great deal when they don't say anything. Miss Hargreaves was one of those people. She could perform extensive, impressive feats of oratory without saying anything.

'I'm sorry,' I said, hardly recognising the feeble little voice which seemed to have come out of my body. I wasn't sure why I was apologising but it seemed the sensible thing to do.

I remembered my unanswered question and asked it again. 'Who is the Chairman of the School Board?'

'A pompous half-wit called Palfrey,' replied Miss Hargreaves, with disdain. 'He's an estate agent,' she added, giving me this information in the same sort of tone that she might have used if she had told me that he had a penchant for gambling or some other morally indefensible activity.

'Do you know where he works?'

She gave me the name of an estate agents' office in Barnstaple.

'I'll go and ring him,' I said, standing up.

'Just tell him that I want to be back in my cottage in two weeks' time,' said Miss Hargreaves firmly.

I smiled weakly at her and left.

* * *

It took me about ninety seconds to decide that I didn't much like Mr Palfrey. I had never before spoken to anyone who managed to give the impression of being both obsequious and condescending at the same time.

'Bilborough, did you say?' he asked me, when I explained where I was calling from.

'Bilbury,' I repeated. 'Bilbury School. Am I right in thinking that you are the Chairman of the School Board?'

There was a pause. 'Oh, yes, I know it,' said the estate agent at last. He sighed a little when he realised that I hadn't rung to make an offer for a house. 'Tiny little place isn't it? Sweet village. Nice amenities. Conveniently situated. Hunting country. Yes, I'm Chairman of the School Board.' There was another pause. 'I have a lot of other political and social commitments and appointments, you know.'

'The storm took the chimney off Miss Hargreaves' cottage,' I told him. I had to bite my tongue when he had told me that Bilbury was hunting country. It was true that the hunt did gallop over much of the land around Bilbury but they did this without the support of the villagers; most of whom disapproved of hunting. 'The chimney came straight through into her bedroom and has demolished most of the house. She's staying with my wife and me at Bilbury Grange. Well, not exactly with us, you understand. We have a small, self-contained flat that she's borrowing.'

'What has all this got to do with the school?' asked Mr Palfrey.

'Miss Hargreaves is the schoolteacher,' I explained. 'She lives in School Cottage. It's an insurance claim.'

'Oh, yes, I know it,' said the estate agent. I could almost hear him nodding. 'Nothing to do with us, though. Miss Hargreaves has a lease on the cottage. She's responsible for her own insurance.'

I went cold.

'Are you sure?' I asked him.

'Absolutely,' insisted Mr Palfrey. 'I remember the subject of insurance coming up at a meeting a few months ago. We had a very lengthy discussion about the school's insurance policy. One of the Board members thought we were paying too much and we managed to obtain a considerably cheaper quotation from his company. I distinctly remember that the cottage was excluded from the policy.'

I didn’t say anything. I felt a little dizzy. ‘Are you absolutely sure that Miss Hargreaves isn’t covered under the school’s insurance?’ I pulled a chair towards me and sat down.

‘Absolutely sure,’ said Mr Palfrey, rather wearily. ‘She was expected to make her own insurance arrangements since the property is her responsibility.’ There was another pause. ‘You aren’t telling me that Miss Hargreaves has no insurance, are you?’

‘Good heavens, no!’ I lied quickly, not wanting to get Miss Hargreaves into trouble. ‘I’m sure she’s arranged something,’ I added.

‘Good,’ said Mr Palfrey. ‘Thank you for calling.’

‘By the way,’ I said, before he could go, ‘I know you’ll be pleased to hear that Miss Hargreaves wasn’t injured.’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Mr Palfrey. ‘Jolly good.’ And he put the phone down.

I sat there for several minutes listening to the buzzing of the disconnected telephone and wondering how on earth I was going to tell Miss Hargreaves that she wasn’t insured.

* * *

CHAPTER FIVE

The local witches' coven was having a meeting upstairs at the Duck and Puddle and the car park was full of Ford Populars, Austin Minis and other, comfortable, 'compact' English motor cars. The witches, there were eleven of them, met once a month and exchanged recipes, spells and incantations. Since one of the members of the coven was also a part-time slimming adviser they also borrowed Gilly's bathroom scales. The floorboards above our heads were groaning and we could hear them giggling as they took it in turns to strip down to the bare essentials and weigh themselves.

I rested my chin on my hands and looked out of the window. A thin layer of salt, left by spray brought inland by the wind, had clouded the glass. Outside the snow had now almost gone completely. It had virtually disappeared overnight, leaving every low lying piece of land in the area flooded. The thaw had, inevitably, turned into something of a plumber's bonanza as householders all across North Devon suddenly discovered the twin laws of plumbing: that burst pipes leak and that water obeys the laws of gravity. All that remained of the blizzard now were those few small pockets of snow which the wind had pushed into corners and which the sun had not yet managed to melt. The village green, which had been temporarily converted into a village white, had been restored to its original green glory.

'Why on earth didn't she get herself some insurance cover?' asked Dr Brownlow for at least the fifteenth time. No one bothered to answer because although we had all asked the same question roughly the same number of times no one had yet managed to come up with an answer.

There were six of us: myself, Dr Brownlow, Thumper Robinson, Peter Marshall, Gilly Parsons and Kay McBride, the bathukolpian local district nurse. Kay had been the first person I had met when I had arrived in Bilbury although then she had been called Mrs Wilson and had been married to the local policeman. Now she was married to a tractor engineer from Ilfracombe. Mr McBride was twenty two years younger than the former Mrs Wilson.

We had formed a sort of unofficial 'Help Miss Hargreaves' group to try to work out a way to make sure first that Miss Hargreaves didn't spend the rest of her life tramping the streets or slumped in a debtors' prison and second that the school didn't close down through lack of a teacher.

When I had broken the news to Miss Hargreaves that she was not insured, and therefore could not realistically expect any of Britain's insurance companies to pay for the repairs on her cottage, she had seemed remarkably phlegmatic about it all. I had rather expected her to throw what is usually regarded as 'a bit of a wobbly', firing deadly eyebrows off in all directions, but nothing of the sort had happened. Instead she had simply sighed, said something that sounded rather like, 'Oh, dearie, me!' and smiled rather thinly in my direction.

'Have you got any savings?' I asked her, rather brashly.

Miss Hargreaves had visibly brightened at this and had instructed me to pass her handbag. This was not as simple a task as it sounds for the piece of luggage in question was far too large to be accepted as cabin baggage on any airline I've ever travelled on. It was the sort of item usually known as a 'carpet bag' although this one looked as though it had been made from a whole carpet roll rather than an offcut. From this capacious piece of luggage she had extracted a thin and rather dogged National Savings Book which she had handed to me with considerable caution. From the way in which she handled it the passbook was clearly not an item which she handed over to any Tom, Dick or Harry and I felt rather honoured.

'£129 17s 6d!' I read, from the bottom line. Miss Hargreaves hadn't had her passbook updated since decimalisation. For a brief moment I harboured the joyful thought that the interest on the capital might have built up into a sizeable sum. I once read a news story about a man who put a dollar in a bank account during the American Civil War. When a descendant found the pass book compound interest had turned the dollar into a fortune so large that the pass book holder owned the bank. But a look at the date on Miss Hargreaves' National Savings Book dashed this slender hope. I am no mathematical genius but even I could work out that at four and a half per cent interest £129 isn't likely to grow into a fortune in three and three quarter years.

‘I’m afraid I don’t think that will be anywhere near enough,’ I said, glumly.

‘Oh dear,’ said Miss Hargreaves. ‘I always intended to save but somehow I never got round to it.’ This was, I knew, not because she was self-indulgent but because she was generous. She was always buying clothes and books for children and she supplemented the Bilbury School’s meagre book and equipment allowance with much of her own money. Her earnings had been frittered away not on secret bottles of sweet sherry, French cigarettes or horses with a penchant for travelling slowly and a preference for grazing rather than running but on second hand copies of Robinson Crusoe, Treasure Island, Black Beauty, Swiss Family Robinson and similar classics for the school library. It was Miss Hargreaves, said Patsy, who had taught her to love books and to find friendship, companionship and comfort among the novels of many different writers.

When the School Board somehow found out that Miss Hargreaves had not bought any insurance, and furthermore, had no savings with which to pay for the repairs to her cottage, they held an Emergency Special Meeting in Bilbury Village Hall. This meeting was held in secret and so it was not until later that evening that we discovered that the members of the board had decided to close down our village school completely and transfer all seventeen pupils to a school in nearby Combe Martin. It was only about a year since National Health Service Administrators had decided to close down my surgery in Bilbury and transfer patients to a medical list in Barnstaple, so this additional bad news was greeted with considerable dismay by those villagers who felt that this was just too much to bear and that the village was rapidly losing its personal identity.

‘The school has no funds to pay for the repair to the School Cottage,’ Mr Palfrey had explained when I had telephoned him about it. ‘We’ve decided that the only viable financial route is to sell the school to be used as a personal residence and to reallocate the proceeds among the other schools in the area.’

‘Less a fat commission for selling the property,’ I had thought but hadn’t said. I really didn’t like Mr Palfrey. Only an estate agent could refer to a ‘home’ as a ‘personal residence’.

Mr Palfrey had, however, rather unwillingly agreed that if we in the village managed to raise enough money to get School Cottage repaired then the School Board would allow the village school to stay in business.

‘So,’ said Thumper. ‘There’s only one thing for it!’

We all looked at him expectantly.

‘We’ll have to raise the money ourselves,’ he explained, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world which in a way I suppose it was. ‘The School Board isn’t planning to close the school down until the beginning of the autumn term so that gives us,’ he looked at a calendar on the wall and did a quick calculation (the calendar was for the year 1963 but since the government hadn’t got round to changing the names of the months the principle was the same), ‘eight and a half months.’

‘How much is it going to cost?’ asked Peter Marshall, the village shopkeeper, taxi driver, undertaker, postman, florist and pessimist. Peter can always be relied upon to think about these mundane matters although I do think that his reputation as the meanest man on Exmoor is, in my view, rather unjustified. Although I have been living in Bilbury for a long time I still haven’t had a bill from him. Every time I ask him how much I owe he just smiles at me and tells me not to concern myself with such trifles. I do sometimes worry that one of these days I am going to have to take out a second mortgage to settle up with him.

‘There won’t be much change from £8,000,’ said Thumper.

I’ve noticed before that builders seem rather to like the phrase ‘there won’t be much change from...’. This quite inaccurately implies that there is likely to be some change. Strictly speaking Thumper Robinson isn’t a builder, for he earns his living doing what he describes as ‘a bit of this and a bit of that’, (After living in Bilbury for a while I understand that this is the rural equivalent of being in the ‘import-export business’), but he has done enough brick and mortar work in his time to know his way around a building estimate.

‘That means it’ll be £10,000,’ said Dr Brownlow, with a weary sigh. Dr Brownlow, who lives in a house which is so large that not even he knows how many bedrooms there are, has much experience of dealing with builders.

Thumper waved a hand backwards and forwards to indicate that he didn't entirely disagree with this interpretation. 'There's a new thatch, a new chimney, new ceiling, new bedroom floor and then there's the decorating.'

'It's all a bit academic, isn't it?' said Mrs McBride. 'How on earth are we going to raise that much money?'

This realistic but gloomy thought successfully silenced the discussion for a while.

'Why don't we organise a Revel?' asked Dr Brownlow, suddenly and quite unexpectedly.

'A what?' I asked. I'd never heard of a Revel before. I had no idea what one was.

'What a brilliant idea!' cried Peter Marshall, looking genuinely excited. I hadn't seen Peter Marshall look excited since a coach-load of Japanese tourists had stopped outside his shop. Within ten minutes he had not only got rid of a whole box of out of date photographic film but had also sold his entire stock of sticky fly paper. The Japanese had been fascinated by it.

'Of course!' agreed Thumper. 'A Revel!'

'What's a Revel?' asked Mrs McBride.

'We haven't had one of those for years!' said Peter Marshall.

Gilly Parsons looked at me. 'What's a Revel?' she whispered.

I shrugged.

'When was the last one?' asked Thumper.

'It must have been 1961,' said Peter Marshall.

'It was before that,' said Dr Brownlow, shaking his head. 'Maybe 1957 or 1958.'

'What on earth is a Revel?' demanded Gilly Parsons, laughing.

Dr Brownlow looked at Thumper, Thumper looked at Peter Marshall and Peter looked at Dr Brownlow.

'It's a bit difficult to explain,' said Dr Brownlow. 'It's a sort of fair.'

'Spelt f-a-y-r-e,' said Thumper.

'We always used to have them,' explained Peter Marshall.

'I remember that we always used to raise a lot of money,' said Dr Brownlow.

'That was one of the main reasons why we stopped them,' said Thumper. 'No one could agree on what to do with the money.'

'But what is a Revel?' demanded a very impatient Mrs McBride.

'It's whatever we want it to be,' said Dr Brownlow, after a lengthy silence. 'Side shows, cricket tournament, bowling for the pig, dancing, vegetable show, all that sort of thing.'

'A real Revel lasts for a whole week,' explained Thumper. 'Traditionally it starts on a Sunday after morning service and ends at midnight on Saturday. Sometimes they go on for longer.'

'How will a fayre pull in that sort of money?' I asked.

'Grockles!' said Peter Marshall, with a broad grin. 'Grockle' is the local term for a tourist.

‘We’ll have maypole dancing, morris dancing and all that stuff,’ said Peter Marshall. ‘The grockles love it!’

‘I hate to throw cold water on this but can anyone in the village actually do morris dancing?’ I asked quietly. I’d once seen men morris dancing and it had looked very complicated. There looked to be much more to it than having little bells sewn onto your socks and then dancing around banging sticks.

‘No problem!’ said Peter. ‘My grandfather used to be a great morris dancer. I’ve got a book on it somewhere. Philip Dinsdale knows all about morris dancing. He used to run the Bilbury Morris Dancers. We’ll get him to start them up again.’ He rubbed his hands together. ‘What a great idea!’ he said. ‘A Revel!’ He looked around the table and grinned at us all. ‘You’ve got a real treat in store,’ he said to me. ‘My old granddad always used to say that if you ain’t seen a Bilbury Revel you ain’t lived properly!’

‘So, shall we do that then?’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘Organise a Revel to pay for the repairs to Miss Hargreaves’ cottage?’

We all formally agreed with this.

‘Now that we’ve sorted out where the money is going to come from I can get a few of the lads together to start work pretty well straight away,’ said Thumper. ‘The quicker we start the sooner we’ll be finished. I can get all the stuff we need on tick.’ He, like everyone else, seemed to take it for granted that by organising a Revel we would automatically raise enough money to pay for all the repairs that Miss Hargreaves’ cottage needed.

Peter Marshall then decided that this would be a good time for someone to go for another round of drinks while he popped upstairs to see if one of the witches would run a Fortune Tellers’ tent for us.

CHAPTER SIX

I was helping Patsy clear away the breakfast things when there was a sudden, sharp knock on the back door. Patsy looked at me and I looked at her. Neither of us could think of anyone who would knock on the back door at that time in the morning. Anyone from the village would have just walked into the kitchen.

There was one easy way to find out who was there. I put the plates I was carrying into the sink and opened the door.

‘Good morning!’ said a rather scruffy individual whom I had never seen before. He wore a suit that looked as if it had once been rather smart and a floppy tweed hat which looked at least two sizes too small for him. He had a grey, curly beard and handfuls of curly grey hair escaped from underneath his hat. He looked a bit like a pixie.

‘Good morning!’ I replied.

‘Lovely house,’ said the pixie.

‘Thank you.’

‘Beautiful garden.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Do you need any help with it?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Your garden,’ explained the pixie. ‘Do you need any help with it?’

‘I don’t really know,’ I mumbled. ‘We hadn’t really thought about it.’ I half turned to look back at Patsy who couldn’t see who was at the door but had obviously heard the conversation. She raised an eyebrow and shrugged her shoulders.

‘Give me a trial week,’ suggested the pixie.

The truth was that we undeniably did need someone to help us with the garden. It was far too big for us to be able to cope with without any outside help and although we had successfully restored the vegetable garden we had still done nothing at all to the area around the small ornamental lake.

‘I don’t think we can afford anyone,’ I confessed, deciding the truth was better than a made up excuse.

The pixie looked up and around the courtyard, clearly finding this difficult to believe. ‘I’m not expensive,’ he said, with another big grin.

‘I know it’s a big house,’ I said, ‘but we aren’t rich.’ I thought I caught a touch of disbelief in his eyes. ‘Honestly!’ I added.

‘I tell you what I’ll do,’ said the pixie. ‘I’ll work for you for £5 and somewhere to sleep - then you see what you think and if you’re satisfied with my work you pay me what you can afford. Give me a trial for a week.’

I half turned again and looked at Patsy. She made it clear that she was happy to leave the negotiations up to me.

‘Come in,’ I said, stepping back from the door and making a snap decision. He looked trustworthy enough. ‘We’ll find you a room. We’ll pay you £5 a week and we’ll share the income from selling fruit and vegetables to the local shops and hotels.’

‘That’s very fair!’ said the pixie. He didn’t enter the house. ‘But I didn’t mean a room in the *house!*’ He seemed genuinely embarrassed and looked around the courtyard. ‘You must have a bit of a stable somewhere, a loft, something like that...,’ he waved a hand around airily to make it clear that he wasn’t fussy.

We found him a dry loft above one of the unused stables and he seemed well pleased with this. When he had deposited his bag, a small canvas holdall which would have made a scarcely adequate weekend bag for most travellers, Patsy and I led him on a brief guided tour of the garden. He seemed quietly impressed with the state of the walled vegetable plot but tutted and oohed and aahed when he saw the overgrown and out of control gardens around the ornamental lake.

‘There’s a lot to do,’ said Patsy.

‘There is that,’ said the pixie. ‘But you’ve got the makings,’ he added quietly and appreciatively. ‘Oh, yes, you’ve certainly got the makings.’

I thought I knew what he meant.

We walked slowly back towards the house together.

‘I’ve suddenly realised that we don’t know your name!’ said Patsy.

‘No,’ said the pixie. He had engaging, twinkly eyes but there was a sadness in them. He looked the sort of man who liked smiling but hadn’t had much to smile about recently. But he still didn’t tell us his name.

‘What is it?’ I asked him after we’d walked on together for another half a dozen paces.

‘Parfitt,’ said the pixie, almost reluctantly.

‘Welcome to Bilbury Grange, Mr Parfitt,’ said Patsy.

‘Thank you,’ replied the pixie. We showed him where there was a water tap and an outside lavatory, told him that he could help himself to any winter vegetables still growing in the garden and warned him about the existence of Miss Hargreaves whom we hardly ever saw and who had settled into the coach-house flat very well.

And so we acquired a gardener; albeit only on trial for a week.

When we got back to the house we discovered that a delivery van had been out from Barnstaple with a parcel for me. Because there had been no one in the house the driver had left a card to say that he had taken the parcel all the way back into town. I went and fetched the car keys and set off straight away. I rather thought I knew what the parcel might be and I was anxious to collect it without too much delay.

* * *

The road from Bilbury to Barnstaple twists and turns a hundred times. People who believe that crows fly in straight lines would probably estimate that a flying crow would measure the distance between our village and the nearest town as no more than five miles. But for earthbound travellers, who have to obey the whims of centuries old track makers, the distance is twice as far. The A39, the main coast road down through North Devon and North Cornwall skirts around the edge of the straggling village of Kentisbury, passes Arlington Court on the left and climbs up a steep hill around the edge of Woolley Wood before dropping down to skirt past the edge of the village of Shirwell and enter Barnstaple from the north east. I know the road well and because it was winter and there were no visitors around I drove quickly, taking particular care on those corners which were sheltered from the sun and which might therefore still be icy. The weather had become a little milder since the big blizzard but there were still patches of drifted snow to be seen on the northern side of many hedgerows.

I had just negotiated the severe hairpin bend halfway up the hill past Woolley Wood when I saw a couple of red flags sticking out of the side of the hedge. The flags were faded, dirty and drooping and I very nearly missed them completely.

I stamped my foot on the brake and skidded to a halt just in time to avoid smashing into the back of a very grubby pick-up truck. The truck was so dirty that it was quite impossible to see what colour it had been when it had been first driven out of the showroom. In fact it was so filthy that it was difficult to believe that it had ever even been in a showroom. Not that this was anything unusual. As a general rule in North Devon it is fairly safe to assume that any vehicle which isn't battered or dirty belongs to a visitor.

The truck had been parked less than fifty yards after a blind bend. A small grey saloon was parked a few yards in front of the truck. Three scruffy figures and a man in a suit were standing in the road talking. The man in the suit was holding a clipboard. He looked very cold. A fallen tree trunk lay across half the road and two of the scruffy men were holding chain saws. The road was littered with sawdust and small branches.

A tall, long haired figure wearing a green jacket, a beige woolly hat, dark brown corduroy trousers and a pair of heavy boots waved to me and wandered over towards me. I didn't know his name but I recognised him. During the summer months he operated a hut renting out surfboards and selling ice cream on one of the nearby beaches and during the winter he earned a living doing anything that wasn't overtly illegal.

'Hello, doc!' he cried, grinning cheerfully when he recognised me. It seemed clear that whatever was going on was going to take some time so I got out of the car and wandered over to him. I sometimes think that living in Devon is a bit like living in Spain. There isn't a lot of point in trying to hurry because by and large things will get done when the people doing them are ready to do them and no amount of cajoling or threatening will make any difference. Since I've lived in Bilbury I've known of three couples who have left London to live in the area. They all returned to their more familiar haunts within a year, claiming that they found the slow, laid back pace of life far too stressful for them.

'You'd get on quicker if you didn't cut everything up so small!' insisted the man in the suit. He shivered uncontrollably. He pointed to the pile of logs at the side of the road. They looked as if they'd been cut to fit perfectly into the average sort of fireplace.

'We have to cut them into small pieces or else we can't get them into the back of the truck,' said one of the woodmen. I recognised him too. I'd seen him at the Duck and Puddle.

The man in the suit frowned, clearly unconvinced.

'I've got a bad back,' said one of the men.

'Hernia,' said another.

'It's me chest,' said the third.

The man in the suit scribbled something on his clipboard, glowered at no one in particular, shivered and walked back to his car. He got in, performed an eighteen point turn and drove away. When he'd gone, the three men dragged the tree trunk out of the way so that I could drive past.

'Don't strain yourselves!' I shouted.

They grinned back at me and the man in the woolly hat who rented out surfboards in the summer winked.

* * *

The parcel was, as I had expected and hoped, from my publishers in London. It contained my six author's copies of my very first book. I signed the forms that the brown coated man behind the counter handed to me and took the parcel carefully into my arms.

'You don't need to worry,' said the man in the brown coat, pointing to the form I'd signed. 'It's only books.'

Only books! He might as well have said: 'It's only holy relics' or 'It's only the crown jewels'.

I could have not felt more tenderly towards that parcel if it had contained my first born baby. In many ways that was exactly what it *did* contain. I had spent nearly a year writing the book, a serious expose of the international drug industry, and when I had finished the researching, and the writing, and the editing and the proof reading and the answering of queries from the libel lawyers (that alone had taken three months and by the time I'd finished the book was less than two thirds of its original length) I was as exhausted and as careworn as a mother at the end of a full nine month pregnancy.

I glowered at the insensitive bibliophobe in the brown coat, tucked the parcel safely under my arm and walked out to my car. There I sat and stared at the parcel for what seemed like an hour or two (but was probably no more than a couple of minutes). I desperately wanted to open the parcel and see what one of my babies looked like. But I also wanted to share that magical moment with Patsy.

Something the publisher had said to me kept coming back. 'However many other books you write this will always be your first book,' he had said when I was flagging during the lengthy editing process. 'You must make it as good a book as you can.' I had done just that.

I made the decision to delay the opening of the parcel until I got home, put the unopened package down on the passenger seat, fastened the seat belt around it and set off on the winding journey back to Bilbury Grange.

The three wood cutters were still working near Woolley Wood, though the tree trunk they had been chopping up had more or less disappeared. I slowed down as I approached their truck and the ice cream salesman in the woolly hat waved to me. I wound down the car window and stuck my head out into the cold.

'Is the hernia O.K.?' I asked.

'Fine, thanks, doc!' he grinned. He rubbed his hands together. He wore no gloves and it really was bitterly cold. 'Do you want some logs?' he asked me, pointing to the large pile of neatly cut small logs in the back of the pick-up truck. The three of them had been busy.

'How much do you want for them?' I asked him.

He suggested a price that seemed halfway between outrageous and absurd. I offered a price that was mid-way between mean and theft. We then quickly agreed on a sensible compromise; the price both of us had probably thought of in the first place. Patsy and I had burnt up quite a large proportion of our stock of logs during the blizzard and it seemed an excellent opportunity to replenish our supplies. Patsy's father had explained to me that logs burn best if stored for a year or more and so I didn't want to have to buy logs at the last minute. Green wood is slow to ignite, burns poorly and tends to give off more steam than anything else.

'We've just got a bit more tidying up to do,' said the man in the woolly hat. 'Shouldn't take us more than half an hour or so.'

'I'll be back home by then,' I told him. As I drove away I couldn't help smiling to myself. The men had been paid by the council to remove the tree trunk and they had now managed to get paid by me for the logs. I rather suspected that they would all be doing a little celebrating later that evening. Being a townie who relied on central heating the man in a suit from the council probably hadn't even realised that a chopped up tree can have a cash value in the countryside.

* * *

Patsy and I sat in the kitchen staring at the parcel for a while.

'Aren't you going to open it?' asked Patsy at last.

'You open it.'

'No, you. It's your book.'

I picked up the parcel, found the knot and picked eagerly at the string. Whoever had packed the parcel had certainly taken no chances with it coming undone.

‘Cut it,’ suggested Patsy, handing me a sharp kitchen knife.

‘I can’t do that!’ I said, rather shocked. When I was a boy my mother would never let anyone cut string. I don’t know whether this was because she thought it was bad luck to cut string (she had a lot of superstitions and quite a few of them seemed to involve black cats, the number thirteen and pieces of string) or because she just thought it was a waste (I suspect that the latter may have had some influence on her thinking for I don’t think she ever threw away anything - her kitchen always contained mountains of neatly folded paper bags). We always had to undo string, roll it up neatly and put it into the string box before we could even think of unwrapping the rest of the parcel.

Patsy smiled and put the knife away. She had enough superstitions of her own not to dismiss mine as entirely silly. When I had eventually managed to unravel the knot, had unfastened the string, folded it, tied it neatly and put it away in a drawer (we didn’t at the time have a string box though we did eventually acquire one) I carefully unfolded the thick brown wrapping paper. Inside that there was another thick layer of wrapping paper, made up of large proof sheets from another author’s book. And inside that layer of wrapping paper lay my six author’s copies. I stared at the small neat pile of books for a moment and could feel my heart beating wildly. A *With Compliments* slip lay on top of the books. I picked that up first and carefully laid it down on the table. Then I picked up one of the books and handed it to Patsy and picked up another book to look at myself. On the front cover there was the title and my name. On the back cover there was a small piece of blurb about the book and a photograph that made me look quite respectable. I examined the jacket spine and then I slowly undressed the book and examined the binding. Then I put the dust wrapper back around the book and flicked through the pages. I could hardly believe it. But the proof lay in my hands. I had written a book.

‘It’s just like a real book!’ said Patsy, holding her copy book very gently, as though frightened that it might suddenly fall apart.

‘Yes!’ I said.

‘Here’s that chapter that you had all those worries about!’

‘It’s nice paper isn’t it?’

‘It’s a good photograph of you.’

‘Do you think anyone will want to buy it?’ I asked, suddenly overwhelmed by an awful feeling that after all this trouble the book would not be of any interest to anyone.

Patsy looked up at me and reached out to hold my hand. ‘It doesn’t matter whether they do or they don’t,’ she said quietly.

She was right.

For that moment I didn’t care what the critics said or whether anyone bought the book or not. The important thing was that I had written my first book. No one could ever take that away from me.

And then for the second time that day there was a loud knocking at the back door and I had to go and show the wood cutters where to unload the logs I’d bought.

* * *

‘I almost forgot,’ said Patsy, when I came in from helping to move the logs from the back of the yellow truck into the back of our log shed, ‘there were two telephone calls for you while you were in Barnstaple.’ Inevitably, the wood cutters had wanted to dump the newly cut logs at the front of the shed. I had had to give them an extra pound each to persuade them to help me to put the logs right at the back where there was plenty of room and where they would be able to dry out in peace for a year or so. The first call had been from a girl called Tanya who worked for a publicity agency in London which had, apparently, been hired by my publishers to promote my book. They wanted to know if I would go up to London to meet with them and discuss the various ways of promoting the book. The second telephone call had been from Peter Marshall who hadn’t left any message apart from the fact that he wanted me to ring him back.

I rang the publicity people in London first and got hold of Tanya straight away.

'First,' she cooed, 'I have to tell you how *thrilled* we all are to be handling your book. It's going to be a real joy and a privilege to work with you.'

Not realising that this was publicity-agent-speak for 'hello' I felt a little embarrassed at the effusiveness of this greeting. 'That's very kind of you,' I stuttered back, rather hesitantly.

'Oh no,' said Tanya. 'We really are most terribly, terribly excited by this project. I can't tell you how honoured we are to have been chosen to help promote your book. Mr Leytonstone himself has told us that the book must be given every priority. He is convinced that it's going to be a major, major bestseller.'

'Oh,' I said, rather taken aback by all this. 'Thank you.' Then after a moment's hesitation I asked who Mr Leytonstone was. This question clearly threw poor Tanya who obviously lived in a world where everyone not only knew who Mr Leytonstone was but also regarded him as being only slightly less important than the gods of fire, water and earth.

'My Leytonstone is our Senior Account Director,' she answered, in a whisper. I realised that she was probably whispering because she was embarrassed at having to explain who Mr Leytonstone was.

'Ah,' I said, as knowledgeably as I could.

'We would all love to meet you so that we can take on board your views about how the book should be promoted,' said Tanya. 'And, of course, we would like the opportunity to tell you about our plans for you and your book.'

'Er, yes,' I said. 'Thank you.' I was naturally keen to go and talk to the publicity people who were going to turn my book into a bestseller but I really didn't fancy the idea of a trip to London.

'We'll be fixing up lots of radio and television interviews for you,' said Tanya. 'Deborah has already started talking to people about you.'

'Radio?' I said. 'And television?' I could feel my palms becoming sweaty. I wondered who Deborah was.

'Oh, yes, absolutely. Have you done any broadcasting before?'

'Broadcasting? Er, no, I don't think so,' I muttered. I was beginning to get very cold feet about this whole business.

'You'll be absolutely marvellous,' said Tanya. 'I just know you will. Now, when can you come up and have lunch with us all? Would next Wednesday be convenient?'

I looked at the calendar hanging on the wall near to the telephone. There was nothing at all written on it. 'Yes, I think so,' I said, hesitantly. 'Next Wednesday would be fine.'

'Wonderful. Everyone here will be so thrilled that you're coming! It's going to be a real treat for us all to meet you.'

'Er, thank you,' I mumbled.

'Goodbye then,' said Tanya.

'Goodbye,' I said and found myself listening to the brrrr of a disconnected telephone.

* * *

After all this it was a real relief to telephone Peter Marshall and get back to the real world. After the telephone had rung for what seemed like a lifetime Peter eventually picked up the receiver and then immediately asked me if I could wait for a moment, explaining that a potato sack had split, spewing its contents all over his store room. I sat there listening to him huffing and puffing and cursing in the background as he picked up the potatoes.

'Who is it?' he demanded eventually. He sounded very bad tempered.

I told him.

‘Oh, hello!’ he said. ‘What can I do for you?’

‘You rang and left a message for me to telephone you,’ I reminded him.

‘Did I?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh.’ said Peter. ‘Well I must have wanted to speak to you about something, I suppose. I wonder what it was. Wait a minute.’ Again the phone went dead and this time I heard him rummaging around on his desk. There was a loud crash as something breakable fell on the floor and broke.

‘I know what it was,’ he said eventually. ‘I’m sorry about all that but I’ve had an absolutely terrible day. Can I put you down for the cricket team?’

‘The cricket team?’ I exclaimed, horrified. ‘Do you mean you want me to *play* cricket?’

‘Well I’m not selling tickets and I don’t want you to make the teas.’

‘I haven’t played cricket since I was six years old!’ I protested.

‘Doesn’t matter,’ said Peter without hesitation. ‘I was appointed secretary of the cricket club at the last meeting and we’ve only got ten members.’

‘What do I have to do?’ I asked.

‘Turn up,’ said Peter baldly. ‘You’ll only have to field a bit and maybe bat. You can bowl if you like. We’re going to play a few matches as part of the Revels.’

‘What’s the team called?’

‘We’re the Old Bilburians,’ replied Peter.

‘The *what?*’

‘I know,’ sighed Peter. ‘I don’t know how we got that name. I think someone said it would make us sound more important than Bilbury Village Cricket Club. Can I put you down?’

‘Who else is in the team?’

‘Thumper, Dr Brownlow, Frank, Patchy,’ began Peter.

‘O.K.’ I agreed. ‘Put me down then.’

‘Jolly good,’ said Peter. ‘There’s a meeting at 8 tonight at the Duck and Puddle.’

‘I’ll be there,’ I sighed.

* * *

The Old Bilburians Cricket Team had what a generous sports writer might describe as a ‘patchy’ history. A less generous, more realistic, critic might have preferred words such as ‘useless’ or even found the plain ‘not very good’ suitable. An unkind commentator might have found the word ‘pathetic’ irresistible. It was the sort of team which is usually described as being reliable (roughly translated this means that at least eight men usually turned up for most of its matches) and ‘the backbone of the local cricket league’ (translated as meaning that no one alive could remember it ever having won a match).

The team, I learned from Peter in the Duck and Puddle that evening, had not actually played any cricket matches for four years. It had, however, had four annual dinners, four summer barbecues, eight committee meetings and five car boot sales and had played six darts matches, four skittles matches and a snooker match.

'I thought we could organise a few matches as part of the Revels Week,' said Peter, when he finally decided that it was time to start the meeting.

'Cricket matches?' asked Dr Brownlow, seemingly startled at the prospect of the Old Bilburians Cricket Team actually playing any cricket. From the looks on the faces of the others I gathered that I was the only one who had been made aware of Peter's plans.

Peter nodded.

There was a lengthy silence as this information sank in.

'Does anyone here actually know how to play cricket?' asked Thumper at last.

There was then another fairly lengthy silence while we all considered this question.

'I used to be a pretty mean leg break bowler,' said Patchy, picking up a beer mat and wrapping his fingers around it as though it were a cricket ball.

Dr Brownlow studied Patchy's grip critically. 'Isn't that the grip for an off spin bowler?' he asked cautiously.

Patchy stared at his fingers, at Dr Brownlow and then back at his hand. He frowned.' Is it?'

'I'm not sure,' confessed Dr Brownlow, with a shrug.

'It's a long time since I was at school,' admitted Patchy quite unnecessarily. He carefully put down the beer mat and flexed his fingers. 'Maybe I was an off spinner,' he said thoughtfully. He picked up the beer mat and tried out the grip again.

'Have we got any equipment?' asked Frank.

We all looked at him. This was an unusually specific, and unexpectedly relevant remark for Frank who, when faced with social events of any nature, is usually more concerned with problems such as 'Will there be enough beer' and 'Who will carry me home afterwards'.

'Equipment?' frowned Dr Brownlow.

'Bats, balls, stuff like that,' explained Frank.

'I can get bats and wickets and balls,' said Peter quickly.

We all looked at him. Peter's shop sells toy beach cricket kits which contain little bats made of balsa wood, stumps that are barely more than eighteen inches high and balls that are so light that they travel no more than ten feet however hard you hit them.

'I'm not sure that the stuff you sell will be quite the sort of equipment our opponents will be used to,' said Dr Brownlow, tactfully.

Peter looked at him blankly.

'The stuff in the shop,' explained Dr Brownlow. 'Good, though it is,' he added quickly. Peter can be a little touchy if his wares are criticised. He once hit a French visitor who had dared to criticise his sprouts. He didn't hit him with his fists, of course, but with a rather large piece of broccoli. Afterwards a representative from the French Embassy travelled down from London to issue Peter with an official protest. He subsequently needed to have a length of cucumber removed from his person. On another occasion a weekend inhabitant of the village was foolish enough to compare Peter's unwashed, organic carrots unfavourably with those on sale in the Harrod's Food Hall in London. The man, who had also made the mistake of threatening to report Peter to the authorities for not making sure that his outside window blind was the regulation height above the ground, had been promptly banned for life from Peter's shop. A full two years after the incident Peter proved that he isn't a man to bear a grudge lightly by refusing to sell the weekender a newspaper. Peter tutted impatiently and shook his head. 'No,' he said, 'I mean real cricket bats. Real balls too.' He paused, realising perhaps that he got carried away a little. 'Well, nearly real.'

'Ah,' said Dr Brownlow, impressed. 'Nearly real will do us very nicely.'

'I'll get them at cost,' said Peter. He took the small red notebook in which he writes down all his orders and cash transactions out of his inside jacket pocket, licked the business end of a small stub of a pencil which he took from behind his left ear and carefully wrote down the order.

'Will anyone want to play us?' I asked, feeling rather foolish but thinking nevertheless that the question ought to be asked.

'Finding opponents won't be a problem,' Dr Brownlow reassured me. 'Every summer there are hundreds of teams from the Midlands down in the West Country looking for games. Any village that has a picturesque ground can get as many matches as it wants. Over at Yoxley they play four or five times a week all through the summer.'

'When the village last had a cricket club we went for years without ever playing an away fixture,' said Thumper. 'Visitors love playing here because we've got a pretty ground.'

'Where is our cricket ground?' I asked.

Everyone looked at me as if I were mad.

'The village green!' said Thumper, pointing through the window.

It was, when I stopped to think about it, a pretty obvious setting though the village green didn't look very much like a cricket pitch. The grass was nearly a foot long and most groundsmen would have regarded it as something of a challenge to get it ready for a football match - let alone a cricket match.

'It'll need a bit of a rolling,' said Dr Brownlow, who has a nice ear for the understated phrase.

'No problem, doctor,' said Thumper. 'I can borrow Herbert Thurlow's roller.'

'Splendid!' said Dr Brownlow.

'Forgive me for asking what is probably another daft question,' I said, 'but if we're going to start playing cricket seriously doesn't it mean that we have to start practising?'

Peter looked at Frank, Frank looked at Thumper and Thumper laughed.

'I don't think we have to be *that* serious about it!' said Thumper.

'Besides,' said Frank, 'practising isn't exactly the gentlemanly thing to do, is it? Not for amateurs.'

'Look at it this way,' said Peter, 'our role is to make the other team feel good - they are the visitors after all.'

'And if they feel happy because they've won,' said Frank, 'they'll buy all the drinks!'

'Since I seem to be asking all the stupid questions,' I said, 'can I just ask one more?'

'Certainly!' said Frank. He paused. 'One more.'

'The idea of organising the Revels is to make money to pay for repairing Miss Hargreaves' cottage, right?'

'Right,' agreed Thumper with a nod. Everyone else murmured assent.

‘How will a few cricket matches help us make money?’

‘Ah!’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘That’s easy. First, the visiting teams will spend money when they’re in the village. They’ll drink a lot of beer, smoke a lot of tobacco and eat a lot of chips. Frank will sell them the beer and the chips and Peter will sell them the tobacco.’

‘And we’ll sell them raffle tickets,’ said Thumper.

‘And we give a cut of the extra profits to the Revels Committee,’ said Frank.

‘Second, if we advertise the fact that we’re holding cricket matches on the village green we’ll get a lot more visitors to the village. And they’ll...‘

‘...drink a lot of beer, smoke a lot of tobacco, buy a lot of raffle tickets and eat a lot of chips!’ I interrupted.

‘And buy a lot of postcards, maps, tinned sweets and magazines!’ added Peter with a broad smile. I felt silly for not having thought of all this. I should have known that Peter is not a man to organise anything if there isn’t a shilling or two to be made out of it.

‘Does the Revels Committee get a cut on all those things?’ Dr Brownlow asked Peter, apparently innocently.

Peter looked as though he would have gone red if he’d been the sort ever to get embarrassed or cross with himself.

‘Hrrmph, er, well, not exactly the postcards,’ he mumbled.

‘What about books?’

‘Books are a rather difficult commodity, you know. Margins are poor you know,’ said Peter, continuing to mumble.

‘Magazines?’ asked Dr Brownlow.

‘I don’t think my contract with the wholesalers allows me to have any arrangements with a third party,’ said Peter, quite earnestly and without the hint of a blush.

‘Sweets?’

‘Oh, the profit on sweets wouldn’t be worth having,’ said Peter with a shake of his head.

‘What do we get a cut on, then?’ asked Dr Brownlow.

Peter hesitated. ‘Tobacco!’ he said at last, giving us all a rather hollow smile.

‘We perhaps ought to have a little meeting,’ murmured Dr Brownlow, giving Peter a wink. ‘See if we can’t sort out a few more items where the Revels Committee might conceivably expect a little payment.’

‘What about your bottled water, then?’ asked Peter.

‘I’ll certainly be giving ten percent of all my sales during Revels Week,’ said Dr Brownlow.

‘And we’ll give ten percent of the take from the Duck and Puddle during Revels Week,’ promised Frank.

Everyone looked at Peter expectantly.

Peter looked glum and for a moment or two didn’t say anything. I thought he was probably going to brazen it out. But it turned out that even Peter had a breaking point. ‘All right,’ he agreed at last. He sighed.’ Ten per cent of all my sales during Revels Week.’ He had to drag the words out as though they were sewn in.

‘Splendid!’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘I’d drink to that but my glass is empty.’ He leant a little closer to Peter. ‘I think it’s your round!’ he said with a rather wicked smile.

* * *

CHAPTER SEVEN

The human body is equipped with an enormous range of subtle and sophisticated mechanisms; many of which are as yet quite unexplained by doctors and some of which you are probably unaware that you have. Should a speck of dust find its way into one of your eyes tears will flood out in an attempt to wash the irritant away. The tears contain a special bactericidal substance designed to kill off any infection. When you have a fever, the rise in your temperature is probably a result of your body trying to help you cope more effectively with any infection that may be present. There is even a quite remarkable mechanism which will enable you to go to bed at night, tell yourself what time you want to wake up and then wake up at that time!

In order to get to London in time to have lunch with the people who had been hired to promote my first book I had to get up at half past five in the morning. When I was working as a doctor I often had to get up out of bed during those parts of the night when I would have preferred to have been fast asleep but I never grew to like it. Many of the other inhabitants of Bilbury, being farmers, probably thought nothing of getting up at half past five in the morning but to me it was still a chore which required discipline and effort.

However, since I was a child I've been able to wake myself up at whatever time I wanted simply by telling myself the specified time. Just how this internal mechanism works is a mystery. But work it does.

On the morning I was due to go to London to meet Tanya and the publicity people who had been hired to promote my book I woke suddenly and carefully reached out, cautiously grasping for the alarm clock. The illuminated hands showed that it was 5.25 am. I turned off the alarm, due to go off in five minutes time (even after all these years I am, I am rather ashamed to admit, still sceptical about my powers to wake up on cue and so whenever I need to get up particularly early I always put the alarm clock on as a mechanical 'back up') picked up the small torch that since the blizzard I had kept on my crowded bedside table alongside the alarm clock, the lamp and the telephone and stealthily crept out of bed. Ben, who had been curled up next to my feet, woke instantly and leapt down off the bed. I reached down and touched her mouth to tell her not to make a sound and took my flannels, my old and faithful sports jacket, a clean woollen shirt and my underwear into the bathroom so that I could get dressed without waking Patsy. I heard Sophie and Emily, our two young cats, follow Ben down off the bed.

Cats are supposed to be silent creatures but those two, particularly Sophie, made so much noise when they moved about that I could never understand just how they managed to catch as much wildlife as they did. Sophie was pretty clumsy as well as noisy and whenever a pot plant was found mysteriously smashed on the floor we knew who to blame. (Not that we ever did blame her, of course. We knew that in reality it was our fault for leaving the plants scattered around in such silly places. Anyone who puts a pot plant on the mantelpiece when there is a cat living in the house must expect to come in one day and find a smashed pot in the hearth.)

It was still dark outside and I couldn't see a thing, though I could hear the wind and the rain lashing against the windows. As usual it was freezing cold in the bathroom. I shaved and then dressed and started to tiptoe down the stairs when to my surprise I heard Patsy calling from the kitchen.

'Your porridge is ready!'

I hurried downstairs. I could smell fresh toast too. The morning was looking better already.

'I didn't even know you were up!'

'You don't think I was going to let you creep out of the house without any breakfast, do you?' Patsy poured boiling water from the kettle into the teapot.

'But it's horribly early!' I said, sitting down at the breakfast table. Ben, Emily and Sophie all sat around looking underprivileged.

'I was brought up on a farm. This isn't early. Come on, start your porridge and I'll boil you a couple of eggs. Do you want syrup on your porridge?'

I said ‘yes, please’, accepted the proffered tin and put two large dollops of sweet, sticky, golden syrup into the middle of my bowl of porridge. Twenty five minutes later, with a bowlful of porridge, two boiled eggs and two slices of toast inside me, and feeling infinitely better than I had when I’d woken, I stuffed my feet into my shoes, pulled on my coat and gloves, crammed a hat onto my head, scraped the ice off the car windscreen and set off to drive to the railway station in Barnstaple.

It’s difficult to feel in a hurry on the journey between Barnstaple and Exeter. The train stops at Lapford, Eggesford and what seems like every other village in the county. When you look at the map it seems as though the railway takes a pretty direct line between Barnstaple and Exeter. In real life I suspect that the train prefers to take a more adventurous, circuitous route.

In Exeter I had a twenty five minute wait before I caught the main line express from Cornwall to Paddington. I bought a newspaper and joined the hardy bunch of early morning travellers waiting to journey East. I can never quite believe it but I have it on the firmest authority that the early morning passenger list from Exeter to London includes a number of daily commuters - most of whom catch an earlier train than the one I was catching! I suppose it’s all right if you enjoy travelling and find working and reading on the train easy to do but I would find it an enormously tedious and quite exhausting business.

I was in London by eleven o’clock and since I didn’t have to be in the south of the city for my meeting with Tanya, Mr Leytonstone and the others until one o’clock I decided that instead of catching the tube or taking a taxi I would walk from the station. A quick look at the elderly and rather dog eared copy of the map of London that I had brought with me suggested that it couldn’t be more than a few miles. It was much warmer in London than it had been in Devon and even though there was a thin, misty rain falling a walk through Hyde Park seemed a much more pleasant proposition than being cooped up in an underground train.

By the time I had stopped at a cafe in Knightsbridge for a cup of tea and a bun (I could have bought a three course meal at the Duck and Puddle for the same price), lingered in a bookshop where I bought a fistful of paperbacks which filled the pockets of my coat and bought a brooch in the shape of a butterfly from a street trader for Patsy it had started to rain more steadily.

There was something distinctly odd about the rain which for a moment or two I couldn’t quite put my finger on. Eventually, I realised what it was. The rain was coming straight down and as a result pedestrians who were carrying umbrellas were staying quite dry. In North Devon the rain tends to pay more attention to the wind than to gravity and usually travels horizontally. No locals in Bilbury, Combe Martin, Ilfracombe, Lynton or Barnstaple ever bother carrying umbrellas because they know that if it rains then it will probably also be windy. In London businessmen in suits were successfully keeping keep themselves dry by holding newspapers over their heads!

By the time I got to the offices of Taggart, Leytonstone, Mortehoe and Evans (the publicity firm which my publisher had hired to promote my book) my coat and hat and shoes were soaking wet.

‘Good morning, can I help you?’ asked a stunning young lady with long blonde hair, bright blue eyes and improbable looking eyelashes. The eyelashes were heavy with mascara and pulled her upper eyelids down so low that she had to hold her head back in order to look at me. She wore a high neck, skin tight, Chinese silk mini dress and had a tiny pair of headphones and a miniature microphone hanging around her neck. The dress looked about three sizes too small for her. Her bosom was straining as though anxious to escape and the dress was so short that the welt at the top of her tights was clearly visible. She wore a white enamelled name badge with gold edging and gold writing on it. The badge told me that she was called Felicity.

‘I’ve got an appointment to see Tanya,’ I said.

The receptionist leant forward and gingerly tapped at a small telephone switchboard with the end of a pencil, presumably to avoid damaging her fingernails. She held the headphones to one ear and twisted her neck so that she could speak into the microphone. She clearly didn’t want to upset her hair by wearing the headphones. ‘Hello, Tan,’ she said, ‘there’s a person here to see you.’ She looked up at me as she spoke and was clearly not impressed with what she saw. The person at the other end, presumably Tanya, said something which I didn’t hear.

‘What’s your name?’ asked the receptionist.

I told her.

The receptionist passed this information on to the person at the other end of the telephone.

Tanya said something which, again, I didn't hear.

'Are you an author?' asked the receptionist, lowering her voice a little, as though anxious lest anyone overhear my embarrassing secret.

I confessed that I was, indeed, an author.

'Yes, he is,' said Felicity. She put a hand half over her microphone as though anxious to stop me overhearing what she was going to say next but the ploy was pointless and I could hear perfectly well. 'He's very wet,' she murmured. There was a lengthy pause while Tanya said something else. 'No,' continued Felicity, with her hand still wrapped around the microphone, 'dripping wet!' She giggled at something that Tanya had said and unplugged the connection. 'Please take a seat,' she said, waving a hand airily towards a sofa. 'Tanya will be with you shortly.'

I hung my coat and hat on a chromium plated hat rack, sat on a black and white striped sofa and waited. There were a dozen, glossy magazines scattered around on a glass topped table but none of them looked particularly attractive. I reached up to my dripping coat and took one of the paperbacks I had bought, 'Walden' by Henry David Thoreau, out of my pocket and settled back to read it.

'Hello! Sorry to have kept you waiting!' said a chirpy young girl about fifteen minutes later. She looked about nineteen, maybe twenty, years old. She had tousled blonde hair that made her look as though she'd just got out of bed and wore a baggy, rugby shirt and a pair of very tight jeans. She rolled her eyes heavenwards. 'I've just had the most ghastly row with a TV producer in Manchester,' she told me. 'He promised me faithfully that he'd get one of our authors on his show but now he says he can't squeeze him in and we've already fixed up newspaper and radio interviews around his wretched show so it's all very beastly and damned inconvenient. Would you like a drink?'

I started to reply but was too slow.

'Felicity, would you be an absolute darling, and bring us three coffees?' She turned to me. 'Follow me, darling, I'll take you along to meet Deborah who'll be working with you.' As she turned she caught sight of my coat and hat, and the puddle that had formed around the base of the hat stand. 'Good heavens, are those yours?'

I said they were. 'I don't actually drink...,' I started to add but Tanya wasn't listening.

'Couldn't you get a cab? Oh, you poor darling!' She put a hand on my arm in apparently genuinely concern.

'I walked,' I explained.

'You walked?' It was a question, quite clearly born of disbelief.

'It wasn't far.'

Tanya stopped and stared at me. 'Where did you walk from?'

'Paddington station.'

'Paddington? Oh my god! You must be exhausted. That's the other end of town. Oh my god! That's miles. Oh how awful. Your publisher would have paid for a cab you know. Where have you come from?'

'Devon.'

'Devon? Good heavens! That's where people go for their holidays isn't it? Do you mean to say you actually live there? Oh how absolutely divine! But I could never live there. All that clotted cream! I'd be the size of a house in a week. You simply must meet Tiffany before you go. Her parents come from Devon. Well, they have a holiday home down there. I think it's Torquay or Newquay or somewhere with a quay in it. They're called Parkinson. Tiffy's father is THE Parkinson, the one whose firm makes all those witty advertisements that you see all the time on the television, but you wouldn't know it to talk to her. She's an absolute gem. Do you know them? I'm sure you must. I gather they know just about everybody in Devon. Did you really walk all the way from Paddington?'

I muttered something that sounded suitably inconsequential in reply to this barrage of questions and comments and strode along behind Tanya who had shot off down a corridor at a surprising speed.

'Hugo, this is the wonderful man who has written that absolutely sensational book on drugs!' said Tanya, stopping at an open door. She giggled nervously. A balding man who wore a large pink bow tie, had his trousers held up with a pair of bright yellow braces and was holding a Sherlock Holmes pipe in one hand a telephone in the other put his hand over the telephone and waved to us both. 'He lives in Devon and walked here in an absolute storm!' explained Tanya, pointing to me.

'Pleasure to meet you! I'm sure your book is going to be a tremendous success,' said the man with the bow tie, waving his pipe around airily. His office was lined with bookshelves. All the shelves were crammed with books. His desk was covered with books, manuscripts, magazines and loose papers. 'Jolly good timing. There's a tremendous amount of interest in the drug abuse problem. Heroin, cocaine, cannabis and all that. Tremendous interest. Big problem. I'm sure your book will make a vital contribution to the debate.' He nodded wisely, held his pipe aloft in some sort of salutation, took his hand away from his telephone and continued with his conversation. He had an airy, superior, rather condescending manner which I found slightly disturbing. Some men command respect, some demand it, a few deserve it; Hugo simply seemed to expect it.

'It isn't actually about drug abuse,' I tried to tell him, but he wasn't listening. 'It's about drug companies and, er, doctors...,' I continued lamely, abandoning my reply when I realised that Hugo was ignoring me.

'That was Mr Leytonstone himself,' whispered Tanya, hurrying along the corridor again. 'Isn't he an absolute angel? Absolutely brilliant, of course. He personally masterminded the Stuart Wallis story and when he was in advertising he thought up that completely sensational campaign for Tracey's Ales. He's a writer too so he has a special affinity with our authors. He wrote a book about advertising which is an absolute classic I'm told. I haven't actually read it, of course, because you can't get a copy - they're like absolute gold dust but everyone says it's really the most important thing ever written.'

I didn't have the faintest idea who Stuart Wallis was and I hadn't heard of Tracey's Ales but I made what I hoped were suitable noises to let Tanya know how impressed I was.

'And this,' said Tanya, pausing in the doorway of an office the size of a broom cupboard, 'is Deborah who'll be looking after you. She's going to take over your life completely, aren't you Debsie? Call her Debsie everyone does.'

I peered over Tanya's shoulder at a girl of about eighteen. She looked up at me and smiled. She had a thin, nervous looking face and shoulder length jet black hair. She wore a T-shirt with a message I couldn't quite decipher.

'He lives in Devon and he walked all the way here in the pouring rain! Isn't he divine? You're going to be fighting off producers when they see him.'

I hesitated, but thought I probably ought to correct Tanya before I developed too much of a reputation as a long distance walker. 'I didn't actually walk from Devon - only Paddington. And it wasn't raining all that much.'

Tanya waved a hand dismissively, as though none of this was important. 'Debsie is going to have you flying all over the country! Manchester, Glasgow, Birmingham, Cardiff. Everywhere! You'll be a household name by the time she's finished with you!'

'Golly,' I murmured. I wasn't sure that I was ready for any of this.

'And that's Fawn and that's Vanessa,' continued Tanya, pointing first at a plump, buxom blonde in a white silk blouse and then a freckled, redhead in a mauve jumper. 'They are the rest of my team!' Fawn and Vanessa, who were both busy on the telephone, beamed at me and waved their pens. I smiled back and waved rather diffidently.

'Do you want to come with us to my office, Debsie?' asked Tanya. 'There's a bit more room there and you can explain to us all the exciting things that you've got planned!'

'Shall I order some coffee?' asked Deborah, picking up all her telephone. As she reached across her desk I could read the message on her T-shirt but I still couldn't understand it.

'It's all done, darling!' cried Tanya, rushing off again. I hurried after her and heard Deborah clip clopping along behind me. Intrigued by the sound I turned, looked and saw that she was wearing white, high heeled, backless, toeless sandals. I couldn't help wondering if she'd travelled through wintry London wearing such impractical footwear.

'Sit yourself down!' said Tanya, as she led me into her office. It looked like another broom cupboard. Like every room I'd seen in Taggart, Leytonstone, Mortehoe and Evans the walls were covered with bookshelves, the bookshelves were bending under the weight of the books they were carrying and the desk was littered with books, manuscripts, press releases, letters and scribbled notes. Three mugs full of steaming hot black coffee stood in the middle of the desk. I hadn't seen Felicity bring the coffee although she must have walked down the corridor behind me. I sat down on an uncomfortable metal chair. Deborah, sat down beside me on a similar chair and lay down a huge diary across her knees. The open pages of the diary were covered with tiny, scribbly hand writing and there were at least fifty bits of paper sticking out of other pages in the book. I could see my name printed in large letters under the day's date. It was spelt wrongly.

'Debsie is really thrilled to be working on your book. Aren't you Debsie?' Deborah confirmed that she was, indeed, quite thrilled to be working on my book and added that she was envied by both Fawn and Vanessa. I don't know why but I got the feeling that this was an ego boosting routine served up to all authors. 'Do you take milk?' Tanya asked me, rummaging in the drawer of her desk. 'Sugar?'

'I don't...,' I started to say.

She pulled out two tiny cartons of milk and a handful of sugar sachets. 'I have to filch them from cafes and pubs,' she admitted with a nervous laugh. 'We never have any milk or sugar here because we all drink it black - we need the caffeine! So, how's it going so far, Debsie?'

Deborah glanced at me and smiled and then looked down at her diary. 'It's going terrifically well and there's an absolutely enormous amount of interest. I'm pretty certain that the producer of 'All Together!' is desperate, absolutely desperate to have us on the programme and I've got really firm maybes from Radio Manchester and Radio Birmingham.'

'Er... what's 'All Together!'?' I asked, diffidently.

'Haven't you seen it?' asked Tanya, seemingly astonished.

I admitted that I hadn't.

'Oh, it's an absolutely wonderful programme, darling! It goes out in the early afternoon and it's really terrific. You'll be marvellous on it. They'll love you to bits.'

'Oh.' I said. I swallowed and felt uncomfortable. I wasn't sure that I was ready to be loved to bits by people I didn't know and would never know. In the end I need not have worried. I never heard any more about 'All Together'.

'It's looking good, Debsie!' said Tanya. 'What else is there in your little book?'

'The producer of 'Youth Culture' on Radio Leeds is pretty sure that they'll want to do something - they're having a week-long series of programmes on drug abuse next month so our book fits in really well!'

'It isn't actually about drug abuse,' I said quickly.

'What isn't, darling?' asked Tanya.

'My book.'

Tanya looked at me and frowned. ‘I thought it was about drugs?’

‘It is.’

‘Well, there you are then!’

‘No, but...,’ I stumbled. ‘It’s not really about drug addiction. It’s more about prescription drugs.’

Tanya looked rather startled. ‘Oh!’ she said. ‘Oh. That’s a terrible pity. It’s a wonderful programme.’ She turned to Deborah. ‘Is Eden Taylor still presenting it?’

Deborah checked her diary and nodded.

Tanya turned to me. ‘He’s wonderful, isn’t he? Absolutely brilliant.’ She must have seen the look of incomprehension on my face. I knew it was there but had tried to conceal it. Have you not heard his show?’

‘Er... no, I can’t say I have,’ I admitted.

‘The next time you go to Leeds you make a point of tuning in,’ said Tanya. ‘He does a lot of our authors. What time does his programme go out, Debsie?’

‘Eleven until midnight on Sundays,’ said Deborah quickly.

‘I don’t get to Leeds much,’ I admitted. It was a dramatic understatement. I couldn’t remember ever having been there before.

‘Well you’ll be there if you’re on Eden Taylor’s show!’ Deborah pointed out.

I said that this was undoubtedly true and that I looked forward to hearing Mr Taylor.

‘Not that you’ll be able to listen to the show if you’re there with us!’ said Tanya, with a giggle.

Deborah and I both looked at her.

‘You’ll be ON the programme, won’t you!’

‘Er, yes...,’ I agreed. ‘I suppose I will.’

‘Do you not know anything about drug addiction?’ Tanya asked me. She picked up her mug and took a noisy slurp of coffee. Deborah picked up her mug and followed her example. I left my mug of coffee where it was. It looked more like black soup than coffee and I wondered how many hundred milligrams of caffeine each mug contained. There was, I thought, probably enough caffeine in those three mugs to keep an entire platoon awake throughout a long night of manoeuvres.

‘Well, yes, I suppose so...,’ I agreed. ‘A bit.’

‘So you could talk about it?’

I thought about it for a moment. ‘I suppose so,’ I said. ‘As long as it wasn’t anything too complicated.’

‘Oh, don’t worry,’ laughed Tanya. ‘It won’t be anything complicated! Not with Eden!’

‘So I can still pencil in Eden and Leeds?’

‘Oh, yes, absolutely, absolutely, Debsie!’ said Tanya enthusiastically. ‘What else have you got? Any nibbles from the nationals yet?’

‘Well a nice lady at the Express said she thought they might be prepared to do something and your friend at the Telegraph who sends his love by the way and told me to tell you that Freddie is pining for a big kiss - says he’ll try to get something in if the conference on sewage treatment is cancelled.' Tanya, who was blushing heavily, tried to hide behind her coffee mug but seemed secretly quite thrilled.

'I think - and this negotiation is at a very early stage so we mustn't get too excited - but I think there's a chance that The Guardian will buy serial rights.' Deborah looked at Tanya and then at me and smiled as though waiting for praise.

'Oh, you clever thing! That's absolutely marvellous, darling! You are a wonder! Isn't she a wonder?'

I agreed with Tanya that Deborah was, indeed, a wonder and that the news was absolutely marvellous. 'But what, er, what are 'serial rights'?' I asked.

'If The Guardian buy serial rights they'll publish an extract from your book!' said Tanya. 'It's very, very exciting news!'

I agreed that this was, indeed, exciting news.

'The 'West Country Post' is pretty sure that they think they probably want to do an interview,' went on Deborah, blushing now with pride at having almost persuaded The Guardian to publish an extract from my book. 'Your friend Kathy on 'Good Homes and Beautiful Gardens' says she's almost absolutely certain they'll do a short review and that man you told me to ring said we're pretty sure to get a piece on the diary page of 'Music Week'.'

'Marvellous!' said Tanya. 'Isn't that marvellous!'

'Well, yes,' I agreed.

'Of course, the 'Music Week' piece depends on the book being about drug addiction,' said Deborah, 'so I suppose we might have to do a bit of arm twisting there.'

'Oh, I'm sure you'll manage something,' said Tanya, confidently. 'Is Bernard Crossweather still the news editor?'

Deborah looked at her diary and nodded.

'Just take him for a long, boozy lunch and wear something with lots of cleavage,' said Tanya. She looked at her watch. 'Talking of lunch,' she said, 'it's time we left. I've got a table booked at Le Dejeuner Sur L'Herbe. I hope that's O.K.'

'I'm sure it will...,' I began.

'They do the most divine veal and lamb pie,' said Tanya.

'Er, actually, I'm, well, sort of vegetarian,' I confessed. Tanya, who had been busy filling a huge leather satchel with diaries, appointment books, a Filofax and half a dozen books, stopped as though suddenly frozen. 'Oh my God!' she said.

'Did you tell us?'

'I don't think...,'

'I should have guessed,' said Tanya. 'Walking all that way.

You must be a bit of a health freak. I suppose it's with you being a doctor and so on.'

'Well, no, in fact it hasn't got anything...,' I began.

'Never mind,' said Tanya, 'I'll have a word with Felicity on the way out and get her to ring Maurice and make sure he can do you an omelette or something.'

'Please don't go to any...,'

Tanya carried on throwing books and papers into her satchel. I began to wonder if she was taking advantage of her lunch break to move offices. ‘Debsie, darling, have a word with Felicity on the way out will you, my love and get her to ring Maurice and make sure, absolutely double certain sure, that he can do an omelette. Tell her to make sure he understands that it is for a very important author, won’t you?’

Deborah hurried off to have a word with Felicity.

‘Debsie is an absolutely angel. She’s a fiend in the office and can be quite utterly ruthless with some of these self-important media types but she’s such a sweetie really. She’s been with us for nearly a week now and I can’t imagine how we ever managed without her.’

‘Where was she before she came here?’ I asked. I was surprised to hear myself finish a sentence.

‘Rodean, darling,’ said Tanya.

‘Rodean?’

‘School! You know, hockey sticks, blue knickers and all that...!’ Tanya giggled. ‘Come on, we’ll be late for lunch and Maurice will never, ever forgive me!’

I went to lunch slightly chastened by the thought that the publicity expert who was looking after my book had slightly less than a week’s experience behind her. As we walked along the corridor back to where my still damp coat and hat were waiting we passed another open door and another small office wherein three more teenage girls were busy being charming on the telephone.

‘That’s Jacantha, Arabella and Fiona,’ said Tanya, stopping in the doorway and whispering to me. ‘They all work with Imogen. She’s one of our other executive directors.’ ‘This is one of our authors,’ whispered Tanya to the three teenagers. ‘He’s just walked from Devon in a thunderstorm! Isn’t he an absolute wonder?’ The three girls all smiled at me and waved their pens.

* * *

‘Now I absolutely don’t want you to take this the wrong way,’ said Tanya as she signed the credit slip for lunch. ‘But do you have another jacket?’

I was still coming to terms with the fact that I’d been bought a meal by a woman. I looked down at my jacket and brushed at a blue ink stain on the lapel. ‘Is there something wrong with it?’

‘Not in the slightest,’ said Tanya, a little too quickly. ‘It’s an absolutely splendid jacket. Isn’t it, Debsie?’

Deborah agreed that it was, indeed, an absolutely splendid jacket.

I put my hand over the leather patch on my left elbow. It had been loose for rather a long time but I hadn’t got round to getting it put back on properly.

‘But I’m not sure that it’s going to give you the image we’re searching for!’ Tanya continued. ‘It’s an absolutely lovely jacket for the country - on the moors in Devon and so on - but we want you to have a certain, what’s the word I’m looking for...,’ she paused. ‘Gravitas!’ she added explosively.

‘I don’t actually...,’ I began.

‘Charcoal with a pale blue shirt and a dark tie,’ suggested Tanya. ‘Some people still have black and white sets and blue looks a really bright white on a black and white set.’

‘Oh.’

‘And maybe it would be possible to get a little something done with the hair?’

‘The hair?’

‘It’s lovely hair. Really lovely, isn’t it, Debsie?’

‘It is,’ agreed Deborah rather too vehemently. I looked at her, surprised. She blushed at her own over enthusiasm and looked down as a waiter whisked away the remains of her traditional veal and lamb pie and my Italian herb omelette, Iberian sun dried tomatoes and French field mushrooms.

‘But...,’ sighed Tanya, shaking her head, ‘...and I know that Hugo would be the first to agree with me on this... if you could have it cut a little shorter.’

‘Hugo?’ I couldn’t think of anyone called Hugo.

‘Yes, Hugo. He gets his hair cut twice a week!’

‘Hugo?’ I still didn’t know who she was talking about.

‘You know... you met him in his office... Hugo Leytonstone.’

‘Ah, yes.’ I remembered. I tried to picture Hugo Leytonstone. He had, I felt quite sure, been more or less completely bald.

‘Isn’t he, er, bald?’ I asked, rather undiplomatically.

‘Only on the top of his head,’ said Tanya, rather sternly. Hugo’s lack of hair was clearly not a suitable topic for conversation. ‘He has quite a luxurious growth around the back and the sides and he says that the less you’ve got the more care you need to take of it.’

I automatically brushed my fingers through my hair. There did seem quite a lot of it. I tried to remember when I had last had it cut but couldn’t.

‘I’m afraid I haven’t got a suit,’ I said.

‘Oh,’ said Tanya, clearly rather stunned by this confession. ‘Well, just wear something sober. Try not to wear anything too flashy - it’ll make you look like a game show host on television and no one will take you seriously.’

‘I’m afraid this is the only jacket I’ve got,’ I said. ‘I don’t own a suit. And I don’t think I can afford one. I’ve just bought a rather old house. Besides, there doesn’t seem an awful lot of point in buying another jacket when I’ve got this one.’

Tanya looked at Deborah and Deborah stared back at Tanya.

‘Don’t tease me,’ said Tanya.

‘I’m not,’ I said. I examined the jacket again. ‘It was new when I bought it,’ I said rather defensively.

‘Well, I’m sure it will be fine,’ smiled Tanya.

‘It’s Harris Tweed,’ I continued. I opened the jacket and showed her the label. ‘I remember the salesman saying that it was the sort of jacket that would last a lifetime. The buttons are genuine...,’ I examined the one on my left cuff carefully but couldn’t work out what it was made of and couldn’t remember what the salesman had said it was made of, ‘well, I’m not entirely sure what they are but they’re genuine, anyway.’

‘I’m sure they are,’ said Tanya.

I wondered if there was going to be anything else. There was.

‘And you need to push yourself forward a little more,’ said Tanya. ‘You don’t mind me telling you these things, do you?’

I shook my head.

'That's good,' Tanya smiled. 'I'm just keen to help you promote your book successfully. Some of the interviewers you meet will be quite tough with you but you mustn't take it personally.'

'Er, no,' I said, thinking that writing books seemed a lot easier than promoting them. I had, rather naively imagined that I could leave the selling of the book to the professionals.

'Will it be all right if I'm assertive?' I asked, rather diffidently. 'I don't want to appear pushy or arrogant.'

Tanya nodded furiously, and handed the signed slip and her credit card to a waiter. 'Absolutely, darling!'

'O.K.,' I said, with a slight shrug. 'I'll try to be more assertive.' I paused and looked at first Deborah and then Tanya. 'If you're sure that will be all right,' I added. I paused, smiled and looked at them both in turn. 'Anyway,' I said with a brave attempt at confidence, 'It's surely what I say that really matters - not how I say it or what I look like!'

Tanya smiled at me and I knew from the way that she smiled that I had said something stupid. That smile said volumes. 'Television is all about image,' she told me kindly. 'Hugo always says that perception is far more important than reality and that reality and substance have very little to do with anything on television and are of very little consequence.'

I suppose I should have thought of something sharp and witty to say but I couldn't and I didn't. Some people complain that they always think of their bon mots and acerbic responses seconds too late. I envy them. At least they can replay their conversations in their mind and imagine themselves handing out a suitably reproving put down. Only rarely can I think of the right thing to say; even months later I tend to feel deflated and noticeably inconsequential when I have been thoroughly patronised.

* * *

'Deborah will ring you as soon as we've got things firmed up a bit more,' promised Tanya, as the three of us stood on the pavement outside Le Dejeuner Sur L'Herbe. She wore a thin summer raincoat and shivered in the cold. 'We've got to rush back to the office to do some more frantic telephoning on your behalf but it's been absolutely, wonderfully marvellous to meet you!' She stood on tiptoe, put her arm around the back of my head, pulled my face down to her and kissed me several times on both cheeks.

'It's been a real thrill,' said Deborah. She too stood on tiptoe and kissed my cheeks. She wore no coat at all and was shivering even more violently than Tanya.

'Oh, one more thing - send us a photograph of yourself!' instructed Tanya, as she edged away. 'If you haven't got one then get one taken.'

'Right,' I said.

'Bye!' they both cried, hurrying off back to their offices to tell the editors of Motoring Weekly, Gardening Today and the Leamington Spa Review just why they had to include a review of my book. The rain had more or less stopped and Deborah's impractical, summery sandals clip clopped furiously on the hard, wet London pavement as she struggled to keep up with Tanya's furious pace.

I looked around to see if anyone was staring at me. I'd never been kissed so many times by women I hardly knew. It was, I supposed, one of the small perks or penalties of being a modest, new entrant to the world of show business. No one seemed to be staring so, pulling my coat collar up against the light London breeze, I walked briskly back across London to Paddington. After four hours I'd had quite enough of life in the big city and was keen to get back to the sharper winds and narrow lanes of Bilbury just as quickly as I could.

On the way back to the railway station I narrowly avoided being run over on two occasions. Each time it was my fault for I was quite mesmerised by the traffic. In London the roads are wide enough for the traffic to travel in at least two directions. In Bilbury the lanes are all so narrow that if two vehicles approach one another from opposite directions then one of them will have to reverse.

When I finally got back to Bilbury that evening Patsy reported that we had frogspawn both in the lake and in our ponds and that Sophie had caught a vole. Through the window I noticed that a single, glorious, impertinent primrose had appeared to add a dash of yellow to the carpet of snowdrops in the shrubbery. It was good to get back to the real world.

* * *

CHAPTER EIGHT

Patsy and I were having quite a struggle to make ends meet without my income from the practice. Repairing the structure of Bilbury Grange had taken all the money we had borrowed from the bank and keeping up the repayments on the mortgage wasn't easy without a regular income. I earned £40 a week for writing my newspaper column and although I still hadn't received the cheque I had another £250 due on the publication of my book. In addition I was managing to earn something (but not much) by writing articles and stories for magazines and newspapers. Patsy was bringing in small and irregular sums of money by buying books at auctions and selling them to a dealer in London but with Miss Hargreaves living in the stable flat we wouldn't be able to earn an income by letting it out to holiday-makers.

We were toying with the idea of having paying guests in the house during the summer months and I had started to make discreet enquiries about finding some locum work in the area. Most of the medical practices in Devon have more work to do in the summer months when the local population is dramatically increased by an influx of holiday-makers and so I was hoping to find a niche where I might earn a regular income by doing a few surgeries every week. In the end, however, we didn't take guests in and I didn't get a job doctoring.

Surprisingly, perhaps, being broke never really worried either of us. We both loved Bilbury Grange but we both had faith in fate and we believed that something would turn up. Besides, worrying wasn't going to change anything - other than to make us miserable as well as poor!

Meanwhile, being poor did have one big advantage: it meant that since we had to ration the number of times we used our car (both because we didn't have the money to spend on petrol and because the more we used it the more likely it would be to wear out and break down) we had taken to using our bicycles; old but extremely sturdy machines which we had bought from the lost property office at the local police station. As a result we had discovered footpaths and bridlepaths that even Patsy, who had spent all her life living in the area, didn't know about.

After my London meeting with Tanya and the other publicity people I had not arrived back in Bilbury until late. Although I had spent at least six hours of the day sitting down on the train I had felt exhausted by the time I finally slipped off my shoes and climbed the stairs to wash the grime and smell of London away. I comforted myself after my adventure in the city with the promise that I would go for a bicycle ride around Holdstone Down the following morning. Patsy who had fallen down the cellar steps and banged her knee said that if I didn't mind she would stay at home.

* * *

As Patsy had reported the lake and all our ponds were full of frogspawn, always a sign to me that spring can't be far away. The wind, which seemed to have been howling for ever, had miraculously died down and although the sun wasn't shining the grey of the winter sky had acquired a hint of blue. Most important of all it wasn't raining! I put on my old jeans and the thick, oily sweater which Patsy's mother had knitted and felt far more comfortable than I had while wearing my flannels and sports jacket.

While I checked my bicycle, making sure that the chain was tight and the tyres fully inflated, Patsy made a packet of sandwiches, wrapped in greaseproof paper, and then packed the sandwiches, a banana, an apple and two rock cakes into a brown paper bag (Peter at the local village shop still uses old fashioned brown grocery bags and refuses to have anything at all to do with bags made of plastic, though I suspect this is more because he has a large cache of old fashioned paper bags rather than because of any matter of principle or environmental concern).

Patsy also filled a thermos flask with hot, home-made vegetable soup. Patsy's soup is the mainstay of our diet: its contents vary with the seasons and the stores in our cellar and outhouses but everything in the soup is grown in the Bilbury Grange garden.

With the picnic safely packed away in my saddlebag I set off for the sea with Ben bounding along beside me as excited as a puppy! Sophie and Emily would have come too if I hadn't set off quite so quickly; they both ran after me for a few yards as I cycled down the drive. When I looked back they were sitting in the middle of the driveway staring after us like two children who’ve been told that they can’t go to the party.

From Bilbury I rode across Kentisbury Down until I met the main road from Blackmoor Gate to Combe Martin. I turned left at the main road, rode down Silkenworthy Knap and turned right at Waytown, pedalling down the lane past Truckham Farm.

When I got to Stony Corner I took a right hand turning to Trentishoe and Heddon’s Mouth. The route is undulating but beautiful, rich with hidden promises, and bordered by thick hedgerows. My bicycle, built and geared for flat suburban roads and city thoroughfares, creaked and complained as I forced the pedals round. Ben, unhindered by sprocket or crankcase, pounded along ahead of me apparently tirelessly; stopping every hundred yards or so as though to say ‘What’s keeping you? Hurry up!’ and then bounding back towards me in a flurry of flying paws; her tongue dangling from the corner of her mouth and her tail high with excitement.

Holdstone Down is a beautiful, windblown, rockstrewn piece of moorland covered in tight, scrubby heather and gorse. It is aptly named for the wind blows so fiercely along the cliffs that not even rocks are safe here. In summer its undulating contours are covered in purple and yellow and it looks like a giant five day old bruise. Half a dozen stunted, bent over, scrubby trees struggle to survive and it is easy to see which way the wind usually blows from their bizarre shapes. Higher up there is nothing over a foot tall and the ground is scorched by searing, salt laden winds which blow almost endlessly from the south west. Small, hardy sheep, their coats ragged from the wind and the gorse, struggle to find enough to eat and the few patches of grass are eaten almost down to the bare earth. Across the Bristol Channel lies the coast of Wales. During the winter the coast is usually only dimly visible through the mist which so often lies across the channel. The coastline is at its most beautiful late on a summer evening when the Welsh lights shine and flicker like a valuable necklace laid out on the horizon.

In summer the sea between Devon and Wales is dotted with fishing boats, yachts and pleasure craft. Holiday-makers try sea fishing for the first and only time in their lives. Brave yachtsmen dart along the coast, hopping from one small port to the next and, if they are sensible, listening regularly to the weather forecast for even in summer the conditions can change quickly and a friendly, warm blue mill pond sea can become a fierce and unmistakeably unfriendly monster.

In the winter it is difficult to believe that this is the same stretch of water. Whipped into a constant frenzy by the wind there is more white than grey and mountainous waves crash down onto the jagged rocks, creating towers of spray and filling every tiny inlet with thick, creamy foam.

If you tried to sell this land for farming you would get only pennies for it. But if you measure land by its beauty then this is territory that, inch for inch, matches the value of the Mona Lisa.

The path which stretches, sometimes precariously, often spectacularly and always unpredictably, along the coast of North Devon runs around the foot of Holdstone Down. In summer the wide grassy footpath is alive with walkers for people come from all over the country to tread this path. They come in many different sizes and shapes; women in their fifties in shorts and stout boots with maps strung around their necks, men in breeks or plus twos wearing thick socks and brogues and carrying tiny rucksacks; young hikers led by earnest, bearded school masters or scout troop leaders and lone adventurers carrying their tiny tents and neatly packed supplies on their backs. But in winter the footpath is deserted. No one wants to walk this desolate route in the cold and savage months between October and April.

I turned left onto the coast path just before the lane veered down and to the right. From here, high up above the sea, the view along the cliffs is breathtaking. The lane heads down towards the village of Trentishoe, where the church of that name nestles comfortably in a cleft in the hills, and then twists sharply down a steep hill to Hunter’s Inn and to Heddon’s Mouth Cleave, a spectacular river valley which leads down to the tiny bay of Heddon’s Mouth. Huge puddles lay across the path heading west towards Blackstone Point and Combe Martin and my bicycle left tyre tracks in the occasional patches of soft, sodden earth; not that I was despoiling virginal countryside for someone, probably a farmer fetching a dead or injured sheep, had driven a Land Rover along the path and had left deep ruts behind. Most of the path had, however, long since been worn down to rock and the puddles lay on the top. Ben, a little slower now, jogged happily along beside me; politely and professionally ignoring the attractions of the grazing sheep and rabbits scattered around on either side of the path.

Pleasantly wearied by my ride along the lane I free wheeled down the path, bumping and jolting my way around Holdstone Down, frequently having to take avoiding action in order to steer around particularly large rocks or potholes and constantly having to brake in order to stop my machines running away with me. I thought once or twice of the over-enthusiastic Tanya and Deborah and the others beavering away in their tiny, claustrophobic offices in London and felt myself fervently hoping that I would never have to leave Bilbury to work in a town or city. I felt at home in North Devon; comfortable, safe and at peace.

I rode my bicycle around Holdstone Down until I reached the path leading down into the tiny valley of Sherrycombe; a hidden, deep gorge where a clear, fast flowing stream bubbles and gurgles over a rocky bed. The path there is far too steep to ride down and so after I had taken the bag containing the food supplies from my saddlebag I pushed my bicycle underneath a bush to protect it in case it rained (I had no fear of my bicycle being stolen - in winter you could safely leave a well-stuffed wallet on Holdstone Down and go back and collect it a week later) and, much to Ben's obvious delight, continued down the hill on foot.

I ate my picnic sitting on a rock by the stream; sharing my sandwiches with Ben and a friendly robin. It was surprisingly warm in the valley. I was tucked away between rocks and trees and although I could hear the wind howling above me I could neither feel it nor see any evidence of its presence. All the really enjoyable meals I have ever eaten have been consumed out of doors. I have never been much of an enthusiast for starched linen tablecloths, obsequious waiters or restaurants where men in bow ties, oozing false bonhomie, charge fancy prices for undersized portions of overcooked food. I would be happy never to eat again in a restaurant where diners snap fingers, ties are essential items of apparel and everything on the menu is handwritten in French. Few meals could ever provide me with as much pleasure as a bagful of sandwiches and a piece of fruit eaten out of doors. I have eaten - and enjoyed - picnics in howling gales and the pouring rain and though I enjoy outdoor dining best when the weather is clement I must have an ounce or so of adventurer's blood flowing through my veins for I would turn down an invitation to dinner in the smartest restaurant in London for a chance to sit on wet grass and eat squashed cucumber sandwiches.

* * *

Since the age of four, when I first learned how to read, I have rarely moved anywhere without a book (or sometimes two) in my pocket. When I had finished my lunch I took out my by now rather battered paperback copy of Henry David Thoreau's 'Walden'.

Thoreau is without doubt my favourite philosopher; simple, honest and unpretentious and yet infinitely wiser than many more austere and apparently more intellectual philosophers. The kindness and compassion pours from his pen and I have always found his wonderfully anarchic distaste for bureaucracy and government, tempered as it is by genuine, heartfelt concern for the rights and responsibilities of both men and animals, truly inspirational.

Thoreau abandoned society for a while and lived in a rough cottage by the side of Walden Pond. He believed that 'the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation' and argued that man's desperation is often born of the consequences of his desire to accumulate material possessions which he doesn't really need. I sat there, half dozing, and thought of some of the friends I'd had at medical school. As students they had worked long, hard hours but they had enjoyed life too and although their hours were full they had enjoyed a real sense of freedom. Their lives had been structured but despite the structure there had been freedom. Without exception they had all changed, almost beyond recognition. A few months earlier I had attended a reunion dinner and had hardly recognised any of my former friends. The men all wore suits and looked very earnest and respectable. The women all wore sensible shoes and carried sensible handbags. The system had pulled them in and sucked them dry.

The truth, I realised, is that most people are dead at twenty five: their ambitions, hopes and aspirations confined to acquiring a car with 'genuine' vinyl seats and a fully paid up pension plan. They won't be buried for another half a century but they are doing little more than killing time until life runs out. They watch life drift by; never grasping their destiny or taking control.

I realised then, with genuine sadness, that most of my former friends were doing jobs that they hated - but excusing themselves by arguing that they needed the money to pay for the things with which they had littered their lives. I wondered how many of those possessions -paid for with blood, sweat and tears - were worth the price they had paid.

I thought of people I knew who had sold their souls so that they could receive a pension in their old age. One friend had taken a job with a drug company, although he had always professed to despise the industry. When I gently chided him about his dreams he replied: 'I'll have plenty of time and money to enjoy myself when I retire.'

The truth is that we only get one chance at living. We should not sell our bodies, souls or minds so that we can buy an ice cream maker, a timeshare apartment in Marbella or a three piece suite in mushroom velour. I swore there and then that I would not make the mistake of wasting my life on low expectations. I would not let my possessions own me or direct my life. I would take some chances and accept the consequences.

Three days earlier I had received a telephone call from one of the consultants I had worked for in hospital. He had been sent an advance copy of my book to read and, through kindness and genuine concern for my welfare, had rung me to ask me not to publish it.

'It will wreck your career,' he had warned me. 'You'll never be able to get a decent job in medicine.'

He had explained that the medical establishment didn't like people who rocked the boat or who spoke out in public about injustices or irregularities. 'These things are best dealt with within the profession,' he had told me. 'There is no need to worry patients with all this sort of nonsense.'

I had thanked him for his call, told him that I appreciated his concern and promised to think about it. I think he meant well. I think he really believed that the men in pinstripe suits and old school ties really did know best.

I had thought about what he had said. But not for long. I felt that my book, which denounced the close links between the medical profession and the pharmaceutical industry, and which named a number of prescription drugs which confidential papers I had unearthed had shown to be far more dangerous than the manufacturers had admitted, deserved to have its chance. I had conceived, nurtured and given birth to it and I did not feel that I now had the right to destroy it.

And what, in truth, had I got to lose? Maybe, in a strange

way, I was lucky in that I no longer seemed to have a career to worry about. I had abandoned the chance to work in hospital to work as a general practitioner. But then, through a mixture of my own bloody-mindedness and sheer misfortune over which I had no control, I had lost my practice.

Many of my former student colleagues now seemed afraid. But I didn't really understand what they were afraid of. I knew that they had dreams when they were students. We had shared our dreams in those late night conversations; sitting at one of the Formica-topped tables in the hospital canteen. But their dreams had been buried, pushed deep down out of sight. And I felt far sorrier for them, with no dreams, no independence and no pride, than I did for myself, with no career and no future in medicine. I was merely giving up a place on the ladder. In order to retain their places on the ladder they had given up their dreams. I still had my dreams. I still wanted to change the world. It seemed to me that I had come off best.

Lying on the soft, sheep shorn grass by the side of the stream I read another chapter of Henry David Thoreau's masterpiece and then, as the weak rays of early spring sunshine faded away, I gathered up my sandwich wrappings and started back up the hill towards the spot where Ihad left my bicycle. And then, with Ben bouncing along beside me, I pedalled back home.

***

While I had been refreshing my spirit, battered and dented by a day in London, the telephone at Bilbury Grange had apparently been ringing incessantly. Tanya had rung three times and a man called Reynolds from a television programme called 'Alive and How!' had telephoned twice. Peter Marshall, never a man to waste money on making two telephone calls when one would do, had left one message.

'Did any of them say what they wanted?' I asked Patsy, who was surrounded by mounds of fresh vegetables.

'Tanya said it was vital that you rang her the moment you came in and wanted to know why you didn't have a bleeper.'

‘I used to have a bleeper when I worked in hospital,’ I said. ‘Why would I want to take a bleeper with me to Holdstone Down?’

‘Well Tanya seemed to think you ought to have one so that she could get in touch with you.’

This didn’t seem to make any sense to me. I’d gone to Holdstone Down to recover from going to London to see Tanya. ‘I’ll ring her later,’ I said. ‘I’ll ring Peter Marshall first.’

‘He said it wasn’t urgent,’ said Patsy. She finished scraping the carrot and tossed it into a bowl.

‘What are you making?’

‘A vegetable pie.’

‘Great!’ Patsy makes a terrific vegetable pie. ‘Are we expecting someone to dinner?’ I asked. She seemed to be making a larger than usual pie. One of Patsy’s ordinary pies would feed six. This pie looked as though it would feed at least a dozen. She was making it in a gigantic dish which I had never seen before.

‘I invited Miss Hargreaves round for a meal,’ said Patsy. ‘She popped in this morning to see if I wanted anything bringing from the shop and we got talking and I felt that she was probably a bit lonely so I invited her round.’

‘That’s nice. I like Miss Hargreaves. She’s got a terrific library, you know. Where did you get that pie dish from?’

‘I found it in the cellar. Is that what was in all those cardboard boxes we brought round from her cottage?’

‘What?’

‘Books.’

‘Yes. She’s sweet. She keeps all the male authors in the bookcase in the living room and the female authors in the bookcase in the bedroom.’

‘She doesn’t!’

‘She does.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘Because I helped her unpack and I asked her if the books had to go anywhere in particular and she told me.’

‘That she keeps her books segregated by the authors’ sex?’

‘Yes.’

Patsy giggled.

‘I think she’s worried that if she lets Daphne du Maurier and Charles Dickens get together there could be trouble,’ I explained.

The telephone rang.

‘That’ll be Tanya!’ said Patsy. ‘And I invited Mr Parfitt too,’ she added.

Brrr Brrr.

‘To dinner?’

‘Yes.’

Brrr Brrr.

Mr Parfitt was the pixie. Our gardener.

‘Do you think they’ll get on?’

Brrr Brrr.

‘Miss Hargreaves and Mr Parfitt?’

Brrr Brrr.

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t know. Why shouldn’t they?’

Brrr Brrr.

‘I don’t know.’ I shrugged. ‘I’ll answer the telephone.’

I went into the hall and picked up the telephone.

‘Tanya here,’ said a voice I recognised instantly. ‘Thank heavens I’ve found you!’ said Tanya. ‘Are you all right?’

‘Yes, of course,’ I said. ‘Why shouldn’t I be?’

‘Your wife said you were riding your bicycle on the cliffs!’

‘Yes, that’s right.’

‘We were terribly worried that you might have an accident. When no one answered the telephone I was terrified that you’d fallen off.’

‘What - the bicycle or the cliffs?’

‘Oh, don’t joke about it!’ said Tanya. ‘You mustn’t take any risks! We’ve got a tremendous amount of exposure planned for you.’ She sounded genuinely concerned.

‘I’ll take care.’ I thought I was probably much safer riding my bicycle around Holdstone Down than I would have been walking through London.

‘Good,’ she said. She still sounded worried. ‘You’ll be getting a telephone call from Simon Reynolds.’

‘He’s already rung.’

‘Oh no! And you were out!’

‘Yes. I was riding my bicycle on the cliffs.’

‘Oh dear. Never mind. I’ll get a message to him to let him know that you’re in now. You’re not going anywhere, are you?’

‘Not that I know of. Who is he?’

‘Who?’

‘This Reynolds fellow.’

‘Simon Reynolds?’

‘Yes.’

‘Haven’t you heard of him?’

‘No.’

‘He’s one of the producers of ‘Alive and How!’ - he’s married to Celeste Peters.’

‘Who?’

‘Simon, of course.’

‘No, who did you say he was married to?’

‘Celeste Peters.’

‘Is she a singer?’ I asked. I thought I might have heard of her.

‘She reads the weather on television.’

‘Oh.’ I hadn’t heard of her. ‘I think I must have got her confused with someone else. Isn’t there a singer called Celeste something?’

‘Celeste Bartholomew?’

‘That’s it!’

‘She’s an American jazz singer. I think she’s around seventy years old.’

‘I used to have one of her records. She sang with Duke Ellington.’

‘Probably.’ said Tanya, rather impatiently. ‘But Celeste Peters is a big star. She opened three supermarkets last month.’

‘Ah,’ I said. ‘And she’s married to Simon...’,

‘... Reynolds. That’s right. She’s married to Simon Reynolds. And Simon Reynolds rang you because he absolutely adored your book and he wants you to appear on ‘Alive and How!’!’

‘Oh, good.’

‘If I put the telephone down do you promise not to go anywhere?’

‘Yes.’

‘Really promise?’

‘Yes.’

‘O.K. So I’ll put the telephone down and ring Simon and tell him that you’re at home waiting for his call.’

‘Fine,’ I said. I thought that while I was waiting for Simon to call I would find out what Peter Marshall wanted. I put the telephone down, picked it up again and dialled Peter’s number. Or, rather, I was about to dial Peter Marshall’s number when the telephone startled me by ringing again. I picked up the receiver.

‘Hello,’ said a girl’s voice. ‘Mr Simon Reynolds is calling you. Please hold the line.’

I started to say ‘thank you’ but she had gone. I stood there in the hallway for what seemed an eternity but no one came onto the line so I put down the receiver and headed back for the kitchen. I was still several paces short of my destination when the telephone started to ring. I turned round, walked back and picked it up again.

‘Hello,’ said the girl again. ‘Mr Simon Reynolds is calling you. Please hold the line.’ She sounded rather cross and put great emphasis on the last sentence.

‘Hello,’ said a male voice a moment or two later. ‘I’ve just been talking to Tanya about you. It’s a great honour to speak to you, sir.’ He didn’t sound as though he was taking the mickey so I muttered something polite about the honour being mutual.

‘I believe that Tanya told you about our little show,’ he said. I confirmed that she had.

‘And we’re all absolutely thrilled that you’re prepared to come on and talk to Vivienne about your book.’

‘Vivienne?’

There was a silence at the other end of the telephone line. ‘Vivienne Nugent,’ said Simon, as though he felt sure that he was simply jogging my slightly addled memory. ‘Our presenter!’

‘Of course,’ I said. I had never heard of Vivienne Nugent.

‘It’s a wonderful, wonderful book,’ said Simon enthusiastically. ‘I’m sure it’s going to be an enormous bestseller and earn you millions.’

Enthusiastic as I was about my book I thought that this was probably a little over the top. Even I suspected that the market for an earnest polemic about prescription drugs might be severely limited. But it was my first book and I wasn’t blasé enough about the experience of publication lightly to dismiss such enthusiastic praise.

‘That’s very kind of you,’ I said.

‘I know that Vivienne is just as excited as I am,’ said Simon. ‘She can’t stop talking about your book! She’s a real fan!’ I had never heard anyone sound quite so full of enthusiasm.

I didn’t really know what to say to this so I said nothing.

‘We’d like to have you on the show on Friday,’ said Simon, positively bubbling. ‘We’ll send a car for you, of course!’

‘Friday?’ I said, surprised. ‘This Friday?’ Friday was only two days away.

‘We’ll have a car pick you up at six. You should be with us by ten. That’ll give you time to meet Vivienne, go into make-up, have some breakfast and relax a little before the show.’

‘Er... what time is the programme?’ I asked, more because I couldn’t think of anything else to say than because I particularly wanted to know. I was beginning to get cold feet and wondered if there was any way that I could get out of appearing on the programme.

‘We go on air at two and we’ll probably put you in the first segment of the show,’ said Simon. ‘Which name do we use when we talk to you on air?’ he asked. ‘The one on the book jacket, I guess!’

‘Yes,’ I replied, puzzled. I started to say that I didn’t have any other names but Simon wasn’t listening. ‘I’ll go and tell someone to order the car to collect you,’ he said. ‘What’s your address?’

‘Bilbury Grange, Bilbury, North Devon,’ I told him. ‘But I’m not...,’ I began.

‘Wonderful!’ said Simon. ‘Absolutely marvellous. One of our cars will pick you at six a.m. on Friday!’

And before I could say anything else he put the telephone down.

It rang again immediately.

‘Have you spoken to Simon?’ demanded Tanya.

I said that I had and that Simon had invited me to appear on his programme in two days time.

‘Oh that’s fantastic!’ said Tanya. ‘Absolutely terrific. Isn’t he a wonderful man?’

‘I don’t...,’ I began.

‘Are they sending a car for you?’

‘Yes, b-b-b-but...,’I stuttered.

‘I’ll get Debs to meet you at the studios,’ promised Tanya, ‘just to make sure that you’re O.K. Marvellous, marvellous news, darling! I’m so thrilled. I’ll speak to you later.’

I thought I ought to return Peter Marshall’s call quickly before anything else happened. I dialled his number and waited. Unlike most of us Peter never allows the telephone to interrupt him but insists that it should take its place in the queue for his attention. If he is serving a customer and the telephone rings he won’t answer the call until he has dealt with all the customers who were in the shop before the telephone started ringing - and since he never hurries any of his customers this can take quite a while. His attitude is that whereas the customer standing in the shop is almost certainly going to spend money the caller on the other end of the telephone may not even be a customer at all.

‘Are you all right?’ asked Patsy coming out of the kitchen a few minutes later.

I put my hand over the telephone mouthpiece, though there was no need for this since the telephone was still ringing, and explained that I was calling Peter Marshall at the village shop.

‘Ah,’ said Patsy, with a knowing nod. ‘Would you like a cup of tea and a rock cake?’

I said I would. I had drunk the tea and eaten the rock cake when Peter finally picked up the receiver.

‘I think all the houses round the village green should be painted,’ said Peter when he recognised my voice. ‘We must make sure that the village looks smart for the Revels.’

‘That’s a good idea!’ I agreed. ‘But do you think we’ll be able to get people to agree? Some of the villagers living round the green might not be able to afford to get their cottages repainted.’

‘I’d thought of that,’ said Peter. ‘So I think the committee should pay for the paint.’

‘But the committee hasn’t got any money!’ I pointed out. ‘And it won’t have any money until the Revels are over!’

‘That’s all right,’ said Peter, cheerfully. ‘I’ll let the committee have the paint on account. It can pay me when it has some money.’

I told Peter that I thought that would be fine. Foolishly I forgot to ask him the colour of the paint of which he had such large quantities in stock.

* * *

CHAPTER NINE

I'd had to pop into Barnstaple to take a copy of a lengthy article I'd written to the main post office and by the time I got back to Bilbury Grange both our dinner guests had arrived. I found Miss Hargreaves, Mr Parfitt and Patsy all sitting in the living room, each clutching a glass of the parsnip wine that Patsy's uncle had made three years earlier. Emily and Sophie were both curled up on Patsy's lap and Ben, who I had left behind, was curled up on the rug in front of the log fire.

Not having been lived in for a long time Bilbury Grange had been in terrible condition when we had bought it and Patsy and I had decided that we had to concentrate first of all on mending the roof and replacing the rotten windowframes. Repairing the fabric of Bilbury Grange had taken all our money, most of our time and much of our energy and there had been little of any of these left to spend on decorating or furnishing the inside of the house.

We had, however, managed to buy a huge quantity of cheap white paint from Peter Marshall and with Thumper's help we had decorated all the downstairs rooms, the staircase and several rooms on the first floor. We had furnished the house by attending auctions and buying the cheap reproduction furniture that is always left over when the dealers and collectors have taken their pick and bid against one another for the real antiques.

As I entered the living room and looked around I couldn't help thinking how homely and inviting the room looked. Our plain white walls and simple, cheap and slightly battered furniture wouldn't have won any plaudits from smart interior designers with expensive tastes, and we weren't likely to find ourselves besieged by photographers working for smart monthly magazines, but the room looked lived in. Most important of all, perhaps, it looked a happy room.

The chintz covered sofa on which Patsy and Miss Hargreaves were sitting was designed to accommodate four large adults and we'd bought it for two pounds at a house auction in South Molton. It was far too large for a cottage or a modern house but looked very much at home in front of the fireplace. The springs weren't quite as firm as they once had been but most people who sat on it agreed that it was one of the most comfortable pieces of furniture they had ever come into contact with. The only snag with it was that it was so soft and squashy that levering yourself up out of it was sometimes a bit of a problem - particularly if you'd been sitting in front of a nice, cosy fire for a few hours and had drunk a glass or two of anything brewed locally.

Grouped on both sides of the sofa, also facing the fireplace, there were three huge armchairs. None of these matched the sofa and all had come from different auctions. The leather one had come from a house in Lynton, the green one from a hotel in Barnstaple and the dark brown one from a flat in Bideford. We couldn't afford to have any of the chairs recovered and so Patsy had strewn a dozen or more brightly coloured cushions around and had draped multi coloured shawls (found in a suitcase we'd bought at an auction in Hatherleigh) over the backs of the sofa and the chairs. The white painted walls were almost covered with old paintings, all bought for next to nothing, and above the fireplace hung a huge but slightly flawed mirror in a chipped, gilt frame. Apart from the flickering orange red light from the flaming beech logs in the fireplace the room was lit by two old fashioned, wooden-based standard lamps. The dark, gloomy night was shut out by a wall of red velvet drawn across the windows. The curtains, which had come from a hotel in Ilfracombe, had cost us £1 to buy and Patsy's mother had altered them by hand for us. Altogether we hadn't spent more than £30 on furnishing the entire room but because all the furniture was old the room looked as though it had been the way it was for half a century or more.

I kissed Patsy on the cheek, said 'good evening' to our two guests, apologised for being late, rubbed Ben's head, poured myself a glass of wine and filled up Mr Parfitt's glass. Miss Hargreaves put her hand over her still nearly full glass to make it clear that she didn't want any more and Patsy just smiled at me and gently shook her head to give me the same message.

'Have you two met before?' I asked our two guests. It wasn't just an attempt to break the ice but was a genuine question, inspired by curiosity.

'Sadly no,' said Mr Parfitt. He looked across at Miss Hargreaves and tentatively smiled.

Miss Hargreaves didn't reply but pursed her lips and shook her head.

‘Miss Hargreaves is the village schoolteacher,’ I explained to Mr Parfitt.

‘So I understand,’ said Mr Parfitt.

Miss Hargreaves glared at him. ‘Who’s been talking about me?’ she demanded, frostily.

‘Just someone in the pub,’ replied Mr Parfitt, going slightly red.

‘Hmm!’ said Miss Hargreaves tartly. She clearly disapproved of something though whether this was Mr Parfitt, people talking about her, the Duck and Puddle or all three it wasn’t quite clear.

There was a slightly uncomfortable silence for a moment. Mr Parfitt looked as though he was about to say something but then changed his mind. I thought I ought to try to defrost the atmosphere but I was too frightened of saying something that might lower the temperature still further to dare say anything at all.

‘I read your book,’ said Miss Hargreaves. I didn’t even know that she knew I’d written a book.

‘Ah,’ I said cautiously, not quite sure how to respond to that.

‘Is it selling well?’ she asked.

I hesitated. ‘Well not terribly well,’ I said. ‘It’s not a very commercial book.’

‘There have been some super reviews,’ said Patsy quickly.

‘So I gather,’ said Miss Hargreaves.

‘And The Guardian serialised it,’ added Patsy.

‘I’d like to read a copy,’ said Mr Parfitt.

‘I’ll lend you one,’ I said.

‘He can borrow mine,’ said Miss Hargreaves. ‘It’s a very courageous book,’ she said. She glared at Mr Parfitt. ‘But I want it back, mind you!’

‘Er, of course!’ said Mr Parfitt.

There was then another long silence which Patsy broke by carefully moving Sophie and Emily off her lap, putting them down on the sofa beside her and then standing up. ‘Dinner is ready so if you don’t mind I think we ought to eat before it spoils!’

We all politely murmured our readiness to eat and after I’d put up the huge brass fireguard (bought, together with a brass coal scuttle, a set of dog irons and a full set of brass hearth tools for £1 from an auction in Porlock) to protect the carpet (given to us free by an auctioneer in Combe Martin who was under strict instructions to make sure that he got rid of everything at a house clearance sale) we all followed Patsy into the kitchen.

We did have a dining room at Bilbury Grange (it was connected to the kitchen by a hatch in the wall) but we still didn’t have a dining table (we had nearly bought a massive old refectory table and eight matching chairs for £20 but then two dealers spotted the table and within minutes the price had gone up to £350) so we ate all our meals in the kitchen.

As soon as we were all sitting around the kitchen table Patsy served out large portions of tomato soup (made with fresh tomatoes and four different herbs) and put a basket full of home-made bread into the middle of the table.

* * *

‘Have you always been a gardener?’ Patsy asked Mr Parfitt.

Mr Parfitt, his mouth full of bread, shook his head. ‘No,’ he said, when he’d emptied his mouth. ‘Not exactly.’

‘Well, you’re very good at it!’ said Patsy.

‘Thank you,’ said Mr Parfitt. ‘I’ve always been interested in plants. Gardening has always been a love of mine.’

‘What did you do before you became a gardener?’ I asked him, innocently.

‘I worked in a bank,’ said Mr Parfitt.

Patsy and I both stared at him. He smiled back at us.

‘What did you do in the bank?’ asked Patsy.

‘Up until fairly recently I was in charge of the securities trading room,’ replied Mr Parfitt, rather unexpectedly. I would have been no more surprised if he had told me that he had been an astronaut, a bull fighter or a Minister of State.

I tried to lift my spoon out of my soup bowl and put it into my mouth but my muscles seemed to have frozen. Miss Hargreaves seemed neither impressed nor surprised by this revelation. She simply carried on sipping at her soup.

‘In London, I presume?’ I said, more to make sure that I could still speak than because I thought the comment was worth making.

‘Oh, yes,’ confirmed Mr Parfitt. He told us the name of the bank he used to work for. It was such a large and well known bank that even I recognised it immediately.

‘What, er, what took you into gardening?’ asked Patsy, hesitantly. ‘I mean, it seems quite a career change...’

Mr Parfitt grinned and shrugged. ‘I ran away,’ he said.

‘Oh,’ said Patsy, weakly. Miss Hargreaves reached out and plucked another piece of bread from the basket.

I went cold inside and wondered how much he had stolen, whether Patsy and I would be sent to prison for sheltering him and who would look after our animals.

‘Don’t look so worried,’ said Mr Parfitt, with a mischievous grin. ‘I didn’t empty the vault before I ran away!’ he told me, as though reading my mind.

‘Oh good heavens,’ I laughed weakly, but with considerable relief. ‘I never thought you did!’ I murmured, rather dishonestly.

‘I just woke up one morning and decided I’d had enough,’ said Mr Parfitt.

I wondered why I had automatically believed him when he’d told me that he hadn’t stolen anything. Would he have told me if he had? If he was a thief wasn’t there also a good chance that he would be a liar?

‘It must have been quite a big step to take,’ said Patsy.

Mr Parfitt shrugged as though the decision had been inevitable and out of his control.

‘Did you have a family?’ she asked him.

Mr Parfitt nodded.

Miss Hargreaves, apparently oblivious to all this and clearly not on a diet, took yet another piece of bread. I like to see people enjoy their food but I had never before seen anyone work up a sweat while eating.

‘A wife?’

Another nod.

‘Two children. Rodney, who is 21 and Polly who is 20,’ said Mr Parfitt.

‘Won’t they be worried?’

‘No,’ replied Mr Parfitt, simply. ‘We only had three cars so I expect they’re quite pleased I’ve gone,’ he explained.

‘Oh, surely not!’ said Patsy, horrified.

‘You don’t know my family,’ said Mr Parfitt. ‘When I first realised that I was wasting my life I talked to my wife and asked her if she’d stay with me if l gave up my job and started doing something I enjoyed. It would have meant selling the house and having a less expensive lifestyle but we would have had more time together.’ He paused. ‘Do you know what she said?’

No one said anything.

‘She said: ‘happiness isn’t everything’.’ said Mr Parfitt. He broke a small piece of bread into two and popped the smaller half into his mouth. He chewed slowly and then swallowed. ‘Anyway I sent them a couple of postcards so they know I’m still alive,’ he added.

‘That was thoughtful of you,’ said Patsy.

‘I didn’t want them having me declared officially dead,’ said Mr Parfitt, with disarming honesty.

‘Would you like some more soup, Miss Hargreaves?’ asked Patsy, suddenly noticing that our other guest had emptied her bowl.

‘I don’t mind if I do,’ said Miss Hargreaves.

Patsy stood up, brought the saucepan full of tomato soup from the stove where it had been kept warm, and replenished Miss Hargreaves’ bowl.

‘Would you like more bread?’ Patsy asked her.

‘If it’s not too much trouble,’ said Miss Hargreaves.

Patsy refilled the basket with hunks of bread.

‘Did you decide to leave suddenly or was it something you’d been planning for some time?’ I asked. I hesitated. ‘I’m sorry is that rude? I don’t mean to pry...’

Mr Parfitt waved a hand. ‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘I don’t mind talking about it.’ But he lifted his spoon and sipped at his soup before answering. ‘I suppose I had been thinking about it for a long time,’ he told me. ‘I don’t know when I first realised how dissatisfied I was with my life. The funny thing is that although we all think we have choices, and we think we control our own lives, we don’t, do we? Most of the time we allow ourselves to be led by destiny, by chance and by the ill thought out ambitions and prejudices of those around us.’

I felt myself warming to Mr Parfitt. His must, I knew, have been a difficult decision. I remembered what I’d been thinking about during my picnic on Holdstone Down.

‘But when it came to it everything happened quite suddenly. The government had just put a new range of gilts on the market and the dealing room was frantic. I was talking to half a dozen people at the same time and suddenly, for no reason, it occurred to me how pointless the whole thing was. I had my usual bad indigestion and the noise in the dealing room was giving me a headache. I was looking around thinking how much I hated my job - and always had - when my wife rang in an absolute panic to tell me that we had twelve people coming to dinner that night and that she had discovered that we only had ten matching ramekins. She said I had to go to Harrods immediately and either buy two to match the ones we already had or else buy a dozen new ones.’

Mr Parfitt looked around and shrugged, rather apologetically. ‘It probably sounds silly to you,’ he said. ‘But I just got up and walked out of the dealing room, left the bank and started walking away from the City. Then it started raining so I got on the first bus that came by and when the bus stopped at Paddington Station I got off the bus and got on a train. I got off at Exeter because I was hungry and there was no buffet car on the train and after I’d eaten a couple of sandwiches and drunk a cup of tea I caught the next train out which happened to be the train up to Barnstaple.’

‘How long ago was that?’

‘A month or so.’

‘Any regrets?’

Mr Parfitt shook his head.

‘When I first arrived down here I was a nervous wreck. I walked past a cottage on the edge of the village green and heard a telephone ringing. I instinctively found myself waiting for someone to open the window and tell me that the call was for me.’

‘Do you think you’ll go back?’

‘I don’t know. I haven’t even thought about it,’ said Mr Parfitt. He thought for a moment. ‘And I don’t want to think about it,’ he added, quite firmly.’ He looked around at each of us in turn, and smiled. ‘I’m happier and more content now than I can ever remember being before. I just want to take things day by day.’

‘That’s fine with us,’ said Patsy.

‘You stay as long as you like!’ I told him. ‘The garden has never looked as good!’

‘Thank you!’ said Mr Parfitt. ‘You know, it’s a real joy to have a job where you can see an end result, where every day brings a new challenge and where there is always something to look forward to tomorrow. And the wonderful thing is that when I finish for the day I stop thinking about work.’ Mr Parfitt looked around at us with a wonderful smile on his face. ‘I don’t worry about it!’ he said. ‘That’s the real luxury. I don’t worry because there isn’t any point in worrying. I can’t change the weather. I can’t control nature. When I worked at the bank I used to go home at night and carry on working in my study until one or two in the morning. And then I’d lie awake worrying about the decisions I’d made - wondering whether I’d thought of all the angles and worrying about whether someone else might have stitched me up. And telephoning people in Japan or America to see what was happening there.’

‘Now I live in a tiny room and I have virtually no possessions to speak of but I’m happier than when I lived in a massive house and had an expensive car. The snag with wealth and power is that if you have either or both then you’re always frightened of losing what you have - and losing what you think of as being the security that goes with them. If you have nothing then you have nothing to lose and so only then are you truly free. I knew some very rich people when I worked in London but they were among the least secure people I’ve ever met.’

We finished our soup and while Patsy served up her vegetable pie I opened a bottle of her father’s potent bilberry wine.

* * *

‘That was a lovely meal,’ I said, when our two visitors had gone and Patsy and I had washed up the dirty dishes.

‘Did you like the apple and blackberry pie?’

‘It was lovely!’

‘Not too tart?’

‘Not at all.’

‘I really admire Mr Parfitt, don’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘You don’t ever feel trapped do you?’

‘No, of course not. I don’t do anything I don’t want to do. I’m very lucky. How about you?’

‘What?’

‘Do you feel trapped?’

‘No! Of course not.’ Patsy paused. ‘If you ever thought that Bilbury Grange was too much of a burden and you wanted to sell it and live in a tiny cottage I’d be just as happy.’

‘I know,’ I said. ‘That’s one of the reasons why I love living here.’

* * *

CHAPTER TEN

The car sent by the television company arrived bang on time. By eight thirty a.m. we were the other side of Bristol, having breakfast at a motorway service station. I had egg on beans on toast while the driver, a short, overweight, taciturn man with terrible dandruff and a voracious appetite for boiled sweets (which he crunched all the way between Bilbury and Birmingham) ate a huge plate piled high with heart attack fodder: four slices of very fatty bacon, two huge fatty sausages, two eggs, and two slices of fried bread all floating on a small lake of grease. He washed all this down with two huge mugs of tea and finished off with two slices of thickly buttered toast upon which he spread a generous layer of marmalade. We then climbed back into the car and continued our journey north; finally arriving at the television studios at about the same time as the locally resident staff.

The driver handed a slip of paper to a uniformed man behind a desk who examined it carefully before picking up the telephone. After speaking to the person he'd called for a moment he told me that someone would be with me in a minute or two. The someone turned out to be a very businesslike young woman in a red trouser suit. 'Would you like some breakfast?' she asked me. She had very short blonde hair, carried a huge clipboard, had a pen and a stopwatch hanging around her neck and had introduced herself as Louise. She was, she said, a programme researcher, though she had advised me that this was just a temporary stepping stone and that she would soon be working as a fully-fledged producer on her own show. Impressed by her confidence I shared her lack of doubt in her ability to succeed.

I politely declined her offer of food, pointing out that I had eaten at a motorway service station and did not yet feel able to subject my stomach to any more excitement.

'Then I'll take you straight along to make up,' said Louise. 'Follow me!'

She scurried off along the corridor as though she was in training for a fast walking competition and I hurried along behind her, struggling hard to listen to the running commentary she was giving me. The media world seemed to be full of fast talking, fast walking young women. Eventually we stopped outside a door upon which there was a small sign bearing the words MAKE UP. Louise reached for the door handle but before she could grasp it the door flew open and a dozen waiters and waitresses streamed out past us. I was at first puzzled by this for I had not realised that even the catering staff had their make-up applied professionally when working at television studios. I was about to make some comment about this when Louise whispered something to me about feeling sure that I would recognise them as being from the 'Royal Hotel'.

'Where is the 'Royal Hotel'?' I asked, timidly, too confused by everything around me to think it odd that the staff of a hotel should be got ready for work by a television make-up department.

Louise sighed and looked at me as though I'd asked her if she knew the name of the occupant of Buckingham Palace. "Royal Hotel' is one of our top rated comedy dramas!'

I apologised, and tried to explain my ignorance by pointing out that I didn't get much time to watch television. Louise just tutted and walked through the now open door. I followed her into the make-up room and found myself standing between a huge pirate, complete with beard, eye patch and wooden leg and a young woman dressed as a fairy. They were having a row.

'I did warn you that I'd be late,' said the pirate, apologetically.

'You said you'd be a bit late,' corrected the fairy. 'I don't call three hours a bit late!'

'I had to go and get the car serviced.'

'Since when have they sold beer at the garage?' demanded the fairy, hands on hips. 'You stink of the stuff!'

'I took John to the 'Bear and Flagstaff' for a pint to thank him for getting me that job as a bar of soap,' said the pirate sheepishly.

‘Ha!’ snorted the fairy with a toss of her head. ‘You just wanted to drool over that trollop behind the bar!’

Underneath his make-up the pirate blushed. ‘Don’t be silly, Brenda!’ he whined. ‘You know I love you!’

The fairy glared at him and then smashed her wand over his head. The wand, made of silver painted balsa wood, broke into two pieces. ‘Now look what you’ve made me do!’ she said, angrily. The pirate bent down and picked up the two pieces of shattered wand.

‘Give those to me!’ snapped the fairy, close to tears.

‘Who’s next?’ demanded a cheery and attractive young woman in a pink overall. She had a powder puff in one hand and a pot of powder in the other. The name, Karena, was embroidered on the breast pocket of her overall.

Neither the pirate nor the fairy moved. They were both trying to fit the two pieces of the broken wand back together again.

‘I think that’ll be us, then!’ said Louise, pushing me forwards. She looked at her watch and wrote something down on her clipboard.

The make-up girl smiled at me and pointed to a chair. I sat down and she draped a white cloth around me, tucking the ends in at the back of my neck. ‘What are you here for?’ she asked me.

‘I’m appearing on...’ I began and suddenly realised that I had forgotten the name of the programme. ‘I’ve forgotten the name of the programme.’ I said, feeling rather foolish.

‘Alive and How!’ whispered Louise from behind me. She put a hand on my shoulder. ‘Don’t be nervous!’ she said. ‘You’ll be marvellous!’

‘I’m not nervous,’ I said. ‘I just couldn’t remember the name of the programme.’

‘What are you talking about?’ asked Karena, dabbing powder over my face.

‘I was just telling Louise that I couldn’t remember the name of the programme,’ I explained.

‘No. I mean what are you talking about on the programme?’ She did something around my eyes.

‘Ah, sorry. My book,’ I said.

‘Would you like to comb your hair?’

I felt in my pocket for a comb but couldn’t find one. ‘I don’t seem to have a comb,’ I said.

‘Would you like me to brush it for you?’

I said I would be grateful.

‘What’s your book about?’

‘Drugs and drug companies and doctors and... things,’ I said.

‘How interesting!’ said Karena. ‘My brother once smoked cannabis at a party in Fulham. He said it made him feel sick for three days afterwards but I think it was just as likely to be the lager, don’t you?’

‘I don’t, er...,’

‘Do you have a parting?’

‘Yes. On the left.’

'He drinks too much but won't listen to anyone.'

'Er, sorry. The other side.' I realised I'd been looking at myself in the mirror.

Karena ignored me and carried on talking about her brother while she brushed my hair. When she had finished she sprayed half a can of lacquer over it. I reached up and gingerly touched the top of my head. It felt as though it was covered with chicken wire. If someone had tried to mug me by hitting me over the head with a blunt object I would probably not have noticed.

'I'll take you along to the canteen in a moment and you can get a cup of tea,' said Louise.

The make-up girl whisked the white cloth away from me and disappeared in search of her next customer. I stood up, edged carefully between a human sized carrot and a police constable with his arm in a blood stained sling, and followed Louise back out into the corridor where twenty or thirty children, all dressed as elves were waiting in an unruly line. A morose, red faced fellow in a Father Christmas costume stood at the end of the queue surreptitiously smoking the last half inch of a homemade cigarette. He had his beard pulled down underneath his chin so that it looked rather like a bib.

'Isn't it a bit late for Christmas programmes?' I whispered to Louise.

Louise half turned her head. 'They're filming a special show for *next* Christmas in Studio B!' she explained.

* * *

The canteen was full. Roughly half the customers seemed to be large, scruffy men, identically dressed in grubby T-shirts, jeans and worn sneakers. These customers were all busy wolfing down platefuls of bacon sandwiches and noisily drinking tea from huge mugs. The other half of the customers were in fancy dress. There were pirates, policemen, chambermaids, nurses, doctors, elves, vegetables, dancing girls in spangly leotards and fishnet tights and a dozen men in white ties and tail coats. I spotted one clergyman, an Elizabeth I, complete with ruff and bustle, two gypsy girls and half a platoon of soldiers - all equipped with balsa wood rifles. These customers were daintily nibbling biscuits and sipping tea and taking great care not to spill any food.

I bought myself a can of lemonade, a packet of crisps and an apple and carried my tray around the room looking for a spare seat. I had just found one, and had sat down between a potato and a chambermaid, when I noticed Louise, still carrying her clip board, walk briskly through the door. She was accompanied by a tall red-haired, harassed looking man in a lilac coloured shirt and a pair of very tight lemon coloured trousers. Behind them there stood a third figure. The red-haired man had a pair of headphones and a microphone around his neck and he too carried a clipboard. The microphone he wore was connected by a wire to a large metal box which was clipped to his belt. The two of them stood in the doorway for a few moments, clearly looking for someone. Eventually Louise tapped the red-haired man on the arm and pointed in my direction. He looked at me, looked back at her and frowned. She nodded and said something. He seemed surprised but, shrugging off the confusion he obviously felt, minced briskly across the room towards me. As he moved I could see that the third person was Deborah, Tanya's assistant. Louise and Deborah followed the red-headed man across the canteen.

'Darling!' cried the red headed man, holding out both hands as though we were long lost brothers. 'How wonderful of you to come!'

I looked to either side, just in case I was mistaken. But the potato carried on sipping his or her limeade through a straw and the chambermaid carried on nibbling at her digestive biscuit. I stood up and received a hug and a kiss on each cheek from the red-haired man. No one, apart from me, seemed surprised or embarrassed by this. The potato simply carried on sipping and the chambermaid carried on nibbling.

'We're all so absolutely thrilled that you could come!' said the red-haired man.

'You must be Simon Reynolds!' I said, feeling quite pleased with myself for remembering his name.

The red-haired man burst into a fit of giggles, as though I'd just delivered the smartest one liner he'd ever heard, and clapped himself on his chest with his left hand in a very camp gesture. 'Me?' He turned to Louise. 'He mistook me for Simon!' he said, and burst into another fit of giggles.

'This is Tony,' said Louise. 'He's the floor manager.'

I said hello to Tony and smiled at him.

'Hi!' said Deborah. She seemed rather shy and overawed by it all.

I said hello to her.

'Have you been to make-up, yet?' the floor manager asked me.

I said I had.

He bent closer and peered at me. 'Silly me! Of course you have, darling! Then as soon as you've finished your drink we'll get you along to wardrobe. Where are your clothes? Have they given you a dressing room?'

I looked down at my sports jacket and grey flannels and then I looked back up at him. 'These are the only clothes I've brought,' I said.

Tony the floor manager started to giggle but stopped when he realised that I was serious. He put his hands over his face as though not sure what to say. He turned. 'He does know it's television and not radio, doesn't he?' he whispered loudly to Deborah. I thought that this was pretty catty and I decided that I didn't like Tony very much. I didn't see why I should present a false front to the viewers. I knew that lots of people made a special effort to look smart when appearing on television but this seemed as dishonest as saying something you didn't agree with so as to gain popularity. I like to feel that people who read what I write will trust me. How can I expect anyone to trust me if the very way I look is fraudulent? If I give the impression of being scruffy it isn't because I want to be offensive or because I'm deliberately making some anti-fashion statement but, rather, it is because I'm unwilling to waste time making myself look pretty. I'd rather spend the time researching the things I'm going to write or talk about rather than selecting a smart looking shirt or an impressive tie. Some people say that they like their clothes to make a statement for them. I prefer my clothes to keep quiet while I make the statements.

Deborah, blushing bright red, nodded, stuttered and finally said something to the effect that she was pretty sure that I did indeed know that the programme was being broadcast in vision as well as sound.

'It's the best jacket I've got,' I said defensively. I paused. 'In fact, to be perfectly honest it's the only jacket I've got.'

'Well, we'd better get you along to wardrobe and see what they've got that will fit you,' said Tony, rather peevishly. He turned and minced back across the canteen floor, followed by Louise and Deborah. I finished my lemonade, stuffed my apple and the remainder of my crisps into my jacket pocket, said 'goodbye' to the potato and the chambermaid and followed them. Standing in the doorway to the canteen the pirate and the fairy were still arguing. They had not managed to mend her broken wand.

* * *

The wardrobe department was full of people trying on clothes. Half a dozen tall, beefy looking men in socks and underpants were pulling on pirate costumes. Four or five equally tall, but willowy, girls were standing around shivering in bras and panties. There were racks and racks of colourful clothes and a plump woman in a grey knitted cardigan was ironing a white blouse for a girl wearing jodhpurs, black leather boots and absolutely nothing else.

'I need a jacket!' said Tony, clapping his hands excitedly and pointing to me. 'To fit this one over here.'

No one took any notice of him and this seemed to make him angry. I watched, mesmerised, as he stamped a foot. I'd never seen anyone actually do that before. 'I need a jacket!' he shouted. This time everyone looked. 'For him!' he cried, pointing at me. Everyone looked at me. I tried to shrivel up and disappear but when you're well over six foot tall and weigh fourteen stones it isn't easy to disappear in a crowded room. A middle aged woman in a blue jumper, dark blue skirt and grey carpet slippers shuffled over, looked at me and shook her head as though she didn't hold out much hope. ‘What sort of jacket?’ she asked.

‘Something lively!’ said Tony. ‘And some trousers, too!’ he said, catching sight of my grey flannels.

The woman in blue disappeared and returned a couple of minutes later with two jackets thrown over one arm. One jacket was made of shiny, plastic in a leopardskin print. The other was a very bright yellow and had sequins sewn all over it.

‘Try them on!’ said Tony to me. He ran his fingers over the bright yellow jacket. ‘Oh, isn’t it absolutely divine! Who’s worn this?’

‘David Dunster!’ replied the woman in blue.

‘David’s worn this? David Dunster?’

The woman in blue nodded.

Tony closed his eyes and swooned.

‘Who’s David Dunster?’ I asked Deborah.

‘He hosts a quiz show,’ she replied, in a whisper.

“Tickle My Fancy!” said Louise.

Startled, I looked at her.

‘That’s the name of the show,’ she explained, blushing.

I took the hideous fake leopardskin jacket and tried to get into it but it was at least four sizes too small. The ripping sound the jacket made as I tried to squeeze my arms into it made me wince. I hurriedly shrugged it off and handed it back to the woman in blue. Without even looking at the jacket she just tossed it across a rail which was already laden with clothes - presumably all waiting to be repaired - and handed me the yellow jacket. That too was far too small.

‘Can you alter the yellow one for him?’ asked Tony.

The woman in blue thought for a moment and then shook her head.

‘Damn!’ said Tony.

‘I don’t think either of those is exactly right for me,’ I said, relieved.

Tony, a sulky look on his face, minced out of the wardrobe department and stopped and looked at his watch; a huge and outrageously flashy piece of gold-coloured jewellery. He then rather brusquely ordered us all to follow him to the studio. It was, so Louise whispered, time for the rehearsal.

* * *

The studio was much bigger than I had expected it to be; more like an aircraft hangar than anything else. A small fake living room, complete with rug, sofa, easy chairs, bookcase, potted plants and a long, low, glass topped coffee table had been built in the middle of the available space and a dozen or so men in grubby jeans and dirty T-shirts were standing around looking bored.

‘I’ve got him here,’ I heard Tony mutter. I looked across at him and he turned his head away from me. He was clearly not going to forgive me for not wearing a more fashionable jacket. I wandered across the studio and peered at the bookcase to see what titles they had chosen but the shelves were filled with strips of cardboard painted to look like rows of books. I looked at the plant; that, too, was artificial.

‘Darling!’ I heard someone behind me say. ‘How wonderful of you to come! We’ve all been looking forward to meeting you!’

Idly, I turned and found myself the target of a portly, bespectacled, middle aged man who was trotting towards me with an eager look on his face. He had his arms outstretched as though we were relatives who had been parted by several continents and oceans for a couple of decades. He wore a brightly coloured Hawaiian shirt and a pair of mauve corduroy trousers and had a green and yellow patterned neckerchief knotted around his neck.

‘I’m Simon, darling!’ he said, grasping me by the shoulders and kissing me on both cheeks.

I said that I was pleased to meet him and thanked him for inviting me.

‘Did you have a good journey?’ he asked.

‘Yes...,’ I started to reply. But he’d turned away and was telling one of the men in jeans to get rid of a wrinkle which had appeared on the rug.

‘I have to worry about absolutely everything, darling!’ he said, turning back to me. ‘Someone find Vivienne!’ he shouted. Half a dozen people, including Louise, hurried away in search of Vivienne.

‘I gather Tony wasn’t too pleased with your jacket,’ whispered Simon.

‘No, I’m afraid not,’ I said.

‘Don’t you worry about it, darling!’ whispered Simon, giving me a reassuring pat on the arm. ‘I think it’s absolutely divine! The leather patches on the elbows are quite, quite perfect and I’ll get someone from the props department to cover up the worst of the stains!’

I thanked him.

‘And we all absolutely loved your book, darling!’ said Simon. ‘Marvellous, absolutely marvellous!’

‘That’s very kind of you.’

‘I loved the bit where the hero is in a lift with the bad guy and neither of them knows who the other one is! Absolutely gripping. Quite sensational, darling! Divine! Terrific plot. Can’t wait for the movie. Have they decided who’s playing the lead yet? I read that both Redford and Newman are desperate for the part and to be honest I’m not surprised!’ Simon put his arm around my shoulder. ‘Perhaps we could have a word later on,’ he said. ‘Maybe you could put in a word for Celeste?’ He winked. ‘She’d be terrific as Angie.’

I frowned, puzzled and started to say something. There was no lift scene in my book. There was no hero. There was no plot. There was no character called Angie. There were no characters at all. And unless Redford and Newman were keen to play the part of a slightly discredited sleeping tablet there wouldn’t be a movie either.

I tried to mention all this. It seemed important. But Simon had rushed off to the other end of the studio to greet and assist a tiny, woman who was tottering along underneath a massive, shoulder length blonde wig and on top of a pair of monstrously elevated high heeled shoes. A moment or two later Simon introduced me to Vivienne Nugent, the presenter of ‘Alive and How!’ She showed me a row of expensively capped teeth. Once again I tried to explain to Simon that he had confused my book with someone else’s but, as before, he was too busy to listen to anything I had to say. I tried to say something to Vivienne but she just smiled at me and ignored me.

‘That script you wrote for your introduction is marvellous, absolutely marvellous!’ Simon said to Vivienne. He kissed her and hugged her. ‘Dialogue as crisp as a freshly baked poppadom!’

Vivienne looked pleased with herself.

‘Just look at this!’ said Simon, holding out the script in his hand so that I could read it. ‘Read it out loud!’

‘Hello,’ I read, ‘and welcome to another edition of your favourite magazine programme: ‘Alive and How!’ As always it’s a real pleasure to have your company and I’m delighted to be able to tell you that we’ve got our usual marvellous mix of entertainment and education for you!’

I looked at Simon, waiting for him to offer me another page of script. He didn’t. Instead he smiled and withdrew the script.

‘Super isn’t it?’

I said I thought it was wonderful.

Vivienne and I were then escorted onto the set and allowed to settle down onto the sofa; a plushly upholstered piece of furniture into which I sank at least a foot and a half. Vivienne, clearly on a high from Simon’s glowing praise, smiled a lot at everyone.

‘I don’t want to talk to you about your book until we go on air,’ said Vivienne, speaking to me at last. She spoke slowly, carefully and quietly as though sharing a secret and anxious to make sure that no one else overheard. ‘I always think it spoils the freshness of what we have to say if we rehearse our little chat!’

I made one last attempt to avoid what I suspected might prove to be an embarrassing moment for her. ‘I think Simon might have got me mixed up with...,’ I began.

But Vivienne wasn’t listening. She had called a make-up girl across and was having running repairs made to her lipstick.

I secretly hoped that she, at least, did not think that my book contained a plot, a hero or a part for any of her friends or relatives.

When she was satisfied with her appearance she turned to me again. ‘Is this your first time?’

I said that it was.

‘How exciting you must find it,’ she said. ‘But try not to be too nervous,’ she added. I waited for her to pat my knee but she didn’t.

I said that I would try.

She then talked about her forthcoming memoirs, her new television programme about cookery, the shops she had opened, the carpet warehouse she was due to open, the magazine interview she’d done that morning, the fee she had been offered to pose topless for a men’s magazine (she had, of course, refused it), the modelling work she had done in Paris and the wonderful plastic surgeon she’d found in Beverley Hills (not that she needed plastic surgery herself, of course, but it’s always nice to know of someone just in case you ever get asked).

Suddenly Tony rushed onto the set, clapped his hands and made very loud shushing noises. Vivienne shut up and we both stared at him. He seemed to enjoy this. ‘Simon wants the table moving forwards two inches,’ he said, as though Simon had asked for Tower Bridge to be moved a few hundred yards along the Thames.

‘No problem!’ I said, keen to be helpful. I leaned forward, moved the table two inches and leant back again. Tony stared at me as though I had just spray painted a rude graffiti message onto the carpet. The studio fell silent and, gradually, I became aware that everyone was staring at me.

‘What’s the matter?’ I whispered to Vivienne.

Vivienne, who had already edged a few inches away from me, looked down at her knees and pulled pointlessly at the hem of her skirt. The skirt was far too tight to move and far too tight to reach her knees. She no longer seemed to want to talk to me. A huge, mountain of a man who wore a full black beard and a T-shirt with the slogan ‘Alive and How!’ on the front strode onto the rug and glared down at me.

‘Did you move that?’ he demanded fiercely. He had bunches of black hair sticking out of his nostrils and it was difficult to take him seriously.

I said I had. I thought that the bunches of black hair looked rather like wrestling spiders and wondered if he would find it amusing if I were to tell him this.

‘Are you union?’ he demanded.

I looked at him, not quite sure what he meant. He repeated the question.

‘No, I don’t think so,’ I said. I decided that it would be tactful for me to keep to myself the observation I had been thinking of making about the hair in his nostrils.

The man mountain took a silver coloured whistle out of his pocket and blew into it. He and the other men in T-shirts and dirty jeans then walked slowly but determinedly out of the studio.

‘Well,’ said Tony, close to tears.

‘Was it something I did?’ I asked.

‘You touched the set!’ said Tony.

‘I was just being helpful.’

‘No one is allowed to touch the set if they aren’t in the union!’ said Tony. ‘Everyone knows that!’

‘I didn’t!’ I protested.

‘I just hope you’re pleased with yourself!’

Tony turned and flounced off the set leaving Vivienne and I sitting together but quite separately on the sofa. Someone out of sight switched off the main lights.

‘You fool!’ hissed Vivienne in the darkness. I really wasn’t warming to her.

* * *

I don’t know how long we sat there, waiting. It seemed like hours but I don’t suppose it could have been anything more than a few minutes. Suddenly the lights came back on and Simon strode purposefully towards us. He was scowling and sweating profusely. Behind him stood Louise and Deborah; both looking very serious. ‘They say they’ll go back to work if you apologise,’ Simon said.

‘What do I have to apologise for?’ I asked. I noticed that he was no longer calling me darling and for this I was quite grateful.

‘For moving the table.’

‘But I was just trying to be helpful.’

‘It doesn’t matter. They don’t like people being helpful.’

‘But I’m a doctor. I was trained to help people.’

Simon thought for a moment, dabbed his forehead with a red, silk handkerchief and then shook his head. ‘They won’t buy that,’ he said. ‘You’ll have to apologise.’

‘What will happen if I don’t apologise?’

‘They’ll black you, me, the studio and probably the entire station.’

‘You mean that the programme won’t go ahead?’

‘We’ll be lucky if we get back on air within a month.’

‘Do you mind if we have a word in private?’ asked Deborah, moving forwards and beckoning me to join her.

‘Not if you can persuade him to apologise!’ sighed Simon. ‘And preferably fairly quickly!’ He dabbed his forehead again, blew his nose and looked at his watch. ‘I’ve got a programme due to go on air in less than an hour.’

‘I’ll do my best,’ promised Deborah.

I stood up and followed Deborah over to a dark, far corner of the studio.

‘I just rang Tanya,’ whispered Deborah. ‘She said you don’t have to apologise if you don’t want to.’

‘But I thought you’d want me to apologise?’ I whispered back.

‘Officially, we do!’ whispered Deborah. ‘And for heaven’s sake make it clear to Simon that I tried to persuade you to apologise. But unofficially Tanya thinks we could be heading for a great stunt. If the programme is blacked the papers will have to say why. Your book will get a fantastic amount of publicity!’

We walked back over to where Simon and Louise were waiting for us. Vivienne had disappeared.

‘Deborah wants me to apologise but I don’t think I’ve done anything I need to apologise for,’ I said. ‘But as a gesture of goodwill I’m happy to move the table back to where it was.’

Simon stared at me.

‘If I put it back where it was then one of the men can move it to where you wanted it putting, which was where I’d moved it to,’ I explained.

Simon, dabbed his face and neck with his now very damp handkerchief and glared at me. ‘I don’t know whether they’ll buy that,’ he said.

I shrugged. ‘I don’t care whether they do or not,’ I said.

Simon, now looking a broken man, turned and scurried away. Louise, still carrying her clipboard, hurried after him. Deborah and I stood and waited.

‘You were brilliant!’ whispered Deborah.

‘I haven’t got the foggiest idea what is going on,’ I said. ‘This place is like a lunatic asylum.’ I just wanted to get back home as quickly as I could and I no longer cared whether or not I made my television debut.

A few minutes later Simon reappeared. This time, in addition to Louise, he was followed by Tony, the floor manager, the large man with the fighting spiders up his nose, and the rest of the offended crew.

‘Bill says that in view of your lack of experience they’ll accept your offer,’ said Simon. The sweat was dripping off his nose. Bill folded his arms and looked very stern.

I walked across to the table and moved it back to where I thought it had been before I’d moved it the first time. Simon turned to Bill. ‘Is that O.K.?’

Bill walked over to the table and stared at it. He moved around it and looked at it from the other side. He bent down and examined it from a different angle. Then he went back to where Simon was standing. ‘It needs to be another inch nearer to the bookcase,’ he said.

‘It needs to be an inch nearer to the bookcase,’ Simon said to me.

I moved the table so that it was an inch closer to the bookcase.

Once again Bill walked across and examined it carefully from all possible angles. This time, when he walked back to Simon, he nodded. Simon closed his eyes in relief and blotted his face once more. Bill then called to two burly looking men who were standing about ten yards away. They walked over and, under his directions, moved the table back to where it had been after I had moved it the first time.

‘O.K.?’ Bill asked Simon.

‘Marvellous,’ said Simon, weakly. He turned to Louise. ‘Would you like to take him to the canteen?’ He gave me what was intended to be a smile. But there wasn’t much fun in it. ‘We’ll come and get you when we need you,’ he said.

‘You were wonderful!’ whispered Deborah as we followed Louise back to the canteen.

‘Is television always like this?’ I asked her.

‘I don’t know,’ admitted Deborah. ‘I’ve never been in a studio before.’

* * *

Eventually, I found myself sitting on the sofa watching the second hand on a huge clock tick slowly round and round. A man in a grey pullover knelt by my side fitting a tiny microphone to my tie.

‘Is this a club tie?’ asked the man in the pullover.

‘No, I don’t think so.’

‘Oh.’

‘Why?’

‘I didn’t think anyone would wear a tie this awful unless it was a club tie.’

I looked down. I’d never really looked at it before. I didn’t usually wear a tie but had put it on simply in honour of my television debut.

‘Shall I take it off?’ I asked him.

‘No!’ he said, rather insistently. He glowered at me. ‘Where am I going to fix my microphone if you take it off?’

‘Three minutes to air!’ cried Tony, his voice breaking with excitement.

I remembered having read that performers work better when they are nervous and so, conscious of the fact that I felt merely bored rather than excited, I tried to feel more apprehensive. It didn’t work. I looked across at Vivienne. She was carefully studying a thick sheaf of notes. On the coffee table in front of her lay a thick, fat book. On the cover of the book a buxom young woman who was bursting out of her dress was running away from a horde of bad-tempered looking men brandishing guns. The author’s name, a name I had never heard before, was printed in very large type. I realised for the first time how Simon had made his mistake. The book had exactly the same title as my own book.

‘Any good?’ I asked.

Vivienne looked up at me.

I nodded towards the coffee table. ‘Is the book any good?’ I asked.

Vivienne showed me her dentist’s handiwork again. It really was more of a dental display than a smile. ‘I loved it,’ she said. ‘Perhaps you’d like to sign it for me afterwards?’ she suggested.

‘Me?’

‘Authors often do sign books, don’t they?’

I envy people who can produce a bon mot at the drop of an insult or who can produce incisive, relevant comments at exactly the right moment. As I’ve already pointed out I don’t often think of sharp or witty things to say, but just once in a while the right words trickle out at exactly the right moment. They weren’t particularly witty or incisive words. But they were the right words.

‘Yes,’ I said quietly. ‘But usually only the books they’ve written.’

Vivienne’s response to this apparently harmless comment was instant and quite predictable. She panicked. She looked at the book and then at me and decided that I must be joking. ‘You did write this didn’t you?’

I shook my head.

‘That isn’t funny.’

‘It isn’t meant to be.’

I shall forever treasure the memory of the look which crossed Vivienne’s face at that moment. It contained a rare mixture of emotions though fear was, I felt, by far the most dominant.

She picked the book up and held it up so that I could see the cover more clearly. ‘You didn’t write this?’

‘I’ve written a book with the same title but I didn’t write that book.’

Vivienne looked around.

‘Two minutes to air!’ called Tony.

‘Simon!’ screamed Vivienne. ‘Simon! Come here!’

I don’t know where Simon had been but by the time he arrived on the set he was quite breathless. He had abandoned his handkerchief and was now mopping his brow with a small, white hand towel.

‘He didn’t write this book!’ squealed Vivienne, waving the book in the air.

Simon looked at me. He now had the same look in his eyes as Vivienne had for a few moments. His skin was the same colour as the towel he was holding.

‘Ninety seconds to air!’ croaked Tony, who had realised that something wasn’t right.

‘I’ve written a book with that title,’ I explained. ‘I did try to tell you that I thought you’d got confused but you wouldn’t listen!’

‘How can you do this to me?’ demanded Simon. He started tearing at the towel and I thought he was going to have a fit of some kind. ‘Do you hate me?’

‘It’ll be O.K.!’ I said. ‘My book is quite interesting!’

‘What’s it about?’ demanded Simon.

‘It’s about doctors and drug companies,’ I replied. ‘If Vivienne asks me what it’s about I’ll explain it all. But it’s better not to talk about it beforehand, isn’t it?’

Vivienne had now also gone white.

‘Sixty seconds to air!’ whispered Tony, who had moved closer to find out what was going on. He too looked terrified.

‘I didn’t mind when I didn’t know what questions you were going to ask me,’ I said, trying to cheer up Vivienne. ‘Now neither of us knows the questions or the answers! It’ll be more exciting this way!’

I heard someone or something hissing on my right. I turned my head but could see nothing except a camera. Then I heard the hissing noise again. I looked over the arm of the sofa and saw the man in the grey pullover lying on the floor.

‘Hello!’ I said. ‘What are you doing there?’

He said something but didn’t actually speak and I’ve never been able to lip read.

‘Pardon?’

‘You’re crackling!’ he hissed. ‘Every time you move you crackle.’

‘Thirty seconds!’ muttered Tony, who looked as though he was about to faint.

Still tearing at his towel Simon stumbled off the set and fell to his knees just out of camera shot. Louise rushed over to him and put her arm around his shoulders. I couldn’t see his face but his shoulders were shaking and I got a strong feeling that he was crying.

I looked down at my microphone but could see nothing wrong.

‘What have you got in your pocket?’ shouted the man in a pullover who, although he had shouted had managed to do it in a whisper.

I put my hand in my left hand jacket pocket. Nothing. I put my hand in my other jacket pocket and found the packet of crisps I had bought in the canteen but hadn’t finished eating. I pulled the packet out.

Tony, who was now using his fingers to tell Vivienne the number of seconds that were left before we went on air, looked really ill. I handed the packet of crisps to the man in the grey pullover. ‘Don’t eat them!’ I told him, sternly. He took the packet from my outstretched hand and wriggled away.

‘Are you O.K.?’ I asked Tony. ‘You look terrible!’

Tony weakly pointed a finger at Vivienne and nodded. He then backed away a couple of yards and sank gracefully to the floor.

‘Hello, and welcome to another edition of ‘Alive and How!” said Vivienne to a camera which had a little red light lit up on its snout. ‘Today my first guest is the author of an exciting new book.’ She turned to me. ‘Tell us what your book is about!’ she said.

* * *

‘You were marvellous!’ said Deborah afterwards.

‘Wonderful television! Absolutely wonderful, darling!’ said Simon. Judging by the reappearance of the word ‘darling’ he was no longer quite so cross with me. ‘But don’t you ever put us through that again, darling!’ he added, with a nervous laugh. I couldn’t help wondering how Thumper, Peter Marshall or Frank Parsons would respond if I started calling them ‘darling’.

‘Terrific, darling!’ said Vivienne, giving me a kiss on the cheek and immediately disappearing to talk to someone else more interesting.

‘Can I go home now?’ I asked. I had seen enough of the world of television not to believe any of them. It was, it seemed to me, a very superficial, artificial, unpleasant world.

‘Your car is waiting at the front door,’ said Louise.

On the way home the short, overweight, taciturn driver and I stopped at a motorway service station for food and fuel. While the driver was chewing his way through a plateful of sausages and chips and a dishful of spotted dick and lumpy looking custard I telephoned Patsy to tell her that I was on my way home.

Since we didn’t have a television set at Bilbury Grange she hadn’t seen the programme. ‘How did it go?’ she asked.

‘It was O.K.,’ I said.

‘I’ve heard that making television programmes is very boring,’ she said.

‘It is,’ I agreed.

‘The first swallow arrived this afternoon!’ said Patsy.

And that was truly the most exciting news I’d had all day.

Spring had come.

* * *

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I'd only been away from Bilbury for a day but the arrival of the first swallow of spring hadn't been the only notable thing to have happened in my absence. Even though the Revels Fund didn't have a penny in it, and they all knew very well that it would be several months before they could receive any money for their labours, Thumper Robinson, Alf Lillywhite, Geoff Taylor and Ian Entwhistle had cheerfully started work repairing Miss Hargreaves' cottage. And on the other side of the village, Frank and Gilly Parsons had erected a plaque on the outside wall of the Duck and Puddle to tell the world that the North Devon writer and naturalist Henry Williamson had once been a much loved customer. Finally, Patsy also told me that Peter Marshall had called round to let me know that the cricket team would be holding its first practice session on Saturday evening.

Still, despite all this excitement it was, without doubt, the arrival of the first swallow of spring which had really delighted me. I stood in the courtyard and watched as he (or maybe she: like everyone else I know I am quite unable to differentiate between the male and the female of the species) explored our outbuildings. It was, we were both quite certain, one of the same swallows which had lived with us the previous summer.

Mr Parfitt, who had been working on some flower tubs he had installed in the courtyard, had been the first to see our first resident of the season arrive.

'He knew exactly where he was going,' said the gardener, standing beside Patsy and I as the three of us watched the swallow swoop straight down out of the sky, fly rather languidly around the courtyard and dive immediately and without hesitation into the stable where he and his colleagues had nested last summer.

Suddenly, there was another flash as a second swallow arrived. This one perched on the electricity cable which runs across the courtyard to provide the flat and stable block with power. It sat there for a moment, looking lonely, miserable, bedraggled and rather weary after what must have been a flight of several thousand miles across Europe.

Moments later the three of us witnessed one of the most joyful reunions any of us had ever seen. The swallow which had arrived first came out of the stable and immediately spotted the second bird perched on the electricity cable. The quiet and peace of the morning was shattered when the two birds saw each other. The two birds soared and dived and gave us a most extraordinary display of aerobatics. They flew together, never more than an inch or two apart, in absolutely perfect harmony. They flew around us and around our legs. They circled our heads and dived into and out of every opening on the stable block. They flew, no more than two feet above the courtyard floor, at such speed that it seemed inevitable that they would smash into the wall of the house and destroy themselves. But at the very last moment they swerved upwards, soaring high up into the sky, disappearing from sight and then racing back down earthwards again. From the way that they checked out all their old haunts it was clear that these were indeed two of last summer's residents. And from the way that they stayed with each other, never moving more than a few inches away from each other's side, it was clear that they were mighty pleased to see each other.

Most birds fly to get from one spot to another or to catch food but swallows alone seem to fly for fun. They always seem to enjoy their wonderful ability to dance and soar and play with one another. It is always the same; they always seem to fly as though they have just discovered their wings. And although they have their off days (particularly when the weather is grey and gloomy - for they love the sunshine) they never seem to lose their ability to enjoy life. I always get pleasure from watching swallows; they always bring bright sunshine into my heart. And even on a cool, rather dank spring morning the very sight of them reminds me that it will soon be summer and that we will soon be enjoying still, sun bathed mornings, warm days and balmy evenings.

I know it's always too easy to anthropomorphise when watching animals or birds but I couldn't help wondering where they had been separated from each other. I wondered if the sadness they had experienced when they had been parted had matched the joy they now expressed at the sight of each other.

After twenty minutes or so Patsy said she had to go into the house to check on something she'd put in the oven. Mr Parfitt asked me to walk down to the walled garden with him.

'I love watching you two together,' said Mr Parfitt.

I looked at him, slightly puzzled. I didn't really know what he meant. I said so.

'You remind me of those two swallows,' he said. 'You love each other totally, don't you?'

I nodded.

We walked another few paces.

'Did you love your wife?' I asked him.

'To begin with,' replied Mr Parfitt. 'But I don't think she ever really loved me,' he said, sadly. 'I think that was part of our problem.'

'Why did she marry you if she didn't love you?'

Mr Parfitt shrugged. 'I've thought about that,' he said. 'But I'm still not sure of the answer. Maybe she was running away from something. Maybe she was so desperate to leave home that she didn't need to love me to marry me. Maybe she can't love anyone. I don't know. Her father had died when she was seven and her mother had married again. She didn't get on with her stepfather and she fought with her mother all the time.'

'But you must have had some good times.'

'I suppose so,' agreed Mr Parfitt. 'But they were never really carefree times. When we married I was trying to make it as a racing driver. I'd inherited some money from an aunt and I'd spent a big chunk of it on buying a car. I wanted three years to see if I could really make it into the big time. Although I think it was the wildness and excitement of racing which had first attracted her to me, Clarice - that's my wife - didn't really approve of my lifestyle. Once we got married she worried that I was wasting the money I'd inherited. She wanted me to get a job and race cars at the weekends. You can't do that if you want to do it properly.'

'Gradually, the things about me which had attracted her to me in the first place began to worry her, to eat away at her. I won a few races and people started to say that I could become a champion. But there was never any security in it and that worried her. When I got some sponsors and started to make money out of my racing she became even more uncertain. I think she was worried about the fact that we could so easily lose what we'd got. The more we had the more she was frightened of losing it. I never made enough money to invest any for the future.'

I'd always taken risks as a driver you have to if you want to get anywhere professionally - but she started to worry about me crashing and not being able to drive any more. And, strangely, I think she resented my success too. She enjoyed the success but she wanted it to be her success and it was so obviously mine.

'Slowly, and in little ways, she tried to change me. No, that's not fair. She didn't try to change me. I tried to change myself. But I tried to change myself because I knew it was what she wanted - and I wanted to please her. I gave up racing and got a job in banking through one of the sponsors I'd met.'

'Gradually, what had seemed at first like a passionate, caring and genuine interest in my well-being and progress became tedious and suffocating. As a young, newly married husband I was flattered that someone cared about me so much that they didn't want me to take risks. It was sweet and charming. But as I grew into middle age I felt thwarted by the knowledge that I had to tread carefully and avoid all risks. I became someone I am not. I became someone I did not like or feel comfortable with. I had to be nice to everyone above me in the bank because Clarice was terrified that if I annoyed anyone important they would wreck my career. I had to be careful about what I said and who I said it to. I felt constantly threatened by Clarice's insecurities.'

'Because I didn't say anything, Clarice assumed that I was happy with my life and that was my fault. I should have told her how I felt. I stayed quiet because I didn't want to hurt her by telling her the truth and gradually whatever love there had been between us just seeped away until there was nothing left holding our marriage together but habit and children and social niceties and in the end that wasn't enough.'

'Do you think you'll ever go back?' I asked for the second time.

This time Mr Parfitt didn’t even hesitate or stop to think about it. ‘No! Never!’ he said firmly. He smiled at me. ‘I’ve never been as happy or as content as I am now,’ he said. ‘Besides,’ he said. ‘I had a letter a few days ago. My wife has started divorce proceedings.’

‘Oh,’ I said. I reached out and touched his arm. ‘I’m sorry...’

‘Don’t be,’ said Mr Parfitt. He smiled. ‘I’m not.’ I could tell that he meant it.

We pottered around the garden for a little while longer and Mr Parfitt showed me some bushes he thought needed moving and then we walked in comfortable silence back to the house. When we got there we discovered that the courtyard was as busy with revellers as Trafalgar Square on New Year’s Eve. There were, I suppose, no more than six or seven pairs of birds but they were playing a complicated series of flying games and when they saw us approaching we were incorporated into the games. They flew around our heads and around our bodies, never moving at anything less than top speed. Emily and Sophie were sitting on the courtyard cobbles watching the birds’ fearless antics with confused looks on their faces. The birds seemed completely unperturbed by the presence of our two cats; indeed, several of them seemed to delight in deliberately flying within inches of the cats’ heads. Some of the birds were undoubtedly the offspring of last year’s pairs (‘Can we come and stay with you, Mum? Just till we find a place of our own?’) but others must have been new.

‘It looks as though you’ve got an entry in the Good Nest Guide,’ said Mr Parfitt.

I laughed. But inside I felt quietly proud that the swallows had chosen to come back to us. I have heard people complain that swallows and house martins make a mess and are noisy, disruptive birds. I don’t care about the mess and I love the noise. I know of one man who deliberately shot the swallows who came to roost around his house. He claimed that one year they had nested in the outhouse where he stored his garden equipment and that several times during the season he had had to scrape thick layers of droppings from his lawn mower. What a small, insignificant price to pay for such intense and pure pleasure from such delightful companions. How anyone can be so callously cruel is quite beyond my comprehension. The man who told me this used to be a friend. I have never spoken to him since. You can judge the character of people by the way they treat animals, birds and other creatures. I considered our swallows to be part of the Bilbury Grange family and from the first day I saw them I hoped they would never stop coming back to stay with us.

* * *

I wasn’t quite sure what to wear for the cricket club’s first official practice session. After our last meeting I had been surprised to hear that the Bilbury cricket club was going to hold practice sessions at all! But I was keen to make a good impression and to justify my inclusion in the team.

Neither at school nor at medical school had I ever taken part in any team sports. There had been three main reasons for this complete lack of athletic experience. Firstly, I had never found the necessary time. At university the football and cricket team members had all trained on at least three or four nights a week and their training sessions had each lasted several hours. Students studying Greek, astronomy or civil engineering might have been able to find the time for such things but, like most medical students, I found that I was working what often seemed like, and sometimes was, a twenty hour day. Secondly, I had never been attracted to the idea of running round and round a damp field in a wet tracksuit. Most of the training sessions I’d witnessed had taken place in the pouring rain and hadn’t looked much fun. Thirdly, I had never been regarded as being any good at sports and I was therefore quite sure that even if I had wanted to play they wouldn’t have let me. I’ve always loved cricket but at school my skills were ignored. I’ve always suspected that my natural sporting skills remained undetected and undeveloped because I was never the sort of child who makes friends easily. Team captains were elected as a result of their popularity among the other boys. And, naturally enough, team captains tended to pick their chums first when selecting teams. As a result, when teams were being picked I was always one of the stragglers, unwanted by either captain. My name always appeared at the bottom of batting lists, I never got a chance to show my skill as a bowler and when fielding I was always sent to ruminate in the rutted pasture lands of long leg, long on or third man.

I have always comforted myself with the thought that if it had not been for my natural shyness, innate sense of independence and refusal to be bullied, my hidden sporting talents would have brought me certain acclaim. If, at the age of six, I’d let John Boardman have my best marble he would have picked me as an opening batsman and I would, in the fullness of time, have played cricket for England. It is with such slender threads of fate that the tapestry of our lives are sewn. My refusal to compromise my integrity (and my reluctance to part with my best marble - a wondrous looking beast the size of a table tennis ball) had meant that my natural talents as a cricketer had never had a chance to flower.

In the end I had stuffed an old T-shirt, my best gardening trousers and a pair of tennis pumps that I'd found in the cellar into a plastic shopping bag and had set off for my first training session. The pumps were a trifle on the small size so I had cut holes in the front of the shoes so that my big toes could poke through.

Peter Marshall had told Patsy that the club would be meeting in the tap room at the Duck and Puddle at seven thirty.

Anxious not to miss any opportunities in this final chance at a sporting career I got there at twenty past. The new blue painted plaque, commemorating Henry Williamson's custom, had been fixed to the wall alongside the front door at eye level and looked very impressive.

As I walked in I congratulated Frank on the new plaque.

'Hmm.' said Frank, rather glumly.

'What's up?' I asked him.

'When that...,' Frank paused, '...woman at the Pig and Whistle in Kentisbury heard about our plaque she put one up too. She says he drank there as well.'

'Did he?'

'God knows. Probably.' Frank automatically took down a glass and started to pull me a pint of Old Parsonage Brew.

'You mustn't say that!' said Gilly, appearing as if by magic. Her hands were covered with flour and she was wearing a large white, starched apron. 'I don't think he ever did drink there. They certainly can't prove that he did.' She disappeared again.

I held up a hand. 'I'm not sure I should be drinking that stuff yet,' I told him.

'He drank here at least twice!' said Gilly, returning. Before I could comment she disappeared again. I'd never seen her so upset.

'Is Gilly O.K.?' I asked Frank.

'Oh she's just a bit peeved over this blue plaque business. She found some letters showing that Henry Williamson had drunk here and she thought it might help our summer trade if we put a plaque up.' He shrugged. He hadn't stopped what he was doing but he now looked up at me anxiously. 'Are you O.K.?' he asked, putting the emphasis firmly on the second word.

'Cricket team practice!' I explained, rather proudly. 'Though I'm not sure what Peter's got planned,' I confessed.

Frank laughed. 'I shouldn't worry too much!'

I said that all the same I thought I would play safe and just have a tomato juice. Frank, staring at me as though I'd just deliberately chosen to share my bed with a rubber hot water bottle instead of Lauren Bacall, finished pulling the pint of ale (it wouldn't be wasted for he would, I knew, drink it himself) and then bent down and picked up a small bottle of tomato juice. He blew the dust off it and handed me the bottle, the opener and a glass.

'Do you mind opening it yourself?' he said. 'I never feel comfortable touching that stuff.'

I took the bottle of tomato juice off him, levered off the top and poured the contents into the glass. As I was pouring the thick red juice Thumper walked in. He saw the pint that Frank had just pulled and grinned. 'Saw me coming, did you Frank?' he said. 'Nice plaque. Have you seen the one they've put up at the Pig and Whistle?'

Frank said nothing but just pushed the foam topped glass across the bar counter into Thumper's hand. Neither of us paid for our drinks. Frank just made a note in the book he kept hanging on a string behind him. We would get our bills when our entries in the book filled a page.

'He hasn't drunk there!' said Gilly, reappearing for a moment and then disappearing again. She looked harassed and had a smear of flour across her forehead where she had wiped her hair out of her eyes with her hand.

Thumper turned to me. 'Who didn't what?'

'Henry Williamson hasn't ever drunk at the Pig and Whistle.'

'Oh. Hasn't he? They've got a plaque up. I don't much care anyway.' Thumper nodded towards the plastic bag at my feet. 'What's in the bag?'

I told him. He laughed. Before I could ask him what he had found so funny Peter Marshall and Dr Brownlow turned up closely followed by Patchy Fogg and what was clearly the rest of the Old Bilburians Cricket Club. Patchy, who specialised in selling very nearly genuine antiques, was looking particularly pleased with himself. I discovered later that he had just sold a truckload of genuine Chippendale antique television cabinets to an American dealer. Two skilled craftsmen in Combe Martin would, as a result, have enough work to keep them going for nine months while Patchy would make enough profit to avoid doing any work for at least a year. Frank, exercising the way he knew best, pulled pints of beer for everyone.

When used to describe a sports team the word 'Old' usually implies that the members were all once students at some scholarly institution. But in the case of the 'Old Bilburians Cricket Club' the word was used in a more direct, more definitive sense. Some members of the 'Old Bilburians Cricket Club' were, to put it as simply as possible, very well qualified to be in the team. There was certainly no danger of us getting into trouble for misrepresenting ourselves.

'Do you want to practise in the room upstairs?' Frank asked. His attention was, as ever, focused on the pint he was pulling and so he didn't look up or direct the question at anyone in particular. Frank regarded the work of transferring beer from a barrel to a glass as a craft, maybe even a minor art form. He would never allow himself to be distracted and still did not like to be reminded of the time when two tall, long legged, blonde, Swedish hikers wearing very short shorts and very skimpy tops had walked into the bar and ordered drinks and sandwiches. It was as a result of that incident that the front door of the Duck and Puddle now carried a notice, similar to the ones which appear on the outside of cathedrals all over Europe, asking female customers to dress appropriately. Frank didn't like spilling beer. We all looked at one another.

'Maybe we should,' said Peter, thoughtfully. 'Secret training camp! Just in case someone from another village comes in. Nice plaque, Frank. If you want any more I can get them done wholesale.' He paused and frowned. 'Who is Henry Williamson, by the way?'

I wasn't sure that moving upstairs was an entirely practical notion. Looking around I wasn't at all sure that all the members of our team would even be able to get upstairs under their own steam.

'Safer down here,' said Thumper, settled comfortably on his usual bar stool.

We all looked at him.

'We don't want anyone getting injured,' he explained, taking a sip at his beer. 'Cricketers are always getting injured during pre-season training.'

'I don't think we're any more likely to injure ourselves upstairs than we are down here!' I said.

'It's not the being upstairs that's dangerous,' explained Thumper. 'It's the getting there. All those stairs. Trays of beer every five minutes. Someone is bound to fall.'

'Thumper is right!' said Peter, firmly. 'Is that O.K. with you, Frank?'

'Fine with me,' replied Frank, with a shrug. 'You can practise wherever you like as far as I'm concerned.'

We settled ourselves around the bar. I recognised everyone in the team, though I didn't know everyone's names. Peter introduced us all to one another but did it in rather a hurry and didn't bother to tell us whose name went with which face. I recognised all the names but was as confused and as ignorant as I had been to start with.

'First thing we've got to do is choose a captain,' said Peter Marshall.

'Josh.' said Thumper immediately.

'Josh.' agreed everyone else.

'Is that O.K. with you?' Peter asked Josh.

'Thank you very much,' said Josh. 'I'll have a gin and tonic.' He paused. 'And a packet of salt and vinegar crisps.'

I was, to say the least, surprised at this choice. Josh Wilkins is at least 80-years-old and bent double with arthritis. He lives on the other side of the village green to Peter's shop and every morning at 8 a.m. sharp he sets off to fetch his morning paper. He arrives at Peter's shop at about ten thirty, collects his paper and gets back home at about one. He then has his lunch and walks back to the shop to do his shopping. Whatever the weather his hunched and crippled form is, therefore, an almost constant sight on the round around the village green. I once asked him why he didn't do his shopping in the morning when he picked up his newspaper. He had looked at me in some surprise. 'If I did that what would I do in the afternoons?' he had asked.

I bent closer to Patchy Fogg, who was sitting next to me.

'Why Josh?'

'Because he is bent over and so close to the ground that when the toss is taken he can see whether it's heads or tails before he commits himself,' explained Patchy. 'He was the Old Bilburians Cricket Club captain in the fifties and he always got the other captain to toss so that he could call and he always called late.'

'Did he get away with it?' I asked.

'Of course!' said Patchy. 'Can you imagine anyone accusing Josh of cheating?'

I had to agree that any such remark would look in poor spirit.

'Besides,' added Patchy, 'he's completely deaf so even if the opposing captain complains Josh won't hear him!'

'But why is winning the toss so important?' I was puzzled by this. 'I thought we weren't worried about winning?'

'We aren't. But winning the toss means that we control the game. And if we can control the game we can make sure that in the unlikely event that the other side are worse than us then they still win.'

There was clearly a great deal about village cricket that I didn't understand. 'How does winning the toss mean that we control the game?'

'It means that we can always make sure that our opponents bat first.'

'Oh.'

'If they bat second they might lose. If they bat first we always know what score they've got - so we know what we mustn't beat.'

'Losing sounds quite tricky.'

'It is,' said Patchy quite seriously. 'It's sometimes much harder than winning.'

After the selection of the captain had been completed Peter suggested that we had a break. Thumper and three of the others went off to play pool while a couple of team members borrowed the darts from Frank and started peppering the panelling around the dartboard. In most pubs the dartboard is surrounded by a tyre and the tyre is surrounded by a wooden board. At the Duck and Puddle the quality of dart playing is so low that such localised forms of protection would be of absolutely no value. Even the unshaded light bulb hanging from the ceiling is at risk and sits in a small chicken wire basket.

After twenty minutes Peter coughed loudly and clapped his hands. ‘Time for team selection, gentlemen!’ he cried.

‘Thank you!’ smiled Josh. ‘I’ll have a gin and tonic, please.’

The pool and dart players finished their games. More drinks were poured.

‘Thumper,’ said Peter, ‘will you bat at number eleven?’

Thumper nodded and said that he would be delighted to bat at number eleven. I was, I confess, slightly surprised by this. I had thought that Thumper would command a batting place far higher up the order.

Gradually the rest of the batting order was organised. Patchy Fogg was put at number ten and Peter Marshall volunteered to bat at number nine. Frank was given the number eight spot and Dr Brownlow the number seven position. Eventually the only two people left were Josh, the newly elected captain of the Old Bilburians Cricket Team, and myself.

‘Well it looks as if you two are going to open the batting for us this year!’ said Peter. ‘Is that O.K. with you both?’

I said I would be honoured to take such a responsible position. Josh, who clearly had no idea what was going on, said that he would have a gin but that we could hold the tonic. As an afterthought he mentioned that he would also like a packet of pork scratchings.

We then all sang ‘Ten Green Bottles’ and sixteen choruses of ‘Eskimo Nell’ before Peter officially declared the training session over.

‘Are you sure you don’t mind opening the batting for us?’ asked Peter, as the rest of the team celebrated the end of the session by ordering drinks and Dr Brownlow and I headed for the door. Dr Brownlow had offered to give me a lift home but I had gracefully declined.

I said that I would be delighted to try to see off the new ball bowlers.

Peter looked at me rather strangely and then, apparently deciding that I was joking, laughed nervously. ‘Don’t try taking any quick singles!’ he laughed. ‘Josh likes to take things fairly slowly.’

This seemed good advice and so I nodded sagely.

‘I’ll try to push you up the order a bit for some of the later matches,’ said Peter. He looked down. ‘What’s in the bag?’ he asked.

I followed his eyes down. ‘Oh just some old clothes,’ I said.

‘Patsy asked me to drop them off at the vicarage for next week’s jumble sale,’ I lied, saying the first thing that came into my head.

‘Oh wonderful!’ said Peter, taking the bag from my hand. ‘I’ve got a pile of stuff to go there I’ll take this lot round there for you.’

‘Thank you,’ I said, weakly, making a mental note to pop round to the vicarage the following morning to retrieve my clothes.

‘Why were Thumper and Patchy put at the bottom of the batting order?’ I asked Dr Brownlow as he climbed into his elderly Rolls Royce.

‘We need our best players at the bottom of the batting order,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘Just in case we need to lose some wickets in a hurry.’

I looked at him and frowned. ‘I don’t understand,’ I said.

‘If the other sides’ bowlers aren’t very good it can be quite difficult to get out,’ explained Dr Brownlow. ‘If they aren’t bowling very accurately you can’t rely on being bowled or given out leg before wicket so you have to make sure that you give easy catches.’

‘Oh.’ I said, wishing I hadn’t asked.

Still, for a brief moment I had enjoyed the thought that my talents had been recognised and that I had been selected to open the batting in recognition of the strength of my sporting skills instead of, as had always been the case, an entirely justifiable assumption that I had no sporting skills.

As I left the Duck and Puddle I noticed that someone had stuck a small cardboard notice on the Duck and Puddle’s front door. It said simply: ‘Thumper Robinson drank here’. The next time I returned to the pub, the notice about Henry Williamson had disappeared.

* * *

I had turned down Dr Brownlow’s offer to drive me home because there was a full moon and I rather fancied the walk back across the fields. During the last week I had spent one day in London and another in the Midlands and I hadn’t had time for any of my favourite country walks. I have noticed that if I don’t get out into the fields very regularly I suffer from withdrawal symptoms. I get edgy, irritable and easily upset. Besides, I had a rather strong suspicion that Ben, who had spent the evening sitting obediently and quietly under my chair in the Duck and Puddle, would enjoy a chance to get a little fresh air in her lungs and a little mud on her paws.

I had got to the bottom of the main field where our four sheep usually graze when I heard the unmistakeable sound of a sheep in trouble. The noise was coming from a small copse and so, treading carefully because it was dark underneath the trees, I gingerly edged off the path. The ground between the trees was thick with dead brambles and as I forced myself further and further into the thicket I could feel the thorns scratching at my legs through my trousers. Ben, who had tried to follow me but had, to her dismay, discovered that she simply could not find a way through the brambles remained on the path, occasionally whining very quietly.

At first I had half suspected that the sheep which was in trouble might be one of ours. It didn’t sound like Lizzie, Petula, Cynthia or Sarah-Louise (people who don’t know anything much about sheep assume that they all must sound the same but they do not; their voices are most distinct) but a distressed sheep can sometimes sound quite different. But when I finally managed to break through the brambles to stand within a foot or so of the trapped sheep I could clearly see that it wasn’t one of our tiny flock.

The poor thing must have been stuck for hours. It had strayed into the overgrown thicket, presumably in search of some tasty morsel, and had got itself naturally tethered by two long, strong brambles. It was so nervous and agitated that before I could even begin to free it I had to spend ten minutes stroking its head to calm it down. It looked no more than a year old and had enormous, trusting brown eyes. Sheep love having their heads stroked; best of all they adore having the area underneath their chins tickled.

Even after I had calmed the sheep down and managed to assure it that I didn’t mean it any harm it took me over half an hour to release it from its bonds. The brambles were unbreakable and even the Swiss Army Penknife which I always carry with me had a job cutting through the woody tangles. By the time the sheep was free my fingers were sore and raw and even in the dim moonlight I could see that my hands were bleeding quite badly. It was impossible to get the sheep back through to the field from which it had come so I trampled down a path back out of the brambles and then coaxed and pushed and pulled the liberated sheep onto the path leading up to our field where, although it hesitated for a moment at the sight of Ben, it trotted after me quite happily.

At the top of our field our four sheep came out of their stable when they heard me coming. They stared at the newcomer as though it were an alien and the newcomer stared back at them like a new girl starting a strange school.

I introduced them to one another and by the time I had fetched a bundle of hay and a couple of handfuls of sheep pellets the five animals seemed to have accepted one another. I left them all sleeping together in the stable and with Ben padding along silently behind me I went into the house, dumped my clothes on the kitchen floor, explained to Patsy what had happened, bathed the blood and mud off my hands, arms and legs and, exhausted but content, collapsed into bed.

As I lay my head on the pillow I remembered that just before I had left him that evening Dr Brownlow had asked me whether I’d thought of a subject for my second book yet. I had told him that I had no idea at all what I was going to write next, but as I drifted off to sleep I began to have the beginnings of an idea for a book which I knew I would enjoy writing.

* * *

CHAPTER TWELVE

First thing the following morning I rang Colin Jackson who rents the field from which the sheep I had rescued must have wandered. I knew that if I didn't ring him early he would have gone out to work in the fields and I probably wouldn't be able to catch him until the evening.

'I think I've got one of your ewes in my stable,' I told him. I explained what had happened. Colin said he would come round with his trailer to pick the animal up. I told him that he needn't bother coming up to the house but that he could just drive straight into the field from the lane. He didn't thank me and I didn't expect him to. People in Bilbury give and receive kindnesses with great ease. Villagers help one another because life is hard and helping your neighbours when they are in trouble is the way that generations of country folk have learned to survive the cruel vicissitudes of country life.

Town dwellers who come to Bilbury Grange sometimes remark on how lonely it must be and how desolate and isolated they feel. I never feel that at all in Bilbury though I do, I confess, feel lonely and alone if I have to go to London or any other big city. There is plenty of space in Bilbury but that's a different thing altogether; space has nothing to do with loneliness.

I put the telephone down, walked across the bedroom and drew back the curtains. The sun was shining. It was a thin, rather watery spring sunshine but it was sunshine nevertheless and it was good to see this additional clear reminder that winter was over. The winter seemed to have lasted a long time and it had been a hard one.

'What on earth happened to your clothes?' asked Patsy, clambering out of bed, coming over to the window to see what I was looking at and catching sight of my torn jacket and trousers. 'And where on earth did all this blood come from?' she asked, quite horrified.

I reminded her about the sheep I had rescued.

'But I didn't know you'd been bleeding so much!'

'Just scratches.' I showed her my hands and arms. 'They'll heal.'

'I wish I could say the same about your trousers!' said Patsy, poking her hand through a long tear.

'Can you mend them?'

'I can mend them,' said Patsy. 'But they'll look mended.'

'That's O.K.!' I grinned. 'Maybe I'll start a new fashion.'

We went downstairs and had breakfast and then I spent the rest of the morning working on an outline for the book I'd decided I wanted to write. I had been told so many stories since I had moved to Bilbury that I decided to try to write a novel about an imaginary village in Devon. I would, I thought, fill it with the adventures of a series of robust and humorous characters. I wondered if I would be able to create a character as full of life as Thumper Robinson!

* * *

Just before lunch Tanya telephoned from London.

'Have you sent me that photograph yet?' she asked.

'Photograph?'

'You were going to send me a picture of yourself. For newspapers and magazines.'

'Sorry!' I said. 'I forgot. I'll try to find one. I think I've got one of me in fancy dress when I was a medical student.

Do you think that will be O.K.? You can probably cut off most of the headdress.'

Tanya sighed. 'Headdress?'

'I went as an Indian brave.'

'I'm afraid that doesn't sound very suitable. 'The Observer wants to print a picture of you to accompany their review of your book.'

'Well, it could have been worse! Nigel Popplethwaite went as a Zulu and was covered from head to toe in boot polish. It took him a week to get it all off.'

'Haven't you got a decent portrait shot?' asked Tanya.

'I'm afraid not,' I confessed.

'I don't suppose you're coming up to London today or tomorrow?'

'No.'

Tanya sighed again. She seemed to sigh a lot when she spoke to me. 'I'll send a photographer,' she said. 'Will tomorrow morning be O.K.?'

I said that it would be fine.

'Make sure you wear something smart but casual,' said Tanya firmly.

I said I had just the outfit.

* * *

My morning's work hadn't gone too badly. I had thrown most of it away but I had kept a few good ideas and, by and large, was quite pleased with the way things were going. I had planned to carry on working on my book outline that afternoon but when Thumper came round to ask Miss Hargreaves to go round to her cottage with him I allowed myself to be persuaded to accompany them. I had discovered that although working at home has many advantages it has one huge disadvantage: it is all too easy to allow yourself to be distracted by something more interesting than work. Friends wandering idly by will catch me sitting at my desk and say things like: 'Oh I'm glad you're not doing anything important. Have you seen the gorse on the moors recently? It looks really beautiful today.'

The three of us, plus Ben, climbed into the cab of Thumper's truck and set off for Miss Hargreaves' cottage where work had been continuing at quite a spectacular pace since the night of the storm.

'We could rebuild the cottage so that it looks just the same as it was before the storm,' explained Thumper, picking his way carefully between a huge pile of freshly delivered building sand and an impressive looking stack of freshly cut timber. 'But stronger!' he added with a grin.

Miss Hargreaves looked at him rather sharply. 'That's how I want it, Robert,' she said. She was the only person I had ever met who called Thumper by his real name. Even Annie, his wife, called him Thumper.

'But while we're working on it we could make a few improvements if you like,' said Thumper. 'It won't take us much longer or cost much more money,' he added quickly.

'What sort of improvements?' asked Miss Hargreaves, extremely doubtfully. It wasn't difficult to tell that she was a woman who was not enthusiastic about change. She was the only person I knew who still did all her writing with a bottle of blue ink and a simple nib pen. Every other year the children at the school pooled their pocket money and bought her a ballpoint pen or a fountain pen and each time she said 'thank you' very nicely and then put the new fangled gadget away in a drawer. Generations of children had failed to persuade her that progress was here to stay.

‘Well we could build a little porch onto the front, extend your kitchen at the back, put another bedroom in your loft and add an indoor lavatory,’ said Thumper.

Miss Hargreaves stared at him. ‘Certainly not!’ she said indignantly. ‘An indoor lavatory!’ she repeated, as though Thumper had suggested building a bordello or a ten pin bowling alley onto the side of her cottage.

‘Don’t you want to think about it?’ asked Thumper, who was clearly rather disappointed.

‘I’ve thought about it!’ snapped Miss Hargreaves. ‘What do I want an indoor lavatory for?’

‘Well it’ll save you getting quite so chilly if you need to make an urgent call at night!’ said Thumper, looking rather embarrassed. I’d never seen Thumper look even remotely embarrassed before.

‘I’ve never had one indoors,’ said Miss Hargreaves. She looked at me. ‘There’s one in the flat at his house,’ she said, nodding in my direction. ‘But I don’t like it. It’s not natural or healthy.’ She walked briskly back to Thumper’s truck, climbed in and sat down. She was clearly waiting to be taken back to Bilbury Grange.

‘See if you can persuade her,’ whispered Thumper. ‘It seems a pity not to make a decent job of it.’

‘I doubt if she’ll listen to me,’ I whispered back.

‘What are you two whispering about?’ shouted Miss Hargreaves.

‘Nothing, Miss Hargreaves!’ we both lied. Even though Miss Hargreaves had not been my teacher I found myself feeling as guilty as Thumper looked.

* * *

After Thumper had dropped Miss Hargreaves, Ben and I off at Bilbury Grange, Ben and I popped out into the field to make sure that our four sheep were happy and well. I always visited them at least once, usually twice and sometimes three times a day to make sure that they had plenty of clean straw and fresh drinking water. If the weather was wet I fed them sheep pellets and hay. They always ran for shelter the moment it started to rain for although they didn’t mind the wind they hated getting soaked.

The sheep were all out in the field and they were absolutely fine but I didn’t need to risk drowsiness by counting them to see that there were five rather than four of them. The solitary sheep that I had rescued the night before was still there. It looked very much at home and Lizzie, Petula, Cynthia and Sarah-Louise all seemed quite at ease with it. I shared out the digestive biscuits which I had in my pocket. After a moment’s hesitation the newcomer decided that she too liked digestive biscuits. She was still nervous about Ben but clearly took comfort from the fact that her four new friends weren’t in the slightest bit worried about her.

When I had swept the concrete terrace outside the stable and refilled the sheep’s water bowl I walked back to the house and telephoned Colin Jackson. His wife Rosie, who had been brought up in Liverpool and had come to North Devon to work as a barmaid at a holiday camp, answered the phone in her quite unaltered Liverpool accent. I liked Rosie a lot. She and Colin had met at a pub in Ilfracombe and had married within a month. Now, just a few years later, she looked every inch a farmer’s wife. She had a huge, soft bosom and rosy cheeks and invariably wore a cheerfully coloured, old-fashioned print pinafore. She had a wonderful complexion, completely free of wrinkles or lines.

I was lucky, Rosie told me, after inviting Patsy and me to go round for Sunday lunch. Her husband had just arrived back at the house for his tea.

‘I don’t mind but I’ve still got your sheep,’ I reminded him. ‘Have you forgotten it?’

‘I picked her up this morning,’ replied Colin, tersely. ‘Not half an hour after you called.’

‘Well, five minutes ago she was in my field,’ I told him. ‘She must have fought her way through the brambles and come back again.’

Colin sighed. ‘I’ll pick her up as soon as I’ve finished my tea,’ he said.

* * *

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

‘I knew I should have brought hair and make-up with me,’ said the photographer gloomily. He was about thirty years old, five foot ten inches tall and so thin that if he had been standing sideways he would have been all but invisible. He stood, hands on hips, and stared at me in clear despair. He was wearing a plain white polo necked shirt, a pale grey silk suit and a floor length coat that was made of something so flimsy that even in the stillness of the living room it seemed to float on the air whenever he turned around.

‘Hair and make-up?’ I said, frowning. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Someone to do your hair and someone to do your make-up, my love,’ said the photographer. He sighed. It was a deep sigh, a sigh from the heart. He was clearly a troubled and unhappy man. ‘I should have brought wardrobe too,’ he added. He stepped forward a pace, reached out and toyed ruefully with a lock of my untameable hair. ‘Someone to dress you,’ he explained. I was glad Thumper wasn’t around to listen to any of this. The photographer stared dolefully at my stained and tattered sports jacket. Patsy had done a good job of mending it and it looked fine to me. It had pockets and kept me warm and I could think of no more to ask of a jacket. ‘Are you sure you haven’t got anything else you could wear?’ he asked, plaintively. ‘A suit, perhaps? Maybe something you wear on Sundays?’

‘This is all there is,’ I told him for the fourth time. I was getting just a little bit fed up of people telling me that my clothes were old and out of fashion. ‘Don’t think of the jacket as being out of fashion,’ I told him, trying to cheer him up. ‘Think of it as a timeless classic.’ The photographer tried hard to smile but it looked more like a grimace of pain. ‘No offence, dear,’ he said. ‘But I don’t honestly think that jacket was ever in fashion.’ He gave me what I think he thought was a smile. ‘Don’t take it personally.’ I thought that this was a remarkably silly thing to say. After all, how else could I take it but personally? It was, after all, my jacket he was talking about.

He stepped back a couple of paces, lowered his head to one side like a thoughtful budgerigar about to perform his party piece, and stroked his smooth, pink chin with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. He tilted his head the other way. ‘George, darling,’ he said, speaking to his assistant, ‘I want you to bring in every light we’ve got.’ He turned back to me. ‘I’m going to shoot you in your shirt sleeves,’ he said, giving this modest statement a profundity that I did not feel it entirely merited.

‘Just my shirt?’ I asked, surprised.

‘Just the shirt.’

‘Er... no trousers?’

‘Darling, I don’t care whether you wear trousers or not though to be perfectly honest I wouldn’t advise you to take them off with George around. I’m only shooting you from the chest up.’

‘Oh.’ I said. I looked down. ‘Shall I keep my tie on?’

The photographer closed his eyes as though in pain. ‘No,’ he said, after a long moment. ‘You can lose the tie.’ He paused ‘And when I say ‘lose the tie’ I do mean that you can ‘lose the tie’.’

I looked down at it. My Aunt Matilda had bought it for me on my fourteenth birthday and I had always rather liked it. It had so many colours in it that it seemed to go with just about anything. On the other hand, if you looked at it from another point of view then I suppose it was equally true that it didn’t really go with anything. I removed my tie, rolled it up and put it into my jacket pocket, removed my jacket and unfastened my top shirt button. I felt much more comfortable without a jacket and tie.

‘Right!’ I said, folding my arms, sitting up straight and smiling.

The photographer frowned.

‘Ready when you are,’ I said.

The photographer glared at me but didn’t answer. He walked off into a corner of the room and stared out of the window.

‘I should go and get yourself a coffee,’ whispered George, the assistant, who was busy setting up a battery of floodlights. He had a lisp which I suspect he had deliberately accentuated. I could imagine him standing alone for hours practising his lisp. ‘It’ll be hours before he’s ready for you.’

I quietly thanked him, tiptoed noiselessly out of the room and left them to it.

Escaping from the lunacy in the house I wandered down to the vegetable garden to have a word with Mr Parfitt about our entering the Bilbury Village Produce Show, a village extravaganza which was being organised as part of Revels Week.

* * *

Miss Phillips and Mrs Blossom had called round to the house the previous evening to tell Patsy and me about the proposed Show.

‘I’ve spoken to quite a few people about it,’ said Mrs Blossom, who was clearly rather excited by the whole business. I had poured them both a glass of parsnip wine. ‘Apparently the village always used to have a produce show on August Bank Holiday.’ She had brought with her a large notebook on the front of which she had stuck a label and carefully written the words BILBURY VILLAGE PRODUCE SHOW in large capital letters.

‘We’re going to have all sorts of categories,’ said Miss Phillips. ‘Carrots, potatoes, beetroot, tomatoes, lettuce, parsnips, broad beans, runner beans, parsley, rhubarb, soft fruits...’ interrupted Mrs Blossom, reading from her notebook.

‘...strawberries, raspberries, blackberries, blackcurrants, redcurrants...,’ explained Miss Phillips in case I wasn’t sure what a soft fruit was.

‘But we’re not just having fruit and vegetables,’ said Mrs Blossom.

‘Fruit cake, fairy cakes, rock buns, sponge cake...’ said Miss Phillips.

‘...with jam and with cream,’ interrupted Mrs Blossom.

Miss Phillips looked at her, rather sharply I thought.

‘Sponge cakes with jam and sponge cakes with cream,’ said Mrs Blossom. She held up her notebook and turned it so that Miss Phillips could read what was written in it. ‘We agreed. Two separate categories.’

Miss Phillips was nodding enthusiastically. ‘Yes. Absolutely,’ he said. ‘Two separate types of sponge cake. Jam and cream. And plain!’ she added. ‘That’s three, isn’t it?’

‘But it must be home-made jam,’ said Mrs Blossom, firmly.

‘Oh, yes, the jam must be home-made,’ agreed Miss Phillips. ‘As must the cream.’

‘That’s why we had to have two categories of fillings, you see,’ Mrs Blossom explained to Patsy and I. ‘Not everyone makes their own cream. So the people who make their own jam have a category they can enter.’

‘Though I suppose not everyone makes their own jam,’ said Miss Phillips, as though this terrible thought had only just occurred to her.

Patsy and I exchanged glances. We were both trying hard not to giggle at the seemingly interminable duologue which was rapidly threatening to turn into a music hall turn. ‘We’d love to enter!’ said Patsy.

‘Oh, would you!’ said Miss Phillips.

‘That’s wonderful!’ said Mrs Blossom. She rummaged around in her huge handbag, found a large black fountain pen and wrote our names down in her notebook. ‘I’ll bring you a category list as soon as they’re ready,’ she promised. She suddenly acquired a very serious look. ‘We’re asking people to pay a penny an entry,’ she said, rather nervously. ‘To help with the expenses. Do you think that will be all right?’

‘I’m sure it will be absolutely fine,’ I said.

‘We’ll be charging an entrance fee to the marquee,’ said Miss Phillips. ‘For the building fund, of course.’

‘But we thought we ought to try to be self-supporting just in case anything goes wrong,’ said Mrs Blossom. ‘We don’t want to end up taking money out of the fund, do we?’

‘No,’ said Patsy. ‘Absolutely not!’

‘I think charging a penny an entry is an extremely sensible idea,’ I said.

Miss Phillips and Mrs Blossom both smiled, first at each other and then at both Patsy and I, and said how very sweet she was and how much they appreciated our support and how thrilled they were that we were going to take part in the Show and how delighted they were that young people like us didn’t look down our noses at old fuddy duddys like them and so on and so on and in the end it looked as though they were going to start another duologue and so I poured them another glass of parsnip wine each while Patsy went out to the kitchen to fetch a batch of freshly baked home-made rock cakes.

‘Did you make the parsnip wine yourself?’ asked Miss Phillips.

I shook my head. ‘No. I’m afraid not. Patsy’s uncle made it.’

‘Her uncle?’

‘My uncle Paul. Paul Simpson.’

‘I didn’t know he was Patsy’s uncle!’

‘He’s her mother’s older brother.’

‘It’s very nice parsnip wine.’

‘Thank you. I’ll tell him. He’ll be pleased.’

‘I must call round and get him to enter. We’re having wine categories.’

‘Isn’t he Esther Kennedy’s cousin?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said.

‘I think he is,’ said Miss Phillips. ‘He lives next door to that woman who used to breed Dalmatians in Ilfracombe doesn’t he?’

I said I wasn’t sure.

‘She had an affair with a man who sold insurance,’ said Mrs Blossom firmly. ‘She had wonderful red hair.’

‘It was a wig,’ said Miss Phillips, rather sourly I thought

‘I don’t think it was,’ said Mrs Blossom.

‘Anyway her husband left her and they had to sell the house. Pink house. 1930s but with a late 50s extension. It was a pity. They'd just built the most beautiful gazebo. Do you remember, dear, it had a wonderful weather vane on the roof?'

'It was lovely, wasn't it?' agreed Mrs Blossom. 'Her daughter married a ski instructor didn't she?'

'Did she? I thought that was the Barnard girl.'

'You're right. It was.'

People who claim that the art of conversation is dead have quite clearly never spent an evening in the company of the indomitable Miss Phillips and the inimitable Mrs Blossom.

* * *

I had rushed out of the house so quickly that I'd forgotten to put on a sweater and by the time I got to the vegetable garden I was shivering with the cold.

'You'll catch your death like that,' said Mr Parfitt, tuttutting. 'Come into the greenhouse and I'll find you something warm that you can wrap yourself up in.' He himself had, I noticed, acquired an even more rural look than before. His suit jacket and its last button had parted company and he now had a piece of binder twine wrapped tightly around his waist and knotted rather flamboyantly. He was now wearing an old, battered tweed hat that was several sizes too large for him. I didn't know what had happened to the other hat. He had this one crammed right down over his ears.

'There's a blanket over here,' said Miss Hargreaves. I turned round. I hadn't noticed her before. 'Mr Parfitt has been showing me round the garden,' she said. She looked almost radiant. 'He's done wonders, hasn't he?' She handed me an old blanket which, judging by the hairs which were stuck on it, had been used as a bed by Sophie and Emily. Miss Hargreaves and Mr Parfitt had clearly got to know each other much better since their first meeting at our dinner party.

Using the back of an old seed catalogue order form, Mr Parfitt then carefully drew out a plan of our walled vegetable garden. Some of the beds were, of course, already spoken for. The longest, sunniest bed, underneath the south facing long wall was where our soft fruit bushes were planted. In another month or two it would be time to erect the netting over them to protect the fruit from the birds. Four of the centre beds were occupied by old-fashioned wood and glass cold frames and those we would use for raising seeds and growing salad vegetables. The bed underneath the short, easterly facing wall was where we grew our rhubarb (thanks to the straw from the sheep's stable it was already two feet high) and four small beds were filled with strawberry plants.

'I reckon we've got twelve beds to play with,' said Mr Parfitt, completing his plan of the garden and numbering the free beds one to twelve. 'Do you want to go for quality or variety?'

I scratched my head. 'I'm not sure,' I said. 'What's the, er, difference?'

'Do you want to grow three or four beds full of carrots to give yourself a really good chance of winning first prize in the carrots or do you want a dozen or more different crops so that you can stand a decent chance of getting a prize in several categories?'

'I think we'll go for variety,' I said without hesitation. 'I want to be able to eat the stuff we grow. We'll never get through four beds' worth of carrots!'

Mr Parfitt looked pleased. 'That's the spirit!' he said. 'We'll go for 'Best Exhibitor in Show'!'

'What's that?' I had to ask him.

'Every entrant gets points for all the categories he enters. Whoever ends up with most points wins the overall prize - Best Exhibitor in Show!'

'I'm not even sure that they're having one of those,' I said.

‘Course they are!’ insisted Mr Parfitt. ‘Village shows always have an award for the best overall exhibitor. They couldn’t not have one!’

‘You’ll be bound to win with Mr Parfitt looking after your garden,’ whispered Miss Hargreaves confidently. He looked at her and smiled. She smiled back at him and touched his arm lightly.

In the end, under Mr Parfitt’s guidance I agreed that, among other things, we would grow peas, beans (broad and runner), potatoes (three varieties of potato that would be ready early in the season), carrots, parsnip, beetroot, spinach, brussels sprouts, broccoli, kale and onions. Mr Parfitt asked me which seed merchant I used. I told him that although I liked to give as much custom as I could to Peter at the village shop we didn’t usually buy our seeds there. I explained that Patsy was in charge of seed brochures and had already compared prices from several catalogues.

I then took the old blanket from around my shoulders and put it back in its original place. Before I went back to the house I walked past the sheep’s stable to say ‘hello’ and make sure that all was well.

All was well but once again we had five sheep living with us. The intruder looked thoroughly at home and baaaed as noisily as any of the other four when she saw me. I gave all five a handful of pellets each and knew that I was about to do something that I really didn’t want to do but just couldn’t avoid doing.

‘I thought you’d be out here!’ said Patsy.

I looked up, slightly startled. Patsy was standing on the other side of the gate leading into the field. ‘The photographer says he’s ready for you now.’

‘Right,’ I said. I’d forgotten about the photographer. ‘That sheep is back in our field again.’ I pointed to her. She seemed to know I was talking about her and baaaed noisily.

‘That’s the one that Colin Jackson has fetched back twice?’

‘That’s the one.’

‘She must like it here.’

‘I can’t send her back a third time, Patsy.’

‘You’re daft!’

‘I know.’

‘What are we going to call her?’

‘Well, judging by the number of times she’s escaped we ought to call her Houdini but Houdini was a man.’

‘We’ll call her Miss Houdini then.’

‘O.K. Do you think Colin Jackson will sell her to us?’

‘Oh, he’ll huff and he’ll puff and he’ll go on and on about how valuable she is and how much he could get for her at the market but he’ll sell her. She’s a nuisance and he’ll be glad to get rid of her.’

‘We can’t really afford her, can we?’

‘No. But now that she’s sought sanctuary here three times we can’t let Colin sell her to the slaughterhouse either.’

I sighed, opened the gate and slipped through. At the rate we were going it wouldn’t be long before we had a full sized flock to look after. I stood there for a moment and looked at the five sheep. ‘Damned animals,’ I muttered, half under my breath, though I didn’t mean it, of course.

Patsy looked up at me and grinned. ‘Come on,’ she said. ‘That photographer will be having a fit.’ She put her arm around me. ‘And you must be freezing cold.’ She looked up at me. ‘Has anyone ever told you that you’re a big softie?’

‘Me? A softie? Never.’

* * *

The living room looked like a film studio. The photographer and his assistant had arrived in a small minibus and the whole vehicle must have been crammed with lights, reflectors, camera bodies, lenses and all the other expensive paraphernalia without which some professional practitioners of the gentle and relatively simple art of photography do not seem able to function. Curiously, although the intention seemed to be to flood the room with light, huge black drapes had been hung over the windows so that absolutely no natural light could enter the room at all. Several huge metal trunks - in which the equipment had presumably arrived - were stacked in a corner of the room. It occurred to me that the equipment scattered around our living room was probably worth more than the whole house. It seemed a lot of trouble for a couple of snaps.

‘Crumbs!’ I said, looking round. ‘Why the blackout?’ I asked.

The photographer, who had changed clothes and was now wearing a lilac coloured camisole top with lace edging, a huge white canvas jacket with enormously baggy pockets, a pair of skin tight black jeans and a pair of huge pink basketball boots, waved a hand about airily.

‘God’s very untrustworthy when it comes to lighting,’ he explained. ‘One minute he gives you glorious sunshine and then poof,’ he waved his arms dramatically to illustrate what he was saying, ‘in a flash it’s gone and the sky is brooding black.’ He leant forward, peering at my shirt. ‘What on earth have you been doing?’ he demanded.

I looked down. My shirt was covered with cat hairs. They had presumably come from the blanket that Mr Parfitt had given me to fling around my shoulders. ‘George! Brush!’ shouted the photographer. I then had to stand very still for several minutes while George attempted to brush the cat hairs off my shirt. When the photographer was satisfied he waved a finger to George, who was now fussing with one of the lamps. George, constantly alert, responded to this almost imperceptible gesture as though his employer had cracked a bull whip.

‘Stool for the client, please, George!’ said the photographer. He glanced at me, tutted and rolled his eyes heavenwards. ‘He doesn’t know which side his bread is buttered,’ he said. He was, it was clear, a master of the cliché.

George left what he was doing, scurried behind a huge umbrella shaped reflector and rummaged around. You wouldn’t have thought it would have been possible to lose a stool in one room but for a moment I thought they’d managed it. George emerged a couple of moments later clutching a tall stool with a small black leather seat and long, chromium-plated legs. ‘Things are always in the last place you look, aren’t they?’ he said. His close contact with the photographer had clearly given him an unenviable mastery of the nonsensical cliché. I was tempted to point out that things you think you’ve lost are always in the last place you look - because when you’ve found them you stop looking - but I didn’t.

‘Just here, I think, George,’ said the photographer, pointing to a spot on the carpet.

George put the stool down where the photographer had indicated and glanced up to see that all was well. With a slight wave of his left hand, first this way and then that way, the photographer directed the placing of the stool first away from and then back to the spot he had originally indicated.

‘I’ll go and get lunch started,’ said Patsy, still standing in the doorway. ‘Will you both be staying for lunch?’ she asked our two visitors.

For some inexplicable reason the photographer seemed overcome by this uncomplicated offer of hospitality. He put his hands together as though praying, lowered his voice and delivered a small speech about how kind we were and how touched he was and how wonderful he thought it was that people in the country still made their visitors feel so welcome.

‘It’s just home-made vegetable soup,’ said Patsy. ‘And home made bread,’ she added. She rather wisely disappeared before the photographer could launch himself into yet another eulogy about country cooking.

Deprived of this opportunity, the photographer turned to George. ‘What’s the time?’ he asked the infinitely patient assistant. I could see that he himself was wearing an expensive Rolex on his left wrist but it was presumably easier and less exhausting to get George to look at his watch than to raise his arm and look at his own

‘Twelve fifteen,’ replied George, after studying his own less expensive timepiece.

This news seemed to startle and upset the photographer. He clapped his hands, looked as though he was about to have a nervous breakdown and then made a great effort to control himself. ‘Come on!’ he said, though I wasn’t sure whether the encouragement was directed at me, George or himself.

George positioned one of the cameras, looked through the viewfinder and then politely asked me if I would be kind enough to sit on the stool. I sat on the stool. When George was content with what he could see he backed away. The photographer then moved in, bent down and looked through the viewfinder himself. After a brief glance he stood up, sniffed thoughtfully and then nodded. George moved back in and pressed a button on top of the camera. There was a click and a whirring noise and a photograph emerged from the back of the camera. The two of them studied it carefully and then George brought it over to me so that I could look at it. It was a picture of me in my shirtsleeves sitting on a stool. The photograph made me look very bored and so the camera had managed to capture my feelings very effectively. I said I thought it looked fine. George said he thought it was a tremendously powerful and evocative shot. He then changed something on the camera, looked up to the photographer for permission, and pressed the button again. This time no photograph emerged from the back of the camera.

After half an hour of this I was bored rigid. ‘I think that last one was fantastic,’ I said, getting down off the stool. My left leg was lucky, it had gone to sleep. ‘Lunch will be ready,’ I said.

George looked shocked and turned immediately towards the photographer. ‘You can’t go yet!’ the photographer cried.

‘Patsy will be cross if we keep her waiting,’ I warned him, quite untruthfully. The threat proved extremely effective. He followed me to the kitchen as meekly as a sheep will follow its shepherd. George followed behind like a lamb trailing behind its mother.

After lunch I managed to cut the photo session short by telling the photographer and his assistant that I had to clean out the sheep’s stable. I said that they could photograph me up to my knees in dirty straw if they wanted to but I wasn’t in the slightest bit surprised or disappointed when they both declared that since they had a long journey back home they thought they had better start packing up.

After they had gone I rang Colin Jackson and arranged to buy the sheep which had decided to come and live with us.

* * *

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

After my first, and I thought rather abortive, appearance on television, I had not expected to receive any more invitations to pollute the nation's airwaves with my own peculiar brand of delicate anarchy. But, strangely, the invitations to appear on chat shows, news programmes and magazine programmes had come in far more quickly than even Tanya had expected. What I hadn't realised was that both television and radio producers are constantly looking for new faces and voices with which to entertain their viewers and listeners. The demand for new guests, new topics and even moderately interesting subjects for discussion is constant. I was first flattered into thinking that the tremendous interest that was being shown in me and my book had been inspired by my personality and the value of the words I had written. Only later did I realise that the enthusiasm was general rather than particular and that I would have attracted as much (and possibly more) interest if I had written a book describing the history of lace making on the Norfolk Broads.

In addition to the invitations to appear on television and radio (most of which I managed to avoid) the following few weeks also brought a steady trickle of invitations to speak at literary luncheons and women's institutes. There were even one or two invitations to sit in bookshops and to sign copies of my book.

I have never believed in the philosophy that one should try everything once. It has always seemed to me that this is an approach which is destined to produce much unhappiness, regret and indigestion. But I was just as inexperienced in saying 'no' to invitations of this type as I was in accepting and fulfilling them.

My first invitation to speak in public came one evening. Patsy took the call and handed me the telephone.

'It's a Mrs Periwinkle,' she whispered, politely holding her hand over the mouthpiece so that the subject of this introduction would not hear herself being announced. I tried, unsuccessfully, to think who Mrs Periwinkle could be. In the days when I had practised as a family doctor I was quite accustomed to receiving telephone calls from complete strangers (and then, within seconds, asking them the most intimate of questions) but since my retirement my natural English reserve had reclaimed its place.

'I'm sorry to bother you, doctor,' said Mrs Periwinkle. 'You don't know me but I'm joint secretary of the Little Tidbury On Sea Branch of the British Literary Guild. Your publisher gave me your telephone number.'

I said 'hello' and told her, as one does in these circumstances, that it was nice to hear from her. The British Literary Guild, in case you haven't heard of it, is a huge national organisation. They have branches in just about every town and village in the country and members regularly meet to discuss, dissect and, presumably sometimes even enjoy, modern and classical works of literature.

'We have a meeting every third Tuesday,' said Mrs Periwinkle. 'And one of our most popular themes for speakers is 'My First Book'. Your name was put forward by several of our members last week and we're hoping that we might be able to ink you in for one evening soon.' She put a lot of emphasis on the word 'ink'.

'That's very kind of you,' I said. 'Er... where is Little Tidbury On Sea?' I asked. I'm not sure why I asked this, though I suppose that I must have been subconsciously aware of the fact that she had rung to invite me to do something that I didn't want to do and so it might have simply been a delaying tactic.

She told me. Any hopes of being able to explain that I lived in a remote village of Devon and would, with regret, have to decline her invitation evaporated when she explained in some detail that Little Tidbury On Sea was no more than forty miles away from Bilbury. I was surprised to discover that, despite its name, the village was at least twenty miles away from the coast and over thirty miles away from its namesake, Tidbury On Sea. I should not have been surprised. Places in Devon often have misleading and unrealistic names. The village next to Bilbury is called Kentisbury Town but has a total human population of about fifty. The village of Greater Munton is much smaller than the village of Lesser Munton. And the village of South Boreham is directly north of North Boreham.

'Ah!' I said, when she had told me the location of Little Tidbury On Sea.

‘Can I put you down for one evening this month?’ she asked.

I know now that I should have said almost anything other than what I did say. I should have told her that I was emigrating to Lithuania or suffering from an infectious disease. I should have been honest, risked offending her, and explained that the very thought of public speaking always made me feel so ill that I was never able to fulfil my engagements. I should have explained that I would rather have major surgery than speak in public. It isn’t just the twenty or thirty minutes standing up in front of an audience which I dread but the sleepless nights beforehand.

But I didn’t tell the truth. I made an excuse. I said I was committed on Tuesdays. It wasn’t really a lie. I’m committed to sitting in front of the fire on Tuesdays.

But, if there is one thing that is guaranteed to backfire it is using a feeble and dishonest excuse in order to try to get out of doing something you don’t want to do.

And, because I felt guilty about almost lying and because I felt that I ought to have said ‘yes’ I then proceeded to dig my own grave. ‘What a pity,’ I said. ‘I’d have loved to come and any other day would have been fine. But Tuesdays are just impossible, I’m afraid.’

I had, in my ignorance and innocence, completely failed to make any allowance for the fact that with the possible exception of politicians, club secretaries are the most ruthless and least generous of all beings. Few of them ever wanted to be club secretary but now that they are their main ambition in life is to fill their quota of speakers as quickly as they possibly can. They don’t care whether the speakers they book are competent or even capable of speaking the right language. They have no compassion for the shy and retiring. Their aim is simply to get names written into the club diary - preferably in ink.

‘Oh dear,’ said Mrs Periwinkle, malevolently lulling me into a false sense of security. ‘Well, never mind,’ she said. And she paused before pulling the pin out of the hand grenade she’d skilfully tucked down the front of my trousers. ‘I’ll have a word with one or two of the committee members and see if we can rearrange one of our meetings to fit in with you. Shall we say next Wednesday?’

I was sunk. I had wandered up a creek and found myself without a canoe. I had climbed a tree and found myself stuck without a ladder. I was hoist by my own petard. I had shot myself in the foot with astonishing accuracy. Trying hard not to sound as glum as I felt I said that would be very kind of her. We exchanged final pleasantries and then I put down the telephone.

I had, however, learned my lesson, though I was to discover that avoiding public speaking can be even more difficult than you might imagine. Sometimes you have to be quite unbelievably blunt. When the next invitation came, asking me to speak at a literary dinner somewhere in the north of England, I simply thanked the caller and told him that I was terrible at public speaking.

‘Oh, don’t worry about that,’ said the person who had invited me to speak. ‘Most of our speakers are pretty rough. In fact some of them are bloody awful. The people who come to our dinners are used to that. To be honest our dinners are just a bit of an opportunity to get out and meet some friends.’

‘I hadn’t expected this. I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘But I really hate public speaking. I don’t like leaving home and I get very nervous for days - weeks - beforehand.’ Just talking about public speaking was making me feel nervous.

‘Oh, I’m just the same,’ said the caller cheerfully. ‘And you know, the funny thing is that it never gets any easier! We usually have three speakers. Would you like to be on first? I always find I prefer to speak first so that I don’t have time to get too nervous!’

‘I’m afraid I’d rather not speak at all,’ I told him. ‘But thank you very much for inviting me,’ I added.

‘You’ll have to get used to it,’ insisted the caller. ‘Publishers like their authors to speak at dinners and luncheons.’

‘Public speaking really isn’t my scene,’ I apologised. ‘Sorry.’

‘We’ll put you up in a very nice boarding house and your publisher will pay your travelling expenses so you won’t be out of pocket.'

'No, thank you.'

There was a pause. When the caller spoke again his voice had changed. 'You're saying 'no'?' He sounded very put out.

'I'm afraid so.'

'Well, don't expect us to put your book on our recommended list for the local public library!' he snapped, slamming down the telephone.

* * *

Planning for the Revels Week was continuing so fast that I was beginning to find it difficult to remember exactly what had been organised. The Revels had acquired a momentum of their own and I think most people in the village had more or less forgotten that the original idea had been simply to raise some money to pay for repairing the school cottage. Fund raising may have been the original reason for bringing back the Revels but it was certainly no longer the sole reason for the enthusiasm in the village. Many of the events being organised seemed unlikely to raise any money at all but this didn't seem to discourage people in the slightest. I suspected the truth was that the Revels had added a rare air of excitement and anticipation to the village. Even more importantly, perhaps, they had brought an already close village even closer.

One of the things I had always liked about Bilbury was the fact that the villagers regarded one another as being members of a community. The Revels had strengthened the already powerful community spirit that I so admired and I felt proud and privileged to be regarded as a villager.

In some parts of Devon you have to live in the area for decades before you're regarded as 'local'. A friend of mine who had lived in a cottage in Cornwall for thirty years told me gloomily that he reckoned that if his children stayed in the village then there was a real possibility that their grandchildren might be accepted as 'locals'. In Bilbury you were regarded as being a 'local' if you wanted to be a 'local'. The key was not the length of time that you'd lived there but the enthusiasm with which you lived there. Many of the villagers had themselves moved to Bilbury after living in other parts of the country and they valued the feeling of belonging which the village gave. After all, as Dr Brownlow once said, it is possible for someone to have been in a village for decades and yet to have no love either for the village itself or its inhabitants. He pointed out that a newcomer who contributes to village life is of far more value to the village community than an old resident who constantly yearns to be somewhere else.

It was in the spirit of togetherness that the villagers living around the Bilbury village green had, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, painted their houses with the paint that Peter Marshall had provided. Although there had been some initial dissent most of them had eventually admitted that pink, though it might perhaps not have been their first choice, wasn't too bad a colour after all. Those who remained unconvinced of the appeal of the colour were enormously cheered when the first rainstorm completely washed the paint away. It was only then that Thumper Robinson noticed that the paint which Peter had provided was quite clearly marked 'water soluble' and 'unsuitable for exterior use'.

Patsy and I had both been press ganged by the wife of Bilbury's new vicar into helping with a special midsummer night's revue. Having made it quite clear that I would not accept any role which involved any sort of public appearance I found myself appointed assistant stage manager while Patsy rather reluctantly found herself a slightly nervous member of the 'Bilbury Ladies Amateur Cancan And Exotic Dancing Troupe'. The title of what was generally agreed to be the first Bilbury dance team was admittedly rather a mouthful but it was the result of a democratic compromise between those members of the Committee who wanted the dancers to be known as 'The Buxom Bilbury Beauties' and those who felt that 'The Bilbury Belles' was more appropriate.

When Bilbury's previous vicar had unexpectedly been promoted and moved away to tend to a flock in an altogether grander and more elegant environment the villagers had awaited the appointment of a new spiritual saviour with some trepidation. The villagers had found their previous spiritual saviour rather unbending and had regarded his hardline approach to subjects such as poaching to be a little out of touch with reality.

Technically, Bilbury hasn't actually had a vicar of its own for many years. For as long as most people can remember the village has shared a clergyman with five other small, local parishes.

The Bilbury parsonage, a grand, nineteenth century building with eight bedrooms, two turrets and a swimming pool, has for several years been owned by a mysterious businessman who has only ever been seen twice in the village. On both occasions he landed by helicopter, stayed for a night and disappeared the next morning. In his absence the former parsonage is kept warm and waterproof by a couple from London who do all their shopping at a supermarket in Taunton and have probably not exchanged more than half a dozen words with anyone in the village in the five years of their residence.

The new vicar, Ernest Riddle, had come late to the church. He had worked as an accountant for twenty years before switching careers and becoming a guardian of souls rather than balance sheets. He was short, probably no more than five feet four inches tall, plump, weighing twelve stones or even slightly more, and enormously jovial. It had, he told me, always been a dream of his to acquire custody of a country parish. He was thrilled that his dream had come true. His wife, Delilah, who looked more like a fashion model than a country vicar's wife, a post normally recognised as being ideally suited to a woman built for jam and chutney making, was a decade his junior and had been a well-known athlete under her maiden name. She had, she told us, enjoyed an interest in amateur theatricals since she'd been a girl. She regarded the Revels as an opportunity not to be missed.

* * *

All too soon it was Wednesday and I was heading for Little Tidbury On Sea with the notes for my speech in my inside jacket pocket and my ordnance survey map of North Devon opened out on the car seat beside me.

I had spent hours agonising over what to say. Should I write a formal speech and read it? Should I simply make a few brief notes and ad lib my speech?

I toyed with the idea of talking about how much of a struggle it had been to turn several reams of copy paper into a book but dismissed that notion as pretentious. Talking about the theme of the book - the cruel greed of the pharmaceutical industry and the naivety of the medical profession - seemed too pompous and earnest. I would have liked to have made it a funny speech but I simply didn't have the confidence. I thought about talking about the technical problems of writing a book but I thought that everyone else who had ever spoken on the subject of 'My First Book' would be bound to have explored that particular territory. I thought about detailing my bizarre and sometimes seemingly unreal confrontations with the professionals of the publishing industry but decided that that would be too esoteric. I was attracted by the idea of talking about my experiences in television but I didn't really have enough material. In the end I had abandoned all these formal notions, and decided simply to make a few general notes which fitted the theme and to adapt the content and form of my speech according to the audience.

The meeting was due to be held in the church hall and I parked, as I had been told to do, in a tiny car park behind the church. A large white board at the far end of the car park bore two wind and rain battered posters. Both posters carried messages in screaming, fluorescent, orange letters. One said: 'Be Generous To Your Fellow Man And The Lord Will Be Generous To You'. The other said: 'Forgive Those Who Have Sinned Against You And You Will Be Blessed'. Above this a large hand painted sign saying 'NO PARKING - TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED' had been nailed to the notice-board. I locked the car, checked that I had my notes in my inside jacket pocket, and walked round to the side of the church hall.

The door to the church hall was open, as I had been told it would be, but except for a couple of dozen tubular steel stacking chairs the hall itself was empty. I stood there for a moment and then called out: 'Is anyone there?' No one came and no one answered my call so I walked a few paces further into the room and repeated the question. This time a middle aged woman in a floral pinafore responded by poking her head and upper body through a hatchway which I hadn't even noticed before. She asked me if I'd come for the meeting. I said I had and introduced myself. The woman introduced herself as Mrs Kennedy, the society's treasurer, thanked me for coming and asked if I was any good at mending kettles. I said I didn't think so but that I would take a look.

Generally speaking, I know as much about kettles as I do about the economic influences of nuclear power on third world countries but it was pretty clear to me that this particular kettle had boiled its last teapot full of water. It was one of the old-fashioned sorts of kettle that sits on the top of a stove and someone had clearly left it to boil dry. It had a rather large hole in its blackened bottom.

I showed Mrs Kennedy the hole. ‘I’m afraid I don’t think there’s much you can do for this,’ I told her sadly.

‘Well we can’t manage without our kettle,’ said Mrs Kennedy firmly. ‘Let’s pop round to Mrs Alladyce’s to see if she’s got a spare.’

Obediently, I followed her out of the church hall, waited while she locked the door with a huge, rusty, iron key and then followed her across the road, down a little alleyway and in through the back door of a tiny terraced house. She walked with the shuffling gait of a woman who is a martyr to her feet. English women of a certain age and breeding are always martyrs to their feet.

Mrs Alladyce, clearly the occupier of the house, was in her living room doing her ironing while listening to the radio. She looked up as we entered. ‘I was just coming over, Mrs Kennedy,’ she said. ‘I thought I’d just have time to finish off my ironing and listen to the end of my play.’ She spoke of it as though the play had been specially broadcast for her.

‘Don’t let us disturb you,’ whispered Mrs Kennedy. ‘Have you got a spare kettle we can borrow?’

‘In the kitchen,’ replied Mrs Alladyce, in what I suspect she thought was her own version of a whisper. It was a whisper that would have carried two miles in a storm. ‘Cupboard under the sink. My Geoffrey bought me one of those electric jobs last Christmas. But I kept my old faithful just in case.’

‘Geoffrey’s her son,’ whispered Mrs Kennedy, as we tiptoed out of the living room, along the corridor, past the door through which we had entered and into the kitchen. Back in the living room we could hear the radio play to which Mrs Alladyce was listening come to a thrilling climax. ‘He’s a chartered surveyor,’ Mrs Kennedy added, and I assumed that she was referring to Mrs Alladyce’s son, Geoffrey. I tried to forget this little titbit of information but my brain probably stored it away somewhere safe anyway. I’ve always noticed that the more irrelevant a piece of information the more likely I am to remember it. In a year’s time I would forget where I had parked the car but remember that Mrs Alladyce’s son Geoffrey was a chartered surveyor.

Mrs Kennedy bent down, opened the cupboard underneath Mrs Alladyce’s sink, removed a small silverish kettle which had a whistling nozzle on its spout, and then closed the cupboard and stood up.

‘Thank you, Mrs Alladyce!’ she called out as we left. ‘Much obliged!’ She lowered her voice. ‘Remarkable woman,’ she added, sotto voce. ‘She’s got four sons and terrible veins. One of them was very nearly a Parliamentary Candidate for Preston North.’ I assumed that she was referring to one of the sons rather than her veins and murmured something suitably non-committal and inconsequential. It occurred to me to wonder of whom she was prouder: the son who was a chartered surveyor or the son who had very nearly been a Parliamentary Candidate for Preston North.

When we got back to the church hall there were two people waiting outside. One introduced herself as Mrs Periwinkle, the woman who had invited me to Little Tidbury on Sea. She had bright blue hair, wore spectacles with hugely ornate frames and carried a music case which she clutched to her bosom as though afraid that someone might try to steal it from her. The other woman was tall, and heavy set and wore a short black, pencil skirt and a bright pink sweater. She was heavily made up, had shoulder length, curly blonde hair, wore white, lacy gloves and carried a large, blue, plastic handbag.

‘It looks like being one of our quiet evenings,’ said Mrs Periwinkle, as we all trooped inside the church hall. Mrs Kennedy disappeared into the kitchen with her kettle and the other woman, who hadn’t spoken and to whom I had not been introduced, sat herself down on the front row. Mrs Periwinkle walked briskly across to the side of the hall and brought a small beige topped folding card table across to the middle of the room. I stepped forward, took the table from her and, with some difficulty, erected it. Mrs Periwinkle smiled at me. I moved a couple of chairs round to the other side of the table, so that they were facing the audience of stacking chairs.

‘Er... how many people usually turn up?’ I asked, hesitantly.

‘Sometimes, on a very good night, we’ve had as many as eighteen,’ said Mrs Periwinkle, proudly. ‘But that was for a very special speaker. Usually we get eight or nine.'

I swallowed. It had never occurred to me that the audience might be so small. I realised that I found the prospect of speaking to a small audience far more intimidating than the idea of addressing a large audience. I suddenly remembered the first time I had spoken in public - at an anti-vivisection meeting in Barnstaple. My throat felt very dry and when Mrs Kennedy thrust a cup of tea into my hand I accepted it gratefully.

'Of course Mr and Mrs Jilkes are away on holiday,' said Mrs Periwinkle. 'And they always bring Miss Llewellyn with them. She has a gammy knee and can't walk far. So that's three who won't be coming. Could we have a water jug and a couple of glasses, Mrs Kennedy?'

'And poor old Mr Bedford is in hospital,' added Mrs Kennedy, over her shoulder as she scurried off towards the kitchen to fetch the water jug and glasses.

'Is he? I didn't know that. Oh, the poor dear. What's the trouble? It's not his liver again, is it?' called Mrs Periwinkle.

'I don't think so. I think he's been having trouble with his, you know, down below...,' Embarrassed, Mrs Kennedy's voice tailed off. She waved a hand around airily.

'Ah!' said Mrs Periwinkle, quickly. 'Well I hope he gets better soon. He always brings Mrs Lawson and Miss Innes so that's another three who won't be coming. I must send him a card. Is he in the Exeter General?'

'Yes, I think so.'

'Do you know which ward he's in?'

Mrs Kennedy scurried back, carrying a water jug in one hand and clutching two unbreakable glasses in the other.

'Men's surgical I expect,' said Mrs Kennedy.

'He's on the Arthur Thomas Ward Ward,' said a gruff voice.

I looked around to see who had spoken. There was no one there except the blonde woman with the blue handbag. She smiled at me. She had lipstick on her teeth. There was something odd about her but I couldn't quite make up my mind what it was. She still had her gloves on. Her unusually deep voice made me think that she might perhaps have a thyroid problem. I wondered whether or not I should ask her if she'd visited her doctor. Her gruff voice might be explained by an underfunctioning thyroid gland which thyroid tablets would cure. I wondered if the blonde curls might be a wig. Another symptom of hypothyroidism is hair loss.

'Arthur Thomas,' said Mrs Periwinkle. 'I'll send him a card tomorrow. I always keep one or two in. They never have much choice at the shop do they?'

'I think it's gone downhill since Elsie and Robbie left. I'm sure those new people mean well but they just don't seem the right sort of folk to be running a village shop. She's far too brassy for my taste.'

'Arthur Thomas Ward,' said the gruff-voiced, blonde-haired woman with the blue handbag.

Mrs Periwinkle and Mrs Kennedy both looked at her and frowned. 'Yes, dear,' said Mrs Periwinkle. 'Arthur Thomas.' She turned to me. 'This is Josephine,' she said. I said 'hello' to Josephine and Josephine said 'hello' back and smiled at me again. I remembered that women with hypothyroidism also suffered from dry, rough skin. That could explain why Josephine hadn't removed her gloves.

'No,' said Josephine. 'The ward is called Arthur Thomas Ward Ward. It's named after someone called Arthur Thomas Ward.'

'Well,' said Mrs Periwinkle, as though this was just another example of bureaucracy gone mad. 'That's very confusing!'

Josephine looked rather apologetic, as though it was her fault that the hospital authorities had chosen to name the ward in such a manner. I felt sorry for her and decided that I would try to get her alone for a moment so that I could suggest that she seek medical help. I was now quite convinced that she had a thyroid problem.

‘Would you like a biscuit, doctor?’

I turned round. Mrs Kennedy had produced a tin of mixed biscuits. I hesitated for a moment, realised I was hungry and took a bourbon cream.

‘Take two,’ she said, waggling the tin under my nose.

I wanted to but politeness won. I smiled, shook my head and raised a hand as my ‘no’.

‘More tea?’

‘No, thank you.’

‘I’m afraid it doesn’t look as if your audience is going to get any bigger,’ said Mrs Periwinkle. She somehow managed to make it clear that if the audience was small it was entirely my fault. ‘Would you like to start?’ She noticed that the blonde with the blue handbag had disappeared. ‘When Josephine gets back,’ she said. ‘She must have gone to powder her nose.’

‘Right!’ I said. ‘I’ll just, er, pop to the, er...’

‘The little boys’ room is over there on the left,’ said Mrs Periwinkle, pointing to the left of the stage.

When I opened the door and saw Josephine standing in front of the porcelain I thought I must have gone into the wrong room. But another glance assured me that I hadn’t. She had her skirt pulled up to her waist and was doing exactly what I had gone there to do.

‘Hello!’ she said, quite unflustered and completely unembarrassed. ‘I’m really looking forward to hearing your talk. I’m writing a book myself.’ I couldn’t help noticing that the backs of her hands were covered in thick black hair. I understood why the gloves were necessary.

‘Oh!’ I managed to croak. I took my place beside her and tried not to make a big thing out of the fact that I was sharing a urinal with a large bosomed stranger wearing stockings and suspenders and high heeled shoes. ‘What about?’ I asked her.

‘It’s a sort of autobiography, really,’ said Josephine. ‘I thought I’d call it ‘From Joe to Josephine’.’

I said what a good title I thought that was. Josephine then finished what she was doing, readjusted her dress (there was a curiously appropriate ‘Gentlemen Please Adjust Your Dress’ sign on the wall above the washbasin), washed her hands and put her gloves on. A few moments later I followed her back into the main hall. I admired her confidence and her courage enormously and suddenly I didn’t feel nervous.

* * *

‘How did it go?’ asked Patsy, when I got back to Bilbury Grange later that evening. Ben leapt up to welcome me home. I had left her behind though I suppose I could have taken her with me. She hated being left behind.

‘I think it went quite well,’ I replied, rubbing Ben behind the ears.

‘Was it a good audience?’

‘Oh, yes. They were very good.’

‘What sort of people were they? Mostly women?’

‘Mostly women,’ I agreed. I hesitated. ‘Largely,’ I added.

‘What did you talk to them about?’

‘I kept it very informal,’ I said, rather vaguely. ‘Just talked about drugs and doctors and books and publishers.’

‘Did you tell them about the new book you’re writing?’

‘No. I didn’t want to talk about it yet.’

‘How many people were there?’

‘Oh, not too many. It was quite a compact and friendly audience. But they asked quite a few questions. There was a woman there who was writing a book of her own. She asked a lot of questions.’

‘How many people do you think there were, then?’

I hesitated.

‘Roughly?’

‘Three or four,’ I admitted, ruefully. ‘But Mr and Mrs Jilkes were on holiday and Mr Bedford is in hospital,’ I added, as an explanation.

‘Ah,’ said Patsy.

I thought for a moment. ‘Do you think I ought to send him a card?’ I asked her.

Patsy frowned. ‘Who?’

‘Mr Bedford. He’s in the Arthur Thomas Ward Ward at Exeter General.’

Patsy shook her head. ‘I don’t think so,’ she said. ‘If you start sending cards to all the people who weren’t there it’ll cost a fortune in stamps.’

‘You didn’t ask me why I’d said he was in the Arthur Thomas Ward Ward,’ I complained. ‘Two Wards!’ I added, unnecessarily.

Patsy looked puzzled. ‘Why should I have done?’

‘The man they named the ward after was called Ward,’ I explained, anxious to share the feeble joke.

‘Yes, I know,’ said Patsy. ‘He was a friend of my father’s.’

‘Oh.’ I said, rather disappointed. I felt rather cheated.

* * *

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I had to look twice to make sure it was him. But it was. Peter Marshall was wearing a bottle green jacket covered with sequins and a huge floppy pink bow tie. His hair was slicked down with hair cream. The effect was slightly spoilt by the fact that he was wearing rather baggy brown corduroy trousers but from the waist up he looked magnificent. ‘For this next trick I need a member of the audience,’ he said, stepping forward, towards the edge of the stage, and peered out to where Delilah Riddle was sitting. ‘It’s a card trick,’ he whispered, as though unwilling to break the spell which his presence on stage had created. ‘I need someone out of the audience to pick a card.’

‘Do you want them to come up onto the stage with you?’ the vicar’s wife asked him.

‘I think so,’ said Peter. He thought about it and then nodded firmly. ‘Yes, definitely,’ he said. I couldn’t take my eyes off him. I had never thought of Peter Marshall as a magician.

‘Then we’ll need some steps,’ said Delilah. She called to me.

‘Do you know if there are any steps we can use at the front of the stage?’ she asked. ‘Peter needs a member of the audience to go up onto the stage and we can’t expect people to clamber up a three foot high stage dressed in their best clothes.’

‘I’ll go and see what I can find.’ I carefully balanced the paint brush I was using to paint one of the fake stone pillars at the edge of the stage on the side of the paint pot and hurried backstage in search of steps. I rather enjoyed being assistant stage manager. I didn’t have to think or make any decisions at all. People gave me simple tasks to do and I had to try to finish them as quickly as I could. It was all delightfully simple and free of frustration or responsibility.

Backstage, ten or twelve people were crammed into a space the size of an ordinary bathroom. They were all busy doing things and trying to keep quiet. Patchy Fogg was oiling something that looked like and, indeed, was half a bicycle. Frank, from the Duck and Puddle, had his eyes closed and, was silently practising his monologue. I could tell what he was doing because his lips were moving. Miss Johnson, my former receptionist, was sewing sequins onto a pair of grey flannels (this, I realised, explained why Peter’s stage ensemble was so unbalanced). The Hewitt children (all three of them) were trying to practise their tap dancing but had taken their shoes off so that they didn’t make a noise. There was, inevitably, a fair degree of chaos.

‘Psst! You can’t go in there!’ whispered Thumper, as I tried the doorknob leading to the Bilbury Village Hall’s tiny washroom and only back stage lavatory. Thumper, whom Delilah had wisely appointed as stage manager, was spraying a huge sheet of hardboard with silver paint from an aerosol can. I leapt back as though the doorknob had been connected to the mains electricity.

‘Why not?’ I hissed back. We were in the middle of our first and only dress rehearsal and I no longer knew what to expect.

‘The girls are in there changing,’ explained Thumper.

‘Oh. I’m looking for some steps. Have you seen them?’

‘Try the store cupboard.’ Thumper cursed quietly as his spray can stopped spraying. He shook it, pressed the nozzle and then, when nothing would come out, shook it again. ‘Listen to that,’ he said, holding the can near to my ear and shaking it. ‘It’s half full,’ he said. ‘But it won’t spray.’

‘Frustrating, isn’t it?’ I agreed. ‘I hate that. I always feel cheated when the propellant runs out before the stuff it’s supposed to be propelling.’ I opened the door to the store cupboard and slid inside.

The store cupboard, like most store cupboards in village halls, was jammed from floor to ceiling with broken chairs, used light bulbs, bristleless brooms, old cardboard boxes and buckets with holes in them. They had presumably all been kept on the grounds that they might one day turn out to be useful. What those who had kept them had failed to understand was that a use is only ever found for such items the day after they have been eventually thrown away.

I learnt some time ago that the one sure way to find the lock which an apparently useless key opens is to throw the key away.

For four years during my medical school training I carried around with me a small piece of metal which looked as though it ought to have an important role to play in my life. It was round, about the size of an old, pre-decimalisation penny, and had two funny little prongs sticking out of one side. I had absolutely no idea what it was for but in each flat or hospital bedroom which I occupied I found it a safe corner in a dressing table drawer. I lost books, socks, pens, shirts, notebooks and bicycles but I never mislaid that little piece of metal because although I couldn't for the life of me remember what it was for I felt sure that it had a very important purpose.

I finally threw it away just six weeks before I qualified. I was having my annual spring clean and I looked at this little piece of metal, turning it first this way and then that way, and could still see no possible use for it. I decided that I had been looking after a piece of scrap metal. And so I threw it into the dustbin along with the old Christmas cards, the used batteries, the inkless ballpoint pens, the odd socks and the old train tickets.

The very next morning my watch stopped. I took it to a local jeweller. He studied it for twenty minutes then handed it back to me. It was, he said, an unusual make which could only be opened with a special key. 'What does this special key look like?' I asked him.

He carefully described the piece of metal I had thrown away. 'It's round, about the size of an old penny,' he said. 'You know, the ones we used to have before decimalisation. And it has two tiny little prongs sticking out of the side. The manufacturers always used to put one in the box in which the watch came.' I rushed back home but for the first time in a generation the dustbin men had arrived early and had spilt nothing.

During the following week I visited every jeweller in the town. They all knew exactly what I needed but none of them had one. 'Those little metal keys are like gold dust,' said one jeweller. 'I've been trying to get one for years but everyone with one of their watches has thrown their key away. If you ever find one I'll pay you £20 for it.' I ended up having to buy a new watch. I didn't throw the watch away, of course. I put it in a drawer because I knew that the day I threw it out would be the day before I would meet someone who had one of the funny little pieces of metal.

In addition to the legless chairs, the bald brooms and the leaky buckets, the cupboard contained a solid looking set of heavy wooden steps which looked as though they would fit neatly onto the front of the stage. (Since that was where they had come from in the first place this was not particularly surprising). I carefully moved away a couple of chairs and a bucket and then half dragged and half lifted the steps out through the cupboard door. As I did so the aerosol can which Thumper had been hitting with a huge metal wrench split into two, making a noise like a hand grenade as it did so. Paint flew all over the room, splattering everyone and everything with silver flecks. The tension in the room meant that this unexpected incident produced much squealing and loud complaining. The door to the lavatory/changing room flew open and Kay's head and shoulders appeared. She looked around, tutted loudly, and then swiftly closed the door again.

'Whoops!' said Thumper, his chest, face and arms covered in silver paint. (Since this is an accurate and honest account of life in Bilbury I feel honour bound to admit that the word he actually used was not 'Whoops!').

'What the hell did you do that for?' spluttered Frank, interrupted in mid monologue. 'I've forgotten where I was now.'

'I was just trying to get the bloody paint out of the can,' explained Thumper. 'I'd nearly finished! I only needed another couple of squirts.'

'I'll have to go right back to the beginning,' said Frank.

The door to the main hall suddenly burst open and Delilah Riddle burst in. Her face was crimson. 'Ssshhhh!' she hissed. 'We're trying to rehearse out here!' She stared at Thumper, at Frank and then one by one at everyone else. 'Why are you all covered in silver paint?' she asked. She wore half moon spectacles for close work and whenever she spoke to anyone she lowered her head a little so that she could look over the top of the lenses. It made her look like a very superior school mistress.

‘We had a bit of an accident with a faulty aerosol,’ explained a quick thinking Patchy Fogg. We all nodded and murmured and tried hard not to giggle. I couldn’t help thinking that it was all rather like being back at school. Thumper, the naughty boy we were protecting, opened his mouth to say something but then thought better of it and closed it again.

‘I’ve found those steps you wanted!’ I said, anxious to change the subject.

‘Oh wonderful!’ said Mrs Riddle. She looked at the steps, still half in and half out of the store room, with an artistically critical eye. ‘They look perfect!’ she said, and clapped her hands together in front of her chest. It made her look as though she was praying. ‘Would you bring them out here so that we can see exactly what they look like?’

Thumper and Patchy helped me move the steps out into the main body of the hall where Peter Marshall, still on stage, was pacing up and down rather nervously.

‘You lot go away now you’ve done that!’ he shouted to us from the stage, when we had manoeuvred the steps into position. ‘I don’t want you watching. You’ll make me nervous.’

‘Come on, Peter!’ said Patchy. ‘Show us a trick or two.’

‘I want to see you switch price labels on a tin of tomatoes,’ said Thumper. This was rather a sore point with Peter at the time. A customer who was camping in one of Colin Jackson’s fields had accused Peter of putting higher priced labels onto some of the goods she had selected. Peter, clearly angry at this barb, hurled a pink, stuffed rabbit at Thumper’s head. It missed by less than a foot.

‘Come on, now!’ said Miss Riddle. ‘Good heavens!’ She frowned at us as though she had never seen such behaviour before.

‘Are you doing your trick with a tax return?’ Patchy asked Peter. This was another cruel jibe for it had been rumoured for a month or so that the Inland Revenue had begun investigating our local shopkeeper. However, Peter’s reputation for hanging onto his money and deflecting criticism was such that the general feeling in the village was that the tax inspectors would give up first. Patchy ducked as what looked like a waste paper basket span through the air where his head had been a few moments earlier.

‘Stop it!’ said Mrs Riddle, sharply. She peered over the top of her spectacles. ‘What on earth is going on?’ she demanded. ‘You’re behaving like children!’

‘Sorry, Mrs Riddle,’ muttered Patchy and Thumper.

‘I’m surprised at you, doctor,’ said Mrs Riddle.

‘Sorry, Mrs Riddle,’ I said.

The three of us went round to the back of the stage again. We spent the next hour cleaning silver paint off everyone and everything.

* * *

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The moment I awoke I knew that something important was happening but for a few happy seconds I couldn't remember what it was. I lay there, enjoying those seconds of disorientated peace which lie between sleep and waking, watching the early rays of sunshine filtering through a narrow gap in the curtains and realising with a light heart that another glorious summer's day lay ahead. And then I remembered.

It was the day of the Old Bilburians first cricket match. The Bilbury Revels were truly taking over the summer.

The peaceful anticipation of another warm, summer's day was banished instantly. Why, I wondered, had we so steadfastly and defiantly refused to practise? Sitting in the Duck and Puddle it had all seemed a bit of a joke. But with the start of our first match now just hours away our failure to practise seemed foolhardy to say the least. I hadn't played cricket since I'd been at school and even then I hadn't played much of it. The only thing I could remember with any certainty was that cricket balls are extremely hard and that it hurt when they hit you. That fact did not provide me with comfort. A friend of mine who had been hit on the leg by a cricket ball had spent the rest of the summer limping around on crutches. I tried to remember when I'd last seen him.

'What's the matter?' asked Patsy, sleepily. She had only just woken and hadn't even opened her eyes but she knew that something was wrong.

'It's the first cricket match today,' I told her glumly. 'I don't think Roger Toohy ever fully recovered from the time when his leg was broken.'

Patsy sat up. 'Who is Roger Toohy?'

'Someone I was at school with.'

Patsy frowned. 'How did he break his leg?'

'He was hit by a cricket ball. He was fielding at silly mid on. We didn't used to wear shin pads in those days. I don't think any of us had ever seen a shin pad.'

'Well don't do any silly fielding!' said Patsy brightly. She kissed me on the cheek, climbed out of bed and pulled back the curtains. Sunshine flooded the room and Sophie and Emily, lying at the bottom of the bed, both yawned and shook their heads. Ben, lying across my feet, opened an eye and looked at me reproachfully as I tried to struggle out of bed.

'What does the sky look like?' I asked, leaden hearted.

'Bright blue!' replied Patsy instantly. 'There isn't a cloud in sight.'

'You don't think by any chance that it might rain later?'

'There isn't the remotest possibility of one raindrop falling today,' she said cheerfully. Her optimistic weather forecast was not born of malice. I think she'd just mistaken my hope for fear and was trying to cheer me up. It had been a glorious summer; one of the best I could ever remember. The days were long and warm and peaceful and when it rained it usually rained at night. Sometimes I thought that instead of living in Bilbury I was living in Camelot.

But I was not looking forward to our first cricket match.

Glumly, I clambered out of bed wondering which of my limbs would, by evening, be encased in plaster. The more I thought about it the more certain I was that Roger Toohy had never been able to walk properly at all after his accident. I liked my legs the way they were. I wandered over to the window and looked out at a world full of bright colours and singing birds. Flowers were bursting into bloom and Patsy was right: the day promised long, glorious hours of summer sunshine. Idly I allowed my gaze to drift across the shrubbery and towards our large front lawn - it looked like a cricket pitch. In my mind I could see Roger Toohy, gaunt and grey-faced, sitting in a wheelchair.

A summer day's glorious sunshine spoilt by the prospect of cricket balls being fired at my person. I sighed. 'Let's go and get some breakfast.' Ben, Sophie and Emily, eager for their breakfasts too, all raced for the door when they saw me heading in that direction.

I don't know who first started that nonsense about condemned men eating hearty breakfasts. I think it's nonsense. I could hardly eat anything. Patsy cooked freshly picked field mushrooms, scrambled eggs from her mother's hens and served them up on toasted home-made bread. Normally I would have wolfed everything down and would have probably asked for seconds too but although I recognised that it smelt good I just didn't feel hungry. I picked unenthusiastically at the food on my plate. I couldn't help thinking that if I was hit by a cricket ball and needed surgery and a general anaesthetic then it would be best if I hadn't had anything to eat at all.

'Come on,' sighed Patsy eventually. 'Leave that. Go for a walk round the garden. You'll feel better.'

* * *

I found Mr Parfitt already at work in the vegetable garden. He was busy feeding the ground around the raspberry canes with home-made liquid fertiliser. We had two varieties of liquid fertiliser with which to boost our crop production. One variety, allegedly rich in iron, had been prepared by putting armfuls of nettles into a tin bath full of water and leaving them to rot. The other variety, the type which my sense of smell told me that Mr Parfitt was using, was rich in nitrogen and had been prepared by putting dirty wool clippings into a water butt and leaving them there for a few months. When Patsy's father had shaved our sheep he had sold the main fleeces to the wool merchants on our behalf but he had left the grubbier bits of fleece - the bits taken from the non-eating ends of our sheep - and explained to me that we could use it first for making liquid manure and then, afterwards, for stuffing into cushions.

Patsy was right. After half an hour in the garden I felt much better.

* * *

Our first match, against an enthusiastic team of cricketers who had travelled down from the Midlands, was due to start at noon and it had been agreed that our team would meet in the bar at the Duck and Puddle at eleven o'clock. This was not because any member of the Old Bilburians thought that we needed an hour to get ourselves ready or because any of us anticipated taking part in serious discussions about team tactics but more, I suspect, because Thumper and the rest of the team seemed to think that if they had an hour's drinking behind them when the match started then they would play better.

I was in at least four minds about this. Part of me felt that it would be wise to remain sober and alert when taking part in a sporting encounter during which a solid piece of leather wrapped cork might well be travelling in the direction of my head at anything up to eighty or ninety miles an hour. Part of me felt that the anaesthetic quality of alcohol might prove useful were I to find myself unable to get out of the way in time. Part of me felt that even if I didn't play any better after a few drinks then I would at least think I was playing better and that since sports psychologists now seem to believe that sporting success is as much mental as physical then the extra confidence that the alcohol might give me would probably be invaluable. And part of me believed that if I began the game as tight as a drum then I wouldn't have to worry about the other three parts of me.

'Do you want another?' asked Thumper, pointing to my glass.

I looked at him and hiccupped. 'Beg your pardon,' I said; the phrase serving both as an apology for the hiccup and as an indication that I hadn't heard Thumper's comment.

'Another beer?'

I screwed up my eyes and tried to concentrate. 'How many have I had?' I glanced out of the window and saw a blurred version of Gilly, the landlady, walking past. She was carrying a huge blurry, cardboard box. I waved but she didn't see me.

‘You must get these windows cleaned,’ I told Frank. I decided that the problem was that they were still covered with salt from the last storm.

Frank looked across at me and frowned. ‘Why?’ he asked.

I didn’t know why so I couldn’t answer.

Thumper, who had been thinking, suddenly spoke. ‘Four, I think,’ he said.

I looked at him. ‘Four what?’

‘I think you’ve had four.’ He thought a little longer and corrected himself. ‘No, five,’ he said.

I shook my head and then winced. I don’t know why this should be but alcohol always seems to have a far more fearsome effect when drunk before lunch. When I was a medical student I could put away four or five pints of beer in an evening, balance a beer mat on my chin and sing twelve verses of Eskimo Nell without showing any signs of inebriation. But I had long ago noticed that if consumed before twelve noon the same amount of alcohol seemed to have a devastating effect. Some day a team of scientists with nothing better to do should look into this phenomenon. ‘I don’t think I’d better have any more, thank you,’ I said. I spoke slowly and clearly, not wanting anyone to think that I had too much to drink, and then looked across at the bar. Frank, the landlord, seemed to be having trouble in focusing his body.

‘Are you all right?’ asked Thumper, solicitously.

‘Yes. Tell Frank he’s all blurred.’

‘Frank, the doc says you’re all blurred.’

‘That’s all right,’ cried Frank, remarkably cheerfully for one so blurred. ‘Tell the doc he’s all blurred too.’

Thumper, who was standing next to me, passed on this information as though he were an essential relay station without whom intra Duck and Puddle communications would have been impossible. ‘Oh good,’ I said, for some reason relieved and cheered by this news. I was still puzzled by the fact that on my journey to the Duck and Puddle I had seen an apparently endless procession of energetic looking men in tracksuits jogging earnestly along the road.

I was about to comment on this bizarre occurrence when the door to the bar opened and Peter Marshall (also looking rather blurred) appeared. He was closely followed by a cluster of blurred but extremely athletic looking men. I immediately recognised them as the men I’d seen jogging through the lanes. They were all dressed in dazzling white shirts and equally dazzling white flannels and their white, studded cricket boots made a clatter as they marched across the red and black tiled floor at the entrance to the Duck and Puddle bar. The swarm of newcomers all had red faces and damp hair and had that clean and godly look that people have when they have just finished exercising and have showered away their sweat. Even though I had probably had a little bit too much to drink I realised that unless these cricketers had been stranded in our village through some unfortunate mechanical mishap this was our opposition.

‘They look a bit keen,’ murmured Thumper.

This was an understatement of quite heroic proportions. The opposition looked very keen and professional. If the match had been decided on appearances we would have lost there and then. They even smelt more professional than we did. Our lot smelt of stale tobacco, beer and sheep dip. They smelt of oil of wintergreen and massage oil.

Only three members of the Bilbury team wore anything that could be described as being either remotely white or sporty. Dr Brownlow was by far our smartest player. He wore the cricket trousers and shirt which he had worn when he had played for his university second eleven team in his early twenties. Both trousers and shirt were a rich Devon clotted cream colour rather than white and although they had probably once fitted him to perfection they were now what a tailor might politely describe as a little bit on the tight side. Unable to fasten the zip at the front Dr Brownlow had secured his privacy and guarded against unpleasant draughts and accusations of indecency with the aid of two large safety pins. The shirt, bought for a man with a thinner, more youthful chest was stretched to the limits. Around his neck Dr Brownlow had casually tied the sleeves of his college sweater.

Patchy Fogg wore a brand new plain white shirt that still had the original creases in it (and, as Patchy discovered a little later still had one or two pins in it too) and from the waist upwards he looked every bit a cricketer. Unfortunately, his bottom half was draped in a pair of faded blue jeans and so that part of him didn't look quite so much a cricketer.

Third in our list of sartorial leaders, and most imaginatively dressed of our fashion trend setters for the international sports scene, came Ernie McBride, Kay's husband, the locally famous tractor engineer from Ilfracombe. Ernie wore a pair of baggy, knee length pale khaki tennis shorts, a flowered Hawaiian shirt, (the predominant colours of which were orange and green) and a pair of brown, artificial leather strap on sandals. The effect of this otherwise potentially acceptable ensemble was rather spoilt by the pair of fluorescent pink socks which Ernie wore beneath his sandals. Until his marriage to Kay, the much loved Ernie had lived at home with his mother who had always bought his clothes for him. She had never grown out of the habit of buying his clothes a size too large so that he could grow into them and this meant that he had a permanently creased, slightly unkempt, baggy look and so, according to the fashion of the day, he either looked extremely fashionable or quite out of touch with reality.

'Do you think your players would like to get themselves a drink?' Peter asked their captain, a dour faced fellow whose trousers were held up with a club tie and whose upper lip was decorated with the thinnest moustache I have ever seen. He was just over six feet tall, looked as though he weighed around fourteen stone and was probably the shortest man and lightest man on their team. Still in his early thirties he was probably also the oldest. I couldn't help thinking of the amateur football side from Exeter which had gone to Italy on a five day tour and had accidentally got themselves booked for a match against Turin A.C., Rome B.D. or one of the other famous professional sides. It was a historic mismatch. The Italian professionals had scored 36 goals in the first half of the match. By then everyone realised that a mistake had been made. The professionals played the second half of the match with half a team and still won by the impressive total of 42 goals to five.

The captain nodded. 'I expect they would. They've only just got back from a five mile run round the village.' He craned his neck and spoke to his colleagues. 'Would you like drinks, lads?'

There was a deep throated, masculine murmur of approval.

On the other side of the bar Frank, anticipating a flurry of his favourite act beamed, flexed his right arm and grasped the handle that would enable him to draw twelve pints of foaming best Devon bitter.

The captain leant across the bar. 'Twelve lemonades, please,' he said to Frank. 'But individual bills, please,' he added.

Frank's smile disappeared as quickly as it had come.

'We have crisps, I think,' said Peter, anxious to drum up a little more trade. 'Should any of your players feel they need to replenish their salt levels.'

'I don't think so, thank you,' said the visitors' captain. 'Our nutritionist doesn't allow us to eat junk food.'

Hearing this Thumper and I exchanged horrified glances. I suddenly felt cold. The effects of the alcohol seemed to have worn off rather quickly.

'I think I'll have another drink,' I muttered to Thumper. 'Some of the opposition aren't looking quite as blurred as they did.'

Peter Marshall, however, was not in the slightest bit shaken by the fact that our opposition had their own nutritionist.

'Oh, our expert chap feels that crisps make an excellent pre-match snack,' he replied, without any hesitation. 'Full of iron and magnesium - as well as salt.'

I felt proud of him.

* * *

‘Have you seen Harry Burrows?’ asked Patchy Fogg, a few moments later. We were all standing outside the front door of the Duck and Puddle, watching in awe as our opponents went through a series of warm up exercises. As huge muscles stretched and relaxed and stretched again and tendons were toned and retoned the air was filled with annoyingly wholesome grunts and earnest sounding groans. On the other side of the road the village green, the arena for our forthcoming sporting encounter, waited patiently and silently for the dramas to come.

Josh Wilkins, our elderly and arthritic captain, leant heavily on his stick and wheezed uncomfortably as his lungs breathed in draughts of rich, fresh air.

‘He was in the bar when I arrived,’ I answered Patchy.

Harry Burrows, bank clerk, keen gardener, fisherman and father of six, was number five on our batting order and joyfully free of ambition. Now in his late forties, Harry had lost count of the number of times he had been offered promotion by the bank for which he worked. ‘He could have been managing his own branch by now,’ Dr Brownlow once told me. Harry steadfastly turned down all offers of promotion because moving up the career ladder would have meant moving to another area. ‘Why should I leave my friends, sell my house, abandon my garden and move to a part of the country I know nothing about to take on a job with extra responsibility?’ he asked. ‘I’ve got a house, a car, a steady job with a pension and twenty miles of free sea fishing within half an hour’s drive. Why do they think I would want to go and live in Manchester, Fulham or Swindon?’ Had Harry been married to a woman who wanted to be married to a man of greater substance then this philosophy might have led to many arguments and much unhappiness. But since Enid, Harry’s wife, was equally content with her life everything in his garden was lovely.

‘If I did that much exercise before a match I’d need to lie down for an hour,’ murmured Dr Brownlow, nodding towards the opposition, still earnestly performing their warm up exercises. He sighed. ‘It makes me feel tired just to look at them.’ Dr Brownlow’s trousers and shirt were so tight that when he moved he did so as though he was wearing armour.

‘Harry and Kevin were supposed to roll the pitch,’ said Patchy. ‘But I don’t think they have.’

Kevin Pettigrew was an electrician by trade but wasn’t terribly good at it. ‘I was O.K. until they invented electricity,’ he once admitted. ‘Then it all got a bit too complicated for me.’ A series of unfortunate accidents means that these days he earns his living as a car park attendant. He is notoriously unreliable though he has a mellow, laid back manner which makes it difficult for anyone to get cross with him. At the first sign of criticism he always apologises profusely and asks what he can do to put right that which he has done wrong. It is difficult to continue to feel cross with someone who is obviously contrite and his readiness to admit his mistakes invariably takes the wind out of his would-be critics. His broadly based lack of talent and skill is supplemented by an affection for rum.

Patchy pointed towards the centre of the green where the two sets of stumps were already standing waiting. The roller, huge, heavy and brown with rust, lay abandoned in the middle of the wicket. When I looked at it closely I felt sure that I could see a leg sticking out of one side of it. I knew that when last I had seen it, the roller had been quite devoid of legs.

Slightly alarmed, but not wanting to alarm anyone else unnecessarily, I walked fairly briskly out to the middle of the pitch and peered around the roller expecting the worst. The possibility of some sort of emergency had sobered me up. Patchy followed me. I’m sure that Dr Brownlow would have come too but he found walking difficult. What we saw wasn’t the worst, but it was pretty close. Harry and Kevin were sitting on the ground with a bottle of dark, Navy rum in between them. When I looked closer I could see that the bottle was empty. I didn’t need to look any closer to know where the rum had gone.

‘Iss werry, hic, heavy!’ said Kevin, pointing over his shoulder at the roller he was leaning against.

‘We had a little drink to give us strength,’ explained Harry. ‘Rum’s supposed to give you strength,’ he said. ‘Did you know that? It’s full of iron. Absolutely full of iron. It’s got more iron in it than spinch... sppin... spinch... spinstuff... that green stuff that Popeye eats... you know what I mean.’ Suddenly everyone in our team was an expert on minerals. I hadn’t been aware of this and although I was not entirely sure of the reliability of the information I nevertheless thanked Harry and showed what I hoped was suitably earnest appreciation.

'Have you got enough strength to get up?' asked Patchy. 'The match is about to start!'

Harry thought about this for a moment and then shook his head. 'No,' he said. 'Can't stand up.' He turned to Kevin. 'We tried that, didn't we?'

Kevin nodded. 'We need more rum,' he said. 'We ran out. If we had more rum we'd be able to stand up.'

'The last thing you need is more rum,' I told him.

Kevin looked up at Patchy and I. 'Have we let you down?' he asked, suddenly but convincingly contrite.

'Yes!' said Patchy, bending down and pulling Kevin to his feet. I did the same with Harry. I had the worst job because Harry was several stones heavier than Kevin.

'I'm very solly!' said Kevin, who genuinely looked it. 'I wouldn't have let you down for the world. What can I do to put it right?' His mouth happened to be close to my face when he spoke. I instinctively pulled away from the rum fumes and nearly dropped Harry.

'We need to keep these two away from naked flames,' said Patchy. 'Let's lean them up against the oak.' He nodded towards a huge old tree which stands about twenty yards away from the wicket at square leg. The two of us then half carried and half dragged Kevin and Harry to the base of the trunk and left them sitting up against the tree. I noticed that Kevin had instinctively picked up the empty rum bottle and taken it with him. He clutched it to his chest the way a child will clutch a favourite teddy bear.

'We'll be all right in a couple of minutes,' said Kevin, quite unrealistically.

'Be absolutely fine in a couple of minutes,' insisted Harry. He tried to get up but quickly abandoned this idea.

Patchy and I finished rolling the wicket and pushed the roller to the edge of the village green. We then walked back to the Duck and Puddle forecourt.

'I'm afraid that two of our players have been taken ill,' I announced.

'Oh dear!' said our opponents' captain. 'Nothing serious, I hope?'

'They'll be O.K.,' I told him.

'One of our players is a qualified first aider,' said the captain. 'Would you like him to have a look at them?'

'That's very kind of you,' I said. 'But I'm a doctor.'

The visitor raised an eyebrow, as though he found this difficult to believe. I suppose you couldn't blame him. He was probably used to doctors who looked like doctors.

I turned away from him and spoke to Peter Marshall. 'Have they tossed yet?' I whispered.

Peter shook his head.

'We're two men short,' I told him. I quickly explained about Harry and Kevin.

'We're three men short,' said Peter...

I stared at him and frowned.

'Colin Jackson was supposed to be batting at number three,' he reminded me. He sighed. 'His wife rang twenty minutes ago. A cow trod on his foot.'

‘Can’t he play on one leg?’

‘You know Colin,’ said Peter. ‘He’s gone to bed. He thinks he’ll die if he walks on it.’

‘We can’t play with eight men! They’d slaughter us if we played with twenty two men!’

‘Good luck you chaps!’ cried a cheerful female voice.

We both turned and looked. Kay McBride, the district nurse, had stopped her car outside the pub and was waving to us.

Peter looked at me and I looked at him and then Peter looked back at Kay. ‘Park your car!’ he shouted. ‘You’re playing.’

Kay stared at him and laughed. ‘Don’t be daft!’ she said.

‘We need you!’ I told her. Peter and I walked across to her and explained what had happened.

‘But I’ve never played cricket!’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘Do they let women play?’

‘They do now.’

‘Who’s your captain?’ asked the visiting captain. He looked at his watch. ‘Shouldn’t we toss and get on with it? My chaps are all warmed up and ready to go.’

‘Is it better for us to bat first or field first?’ I asked Peter.

‘How soon will Harry and Kevin be fit to play?’

‘Wednesday, I should think,’ I told him, gloomily. I thought about it for a moment. ‘They might be able to stand up for the second innings,’ I said.

‘Then I’ll tell Josh we have to field,’ said Peter, walking briskly over towards our captain. ‘That’s O.K. because that’s what we normally do anyway.’

‘Wouldn’t we be better off batting first?’ I asked Peter a couple of minutes later as we strolled onto the field behind Josh.

‘When we bat there’s a chance that we’ll all be out in half an hour,’ explained Peter. ‘In which case we’ll be batting two men short if we bat now. If we bat second then we should have eleven players. Besides,’ he added, ‘Harry and Kevin can field lying down but they have to stand up to bat.’

I was deeply impressed with Peter’s logic and strongly suspected that these were not problems that were dealt with in any detail in standard cricket coaching manuals.

* * *

I think it is fair to say that our opponents were not quite prepared for combat with the Old Bilburians Cricket Club. As their opening batsmen (tall, broad, immaculately attired and carrying bats which were still new enough to show individual marks where contact had been made with the ball) walked out to the wicket I could see that there were things about our team which surprised them.

It was, for example, probably the first time they had seen a wicket keeper sitting in a deck chair.

Josh, our captain, suffers terribly with his arthritis and though he is mentally alert for his age, and bravely regards the deterioration in his visual and auditory capacities as an inevitable consequence of advancing years, we had agreed among ourselves that he could not possibly be expected to stand for a day's cricket. Between overs, Thumper and I carried Josh and the deck chair from one end of the pitch to the other.

It may well have been the first time they had seen a fielder (Harry) sitting with his back to a tree, just a few yards away from the wicket. It was probably the first time they had seen a fielder lying on his side at mid on. This was Kevin, who had been carefully positioned to stop any straight on drives. And it was almost certainly the first time they had seen a buxom district nurse, still attired in her full uniform, fielding at third man with her dress tucked into her knickers.

They stood together in the middle of the wicket and looked around them in quiet amazement. And then, after exchanging a brief word or two, one of them walked up the wicket and spoke to the vicar, who was umpiring for us. Our other umpire hadn't turned up so the vicar had to stand at both ends (though not at once).

'Are that man's hands tied together?' he asked the vicar, nodding towards Harry.

The vicar followed the batsman's gaze, peered at Harry, turned back and nodded. 'Yes, I think you're right.' At Thumper's suggestion we had used a length of binder twine to tie Harry's hands together into a catching position. We had used another piece of string, looped around his neck, to hold his hands a few inches away from his chest in a perfect catching position.

The batsman frowned. 'Is that allowed?' he asked.

The vicar thought for a moment. 'I don't think it's not allowed,' he said. 'I don't think I've ever seen anything in the laws about it. Have you?'

The batsman had to admit that he too had never seen anything in the laws forbidding the tying together of a fielder's hands.

'What about the deckchair?' he asked. 'Is that allowed?'

The vicar thought carefully again. 'I don't think there's a problem,' he said. 'As long as the wicket keeper doesn't use the deckchair to assist him in making a dismissal.'

Josh had wisely decided that Thumper would open the bowling for us. This was not a difficult decision to make for when those of us who could move had gathered around Josh to discuss the team's tactics only Thumper Robinson and Patchy Fogg had admitted to any bowling experience. Since Patchy claimed to bowl either leg breaks or off breaks ('but definitely something slow') it was felt that he should be introduced into the Bilbury attack a little later on in the innings. What this meant in practice was that he would be bowling the second over.

'Play!' cried the umpire, when the opposition's opening batsman had finally settled down, taken guard, flattened a molehill which he seemed to think might interfere with play and removed the heads, stalks and leaves from a large dandelion plant growing in the crease.

Thumper, who had been carefully marking out his run up and was by now almost out of earshot put a hand to his ear to indicate that he wasn't quite sure whether or not he could start bowling.

'PLAY!' yelled the vicar.

Thumper smiled, waved and began his approach to the wicket. He ran as fast as he could for about thirty or forty yards, and then started to slow down. By the time he was about ten yards away from the delivery crease he was panting heavily and sweating profusely. By the time he was ready to deliver the ball he had slowed to a gentle walking pace.

The opposition batsman was clearly deceived by the pace and flight of Thumper's first ball. He had probably been misled by Thumper's enthusiastic run up and had not expected a slow, looping full toss. He changed his planned backward defensive stroke into a full blooded drive but still overestimated the speed of the ball and had completed his stroke by the time the ball finally arrived. As the ball hit him in the groin he sank noiselessly but gracefully to the ground. The vicar, the other batsman and I rushed forward to see if we could help. Dr Brownlow, moving as quickly as his clothes would let him, joined us a moment or two later. Thumper, looking slightly guilty and embarrassed, walked a third of the way down the wicket as though planning to apologise, realised that this was not what was normally expected of a fearsome opening bowler and stayed where he was.

Even though he was wearing the usual protection the batsman was in no fit state to continue. Patchy Fogg and I helped him off the pitch and handed him over to his colleagues who were sitting, looking slightly stunned, on a row of benches at the edge of the village green. As we lowered him to the ground he groaned loudly. 'Listen, friend,' said Patchy to the injured batsman, 'the only thing you can count on in this life is that some terrible things will happen to you. There may be some good things. But you can guarantee that there will be bad things. This was one of the bad things.' He beamed at the bemused batsman. 'But look on the bright side,' he finished, 'this is one of the bad things that you haven't got to worry about happening because it's already happened.'

The batsman frowned and looked at his colleagues. They looked as puzzled as he did.

'Am I right in thinking that one of your fielders has got his hands tied together?' the opposition captain asked us.

I told him that he was, indeed, quite right about this.

'Is this allowed? Is there anything in the laws about it?'

'I don't think there's anything in the laws about tying together a fielder's hands,' I said. 'Harry's a bit tired,' I added, in explanation.

'Ah!' said the opposition captain. 'And the deckchair?'

'Josh has terrible arthritis,' I explained. 'He finds it more comfortable to field in a deckchair.'

'I've never seen anything like it,' said the opposition captain, shaking his head.

'No,' I agreed. 'I suppose not.'

'Is that a woman you've got fielding at third man?'

'Yes,' I agreed. I thought about it for a moment. 'I suppose we ought to say that she's at third woman!' I said.

'Your captain didn't mention that you were playing a mixed side.'

'It's not a very mixed side,' I said. 'Kay's our only female player. She wouldn't have been playing at all but Colin Jackson had his foot trodden on by a cow. She's married to Ernie,' I said. 'The chap in shorts.' I pointed to Ernie. The opposition number three batsman finished fastening on his pads and started off towards the crease. 'I'd better get back,' I said, apologetically. 'I don't want them to start without me.'

* * *

By lunch our opponents had scored 128 runs and had used up exactly half of their allocation of 40 overs. And although one of their batsmen had to retire hurt they still hadn't lost any wickets. The two batsmen were clearly wary and unwilling to take risks. I suspect that this was simply because they were wary about being dismissed cheaply by such a poor side. In any team sport good sides are at a tremendous disadvantage when playing poor sides. A good side can hardly take much pride in a win when the opposition is of low quality but their self-esteem and self-respect can take quite a battering if they lose.

The remainder of Thumper's first over had been something of a disaster. The replacement batsman had shown very little respect for Thumper's bowling and had hit him for two fours and a six. If it hadn't been for Patchy Fogg's bowling the opposition score would have been even more impressive. Patchy's main advantage was that no one had any idea what he was bowling. He didn't know. We didn't know. And the opposition batsmen certainly didn't know. Sometimes the ball would turn prodigiously to the left. Sometimes it would turn an equally impressive amount to the right. Sometimes it would leap up into the air. Sometimes it would land and shoot forwards along the ground. And most of the time it wouldn't turn or do anything exceptional at all. The two batsmen could see that Patchy had no idea what he was doing and this intimidated them enormously for they were both terrified of being dismissed by a bowler who had no control at all over the ball. Both batsmen were dismissed immediately after lunch and in both cases the dismissals were neither expected nor predictable. Nor, for that matter were they explicable or believable.

When watching the credits rolling at the end of a movie I have often wondered whether it is really necessary to list so many people. Occasionally, at the end of an epic, the list goes on and on for so long that it seems as if it would have been quicker to have listed all the people in California who weren't involved.

After the first of our two unexpected dismissals, the first glorious post-prandial success, I felt that cricket scorers ought to follow the movie makers' example and spread the credit around a little more. The scorebook will for ever show that H. Ainsworth was bowled by P. Fogg and caught by T. Robinson but this bald and sketchy outline of the truth does not in any way begin to tell the true story. This dismissal was, perhaps like no other dismissal in cricket, a genuine team effort and I was proud to have played a part in it.

Before lunch, Ainsworth, the hugely muscled assistant manager of an estate agents' shop, had batted carefully and wisely and had accumulated 47 runs without taking any chances whatsoever. During the luncheon interval he had clearly been advised by his team captain to push the scoring rate along a little and when he returned to the crease, full of pork pie, egg salad and thickly cut home-made bread spread with creamy, hand-churned butter he walked down the wicket to Patchy's first delivery and played a shot that seemed guaranteed to turn the ball into some sort of intergalactic object.

Unfortunately for Ainsworth the ball didn't come off the middle of the bat but hit the edge and instead of clearing the village green, the road, the cottages on the other side of the road and the gardens behind the cottages on the other side of the road (as it would have surely done if it had been hit cleanly) it skied upwards, almost out of sight.

It was Dr Brownlow who first realised that the ball was going to come down into the branches of the oak tree at square leg. He called out to tell us all this and so deserves credit in the scorer's book for conceiving Mr Ainsworth's dismissal. Credit for inspiring the execution of the dismissal must go to Frank Parsons, the corpulent, genial landlord of the Duck and Puddle for it was he who had the presence of mind to lead us into action with a shout of: 'Let's try and catch it!'.

For hours after the match there was much discussion about the legality of this dismissal. Our visitors claimed, without rancour, that the ball was 'dead' when it first hit the tree and that what happened to it thereafter was of no relevance to the match. We claimed (and, importantly, our claim was supported by the umpire) that the tree was merely a local hazard which had, in practice, made the catching of the ball considerably more difficult than it would have been had the tree not been there. Since no one had a copy of the laws of cricket the umpire's decision was adopted.

At the time of the incident, of course, no one was very concerned about the laws of cricket. Encouraged by Frank's vocal enthusiasm all those who could move (Kevin was still fielding prone, Harry was still sitting with his back to the tree with his hands tied into a catching position and although Josh did try to get up he didn't manage to escape from his deckchair until it was too late for him to take an active part in the Ainsworth dismissal) hurried up to the base of the oak tree and stood around, looking upwards, waiting for the ball to appear. We could hear it crashing through the branches but for what seemed like an hour or so we couldn't see anything at all.

It was Patchy Fogg who saw it first, and for this he deserves a large chunk of the credit for what happened next. Without his alert advice the ball might well have come crashing down to the ground before any of us could spot it. 'There it is!' he cried, pointing upwards.

We all followed his outstretched arm and looked up. Frank, Kay McBride, Dr Brownlow and I, who were all standing on the wrong side of the tree, hurried around to join Patchy and Ernie McBride who were standing directly underneath the ball. The two batsmen were racing up and down the wicket as quickly as they could but none of us was concerned with what they were doing. We all knew that this was our first real opportunity to take a wicket. Heads thrown back we all watched carefully as the ball bounced from one branch to another, crashing through leaves and temporarily disappearing and reappearing. It was, I suppose, inevitable that some of us would collide. Frank, Kay and I, all looking upwards and none of us looking where we were going, crashed into each other and seconds later lay sprawled flat on the ground on our backs. Slowed down by his trousers and shirt, Dr Brownlow was several yards behind us at the moment of impact. Temporarily distracted, Patchy, Thumper and Ernie all looked down to see what had happened. It was at that inconvenient moment that the ball chose to begin its final, untroubled descent from branch to ground.

Patchy still says that he would have been able to catch the ball if he hadn't been staring at Frank, Kay and I, lying flat on our backs on the ground. Ernie and Thumper both think that the ball's final ricochet off the lowest branch of the tree was so unpredictable that no one would have been able to catch it. Regardless of this disagreement Kay and I both claim that our part in the dismissal was crucial; we argue that if we hadn't bumped into him Frank wouldn't have ended up flat on his back and the ball would have probably just landed on the grass. Frank insists that he and not Thumper should have been credited with the catch since it was he who managed to get in the way of the ball. None of this matters, of course, because what happened was that with a strange, half thuddy, half squelchy sort of sound the ball landed on Frank's abdomen.

For a brief moment it stayed where it was. Frank's shirt had burst open with his fall, revealing his large, pink (and surprisingly hairless) abdomen and the cricket ball looked for all the world like a cherry bobbing around on a bowl of pink blancmange.

'It's going to roll off!' cried Ernie, playing his own small but crucial part in the Ainsworth dismissal.

And so it was Thumper, diving to his left, who caught the ball as it started to roll off Frank's abdomen.

In the end, as I have already reported, the dismissal went down in the score book as H. Ainsworth bowled P. Fogg and caught T. Robinson but that simple shorthand goes nowhere near enough towards explaining the full story of the quite remarkable Ainsworth dismissal.

Gilly Parsons brought out drinks as we recovered from the excitement. One of the visiting batsmen said that he had never before seen a woman carry so many full pint glasses without spilling a drop. Much to the horror of Frank and Thumper the other batsman told us that on the grounds where he usually played it was more usual for 'drinks' to consist of glasses of orange squash.

* * *

In the end the visitors didn't score as many runs as we had at first feared. Much to our own surprise and delight the Ainsworth dismissal turned out to be the stimulus that inspired us to become something of a team. At the same time this incident seemed to have a very demoralising effect on our opponents. They rather seemed to regard it as a sign that the fates were conspiring against them.

There were, of course, one or two more highlights and memorable moments in their innings.

After the miserable Ainsworth had left the field trailing his bat, muttering curses about trees and threatening to do things with a chainsaw that would bring tears to any arborphile's eyes he was briskly replaced by his team captain, a man who had not up until that point impressed me as being the sort of fellow who gets a lot of laughs out of life. The corners of the fellow's mouth drooped downwards, giving him the permanent appearance of a man who has spent too much of his life sucking lemons. He did not strike me as a man who did anything for fun and he was certainly not amused when his first shot, a sizzling drive which sent the ball hissing across the grass, was stopped from reaching the boundary by the inert form of Kevin Pettigrew. Much to everyone's surprise the semiconscious Kevin had probably been our best fielder. He had certainly saved an enormous number of runs, though the personal cost was a high one and a fortnight later his wife told Patsy that some of the bruises he had acquired in the line of duty were still visible.

'Well, really!' snorted the captain. He stalked down the wicket and glowered at the vicar. 'Is that allowed, umpire?' he demanded, in the tone of a man who is accustomed to having his whims fulfilled and his fancies expedited.

The vicar said that although he realised that it was unusual to have a semicomatose fielder he didn't think he knew of any law which prevented a member of a side fielding the ball while asleep and recumbent. 'As long as he doesn't use any article of clothing to assist him,' added the vicar.

The captain made the mistake of allowing this relatively trivial incident to disturb his composure and he unwisely walked down the wicket and tried to hit the next ball into an adjacent county. Unfortunately, his enthusiasm proved too much for his skill and after completely missing the ball he span round just in time to see Josh, leaning forward in his deckchair, picking up the ball and rolling it back along the ground towards the stumps. I was fielding at slip at the time and had a perfect view. The sight of the captain's face as he watched his bails drop almost noiselessly to the ground was worth almost any amount of ready money. The not inconsiderable, and largely partisan, crowd which had gathered around the edge of the village green showed their appreciation in the traditional way.

In the end, although they reached the very respectable score of 189 runs our opponents would have to agree that they batted disappointingly. As the church clock struck three we had 40 overs in which to score 190 runs to win. No one seriously expected us to be able to do it. But it was a much smaller target than we had at one time feared that we would face.

* * *

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

While Thumper, Peter, Patchy, Kay and the rest of us sat on the grass quenching our thirsts and appetites with tankards of beer and plates of crusty sandwiches our opponents began to prepare for their stint in the field. Their injured player, the opening batsman who had received a blow in the groin, seemed keen to resume his involvement in the match. He still looked a little pale and rather groggy but, when questioned by his captain, insisted that he was fit enough to bowl. This was not a view with which I had much sympathy when I watched him warming up. He turned out to be one of those infuriatingly talented individuals who opens both the batting and the bowling; a fast bowler with a mission to maim.

‘I don’t fancy my chances against him,’ I muttered to Dr Brownlow, as we lay sprawled on the grass watching this huge sporting hooligan burst out of convalescence, speed through recuperation and arrive at top flight fitness, all in the space of about fifteen minutes. I have never wished anyone ill but I wouldn’t have minded if he had decided to spend a little longer getting better.

Dr Brownlow leant a little in my direction. ‘Pop to my car and get my bag, will you?’ He grimaced. ‘I’d go myself but I want to delay having to get up for as long as possible.’

I grinned at him, got up, strolled over to his elderly Rolls Royce which was parked in front of the Duck and Puddle, opened the front door and took out his black, leather medical bag. It was some time since Dr Brownlow had practised medicine but he still kept his black bag in the car in case of emergencies. And I’d never seen him lock his car or hear him complain that anything had been stolen. Crime was not a problem which figured high on our list of anxieties. There had been an incident the previous summer which worried us all when Frank, the publican, noticed that a spare gallon can of petrol had disappeared from his garage (actually the can itself hadn’t disappeared - but the petrol had) and for a while there was some concern in the village that we might have been contaminated by the twentieth century crime wave which seems to have swept the nation. And then Frank received a letter from Manchester which contained a generous cheque and an explanation. The petrol had, it seemed, been taken by a holiday-maker who had set off from Ilfracombe early one Saturday morning in an attempt to beat the holiday rush. He had not realised that the local garages would not be open at that time of night and during his search for a petrol station had driven round and round getting more and more lost. Eventually he had spluttered to a halt a hundred yards away from the Duck and Puddle and rather than wake anyone up had simply helped himself to Frank’s petrol. We were all mightily relieved when we discovered that we did not have a major criminal living in our midst.

‘What do you suggest we do?’ I asked, putting his bag down beside him and lowering myself back down onto the grass. ‘If you fill a couple of syringes with a decent tranquilliser I could probably put him out of action before he manages to kill me!’

Dr Brownlow, who was rummaging through his bag, just grunted. ‘This will do!’ he said at long last, producing a piece of official looking paper.

‘What on earth is that?’ I asked, peering over his shoulder.

‘It’s an S. B. form,’ explained Dr Brownlow. ‘I had these printed years ago.’ He handed me the form. Underneath a very impressive looking crest and a dozen words in Latin were printed the following words:

I.................... of........................... do hereby declare that I have rejected the medical advice of Dr ....

Furthermore, I understand that by rejecting his advice I am putting my health at risk. I take full responsibility for my actions.

Signed...

Witnessed by...

I looked at Dr Brownlow and frowned. ‘How’s this going to help us?’ I asked him.

‘Help me up and then watch,’ said Dr Brownlow, holding up a hand so that I could pull him to his feet.

I followed him as he marched stiffly over to where the fast bowler was busy practising his scowl.

‘I’m Dr Brownlow,’ said Dr Brownlow. He put his black bag down on the grass and then formally introduced me. ‘How are you feeling?’ he asked the fast bowler solicitously.

The fast bowler stopped and thought about his answer for a moment. ‘I’m all right!’ he said gruffly.

‘May I examine you?’ asked Dr Brownlow.

The fast bowler blinked. ‘What for?’

‘To make sure that you’re fit to play,’ he said.

The fast bowler turned and looked around for his captain. ‘Captain!’ he called. ‘These doctors want to examine me. Is it all right?’

The captain came scurrying over.

‘I just thought I’d give your chap the once over,’ explained Dr Brownlow, giving the captain what he called his ten guinea smile.

‘That’s very decent of you,’ said the captain, succumbing entirely to Dr Brownlow’s admirable bedside manner.

‘Not at all,’ said Dr Brownlow. He stood on tip toes, reached up and peered into the fast bowler’s eyes. Satisfied with that he lowered himself back down onto the ground. ‘Open your mouth!’ The fast bowler did exactly as he was told.

‘Multiply 234 by 56,’ said Dr Brownlow briskly.

The fast bowler stared at him. ‘Yer what?’

Dr Brownlow repeated the instruction. ‘It’s a mental agility test,’ he explained. ‘Designed to make sure that you aren’t suffering from any delayed effects.’

The fast bowler frowned and scratched his head. ‘I dunno.’

‘Never mind,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘Don’t worry about it.’ He smiled. ‘You’re doing fine,’ he said, somehow managing to give the fast bowler the impression that he wasn’t doing fine at all.

‘Touch your left ear with your right forefinger.’

The fast bowler lifted his left arm, lowered it, raised his right arm, thought for a moment, touched his right ear with his left thumb, touched his nose with his right forefinger and went very red.

‘I’ve never been any good at this sort of stuff,’ he said, rather crossly. Beads of perspiration were beginning to form on his brow.

‘I think you ought to sit out the rest of the match,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘We’ll find a substitute to field for you.’

The fast bowler stared at Dr Brownlow as though he’d suggested that he retire from the game and take up ballet dancing instead. He stood up straight, squared his shoulders and stuck out his not insignificant chin.

‘I’m gunna play!’ he said defiantly.

Dr Brownlow let out a little sigh, took one of his forms from his bag and handed it to the giant. ‘Then you must sign this,' he said.

'Wot's that?'

'Just a form confirming that you've rejected my advice and chosen to risk your health by continuing to play,' said Dr Brownlow.

The fast bowler blanched but took the form that Dr Brownlow held out. He studied it, thought about it for a moment and then, with some visible reluctance, took the pen that Dr Brownlow offered, filled in the form and then scrawled his signature in the appropriate place.

'I'll give him thirty minutes at most,' whispered Dr Brownlow as we walked back to his Rolls to deposit his black bag. 'Every time he passes near you ask him if he's still feeling all right. Tell everyone else to do the same.'

I didn't think our huge opponent would crack so easily but I was prepared to give it a try. 'What does S. B. mean?' I asked him, as we walked back onto the village green.

'S. B.?'

'You said the forms were S. B. forms.'

'Ah,' smiled Dr Brownlow. He leant towards me, conspiratorially. 'S. B. stands for silly beggar,' he told me.' I had the forms printed for silly beggars who won't listen to good advice.'

Just then Peter Marshall approached us and handed me a cricket pad. 'Since you're opening the batting you'd better put this on,' he said. He turned to Dr Brownlow. 'Do you think Kevin and Harry are fit to play?' he asked.

'Can they stand up?' asked Dr Brownlow.

'Just about,' said Peter.

'Then they're fit to play,' said Dr Brownlow. 'I'm going to get myself another beer. Do either of you want one?'

'No, thanks,' I said. 'Not just before I bat.' I turned to Peter. 'Where's the other one?'

'Yes, please. I'll have a pint,' replied Peter. He frowned. 'Other one what?'

'Pad.' I held up the pad he'd given me. 'You've only given me one.'

'Josh has got the other one,' explained Peter. 'You've got one each.'

I looked at the single pad and sighed. It was grey and flimsy.

'Which leg am I supposed to put it on?'

'Up to you, doc!' said Peter. 'Do you bat right handed?'

'Yes. I think so.' I took up a practice batting stance. 'Yes.'

'Then put the pad on your left leg. That's the one that is most likely to be hit. They're good pads. I got them from Mrs Winterbottom. They used to belong to her husband.'

'He was over 80 when he died and he'd been bedridden for years. He probably hadn't played cricket since the last war!'

'A pad's a pad!' said Peter. 'What's wrong with them?'

'These are antiques!' I told him. 'We should be auctioning them not playing in them!'

Peter looked concerned and bent down to examine the pad I was preparing to put on. ‘Well, just make sure you don’t damage it,’ he said. ‘I’ll take them into one of the antique dealers in South Molton next week.’ He looked thoughtful. ‘Maybe you should put it on your other leg?’

I stared at him.

‘So that it won’t be so likely to get hit by the ball,’ he explained.

I ignored him and sighed. ‘We don’t have to share a bat, do we?’ I asked, buckling my solitary pad onto my left leg. The leather straps were dry and cracked and the buckles were rusty.

‘Of course not!’ said Peter. ‘I bought two brand new ones. I’ll get them.’ He hurried off and returned a few moments later clutching a pair of those cheap, rather flimsy cricket bats that are sold for beach cricket and made for use with old tennis balls. Josh followed him over.

I took one of the bats from Peter and stared at it. ‘We can’t play with those!’ I protested. ‘They’re far too small and they’ve got no springing. I thought you said you were going to get proper bats!’ I twirled the bat around. ‘These are made of balsa wood!’ I turned the bat around. It carried a sticker on the back. The sticker said: ‘Foreign Made’. There was a price label for three shillings and sixpence.

‘They’re proper bats!’ insisted Peter. ‘Look!’ he said, reaching out, turning round the bat I was holding and pointing to the front of it. ‘Look at that!’

I looked at the front of the bat. In black print it said: ‘W. G. Grace Special.’

‘There you are!’ said Peter. ‘W. G. Grace! He was a proper cricketer!’

I sighed, took one of the bats from him and turned to Josh. ‘Come on,’ I said. ‘Let’s get it over with.’

* * *

Apart from his arthritis, his bad chest, his angina, his bad hearing, his poor eyesight and his prostate trouble Josh Wilkins was in pretty good health for a man of his advanced years. He still had a terrific sense of humour, although jokes and witticisms sometimes had to be slowly explained to him several times before he could benefit fully from every nuance, and he never tired of telling people that on a recent visit to the chiropodist he had been assured that he had feet that would have looked good on a man of seventy. However, it was probably not unfair to say that Josh was rather a long way past his prime as a sportsman.

As we walked out to the wicket together I had to keep stopping so that he could catch up with me and by the time we finally arrived at our destination he was wheezing badly and using his rather small cricket bat as an impromptu walking stick.

‘Glad you could both make it,’ said the opposition captain, when we finally arrived. I thought it was rather unnecessarily sarcastic of him. ‘We were getting worried that we would have to start without you.’

At the other end of his twenty yard run up, the fast bowler glared at us all. ‘Can I start?’ he called to the umpire. The vicar held up a hand while I walked down the wicket to defend my stumps. I took guard, as I’d seen the professionals do, looked around the village green to check on the positions of the fielders, adjusted my pad, twirled my little bat, which felt absurdly flimsy, swallowed hard and then nodded to the vicar to let him know that I was as ready as I was going to get.

Peter said afterwards that I must have damaged the bat in some way while I was walking out to the wicket. ‘It was in perfectly good condition when I handed it over to you,’ he insisted. ‘You must have leant on it, or banged it against the ground.’ I still maintain that the problem was that the bat was too flimsy for proper cricket and that a well-made bat would have withstood all such traumas without ill-effect.

I suppose that from a distance what happened must have all seemed rather funny. But from where I was standing it didn’t seem funny at all. I didn’t see the ball after it left the fast bowler’s hand until it hit my bat. And then there was chaos. Cries of ‘Catch it!’ were interspersed with cries of ‘Watch out!’ When I looked down I found that although I was still holding the handle of a bat the handle had no blade attached to it. I discovered afterwards that when the ball had hit the bat the latter had instantly broken and while the ball had flown off in one direction the best part of the bat had flown off in another direction. The good news was that no one was hurt by the piece of airborne cricket bat. The even better news was that the fielders were so distracted by what had happened that none of them managed to catch the ball.

After that the opposition had little option but to lend us their bats. It was either that or abandon the match.

* * *

By the end of the third over we had scored 22 runs (mostly extras) and lost three wickets. The match looked almost finished. Josh had been our first victim. The second ball I had received had slid off the face of my bat (without either my knowledge or consent I confess) and had squirted down to long leg at a tremendous pace. Seeing the ball disappear across the grass and realising that there were no fielders in the area I had immediately looked down the wicket, yelled ‘Run!’ and started off for the other crease. I don’t think Josh heard me because he didn’t move straight away but he soon realised what was happening when he saw me tearing down the pitch towards him. When I arrived at his end of the wicket he had made very little progress and still had about twenty yards to go to reach safety. I checked the position of the fielder who was chasing the ball and decided that we would have plenty of time to make it so I dropped my borrowed bat on the ground, took Josh’s arm and started to walk with him back in the direction from which I had come. When I had escorted him to the batting crease, and made sure that he was fairly stable and not likely to topple onto his wicket, I scampered back up the pitch as quickly as I could.

Although I had effectively run two and walked one and the scorebook would only register a single I was still quite pleased with myself for masterminding what had turned out to be a fairly complicated exercise in logistics.

Then, just as I was relaxing a little and thinking of the century that would be mine if I could just get those other 99 runs, I heard a huge cry from Josh’s end of the wicket. I turned round just in time to see him walking slowly back up the pitch towards me and pointing to the bat which lay on the ground at my feet.

‘I forgot my bat!’ he shouted to me.

‘You’ve got yours! I shouted. He was using it as a walking stick.

When they ran him out he was a third of the way down the wicket. They nearly ran me out at the same time because I had started down the pitch to try to explain to him that the bat he could see was the one I was using whereas the stick he was using to help him walk up the pitch to fetch his bat was, in fact, his bat.

When I saw that it was too late to save him I turned round and just got back into my crease in time. Josh was quite sporting about it. He said that he needed to go to the lavatory anyway. All things considered we were pretty well resigned to the fact that it was just a matter of time before we lost, though to be honest I think we all felt that we had put up a better show than anyone might have expected.

* * *

After our third wicket fell, Kay McBride came out to bat. During the interval she had gone back to her cottage to change and to put on something more appropriate for the occasion and was wearing a breathtakingly short, white tennis skirt and a diaphanous white blouse which was clearly a couple of sizes too small for her. The opposition certainly found it extremely difficult to concentrate. When Kay bent down into her batting stance the fielders behind her found themselves staring at the tops of her stockings and a foot of white thigh while the fielders in front of her found themselves gazing into an apparently bottomless cleavage. I don’t know whether it was because they were distracted by these unexpected visions of rural loveliness or because they didn’t want her stay at the wicket to be too short-lived but the fielders did not react particularly quickly when Kay was at the crease.

The humourless fast bowler was not amused by what he clearly regarded as indefensible sloppiness and when the second catch was put down he got very angry and said some very hurtful things. He was putting his heart and soul into his bowling and I suppose he felt a little let down.

* * *

Dr Brownlow had forecast that their fast bowler would not stay on the pitch for more than half an hour and I decided that this was the moment to start taking advantage of the seeds of doubt which Dr Brownlow had sown. I wandered a little closer to the angry fast bowler. ‘You shouldn’t get so excited!’ I warned him, gently. ‘If your blood pressure goes up too high you could be in real trouble.’

He looked at me with eyes that could burn holes in armour plating. ‘What do you mean?’ he demanded, scowling.

I sucked half a litre of air in through my teeth, let it out slowly and shook my head knowingly. ‘I don’t want to say any more,’ I said. I paused and bravely looked him in the eye. ‘But just tell me immediately if you get a headache.’

The fast bowler stared at me and frowned. ‘What sort of headache?’

‘Any sort of headache.’

He looked at me and frowned. ‘Why?’

I shook my head. ‘I don’t want to say any more,’ I said. ‘You signed one of Dr Brownlow’s S. B. forms and so it’s really nothing to do with me.’ I regarded this abuse of my professional position as justified since if the fast bowler continued to bowl one of us would probably be severely injured. Apart from a bat and a single pad each we had nothing to protect us from the ball. I felt that getting him out of the way could be regarded as a valuable form of preventive medicine.

Three balls later the fast bowler stopped in mid run up and held his forehead. His captain and I wandered up to him. ‘What’s up?’ asked the captain.

‘I don’t feel well,’ complained the fast bowler. ‘I’ve got a bit of a headache.’

‘Probably just a bit too much sun,’ said the captain. ‘I’ll send for an aspirin.’ He turned and waved towards the boundary.

‘Maybe I ought to go and lie down for a while, captain,’ said the fast bowler. He swallowed and mopped at his brow. His captain did not think this was a good idea. He force fed the fast bowler with a glass of water in which two aspirin tablets had been dissolved and told him not to be such a sissy. The bowler sent down two rather medium pace deliveries which Kay McBride succeeded in deflecting into the outfield. We ran two off the first and the second went for four.

‘Is there anyone we should telephone, you know, in case...,’ I asked him when he next walked past me.

The fast bowler stopped and stared at me.

‘You’re a very brave man,’ I told him quietly. ‘Not many people would put their team before their health.’

He bowled just one more ball and then walked off the field clutching his head. When his captain remonstrated with him he started to cry and talk about his children.

* * *

Without their fearsome opening bowler the visitors turned out to be a very ordinary side. What is more the loss of their star player seemed to weaken their spirit and remove much of their confidence. The substitute they fielded as a replacement turned out to be their twelfth man, a flimsy looking fellow who obviously hadn’t expected to be called upon to play and turned out to be an individual of a nervous disposition. His presence did not do much for the morale of our visitors.

The twelfth man’s credibility was finally destroyed when he missed a catch which was such a sitter that Ernie McBride, who had hit the ball, had already given up hope and left the crease. Ernie had to scurry back in order to avoid being run out.

We had never been in the slightest bit worried by the prospect of losing. It had, after all, been our original intention to let all our opponents win so that they would happily spend more money on buying rounds of drinks for one another (and for us).

But by teatime, when we had scored a quite remarkable 77 runs for a modest five wickets, something strange had started to happen: we had, for the very first time, begun to think of not losing. There were two reasons for this. First, our opponents had given absolutely no indication that they were likely to start spending money if they won. They were a rather miserable bunch. And second, as our innings progressed we noticed a distinct change in their attitude. They began to make sneering, uncomplimentary remarks. They called all our scoring shots 'lucky'. They criticised our pitch. They complained about having a tree on the playing area. And they made loud, rude remarks about our attire. We still had over 100 runs to score in order to win, and none of us thought of winning as a realistic possibility, but we felt that if we could last out the remaining 20 overs of our innings then we would have won a modest, moral victory. One thing gave us hope that we might be able to do this: it was getting dark.

Although the match had started at twelve noon, and should have finished while it was still light, there had been a considerable number of unexpected delays. Having Josh as wicket keeper had meant that our opponents' innings had taken rather longer to complete than anyone had expected (we would have been happy to carry him seated in the deckchair but sometimes he had insisted on moving from one end to the other under his own steam). Injuries on the field had taken up quite a lot of time and luncheon had dragged on for an additional, unscheduled three quarters of an hour. As we resumed the match after tea the sun was already beginning to set and it was clear that it would be quite dark by the time the match was completed. Under normal circumstances it is generally thought that the batting side are most disadvantaged by playing in poor light. But these were not normal circumstances and we all felt that the darker it got the greater our advantage would be.

I had been given out leg before wicket just before tea (it would be unnecessarily immodest of me not to record that I scored 23 runs though dishonest of me not to confess that only three of them came from deliberate strokes, the rest were more a result of the ball hitting the bat than the bat hitting the ball) and so, it was Ernie McBride and Dr Brownlow who strode out onto the pitch to resume our innings.

Dr Brownlow was lucky to survive the first ball he received. Inspired, perhaps, by memories of a dim and distant playing career, he greeted his first delivery for nearly half a century by swinging his bat around his body at waist height. Remarkably and unexpectedly the bat and the ball collided in mid air and the latter, being the smaller and more mobile of the two, flew sharply upwards and then began a slow descent that would have taken it straight into the hands of a nearby fielder.

At least, it would have taken it into the fielder's hands if he had been ready for it. But he was too busy dancing around and generally doing a rather good impression of an African tribal rain dancer to pay any attention to the ball.

Those of us sitting or standing watching at the boundary's edge were confused by what we saw. At first we thought that the fielder must have been stung by a bee or a wasp. Only a few moments later, when Dr Brownlow strolled rather guiltily to the boundary in search of safety pins, did we discover that the unfortunate fielder had, in fact, been hit by one of Dr Brownlow's shirt buttons. The effort of making such an athletic manoeuvre had proved too much for Dr Brownlow's elderly shirt and buttons had flown off in several random directions. As luck would have it the only fielder who was struck by one of these button bullets was the only one who had been in a position to catch the ball.

Dr Brownlow clearly regarded this escape as a sign from the gods that they were inclined to look favourably upon his batsmanship. He swung at every other ball he received and by the end of two overs had scored an astonishing 26 runs, 24 of them in boundaries. We thought that the fact that he didn't throw his bat at every ball he received meant that he was choosing the balls to attack but in fact he admitted later that on those occasions when he had not thrown his bat at the ball he had been merely recovering his breath and energy.

By the time the gods decided that Dr Brownlow had been blessed enough he had been joined at the wicket by Frank Parsons and had helped to take our score to a quite remarkable 136 and his own personal score to a team best 42.

Frank only lasted three balls before being run out and Peter Marshall, who had followed him, lasted another over before being caught at the wicket. When Thumper Robinson, our number 11 batsman, strode out to the wicket to join Patchy Fogg, we had nine overs left and were just 45 runs short of our opponents' total. It didn't look as if we could win and it didn't look as if we would be likely to still be batting when we ran out of overs, but we were on top of the world. As Frank pointed out, we had almost become a cricket team.

What hope there was came from the fact that it was now almost pitch black and our opponents were having a terrible time keeping track of the ball. If Thumper and Patchy had been more skilled as batsmen then the fielders would have been able to judge the direction of the ball by watching their bodies and bats. But although both were playing well neither of them was particularly successful at controlling the direction of the ball. A firm, straight drive which should have sent the ball whizzing towards mid on or mid off would instead send the ball flying over the slips, soaring past square leg or bouncing into the covers. It is more difficult to field competently in the dark when even the batsman has absolutely no idea where the ball will go when it has been hit.

Things moved even further in our favour when the visitors lost their vice captain, who thought himself a real tough guy, in a collision with our oak tree, which didn't think of itself as anything very much but which turned out to be considerably tougher than the vice captain.

The vice captain had been running flat out after one of Thumper's drives and had run straight into the side of the tree. He regained consciousness quite soon after the collision but Dr Brownlow and I both felt that he needed to be X-rayed at Barnstaple hospital and seen by a dentist. We picked up as many of his teeth as we could find, popped them into a plastic container full of milk and told him to give them to the doctors as soon as he arrived at the hospital.

By half past nine that evening the unthinkable had happened and the impossible had nearly happened: we needed just eleven runs to win and we had just six balls in which to score them. Thumper Robinson and Patchy Fogg were playing like giants and the fielding side was in total disarray.

But although we didn't get the runs we needed we went out fairly gloriously. Thumper walked down the pitch to drive the opposition bowler straight back over his head. He missed. The wicket keeper caught the ball and, without fuss, removed the bails. We had been dismissed just eleven runs short of the opposition's total.

Our opponents were so relieved about their win that they abandoned their puritanical training regime and bought alcohol with such enthusiasm that even Frank started smiling his approval. It was a cricket match worth remembering. The only pity is that most of the players had so much to drink that the following morning they could not remember whether they'd been playing cricket, croquet or ping pong.

* * *

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

With just half an hour to go before the curtain went up on the Bilbury Revue even Thumper and I were as excited and jittery as seven-year-olds on Christmas Eve - and we weren't performing.

Mrs Riddle had insisted that everyone in any way involved with the revue should be at the village hall at least two hours before the show was due to begin. 'I don't want to be pacing about wondering where you are,' she told us all at the preperformance briefing.

'And no calling in at the pub for a quick one!' she had added, sternly, and although I think she probably thought the use of the phrase 'quick one' made her look worldly-wise it did, in fact, show that she had little conception of what went on at the Duck and Puddle. I don't think any local had ever gone into Frank and Gilly's pub for a 'quick one'. If she'd really wanted to appear knowing she should have forbidden us all to go into the pub for a 'slow three or four'.

Mrs Riddle had insisted that alcohol would not be allowed backstage but had not allowed for the ingenuity of the hard drinking locals. Frank Parsons, the publican, had filled a two litre vacuum flask with hot mulled wine and had thrown half a dozen carrot slices into the brew so that anyone glancing at the mixture would assume that it was some sort of vegetable soup. Patchy Fogg had filled a Coca Cola bottle with Vodka and blackcurrant. Peter Marshall had hidden a pewter hip flask full of brandy in one of the secret pockets inside his jacket. And Thumper Robinson had stashed a bottle of red wine and a bottle of whisky behind a beam high above the stage.

'How big is the audience?' Patsy asked me, in a whisper. It was the fifth or sixth time she had asked the same question. Like the other members of the 'Bilbury Ladies Amateur Cancan and Exotic Dancing Troupe' Patsy had been dressed and fully made up for several hours. The Troupe's stage gear consisted of matching, pale pink swimming costumes (bought at what Peter Marshall insisted was cost price from the village shop), fishnet tights (most definitely not bought from Peter Marshall's shop since Peter had only recently recognised the invention of the ordinary silk stocking and would never have even contemplated the notion of selling such an indelicately natured article of female apparel), multi-petticoated cancan skirts (hired at enormous expense from a theatrical outfitters in Bristol) and exotic headdresses (individually built by Kay McBride with materials supplied by Anthea Yarnold whose husband owned the 'Happy Chickens Lay Nicer Eggs' chicken farm just outside Bideford). Like the other five members of the troupe - Kay McBride, Anne Thwaites (Thumper Robinson's girlfriend), Gilly Parsons, landlady of the Duck and Puddle, Deidre Mulberry and Elspeth Nutcomb - Patsy was preserving her modesty and her body temperature for as long as possible by wearing a dressing gown over her costume.

Gingerly, I opened the door out into the main part of the hall and peered through the tiny gap that appeared between the hinge end of the door and the doorframe. I was getting quite good as this.

'It's nearly half full,' I told Patsy. I looked at my watch. 'And there's still twenty minutes to go!'

Patsy turned. 'Nearly half full!' she hissed to Kay, who was standing just behind her. Kay turned to pass the information on to those standing behind her and decided to economise on words. 'Nearly full!' I heard her whisper. Not surprisingly, this good news brought a murmur of approval from the other members of the Revue; most of whom had been ready to go on stage for at least an hour and were now beginning to feel rather fretful.

Mrs Riddle's requirement that they be at the village hall two hours before the curtain went up might have saved her from worry but it hadn't helped the performers. The greatest and most popular worry seemed to be that although all the tickets had been sold no one would turn up to watch the performance. Financially, the revue was already a great success. But to the performers, waiting back stage, the financial success of the event was not something which they regarded as a priority. For most, if not all of them, this was their first adventure in the world of show business and they were all looking forward to their moments of glory.

'I hope the weather stays nice,' said Anne Thwaites. 'If it rains people won't want to come out.'

'Well, I hope it's not too nice,' said Elspeth Nutcomb. 'If it's a lovely sunny evening people won't want to come and sit in a stuffy old village hall, will they?’ Elspeth runs an animal sanctuary and years of frustration and disappointment have lined her face. In her spare time she is married to an insurance underwriter. He works in London during the week and comes home only at weekends. Surprisingly, they both seem happy with this arrangement.

‘But surely they’ll come if they’ve paid!’ argued Deidre Mulberry, a divorcee with two children who thinks that accepting state help or alimony would be a sign of defeat and weakness, who keeps herself and children fed and clothed on what she earns by working as an occasional relief barmaid at the Duck and Puddle and who regards waste as the most heinous crime of all. Deidre cannot afford the bus fare into Barnstaple and so has to do all her shopping in the village. Because she can’t afford Peter Marshall’s prices she only ever buys stale bread and fruit and vegetables which are slightly past their best.

I borrowed a chipped china cup from the store cupboard, persuaded Frank to fill it with mulled wine from his flask, and passed the warming brew around the Revue members.

‘Everything’s going to be absolutely fine!’ I promised them, without justification, as they sipped at Frank’s wine. ‘The audience will be marvellous and you’ll be brilliant!’

Like all performers they accepted this fulsome praise without hesitation and settled down to try to relax. It was at least a minute and a half before Patsy asked me to check again on the size of the audience.

* * *

The waiting went on for so long that when the time came for the show to start no one was ready.

‘Good luck, everybody!’ said Mrs Riddle, after looking at her watch so often that Frank had warned her that if she looked at it again it would wear out. She spoke in one of her now famous backstage whispers. I think she thought she was whispering but even when whispering her voice carried so well that villagers in Combe Martin would have had no difficulty in hearing her. Mrs Riddle herself was due to introduce the show and act as the compére. She was dressed in a pair of black tights and a black leotard, a white dress shirt, a black bow tie, a black tail coat and a pair of black, high heeled shoes. She wore a top hat on her head and carried a black, ebony walking cane.

‘Oh, is it time for the show?’ squeaked Miss Phillips. She sounded surprised, as though she and all the others had all gathered backstage for some other purpose entirely. She and Mrs Blossom were due to close the first half of the concert with a duet on the piano but they were still arguing about what to play. Mrs Blossom wanted to play something by Chopin whereas Miss Phillips had made no secret of the fact that she rather favoured a composition by Liszt.

‘Oh, I must just spend a penny!’ cried Kay McBride, darting into the ladies changing room and bolting the door behind her.

There was a chorus of ‘me too’s and ‘me next’s from the other female performers who, in true English fashion, quickly formed a neat queue. It wasn’t a straight queue - there wasn’t room - but everyone instinctively seemed to know who they followed. The male performers did not have to queue. Their lavatory was behind a hedge just outside the back door.

‘Give it until quarter past,’ suggested Thumper calmly to a suddenly distraught Mrs Riddle. He took his hand away from the switch with which he had been planning to extinguish the house lights and gave Mrs Riddle a comforting pat on the shoulder.

‘People are still coming in!’ I added. I watched as Patsy’s parents took their seats. Patsy’s father was wearing his Sunday best suit and had even shaved for the occasion. As for Patsy’s mother, well it took me a few moments to recognise her. For a while I couldn’t work out why she looked so different. Finally, I realised that it was the first time since our wedding that I had seen her without a pinafore on.

Looking around the audience it wasn’t difficult to tell the locals from the visitors. The locals all wore their best clothes. The men were pulling uncomfortably at shirt collars and ties and wriggling their shoulders in suits that were a size or two too small for them. Normally unkempt hair had been brushed, combed and cajoled into place with the aid of hair gel or water and feet which were accustomed to roaming free in wellington boots were universally imprisoned in once fashionable but hardly worn leather shoes. The women had all helped one another do their hair. And they all wore summer dresses that reminded me of clothes my mother had worn when I'd been a boy. Even the younger women wore slightly out-of-date clothes.

This final quarter of an hour didn't seem to last anywhere near fifteen minutes.

'Lights out, please, Thumper!' whispered Mrs Riddle.

Since they heard this at exactly the same moment as Thumper the audience fell silent a split second before the house lights went out.

'Curtain!' she whispered.

'Good luck! I whispered back, as I pulled on the rope which would open the curtain on my side of the stage. I watched Thumper's hand signals so that we could draw our curtains at the same time. We had practised this several times and were quite proud of our skill in this regard. Too late I remembered that Mrs Riddle had told us all that we weren't allowed to say 'Good luck!' to one another because it was considered unlucky in theatrical circles. 'Break a leg!' I added, remembering the old theatre saying that she had taught us, just a second or so too late.

Mrs Riddle had gone and was standing in the centre of the stage long before Thumper and I had finished opening the curtains. I thought the stage looked terrific. The silver painted hardboard reflected the light from the four Ford Cortina headlamps which Thumper had fitted up as spotlights and the two artificial apple trees on either side of the stage gave the whole stage a suitably rural, albeit perhaps rather surrealistic, aspect. The children at the village school had, under Miss Hargreaves' expert tuition and supervision, made the leaves out of green crepe paper and the fruit out of clotted cream cartons, half of which had been painted red and half of which had been painted green. The piano which Mrs Blossom and Miss Phillips would use for their recital was at this stage disguised as a rock. At least it was supposed to be a rock but the grey paint which Thumper and I had used to cover the cardboard edifice which surrounded the piano looked rather white in the bright spotlights and during the interval there was much curiosity among the audience about the reason for the iceberg on the stage. It was, I gather, generally thought that it was considered to be an ironic reference to the North Devon weather.

'First of all I'd like to thank you for coming along to our first annual Revue,' began Mrs Riddle, startling those of us who had thought that this Revue was a one off production. She wore her hat at a rakish angle, leant on her cane as she spoke and radiated confidence. I'd never seen her look so calm or so comfortable. 'As you all know tonight's performance is for a wonderful cause and if you haven't done so already I hope you'll all buy programmes from two lovely young attendants.' Mrs Riddle waved a hand towards Jackie and Dawn Peters, fifteen-year-old twins who actually lived in Parracombe but who, when they had heard about the Revue, had come rushing over to offer their help. 'During the interval,' she went on, 'you'll be able to buy tea and scones at the back of the hall.'

She paused for a moment. 'And now, let the show commence!' she cried, waving her arms about enthusiastically. 'Our first performer is someone most of you know very well, though you might not have been aware that he had a hidden talent as a monologist!'

Someone nudged my elbow. I turned my head. It was Frank. 'Hold this for me!' he hissed, handing me his now almost empty vacuum flask.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' continued Mrs Riddle. 'Please welcome your local publican: Frank Parsons!' She took off her top hat and held it and her cane at arm's length. There was a roar of approval from the audience which confirmed Frank's popularity and Mrs Riddle's good sense in choosing him to open the show.

At the dress rehearsal Frank had sped through his monologue (an old music hall favourite about a girl and a boy, a dog, a rowing boat and the girl's mother) so quickly that he hadn't been on stage for more than a minute or so and, therefore, my second job, after opening the curtains, was to remind him not to speak too quickly. I did this by simply muttering: 'Slow!' to him as he was about to stride out onto the stage.

The result was something of a modest misunderstanding for while Mrs Riddle strode daintily into the wings Frank moved much less daintily, and painfully slowly, towards the centre of the stage. For some reason he seemed to think that in addition to walking slowly he had to face the audience as he walked and this gave him a distinctive and rather crab like gait.

After arriving at the small chalk cross which marked the centre of the stage he stood there for a moment or two just peering into the darkness. For a moment I feared that he had forgotten his lines. But he hadn't. He was simply doing his best to obey the instruction he had been given. Miss Johnson, the Revue's official wardrobe mistress, had chosen to dress him in Austrian lederhosen, complete with a green chiffon blouse with bouffant sleeves and a pair of long grey socks borrowed from Patchy Fogg, who had once been a boy scout. Frank had at first been reluctant to dress in such a flamboyant manner but somehow Mrs Riddle and Miss Johnson had managed to persuade him that making a complete and utter fool of himself was an unavoidable part of show business. I had asked Miss Johnson why she'd chosen the Austrian national costume of lederhosen for Frank, a traditional English publican who was, after all, reciting a nineteenth century Victorian monologue. She had explained that she'd found them in a pile of old clothing donated to the last church jumble sale. When I pointed out that although this was an answer it wasn't really an explanation she had just smiled rather sweetly and told me that she thought someone ought to wear them and that they fitted Frank almost perfectly. There had been much discussion about whether or not Frank should shave his legs but it was quite clear that the final decision had come down against shaving.

I suspect that when Mrs Riddle had said that she wanted him to deliver his monologue more slowly she had meant that she wanted him to deliver the whole thing at a steadier pace. This was not, however, the way that Frank interpreted the instruction. He delivered each line as rapidly as he had done during the rehearsal but at the end of each line he paused for what seemed to be a good chunk of eternity, though it was probably no more than half a minute at a time. It is true that this had the effect of slowing down the overall pace at which the monologue was delivered but it also had the effect of rather disrupting the flow of the story. By the time he began a new line the audience had largely forgotten what the previous line had been about.

Still, none of this mattered for the audience hadn't come to listen to a rather dated monologue they'd come to watch Frank deliver it. And when he finally finished they cheered and clapped enthusiastically. I hadn't heard such cheering since I'd been at school and a visiting speaker had given us all an extra half day's holiday. This wasn't the sort of polite clapping sound you get when people clap their hands as if they are praying, or tap the fingers of one hand on the palm of the other; this was the much louder sort of clapping you get when people slam their palms together and produce great resounding, echoing claps.

Frank had been nervous beforehand but when he heard the audience's response he didn't want to leave the stage. He would have probably still been there if Mrs Riddle hadn't marched out, thanked him and escorted him back into the wings. I drew the curtains and was proud to be the first to shake Frank by the hand. He was perspiring heavily but beaming broadly and looked justifiably pleased with himself.

After that tremendous start the concert went swimmingly. Patchy Fogg rode his monocycle round and round in circles for twelve and a half minutes. The audience got a little restless after the first minute, and to be perfectly honest I rather think that some of them might have expected Patchy to do more than just ride his monocycle round and round in rather erratic circles, but they were far too polite to do anything but applaud him enthusiastically when he finally got dizzy and crashed into the cardboard rock (or iceberg) which was disguising the piano. This was not an evening for criticism. Besides, everyone had to admit that Patchy had cleaned and greased his machine assiduously and it positively sparkled in the glare of the Ford Cortina headlamps.

The Hewitt children did their tap dancing routine (and although I have never been an aficionado of tap dancing even I had to admit that it sounded much better and looked far more impressive when they did it with their shoes on than it had when they had practised in their stockinged feet) and seemed not in the slightest bit distracted by the fact that throughout their performance their father danced around in front of the stage taking photographs.

(Mr Hewitt, by profession a sewage consultant, had appointed himself our official photographer and had come to the Revue equipped with two boxes of flashbulbs and six rolls of 36 exposure film. A week after the concert he got his films back from the developer and proudly displayed the results on the walls of the village hall. Of the 216 pictures he took, 187 were of his tap dancing children. There were some in the village who felt that as official photographer Mr Hewitt had provided a rather unbalanced historical record of the evening. This view was held most strongly by those members of the troupe who did not appear at all in any of Mr Hewitt's photographs.)

After the Hewitt children came the vicar.

Mr Riddle had been planning to juggle with three old tennis balls which Miss Johnson had painted red, green and yellow, but the day before the concert he injured himself when the church bell rope on which he was pulling snapped back rather suddenly and unexpectedly. Bravely insisting that the show must go on, he ignored his sprained wrist and performed half his juggling act with enviable panache. He couldn't manage three balls with one arm in a sling, of course, and there had been a serious discussion before he went on stage about which ball he should leave out of his act. He originally planned to leave the yellow ball behind and to juggle with the red and green balls but Miss Johnson said she thought that the yellow and the green would look best and that he should leave the red ball behind. Mrs Riddle said she thought that red and yellow would look rather nice together and that he should allow the green ball to 'rest'. In the end the vicar, Mrs Riddle and Miss Johnson had decided on a compromise. And so for the first two minutes of his spot the vicar juggled with the red and green balls; for the second two minutes he juggled with the red and yellow balls; and for the finale he brought back the green ball and rested the red ball.

'What did you think of the vicar's act?' I asked Patsy's father after the show.

'I've never seen a one armed juggler before,' my father-in-law replied, laconically. 'So I haven't anything to compare it with. But the balls were very pretty.'

And I don't think anyone would have disagreed with him. There was back stage controversy too before Miss Phillips and Mrs Blossom went on to bring the first Act to a close. They had been arguing about which piece to play for days and with just minutes to go their argument did not seem any closer to resolution. After the vicar had left the stage and Thumper and I had closed the curtains he and I rushed out to remove the piano's disguise and to push the instrument into the centre of the stage. We then added two piano stools and exited rapidly. At this point I realised that Miss Phillips and Mrs Blossom, who were on my side of the stage, were still arguing about what to play. Mrs Blossom still wanted to play the Chopin. Miss Phillips still insisted that they should play the Liszt. I was tempted to tell them that I didn't think that anyone would know the difference and that the audience would probably prefer a Russ Conway tune anyway. I looked across at Thumper and then at Mrs Riddle. She seemed surprisingly calm as she gave Thumper and me the signal to open the curtains. Then, as the curtains drew (smoothly) back she strode out onto the stage and announced that Miss Phillips and Mrs Blossom would close the first Act by playing a piece by Brahms. As she came off the stage she smiled sweetly at the two duelling pianists. They glowered at her but had little option but to go on and play something by Brahms. This they duly did.

* * *

During the interval while Mrs Hewitt (mother of the Hewitt children and wife of their doting father) and Jackie and Dawn Peters from Parracombe fulfilled Mrs Riddle's promise and sold scones and tea at the back of the hall we all huddled together behind the stage and told each other how wonderfully well we thought it was going.

The performers who had performed had relaxed a little and were desperate to hear how well they'd done. I was quickly to discover that people who have been on stage will believe anything you tell them as long as it is complimentary. There was more performing going on back stage than there had been on stage.

'How was I?' asked the normally urbane Patchy Fogg. 'Do you think they liked it?'

'You were terrific. They loved you.'

'Do you really think so? That's very kind of you. You're not just saying that, are you?'

'No, of course not!' I replied.

'You would tell me the truth wouldn't you?'

'Yes, of course!' I lied.

Frank sidled over to me. His flask had been emptied long ago but he had sent Miss Johnson back to the Duck and Puddle for a refill and he was now halfway through the second quart of his special recipe mulled wine.

‘What did you think?’

‘I think the whole show is going very well,’ I replied, knowing very well that he didn’t want to know what I thought about the whole show.

‘Er, what did you, er, think about, er, my, er, little bit?’

‘Oh, *your* bit?’

‘Er, yes. What did you think?’

I put my hand on his shoulder. He visibly blanched, expecting the worst.

‘I thought you were sensational, Frank.’

His face lit up. And then a slightly worried look appeared. ‘You’re not just saying that?’

I tried to look hurt that he should even think this of me. ‘Of course not! You were absolutely fantastic. Couldn’t you tell? The audience loved you.’ I stared down at his hairy legs and knobbly knees. ‘Aren’t you going to get changed?’

‘Mrs Riddle wants us to stay in costume for the final curtain, ‘he told me. I rather thought that he was pleased of this excuse to make sure that the moments of glory lasted as long as possible. He spotted Pauline Peterson, in charge of make-up, excused himself and hurried across to ask her to check his rouge, eyeshadow and lipstick. Pauline’s first attempt at stage make up had been quietly restrained but Mrs Riddle had persuaded her that in making up a stage artiste the key criterion is not the skill with which the make-up is applied but the quantity of powder, paint and lipstick which is applied. Pauline had taken this lesson to heart and had used up two lipsticks already.

The performers who had done their routines might still be just slightly edgy but they were definitely less tense than those Bilburian performers who hadn’t yet been on stage.

Five of the six members of ‘The Bilbury Ladies Amateur Cancan And Exotic Dancing Troupe’, due to open the second half, were in an absolutely terrible state. Kay McBride kept rushing around telling everyone who would listen (and, for that matter, those who wouldn’t) that she’d been to the lavatory at least twenty times. Anne and Patsy were sat huddled together in a corner, shivering despite their dressing gowns. Two of the others, Deidre Mulberry and Elspeth Nutcomb, had not yet re-emerged from the changing room and ladies’ cloakroom wherein they had been securely locked for the whole of the first half of the Revue.

Gilly Parsons, the sixth member of ‘The Bilbury Ladies Amateur Cancan And Exotic Dancing Troupe’, had loyally watched her husband’s stage debut from what Mrs Riddle tried to persuade us to call the wings but what the rest of us, through habit rather than stubbornness, still tended to call the side of the stage, and had stayed there to watch the rest of the show. As the only performer to have seen the whole of the first half she was much in demand for approving comments and repeated requests for praise had led her to produce the sort of superlatives for which West End producers would have sacrificed their souls.

‘You were out of this world!’ I heard her tell Patchy Fogg, the erratic monocyclist, just as Mrs Riddell announced, in her now familiar stage whisper, that it was time for the second half of the show to begin.

* * *

I realise that I may be accused of bias but in my view ‘The Bilbury Ladies Amateur Cancan And Exotic Dancing Troupe’ were truly sensational. I hadn’t seen anything like it since Horace Inchmore and I got lost in Amsterdam when we were fourth year medical students.

During the dress rehearsal I had been busy helping Thumper paint the artificial rock (or iceberg) and so I hadn’t seen the Troupe in their costumes until they went on stage. Nor had I seen them perform any of their numbers. Patsy hadn’t let me see her when she tried on her costume on home. She said that it would be unlucky. I said I thought it was only brides who had to keep their dress secret. Patsy said that the same rule applied to exotic dancers.

Their act began with a traditional heart-stopping cancan number and I was glad of the fact that Dr Brownlow was in the audience for when the six women started kicking their legs and waving their petticoats in the air I became quite genuinely concerned that members of the audience might start collapsing. I rather suspect that if the show hadn't been organised by the vicar's wife who was, ex-officio, president of the Bilbury Wives' Group it might have been banned by the village elders. There was some consternation among the visually less acute members of the audience when, inspired by the fact that they were wearing pink swimming costumes, a whispered rumour started that none of the women was wearing anything underneath their petticoats. Mr Horace Halifax, a retired stockbroker who had seen the cancan performed in Paris in the 1920s, told everyone who would listen to him that cancan dancers never did wear underwear and a little wishful thinking did the rest.

After the cancan the Troupe performed what Kay announced was a rare formation tango and entertained us with a flamenco dance (complete with clicking fingers). They then finished off with another rendition of France's favourite dance.

The enthusiastic applause was accompanied and punctuated by loud cries of approval, most of which seemed to emanate from a group of teenage youths from Ilfracombe. There was no doubt at all that Patsy and the other girls had been the hit of the evening.

Megan Underwood, curiously billed on the programme as 'The Sensational Singing Soprano', was the next act and it was difficult not to feel sorry for her. Following 'The Bilbury Ladies Amateur Cancan And Exotic Dancing Troupe' cannot have been easy.

However, Megan, who once sang professionally in a Welsh pop group called 'The Psychedelic Mushrooms', did not appear to be in the slightest bit overawed by the success of the dancers. Wearing a floor length evening dress in bottle green satin, and accompanied by Mrs Blossom on the piano, she sang three songs, 'Oh Come All Ye Faithful', 'Give Us A Kiss For Christmas' and 'White Christmas', and by the finish she had the audience tapping their feet and humming along with her. Mrs Riddle had tried to persuade her that her choice of songs was hardly appropriate for a mid-summer festival but Miss Underwood had at first insisted that these were her favourite tunes and eventually admitted that they were, in fact, the only three songs to which she knew the words.

It was during the first few verses of 'Oh Come All Ye Faithful' that I first realised that there was a problem with the lights.

* * *

The Bilbury Village Hall is normally lit by two 100 watt light bulbs though during a single six month spell a year or two ago, when the Parish Council had badly misjudged its financial commitments and every aspect of community living had been subjected to a fairly vicious economy drive, the hall had actually been lit by nothing more enlightening than two 40 watt light bulbs. Naturally, Mrs Riddle wanted her performers to be lit with rather more enthusiasm than this meagre allotment could provide and so, as I have already explained, Thumper had cleverly lit the stage with four old headlamps powered by a motor car battery. The battery was on the far side of the stage so that Thumper, when not busy closing or opening his half of the curtains, could control the lights by the simple expedient of removing the clip from the battery's positive terminal.

Thumper had expected the battery he had acquired to last throughout the performance but it was clear that his expectations were not going to be fulfilled. I looked across the stage. Thumper was looking back towards me. I looked up at the lights. Thumper looked up at the lights and nodded. Unless the rest of the concert was going to be completed in steadily growing darkness we clearly had to do something. And we had to do it fast. We had to find a new battery and somehow we had to get the new battery across to Thumper's side of the stage. The leads from the four lights were tacked to the beams above the stage and only reached as far as the window sill on the far side of the stage. It was on the window sill that the fading battery stood. Thumper's first problem was that he had somehow got to get from his side of the stage to my side of the stage. He couldn't wait until Megan finished her act and he certainly couldn't just stroll across the stage while she was singing. He looked up, looked across at me and smiled, and then, with a casual shrug, using window, curtains, ropes and everything else he could grab hold of, managed to pull himself up onto the beam above the stage upon which the four fading car headlamps were anchored. He then performed what I can only describe as the most daring and impressive feat of beam walking that I have ever witnessed. Although he was walking in darkness, his path lit only by a feeble glow from the backs of the tethered headlamps, he was clearly visible to the audience and after a moment or two of fairly heavy nudging I think that just about everyone in the room except Megan Underwood was aware of what was going on above her head.

It took Thumper no more than a single verse of ‘Oh Come All Ye Faithful’ to get across the beam and another verse to clamber down the ropes and curtains and pillar on my side of the stage. He put his hand on my shoulder, grinned at me, and motioned for me to follow him. Loyally, I did so.

A few seconds later we were standing in the small car park outside the back of the village hall. It was a beautiful, balmy evening and although it was after half past nine it was not yet completely dark.

‘Whose is that?’ demanded Thumper, pointing to a brand new and rather smart looking German car whose owner had ignored the huge notice asking motorists not to block the hall’s rear exit with their cars. The car, a large, silver grey, expensive looking model, had been abandoned rather than parked.

I shrugged. I didn’t have the faintest idea whose it was.

Thumper poked a stick through the car’s radiator grill and fiddled about for a moment or two. A few seconds later the bonnet clicked open.

Thumper and I arrived back in the hall, carrying a replacement car battery, just as Megan Underwood was launching into her final song, a tearful and emotional rendition of the Bing Crosby classic ‘White Christmas’. When I heard the words I couldn’t help thinking of that terrible night when Miss Hargreaves’ cottage had lost its roof and Ben had saved my life. It occurred to me that it was, after all, a rather apt song under the circumstances. The rapidly fading car headlights meant that Megan completed the song in a rather romantic half light.

‘I can’t carry the battery up by myself,’ whispered Thumper. ‘So I’ll go up and let down a piece of rope and you then tie the battery to the end of the rope. I’ll pull the battery up, carry it across the beam, lower it down the other side and connect the lights. Simple!’

It sounded simple.

But as they always do when they sound that simple things went wrong right from the start.

To begin with I couldn’t find anywhere on the battery to fasten the rope. I had to borrow Miss Johnson’s capacious handbag, tie the handbag to the rope, put the battery in the bag and then get Thumper to haul up the bag and the battery. Then, when he had got the bag and the battery in his arms Thumper nearly fell off the beam and almost dropped the battery down onto the stage. It would have missed Megan’s head but it would have almost certainly spoilt her big finale. He put the bag and the battery down on the beam and tied the rope with which he had hauled them up firmly around his waist. I wondered at the wisdom of this for it seemed to me that it meant that if he dropped the battery he would fall with it. I didn’t fancy the idea of being promoted to full stage manager with such little experience.

It was only when Megan curtsied to the audience and they applauded that it occurred to me that since she was finishing her spot we needed to draw the curtains across the stage so that we could get things ready for the next act - billed on the programme as ‘Peter Marshall’s Astonishing Conjuring Tricks’! At the same moment it also rather belatedly occurred to me that if we were drawing the curtains then Thumper didn’t need to risk life and limb carrying the heavy car battery across a narrow beam twelve feet above the stage.

Sadly, however, this thought did not occur to Thumper.

I looked up and tried to catch his eye but it was far too late for he had already begun to make his way along the beam. The audience, spotting him, were quickly distracted from what was going on in front of them on the stage and their applause for the ‘Sensational Singing Soprano’ faded away as their hands reached up to cover their mouths. Thumper was rapidly becoming the evening’s main attraction.

‘I love the way Thumper has dimmed the lights!’ whispered Mrs Riddle behind me. I turned round. The vicar’s wife, top hat in hand, was smiling at me. ‘Marvellously evocative!’ she murmured. ‘How did he do it?’

I opened my mouth to explain but the vicar's wife noticed that Megan had come running off into the wings, leaving the stage quite deserted. 'Shouldn't you draw the curtains?' she asked me, in a throaty whisper which probably resulted in citizens from Ilfracombe to Lynton leaping up from their armchairs and drawing their curtains.

I said that I would happily draw my curtain but that we would have to wait for Thumper to cross the stage before his curtain could be drawn.

Mrs Riddle looked puzzled.

I pointed upwards, at the wobbling figure of our stage manager.

'What on earth is he carrying?' asked Mrs Riddle.

'A car battery,' I replied.

'It looks more like a handbag!'

'Well, the car battery is in the handbag. The handbag belongs to Miss Johnson.'

'Ah!' said Mrs Riddle, as though this made it all clear and it was the most natural thing in the world for a stage manager to be doing. She frowned and thought about what I'd said for a moment or two. 'Why?' she asked.

I explained about the floodlights.

'Aha!' said Mrs Riddle.

'Shall I draw my curtain?' I asked.

'No,' said Mrs Riddle, vehemently shaking her head. 'We'll have to wait until Thumper can draw his curtain as well.' She turned round, reached out and caught hold of Megan Underwood by the arm. 'Go back on!' she hissed. 'Do an encore!'

Megan, who was already accepting congratulations from Anne and Kay of 'The Bilbury Ladies Amateur Cancan And Exotic Dancing Troupe' looked thoroughly startled. 'An encore?'

'Sing another song!'

'But they've stopped clapping!'

'It doesn't matter!' insisted Mrs Riddle. 'Just go out there and sing something else.'

Confused but obedient Megan headed back out onto the stage but stopped after two or three paces and turned back, bumping into Mrs Blossom, who was trotting back towards the piano. 'I don't know any more songs,' said Megan anxiously.

'Do 'White Christmas' again! They loved that one.'

I looked up. Thumper had reached the far end of the beam and was gingerly lowering the car battery down onto the bar. Now that this additional piece of entertainment was almost over the audience was getting restless.

And so, while Thumper first lowered the bag and the battery down to the ground and then clambered down after them, Mrs Blossom and Megan Underwood launched into another rousing version of 'White Christmas'. The audience, slightly surprised but quite uncomplaining, hummed along with, or almost with, the tune. Half way through the song the spotlights went out for a moment and then came on again, much brighter, as Thumper swapped the batteries over. When it looked as though Megan was about to finish her encore, Thumper and I both drew our curtains so speedily that the unfortunate soprano suddenly found herself singing the last few seconds of her final note to an extensive but unresponsive patch of curtain material. As she staggered off stage exhausted Thumper walked across carrying the completely dead battery. He put it down on the floor on my side of the stage and winked at me. ‘Pop that into the car we took the other one from, would you?’

* * *

It took Thumper and me a couple of minutes to get everything ready for Peter’s magic act. As we hurried around turning the piano back into a rock and dragging surprisingly heavy equipment into position Peter scurried about hiding playing cards, eggs, stuffed rabbits and other bits and pieces of magical miscellanea around the stage.

‘Where did you get all this stuff from?’ I had asked Peter before the dress rehearsal, as I had helped him carry his disappearing lady cabinet onto the stage.

‘I bought it all at an auction,’ he had told me. ‘It was very cheap.’

‘Were there any instructions with it?’

Peter shook his head. ‘I still haven’t worked out how to use it all yet,’ he confessed. ‘I can make the stuffed bunny disappear but I don’t always get the same one back again.’

I had asked him how long he’d had it all but he said he couldn’t really remember. He said he was pretty sure that he thought he’d probably bought it sometime during the sixties, though it could have been during the fifties. I hadn’t pressed him for a more precise answer. I found his answer strangely satisfying. I have always found it immensely dispiriting when I find someone who can tell me exactly what they were doing for lunch on March 22nd 1968.

Eventually, with everything in place, Thumper and I told Peter that we hoped he broke a leg and then we left him to face his audience.

Things went wrong right from the start.

Encouraged and advised by Mrs Riddle, Peter had decided to begin his act with the card trick which required the participation of a member of the audience. ‘It’ll get them interested, make them feel they’re part of the act,’ she had told him.

And so as the curtains drew back Peter was standing at the front of the stage with a pack of cards in his hand and a huge, patently false smile on his face. His black hair was slicked down with copious quantities of grease and he wore the sequin studded bottle green jacket and the floppy bow tie which I had first seen him wearing at the dress rehearsal and the sequin starred grey flannels which Miss Johnson had been working on when Thumper had had his accident with the silver paint. The trousers still had a streak of silver paint across the back of one leg. Most impressive of all, however, was the fact that Peter had put in his best teeth especially for the occasion. Having been bought from a house auction in Bideford and made for a seventy-year-old woman with an overhanging bite these did not fit particularly well but they were unstained and reflected the bright lights perfectly.

Mrs Riddle’s idea had been that Peter would stand at the front of the stage and invite a member of the audience to join him and take a card from the pack he was holding. What Mrs Riddle hadn’t allowed for was the fact that most of the people in the audience knew Peter and were genuinely worried that if they went up on stage under the pretext of selecting a card they would end up buying a wooden handle for a garden rake, a two gallon drum of tractor oil or a sack of only very slightly mouldy dog biscuits. None of these purchases would, they knew, be in any way dependent upon whether or not they owned a garden rake with a broken handle, a tractor or a dog. Peter’s ability to sell out-of-date or entirely worthless commodities to people who wouldn’t have needed them even if they had been brand new, best quality and bottom price was the subject of gossip and rumour throughout the West Country, and had been for several decades.

When the audience showed that they were reluctant to wander up onto the stage, Peter decided that if the mountain wasn’t going to come to the prophet then the prophet would have to swallow his pride and make the first move. So he jumped down off the stage and onto the wooden steps which I had found in the store cupboard and which we had carefully pushed into position the day before.

Afterwards Peter claimed that the steps collapsed because the wood was rotten. Thumper and I both claimed that it was his fault for jumping down onto them far too heavily. ‘They were only wooden steps,’ insisted Thumper, without even a hint of a smile. ‘You have to treat wood with respect.’

‘What fool put those old steps in front of the stage?’ demanded Patsy’s father afterwards. ‘They were thrown out years ago. They’re riddled with woodworm.’ I bought him a large drink at the Duck and Puddle and swore him to silence.

Whatever the cause, the consequence was that Peter went crashing into a pile of splintered firewood, the playing cards were scattered far and wide and I suddenly felt terribly guilty for telling him that I hoped he broke his leg. For a brief moment I had an awful thought that he might have done just that.

Peter made a brave attempt to shrug the fall off as part of the act but his nonchalance was not convincing. Once the audience could see that he was not hurt their shock quickly turned into sniggers and their sniggers then duly grew into laughter. That was really when Peter lost control and he never looked like getting back in charge again after that. Red-faced and breathing heavily he spent a few moments scrabbling around in the wreckage of the steps looking for the playing cards which he had dropped before he abandoned this and climbed back upon the stage to resume his act.

But he had, not surprisingly I suppose, lost his confidence and after that terrible beginning things went rapidly downhill. The pink rabbits wouldn’t disappear, the chiffon scarves came out of the back of his neck in a large, messy clump and the invisible glass shelf fell out of the bottom of his bottomless bucket and shattered on the stage.

Things got worse when he reached what was supposed to be the penultimate high point of his act - the sawing of the lady in half.

The glamorous but nervous eighteen-year-old chemist’s assistant from Barnstaple had run out of the back of the hall in her swimming costume and a pair of borrowed six inch high heeled shoes less than ten minutes before she was due to make her stage debut and poor old Miss Johnson, my former receptionist, was press-ganged into acting as substitute. Unfortunately, Miss Johnson was rather broader beamed and less supple than the chemist’s assistant and she couldn’t pull her legs into the top half of the box. Her screams and waving arms alerted Peter to the fact that things weren’t going quite right and he abandoned this trick before any permanent damage was done.

Peter’s final trick, his piece de resistance, was a disappearing lady trick which involved the use of a wardrobe shaped piece of equipment which had a false back and a trap door in the bottom. When performed properly the trick involved getting a pretty young woman to walk into the wardrobe and then apparently stand quite still while the magician thrust sharp swords through parts of her body. The woman would, of course, be standing in the back half of the wardrobe, well away from the swords, and for the finale she would disappear down through the trap door in the bottom of the wardrobe and through a matching trap door in the stage so that she could startle, amaze and astonish the audience by reappearing from the side of the stage.

Peter’s problem was that the village hall stage didn’t have a trap door and neither the vicar nor the Village Hall Committee would give us permission to make one. They said it would be a possible health hazard to visiting dignitaries but Thumper and I decided that what they really meant was that it would be a dignity hazard and that no local politician would dare stand on the stage lest some local prankster should be tempted to crawl underneath the stage and open the trapdoor.

So Peter had persuaded Jackie and Dawn Peters, the twins from Parracombe, to help him with the trick. The idea was that Jackie, dressed in a pale blue swimming costume, a pair of her mother’s tights and a pair of borrowed high heeled shoes, would climb into the wardrobe, wriggle through into the back section and stay there until the end of the show. Then, at the appropriate signal from Peter, Dawn, dressed in a similarly coloured swimming costume, another pair of tights and another pair of borrowed high heeled shoes, would amaze everyone by running up the centre of the hall.

It wasn’t Peter’s fault that this apparently simple trick went wrong.

Dawn, standing waiting at the back of the hall had started to shiver (though it was thought later that this was more likely to be a result of nerves than the temperature) and had borrowed a bright red, knee length anorak from her friend Cheryl. In all the excitement she forgot to take off the anorak when Peter gave her the signal she had been waiting for and she headed up towards the stage.

The audience was, not surprisingly, very confused when, after watching Peter shut a girl wearing a pale blue swimming costume into a wardrobe a girl wearing a red anorak ran up the centre of the hall. They watched, in mystified silence, as Dawn ran up onto the stage and stood alongside Peter in the way they had rehearsed. Dawn even remembered to smile and to hold her arms aloft in the way that Mrs Riddle had taught her. The audience, wondering what was going to happen next, remained silent.

When Peter, furious that even this moment of glory had been denied to him, hissed 'Take that thing off' and Dawn, shocked, started to back away from him the audience began to titter. When Peter, furious now, started to chase a squealing Dawn around the stage in an attempt to remove the red anorak from her and to prove to the audience that even if Dawn was not the very same girl as the one who had been locked in the wardrobe she was a pretty good imitation and that even if a standing ovation would be too much to ask for he was due a few cheers, the titters grew louder. Things got even worse when Jackie, who was still locked in the back section of the wardrobe, and who was alarmed by the squeals which her sister was making, tried to get out, found that she couldn't and suddenly started to panic.

It was then, with Peter chasing the squealing Dawn around the stage and Jackie banging on the inside of the wardrobe and shouting for help, that the replacement car battery, which had been providing the power for the lights, inexplicably and without warning stopped working. The inevitable result was that the entire stage was suddenly plunged into darkness.

And it was at that point that Peter sat down on the stage and started to cry.

It was generally agreed by the company that Mrs Riddle's presence of mind in borrowing a small torch from Patchy Fogg and using it to lead Mrs Blossom out onto the stage and across, round and through the wreckage so that she could round the evening off with something jolly on the piano showed enormous presence of mind.

When they heard the haunting strains of the title tune from 'The Sound of Music' and saw Mrs Blossom, lit only by a small torch beam, enthusiastically banging away at the keys of a piano disguised as a rock (or possibly an iceberg), the audience began to applaud and stamp to their feet and to cheer as though they had never before seen anything quite so funny. Peter's disaster had become the hit of the evening.

* * *

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Despite the dramas which had brought the evening to a rather noisy and slightly premature close it was generally agreed that the first night of the first Bilbury Revue had been a resounding success (although there was one member of the audience who did not have a smile on his face when he left - the owner of the vehicle who had unknowingly donated his battery to the cause was not well pleased when his expensive foreign motor car would not start).

Even poor old Peter Marshall, quite exhausted by his ordeal had quickly regained his enthusiasm when he had found himself surrounded by enthusiastic fans insisting that his comedy magic show was one of the funniest things they had ever seen.

Mrs Riddle was quite prepared to change the nature of her show to satisfy the demands of the public. ‘I want you to do everything just the same tomorrow night,’ she had told him.‘ Don’t change a thing!’

Thumper and I were instructed to reconstruct a collapsible staircase and when Dawn and Jackie flatly refused to have anything further to do with Peter’s act (and were only persuaded to carry on selling scones and tea during the interval when they were promised that Peter would not go anywhere near either of them) Mrs Riddle persuaded Patchy Fogg to dress up in Mrs Blossom’s best swimming costume and to agree to be locked in Peter Marshall’s wardrobe while Frank from the Duck and Puddle was somehow talked into running up to the stage wearing Mrs Blossom’s second best swimming costume. It was agreed that since Patchy and Frank bore absolutely no resemblance to each other, the red anorak would not be a necessary prop.

There was never any doubt that the Bilbury Revue was an enormous financial success. The quite surprisingly substantial income from the modest admission charge had been more than doubled by the income from the sale of scones and cups of tea, from the sale of programmes and from a modest charge made for storing people’s summer coats and hats on pegs at the back of the hall. At the end of that first evening Mrs Riddle announced that we had collected a quite magnificent £327.45 towards the Bilbury Village School Cottage Rebuilding Fund.

But despite all the excitement generated by the Revue (and it is, I think, fair to say that the whole village was enthralled by its first venture into show business) life in Bilbury still had to go on.

The following morning, after I’d fed Ben, the cats, the sheep (five of them now, of course) and myself, Patsy and I and Mr Parfitt went down to the vegetable garden to choose the vegetables and flowers that we would enter for the Bilbury Village Produce Show. Miss Hargreaves, carrying a stout basket, came with us to help pick and carry the selected items.

We had been keeping a careful eye on the best of our produce in each category but, inevitably, some of the most promising looking vegetables, fruit and flowers had either gone past their best or had been eaten by slugs or birds. Our only consolation was that all the other entrants would be facing the same frustrations and disappointments.

After we had made our selections for each class I left Patsy, Mr Parfitt and Miss Hargreaves busy in the kitchen getting the entries ready for the Show and I took my pen and notebook down to the summerhouse to do a little more work on the novel I was writing.

I had a room in the house which I used as a study but I found it much easier to work well away from distractions such as the telephone and the doorbell. One or two people I knew in London had telephone answering machines to protect them from irritating or disturbing calls but even if I had been able to afford one of these devices I doubt if I would have been able to buy one without a trip to Bristol, or maybe Exeter. Besides, a telephone answering machine would not have provided me with any protection against casual callers.

Since I had moved to Bilbury I had acquired quite a number of good friends - people who I trusted, respected and liked a great deal.

When I had been at medical school, or working in hospital as a junior doctor, I had met lots of people but somehow none of those acquaintanceships had gone on to turn into fully-fledged friendships. I suppose part of the problem was the fact that at a medical school or in a hospital everyone was always rushing to be somewhere else. And even when there weren't any immediate pressures to be doing something else acquaintanceships were put under tremendous pressure by the demands of personal and professional ambition.

In Bilbury, people had time to develop friendships; time to listen to one another and time to share personal hopes and fears and aspirations. Living in a fairly remote village one soon learns to accept that having a roof, a fire, some warm clothes and enough to eat are really the only material essentials for a comfortable life. When I'd lived in a city I had found myself under constant pressure to conform to the city dweller's restless urge to find something better to do and to find somewhere more important or more interesting to be. I never found that lifestyle comfortable or satisfying and I much preferred the simpler life in Bilbury.

Surrounded by friends like Thumper, Patchy, Frank and Gilly and Dr Brownlow I found it comforting to know that Patsy and I were not alone. We were not fighting life by ourselves but as part of a community; a large and loving family. It was reassuring to know that if ever I or Patsy were in trouble we would have friends we would be able to call upon for help. In Bilbury I had learned that real wealth is measured in friendships not in television sets, jewellery, motor cars or expensive clothes.

The only problem was that, as I have already explained, I soon found that working at home and being surrounded by good friends were mutually incompatible. Patsy and I rarely locked our doors (and when we did it was more because we wanted some privacy or some warning of a visitor's arrival than because we were worried about being burgled) and if I was working in the house I would often look up from my desk and find myself staring at a grinning Thumper or Patchy.

The business of writing involves a lot more sitting and doing nothing than actually scribbling things down on bits of paper and my visitor would usually mutter something like: 'Glad you aren't doing anything' or 'Pleased to see you aren't busy' before offering me a chance to do something far more enjoyable than stare at a wall and a ream of blank paper.

So, to protect myself and to prevent myself succumbing to the temptations offered by my friends, I had taken to writing in a small, wooden summer house which we had uncovered in a quiet part of the garden. Surrounded in summer by a sea of glorious poppies, the summerhouse provided privacy and peace and although the constantly active birds and frogs and rabbits tended to distract me I did manage to get more work done there than I did in the house. I sat there in a deckchair with my notebook on my knee, a straw hat on my head to shade my eyes and Ben lying at my feet. It wasn't a bad workplace.

The novel was growing at quite a decent rate and I had already filled a notebook and a half but I had hit one problem the characters seemed to have taken on lives of their own. Although I had made plans for them, and had, when I had started the book, thought I had known what was going to happen, they seemed quite determined to control their own destinies. I had not expected this. Each morning I would start work thinking that I knew what was going to happen next. But within twenty minutes or so I would have to abandon my so carefully plotted story outline and allow the characters (I quickly gave up thinking of them as my characters) to take charge of their own lives.

Having had no previous experience of writing fiction I wasn't quite sure whether this was normal or not. At first I was peeved when, one after another, my carefully constructed story lines had to be abandoned and the characters who I thought I had invented, ungratefully refused to utter the neatly honed phrases I had devised for them. For a while I fought hard to impose my will. But when I tried to get heavy-handed the characters, who had by now established strong personalities of their own, stubbornly refused to cooperate and I began to find myself writing in circles.

When I eventually gave up battling and decided to let the characters speak for themselves and to allow the plot to unfold without any interference from me I found the business of writing fiction far easier and much less exhausting. The one enormous and entirely unexpected advantage of allowing the characters to decide what happened was that instead of the writing being a struggle I found that I was enjoying it as much as if someone else had written it and I was reading it.

On the morning after the first night of the Bilbury Revue I worked for about three hours (the longest length of time I found I could write without a break) and then went up to the house to help Patsy finish off her preparations for the

Bilbury Village Produce Show.

* * *

Mrs Blossom and Miss Phillips had, in the end, produced a list of nearly a hundred different entry classes for the Show.

There were five main categories: Vegetables, Flowers, Domestic, Men and Children. Each entry cost one penny and the first, second and third in each class would receive certificates (described on the official programme as ‘suitable for framing’). The certificates, like the Village Produce Show and Bilbury Revue programmes had all been printed at cost price by a jobbing printer in Barnstaple who owed Thumper a favour (though Thumper would not share with us the truth about how he had earned the favour).

Apart from the money they collected from the entrance fees, Miss Phillips and Mrs Blossom intended to raise money for the Bilbury Village School Cottage Rebuilding Fund by charging visitors 10 pence to enter the marquee, (which Dr Brownlow had erected on his front lawn); by selling them pots of tea and plates of scones liberally laced with clotted cream and generous dollops of strawberry jam and, at the end of the show, by auctioning all the entries.

I read through the impressive list of categories that villagers could enter:

FRUIT and VEGETABLES

potato (white) - *6 in a bowl*

potato (red) - *6 in a bowl*

cabbage - *1 on a plate*

peas (in the pod) - *12 on a plate*

peas (out of the pod) - *from 12 pods in dish*

cauliflower - *1 on a plate*

broad beans - *from 12 pods in a dish*

runner beans - *6 on a plate*

onion - *1 on plate*

onions - *12 on a string*

turnip - *1 on a plate*

beetroot - *3 on a plate*

carrot - *6 on a plate*

parsnip - *1 on a plate*

radish - *12 on a plate*

celery - *1 head on plate*

melon - *1 on a plate*

tomato - *6 on a plate*

cucumber - *1 on a plate*

lettuce - *1 on a plate*

sweetcorn - *3 cobs on a plate*

parsley - *bunch on a plate*

cress - *bunch on a plate*

water cress - *bunch on a plate*

marrow - *1 on a plate*

pumpkin - *1 on a plate*

rhubarb - *6 sticks on a plate*

apple - *6 on a plate*

pear - *6 on a plate*

strawberries (cultivated) - *a dish*

strawberries (wild) - *a dish*

gooseberries - *a dish*

blackcurrants - *a dish*

redcurrants - *a dish*

cherries - *a dish*

loganberries - *a dish*

raspberries - *a dish*

blackberries - *a dish*

FLOWERS

potted plant

cactus in a pot

fuchsias in a pot

vase of 12 poppies

vase containing 2 each of 6 different annuals

vase containing 2 each of 6 different perennials

vase of 12 chrysanthemums

vase containing a single rose

vase of 12 red roses

vase of 12 white roses

vase of 12 roses (not red or white)

vase of 12 stems of sweet peas

vase of 12 dahlias

vase of 3 hydrangea stems

vase of 3 gladioli

Hanging basket

dried flower arrangement

DOMESTIC

pot of strawberry jam

pot of gooseberry jam

pot of blackcurrant jam

pot of blackberry jam

pot of blackberry and apple jam

pot of honey (hard)

pot of honey (runny)

pot of lemon curd

pot of marmalade

pot of chutney

jar of pickled onions

jar of mixed pickles

dish of clotted cream

pound of butter

eggs - *12 in a dish*

loaf of bread - *white*

loaf of bread - *brown*

fruit cake

sponge cake (plain)

sponge cake (filled with jam)

sponge cake (filled with cream)

rock cakes - *6 on a plate*

scones - *6 on a plate*

fairy cakes - *6 on a plate*

gingerbread man

shortbread - *6 pieces on a plate dish*

fudge - *dish*

knitted article

MEN

bottle of white wine

bottle of red wine

bottle of beer

neatest bale of hay

neatest bale of straw

rock cakes - *6 on a plate*

CHILDREN

oddest shaped vegetable

longest stick of rhubarb

prettiest wild flowers in a jam jar

longest runner bean

biggest strawberry

greatest number of different objects in a matchbox

* * *

In addition to the individual prizes there were five small cups, to be awarded to the overall winners of each category and a very splendid looking Bilbury Produce Show Cup which would, so the programme notes made clear, be awarded to the household which scored the greatest number of points in all the different categories and classes. For the purpose of judging the Show Cup winning a first prize in any class was worth three points, a second prize was worth two points and a third prize was worth one point.

Patsy had chosen to enter all the Vegetable and Fruit classes except for the cauliflower and radish classes (our cauliflowers had, for some inexplicable reason, failed to flourish and all our radishes had been eaten by something), all the Flower classes, except for the cactus in a pot and the various rose classes, and all the Domestic classes except for the clotted cream, the homemade butter, the 12 eggs in a dish and the knitted article classes. Under some duress, and with some trepidation, I had agreed to enter the Men's rock cake class and had spent the previous afternoon doing my best to follow the instructions which Patsy had given me. I managed to rescue half a dozen buns that weren't burnt too badly and these I had put on one side as my entry. I tasted one of the rejects and was glad that I didn't have false teeth fitted for I don't think there is any man-made material which could have cut through one of my rock cakes.

It was twelve fifteen when I arrived back at the house and as I walked through the back door into the kitchen I could hardly believe my eyes. Every flat surface in the kitchen was covered with baskets and boxes full of produce which Patsy, Mr Parfitt and Miss Hargreaves had got ready to take to the Show.

We had a quick snack of scrambled eggs on toast for lunch but had to eat without plates because every plate that we owned had been carefully wrapped in newspaper and packed into a cardboard box so that we could use them for displaying our produce. I very nearly got my fingers rapped with the back of a fork when I almost opened Patsy's best looking pot of homemade chutney.

* * *

When we arrived at Dr Brownlow's home it looked as if the whole of the village was already there. Although the Produce Show was by far and away the most important part of the event it wasn't the only thing happening. At a meeting of our committee we had decided to hold a proper old-fashioned fête alongside the produce show and so Dr Brownlow's grounds were packed with stalls.

But it was the Produce Show in which Patsy and I were most immediately interested. The huge marquee in which the produce would be displayed and judged, and which had been erected on Dr Brownlow's lawn, already looked like a high quality food store.

I parked as close as I could to the back of the marquee and then helped Patsy and Mr Parfitt and Miss Hargreaves carry all our entries into the tent and place them on the correct trestle table. Even using the large wooden tray we had brought with us it took us seven journeys to carry all the stuff from the car to the marquee. When we'd finished I moved the car into a nearby field which was being used as a car park so that some other entrant could get closer to the marquee.

When I got back I bumped into Miss Phillips.

'Where on earth did you find all these trestle tables?' I asked her, after I'd told her how well I thought that she and Mrs Blossom had played in the Revue. Poor Miss Phillips seemed nervous and very slightly harassed but she looked very elegant and distinguished in a long pale blue dress, a dark blue blazer, a pair of navy blue high heeled shoes, single row of pearls and a flamboyant straw hat with bundles of very realistic looking artificial fruit fastened around its rim.

'A friend of Thumper's let us have them,' whispered Miss Phillips. 'Someone from Ilfracombe who owed him a favour,' she added with what I think was intended to be a wink but which ended up looking rather more like a twitch. I don't know why it is but women rarely seem able to wink properly.

'Good old Thumper!' I said.

'Indeed!' agreed Miss Phillips. 'Where would any of us be without him?'

We exchanged gossip about some of the other entries and I truthfully told her how cool and elegant she looked, and she seemed quite pleased about that and even blushed a little and I thought how beautiful she must have been when she was younger and wondered what wonderfully romantic secrets there were hidden away in her past and then I rushed off to help Patsy who was clearly having a good deal of trouble keeping all her white potatoes on a plate.

'I dropped one,' said Patsy, looking glum. 'I think it's probably all bruised.'

'Put the bruised bit where it won't show,' I suggested.

‘Oh, I couldn’t do that!’ said Patsy. ‘Anyway,’ she added, examining the potato she had dropped, ‘I don’t know which is the bruised bit.’

‘What have we got left to put out?’ I asked her. ‘Just the jams, the soft fruits and the flowers,’ said Patsy, nodding towards the spot where we’d temporarily deposited all our entries. I walked back across with her, picked up a dish full of strawberries and a dish full of blackberries and headed for the soft fruit display tables.

‘Psst!’

I turned round and saw someone I recognised but couldn’t name standing right behind me. He was about fifty five years old and despite the heat he was wearing a heavy tweed suit, complete with waistcoat and fob watch. He had a large, rather overgrown moustache, the sort of thing that RAF officers used to wear during the Second World War. I had seen him around in the village quite a lot, usually walking a pair of huge Great Danes but I didn’t know him well. He kept himself rather to himself and never patronised the Duck and Puddle.

He came a little closer, leant forwards and whispered. ‘I say old chap, I don’t suppose you’ve got any spare blackberries have you?’ he asked. His breath smelt of beer and onions.

‘I’m afraid these aren’t for sale,’ I said. ‘But I think there is a refreshment tent.’

‘I don’t want to eat the damned things!’ snorted the man with the moustache. He leant closer. ‘My damned blackberries haven’t ripened,’ he added. ‘It’s far too early in the season for blackberries.’ He peered at the plateful of blackberries I was holding. ‘I suppose you forced yours?’

I suddenly realised that he meant he wanted to buy some of our blackberries to display as his own. I was quite shocked. ‘No.’ I told him, firmly. ‘But we have a walled garden and so most of our soft fruits tend to ripen a couple of weeks earlier than they otherwise would.’

‘I’ll give you a fiver for them,’ he said, reaching into his jacket pocket as though about to take out his wallet.

‘But you can’t do that!’ I said. ‘It wouldn’t be fair!’

The man with the moustache stared at me as though I was stark raving mad, scowled, muttered something under his breath, and then turned and stalked away without another word. I continued on my way to the soft fruit stall and put Patsy’s strawberries and blackberries on display. There were a couple of dozen dishfuls of strawberries already there but only one other dishful of blackberries.

When we had finished displaying the Bilbury Grange entries Mr Parfitt, accompanied by Miss Hargreaves, took our completed entry form along to Miss Phillips and Patsy and I went for a walk around the other stalls. Although I had known that Dr Brownlow had intended to organise a proper fête I was, nevertheless, extremely impressed by what I saw.

There was a stall where you could get rid of your anger by throwing wooden balls at old china; a treasure hunt where you could try to win a bottle of rum by sticking a small wooden stick into a sandpit; a stall where you could pay 5 pence for three sopping sponges and then throw them at the vicar fixed in wooden stocks and a roll a penny stall where, if you were lucky, you could win a goldfish in a small glass bowl.

There were stalls selling massive slabs of sugary, home-made chocolate fudge, huge black lumps of home-made treacle toffee which had to be cracked into chewable sections with the aid of a small hammer and six flavours of home-made ice cream which tasted so creamy and rich that it was difficult to believe that it was made according to anything like the same sort of recipe as is used to produce the mass market variety. When you’ve once tried home-made ice cream you are spoilt for life.

There was a stall where you could try your luck at darts, a stall where sharpshooters could show off their proficiency with an air rifle and a stall where you could try to win a huge, cuddly, fluffy, pink monkey by tossing jam pot sealing rings onto coat hooks screwed into a board.

The fête wasn’t officially open and none of the stalls was ready for business but I hadn’t ever seen anything that so closely matched the mental image I had always had of how traditional English village life ought to be.

* * *

‘Who’s that chap with the moustache?’ I asked Patchy, a few minutes later. Our local Member of Parliament, The Right Honourable Justin Fitzwalter-Simmons PC,QC,MP and goodness knows what else, was fumbling with his notes and hopefully about to declare the Bilbury Village Produce Show and Fête truly open and the moustachioed man who had tried to buy blackberries from me was standing by himself, leaning on a shooting stick. He had a piece of paper in his hand and he was staring at it moodily. Eventually he thrust the piece of paper into his jacket pocket. He looked very cross about something.

‘That’s the Wing Commander,’ said Patchy.

‘Wing Commander Who?’ I asked.

‘Haven’t the foggiest,’ said Patchy. ‘He likes people to call him Wing Commander. He probably hasn’t got a name. I think his mum probably called him ‘Wing Commander’ when he was a lad.’

‘He tried to buy some blackberries from me,’ I said

Patchy looked at me. ‘Did he?’

‘I think he was going to show them and pretend that he’d grown them himself.’

‘Of course he was!’

Now it was my turn to look at Patchy. ‘Why?’ I was honestly shocked to think that anyone in Bilbury would be prepared to cheat to win a certificate suitable for framing.

‘He wants to beat the Colonel.’

‘The Colonel?’ I didn’t know the Colonel but I knew of him. He was Bilbury’s only other retired military man of distinction. He was in his eighties but still stood as erect as a telegraph pole.

‘That’s the one! He’s over there.’ Patchy nodded towards the far end of the marquee. I could just see the Colonel standing talking to Mrs Blossom.

‘Why does the Wing Commander want to beat the Colonel?’

Patchy looked at me and shrugged. ‘I haven’t got the faintest idea,’ he said. ‘But his gardener told me that he was promised a £20 bonus if they won the Cup.’

‘Which cup?’

‘The Show Cup, you idiot!’

‘Crumbs! I wonder if the Colonel knows what’s going on?’

Patchy snorted disdainfully. ‘Don’t you worry about the Colonel,’ he said. ‘I bet you a bag of truffles to half a pound of acorns that he’s been at the same thing himself.’

There was a smattering of polite applause from the far end of the marquee. The Right Honourable Justin Fitzwalter-Simmons PC,QC,MP had successfully managed to open the fête and everyone was looking very relieved. Our local MP was well known for being slightly forgetful and disorganised. A few weeks earlier he had given the members of the local Women’s Institute a half day’s holiday and had subsequently congratulated the children of a primary school in Lynton on the consistency of their chutney. I had once asked Frank why the electorate still voted for a man who no longer seemed to be in touch with what was going on in the world. Frank had told me that he thought that was exactly why they did vote for him. ‘We’ve probably got the only parliamentary representative who is incorruptible,’ he had explained. ‘He’s too stupid to get involved in any financial jiggery pokery.’ I had to agree that, given the general ability of parliamentary representatives to get into trouble of one sort or another, these were powerful factors in his favour.

‘He tried to get me to sell him some chutney!’ muttered a voice I recognised instantly.

I turned round. I’d never seen Thumper looking quite so smart. He was wearing a pair of brand new jeans and a freshly ironed lumberjack shirt. He had even combed his hair. ‘Who? Fiztwater-Simmons?’

‘No, you clot! The Colonel.’

‘The Colonel wanted to buy chutney off you?’

‘Yes.’

‘But why? You don’t make chutney do you?’

‘No, I don’t. But Anne does. And last year her chutney won first prize in the Shirwell, Kentisbury and East Down Produce Shows.’

‘See, I was right! They are both at it!’ said Patchy.

‘It’s a pity really,’ said Thumper. ‘But one of them is bound to win.’

‘They’re a pair of mean old devils,’ said Patchy. ‘Mrs Blossom told me that the Wing Commander tried to get out of paying his penny an entry. He said he wanted a discount because he was entering for so many different classes. Do you know he’s even got his gardener’s five-year-old to enter the children’s category so that he can pick up a few extra points there.’

Patchy muttered something under his breath. It didn’t sound very complimentary.

‘I bet neither of them bought tickets for the Revue,’ said Thumper.

We all stood and silently fumed.

‘Maybe we could make a few bob out of them after all,’ said Thumper thoughtfully.

Patchy and I both looked at him.

‘Wait there a minute,’ he said, and darted off in the direction of Mrs Blossom who was talking to two of the three judges. Thumper gently touched her arm and when she turned to look at him he whispered into her ear. She excused herself and they moved to a nearby table where Miss Phillips was busy checking entries. The two judges, I didn’t recognise them but knew that they had come from villages thirty or forty miles away, carried on talking to one another. Thumper and Mrs Blossom and Miss Phillips spoke for a few moments and then Miss Phillips bent down and took a thick wad of entry forms from out of a large, brown leather bag at her feet. She carefully flicked through the forms, taking out two and handing them to Thumper. She then handed him two sheets from another pile on the table in front of her. Thumper smiled at both Miss Phillips and Mrs Blossom, hesitated and then gave them both a kiss on the cheek and hurried back to where Patchy and I were standing.

‘We’ve got twenty minutes,’ he said. ‘The third judge telephoned to say that he’d had some trouble with a mare in foal and would be a bit late. Miss Phillips says she’ll continue to accept entries right until the judging starts.’

‘What have you got there?’ Patchy asked him, nodding towards the four pieces of paper he was holding.

‘The Wing Commander’s entry,’ said Thumper, holding up one piece of paper. ‘And the Colonel’s entry,’ he said, holding up a second form.

‘What are the other two?’ I asked him.

‘Complete entry lists - so that we can see which classes they haven’t entered yet!’

‘Brilliant!’ said Patchy, rubbing his hands together. ‘Let’s get to work!’ He took one of the lists from Thumper and started to compare it with the full list of possible categories and classes.

‘Hang on a minute,’ I said, genuinely puzzled. ‘I don’t understand. What are we going to do?’ Although I’ve been living in Bilbury for a while I’m still nowhere near as quick as Thumper or Patchy when it comes to plotting a scam.

‘We’re going to look through these lists and find out which classes these two haven’t entered,’ explained Thumper.

‘And then we’re going to sell them the produce they need to enter the classes they haven’t entered!’ added Patchy.

I thought about what they’d said for a moment. ‘But that’s not right!’ I protested, mildly. ‘That’s cheating!’

‘Listen,’ said Patchy; ‘one of these two will win anyway. They both cheat. And this way we’ll make a few bob for the Fund!’

‘How?’ I asked. I was obviously having one of my really thick days. Sometimes I feel that both Thumper and Patchy must think I am one of the most innocent people in the world. I’m just glad they are friends of mine! After what happened at the Bilbury Village Produce Show I was more than ever convinced that no city huckster or street trader could beat this pair when it comes to working out a way to take a few pounds from a well-heeled mark.

‘By selling them what they need!’ explained Thumper. ‘Ten pounds for a dish full of luscious blackberries!’

‘Twenty pounds for a really good marrow!’ said Patchy.

‘But where are we going to get the stuff from?’ I asked.

‘You leave that to me,’ said Thumper with a wink. ‘You two go and see how much you can get those two old reprobates to pay for the produce they haven’t got.’ He handed me the other two forms.

‘What if they spot what we’re doing?’ I asked. I looked at the forms he had handed me. One of them had ‘Wing Commander’ written at the top.

‘Try to make sure they do,’ said Thumper, with a rather sly laugh. ‘If they both realise that the other one is cheating they’ll be even more eager to buy what they need!’ I studied the two lists. The Wing Commander had entered most of the classes (though none of those under the heading CHILDREN) but still needed blackberries, loganberries, a cucumber, a dried flower arrangement, a pot of gooseberry jam, blackcurrant jam and lemon curd, two pots of honey (runny and hard), a pot of marmalade, a jar of pickled onions and a knitted article. ‘I’ll be behind the marquee with everything they’re likely to need in ten minutes,’ Thumper added.

And so with my heart beating fast I walked over to where the Wing Commander was standing. Fortunately, he was still alone. ‘Do you still want to buy some blackberries?’ I asked. I felt sure that I must be blushing bright red.

The Wing Commander glowered at me. ‘It’s too late.’ he said.

‘No, it isn’t,’ I told him. ‘One of the judges has been held up. You can still enter them.’

‘How much?’

‘F-f-f-f..,’ I began. ‘Ten pounds,’ I said. If I was going to get involved in such chicanery I was damned certain I was going to make it pay.

‘Ten pounds!’ The Wing Commander glared at me and his bushy eyebrows zoomed inwards. I thought how frightening he must have been to those unfortunate men who were under his command.

I said nothing.

‘I’ll give you five. Not a penny more.’

I didn’t say anything at all, but shrugged and started to walk away.

‘All right, ten,’ said the Wing Commander quickly.

I turned back. ‘It’s for a good cause,’ I told him.

‘What?’ he demanded.

‘The Bilbury Village School Cottage Rebuilding Fund.’

‘Oh, that.’ He reached into his coat pocket, took out his wallet and removed a ten pound note. ‘Where are the blackberries?’

‘I can get you the other things you need,’ I whispered. I have to admit that I felt a bit like a street trader selling dirty postcards.

‘Pardon?’

‘The other things you need - marmalade, honey, gooseberry jam - I can get them all for you.’

The Wing Commander stared at me furtively, and leant closer. I could smell tobacco on his breath. ‘All of them?’

I nodded. ‘Except for the stuff in the Children’s Category you’d need a child to enter that anyway.’

‘But including the knitted article?’

‘Including the knitted article.’ I had no idea where Thumper was going to obtain a knitted article at such short notice but I had absolute faith in his ability to do so. I would have trusted Thumper to have found bright pink water cress, a carrot in the shape of a heart or a full suit of sterling silver armour. ‘How much?’ The question came out as a growl.

I did a rapid mental calculation. ‘I’ll let you have them all for a hundred pounds.’

The Wing Commander made a sound like a horse. ‘Don’t be absurd, man! I’m not paying that sort of money!’

I shrugged and casually looked over to where Patchy and the Colonel were deep in conversation. The Wing Commander’s eyes followed mine.

‘What the devil is that crooked, good for nothing up to?’ he demanded, suspiciously.

‘Who?’ I asked, innocently. To be honest I thought he was referring to Patchy and I was about to leap to the defence of my friend (though to be honest I very much doubt if he would have argued with the description).

‘That Colonel fellow! What’s he up to?’

‘Much the same as you,’ I told him, rather wickedly.

‘Damned cheat!’ exploded the Wing Commander.

I looked around. No one seemed to have noticed. ‘Ssshhhh!’ I warned him.

‘A hundred pounds you said?’

‘Plus the ten pounds for the blackberries,’ I added quickly. I was, I confess, particularly pleased with that touch. When I think back to my first scam I think that was by far my most glorious moment.

The Wing Commander glared at me. He was furious. But he had little option other than to pay up. His face was bright red with anger when he had finished handing me the notes.

‘Where is the stuff?’ he demanded, as I rammed the money into my jacket pocket.

I looked at my watch. ‘Do you know Thumper Robinson?’

‘I know what he looks like. Another damned rogue.’

‘He’s behind the marquee with everything you need.’

The Wing Commander hurried off without so much as a ‘thank you’.

And a few minutes later I watched as the Colonel followed him.

Patchy Fogg, now alone, looked across at me, winked and held up a thumb. I winked back. I felt quite pleased with my first venture into hucksterism. It had, I thought, been rather successful.

* * *

Patchy had managed to sell the Colonel a turnip, six tomatoes, three sweetcorn cobs, a bunch of watercress, a dish of wild strawberries, a vase containing 12 poppies, a vase containing three gladioli, a dried flower arrangement, a jar of mixed pickles and, most surprisingly of all, perhaps, a jam jar full of wild flowers (for the CHILDREN category) for the princely but slightly uneven total of £76.45.

‘It was all he’d got,’ said Patchy, rather apologetically. ‘I made him empty out all his pockets and he really didn’t have a penny left.’ To be perfectly honest, I felt quite pleased about the fact that I’d manage to gouge so much out of the Wing Commander. Between us we had ‘acquired’£186.45 for the Rebuilding Fund - though, admittedly, this wasn’t all profit for Thumper had to spend £7.40 to acquire the goods we had sold to the Wing Commander and the Colonel. Still, a £179.05 profit was not to be sneezed at!

Minutes later the third judge arrived, looking very hot and flustered, and after he had a quick cup of tea the judging and the tension began in earnest.

Mr Parfitt was too excited to go far from the marquee, though he wasn’t allowed to stay inside. He said he simply couldn’t bear the idea of being anywhere else while the judging went on and so he simply stood outside and watched through the open doorway as the potatoes, and the beans and the carrots he had grown with such loving care and attention were subjected to close scrutiny. Patsy and I both pretended that we weren’t particularly bothered about winning any certificates, though I felt sure that all her jams and cakes would win their categories. We had only entered to please Mrs Blossom and Miss Phillips, and to do our bit for the village, but for Mr Parfitt’s sake, we both hoped that we managed to get one or two certificates. We thought that our soft fruit was especially good and probably our best bet for winning a certificate or two.

We had grown our vegetables and our fruit under quite a handicap since we didn’t use any inorganic fertilisers or chemical insecticides. Instead of using sprays and powders we had relied entirely upon natural fertilisers: manure and straw from the sheep’s stable, kitchen compost and the rather pungent concoction which we made, according to the recipe given to us by Patsy’s father, and by soaking armfuls of nettles in an old tin bath for several months. As a result our vegetables and fruit weren’t quite as perfectly formed as those which had been grown with artificial aids.

We weren’t sure whether the judges would take this fact into account when comparing our produce with that which had been grown with the aid of chemicals, but in the hope that it might perhaps make a small amount of difference Mr Parfitt had carefully written ‘organically grown’ at the bottom of all our labels.

I didn’t much mind whether the judges took any notice or not; I much preferred the taste of naturally grown food and I very much enjoyed knowing that the food I was eating had not been contaminated by possible poisons made far away in factories in Birmingham, Chicago or Hamburg.

By now the fête accompanying the Produce Show was in full swing and the stalls all seemed to be doing a roaring trade. Everywhere you looked people were licking ice creams, chewing fudge and crunching brittle treacle toffee. I couldn’t help thinking that a few dentists would probably notice a strong uplift in their business as a result of our village fête. Small children were walking around with balloons clutched in their fists and older children were carrying goldfish in bowls and huge, colourful stuffed toys. Mothers were being harassed and fathers, having emptied their wallets, were now emptying their pockets of loose change. Everyone was having a wonderful time.

Patsy and I bought ice creams and sat on a bench and watched this colourful and ever moving carnival unfolding before our eyes.

* * *

The minute the judging was over Mrs Blossom took down the green ribbon which she had tied across the doorway of the marquee. The removal of the ribbon was a sign that exhibitors, friends and members of the public were once again allowed to enter. Some exhibitors were very casual about it all but Patsy and I stood up the moment we saw the green ribbon being removed. Despite my earlier calmness I realised that I found these last few moments just as exciting and as nerve wracking as waiting for examination results or reviews of my first book.

Even though we had been quite quick off the mark there was a big queue to get back to the marquee and by the time we got in Mr Parfitt had been round half of the exhibits and had an enormous smile on his face. Patsy, who was holding my hand, squeezed my fingers as he approached.

'I've counted three firsts, five seconds and three thirds in the vegetable and fruit category!' said Mr Parfitt, clearly thrilled by this success. 'We've done much better than I dared hope. Our potatoes got first prize in both classes!'

'Congratulations!' I said, reaching out and shaking him by the hand. Mr Parfitt mumbled something about it being our success (meaning Patsy's and mine) but Patsy and I made it clear that we both regarded the vegetable and fruit category as being entirely his responsibility. Miss Hargreaves was beaming as broadly as if she was the one who had won.

When we'd finished congratulating Mr Parfitt (and I had never seen him look so happy) Patsy and I walked around the rest of the marquee to see how our other entries had got on. I was delighted to see that Patsy's jams and cakes had won her no less than four first prizes, two second prizes and two third prizes. We hadn't done quite as well with our flowers but we had won a first for our sweet peas and a second prize for our mixed perennials. And Patsy's dried flower arrangement had won her a second prize too!

Most surprising of all was the discovery that, much to my astonishment and delight, my rock cakes had won third prize! I could hardly believe it! It was my first ever cooking adventure and it had been a success. My feelings of delight were only very slightly modified when I discovered that there had only been four entries for this particular competition. Nothing could change the fact that I now had a certificate (suitable for framing) proving that I was a prize winning chef! I wasn't in the slightest bit bothered by the knowledge that two men in Bilbury could make better rock cakes than I could. All I was interested in was the much more fascinating fact that somewhere in Bilbury there was someone whose rock cakes weren't as good as mine!

* * *

We had just completed our tour of the marquee when we heard Mrs Blossom's voice announcing that the winners of the five separate category Cups (for the best overall scores in each of the five categories: fruit and vegetables; flowers; domestic; men and children), and the absolutely magnificent Bilbury Village Produce Show Cup for the household obtaining the greatest number of points, were about to be announced. The marquee was packed; everyone in the village seemed to be there. Since only villagers or people living in the area stood a chance of winning any of the prizes the visiting holiday-makers were still roaming around outside, enjoying the sunshine, the ice cream and the entertainments.

Someone had fixed up a not terribly clear loudspeaker system which only seemed to amplify every other word. Because she was conscious of this fault, Mrs Blossom raised her voice to compensate for the occasional lack of loudspeaker support. Unfortunately, the fault in the system meant that all that happened was that the loud, and perfectly audible words became so loud that they were distorted, and therefore inaudible, while the unamplified, and therefore rather inaudible, words remained largely inaudible.

Mr Parfitt, Miss Hargreaves, Patsy and I stood together near the back of the marquee and tried to work out what Mrs Blossom was saying. Everyone else seemed to be having exactly the same problem and so the people who were standing at the front were, in response to constant tapping on their shoulders, turning round every few seconds to pass on the latest bit of news. In this way the news spread slowly around the assembled villagers; the words arriving at the back of the tent some thirty seconds after they had left Mrs Blossom's lips.

Young Nathaniel Bishop won the Children's category, and to absolutely no one's surprise our sheep farming neighbour Colin Jackson won the Men's category. Colin would have been entitled to a recount if he hadn't won the cup in this category for he had won first prize certificates for his red wine, his white wine, his beer, his hay and his straw! (His rock cakes had taken second place). The cup for the greatest number of points in the Flower section was awarded to a highly embarrassed Miss Phillips who tried to turn the cup down but was eventually persuaded to accept what was rightfully hers. The cup for the highest score in the Domestic category was won by Mrs Colin Jackson and although I naturally felt that Patsy should have won I had to admit that Mrs Jackson was not an unworthy winner.

Mrs Blossom had delayed announcing the winner of the Fruit and Vegetable Category until last since it was generally agreed that, of the five categories, this was the blue ribbon event.

When the woman standing in front of me turned round to tell me that she had been told that Mrs Blossom had announced that Bilbury Grange had won this category I didn't really take in what I had been told. I had never expected to hear that we had won anything so important. Indeed, the news was so unexpected that I had turned around and passed it onto the person standing behind me before I realised that it was us - or rather Mr Parfitt - who had won!

When the news finally sank in, Mr Parfitt's face was taken over by a huge grin. I honestly do not think I had ever seen anyone look quite so happy. I had the shock of my life when Miss Hargreaves turned, put her arms around him and gave him a big kiss.

But that wasn't the biggest shock.

I think that most of us in the marquee had assumed that either the Wing Commander or the Colonel would have assuredly won the Bilbury Village Produce Show Cup. Even those innocent Bilbury residents who didn't know the amount of cheating that had gone on behind the scenes had assumed that either one or the other of these two former military men would be driving home with the big Cup proudly displayed on the back seat.

Neither of them won.

And when the woman in front turned round and told me that Mrs Blossom had announced that Bilbury Grange had won the big Cup I really didn't believe her. At first I thought I had misheard. Then I thought it was a joke.

But I hadn't misheard. And it wasn't a joke.

We had won.

Apart from a small box of chocolates, which I was awarded for coming second in a church raffle, I had never won anything before. And I'd never felt quite as proud before either. I hugged and kissed Patsy. I shook hands with Mr Parfitt (who had, I think, just the beginnings of a tear in the corner of one eye) and I accepted a bone-crushing hug from Miss Hargreaves, who seemed to tear herself away from Mr Parfitt with some reluctance and whose cheeks were quite definitely very wet with tears. It was all made especially joyous by the fact that apart from the Wing Commander and the Colonel (who both stalked out of the marquee looking very ill-tempered) not one person in the village seemed to begrudge us our small success.

Our win made it quite certain that neither Patsy nor I would ever forget the first Bilbury Revels.

* * *

CHAPTER TWENTY

The unofficial 'put a roof over Miss Hargreaves' head' action committee, more formally known as the Bilbury Village School Cottage Rebuilding Fund, met for the final time a week later at the Duck and Puddle. There were, as usual, the six of us present: myself, Gilly Parsons, Kay McBride, Peter Marshall, Thumper Robinson and Dr Brownlow.

'How's the repair work going, Thumper?' asked Dr Brownlow, our unofficial chairman, when we had all settled ourselves down with our chosen intoxicants.

'Finished!' said Thumper, with some considerable pride. He leant back in his chair and grinned with the solid confidence of a man who knows that he has done a good job. 'Miss Hargreaves can move back in whenever she likes. We put the last coat of paint on this afternoon!'

'That's wonderful news!' said Dr Brownlow. He paused, and his voice fell to a whisper. 'What's the final bill?'

Thumper took a grubby piece of paper out of the back pocket of his jeans, put it down on the table in front of him, smoothed it out and started to read out the figures for timber, paint, labour and other costs.

'Just the total will do, Thumper!' said Dr Brownlow, putting his hand across his eyes, as though he felt the need to hide his face at the moment of truth.

'£9,276.84,' said Thumper, reading out the bottom line.

Slowly, Dr Brownlow took his hand away from his eyes. Gradually a smile appeared. 'And that's everything? Absolutely everything?'

'Every last nail and drop of paint,' said Thumper proudly.

'No hidden labour charges? No timber merchant in Taunton is going to be sending us a bill in six months time?'

'No. That's the lot. And we put a lavatory in for that too.' Thumper looked at me and grinned. It had been hard work persuading Miss Hargreaves to accept an indoor lavatory.

'That's pretty good, Thumper!' said Dr Brownlow. He looked around the table at the rest of us. We all nodded our agreement. It was very good. Thumper and the others had virtually rebuilt School Cottage. A commercial builder would have undoubtedly charged half as much again.

'Can we pay it?' Dr Brownlow asked Peter Marshall, our treasurer. We had all taken part in numerous events but we had no idea how successful our fund raising had been. We'd been too busy raising money to stop and count it. Just about everyone (apart from the Wing Commander and the Colonel who had, nevertheless, unwittingly made their own contributions) had done something. The Bilbury Morris Dancers had danced their way round North Devon. Miss Venables had given her illustrated talk on the ferns of North Devon seven times. Mrs Oliphant had held an exhibition of her oil paintings in the public library in Barnstaple. Elijah Huttlecombe had been persuaded to give holiday-makers two talks and a short demonstration on charcoal making. We had played four cricket matches (we had lost all four but had acquitted ourselves admirably) and the Bilbury Revue had been performed a total of six times (including one matinee).

Peter shook his head and sucked air in through his broken front teeth. The rest of us waited in an increasingly gloomy silence.

'Come on, Peter!' shouted Gilly, unable to bear the tension any longer.

Slowly, very slowly, a smile spread across Peter's face. 'We raised a total of £10,041.39,' he announced with considerable pride.

If I hadn't been there I wouldn't have believed that six people could have made as much noise. Gilly and Kay both kissed Thumper, and then they both kissed Peter, Dr Brownlow and me. We all shook hands and congratulated one another.

'Well!' said Dr Brownlow, at last. 'I reckon that means we've got a surplus of...'

'£764.55,' said Peter, instantly. 'Minus £24.53 for the paint.'

'Paint?'

'The pink paint. The paint for the cottages around the village green.'

'That all washed off!'

'It wasn't my fault!'

'Yes it was. You can't charge for that.'

'What are we going to do with the money?' asked Gilly.

Peter, who seemed to have accepted Dr Brownlow's ruling on the paint uncharacteristically easily, coughed.

We all looked at him.

'I just wondered,' he said, hesitantly. 'Are we going to have a Revels again next year?' he asked.

We all looked at him.

'Oh no, I don't think so,' said Dr Brownlow. 'It was all a bit too exhausting. And my front lawn is going to take months to recover. We only needed to organise the Revels to raise money for School Cottage.'

'But we could do with renovating the village hall!' said Kay.

'Especially if we're going to perform another Revue!' said Gilly. 'We need better changing facilities.'

'And a proper kitchen!' said Kay.

There was a simple flaw in this argument. Since if we didn't hold a Revels we wouldn't need a Revue, Gilly's claim that we needed better changing facilities if we were going to hold another Revue was hardly an argument in favour of organising another Revels. But I kept quiet.

'It's just that I thought that if we were going to organise another Revels then we could keep the surplus from this year as a sort of float for next year,' said Peter. 'To pay for better costumes...'

'... and some decent cricket bats!' said Thumper.

'Good thinking, Thumper!' said Dr Brownlow. 'We need some proper bats, Peter. Not that cheap rubbish.'

'And pads!' I added. 'Two for each batsman!'

'And pads!' nodded Dr Brownlow.

And so it was agreed. The Bilbury Revels would become an annual event.

* * *

'Do you know when Miss Hargreaves is moving back into School Cottage?' Thumper asked me as we got up from the table an hour or two later. 'I'll give you a hand with her stuff, if you like.'

The others, who had heard his question, looked and waited.

‘I think she wants to wait until next Saturday afternoon,’ I said.

‘Oh!’ said Thumper, clearly surprised. ‘I thought she wanted to move back in as soon as she could.’

‘She did. She does,’ I said. ‘But she wants to go there as Mrs Parfitt.’

Everyone stared at me.

‘Close your mouth, Thumper!’ I said. ‘You look daft.’

‘Say that again,’ said Gilly.

‘Close your mouth, Thumper...’ I began.

‘Not that. The bit before,’ said Gilly, impatiently.

‘When she goes back to School Cottage she wants to go as Mrs Parfitt so she’s waiting until next Saturday afternoon,’ I explained.

No one understood.

‘She’s getting married,’ I said. ‘To Mr Parfitt, our gardener.’

If I had told them that she had entered the world figure skating championships they couldn’t have looked more amazed.

‘That’s marvellous news!’ said Kay, at last, when the news had finally sunk in.

‘Miss Hargreaves getting married!’ muttered Thumper. ‘Well, I never!’

‘Are we invited?’ asked Gilly.

‘Oh yes,’ I said. ‘I almost forgot.’ I reached into my inside jacket pocket and took out a small bundle of white envelopes. ‘She asked me to give you one of these each.’

‘You...!’ cried Kay. ‘How could you forget something like this!’

‘Well, I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m thrilled with the news!’ said Dr Brownlow.

‘Absolutely delighted!’ said Gilly.

‘And without Mr Parfitt looking after your garden I’ll stand a decent chance of winning the Show Cup next year!’ Dr Brownlow said to me, rubbing his hands with glee.

I shook my head. ‘Sorry to disappoint you, doctor,’ I said. ‘But Mr Parfitt is still going to look after the garden for us.’

Dr Brownlow tried to look disappointed but was too happy to succeed.

‘Where are they holding the wedding party?’ asked Kay.

‘I don’t know that there is going to be a wedding party,’ I said.

‘Oh, they’ve got to have a party!’ said Gilly.

‘Compulsory!’ said Thumper firmly.

I left the five of them planning the celebration party for Mr Parfitt and Miss Hargreaves. I wanted to get back to Bilbury Grange and do some more work on the book I was writing. I found that living in Bilbury was a constant inspiration.

* * *

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The Young Country Doctor: Book 4

Bilbury Country

Vernon Coleman

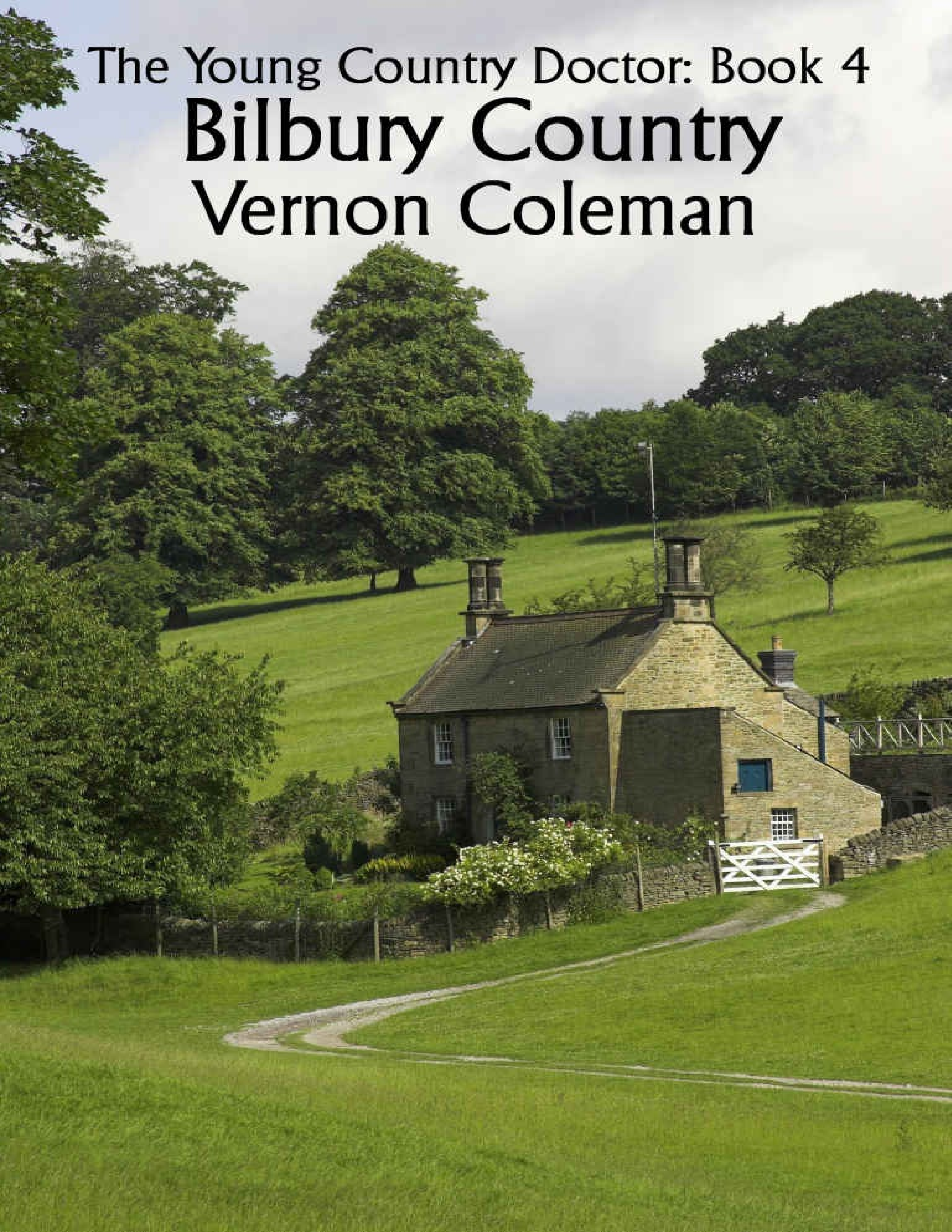

THE YOUNG COUNTRY DOCTOR: BOOK 4

BILBURY COUNTRY

VERNON COLEMAN

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Bilbury Country is the fourth of Vernon Coleman's seven books about Bilbury. These are: Bilbury Chronicles, Bilbury Grange, Bilbury Revels, Bilbury Country and Bilbury Village. There are two books of short stories called Bilbury Pie and Bilbury Pudding. If you enjoy the Bilbury books you may enjoy other books by the same author including Mr Henry Mulligan and Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War'. For full details of over 100 books by Vernon Coleman please see his author page on Amazon or http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

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CHAPTER ONE

It was one of those wonderful, warm, late summer days. The sort of day I always associate with summer in the English countryside whenever I am separated from both. The sky looked as though it had been freshly decorated. It looked so beautiful that it was almost unreal, as though it had been painted by a trompe d'oeuil artist. There were just enough small fluffy white clouds scattered around to bring out the blue. It looked as though someone should have climbed up and attached a 'Wet Paint' notice.

The air was thick with butterflies, dancing erratically from one bright flower to another and the only sounds disturbing the stillness were the music of a choir of unseen birds singing their hearts out and the hum and buzz of a hundred thousand small insects rushing around doing whatever it is that small insects do. It was Sunday morning and the worries of the world all seemed a million miles away.

Ben, our dog, was snoozing in the shade of a small rhododendron bush, Emily and Sophie, our two cats, had given up chasing butterflies and were both dozing on a pile of old sacks in a dark corner of the potting shed. Our five sheep, Lizzie, Petula, Cynthia, Sarah-Louise and Miss Houdini, were sheltering in the cool shade of their stable.

Patsy and I, the only two lunatics at Bilbury Grange not to be resting in the shade, were both out in the front garden doing what is usually known as a little light 'tidying up'. In practical terms this means that we were messing about in the broad flower border which runs along the edge of the shrubbery, cutting the heads off dead flowers and pulling up weeds that were about to seed. Normally these chores were attended to by Mr Parfitt but while he was away on his honeymoon Patsy and I had to assume these additional responsibilities ourselves.

To the animals this was just another sunny day; another in an apparently endless series of sunny days. It had been a marvellous summer. But we were only too well aware of the fact that, judged by the calendar, the summer would soon be over and, if the good weather continued, we would soon be stealing days from autumn. Patsy and I were both eager to take full advantage of it; keen to bathe in the sun's warm rays, keen to allow the warmth to massage our muscles and keen to acquire more comforting memories to help us through the coming dark, cold snowbound days of a North Devon winter.

Patsy was wearing a pair of very short, white shorts and a bright yellow bikini top. Every available inch of her body was already tanned a deep brown and her legs looked as long as childhood summers. I was wearing a pair of cut off old jeans and a short-sleeved light summer shirt. I too showed signs of having spent much of the summer out of doors. I had never been so brown.

It hadn't just been the weather which had made it a glorious, never-to-be-forgotten summer. Once again the villagers of Bilbury had come together as though they were members of one large family. The revived Bilbury Revels had been a tremendous success. We had produced a summer Revue which had attracted people from miles around, and had entertained scores of holidaymakers; we had organised a produce show and a surprisingly successful cricket team and, most important of all, we had raised enough money to repair the roof on Miss Hargreaves' storm damaged cottage!

'Do you know if Tim and Angie have managed to find anywhere to live yet?' asked Patsy, furiously digging away with her trowel at a particularly stubborn weed.

'No, they haven't,' I replied. I had seen Tim's uncle in the Duck and Puddle the day before and knew that the newly married couple were still living in Angie's mother's tiny two bedroomed cottage. 'Apparently every piece of property in the village gets snapped up these days as soon as it comes onto the market.'

'Prices are becoming very silly,' said Patsy. 'I heard that 'Chestnut View Cottage', one of those lovely little cottages around the village green, has just been sold for £20,000!'

I stopped snipping and looked up. '£20,000? Are you sure?' I stretched my aching back.

'That's what I heard.'

Patsy was right. Prices in Bilbury were becoming very silly. Just six months earlier one of those cottages had changed hands for half that amount. And we had paid very little more than £20,000 for Bilbury Grange!'

'Who bought it?' I asked, stooping down again and tackling another rosebush.

'It wasn't anyone local,' said Patsy. 'The estate agent in Barnstaple apparently told Kay Mcbride that it was someone from London.'

Kay Mcbride, our local district nurse, prides herself on being first with the local gossip. She has a large and reliable stable of informers.

'So someone has bought it as a holiday cottage?' I said, after a moment or two.

'Most likely,' agreed Patsy.

I didn't object at all to holiday-makers buying second homes in Bilbury. I could quite understand their desire to have a hideaway in such a beautiful part of the world. But it did annoy me that 'foreigners' were driving the prices of local property so high that young locals could no longer afford to buy homes of their own. From a purely selfish point of view I suppose I should have been pleased to see property values rising. But I wasn't.

'The odd thing is,' Patsy went on, 'that cottages in Combe Martin and Lynmouth haven't gone up much at all. Kay says that property prices in Bilbury are now nearly twice as high as they are anywhere else in North Devon.'

That puzzled me considerably but I didn't have time to think about it. I had my secateurs poised ready to snip off a dead rose when the morning quiet was interrupted by a voice I did not recognise.

'There's the doctor!' said the voice. It was a firm, rather loud voice and the owner spoke in a rather proprietorial way, as though I were a rare exhibit in a wildlife park and he a camera toting tourist. Although I had only written one book, and had made relatively few television appearances, I had already discovered that I did not like being recognised. Some people enjoy fame. A friend of mine once confessed to me that his sole ambition was to be able to go into any supermarket in the country and be recognised. I didn't like it at all and had already decided that I would try to keep away from television studios for this reason if for no other (although there were plenty of other reasons). I made sure that I looked as little as possible like the publicity photographs of me that had been taken and distributed to newspapers and magazines.

I looked around but could see no one. I gazed across at Patsy. A moment earlier she had been pulling out a weed with a root that seemed to go on forever. She too had stopped work and was now standing and looking across in my direction. She raised a questioning eyebrow. I shrugged my shoulders in answer and then looked around again.

'And there's Patsy!' said the voice, clearly triumphant at having spotted another exhibit.

Patsy and I repeated our silent exchange, only this time it was my turn to raise an eyebrow and her turn to lift a pair of bronzed shoulders in reply. Through the rhododendron bushes I could vaguely see something coloured a very vivid orange. I bent down a foot or so and peered underneath an overhanging branch in an attempt to see what was there. I need not have bothered. As I stooped the owner of the voice strode into view. It was not a pretty sight.

Apart from a bright orange, short-sleeved shirt, hanging free outside khaki shorts which came down just below his knees, he wore long, woollen, fawn-coloured socks, black brogue shoes and a wide brimmed straw hat. The bits of his legs which I could see were white, stick like and very hairy. He had a huge paunch which he carried before him as though it were a trophy and around his neck hung a pair of binoculars and a camera. In his right hand he carried a rolled up copy of a magazine.

He had three companions. By his side there was a very short, stout blue-haired woman who wore a light green cotton dress and a white straw hat and carried a large raffia shopping basket. A couple of yards behind them came a girl in her mid twenties who, despite the heat, wore a dark green anorak, dirty blue jeans, sunglasses with mirrored lenses and a black baseball cap. She carried a large bunch of freshly picked but already wilting flowers in her left hand. She was chewing something uncooperative. By her side stood a very sullen looking young man of about the same age who also wore sunglasses with mirrored lenses but instead of the dirty green anorak and the blue jeans wore a black T-shirt, black jeans and black motorcycle boots. He had tattoos on both his forearms and a large quantity of grease made sure that his hair remained exactly where he had put it earlier in the day. He carried a black leather, studded jacket which dragged along on the ground behind him.

'You're the doctor who wrote the book, aren't you?' said the man in the orange shirt, grinning broadly as though rather pleased with himself. He didn't seem to expect or want an answer. He had a self-satisfied, complacent, insensitive look about him that made me dislike him from the start. I know that it is unwise to make assessments about people when you've only just met them. First impressions can be dangerously misleading. But there are times when my instincts are so strong that I am reluctant to ignore them. This was one of those times. I did not feel that I would ever want to put my arm around the shoulders of the man in the orange shirt. He was not, I felt sure, anyone I would ever be pleased to see. He handed the magazine he was carrying to the blue-haired woman and fiddled with his camera case. 'Mind if we take some snaps?' He asked. It wasn't really a question.

I stared at him. 'Er...,' I began, but couldn't think of anything to add to the 'Er...,'.

'Isn't it wonderful, Elsie?' said the blue haired woman, ignoring her husband, Patsy and me and pointing at Bilbury Grange with an outstretched and grubby finger.

The young woman, clearly the intended recipient for this comment, looked very bored and blew a large pink bubble. When the bubble burst she used her tongue to drag the strands of sticky pink gum back into her mouth. If anyone ever gave awards for looking bored she would win all the top prizes.

The blue-haired woman, accelerated sharply and without warning. It was an impressive getaway from a standing start, particularly for someone with legs so well equipped with varicose veins that they looked like relief maps of Britain's inland waterways. She lowered her head, pushed out her elbows and surged forwards along the drive as though hurrying to catch a bus or get to the front of the queue at the local department store annual sale, and then suddenly stopped, stood still and looked around her. 'Where's the vegetable garden?' she demanded, staring first at Patsy and then at me.

Patsy looked alarmed and looked across at me for help.

I swallowed nervously. ‘It’s...er...behind the courtyard,’ I explained. ‘You can’t see it from here. But…’.

‘You should put up notices,’ said the blue haired woman abruptly.

‘I’m sorry...,’ I began, wondering as I spoke why I was apologising to a complete stranger who had entered my private world quite uninvited.

‘It’s this way!’ shouted someone I couldn’t see.

The man in the orange shirt turned and looked back down the drive. ‘Get out of the way, Doris!’ he called. ‘There’s a crowd behind us. I warned you to get a move on.’

Doris, the woman with blue hair, scuttled sideways like a crab and was cowering in the rhododendrons, out of shot, by the time that the man in the orange shirt had prepared his camera. ‘Smile!’ he called out. He had opened his mouth when he raised the camera to his eye, as though this helped him to focus. I wasn’t entirely sure that he was talking to me but felt that smiling would be safest and so I smiled. As the camera clicked the woman with blue hair leapt out of the rhododendrons with Ben snapping at her heels. The woman had, unfortunately, chosen her bush to hide behind and Ben, normally such a friendly dog, didn’t seem keen to share it with her. As soon as she had made sure that the woman didn’t intend to continue to share the cool of her rhododendron bush Ben returned to safety, quiet and shade.

‘Is this Bilbury Grange?’ I heard someone ask. Once again I didn’t recognise the voice. Bilbury Grange, once a silent place of refuge from the hurly burly of the world seemed to have become as busy as Paddington Station.

‘It certainly is!’ answered the man in the orange shirt. ‘That’s the doctor and there’s Patsy.’ He pointed at us in turn, in a rather proprietorial way, as though he were by now a fully qualified tourist guide. ‘He’s not quite as ugly as he looks in the photographs is he?’ He added, not even bothering to whisper this.

‘Look this way, please!’

Patsy moved over towards me just as a tall, fair-haired man wearing a yellow jumper, green corduroy plus twos, long green socks and stout hiking boots strode purposefully into view. He was about fifty-years-old, wore a small rucksack on his back and carried a walking stick in one hand and a copy of a magazine in the other. ‘Aha!’ he said when he saw Patsy and me. I felt Patsy’s fingers grasp mine. He half turned. ‘This is it!’ he called over his shoulder.

‘Where’s the walled garden?’ asked another voice. This voice turned out to belong to a pneumatic, fair-haired woman of a similar age to the tall fair-haired man. Having much shorter legs than her companion she was hurrying to keep up with him. He was clearly a partner of some permanence for she too was wearing a yellow jumper, green corduroy plus twos and stout hiking boots. Her exuberant figure made the jumper look as though it were several sizes too small. She also had a rucksack on her back, and carried a walking stick. She did not seem to be carrying a magazine.

‘It’s behind the courtyard,’ said the woman with blue hair.

‘They should put up notices. I’ve told them.’

‘What’s going on?’ whispered Patsy. She sounded as puzzled as I felt.

‘I don’t know,’ I whispered back.

Before we could exchange another word several more intruders strode into view. They all wore jumpers, corduroy plus twos, long socks and stout, sensible hiking boots, had small rucksacks strapped to their backs and carried walking sticks. Several of them also carried copies of what looked like the same magazine that the man in the orange shirt and the man in the yellow jumper were carrying.

‘Oh look!’ said a woman who wore tortoiseshell framed spectacles and had her copper coloured hair tied in plaits with bright yellow ribbons. ‘Is that Gilly?’

The woman with blue hair glared at her. ‘It’s Patsy!’ she said. ‘Gilly is the one who runs the pub with her husband.’ She spoke with some weariness, as though she was accustomed to having to correct people who hadn’t done their research properly. ‘She’s pretty isn’t she?’

The woman whose copper coloured hair was tied in plaits with bright yellow ribbons courteously agreed that Patsy was, indeed, pretty.

‘They’re both younger than I thought they would be,’ said the woman with blue hair.

‘Where can we get a drink?’ demanded the girl with the pink bubble gum. ‘I’m parched.’

‘Would you kiss each other?’ someone called out. I turned to see who had spoken and a camera flash went on off. I couldn’t help thinking that this was a needless extravagance for God had already lit the day more than adequately.

‘Where are the cats?’ asked a tall, willowy woman who had chosen to express her personality by wearing an olive green camouflage jacket and matching camouflage trousers.

The thought of Sophie and Emily being faced with this small army of intruders finally gave me the courage to speak.

‘Excuse me,’ I said. ‘I’m sorry to butt in but this is a private house you know.’

‘Oh yes, we know that,’ said the man in the orange shirt.

‘You’d think he didn’t want visitors!’ said the woman with blue hair as though she found the very thought incomprehensible.

‘Very nice house it is,’ said the woman with copper coloured hair and yellow ribbons, staring at Bilbury Grange with the critical eye of a potential purchaser. ‘When was it built?’

‘I’m really sorry...,’ I apologised.

‘Nineteenth century,’ replied the man in the yellow jumper. ‘1865 wasn’t it?’

‘Yes!’ I agreed. ‘But how did you know that?’

‘Ah!’ said the man in the yellow jumper, as though unwilling to divulge his secret source of information. He tapped the end of a long, rather red nose lightly with the rolled up magazine he was carrying and winked.

‘You must be very proud,’ said the pneumatic hiker in the tight, yellow sweater. She gave me a big smile. She looked like the sort of woman who ought to have been at home in the kitchen making good chutney.

‘Er, yes,’ I said.

Since we had lived at Bilbury Grange Patsy and I had quite frequently entertained complete strangers who had wandered into the garden because they had taken the wrong route, because they had misread a map or because they were simply and honestly curious. We had always done our best to make such impromptu visitors welcome. We enjoyed showing strangers around the gardens and we invariably ended up showing them around the house too, if they were interested. Bilbury is a wonderful village and both Patsy and I were always keen to share the wonders of the area with people who were genuinely enthusiastic. Most of our visitors ended up regarding themselves as ‘honorary Bilburians’ and several had told us, most earnestly, that as soon as they had saved up enough money to leave their city homes they would be looking for a cottage in the village.

But these people seemed different. Our usual visitors were polite, shy and generally apologetic. These tourists were not polite, shy or apologetic. On the contrary, they seemed rude, aggressive, and demanding. They seemed to think that they had a right to wander unhindered across our land and to stare at us as though we were shop window dummies.

‘It must be this way!’ shouted someone who sounded as though they were at the bottom of the drive. ‘I can hear voices!’ There was a murmuring of approval and I could hear more feet crunching on driveway.

‘What on earth do you all want?’ I asked, looking from one face to another.

‘We just want to look around,’ explained the man in the yellow sweater. ‘Hope you don’t mind! Can’t object to people looking can you?’

‘Do you have a small charge?’ asked the woman in the camouflage jacket. ‘Maybe a contribution to a favourite charity?’ She unfastened a button in her jacket and took out a small black purse.

‘No thank you,’ I said. ‘We don’t have a charge.’

‘Splendid!’ said the woman in the camouflage jacket quickly putting her purse away. She produced a large plastic bottle from somewhere. ‘Have you got a tap, please? I’d like to fill this with your wonderful Bilbury water. It’s for my granny.’

‘There’s a tap down there,’ I said, pointing to one of the outdoor taps we used for watering the garden.

‘Is it real Bilbury water?’ she asked.

I said it was.

‘Here it is!’ cried an overweight, bald, red-faced man whose abdomen hung over the top of his trousers like puff pastry flowing over the edge of a pie dish. His grey trousers were protected against the urgings of gravity by a pair of bright red braces and his white shirt clung to his body as though someone had thrown a bucket of water over it and him. He had a large blue badge with a number on it pinned to his shirt. He mopped at his face with a large, rather grubby looking handkerchief ‘Are there any chairs?’ he asked, rather wheezily.

‘Haven’t seen any,’ said the woman with the blue hair. ‘They haven’t even got any notices up telling people where the walled garden is,’ she added rather critically.

‘Benches?’ suggested the fat, red-faced man hopefully.

‘I haven’t seen any,’ said the tall man in the yellow sweater.

‘Where’s the walled garden?’ asked someone.

‘It’s beyond the courtyard,’ said the pneumatic, fair-headed woman in the tight yellow sweater helpfully.

The fat, red-faced man, who clearly hadn’t heard the question, frowned and looked puzzled. ‘What is?’

‘The walled garden,’ explained the pneumatic woman.

‘Over there!’ added the woman with the blue hair, pointing in the correct direction.

Just then a group of about twenty strangers strolled into view. The women all wore white cardigans, most of them carefully buttoned up to the top, and carried large, sensible handbags and floral patterned collapsible umbrellas in plastic sheaths. The men all wore beige polyester windcheaters, light-coloured trousers and nicely polished sandals.

They all had small white cardboard badges pinned to their chests and upon these badges were written what I assumed were their first names. Most of the men seemed to be called Hubert and most of the women were called Margaret. Several of the party carried rolled up copies of a magazine. One of the male strangers, an elderly gentleman who looked as though he was far too old to be wandering about in other people's gardens, shuffled up to the bald, red-faced man, tapped him on the shoulder and whispered in his ear.

'I don't know,' replied the bald man. 'I'll ask.' He mopped his head again before turning to me. 'Where's the lavatory?' he enquired.

'I really do think there must be some mistake,' I said, looking around at what had now become quite a large crowd and beginning to panic a little. The man in the orange shirt, the woman with the blue hair, the girl with the pink bubble gum and the young man in black leather seemed to have disappeared. I wondered where on earth they had gone. 'This is a private house,' I explained again. 'I'm afraid that we don't have any facilities for visitors.'

The elderly man whispered in the fat man's ear again.

'It's urgent,' said the bald man. 'We had to stop five times on the way here for him.'

I sighed and looked at Patsy. She shrugged. 'You'd better follow me,' I said to the elderly man with the enlarged prostate gland. There was a lot of murmuring among the other name badge wearers. A woman in corduroy trousers and a dark green sweater whom I hadn't seen before produced a small trowel from somewhere, presumably her knapsack, and began to dig up a small fuchsia bush in the shrubbery. 'Er, excuse me!' I said. 'Please don't do that!' The woman ignored me and carried on digging. 'Er, I'd rather you didn't do that,' I said, hesitantly. 'I rather like that bush where it is.'

The woman turned her head and glowered at me. 'Just because you think you're famous,' she snapped. I recoiled. 'I don't think you're famous,' she said. 'Anyway I'm entitled to take a souvenir.'

'How many for the lavatories?' asked the bald, red-faced man. 'Make a neat line,' he said firmly. He spoke to the supplicants as though they were children and he a schoolteacher, though I had by now realised that their relationship was that of coach driver and passengers.

A dozen arms were raised instantaneously.

'I'll take them,' said Patsy, with a sigh. 'You try to find out what is going on.' She strode off towards the back door followed by an apparently interminable line of strangers with full bladders.

I was about to start quizzing some of the remaining visitors in an attempt to find out where they had all come from and why they had chosen to come to Bilbury Grange when I heard a voice which, I was delighted to realise, I did recognise.

'Whose is that bloody coach parked in the lane?' demanded Samuel Houghton.

Samuel, who has a farm out on the road to Little Mitcham but who keeps sheep in a couple of nearby fields, strode into view. It was good to see a familiar face. Despite the blistering heat Samuel wore his usual rusty-brown, tweed jacket, tied around the waist with orange baler twine. He had his pipe fixed firmly in one corner of his mouth and a small, rather greasy hat perched on the back of his head.

'Mine!' answered the bald, red-faced man. 'What's your problem?'

'It's blocking the lane!' protested Samuel. 'I can't get my tractor past.' He took his pipe out of his mouth and poked at the contents of the bowl with a penknife which he had taken out of his jacket pocket.

'Well there's no coach park signposted!' explained the bald, red-faced man as though that was excuse enough. 'Where am I supposed to park if you don't provide proper car parking facilities? '

'I don't care where you put the darned thing,' said Samuel, calmly but firmly. 'But you can't leave it where it is.' He bent down, tapped his pipe against the side of his boot and looked up at me. 'I'm sorry, doctor,' he said. 'I got past most of the cars that are parked but the coach is just blocking the whole lane.'

'I don't know what they're doing here, Samuel,' I said. 'The world seems to have gone stark raving mad this morning.'

'They're all over the darned village!' said Samuel. He examined the contents of his pipe bowl again and carefully scraped at it a few more times with his penknife. 'There are cars parked all over the village green and there are three more coaches parked outside the Duck and Puddle. Colin Jackson found a dozen of 'em having a picnic on one of his fields and fired his shotgun at 'em.' He bent down and tapped his pipe against his boot once more. 'They scattered pretty darned quick by all accounts.'

'Haven't you seen this article in the *Sunday Planet* colour magazine?' asked the hiker in the yellow sweater and the green corduroy plus twos. He held out the magazine he had been carrying. I suddenly, rather belatedly, realised that it was the same magazine that many of the other intruders had also been carrying.

I took the magazine from him, thanked him, unfolded it and stared in astonishment at a large colour photograph of Bilbury Grange. There was another smaller photograph of Patsy and myself sitting eating afternoon tea in the garden. I didn't remember either of the photographs ever being taken. I turned the page and there were more photographs of Bilbury; a shot of the Duck and Puddle, a shot of a cricket match in progress on the village green and a close up picture of two or three of the cottages on the far side of the village green. I turned back to the start of the article. It was headed: 'BILBURY COUNTRY'. Underneath this headline, and the name and photograph of the author, who was someone I had neither heard of nor recognised, was the subheading 'The Perfect Place to Live: England's Healthiest Village!'

'Is this why you're here?' I asked the hiker.

He nodded. 'Of course!'

'Where have you come from?'

'Swindon,' he replied, as though it was the most natural thing in the world to travel across half of England to stare at someone else's home. 'We were going to go to the Quantock Hills in Somerset but when Stella saw this article in the magazine we thought we'd come on and take a look at Bilbury.'

'Stella?'

'My wife.'

'Is this why you're here too?' I asked the coach driver.

'Certainly is!' he replied. 'Mystery tour. The boss read that article this morning and put you on the tour instead of Clovelly. A lot of our ladies and gentlemen complain about Clovelly with them being a little mature for anything too energetic. They say as how it's a mite too hilly.' He sniffed. 'But at least they've got decent parking and lavatories at Clovelly.'

'But they want visitors,' I pointed out. 'We didn't ask for visitors, we didn't expect visitors and I obviously can't speak for anyone else in Bilbury but to be perfectly honest Patsy and I really don't want any uninvited visitors!'

'Well you're not going to get many more with that attitude!' said the coach driver, rather belligerently I thought.

I felt a small hand slipping between my arm and my body. I looked around. 'I left them all queuing in the hallway,' said Patsy quietly.

I frowned. 'Do you think that was safe?' I asked her.

'I don't know,' said Patsy. 'Do you think I should have stayed with them?' She looked worried.

'I don't know,' I admitted.

Samuel, carefully filling his pipe bowl from a leather pouch he had taken from one of his jacket pockets, looked across at the coach driver. 'So,' he said, pausing for a moment, 'do you think you're going to be moving that coach then?'

'Where else can I put it?' demanded the coach driver.

'I don't know as I can rightly answer that,' replied Samuel. 'You could just drive round and round the village as far as I'm concerned. I just want to get to my sheep.'

'If you're going to take that attitude then I might just leave it where it is!' snapped back the coach driver.

'That's not something I'd be keen to recommend,' said Samuel. 'Otherwise I'll just have to try to squeeze past and hope your shiny coach doesn't do too much damage to my tractor.'

'Can't imagine anything doing any damage to your tractor!' I said, lightly. 'I've never seen so much rust in one place.'

'Well, I just hope the paintwork on his coach doesn't scrape off any of my rust!' said Samuel. 'I'm very fond of that rust. It's been there a long time.'

Muttering something inaudible under his breath the coach driver told the few remaining members of his flock who had not joined Patsy on a guided tour of our lavatory that he would meet them at the entrance to the driveway in fifteen minutes. He could not, however, resist one parting shot. 'You want to learn to be a bit more hospitable!' he said as he started off back down the driveway. 'I'll be having a word with my boss and it wouldn't surprise me one little bit if your village wasn't taken off our mystery tour itinerary. It certainly wouldn't surprise me one little bit.' He pulled himself to his full five foot four inches and glowered at me. 'I'll be recommending that we go back to Clovelly next week. They know how to treat people proper down in Clovelly. And they've got ice creams too.'

Leaving us with this awesome threat hanging over us the coach driver waddled off down the drive to move his vehicle.

'I'll get on and look after my sheep then, doctor,' said Samuel, following him down the driveway. 'I hope you manage to clear all these visitors away before too long.'

'So do I, Samuel,' I said. I looked around the garden, now awash with brightly coloured anoraks, jumpers and T-shirts. A giggle of teenage girls were taking photographs of one another. 'So do I!'

Samuel looked up at the sky, and chewed on a piece of straw which stuck out of a corner of his mouth. He scuffed the ground with the toe of his boot and sniffed at the air. 'It's going to rain later,' he said, with quiet country certainty. 'That should clear 'em away.'

I was impressed. 'How do you do that?' I asked him, intrigued.

He looked puzzled. ‘Do what?’

‘Predict the weather,’ I said. ‘How do you know what the weather is going to be like?’ I thought that he was perhaps going to explain that he’d seen all his cows facing South Westerly. Or that he had a piece of seaweed hanging up outside his back door. Or that he’d seen flies hovering over the pond near his back door. Or that he’d been studying the clouds.

‘I heard it on the wireless this morning,’ he told me.

I was terribly disappointed.

* * *

CHAPTER TWO

Patsy and I spent the rest of what we had hoped would have been a quiet Sunday trying to stop our unwanted visitors from doing too much damage to our home and garden. They came in their hundreds; by coach and by car. They arrived singly, in twos, in families and in parties so large it was impossible to count them. They came demanding food and lavatories and postcards and photographs. They shouted and complained and moaned and threw their rubbish down on the ground and stubbed their cigarettes out on the lawn and picked the flowers.

A couple in a Ford Escort insisted on parking their car on the front lawn. When I remonstrated with the driver he pointed indignantly to an orange badge stuck to the inside of his windscreen, told me that the badge gave him legal authority to park wherever he liked and threatened to report me to the authorities if I didn't apologise.

When the group of people Patsy had taken into Bilbury Grange to use the lavatory didn't reappear I went in search of them and found them spread all over the house. Three were in our bedroom and half a dozen were standing around in the living room looking confused.

'There doesn't seem to be a television set,' said a man in a beige polyester windcheater and light blue trousers. Even though he was indoors he still wore a white nylon cap.

'No,' I agreed.

'Where do you keep it then?'

'There isn't one,' I explained.

'No, I realise you haven't got one in this room,' said the man in the white nylon cap. 'But which room is it in?'

'We haven't got one.' I insisted.

'Bedroom?'

'No.'

The man in the white nylon cap sighed, as though we were playing some sort of game. 'Kitchen?' he suggested.

'No.'

The man in the white nylon cap put his hands on his hips and stared at me. 'Come on, sonny,' he said. 'We don't want to steal it. We only want to look at it.' He looked around at his companions who nodded in confirmation.

'We don't have a television set,' I said, rather coldly. I didn't like being called 'sonny' in my own home.

The man stared at me, looked at his companions and then stared at me again. 'You don't have a television set?'

'That's right,' I sighed, pleased that the message was beginning to sink in.

'Not one?'

'No.'

There was a pause.

'Not even a portable?'

'No.'

The man thought about this for a few moments. 'I don't believe you,' he said at last. I turned and left him and his friends peering at every item of furniture in the room, clearly expecting to discover a television set disguised as an easy chair, a bookcase or a coffee table.

In the kitchen I found a woman in a white cardigan and fawn trousers slicing bread and making sandwiches. The kettle was boiling and four cups and saucers were sitting neatly beside it. A woman in a white cardigan and primrose coloured trousers was sitting knitting and humming quietly to herself. Three men in beige polyester windcheaters were smoking pipes and reading newspapers.

'Is the strawberry jam homemade?' the woman asked.

'Yes,' I said. Patsy had made it the previous summer. She'd been up until three o'clock one morning because it wouldn't set. Eventually I'd had to wake up Peter Marshall at the village shop so that I could buy some pectin. Peter hadn't minded. He'd also sold me a pair of secateurs, a packet of candles, two pounds of rice and a spare broom handle.

'That's nice,' said the woman. 'My Gilbert doesn't like the factory made stuff. Do you Gilbert?'

One of the men, presumably Gilbert, looked up. 'What's that, dear?'

'You don't like factory made strawberry jam, do you?'

'Don't I, dear?'

'No, you don't. That's what you said.'

'Yes, dear.'

'Doesn't have the flavour,' explained the woman spreading jam on a slice of buttered bread. 'Made by Patsy was it?'

'Yes.'

‘Lovely,’ said the woman. She lifted the boiling kettle off the Aga and rinsed out the teapot with hot water. She then put several large spoons of tea into the pot and filled it with boiling water. I could hardly believe that all this was happening in our kitchen.

‘How does she make sure the strawberries don’t all rise to the top?’ she asked me when she’d finished doing this.

‘I’m not sure,’ I said. ‘Look, I don’t want to be rude or inhospitable or anything but this is our kitchen and I’m afraid we don’t do teas.’

‘One of your cups was chipped,’ said the woman, ignoring my protest and adding another sandwich to a growing pile. ‘I threw it away. You don’t want to keep chipped cups. They’re unhygienic. You should know that, being a doctor.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I mean, yes. I do know that. It’s just that we’ve only got five cups.’

‘Four,’ said the woman.

I looked at her.

‘Four cups,’ explained the woman. ‘You’ve only got four cups now. What are you going to do if more people want tea?’

I took a deep breath. ‘I don’t want to be rude,’ I said. ‘But I really would be very grateful if you’d leave. This is our home. It isn’t a cafe.’

‘And what about lunches?’ asked the woman. ‘It won’t be long before they’ll all be wanting their lunches!’

I closed my eyes and slowly counted up to ten. ‘This isn’t a cafe,’ I repeated. ‘We don’t do morning snacks, lunches, afternoon snacks, dinner or anything else!’

‘It’s pretty obviously not a cafe!’ said the woman. ‘Not with just four cups!’ She smiled at me in a patronising way. ‘We won’t be long, dear,’ she said. ‘And then we’ll be out of your hair.’ She nodded at one of the men at the table and then lowered her voice to a whisper. ‘The doctor says that Gilbert should eat regularly. It’s his bowels you know. Very sensitive bowels he’s got. Always has had. If he doesn’t eat regularly he gets terrible gurglings.’ She carried the plateful of sandwiches over to the table, put it down and walked back to collect the teapot. ‘Where’s the tea strainer?’ she asked, but didn’t wait for an answer before opening a drawer and rummaging around in it. Before I could reply the door burst open and the man in the white nylon cap came in, closely followed by his companions.

‘Ah, tea and butties!’ said the man, rubbing his hands together. ‘At least we can get something to eat!’ He bent down to speak to the three uninvited visitors already sitting around our table. ‘Do you know,’ he said, ‘he,’ and at this he nodded in my direction, ‘won’t even let us watch the television!’ He looked around. ‘Aren’t there any more chairs?’ he demanded crossly.

‘Can’t find the tea strainer anywhere,’ said the sandwich maker. ‘Where do you keep the tea strainer, love?’ she demanded again.

I gave up and went outside.

‘Hey you! How do we get to the church?’ demanded a rude and very aggressive man in a beige anorak. He was accompanied by a plump woman in a matching anorak. He unwrapped a toffee as he spoke and, after popping the sweet into his mouth, casually threw the unwanted wrapper down onto the ground.

I bent down, picked up the wrapper and put it into my pocket. ‘Turn left outside the gate,’ I told him. ‘Go two hundred yards down the road and follow the road round to the left – ignore the track on your right – and then turn left on a farm track just after you come to a right angle left hand bend. If you find yourself on the Combe Martin road, which you probably will do because the turning to the church is almost hidden by brambles at this time of the year, then you’ve gone too far. Turn round and go back the way you’ve come for two hundred yards and you’ll see a turning on your left. That will take you down to the church.’

The man made me repeat all this and then stalked away without even a ‘thank you’. I didn’t mind. The instructions I had given him wouldn’t take him very near the church but would take him directly past a brace of the most vocal farm dogs in North Devon. For a moment or two I felt a tiny bit guilty, but the feeling soon passed.

In the vegetable garden I managed, with some difficulty, to persuade a family from Bristol to stop picking our raspberries. They had brought their own plastic containers and seemed most put out when I remonstrated with them. As they walked away the mother, a large woman, told me that it was the last time her family would ever visit Bilbury Grange. She raised her voice to make sure I heard her. ‘And what’s more we’ll tell our friends not to come!’ she threatened.

On the driveway, I stopped a man in checked golf trousers and a green shirt. He was trying to carry away a stone statue which he said he had ‘found’ down by the lake.

‘Excuse me, but do you mind putting that back where you found it?’ I asked, as politely as I could.

‘What for?’ demanded the man.

‘Because that’s where it lives,’ I explained, trying hard to remain calm. ‘It wasn’t lost or abandoned and it isn’t for sale.’

‘You should have a notice on it saying ‘Not for sale’,’ snapped his wife. ‘Don’t you carry it all that way back, Keith. It’s far too heavy. Leave it there and let him take it back himself.’ Keith put the statue on the drive. She jabbed a finger in my chest. ‘I’ve a good mind to complain to the authorities!’ she said. ‘My Keith could have injured his back carrying that statue all this way. He thought he was doing you a favour. He was tidying up.’

I opened my mouth but couldn’t think of anything to say to this bizarre outburst.

‘And another thing,’ said the woman, jabbing her finger at me a second time, ‘you should have a fence around that lake. People could fall into it. Call yourself a doctor? You’re a disgrace, that’s what you are!’ She called over a woman in her late twenties who was heading in the other direction and who had small children attached to each hand. ‘Don’t go down by the lake!’ she said. ‘There’s no fence round it, you know. Your children could fall in and I bet you there are no lifebelts.’ She turned to me. ‘Are there any lifebelts?’

‘Er...no,’ I admitted.

‘There you are!’ said the large woman. ‘Should be reported to the authorities.’ She sniffed. ‘Come on Keith,’ she said. ‘Let’s get out of here. It’s a death trap.’

The woman with the two small children stood where she was, looking anxious. She looked around, spotted her husband and called to him. ‘Jim!’ she screeched. ‘There’s no lifebelts by the lake.’ She nodded in the direction of the fat woman, now hurrying away as fast as her fat legs could carry her. ‘That woman says it isn’t safe,’ she said.

The fat woman turned round. ‘Ask him how many people have drowned!’ she shouted back up the driveway.

Jim hurried over to where his wife and children were standing. He put a protective arm around his wife and drew the children close to him. He glared at me. ‘How many people have drowned?’ he asked sternly.

‘I don’t think anyone has drowned,’ I said, feeling that everything was beginning to get away from me.

‘Well, that’s not good enough!’ snorted Jim. ‘Come on Cynthia We’re leaving.’ They set off back down the drive. I heard him telling people not to go near the lake because not even I knew how many people had drowned in it.

I turned and started to look for Patsy. It seemed an impossible task. Everywhere I looked there were huge crowds of people. There were families having picnics on the lawn. There were dogs chasing children and children chasing dogs.

‘Where are the lavatories for the disabled?’ demanded a woman pushing a man in a wheelchair.

I said I was sorry but that we didn’t have any lavatories for the disabled.

‘I can’t get him into the house,’ said the woman. ‘You’ve got steps.’

‘Yes,’ I said, as politely as I could. ‘I know we’ve got steps.’

‘The wheelchair won’t go up them,’ said the woman.

‘No,’ I agreed. ‘I don’t suppose it will.’

‘So what are you going to do about it?’ demanded the woman.

‘There’s a public lavatory near the village green,’ I said. ‘That hasn’t got any steps.’

‘The village green?’

‘That’s right.’

‘But we don’t want to go to the village green. We haven’t finished here yet.’

‘Maybe together we could lift him out of the wheelchair and carry him into the house?’ I suggested.

‘That’s not good enough,’ said the woman. ‘You should have ramps.’

‘Well I’m afraid we haven’t got any ramps,’ I said. ‘We weren’t expecting people in wheelchairs.’

‘That’s just typical of your sort!’ said the woman. ‘You’re quick enough to take the public’s money but you aren’t prepared to put yourself out or spend anything on providing facilities. I’ll be writing to the *Sunday Planet* about this. Let’s see what they have to say when I tell them how you treat disabled people.’

‘I’ve offered to help you carry him into the house,’ I pointed out.

‘He doesn’t want to go to the lavatory at the moment,’ said the woman. ‘Do you Darren?’

Darren confirmed that he didn’t want to go to the lavatory at that particular moment.

‘It’s the principle that is important,’ said the woman. ‘But I don’t suppose you understand anything about principles do you!’ She pushed Darren away, warning me that she would be writing to the authorities and to the papers and that I could try to explain myself to them.

‘Are you in charge?’ demanded another voice. I felt a blow on my back and whirled round. A small, very plump woman in a dark blue mackintosh was getting ready to hit me again with her umbrella ‘Are you in charge?’ she demanded.

‘I don’t think so,’ I answered.

‘They said you were in charge,’ said the woman, waving her umbrella I noticed that she was accompanied by a small, sodden child. He was drenched and had pond weed draped over his scalp.

‘What happened?’ I asked her. I nodded at the boy.

‘He fell in your pond!’ said the woman. ‘He might have drowned.’

‘But he didn’t!’ I pointed out, not unreasonably.

‘There’s no fence around it,’ complained the woman.

‘Two thirds of the earth’s surface is covered in water,’ I told her. ‘It’s not surprising people keep falling into the stuff.’ Just occasionally I can think of the clever thing to say while there is still some point in saying it. I readily admit that these things usually come to me an hour or two past their sell-by-date.

‘But there’s no fence!’ said the woman, slightly taken aback.

‘There’s a wall and a gate,’ I explained. I pointed down the driveway. ‘There’s a gate down there which was shut this morning. I didn’t open it. This is private property and you weren’t invited to come through the gate.’

The woman opened and shut her mouth but nothing came out of it.

‘Hey you!’ someone else called out.

I turned round. I was beginning to feel dizzy. A snooty looking fellow in a white suit was beckoning to me. I walked over towards him. ‘I want to buy a cottage in the village,’ he said. ‘Just for weekends.’

‘I don’t think there is anything much for sale at the moment,’ I told him.

‘A barn will do,’ said the man in the white suit. ‘I’ll have it converted.’

‘I don’t think anyone’s got a barn for sale either,’ I said.

* * *

I eventually found Patsy standing on a quiet, secluded corner of the front lawn. Ben was lying at her feet. Patsy was crying.

‘Why are all these people so horrid?’ she asked me. ‘I saw a boy carrying fish in a plastic bag,’ she said. ‘When I asked him where he’d got them from he said he’d caught them in a pond and that they were his. When I told him he had to take them back his mother screamed at me and his father said we’d be hearing from their solicitor!’

I put my arm around her and kissed her.

‘I found two little girls holding Ben down while another girl tried to tie an empty can onto her tail!’

I bent down and scratched Ben’s head. She looked up at me with sad, sad eyes and raised a paw. I held her paw for a moment. ‘Have you seen Sophie and Emily?’ I asked Patsy.

Patsy shook her head.

‘You look after Ben!’ I told her. ‘Stay here and look after Ben. I’ll go and find Sophie and Emily.’

I hurried off towards the vegetable garden, in the rather vain hope that I might find our two cats still safely hidden in the greenhouse. When I got there I was horrified to find that the greenhouse door was wide open and there was no sign of either Emily or Sophie.

‘Have you seen two cats?’ I asked a youth with green spiky hair. He bit at a huge strawberry he was holding, stared at me uncomprehendingly and wandered away.

‘Have you seen two cats?’ I asked a young woman in a see-through blouse. She was holding a bunch of flowers she had picked.

‘Pardon?’ she said.

I repeated my question.

‘Je parle pas anglais,’ she said, shrugging a pair of alabaster shoulders. She said something else in French and giggled.

‘Excuse me,’ said a diminutive and elderly lady with grey hair and a metal walking frame. ‘Did you say that you were looking for two cats?’

I said I had and I was.

‘There are two cats over there,’ she said, lifting her entire walking frame into the air with ease and using the upended aluminium scaffolding to point towards the far end of the walled garden. ‘On top of the wall,’ she said. ‘Two boys were throwing stones at them,’ she added. ‘I tried to stop them but...’.

Shouting ‘Thank you!’ over my shoulder I raced along the narrow paths to the other end of the walled garden. The grey-haired old lady was right about the stone throwing youths. But at first I couldn’t see Emily and Sophie. They weren’t on the wall. And then I spotted them; they had both climbed up a huge walnut tree which grows on the other side of the wall.

When she saw me Emily miaowed very loudly.

‘Hey!’ I shouted at the boys. ‘Stop that!’ I was furious.

The two boys turned and stared at me. ‘Who are you?’ demanded the taller of the two.

‘Stop that!’ I said.

‘Or what?’ demanded the shorter boy. He looked about fifteen or sixteen-years-old. His companion may have been a year or so older.

I lost my temper.

I had put up with people parking on our lawn. I had been patient with uninvited visitors who had made themselves sandwiches in our kitchen. I had bitten my tongue when complete strangers had walked around Bilbury Grange throwing their rubbish onto the ground. I had tried not to be rude to people trying to steal bits of our garden. But I'd had enough. Girls had tried to tie a can to Ben's tail and now boys were throwing stones at Sophie and Emily.

I picked up a long handled hoe that was leaning against the vegetable garden wall and raised it high above my head. 'Get out of my garden!' I shouted. 'Stop throwing stones and get out!'

The two boys dropped the stones they were holding and started to back away.

'Hey, they were only cats,' said the taller youth.

I started to run towards the two boys, the hoe still high above my head.

'We didn't hit them,' said the smaller youth, now starting to run. 'They kept moving.'

'Get out!' I said, speaking more quietly now but coldly. 'Get out and don't come back!'

The two boys ran off much faster than I could but I wasn't finished. 'That goes for all of you!' I shouted at the other intruders. 'Get out! This is a private garden. We don't want any of you here. Get out and don't come back!' Like a madman I ran around the garden chasing the uninvited visitors back towards the driveway and down towards the road.

As I passed the house, with the hoe still held aloft, and with a large crowd of panicking visitors running ahead of me the panic spread. Picnickers rapidly gathered together their rugs, hampers, baskets and small stoves and headed for the gate. Crying children were lifted up into the air by worried looking parents.

When most of the people in the garden were heading for the front gate I went into the house. The sandwich maker was still in the kitchen, making tea and yet more sandwiches.

'We've run out of bread!' she said. 'And the last pot of jam has gone.'

'Get out!' I shouted. 'Get out of my house. Now!'

The woman dropped the knife she was holding and backed towards the door.

'All of you!' I shouted. 'I'm serious. I'm going to count to ten and by the time I finish I want everyone out of this house!' I clutched the hoe firmly in my right hand and looked around the kitchen. The man with the white polyester cap took two sandwiches from the plate on the table and edged around me towards the door. 'There's no need to be like that!' he said.

'Yes, there is!' I said. 'Out! Out! Now!' I didn't see him leave but I heard the back door open and I heard the sound of chairs being pushed out of the way. Something breakable fell to the floor and broke.

I raced along the hall towards the living room. 'Get out!' I shouted at the long queue of people waiting to use the lavatory. They stared at me rather disbelievingly. 'Out!' I yelled. 'This is my house! And I want you all out. Now.'

'We're just going to use the toilet,' said a belligerent looking man with an unhealthy looking paunch. 'You can't stop us using the toilet.'

'Yes I can!' I shouted, surprising even myself by my belligerence. 'If you're not out of here within five seconds you won't need a toilet!'

Muttering noisy threats about making complaints to various bodies, the existence of which I was only dimly aware and the views of which I cared nothing about, the man scurried away towards the back door.

When I was satisfied that the house was empty I left, locked the back door and went back outside. The garden and driveway looked deserted but there was rubbish everywhere. A small blue pushchair had been abandoned in the middle of the drive. An orange tent which someone had erected on the lawn lay half flattened, its main pole snapped in two. Among the empty soft drink cans, sandwich wrappers, orange peel, banana skins and cigarette packets I spotted a pair of plimsolls, a sage coloured anorak, a small khaki haversack, a pair of navy blue knickers and numerous copies of the *Sunday Planet* supplement which contained the article which had caused all the trouble.

Patsy was exactly where I had left her, though now, instead of standing, she was sitting on the grass. Ben was sitting with her head in Patsy's lap.

'Did you find them?' Patsy asked as soon as she saw me, gently moving Ben's head and then jumping to her feet.

'They're both fine.' I answered.

'What happened?' asked Patsy. 'Where did everyone go?'

'I'm afraid I lost my temper,' I confessed. 'I think I threatened them.'

Patsy started to giggle. 'With that?'

I was still clutching the garden hoe I had picked up in the vegetable garden.

'I think so,' I admitted.

Patsy put her arm around me and kissed me on the cheek. 'You're my hero!' she said.

'That's wonderful!' said a voice I didn't recognise. 'Just hold that for a moment!'

Startled, Patsy and I both turned our heads together. Ben started to bark. A man in a multi-coloured shirt, green shorts, white pumps and dark glasses was fumbling with a very large camera. Behind him a woman in a light coloured summer dress was standing looking bored.

I'd had quite enough. 'Please get out!' I shouted. 'This is a private garden.'

'I just want a couple of snaps of the two of you,' explained the intruder, who was, nevertheless, backing away.

'We don't want any photographs taken,' I said.

'We aren't doing any harm,' said the intruder unwisely.

I glowered at him and lifted my hoe. He turned and fled, followed closely by his wife.

With Patsy and Ben behind me I followed them both the full length of the drive and as they disappeared down the lane I pulled at the tall, iron gates and slammed them shut, dragging the bolt into place. I told Patsy I'd stay there on guard while she went up to the house and fetched the key.

'Hey mister, open up them gates will you,' said a woman in a lilac trouser suit. She was carrying a huge shopping basket which was crammed full of plastic boxes.

'Sorry,' I said. 'I'm not allowed to let anyone in.'

'Oh, go on,' pleaded the woman. 'We only want to look around and take a few snaps and maybe have a bit of a picnic.' Her companion, a man in grubby white tennis shorts and grubby white tennis shoes leant forward and tried to rattle the gate. The gate, I was pleased to see, didn't budge an inch. He peered through the bars but could not, I knew, see anything other than a few yards of drive. Bilbury Grange is completely invisible from the road.

As they wandered back down the lane cursing me Patsy appeared clutching a huge iron key. The lock was a little stiff from disuse but we both breathed huge sighs of relief when I finally succeeded in locking the gate; locking us in and locking the tourists out. Even though we had a lot of mess to tidy up in the garden and the house it felt good to be safe from unwanted visitors.

* * *

CHAPTER THREE

At eight o'clock that same evening Patsy and I were both sipping whisky and trying to recover in the kitchen when Frank, the landlord of the Duck and Puddle, telephoned to invite us to attend an emergency meeting in the public lounge.

'One or two of us are having a bit of a meeting to try to decide whether we need to do anything about all these visitors we've been having,' said Frank. 'Gilly and I were wondering if you'd like to come along?'

'Have the tourists all gone now?' I asked him anxiously.

It had taken Patsy and me the rest of the day to tidy up the worst of the damage caused by our uninvited guests. I had a strong suspicion that some of the tourists had come to the country armed with large bags of their own household rubbish which they then distributed generously as they toured around.

Ben, Sophie and Emily, who were all sprawled comfortably on the kitchen floor, seemed to have recovered completely from their terrible experiences but Patsy and I had not yet forgotten the day's horrors. Getting out to go down to the pub meant opening up the front gate and I wasn't keen to do that even temporarily – until I was absolutely sure that the danger was past for the time being at least.

'Most of them seem to have gone,' replied Frank. 'I think one or two of them might still be wandering around the lanes but I reckon the rest of them have gone home now.'

'Patsy and I will both be there,' I promised. 'We had a terrible day,' I briefly told him what had happened.

'It's been just as bad everywhere in the village,' said Frank, sympathetically. 'Some well-meaning city idiot shut the gate to Buttercup meadow at 8 o'clock this morning.'

I closed my eyes and groaned. Colin Jackson always lets his cows find their own way back to their field when he's finished milking them. Daisy, his bell cow, is more intelligent than any politician or bureaucrat I've ever met. Colin leaves the gate to Buttercup meadow open and the cows wander, unaccompanied, along Pilton Lane, turn right at the junction with Parsonage Road and amble along the track which runs along behind the back of the Duck and Puddle. They turn into the gate at Buttercup field and when he's finished milking the last cow and had his breakfast, Colin trundles along the lane on his old tractor and shuts the gate. This is not so much to keep the cows in the field (after all, why would they want to leave – the grass in Buttercup meadow is sweet and lush and greener than any in the surrounding meadows) as to stop Oliver Huckberry's cows wandering in to join them when they're returning to their field half an hour or so later.

'And we've had 'em round here,' continued Frank. 'It's been awful. Absolutely awful. Hordes of 'em wanting lemonade and orange juice. You know how I hate serving lemonade and orange juice. It makes me ill. Hundreds of 'em wanting to come in and use our lavatories and fill their water bottles from our tap. I found one bloke with a hosepipe fitted onto our kitchen tap. He was filling up a 70 gallon drum he had fitted on the back of a small truck! He said something about taking the stuff to London and selling it in third of a pint bottles. When I told him what he could do with his hosepipe he offered me money to let him come and fill his tank up twice a week.'

'What did you say to him?' I asked, not really needing to ask to know the answer.

Frank snorted. Although Frank runs an establishment which is theoretically designed to persuade members of the public to exchange hard cash for fluid he doesn't like being too busy. He prefers to share a few pints with his chums rather than rush about catering for large numbers of people wanting glasses of lemonade or cups of tea.

* * *

'It says here that the drinking water bottled by Dr Brownlow in Bilbury has aphro..., aphro..., aphro something qualities,' said Thumper Robinson, reading from the *Sunday Planet* magazine article which had caused so much trouble. I realised that although I had picked up scores of copies of the *Sunday Planet* magazine I still hadn't actually read the article which had disrupted our life so dramatically. Thumper looked up and across at me and frowned. 'What's aphro what does it mean?' he asked.

'It's a type of hairstyle,' said Frank, firmly. 'Aphro thingy,' he explained. He moved his hands around about a foot away from his head. 'The way those Africans have their hair. All bouffant and curly like.'

Peter Marshall, who runs the village shop, nodded his head wisely. 'I've heard of that,' he agreed.

'It must mean that if you drink Dr Brownlow's water it will make your hair stick out,' went on Frank. He paused and grimaced. 'I think you should all stick to my beer,' he said. Frank is very nearly bald and it would be a miracle if any of the remaining hairs on his head had the energy to stand up by themselves.

'Aphrodisiac. It means the water makes you feel fruity,' I told Thumper.

'Then thank heavens you don't drink water!' said Anne Thwaites instantly. She looked at Thumper, the father of her child 'You're randy enough as it is!'

Peter, who runs the village shop, looked slightly disbelieving. 'I clean my teeth in water,' he said 'but I can't say as how I've ever noticed any funny feelings.'

Kay, Bilbury's bathukolpian district nurse, bent forwards and lowered her voice. 'Er, is this just the water Dr Brownlow sells?' she asked me. 'Or do you think it applies to all the water in the village?'

I thought for a moment. 'I'm not sure,' I said at last. 'But I expect all our water is the same.'

'Oh!' said Kay, blushing but looking rather pleased. 'How interesting...'.

'I don't need any artificial help,' said Thumper, unabashed and unembarrassed. He peered at the magazine again. 'Anyway, it says here that the drinking water Dr Brownlow bottles has aphro whats it qualities and is a real elixir of youth and a medically proven cure for arthritis! Elixir of youth.' He looked up at me. 'What's that doc?'

'He means that if you drink Dr Brownlow's bottled water you feel younger,' I explained.

'Sensible writer,' nodded Dr Brownlow. 'I must send him a 'thank you' note. What's his name?'

'George Nympton,' replied Thumper. He frowned. 'Does anyone remember him? Has he ever actually been to the village?'

'George Nympton? We remember him!' said Frank and Gilly in unison.

Everyone looked at them. Something Thumper had read out was nagging at me but I couldn't remember what it was.

'He stayed here at the Duck and Puddle a few months ago,' they replied.

'Short, fat chap,' said Frank. 'Wore a bright red wig. Underneath he was as bald as a billiard ball. He was completely neurotic and in very poor health.'

'Peter brought him from the station in Barnstaple,' said Gilly.

'Do you remember Peter?'

Peter thought for a moment. 'Did he smell of aftershave?' he suggested.

'That's him,' nodded Frank. 'Pungent, it was. Very pungent.'

'Six suitcases,' said Peter, nodding. 'He had six huge suitcases with him. I thought he was moving down here permanently.'

'He stayed here for three days and didn't leave his room,' said Gilly. 'Sent a photographer round the village taking snaps and asking questions. Tall, stringy fellow in a red fishing vest and black jeans. He had a ponytail and a gold earring.'

'I remember the fat chap!' said Patchy. 'I was in the bar when he came in. I remember thinking he was so fat that he probably needed to get planning permission every time he sat down.'

'That's a terrible thing to say about someone!' said Patsy.

'It's true!' protested Patchy. 'You should have seen him.'

I looked up from reading the article. I remembered the photographer. He had wandered into our garden one early summer afternoon and asked if he could take some photographs. He hadn't said he was from the *Sunday Planet*.

'Mr Nympton brought his own food with him,' said Gilly. 'We had to heat up all these meals he'd had prepared by some chef in London. He wouldn't eat anything we prepared.'

Thumper carried on reading. 'Well he says here that he reckons Bilbury is the calmest, most tranquil place in Britain.'

'It was tranquil until all those damned tourists turned up!' said Patchy Fogg, the antique dealer, sipping at a pint of stout. 'It took me an hour and three quarters to get from Softly's Bottom to the Duck and Puddle at lunchtime! Do you think any more will come? Or was that it?'

'I think we've probably seen the worst of it,' said Dr Brownlow.

Dr Brownlow, who used to be the village GP, is my ex employer and now, despite his advancing years, runs a thriving and prosperous water bottling facility at his home. 'It'll be a one day wonder, you see if it isn't. People throw those giveaway magazines in the bin after a day. You can't even wrap chips in them.'

There were murmurings of agreement. I hoped Dr Brownlow was right. But I wasn't quite as confident as some of the other villagers sounded. Patsy and I still hadn't finished clearing up the rubbish from our lawn. And there was still something niggling at me. I leant across towards Thumper and tapped him gently on the arm. 'Could I take a look at that article?' I asked. Thumper passed me the magazine.

'I know today's been a bit chaotic,' said Churston Ferrers. He cleared his throat as we all looked at him. 'But that's largely because we weren't ready for the number of tourists we got. I think we could be missing a great opportunity here. We ought to be careful not to, er, throw the proverbial baby out with the, er, proverbial bath water.' He looked around, waiting to gauge the response. No one else said anything.

Churston Ferrers and his wife had only arrived in Bilbury village a few months earlier. Churston used to live in London though what he did there and exactly why he came to live in Bilbury is something of a mystery. Churston is in his late thirties and always dresses impeccably. He was on this occasion wearing a light grey silk suit, a white shirt and a plain red tie. He had a neatly folded white handkerchief in his breast pocket and wore highly polished black shoes decorated with gold coloured buckles. He stands out in Bilbury just as much as Thumper, Frank, Patchy or I would in The Strand.

'This article,' he said, pointing to his own copy of the same *Sunday Planet* magazine that I was reading, 'could be an absolute godsend for the village! It could revolutionise life for all of us.' He spoke quietly and peered around at us all over the top of his gold framed spectacles. 'An absolute godsend!' he said again.

No one else said anything. To be honest I don't think any of us wanted our lives revolutionising. If we had wanted revolution we would have gone to live somewhere big and exciting like Barnstaple or South Molton; or even emigrated and gone to live in a foreign place – somewhere like London, Birmingham or Milton Keynes.

'Lots of villages would give their eye teeth for this sort of publicity,' said Churston eagerly. 'Just look at this,' he pointed to the page of the magazine in front of him. He held up the magazine so that we could see that he had drawn circles in blue ink around several parts of the article. He now proceeded to read out some of the quotes he had marked.

'Bilbury is the most peaceful and idyllic village in the whole of England,' he read. 'I know of no other village where I would prefer to live.' He looked up as though to make sure that we were all listening. 'Just a weekend spent in Bilbury will help you get rid of all the world weary blues.' He waved a hand in the direction of Dr Brownlow before continuing. 'Dr Brownlow's tiny bottling company produces drinking water which is, I am convinced, the true elixir of life. Apart from having astonishing qualities as an aphrodisiac the Bilbury water is absolutely replete with life-giving essential minerals. It is also a medically proven cure for arthritis.' Churston paused. 'We would have to pay a fortune for this sort of publicity!' he said. He then sighed. 'We would be very foolish indeed not to take advantage of it. The only pity is that the article wasn't published at the start of the summer season.'

'Where does it say that?' I asked Churston. That was the phrase that had caught my subconscious.

'Say what?'

'That stuff about arthritis. Where does it say that the Bilbury water is a medically proven cure for arthritis?'

Churston showed me. I found the same paragraph in the copy of the magazine that I was reading and showed it to Dr Brownlow.

'Do you know anything about this?' I asked him, puzzled.

Dr Brownlow shook his head and frowned. 'Bit over the top, isn't it?' He cleared his throat, took the magazine from me, held it up and waved it around. 'Does anyone know where they got this stuff about my water curing arthritis? In a few days' time we won't just be getting tourists we'll be having hypochondriacs and pilgrims flock to the village!'

Churston Ferrers grinned and nodded. 'Terrific publicity, isn't it? People will be coming here from miles around!'

'You're not kidding!' I said, horrified. 'When people find out that they can cure their arthritis by drinking a glass of our water they'll be coming here in coach loads and plane loads. Bilbury will be the new Lourdes!'

Churston looked at me and frowned. 'I can't see anything wrong with it,' he said. 'And it's perfectly true. Not a word of a lie! I just happened to mention to the writer fellow that I hadn't had any trouble with arthritis since I'd come to Bilbury.'

'How long had you had arthritis?' I asked Churston. 'You're very young to suffer from arthritis.'

Churston winked. 'I didn't say I ever did have arthritis,' he said. 'I just said I hadn't had any trouble with arthritis since I'd come to Bilbury. And that's perfectly true!'

'You never did have arthritis?'

'Well, not exactly. Not precisely.'

Dr Brownlow and I exchanged glances. There didn't seem anything else to be said.

'We just can't cope with all these people,' said Patchy Fogg anxiously. 'The village doesn't have the car parks, the toilets or – what's the posh word – the 'infrastructure' to cope with so many people.'

'Of course we can't cope at the moment,' said Churston who didn't seem in the slightest bit concerned that his trickery over the arthritis 'cure' had been exposed. 'Things got out of hand today because we weren't ready for what happened. But if we put a little bit of effort into making sure that we are ready then we could make a lot of money out of all these tourists.' He stopped and looked around again. The mention of the word 'money' had done its trick. Some of the villagers who had been dismissive of him a moment or two earlier were now listening carefully. I couldn't help wondering why Churston was so keen to see Bilbury prosper. And why, I wondered, had he made up all that nonsense about arthritis.

'Other villages would be absolutely thrilled with publicity like this,' said Churston. 'Lynton and Lynmouth, Combe Martin, Ilfracombe, Clovelly – they'd all be completely over the moon to get this sort of promotion! Over the moon!'

Peter Marshall leant forward towards Churston. 'I'm, er, not saying that I'd want more visitors in Bilbury,' he said quietly, 'I'm not saying that at all, of course, but what would we need to do and, er, how much money do you think we might be talking about to provide the, er, what is it called, the ‘infrastructure’?’ He looked around. ‘Just out of curiosity,’ he added, quickly.

Churston nodded understandingly and held out his left hand, fingers splayed. Using the forefinger of his right hand as a pointer he marked off the things we needed to do, finger by finger.

‘First, we need car parking facilities,’ said Churston, tapping his little finger. ‘We don’t need anything particularly sophisticated. Just a couple of fields and a couple of lads prepared to make sure that motorists park in nice straight lines.’ He looked around. No one seemed particularly excited by this.

‘Motorists would, of course, expect to pay a car parking charge,’ he continued. ‘And I think we could reasonably charge motorists 25 or even 50 pence a day to park their cars,’ he added. ‘Quite reasonable.’ Suddenly there was a perceptible change in the atmosphere. Thumper Robinson and Patchy Fogg both started to take notice. Samuel Houghton cleared his throat noisily. ‘I’ve got a couple of fields we could use,’ he said, generously. You could see him trying to work out how many cars had been in the village during the day, how many cars he could cram into a couple of decent sized fields and multiplying the result by 50 pence.

‘That’s very nice of you, Mr Houghton,’ said Churston. ‘Very generous of you indeed.’ He tapped the ring finger of his left hand ‘Toilets,’ he said ‘We obviously need more toilet facilities. The facilities on the village green were quite inadequate today. But we don’t have to go to any great expense and we don’t even have to have anything built. We can hire portable toilets and have them stationed in the car parking area’

‘How big are these portable toilets?’ asked Samuel.

Churston frowned. ‘I’m not sure,’ he admitted ‘I think that rather depends upon the number of facilities.’ He thought for a moment. ‘Say around fifty feet?’ He suggested rather vaguely.

‘How many do we need?’ asked Samuel.

‘One facility for gentlemen and one for ladies,’ explained Churston reasonably.

‘Ah,’ said Samuel, apparently satisfied. He had, I knew, been worried that if the portable lavatories were too large they would take up valuable car parking spaces.

‘We can, of course, make a modest charge to those who use these facilities in order to help us defray our expenses,’ said Churston.

‘How modest?’ asked Peter Marshall immediately.

‘Ten or twenty pence I would think,’ said Churston. ‘We should be able to make a small profit.’ He tapped his middle finger. ‘And then we’ll need to make sure that visitors can buy ice creams and soft drinks.’

‘They’ll want pots of tea and scones,’ said Gilly Parsons, the landlady of the Duck and Puddle. ‘And they’d want cream teas as well. Lots of cream teas.’

‘Great idea!’ said Churston. ‘Of course they would. Traditional Devon cream teas! And it would be marvellous if we could tell them that the cream and the jam were all freshly made in Bilbury. Do you think the village could produce enough cream and strawberry jam?’

‘Cream is no problem,’ said Samuel, who has quite a large dairy herd.

‘Jam wouldn’t be a problem either,’ said Kevin Pettigrew. ‘My mother makes umpteen jars of the stuff every summer.’

‘Then maybe, if she has some left over, she wouldn’t mind selling a few jars to the tourists?’ suggested Churston. ‘People always like to take a little something home with them. As a souvenir of their day out.’

‘My wife makes raspberry jam,’ said Harry Burrows. ‘We’ve got a lot of raspberry canes,’ he added in explanation.

‘Splendid!’ said Churston. ‘Terrific! And maybe someone else could sell gooseberry or blackcurrant jam?’

Josh Wilkins raised an arthritic finger. ‘My mother makes blackcurrant jam!’ he said.

‘Wonderful!’ said Churston. ‘That’s wonderful!’

I leant a little closer to Dr Brownlow, who was sitting next to me. ‘Josh’s mother must be quite an age!’ I whispered. Josh, the captain of the Bilbury Village Cricket Team, is reputed to be well into his eighties, though he looks and may well be considerably older than that.

‘She would be if she was still alive,’ Dr Brownlow whispered back. ‘She died of pneumonia in 1963.’

‘Postcards!’ said Peter, excitedly. ‘They’ll want postcards.’

‘Of course they will!’ agreed Churston. ‘Postcards of Bilbury!’

‘I’ve got some postcards of Bilbury,’ said Peter, to groans from the rest of us.

‘They’re in black and white and they were taken before the war!’ protested Thumper.

‘They’re period!’ said Peter defensively. ‘Folk love the old stuff.’

‘They do indeed!’ said Churston. ‘I would have thought that a little shop or stall selling antiques would have done a roaring trade today.’

I saw Thumper and Patchy Fogg exchange glances.

‘Maybe we could also produce a little souvenir booklet describing the history of the village,’ suggested Churston, who had now run out of fingers. He looked directly at me. ‘Could you put something together, doctor?’

‘I suppose so,’ I said, rather reluctant to get dragged into all this enthusiasm. I had an uneasy feeling that Churston was deliberately trying to find some way of persuading each one of us in turn to become excited by the prospect of attracting hordes of visitors to Bilbury.

‘Just a few pages about the village and half a dozen pictures,’ said Churston. ‘We could sell copies at the car park, at the ice cream stands and with the cream teas. It would be quite a little earner.’

I made some non-committal remark. Patsy and I certainly needed extra money but I was still not at all keen to see Bilbury turned into a real life theme park.

‘Of course I realise that none of you really want to get involved in any of this,’ said Churston, sitting back, as though everything he had been talking about had been simply theoretical. ‘But you can see why some villages would be excited by this article can’t you?’

I was now very suspicious. I got the distinct and uncomfortable feeling that having whetted everyone’s appetite Churston was now backing away and waiting for greed to take over. Patsy, who had been sitting quietly beside me, squeezed my hand. I looked at her. ‘What’s going on?’ she asked me quietly, looking puzzled. ‘I don’t know,’ I whispered back.

There was a long silence.

‘I don’t think we necessarily want to turn our backs on all these possibilities,’ said Gilly Parsons at last. She thought for a moment and looked hard at Frank. Frank didn’t say anything. ‘I wouldn’t mind having a few tables outside the pub and serving the odd cream tea,’ she said at last. ‘It would probably only be for a few weeks. But it would help keep us going.’

‘I can let you have all the cream you need,’ said Samuel Houghton quickly.

‘I don’t mind having an ice cream stand outside the shop,’ said Peter Marshall.

‘We need some sort of proper committee to tackle this,’ said Gilly firmly.

‘Oh I don’t think we should start setting up special committees,’ said Churston, with a shake of his head. ‘This is surely the sort of question we ought to hand over to the Parish Council.’

Everyone looked at him in surprise. The Bilbury Parish Council is not exactly the most forceful and go-ahead political organisation in the world. It meets four times a year and since I’ve been living in Bilbury I can’t remember it ever making much in the way of decisions. Take the village hall, for example. The Council has always been responsible for the repair, refurbishment and decoration of the village hall but after seven four hour meetings, spread over nearly two years, the Council still hadn’t decided who to hire to replace a broken pane of glass in the gentlemen’s lavatory and whether, when and where to put up six hat and coat hooks. In the end Thumper Robinson and Patchy Fogg had a whip round in the Duck and Puddle one Friday lunchtime, bought some glass, putty and coat hooks from Peter Marshall’s village shop and broke into the village hall that same evening to repair the window and put up six coat hooks in the hallway. The odd thing was that five of the people who had contributed money to Thumper’s impromptu fund were members of the Parish Council.

‘Do you really think that’s wise?’ asked Harry Burrows. Henry works in a bank and is a valuable member of the Bilbury Village Cricket Team. He sat on the Council in the 1960s but resigned when the Council spent five entire meetings discussing the type of lawnmower to buy for the village green. ‘When is the Council due to meet next?’ he asked.

Josh Wilkins, Captain of the Old Bilburians Cricket Team, and Chairman of the Parish Council for 42 years believes that the secret of political success is not to try to please people but to make sure that you don’t annoy anyone by taking decisions. He reached into a jacket pocket and pulled out a Racing Post diary for 1957. Josh has been using the same diary for quite a few years now. He writes his entries in pencil and rubs out all the old entries every December 31st so that the diary will be ready to receive his appointments for the following year. He simply ignores the names of the days printed on each page. Four years ago someone ripped out the last week in June and the first week in July. Some people might have found this a problem. But Josh simply avoids making any appointments for those two weeks. He slowly flicked through the pages. ‘We don’t seem to have anything planned,’ he told us, a few minutes later.

‘Maybe the Council could have an emergency meeting?’ suggested Churston.

‘Thank you very much, I’ll have a gin and tonic,’ said Josh. ‘Very kind of you.’

‘If we are going to do anything about this then I don’t honestly think we can afford to wait too long before taking advantage of our good fortune,’ said Churston, suddenly serious. He leant back and waved a hand around the room. ‘But what does everyone else think?’ he asked, apparently touched by an unusual attack of modesty.

‘I think Churston is right,’ said Patchy. ‘If we’re going to take advantage of what has happened we need to move pretty quickly.’

‘Do you think the Parish Council is, er, the right group to be dealing with this?’ asked Harry.

‘We don’t have much option,’ said Patchy. ‘If we’re going to do anything then we have to get the Council’s approval anyway. So they might as well be involved from the start.’

‘Thank you very much,’ said the Chairman of the Parish Council, accepting the gin and tonic which Churston put into his hand.

‘Maybe Churston would consider helping the Council?’ suggested Gilly.

Churston held up a hand. ‘Oh, no!’ he said.’ I couldn’t do that. It wouldn’t be right.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Gilly. ‘Why wouldn’t it be right?’

‘Well the Council is an elected body,’ explained Churston. ‘I wouldn’t feel comfortable attending Council meetings as an outsider.’

‘Then the Council should co-opt you as a member,’ said Gilly.

‘Oh, I don’t know about that,’ said Churston. He seemed strangely shy. ‘What would other people say? It doesn’t seem very democratic.’

‘What do you think about it, Josh?’ asked Gilly. ‘Josh!’

‘What’s that?’ demanded Josh, waking with a start. He had nodded off. ‘Gin and tonic, thank you very much! And a packet of salt and vinegar.’

Gilly leant closer and shouted in his ear. ‘What do you think about co-opting Churston as a full voting member of the Council?’

Josh, who had clearly no idea what was going on, looked very confused. ‘Why are you asking me?’ he asked.

Gilly sighed. ‘I’ll get you another gin and tonic,’ she promised.

‘Don’t forget my crisps!’ said Josh.

‘Seems the obvious thing to do,’ said Harry Burrows.

There was a murmuring, mainly from Patchy Fogg, confirming this point of view.

‘Well, I don’t know. I really don’t know. This isn’t what I’d had in mind,’ protested Churston.

‘Oh, please!’ pleaded Gilly, handing Josh his packet of crisps.

In the end Churston agreed, with quite a show of resistance, to join the Bilbury Parish Council if the other councillors approved the idea. And Josh, happily munching crisps, formally agreed to call an emergency Council meeting for the following evening.

Afterwards, I stood outside the Duck and Puddle and stared up at a starry September sky. I felt sad but didn’t really know why. I hadn’t realised that there was anyone else there until Dr Brownlow spoke.

‘Wonderful, isn’t it?’

I turned and looked at him.

‘The sky.’

I said it was.

‘Did you hear about ‘Chestnut View Cottage’?’

‘Selling for £20,000?’

‘I heard it was £25,000.’

‘Why would anyone pay that much for a tiny cottage in Bilbury?’

‘I have no idea,’ replied Dr Brownlow. ‘Property prices around here have rocketed recently. An estate agent rang me a week ago to offer £10,000 for a disused barn in one of my fields. I told him not to be silly. The barn is a wreck. It isn’t worth a tenth of that. And a chap I know in Exeter rang me a few days ago to ask me if I wanted to sell any land. Apparently someone is buying up land in the village. They’re prepared to pay really silly prices.’

‘What on earth is going on?’

‘I haven’t got the foggiest. But I don’t like it.’

We stood in silence for a few moments. The cool air reminded us both of the changing seasons.

‘Summer will be gone soon,’ said Dr Brownlow.

I agreed.

‘Then it’s autumn. And then winter again. Storms and snow and log fires. The older I get the quicker the seasons seem to change.’

I said I knew what he meant.

* * *

CHAPTER FOUR

I was woken next morning by the sound of the telephone. Sleepily I reached out and lifted the old-fashioned Bakelite handset to my ear. A cheery, summery voice belonging to a young girl who wished me good morning, apologised for disturbing me, said what an absolutely wonderful day it was, introduced herself as a television researcher for a programme the name of which I didn't catch but which she clearly assumed that I would watch regularly, and asked me if I would be available during the day to be interviewed. She was so excited that she managed to do all this without breathing. She was so breezy and enthusiastic that I felt exhausted just listening to her. She sounded about sixteen-years-old.

Trying not to sound as completely unenthusiastic as I felt I asked the young caller to repeat the name of the programme.

'Up Your Way!' said the sixteen-year-old. She clearly expected me to know what the programme was about. I didn't. I admitted my ignorance. I have found by bitter experience that it is a mistake for me ever to pretend to know something I don't know. Other people may be able to glide through life, blithely glossing over their ignorance, but I cannot.

'It's a daily magazine programme,' she explained, clearly rather startled by my ignorance. 'It's presented by the Blimpton Twins,' she added, proudly.

'The Blimpton Twins?' I said. I racked my brain. I had never heard of them either. Emily, our mixed tabby cat, crept up my chest and started to lick my nose. This was her subtle way of telling me that she was hungry and wanted her breakfast.

'Josie and Kenneth Blimpton,' persisted the researcher. 'You must have heard of them,' she said. 'The Blimptons. They are the only twins presenting a TV programme!' She paused, waiting for an appreciative response. 'Kenneth and Josie,' she explained when her appeal was met with my silence. She clearly believed that if she repeated their names often enough I would eventually remember having heard of them.

Emily patted the side of my nose gently with her paw and licked my cheek. Her rough tongue tickled and I had to stifle a giggle. I apologised and admitted that I had never heard of 'Up Your Way!' or the Blimpton twins. I sometimes felt very out of touch. I explained that I lived in the country and didn't read many newspapers or magazines.

'Who is it?' whispered Patsy, who had just woken up.

I put my hand over the mouthpiece of the telephone. 'Someone from a TV programme. Have you ever heard of the Blimpton Twins?'

Patsy thought for a moment, started to shake her head and then stopped. 'Are they tennis players?' she asked. 'Did they win the Mixed Doubles at Wimbledon last year?'

'Did they win the Mixed Doubles at Wimbledon last year?' I asked the sixteen-year-old.

'No!' replied the researcher rather indignantly. 'Of course they didn't.' There was a pause. 'At least I don't think they did,' she added, sounding rather uncertain. 'They are very talented,' she explained cautiously.

'Well if they didn't win the Mixed Doubles my wife hasn't heard of them either,' I told her.

Sophie, our mackerel tabby cat, lay down on my arm.

'We want to do an item about Bilbury,' said the sixteen-year-old, brushing off this disappointment.

'Oh,' I said, glumly. 'You read about the village in the *Sunday Planet*?'

'That's right! Said the sixteen-year-old brightly. 'We think the village sounds absolutely marvellous! Rodney can't wait to meet you all.'

'Rodney?'

'Rodney Wetherall. He's our other presenter.'

'I thought the Plimpton twins were the presenters,' I said, now thoroughly confused. I tried to move Sophie because I was already beginning to get cramp in my arm but she didn't want to be moved.

'The Blimpton twins,' said the sixteen-year-old.

'Yes, that's right'

'You said Plimpton.'

'Did I?' Ben, our collie, decided that this was a good moment to lie down on my stomach.

'Yes. It's Blimpton with a B. And they're really very well known!'

'Why aren't the Blimptons coming down to do the interview?'

'Oh Josie and Kenneth don't leave the studios to do interviews,' said the sixteen-year-old, shocked. 'They simply don't have the time. Besides they always attract great crowds wherever they go.'

'Is there room for me?' asked Patsy, gently squeezing her head onto what was left of my chest.

‘No!’ I said. ‘I’m full up!’

‘But it’ll only take a few minutes!’ said the teenager, who clearly thought that I was talking to her.

‘No you’re not!’ said Patsy, ignoring my telephone conversation. She slipped her arm around me.

‘Oh all right then!’ I said, grinning at Patsy, and forgetting to cover the mouthpiece of the telephone.

‘Oh good! Rodney and the crew will be with you at eleven fifteen,’ said the sixteen-year-old. ‘We’re grateful to you for agreeing to take part at such short notice.’

‘Hey! Wait a minute!’ I shouted into the telephone. ‘I wasn’t talking to you!’

But it was too late. The sixteen-year-old had gone. And I was committed to a television interview I didn’t want to do. Gently moving Emily, Sophie, Ben and Patsy from where they lay I slid out of bed, shivered once in the morning chill, walked briskly across the room and opened the curtains. It was raining heavily and a stiff South Westerly wind was dashing the rain against the windows so powerfully that at first I thought it was hailing. The sky was dark and I realised with some sadness that summer was probably over. Every sunny moment would now be a welcome bonus to be savoured and remembered through the dark, damp, windy months to come. I dressed quickly and went downstairs to put the kettle on. Ben, Sophie and Emily, who had all stood patiently by the door while I dressed, overtook me on my way down the stairs and were in the kitchen waiting to be fed.

* * *

By the time I’d finished breakfast half an hour later the storm had, much to my surprise, blown itself out. The sky was still dark but the rain had stopped and the wind had dropped too. I went outside to walk around the house and other buildings to see if any damage had been done. I’d lived in North Devon long enough to know that if you lose a slate or two it’s wise to get them replaced as soon as possible. If you don’t do repairs quickly the next visit from the wind will find the new weakness and whole rows of slates will disappear before you can say ‘insurance claim’.

I was gloomily staring up at the main house roof, trying to decide where the broken slate at my feet had come from, when I heard a car horn tooting outside the front gate. I wandered down the drive expecting to find another car load of tourists demanding entry into Bilbury Grange. There were, indeed, a dozen or so strangers in shorts and anoraks standing around looking rather lost but there was one visitor, standing on the other side of the gates, who looked very out of place and was clearly neither a local nor a tourist. He was wearing a charcoal grey pinstripe suit and carrying a green cardboard folder and a clipboard. Rather incongruously his sharply creased pinstripe trousers were neatly folded inside spotlessly clean, green Wellington boots.

‘Bilbury Grange?’ he enquired politely.

Rather warily I confirmed that he had found the right place. ‘My name is Huxley. Benjamin Huxley. I’m from the Devon and Cornwall Bank,’ he told me. ‘Assistant Regional Farming Accounts Manager,’ he added. He reached into his coat pocket, took out a smartly printed visiting card and handed it through the gate to me. I handed the card back. He didn’t offer to shake hands and when I poked my hand through the gate he didn’t respond. Feeling rather foolish I pulled my hand back.

‘What can I do for you?’ I asked brightly, my confidence inspired by the comforting knowledge that our mortgage was with another bank and that Mr Huxley couldn’t possibly have come to take away our home.

‘I’ve come to see Mr Kennett’s cows,’ said the banker.

I stared at him, puzzled, wondering why a man from the bank had come to Bilbury Grange to see Mr Kennett’s cows. I was particularly puzzled by the fact that the farm belonging to Mr Kennett, Patsy’s father and a local farmer, is some distance away from Bilbury Grange. I made this point to the man from the bank, explaining politely that if he was keen to do a bit of specialist cow spotting he’d be much more likely to have positive results by wandering through the village in the direction of Mr Kennett’s farm.

Mr Huxley looked down at his clipboard. ‘Twenty four Jerseys,’ he said. He examined his clipboard again and then moved closer to me so that he could show me a photocopied map neatly attached to his clipboard. I was impressed by the fact that I knew he was talking about cows and not jumpers. ‘Should be in one of your fields, I think,’ he said, pointing to the map with a neatly manicured finger. He smelt strongly of a cheap and particularly unpleasant aftershave.

I looked at the map. The field he was pointing to was the one where our five sheep lived. But as far as I knew there weren’t any cows there. I had once or twice gone there and found thirty of Colin Jackson’s cows grazing but that had been because Colin had cheekily sneaked his cows in for a little free bed and breakfast. Surreptitiously feeding your cows on someone else’s pastureland is a fairly common trick among some farmers. I didn’t have the faintest idea what was going on and was very keen not to put my foot into whatever scheme Mr Kennett was involved in. It had taken me long enough to persuade him that having a son-in-law who didn’t know how to milk a cow or operate a combine harvester was not quite the end of the world. He had been rather reluctant to accept me when I had been a doctor, treating me as though I had a nasty and very infectious disease. When I’d given up medicine to become a full-time writer I felt that his disapproval had grown even stronger.

‘I don’t always know what’s going on, ‘I said. ‘I leave fields and animals and that sort of thing to my wife. She’s the one with the farming experience.’

‘So shall we go and have a look at these cows then?’ suggested Mr Huxley.

‘Absolutely!’ I agreed. ‘Splendid idea!’ But my enthusiasm was superficial. I’d been on the land just ten minutes earlier when I’d been to say ‘hello’ to our five sheep and I knew that there hadn’t been a single cow in the field at the time. It seemed unlikely that they could have all been playing hide and seek. I took the key out of my pocket and unfastened the gate. When the banker had walked through I locked it again. There was a moan of protest from the other would-be visitors, most of whom were carrying copies of the *Sunday Planet* magazine and most of whom seemed to have recognised me and know exactly who I was.

‘You seem to be very popular,’ said the banker as we walked together up the drive.

‘Notorious is probably a better word,’ I said, desperately thinking of a way to slow things down so that I could get to a telephone, call Mr Kennett and find out what on earth this was all about.

‘Would you like a cup of tea first?’ I asked Mr Huxley, rather desperately. It was the best I could do on the spur of the moment

‘No, thank you,’ he replied.

‘Some hot, buttered toast, perhaps?’ I suggested, putting a hand on his arm and standing still. I was getting more and more desperate and I had an awful suspicion that the desperation was probably showing. ‘Bilbury Grange is just over here...’

‘No, thank you,’ said the banker firmly.

I stopped walking and stood still. ‘Patsy – my wife – has some absolutely scrumptious home-made strawberry jam!’ I told him. ‘It’s particularly marvellous on hot buttered toast!’

Mr Huxley, stopped a few paces further on, turned round and looked at me quite sternly. ‘Shall we go and look at these cows?’ he asked. He examined his watch. ‘I have quite a few other calls to make today,’ he added.

‘What do you need to look at these particular cows for?’ I asked him with a smile. ‘I would have thought that one cow was pretty much like another!’

‘Mr Kennett has a mortgage with us,’ explained the banker. ‘We’ve loaned him money on the understanding that he has 200 cows. It’s my job to check that he has 200 cows.’ He tapped at his clipboard. ‘Twenty four of the 200 should be in this field,’ he explained

‘Ah!’ I said. With reluctance and a heavy heart I walked on, desperately trying to get an excuse ready.

‘I do hope the wind didn’t blow the gate open again,’ I said. ‘Last week the wind blew the gate right open and all Mr Kennett’s cows got out! It took us hours to round them up again.’ I could feel myself blushing. I’ve never been able to lie convincingly but even I realised that this was pretty pathetic stuff.

‘It fortunately doesn’t seem to have happened this time,’ said Mr Huxley.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘The gate appears to have stayed shut,’ said the banker, nodding in the direction of the field. I followed his nod with my eyes and to my absolute astonishment saw that the field was unnaturally well stocked with cows. The field was positively awash with cows. While I stared, Mr Huxley counted.

‘Twenty four,’ he said a few moments later. He took out a black fountain pen, made a neat note on his clipboard and smiled at me for the first time. ‘Thank you for your cooperation.’ He put the cap back on his pen and slipped the pen back into his pocket. ‘Don’t bother to show me out,’ he said, ‘I can find my own way back to the road.’

‘I’ll have to let you out,’ I pointed out, holding the key aloft. ‘Or you won’t be able to get through the gate.’

We walked together back to the entrance to our driveway and I unlocked the gate and waved goodbye to the banker, locking the gate behind him. Then I walked back to the field. I half expected to find that the cows had all disappeared again. They hadn’t I couldn’t take my eyes off the scattering of cows which were happily grazing in our field. A few minutes earlier none of them had been there.

‘Psst!’

I looked around but could see no one.

‘Psst! Has he gone?’

I looked around again. This time I could see Mr Kennett half hiding behind the hedge.

‘Yes! What on earth is going on?’

‘I’ll tell you later. Give me a hand will you? I’ve got to get these cows over to a field behind Dr Brownlow’s place.’ A man in a green oiled jacket and a flat cap was already encouraging the cows to trot back across the field towards the gate. I could just see the bonnet of a tractor parked in the road outside. I recognised the man in the green jacket and flat cap as one of the cowhands who worked with Mr Kennett on his farm.

I helped Patsy’s father persuade his small herd of cows to clamber aboard a couple of large trailers and then slowly shut my gate and watched him and the cowhand drive away two tractors.

‘See you later!’ cried Mr Kennett, waving cheerily. ‘Thanks!’

* * *

When I got back to the house Patsy had already started preparing lunch. Freshly picked vegetables had been washed and chopped and Patsy was now making pastry.

‘Your father seems to be playing some sort of game with his bank,’ I said. ‘He had twenty four cows in our field.’

‘Oh,’ said Patsy, clearly not surprised by this revelation. ‘He’s been doing that for years. I don’t know how he gets away with it. How’s the roof?’

‘Just one slate down,’ I told her. ‘I’ll ring Thumper later and ask him to pop over and stick another one. The first of many, no doubt,’ I added

‘Maybe you should write to *The Times* about it,’ suggested Patsy.

‘About what?’

‘The slate,’ she said. She wrapped a sheet of pastry around a huge mound of chopped carrots, potatoes, leeks, celery and beans.

I didn’t understand. I wasn’t having a very good morning. ‘Sorry? Try that again!’

‘People write to *The Times* when they hear the first cuckoo don’t they?’

‘Yes,’ I agreed.

‘So maybe you should write about the first lost slate of autumn,’ explained Patsy.

I was still too puzzled about what had been going on with the cows to concentrate on slates. ‘Why is your father moving cows around the countryside?’ I asked Patsy, rather impatiently.

‘Because the bank thinks he’s got 200 cows and he hasn’t. He’s always broke. He’s probably only got 100. So he has to move the same cows around into different fields and the chap from the bank who has come to count them thinks he has seen 200 when in fact he’s seen 100 cows but counted them all twice.’

‘Oh,’ I said, feeling very stupid. ‘It seems quite simple when you put it like that.’

‘It is quite simple.’

‘I liked your slate joke.’

‘Thank you.’

‘I think I’ll put the kettle on. Do you fancy a cuppa?’

* * *

By the time that Rodney Wetherall and his television crew from the ‘Up Your Way!’ programme arrived the weather had changed completely. The clouds had gone, the sky was blue and the sun was shining. The cameraman, I was delighted to see, was a man I had worked with before when I had been promoting my first book. He smiled, we exchanged a few reminiscences and he told me what had been happening to the people he’d been working with when I’d seen him last.

‘Would you mind terribly if we filmed you outside?’ asked the producer who had come with Rodney. Rodney turned out to be about seventeen-years-old and very sulky. He had an irritating, squeaky voice. He wore white trousers, a white T-shirt with a cartoon character on the front, white socks, white shoes and a bright red baseball cap.

‘I hate doing interviews outside,’ he complained.

‘Don’t worry,’ said the producer, ‘we won’t have you on camera. We’ll just record your voice later.’ Miss Potterton, the producer, was a stout, sensible looking woman in stout shoes and a stout, tweed suit. She smiled at me conspiratorially as she said this.

‘What do you mean?’ screeched Rodney. ‘I’ve got to be on camera!’ He literally stamped a foot. ‘I’m not doing the interview if I’m not on camera.’

The producer shrugged. ‘O.K.,’ she said.

‘What do you mean?’ demanded Rodney, glaring at her.

‘I mean that’s O.K.,’ said the producer firmly. ‘If you don’t want to ask the questions I’ll ask them.’

Rodney looked as though he might cry.

‘Sorry about this,’ whispered the producer, gently taking my arm and leading me outside. She told me that her name was Avril. The cameraman, the cameraman’s assistant, the sound man and two other people whose jobs were undefined had quickly settled down in the kitchen. Patsy had made them tea (using some plastic beakers she’d recently bought to supplement our four cups) and her offer to prepare them a plate of sandwiches had been greeted with great joy, though that joy would probably diminish when they discovered that we were vegetarian and that they weren’t going to get their usual favourite bacon sandwiches.

‘Rodney may seem a bit over-sensitive,’ explained Avril, ‘but in fact he’s just a complete prat so don’t take any notice of him. If I have anything to do with things we’re dumping him at the end of the series anyway. Now, where do you think would be a good spot for us to film you? It would be nice to have some of those rolling Devon hills behind you, wouldn’t it? Just to give the viewers a taste of Bilbury Country!’

I suggested that we film by the gate into the field where our sheep live. When I showed her the spot I had in mind Avril thought that this was an excellent suggestion and wisely recommended that we film straight away before the sun went in, the wind came back and the crew became so firmly ensconced in the Bilbury Grange kitchen that they were impossible to drag to work.

She strode back to the house to collect as many of them as she could while I waited by the gate and watched the swallows gathering on the branches of an old oak tree. It seemed early for them to be leaving but perhaps they knew something I didn't about the onset of autumn. When the swallows leave I always feel a little sad. I'm not sure whether this is because I'm simply sorry to see them go or whether it is because I know that their departure marks the end of summer.

The producer and the crew arrived a few minutes later with Rodney struggling breathlessly behind them. The short walk from the house seemed to have quite tired him out and he was wheezing noisily.

We had completed several minutes of filming (with Rodney, who had clearly withdrawn his objection to filming outside and off camera, asking the questions in a strangely, uncomfortable and rather staccato style) when the sound man suddenly removed his ear phones and threw down the long, grey, wool-covered microphone he was using to record Rodney's questions and my answers.

'What's the matter, dear?' asked Avril, who seemed to have inexhaustible resources of patience.

'There's too much background noise,' said the sound man.

'Noise, dear?' said the producer. She looked around. 'What noise?'

We all kept perfectly still for a few moments and strained our ears to try to pick out the noise that had caused the sound man so much distress.

'Butterflies?' asked Avril. 'Is it the butterflies fluttering their little wings?'

'Very funny!' snarled the sound man, who clearly didn't think it was funny at all.

'Clouds?' asked the producer. 'Are the clouds making too much noise for you?'

'It's that bloody tractor!' said the sound man, pointing to a distant field. He was sitting cross legged on the grass surrounded by cables and machines with dials and indicator lights. We all looked in the direction he was pointing. I could just make out the shape of a tractor in one of Colin Jackson's fields. Colin Jackson was clearly taking advantage of the change in the weather to do a little hay making. When I concentrated really hard I could just hear the sound his tractor was making.

'Well, we can't do anything about it, dear, so you'll just have to put up with it!' said Avril firmly.

'I can't,' said the sound man firmly and defiantly. He stood up. 'I'm going to get him to stop his tractor while we do this interview.'

'He must be two miles away!' said Avril the producer.

'I don't care,' said the sound man, though I detected a touch of uncertainty in his voice now that he knew how far he had to walk to reach the driver of the wretched tractor.

I cleared my throat to attract attention. 'I don't think you should tell Mr Jackson he can't drive his tractor simply because we're making a television programme,' I told him quietly.

'Why not?' he demanded, rather aggressively.

'Because Mr Jackson carries a double barrelled shotgun in his tractor cab,' I told him. 'Yesterday he took a pot shot at a party of tourists who were having a picnic in the middle of one of his fields. I'm told that he missed and so I don't expect he's in a particularly good mood today.'

The sound man swallowed noisily. 'Ah,' he said, sitting back down again. He thought for a moment. 'I suppose we could always just regard it as another one of those country sounds.'

'No one will worry about it dear,' said the producer, comfortingly.

'I'll go and tell him he's got to stop,' squeaked Rodney, clambering over the gate before anyone could stop him. He turned back to face us all. 'I don't know why you're all so scared of some stupid old farmer. I don't care if he does have a gun. He won't dare use it on ME.'

I turned to Avril. 'Aren't you going to stop him?'

'Rodney! Come here!' called the producer, without much enthusiasm. Rodney, by now twenty yards away, didn't even look back. 'There,' she said. 'I did try didn't I?'

The others all agreed that Avril had done her very best to stop Rodney putting his life in danger.

'I'll carry on with the interview,' said the producer. 'We can always glue Rodney's questions on when we get back to the studio.'

'Or you could re-record his questions and just get rid of his voice completely,' suggested the cameraman.

'Brian!' said the producer. 'What a naughty notion!' She grinned at him. 'But what an absolutely wonderful idea!' she whispered.

We had finished the interview and the cameraman and soundman were both packing up their equipment when

Rodney reappeared. He had lost his hat, was covered in mud and the tear stain streaks across his muddy face were clear evidence that he had been crying a lot.

‘Oh dear, poor, poor Rodney,’ said the producer. Her over-solicitous sympathy did not sound particularly convincing though Rodney did not seem intelligent enough to realise this. ‘Whatever happened to you!’ she asked. She caught me looking at her and winked.

‘That horrible farmer chased me all the way back down the hill and right through a very muddy stream,’ moaned Rodney. ‘I lost my cap! And just look at my trousers!’

‘Did the nasty man shoot at you?’ asked the cameraman.

Rodney started to cry again. ‘I don’t think so,’ he said. ‘I’m not sure.’

‘Never mind, dear,’ said the producer. ‘We’ve done the interview now.’ She patted him on the head. ‘If you’re a good boy I’ll buy you an ice cream when we see a shop.’

We all said goodbye to one another as though we’d all been the best of friends for years. The TV crew drove off to interview someone else and I went back to the house for lunch.

While I washed my hands and salivated (the smell from the Aga cooker was a tantalising treat for the taste buds – it is only when vegetables are overcooked that they smell so unpleasant) Patsy took heated plates out of the spare oven and put them on the table. ‘Would you like a glass of wine with your lunch?’ she asked.

‘That’s a good idea,’ I said, heading for the cellar door.

‘I put a bottle of my dad’s parsnip wine in the fridge,’ Patsy told me. ‘It should be just right by now.’

I opened the fridge and took out the chilled wine.

‘Dad brought it round as a ‘thank you’,’ she said. ‘He said you handled that banker well. He was proud of you.’

I felt really pleased with myself.

* * *

CHAPTER FIVE

To my daily astonishment the steady stream of tourists coming to Bilbury was increasing rather than slowing down. In my heart I had been convinced that the village's notoriety would have a short lived fascination for the general public. But it was gradually becoming apparent that I was quite wrong about this. The lane outside our front gate, normally deserted apart from the occasional tractor, or the odd rabbit sunning itself, was packed with tourists: most of them still in their coaches or motor cars. Although one or two farmers with spare fields on the outskirts of the village had opened up 'Bilbury Village Car Parks' it had soon become abundantly clear that the vast majority of the tourists simply were not prepared to have to walk to see what they had come to see. They ignored the car parks on the outskirts of the village and instead drove in long queues to the car parks which were nearest to the village green. Several magazines and newspapers had published maps of the village and most had also included directions on how to get to the most conveniently situated car parks.

Within days just about everyone in the village found at least one way to take advantage of the number of tourists, and the amount of money pouring into Bilbury.

Mr Lovelace and his wife had surprised just about everyone by opening a restaurant called 'The Captain's Table; Deidre Mulberry had opened a small tea rooms called 'The Bilbury Cafe' in her garden; and Maisie Falmouth had turned her living room into a tiny restaurant called 'The Lobster Pot'.

Mr and Mrs Knowlson were serving cream teas on their lawn and Mrs Hewitt had quickly put up a sign offering 'Genuine Hand Made Devon Shawls' for sale, although after the first day or two she found that even her nimble fingers could not keep up with the demand. For a while she coped by hiring Thumper's grandmother to make shawls for her but that solution quickly proved equally inadequate and she eventually solved her shortfall by finding a supplier in Leeds who imported the shawls from Turkey and had the incriminating labels removed in a warehouse in France.

But I was quite convinced that Olive Robinson, Thumper's much loved aunt who lives at Daffodil Cottage, was the most enterprising of all Bilburians.

Miss Robinson had a small handwritten notice on her garden gate inviting tourists to take a look inside her 'typical Bilbury cottage' and to sample her homemade biscuits and genuine old fashioned lime and lemon squash. Judging by the number of cars parked outside her cottage she did a roaring trade.

Business was so good, in fact, that like Mrs Hewitt, who ended up importing shawls from Turkey, Miss Robinson soon found that she couldn't bake biscuits fast enough to satisfy the tourists' voracious appetites. I used to visit her three times a week with a basket of vegetables from our garden and I popped into her back kitchen one morning to be handed a cellophane wrapped packet of biscuits.

'Can you open that darned packet for me?' she asked.

After a bit of struggle I eventually managed to break through the shrink wrapped cellophane. Slightly puzzled as to why the best baker of biscuits I had ever met should be buying biscuits this way, I carefully handed her the opened packet. Miss Robinson then poured half of the biscuits onto an old, rather chipped plate and popped the remainder into a slightly creased brown paper bag. 'They always like to buy a few to take away with them,' she whispered, nodding her head in the direction of the living room where a family of four from Beckenham were studying her family photograph album and, no doubt, wondering what would be an acceptable donation to slip into the small wooden box labelled 'Daffodil Cottage Preservation Fund: Voluntary Contributions Very Gratefully Received' that Miss Robinson had so carefully positioned on the small table in the centre of the room. The word 'Very' was underlined three times in black ink and the box itself, which had previously served as a collecting receptacle in Bilbury Church, had an official look about it which encouraged those who might otherwise feel inclined to resist Miss Robinson's invitation to dig deeply into their wallets. The slit at the top of the box had been carefully narrowed with packing tape so that it would only accept paper donations.

Despite the mild subterfuge with the packeted biscuits Miss Robinson did keep on baking her renowned and genuinely homemade comestibles. Her cottage always smelt of cooking because her oven was constantly full of baking biscuits which she kept for her favourite relatives and friends. As a close friend of Thumper's she regarded me as 'family'.

One Thursday morning I was drinking tea, wondering why on earth Miss Robinson had half filled her living room with a huge sideboard and trying hard not to devour an entire plateful of meltin-the-mouth (genuine) homemade ginger and treacle biscuits when there was a firm knock on the door.

Miss Robinson peeped through the lace curtains at her front window. A huge black Mercedes was parked right outside her front door. It was left hand drive. 'They're starting early today,' Thumper's aunt murmured, snatching a glance at the wooden framed clock on her mantelpiece. 'Pop into the scullery would you, love?' she added. As she spoke she picked up the plateful of genuinely homemade biscuits from which I had been eating and thrust it into my hand and then, as an afterthought, handed me the basket of vegetables which I'd brought her too. She then shooed me out of the living room.

A few moments later, through a crack in the door I watched Miss Robinson open the door and welcome into her home a tall, well-built, smartly-dressed, middle-aged man and a tall, elegantlydressed, slim, blonde woman. Miss Robinson, who is an extremely fit seventy-year-old, a history graduate and an international authority on Spode china, suddenly seemed to have aged at least twenty years and to have acquired a degenerative joint disease. She hobbled into the centre of her living room and waved an arm in the direction of a pair of deep and comfortable armchairs.

'Sit yourselves down!' she said. 'Would you like some of my homemade biscuits?' She smoothed out her pinafore. 'You timed your visit well! I've just finished baking a fresh batch.' She deserved an Oscar. She normally spoke in an accent which reeked of Rodean and Oxford but when talking to tourists she acquired a very passable Devonshire accent.

'Zank you!' said the German. 'Zat would of you very – how you say – nice be.'

'My pleasure, I'm sure!' said Miss Robinson. 'It's a real pleasure to welcome you to Bilbury. We don't see many people from foreign parts.' I felt myself blushing for Miss Robinson. Ever since the wretched George Nympton article, the entire village had been overrun by foreigners. Most of the local children now knew how to say 'Hello', 'Turn left at the church', 'My mum has a spare room to let,' and 'Can you spare a few pennies for an ice cream' in at least half a dozen European languages. Patchy had told me that he knew of seven children under the age of twelve who had opened their own bank accounts. Miss Robinson shuffled towards the scullery and I backed away from the door so as to make sure that I remained well out of sight.

'How can you do it?' I whispered, stifling a giggle.

'Where are those other biscuits?' demanded Thumper's aunt, rummaging around in the cupboard underneath her sink. Once she'd found the packet she was looking for she handed it to me to open while she switched on the grill. Although the invitation on her gate suggested that tourists might expect a guided tour of 'Daffodil Cottage' she never allowed them into any room other than the living room. This was probably just as well for they would have probably been surprised to see that the room she referred to as the scullery was equipped with a very modern cooker with eye level grill, a washing machine, a tumble drier, a dishwasher and a large fridge-freezer while her bedroom had a built-in shower unit and a portable television set.

As soon as the packet was open Miss Robinson spread the biscuits out on the grill. She then opened the door back to the living room and slipped effortlessly back into character; hobbling along and bravely ignoring the pain of her arthritic hips, knees and spine. I decided that an Oscar would be grotesquely insufficient recognition.

'I've just put the biscuits out to cool,' she told her visitors from across the Channel. 'They won't be but a moment.' She hobbled across to the closed oak cupboard inside which she kept her 24 inch colour television set and, with some difficulty, picked a huge photograph album off the top of the cupboard. 'Would you like to look at my family album while you wait?'

'Zank you! Zat would being too kindly!' said the German. He stood so that he could bow. I was slightly disappointed that he did not click his heels.

'Zank you!' added the tall, slender blonde, whose English did not appear to be quite as good as her husband's.

'Would you like some of my homemade, traditional lime and lemonade with your biscuits?' asked Miss Robinson, after she had opened the photograph album in front of her visitors. To make room for the album she had to move the small wooden box with the 'Daffodil Cottage Preservation Fund: Voluntary Contributions Very Gratefully Received' notice on it. But I noticed that even though the small table was now rather overcrowded she did not move the box away.

'Oh ya! Zank you!' said the German, grinning broadly.

'I use a recipe that has been handed down for three generations!' said Miss Robinson proudly, before shuffling back towards the scullery door. Once through the door she took down a bottle of lime juice and a bottle of lemonade and poured liberal quantities of each into an old glass jug. She then filled up the jug with water.

'Do you want ice?' I asked her, heading for the freezer.

'Ice? Where would an old crone like me get ice?' hissed Miss Robinson, giving me a black look. She pulled out the grill pan. The biscuits were now looking a little burnt on top. Using a wooden spatula she put half the biscuits onto a plate and the other half into a brown paper bag. Carrying the plate in one hand and the jug in the other she hobbled through to the living room. Moments later she returned to fetch two small side plates, two drinking glasses and the paper bag full of biscuits. I thought that the paper bag was a brilliant touch. You would have to have a hard heart to leave Daffodil Cottage with a paper bag full of Miss Robinson's biscuits without first slipping a donation into her wooden box.

‘Zat is a very fine cabinet!’ said the German, using a half nibbled biscuit to point to the huge sideboard, the unexpected arrival of which had so surprised me earlier.

Miss Robinson did not reply to this compliment immediately but merely gave the admired piece of furniture a loving rub with the edge of her pinafore. ‘It’s been in the family for generations!’ she said lovingly, at last.

‘It is very old?’

‘Oh yes! Very, very old! It was made for my great, great, great, great grandfather by a very skilled craftsman.’

The German coughed. ‘Er, are you knowing of his name?’

‘Oh it was Robinson – the same as mine,’ replied Thumper’s aunt with a sweet smile.

‘Ze man who made ze cabinet was Robinson?’

Miss Robinson feigned a look of puzzlement. ‘No. My great, great, great, great grandfather was called Robinson.’

‘And ze man who made ze cabinet?’

‘Oh, that was a Mr Chipping I think,’ said Miss Robinson. ‘The bill is in the back of our family album. My grandfather said he thought it might be valuable one day and so he kept the bill.’

With visibly trembling fingers the German gently leafed through the photo album. Eventually he found a thick piece of parchment type paper.

‘Do have another biscuit!’ said Miss Robinson.

Neither of her visitors seemed to have heard her. The German man pointed to the piece of parchment and his wife studied the paper carefully. The German woman then said something I did not understand. The German man spoke back in a slightly frenzied whisper. Since it had been reasonable to assume that she had been speaking German it was now equally reasonable to assume that he too was speaking German. My skill in that language is limited and although I can order a coffee with some confidence, I am rather at a loss when faced with more complex conversation and I could not understand anything he said. I was, however, aware that the name ‘Chippingdale’ occurred several times.

‘You are not minding if we at your cabinet look?’ said the German at last, standing up and putting down his half-eaten biscuit

Before Thumper’s aunt could respond the German and his wife were peering and poking at the sideboard with thinly disguised greed. The German looked at his wife questioningly. She nodded.

‘I am liking this cabinet very much,’ said the German. ‘You are selling it to me, no?’

‘Oh, no!’ said Thumper’s aunt. ‘I couldn’t possibly part with it. Not with it having been in the family for so many generations.’

I couldn’t listen to any more without my giggling turning into guffaws. I quietly opened the back door and tiptoed out into Miss Robinson’s back garden. Fifteen minutes later, after I had heard the front door shut and the Mercedes engine purr into life I went back into the cottage. Miss Robinson was in the scullery and already on the telephone.

‘Thumper, it’s me,’ said Miss Robinson. She saw me and winked. ‘I’ve sent a German round to see you. He wants someone to transport the sideboard over to Germany. When you’ve fixed that up would you ask Patchy to get me another one – and I’ll need another one of those nice old-fashioned parchment bills too.’

* * *

CHAPTER SIX

Despite the widespread enthusiasm for relieving the tourists of their money I wasn't the only one who expected the tourist invasion of Bilbury to be a short-lived phenomenon. We didn't really imagine that a single magazine article could produce anything other than a temporary, fleeting interest in our village. But that original article was merely the starting point. Within a short space of time a dozen other newspapers had carried stories about 'Britain's healthiest village', there had been numerous television and radio journalists wandering around interviewing all the locals they could find and coach companies from as far away as Bristol, Birmingham and London had started running day trips to Bilbury Country.

The weather didn't help those of us who selfishly wanted Bilbury to remain private and peaceful. Through an ironic twist of fate the first few weeks of autumn were proving to be surprisingly sunny and warm and Bilbury looked at its best and most attractive. I was delighted to see that the swallows, thoroughly confused by the weather, had decided to hang around in Bilbury for a little while longer.

Every road into and out of the village was blocked by cars and coaches. Several enterprising farmers had already turned fields into car parks and were making more money sitting in a deckchair for a day than they could hope to make in a month of hard work.

When he had opened his first al fresco car park Colin Jackson had charged five pence per vehicle. By Tuesday the price had risen to ten pence. By Thursday it was twenty pence. But Colin is not slow to find ways to take advantage of any situation and on Friday he erected a huge, hand-painted notice telling motorists that they could park their cars free of charge. The small print, painted so small that it could only be read at the last moment, informed car drivers that although cars were free there would be a charge of twenty pence for every occupant in each car. Colin had worked out that the average car contained three and a half people and that this pricing structure would, therefore, give him an income of seventy pence per vehicle – considerably more, I suspect, than even he would have the courage to charge.

P.C. Wren, the village constable, was working from dawn to dusk and there were unprecedented (and I have to admit unsubstantiated) rumours that a Police Inspector from Barnstaple had been seen in the village.

Outside the gates of Bilbury Grange, the village of Bilbury was buzzing with tourists; all anxious to spot the homes and characters they had read about or seen on television. From the Grange itself we could see nothing of this invasion but we could hear the steady, unceasing hum of their cheerful chattering. In order to stop tourists swarming into the garden we still had to keep the main gates to Bilbury Grange permanently locked.

Outside the gates there was a constant whirring and clicking of cameras and unnecessary popping of their flashbulbs (unnecessary because the sun was bright) as the visitors sought mementoes of their visit.

Mr Parfitt, the Bilbury Grange gardener, back from his honeymoon and much confused by what was going on in the village, would have preferred to spend all his time preparing compost and looking after plants but he was now spending several hours a day clearing sandwich wrappers and soft drink cans out of the shrubbery.

Even though the invasion of Bilbury was still quite young we were already discovering that many tourists like to leave souvenirs behind them as well as taking things with them. The hedgerows and lanes of Bilbury were bright with litter. Many of the visitors seemed to feel that by throwing their rubbish over a hedge or wall they were disposing of it tidily. Each day we managed to take enough rubbish from the part of our garden that bordered the lane to fill a rubbish sack.

When Mr Parfitt had first arrived at Bilbury Grange and asked to be taken on as the gardener, Patsy and I had explained that we couldn't afford to pay him a proper wage. We had, however, offered to give him a week's trial, to pay him £5 a week, to let him make himself a home in the stables and to share with him the profits we made from selling produce to local hotels, restaurants and pubs.

Now that he was married, Mr Parfitt didn't need a home in our stables but he had insisted that he was more than happy to continue with the existing relationship. Patsy and I had suggested that he should also take whatever garden produce he and Miss Hargreaves needed for themselves and he'd been delighted with that slight amendment to our existing arrangement.

One of Mr Parfitt's new responsibilities was to look after the gate at the end of the driveway to the house. We didn't dare leave the gate unlocked, and so any guests or tradesmen arriving had to be let in. Even the postman had to ring the bell at the gate so that we could go and collect the mail from him.

* * *

Although we really couldn't afford it Patsy and I had decided that it was time we bought a new carpet for the living room. Bare boards are all very well but they're a bit chilly and I was getting fed up with having to pick splinters out of my bare feet.

We were very broke and I daresay it would have been cheaper to buy myself a pair of slippers but a publisher had already bought my next book and so we had decided to celebrate the forthcoming royalties by treating ourselves to a stretch of carpet that Kelvin Johnson assured us would be warm, hard-wearing, practical and very cheap. For two weeks now I had been waiting for a letter from my publishers about what had started out as my first novel but had ended up as a book about the goings on in Bilbury. I had a contract for the book, which I had delivered, and I was now waiting to hear what the publishers thought of it. Each day we had leapt at the morning post with great expectations. But so far each day's post had brought nothing but disappointment.

Publishers generally pay authors an advance against their expected royalties and the advance is usually divided into thirds. One third is paid when the book is published, one third is paid on delivery of an accepted manuscript and one third is paid at the time of signing the initial contract. We had long since spent the one third I had received when I had signed the contract. Since I had completed the book I would get the second third of the advance money as soon as the book was delivered and accepted. The manuscript had been delivered and I was now waiting for a letter confirming that it had been accepted. It was, therefore, the second part of the advance money that we were counting on.

Kelvin, who lived in Bideford and whose sister Doreen Johnson used to be Dr Brownlow's receptionist and later worked as my receptionist too when I practised as a general practitioner on my own account, runs a carpet showroom from the back of a very elderly van. I don't know where Kelvin gets his carpets from but he has an excellent reputation locally for providing good value for money. He is also extremely convenient, of course. Instead of visiting Barnstaple or Exeter one can choose a new carpet without leaving home. And since Kelvin lays the carpets himself you can sometimes have the carpet laid there and then!

When Mr Parfitt appeared to tell me that Kelvin the carpet salesman had arrived, I offered to help Kelvin unload the roll of carpet he had brought with him.

'Don't you bother yourself, doctor,' said Kelvin. 'I prefer to work alone. I can get on with things much quicker that way. Shall I come and tell you when I've finished so that you can see if you like it?'

'I'm sure it will be absolutely fine!' I told him. I took out my wallet and paid him with the cash I'd taken out of the bank the previous day for that very purpose. Like most other local tradesmen Kelvin preferred to be paid in cash.

'Oh, and would you make sure that the back of your van is kept shut?' I asked him. 'Emily – one of our cats – has a tendency to climb into cars and vans and fall asleep. I don't want her to fall asleep in the back of your van, wake up in Bideford and get lost!'

'Don't you worry!' said Kelvin. 'I'll keep the van doors shut and I'll check everything out before I leave.'

I popped back down to the front gate to tell Mr Parfitt that now that Kelvin had arrived he could abandon his guard duty and get back to his compost bins if he wanted. He was delighted.

The tooting of car horns outside was getting worse and I guessed that Hubert Knowles was out causing trouble again. I had seen him in the Duck and Puddle two days earlier and he had rather gleefully confessed that he got great pleasure out of driving round and round the village as slowly as he possibly could. 'I had 57 cars behind me this morning,' he told me proudly. 'All pooping their hooters and anxious to pass me!' Hubert didn't like tourists. When he had eventually pulled onto the Duck and Puddle forecourt he had sat in his tractor cab for ten minutes counting the vehicles as they drove past and waving inanely at the furious drivers and passengers. When I saw him again the following day he told me that he'd managed to beat his record by building up a queue of 65 cars, three caravans and four lorries.

Later that day as Patsy and I sprawled on the grass, enjoying our lunch and another glass of Mr Kennett's excellent homemade wine I couldn't help thinking how lucky I was to have found such a beautiful village and to have acquired such good friends. Patsy and I didn't have much money and sometimes the size of our overdraft and the size of the mortgage on Bilbury Grange worried us both a little but in my heart I felt fortunate; I felt that the fates had been kinder to me than I could have possibly hoped them to be.

I had made the decision to stay in Bilbury even though I had lost my job as a general practitioner but I would never have found Bilbury at all if I hadn't seen Dr Brownlow's small advertisement for an assistant. And if someone else had seen the advertisement before I had then I would have probably never got the job, met Patsy or found Bilbury Grange!

After lunch, Patsy walked down to the walled garden and I walked through the courtyard and approached the back door to go back to work. As I did so I spotted a stranger peering in through the kitchen window. He was wearing a heavy, brown suit and a small, brown, trilby hat and didn't look at all like a tourist. It was the second time in a week that a stranger in a suit had visited Bilbury Grange and I didn't like it one little bit. This stranger didn't look like a banker but I had lived in Bilbury long enough to know that suits usually spell trouble.

* * *

CHAPTER SEVEN

‘Good morning!’ said the stranger, cheerfully, when he saw me approaching. He was about five foot ten inches tall, and more than slightly overweight. His face was heavily lined and his nose and cheeks had the reddish hue of an accomplished drinker. He didn’t seem to be in the slightest bit embarrassed about being found peering into someone else’s kitchen window.

He pushed his trilby hat backwards, so that it was perched rather comically on the back of his head, and grinned at me. ‘Is this Bilbury Grange?’

I confirmed that he was indeed looking through the windows of Bilbury Grange. Ben, who was as always by my side, growled at him.

‘Are you the owner? The doctor?’

‘That’s right,’ I said. I put the tray of plates which I was carrying down on the back doorstep. ‘And who are you? How did you get here and what do you want?’ I was getting rather fed up with strangers wandering around my home. I was beginning to think that Patsy and I would soon have to start locking our back door during the daytime even when we were in the garden. I wondered if the stranger would have wandered into the house uninvited if I hadn’t turned up when I had.

‘The name is Ladd,’ said the stranger unabashed. ‘Friends call me Jack.’ He reached into his inside jacket pocket and took out a battered leather wallet. From inside the wallet he took a small piece of rather dog-eared card which he handed to me. The words ‘Sunday Globe’ were printed on the card in red. Underneath them was the name Jack Ladd and underneath that the single word ‘Reporter’.

‘You’re from the *Sunday Globe*?’

‘Britain’s biggest and brightest Sunday paper!’ said the reporter, as though automatically reciting an advertising slogan.

‘I think the newspapers have done enough damage to our village.’

‘Damage?’ said Mr Ladd, giving every appearance of being genuinely shocked and startled by the question. ‘The publicity your village has had is worth thousands. You can’t buy that sort of publicity!’

‘I don’t think we wanted to buy any publicity,’ I told him.

The reporter frowned, clearly genuinely puzzled by this, and held out his hand. ‘Could I have it back, please?’

For a moment or two I didn’t realize what he meant. ‘I beg your pardon?’ I said.

‘My card.’ In explanation the reporter pointed to the visiting card I was still holding. ‘It’s the only one I’ve got left,’ he apologised.

I handed him back the dog-eared visiting card and he carefully put it back inside his wallet.

‘To be perfectly honest, doctor, I would have thought you’d have been delighted with the publicity you’ve been getting!’ he said. ‘It’s bound to help you sell more books.’

‘I doubt it,’ I said drily. ‘How did you get in?’ I asked him again. ‘The gates are locked.’

‘I came over the fields,’ explained the reporter. He reached down and brushed bits of grass and other debris from his trousers. ‘Wonderful views by the way,’ he said.

‘The gates are locked so that we can have some privacy,’ I told him. ‘I’d be grateful if you would leave us alone.’

‘No offence, doctor,’ said Mr Ladd. ‘Just doing my job. The editor wants me to write a few follow-up pieces about the village. Since you’re probably the best-known inhabitant I thought I’d start with you.’

‘I’m afraid I don’t have anything to say,’ I told him, bending down and picking up the tray.

With some difficulty I opened the back door while still holding the tray. I then stepped into the kitchen.

‘I don’t suppose you know of a pub or farmhouse where I could rent a room, do you?’

I put the tray of dirty plates down on the draining board and turned round and faced the back door. Mr Ladd was standing in the doorway looking around.

‘I need somewhere to stay for a while,’ he explained. ‘The Duck and Puddle is full,’ he told me. He smiled and shrugged. ‘Money is no problem,’ he added. ‘The paper is paying.’

‘I’m afraid I can’t help you,’ I said.

‘Ah well, never mind,’ the reporter shrugged. ‘Thanks anyway. I’ll find my own way out.’ He turned and started to walk away. ‘See you again!’ he shouted, over his shoulder.

As Mr Ladd walked away I felt guilty. I felt that I had perhaps behaved rather rudely. He seemed a decent enough fellow and he was, after all, only doing his job. I nearly called him back and invited him to join us for a drink. I very nearly told him that we had a flat he could rent. But I didn’t. I did nothing. Except to pop into the living room to check on the new carpet that Kelvin Johnson had laid. It looked extremely smart. Kelvin had carefully replaced all the furniture in exactly the position it had been before he had arrived and the room was spotlessly clean with no signs of any mess. One of the reasons why Kelvin gets so much work and is so popular in the villages of North Devon is that he always cleans up after himself.

I then put down fresh food for Emily and Sophie, and popped down into the cellar where I picked up a bottle of cold home-made lemonade. When I got back up to the kitchen Sophie was eating the food I had put down but there was no sign of Emily. This didn't surprise or worry me since I assumed that Emily was simply out hunting in the garden.

* * *

I was in the garden when the postman arrived. He called me to the gate, greeted me with a big cheery smile and handed me a large rectangular package. I knew immediately what it was. I tried to smile back, thanked him and carried the package into the kitchen where I put it down on the table and stared at it glumly.

'What's that?' asked Patsy.

'It's from my publishers,' I told her. I hadn't even needed to look at the return address printed at the top of the label to know that. A book manuscript has a very distinct feel to it.

'Oh, that's wonderful!' said Patsy. 'At last!' she said. 'What have they got to say?'

'They've sent the book back,' I told her, flatly.

Patsy looked at me and then looked at the package and frowned. 'How do you know?' she asked me. 'You haven't opened it yet!'

'It's exactly the same sized parcel as the one I sent them,' I explained.

'But maybe they've just sent it back with some suggested alterations?'

I shook my head. 'They're not going to publish it,' I told her firmly. I don't know how I knew but instinctively I knew. I suppose my subconscious mind had reasoned that if they were still planning to publish the book they would have probably rung first before sending it back. I reached and pulled the package towards me. I stared at it for a few more moments and then took out my pocket knife, cut through the tape which held it together and opened the package. The bulk of the parcel was taken up with the typed pages I had sent them so long ago. On top of the typescript sat a neatly folded letter. I picked up the letter and opened it.

'What does it say?' asked Patsy almost immediately.

The letter informed me that the editor who had bought my book, and who had been so full of enthusiasm, had left the company and that subsequently a decision had been made to concentrate entirely on books on cookery and romantic fiction. There was, the writer said, therefore no room for my book on their list. They were returning the typescript to me so that I could offer it elsewhere. There were then a couple of sentences about being sorry to disappoint me and hoping that I understood that the state of the market was a difficult one. Finally, there were a couple of lines in which they assured me that they would not be seeking the return of the first third of the advance money – which they had already paid and I had already spent – but that they would not, of course, be paying the two thirds of the advance which they had not paid.

I felt as though my world had collapsed.

'I'm sorry darling,' whispered Patsy, who had been reading the letter over my shoulder and who knew exactly how I felt. She put her arms around my neck and hugged me.

I knew that the most sensible thing to do would have been to pack it up and send it off to another publisher. There are hundreds of publishers in London. But I didn't want to do that. It is often said that authors regard their books as their babies and this is absolutely true. I didn't want to expose my new baby to the dispassionate stares of strangers.

* * *

By evening time there was still no sign of Emily. I fed Ben and then put some fresh food and water down for Emily and Sophie and called to them to tell them that their meal was ready. Sophie turned up almost immediately but didn't seem particularly hungry. She miaowed a lot and rubbed her head against my legs as though she was trying to tell me something. I tickled her behind her ears and apologised to her for having had so many visitors in the garden. Neither she nor Emily like visitors. I guessed that Emily had probably found herself a nice hiding place in the airing cupboard or on top of my sweaters.

Emily is never slow to let me know that she is upset with me. If I have dared to go away for a day and leave her without a lap or shoulder to sit on she will refuse to have anything to do with me for exactly sixty minutes after my return home. She will then suddenly appear and make a terrific fuss of me. Emily usually sits on my lap or on the back of my neck while I'm writing whether I am in the house or in my little summerhouse hideaway.

But there was no reason for Emily to be upset with me today and so I decided to go and find her. I was beginning to feel just a little bit worried.

'You can come out now!' I called to her, approaching all her usual downstairs hiding places in turn. But she didn't appear.

'I'll just pop down to the summerhouse,' I said to Patsy, trying not to show that I felt worried. 'Maybe she's gone down there for a bit of peace and quiet.'

'I'll look for her upstairs,' said Patsy.

'Check the airing cupboard and my sweater cupboard,' I suggested quite unnecessarily. Patsy knew as well as I did where Emily liked to hide.

I set off in the darkness for the summerhouse, scuffing my feet along the ground so that I wouldn't trip up over any stones and holding my hands out in front of me to push branches of bushes and trees away from my face. I couldn't see anything but that didn't matter because I knew our paths well. I kept calling and whistling and expected Emily to appear at any moment, purring with happiness and pleased to see me.

But Emily didn't appear. There was no sign of her and I was by now beginning to get very worried. When I got back to the house Patsy hadn't found her either. There was nothing else we could do and so, hoping desperately that Emily was out hunting somewhere and would just 'turn up' when she was ready to come home, Patsy and I went to bed.

* * *

I had, during the day, decided that I wanted to publish my book myself. This was, of course, complete madness. I knew nothing at all about publishing and I didn't have the faintest idea where the money would come from to pay for a publishing venture. But it was something I wanted to do. I knew that throughout history numerous authors had published their own books.

I don't know what was pushing me along this mad route – we had no stable income at all apart from the sale of produce from our garden and my local newspaper articles – but it was something I felt I wanted to do.

'Do you mind if I publish my book myself,' I said to Patsy as we lay in bed that night.

'Of course not!' said Patsy. 'Why should I mind? It sounds very exciting! Can I help?'

'I won't be able to do it without you,' I told her.

She frowned. 'If you are going to be a publisher you won't have to wear a suit, will you?'

'No.'

'And you won't have to go to London every week?'

'I'll have to go to London even less than I do now.'

'Wonderful!' said Patsy. 'Then I'm happy.'

* * *

Neither of us slept well. We lay there, alternately dozing and listening for the sound of tiny footsteps on the stairs.

Every time Sophie or Ben moved or made a sound I sat bolt upright desperately looking to see if Emily had joined them on top of the bedclothes. Towards morning I finally fell asleep. I woke at about six thirty and the moment I awoke I immediately looked for her. But Emily wasn't there and by now I knew that something terrible must have happened to her.

* * *

CHAPTER EIGHT

Patsy and I spent the morning searching the house and gardens to see if we could find Emily anywhere. We thought that she might have hurt herself and crawled into a cupboard or under a bush as cats usually do when they are in pain. We searched the summer-house, the greenhouse and the stables; we searched the shrubbery at the front of the house, the walled vegetable garden and the field where the sheep live. Sophie and Ben, sad-eyed and quiet, searched with us. But there was absolutely no sign of Emily anywhere.

Late the night before I had a terrible thought. I had suppressed it for hours. But the thought would no longer stay suppressed.

'Do you think she could have got into the carpet van?' I asked Patsy.

Patsy looked at me in horror.

'I asked Kelvin to check his van before he left,' I said. 'But you know what Emily is like. She might have found somewhere really comfortable among all those rolls of carpet.'

'Ring him!' said Patsy immediately.

I rang Kelvin Johnson. He said he hadn't seen Emily leap out of the back of his van but that he was perfectly happy for me to visit his home and see if I could see any sign of her. So, while Patsy stayed at Bilbury Grange in case Emily turned up injured I drove over to Kelvin Johnson's house. I spent four hours searching his van, the garage where he keeps spare rolls of carpet and the surrounding gardens. Kelvin, almost as upset as I was, helped me. But of Emily there was absolutely no sign. I returned home with tears rolling down my cheeks.

Emily was as much a part of our family as I or Patsy. I knew that she would not have left us deliberately. I knew that she loved us all dearly and that even if she was unhurt she would be lonely and frightened away from us. I was terrified that she might be lying injured or even dying in a ditch somewhere.

'There were a few calls for you,' said Patsy, as she heated up some home-made tomato soup. Neither of us had eaten all day and although neither of us was hungry we both knew we had to eat. 'That woman who came with the TV crew the other day telephoned twice.'

'The 'Up Your Way!' woman?'

'Yes. She sounded quite nice.'

'Did she say what she wanted?'

'No. She asked if you would ring her back. She said it was important and quite urgent.'

'I'll ring her tomorrow,' I said. I didn't feel very much like talking to anyone.

'And a man called Jenkins from the *Sunday Globe* telephoned three times.'

'Are you sure it was Jenkins? Not someone called Jack Ladd?'

Patsy said she was sure. I told her about the reporter I had found wandering around the courtyard the day before.

'He asked me to make sure you rang as soon as you came in,' said Patsy. 'He said it was very important.'

I hardly heard her. I was desperately trying to think of something else I could do to help us find Emily.

'You don't think she could be caught in a trap somewhere, do you?' asked Patsy.

I was surprised. I said I didn't think anyone still set traps. But Patsy said they did. She told me that a friend of hers from the village had lost her dog for two weeks and after hours of searching had found it, starving and almost dead, trapped by its leg. The dog, she said, had virtually bitten through its own limb in an attempt to set itself free. Patsy said that several villagers still set traps for rabbits.

I listened to this horrible story in silence. We then both sat together holding hands and feeling extremely miserable. The thought of Emily trapped and trying to chew off her own leg was more than I could bear.

'We've got some photographs of Emily, haven't we?' I said, suddenly.

Patsy nodded.

'If I get some copies made we can distribute them around the village. Then if anyone happens to see her they'll know where to ring'.

'That's a brilliant idea!' said Patsy, getting up. 'I'll find a photograph.' She went into the living room, rummaged around in an old chest of drawers for a few moments and returned triumphantly holding up a colour photograph of Emily sitting on a low wall in the garden. Having something positive and practical to do made me feel a fraction better.

'I'll take this straight down to Peter Marshall's shop,' I told Patsy. 'I'll walk there through the fields just in case she's got lost down there. And while I'm in the village I'll ask around in case anyone has seen her.'

* * *

There was no sign of Emily on the path to the village. I called, whistled and listened all the way in the vain but constant hope that she might have strayed and somehow become disoriented and lost. I didn't really believe that could have happened – cats have a magnificent sense of direction – but I had to keep trying. Ben ran quietly beside me, her ears pricked and her eyes alert. I felt sure that she too was searching for Emily. I didn't see a soul on the path through the woods – the same path along which I had struggled through thick snow to Miss Hargreaves' cottage the previous winter – but as soon as I reached the lane I was reminded that Bilbury had now become a major tourist attraction.

There were camera toting visitors everywhere and coaches and cars were packed nose to tail in the narrow country lanes. The Bilbury I loved so much was changing beyond recognition and I didn't like it one little bit. I felt slightly guilty about my feelings because I knew that many of the villagers welcomed this exceptional opportunity to make some money. I knew that as a relative newcomer I had no right to say anything to try to change things – even if I could.

Outside the village shop a man in a smart white coat was standing on a chair putting up a huge hand-painted poster outside Peter Marshall's shop. 'WIN AS MUCH AS YOU CAN GRAB!' said the poster. 'ENTRY TICKETS 50 PENCE EACH. APPLY INSIDE.' Half a dozen tourists were standing around watching. One was even taking photographs. As I got closer I realised that the man in the white coat was Peter Marshall. I was astonished. Peter had even combed his hair.

'What on earth are you doing?' I asked him.

'I'm putting up a poster,' Peter snapped back.

'I can see that. But why are you wearing a white coat? And where's your flat cap?'

Peter looked down. 'Just tell me if this is straight, will you?'

I stood a few feet back from the poster. 'Left hand up a bit!' I suggested. 'Why the white coat?'

'Image,' said Peter baldly.

'Image!'

'Image is very important in retailing,' hissed Peter. 'I read all about it in a magazine.'

I stared at him. This was not the Peter I knew and loved. Image. White coat. Combed hair. I sighed.

'Do you still do film developing and printing?' I asked him. 'I've got a photo I need copying.'

Peter raised the left hand corner of the poster a couple of inches. 'Oh yes, sir. No problem. I can get photographs done for you, sir. We offer a full photographic service. Developing, printing and enlargements. All done within 24 hours.'

'You are Peter Marshall, aren't you?' I said.

He looked down and glowered at me.

'What do you mean?'

'You're being unnaturally polite, Peter. It doesn't seem right. The tourists are too far away to hear you.'

'Customer relations,' said Peter. 'The customer is always right. Is that straight?'

It was, I think, at that point that I knew that something had to be done to rescue Bilbury from the hideous influences of commerce. I much preferred the old Peter Marshall. The one who deliberately sold cartons of milk that were difficult to open because he knew that when people made a mess opening them they would buy more paper tissues; the one who bought up a supply of fire-damaged lawnmowers then sold lawn fertiliser at a special discount so that everyone's grass would grow more quickly, hoping that their lawnmowers would wear out and he could sell his new mowers more quickly.

I sighed. 'Down a fraction. Can you really get them for tomorrow? I need them fairly quickly.'

Peter moved the left hand corner of the poster down a fraction of an inch. 'Is tomorrow afternoon soon enough, sir?

'I guess so. The poster's perfect now by the way.'

'Hand me the sticky tape, will you?'

I looked around. I couldn't see any sticky tape.

'In with the oranges you buffoon!' said Peter. Both his hands were busy holding up the poster and so he pointed with his nose. His image was slipping slightly.

Sure enough the roll of sticky tape was sitting on top of a box of oranges. I picked up the tape and handed it to Peter. 'Tear me off a piece!'

Using first my teeth and then my fingers I tore off a piece of tape a couple of inches long.

'Not that much!' said Peter testily. It was good to see the old Peter shining through.

I looked at the short piece of tape I was holding. 'I'm sorry!' I apologised. I shrugged. 'Not much I can do about it now.'

'Tear it in two. I can use that much for two corners.'

The piece was too small to tear and I ended up with a tiny ball of totally unusable tape.

'You come up here and hold the poster and I'll handle the tape!' said Peter, losing patience. 'You're costing me a blooming fortune!'

With some difficulty we changed places. Peter tore two tiny pieces of sticky tape, gave me instructions on exactly where to position the poster and then handed me the bits of tape. When I had finally finished fixing the poster, I clambered down gingerly off the chair. I was worried that with so little tape holding the poster in place the slightest breeze from the movement of my body might dislodge it.

'Do you want one?' asked Peter.

'One what?' I asked, puzzled.

'A ticket.'

'A ticket for what?'

Peter sighed and pointed at the poster. 'The competition,' he said impatiently.

'What do I get if I win?' I asked him.

'You get one minute to grab as much as you like from the shop,' said Peter. 'Anything you can carry.' He thought for a moment, as though suddenly worried by the exceptionally generous offer he had made. 'Anything except the till,' he said. 'And cigarettes,' he added. 'No cigarettes.'

'I don't smoke,' I pointed out.

'You could grab quite a lot in a minute,' Peter pointed out.

'Why are you running a competition?' I asked him. 'You've got the only shop in the village.'

'Not any more I haven't,' said Peter, rather sourly.

'What on earth do you mean?'

'Colin Jackson has opened a caravan park,' said Peter moodily.

'A caravan park?'

'That's what I said. A caravan park. He reckons he can get over a hundred of the damned things on one field. But that's not the half of it. He's turned his kitchen into a shop.'

'Golly!' I said, genuinely surprised. 'Can he do that?'

'There's no 'can he do that' about it!' said Peter. 'He's just done it!'

'Oh,' I said. I thought about it for a moment. 'Well, he'll probably only be selling milk and bread to the people who are parked on his caravan site.'

Peter shook his head. 'The wholesaler in Barnstaple tells me he's ordering newspapers and magazines,' said Peter. 'And he's selling green vegetables, and fruit and Mrs Jackson's jams.'

I didn't know what to say. 'I don't know what to say,' I said. 'I'm flabbergasted.'

'You could have knocked me down with a feather,' admitted Peter, rather bitterly. 'He's selling things cheaper than I am. It won't be long before everyone in the village will be doing their shopping there.'

'Oh surely not!' I protested. 'The villagers will be loyal to you, I'm sure!'

'I'm not so certain about that,' said Peter. 'That's why I'm fighting back.'

'Fighting back?'

'Competitions!' said Peter sternly. 'This isn't the end of it,' he said defiantly. 'I'm not giving up!'

I started to say that I really didn't think he had anything to worry about when there was a cry from some distance which stopped me talking and Peter listening.

'Peter!' called a voice I didn't recognise. 'Peter Marshall!'

We both looked round. A tall, spindly looking fellow in a blue and white checked sweater and light grey slacks was easing his way through the assorted holidaymakers and walking briskly along the road towards us. He had long, wispy fair hair combed over a large bald patch and wore tortoiseshell framed spectacles.

Peter peered at the stranger for a few moments but showed no sign of recognition.

'Peter!' said the stranger, holding out a hand. 'It's me! Nathan!' He stared at Peter for a few moments. 'I must say you've changed a lot!' he admitted. 'I don't remember you ever wearing a white coat before. And what's happened to your flat cap?'

Peter looked closely at the stranger for a few moments but kept his own hands firmly by his side. 'Nathan?' he said. And then, very slowly, a look of comprehension spread across his face.

'Nathan Field?' he asked.

'Nathan Field!' agreed the stranger.

'I haven't seen you for ten years!' said Peter, putting his own hand in the stranger's and shaking it firmly.

'Twelve,' corrected Nathan Field. 'I read about Bilbury in the papers,' he explained. 'So I thought I'd pop back and have a look at you all.'

'Nathan was born here,' said Peter, turning to me. 'Grew up in the village. Then went off to college and never came back. Caught up by the big city lights I've no doubt.'

Nathan looked rather embarrassed. 'It's nice to see you again!' he said to Peter.

‘The last time I saw you I threatened to give you a good hiding!’ said Peter; memories now flooding back. ‘You’d broken a window with your cricket ball.’ I glanced over his shoulder. A pane of glass in an upstairs window was repaired with bits of sticky tape.

‘Is that the one?’ I asked. They both looked up at the window I was looking at.

‘That’s the one!’ agreed Nathan. ‘I should pay you for that!’ he said, reaching into his back pocket and pulling out his wallet.

‘I could never afford to have it repaired properly,’ lied Peter.

‘How much do you think it’ll cost?’ asked Nathan.

Peter glanced at Nathan’s wallet; expensive leather but rather thin. ‘Thirty pounds should do it!’ he said.

Nathan looked surprised. He had good reason to. Thirty pounds would have probably paid for the whole of Peter’s shop to be reglazed.

‘Very expensive, old-fashioned glass,’ explained Peter. ‘Very difficult to match.’

Nathan, nodded understandingly. I felt sure that he knew Peter just as well as I did. He said nothing but opened his wallet and took out three ten pound notes. He smiled and handed them over to Peter who took them and slid them into his own pocket in one swift and well-practised movement.

Nathan held open his wallet so that we could both see that it was now almost empty. ‘That’s left me a bit short of cash,’ he said. ‘Could you cash a cheque for me, Peter?’ He put the wallet away and took out a cheque book.

Peter looked at him rather suspiciously. ‘How much for?’ he asked.

‘Oh, thirty will do,’ said Nathan.

‘I suppose so,’ said Peter, rather ungraciously. ‘But I’ll have to charge you a pound for changing the cheque.’

Nathan sighed and smiled. ‘That’s O.K.’

‘Would you like some tickets? Five? Ten?’

‘Tickets?’

Peter pointed to the poster he and I had just put up. ‘I’m having a competition,’ he explained. ‘The winner gets to keep everything he can grab in a minute.’

‘Except the till,’ I said.

‘And no cigarettes,’ added Peter. ‘Shall I take ten? The tickets are only fifty pence each.’

‘Er...,’ I suppose so, said Nathan.

‘And I’ll need to see some identification.’

‘Some identification?’

‘You can’t expect me to cash a cheque without identification!’

‘But you know who I am!’

‘Doesn’t matter,’ said Peter firmly. ‘I need identification before I can cash a cheque.’

Nathan didn’t even sigh. He obviously knew Peter very well. He took out his cheque card and driving licence. ‘Will these do?’ he asked.

Peter examined both documents carefully. ‘They’ll do fine,’ he said at last. Nathan then wrote out a cheque for thirty-six pounds and Peter gave him back his own ten pound notes and ten competition entry tickets.’

When Nathan had gone, clutching a roll of raffle tickets and a replenished wallet, I took out the photograph of Emily. ‘Could you get me a couple of dozen copies made of this?’ I asked Peter.

‘Who is it?’ he asked, squinting at the print.

‘It’s Emily,’ I explained. ‘One of our cats. She’s gone missing.’

Peter looked puzzled. ‘Why don’t you just get another cat?’ he asked. ‘It would be cheaper than having all these photographs made!’

‘We rather like Emily,’ I said, staying patient. I hadn’t really expected Peter to understand and wasn’t offended by the fact that he hadn’t. ‘I thought I’d put up a few posters around the village – then if anyone sees her wandering about they’ll know where she belongs.’

Peter shook his head and snorted. ‘It’s your money,’ he said, taking the photograph from me. ‘I’ll get your pictures for you,’ he promised. ‘They’ll be here tomorrow afternoon,’ he said. ‘Sir.’ he added as an afterthought.

* * *

Even though it was crowded with traffic and gawking tourists I decided to walk back to Bilbury Grange along the lanes, looking and calling for Emily along the way. I still didn’t think it very likely that I would find her in the village – I was sure that if she was alive and in Bilbury she would have found her way back home by now – but I had to try.

The Duck and Puddle was crowded with tourists. Frank and Gilly had filled their small parking area with tables and chairs and these were all occupied. There was even a queue of people patiently waiting for their turn to be fed and watered. I was pleased for Frank and Gilly but selfishly I much preferred the old, quiet Bilbury village pub.

As I walked around the village green, peering into gardens and under hedgerows, I heard an angry shout of protest coming from somewhere on my left. I stopped, turned my head and saw a fat, middle aged man in a beige windcheater and a pair of beige slacks furiously waving his walking stick and waddling after two village boys who were running away across the village green as quickly as they could. The fat man in beige quite clearly didn't stand a chance of catching the two boys.

'What's the matter?' I called.

The fat man in beige turned and glowered in my direction. He was wheezing noisily and seemed glad of an excuse to vent his wrath at a less mobile target.

'It's a disgrace!' he complained. Even from those three words it was clear that he was American. A group of Japanese tourists who were busy taking endless photographs of Ted, the village postman, stopped what they were doing and aimed their cameras in his direction. The village postman, who had been posing alongside his bicycle, looked most aggrieved. The Japanese tourists, all male, were all wearing identical dark grey suits, plain white shirts and identical dark blue ties.

I wandered over and gently asked the fat American in beige to tell me what had troubled him so much.

'Those young vandals were throwing sticks up into the trees! He reported, amidst much huffing and puffing.

I looked up. The horse chestnut trees underneath which we were standing were laden with conkers. I hadn't realised that the conker season had already started but down around our feet the ground was littered with small, broken pieces of branch, opened horse chestnut seed casings and the thicker sticks which had clearly been used by the two boys to speed the process of gravity sponsored seed distribution. Out of the corner of my eye I could see that Ben was eyeing a fairly large stick covetously; but she didn't move an inch from where she was standing by my side.

'They were just trying to get conkers down,' I explained. 'Boys do it every autumn.' I had done it myself often enough.

'They could have injured me or my wife!' protested the fat American in beige. He waved his stick somewhere behind him. I looked and saw a fat woman in a slightly lighter shade of beige sheltering under a fringed, pink parasol. She was carrying a large white canvas bag and wore imaginatively framed sunglasses. I wasn't sure whether she was using the parasol to protect her skin from the weak rays of sunshine or (rather vainly, surely, for it was a flimsy looking device) to protect her head from falling sticks, leaves, conkers and other arboreal debris. Neither function seemed practical.

'But you weren't hit?'

'That's not the point!' drawled the fat American in beige angrily shaking his walking stick. The Japanese photographers snapped away furiously. The fat American in beige, who had almost overbalanced and fallen over as a result of this violent gesture, planted his walking stick firmly on the grass and spoke to the Japanese. 'I'd like some of those photographs!' he shouted at them, speaking in that clear, exceptionally distinct way that people use when they are talking to foreigners and fear that they might not be understood. 'Do you understand?' he enquired. He had a huge video camera and two still cameras slung around his neck but had made no attempt to use any of his own equipment to record the scene of this most heinous crime.

'We understand perfectly!' said one of the Japanese men very politely. He bowed. 'If you give us your name and address we will be delighted to send you photographs.'

'Take some pictures of these branches,' instructed the fat American in beige, pointing to the bits of branch scattered on the ground.

'I would have thought it was very much the point,' I said, without much sympathy.

'I shall be making my complaint known!' said the fat American in beige, turning towards me. 'You people will be hearing from my lawyers.'

Deciding that there was little point in continuing with this bizarre conversation I started to move off. But before I did so I bent down, picked up a short, thick stick which the boys had been throwing up into the trees and held it out so that Ben could take it in her teeth. She looked up at me and thanked me with her eyes. The two of us then continued along the lane back towards Bilbury Grange.

'That's evidence!' shouted the fat American in beige. 'Don't you go carrying off the evidence!'

I ignored him and walked on slowly homewards, continuing my sad and fruitless search for Emily.

On my way home I met Thumper wobbling along on an old bicycle. 'I'm just popping along to the Duck and Puddle,' Thumper told me. 'Fancy a slow one?'

'I shouldn't bother if I were you,' I told him.

He frowned, looking puzzled.

I explained. 'You'll have to book a table for tomorrow if you want a drink,' I said. 'The Duck and Puddle is absolutely full of tourists.'

Thumper stared at me in disbelief. ‘You mean there’s no room?’

‘No room,’ I confirmed.

Thumper scratched his head. ‘That’s a pity,’ he said. ‘Still,’ he brightened, ‘I expect Frank and Gilly are pleased.’ He turned around his bicycle and walked back along the lane with me.

‘Is that it?’ I asked him, astonished. ‘The Duck and Puddle is full. You can’t get a drink. And all you can say is that it’s a pity?’

‘It’s business,’ shrugged Thumper. ‘We’ve got to strike while the iron is hot.’

I stared at him, disbelievingly. ‘Strike while the iron is hot? What does that mean?’

Thumper frowned. ‘I’m not sure,’ he confessed. ‘It’s something Churston said.’

‘Churston Ferrers?’

Thumper nodded. I was beginning to think that Churston had an unhealthy amount of influence over what was going on in Bilbury. It occurred to me that none of us knew very much about him. ‘What are you looking for?’ he asked me, as I peered under yet another stretch of hedge. I explained about Emily.

‘Did I tell you about how my cousin’s cat died?’ Thumper asked me.

‘No,’ I said.

‘He lives in the middle of a big city,’ said Thumper, for whom a big city is anywhere which has a set of traffic lights. ‘One day he was out in the driveway washing his car when his cat suddenly jumped over a high wall into the next door neighbour’s garden. Suddenly there was terrible squealing and screeching and he realised the next door neighbour’s dog – a huge Doberman – must have been out in the garden.’

‘Oh no!’ I cried. ‘Don’t tell me anymore! How horrid!’ I shuddered involuntarily at the very thought of it.

‘Well, my cousin tried to climb over the wall,’ continued Thumper, oblivious to my protests, ‘But he’s a bit overweight and the wall was far too high for him. All this time the cat was screaming and wailing and he could hear the damned dog starting to eat the poor cat. He raced round to the front gate but that was locked. Eventually he managed to get a stepladder so that he could see what was happening. By then the cat had half gone so there wasn’t any point in doing anything else.’

I stared at him in disbelief, feeling sick.

‘Oh, I nearly forgot,’ said Thumper. ‘Patchy and I and a few of the other blokes are cleaning out the village pond tomorrow morning. If you can spare a couple of hours to help it would be much appreciated.’

I was still numb from the horrible story he had just told me.

‘You game?’ asked Thumper.

‘Why are we suddenly cleaning out the village pond?’ I asked.

‘Churston thought it would be a good idea,’ said Thumper. ‘He says we should do everything we can to improve the village’s appearance.’

‘Do you trust him?’ I asked.

‘Who?’

‘Churston.’

‘Trust him?’

‘We don’t know very much about him, do we?’

‘He’s just trying to help,’ said Thumper. ‘Why shouldn’t we trust him?’

I didn’t have any foundations for my suspicions about Churston and so I just shrugged. ‘No reason,’ said. ‘No reason at all.’

* * *

‘Oh, I almost forgot. That woman telephoned again while you were out,’ said Patsy.

After I’d returned from the village we had spent the rest of the afternoon working. I had spent a couple of hours in the summerhouse working on my weekly local newspaper column while Patsy had been busy in the kitchen making jam. Now we were both spending a balmy evening in the vegetable garden, helping Mr Parfitt pull up the last our onions. We had a good crop. Mr Parfitt, who knew far more than we did about vegetables, fruit and other plants liked to let the pulled onions dry off in the sunshine before laying them on trays in the greenhouse to store them for the winter.

‘Which woman?’

‘Avril thingy.’

‘From that TV programme?’

Patsy nodded. ‘She rang several times. She said it was very, very urgent and would you please ring her at home this evening. She gave me her home number. I wrote it down and put it on your desk.’

‘Did she say what it was about?’

‘No.’

‘Probably wanted to come and film another daft interview,’ I said, without enthusiasm. We continued pulling onions. Ben was sleeping a few yards away on the path. Sophie was lying on top of the wooden cover which kept leaves and other debris out of the water butt. It was one of her favourite spots. I constantly missed Emily and was aware of her absence.

‘I’m going to go back over to Bideford, tomorrow,’ I said, suddenly. ‘I still have this awful feeling that Emily climbed into that carpet van.’

‘But where will you start looking?’ asked Patsy. ‘She could be anywhere.’

‘I don’t know,’ I admitted. ‘But I’ve just got to do something.’

‘If she did get taken over to Bideford maybe she’ll find her own way home,’ said Patsy.

It was a nice thought. I wanted to believe it. But it seemed unlikely. Bideford is at least twenty miles away from Bilbury. It’s a long way for a cat to walk. I didn’t say that I thought it sounded unlikely. I didn’t want to take this one cheer from Patsy. Or, for that matter, from myself. Voicing my disbelief would, it seemed, almost seem like giving up hope.

‘My Aunt had a cat which walked from Bristol to Taunton in three weeks!’ said Mr Parfitt suddenly.

We both stopped what we were doing and looked across at him.

‘She moved from Taunton up to Bristol when her husband died,’ said our gardener. ‘She went to stay with her sister and took her cat with her but that cat loved my Uncle Reg and he just walked straight back to Taunton. The neighbours recognised him and rang my Aunt.’

‘Taunton to Bristol!’ said Patsy. ‘That must be, what, sixty miles?’

‘I should think so,’ agreed Mr Parfitt. ‘Thereabouts.’

‘And the cat walked all that way in three weeks!’

‘He was a poor, weak little thing when he got there. But he got there.’

‘What did your Aunt do?’

‘Moved straight back to Taunton,’ said Mr Parfitt. ‘She hadn’t sold her house and she said that if Tibbles – that was the cat – wanted to stay in Taunton then she’d stay in Taunton too.’

‘That’s a wonderful story!’ said Patsy, much brightened by this tale. She frowned. ‘Is it true?’ she asked.

‘Of course it’s true!’ said Mr Parfitt. ‘My Aunt rang the papers but they weren’t much interested. They said they were always getting stories like that. They told her about a cat called Toby who had walked from Cornwall to Kent in four months and about a cat called Smokey who walked from Newquay in Cornwall all the way to Bexhill in Sussex – and did it in just three months!’

‘So, if your Aunt’s cat walked from Bristol to Taunton in three weeks and that’s sixty miles...,’ began Patsy.

‘Emily should take about a week to get home if she’s in Bideford!’ I said.

‘If she was in Bideford,’ said Patsy cautiously.

‘If she was in Bideford,’ I agreed.

But I now had real hope in my heart and with real hope the heart beats easier and life seems much more worthwhile. I carried on pulling and turning onions with renewed enthusiasm.

We had finished the onions and were picking runner beans (‘The best crop I’ve ever seen!’ said Mr Parfitt with justifiable pride) when, with more dismay than pleasure, I heard a voice I recognised.

‘Sorry to trouble you again,’ said Jack Ladd, the reporter from the *Sunday Globe*. ‘Can I ask you a couple of questions?’

I stood up and glared at him. ‘This is private property!’ I told him, rather rudely. ‘I do wish you’d come to the front gate.’

‘But your front gate is always locked,’ the reporter pointed out perfectly accurately. He smiled. ‘I understand how you feel,’ he said sympathetically. ‘But I really just want to give you a chance to reply to the complaint. I thought it would be fair to give you a chance to put your side of the story.’

I looked at him, puzzled. ‘A complaint? Who’s made a complaint? What about?’

Patsy and Mr Parfitt had both stopped what they were doing.

The reporter smoothly slipped a spiral bound notebook out of his jacket pocket and flipped over half a dozen pages until he found the right page. ‘Caldwell West,’ he said. ‘Vice President of West Oil.’

‘I don’t know anyone called Caldwell West,’ I said. ‘Who is he? What am I supposed to have done?’

‘Mr West claims that he and his wife narrowly escaped injury this morning when young hooligans threw sticks at them on Bilbury Village Green. He claims that you distracted him and so enabled the vandals to escape. And he also claims that you took away the evidence. He’s very cross about it. He’s threatening to sue the entire village.’

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. It was all so silly. ‘That’s daft!’ I said. ‘There were a couple of kids trying to get conkers down from the trees around the edge of the village green. The chap can’t be serious!’

Jack Ladd stared at me sympathetically. ‘I’m afraid it isn’t funny and he is serious,’ he said. ‘Very serious. He’s suing the village of Bilbury for a million dollars.’

I stopped laughing. Jack Ladd was right. It wasn’t funny.

* * *

CHAPTER NINE

Neither Patsy nor I slept very well that night.

But it was Emily's continued absence, rather than the reported threat from Caldwell West, which stopped us from sleeping.

Neither of us could take the threatened lawsuit too seriously (and since I still hadn't been officially notified that I was the subject of a lawsuit I wasn't entirely sure that Jack Ladd wasn't making the whole thing up for the sake of a story – it sounded more like the result of a tabloid imagination than a real life development) but we both lay awake most of the night waiting to see if Emily would come back.

We lay there silently in the darkness waiting for the tell-tale sound of paws pattering up the staircase, the unique 'Prrrp' noise that Emily always made when she greeted us and the comforting feel of her tiny body landing on the bedclothes.

But when the first rays of the day's sunshine began to filter through a narrow gap between the curtains we realised that another night had gone by and still Emily hadn't returned. Neither of us spoke of it but I know that I was gradually beginning to fear that I would never see Emily again. I suspected that Patsy felt the same. We lay there, side by side, in the gently easing darkness and I reached out and found Patsy's hand and squeezed her fingers tightly.

'She'll come back!' whispered Patsy hoarsely.

'Of course she will!' I replied.

'Let's close our eyes and send her love and strength wherever she is,' said Patsy.

I glanced across. Patsy's eyes were tightly closed and her face showed that she was concentrating hard. Ben and Sophie were lying perfectly still too. At this time in the morning they both normally let us know that they were ready for their breakfast. But I felt certain that they felt that this morning was different.

I closed my eyes, squeezed Patsy's fingers more tightly and sent Emily all the love and strength and courage I could raise.

We lay like this for several minutes.

And then the telephone started to ring and the spell was broken.

* * *

'Avril Potterton here,' said the television producer. She sounded indecently cheerful for so early in the morning. 'I'm sorry to ring you at such an ungodly hour,' she apologised, 'but I thought I might catch you if I rang early.' Although she sounded improperly cheerful she spoke breathlessly – as though in a hurry to share some wonderful secret with me.

I stifled a yawn, muttered some incoherent pleasantry and tucked the telephone between my ear and my shoulder while I fastened the belt of my dressing gown. There was an autumn chill in the air and I shivered involuntarily. Sophie rubbed herself against my legs and Ben sat in front of me, staring at me and making it quite clear that she didn't want to hurry me but that when I was ready to give her some breakfast she would be ready to eat it.

I listened as Miss Potterton talked about the wonders of the 'Up Your Way!' programme in particular and about the joys of television in general. Then she said something else which I thought so unlikely that I was not at all sure that I had heard what I thought I had heard.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'Would you repeat that?'

Avril laughed and repeated what I thought she had said. I said it was very kind of her and that I much appreciated everything she had said but that if she didn't mind I would have to think about it and that I hoped she understood. She said that would be fine. I then put down the telephone and wandered downstairs and into the kitchen and fed Ben and Sophie (and the Aga which would only continue to provide us with hot water and heat if I fed it coke twice a day) in something of a daze.

I then pottered back upstairs to get washed and dressed.

'Who was on the telephone?' asked Patsy, as I took off my dressing gown and shivered again. First there had been the boys collecting conkers. Now I was shivering. I realised that there was no longer any question about it – autumn had arrived. I plucked a clean shirt out of a drawer and darted out into the bathroom to wash.

'Avril Potterton,' I called, hurriedly washing.

'That woman from the television programme?'

'That's the one!' I splashed steaming hot water onto my face and then rubbed my shaving brush vigorously on my dish of shaving soap to create a lather.

'What on earth did she want?' asked Patsy, appearing in the bathroom doorway behind me. I could see her in the bathroom mirror, fully dressed from the waist down but wearing only a bra above the waist and holding a white blouse and a multicoloured sweater in her hand. ‘Do they want you to do another interview?’

I lathered my face, rinsed the brush in the bowl and then started shaving.

‘No,’ I said. ‘They’re apparently quite happy with the interview they’ve already done.’

‘So what did she want?’ asked Patsy.

I carefully scraped away at my chin. I needed a new blade but to say that cash was a little tight was an understatement and I was trying to make each razor blade last as long as possible. The new carpet in the living room had really been an extravagance. ‘Do you remember that half-witted interviewer they brought here?’ I asked her.

‘Roger?’

‘Rodney. You’ll catch cold standing there half naked.’

‘Rodney. What about him? And I’m not half naked. I’m half dressed.’ But Patsy slipped on her blouse and started to button it up. I wished I hadn’t said anything as the view in my mirror slowly became more decent.

‘Miss Potterton managed to persuade the Executive Producer to fire him,’ I told her. I scraped away at the stubble on my upper lip and decided that the blunt blade would have to be retired very soon.

‘Why did she ring you to tell you that?’ asked Patsy, puzzled and now completely dressed.

‘Because they’ve offered me his job, ‘I explained, splashing more hot water onto my face to remove the remains of the shaving soap lather.

For a moment or two Patsy didn’t say anything. Then she gave out a great whoop of delight. ‘Congratulations!’ she cried, throwing her arms around my neck and kissing me full on the mouth.

‘Hang on a minute, ‘I said, gently pushing her away from me. ‘I haven’t said I’ll take the job yet.’

Patsy frowned and looked at me. ‘Why not?’

‘I wanted to talk things over with you,’ I explained. ‘If I do take the job it’ll change our life. For a start I’ll have to travel up to Glasgow every week and I’ll probably have to spend Monday to Friday living there.’

‘Glasgow?’ said Patsy, in the same way that she might have said Gdansk, Ghent, Gothenburg or Guatemala ‘Why Glasgow?’

‘Because that’s where the programme comes from, ‘I explained.

‘Oh!’ said Patsy, suddenly far less enthusiastic. There was a pause while this news sunk in. ‘And you’d really have to live there all week?’

‘I couldn’t present a television programme from Bilbury,’ I pointed out.

‘Oh!’ said Patsy, again.

I dried my face and put my shirt on. ‘I’m starving. Let’s eat and talk about this later,’ I said quietly. ‘Let’s give ourselves a treat and have a full fried breakfast!’ Some days we simply had porridge and toast for breakfast. On other days we gave ourselves a treat. For one reason or another this felt like a morning for a treat.

I quickly finished dressing and then the two of us went downstairs. We both picked up small, open wicker trug baskets and went out through the back door to fetch our breakfast.

We picked field mushrooms from a meadow still damp with morning dew and then we carefully collected eggs lain by our happy, strutting hens and for carrying safely back to the house nestled these amidst the softer, more cushioning fruits of nature. Back in the kitchen Patsy boiled the kettle for our morning tea, sliced her homemade bread for toasting and prepared our breakfast feast from plump white and grey mushrooms and eggs which were still warm.

While Patsy made breakfast I refilled the living room log basket with wood from the log shed, cut a strand of ivy that had managed to squeeze between a wooden window and its frame and temporarily refastened a bracket on a downpipe at the side of the house. With a large house like Bilbury Grange there are always small chores to be done and I had learnt that it is much easier to do these when you spot them rather than leave them for later. If I left essential chores to do another time I found myself constantly wasting time reminding myself of the work that needed to be done. Besides, if you leave small tasks for a week or two they quickly become much bigger tasks.

If, for example, I had left the loose downpipe unfastened the chances are that a strong wind would have shaken it free from its other mountings and created a much bigger problem and a considerably more difficult job. If I had ignored the tiny strand of ivy it would, within a week, have grown so thick that the window would probably never fit its frame properly again.

* * *

During breakfast we talked of the job I had been offered. The money that Avril Potterton had told me that the television company would pay was very good. I suspected that if I found myself an agent in London I would probably be able to persuade them to pay even more. Even as it was the money would undoubtedly have solved all our immediate financial worries.

The money was the job’s solitary attraction.

It wasn’t a job I really wanted to do and I didn’t like the idea of having a face that would inevitably become better recognised.

Most of all I didn't like the idea of spending most of my life away from Patsy, our animals and Bilbury. Even with the lanes and village green full of tourists I still loved Bilbury far more than I had ever loved any other place in which I had ever lived. I thought of it as 'home' in a way that I had never really thought of anywhere else as 'home'.

But there was no denying that the money was very attractive. 'What do you want to do?' asked Patsy for the umpteenth time.

I said I didn't really know. And so once again we went carefully through all the advantages and disadvantages. My instinct was to turn the job down immediately and think nothing more about it but I felt a responsibility to Patsy, to our animals and, strange though it may sound, to Bilbury Grange itself.

I knew that Patsy wouldn't want me to spend most of my life working away from Bilbury Grange if there was a realistic alternative. But I also knew that she was just as worried about our fragile finances as I was.

'Maybe I should just take the job for a few months,' I suggested, trying to see what Patsy would say but hoping that she would say 'no'.

Patsy nodded. 'That would probably be best,' she said firmly. 'It would certainly be silly to turn down a steady income.'

'I could give up the job when we have published my book,' I said. 'And I'd be home every weekend.' I was trying hard to convince myself that I should take the job. I wasn't doing very well.

'Lots of people have to work away from home,' said Patsy, quietly.

'Sailors go away for months at a time,' I pointed out.

'Plenty of businessmen have to travel,' said Patsy.

And so we agreed that I would ring Avril Potterton and accept the job she had offered me. I didn't want to have to spend most of the week away from Bilbury. I didn't want to work on television. In short, I didn't want the job. But I felt that Patsy would be happier if I took it.

But I didn't ring Avril Potterton straight away.

* * *

Since I had sort of promised Thumper Robinson that I would help him and Patchy Fogg clear out the village pond I decided to try to forget about everything for a couple of hours while doing some old-fashioned hard manual labour.

Because I guessed that the lanes around Bilbury would almost certainly be blocked with tourists, I left the car in the barn which doubled as a garage and rode into the village on my battered old bicycle. Riding a bicycle while wearing Wellington boots isn't easy and I must have looked quite a comical sight as I pedalled along, trying to keep my huge boots out of the way of the front wheel.

Thumper Robinson, Patchy Fogg, Frank Parsons, Wayne Wellard the farrier and Jack and Ollie, the two farm labourers who had helped us rescue Miss Hargreaves when the storm had sent her chimney crashing through her roof, were already gathered at the edge of the village pond as I clambered off my bicycle and leant it against a nearby tree.

Churston was there too but judging by the fact that he was elegantly dressed in his usual smart suit, white shirt, expensive looking tie, gold cufflinks and well-shined black shoes it was clear that he was there to direct operations rather than to do any of the dirty work. His car, a brand new, steel-grey, top-of-the range BMW, was parked casually on the grass verge. There wasn't a speck of dust on the car nor a spot of mud on the wheels. I still found it difficult to trust a man who seemed so incapable of getting dressed in the morning without putting on a suit and I found myself deeply distrustful of a man who managed to drive his car around the lanes of Bilbury without it getting dirty.

Half a dozen children had also gathered to watch the fun and a small group of tourists were standing far enough back out of the way to make it clear that they were present only out of curiosity and not to do any work.

'They do say it's bottomless,' said Jack, standing close to the edge of the pond and staring down into the water.

'Of course it isn't bottomless,' said Patchy. 'People always say that about ponds. They say it to keep the kids away from them.' He moved a little closer to the edge of the pond but sank quickly into the muddy border which surrounded the pond. Thumper and Wayne pulled him out about a sixteenth of an inch before the top of his Wellington boots slid under the surface of the mud. Looking at the mud I realised that it had been rather silly of me to put on a clean shirt.

'I don't think many kids would want to go into this one,' muttered Frank. He surreptitiously took a silver hip flask from his jacket pocket and took a long swig. When he'd finished he exhaled noisily, shook his head and quietly slid the flask back into his pocket as though certain that no one would have noticed.

Frank was right. The pond, like most village ponds, didn't look particularly attractive. There were a dozen ducks paddling around at the far side of the pond and quacking away quite merrily but much of the surface was covered in a thick green layer of weed and algae.

'I don't know why it needs cleaning out,' said Ollie.

I agreed with him. The pond wasn't dirty, it didn't smell and there was no sign at all of any old prams, bicycle frames, rusty kettles or discarded boots. It looked to me like a fairly healthy English pond; full of wildlife, home to a family of ducks, temporary resting place for migrating birds needing a night's lodgings, and source of many local rumours. Besides, Thumper and I had tidied it up once before a year or so earlier.

Apart from the one already voiced by Jack (that the pond was bottomless) I had, over the years, heard rumours that the pond contained an elderly pike the size of a small child and that the proceeds from a London robbery had been dumped into the water by a gang of escaping jewel thieves ten years earlier. (No one ever bothered to ask what a gang of London jewel thieves had been doing in North Devon nor why no one had ever made any effort to retrieve the jewels they were alleged to have dumped).

'It's got far too much weed in it,' explained Churston.

'Tourists want a nice, clean, fresh looking pond – a pond where kids can paddle and sail their boats.'

'The ducks won't like that,' I pointed out.

But, sadly, no one else seemed particularly interested in whether the ducks would approve of what we were doing. 'How do you think we should set about it?' asked Churston.

'I think filling it in and digging another pond somewhere else would probably be best,' suggested Patchy rather sarcastically. 'We could build something nice and neat in concrete, fill it with Dr Brownlow's health giving water and invite people with gout to come here and dip their toes in it.'

Churston, who was not a man who did a lot of smiling, stared at Patchy for a moment or two, carefully weighing up what he had heard. He then made his opinion clear as though handing down a judgement from a high court bench. 'What a splendid idea!' he said enthusiastically. 'We could turn Bilbury into a Spa town!'

'With an outdoor paddling pond?' asked Patchy, incredulously.

'No, no!' said Churston, dismissively and rather impatiently. 'We'd have to build something a bit more substantial. A swimming pool, maybe. But the idea is marvellous. Just what Bilbury needs! A bit of something special. By the way,' he asked, looking around, 'Where is the nearest car wash?'

We looked at one another. 'Car wash?' asked Wayne.

'I like to have the BMW cleaned regularly,' explained Churston.

'There might be one in Bristol,' said Patchy, hesitantly.

'Oh,' said Churston, disappointed. 'That seems rather a long way to go for a car wash.' Suddenly, he looked at his watch. 'I must rush!' he said. 'I have to ask Peter to put a notice up in his shop window for me.'

'Shall we leave the pond alone, then?' asked Patchy, hopefully.

'Oh no, I still think we should still clean it up,' said Churston. 'But if you'll excuse me I must rush.' He turned and headed towards his car, the immaculate grey BMW. When he got to the car he opened the door as though intending to get in but then he noticed that the road alongside the pond was absolutely choc-abloc with tourists' motor cars. So Churston reached inside the open window and plucked a thin, brown leather briefcase from the passenger front seat. 'Oh, by the way,' he said as he hurried off on foot, 'I've suggested that the Parish Council hold an emergency meeting this evening. We've got a bit of a problem to sort out.'

'What sort of a problem?' I asked him. The others all stopped what they were doing (which wasn't much) and paid attention.

Churston stopped and turned for a moment. 'Oh, just some conker trees,' he explained. 'We've had a serious complaint about them and after taking expert advice I'm going to recommend to the Council that we have them all chopped down before they get us into any more trouble.'

'You can't do that!' cried several of us together.

But Churston was already fifty yards down the road. 'Look after the car for me!' was the last thing we heard.

* * *

For a few moments we all stood there in silence. No one spoke but there was, I suspect, quite a lot of thinking going on. Eventually it was Wayne Wellard, the diminutive farrier, who broke the silence.

'Well, if we're going to get this pond cleared I suppose we'd better get on with it,' he said, with unconvincingly feigned enthusiasm.

'If we're going to do the job really properly we need to drag it,' said Thumper.

Wayne looked at him, puzzled. 'Drag it?'

'Clean out the bottom of the pond to get rid of any rubbish.'

'How do we do that?' Wayne asked.

I listened carefully. My twenty years of formal education had included nothing at all relating to the cleaning out of ponds. The longer I lived in Bilbury the more extensive I discovered my ignorance to be. I had, over the years, acquired much theoretical knowledge. Men and women with chalk on their fingers had taught me trigonometry, Latin grammar and the names of the bones of the foot. But, to my daily embarrassment and shame, no one had ever taught me how to erect fences, mend droopy gates, layer hedges or replace slipped slates. These things I was now having to learn from men with calloused, splintered hands.

‘Thick rope,’ explained Patchy. ‘A couple of us take one end and another pair takes the other end and we drag the rope across the bottom.’

‘Damned hard work,’ said Ollie. ‘Jack and I did a pond that way last year down near Softly’s Bottom. I couldn’t move for a week afterwards.’

‘The rope got caught on an old stone roller,’ remembered Jack with a grimace. ‘In the end we had to use the tractor to pull the roller out of the water,’ he told me.

‘Sounds a jolly sight easier than pulling on a rope!’ said Patchy. ‘Why don’t we use a tractor to start with?’

‘We haven’t got a tractor here,’ Wayne pointed out, with unassailable logic. ‘And with all this traffic on the road we won’t be able to get one here until about eleven o’clock tonight.’

‘We’ve got Thumper’s truck!’ Patchy said. ‘Much better than any tractor!’

When it comes to pushing or pulling heavy loads, or driving through difficult conditions, it is difficult to think of any vehicle that would better Thumper’s truck. The truck had undoubtedly been born at some mass-market American car and truck manufacturer’s plant but Thumper has, over the years, made substantial alterations and some dramatic improvements. The bodywork is, it is true, dirty, rusty and battered and the vehicle would win no prizes for its appearance. The side window on the passenger’s side of the car was long ago broken and is now blocked up with a piece of cardboard and an old plastic fertiliser bag, the bodywork is festooned with dents (even the cab roof has a large dent in it) and the truck is decorated with so many patches of primer that if required to describe the colour of the vehicle to anyone in authority I would have had to declare myself quite incapable of offering an authoritative answer. Thumper doesn’t bother about appearances. He steadfastly refuses to spend a penny on the outside of the truck but is proud of the fact that the engine is widely believed to be more powerful than anything else in North Devon, with the possible exception of the railway engine which travels between Exeter and Barnstaple.

‘It would be a lot easier with two vehicles,’ said Thumper, thoughtfully. ‘We could tie a rope to the two back ends, drive the cars along the two sides of the pond and just pull the rope through the mud and sludge at the bottom. We might have to do it a couple of times to make sure we drag out everything that’s in there but it will all be over in five minutes and then we can hurry along to the Duck and Puddle before it fills up with tourists wanting plates of chips and bottles of fizzy pop.’

Thumper’s suggestion did promise to be a good deal easier than wading into the pond in Wellington boots and hauling out whatever debris we might find by hand. Frank was so full of enthusiasm that he took another swig from his hip flask and then handed the flask around. This was, for Frank, a considerable sacrifice. He was not an ungenerous man but he did not lightly share his alcohol supply with others when there was no guarantee of readily obtaining replacement supplies. We all took sips from the flask.

‘What on earth have you got in there?’ Wayne demanded of Frank, when he’d finished coughing. Wayne is not renowned as a great drinker.

‘Man’s whisky,’ said Frank, who had been busy sipping when Wayne had asked his question. ‘Laphroig’, he explained. ‘Single malt.’

‘We need another vehicle. At the moment we’ve only got your truck!’ said Patchy. The rest of us, wary of the heavy traffic which now regularly blocked Bilbury’s roads, had travelled to the pond by foot or bicycle. Thumper had avoided the traffic by the simple but effective technique of driving across the fields.

‘We could borrow Churston’s BMW,’ said Thumper, innocently.

It seemed an innocuous, harmless even sensible suggestion. After all Churston was the one who wanted the pond cleared and he wasn’t using his car. It was just sitting there quietly deteriorating and depreciating in the way that motor cars do. But even as Thumper spoke I instinctively felt that this was not something we should do. However, I said nothing when Patchy, who had wandered over to peer inside the BMW, announced with delight that Churston had left the keys in the ignition.

It was decided that Thumper would drive his truck around to one side of the pond while Patchy would manoeuvre Churston’s shiny German motor car into position on the other side of the pond. Jack and Ollie would then each tie one end of a long rope (taken, inevitably, from the pile of useful but distinctly rural and disorganised paraphernalia which always adorns the back of Thumper’s truck) to a suitable anchorage at the back of each vehicle, making sure that the rope was loose enough to drag along the bottom of the pond rather than merely skim the surface.

The plan seemed so simple and foolproof that I felt confident that my initial suspicions and fears were entirely unfounded. Nothing, I was now sure, could possibly go wrong.

Everything began smoothly.

On one side of the pond Thumper manoeuvred his truck into position without any difficulty at all. On the other side of the pond, driving with laudable caution, Patchy carefully reversed Churston’s expensive and pristine BMW into position. Jack then tied one end of the rope to the towbar at the back of Thumper's truck while Ollie tied the other end of the same rope to the towing point at the back of the BMW. Wayne and I were kept busy trying to make sure that the tourists kept well out of the way. We didn't want any innocent bystanders being cut in two by the rope or injured by any debris which the rope might drag out of the pond.

Once both ends of the rope were firmly in place Ollie and Jack ran to the two drivers to tell them to start moving forwards.

* * *

At the post-mortem, held in the Duck and Puddle most lunchtimes and evenings for the next six months, it was generally agreed that everything would have gone completely to plan if it hadn't been for the two blonde haired, very shapely girls in very tight T-shirts and extremely short shorts who were, at those crucial moments, standing slightly to the right of Thumper's truck.

No one knew who they were or where they had come from (and nor, indeed, where they went to afterwards) but it is generally agreed that what happened next would almost certainly not have happened if they had either not been there or if they had been dressed a little more conservatively – preferably in shapeless, brown boiler suits.

His attention distracted by the two bathukolpian blondes on his right, Thumper accelerated away as though leaving the starting grid in a Grand Prix race. The front two wheels of his truck left the ground for a moment and the back wheels spun furiously, throwing great chunks of grass and soil out behind them. From my vantage point on the edge of the pond I could see Thumper smiling and waving at the two girls, who were smiling and waving back to him. He never once glanced to his left to see what was happening to Patchy, driving Churston's BMW on the other side of the pond.

(Thumper customarily replies to criticism of his behaviour at this point by explaining that a glance to the left would have been of very little use since the passenger side window of his truck had been replaced with cardboard and plastic and he would not, therefore, have been able to see anything anyway.)

Meanwhile, in the BMW, on the other side of the pond, the hapless Patchy was desperately but vainly struggling to keep up with Thumper's progress. His problem was that although the BMW was an exceedingly powerful motor car it was lighter and less powerful than Thumper's truck. It was also a two wheel drive motor car and it was slipping and sliding sideways on the still damp grass.

The rope which connected the two metal leviathans dipped into the pond, disappeared for a moment and then surfaced again as Thumper's truck roared ahead and veered a little towards the two blondes. I watched, aghast, as the rope between the two vehicles leapt upwards out of the water and rapidly tightened and I then watched, quite utterly helpless, as Patchy struggled to control Churston's motor car. It was clear within seconds that Patchy was losing the battle. The back end of the BMW swung round and, with Patchy Fogg now a helpless passenger inside it, slid backwards and sideways into the pond.

The splash the car made when it hit the water soaked most of the tourists. There was probably only one person within a mile who neither heard the splash nor knew what was going on and that was Thumper. As his powerful truck towed Churston's shiny BMW deeper and deeper into the pond Thumper continued to drive on regardless, waving and smiling at the two girls.

He insisted later that when the two girls started to jump up and down and point towards the pond he thought they were excited because the rope was dragging some submerged trophy from the previously uninvestigated depths of the pond.

Patchy was never in any danger. He slid back the sun roof (later commenting that he was impressed with the ease and speed with which it moved), climbed out onto the roof and half dived and half jumped into the pond just as the car sank into the mud.

It was at this point that Thumper started to slow down; not because he had realised that anything was wrong but simply because he had realised that the rope should, by that time, have travelled all the way through the pond, bringing with it whatever debris it had accumulated on its journey. He slowed down, put on his handbrake and climbed out of the cab of his truck, grinning and waving at the crowd in general and the two buxom girls in particular.

The look on his face when he saw what had happened was priceless. His first thought was for Patchy and he dived straight into the pond without hesitating. By this time, however, Patchy was standing on the bank cursing. Once he had discovered that his friend was safe (if wet), an equally wet Thumper climbed back into his truck and pulled Churston's BMW backwards out of the pond.

The car was, of course, completely full of water and the inside was soaked and covered with weed. A tourist with an expensive looking camera took several photographs of a large perch swimming around in the rear of the car.

'What's the matter?' asked Thumper, his sense of humour and bonhomie slightly dented now. 'Haven't you ever seen a fish in a car before?'

We opened the doors and let the water and fish out and then did our best to scrape the mud and weed from the leather upholstery. By the time Churston returned, his car was shiny and sparkling and from the outside it was difficult to tell that it had just been through a terrible ordeal. It looked, indeed, as though it had just been washed.

'Golly, lads, that was very decent of you?' said Churston, admiring his still dripping car. 'What good chaps you are!'

He opened the car door and swung inside in one single, smooth movement, without bothering to look what he was doing or where he was sitting. He sat down with a tremendous squelch. A frog leapt out from underneath his seat and jumped out through the open roof. A split second later Churston leapt out, though, in contrast to the frog, he came through the door. 'What on earth have you done to my car?' Churston demanded, rather hysterically.

'I'm afraid we forgot to shut your car roof when we took it through the car wash,' said Patchy apologetically.

With more caution this time Churston climbed back into his soaking motor car. To our surprise it started first time when he turned the key.

'Good advert for Mercedes,' said Wayne. We all looked at him.

'It's a BMW,' explained Patchy.

'Ah.' said Wayne.

Churston put his car into gear and slowly drove off down the road. A pile of soggy weed fell onto the road with a splodgy sort of noise.

'Try your brakes!' called Thumper. 'They might be a bit

Damp.'

As Churston disappeared, Malcolm Eggington, local reporter and photographer for the *Barnstaple, Bideford and Bilbury Herald* pedalled furiously into view.

'Hello, chaps!' he cried breathlessly. 'I heard you were cleaning out the village pond. Thought it might make a nice little story for this week's paper. Have I missed anything?'

* * *

Having wheeled my bicycle up to the house and dealt with the little mail which was waiting for me, (a telephone bill, a final rates demand and an unsolicited letter from a publisher I had never heard of offering to sell me a magazine subscription at a massive discount simply because my very special name had been drawn out of a computerised hat) I swapped my Wellington boots for a more comfortable pair of shoes and, assuming that Patsy was somewhere in the garden with Mr Parfitt, I set off to look for her.

But Patsy wasn't in the vegetable garden and Mr Parfitt, who was busy picking runner beans, said he had seen her heading down towards the lake an hour or so earlier.

'I know it's none of my business,' he said, taking his cap off and running his fingers through his hair, 'but I thought she looked a little under the weather. Is she all right?'

I said that as far as I was aware Patsy was fine but that we were both upset because of Emily. Mr Parfitt said he quite understood and that if there was anything he could do to help, we only had to ask him. I said that was very kind of him and headed off in search of Patsy. I was worried. It wasn't like Patsy to wander off without saying where she was going.

A few minutes later I was walking down a narrow path between two huge twelve foot high rhododendron bushes when I heard sobbing from somewhere on my right; a spot by the lake where there was, I knew, a wooden bench. I hurried along the path, turned right, turned left, cut through a clump of smaller rhododendron and fuchsia bushes and saw Patsy sitting on the bench sobbing her heart out. I paused for a moment, uncertain about whether or not to make my presence known, and then realised that I had to do or say something. Choosing to do both I said her name and walked slowly towards her. As she looked up I could see that Patsy's face was streaked by tears. Her eyes were red and puffy and she had quite clearly been crying for some considerable time. I sat down beside her and put my arm around her. As soon as I did so she threw her arms around me and started sobbing uncontrollably.

'We'll find her!' I said. 'Or she'll find us.'

'I know she will,' said Patsy at last. She spoke very quietly.

I held her to me for several long, long moments. But the crying didn't stop. Slowly, I don't know how, I came to realise that she wasn't just crying about our missing cat.

'It isn't just about Emily is it?'

Patsy didn't move for a while.

'There's something else, isn't there?'

Patsy didn't reply.

'Please tell me.'

'I feel so guilty about the way I feel,' sobbed Patsy. She looked up at me but still said nothing.

'Please tell me,' I said again.

‘I don’t want you to go away,’ she said. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I know you want to go. And you must go. It’s a wonderful opportunity. But I’ll miss you terribly.’

‘Is that what you’re crying about?’

She nodded.

I held her even tighter to me, kissed her hair and then started to laugh. ‘You daft thing!’ I said. ‘I don’t want to go! It’s the last thing in the world I want to do.’ I pulled a handkerchief from my pocket and handed it to her.

Patsy looked up at me. ‘But then...why?’ She dabbed at her eyes with the handkerchief.

‘Because I thought you wanted me to do it so that we wouldn’t have so many money worries!’

‘I only said I wanted you to go because I thought you really wanted to go!’ said Patsy. ‘I thought you didn’t like to say you wanted to go because you thought I didn’t want you to go and so I said I wanted you to go – even though I didn’t – so that you wouldn’t feel bad about going!’

Patsy dried her eyes and blew her nose and then we both cried a bit more and then we laughed and told each other how silly we both were and then we walked slowly back to the house and on the way Mr Parfitt stopped us and told us that a man in a dark suit was waiting for us in the courtyard and that he wouldn’t say what he wanted but that he had said that he wouldn’t go away until he saw me.

The stranger in the dark suit turned out to be a process server hired by a firm of London solicitors.

When we asked him how he’d got into the grounds he said he’d come in through the front gate with the postman but I knew that was a lie. He asked me my name and then handed me a long, brown envelope. Then he just walked away towards the front gate.

The London solicitors had been hired by Caldwell West and the envelope contained several pages of legal gobbledygook which, as far as I could make out, was partly designed to let me know that Mr Caldwell West was suing me for a sum of money with a lot of noughts on the end of it and partly designed to frighten me half to death. It succeeded on both counts.

I sighed and put the envelope and the letter down on the kitchen table. ‘I can only cope with one problem at a time,’ I told Patsy. ‘And I can’t cope with even one problem at a time without a cup of tea. If you’ll put the kettle on I’ll telephone Avril Pottington, thank her very much and tell her that I don’t want the job.’

* * *

There was an impressive turn out at the Bilbury village hall that evening. Churston had put up a poster or two around the village but they hadn’t really been necessary. Looking around the crowded room it seemed that just about everyone in Bilbury had turned up to help settle the fate of the conker trees. Listening to people talk it seemed clear that the village was divided about the future of the trees.

Many, myself and Patsy included, felt that the trees were an integral part of Bilbury village green. More than that, we felt that we had no right to cut them down just because of a silly complaint from a visiting American.

But there were those, and it seemed to Patsy and I that they were in a minority, who felt that Bilbury had to move with the times and that if that meant that if a few horse chestnut trees had to be sacrificed then that was simply the price of progress – particularly if leaving the trees where they were was going to mean lawsuits for the village.

At the start of the meeting it was announced by Josh, the chairman of the Council that Dr Brownlow would speak for the trees, and newcomer Churston, recently co-opted onto the Parish Council, would then follow him and explain why the trees had to be sacrificed for the good of the village, and that the destiny of the trees would then be decided by a vote.

Dr Brownlow got a terrific reception when he got to his feet to speak. It had been some time since he had retired as the village’s general practitioner but I don’t think there was a soul in the village hall who didn’t know and love him dearly.

I thought that he looked rather tired and I suspected that the changes he was seeing in the village he loved so much were beginning to have an effect on his health. He wore an elderly, rather frayed tweed suit. The jacket had leather elbow patches and the trousers were baggy at the knees and slightly too long for him.

‘I have lived in this village for most of my life,’ began Dr Brownlow. He spoke quietly but everyone wanted to hear what he had to say and the silence meant that his words could be heard clearly in every corner of the hall. ‘I honestly believe that this is one of the most important decisions we have ever had to take in this village. These horse chestnut trees are an important part of this village. They have been here longer than any of us – including even Josh Wilkins.’ There was considerable laughter at this and cries of ‘not possible’ were heard from several parts of the hall. ‘Each one of those trees is more a part of Bilbury than any single one of us,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘What right do we have to cut them down?’

‘But this meeting and this decision is about more than a few trees,’ went on Dr Brownlow. ‘It’s about our whole future; it’s about the way we look at our village and the way we think of it.’

‘If you vote to let Churston and his supporters chop down the Bilbury horse chestnut trees then you’re voting to throw away the past and say 'goodbye' forever to the Bilbury we know. If we allow these trees to go then we're saying that the tourists who come here are more important than the village itself. We are saying that we are prepared to sell our heritage and destroy the very heart of the village simply to keep the tourists happy. And what will be next? What will be the next landmark to go? Will they want to knock down the thatched cottages around the village green and build a multi-storey hotel there?'

There was much mumbling at this, particularly from the villagers who lived in the thatched cottages around the village green.

'The real irony is that if we allow the developers to change our village what will be left? Will the tourists still want to come here? I rather suspect that it is the trees and the hedgerows and the streams that attract people to our village. If we cut down all the trees and get rid of the hedgerows what will be left? Will people come from America to look at our tree stumps and our car parks? I doubt it. Those trees are an important part of our village. Let's vote for their continued survival.'

The end of Dr Brownlow's speech was greeted with sustained applause and a good deal of very noisy cheering.

It was then Churston's turn to speak.

Churston and Dr Brownlow were complete opposites. Whereas Dr Brownlow wore an elderly tweed suit Churston wore a smart, three piece grey silk suit. Dr Brownlow wore a badly knotted green knitted tie but Churston wore a red silk tie which was knotted perfectly and which matched the red silk handkerchief in his breast pocket.

And Churston's speech to the people of Bilbury was very different to Dr Brownlow's.

Dr Brownlow had been quiet, his voice so soft that everyone present had to strain their ears to hear him properly, Churston spoke loudly and confidently and his voice boomed around the tiny village hall as though he were using a microphone. Dr Brownlow's speech had been honest, simple and emotional and had been aimed at the hearts of his listeners. Dr Brownlow had stood still, and spoken without moving. Churston walked about the stage like a performer working hard to entrance an audience.

When the newcomer stood up to speak, holding a sheaf of papers and an impressive looking black plastic clipboard in front of him, he was greeted with respect and scattered, polite applause. He was treated with respect but, not surprisingly perhaps, there was none of the affection that had greeted Dr Brownlow.

'I understand Dr Brownlow's point of view,' he began. 'And to a very large extent I agree with him. I certainly wouldn't want to change the nature of the village. I love Bilbury. I think it's a wonderful place. I know I haven't been here long, and some of you don't yet know me very well, but I'm a country lover at heart. And I feel enormously privileged to have an opportunity to do what I can to help you to preserve the village which we all love so much.'

'Very impressive so far,' murmured Patchy quietly. Patchy and Thumper were standing next to Patsy and I. Stunned, I raised an eyebrow and looked at Patchy in surprise. I thought Churston was a very skilled confidence trickster – but a confidence trickster nevertheless.

'But let's keep this in perspective,' said Churston firmly. He had a gentle, reassuring voice. 'We're talking about just six trees.' He looked around. 'Six trees!' He paused to let this sink in and then looked around before raising his voice and continuing. 'Six trees that are threatening your financial health and standing in the way of the village's future prosperity!' he told us, dramatically, waving an index finger.

'Our first problem is that if we leave those trees where they are then the village will have to find thousands of pounds to fight a lawsuit from a very rich and very litigious American.'

Churston held up a thick, legal document which looked suspiciously like the one I had received earlier that day. 'This is a writ,' he announced dramatically. 'I am reliably informed that if we apologise unreservedly and have those trees chopped down then the legal action will be stopped at no cost to any of us.' He paused again. 'But if we insist on keeping those few trees then the village will have to increase its annual rates by several hundred percent. Is that what you want? Are you all prepared to pay out good money to save those trees?' He looked around the hall after he had asked this question. There was much murmuring and shaking of heads.

'But there's another reason to cut down those trees!' went on Churston. 'If it was just a question of money then I'd probably side with Dr Brownlow. 'I'd probably vote to save the trees and pay the price.' He walked forwards to the front of the stage. 'But we can't live in the past. And if you care about the future prosperity of Bilbury – if you care about your children's future – then I honestly don't think you have a choice.'

Churston looked at his audience, carefully and sternly. 'Do you care about your children's future?' he asked them.

There was silence.

'Do you care about your children? The future?' he asked again, louder this time.

'Yes!' cried a voice from somewhere in the hall. 'I do.'

'Of course we do!' cried another.

And then there were other murmurings and shouts of 'yes'.

‘Then you have to accept and understand that Bilbury’s future lies in tourism,’ Churston told the audience simply. ‘It is the only way forward for the village. At present Bilbury is an anachronism; it is a piece of living history. But the village is dying. It is simply no longer possible for villages like Bilbury to survive unless they are prepared to change and to accommodate the needs of the tourist industry. In order to make sure that our children have employment, in order to make sure that we all have food on our tables and in order to make sure that we can maintain the infrastructure of the village we have to move with the times.’

‘I like living in an anachronism,’ whispered Patsy.

‘So do I,’ I whispered back.

‘And I don’t feel as though Bilbury is dying,’ she added.

‘It isn’t!’ I whispered.

‘What has happened to Bilbury in the last few days has been the best thing that could possibly have happened to us!’ went on Churston Ferrers. ‘You couldn’t buy the publicity we have had. A couple of weeks ago Bilbury was nothing; no one had heard of it and no one wanted to come here. But today Bilbury is the hottest spot on the tourism map. There are holiday firms all over Europe planning to bring coach loads of people here. If we take advantage of our good fortune then we will guarantee our own prosperity, the prosperity of our children and the long-term survival of the village.’

‘Of course all this will mean that there will have to be a few changes. A few changes are unavoidable. You can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs. A few trees will have to be chopped down. A few car parks will be needed. But all of you will have a real chance to become rich as Bilbury grows and expands and becomes better and better known around the world.’

Churston studied his clipboard. ‘We don’t have to do much,’ he said. ‘I certainly don’t want to change Bilbury very much. After all, we have to remember that people are coming here because they like Bilbury the way it is. But Bilbury desperately and urgently needs a central car park, an information kiosk for visitors and new public lavatories. Those three are absolutely vital. And if we get rid of those trees it will be possible to provide those essential facilities without knocking down any homes. Would you rather see houses knocked down? Or a few trees?’

‘Here are the three big questions you must ask yourself when considering your vote today!’

Churston put down the clipboard he had been holding and held up three fingers of his left hand He touched the ring finger on his left hand with the forefinger of his right hand. ‘Do you want to pay out a great deal of money to defend those trees in court? I can’t tell you how much it will cost. But we could easily have a bill running into many thousands of pounds. And that could bankrupt us all!’

He looked around the hall to give people time to think about this, and then touched the middle finger of his left hand with his right forefinger. ‘Do you care about the future of this village and do you want your children to have a future here?’ he asked, glowering at the audience as he did so, almost daring people to answer: ‘No’.

‘And third,’ he said, touching his right forefinger against his left forefinger. ‘Do you want to see Bilbury homes knocked down so that those trees can be saved?’

‘Think carefully before you answer because those are all important questions. If you don’t want to go bankrupt saving those trees, and would rather see the trees be chopped down than see houses knocked down and if you care about the village and your children then you have to vote with me for those trees to be taken down. It’s a sad thing to have to do but I don’t really think we have a choice.’

I was appalled by the way Churston was trying to manipulate the villagers and swing the vote in his favour and was about to say so when Thumper, who was standing close by me, whispered in my ear. ‘I came here absolutely determined to vote for the trees,’ he said, scratching his head. ‘And Dr Brownlow had me convinced. But I’m not so sure now. What do you reckon?’

‘Oh Thumper!’ I said, feeling very impatient with him. ‘Don’t let yourself be persuaded by all that trickery! How do we know that saving those trees is going to cost a fortune? How can anyone take the village to court because it won’t chop down half a dozen conker trees? It’s nonsense to say that if we don’t chop down those trees then the only alternative is to knock down houses. And it’s not true to say that Bilbury has no future unless it opens its arms to tourism! Bilbury was doing fine before that damned article appeared!’

Thumper looked at me uncertainly, and in that terrible moment I knew that Churston was going to win the vote. ‘He was very convincing...,’ he said, hesitantly. He looked at me. ‘Are you still voting with Dr Brownlow?’

‘I certainly am!’ I said.

‘Me too,’ added Patsy, who had heard Thumper and was looking at him and waiting for his final decision.

‘I’d trust you and Dr Brownlow with my life. I certainly trust you both a hell of a lot more than I trust Churston,’ sighed Thumper.’ I really don’t know what to think but I’ll certainly vote with you.’

But I knew it wasn’t enough. Josh, the chairman of the Council was already calling for a vote. And in my heart I knew that Churston had tricked enough people in the room into believing his argument.

Ten minutes later my worst fears were realised. Churston had won the vote by 197 votes to 154: a majority of 43. In my heart I was surprised that those of us who supported Dr Brownlow had done as well as we had.

'Thank you very much for your attention,' said the chairman as the meeting ended. 'Churston tells me that he'll be making the arrangements for the six horse chestnut trees to be cut down as soon as possible.'

Dr Brownlow was inconsolable and there wasn't a smile to be seen in the Duck and Puddle afterwards.

'We've got to do something about this,' said my former employer as we walked away from the village hall.

'But what?' I asked.

'This business about the Bilbury water curing arthritis and making people live longer is a lot of nonsense,' said Dr Brownlow.

'You must be making a fortune,' I said, teasingly.

'I don't want to make a fortune,' said Dr Brownlow baldly. 'I wish someone would expose this stuff about our water curing arthritis for the nonsense it is. I'd happily close my bottling plant down to save Bilbury from these philistines but it won't make any difference. There are already half a dozen people with springs bottling their own water.'

An idea had popped into my head. 'Do you mean that?' I asked him.

Dr Brownlow looked at me, slightly puzzled. 'Of course I do,' he said. 'Bill Yates, Dave Tranter and Wally Peters are all bottling water off their land.'

'Not that,' I said, rather impatiently. 'Do you really wish someone would expose that stuff about our water being good for arthritis as nonsense.'

'Yes, of course I do!' said Dr Brownlow. He looked at me. 'Why?'

'I've got an idea,' I said.' I just wanted to be sure about how you felt.'

Dr Brownlow moved a little closer. 'You can do anything you like that gets rid of these damned tourists!' he whispered. 'I found six of them camping on my tennis lawn yesterday and they were eating vegetables they'd picked from my garden!'

He sighed and thought for a moment. 'If we expose it as a lot of nonsense then maybe the tourists will stop coming and things will get back to normal,' he said quietly. Neither of us said anything for a moment. And then Dr Brownlow looked at me. 'What have you got in mind?'

'I could try to find someone to do some tests for us.'

'Water tests?'

I nodded.

'You don't think an independent scientist would find anything special in Bilbury's water?'

'I certainly don't.'

'Nor do I,' agreed Dr Brownlow.

'And if that became widely known Bilbury would get back to normal quite quickly.'

'I think so.'

'What an absolutely splendid idea,' said Dr Brownlow. He smiled at me. 'What an absolutely splendid idea!' he repeated.

On my way back to Bilbury Grange I was stopped by a man with a bicycle. It was Malcolm Eggington, local reporter and photographer for the *Barnstaple, Bideford and Bilbury Herald*.

'I'm sorry I'm a bit late,' he said. 'I had a puncture. I believe you had a meeting in the village hall this evening. Did anything happen?'

* * *

CHAPTER TEN

Everything seemed to be going wrong. My book had lost its publisher, Emily was missing and Bilbury had been invaded by tourists. I was being sued by an American, I had turned down my only offer of employment and I didn't have the faintest idea where I was going to find the money to pay next month's mortgage.

Things looked pretty bleak and at that moment I could see nothing but clouds on the horizon. Our worries about Emily made everything else seem insignificant by comparison but there was no escape from the fact that our anxieties about money were very real. We didn't talk about it but we both knew that unless something turned up quickly we would not be able to stay at Bilbury Grange for much longer.

Feeling really gloomy I made a telephone call and spoke to the wife of a doctor I had known when I'd been a medical student and who was now working in a public health research laboratory in Exeter. I asked if it would be possible to see him. She told me that he was at home because he wasn't very well but that she thought he would be pleased to see me. She said that since he wasn't going anywhere it didn't really matter what time I arrived. I said I'd be there sometime late that same afternoon.

* * *

It is amazing how often in life it happens that as one door closes another will open. The door that has closed may have been a large and important one and the one that opens may be so small that it lets in only a single ray of light but that small ray of light can often be the start of something much more significant and it is the hope it gives, the surge of optimism it inspires which is so important. I had no way of knowing at the time but the knock on the back door that interrupted what threatened to be a drift into self-pity would have a tremendous influence on our future.

I opened the back door and, to my surprise and annoyance found myself face to face with a grinning Jack Ladd. The by now all too familiar newspaperman was standing on the step, his hat on the back of his head and his notebook and a copy of a newspaper stuffed untidily into his jacket pocket 'I suppose you came over the fields again?' I asked him.

'Over the fields,' he agreed, completely without embarrassment. 'Your front gate is still locked,' he added as an explanation.

'It's locked to keep people out,' I explained dryly.

'Very sensible too! The lane outside your house was absolutely packed with tourists earlier today. I couldn't get through. I don't know where they all keep coming from.'

'Who is it?' asked Patsy from behind me.

'A reporter,' I answered.

'Ladd!' the reporter called out, leaning forwards so that Patsy could hear him. 'Jack Ladd. I'm from the *Sunday Globe*.'

'Would you like a cup of tea?' called Patsy. 'I've just put the kettle on.'

'Very kind of you!' answered the reporter instantly. He put a foot up onto the doorstep and had squeezed past me before I could stop him. He took his hat off and looked around him at our huge Aga, the scrubbed pine table and chairs, the Victorian laundry rails suspended from the ceiling and the basket of onions and bundles of herbs which Patsy had hung from meat hooks attached to the beams which crossed the ceiling.

'Lovely kitchen!' said Jack Ladd, admiringly. 'I love oldfashioned kitchens. Did you grow the onions yourselves?'

I said we had. He said he had always dreamt of having a little place in the country where he could grow vegetables and get away from the hurly burly of city life. He and I then sat down at the kitchen table while Patsy made the tea.

'Tea or coffee?' Patsy asked, interrupting apologetically.

'Whatever you're making, dear!' said the reporter.

'You can have whatever you want!'

'Well then I'll have a nice cup of tea if you don't mind.'

'Milk?'

'Yes, please.'

'Sugar?'

'Two please,' he replied, turning to me. 'Did your book do well?'

'Not terribly well, I'm afraid, 'I confessed. 'There's a paperback coming out later this year. But there doesn't seem to be much of a market for that sort of book.'

'Have you done much newspaper writing? Articles? Features? That sort of thing?'

'I write a syndicated column for a few local newspapers. And I wrote one or two features when my book came out.’

‘Who for?’

‘*The Guardian* and *The Observer*,’ I replied, rather proudly.

Jack Ladd nodded wisely but said nothing.

Patsy put two cups of tea on the table in front of us.

‘It occurred to me a day or two ago that you’d be just the chap to write an article for us about Bilbury!’

‘For the *Sunday Globe*?’

‘Absolutely! I rang our features editor chap called Jenkins, a real gentleman, you’ll like him – and he’s terribly excited about the idea! He tried to ring you.’

‘Didn’t you ring him back?’ Patsy asked me.

‘I forgot, ‘I admitted. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said to Jack Ladd. ‘What sort of article did you have in mind?’

‘HOW TO LIVE TO BE 100! BY THE BILBURY DOCTOR!’ replied the reporter, writing out the headline in the air between us with the forefinger of his right hand. ‘Very topical – with everyone talking about how healthy it is to live in Bilbury.’

I looked at him, slightly alarmed. ‘I couldn’t do that!’ I told him immediately.

‘Why on earth not?’

‘Well, for one thing I don’t practise medicine any more,’ I explained.

‘You’re still a doctor aren’t you?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘And you live in Bilbury?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘And you used to be Bilbury’s GP?’

‘Yes.’

‘So, what’s the problem?’ Mr Ladd took a sip of his tea and leant forward. ‘There isn’t a paper in Fleet Street pays better than *The Globe*!’ he said. ‘And if they’re pleased with this piece I’ve no doubt they’d want more.’

I looked at Patsy and thought about what he’d said. We certainly needed the money. Patsy just smiled at me and with a glance made it clear that it was up to me to decide what to do. I knew that whatever I decided she would support me. ‘But how can I possibly tell people how to live to be 100?’

‘Some people live to be 100!’

‘Yes, that’s true.’

‘But most people don’t.’

‘No.’

‘So, why do most people NOT live to be 100?’ he asked me.

I thought about the question for a moment. ‘Usually because they smoke too much, drink too much, take too little exercise and eat too much of the wrong things!’ I answered.

‘Exactly!’ replied Jack Ladd, smacking the table with his fist. The mugs of tea jumped up off the table, spilling a little. Mr Ladd wiped up the small puddle with his jacket sleeve. ‘You’ll be doing the nation a great service!’ he said. ‘When you were practising as a doctor didn’t you tell your patients about those things?’

‘Of course I did.’

‘So what’s the difference between telling people one at a time and telling several million of them all at once?’

I couldn’t think of a sensible answer to that so I said nothing.

‘Great!’ said the reporter. ‘Will you come up to London with me tomorrow? The paper will pay all your expenses of course.’

‘London?’

‘Jenkins would like to meet you and talk over the feature. You can sort out the business side of things with him.’ He paused as though something awful had just occurred to him. ‘You don’t have one of those literary agents do you?’

Still in rather a daze I shook my head.

‘That’s good. Much better to deal with things yourself.’ He stood up. ‘Thanks for the tea, love,’ he said to Patsy. ‘Lovely cuppa.’ He picked up his hat and put it on.

‘Thank you,’ said Patsy. ‘You must come back and have tea with us if you’re ever in Bilbury again.’

‘I’ll take you up on that!’ promised the reporter, heading for the back door.

‘Where shall I meet you?’ I asked him.

‘Oh I’ll pick you up on my way to the station,’ said Jack Ladd. ‘I’m staying in Barnstaple and I’ll get a taxi to take us to the railway station in Taunton.’

‘That’ll cost a fortune!’ I warned him. ‘If you get the taxi to drop you off here I’ll drive us both to the station.

Then I can drive back from Taunton in the evening.'

We agreed on this. And I then walked down the drive with the reporter so that I could let him out through the front gate. There was a nose to tail traffic jam in the lane and a steady stream of pedestrians filed along each side of the stationary vehicles. Many of them stopped to peer through the gates as I opened them. I thought how fortunate it was that they didn't have the initiative of Jack Ladd or our home and garden would have been swarming with tourists all day long.

'I bet you have mixed feelings about your village's popularity!' said Jack Ladd.

'You could say that,' I replied, wryly.

'See you in the morning!' he said. He winked and sauntered off down the lane in the direction of the village and, I assumed, the nearest bar: the one at the Duck and Puddle.

Once he had gone I went back to the house, and got the car. I had some driving to do.

* * *

The lane outside Bilbury Grange was, as always, choked with traffic. But since it was still early in the day most of it was heading into Bilbury rather than out of Bilbury and once I'd managed to get along our single track lane and out onto what we called the main road (it was wide enough for traffic to travel in two directions at the same time and did not have any grass growing down the middle) my side of the road became quite clear.

I hadn't seen Dr Jones for two or possibly three years and I wasn't even sure that he would remember me but after a good deal of thought I had decided that he would be the best person to do the water tests that I wanted doing. He was short-tempered, humourless and very, very pernickety. I didn't particularly like him but he would, I knew, write an honest and entirely accurate scientific appraisal of Bilbury's water.

Mrs Jones had given me excellent instructions when I had telephoned and I found their house in Exmouth without any difficulty. It was a huge, Victorian building in a quiet road full of similar houses. There was a high, slightly dilapidated fence across the front of a small garden. Through the gate, which was open, I could see that the shrubbery badly needed attention and the lawn needed cutting. The house was rendered and the rendering was cracked in many places. The woodwork needed painting but painting it would have been rather a waste of time since most of it was rotten.

But although the house itself had known much better days the view was undoubtedly just as marvellous as it had been when the house had first been built. From the driveway I could clearly see the huge stretch of golden yellow sands for which Exmouth is justly famous. And beyond the sand the sea; calm and a beautiful green-blue.

I rang the doorbell but heard nothing and so after a few moments I hammered on the door knocker. A short, rather overweight, harassed looking woman wearing an old-fashioned pinafore eventually answered the door. I gave my name and asked if she was Mrs Jones. She said she was and told me that she was pleased to see me because it would be nice for her husband to have a visitor.

'Would you like a cup of tea?' she asked, as she led the way up the stairs. I thanked her, said I would, and wondered whether her husband had a study upstairs or whether he was perhaps so poorly that he was in bed.

'What's wrong with Dr Jones?' I asked. Since I had known him when I had been a mere medical student our relationship had been a mixture of formal and informal. He always called me by my Christian name and I always called him Dr Jones.

'It's his back,' explained Mrs Jones. 'He's put it out.'

'Oh dear,' I said, with what I hoped sounded like a suitably sympathetic tone. 'I am sorry.'

Mrs Jones stopped in the middle of the landing directly in front of a wooden ladder. I looked up. The hatch into the roof space was open and the top of the ladder had disappeared through the open hatch space. There was a length of electric cable hanging down through the opening. The plug at the bottom of the cable was plugged into an electrical socket in the wall. The opening into the roof space was very small.

'He's up there,' she said, simply. 'I'll bring your tea in a few minutes. I expect Clifford will want one too.'

I looked upwards. 'In the loft?' I asked, rather stupidly.

'He was up there laying some insulation when he did his back in,' she explained. 'He can't straighten up and so he can't get down. The doctor suggested he just stays up there until he feels a bit more mobile.' She then squeezed past me and headed off back down the stairs.

I climbed rather gingerly up the ladder. It wasn't a very good ladder and one rung had already been broken during a previous ascent. When I'd got to the top I peered through the open hatch. An electrical cable was hanging from several nails hammered into the rafters and at the far end of it a naked bulb hung, illuminating a small area of the loft space. The bulb was a small one and it didn't seem to provide a great deal of illumination. I could just see the figure of a man lying on a makeshift bed made of rugs and cushions spread out on half a dozen lengths of board.

'Dr Jones?' I called out rather hesitantly. During my years as a general practitioner I had visited many patients in their homes but I had never before visited a patient in a loft.

‘Make sure you tread on the beams,’ replied the distant figure, rather sharply. ‘Or you’ll put your foot through the ceiling.’ Dr Jones had never had a particularly pleasant personality. Being stuck in his loft with a bad back didn’t seem to have added anything to his unimpressive repertoire of social graces.

With considerable difficulty I managed to squeeze myself through the hole into the loft. ‘I wonder why they always make these gaps so small,’ I murmured. ‘Maybe they only used to send up the boys who used to clean chimneys.’

‘Do I know you?’ demanded the distant figure, ignoring my rhetorical questions.

I explained who I was. ‘You taught me a few times when I was a medical student.’ I added.

‘Oh,’ said the figure, sounding rather disappointed.

I had by now managed to pull myself up through the hatch way. Moving very carefully I stepped forwards from beam to beam, holding onto the rafters to balance myself.

‘Over here!’ called Dr Jones, needlessly. My eyes were now pretty much accustomed to poorly lit loft-space and I could see that he had made a fairly comfortable nest for himself out of a few pieces of planking and an assortment of old cushions and blankets.

There didn’t seem much point in struggling to make polite social conversation with a man who was not particularly gifted in that direction, and with whom I had virtually nothing in common, and so I sat myself down on a spare plank and came straight to the point.

Dr Jones accepted the commission with his usual bad grace and assured me that since his family doctor had told him that he would be able to move out of the loft in another day he would be able to perform the necessary tests quite quickly. To avoid any further delay I had the foresight to take with me a two litre sample of Bilbury water in a sterile container.

The journey back to Bilbury seemed to take forever. The roads away from the village were solid with traffic as tourists who had spent the day clogging up our lanes and littering our verges with their unwanted debris headed for home. The final part of my journey was constantly interrupted as I had to reverse back in the direction from which I had just come in order to accommodate motorists dragging caravans and trailers behind them.

By the time I got back to Bilbury Grange I was utterly exhausted. It had, I hoped, been a fruitful journey. When I had locked our front gate behind me and told Patsy what had happened all I wanted was to soak for half an hour in a bath, swallow a little light supper and collapse into bed.

* * *

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The next morning Jack Ladd arrived at six on the dot.

I had been up since five searching the fields and outbuildings, just in case Emily had come home during the night. But there was no sign of her and there had been no response at all to the posters and leaflets I had pinned up on tree trunks and gate posts all over the village of Bilbury, in shops in Barnstaple and in village shops between Bilbury and Barnstaple.

Jack Ladd paid off his taxi driver, a large rather sour-faced man whom I had never seen before, and then we climbed into my elderly motor car and set off for Taunton. At the railway station Jack Ladd bought two first class tickets and we travelled to London at great expense and in considerable style. We sat in the dining car and had breakfast and endless cups of tea while the countryside flashed by outside. It was, I had to admit to myself, a very stylish way to travel.

At Paddington Station in London there was a chauffeurdriven Jaguar motor car waiting for us. Jack introduced me to the driver, a man called Billy, who was the editor's personal chauffeur. Outside the station the London traffic looked busier than ever but Billy drove down side streets and narrow alleyways to avoid the jams. Twenty minutes later we were standing in the foyer of *The Globe* building and five minutes after that a tall, blonde-haired girl in a very short skirt was escorting us into the office of Mr Jenkins, the paper's features editor.

I'd been in one or two other newspaper offices, all belonging to local newspapers, but none of them had been anything like this one. They had been all clutter. Piles of paper and books and dirty coffee cups. This one looked as if the owner had only moved into it that morning. The walls, which were panelled in rich oak boards, were decorated with huge posters advertising forthcoming issues of the *Sunday Globe* and framed front pages of the newspaper itself. There were just five pieces of furniture in the room: a broad shelved, open-fronted bookcase, three chairs and a desk. The top shelf of the bookcase contained half a dozen reference books. The lower shelves were quite empty. The two chairs in front of the desk were cheap stacking chairs – the sort usually found in waiting rooms. The leather-topped desk which dominated the room was probably the biggest I had ever seen. It contained two slightly old-fashioned telephones and a more up-to-date telephone which was equipped with at least a dozen buttons; a single, large sheet of paper which had headlines pencilled in and boxes drawn to show where text and photographs would appear, and a chipped mug full of pencils and pens. Behind the desk was a huge, black leather swivel chair which looked extremely expensive. It looked out of place for the rest of the furniture was cheap and battered. The expensive black, leather chair was empty.

There were two people in the room. In front of the desk there was a bald man in shirt sleeves. His grey suit trousers were held up by broad, bright red braces and he wore the largest bow tie I'd ever seen. He was bending over, scribbling on the sheet of paper on the desk and saying something to the room's other occupant, a tall, broad shouldered, slightly balding man in need of a haircut who was standing behind the desk. This individual, who was I assumed Mr Jenkins, the room's official occupant, had a large moustache and wore two thirds of a smart, three piece pin striped suit. The other third of the suit, the jacket, was hanging on a nail hammered into the panelling behind the desk. The jacket looked expensive and a Savile Row label indicated that the look was not misleading.

The man whom I assumed was Mr Jenkins stood up, smiled and held his hand out across the desk to me. 'Jenkins,' he said, by way of introduction. 'You must be the Bilbury doctor!'

I muttered something appropriate and took his hand. One of the telephones rang and Jenkins picked it up. Listening to the caller he put his hand over the mouthpiece and spoke to me: 'I hope Jack has been looking after you!'

I confirmed that he had.

'Thanks for coming up,' he said quietly, with the telephone still fixed to his ear. 'I'm really excited that you're going to do this piece for us.'

I said I was grateful to him for asking me.

'No, sorry!' said Jenkins, sounding suddenly more formidable than he had a moment ago. 'Can't possibly go above three. Ring me back in five if you want to take it' He put the telephone receiver down and then picked up the telephone which had all the buttons attached to it 'Jane darling,' he said. 'Pop along to accounts and get me a couple of hundred in brown drinking vouchers will you?' He put the telephone down without waiting for an answer.

'Oh, sorry, forgot,' said Jenkins, waving a hand in the direction of the room's other occupant 'Art Young. Our production editor.' He introduced me and explained that he had invited me to write a piece telling the readers of the *Sunday Globe* how to live to be 100.

The telephone rang again. Jenkins picked it up. 'Three? Fine.' He slammed the phone down and spoke to Art Young. 'I've just bought that story on Liz Taylor. It'll make a page. Probably nine or eleven.' He looked at me.

'Sorry about all this,' he said. 'We'll get out of this mad house in a moment I've booked a table at the Savoy. Is that O.K?'

I said that would be fine.

Jack Ladd, who hadn't said a word since we had entered the office, suddenly spoke. He seemed rather in awe of his editor. 'If you don't need me I'll pop along.'

'Thanks Jack!' said Jenkins, with a cheery wave.

The telephone went again. Jenkins picked it up. 'Yes?' he said. He listened for a moment 'No, thanks.' he said. 'But thanks for the offer.' And he put the telephone down again. 'Someone wanted to sell me a story about a vicar and some actress I've never heard of,' he said.

'I thought the *Globe* rather liked stories about vicars and actresses!' I said. Only when I'd said it did I realise that it sounded rather rude.

Jenkins laughed. 'We do,' he admitted. 'But it has to be the right vicar and the right actress – preferably doing the wrong things.'

The tall blonde girl with the long legs and the very short skirt appeared in the office and handed an impressive-looking wad of ten pound notes to Mr Jenkins. 'This is Jane,' he said, introducing the girl to me. 'She thinks we hired her because she's got a first in modern languages from Cambridge but we hired her because of her legs.' Once again he introduced me as the Bilbury doctor who was going to write a feature for the paper.

'Right,' he said, taking his coat down from the nail. 'Let's go and have some lunch!'

* * *

Jenkins was clearly a regular diner at the Savoy. The head waiter met us with a broad smile and escorted us to a table overlooking the river. Looking around I was glad I'd put on my jacket and a tie. I had a strong suspicion that I would have not been allowed into the restaurant wearing anything more casual.

'I liked your book,' said Jenkins, after we had ordered food. 'Claret O.K?'

I was surprised at the compliment and muttered something appropriate. 'Claret would be lovely.'

Jenkins ordered a bottle of something that was undoubtedly extremely expensive. 'We'll mention it when you do your piece for us,' he said.

I started to thank him but he held up a hand. 'It'll give you 'gravitas',' he said. 'So it's a help to us as much as it is to you.' He took a bite from a brown roll which he had taken from the bread basket the waiter had offered to us. 'What articles have you written before?'

I told him about my syndicated column and about the articles I'd written for *The Guardian* and *The Observer*.

He nodded. 'That's good,' he said. 'But you haven't done anything for a mass market tabloid?'

The wine waiter arrived, showed a bottle to Jenkins and then drew the cork.

I shook my head.

'It's a knack he told me. 'You'll probably find it a bit tricky to start with. Do you ever read the *Sunday Globe*?'

The wine waiter poured an inch of wine into the feature editor's glass. Jenkins waved a hand to tell the waiter to just pour the wine.

I hesitated. 'I haven't seen it recently,' I admitted at last.

The features editor smiled at me. 'You've never really read it all the way through, have you?' He sipped at his wine and nodded appreciatively.

'I have seen it,' I protested, slightly embarrassed.

'What do you think?'·

I looked at him, confused and embarrassed.

'The wine.' he explained.

'Oh,' I said, relieved. I picked up my glass and took a sip. It was like drinking rich velvet. I'd never tasted such a smooth wine before. 'Wonderful!' I said.

'I'll give you a couple of recent copies of the paper and I'd like you to read them all the way through on the way home,' he said. 'You'll see that we have a very definite style of our own. You must keep the sentences and paragraphs short but you must avoid being patronising. Keep it sharp, bright and witty but never write down to people.'

'You make it sound as though writing for the *Sunday Globe* is more difficult than writing for the other papers.'

'I think it is,' replied Mr Ladd, quite seriously. 'When you write for us you're writing for a very large audience. And it's a very special kind of writing.' He smiled at me. 'That's why we pay a lot more than the other papers.'

I was still listening to him but over his shoulder I had suddenly seen something which puzzled me. Jenkins paused and for a while there was silence. 'Have you seen something?' he asked suddenly, lowering his voice slightly.

I hesitated for a moment. 'I'm sorry,' I apologised, hauling my attention back to the man across the table from me. 'There are two people I know at a table across the room,' I explained. 'I'm just a bit surprised to see them together.'

Jenkins said nothing but waited for me to continue.

'One of them is a man called Churston,' I went on. 'He lives in Bilbury and has just been co-opted onto the Parish Council. The other is an American called Caldwell West who is suing me because I picked up a stick that some boys used to get conkers out of a tree on the village green. I don't know who the third man is. I feel I ought to know him but I can't remember his name.'

Jenkins looked at me and raised a questioning eyebrow. 'Why on earth is an American suing you because you picked up a stick?'

I explained to him what had happened.

'It's a nuisance suit,' nodded Jenkins. 'They obviously just want to frighten you.'

I stared across the room and frowned. 'I wish I knew what they were talking about!'

'Go to the gents!' said Jenkins suddenly. He spoke quietly but firmly.

'I beg your pardon?'

'Go to the loo. Go and buy a paper. Comb your hair.' He waved a hand about as though to hurry me up and to make it clear that it didn't matter what I did or where I went. 'Just leave the table for a minute or so.'

I didn't understand what was going on but Jenkins was so insistent that I did as he told me. I went into the foyer, picked up a hotel brochure, watched a plump, middle aged woman in a lime green coat imperiously giving instructions to half a dozen porters carrying her cases, walked around for what seemed like a minute and then returned to the restaurant and to our table. Jenkins, nibbling on another bread roll, was sitting in my chair. I hesitated for an instant and then sat down.

'Have you ever heard of a man called George Nympton?'

I stared at Jenkins. 'Yes, of course. He's the chap who wrote the first article about Bilbury. Why?' As I spoke two waiters arrived; one put a fresh tomato salad down in front of me and the other put a plateful of whitebait down before Jenkins. They seemed to take for ever, tidying up cutlery and checking that we had everything we needed.

'He's the third man, the guy talking to your Councillor friend and the American,' said Jenkins when they had gone. Jenkins seemed hypnotised by the three men on the table at the other side of the room. He hadn't taken his eyes off them.

I had been confused before. But the sense of confusion I had felt then was nothing compared to the sense of confusion I now felt. 'Are you sure?' I asked, pouring olive oil and vinegar onto my tomatoes. I suddenly remembered Frank's description of George Nympton: 'short, fat and wearing a bright red wig'. That was why I thought I had recognised him.

Jenkins smiled. 'I've known George for years,' he said.

'Oh.' I sipped at my wine. It went down very easily.

'He writes full time for the *Planet* now but when he was a freelance he always used to hang around trying to sell me stuff. I would never buy anything from him. I didn't trust him.' Even though Jenkins was talking to me he still didn't look at me. It wasn't like him.

'Why?'

'Why didn't I trust him?'

'Yes.' The wine waiter appeared from nowhere and re-filled my glass. I looked up at him and smiled and then took another sip. I'd never tasted wine that slipped down quite so easily. Patsy and I usually bought the cheapest wines we could find – the sort that make you cough afterwards.

'I don't know,' admitted Jenkins, still not looking at me. 'Instinct, I suppose. I just didn't like him. In the business I'm in you have to go by instinct a lot.' He paused. 'Do you know anything about plans to build a hotel on Bilbury village green?' He still didn't look at me.

I stared at him, open-eyed, with a forkful of tomato half way to my mouth. 'A hotel?'

'Ssshhh!' said Jenkins, holding a finger to his lips. 'Not so loud.'

'Is that what they're talking about?'

Jenkins nodded. 'Your Councillor chum has told them that everyone in your village is making so much money out of providing car parking space and selling cream teas that they'll let him do anything he wants.'

'They're going to build a hotel? On Bilbury village green?'

'Ten storeys, 150 bedrooms, swimming pool – the lot.'

'How on earth do you know that?'

The features editor smiled at me. 'One of the most important and underrated skills in journalism is the ability to lip read.'

I stared at him. 'But they can't do that!' I said indignantly. 'They'd never get planning permission!'

Jenkins looked at me as a parent might look at a child just discovering that the world is not necessarily a just or fair place.

‘The conker trees!’ I said, suddenly understanding. ‘The American!’ I realised why the conker trees had to go.

Jenkins nodded. ‘Look down and eat,’ he said sharply.

I looked down and pushed a forkful of tomato into my mouth.

‘George!’ said Jenkins, standing and throwing his napkin down onto the table in front of him. He held out his hand. ‘How nice to see you!’

‘Jenkins, old chap!’ wheezed George Nympton, who had clearly spotted the *Sunday Globe* editor at last. Anxiously I looked around. Churston and the American were on their way out of the restaurant. By the relaxed way in which they were chatting it seemed unlikely that they had seen me. If I had been them I would have been very agitated if I’d spotted someone from Bilbury in the restaurant.

‘...he’s going to write some angling articles for us,’ finished Jenkins, with a nod in my direction.

‘How nice,’ said George Nympton, clearly disinterested in anyone as insignificant as a writer on fishing.

‘David is quite an expert on perch fishing,’ said Jenkins. I gathered that I was supposed to be ‘David’. I was impressed at how fluidly Jenkins lied. It was, I supposed, another essential skill for a journalist.

‘How divine!’ said Nympton with transparent insincerity. His smile and toupee were about as honest and convincing as a politician’s promise. I looked at him and realised that he was one of the men who was responsible for turning my beloved village Bilbury into the circus it had become. I wanted to hit him.

‘Why don’t you join us?’ invited Jenkins, mischievously. He called to the wine waiter. ‘Can we have another glass?’

‘Another time. Must rush, darling!’ said the *Sunday Planet* writer, holding up a hand and waddling off towards the restaurant exit. ‘Lovely to meet you, Daniel!’ he threw over his shoulder, carelessly.

‘That was close!’ I said, when they’d gone. Jenkins just smiled.

The waiter came and took away our empty plates. I’d been so enthralled by what had been going on around me that I hadn’t even been aware that I’d been eating.

‘It rather looks to me as though you’ve got a bit of a problem,’ said Jenkins.

I nodded, glumly.

‘If I can help...,’ he began. He left the rest of the sentence unfinished.

‘Thank you.’

‘I’ll send Jack Ladd back down to Devon with you if you don’t mind. He may be able to do a bit of digging.’

‘Thanks!’

Jenkins shrugged. ‘There’s a story in here somewhere,’ he said.

‘And if there isn’t?’

Jenkins shrugged again and grinned at me. ‘I don’t like George Nympton,’ he said. ‘It’ll be a pleasure to put a stick in his spokes.’

The waiters returned. This time there were four of them. I had a plateful of succulent looking, crisp vegetables. Jenkins had a steak and a large portion of thick cut chips. He also ordered a second bottle of claret. I looked at the empty bottle as the waiter took it away and wondered where the contents had gone.

‘I’ll pay you £200 for the article you’re writing for us,’ said Jenkins. ‘Is that O.K?’

I half closed my eyes and tried to concentrate. I had never earned much more than £25 before for a single article. £200 was a fortune. It would pay our mortgage for weeks. I was suddenly overcome with great self doubts, wondering whether I would be able to write an article that was worth that much money. I heard a sigh from the other side of the table and then Jenkins laughed.

‘O.K.,’ I heard him say. ‘£300 as long as we print the piece. But I can only pay you £200 if we don’t use it. I really can’t go any higher for a first article. If we like what you do for us then we can negotiate upwards.’

I opened my eyes and looked at him. He was smiling. £300 for one article. It was a huge sum: nearly half as much as I had received for writing my first book.

‘You don’t need an agent,’ he said.

‘I don’t?’

‘You made me feel bad for trying to get away with £200!’ he laughed.

‘Oh.’ I didn’t have the courage to tell him that my hesitation had been inspired entirely by shock at the enormity of the amount rather than by any desire to raise it still higher.

‘Have we got a deal then?’

‘A deal? Oh yes.’ I was desperate to tell Patsy that our immediate financial problems were over.

‘You can send the article by special delivery,’ said Jenkins.

‘Just ring me up and I’ll get someone to pick up at Paddington. That is your station isn’t it?’

I nodded. This was all getting too much for me. I couldn’t imagine that anything I could write could be worth special deliveries and messengers.

'There's no hurry,' said Jenkins. 'But I'd like to use it next week so if you could get it to me by Tuesday.'

'Tuesday?'

'Is that O.K?'

'Tuesday is fine.'

Jenkins held his glassful of claret across the table towards me. I held out my glass and we clinked to seal the contract. I was, over the years, to meet and work for many other Fleet Street editors but I never met anyone more honest or trustworthy than Jenkins.

One hour and a half, a fruit salad and another bottle of claret later, I stood up and had to hang on to the back of my chair. It was then that I realised where all the wine had gone. It was in my head.

* * *

'Drink this!' insisted Jack Ladd, putting a fresh plastic cup and another bottle of mineral water down on the table in front of me.

I looked at him and held my head. 'Must I?' The train we were on seemed to be swaying like a ship.

'You've got to sober up, you're driving us back from the station,' said Jack. He unfastened the top of the bottle. The fizzing noise forced me to cover my ears.

'Oh.' I said.

We were on the early evening train from Paddington back to the West Country.

I could remember very little of the rest of the afternoon after Jenkins and I had left the Savoy. On the seat beside me there was a small pile of old copies of the *Sunday Globe*. I still hadn't even looked at them.

'Thanks for introducing me to Jenkins,' I said, as the train slowed down. I looked out of the window. We were approaching Reading station.

'No problem,' said Jack, sipping gin from a clear plastic beaker. He had bought a bottle of gin and 200 cigarettes at the off-licence at Paddington Station. 'It's a long journey,' he had explained. 'Essential supplies.'

'Well, I'm grateful,' I said.

'Just don't let me down,' said Jack.

I looked at him.

'Make sure you write a good piece,' he said, grinning. 'Otherwise I'll probably lose my job.'

'Thanks.' I said. 'It'll help to have that extra responsibility when I sit down at the typewriter.'

'Jenkins told me about George Nympton.'

'What do you make of it?'

'It sounds to me like you've all been set up. You're going to have to move fast.'

'I'm amazed that they all met in public,' I said.

'They were unlucky,' said Jenkins. 'How many times a week is there someone from Bilbury eating at the Savoy?'

'I see what you mean.'

The train lurched a little as it started out from Reading station. Jack clutched at his glass to make sure none of the gin was spilt.

* * *

The train gathered speed and outside the Berkshire countryside flashed by. It was still only early evening but the sky was dark. Winter wasn't far away. I couldn't help remembering the way the village had pulled together to help Miss Hargreaves when the storm had destroyed her cottage. Bilbury had been such a happy, close knit village but now there was a danger that all that would be destroyed by commercialism. I felt miserable. Usually when I'd been away from Bilbury I couldn't wait to get back there but somehow things had changed. I wondered if we would be able to get things back to the way they had been before George Nympton had written his wretched article.

'Are you hungry?' asked Jack Ladd.

'Not really.'

'You ought to eat something,' said Jack firmly.

I got the distinct impression that he was speaking with the authority of a man who knew the damage alcohol could do. He stood up and walked along the corridor to the buffet. I watched him go and realised that to some extent Bilbury's future lay in his hands.

Churston, George Nympton and Caldwell West came from a different world. Thumper and Patchy were crafty but when it came to crookedness they weren't in the same league as those three. I had a feeling that the little man with the funny hat and the inevitable notebook and newspaper stuffed into his jacket pocket was going to play an important part in the future of the village.

I hadn't liked him at all when I'd first met him. He had seemed brash and rude and insensitive. But now I realised that we needed his unique brand of newspaperman's brashness and determination in order to tackle Churston Ferrers and George Nympton. More than that, rather to my surprise, I realised that I'd grown to quite like him in a funny sort of way.

'Here you are!' he said, returning from the buffet clutching four packets of crisps and throwing two packets onto the table in front of me. 'Only thing they'd got for vegetarians!' he said. He looked at me, as though having second thoughts. 'You can eat crisps can't you?'

I laughed. 'Yes, thanks!' I said. I appreciated his thoughtfulness. 'Where are you staying?' I asked him.

'I rang and booked a room at the *Globe* in Barnstaple,' he replied. 'It seemed an appropriate name. I'll get a taxi from Bilbury into Barnstaple.'

'Wouldn't it be more convenient if you could stay somewhere in Bilbury?'

'Yes, but there isn't anything in Bilbury. The Duck and Puddle is booked solid.'

'You can have our flat if you like,' I said. 'We've got a flat over the coach-house. It's empty at the moment. We had holiday-makers there during the summer.'

He looked at me. 'Are you sure?'

'Yes,' I said firmly. 'I'm sure.'

'That's very kind of you,' said Jack. 'Wonderful!' He stood up. 'Let me get you a drink and we'll celebrate.'

I half laughed and then held my head. 'I'm supposed to be sobering up!' I reminded him.

Jack waved a hand about dismissively. 'Plenty of time for that,' he insisted, rushing off back to the buffet.

* * *

CHAPTER TWELVE

I awoke the next morning feeling dreadful.

When I checked the time I decided that the clock must have stopped. According to the hands the time was half past eleven. I reached out, picked the clock up and shook it. It seemed to be working. It was all very puzzling. The curtains were still tightly drawn and it was still pitch dark in the bedroom. Holding my head, to keep it together, I clambered out of bed and struggled to the window. Gingerly I pulled back the curtain and flinched as bright sunshine poured in through the gap I had created. It was then that I realised that the clock was probably correct. I unfastened the catch and opened the window in the hope that a few draughts of fresh air might clear my head but in the shrubbery below an unreasonably jolly blackbird was singing merrily and the sound, which on any other morning I would have welcomed joyfully, made me flinch. I closed the window again quickly.

I tiptoed to the top of the stairs, peered down and gently called Patsy's name. The sound of my own voice echoed around and around inside my skull.

'Did you have a good day in London?' she called up, appearing out of the kitchen.

'Er, yes, I think so,' I murmured. 'I seem to have slept in a bit.' I whispered rather apologetically.

'You didn't get home until very late,' said Patsy, far too loudly. 'And then it took them absolutely ages to get the transporter in through the gates.'

I paused. 'The transporter?'

'They brought the car back on a transporter.'

'Oh! Was there something wrong with it?'

'The transporter? No, it was a bit big for the gate but that

Was all.'

'No, the car. Was there something wrong with the car?'

'No. The car was fine but you'd had too much to drink.'

Slowly it came back to me.

Jack Ladd had insisted on buying me a handful of whisky miniatures from the bar on the train and by the time we arrived at Taunton railway station, where I had left my car, I had been in no state to drive. Instead of just hiring a taxi to take us back to Bilbury, Jack had found a local garage and had persuaded the proprietor, a fat, dour-faced man with terrible body odour, to load my car onto the back of a flatbed truck and to take us and it back to Bilbury.

'How on earth did you persuade this chap to take us and the car back to Bilbury?' I had asked him. I had been very impressed. I wasn't accustomed to the Fleet Street way of doing things.

He had grinned; a mischievous, naughty boy grin. 'Money!' he had replied, quite simply. I must have looked alarmed. 'Don't worry!' he added quickly. 'It wasn't mine!'

I closed my eyes and sighed. 'I think I'll have a bath. Perhaps it'll wake me up a bit.'

'Do you want some breakfast?' asked Patsy.

'Not yet.' I paused. 'But I'd like a cup of tea.'

'I'll put the kettle on!' called Patsy.

I had half moved away from the top of the stairs but I turned back and peered over the bannisters again. 'Did I bring someone back with me last night?' I called.

Patsy reappeared, drying her hands on a towel and smiling. 'Yes!' she nodded.

'The rather scruffy little fellow with the funny hat?'

'Yes.'

I cleared my throat tentatively. 'I seem to remember that I said he could rent our flat?'

'That's what he said.'

I swallowed and licked my lips. I felt rather guilty. We usually discussed everything together. 'Do you mind?'

Patsy shook her head. 'Of course not!' she said. 'We need the money. Anyway, he seems quite sweet He came in this morning and paid for a week in advance.'

'He's already up?'

'He was waiting outside the back door when I got up. He wanted to buy some bread, butter, milk, tea and eggs from me. I gave him what he needed to make his breakfast and promised to do some shopping for him at Peter's shop. He said he had to hurry out because there were quite a few people he wanted to talk to.'

I was surprised and slightly envious. I felt that I deserved my hangover but Jack Ladd had drunk a good deal more than I had and it didn't seem fair that he had apparently woken undamaged. Feeling slightly aggrieved at this blatant example of life's unfairness I tiptoed into the bathroom, treading carefully to avoid the squeaky floorboards, and turned on the taps for a bath. I then put my hands over my ears and stepped back a few paces to escape from the noise of water splashing onto white enamel. It was clearly not going to be an easy day.

* * *

The hot bath had refreshed me and I felt considerably less fragile by the time I got downstairs. After two cups of lemon tea and two rounds of toast and marmalade I felt almost human. It is my experience that a full stomach is always less edgy than an empty one.

'What I don't understand,' said Patsy, as I put the kettle on for a third cup of tea, 'is why that newspaperman wants to stay in Bilbury. I would have thought that people outside the village would have lost interest in us by now.' She had let me eat and drink in peace although she must have been bursting with curiosity to find out what had happened in London.

I explained how I had seen Churston, Caldwell West and George Nympton all having lunch together at the Savoy and how Jenkins, the *Sunday Globe* features editor, had cleverly discovered what they had been talking about.

'I never did trust that Churston!' said Patsy. I don't think that I had ever seen her quite so angry. She unfastened her pinafore and threw it over a chair. 'I'm going straight round to tell him what I think of him!' She moved off towards the back door and clearly meant what she said.

'You mustn't!' I said 'Please! Let's try to think this through before we do anything.'

We eventually decided that we would call a meeting for that evening and invite a few stalwart Bilburians round to help us decide what to do.

'We must obviously invite Dr Brownlow,' said Patsy. 'And Thumper and Anne and Patchy Fogg.'

'And Frank and Gilly,' I added.

We decided that for the time being that would be enough.

'Oh, there is one other person we should invite,' I said. Patsy looked at me and waited.

'Jack Ladd,' I said. 'The reporter from the *Globe*.'

Patsy frowned. 'Can we trust him?'

'We have to. He already knows everything and he's far more experienced at dealing with people like these than we are.'

'Thumper and Patchy can be pretty devious when they want to be,' Patsy pointed out.

'But I don't think even they have ever come across anything on this scale,' I said, sipping at my second cup of tea. My head still felt sensitive but the man with the hammer had, thankfully, stopped working on my skull. Talking about the problem we faced had helped clear my head.

'I'm sorry,' said Patsy, as I attacked another piece of toast. 'But I have to ask you this.'

I looked up, surprised.

'What?'

'How did you get on yesterday? Do they still want you to write that article? Or did they change their minds?'

Up until that moment I had completely forgotten about the article Mr Jenkins had commissioned me to write for the *Sunday Globe*. But now it all came rushing back.

'No!' I said with a smile. 'They didn't change their minds!' And I quickly told Patsy everything.

'How much did you say they were going to pay you?' she asked, eyes open wide.

'£300.' I repeated. 'As long as they use the article. If they don't use it they will only pay me £200.'

'But that's a fortune!' whispered Patsy, holding her hand to her mouth as though afraid that she might scream if she didn't.

I nodded and then frowned. 'Did I have a pile of newspapers with me last night?'

Patsy nodded. 'You were clutching them like a baby clutches a comfort blanket,' she told me. 'You wouldn't let go of them. They're in the bedroom somewhere.'

'Thank heavens for that!' I said, pushing back my chair and heading for the stairs. 'I'd better get started!'

'I'll ring Dr Brownlow and the others and ask them to come round here this evening,' said Patsy, as I disappeared through the door and headed for my study.

I spent the rest of the day reading through old copies of the *Sunday Globe* and trying to decide how best to begin the article I had been commissioned to write. After an hour I had decided that this would be the easiest £300 I had ever earned. I popped back into the kitchen and had a bowl of Patsy's vegetable soup to celebrate my first foray into the world of mass-market journalism. After two hours I had decided that it would be the most difficult £300 I had ever earned. I skulked back into the kitchen and made myself a huge honey sandwich. And after three hours I had decided that I would never be able to write anything that Jenkins would accept and that I might as well just telephone him and tell him that I wouldn't be writing the article after all.

After a cup of lemon tea and two toasted tea cakes I then spent another hour trying to think of excuses for my failure and finally decided that making an attempt at writing the piece could not possibly be any more difficult than thinking up an excuse for not writing it!

* * *

By the time Patsy knocked on my study door and told me that Thumper and Anne had arrived for our meeting I had managed to produce what I thought was a pretty good article. I knew it might need a little bit of fine tuning but I was fairly pleased with it, I showed it to Patsy who thought it was terrific.

Naturally, both Thumper and Anne, who were sitting in the kitchen, wanted to know why Patsy and I had called a meeting. But so that I didn't have to explain everything afresh every time there was a new arrival I managed to persuade them to wait until the others had arrived. I boiled the kettle and made hot drinks for everyone while Patsy and Anne buttered a huge pile of homemade scones.

At last everyone except Jack Ladd was present and since Jack Ladd already knew what I had discovered in London I decided to carry on.

'I think you'd better begin by telling everyone what happened yesterday,' Patsy said to me.

While the others listened in complete silence, and steadily increasing disbelief, I explained how I had spotted Churston Ferrers and the other two by accident in the restaurant at The Savoy.

'How did you recognise Nympton?' Patchy wanted to know at last.

I explained that it hadn't been me but Jenkins, the editor, who had identified the fat journalist.

'So the incident with the American and the horse chestnut trees was merely a ploy to get the Council to have the trees chopped down?' asked Dr Brownlow thoughtfully.

'So it seems,' I agreed. 'I may be wrong but I got the impression that our good 'friend' Churston and George Nympton are partners and that the American was hired to scare us into agreeing to let them chop down the trees so that they can build a hotel on the village green.'

'When are they planning to take the trees down?' asked Dr Brownlow. 'Does anyone know?'

'It won't be for a while,' said Thumper. 'Churston apparently told Colin Jackson that he thought the village should get on with it before there was any more trouble with boys hunting conkers but even though he won the vote he apparently couldn't find anyone in the village prepared to chop the trees down. I heard someone say that he was bringing in a firm of tree surgeons from Taunton.'

'We must stop them!' said Gilly firmly.

'That's not going to be easy,' said Anne.

'Not now that the village has voted to chop them down,' agreed Thumper.

'But if people knew what Churston was planning they'd change their minds!' said Patsy.

'Churston would wriggle out of it. We haven't got any proof and he'd probably sue us all for defamation,' said Dr Brownlow, who looked very thoughtful. 'When do you think they started planning all this?'

I shrugged. 'I don't know.'

'But you reckon that Churston and George Nympton planned this together?'

'It looks like it,' I agreed.

'They must have been planning it for ages,' said Dr Brownlow. 'When did Churston Ferrers first come to live here?'

'It can't be long,' said Thumper. 'Six months?'

'It's much less than that,' said Gilly.

'Just over three months,' said Patchy. 'I sold him some furniture.'

'I hope you gave him a good working over!' said Thumper.

Patchy gave him a 'what-do-you-think' look and Thumper nodded contentedly.

'That man is an absolute down and out rogue!' said Frank, suddenly. 'I shan't serve him again.'

I explained to Frank why it was important that he didn't do anything which might indicate to Churston that we knew what he was planning.

With some reluctance Frank agreed to continue serving Churston.

'But I won't be able to smile at him!' he warned us.

'That's O.K.,' said Thumper, apparently quite seriously. 'He won't notice that'

'And...,' began Frank. He halted for a moment, searching for a second way to make his disapproval plain. 'And,' he went on, with earnest determination, 'I'll make sure his change always goes into a puddle of beer.' He finished with a defiant thump of his fist on the table.

The thump of fist on table was so loud that it nearly masked the knock on the kitchen door which heralded the arrival of Jack Ladd.

'Sorry I'm late,' apologised the newspaperman, after I had introduced him to all the others. 'I've only just got back from Barnstaple.' He was carrying a large shopping bag which appeared to be very full.

'Oh, seeing that bag reminds me,' said Patsy. 'I got the shopping you wanted. I've put it all in the kitchen in your flat. I left your change on the table.'

Jack smiled and thanked her and opened his shopping bag. It was packed with loose pieces of paper and thin, cheap, brown cardboard folders. He carefully moved mugs and plates out of the way to clear a space in front of him.

'Have you eaten?' asked Patsy.

'I grabbed a pie and some chips at lunch time,' answered Jack, carefully tipping the papers and folders onto the kitchen table. 'Look at this little lot!'

'What are they?' asked Patchy.

'Photocopies of Land Registry documents and planning permission application forms,' replied Jack. 'I got some of them in Barnstaple but I had some of them sent on the train from London.'

We all stared at the pile of documents but no one spoke. Dr Brownlow reached out and picked out one of the documents at random.

'This seems to be a planning application to convert the old barn just beyond Miss Hargreave's cottage into a shower block for a caravan site,' explained Dr Brownlow eventually.

'Look at the applicant's name,' said Jack.

Dr Brownlow turned over a couple more pages before finding the information Jack had asked for. 'It's an investment company,' he said, eventually. He was clearly puzzled. 'Why would an investment company want to bother establishing a caravan site in Bilbury?'

'The same name appears on all these other documents,' said Jack Ladd, nodding towards the litter of papers which was now spread across the table top. 'The same company owns four detached houses, eight cottages, six barns and 143 acres of land in and around Bilbury. It has bought just about every piece of property to come on the market for the last six months. They have clearly been buying up everything they could get their hands on.'

No one said anything. We just stared at Jack. At the same moment we all realised why property prices in Bilbury had been rising so rapidly – and why Tim and Angie couldn't afford to buy a cottage of their own. Churston Ferrers and George Nympton had clearly been planning this venture for some time.

'They even own the freehold to the Duck and Puddle,' said Jack, speaking to Frank and Gilly.

'No, there must be some mistake there,' said Gilly. 'Frank and I own the Duck and Puddle. Well, together with the mortgage company we own it.'

'You bought the Duck and Puddle with a loan from a mortgage specialist in the North?'

'That's right,' said Gilly.

'The same company that has been buying up property all over Bilbury bought your loan,' explained Jack.

Gilly had gone pale. Frank put his arm around her.

'I don't like the sound of that,' said Gilly. 'Can they do that?'

'I'm afraid they can,' said Jack.

'But who owns this company which has been buying up so much of Bilbury?' asked Dr Brownlow.

'I think we can probably guess,' I said quietly.

Jack Ladd nodded. 'You probably can,' he agreed. 'I got one of the reporters in London to pop along to Companies House. The sole two directors of the company which now owns a good chunk of Bilbury are George Nympton and Churston Ferrers. They've done it all with borrowed money. But they'll make a fortune if everything goes according to plan. They'll be able to sell houses and cottages and land for two or three times the price they paid. Bilbury will become a Mecca for hypochondriacs from all over the world.'

No one said anything.

And then Frank spoke.

'Churston drinks port and lemon,' said Frank, quietly. 'I've never trusted men who drink port and lemon.'

Dr Brownlow, Thumper, Anne, Patchy and Frank and Gilly stayed for another two hours or so and inevitably, there wasn't much variety to the conversation. But although we came up with all sorts of ideas we couldn't think of any way to stop Churston Ferrers and George Nympton from taking over and destroying the village we all loved. The two unwanted interlopers had planned their take-over of Bilbury with great precision and the evening ended in a great sense of gloom.

* * *

'How did you get on with that article you're writing for the *Globe*?' asked Jack Ladd, standing on our doorstep when I returned to the house from letting our visitors out through our gate. One of the things I hated most about Bilbury's popularity was having to live behind a locked gate. It made me feel like a prisoner.

'I think it's O.K.,' I told him. 'I'm quite pleased with it.' I paused and hesitated. 'Would you look at it for me?'

To my relief and delight Jack said he would be happy to look at my article. 'I'll have a look at it tonight,' he said. 'And then if you come round at about nine in the morning, I'll tell you if I've got any suggestions.'

I thanked him profusely, rushed and fetched the typed out copy and handed it to him as though it were a valuable manuscript by an 18th century literary master. Jack Ladd took it from me and stuffed it unceremoniously into his jacket pocket.

* * *

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The next morning I knocked on Jack Ladd's door at 9 a.m. precisely. Jack was making himself a simple, cooked breakfast but the kitchen looked as though he were preparing a banquet for at least 5,000.

'Breakfast?' he asked.

'No thanks. I've already eaten.'

'Coffee?'

'No thanks.'

'Sit yourself down while I just finish off these eggs.'

I sat and watched as he skilfully jiggled with the frying pan.

'I read your piece.'

I waited, nervously.

'Are you sure you don't want anything?

'No, I'm fine thanks.'

'It's packed with information.'

'Oh, good.' I said, beginning to feel increasingly uncertain.

'I tried to put in as many facts as I could.'

'As it stands it would make a terrific article for one of the posh papers.'

My heart sank.

Jack put four rashers of bacon, three sausages and two eggs onto his plate. 'I do enjoy a good breakfast,' he said, adding two slices of fried bread. He carried the loaded plate across to the table and sat down.

'But you need to change the approach a little for us,' he went on, removing the cap from a bottle of brown sauce and pouring a huge puddle of sauce onto his plate. 'Why not rewrite it as 'Twenty Tips To Help You Live To Be 100!'?'

I said I thought that idea sounded very appealing. I couldn't help wishing I'd thought of it.

'Keep the sentences and the paragraphs very short. And write a zippy one hundred word introduction in which you catch the reader's interest by telling him that if he reads your article and follows your advice he can live to be 100.'

Jack dipped a huge piece of sausage into one of his eggs and popped it into his mouth. 'Wonderful!' he said, closing his eyes in obvious delight. He took a swig at his coffee. As he ate his breakfast he went through my article almost line by line and showed me precisely how to rewrite it so that it would fit comfortably into the *Sunday Globe* style.

I listened carefully and when he had finished his impromptu lesson in tabloid journalism I was silent for a moment.

'Thanks, Jack,' I said, eventually.

He winked. 'Pleasure, son!' he said simply. 'Do me a favour, will you?'

'Certainly!' I said, eager to repay his kindness.

'Pour me another cup of coffee! Are you sure you won't have some?'

I poured him more coffee and then rushed back to the house to rewrite my article.

* * *

Early that afternoon I took my finished article into Barnstaple and put it on a train to London. Jack had read it and had said that he thought it 'just what the doctor ordered' but I had still been very nervous as I had handed the packet over to the official at the railway station. I then telephoned Jenkins' office at the *Sunday Globe* and told his secretary, the long-legged Jane, what time the train was due to arrive so that she could arrange for a messenger to meet it. I felt terribly important doing all this but it did rather add to my nervousness.

Once the packet was out of my hands and there was nothing more to be done I felt more relaxed. With Jack Ladd's help I had done my best and if it wasn't good enough then I had lost nothing but would have gained the £200 fee the paper would pay for commissioning but not using my article as a consolation prize.

I drove slowly back to Bilbury peering at the hedgerows in the hope that I might see Emily, slowly plodding back home. Much to our disappointment and sadness we still hadn't heard any news about her. Even though I had pinned more 'Reward' posters all around our village, and several neighbouring villages too, no one had telephoned to say that they had seen her. With so many tourists around, I simply couldn't understand why no one had spotted her. I was beginning to lose hope of ever seeing her again.

When I got back to Bilbury Grange Patsy met me at the door with the news that Frank and Gilly had received a letter telling them that their loan was being withdrawn and that unless they paid back all the money they had borrowed within a month they would be evicted from the Duck and Puddle. Churston and George Nympton were clearly stepping up their campaign to take complete control of the village.

‘We’d better go down and see them,’ said Patsy.

‘They must be in a terrible state.’

‘Frank was threatening to go round and do pretty terrible things to Churston,’ admitted Patsy.

When we arrived in the centre of the village we were confronted by a quite remarkable sight. Deciding that the tree surgeons would not dare chop down the trees if they were inhabited, Thumper and Patchy had climbed up into two of the condemned horse chestnut trees and had built themselves small but quite substantial looking wooden platforms. They had hung huge signs saying ‘Save Bilbury’s Trees’ from the branches around them and a large crowd of tourists had gathered beneath. Patsy and I got as close as we could and then we waved and shouted out to them both. Ben, puzzled, just barked.

‘I’m starving!’ shouted Thumper, leaning over the edge of his precarious perch. ‘Would you get me a couple of cheese sandwiches and a pint of best bitter from the Duck and Puddle?’

‘I’ll have a pint and two rounds of egg and cress!’ called Patchy, who had managed to haul a deckchair up onto his platform.

Not quite knowing how on earth we were going to get the ordered food and drink up to where Thumper and Patchy were perched, Patsy and I hurried off to the Duck and Puddle where Frank and Gilly were gloomily serving soft drinks and Cornish pasties to a coach load of very demanding customers.

‘It’s no job for a man this,’ said Frank, miserably, opening yet another half a dozen bottles of fizzy pop.

‘But it must be good for business,’ I said.

Frank shrugged. ‘I’d rather serve decent drinks to people and have a bit of a chat. And Gilly’s fed up with warming up pies that were made somewhere the other side of the country. She hasn’t had time to do any real cooking of her own for days.’

‘Can you manage some sandwiches and beer for Thumper and Patchy?’

Frank sighed. ‘I’m afraid you’ll have to make the sandwiches yourself,’ he said, lifting up the lid of the bar counter to let me through.

‘Patsy told me about the letter from the bank,’ I whispered as I passed him. ‘I’m sorry.’

Frank pulled a face. ‘If running a pub is going to consist of opening bottles of pop and serving up factory made pasties then I’ll be glad to go,’ he said.

I didn’t know what to say so I just went straight through to the kitchen where Gilly and a couple of assistants were busy taking Cornish pasties out of cardboard wrappers and putting them into the oven to be warmed up. I couldn’t help noticing that the Cornish pasties were made in Lancashire while the Devon clotted cream which Gilly was using to serve with ‘home-made apple pies’ (which came from the factory of a supplier in Belgium) seemed to have come from even further north. It seemed that Bilbury’s popularity was destroying everything natural about the village.

‘Look at this!’ said Gilly, pointing to a huge plastic bag that contained ready-made chips. ‘We even have to buy these now!’ She shuddered. As someone who had always regarded Gilly’s chips as being good enough to win prizes in any chip making Olympics, I was distressed to learn that the Duck and Puddle was now reduced to such depths.

‘I need to make some sandwiches,’ I explained. I told Gilly about Thumper and Patchy.

‘Brilliant!’ she said, clearly absolutely delighted to hear what the intrepid duo was up to. ‘That’s the only decent news I’ve had all day!’

* * *

When I called out to Patchy and Thumper that I had their food ready for them they both lowered wicker baskets down to the ground by rope. I might have known that they wouldn’t have gone up a tree without some preparation! Patsy and I then tucked a pack of sandwiches into each basket and wedged two pint mugs, both just half full, in between the sandwiches and the side of each basket. This had been Frank’s idea.

‘They’re bound to spill at least half if you take full pint glasses,’ he had sensibly pointed out, his natural respect for good beer and a strong aversion to seeing any of it spilt dominating his feelings on this point.

‘Is it for charity?’ asked a woman in a beige jumper, beige slacks and beige shoes, detaching herself from a small group of similarly dressed companions.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘What charity are they doing it for?’ she asked, opening her beige handbag and fumbling inside it, presumably looking for small change.

‘It isn’t for charity,’ I told her. ‘It’s a protest.’

The woman in beige looked interested. ‘What are they protesting about?’ she wanted to know.

I pointed to the banners Thumper and Patchy had hung upon the trees and I told her why the trees were threatened. I didn't tell her that developers wanted to chop the trees down on our village green because they wanted to build a huge and probably ugly hotel on the site but I did tell her that the Parish Council had agreed to have the trees removed because an American tourist had complained that he had been very nearly hit on the head by a stick thrown by a boy collecting conkers.

'That's disgraceful!' said the woman, indignantly. 'How dare they! I shall telephone someone about this.' And she marched off to share this glum news with someone while Patsy and I sat down on the grass to wait for Thumper and Patchy to finish their meal and send back down their empty glasses.

* * *

By the time we got back to the Duck and Puddle the rush had ended. The coach party had moved on and although there were still a couple of dozen people sitting on benches outside the pub, the inside of the Duck and Puddle was almost totally deserted. Frank and Gilly were sitting at a table at the back of the bar. Frank had what was left of a pint of beer in front of him. Gilly was nursing what looked like a gin and tonic. They were both eating potato crisps. I don't think I had ever seen a more miserable looking pair.

I put the tray containing the glasses on a nearby table.

'Do they want refills?' asked Frank, preparing to get up.

'I don't think so,' I said. 'I think they're both a bit worried about the absence of toilet facilities where they are at the moment'

'I hadn't thought of that,' said Frank.

'Have you decided what to do?' Patsy asked Gilly.

Gilly shook her head. 'To be honest,' she said, 'if things are going to carry on like this I'll be glad to see the back of the place.'

I looked round. The tables and floor were littered with empty bottles, paper plates and plastic knives and forks.

'It's not much like the old Duck and Puddle, is it?'

Frank looked at me sadly. 'I used to really enjoy running a pub,' he said. 'Pulling pints, chatting with the regulars, having a quiet drink, putting a couple of bob on the horses...'

Gilly looked at him sharply. 'I thought you'd given up gambling?'

'More or less,' said Frank quickly. 'Just the occasional flutter on the Derby or the Grand National.' He waved a hand about airily, as though to make it clear that he was talking of trivial affairs. 'Nothing wrong with that, is there?' He paused, and sipped at his beer.' It's unpatriotic not to have a flutter on the Derby and the National,' he added, rather defensively.

Gilly, who knew him better than anyone, looked at him and almost smiled. It reminded me how rare smiles had become in Bilbury since the village had been invaded by tourists. Everything had changed; and changed for the worse.

Before George Nympton had written his wretched article the village had been the happiest place on earth; full of fun and laughter. Now, no one had time for fun, and laughter had become a distant memory.

'What did the letter from the bank say?' I asked them both.

Frank fished around inside his jacket pocket and pulled out a rather creased envelope. From inside the envelope he took two creased sheets of paper, stapled together at the top left hand corner. He handed the letter to me without a word.

The letter was unambiguous. The writer made it perfectly clear that the company which had taken over the loan had decided to take advantage of a clause in the contract which gave them the right to demand more or less instant repayment of the loan.

'I take it you can't afford to repay the loan?' I said.

Frank half stifled a laugh. 'If we carried on working at this rate we could probably pay it off in another two or three years,' he said.

'But I think that working at this rate would have probably killed us before then,' said Gilly,

We all sat around staring at the table.

'It looks pretty definite then,' I said.

'Yes.' said Frank.

'The new owners will probably call it 'Ye Olde Ducke and Puddle',' Gilly said 'They will put in a 'Ye Olde Middle Englande Juke Boxe', stick one of those little signs of a man with a top hat and a walking stick on the door to the gentlemen's lavatory and a sign of a woman in a long dress and a bonnet on the ladies' lavatory, and then staff the place with buxom barmaids dressed in Bavarian costumes.'

'They can't do that,' I said. 'There isn't even a door on the gents.'

'That's true.' nodded Frank.

'German lager, chicken-in-a-basket and a musical trio on Saturday evenings,' added Gilly, disregarding this minor complication.

We all sat gloomily contemplating this depressing scenario.

'I suppose we'll have to start looking for somewhere else,' said Gilly.

'I suppose so,' said Frank, sadly. 'I liked it here,' he said rather plaintively. 'I liked it here very much.'

He emptied his glass and turned to Gilly thoughtfully. 'Do you think the costumes the buxom barmaids will wear will be those with the low cut fronts that show lots of cleavage?'

Gilly thought about it for a moment 'I expect so.'

Frank was silent for a while. 'Maybe we could apply to the new owners to be kept on as bar staff,' he suggested.

Gilly thumped him but even she couldn't help smiling. These were dark, dismal, depressing days for Bilbury and we all needed every smile we could find. But the smiles were only superficial. There were no smiles in our hearts.

* * *

When I got back to Bilbury Grange Mr Parfitt, the gardener, handed me a letter. It was postmarked 'Exmouth' and so I knew who it had come from without even opening it. It was Dr Jones' report on the quality and contents of Bilbury's water and it must have arrived with the afternoon delivery. I stuck my thumb under the flap and started to tear the envelope open but stopped before I'd finished.

'What's the matter?' asked Patsy, who knew as well as I did how important the letter was.

'If this letter tells us that Bilbury's water doesn't contain any mysterious, magical ingredients then all those locals who've been making money out of the invasion of tourists will have to go back to being poor again,' I said.

'But Bilbury will go back to being Bilbury,' said Patsy quite bluntly. 'Open it,' she said firmly.

I opened the letter.

The results were unambiguous. Bilbury's water was clean and pure. But it contained nothing not found in a thousand natural springs all over Devon. Dr Jones hadn't known what we had hoped he would find but the results he had come up with couldn't possibly have been greeted with more enthusiasm.

'So what do we do now,' asked Patsy.

'That's simple,' I replied. 'We just give this letter to Jack. The *Sunday Globe* will print the story and that will be the end of the Bilbury gold rush.'

I rang Dr Brownlow to tell him the news. He was thrilled.

'Do we have to keep this secret?' he asked, clearly unable to contain himself.

'I'd like to let Jack have the story,' I said.

'That's fair enough,' said Dr Brownlow. 'Without Jack's help we wouldn't have found out what has been going on.'

'But I don't think a little gossip and a little rumour spreading would do any harm at all,' I said.

'Jolly good!' said Dr Brownlow, delighted. 'I'll ring Kay then, shall I?'

I agreed that a telephone call to Kay would be the quickest way to make sure that the news about Bilbury's water reached the greatest possible audience in the shortest possible time.

* * *

At some time in the night I woke up suddenly. For an instant I couldn't quite remember where I was, or even who I was. I was aware only that someone or something had woken me.

Blinking and yawning, I reached out for the telephone, assuming in my confused state that it must have been the telephone which had awoken me. But when my fumblings with the telephone proved that there was no one at all at the other end, I clumsily put the receiver back down upon the rest. It was then that I heard a repeat of the sound which must have woken me.

My heart beat faster and I switched on the light and sat up.

'What's the matter?' demanded Patsy, rubbing her eyes.

'Sit up!' I said quietly, with tears welling in my eyes. 'Listen.'

As if on cue the sound came again.

Patsy sat up with a start when she heard it and almost immediately she burst into tears. I felt her fingers reach for mine and we held hands tightly. These were not tears of sadness or fear but tears of delight, relief and pleasure.

Moments later my joy was complete when I felt myself being kissed. It was like being kissed by an angel.

* * *

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I could wait no longer. With my free hand I switched on the bedside light and there, sitting on the bed covers just a foot away from me, sat Emily. Behind her, at the end of the bed, sat Sophie and Ben; both looking very happy and both quite content to stay in the background for this reunion. They had, I guessed, already greeted their missing friend

Gently, tenderly, I reached out and stroked Emily's head. A large piece had been bitten out of her ear, there was a lump of matted fur on her neck and she was holding one paw off the bed as though she knew it would hurt her to put it down.

'She's been in a fight!' said Patsy, gently touching Emily's face. Emily pushed her face against Patsy's hand and purred loudly. 'Look!' said Patsy, touching the matted fur on Emily's neck. 'Blood!'

'She's hurt her paw too,' I said.

'I wonder where she's been.' said Patsy.

Emily purred even louder, as though to confirm this suspicion.

'We should ring the vet,' I said firmly. 'I want him to take a look at her. She probably needs antibiotics for the cuts and bites.'

'I'll go and get her some food,' said Patsy, gently moving back the bedclothes and carefully easing herself out of bed 'She must be starving!' Emily miaowed plaintively as Patsy put on her dressing gown and slippers.

'I'll be back in a minute!' promised Patsy. 'You stay there!'

'Cold custard!' I reminded her, picking up the telephone again and dialling the vet's number. 'It's Emily's favourite.'

* * *

Within a couple of minutes Patsy returned to the bedroom holding a large, wooden tray upon which there were four bowls. One bowl contained cold custard, the other three bowls contained pieces of chicken. Although neither Patsy nor I ate meat Ben and the two cats did. Patsy gave Ben and Sophie their bowls of chicken and then offered Emily the choice of chicken or custard. It was no surprise to us that she ate the custard first. And then devoured the chicken. It had quite clearly been some considerable time since she'd eaten properly.

The vet came. I carried Emily downstairs into the kitchen, and after Patsy and I had apologised for getting him up at night he gave our returned prodigal daughter a thorough check-up and confirmed that she did, indeed, need antibiotics. She had several bad bites and a badly cut, bruised and infected paw.

'I don't know how far she's travelled,' he told us, 'but she must have limped a good deal of it on three legs.' He gently cut away some of the matted fur around her head and leg, carefully cleaned her wounds and gave her an antibiotic injection. When he'd finished, he put a small bottle containing antibiotic capsules on the kitchen table. 'Give her these twice a day and I'll come and see her in a couple of days.' He closed his bag and shook his head. 'She's lucky!' he said. 'I reckon she must have used up at least a couple of her lives!' He looked at her for a moment 'Pity she can't write a book about where she's been and what she's been up to!' he said. 'I bet she has quite a story to tell!'

After the vet had gone back home the five of us went back upstairs to the bedroom. Patsy and I climbed into the bed and Emily, Sophie and Ben climbed onto it Patsy and I then lay there in the dark.

'Are you asleep?' asked Patsy, in a whisper.

'No,' I replied. 'I'm too happy to sleep.'

'Me too,' said Patsy.

'Nothing else seems important now that Emily is back,' I said. Emily and Sophie were now purring loudly as they slept. Ben, at the bottom of the bed, grunted occasionally.

'I know.' said Patsy simply. She squeezed my fingers.

We lay there side by side and eventually dropped off to sleep. Neither George Nympton nor Churston Ferrers could interfere with our happiness.

* * *

Early the next morning Patsy made up two huge packs of sandwiches and filled two thermos flasks with coffee and I cycled into the village to feed Thumper and Patchy. We had heard that today was the day the tree surgeons were due to chop down the horse chestnut trees.

I had deliberately gone out early so that I could get to the village green before the tourists arrived but as I pedalled into Bilbury it slowly became quite apparent that I hadn't gone out early enough. The lanes were not as busy as I knew they would become later in the day but they weren't deserted either, and instead of the gentle, early morning twitter of birds, the only sound which normally troubles the ears of a wandering Bilburian, I could hear the steady buzz made by a lot of people talking. I also thought I could smell bacon frying.

As I rounded the final corner of the lane into the village, instead of finding myself facing the quiet, rural, verdant beauty of Bilbury's traditional, unspoilt village green, I found myself faced with a sea of bright colours. Just about every inch of grass was covered with orange, blue and green tents and white, beige and cream caravans. And there was a smell of bacon sizzling. In between the tents, scores of men and a few women were hunched over small gas stoves shaking frying pans and muttering occasional oaths as spots of fat flew out. The campers were wearing so little that from a distance it looked as though they were all completely naked.

I stopped my bicycle and stared. Two figures who looked very much like Thumper and Patchy were sitting in aluminium and canvas chairs, surrounded by young women who really didn't seem to be wearing any clothes at all, eating cooked breakfasts. I edged closer. The two men in the aluminium and canvas chairs were Thumper and Patchy. And the young women were naked.

'Hey!' I called out, trying hard not to look at the women. 'Aren't you two supposed to be protecting the conker trees?'

They both looked at me. Thumper had a large portion of herbal sausage on a fork suspended halfway between his plate and his mouth. Patchy's mouth was so full that he looked as if he had mumps.

'Bhegelkjeh mdnske hkeuyhs!' protested Patchy, waving a fork around in the air and pointing indiscriminately in the direction of the surrounding campers. He tried to stand up but a hot, fried mushroom slipped off his plate onto his leg and with a howl of anguish he sat down again very quickly.

'No one can get anywhere near to the trees!' said Thumper, pointing his heavy fork at the nearest tent. 'The campers have surrounded them!'

I climbed off my bicycle, carefully rested it against the corner of a very large and expensive looking caravan and quickly alerted my eyes to avoid looking at the naked woman inside who was preparing breakfast for an equally naked man who was standing behind her holding a newspaper. I felt myself blushing. It had been a long time since I'd slept in a tent on a boy scout's adventure holiday and I hadn't realised that standards of accepted costume had changed so much.

'Ckehekbks bekeh bwyujhx lskhxb!' said Patchy, who had filled his mouth again. He stopped, chewed hard and swallowed.

'They've come to help,' explained Thumper.

'I brought you sandwiches,' I said, rather limply. I nodded towards the laden plates on their laps. 'I don't suppose you want them...,' I finished, completely lamely.

'Maybe later,' said Thumper, popping a huge hunk of fried bread into his mouth.

Since I clearly wasn't to get very far with Thumper and Patchy until they'd finished eating I turned to face the nearest camper. She was in her twenties, quite tall, built like an advertisement for oestrogen and, unless you count a very small pair of gold earrings, completely, absolutely, totally stark naked.

I had held many conversations with people who weren't wearing any clothes but such conversations had always been conducted under the conventional rules of medical engagement. I had always worn my badge of office (a stethoscope), the naked person had always been there as a patient, seeking advice, and the consultation had always been conducted in the acceptable surroundings of a hospital, medical consulting room or bedroom.

Talking to a naked woman on Bilbury village green was something for which life had not adequately prepared me. I tried to keep my eyes concentrated on a spot just an inch or two below her hairline but I found that this was far too low and so I moved my eyes upwards a foot or so and stared at a branch in a tree about twenty yards above her head.

'It's very good of you all to help us!' I said.

The flap at the front of the orange tent was flung back and a squat, hairy man crawled out and stood up. I could not stop myself looking. He too was naked. I moved my eyes to the left and concentrated instead on a blue tent.

'It's our pleasure,' said the woman, with a big smile. 'We're delighted to be able to help save the trees. Would you like some breakfast?'

She couldn't talk without moving a lot and when she moved she also jiggled. The fact that she was uncommonly well endowed meant that to say that I found the jiggling distracting would have been an understatement of political proportions. I tried hard to concentrate on the blue tent but the blue tent wasn't jiggling and I had discovered that things which jiggle are, for some inexplicable reason, uniquely difficult to ignore. They are certainly far more difficult to ignore than stationary blue, canvas tents.

I shook my head gently. 'No thank you. But that's very kind of you.' I realised I was staring again and I felt myself blushing. I stared hard at a nearby tree.

'Do you have any mustard?' asked Thumper.

I looked at him. I couldn't believe that he could even think of condiments or seasoning in such circumstances. I tried to stop myself blushing but I couldn't. I realised that instead of stopping, the blushing was getting worse.

'I think Jeffrey has got some,' said a short girl with long black hair. Her long black hair wasn't long enough to hide the fact that she was completely naked too. She turned and ran towards a green and white caravan, skilfully jumping over guy ropes and around obstacles. I couldn't help noticing her plump, brown bottom. I suddenly realised that none of these naked people had any white patches in those places where normal people have white patches when they have been out in the sun and they take off their clothes. 'I hope you don't mind our not wearing any clothes,' said the tall girl.

I lowered my eyes and feigned surprise. 'Oh gosh!' I heard myself say. 'So you aren't! I really hadn't noticed.' Even as I said it I realised that it was a particularly stupid thing to say. In the distance I could see Peter Marshall, dressed in his now not quite so smart white coat, moving from tent to tent with a wheelbarrow packed with bread, milk and newspapers.

'He's a doctor,' I heard Patchy say. I looked down. Patchy had now finished chewing and was clearly trying to decide whether to spear a fried tomato, puncture a fried egg or attack a large rasher of bacon. He looked up for an instant and grinned at me. 'He's used to naked people,' he added.

'How interesting!' said the tall woman. 'Are you the village doctor?'

I shook my head. 'I used to be.'

'We're the South East Midlands Nudist Club,' said the tall woman. She held out a hand and smiled. 'I'm Cheryl.'

We shook hands.

'I feel overdressed,' I said, rather apologetically.

'There didn't seem much point in our staying up the trees,' said Thumper. 'Not with all these people here.'

'No, I suppose not.' I agreed.

'We're all very environmentally conscious,' said Cheryl, she leant a little closer and whispered conspiratorially. 'But we've never done anything like this before. We were camping in Combe Martin when we had a telephone call from a relative of a member. She told us what was happening and suggested that we might be able to help.'

As she spoke, and amidst much tooting and hooting from other vehicles, a car screeched into view and pulled up on the road a few yards away.

'What the hell is going on here?' demanded a voice I recognised instantly.

'Hello Churston,' I said. I didn't need to turn round to see who it was and so I didn't.

'What is going on?' demanded Churston, moving into view. His face was bright red and several veins on his forehead were swollen and throbbing. He looked very cross indeed.

'It's a spontaneous demonstration,' explained Thumper.

'To stop the trees being cut down,' I added. I heard another vehicle approaching, turned my head slightly and saw that a lorry had pulled up behind Churston's car. The back of the lorry contained a huge pile of equipment and half a dozen men. These were, I assumed, the tree surgeons.

'But we had a vote!' spluttered Churston, spitting the words out with difficulty. His face was getting even redder. If he had stood in front of a fire engine his head would have merged into the background. He stared first at the tall woman and then at the smaller black haired woman who had now returned clutching a pot of mustard and then he turned to me. 'These people haven't got any clothes on!' he protested. 'They're women!'

'I think they know that.' I said. The men had climbed down from the back of the lorry and were standing around staring with obvious disbelief at all the naked bodies.

Churston huffed and puffed and waved his hands about as though searching for the right words. 'But there are laws about that sort of thing,' he said at last. He spoke indignantly and he waved a hand in the general direction of the two women. 'Are you people going to move?' he demanded angrily.

Churston's noisy anger had now attracted quite a small crowd of nudists. To my own surprise I realised that I was beginning to get used to being surrounded by naked people.

'We're protesting about the proposals to cut down these beautiful trees,' said a rather chubby man who wasn't quite as naked as the others. He wore a pair of gold-framed spectacles and an expensive looking watch.

'But this is a village affair!' complained Churston. 'The village voted to have the trees cut down and you have no right to get involved.'

'We've got a perfect right to protest!' said the chubby man. He pointed up at the horse chestnut trees. 'These are beautiful trees. No one has a right to cut them down.'

'And don't forget we're protesting too!' said Thumper.

'We're more local than you are!' said Patchy.

Churston looked first at Thumper and then at the chubby man. 'Well, you're asking for trouble and you're going to get it!' he said crossly. He turned abruptly and stormed back towards his motor car. 'I'm going to fetch the police!' he shouted. He pointed at the tree surgeons. 'You stay here!' he told them, though they didn't look as if they were planning to move. One of them had set up a small stove by the side of the road and had begun to boil water for tea. The rest, leaning against the side of the lorry or sprawled on the grass, had lit cigarettes and were clearly enjoying the scenery. Peter Marshall, who had almost emptied his wheelbarrow among the caravanners and campers, approached them with what little stock he had left over.

'We could do with getting a few press photographers here,' said the chubby man, who seemed to be taking charge.

Thumper, Patchy and I must have looked puzzled.

'Humphrey is used to this sort of thing,' explained the tall woman. 'He's marched with the anti-nuclear demonstrators lots of times.'

'You've been arrested three times haven't you, Humphrey?' said the short, dark haired woman.

'The police will be very careful if they think the press is watching,' explained the chubby nudist, not commenting on these unrequested testimonials but, judging from the rather cheeky little grin on his face, clearly not unhappy that they had been introduced. 'Has anyone got any local press contacts?'

'There's a Sunday newspaper journalist staying with us,' I said quickly, heading towards the telephone box beside the Duck and Puddle. A glance told me that the telephone box was occupied and that the occupant was a naked teenage girl. Two more teenage girls, both also naked, stood outside the telephone box. Knowing how long three teenage girls were likely to spend on the telephone I abandoned that idea, turned round and headed for my bicycle. A moment later I retrieved it from where it was leaning against a caravan and threw a leg over the crossbar. 'I'll go and tell him,' I said.

* * *

Jack Ladd was predictably enthusiastic when I told him what was happening in Bilbury village. It can't be very often that a Sunday tabloid journalist finds himself just a few minutes' walk from a village green laden from verge to verge with demonstrating nudists. But as far as he and the *Sunday Globe* were concerned there was one huge, overriding problem: the action had come rather too early in the week.

'I don't suppose they'd like to postpone the demonstration, would they? Could you persuade them to have a spontaneous demonstration on Saturday afternoon?'

If I hadn't still been gasping for breath after my furious ride back to Bilbury Grange I would have smiled. 'I'm afraid I don't think they'll do that,' I said. 'The trees will have probably been cut down by then.'

Jack sighed. 'I was afraid of that.'

'But we need some press photographers there today,' I pointed out. And I think you might find this worth a few paragraphs on Sunday,' I added, handing him a copy of Dr Jones' report on Bilbury's water.

Jack read it slowly and then looked up at me and smiled. 'That's it then,' he said. 'Do Churston and George know about this?'

'I don't think so,' I said. 'Though I think the rumours will be flying around the village pretty soon.'

'Just rumours?' asked Jack.

'Until Sunday,' I said, with a smile. 'Nothing concrete until Sunday. The story is yours.'

Jack nodded and reached for the telephone. 'I'll call a few friends,' he told me. 'You leave everything to me. This fresh publicity will make our Sunday scoop all that much more timely – and it will help give your article a little extra significance too.'

I turned away. 'Did Jenkins manage to get hold of you?' Jack asked me.

I turned back. 'No.' I said.

'He's been trying to ring you for ages,' said Jack. 'He wanted to talk to you about your article.'

'Oh.' I said. It didn't sound like good news.

Jack suddenly grinned. 'He liked it,' he said. 'He said to tell you that he's using it this Sunday. Not changing a word.'

'He liked it?'

'He said he'll ring you next week to talk about a few more ideas he's got. He told me he wants you to contribute regularly to the paper.'

'Really? Do you mean it?'

'No. I'm making it all up,' laughed Jack. 'Of course I mean it!'

* * *

Leaving Jack Ladd to sound the bugle that would bring the press cavalry galloping to our rescue, I stopped off at the house to tell Patsy the good news from London and to return the uneaten sandwiches. There hadn't seemed much point in leaving them for Thumper and Patchy.

'Darling, that's wonderful!' cried Patsy, throwing her arms around my neck. She was baking and her arms and hands were covered in flour. I didn't mind one little bit.

‘Jack says that Jenkins wants me to write regularly for the paper,’ I said.

Patsy squeezed me so tightly that I could hardly breathe. ‘That’s marvellous news,’ she said, in a tiny voice.

Very gently I prised her away from my chest so that I could look at her face. ‘Are you crying?’

‘Only because I’m happy,’ said Patsy, tears welling in her eyes. ‘Just cuddle me and kiss me and make a fuss of me.’

So I cuddled her and kissed her and made a fuss of her.

‘Weren’t they hungry?’ asked Patsy, when she had eventually decided that she’d had enough cuddling and kissing. She pointed towards the sandwiches I had brought back.

I explained.

Patsy didn’t believe me.

I explained again, with a little more detail.

‘I must see this!’ said Patsy, still not entirely convinced. She rinsed what was left of the flour from her hands under the cold tap and then dried them quickly on a towel hanging on a rail in front of the Aga. She then untied her pinafore and followed me out through the back door. Moments later we were both on our bicycles heading back towards the Bilbury village green.

I don’t know precisely how news spreads in the country but I do know that it has nothing whatsoever to do with any of the gadgets normally recognised as having a communications function. If something important happens in one village then even if the telephone lines are down, people living in a nearby village will know about it long before anyone can run, pedal or drive the distance between the two villages.

The lane between Bilbury Grange and the village green was full of cars, motor cycles (with and without sidecars), coaches, pedal cycles, tractors and every other possible form of wheeled transport with the exception of trains and Mississippi paddle steamers. Tourists and curious locals from nearby villages and outlying farms were all on their way to view the demonstration to save Bilbury’s horse chestnut trees. Only the truly naive and innocent could have imagined that a few trees would have attracted quite so much interest if the demonstrators had been fully clothed.

We arrived in the centre of the village just as Churston’s expensive BMW squealed again to a halt alongside the village green. The normally cadaverous P.C. Wren, the Bilbury village constable, brought his old-fashioned sit-up-and-beg bicycle to a halt an inch or two behind Churston’s motor car and rested on his saddle for a moment, puffing and temporarily red-faced, while he got his breath back.

Once he had recovered from the unaccustomed activity Bilbury’s resident guardian of law and order, who had taken over the responsibility for keeping the peace in Bilbury after the death of P.C. Len Wilson, looked around at the mass of tents and caravans, and more particularly at the large crowd of entirely naked campers now gathered beneath the threatened horse chestnut trees, and blanched visibly. He slowly got off his bicycle, bent down and removed his trouser clips and then took out a large red handkerchief which he used to mop his face.

P.C. Wren is a quiet, easy going sort of fellow, normally well suited to pastoral duties in Bilbury, but the sudden flood of visitors had already begun to take its toll on him. Until Bilbury had found itself printed large on the tourist map he had little to worry about other than the occasional disputes between neighbours. Since those simple pre-George Nympton days P.C. Wren’s workload had, of course, increased dramatically. He had to deal with an almost constant stream of poorly parked motor cars, lost children and mislaid umbrellas, but not even this escalation of his responsibilities had prepared him for a full scale conflict between a fairly large crowd of entirely naked demonstrators and a lorry full of saw-happy tree surgeons, egged on by a BMW driving local dignitary of slightly uncertain origins; the very conflict which he now faced with some clear discomfort.

‘Arrest them all!’ said Churston, waving a manicured hand in the general direction of the demonstrators. ‘And move those caravans and tents out of the way so that these men can get at the trees.’ He finished with a wave in the direction of the tree surgeons who did not, I have to confess, seem to be in a great hurry to do anything. Indeed, on the contrary, they seemed quite happy to stay where they were. One of them had clearly discovered the existence of the Duck and Puddle (not a particularly demanding discovery since the pub was just a few yards away from where their lorry was parked) and the grass around them was covered with metal trays and empty beer glasses. With plenty of beer to drink (Frank was so pleased to have customers who wanted to buy beer instead of lemonade that he wouldn’t take any money from them) and a panorama of naked women to admire they seemed content to let things take their slow course at whatever pace God decreed most suitable.

P.C. Wren had looked anxious when he had dismounted from his bicycle. But as the minutes passed by his discomfort seemed to grow. When Churston spoke firmly to him, giving him instructions, he stuck a finger into his mouth and began to nibble nervously at a nail, apparently hoping that this might mysteriously provide him with some inspiration.

Behind and around us the crowd continued to grow as word spread of the growing confrontation on Bilbury village green. There was much giggling and much staring and a plump young woman in bright pink shorts that were two sizes too small for her and a green top that was three sizes too small for her, lifted her small son and turned him round to face away from the nudists so that he would not be in any way contaminated by the sight of so many naked bodies.

'When are you going to do something?' demanded Churston.

P.C. Wren took his finger out of his mouth and stepped a pace forwards, put his hands behind his back and lowered his eyebrows to make himself look as stern as possible. His face, bright red when he had climbed off his bicycle, had now regained its usual pallor. P.C. Wren had spent hours practising his stern, ferocious look in front of the bathroom mirror at home, in readiness for just such an occasion as this. Although he was a village policeman and always had been a village policeman (before being posted to Bilbury he had pedalled the beat in a village in South Devon) he had, in his heart, always been aware that one day he might have to face a real 'crisis'; a 'big one'; a moment of challenge when his inner strength and innate capacity to lead and take charge, would have to take the place of training or experience and see him through.

He had, through years of backwater policing, nurtured a constant private dream that one day his unique skills would be recognised and he would be called to some big city to show his always ever so superior looking colleagues how to handle real crises. He believed that a real policeman was born and not made.

'What's going on here, then?' he asked, bending forwards slightly as he spoke. He spoke directly to the chubby man, whom instinct had enabled him to pick out as the ring leader. He was clearly finding it unusually difficult to deal with an unclothed member of the public. Not even his wildest dreams had prepared him for this.

'We're not moving from here until those trees are safe!' said the tall, blonde haired woman, who stood at the chubby man's side.

There were cheers of support and approval from the naked massed ranks behind her.

P.C. Wren licked his lips, swallowed hard and tried to decide what his hero, Inspector Maigret, would do under these circumstances. Sadly, he could not think of a scene from any of Simenon's books which helped him. As far as he could recall not even the great Parisian detective had ever had to face a determined mob of demonstrating nudists. Instead of being disappointed by this discovery, P.C. Wren found it strangely strengthening. He felt somehow emboldened by the knowledge that he was breaking new ground in law enforcement.

As P.C. Wren contemplated the prospect of the professional glory which would, he felt sure, follow his successful management of this incident there was a heavy whirring sound overhead; tent flaps flapped flappily and awnings fluttered noisily and light, thin, summer dresses on those bystanders who were bravely wearing thin, light summer dresses billowed revealingly. Jack Ladd's pals had decided to avoid the queues around Bilbury and speed straight to the village centre by helicopter.

As several hundred pairs of eyes peered upwards, several telephoto lenses peered downwards and a similar number of motor drives whirred into action. The nation's press had arrived. Once again Bilbury was about to burst into the news. This time, instead of being hidden away on features pages, Bilbury was about to make the front pages.

* * *

The helicopter landed on the roadway a hundred yards away from the village green and about fifty yards away from Peter Marshall's village shop, causing quite a localised storm. As Peter rushed out of his shop, clutching at the placards and notices which the wind made by the helicopter's whirring blades was ripping from his shop windows, representatives of the nation's press scrambled from the open doorway with all the eagerness of commandos heading for action.

P.C. Wren watched the arrival of the press with clearly visible apprehension. The descent of the helicopter had meant that the stakes had now risen sky high. P.C. Wren was wise enough to realise that success or failure would be amplified a thousand times by the attendant and now quite unavoidable publicity. He removed his helmet, wiped his forehead with the back of his hand and scratched his head as though hoping that the action might kickstart his brain into action.

'Are you going to arrest these people?' demanded Churston. His fists were clenched, his brow was furrowed and there was a speckle of froth at the corner of his mouth. He looked like an advertisement for anger and I was genuinely concerned about his health.

I reached out and touched him on the arm to try to calm him down. 'Take it easy, Churston!' I murmured in what I hoped was a soothing voice. But either my soft murmur wasn't quite as soothing as I thought it was or else Churston was simply too tense. He responded as though I'd poked him with an electrical cattle prod.

'He attacked me!' he screamed, leaping a yard away and pointing at me. 'Arrest him! Arrest him! He's one of them!'

'If you're going to arrest anyone it should be me!' said the chubby nudist, stepping forward and holding out his hands so that P.C. Wren could snap on the handcuffs. Unlike those of us who lived in Bilbury the visitor didn't realise that P.C. Wren did not carry handcuffs with him. His handcuffs were at that moment busily occupied holding together the two old sets of bedsprings which plugged the gap in his front hedge and stopped wandering sheep from straying into his garden.

'I think you should arrest us,' said Patchy, indicating himself and Thumper. 'We were the ones who started the protest.'

'Just arrest Patchy,' said Thumper, quickly. Thumper has had a brief taste of prison food and didn't like it. 'But I think it is all a bit of a waste of time,' he added, speaking quietly, 'haven't you heard? Some scientist has proved that Bilbury water doesn't cure arthritis or make you sexy after all! No one's going to want a hotel on Bilbury village green so there isn't much point in chopping down the trees.'

Churston went white and opened and shut his mouth like an indignant goldfish. 'What did you say? Where did you hear that? What hotel? Who's building a hotel? I'll sue anyone who says anything about anything!'

'Everyone in the village has heard the rumour about the water,' Patchy added. I suppressed a smile. Kay had clearly done her work well.

'Great news, eh?' said Patchy. 'Frank at the pub told me that Bilbury water contains so many pollutants that everyone has got to drink bottled water.'

'It's all lies!' screeched Churston. 'Where's the nearest telephone?' he demanded.

'Actually I think he said that we all had to drink beer,' said Thumper.

'You're right,' said Patchy. 'He did.'

'There's one outside the Duck and Puddle,' I told Churston. 'But when I last saw it there was a queue about thirty yards long outside it.'

'I'll sue you all!' screamed Churston.

'Arrest me!' said the tall, blonde nude girl, stepping forwards a pace. The motor drives whirred into action again.

'And me!' added the short, brunette, nude girl. The motor drives whirred.

P.C. Wren put his helmet back on and tried to keep his eyes moving so that they didn't settle anywhere. I'd long ago given up trying to do that; it had made me dizzy.

'Arrest them all!' shouted an indignant and frustrated Churston, now clearly beside himself with worry. 'These men are waiting to cut down those trees!' As he spoke he pointed first towards the tree surgeons, still lounging around on the grass, and then towards the trees, quietly and stately oblivious to the fact that they were standing on death row. He then turned back and stared at the tree surgeons. Frank's free beer had a predictable effect. They didn't look as if they were waiting to do anything and they certainly didn't look capable of cutting down a dandelion let alone a tree. 'Get up you lazy good-for-nothings!' he shouted. He walked across to one of the semi-comatose tree surgeons and kicked his foot. The tree surgeon didn't like this and tried to stand up to defend himself. But he didn't get past the sitting up position. He then smiled, waved and lowered himself back down onto the ground. The photographers, who had temporarily switched their aim from the two nude girls, kept their fingers on their buttons in case anything exciting happened.

'Arrest us!' cried the tall, blonde girl and the short brunette. They leapt up and down as they spoke and as their jiggling breasts played with and taunted gravity the photographers whirled round again. Two of them cursed as their films ran out and one of them stepped forwards. 'Do you mind doing that bit again?' he asked the girls, as he skilfully removed the exposed film and replaced it with a fresh roll. The girls dutifully obliged and the motor drives whirred again.

'I want compensation!' said Peter Marshall, suddenly arriving on the scene and holding out three badly torn posters and a copy of *The Times* which looked as though it had been in a puddle. He was breathless and dishevelled and had clearly expended considerable effort in chasing down the posters which the helicopter had disturbed.

P.C. Wren, now helmeted and officially dressed, turned towards him and took out first his notebook and then his pencil. 'What seems to be the trouble?' he asked, in his best and most official voice.

'Their helicopter landed right by my shop!' said Peter, aiming an accusing finger at the photographers. 'It blew away my posters and blew over my newspaper stand.'

P.C. Wren wrote all this down in his notebook. 'Was anyone injured?' he asked.

Peter thought for a moment, and examined his limbs carefully. 'I don't think so,' he said, at last. He thought for a moment, reluctant to abandon the prospect of compensation for physical injury. 'But I might suffer delayed shock,' he added.

P.C. Wren carefully wrote all this down while the rest of us stood around and waited. 'Can you give me a description of the allegedly responsible vehicle?'

Peter paused and looked confused for a moment. 'It was a helicopter,' he said at last. He twirled a hand round above his head in a rather poor imitation of a helicopter in action 'You know,' he continued, 'a helicopter.'

'Did you get the number?' asked P.C. Wren, pencil poised for action.

'No,' admitted Peter, rather sadly.

‘Well we’ll have to see what we can do,’ said P.C. Wren, closing his notebook and putting it and his pencil back safely inside his tunic pocket. ‘I’ll make a report.’

Mollified by this, Peter hurried back towards his shop.

The crowd of spectators, which now completely surrounded the village green, was becoming restless. The sight of so many nudists had kept them amused and entertained for a while but now they wanted some action.

‘Are you going to arrest these people?’ demanded Churston, jabbing a finger towards the top button on P.C. Wren’s tunic.

P.C. Wren rubbed his chin. ‘I have to tell you, Churston, that I’m in a bit of a quandary,’ he admitted quietly. ‘I feel as though I probably should arrest someone but I’m not quite sure who to arrest or what to arrest them for.’

‘I don’t care what you arrest them for!’ shouted Churston. ‘Just arrest all these people who are stopping these men chopping down those trees!’ He was confused that this time he waved a hand in the direction of the trees when he mentioned ‘men’ and in the direction of the comatose tree surgeons when he mentioned ‘trees’. But we knew what he meant.

‘Those men aren’t in a fit state to chop down any trees,’ said Patchy. ‘So how can anyone be stopping them?’

‘Have you got any paperwork to show that those men have a legal right to chop down these trees?’ asked P.C. Wren.

Exasperated, Churston sighed. ‘Not with me!’ he admitted. ‘But you were at the meeting the other day!’

This was accurate. P.C. Wren had indeed been at the meeting at which the village had decided that the horse chestnut trees should be cut down.

‘Not in my official capacity,’ said P.C. Wren.

‘What do you mean?’ demanded Churston.

‘I was there in my private capacity,’ said P.C. Wren. ‘As a citizen. I was not there in my official capacity as a member of the constabulary.’

‘But you heard what the vote was!’

‘In my private and personal capacity I did,’ agreed P.C. Wren, with a nod.

‘So arrest them!’

‘Ah!’ said P.C. Wren. ‘To do that I would have to take evidence from myself in my personal capacity as a witness. But that would be uncorroborated, hearsay evidence and not admissible in court.’ He folded his arms, clearly rather proud of himself.

‘Ice creams! Ice lollies! Cold drinks!’ called a familiar voice. Patsy nudged me and pointed at something that was happening behind us. I turned my head slightly and there was a breathless but ever enterprising Peter Marshall pushing his wheelbarrow. The wheelbarrow appeared to be full of bags of frozen peas. As I watched, two small children approached him holding out their pocket money and asking for ice creams.

Filled with curiosity, Patsy and I stepped over to where he was standing. I leant close to him so that I could whisper in his ear. ‘Why are you trying to sell bags of frozen peas to holiday-makers?’ I asked him, while the children counted out their pennies into his outstretched hand.

Peter answered without turning his head. ‘I hadn’t got enough ice,’ he explained. ‘The frozen peas are to stop the ice creams melting.’ He slipped the coins into the pocket of his white coat, rummaged around between the bags of frozen peas and produced two ice creams.

I explained this apparent mystery to Patsy and turned back to the action to see that Churston was now jumping up and down with rage. ‘Arrest them for something else!’ he insisted. ‘Breach of the peace or threatening behaviour or something.’

P.C. Wren rubbed his nose with his forefinger. ‘I don’t think I can do that, Mr Ferrers,’ he said. I rather got the impression that he might have been enjoying himself. ‘They don’t seem to be threatening anybody or breaching the peace.’

‘Well, just arrest them for not having any clothes on!’ cried Churston desperately, pointing at the nudists. ‘Look at them!’ he cried. ‘They’re... they’re... They’re nude! And naked!’

‘They don’t seem to be upsetting anyone,’ I pointed out.

‘They were here very early; before there was anyone here to upset,’ said Thumper. ‘And they’re just camping out. Surely, they’re entitled to take their clothes off to have a wash. If you’re going to arrest someone shouldn’t you arrest the people who are looking at them?’

P.C. Wren looked at Thumper and frowned. ‘Why should I do that?’

‘I thought there were laws about peeping,’ said Thumper. ‘If you caught Churston peeping through Daphne Borrodale’s window when she didn’t have any clothes on you’d arrest him, wouldn’t you?’

‘Oh yes,’ agreed P.C. Wren, with a nod.

‘So there you are!’ said Thumper.

‘Has he peeped through Daphne Borrodale’s window?’ asked P.C. Wren.

‘This is absolutely preposterous!’ shouted Churston. ‘Why would I want to peep through Daphne Borrodale’s window?’

‘I don’t know,’ admitted Thumper. ‘I was using the example to make a point.’

‘Ah!’ said P.C. Wren. ‘It certainly is a very difficult legal situation,’ he admitted. ‘I probably should arrest someone.’ He paused and thought for a moment. ‘But should I arrest the nudists for not having any clothes on or should I arrest the people who’ve got clothes on and who are looking at them for peeping?’

Churston stared at P.C. Wren for a moment and said nothing. And then he hit him right on the nose. The sound of the blow was drowned by the sound of cameras clicking. P.C. Wren staggered backwards in surprise. He put his hand up to his nose and when he examined his fingers he could see what we could already see: blood.

‘You’re under arrest!’ said P.C. Wren to Churston.

‘What for?’ demanded Churston rather weakly.

‘For hitting a police officer on the nose and making him very, very cross,’ said P.C. Wren, marching the miserable Churston away.

‘Have I missed anything?’ demanded a breathless voice.

I turned round.

Malcolm Eggington, red-faced and rather damp with the exertion of riding his bicycle all the way from Ilfracombe, was struggling to remove a large, spiral-bound reporter’s notebook from his jacket pocket. The spiral binding had caught on his camera strap. ‘Will you fill me in?’ pleaded Malcolm, local reporter for the *Barnstaple, Bideford and Bilbury and Bideford Herald*. ‘My bicycle chain came off and rather held me up.’

* * *

While P.C. Wren held his handkerchief to his bloody nose with one hand and used the other to drag Churston off in the direction of the Bilbury Police Station (actually the front parlour of P.C. Wren’s cottage), the nudists carried on being nude, the tree surgeons carried on metabolising the vast quantities of alcohol which they had consumed, and the representatives of the national press rushed off in their hired helicopter so that they could take their photographs and stories back to their news desks. Malcolm, taking things easy with the calm of a man who had several days to wait before the next edition of his newspaper was due to be published, stayed a while, replenishing his fluid intake with a mug of tea which one of the nudists had given him.

The spectators who had watched the whole helicopter landing, nose punching incident as though it had been one of those historical village pageants put on for the benefit of tourists, wandered around the village taking photographs, licking Peter Marshall’s ice creams and tracking down the various local points of interest which were listed on the special Bilbury village map (available from the Duck and Puddle or the village shop at the very reasonable price of 10 pence).

Patchy, Thumper, Patsy and I tried hard not to celebrate too much in public but retired to Frank and Gilly’s private sitting room in the Duck and Puddle for a little quiet gloating. I telephoned Dr Brownlow from the pub and told him the good news. He came round straight away to join us.

‘Tim and Angie will be able to buy a cottage of their own,’ said Patchy.

‘Do you think house prices will come down now?’ asked Gilly.

‘They’ll drop like a stone,’ said Patchy. ‘Churston and George borrowed all the money they invested in property and land. When the bank finds out that Bilbury water is no better than water anywhere else it will be clear that Churston and George paid much more than the market value for the property they’ve got. They’ll have to repay the bank and that means that they’ll have to sell for whatever they can get. Because they’ll be selling lots of properties they’ll get peanuts for them.’

‘The value of Bilbury Grange is about to collapse and I’m delighted!’ said Patsy.

‘So there won’t be any danger of us being thrown out of the Duck and Puddle?’ said Gilly.

Patchy shook his head.

‘I do hope people in the village aren’t going to be too upset when the tourists stop coming,’ I said.

‘Not a chance!’ said Thumper. ‘Everyone I know is already fed up of having to work so hard. The money was nice enough but people will be glad to get back to normal.’

‘What about that American’s lawsuit?’ asked Patsy.

‘You can forget about that!’ said Patchy. ‘Churston and George are going to be far too busy salvaging what they can from the wreckage of their business plans to continue with their stupid legal threats.’

‘I think the drinks are on us, then,’ said Frank, with a large grin spread across his face. ‘What would everyone like?’

‘I’ll have a triple whisky, please, Frank!’ said Dr Brownlow, appearing in the doorway. ‘But no water with it, thank you, Frank. I’ve heard that Bilbury water is full of typhoid and cholera germs.’

* * *

After we had finished celebrating, Patsy and I retrieved our bicycles and pedalled home. When we got back to Bilbury Grange we found that a lorry driver had blocked our gates with two large, wooden pallets piled high with something wrapped in thick plastic.

'What on earth is that?' asked Patsy.

'Damn!' I said. 'Must be a mistake. I'll have a look.' I walked up to the nearest of the two pallets and peered through the plastic.

'What is it?' Patsy asked.

'It's, er, my book,' I told her. 'I found a printer and had it published.'

'Gosh.' said Patsy, clearly impressed. 'How many copies are there exactly?' she asked.

'Just two,' I said.

'Two?'

'Two thousand.'

'So what do we do with them now?

'After we've moved them away from the gate I hope we'll eventually manage to sell them,' I replied.

Patsy stood for a moment and stared at the daunting pile of books before us. 'Well, I suppose the first thing is to move them into the house,' she said, completely undaunted.

I took her hand. 'Thanks!' I said.

'What for?'

'For being so supportive.'

'Don't be silly,' said Patsy.

I kissed her.

'When I was seven I helped run the book stall at the village fete,' she said, clambering over the pile of books to get at the gate. 'There can't be much about selling books that I don't know!'

'That's great!' I said.

Patsy unlocked the gate, and climbed down the other side of the pallet. A moment later her head re-appeared. 'How many did you say there were?' she asked.

'Two thousand. I thought that was a sensible number to start with.' I scratched my head. 'But it does look rather a lot,' I admitted.

'We'll soon sell all those,' she said. 'People will love reading about Bilbury.' And she disappeared again.

A moment later she reappeared. 'Is Thumper in it?'

'Of course.'

'And the Duck and Puddle and Frank and Gilly?'

'Yes.'

'And Dr Brownlow?'

'Naturally.'

'And Patchy Fogg?'

'Yes.'

'It's bound to be a success!' she said. 'They're all such lovely people.' Then she disappeared again.

And then her head reappeared above the pile of books.

'Am I in it?'

I laughed. 'You'll have to read it to find that out!' I told her.

* * *

Bilbury Country is the fourth of Vernon Coleman's seven books about Bilbury. These are: Bilbury Chronicles, Bilbury Grange, Bilbury Revels, Bilbury Country and Bilbury Village. There are two books of short stories called Bilbury Pie and Bilbury Pudding. If you enjoy the Bilbury books you may enjoy other books by the same author including Mr Henry Mulligan and Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War. For full details of over 100 books by Vernon Coleman please see his author page on Amazon or http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

Also available by Vernon Coleman

The Bilbury Chronicles
A young doctor arrives to begin work in the small village of Bilbury. This picturesque hamlet is home to some memorable characters who have many a tale to tell, and Vernon Coleman weaves together a superb story full of humour and anecdotes. The Bilbury books will transport you back to the days of oldfashioned, traditional village life where you never needed to lock your door, and when a helping hand was only ever a moment away. The first novel in the series.

"I am just putting pen to paper to say how very much I enjoyed The Bilbury Chronicles. I just can't wait to read the others." (Mrs K., Cambs)

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"A wonderful book for relaxing and unwinding. Makes you want to up roots and move to the rural heartland." (Lincolnshire Echo)

"For sheer relaxing pleasure here's another witty tale from the doctor whose prolific writings are so well known." (Bookshelf)

The Bilbury Revels
Disaster strikes in this the third Bilbury novel when a vicious storm descends on the village. The ensuing snow storm cuts off the village and blankets the whole area in a deep carpet of snow. Much damage is done to the village as a result of the storm and the locals band together to undertake the repair work. Money, as ever, is tight and fund-raising is of prime importance. Money-spinning suggestions are sought and so the idea of the Revels is born – a week of fun and festivities to raise the money needed to repair the local schoolteacher's cottage.

Reviews of 'The Bilbury Chronicles' by Vernon Coleman

'Coleman handles the humour with the assured touch that comes from having already written a string of successful titles (and) manages to retain a heartwarming affection for his fellow man.' - Yorkshire Evening Post

'Very readable, funny and full of richly drawn characters.' - Southern Evening Echo

'You can sniff the clean Devon air and, despite the fiction, hear and recognise characters indigenous to any West Country village... Dr Coleman harnesses the essence of village life with a wealth of characters and strings them along on a tide of gentle humour. One of the pleasures of this tale is that so many people will recognise Bilbury under a different name.' - Western Morning News

'A cornucopia of colourful characters helps to weave a rich tapestry of village life subtly tempered with the gentle humour which hallmarks this author's work. Set in 1971, the mixture of rural beauty, human nature and the odd whisper of nostalgia combine to make this book a real delight.' - Western Gazette

'The stories have moments of poignancy and tragedy as well. And how splendidly he mixes all the ingredients to produce a startling, but still credible tale about the local bobby and his man-eating wife. Dr Coleman's book is a real delight from cover to cover. As the first in a series, it holds out the promise of entertaining things to come.' - Huddersfield Daily Examiner

Reviews of 'Bilbury Grange' by Vernon Coleman

'Captures the essence of old-fashioned village life where you never needed to lock your door' - Western Evening Herald

'A wonderful book for relaxing and unwinding... Makes you want to up roots and move to the rural heartland' - Lincolnshire Echo

'For sheer relaxing pleasure here's another witty tale from the doctor whose prolific writings are so well known to many of us' - Bookshelf

'A pleasure to read from cover to cover.' - Kentish Express

The Young Country Doctor: Book 5

BILBURY VILLAGE

Vernon Coleman

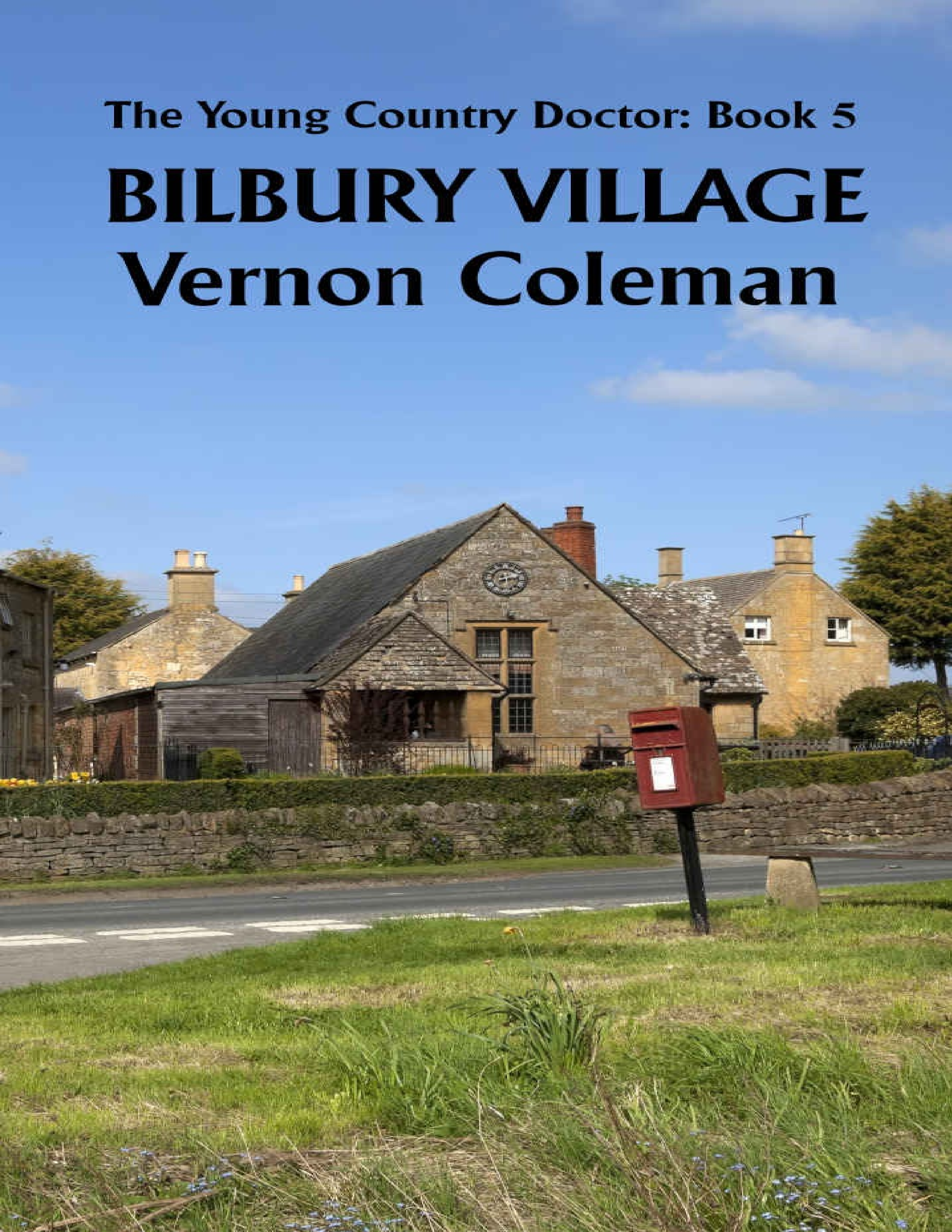

THE YOUNG COUNTRY DOCTOR: BOOK 5

BILBURY VILLAGE

VERNON COLEMAN

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Bilbury Village is the fifth of Vernon Coleman's seven books about Bilbury. These are: *Bilbury Chronicles, Bilbury Grange, Bilbury Revels, Bilbury Country* and *Bilbury Village.* There are two books of short stories called *Bilbury Pie* and *Bilbury Pudding*. If you enjoy the Bilbury books you may enjoy other books by the same author including '*Mr Henry Mulligan'* and *'Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War'*. For full details of over 100 books by Vernon Coleman please see his author page on Amazon or www.vernoncoleman.com

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To Donna Antoinette

Wherever I am with you
I will always be at home.
You will always have my love
You will never be alone.

CHAPTER 1

I had forgotten how much blood there is in the human body and how much of it can be lost without the heart and brain shutting down completely. And I had forgotten that a few pints of blood can look like gallons when they're out of the arteries and veins through which they once flowed.

The human body contains eight pints of blood. It contains eight pints because that's what it needs to move oxygen from the lungs to the tissues and organs.

There wasn't eight pints left in the man in the car. The stuff had been pumping out of him at quite a rate. An artery had been severed and the man's blood was squirting out like a fountain. Fortunately, it wasn't a big artery and so it wasn't a big fountain.

It's easy to tell whether it's a vein or an artery that's been severed. Blood comes slowly out of a leaking vein. The pressure is so low that unless a major vein is completely severed the blood loss is more of a mess than an emergency.

But when an artery is cut the blood comes out under pressure. When I was a medical student, and we were being taught how to perform venipunctures by practising on one another, one of my colleagues asked the tutor how she'd know if she'd hit an artery instead of a vein. 'You'll know,' said the tutor. 'The syringe will come whistling back past your ear.' It may have been a slight exaggeration but the key word is 'slight' and not 'exaggeration'.

Normally, the human heart pumps eight pints of blood through the arteries every minute of every day. But the amount of blood the organs and tissues need varies from minute to minute. In an emergency - when the body's organs need extra supplies - the heart can pump fifty pints of blood a minute to give the muscles extra power and strength.

Anyone who loses a lot of blood will faint. This is a deliberate technique used to ensure that the brain gets a good supply of food. When standing, blood has to travel upwards to reach the brain. Someone who faints automatically lies down and this makes it easier for blood to get to the brain - the most important organ.

* * *

The man inside the car was a long way from producing scar tissue but he was losing blood from a cut in his wrist. His radial artery had been sliced in two. I had no idea what had caused the cut but the inside of the car was badly smashed up and there were several sharp edged pieces of plastic around which could have done the damage. Judging by the stickiness in the car he had lost far more blood than was entirely good for him. He was unconscious, though whether this was because he had fainted or because of something else I had no idea. My only concern was to do everything I could to keep him alive. Making a formal diagnosis and initiating treatment would be someone else's responsibility. All I was interested in was getting him to hospital and keeping him alive until I got him there.

There are many ways in which people are prepared for emergencies. From time to time the authorities have practice emergency days. Accidents are staged on a railway line or in a large factory and civil servants, politicians, administrators and others are rehearsed in an attempt to show them how they should react. All this is, of course, utterly useless. In a real emergency those memories are suppressed; overtaken by fear, panic and the reality of the moment.

Similarly, first aiders who practise in a village hall or school gymnasium may think that they are preparing themselves for an emergency but, sadly, they are doing nothing of the sort. They may become proficient in a village hall or school gymnasium but when faced with a real situation virtually everything they have learned will be forgotten. There will be no instinctive muscle memories to help them because the only way to prepare yourself to react in an emergency is to find yourself in emergency situations so often that you automatically know what to do.

Fortunately I had, before coming to work in general practice in Bilbury, worked long hours, long weeks and long months in several busy casualty departments. I had seen enough emergencies not to panic. Dealing with emergencies never becomes routine, and never should, but the practicalities can become instinctive so that there is time for the brain to tell the rest of the body what it has to do.

* * *

The car was lying on its side in a deep ditch. It looked like a complete wreck. The man wasn't the only occupant in the car. Wriggling down into the car to attend to the man, I had found a woman in the car too. I guessed that she had been the passenger and he had been driving. She was lying underneath the man and she too was unconscious. The water in the car had risen several inches in the few minutes I'd been in there with them. She was still alive but if I didn't get her out quickly she would drown. When it had crashed into the ditch the car had tipped onto its side. The windscreen and nearside windows had smashed and water from the ditch had flooded into the car. As the rain continued to pour down so the water level in the ditch rose – and as the water level in the ditch rose so the water level in the car rose too. I gently moved the woman's head as much as I could and tried to wedge her in such a way that her head was as far as possible above the water.

I clambered out of the car and the torch beam that had been shining into the car followed me out. Thumper Robinson had used orange baler twine to tie the car door on the driver's side to the car's front bumper in order to keep it open. The rain was getting heavier. It was like standing under a huge tap. Living on the North Devon coast I'd got accustomed to storms and strong winds. South Devon is all sunshine and gentle breezes. North Devon is more gale force winds and horizontal rain. But this was bad even for our part of the coastline. I thought the force of the water and the wind was going to knock me over. Apart from whatever happened to be lit by the torch I couldn't see anything. The night was pitch black. If there was a moon I couldn't see it. The wind must have been close to hurricane levels.

'Are they dead?' asked the man with the torch.

'No,' I said rather too sharply. 'They're both still alive. But we need to get them out of there fast. He's bleeding from a cut artery and I think he's fractured his left ankle. His foot is certainly pointing in the wrong direction. She's badly cut and has a broken arm.' Those were the injuries I'd been able to find. There were, I suspected, almost certainly more.

'The petrol tank is ruptured,' said Thumper. 'Petrol is coming out. I can't see it but I can smell it.'

I sighed. Something else to worry about. Somehow I didn't really care. You reach a point where there isn't any brain left for worrying. Besides, I had plenty of other things to think about.

I'd taken off my coat to enable me to wriggle into the car and the wind was tearing at my shirt. I was soaking wet and shivering almost uncontrollably. I tried to tear the sleeve out of my shirt but failed even to break the stitching. It must have been a good shirt. In the movies people always manage to rip up shirts with ease. In real life it's more difficult. I took my penknife out of my trouser pocket and managed to cut into the material and then tear off a sleeve.

'Shouldn't we leave them where they are until the emergency services get here?' asked a female voice. 'Patients shouldn't be moved when they have spinal injuries,' she added.

'If we don't move them both quickly the woman down there will drown,' I told her. 'She's unconscious and she's trapped underneath the man. The water level is rising fast and her head is about three inches above the water level – or at least it was when I was last in there. They've both got head injuries. How long will the fire brigade and the ambulance be?'

'They can't get here,' said Thumper Robinson.

Thumper was my oldest and best friend in Bilbury. Though we were the same age we were the proverbial chalk and cheese. I had spent most of my early life at school, studying books. He had spent most of his early life playing truant from school, studying cars, animals and the countryside. He'd certainly never been to university. I had 'O' level Latin, knew who Pythagoras was and could tell you the names of all the small bones in the human wrist. Thumper could catch a trout with his bare hands, could build a stout and serviceable chair from a couple of fallen tree branches, could skin a rabbit quicker than any butcher, could change a car engine and could tell you, with certainty, which mushrooms were edible and which would kill you. In short, my learning had largely theoretical value while Thumper's learning was exclusively practical.

Thumper, however, was not a doctor. I was, and as such I was expected to be able to save the lives of the two people who were trapped in their car.

'The main road is closed about half a mile from here,' explained Thumper. 'The stream has flooded the road and they won't be able to get through. Not even with an ambulance.'

'Can they get across the fields?'

The wind was so fierce that we had to shout to make ourselves heard. I wished I'd put on something warmer. I shivered.

'It's far too wet,' replied Thumper. 'The ground is soaking. The nearest an ambulance can get is probably the spot where the A39 passes the end of Southcombe Wood and crosses Lower Kentisbury Ford.'

'Then we have to get them out of the car,' I said, making the decision. 'And if the ambulance can't get to them then we have to get them to an ambulance. But first I need to put a tourniquet on the man's arm. He's losing a lot of blood. And then I need something to make a couple of splints with.'

'I thought tourniquets were considered too dangerous,' said the woman. 'They can result in tissue damage. Shouldn't we apply direct pressure?'

I peered through the darkness. 'Are you a doctor?'

'I'm a social worker and a fully qualified first aider.'

I was getting rather tetchy. 'Do you want him to bleed to death?'

‘No, of course not.’

‘Then I need to put on a tourniquet.’

I climbed back into the car. Just before I disappeared back into the sticky blackness I turned back and called to Nick Houghton, who’d been holding the torch. ‘Go and ask your Dad to drive over here with his tractor,’ I said. ‘He’ll need to bring a trailer. Something we can put these two on. And while he brings the tractor you stay there and ring 999. Ask for an ambulance and tell them I need one to meet us where the road from Barnstaple to Lynton passes the end of Southcombe Wood and crosses Lower Kentisbury Ford.’

I wanted Nick’s father to drive the tractor because I knew no one in Devon who handled a tractor more skilfully in tricky conditions. In addition to running a large farm Samuel had a contract with the local authority to keep the local roads clear of snow. He would fix a huge snow-moving attachment to the front of his ancient red monster of a tractor and drive serenely through anything. Whatever the weather, however cold, he always did it wearing a rusty brown tweed jacket with a length of baler twine around his waist. He never wore an overcoat of any kind.

I had often wondered how I would feel if I started practising medicine again. Would I panic and forget what to do? A doctor, more than any other professional, needs to know how to look and sound calm whatever his inner feelings. I was relieved to discover that I didn’t feel in the slightest bit panicky. And I knew what I had to do. But I had been reminded, with a shocking suddenness, that the responsibilities of a country general practitioner are awesome. The real measure of responsibility is just how big a mistake you can make before someone stops you and at that moment I couldn’t think of a job I could be doing that would carry more direct responsibility. I don’t suppose either highly-paid civil servants or corporate executives paid millions for their decision-making are faced with many splitsecond life or death decisions.

* * *

Forty minutes earlier I’d been fast asleep in bed. Warm, dry and cosy. I don’t know how long the telephone had been ringing when I woke but it couldn’t have been long. I’d been a general practitioner long enough to wake almost instantly at the first ring of a telephone bell.

‘Is that the doctor?’ demanded a frantic sounding voice which I didn’t recognise.

‘Well, yes, sort of,’ I replied warily, instantly awake but puzzled. ‘I am a doctor but I don’t practise any more.’ I had been a GP in Bilbury but I’d retired a year or two earlier when the authorities had decided that Bilbury wasn’t a big enough village to have its own doctor. Medical services were now provided by a practice in Barnstaple

‘You’re needed urgently,’ said the voice. ‘There’s been an accident. In the lane just beyond Softly’s Bottom. On the Parracombe road. About a quarter of a mile past the turn to Henshaw’s farm.’ The words came out so quickly that I had difficulty understanding what I was being told.

‘Slow down,’ I said. I sat up in bed and turned on the bedside light on the small oak table that stood at my side of the bed. Emily and Sophie, our two cats who were sleeping on the bed, didn’t budge. Ben, the Welsh sheepdog who always slept on the carpet next to my slippers, was awake. She looked up, ears pricked, but didn’t make a sound. Patsy slept on undisturbed.

‘Thumper asked me to call you,’ said the voice.

‘Thumper? Is he OK? Is Thumper hurt?’

‘No. Thumper is fine. But he’s at the accident. He was driving past and saw the car in the ditch. There are two people in there. He thinks they’re seriously injured and daren’t move them.’

‘What’s your name?’

‘Michael Houghton. I’m Samuel’s son. We’ve played cricket together a few times.’

I knew Samuel Houghton. He was a local farmer. And I knew his, sons. Michael was a good batsman and a competent medium pace bowler when he didn’t try to bowl too quickly.

‘Have you telephoned for an ambulance?’ I asked him.

‘They can’t get through. The road from Barnstaple is blocked. The storm has brought down trees all over the place and the road is flooded in several places.’

‘So the doctors can’t get through from Barnstaple?’

‘No. Thumper says you’re the only doctor who can get here.

He said to say he’s sorry to have to ring you. He came to our house because we’re the nearest. My brother Nick and his girlfriend have gone with him. They told me to ring you.’

‘I’ll be there as soon as I can,’ I said. I put the phone back on its rest, pulled back the covers and started to climb out of bed. Ben looked excited. I shook my head at her to tell her she wasn’t going with me. She looked crestfallen.

‘Who was that?’ asked a sleepy Patsy.

‘There’s been an accident,’ I told her. ‘No one can get through from Barnstaple so I’m the only doctor around.’

I looked around the bedroom. When I’d been practising as a GP I’d always kept my clothes ready by the bed so that I could get dressed quickly and be out of the house in minutes.

‘Shall I get your bag out of the old surgery?’ asked Patsy. Although it had been some time since I’d practised medicine we’d left the old surgery just as it was.

I thought for a moment. ‘I don’t think there’s anything in it that will be much use,’ I told her. ‘But there’s a first aid kit in the car.’ Little did I know as I spoke that a stethoscope would have been about as much use as the box of sticking plasters the first aid kit contained.

* * *

Using my shirt sleeve as a tourniquet I’d managed to stop the man bleeding to death. And then, inch by inch, I had, with Thumper’s help, succeeded in dragging the two people out of their crashed car.

Once they were out in the open it was possible to see that they were both very young. He was wearing a thin blue suit. She was wearing a mini dress. They looked as if they had been out to a party somewhere. I found a rug in the boot of my car. I wrapped it around them both to try to keep them warm.

‘Do you know them?’ I asked Thumper.

He shook his head. ‘Will they make it?’

‘I think so,’ I said. Neither of them had been wearing seat belts and they’d both been bashed around quite a bit in the crash. They were both still unconscious.

‘Do you recognise them?’ Thumper asked Nick’s girlfriend. I still didn’t know her name. She had stayed behind in case the unconscious girl woke up and needed comforting.

She nodded.

‘The man is George Willoughby,’ she said. ‘He lives in Lynton. The girl is Enid something. I don’t know her second name. She lives in Lynton too.’ She turned to me. ‘Are they going to be OK?’

‘I think so,’ I told her quietly.

‘He’s only eighteen,’ said Nick’s girlfriend. ‘It’s his Dad’s car. He always drives too bloody fast.’

I didn’t say anything.

‘I’d just like to apologise for being a bit bossy,’ she said. I could tell it wasn’t easy for her to say ‘sorry’. But she said it anyway.

‘That’s OK,’ I said. ‘Forget it.’ I smiled at her. ‘I was a bit irritable,’ I apologised. ‘We didn’t have much time. You’re quite right about tourniquets by the way. But under the circumstances...’

‘Under the circumstances you obviously did the right thing,’ said Nick’s girlfriend.

The rain was now coming down harder than ever. And the wind was still howling. It was an evil night. The wind was making so much noise that we saw the lights of Samuel’s tractor before we heard it. I have never in my life been so pleased to see a piece of farm machinery. It was strangely comforting to see that Samuel was, as always, wearing his rusty brown tweed jacket with baler twine around the waist. Some things never change and it is those things which give us stability and strength.

Forty minutes later, after getting stuck twice and nearly overturning more times than I can remember, we met the ambulance at the pre-arranged spot on the Barnstaple road. Since I had no morphine I wasn’t too unhappy that they were both still unconscious. They were both breathing well and their pulse rates were good. The ambulance then drove the two accident victims to Barnstaple. It was a relief to see them driven away in safe, professional hands.

CHAPTER 2

‘I heard the car come into the drive,’ said Patsy when I walked into the kitchen. Outside the sun was coming up and the storm was subsiding. ‘The kettle is boiling. I’ve put some muffins in the toaster.’

‘Great,’ I said. ‘Then I need a hot bath.’ I reached down and rubbed Ben’s head. She sniffed at me. I could see the puzzlement in her eyes. I was soaked in ditch water and blood. I probably didn’t smell anything like me.

Patsy came closer. ‘You’re drenched!’ she said. ‘You’d better get out of those wet clothes.’

I put two hands on the back of a kitchen chair and lent on it. I was almost too exhausted to move. It had been a difficult and tiring few hours. Almost as difficult physically as it had been mentally. Gently, Patsy unfastened my jacket and helped me undress. She tossed my waterproof jacket, my sweater, shirt and trousers onto the floor by the side of the Aga. I took off the rest of my clothes myself. Even my socks were dripping wet. Patsy handed me a huge cream coloured towel which was warming on a rack above the Aga. I wrapped the towel round me. It was soft, fluffy and warm. It felt wonderful.

‘Is this blood?’ Patsy asked, pointing to a huge dark stain on my discarded trousers.

I nodded.

‘Not yours?’

I shook my head.

‘Was it bad?’

‘Pretty bad.’

Patsy plucked a small towel from a rail in front of the Aga and began to rub my hair.

‘You’ve got blood on your face.’ She wiped the blood away with a corner of the towel.

‘An artery was squirting blood everywhere.’

‘Is Thumper OK?’

‘Thumper is fine. He’s gone home for a bath and something to eat. He was brilliant.’

The kettle started to boil. Patsy poured hot water into two mugs which already contained granules of instant coffee. ‘Do you want some whisky in yours?’

‘Just a splash.’

She opened a cupboard, took out a bottle and added half an inch of whisky to one of the mugs.

I inhaled the steaming vapour, then put the mug down on the kitchen table and flopped in to one of the chairs.

While she took muffins out of the toaster I explained what had happened and why I had been called. She sliced two of the muffins in half, buttered them and put the four halves on a plate. She put the plate in front of me. The muffins were hot and the butter was melting into the soft dough. I managed to pick up one of the halved muffins all by myself.

‘Do you think they’ll both be all right?’

I chewed and thought hard before answering. ‘I think they’ve got a good chance,’ I said. ‘They were lucky.’

‘Lucky they had you.’

‘Lucky that Thumper happened to drive by. He doesn’t usually go down there but the lane past Withydown Farm was flooded. If he hadn’t seen them they would have certainly died. He and Nick Houghton, one of Samuel Houghton’s sons were there. Plus Nick’s girlfriend.’

‘Did the ambulance get through in the end?’

I shook my head. ‘Samuel Houghton took the two of them on a trailer we hitched on the back of his tractor. We went across the fields and met the ambulance on the main road. I’d had to put a tourniquet on the man’s arm. I needed to tell one of the ambulance men to unfasten it every few minutes. Then Sam took Thumper and me back to our cars.’

Patsy hesitated. There was something else she wanted to ask me. I knew what it was.

‘Was it difficult?’ she asked me at last.

‘You mean, not having done it for a while?’ It was two years since I’d retired from medical practice. Two years since I’d picked up a stethoscope. Two years since I’d seen someone else’s blood.

‘Being a doctor again.’

‘No. It wasn’t difficult.’ I smiled at her. ‘Fortunately, it seems that doctoring is a bit like riding a bicycle,’ I said. I grinned at her. ‘Luckily, it all came back to me.’

I had always thought that a doctor’s instinct is derived not so much from medical school training (that simply provides the framework for learning) as from an accumulation of experiences. Now I was sure I was right about that.

Patsy wanted to ask me something else. I knew what it was and so I answered the unasked question. ‘It felt good,’ I told her. ‘It felt good being able to help someone. Maybe help save a life.’

‘It was awful that they made you close the practice,’ Patsy said quietly.

I shrugged. ‘Nothing we can do about it. Nothing we could have done about it.’

‘You’ve missed it haven’t you?’

I didn’t answer.

‘We could move somewhere else. You could start a practice or get a job as a partner somewhere else.’

‘Leave Bilbury?’ She nodded.

I shook my head without hesitation. ‘I do sometimes miss medicine,’ I admitted. ‘But I wouldn’t – couldn’t – leave Bilbury. This is our home. And it always will be.’

I knew what leaving Bilbury would have meant to her. Bilbury is the village everyone dreams of living in. It’s a village where people speak to strangers and are kind to one another, it’s a village where doors are left open during the day and at night and when they are shut (rather than bolted) it is merely to keep out the cold and the neighbours’ cats. It’s a village where children play on the village green without mothers hovering constantly nearby, alert for dangerous strangers in long overcoats.

Villagers in Bilbury leave their doors open when they pop to the shop so that unexpected visitors can make themselves a cup of tea. Living rooms have log fires, the pub has a piano and no one knows what a window lock is. I knew of nowhere in the world quite like Bilbury.

She put an arm around me. I put an arm around her. We stayed like that for a while. Despite the warmth of the Aga and the hot towel I still felt cold. I shivered. She felt the involuntary movement.

‘I’ll run you a bath,’ she said. ‘Finish your coffee and eat the last of the muffins.’

I did as I was told.

* * *

Forty minutes later I clambered out of the bath, got dressed and went downstairs. Patsy was in the kitchen baking. The smell, as always, was wonderful.

‘What are you making?’

‘An iced sponge cake, some of those buns you like and another tray of fudge.’

‘Great!’ I said, with genuine enthusiasm. ‘When will they be ready?’

‘Aren’t you going back to bed?’ Patsy asked.

I shook my head, took a teaspoon from the cutlery drawer and helped myself to a taste of the mixture in the bowl she was working on. ‘Terrific,’ I said.

‘You’ve just got an awfully sweet tooth.’

‘No, no,’ I protested. ‘Your icing is much better than anyone else’s.’

She raised an eyebrow.

I once complained to my friend Patchy Fogg, a local antique dealer, that I was putting on weight.

‘Could there be a link between that fact and the fact that Patsy is a brilliant cook?’ Patchy had asked. He had been right, of course.

‘I thought I’d do some work on the latest Bilbury book,’ I told her. ‘I’m a bit bogged down at the moment.’ The last book in my series about the village had been well received and I’d received an encouraging number of letters from readers wanting more.

Curiously, the only complaint had come from the friend upon whom I had based the character Thumper Robinson. My friend had wanted to know why I had called him by the name ‘Thumper Robinson’ in the books, rather than using his real name.

‘Everyone knows that the person you are writing about is me,’ he’d said.

I’d explained that I’d given him another name so that I could, if I wanted to, make him do things in the book that he didn’t do in real life.

‘But Thumper is me!’ he’d protested. ‘And if you want me to do something else, all you have to do is say!’

* * *

‘How did the writing go?’ asked Patsy, when I went downstairs two hours later.

‘Not bad.’

‘Thumper telephoned and left a message for you while you were working.’ As she spoke she opened the door to the Aga cooker and put a hand just inside to check the air temperature. Satisfied, she closed the door.

‘Did he sound OK?’

‘He was a bit shook up, I think,’ said Patsy. ‘He said the two families are very grateful. The hospital doctor told them that the couple would have both died if you hadn’t been there. He said the boy had got a broken ankle and a broken clavicle. The girl had a fractured skull and a broken arm. But they’re both going to be OK.’

‘That’s good,’ I said. ‘I completely missed the broken clavicle and the skull fracture.’

‘I suspect it was easier to spot them in a dry, well-lit ward,’ said Patsy.

‘Probably,’ I admitted.

‘Thumper wanted to know if we could go to a meeting in the Duck and Puddle tonight,’ said Patsy.

The Duck and Puddle is Bilbury’s local public house and the unofficial centre of village life.

‘A meeting?’ I said, with some surprise. Thumper wasn’t the sort of person who usually went to meetings. I’d certainly never known him to organise one.

‘He said he was ringing round and trying to get as many people there as he could.’

‘Do you know what the meeting is about?’

Patsy shook her head. ‘He didn’t say. He just said it was important. And that we should get there at half past nine.’

‘Then we’d better go,’ I said. I frowned as I realised what Patsy had said. ‘Half past nine is a bit late to start a meeting,’ I said.

‘That’s what I thought,’ agreed Patsy. ‘But he was quite definite about the time.’ She started running hot water into the sink, ready to wash up the dishes she’d been using. ‘Oh, and I’ve got to pop into Barnstaple this afternoon.’

‘OK,’ I said, surprised. It was unusual for either of us to go into Barnstaple by ourselves. We usually went in together and had a pub lunch in the Regent Hotel. ‘Problem?’

‘Oh, no, just something I need to do.’

I kissed her on the cheek, and went back upstairs to my study to struggle with the book I was writing.

‘Lunch will be in half an hour!’ called Patsy.

‘Great,’ I called back. ‘I’m starving.’

CHAPTER 3

It was just over two years since health service administrators had forced me to close down my medical practice in Bilbury.

A miserable, mean-spirited Health Service administrator called Perkins, a bureaucrat who worked for the National Health Service's local Planning and Rationalisation Department (a branch of the NHS that was so badly thought of by those whose lives were touched by it that those who worked for it did everything they could to remain secret) had decided that Bilbury was too small to have its own general practitioner. Perkins, who spoke with an annoying, whining voice which suited him perfectly, had invoked Government regulations and used his powers to cancel my contract with the Secretary of State and to put all my patients into the care of a practice in Barnstaple. It was, he had told me, in a long and almost incomprehensible letter, part of a Government plan to 'maximise resource utilisation'. For the health service it was the equivalent to Dr Beeching's savage cuts of the nation's railway system. To me, and to everyone in Bilbury it seemed to be as socially destructive as Beeching's cuts threatened to be. It was, we felt sure, a foolish decision that would undoubtedly produce short-term savings but, equally certainly, do long-term damage to the village and to the health of those who lived in it.

And so, as a result of Government policy, the health care of the villagers of Bilbury had officially become the responsibility of a modern group practice in Barnstaple. One of the senior partners there was young Dr Brownlow, the son of Bilbury's previous GP.

When my practice had been closed down I had been forced to choose between applying for a job elsewhere, and leaving Bilbury, or taking early retirement and trying to earn my living as a writer.

It wasn't a difficult decision to make.

I'd enjoyed being a village doctor. I could have imagined spending my life that way. I enjoyed being a part of a small, tightknit community and feeling that I was making a small contribution to the safety of the village.

'Being a village doctor is like being responsible for the health of a large family,' my predecessor Dr Brownlow once told me. 'As a GP in a village you'll see your patients grow old with you. You'll deliver babies, attend their weddings and then look after them when they have children.'

But when my practice was closed I didn't want to leave Bilbury. And I knew that my wife Patsy didn't want to leave the village either. Friends and relatives who had visited used to write and say how much they loved the place. 'I like to consider myself an honorary Bilburian,' wrote one friend who told me that it was only dreaming of life in Bilbury that he managed to get through the darker days of his life.

Most of the people who lived in Bilbury had lived there for years. Very few people moved there and then moved away. I knew several people in the village who had only ever been as far as Lynmouth to the east, Bideford to the west and Exeter to the south and who, indeed, regarded trips to any of these places as expeditions rather than mere excursions. A visit to Barnstaple, on the other hand, was considered to be simply an excursion requiring little more than a few days advance planning.

'Why would I want to go further?' asked one. 'I've talked to people who have travelled and I've seen the television. Nothing seems better than here.'

I found it difficult to argue with this viewpoint.

And so in 1972, when the Government had closed down my practice, I'd chosen to stay in Bilbury, to hang up my stethoscope, and to earn my living with my typewriter.

* * *

The Duck and Puddle was packed for the meeting to which Patsy and I had been invited. It was immediately clear that Thumper had done an excellent job at convening a meeting at such short notice.

Patchy Fogg welcomed Patsy and me to the meeting. 'It has been decided that we've survived long enough without a resident doctor in the village,' he said. There was much murmuring of approval response to this. 'A real village,' he went on, 'needs a pub, a shop, a church, a school and a doctor. We've got four of those. We need – and we intend to have – the fifth. How can you have a village without a doctor?'

'Without a doctor the very survival of Bilbury is threatened,' said Thumper. 'Without a doctor people will leave the village and no one will want to come here. The village will die.'

'Without enough people living here the Duck and Puddle and my shop will have to close,' said Peter Marshall. 'House prices will collapse,' he added after a short pause.

'Would you be willing to reopen your practice here in Bilbury?' asked Thumper.

The question wasn't a complete surprise, of course. Patsy and I had guessed that this could well be the purpose of the meeting. But I didn't know whether I should or could reopen my practice. It had been a couple of years since I'd last wielded a stethoscope in earnest. In particular I worried that the instincts I'd acquired as a GP might have left me.

My experience at the road accident had, in hindsight, not done my self-assurance any good at all. The small oasis of confidence I had had vanished and had been replaced by an endless, arid desert of doubt. A village GP, the only doctor around for miles, has to have belief in himself and has to be able to transmit that belief and faith to his patients without them feeling that he is arrogant or reckless. At the same time he needs to know, probably more than any other type of doctor, when he doesn't know and what he doesn't know. A village doctor works alone and must rely entirely on his own resources.

Could I still do it?

I'd thought long and hard about it.

Conscious that everyone was looking at me, waiting to hear my response, I picked my words with care.

'I'm very flattered that you'd like me to reopen the surgery,' I said. 'But it's really not down to me.' I paused. 'I'm afraid I don't think the bureaucrats will let me reopen my practice,' I went on. 'When they forced me to close the surgery they were quite certain about it. And they quoted some very official sounding regulations which gave them the authority to do it.'

'But when the weather is bad the doctors in Barnstaple can't always get out here,' said Patchy Fogg.

'As happened last night,' added another villager. I didn't see who it was.

'If you hadn't still been living here there would have been no one to help that couple in the car,' said Anne Thwaites, Thumper's long-standing girlfriend.

'I suspect the bureaucrats will just say that last night was exceptional,' I said.

I was dodging the important question and putting everything in the hands of the bureaucrats. It was, I suppose, my way of letting fate make the decision.

'The village has been cut off at least three times in the last twelve months,' pointed out Frank Parsons, the landlord of the Duck and Puddle. 'If anyone in the village needs a doctor when we're cut off what are we supposed to do? The authorities have to let us have our own doctor.'

'It's not as if we're asking them to build a new health centre,' said Gilly, Frank's wife. 'We just want them to let the doctor reopen his surgery at Bilbury Grange. A village needs five things to be a proper village: a shop, a church, a school, a doctor and a pub. We've got a pub. We've got a shop. We've got a church and a school. We need a doctor.'

There was loud murmuring of support for this point of view.

'If he wants to,' added Frank quickly, looking at me.

'If he wants to,' agreed Gilly.

'I never wanted to close the practice,' I told them truthfully. 'But the closure was forced on me. And whatever we decide we want won't matter a jot if the bureaucrats won't give us permission to reopen the surgery.'

'But if they gave permission you might be willing to do it?'

I looked at Patsy. 'Patsy and I would have to talk about it,' I said. 'It's a big decision which would, of course, affect us both a great deal.'

'But you might say yes?' said Patchy.

I looked at Patsy again. She smiled and, almost imperceptibly, she nodded. 'Yes,' I agreed. 'We might say 'yes'.'

'That's all we wanted to hear,' said Thumper. 'I think we can get the authorities to approve a reopening of your surgery.'

He said this with such certainty that I looked around. 'Is there something going on here that we don't know about?' I asked.

'Definitely,' laughed Frank.

'What?' I asked.

'We think it's better that you don't know,' smiled Thumper.

* * *

It was a cold but clear, moonlit and starry evening. We had walked to the Duck and Puddle and taken Ben with us. By the time the three of us had walked back to Bilbury Grange it was half past eleven. Ben loved night-time walks. From a dog's point of view there always seems to be far more going on at night than there is during the daytime. Several times we had to stop and wait for her while she scrambled through hedges and raced across nearby fields.

'How did you get on in Barnstaple?' I asked as we stood waiting for Ben to return.

'Fine,' said Patsy.

There was something in her voice. I looked at her. 'Are you all right?'

'I'm very definitely all right,' she said.

I looked at her. 'Is there something you should tell me?'

'I was going to keep it until tomorrow,' she said. 'It's been a busy day.'

‘Keep what for tomorrow?’

‘I’ll tell you in the morning.’

I looked at her. ‘You can’t do that! Tell me now. What is it? Is there are a problem? Are you OK? You’re not sick?’

She laughed. ‘No, I’m not sick. I’m very healthy.’

Suddenly, I don’t know why, I realised where she’d been. ‘You went to see the doctor?’

She nodded. ‘That nice lady doctor in Barnstaple.’

‘But...why didn’t you say something? What’s wrong? What did you think was wrong? We’re not supposed to have secrets from each other.’

Patsy laughed out loud. ‘There’s nothing at all wrong,’ she said.

‘At least I don’t think there is.’ She paused and bent down to pat Ben who had returned. She was soaking wet and muddy. ‘And I hope you won’t.’

I put my hands on her shoulders. ‘Patsy, what is it?’ I asked her.

‘I think we should consider redecorating the small bedroom next to ours,’ she said. ‘Nice pretty wallpaper.’

‘Don’t change the subject!’ I told her, pulling her towards me.

‘Tell me why you went to see the doctor.’ Ben wriggled and wriggled and managed to squeeze between us. She really was soaking wet.

‘They have some lovely pink and blue striped wallpaper in Hutchins,’ she said, mentioning a smart store in Barnstaple. ‘We could get Thumper to put it up.’

‘I can put up wallpaper,’ I said.

‘Oh, why not let Thumper do it,’ she said.

‘That stuff I put up in the dining room is still on the wall isn’t it?’

‘Most of it,’ she agreed with a laugh. ‘I had to get some more paste for two pieces. And the pattern doesn’t quite match.’

She was being kind. The patterned wallpaper I had put up didn’t match at all. And it had taken me days to do that.

‘OK,’ I said, feeling exasperated. ‘We’ll decorate the small bedroom and we’ll get Thumper to do it. Will you please forget about wallpaper and tell me why you went to Barnstaple!’

‘The beauty of it being pink and blue is that you don’t have to worry about getting it wrong,’ she said. ‘And, despite all the clever things they can do with technology, I’d rather it was a surprise wouldn’t you?’

‘We’ll paper the room purple and yellow if you like,’ I said. ‘But why did you go and see the doctor in Barnstaple?’

‘Oh no, it’s got to be pink and blue,’ said Patsy.

I thought about this for a moment. Ben had now run off again and I could hear her barking at something. ‘We really need a spare bathroom. If we’re going to all this trouble wouldn’t it be more sensible to see how much it would cost to have another bathroom put in?’

Patsy started to giggle. ‘You really haven’t guessed?’

‘No! Guessed what?’ I was genuinely getting confused.

‘And maybe we could get Peter Marshall to make us a cradle. He made a beautiful one for the young Henshaws.’

‘What on earth do we want...’ I began.

It was only then that I realised exactly what Patsy had been trying to tell me. And suddenly, at long last, I understood. There wasn’t much point in having a nursery or getting Peter Marshall to make a cradle if there wasn’t going to be a baby to put in them.

And so, suddenly I understood.

‘You’re having...’ She corrected me.

‘*We’re* having a baby.’

I hugged her, kissed her and let out a great cry of joy. Ben, assuming that I was calling her came hurtling back across the field and through the hedge. She hurled herself up at me. I held onto her and felt her rough tongue licking my cheek. The three of us stood there in the dark. A small family about to grow a little larger.

CHAPTER 4

The morning after the meeting at the Duck and Puddle I went to see Dr Brownlow.

Dr Brownlow was the reason I was living in Bilbury. He was the reason I was married to Patsy and the reason I had, before the bureaucrats closed it down, been a general practitioner in the village

Now Dr Brownlow looked more like a ghost than the man I had met when I'd first arrived in Bilbury. He weighed less than half he had done a year earlier. And the weight loss wasn't the result of dieting.

For the last few weeks he'd been my only, entirely unofficial patient.

It had started, as so many things do, with a telephone call.

* * *

He rang me one Thursday morning and asked me to pop round when I had a moment. He wouldn't say what it was for. When I arrived at his home the door was, as usual, opened by Bradshaw, Dr Brownlow's long-standing butler, valet and factotum.

Bradshaw looked no different now to how he'd looked when I first met him. He wore a black frock coat, black trousers, a white shirt and a black bow tie. Wizened, tiny and frail he had looked at least eighty when I'd first met him. He looked no younger now. On the other hand he looked no older either.

'Dr Brownlow is expecting you,' said Bradshaw, with an almost imperceptible bow of his head. He led the way to the drawing room. Dr Brownlow was sitting in a leather armchair beside a roaring log fire. He nodded to the chair opposite me. I sat down. The chair had long since lost its springs. It was like sitting on a marshmallow.

'Shall I make tea, sir?' asked Bradshaw.

Dr Brownlow looked at me. I shook my head. 'No thank you.'

'No thanks, Bradshaw,' said Dr Brownlow. He watched as the butler shuffled out of the room, closing the door behind him.

'Get me a whisky will you?' said Dr Brownlow, when we were alone.

There was a tray on a table beside Dr Brownlow's chair. There was a whisky bottle on the tray, together with a jug of water and two cut glass tumblers.

I got up, poured him about two fingers of whisky and looked across at him. He raised a hand to suggest I added more. I poured another two fingers worth. 'Water?'

He shook his head.

I handed him the glass and sat down again.

'Are you not having one?'

'No thanks,' I said. 'Maybe later.'

He took a sip, closed his eyes and savoured the flavour of the whisky. He held it in his mouth for a long time before he swallowed.

'How is everything?' I asked.

'Did you know that the Porters had left?'

I nodded. 'I heard,' I said. Frank Porter had been Dr Brownlow's gardener. His wife Ethel had been Dr Brownlow's housekeeper and cook.

'Frank inherited a chip shop in Lancashire,' said Dr Brownlow. 'He and Ethel have gone up there.'

'Have you got someone else?' I asked, though from the state of the garden I knew he hadn't.

He shook his head. 'And the dogs have both gone.'

'I know,' I said quietly. 'Thumper told me.' Dr Brownlow had had two Doberman Pinschers. They had terrified the life out of me, and most other people too.

'Thumper buried them for me,' said Dr Brownlow. I nodded. I knew that too.

Dr Brownlow shook his head. 'Are you still on the medical register?' he asked me suddenly.

Puzzled, I nodded.

'You can still write prescriptions and sign certificates?'

'Yes. I suppose so. But I don't have any patients.'

'Will you accept me as a patient? A private patient.'

'Yes, of course,' I replied, without having to think about the answer.

But then I thought about the question.

'Why?' I asked him. 'I don't understand. Is there something wrong with you? Why me? The Barnstaple practice looks after everyone in Bilbury.'

'I don't want them looking after me,' said Dr Brownlow. He started to say something but changed his mind. 'I don't want them looking after me,' he repeated.

His son was a senior partner at the practice which had taken over my former Bilbury practice. Clearly Dr Brownlow didn't want his son looking after him. 'We don't get on,' he told me bluntly, though this was no surprise.

'What's wrong with you?' I asked him, quietly. 'Why do you need a doctor?'

'Cancer,' he said bluntly. 'Pancreas.' He took a big sip of his whisky. This time he just swallowed it.

Shocked, disbelieving, I looked at him. 'How do you know? What tests have you had? Are you sure? When did you find out?' The questions were queuing up to be asked.

'I made the diagnosis a couple of months ago,' he said. 'I went up to London and saw a couple of chaps there. They did some prodding and some tests.'

'And they were certain?'

'No question of it.'

'Can they operate?'

Dr Brownlow shook his head.

'Drugs?'

'Just painkillers,' he said. 'That's where you come in.' He sipped at the whisky again. 'Three months. Probably less. No more.'

'I'll have that whisky if you don't mind,' I said. I stood up, walked the couple of paces to the whisky bottle and poured myself a stiff drink. I offered Dr Brownlow the bottle. He nodded. I added another good slug of whisky to his glass. He sat quite still, staring into space. Then, slowly, his eyes closed. For a moment I thought he had died and then I realised that he had just fallen asleep. I reached for his wrist. His pulse was fine. His eyelids fluttered but didn't open. I sat down and sipped at my whisky. It was, as always, a good malt. It was Dr Brownlow who had first introduced me to malt whisky. He'd insisted that I should know how it was made if I was going to drink it. 'You let the barley grains start to grow,' he said, 'until they're shoots an inch or so long. Then they're called malts. You smoke them over burning peat until they pick up the flavours of the peat and the smoke and have become nice and crisp. Then you make a mash of the malts with water – river or beck water not the stuff that comes out of the tap – and you let the stuff ferment. Then you distil it and you put the distillation into wooden casks to age it for several years. That's malt whisky. And there are enough different flavours and tastes and smells of malt whisky to suit every palate and to keep a man going through his life testing and tasting. In wooden casks the spirit develops and grows. You need to keep it in the wood for at least three years. Ten or fifteen years is better.'

I remembered I'd asked him what the difference was between malt whisky and ordinary grain whisky. He said that for ordinary grain whisky they just made the barley into a mash without the other stages. He also said that he had long had the thought that one day he might persuade a distiller to put malt whisky into wooden bottles so that the whisky would continue to age after it had been bought. In a glass bottle it is the same when you take it out as it was when you put it in.

'What does 'proof mean?' I'd asked him.

'Three hundred years ago a spirit seller would prove that the liquid he was selling was alcohol by mixing it with gunpowder and igniting it. If it burned with a steady blue flame it was considered 100% proof that it was 50% alcohol.' He grinned, I remember. 'These days,' he'd continued, 'they do the testing with hydrometers but they still use the same daft scale. So if something is 75% alcohol they say it's 150% proof. If it's 10% alcohol they say it's 20% proof.'

All this I remembered as I sipped at my whisky and the tears rolled down my cheeks. Dr Brownlow had done so much for me. He had taught me almost everything of value that I knew.

'I don't want to go into hospital,' Dr Brownlow said suddenly.

I looked across at him. His eyes were open again. 'Bradshaw can look after me.'

'Bradshaw?' I said, surprised. It was difficult to imagine a man who wore a frock coat and white tie working as a nurse.

'He was a nurse in the army,' explained Dr Brownlow. 'Thirty years. He's very good.'

I was surprised. I hadn't known.

'I'll need some things,' Dr Brownlow said.

'Morphine.'

'Morphine. Lots of it.' He'd smiled. 'Don't worry. I won't have time to become an addict.'

I sipped at my whisky. It had been the first time a patient had told me what was wrong with him and what the prognosis was and I was still in a state of shock. As a doctor I was used to being the one handing out information. Ever since I'd first worked for him Dr Brownlow had been more of a father than an employer.

'There are quite a few things I need to work out,' Dr Brownlow had continued. He, of course, had had time to get used to his own shocking news. 'The one big certainty is that I want to be buried next to my wife.'

I nodded. When Dr Brownlow's wife had died several years earlier she had been buried in the gardens. There was a piece of consecrated ground that had been used as a burial ground when the house had had its own chapel. A gravestone, already bearing Dr Brownlow's name and birth date, had been prepared. All the stonemason would have to do was add the date of Dr Brownlow's death.

'Are you sure...,' I'd begun. My voice had cracked. I swallowed hard and looked away for a moment. I didn't know why but I didn't want to wipe the tears away from my eyes. 'Are you sure you don't want me to arrange for you to see someone else? A specialist?'

'No need,' Dr Brownlow had said softly. 'Really. There's nothing anyone can do.' He sipped at his whisky. 'I've had a good life,' he said. 'I'm not especially unhappy that it's over. Now I just want to go with as much dignity as I can muster.'

I nodded, accepting his judgement and honouring his decision.

'Will you come back and see me in a couple of days?' he asked.

'There are quite a few things I want to talk over with you.'

'Of course.'

I stood up. I was glad to be able to leave. I needed time to come to terms with what he'd told me.

'One other thing,' he said. 'I'd rather people in the village didn't know just yet. Bradshaw knows, of course. And you can tell Patsy. But...'

'I won't tell anyone else unless you ask me to,' I assured him. I bent down and put a hand on his shoulder. 'I'll do everything I can to help you,' I promised him. 'Everything.'

He put his hand on top of mine and looked up at me. 'I know you will,' he said. He smiled. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'We're all dying. It's just something we all have to live with.' His smile broadened. 'Besides,' he added, 'I come from a long line of dead people.'

I squeezed his shoulder and tried to say something but the words wouldn't come out. I nodded and left.

Outside, as I walked back to my car I felt the tears pouring down my cheeks. I couldn't understand how the sun could keep shining. How could the birds keep singing? Didn't they know what was happening inside that house?

I put the car into gear and sped away, spraying gravel everywhere.

* * *

That evening, after dinner, I put on an old Barbour and a flat cap and went out into the garden.

'There's a huge pile of old clippings left over from the autumn,' I explained to Patsy. 'I'd better burn them.'

Getting rid of the clippings was only an excuse. I have always found lighting and managing a bonfire to be an excellent way to find some temporary respite from sadness and stress. Patsy knew this, of course. When I went outside it was raining steadily. It had started during dinner as a typical Devon drizzle, just more than mist but slightly less than drizzle, and had steadily built up into a downpour. By the time I got to the part of the garden we use for bonfires the rain was pouring down.

All the clippings and dried leaves and other bits of rubbish that I'd been storing were piled up ready to be burnt. Our gardener, Mr Parfitt, had, for weeks, been trundling the wheelbarrow, laden with garden detritus, to the site. But he'd been under strict instructions to leave the bonfire lighting to me. For him it would be just a chore, but it was, he knew, one of my favourite tasks in the garden.

I had taken several large cardboard boxes and a copy of the *Daily Telegraph* with me. Boxes are useful for keeping off the rain while the bonfire gets going. And the *Daily Telegraph* is the most inflammatory newspaper I know. Being a broadsheet helps, of course, but there's more to it than that. *The Daily Telegraph* seems to me to burn much better than other newspapers. Maybe it's the paper they use. Or something they put in the ink. Or maybe it's the words.

I put the boxes on their sides, placed screwed up pages of newspaper inside the boxes and then built piles of branches and twigs over and around the boxes. I picked out, and put on one side, the ash tree twigs and small branches because they make excellent kindling for fires in the house. The larger branches would provide the framework which would keep the sodden privet, bay, laurel and other cuttings away from the boxes while they caught fire.

A fire needs oxygen just as much as an animal does and the big mistake most bonfire builders make is to forget this and fail to leave enough space for the air to filter into the heart of the fire.

When the branches were hooped over the boxes, I piled the first few armfuls of clippings onto the top of the woody branches. I picked the greenest cuttings, the ones with the most leaves still attached, because these would help keep the rain off the underlying fire.

I bent down and lit the paper in each of the boxes. And then I stood up, took a pace or two backwards, and waited.

Within minutes the three boxes were ablaze. The bare, dry tree branches soon caught fire too. And then the smoke started. Plumes of white smoke from the drying and smouldering leaves and clippings. The laurel and bay crackled and threw off sparks as their oily, evergreen leaves caught fire. Some branches of rosemary added to the aroma.

Coniferous branches crackled too. I fed an armful of leaves onto the top of the fire.

I stood there, watching the rising flames and the vast plume of smoke disappearing into the night. The rain was heavier. Suddenly I felt a hand slide into mine. I turned and looked at Patsy.

‘You’ll miss him won’t you?’

‘I will,’ I whispered. The smoke was irritating my eyes. Tears were rolling down my cheeks. The two were not connected.

‘Me too,’ she said softly.

We stood there for a long time. We didn’t speak again. Occasionally we leant against a nearby tree. From time to time we pushed twig ends into the fire to make sure that when the fire had burnt away there would be nothing left but a neat circle of ash.

When we went back up to the house it was still raining. I put the small branches of ash tree into the log shed and once inside the house we hung up our coats. I put the kettle on and Patsy took a couple of crumpets out of the bread bin and the toasting fork from its place beside the Aga. She opened the fire door to toast the crumpets. I could feel the heat across the other side of the kitchen.

‘We must both reek of smoke,’ I said. ‘We need baths.’

‘It’s a lovely smell,’ she said.

I took a bottle of whisky from the sideboard and put it on the kitchen table, ready to add a splash to the coffee Patsy was making.

Appropriately, I remembered, the whisky had been a Christmas present from Dr Brownlow.

There would be no more Christmas presents from him. I wondered how long he’d got.

I knew I would remember this day for the rest of my life.

* * *

That had been some time ago.

He’d lived longer than either he or I had expected. But now the end was approaching fast.

‘Push me out onto the terrace,’ he said. He was sitting in a wheelchair. It was only the second time I’d seen him use it.

‘It’s cold,’ I warned him.

‘I’m not a bloody orchid,’ he said. ‘There’s a rug on the back of the sofa. Drape it around my knees. If I’m going to be an invalid I might as well look the part.’

I opened the French windows, took the brake off the wheelchair and pushed him outside. He grabbed the whisky bottle and two glasses as we passed the table. He didn’t get the water jug. I parked him on the terrace where he had a good view of the gardens.

‘That oak tree was there when I came here,’ he said, nodding towards a huge oak about fifty yards from the house. He poured whisky into the glasses and handed one to me.

‘A single oak tree is like a village,’ Dr Brownlow said. ‘One tree can play host to hundreds of different insects, flowers, fern and lichen. Did you know that? No other tree carries as many species as the oak tree.’ He paused for breath. He had difficulty in breathing if he spoke too much. ‘And because the leaf canopy offers protection from the elements without preventing light reaching the ground a whole host of flowers grow around its trunk – bluebells, wood sorrel, primroses.’

I admitted that I didn’t know this.

‘How many different mammals do you think live in or underneath an oak tree? Or benefit directly from its existence?’

‘Squirrels?’ I suggested rather lamely.

‘Over thirty species,’ he said. ‘Badgers, deer, hedgehog and mice all eat acorns. Field mice climb up oak trees and steal eggs out of nests. So do weasels. Do you know how many birds make their nests in oak trees?’

I admitted that I didn’t know that either.

‘Nuthatch, tawny owl, jay, great spotted woodpecker, rook, pied flycatcher, tree creeper, blue tit and great tit. Nearly seventy species in all.’ He paused. ‘Even sparrowhawks live in oaks. They make their nests in old crows’ nests. Sometimes they’ll nest in an old squirrel drey. Did you know that a squirrel’s nest is called a drey?’

I nodded.

‘So, are you going to do it?’

‘Do what?’

‘Don’t be obtuse. Open up a surgery again.’

I sighed. ‘To be honest, I don’t know whether they’ll let me,’ I said. ‘The administrators are having a meeting.’

‘They’ll let you open up again,’ said Dr Brownlow firmly.

‘You seem very certain.’

‘The villagers have decided they’ve been without a doctor long enough.’

I looked at him. ‘But do you think the villagers can persuade the authorities to change their minds?’

‘Oh, I think so.’

‘Do you know something I don’t know? Has Thumper told you something?’

Dr Brownlow turned to me and grinned. He ignored my questions. ‘Will you open up your surgery again if they give you the opportunity?’

I nodded.

‘Good.’ he said. He raised his glass and held it out towards me. I raised mine and we clinked glasses and drank.

‘I know you’ve got your books,’ he said. ‘It’s different for you. But being a country GP was the only thing that gave my life meaning and purpose. Especially in the years since I’ve been alone.’ He pointed at a squirrel running down the trunk of the oak. We watched it for a few moments. After Dr Brownlow’s wife had died he had very much lived the life of a lonely bachelor. ‘It made me feel that I was at the heart of the village.’

I didn’t speak for a while. ‘I know what you mean,’ I said at last. ‘I’ve missed it a lot.’

‘It’s meaning and purpose which give life to our lives. Without purpose life is just a compendium of routine, habit and drudgery. I always needed something to believe in, to work for, to make me feel contributing.’

The squirrel had disappeared.

‘How do they do that?’

‘Do what?’

‘Disappear like that. Just disappear.’

‘Magic.’

‘I suppose so.’

We sat in silence for quite a while.

‘If this isn’t nice I don’t know what is,’ he said.

We sat for a little longer.

‘It’s important to notice the magic moments,’ he said. ‘We all rush around so much that we tend to miss them.’ There was another long silence.

‘We’re all so busy racing through life, waiting for the bad news. Dealing with problems. Facing crises. The nice moments pass us by. We sort of enjoy them. But we don’t savour them as we should.’

‘I know what you mean,’ I said. I sipped at the whisky. ‘If I do start the practice up again, do you think I should let them pressure me into having an appointment system?’

‘The dour men in suits will want you to have one,’ he said. ‘Appointment systems are all the rage now. The bureaucrats like them. It keeps everything neat.’

‘I’m not keen,’ I said. When I had taken over from Dr Brownlow I had followed his example and had refused to have an appointments system at all. It had worked very well. Patients had to wait but they always got seen within an hour or so of turning up. If there was a long queue, patients would tell the person they were in front of that they were just slipping out, perhaps to do a little shopping at Peter Marshall’s. Or, if it was a fine day, they’d just go out and sit in the garden and read a magazine.

‘Appointment systems probably suit a town practice,’ he said. ‘But you might be better without one here.’ He sipped at his whisky.

‘Up to you, of course.’

We neither of us spoke for a while.

‘People in Bilbury don’t all have the telephone,’ he said. ‘And half of those who do don’t like using it.’

I nodded. He was right. When I’d been a GP many of the requests for visits had come on slips of paper passed over to the receptionist or slipped under the front door

‘Actually, on thinking about it, I’m not sure appointment systems are right for doctors anywhere. Appointment systems are fine for lawyers and hairdressers. But patients can’t be ill by appointment.’ He stared at the oak tree. A squirrel scampered along a branch and then disappeared. It was impossible to see where this one had gone either.

‘My son has an appointments system,’ continued Dr Brownlow.

‘Someone told me the other day that they rang up needing an appointment and were told they couldn’t see a doctor for ten days.’

‘I’ve heard that sort of thing,’ I agreed.

‘Bloody silly,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘What are you supposed to do? Make an appointment ten days before you become ill or wait in agony for ten days when you have become ill?’

We sat, saying nothing for a while longer. Silences are difficult to endure with some people. I always found silences easy with Dr Brownlow.

‘It’s getting chilly,’ I said at last, standing up. ‘I’d better take you indoors.’

CHAPTER 5

Patsy was in Barnstaple attending her first antenatal class and so I called in at the Duck and Puddle to get myself some lunch. I found something of a crisis there.

'Frank has run out of pickled eggs,' said Patchy, as I walked in. 'We're thinking of making a formal complaint.'

'Who are you going to complain to?' demanded Frank.

'The Pickled Egg Marketing Board,' answered Patchy instantly. 'They'll be interested.'

'I couldn't get into town,' said Frank defensively. 'Peter Marshall doesn't sell the large jars of pickled eggs we need so I have to get them from the wholesaler. The car wouldn't start. The battery is flat.'

'Don't tell lies,' said Gilly. 'You'll only get found out.'

'The car wouldn't go!' insisted Frank.

'It's always the cover up that causes the most trouble,' said Gilly. She turned to Patchy. 'He hit a hedge. The car hasn't got a right front wheel.'

'Well, there's that as well,' admitted Frank. 'But the battery is flat too.'

'That's because you keep forgetting to get a new one,' said Gilly.

'You'd forget your head if it wasn't fixed on.' She turned, hurled the tea towel she was holding at Frank's head and stalked out of the bar. The tea towel hit Frank on the neck and stayed on his shoulder.

'What's wrong with Gilly?' asked Thumper. 'She seems a bit overwrought today. Not her usual breezy self.'

'I forgot her birthday,' admitted Frank. 'Didn't even buy her a card.'

Thumper, Patchy and I sighed. An unhappy Gilly would make the Duck and Puddle unbearable.

'Apparently it was her 50th,' said Frank.

'Oh no,' groaned Patchy. 'You missed a milestone.'

'You've got to sort this out,' said Thumper.

'Cost you twice as much now,' said Patchy. Frank looked at him.

'Whatever you buy her now will have to be twice as expensive as it would have had to be if you'd bought it before her birthday,' explained Patchy.

'I didn't know she was that old,' said Frank.

'You didn't tell her that, did you?' said Patchy.

Frank paused. 'What was wrong with that?' he asked. 'It was a compliment.'

'It'll cost you three times as much,' said Patchy. He looked at Thumper who nodded.

'I haven't the foggiest idea what she wants,' said Frank glumly. There was a long silence.

'I wish I was married to the Queen,' said Frank eventually.

We all looked at him, puzzled. Frank had never previously shown any romantic interest in Her Majesty.

'Her birthday is printed in my diary,' he explained. 'I can't forget her birthday even if I want to. Prince Philip has got it easy.'

'She must have given you hints,' said Patchy. 'Women always give hints.'

Thumper nodded in agreement. 'Definitely,' he agreed.

'Patsy has been known to mention things,' I agreed. 'Subtle hints.'

'What do you mean?' asked Frank. 'What sort of hints?'

I thought for a moment. 'Oh, things like 'I saw a pair of green shoes in Barnstaple today. Size five. In that shop next to the tobacconist's. They were ridiculously priced. How can anyone justify spending that much on a pair of shoes?'

Frank looked at me blankly. 'What sort of hint is that?' he asked.

'That's telling you about something she doesn't want.'

We all looked at him. Patchy sighed. Thumper shook his head.

'How long have you been married?' I asked him.

Frank thought for a while. 'Can't remember,' he said at last. 'Long time though.'

'What's she talked about a lot recently?' asked Thumper.

'The bathroom sink is blocked,' said Frank. 'She's always on about that.' He brightened up. 'Maybe if I get a plumber in to sort it out? Or I could buy her a plunger. That would be cheaper.'

'You can't buy your wife a sink plunger for her birthday,' said Patchy.

'Not when it's after her birthday,' said Thumper. 'You might have got away with it if you'd bought it before her birthday. But not afterwards.'

From Thumper this was serious stuff. He had once bought Anne Thwaites, the mother of his child, a second-hand petrol driven chainsaw for her birthday. When she had shown slightly less enthusiasm than he had expected he'd pointed out that he would use it to cut logs for the fire to keep her warm.

‘Her sister went to London a couple of months ago,’ said Frank. ‘Gilly went on about that for ages. Kept going on about it.’

‘Take her to London for the weekend,’ said Patchy firmly.

‘London?’ said Frank.

‘London,’ said Patchy. ‘And take her round the shops and buy her something expensive. It doesn’t matter what it is as long as it’s expensive.’

‘But we can’t leave the pub!’ said Frank.

‘The brewery must have couples they send round to cover illness and holidays,’ said Thumper.

Frank thought for a moment and then nodded.

‘Patchy is right,’ I said. ‘Get a locum in to look after the pub and take Gilly to London for the weekend. Stay somewhere nice and take her shopping in Harrods.’

‘You think that would settle her down?’ asked Frank.

‘Definitely,’ said Thumper.

‘We still haven’t got any pickled eggs,’ said Patchy. ‘I’ll have a packet of crisps as long as you’ve got the ones that have the salt wrapped up in a little blue bag inside them.’

‘Why on earth do you want those?’ demanded Thumper, as Frank disappeared under the counter.

‘I like having control over my crisps,’ replied Patchy. ‘I don’t want some unseen machine sprinkling salt on for me.’

There was a cry of delight from somewhere under the counter where Frank had been rummaging around cardboard boxes.

‘Here you are!’ he said, banging a large box of crisps on the bar counter. ‘Crisps with little bags of salt inside.’ He tore open the box, pulled out a packet of crisps and handed it to Patchy.

‘Bit soft aren’t they?’ said Patchy, squeezing the packet rather critically.

‘They’re antique crisps,’ said Thumper. ‘Just up your street.’

‘Very funny,’ said Patchy, tearing the packet wide open. He rummaged around in the packet until he found the pinch of salt wrapped in blue paper.

‘A mate of mine once found a five pound note wrapped up in one of those little blue twists,’ said Thumper.

‘I don’t want a five pound note,’ said Patchy, untwisting the paper. ‘I want salt.’ He sprinkled the salt on his crisps and then closed the bag and shook it.

CHAPTER 6

‘Have you seen the local paper?’ asked Patsy.

I hadn’t. I had meant to pick up a copy at Peter Marshall’s shop but I’d forgotten. We didn’t have papers delivered to the house for two reasons. First, it was easy enough to get one from the village shop. Second, and by far the best reason, there were no newspaper deliveries in the village.

‘Look at the letters in this week’s paper,’ said Patsy. She picked the paper up off the table and handed it to me. It was already opened at the correct page.

The lead letter, right across the top of the page, was headed ‘Deteriorating Medical Care in Bilbury’.

Dear Sir,

As a long-standing Bilbury resident I am appalled at the quality of medical care provided by the general practitioner branch of the National Health Service. The other night I had the misfortune to trip over one of my Labradors in my own hallway. My good lady wife immediately telephoned our General Practitioner to inform him that his attendance would be required forthwith. Three and a quarter hours later a seedy looking fellow in a cheap suit arrived. He informed me that he was a partner of my usual GP. I was in a considerable amount of pain for all this time. If I had done myself serious injury I could have died.

This situation is quite outrageous and the appalling decision to close the Bilbury practice must be corrected immediately. The people of Bilbury are just as entitled to receive decent medical care as are the citizens of any other town or village in the land. The NHS minions who made this appalling decision must be held accountable for their blunder.

Yours sincerely

(Name and address withheld)

There were three other similar letters underneath it.

Dear Sir

Ever since Bilbury lost its own resident medical officer the quality of care in the village has steadily deteriorated. If a patient dies because of this state of affairs I trust that the officials responsible will be prepared to explain their decision to the bereaved family and friends.

Yours sincerely

(Name and address withheld)

Dear Sir

When my little boy was ill with earache I called the doctor. An hour and a half later the doctor still hadn’t turned up and so I telephoned a doctor friend who lives on the coast of South Wales. He has a motor boat which he uses for fishing. He was at my home less than ninety minutes after I called. The doctor from Barnstaple arrived 75 minutes after he had gone. What would have happened in a real emergency If the authorities are determined to deny Bilbury its own general practitioner then perhaps they would allow us to register with a practice in Wales rather than forcing us to register with one in Barnstaple.

If a patient dies because of this bureaucratic decision I hope that those responsible will be hauled into the witness box to defend themselves.

Yours sincerely

(Name and address withheld)

Dear Sir

I am 87-years-old and since I have no car of my own I am entirely reliant on public transport. There is now a bus service between Bilbury and Barnstaple just twice a week. A bus leaves Bilbury at 11.30 a.m. on Tuesdays and Fridays and arrives in Barnstaple at 12.49 p.m. The return bus from Barnstaple to Bilbury leaves the bus station at 1.19 p.m. and arrives back in Bilbury at 2.39 p.m. This means that anyone wishing to visit the doctor and not having their own car has just 30 minutes to get to the surgery, see the doctor and get back to the bus station. The bus station is three quarters of a mile from the surgery.

The result is that the people of Bilbury now receive very second rate health care. When – rather than if – someone dies because of this short-sighted attitude I hope that the police will want to interview the administrators whose decision to close down the practice in Bilbury led directly to this sad state of affairs.

Yours sincerely

(Name and address withheld).

‘Thumper and Patchy have been busy,’ I said to Patsy, putting down the paper.

‘So it would seem.’

‘Of course, it’s always possible that four real people wrote these letters.’

‘Though it is convenient that they all chose to write them this week.’

‘Quite.’

‘What sort of effect do you think they’ll have on the NHS?’

I didn’t have to think about it for long. ‘The final paragraph of each letter is very powerful,’ I said. ‘In my experience the one thing bureaucrats don’t like is being expected to take responsibility for their actions.’

‘So you think the NHS might let you open up your surgery again?’

I thought about it for a while. ‘For the first time, I do think it’s possible,’ I said at last. ‘Thumper and Patchy have done a pretty impressive job.’

CHAPTER 7

A week after the meeting in the Duck and Puddle I received a telephone call from the local NHS bureaucrat who was responsible for administering general practice in the area.

He told me that the medical practice in Barnstaple which had been looking after Bilbury had unexpectedly decided that they no longer felt able to provide medical care for the villagers. He said that this news had been received in the administrative offices with some dismay, that it had put them in rather a difficult position and that in order to avoid the delay that would ensue if they had to advertise the practice in the normal manner he wondered if I would consider reopening my practice and taking on responsibility for the medical care of the people of Bilbury.

‘You have experience of the area,’ he said. ‘And we would be very happy if you felt able to resume your previous responsibilities.’

‘The GPs in Barnstaple no longer want to provide medical cover for Bilbury?’

‘That is correct.’

‘So I’d be completely responsible for patients in Bilbury?’

‘Yes, that is our proposal.’

‘Day time surgeries and night time care? Everything? I’d be an independent general practitioner? No ties whatsoever with any other practice?’

‘Indeed, yes, that is our proposal.’

‘When would you want me to start?’

‘As soon as possible. I understand from our records that you ran your surgery from your home. Would you be doing that again?’

‘I think so. Yes.’

‘The committee would like to have a meeting with you on Thursday morning to discuss this.’

‘No meetings.’

I hate meetings, I hate bureaucrats and I hate committees. I long ago decided that the main job of a committee is to meet. People make decisions. Committees have meetings. And nowhere on the planet are there any more self-important, self-congratulating, prevaricating, uncaring people than those sitting on health service committees.

‘The committee...’

‘No meeting,’ I said firmly. ‘You know who I am. I know what the job is. You need a doctor for Bilbury. There is no need to have a meeting. If you want me to do the job I will do it.’

There was a long silence.

‘I will need to speak to the chairman.’

‘Please do.’

‘I’ll ring you back.’

‘Fine.’

He rang back in just under a quarter of an hour.

‘Given the circumstances, would it be possible for you to take over responsibility for Bilbury from this coming weekend?’

‘That’s rather short notice.’

‘The practitioners in Barnstaple are adamant that they won’t provide cover for patients in Bilbury.’

‘And you have a legal responsibility to find a general practitioner prepared to take on the care of the villagers?’

‘Er, yes, that’s correct.’

I thought hard. Never again would I be in a position of such negotiating strength with the local bureaucrats.

‘I’ll hire a receptionist, but also I’ll need the NHS to pay for a district nurse to work with me,’ I told him. I knew this would be something the bureaucrats would try to avoid.

I’m sure we can arrange for a nurse from Barnstaple to visit Bilbury once a week,’ said the administrator.

‘Dr Brownlow always had a full-time district nurse working with him,’ I said. ‘I don’t think it would be possible to look after the villagers properly without the services of a district nurse.’

There was a long pause. ‘I’ll have to consult on this,’ said the administrator.

‘Fine,’ I said. ‘You know where to reach me.’ I hesitated. ‘Naturally, although you’ll be paying her wages I will want to choose and recruit the nurse myself’

‘Oh I definitely don’t think we can agree to that,’ said the administrator. He sounded very firm. ‘We have procedures to follow.’

‘Bilbury is a very small village,’ I told him. ‘We need a nurse who lives locally and who fits in with the community.’

There was a silence.

'I'll telephone you later,' he said. He paused again. 'Will those be your only stipulations? You choose a nurse and we pay her wages?'

'If you agree to do that then I'll take over as Bilbury's GP from this coming Saturday.'

I went into the kitchen where Patsy was baking a fruit cake. When I told her that it seemed likely that I was about to become a GP again she said she had never had any doubts about it. I said that I was waiting for the bureaucrat to call me back to confirm it. She said it was a formality and that he would ring back before the cake went into the oven. She was right. This time the administrator rang me back eleven minutes later to tell me that the health service had agreed to my terms. He said a contract would be sent out to me by recorded delivery mail. Patsy put her arms around my neck and gave me a kiss. I kissed her back.

'When I've finished this cake I'd better give your old surgery a clean,' she said, breaking away from me. Suddenly she started laughing. I looked at her, puzzled. 'You've got a ring of flour around your collar,' she said. 'It looks as though you've had a halo and it's slipped.'

I said I hoped this wasn't an omen. I looked at my watch. 'I need to recruit a nurse and a receptionist,' I said.

'Who are you going to get?'

'I need a slightly pernickety, fastidious receptionist,' I said. 'And a good reliable district nurse.'

'Miss Johnson,' said Patsy instantly, naming the receptionist who had worked for me when I'd taken over Dr Brownlow's practice.

'Absolutely,' I agreed. 'She is the only real choice for receptionist.'

Miss Johnson was kind, loyal, strong and hard-working. If you got in her bad books she could be stern and a recalcitrant, unmoving opponent; a cross between the headmistress of a girls' school and an English bulldog. I couldn't imagine how difficult it would be to try to manage the practice without her.

Doreen Johnson had been Dr Brownlow's secretary and receptionist for longer than even he could remember. Tall, slim and white-haired she was a martyr to her feet and always wore a single row of pearls. She always had a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles perched on the end of her nose. A thin gold chain hung from the arms of the spectacles and was draped around the back of her neck.

She had an inexhaustible fund of knowledge and information about the workings of the National Health Service bureaucracy and the idiosyncrasies of the patients. She also knew where everyone lived, what they did for a living, how they voted and what they were thinking. She could answer every question about any villager which began with the words 'Do you know...?' By lunchtime each day (including Sundays and bank holidays) she knew what everyone had for breakfast.

I knew that Miss Johnson had retired and that I would have to try to persuade her to unretire.

The other person I wanted to recruit was Kay McBride, the former district nurse. I hadn't seen Kay McBride for ages. As Kay Wilson she had been married to the local policeman. That marriage had ended tragically when PC Wilson had knocked down and killed a boy in the village. Full of remorse and unable to live with the guilt PC Wilson had hung himself. A couple of years later the widow had married a local tractor engineer called Ernie McBride. He was 22 years her junior but the marriage had apparently proved a resounding success.

'Do you know where Kay is living?' I asked Patsy. I knew exactly where I could find Miss Johnson.

'She's still in Ilfracombe, as far as I know,' said Patsy. She frowned.

'She's not still killing cats, is she?'

When she had still been Mrs Wilson, Kay had persuaded the vet to put down her husband's two cats. He had been heartbroken. Their only crime had been their age. I shared Patsy's concern. The killing of the cats had worried me then and worried me still. But I needed a district nurse and I needed one quickly.

'Miss Johnson will probably know where she is,' I said. 'I'll go and see her first.'

CHAPTER 8

I bumped into Thumper (almost literally) on my way to see Miss Johnson. His van was parked on a corner in a narrow lane just wide enough to take one car at a time. There were two other cars parked in front of him. I didn't recognise either of the other vehicles or their drivers.

'What's up?' I asked Thumper.

'There's a cow lying down in the lane.' He stepped onto the verge and pointed to her. I stepped up beside him. He was right. A large brown and white cow was lying down on the road. She'd positioned herself in such a way that she could munch at the lush grass growing in the verge. She seemed quite happy. She looked at us and carried on chewing in that lazy yet determined way cows have.

'Can't anyone move her?'

'She won't budge. I've tried shouting at her to move. She takes no notice.'

'Who does she belong to?'

'Dunno. Probably one of Sam Houghton's. When he moves his cows from field to field he usually just opens both gates and lets the cows meander down when the fancy takes them. The cows know where to go so he leaves them to it.'

'But this one seems to have gone on sit down strike.'

'Apparently so.'

We stood and waited for a while. The cow kept chewing in the way that cows do. She showed no sign of wanting to move. Thumper told me he was on the way to Cornflower Cottage.

'New people there,' he said. 'Have you met them?'

I shook my head.

'Phatt,' he said.

'All of them?' I asked, misunderstanding.

'No. That's their name. They're called Phatt.' He spelt it for me. 'I've been doing some work on the cottage for them. They're having a new kitchen and a new bathroom put in.' He screwed up his nose. 'Ghastly,' he said. He shuddered. 'They got me to put in a maroon bathroom suite. Maroon bath, maroon handbasin and maroon lavatory.' He shook his head sadly. 'I nearly refused,' he said. He grinned. 'But they're new. They're paying townie prices.' Thumper was one of the kindest men I knew. He was always doing favours for old people who had no money, and when he worked for friends he could rarely be persuaded to take more than the cost of the materials he'd bought. But he had no qualms about overcharging people whom he regarded as fair game. It was, I suppose, his way of playing Robin Hood.

'They've agreed to let me open up the practice,' I told Thumper.

He grinned. 'I thought they might.'

'How did you get them to agree?' I asked. 'What have you been up to?'

'There were a couple of letters in the local paper.'

'I saw them. That might have influenced the bureaucrats but I think there was something else.'

'You think so?'

'Yes.'

Thumper smiled, thought for a moment and then shook his head.

'I don't think you want to know.'

'Was it legal?'

'Entirely.'

'I didn't want to know beforehand,' I told him. 'But I do now.'

Thumper hesitated, sighed and then made up his mind. 'We had a sick rota,' he told me. 'Two dozen of us took it in turns to ring the doctors in Barnstaple and demand home visits. We called them out three or four times a night.'

I couldn't help laughing. 'I'm not surprised they gave in!'

Just then Samuel Houghton's tractor pulled up behind my car. Samuel clambered out and meandered over to where we were standing.

'Why the queue?' he asked.

Thumper pointed to the cow. 'One of yours?'

Samuel nodded. 'Sorry about this,' he said cheerfully. 'It's the one I bought at auction last Thursday. She's deaf and a bit bloodyminded.' He walked slowly over to the cow, bent down until his mouth was about six inches from her left ear and shouted 'Get up my dear!' in her ear.

The cow got up.

Samuel tapped her lightly on the backside. He leant close to her ear again. ‘To your field!’ he shouted.

The cow set off down the lane.

‘Deaf,’ explained Samuel again. He got back into his tractor and sat there waiting for the traffic jam to disappear.

Still chewing, the cow started walking down the lane, following the trail of hardening cow pats left by her companions.

* * *

After the Government had closed down my medical practice Miss Johnson had decided to retire. She was old enough to take a small private pension to which she had contributed for most of her life, and her own modest savings had received a welcome boost when she had received an unexpected windfall after the death of an elderly aunt.

‘I could never leave Bilbury,’ she had told me. ‘And since I can’t drive a tractor or milk a cow I don’t think I’ll find any other work here.’

And so Miss Johnson had declared her intention to cultivate roses, read sentimental, romantic novels and never answer the telephone again.

After knocking on the front door of her cottage, I opened it and walked in. I don’t think there are more than half a dozen doorbells in Bilbury. When visiting one another most people living in the village just knock and walk in. This can, of course, lead to some embarrassing moments but since the village’s inhabitants tend to think of themselves as members of one large family these embarrassments are regarded as trivial and of little consequence.

Miss Johnson was sitting in the tiny living room of her tiny cottage. If she had changed at all in the time since we had both retired from medical practice it was to look younger and healthier. She was wearing a plain blue skirt and a white blouse. She wore her pearls, of course, and the gold-rimmed spectacles. ‘I made a seed cake for you,’ she said. Miss Johnson’s seed cake was renowned and incomparable.

‘How did you know I was coming?’

She looked at me over her spectacles. ‘I would have been very disappointed in you if you hadn’t come to see me.’

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. Miss Johnson had always been the best informed person in the village. She usually knew who was getting married or having a baby even before they did themselves.

‘How did you know I was going back into business as a village GP?’ I asked her.

She looked at me over her spectacles again.

‘OK!’ I said, holding up a hand. Miss Johnson had never liked telling me the identity of her sources. ‘Just one question: will you come back and work with me?’

‘Of course I will!’ she said emphatically.

‘You’re not enjoying your retirement too much?’

She leant forward. ‘To be perfectly honest,’ she said, ‘I’m bored rigid. The roses don’t take more than twenty minutes a day at the most and if I read any more of these wretched novels I think I’ll go potty.’ She pointed to a row of paperback novels sitting on her bookshelf

‘You miss the gossip?’

‘Of course I do! When are we starting?’

‘This Saturday.’

‘This Saturday! Gosh. Thumper’s little plan did work well.’

I smiled. ‘It would seem so.’

‘I’ll pop round to the Grange tomorrow shall I? When are they sending the patients’ medical records over from Barnstaple?’

I looked at her, not quite sure how to tell her that I’d forgotten all about the medical records. But I didn’t have to say anything. My silence told her the answer.

Miss Johnson sighed, looked over her spectacles at me and shook her head in mock despair. ‘Never mind,’ she said. ‘I’ll ring the bureaucrats later on and get them to send the records over in a taxi.’

‘Will they do that?’

‘They will if I tell them that if they don’t and someone dies you’ll see that they’re blamed.’

‘Ah, yes.’ I said.

‘Your little trick never fails,’ she said. ‘You taught me that one.’

A year or two earlier I had used this threat to get the local health service administrators to rush me the medical records for a patient who had just moved into the area. The administrators had never forgotten the threat – or the lesson.

I smiled. ‘And that was about the only thing I did teach you!’

‘I’ll go and get the cake,’ said Miss Johnson. ‘Shall we have a glass of my elderberry wine to celebrate?’

‘A small glass,’ I said. ‘I like your elderberry wine but it’s got a kick like a bad-tempered mule. And then you can tell me how I can persuade Kay to come back to work as the practice nurse.'

'Oh, if you're quick I don't think you'll have too much difficulty,' said Miss Johnson, with a twinkle in her eye. 'When I last saw Kay she told me she was working as a barmaid in a pub in Barnstaple I can't think that's quite her cup of tea.'

'Why on earth is she working in a pub?'

'There weren't any other vacancies for district nurses and she didn't want to work in a hospital,' answered Miss Johnson. 'I don't think our Kay likes authority too much,' she said.

* * *

It took me twenty five minutes to get into Barnstaple. I would have got there quicker except for the tractor which held me up for a mile or so between Winford Bridge and Garman's Down. The driver was too busy trying not to let his overladen load of straw topple into the ditch to notice that there was a car stuck behind him.

In Barnstaple, I left the car in the car park behind Bear Street and hurried through the town to the pub where Miss Johnson had told me I could find Kay behind the bar.

It was a dark and rather dingy pub that advertised itself as having been serving beer and sandwiches since the Middle Ages. It didn't look as if it had received a lick of paint since opening day. I wondered if they were still selling the same sandwiches.

I spotted Kay straight away. She was polishing a glass with a rather grubby tea towel and trying to ignore a small, skinny bald customer who had his shirt sleeves rolled up to display two large tattoos – one on each forearm. She was wearing a very low cut white blouse which was obviously fashioned to display her more than ample cleavage; the neckline of the blouse was edged with white lace designed to draw attention to an apparently bottomless pink canyon.

The customer was sipping his pint of beer and staring into the cleavage as though trying to hypnotise it. Or maybe he was the one who was being hypnotised.

'Your landlord claims to have been serving sandwiches since the Middle Ages,' I murmured.

'That's right,' muttered Kay. 'We've been serving ale and sandwiches since 1546.'

'Sandwiches weren't invented until the 18th century,' I said. 'They were named after the Earl of Sandwich. He ordered that one be made for him after he'd spent 24 hours at a gambling table.'

Kay stopped polishing, put down the glass, and looked at me. She was, I could tell, ready to snarl at me. But slowly a huge smile appeared on her face. 'It's you!' she cried. 'What on earth are you doing in this dump?'

'I came to see you.' I looked at her. She seemed different. Then I realised what it was. 'You seem taller. You must be wearing very high heels.'

She shook her head. 'I'm standing on an upturned beer crate,' she told me. 'There are three of them round here.'

'Why on earth are you standing on an upturned beer crate? Isn't it uncomfortable and unstable?'

'It's so that I have to lean forward a lot.'

'Isn't that bad for your back?'

'I'm sure it is. But it's good for business. The more the customers get to see of my cleavage the more beer I sell.'

'Oh.' I said, blushing.

She shrugged. 'It was the only bloody job I could get.' She looked down at her blouse and tried in vain to cover the open chasm that was her cleavage. 'The boss insists that all the barmaids dress like this. He calls us Ye Olde Englishe Barmaids,' she said. 'And he only employs barmaids with Ye Bigge Knockers.' She laughed and shrugged. 'Ah well, I need the work,' she said. 'Things aren't good in the tractor business at the moment.' She put down the glass and tea towel. 'How are you? What's happening? What are you doing? How's Patsy?'

'I want you to come back to work,' I said. 'I'm opening up the practice again. I need a district nurse who knows how to tie a bandage, how to dress a wound, how to comfort a bereaved widow, how to find cottages which don't have names on and how to work all alone except for a slightly eccentric general practitioner who constantly needs the help and support of a loyal, kind and sympathetic district nurse.'

Kay stared at me. She opened her mouth to say something but nothing came out.

'Do you know anyone who might prove suitable?' I asked.

She crossed her arms across her chest and studied me as though contemplating making a bid. 'Not me,' she said eventually. She shook her head to emphasise her reply.

'I start tomorrow,' I said. 'I only found out about it yesterday. It's all a bit of a rush. I need you.'

Kay carried on staring.

'Another pint, lovey,' said the skinny man with the tattoos. He pushed his empty glass across the bar.

'You can't...,' she began. 'The health service will have to advertise the job. I can't...'

'They agreed to let me choose my own district nurse,' I said. 'So if you want the job it's yours.'

'I haven't done any nursing for...,' she paused and thought. 'I can't remember!' she said at last. 'Since they closed you down.'

'Nor have I. It'll come back. Like riding a bicycle.'

'Hey, big girl,' said the skinny man with the tattoos. 'I want another pint.' He sounded threatening. He tried to lean across the counter but either he was too small or the counter was too high.

'How much notice do you have to give?' I asked her.

Suddenly she started talking quickly. 'I get paid three times as much here as the health service will pay me,' she said. 'My husband was laid off. I'm the only breadwinner.' She seemed embarrassed. 'It's a dump but it's busy at evenings and at the weekends. And I get a lot of tips.' She looked down at her own well-exposed cleavage. 'I don't much like the uniform,' she said. 'And the customers still bleed all over me, and vomit on me occasionally too.' She shrugged. 'But it's a living and to be honest I need the money.' She tried, unsuccessfully, to pull the two sides of her blouse a little closer together. Then she tried to smile. That didn't work either. 'Far too revealing for a modest country girl like me,' she said unconvincingly.

'Where's my bloody beer?' demanded the man with the tattoos.

Kay bent down and picked up a fresh glass from underneath the counter. She filled it carefully, tilting the glass so that there was no head on the beer. Then she reached across the bar with the glass in her hand.

'Here's your beer, you horrible, leering, nasty little man,' she said, pouring the pint over his head. She watched with obvious delight as beer ran down the startled man's face and neck, soaking his shirt and dripping onto what remained of the carpet. 'I hope you enjoyed that,' she said.

Surprisingly, the man didn't seem to mind as much as I had expected. He just shook himself and wiped his head with his hand. Kay threw him the damp tea towel. He used it to wipe his face.

'Sorry,' she said. 'Hope you find someone for the job.'

As I left I couldn't help reflecting that a society which paid people more to serve beer than to nurse had somehow got its priorities distorted.

And yet, although I wanted to feel disappointed by my failure to recruit Kay McBride, for some reason I didn't.

I kept remembering the cats she'd had killed.

Perhaps Kay McBride was a little too tough. Maybe I'd find a more suitable nurse.

* * *

When I got home I found that someone had attached a smartly painted sign to the front gate at Bilbury Grange. The sign had my name and the words The Surgery written on it. Underneath were the words 'No wart too small, no rash too faint.' Someone had obviously put a lot of effort into it so I left the sign where it was.

'I've given your surgery a good clean,' said Patsy. 'And I know you've managed to persuade Miss Johnson to come out of retirement because a man from Barnstaple came round with a box full of National Health Service stationery – prescription pads, national insurance certificates, X-ray request forms and all sorts of things. He said Miss Johnson had rung them up and told them they had to send round a boxful of emergency supplies. The man said there will be a proper delivery early next week.'

'Thank heavens for Miss Johnson,' I murmured to Patsy. I'd completely forgotten that I would need prescription pads. 'If I write out a list of emergency drug supplies would you ring the chemist in Combe Martin and ask him to deliver them?'

'Of course.'

I went into the surgery, found a piece of notepaper and a pen and, sitting at the kitchen table, hurriedly began to write down a list of what I thought I'd need for emergency supplies. 'I'll make this a private prescription,' I said. 'Tell the chemist that you'll give him a prescription when he delivers what I need. And ask him if he'd be kind enough to send us a bill with the drugs.'

I wrote down a list of emergency drugs I thought I'd need to start with:

Morphine 10mg/ml for injection x 6 ampoules
Codeine 30 mg tablets x 30
Prochlorperazine 5mg tablets x 30
Amoxicillin 250mg capsules x 56
Erythromycin 250mg capsules x 28
Trimethoprim 200 mg tablets x 20
Aspirin 300mg soluble tablets x 60
Adrenaline 1 in 1,000, 10 x 0.5 ml ampoules

I wrote 'Private Prescription – For Stock' at the top of the piece of paper, signed my name at the bottom, added the date and then handed the sheet to Patsy.

'I'll need more later,' I said. 'But those will do to start with.'

'Do you think he'll have all these in stock?' she asked.

‘If there’s anything they haven’t got ask them if they would be kind enough to get it in for tomorrow,’ I told her. ‘By the way, Kay won’t be coming. She’s working as a barmaid.’

‘She turned you down?’

I nodded. ‘Probably for the best,’ I said.

‘You’ll find someone’ said Patsy. I nodded. She picked up my list of drugs and headed for the telephone.

‘I’d better go and sort out my surgery and my bag,’ I said. ‘I need to make sure that everything is still working.’

CHAPTER 9

When I had retired from general practice I had left my surgery exactly as it had been when I'd worked in it. Bilbury Grange was quite big enough for us to leave the three rooms devoted to the practice untouched. One room had been my surgery, one the waiting room and a third had been the office where Miss Johnson worked.

Patients entered and left the waiting room through a door at the side of the house so it was quite easy to regard the three rooms as an entirely separate part of the house.

A country GP's surgery, back in the 1970s, was hardly a storehouse of high technology but there were some bits and pieces I knew I would need to find.

I sat down at my desk, picked up a notepad and a pencil and made a list:

1. Sphygmomanometer (For taking blood pressure readings.)
2. Patella hammer (For testing reflexes.)
3. Ophthalmoscope (For looking into patients' eyes.)
4. Auriscope (For looking into patients' ears.)
5. Torch (For looking down patients' throats, into their outer ears and into any other dark orifice that needed close examination.)
6. Peak Flow Meter (Tube for patients to blow into in order to check their lung function.)

I looked at the list. There was something missing. I chewed on the end of my pencil. I knew there was something missing but I couldn't think what it was. Then I remembered.

7. Stethoscope (For listening to chests and, most important of all, for looking like a doctor.)

I found the first six items on the list straight away. The ophthalmoscope, auriscope and torch all needed new batteries but that was no problem; they all took standard sized batteries of which we had a supply in a cupboard in the kitchen. I got the batteries, put them in and checked. Everything worked.

But I couldn't find my stethoscope anywhere.

It wasn't in my black bag. It wasn't on my desk. It wasn't in any of the drawers in my desk.

I went back into the house and found Patsy.

'The chemist has got everything in stock,' she told me. 'He said he'll bring it all over when he closes up for the night. He asked me to say how pleased he was that you were opening up the practice again. And he especially said to tell you that that's not just because he'll dispense a lot more prescriptions with patients seeing you and not going into Barnstaple!'

I laughed. The chemist would do well. I was pleased about that. He was a good fellow.

'Have you seen my tubes?' I asked Patsy.

'Your what?'

'My Tubes. My stethoscope. I can't find them – it – anywhere.'

'That long dangly thing that you use to eavesdrop on people's chests?'

'That's the one.'

'I didn't know it was called tubes.'

'It's really a stethoscope.'

'I know. But you called it your tubes.'

'That's what we used to call them at medical school.'

'How sweet and boyish!'

'Whatever I call it I can't find it.'

She frowned. 'Isn't it in your surgery?'

'No.'

'Your black bag?'

'No. Looked there too.'

'I don't have the faintest idea where it could be. I don't suppose it's in your study?'

We had converted a spare bedroom at the top of the house into a writing room. It was quiet and there was no telephone in there. It was where I wrote my books. 'Good idea,' I said. I had no idea why I would have put my stethoscope up there but it was as good a place to look as anywhere.

I raced up the stairs.

Three minutes later I raced back down again.

'It's not up there,' I told Patsy.

'Have you not got a spare?' she asked.

I shook my head. 'I've only ever had one stethoscope,' I told her. 'It's the one I bought when I was a medical student. I won’t look like a doctor without it.’

We searched everywhere in the house. But we couldn’t find it anywhere.

At ten that evening I slumped down in an easy chair quite exhausted and very miserable.

* * *

‘I know where it is!’ I cried out, sitting up in bed.

Patsy woke up, rubbed at her eyes and sat up.

The two cats stirred on the bed but didn’t wake up. Ben, the dog, opened one eye, decided that there was nothing to get excited about and went back to sleep again.

‘You know where what is?’

‘My stethoscope.’

‘Where is it?’

‘I lent it to Mrs Thingy for that play the school did a couple of months ago.’

‘That’s right!’ said Patsy. ‘I remember. You did. What was the play.’

‘I can’t remember the play but there was a doctor in it. One of the children played a doctor. And so they borrowed my stethoscope.’

‘Mrs Bridge!’ said Patsy. ‘Ivy Bridge. She works as an assistant at the school. Her husband works for the council in Barnstaple She does a lot of drama stuff in schools.’

I climbed out of bed.

‘Where are you going?’

‘I’m going to get my stethoscope.’

‘You can’t!’ laughed Patsy.

‘Why not? It’s my stethoscope.’

‘It’s four o’clock in the morning!’

‘What if she’s lost it?’

‘She won’t have lost it.’

‘She might have given it to a jumble sale.’

‘She won’t have done that.’

‘She might have lent it to some other school. By now my stethoscope could be draped around the neck of some junior wouldbe-thespian prancing the boards in Bratton Fleming or South Molton or Woolacombe.’

‘I’m sure your stethoscope will be OK,’ said Patsy, as soothing as only a good wife or mother can be.

Reluctantly, very reluctantly, I agreed to wait until the next morning to collect my stethoscope.

But I didn’t find the waiting easy.

* * *

‘I’m sorry to bother you so early,’ I said. ‘But I’ve come for my stethoscope.’

Mrs Bridge pulled her dressing gown a little tighter around her, stared at me and blinked. ‘Doctor? Is that you doctor?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I’ve come for my stethoscope. I’m afraid I need it back.’

She stared at me as if I were completely mad.

‘I lent it to you for the school play.’

‘Oh yes,’ she said. ‘What time is it?’

I looked at my watch. ‘Fourteen minutes to seven.’ She blinked. ‘It’s a little early isn’t it?’

‘It’s an emergency,’ I told her brightly. ‘I’m starting a surgery at nine o’clock and I need my stethoscope.’

‘What is it dear?’ asked another voice. A large, round man appeared behind Mrs Bridge. He was wearing blue and red striped pyjamas and looked rather put out. He was wearing a hairnet to keep his hair flat.

‘It’s the doctor, dear,’ said Mrs Bridge. ‘I borrowed his stethoscope for a play the school put on.’

‘Good morning, doctor,’ said Mr Bridge.

‘Good morning, Mr Bridge,’ I replied.

‘Didn’t you give it back to him?’ Mr Bridge asked his wife.

‘Apparently not,’ said Mrs Bridge.

‘Do you have any idea where it might be?’

‘I suppose Geoffrey must have taken it home.’

‘Geoffrey? Who is Geoffrey?’

‘He’s the boy who played the doctor.’

‘What doctor?’

‘Dr Thomas Stockmann.’

‘Who is Dr Stockmann?’

‘He’s an important character in *A Public Enemy*.’

We both looked at her.

‘It’s a play by Henrik Ibsen.’

‘You had ten-year-olds playing Ibsen?’ her husband asked, astonished.

‘They enjoyed it immensely,’ said Mrs Bridge defensively. ‘Children need to be stretched.’

‘Yes. Of course. So you think Geoffrey might have my stethoscope?’

‘He could have.’

‘What’s his full name?’

‘Geoffrey Slater.’

‘Where does he live?’

She told me. I thanked her and left. As I got into my car I could hear Mr Bridge berating his wife. ‘I remember that play now,’ he was saying. ‘It’s really not a suitable play for young children to perform.’

I didn’t hear Mrs Bridge’s reply. I was on my way to Geoffrey Slater’s home.

* * *

Geoffrey remembered where my stethoscope was. He’d last used it to decorate a snowman they’d built in their garden. My stethoscope was eventually unearthed amidst a pile of half broken toys and completely broken plant pots at the back of their garage.

It was looking rather the worse for wear. But stethoscopes are pretty basic instruments; there isn’t much to go wrong. And mine had survived. It still worked.

I felt a great sense of relief as I drove back to Bilbury Grange with my stethoscope lying on the front passenger seat.

Now I could be a proper doctor again.

CHAPTER 10

I expected my first surgery to be quiet.

'We'll just open the door, wait around for half an hour or so and then close the door,' I told Miss Johnson. To help while away the time I had picked up a paperback copy of a Graham Greene novel I was reading and stuffed it into my jacket pocket before I went into the surgery.

But things didn't turn out quite as I had expected and the paperback stayed where it was. I'd just settled down behind my desk when Miss Johnson floated in. She had a talent for seeming calm and unhurried whatever was going on around her and it was good to know that she would be working alongside me.

'There are eleven here so far,' she said.

'Eleven what?' I asked, genuinely puzzled.

'Patients,' she said softly.

'Eleven!'

'Seven of them were waiting by the back door when I arrived,' she said.

I was, it seemed, back in business.

* * *

I was quickly reminded of the strange things people worry about. Thanks to articles and columns on health matters in newspapers and magazines, and to constant exposure to medical programmes on television and radio, many people have acquired a smattering of medical knowledge.

In general this is a good thing. But it can lead to some very strange conclusions.

Within fifteen minutes I had been reminded of the odd things people believe.

After a long, preliminary and utterly irrelevant discussion of her feet (she wanted to know if they were flat, which they were not) Mollie Leafinold confided that her husband suffered from premature ejaculation and wanted to know if this meant that she would have a premature baby. Thus I was reminded that when a patient says 'by the way, while I'm here' it invariably means that they are about to reveal the real reason for their visit. Mollie wasn't really worried about her feet. But she was shy about mentioning her real fear and needed time to work up to it.

Eighteen-year-old Amelia Raite wanted to know if it was true that a girl couldn't get pregnant if she or the man she was with wore a cap. Having been away from medical practice for a while I foolishly assumed she knew a little about contraception and was talking either about the Dutch cap or the condom but after some confusing, and for both of us rather bewildering discussion, it turned out that she had somehow gained the impression that if a man wore a flat tweed cap on his head the girl he was making love to would be protected from pregnancy.

'I didn't see how it could be,' she admitted, before she left. 'But it was my friend who told me that.'

I managed to persuade her to re-educate her friend in the hope that this might do something to prevent the rumour spreading any further round the village.

* * *

My next patient was Dean Taunton. He came into the surgery in quite a temper. Brandishing a letter from his mother he wanted to know how he could sue the hospital in Yorkshire where she had been treated.

'They've had a mix up,' he explained when I asked him why he wanted to sue the hospital.

'Tell me about it,' I told him.

'They sent my mother home with Raynaud's disease,' he said. 'So, what I want to know is who's got her disease?'

I told him I didn't quite understand.

'If my mum has got Raynaud's disease then who has got hers and how did they get mixed up?' demanded Mr Taunton quite indignantly.

I eventually managed to explain that many medical diseases are given names commemorating their discoverers. 'Your mother's disease is named after the doctor who first diagnosed the condition,' I explained.

'Silly bloody name,' said Mr Taunton.

'Not as silly as it could have been,' I explained. He asked me what I meant.

I told him that there are some disorders which are named after more than one discoverer. 'There is, for example, a type of muscular atrophy known as Wohlfart-Kugelberg-Welander disease,' I told him.

* * *

In any other small village Nigel Perkins would be the oldest resident.

Mr Perkins celebrated his 87th birthday a few months ago but looks (and behaves) much younger than his years. He still plays darts in the pub team, still plays cricket (though usually, it is true, only when the captain cannot otherwise make up an eleven) and still fancies himself as something of a ladies' man.

Despite his age he has very few real physical complaints. His heart ticks away like a Swiss watch and the rest of him was also clearly made to last.

His main complaint when I saw him was of muscle cramps in his arms and legs.

'How long have you had them?' I asked.

'About a week.'

'Are they getting better or worse?'

'Worse, if anything.'

'You're not taking any medicines are you?'

'Oh no,' he said. He shook his head emphatically. 'Don't like taking drugs.'

I examined him but could find nothing wrong with him.

'You're a medical mystery,' I told him.

'Am I?' he asked, apparently delighted.

'I'll have a look at you in a couple of days,' I told him. 'See how you are then.'

'There's something else I've been meaning to ask you about for years,' he said. I waited. 'Why has my hair lost its memory? Why does the stuff that used to grow out of the top of my head now grows out of my nose and ears?'

I laughed. 'I have no idea,' I told him. 'But it comes with the territory, I'm afraid.'

'What territory?'

'The being 87 territory,' I told him.

He snorted. 'You doctors blame everything on old age,' he said. He bent down and took a parcel wrapped in newspaper out of his bag. 'Brought you and Patsy a lettuce, doctor,' he said, putting the package down onto my desk.

'Thank you,' I said. I reached out and touched the packet. 'We're very grateful.'

Nigel stood up and waved a hand, brushing aside the thanks.

'I'll see you in a couple of days,' I told him.

When he'd gone I took the lettuce through to Patsy in the kitchen.

* * *

'Rick' Shaw, a taxi driver who works in Barnstaple, and whom I knew well, came in to see me looking very worried. He told me that he had been for an insurance medical and had been told by the doctor who had done the examination that he was suffering from asthma. He had, as a result, been told by his insurers that they would charge him a higher premium.

'I thought people with asthma had difficulty in breathing!' he said.

'They usually do,' I agreed.

'Well I don't,' said Rick rather indignantly.

I examined him and agreed that I could find nothing wrong. I asked him to tell me about the examination.

'The doctor got me to blow into this tube,' he said. 'I didn't manage very well. I think that was why he said I'd got asthma.'

'Could be,' I agreed.

I picked up my own spirometer and asked him to blow into it.

'Looks fine,' I said, when he handed the instrument back to me. 'No signs of asthma. Why didn't you manage very well at the medical?'

Rick went red and was clearly embarrassed. I waited for him to tell me.

'The wife said I should wear a collar and a tie for the medical,' he said. 'It being with a private doctor.'

I nodded. 'I don't think I've ever seen you with a tie,' I told him.

'No,' he said. 'I don't wear them.'

'Collar a bit tight?' I suggested. He nodded.

'Button up your collar,' I said.

He buttoned up his collar.

'Now try again,' I said, handing him the spirometer.

This time he produced a very feeble blow. I grinned at him.

'You'd better unbutton your shirt before I diagnose asthma,' I told him.

I said I would write to the insurance company for him and ask them to repeat the medical.

'There will probably be another fee to pay,' I warned him. 'But I expect it will be cheaper than paying bigger premiums.' He thanked me and got up.

'And if you must wear a tie either get a shirt with a bigger collar or leave the top button unbuttoned,' I told him.

He grinned sheepishly.

* * *

I re-learnt a lot of things I had forgotten in that first morning back at work.

I re-learnt, for example, that although many patients will accept a doctor's advice if they genuinely think it is good for them, there are some patients who are very selective about the advice they are prepared to take.

Eddie Busby is five foot eight inches tall and weighs just under twenty stones. He drinks five pints of beer every night and admits to smoking forty cigarettes a day (which means that he probably gets through eighty). I long ago lost count of the number of times I suggested that it might be to his long-term advantage to cut his consumption of both. He took as much notice of that advice as he took of the advice to lose a little weight.

'I need another sick note,' he told me, collapsing into the chair on the other side of my desk. I heard the chair creak and hoped it wouldn't give way under his bulk.

'Why aren't you at work?' I asked him.

'The doctor in Barnstaple said I shouldn't work so hard,' he told me. 'He said I needed to take things a little easier.'

This surprised me for I knew of very few people on the planet who took things easier than Eddie.

'Why did he say that?' I asked.

'He seemed to think my job was making me ill,' said Eddie. 'Stress,' he added. 'Plus I get tired and breathless if I do too much.'

'You need to lose some weight, cut down on the drinking and give up the cigarettes,' I told him.

He looked at me as if I had told him to take up embroidery or hang-gliding. 'I'm not well enough to do any of that,' he said. 'I need to rest and build up my strength.'

'What's your job?' I asked him.

'Unemployed,' he answered immediately.

'Take your shirt off,' I told him.

'Why?' he demanded.

'So that I can examine you.'

Reluctantly, he removed his shirt and threw it onto my desk.

'And your vest.'

He took the vest off and threw it on top of the shirt.

I listened to his heart and lungs, took his blood pressure and did some other simple tests.

'Good news! I think you're well enough to go back to work,' I told him, when he had removed his clothes from my desk.

He didn't look as though this was good news.

'The doctor said I needed to take time off work,' he said.

'And you did,' I said. 'It's done you a lot of good. You're in much better shape. But you're still smoking eighty a day.'

'Forty,' he said.

'Eighty.'

He looked at me and backed down. 'How did you know it was eighty?'

'I can tell.'

'From listening to my chest?'

I nodded. A nod seemed less of a lie than actually saying 'yes'.

He looked glum. 'I get more money when I'm on the sick. Do you know how expensive cigarettes are?'

'I know.' I wrote down details of his blood pressure on his medical notes. 'Of course,' I said, 'if you were making a real effort to lose weight, to cut down your drinking and to reduce the number of cigarettes you smoke then you would probably need a few more weeks on the sick.'

He brightened considerably.

'But I'll need to see you every week,' I told him. 'I'll weigh you and I'll listen to your chest. I'll know whether or not you're making an effort.'

'If I lose some weight and cut down the cigarettes you'll keep me on the sick a bit longer?'

I nodded. It was the best incentive I could think of

He frowned.

'It's the best deal you're going to get today,' I told him. I picked up the relevant form and took the cap off my pen. 'What's the decision?'

'I'll try,' he said.

I handed him a booklet explaining how he could lose weight, a booklet explaining how to stop smoking and a sick note for a week.

* * *

The next two patients came in together.

Nancy and Doreen Norfolk are sisters, known locally as the Norfolk broads, and they live together in a cottage their parents left them. Nancy works as a children's book illustrator and Doreen makes home-made chutneys and jams which she sells on a stall in the Pannier Market in Barnstaple. If I hadn't got their medical records in front of me I would have never guessed their ages. Both are in their early forties but they look at least a decade younger.

'We've got a little problem,' said Nancy.

'A very little problem really,' added Doreen.

'But not so little that it doesn't worry us,' Nancy reminded her.

'No,' agreed Doreen.

It took me nearly ten minutes to get them to tell me what the problem was. We got there via details of a new recipe for tomato chutney which Doreen insisted I gave to Patsy, a discussion of the disappearance of the red squirrel (Nancy was doing the illustrations for a children's storybook about two squirrels) and a fairly extensive discussion of the Des Moulin's whorl snail, a tiny creature the size of a match head which is now so rare that building developers somewhere in the south of England had been told that their plans for a new housing estate had to be abandoned because they would disrupt the snails' natural habitat.

'We could get hold of one or two of the snails and get them to live in Bilbury,' said Doreen. 'That way if any developers ever suggest building here we could stop them.'

I said I liked her idea but thought that getting hold of the snails might be difficult.

Eventually, they told me their problem.

'We have a brother,' said Nancy. 'He's called Arnold and his wife is Felicity. They live in Northampton.'

'He's a chiropodist and she's a dental hygienist,' said Doreen.

'So they're both medical,' said Nancy.

'The problem is that they have told our cousin Jeffrey that we aren't normal,' said Doreen.

'We don't have much to do with our brother,' said Nancy.

'Nor with cousin Jeffrey,' said Doreen.

'Jeffrey works for the Government,' said Nancy, in reverential tones. She lowered her voice and spoke in a whisper. 'Inland Revenue,' she said, in the same sort of tone that she might have used had he been an employee of MI5.

'Ah,' I said, nodding as though I understood where all this was leading. Being a country GP means having a lot of patience.

'Jeffrey told us that Arnold told him that we aren't normal,' said Doreen.

'Has that upset you?' I asked.

'Not so much upset, perhaps,' said Nancy. 'But we're a little concerned.'

'Can the Government have us arrested for not being normal?'

'I don't think so,' I told them. 'In fact I'm pretty sure that they can't.'

'Oh that's a relief,' said Nancy.

'How would they decide what's normal?' I asked. I thought for a moment. 'I don't think I know anyone who is normal,' I said. 'In fact I'm not even sure I know what it means. Do you?'

The two sisters looked at each other. 'I suppose it means being a couple and having children,' said Nancy.

'Thumper and Anne are a couple,' I said. 'They've got a baby. Would you say they were 'normal'?'

'Well, no, not really,' said Doreen, with a little nervous giggle.

'I suppose not.'

'Is your brother normal?'

'Oh definitely not,' said Nancy. 'He flies model aeroplanes and does Morris dancing in the summer.'

Doreen shook her head. 'I don't think he's normal,' she said.

'Then why worry?' I asked them.

'Does Jeffrey seem normal to you? Do you know anyone else like him?'

'Oh no,' they both said. 'He keeps budgies and takes them to shows. He's got a cabinet full of trophies. We don't know anyone else who does that.'

'Working for the Inland Revenue and breeding budgies is hardly normal,' I said.

'No,' she agreed. They both looked a lot happier.

'So do you feel a bit better about things?' I asked them.

'Oh definitely,' they both said together. They looked at each other, smiled and got up.

'I'll bring some rhubarb and beetroot jam round for you try,' said Doreen in a whisper. 'It's my latest recipe.'

'It's wonderful,' said Nancy. 'You'll love it. It's got a very unusual tang to it.'

‘I look forward to that,’ I told them.

* * *

‘Is that it?’ I asked Miss Johnson.

It had been a much busier surgery than I’d expected.

‘I’m afraid not, doctor,’ said Miss Johnson. ‘One or two more arrived while you were with the last patient.’

I opened the door to the waiting room. The room was absolutely full. You couldn’t have crammed more people into the room if you’d been trying to get a mention in the *Guinness Book of Records* for having the most patients in a waiting room. The moment I opened the door everyone started coughing.

Appalled I looked around. I didn’t recognise anyone. Every patient in there looked old, decrepit and scruffy. Most wore beards. The rest had long hair or scarves over their faces.

I backed out of the waiting room and closed the door.

‘Where did they all come from?’ I asked Miss Johnson.

‘They all claim to be visitors,’ she told me.

‘They all came in together?’

‘More or less.’

I sighed. At this rate I wasn’t going to finish the morning surgery before the evening surgery was due to start. Heaven knows when I would get the visits done. Suddenly, and for the first time, I was beginning to wonder if I’d done the right thing by going back into practice. I opened the door again. Everyone started coughing. The noise was deafening. Something didn’t look or sound quite right but I wasn’t sure what it was.

‘Who’s next?’ I asked.

‘Me!’ they all cried at once.

I scratched my head and looked around again. Although I didn’t recognise anyone they all seemed vaguely familiar. And then I spotted Patchy’s shoes.

Patchy Fogg always wears the same pair of brown calf length boots. He wears them with jeans and he wears them with suits. He would, I felt sure, be wearing them on his wedding day. And the patient sitting just to the left of the potted plant in the corner of the room was wearing brown, calf length boots. I looked closer and harder. And then I got it. I pointed at him and started to say something.

As soon as they realised that I knew what was going on everyone in the room started to chuckle. Wigs and false beards and scarves were quickly removed. I turned round. Miss Johnson was smiling and blushing. ‘Mr Robinson and Mr Fogg said you wouldn’t mind, doctor.’

‘Oh no,’ I said, grinning. ‘I don’t mind. But I’ll get my own back on Mr Robinson and Mr Fogg.’

CHAPTER 11

When I finally finished the morning surgery Miss Johnson told me that I had just one home visit to make.

'I don't think it's urgent, doctor,' she said.

I looked at my watch. 'I think I'll go and get it done now,' I said.

The visit was to Gloria, the extremely slender wife of the new village policeman.

The policeman's name was Russell Ross though he was always known as Russ. This was both confusing and convenient for everyone because it meant that no one ever knew whether they were addressing him by his Christian name or his surname. Russ had taken over when P.C.Wren, Bilbury's previous representative of the Devon constabulary, moved on to become a sergeant somewhere in the south east.

A special unkindness of fate had meant that Russ could not pronounce the letter 'r' and so when he introduced himself to people it sounded as if his name was Wuss Woss. This was not a name to inspire confidence. It is difficult to maintain respect when a policeman introduces himself with the words 'Good morning, I'm PC Wuss Woss'.

Russ's biggest problem had been with other policemen and he had requested a transfer to a village constabulary because he found working in a well-staffed police station to be something of a trial.

No one in the village ever laughed at him, but although the smiles might not have been visible they were nevertheless there.

Gloria and Russ had moved into the village two months previously but they still hadn't finished unpacking. Every room in their tiny home, the official policeman's residence in the village, was still piled high with cardboard boxes.

'Moving house is like childbirth,' said Mrs Ross, who had two children by a previous relationship. 'If people could remember just how painful it is they would never do it twice.' She ripped open another cardboard box with her fingernails. 'Why people ever move is a mystery to me.' She delved into the box and pulled out a garlic press, a nightdress, a half used bar of soap wrapped in a face flannel and a box of sticking plasters. 'And here's another mystery,' she continued. 'Why is it that the people who make sticking plasters can never quite make them flesh coloured?' she asked. 'Don't they know what colour flesh really is? Does anyone actually know someone whose skin is the colour of sticking plasters?' She put the box of sticking plasters down in a colander.

'But those aren't real mysteries,' she went on. She picked up a handful of socks that had been lying on the kitchen table. 'When I put the washing into the machine this morning I counted the socks. There were fourteen of them. Exactly fourteen. That's seven pairs. I counted them twice. But when I took the socks out, there were thirteen. So, what happened to the other sock? My washing machine is a better magician than David Nixon.' She sighed and threw the socks into the colander with the sticking plasters. 'I'm sorry, doctor,' she said. 'I don't expect you've got time for my rants. But with Russ out all day and the children off at school I'm all by myself. It's nice to be able to talk to another human being for a change.' She picked up a jumper and moved it. She didn't seem able to keep still.

'That's OK,' I said. 'What can I do for you?'

She looked at me rather blankly. 'What do you mean?'

'You asked me to visit,' I reminded her.

'Oh yes,' she said. 'Just hang on a minute.'

I hung on a minute while she disappeared and made a considerable amount of noise upstairs. Eventually she came back down. She had changed and was wearing what looked like a brand new pair of jeans.

'I need your advice,' she said, turning round. 'Does my bum look big in these?' Before I could reply she added something else. 'Most people want to lose weight,' she said. 'I've always had the opposite problem. I just can't put on any weight. But Russ likes plump women and so I've recently been making a real effort.'

'So you want your bum to look big?' I said, rather hesitantly.

'Oh yes,' said Mrs Ross. 'I couldn't think of anyone else to ask who would tell me the truth.'

'Well, it's quite big,' I told her. It wasn't easy ignoring the usual social conventions and telling a woman that her bum looked big.

'Oh do you think so?' She smiled.

'Quite big,' I confirmed.

She half turned and peered over her shoulder, trying to see her own bottom. 'I'm so thrilled,' she said.

'Have you always been underweight?' I asked her.

'No,' she said. 'Up until about four years ago I was like everyone else I know. But then I just started to lose weight. I thought I had cancer and I went to my doctor. He said that there was nothing wrong.'

'That was when you lived in London?' She nodded.

‘Do you know if they tested your thyroid?’

She frowned. ‘Oh, I don’t think anyone said anything about that.’

‘Let me feel your pulse,’ I said.

She offered me her wrist. Her pulse was fast and a little irregular.

‘Do you sweat easily?’ I asked.

She laughed. ‘Oh I sweat a lot!’ she said. ‘In the hot weather I have to change clothes three times a day.’

‘Would you describe yourself as nervous?’

‘Russ certainly would,’ she said. ‘He says I’m like a kitten.’

‘Would you pop into the surgery tomorrow?’ I said. ‘I’ll take a blood sample and get a simple test done.’

I didn’t say anything but I thought it was quite likely that Gloria Ross had thyrotoxicosis.

* * *

When I left Gloria Ross I drove round to see Dr Brownlow. He insisted on shaking my hand. He smiled. ‘I’m so pleased you’re opening the practice up again,’ he said. ‘A village needs five things...’

‘...a pub, a shop, a church, a school and a doctor!’ I finished for him.

His smile broadened.

‘That’s what Gilly said at the meeting the other night,’ I explained.

Dr Brownlow sighed deeply. ‘I’m glad you’re back,’ he said. ‘But they shouldn’t have ever closed you down.’ He paused and I could see a tear forming in one eye. He poured us both a whisky.

I didn’t know what to say. So I said nothing.

We sat in silence for a while. The silences with Dr Brownlow were always comfortable. I never felt I had to speak just for the sake of breaking the stillness.

‘I used to be in a hurry all the time when I was young,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘But, curiously, now that I am old I feel I can wait. I’ve had a fair innings and I feel more at peace with myself - though not, I have to admit, with the world. I get cross about the things they’re doing to the country. This Beeching thing - closing down half the country’s railways - is the most stupid, short-sighted thing I’ve ever heard of. With no railways the roads are going to become unbearable.’

I nodded. I agreed with him. It seemed short-sighted to me too.

‘I’ve had a lot of time to think,’ he said. ‘Sitting here alone. I read a bit. I look out of the window. But I spend a lot of time thinking.’

I sipped at my whisky. Drinking alcohol in the daytime was becoming a bad habit.

‘Have a biscuit,’ said Dr Brownlow.

I helped myself to a ginger biscuit.

‘How’s the pain?’

‘I need some more morphine I’m afraid.’

‘How much have you been taking?’

I’d brought him a boxful of morphine ampoules and a bundle of syringes.

‘Enough.’

‘OK. I’ll bring some more.’ It didn’t really matter how much morphine he took. We both knew he wasn’t going to live long enough to become an addict. And what did it matter if he did?

‘Did you get Miss Johnson to come out of retirement?’ I nodded.

‘Have you found yourself a nurse?’

‘Not yet.’

‘You need a district nurse in a village. Your patients can’t get into hospital to have their dressings done. And if you have a district nurse you can keep more of your patients at home. Better for them to be at home. And, if only the bureaucrats had any sense they’d realise it saves them money.’

I nodded.

‘I always dreamt of opening a cottage hospital,’ he said. ‘Bilbury could do with a cottage hospital. Just a small one.’

I said it sounded like a wonderful idea but that I doubted if the Government would ever pay for one.

‘You could do worse than hire Bradshaw.’

I looked at him, more than slightly surprised.

‘As a nurse.’

‘As a nurse?’ I repeated, sounding stupid.

‘You can’t have him until I’ve gone,’ he said. ‘But he’s reliable and surprisingly gentle. He’s kind, respectful and caring and he doesn’t panic. What more can you ask for in a nurse?’

‘I hadn’t thought of Bradshaw,’ I admitted.

'Bit old?'

'Bit older than most nurses.'

'He's in good shape,' said Dr Brownlow. 'You hardly notice the Parkinson's Disease.'

I nodded thoughtfully. If I could wait a while Bradshaw would indeed probably make a good, if slightly unusual, district nurse.

'Of course, I've known prettier nurses,' said Dr Brownlow. 'His legs aren't terribly attractive and he has no bosom to speak of.'

* * *

I called in at the Duck and Puddle on the way home. Thumper and Frank were having a discussion about new signs which Frank was planning to put onto the pub's toilet doors.

'These look nice,' said Frank, handing me a catalogue to examine and pointing to a photograph of two plastic signs. One said 'Pointer' and the other had the word 'Setter' on it.

'Bit corny,' I said.

'Have you seen them before?' asked Frank.

'I think so,' I said.

'We could have these,' suggested Frank, turning the page and pointing to two signs which carried male and female silhouettes. The male silhouette was wearing a top hat and carrying a cane. The female silhouette was wearing a huge ball-gown and a large bonnet.

'Very nice,' I said.

'We'll have those then,' said Frank.

'Are you having new lavatories put in?' I asked. The door to the ladies' lavatory led to a single cubicle. The door to the gents was an outside door which led directly into the field behind the pub.

Frank looked at me as though I were barking mad. 'No, I'm not!' he said firmly.

Before I could say anything more Patchy turned up. He was looking pretty grumpy.

'I've just driven back from Exeter,' he told us. 'Some idiot has put up a huge sign warning that they're blasting daily at the quarry.'

'Well, they do!' said Frank. 'They do blast daily.'

'But what's the point of a sign?' demanded Patchy. 'What are you supposed to do when you see it? All these damned signs. They drive me crazy. Why do I want to know that they're blasting daily?'

No one could think of an answer.

I turned to Frank. 'I'll have one of your hot toddies,' I told him.

Thumper and Patchy said they'd have the same.

'What do you put in them?' asked Patchy. 'I don't like to admit this but your hot toddies are the best I've tasted.'

'Trade secret,' said Frank, firmly.

'Oh go on,' Patchy wheedled. 'You know us. Tell us what you put in your hot toddies.'

'If I tell you that you'll make your own and I won't have any customers,' said Frank.

'Don't be daft,' said Thumper. 'We come here for the decor, not the company.'

'And the lavatories,' I added.

'Definitely the lavatories,' said Patchy.

'It's a trade secret,' said Frank :firmly. He stomped off to make three hot toddies in the back room so that we couldn't see what he put in them.

'They're always putting up daft signs,' said Thumper. 'I saw one the other day saying 'Road Liable To Subsidence'. What are you supposed to do when you see that? I didn't know whether to go slower in case the road collapsed or to drive faster so that I'd get through there quicker.'

We all thought about this.

'There's a sign near Pottington that warns of overhead cables,' said Frank, from the back room.

Thumper turned over a beermat and got out a pen. We decided to make a list of the ten most stupid road signs.

After some thought this is what we came up with:

Low flying aircraft

Part time signals

Road liable to subsidence

Blasting daily

Heavy plant crossing

Mud on road (Frank wanted to know why they didn't just clear away the mud instead of going to the trouble and expense of putting up a sign)

Beware of falling rocks (why don't they just move the loose rocks)

Deer for several miles

Our list making (which had now spread to a second beermat) ended when Patchy said he'd seen a notice on Lynmouth beach which said simply 'Do not throw stones at this notice.'

'I don't believe you!' said Frank.

'There is!' insisted Patchy. 'I told two blokes about it a few months ago. They didn't believe me so we all got into a car and drove there.'

'What did you do?'

'It was there. No other warning. No other admonition. Just a large white notice which stated boldly: 'Do not throw stones at this notice.'

'But what's the sign there for?' asked Gilly who had helped Frank carry the hot toddies into the bar.

Patchy shrugged. 'Dunno.'

'What did you do?' asked Frank.

'We all threw a stone at it and left,' said Patchy.

'I'll pop down to the beach next time I'm in Lynmouth and take a look,' said Thumper.

'Don't forget to throw a stone at it,' said Patchy.

'I won't,' said Thumper. 'I'll try anything once.'

'That's a silly saying,' said Frank.

'What is?' asked Patchy.

'I'll try anything once,' replied Frank. We all looked at him.

'Well it is,' he said. 'You would have to be mad to jump out of an aeroplane without a parachute.'

'Don't run before you can walk,' said Thumper. 'That's another silly thing people say. Why would you be able to run if you couldn't walk?'

We thought about it for a minute.

'Put your best foot forward,' I suggested.

'It's the best thing since sliced bread,' said Gilly. 'What's so brilliant about sliced bread?'

'He knows which side his bread is buttered,' offered Patchy.

'You'd have to be a complete moron not to know, wouldn't you?'

'Don't take it personally,' Frank suggested. 'How else should you take it? Whatever it is.'

'It will be in the last place you look,' said Thumper. 'If you've found it then you stop looking don't you?'

'She wants to have her cake and eat it,' said Gilly. 'What good would it be if you had cake and didn't eat it?'

As the discussion continued I looked around the pub, and thought back on my first day's work.

It occurred to me that working as a country GP is a uniquely satisfying way to earn a living. And it also occurred to me that it is a rather curious form of employment; a job perfectly suited to a loner, an individual.

How many people have the power of life and death over their customers? It is difficult to think of many jobs where the daily responsibilities are greater. And yet it is also difficult to think of many jobs where the opportunities for job satisfaction are greater.

It would, I thought, be a tragedy if the bureaucrats succeeded in taking over general practice as they were threatening to do and in the way that they had already taken over the hospitals. I wondered how general practice would look in a quarter of a century, at the turn of the millennium.

I looked around again and suddenly realised that I was almost certainly the only person in the pub to have seen more than half the other customers utterly naked.

It was a sobering thought.

CHAPTER 12

By the time I got to Dr Brownlow's the rain was coming down so fast that the windscreen wipers had more or less given up. I parked the car as close to Dr Brownlow's house as I could and ran the couple of yards that remained. Even so I was soaked by the time Bradshaw had let me in. I shook myself, more like a dog than a doctor.

'Can you remember when you first decided to become a doctor?' Dr Brownlow asked. He looked tired and, if possible, thinner than ever. He was wasting away at a frightening rate.

'I can.' I could remember it as if it were yesterday.

'Pour us both a drink. You look as if you need one.'

I poured out two whiskies. I added water to mine since I still had to do an evening surgery, but not to the one I'd poured for Dr Brownlow.

'I was eleven and visiting an elderly aunt with my parents,' I continued. 'She was a live-in housekeeper who looked after a bachelor. He lived in a beautiful thatched cottage. I remember the garden. I'd never seen so many flowers. Roses. And a pond with lilies. Going through the gate was like walking into a painting by Monet. I don't know what her employer did for a living but he was obviously quite rich. My aunt had made tea for us and while she was showing us around the garden her employer appeared. I can't remember his name. Actually, I can't remember her name either. He wandered over to introduce himself and asked me the question grown-ups always used to ask children of the age I was at the time. He asked me what I wanted to do when I grew up. I didn't have to think about it. I was, I suspect, a rather strange child. I used to visit the public library every week and bring home as many books as I could carry on my bicycle. Half of them were medical books and the other half were legal books. I had discovered that the library had a vast collection of old trial reports. I can't imagine why. I used to read them in the same way that other boys read comics containing stories about Dan Dare. I told him that there were only two things I wanted to be: a doctor or a lawyer. It never occurred to me then that I might not be the one to choose what I did. I confessed that I wasn't sure which of these I wanted to be.'

Dr Brownlow, listening carefully, sipped at his whisky and said nothing.

'My aunt's employer nodded sagely at this precocious selection.

'Easy to choose,' he told me in a deep, rich baritone voice. I can still hear him. 'If you become a doctor you will spend your life helping people and making some of them happier than they were. If you become a lawyer you will spend your life making people miserable.'

'So, not being a sadist, you chose medicine?'

'Absolutely.' I sipped at the whisky I'd poured myself 'Remarkable isn't it? Someone I met once and with whom I exchanged no more words than I've just told you changed my life more than anyone else I've ever met.' I sipped at my whisky. 'Now, it's your turn.'

'My parents were very poor,' began Dr Brownlow. 'My father once smashed his big toe with a hammer because we needed the compensation. But in some ways I had a very satisfying childhood. It was often hard but I learned the values of self-sufficiency. My father could mend his own boots or repair a leaky bucket with just a few tools he kept in his shed. He never hired anyone to do anything with a brush or a screwdriver. I never saw a workman in the house. My father could build a dry stone wall or a chimney, mend a bicycle or dig a well. He could mend everything we had. If the mangle broke he'd mend it. If the clock wasn't working he could mend that too. He could repair chairs and I once saw him put a new leg onto our kitchen table. When he'd finished you couldn't tell the difference between the leg he'd made and the three original legs. Poverty, to us then, was a misfortune, not a sin and we knew that real poverty had nothing to do with money but was more to do with quality of life. I lived in a village, much like Bilbury, and we pitied the people living in the cities, even though many of them might have had more money than we had. We didn't need the outside world or want anything it could offer us. We had our own water from a well in the garden and we grew our own vegetables on a small plot of land behind the house. My mother could spin and weave. She had an old spinning machine in the bedroom and she would collect bits of sheep's wool from the hedges and make us jumpers and scarves for Christmas and birthdays. The only person I envied was a boy whose parents kept corn and wheat in bins, salt beef in a barrel and a smoked ham in the chimney. They could have survived for months without any outside help. We were poor but we had home-made cider and several types of wine. I had an aunt who made elderflower wine and my grandmother made parsnip wine.'

'People speak of the industrial revolution as though it was something wonderful,' continued Dr Brownlow. 'But it put families into terraced houses and factories and chained them to grimy factory benches and took away people's pride and joy and independence and enthusiasm and replaced the missing joy and pride with boredom and dullness and insecurity and fear. They built schools it is true but they were only to prepare children for working long days in factories and to keep them out of the way so that mothers could work too. The industrial revolution was never a revolution of or for the people but a revolution for the rich. The Tolpuddle martyrs were right and more people should have listened to them. People sneer at the Luddites but they had a point.'

I enjoyed listening to Dr Brownlow. He was kind and wise: two things which don't often go together.

'I had a rich uncle. He was very kind to us. He and my aunt didn't have any children of their own. He gave my parents money so that we could stay on at school and try to get to university. He was a very generous man. He told my brother and me that as soon as one of us turned 17 he would buy a car. I remember him saying it. The way he said it made it sound as though he wasn't sure which one of us would get to 17 first. But I knew that since I was eighteen months older than my brother I stood a pretty decent chance of getting there first. True to his word my uncle bought me a car. He taught me to drive in the local cemetery. He said I would be unlikely to hurt anyone there. He did more than he promised; he did the same thing for my brother when he got to 17. We were the only boys we knew who had cars of our own.'

'I needed money to pay for petrol and during the holidays one summer he got me a job with a friend of his who was a doctor but who had a number of small businesses. I did errands, delivered things, drove him or his wife around occasionally. We talked and I ended up wanting to be a doctor too.'

His glass was empty. I got up and refilled it for him. He nodded his thanks.

'I'm glad I practised when I did,' he said thoughtfully. 'When I started out doctors wrote out prescriptions in Latin, patients were polite and respectful and had faith. We didn't have so many wonderful medicines but we didn't kill so many people either.' He sighed and looked at me. 'You'll see big changes in your lifetime.'

'What sort of changes?'

'The first is that by the turn of the century the bureaucrats will be running medicine,' said Dr Brownlow quietly. 'The result will be a constant state of war between the medical profession on one side and the politicians and the bureaucrats on the other. Bureaucrats have destroyed the doctor's authority because they want the power. The tragedy is that in taking away the authority they are also taking away the willingness to take responsibility. Doctors may fight but they won't win, of course. The biggest losers will be patients.'

'The end result will be that GPs will stop providing 24 hour cover. In the end GPs will end up working the sort of hours civil servants work. And that will destroy medicine as you and I know it because patients need to see the same doctor every time when they are ill. If doctors work the average working week of 40 or so hours then that would mean someone who was dying might see four or five different doctors in a week. That would kill a lot of patients and it would be the death of medicine as you and I know it. When that happens continuity of care will be replaced by chaos.'

'Oh, I can't believe that will ever happen!' I said.

'I fear it will,' said Dr Brownlow. 'The next thing that will happen will be that the lawyers will get their claws into medicine too. People are becoming increasingly litigious. And that can only get worse not better. If Isaac Newton were alive today, and he sat under a tree and an apple fell on his head he wouldn't think 'Aha, gravity!' he'd think 'Aha, lawsuit!' And instead of having invented the theory of gravity he'd have gouged five guineas plus costs out of the owner of the orchard. I have a friend in America who's a doctor. He's retiring early because he's been sued four times in the last six years. He's a good doctor but he can't take any more. He's retiring to open a nursing home for the elderly though I think that could bring him just as many problems. Sadly, I think it will be the good doctors who suffer. The bad ones will simply set up companies and protect themselves. The good doctors won't be prepared and they'll be the ones who will be destroyed. There will come a time when people will believe that everything bad that happens to them is someone else's fault. Doctors will become terribly defensive.'

'Do you really believe that will happen?'

'I do. It won't affect everyone. But it doesn't have to affect everyone.'

We sat in stillness for a while.

'And the final thing that will change,' continued Dr Brownlow, 'will be that doctors will lose control of the information they use. Knowledge is being redistributed but it was always knowledge that gave doctors their power. Now patients have some of that power, and so doctors have lost some of theirs. Everything has changed. There are news reports about new treatments published in the newspapers before they appear in the medical journals. The result is that patients know about new discoveries before doctors do. Researchers promote their discoveries to politicians and to the press in order to get bigger grants. But ordinary people don't know how to differentiate between the good, the bad and the deadly. And the information they are fed is biased and controlled by people who aren't as disinterested as doctors would be. If people find a way to share information between computers, as they say they will, then things will just get worse. Patients will think they're better off but they won't be. They'll just be exploited more efficiently. And they'll think they don't need doctors.' He sighed. 'And I suspect that nurses will want to have degrees. Just caring won't be enough for them and they'll believe that only degrees will give them status and power and money. And once they have degrees they'll want to start prescribing drugs and performing surgery and the dividing line between doctors and nurses will get blurred because the politicians will realise that it's cheaper to train and hire a nurse than it is to train and hire a doctor and so everything will get worse.'

I thought (and hoped) that he was being far too pessimistic but I didn't tell him.

'I'm glad I won't be here to see it all happen,' said Dr Brownlow

CHAPTER 13

There were fourteen patients in the evening surgery that day. Three of them, Samuel Houghton, Harry Burroughs and Gilly Parsons, the landlady from the Duck and Puddle, were suffering from strange muscle cramps. Counting Nigel Perkins that made four. I had no idea what was going on but it was clearly something specific to the village.

‘What do you think it could be?’ asked Patsy when we’d finished dinner that evening.

‘I don’t have the faintest,’ I admitted. ‘It could be something in the drinking water.’

‘Samuel Houghton and Harry Burroughs both get their drinking water from private wells,’ said Patsy who had lived in the village all her life.

‘What about Nigel Perkins? Where does his drinking water come from?’

‘He’s on the mains. He gets town water.’

‘So it can’t be a problem caused by anything in the drinking water,’ I said. I thought some more. ‘But there must be some common factor.’

‘Three of them are male,’ Patsy pointed out.

‘And one of them isn’t,’ I said. I sighed. This was proving to be quite a puzzle.

‘So, what are you going to do?’ asked Patsy.

‘I’m going to call round and see them all tomorrow,’ I said. ‘I’ll ask them some more questions. See if I can spot a link.’

‘I bet it will be a drug they’re all taking,’ said Patsy. ‘You always say that drug side effects are now a major cause of illness.’

‘But none of them is taking anything!’ I said. ‘I did ask them all.’

It was a real puzzle.

CHAPTER 14

Patsy was beginning to bloom and the maternity dresses she had bought in the very early days of her pregnancy were now essential. She looked wonderful, and insisted that she felt that way too.

In view of the fact that Bilbury is some distance from Barnstaple, and I was the only doctor in the village, we had discussed the possibility of Patsy staying with friends in Barnstaple during the last week or so of the pregnancy. In the end she decided not to.

'You've got to stay in Bilbury,' she said. 'And if I stay in Barnstaple who will look after you and answer the phone and take messages if you have to go out to see a patient?'

Having someone to answer the telephone is as essential to a country GP as a stethoscope. Since I had opened up my practice again we had relied on Mr and Mrs Parfitt, our gardener and his wife, the former Miss Hargreaves, to answer the telephone when we were out. Mr Parfitt, who had a grey curly beard, always wore a floppy tweed hat that was two sizes too small for him and looked a bit like a pixie, once worked in a bank in London but had given it all up to live a simple life in the country. Miss Hargreaves had been a spinster and a schoolteacher for many years before she and Mr Parfitt had fallen in love. Miss Hargreaves was an avid reader who kept all her books segregated by sex. She kept all the male authors in a bookcase in the living room and all the female authors in a bookcase in the bedroom. She was the only person in the village to call Thumper by his real name.

It sounds rather grand to say that we had a gardener. It wasn't quite like that.

The Parfitts had made a wonderful home for themselves in the flat above the stables at Bilbury Grange. Mr Parfitt looked after the Bilbury Grange garden and in return we let him and his wife have the flat free of any rent. We also paid him a small wage and let him have whatever food he wanted from the produce which was grown in the garden. Since Bilbury Grange had a large garden, which produced far more food than Patsy and I could possibly eat, this was a splendidly symbiotic relationship. We all benefited. And we all ate a healthy diet of fresh potatoes, carrots, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, peas, runner beans, broad beans, onions, garlic, cabbage, cauliflower, apples, pears, plums, redcurrants, strawberries, blackberries and blackcurrants. We also had more different herbs than I'd ever heard of.

Mr Parfitt also cut logs and collected twigs for our fireplaces and for the Aga and if there was any trouble with our water supply it was he who checked that the spring wasn't blocked and that the water pipes which brought water to the house weren't leaking.

It was with his help that we had made Bilbury Grange very self-sufficient.

Mrs Parfitt did a little cleaning and cooking for us (she made wonderful bread and a home-made wine that had quite a kick to it) and helped her husband in the garden. We had somehow found a tactful way to decline her help with the ironing after she had ironed my best trousers without first removing the banana which I had carelessly left in the pocket.

Selfishly, I was relieved and delighted by Patsy's decision. This was not because I wanted her to be at Bilbury Grange to look after me and answer the telephone but because I didn't want us to be parted for an hour more than was absolutely vital.

But, inevitably, the knowledge that we wouldn't have to separate, even temporarily, came at a price.

Patsy was being looked after by an obstetrician and a midwife at the hospital in Barnstaple and if all went according to plan, and the baby had the courtesy to give ample warning of his or her arrival, I would drive Patsy to the hospital, take her to the ward, and settle myself down, in the time honoured traditional way, with a cup of coffee and an eleven-year-old copy of *Reader's Digest.*

Neither of us wanted me to be there at the birth itself (it had recently become extremely fashionable for fathers to sit in the delivery room and to watch the baby being born – a thought that made both Patsy and me shudder) but both of us wanted me to be nearby.

'I want you to walk in and find me sitting up in bed, in a clean nightie and with the baby in my arms,' said Patsy. 'I want my hair combed and my lipstick looking fresh.'

The plan was that before leaving Bilbury I would telephone Miss Johnson who would drive to Bilbury Grange and answer the telephone for me. She would then telephone me at the hospital if there were any emergencies. If necessary, Mrs Parfitt would also help out with answering the telephone.

That was the plan.

It sounded simple and foolproof.

Patsy had an appointment at the hospital and left early that morning. Her sister Adrienne had offered to drive her there.

'All the best, sweetheart,' I said, through the open passenger door window of Adrienne's car.

‘Everything will be fine,’ she promised me. ‘Good luck with your mystery! I hope you find the answer.’

I waved them goodbye and then went into the house to start my morning surgery.

I didn’t have to wait until the end of the surgery, as I had expected, to start reconsidering the mystery of the strange muscle cramps.

The fourth patient that morning, Jennifer Orsey, had exactly the same problem.

Miss Orsey was quite a character.

Now well into her sixties she had been retired for two years but she was well-known in North Devon for the shop she had run in Barnstaple Called ‘Orseys for Corsets’, it had been the place all the well-dressed women of Devon visited for their corsetry and indeed, their lingerie. Miss Orsey had once told me that she had customers from as far afield as London and Manchester.

The walls of her shop had been decorated with blown up black and white prints of a beautiful curvaceous young woman wearing nothing but corsets and stockings.

‘She looks like you,’ I’d once said, when accompanying Patsy into her shop. ‘Is she a relation?’

Miss Orsey had smiled and shaken her head.

‘It’s you!’ said Patsy, turning away from a display of silk slips and camisoles and looking at one of the photographs.

Miss Orsey had nodded. ‘It is,’ she admitted. ‘I was regarded as quite a looker in those days. I couldn’t afford to hire a model for the clothes so I did the modelling myself.’

Miss Orsey lived in a beautiful thatched cottage and was surrounded by an extraordinary mixture of furniture. Everything in the cottage was old, worn and used. Some of it was downright ugly. I’d once commented on her eclectic taste.

‘Every piece of furniture in my house holds a memory and has a meaning for me,’ she had explained. ‘Try me,’ she had said. ‘Ask me about any piece of furniture in this room.’

‘That one,’ I said, pointing to a huge, oak bookcase.

‘That’s easy. It was my uncle’s. He bought it at a house auction in Goodleigh. It used to belong to a Member of Parliament and six years after my uncle bought it he found all sorts of papers in a secret compartment. Old copies of Hansard and memos scrawled on House of Commons notepaper. My uncle knew I admired it and he left it to me in his Will.’

‘The sofa,’ I said, pointing to a rather torn and threadbare sofa in front of the fireplace.

‘I bought that with my winnings after the 1949 Grand National,’ she said. ‘The cats have clawed it and scratched it and it needs recovering but I don’t have the heart to change it. Every time I look at it I’m reminded of all my cats. Nine of them. Every single one loved that sofa.’

Each time I visited her at home she told me the story of another piece of her furniture.

With the addition of Miss Orsey, I now had five patients with the same symptoms. And I still couldn’t put my finger on the problem. I was beginning to worry that I had been away from medicine for too long.

‘How long have you had the cramps?’ I asked her.

‘Three or four days.’

‘Any other symptoms?’

She shook her head. ‘I’ve been a bit worried about it,’ she said.

‘My father had a blocked artery in his leg.’

‘Intermittent claudication?’

‘That’s right. That’s what they called it.’

‘Does exercise make it worse?’ She shook her head.

I checked her leg. Her pulse was good.

‘It’s not intermittent claudication,’ I told her.

‘Could it be a deep vein thrombosis?’

‘That was my worry,’ I told her. ‘But a deep vein thrombosis is caused by a clot in the leg. And the leg is usually swollen.’ I took a tape measure out of the drawer of my desk and compared the circumference of her painful calf with the circumference of her healthy calf. The painful calf wasn’t swollen.

‘I don’t think it’s a deep vein thrombosis,’ I told her. She looked relieved. I looked at her medical records. ‘You’re not taking anything are you? No medication?’

‘Just aspirin,’ she answered.

‘What for?’

‘I’ve been getting a bit of arthritis in my left knee,’ she said. ‘You told me to take soluble aspirin for it.’

I looked through her medical records, went back a couple of years and found the note in my own handwriting.

‘Have you been taking anything except aspirin?’

‘No,’ she said firmly.

‘Nothing at all?’

‘No.’

‘And you take how many?’

‘Two tablets three times a day. It says on the packet that you can take two tablets up to four times a day.’

I couldn’t stop thinking about what Patsy had reminded me.

Side effects are a major cause of illness. And it isn’t just the main constituent of a drug which can cause problems. Drug side effects can (and usually do) cause problems when you least expect them. None of us is immune. And both doctors and patients are usually far too slow to consider drug side effects when they are looking for a cause for new symptoms. We are all likely to forget or underestimate the danger. I had even formulated my very own law, (and called it Coleman’s Law) which stated that when a patient who is being treated by a doctor developed new symptoms then the new symptoms should, unless proved otherwise, be assumed to have been caused by the treatment for the first disease.

Somehow I knew that this problem had to be drug related. But the only drug I’d been able to link into this problem was aspirin. And although aspirin can cause quite a number of side effects it doesn’t usually cause muscle cramps. It was inconceivable that it should suddenly start causing muscle cramps among five separate patients – all living in one small village.

And then, purely out of desperation, I asked if I could see the packet containing the aspirin Miss Orsey was taking. I don’t know why I did this. She opened her handbag and took out a packet of aspirin. It wasn’t a brand I’d ever seen before. There was a sticky label on it carrying the words Aspirin and the usual warnings and recommendations about dosage. I pulled at the corner of the label and peeled it off. I could now read the printing on the box. Or at least I could have done if it had been in English. The printing on the box was in French.

‘Where did you get this?’ I asked her.

‘Peter Marshall’s shop,’ she replied. ‘He’s got a special offer on them. I don’t know where he got them from.’ She frowned. ‘Are they all right, doctor?’ She paused. ‘I rather like them,’ she said. ‘They fizz when you put them in water. Loads of bubbles. And they taste quite pleasant. Not bitter in the way that aspirin usually is.’

‘I don’t know if they are all right,’ I said. ‘But I want you to stop taking them for the time being. I’ll pop round and see you later and tell you more.’ I stood up. ‘There are one or two other patients all with similar symptoms to you. I want to see if they’re also taking aspirin they bought from Peter Marshall.’

* * *

I couldn’t wait for the surgery to end that morning. I was desperate to try to get at the bottom of the new medical mystery.

As soon as I’d seen the last patient, and signed a few letters Miss Johnson had typed for me, I rushed out and drove round to Nigel Perkin’s home. Of the other patients with muscle cramps he lived closest.

‘Show me the aspirin you’ve been taking!’ I said, bursting into his kitchen.

He looked at me, frowning. ‘How did you know I’ve been taking aspirin?’

‘Where is it?’

‘It’s in the kitchen,’ he told me. ‘By the kettle,’ he shouted after me, as I headed for the kitchen. ‘It’s only aspirin!’ he shouted. ‘It’s not medicine.’

And there, by the kettle, was a packet of aspirin. A packet identical to the one Jennifer Orsey had shown me.

‘Did you get this from Peter Marshall?’

‘Yes. Is there something wrong with it?’

‘I don’t know,’ I told him. ‘But stop taking it until I get back to you, will you?’

From there I went to see Samuel Houghton, Harry Burrows and Gilly Parsons at the Duck and Puddle.

They were all taking aspirin from Peter Marshall’s shop.

I’d found the link.

I felt as proud as Sherlock Holmes at the conclusion of a difficult case. Except that I still didn’t know why the aspirin sold by Peter Marshall should be causing such a strange problem.

I carefully examined the packet which Harry Burrows had produced. It had been prepared and packaged in France and was undoubtedly something Peter had managed to import at a rather special price. But the pack wasn’t out-of-date and the aspirin tablets themselves hadn’t started to break down in the way tablets can when they are old.

But when I checked the packet I discovered that, in addition to the aspirin, the tablets contained sodium bicarbonate. The bicarbonate was there to help the tablets dissolve quickly. And there was enough sodium bicarbonate in the tablets to cause the alkalosis.

And the cramps.

‘What’s the problem?’ asked Mr Burrows.

‘It isn’t really a problem,’ I told him. ‘These aspirin tablets are really best taken occasionally – when you’ve got a headache, for example. They contain sodium bicarbonate to make them fizz when you put them in water and so when you take more than three or four in a day you might develop cramps.’

‘The aspirin is causing my cramps?’

I nodded.

‘But I often take aspirin,’ said Mr Burrows. ‘I’ve never had this problem before.’

‘I don’t mind betting that you’ve never taken this brand of aspirin before!’

‘No, that’s true,’ admitted Mr Burrows.

‘Put these in a cupboard and use them for headaches and other occasional aches and pains,’ I told him. ‘But for your arthritis take ordinary plain old soluble aspirin. It’ll be safer. It isn’t the aspirin that has caused your cramps - it’s something they’ve put in with the aspirin. You’ve taken so much sodium bicarbonate that it has caused a metabolic alkalosis - a fairly common cause of cramps.’

‘So do I have to stop taking aspirin?’

‘Just stop this brand,’ I told him again. ‘You can take ordinary soluble aspirin.’

I went round to the other patients and told them the same thing. They were as relieved as I was that the puzzle was solved.

And then I went to see Peter Marshall.

‘There’s nothing wrong with them, is there?’ he asked, clearly worried.

‘Nothing wrong with them at all,’ I reassured him. ‘But when you sell them to people make sure they know that they shouldn’t take them too often. No more than two a day. If they need a bigger dose then they should take ordinary soluble aspirin.’

Peter held up a packet of ordinary aspirin.

‘These?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘I won’t be selling any more of the French stuff. They were quite popular, and I got them very cheap from the wholesaler, but I’ve run out now and I won’t be ordering them again.’

‘That’s very public spirited of you!’ I told him. This was a new side to Peter. A caring, more thoughtful side than the one most people knew.

‘I don’t want my customers developing cramps,’ said Peter, rather spoiling his new caring image. ‘If they’ve got cramp they can’t get out and walk to my shop, can they?’

* * *

That evening I was having dinner when the front doorbell rang.

I was exhausted and tempted not to answer it. But a country GP doesn’t have that luxury. With a sigh I got up from the table and answered the door.

It was Frank Parsons, the landlord from the Duck and Puddle.

‘Come in, Frank!’ I said.

‘No thanks,’ he said. ‘I must get back. I just wanted to bring you this.’ He handed me an envelope. I looked at it. ‘What’s this?’

‘Just a small thank you for solving Gilly’s problem,’ said Frank, turning away and heading back for his car. Bilbury Grange isn’t far from the Duck and Puddle but Frank isn’t a great walker.

‘You don’t have to...’ I started. ‘This isn’t money is it?’

Frank, halfway into his car, looked up. ‘Don’t be daft,’ he said.

‘I wouldn’t give you money, would I?’

I smiled, as he drove out of the drive and headed back to the pub.

‘Who was that?’ asked Patsy, when I got back to the dining table.

‘Frank,’ I said. I held up the envelope. ‘He brought this.’

‘What is it?’

‘Dunno. Frank said it’s a thank you for sorting out Gilly’s problem. She was one of the patients suffering from aspirin induced cramps.’

‘Open it then.’

I opened the envelope and took out a scruffy piece of lilac notepaper which had been folded in two. I unfolded the paper.

Here is what was written on it:

Frank’s Recipe for Spiced Hot Toddy (Serving For One)

Three table spoonfuls of the best whisky you can find

One teaspoonful of honey

A squeeze of lemon juice
Three cloves
A teaspoonful of cinnamon
Half a slice of fresh orange
A pinch of nutmeg
Top up with boiling water
Stir with a cinnamon stick and serve in a Russian tea glass.

‘What on earth is it?’ asked Patsy.

‘It’s Frank’s recipe for hot toddy.’

‘My Dad’s been trying to get that recipe from him for twenty years,’ said Patsy. ‘That’s the biggest ‘thank you’ Frank could give you.’

‘I know,’ I said. ‘I’m honoured.’

I folded the paper once again, put it back in its envelope and slipped it into my jacket pocket.

Sometimes there are wonderful perks associated with being a country doctor.

CHAPTER 15

Spring burst into Bilbury like a man on a horse with an urgent message to deliver.

On Tuesday night we went to bed and said goodnight to a grey, cold world; the weary fag-end of an interminable, harsh winter which had long overstayed its welcome.

On Wednesday morning we awoke to what seemed to be an entirely different world. It was as though a benevolent and understanding god had lifted up Bilbury Grange and spirited it away to a land of sunshine and greenery. The greyness had gone and had been replaced with promises of summer months to come.

Looking out into the garden I saw buds bursting into life and birds singing light operetta. The rough lawn around the trees was studded with daffodils. Wordsworth would have been in ecstasy. Soon the birds would be building nests and the cherry blossom trees would be sprinkling the garden with nature's pink confetti.

And with Easter, the daffodils and the sunshine came the promise of the first visitors of the year to Bilbury Grange.

If you live somewhere pleasant then it is an unavoidable fact of life that friends, relatives, half-forgotten classmates, vague acquaintances and even people who don't like you very much, and from whom you hardly ever hear, will always want to come and stay with you.

Mortimer Gregory, a friend I'd known when we were both medical students (and who, therefore, fell into the half-forgotten classmates category) telephoned one evening to say that he and his family were driving down to Cornwall to stay in a cottage his wife's family had owned for years. I hadn't heard Mortimer's voice for years and when he told me who was calling I had difficulty reconciling the smooth sounding Mortimer Gregory who was on the telephone with the rough-edged Mortimer Gregory with whom I'd once shared a flat.

'Where are you? What are you doing? What's been happening to you?' I demanded, firing off questions in the way people do when they hear from someone they used to know well but haven't seen for years.

'I practice complimentary medicine,' he replied. 'Married. Two kids. Mortgage so big it makes my eyes water when I think about it.'

'You mean you're doing acupuncture and stuff like that?' I asked, surprised.

'Oh, good heavens, no!' laughed Mortimer. 'That's complementary medicine spelt with an 'e'. Load of rubbish. I mean I get up when patients come into my consulting room and I say 'Good morning Mrs Davenport, you're looking lovely today.' He laughed again. 'It makes them feel good about themselves and good about me. Basic principle of medicine for money.'

'You're in private practice?'

'Sort of. Officially I'm the youngest NHS consultant in the area but that doesn't take up much time. Just helps give me a bit of credibility and attracts the patients. I've got consulting rooms in a posh part of town. They cost me a fortune. And a posh receptionist whose daddy owns half of Cheshire, and who looks a bit like the horse she rides every weekend, but who sounds really classy when she answers the phone.'

I murmured something suitably appreciative. He didn't ask about me and so I didn't tell him anything.

'Anyway, we thought it would be nice if we could drop in and say 'hello',' he said. 'We're driving down from the north so we'd welcome a bit of a break.'

'Would you like to stay the night?' I asked, already knowing the answer before I asked the question. Bilbury is hardly on the direct route from the north of England to Cornwall but I hadn't succeeded in persuading myself that Mortimer wanted to make the detour just to see me. Staying with us would be considerably cheaper than finding hotel accommodation for the night.

'Gosh, that would be very decent of you,' said Mortimer, feigning surprise and doing it rather badly.

* * *

'You'll love him,' I told Patsy. 'He's quite a character. He and I once rented a tiny two-bedroomed cottage in the north of Scotland. We were going to spend a week walking round the Scottish countryside. Deer stalking, that sort of thing.'

'But you don't shoot?' said Patsy, surprised.

'Oh no, we weren't going to shoot anything. Just see if we could spot a deer. You know I've always been a great fan of the book *John MacNab* by John Buchan?'

Patsy nodded. She had grown to share my love of all things Buchan. *John MacNab*, not as well-known as The Thirty Nine Steps but in my view by far Buchan's best book, is a magnificent story of a politician, a banker and a lawyer who add missing zest to their lives by stalking deer and salmon on huge and magnificent Scottish estates. The book is, perhaps, most notable for its marvellously evocative descriptions of the wild Scottish Highlands.

'We got to the cottage late one night,' I told her, 'dumped our bags in the tiny hallway and went straight to bed.

We'd been driving in Mortimer's old van for fourteen hours. His van was a terrible wreck. I remember the steering wheel used to come off. If he had anyone new in the van Mortimer would remove the steering wheel and hand it to the passenger asking them if they wanted to drive for a while. There was a hole in the floor and you could see the road rushing by underneath.'

'We were woken up about two hours after we'd arrived by someone coming into the cottage. It turned out that the person who owned it had made a mistake and had double booked the place. The result was that we found ourselves sharing the cottage with a couple from Basildon. They had two fast developing teenage daughters.

Since the cottage really was in the middle of nowhere, and there was absolutely nowhere else for any of us to move to, we decided to divide up the cottage. The family from Basildon had the upstairs and the living room and we had one room downstairs. We shared the bathroom and the kitchen. When they found out that we were medical students they built a barrier at the top of the stairs to protect their daughters. In fact although we were there for a week we didn't see either of the daughters at all after that first night.'

'Wise parents,' said Patsy.

I ignored the remark and continued. 'The father was a fisherman. He went out every day and every night he came back with a variety of fish. He always pretended he'd caught them himself. But we were driving near a small bay one day when we spotted him buying a dozen mackerel from a travelling fishmonger selling out of the back of a scruffy Ford van. He didn't see us. When he came back that night he showed us the twelve mackerel he'd caught.'

'Did you tell him that you knew he'd bought them and not caught them?'

'Oh no! The guy was a complete prat but we wouldn't have embarrassed him.'

'How many of them are coming?' asked Patsy when I'd finished telling her the story of my Scottish adventure with Mortimer.

'Just Mortimer, his wife and their two boys,' I said. 'And they'll only be here for one night.'

'That's fine,' said Patsy. 'I can get the two spare bedrooms at the back of the house ready for them.'

The one thing we weren't short of in Bilbury Grange was space and I found myself looking forward to Mortimer's visit.

CHAPTER 16

The last person I saw in the surgery the next morning unwittingly reminded me that in every practice there are some patients who are, for want of a better description, usually referred to as in dog Latin as being ‘dolor gluteus maximus’. Roughly translated this egregious piece of Latin nonsense denotes patients who are ‘a pain in the backside’.

Lieutenant Colonel Harper was a pompous and humourless man who suffered from what Patsy and I described as ‘irritable person syndrome’. He was, without a shadow of a doubt, a pain in the backside.

His one redeeming feature was his loyalty to his wife. The Colonel was a widower and still wore a black tie every day even though his wife had been dead for nineteen years.

‘She said she chose a military man because she wanted a husband who could cook, sew and make the bed,’ he used to say, occasionally adding that she had also told him that she thought that military men were better suited to marriage because they were accustomed to taking orders.

He had a nose like a vulture’s beak and an exaggerated limp which he said was the result of an old rugby injury but which was, as I alone knew, a consequence of a large bunion on his left foot. A ‘recurrence of an old sporting injury’ sounds rather romantic and is always good for a few oohs and aahs of sympathy in the pub. A bunion, on the other hand, is likely only to attract sniggers since it is the sort of health problem usually associated with women who have, through vanity, chosen to compress their feet into narrow, high-heeled shoes. I think the Colonel might have feigned a war injury if he’d known enough about wars to create a believable story. He had, however, spent his entire military career at an army camp in northern England and was, therefore, a military man without either a fund of old war stories or an old wound and I suppose he felt he needed something to give himself an aura of manly respectability. His military career had been spent supervising the maintenance of military vehicles. I don’t think he’d ever travelled more than twenty miles away from the camp on army business.

I obviously didn’t mind the nose and I didn’t much mind his minor deceit with the bunion.

But what did sometimes get under my skin was the fact that the Colonel was one of those people whose problems are always worse, much worse, than anyone else’s. Tell him that you had broken your leg and he would tell you that he had once broken two at once – both compound fractures. Tell him that you were feeling under the weather with the flu and he would insist on telling you lengthy stories about the many usually fatal illnesses he had succeeded in overcoming. Tell him that you had just got back from a trip abroad and you’d spent an hour and a half fighting your way through overofficious customs officials and he’d insist on topping your story with an account of how he’d once spent half a day trying to find a piece of missing army paperwork for a faulty tank.

He was, to be honest with you, an extraordinarily easy man to dislike. Even my wife Patsy, who was the most tolerant of women, had confessed that she found him rather difficult to stomach. If this made him sound like a fatty meat pie then the analogy was well founded because that’s exactly what he looked like.

‘I’ve got a brain tumour,’ he told me, lurching into the surgery and collapsing into a chair.

‘What makes you say that?’ I asked.

‘Dizzy,’ he said. He reached out and grabbed hold of the edge of my desk. ‘It feels like I’m on a ship.’

‘Are you getting headaches?’

‘No.’

‘Any other symptoms?’

‘No.’

‘Just dizzy?’

‘Isn’t that enough?’ he demanded. ‘I keep falling over. People think I’m drunk.’

I examined him, peered into his ears and did some simple tests.

‘You’ve got labyrinthitis,’ I told him eventually. I wrote out a prescription. ‘Fortunately, it’s quite mild.’

‘No brain tumour?’

‘No sign at all of a brain tumour.’

‘What’s the prescription for?’ he demanded. He didn’t seem in the slightest bit relieved by my diagnosis.

‘A course of antibiotics and some tablets that should help relieve the dizziness,’ I told him. ‘Have you got someone who can go to the chemists for you?’

‘No. I’ll go myself,’ he said.

‘How did you get here?’ I asked.

‘Drove myself in the Bentley. 1956 S1. Best car ever made.’

‘A friend of mine at medical school had one of those,’ I told him. ‘Bought it at an auction. He lived in it for a week when he was thrown out of his flat.’

‘Why was he thrown out of his flat?’

‘He hadn’t paid the rent. Said he couldn’t afford to keep the Bentley on the road and pay rent.’

The Colonel snorted. I couldn’t tell whether it was a snort of approval or disapproval. ‘Beautiful cars. Mine has the two-speed windscreen wipers,’ he said. ‘First model to have them.’

‘You shouldn’t be driving anything,’ I told him. ‘I’ll drive you home.’ I picked up the prescription, tore it in half and threw it into the waste bin. Then I stood up, opened a cupboard behind me and took out two packets of tablets. I wrote out two labels, stuck the labels on the packets and handed them to him.

‘What are these?’ he demanded.

‘Medicines. It’ll save you going to the chemist,’ I told him.

‘What do I owe you?’ I told him.

‘Is that all?’

‘I can charge you more if you like.’

He glowered at me, pulled out a handful of change, picked out the right money and put it on the desk.

Much to his disapproval I made him sit in the waiting room until I’d finished dealing with the messages Miss Johnson had accumulated during the surgery and then I put my bicycle into his car boot and drove him home. He lived in a large cottage set so far back from the road that I’d never noticed it before.

There was a horseshoe pinned up over the front door. He saw me looking at it as I escorted him from the car into the house.

‘I’m told you don’t have to believe in it for it to work,’ he said rather gruffly. ‘Can’t do any harm anyway.’

‘It would do you plenty of harm if it fell on your head,’ I said. He smiled at that.

‘Just rest for a few days,’ I told him.

‘There is one thing,’ he said. ‘Do you have a minute before you go?’

‘Literally just a minute or so,’ I told him. ‘I must get back.’

‘Do you need a pee?’

I was startled at this. ‘I can hang on until I get back to the Grange.’

‘Take my arm and walk with me, doctor,’ he said.

Together we staggered around the side of the house and into a well-looked after back garden. There was a large, neatly mown lawn and several extensive rose beds. Something had been digging up the lawn.

‘Moles?’ I asked.

He shook his head. ‘Badgers,’ he said.

‘Ah. I know who to recommend for moles but I’m afraid I don’t know anything about getting rid of badgers.’

‘I do,’ said the Colonel. He let go of my arm, unzipped his trousers and started to urinate. ‘Just pee where you’re standing, doctor, if you don’t mind.’

I stared at him, wondering if my diagnosis of labyrinthitis was right, after all.

‘Badgers are wonderful creatures,’ he said. ‘Love em to bits. But they dig worms and burrowing bumblebees and cranefly larvae out of the lawn and they make a hell of a mess.’

‘So I can see,’ I agreed, looking around.

‘The one thing that keeps them away is the smell of male pee,’ he said. ‘Has to be male pee. The female variety doesn’t work.’

I was beginning to understand.

‘So if you would just pee on the lawn for me it would help enormously,’ said the Colonel.

Feeling rather self-conscious and hoping that none of his neighbours chose this moment to pop round to borrow a cupful of sugar, I did my bit to help keep the badgers off the Colonel’s lawn.

CHAPTER 17

As I drove to my first home visit I found myself remembering my days at medical school.

I know people who spend their adult lives reminiscing about their days at school or university, and whose lives are defined by their scholarly and sporting achievements during those days of learning.

In contrast, I've never been terribly keen on holding onto those days. I had turned down an invitation to attend a medical school reunion without a moment's hesitation. But Mortimer's telephone call had, inevitably, brought back a host of half-forgotten memories.

The things I remembered in greatest detail were the odd, almost irrelevant, moments.

The haematology lecturer who was so genuinely absentminded that he regularly arrived at lectures an hour late and who, on one memorable occasion, wore two ties at the same time. We were mesmerised by this and I don't think any of us heard or remembered much of what he said. I don't think this mattered very much. I do remember that he spoke only about immensely rare blood diseases and never even mentioned disorders such as anaemia or leukaemia.

I remembered that our ophthalmology course (which lasted half a day) was inexplicably scheduled for the same time as our half day dental course. Since it was easy to avoid both by pretending to be at the other we all succumbed to temptation and took an unofficial half day holiday. Sitting in a cafe in the city someone pointed out that if we ever qualified as doctors we would be legally entitled to practice as dentists even though we had never spent one second studying dentistry. I never did find out if it is true that doctors can practise dentistry but several people have insisted that it is.

Five of us spent a whole year dissecting an old lady and learned the name and location of every vein, artery, nerve, muscle, bone and tendon in her body. Most of this I forgot within 48 hours of the examination I took. Today I doubt if I can remember 1% of the details I learned in anatomy. I never knew the old lady's name but in a macabre sort of way it is, I suppose, true to say that I knew her more intimately than I have ever known anyone.

I remembered the multiple choice examination we were given. Such devices were new at the time and the lecturers who had set the exam had devised a format which meant that many marks were deducted for wrong answers. It seemed to me that the best policy was to hand in an entirely empty sheet. I came top of 120 students with a final score of nought and incurred the wrath of the lecturers who had set the examination. They complained that I hadn't entered into the examination in the proper spirit. I replied that I didn't realise that there was a 'proper spirit' for taking examinations and that I had assumed that the sole aim was to obtain the highest possible mark. I claimed that I had shown initiative and eventually this was grudgingly accepted.

I remembered sharing a flat with Mortimer and three other medical students.

It was a huge flat and we couldn't afford heating. Mortimer claimed it was so cold that he could clean his teeth without moving the brush. The rent was cheap but the flat was several miles from the hospital and medical school and several miles out of town. One Saturday night Mortimer had missed the last bus home and so he walked into the local bus station, climbed into an empty bus and drove it home. No one tried to stop him. He left the bus parked outside our flat. ('What else could I have done with it?' he asked later.

'There wasn't any point in driving it back to the garage and buses are tricky things to hide.') When he was called to see the medical school dean he explained that the buses had stopped running and that he didn't have enough money for a taxi home. The dean had accepted this explanation and had, somehow, settled things with the police and the bus company.

I remembered my first house job. My consultant invited all his junior doctors to have dinner with him. A friend of mine who was invited took a bottle of wine. He couldn't afford anything decent and picked up the cheapest bottle the local off-licence had on offer. The consultant's wife opened the bottle and put it on the table. The consultant examined the label with some suspicion and then poured himself a sample. After spluttering and spitting the wine back into his glass he glowered at his wife. 'Where did you pick up this muck?' he demanded. 'Our guest brought it,' she replied without a pause. After a few embarrassing moments they poured the wine into a saucepan, added sugar, cloves, slices of orange and cinnamon and turned it into a very acceptable hot toddy.

I remembered working on a surgical ward. Every Sunday evening a patient died in the same bed in the intensive care unit. No one knew why. Eventually, I made the diagnosis. It didn't require any medical knowledge. I happened to be in the unit one Sunday and I watched in horror as a cleaner entered the ward, pulled out the life support system plug, and put her floor polisher into the vacant socket. I dashed across and switched the plugs back. It turned out that she had been allowing her polisher to whirr away for a few minutes every Sunday. When she was finished she put the life support system plug back into the socket and left the intensive care unit unaware that she'd just killed someone.

Remembering all this I nearly missed my next turning. I slammed on the brakes, slowed down and turned left onto a deeply rutted track. I then headed south towards Tarrydown Woods where the first patient on my morning call sheet lived on a small farm. As I turned the car down the track so the skies went grey. Moments later the rain started.

Many of the metalled roads in Bilbury are only wide enough for single traffic and have grass growing through the tarmacadam in the middle, but we still call them 'roads' rather than 'tracks'. In Bilbury a 'track' is something that is really only suitable for a tractor. When the ruts are particularly deep it is useless to try to drive with the car wheels in the ruts. If you do that then the exhaust pipe, number plates and other bits and pieces near to the ground will be torn off the car, even at agonisingly slow speeds. The only safe way to drive down them is to put the nearside wheels on the ridge in the centre of the track and the offside wheels on the edge of the bank on the right hand side of the track. (You could put the offside wheels on the ridge and the nearside wheels on the other bank, but if you did that then you would be less likely to spot dangerous obstructions in the bank.) Hoping that no one had dumped anything too solid on the bank, and that any drainage ditches cut into the bank weren't too deep, I gingerly made my way down the track, eventually managing to park in a small courtyard, alongside an elderly and extremely battered old tractor. A rather sorry looking farmhouse lay on one side of the courtyard and barns and stables made up most of the other three sides. The usual bits and pieces of rusting farmyard detritus proved that this was a working farm. Even with his car doors and windows shut a townie would have known that the owner of the property kept pigs. By now the rain was coming down fast and the sky was black.

The patient I was visiting was called Lydeard Lawrence and I'd never met him before, though I'd heard about him. Even in Bilbury, Mr Lawrence (I don't think anyone ever called him Lydeard) was known to be both rather eccentric and rather reclusive. He had never been further than Barnstaple in his whole life. He had, so Patchy Fogg insisted, only ever made one visit there. That had been back in the 1950's and the shock of the hustle and bustle had convinced him that big city life was not for him. Thumper once told me that Mr Lawrence came from stem stock. His father had worked on a farm in Ilfracombe and had walked there from Bilbury every morning and had walked home again every evening. The round trip each day must have been over twenty five miles. When he hit his seventieth birthday Mr Lawrence senior took a job in Combe Martin because the journey was shorter.

Both father and son were, said Thumper, the sort of countrymen who would hand plough six acres and milk twenty four cows before breakfast, plant four bushels of seed between breakfast and lunch, walk a flock of sheep to market in the afternoon and milk the cows again in the evening. At the end of the day they would regard themselves as having had a day off.

Someone, I wasn't sure who, had telephoned the house while I was having my breakfast, spoken to Patsy and asked her to arrange for me to call in and see Mr Lawrence. It was amazing how quickly word had got around that Bilbury had its own doctor again.

I don't know whether it was because the dogs hadn't heard me arrive, or because they were craftily waiting for me to get away from the safety of my vehicle before they showed themselves but I was stranded ten or twelve feet from the car when the two Alsatians appeared. They bore little resemblance to the sort of dogs of that breed which can be seen walking along the pavements of our towns and cities. These were the scariest looking dogs I'd ever seen. Their coats were shaggy and unkempt and their eyes wild. Their teeth seemed more like fangs.

I've always been nervous about dogs and I've been bitten enough times to feel satisfied that my nervousness is a useful form of selfpreservation rather than a phobia of some kind. Dog owners usually make things worse by saying things like 'he only bites if he can tell you're nervous' or, worse still, 'don't worry, he doesn't bite'.

The first of these remarks simply adds to my anxiety and, therefore, the risk of my being bitten. The second remark (which may well be a lie, of course) means, at best, that the dog hasn't yet bitten anyone. Whenever I hear this I am always conscious of the fact that all dogs who bite have never bitten anyone before they do so for the first time.

Over the years I've been given masses of advice from wellmeaning dog owners. Some say that a dog won't bite if you keep quite still. Some suggest walking away as quickly as you can without actually running. A few claim that you should crouch down, make yourself look like a big dog and then bark and growl. All this conflicting advice means that I never know what to do except cower, whimper and panic.

'Who's there?' called someone from deep inside a barn to my right. The question was followed by a loud grunt.

'The doctor!' I called back. 'Could you call your dogs, please?'

'Adolf!' yelled the voice. 'Hermann!' There was then another grunt.

The two dogs, which had looked to me as if they were trying to decide which bit of my flesh to eat first, pricked their ears and turned in the direction of the voice. From the fact that the delay in their response matched the delay between the two names I thought it safe to assume that the two dogs were called Adolf and Hermann. Knowing their names didn't make me feel any better.

The voice called again, this time adding 'Come here you buggers!' Every few words were punctuated by grunts.

The two dogs turned and trotted into the barn.

'Follow the dogs!' called the voice. Reluctantly, I did as I was told.

It was dark inside the barn and after walking through the open doorway I stood still for a few moments, allowing my pupils to enlarge and my vision to develop a little. Gradually I could see that the barn was divided up by wooden planked walls into a number of stalls. Some of these were filled with stacks of hay and straw. I could see no sign of any living creature.

'Over here!' called the voice. There was, inevitably it now seemed, another grunt.

Gingerly, I walked towards the sound. The floor of the barn was covered with straw which needed changing. The straw was so wet that every footstep made an unpleasant squelching sound. My wellington boots were, of course, still in the car boot. Eventually, I reached the wooden partition from behind which the sound seemed to have come. I peered over the partition.

On the other side of the wooden planking lay about a dozen piglets in a large nest made out of bales of straw. Lying alongside them was a human figure dressed in an old blue boiler suit. In addition to the boiler suit he wore wellington boots and a very battered brown trilby hat. Adolf and Hermann were sitting at attention just a couple of feet away from his head. The man was holding glass feeding bottles in each hand and had a third bottle tucked between his thighs. Three of the piglets were sucking greedily at the teats. Every ten or fifteen seconds the man made a loud grunting sound. It was one of the strangest sights I'd ever seen.

'Mr Lawrence?' I asked.

'That's me.'

'Are you all right?'

'The sow up and died just after giving birth,' explained Mr Lawrence. 'The little ones will only take the milk if they think I'm their mother.' He pulled a half empty bottle from one piglet and offered it to another who took it greedily.

'And the grunts are to help convince them that you're their mother?'

Mr Lawrence didn't answer but just grunted.

I stood and watched this extraordinary scene for ten or fifteen minutes. Eventually, Mr Lawrence dropped the now empty bottles onto the hay and rolled over onto his back. One of the piglets jumped up onto his chest. Mr Lawrence brushed it off as if it were a troublesome kitten.

'Give us a hand will you,' he said.

I clambered over the wooden fence, keeping a careful eye on the two dogs, bent down and helped Mr Lawrence to his feet. Or, rather, helped him half way to his feet. This took some time and was accompanied by a good many oohs and aarrhs and ouches. When he was eventually standing he was bent double, with his top half horizontal to the floor.

'I can't straighten up,' he complained.

'How long have you been like this?' I asked.

'Four or five days.'

'How long have you been feeding the piglets?'

'Same time.'

'I think there might be a link,' I told him.

He turned his head (it wasn't as easy as it should have been) and glared at me. 'You being funny?'

'No, no!' I said quickly.

'Take my arm,' he said. 'We'll go into the house.'

I moved forwards to take his arm. The two dogs growled menacingly and edged closer to me. One of them (I couldn't tell whether it was Adolf or Hermann) bared his yellowing teeth to show me what I could expect if I hurt his master.

The four of us then edged slowly out of the barn, across a muddy courtyard and into a small farmhouse. As we moved into the kitchen the farmer kicked the door to behind us, shutting the dogs out. They barked and growled on the other side of the door. The kitchen was quite large and was furnished with a huge old Welsh dresser, a large pine table and four pine chairs. There was a large white sink under the only window. The sink was served by a single, presumably cold, tap. The glass in the small window was so dirty that it was difficult to see anything.

'Where's the light switch?' I asked, after having helped Mr Lawrence into one of the chairs.

He turned, with some difficulty, and looked at me. 'What do you want light for?'

'It's a bit dark in here,' I explained. 'I can't see to examine you properly.'

'I don't have the mains,' said Mr Lawrence. 'You need to pedal.' He nodded towards an elderly bicycle which was fixed into a strange contraption which kept the rear wheels off the ground.

I looked at the bicycle, wondering why my riding an exercise bicycle would help produce some light.

'The bicycle powers the light bulb,' explained Mr Lawrence. 'Climb on the saddle and pedal away.'

I put my bag down on the table, climbed onto the bicycle and started pedalling. It wasn’t easy to get the bicycle going but slowly a glow appeared as a light bulb hanging down from the kitchen ceiling acquired some colour. The frame on which the back wheel was balancing wobbled alarmingly.

‘Is this your only source of electricity?’ I asked him, beginning to feel warm.

‘It is,’ he replied. ‘And it’s free and it doesn’t break down when the wind blows.’ He looked at me. ‘And it keeps me warm too.’

And so I sat on the bicycle and pedalled while Mr Lawrence eased off his shirt and pointed to the places where the pain was at its worst. It wasn’t quite the way I’d been taught to practise medicine but it was the best I could manage. A physical examination was, of course, impossible because the moment I stopped pedalling the light would go out and while I was pedalling I couldn’t examine him. I gave him a small bottle of anti-inflammatory painkillers which I had in my bag and told him to take two tablets every four hours. He said he would and I thought he would. The tablets were huge and dark red and looked extremely potent. I scribbled out a prescription for more of the tablets. I also told him not to lie down in cold, wet straw beside the piglets. I was less convinced that he would obey that suggestion.

‘Have you got someone who can get your pills?’ I asked him.

‘My sister calls in to tidy up,’ said Mr Lawrence. ‘She’ll get them.’

When I’d finished I climbed off the bicycle and helped him put his clothes on. I promised that I’d go back and see how he was getting on.

* * *

By the time I left Mr Lawrence’s cottage it was nearly half past one and I decided to go back to Bilbury Grange to grab some lunch before completing the remainder of the day’s calls. It was still pouring with rain and the track back up the main road had become a small river.

When I finally got back home it was after two o’clock. It had taken me nearly an hour to do a journey which normally took less than fifteen minutes.

A Volvo estate car was parked in the driveway, almost blocking the entrance. If whoever had left it had done so intending to cause the greatest possible inconvenience they had been entirely successful.

It didn’t for a moment occur to me that the car might belong to Mortimer. The last time I’d seen him he had been driving a souped up Austin Healey. He’d drilled holes in the exhaust pipe so that it sounded like a racing car.

I just managed to cram my Morris Minor into the driveway. By the time I’d made my way to the house I was soaked. Cold, wet and hungry I was not in the best of moods.

Naturally, the rain stopped and the sun came out again the minute I walked into the house.

CHAPTER 18

‘Your friends are here,’ said Patsy. I could tell from her smile that she was struggling a little. We had met in the kitchen. Mortimer and his family were nowhere to be seen.

‘Are you OK?’ I asked, quietly.

‘Oh yes,’ she said. But I knew she wasn’t. I could hear what sounded like the smashing of china. We looked at each other. ‘I left them in the living room,’ said Patsy. Her voice seemed thin and strained but there wasn’t time to talk more. She led the way and I followed.

I hardly recognised Mortimer.

He had changed enormously from the rather scruffy, long-haired medical student I remembered.

The Mortimer I’d known had worn horn-rimmed spectacles, garish shirts with long collars, huge ‘kipper’ ties, cowboy boots with huge heels and green corduroy trousers held up with a leather belt which fastened with a huge silver clasp designed to look like a skull. His hair had always fallen over his eyes and he had, I remembered, always had a rather lopsided, sheepish grin.

The new, well-polished and presumably much improved version of Mortimer wore no spectacles (they had, I discovered later, been replaced by contact lenses), a pair of beige slacks, a cream shirt and a pair of highly polished brown brogues. He had a pale yellow cashmere sweater draped around his shoulders, with the arms knotted loosely at the front in the French style. His hair, which looked to be thinning, was expensively cut and neatly combed. He looked like an advertisement for something unreasonably expensive.

There were three people with him.

The woman I assumed to be his wife was tall, extremely thin and blonde. She wore a dark green hip hugging skirt, a lighter green blouse and green high-heeled shoes. She had a string of pearls around her neck and wore pearl earrings. She was standing and clutching a small, green leather handbag.

The two boys, obviously Mortimer’s sons, were fighting and had tipped over a small wooden table. The tray, teacups, saucers, plates and cake which Patsy had put on the table were spread over the carpet. The table had a broken leg. Neither the boys nor their parents seemed concerned by this.

‘Good to see you!’ said Mortimer, holding out a hand. I took it and received a limp, rather half-hearted handshake. ‘We’ve met your wife, Patsy.’

‘Sorry I wasn’t here when you arrived,’ I apologised.

‘My wife,’ said Mortimer, waving a hand in the appropriate direction. He didn’t ask where I’d been or what I’d been doing.

‘Lovely to meet you. The last time I saw Mortimer,’ I told her, ‘he’d just started going out with a large nurse called Clarice.’

I was about to add that Clarice had been hideously bad-tempered, so huge that she must have weighed fifteen stone in her underwear and had a laugh like a drain emptying. I would have completed this pointless and hazardous monologue by adding that I could never work out why Mortimer went out with her and that it was a relief that he didn’t marry her.

But I never actually said any of this because everyone’s attention was on the two boys who had rolled into a small, antique oak table which Patsy’s parents had given us as a wedding present. Realising that the table was about to tip over I reached over them and lifted it up. By then I had temporarily forgotten what I had been about to say.

‘I’m Clarice.’ said Mortimer’s wife, introducing herself.

I felt myself reddening. ‘Amazing coincidence,’ I said, putting the table down. It was heavier than it looked. Both the table and I had a narrow escape.

‘I went on a diet and lost a lot of weight,’ she said. She allowed herself a rather ghostly imitation of a smile. I shook hands with her. Or, rather, she allowed the tips of her fingers to touch mine.

‘The boy on top is my son Spotty,’ said Mortimer, ignoring my gaffe and nodding towards the two boys writhing on the floor. ‘His real name is Dick but he had measles when he was five so naturally we called him Spotted Dick. The name Spotty has just sort of stuck. And the one underneath with his foot up against your television set is Rupert. The boys both suffer from hyperactivity,’ he said, as though in explanation. ‘Nothing much can be done about it, of course.’

‘Hello Spotty,’ I said. ‘Hello Rupert.’ The boy on top looked me up and down as though deciding whether to answer. He obviously decided against the idea for he said nothing. The youngest boy seemed to reach the same conclusion without any discernible effort.

‘You’d better stop that for now,’ said Mortimer. The boys ignored him.

‘Stop it,’ snarled Clarice. I turned, astonished. It was strange to hear such a powerful and venomous voice come out of such a thin and delicate looking woman. The boys stopped fighting and clambered to their feet.

‘My dad’s car is posher than your car,’ said Spotty. ‘I expect he earns more than you do.’

‘He almost certainly does,’ I agreed.

‘We saw you park your car,’ said Rupert. ‘It looks as if it’s covered in mud.’

‘Actually most of it is slurry,’ I confessed. ‘It smells terrible. But when we go to Barnstaple or Exeter it’s easy to find. We just sniff and head towards the smell.’

‘Yuk,’ said Spotty, screwing up his nose.

‘I thought you were supposed to be a doctor?’ said Rupert.

‘Er, I am,’ I told him.

‘My Dad’s a doctor and he’s got a Volvo Estate. If you’re a doctor why are you driving a rubbishy old Morris Minor?’

‘Maybe it’s what he wants to drive,’ suggested Mortimer.

‘Not all doctors earn as much money as Daddy does,’ said Clarice.

* * *

I had hoped that Mortimer and I could reminisce about our student days together.

‘Do you remember when we had a pal who was secretary of a Hall of Residence?’ I asked him. ‘At the end of one summer term he decided that he ought to empty the bar. He said he thought that the opened bottles of spirits would go off if we left them where they were. He got a few of us to go and help him. He was adamant that alcohol deteriorates dangerously if left unattended. The six of us emptied the entire booze cupboard. I wonder what on earth happened to those other three guys?’

‘Richard is a consultant surgeon in Glasgow, Anthony is a consultant anaesthetist in the RAF and Peter is a consultant radiologist. I’ve rather lost touch with him. The chap who was secretary of the Hall of Residence was struck off two years ago for some sort of prescription fraud.’

‘Do you remember we once shared a room when we were doing our maternity work. You woke up in the middle of the night screaming? You’d had a nightmare. I remember you said you’d been told that you needed a brain transplant and that the only organ available belonged to Prince Philip.’

‘I don’t remember that,’ said Mortimer, after glancing in his wife’s direction.

‘Then there was that time we went on a coach trip to a mental hospital. You sat next to the emergency window and noticed that it said ‘In emergency break glass with hammer’.’ I reminded him. ‘No one on the coach had a hammer and you made the driver stop at every shop we passed until you managed to buy a hammer.’

‘I think that must have been someone else,’ insisted Mortimer.

‘No, it was you!’ I insisted. ‘And you must remember that posh, middle aged woman you admitted when you were working on the hospital’s private wing?’

Mortimer frowned and shook his head.

‘You asked her if she had hot flushes.’ Mortimer shook his head again.

‘She said ‘Oh no, we use cold water like ordinary people’.’

‘I think you must be exaggerating,’ said Mortimer.

‘Then there was the time that three of us were working in a general hospital in Selly Oak. The other bloke was a real nerdy type. Bruce I think his name was. When he went to bed at night he always laid all his clothes out very neatly so that in an emergency he could be dressed in seconds. He used to position his shoes very precisely so that he could slide his feet into them the moment he got out of bed. He told us he kept his socks on, I remember.’

Mortimer shook his head. ‘I don’t remember any of this,’ he said.

‘Oh you must!’ I insisted. ‘Bert Whatsisname went into his room one night and glued Bruce’s shoes in position – the whole hospital had awful green linoleum on the floor – so that when he leapt out of bed and put his feet into his shoes his body kept moving but his feet didn’t. He smashed his head into the door. Bert was the duty surgeon and he put six stitches into Bruce’s forehead. I had a card from Bert a year or two ago. He was working as a proctologist in Sunderland.’

Mortimer didn’t seem to remember many of the things I remembered. The few he recalled seemed to have happened quite differently to the way I remembered them. I began to wonder if we’d ever known each other at all.

I was enormously relieved when the surgery doorbell went. ‘A patient,’ I apologised. ‘I shouldn’t be long.’

‘How on earth do you know it’s a patient?’ asked Mortimer.

‘The door to the surgery, the door patients use, has a different bell,’ I explained. ‘It bing bongs. The bell on the front door goes more ding ding.’

‘Oh I think I’d have them the other way round,’ said Clarice. ‘I think I’d prefer the ding ding for patients.’

I headed for the surgery.

‘Do you mind if I come with you?’ asked Mortimer. ‘Be interesting to take a look at how a country GP operates.’

I hesitated before nodding. I really didn't fancy the idea of him breathing over my shoulder.

'I'm sorry to bother you doctor.' It was Tom Kipple. He works as a farm labourer. 'I've cut myself. The wife tried putting a plaster on it.' He shrugged and grinned. He held out his arm. It was wrapped in a blood soaked towel. I explained to Tom that Mortimer was another doctor and asked him if he minded if he stayed. He said he didn't.

'How on earth did you do this?' I asked. Tom had a long, savage looking gash in his forearm. At its deepest it was half an inch deep. I could see bone.'

'Clearing a hedge,' he said. 'Bit of old tractor.'

'Rusty?'

He nodded.

'Did Sally bring you?' Sally was his wife. Another nod.

'Where is she?'

'Sitting out in the car waiting for me.'

'Why didn't she come in?'

'Shy. She saw the Volvo and guessed you must have visitors.'

'Is she OK there?'

He nodded. 'Happier in the car,' he said. 'She'll drive me home afterwards.'

'When did you last have a tetanus injection?'

He thought for a moment. 'Four, five years ago,' he said. 'I cut myself mending the tractor. Hand and thigh. Thirty two stitches altogether. You done 'em for me. Neat job. I had a full course of jabs after.'

'Good. I'll give you a booster jab when I've cleaned this up,' I told him.

He nodded.

'Aren't you calling an ambulance?' asked Mortimer, clearly appalled. 'This man needs hospital attention.'

'He needs sewing up,' I said. 'It'll take an hour for an ambulance to get here and another hour for the ambulance to get him to the hospital. It's a bouncy, twisty, unpleasant road in a car, let alone in an ambulance. Then he'll have to wait for someone to see him. When they've finished with him he'll have to find his own way back here unless his wife follows the ambulance and if she does that she'll need to find a babysitter first. If his wife can't find a babysitter he'll be there all night if he hasn't bled to death or died of boredom.'

'He should still be seen in a hospital,' said Mortimer, rather less sure of himself

'Do you want me to send you to the hospital?' I asked Tom.

'No thank you, doctor. I'd rather you did it for me.' He paused and looked at me. 'Much rather you did it than some doctor I don't know.' He grinned broadly. Most of his front teeth were missing. He had a denture but I'd never seen him wear it. He kept it in a drawer in the bedroom for special occasions. 'Sam Houghton put eight stitches in his own leg last year,' he told me. 'Cut himself on barbed wire. Own silly fault.'

'Why on earth did he do that?' asked Mortimer. 'Sew himself up?'

'We didn't have a doctor in the village then,' explained Tom. 'It was in the middle of harvesting. He didn't have the time to waste.'

'But what did he use to sew himself up?'

'Same stuff as he uses for the cows, of course,' said Tom. Mortimer said nothing.

'Do you want me to give you an anaesthetic?' I asked him.

He shook his head.

'He needs something,' said Mortimer. 'Valium?'

'Nothing, thank you,' said Tom. He spoke to me. I cut off the remains of his shirt, cleaned up his arm and carefully removed all the dirt from the wound.

'You're taking a lot of time over cleaning that wound,' muttered Mortimer.

'Tom works on a farm,' I reminded him. 'Billions of tetanus spores. If I leave any dirt in the wound the spores will grow even though he's immunised. I once saw a farm labourer who'd been to the hospital after he broke his leg. Compound fracture. The doctors set the bones but failed to clean them out properly. He nearly died of tetanus. In the end they had to re-break his leg and clean out the bone.' As I talked I cleaned, working as fast as I could to minimise the blood loss.

'There you are,' I said at last. 'Now we can sew you up.'

'Good heavens,' murmured Mortimer quietly.

I sewed up the wound as neatly as I could and then gave him a tetanus injection.' Don't suppose Sally will want the shirt or the towel back?' I said when I'd finished.

'Don't think so, doctor,' said Tom, grinning.

I tossed the shirt and towel into my rubbish bin. 'I'll get you an old coat to go home in,' I told him. I popped out for a moment, found an old sports jacket hanging in the hall and took it back to him.

‘I’ll bring it back round in the morning,’ he promised. I went outside with him, said hello and goodnight to his wife and then went back into the house. Sophie the cat followed me in. She had clearly been rolling in something exceedingly unpleasant. Her fur was matted and she smelt disgusting. Naturally, she leapt straight up onto my shoulders and started to rub herself against the back of my head. Gently, I plucked her off, cleaned her off as best as I could with a towel and then deposited her in her basket. She purred contentedly and started to clean off the remains of whatever it had been. I was glad I didn’t know. I wiped my neck and the back of my head with a handkerchief

‘Do you get this sort of thing a lot?’ asked Clarice, when I returned. Mortimer had found his way back to the dining room while I’d been dealing with Sophie.

‘What sort of thing?’

‘Patients troubling you in the evenings?’

‘It happens.’

‘How many nights a week are you on call?’

‘All of them.’

‘Yuk. You smell horrid,’ said Rupert suddenly.

‘It was the cat’s fault,’ I said.

‘Every night?’ continued Clarice, ignoring her son. ‘Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday...all of them?’

‘There are no other doctors around here,’ I said. ‘No one close enough to organise a rota with.’

‘And weekends?’ I nodded.

‘Oh how absolutely awful!’ said Clarice.

‘It’s what being a village doctor means,’ I said.

‘Why don’t you charge extra for sewing people up?’ asked Mortimer. ‘You don’t have to do it.’

I looked at him, horrified.

‘We’d better eat,’ said Patsy, diplomatically changing the subject quickly. ‘Or dinner will be ruined.’

* * *

‘That was very nice,’ said Clarice, pushing away her plate. She’d hardly touched anything. ‘But where on earth do you manage to buy such wonderful vegetables? You’re miles out in the middle of nowhere!’

‘We don’t buy our vegetables,’ replied Patsy. ‘We grow them.’

Clarice looked astonished. ‘Oh darling Patsy how wonderful that is! You mean to say that you actually put seeds into the ground and then harvest your very own cabbages and potatoes?’

‘Something like that,’ agreed Patsy, standing up and starting to clear away the plates. I stood to help her.

‘How marvellous. You’re like those self-sufficient people we see on the television sometimes,’ said Mortimer. ‘What a great way to save money.’

I started to say that we didn’t grow our own vegetables to save money but because we wanted better vegetables, but Mortimer wasn’t interested.

‘Here’s a little tip for you,’ he said, holding up a hand to silence me. ‘It’ll save you a few pence when you next go travelling. A patient of mine told me about it but we prefer eating at hotels. You wrap some salmon fillets or pieces of chicken in aluminium foil and wedge them around the car engine. When you stop for lunch they will be cooked.’ He paused and thought for a moment. ‘I suppose you could use sausages just as well,’ he said. ‘They’d be cheaper. My patient chappie reckons 200 miles at a steady 60 mph should do it nicely.’

‘We don’t eat meat,’ I said. ‘We’re vegetarian.’

‘Don’t eat meat!’ said Clarice. ‘Oh how awful for you!’ She reached out and patted Patsy on the arm. ‘Poor dear,’ she said.

‘You’ll have to get that husband of yours to get a job in a town where the pay is better.’

Patsy started to say something but Clarice wasn’t finished. ‘It’s awfully sweet, living in the country, but I could never live somewhere like this,’ she said, wiping her lips with her napkin.

‘Oh!’ said Patsy. ‘Why not?’

‘Far too far from the heart of things,’ replied Clarice. ‘And no shops! My dear, I think you are wonderful, being able to live so far from decent shops.’

‘There’s a department store in Barnstaple,’ said Patsy.

Clarice laughed. ‘Well, yes, I’m sure there is,’ she said.

‘And we’ve got most of the big High Street stores too,’ Patsy said defensively.

‘Boots, Smiths, Marks and Spencer, Woolworths?’

‘Yes,’ said Patsy.

‘Not quite what I was meaning by shops,’ said Clarice. She put all the emphasis on the word ‘shops’.

‘Shopping is Clarice’s main hobby,’ said Mortimer rather proudly. ‘She’s terribly good at spending money.’

‘My sister Adrienne spends a lot of time in shops,’ said Patsy. ‘She loves charity shops. She’s got this theory that she can help the world by spending money. She buys a dress in a charity shop and then immediately gives it to another charity shop.'

Clarice screwed up her nose and looked confused. 'I've seen charity shops,' she said. 'But I'm not sure I understand how that might work.'

'It's simple,' I said. 'Imagine she pays the first charity shop £1 for a dress and she then gives that dress to a second charity shop which sells it to someone else for £1. The total charity shop profit is £2. But she has only spent £1. So, somehow, she has managed to turn £1 of her money into £2 of charity shop money.'

'If Adrienne was Chancellor we'd all have jam on both sides of our cake,' said Patsy.

Clarice, who looked utterly confused, looked at Mortimer for help. He frowned and scratched and then shook his head. 'Sounds as if there must be a flaw but I'm damned if I can spot it,' he said eventually.

'I'm quite terrible,' said Clarice. 'When I went into town to have lunch with a friend last Tuesday I saw these lovely shoes in a shop window. I just had to buy them. But when I'd got them I realised that I didn't have anything to wear that went with them. So then I found a dress that went with them absolutely perfectly. Then, of course, I had to get a handbag to go with the dress. That lunch ended up costing me £80!'

'Probably more than you spend on clothes in a year, eh Patsy?' said Mortimer.

Patsy, who was wearing her best dress, flushed slightly with embarrassment. I went red too – though mine was partly through guilt (I couldn't remember when Patsy had last had a new dress) and partly through anger.

'Mind you, they probably save themselves a fortune by growing their own food,' said Mortimer to his wife. He had an annoying habit of talking about us as though we weren't there. 'A GP living in a village like this won't be making much money.' He turned to me. 'Do you have any private patients?'

I shook my head.

Mortimer turned back to his wife. 'There you are,' he said, satisfied that his point was proven.

'Apple pie for everyone?' asked Patsy, who now had an armful of plates and was heading for the kitchen. 'With custard!' she added, managing to force a smile.

'Is it home-made?' enquired Mortimer.

'It is,' said Patsy proudly. Her apple pies were magnificent and much admired, even within a village where every woman was an excellent cook.

'Oh,' said Mortimer, clearly disappointed. 'I rather like the ones they sell in Sainsbury's.' He paused. 'Well never mind,' he said magnanimously. 'I expect yours will be fine.'

'I don't want any,' said Rupert. 'I don't like home-made things. They're cheap and nasty. I like chips and burgers best and puddings out of boxes. That's what my mummy gives me. I want ice cream now.'

With some difficulty I resisted the temptation to smash the dishes I was holding over the child's head. I wondered how he would look with a carrot rammed in each ear and cabbage leaves draped over his skull.

Patsy had gone pale. 'We haven't got any ice cream,' she said quietly. 'I'm afraid I forgot to get any.'

'I want ice cream,' said Rupert

'I'm so sorry,' said Patsy. 'What an awful hostess I am.'

'Don't be silly, Patsy!' I said. 'You're a wonderful hostess.' No one else made any effort to agree with me.

'You should never put yourself down, my dear,' said Clarice. 'You will never have any difficulty in finding people who are perfectly prepared to do that for you. And other people will do it so much better than you ever could. Ironing, cutting the lawn, car maintenance and putting yourself down – those are just some of the things best left to others.'

'I want ice cream,' said Rupert, turning up the volume this time. He actually banged his fork handle on the table. I'd never seen anyone, not even a child, do that before.

'Oh dear,' said Clarice, looking around. 'I don't suppose we could get some from somewhere could we?'

'They live in the middle of nowhere,' said Mortimer. 'Where are they going to find ice cream at this time of night?'

'It's only eight o'clock,' said Clarice.

'Peter will be shut but I'll give him a ring and ask him to open up,' I said. To be honest I expected Mortimer or Clarice to tell me not to bother.

'Oh that would be so kind,' said Clarice. She thought for a moment and frowned. 'Who is Peter?' she asked.

'Peter Marshall,' I replied. 'He runs the local shop. He sells everything.'

Clarice laughed. Her laugh was beginning to annoy me. It was more a sneer than a laugh born of amusement. 'Everything?' she said. She closed her eyes and shook her head. 'I rather suspect not.'

Patsy headed out for the kitchen. I followed, with an almost empty serving dish in each hand.

'I'm so sorry,' I said to Patsy, when we were out of earshot.

'I don't think they're quite used to country life,' she said. 'I've let you down, haven't I?' There were tears forming in her eyes. She put the plates she was carrying down by the sink. I put the serving dishes down beside them and put my arms around her. 'Listen to me!' I said. 'They're the rudest, nastiest family I've ever met in my life. I don't know what happened to Mortimer but he's become a completely different person.'

Patsy pulled away and looked at me.

'People change,' I said. 'And Mortimer has changed.' I sighed. 'Thank heavens they're only staying one night. I don't think I could stand them for any longer. I nearly killed those obnoxious kids four times this evening.'

'Oh dear,' said Patsy. 'That reminds me. There was something I meant to tell you earlier.'

I looked at her and grinned. 'Don't tell me,' I said. 'Clarice is having such a good time that her sister is coming to stay next week and is bringing her four kids and obnoxious husband.'

Patsy shook her head.

I was beginning to feel cold. I knew from her face that the news wasn't good. 'What is it?' I asked Patsy.

'Clarice had a telephone call from her father while you were out,' she said. 'Mortimer gave his secretary this number in case of emergencies.'

'What did her father want?'

'Apparently there is a problem with the family cottage in Cornwall.'

Now I knew it was bad.

'There's a problem of some sort with the drains. Clarice's father says they can't stay there.'

'Can't stay there?' My stomach shrank and I shivered. I knew what was coming next.

'What else could I say?' asked Patsy plaintively.

'How long?'

'The week.'

'A whole week?' She nodded.

'They're staying here a whole week?'

Patsy nodded again. I put my arms around her. We held each other tightly.

Our moment of peace was interrupted by a yell from the dining room. 'If you can get the ice cream Rupert would prefer chocolate,' shouted Clarice in a voice that would have carried across a steelworks. 'Not strawberry. He's allergic to strawberry. Peach is fine. Not coffee and not mint unless it's the one that comes with the bits of chocolate in it. Raspberry is acceptable as a last resort but definitely not vanilla unless it's extra creamy.'

'I'll think of something,' I said quietly. 'Or Thumper will. We're not having those people here for a whole week.'

I telephoned Peter from the phone in the kitchen. He said he had ice cream in the freezer and that, although he'd locked up, the shop would be open by the time I got there. I didn't ask him what flavours he'd got in stock. Instead I asked him what were the three oddest items he had for sale in the shop. He thought for a few moments and then told me.

'What on earth was that about?' demanded Patsy.

'You'll see in a few minutes,' I promised her. I led the way back to the dining room but before we could get there the door bell went again. It was a bing bong so I knew it was a patient.

'Don't worry,' said Patsy. 'I'll tell them you've got a patient.'

Dealing with the caller took only a couple of minutes.

'What was that one?' asked Clarice.

'Chap who lives in the village,' I said. I didn't name him. 'He works in Exeter and can't get here during the daytime. He needed a prescription. And he wanted me to look at his piles.'

'That's outrageous!' said Mortimer. 'He should take time off work if he wants to see you.'

'It would mean losing a whole day if he did that,' I explained.

'It only took me a couple of minutes. Peter is opening up his shop so that Rupert can have some ice cream,' I said.

'What make is it?' demanded Rupert.

'The best available,' I told him. 'Peter describes it as the ice cream no one can lick.'

Only Patsy laughed.

'Not strawberry,' said Rupert. 'I can't stand strawberry.'

'I heard you were allergic to it,' I said.

'I don't like it,' he said.

'It brings him out in a sort of rash,' said Clarice. She hesitated, embarrassed perhaps. 'Maybe not a full blown allergy. But it makes him upset and when he's upset he goes red.'

'Right,' I said. 'No strawberry then.'

'What flavours have they got?' demanded Rupert.

'I forgot to ask,' I confessed. 'But I expect Peter will have something you like. His shop sells pretty much everything.'

‘I bet it doesn’t sell everything,’ said Rupert instantly.

‘We try to teach him not to exaggerate,’ said Mortimer.

I thought, but didn’t say, that it might be better if they taught their loathsome child some manners.

‘Peter sells all sorts of things,’ I said. I picked up the notepad which always lies beside the telephone in the dining room. ‘I’ll get the ice cream and I’ll test him out on a couple of other things.’ I sucked on the pencil and pretended to think hard. ‘I’ll ask him if he’s got a jar of pickled eggs, a street map of Llandudno and a carburettor for a 1956 S1 Bentley,’ I said. I grinned at Clarice. ‘I bet you even Harrods would have a job finding you all of those.’

‘That’s stupid!’ sneered Spotty. ‘He can’t possibly have all of those stupid things in one shop.’

When I returned fifteen minutes later I had two large brown paper bags with me. One contained a tub of chocolate ice cream (the only variety Peter had in stock). The other contained a jar of pickled eggs, a street map of Llandudno and a carburettor for a 1956 S1 Bentley.

Rupert, Clarice and Mortimer ate the ice cream. I had a very large slice of Patsy’s home-made apple pie. No one said thank you for the ice cream. But they were all extremely impressed at the success of my small shopping trip and, to my surprise, none of our visitors realised how easily I’d tricked them.

‘Do you know where the nearest garage is?’ asked Mortimer, while Clarice was putting Rupert to bed.

‘There’s Tolstoy’s,’ I told him.

‘Tolstoy’s?’ He seemed puzzled.

‘There’s a garage in the village called Tolstoy’s,’ I told him.

‘Why is it called Tolstoy’s?’

‘It’s run by two chaps called Henry Waugh and Reginald Peace.’

‘I don’t get it.’

‘War and Peace. Tolstoy.’

‘Ah. Oh yes.’

‘Do you need petrol?’

‘Bit more than that,’ said Mortimer. ‘I’ve been having a bit of a problem with the Volvo.’

‘What sort of problem?’

‘The wipers on the headlamps won’t switch off.’

‘You’ve got wipers on your headlamps?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Mortimer. ‘The headlamps are equipped with washer nozzles too. When the headlamp glass gets muddy I can clean it.’

I thought for a moment that he was having me on. But then I realised that the ‘new’ Mortimer probably didn’t waste too much time joking. ‘And they won’t switch off?’

‘No. They just keep wiping away.’

‘I can see that would be a bit of a nuisance,’ I lied. I thought about it for a moment and something occurred to me. ‘How did you find out?’ I asked him.

‘There’s a complex system of warning lights on the dashboard,’ he told me. ‘The system gives me instant information when something isn’t working properly.’

‘Right,’ I said. ‘Of course.’

‘You don’t have that sort of system on your car?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘The Morris Minor isn’t equipped with those. But I do have two of those little orange indicator arms that pop out when I intend to turn left or right.’

‘The soft top is manual I suppose?’

‘Oh yes. But it’s fairly easy to operate when you’ve had a bit of practice. I can get the roof up or down in less than twenty minutes.’

‘Pal of mine has a sports car,’ said Mortimer. ‘His roof takes less than a minute to appear or disappear. At the press of a button on the dashboard.’

‘Brilliant.’ I said.

‘You probably remember him,’ said Mortimer. ‘Roderick Furst.’

‘Roderick Furst,’ I repeated. ‘Was he one of our crowd?’ Mortimer nodded.

‘Not Hugo?’

‘That’s the chap,’ said Mortimer.

‘Oh, I remember Hugo!’ I said. ‘He was a real card. We used to go to that pub together. The Barrel of Laughs.’

‘I remember occasional visits to a pub,’ said Mortimer cautiously. ‘But I seem to remember that it was called The King George.’

‘Oh, that might have been the name on the sign,’ I agreed. ‘But we called it The Barrel of Laughs because the landlord was a huge fat chap who never smiled at anything. Miserable sod with absolutely no sense of humour.’

Mortimer looked down and muttered something about not going there often enough to remember the barman.

‘Why is he calling himself Roderick?’ I asked.

‘Hugo was just a nickname,’ said Mortimer.

‘Was it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh. What a pity. I always thought his parents had a great sense of humour.’

‘He thought his real name, Roderick, gave him more gravitas.’

‘P.G.Wodehouse had a potty doctor called Roderick in the Jeeves and Wooster books,’ I said. ‘Roderick Spode.’

‘I’ve never read Wodehouse,’ said Mortimer.

‘Right Ho,’ I said, knowing that he wouldn’t recognise Bertie Wooster’s famous phrase. It’s undoubtedly unfair and prejudiced but I’ve always found it difficult to trust men who’ve never read P.G.Wodehouse.

‘Hugo was so scruffy that when he stood around in the town centre people would give him money,’ I told Patsy. ‘I remember once he made eight shillings and nine pence while waiting for his mother at New Street Station.’

‘If you meet him I wouldn’t remind him of that these days,’ said Mortimer rather stiffly.

‘He was the only person to be thrown out of the rugby club for drinking and womanising,’ I said.

‘I don’t remember that.’

‘He always had cold hands. The patients used to call him Coldfinger.’

Mortimer, who didn’t seem to enjoy my jolly reminiscing, shook his head to show he didn’t remember that either.

‘What did you say he’s doing now?’

‘He’s a plastic surgeon. Very successful. He’s got a villa in Portugal and two Labradors called Nip and Tuck.’

‘He’s a surgeon?’ This wasn’t so much a question as an expression of my disbelief

‘Oh yes. I think he always wanted to be a surgeon.’

‘Golly,’ I said, genuinely astonished at this news. ‘I remember once assisting with him at an operation. It was something complicated and the registrar had Hugo holding a huge textbook so that he could see what he had to do next. The book was very heavy and Hugo, who always used to get nervous, had very sweaty fingers. He turned over two pages at once and the patient nearly got the first half of one operation and the second half of another.’

Mortimer claimed he didn’t know of that either.

‘Are they any good?’ he asked.

‘Who?’

‘These people at this garage of yours.’

‘Oh yes,’ I told him. ‘Brilliant. When I had my first car someone told me that I should have it serviced regularly. I took it in and asked for a service. They couldn’t understand what I wanted them to do and why I’d taken them a car which was still working.’

I thought this was quite charming and quaint. Mortimer clearly didn’t. To amuse him I told him about the time I had borrowed a car from them and had discovered too late that it didn’t have any brakes.

‘I eventually stopped it by driving into a fishpond,’ I told him.

He stared at me, disbelievingly.

‘Actually, that’s a bit of an exaggeration,’ I admitted. ‘Only the first two wheels actually went into the pond. But it was embarrassing. I had to knock on the door and ask Mavis Biddlecome if I could have my car back. Then I had to get Harry Burrows to tow the damned thing out with his tractor. Mavis was a bit miffed. I killed three of her goldfish.

‘I would have left it for the garage to collect,’ said Mortimer.

‘I needed the car for the rest of my visits.’

‘You surely didn’t drive it with no brakes?’

‘Oh, it was OK. I didn’t go above thirty and slowed it down with the gears. Mostly. It wasn’t terribly dangerous. The lanes around here have got grassy banks on each side.’

Mortimer grunted. ‘How do I get there?’ he asked. ‘To this Tolstoy’s of yours.’

‘Turn left out of our gate and then right just before you get to the pink cottage which needs rethatching. Go straight down that lane which wiggles around a bit and go through the farmyard. Don’t take any notice of the dogs. They make a lot of noise but they won’t hurt you – and certainly not if you stay in the car and keep the windows shut. Go up the hill for a quarter of a mile and turn left. The signpost fell down a year ago and the council still hasn’t put it back up but it’s still there in the hedge. If you can see the church you’ve gone too far past the next turning so go on to the red farmhouse, turn round and go back, but slower this time, and turn a sort of half left just before you get to the Jubilee Watering Trough.’ I looked at Mortimer, saw the glazed look in his eyes and realised that I was giving directions like a countryman. ‘I don’t know why the Jubilee Watering Trough is there,’ I admitted. ‘It’s a silly place for it.’

‘Could you draw me a map?’

‘I’ll show you the way in the morning,’ I promised.

‘Thanks,’ Mortimer said, obviously relieved.

There was a silence. It felt uncomfortable. I put up with it for a couple of minutes and then gave in.

‘So, how is life treating you?’ I asked. I hadn’t yet realised that Mortimer had become the sort of person who tells you how he is when you ask.

He responded to this fairly simple question by telling me how much he earned, how much their house had cost and how much he paid for the boys to attend private school. (The bill for the school fees was considerably more than I was earning, or could ever expect to earn in Bilbury.) He told me with great pride that he now employed a man to come round on Sunday mornings. ‘He washes the car and mows the lawn.’

‘Better than doing it the other way round,’ I suggested. He looked at me, clearly puzzled.

‘Washing the lawn and mowing the car.’

He remained puzzled. ‘Mind you,’ he said, continuing on as though I hadn’t spoken. ‘The stresses I have to cope with are pretty awesome.’

He went on to tell us about the problems he was having with the administrators at the hospital where he worked. ‘I insist that I’m entitled to a dedicated parking space,’ he said. ‘But the senior administrator who is in charge of parking spaces is proving to be immensely stubborn. I’ve had six or seven meetings with him about it in the last two weeks alone.’ He puffed up his chest a little. ‘Still,’ he said, ‘I’ve no doubt I will win through in the end. I usually do.’

‘And you must, darling,’ said Clarice, who had reappeared. The two boys were, she said, reading comics in bed.

Mortimer then told us about the row he had with the people who had installed the power shower in their second bathroom (he’d eventually made them take it out and replace it with something even more powerful) and the arguments he’d had with the man whom he paid to cut their grass.

‘The ignorant fool cuts the grass reasonably well,’ said Mortimer. ‘But he spills grass cuttings all over our driveway when he puts them into the back of his trailer. I’ve had numerous rows with him about it. Last week I cancelled half a dozen patients so that I could stay at home and confront him. Clarice had spoken to him but some things do require a man’s touch.’

I murmured sympathetic noises and resisted the temptation to suggest that it might be less trouble if he cut the grass himself.

‘I don’t suppose you have many problems, living out in the country,’ he said.

‘Well, we do have one or two,’ I said. I started to tell him about the storm that had destroyed several houses in Bilbury, making several villagers homeless, and isolating the village.

‘Don’t talk to me about storms!’ Mortimer said, interrupting me before I could go any further with my tale of woe. ‘We had a darned hurricane last winter. Lost three tiles. We were lucky no one was sitting outside in the garden at the time. They’d have been killed.’

I thought about asking him why anyone would have been sitting in the garden during a storm, but didn’t. His comment had reminded me of someone but I couldn’t remember whom.

‘I had a terrible time finding a roofer to come out and do the repairs,’ he continued. ‘In the end it took three days before anyone turned up and it cost me £80 to have the repairs done. It took another three months to get the money out of the insurance company.’

I started to tell him about the battle the village had fought against developers who had wanted to build a massive new housing estate in the area but he interrupted me.

‘Oh, you haven’t seen anything,’ he said, waving a hand around dismissively. ‘I could tell you stories about developers and builders and planning people that would make your blood go cold.’ He leant forwards a little. ‘Last summer one of our neighbours suddenly decided to build an extension above his garage. What they usually call a granny flat except it was for the au pair rather than the granny. We fought him tooth and nail, of course. We would have been able to see part of the extension from our bathroom window. Hideous thing. But the planning people wouldn’t listen. In the end I had to have a word with a pal of mine in the Freemasons.’ He looked at me and winked. ‘Don’t suppose you’re a member?’

I shook my head. I had remembered whom he reminded me of. The Colonel. Both had a habit of trumping everyone else’s misfortunes with misfortunes of their own.

‘Didn’t think you would be. Never mind. They don’t ask many people. Anyway, my pal knows someone in planning. They sorted it out. Made them reduce the size of the extension.’ He grinned and nodded and made a fist with his right hand. ‘That’s power for you!’ he said.

I tried once or twice more to tell about things that had happened in Bilbury but every time I started to tell him something he interrupted, claiming that something similar had happened to him but had, of course, been considerably worse, considerably more dramatic and considerably more dangerous.

Finally, I gave up and he came to a halt. I peeped at my watch. It was half past one. Mortimer had been talking about himself for hours.

'OK,' he said, leaning back into the sofa cushions. 'That's enough about me. Let's talk about you. Tell me what you've been doing with yourself. How did you come to be living in a strange little forsaken backwater like this?'

I sat silently for a moment. I was fed up with his patronising twaddle and I was too tired to talk or to listen. I just wanted to go to bed. But, as host, I felt unable to go up to bed until Mortimer did so. I opened my mouth once or twice but nothing came out.

'I don't suppose you've got much to report, have you?' he said.

'Quiet life in a little dead end place like this.' He leant back and grinned. 'Always thought you'd end up a bit of a drop out,' he said. 'If you haven't got what it takes then it's probably the best option.'

I started to protest and to defend myself and Bilbury.

'By the way,' he said. 'You haven't locked up yet.'

'We never bother,' I told him.

Mortimer seemed appalled. 'Don't you worry about burglars?'

'Not round here,' I said, smiling. 'Not in Bilbury.'

Mortimer pulled a face and then looked around, as though assessing our belongings. 'Not much worth stealing, I suppose,' he said.

I didn't say anything.

'So, what do you think about what's happened to me, eh?' Mortimer asked. 'I don't expect you thought I'd be the successful one out of our group? Top of the range Volvo. Kids at expensive private school. Wife who has her hair done at least once a week - sometimes twice if we're going out to dinner.'

I muttered the sort of pleasantries and sounds of admiration which I knew he wanted to hear. Satisfied with this Mortimer grunted again, got up, said 'Goodnight', nodded and disappeared. It took me a moment or two to realise that he had gone to bed. For a while I sat where I was staring at the fire.

* * *

When I woke up I'd got cramp in my arm, where I'd been lying on it, and the room was cold.

The log fire had burnt itself out but I put up the fireguard anyway and then went upstairs. Ben, who'd spent the last few hours dozing on the hearth rug, padded up after me.

Patsy was sitting up in bed reading a novel by Georgette Heyer. The two cats were asleep by her side.

'You didn't have to wait up,' I told her.

'I don't like to go to sleep until you come to bed,' she said. 'Did you have a nice chat with Mortimer?'

'He has become truly very boring,' I told her. 'And either I'm remembering a lot of things that never happened or he's forgotten a lot of things which did.' I started to undress. 'What do you think of Clarice?'

'Did you see the number of suitcases they brought with them?' said Patsy, carefully avoiding my question.

'We could move house with less luggage.'

'Four of the cases were full of Clarice's clothes,' said Patsy. 'I helped her unpack. She brought six swimming costumes with her.'

'Six?'

'A red one, a green one, a pink one, two yellow ones and a black and white one. I asked her why she didn't have a blue one.'

'What did she say?'

'She said she would never wear a blue swimming costume in England because the water is so cold that people might think she was bathing nude.'

'So no blue bathing costume.'

'No. And she brought three evening dresses with her.'

'What on earth did she do that for?'

'She said you never know when you're going to be invited to a formal dinner. Apparently Mortimer brought his dinner jacket, cummerbund and bow tie.'

I sighed.

'Come to bed,' said Patsy.

I threw off my clothes and climbed into bed. Ben circled my clothes, like a group of Indians circling settlers' wagons, then settled down to go to sleep on top of my trousers.

'You really shouldn't let Ben sleep on your clothes,' said Patsy quietly. I looked at Ben. She sensed me looking and raised an eyelid.

'She seems comfy,' I said. 'And if she doesn't sleep on my clothes she'll sleep on the bed and keep us both awake.’

Patsy looked at him. ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Better to leave her where she is.’

She put her bookmark into her book, put the book on her bedside table and turned off the light.

CHAPTER 19

I got up early the following morning because I had a couple of things I wanted to do. I had woken up in the night having dreamt up a plan which might, I thought, help us reduce the length of time our visitors wanted to stay with us.

They had been with us for only one night and although I had, before their arrival, looked forward to seeing them they had already long outstayed their welcome.

First, I called on Mr Parfitt, our gardener. When I explained what I wanted him to do he was, at first, surprised and puzzled. But when I explained why I wanted him to do it he immediately understood. ‘I’ll give it a good stir,’ he promised. ‘That should liven things up a bit.’

Next I got into the car and drove round to see Patsy’s father. I suppose I could have telephoned but I was terrified that someone might hear me and what I had to say was not something I wanted overheard. Mr Kennett immediately agreed to do what I wanted. He thought it was an excellent idea. ‘Don’t forget to tell Patsy to leave all the windows open!’ he called after me.

My two calls made, I then drove back to the house, parked the Morris Minor roughly where it had been and, after taking Ben for a quick walk round the garden, went into the house for breakfast.

‘Where have you been?’ Patsy asked.

‘Just taking Ben for a walk.’

‘You’ve been a long time.’

‘She seemed to want a longer walk than usual today,’ I told her. I didn’t want to explain what I’d been planning. I thought it might be better if it came as something of a surprise. Just then Mortimer stumbled downstairs and wandered into the kitchen. It was, I noticed, half past eight. He told me that he, Clarice and their two sons had decided to stay on a little longer. He didn’t mention the fact that there were problems with the cottage they’d been expecting to stay in.

‘It’ll give us all chance to catch up a bit,’ he said. ‘We’ve got some slides of our holiday in Disneyland in one of the suitcases. We always cart the slides around with us in case we meet people who’d like to see them. Most people can’t afford to go to Disneyland so it’s a bit of a treat for them to be able to see what it’s like. See what they’re missing.’

‘I’m afraid we haven’t got a projector,’ I told him.

‘Oh don’t worry,’ he said. ‘We’ve got our own with us. All we’ll need is a piece of white wall. Or Patsy can lend us a sheet which we’ll nail up in your living room.’

‘Right,’ I said, though to be honest I had no intention of letting him nail sheets up anywhere.

‘Splendid!’ said Mortimer. ‘And where do I put my shoes?’

‘Er, I’m not sure, I understand,’ I said.

‘To be cleaned,’ explained Mortimer. ‘I got mud on my brogues. They need a clean. And I expect the boys need their shoes cleaning too.’

I stared at him in bewilderment. Was he really expecting me to clean his shoes?

‘We did all leave our shoes outside our bedroom doors,’ said Mortimer.

I had noticed this. I’d assumed they were being thoughtful and not taking mud into the bedrooms. It hadn’t occurred to me that they had left their shoes outside their rooms so that I could clean them.

‘Perhaps if we just leave them by the back door?’ suggested Mortimer, interpreting my silence as simple indecision. ‘Any decent polish will do on mine but I do like them buffed up with a soft cloth afterwards. Clarice will give you specific instructions about hers.’

‘Fine,’ I said weakly.

‘What would you like for breakfast?’ Patsy asked.

‘Oh just the usual,’ replied Mortimer. ‘Bacon, eggs, sausage, fried bread, tons of coffee and a few slices of toast.’

‘Gosh!’ I said. ‘Do you eat all that every morning?’

‘Good heavens, no! At home I just grab a slice of toast and a coffee. But when I’m away I always have the full English.’

‘What about Clarice and the boys?’ asked Patsy.

‘They’ll have the same,’ said Mortimer.

‘Shall I cook theirs now?’

‘Oh no. They’ll all wander down when the fancy takes them,’ said Mortimer. ‘Be better to cook separately when they come down.’ It didn’t seem to occur to him that this would mean Patsy cooking breakfast four times.

‘I’ll pop to Peter’s and pick up the bacon and sausage,’ I told Patsy.

‘Don’t you have them in the house?’ asked Mortimer.

‘Afraid not,’ I said. ‘We usually just have toast and coffee. Besides, we’re vegetarian.’

‘Oh,’ said Mortimer, surprised. ‘I’m sorry to put you to so much trouble.’ He hesitated and I thought he was going to tell me that he would, after all, settle for toast and coffee. But he didn’t. ‘Better make sure you stock up,’ he said. ‘This country air will probably give the boys quite an appetite. And if you load up for the week it’ll save you going out to the shop every morning.’

‘Thanks for the thought,’ I said.

‘By the way, you’ve got a ghost,’ said Mortimer.

I looked at him, puzzled. ‘Have we?’

‘The upstairs loo flushed last night but there was no one in there.’

‘Oh that would have been Emily,’ I explained.

Now it was Mortimer’s turn to look puzzled.

‘Emily is one of our cats,’ I said. ‘She’s taught herself to use the loo. It means she doesn’t have to go outside in the mud when the weather’s bad.’

‘But it flushed

Oh yes,’ I told him. ‘She learned to use the flush too.’ Mortimer stared at me disbelievingly though everything I’d told him about Emily was entirely true. I looked at my watch, grabbed a sip of the coffee Patsy had made, kissed her and set off for Peter’s shop. If I rushed I would just get back in time to start the morning surgery.

As luck would have it there were three other customers ahead of me. For Peter’s shop that constitutes something of a rush. All were tourists passing through the village. And as always there was entertainment to be had.

The first customer purchased three peaches which Peter was advertising as being on special offer. There was a handwritten sign fixed to the tray: Peaches: three for the price of two.

‘I’ll have three of those peaches,’ said the customer.

Peter picked up three peaches, threw one into a rubbish bucket he kept by his counter, and put the other two into a brown paper bag. He handed the bag to the customer and held his hand out for payment.

‘Excuse me! There are only two peaches in the bag!’ protested the customer.

‘One of them was bad,’ said Peter. ‘I threw it away for you.’ The man was so startled by this that he accepted the paper bag and paid Peter. When he walked away he looked stunned. You could tell that he was still trying to work out what had happened.

The second customer, a large American who was obviously camping or caravanning somewhere in the locality, had purchased tins of beans, soup, fruit, a box of cornflakes and a supply of candles. Peter used a sheet of brown paper and a piece of string to wrap the man’s purchases up in a small parcel.

‘Don’t you have a plastic bag?’ asked the customer.

Peter stared at him as if he’d asked for a pound of best quality uranium. ‘I do not!’ he said firmly. Peter doesn’t like Americans at the best of times. This one was wearing plaid shorts, a lime green, short sleeved shirt and a baseball cap and this was not, therefore, the best of times.

‘How am I supposed to carry this?’ demanded the American, picking up the parcel.

‘You could put it under your arm,’ suggested Peter, not irrationally.

‘I want to carry it,’ said the customer. He spoke slowly and loudly, as though speaking to the village idiot. ‘There is no handle!’

Peter took the parcel from the American, unfastened the string and retied it. This time he created a small additional loop of string.

‘There you are,’ he said, speaking softly and carefully, as though talking to a small, rather backward child. ‘Put your finger through the loop in the string and carry the parcel on your finger.’

‘It’s too heavy to carry on one finger!’ snorted the customer.

‘Then carry it under your arm, like a normal person would!’ roared Peter.

Startled, the American waddled away as fast as his fat legs would carry him.

The third customer wanted two pasties. Peter put two pasties into a paper bag and handed him the bag.

‘These feel stale,’ said the customer, feeling the pastry through the bag.

‘They’re not stale,’ insisted Peter. ‘They’re just firmly baked.’

‘I don’t know where these people think I’d get fresh pasties from at this time of the week,’ said Peter crossly when the customer had gone.

‘Some people just expect too much,’ I agreed. I told him what I wanted.

‘I thought you and Patsy were vegetarian? Changed your minds at last, have you?’ He smirked and wagged a finger. ‘I told you that you would.’

‘Visitors,’ I explained.

He handed me three paper bags, one containing bacon, one containing sausages and one containing eggs.

'Don't you have any egg cartons?' I asked.

'They're fresh eggs,' said Peter. 'They don't get laid in egg cartons, you know.'

'Sorry!' I said.

'I suppose you want it on the slate?'

'Yes please!' I called, as I got back into the car.

I got back to Bilbury Grange just in time to hand the bags containing the eggs, bacon and sausages to Patsy before it was time to start the morning surgery.

Thanks to our visitors I was starving hungry.

'I'll give Miss Johnson some biscuits to bring you between patients,' whispered Patsy.

'Chocolate digestives?'

'OK.'

I felt better.

* * *

At eleven o'clock I finished the surgery and popped back into the kitchen to see how Patsy was getting on with our visitors. They were still sitting around the kitchen table eating toast. Patsy was looking exhausted.

'I'm afraid the boys only came down ten minutes ago,' said Mortimer. 'Your wife's been tied to the Aga all morning.'

'I don't know how you manage with that old thing,' said Clarice. 'Mortimer bought me a wonderful new oven last year.'

'Eye level grill, built-in fan, six hotplates, oven big enough for two turkeys,' said Mortimer proudly. 'Cost an arm and a leg as you can imagine.'

I helped Patsy move some of the dirty crocks from the table.

'What do you do with the dirty crocks?' asked Mortimer.

I looked at him, surprised. 'We wash them,' I replied. 'You don't throw yours away do you?'

'No, no,' he laughed. 'I mean, where is the dishwasher.'

'You're looking at him,' I said. 'Well, actually, Patsy and I take it in turns.'

'You haven't got a dishwasher?'

'No.'

'Good heavens!' he cried, as though I'd just told him we didn't have electricity in the house. 'You do believe in roughing it don't you?'

'We've never really thought them worthwhile,' I said. 'You have to load up all the dishes then, when the machine has finished, you have to take them all out again. It seems quicker to wash them, dry them and put them away in the cupboard.'

Mortimer put his dirty plate on the draining board and then laid a hand on my arm. 'You have to get yourself a dishwasher,' he said. 'Buy Patsy one for her birthday. She'll be thrilled.'

'I'm not entirely sure Patsy will be thrilled at getting a dishwasher for her birthday,' I said.

Mortimer ignored me. 'Get one of the new models that dry the crocks afterwards. We've got the top of the range model that takes a twelve piece dinner service.'

'We haven't got a twelve piece dinner service,' I said. I was about to mention that I didn't think we knew ten people we'd want to invite to dinner but I didn't.

'Then get one of the compact models,' he said. 'They're very reasonably priced. Even you could afford one.' He spoke with enthusiasm; the same sort of enthusiasm with which I remembered him once talking about sports cars.

'Splendid,' I said. I found it difficult to believe that I was listening to Mortimer talk to me about the relative merits of different brands of dishwasher. It seemed rather sad.

* * *

Half an hour later we left. I was going out on my visits and
Mortimer was going to follow me to Tolstoy's.

I took Mortimer round to the Bilbury garage.

Henry was busy fastening a loose exhaust pipe on a Ford Popular. He was doing this with a length of orange baler twine. ('The orange stuff is much better than the blue for cars,' he once told me. 'It's much the same sort of colour as rust and so it blends in and you can't see it.') Reginald was kicking the tyres holding up an old Ford Consul.

'What are you doing?' I asked him.

'Visitor brought this in,' replied Reginald. 'Said it wobbled.'

I nodded as though I understood these things. Mortimer frowned. 'So what are you doing?'

'Making sure the wheels are all in the right places.'

‘Good idea,’ I agreed. ‘One on each corner is usually best.’

‘Definitely,’ said Reginald kicking another wheel. ‘I call it an Optical Wheel Alignment Check.’

I waited until he had kicked the fourth tyre and then introduced him to Mortimer who explained his problem.

‘Little wipers on the headlamps?’ said Reginald.

‘That’s right.’

‘And they won’t stop wiping?’

‘That’s it.’

‘Let’s have a look.’

Mortimer took Reginald outside to look at his errant headlamp wipers. He turned on the engine so that Reginald could study the problem.

‘Amazing,’ murmured Reginald. ‘I’ve never seen anything like it in my life.’ He went back into the garage to fetch Henry and then the two of them stood and watched in absolute awe.

‘Can you sort it out?’ asked Mortimer.

‘No problem,’ said Reginald.

‘No problem at all,’ Henry assured him.

‘How long will it take?’

‘You can pick it up at two,’ said Reginald.

‘Will it really take that long?’ demanded Mortimer.

‘Afraid so,’ said Reginald. He sucked air in through the gap in his front teeth. ‘Could be a complicated job.’

Mortimer sighed and turned to me. ‘Bit like rural Spain,’ he said. ‘What’s the local word for manana?’

Reginald looked at me. Mortimer, who seemed to have noticed a mark, was rubbing at the paintwork on the rear offside passenger door. I shrugged and raised my eyebrows.

‘I don’t rightly think,’ said Reginald, ‘that we have a word which rightly conveys quite that sense of urgency.’

Mortimer turned and looked at him. He was clearly puzzled.

‘Do you want a lift back to the house?’ I asked Mortimer.

‘No, I’ll be fine,’ he replied. He looked up at the sky. ‘It’s a warm day. I’ll walk.’ He set off back towards Bilbury Grange.

‘Will you find your way?’ I called after him.

‘Oh yes,’ he replied. ‘I remembered the route. Photographic memory.’

‘Friend of yours?’ asked Henry, nodding towards the disappearing Mortimer.

‘Used to be.’ I replied.

‘Used to be?’ said Henry, checking.

‘Used to be,’ I confirmed.

‘Seems a bit of a plonker to me,’ said Reginald, who was not renowned for his patience or his tact.

‘I’m afraid so,’ I agreed.

Henry wandered off down the lane. ‘I’m going down to the Duck and Puddle,’ he called over his shoulder. ‘I need a drink after that. While I’m there I’ll see if I can find another one of these cars with wipers on the headlights.’

‘He’s a bugger for learning,’ explained Reginald. ‘We had one of them Audi things in the other day. Someone passing through. We couldn’t work out how to open the bonnet. Henry drove around Devon until he saw someone driving something similar. He flagged them down and got them to tell him how to open the bonnet.’

‘Shows initiative.’

‘We didn’t want to have to ask the owner,’ explained Reginald.

‘Damages the customer’s trust.’

‘I can see that it might. Did he find someone with the right car?’

‘In Lynmouth,’ said Reginald. ‘In the car park near the river.’

‘Good,’ I nodded.

‘But when we opened the bonnet we just shut it again.’

‘Too complicated?’

‘Too much engine in there,’ said Reginald. ‘Scary.’ He shuddered. ‘The chap had one of those metal RAC badges fastened to his bumper so we rang them up. A nice chap came out on his motorbike.’

‘And he sorted it out?’

‘Brilliant,’ said Reginald. ‘Henry and I are thinking of joining.’

* * *

Later I drove back to Lydeard Lawrence’s cottage to see how he was getting on. He was in the kitchen filling his three feeding bottles with milk when I arrived. His back, he said, was much better.

‘It’s your birthday today,’ I told him.

‘It is,’ he agreed. ‘How did you know that?’

‘I noticed your date of birth on your medical records,’ I told him. I pulled the cardboard envelope containing all his medical history out of my jacket pocket and pointed to the relevant box on the outside of the envelope. His birth date was written there in faded blue ink.

‘You’re a hundred years old.’

‘I am.’

‘Aren’t you celebrating?’

‘What is there to celebrate?’

‘You could have had a telegram from the Queen.’

‘What would I do with one of those?’

‘You could put it on the mantelpiece. You should show it to people.’

‘Who?’

‘Relatives? Friends? Visitors?’

‘Haven’t got any, don’t want any and never have any.’

‘Right,’ I said. ‘No point in having a telegram then.’

‘One thing I can tell you,’ he said.

‘What’s that?’

‘The first hundred years are the hardest,’ he said.

I looked at him to see if he was joking. He wasn’t, of course.

‘I reckon the next hundred will be a doddle.’ I smiled.

‘You probably don’t think I’ve got much longer to live.’

I thought for a moment and then started to disagree but he spoke again before I could say anything. ‘I’m probably not going to live much longer am I?’ he demanded, staring at me defiantly.

Faced with this more definite question I agreed with him. ‘Probably not.’

This seemed to irritate him. ‘You think I’m on my last legs?’

‘No, no,’ I said hurriedly, back pedalling as fast as I could. ‘I didn’t mean that.’

‘I’m as fit as a flea,’ he said. He dropped to the floor and started doing press ups. ‘I can still do sixty at a time,’ he said. ‘Proper ones too. Legs and body straight, chest to floor, arms fully extended.’ He carried on doing press ups. It was an astonishing sight.

* * *

I called in at Tolstoy’s on my way back to Bilbury Grange. Mortimer’s Volvo had gone.

‘Did my friend collect his car?’ I asked Henry, who was making a car aerial out of a metal coat hanger.

‘Half an hour ago,’ said Henry.

‘Did you manage to sort it out for him?’

‘Certainly did. He was as pleased as Punch. Happy as a sand boy.’ Henry winked at me. ‘I don’t think he thought we could do it.’

‘He probably didn’t,’ I told him. ‘Your laid-back attitude probably worried him.’

‘We sorted it out for him,’ said Henry. ‘Charged him £10.’

‘That seems fair enough,’ I agreed. ‘Did you find out what the problem was?’

‘Nope.’

‘How did you solve the problem then?’

‘We cut the wires didn’t we,’ said Henry. He made a snipping motion with his right hand.

‘You cut the wires?’

‘Yeah. That stopped the bloody little wipers dead in their tracks. No electricity. No wiping.’

‘But won’t he notice? There’s a little panel of lights on the dashboard that tells him when things aren’t working properly. If it’s been raining and he tries to clean his headlamps the warning light will come on.’

‘Ah, we’re not stupid,’ said Henry. He tapped the side of his nose with a greasy finger. ‘We thought of that. We took the little bulbs out of the warning lights.’

I thought about it. It really was unlikely that Mortimer would find out that his headlamp wipers weren’t working and almost impossible that he would find out before he left Bilbury.

‘Fantastic,’ I said to Henry. ‘I knew I could rely on you.’ Henry winked at me. ‘Did you put twenty pence on the dashboard?’

He winked again.

‘Brilliant,’ I said.

‘Tip?’

‘A quid.’

'Brilliant.'

'Always works,' said Henry.

* * *

'That garage of yours may look a bit rough but they're real professionals,' said Mortimer when I saw him that afternoon. It had taken him three hours to find his way back to Bilbury Grange. He claimed he'd gone the scenic route but I didn't believe him. 'And honest too. Not only did they do a brilliant job on the headlamp wipers but when I picked the car up I found twenty pence in change in an envelope on the dashboard. There was a note with it saying that they'd found the coins underneath the mat when they were working on the car. I tell you it made me feel really warm inside.'

'Splendid,' I said. 'I'm so glad you were pleased.'

'You should have given them the twenty pence as a tip,' said Clarice.

'I did better than that,' said Mortimer proudly. 'I gave the chappie a pound note as a reward for his honesty.'

Patsy smiled at me.

I had to fight hard to suppress a giggle.

'I don't like to mention this,' said Clarice. 'But have either of you noticed a rather funny smell?'

Patsy and I looked at each other.

I shook my head. 'Nothing unusual,' I said.

Patsy blushed a little. 'I think there might have been some spraying in the fields near to us. I'm sorry about it. It's not usually this pungent.'

'You mean a farmer has been spraying something?' asked Clarice.

'They spray manure on the fields,' I explained.

'Manure!' said Clarice.

'Liquid manure,' I said. 'It'll probably go on all week now. They spray tons and tons of it. It helps make the grass grow greener.'

'I could...' began Patsy.

'I'm afraid we can't ask the farmer to stop it,' I said. 'It's just something they do.' I paused. 'I'm afraid they wouldn't listen to us anyway.' I shrugged rather sadly and impotently.

'Oh I'm sure I...' said Patsy. I looked at her and winked. She didn't finish the sentence.

'It happens so often that we did think of renaming our house Pooh Corner,' I said, with what I hoped was a smile.

'Well, it has made Spotty feel rather nauseous,' said Clarice indignantly. 'Me too for that matter.'

'Oh, I am sorry,' I said. I smiled sympathetically. 'We're so used to it now that we hardly notice it any more.' 'It stinks upstairs in our bedroom,' said Rupert. 'It's disgusting. I can't sleep up there.'

'I'm afraid that when they do the spraying it always rather stinks the house out,' I said as apologetically as I could.

'Can't you do anything about it?' demanded Mortimer. 'Explain you've got visitors staying?'

'Tell them Daddy is a doctor and he'll have them all locked up!' suggested Spotty.

'I'm sure there must be a law against it,' said Clarice.

'I think you'll find that farmers can pretty much do what they like,' I said. 'You'll probably get used to it after a while.' I paused. 'Though I admit we do find that the smell tends to linger in our clothes and hair for weeks.'

'I don't want to go back to school smelling of cow poo!' said Rupert, red-faced and full of indignation.

'It stays in the hair?' said Clarice. She touched the back of her head protectively.

'I'm afraid so,' I told her. 'But not for ever,' I added, in what I hoped was a reassuring sort of way.

Clarice looked at Mortimer.

'I want to go home,' said Spotty.

'Me too,' said Rupert.

Mortimer looked at me. 'I'm sorry about this old chap,' he said. 'But...' he shrugged. 'Clarice and I did talk about it before you came back. You country folk may be able to cope with this sort of thing but I'm afraid we aren't as used to it as you are.'

'Oh no!' I said. 'You're going to leave?'

'Afraid so,' said Mortimer.

'I'll go and pack,' said Clarice, heading for the stairs.

'Can we come with you to the golf club when we get back?' Rupert asked his father. 'We can play the fruit machines while you play golf'

'Yes, OK,' said Mortimer, glancing nervously towards the stairs. I got the impression that Clarice didn't approve of the boys playing the fruit machines. He lowered his voice and confirmed my suspicion. 'But don't tell your mother you play the fruit machines.'

The boys both looked pleased.

‘Now, we’d better go and help your Mum pack,’ said Mortimer. ‘I want to get my suits into the cases before I need to send them all to the dry cleaners.’ He turned to me. ‘Do you think I’ll need to have them all dry-cleaned to get the smell out of them?’

‘I wouldn’t have thought so,’ I said. I turned to Patsy who was looking rather bewildered. ‘What do you think?’

‘Oh no,’ she said. ‘I’m sure they’ll be fine.’

It took the four of them less than fifteen minutes to pack and to cram all their suitcases into the back of their estate car.

‘Thank you so much for a wonderful stay,’ said Clarice. She gave Patsy one of those light kisses on the cheek that models give one another and then she did the same to me. She was clearly desperate to get into the car and out of range of the smell of manure.

‘Sorry we have to disappear so quickly,’ said Mortimer. He smiled weakly. ‘Hope you understand.’

‘Absolutely,’ I agreed, nodding.

‘Maybe another time?’

‘Look forward to it,’ I said, knowing that we would never see them again.

Clarice and Mortimer got into the car. Mortimer was driving. He wound down his window.

‘Say ‘thank you,’ hissed Clarice to the two boys in the back of the car.

‘Thank you!’ they chorused, without any discernible enthusiasm.

‘I left the Morris out on the road,’ I told him. ‘So that you could get out of the drive.’

As we waved goodbye I turned to Patsy. ‘If you put the kettle on I’ll tell you how Tolstoy’s managed to sort out Mortimer’s headlamp wipers for him.’

Suddenly Patsy stopped and looked at me. ‘You knew they were leaving before they did!’

I looked back at her, trying to look innocent. ‘Why do you say that?’

‘You left your car on the road so that they could get out of the drive more easily.’

‘Well, I thought they might want to go off for a bit of a drive.’

Patsy frowned and looked at me. ‘There’s something going on,’ she said.

As we headed for the kitchen Mr Parfitt appeared. ‘Shall I put the lid back on now, doctor?’ he called. ‘Don’t want any of the animals falling in, do we?’

‘Yes please, Mr Parfitt,’ I told him. ‘And about that other thing, are you sure...?’ he asked hesitantly.

‘I’m sure,’ I said.

‘Seems an awful waste,’ he said.

‘I know it is,’ I said. I grinned. ‘That’s the point.’

He hurried off down the garden path.

‘The lid off what?’ asked Patsy.

‘Off the septic tank.’

Patsy stopped and looked at me. ‘You told Mr Parfitt to take the lid off our septic tank?’

I shrugged and tried to look innocent. ‘Just to give it an airing,’ I told her. ‘Septic tanks need an airing every now and then.’

‘I suppose you got him to give it a good stirring as well?’

‘Well, a bit of a stir. Just to liven things up a bit.’

‘And what else was he asking you?’ asked Patsy.

‘He thinks it’s a bit of a waste,’ I said.

‘It’s a lot of waste,’ said Patsy. She stood for a moment then folded her arms. ‘He wants to put our septic tank contents on our vegetables?’

‘I’ve told him ‘No’.’

Patsy shuddered.

Mr Parfitt, our gardener, had developed a firm affection for manure in all its various forms and was a keen inventor of new forms of homemade liquid manure. The success of our raspberries was all the evidence he needed of the quality of his manure. He had two varieties of liquid manure with which to boost our crop production. One variety, allegedly rich in iron, had been prepared by putting armfuls of nettles into a tin bath full of water and leaving them to rot. The other variety, the type which Mr Parfitt preferred because he said it was particularly rich in nitrogen, was prepared by putting dirty wool clippings into a water butt and leaving them there for a few months. Each summer when Patsy’s father shaved our sheep he had sold the main fleeces to the wool merchants on our behalf but he left the grubbier bits of fleece behind – the bits taken from the non-eating ends of our four sheep. Mr Parfitt had discovered its value as a source of liquid manure. ‘And was it you who got my father to spray the fields on either side of the house?’ said Patsy.

‘I think I did mention that if he wanted to do any spraying now would be a really good time for us,’ I admitted.

Patsy stared at me.

‘You’re not cross are you?’

She stared at me. I honestly thought she was going to be cross. ‘Absolutely brilliant,’ she said at last. She kissed me. ‘You can have a double helping of treacle tart. And take a piece to poor old Mr Parfitt when he’s put the lid back on the septic tank.’

‘OK,’ I said.

‘And just make sure he puts the lid back on firmly,’ she said. ‘If I find he’s been using anything from our septic tank to improve our fruit or vegetables I will buy all our greengrocery requirements from Peter Marshall.

CHAPTER 20

'I met Adrienne in Barnstaple,' said Patsy the moment I got home. 'You'll never guess what's happening?'

Adrienne is Patsy's sister. Although a couple of years older than Patsy, Adrienne still lived at home on her parents' farm in Bilbury.

'So tell me!'

'No, no. You've got to guess!'

'But you've just told me that I'll never guess.'

'So, try!'

'She's joining the Navy and going to see the world.'

'Don't be silly.'

'She's bought a gypsy caravan and a horse and is going to set off round Britain.'

'No. That's more likely. But that's not it.'

'I don't have the faintest.'

'Try once more.'

'She's going to train to be an astronaut.' Patsy laughed. 'She's getting married!'

'Married! To whom?'

'Guess.'

'No! I can't go through all that again. Tell me!'

'To Patchy!'

'Patchy Fogg?'

'Yes.'

I was delighted at this news. But I was so shocked that I had to sit down for a minute. Offhand, I couldn't think of two people less likely to make a couple. But many successful partnerships are created when unlikely individuals come together and of one thing I was certain: neither Patchy nor Adrienne was weak-willed enough to have been bullied into a marriage they weren't absolutely certain about.

* * *

Adrienne was an enthusiastic practitioner of alternative medicine and had nearly killed her and Patsy's father by mistakenly (and dangerously) prescribing hawthorn for him. I believed then, and still believe now, that if I hadn't stopped the hawthorn their father would have died.

Adrienne had never admitted that her herbalism might have dangerous consequences but she had moved into other areas of alternative medicine. At various times she had dabbled in reflexology, iridology, acupuncture and several other branches of alternative medicine. She was fascinated by all aspects of medicine. (I remember us once having a curious conversation about influenza. 'Is influenza catching?' she asked. 'Yes,' I agreed. 'It spreads by passing from one person to another?' I agreed. 'So,' she asked, 'how did the first person in the world to get the flu catch it? From whom did they catch it if no one else had ever had the flu?' She had been quite delighted when I had been unable to answer her question.)

She also had a number of curious medical theories of her own.

She claimed, for example, that as men get older they go bald because their hair gets trapped inside their skulls. She explained the phenomenon by arguing that the male skull gets thicker with age while the brain expands as it accumulates information. Eventually, the expanding brain blocks off the small holes through which the hair normally grows. This leaves the hair trapped inside the skull. She said the proof of this was the escaping hair that can be seen growing out of male ears. Her solution was to try to reduce the size of her patients' brains by teaching them to forget stuff and cleanse their brains of unwanted information. As far as I know she had never had any success but this hadn't diluted her enthusiasm for her theory.

* * *

I'd first met Patchy Fogg, the groom to be, when Patsy and I were buying old furniture for Bilbury Grange.

Patchy was an antique dealer and we'd met at an auction when, in order to push up the price he finally obtained, he had persuaded me to bid for a davenport that he was selling.

At the time Patchy didn't live in Bilbury but he was well-known in the village. His ponytail was tied back with a small red ribbon and he always wore what looked like the same dirty jeans and a grubby T-shirt. He and Thumper Robinson were great pals (the two of them played regularly in the spectacularly unsuccessful Bilbury football team) and were always thinking of new ways to help liberate tourists (especially American tourists) from money they didn't really need.

Patchy once sold an early Victorian television cabinet to a bumptious and self-confident American who had made millions as a stock market analyst. He even claimed that Queen Victoria herself had once owned the cabinet.

Pretending that the stuff he was selling had once been owned by someone famous (and invariably dead) was one of Patchy's favourite and most profitable ploys.

'Aren't you worried he'll go to the police?' I asked Patchy when I'd heard about the sale of the antique television cabinet.

Patchy, clearly unworried, shrugged. 'He'd have to admit he was stupid enough to buy a Victorian television cabinet,' he said with his usual lopsided smile. Selling genuine antique television cabinets was one of Patchy's most bizarre but most lucrative specialities.

Patchy described himself as a dealer in very nearly genuine antiques and had, over the years, taught me more than I probably needed to know about the antique trade. To be honest neither Patsy nor I really approved of many of the things he got up to. But the antiques trade is full of loveable but slightly dodgy characters and even though he was definitely slightly dodgy, Patchy was also definitely loveable. We consoled ourselves with the thought that most of the people he cheated were already cheating someone else.

At an auction in South Molton I once found him staining an antique lace table cloth by pouring red dye onto the lace from a small glass bottle.

'What on earth are you doing?' I asked him, appalled.

'It'll wash out,' he murmured. 'Just a vegetable dye.'

'But why do that?' I asked him, naively.

'It'll put other people off and keep the price down,' he explained. 'I'll wash out the dye and sell it on for what it's really worth.'

A few minutes later I saw Patchy chatting to a big dealer from Exeter.

'What was that all about?' I asked him.

'He was interested in the lace tablecloth but didn't want to bid on it because it's got a nasty wine stain on it,' said Patchy. 'He was worried about whether the stain would come out cleanly.' He winked at me. 'I told him not to bother bidding because I had a perfect cloth, the same size, that I could let him have tomorrow.'

And so Patchy bought the lace cloth cheaply, washed it in his bath that night, dried it and sold it to the dealer in Exeter for several times what he'd paid for it.

On another occasion, at an auction in Lynton, I saw Patchy accidentally-on-purpose break a small piece of glass in the front of a magnificent bookcase.

'What on earth did you do that for?' I demanded. 'It's a beautiful piece of furniture.'

'But flawed now,' said Patchy, skilfully using a small screwdriver to remove a handle from one of the doors.

'And you just happen to have a piece of old glass that you can use to replace the piece you've just broken?'

'Something like that,' grinned Patchy, slipping the handle into his pocket. He then strolled away and hovered over a beautiful set of twelve Georgian silver fruit knives. 'Look at these beautiful knives!' he said, picking up one and showing me the handle. When he moved away the knife went with him, leaving just eleven remaining.

'That's stealing!' I told him. 'If they catch you...'

'I'm not stealing anything,' he replied, sliding the knife into a tray containing several dozen items of miscellaneous cutlery oddments. The knife disappeared underneath a layer of nondescript and unattractive electroplated forks and tarnished spoons.

Naturally, it was Patchy who was the successful bidder on the eleven Georgian silver fruit knives and it was Patchy who, to everyone's surprise, bothered to bid on the unwanted tray of kitchen cutlery.

Patchy didn't only cheat when he was buying. He was an equal opportunities cheat. I once visited him at home and found him dropping handfuls of shiny horse brasses into a bowl full of vinegar and brand new screws into a jar full of very salty water.

'It ages them nicely,' he explained.

And it was Patchy who taught me some of the more honourable tricks of the antiques trade.

At an auction in Barnstaple I spotted a first edition of a book by Graham Greene stuck in a row of old book club editions about gardening and cooking. The only book I wanted was the Greene. It still had a clean and bright dust jacket.

'Do you think the auctioneer would just sell me the Greene?' I asked.

Patchy looked at me pityingly. 'Don't draw attention to the first edition,' he told me. 'Just bid on the row of books and pay what you think the Greene is worth.'

I did as I was told and got the collection for a fraction of the value of the Graham Greene first edition.

'Pick up the book you want,' said Patchy.

I picked up the Greene and slipped it into my overcoat pocket. 'Now what do I do with all these books?' I asked. There were at least forty old books in which I had absolutely no interest.

Patchy took me across the room to the underbidder – the person who had bid £1 less than I had for the row of books.

'My chum only wanted one book from that last lot,' Patchy said. 'Do you want the rest for £1 less than you were bidding?'

'Great!' said the underbidder enthusiastically.

And so I got the book I wanted for a total outlay of £2.

* * *

Patchy's two main redeeming features were that he loved animals and had a heart of gold. I had first hand experience of this shortly after he and I first met.

Alfred Burton, a farmer who lived half way between Bilbury and Combe Martin, had gone bankrupt and his land, house and farm machinery were all being sold off at auction. Alfred had moved into a cottage in Combe Martin with his eighty-five-year-old mother and he wasn't too upset by what had happened. 'I used to work from five in the morning until ten or eleven at night,' he told me when I asked how he was. 'Nowadays I get up when I feel like it and the day is mine to do with as I like. Some days I go down to the coast and do a little sea fishing. Occasionally, I just walk in the woods.' He'd even discovered the joys of reading and could often be seen walking around the village with a book in his hand. I'd given him a battered old paperback copy of a novel by P.G.Wodehouse and he'd become a huge fan of Jeeves and Wooster.

Not having much money to spend on books (even second-hand ones) he'd joined the local branch of the public library and every Thursday afternoon he took out half a dozen books when the travelling library bus stopped at Bilbury.

'The cottage is in my Mum's name,' he told me. 'If she lives another few years I'll be free of the bankruptcy and I can inherit the cottage without the bailiffs taking it from me.'

His one big sadness was that the bankruptcy people had decided that his dog was a saleable asset belonging to his farm. They'd confiscated the dog and put it into kennels so that it could be sold alongside the thirty cows, the milking machinery, the twenty-fiveyear-old Massey Ferguson tractor, a hundred and sixty bales of straw and all the rest of his worldly goods.

And so, on the auction catalogue there was a line which read: Lot 151: 'One working sheep dog (five-years-old). Name of Lady.'

Alfred was at the auction but only because he knew it was his last chance to see Lady. Good working sheep dogs fetch quite a high price and Alfred knew that there was no way he could afford to buy Lady back.

A bailiff led Lady into the barn, where the auction was being held, on lead fashioned out of a piece of string. Lady wasn't used to being on a lead - I don't think Alfred had ever put one on her - and she fretted. When the bailiff brought her into the barn she looked around the familiar sights and sniffed at the air. This was her territory. I don't know whether she smelt or saw Alfred but suddenly she made a leap in his direction. The bailiff couldn't hold onto his end of the string and moments later Lady and Alfred were temporarily reunited. When the bailiff, accompanied now by one of his colleagues, dragged Lady away from Alfred the barn fell totally silent. There were some hard men in that room but no one said a word. With tears running down his cheeks Alfred turned away and walked out of the barn. Held by the bailiff, Lady whimpered and watched him go. It was one of the most painful things I ever saw.

There wasn't much of interest to Patchy or to me at the auction. Most of Alfred's furniture was riddled with woodworm and neither of us was in the market for milk churns, butter making machinery or rusty farm equipment.

Patchy bought three old-fashioned three-legged milking stools (which he would later claim had once belonged to - and been used by Marie Antoinette - and sell to a London dealer for nearly one hundred times what he paid for them) but I didn't buy anything.

Lot 151 came up just before the lunch break and Patchy and I had already decided that we wouldn't bother staying for the afternoon session.

'I'm going to bid for the dog,' I whispered, as the auctioneer announced the lot.

'No,' hissed Patchy. 'Leave it to me. I've dealt with it.'

Like many professional dealers Patchy didn't make a big fuss when he made a bid and I didn't see him move or make any sign when he bid for the dog. Indeed, I wasn't even sure he'd been successful when the auctioneer suddenly brought down his gavel and announced a thirty minute lunch break. The whole thing had been over in a second or two.

'Did you get it?' I asked, but Patchy was off, heading for the desk where bidders paid for their purchases and got the slips of paper which entitled them to pick up their goods. I followed, several yards behind him, struggling through the crowd of people heading out of the barn and towards the van parked outside where a husband and wife team from Ilfracombe were selling coffee and hot dogs.

'Carry these,' he said, moments later, thrusting two milking stools at me. He carried the third stool in his left hand. And in his right hand he had the piece of string to which Lady was attached.

'Come on, Lady,' he said. 'Let's take you where you belong.'

We overtook Alfred a quarter of a mile before he got to his mother's cottage. Patchy stopped his old Volvo but neither he nor I had chance to get out of the car before Lady. The moment Patchy opened his door Lady squeezed past him and out into Alfred's arms.

Alfred didn't speak. He wrapped his arms around Lady's neck, and his eyes, when he looked up at us, said everything that needed to be said.

'See you around Alfred,' said Patchy.

'Thank you,' mouthed Alfred silently, unfastening the string from around Lady's neck.

'Pleasure,' said Patchy, meaning it. Patchy headed back to Bilbury Grange.

'Let me pay half of what you paid for Lady,' I said.

'OK,' said Patchy, more quickly than I had expected.

'How much do I owe you?' I asked, reaching for my wallet.

'A halfpenny,' replied Patchy.

'Don't be daft. How much do I owe you?'

'A halfpenny,' repeated Patchy.

'How much did you pay for Lady?'

'A penny. Your maths isn't very good is it?'

'But...'

'No one bid against me,' said Patchy. 'I bid a penny and got the dog.'

I looked at him.

'I had a word with a few people,' he said. 'Everyone agreed to keep their hands in their pockets. The auctioneer's a good bloke. He didn't mind.'

I left my wallet where it was and fumbled in my pocket.

Eventually I found a halfpenny. I handed it to Patchy. He took it, nodded, and put it in his pocket.

It was the best halfpenny I ever spent.

* * *

'So, when is the wedding?' I asked Patsy.

'Two weeks on Saturday.'

'They're not hanging around, are they!' I paused. 'Is there, er, any particular reason for the hurry?'

Patsy laughed. 'No, we're the only ones who are about to become parents. They're both pretty impetuous people though. And having decided that they want to get married they thought they might as well get on with it.'

'Where are they getting married?'

'Bilbury Church.'

Suddenly, I caught sight of the clock. 'I've got more visits to do,' I said. 'If I don't get them done soon I'll still be doing visits after dinner tonight.'

'Will you be going past the shop?'

'I can do,' I said. 'Do you need something?'

Patsy looked slightly embarrassed. 'Could you get me a pot of Marmite and some ginger biscuits?'

I looked at her and smiled.

'I just fancy some Marmite on a ginger biscuit,' she said.

* * *

'I've had your results back,' I told Gloria Ross. 'You've got thyrotoxicosis. It explains why you've had a job putting on weight.'

She looked worried. 'Is that bad?'

'Not really,' I told her. 'Your thyrotoxicosis is quite mild. I want you to see a specialist so that we can make sure that we get your treatment right. But it shouldn't be difficult.'

'Will I need an operation?'

I shook my head. 'I don't think so. We can almost certainly control it with some tablets,' I told her.

'Will the tablets help me put on weight?'

'Yes.'

'Does this mean my bum will get bigger?' she wanted to know.

I told her that she could count on it.

She beamed with delight and said she couldn't wait to start the treatment.

It wasn't quite the response I usually got from patients. I don't think I'd ever before had a patient who had been thrilled that the treatment she needed would give her a bigger bottom.

* * *

I headed for home and picked up the items Patsy wanted on my way.

'Ginger biscuits and one pot of Marmite,' I said, putting one of Peter's brown paper bags down on the kitchen table.

'Oh wonderful,' said Patsy, grabbing the bag. 'I was hoping you wouldn't forget.' She opened the Marmite and the packet of biscuits and took a knife out of the cutlery drawer.

I then watched, transfixed, as she spread Marmite on one of the ginger biscuits.

'You're not going to eat that?'

She didn't answer immediately but, instead, put the biscuit into her mouth and took a huge bite.

I stared.

'Khgj ty kdil wkhekt kehd kjgl qtkh ptkl ktlrk bklepwjg rtwkl kbjtlg kmnfght lktqpb kghys,' she said.

I didn't understand a word of what she said, but I knew exactly what she meant.

'This is what people mean when they talk about pregnant women having strange eating urges.'

Patsy beamed and swallowed. 'Oh that was wonderful,' she said. 'I'll just have one more and then I'll make dinner.'

* * *

We had finished dinner and we were sitting in the garden, on an old battered bench near to the lake. We each had a glass of fruit juice in our hands. The bottle was leaning against the trunk of a willow tree. Patsy had stopped drinking alcohol during her pregnancy and when I was with her I didn't drink either.

We both love sitting by our small lake. That year we even had a pair of swans nesting by it. We both love swans. As Patsy once put it, swans remind us of a wedding party full of brides. We had spent many happy hours watching 'our' two swans glide, apparently effortlessly across the lake, surrounded by a cygnet ring – a circle of young swans.

'We haven't talked about what we're going to call the baby,' said Patsy.

'It rather depends what sex it is.'

'It's going to be a boy.'

'How do you know that?' I asked. We had agreed not to let the doctors tell us the sex of our baby.

Patsy shrugged and smiled. 'I just know,' she said.

'Then, assuming it to be a boy, what do you want to call him?'

There was a flash of blue as a kingfisher swooped low over the water.

'Did you see that?' I asked, in a whisper.

'Yes,' she answered. There was a long pause. We both sipped our drinks. 'We could name him after you.'

I shuddered. 'Thanks,' I said. 'But I don't think I want that. He'd be known as Junior and it will look as if we're trying to start a dynasty.'

'I don't want to name him after my Dad,' said Patsy. Neither of us spoke for a while. Two moorhens swam silently among the bulrushes at the edge of the lake.

'No.' I said quietly at last. 'Perhaps not.' Patsy's father has two Christian names. The first is Gilbert. The second is Arnold.

'But we've got to call him something,' said Patsy. I agreed with her.

'There's one person I would like to name him after,' I said.

'Me too,' admitted Patsy.

'You first.'

'I wondered if we could perhaps name him after Dr Brownlow,' I suggested. 'He brought us together. I admire him a lot. He's always been good to us. If it hadn't been for him we would never have met and I wouldn't be living in Bilbury.' I paused. 'And I don't know anyone I respect more.'

Patsy nodded her agreement. 'He was my choice,' she said. 'I'd like that.'

We sat there for a while, holding hands.

'There's just one thing,' said Patsy.

'What's that?'

'I don't know Dr Brownlow's Christian name. Do you?'

I thought about this for a while. 'No,' l said at last. 'Maybe we should find out,' said Patsy.

'Certainly before the christening,' I agreed. 'I'll ask him.'

'I expect he'll know,' said Patsy.

'I expect so.'

'That's settled then.'

We sat in silence and watched the moorhens.

I picked up the bottle and shared its remaining contents between us. 'You could drink wine,' said Patsy. 'I wouldn’t mind.’

‘This is good,’ I said, lifting the glass of juice and sipping it. We sat in silence for a while.

Patsy shivered.

‘Cold?’

She nodded.

‘Let’s go indoors. I’ll make a log fire and we’ll create pictures out of the flames.’

Both of us love few things more than a nice log fire. All the joys of a bonfire but held indoors out of the cold and the rain.

Unfortunately, our log fire wasn’t quite the success I’d hoped it would be. Minutes after I’d lit the fire the room was filled with smoke.

‘I’m fed up with this,’ I said wearily. Ever since we’d been at Bilbury Grange there had been problems with the fire. ‘Maybe there is a blockage,’ I said. ‘Perhaps there is a nest.’

‘Those people from Barnstaple wanted to fit a fan,’ Patsy reminded me.

‘They also wanted a small fortune,’ I reminded her.

‘I’ll call the chimney sweep tomorrow,’ said Patsy. ‘Maybe he can do something to help.’

We gave up on the log fire and went to bed instead. It had been a long and eventful day. I took with me the novel I was reading. But I was fast asleep before I could even open the book.

CHAPTER 21

Patsy was away in Barnstaple helping her sister Adrienne choose a wedding dress so I went round to the Duck and Puddle for my lunch. The moment I walked in through the door I sensed that something was different. The bar smelt of a curious mixture of furniture polish and cooking. But the cooking smell wasn't the aroma produced by pies being heated up in the oven. This was the sort of smell you get in a restaurant.

'Good morning, sir!' cried a strange voice the moment I walked in through the door. I turned and looked around. A small, thin stranger with a small thin moustache was standing behind the bar. He wore a checked sports coat with a woollen shirt and a neatly knotted military tie which I didn't recognise. He had a tea towel in one hand and a pint glass in the other. I noticed that his cufflinks carried an emblem which seemed to match the one on his tie.

'Good morning!' I replied. 'Where's Frank?'

'Mr and Mrs Parsons are on leave this weekend.'

'Ah, yes,' I said. 'I remember now.' Frank had taken Gilly to London for the weekend as a belated birthday present.

'I'm Sidney Weedon,' said the barman, 'but people usually call me Lionel. My wife, Mrs Weedon, will attend to any culinary needs you might have.'

I stared at him. I didn't mean to be rude but I was rather startled.

As a regular customer in the Duck and Puddle I wasn't used to this level of service.

The stand-in publican leant forwards across the bar. 'Anything you might need to eat,' he explained.

'Yes,' I said. 'Of course.'

'What can I get you to drink, sir?' he asked.

I asked for a pint of Guinness. While he poured the drink, taking great care with the head, I looked around for the jar of pickled eggs which Frank usually kept on the bar counter. 'Where are the eggs?' I asked.

'We had to move them I'm afraid, sir,' he replied. 'Current health and safety regulations forbid the sale of such items unless the container is fitted with a sealed cap.'

'There is a lid somewhere,' I told him, looking around in the hope that I might spot it. 'I remember we were using it as a Frisbee a few days ago.'

Sidney, known as Lionel, lowered his voice. 'I'm afraid that according to the bar records the eggs were a little past their recommended date for sale,' he told me. I paid him, exchanged a few words about the weather we were having for the time of year and sauntered over to the far corner of the bar where Patchy and Thumper were watching horse racing on Frank's flickering black and white television set.

'Has anyone won anything?' I asked, sitting down next to Thumper. The chair had been polished and felt slightly sticky.

'We're just thinking up daft names for horses,' said Thumper.

'Thumper wants to have a really useless horse called The Winner,' said Patchy.

I looked at him and frowned. 'Why?'

'Because it will be fun when the chap who does the commentating has to say: 'And The Winner came last."

I nodded. 'I can see that would be mildly confusing,' I agreed.

'I want one called The Pantomime Horse,' said Patchy.

'...and The Pantomime Horse is coming up on the outside!' said Thumper, mimicking the sound of a horse race commentator.

'How about The One At The Back,' I suggested.

'The winner is The One At The Back,' said Thumper. He thought about it. 'I like that,' he nodded. 'Very good.'

'Heavily Doped,' suggested Patchy. 'And the horse who came in third was 'Heavily Doped'.'

Thumper and I both agreed that we liked that too.

I lowered my voice. 'Have you met the curious little bloke behind the bar?' I asked. The television flickered and slipped. Patchy stood up and slammed the side of the television with an open palm. The television stopped flickering and the picture reappeared. Patchy muttered something about the television set probably having been the set John Logie Baird had built when he'd invented television.

'Lionel known as Sidney?' said Thumper.

'I think it's Sidney known as Lionel,' I said.

'Whatever,' said Thumper.

'He's confiscated the pickled eggs and there's a smell of cooking coming out of the kitchen,' I said.

'I know,' said Patchy. 'I find it all rather worrying. I'm glad Frank and Gilly are only away for the weekend.'

'Have you eaten?' I asked.

'We were waiting for you,' said Patchy. 'We thought you'd be in since your good lady wife has gone off helping my bride-to-be to spend some money.'

'Don't misunderstand. We weren't waiting out of any sense of politeness,' said Thumper quickly. 'We wanted you here in case we get food poisoning.'

'Sensible,' I nodded. I half turned and called over to the barman. 'What are you doing for lunch?'

'I'll ask Mrs Weedon to bring you the menu,' he told me.

'A Big Brown Labrador,' suddenly suggested Thumper.

'And A Big Brown Labrador has thrown its jockey at the fourth fence,' said Patchy, nodding approval. 'I like that. Not as good as 'Heavily Doped' though.'

Mrs Weedon must have been on starting blocks in the kitchen. She appeared almost instantly. 'I've brought you the menus,' she said.

We all stared at her. Our staring had nothing to do with the fact that she must have weighed thirty stones and had a moustache bigger than her husband's but was entirely a result of the fact that she had brought us menus. Frank and Gilly had once tried producing menus but had long since given up. When all you serve is meat pies, chips, pickled eggs and crisps a menu becomes a rather embarrassing luxury.

'You've got menus?' said Patchy.

She handed us each a red plastic folder. 'Would you like to see the wine list?' she asked.

'We'll just have more of what we were drinking,' said Thumper in a very thin little voice. He looked at Patchy and then at me.

'Unless you two...'

'More of the same is fine with me,' said Patchy.

'Me too,' I agreed. 'Two pints of draught bitter and a pint of Guinness please.'

'I'll have the same,' said Thumper.

Mrs Weedon looked confused.

'Just joking,' explained Thumper quickly.

'I'll leave the menus with you for your perusal,' said Mrs Weedon. 'If you have any queries just ask Mr Weedon to let me know.'

'What's this one,' asked Thumper, who had already opened his menu. He pointed to the top item on the list.

Patchy and I opened our menus and looked at the item to which he was pointing.

Thumper read it out.

'Steaming Hot Natural Pulses Resting On A Grilled Slice From A Fresh Wholemeal Farmhouse Bloomer Generously Bathed In A Succulent Tomato Based Sauce.'

Mrs Weedon, who had already taken a few steps back towards the kitchen, turned back towards us, looked at the menu Thumper was holding and repeated what he had read out.

'Give us a clue,' said Patchy. 'What does it look like?'

'It looks like beans on toast,' said Mrs Weedon.

'It's beans on toast?' asked Thumper, incredulously.

'Some people might call it that,' said Mrs Weedon. 'But Lionel and I believe that presentation and nomenclature are very important in the restaurant trade.'

'And what's a Norway lobster?' asked Patchy.

'That would be commonly known as scampi.'

We thanked her and told her that we would probably be able to work out the rest of the menu but that if we had any more difficulty we would call her and ask her to translate for us.

After twenty minutes of careful study we asked Lionel if he would be kind enough to send Mrs Weedon back to our table.

'I'll have Norway lobster Cooked In Hot Oil With A Covering Of Crumbed Cottage Loaf And Served With Hand Fried Sliced Potatoes,' said Patchy.

'I'll have Chunky Slices Of Best Gloucester Packed Together With Succulent Pieces Of Sun Ripened Tomato Between Sliced Crusty Farmhouse Loaf,' said Thumper.

'And I'll have Steaming Hot Natural Pulses Resting On A Grilled Slice From A Fresh Wholemeal Farmhouse Bloomer Generously Bathed In A Succulent Tomato Based Sauce,' I said.

We sat back and waited. Patchy for his scampi and chips, Thumper for his cheese and tomato sandwich and me for my beans on toast.

Sitting there in the Duck and Puddle life seemed all tickety, with hardly any boo in it at all.

CHAPTER 22

'I'm glad you called in,' said Dr Brownlow. He was, if possible, even thinner than ever. The skin stretched taut over his cheekbones looked like transparent parchment. But although sunken, his eyes were still bright. 'There are a couple of things I want you to do for me.'

'Anything,' I promised.

'You haven't heard what I want yet.'

'I don't care what it is. I'll do it.' He grinned. 'Risky promise.'

I shook my head.

'First, the easy one.'

'OK.'

'Look after Bradshaw for me.'

'Your butler?'

Dr Brownlow nodded.

'He's going to be my new district nurse.'

'You're still sure about that?'

'Certain.'

'What about the bureaucrats?' Dr Brownlow was right. Hiring an 82-year-old former butler as a district nurse would probably create a few problems with the local bureaucrats.

'Bugger them.'

'Just like that?'

'Just like that. They said I could choose my own nurse.'

'He's lived with me so long he's like family.'

'I know.'

'He's got nowhere else to live and he's got no relatives.' I nodded.

'He's 82.'

'I'm not surprised. I thought he was older.'

'I think he probably is. He's been 82 since 1968.'

'Then he's probably older than 82.'

'Bradshaw is a good nurse.'

'I know he is.'

'I'm leaving him the cottage the housekeeper used to have. He can live there.'

'Great. I need him now but I hope I have to wait a long time before he's free.'

'I don't think you'll have to wait long,' said Dr Brownlow, with a faint smile.

'What's the second thing?'

'Pour a couple of whiskies.'

I poured us both a whisky. A small one for me and a large one for Dr Brownlow. I added a lot of water to mine.

'One of my ambitions has always been to be bankrupt at the time of my death,' he said. 'I always rather liked the idea of popping off without leaving enough to pay the solicitor or the damned funeral people. I rather thought it would be nice to die broke, with the Government desperate to sue me for unpaid taxes.'

'A noble thought,' I said, sipping at my whisky.

'But as things stand I don't think I'm going to manage that.'

I couldn't think of anything suitable to say so I didn't say anything.

'So I want you to take this to the bank.' He picked up a white envelope from the table on his left and handed it to me.

'OK.'

'Aren't you going to ask me what's in it?'

'If you want me to know you'll tell me.'

He smiled. 'It contains a letter to the bank manager and a cheque made out to cash. The letter tells the bank manager to give you the cash to bring to me.'

'Right.'

'But I don't want you to bring me the cash.' He handed me another white envelope.

'Open that one.'

I opened it. The envelope contained a receipt, signed by Dr Brownlow. I didn't read it properly.

'This is a receipt...'

‘I know what it is.’

‘You realise that now that I’ve got the letter, the cheque and the receipt the money can just disappear?’

‘That’s what I thought.’

‘So, what do you want me to do with it?’

‘I’d like you to give it away. Do good things with it. Bilbury Mothers Wednesday and Friday Evenings Social Club. Church Organ Fund. Bilbury Boys Summer Outing. Anything you like that helps Bilbury. But don’t draw attention to yourself. If I just leave you this money in my Will the Government will grab a great chunk of it. But they won’t spend money on helping Bilbury survive.’

Sadly, he was right. The Government (in the unpleasant shape of a bunch of NHS bureaucrats) had deliberately closed down Bilbury’s only medical practice. It was only through the slightly devious efforts of the villagers that the Government had been forced to change its mind.

‘Did you know that the Bilbury Mothers Wednesday and Friday Evenings Social Club now meets on Tuesdays and Thursdays?’ I asked him.

‘I had heard.’

‘But they kept the name because they had some leftover stationery.’

He smiled.

‘How much is the cheque for?’

‘£50,000.’

I sipped some more whisky. ‘£50,000?’ He nodded.

‘Cash?’

‘Cash.’

‘Is that legal?’

‘I acquired it legally. It’s my money. I don’t see why it isn’t legal for me to take it out of the bank. They may need a day or two to get the money ready.’

‘I would imagine they will. It’s quite a lot of cash. What about the taxman?’

‘It’s money I’ve paid tax on.’

‘I’m pleased to hear it. But will the taxman be concerned at my taking £50,000 out of the bank and giving it away?’

‘You’re not taking the money. You’ve got a receipt which shows that you gave the money to me.’

‘Ah.’

‘I talked to my solicitor and my accountant about this.’

‘What did they say?’

‘The taxman might want to question me at some point when my estate is being looked at for probate. He might feel that if the £50,000 hadn’t gone missing then there would have been some tax to pay on it.’

‘Inheritance tax?’

‘Exactly.’

I looked at him. ‘They’ll want to question you?’

He nodded.

‘When your estate is being looked at?’

Another nod.

‘After you’re dead?’

‘After I’m dead.’

‘I would imagine you will be tempted to ignore them?’

‘I would imagine I will. They will want to question me to find out what I did with the £50,000 I took out of the bank. And although you will have physically taken the cash out of the bank you, of course, will have a receipt signed by me.’

I picked up the receipt. ‘This receipt.’

‘Precisely. That receipt.’

‘So the money will have just disappeared.’

‘Like magic. The taxman can’t come after you to find out what happened to the money because you will have a receipt. And he can’t come after me because I’ll be dead.’

‘Hmmm.’ I said. I sipped at my whisky and then emptied the glass. ‘Do you mind if I have another whisky?’

‘Please do.’

I poured myself more whisky. I added some to Dr Brownlow’s glass too.

‘I would suggest that you tell no one you can’t trust about this little scheme of ours. You must tell Patsy, of course.’

I sipped more whisky. ‘I will tell Thumper,’ I said. ‘And Patchy.’ I thought a little more. ‘And Miss Johnson.’

Dr Brownlow nodded his agreement. ‘Do what you like with the money. My only suggestion is that I’d like you to spend most of it on helping the village. Feed it in here and there. Or one big splash. Whatever you think.’

‘I will do that,’ I promised. I was touched that he knew he could trust me not to spend it on cars, booze and fancy clothes.

‘And I’m leaving the house to you,’ he said.

I sipped at the whisky and said nothing for a long, long time. Neither of us said anything.

‘What do you want me to do with it?’ I asked him.

‘You won’t live in it?’

I shook my head. ‘It’s a beautiful house,’ I told him. ‘But you’re my patient. I can’t accept money from you.’

‘Then do something with it. Just don’t let anyone turn it into twelve bijou apartments for retirees from London. And don’t let anyone knock it down and put up a supermarket. Use it for the village.’

‘How?’

He looked at me. ‘You’re sure you won’t live in it?’

‘No. Thank you but no.’

‘You don’t want to sell it and keep the money?’

I smiled. ‘No. Thank you but no.’ I paused. ‘Your son won’t like not having the house, I added.’

‘I don’t like him and he doesn’t like me,’ said Dr Brownlow. ‘If I leave him the house he’ll have the architects in before I’m cold and they’ll turn it into a corporate headquarters, a country hotel or luxury apartments. Why should I leave him the house or anything else?’

‘He’ll be cross.’

Dr Brownlow laughed lightly. ‘He’ll be very cross. Furious. And he might try to dispute the Will. But my solicitor assures me it’s watertight. I had my signature witnessed by a psychiatrist and a judge so that no one could claim I was not of sound mind when I signed it.’

‘Clever stuff.’

‘I’m a clever fellow.’

‘I know you are.’

It was his turn to smile. ‘There is one thing you might consider.’

‘What’s that?’

‘A cottage hospital.’ I stared at him.

‘Bilbury needs a tiny hospital of its own. Just a few beds. Nothing elaborate. Somewhere friendly and local for patients to be looked after when they’re too ill to stay at home but not really ill enough to be in a proper hospital.’

‘We would never get the Government to help.’

‘No.’

‘It would cost quite a bit to convert the house into a hospital.’ He nodded.

‘And then there would be running costs. Wages. Heat. That sort of thing.’

Another nod.

‘The £50,000?’

He smiled. ‘After paying tax, £50,000 wouldn’t be enough. With no tax to pay you could get the conversion work done and have some left over to pay for the running of the hospital for a year or two.’

I looked at him and saw that his eyes were closed. I got up, very gently took his hand and felt for his pulse. It was fine.

‘You clever, clever old man,’ I murmured quietly, I walked over to the window and looked out at the gardens.

When I’d first seen Dr Brownlow’s house I had thought it the most impressive building I’d ever seen – the most impressive house that didn’t belong to the National Trust or have coach loads of day trippers parading through it. Built entirely of grey stone, softened slightly by several acres of green ivy, the house had towers, battlements and mullion windows. There was a Union Jack flying from a pole fixed at an acute angle to the front of the central tower. The front door, directly underneath the flag, and flanked by two huge stone lions, was twelve feet high and decorated with scores of very solid looking metal studs. When I’d first seen it I’d half expected Vincent Price (or a hunchbacked minion) to open the door with a good deal of creaking.

Dr Brownlow had bought the house together with his wife and it was the gardens which were his particular pride and joy. There was a formal lawn, a huge Victorian greenhouse and a large walled vegetable garden as well as several acres of woodland. Dr Brownlow loved trees in the same way that some men love cars or boats. He would take me on walks around the woodland and talk to me about them.

‘See those walnut trees,’ I remember him saying. ‘That’s the biggest group of walnut trees in the whole of North Devon.’ He was very proud of them.

‘Do they produce nuts?’ I’d asked.

‘Of course they do,’ he said. ‘You have to wait until they’re ready to fall. You wait until the nuts are too heavy for the twig which carries them. They break off under their own weight and fall to the ground. When the tree is near to a tarmacadamed road you can hear the constant thud thud of nuts falling like stones being thrown. If you pick them too soon, as some people do, you end up with nuts which aren’t properly matured. When they’ve fallen you let them dry out in baskets in the sunshine and then store them somewhere dry and airy. It’s the fruit that are formed on the outer branches which are best. They get the most sunshine and air. The nuts at the centre of the tree are comparatively poor.’

His two dogs, now gone, used to love eating walnuts. They were only supposed to eat the ones which had broken open but they would crack the others with their teeth and then chew the nuts. Dr Brownlow had a small wooden block and a matching wooden hammer which he’d bought in a village in France in the 1930s. It was, he said, the way the French peasants used to break open their walnut shells.

‘In rural France they used to use the leaves of the walnut tree too,’ he told me. ‘Though they probably don’t bother now. They used to lay the leaves out in the sun for a while, though not long enough for them to lose their colour, and then move them into a barn. When the leaves were brittle they would rub them between their palms and put the powder into a wine bottle. They’d then cover the leaf powder with eau-de-vie spirit. They’d leave them for a fortnight and then strain the liquid through a muslin cloth, put it into bottles, add red wine and twelve lumps of sugar per bottle. They called it quinquina and it was,’ he said, ‘the most glorious liqueur known to man.’

Although he loved his trees he knew that occasionally they had to be felled. ‘These days,’ I remember him telling me, ‘the so-called scientific foresters cut trees by the acre.’ He shuddered. ‘No sensible woodman does that,’ he said. ‘If you cut all the trees at once you have rows of young trees all fighting to survive at the same time. All the bugs have a field day. Instead, you should cut down each tree as it reaches its prime and then plant another in its place. And you don’t cut them at ground level, like so many do these days. That leaves a stump which is terribly difficult to remove. You put a cable on a high branch and use a winch to pull the tree down in the right direction. Then while the tree is leaning you dig around the tree on the opposite side, cut off the roots and pull them out. All the time you tighten the winch, pulling on the tree and pulling out more roots. It takes much longer than just chopping through the trunk, of course, but when you’ve done it this way you can plant another tree in the same place. You haven’t wasted the land.’

He was, I remembered, angry that modern farmers and scientific foresters (he used to say the phrase ‘scientific foresters’ in the same way that he would say the words ‘administrator’ and ‘bureaucrat’) would fell trees without replacing them. He compared it to using up the soil without returning the wastes to restock the minerals in the earth. He loved nature and hated those who overfished the seas or polluted our rivers. He thought oxen and horses were a great natural way to return nitrogen to the land. He hated tractors. ‘They tear at the land, they cost a fortune to run, they make a great noise and a horrible smell. They give no pleasure and they return nothing to the land. A good horse or ox does its work and fertilises the land at the same time. He hated the way that country children were running off to the city, getting degrees in subjects he’d never heard of and becoming managers of fast food stores. He was depressed that so many young people couldn’t do things with their hands any more.

I remember him stopping beside a huge poplar and touching the bark with his hand, as though caressing a dear friend. ‘Over one hundred feet high and with a circumference of eight feet,’ he said. ‘Just twenty-years-old. I planted this tree. As white as a silver birch but pearly. A wonderful tree. You cut off the small side branches and the trunk continues to grow straight and true. Because there are no side branches there will be no knots in the wood. And because there are no side branches there is no shade hanging over whatever is growing nearby. He picked up a handful of twigs lying on the ground underneath the tree and made me do the same. ‘Poplar twigs make great kindling,’ he said. ‘Almost as good as ash.’

Walnut wood and oak make the best furniture, he told me.

He said that an oak should be felled and left for years in the round out-of-doors before being cut into planks. ‘Then, when it is cut, the planks should be stored with strips between them so that the air can circulate. It takes 15 years for a piece of oak to season properly. These days they’re in too much of a hurry. They dry the wood in a kiln. A decent carpenter will know that the wood hasn’t been naturally seasoned.’

Looking through the window I saw a chestnut tree and remembered him telling me that if you put chestnuts into a box without drying them out first they will go bad within a week. ‘They will sweat and heat up and be inedible,’ he told me. ‘You have to dry them out before bagging them.’

‘Have I been dozing?’

I turned round. Dr Brownlow was awake and looking across at me.

‘Just for a minute or two.’

‘Sorry about that.’

‘It’s OK.’ I paused. ‘What do you want me to do with the house? You nodded off before you could answer.’

‘Whatever you like. But I don’t want you to give it away and I don’t want you to sell it unless you have to. I’m leaving you enough extra cash to pay any death duties so the house will be yours outright.’ He looked around. ‘It’s a nice house to live in if a little big for two.’

‘Three,’ I said.

He looked at me, with a raised eyebrow.

I told him about Patsy.

‘Congratulations.’ I could tell that he was genuinely pleased.

‘Thank you.’

‘Give my congratulations and my love to Patsy.’

‘I will.’

‘She’s a sweet, sweet girl.’

‘I know.’

‘Kindest girl I ever met. I once told her mother that when they made Patsy it must have been the end of a week. God filled her up with all the kindness he had left over.’

I smiled.

We sat in silence for a while.

‘You’re leaving me everything.’

‘So it would seem.’

‘Why?’

‘Why not?’

‘That’s not a very good answer.’

‘It’s as good as the question.’

I sipped more whisky. I would, I decided, have to walk home and then have a lot of black coffee before the evening surgery. I’d have to bicycle back and pick up the car later.

‘I’m very honoured,’ I said. Before Dr Brownlow could speak I held up a hand. ‘Not because you’re entrusting your house and a huge bundle of money to me. The house and the money are very nice but they’re not all that important.’ I coughed. It might have been the whisky. Or maybe the emotion. What I wanted to say was that I was pleased that he thought enough of me to do this. But I couldn’t get the words out. I think he knew anyway.

Dr Brownlow smiled. ‘I want you to have the Rolls as well,’ he said. Dr Brownlow had an ancient black 20/25 Rolls Royce; a magnificent piece of engineering. He’d had it for over thirty years and it was his pride and his joy. ‘It needs a service,’ he said. ‘And there’s a problem with the clutch.’

I nodded.

‘Surprisingly, you can take her to Tolstoy’s,’ said Dr Brownlow.

‘As you may have noticed they aren’t terribly good with modern machinery but they’re pretty good with old-fashioned motors – especially anything built before the Second World War. Get them to take a look at her.’

‘I will.’

‘I need some more morphine.’

I reached into my pocket, pulled out a prescription pad and wrote out a prescription for two dozen ampoules of morphine. I stood up and handed him the prescription.

‘Is your son arranging, er, things... for you afterwards?’

‘Is my son arranging the funeral?’ I nodded.

He shook his head slowly and deliberately. ‘You are,’ he said.

‘Any special requests.’

‘Get Peter to organise things. He’ll make a good job of things.’

‘Peter Marshall?’

‘Peter Marshall. He does funerals. Thumper is making the coffin. He’s a good workman when he isn’t busy being jack the lad. He put a bathroom in for me once you know. And made some panelling for the library when we had an attack of woodworm.’

‘If Thumper said he’ll make you a coffin then he’ll make you a good one.’

There was another long silence.

‘Any special hymns?’

Dr Brownlow shook his head. ‘Free drinks for the night at the Duck and Puddle.’

‘You’ll be a popular man.’

‘Cheap popularity.’

‘You don’t have to buy people drinks to be popular,’ I told him. ‘And you know it. But I’ll make sure Frank knows.’

I put the two envelopes into my jacket pocket. ‘I’ll leave my car here if you don’t mind,’ I told him. ‘I’ll come back for it after evening surgery.’

He nodded. He was almost asleep. He tired easily these days and didn’t seem to me to have long to go. My visit had taken a lot out of him. I tiptoed out of the room, said goodbye to Bradshaw and walked back to Bilbury Grange. It was a dry, fine afternoon. One of those crisp days that make you want to walk for ever.

CHAPTER 23

‘How did you get on in Barnstaple?’ I asked Patsy later that evening.

‘We found a wonderful dress,’ she told me. ‘But she decided it was too low cut at the front. She says men always look down on women in low cut dresses. Anyway, it was probably all a waste of time,’ she said. ‘Patchy has apparently found an old family dress he’d like Adrienne to wear.’

‘What other wonderful things has Adrienne been up to?’ I asked.

I always love hearing stories about Adrienne. She is a kind but slightly eccentric girl. She has a sweet tooth and loves food – particularly chocolate. She had once confessed that her skirts were made by Marks & Spencer but her bottom had been made by Cadbury.

‘We met Patchy for lunch,’ said Patsy. ‘Adrienne has got Patchy in quite a whirl,’ said Patsy. ‘She told him that she wants a dining table with two legs.’

I looked at Patsy and raised an eyebrow.

‘Patchy said that a table needs at least three legs and Adrienne wanted to know why. Patchy said because if it only has two legs it won’t stand up. And Adrienne said that was silly because she’s only got two legs and she can stand up.’

I laughed. ‘So Patchy has got to try to find a table with two legs?’

Patsy nodded.

‘Poor old Patchy,’ I said.

‘They’re going to be fine. She loves him to bits,’ said Patsy.

‘He’s a lot older than her,’ I pointed out.

‘She’s worried that he isn’t old enough!’ said Patsy.

‘That’s typical Adrienne!’ I said.

‘She says there’s an old adage that a girl should be half the age of the man she is marrying plus seven. So according to that she’s a bit too old for him.’

‘But she’ll cope?’

‘Definitely,’ nodded Patsy. ‘I know she’s a little strange sometimes. But what’s wrong with being a little strange?’

‘Absolutely nothing,’ I agreed.

‘She says Patchy told her he is a lucky man because he’ll get to sleep with a strange woman every night,’ said Patsy.

‘What did you say?’

‘I said she’s right,’ said Patsy. ‘I told her I get to sleep with a strange man every night and I’m very happy about it.’

‘And the strange man is pretty happy about it too,’ I said.

CHAPTER 24

Like all doctors I have, over the years, met a considerable number of hypochondriacs.

Dr Brownlow had taught me two important things about hypochondriacs.

First, they may not be genuinely ill but to them their fears are just as real as the fears of a patient with a genuine disorder.

Second, hypochondriacs do occasionally become really ill and so every complaint and every fear has to be taken seriously and, if necessary, investigated.

Every general practitioner has a few hypochondriacs to care for. Since mine was a relatively small practice I had relatively few genuine hypochondriacs. And mine all lived in the same household.

The Phatt family were the Bilbury hypochondriacs.

The Phatt family had moved into Bilbury about three months before I'd come out of my temporary retirement. There were four of them.

Phyllis Phatt, the mother, a tall, well-built but surprisingly flat-chested woman with the physique of a rugby forward; George, her husband, a small, rather weedy little man with a wisp of gingery hair combed across a bald head and a laugh like a schoolgirl. Phyllis, who was a good foot taller than her husband, called him Clint because she thought George was rather common. She treated him like a son rather than a husband.

'How many children do you have?' I had asked when we'd first met.

'Three,' she had replied. 'Two girls and a boy.'

'How old are they?'

'The youngest girl is 14, the eldest girl is 16 and my boy is 47.' The two daughters were Phoebe (the 14-year-old) and Pauline (the 16-year-old). Both daughters acted considerably younger than they were though both looked physically well-developed for their respective ages.

George had worked as a civil servant (he wouldn't ever tell anyone exactly which department he had worked for and since it seemed unlikely that he worked for the secret service it was generally accepted that he must have been employed by the Inland Revenue) and had taken early retirement as a result of what a letter in his medical notes referred to as 'an extensive variety of stress-related illnesses'.

Phyllis Phatt had telephoned me just a few days after I'd reopened my practice. She telephoned just as I started dinner one evening. Patsy took the call and told me that a woman called Hellaire wanted to speak to me.

'Mrs Hellaire?' I said, picking up the phone.

'Hellaire?'

'Is that Mrs Hellaire?'

'No. This is Mrs Phatt,' said the caller. 'Phyllis Phatt.' It was only when she spoke that I realised why Patsy had made the mistake. The woman spoke with a fake upper class accent and sounded like an American actress trying to play a British Duchess and failing miserably. I won't try to reproduce her awful accent. It is enough to say that when she said 'hello' it came out as 'hellaire'.

'I thought I ought to introduce myself, doctor,' she said. 'We're your patients now and I expect you'll be keen to get to know all about us.'

This, of course, is just the sort of telephone call a general practitioner enjoys. Especially when it comes just as he sits down to a meal after a long, busy day. I thanked her and asked her if there was anything in particular I could do for her.

'My husband and I both have a family history of high blood pressure,' she told me. 'We both need to have our blood pressure taken regularly. We have to be careful with our health, don't we? It's such a valuable gift.'

'Do you have high blood pressure?' I asked.

'Not at the moment,' she replied. 'But I expect we will one day. I always find myself aware of the fact that we're all of us just one heart beat away from the end. Just a second or two from death.'

'Quite.'

'We're so very, very vulnerable, aren't we?'

'I suppose we are.'

'And I'm pre-diabetic.'

'Pre-diabetic?' I repeated. It wasn't a phrase I'd ever heard before.

'It means that I'll develop diabetes one day,' she told me. She made this announcement proudly, as someone might say: 'I am an Olympic athlete. I'm hoping to win a gold medal.'

She then proceeded to treat me to a long and exhaustive description of her family's medical history.

'How long will you be?' whispered Patsy, coming into the hall where I was standing. 'Do I need to put your dinner in the oven?'

I put my hand over the telephone mouthpiece. 'Heaven knows,' I whispered back. 'Could you bring my dinner out here?'

Patsy nodded. Moments later she returned with a chair. Then she returned carrying a plate. Mrs Phatt, who must have had the fittest tongue in Britain, was now going at full steam. She was describing in minute detail an operation her father had had in 1947. Gently, I put the telephone down on the hall table, sat down on the chair Patsy had provided, picked up my dinner and began to eat. Not wanting to eat alone, Patsy brought out a second chair and her plate and sat with me. On the hall table Mrs Phatt chattered away. We couldn't hear everything she said but we could tell that she was still going well.

Fifteen minutes later I'd finished my dinner. I picked up the telephone. 'Hmmm,' I said, with non-committal interest. 'Very useful information.'

'I've still got my mother to tell you about,' said Mrs Phatt. 'And Mr Phatt's parents have a very interesting medical history.'

'It would help me enormously,' I said, 'if you could write all this down for me. Provide me with a sort of family tree, explaining all the family illnesses.'

'Oh certainly, doctor,' said Mrs Phatt eagerly. 'Mr Phatt and I can do that.'

'Splendid.'

'When shall we come round for our initial check ups?' she asked.

'Check ups?'

'I assume you'll want to give us all an examination,' said Mrs Phatt. 'Just so that you'll know what you're dealing with.'

'Of course,' I said, thanking my lucky stars that there was only one Mrs Phatt in the village.

'What time would be convenient for you?' she asked.

'Do you have jobs to go to? Is getting to the surgery difficult for you?'

'My husband is retired,' said Mrs Phatt. 'And I'm a houseswife.'

'Houseswife,' I repeated. 'Did you say 'houseswife'?'

'We've got a villa in Spain,' said Mrs Phatt. 'On the coast. So with two homes that makes me a houseswife doesn't it.'

'Well, just pop along to any surgery,' I told her.

There was a silence. 'With the other patients?' she asked, clearly rather shocked at the idea of being treated like any other human being.

'Oh yes, I think so,' I said.

'You don't want us to make an appointment?'

'Oh no, I don't think that will be necessary,' I said. 'Thank you for calling Mrs Phatt.'

I put the telephone down.

'Forty nine minutes,' said Patsy. I stood up and eased my back.

'I'll make you a coffee,' said Patsy.

'Put a splash of something in it, will you?' I said. I felt exhausted. Sitting through one of Mrs Phatt's monologues had been a tiring experience.

CHAPTER 25

The telephone rang. It was a call asking me to visit Les Salterton.

‘I took him a chair to mend two weeks ago,’ said Mrs Houghton. ‘But he still hasn’t mended it. That’s most unlike him. He just sits there in his chair doing nothing and not saying very much. I wonder if he might have had a stroke.’

Most people in the village thought Les Salterton was in his late sixties but I’d seen his medical records and I knew better. It was nearly a decade since he’d been entitled to celebrate his seventieth birthday. (He hadn’t done anything of the sort, of course. Celebrating birthdays wasn’t the sort of thing he did.)

Les was a big man, well over six feet tall and beefy too, and although maybe not the brightest spoon in the drawer he was without a doubt one of the kindest.

‘I am so big that it is not easy for me to be well all over at once,’ he told me when we first met.

When working for a firm of market gardeners in Barnstaple he had once written to the British Olympic Committee applying for a place on the fencing team. ‘I can,’ he was reputed to have told them, ‘put up fencing faster than anyone else I work with. I could win you the gold medal for fencing without any difficulties.’

At home Les normally wore old army boots, a pair of old wine red corduroy trousers and the sort of shirt reputed to be favoured by Canadian lumberjacks. Whenever he came to see me he always wore his suit. This was dark blue and since it had clearly never fitted him properly I assumed he had probably bought it at a jumble sale or a junk shop in Barnstaple Like his teeth, which he normally kept in a jar of pickled eggs, he wore it only to weddings, funerals and visits to the doctor. His hair was white and long and clearly uncontrollable. It lay, or rather stood, on top of his head like one of those lap dogs which are popular with women and which are most famous for the fact that it is usually nigh on impossible to decide which end is the head end. He always wore a checked cap when he wore his suit and he would remove this before seeing me and hold it nervously in his huge, calloused fingers. He always held it in both hands as though frightened that he might drop it or that someone might try to take it away from him. The curious thing was that when he wore the hat it kept his hair compressed but when he removed the hat the hair always sprang back up again as though it were made of something much stronger and more resilient than hair. His upper lip was decorated with what had undoubtedly once been a fine moustache and although it was now stained by tobacco smoke, soup and stout it still retained the structure and design of a grand moustache. I asked him about it once and he told me that when he first grew it, just after the end of the First World War, the moustache was a symbol of manhood, respectability, family, masculinity, and a proper bourgeois sense of belonging and position. He told me that in 1918, Woolworths staffed its new Liverpool branch with clean shaven men with no moustaches. It was, he said the ‘American’ style. But the English people would not buy anything else from a man who didn’t have a moustache.

He was at his most comfortable with a sharp tool in one hand and a piece of wood in the other and he attempted to cover his shyness and anxiety with an endearing and boyish smile.

When he was young Les had served an apprenticeship, and then worked as, a carpenter and joiner (‘I don’t understand why they called me a carpenter and joiner’, he had once said. ‘Of course I join the bits together. What do folk expect me to do? Carve ‘em nicely and then leave ‘em lying around loose?’), and had been employed by a large firm in Staffordshire where he’d built handmade furniture for many years. Sadly, his career had rather nose dived when he had spent three weeks building a bookcase instead of a chair. ‘I forgot what they asked for,’ he told his employer. ‘I thought a bookcase would be nice.’

After moving to Bilbury and using every penny he had to buy a former estate worker’s cottage, Les had made wooden tent pegs for a year or two. The bottom had fallen out of that particular market when metal ones became popular. After that he’d made clothes pegs. This time it was the rising popularity of plastic pegs which had destroyed his business.

I’d first met him when he’d turned up at the surgery one day complaining of a sore throat. I looked at his medical records and saw that the only previous consultation he’d had, had been in 1924 when he’d visited the surgery complaining of exactly the same symptoms.

‘You had a sore throat in 1924,’ I told him.

‘I remember,’ he answered hoarsely.

‘Obviously a recurrent problem,’ I remarked.

He nodded. Nodding was clearly easier than talking.

‘The doctor prescribed hydrogen peroxide in 1924,’ I said, looking at his notes again. ‘But since then things have advanced a little. I can give you penicillin now.’

He looked doubtful. ‘Will that be as good as the hydrogen peroxide?’ he asked.

'If it isn't then I'll prescribe hydrogen peroxide,' I told him. 'But try my new fangled stuff first.'

Rather reluctantly he'd agreed.

'I'll see you in another fifty years,' I'd told him as he left.

The other notable thing about Les was that he had seven cats, all of whom he adored. I once visited him and found that he had been sleeping in a chair for two weeks. He had developed awful back pains and couldn't walk. When I asked him why he hadn't been sleeping in bed he told me that one of his cats had rather taken to sleeping on his pillow and that he hadn't had the heart to move it off. Only after finding a spare pillow in a cupboard, and putting it down on the floor beside the bed, did I manage to persuade the cat to quit the bed and Les to quit the chair.

* * *

I remembered from past experience that I would have to make some excuse for calling on Les Salterton.

However ill he was Les didn't like people interfering in his life and if he knew that I was calling in response to a telephone call from a neighbour he would have thrown me out and refused to see me.

And so I popped in the boot of the car the small table that Mortimer's sons had broken during my one time friend's ill-fated and eminently forgettable visit.

When I arrived at Les's cottage I took the table out of the boot, opened the front door and walked in.

There was no point at all in knocking on the front door and expecting a reply. (There was no bell to ring.)

The first time I'd called at Les Salterton's home I'd spent ten minutes waiting for him to answer the door. It had been Miss Johnson who, when I arrived back at the surgery, had explained to me that Les Salterton never answered callers at his front door.

'When was the last time you answered a knock on the door and were pleased by the consequences?' he had asked me, when I asked him why he hadn't answered my knocks. 'I can't remember anyone ever banging on my door to bring me good news. How often do you answer the door and find yourself facing someone you don't want to see or receiving something you don't want? Salesmen, bailiffs and unwanted relatives all knock on doors. When people knock on the door it's invariably because they want something. By not answering when people knock on my door I avoid all these unpleasant intrusions.'

I found it difficult to argue with him and although there were some in the village who regarded him as rather more than eccentric I sometimes wondered if he wasn't the only wise one among us all.

'Hello Les, can you mend this for me?' I asked him, holding up our broken, three-legged table in one hand and the solitary leg in the other.

Les was sitting in a chair by the hearth. There was a cat sitting on his lap and another at his feet. Everywhere you looked there were cats. Even in the middle of the afternoon it was dark in his front room. The cottage had small windows, the thick curtains weren't properly drawn back, and ivy and clematis were growing over the windows. It took a minute or two for my eyes to become accustomed to the lack of light. Outside the sun was shining brightly. Inside we could well have been underground.

'Who's that?' demanded Les, peering in my direction. He seemed sleepy and had difficulty in focusing on me.

'It's the doc,' I told him. 'I've got a table that needs mending. Patsy asked me to bring it round for you to see if you can do anything with it.'

Les blinked and tried to sit up. It was clearly an enormous effort for him but I could see that both arms and both legs seemed to be working. He had been dozing and dribbling and there were damp stains down the front of his cardigan. There was skin on a cup of coffee on the table by his chair. It looked cold and undrinkable. He looked at the table I'd brought him but didn't seem to see it.

'Are you all right?' I asked him.

'Don't seem able to get going,' he told me. He gave up trying to lift himself out of the chair.

'Do you want me to have a look at you?' I asked him. 'Check you over.'

'If you like,' he replied. 'Don't mind if you do.'

'I'll just get my bag from the car.'

I popped out to the car and fetched my black bag. I'd never seen Les like this. He was normally one of the busiest men I knew – of any age. Although technically retired he worked longer hours than almost anyone I knew. Everyone who had furniture which needed mending took it along to him.

'Can I light the lamp?' I asked.

Les's cottage didn't have electricity. He had a calor gas cooker in the kitchen and relied on oil lamps for light. He had fireplaces in his living room and bedroom and lit wood fires when the weather was cold.

Les nodded. I lit the oil lamp on the mantelpiece. It filled a quarter of the room with a rich, warm, orange light.

Twenty minutes later I had gone over him systematically and methodically but had failed to find anything wrong with him. His heart and lungs were fine. His blood pressure was actually quite low. His nervous system was in tip top working order. He had lost no muscle strength. I could find absolutely nothing wrong with him.

I carefully moved a cat to one side and sat down on half of a chair opposite him. I packed my instruments away in my black bag.

'Have you finished?'

I said I had.

'Would you turn the lamp off now then, doctor.'

I got up and turned off the lamp.

'Don't need the lamp if we're just talking,' he explained. I smiled and nodded.

'You're a puzzle,' I told him.

He said nothing but just looked at me, with great sadness in his eyes. I know this may sound disrespectful but he reminded me of a trusting puppy.

'The other doctor couldn't find anything wrong with me,' said Les suddenly. It was the longest speech he'd made since I'd arrived.

'What other doctor?' I asked him, suddenly alert.

'A few weeks ago,' he replied. 'Don't know his name.'

'Before I took over the practice again?' I asked.

He nodded and stared at me silently for a while. 'Are you doctoring again?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Are you my doctor?'

'Yes.'

He smiled and nodded approvingly.

'What did you see the other doctor about?'

'I went to see him,' he said. 'Had to go into Barnstaple. Saw some chap called Dr Locum.'

'A doctor acting as a locum,' I corrected him. 'That just means he was standing in for one of the other doctors.'

'Jabbed myself in the foot with the fork,' he said. 'Needed an injection. I was doing the garden.'

'You went for a tetanus injection?'

He nodded. 'You always said I should have one if I cut myself in the garden.'

I got up from the chair, walked over to where he was sitting, bent down and examined his foot. He hadn't yet put his socks and shoes back on after my examination. There was a nicely healed scar on the top of his foot. It was quite small which was why I hadn't noticed it before. It was a few weeks old. It looked perfectly healthy.

'Did you clean the wound properly?'

'Oh yes, doctor.'

'Did he give you anything to take?'

'Just some tablets,' said Les. 'I'm nearly out of them. I need another 'description'.'

Alarm bells started ringing the moment he said this. A course of antibiotics hadn't been necessary but even if the doctor he'd seen had prescribed them it would have been for a week or ten days at the most. I had a feeling I knew what pills Les was taking.

'Where are they?' I asked him.

'In the bedroom.'

Les's bedroom was up a narrow, twisting steep staircase. It was more like a ladder than a staircase. At the top of the stairs there were two tiny rooms. One was used as a storeroom and was full of bits of furniture. The room was dominated by a six foot high doublefronted bookcase. I had no idea how he'd managed to get it up the staircase. The other room was Les's bedroom. It contained a bed and a bedside table and a small wardrobe. There was no bathroom. Les washed in the kitchen. Once a week he bathed in a tin bath outside in the garden. The toilet was fifty yards away down the garden path. There was no running water and no mains sewage. Les got his drinking water from a spring. His toilet consisted of two boards strategically placed over an old-fashioned earth closet.

There were three cats lying on the bed. One of them lifted its head when I entered the room. The other two didn't move.

The tablets, in a large brown bottle on his bedside table, were benzodiazepine sleeping tablets. The dose was enough to drug a man of Les's age. Tranquillisers had only been around for a few years but they were already some of the most popularly prescribed drugs. Many doctors, and even more patients, had become seriously addicted to them. The doctors were addicted to prescribing them (because they provided a quick and easy answer to a medical encyclopaedia of problems) and the patients were addicted to taking them partly because the drugs numbed their minds and stilled their fears and partly because the drugs themselves were ferociously addictive.

I had done some studies into these drugs and had come to the conclusion that eventually they were going to become a huge problem. The elderly seemed to me to be the most vulnerable – largely because they seemed more susceptible to the adverse effects. Many who became confused were already being wrongly diagnosed as demented and condemned to spend the rest of their lives in psychiatric hospitals or on geriatric wards.

‘Did you tell the doctor you saw that you weren’t sleeping properly?’ I asked him when I got back downstairs again.

‘He asked me how much sleep I got.’

‘What did you tell him?’

‘Four or five hours.’

‘And he gave you the tablets to help you sleep?’

Les nodded. ‘I tried to tell him that I’ve never slept more than that.’ He shrugged. ‘But he wasn’t interested. He said the tablets would help me.’

‘You can stop the tablets now,’ I told him. I held up the bottle and let him see me put it into my pocket.

‘I don’t need any more of them?’

I shook my head.

‘I’ll come back and see you in a few days.’

CHAPTER 26

On my way home that evening I called in at the Duck and Puddle in the hope that I would find Patchy there. I wasn't disappointed. He and Thumper were playing darts. It was Thumper's turn to throw. He was holding two darts. A third dart was stuck firmly in the wall just to the right of the dartboard.

Patchy smiled rather sheepishly when I congratulated him on his engagement.

'Thumper and I are celebrating,' he said. 'You weren't here so we started without you.'

'What can I get you to drink?' I asked him.

'Whisky. Just a small one.'

I looked at him, surprised. Patchy was not a greedy man but I had never known him drink whisky in singles before.

Thumper threw his second dart. This time he managed to hit the board but not, unfortunately, with the pointed end of the dart. The dart clattered noisily to the floor.

'I thought you said you were celebrating?'

He told me that he was but that Thumper had read in his morning paper that when men toasted a lady's health in ancient Rome they would drink one glass for each letter of the woman's name. Consequently, the two of them had decided to celebrate Patchy's engagement by drinking a glass for each letter in the name Adrienne.

'It's quite a long name,' said Patchy.

'We're on the second 'n',' added Thumper. He threw his third dart. This time he actually managed to hit the board with the right end of the dart. Even more impressively the dart stuck firmly in the board. Less impressively it was in the part of the board just outside the scoring area.

'Bugger.' he said. He plucked the dart out of the board and examined the pointed end. 'These bloody darts are blunt,' he said, as though that was the reason for his failure to score.

'So you've only got one more letter to go,' I said to Patchy. 'You seem in pretty good shape to me.'

'We're doing her surname as well,' said Thumper who had put the dart down on the ledge underneath the scoreboard next to the dartboard. In doing so he had dislodged the piece of chalk which usually lived there. He did not seem to notice that the chalk had fallen to the floor. 'Kennett,' he told me, presumably in case I'd forgotten my wife's maiden name. I didn't get the impression that Thumper had been celebrating with singles.

I counted the letters off on my fingers. 'Another seven drinks to go.'

Both nodded. They didn't seem upset by this at all.

'No problem,' said Thumper. 'We'll just get even more relaxed.' He thought about this for a moment. 'Relaxation is good for you isn't it, doc?'

I agreed with him that relaxation is, generally speaking, good for both mind and body. 'Why aren't you including her middle name in the toast?' I then asked Patchy.

He looked surprised. 'I didn't know she'd got a middle name!'

'It's Christabel.' I told him.

I finished my drink and then I left.

When I got back home I asked Patsy if her sister had a middle name.

'No,' she replied, clearly puzzled. 'Both of us only have one Christian name. Why do you ask?'

'Oh nothing,' I said.

Christabel had been the longest name I could think of on the spur of the moment.

* * *

When I got home Patsy was holding her abdomen.

'Are you having pains?' I asked her.

'Very early,' she said. 'No hurry at all.'

'I should take you to Barnstaple,' I said.

'No, not yet,' said Patsy. 'They'll probably just send me home again. Then we'll spend hours driving backwards and forwards. Besides, there was an urgent call for you.' She handed me a message from Mrs Phatt. 'She said they need you urgently,' said Patsy. 'She wouldn't tell me what it was about.'

With a weary sigh I kissed Patsy, left the house, got into the car and set off for the Phatt's home.

One of the first things Dr Brownlow had taught me is that if a patient requests a visit the doctor should always go. There was, he readily admitted, some self-interest in this. 'The nicest thing people say about a doctor is: 'He will always come out.'' he had told me.

When they had arrived in Bilbury the Phatts had bought one of the village's smartest houses. A small but beautifully proportioned Edwardian house on the Patchole and Stonecombe road out of Bilbury. For nearly fifty years it had been home for a family who had run a smallholding on their dozen acres. Higher costs and smaller profits had made life difficult for them and very little other than essential repairs had been done to the property in the last few decades of their ownership. Upon the death of the last remaining member of the immediate family the man who'd inherited the house, a rich solicitor who worked in Birmingham, had shown very little interest in it and had put the house up for auction. The Phatts had bought it for a song. They had, it was clear, then spent a considerable sum of money restoring, improving, extending and turning the house which they had chosen into something completely different.

It was Mr Phatt who opened the front door.

'It's the wife, doctor,' he said. He spoke in a hushed tone. The sort of voice people use when there is a death or serious illness in the house. 'She's in the living room.'

Mrs Phatt was sitting on a huge white leather sofa.

'What's the trouble?' I asked her, putting my black bag down on the carpet.

'Heart attack, doctor,' said Mrs Phatt. 'I wanted Clint to call the ambulance but he said we should ring you first as a courtesy.'

I asked her to explain her pain.

'In the shoulders,' she said, rubbing her left shoulder. 'The pain goes up into my neck and the back of my head.'

'Just the left side?'

'No. Both sides.'

I took her pulse. 'I don't think it's your heart,' I told her. Her heart was beating strongly and regularly. Her colour was good. She wasn't sweating.

'Maybe it's arthritis?' she suggested. 'A frozen shoulder? A tumour with secondaries in my spine?'

'Slip your blouse off,' I told her.

'Leave the room Clint,' said Mrs Phatt. 'And you girls.' The two daughters didn't seem much interested in their mother's illness. They were both sitting watching the television. I glanced over to see what they were watching. It was a beauty competition.

'It's OK with me,' I said. 'They can stay.' I didn't particularly want to be left alone with Mrs Phatt and was happy to have the girls as chaperones. Hypochondriacs often have vivid imaginations.

'Have you been breathless?'

Mrs Phatt removed her blouse. 'It is a little difficult to breathe,' she said. She took a deep breath, immediately disproving this claim.

'Oh yes,' she said. 'That hurt.'

'Where?' I asked her.

'In my chest.'

'Have you noticed anything else wrong?'

She thought for a moment. 'I had a little diarrhoea last Thursday. I thought it might have been some prawns we ate.'

'I had diarrhoea too,' said Mr Phatt who had ignored his wife's suggestion that he leave the room.

'Anything else? Problems anywhere else?'

She gave this careful thought. 'I can't think of anything particular,' she admitted regretfully.

'Sorry I have to ask you all these questions.'

'Oh that's all right. I don't mind.'

'She likes you asking her questions,' said Mr Phatt. 'It makes her feel important. She likes talking about herself.'

'As if you don't!' she said. 'Ignore him. Please ask me as many questions as you like.'

On the television set the interviewer was asking a girl in a swimsuit what her ambitions were. She said she wanted world peace, a chance to work with underprivileged children and a boutique where she could sell the clothes she intended to start designing.

'I'll listen to your chest,' I told her.

'Shall I take my bra off?'

'No, I don't think that will be necessary,' I told her.

I listened to her chest. It sounded very healthy. I told her so. When I listened to her chest I couldn't help noticing that her bra straps were digging into her shoulders quite deeply.

'Your bra seems a little tight,' I said.

She fumbled with the straps. 'I think perhaps I need a bigger size,' she said. She sounded rather pleased about this.

'She's always been small breasted,' said Mr Phatt. 'There's a medical term for it. It's called micromastia.'

'There's a medical term for what you've got,' snapped back Mrs Phatt. 'Microthingy.'

Mr Phatt blushed bright red.

'What size bra do you normally wear?' I asked her, examining the small label attached at the back of her bra.

'38B.'

'Ah.' I said. 'I think we might have found the problem.' I turned to the two girls. 'Does either of you wear a 34B bra?'

The older girl looked up from the television screen. 'I do,' she said. Many teenage girls would have been embarrassed to discuss their bra size with a stranger. She wasn't. She seemed quite proud of it.

'You're wearing your daughter's bra,' I told a rather startled Mrs Phatt. 'It's too small and it's digging in and pressing on a nerve.'

* * *

When I got back home Patsy was lying on our bed in labour. Mrs Parfitt was holding her hand telling her to take deep breaths.

'It came on quicker than I expected,' said Patsy, in between deep breaths. She was sweating.

'I'll get you into the car,' I said. 'I must get you to Barnstaple.'

'There isn't time,' said Patsy.

'I'm afraid you're going to have to deliver the baby,' said Mrs Parfitt. 'I'm afraid I'm not much good at that sort of thing.' She winced. 'You know, blood and entrails and so on.'

'I hope there aren't going to be any entrails,' said Patsy. 'And not too much blood either.'

Now I was sweating too. My mind was working overtime. If I couldn't get Patsy to Barnstaple could I get a midwife over to Bilbury?

'There isn't time to bring anyone over from Barnstaple,' said Patsy, reading my mind.

And then I had an idea. 'I'll be back in just a minute,' I said, heading for the door.

I raced down the stairs and into the kitchen. From there I telephoned Dr Brownlow's home. As I had expected it was Bradshaw who answered the phone.

'How is Dr Brownlow?'

'He's sleeping peacefully at the moment,' said Bradshaw,

'Bradshaw, have you ever delivered a baby?'

'Oh yes, indeed, sir. Quite a number.'

'Can you leave Dr Brownlow for an hour?'

'Is Miss Patsy in labour?' asked Bradshaw.

'She is,' I told him. 'And too late to get her to Barnstaple. We need you, Bradshaw.'

'I will be with you momentarily,' said Bradshaw. 'If you would just boil some water in preparation that would be useful.'

I put the telephone down and smiled. I felt more relaxed already. I telephoned Patsy's mother. She promised to rush round with Adrienne. I raced back upstairs.

'Bradshaw is coming!' I shouted, halfway up the stairs.

'Dr Brownlow's butler?' said Mrs Parfitt. 'What do you need a butler for?' She stopped for a moment, and thought. 'Goodness gracious! You aren't having people round to tea at a time like this are you?'

'Bradshaw is a trained nurse,' I explained. 'He's delivered lots of babies. Hundreds and thousands probably.'

I knelt down beside the bed and spoke to Patsy. 'Are you OK with that?' I asked her. I took a fresh tissue from a box beside the bed and gently wiped her face.

She looked at me and nodded. 'I rather like the idea of our firstborn being brought into the world by a butler,' she said. 'It has a certain style to it.' She grimaced and clutched at my hand as a labour pain struck.

'I've been instructed to boil water,' I said when the moment had passed.

'Good,' said Patsy. 'Will you be able to do that, OK?'

'I'll manage,' I said. 'Where's the kettle?'

Patsy aimed a weak punch at my jaw. I side slipped it easily.

'You go and boil the water,' said Mrs Parfitt. 'I'll look after your wife until Mr Bradshaw gets here.'

'Your mum and Adrienne are on their way,' I told Patsy. I went down to the kitchen, filled the kettle and three saucepans and started boiling water.

'What do you need all this boiling water for?' I asked when Bradshaw arrived. 'I've never understood.'

'Tea,' said Bradshaw simply. 'We'll need lots of fresh tea. Where is Miss Patsy?'

'Up the stairs, second on the left. The door is open,' I told him.

Just then Mrs Kennett and Adrienne appeared. Mrs Kennett was carrying an armful of fresh towels. Adrienne had a suitcase.

'Upstairs, in the bedroom,' I told them. 'What on earth have you got there?' I asked, pointing to the suitcase

Adrienne was carrying.

‘Baby clothes,’ she replied. ‘I learned to knit.’

I returned my attention to my water boiling.

* * *

The baby, a boy, as Patsy had predicted, and therefore a perfect excuse for me to buy a railway set, arrived just under an hour later. Bradshaw, everyone agreed, was marvellous. As planned I didn’t go upstairs until Patsy was sitting up in bed with our firstborn in her arms. Her hair was neatly brushed, as she had said it would be, and she wore fresh lipstick. She looked wonderful. They both did.

And it was generally agreed that no one had ever boiled water better than I had.

CHAPTER 27

The Phatt family turned up at surgery two days after Mrs Phatt's evening telephone call.

'We waited until the end of the surgery so that you wouldn't feel bad about having to keep other patients waiting,' said Mrs Phatt.

'Oh, thank you,' I said.

I only keep two chairs in the surgery so, since there were four of them, I had to fetch a couple of spare chairs from the house before they could all sit down.

Mrs Phatt opened the small suitcase she had brought with her and took out a large, blue file. She handed it to me.

'Ah,' I said. 'Your family history.'

'That's my parents' medical history,' said Mrs Phatt. She delved into the suitcase and took out a second file. This one was yellow.

'My husband's parents,' she said, putting the yellow file on top of the blue file. 'These are yours to keep,' she said. 'We have our own copies at home.'

'Thank you.'

'My husband's medical records,' she said. She took out a red file and put that on top of the yellow file.

I nodded my thanks. Piled one on top of the other, the three files were nearly a foot thick.

'This is my file,' said Mrs Phatt. She put a thick green file on top of the red file. The green file was far thicker than any of its predecessors.

'And these are the girls',' added Mrs Phatt. She put a pink file and a lavender file on top of the pile. These two files were much thinner.

'When are you going to introduce an appointments system?' asked Mrs Phatt.

'I have no plans to introduce one,' I told her. 'Most of my patients appreciate being able to pop in whenever there is a surgery. And quite a few don't have a telephone so making an appointment would be difficult.'

'Oh don't get me wrong,' said Mrs Phatt. 'I'm all for your present system. It means we can pop in whenever we feel like it.'

'Quite.'

'This is my husband, Mr Phatt,' said Mrs Phatt. 'Clint.' I shuffled through the medical records in front of me and found Mr Phatt's notes.

'He used to be George,' said Mrs Phatt. 'But he changed his name to Clint.'

Mr Phatt seemed to have found something fascinating on the carpet. He seemed shy, rather overwhelmed by his wife.

'Of course,' I said. He looked very much like a George and not a bit like a Clint.

'Not officially, of course,' muttered Mr Phatt quietly.

'And these are our daughters,' said Mrs Phatt. 'I kept them home from school so that they could come and meet you.'

'Good morning,' I said to the two Phatt daughters. They both giggled lightly but didn't say anything. One, the slightly taller one had her hair in pigtails. The other wore hers in a ponytail. Both girls wore spectacles and school uniform.

'I think I mentioned that I'm pre-diabetic,' said Mrs Phatt.

'I think you did,' I agreed.

'And pre-hypertensive.'

'Quite.'

'I also suffer from rheumatism, varicose veins, emphysema, arthritis – both main varieties – and haemorrhoids,' said Mrs Phatt.

I nodded. I wondered if her husband ever said anything. I was contemplating putting a thermometer in her mouth to shut her up for a while (Dr Brownlow had taught me that a thermometer is an essential aide when dealing with over-talkative patients and that, with a little reassurance and a stern look, one can be left in situ for up to five minutes at a time) when Mr Phatt spoke for the first time.

'I'm pre-diabetic too,' said Mr Phatt. He spoke rather surprisingly sharply. He had a curiously squeaky voice that made him sound a little like a cartoon character. 'And pre-hypertensive.'

'But not as pre-diabetic as I am, dear,' said Mrs Phatt firmly.

'I am,' said Mr Phatt.

'Oh no,' said Mrs Phatt vehemently. 'Oh no, you're not.'

'My liver is in a far worse state than yours,' said Mr Phatt emphatically. I was beginning to think I'd been wrong about Mr Phatt. He could stick up for himself - particularly when it came to defending his medical history.

‘Oh how can you sit there and say that?’ demanded Mrs Phatt. ‘When they took that reading of my liver enzymes the doctor said it was a miracle I was still able to walk about.’ She stopped and thought for a moment. ‘And then there’s my mastitis. You don’t have that, do you?’

‘I have an enlarged prostate and two pre-malignant moles,’ said Mr Phatt, attempting to match his wife’s mastitis with his enlarged prostate and then trump her with the moles.

‘Oh that’s ridiculous,’ said Mrs Phatt. She turned to me. ‘I’ve got three and possibly four pre-malignant moles,’ she said. ‘When you examine him you will find that he’s only got the one. And it’s very pre-pre malignant.’

‘I’m allergic to more drugs than you are,’ said Mr Phatt. ‘I’m allergic to penicillin, sulphonamide and three different types of anaesthetic.’

‘The allergy to penicillin was never proven!’ snapped Mrs Phatt.

‘I nearly died when I had my anaphylactic shock reaction,’ said Mr Phatt. ‘The doctors said it was the most exceptional case they’d ever seen.’

‘That was just hay fever,’ said Mrs Phatt derisively.

‘No it was not!’ insisted Mr Phatt. ‘It was a very rare example of anaphylactic shock. Far more serious than the usual variety.’ He paused, clearly thinking hard. ‘And I’ve had more operations than you have,’ he added.

‘Seven of yours were minor surgery,’ said Mrs Phatt. ‘All of mine were major.’

Listening to them was like watching a verbal tennis match. I was fascinated.

‘It’s a matter of opinion,’ sneered Mr Phatt. ‘I nearly died on the operating table twice.’

‘Doctors said I was a walking miracle,’ said Mrs Phatt. ‘My doctor brought round a big group of medical students. They were all amazed.’

‘It was a medical school,’ said Mr Phatt. ‘They took medical students to see everyone.’

‘No they did not!’ said Mrs Phatt.

‘My piles are bigger than yours,’ said Mr Phatt.

‘That’s a matter of opinion,’ said Mrs Phatt. ‘I’m the one who had two children.’

The two children looked embarrassed. They hadn’t said a word and didn’t look as if they intended to. I got the impression they never said very much. Indeed, it didn’t seem likely that they ever got the chance to say much.

‘And I’ve got an incipient prolapse,’ said Mrs Phatt, as though laying down the ace of trumps. Her remark had the desired effect. Mr Phatt didn’t say anything in response to this. ‘Plus,’ continued Mrs Phatt, ‘I worry about you.’

‘I worry a lot too,’ said Mr Phatt, defensively.

‘I know you do,’ agreed Mrs Phatt. ‘That’s why I worry about you so much. You’ll make me ill with all your worrying.’ Just then there was a knock on the door.

‘Come in!’ I called.

‘Bit of an emergency at Bunbury Cottage,’ said Miss Johnson, popping her head round the door.

‘Right, thank you, Miss Johnson,’ I said, standing up. ‘Sorry about this,’ I said to the Phatts. ‘But I’m afraid I have to go.’ I pointed to the pile of files now dominating my desk. ‘Thank you so much for these,’ I said.

‘Don’t you just want to check our blood pressure?’ asked Mrs Phatt.

‘Not at the moment I’m afraid,’ I said. ‘Emergencies have to come first.’

‘Oh,’ said Mrs Phatt. She sounded disappointed. Reluctantly she stood up. Once she was standing her husband and daughters stood too. I ushered them out of the surgery, much as a mother duck will usher its ducklings in the direction she wants them to go.

‘We’ll see you soon!’ said Mrs Phatt, leading her brood through the door.

‘I’m sure you will,’ I said, quietly.

‘Was that a threat or a promise?’ asked Miss Johnson, when she’d shut the door behind them.

I slumped back down into my chair and put my head in my hands. I knew, just as well as Miss Johnson, that there is no Bunbury Cottage in Bilbury nor, as far as I know, anywhere in the vicinity of the village.

‘Thank you,’ I said weakly.

‘Shall I put the kettle on?’ enquired Miss Johnson.

I nodded. ‘And bring in some chocolate digestive biscuits, please,’ I said. ‘This is a time for comfort eating.’

‘Shall I put these files somewhere safe?’ asked Miss Johnson, picking up the files Mrs Phatt had left on my desk.

I nodded, gratefully.

CHAPTER 28

Thumper, Patchy, Frank and I were sitting in the lounge of the Duck and Puddle discussing business ventures we had come across in our time. The discussion had been triggered by the news that someone Patchy vaguely knew was opening a restaurant called The Lobster Pot. In ten minutes we managed to think of nine other restaurants with the same name. We also came up with five called 'The Captain's Table', three called 'The Hole in the Wall', seven tea shops called 'A Taste of Devon' and six shops which their proud owners had named 'The Tackle Box' (not all of them selling fishing equipment).

When Thumper said that the wife of a chum of his had recently opened a millinery shop called The Mad Hatter's we started discussing other memorable names we had come across. We all remembered the local builder known as 'Sherlock Homes' and the travel company called 'Seymour Tours' but it was Patchy who insisted that he knew a firm of accountants called 'Limp and Grimace'.

Frank, who had joined in the discussion, said that he knew of a pair of comedians who called themselves Bitter and Twisted. Patchy said a bloke he knew had made a lot of money by selling a soap powder called CARE. He said that when women saw a label advising them to 'wash with care' on their clothes they went out and bought his product.

I said that when I was at medical school I'd heard of two businessmen who had changed their names by deed poll to 'Swifter' and 'Cheaper' so that they could open a carrier service and call themselves Swifter and Cheaper without getting into trouble with the authorities for misleading advertising. Patchy said a former girlfriend of his had once run a slimming club called Waist Management. I remembered that a drug company representative had once come in to promote a sleeping tablet called Pill-O. 'The slogan that went with it was,' I added, 'the sleeping tablet that helps you get your head down'.'

Then Frank said that he'd always fancied setting up a door-todoor booze delivery service called 'Booze on Bikes' and Thumper said that 'Pissed on Pedals' would be a better name for it. After that things rapidly got out of hand. Thumper said he'd always wanted to set up an organisation called Interchip which would be like Interflora except that people could use it to ring up and have chips (and possibly but not necessarily fish) delivered to friends.

The conversation came to a rather sudden end when Patchy said that a farmer pal of his had once had a brilliant idea for making money out of flies. He said the farmer had noticed that the cow manure in his sheds always attracted a lot of flies and so, after reading that French farmers fed flies to their frogs to put meat on their legs, he had bought a huge fan, a long piece of wide rubber tubing and some old milk churns. He'd then used the fan and the tubing to suck up the flies and store them in the milk churns.

'What did he call the business?'Thumper asked.

'Dunno,' said Patchy. 'It never got off the ground. He couldn't get an export licence to sell flies to France.'

'All that brain work has made me hungry,' said Thumper, emptying his beer glass.

'You're always hungry!' I reminded him.

He shrugged, thought about it for a moment, nodded in agreement and turned to Frank. 'I'll have the Steaming Hot Natural Pulses Resting On A Grilled Slice From A Fresh Wholemeal Farmhouse Bloomer Generously Bathed In A Succulent Tomato Based Sauce,' he said.

The landlord glowered at him. 'You'll have a pie or a pickled egg and bloody like it.'

'It's good to have you back, Frank,' Thumper told him with a laugh. I looked along the counter. The jar of pickled eggs was back. A table mat had been placed on top of the jar as a stand in for the missing lid.

'I'll have a packet of crisps, please,' I said firmly. 'The ones with the salt wrapped up in a twist of blue paper please.' Just then Gilly appeared.

'What did Frank buy you in London?' Thumper asked her.

Gilly disappeared as suddenly as she had appeared and returned a moment later with a smart looking shopping bag with the Harrods logo on the side. Proudly, she held the bag up for us to see.

'Impressive,' said Thumper. 'But what did he buy you?' He leant forwards a little and lowered his voice. 'What's in the bag?'

Gilly frowned. 'The bag is the present,' she said.

'Lovely bag,' said Thumper, trying to rescue the situation.

'They sell fantastic train sets in Harrods,' said Patchy. He looked at me. 'You should get one for your kid,' he said.

'I think it's a bit early,' I said.

'Oh no,' said Patchy, shaking his head. 'Give you a chance to set it all up and make sure it works properly.'

I admit I was tempted.

I’ve always wanted a train set.

* * *

After lunch I headed off to do my afternoon visits. As I reached my car I heard footsteps behind me. I turned to see Thumper running after me. ‘Could I have a word with you, doc?’ he said.

‘Of course.’

‘I didn’t like to mention it in there,’ he turned and nodded his head towards the pub, ‘but my Aunt Olive has been a bit under the weather recently. I’m worried about her.’

‘I’ll call in before I go home,’ I promised him.

‘Thanks doc,’ he said. ‘There’s no hurry, though.’ And he disappeared back into the Duck and Puddle.

CHAPTER 29

I called in at the village shop to collect one or two things that Patsy had asked me to pick up. Peter was not in a good mood.

'Have you seen Gilly?' he demanded.

'Yes. I gather they had a wonderful time in London.'

'They went shopping in Harrods!' complained Peter. 'Doesn't anyone in Bilbury realise how difficult it is for a small retailer trying to make a living these days?' He paused for a moment. 'And now she's walking around with a bag advertising Harrods!'

'Well, give her a bag advertising Peter Marshall's!' I told him.

'I haven't got any,' he muttered. He thought for a moment. You could almost see the steam coming out of his ears. 'Maybe I could get some made.'

'Why not?' I said.

'I need to do everything I can to survive,' said Peter, who loved moaning almost as much as he loved making money. 'There's another new supermarket opening in Barnstaple this week.'

Knowing how much he disapproved of supermarkets I made murmuring sounds of sympathy and disapproval. No one in Bilbury ever dared let themselves be seen carrying shopping bought at a supermarket. Peter could just about bear it if he saw carrier bags from W.H.Smith or Boots in someone's car but if he saw evidence that anyone had visited a supermarket he would fly into a red-faced rage.

As I should have expected, my sympathetic sounds triggered something of an onslaught.

'I hate supermarkets!' he said. 'They're ruining our society. Go into big towns these days and all you find are supermarkets and charity shops. Both just giving things away.

You just watch! The supermarkets will lower their prices until I go bust and then they'll put their prices up again!' He waved a finger in my face.

'You're absolutely right,' I said.

'You mark my words,' continued Peter. 'I'll go out of business and then there will be no village shop. Where will everyone go to on Sunday evenings when they've run out of tomato ketchup? Village shops will be closing down left, right and centre.'

'I agree with you,' I told him.

'The village shop is the heart of any village.'

'Absolutely true.'

'Supermarkets are destroying our culture!' said Peter, warming to his eternal theme. 'And they're destroying our health.'

'Destroying our health?'

'The food they sell is rubbish,' he said. 'Packaged hamburgers. Everything double wrapped. Good old-fashioned greengrocers and butchers shops will all go under. When did you last see a proper fishmonger? And you mark my words they'll start selling books eventually and then there won't be any bookshops left.'

'You'll have to start competing with them head on!' I told him.

'How do I do that?'

I thought about it for a minute. 'You could try having one of those competitions they have where the winner gets to grab and keep as much as they can collect in a minute.'

'How will getting people to shop quickly make any difference?' asked Peter.

'No,' I explained. 'It's a competition. The winner of the competition gets given a trolley, or in your case a basket, and then given a minute to rush around the store picking out things they want. At the end of the minute they get to keep everything they've collected.'

'I like that,' said Peter. 'I could sell a lot of stuff that way.'

'No, no. You give the stuff free to the person who is the winner.'

Peter stared at me for what seemed like an eternity but was probably no more than a minute. 'I let people fill a basket with things from the shop and I don't charge them anything?'

'That's it,' I said.

'Not a penny?'

'Not a penny.'

Peter stared at me. 'Have you just come out of the Duck?'

'Yes.'

He nodded. 'I thought so.'

'It's what the supermarkets do,' I insisted.

'And how can I compete with that?' demanded Peter. 'How can I compete if they're giving away whole baskets of stuff?'

'Well, maybe that wasn't such a good idea,' I said, abandoning the idea of explaining it to Peter. 'Maybe you just want to introduce some of those offers that encourage people to spend more money.'

'What sort of offers?'

'You could do tastings.' He looked puzzled.

'They do that in the supermarkets,' I said. 'So I'm told,' I added quickly. 'They give customers a biscuit in the hope that they'll buy a whole boxful of them. Or they give customers a glass of wine so that they are encouraged to buy a bottle of the stuff.'

Peter thought about it. 'That might work,' he agreed. 'Any more good ideas?'

'You could have a closing down sale.'

'But I'm not closing down,' he pointed out. 'Not yet anyway.'

'No, no, you don't actually have to close down. You just say you are. You put up signs saying Everything Must Go. When I arrived in Birmingham to start my six years at medical school I noticed a jewellery shop had a huge notice in the window saying 'Closing Down. Final Days. Everything Must Go.' When I left Birmingham six years later the same shop was still there with the same sign in the window.'

Peter looked puzzled. He had been running the village shop for a long time but he didn't seem to know much about the tricks employed by the retail trade.

'It's an excuse to get people to think you're selling stuff cheap,' I explained. 'None of the stuff they were selling was particularly cheap.'

Peter brightened at this. 'I don't really have to sell anything cheap?'

'Not if you don't want to. Of course, if you've got some things you are prepared to sell cheap to get rid of them then you could have a bit of a sale as well.'

Suddenly Peter's eyes lit up. 'I could have a bit of a clear out,' he said.

'Exactly!' I agreed.

'Great idea!' he said. 'Now what do you want?'

I started to read from Patsy's list and then just handed him the piece of paper. 'If you get that lot ready for me I'll pick it up later,' I said.

'Right ho,' said Peter, looking down the list and nodding happily.

CHAPTER 30

General practitioners who work in towns and cities have to contend with heavy traffic and, often, with the problem of what to do with their car when they finally arrive at a patient's home. That's the downside. On the other hand, the roads in which their patients live are usually neatly named and numbered and if they live and work in anything more than the smallest of towns there will probably be a street map of the whole area available for a modest outlay.

A GP working in a town or a city can probably expect to be able to find all, or at least most, of his patients residing within a fairly small area. And if he is lucky enough, he may be able to visit two or three of his patients within a single building. (If he's unlucky they will all be in a tall building where none of the lifts are working.)

Practising as a country GP is a very different business.

There are, of course, no flats or terraced houses in Bilbury. Indeed, there are no more than a dozen semi-detached properties in the whole of Bilbury. The vast majority of the villagers live in detached houses and cottages. And even when the lanes and tracks down which people live do have names (and, more often than not, they don't) there are certainly no such things as road signs to guide the traveller who is not content to wander where the will takes him but has, instead, some formal destination in mind. House signs, where they exist, are almost bound to have faded or to have been overgrown by ivy and other creepers. To know where most of the residents lived and, just as importantly, to know the quickest way to get to them. I knew which lane was likely to be blocked, and at what times of day, by a herd of cattle being moved to or from a milking shed. I knew at which times of year, and in which weather, certain lanes and tracks were likely to be flooded or impassable because of thick mud.

I knew exactly where Thumper's Aunt Olive lived, and the journey should have taken me no more than ten minutes. But, I was in no great hurry and it took me considerably longer than that to get to her.

People who live in towns sometimes complain that the countryside is dull and that there is nothing much to see. It's true there are no museums, art galleries, theatres or cinemas in Bilbury (though it should be remembered that the vicar does put on a film show once a fortnight during the winter months) but there are many other things to see and enjoy.

And lots of other things to keep everyone busy too.

I was about half way between the Duck and Puddle and Thumper's Aunt's cottage when I spotted half a sheep poking out into the lane. The sheep was making a considerable amount of noise but seemed unable to move. Guessing what had happened I stopped the car and parked on the grass verge.

Contrary to their reputation sheep are intelligent animals. But they are also intensely curious creatures and their lives are constantly controlled by the suspicion that the grass will always be greener (and probably tastier) on the other side of the hedge.

Since becoming a resident of Bilbury I had acquired a good deal of respect and some affection for sheep. As a town raised observer I had always assumed sheep to be rather stupid animals. That, after all, is the reputation they've been saddled with. And my ignorance about their behaviour and habits had been pretty far reaching. Within weeks of arriving in Bilbury I had rushed into the Duck and Puddle and informed the first farmer I'd seen that there were sheep in the village suffering from some terrible infection.

'What sort of infection?' he'd asked, peering at me over his pint glass.

'They've got purple spots on their backs,' I told him. 'Great purple blotches.'

The farmer hadn't laughed, though it would have been difficult to blame him if he had. He'd explained, with considerable patience, that the birds, particularly the bigger ones, the magpies, the crows, the starlings, the seagulls and so on, had been eating blackberries from the hedgerows. When I still didn't understand he asked me if I had not noticed that birds like standing on the backs of sheep. I said I had. He then asked me if I noticed that if I parked my car under a tree I was likely to find it speckled with nasty white splodges. I said that of course I had. He then pointed out that if I looked carefully I would notice that at this time of year the splodges were more likely to be purple than white. Suddenly the truth dawned on me. I bought the farmer another pint and he promised not to tell the story about how the new doctor had discovered a new and deadly epidemic of 'Purple spot' among Bilbury's sheep. As far as I'm aware he kept his side of the bargain too. That's another country truth I discovered. No one can keep a secret quite as well as village folk. (And no one can spread gossip quite as fast either.)

Gradually, over the months and years, I learned that lambs play just the same sort of games as children love. Each spring I parked my car on a piece of verge, or leant my bicycle against a tree and then stood, arms folded on the top bar of the nearest five-barred gate, and watched as lambs played tag, king of the castle and I canget-to-that-bush-faster-than-you-can games.

When Patsy and I acquired sheep of our own I learned that sheep will learn their name and will come when called. I learned that sheep are bright enough to know how to open a gate and sneak from a field (where the only food available is grass) into a garden where there are tender shoots galore for the taking. I even saw them close a gate when, to avoid the consequences of their actions, they hurried back from garden to field. I learned that when they are happy, lambs - and even sheep - will leap into the air with joy. (The Devon villagers call it pronging.) I learned that if sheep are parted from their friends they will fight to get to one another. Even years later one sheep can immediately recognise its own lamb out of a field of a hundred. I learned that sheep hate getting wet and will always run in out of the rain (if they have somewhere to go). I learned that they hate walking through mud and will always go round a muddy patch of field if they possibly can. I learned that they can be selfish and stubborn but are often sensitive and logical. I learned that they can identify individual people, as well as sheep. And I learned that sheep get depressed in bad weather and that a depressed sheep will stand still with its head down, its ears unmoving and its eyes dull.

Like so many sheep had done before it (and just as many will doubtless do in the future) the sheep had tried to force its way through the hedge and it had got stuck. It had sealed its temporary fate by going into reverse and trying to back out of the hedge. Now it was held quite firm by a mass of brambles.

Problems of this type are so common in Bilbury that in the boot of the Morris Minor I keep a pair of thick gardening gloves. I opened the boot, took out the gloves and put them on. The sheep made one last attempt to free itself but, inevitably, succeeded only in getting itself stuck even more firmly.

It took me nearly half an hour to free the animal. I used the biggest blade on my penknife to cut through the brambles which were stuck in the sheep's wool and eventually, after a good deal of effort, I succeeded in pushing the sheep back through the hedge and into the field from which it had tried to escape. Its friends and family (including a lamb which was clearly delighted to have its mother returned to it) were waiting just a few yards away and they received it with great joy. I put my penknife away, stuffed the pieces of cut bramble into the hole the sheep had made in the hedge and removed my gloves and tossed them into the car boot. Despite having worn thick gloves my hands and my forearms were scratched and bleeding. My shirt, my trousers and my jacket were all badly snagged. I tidied myself up as well as I could and stood for a while watching the happy lamb gambolling around its mother. Then I wandered over to a nearby stretch of wooden fencing and put my arms on the top rail. I almost wished I smoked a pipe at that moment. As a poor substitute I reached down, picked a piece of long succulent grass and stuck it between my teeth.

When I'd first moved to Bilbury I would have seen very little of what was going on around me. But Patsy, Thumper and many others had taught me what to look for.

Up above the field ahead of me a buzzard was slowly circling; watching and waiting. There is something admirably serene about buzzards. They are so silent and so clearly fearless. It is easy to assume that they are harmless too. But a pair of buzzards with three young will kill 600 rabbits and 8,000 voles in a single year.

To my right a pair of bluetits hovered like hummingbirds and plucked flies out of the centre of a spider's web. The web spinner, whose lunch, dinner and supper were being taken, sat on a twig nearby. Watchful, waiting and quite possibly, and justifiably, resentful.

Swallows, just returned for the summer, raced around the field checking out their old haunts and welcoming friends as they arrived. Swallows whizz around the sky with the same joy that people would show if they discovered they could fly. Attracted, no doubt, by my sweat, two swallows swooped around me, searching for any insects which might have also been attracted by the same smells.

I heard a rustle to my right and saw a large badger emerge from the grass bank on the other side of the lane. Contrary to what most townspeople and some naturalists believe it's unusual but not at all unknown to see badgers up and about in the daytime.

The badger disappeared into the thick, long grass at the side of the lane and seemed to be struggling with something. Minutes later he was joined by a second badger. The two of them pulled and pushed and worked hard at whatever it was they were trying to move. Hesitantly, not wanting to frighten them away, I moved a little closer until I could see what they were doing. There was a dead badger lying in the long grass and the two badgers which had arrived were trying to move the body. I watched as they pulled it out of the long grass, up the bank and through a small gap at the bottom of the thick hawthorn hedge which separated the lane from the field on that side of the road. I watched as they dragged the badger's corpse across several yards of grassland and then into the edge of a nearby stretch of wood. It was clearly hard work but they didn't stop for a second. When they had managed to drag the body into the wood they dug a shallow grave, placed the body into it and then covered it with leaves and branches.

There is, truly, so much to see in the countryside if you are prepared to look.

I looked at my watch and realised that if I was going to see Thumper's Aunt Olive and get back to Bilbury Grange in time for evening surgery I'd better hurry.

* * *

Thumper's Aunt, Miss Olive Robinson, lived in a thatched cottage which had roses and clematis climbing around the door and round the windows. The traditional cottage garden is full of lupins, honeysuckle, roses, hollyhocks and delphiniums. In mid summer the garden is alive with butterflies and bees.

It is, without a doubt, one of the most beautiful cottages in Devon.

She shared it with a cat called Tinsel and a dog called Bonzo.

The cottage is, of course, a tourist attraction for holiday-makers passing through Bilbury, and Miss Robinson takes full advantage of this by selling home-made biscuits and home-made cakes. She also supplements her income by allowing foreigners to buy pieces of her furniture. To ensure that she gets top prices, her nephew Thumper somehow manages to ensure that she obtains a steady supply of small bookcases, coffee tables, trays and other items which were once the property of William Shakespeare and which are suitably marked with the initials WS and an appropriate date scratched roughly into the underside.

Thumper and Patchy Fogg, the village's resident antique dealer, long ago worked out that items of furniture small enough to be stowed inside the boot of a car, or on the back seat, are far more likely to find a buyer than pieces which will require the services of a removal company.

When confronted with a potential buyer Miss Robinson never actually says that the item of furniture belonged to Mr Shakespeare, of course. But she mentions that it has been in the family for a long, long time, hints that a distant ancestor worked with the playwright as some sort of stage manager and lets it be known that she wishes she could sell some of her belongings so that she would have enough money to pay her rates and buy a little food and fuel.

At this point she pops out into the kitchen to put the kettle on, leaving the American (German or Japanese) tourist to put two and two together and make five.

'I don't cheat these people at all,' Miss Robinson once told me. 'They think they're cheating me and they end up cheating themselves.'

It was difficult to argue with her logic and so I never tried to.

I parked the car, half on the verge and half in the lane, picked my bag off the front passenger seat, and walked up the path to Miss Robinson's front door. I knocked to let her know I was there and walked in.

She was sitting in her front parlour. I was startled by her appearance.

Miss Robinson had always been very welcoming; a very ebullient woman. She had always been a robust woman with the sort of laugh adored by television producers making weak situation comedies. No audience could have sat in silence once Aunt Olive began laughing.

Now, quite suddenly, she looked old and frail. Her hair wasn't combed or washed. And she seemed slow in everything she did. She remembered to tell me off for bothering to knock on the door rather than just walking in ('as I expect my friends to do') but she quickly showed her confusion. She asked me if she'd requested me to call and confessed that her memory wasn't what it used to be. She said she'd only just finished breakfast. And she didn't seem embarrassed about the fact that her usually immaculate living room was untidy and littered with dirty crockery, bits of clothing and newspapers and magazines.

I was glad that Thumper had asked me to see his aunt. I didn't know what was wrong but I knew at once that it was something quite serious.

'Thumper asked me to call around and see you,' I told her.

'Oh, my dear, it's nice to see you but I'm not well enough for visitors,' she said. 'My hair is a mess. Can you call back when I feel a little better?'

'It's me!' I reminded her. 'The doctor.'

'Oh dear,' she said, looking worried. 'At my age I have to keep in with the doctor.'

I smiled at her and touched her shoulder. 'How do you feel?'

'Terrible,' she said. 'If I'm honest. And at my age there isn't much point in being anything else. I look awful.' She sighed as though suddenly feeling the weight of the world on her shoulders.

'I've matured,' she said. 'Like cheese.' She thought about this for a moment. 'People think far too highly of maturity,' she said. 'It's greatly overrated. What does it mean? What's good about it?' She looked at me, as though trying to decide where she'd seen me before and then gave up the struggle. 'I've suddenly been lumbered with an old person's hair and feet,' she said with enormous sadness. 'I can't do a thing with either of them.'

'Well, let me see if I can help,' I suggested.

'Maybe you can give this hair and these feet back to the person they belong to,' she suggested.

'And get yours back for you?'

'That would be nice,' she said. 'I'll put the kettle on.' She got up and headed, with obvious difficulty, towards the kitchen. She walked with a limp and shuffled across her carpet, sounding like a boy rustling through fallen autumn leaves.

'How long have you had difficulty in walking?'

She half turned to look at me. 'Am I having difficulty in walking?'

'You seem to be,' I said.

'I suppose I am,' she admitted. 'I fell. Perhaps I sieved something. Strained something. Hurt myself I get headaches. Did you know that?'

I shook my head.

'Terrible pains in my head,' she said. 'They won't go away.'

'I think I should organise some tests for you,' I said. 'At the hospital,' I added.

Miss Robinson glowered at me disapprovingly. 'Young man,' she said, 'I am the world's leading expert on my body. It is my speciality. I know more about it than any other man or woman alive. I know more about its weaknesses, its strengths, its foibles than any of your damned specialists. And I don't care what your needles and X-rays tell you. I am telling you that I am perfectly well.'

But I knew she was wrong. And so did she.

'Can I use your phone?' I asked.

'Of course you can dear.'

I telephoned the hospital and spoke to one of the hospital doctors. I explained that I had a patient with some curious symptoms. He agreed to take her in for a few days.

'How old is she?' he asked, when I'd finished describing her symptoms.

I told him.

'We're not going to get stuck with her?'

I assured him that he was not. Like most hospital consultants he was wary of admitting elderly patients and then finding that they needed to stay in hospital for months or even years because they could not be sent home.

'No more than a week,' he said, insistently. 'We've got a massive bed problem these days.'

'No more than a week,' I agreed.

I told Olive that I wanted her to go into hospital for some more tests.

'I had some tests done,' she said. 'They said the fracture was healing nicely.'

'What fracture?' I asked.

'My arm,' she said.

'How did you break your arm?' I asked her.

'Fell off my bicycle,' she replied.

I didn't know anything about this. I made a mental note to check her medical records when I got home.

'I'll ring Thumper and ask him to take you into the hospital tomorrow morning,' I told her. 'You won't be there for long.' Then I rang Thumper.

'I've arranged for your Aunt Olive to go into the hospital tomorrow for an X-ray and some tests,' I told him. 'I could get an ambulance...'

'What time?'

I told him.

'Does she need to go in an ambulance?'

'No.'

'Tell her I'll pick her up an hour before she's due at the hospital,' he said. 'That should give us plenty of time in case we're held up on the way. Will she have to stay in?'

'Yes. I don't know how long. Just a few days.'

'Is it serious?'

'I don't have the faintest idea what's wrong with her yet,' I told him.

'Thanks for sorting out the tests so quickly,' he said.

* * *

I'd been with Thumper's Aunt for less than an hour but in that time I'd lost count of the number of cups of tea she'd poured for me. Thumper's Aunt had been brought up in a time when the quality of hospitality was measured by the amount of tea a visitor could be persuaded to drink.

'Can I borrow your toilet before I go home?' I asked her.

'It's down the garden,' she said.

'Have you not got one indoors?' I asked, surprised.

'Won't have one indoors,' she said. 'Terrible to have one indoors. People are never well when they have those things indoors.'

I headed for the back door. 'Is there a key?' I called, over my shoulder.

'A key?' said Thumper's Aunt in astonishment. 'I've been here 40 years and no one has tried to steal the bucket yet.'

CHAPTER 31

When I called in at Peter Marshall's shop on my way home I could hardly believe my eyes.

The words 'SHUTTING. DESTROYED BY SUPERMARKETS. BARGAINS. SALE' were painted on the windows in whitewash.

'What do you think?' Peter asked.

'It's a bit startling,' I told him. 'But it should draw attention to the shop.'

'Great idea of yours!' he said. 'Look at this!' He pointed to a large trestle table he'd erected outside the shop. It was laden with tins and boxes.

'What on earth have you got there?'

'I looked through the old stock,' said Peter. 'There's a ton of stuff I can sell off cheaply.'

I picked up a tin. 'There's no label on this,' I said. 'It's impossible to tell what it is.'

'I call it pot luck,' said Peter. 'You buy three tins and you've got a meal.'

'But no one will know what they're eating!'

'Exactly.'

'These tins could contain anything.' Peter nodded.

'Any ideas?'

Peter shrugged. 'There's some soup. Some apricots. Some beans. Spaghetti hoops probably. Beef chunks. Dog food.'

'Do you have any idea how old this stuff is?'

'No idea at all. I found it in boxes in the shed. I've given it all a good mix. Take some tins back for Patsy. You'd be very unlucky to get three the same because I've given them a good mix up.'

'Guess how old it is,' I said. I picked up a couple of tins. They were rusty around the rims. The cans were dented. It looked as if they'd been given more than a good mix up.

'Probably twenty five or thirty years,' he said. 'This was a great idea of yours. If I can sell this lot I'll be able to pay the wholesaler.' He rubbed his hands together and lowered his voice. 'It's only eighteen months since I paid them last time,' he confided, 'but they've been getting a bit aggressive recently.'

'If this stuff had labels on you could sell it to museums!' I told him.

'Do you think so? Maybe I can find some of the old labels.'

'What are you selling them for?'

'Twenty pence a tin.'

'But that's far more than customers would pay for tins with the labels still on!'

'Yes, I know. But I'm selling excitement and adventure aren't I?'

I put down the tin I'd been examining.

'Exciting isn't it?' said Peter.

'Yes,' I agreed.

'I'm doing tastings as well,' he said.

'Oh, right! What of?'

'Mustard and soup.'

'Mustard and soup?'

'I've got quite a lot of mustard and six cases of green pea soup,' explained Peter. 'Here you are!' He pointed to an open jar of mustard and an opened tin of soup on the trestle table and then handed me a spoon. 'Help yourself!'

'The soup is cold!' I said, peering into the tin.

'Of course it is! I can't keep soup bubbling on the stove all day, can I?'

'And how am I supposed to taste mustard?'

'You put the spoon in the mustard jar and then suck the mustard off the spoon,' Peter explained.

I looked at him and put the spoon down. 'I'll just take my shopping for now,' I said. 'Patsy will have dinner ready for me and I don't want to spoil my appetite.'

I paid him, put the shopping in the boot of the car and set off for home.

As I left, Peter was trying to persuade Patchy Fogg to buy a dozen unlabelled tins of whatever for the price of twelve.

* * *

When I got back to Bilbury Grange I picked out Olive Robinson's medical records. I flicked through her notes and, in Dr Brownlow's writing, found the reference I was looking for.

She'd broken her left forearm in 1952.

CHAPTER 32

Now that I was a GP again I was getting used to getting up in the middle of the night.

My patients weren't a bad lot.

Unlike patients in some city practices mine hardly ever called me out unnecessarily (and never did so recklessly). But there were enough night time emergencies for me to have got used to waking up instantly when the phone went in the night.

So when the telephone went I turned on the bedside lamp and picked up the telephone and was awake within seconds.

'Hello!'

There was no one there.

For a moment I thought it was a hoax call.

And then I realised that all I'd heard since I'd picked up the telephone had been the dial tone. I was puzzling over this when the bell went again.

It was the doorbell not the telephone.

I glanced at the clock, clambered out of bed, put on my dressing gown and headed for the door. It was twenty minutes past six.

'Who is it?' asked Patsy, who was now wide awake.

'Dunno,' I replied sleepily. 'Probably a patient who doesn't have a telephone.' It was the wrong doorbell for a patient. But maybe they'd gone to the wrong door.

I tottered down the stairs and opened the front door.

'Morning doctor!' said a cheery face. For a moment I didn't recognise him. Then I realised that the caller was holding a pile of brushes in one hand and a large bag in the other. And just behind him I saw his van. It was Wilson Porter, the village sweep.

'I have a job sleeping these days,' said Wilson, putting down his bag touching his cap with the forefinger of his free hand. 'So I just pop round and visit my customers. Easier than trying to get back to sleep. Fireplace in the living room?'

'Yes,' I told him.

He picked up his bag and headed into the house. I padded after him. I was beginning to wonder if he was having a break down. Perhaps, I wondered, he was developing mania. His behaviour certainly couldn't be described as normal.

'Don't some of your customers mind you calling round in the middle of the night?'

'Oh, no,' replied Wilson. 'And the lanes are quiet. I can get round the village more easily.'

He put down his bag and brushes and took a large sheet out of the bag. He laid this down in front of the fireplace.

'Do you need me to move things out?' I asked. 'Cover things up?'

'Oh no,' he said. 'Don't worry yourself I won't make a mess.'

'It smokes,' I said. 'Actually it smokes quite a lot.'

'Always has done this one,' said Wilson.

'We did get some people in from Barnstaple,' I told him. 'Soon after we moved here.'

Wilson sucked some air in through a gap between his front teeth. 'Bet they wanted an arm and a leg?'

'We couldn't afford them,' I said.

'Wanted to rebuild your chimney?'

I nodded. 'They wanted to put in some fans.'

He laughed.

'They said the fans would help take the smoke up the chimney,' I explained.

'Probably would,' he agreed. 'But what a complicated and expensive way to do it.'

'Can you sort it out without putting in fans?'

'Of course I can,' he said. He lifted the fire basket out of the fireplace and put it on his sheet. 'Have you got any spare bricks?'

'We've got piles of them,' I told him.

'Bring me two,' he said.

I slipped on some shoes and let myself out of the house. Dawn was breaking. It was a wonderful sight. A few minutes later I was back with two ordinary house bricks.

'I've given it a poke with the brushes,' he said as I returned. 'It's clean as a whistle.' He took the bricks off me, arranged them in the fireplace and then put the grate back on top of the bricks.

‘That’ll sort your problem, doctor,’ he said. I stared at him. ‘Just that?’

He nodded. ‘It’ll put your fire nearer to the chimney. Plus, you’ll get more air under the fire and a better draught.’ He folded up his sheet and put it back into his bag. Then he picked up the bag and his brushes and headed for the door. I glanced at the clock. It was ten to seven.

‘Have you finished?’

‘All done, doctor!’ he said. ‘Call me in the morning if it’s not better.’ He laughed. ‘There you are!’ he said. ‘I could have sorted it out over the phone. Take two house bricks and call me in the morning if it’s not better.’ He laughed a lot and clearly thought this very funny. I was still too tired to laugh.

‘How much do I owe you?’ I asked him.

He shook his head. ‘On the house,’ he said. He leant towards me. ‘Just a little thank you for popping in to see my Aunt Olive,’ he said.

‘Olive Robinson?’

‘That’s the one.’

‘She’s your Aunt? I thought she was Thumper’s Aunt.’

‘She is. Thumper and I are cousins.’

‘Oh.’

The endless complications of relationships within Bilbury never failed to astound me. I was always discovering that people whom I assumed were just friends were, in reality, quite close relatives. In a small village like Bilbury, most people are related to at least half the other villagers.

The sweep lowered his voice, as though about to share a secret.

‘In case you’re worried, I don’t always do my visits at night. It’s just that I’m taking the family off on holiday today. A fortnight motoring on the continent. Your missus rang me yesterday but I was booked up solid. I wanted to sort out your chimney before we go away. Hope you didn’t mind.’

I stared at him and burst out laughing. ‘That’s very kind of you!’

He winked at me. ‘You thought I’d gone bonkers, didn’t you?’

I nodded. ‘I did wonder,’ I admitted.

‘Your fireplace will be fine now,’ he promised. ‘Just you see.’

And it was too.

The chimney specialists had wanted over £1,000 to put it right. Wilson had done it for nothing. Total cost: two old house bricks.

CHAPTER 33

'It's going to be a quiet wedding. We don't want anything too big,' said Patchy. 'Just a memorable occasion with a few close friends and relatives.'

'And we certainly don't want lots of noise and dancing,' said Adrienne. 'We want our wedding to be a special, sacred occasion. We don't want one of those weddings where the women hitch up their skirts and dance round their handbags while the men drink too much beer, tell dirty stories and then start fighting.'

'Or, indeed, one of those weddings where the men dance round their handbags and the women drink too much beer, tell dirty stories and start fighting,' said Patchy.

Adrienne Kennett and Patchy Fogg, my sister-in-law and my brother-in-law to be, were sitting in the kitchen at Bilbury Grange discussing their forthcoming wedding.

'You're definitely decided on the dress?' said Patsy, who was just as excited as her sister at the forthcoming nuptials.

'Definitely,' said Adrienne.

After days spent searching the shops in Barnstaple and Exeter, Adrienne had decided that she would wear an antique lace wedding dress that had first been worn by Patchy's grandmother.

It had been altered by Adrienne's mother my mother-in-law, and the fact that the changes were invisible to the naked eye was a considerable tribute to Mrs Kennett's skills with a needle. Adrienne was taller than Patchy's grandmother and several inches larger around both the bust and the hips.

'We're getting married in Bilbury church, of course,' said Adrienne. 'But Mum and Dad aren't so sure about having the reception at the farm.'

'There isn't a lot of room there,' agreed Patsy. This was something of an understatement.

The Kennett's farmhouse was in a beautiful position and had wonderful views but a general estate agent, searching for the most appropriate bon mot, would have described the house as 'cosy'. If more than half a dozen people turned up to the reception they would be standing on one another's toes.

'They say we can have it there if we can't find anywhere else,' said Adrienne.

There was a long silence.

Patsy looked at me. I knew what she was thinking. I smiled and nodded slightly.

'You must have the reception here,' said Patsy. 'If you'd like to, of course.'

Adrienne jumped up and threw her arms around her sister. 'Oh, are you sure?' she said. 'That would be absolutely wonderful!' She turned to Patchy. 'Wouldn't that be wonderful?'

'It would,' agreed Patchy. He looked at me. 'Are you sure?'

'It'll be our pleasure,' I said. 'We can put a marquee up on the lawn.'

'I've got a pal who can let us have one at a special price,' said Patchy. Patchy always knows someone who can do things at a special price. 'Nice chap if a bit odd. He calls his business the Marquee de Sade. He also promotes rock concerts and gives lectures on flower arranging.'

'We'll pay for everything,' said Adrienne. She laughed. 'Patchy has got plenty of money.'

'Don't ever tell anyone that,' said Patchy sternly.

'But they're family!' protested Adrienne.

'Especially not family,' said Patchy. It was difficult to tell how much he was joking. Patchy wasn't as tight as Peter Marshall but he didn't like parting with money unnecessarily. I think he thought his money might get homesick if it left his wallet.

'I expect Dad will want to pay for everything,' said Patsy.

'Well, we'll let him pay for some things,' said Adrienne. She lowered her voice in that way people do when they're telling you something confidential, even though they know perfectly well that there is no chance of anyone overhearing them. 'Things have been a bit tight recently at the farm. So Patchy and I will try to grab some of the bills before he sees them.'

'Well, if it's going to be a quiet wedding it shouldn't be all that expensive,' said Patsy.

'No,' agreed Adrienne. 'Just relatives and a few very dear friends.'

'I suppose we'll have to invite these two as well,' said Patchy, nodding at Patsy and me. 'Since we're using their house.' Adrienne hit him over the head with a newspaper.

CHAPTER 34

‘Do you remember a chap called Alfred Burton?’ asked Patchy.

I thought hard but eventually shook my head.

‘Farmer who went bankrupt. We bought his dog.’

‘Lady!’ I said. ‘Yes, of course I remember. We paid a halfpenny each for her.’

‘That’s the one,’ agreed Patchy. ‘He moved in with his mother in a cottage in Combe Martin.’

‘I remember,’ I said. ‘Nice little cottage.’

‘His mother is dying,’ said Patchy.

‘Oh I’m sorry to hear that,’ I said.

‘She’s eighty nine,’ said Patchy. ‘It happens.’

‘Yes,’ I agreed. ‘I suppose it does.’

‘The problem is,’ said Patchy, ‘that Alfred is still bankrupt.’

I waited. I couldn’t see what Alfred’s bankruptcy and his mother’s death could have to do with me.

‘The cottage goes to Alfred when his mother dies,’ explained Patchy.

‘Fair enough,’ I nodded. ‘So he can stay there.’

‘Not if she dies before Wednesday,’ said Patchy. I stared at him, thoroughly confused.

‘Alfred’s bankruptcy finishes on Wednesday,’ explained Patchy.

‘If she dies before Wednesday then the cottage goes to Alfred and the court will take it off him.’

‘But if she dies after Wednesday Alfred gets to keep the cottage?’

‘Exactly.’

‘She’s got to stay alive for two days.’

‘Two days. Just two days.’

‘I see.’ I said. ‘Where do I come in?’

‘You’re their doctor.’

‘I am?’ I frowned.

‘Alfred and his mother used to live just outside Bilbury. They were both on Dr Brownlow’s list.’

‘But I don’t remember ever seeing them.’

‘I don’t think you have. They don’t bother much with doctors, lawyers or accountants.’

‘I don’t suppose that might possibly explain why Alfred went bankrupt? The absence of professional help?’

‘I don’t think you can blame yourself for that. But I suppose that good advice from a numerate accountant might have helped fend off the bankruptcy.’

I thought about things. ‘I can see my future role in this drama becoming quite significant.’

‘Indeed,’ agreed Patchy.

‘This isn’t just a question of contributing a halfpenny towards buying back a sheepdog?’

‘No. You need to do a bit more than that.’

‘I need to keep Alfred’s mother alive until after Wednesday.’

‘Precisely.’

‘How ill is she at the moment?’

Patchy looked at me but didn’t say anything.

I closed my eyes and put my head in my hands.

‘It’s just the date on the death certificate that matters,’ said Patchy.

‘That’s what’s really crucial.’

‘How bad is she?’ I asked again.

‘She’s still alive,’ said Patchy. He held out one hand in front of him and waved it from side to side, as though it were a raft on a choppy sea. ‘Just.’

‘We’d better go and have a look,’ I said. ‘What’s her name?

‘Lisa,’ replied Patchy. ‘Lisa Burton, nee Pinkerton.’

* * *

I called in at Bilbury Grange to have a look at Mrs Burton’s medical records. Patchy came in with me.

‘I’ve found an Alfred Burton,’ I said, producing Alfred’s medical records. ‘He’s been a bit of a nuisance,’ I said, holding up the card.

‘He had mumps in 1922 and a sprained ankle in 1925.’

‘Clearly a hypochondriac,’ said Patchy.

‘But I haven’t got any medical records for a Lisa Burton or a Lisa Pinkerton.’

‘Try looking for Joan Burton,’ suggested Patchy. I found the notes for Joan Burton straight away.

‘Why did you call her Lisa if her name is Joan?’

‘Everyone called her Lisa because she was such a moaner,’ explained Patchy.

I looked at him and frowned. ‘I don’t get it.’

‘Moaner Lisa.’

‘Ah.’

‘Have you learned anything?’

‘No.’ I need not have bothered going back to Bilbury Grange. Mrs Burton’s medical notes were as pristine as they had been when they’d first been issued. Apart from her name and date of birth, written at the top of the card by some anonymous clerk, there was nothing at all written on her records. Leaving the useless records where they were I went back outside and told Patchy to lead the way. He had promised to introduce me to the Burtons.

Their cottage was no more than a hundred yards away from the beach, and Alfred, his mother and the dog, Lady, were all in the living room when we arrived.

Alfred looked tired and worn out. His mother, sitting in an easy chair by the fireplace, was unconscious. She was white and looked like death only very slightly warmed up. She did, however, look remarkably peaceful.

‘Why didn’t you call me?’ I asked him.

‘Didn’t like to bother,’ he replied. ‘One of the neighbours has been helping me.’ He paused. ‘With the washing and so on,’ he explained.

‘Do you know what’s wrong with her?’ I asked him. Alfred looked at me and shook his head.

‘What symptoms did she have?’ I asked. ‘Before she went unconscious?’

Alfred shrugged. ‘I don’t know,’ he admitted. ‘She wasn’t very well.’

‘We may have to get her into the hospital,’ I told him.

‘No! No!’ said Patchy.

I looked at him. He made a frantic sign for me to follow him into the kitchen.

‘You can’t send her into hospital,’ he said. The kitchen was a cockroaches’ delight. Every available surface was piled high with dirty crocks.

‘Why not?’

‘Because she might die there!’

‘She might die here.’

‘Yes, but if she dies in hospital everyone will know precisely when she died. And if she dies before Thursday Alfred will be thrown out of his home. He’ll end up sleeping rough.’

‘What on earth are you suggesting?’ I demanded. ‘If she dies too soon do you really want me to ignore it and write the certificate a day or two later?’

‘Yes!’ said Patchy. ‘Of course.’

‘I can’t do that!’

‘Why not?’

‘Because...’ I tried to think of a reason. ‘Because I could get into trouble,’ I confessed rather lamely. ‘A death certificate is a legal document.’ I felt rather ashamed of myself for this feeble excuse.

‘That’s a bit weak as excuses go,’ said Patchy.

‘I know,’ I admitted.

‘If you send her into hospital what will they do?’

‘Hopefully, they’ll try to find out what’s wrong with her,’ I said.

‘And then if they can find anything they’ll try to treat it.’

‘Hopefully,’ said Patchy.

‘Hospitals don’t always try as hard as they should with elderly patients,’ I admitted.

‘So she probably has as good a chance – or better – if she stays here.’

‘I can do some preliminary tests,’ I agreed. ‘But this place is a pigsty.’ I looked around. ‘Actually, I’ve seen pigsties that were much cleaner.’

‘I’ll get one or two people in to clean things up,’ said Patchy. ‘Just tidy up.’

‘Can you?’ I asked doubtfully.

‘Definitely. And I can get one or two people to help look after Mrs Burton.’

‘Who?’

‘Friends. Relatives.’ I nodded.

Patchy grinned. ‘Good,’ he said. ‘Let’s go back and see Mrs Burton and you can do your well-known impersonation of a doctor.’

We went back into the living room. I told Alfred to walk to the local store to buy some cleaning equipment and some black bags. He hadn't got any money so I gave him a five pound note. Patchy went out to find a couple of women who would help nurse Mrs Burton.

And then I set about examining Mrs Burton and trying to work out what was wrong with her. I was, I suppose, hoping that I could find some simple explanation for her condition. Maybe I would be able to diagnose an easily treatable problem. Perhaps I'd be able to send Alfred or Patchy to the chemist's with a prescription and then, moments after their return, inject Mrs Burton with some magical remedy that would drag her back from the porch way in front of death's door.

But it wasn't like that.

I found out what was wrong with her within minutes.

She had a huge suppurating ulcer on her chest and a cancerous lump in her left breast that had replaced all of the breast tissue. Her lymph glands felt like golf balls, her liver felt like a boulder and there were secondary deposits in every part of her body that I could find. It was pretty clear that the kindly neighbour who had been helping to look after Mrs Burton had not invaded her privacy enough to wash anything more intimate than her face and hands.

How, I wondered, could anyone let themselves get into such a condition. How could a woman ignore a growth that had taken over so much of her body?

I would never understand but somehow I felt responsible and guilty. I was Mrs Burton's general practitioner. I should have known. The fact that I had only been her GP for a matter of months, while the cancer that was killing her had clearly been at work for years, was of no interest to me. I felt angry. I couldn't be angry with Mrs Burton and so I felt angry with myself

Alfred and Patchy came back to the house at almost the same time. Patchy brought Nelly with him. She was, he said, a relative of the family's who had done some nursing but who needed a few days work. He had, he said, agreed a fee that he would pay her. She looked to be in her early thirties. She was smartly dressed in a plain blue frock and a white cardigan. She looked efficient. I asked her where she'd trained. She told me. I asked her what qualifications she had. She said she was a State Registered Nurse. I said that was perfect.

Although Mrs Burton seemed to be unconscious I always assume that patients can hear what I am saying even when I strongly suspect that they cannot and so I took the three of them into the tiny kitchen. I told them the blunt truth.

'No hope?' said Alfred.

'No hope, I'm afraid,' I said. 'No one can do anything for your mother – except make her comfortable and make sure that she doesn't suffer.'

Many doctors don't realise it but in medicine 'nothing' is often the best thing to do.

Alfred nodded his understanding. 'I'll go and sit with her,' he said. He left the three of us alone.

'So, how long do you think she'll last?' asked Patchy.

'She could go at any time,' I said. I sighed and looked at Patchy questioningly. 'Midnight on Wednesday?'

Patchy nodded.

'Midnight between Wednesday and Thursday?' I asked, making sure.

Patchy, understanding my caution, nodded again.

I looked at my watch and did some quick calculations. 'We've got 46 hours,' I said.

'Should we move her upstairs?' asked Nelly. 'Into her bedroom?'

I shook my head. 'She's comfortable where she is. If we try moving her we could kill her. I've never seen such a terrible case of metastatic cancer. It's spread everywhere.'

Patchy paled. 'Don't tell me any more,' he begged. 'I'm not terribly good with illness.'

I smiled at him weakly. 'Who has been coming in to help Alfred?' I asked.

'Just an old woman who lives a few doors away,' said Patchy. 'Not really a friend. She was just helping out.'

The door from the living room opened and Alfred came back in. 'Do you mind if I take the dog for a walk?' he asked. There were tears in his eyes.

'Good idea,' I told him. 'Have you got anywhere that you can stay for the next day or two?'

Alfred shook his head.

'He can stay with me,' offered Patchy.

'Your mum could go at any time,' I told him. 'Do you want to be with her when she goes?'

He looked at me uncertainly.

'Would you rather say goodbye now?' I asked him. 'And go and stay with Patchy?'

Alfred nodded.

'Then take him with you,' I said to Patchy. 'Nelly and I will look after Mrs Burton.'

When they'd gone I turned to Nelly. 'Do you understand what's happening here?'

She nodded. 'Patchy explained.'

‘Are you entirely happy about being part of it?’

‘Absolutely,’ she replied. ‘Definitely. Alfred’s farm was taken by the bank. They were the only people to whom he owed money.

They could have let him work off his debts but they wouldn’t. If they’d waited a few months and let him sell the year’s crops he would have been OK. And they’ll take his mother’s cottage if we don’t help. Of course I’m happy about being part of it.’ She nodded. ‘Most definitely,’ she said. She paused. ‘Alfred is my uncle,’ she added.

‘Right,’ I said. ‘Then we keep this to just the two of us. And we take it in turns to sit with her. We need a shift system.’

‘And if she dies before Thursday we just keep coming in and out as if she was still alive?’

I nodded.

‘And, whatever happens, we don’t ring the undertaker until Thursday?’

There are times in life, I was discovering, that doing the right thing means doing the wrong thing.

Mrs Burton died on Thursday.

CHAPTER 35

Patsy was in Barnstaple at the post natal clinic and so I popped into the Duck and Puddle for a cheese sandwich and a pint of shandy.

‘What are you getting Patchy and Adrienne for their wedding?’ Thumper asked me when I’d ordered.

‘I don’t think we’ve really thought about it,’ I admitted.

‘Anne and I are getting them a toaster,’ said Thumper. Anne Thwaites is his girlfriend and the mother of his child.

‘Ah,’ I said. ‘Hmmm.’ To be honest this didn’t sound very original to me.

‘Ask Frank what he and Gilly are getting them,’ said Thumper.

Frank was pouring my shandy. ‘What are you and Gilly getting the happy couple?’

‘A toaster,’ replied Frank instantly. ‘Peter Marshall bought a whole pile of them from a bankrupt wholesaler in Bristol. They were made in Korea. He’s selling them very cheap. Only three quid each.’

I looked at Thumper. He was grinning. ‘We’ll get them something else as well,’ he said. ‘But I thought that if we all bought them a toaster – and exactly the same model toaster – it might be rather fun.’

‘How many of us are there?’

‘Peter’s got twenty three toasters.’

‘Do you know twenty three people all prepared to buy a toaster?’

‘Oh yes! There are only three left. But I told Peter to put one aside for you. I knew you wouldn’t want to be left out.’

‘Do they all work?’

‘No idea. Does it matter? Out of twenty three toasters there is bound to be one or two that works.’

‘I’ll call in on the way home,’ I promised.

‘We’re all going to wrap our toasters up,’ said Frank. ‘And try to make them look different.’

‘Adrienne will be thrilled,’ I said, picking up my sandwich and taking a bite. I knew that Patchy would appreciate the funny side of being presented with twenty three cheap Korean toasters but I couldn’t help wondering if Thumper might not be over-estimating the bride-to-be’s sense of humour.

CHAPTER 36

I called in to see Les Salterton the next morning.

It was a beautiful day and he was working outside in his garden. He often did that. ‘The wind blows the shavings away,’ he once explained. ‘No sweeping up to do when I finish work.’

He saw me coming and stood up from his work bench. He straightened his back and smiled in welcome. ‘I’ve finished mending your table,’ he said. ‘Good as new now.’

‘Thanks. How do you feel?’ I asked him.

‘Fit as a fiddle,’ he said. ‘That course of tablets did me a power of good.’ He leant closer and lowered his voice. ‘I’d been feeling a bit low,’ he confided.

I didn’t tell him that it was the tablets that had made him feel low and that it was stopping them that had made him feel good again.

‘There’s a pair of green woodpeckers down the lane,’ he said.

‘Want to see?’

Of course I did.

Before we set off, Les bent down and popped a brick in between the front door and the frame to stop it closing completely. ‘I have to leave the door open so that the cats can get in and out.’ He paused and frowned. ‘Besides,’ he added, ‘I don’t think I’ve ever had a key.’

We wandered down the lane and spent half an hour watching the green woodpeckers digging holes in trees as only woodpeckers can.

‘Did you know that green woodpeckers were once regarded as vermin?’ he asked me quietly.

Surprised, I said I didn’t.

He told me that in the 18th century the green woodpecker had become unwanted because of its habit of hammering its way through the wooden shingle roofs of country homes. ‘The church oversaw their destruction,’ he told me. ‘But unlike the red kite and the raven, species which were also regarded as vermin and which were wiped out, the green woodpecker survived.’

As we wandered back up the lane towards his house and my car I wondered how many city GPs get to spend a guiltless half an hour bird watching in the middle of a working day. It occurred to me too that in towns and cities people measure time by minutes and seconds. In the country people measure time in hours and days.

Not for the first time I was pleased that I’d chosen to live in Bilbury, and grateful that I’d been given the opportunity.

CHAPTER 37

It was three days since Olive Robinson had been to the hospital and I still hadn't heard about the tests that had been done. After lunch I telephoned the hospital. I spoke first to the pathology laboratory. They had found nothing noticeably abnormal in any of the tests they'd done. Then I dialled the direct number of one of the hospital radiologists; a fellow I had known at medical school. He was the only doctor I knew who still smoked and his small office at the hospital was always thick with cigarette smoke. Smoking had been banned in the rest of the hospital but the administrators had failed to persuade him to pop out into the hospital grounds every time he needed to top up his nicotine levels.

'Funnily enough I've just put her skull X-ray back up on the light box,' he told me, thoughtfully. He was using the speaker phone on his desk and it made him sound as though he was talking in an echo chamber. 'It's a bit of a puzzle to be honest. Her ventricles are dilated but they look a bit odd. I can't quite decide why. Is she showing signs of dementia?'

I told him that she was.

'That could be it,' he said. 'Brain tissue deteriorating. Ventricles enlarging.' There was a pause and I heard a match strike as he lit a fresh cigarette. 'How old is she?'

'Seventy two,' I told him.

'That's probably it then.' He coughed for a few moments.

'When are you going to give those things up?'

He laughed. 'Don't you start.'

Neither I nor anyone else could understand why a radiologist, of all people, should smoke. Every week he viewed the chest X-rays of people with lung cancer caused by smoking. But it didn't seem to bother him. 'Got to die of something,' he said merrily.

'It doesn't seem like simple dementia,' I told him. 'She has become confused,' I told him. 'But it's all happened very quickly. Far too quickly for a simple dementia. And she's also having difficulty in walking. She drags her left leg.'

'I know it's a pretty obvious thought but you're sure she hasn't had a stroke?'

'Pretty sure. I can't find any evidence of one. And there's another thing: she's complaining of constant headaches.'

'What sort of headaches?'

'Just a general headache. All over her head. She complains it feels as though her head is about to explode.'

There was silence at the other end of the phone. 'You still there?' I asked.

'Yeah,' said the radiologist. 'It's a puzzle isn't it? Anything show up on the blood tests.'

'Nothing interesting.'

'Let me think about it a bit more,' he said. 'Maybe I'll come up with something. Maybe you ought to get her in for a few days so that we can keep an eye on her.'

CHAPTER 38

'I'm still no nearer getting a diagnosis for Olive Robinson,' I told Dr Brownlow.

I wanted to talk to him. Dr Brownlow was the best diagnostician I'd ever known.

Making a clinical diagnosis is like solving a puzzle. Sometimes the solution is easy. The clues are easy to spot. But too often the clues are hidden, the evidence confusing and contradictory and the conclusion debatable.

When Dr Brownlow had learned his profession, a doctor had to rely very much on his own eyes and ears for the information with which he would make a diagnosis.

In the 1960s, when I was trained, doctors had vast quantities of equipment available to them. 'Too much information can mask the diagnosis,' Dr Brownlow once told me. 'Doctors forget that their laboratory tests and X-rays and so on aren't always right. Too many young doctors – and a good many older ones – make the mistake of ignoring the patient and listening only to the bits of paper they get from the laboratory. They then compound their error by treating what they suspect the diagnosis to be, rather than treating the patient.'

He was right. I learned a lot from Dr Brownlow.

'When the patient talks he is telling you the answers,' Dr Brownlow once said. 'He probably doesn't realise he's telling you the answers, of course. Finding the answer from what he tells you is your job.'

Dr Brownlow would often just sit quietly and let his patients ramble on. 'Doctors should shut up and listen more,' he told me. He believed that collecting information was more important than a physical examination. And he was right about that too.

'Some diseases are rare,' he said. 'But to the people who get them they aren't rare at all. Put together all the information a patient gives you and you will sometimes suddenly see that the condition you thought was impossibly rare will suddenly become quite obviously certain.'

When I was a young assistant and we were working together I remember a patient appearing at the surgery with a fever. Dr Brownlow diagnosed malaria. 'How on earth did you make that diagnosis?' I asked him afterwards, greatly impressed. 'I would never have thought that a patient in Bilbury might have malaria.' Dr Brownlow had simply shrugged. 'It was obvious. He told me he'd just come back from a trip to Africa,' he said. 'And I didn't know he was going so I knew he hadn't taken any prophylactic medicine.'

We were sitting in the living room with the French windows thrown wide open. Sunshine and birdsong filled the room. Bradshaw was tidying up. When I'd arrived he'd offered to leave and finish tidying the room later but both Dr Brownlow and I had told him that there was no reason for him to leave. Since Bradshaw was going to join me as Bilbury's district nurse he would soon get to know whatever medical secrets there might be in the area. And Bradshaw had, in any case, long ago proved himself to be the soul of discretion.

'Nothing else from the tests?'

I shook my head. 'They even did a lumbar puncture to see if she had raised cerebrospinal fluid pressure.'

'Nothing odd?'

'Absolutely normal.'

'How is she?'

'Steadily deteriorating.'

We sat in silence for a few moments. The silence was broken only by the sound of birds singing and Bradshaw wheezing very lightly as he put books back into the bookcase. Dr Brownlow had been looking through his books before I'd arrived; taking leave of some old and much valued friends as he'd put it.

'So tell me again, what's wrong with her.'

'She's gradually developing dementia, she complains of constant headaches and she's losing power and function in one leg - so much so that she can't walk without help. Her memory is going, she's constantly tired and she's incontinent.'

We stared at each other, neither speaking.

'Definitely hasn't had a stroke?' I shook my head.

'Blood pressure?'

'Normal.'

'And the dementia isn't just senile dementia?'

'No. It's developing too quickly for that. Just last week she was doing the crossword in the paper. This week she just can't pay attention long enough to do one clue. Her judgement seems to have gone and there are daily changes in her moods and behaviour. And then there are the physical problems which you don't get with dementia. Her legs are weak and she's terribly unsteady. Sometimes her feet seem to freeze to the floor and she has great difficulty in taking the next step. Instead of walking she shuffles – she walks in a strange, wide-legged sort of way and she's fallen twice recently.'

'And she's incontinent?

'Urine only.'

'And a headache you say?'

'Constant. Nothing seems to make it go away. And she has difficulty in focusing her eyes.'

Dr Brownlow sighed. 'Poor Olive,' he said.

'They've brought in several consultants to look at her,' I said.

'Every time a neurologist or consultant physician comes up from Exeter they get him to take a look.'

'No ideas?'

'Oh, lots of ideas. But nothing useful.' Suddenly there was a cough. I turned.

'I hope you don't mind my saying something, doctors,' he said.

'But I couldn't help overhearing what you were saying about Miss Robinson.'

'If you've got any ideas Bradshaw they will be welcomed,' said Dr Brownlow. 'We're both stumped. And so, it seems, are the bright boys at the hospital.'

'Well, sir, when I was in the army in India, we once saw a patient who had similar symptoms to those currently being experienced by Miss Robinson,' said Bradshaw. It was one of the longest speeches I'd ever heard him make.

'And...?' said Dr Brownlow.

'Eventually a diagnosis of normal pressure hydrocephalus was made,' said Bradshaw.

Dr Brownlow looked at me. 'What on earth is that?' he asked.

I shook my head. I'd never heard of it either.

'What's that?' Dr Brownlow asked his butler.

'I believe it to be a rare neurological condition,' said Bradshaw. 'As I understand it, the condition develops when the fluid surrounding the brain, the fluid which normally surrounds and protects the brain tissue...'

'You're talking about the cerebrospinal fluid?' said Dr Brownlow.

'Exactly so, sir. The cerebrospinal fluid is normally reabsorbed if there is too much of it. But in this particular condition the reabsorption does not take place as it should and the increasing amount of fluid around the brain puts pressure on the delicate tissue, resulting in a unique form of dementia – very much, I think, like the type currently suffered by Miss Robinson. The patient whom I saw had very much the same sort of symptoms – even including the wide-legged walk and considerable instability.'

'Good heavens, Bradshaw!' said Dr Brownlow. 'It sounds as if you could have cracked the case.'

'I do hope that I have been able to help, sir,' replied the butler.

'I have always been fond of Miss Robinson. A true lady, I've always felt.'

'Exactly so,' said Dr Brownlow. 'Is there any treatment for this condition? Can we do anything to help Miss Robinson?'

'Oh, I believe so, sir,' said Bradshaw. 'If the excess fluid were to be removed from around the brain by the installation of a drainage tube...'

'A shunt?' I suggested.

'Precisely so,' nodded Bradshaw. 'With the aid of a shunt it should be possible to reduce the amount of fluid pressing on the brain.'

'And the symptoms will disappear?' asked Dr Brownlow.

'Judging by the incident I remember there should be a noticeable improvement in Miss Robinson's condition if this were to be done,' said Bradshaw.

Dr Brownlow looked at me. 'I'll ring the hospital now,' I said.

'I'll have a word with the doctor looking after Olive and then I'll drive into Barnstaple and make sure that they are doing everything they can.'

'Congratulations Bradshaw,' said Dr Brownlow, turning to his butler. 'Pour yourself a large whisky. You've earned it.'

'Thank you, sir,' said the butler.

'And pour another one for me. And one for the young doctor while he rings the hospital.'

Seven minutes later I put down the telephone. 'They hadn't thought of normal pressure hydrocephalus,' I told Dr Brownlow and Bradshaw. 'But the consultant agrees that this could well be what is causing Miss Robinson's problems. They're going to get on with it straight away.'

As I sipped the whisky Bradshaw had poured I could not help reflecting that if he had not overheard our conversation Olive Robinson would have probably never been diagnosed.

Many patients regard medicine as a science. It isn't. Accurate diagnoses are often missed. And, far more often than doctors like to admit, they are made by chance.

* * *

When I got back to Bilbury Grange, Patsy met me at the door and whispered to me that Adrienne was in the kitchen and on the warpath.

'She says she's got a bone to pick with you,' said Patsy.

I couldn't think of anything I'd done that could have possibly upset my sister-in-law. I wandered into the kitchen convinced that I had done nothing wrong.

Adrienne was holding our baby. He was wrapped in a blue shawl. I kissed his forehead. Just looking at him I could tell he was going to be wise, handsome and honest; a man looked up to and admired by everyone who knew him. None of this was mere paternal pride but would have been obvious to anyone who looked at him. I gazed at him adoringly. He had Patsy's eyes. I wondered how long it would be before I could buy him a bicycle. 'Why did you tell Patchy that my middle name is Christabel?' she demanded.

Ah.

'It's a long story,' I told her, turning round and heading back for the door. 'And I've just remembered I've got someone I must call in on.'

That's one of the advantages of being a country GP. There's always a good reason to be somewhere else in a hurry.

'I'll be in the Duck and Puddle,' I whispered to Patsy as I left.

'Give me a call when your sister has gone.'

I found Thumper in the Duck and Puddle. I told him that Bradshaw might well have diagnosed his aunt's illness.

'You mean Bradshaw made the diagnosis even though all the doctors were stumped?'

I nodded.

'When I heard he was going to be the new district nurse I was a bit apprehensive,' admitted Thumper. 'But this changes things a bit doesn't it?'

'I hope so,' I agreed. 'I hope the rest of the village feels the same.'

'They will,' said Thumper firmly. 'Oh, they will.'

I was convinced.

* * *

The doctor at the hospital telephoned me the next day.

'Great news!' said the consultant. He sounded quite excited. 'Dr Brownlow's butler has shown us all a thing or two.'

'You think Olive has got normal pressure hydrocephalus?'

'Definitely!' said the consultant. 'We put in a shunt and lowered her cerebrospinal fluid pressure. It's amazing. She's a different woman. She's still a bit slow but she says the headache has gone and she can walk pretty well normally.'

I thanked him, told him I'd be in to see her soon, and put down the telephone.

'Olive?' asked Patsy when I walked into the kitchen.

'She's going to be fine,' I told her. We hugged each other and cried with joy. We were both very fond of Thumper's aunt.

And then, while I sipped the tea Patsy had made, I telephoned.

Thumper to tell him the good news.

Thumper is the toughest guy I know.

He burst into tears when I told him the news.

It was one of those moments when it feels really good to be a village doctor.

CHAPTER 39

It was, at last, the morning of the big wedding. Three men working for Patchy's chum had erected a huge white marquee on our back lawn.

(It had the slogan 'Marquee de Sade' stitched into the canvas just beside the entrance. 'Oh, I've heard of him,' said Mrs Kennett when she saw the slogan. 'Isn't he foreign? Fancy him making tents and bringing them all this way from abroad.')

Adrienne, Patsy and their mother had spent much of the previous week preparing food for the feast which would follow the ceremony. By noon the twelve trestle tables which had been put up in the marquee were so laden with plates of food that they were beginning to creak.

It had been decided to have a cold buffet and there were hundreds of different types of pie and pasty on display. There were three whole salmon, six huge plates of cold meats and a tureen full of cold soup which Adrienne had prepared from nettles and dandelions which she had collected herself. There were slices of chicken breast, a huge side of cold beef and what looked like several hundred homemade mushroom vol au vents. There were enough sandwiches to keep an army marching for a week. The three-tier wedding cake, which took pride of place at the far end of the marquee, had been made by Adrienne's aunt, and to keep the sweet-toothed happy before the cutting of the cake ceremony there were numerous dishes full of sherry trifle (sponge fingers, red jelly, yellow custard, mixed fruit and fresh cream topped with multi-coloured hundreds and thousands and little silver balls), half a dozen sponge cakes and a vast array of fairy cakes, scones, profiteroles, cream horns, cream-filled brandy snaps, jam tarts and home-made biscuits. Olive Robinson, Thumper's aunt, had been out of hospital just one day but had, nevertheless, managed to make a fruit cake, a carrot cake and a Victoria sponge. She was looking good. I learned from Thumper that there had been some doubts in the village about Bradshaw becoming my district nurse but that these doubts had now disappeared entirely.

The wedding presents were piled high on a trestle table just inside the entrance to the marquee. They were positioned there so that the bride and groom could open them in full view of their guests. The twenty three toasters which had been purchased from Peter Marshall's shop had all been neatly wrapped and although some attempts had been made to disguise the contents it wasn't difficult to guess that a lot of presents were items which came in neat, oblong boxes.

The men who had brought the marquee had offered to set up some portable lavatories on one of our smaller lawns but we had decided that this wouldn't be necessary. We had, instead, put up one notice inviting lady guests to use the lavatory in the surgery – the one provided for patients – and another notice pointing to a rather overgrown area behind three large oak trees and a stretch of beech hedge. Thumper, who was Patchy's best man, had prepared a special sign which said, simply, 'USED BEER DEPARTMENT'.

'I thought it was going to be a quiet wedding,' I whispered to Patsy. We were standing alone in the garden. The calm before the inevitable storm. We had rushed back home from the church so that we would be ready to welcome the bride and groom and their guests.

The ceremony had been dignified and beautiful. Patsy, who had been the bridesmaid, was still wearing the beautiful pale yellow dress with a lot of frills which her mother had made for her. She vowed that she was not going to change out of it all afternoon since she was unlikely to get another chance to wear it.

We had both been able to go because Mr Parfitt, who said he wasn't terribly interested in weddings but who I knew couldn't bear to see his lawn being trampled by a lot of strangers wearing high heels, had volunteered to sit by the telephone for me in case there were any medical emergencies. His wife had promised to look after the baby. I didn't think Mr Parfitt would have to take too many calls since most of the villagers were likely to be in the tent on our back lawn and anyone who needed me wouldn't need a telephone.

'I think the guest list grew a bit larger than they had anticipated,' replied Patsy.

'How many people are coming?' I asked.

'Patchy says they kept it down to a minimum.'

'How many people are coming?'

'Around two hundred.'

'Two hundred!' I was astonished. 'Where are they all going to park?'

'My Dad has moved the cows out of one of his fields,' said Patsy.

'There's a sign up saying Free Parking.' I looked at her.

'He wanted to charge a shilling for the day,' admitted Patsy who knew what I'd been thinking. 'But Adrienne and I managed to persuade him not to.'

'Don't forget to keep two pieces of cake,' I told her. 'One for Dr Brownlow and one for Bradshaw.'

‘Of course I won’t.’

Dr Brownlow had desperately wanted to attend the wedding but he was sinking fast. He had, however, sent a splendid wedding present (an envelope stuffed with fivers) and had asked for a piece of cake in return.

‘Everything looks well under control,’ I said recklessly. The truth is that I was bursting with pride and far too pleased with the world around me to realise just how much I was tempting fate. Patsy looked beautiful and thoroughly regal. Bilbury Grange looked absolutely magnificent. And our new baby (being looked after by a very elegantly dressed Mrs Parfitt) was, of course, a microcosm of perfection.

From the driveway there were the sounds which told us that the principal players and their guests were arriving. Patsy, full of excitement, hurried forward to greet them.

I wandered into the marquee, picked up a jam tart and crammed it into my mouth before I joined her.

* * *

An hour later the wedding party was in full swing.

It was not, perhaps, the quiet and low key wedding ‘just for a few close friends and relatives’ which I seemed to remember the happy couple talking about in our kitchen. But it was, at least, a dignified wedding. No one had fallen over or disgraced themselves and although it was clear that there were going to be enough pies and cakes left over to feed the proverbial five thousand (without the aid of any miracles of enhancement) the organisation seemed faultless.

The opening of the twenty three toasters had started things off well.

I think Patchy had guessed that something was up when he saw the huge array of similarly sized boxes awaiting them. He clearly knew what was going on after the first three packets had been opened to reveal identical Korean toasters.

‘Splendid!’ he cried, holding up one of the toasters and pointing to the other two. ‘Fresh toasters for Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. Let’s just hope we get toasters for Thursday and Friday too.’

And of course, they got toasters for Thursday and Friday. And for the weekend and for the next fortnight too.

‘Marvellous!’ cried Patchy. ‘I’ve always thought it’s a wise idea to buy spares when you find something you really like.’

‘These came from Peter,’ muttered Frank gloomily. ‘You’ll probably need all the spares to make one piece of toast.’

If Adrienne was disappointed by this apparent lack of proper planning among her friends she managed to hide it well. And when the huge pile of toasters were stacked in a corner of the marquee and replaced by the real presents any residual disappointment she might have felt disappeared entirely.

So, even Thumper’s practical joke had, it seemed, been well received.

And you can’t ask for much more at a wedding than that the best man’s practical joke goes down well.

* * *

Looking through the retrospectoscope (a medical instrument much favoured by a tutor of mine at medical school which enables the user to examine events with the inestimable benefits of hindsight) it is clear that I should have realised something odd was happening rather earlier than I did. Sadly, I did not, though, to be perfectly honest, I doubt if events would have been any different if I had.

Bizarre things were occurring everywhere.

Peter Marshall was attempting to climb up one of the main poles holding up the marquee. Anne Thwaites was trying to juggle with scotch eggs (and judging by the tell-tale debris at her feet proving to be not very good at it) and an uncle of Patchy’s from Huddersfield was standing on a wooden trestle table (from which he had thoughtfully removed the table cloth) and preparing to prove that he could fly. A cousin of Patchy’s was lying flat on his back snoring very loudly. Samuel Houghton and his wife were dancing the polka (or, at least, their own version of as much of a polka as can be danced in an area about four foot square) and Harry Burrows had taken one of the toasters out of its box and was trying, unsuccessfully and inexplicably, to cram a Cornish pasty into the slit at the top of the toaster.

(We were later to find that Harry would have been just as unsuccessful if he’d tried to insert a slice of bread. Sadly, the opening in the top of the toasters wasn’t wide enough to take a whole slice of bread. Remarkably, although Patchy and Adrienne were the proud owners of 23 toasters, they were only able to make a full round of toast by spearing a piece of bread on a toasting fork and holding it in front of the fire.)

‘Do you think they’re all drunk?’ asked Patsy. Even for Bilbury this was more than vaguely eccentric behaviour. She and I had been kept busy ensuring that the wedding guests were adequately fed and watered and had not, as yet, managed to eat or drink anything.

‘They seem drugged to me,’ I said, staring in astonishment as, no more than six feet away from where we were standing, the vicar and his wife started to undress each other.

Patsy stared at me. ‘Are you serious?’

I nodded. ‘I’m afraid so. If the vicar had had enough to drink to banish his inhibitions to that extent he’d be flat on his back and incapable of unbuttoning his own trousers.’

We stood and stared in astonishment as the vicar did indeed remove his own trousers. He did this nimbly and gracefully. I had never expected the vicar to be a man who favoured underwear decorated with cartoon characters. Having removed his trousers the vicar gave out a great whoop and flung them skywards.

‘If you ever wear boxer shorts like those I may divorce you,’ said Patsy.

‘You need have no worries,’ I assured her.

The first clue as to the cause of all this mayhem came when Samuel Houghton shuffled over to ask if there were any more mushroom vol au vents.

‘I’m afraid not,’ Patsy told him. ‘All the ones we had were out.’

‘Pity,’ said Samuel.

‘Did you know that your trousers were around your ankles?’ I asked him

‘The vicar’s wife unfastened my braces,’ he told me proudly. ‘Stout woman.’ And he shuffled off, examining abandoned plates as he did so. Occasionally, he found an abandoned mushroom vol au vent and when he did so he popped it straight into his mouth.

‘Who made the mushroom vol au vents?’ I asked Patsy.

‘Have you tried them? Are they all right?’

‘I haven’t tried one. But they seem popular. They’ve all gone. Who made them?’

‘Adrienne.’

It was the answer I’d expected. ‘I don’t suppose she picked the mushrooms herself?’

Patsy, rather pale now, nodded.

And then I knew.

‘Do you think there is something wrong with the mushrooms?’ asked Patsy.

‘I think Adrienne has made her vol au vents with magic mushrooms.’

Patsy actually lifted one hand and placed it across her mouth, just in the way people are supposed to do when they are shocked by news they’ve been given.

I looked around to see if I could find Adrienne. I had hoped to be able to ask her about the mushrooms she’d used but it was at this point of the wedding celebration that things really started to get out of hand and suddenly the mushroom vol au vents were only part of the problem. There was an even bigger problem to deal with.

* * *

Two weeks earlier the father of the bride (and, coincidentally of course, my father-in-law) had read an article in a farming magazine in which the author had claimed that he had found that it was possible to increase the milk yield of a herd of dairy cattle by playing them music.

Ever anxious to increase his income, and hopefully his profits, Mr Kennett had borrowed an old portable tape recorder of mine and an Elvis Presley tape belonging to his daughter Patsy in order to see if his cows responded in a similar way.

To his (and everyone else’s) astonishment he had discovered that his cows did produce far more milk after they had spent a few hours listening to the rocking and rolling of Elvis Presley than they did when they had spent their time listening to their more usual rustic auditory diet of birds tweeting, leaves rustling and one another mooing. Mr Kennett had discovered that a herd of happy rockers produced noticeably more milk than a herd of cows who knew nothing of blue suede shoes.

Mr Kennett had generously made it clear that since his cows lived in the field adjacent to our garden, he did not plan to play music during the wedding celebration.

This was not quite as generous a gesture as it first appeared for even if Mr Kennett had wanted to continue with his experiment he wouldn’t have been able to because Patsy and I had borrowed back the tape recorder and the Elvis Presley tape. We wanted them so that we could provide music in case any of the wedding guests wanted to dance.

But what we had all overlooked was that Mr Kennett’s cows were chewing the cud in the field next to Bilbury Grange.

And we were playing music.

Moreover, we weren’t just playing music we were playing exactly the Elvis Presley tape which the cows loved so much and which had proved to have such a dramatic influence on their mood that it had actually resulted in a measurable, and profitable, increase in milk production.

If we had thought about this a little more we might have realised that there might be consequences. In our defence all I can say is that there were a lot of other things to think about.

It was, I think, Gilly Parsons who first noticed that the cows in the next field were taking a more than usual interest in what was going on in the marquee in the garden at Bilbury Grange. However, although she had lived in Bilbury for many years Gilly had never really become a country girl; she remained a city dweller at heart.

Having enjoyed a few glasses of champagne her reaction was not to cry out something useful such as ‘Help! Help! Cows have got into the garden and are trying to get into the big tent!’ but to totter unsteadily towards them crying ‘Here pretty cows, here pretty cows!’, making the sort of kissy kissy noises which town dwellers who have little understanding of the animal world usually consider appropriate for attracting cats and small dogs, and holding out a large plate containing three of Mrs Kennett’s scones, two ham and pickle sandwiches, a fresh tomato, a boiled egg, two large pickled gherkins and a large dollop of sherry trifle. She had lost her blouse in her tussle with Frank but had, I am relieved to be able to report, managed to retain full ownership of her brassiere.

I know all this because I saw her.

Embarrassing as it is to have to admit it, I saw her and I did nothing.

My excuse is that I was, at the time, torn between trying to decide whether to persuade Ben to take his teeth out of the photographer’s trousers or to dissuade Sophie, who was clearly making plans to try to jump onto the top tier of the wedding cake.

(I never did find out why Ben, a normally obedient and docile dog, had taken a dislike to the photographer – though it may well have been that Ben had at some point hoovered up the fallen remains of a mushroom vol au vent and that his behaviour had, therefore, been transformed by what he’d eaten. Sophie, on the other hand, has always had a habit of leaping up onto things regardless of the consequences so her intentions came as no surprise at all.) I suspect that I wouldn’t have been able to do anything anyway for things then happened very quickly.

‘The cows are trying to get into the tent!’ yelled Thumper Robinson. And in less time than it took him to say this, the first few cows had managed to force their way into the tent.

‘It’s a marquee!’ shouted Patchy who was, for some reason, quite touchy about it being called a marquee and not a tent. He and Adrienne were circulating among the guests and offering thanks. Thanks for coming. Thanks for the card. Thanks for the best wishes. Thanks for the toaster. Patchy was shaking a lot of hands and Adrienne was getting kissed a good deal. Not surprisingly, not many people seemed to want to kiss Patchy.

‘OK! The cows are trying to get into the marquee!’ shouted Thumper.

I turned and you didn’t need an honours degree in animal husbandry to work out that his diagnosis was absolutely spot on. The cows were trying to get into the marquee and they were proving to be quite good at it.

There were four reasons that I realised precisely why the cows had come into the marquee.

First, they weren’t interested in any of the food on offer.

Second, they all headed for the corner of the marquee where the cassette player was sitting.

Third, they all started swaying. It was, I suppose, their way of showing their appreciation of the King’s music. They weren’t exactly dancing, not in a Fred Astaire sort of way, but they were definitely swaying.

Fourth, Mr Kennett explained things to me.

‘It’s the music,’ he said, having hurried over to where Patsy and I were standing. ‘They like your music.’ He explained.

‘So let’s turn it off,’ suggested Thumper, who’d hurried over to see what we wanted to do.

It seemed an easy solution.

We turned off the tape recorder and, dutifully, Mr Presley stopped singing.

The cows stopped swaying but they didn’t go away. They looked disappointed. One of them mooed in protest. I had never before realised just how much a moo sounds like a boo. Two cows chose the moment to provide ample proof that they had not been house trained. Or marquee trained either. I was glad Mr Parfitt wasn’t there to see what was happening to his lawn.

‘They’re not going to go,’ said Patsy in a tiny voice.

‘No,’ agreed Mr Kennett.

The cows stayed where they were. One of them turned round and knocked over a table. Several platefuls of sandwiches fell on the floor. I instinctively checked to make sure that there were no mushroom vol au vents among them. The last thing we needed was a marquee full of cows who’d eaten magic mushrooms.

‘Maybe we can use the fact that the cows will go where the music is,’ I suggested. ‘If I take the cassette player out of here and turn it on maybe I can get the cows to follow me.’

‘Like the pied piper of Hamelin?’ said Patsy.

‘Exactly.’

‘Can you get them to back out of the tent and back into the field?’

I shook my head. I didn’t think I wanted to try to get them to force their way back out through the side of the marquee. It had been a miracle that they hadn’t done any damage to the canvas when they’d forced their way in. I walked across the tent and picked up the cassette player. Then I walked briskly out of the marquee before turning it on. I turned the volume up as high as it would go. The lead cow responded immediately (there is always a lead cow in a herd) and began to move in my direction. Slowly, I headed for the driveway. The lead cow followed me and the other cows followed the lead cow. Elvis finished ‘Hound Dog’ and started singing ‘Heartbreak Hotel’. The cows didn’t seem to mind.

Within minutes - I was in the lane and behind me the cows were swaying out of our driveway. As they swayed one way their udders swayed the other way. It would, I thought, take me no more than a quarter of an hour or so to lead them round to the gateway leading into the field from which the cows had escaped. I would then find the gap they’d used to get into our garden and block it with a piece of corrugated iron. There isn’t a field in North Devon that doesn’t have a spare sheet of corrugated iron lying around in it somewhere.

As Elvis finished ‘Heartbreak Hotel’ and started on ‘Jailhouse Rock’ I looked back. The cows were still there. More surprisingly, so were most of the wedding guests. I really had become the pied piper of Hamelin.

‘Play ‘All Shook Up!’,’ suggested Patchy. ‘Maybe we’ll get milk shakes.’

Naturally, things didn’t go quite as smoothly as I had hoped. Someone, presumably one of our guests, had parked their car in the gateway leading into the field where I wanted to take the cows.

And so, knowing that I would eventually come to another suitable field, I kept walking.

Just Elvis and I impersonating the Pied Piper of Hamelin.

The swaying lead cow was just behind me. The other cows were just behind the lead cow. The dancing guests followed them.

It was a mile and a half and forty five minutes later before I found a suitable empty field which had a gate I could open. By that time the procession I was leading consisted of two dozen cows, fifty wedding guests, a car towing a caravan (driven by a woman whose command of the expletive was impressive), three cars, a tractor towing a trailer full of silage and a boy on a bicycle who presumably had no sense of smell or else he would have surely overtaken the tractor towing the trailer full of silage.

When I’d shut the cows into their new field, and let the caravan, the three cars, the tractor and the anosmic boy on the bicycle go on their way, I led the guests back to Bilbury Grange. I turned off the cassette player lest this encourage the cows to break out of their new field but the guests, who presumably knew the contents of the tape by now, kept dancing anyway.

By now the effects of Adrienne’s magic mushrooms had largely worn off. Some of the guests, in particular the vicar and his wife, were looking tired, puzzled, confused and rather sheepish.

‘Excuse me,’ said the vicar, sidling up to me as we arrived back at Bilbury Grange. ‘I don’t suppose you’ve seen my trousers have you?’

I told him where I’d last seen them. He seemed grateful. I leant a little closer and whispered. ‘Nice boxer shorts. I’ve always been fond of Donald Duck.’

He looked down, thanked me and blushed.

* * *

‘Where did you get the mushrooms from?’ I asked Adrienne later that day. She and Patchy were changed and ready to leave for their honeymoon in south Devon. They had a suite booked in the Victoria Hotel in Sidmouth.

‘Oh just here and there,’ said Adrienne. ‘They were really fresh. I picked them the day I made the vol au vents. They can’t possibly have gone off.’

‘I’m sure they were fresh,’ I said. ‘I don’t think there’s any question of that. Can you remember what the mushrooms looked like?’

‘They were very pretty,’ said Adrienne. ‘Much prettier than ordinary mushrooms.’

Patchy stared at her open-mouthed in horror.

‘You could have poisoned everyone!’ he said.

‘Oh no,’ said Adrienne. ‘I didn’t make enough vol au vents for everyone.’

‘You must have picked magic mushrooms!’ Patsy told her.

‘Oh well,’ said Adrienne dismissing everyone’s concern with a shrug. ‘People seemed to have a good time didn’t they?’

We all agreed that everyone seemed to have had a good time.

‘When we get back from our honeymoon,’ said Patchy. ‘I’ll pick my own mushrooms if you don’t mind.’

‘Oh, OK,’ said Adrienne. She put her arm around her new husband. ‘You’re not cross with me, are you?’

Patchy looked at her, shook his head and sighed.

No one ever manages to stay cross with dear Adrienne for long.

CHAPTER 40

The telephone call I had been expecting, and dreading, came at 3.37 a.m. one cold, wet, windy morning. I turned on the bedside light and picked up the telephone.

'Can you come, please, doctor. I think it's time.'

I recognised the voice and there was no need for me to ask where I should go or what it was time for. I said I would be there as soon as I could, swivelled out of bed and picked up the trousers, lying ready on the floor, to pull over my pyjamas.

'Who was it?' asked Patsy sleepily.

'Bradshaw.'

She sat up, as instantly awake as I had been. 'Dr Brownlow?'

'Bradshaw says he's going.'

Patsy reached out and touched my arm.

Dr Brownlow was just conscious when I got there. I held his hand. He was in no pain and there was nothing whatsoever that I could do for him now. I was there as a friend as much as I was there as a doctor.

He drifted in and out of consciousness and then gradually the moments when he was conscious became shorter and the moments when he was unconscious became longer.

Bradshaw left us alone for much of the time. You could see that he was exhausted. He had been looking after his master for many months without a break. I made a mental note to make sure that he had a rest before starting work as district nurse. He wouldn't want to. But I would make sure that he did.

For some of the time Dr Brownlow and I sat quietly. Neither of us saying a word. Occasionally, I spoke. I told him about some of the clinical problems I was puzzling over. I told him how our new baby was doing. (He had been delighted when Patsy and I had taken the baby round for him to see. And even more delighted when we'd told him that we were naming the baby after him.) I told him about Patchy and Adrienne's wedding. He was conscious when I told him about the cows. He smiled and nodded a lot. He enjoyed the story.

Eventually he stopped smiling and stopped nodding and his hand started to go cold and the light started to break through the trees outside and a new day had begun and Dr Brownlow had gone.

I found Bradshaw and told him to go to bed and told him that I would see to the immediate arrangements.

As I drove home the clouds started to appear and the sun disappeared and then the rain came.

It was as it should have been.

It was not a day for sunshine.

* * *

We buried Dr Brownlow in the garden next to his wife. Bradshaw and I put his stethoscope in the coffin with him. The whole village turned out. I looked around the church during the service and couldn't see a dry eye anywhere. Dr Brownlow had been immensely popular. He had been an excellent country doctor but, more than that, a great human being. To me he had been a mentor and a friend. He had been a guide and a father figure.

* * *

Hours after Dr Brownlow had been buried I went back to sit beside his grave in what had been for so long his garden. I took a small silver hip flask he had once given me. It was filled with his favourite malt whisky. From time to time I took a sip from it and from time to time I poured a few drops onto the fresh earth on top of his grave. I wanted to ask him if he minded my going to him from time to time when I needed help and advice. He said that would be fine.

When I'd finished I leant the hip flask beside his gravestone. It would, I knew, be there whenever I went back.

It was late when I got home. Patsy had been keeping dinner warm for over an hour.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I went to talk to Dr Brownlow.'

'I thought you had,' she said. I looked at her. 'I guessed,' she said.

'I asked him if he minded if I popped along there when I had tricky clinical problems.'

'What did he say?'

'He said he'd be delighted to see me.'

'Good old Dr Brownlow,' said Patsy. 'He never said 'No' to anyone, did he?'

'Never,' I agreed.

* * *

In the days that followed Dr Brownlow's GP son complained bitterly about the Will. He even consulted a lawyer who sent me a venomous letter announcing that his firm would be taking legal action to overthrow Dr Brownlow's wishes. But Dr Brownlow's preparations stalled any attempts to overthrow the Will. When the lawyer saw the letters

Dr Brownlow had prepared he gave in. There was no apology, of course. Just the apology of silent withdrawal.

Dr Brownlow had managed to stymie the tax man too.

A mean, ferret-faced man in a cheap suit turned up one day from the Inland Revenue. He said he was investigating the disappearance of a considerable amount of cash from Dr Brownlow's account and asked me if I knew anything about it. I showed him the receipt that Dr Brownlow had arranged and refused to answer more of his questions on the incontestable grounds of patient confidentiality. He didn't seem particularly happy but he went away again and I lost no sleep over his misery.

Gradually, I got used to driving Dr Brownlow's old Rolls Royce. I didn't want to sell it but it was truly a most impractical car. It was so big it felt like driving a small country. Thumper said that whenever I set off, the radiator would always be half way to my destination.

I had intended to keep it in a barn and use it only for special occasions. But I grew to like it. And the villagers liked to see it being driven around the village. It was a tangible link with Dr Brownlow, whom they had all loved so much. And so I started to use it for my visits to patients and for trips into Barnstaple It cost a fortune in petrol but the mechanics at Tolstoy's Garage loved looking after it so the maintenance and repair bills were very reasonable.

CHAPTER 41

A month or so later I was sitting in my study staring at a blank sheet of paper.

It was, I had decided, time to start another book about life in Bilbury.

I had two problems.

First, so much had happened that I really didn't know where to start.

Second, there was so much still happening that I was finding it difficult to look backwards and put the recent past into perspective.

I still missed Dr Brownlow, of course. There was a huge void both in the village and in my life. It felt strange to know that he had gone and would never be coming back.

But I still spoke to him at least once a week.

I would cycle round and sit by his graveside and talk to him. I would ask him about patients who were puzzling me. And he would listen.

There was a lot to be done and a lot I needed his help with.

There was, for example, the conversion of Dr Brownlow's old house into a small cottage hospital for Bilbury. I'd already talked to Thumper about hiring workmen who would be prepared to work for cash - with no questions asked. It would not, he said, be difficult. The cash was still hidden in a safe place. I would have to find an explanation for the way the building work had been funded. But Thumper and I had already worked out a way to do that.

The telephone rang.

Reluctantly, I picked it up.

It was Mortimer.

'I thought it was about time we caught up with each other,' he said. 'It's been some time since we saw you.'

'It has.'

'Sorry I haven't got round to writing or ringing. We've been terribly busy. We managed to get planning permission to put another bedroom over the garage. You can't imagine the chaos. And then we bought a new dining room suite. White leather. We'd only had it a week when one of the kids got orange crayon on one of the cushions. Strewth! Clarice went clear through the roof. We had three different specialists round to try to get the mark out of the leather. And it took us seven weeks to get the insurance company to pay up.'

I muttered something suitably sympathetic.

'What else? Oh yes, a very, very good friend of ours called Maurice, died. We were utterly devastated. He lived in the Lake District. Near Kendal. A long drive for the funeral. We decided to stay over a few days and make a short holiday of it so that the trip wouldn't be entirely wasted. We found a nice little hotel. It was very reasonably priced, though the room was rather small and the view disappointing. The family held the funeral in the afternoon, which we thought was rather thoughtless because we wanted to take a boat ride down Lake Windemere. Consequently, we had a heart breaking decision to make. The boys had never been on the Lake and in the end we decided that Spotty wouldn't have minded and so we gave the funeral a miss. All things considered I suppose the weekend didn't turn out too badly. We were lucky with the weather.'

He paused to breathe. 'What else has happened?' he asked himself. There was another quiet moment while he thought. 'Oh, Clarice lost another half a stone and changed her hairstyle. I had a huge row at work over parking space allocations. You simply can't believe how petty-minded some of these people can be. Oh, and you won't believe this but some bastard cut the wires to the headlamp washers on the Volvo. Would you believe it? I'm pretty sure I know who it was. One of the administrators. I've got his card marked. I tell you, it's been a pretty devastating few months. You and Patsy simply wouldn't have coped with it. Clarice and I often think of you two just muddling along down there in Bilbury. No worries. No stresses.' He paused, for the first time. 'I expect it's been as quiet as ever down there.'

I stared out of the window.

I had gone back into practice. Patsy and I had had our first baby. Dr Brownlow, my friend and mentor, had died. Patchy Fogg and Adrienne Kennett had got married at Bilbury Grange. A baby, a wedding and a funeral. It didn't seem to me to have been an entirely uneventful year in Bilbury. But I realised that none of these were things I wanted to share with Mortimer.

'You still there?'

'Yes.'

'Silly question. What am I saying? Nothing much ever happens in Bilbury, does it?'

'No,' I agreed. 'Nothing much has happened. Quiet as always.'

We said goodbye and promised to keep in touch. I put the telephone down. Outside a squirrel raced up an oak tree. Ben, who'd been chasing it across the grass, stared up rather forlornly. Emily, who was asleep by the window, opened an eye, watched for a moment and went back to sleep. Sophie, who was lying beside her stood up, arched her back, yawned and then walked two paces to her left. She then sat down on the blank sheet of paper I'd been staring at and started to lick her bottom.

There was a gentle tap on the half open door. I turned. Patsy was standing there with a cup of coffee. There were two bourbon biscuits in the saucer.

'I thought you might like a break.'

I pointed to Sophie sitting on the blank piece of paper in front of me.

'Underneath that cat there is a blank sheet of paper. I haven't started yet.'

'Oh.' She brightened. 'Never mind. Come and have a look at that old junk room next to the nursery.'

'Oh no!' I said. 'You don't want it clearing out do you?'

'The nursery is a bit small,' she said. 'I wondered if we could get Thumper to take down the wall dividing the nursery from the junk room and make the nursery bigger.'

I looked at her, puzzled. 'What's wrong with the size of the nursery? It's a perfect size for a baby's room.'

'It's perfect for one baby.'

'Exactly.'

'But not really big enough for two.'

'I suppose not but what...' I stopped, looked at her and started to grin.

'Careful!' she said, smiling, as I put my arm around her and pulled her onto my lap. 'I'll spill your coffee.' She put the cup and saucer down on my desk and put her arms around my neck.

'It's definite?' She nodded.

'Then I suppose I'd better clear out the junk room,' I said. 'Most of it can be thrown out. I'll have a bonfire this evening. And when I've cleared it out I'll ring Thumper and get him to take down the partition wall.'

Patsy started laughing.

'Do you think we should redecorate? When's it due? What are we going to call it? Do you think it will be a boy or a girl?'

'What about your book?'

I helped Patsy to her feet and then stood up myself 'It'll have to wait,' I said. 'I need to clear out that junk room.' I picked up my coffee and took a sip. It had cooled. I drank half of it. I offered the biscuits to Patsy.

'You'd better have one of these,' I told her. 'You need to start eating for two.'

Patsy took a biscuit. I popped the other one into my mouth. Sophie, who had finished licking her bottom, turned round three times and lay down on my blank piece of paper. I stroked her back, tickled Emily under the chin and headed for the junk room.

There would, at least, be an excuse for another bonfire.

Nothing much else ever happens in Bilbury.

* * *

Bilbury Village is the fifth of Vernon Coleman's seven books about Bilbury. These are: *Bilbury Chronicles, Bilbury Grange, Bilbury Revels, Bilbury Country* and *Bilbury Village.* There are two books of short stories called *Bilbury Pie* and *Bilbury Pudding*. If you enjoy the Bilbury books you may enjoy other books by the same author including '*Mr Henry Mulligan'*, *'It's Never Too Late'*, *'Second Innings'*, *'Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War'* and *'Mrs Caldicot's Knickerbocker Glory*'. For full details of over 100 books by Vernon Coleman please see his author page on Amazon or http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

Reviews of previous books in the Bilbury series of novels

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The Young Country Doctor: Book 6

BILBURY PIE

Vernon Coleman

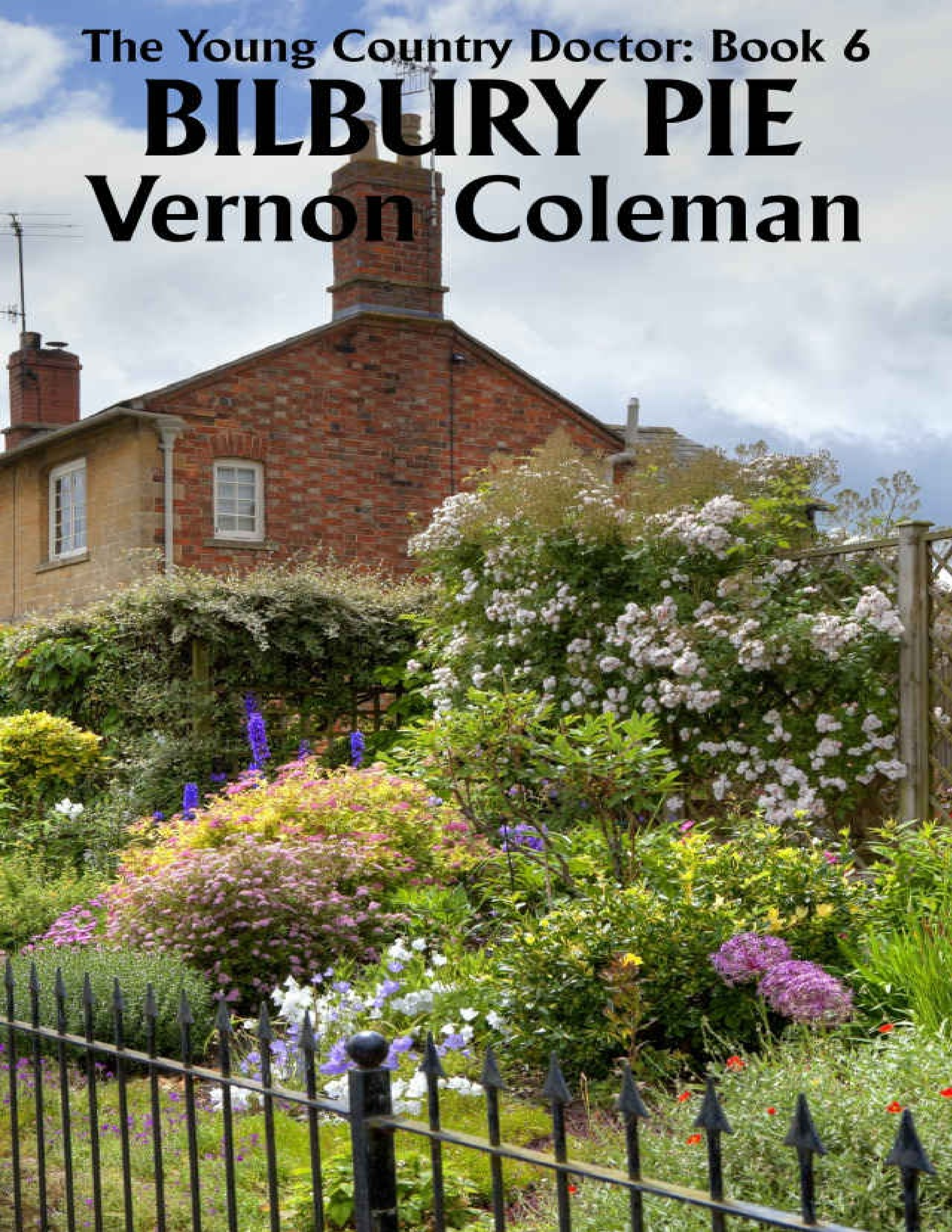

The Young Country Doctor: Book 6

BILBURY PIE

(Tales from the village of Bilbury)

Vernon Coleman

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Bilbury Pie, a collection of short stories, is the sixth of Vernon Coleman's seven books about Bilbury. These are: *Bilbury Chronicles*, *Bilbury Grange, Bilbury Revels, Bilbury Country* and *Bilbury Village*. There are two books of short stories called *Bilbury Pie* and *Bilbury Pudding*. All are available as Amazon Kindle Books. If you enjoy the Bilbury books you may enjoy other books by the same author including *Mr Henry Mulligan*, *Second Innings*, *It's Never Too Late* and *`Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War'*. For full details of over 100 books by Vernon Coleman please see his author page on Amazon or http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

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GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

When old Farmer Henshaw died last Wednesday it seemed to mark the passing of an era. I doubt if we shall ever see his like again.

Farmer Henshaw (I don't think anyone knew his first name and I doubt if anyone in the village would have had the courage to use it even if they had known it for he was not what one would describe as an 'approachable' individual) was no ordinary villager.

In addition to whatever passing memories he has left behind he has, even in death, given us at least one reason to remember him for some time to come.

He is the first person from the village of Bilbury to have been buried standing up.

Throughout his life, Farmer Henshaw loved defending lost causes and championing minority interests. Few things gave him greater pleasure than making bureaucrats look silly. He fought everyone and everything though the fighting was, I suspect, done as much for the battle as for the victory.

He fought hard against the Parish Council's plans to build a new village hall after the Second World War. And then, when the plans were defeated, he helped Norman Jackson prepare the appeal. When the County Council wanted to widen the main road into Bilbury he lay down in front of the bulldozer which was due to take the corner off the copse at Softly's Bottom. Less than eighteen months later he led a petition demanding that the very same road be widened to make it safer!

The instructions in the old man's Will were clear enough, though neither Mr Willoughby, the solicitor who read them out, nor the two Henshaw boys would have been too unhappy if there had been any way of avoiding them.

(The Henshaw boys, both in their sixties but for ever to be known as the Henshaw boys, were always something of an embarrassment to their father. One works as an accountant in London and the other is a solicitor in the north of England. Most fathers would be proud of such sons. But Farmer Henshaw never really got used to the fact that his two sons put on suits when they went to work. In his view no man had a proper job if he could do it without a ball of orange baler twine in his pocket.)

At first the two sons tried to persuade the vicar that it wouldn't be proper to conduct a burial service with the corpse standing upright.

But after the vicar had made some enquiries he told them that there was nothing in the funeral service that said that a dead man had to be buried lying down.

Amos Tweed of Black, Titmarsh and Tweed, the undertakers in Barnstaple, said that he had never known anything like it, but that as long as someone was prepared to pay for designing a new type of coffin and digging a hole that was twice as deep and half as wide as normal he would not object.

So a carpenter was instructed to make the coffin and Peter Marshall from the village shop was hired to spend an extra six hours digging a deep enough hole. When Peter had finished, Thumper Robinson and Frank, the landlord from the Duck and Puddle, had to lift him out with a rope. (Peter was more than a bit miffed about the fact that although he'd had the foresight to pay the Culpepper boy to hang around in the graveyard to go and get help when he needed it, Thumper and Frank left him there for nearly an hour while they finished a game of pool).

Then they had to work out a way to move Farmer Henshaw from the Chapel of Rest to Bilbury Church.

Amos said he didn't think Mr Henshaw would mind being carried lying down but the vicar said he thought that if we were to enter truly into the spirit of Mr Henshaw's Will he should be carried upright, and so Patsy's father had the silage washed off his best tractor and towed the coffin behind on a hay cart.

It made a strange sight. A still rather dirty red tractor pulling an erect coffin followed by the largest entourage of mourners that anyone could remember seeing in Bilbury.

The moment of truth came when the coffin was lowered into the ground. It sank gracefully until coming to rest with a loud thud, the top eighteen inches still protruding over the top of the hole. Peter Marshall reddened visibly and, after the coffin had been unceremoniously hauled up, he was lowered back down into the grave to continue digging. The waiting mourners retreated to the Duck and Puddle.

So, in death Farmer Henshaw was as newsworthy as he had been in life and the story of his burial (and attempted burial) was carried prominently on the front page of the local newspaper. Farmer Henshaw would have been very pleased indeed.

But it was when it came to sorting out the old man's estate that the real fun and games started.

Everyone in the village knew that the old man had been worth a few shillings. At one time his farm had included well over a thousand acres of prime Devon pasture land and Mr Henshaw wasn't a man who enjoyed spending his money. When his two sons were young he used to work them hard all day in the fields and then, to save on housekeeping, give them sixpence each to go to bed without any supper. The next morning he'd get his money back, with interest, by charging them a shilling each for breakfast.

So when the will was read and the two sons found that they'd been left the house and its contents between them and no more than £350 in cash everyone knew that however dead the old farmer was he still had one last trick up his sleeve.

Where, wondered everyone in the village, had old Farmer Henshaw hidden his fortune? We all knew that he was worth more than £350.

For days the two sons searched everywhere they could think of. They searched every room in the house. They searched the barns and they searched the stables and they went up into the attics and they got themselves covered in dirt and dust and rat droppings by scrabbling about underneath the loose floorboards in the ceiling of the old coach house.

They knew that the money wouldn't be in a bank - their father had hated banks - but although they searched high and low they could find nothing of any great value.

Suspecting that the old man might have invested his money in antiques they got an antique dealer to come and inspect all the furniture but there was nothing of value to be found there. The paintings on the walls were cheap daubs, there was no hidden stamp collection and Mr Henshaw's old runabout was no classic car.

For a while the sons suspected that the wallpaper in one of the bedrooms might be original 'William Morris' and there was talk at the Duck and Puddle that they were contemplating bringing in an interior decorator from London to peel it off but then someone pointed out that Mr Henshaw had the room decorated three years earlier and that the wallpaper had been bought in a sale at the ironmongers in Lynton.

Eventually, the two sons gave up, called in an auctioneer and decided to try to make as much as they could out of their inheritance.

The house was packed for the auction. Attracted by the hope of a bargain there were people there from as far away as Torrington, Okehampton and Tiverton. There was even an unsubstantiated rumour that a dealer had come all the way from Exeter to look at Farmer Henshaw's old desk.

Basil Wishbone the auctioneer was hired to organise the sale and the sons couldn't have done better. Basil never misses a trick and had lot numbers pasted on everything that moved or could be unscrewed. Basil once got so carried away that he sold his own jacket, and at one country house auction he is reputed to have sold (separately) two half used bars of soap, half a box of cornflakes, a set of false teeth with a crack in the plate and the letterbox from the front door. He got a good price for them all too.

In the end the auction raised £17,000, which wasn't bad considering that there wasn't anything there which fetched more than £250, and Basil even managed to sell the carpets and the curtains to Tippy Knowles, whose husband runs Blackwater Pond Farm.

It was the curtains which caused the trouble.

When Tippy started to take them down from the curtain rails she found that someone had sewn coins into the hems to hold them straight. She assumed that they were pennies but a flick from Peter Marshall's penknife showed that they were gold.

Old Farmer Henshaw had hidden his fortune in the hems of his curtains. Every single hem contained dozens of sovereigns.

Now, of course, there's a huge row going on.

The two Henshaw sons are insisting that the gold coins are theirs but Tippy and her husband are holding firm and are planning to spend their good fortune just as quickly as they can.

FASHION SHOW

The clock tower of Bilbury church has developed a nasty crack and the vicar has launched a fund to try to raise the £20,000 that the builders estimate the repairs will cost. I have been appointed a member of the fund raising committee and our first event was a fashion show which we held in the village hall.

Our original plan was to find a local dress shop prepared to provide the dresses and a little ready cash in sponsorship money in return for some goodwill and a little advertising. The vicar said that a similar event organised in nearby East Moulton had raised over £100. Gilly, Patsy, Anne and the bathukolpian Kay had all been press ganged to serve as models.

Unfortunately, the only clothes shop in Barnstaple which was prepared to cooperate turned out to be a shop called Flimsies. No one on the committee would admit to having heard of this store which, we discovered, specialised in entirely impractical underwear that no woman would wear if her main intention was to keep warm. Having heard a brief description of the sort of garments involved the committee felt that an advance inspection of the stock was necessary and the vicar and I were appointed to undertake this onerous task.

I had, I confess, seen one or two items of a similar nature in the past (entirely in the course of business you understand) but to the vicar this was entirely uncharted territory.

'What exactly are these?' he asked, holding up several items in black silk that must have weighed no more than an ounce between them. The manageress tried to explain but the vicar was clearly too shocked to take it all in.

'We can't get any of our ladies to wear those things!' he whispered as we hurried away. Sadly, I agreed with him though I felt that in a way it was a pity for if we had been more courageous we would have probably been able to raise our £20,000 in one solitary but glorious evening.

Eventually, we ended up organising a fashion show with clothes supplied entirely out of Mrs Bridgford's Rummage Sale stocks (stored in her garage in a series of large cardboard boxes).

Before the show started we were all overwhelmed by a sense of gloominess which bordered on despair. I had been appointed as announcer for the evening and I was dismayed to discover that Mrs Bridgford had produced from her garage a range of clothes for which the only honest adjectives were 'sensible', 'warm' and 'comfortable'. Everything seemed to be in solid, dark browns or blues and to be made of either serge or tweed. Pockets were invariably 'capacious' or 'spacious' and zips were 'stout' or 'sturdy'.

We made a real effort to overcome our handicap. At Patsy's suggestion everything that relied exclusively upon orange baler twine for fastening was excluded from the show and the vicar used two cans of air freshener to combat the pungent smell of mould which rose like a cloud from each and every garment (though given the fact that the all pervading smell of silage which usually fills the village hall is impossible to defeat this was probably a waste of time).

Kay, our exceptionally buxom district nurse, was the first of our models to step out onto the village hall stage. She wore a pink and grey houndstooth check suit in Harris Tweed and an off-white blouse with imitation pearl buttons. Both the jacket and the blouse were several sizes too small for her and there was widespread admiration for the strength of the cotton holding the buttons onto the blouse.

Since I had never sold a pink and grey houndstooth check suit before I had no idea at all what price to ask for it and so I invited offers. Ignoring one or two earthy suggestions which brought a flush to Kay's cheeks and put a twinkle in her eyes (and a blush to the vicars' already ruddy cheeks) I eventually found myself selling the suit and blouse together for £12.50, at least £12 more than I had expected. I found out later that Thumper Robinson and Frank Parsons had kept the bidding going up in ten pence stages in the belief that the longer Kay remained on stage the greater the chance of nature, in the form of Kay's bust, proving too powerful for science, in the form of cotton thread.

And so the fashion show became an auction and by the end of the evening we had raised well over £250 for the church tower restoration fund. As Frank, from the Duck and Puddle, pointed out this means that we now only have £19,750 left to raise.

'What a brilliant idea!' said Mrs Lovelace afterwards. 'Most fashion shows are packed with unwearable nonsense but your clothes were all so *practical!'*

OLD BRASS TAPS

A couple of months ago I arrived at the Duck and Puddle for a medicinal tonic and found Thumper Robinson sitting at one of the outside tables, carefully examining something that looked like an old brass tap. His pick-up truck was parked nearby. An empty pint glass stood on the table in front of him.

‘Do you want me to bring you a drink?’ I called to him, as I approached the pub door.

This was a silly question. Thumper wiped what I could now see really was an old brass bath tap on his jeans, and then casually tossed the tap into a large, stout, cardboard box. Then he grinned at me and nodded. The box, I noticed, was absolutely full of old-fashioned brass taps.

‘Where on earth did all those taps come from?’ I asked him, a few moments later. I put a pint down in front of him, sat myself down opposite him and took a long draught out of my own glass. It was a warm day and I was thirsty. ‘And what the devil are you going to do with them?’

‘They’re from the Gravediggers’ Rest,’ said Thumper, mentioning a local pub in Braunton which we both know well. ‘I’ve been helping to clear out some rubbish for Franklin Mynton. He’s having the place restored.’ Franklin Mynton is the landlord of the Gravediggers’ Rest. He is renowned for his meanness.

I picked one of the taps out of the box. ‘How much did he charge you?’

Thumper looked at me as if I were mad. ‘He paid me to take them away!’ He explained. ‘He just wanted the rubbish clearing out’.

‘They look too good to dump,’ I said, peering down into the box, and rummaging around.

Thumper looked across at me. ‘Who said anything about dumping them?’ he asked, raising a quizzical eyebrow. He lifted his glass and half emptied it in a single, long, smooth movement.

I might have known.

Thumper doesn’t believe in throwing anything away. He and Anne Thwaites live in a tiny cottage on the moors where every outbuilding and barn is stuffed to the rafters with things which just might come in useful one day. Thumper saves everything from old feed bags and leaky watering cans to discarded tractor tyres and dead batteries

I completely forgot about the taps after that. But when I called at their cottage yesterday morning I found Thumper giving the taps a clean with an old rag and a bottle of patented brass cleaner.

‘Are those the same old taps I saw you with at the Duck and Puddle a few weeks ago?’

Thumper looked up at me, grinned and nodded.

I bent down and examined one. ‘I’d hardly recognise them!’

‘Good.’

‘Have you found a buyer?’

‘I’m not cleaning them because I like the smell of polish!’

‘Have you sold them all?’ It seemed strange that Thumper had the good fortune to find someone to buy every one of the taps he had rescued from the Gravediggers’ Rest.

‘Every single one,’ nodded Thumper. ‘I’ve sold them to some fancy interior decorator from London. Clarence or Timothy or something like that.’

‘Good price?’ I asked, though it was a superfluous question. Thumper doesn’t sell anything to anyone from London without making a healthy profit.

Thumper grinned. ‘Good enough,’ he admitted.

‘Lucky he wanted them all!’ I remarked.

‘He’s doing up a pub,’ explained Thumper. ‘They want to make it look really old-fashioned.’

I didn’t put two and two together until a day later. I had to go into Braunton to deliver a pile of old books that I had promised to donate to the Cat Protection League jumble sale and I saw Thumper’s truck parked outside the Gravediggers’ Rest. I sat and watched him lift a box full of shiny, brass bathroom fittings out of the cab and hand them to a lanky, weedy looking individual who wore designer jeans, a ponytail and a pink T-shirt.

As the lanky individual wandered away clutching what he obviously regarded as a precious purchase I wandered over and said ‘Hello!’ to Thumper who was busy counting a very healthy looking wad of notes.

Thumper was clearly surprised to see me. He looked almost embarrassed.

‘Just sold those taps, I see!’

‘Er... yes.’

‘Was that the interior decorator?’

Thumper swallowed hard and nodded.

‘Where did you say he was working?’

Thumper didn’t exactly blush. I don’t think Thumper has the physiological equipment you need to blush. But he got close to it. ‘The mumblemumble mumble.’ he said.

‘Oh, The Gravediggers’ Rest!’ I said, nodding at the pub behind him.

Thumper, who had just sold Franklin Mynton his own taps, grinned sheepishly, winked and put a finger to his lips. ‘Come on,’ he said, ‘I’ll buy you a drink.’ He looked over his shoulder.

‘But not here,’ he added quietly.

THE HORSE RIDE

Although I have lived in the country for many years I have never ridden a horse.

I don't mind patting them and giving them sugar lumps and I am happy to confirm that without horses my rhubarb patch would be but a shadow of its present self but I have always regarded the absence of any clearly defined equine braking system as a discouraging factor. As far as I am concerned if God had intended me to ride a horse he wouldn't have invented the bicycle.

(My scepticism about horse riding as a sensible means of transport is, I suspect, at least partly inspired by an unhappy experience I had on a donkey on Blackpool sands at the age of six. I do not wish to say any more about this experience.)

Last week Thumper, Anne and Patsy all decided that it was about time I abandoned my childhood fears and learned a little about the joys of horse riding. Although this adventure was clearly carefully prearranged, I first heard of it in the Duck and Puddle on Saturday lunchtime.

'Sarah Knowlson at Burnt Oak Farm says we can take four of her horses out over Exmoor for the afternoon,' said Thumper. 'We can take a picnic with us.' Sarah and her husband run a riding school.

I mumbled something about having promised to take Patsy into Exeter.

'Patsy's coming with us,' said Thumper. He looked across at Patsy, who was sipping her usual tomato juice.

Patsy nodded and blushed. 'You'll enjoy it!' she insisted. She looked guilty.

'This is a set up!' I protested.

Patsy had asked me to keep the afternoon free, saying that she wanted to go hunting for a new dress in Exeter.

'We knew it was the only way we would get you on a horse!' said Thumper, grinning broadly.

'What about that dress you wanted to buy?' I asked Patsy.

'It's for Simon and Laura's wedding,' said Patsy. 'And that's not for another three weeks. We can go to Exeter next weekend.'

And so I found myself being press-ganged onto a horse.

I doubt if there has ever been a less enthusiastic prospective equestrian. As I drove to Burnt Oak Farm my one comfort was the thought that having a horse between my legs would at least stop my knees knocking together.

'She's not going to bolt is she?' I asked Thumper as Sarah pointed out the largest, most docile creature in her stables.

'Lettuce could bolt faster than that horse!' Thumper said. 'Put your foot in here...'

With some difficulty and a definite loss of dignity I eventually succeeded in clambering aboard. I was relieved to find that the horse and I were both facing in the same direction but I was surprised to find out how high up I seemed to be. The horse hadn't seemed *that* tall when I'd been standing on the ground. As I gazed around the others leapt onto their horses with sickeningly practised ease.

'Hold the reins like this,' said Patsy. 'And just tap your heel into her flanks when you want her to start moving.'

I looked at her. 'Never mind starting. How do I stop?'

The others looked at me and then at one another. No one said anything.

Very gently and slowly we walked our horses through a meadow and along by a stream. Apart from nearly having my head removed by a branch I didn't think I was doing too badly.

'Let's try trotting!' said Thumper, when we had travelled a couple of hundred yards. 'Just tap your heels like this.' He did something almost indiscernible and his horse shot off like a bullet from a gun. Patsy and Anne followed him. It looked as safe and as inviting as space travel.

I sat still and tried to make sure I didn't move. I was particularly worried about my heels and I tried to keep them well away from my horse. She, however, had a dislike of speed which matched my own. She stopped, lowered her head and started eating.

Once I had got used to the fact that the dashboard had disappeared I didn't mind this at all.

'Come on!' shouted Thumper from half a mile ahead. His horse sprayed clods of earth in all directions as it skidded to a stop and then turned round. 'Dig your heels in!' he shouted.

Thumper's uninhibited enthusiasm reminded me of a ski instructor I once had who ordered me to ski over the edge of a cliff and seemed surprised and disappointed when I responded by deliberately falling over and going down the hill on my bottom. 'Don't you ever get afraid?' I had asked him. 'Afraid?' said the ski instructor with a puzzled look. 'Vot iz dat?' He must have been all of 18-years-old. I kept well away from him after that. I never want to be taught any potentially lethal activity by someone who has neither the imagination nor the experience to understand the consequences of disaster.

'My horse is hungry!' I shouted to Thumper. 'You go on. I'll have to stop here.' Gingerly, I dismounted, wrapped the horse’s reins around a nearby branch (just as I’d seen the cowboys do on the TV), sat down on the grass and took out my sandwiches.

‘What are you doing?’ asked Patsy, laughing, when she and Anne had ridden back to me.

‘We came out for a picnic,’ I said, defiantly. ‘So I’m having a picnic.’

I think one should try most things once.

I’ve tried horse riding.

BLACK ECONOMY

I have recently noticed a considerable increase in the amount of bartering going on in the village.

During the summer I regularly saw our village shopkeeper Peter Marshall swapping loaves of bread, mint humbugs and pipe tobacco for fresh free-range eggs, runner beans and freshly picked strawberries. Frank and Gilly who run our local pub, the Duck and Puddle, have been paying their paper bill with beer for as long as I can remember. Even the vicar has succumbed to the rules of the new rural economy. He told me recently that the going rate for a christening was four pounds of strawberries and that he charged three large sacks of potatoes for a wedding. Thumper told me that when Arthur Jackson was buried, the deceased's brother paid the vicar's funeral bill by repairing the leaky downpipe on the north side of the knave.

The habit of bartering suddenly came close to home this week when Willy Porter, who lives in Nettledown Cottage next to Norman Kendrake's stables, came to the back door to tell me that he could, if I was interested, get me a cartload of fresh horse manure to dig into the vegetable patch at Bilbury Grange.

I'm a firm believer in manure and was immediately interested. Dr Brownlow, who calls manure 'political rhetoric', on the grounds that both come from a horse's rear end, taught me that whether you're growing strawberries, rhubarb or broad beans horse manure beats all known chemical fertilizers hands down. Dr Brownlow has been an organic gardener for a lot longer than organic gardening has been fashionable. Patsy and I have a good supply of used straw from the sheep's stable but you can't beat horse manure.

'How would you like to pay?' Willy asked. In shops this question is usually designed to find out if the customer wishes to pay by cheque, credit card or cash but I had a pretty good idea that neither credit cards nor cheques were likely to feature on Willy's list of possibilities. Cash is as close as Willy likes to get to the banking system.

'What are the alternatives?' I enquired, rather hesitantly.

Like Thumper Robinson and Patchy Fogg, Willy has quite a reputation in Bilbury as something of a wheeler-dealer. I'm never sure how much to trust him. He once brought me a boot load of neatly chopped up firewood that was so badly infested with woodworm that I didn't dare take it into the house. I swear that if you kept still and put your head close to the wood you could hear the worm munching their way through it.

'Three drinking vouchers or lend Norman your mower for a couple of days,' said Willy with a toothless grin. To Willy a drinking voucher is a five pound note.

It sounded an irresistible offer so I knew I had to think about it carefully. The problem with bartering as opposed to paying by cash is that there are no hard and fast exchange rates and there is no real way of knowing whether you've done a good deal or been done yourself. This makes bartering a hazardous business. Once anyone in Bilbury acquires a reputation as a poor judge of a deal, the reward is eternal ridicule and cold contempt. In a more kindly society poor financial judgement might be regarded as hardly more heinous than simple generosity but in Bilbury any man who throws his money around is regarded as a fool. Two years ago a fellow called Rupert Jackson retired to Bilbury with a very healthy bank balance after selling his share of an advertising business in London. Being a naturally generous soul (and accustomed to London wage rates) he willingly paid well over the going rate for work in his house and garden. I warned him that he was over-paying but he didn't seem worried. I think he expected the locals to look upon him as a kindly benefactor. Instead they despised him for damaging the fragile local economy, hated his ostentatious wealth and treated him with contempt which they made no attempt to hide whenever he ventured into the Duck and Puddle. After nine months he sold up and went back to London.

'Delivered?' I asked.

Willy grinned and nodded. He knew the deal was on.

'O.K.,' I said. 'But Norman can only have the mower for one day. Or I want two loads of manure.'

Willy beamed at me. Five minutes later we had hammered out a deal. So, I have now become a part of the village black economy. Each day living in Bilbury becomes more and more like living in an Arab bazaar. If only we had their weather.

TALL STORY

I was standing having a quiet drink with Thumper Robinson when two men I had never seen before came into the Duck and Puddle. The taller of the two wore a flat cap with a well thumbed peak. He limped slightly. Both men were in their sixties.

They ordered drinks and then took them to a quiet corner of the pub where they sat down together. The man who wore the cap took out a small wooden board and a pack of cards. The pair then quietly began a game of cribbage. It is years since I saw anyone play cribbage in a pub.

'That's Terry Collins,' murmured Thumper, who was standing next to me at the bar.

'Who's Terry Collins?'

'The guy in the cap.'

'But who *is* he?' I was puzzled. By the way Thumper had murmured his name I gathered that the stranger was something of a local celebrity.

'He shot down a German bomber during the war,' said

Thumper.

'He was in the RAF?'

Thumper shook his head. 'He wanted to join but they wouldn't have him. He lost both legs in an accident when he was a kid.'

'So, how did he come to shoot down a plane during the war?'

'He was out hunting for rabbits one night when he looked up and saw a bomber overhead,' replied Thumper. 'There was a full moon and the plane was flying low enough for him to see the swastika on the wings. The pilot was having engine trouble and had got separated from his mates somewhere over Dorset. He was lost.'

'And Terry Collins shot it down?'

'With his shotgun,' Thumper told me. 'It was a lucky direct hit on the plane's one good engine. The pilot managed to land on the moors and he was captured two days later. Terry painted a small plane on the stock of his shotgun.'

I was very impressed.

'So, who's the chap with him?' I asked Thumper.

'That's the pilot,' said Thumper. 'Klaus Hoffman. He never went home. He was in a prisoner of war camp until the end of the war and then he got a job as a translator for a technical publisher in Exeter.'

I looked across at the two men. To the casual observer they looked like a couple of very ordinary farmers having a quiet evening drink.

'What are they doing here?' I asked Thumper.

'They've probably been buying cattle at the Blackmoor Gate auction,' Thumper told me. 'They run a small farm near Tiverton now.'

'Together?'

Thumper nodded.

'That's amazing!'

Thumper looked at his watch. 'I must be going,' he said. 'I told Anne I'd be home an hour ago.' He finished his drink, grinned and waved a cheery goodbye.

'Astonishing about those two, isn't it?' I muttered to Frank, the landlord, when Thumper had gone.

Frank looked puzzled. 'What do you mean?'

'You wouldn't think there was anything special about them would you?'

Frank shook his head.

'I'd like to meet them,' I said. 'Do you think they'd mind if I went over?'

'What on earth do you want to meet them for?' demanded Frank, clearly puzzled.

'Thumper was telling me their story,' I explained. 'About the war and so on. I'd like to write about them.'

'I don't know what Thumper's been telling you,' said Frank.

'But those two didn't have a very interesting war. Hubert spent it in the catering corps in Aldershot. Ralph was in the Home Guard.'

'But one of them is German,' I mumbled, 'and one of them has artificial legs. They wouldn't let him in the RAF... I saw him limp when he came in.'

'The tall one? Is that what Thumper told you?'

I nodded.

'That's Hubert. He's got arthritis in his knee. That's why he limps.'

‘Don’t they have a farm together near Tiverton?’

Frank grinned and shook his head. ‘They’re both VAT inspectors. They’ve been out here giving Peter Marshall his usual three monthly grilling.’

I truly hate it when Thumper does that. One of these days I’ll get my own back on him.

FREE WHEELING ON EXMOOR

Too many people who live in the country seem to take the beauty of their surroundings for granted, only ever seeing the varying beauty of the countryside through their car windows. I know people who have lived in North Devon all their lives who have never walked on the cliff tops at Mortehoe, never watched the buzzards circling high above the moors in Lorna Doone country and never walked along the banks of the river Lyn to Rockford.

It is too easy to become blasé about the wonders of this world though this is not, of course, a fault which is unique to those who live in the country. There are probably people living in Paris who have never walked across the Pont Neuf by moonlight, never picnicked in the Place des Voges and never wandered through the Marais on a Sunday morning.

Although I made a deliberate choice to live in Bilbury because I love it I spend too much of my life sitting behind a desk. I am therefore always ready to seize the opportunity to go outside and to enjoy the wonderful, calming nature of this very beautiful part of the world.

Last Saturday Patsy, Anne, Thumper and I put the clocks back twenty years and went cycling on Exmoor. Neither Thumper nor Anne had bicycled for years and they had to borrow old bicycles which had been rusting away in the shed behind the Duck and Puddle.

We drove out onto the road between Simonsbath and Lynton, parked Thumper's old Ford pick-up truck on the wide verge near Brendon Two Gates and set off onto the most romantic, most alluring moorland anywhere in the kingdom.

As we wobbled off along a dusty moorland track and headed towards Hoccombe Hill it took Thumper and Anne several hundred yards to gain the confidence they'd had as children. (It took them a little further to discover how to operate the rather rusty gears on their mounts).

But within a few minutes they had remembered just how joyful bicycle riding can be away from the traffic and with only the ponies, the cattle and the deer of Exmoor for company.

We pedalled up steep and rocky, rutted narrow paths, we coasted at breakneck speed down grassy, rock strewn slopes and we explored the heather of Brendon Common, Badgworth Hill and Malmsmead country; the ever romantic, constantly alluring backdrop for R. D. Blackmore's spectacular Lorna Doone saga.

We saw dippers and wagtails and buzzards. We watched plump partridge struggle into the air and we admired the shaggy, prehistoric looking cattle which browse alongside the Exmoor ponies among the heather. No cars, no queues, no charge for admission.

We splashed our sweaty hands and faces with water from a crystal clear stream and ate lunch in the sunshine with our backs leaning against a moss covered dry stone wall. Fresh crusty bread from the local bakers, still soft and warm inside; hunks of farm-made cheese; crisp, juicy English apples and home-baked scones, hardly cool yet from Anne's oven. We dozed and watched the birds and like children on a day out told each other tall stories of our narrow escapes among the ruts and rocks of the paths we had explored.

Afterwards we cycled back up and over Malmsmead Hill, towards Withycombe Ridge and finally to Farley Water; splashing through shallow puddles and racing one another along narrow sheep paths. Exhausted but relaxed and content we got back to Thumper's pick-up truck just as the day was beginning to cool and the sun was starting to set.

Back in Bilbury we called in at the Duck and Puddle for a drink.

'Someone was trying to get you this morning!' said Frank, scrabbling around under the bar for the note he had made.

'They called two or three times!' he added, finally finding and handing me a scrap of paper with a London telephone number written on it.

People I know often leave messages for me at the Duck and Puddle but I didn't recognise the number the caller had left. 'Did they leave a message?'

Frank shook his head but handed me the telephone. I dialed the number.

'It's Henry,' said a voice I recognised, 'where the hell have you been?' Henry is a friend who lives on the outskirts of London. Hampstead. Finchley. Islington. One of those brick road-car-noise-dirt-stress places. 'You've missed a wonderful opportunity,' he told me. 'We had spare tickets for a Post Modernist Art Display at the National Gallery. You could have come.'

'I was out,' I said.

'You miss all the good things - being buried down there in the middle of nowhere!' said Henry.

'Oh no I don't!' I thought.

But I didn't tell Henry what I'd been doing. I didn't think he would understand.

VILLAGE IDIOT

A generation or two ago every village had its idiot and every village idiot had to put up with all sorts of cruel ragging. These days we like to think that we are more compassionate and less openly hurtful but I have my doubts about that. It may be that village idiots are no longer openly laughed at but deep down our society is just as thoughtless as it ever was. My despair and my anger are fuelled each day by sad, new stories of prejudice, ignorance and abuse.

Take Michael, for example. He is 25-years-old and he is what society now calls educationally subnormal. He can read a few simple words and he can sign his name but books, magazines and newspapers are a mystery to him.

But what Michael lacks in intellect, he more than makes up for in compassion and in spiritual strength. There is a gentle simplicity to his world and I sometimes envy him his black and white values.

Michael lives on the Lynton side of Bilbury with his brother, Tom and his sister-in-law, Elspeth. His brother has a small farm and Michael helps to look after the animals. He has a way with four legged creatures. They trust him.

Although his father is dead, Michael's mother lives in Newton Abbott and for as long as I can remember it has been his simple ambition to travel down to the south of the county to see her by himself. Last week I met Tom and he asked if I thought Michael could manage the journey by himself. 'He keeps on about it,' explained Tom. 'And I keep thinking of excuses. But do you think he'd be able to manage it?'

I said I thought he would. There is a bus service from Lynton to Tiverton and a good train service from Tiverton to Newton Abbott. And Michael's mother's flat is no more than a quarter of a mile from the Newton Abbott station.

So, last Tuesday was chosen as Michael's big day. Tom and his wife took Michael to the bus station and Thumper, Anne, Patsy and I turned out to give him a cheery wave. Elspeth had made a huge pile of sandwiches and wrapped them in greaseproof paper and Michael clutched them to his chest as he waited for the bus. He had a flask of coffee with him too and its sweet and milky smell filled the air around him. I don't think I have ever seen any man so dignified. He looked proud and excited as he waited for his adventure to begin.

'Have you got your money?' asked Tom, who was clearly apprehensive.

Michael nodded, pushed his left hand deep into his trouser pocket and pulled out a battered black leather purse. He started to unfasten it but Tom put out a hand to stop him.

'When you get on the train just sit down and stay there. Don't move about.'

Michael nodded to show that he understood.

'He'll be fine,' whispered Elspeth. She reached out and squeezed her husband's hand. It was a big day for them all.

Two minutes later the bus drove out of sight with Michael waving furiously from the back window. We stood together and waved him goodbye.

By chance I happened to be in Lynton again a few hours later and to my surprise I saw Tom driving by with Michael sitting beside him. Michael, who should have been in Newton Abbott, was in tears.

I telephoned Tom as soon as I got home.

'What happened to Michael?'

'He got on the train at Tiverton without any problem,' said Tom. He sounded tired and depressed. 'But the guard had him taken off the train at Exeter and the police rang me to go and fetch him.'

'What on earth happened?'

'He bought an ordinary return ticket but got into a first class compartment by mistake,' explained Tom. 'He didn't know there were two types of ticket so when the guard shouted at him he got confused. He said I'd told him that he wasn't to move until the train got to Newton Abbott. When the train stopped at Exeter they called the police and had him thrown off the train.' Tom sighed. 'The guard said that four smartly dressed businessmen from London had complained that they hadn't paid the extra to share their first class carriage with a drivelling idiot and so he had to do something.'

Poor Michael. I felt anger as well as sadness when I first heard this tale. I still feel anger and sadness now.

THE GENERATOR

Like most local farmers, Thomas Yattenden has a generator in his barn so that on those occasions when Bilbury is deprived of electricity he can still milk his cows, prepare his animal feed stuffs and see where he is going and what he is doing on dark winter mornings.

Last month Thomas replaced his 20-year-old generator with a brand new, state of the art model that is designed to switch on automatically the moment the supply from the national grid switches off.

Thomas was immensely proud of his new toy and he insisted on taking us all round to look at it.

'Just watch this!' he said, flicking his mains electricity switch into the 'off' position. The lights dimmed for an instant and then brightened quickly as the wonderful new generator burst into action.

'Marvellous, isn't it?' purred Thomas. There was much murmuring of appreciation and Thumper and I applauded quietly.

Just then the generator stuttered, coughed and stopped and the lights went out. One of the essential laws of thermodynamics is that machinery will always break down at the most inconvenient and embarrassing moment and Thomas, although not inconvenienced, was certainly embarrassed.

'Just give it a kick!' said Thumper, who has a sensitive feeling for all mechanical and electrical equipment.

Thomas shook his head sagely. 'I can't do that,' he said. 'This is sensitive equipment. I've got a number to call in Exeter. There's probably a loose connection somewhere.'

The man who came out from the supplier in Exeter arrived in next to no time in a van which had a flashing amber light on the roof. I've known ambulances take longer. He certainly looked very impressive. He brought with him a huge box of tools, an inch thick manual and a variety of testing equipment. He had screwdrivers which lit up like fairy lights, multicoloured gadgets that beeped and burped and a pair of neat blue overalls with his name emblazoned on the breast pocket. A row of coloured screwdriver tops poked out from his pocket.

He could find nothing wrong with the generator and announced, with some regret, that he would have to arrange for a technician from London to come and take a look.

'I suppose that means I'm going to be without my generator for a month,' said Thomas wearily.

'Oh, no, sir!' said the technician from Exeter. 'Our man from London will be here tomorrow.'

And he was, too.

He came in an even bigger van with an even bigger amber flashing light and even more equipment. He wore a smart three piece blue suit instead of blue overalls and he had a row of pens instead of screwdrivers in his pocket. He had his name printed neatly on a small, white plastic name badge that was pinned to his suit lapel.

He spent a whole day on the generator and seemed, so Thomas later told us, to have completely rebuilt the whole thing.

But he couldn't make it work, either, and although Thomas was impressed with the quality of service he was receiving he was getting a bit fed up with the fact that his expensive generator didn't work.

'We'll have to get someone over from the manufacturers in Germany,' said the man from London. He telephoned London on the radio phone in his van and made the arrangements. 'One of their top design specialists will be here tomorrow,' he told Thomas. 'I'll stay overnight. I'd like to find out what the trouble is.'

And so the next morning there was quite a crowd waiting at Thomas's farm when the German expert arrived. There was Thomas, and the technician from Exeter and the man from London and Thumper and Frank from the pub and Peter Marshall. I was there too, of course.

The German expert came by plane and train and taxi and arrived at about mid day. He was very casually dressed in a pair of beige slacks and an open necked shirt and he carried a small overnight bag with him. He had no tools and no overalls and no name badge. He grinned a lot and shook hands with everyone, walked over to the generator and, before anyone quite realised what he was doing, gave it an almighty kick.

The generator burst into life instantly and purred like a contented cat.

'When they're new they sometimes need a bit of help starting,' he said in faultless English. 'Shall we have a nice cup of tea now?'

TROPHIES

Lionel won the Club Trophy at Kentisbury Golf Club last month and he has been unbearable ever since.

He came into the Duck and Puddle with the trophy cradled carefully in his arms and stood there nursing it for twenty minutes while Thumper, Frank and I had one of our occasional philosophical arguments.

Thumper had started the argument by claiming that a couple of years ago there used to be a sign on Lynmouth beach which said: 'Do not throw stones at this notice'. Nothing else. Just 'Do not throw stones at this notice.'

Frank said that even the council wouldn't be so daft as to put up such a stupid sign but Thumper said that he'd seen the sign himself.

Then Frank said that he'd probably *thought* it had said that but that Thumper's memory had undoubtedly been distorted by prejudice and wishful thinking and alcohol.

And that is when it all got very philosophical.

Thumper said that what people remember is the truth and that history is simply what people believe. He said the facts don't really matter at all.

Frank snorted and said that this was nonsense and that history wasn't history unless people could prove it had happened, so Thumper asked him if Danny Jenkins had really been arrested for tying the back bumper of a police car to one of the poles holding up the refreshment tent at the Agricultural Show in Exeter. Frank said yes, that was history and so Thumper asked him how he could prove it and Frank said he thought it was time we all had another drink.

'Let me get them!' said Lionel, putting his very conspicuous trophy down on the bar and pulling out his wallet.

'That's a nice trophy!' said Frank, rising to the bait for the sake of a pint. 'What did you get that for?'

With considerable pride Lionel explained. The three of us listened with rapidly diminishing patience as he explained how he'd escaped from a bunker at the 7th, used a niblick to put his second within a foot of the pin on the 10th and drilled a drive straight down the fairway on the 14th. It was tedious stuff made even more tedious by the fact that none of us understood what he was talking about.

'I'll loan you the trophy for display!' said Lionel, accepting his change.

'Oh no, I couldn't!' said Frank, who clearly didn't want his pub cluttered up with Lionel's ugly silver plated trophy.

'No problem!' insisted Lionel, sticking the trophy in between a small plastic model of Johnnie Walker and a collecting box for a Donkey Sanctuary.

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Lionel is normally only an occasional visitor to the Duck and Puddle but for the last four weeks he hasn't missed an opportunity to call in for a drink and every time he's been in the pub he has insisted on telling someone how he won his trophy.

We have all come to loathe the bunker at the 7th for allowing him to escape and our combined hatred of the hummock on the 17th fairway which bounced his ball back into play would be quite enough to turn any ordinary hummock bright red with embarrassment.

But I think our ordeal may now be over.

Yesterday lunchtime Thumper arrived at the pub clutching a large sack which clattered ominously as he dropped it down onto the floor beside the bar. Without waiting for any questions he reached into the sack and pulled out an enormous range of cups and trophies.

'Brought you my cups, Frank!' said Thumper, lining his tarnished silver ware up along every available piece of shelf space.

'What on earth...,' began Frank. 'Where did you get all those?'

Lionel, who was as usual sitting close to his trophy, ready to describe the way he had won it to any newcomers, said nothing but stared open-mouthed at Thumper's impressive collection.

'There's a story behind every one,' said Thumper cheerily. 'I'll start telling my sporting history tonight!' He picked up one small trophy and cradled it lovingly. 'Mid Devon Open Darts Challenge Match 1967,' he said, reading out the inscription on the small plaque screwed to the trophy's sun-faded wooden plinth. He turned to Lionel. 'Being a sporting man you'll be interested in this!'

Lionel made gargling noises and looked at his watch. 'I really must be off,' he said. He muttered something about another appointment.

'Where the hell did you get all those?' I asked Thumper when Lionel had gone. 'Did you really win them?'

Thumper laughed. 'Of course I didn't. I bought the lot for two quid at a house auction in Torrington this morning.'

JACK POND

Jack Pond is 35-years-old and schizophrenic. He lives with his mother and father in one of a short row of whitewashed terraced cottages down near Softly's Bottom.

Many people are frightened of schizophrenics. They assume that all patients with this disease are dangerous, potential killers.

But the truth, of course, is that most schizophrenics are quiet, peaceful, innocent and entirely harmless. Their torment exists solely inside their own heads and they are rarely of any danger to anyone except themselves.

Jack is probably the most harmless person you could ever hope to meet. I doubt if he has ever had an aggressive thought in his life, though for years he has been tortured by feelings of self doubt and the suffering he has caused himself is incalculable.

Jack has never had a proper job. He has worked on one or two farms during the summer months but he is nervous of animals and because he is rather forgetful no one likes him to be too close to any of the machinery so his usefulness as a farm labourer is limited.

'He tries hard and he wants to be useful,' said one farmer. 'But I don't have the time to keep an eye on him and a modern farm is a potentially dangerous place.'

Six months ago Jack's life changed when he was offered a job in a specially run small factory which had been set up in a nearby town by a group of volunteers. The small charity running the factory believed that by giving people jobs they could help build up their self-esteem and self-confidence. They wanted to find regular work for people like Jack who couldn't hold down a proper job and so, with the aid of a small legacy, they bought a lease on a small factory unit and got contracts to do a variety of light, routine industrial work - the sort of work that is often done by people working at home. Packing small toys in boxes. Screwing grommets to grommets. Putting twenty screws in a plastic envelope. That sort of thing.

Jack loved his new job. He had to get up at six every morning in order to get to the factory and his pay packet was only ever very light but he enjoyed his work very much for it gave him a real sense of purpose.

Instead of spending his days watching television he spent them with new friends. He took great pride in doing the simple tasks he was given with skill and speed. The hospital consultant looking after him told me with some surprise that he had never seen Jack behave so normally. He said that he was thinking of reducing Jack's daily medication.

Jack's job even had a tremendous influence on his social life. Together with a few of the other men at the factory Jack formed a football club. They didn't play in any formal league but they met every Sunday morning and played a fast, enthusiastic and surprisingly physical game on a public pitch.

And twice, Jack went out to the cinema with a girl he met at the factory.

But now Jack no longer has a job.

A team of social workers swooped on the factory a couple of weeks ago and decided that because Jack and his friends were vulnerable and were being paid very little they were being exploited. They recognised that the people running the factory were doing so with no intention of making a profit. And they acknowledged that without the factory Jack and his friends would, once again, be left with purposeless lives. But the officials insisted that the factory must close.

Jack does not understand. He is now very depressed. He is depressed because he has lost his independence. He is depressed because he has lost his weekly pay packet. He is depressed because his life no longer has a sense of purpose. He is depressed because he fears that he will lose touch with the friends with whom he used to play football on Sunday mornings. And he is depressed because he fears that since he will not see her during the day time his relationship with his new girlfriend will fade. Besides, without his pay packet he won't have the money for bus fares or cinema tickets.

He is not, I am afraid, at all grateful to the social workers who want to stop him being 'exploited'.

THE FAMILY MAN

I shared a flat with Tim Leyton when we were both at medical school and he was, without a doubt, the most exciting, unpredictable and stimulating individual I'd ever met. So, when I got a note from him asking if he and his family could come down to the West Country for a few days I was absolutely delighted.

'You'll love him!' I told Patsy and Thumper in the Duck and Puddle that evening. 'He's the wildest, maddest fellow I've ever met!' I told them about the time that he had been stranded in the centre of the city, long after the buses had stopped running and without enough money to pay for a taxi. Tim had simply walked into the bus station, climbed aboard a doubledecker and driven himself home in it. The next morning we all awoke to find a large, blue number 57 bus parked outside our flat.

It was Tim, I remembered, who had persuaded the rest of us to help him put a mini car belonging to one of the consultant surgeons on top of the flat roof of the nurses' home. The consultant had to hire a crane to get his car back.

And it was Tim who somehow managed to move a council grit bin (complete with a full complement of grit) from its natural roadside habitat into the reception area of the maternity home.

Not wanting to frighten them too much I didn't tell them about the day that Tim used a fire hose and twelve packets of orthopaedic cement to turn the matron's kitchenette into a swimming pool. Nor did I mention the day that he and the senior anaesthetist's wife were found together absolutely stark naked in the linen cupboard on the men's surgical ward. Tim was the sort of medical student you read about in books and I awaited his arrival rather nervously.

He and his family arrived with us last Tuesday in a four-year-old muddy brown Volvo estate car, and the moment I saw him I knew that Tim was not the man he had been. He wore a slightly crumpled blue suit that made him look like an unsuccessful insurance salesman. He smiled at me nervously and we shook hands rather formally. His wife, Myrtle, wore horn-rimmed glasses, a sensible skirt and an equally sensible jumper. She had the sort of shape you associate with chutney and PTA meetings. And they were accompanied by an assortment of children of various ages.

'Do you mind if I just make a phone call?' asked Tim, while Myrtle tried to persuade some of the children to stop screaming.

'No funny business with ink or super glue!' I warned him, with a wink. He frowned for a moment, looking puzzled. 'I just need to ring one of my partners,' he explained. 'We're having the surgery rewired and I want to remind them to put an extra socket in my consulting room.'

I went into the living room. Myrtle had turned on the television set and she and the children were watching a cartoon programme.

'Shall we pop round to the Duck and Puddle?' I asked when Tim had finished on the telephone.

He looked puzzled.

'The pub!' I explained.

'Oh!' Tim looked across at his wife, rather nervously. 'We don't like to take the children into pubs,' he said.

We all sat down and watched the television. A two dimensional rabbit was chasing a two dimensional dog down an apparently endless road. The children seemed to like it and it kept them quiet.

'It's kind of you to put us up,' said Myrtle. 'We're having a conservatory built onto the house so we're trying to economise on holidays.'

We sat for another hour or so watching the television. Several times I tried to begin a conversation but I've had more fun talking to Jehovah's witnesses. All Tim and Myrtle wanted to talk about was children, private schools, double glazing, the price of soap powder and the mortgage rate.

In the end I felt that I had to get out of the house. 'Is there anywhere you want to go?' I asked. 'Anything you'd like to see?'

Tim looked up. 'I think we're all O.K. here, thank you.' He had opened and was reading a copy of the European Medical Journal that he'd brought with him. Myrtle was reading one of the supplements from the previous Sunday's paper.

I stood up. 'I'll just pop to the shop and get some bread,' I lied. 'I'll come with you,' said Patsy quickly.

'Has your wild chum arrived?' asked Thumper, when Patsy and I walked into the Duck and Puddle.

'We had to escape,' I grinned. 'I must be getting old. I can't stand the pace any more.'

THE TRAMP

Geoffrey the tramp had been a part of Barnstaple for several years. As much as a fixture as the Pannier Market or Butchers' Row.

He lived rough; spending his days prowling the streets on the look-out for bits and pieces of useful debris and his nights curled up in a cardboard box. I never saw him begging but if people offered him money he would accept the gesture with a gentle graciousness. He had a long beard flecked with grey and wore a brown tweed overcoat. Even in summer you could hear him wheezing like an out of condition water pump.

Once, I chased away a few youths who had gathered around to make fun of him. Some time last winter someone poured petrol onto his cardboard home and set fire to it. Geoffrey suffered severe bums and was lucky to survive. Where does such cruelty come from?

A couple of weeks ago I realised that Geoffrey had not been around for a while. Concerned and curious I made a few enquiries.

'We found him dead in a building society doorway,' an unconcerned policeman told me. 'He'd been beaten and kicked to death.'

I felt sadness, anger and despair in almost equal mixtures. 'Who did it?'

The policeman shrugged. 'No idea. Kids probably.'

'Why?' I couldn't understand it. 'He couldn't have had anything worth stealing.'

'Probably just for fun.'

'For *fun?'*

No one seemed to care very much. In death, as in life, Geoffrey had passed by unnoticed. No one will mourn his passing. No one will seek revenge for his loss. There will be no recriminations. This is the twentieth century. Civilisation.

I wondered what sort of man he was, how he had come to end his days sleeping in a cardboard box and what sorrows, despair, frustrations and unhappinesses had ruled his life. I have spent much of the week doing a little detective work.

Geoffrey was born in Wolverhampton in 1942 and although his childhood seems to have been uneventful, the first half of his adult life was extremely successful. He loved motor cars and was a brilliant mechanic. He built up a very successful garage business. At the age of 27 he married and, at his wife's insistence, sold the garage and bought a fast food franchise. His wife didn't like the motor car business. She thought it rather 'dirty' and 'low class'.

All went well for ten years. Geoffrey got richer and his wife gave birth to two children. He bought a large house with two garages, a swimming pool and a tennis court and expanded his business. The dream finally soured when his wife took a fancy to a young solicitor whom she had met at her tennis club. She announced that she wanted a divorce.

Although he was guiltless Geoffrey freely offered to give her the house. But it wasn't enough. She wanted money. Her young solicitor lover insisted that Geoffrey turn all his business interests into cash. It wasn't a good time to sell and the bank took most of Geoffrey's share of the proceeds.

With the small sum that was left over, Geoffrey bought an old van and started again; living in a rented flat several miles from the smart home he'd had to sell. He couldn't afford the equipment he had needed to set up a restaurant, so he parked in a lay-by and sold hot dogs and hamburgers to lorry drivers. He was happy to have the work and his customers were satisfied. For a while it looked as though he would survive.

Then, one morning Geoffrey woke to find a letter from his wife's solicitor on his doormat. She had found out about his new business and she wanted her share of the income.

Geoffrey left his rented flat, abandoned his van and headed south. Through some primeval instinct he headed for North Devon where he had spent many happy childhood holidays. Ilfracombe. Combe Martin. Lynmouth. The names drew him to them as surely as a lamp will attract a fluttering moth. Geoffrey arrived in Devon with no possessions and no money. He had only sadness in his heart. He just wanted to get away. To hide. To forget and to be forgotten. And the rest is now history.

Geoffrey was still a young man when he died. I wonder how many of the people who passed his cardboard home ever even wondered about the tragedy behind the man.

PROGRESS

I had lunch last Tuesday at the Gravediggers' Rest in Braunton. I confess I don't normally stray so far from Bilbury but I went at the invitation of a friend of mine called Ed Hunter whom I hadn't seen for quite some time.

Ed is a Director of Human Resources for an American company and he normally works in a city where the traffic jams are endless and the air so polluted that breathing is a dangerous business.

(To be honest I still get confused by phrases such as 'Director of Human Resources', though I know that such jargon is all the rage these days. I have heard army spokesmen refer to dead bodies as 'non effective combat personnel'. On the radio, I heard a housewife described as a 'life support consultant'. People over sixty are no longer 'old'. These days they are 'chronologically enhanced'. Dwarves are 'vertically challenged' and tall people are 'vertically enhanced'. Ed once told me that no one who works for his company is ever made redundant these days. Instead they have to endure 'management initiated separation'. I think I'd rather be sacked.)

Ed has always been a bit gadget conscious and was the first person I know to have a portable phone. Sadly, however, his gadgets don't always work. I know for a fact that he has not been able to put his car away in his garage since he had an electrical opening device fitted. His garage now resolutely resists all attempts to persuade it to open and his car stands out in all weathers.

Ed pulled a small computer out of his pocket as we sat down. He couldn't wait to tell me all about it. 'It's brilliant!' he enthused. He always gets excited about his new gadgets. 'It's an electronic notebook, diary and calculator all rolled into one.' Like most city folk he always thinks that just because I live in the country I live a primitive, rather backward existence. He pressed a couple of buttons and showed me my initials and telephone number on the computer's tiny screen.

'There you are!' he said, triumphantly. He suddenly sniffed as though his nose had been assaulted by some noxious smell. 'What's that?' he demanded.

I sniffed too. I couldn't smell anything.

I am not over keen on computers. I have an enduring suspicion that much of the time they offer answers to problems people don't have and wouldn't be bothered about solving even if they knew they had them. My idea of high technology is having a rubber fixed on the end of my pencil. I put my hand in my pocket, pulled out my old-fashioned pocket diary (29 pence in the January sales), opened it and showed my friend his name, address and telephone number.

'It's quicker my way,' I pointed out.

'You're such a Luddite,' he exclaimed. 'You'll have to buy another diary next year. My computer comes complete with a 199 year diary.'

I looked at him in quiet amazement. 'Why do you want a diary for 199 years?'

He had the good grace to look slightly uncomfortable.

'What appointments do you have for the year 2087?' I teased him.

He muttered something about long-term strategic planning and then wagged a finger at me. 'My little gadget will tell me the time in 126 different places all over the world.'

'How many places can you be in at any one time?' I wanted to know, genuinely confused and unable to discern a purpose for this excess of knowledge.

Ed was beginning to get angry. 'Now you're just being deliberately difficult,' he said. He tapped away at his tiny keyboard. 'There!' he said proudly, a few moments later, showing me his tiny screen. 'I've written myself a memo. When I get back to the office I can copy that out.'

He sniffed again. 'Are you *sure* you can't smell anything odd?'

I pulled a 20 pence notebook out of my pocket, found a stub of pencil and scribbled a memo to myself. As I scribbled I realised what the smell was. Silage. My shoes always smell of silage.

'Me too!' I countered, showing him my note.

'But your diary and your notepad are so ...,' he paused, searching for the right words, 'old-fashioned'.

'I know. And cheap.'

He suddenly bent forwards and peered at his new toy. He looked worried.

'What's the matter?'

'I don't know,' he said. He turned the computer round and showed me an empty screen. 'I think the battery might have gone.'

I offered him my notepad. 'Do you want to make a note to get yourself a new battery?'

THE SHY ROCK STAR

His face appears on millions of record covers and on thousands of posters. Every night several hundred thousand young girls (and some quite a number of not so young women) say 'goodnight' to him when they go to bed. Once a year he goes on tour to America, France, Germany and Japan and his concerts around the world are sold out within hours of the tickets going on sale. Last year the group of which he is a member earned rather more than Wales.

Despite all this success he lives in Bilbury in total obscurity. Without his long, blond wig and flamboyant clothes he is never recognised. He drives an old, beaten up, muddy Land Rover and invariably wears wellington boots, a green waxed coat and a flat cap with a grubby peak. He lives in two small silver miners' cottages which were knocked into one half a dozen years ago by a local builder. He has a horse and a Great Dane and shares his life with a good looking, plumpish girl who always wears tight fitting blue jeans and dark coloured sweaters.

I'm not going to tell you his real name (which is the name he uses in Bilbury) or his stage name (which you would recognise instantly) because he works hard at keeping the two parts of his life quite separate.

He has lived in Bilbury long enough to be a part of the village and he gives of his time quite freely. Last summer he helped Thumper and me clear the village pond; spending two days up to his waist in stagnant water and helping to fill the skip we had to hire to carry away the old bicycle frames, pushchairs, prams, flat irons and pieces of motor car which had been dumped in the water. (We even unearthed two shopping trolleys despite the fact that the nearest supermarket is probably across the Bristol Channel!)

Most people in show business pretend to want privacy but then do everything they possibly can to ensure that their private lives are made public. 'People who buy houses in Marbella and spend their free time going to nightclubs and beach parties don't have any right to complain if they find themselves being chased by photographers.' says Bilbury's gentle rock star.

He claims that public figures who cavort in public places have abandoned their right to privacy and argues that anyone who wants a private and peaceful life can have one easily if only he (or she) is prepared to find their Bilbury and then spend time living there.

'Most of us dress ourselves up so much when we're working that we're virtually unrecognisable when we're not on stage,' he says. 'And people who don't work in disguise could easily change their appearances enough to enable them to escape from journalists and photographers if they really wanted to.' He is living testimony to the truth of this assertion. On stage he is wild, unkempt and even frightening. Off stage he is shy, retiring and inconspicuous.

'Surgeons don't wander around dressed in gown and mask when they are at home,' he points out. 'When I'm working I dress up and put lots of make-up on. When I'm not working I'm a different person.'

Just before Christmas Frank and Gilly from the Duck and Puddle organised a trip to Wembley to see a rock concert. By chance they chose to see a show performed by a man who spends much of his life sitting in a corner in the pub they run. By irony they invited the star of the show they were going to see to join them on the coach trip.

'Sorry,' he said, when they told him the venue, the date and the name of the main attraction. 'I'm afraid I won't be able to make it then. I've got something fixed up.'

'It'll be a cracking show!' promised Gilly. 'I saw him in Birmingham last year. He was fantastic!' She had no idea at all that her hero was standing less than a yard away from her, dressed in a mud spattered Barbour and a pair of oil and mud stained jeans.

'Not really my scene, love.' said our rock star shyly. 'I'm a bit old for all that.' He emptied his pint and shuffled out of the bar.

'Really nice bloke,' said Frank, when he'd gone. 'But he needs to let himself go a bit more.'

Gilly looked at me. 'It's a shame,' she said. 'The funny thing is that X (she mentioned the name of the rock star) must be about the same age as him! You couldn't imagine two more different people, could you?'

I didn't say a word.

NICE TO COME HOME

It isn't easy being a vegetarian. I see nothing odd in preferring to see animals walking about rather than sliced up with two veg or mashed up (bones, intestines, tonsils and all) and served up with chips, but some people still think that refusing to eat animals is a sign of lunacy.

It is, however, a darned sight easier being a vegetarian in Britain than it is once you leave the country.

I've just come back from a two day visit to Lindau in Bavaria.

I should have guessed that my stomach was in for a bad time when the stewardess brought me my in-flight meal on the aeroplane. I had, of course, warned the airline that I was vegetarian but the meal they had prepared consisted of cheese flan, cheesecake and cheese and biscuits. At least I think it did. Since I don't eat cheese I didn't actually taste any of the stuff in my little plastic dish. I ate the radish which was decorating the cheese flan and the two small biscuits that came with the cheese and washed down this unbalanced repast with a miniature bottle of white wine (for what it's worth, my advice is that no one with a sensitive palate should ever drink red wine on an aeroplane).

Seven hours later I was comfortably settled in one of the world's most beautiful hotels on the shore of a lake which is bordered by three countries (the Swiss call it Lake Constance, the Germans call it Bodensee and the Austrians call it Lake Konstanz and still the pro-Europeans talk of European unity).

The peace there is majestic: monasteries and castles cling to cliff tops, and hang in the mist, built as though to defy the possible and the practical.

I wandered into one of the hotel restaurants to order a meal. There were 59 items on the menu and with the aid of my fragile German and a small dictionary I worked my way through them all. If you exclude the one which my dictionary translated as 'Enclosure with deposit' (I hate to think what it was) no less than 58 of the available meals were meat based. I ordered the 59th: Russian egg and potato salad. It came covered in slices of salami. The Germans hate serving up anything that doesn't have a bit of a dead animal in it somewhere. I suspect they think they'll be arrested if they serve food that doesn't include meat. For dinner I ate two slices of black bread and drank two bottles of light beer.

Next morning at breakfast I decided to fill up with bread rolls. I sat at a rose laden table overlooking the lake and spread thick black cherry jam on a crisp brown roll covered with something white which I took to be sugar. It wasn't sugar. It was salt. I can still taste that roll and it makes me shudder as I write.

During the conference lunch break, obsessed with the thought of food, I wandered around the town looking for somewhere to eat. It was all typically Bavarian. Impossibly steep roofs, painted wooden shutters, colourful window boxes and neatly stacked piles of logs. I thought I'd got close to something promising fairly early on. The main item in the dish that had caught my eye was mixed vegetables covered in something that looked, even in German, like a misprint. It was one of those long, composite German words. I split the word up into its component parts and discovered that the mixed vegetables were served with a thick covering of bacon fat.

Eventually, I found a cafe which advertised soup of the day as consisting of tomato soup with rice. I ordered this. When it came it arrived with a large sausage floating in it. A huge dollop of fresh cream was balanced on the sausage.

On the flight back the airline served me a half decent vegetarian meal but brought no cutlery.

'I have no cutlery,' I pointed out, apologetic as only an Englishman can be under such circumstances.

'Yes,' said the stewardess with a smile. 'That'll be because you're a vegetarian.'

When I got back to Taunton I walked round the corner from the railway station to the chip shop just under the railway bridge. There I bought the biggest bag of chips they would serve me with and ate them in the street.

It's nice to go travelling but it's always nice to come back home too.

PLEASE SHUT THE GATE

Tradesmen and delivery drivers have left open the main gate to Bilbury Grange on three separate occasions in the last week. As a result, wandering sheep have spent a very pleasant hour or two munching their way through our shrubbery, pelleting the drive and aerating the croquet lawn.

So, this morning I drove into town with the express intention of purchasing a 'PLEASE SHUT THE GATE' sign. It seemed a modest ambition.

The first shop I tried, a stationers, could only offer me a variety of small, red and white plastic stick on signs carrying such messages as PLEASE WASH YOUR HANDS NOW and DANGER GUARD DOG PATROLLING. I explained to the salesman that none of these messages seemed entirely appropriate and asked him if he would suggest anywhere else that I could try.

'You could try the shop four doors down,' suggested the salesman. 'It's run by my brother-in-law. Mention my name.' Foolishly, I accepted his recommendation and tried the shop four doors down. Although my confidence was not enhanced by the discovery that the craftsman who had designed and executed the sign over the shop had described it as a plumbing supplies centre, I suppressed the inevitable sense of pessimism that this discovery inspired and explained to the assistant, a tall, dour-faced youth wearing a grey smock and a sullen look, exactly what I was looking for.

'Your brother-in-law suggested I try here,' I told him, when my explanation was greeted with a blank stare.

The dour-faced youth continued to stare at me dully. His mouth had fallen wide open and I could see that a clumsy labourer masquerading as a dentist had at some time slapped vast quantities of mercury amalgam into his mouth. His teeth were silver rather than white and looked as though they had been repaired by a man with a grudge.

'Do you sell signs?' I asked him, speaking slowly and clearly, as though addressing a foreigner.

The youth continued to stare at me and I could see that he was thinking. This was, for him, clearly something of an adventure, a sail into unchartered waters.

'Signs.' I said. I looked around. My eyes lit upon the 'OPEN' and 'CLOSED' sign on the back of the shop door. I pointed to it to illustrate my message. The youth followed my outstretched finger and nodded slowly. 'My uncle does up and over garage doors,' he told me proudly and inconsequentially.

Eventually, I found a shop that sold signs. It was full of signs. I had never seen so many signs in all my life. There were signs of all shapes and sizes. Red and white signs. Black and yellow signs. Blue and white signs. PLEASE DO NOT GIVE ICE CREAM TO THE PEACOCKS. DO NOT THROW STONES AT THIS NOTICE. CARS PARKED BEYOND THIS NOTICE WILL BE UNDER WATER AT HIGH TIDE.

'Do you have a sign that says PLEASE SHUT THE GATE?'

I asked a man in a green tweed suit. He was wearing a pale yellow shirt and a red tie. He looked like a short circuited traffic light.

The man didn't hesitate. 'No, sir! I'm afraid we can't help you with that.' As he spoke he flicked through a clutch of ready-made signs and picked one out. He held it out so that I could read it. 'What about this, sir?'

I looked at it. It said: NO HAWKERS, NO CIRCULARS, NO TRESPASSERS. I must have looked disappointed.

'I didn't really think so. Sorry not to be able to help,' he said. Then he leant forwards, as though about to share something deeply confidential with me. 'It's a funny thing, sir, but we get a lot of requests for PLEASE SHUT THE GATE signs.'

'I'm not surprised.' I said. 'There must be a lot of people who get fed up with having their gates left open.'

'Exactly my sentiments, sir.'

'Why don't you make one?' I asked him.

'Sir?'

'A sign that says: PLEASE SHUT THE GATE.'

The sign salesman shook his head violently. 'Oh, I don't think the manager would agree to that, sir.'

'Why on earth not?'

'He keeps a strict record of which signs sell best,' explained the salesman. 'And we've never sold a single PLEASE SHUT THE GATE sign in the seventeen years I've been here.'

I went home, found a flat piece of wood and a pot of paint and made myself a sign. I may have found a market niche.

PEAR TREES AND TIGER DUNG

Animals are invariably more intelligent than most of us realise. And they are equipped with extraordinary skills and talents.

Consider, for example, this remarkable true story of the deer belonging to Sir William Footling-Blenchard.

Sir William is the local Bilbury aristocrat. He lives in faded glory in what undoubtedly was, in the eighteenth century, a splendid castle but is today a rather run down and sad looking place. The battlements are crumbling, the roof is leaking and the whole place is held up by ivy, history and extensive strands of dry rot. There is hardly anything left for the woodworm to eat and the oak beams have been turned into fretwork by battalions of death watch beetles.

But however dismal Blenchard Castle may be inside it still has one remaining virtue: its gardens. Every summer visitors come in their thousands to walk around gardens which were once described in a Sunday newspaper colour supplement as ‘the most majestic, the most inspiring and the most colourful private gardens in England’.

Some time ago Sir William realised that he could not afford to try to restore the house and to keep the gardens in good order. He had to choose one or the other and so without any apparent regret he moved into the two bedroom lodge house and chose to maintain the gardens.

Recently, however, Sir William has faced a problem that few ordinary gardeners will have ever had to worry about: his deer have been eating his pear trees.

To those gardeners more accustomed to worrying about greenfly or slugs, Sir William’s problem may sound absurdly esoteric but to Sir William the problem was just as real as caterpillars eating the cabbages may be to the man with an allotment.

A fortnight last Tuesday, Sir William discovered a solution. Or, at least, he *thought* he had discovered a solution. Hearing that a cousin in Yorkshire, who had exactly the same problem, had found that if he regularly put buckets full of tiger dung around his pear trees the deer kept their distance, Sir William immediately contacted the Budleigh Salterton Wildlife Park and made arrangements for a small van load of fresh tiger dung to be delivered to Bilbury every week.

(There was, by the way, some immediate and rather intense controversy over whether tiger dung is subject to value added tax. One school of thought argued that tiger dung is inherently agricultural in content whereas another claimed that the provision of tiger dung is essentially a branch of the entertainment industry and a third group asserted that the tiger dung is being used as a security measure. A fourth group of accountants and customs and excise specialists supported Sir William’s assertion that whatever its immediate purpose may be the tiger dung was inherently nutritious and should, therefore, be classified either as a foodstuff or as a fertiliser. This controversy is, I suspect, destined to run and run.)

Sadly, Sir William’s high hopes for the efficacy of tiger dung as a deer deterrent were dashed when the deer ignored the buckets full of dung and continued to munch their way through the pear orchard, eating leaves, blossom, shoots and branches with undisguised and undiminished delight.

This failure puzzled both Sir William and his cousin but a telephone call to the Budleigh Salterton Wildlife Park provided a quick explanation.

It seemed that the two tigers in Budleigh Salterton had both been constipated for a week and so the game warden who had been given the task of collecting together a van load of valuable tiger dung had instead collected together a van load of lion dung.

When he was told about this substitution, Sir William’s cousin snorted and then explained that lion dung just wouldn’t do the job. When they had smelt the lion dung around the pear trees the deer would have sniggered quietly and knowingly to themselves and then gaily carried on munching the pear leaves. They knew that they could outrun lions and so they weren’t frightened.

All has turned out well.

Now that the tigers are no longer constipated and Sir William’s pear trees are protected by genuine, 100% tiger dung, the deer, who have never met a lion or a tiger but who instinctively know that they cannot outrun tigers, are sticking to the grass and leaving the pear trees alone.

THE BAKERY

I love the smell of freshly baked bread.

Bilbury does not have its own bakery and so I usually shop at a small bakers in the next village where the loaves are freshly prepared on the premises every morning and where the sweet, warm smell of rising dough is a delightful daily bonus. On dry days I cycle there and back on my rather rusty old bicycle.

The shop is owned by a middle aged couple called Bristow. Helen, plump, blonde and nervous is the baker. She hardly ever ventures out from the small, hot, dark room at the back of the shop where she tends her ovens. George, her husband, looks after the shop and is well suited to it. He has a constantly sunny demeanour and greets each new day and each fresh customer with a never changing smile. I have sometimes suspected that if I had to live with him I might find George's never failing cheerfulness rather wearing. But as a customer I find his smile as warming as a ray of sunshine. Have you ever noticed how difficult it is not to smile back when someone smiles at you? And have you noticed how difficult it is to feel glum when you are smiling?

Helen and George, both native Londoners, met in a most unusual way.

Throughout her teenage years Helen had been prone to attacks of shyness and dominated by an almost overwhelming lack of self-confidence. She was overweight from childhood and was always self-conscious about her appearance.

In her early twenties Helen had to be admitted to hospital suffering from a deep, dark and seemingly impenetrable depression. The doctors who looked after her tried drugs, they tried electric shock therapy and they tried talking to her. None of these things worked and Helen's depression remained stubbornly incurable.

Eventually, one day, the inevitable happened. Helen tried to commit suicide.

Since the psychiatric ward in which she was a patient was on the sixth floor of the hospital and since the hospital administrators had never got round to putting bars on the windows Helen's choice of method was simple and straightforward. Early one morning she climbed through a window and threw herself out.

Eighty feet or so below she landed on the roof of a taxi belonging to George Bristow. The roof of the taxi caved in (hitting George's head) and instead of dying Helen was taken back into the hospital suffering from bruising, shock and embarrassment. George was taken into the accident department for X-rays and observation.

Two days later, when he was allowed out of bed, George visited the woman who had given him such a severe headache and for him it was love at first sight. He had always been over-endowed with optimism and happiness and he regarded Helen's persistently gloomy nature as a challenge to his cheeriness.

Much to the surprise of her doctors Helen responded well to George's daily visits and three months later she was discharged. They were married six weeks after that and although neither of them knew anything about baking or retailing they used a small inheritance of George's to buy our nearby bakery.

I usually call at the Bristow's bakery at roughly the same time every morning and for nearly a year I have watched George carefully breaking a brand new loaf into tiny pieces and then putting the pieces of crust into one brown paper bag and the soft, inside pieces into another brown paper bag.

I often wondered why George was doing this and I invented a number of possible explanations for myself. It was, I thought, possible that he might have a regular order from a restaurant wanting raw ingredients for a bread and butter pudding. Another possibility I toyed with was the fact that he might have an edentulous customer who needed his bread breaking up into mouth sized pieces.

Yesterday, I found out why George broke up a loaf every day and put the soft bits into one bag and the crust into another. I satisfied my curiosity by the simple process of asking George why he was doing it.

'It's for Mrs Garrow,' explained George. 'She likes to sit and feed the birds in her garden but she's got bad arthritis in her fingers and can't break up the bread herself. The soft, squashy bits out of the middle of the loaf are for the sparrows and the robins and the tits and the hard, crusty bits from the outside of the loaf are for the pigeons.'

GEORGE AND SALLY

'I'm sorry to have got you up,' said George quietly. 'But I couldn't think of anyone else to call.'

I told him not to be so silly, muttered stuff about that being what friends are for and put my arm around him. He had been crying. His eyes were still red and puffy and his cheeks were tear-stained. There was something wrong, something missing, but for the moment I couldn't work out what it was. The long drive to the city had woken me up but now I was beginning to feel tired again.

I don't know what time it had been when the phone had woken me. I'd been fast asleep and for a moment or two I hadn't recognised George's voice. I suppose that wasn't all that surprising. None of us sounds entirely normal when we are frightened and George was certainly frightened. He is 84-years-old and it was the first time he had ever been in a police station.

I've known George for as long as I've lived in Bilbury. He lives alone, with a Border collie for company, in an old farm labourer's cottage. He gets his water from a spring and his electricity from an unreliable old generator which works on alternate Wednesdays when the wind is in the right direction.

I asked him what had happened.

'I went to see my sister,' he told me. 'She lives here.'

I nodded. I'd met her once or twice when she'd come to Bilbury for short holidays. A former school mistress she is five or six years younger than George.' She had an operation,' explained George. 'I came up to see her in the hospital.'

'What sort of operation?' I asked him automatically.

George looked puzzled. 'I don't know,' he said. 'I didn't ask.' It was not, I knew, because he didn't care but rather that he didn't like to ask.

'I came on the Bus and the Train,' he said. When he spoke he somehow made it sound as though there was only one Bus and one Train. This was almost certainly the first time for fifty years that George had been more than ten miles from Bilbury. For him it had been a brave excursion into a world he did not know. 'I was on my way back to the station when I met these boys.' The tears started to stream down his cheeks again.

'Boys?'

'There were a lot of them. Ten or fifteen at least.'

I turned and looked at the policeman who was standing silently in a corner. He was overweight, balding and had a nasty little toothbrush moustache parked on his upper lip.

'Football supporters, doctor,' the fat policeman explained. 'Their side lost,' he added, as though that both explained and excused what had happened. He was, I felt, the sort of man who hides behind his uniform, his job and his superiors but enjoys the power that goes with the uniform.

'They started taunting me,' said George. 'And Sally didn't like it.' I suddenly remembered what was missing. Sally. His 12-year-old Border collie. George would never go anywhere without her. They adored each other. I looked around but she was nowhere in sight.

'Where is she?' I asked him quietly.

George tried to speak but couldn't. The tears were pouring down his cheeks. I held him to me and waited. 'She started barking so they began to kick her.'

I went cold inside and looked at the policeman. 'What happened?' I demanded.

'They kicked the dog to death,' said the policeman. For a moment I thought that he was embarrassed then I realised that what I had mistaken for embarrassment was merely coldness. The policeman simply didn't care.

'Come on,' I said to George. 'I'll take you home.' I stood up and started to help him to his feet.

'Not that simple, I'm afraid, sir.' said the policeman.

I looked at him. 'What do you mean?'

'Your friend has been arrested, doctor.'

'Arrested? Why?'

'He hit one of the youths with his stick.'

'I'm not bloody surprised!'

'The youth has complained.'

'Was he injured?'

'The doctor says he'll have a bruise on his leg.'

'George is 84-years-old for God's sake! And they killed his dog!'

'The inspector says we could do him for carrying a dangerous weapon.'

'A walking stick! A dangerous weapon?'

The policeman shrugged. ‘I’m just doing my job,’ he said.

I lifted George to his feet. ‘I’m taking him home,’ I said firmly. ‘He’s my friend and so that’s *my* job.’

For a moment I thought that the policeman was going to stop me. But he didn’t. I took George back to Bilbury Grange and Patsy and I kept him with us for a week. He never recovered from the sorrow of losing Sally and he died two months later of a broken heart. I sometimes despair when I look at the type of people with whom we have to share this world of ours.

VIETNAM VET

‘Have you heard the news?’ demanded Thumper, when I entered the Duck and Puddle last Wednesday lunchtime.

· ‘Don’t tell me Frank has been found sober?’

‘No!’ laughed Thumper. ‘Nothing as spectacular as that.’ He emptied his glass so that he would be able to take advantage of my unspoken but expected offer to buy him another drink.

‘Go on...,’ I sighed. ‘Tell me!’ I gestured to Frank to refill Thumper’s glass and picked up the pint he’d pulled for me.

‘We’re going to have a celebrity visiting the village!’

‘Who?’

‘I don’t know his name but he’s a Vietnam Vet! He’s touring Devon to promote some book he’s written and the vicar has fixed up for him to come to Bilbury to speak to the Young Wives Group.’

‘Pretty impressive,’ I agreed. ‘I once read that there are supposed to be hundreds of those guys living in the wilds because they can’t get used to civilised life again.’

‘I read about one who nearly killed his mother,’ said Thumper. ‘He was staying at home and she bent down to wake him up with a cup of tea. Before she could move he had her pinned to the wall with his forearm pressing into her throat.’ He lifted his arm to demonstrate the move.

‘Frightening!’ I agreed, backing away. ‘I’ll be fascinated to see what this chap has got to say. Do you know if the Young Wives Group committee is allowing visitors?’

Thumper shrugged. ‘I don’t know. But Anne usually does the sandwiches so I’ll have a word with her if you like.’ Anne said that under the circumstances the committee had decided to make a break with tradition and to open up the meeting to anyone who wanted to go, and so last night Thumper and I joined the rest of the village in our local hall. The place was packed.

‘I don’t think we’ve had such a good turn out since we had that weather forecaster from the television,’ said Gilly Parsons. She wrinkled up her nose. ‘I can’t remember his name now but he always used to wear those funny waistcoats.’

‘Does anyone know this bloke’s name?’ asked Thumper.

‘I still don’t understand what an isobar is...,’ muttered Gilly.

Anne shook her head. ‘We got him on the vicar’s recommendation,’ she said. ‘He heard about him through someone in Exeter.’

‘I bet he’s got some good tales to tell,’ said Thumper, rubbing his hands together. ‘Jumping out of helicopters and all that. Did you see that film?’

I tried in vain to remember the name of the film. ‘I gather that most of those guys were hooked on drugs by the time they got home. I wonder if he had any problems like that?’

‘They had a pretty good time in Saigon though!’ said Thumper. ‘Wall to wall women as I’ve heard it.’

He’s probably more interested in the philosophical side of things,’ said Gilly. ‘I’ve heard that quite a lot of them have become very religious. That’s probably why the vicar heard about him.’

Thumper looked disappointed. ‘I hope he hasn’t become totally boring,’ he said, sounding rather worried. He looked around to plan his escape route but the hall was so crowded that escape was impossible. It was, in any case, too late for as he spoke the vicar walked out onto the stage.

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ said the vicar, putting stress on the third word to emphasise what an unusual meeting this was, ‘I’m delighted to see such a good turn out. I know you’re all going to enjoy this evening’s meeting and so without further ado I would like you to welcome our very special speaker...,’ he waved an arm towards the side of the stage and a diminutive oriental walked briskly onto the stage, bowed and grinned at us all.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, please give a big welcome to D’Ing Ling Dong - a veterinary surgeon who has come to talk to us about his experiences at the Saigon Missionary Hospital for Animals.’ The vicar clapped his hands together enthusiastically.

There was a rather prolonged and embarrassing silence for a few moments, broken eventually by a smattering of polite applause. It wasn’t quite the sort of Vietnamese vet that any of us had expected but even Thumper had to agree that under the Trades Descriptions Act none of us had any cause for complaint.

It was, I suppose, quite an interesting talk if you’re interested in Vietnamese pot bellied pigs.

THE COACH TRIP

The villagers of Bilbury are a hard-working lot. They do not feel entirely comfortable with holidays and they are not easily tempted away from their regular domestic and commercial duties.

The men in particular seem to take their responsibilities seriously. Unlike the men in cities, who seem constantly eager to abandon their homes and their jobs to follow football teams around the country, Bilburians can usually only be tempted from the village by an earnest and determined quest for knowledge and self-improvement.

When there are real prospects that the thirst for knowledge can be quenched the men of Bilbury will set aside their love of their village, temporarily abandon their fierce and selfless loyalty to their loved ones and sally forth into the outside world with all the vigour and courage of Crusaders setting off into the unknown. In Bilbury the good of a greater cause reigns for ever supreme over such trivial and insignificant forces as personal comfort, private pleasure and individual ambition.

During the summer, for example, Peter Marshall, shopkeeper, postman, undertaker and 24 hour dry cleaning agent, organised a coach trip to the Yeovil Show.

This adventure attracted an immediate and public-spirited response from two dozen men who were eager to demonstrate their willingness to sacrifice the joyful sense of self-satisfaction to be gained from a day spent quietly working so that the village might benefit from a supply of new ideas.

Encouraged by Thumper and Frank and carried along by this feeling of social responsibility I agreed to join the trip.

We set off early so that we could, as Kevin Montgomery explained, ‘drink copious draughts from the well of knowledge in Yeovil’ and so ‘quench our thirst for useful information’.

‘These trips are a vital part of village life,’ Thumper told me. ‘Information we obtain at the summer Shows helps us plan and make the best of our lives in the village.’

We were on the coach by 6.30 a.m., on the road by 6.40 a.m. and in Yeovil by 10 a.m.; our journey punctuated only by a ninety minute stop for essential fuel and lubrication.

(The high grease content fuel we bought from a lorry drivers’ cafe and the lubrication we took from one of several crates which Peter, with foresight, had packed for what Frank described as ‘social emergencies’. The coach, which had been adequately fuelled, in his absence, at Edwin Jackson’s farm pump in order to minimise what Peter described as the ‘nonessential’ expenses of the journey, required no attention).

At the Yeovil Show Peter parked the coach in a field (‘no point in paying car parking charges’ explained Peter, ‘we can use our money much more wisely than that’) and we walked two miles across country before climbing over an eight foot high metal fence to get into the showground (‘no point in paying entrance money,’ said Thumper, ‘it don’t seem right for there to be a charge for knowledge’).

All this exercise had made us sweat a little in the warm, morning, summer sunshine and I was by no means unenthusiastic when Frank suggested that we begin our day with a visit to the Beer Tent.

With pints of beer set before us Frank and Thumper then proceeded to plan our day, doing so with the precision of generals organising a military campaign.

When we had finished our beer we moved a few yards away into the hospitality tent of a large tractor manufacturer where pint glasses full of beer were thrust into our hands by girls dressed for some inexplicable reason in Bavarian costumes. Thumper and Kevin looked at a couple of tractors and stuffed a pile of brochures into their pockets.

Next, we visited the hospitality tent of a cattle feed supplier where girls dressed in brief shorts and T-shirts gave us pints of beer and small cubes of cheese on toothpicks.

From there we went onto the hospitality tent of a bank where tall girls dressed in dark grey suit jackets and tiny white shorts gave us glasses of sherry, stuffed olives and salty biscuits.

After taking a leisurely and restful lunch in the official Beer Tent we spent an exhausting afternoon visiting another series of hospitality tents.

We accepted glasses of cider from girls dressed in flimsy red skirts and diaphanous white blouses, glasses of lager from girls dressed in short kilts and tartan jumpers, and large glasses of white wine from girls dressed in French peasant costumes.

Afterwards we went back to the Beer Tent and had a meeting.

‘How many votes for the Gamekeeper’s Best Bitter?’ asked Frank, licking the end of his pencil. He carefully counted the number of raised hands and then made a note on a folded tractor brochure. ‘And how many for the Old Grey Beard Cider?’ Again he made a careful note of the number of votes cast.

At seven sharp we set off for home, making an early start so as to make sure that we got back to the Duck and

Puddle before closing time.

'I think we can regard that as a very educational and very successful day,' said Frank, speaking slowly, when we stopped briefly for light refreshments at a pub called the Ferret and Weasel in Little Witton.

I looked up at him and frowned. 'Educational?'

Frank pulled the tractor brochure out of his jacket pocket and showed it to me. 'There you are,' he said, pointing a podgy finger at some indecipherable scribble. 'We've got the names of three good draught beers and a cider that the Duck and Puddle has never stocked before.' He carefully refolded the brochure and put it away.

'Very informative day,' said Peter Marshall.

'I'll drink to that,' said Thumper, emptying his glass.

A PHEASANT SURPRISE

David Faraday came into the Duck and Puddle yesterday evening looking as though he had just seen a ghost. I've seen snow which had a better colour.

'What on earth has happened to you?' asked Frank, pouring a large, medicinal brandy and pushing it across the counter.

David picked up the glass, knocked back the brandy and shuddered. Then he put the empty glass down, pushed it silently back across the counter to Frank and nodded. Frank quickly refilled the glass and David emptied it, just as quickly.

'I needed that,' he said.

We waited.

'I had to drive up to London this morning,' he began at last. 'Have you ever been on the road out near Simonsbath early in the morning?'

We all had and there was a general murmuring to that effect.

'I very nearly had a nasty accident before I'd really started,' he said. 'I'd forgotten just how dazzling the sun can be early in the morning,' he said. 'It's not so bad when you're driving due East on a straight road. You can get used to the rising sun when you know where it is. But that road twists and turns and one minute you can see perfectly well and the next moment you turn a corner and the damned sun blinds you completely.'

'I once put my truck into the ditch on that road,' confessed Thumper. He shook his head at the memory.

'I went round the corner by Jack Marshall's farm and suddenly couldn't see anything!' said David. 'I slammed my foot on the brake but before I could stop I felt a dull thud and heard a squawking and screeching from somewhere on the right. I got out and walked back. I was lucky not to have hit the side of Jack's barn. The fattest pheasant you'd ever seen was lying on the side of the road.'

'Nasty corner that,' said Frank, nodding wisely.

'It seemed like a good start to the day and there wasn't any point in leaving it there,' continued David. 'So I picked it up and threw it into the boot.'

Thumper, who has been known deliberately to collect pheasant out of season in this unorthodox fashion, nodded his approval.

'I went into London, did my bit of business and was on my way back home again when I found myself in a long queue to get onto the M4,' continued David. 'I tuned into the local radio station and found that the police were hunting for a couple of terrorists who had kidnapped a diplomat's wife in Kensington.'

'I hate London,' said Frank. He shivered. 'Horrible place.' There was a general murmuring of agreement with this observation and Frank refilled everyone's glasses so that we could drink a toast of damnation to our capital city.

'I'd just breathed a sigh of relief because I'd got to the front of the queue when suddenly this huge guy in a blue flack jacket, wearing a dark blue helmet with a plastic visor, thrust the business end of an automatic rifle in through the car window and screamed at me to keep my hands in view,' said David.

There were sharp intakes of breath all around the bar as we waited for David to carry on.

'What the hell did you do?' asked Frank.

'What do you think I did?' asked David. 'I did what I was told. The guy reached into the car, turned off the ignition and took my keys and then stepped back and told me to get out of the car very slowly keeping my hands in view all the time.'

Frank, who had emptied his own glass, poured himself another quadruple whisky in a vain attempt to stop his hands from shaking. I like Frank but I do not think he would be a good man to have alongside in an emergency.

'They said they'd heard a noise coming from my boot and before I could say or do anything two of them had searched me and pinned me to the side of a van while another three all aimed their rifles at the boot while a bloke with no helmet on reached out and used my key to open it.'

Frank took a huge gulp out of his whisky and leant forwards, waiting.

'Well, the boot lid lifted up and the pheasant flew out,' said David. 'It landed on the Cromwell Road for a moment, squawked a bit, flapped its wings and then took off over the traffic; flying, so one of the coppers told me, towards Regents Park.'

'Did they let you go then?' asked Frank.

'They searched my boot,' said David. 'But all they could find was an empty oil can, a pair of grubby gym shoes, a few tools and the spare tyre. So they told me I was lucky they hadn't charged me with wasting police time and let me go.'

'Phew!' said Frank. 'I'm glad I never go to London.'

‘Did you get the pheasant back?’ asked Thumper, who has a way of putting his finger on the crucial issues.

‘No,’ said David sadly. ‘And the damned thing had crapped all over the carpet in my boot as well.’

‘What a day,’ said Frank. ‘Have another brandy.’

‘I don’t mind if I do,’ said David, wearily.

AMERICANS IN BILBURY

Although it is situated right in the middle of one of the most beautiful parts of England, Bilbury is a little bit off the mainstream tourist track and we don't get as many visitors passing through as do nearby villages such as Lynton, Lynmouth and Clovelly.

So, when two Americans called Arlene and Homer Trout booked in at the Duck and Puddle for a week's holiday they caused quite a stir, especially since they let it be known that they were on a bit of a buying spree and were looking out for antiques to take back to their home in Texas.

Within twenty four hours of their arrival, local antique dealer Patchy Fogg had sold them a grandfather clock, a pine wall cupboard, a handmade pair of bellows that had been recovered from Camelot Castle and probably used by King Arthur himself, and a set of wooden bowls which had once been the property of Sir Francis Drake. Peter Marshall, the village shopkeeper, had persuaded them that a rusty old tree saw which has been lying amidst the rubbish behind his woodshed for years would look perfect hanging up over their fireplace.

Naturally, it wasn't long before Thumper Robinson turned up and I have to admit that it was a joy to watch him at work.

'Did I hear someone say that your name was Trout?' asked Thumper, after introducing himself to Arlene and Homer.

Arlene and Homer confirmed that he had heard correctly and that their name was, indeed, Trout.

'How remarkable!' said Thumper.

'Why is that remarkable?' asked Homer, who couldn't have responded better if he'd been coached.

'I don't suppose your family originally came from this part of the world, did they?' asked Thumper.

Arlene and Homer beamed. 'Well, we don't rightly know!' admitted Homer. 'But my grand-daddy always said that his forebears came over on the Mayflower.'

'Isn't that remarkable!' sighed Thumper.

'Do you know anyone around here with the name?' asked Arlene.

'Of course!' said Thumper. 'Old Granny Trout at Daffodil Cottage!'

Frank, the landlord, and I exchanged glances. Patchy who was standing nearby gazed on in admiration.

'Can we meet her?' asked Arlene, breathlessly.

'Well, I'll see if it's possible,' said Thumper. 'Give me a day or two.'

The following evening the Trouts were back in the pub. Thumper approached them with a broad grin on his face. 'I've spoken to old Granny Trout,' he told them. 'And she'd like to meet you. She says her father always used to talk about someone in the family having emigrated to the New World.'

Arlene and Homer held each other's hands and gazed at Thumper as though he'd just told them he could sell them the secret of eternal life for five dollars.

'I'll take you round there now, if you like,' offered Thumper, generously. 'It's only five minutes away in the car.'

The Trouts didn't need to be asked twice. Less than a minute later they were looking for the non-existent seat belts in Thumper's battered and beltless truck.

They were gone for around an hour and returned, without Thumper, looking as though they'd just seen the Holy Grail.

'How did you get on?' Frank asked them. They were clutching something which was crudely wrapped in old wallpaper.

'Wonderful!' said Arlene. 'Granny Trout is a marvellous old woman. Eighty-three and as bright as a button.'

'She's convinced we must be related,' said Homer. 'She says I'm the spitting image of her brother.'

'He died in the war,' Arlene explained, rather sadly.

'What's in the parcel?' asked Frank.

Homer carefully unfastened the wrapping paper. 'It's the old family bible!' he explained. He opened it and showed us two pages of faded, spidery writing at the front of the book. 'There you are!' he said. 'The Trout family history!'

'Granny Trout wanted us to have it,' said Arlene. 'Wasn't that wonderful of her?'

'Marvellous!' agreed Frank.

'She didn't sell it to you, I don't suppose?' I asked them.

'Good heavens, no!' said Arlene.

'So no money changed hands?' said Frank.

'Well, we asked Thumper if the old lady needed anything and he said her roof leaked,' said Arlene.

‘So we’ve given him some travellers’ cheques so that he can have her cottage re-roofed,’ added Homer.

‘That’s very kind of you,’ said Frank.

‘It was the least we could do for her,’ said Arlene. ‘We’re all she’s got.’

That wasn’t strictly true.

Most of us know Granny Trout at Daffodil Cottage rather better as Olive Robinson.

She’s Thumper’s aunt.

THE FENCE

Living out in the country is wonderful but there are occasional disadvantages. For example, if you suddenly find you need something from the shops it can mean a round trip of twenty miles or more if Peter Marshall doesn't stock what you need at the village shop.

I usually try to plan my shopping so that I keep the number of journeys I need to make down to a minimum.

But it doesn't always work out as simply as I would like.

For example, take what happened at the end of last week when I decided that I wanted to plant a dozen small oak trees in a corner of the meadow behind the house. A recent gale had brought down a dozen oaks and I wanted to replace them as soon as possible.

I knew that if I didn't fence the area where I was going to put the young trees the sheep would strip the leaves and shoots from the saplings within minutes. Sheep may not be quite as destructive as goats but they do love the tender young shoots growing on shrubs, bushes and trees.

A local gardener told me that it would take a day's work to put up the fence and plant the trees. I felt sure I could do the job in less time and so I decided I'd do the job myself. Since the weather was decent enough last Saturday that was the day I decided to do it.

I needed a roll of stockproof fencing wire and a couple of dozen fence posts so I drove down to see Peter Marshall at the village shop in Bilbury. I just naturally assumed that he would sell such obviously agricultural items.

Peter's shop has the biggest range of goods on sale that I've ever seen anywhere. Most of the villagers are so accustomed to being able to find what they need there that they call *his* shop 'Harrods'. I once went into his shop clutching a shopping list which included: a handful of six inch masonry nails; two handfuls of two and a half inch vine eyes; twelve first class postage stamps; a packet of self-seal envelopes; a replacement handle for a garden fork; a pint of strawberry ice cream; a tin of dressmaking pins; a roll of cotton wool; two 150 watt light bulbs; a wholemeal loaf of bread; fourteen pounds of sugar and a bottle of malt whisky. I came away with everything I wanted wrapped in individual brown paper bags. And I had a choice of three different types of malt whisky.

But although Peter sells most things, he doesn't sell fencing stakes or wire and I came away disappointed and rather disillusioned; my faith in the village store slightly dented.

(I did not, of course, come away from Peter's shop entirely empty handed. It is, I firmly believe, quite impossible to come out of that shop without buying *something.* Unable to buy the stakes and fencing material that I needed I came away clutching a brown paper bag containing two cream doughnuts, another paper bag containing a pound of pears and a bicycle repair kit with which to mend my wellington boots.)

The result of my disappointment was that I had to drive into Barnstaple to buy what I needed.

Still, it didn't take too long and less than an hour after setting off I arrived back at Bilbury Grange with two dozen six foot high stakes and a roll of stock netting in the boot of the car.

After stopping at Bilbury Grange for a cup of tea and one of Peter Marshall's doughnuts, I backed the car down the lane towards the meadow and unloaded the stakes and fencing. It was then that I realised that I didn't have a large enough hammer to put the stakes into the ground. I immediately drove down to the village shop.

'I can let you have one of these,' said Peter, looking very glum and offering me a small lump hammer. 'But you really need a long-handled sledgehammer or the blunt side of a pick axe. I sold my last sledgehammer three weeks ago and I haven't restocked yet.'

I sensibly declined the lump hammer, bought a packet of drawing pins, two spare batteries for my torch, a packet of chocolate digestive biscuits and a pen refill and then drove back into Barnstaple.

Once again it took me less than an hour to get into Barnstaple and back.

When I got back to Bilbury with my sledgehammer and a patented wire cutting tool I popped into the house to have another cup of tea and a couple of chocolate digestive biscuits and then took the sledgehammer down to the meadow.

It was only after I had measured out a corner of the meadow, and hammered the fencing posts into the ground, that I realised that I didn't have any staples to hold the fencing onto the posts.

Peter was definitely embarrassed about not having the staples in stock.

'What can I say?' he said, miserably. 'Dr Brownlow bought up all my staples last Wednesday.'

I came away with a packet of marzipan, two dozen candles (ready for the next power cut), a packet of razor blades and a plastic rubber band dispenser. I then drove into Barnstaple for the third time that day.

This time there was more traffic and the first two ironmongers I tried had also sold out of staples. The result was that the journey there and back took me an hour and a half.

By the time I had finally stapled the wire to the posts I was exhausted and it was getting dark. I threw the tools and what was left of the wire netting and the staples into the boot of the car and drove home via the Duck and Puddle.

‘You look pretty well knackered,’ said Frank, handing me a pint without my having to say a word.

‘Hard day,’ I told him.

‘What have you been doing?’

‘Planting trees,’ I said. ‘Well, putting up a fence, actually,’ I admitted. I sighed. ‘I thought I’d save time and do it myself.’

The job had taken me a whole day and I hadn’t even started to put any trees into the ground.

THE BURNING HOUSE ON HOLLERDAY HILL

I don't like going to London. For one thing it's a long tedious journey. Even by train the journey is exhausting. It doesn't help that the trains are often dirty and overcrowded and the fact that they rarely seem to run on time just makes things even worse.

Apart from the fact that it takes several hours to get there, and that when you are there the dirt, the litter and the endless queues make life miserable and depressing, I dislike London because it always seems full of people who are so busy and full of their own sense of self-importance that they have no time for simple old-fashioned values such as courtesy.

I have, perhaps, grown too accustomed to the kinder, more sympathetic people who live in Devon in general and the gentle pace at which life moves in Bilbury in particular.

In London I always have the feeling that if I were to collapse in the street people would just step over me and carry on without any concern for my welfare. If anyone did bend down it would probably be to rob me rather than to help me.

When I had finished my meeting with a publisher in the centre of London I took a taxi to Paddington station and squeezed onto one of the early evening West Country trains. By the time we got to Reading it was running nearly half an hour late and by the time we arrived back in Taunton, where I had left my car, the train was the best part of an hour late.

Wearily, I climbed down off the train and walked the short distance from the railway station to the car park where I had left my car. It was a cool but clear evening and although the sun had long since set there was a full moon so visibility was good.

I always enjoy the drive back across Exmoor and along the coast towards Lynton. At night and out of the holiday season, there is rarely much traffic on the coast road and even after dark the views across the moors and the Bristol Channel are breathtaking. Between Porlock and Lynton you can see lights sparkling all along the Welsh coast. It was about nine o'clock, maybe a little later, when I drove around a bend five or six miles away from Lynton and saw that the whole of the sky above the village was bright red and orange with flames.

There was no doubt in my mind that there was a major fire in the village.

It was a terrifying sight and I increased my speed in order to get there as soon as possible.

As I drove I tried to keep my eye on the flames as much as I could. Occasionally, as the road twisted and turned, I lost sight of the fire and the orange sky, but, whenever I was in a position to see the hill above the village, the flames were clear and bright.

The road along the coast is narrow and hazardous at that point and even though I drove as quickly as I dared it still took me seven or eight minutes to cross the moors from the place where I had first seen the flames to the top of Countisbury Hill, where I could see the villages of Lynton and Lynmouth.

I slowed down as I reached the top of the hill, hoping that I could see where the fire was situated. I knew that it would take fire fighting crews and ambulances from Barnstaple at least half an hour to reach the town. There is a fire engine and an ambulance in Lynton but from the size of the blaze I felt sure that they would need help.

Strangely, from the top of Countisbury Hill, I could see nothing. No flames, no fire, no devastation - nothing. The flames had gone and the fire had disappeared. I was astonished and relieved.

I drove down across the bridge in Lynmouth, up the hill and along the A39 back to Bilbury.

The next morning, still puzzled, I drove back to Lynton and asked one of the shopkeepers if there had been any fires in the village the night before. The shopkeeper shook his head. There had been nothing that he knew of. Confused, I told him that I thought I had seen flames coming from the village. The source of the fire, I explained, seemed to me to have been some houses on the hill behind the village.

The shopkeeper nodded. 'Hollerday Hill,' he said. I looked at him, still not understanding.

'The big house on Hollerday Hill,' he went on. I waited.

'It burned down,' he finished.

'Is that the hill right behind the town?' I asked him. He nodded.

'It looked like a big blaze,' I said.

'It was a huge house. Massive country house. It burned to the ground.'

'Was anyone hurt?' I asked, anxiously.

The shopkeeper screwed up his eyes and thought for a few moments. 'I can't remember,' he said.

'But you must know!' I insisted. 'It must have been the biggest fire Lynton has ever had!'

'It was,' agreed the shopkeeper.

I couldn't understand why he seemed so unconcerned. 'Who lives there?' I demanded. 'You must know them!'

‘Sir George Newnes lived there,’ replied the shopkeeper. ‘And my grandfather might have known him but I certainly never did. The house burnt down 50 years ago. It’s been a wreck for half a century.’ I stared at him.

The shopkeeper opened a drawer in a cabinet behind him and rummaged around for a few moments. Suddenly, triumphantly, he produced a booklet about the history of the village. He opened the booklet and flicked through the pages.

‘Here you are!’ he said. He showed me a picture of a burned out wreck of a house.

I looked at the date underneath the photograph.

When I had driven across the moors and seen the flames engulfing Lynton it had been exactly 50 years after the burning of the house on Hollerday Hill.

MRS DUNCAN'S VISITORS

I first met Pearl Barley when I was practising as family doctor in Bilbury. Dr Brownlow was still the principal and I was his assistant.

'My real name is June but everyone calls me Pearl,' she said. She looked slightly older than the 65 her medical record card said she was. She wore a thick woollen coat and a small hat which had a rather sad looking bunch of artificial fruit sewn onto the brim. The colours of the cherries had faded to a dull and lifeless pink.

'Don't you want to take your coat off? I asked her.

She hesitated and then slowly unbuttoned her coat. When she had removed it she looked around before laying it gently on the examination couch. Underneath she wore a dark blue woollen skirt, a light blue nylon blouse and a full length flowered pinafore.

Mrs Barley looked shy, and stood almost at attention in front of the desk.

I pointed to a chair and smiled at her, trying to put her at her ease. 'How can I help you?'

'Could I have another prescription for some stockings for my veins?' she asked, sitting down. Timidly, she raised the hem of her skirt and showed me her elastic stockings. They were baggy, wrinkled and holed in several places.

'Are those your only pair?'

She nodded.

'But how on earth do you manage?'

The shyness slowly turned into embarrassment. 'I wash them every night and leave them in front of the fire to dry.' I reached for my prescription pad and then remembered that I had signed the last form for my previous patient. 'I'll just have to pop and get another pad of prescriptions from the receptionist.'

I was away no more than a minute or so and when I walked back into the room I had quite a shock. Mrs Barley had moved around to my side of the desk and was rummaging around in the drawers in my desk.

When she saw me Mrs Barley reddened and leapt back from the desk as though it had suddenly become red hot. She started to say something and then stopped.

Once I'd sat her down again and convinced her that I wasn't going to call the police I managed to persuade her to tell me what she had been looking for.

'Visiting cards,' she confessed at last.

I was so surprised that I nearly laughed.

'My visiting cards? But I don't have any.'

'It doesn't matter whose name is on them.'

It took another ten minutes to get the explanation.

'I work for Mrs Duncan. Do you know her?'

'I've heard of her.' Mrs Duncan was an elderly, rich and reclusive widow who lived in a large, detached house on the Barnstaple road. Dr Brownlow had told me that she had wanted to join his list as a private patient. When he had refused she had insisted on registering herself with a doctor in Barnstaple.

'She lives in the past a little. She's very grand. Her husband was in the diplomatic service.' Mrs Barley clearly had a great deal of respect for her employer. There was probably more than a little affection mixed in with it. 'She can be a bit, well, barbed.' She paused. 'But she's a real lady.' She put the emphasis very firmly on the word 'lady'.

'So why on earth do you need the visiting cards?' I asked her gently.

'She's very lonely. She hasn't got any family and her friends have all passed away. So no one ever comes to visit her. But she's very proud and she doesn't like to think that she never gets any visitors.'

'So you take in visiting cards?'

Mrs Barley nodded. 'And she tells me that she is busy and doesn't want any visitors.' She shrugged. 'It makes her feel better.'

'But what would you do if she said that she'd see them?'

Mrs Barley shook her head. 'I think she knows it's just a...,' she paused... 'well, just a sort of a game we play.'

I rummaged around in my desk and found some visiting cards. Half a dozen were from drug company representatives and one was from a double glazing company salesman. I handed the cards across the desk together with a prescription for three pairs of elastic stockings. Mrs Barley was overjoyed.

The next time I went into Barnstaple I called in at the printers and got them to give me a whole handful of sample visiting cards. I've put them in the drawer of my desk for the next time that Mrs Barley comes to the surgery.

HUBERT SPRING

The truly eccentric are never aware of their eccentricity; they behave in what to the rest of us may appear to be an unusual way not because they derive any pleasure from shocking but because what they do is, to them, perfectly sensible and rational.

Consider, for example, the case of Hubert Spring, well known in our village for his lasting and largely inexplicable habit of spending exactly one hour every day sitting naked in the arms of a gnarled and rather uncomfortable looking old apple tree which stands at the bottom of his garden.

(When asked by a radio reporter to explain his apparently peculiar habit Hubert, who was at the time blue with cold and covered with a thin but noticeable layer of frost, answered that he was merely reminding his body of its general good fortune. 'How,' he asked, 'can you enjoy the good things in life unless you are regularly reminded of how unpleasant life can be?' Hubert's logic was regarded as unassailable in the village since he is unfailingly cheerful and enjoys consistent and excellent health.)

Hubert, who lives in a tiny cottage overlooking the Bilbury village green and whose unusual habit has startled and surprised many a summer visitor, spent the first thirty years of his life working for the post office but retired when he won a delightfully obscene amount of money in an Irish lottery.

Lots of people who win large sums of money stoically claim that their lives will not be changed by their good fortune but Hubert was not so unimaginative. After walking out of his job he gave large sums of money to each of his three daughters, April, May and June (April and June are as yet unmarried and are still known as the Spring sisters but May has married a boy called Geoffrey Summers and is said locally to have enjoyed a well deserved seasonal promotion) and told a reporter from the local evening paper that he intended to use the rest of the money to make sure that he grows the largest onions in the county and makes life as miserable as he can for the hunting fraternity.

It was, insisted Hubert, his intention to show that money does make a difference. Hubert loves gardening and animals and has spent almost equal parts of his life attempting to win a prize in one of the local vegetable shows and campaigning against the barbarism of hunting.

His vegetable growing efforts have brought him one fourth prize and a commended and his campaign against hunting has won him a suspended prison sentence, a broken collar bone and an honorary mention in the journal of the Hunt Saboteurs Association.

Hubert's financial good fortune came too late to enable him to win any vegetable growing awards in that year's vegetable shows but in good time to enable him to satisfy his second ambition.

Everyone was anxious to see what Hubert would do.

There was a rumour that he had decided to spend his money on buying up a huge tract of land which was for sale but I thought that was unlikely. The land was by no means essential to the hunt and it wasn't Hubert's style.

Another local rumour suggested that Hubert might be considering buying a motorbike and creating havoc by riding round and round the hunt. I didn't think that was very likely either. Hubert's eccentricities have always been envisioned on a much larger scale than that.

In the event no one guessed what Hubert was going to do and we were all surprised by his opening gambit for the hunting season.

His timing was absolutely perfect.

The hunt had met at Blackmoor Gate and dogs, horses and men in red coats were all milling around yapping and whinnying when suddenly these traditional hunting noises were swamped by the sound of an approaching helicopter. The clump of policemen who had turned up to deal with any threatened violence looked up anxiously but impotently.

Seconds later a crop spraying helicopter appeared overhead and began to drench the assembled multitude with a particularly pungent, clinging and unpleasant brand of aftershave.

Peering from the passenger side of the helicopter Hubert could be seen waving part of one hand at the huntsmen.

The hunt had to be abandoned, of course. None of the dogs could smell anything and every possible scent for miles around had been wiped out.

Hubert explained later that when he had seen the crop spraying helicopter advertised for hire he had realised it was a heaven scent opportunity

HANS FROM ACROSS THE SEA

Bilbury had a visitor from abroad for most of last week and it was an educational experience for us all.

Hans came over from Germany where he works as an electrical engineer in a large factory which makes pop up toasters.

Although he is married he came alone as a representative of a small community which is looking for a village with which it can 'twin'. He has been staying with the vicar but he has spent much of his time in the Duck and Puddle talking to the regulars. Most of us have had the feeling that we have been undergoing some sort of screening procedure. I am, however, pleased to say that we are all confident that we have failed.

Although our German visitor speaks almost perfect English there are some aspects to our way of life which seem to puzzle him.

Last Sunday afternoon, for example, when Hans came into the pub for the first time and introduced himself to Frank Parsons behind the bar, Frank shook his hand and said 'Hello, how are you?' not for a moment expecting anything other than a perfunctory and superficial reply.

But Hans replied to Frank's query with precise and very Teutonic efficiency.

'I had a little headache last night,' he said. 'But I think that was probably a result of my flight. I would also blame my flight for the digestive upset I have experienced since my arrival in your country. I also suffer a little with my blood pressure and I have arthritis in my left knee.' He stopped for a moment, clearly making sure that he had not missed anything and then smiled. 'How are you?' he asked.

'Fine, thanks.' replied Frank, with typically British understatement. Frank is overweight and has a liver the size of Cornwall; he suffers from chronic bronchitis, persistent high blood pressure and can't walk for more than five yards without having to sit down and rest.

'My village is looking for a twin,' said Hans.

'That's nice.' said Frank. 'Is your village like Bilbury?'

'No.' said Hans, visibly growing in stature as he told us about his home town. 'It is much, much bigger. We have twenty thousand inhabitants, four factories, an industrial estate, an Olympic size swimming pool and many, many four lane highways. Our football club won second place in our local league last year.'

'That's very nice.' said Frank, pouring Thumper a drink.

'Bilbury has a pond, a village green, one lane that takes two way traffic, a series of single track roads and a darts team that has come bottom in our local league for the last five years,' said Thumper, exaggerating somewhat. The darts team has, in fact, only come bottom of the league for four out of the last five years. Last year the Bilbury team came second from bottom and the celebrations in the Duck and Puddle lasted for nearly a week.

'What does your town want out of a twin?' asked Frank.

'We would like very much to enjoy a cultural and artistic exchange,' replied Hans. 'And to establish an exchange of business ideas.'

'I'm not sure that Bilbury is exactly the right place for you,' said Frank. 'We don't have much business going on here.'

'Unless you count insurance fraud,' I muttered under my breath.

'Our town has many powerful links and great industrial traditions,' said Hans. 'Your little village could learn a lot from an association with us. You could quickly expand and become big and prosperous like us.'

Peter Marshall, our local taxi driver, shop keeper, funeral service operator, 24 hour dry cleaning agent and part-time postman, sat up and began to look interested.

'We have a powerful system of local government,' said Hans. 'Through our taxes we use our wealth for the good of our community.'

Peter's interest evaporated.

'I don't think we're really all that keen on becoming big and prosperous,' said Thumper. 'We rather like life the way it is.'

'I'd better move,' I said, looking at my watch, suddenly remembering that I'd promised to be back home for dinner.

'What is the time?' asked Hans.

'Quarter to six.'

Hans looked very worried. 'I must go and change my shoes!' he announced.

We all looked at him.

'I have brown shoes on,' said Hans. He smiled proudly. 'I have read a book on how to behave in England. 'It says that after 6 p.m. gentlemen always wear black shoes.' He slid off his bar stool, said goodbye to us all and left rapidly for his bedroom.

'I'm just glad I've got black wellington boots on,' said Thumper as Hans disappeared. He held out a leg so that we could admire his taste in footwear.

Most of us feel confident that Bilbury will not be getting twinned with any foreign towns. I'm afraid that none of us really feels that we are up to it.

ENID AND ELSIE BYGRAVES

Enid and Elsie Bygraves are twins.

No one seems to know exactly how old they are but Gilly Parsons reckons they must be at least 85. They are both rather forgetful and they never hurry anywhere but they are fit and strong and eminent testimony to the virtues of simple, healthy living. They are as alike as two peas although if you get close enough you can tell them apart if you look for the freckle just in front of a right ear. If the freckle is there then you are looking at Enid. If it isn't then you are looking at Elsie.

(Or is it the other way around?)

Elsie and Enid have spent their entire lives together and they are still living in the same small cottage that they were brought up in at the beginning of the century. They had electricity installed in the 1960s but apart from that there have been few, if any, other changes to their home.

Seven weeks ago there was a considerable amount of anger in the village when the pair reported that their car, an ancient but reliable Ford Popular with just 17,000 miles on the clock, had been stolen from the garage at the side of their cottage.

No one could understand why car thieves would want to steal an old Ford Popular. Even though it had never been driven at more than 30 mph it didn't exactly have classic car status. And P.C.Wren, our local constable, confirmed that no joy rider would be seen dead in such a vehicle.

Elsie, who always drove (although Enid also had a driving licence) said that she had absolutely no idea when the car had been stolen. She told the police that she only ever opened the garage doors once a week when she went to get the car out for their weekly shopping trip.

The anger and outrage in the village was intensified by the knowledge that for Bilbury, crime had previously always been something we had read about rather than experienced. Most of us regularly leave our homes and cars unlocked and it was disturbing to think that our peace and trust had been so cruelly violated.

The police put the car on their missing vehicles list and with P.C. Wren's help Elsie and Enid filled in an insurance claim form.

Last week they received a cheque from the insurance company and in a mood of great excitement they went into Barnstaple in Peter Marshall's taxi and bought themselves a replacement; a good-looking, two door Ford Escort with twin exhausts, twin spotlights, fake fur seat covers and a pair of fluffy dice hanging in the back window. They were, they professed, very pleased with it. Elsie was particularly taken with the leatherette steering wheel which, she said, she liked a lot.

There has, however, been an unusual twist to Bilbury's first major crime story in years.

Enid and Elsie do not have a telephone in their cottage and yesterday evening Frank Parsons took a call at the pub from a man working at a garage in Barnstaple.

'Do you know a couple of old dears called Bygraves?' asked the caller.

Frank said that he did, indeed, know Enid and Elsie Bygraves.

'Are they O.K? They haven't died have they?'

'They're fine. Why?'

'Would you ask them if they'd like to come and collect their car?' asked the caller. 'It has been cluttering up my garage for weeks now.'

'I don't understand,' said Frank, who didn't understand.

'They brought it in for a service but they've never come back to pick it up. If they don't pick it up soon we'll have to sell it to pay the bill.'

Frank said he'd try to get in touch with the sisters and asked the garage man not to do anything hasty.

'What do we do?' Frank asked Thumper Robinson and me.

'They must have taken the Ford Popular over to Barnstaple, left it for a service, got a taxi back home and then completely forgotten about it! If they go and pick it up the insurance company isn't going to be very pleased.'

I looked at Thumper and waited. He is our local expert on insurance matters.

Thumper sipped at his beer and shook his head sagely. 'I'll sort it out,' he promised. He looked at me. 'But I'm not going to tell *you* what I'm going to do. I don't want the insurance company reading about it in one of those books of yours.'

THE ARTIST

Ian's parents were wealthy enough to send him to private school and ambitious enough for him to want him to have a good career in one of the professions. At their insistence he applied for and won a place to study law at university.

But he gave it all up three months before he was due to qualify, bravely telling his horrified parents that he could not contemplate spending his life making people miserable. There was, he insisted, no link between justice and the law and he was not prepared to spend his life taking advantage of people's fears, anxieties, shortcomings and weaknesses.

After spending a month on holiday in Europe, Ian returned home to find that his parents had fixed him up with a job as a life insurance salesman.

'If you won't make a career in law,' said his father firmly, 'then you'll have to have a career in business.'

Ian began his business career by failing as a life insurance salesman. He was far too honest for his own good and no one ever bought any policies from him.

He went on to fail as a double glazing salesman, an encyclopaedia salesman and an estate agent. He did not enjoy any of these jobs and (Ian readily admits) was not very good at them either.

For a while Ian worked as an assistant manager in a supermarket. But he left there after a row about the way the check-out girls were treated.

By the time he was 35 Ian had failed at just about every job known to man. His parents, who'd had such high hopes for their son, told him that they washed their hands of him.

For one whole summer Ian wandered rather aimlessly around the coast of Devon and finally settled in Bilbury where he rented a small, tumbledown cottage and planned to earn a modest living doing whatever odd jobs he could find.

In the summer he sold ice cream, helped out in the restaurants and cut lawns and in the winter he sold firewood.

Somewhere along the line (he had long since forgotten what had triggered his interest) Ian had acquired an enthusiasm for ornithology and with no steady job to interfere with his life he began to spend more and more of his time exploring the moors and cliff tops of the west country drawing and painting birds.

He had a natural, untutored talent for art and he had taught himself to identify a bird on the wing so well that even Thumper Robinson envied him this skill.

Occasionally he would sell one of his paintings though, to be honest, most of the sales were made to people who were more interested in helping him through a difficult patch than in collecting art. He was a very likeable fellow.

Apart from the dog with whom he shared his cottage, Ian had no responsibilities and no ties and no ambitions. He had very few possessions and approached each day with an innocent freshness that almost guaranteed happiness. Disappointments and setbacks were always regarded as temporary and of no real significance.

But six months ago something terrible happened to him.

A stranger turned up at the Duck and Puddle, driving a BMW and wearing a tweed hacking jacket, a pair of tweed plus twos and a deerstalker hat.

He was, he said, an art dealer from London. A friend had bought one of Ian's paintings while in Devon on holiday and the dealer told Ian he wanted to represent him and make him rich. There was, insisted the dealer, a heavy demand for the sort of old-fashioned painting that Ian produced.

At first Ian was reluctant even to see the dealer. But the man from London was very insistent.

Eventually, Ian signed a contract and the dealer handed over a cheque (which Ian, who did not have a bank account, had to cash at the pub) and went away with a car boot full of paintings.

Two months later the first journalists appeared. Then a television crew from an Arts programme (with a capital A).

Ian's life has now changed completely. He has, unwillingly, become a major celebrity in the art world. His pictures are being collected by the wealthy.

Ian is no longer the contented man he was. He is nervous and anxious and for the first time in years he cannot sleep.

The final irony in this story is that two days ago Ian's parents turned up to see him. They were, they said, very proud of him.

THELMA AND JACQUI

When I was a family doctor I always kept a box of paper handkerchiefs on top of my desk in the certain knowledge that at every surgery there would be a few tears shed.

I remember one late September surgery when I started the evening with a half full box of tissues and ended it with nothing but an empty box.

First, there was Thelma Pettigrew.

Thelma, her husband and their three small children lived in a two bedroom cottage out on the edge of the moors. They had a two acre garden on which they grew most of their own food and they enjoyed one of the most spectacular views on Exmoor. Their cottage had no mains electricity and so the Pettigrews relied entirely on a small petrol driven generator which was constantly breaking down. They did all their cooking and got all their heat and hot water from a small wood burning stove in the kitchen.

‘I think I need a bit of a tonic,’ said Mrs Pettigrew. ‘I feel really miserable.’ Her eyes were red and she had clearly been crying. She wore a pair of faded jeans and a thick, home knitted jumper that looked as if it had probably been made for someone at least four sizes larger.

I asked her if there was anything in particular making her feel miserable.

She shrugged. ‘Just life in general,’ she said, wearily. ‘I get up every morning and have to spend at least two hours trying to relight the stove.’ She sighed. ‘It always goes out during the night.’

There was a pause while she rummaged around in her pocket for a paper handkerchief. ‘I hate that stove!’ she said emphatically. ‘And I’m sure it hates me.’ She blew her nose noisily.

‘As soon as I’ve got the stove alight I have to start the lunch, then there’s the cooking and the washing and the ironing and as soon as I’ve done that I have to get out into the garden and weed the vegetable patch.’ She twisted her handkerchief around and around in her fingers until it tore. I pushed my box of tissues across the desk towards her. She took one and blew her nose again.

‘I spent three years at college and I’ve got a degree in Spanish,’ she told me, the tears rolling down her cheeks. ‘I should have studied stove lighting and nappy washing.’ She took another tissue and wiped her eyes. ‘There’s no challenge in my life at all. I want more excitement, more action. I want something more demanding than lighting that damned stove.’

She stayed for nearly half an hour and my box of tissues was a lot emptier by the time she’d gone.

The patient who followed Thelma Pettigrew was someone I had never seen before.

‘I don’t suppose you can help me,’ she said, even before she’d sat down. ‘But I thought I’d call in on the off chance.’

She told me that her name was Jacqui (with a q) Tavistock and that she was on holiday, staying at a small boarding house on the Combe Martin road. She wore a black tracksuit with an emblem I didn’t recognise emblazoned on the chest and had a pair of designer sunglasses pushed high up into her hair.

‘I love it down here,’ she sighed, and clearly meant it. ‘I live in London and work for an advertising agency. I hate it there. There’s never any time to think. Everyone is always rushing and everything is done in a panic.’

She said at first that she wanted to know if I could give her something to calm her down and help her relax but quickly confessed that what she really wanted was a sick note to send to her boss.

‘I just can’t cope with the idea of going back to that mad house,’ she told me, with tears beginning to appear. She sighed and sniffed and I handed her the box of tissues. ‘I do wish I could find a little cottage down here,’ she said, dreamily. ‘I’d love somewhere miles from anywhere. I could grow my own vegetables and do my own cooking and be independent. It would be wonderful.’

She had a ten tissue story to tell and I listened to her for twenty minutes before confessing that there really wasn’t anything useful I could do, apart from give her the sick note she wanted so that she could steal another week’s holiday.

When she’d gone I couldn’t help thinking how strange life is and how wonderful it would have been if I had been able to help Thelma and Jacqui swop lives for a week or so.

But I couldn’t help wondering just how long they would be happy living each other’s lives.

FISH PIE

Gilbert Halliwell had made his fortune as a builder in Wolverhampton and at the age of 55 had retired and bought a large and rather absurdly expensively converted barn on the outskirts of Bilbury. He bought himself a Range Rover, a brand new Barbour coat, a shooting stick and a hip flask.

Together with Maude, his wife, and Cynthia, his unmarried eldest daughter, Gilbert Halliwell wasted no time in doing what he could to establish himself as a stalwart of the local community. Within a year of coming to live in the village he had managed to get himself onto the Kentisbury Golf Club committee, had joined the nearest hunt, had made a generous donation to the church funds and had narrowly missed being elected onto the local Parish Council.

Gilbert desperately wanted to be a country gentleman.

He wanted local farm workers to touch their caps, nod slightly and say ‘Good morning, Mr Halliwell, sir,’ when he went past. He had been brought up in a terraced house in Wolverhampton and he now wanted everyone in Bilbury to treat him as a man of property.

Gilbert had just under an acre of garden and even he realised that this wasn’t enough land to raise deer, breed exotic varieties of sheep or play host to the hunt.

And so he hired an expensive firm of landscape gardeners to throw money and muscle power at a fairly flat and rather ordinary piece of pasture land.

At the end of six months (and after handing over a cheque for a small fortune) Gilbert was the extremely proud owner of sixteen varieties of apple tree, a rose garden, a small kitchen garden, a Japanese garden and a pond.

He was particularly proud of the pond and of the five huge and very expensive coy carp which the landscape gardener had insisted were far more fashionable than goldfish or trout. Gilbert was ‘sold’ on them when he was told that all the really rich country folk had them in their lakes. At £6,000 each they were certainly the most expensive fish Gilbert had ever bought.

Sadly for Gilbert life was not as full of joy as he had hoped it would be. He was not an insensitive man and he was constantly aware of the fact that however hard he tried people were always sniggering about him behind his back.

Even worse was the fact that his wife was not happy in Bilbury. She missed the bright lights and shops of Wolverhampton and she desperately missed her friends and her twice weekly coffee mornings. She found Bilbury a rather lonely place and she hated the mud and the quiet of the country.

A few weeks ago Gilbert decided that in order to try to increase his local standing and to decrease his wife’s sense of isolation he would hold a large dinner party in a marquee in his garden.

Maude, who was given the task of organising the affair and supervising the preparation of the meal, was not at all enthusiastic. In fact, she hated the whole idea.

But Gilbert insisted. He wanted the rest of Bilbury to experience some of the sophisticated style of Wolverhampton social life. In particular, he wanted Maude to make sure that the vegetables were taken from their own garden. ‘I might not be able to serve my own venison!’ he said. ‘But I can serve my own potatoes!’

The dinner was held last Sunday. Together with most of the population of Bilbury I was there. And it was probably the most embarrassing evening of my life.

The big explosion took place when the main course was served.

‘What’s this?’ demanded Gilbert, shouting to his wife across the marquee. ‘I said I wanted beef!’

‘It’s fish stew,’ replied Maude.

‘I can see that!’

‘Well, why did you ask me what it was then?’

‘Because it isn’t beef!’ Gilbert lowered his nose and sniffed.

‘What sort of fish is it?’ he demanded.

‘Home-grown,’ answered Maude. ‘Like the vegetables.’

It took a moment or two for Gilbert to realise what Maude meant.

Then he got very cross and said things that we all felt he would regret the following day. Together with the other guests I muttered something about suddenly remembering another engagement and left.

‘Pity,’ said Thumper. ‘I’ve never eaten coy carp. Often wondered what the things taste like.’

I understand that Gilbert has now put his house on the market and is planning to return to Wolverhampton.

WHEN MIDGES BITE

‘I read a report in the paper this morning,’ said Lionel Francis, ‘that claimed that when a midge bites you it drinks one tenth of a millionth of a litre of blood.’

Lionel is the nearest thing we’ve got to an executive in Bilbury. He always wears a matching handkerchief and tie set and his two tone Ford car is equipped with twin halogen spotlights and a telephone.

The telephone doesn’t work very well around Bilbury because the hills interfere with the reception but even a non-functioning telephone is something of a status symbol in a village where the grapevine is still the preferred method of message carrying.

Lionel, who runs a small chain of chemists’ shops, doesn’t often come into the Duck and Puddle because, as he once put it, he regards it as rather too ‘rural’ for his taste. (I think what he means is that too many of the customers come in wearing dung encrusted wellington boots).

‘You can spare that much,’ said Thumper.

This was a slightly barbed comment for Lionel, who has the reputation of eating for two, has the body to confirm the reputation. Peter Marshall still claims that it was Lionel Francis who broke the springs in his taxi.

‘You may scoff!’ admonished Lionel. ‘But the report also stated that there are ten million midges to the acre on moorland.’

‘This sounds like the beginning of one of those "If a man leaves the bath tap running how long will it take two boys with wheelbarrows to move six tons of sand to Llandudno" questions.’ said Thumper. ‘I could never do those at school.’

I started scribbling on a beermat. ‘Did it say how many times a midge is likely to bite in an hour?’

‘No.’

‘Twice?’

‘That sounds fair.’

‘That means that the midges on one acre of moorland will drink two litres of blood an hour!’ I announced. I did the sum again and found, to my surprise, that either the first answer was correct or else I had made the same mistake twice. In view of the fact that it was very nearly official closing time I thought that this was rather impressive.

(At official closing time Frank shuts the pub front door and doesn’t let anyone else in. But he doesn’t throw anyone out. For thirty years he has worked on the assumption that this is what the authorities mean by ‘closing time’ and since after 6 pm the local police stations all seem to be manned by telephone answering machines it seems unlikely that he will be forced to think otherwise.)

‘How many litres of blood in the average human body?’ Thumper asked me.

‘Eight pints or so. What’s that in litres?’

‘Five.’ answered Lionel instantly.

‘So the midges on five acres of moorland will completely exsanguinate two human beings every hour.’ I said, impressing myself again.

‘Ex- what?’ asked Thumper.

‘Exsanguinate - completely empty all the blood out. Like vampires.’

Thumper put his glass down so heavily that some beer splashed out onto the bar counter. He immediately picked up a towel and started to mop up the mess he’d made. A stranger might have been impressed by this apparently selfless act. ‘The moors must be solid with dead bodies during the summer. You’d think we’d be falling over them!’ He shivered. ‘How many acres of moorland are there on Exmoor and Dartmoor?’ Frank pulled a tourist guide down from a shelf behind the bar and rapidly thumbed through it. ‘Exmoor is 265 square miles and Dartmoor is 365 square miles.’

‘How many acres is that?’

‘A lot.’

For a moment there was silence.

‘Maybe the bodies all get eaten by maggots.’ said Thumper, who was wringing out the towel over his beer glass. ‘How many maggots are there to the acre, Lionel?’

Lionel frowned. ‘I don’t know. The article didn’t say.’

‘If I were you,’ said Frank quietly, ‘I’d stop reading those darned newspapers. If you hadn’t read that stuff about midges none of us would be worried about this.’ He shivered involuntarily. ‘I’ll tell you this for nothing - I shall keep my car windows shut next time I drive across the moors.’

‘I reckon the police probably get someone to move all the dead bodies so that there isn’t any public panic.’ said Thumper, who, whenever there is any doubt, always believes in giving the conspiracy theory the benefit of the doubt. ‘Either that or the Tourist Board have it done.’

‘That’s a lot of coffins and a lot of funerals,’ said Peter Marshall from the village shop. We had all assumed he was fast asleep. ‘I wonder if I could get the contract?’

MRS LOVELACE'S MATCHBOX

An unholy row has broken out in Bilbury this week.

It started, as these things often do, with something very trivial: a competition at the monthly meeting of the Bilbury Women's Institute.

Organised by Mrs Parsons, the aim of the competition was to see how many small items could be crammed into a matchbox.

Last year Mrs Jellicoe's prize-winning matchbox contained twenty seven items (including a collar stud that, according to Mrs Jellicoe, once belonged to Lloyd George).

This year Mrs Lovelace, who lives in the main part of the Old Priory and whose most notable physical feature is an artificially enhanced pneumatic bust of unlikely proportions, won the competition easily with a matchbox that contained 559 ordinary steel sewing pins.

Not all the other members of the W.I. were happy about it.

'That's cheating!' insisted Mrs Bridgford, who never pulls her punches and who, with a matchbox crammed tightly with 31 different items, considered herself to the rightful winner of the competition.

(It is worth pointing out that Mrs Bridgford has never forgiven Mrs Lovelace for winning the Best Cake Prize at the Blackmoor Gate Show last summer. Mrs Bridgford has made no secret of the fact that she believes that the triple layered sponge that took Mrs Lovelace to victory was baked not by Mrs Lovelace herself but by her daily help - Mrs Pettigrew - a woman whose way with a sponge cake has long been legendary in W.I. circles.)

Mrs Lovelace rose to the bait like a trout to a May fly. 'How dare you!' she demanded, her hackles well and truly risen.

'Pins! Pins! Pins!' spat Mrs Bridgford. 'Anyone could have filled a matchbox with pins!'

'Just because you didn't think of it!' spat back Mrs Lovelace.

'I'm surprised you didn't get one of those huge, joke matchboxes,' said Mrs Bridgford. 'You could have got millions of pins in one of those.'

'That would have been against the rules,' Mrs Lovelace pointed out. She took a crumpled piece of paper out of her handbag, lay it out on her lap and straightened it. She took out her blue framed spectacles and put them on.

'Look!' she said, reading from the paper and pointing to the words as she pronounced them. 'Matchboxes must be no larger than two and a half inches long and one and a half inches wide.' She refolded the paper, put it back into her handbag, sat back, folded her arms and looked around the room defiantly.

But Mrs Bridgford was not about to give in so easily.

'It's still cheating!' she insisted. 'It's still against the spirit of the competition!'

And so it went on.

Mrs Lovelace repeated her assertion that Mrs Bridgford only objected because she hadn't thought of it, and Mrs Bridgford said that no one with an ounce of honesty would have thought of such a thing and Mrs Lovelace asked Mrs Bridgford if she was calling her dishonest and Mrs Bridgford said she was and that was when things really started to get out of control.

Mrs Parsons stood up and in a very loud voice asked if anyone wanted another cup of tea but no one took any notice of her at all.

Mrs Lovelace said that Mrs Bridgford smelt of silage and Mrs Bridgford said that at least she could sit by the fire without worrying that her silicone implants might melt, and after a moment's deafening silence Mrs Lovelace burst into tears and rushed out of the village hall and hurried home to tell her husband and he immediately went out and built a dam across the stream that leads down to the Bridgford farm.

And the upshot of *that* was that late last night, after dark, Albert Bridgford went up to the Lovelace's place with his double-barrelled shotgun under his arm and took a pick axe to the dam.

To complete the story I should tell you that the prize Mrs Lovelace won was a jar of home-made rhubarb jam which, in all the excitement, she forgot to take home with her. It is still standing on the village hall window sill waiting to be collected.

The jam was made by Mrs Norton and is widely reputed to need more sugar in it.

THE JAZZ WEEKEND

When I first moved to North Devon I thought I might buy a boat and take up sailing.

When I mentioned this to Frank in the Duck and Puddle he suggested that I should telephone the local harbour master in the nearest coastal village.

'Have you got any spare moorings?'I asked Alf, the harbour master. Alf is not a full-time harbour master. He runs a petrol station for a living and works as harbour master for the power and the glory.

'How big is your boat?'

'I haven't bought one yet. I wanted to make sure that I could get a mooring first.'

'I can't give you a mooring until I know how big your boat is.'

The logic of this seemed solid and unassailable so I thanked the harbour master and put down the telephone. Later that evening, in the Duck and Puddle, I asked Thumper if he knew of any boats for sale.

'How big is your mooring?' Thumper wanted to know.

'I haven't got one yet.' I told him. 'I thought I'd buy the boat first and then get a mooring to fit it.'

Thumper sucked in air through clenched teeth and shook his head. Instinctively, I knew that something was worrying him.

'What's up?' I asked.

'Dangerous move!' he told me sternly. 'You could end up with a boat and no mooring. Then where would you be?'

His logic seemed equally unassailable. A boat without a mooring is like a bridge without a road.

'Get the harbour master to give you a mooring and then go out and buy a boat to fit it,' suggested Thumper.

'But what if I can't find a boat to fit my mooring?' I asked him, conscious that a mooring without a boat wasn't likely to be much fun.

That was eight years ago. I still haven't got a boat or a mooring.

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At first I thought that the fact that things did not change very rapidly in Bilbury was a result of a deliberate objection to progress, a reactionary attitude orchestrated by local politicians and sustained by a population which is wedded to tradition.

But, over the years, I have gradually come to realise that Bilbury remains firmly entrenched in the past not as a result of any deliberate, consciously thought out policy but as a result of its inhabitants' skilful ability to avoid making decisions of any kind. The people of Bilbury have turned procrastination into a sophisticated science. It is this, rather than any objection to change, which protects the village from any serious flirtation with the twentieth century. Bilbury folk have a powerful talent for repelling change without confronting it.

Some people would probably find all this rather tiresome. But I have long since stopped feeling frustrated. These days I rather like the Bilbury way of doing things. There is something very comforting about living in an unchanging world. After all, anything which results in change is also likely to lead to heartache, dissatisfaction and despair, whereas an absence of change means stability and reliability.

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Bilbury's rather special variety of local logic can be very infectious. Today, I realised that I have become a true Bilburian. Without even thinking about it I have helped to preserve the status quo.

I walked into the Duck and Puddle at lunchtime to discover that Gilly, the landlady, had announced that she wanted to organise a Jazz Weekend in the village hall, bringing in bands from as far away as Bude and South Molton. Thumper, who could see his quiet weekend drinking haunt filling up with men in beards and corduroy trousers, was vociferously opposed to this proposal.

'Bilbury needs livening up a bit!' said Gilly, firmly.

'It will certainly do that!' agreed Frank loyally, though one could see that his heart wasn't really in it. Frank is at his happiest when he is pulling pints and drinking them himself. I knew that he wouldn't be keen on any increase in business if it meant spending his time pulling pints for other people to drink. Thumper took a large swig out of his beer, wiped froth off his mouth with the back of his hand and snorted.

I found myself firmly on Thumper's side.

I had no objection to the idea of listening to jazz for a weekend but I strongly suspected Gilly would want to put up advertisements and that as a result there would be strangers coming into the village.

Strangers!

'There is a snag,' I pointed out.

They all turned and looked at me.

‘Don’t you agree that this sort of thing only really works when it’s a tradition?’

Even Gilly nodded.

‘But it’s never been done before here.’

‘No,’ agreed Gilly cautiously.

‘So it isn’t a tradition,’ I pointed out.

‘And so it’s bound to be a failure.’ nodded Frank, gloomily.

‘We don’t want Bilbury to be associated with a failure!’ said Thumper firmly.

‘Besides,’ I pointed out, ‘the village hall is always shut at weekends.’

The jazz festival has now been abandoned.

AN UNROMANTIC MAN'S LAST ROMANTIC GESTURE

Keith Littlejohn did not live in Bilbury, nor, indeed, in Devon. He lived in a small town in Somerset, just over the county border. But he has truly earned his place in the history of the area for he came to Devon to commit suicide and he died not far from Bilbury, at the bottom of the tallest sea cliffs in England. For nine months Keith, a 22-year-old assistant supermarket manager, had been courting Lesley, a 21-year-old bank clerk. I know that the word 'courting' sounds old-fashioned but they were, in truth, an old-fashioned couple.

Keith sported a small, neatly-trimmed toothbrush moustache, had his hair cut in the old-fashioned, short back and sides 'pudding basin' style and, when not working, invariably wore a sports coat and grey flannels. He wore a trainspotter's enamel badge on his jacket lapel and carried a neat row of coloured pens in his breast pocket.

Lesley who was two inches shorter, wore her light brown hair in a neat, page-boy style and liked pleated skirts, fluffy jumpers and cameo brooches.

On warm, dry days they would drive to Lynmouth and spend the day walking along the cliff tops near Countisbury. On Saturdays they would share a pizza, go to the cinema and hold hands while walking back to the car park where Keith's neat and well-kept Vauxhall was waiting for them. Although at the end of the evening they would kiss each other, theirs was not what you could call a *physical* relationship.

Last Saturday Keith proposed to Lesley. It wasn't a particularly romantic moment. He didn't get down on his knees and he had not been presumptuous enough to purchase a ring. His precise words were: 'Shall we get married then?'

'Could I have 48 hours to think about it?' Lesley had asked, to Keith's surprise. 'It's not that I'm not sure,' she reassured him, though to be truthful that was exactly the problem. In recent months, Lesley had begun to suspect that she might be more of a romantic than she had ever previously realised.

'Of course!' Keith had replied, rather taken aback. He had rather assumed that they were stepping out together in the quiet, unspoken, expectation of matrimony.

'It's not you I'm not sure about it,' she had told him. 'It's just that I'm not sure that *I'm* ready to get married yet.'

'When will you know?' asked Keith.

'By Monday,' promised Lesley.

And so Keith took Lesley home, kissed her affectionately on the cheek and said he looked forward very much to hearing from her.

He heard nothing on Sunday and by 8 am on Monday morning he was in deep despair. Lesley had promised to let him know by Monday and now it was Monday and he had heard nothing. Keith was convinced that this meant not only that Lesley was not going to marry him but also that she was not even going to reply. He felt disappointed, humiliated, let down and deeply depressed.

He climbed into his Vauxhall and instead of driving off to the supermarket he drove towards Lynmouth.

On the steep cliff road down from Countisbury he stopped his car for a few moments, and gazed out towards the Bristol Channel. Then he revved up the engine, bounced the car over the low grassy bank that was the only barrier which protected the road from a drop of several hundred feet down into the sea and slammed his foot down onto the accelerator.

The coroner told the young man's relatives that Keith died the instant his car hit the rocks below. The petrol tank had exploded with the impact and even if Keith had, by some miracle, survived the crash he could not have lived on through the inferno which followed. The irony in this tragedy is that Lesley had decided to accept Keith's proposal of marriage but in a moment of premeditated romanticism had telephoned the disc jockey at a local radio station and asked him to announce her acceptance during his programme. She knew that the supermarket where Keith worked normally carried the broadcasts from the radio station on its loud speaker system.

And the tragedy in the irony is that Keith's radio was tuned to the radio station Lesley had contacted. The local police technician who examined the car told me that judging by the time shown on the clock on the dashboard of Keith's Vauxhall the assistant supermarket manager had probably heard of his fiancée's acceptance of his proposal just as his car plummeted over the cliff edge.

THE TEMPORARY RESIDENT

I had many strange experiences when I was a family doctor. When you press the buzzer underneath your desk you never know who is going to come in next or what story they will tell.

One evening, after a long and at times seemingly never ending day, I stood up and started to stuff my stethoscope into my jacket pocket, thinking I had seen my last patient. Suddenly, and unexpectedly, Miss Johnson, the receptionist, poked her head round the door.

'There's one more patient waiting for you, doctor,' she said 'He came just as I was shutting the front door.' She knew how tired I was and looked at me apologetically. 'He's a temporary resident.'

'O.K.,' I sighed, pulling my stethoscope out of my pocket and dropping it down onto the desk. I slumped back down into my chair. 'Show him in.'

'Temporary resident' is the phrase doctors use to describe a patient who does not live in the area and who is not a normal client of the practice. Bilbury, being so close to the coast, has more than its fair share of 'temporary residents' and in the summer it isn't unknown for half the patients at a surgery to be strangers.

The latecomer was in his sixties. He wore a heavy tweed three piece suit, a checked green and brown woollen shirt with button down collar points, a plain green woollen tie and a pair of highly polished brown brogues. His half moon gold framed spectacles gave him an academic air.

I vaguely waved a hand in the direction of the chair on the other side of the desk.

'Are you staying round here long?' I asked him after we had exchanged the usual formalities.

He mentioned the name of a well-known local hotel. 'I've been down for a few days break,' he told me. 'But I've got to be back at work tomorrow.' He spoke slowly and deliberately but rather loudly as though used to speaking to children. I wondered if he was a school master, though to be honest he seemed a little old. His nose was richly veined and he had a large, harmless lipoma growing out of the top of his balding head.

'What can I do for you?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'How can I help you?'

The latecomer leant forwards in his chair, frowned as though about to say something and then leant back again.

I waited.

'I'm sorry,' he apologised. 'My brain isn't as fast as it used to be.'

'That's O.K. Take your time. Tell me what's been worrying you.'

He glowered at me. 'Why should I tell you?'

'Er... I'm a doctor,' I mumbled. I waved a hand around, indicating the shelves piled high with books and medicines, the horsehair examination couch with the stuffing coming out of it and the eye test chart. 'This is my surgery.'

The latecomer looked around, as though seeing the room for the first time. 'I'm sorry,' he apologised, unexpectedly. 'That's what I came about. My memory is not what it was. The old grey matter seems to be getting a bit porridge-like.'

'If you're going back home then you should perhaps go and see your own doctor,' I suggested. 'You need some tests doing.'

'Can't you do them? You're a doctor aren't you?' I sighed silently.

'Take seven from one hundred!' I told him.

'Why?'

'It's a test for your brain.'

'Ninety something.'

'Can you be more precise?'

'Ninety two?'

'And seven from that?'

'Seventy? Seventy seven?' He waved a hair airily as though we both knew the answer didn't really matter. He was clearly suffering from senile dementia. 'Can you tell me the name of the Prime Minister?' I asked him.

'Why do you want to know? Don't *you* know?'

'Yes.' I said patiently. 'I know. But I want to see if you know. It's another test.'

'Churchill.' said the latecomer, without hesitation.

'Can you stay around in the village for a few more days?' I asked him. 'If you really want me to check you out I need more time.'

'I've got to go back.' he said. 'I'm in court tomorrow.'

‘Oh.’ I said. ‘I’m sorry. Why? What... er... ?’ I wondered what on earth he’d done. Exposed himself? Some innocent fraud? I felt sorry for him.

‘I’m a judge.’

I went cold when he told me.

And even now I still feel cold when I think about it. I often wonder if he’s still sitting on a bench somewhere, handing out judgements, making decisions about people’s lives. A man who cannot do simple sums and who still thinks that Churchill is Prime Minister.

I don’t want to know if he is still sitting on a bench and passing judgement. Patient-doctor confidentiality means that there is absolutely nothing I can do about it.

FASHION CONSCIOUS

A month or so ago I read an interview with a professional cricketer who said that his favourite hobby was buying new clothes.

He confessed that he spent all his free time (and available money) on shopping for new shirts, trousers, jackets and suits.

This worried me rather a lot for I had always assumed that choosing and buying clothes was an essentially female activity. As far as I am concerned I wear clothes to keep me warm and dry and protect me from the elements. My only other criterion when choosing clothes is that they must have lots of pockets. I know that women never understand this essentially male craving for pockets but it is, nevertheless, important. Given a choice between a fashionable jacket in an agreeable colour with no pockets and an ill cut, nauseating looking jacket with plenty of pockets I would choose the ill cut, nauseating looking jacket with pockets every time.

But for a while the other day I harboured the fear that my simple view might be out-of-date, that men might be changing their views of clothes and that a growing number might be adopting a viewpoint that I had, in the past, always regarded as essentially feminine.

My experiences in the changing rooms at the Leisure Centre in Barnstaple really depressed me.

First, there were three school boys who were getting changed to go swimming. They were all around twelve or thirteen-years-old and you might have expected that they would have been talking about girls, football or racing drivers.

But they weren’t.

Their sole topic of conversation revolved around the colour, size, shape, make and style of their footwear.

One of the schoolboys had just purchased a new pair of training shoes for which he (or, more accurately, his mother and father I suspect) had paid the sort of money for which one could, just a little while ago, have bought a perfectly decent *motor car!* The last time I looked, training shoes were called pumps or plimsolls and they came in black or white and cost no more than a hamburger. I doubt if any one I knew in my teens had the faintest idea who had *made* their pumps. The kids I was at school with would have laughed at the idea of arguing the merits of one pump manufacturer versus another.

But, I discovered that it isn’t just teenagers who are now obsessed with what they wear. On the other side of the changing room there were two fellows in their late twenties who were getting ready to play badminton. They were obsessed with the cut of their trousers and they seemed genuinely interested in whether turn-ups were in or out of fashion! They talked knowledgeably and at length about gussets and linings and pleats and I found it all deeply disturbing.

When I was growing up things were very simple. Trousers, which were grey, had turn-ups and jeans, which were blue, did not. No male with his fair share of testosterone would be seen dead worrying in public about the *cut* of his trousers!

The final straw was a conversation I heard between two men who were getting changed for a karate class. They were tall and well-built and I felt confident that they at least would be talking about some healthy sporting activity. They weren’t. One of the karate practitioners had just bought a new outfit and he was showing his companion the stitching and the material on his coloured belt.

That was bad enough. But what made it worse was that his companion was *interested!*

I hurried home from Barnstaple in a deep state of depression and was comforted slightly when I found that in the Duck and Puddle Thumper and Frank were arguing about whether the barmaid at the Gravediggers’ Rest had a bigger bosom than Kay, our district nurse.

‘Do you know who made your wellington boots?’ I asked Thumper.

He looked at me as if I had gone mad. ‘No.’

‘Have your trousers got turn-ups on?’ I asked Frank.

‘I don’t know.’

‘What sort of belt do you use?’ I asked Peter.

‘Baler twine.’

Suddenly, I felt better.

I do like living in Bilbury.

WAYNE WELLARD

People who live in towns always regard sheep as stupid animals. But sheep aren't at all stupid. They are certainly stubborn, they may be selfish and they are without doubt among the most determined of creatures, but they have more native intelligence than many human beings. Thumper Robinson seriously reckons that he has never met a policeman or a politician with the intelligence of a sheep.

Sheep have an outstanding ability to forge strong and lasting relationships and a burning curiosity. They also have very good memories. When I got the lawnmower out this year, for the first spring cut of the season, the sheep pricked up their ears, stared at me, studied the mower, looked at one another and then immediately responded by racing around to the spot in the field where I always dump the grass cuttings. They like eating freshly cut grass cuttings - I suppose it cuts down the work involved in eating! It had been six months since they had seen or heard the mower but they immediately knew what it meant!

Our five pet sheep, Lizzie, Petula, Cynthia, Sarah-Louise and Miss Houdini, all saved from a rendezvous with mint sauce, are spoilt rotten. Four of them were bottle fed from birth and since they still get one digestive biscuit each most days (they don't like any other types of biscuit half as much, though they did express some enthusiasm for chocolate finger biscuits last Christmas) they all greet any visitor with undisguised, unlimited enthusiasm.

Walk into the average sort of field where the average sort of sheep are grazing and they will, in the interests of self-preservation, run away from you.

But if you walk into a field where our five pet sheep are grazing they will run towards you at a startling pace.

In addition to this affection for human beings and digestive biscuits they have acquired some rather unusual habits.

They don't like getting wet (we had a shelter built for them and if it rains they run in out of the rain quicker than you or I could put up an umbrella) and they hate mud. When we took them to be dipped one autumn neither Sarah-Louise nor Petula would walk through the muddy patch at the approach to the dip. Both looked down at it and backed away from it. They had to be carried across the quagmire.

I also have a strong suspicion that our sheep have acquired a sense of malicious mischief.

For example, last Wednesday the five sheep had more than a little fun with Wayne Wellard the farrier. Wayne Wellard was in the field putting some new shoes on Lightning, a horse who has been living in a spare stable at Bilbury Grange for a while.

Wayne Wellard is built along the lines of a small building and wherever he goes he is accompanied by his dog called Kamir. I was once stupid enough to ask him why he had given an Indian sounding name to a dog.

'Try shouting it out loud!' suggested the farrier, with a grin. I was called away to the telephone just as Wayne Wellard arrived, but since apart from Lightning herself the only animals in the field were the five sheep I didn't think anything about it. Fifteen minutes later I went back out to check that all was well and I heard an unmistakeable cry for help coming from the field. The cries were coming from somewhere behind the stable so I vaulted over the fence and ran round the corner to see what was going on. I could hardly believe my eyes.

There, standing with his back to the stable, his hands held up in front of him and a look of sheer terror on his face, was Wayne Wellard. Kamir was cowering behind him. And in front of them both were our five sheep. Cynthia and Petula were standing on their hind legs and resting their front legs on Wayne Wellard's thighs and Sarah-Louise, Lizzie and Miss Houdini were jumping up and down with excitement just behind them.

'Help!' cried Wayne. 'Get these bloody sheep off me!'

I put my hand into my coat pocket and found a few pieces of broken biscuit. When I called them, the sheep turned and raced towards me.

'Thank heavens for that!' said Wayne Wellard, sounding relieved. 'I've never been so terrified in all my life. I thought the damned things were going to eat me alive!' His dog whimpered pitifully.

'They're only sheep!' I pointed out, feeding them bits of biscuit. Lizzie jumped up and got one of her front legs caught in my coat pocket. I bent down and disentangled her.

'They're a menace!' insisted Wayne. 'There should be a law about sheep molesting people and their dogs.' He brushed some dirt and straw off his overalls and glowered at the sheep.

I couldn't help smiling. 'I can see the headline now!' I told him. 'Farrier claims sheep worried his dog.'

Wayne Wellard didn't say anything for a moment and then he half smiled. 'It's not funny,' he muttered defensively.

But it was.

IRIS, MILO AND DAPHNE

Occasionally, we all misjudge people we hardly know. We hear things about them, we make assumptions and we come to conclusions based on hearsay, prejudice and gossip. Those of us who live in villages are, I suspect, more susceptible to this fault than anyone else for we are constantly exposed to stories, anecdotes and half truths about our neighbours.

Take Iris, for example, who lives right on the edge of Bilbury and who telephoned me on Monday. I have met her only half a dozen times and I have heard nothing but bad about her but this week she surprised me. Peter Marshall, who runs the village shop and is himself something of a master at being somewhere else when it is his turn to buy the drinks, claims that she is one of the meanest women in the county. I don't think I have ever heard anyone say anything nice about her.

In summer her cottage has lupins in the garden and a pink climbing rose round the door.

The beauty of her cottage is, however, rather spoilt by the fact that it has a rusting corrugated iron roof where the thatch used to be. Iris is reputed to have discovered that her insurance premium would fall dramatically if she had iron instead of reed on her roof and so when her thatch needed repairing she is said not to have hesitated before choosing the expedient, if ugly, alternative.

Doctors get a lot of very strange requests but I rather think that the first call I received from Iris ranks as one of the oddest I ever received.

When she telephoned, Iris sounded extremely anxious.

'It's Milo,' she said. 'I'm worried about him. He hasn't eaten for days. Would you come round and have a look at him?'

I didn't know she shared her cottage with anyone called Milo (her children have long since grown up and got as far away from home as they could and Iris's husband died of a rare vitamin deficiency while still in his late thirties - Frank, the landlord at the Duck and Puddle says that Iris regards spending money on food as rather akin to wasting it, arguing that there is little point in spending good money on a commodity that will, within hours, be nothing more than sewage) but before I could ask her for more information she had put the telephone down.

I left my lunch to congeal and raced off to see what was the matter. As I drove off I felt tired and depressed and full of despair. Over the weekend a young farm labourer had died in an accident and I had been the one who had to break the news to Daphne, his wife.

When I got there Milo turned out to be a Venus Fly Trap. A plant.

'He usually eats flies,' said Iris. 'I save a fortune on fly sprays.' She poked at one of his clearly empty leaf pouches.

'But he just hasn't been eating.'

'Why on earth did you ring me?' I asked, more bewildered than angry. 'I'm a doctor!' The call was so absurd that I just could not feel cross with her.

'I could hardly ring the vet, could I?' snorted Iris, with undeniable logic. 'And the people from the garden centre don't do house calls.'

I picked up a dead insect from the windowsill and tickled the fly trap with it. Hungrily, the fly trap opened a pouch and accepted the meal.

'You'll just have to try feeding it by hand,' I told her. 'Dead flies morning and night for a week.' I know nothing about house plants but if you say things with conviction it is easy to assume the air of an expert.

I turned as I was about to leave. 'Why do you call it Milo?'

'It's a Venus fly trap,' explained Iris wearily. 'Haven't you heard of the Venus de Milo?'

I hadn't thought of her as a person with a sense of humour. I smiled faintly and nodded my appreciation.

'While you're here,' said Iris, 'there's something I want you to take.' She walked over to the sideboard upon which there lay a thick brown envelope. She picked it up and handed it to me. It was unsealed and I peeped inside. It was full of bank notes.

'It's for Daphne King,' she said. 'I know what it's like to be widowed young. She'll be able to use that.' She stared at me. 'But you're not to tell her where it came from. I don't want everyone thinking I'm a soft touch.'

THE ANNIVERSARY SURPRISE

Dennis Bride is not a regular in the Duck and Puddle. To be perfectly honest since their arrival a year or two ago neither he nor his wife, Ivy, have fitted into the village terribly well. Dennis has a rather important executive position (no one is sure precisely what) which takes him up to London two or three days a week.

Ivy is, to use a rather old-fashioned but eminently serviceable phrase, a bit stuck up. Her family have always had money and I think she finds it genuinely difficult to talk to 'ordinary' people like Frank, the publican, Peter the shopkeeper, Thumper (how on earth can I describe what Thumper does in a couple of words?) and me. She rides side saddle, wears a headscarf with beagles on it and speaks as though she's got a mouth full of ripe Victoria plums.

So we were all surprised when Dennis suddenly appeared just over a week ago, took out his wallet, and bought a round of drinks.

'It's my wedding anniversary on Friday,' he told us, when Frank had done his serious stuff with the optics and the beer pump and had poured Dennis his low calorie orange juice. 'My wife thinks I've forgotten - I nearly always do - but I thought it would be rather nice to have some people in from the village to help celebrate the occasion.'

I have to confess that none of us looked particularly excited by this. Thumper, Frank and Peter all looked as if they would have been more enthusiastic if invited to attend an evening of Welsh choral singing, meet with the local temperance society or join an insurance underwriting syndicate and although I tried hard to hide my feelings I don't think I was entirely successful. I've never had much of a soft spot for Ivy and the only genuine emotion I feel for Dennis is pity for his life seems to me to consist of long dull patches interspersed with periods of terminal boredom.

'I've got a firm of caterers coming over from Taunton,' said Dennis. 'And maybe you, Frank, would help us out with the drinks?'

'What did you have in mind?' asked Frank, with about as much enthusiasm as a politician invited to make a decision.

'Happy to leave that in your hands,' said Dennis. 'Whatever you think. You're the expert.'

'What did you plan on spending?' asked Frank.

'Open cheque,' said Dennis, using words which brought a glow to Frank's cheeks and a sparkle to his eyes.

'Right!' said Frank, enthusiastically. 'I should think I could help you out with that.'

Thumper, interest aroused, looked up. 'Friday, you said?'

Dennis nodded. 'But I don't want Ivy to find out about it. I want it to be a surprise.'

'She thinks you've forgotten it's your anniversary!' said Peter Marshall, dripping with understanding.

'Absolutely!' agreed Dennis. 'She'll be sitting there by the fire and then we'll all troop in and have a party. It'll be a good opportunity for us both to get to know everyone in the village.'

We arranged that at about eight o'clock on Friday evening Dennis would call in at the Duck and Puddle on his way back from London and we would then follow him back home. The booze would be packed into the back of Thumper's truck and the caterers would turn up at around nine. Everyone promised to make sure that Ivy didn't find out what was planned; since no one ever spoke to her this did not seem to be an unduly arduous responsibility.

On Friday evening everything seemed to go according to plan. Dennis arrived at 7.45 pm and we followed him back home in a straggly procession of trucks and tractors. We all parked in the lane and walked up to the house so as not to give the game away.

Dennis put his key in the front door lock and turned round to check that we were all there. We smiled encouragement at him. We were all carrying cases of alcohol. Frank had done us proud.

'I'm home, dear!' cried Dennis, walking briskly down the hall and into a spacious and elegantly furnished hallway. We all tip toed along behind him.

Ivy, her hair deliberately and carefully tousled, her face made up in what Thumper later described as a 'tarty' sort of way, responded to this greeting and tottered into view on pencil heeled black shoes. She was carrying two glasses of wine and dressed only in a pair of black fishnet stockings and a rather too small black and red basque over the top of which her ample bosom flowed like bubbling champagne. Behind her, in the dining room, I could see that the table had been set for a cosy, candle-lit anniversary dinner for two.

It was immediately clear that our arrival was something of a surprise to her.

'I've brought a few people from the village for dinner,' stuttered Dennis.

Ivy fainted.

'It was a good job you were there,' said Dennis, gratefully, when I had loosened his wife's clothing and helped him carry her upstairs to bed.

I did not like to point out that if I, and the rest of us, had not been there I probably would not have been needed.

Downstairs the pop of another cork was greeted with cries of approval.

THE DISCLAIMER

I was fast asleep one night when I was woken by the sound of the telephone.

'Hello?' I mumbled.

'Is that the doctor?'

I said it was. I was still working as a general practitioner at the time.

'This is the duty sergeant at the police station,' said a voice I didn't recognise. 'Sorry to bother you, doctor, but our usual police surgeon has been taken ill with food poisoning and we're rather stuck. We wondered if you could help us out?'

'Me?'

'There is a fee,' said the sergeant. 'And we'd be extremely grateful. We've got a gentleman here who has been charged with a serious driving offence. The breathalyser suggests that he's been drinking rather heavily. We've offered him the choice of giving us a blood sample or a urine sample and he's chosen to give us a blood sample.'

'Oh,' I said. I could see their problem. If they couldn't find a doctor to take the blood sample the charges against the man would, presumably, have to be dropped.

Rather reluctantly I agreed to go.

I woke Patsy, told her where I was going, got dressed, got into the car and drove to the police station.

It was a terrible night. The wind was howling and the rain was lashing down. Pieces of branch were strewn all over the road.

It took me forty minutes to get from Bilbury Grange to the police station. Normally, the journey would have taken no more than half that time.

The police sergeant on duty greeted me with a smile and something that was a cross between a wave and a salute. He took me into the medical room where two police constables were waiting with a large, red-faced and bad-tempered looking man. The room was equipped with a cheap but sturdy looking metal desk, two steel framed plastic chairs and an examination couch.

The police sergeant gave me a form to complete and I asked the prisoner a few questions to confirm that he was willing to allow me to take a sample of his blood. He said he was.

When the form filling was finished with the policeman handed me a small packet that contained a syringe, a needle and two small containers for the blood sample. One sample, explained the sergeant, would be given to the prisoner. The other sample would be sent to the police laboratory.

'Would you please take off your coat and roll up your sleeve?' I asked the prisoner.

The man stared at me belligerently and scowled. I repeated my request.

'No,' he said, bluntly. 'I won't.'

'But you've just agreed...,' I reminded him.

'I said you could take blood,' he said. 'But not from my arm.'

He ended this sentence with a loud hiccup.

I stared at him uncomprehendingly.

'You can take it from here!' he announced, suddenly unzipping his trousers and producing a part of his body which I had never previously regarded as offering a particular popular or suitable site for venepuncture.

I stared at the man and at the small and shrunken organ which he was holding.

'The law doesn't say *you* can choose where you take the blood from,' announced the man, as though he knew what he was talking about.

I turned to the sergeant. 'Doesn't it?' I whispered.

The sergeant shrugged. 'I don't know, doctor!' he admitted.

'I've been doing this job for twelve years and I've never come across anything like this before.'

'Come on!' said the man, tauntingly waving his organ at me. 'Take your damned blood!'

I took the sterilised syringe out of its packet and fitted the sterilised needle onto the end of it.

And then I had one of those flashes of inspiration which usually arrive about a day and a half too late.

'If you want me to take the blood from there just drop your trousers while I prepare this disclaimer for you to sign,' I said. I took a pen from my pocket and took a blank sheet of writing paper from a wire tray on the top of the desk.

'What disclaimer?' demanded the man. He had not dropped his trousers. Indeed, he was now holding two hands across his opened fly.

'Just in case anything goes wrong,' I told him. 'Taking blood from that particular site can occasionally result in gangrene and eventual amputation.'

The belligerent prisoner stared at me. ‘Amputation?’ He winced.

‘It’s not a terribly big risk,’ I told him. ‘But you have to sign to say that you accept the risk.’

‘I’m not signing!’ said the man, backing away from me nervously. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone change their mind quite so quickly. He threw off his coat and rolled up his shirt sleeve. ‘Here!’ he said, holding out his bare arm, complete with a nice, juicy looking vein. ‘Take it from here!’

THE KITCHEN CHAIRS

We had visitors from London last weekend.

Tony and Yvette are both in the restaurant trade and they are both huge. Tony, a chef at an Italian restaurant weighs at least sixteen stones and Yvette, a waitress, must be even heavier.

Halfway through their visit Yvette sat down on one of our kitchen chairs and ended up sitting on the floor amidst a muddle of splintered wood. The chair, an old piece of pine furniture which we had found at the back of the barn, had simply decided that enough was enough and had given up the ghost.

Patsy and I decided that rather than buy something new, which would look distinctly out of place in our kitchen, we would visit Patchy Fogg's antique shop and see if he had anything suitable as a replacement. We also thought that we would be able to buy something for less money at Patchy's than at any of the local furniture stores.

'I can let you have this set of four Victorian rosewood chairs for £135,' said Patchy, caressing the back of one of the chairs he was offering us.

Patsy and I looked at each other.

'That's rather more than we intended to pay,' said Patsy, with a frown.

'It's only for the kitchen,' I pointed out. 'Haven't you got something the same sort of age but a little cheaper?' I paused. 'Rather a lot cheaper actually.'

Patchy took his hat off and scratched the top of his head with simple, easy movement. Then, as though suddenly struck by a sudden thought, he put his hat back on again and disappeared through a door into a room that was packed from floor to ceiling with miscellaneous bits and pieces of furniture.

'I was going to put this into an auction in South Molton,' he said, reappearing and holding a plain, stripped pinewood kitchen chair out towards us. He examined a small, white label stuck onto the back of the chair. 'It's Victorian. I was going to put a reserve of £20 on it,' he told us. 'But for cash, without any commissions and so on, I can let you have it for £12.'

Patsy and I looked at the chair. It wasn't anything special to look at but it did look as though it would suit our kitchen.

I took the chair off him, found a space on the floor and put the chair down. I sat on it. It didn't break.

'It seems O.K.,' I said to Patsy.

'It looks quite nice,' said Patsy.

'But it is a little expensive,' I said.

Foggy sighed. '£10 then,' he said. 'But that's rock bottom. At £10 you're saving more than you're spending.' He reached out and fondled the chair. 'You could pay £50 for one like this in a London antique shop,' he murmured.

Patsy and I still didn't commit ourselves.

'Look,' said Foggy. 'I think I might have another one like it somewhere. Do you want me to have a look?'

Patsy and I exchanged glances. 'Yes, please.' I said.

Again, Patchy disappeared.

He reappeared a few moments later clutching a second chair.

'You can have the two for £17,' he said. 'I can't do any fairer than that.' He shook his head as though embarrassed by his own generosity. 'They should be going to the auction with a reserve of £20 each on them.'

I sat on the second chair.

'That means you're saving £23 on the two chairs,' he said. 'And you've saved £83 on what you'd have to spend in London.'

'It sounds very good value,' I agreed, by now totally confused.

'I'm too damned soft-hearted for this business,' sighed Patchy.

'Do you think you might find any more like them?' asked Patsy. 'If we're going to buy two it would be nice to put a set of four together eventually.'

Patchy rubbed his chin. 'At this price?'

I nodded.

Patchy shook his head. 'At this price I'm making a loss,' he said. 'I have to pay more than you're paying me!'

I took out my wallet and counted out £30. 'For four,' I said.

Patchy sucked in air. 'You should be in this business,' he said. He turned round. 'I'll go and have a look in the back and see what there is. But only because I like you both.'

Three or four minutes later we packed four chairs into the car.

'You've got a real bargain there,' said Patchy. He laughed. 'Do me a favour will you? Don't come back too soon! I can't afford to do too much business with you two!'

Patsy and I felt very pleased with ourselves.

Two days later Thumper Robinson called in to talk about some work he was doing on the stables.

‘I see you’ve been to Jasper Bottomley’s Furniture Warehouse,’ said Thumper, sitting down on one of our chairs. ‘They almost look like the real thing, don’t they?’ Patsy and I exchanged glances.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Patsy.

‘We got them from Patchy Fogg,’ I said. ‘They’re Victorian.’

Thumper put his head in his hands. ‘How much did you pay?’ he asked, a moment later.

I told him.

‘Jasper brings them in as kits from Taiwan, has them glued together in Torrington and sells them for £4.99 each,’ said Thumper

A BUSY WEEK IN BILBURY

There’s been so much happening this week in Bilbury that I hardly know where to start. On Monday Norman and Elsie Burrows had an argument over their false teeth which resulted in a small domestic disaster.

For twelve years now, ever since Elsie’s teeth were eaten by one of Dr Brownlow’s Doberman puppies, the two of them have shared a set of artificial dentures which Norman bought in 1956 from a dental technician in Bristol. (To be honest the man wasn’t a proper dental technician. He earned his living as an undertaker but made false teeth in his spare time and, according to Norman, had quite a reputation in that part of the West Country).

When they go out to dinner they take it in turns to chew. Norman will usually start with the teeth (because they are his) but when he’s finished eating his meat, he’ll wrap the dentures up in his handkerchief and pass them on to Elsie (who will have been busy with her vegetables) so that she can chew her meat properly.

No one seems to know what caused the argument on Monday but Norman tried to snatch the dentures and ended up knocking them onto the floor and before anyone could stop her Dulcie Patterson had trodden on them.

All may not be lost, however, for Peter Marshall says he’s got some special repair glue and he’s going to try to mend the fractured dentures before Roy Pilton and Iris Martinhoe get married on Saturday.

On Tuesday evening Patchy Fogg called in at the Duck and Puddle to tell us that he’d come third in a golf tournament at Kentisbury. Since Patchy only started to play golf six months ago we were all terribly impressed and several of us bought him drinks.

Early on Wednesday morning Peter Marshall rushed out of his shop and announced to the world that he had been burgled and that someone had stolen his alarm clock. As you can imagine this caused a considerable amount of excitement in the village and P.C. Wren was summoned to take statements from everyone who was in a fit state to make them.

On Wednesday afternoon Harry Tattersall arrived back in Bilbury in a taxi and was promptly turned round by his wife Trudy who was the only one of the pair who remembered that when he left the house for a business meeting in Belgium last Thursday, Harry had taken their car. He had left the car at Heathrow Airport. Harry is terribly absent-minded and once phoned home to say that he was in Madrid and could Trudy please tell him what he was doing there. On one famous occasion he got as far as Istanbul with no money, no passport, no luggage and only carpet slippers on his feet.

Late on Wednesday evening Peter Marshall called the police again and reported that the burglar who had stolen his alarm clock had left a bomb behind his bedside table. P.C. Wren, who, despite pressure from Peter, was reluctant to call the bomb squad all the way from London, bravely investigated and discovered that the ticking was caused by Peter’s alarm clock which must have fallen off the table the night before.

On Thursday Roy Pilton came into the pub and said he was having second thoughts about getting married. When he’d had a few pints of Frank’s best bitter he said he’d marry Iris if, when he tossed a coin, it came up heads three times running.

The first three tosses were all tails so Thumper said they couldn’t be counted and Roy had to carry on. Eventually, after tossing the coin 18 times it came up heads three times running and to everyone’s relief Roy swore that he’d go ahead with the wedding. The relief was occasioned by the fact that Roy is 42, Iris is 39, they have three teenage children and two grandchildren and they’ve been living together for 19 years.

On Friday, Patchy came into the pub looking very penitent and admitted that although it was true that he had come third in the Kentisbury Golf Tournament there had only been three entrants and he had taken 37 strokes more than the player who’d taken second place. He admitted that he had only shared this news with us when he had discovered that the full scores are to be printed in next week’s edition of the *Barnstaple, Bideford and Bilbury Herald.* Thumper said we’d all forgive him this slight deceit on condition that he bought drinks for all of us and rather to everyone’s surprise he did.

On Saturday Roy and Iris got married and despite all the business with the alarm clock Peter Marshall had still found time to mend Norman and Elsie’s false teeth and so they were able to enjoy themselves as usual.

INDISPENSABLE

Most people eventually lose much of the accent they had as children if they move to a new locality and stay there long enough. Britons who emigrate to America or Canada usually come home speaking with a noticeable transatlantic twang. And even the Irish usually lose much of their brogue when they've lived in England for a few years.

But Evan Jones who lives on the outskirts of Bilbury and operates a one man taxi service into and out of Barnstaple is the proverbial exception who proves the rule. Evan has lived in Bilbury for longer than he or anyone else can remember but still speaks with such a broad native Welsh accent that most local people who do not know him well have to ask him to repeat everything he says several times. His accent is so broad that holiday-makers are frequently confused and assume that they cannot understand him because he is speaking in traditional Devonian.

I bumped into Evan late on Tuesday evening when I called into the Duck and Puddle to appease my rumbling stomach with one of Gilly Parson's cheese and mushroom pies. I've been a firm fan of Gilly's cooking ever since I moved to Bilbury. I was still working as the village doctor at the time and I was on my way home from delivering Mrs Bassett's seventh baby (when I claim the responsibility for 'delivering' the baby I am being unduly generous to myself for Mrs Bassett is such an accomplished mother that my role was confined to cutting the cord and accepting a large glass of very good whisky from Mr Bassett) and I found Evan slumped on the bar with his head in his hands and an untouched pint going flat on the bar in front of him. It's not like Evan to let a pint of beer go flat.

Beside Evan sat Dr Brownlow.

Dr Brownlow is the doctor who founded the practice I was running. Retired from medical practice (but not by any means retired from life) he had celebrated his birthday two weeks earlier but still looked fitter than many men twenty years younger than he was. Sitting upright on his bar-stool he was sipping his customary glass of malt whisky with obvious enjoyment.

Some people drink alcohol because they want to get drunk and forget their worries and a few drink the stuff because they are thirsty but Dr Brownlow drinks it because he likes the taste. Frank buys Dr Brownlow's favourite malt whisky by the case.

'I'm shattered, doc,' Evan sighed, when I asked him what was troubling him. (I knew that I had become a local in the village when I found that I could understand him). 'I had a funeral in Combe Martin on Monday and a wedding in Lynton on Tuesday and I've done seven trips into Barnstaple today.' Evan normally shared the taxi work with Peter Marshall, who keeps the village shop in Bilbury, but Peter's car had been off the road for a few weeks and so Evan had, for many in the village, been the only means of communication with the outside world.

'Why don't you say 'no' occasionally?'

Evan looked up at me sharply, as though I'd suggested that he give up beer, cigarettes or breathing. 'Say 'no'?' He looked across at Dr Brownlow as though expecting support.

'No one is indispensable,' Dr Brownlow pointed out.

Evan raised a doubting eyebrow.

Dr Brownlow took a sip at his whisky and sighed with delight. 'The church graveyard is full of people who thought they were indispensable,' he said wisely.

Evan was clearly unconvinced.

'If you work too hard you'll make yourself ill,' I warned him, prosaically.

Suddenly, Dr Brownlow climbed off his stool, leant over the bar and lifted a bowl of washing up water up onto the bar top. 'Put your hand into that,' he ordered Evan.

Obediently, Evan did as he was told though the water looked none too clean. People who have lived in Bilbury for more than a few years always do whatever Dr Brownlow tells them to do.

When I first came to work in Bilbury I was told a story about a woman who hadn't been out of bed for eleven years. Dr Brownlow had ordered her to stay there during an attack of flu. He had told her not to budge until he told her otherwise but had then forgotten to go back. At first I thought the story was apocryphal. These days I'm not so sure.

'Pull your hand out of the water.'

Once again Evan did what he was told.

'Now look at the size of the hole that you've left behind.' said Dr Brownlow.

Evan stared at the bowl of water blankly.

'That's how indispensable you are.' Dr Brownlow told him.

THE CRICKET CLUB DINNER

You will not be surprised to hear that the Bilbury Village Cricket Club usually holds its annual dinner at the Duck and Puddle.

Frank, the landlord, puts in an order for an extra couple of barrels of best bitter. Gilly, his partner in life and business, bakes a few dozen pies. And Peter at the village shop lets us have his left over Christmas crackers and Christmas paper serviettes at half price. (Peter always stocks very flimsy paper serviettes that look quite seasonal because they have scalloped edges and holly decorations but which are tissue paper thin and provide about as much protection from a spoonful of gravy or a dollop of custard as would a spider's web. I gather he buys them very cheaply from a wholesaler in Leeds who bought a warehouse full of them in 1946). Maisie Falmouth, the club treasurer's wife, hammers out some menus on her 1926 Royal sit up and beg typewriter. (The typewriter she uses, which once belonged to the late Arthur Appleyard, the author of the best-selling 'My Days at Sea' and undoubtedly one of Bilbury's best-known literary figures, lost its 'e' in 1987 and so since then Gilly has been under strict instructions to try her best to provide dishes that don't have an 'e' in them. This is even more difficult than it sounds. Try it if you don't believe me.)

This year, however, the club's four man committee (which basically consists of Kenneth, the club honorary vice president, because none of the other committee members is ever sober for long enough to make any sensible contributions to the proceedings) decided that we should hold our annual dinner at the Ritz-Carlton hotel; one of the very few establishments in North Devon which can boast both a full-time doorman who wears a top hat and a green tail coat and a porter who is employed to clean the guests' shoes while they sleep.

The man who is employed to clean the guests' shoes is called Carl Kassenbaum, by the way, and he has a very simple system to ensure that the shoes he removes are put back outside the correct bedroom doors. Sometime you must remind me to tell you about the night that Thumper Robinson decided to 'help' Carl 'improve' his system and accidentally got a high court judge mixed up in a rather unpleasant divorce scandal.

To be honest none of us was terribly keen about this change in our annual routine but by the time we found out what was happening, Kenneth had booked the hotel dining room and it was too late to do anything about it because the hotel had written Kenneth a letter telling him that the booking deposit was non-refundable.

'It's a daft idea,' complained Thumper, who pointed out that whereas we could all drive home from the Duck and Puddle without any danger of being stopped by the police we would never all get back to Bilbury without attracting Mr Plod's attention.

'I've hired a coach!' countered Kenneth. 'The coach will pick us all up at the Duck and Puddle and when the dinner is over, the coach will take us all back to our cars at the Duck and Puddle. Then we can all drive ourselves home.'

Grudgingly, Thumper agreed that this plan would at least reduce our chances of ending the night blowing up police sponsored balloons. 'Where did you find a coach driver who was prepared to sit around for four or five hours?' I asked Kenneth.

'Peter Marshall agreed to do it,' said Kenneth. 'He's borrowing the school bus for the evening.'

No one could argue too much about that and so last Saturday evening at about half past seven we all put down our glasses at the Duck and Puddle, said goodbye to Frank and Gilly (Frank is a vice President of the club but, not surprisingly, he was in a bit of a huff and had refused to join us) and clambered into the coach.

'You can't come in here,' said Eugene Cudlipp, the doorman at the Ritz-Carlton, when we all climbed down from the coach and tried to shuffle into the hotel.

'Don't be silly, Tiny,' said Kenneth. 'We've booked the dining room for the cricket club dinner.' Eugene, who is six foot six inches tall, has been called 'Tiny' since he was fifteen.

'I'm sorry, Mr Falmouth,' said Tiny, who was clearly quite genuinely cut up about it all. 'You and Mr Petherick can come in, but none of the others.'

'What on earth do you mean?' demanded Kenneth. 'Why can Reggie and I come in when the rest can't?'

'Because you're the only two who are wearing ties,' explained Tiny. 'The hotel manager doesn't allow guests into the hotel if they aren't wearing ties.' He looked around at the rest of us as we clutched at our tie-less throats.

And daft as it sounds they wouldn't let us in.

Kenneth insisted that Tiny went and fetched the manager but he wouldn't budge.

So, in the end Peter took us back to the Duck and Puddle where Gilly cooked us all egg and chips and Frank refused to sell us any beer until we'd all combed our hair. Peter popped out and fetched some Christmas crackers and serviettes so only Maisie's menus were missing but since there's an 'e' in 'egg and chips' she wouldn't have been able to type that out anyway.

THE CHRISTMAS FAYRE

The Bilbury Christmas Fayre may not be much compared to Disneyland but it's all we've got and every year it gives everyone a tremendous amount of pleasure.

America's Disneyland has its rides, its castles and a larger than life version of Mickey Mouse but the Bilbury Fayre has a proper old-fashioned coconut shy, a 'guess the weight of the cake' competition (Mrs Anstruthers always makes the cake and it is well-known now in the village that in order to stand a chance of winning first prize you have to double the first weight you thought of), a stall where you can win a goldfish if you can throw one of the rubber rings that are used for sealing jam jars over a pencil standing in a block of plasticine and a stall where you can rent three wooden balls and throw them, just for the hell of it, at four rows of redundant crockery. A banker from Manchester once put down a £20 note and stayed at the 'break a plate' stall for an hour and a half, breaking umpteen old plates and happily exorcising a year's accumulated strains and stresses. He was afterwards heard to claim that he had derived more relief from this ninety minutes of organised destruction than he had from two and a half years of extremely expensive psychoanalysis.

In my first year as a doctor in Bilbury I was honoured by being put in charge of the 'guess the number of peas in a teapot' stall. A small handwritten card pinned to the trestle table upon which my teapot stood informed competitors that the prize on offer was a 'flamingo pink' plastic shower caddy 'designed to hold soap, shampoo and sponge while you shower with complete freedom and confidence'.

Despite the fact that as far as I aware there was not one home in Bilbury which contained a fitted shower, this prize seemed surprisingly attractive to those villagers who regarded themselves as expert in the unusual and esoteric art of judging the pea capacity of a brown catering size teapot.

All things considered there is no doubt that the Christmas Fayre was, as usual, an enormous success and when I left at nine thirty, I was tired but contented for my stall alone had raised over £7 towards the Village Hall Dry Rot Fund, a noble attempt to raise enough money to enable the village hall to combat the ravages of a persistent and apparently insatiable fungus.

To be honest I would have left earlier, for since the fuses in the village hall blew up at Halloween all of our social events have been primarily afternoon affairs, but Mrs Pilkington told me that as custodian of the 'peas in the teapot' stall it was my responsibility to check the entries and find the winner.

'Fine,' I said. 'Have you got the correct answer?'

'What answer?' asked Mrs Pilkington.

'The number of peas there are in the teapot,' I explained.

'Oh no,' said Mrs Pilkington. 'You've got to count them yourself.'

In view of the lack of light I did my counting sitting in the car and it was pitch black when I left. Since I was hungry and I knew that Patsy, who had been in charge of the 'toss a horseshoe over a wooden stake' stall, had gone over to Barnstaple with Kay to visit Elspeth Norwich who was still in hospital after her unfortunate accident with the patented automatic butter pat maker which she bought from an auction in Torrington, I decided to call in at the Duck and Puddle for a bite of something to eat.

'I'm glad you're here,' said Gilly. 'Would you call round on the Prestons? Mrs Preston rang half an hour ago and said it was urgent. She hoped you might pop in. They can't get hold of the doctor in Barnstaple.' The Prestons' cottage is only about five minutes away from the pub so I asked Gilly to cook me some chips, cut me half a dozen slices of bread and butter and put a couple of eggs out for frying while I popped over there to see what was the matter.

'It's our Henry,' said Mrs Preston, opening the door and ushering me in. 'He's been in bed for three days with a bit of a cold.'

'Right,' I said. 'Let's have a look at him, then!'

'I took Simon to the Fayre,' said Mrs Preston, as she led the way upstairs. Simon is her other son. At nine he is two years older than Henry. 'We won a goldfish which Simon insisted that we gave to Henry.'

'That's nice,' I murmured.

'Well it was,' said Mrs Preston, opening the door to Henry's bedroom. Henry was sitting up in bed looking, I thought, rather pleased with himself. 'Simon insisted that we put the goldfish by Henry's bed so that he'd see it when he woke up.'

I still didn't guess what had happened.

'We haven't got a goldfish tank,' said Mrs Preston. 'So I put the fish into a glass of water,' she nodded towards a half empty drinking glass on Henry's bedside table. It clearly contained no goldfish.

'I can't see a goldfish,' I said, stupidly.

'No,' said Mrs Preston. 'Henry woke up feeling thirsty and took a drink out of the glass.'

And that is when I realised where the goldfish was.

'The goldfish is in my tummy,' said Henry, just in case I still hadn't worked it out. He looked very pleased with himself.

'Do you think he'll be all right?' asked Mrs Preston, anxiously.

I told her that my fears were entirely for the goldfish and asked her to ring Gilly and tell her to put my eggs in the frying pan.

THE ANTIQUE TABLE

It's been a busy week in Bilbury.

I've been involved in something very illegal and I've spent all the money Patsy and I have on a table for Bilbury Grange.

It all started when Patchy Fogg came into the Duck and Puddle on Tuesday evening looking really miserable.

'What on earth's the matter with you?' asked Thumper. 'You look as though you've lost a Georgian silver sugar sifter and found a plastic tea spoon!'

'I'm in a quandary,' moaned Patchy. 'It's terrible. I really don't know what to do.'

Frank pulled him a pint of stout and handed him a packet of crisps, and armed with these life-saving essentials Patchy sat himself down at the bar.

'One of those interior decorators from London came into the shop today,' he told us. 'He saw that oak refectory table I've got, got himself all excited the way they do, and told me he wanted to buy it for a client in Kensington.'

'Sounds good so far,' said Thumper with a grin. 'He didn't knock you down too far on the price, did he?'

'Didn't even haggle,' said Patchy. 'Those guys never do. They're working on commission so the more they spend the more they make.' He pushed a handful of crisps into his mouth, crunched them to death and then washed them down with a long draught of stout.

'So where's your problem?' demanded Thumper. 'Sounds like a good day's work to me!'

'He wants the table for what he called a 'dining nook',' said Patchy. 'And apparently his client's 'dining nook' is nine inches shorter than my table.'

'Can't they knock a wall down or something?'

Patchy shook his head miserably. 'Apparently not,' he said. 'He wants me to take nine inches off the table before I deliver it.'

Now, at last, Frank, Thumper and I all understood Patchy's dilemma.

Patchy Fogg is a smooth operator, a fast talker and not above a little bit of chicanery. There probably aren't many things that he won't do to make a few bob.

But he does have a genuine and enduring love for antiques.

'What the hell am I to do?' he asked us, plaintively. 'I've had that table for nine months. It's a beautiful piece of work. I was beginning to abandon the idea of selling it at the price I need to get to give me a profit.' He crunched some more crisps and washed them down again with more stout. 'But it's a marvellous table. It came from a monastery in Yorkshire and it's absolutely genuine. Sixteenth century. It would be an act of vandalism to chop nine inches off the end just so that it will fit into some damned 'dining nook' in Kensington.'

'Can't you switch tables?' asked Thumper, clearly surprised that Patchy hadn't thought of it.

'Obvious thing to do,' agreed Patchy. 'My first thought. But I've got to deliver the damned table on Friday so I've got two days. I've got no chance of finding anything remotely like it.'

'Make a copy and chop nine inches off the copy,' said Thumper, bluntly.

Patchy looked at him rather wearily. 'I've got two days!' he said. 'Two days to make a sixteenth century oak refectory table?' He laughed but it was a hollow, tragic laugh.

'We'll give you a hand,' said Thumper. 'I've got some old oak planks that came out of a house in Parracombe and you must have some handmade nails.'

Patchy looked at him and then looked at Frank and me. For a few moments he didn't say anything. 'Would you?' he asked.

'Of course!' said Thumper. 'Anything to help a mate out.'

I swallowed hard. 'I'll help,' I agreed. 'I'd rather you sold him a fake than cut the end off a genuine antique table.'

'I dare say there'll be a drink in it for us ...,' said Frank with a grin.

'There certainly will!' said Patchy, enthusiastically.

So there and then Frank left Gilly in charge of the Duck and Puddle and while he and I and Thumper drove out to Thumper's place and started sorting out the oak planks, Patchy called in at his shop to measure the table and pick up some old handmade nails and wooden pegs.

It took us thirty hours to make the fake table and when we'd finished it looked so good that Frank had to turn away when Thumper got his saw and cut nine inches off the end of it. Frank said that even though it was a fake cutting it up was sacrilegious.

On Saturday, when Patchy got back from London, he rang to invite Thumper, Frank and me round to his place to help him celebrate. The interior decorator had paid him cash and Thumper and Frank looked very pleased with their share of the proceeds. I told Patchy that I'd talked it over with Patsy and that if he didn't mind we'd like to buy the original sixteenth century refectory table for Bilbury Grange and we'd be happy to have my cut of the profits as a discount.

Patchy said he'd be delighted and promised to deliver the table next Tuesday.

On our way back home Thumper told me that he had scratched an almost invisible mark on one of the legs just to be on the safe side.

‘It’s not that I don’t trust Patchy,’ he said. ‘But sometimes temptation can be very difficult to resist when you’re an antique dealer.’

The End

There are more short Bilbury stories in *Bilbury Pudding.*

Bilbury Pie, a collection of short stories, is the sixth of Vernon Coleman’s seven books about Bilbury. These are: *Bilbury Chronicles, Bilbury Grange, Bilbury Revels, Bilbury Country* and *Bilbury Village*. There are two books of short stories called *Bilbury Pie* and *Bilbury Pudding.* All are available as Amazon Kindle Books. If you enjoy the Bilbury books you may enjoy other books by the same author including `*Mr Henry Mulligan’*, `*Second Innings*’, `*It’s Never Too Late*’ and `*Mrs Caldicot’s Cabbage War*’. For full details of over 100 books by Vernon Coleman please see his author page on Amazon or http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

THE BILBURY CHRONICLES

Vernon Coleman

The first in the Bilbury series of novels describing the adventures (and misadventures) of a young doctor who enters general practice as the assistant to an elderly and rather eccentric doctor in North Devon.

When he arrives in Bilbury, a small village on the edge of Exmoor, the young doctor doesn't realise how much he has to learn. And he soon discovers the true extent of his ignorance when he meets his patients.

There's Anne Thwaites who gives birth to her first baby in a field; Thumper Robinson who knows a few tricks that aren't in any textbook and Mike Trickle, a TV quiz show host who causes great excitement when he buys a house in the village.

Then there's elderly Dr Brownlow himself who lives in a house that looks like a castle, drives an old Rolls Royce and patches his stethoscope with a bicycle inner tube repair kit; Frank the inebriate landlord of the Duck and Puddle, and Peter who runs the local taxi, delivers the mail and works as the local undertaker.

There's Miss Johnson, the receptionist with a look that can curdle milk; Mrs Wilson the buxom district nurse and Len her husband who is the local policeman with an embarrassing secret.

'A delightful read. I was entranced for hours.' *Miss S, Devon*

'I loved this book. Please send two more copies as soon as possible.' *Mrs S, Nottingham*

'Wonderful. One of the best novels I've ever read.' *Mr T, Leamington Spa*

'I enjoyed "The Bilbury Chronicles" more than any other book I've read for years. I am very much looking forward to the sequel.' *Mrs G, Sunderland*

BILBURY GRANGE

Vernon Coleman

The second novel in the Bilbury series. The Doctor and his wife move to Bilbury Grange - a dream of a house with stone lions guarding the front door, a Victorian, walled kitchen garden and a coach house complete with clock tower. But the newly married couple have no idea of the horrors that await them - crumbling slates, rampant woodworm, creeping dry rot and, worst of all, crooked builders all too ready to lend a hand. With money tight and repair bills soaring the young couple have to find a way to make ends meet.

But repairing Bilbury Grange isn't the only problem they face. Rumours abound that a developer is about to build new houses and a golf course in the village - and to top it all Thumper Robinson gets arrested!

Somewhere, as all this is going on, the Doctor and Patsy find time to adopt two young kittens and four young lambs.

'Captures the essence of old-fashioned village life where you never needed to lock your door.' *Western Evening Herald*

'A wonderful book for relaxing and unwinding…makes you want to up roots and move to the rural heartland. *Lincolnshire Echo*

'For sheer relaxing pleasure here's another witty tale from the doctor whose prolific writings are so well known to many of us.' *Bookshelf*

BILBURY REVELS

Vernon Coleman

The Bilbury series continues with this, the third novel set in the idyllic Exmoor village.

Disaster strikes during a long, relentless storm which batters Bilbury Grange, cuts off the village and blankets the whole area in a thick covering of snow. The Doctor nearly loses his life (he is saved by his faithful dog Ben) and the village schoolteacher loses her cottage roof.

The fun really starts when the villagers join together to raise money to repair the devastated cottage. Vernon Coleman describes an old-fashioned music hall evening (during which just about everything which can go wrong does go wrong), one of the funniest cricket matches ever to take place, and a village Produce Show where the locals compete (with some very surprising results) to find out who has grown the biggest and best vegetables.

And as if that wasn't enough the Doctor has to promote his first book. He travels to London, makes his first hilarious television appearance, and is invited to speak at a local village hall where things aren't quite what they seem to be.

Vernon Coleman's comic novels have been compared to Jerome K. Jerome's classic 'Three Men in a Boat'. Readers of the previous Bilbury books will love The Bilbury Revels. New readers be warned – you'll be hooked.

THE VILLAGE CRICKET TOUR

Vernon Coleman

A novel describing the adventures and mishaps of a team of cricketers who spend two weeks of their summer holidays on a cricket tour of the West Country, and who make up in enthusiasm for what they may lack in skill.

‘If anyone ever manages to bottle the essence of the village cricket he will very quickly scale the dizzy heights of personal fortune. In the meantime we read and write about it in pursuit of understanding. Seminal reading here includes Selincourt and Blunden and should now embrace Vernon Coleman’s latest offering, a whimsical piece about the peregrinations of a village team on its summer tour...all the characters are here, woven together by a raft of anecdotes and reminiscences and a travelogue of some of the most picturesque spots in the south west. ‘*The Cricketer*

‘Describes in hilarious fashion the triumphs and disasters of a Midlands teams tour of the West Country and there is not a little of Jerome K. Jerome in Mr Coleman’s style.*’ Worcester Evening News*

‘I enjoyed it immensely. He has succeeded in writing a book that will entertain, a book that will amuse and warm the cockles of tired hearts. And what a change it makes from the wearisome cluckings of the current crop of cricket books with their grinding pomposity and, in many cases, their staggering lack of craftsmanship and originality.*’ Punch*

‘A delightful book which also highlights some of the most spectacular scenery in Cornwall and Devon.’ *The Cornishman*

‘Vernon Coleman is obviously a man who has enjoyed his cricket and over the years has committed to memory the many characters he has seen playing the game. He weaves them into the story as he charts the progress of his team’s tour of Devon and Cornwall. The tale captures club cricket as everyone imagines it should be.’ *Falmouth Packet*

‘Coleman is a very funny writer. It would be a pity if cricketers were the only people to read this book.’ *This England*

THE MAN WHO INHERITED A GOLF COURSE

Vernon Coleman

Trevor Dukinfield, the hero of this delightful novel, is a young, not very successful journalist. Completely out of the blue, Trevor receives a letter informing him that he has inherited a golf course from an uncle he never knew he had.

You might think that this would have been greeted by Trevor as good news. Indeed, Trevor *did* treat it as good news until he heard about the two small snags which accompanied his good fortune.

First, in order to keep the golf club under the rules of his uncle's will, Trevor must play a round of golf in less than 100 strokes. Second, he has to find a partner to help him beat two bankers in a match play competition. Not particularly stringent conditions you might think - except that Trevor has never played a round of golf in his life, unless you count an hour spent on a crazy golf course in Weston-super-Mare.

'Another witty volume from the doctor who has successfully turned from medical topics to novel writing. The...mix of anecdotes and moments of sheer farce make for an absorbing read.' *Lancashire Evening Telegraph*

…another delightful and amusing story. I rate this one as the best of his twelve novels so far. His fans will lap it up.' *Sunday Independent*

MRS CALDICOT'S CABBAGE WAR

Vernon Coleman

Thelma Caldicot was married to her husband for thirty dull and boring years. Then completely out of the blue, two police officers arrived at Thelma's house to break some sad news. That afternoon, while her husband was at a cricket match, she had become a widow.

Her ambitious son Derek soon appears on the scene, determined to interfere in every aspect of his mother's life. After thirty years of being dominated by her husband, it looks as though Thelma's son is about to step into his shoes and continue the good work.

But then something happens to Thelma Caldicot. After years of being pushed around and told what to do, she takes charge of her life and fights back.

Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War is the poignant, warm and often funny story of an ordinary women who finally decides to stand up for herself.

'…a splendid, relaxing read…' *Sunday Independent*

Thank you so much for Mrs Caldicott's Cabbage War. All your books are great. *Mrs N*

The Young Country Doctor: Book 7

BILBURY PUDDING

Vernon Coleman

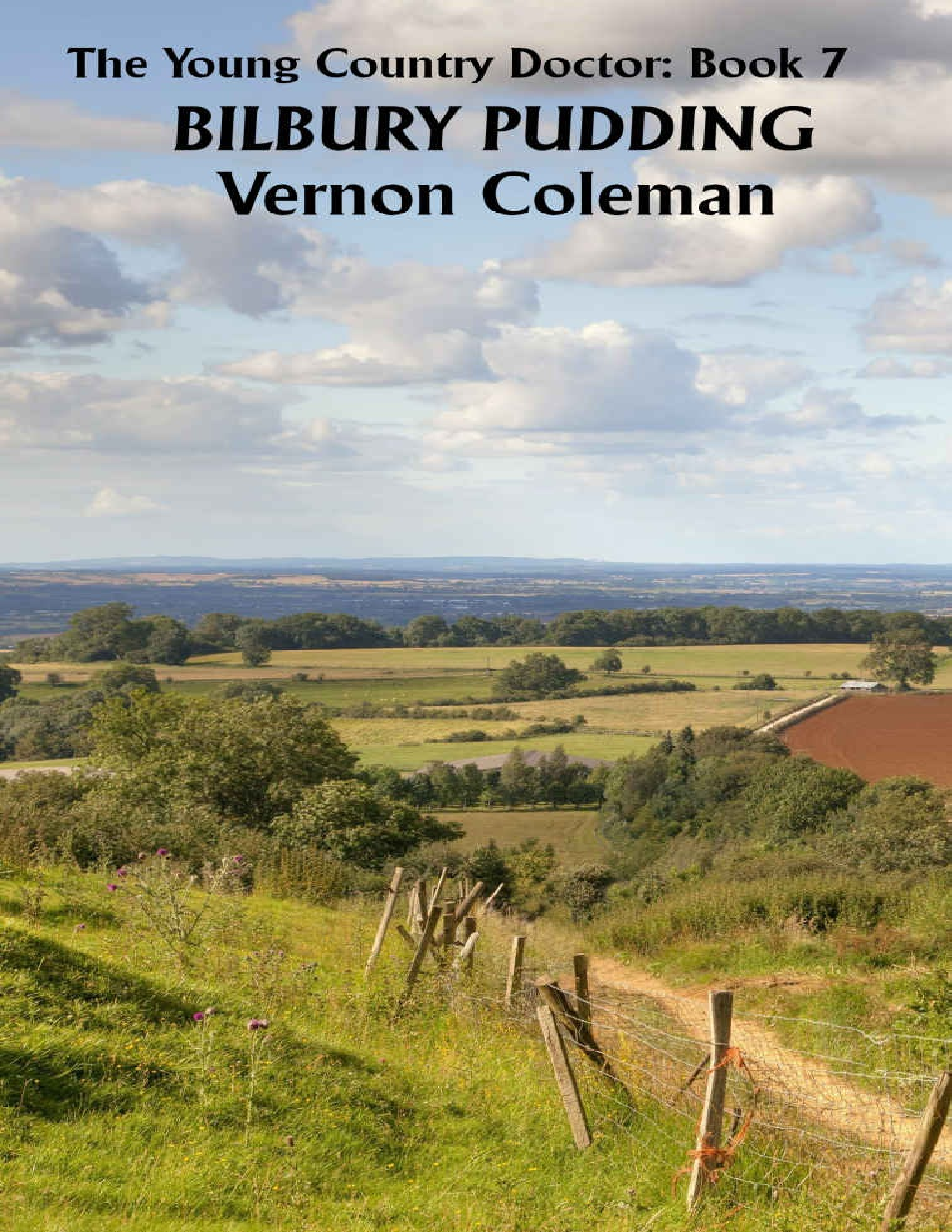

The Young Country Doctor Book 7

Bilbury Pudding

(Short stories)
Tales from the village of Bilbury

Vernon Coleman

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DEDICATION

To Donna Antoinette, who bakes the best cakes and pastries in Bilbury (her buns are, quite rightly, widely revered) and whose music soothes my soul.

If God were kind and said to me
Go dream a wife
Your choice is free
She is the one who it would be.

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THE JUDGE

Most of the patients I saw at my surgery in the North Devon village of Bilbury were locals; villagers whose families had lived in Bilbury longer than they, or anyone else, could remember. Thanks to Miss Johnson, my receptionist, I always had their medical records in front of me when they came in to see me though in many cases, of course, the official records were quite unnecessary. I knew their lumps and bumps and medical idiosyncrasies almost as well as they did.

There were, of course, occasional exceptions: visitors, known officially as 'temporary residents', who did not live in the village; for whom I held no medical records and about whom I knew nothing.

'There's a gentleman to see you who is new to the village,' whispered Miss Johnson at the end of one Saturday morning surgery. Miss Johnson is efficient but kind. She is also enormously discrete and very loyal. She is in her fifties, tall, slim and white haired. She dresses neatly and always has a single row of pearls around her neck. 'He's staying for two nights at the Duck and Puddle. I think he's just passing through.' She put the form he'd completed on the blotter on my desk. I glanced down at it. His name, date of birth and home address, and the name and address of the GP with whom he was registered were all written down neatly.

The Duck and Puddle is our village pub, run by Frank and Gilly Parsons. Frank, the landlord, is in his late fifties. He is bald, overweight and a shuffling advertisement for poor health. He suffers from chronic bronchitis, persistent high blood pressure and an overworked and constantly complaining liver. His wife, Gilly, is tiny, lively and in her forties. They have two or three bedrooms which they let out occasionally to travellers and holiday-makers. They don't take couples with children or young men travelling in groups, and Gilly has been known to turn away couples if she thought one or the other might not be with their lawful partner. They don't have a lot of people staying with them but that suits them fine.

I looked at Miss Johnson and raised an eyebrow.

'Sixty four, sixty five next February, gentleman, smart sounding address on his form, possibly a lawyer though I'm guessing, nice Mercedes motor car, bachelor, lives alone, expensive suit, has his shirts professionally laundered, very nice luggage, silver-backed hairbrush, paid Gilly in cash in advance for two nights.'

I couldn't help smiling as Miss Johnson passed on this information, especially the use of the word 'gentleman'. She blushed lightly. 'He's been in the waiting room for fifteen minutes,' she explained. 'I rang Gilly for a little extra information.'

Bilbury is one of those small, off-the-beaten track Devon villages where the locals know each other so well that the arrival of any stranger is a noteworthy event. The North Devon coast is three miles to the north and our nearest big towns include such urban centres as Combe Martin, Lynton and Ilfracombe. Barnstaple, ten miles or so to the west, is our metropolis. It is to Barnstaple that we go when we need the services of solicitors or dentists or when we need to purchase exceptional items such as new shoes or carpets.

I glanced down at the form. 'Rushmore. Gerald Albert.' Miss Johnson nodded. 'That's what he told me,' she agreed. 'He told Gilly the same.'

'So if he's here under a pseudonym he's bright enough to stick to his story,' I quipped.

Miss Johnson looked at me, not sure whether or not I was being serious.

'OK,' I said. 'Ask him to come in, please.'

Rushmore, Gerald Albert, looked younger than his age. He wore an expensive light tweed suit, a club tie which I didn't recognize and a silk shirt that had his initials on the pocket. A laundry mark was just visible. His clothes seemed to have been made for someone a couple of sizes larger and so I assumed that he had recently lost weight. His grey hair was a tight mass of curls just above his ears, but thinned quickly into a desert-like scalp at the top of his head. He looked distinguished. I could see why Miss Johnson had called him a 'gentleman'. He looked like the sort of man who is accustomed to having people jump without him having to tell them to do it.

I smiled, greeted him, waved him to a chair and invited him to sit down. He nodded but didn't smile back.

I didn't have to put much effort into making a diagnosis because he told me what was wrong with him.

'I'm depressed,' he said. 'I have difficulty in sleeping, I wake early in the mornings, I have no appetite.'

'How long have you felt like this?'

'Several months. Three months. Four.'

'Can you think of anything that might have triggered it?' He thought for a moment and then shook his head.

'Are you being treated? Drugs? Anything?'

Another shake of the head. 'I haven't spoken to anyone else,' he confessed.

'Not even your GP?'

He shook his head.

'But you've been ill for some months?'

He nodded.

'Is there a reason for your not having talked to your GP?'

'It's difficult.'

'I'm not a psychiatrist,' I pointed out, after a silence.

'Splendid,' he said. 'I've never had much faith in psychiatrists. I would deny I ever said this but it has always seemed to me to be a black art masquerading as a science.'

'What are you doing in Bilbury?'

'Taking a short break.'

'How long are you staying?' I asked, though I already knew the answer.

'Just two nights. Last night and tonight.'

Mr Rushmore was not the usual 'temporary resident'. The visitors who call into my surgery are usually suffering from something sudden and unexpected. A chest infection. A urinary infection. Earache. Fishing hook caught in a finger. Sprained ankle. I treat them, give them a note to pass on to their own GP, send them on their way and never see them again.

'Have you been resting? Off work?'

He shook his head.

'Might it not be a good idea to take a break?'

'It's difficult,' he said.

'What about taking next week off work?' I asked.

'I can't.'

I asked him why not.

'I have to be in court on Monday,' he answered. 'I need to leave here early on Sunday evening.'

'I'm sorry to hear it,' I said. I wondered what he'd done. 'Would it help if I gave you a note?'

He shook his head sadly. 'I've got to be there,' he said. 'They're expecting me.'

I nodded. 'They're expecting me,' seemed a sweet way to put it.

There was a silence for a while.

'I'm the judge,' he said.

Suddenly I could see why he had to be in court. And I thought I understood his reluctance to discuss his problem with his own GP. It had never before occurred to me that judges might suffer from the same weaknesses and frailties as other human beings.

'The sort of judge who wears a wig and sends people to prison?'

He nodded. 'People who have done something wrong.'

I drew some circles on my blotter and then turned them into faces. I'd never knowingly treated a judge before. It occurred to me that I might have a responsibility to insist that he signed himself off work. I wondered if I could. Can a doctor's authority exceed that of a judge?

'It's something of a dilemma isn't it?' he asked, seemingly reading my mind.

I agreed that it was. 'How did you come to be here? Why tell me if you won't tell your own GP?'

'I came away to think about things. I decided I needed to talk to someone. It had to be a stranger. Someone who doesn't know where I live or where I work. And it had to be a priest or a doctor.'

'Someone obliged to keep your secret?'

'Precisely.'

'How did you choose Bilbury?'

'I didn't choose Bilbury. I just found myself here.'

'And decided to look for a local doctor?'

He nodded.

'Your name isn't Rushmore, of course?'

He shook his head. 'I'm afraid it isn't.'

'And the address you gave on your form is false?'

'I'm afraid it is. Giving a false name and address on a temporary resident form may be morally debatable but it isn't, strictly speaking, illegal.'

I thought about things for a moment.

'Which means,' he said, 'that even if you want to insist that I take time off from work, you cannot.'

'No, I suppose not,' I agreed.

'If it is any consolation I gave a false name and address to liberate you from a potentially uncomfortable dilemma.'

I nodded my understanding.

'But maybe you can help me.'

'Maybe I can. But not in half an hour I'm afraid.'

'Maybe we can sort something out.'

'Do you have a suggestion?'

'I need to talk to someone. If you can find the time. I'll pay you. I can come back. But not as an NHS patient. I'll come to you as a private patient.'

'I don't take private patients.'

'Maybe you would consider an exception?'

'I'll think about it. But if I treat you I may need to prescribe for you.'

'No drugs. I won't take drugs. Drugs might affect me.'

'Affect your judgement?'

A hint of a smile. The first. And a nod.

'Why trust me? You don't know anything about me.'

'I'm quite a good judge of character,' he said. 'It comes with the job.'

'I suppose it does.'

'And I asked around.'

'In the village?'

'I had to ask how to find the local doctor. I pretended to be less capable at following directions than I am. I enquired at the public house and the local shop and spoke to a woman on a bicycle and a man in a small but very dirty truck. Everyone I spoke to seemed to have confidence in your skills as a physician. The man in the truck spoke of you with some affection in his voice.'

I felt a mixture of pride and embarrassment. 'That's good to hear.' I paused. 'The man in the truck was about my age? Well-built and weather-beaten?'

'He was. He looked reliable. Not the sort of man to dissemble.'

'Thumper Robinson,' I said. 'That's his name. I don't think he's ever dissembled in his life.'

'Is Thumper his real name?'

I thought for a moment. 'As far as I know. His family all call him Thumper.'

Thumper is in his twenties. He has an unruly mop of black, curly hair that he is beginning to lose and drives an ancient, powerful four wheel drive truck that has what look like metal farm gates welded to the front and the back. If you ask him what he does for a living he usually smiles and replies: 'Oh, a bit of this and a bit of that.' He is a jack of all trades and a master of most of them.

I looked at my watch. 'I have two urgent visits I must make,' I told him. 'Can you come back later?'

'You choose the time. I have nothing else to do and nowhere else I need to be.'

'Three o'clock this afternoon?'

'That's fine. Does the Duck and Puddle provide a good lunch?'

'Excellent.'

He rose and held out his hand. 'Until three o'clock,' he said.

I shook his hand and, when he'd gone, I sat for several minutes thinking about who he was, what he'd said and how on earth I could possibly help him.

***

The judge was, as I had expected, on time.

Miss Johnson doesn't work on Saturday afternoons and so I escorted him into the surgery myself.

'I suggest that I pay you £50 an hour,' he suggested. 'If you think that too little, please tell me now.'

I looked at him, astonished. 'I don't think I make much more than that in a week!'

He smiled. The second smile of the day. 'So £50 an hour will be acceptable?'

I shook my head. 'We'll find some other way for you to pay me,' I told him.

He frowned.

'Nothing illegal,' I assured him.

He seemed to realise that I was serious and he didn't press the point. But I could tell that my refusal had made him slightly uncomfortable.

And then we talked about his life. I asked him to tell me five things which had made him laugh in the previous six months. I asked him about his hopes, his ambitions and his fears. I asked him what things he enjoyed and what things worried him.

At first he clearly felt uncomfortable talking about such things. He answered vaguely or flippantly. But when I pointed out that I didn't know his real name and didn't know where he lived and that he could therefore treat me as the stranger I was, a medical confessor, he seemed to feel more comfortable about opening his heart.

He couldn't remember anything that had made him laugh. He said his hopes and ambitions and fears were all related to his work. He admitted that his work was his life.

When my wife Patsy knocked on the door to tell me that it was six o'clock, and to ask me if I wanted dinner, both the judge and I were surprised.

'Would you like to stay to dinner?' I asked, as he stood up to leave.

'Oh no, thank you,' he said swiftly. 'I've reserved dinner at the Duck and Puddle.'

Both Patsy and I knew that this was nonsense. No one at the Duck and Puddle has ever reserved a table. But I assumed that the judge felt uncomfortable about staying and that the lie was his escape clause. I guessed that he would suspect that I would know it wasn't true. I didn't press him. Patsy said nothing.

At the door the judge turned. 'I'm not sure why,' he said bluntly. 'But I feel in some way strangely comforted.'

'I'm pleased.'

'I would like to see you again.'

'OK.'

'May I return next weekend?'

'Of course. Are you still here tomorrow? You can come back tomorrow afternoon if you like?'

He thought about this for a while. 'I think that may be too soon,' he said at last. 'I need to think about today's conversation. There are many confusions in my mind. A week's interval would give me chance to clear my thoughts.' He looked at me. 'Besides,' he said, 'I think I've taken up enough of your time for one weekend.'

I started to say something but he held up a hand to stop me. Then he hesitated, clearly wanting to add something else. 'I am aware that you will treat our relationship in confidence.'

'Of course.'

'I appreciate that,' he said. 'And I trust you completely. But, since I may be taking up a large part of your weekends, I think you should explain things to your wife.'

When he'd gone I did as he'd suggested and told Patsy everything he'd told me.

'What do you think of him?' I asked her.

'I don't really know,' Patsy protested. 'I only met him for a moment.'

'Sum him up,' I said. 'First impressions. Two words.'

'Pompous and lonely,' she said immediately.

They would have been the two words I would have used.

***

The judge came to see me every Saturday for five weeks. He stayed at the Duck and Puddle and when he wasn't in my surgery he spent his time walking around the village. He became a regular customer at the village shop where Peter Marshall laid in a good supply of the old-fashioned humbugs he liked to suck as he walked.

The judge and I talked for two to three hours each week. The practice in the village was quiet at the time; I had no one seriously ill to worry about and, therefore, no exceptional demands upon my time.

As I had warned the judge before we had started I had no training in psychiatry and no specific aims in mind when we talked. It seemed to me that if I could learn to understand him a little through listening then maybe he would understand himself a little better too. And, maybe, through understanding would come a solution.

At the end of our second meeting he again raised the question of payment. He took out his wallet, removed a clump of notes and placed them on the desk.

'No thanks,' I told him.

'But I have to pay you,' he said.

'You don't have to pay me,' I said, softly.

'But that's the way the world works,' he said.

'No it isn't,' I said. It was the first time I'd contradicted him and he looked startled. 'Not in Bilbury.'

I thought about telling him that the fee he had to pay would be accepting my time without payment, and understanding and accepting that not everything is a matter of money. But that seemed pompous and I didn't want to fight his pomposity with any of my own.

And then, quite on the spur of the moment, I thought of something.

'Miss Billingham's wall has fallen down,' I told him. 'Actually, it was helped on its way by a delivery lorry which took the corner too sharply. But it has been falling down for years. Thumper says it was falling down when he was a kid.'

'I can't and won't interfere with the courts,' said the judge firmly.

'No, no,' I said. 'I don't want you to. It's simpler than that. Miss Billingham can't afford a new wall and the lorry driver's insurance company will take years before they agree to cough up a penny.'

'You want me to pay for a new wall?' asked the judge, looking surprised.

I shook my head.

'We're going to rebuild her wall tomorrow,' I said.

'We?'

'The village. But I want you to help us.'

'It's Sunday.'

'Yes.'

'I don't know anything about building walls.'

'Nor do I.'

'I'm a judge for heaven's sake.'

'I'm a doctor.'

'You're helping?'

'Of course.'

'Do you know anything about building walls?'

'No. But I can push a wheelbarrow and probably mix cement if someone shows me how to do it.'

'Why don't we just pay someone to do it?'

'Because Miss Billingham would feel obliged to us.'

'And she won't feel obliged if we rebuild her wall?'

'No, of course not. We'll do it as friends. She'll make endless cups of tea and hand out sandwiches and cake.'

The next day the judge and I spent eight hours helping Thumper Robinson, Patchy Fogg, Frank Parsons, Peter Marshall and the rest of the village to rebuild Miss Billingham's wall. Patchy Fogg is a local antique dealer who specialises in selling very nearly genuine antiques. He is invariably unshaven, has a ponytail tied back with a small red ribbon, and usually wears a pair of dirty jeans and a grubby T-shirt. Peter Marshall runs the well-stocked Bilbury shop. He is also the local taxi driver, postman, florist and pessimist. He used to be the local undertaker too until his old hearse broke down while taking a customer to the cemetery in Lynton. Peter has a thin moustache on his upper lip and always wears a badly creased suit and a flat cap. Peter has a reputation for being the meanest man on Exmoor but this is unfair. He is probably the meanest man in England. It was heart warming to see him helping rebuild Miss Billingham's wall. (I later found out that he had been bullied into it by Frank Parsons who had told him that if he didn't help, the cement and sand and other essential ingredients would not be purchased from his shop but from a builders' merchant in Barnstaple.)

At the end of the day I walked back to the Duck and Puddle with the judge.

'Thanks,' I said. 'You did a good day's work.'

'You're a very strange person,' said the judge. I grinned at him.

'I don't understand this,' said the judge. 'But I feel as though I've actually done something useful with my life today.'

'Good.'

'It's a very disconcerting feeling,' admitted the judge. He thought for a while and then added: 'I'm not sure that I appreciate it.'

I didn't say anything.

'And I'm beginning to get a suspicion that you're not quite as simple as I thought you were.'

***

My initial reading of the judge turned out to be accurate. He was a very lonely man and he perhaps took himself (and his undeniably awesome responsibilities) a little too seriously.

'It's difficult not to take my responsibilities seriously,' he told me when I tentatively made this latter point. 'I have the duty to protect society and the right to deprive a man of his freedom.'

'It is,' I agreed, 'a huge responsibility. But lots of people in our society have huge responsibilities.'

He had shaken his head at this.

'You don't agree?'

'No, I don't,' he said firmly. 'The responsibilities on a judge's shoulders are quite exceptional.'

'If you make a mistake then an innocent man could be locked up for years?'

'Precisely. I don't think many men have to carry that sort of responsibility.'

'Oh, they do,' I insisted. 'They don't bury your mistakes do they?'

He looked puzzled.

'If you make a mistake and send an innocent man to prison there is a chance that he, his friends or his lawyer will fight hard and reverse your decision?'

He nodded.

'What about the surgeon?' I said. 'If he makes a mistake his patient may die. And then there is nothing he, his friends or his lawyer can do to bring the patient back to life. The error is irreversible.'

He said nothing but stared hard at a photograph of Bilbury village green which I'd had framed and which hung on the wall in my surgery. The photograph had been taken in summer and there was a cricket match in progress.

'Even the ordinary GP carries huge responsibilities,' I pointed out. 'If I make a mistake writing out a prescription I may give a patient the wrong drug - or the wrong dosage of the right drug. The result could easily be fatal.'

'Doctors are perhaps a rather special case,' murmured the judge.

'And then there's airline pilots,' I said. 'One mistake at 10,000 feet and a whole plane load of people could be dead.'

'Possible,' mumbled the judge.

'Bus drivers,' I said. 'A moment's inattentiveness could result in a bus crashing into a wall and killing dozens of people.'

The judge cleared his throat. 'These are all exceptional circumstances.'

'No, they're not,' I insisted. 'And that, surely, is the point. Thousands of people have hugely responsible jobs. Most of them have far less time to make their decisions than you do. You can take as much time as you like before sentencing a man. You have time to consider and to reflect. Many people don't have the luxury of time. Many people are constantly being pushed hard, constantly forced to make important life or death decisions every minute of their lives, constantly forced to accept huge responsibilities. Many people with much greater responsibilities are far less well-paid and less well-regarded by society than you are.'

Suddenly, the judge pushed back his chair, stood up and walked out of the room.

I waited five minutes in case he returned. He didn't.

I spent the afternoon helping Patsy and our gardener, Mr Parfitt, clear the weed from our lake.

***

I didn't see or hear from the judge for a week. But the following Saturday he returned. For a moment or two I couldn't put my finger on precisely why, but he looked different.

'I owe you an apology,' he said.

'There's no...' I started to say.

He held up a hand to stop me. 'Please let me do this,' he said. 'I can't remember when I last apologised to anyone for anything. This may be the first time in my life that I have apologised and truly meant it. I owe you an apology for my rudeness. You have been kind and considerate and I behaved like a boor by walking out of your surgery.'

'Apology accepted,' I said. 'And all forgotten.'

'I also want to say that you were right,' he said. He paused, as though trying to decide what to say next. 'I was wrong,' he said at last and I realised that it wasn't the words he was searching for but the will to say them. It was only then that I realised why he looked different. He looked calmer and more at peace with himself His eyes looked alert, when before they had looked haunted. When I'd seen him before he had, I suddenly realised, had the eyes of a wounded and cornered wild animal. I'd seen precisely the same look in the eyes of animals I'd found wounded by the roadside; a mixture of fear, uncertainty and defiance. With rage in there too.

'I haven't been to court this week,' the judge said. 'I telephoned my clerk and told him that I was ill. I have a housekeeper, a woman who looks after me. She and her husband live in a flat in my house. Her husband looks after the garden and drives for me occasionally. They're a pleasant couple. Very loyal. I gave them a cheque and told them to go away on holiday. They seemed startled but they went. I lived on sandwiches and soup which I found in the kitchen. Do you know it took me an hour to find the can opener? After two days I lived on toast and soup because the bread had gone stale. After four days I lived on biscuits and soup because the bread had run out.'

I didn't say anything.

'I needed time to think,' he said.

I still didn't speak.

'It was the first time I've not been to work for ten years,' he said.

I nodded and listened.

'I realise why I've been depressed,' he said. There was a long pause. He cleared his throat. 'I don't suppose you've got any whisky in here?'

I don't keep whisky in my consulting room. In fact I'd never drunk whisky in there. And I don't usually drink alcohol before dinner. But I fetched a bottle of malt whisky and two crystal tumblers. I handed the judge the bottle. He poured a large drink and put the bottle back on my desk. He then picked up his glass and took a sip.

'Water?'

He swallowed and then shook his head. 'This is difficult for me to talk about,' he said. 'I don't usually need alcohol for courage.'

I nodded to show that I understood.

'I believe most people look forward to their retirement,' he said. He took a second sip, larger this time. He reached forward, turned the bottle, examined the label and nodded. 'I've been terrified about my impending retirement,' he admitted. 'When I was appointed a judge it was the culmination of my career. It was all I had hoped for. I took my responsibilities to society extremely seriously. I became a workaholic. And my work completely took over my life. I've never had hobbies, interests or friends. But I used to travel a little. And I collected nineteenth century maps. I gave up those things. I tried to become the person I thought I should be. Dedicated to justice.' He swallowed some more whisky.

He didn't speak for a while. I didn't speak either. I remembered Patsy's judgement. 'Pompous and lonely.'

'I was depressed because I was worrying about my retirement.'

I poured myself a drink. It didn't seem right to let him drink alone.

'This sounds pompous but there is no gentle way to put it. I worried about how the judiciary would cope without me.' He examined his glass. It was nearly empty. I pushed the bottle across the desk towards him. He added another inch of whisky to his tumbler. 'And I couldn't see that I could have a life without my work.'

'I understand,' I said.

'This morning, I walked past that wall we built. For the old lady who fed us those wonderful cakes.'

'Miss Billingham.'

He nodded.

'I cried,' he said.

'I'm sorry.'

'No, no,' he said quickly. 'I cried tears of happiness. I really enjoyed that day's work. I wasn't much help but at the end of the day I felt good. I felt that I had contributed something genuinely useful. And I'd managed it without my wig or my robes.'

'Good.'

'Last night I slept right through without waking. I didn't wake until nine o'clock this morning. I had my breakfast at nine forty five. Sausages, bacon, black pudding, eggs, mushrooms, tomatoes, fried bread, toast, marmalade, coffee.'

'Gilly makes a good breakfast.'

The judge smiled and nodded. There was a silence for a while.

'Are there ever any cottages for sale around here?'

'Occasionally.'

'Would you let me know if anything comes up? I don't much care what it looks like or how old it is. As long as it's within the village.'

'I'll let you know as soon as I hear anything,' I promised.

'I'd use it as a holiday cottage to start with,' he said. 'But it would be somewhere to live when I retire.' He stood up. 'I can't think of anywhere I'd rather live.'

'Bilbury can be rather quiet at times,' I warned him.

He shrugged. 'That's fine,' he said. He took out his wallet and extracted a small piece of cardboard. He handed it to me. It contained his name, address and telephone number. 'My real name,' he explained. I looked at it and put it into my desk drawer.

He stood up and we shook hands.

'Thank you,' he said.

'No need to thank me,' I said. 'I haven't done anything.'

'You did it very skilfully,' he said.

As we left we bumped into Patsy who was bringing some raspberries in from the garden. The three of us talked for a few moments. 'Would you two be my guests for dinner tonight?' he asked. 'At the Duck and Puddle?'

Patsy looked at me. He was, after all, my patient. 'We'd be delighted,' I told him.

'Thank you,' said Patsy. 'That would be lovely.'

'Nice man,' said Patsy when he'd gone. 'He's changed a lot. He seems much more relaxed. Much happier.'

'I think he is,' I agreed.

We had a splendid dinner and Frank told the judge about an empty cottage.

'It's on the edge of Softly's Bottom,' said Frank. 'The estate agents haven't got their hands on it yet. It's pretty derelict but you could do it up nicely.'

The judge turned to me. There was a twinkle in his eye. 'Maybe you know someone who could help me with that?'

'I'll have a word with Thumper Robinson,' I promised him. Two days after the judge went home a courier arrived at Bilbury Grange with a crate of malt whisky and a charming note. And a month later the judge bought the old cottage near to Softly's Bottom and Thumper started work repairing it.

PUDDINGS GALORE

When I first started in medical practice I sometimes tried to cajole or bully my patients into eating and drinking sensibly.

But, after a few months, I became old enough and wise enough to know that there are times when a doctor should hold back on the good advice - however sound or well meant.

By and large, if a patient has reached his or her three score years and ten I now assume that any bad habits he or she might have acquired are probably too well-ingrained to be changed. Besides, it's difficult to tell a fit and very healthy 88-year-old that his dietary habits are going to adversely affect his health and life expectation.

Occasionally, I find patients who have some very unusual habits.

It was just before lunchtime when I called in at the home of Richard Drummond, to check that a wound on his leg was healing properly.

Mr Drummond, who had celebrated his 82nd birthday just a few weeks earlier, had fallen off his mountain bicycle while riding across a stream. (He was compiling a book on fungi, and collecting photographs with which to illustrate it. He used his bicycle to enable him to cover more territory.) He had a badly cut leg which I'd stitched up, and it was time to remove the stitches.

When I got there Mr Drummond was preparing what obviously looked like a complicated meal.

'This will take about five minutes,' I told him. 'Or I can go and check Mrs Butterway's blood pressure and come back in an hour.'

'Oh, five minutes won't hurt anything,' he assured me, pulling up his trouser leg and sitting down on one of his kitchen chairs.

I opened my black bag and set to work.

'Your wound is healing perfectly,' I told him, when the stitches were out. 'Most people your age heal slowly but you heal like a 20-year-old.'

'Good, sensible, living,' he said with a wink.

'What are you having for lunch?' I asked him.

'Spotted dick with custard, treacle tart with custard and rhubarb crumble with ice cream,' he replied without hesitation.

I stared at him.

'I've always liked puddings,' he told me. 'When I reached 70 I told myself that I would eat only what I like. And I like puddings. So I'm going to eat puddings for the rest of my life - except for breakfast of course. I still eat three course meals but all the courses are puddings.'

'What do you have for breakfast?' I asked him, hardly daring to ask.

'Oh, the full English, of course. Every morning. Bacon, sausage, egg, fried bread, black pudding, tomatoes - the usual.'

'You look well enough on it,' I told him. He was about five foot eleven and no more than eleven stone.

'Regular exercise to burn up the calories,' he told me. 'Most old people sit around and get fat.'

He gave me two paper bags before I left. One contained homemade fudge and the other home-made toffee.

'You and your lovely wife must come to dinner one day,' he said. 'Just puddings, of course.'

'I'd love that,' I told him. 'But I think I'd better lose some weight before we accept the invitation.'

THE ASHES

When Patsy's paternal grandfather died he left instructions that he was to be cremated and his ashes distributed on the beach at Combe Martin. He was 95-years-old.

'There's a problem,' said Patsy's father, after the funeral. We were holding the wake at Bilbury Grange. 'Cecil Roberts, one of the local councillors, has found out. He hated my dad and he says that human ashes can't be spread on the beach. He says it's against the law.' (Since the truth is no longer an effective defence against those of a mean and litigious nature, I thought of changing Cecil Robert's name for this book. But, he has been dead for 20 years so I feel that including his proper name is probably not excessively reckless.)

'Oh, that's awfully unfair!' said Patsy. She was holding a plate full of sausage rolls which had been made by her mother. Her father, knowing the provenance of the sausage rolls, took one, popped it into his mouth and bit off half. It was, to my knowledge, his sixth.

'How could anyone hate your grandfather?' I asked Patsy. 'He was the kindest, sweetest old man I ever knew.'

I'd always been very fond of him. Until a week before his death he'd spent most of his days pottering in his garden, where he grew the greatest variety of lupins I, or anyone else I knew, had ever seen. He toyed with hollyhocks, stocks, larkspur, nasturtiums, sweet williams, delphiniums, pansies and sweet peas but lupins were his true floral love.

He had spent his early years as a school teacher at the local primary school but had retired at the age of 44 when he'd been diagnosed as suffering from a serious heart disorder. He had, therefore, spent a total of 51 years as a pensioner. I'd examined his heart and had never found anything wrong with it. When he died I didn't know what to put on the death certificate. I wanted to put 'old age' but I didn't think the Registrar would accept that so I put 'pneumonia' down as the cause of death. It probably had been a chest infection which had killed him. He'd suddenly become very frail in that last week. Not for nothing do they call pneumonia the old man's friend.

'I know what it is,' said Patsy's father, suddenly. 'Roberts hates my dad because he won the silver cup for the best carrot in 1933.'

Patsy and I looked at him. If he hadn't been so serious, and it hadn't been such a serious subject, I would have thought he was joking.

'Cecil thought it was his big chance,' he explained. 'He'd grown a big carrot. But my dad was a wonderful gardener. He didn't always specialise in lupins. In those days he grew lots of vegetables - including carrots. He had a bigger carrot than Cecil and he won the cup. He always won lots of cups. At least two every year for as long as I can remember.' It was true. The living room in their house was full of trophies. They were in a display cabinet, on the mantelpiece, on the windowsills and on the sideboard. There were more trophies upstairs in the bedrooms.

'That's a long time to bear a grudge.'

'Cecil is like that,' said Patsy's father, helping himself to a seventh sausage roll. 'He lives near the beach and he says that if he sees us going anywhere near it with my dad's ashes he'll call the police and have us all arrested.' He took a bite out of his latest sausage roll.

'Oh, that's just crazy,' I said. 'Why don't I go down there one night and spread his ashes around in the dark.'

'You can't,' said Patsy firmly. 'For one thing, my grandmother wants to be there. We can't possibly take her down onto the beach in the dead of night. She's very doddery. And for another thing, if they catch you and take you to court you could get a criminal record. Then the General Medical Council will get involved and you'll get struck off the medical register.'

I stared at her, knowing that everything she said was true.

'We could formally apply to the council for permission to distribute the ashes,' said Patsy's father.

'That would take months,' said Patsy. 'And if they refuse us permission that will be it.'

'Why we don't we do it next Thursday?' I asked.

Patsy and her father looked at me in surprise.

'You've had an idea?' said Patsy.

I nodded. They don't come to me often but this one was a good one. 'How many people will want to be there?'

'You and me, dad, mum, grandma and my sister,' said Patsy.

'Thursday would be fine with me,' said Patsy's father. 'What time?'

'Two o'clock?' I suggested.

'Two o'clock is fine.'

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The following Thursday, we parked our cars in the small car park close to the beach in Combe Martin. Patsy and I had Patsy's grandmother in our car and Patsy's parents and sister travelled together.

It was a grey, dull day; entirely suitable I suppose for the purpose for which we were gathered. I was relieved. I didn't particularly mind distributing Patsy's grandfather in full sunshine but I didn't want the crowds of children that a sunny day would have brought.

We walked down to the beach, no more than a few minutes gentle walk from the car park.

'Have you brought the ashes?' asked Patsy's father, in a whisper, as we strolled to the beach.

'They're in my handbag,' replied Patsy, also in a whisper.

Her father looked. Patsy was carrying a large, old black handbag. She was carrying it by the handles.

'It seems strange to think of my dad being in there,' said Patsy's father.

There wasn't anything to say to that so no one said anything. We walked onto the beach. Patsy's father and mother each took one of Patsy's grandmother's arms to help make sure that the old lady didn't slip on the pebbles. There must have been a high tide recently for there was seaweed everywhere.

'Let's sit here for a moment,' said Patsy, as we approached a large boulder. Her parents, sister and grandmother half sat and half leant on the boulder. Patsy and I squeezed alongside them. We sat there for a few minutes, looking out to sea.

'He was a grand man,' said Patsy's grandmother softly. 'A grand man.'

We watched the waves breaking on the shore. The tide was coming in but still some distance away. The sea was behaving itself that day; polite, respectful little waves flopping quietly onto the shore with hardly any fuss at all. I squeezed closer to Patsy and then bent down to fasten my shoelace which had come undone.

'Marriage,' said Patsy's grandmother, speaking to her son. 'It's all about love, support, kindness, friendship, loyalty, understanding, generosity and sharing.' She recited this list of virtues slowly, thinking between the words. 'Your father had all those qualities in abundance.'

'He was a good man,' murmured Patsy's father. 'A good man,' he repeated, relishing the adjective by stretching it out. 'A good father and a good husband.'

'He was a very gentle man,' said Patsy, who had, I knew, loved him very much.

'Do you know, we never argued,' said Patsy's grandmother.

'He was a very kind man,' said Patsy's sister, who hadn't previously spoken all afternoon. She rubbed at her eyes with a small, white handkerchief.

'Most of us are many different people,' said Patsy's grandmother. 'Have you noticed that?'

We all murmured that we had.

'He wasn't. He was the same person with everyone he met. All the time. Never changed.' There was a long pause. No one spoke. We knew she hadn't finished. She was thinking. 'If the world were made up of people like him there would be no need for armies or law courts or prisons.'

Patsy's father then said a prayer in memory of his own father. We all said 'Amen' when he'd finished. The sky was brighter now. There was blue sky up above and the greyness had gone. We sat for a while longer in the strengthening sunshine.

'I think I'm getting a little stiff,' said Patsy's grandmother after a few moments. 'This rock is hard.'

'Let's just walk for a minute or two,' I suggested.

We walked for a minute or two.

'Shall we go back to Bilbury Grange now?' suggested Patsy eventually. 'I'll make us all some tea. I've baked a fruit cake.'

'Your grandfather liked fruit cake,' said her grandmother.

'I know,' said Patsy quietly. I knew, but did not say, that Patsy had made the cake in his memory.

We walked slowly back to the car. Patsy's parents still one on each side of her grandmother. Patsy, her sister and I followed them.

As we were getting into our cars Patsy's father suddenly stopped and turned.

'We haven't done it!'

'Haven't done what?' asked Patsy.

'You know,' said Patsy's father, lowering his voice. 'We haven't done it. We haven't done what we came for. We haven't distributed the...' his voice trailed off.

'You mean grandfather's ashes?' asked Patsy.

Her father nodded.

'Grandfather is on the beach,' she said.

He looked at her. She opened her handbag so that he could see inside. It was empty.

'I never saw you do that,' he said, looking puzzled.

'Let's go and have a cup of tea and a piece of cake,' said Patsy softly.

We went home and had tea and huge slices of an excellent fruitcake.

'How did it happen?' Patsy's father asked me.

I took my penknife out of my pocket. 'When we were sitting on the rock I bent down to tie my shoe lace,' I told him. 'While I was tying my shoelace I cut a long slit in the bottom of Patsy's handbag. It was an old one made of thin leather. It cut easily.'

Patsy's father looked at me, slowly understanding. 'And then when we walked about on the beach...'

'As we walked about the ashes dribbled out of Patsy's handbag,' I explained.

'So he's on the beach now.'

'Your father is where he wanted to be.'

'That's nice,' he said.

'Would you like another slice of fruit cake?' asked Patsy.

ARBUTHNOT'S TOWER

Although Patsy came from a farming family her father had never kept hens. 'Never bothered with hens. Damned squawking nuisance,' said her father, Mr Kennett, when I had asked him why our hens were constantly pecking at one another. 'Know nothing about them. We buy our eggs from Peter Marshall.'

Patsy and I kept hens and they were as well looked after as any in Devon. They had all the natural light and fresh air they needed. They had room to flap their wings and chase flies. They could scratch about in the soil looking for worms. In hot weather they could bathe in the dust. They had room for a bit of privacy. And the cockerels lived with them.

Our hens were certainly good layers and they produced plenty of eggs for Patsy and I and everyone we knew who didn't keep hens. Peter Marshall was a little miffed for a while when Patsy's mother stopped getting her eggs from him. But we solved that diplomatic problem by selling him our extra eggs.

But all was not well.

'Our hens are a real worry,' I told my receptionist Miss Johnson at the end of one morning surgery. 'They keep pecking at one another. They're beginning to look distinctly down at heel.'

'I thought it was just husbands who were hen pecked.'

'Very clever. Do you know anything about hens?'

'Only that they lay eggs,' she said.

'I was looking for something rather deeper than that,' I replied.

'Some lay white eggs and some lay brown eggs,' she said. 'I don't know why. They just do.'

'You're no good at all,' I told her.

'Not if you're paying me for poultry advice,' she agreed. I read the mail she had opened, dictated half a dozen letters and wrote out a few prescriptions. 'Any requests for home visits?'

She shook her head.

'I think I'll just go and check on our hens once more,' I said.

I stood up and moved towards the door but before I got there the telephone rang. Miss Johnson answered and then called me back. 'It's Thumper Robinson,' she said. 'He says it could be urgent.'

I took the telephone from her.

'Could you pop in and take a look at Arbuthnot Cuthbertson?' asked Thumper. 'He's flying his flag upside down.'

I said I'd go there straight away.

When I was at medical school I thought I knew a number of eccentrics.

There was the student who always wore grey spats and a matching cravat with a pearl pin in it. And the anatomy lecturer who always wore odd socks (one fluorescent pink and one lime green) and who told anyone who noticed (and was foolish enough to comment) that he had another pair just like them at home. And there was a student who drove a twenty-year-old hearse which he had painted bright pink. Outside the hospital he always wore a black frock coat and a top hat.

But I slowly learned that these weren't real eccentrics. They were attention seekers who were playing at eccentricity. I met quite a number of real eccentrics in Bilbury; people who cared not a jot for convention but who lived their lives the way they wanted to lead them.

Arbuthnot Cuthbertson was one of them.

The second son of a rich landowner with extensive estates in the English midlands, Arbuthnot had been an explorer, a mountaineer and a racing driver. He had climbed the north face of the Eiger (wearing a pair of green corduroy trousers, a sports jacket with leather elbow patches and a small trilby). In his twenties he had driven Bentleys and had been one of the famous group known as the Bentley Boys. He had played cricket for Oxford and had missed the Varsity Match two years running due to injuries sustained during his other adventures.

For the last twenty years he had lived in a curious stone tower which stood on the top of a hill just south of Bilbury. Built as a folly by a rich North Devon landowner, who had wanted to find employment for out of work local masons, the tower had been crumbling for years. No one knew or cared who owned it and when Arbuthnot moved into it he was the first person for a long time to go inside. The tower stood in the middle of a two and a half acre plot of land which had long ago been overrun by an impenetrable mass of brambles. Even local children had given up trying to reach the tower.

Using nothing more than a simple, old-fashioned machete, Arbuthnot had carved a path through the brambles and had settled in the tower in the early 1950s. But, instead of simply carving a direct path through the brambles, he had created a maze which meant that the tower was still almost impossible to reach unless Arbuthnot, standing on the battlements of his tower, was prepared to shout down advice and directions.

In the late 1960s, a couple of years before I had arrived in Bilbury, a team of social workers from Barnstaple had tried to have Arbuthnot moved out of the tower and into some sort of statutory accommodation. Arbuthnot had fought them and with the help of my predecessor, Dr Brownlow, had established that the fact that he had lived for so long in the tower meant that he could claim ownership of it. As a landowner, and owner of his own property, Arbuthnot had become immune to the threats of the social workers. When he became a property owner Arbuthnot was transformed from a sad, old man incapable of looking after himself into an eccentric.

The tower had seven doors and 12 windows and, originally, there had been 136 steps up to the battlements. Only one of the doors had ever been operational (the others were there only to make the folly look more beguiling) and some of the steps had crumbled away, making the ascent to the top of the tower a dangerous business. It was, however, up there, with a large parliament of crows for company, that Arbuthnot had made his home. The ground floor of the tower was given over to a large company of hens and several cockerels. They had as free range a life as any hens anywhere and since not even foxes could find their way through the brambles there was no need for Arbuthnot to lock them up at night.

He had made a small shelter from a canvas awning and seemed to live largely on a diet of eggs, rabbits and, in season, blackberries. He never killed any of the hens. He entertained himself with a powerful telescope which, he told me, enabled him to study activities on the Welsh coast quite clearly. I was never quite sure what he meant by the word 'activities' and I didn't like to ask. He made it sound as though he was keeping an eye on Welsh insurgents preparing to march on Cardiff and then Bristol. He was certainly far too much of a gentleman to spend time staring through the windows at a Welsh housewife who didn't bother to draw her curtains at night.

Arbuthnot didn't have a telephone but he did have a flagpole from which he proudly flew a skull and crossbones flag. If he needed help he flew the flag upside down. The tower was visible from all over the village and enough people knew about the signal for us to be confident that, during the hours of daylight at least, I would be there quite quickly if I was needed.

I drove straight round to see him. As Thumper had said the flag on the top of the tower was flying upside down but there was no sign of Arbuthnot. Fortunately, however, Arbuthnot had once told me the secret for finding the way through his maze of a path through the brambles. 'Take every second left,' he said. 'And you'll get to the real door at the base of the tower. The only door of the seven that opens.'

I took every second left, reached the door and climbed up the crumbling stone staircase. Arbuthnot was lying on a layer of straw under his canvas awning. He looked terrible.

'Sorry to drag you up here, doctor,' he apologised. 'I've got one devil of a pain in my groin. And a nasty looking lump.'

I unfastened his trousers and found that he had a huge hernia. A piece of bowel had slipped down between weak muscles and had prolapsed. Fortunately, the hernia hadn't strangulated and I managed to push it back to where it should be.

'You can have an operation or wear a truss,' I told him when he was feeling a little better. He was greatly relieved not to have to go into hospital.

'Truss,' he said, without hesitation. 'I've always fancied myself as a truss wearer.'

'I'll get you one,' I promised. 'Meanwhile, if it starts to poke through again just give it a gentle prod and push it back where it came from.'

'I will, doctor!' he said. 'Damned impertinence.'

'Anything else?' I asked him.

'Since you ask, there is,' he admitted. 'I've gone deaf in my left ear. Can't hear a thing.'

I took my auriscope out of my black bag and had a look.

'Wax,' I said. 'Entirely blocked with wax. When I bring you the truss I'll bring my syringe and sort it out for you.'

'Damned decent of you, doctor,' he said. 'Much obliged. If you'd like some eggs help yourself. There should be quite a few around the place downstairs. Take whatever you need.'

I thanked him and pointed out that we had hens of our own. 'We have plenty of eggs,' I said, thanking him.

'But maybe you can help me. Our hens are constantly pecking at one another. Any idea why they do that?'

'Hens peck at each other to get at the oil at the base of the feathers,' he explained. 'They'll kill one another for oil if they're short of it.'

'So what on earth can we do?' I asked. 'Several of our hens are looking distinctly sorry for themselves.'

'Easy,' he replied. 'Put a little cod liver oil in their feed. That will solve your problem.'

And it did too.

We followed his advice to the letter and within a few days the problem disappeared, never to return.

When I went back to take him his new truss and to syringe his ears I took him a traditional Cornish pasty that Patsy had made for him a large piece of pastry with the savoury course at one end and a pudding at the other. It was a clear, warm day and from the top of the tower you could see for miles and miles. The Bristol Channel was shimmering in the distance and all around us swallows and swifts were swooping and diving. I sat down beside him to get my breath back. The climb up the tower was never easy and my knees had begun to creak.

'Patsy made this for you when I told you I was coming up to see you,' I told him, when I'd shown him how to wear the truss and finished syringing his ears. I took the pasty, which was wrapped in a tea towel, out of my black bag. 'Potatoes and carrots at one end and apple and blackberry at the other.'

He took the pasty from me, unwrapped it and looked at it admiringly.

'I'm afraid I can't remember which end is which,' I told him.

'Don't matter a bit,' he replied with a smile. He looked at me thoughtfully. 'You've fitted me with a new truss, cured my deafness and brought me a double ended pasty!' he said, genuinely grateful. There were tears in his eyes. 'Like Christmas,' he whispered. 'Like Christmas.'

'A real pleasure,' I told him.

'I bet you didn't think life would be like this when you started medical school, did you?'

'I never thought it could be so good,' I told him. And it was as true as anything I'd ever said.

A PARROT, A CONKER AND A MAN WITH A COUGH

Since very few of the Bilbury residents would qualify as 'normal', by the standards applied in much of the rest of England, it should be clear that the qualifying standards required for an individual to be described as 'eccentric' are probably considerably higher than in most areas.

Connolly Ryder had no difficulty in reaching these standards. He would, by anyone's standards and by any benchmark, have qualified as an eccentric in any place and at any time. His dress, demeanour and habits would have marked him out as 'eccentric' in any society.

I first met him when he turned up after surgery one morning and asked me if I would accept the post as Official Grand Senior Inspector of Conkers for Bilbury's annual conker championships. It was my first summer in Bilbury. I was still very new and wet behind the ears. I knew far less of village ways than I thought I knew. I did, however, have fond memories of playing conkers in the school playground. It was, I think, the only sport at which I had ever achieved anything approaching success.

I had learned that the secret is to strike first and to aim at the conker's weakest point - the edge of the hole made for the string to go through. A sound strike at that point will crack the top of the shell and split the opponent's conker. The second sound strike will push the damaged conker down and complete the split as the conker is pressed against the knot below.

'We can't pay you a proper fee,' he apologised. 'But we'll provide an honorarium.' He turned his head, covered his mouth with his hand and coughed. He didn't mention, and it would not have mattered if he had, that the honorarium would consist of half a bucket of conkers, a packet of 18-inch bootlaces and free entry into the competition. .

Connolly was a striking man, well over six feet tall and with shoulders and a girth to match. He was big but somehow, in that strange way some big men have, managed to avoid looking fat. He had ruddy cheeks, decorated with mutton chops, and shoulder length glossy black hair that many a woman would have been proud to own. His clothes were always unusual, to say the least. That day he wore a flared purple jacket, a Chinese silk waistcoat, port red velvet plus fours, black knee length boots and a black fedora which at the time we met he was holding in his hand. He looked like a French musketeer, straight out of the pages of a Dumas novel. He'd been running the Bilbury Conker Championships for longer than anyone I knew could remember.

'When is it?' I asked.

'The last Saturday in September.' He coughed again. This time he winced.

'OK,' I said. September was still two months away. As long as people ask me to do things far enough ahead for me to convince myself that whatever they are asking me to do is so far away that there is no real need to worry about it, I have always tended to accept appointments which are some way ahead without thinking too much about them.

'How long have you had that cough?' I asked him.

He waved a hand, indicating that the cough was of no real significance. ‘Just a bit of summer flu,' he said 'Nothing to worry about.'

'What do I have to do?' I asked. 'Treat anyone who gets rapped on the knuckles with a conker? Attend to spectators wounded by bits of conker flying off?'

I had already been appointed Honorary Medical Officer to a number of local societies (the Bilbury Cricket Club, the Bilbury Carnival Committee, the Bilbury Amateur Dramatic Society, the Bilbury Folk Dancing Group and the Bilbury Fete Committee to name just a few) and, not unnaturally, assumed that I would be expected to fulfil a similar professional role at the Bilbury Conker Championships.

'Oh, no, no,' said Connolly. 'We aren't bothered about anything like that.' He explained that he didn't want my medical services but that he needed, in his words, 'a gentleman of unimpeachable probity to ensure that the rules and regulations were applied fairly and properly'.

It wasn't until two days later that I discovered that the post the previous year had been held by Thumper Robinson. Thumper is my best friend and I love him dearly but not even I would describe him as a 'gentleman of unimpeachable probity'. Come to think of it I'm pretty sure that neither his long-term partner, Anne Thwaites, nor his mother would describe him in quite those terms either. Not if they were on oath.

'You have to make sure the conkers haven't been tampered with. We don't want competitors baking their conkers for a couple of hours or soaking them overnight in vinegar. And we don't want players turning up with conkers they've been keeping in a drawer for a year.'

'Do people still do all that?' I asked, astonished.

'Give them half a chance and they will.' He coughed for the third time. It sounded dry and raw.

I remembered a chap I knew at my infant school. He was banned from playing conkers for the whole of the season. Nearly two weeks as I recall. I remembered this because I had recently learned, and not been surprised, that he had managed to fail the modest ethical requirements of the legal profession and get himself struck off the legal equivalent of the medical register. He was I knew serving time for using money which rightly belonged to his clients. He had purchased a flat in Venice and a Ferrari. I mentioned this to Connolly.

'You can never trust anyone who cheats at conkers,' said Connolly firmly. 'A kid who cheats at conkers will always go bad. It's an indisputable fact. School-teachers should keep an eye out for conker-cheats. When they spot one they should have him branded for life.'

'But I'm surprised you have a problem with the villagers in Bilbury,' I said. 'My experience has been that they are pretty trustworthy people.' I paused and thought. 'When dealing with one another anyway,' I added, thinking of the enthusiasm with which one or two villagers were prone to take advantage of insurance companies.

'Oh we don't have trouble with the locals,' said Connolly quickly. 'Our problem is with foreigners.'

'Foreigners?' I said, surprised. 'People come a long way to play?' I hadn't lived in Bilbury long at the time and I had a vision of Americans flying over and bringing with them new types of string and extravagantly tested techniques. I envisaged Chinese peasants riding bicycles half way round the world to enter the Bilbury Conker Championships.

'People come from all over,' said Connolly.

I nodded and paused, giving him an opportunity to expand.

'We've had people from South Molton, Barnstaple, Lynton, Combe Martin and even Bideford,' he told me proudly. 'Three years ago we even had a chap from Tiverton, though I believe he was staying with relatives in Parracombe at the time.'

I nodded sagely but didn't mention America or China.

'Your job will be to weed out the baked, the soaked and the wrinkled,' said Connolly.

'Not easy,' I admitted.

'Your word is final,' said Connolly. 'No disputes and no second opinions.'

And so I became Official Grand Senior Inspector of Conkers for the Bilbury's Conker Championships. I did not know it at the time but it was a post that I was to hold for many years to come. It was also the position of which I was proudest and the role I always listed on application forms when required to give my occupation.

There is no more archetypically English sport than conkers (the name 'conkers' is derived from the word 'Conquerors') and to be an official, regulating such an arcane sport, would be an honour for any Englishman.

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Within days I had forgotten about Connolly's invitation. It had been a busy time. Mrs Hunter had her third baby, Geoffrey Parish broke his leg when he fell off his tractor, and seven-year-old David Whitlock got his foot stuck in a milking bucket.

And then I received a telephone call asking me to visit Connolly Ryder at his home. The call came from Mrs Holmes who 'did' for Connolly three times a week.

Connolly lived in a huge, old house on the eastern border of the village. Once undoubtedly grand it had long ago become rather shabby. The walls were covered with ivy which had crept up onto the roof and was now about to attack the chimney. So much paint had flaked off from the window frames that it was impossible to tell what colour the paint had originally been. The front door, a massive iron-bound piece of oak, had lost its varnish and now stood naked against the elements. Twin stone griffins, one on either side of the door, were now camouflaged green and blue with moss and lichen. When I pushed the brass button set in the stone frame at the right of the door, the bell which rang faintly seemed to be half a mile away.

'He's come over proper poorly, doctor,' whispered Mrs Holmes. She closed her eyes, pursed her lips and shook her head. Mrs Holmes, stout and solid, was in her late sixties. She had a scarf around her head and wore a floral pinafore. She was gloomy and pessimistic and always expected the worst.

'He did have a cough when I last saw him,' I told her. 'But he didn't seem too worried about it.'

'He's had it for a fortnight,' whispered Mrs Holmes. She shook her head sadly. 'Definitely very under the weather. Terrible chills. Off his food. And that's not like Mr Ryder. His bed sheets have been soaked in the mornings.' She always called her employers by their surnames when in their homes. If she'd seen Connolly in the Duck and Puddle she would, of course, have called him Connolly. She leant towards me as though about to share something very secret. 'I changed them again this morning. Top and bottom. Both sheets.' There was no need for the whispering. The house in which Connolly lived was so huge that she could have shouted without any fear of him hearing her.

Upstairs, Connolly Ryder was in bed, though not asleep.

'Good heavens, doctor!' he said, surprised at my arrival. 'Don't tell me that damned silly woman has called you out.'

'She's worried about you,' I told him.

He shook his head, coughed and tried to push himself up the bed but failed miserably. 'Just a bit weak,' he said. The exertion made him cough and sweat.

I examined him carefully and listened to his chest. He clearly had pneumonia.

'Just a bit of a chill, doctor,' he said, dismissively. 'Nothing to worry about.' He coughed. 'Got to be better for the Conker Championships,' he said softly. 'Can't be ill. Can't miss one. Not after thirty years.'

'Is there anyone who can come and stay with you for a few days?' I asked him. 'You've got pneumonia. You need looking after.'

He shook his head.

'If there isn't then I'll have to get you into hospital.' It was by no means a threat. Just a statement of fact.

'I don't want to go into hospital. If I have to die I want to die here.' He coughed again. 'I've done lots of things with my life. I want to die in dignity. At home.'

'You're not going to die!' I told him, with more certainty than I felt.

'I don't want to go into hospital,' he repeated.

I said nothing, but waited. He looked at me and thought for a moment. 'I've got a sister in Lynmouth,' he said. 'She'll come.'

I telephoned Connolly's sister. She tutted and sighed but said she'd come and stay for a few days. She didn't seem surprised or upset that he was ill. 'I'll ask Mrs Holmes to prepare a room for her,' I told Connolly.

'We're not close,' he told me. 'Never have been.'

'She's coming,' I told him. 'You can't ask more than that.'

I wrote out a prescription. 'I'll ask Mrs Holmes to get this for you.'

Connolly nodded.

I told him that I'd be back to see him the following day.

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Four days later Connolly was worse than ever.

'He's deteriorating, doctor,' his sister told me, unnecessarily.

I nodded. I knew.

Connolly, opened his eyes and looked up at us. 'I don't want to go into hospital,' he said.

'I think you'll have to,' I told him. 'The antibiotic isn't working.'

It was only when I went back downstairs that I heard the parrot. I didn't know it was a parrot when I heard it. I didn't have the faintest idea what it was.

'What on earth...?' I asked Mrs Holmes.

'That's Lucifer,' said Mrs Holmes. She explained that Lucifer was Connolly's pet parrot. She led the way down a long, dark corridor and then opened a door that led into a huge conservatory. Massive ferns and a vine reached right up to the glass roof, at least twenty feet above us. A multicoloured parrot swooped down and landed on a branch near to us.

I looked at the parrot and suddenly I knew.

'Has the parrot been under the weather?' I asked, quietly.

'Terribly,' said Mrs Holmes. 'Mr Ryder was very worried about him.'

'Is there just the one bird?'

'Just the one parrot,' said Mrs Holmes. 'But he goes out and flies with the pigeons.'

I looked at her, inquiringly, wanting more.

'Mr Ryder lets him go out and fly once a day,' said Mrs Holmes. 'He tends to fly with the pigeons.'

And then I was certain.

I went back upstairs.

'I'm going to change your prescription,' I told Connolly. I took out my prescription pad, wrote out a prescription for tetracycline and handed it to his sister, who was still in the room.

'Why?' she asked.

'Your brother has psittacosis,' I told her. 'It's an unusual form of pneumonia, caused by a bacterium found in birds. It needs to be treated with tetracycline.'

'Bird fancier's lung,' said Connolly's sister. I nodded. 'That's the one.'

'Lucifer,' said Connolly's sister.

'Lucifer,' I agreed. 'He flies with the pigeons.'

'He caught it from the pigeons?'

'Probably.'

'Will this antibiotic work?'

'It will if I'm right,' I said. I paused, feeling uncomfortable.

'I didn't know about the parrot until a few moments ago,' I explained.

'How long does he need to take it for?'

'Ten days,' I said. 'But there should be some improvement long before then.'

'I need to be up and about in ten days,' said Connolly. His voice was quiet and feeble. He looked pale and exhausted.

I looked at him, puzzled.

'It's the Bilbury Conker Championship!' he reminded me.

'I'd forgotten,' I confessed.

He looked at me accusingly. 'But you promised!' he said.

'I know,' I said. 'I'll be there.'

'What about Lucifer?' asked his sister.

'I don't know,' I confessed. 'Maybe we can treat him. I don't know.'

'Don't have him put down,' said a quiet voice. I looked down at Connolly. He sounded as exhausted as he looked.

'I'll do my best for him,' I promised.

Downstairs I told Mrs Holmes to keep the parrot in the conservatory. 'Shut the doors and windows,' I told her. 'The parrot is in quarantine until I can speak to a vet.'

When I got back home I telephoned a vet I knew in Barnstaple.

'Oh we can treat the bird,' he said confidently. 'I'll send a nurse over to pick him up. We'll put him in isolation here.'

'Tetracycline?'

'Yes,' he agreed. 'Same drug as humans. But a longer course. We usually give them tetracycline for 45 days. That usually knocks it on the head.'

I told Mrs Holmes to expect a veterinary nurse to pick up Lucifer and drove back home, hoping that I'd got the diagnosis right this time.

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Within a week Connolly was up and about.

The tetracycline worked and he made an astonishing recovery. He was weakened by the illness, still frail and needing a stick to move about, but coughing less and looking much brighter. He was also eating. His sister went back home, and Mrs Holmes agreed to call in every day to make sure he was OK and to cook him a meal.

And he was there at the Bilbury Conker Championship.

I did my job as Official Grand Senior Inspector Of Conkers, causing a certain amount of controversy when I arbitrarily banned conkers which I thought had been 'prepared' for the event in an illegal way. I entered the competition too, using the biggest and best conker I could find in the half a bucket full of horse-chestnuts with which I had been provided, and getting as far as the second round before I was defeated by an 11-year-old girl from Combe Martin. It was none too soon for me. My knuckles had already taken quite a hammering and it seemed to be a rather more physical sport than I remembered. Maybe my knuckles were tougher when I was eleven.

After several hours of competition the Championship was won by a 65-year-old retired thatcher who had lived in Bilbury all his life, had entered the competition for as long as he could remember and who announced at the prize-giving that this was the proudest day of his life and that he could now die a happy man. Connolly was delighted to have a local victor.

'We kept the foreigners at bay this year!' he said, with a huge grin on his face.

'Congratulations on a splendid tournament!' I told him.

'Will you be our Grand Senior Inspector of Conkers next year?'

I said I would be delighted to be reappointed but that I thought it might remove some potential embarrassment if I didn't enter the competition myself. Connolly agreed with this.

Just under two months later Lucifer returned home and Connolly was once more a happy and thoroughly contented man. In order to avoid any future risk of psittacosis he decided not to allow Lucifer out of doors again. To keep Lucifer content Connolly bought a female parrot as a companion.

KITTENS ON PRESCRIPTION

Sophie, one of our two cats, had kittens one May. She had them in a cupboard in my surgery. Heaven knows why she chose that as a maternity ward. It wasn't one of her favourite sleeping places. Indeed, when she disappeared while heavily pregnant it took us several hours to find her. Miss Johnson, my receptionist, had closed the cupboard door, shutting Sophie in, and if I hadn't heard her gentle miaowing I hate to think what might have happened.

There were five kittens, all absolutely adorable of course, and Patsy and I knew that we couldn't possibly accommodate five additional cats.

'Who on earth can we give them to?' asked Patsy, a few weeks later. We had tried all our friends and relatives and it seemed that everyone we knew already had a full complement of cats.

And then, one day, while I was doing an evening surgery, I had a brainwave.

The patient in the chair on the other side of my desk was a widow in her late fifties called Mrs Bridge. Her husband, rather older than her, had died of a heart attack two years earlier. He'd been very overweight and had made the mistake of racing around his vegetable patch trying to chase rabbits away from his developing lettuces.

'My life has lost all meaning since Albert's been gone,' said Mrs Bridge. 'I've always been a very loving person and although I still feel as though I've got a lot of love left I've got no one to give it to.'

'No family?' I asked.

'A nephew in Durham,' she said. 'I haven't seen him since he was twelve. He's forty-two now. I didn't speak to his parents, my sister and her husband, for over twenty years. They're long gone now.'

'And you don't want to get in touch?'

'I sent him a Christmas card for years,' said Mrs Bridge. 'But I never got one back so I gave up. Didn't seem any point.'

'No,' I said. 'How about joining a club?'

'What sort of club?'

'The sort that goes on outings and has whist drives.'

She laughed. 'I can't think of anything worse,' she said. 'I don't want to meet any more people. I've known enough people. I don't need to know any more.'

'I thought maybe you might find someone special,' I suggested.

She laughed again. 'No thank you, doctor,' she said. She thought for a while. 'Maybe I'll take up a hobby. Something solitary that I can get really keen about. Brass rubbing or needlework. No, not needlework - my eyes aren't good enough.'

She sat and thought for a while. So did I. 'Have you thought about a kitten?' I asked her at last.

'A kitten?' she said, as though puzzled.

'A small cat,' I said.

'I know what a kitten is.'

I got up and walked over to the cupboard where the kittens still spent much of their time. The door was now lodged permanently open. I looked inside. There was one kitten there. An almost entirely white one. It had a brown smudge mark above one eye. I picked up the kitten and took it over to Mrs Bridge.

'It needs a lot of love,' I told her.

'I don't want a cat,' she said.

'It isn't a cat,' I said. 'It's a kitten.'

Almost reluctantly, she reached out and took the kitten from me. The kitten miaowed and reached out and touched her chin with a tiny paw.

'Oh it likes me!' said Mrs Bridge.

'It will soak up all the love you can give it,' I promised her.

Mrs Bridge looked at the kitten. It looked at her.

'What's its name?'

I shrugged. 'It hasn't got a name,' I said. 'We knew we weren't going to keep it and so we deliberately didn't name it. But we know it as Smudge.'

'Because of the smudgy brown mark on its face?'

'Because of the smudgy brown mark on its face,' I confirmed.

'It's a nice name,' she said. 'A perfect name. I'll call it Smudge.'

Over the next four days I prescribed the other four kittens for needy patients.

'Take this kitten,' I told one neurotic patient. 'It will do you more good than all the pills in the world.' And I still believe I was right.

For weeks afterwards patients of a certain disposition would say, just as they were about to leave the surgery: 'I don't suppose you have any of the medicinal kittens, do you, doctor?'

After that we always knew what to do when Emily or Sophie had kittens.

THE POACHERS

Poaching was very common in Bilbury in the early 1970s. Some of the locals were pretty much professional poachers. They would sell what they caught to hotels and public houses where the proprietor or landlord wasn't too fussy about the provenance of what he bought. Other locals were just good amateurs. My friend Thumper Robinson was the best poacher I ever saw in action but, later in his life, as a general rule, he only caught creatures for his own dinner table. Knowing that Patsy and I were vegetarian he didn't offer to catch anything for us, though I know he would have done so if we'd asked him to.

Thumper had a lurcher which he used to catch rabbits and hares but he would tickle trout out of the river, using nothing but his own bare hands. Occasionally, he would use a home-made rod and a fly to take a trout or a salmon out of one of the local rivers or lakes. He would do this at dusk but naturally he never bothered to buy a licence. Once or twice he was nearly caught but he was far too fast for the water bailiffs to catch. He had never owned a proper fishing rod. He used to carry a sharp knife with him and cut a rod out of a branch of something suitable. He had a line and a lure tucked away in an old tobacco tin. If he was being chased he would simply hide the tobacco tin under a rock and then, even if he was caught, there would be no evidence to support the bailiff's claim that he had been poaching.

'Who gave anyone the right to sell me a licence to catch wild fish or wild animals?' he would demand.

It was a good question and one to which neither I nor anyone I knew ever tried to provide an answer.

Sitting in the lounge at Bilbury Grange, or the snug at the Duck and Puddle, on wet winter evenings Thumper would often tell me poaching stories. He knew all the tricks.

He knew a country butcher who in the late 1950s still drove around in a horse and cart and who used to catch pheasants using just his whip and one of the small brass weights he used to weigh out the meat he sold. He would tie one of the weights onto the end of his whip and then catch roosting pheasants by flicking the whip up into the air so that the weighted end wrapped itself around the bird's neck.

He told me about a professional poacher he knew who used to catch pheasants by putting bird lime into a cone made out of stout brown paper.

'He would lay a trail of maize right up to the cone, and just inside it, and then wait,' said Thumper. 'Most poaching involves a lot of waiting, and good poachers are very patient men. The bird would follow the trail, eating up the maize as it went, and would then put its head into the paper cone. The pheasant, its head stuck inside the cone, would stand still, unable to see and therefore unable to move, and would wait for the poacher to collect him.'

Thumper claimed he also knew an old poacher from Lynton who had a tumbling dog which used to perform somersaults.

'He'd take the dog out into the fields and the dog would do its tricks,' he told me. 'The rabbits would come out to stare at the dog's strange antics and, fascinated, they would move closer and closer. Eventually, the dog would pounce and catch the plumpest and nearest.'

He said that the same poacher used to catch hares by mesmerism. 'If he saw a hare he would walk slowly in front of her. He would put a stick into the ground and then hang his coat and hat on the stick to make a rough human form. While the hare continued to stare at the scarecrow he would walk away, go round in a big circle, and come up behind the hare. He'd then catch her by the ears as she stared, paralysed into action as she concentrated on the stick, coat and hat.'

Another poacher used to specialise in catching trout with a blow tube, made out of a piece of bamboo, and a pocket full of elderberries. 'He would put a berry into the bamboo and blow it out so that it landed just above the biggest fish he could see. One by one he'd serve the fish a big meal of berries. Eventually, the fish would get intoxicated and drowsy and the man would send his dog into the river to pluck the fish out of the water.'

Not all poachers worked alone.

Thumper told me about a team of six or seven poachers from South Molton who used to enter a wood where pheasant were being reared and walk quietly through the trees in single file. All were carrying shotguns. 'When the last man in the file saw a roosting pheasant up above him he would tap the man in front on the shoulder and then stand still and wait. The remaining men in front of him would carry on their way. When the new last man saw his pheasant up above in the trees he would again tap the man in front on the shoulder. And so it would go on until every man was standing still with a pheasant in his sights. The man at the front of the line, the last one to spot a pheasant, would whistle. And all the poachers would fire a single volley of shot. They would then pick up their fallen pheasants and be gone.'

Apart from Thumper Robinson I only ever met one other poacher in Bilbury. (At least, I only ever knowingly met one other poacher. I had my suspicions on many occasions about how various villagers had sustained their injuries.)

I met him very early one Sunday morning, lying injured on the edge of a riverbank on a private estate just south of Bilbury. And, in a strange way, it was for him a remarkably lucky accident.

I was woken by the sound of banging. I threw open a window directly above our front door to see who was there and what they wanted.

I was more suspicious than I might normally have been because there had recently been two well-publicised burglaries in the nearby village of Lynmouth. A small gang of London thieves had woken up the owners of two large houses, bound and gagged them and then stolen silver, paintings and jewellery worth a considerable sum of money.

My caution was to a large extent unnecessary. Bilbury Grange is a large house but we have no silver and no paintings and I'm afraid I have to admit that I doubt if the resale value of Patsy's entire collection of jewellery would pay for the second class return rail fares from London for a gang of three. But although I knew this I wasn't entirely sure that potential burglars would know it.

So I stayed upstairs and looked out of the window to find out who was banging on the front door and what they wanted.

'My mate has fallen and hurt himself,' said a stranger.

'Who are you, who is your mate, where has he fallen and in what way has he injured himself?' I called down.

'My name is Keith Messenger and it's my brother Christopher who is injured,' said the voice. 'We aren't patients of yours but you're the only doctor around. I called at the Duck and Puddle and someone called Frank told me where to find you.'

'Where do you live?'

'Exeter.'

'What are you doing in Bilbury?'

'We like nature,' said the man. 'Bird watching. Rambling. That sort of thing.'

I turned round and looked at the clock. 'It's ten past five in the morning!'

'We thought it might be nice to see the sun come up,' replied the man.

His whole story was so feeble that even I knew he was lying. But the story was so bad that I no longer suspected him of being a burglar.

'What's happened?'

'My brother has hurt his leg.'

'Where is he now?'

The man didn't know precisely how to explain where his brother was. 'Over there,' he said, pointing south. 'Just by the river. There's a stone bridge fifty yards away.'

'And a Christmas tree plantation on the other side of the river?'

'Yes!' agreed the man, clearly relieved that I knew the area.

'Give me two minutes,' I told him. 'Wait there and I'll be down in two minutes.'

I got dressed, picked up my black medical bag (which I keep in the bedroom so that it's always ready) and ran down the stairs.

'Did you walk here?' I asked him. The man nodded.

'We'll take my car,' I told him. 'We can drive to the bridge. It'll be useful to have a car nearby if we need to move your brother.'

'Thanks, doctor,' said the man, climbing into the passenger seat of my car. 'Don't you lock this?' he asked, suddenly realising that I hadn't unlocked the car.

I shook my head.

'You should keep it locked,' said the man, sternly. I started the car, and looked at him.

'There are a lot of burglars around,' he added, in explanation.

'I suppose so,' I agreed. 'But they'd have to be pretty desperate to steal this old thing.'

He looked around at the battered upholstery. 'I suppose you're right,' he said.

I drove out of the driveway and headed towards the bridge.

'You doctors have to abide by confidentiality rules, don't you?' said Mr Messenger.

'We do,' I confirmed.

'It's just that we wouldn't want you telling the police,' he said.

'I have to report gunshot wounds,' I said.

'Oh no,' he said quickly. 'Nothing like that.' I wondered what it was like.

Mr Messenger's brother, the other Mr Messenger, was lying on the riverbank. He was soaking wet. His shoulder was dislocated and he was convinced that he had broken his ankle.

'Do I have to go to hospital?' asked the injured man, when I'd finished examining him.

'Can you deal with it?' asked the brother who had fetched me. 'Privately?' He paused. 'We can pay for private treatment,' he added.

'Not straight away,' said the injured man quickly. 'Not now. But we can pay later.'

'I can put your shoulder back if you want me to,' I told him. 'And your ankle isn't broken. It's only sprained.'

The man said he would like me to mend his dislocated shoulder. So I did. The scream would have woken the dead.

'I'll take you back to my surgery and strap up your ankle,' I told him. 'It'll be OK in a day or two. How's the shoulder?'

He rubbed his shoulder and gingerly moved it around. 'Much better, thanks, doc!' he said.

'What happened?' I asked him as his brother and I helped him to my car.

'I slipped on a rock on the river bed,' he told me.

I looked at him and then at his brother.

'You're not going to call the police?'

I shook my head. We helped the injured man into the front passenger seat of my car. His brother got into the back seat.

'We were trying to net salmon,' said the injured man.

'Where's your net?'

He opened his coat and pulled out a piece of white net curtain.

'That's your net?'

He nodded.

'You didn't catch anything?'

'No.'

'You wouldn't,' I said. 'There aren't any salmon in that river.'

'Are you sure?'

'I'm sure.'

'I told you,' said the brother in the front seat.

'There should be salmon in it,' said the other brother. 'It's a river isn't it?'

The brother in the front of the car half turned and looked at the brother in the back. Neither of them said anything else for a while.

'None?' asked the brother in the back of the car at last. 'Are you sure about that?'

'I'm absolutely sure,' I told him.

I drove back to Bilbury Grange, found the man a towel and some dry clothes and then bandaged his injured ankle. The healthy brother went off to fetch their car which they had left a mile and a half away.

'Have you got anything for headaches?' the man asked, when I'd finished wrapping his ankle.

'Did you knock your head as well?' I asked him.

'No,' he said. 'It's just that I get a lot of headaches. Throbbing headaches.'

'Roll up your sleeve,' I told him, reaching for my sphygmomanometer.

He rolled up his sleeve.

'Your blood pressure is high,' I told him. 'It's 160 over 120.'

'Is that bad?'

'It's too high,' I told him. 'You need to go and see your own GP in the morning. Tell him whatever story you like but make sure that he checks your blood pressure.'

When the driver returned I told him to make sure that his brother visited his doctor the next day.

'In some ways it was a lucky fall,' I told him. 'Your brother's blood pressure needs to be controlled.'

'Thanks, doc,' said the healthy brother. He helped his brother into their car. And then he turned to me. 'Do you mind if I ask you one more question, doctor?'

I raised an eyebrow and waited.

'My Dad went bald in his late forties. But I recently found out that he isn't my real Dad. My real Dad has a bald patch but he's not as bald as the man my mother married after he left.'

I looked at him.

'Do you think I'll go bald?'

I stared at him in amazement.

'Every time I wash my hair some of it leaves home and never returns,' said the man. 'But I haven't got a bald patch yet.'

'If you lose all your hair you'll go bald,' I told him.

'Right, thanks, doctor,' he said. He climbed into his car and then, puzzled, looked at me.

I waved and went back upstairs.

'What time is it?' asked Patsy.

'Six thirty,' I told her. 'Go back to sleep.'

'Patient?'

'Mmm.'

'What did they want?'

'Man worried that he'll go bald if his hair comes out,' I said.

'Ah,' said Patsy, as though it were perfectly normal for me to get out of bed early on a Sunday morning to see a man worried about going bald. She turned over and went back to sleep again.

THE BICYCLE DOCTOR

I was brought up in a town, where trees grew neatly in parks and along smart, residential avenues, and where the only flowers grew in neat, regimented rows. Grass was something to be played on and cut. It certainly wasn't there for cows, sheep and horses to eat. It was mown in neat stripes and the cuttings thrown away. It wasn't until I moved to Bilbury that I discovered the joys of living in the country.

Town folk tend to feel sorry for people who live in a part of the world where there are no streetlights, buses or telephone boxes. But to country folk the lives of city and town dwellers seem to be constrained. It is country folk who are more likely to take the time to stand and stare. It isn't that they have less to do, it's just that with the world around you moving at a more reasonable pace there is less of a feeling that life is a series of competitions.

In the country the seasons mean so much more than they mean in the town. Each time of the year brings its own special joys and delights.

Spring brings wild daffodils and primroses into bloom, turns stark, empty branches into huge green bowers and is marked by the sudden reappearance of animals who had been hibernating and birds who have, like the idle rich, spent the winter abroad.

Summer brings swallows darting back and forth across the fields. It brings bees, caterpillars, butterflies and bushes and trees laden with their developing fruits. It brings untold varieties of wild flowers, ferns and other plants: lesser timothy, adders's tongue fern, enchanters nightshade, meadowsweet, fleabane and, for me the most magical of all, wild orchids.

In the autumn the leaves that have shaped near and far horizons turn from green to gold, russet and cream and then they darken, crispen and fall. Birds and animals, sensing the onset of the darker, colder months, prepare themselves for survival.

And then winter arrives. Skies darken and storms come. Winds break away broken branches and scatter leaves. The remaining animals hide away, tiny becks turn into raging streams and rivers fill to the brim. It is a time that nature cleanses with freezing winds.

Commercial farming, factory life taken to the country, had reached much of England but it had not yet reached Bilbury.

Instead of huge fields full of one crop, the smaller fields of Bilbury were still divided up by thick hedgerows, and independent farmers still grew what they wanted to grow rather than what they were told to grow by marketing men in smart suits. Walk around Bilbury and you would see fields containing cereals, wheat, rye, potatoes, maize, cabbages, broad beans, peas, haricot beans, artichokes, corn, sugar mangold, pumpkins, carrots, onions, turnips and swede. Not every crop was successful, of course. But, as one farmer had once told me, if he'd chosen a career to make money he'd have become a solicitor or an accountant. He certainly wouldn't have become a farmer.

I learned that in the country it is much safer to mess with a man's car or his wife than it is to mess with his fence, hedge or boundary.

I learned a little about gardening too. I learned that the best way to tell if a plant is a weed or not is simply to pull on it. 'If it comes out of the ground easily and without much resistance then it is a plant and you've probably killed it,' said Mr Parfitt, the gardener at Bilbury Grange. Mr Parfitt looks a bit like a pixie. He has a grey, curly beard and handfuls of curly, grey hair. The pixie look is enhanced by the fact that he always wears a floppy tweed hat, which is at least two sizes too small for him, perched on top of his head. 'The easier it came out the rarer and more valuable it was. If it's a bugger to pull up then it's a weed and you should get it out.'

And I learned that the best way to get rid of moles is to call Morris the Mole Man. (His son is, inevitably, known as Morris Minor). Morris the Mole Man or Morris Minor will fix bottles on sticks all over your lawn and the moles, alarmed by the vibrations caused when the wind blows and moves the bottles, will go and dig their tunnels somewhere else. I learned too that this simple trick only works when Morris the Mole Man (or his son) does it. Try to save his modest fee by doing it yourself and the moles will laugh at you and stay exactly where they are.

When I didn't have urgent calls to do I would make my visits on my bicycle. I did this solely so that I could see more of the countryside in and around Bilbury. There is, in my experience, no better way to get to know an area than to spend some time cycling around it.

My bicycle was an old-fashioned "sit up and beg" machine which I had purchased for £1 at a Bilbury Church jumble sale. Some of the spokes were missing and the back mudguard had a stay loose and rattled rather a lot but all three gears worked and although the front brakes didn't work (mainly because the brake blocks had worn down so much) the back brakes were almost functional. Because it was a sit up and beg machine I could look around as I pedalled, rather than having to concentrate on a piece of tarmacadam a few yards ahead of me, as is the miserable lot of those who choose to ride racing bicycles. I had originally been attracted to the machine by the fact that it had an old-fashioned wicker basket attached to the handlebars. I could just fit my black medical bag into the basket if I jammed it in sideways. I liked riding around on a bicycle which would have proved perfectly suitable for a prim and proper Victorian governess.

City doctors occasionally expressed surprise that I sometimes did my visits on a bicycle. 'For one thing it's so slow,' said one. 'And for another it's not dignified.'

I didn't much care about whether or not it was dignified (it seemed - and seems - to me that if you have to rely upon your mode of transport for your dignity then you haven't got much) but I did dispute the fact that a car would be quicker. Bilbury isn't a big village and once I got to know the bridle paths and short cuts I could often do my visits more speedily on a bicycle than I could in a car.

And on at least one occasion doing my visits by bicycle helped save a life. Actually, if you count the life of the dog, as I certainly do, it helped save two lives.

I was pedalling back to Bilbury Grange one day, after completing my morning calls, and riding on the gently curving, slightly uphill stretch of road which heads eastward along the lower reaches of Hillberry Mound, when I heard a whimpering from the bushes on the right side of the road.

I stopped my bicycle, leant it against the hedge and peered into the bushes. Deep inside a tangle of brambles and hawthorn I could see a West Highland terrier. His coat was snagged and he was completely stuck; he couldn't move backwards, forwards or sideways. He looked miserable, tired and frightened and had clearly been there for some time. He had, I suspected, chased a rat or a squirrel into the bushes and in his excitement had himself become the victim; transformed from hunter to potential prey in a matter of seconds. One thing was obvious; unable to move or defend himself he would not last long where he was. He would be dead long before he died of thirst or hunger.

Using the biggest blade on my Swiss Army penknife to cut through the surprisingly thick and woody brambles and hawthorn branches, it took me over three quarters of an hour to get him out. By the time I reached him, and was able to disentangle him from the thorns of the hawthorn and the brambles, my hands and arms were scratched and bleeding and my Harris Tweed sports jacket, which I had previously regarded as darned near indestructible, was snagged and ripped in several places. I had on several occasions released ewes and lambs from such predicaments but I had always been in the car when I'd spotted the problem, and had enjoyed the protection of the thick pair of gardening gloves I kept in the car boot specifically for such occasions. This was the first rescue I'd done without any gloves. Looking down at my scratched and bleeding hands I decided that I would, in future, keep a second spare pair of gardening gloves at the bottom of the basket on the front of my bicycle. Or perhaps, I thought to myself, I would purchase a pair of saddlebags to strap either side of the rear wheel. Then I could also carry a rain cape and a hat in case of bad weather.

I had half expected the little dog to bite or struggle when I eventually got hold of him and dragged him to safety. But he didn't struggle at all. And he certainly didn't bite. He was so relieved to be freed that he licked my face and tried to lick my hands. Since my hands were bleeding I held him firmly to prevent him from doing that.

Many of the dogs in the village I knew by name but I had never seen this little fellow before. He wore a collar, however, and attached to it was one of those small metal tags on which is engraved the dog's name and address.

On one side of the tag the name 'McTavish' was engraved. On the other side the four line address: 'Stein, Primrose Cottage, Bilbury, Devon'. I assumed that Stein was the name of McTavish's owner and was surprised by the fact that I didn't recognise the name at all. I honestly thought I knew the names of all the villagers. But Stein was a new name to me. Worse still, I didn't even know where Primrose Cottage could be found.

It did not, however, take much thought to realise that it could not be far away.

With McTavish in my arms I stood on tip toe, walked a little further along the lane, and examined the countryside in all directions; I was looking for a track or a bridle path which might lead me to a cottage I didn't previously know existed. I left my bicycle where it was. No one would steal it.

It took me twenty minutes to find the track and another fifteen minutes to find Primrose Cottage.

Estate agents would have doubtless described Primrose Cottage as 'delightfully secluded' and 'offering complete privacy' and, on this occasion, they would have been absolutely right. Built in a clearing, with woods all around it, Primrose Cottage had a thatched roof and the walls were covered with a mixture of ivy and climbing roses. The cottage was in a poor state. In several patches the thatch was thin and birds had clearly been helping themselves to nest-building material. The two chimneys both needed pointing and the small garden around the cottage was overgrown and badly needed some care and attention. A small wooden sign attached to the wall to the right of the front door, and now almost overgrown with ivy, told me that I was at the right place: this was Primrose Cottage. McTavish, clearly delighted to be home, started barking and wriggled furiously to be set free.

I stood at the front door, with McTavish at my feet, and looked for the bell or a doorknocker. I could find neither. I tapped on the door with my knuckles. There was no reply. I turned the knob, pushed at the door and called out. There was still no reply. McTavish rushed past me into the cottage. I followed him. The smell, which hit me as I entered, was terrible. Urine and something else. As a GP I had grown accustomed to strange sights and awful smells. I once visited a woman whose husband had died unexpectedly of a heart attack. She was demented and didn't know what to do with the body, so she just left him sitting by the television. It was three weeks before neighbours called me. I find it difficult to remember smells accurately but I was sure that this smell was worse than that had been.

I found the cottage's owner slumped in an easy chair in the living room. At first I thought she was dead. Her head was slumped on her chest. She was wearing a grey dressing gown and her hair, which was grey and looked coarse, hadn't been combed for a long, long time. As I got closer to her I could feel the carpet squelching under my feet. Her feet and legs were swollen. She was wearing carpet slippers and her ankles were so swollen with oedema that they overflowed around the tops of the slippers. There was a huge ulcer in one leg. It seemed to be moving. I looked closer. There were maggots eating away at the flesh. I had never seen anything like it before. It wasn't difficult to see where the smells were coming from. I bent down and reached for her arm. I could actually see the fleas jumping up from her dressing gown as I approached her.

She was alive. I could feel a good pulse. And then she woke up.

'Who are you?' she demanded. 'What do you want?'

'I found your dog,' I told her. I told her who I was and explained what had happened.

McTavish, who had been waiting patiently, barked once and jumped up onto her lap. 'Damned silly thing,' she said. She rubbed his head affectionately.

'I'm afraid I haven't got dressed or done my hair,' she said. She sighed. 'Not been feeling too good.'

'I think you need to be in hospital,' I told her.

She pushed McTavish off her lap, leant on the arm of her chair and levered herself to her feet. 'I'm not going into any hospital!' she said. 'People who go into those places never come out of them.'

'You need to be in hospital,' I told her firmly.

'No, no, no!' she said firmly. She shook her head. 'I'm just tired,' she said. 'Old age.'

'How old are you?'

'That's a rude question to ask a lady. Didn't your mother teach you any manners?'

'How old are you?'

'Sixty something. Eight I think.'

She was much younger than I had expected. She looked considerably older than 68. We looked at each other for a while.

'What's your name?' I asked her.

'Phyllis Stein,' she replied. 'Miss Stein.'

'Walk into your bedroom Miss Stein, lie down and I'll examine you,' I told her.

'Ah, your mother did teach you something,' she said. 'Never tell a lady to lie down on her bed without asking her name first.'

'I'll examine you and then I'll decide whether or not you need to go into hospital. If you can convince me that you can manage I'll let you stay here and get you some help.' I could not force her to go into hospital, of course. But I doubted if she knew that. I wanted her to walk to her bedroom so that I could see how mobile she was.

'I don't need any help,' she said.

'You do,' I told her quietly. 'You need your ulcer dressing and you need someone to help tidy up your house.'

And then she started to cry.

I asked her to tell me the way to her bedroom, and then I took her arm and helped her there. She undressed and lay down on her bed and then I examined her.

To my relief and delight she wasn't as ill as I had first thought. She had relatively mild congestive cardiac failure, with bad oedema affecting both legs, an ulcer that needed cleaning, a mild prolapse that could be held in place without surgery and urinary incontinence. She was also suffering from an underactive thyroid.

'Can I stay in my home?' she asked when I'd finished and told her what I'd found. For the first time she sounded frightened. McTavish, who had been sitting quietly beside the bed, jumped up onto the bedclothes and licked her hand.

'You need someone to come in every day,' I told her. 'I can send the nurse in but she can just look after your leg. You need someone to help you tidy up. Would you like me to have a word with the social workers in Barnstaple to see if they can help?'

'I don't want any social workers!' she said.

In a way I was relieved by this. I was reluctant to involve the social workers. In my experience they would interfere and hold a lot of meetings but, in the end, do damn all to help. They would be appalled when they saw Miss Stein, and there would be much drawing in of breath and tutting, but I would not rely on them for practical assistance.

'Then you need a cleaner,' I said. 'Someone who can tidy up for you. Someone who can come in every day.'

'It needs a bit more than a tidy up,' she said sadly.

I nodded.

'I have a little money,' she said. 'I can pay.'

'Good,' I said. 'Do you want me to try to find you someone?'

She nodded.

I knew just whom I intended to ask. Gladys Pendle was a retired auxiliary nurse who had worked at the hospital in Barnstaple and lived in Bilbury. For several years she had cycled into Barnstaple every day. But the journey had, at last, become too much for her. A round trip of over twenty miles a day, some of it uphill and all of it along narrow, difficult roads was just too much for her - particularly in the winter months. She had, I knew, toyed with the idea of selling her cottage and moving to Barnstaple but in the end she decided that she could not and would not leave her home. She had, on several occasions, asked me if I could hire her. She had a minute pension, which wasn't enough to enable her to live, and desperately needed nursing work. She would not, I knew, flinch at the problem facing her.

I left Miss Stein and McTavish, collected my bicycle (which was, of course, precisely where I had left it) and rode back to Bilbury Grange where my wife, Patsy, cleaned the scratches I'd received while rescuing McTavish. Some of the scratches were quite deep and needed small dressings. As soon as this was done I telephoned the district nurse and collected a supply of bandages, dressings and drugs. I then drove to Miss Stein's cottage and met the district nurse there.

It took Gladys Pendle just two days to throw out Miss Stein's carpets (all of which had to be burnt), her easy chair (which also went on the bonfire) and various bits of clothing and bedding. It took the nurse and me rather longer to clean and heal Miss Stein's ulcer and to get her myxoedema and congestive cardiac failure under control.

But, in the end, we managed it.

And I was delighted when, almost exactly a year later, I rode my bicycle along the lower reaches of Hillberry Mound, and met Miss Stein and McTavish walking together in the opposite direction. I stopped to say 'hello'.

'McTavish has been stuck in the bushes,' said Miss Stein, showing me her scratched hands and forearms. McTavish looked rather sorry for himself and had clearly been told off. 'He chased something. Didn't see what it was.'

I bent down and pulled a remaining piece of bramble leaf out of his fur.

'There's no need for you to tell him off,' said Miss Stein. 'I've already given him a firm talking to.'

'Oh, I wasn't going to tell him off,' I told her, remembering the day when he and I had first met. 'And you shouldn't be too hard on him.'

She looked at me, surprised.

'It was the fact that McTavish got stuck in the bushes which saved your life,' I pointed out.

She thought for a moment and then looked down at her dog. 'I hadn't thought of that,' she said thoughtfully. She bent down and rubbed his head. 'Sausages for tea, McTavish?'

From McTavish's reaction it was quite clear that he approved of this suggestion.

THE HAPPINESS LIST

I woke up to find that the car battery was flat and the car wouldn't start. (It was my fault. I'd left the headlights switched on when I'd got out of the car the night before.) Most of the patients who wanted home visits said that they would happily wait until the afternoon when my battery would be recharged. But one, a holidaymaker renting a cottage on the other side of the village who had woken up with a sore throat, insisted that I visit immediately.

It was, inevitably perhaps, raining heavily. Stubbornly refusing to ring my friends Thumper Robinson or Patchy Fogg for help, I set off on my bicycle, with my black medical bag crammed into the basket at the front.

When I arrived, soaked to the skin, I found that the holidaymaker who had demanded my call had made a miraculous recovery and had driven to Ilfracombe with his son to buy some fishing bait. 'He'll be back this afternoon,' his wife told me. 'Perhaps you could come back then?'

I gave her instructions explaining how her husband could get to Bilbury Grange and told her the times of the evening surgery.

On the way back home I hit a pothole. It was still raining heavily and the pothole was full of water and quite invisible. I ended up on my nose in a ditch, badly grazing my leg on my bicycle. My bicycle chain came off and I couldn't get it back on.

When I finally got back home, soaked, covered in oil, bleeding, limping and pushing my useless bicycle, I discovered that the boiler had broken down. We had no hot water so I couldn't have a hot bath.

Wrapped in a thick, soft white towel and with a mug of coffee on the table in front of me I pulled a pencil and a notepad out of the kitchen drawer and wrote out a list of all the things that make me happy. I excluded family, friends and pet animals from the list as being too obvious. When I'd finished I pinned the list to the kitchen mantelpiece so that I could cheer myself up by looking at it whenever I felt glum.

Here is a copy of the list I wrote:

1. Lying in the bath. Not soaping or scrubbing but just lying there soaking.
2. Making plans. Making plans to do something or go somewhere is invariably far more fun (and far less hassle) than actually doing something or going somewhere. There are no traffic jams, airport delays or pompous officials in my daydreams.
3. Enjoying the smell of freshly-baked bread, damp earth, newly brewed coffee, just-made cakes, freshly-mown grass and tarmacadam that hasn't yet dried.
4. Admiring a tree and working out how to climb it.
5. Sitting in the garden (preferably when I have a great many 'important' things to do) and watching butterflies dancing on air, fluttering by and visiting the flowers that take their fancy.
6. Setting out on a long train journey in a comfortable seat, with a good companion and a book I'm looking forward to reading.
7. Sitting in a café, with a glass of hot wine or a cup of tea and a good book. With some shame I admit that the pleasure is heightened if there is a rainstorm outside and passers-by are hurrying here and there under their umbrellas.
8. Driving home in the early morning after successfully treating a patient who thought (or whose relatives thought) he was about to die.
9. Rediscovering an album of old photographs and reliving the memories they inspire.
10. Walking through crisp and crunchy fallen leaves on an autumn day.
11. Sitting on a riverbank and watching a heron fishing.
12. Walking in the rain in a waterproof coat and a good hat. And knowing that back home there is a log fire, a toasting fork, a plate of crumpets, a dish of butter and a kettle ready to boil.
13. Sitting in front of a log fire on a cold winter's day and knowing that you can pile on as many logs as you like because the log shed is packed to capacity with well-dried logs and kindling.
14. Lighting and tending a garden bonfire on a misty, drizzly autumn day. Having a few rosemary snippings to toss onto the fire.

15. Picking up the fruit of the horse-chestnut tree and removing a still sticky, glossy conker from its spiky outer casing.

16. Taking the first bite of a piece of home-made cake that is fresh from the oven and still warm.

17. Putting the fairy on top of the Christmas tree and then standing back and admiring the decorations.

18. Wrapping presents for a loved one and then watching them open the gifts afterwards.

19. Coasting down a long hill on a bicycle and knowing that you're heading home and don't have to ride back up the hill (or one like it) when you get to the bottom.

20. Watching newly arrived swallows diving and swooping at the start of summer.

21. Exploring rock pools on the shore and trying to identify the seemingly endless variety of flora and fauna.

22. Building a sandcastle as the tide comes in and struggling to defend the ramparts against the inevitable.

JINGLE BELLS

Josh Wilkins died early on Sunday morning.

I pedalled over to his house when his neighbour, Elsie Tufnel, telephoned me.

Elsie, who was herself in her eighties, used to pop in every morning to make sure that Josh was 'all right'. (This was her tactful way of saying that she used to pop in to make sure that he hadn't died in the night.)

'He wasn't up and about so I went upstairs,' said Elsie. 'I knew he was gone as soon as I saw him. White as snow and cold as ice.' Elsie wasn't much bothered by death. She had buried her parents, three brothers, two sisters and four husbands before her sixtieth birthday.

Back in the 1970s doctors weren't allowed to put down 'old age' as a cause of death but if anyone ever died of old age it was Josh. He was, quite literally, worn out. In the final year or two of his life he suffered from angina, emphysema, arthritis, deafness, cataracts and prostate trouble. And those were just the diseases that annoyed him because they interfered with his cricket. He had been Chairman of the Parish Council for over 40 years and had been elected cricket club captain in his 84th year.

'I'm glad I'm old,' Josh had once told me. 'At least it means I know I didn't die young.'

He was 89-years-old when he died and although he looked every minute of his age he never allowed his frailties to slow him down.

'The best thing about being old is that you don't have to worry about getting old and the best thing about dying is that you don't have to worry about things which might kill you,' he said one evening, a fortnight before he died. 'I've had as good a life as anyone could ever hope for,' he said. 'No complaints.'

'Do you have any special requests?' I asked him when I saw him last. We both knew he hadn't got long.

'For my funeral?'

'Yes.'

'It's not something I've thought of.'

'Do you have any hymns that you would like playing?'

'I don't know any hymns.'

'Well, music then?'

'Jingle Bells. I've always liked Jingle Bells. That's my favourite tune.'

I hesitated. 'I'm not sure they'll play Jingle Bells,' I said.

He looked at me and frowned. 'Then why did you ask me what I'd like?'

'Jingle Bells,' I said firmly. 'I'll make sure they play Jingle Bells.'

'Fine.'

'Do you want to be buried or cremated?'

'Cremated. I don't want to be buried. The worms get you if you're buried. I hate worms. Slimy. And I want my ashes sprinkled on the village cricket pitch.'

'OK,' I nodded. 'I'll have a word with the captain,' I said tactlessly. 'I'm sure he'll agree to that.'

'I am the captain,' said Josh.

'I meant the, er, next captain,' I said softly. The club had, I knew, already arranged for a smooth succession. At a meeting held some weeks earlier it had been decided that the vice-captain, Mr Kennett, would be promoted to captain 'if anything happened to' Josh.

'On a good length,' added Josh ignoring me. 'I've always wanted to see the village team win the North Devon Cup. It would make me very happy to be a part of it.'

In cricketing terms 'a good length' means the point on the wicket where the bowler aims to pitch the ball.

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The day after Josh's death, I called in at the Duck and Puddle as I was cycling back home and saw Patsy's father, Mr Kennett, the new captain of the cricket team. He was watching a cowboy film on Frank's old black and white television set.

'Have you noticed that the goodies and the baddies all have expensive teeth?' asked Mr Kennett. He always noticed people's teeth. He hadn't any of his own since 1949. (Although when Patchy Fogg once said this Mr Kennett instantly responded by taking out his false teeth, holding them up and demanding 'Whose are these then?')

I said I had. A man in a white hat shot three men in black hats. They all fell off their horses, rolled around a little and then lay still. One of them twitched. The man in the white hat twirled his gun around before putting it back in his holster. The television picture then slipped. I slammed the side of the set with my hand. The picture stopped flickering.

'But you can always tell the goody,' said Mr Kennett.

'White hat?'

Mr Kennett shook his head. 'Creases in his shirt,' he said. 'The good guy sometimes wears a white hat, sometimes wears a black hat. But whatever colour hat he wears the good guy always has a nicely ironed shirt with neat creases in it.'

I looked carefully. It wasn't easy to see the screen but I could tell that he was right. The hero's shirt looked as if it had just come back from the laundry.

'Even when he's spent a week tracking the bad guys across the desert the good guy always has neat creases in his shirt,' said Mr Kennett.

'Except Clint Eastwood in those dollar films,' I said.

Mr Kennett looked at me. 'They're new,' he said. 'Only been out a couple of years. Not proper cowboy films.' He snorted derisively. 'Besides,' he added, 'they're in colour.'

'Did the cricket club have a meeting to discuss whether or not Lawrence's ashes could be distributed on the pitch?' I asked.

Mr Kennett nodded. 'We had an emergency meeting last night.'

'And what was the result?'

'We decided that in view of Josh's long association with the club it would be perfectly proper for his ashes to be sprinkled on a good length,' said Mr Kennett

'He will be pleased,' I said. 'Or, he would have been.'

I was relieved too. Patsy and I had already decided that if the club didn't agree to Josh's request we would go out in the middle of the night and sprinkle his ashes where he wanted them to lie. This wouldn't have been the first time we had done something like this. We'd spread Patsy's grandfather where he wanted to be. And had once climbed a gate at two in the morning on a warm, moonlit summer night in order to sprinkle the remains of Patsy's Aunt Thelma around the base of a particularly lovely magnolia tree. The tree bloomed in the garden of a cottage in Berrynarbor which Aunt Thelma had once owned. The cottage's new owner, a young London banker who spent no more than six weeks a year in Devon, had responded to our polite request for permission to sprinkle Aunt Thelma around the base of his tree by instructing his solicitor to send us a threatening letter. The solicitor, one of those expensive London varieties with so many partners on board that the top half of the notepaper is taken up with names, had sent us a very nasty letter warning us of the terrible things that would befall us if we dared even to consider entering the banker's property.

Although delighted, I was slightly puzzled by the cricket club's decision. I had once seen Mr Kennett go red with rage when a visiting batsman had allowed ash from his pipe to fall on the wicket.

'That's very generous of the club,' I said.

Mr Kennett looked around, as if to make sure that he wasn't going to be overheard. 'We've got three spin bowlers in the side this year,' he whispered.

And then I understood.

Sprinkling the contents from an urn full of ash onto a good length would, if done at the appropriate moment, give the spinners a huge advantage. When landing on dry ash the ball would get a good deal of grip and turn much more than usual.

'I expect you'll want to sprinkle the ashes at tea time,' I said. 'Between the two innings.'

Mr Kennett nodded. 'As long as we've batted first.'

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The funeral was on Wednesday. Afterwards we all adjourned to the pub. There was a good turnout. Everyone had been fond of Josh.

'It was a nice day for it,' said Mr Kennett. 'Nice bit of mizzle. Bit of mist. Perfect. You don't want sunshine for a funeral. Disrespectful.'

'Far too warm,' complained Peter. 'I want to be buried in the cold and rain in a damp churchyard so everyone suffers.' He paused. 'I'll be tucked up nice and cosy in my walnut coffin and everyone else will be shivering.' He looked around and smiled. 'Everyone will get nasty colds and die.' Peter's walnut coffin was lying in the store room at the back of the shop. It had brass handles and a brass plate on the lid, waiting for the inscription. He'd bought it cheap when an undertaker in Barnstaple had gone bankrupt. Meanwhile he used it to store tinned food.

We all looked at him. We knew he wasn't joking. Peter didn't joke. He always said he couldn't see the value in it.

'I remember Josh once telling me that he'd been to see the chiropodist and that the man had told him that his feet would have looked good on a man of seventy,' I said, trying to lighten the tone. 'He was in his mid eighties at the time and very proud of his feet.'

'He was a born politician,' said Patchy Fogg. 'He once told me that the secret of political success is not to try to please people but to make sure that you don't annoy anyone by actually making decisions. He told me that his motto in politics was 'lots of promises but no decisions'.

'He had a great sense of humour,' said Frank. 'It's true that jokes sometimes had to be explained to him in some detail but he nearly always laughed in the end.'

'And he had a good laugh,' said Gilly. 'A fine, throaty laugh.'

'He was a great countryman,' said Thumper. 'And a great gardener.'

'He won the prize for best onions seventeen years in a row,' said Peter Marshall, who had closed his shop for two hours in respect. (He had, however, put a notice on the door telling any potential customers where he could be found.)

'He really loved winning that prize,' said Thumper. 'I remember him coming to see my Dad and telling him that he was getting old and that it would probably be his last year at trying for the cup and that his onions weren't very good that year and that if my Dad could see his way to not competing for the prize he'd be very grateful.'

Frank looked at Thumper. 'Really?'

Thumper nodded.

'He did that with me,' said Frank. There was a pause.

'Me too,' said Peter.

Several other people nodded in agreement.

'That was at least ten years ago,' said Thumper.

'He came to me seven years ago,' said Harry Burrows. 'He'd heard that I had a particularly good onion crop that year. He was right too. His weren't a patch on mine.'

'But he still got the cup?'

Harry nodded. 'I didn't enter any of my best onions.'

'When he came to me three years ago he said he didn't have anything else to live for except the onion prize,' said Samuel Houghton.

I It was generally agreed that this was a pretty clever trick and that Josh deserved to have been such a consistent winner of the cup for best onions. We all drank to him.

'He was very tight with his money,' said Peter.

I should perhaps make it clear that he said this not as a criticism but as a compliment. Parsimony, in Peter's eyes, was a virtue.

'He had a *Racing Post* diary for 1957,' said Patchy. 'He used it for years. He used to write his entries in pencil and rub them all out at the end of the year so that he could write in the next year's appointments. He simply ignored the names of the days printed on each page.'

'I remember that diary. He bought it second hand at a jumble sale,' said Patsy. 'When he got it home he found that someone had ripped out the last week in June and the first week in July. So to get round this he just didn't make any appointments for those two weeks. They were an annual lost period in his life.'

'You're kidding!' said Gilly, with a laugh.

'No, no, it's true!' insisted Patsy.

'It is true,' agreed Peter Marshall. 'The council never met in either of those two weeks.' He paused thoughtfully for a moment. 'I'll miss him,' he said. 'Do you know,' he said, he fetched his paper every morning until last week. He only lived on the other side of the village green but it used to take him all morning. He'd set off from home at about eight, arrive at the shop at about ten thirty and get home by one. Some days he would walk back again after lunch to do the rest of his shopping.'

'It's remarkable to think that he was still opening the batting for the cricket team,' said Patchy.

There was a long silence while we all pondered on this remarkable fact.

'He ran out the entire team in a match last season,' said Thumper. 'I think it was a record.'

There was more pondering and drinking.

'He once sued the Devon paper,' said Frank. He looked at me. 'The one you write a column for. Did you know that?'

I said I didn't.

'Oh I remember that,' said Thumper with a laugh. 'The photographer took a picture of Josh's prize bull but the proprietor's wife saw the photo before it went in the paper and insisted that they airbrush out the bull's family jewels. She said a picture showing such things wasn't suitable for a family paper.'

'And Josh sued?' I asked.

'He said it made his bull look like a eunuch,' said Frank.

'That's a cock and bull story if ever I heard one,' said Gilly.

'No, it's not,' said Patchy, as quick as a flash. 'It's a cock and balls story.'

Frank insisted the story was true.

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We talked for a while about funerals in general.

Thumper said at least we all had something good to say about Josh. He said he once went to a funeral of an old aunt of his where the vicar hadn't been able to think of anything at all to say about the deceased. So, instead of spouting the usual meaningless and platitudinous drivel he'd invited the congregation to share their memories of the deceased. He said we could all stand up and say something brief but important to us about her.

'The trouble was,' said Thumper, 'that half the people there couldn't think of anything at all to say about her and the other half couldn't think of anything nice to say about her. Eventually, this old chap who had been a neighbour of hers for thirty seven years stood up and said that the one thing he remembered about her was that her grass was always cut and her windows always clean.'

We sat in silence for a moment or two. No one said anything but I suspect we all felt that it was a pretty awful way to be remembered. Neatly trimmed grass and clean windows.

Frank said he once went to a funeral in Wolverhampton where the family had the coffin sitting in their living room for a couple of days so that relatives and friends could pop in and say their goodbyes. When the undertakers came to collect the deceased they were invited in to have a drink of sherry with the family. One drink became two and then three and it was nearly an hour later that the cars left the house to go to the church for the service. It was only when they got there that they realised that they'd left the coffin behind, sitting alone on the table in the dining room.

'It had taken them nearly an hour to drive the twenty five miles from the house to the church,' said Frank. 'But the driver of the hearse got to the house and back in forty minutes. Altogether it cost the family an extra £20 for the vicar, who'd been kept waiting, an extra £20 for the grave diggers who had threatened to go home if they weren't given a bonus.'

He said the deceased had always been a poor time keeper and that her family had always joked with her that she'd be late for her own funeral one day.

Mr Kennett said that he once went to a funeral at a crematorium in Lancashire where the staff got two coffins mixed up. He said one of the undertakers later admitted that while mourners had been spouting homilies over what they thought was the corpse of a Methodist Minister they had in fact been paying homage to a Hell's Angel who'd been killed doing 130mph on the bypass. Inevitably, this also meant that a group of leather jacketed Hell's Angels had said a rather noisy goodbye to a Methodist Minister who had once refused to ride his bicycle to the shops because his bell had lost its ring-a-ling.

Thumper said he hated crematoria but that he had once been to one in London which was called 'Dead Centre' and he thought if you had to have a crematorium that was a pretty appropriate name.

Patchy said he'd once gone to a funeral in Chester and that he had hung his best suit up in the back of the car so that it wouldn't be creased. He had, he said, intended to change into it at the house of the widow who had offered to let him use her spare bedroom. Unfortunately, on the way to Chester the bonnet had flown off his car and had smashed into the windscreen.

'It had rained all the way up there,' Patchy said. 'And for twenty miles I got stuck behind a lorry carrying about two hundred bales of straw. The bits of straw blowing off the lorry all came into the car, as did the rain, and by the time I got to Chester my nice, neat, uncreased suit hanging up in the back of the car was soaking wet and was covered with several thousand bits of straw and dust.'

Because he had to drive slowly Patchy didn't have time to drive to the widow's house and had to drive straight to the church.

'I got changed into my suit in the car park,' he said. 'When I got undressed I stood so that I had the car in between me and the people waiting to go into the church. In my haste and general sense of confusion I didn't realise that the building on the other side of me was the local comprehensive school. It was just my luck that the girls' netball team was out in the playground practising. When I finished squeezing into my soaking wet and straw bedecked suit the girls all applauded.'

Patsy said she had once gone to a funeral in an old Morris Minor. 'The fan belt broke,' she said. 'So my Uncle Silas used one of my stockings as a temporary replacement. For months afterwards people complained to my mother that it was very disrespectful of me to turn up at a funeral in bare legs.'

'You should have kept one stocking on,' said Gilly. 'Then they'd have only been able to complain about you having one bare leg.'

All things considered it was unanimously decided that Josh's funeral had gone very well.

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There were noisy and lengthy celebrations in the village pub a week later. The Bilbury Cricket Club had, for the first time in its history, won the North Devon Cup.

At the post match celebrations in the Duck and Puddle, Josh Wilkins was declared 'Man of the Match'. It was the first time in living memory that a dead man had been honoured in such a way.

'It was his ashes which made all the difference,' said Seth Pitt, the Bilbury team's leading spinner, who had taken eight wickets for 17 runs.

All Josh's friends agreed that he would have been delighted to have played such a big part in the team's victory.

THE LORD OF THE MANOR

It should have been a quiet summer's day in Bilbury, but we were in the Duck and Puddle having a crisis meeting. The village had been invaded by Americans and we had to do something quickly.

It had all started just three weeks earlier.

A rented Mercedes had roared into the village, scattering gravel, birds and wandering sheep with utter disregard. The driver had raced up onto the village green, already neatly mown in preparation for the next day's cricket match, gone round in a circle and finally parked his car at mid-off.

When the vicar, who happened to be passing on his bicycle, had paused to remonstrate, the driver, a fat man in a pink sweater and tartan trousers, had simply laughed at him.

'There are no signs saying No Parking!' the driver pointed out in a broad Texan accent, proving that his dress sense was in keeping with his nationality. His female companion (whom we later discovered to be his wife) sniggered and applauded this banal but sadly accurate observation. From the waist down and the neck up she was emaciated, rather than slim, and she was festooned with more glitter than a Christmas tree. Gold bracelets, gold necklaces, gold earrings and a gold and diamond watch. Her skinny legs were encased in lime green trousers and her obviously enhanced bosom was doing its best to burst through a gold lame halter-top. There was too much of him (far more than was expected or required) but, although she looked overcooked and anorexic, there was also more than enough of her.

From that point on, the American visitors dominated village life and every conversation related to where they were, what they were doing and what they had said.

'They're staying at the Blue Grape in Woody Bay,' reported Patchy Fogg. The Blue Grape was a huge, ten-bedroom house on the cliffs which had, some years before, been converted into a hotel. 'The landlord tells me they're looking for a house to buy in the area.'

'His name is Tyrone Q Yattendon III, and he's bought the Lordship of the Manor in Combe Valley,' reported Patsy's father. 'Now he wants everyone to call him Lord Tyrone.'

Tyrone's wife, called Hortense, told everyone she met that she didn't like her Christian name to be abbreviated, but that they didn't have to call her Lady Hortense unless they wanted to. She complained so much about the cold weather that it was difficult to see why they wanted to live in Bilbury. 'I shiver so much that I can clean my teeth without moving my hand,' she said. 'I wouldn't dare wear a blue bathing costume. People would think I was bathing nude.' Like her husband she was the sort of person who told you how she was when you asked.

When she complained about the heat in the public bar at the Duck and Puddle the landlady, Gilly, trying to be helpful, asked her if she had hot flushes. Mrs Yattendon seemed surprised at this. 'Oh no,' she replied. 'We use cold water like ordinary people.'

They had just finished a European Tour. 'In two weeks you can see pretty much what you want of Europe,' said Tyrone. 'We did Belgium in an afternoon.' He told us that they had stayed at a hotel in Paris where they'd had a suite that had once been occupied by Greta Garbo. He said it was a pity that none of us would be able to afford it. He complained bitterly that so many people in Europe didn't understand English and then arrogantly went on to ask why the English couldn't spell the language properly; why they called an elevator a lift, a hood a bonnet and suspenders a pair of braces.

He annoyed Frank, the landlord at the Duck and Puddle, by putting ice cubes into twelve-year-old malt whisky. Frank was so upset by this that he subsequently refused to sell the American anything other than the cheapest, blended whisky; he put the bottles of malt away under the counter whenever the American was present.

'I say it like it is,' the American said to Peter Marshall, when complaining loudly about Peter's failure to stock the *Wall Street Journal*. 'You're a disgrace to retailing! I tell people what I think. I'm a blunt speaking man and people can take it or leave it. It's the way I am. I don't like people who mince their words.' Peter then replied by telling the American that he was fat, illiterate and uncultured. He pointed out that the Americans only ever played games that only they bothered to play, so that they could always call themselves world champions. He wanted to know why the American talked so loudly and said so little worth listening to.

The Yattendons inspected a cottage near to Pooter's bridge. When Mrs Yattendon asked to see the downstairs bathroom (and had explained what she meant by this) the owner, Geoffrey Pickles, took her down the garden to a small wooden hut in which a moveable bucket rested underneath a fixed seat. When it was full the bucket had to be emptied into a cesspit fifty yards away.

'There is no lock on the door!' complained Mrs Yattendon.

Geoffrey Pickles looked at her sharply and instantly replied: 'Madam, I have lived here for over 40 years and no one has ever tried to steal the bucket.'

Mr Yattendon, cross about the fact that it was taking two days to obtain a replacement wing mirror for his rented car, asked Henry Waugh, one of the two proprietors of our local garage, if there was a local word for 'manana'.

'I don't rightly think we have a word which conveys that sense of urgency,' replied Henry.

'They like Bilbury,' said Gilly Parsons, landlady at the Duck and Puddle. 'They want to buy a house in the village. He made his money out of barbed wire and wants to string it up everywhere he can.'

'This village needs dragging into the twentieth century!' the American told Frank Parsons. 'You need more barbed wire, wider roads and more shops. Most of all, you need some big hotels so that more people can enjoy the peace and quiet of your rural English lifestyle.' He announced his intention to apply for planning permission to build a motel on the village green.

'Great central position!' he'd insisted. 'What a waste to leave it as grass and use it just in the summer for your darned silly cricket matches.'

This was not what any of us wanted to hear.

And so, one evening, Frank and Gilly at the Duck and Puddle organised a crisis meeting to discuss what we should do to ensure that the Yattendons did not settle in Bilbury.

It took less than a minute for us to decide on a plan of action.

And by the following evening the Yattendons had left North Devon, firmly telling the landlord at the Blue Grape that they would not be coming back.

It was terribly easy.

We all took the lids off our septic tanks and stirred them up. And the farmers in the village all sprayed their fields with manure.

'What on earth is that terrible smell?' demanded Mrs Yattendon, having stopped Thumper Robinson in a lane near Bilbury Grange.

'Oh that's why Bilbury is known as Pooh Corner,' he told her.

'But the village hasn't smelt like this before!' said the American woman.

'We try to keep it under control,' said Thumper. 'But this is the way the village usually smells.'

And that was that.

That evening we all put the lids back on our septic tanks and celebrated at the Duck and Puddle.

It took three days for the smell to disappear, but it was well worth it.

MONTGOMERY AND CYNTHIA HALL

In a general practitioner's home the telephone seems to be wired up to much of the rest of the house. Sit down to a meal and the telephone will ring. Make yourself comfortable in front of the television and the telephone will ring just as the opening credits begin to roll. I don't care what people say, I am certain that the bath and the telephone are linked. If you fill the first with hot water and climb into it then the second will ring.

And, if you're a village doctor, you can't escape from the telephone merely by leaving your house. You don't need to tell people where you are. They'll find you quickly enough.

I had called into the Bilbury village pub, the Duck and Puddle, for lunch with Thumper Robinson and Patchy Fogg, when the telephone rang. Frank and Gilly, the landlord and landlady of the Duck and Puddle, were out for the day and had hired a temporary barman called Sidney Weedon.

'You've reached the Duck and Puddle in Bilbury,' we heard Mr Weedon say. 'And you're speaking to Sidney Weedon.' He always put on a very posh voice when he answered the telephone. He once explained that he did it so that it sounded as though the Duck and Puddle was a five star hotel, but it seemed to us unlikely that anyone ringing somewhere called the Duck and Puddle would be under the impression that they were telephoning a five star hotel. In reality it just sounded as though the bloke answering the phone at the Duck and Puddle was putting on a posh voice.

There was a pause, Sidney put the receiver down on the bar counter, and then I heard the words I always dread when I'm about to eat. 'Is there a doctor in the house?'

I got up, walked over to the bar and held out a hand. Sidney handed me the telephone receiver.

'Just wanted to give you the opportunity to not be here,' he whispered.

'Thank you,' I whispered back. Sidney went through this charade every time he handed me the telephone, even though he knew that I always took calls.

Cynthia Hall was on the other end of the phone. I listened to her for a few moments, told her I would be with her as quickly as I could, and put the telephone back on its rest.

'I'm sorry about this,' I told Sidney. 'Could you keep my beans on toast warm for me?'

Sidney, who was one of the diminishing number of people who regard doctors with a mixture of awe and respect, said that he would.

I hurried back towards Patchy Fogg and Thumper Robinson, with whom I was having lunch. 'Got to pop out,' I said. 'Someone has fallen off his exercise bike.'

'I've always maintained that exercise is very dangerous,' I heard Thumper say as I headed for the door.

'Totally agree with you,' said Patchy. 'Poor old Montgomery. Fancy him falling off his exercise bike.'

I turned back. 'How did you know it was Montgomery Hall?' I demanded.

'Small village,' said Patchy with a grin. 'There are only two exercise bikes in the village.'

'Who's got the other one?' I asked him.

'Me.'

'Not a word to anyone!' I warned him, waving a finger. 'I shouldn't have told you anything.'

'Our lips are sealed,' promised Patchy.

I headed back for the door.

'I'll drink your Guinness for you,' called Thumper. 'It'll go flat if it's left.'

'Thanks,' I called back as I disappeared through the door and down into the car park at the front of the pub.

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Montgomery and Cynthia Hall were relative newcomers to the village. They had arrived in the period when Bilbury had had no general practitioner of its own and I'd only ever met them twice.

On one occasion I had bumped into them at Peter Marshall's shop. They had been buying paint so that they could decorate the outside of their cottage and Peter had, as usual, been trying to sell them a few gallons of the stuff he'd acquired some years earlier from a bankruptcy sale in Bideford.

The paint was a hideous shade of pink and at least half a dozen houses in the village had been painted with it before people started to complain that the village was beginning to look like a set prepared for a pop music video.

(In the end things hadn't worked out too badly. A sharp downpour had proved that the paint wasn't terribly suitable for outdoor use and those who had used it on their homes had ended up with exterior walls painted a very slightly pink version of whatever else it was that they had been painted previously.)

I'd met them for a second time during an infamous and rather curious stand-off between two local farmers, Samuel Houghton and Walter Robinson. The two, both driving tractors, had met head on in a narrow lane that led down to the Hall's cottage. Neither farmer would back up (largely, it was believed, because neither of them could reverse very well) and, as a result, the entire lane was blocked for four days. Samuel and Walter both refused to leave their tractors. The police, in the person of Constable Russ Ross, refused to interfere because Walter owned a shotgun which it was well known he kept in his tractor. Constable Ross didn't want to make things worse than they already were. Most locals just drove around the blockage but the Halls didn't have this option because there was no other access to their property. When they started to run out of food I was appointed to negotiate with Samuel and Walter for permission to take them some supplies. This I managed to do. Two days after my mercy mission, the tractor incident ended in farcical circumstances when both men developed rather bad attacks of colic and diarrhoea after eating too many blackberries. They were both taken home in the back of Thumper's van (which had to be washed out afterwards) and he and Peter Marshall quietly returned the two tractors to their respective farms the same evening.

From what I knew of them the Halls were a pleasant and unexceptional middle-aged couple. They had moved to the village after he, a former fireman, had taken early retirement, on a full index-linked pension, after complaining that he was suffering from stress.

With remarkable and commendable optimism the Halls had named their new home 'Dunmoanin'. To discourage unwanted visitors they had put a large 'Beware of the Dog' notice on their gate. The notice carried a picture of an Alsatian which had blood dripping from its jaws. To add extra colour to this stark warning they kept a rubber ball and a real bone on their lawn.

When I'd visited (delivering supplies during the Great Tractor Fiasco), I had found the sign and the evidence quite convincing. I had refused to pass through the gate until Mrs Hall had assured me that there was no dog and that the sign and the fake 'evidence' were there to frighten away intruders.

This time I didn't pause. I jumped out of the car, opened the gate and went into the garden. Mrs Hall must have been watching out for me. She met me on the front doorstep. She was smartly dressed in a powder blue skirt and matching jacket. She wore a crisply ironed white blouse. In any other Bilbury home this would have been unusual attire but Mrs Hall had been dressed quite formally on both the previous occasions when I'd met her.

'I think Montgomery has broken his collar bone,' she said. 'But I need to talk to you before you see him.' She led me into their neat and smartly furnished living room. Large French windows led out onto a small terrace and overlooked a neat garden surrounded by woodland. She straightened a magazine on a small table and sat down on the sofa and pointed to a chair. I sat down. She pulled her skirt down to make sure that it covered her knees, though it already did this.

'Where is your husband?' I asked.

'He's in the garage, where he fell,' she told me. 'But he's sitting and he's fairly comfortable.' She paused, picked up a cushion that sat on the sofa beside her and punched it a little. Then she put it back. 'As comfortable as can be expected.'

I nodded, to indicate that she should go on.

'It's a bit difficult,' she said. She paused and played with her hair. 'Embarrassing is a better word.'

'Tell me,' I told her. 'Nothing you tell me is going to embarrass me or shock me.'

'I couldn't ring an ambulance,' she said. 'I don't want people talking. Nor does Montgomery.'

'OK,' I said. 'Even if you had called an ambulance it probably wouldn't be here for an hour I'm afraid.'

'No,' she said. 'That's one of the disadvantages of living in the country, isn't it?' She checked her earlobes one by one, as though making sure that her earrings hadn't fallen off. They were the clip-on variety and they were both still there. 'Would you like something to drink? A cup of tea? Sherry?' She pulled off one of the earrings and then examined it as though she'd never seen it before.

I held up a hand. 'No thanks.'

She put the earring back into position.

'You're going to have to tell me eventually,' I pointed out. 'And the longer you wait the more difficult you're going to find it will be.'

'Montgomery was on the exercise bicycle,' she said. 'He likes to keep fit.'

I nodded.

'He's very fit for a man of his age.'

'He looks fit,' I agreed. 'At least he did when I last saw him.'

'He's only a couple of pounds overweight.'

'Good.'

'He had a portable television set balanced on a pile of boxes so that he could watch it while he pedalled.'

'Splendid idea.'

'But when he reached out to change channels the bicycle tipped over.'

'Oh dear,' I said, nodding as though this was something that happened all the time.

'The problem is that Montgomery wasn't dressed normally when he fell.'

'I wouldn't imagine he was,' I agreed. 'People wear all sorts of funny things when they're exercising. I once had a pair of hideous, fluorescent-orange running shorts. And a bloke I shared a flat with had a pale blue tracksuit made of something shiny and slightly luminous.'

'Perhaps you'd better come and take a look,' said Mrs Hall standing up. She tugged at the sides of her skirt again.

I followed her out of the living room, through the kitchen, out of the back door and into the garage.

Montgomery was sitting on a plastic garden chair holding his shoulder and keeping very still. The exercise bicycle that had thrown him onto the floor was lying on its side. The television set was still on. Black and white actors dressed as cowboys were shooting black and white actors dressed as Red Indians. It was no surprise at all to see that the men dressed as cowboys seemed to be winning.

Montgomery was wearing a dark blue skirt with a slit up one side, a pale blue blouse, black stockings, a pair of black court shoes, a dark, shoulder length wig and half a pound of make-up. 'You've broken your collar bone,' I told him when I'd examined him. 'You'll need an X-ray and some strapping. There's no real point in doing an X-ray because it's obvious what's wrong. But they'll do one anyway.'

'I'm sorry about you seeing me like this,' he said.

'No need to apologise,' I told him. 'Scottish men wear skirts with great pride. Cross-dressing is revered in Scotland. There are whole regiments of transvestites up there. Why shouldn't you?'

'You're very understanding.'

'Nothing to be understanding about.'

'Would you do something for me, please?'

'Of course.'

'Help me out of my damned corset. It's killing me,' whispered Montgomery.

'I expect it is,' I agreed. 'I take it you would rather change into something less comfortable before you go to hospital?'

Montgomery nodded and smiled weakly.

'Start removing his make-up,' I told Cynthia. 'I'll pop out to the car for some temporary strapping.'

We had to cut through the sleeve of the blouse and unclip the straps of his corset but we managed to undress Montgomery without too much trouble. It took us nearly thirty minutes for Cynthia to remove all the make-up.

'I've been cross-dressing for years,' said Montgomery. 'I can't remember exactly how it started. But I kept it secret from Cynthia for ages.'

'When I first found his underwear hidden at the back of the wardrobe I thought he had another woman,' said Cynthia. 'I thought it was stuff he'd bought for her. And he was so ashamed and embarrassed that he didn't contradict me when I confronted him.'

'You let your wife think you were having an affair rather than let her know that you dressed in feminine clothing?'

Montgomery nodded and winced.

'Just keep as still as you can,' I told him, unfastening a stocking and pulling it down his leg. Cynthia removed the other one.

'I was so relieved when I found that he wasn't having an affair,' said Cynthia. 'I didn't care about the cross-dressing.'

'Now she does my make-up for me,' said Montgomery.

'Very good it was too,' I said.

They both looked pleased.

'Do you think so?' said Montgomery.

'Absolutely,' I said.

It took another ten minutes to get him into a pair of Y-fronts, a pair of trousers and a pair of slip-on shoes and to get his good arm into the sleeve of a baggy old shirt. I bandaged him up so that he wouldn't be too uncomfortable.

When we were finished I offered to drive him to the hospital (explaining that it would be quicker than waiting for an ambulance) but Mrs Hall said that she could do it herself and that there was really no need for me to bother. We were about to get him into the car when Cynthia noticed that his fingernails were still painted scarlet. And when she'd found the nail varnish remover and cleaned them he remembered that his toenails were painted the same colour.

It was half past three by the time I watched Cynthia drive Montgomery off towards Barnstaple. It was far too late to go back to the Duck and Puddle. My beans on toast would be in the bin. But, since I hate waste, I was comforted by the thought that Thumper had doubtless drunk my Guinness.

CAT UP A TREE

There is no fire station or fire engine in Bilbury. On those rare occasions when there is a fire in the village which cannot be dealt with effectively by villagers wielding metal buckets and garden hoses we have to telephone Barnstaple and ask for an engine and crew to be sent out. Since Bilburians are proud of being self-contained this is something we try to do as infrequently as possible. In 1952, a large fire at the vicarage (caused, it is rumoured, when the vicar fell asleep in his study and let his post-prandial cigar slip to the floor and set fire to the carpet) was effectively extinguished by a human chain, twenty galvanised buckets and the contents of the carp pond at the bottom of the vicarage garden.

Only once in the last ten years have we had to call the fire brigade. And on that occasion it wasn't because there was a fire. It was because Mrs Pettigrew's cat (a plump and usually lazy mackerel tabby called Catarina who was, on occasion, surprisingly agile) had got stuck up a large oak tree at the end of her garden.

Agatha Pettigrew was a dedicated and committed ailurophile. In her late sixties, she had never been married, never had a job and never lived anywhere other than in Bilbury. She only rarely ventured outside the village boundaries (once a year she went shopping in Barnstaple and that, she said, provided her with more than enough excitement) and once told me that she had never once spent a night away from the cottage where she'd been born and raised. Her parents, both long dead, had left her the cottage and she lived on a small unearned income derived from a modest portfolio of National Savings certificates and an even smaller income derived from the sale of stories about her cats; delicate, loving tales which she illustrated herself with pen and ink line drawings. She supplemented this totally inadequate income by growing much of her own food and mending her clothes until each item contained so many patches and darns that the original colour of the garment was no longer discernible.

Mrs Pettigrew's one luxury was her cats.

Some people scrimp and save in order to buy beer, wine, tobacco or expensive frocks. Others forego more basic delights in order to buy rare stamps or commemorative ashtrays.

Mrs Pettigrew fed herself on home-made leek and potato soup and occasional mutton stew, and at the village shop was a regular buyer of dented tins which had lost their labels and were, therefore, culinary mysteries offered at a heavily discounted price.

Everything Mrs Pettigrew did not have to spend on survival she spent on her three cats: Catarina, Chloe and Chantelle. She bought them the best of everything and gave them all her love.

When I received a message asking me to visit Mrs Pettigrew I was surprised. I knew where she lived, I'd met her once or twice at Peter Marshall's village shop and I'd often seen her tending her vegetables as I'd cycled past her cottage. If I had time I would stop and pass the time of day.

Mrs Pettigrew knew and understood cats better than anyone I'd ever met, and our conversations always turned to feline matters. We might start by talking about the weather, the slug population or the first sighting of the summer's swallow but it would never be too long before we were talking about cats. I didn't mind a bit. I love cats and am always happy to talk about them.

It was Mrs Pettigrew who told me that cats purr not just when they are contented but also when they are injured or in pain.

'Cats purr at a frequency of 25 to 50 hertz,' she had told me, one summer morning when I'd stopped to admire her runner beans. 'It's the best frequency for bone growth and fracture healing and for the repair of tendons. It's also good for healing muscle and ligament injuries and for strengthening and toning muscles. You doctors could learn a thing or two from cats. Purring helps heal joint injury, it encourages wound healing, reduction of swelling and infection, pain relief and relief of chronic pulmonary disease.'

It was, Mrs Pettigrew told me, because of the purring that cats suffer from fewer diseases than dogs, and heal better and more quickly too.

It was also Mrs Pettigrew who explained to me a couple of things that had puzzled me for ages.

'Why do my cats always want to sit on whatever it is that I'm reading? I've got two cats and if I sit down with a book or newspaper one of them will always plonk themselves down on the bit I happen to be reading at the time.'

Mrs Pettigrew had laughed. 'Cats like attention,' she said. 'If you're giving all your attention to a book then they'll know that is the place to be. By lying on top of the book you're reading they'll get your attention. Simple!'

'And why do they like to lie on my typewriter keyboard? Sophie in particular loves it.'

'You have to learn to think like a cat if you want to understand cats,' said Mrs Pettigrew. 'Your typewriter keys mould themselves very well to the cat's shape and whenever the cat moves the keys will move with her, adapting to her as she stretches and rolls from side to side.' She'd moved backwards and forwards as she'd explained this to me, as though she were a cat, making herself comfortable on a huge keyboard.

But, well as I knew her, I'd never been called to attend Mrs Pettigrew professionally. And, as I drove to her home I wondered what on earth could have happened to require my services.

'It's Catarina,' Mrs Pettigrew explained. She was clearly quite distressed. She held a handkerchief to her nose and blew hard. It sounded like a foghorn.

'Your cat?'

She nodded.

'I didn't know who else to telephone,' she said, apologetically.

'That's OK,' I assured her. 'What's wrong with her?'

'She's up there,' said Mrs Pettigrew, pointing to the large oak tree at the front of her cottage garden. 'The poor dear's stuck.'

I looked at the tree and could just make out Catarina. She was tucked into a fork two thirds of the way up the tree, almost hidden by the foliage.

'How long has she been up there?'

'Four and three quarter hours,' replied Mrs Pettigrew instantly.

I scratched my head.

'You've tried a saucer of milk?'

'She doesn't like milk,' said Mrs Pettigrew. 'But I've tried salmon, chicken, pilchards and clotted cream.'

'No luck?'

'She wouldn't budge.'

'And you think she's stuck?'

'Definitely,' said Mrs Pettigrew. 'I know her. She's definitely stuck. She won't show it because she's proud, but she's frightened.'

'Do you have a ladder?'

Mrs Pettigrew thought for a moment. 'I've got some steps in the kitchen,' she said. 'I use them to reach the cupboard over the sink.'

'I don't think they'll be high enough. You don't have a ladder?'

She shook her head.

I looked up at Catarina and scratched my head again. 'I'm afraid we'll have to ring the fire brigade,' I told Mrs Pettigrew.

'But we haven't got a fire brigade,' Mrs Pettigrew pointed out. Like many villagers she didn't like to recognise that there was a world outside Bilbury.

'They've got one in Barnstaple,' I pointed out.

'Foreigners!' said Mrs Pettigrew, alarmed. 'That will mean foreigners handling Catarina. She won't like that. Not a bit.' She shivered.

In the end I managed to persuade her that we didn't have much of a choice. And I telephoned the fire brigade.

'Bilbury?' said a voice at the other end of the phone. 'Is Bilbury in Devon?' He called to someone in his office. 'Do we cover Bilbury?' He brightened up when I told him the problem. 'Oh, right,' he said. 'Goody. We haven't had a cat for weeks. The chaps love a stuck cat.' There was a pause. 'Is it urgent?'

'Well, it is sort of urgent,' I replied.

'Splendid,' said the man. 'I'll come on the engine myself. I can ring the bell.'

I put the telephone down and turned to Mrs Pettigrew. 'They're on their way,' I told her.

'Oh you are wonderful!' she said. 'I knew you'd know what to do.'

'Why don't you put the kettle on and make a nice cup of tea?' I asked her. In an emergency the making and drinking of a nice cup of tea are crucial.

She put the kettle on and while we waited for it to boil we sat down at the table and talked about snails, rhododendrons and cats.

'Maybe I'll just go and check on her,' said Mrs Pettigrew getting up from her chair. 'Oh no!' she squealed. 'I don't need to. Here she is!'

I looked down. Catarina was standing there looking up at us.

'Oh my clever little sweet pussycat!' cried Mrs Pettigrew. She scooped up the cat and clutched it to her bosom. The cat purred but made no discernible protest.

'I'd better ring the fire brigade,' I told her, wondering whether there was a penalty for making hoax calls to the fire brigade.

'They're on their way!' a new voice assured me when I'd rung. 'Should be with you in another fifteen minutes. I've just had them on the radio. They got stuck behind a hay cart and had to make a detour via Combe Martin.'

I wanted to tell him the cat was safe but I couldn't bring myself to say the words. While I hesitated the operator broke the connection. I stared at the phone wondering whether or not to call him back.

Just then Thumper Robinson arrived. 'I saw the doc's car here and guessed you'd have the kettle on,' he told Mrs Pettigrew as he burst into her kitchen. 'Have you got any of that wonderful Madeira cake of yours?' Thumper Robinson is my oldest and best friend in Bilbury. He earns his living buying and selling cars and antiques, doing odd jobs and helping people out.

I explained what had happened.

Thumper shook his head and sucked in half a lung full of air.

'Trouble?' I asked him.

'They won't like it,' he said. 'And to be honest it'll give the village a bad name. We'll be a bit of a laughing stock. The local paper will make us look like idiots.'

He and I stared at each other. Mrs Pettigrew was too busy feeding Catarina to care.

'So what do we do?' I asked. 'They'll be here in minutes!'

'We'll put the cat back up the tree,' said Thumper suddenly. Mrs Pettigrew looked up and started to protest.

'Only for a few minutes,' said Thumper, holding up a hand to silence her. 'No option. When the firemen get to that tree they've got to find a cat up it.'

'Mrs Pettigrew hasn't got a ladder,' I told him. 'And I doubt if there's a ladder in the village big enough.'

'Don't need a ladder to get up there,' insisted Thumper with a smile.

And he didn't.

He put Catarina down his shirt so that he would have both hands free and went up the tree as though he was going up the staircase at home. He deposited the cat in the fork we pointed out and was back down on the ground a minute and a half before the Barnstaple fire engine appeared.

'Do you mind if we wait a moment,' asked the Chief Fireman. 'The photographer from the local paper is following us. He'll be here in a couple of minutes.'

Knowing that Catarina was safe, and had a tummy full of salmon, Mrs Pettigrew said that would be fine with her. And so the fire brigade waited until the photographer arrived and then, when he turned up, the youngest fireman, who'd never had his picture in the paper and who was plucking up courage to ask his girlfriend to marry him, climbed up their turntable ladder and collected Catarina. He then held her up so that the photographer could take a picture that would impress his girlfriend and make sure he got the answer he wanted when he popped the question.

And then Mrs Pettigrew gave everyone except the driver a glass of her home-made Parsnip wine and made a fresh pot of tea for the driver. Everyone had a slice of her Madeira cake before they went home and told of derring-do and brave adventures out in the wilds of Bilbury village.

THE WITCH AND THE BULLY

Elsie Fingleton didn't live in Bilbury and, strictly speaking, shouldn't have been a patient of mine at all. She lived in a small, rented, terraced cottage near the beach in Combe Martin and remained on my list of patients because she'd lived in Bilbury for over half a century and wanted to retain as many links with the village as she could. Dr Brownlow, my predecessor and mentor, had saved her life in 1954 when she'd had an attack of asthma which had developed into status asthmaticus. Apart from being an asthma sufferer she was also one of the most nervous people I knew. She once told me that she slept with the light on in her bedroom.

'What are you frightened of?' I had asked her. 'Burglars? Ghosts? Things that go bump in the night?'

'All of those,' she had replied instantly.

She came to see me one day in a terrible state. She was literally shaking from head to toe.

'What on earth is the matter?'

'I'm going to die a horrible death,' she whispered.

'Why do you say that?'

'I've been told,' she said.

'Who has told you?'

'Beryl Hardcastle.'

'Who is Beryl Hardcastle?'

'She's a medium,' said Elsie. 'She came to the door and told me.'

'She came to your cottage?'

'Yes. She says her name is Queen Julianna and that she is a Gypsy queen but I was at school with her and her real name is Beryl Hardcastle and her father had a chip shop.'

'She didn't recognise you?' Elsie shook her head.

'Why do you believe what she says if you know she's lying about who she is?'

Elsie looked at me blankly. 'I don't know,' she said. She looked down at her hands. 'She frightens me.'

'What did she tell you?'

'She said I wasn't to tell anyone.'

'You can tell me. I'm your doctor.'

'Will it be all right?'

'Yes. I promise.'

'She said that I had to talk to the Black Angel every week to stop him killing me.'

'And do you have to give the Black Angel money?'

'Oh no,' said Elsie.

'You just have to talk to him?'

She nodded.

'No money?'

'Only to Beryl. Queen Juliana.'

'You have to give her money?'

'To give her the strength to contact the Black Angel for me. I can't do it without her.'

'How much do you have to give Beryl?'

'£20.'

'£20 every week?'

'Yes. And I can't afford it. I've sold everything I can sell. Now I haven't got any more money. So I can't talk to the Black Angel and he will kill me.'

I tried to explain to Elsie that it was all nonsense. I told her that Beryl was simply tricking her into handing over money. But, although I think she knew that what I was saying was the truth, Elsie still would not accept that the Black Angel did not exist and had no power over her life.

'We should go to the police,' I said, though I suspected they would not be terribly interested.

'Oh no!' said Elsie. 'We mustn't do that. Going to the police would make things worse.'

'Would you like me to speak to Beryl?' I asked.

'Would you?' asked Elsie, a light of hope appearing in her eyes. 'Maybe you could explain that I haven't got any more money.'

'Where does Beryl live?' I asked.

'She lives in a cottage with a man called Ollie,' said Elsie. She told me the address.

'What does Ollie do?'

'He's horrid,' said Elsie.

'What does he do?' I asked again.

'He's just horrid,' said Elsie. 'He goes into pubs and cafés and just sits there until they give him money to go away.'

'Why would they do that?'

'Because he stares at people. He looks very fierce. He makes people feel uncomfortable. So the people who run the cafés give him money to go somewhere else.'

'Have you got somewhere you can stay for a few days?' I asked her. 'So that Beryl can't find you?'

Elsie thought for a moment. 'I can go and stay with my aunt,' she said. 'She has a boarding house but she's not full. She'd put me up for a few days. It's only round the corner from where I live but I don't think Beryl knows about it.' She told me the address.

'Go there and stay there,' I told her. And I promised Elsie that I would help her.

After Elsie had gone I sat in my surgery for over half an hour trying to think of a way in which I could keep my promise. I thought again of going to the police. But in my heart I knew that wouldn't work. For a brief moment I even thought of arranging for Thumper to take a couple of pals round to scare Beryl and her 'horrid' man away from the area. I pulled out a map and found Beryl's cottage on it. I drew a ring around the cottage in red ink and stared at it. There had to be a way to help Elsie.

And then Miss Johnson came in and told me of a call I had to make in the village. I left the map on my desk and did the call.

When I got back Thumper Robinson was waiting for me. He was sitting in the patient's chair in my surgery looking at the map I'd marked.

'I've got a load of logs in the truck,' he said. 'Do you want some?'

I said I'd take all he'd got, asked him how much he wanted. I paid him cash.

'Myrtle Cottage on Combe Road,' he said, pointing to the red ring I'd drawn on the map. 'I heard something about Combe Road and Myrtle Cottage recently. Can't for the life of me remember what it was. What do you know about Myrtle Cottage?'

'Nothing,' I told him, with a shrug. 'But I know who lives there.'

'Beryl and Ollie,' said Thumper. He put the map back down on my desk.

'Yes.'

'Nasty pair,' said Thumper. 'She dabbles in witchcraft and he's just a bully. They rent the cottage. They've lived there for years.'

'I know about the witchcraft.'

'One of them been upsetting a patient of yours?'

I nodded. 'I can't tell you who.'

Thumper shook his head. 'I don't want to know,' he said. 'But Beryl and Ollie need teaching a lesson. They've been annoying people for far too long. She pretends to be a gypsy Queen. Dabbles in witchcraft. Scares people silly.'

'I know,' I said. 'Have the police been round there?'

Thumper laughed. 'They've tried,' he said. 'Ollie just snarls at them. He's the sort of person most people apologise to when he treads on their toes. The trouble is that even when Beryl and Ollie break the law no one will give evidence against them.'

'There must be a way...' I murmured.

'We could pan them,' suggested Thumper.

I frowned. 'What's that?'

'It was an old way of getting rid of people who were bad,' explained Thumper. 'All the villagers would gather outside their house. They'd be armed with pans and ladles and they'd make a noise.'

'And that would scare the bad people away?'

'It used to,' said Thumper. He paused. 'So they say.'

'Do you think it would work with Beryl and Ollie?'

Thumper smiled and shook his head. 'No,' he admitted. 'No, I don't.'

'We need to scare them,' I said.

Suddenly Thumper banged his fist on my desk. 'I've just remembered!'

'Remembered what?'

'Combe Road,' he said excitedly. 'They're widening Combe Road. It leads up to a caravan site on the cliffs and in the summer caravans are always getting stuck. So they're doing some road widening.'

'And what about Myrtle Cottage?'

'Knocking it down,' said Thumper. 'They're getting a compulsory purchase order and knocking it down.'

'How do you know?' I asked him.

'A mate of mine owns a digger. He does a lot of demolition work for the council and is always tendering for stuff. He has a contact there who tips him off about what the council is planning. It isn't public knowledge yet.'

'But surely the council will have contacted the owner of the cottage?'

'They may have done,' said Thumper. 'But Ollie and Beryl are just renting it. The council may have contacted the owner - but that's Mickey Dunn who owns all sorts of property round there. And he won't have bothered telling Ollie and Beryl.'

'I've thought of something I could try,' I said. 'Are you sure they won't know?'

'Not for another two days,' said Thumper. 'Details of the road widening will be in the local paper on Thursday and then everyone will know.'

'I'm going round to see Ollie and Beryl,' I said, standing up.

'I'll come with you,' said Thumper.

I shook my head. 'This will work better if I go alone.'

On the way to Myrtle Cottage I rehearsed what I intended to say. Ollie opened the door. He was as ugly and as frightening as I had heard.

I introduced myself.

'We didn't call for a doctor,' snarled Ollie.

'I know,' I said. 'But I'm here about a patient of mine called Elsie Fingleton.'

'Don't know her,' said Ollie. He tried to shut the door but I was ready for him and had my foot in the way.

'Your wife does,' I said. 'Could I have a word with her, please?'

'What about?'

'It's important,' I said.

Ollie thought for a moment and then called for Beryl.

'What is it?' she demanded when she came to the door. She was dressed entirely in black and looked older than I knew she was.

'I'm afraid you've frightened a patient of mine,' I said. 'Elsie Fingleton.'

'Never heard of her,' said Beryl, without hesitating.

'She knows you as Queen Juliana,' I said.

'So what?'

'I'd like you to stop frightening her with your superstitious nonsense,' I said. 'She hasn't got any more money.'

'If she believes it that's her look out,' said Beryl, now not bothering to deny that she knew Elsie.

'It could be a problem for you,' I said.

'Are you threatening me?' demanded Elsie.

'No, not at all,' I said. 'But I'd like you to see her and tell her that she is no longer in danger.'

Beryl laughed. 'And what are you going to do if I don't?'

This was my moment.

'I'll have your house knocked down,' I said quietly. I always find that threats muttered softly are far more menacing than threats uttered loudly.

Beryl stared at me.

I stared at her. And I smiled.

'Ollie!' she yelled. Ollie appeared.

'This bastard is threatening to knock down our house,' she said.

'No I'm not,' I corrected her. 'I'm not going to knock down your house. The council will do it.'

'You can't do that, mate,' snarled Ollie. And he slammed the door.

***

Two days later, armed with a copy of the local newspaper, I went back.

'Have you seen the paper?' I asked Ollie, who answered the door.

He stared at me. I think it was intended to be menacing. I showed him the story about the road widening. 'Your house is going to be knocked down,' I said.

'You fixed this?' he said, more astonished than anything else. I stared at him.

'Beryl!' he yelled.

Beryl arrived. He showed her the newspaper and then looked at me. 'You've got that sort of clout?'

'I want Beryl to stop frightening my patient,' I explained.

'So now what?' he asked. He didn't look anywhere near as frightening now.

'You've lost your home,' I told him.

'And now what?'

'You leave the area,' I said. 'But before you go, you apologise to Elsie, you give her back the money you've taken from her and you tell her that there isn't anything for her to worry about.'

They stared at me.

'Or else?' said Ollie.

I shrugged. 'I'll think of something,' I said, trying to give the impression that I had limitless powers over their lives.

They looked at each other.

'When?' asked Beryl.

I looked at my watch. 'Thirty minutes,' I said. 'Elsie's cottage.'

Ollie nodded. 'She'll be there,' he said. 'And then you'll leave us alone?'

'You leave the area and I'll leave you alone,' I assured him.

I went back to my car and climbed in behind the wheel. I had to wait for a moment or two before I drove off. I was shaking and I was sweating so much that my shirt was stuck to my back.

Beryl was there on time. She gave Elsie back her money and assured her that the Black Angel had gone and would trouble her no more. She even apologised. And then she left.

Elsie beamed and cried a little in relief. She made a cup of tea for us both. Fifteen minutes later I left. A quarter of a mile down the road I ·looked in my rear view mirror and noticed Thumper Robinson's truck behind me. I pulled over, got out and walked back to where he had parked.

'Did it go OK?' he asked.

'Fine,' I said. 'Beryl and Ollie are leaving the area.'

'Great,' said Thumper.

'How did you come to be here?' I asked him.

He grinned. 'You didn't notice me before?'

'No.'

'I've been following you since you left Bilbury Grange an hour and a half ago,' he said. 'I asked Patsy to let me know when you left. I just thought I'd keep an eye on you. Ollie can be a naughty boy.'

I nodded. 'Thanks.'

'I couldn't have sorted it better myself,' he said.

It was one of the best compliments I've ever had.

DR BROWNLOW'S ADVICE

My predecessor as Bilbury's medical practitioner, Dr Brownlow, was my greatest teacher. To use a now fashionable (though old fashioned) word he was my mentor. He was, without a doubt, the wisest man I ever knew. He taught me almost everything I know about medicine and most of what I know about life.

Over the years I got into the habit of writing down the things he told me. I put them into a small, red and black spiral-bound notebook.

I told myself I was doing this so that I could pass on these pieces of wisdom to my children. But I was really doing it so that I could remember his words - and remind myself of them whenever I needed reassurance or advice. Much of the advice he gave me was designed to make me a better doctor. But I think some of the advice probably works for patients too.

Here's a selection of the advice he gave me:

1. However bad things may be always remember that these are tomorrow's good old days.
2. Never complain in a restaurant before you have finished your meal.
3. Ignore those who tell you that something can't be done. All they mean by that is that they cannot do it and cannot see a way that it can be done; they do not mean that you cannot do it. How could they possibly know what you are capable of?
4. You will regret the things you didn't do far more than the things you did do.
5. When patients tell you things about their lives write down what they tell you on their medical notes. When they come back to see you again you can ask them how they enjoyed their holiday, how the new bathroom is coming along or how their husband is coping with his problems at work. You may remember some of these things anyway but you won't remember them all and jotting down little notes will help to give your memory a jog occasionally.
6. It's the dog you don't worry about who is the one who bites you in the leg. While you're worrying about the black dog in front of you, the white dog comes round behind you and nips you in the calf. Whatever it is that you worry most about it will almost always be something else (usually unforseen) that causes you most trouble.
7. The more taps you have the greater the chances are that one of them will be leaking. And the more slates there are on your roof the greater the chance that one of them will slip off.
8. Look after the minutes as carefully as you look after the pennies and the hours, like the pounds, will look after themselves.
9. Life is too short to be wishy-washy. Say what you feel. Defend what you believe in. Don't waste time and energy on those whom you despise.
10. Every human body has a weak point - it may be the stomach, the lungs or the skin. When you are under too much stress, or are pushing yourself too hard, you will acquire symptoms at or around your weak point. Regard these symptoms as a warning sign to pull back a little.
11. People always appreciate a doctor who is prepared to visit - without making a song and dance about it. If you're going to do something, why whinge and make everyone feel uncomfortable about it?
12. Buy socks that are all the same colour and the same style. This will make life much easier. And who cares what colour socks you wear?
13. They used to build houses out of stone. Today, they build them out of breezeblock and then clad the visible bits with artificial stone to make it look as though the houses are made of stone. Remember this when someone argues that progress is always good.
14. Expect the worst and your life will be full of pleasant surprises.
15. Reasonable people are invariably without passions or ideas and reasonable men never do anything remarkable. Remember this when critics complain that you are being unreasonable.
16. When faced with a problem in medicine (and in life) it is sometimes best to do nothing - and to wait and see what happens. Very few doctors realise this and even fewer are prepared to act this way.
17. A doctor can often produce an improvement in a patient's condition by taking him off the drugs prescribed by other doctors.
18. Never lend money to friends.
19. When you are travelling a long distance always take advantage of every opportunity to empty your bladder.

20. Carry matches with you when visiting other people's homes or staying in hotels. Lighting a match in the lavatory may save you considerable embarrassment.

21. As soon as you have a little money saved up, invest ten per cent of it in gold coins and keep them somewhere very safe.

22. You should only ever do things for one (or more) of three reasons: first, because it will make the world a better place for those around you; second, because it will be fun; third, for money which you can use to make life better for you and for others.

SIGNED BY THE AUTHOR

Molly Tranter had lived in London until her mid twenties. She'd arrived in Devon during the Second World War to work on a farm in Bilbury as a 'land girl' and while digging up turnips had fallen in love with Kenny, the son of a local farmer. He was a sapper, home for a long weekend leave, and they'd gone into Barnstaple together to the cinema. After he'd gone back to the front they'd written to each other. And six months after meeting Molly he came back again, this time for a slightly longer leave. During Kenny's second leave the two married. They both knew it might be their only chance. Three months later, a telegram arrived and turned Molly into a widow.

'I saw Molly Tranter today,' said Gilly, putting a new bowl of peanuts on our table. 'Haven't seen her for months. She was in Peter Marshall's shop.'

There were six of us sitting in the Duck and Puddle having an early evening drink: Thumper Robinson and his girlfriend Anne Thwaites, Patchy Fogg and his wife, Patsy and me.

'I haven't seen her for ages,' said Patsy. 'How is she?'

'Frail but surprisingly lively,' said Gilly. She picked a couple of empty glasses off the table. 'She's got a bit of a chest infection. She shouldn't have been out but you know what she's like. She was a bit down too, when I saw her. Her sister is dying. Molly wants to go and see her one last time but can't afford the rail fare.'

We all expressed sympathy. We all liked Molly Tranter.

'I don't suppose you could pop round and see if she's got anything you can sell for her?' Gilly asked Patchy.

'Of course I will,' said Patchy. 'I'll pop round now. How much does she need?'

'£50 would buy her train tickets and give her a few pounds for taxis,' said Gilly.

'OK,' said Patchy, standing. 'I'll take a look.'

'Come in my car,' I told him, standing too. 'I'll have a look at her chest while you take a peek at her antiques.'

We slipped out of the Duck and Puddle and drove round to Molly's cottage. She was surprised but pleased to see the two of us.

I listened to her chest, checked her lungs and heart, and gave her some antibiotics. 'You should have called me,' I told her. We talked about her sister while Patchy finished looking around the room.

'Is there anything you can sell for me?' Molly asked him.

'The table is pretty decent,' he said. 'I can get £250 for it.' Molly shook her head. 'Oh, I couldn't sell that,' she said. 'My husband's family gave me that.'

'The bookcase?'

Molly looked sad. 'They gave me that too,' she said. 'I'd be very sad to sell that.'

'Let me take a look at these books,' said Patchy, opening the front of the bookcase.

'Oh you can take any of those,' said Molly. 'I never look at them.'

Patchy flicked through the books. Eventually he picked one out. 'What about this one?' he asked her.

'Oh you can take that,' said Molly. 'What's it worth?'

'I can give you £100 for it,' said Patchy.

Molly gasped in delight. 'Oh that would be wonderful!' she said.

Patchy took out his wallet, removed ten £10 notes and put them on the table in front of Molly. Like all antique dealers he always carried quite a sum around with him in his wallet. He picked up the book he'd bought from her and slipped it into his pocket.

'Take the rest of those capsules,' I told her. 'When are you going to see your sister?'

'I'll go early next week,' she replied. 'Now that I've got the money.'

'You should be feeling better by then,' I told her. 'Finish off all the capsules. And ring me if you don't feel better before you go.' Molly said she would.

Outside, in the car, I looked at Patchy. 'Can I see the book?' I asked.

Patchy had stuffed it in his pocket. 'Oh, it's not particularly interesting,' he said airily.

I reached over and took the book out of his pocket.

'The Bible,' I said, reading the title. I opened the first pages and looked at the copyright page. 'Very good,' I said. 'It's the 1922 edition.'

'It's an unusual edition,' said Patchy, looking embarrassed.

'£100, eh?' I said. I put the book back into Patchy's pocket. 'I think we've got a copy like that at home.'

'Similar perhaps,' said Patchy, wriggling uncomfortably. I started the car.

'Just keep your fingers crossed Molly doesn't tell anyone what you paid for it,' I told him. 'If she does you'll have a queue outside your door before the weekend. Everyone in Bilbury will want to sell you their copy of the Bible for £100.'

Patchy looked worried for a moment.

'I'll tell them Molly's book was signed by the author,' he said.

HYPOCHONDRIACS AND MALINGERERS

All the available evidence shows that the number of hypochondriacs - people who genuinely believe that they are ill when they aren't - is increasing rapidly.

Four out of every five men and six out of every seven women complain that they aren't well. Even worse, over half of all men and about three quarters of all women say that they are never well. And yet the evidence suggests that about half of all these prospective patients are, in fact, perfectly healthy.

We have more doctors than ever before. We are spending more money on health care. But there are also more hypochondriacs than ever before.

Why?

There are a number of explanations.

First, people are more likely to feel ill if they are bored, unhappy or frustrated. And today millions of people are bored, unhappy and frustrated. Millions don't have jobs. Millions more have jobs they hate.

Second, loneliness is becoming a greater and greater problem. We don't talk to one another enough. Talking and sharing problems really does help. You don't need a psychotherapist - the evidence shows that talking to a friend, a neighbour or even a barman or hairdresser will do. People who are lonely have too much time to think about themselves and their health. Hypochondriacs know that having an illness makes them special and gives them something to talk about that will make them the centre of attention. (The three words you should never say to a hypochondriac are 'How are you?'.)

Third, we are constantly being terrified out of our minds by exaggerated reports of new illnesses and deadly diseases.

Like all doctors I have, over the years, met a considerable number of hypochondriacs.

It may not be generally realised, however, that there are as many different varieties of hypochondriac as there are different types of cheese in France.

I have met hypochondriacs whose lives were crippled by their fears; people obsessed by their imaginary illnesses.

And I have met hypochondriacs who so much enjoyed the attention and sympathy their imaginary illnesses attracted that they became angry and upset if they were told that there was nothing the matter with them. There really are people who genuinely seem to enjoy ill health.

One hypochondriac I knew, Algernon Crabtree, positively lived for the attention his imaginary illnesses attracted. When, in frustration, I told him that he was the healthiest man I knew he was so upset that he burst into tears. He was terribly disappointed that there was nothing wrong with him. Moments later, when he had recovered, he demanded a second opinion. I remember that he used to read the obituaries in his daily newspaper to make sure he hadn't died. 'I might have died and gone to heaven,' he argued when I said that I thought this might be regarded as rather an eccentric thing to do.

It's worth making the point, of course, that at some stage in their careers all doctors become hypochondriacs. Fortunately, it's a stage that most of us grow through.

A chap I once shared a flat with was a terrible sufferer. Being a hypochondriac meant that he got everything we discussed. And once he qualified, as a junior doctor, things just got worse and worse. Every time he saw a patient he developed the patient's symptoms. His life became very miserable. His mother once sent him a calendar for Christmas. He got very upset about it and rang her up to complain.

'It's no good you giving me a calendar,' he told her. 'I'll be dead before the year's out.'

The only time he was ever happy was when he was really ill.

'Only when I'm ill,' he said glumly, 'do I stop worrying about becoming ill.'

Eventually, he found a very effective solution. He decided to specialise in a subject where he would never again suffer from the symptoms complained about by his patients. He became a gynaecologist.

The most extreme hypochondriacs are undoubtedly the patients who are said to be suffering from Munchausen's Syndrome. Unlike most medical syndromes this disorder is not named after an earnest physician creating a little instant immortality for himself but after an entirely fictitious character called Baron Munchausen.

The Baron, allegedly a Russian nobleman, was the hero of an eponymously titled book which was published in

1785. He was renowned for exaggerating his exploits.

Munchausen's Syndrome sufferers aren't just harmless hypochondriacs. In order to get a doctor's attention they don't simply fake symptoms - they will actually make themselves ill by swallowing poisons or deliberately cutting themselves. A woman patient suffering from Munchausen's Syndrome managed to get herself admitted to 400 hospitals all over Europe - having 92 operations that she didn't need.

The best known sufferer of Munchausen's Syndrome I ever met was a patient who, it was eventually shown, managed to get himself admitted 216 times to 77 different hospitals. He managed all this in the space of 34 years. He had thousands of X-rays and blood tests and is believed to have had treatments costing well over £1,000,000. He had 23 operations and never went more than 6 months without being admitted to hospital. This remarkable patient used so many aliases that eventually doctors learned to identify him by his scars. His career is believed to have ended at the age of 75. By then he had spent around a third of his life in hospital beds and had been in more hospitals than any doctor or nurse. He undoubtedly knew more about medicine than many doctors.

Using over 20 different names he had countless tests before doctors realised that he was faking. His body was criss-crossed with the scars of operations he didn't need. I was working as a young casualty officer when I met him. A surgical registrar and I both felt suspicious because the signs and symptoms he displayed were just too perfect. He had every possible symptom listed in the medical textbooks. He was quite good-natured when we eventually succeeded in proving that he was a fake. He simply climbed out of his hospital bed, put on his clothes and tottered off to find another hospital. I discovered later that this isn't at all unusual. As soon as they suspect that doctors know they are faking, patients with Munchausen's Syndrome will usually make a miraculous recovery and discharge themselves from medical care.

In the end it wasn't our diagnostic acumen which caught him out but his own carelessness. He had complained of kidney pains - his favourite illness - and had tried to trick us by placing a pebble under his back when he was X-rayed. The pebble showed up on the X-ray as a kidney stone. It was a cleverly done trick because the stone had to be placed in precisely the right position. The con came to an end because he forgot to take the 'kidney stone' with him when he left the X-ray table.

Most patients with Munchausen's Syndrome show the first signs of the disease in their teens by falling ill suddenly and dramatically. They often manage to convince family, friends and doctors that they are ill by mixing fact and fiction. When they can't answer questions about their supposed illness they either become aggressive or else fake a sudden attack of pain. Because it's difficult and dangerous even to dismiss patients as faking (and it is something that is notoriously difficult to prove) doctors usually accept what they're told and, even when investigations show no abnormality, will often prescribe drugs or surgery 'to be on the safe side'.

Many patients with Munchausen's Syndrome are lonely and desperate for love and attention. They know from experience that they can get the attention and care they crave by faking illness. The outlook for such patients is bleak. Treatment usually involves long-term psychotherapy and isn't often successful. The best hope is usually for a sufferer to acquire responsibility for someone or something else - an animal or another human being for example.

Whereas sufferers from Munchausen's Syndrome are pretending to be ill simply because they want attention there is a category of hypochondriacs known as malingerers who pretend to be ill as a means to some other end.

The majority of experienced malingerers will give what doctors call 'organ recitals'; describing their problems in well-rehearsed detail. And they'll usually manage to fake a few interesting physical signs.

They will, for example, pretend to have a fever by rubbing the thermometer on the bedclothes or dipping it into a cup of tea. Or they'll make their gums bleed and then spit blood into their urine. One young malingerer I knew used to lick his palms to make them feel clammy.

All malingerers choose their diseases carefully.

The man who is trying to con a sick note out of his doctor doesn't want to spend the day having painful tests done. He wants the day off to go to a football match. He knows that something simple like a feigned backache will be far more likely to succeed than something complicated and threatening. Many patients pretend to be ill for specific reasons. When I was a hospital doctor I saw a patient pretending to have a heart attack. He wanted a heroin injection because he was an addict. And I once saw a patient pretending to have injured his leg at work. He came into the out-patients department wanting to claim compensation money from his employers. He said he couldn't walk but I guessed he was exaggerating slightly when, from a hospital window, I spotted him playing football with his son in the hospital car park.

Most malingerers are content with taking off an odd day here or there. Occasionally, they may steal a week or a fortnight from work.

But I have met patients who have spent their entire lives malingering.

One woman I knew had seen private specialists on three continents. Her alleged ill health was her hobby and gave her an opportunity to travel. She always dressed well and looked ten years younger than she really was. Her unfortunate husband had to trail around behind her - and find the money for all her consultations. When I saw her she was travelling around the West Country visiting doctors wherever she wandered. I was, she told me proudly, the 112th doctor she'd seen in her life. She kept a diary in which she jotted down records of her consultations. She even gave the doctors points out of ten for courtesy, professional skill, bedside manner and so on. I wanted her to tell me how I rated but she refused to tell me so perhaps I didn't score very well.

Shortly after I first started work in Bilbury I met Thomas O'Donnell, a quintessential Irishman who complained softly that he had 'the weariness'. He lived in a small cottage and spent his days and his nights in a huge, old-fashioned wooden bed, covered by a double layer of heavy woollen blankets and a thick, richly-embroidered eiderdown. He had a small sun-faded postcard thumb-tacked to his front door inviting all callers to climb the stairs if they wanted to speak to him. Mr and Mrs Broadstone, his kindly next door neighbours looked after him devotedly. They shared the vegetables they grew in their garden, picked up his groceries and even did his cooking and laundry for him. The window in his bedroom was low, and from his bed Thomas could see a huge stretch of Bilbury and the surrounding countryside. Like everyone else in the village I treated him as an invalid. Neither Dr Brownlow nor I were ever able to find out what was wrong with him. But neither of us liked to tell him to his face that he was a fraud.

Once a year Mr O'Donnell would go to the hurling championships in Dublin. For this annual treat, a visit to a uniquely Irish game in which every man starts the match equipped with a large stick and ends it covered in his own and everyone else's blood, Mr O'Donnell would climb out of bed and put on a dark three piece heavy worsted suit, a white shirt with a stiffly starched collar and a plain, dark green tie. On the top of his head he would carefully place a smart black trilby hat. To get to Dublin he would hire Peter Marshall to take him to Barnstaple in his car. From Barnstaple he would take the train to Exeter and from there he would catch the express to Birmingham. From Birmingham he took a plane to Dublin. Upon his return from the hurling championships Thomas would take off his suit, hang it up in his wardrobe and climb back into his bed.

I also knew of a woman who lived in a small village half way between Bilbury and Barnstaple. She had decided at the age of 14 that she didn't like work so she went to bed. And she stayed there for the next fifty years, eating chocolates and reading magazines.

Until she died at the age of 64 she was looked after by relatives, friends and a series of impatient doctors. Her life might not have been particularly fulfilling but it certainly wasn't very demanding either.

The big difference between Munchausen Syndrome sufferers and malingerers on the one hand and genuine hypochondriacs on the other is that while those in the first group pretend they are ill hypochondriacs genuinely believe that they are ill.

All the available evidence shows that the number of hypochondriacs - people who genuinely believe that they are ill when they aren't - is increasing rapidly.

Malingerers and patients with Munchausen's Syndrome were rare in Bilbury. But the village, and the practice, did have its fair share of hypochondriacs and, as a group, they created a greatly disproportionate amount of work. As any doctor will tell you, one genuine hypochondriac can generate ten times as many telephone calls and surgery visits as ten genuinely healthy and needy patients.

A friend of mine from medical school took a job as a general practitioner in Leamington Spa, a pleasant, rather leafy town in the English midlands. He once told me about an attempt he'd made to help the hypochondriacs in his practice.

With the approval of the senior partners in the practice where he worked, he started a weekly Hypochondriacs Group. The senior doctors all said they desperately hoped that his scheme would work but admitted that in their hearts they knew it didn't stand a chance. The idea was that hypochondriacs could go along and talk about their personal problems and experiences in the same way that alcoholics do when they attend Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. My friend hoped that by sharing their pain, and their hopes and strengths, the patients would be able to deal with their fears in a constructive way. He also hoped that in the long-term the existence of his group would mean that the doctors in the practice would spend less time dealing with this small group of very demanding people. He thought, rather naively perhaps, that once they heard other hypochondriacs talking about their imaginary illnesses they would be embarrassed and walk away feeling full of beans.

The scheme was an absolute disaster.

The first problem was that my friend hadn't realised that many hypochondriacs love their illnesses and are, indeed, often quite proud of them. The very last thing they really want is a cure. They go to the doctor not in search of a remedy but in search of sympathy. They want the doctor to tell them that their problem is unique and that nothing can be done about it. I've known hypochondriacs become severely depressed, and demand a second, third and fourth opinion, when told that there is nothing seriously wrong with them. There are not a few doctors with private practices who make a very good living out of offering sympathy to long-term hypochondriacs. One I know, who is especially successful, tells his patients that their problems are so special that he would like to write about them in one of the medical journals. There are journals which will print articles if the author pays a fee (these journals make most of their money from drug companies anxious to have articles published extolling the virtues of their latest wonder-drug, but they are also happy to accept money from individual doctors) and so the doctor writes a page or two about Mrs X's puzzling condition and has it published. The fee he pays to have it in print is nothing compared to the fees he charges Mrs X for support and sympathy. The cost is doubtless tax deductible as an essential expense. Thrilled to see herself in print, and to have evidence confirming that her disease is very special, Mrs X buys up two dozen copies of the journal to send to her dearest and most intimate friends. She becomes a fan of the doctor for life and several of her friends make appointments to see him too.

The second problem my doctor friend faced was that all the hypochondriacs were proud of their illnesses and only wanted to talk about themselves. They wanted lots of fuss and attention. They all wanted to have the worst symptoms and the worst prognoses. They all wanted to have been closer to death than anyone else. They all wanted to have amazed and bewildered and stumped the biggest number of doctors. They all wanted to have had the most difficult surgery. And they got very jealous, and sometimes quite hysterical, when another patient started talking about his problems as though they mattered a damn.

Finally, my friend in Leamington Spa had known that because the hypochondriacs all knew lots of medical jargon they would be able to talk to one another about their various illnesses, but he hadn't realised that hypochondriacs love acquiring new symptoms and new illnesses and would, within a very short space of time, all add everyone else's diseases to their own library of ailments.

Eventually, the Hypochondriacs Group meeting fell apart when, one by one, the members sent messages to say that they were too ill to attend. My friend reported that the senior partners were furious with him. For six months after the Group folded they were spending twice as much time on their small group of hypochondriacs as they had been before the Group started. What made things particularly galling was that instead of having just one or two favourite diseases the worst hypochondriacs now had a whole textbook of symptoms and disorders. Eventually, the senior partners introduced a strict rule limiting known hypochondriacs to one fatal disease per day and a maximum of three per week.

The happiest and most successful hypochondriacs I ever knew were a couple of men called Godfrey Fame and Michael Fortune. They ran an estate agency called Fame and Fortune. (Godfrey once admitted to me that he was born Godfrey Fane and had changed his name by deed poll. Michael's surname really was Fortune. Thumper Robinson referred to them as Piles 1 and Piles 2 because, as he said, they were both a 'pain in the bum'. Patchy, slightly more tactful, described them both as suffering from 'irritable person syndrome'.)

Godfrey and Michael were both raging hypochondriacs but they shared their symptoms, their fears and their illnesses with each other. Both enjoyed having a permanent audience, and they would literally take it in turns to talk about themselves and their health problems. I could never quite work out how the rota worked but I never knew both of them to be ill at the same time so it clearly worked quite well.

When I first moved to Bilbury they told me that they were worried that I was far too young to be their doctor.

'We need someone with experience and gravitas,' Godfrey said, when warning me that he and Michael were considering moving to an older doctor with a practice in Barnstaple.

But they never did change doctors.

'We've decided to stay with you,' said Michael eventually.

'Better the devil you know,' said Godfrey.

I said I was very flattered by their trust. And then, since it was Godfrey's turn to be ill, I listened and nodded as he told me why he thought he had acquired leptospirosis while cleaning the bathroom sink and how he had contracted a variant form of Lassa fever while showing a man who'd been on holiday in Africa round a house in Shirwell. He had, as usual, been to the library in Barnstaple and knew a good deal about both of these diseases. In the end, after a careful and thorough examination, I managed to persuade him that all he had wrong with him was tinea pedis (athlete's foot) and mild incipient seborrheic dermatitis (dandruff). I gave him some cream for the tinea pedis and a special shampoo for the mild incipient seborrheic dermatitis. Both men were very happy with me when they left and told me, for the 800th time, that if Patsy and I ever wanted to sell Bilbury Grange they would be happy to handle the sale for us at a very competitive rate.

Having one or two hypochondriacs in a practice is always stimulating. But one or two is plenty.

THE WOMAN WHO WAS TOO BUSY TO DIE

Human bodies are extremely complicated and over the years I learned three important things about them, none of which I had been taught by lecturers or professors at my medical school.

First, I learned that no two bodies are identical and there are an infinite number of variations. Not even twins are truly identical. When I first started to study medicine I used to think how much easier it would be for us all (doctors and patients) if bodies came with an owner's manual, but the more I learned about medicine the more I realised that such a manual would have to contain so many variations, footnotes and appendices that it wouldn't fit into the British Museum let alone sit comfortably on the average bookshelf. Even if manuals were individually prepared they would still be too vast for practical use. However much we may think we know about illness and health there will always be exceptions; there will always be times when our prognoses and predictions are proved wrong.

Second, I learned that the human body has enormous, hidden strengths, and far greater power than most of us ever realise. We tend to think of ourselves as being delicate and vulnerable. But, in practice, our bodies are tougher than we imagine, far more capable of coping with physical and mental stresses than most of us realise. Very few of us know just how strong and capable we can be. Only if we are pushed to our limits do we find out precisely what we can do.

Third, I learned that our bodies are far better equipped for selfdefence than most of us imagine, and are surprisingly well-equipped with a wide variety of protective mechanisms and self-healing systems which are designed to keep us alive and to protect us when we find ourselves in adverse circumstances. The human body is designed for survival and contains far more automatic defence mechanisms, designed to protect its occupant when it is threatened, than any motor car. To give the simplest of examples, consider what happens when you cut yourself. First, blood will flow out of your body for a few seconds to wash away any dirt. Then special proteins will quickly form a protective net to catch blood cells and form a clot to seal the wound. The damaged cells will release special substances into the tissues to make the area red, swollen and hot. The heat kills any infection, the swelling acts as a natural splint - protecting the injured area. White cells are brought to the injury site to swallow up any bacteria. And, finally, scar tissue builds up over the wounded site. The scar tissue will be stronger than the original, damaged area of skin.

Those were the three medical truths I discovered for myself. Over the years I have seen many examples of these three truths. But one patient always comes into my mind when I think about the way the human body can defy medical science, prove doctors wrong and exhibit its extraordinary in-built healing power.

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I can still remember when I first met Dawn.

'The next patient is new to the village,' my receptionist, Miss Johnson, had said. 'She's renting the Bradshaw's old cottage on Parson Lane. Her name is Northolt. Mrs Dawn Northolt. The Family Practitioner Committee hasn't yet sent us her medical records.'

I'd stood up and waited for Mrs Northolt to enter. Right from the start, I always stood up when patients came in to see me for the same reason that I shook hands with them when they left, and, unlike some of my colleagues in general practice, wore a sports jacket instead of a white coat. I wanted to make patients feel comfortable and relaxed; as though they were visiting a friend rather than the doctor. However much they might hide it, most patients are a little nervous when they enter a doctor's surgery. My predecessor, Dr Brownlow, had believed that small, natural, social courtesies help eradicate the nervousness. And I'd decided to maintain the tradition. I still do.

Mrs Northolt looked to be in her early twenties, though I was to discover that she was actually just nineteen. She was short, dark haired and very pregnant. She had clearly spent a good deal of time crying.

She told me that she was eight months pregnant and that her husband had been away on an oil rig for nearly a year. When he'd returned home he had, not surprisingly, refused to believe her claim that the baby was his. He'd stormed out and gone to the pub where he'd discovered that his wife's faithlessness was well-known. The barman, an old friend of his, reported that she was known by the name 'Treacle' because she was considered by the locals to be a tart. She had never charged for her favours, the barman had reported, but she had, nevertheless, been exceedingly liberal with them.

'I was lonely and frightened, especially at night,' was all Dawn could offer in her defence. 'It was the only way I could get men to stay with me.'

Her husband, who had regularly sent money home, was not impressed with his young wife's explanation. He did not hit her or even shout at her. He simply packed his bags and walked out.

Desperate, even more lonely and even more frightened, Dawn also left their home in Newcastle. She had no idea who the father was. There were a number of candidates. She didn't love any of them, or even know their last names. She packed one suitcase (all she could carry) and caught a bus to Taunton, where she had an aunt. The aunt provided a bed for two nights and then found Dawn a cottage to rent. The cottage was in Bilbury. Neither of them had ever heard of Bilbury. Dawn's aunt drove her there in her Ford and then went straight back to Taunton. Once again Dawn was on her own.

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For the first few weeks Dawn was, I remember, a lot of trouble. Since Miss Johnson and I were the only people in the village whom she knew, she would telephone the surgery three or four times a day. She even telephoned in the evenings and at night. Once, I remember, she telephoned at midnight in a terrible state.

'What's the matter?' I asked her.

'I think I've drowned my baby!' she cried, between sobs.

'You haven't had the baby yet,' I pointed out.

'No. But I had a bath!' she told me. It had suddenly occurred to her that in taking a bath she might have drowned the baby in her womb. It took me fifteen minutes to persuade her that there was nothing for her to worry about.

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She had a low opinion of doctors. She didn't like them and she didn't trust them. It wasn't difficult to see why, or to blame her.

Her previous GP, having decided that she was mentally ill, had once sent her to see a psychiatrist.

'He said I was mad,' she said.

'Who did?'

'My GP. He sent me to see a psychiatrist.'

Dawn reached over and picked up a toy car. My desk is always littered with toys as well as books, letters and medical instruments. I put the toys there to amuse the children, though they seem to amuse the adults too. She turned it over and examined the underside. 'I thought I was ugly and useless,' she said. 'At school I was always the last but one person to be picked when the captains were picking their netball and hockey teams.'

'Last but one is not too bad. You could have been the last choice.'

'The one they always picked last weighed 12 stones, had asthma and wore spectacles with lenses as thick as the bottoms of milk bottles. She had bad breath and was loathed because she never stopped telling us all how rich her family was.'

'So what did the psychiatrist say?'

'He told me to lie down on his couch and then he sat there and told me to talk about myself.'

'Did it help?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Because after twenty minutes or so I had run out of things to say. I lay there in silence. He didn't say a word. Twice a minute I looked at the clock. When my fifty minutes were up I asked if I should go but he didn't reply. I turned round and thought he was dead. His eyes were closed, his hands were folded across his stomach and his chin was resting on his chest. There was a long dribble of saliva connecting his chin to his cardigan. I sat up and realised that he was still breathing.'

'What was wrong with him?'

'He'd fallen asleep.'

I looked down at my desk, embarrassed for her, despite the time that had passed by since it had happened.

'Not the best thing for someone who felt inadequate,' she said softly.

'What did you do?'

'I asked him if I could go. I had to reach out and touch his shoulder to wake him up.'

'Was he embarrassed?'

'No, not at all. He told me to make another appointment to see him in a week's time.'

'Did you?'

She shook her head. 'I never saw him again.'

'Did your GP ask you what had happened?' She shook her head again.

'What did he do?'

'He always just asked me questions about my sex life. He seemed to find it interesting. In the end I just made stuff up. I wasn't going to tell him all my personal and private thoughts. So I made stuff up.'

'Why did you keep going to see him?'

'I wanted the tranquillisers he gave me. He wouldn't give me the prescriptions if I didn't go and see him.'

***

'Do you think I'm mentally ill?' she asked me one day. She'd had the baby, a beautiful little girl, and had, defied the social workers, who wanted her to give the child up for adoption. But, to me, she'd never really seemed to bond with the child.

I looked at her and spoke slowly and certainly, so that she would know that I knew what I was saying.

'No,' I told her. 'You're not mentally ill.'

'So, what's wrong with me?'

'You need a purpose,' I told her.

To this day I still have no idea why I said that. I would never normally say something so crass and simplistic to a patient. I've always believed that, as a GP, my job is to look after the mental and physical welfare of my patients. That's it. It isn't my place to offer advice (other than a suggestion to stop smoking or lose weight) any more than it is to make judgements.

'What do you mean?' she asked.

'You've got a baby and a new home,' I said. 'You're lucky enough to be living in a village 'where people treat their neighbours according to who they are, not who they were or who they ought to be. You've got a lot to be proud of and a lot to look forward to.' I remember knowing that I was way out of order. It wasn't my place to say any of this but I said it anyway. I was beginning to sound like a social worker or a newspaper agony aunt.

'What have I got to look forward to?' she asked. There was a touch of defiance in her voice.

'Watching your little girl grow up. Turning your cottage into a home for you both. Enjoying the seasons in Bilbury.'

She looked at me thoughtfully.

'You've got a decent sized garden,' I pointed out, 'you could start growing your own vegetables. If you grow too many for the two of you, you could sell the excess to Peter Marshall at the village shop.'

'I don't know anything about gardening,' she said.

'That's no problem. Your neighbours know. Ask them.'

'I don't know anyone,' she said.

I turned round to the bookshelf behind me, found the book I was looking for and handed it to her.

She took the book and read the title out loud. 'The Beginners Guide To Gardening.'

'It's the book I used when I first came to Bilbury,' I told her. 'Borrow it for as long as you like.'

Six months later she brought me a basket of home grown vegetables. The book, neatly wrapped and with a thank you card tucked inside, was at the bottom of the basket.

***

Three years after that Dawn was well settled. Her little girl was growing and healthy and Dawn, who had made several friends and was popular, was making a living working as a part time barmaid at the Duck and Puddle and selling vegetables to the village shop.

And then she came to see me one day complaining that she had found a lump in her left armpit.

'I don't know why I still bother, because I never wear sleeveless dresses and I never go out, but I was shaving,' she said. 'And I found this lump.'

I looked and felt and didn't like the feel of it. I examined her breasts and found another lump. A bigger one. This one was on the outer edge of her left breast.

'I want you to see someone,' I told her. I picked up the telephone and made an appointment for her to see a surgeon in Barnstaple. A surgeon who specialised in women with breast cancer. She said her neighbour would look after her child for the day.

At 12.15 p.m. the following day the surgeon rang to tell me that he was taking Dawn into the operating theatre. At 1.30 p.m. he rang to tell me that there was nothing he could do for her. Dawn's breast cancer had spread and was inoperable. A day later Dawn was back home. She'd been told that she had, at most, six months to live.

'Do you remember once telling me that I needed purpose in my life?' she asked me.

I confessed that I did. 'It was very pompous of me,' I said, apologetically.

'No, no,' she said. 'It changed my life. But if I'd been told then what I've been told today I would have welcomed it,' she said. 'I didn't have anything to live for.'

I didn't say anything.

'I can't die,' she said suddenly. 'I've got everything to live for now. A lovely daughter. A real home. And friends. I'm too busy to die!'

I honestly didn't know what to say. It never, ever gets any easier. 'I'll help you in any way I can,' I told her.

'I'm not going to die,' she said. 'I can't die. Not now.'

'OK,' I said. 'Then what are you going to do to make sure it doesn't happen?'

She turned the question round. 'What would you do?'

I thought about the question and the answer. And I told her. 'I would drink lots of vegetable and fruit juices and eat lots of vegetables,' I told her. 'There's evidence so show that diet can help beat cancer.'

'OK,' she said. 'I can easily do that. What else? Would a healer help?' Suddenly, she seemed so very, very strong. I would never have believed that she would have found so much inner strength.

'Maybe,' I agreed. 'It wouldn't do any harm.'

'I heard of a healer who lives in Lynmouth,' said Dawn. 'I'll ring her. What else?'

I talked to her about visualisation. 'Imagine your body is full of tiny warriors fighting the cancer cells,' I said. 'It sounds crazy but there's some evidence to show it can work.'

'I'll try it,' she said. 'I'll do it,' she corrected herself. She looked at me. 'I'm not going to die.'

'No,' I said. 'I don't believe you are.' I promised to think of other things she could try.

***

A year later I had a telephone call from the surgeon who had seen her in Barnstaple.

'Do you remember that girl you sent me? Dawn Northolt?'

I said I did.

'She's just been in the clinic,' he said. 'For her check up.'

'How is she doing?'

'She should be dead,' said the surgeon. 'A year ago she had a few months to live. She had secondaries everywhere. Her blood tests were awful. She was so ill we didn't even see any point in starting her on chemotherapy.'

'She looks quite well doesn't she?' I said. I had seen her the day before and been impressed by her vitality. I had never seen her look so full of life.

'Quite well?' he said. 'She is a walking miracle. The cancer seems to be receding. I've been a surgeon for thirty years and I've never seen anything like it.'

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That all happened some years ago.

I saw Dawn last week. She's fine. Her little girl is growing up into a beautiful young woman. And Dawn is healthy again.

'Do you remember that speech you gave me?' asked Dawn. 'The one about having purpose?'

'I do,' I admitted, embarrassed by the memory, as I always am.

'I found my purpose,' she said. 'Beating the cancer so that I could see my little girl grow up.'

I nodded.

'It embarrasses you when I remind you about that, doesn't it?'

I nodded.

'You shouldn't be embarrassed,' she said. 'I was the right person to say it to, it was the right thing to say, and you said it at the right time.'

It made me feel a little better.

WHAT WOULD WE DO WITHOUT PROGRESS?

Thumper Robinson, Patchy Fogg and I spent an hour in the Duck and Puddle reminiscing. Here's a list of the good things we remembered from our pasts.

1. A man with a huge suitcase used to travel door-to-door selling brushes. He invariably wore a dodgy mackintosh and a trilby hat. Our mothers always used to buy brushes from him. He used to hand out small plastic toys which we loved.
2. Another man, this time with a briefcase but also wearing a dodgy mackintosh and a trilby hat, used to call round once a week to collect a few pence in insurance. He called whatever the weather. None of us could work out how the amounts he collected could have been worth collecting.
3. School children all wore ugly school uniforms.
4. It took five minutes for the television set to warm up. At the end of the evening, transmissions would close down. They would then play God Save the Queen and loyal citizens would stand up. When you turned off the set there would be a white spot visible on the screen for some time afterwards.
5. Mums were waiting at home when their children got back from school. Even quite small children were trusted to get home safely by themselves - either walking or on bicycles.
6. In between programmes the BBC used to show a film of a potter making a pot or waves breaking on the shore.
7. Women always wore suspender belts to hold up their stockings.
8. Men wore jackets and ties, and hats too, when they went to watch cricket or football matches.
9. Women had their hair permed and wore dresses which swished when they walked.
10. Petrol station attendants cleaned car windscreens without being asked and asked the driver if he wanted the oil checked. They operated the petrol pump and took the money while the driver and his passengers remained sitting in the car. If your tyres needed air they did that too - free of charge.
11. All sorts of goods came with Green Stamps which could be saved in a book and exchanged for exciting products. You didn't have to spend a million pounds to get something worthwhile.
12. Small items (particularly sweets) were sold in white paper bags. Large objects were placed in brown paper bags.
13. If you wrote and complained about something the company would send you a present and a letter of apology signed by someone really important. The best presents came from Cadburys.
14. Teenagers going on a date would think themselves fast and daring if they held hands in the cinema and kissed each other good night at the end of their evening.
15. Motorists would leave their cars unlocked and their car keys in the ignition when they went into a shop.
16. Screws were sold singly and loose. The ironmonger would put them into a small paper bag.
17. Girls tucked their skirts into their navy blue knickers in order to play netball in the schoolyard. The hoops never had any nets. Boys never played netball.
18. Going out to dinner was a treat kept for birthdays and special occasions and always involved sitting down at a table with cutlery, tablemats, cloth napkins and a menu. The bill would be paid with crisp notes taken from a leather wallet and plastic would play no part in the proceedings.
19. You could buy a replacement blade for a motor car windscreen wiper - instead of having to buy a whole unit.
20. Pots and jars were easy to open. Since no one had ever tried to poison people they didn't know, no one worried about such things. Shrink-wrap had yet to be invented.
21. Sardines were sold in tins which were opened with special keys which required a knack.
22. Boys played with weapons (such as peashooters, cap guns, catapults made out of twigs and rubber bands and bows with home-made arrows which flew huge distances but not necessarily in the right direction) while girls played with dolls. Children never needed batteries for their toys. Toys lasted for ever and didn't break down.
23. Conkers were fashionable in the autumn because that was when they were available. But other toys (such as hula hoops and yoyos) which were not dependent on nature also came in and out of fashion though no one ever knew quite why.
24. Milk was delivered daily by a man driving an almost silent milk float. Imaginative milkmen also sold eggs and

orange juice, though this was considered rather daring.

25. Children used to swim in rivers without worrying about pollution or drowning.

26. Films shown in cinemas were preceded by B movies, newsreel features and travel programmes.

27. You could dial telephone numbers by using letters as well as numbers. The best-known telephone number in the country belonged to Scotland Yard. The number was Whitehall 1212.

28. People made decisions by going eeny meeny miney moe.

29. Boys would fix a cigarette card onto their bicycle so that the card hit the spokes as the wheel went round and made a sound like a motorbike.

30. Summers were always long and warm (though never too hot) and it always snowed in the winter.

'Those were the days,' said Thumper, when we'd finished our list.

'All just memories now,' said Patchy. 'Thanks to progress.'

'What would we do without progress?' asked Thumper.

THE BROTHERS

Paul and Freddie were brothers. I could never remember which was the eldest but there wasn't much between them. They were both in their mid-forties when I first arrived in Bilbury. They lived on a small farm on the outskirts of the village and kept themselves to themselves. They drove into Barnstaple once a month to do their shopping (unlike just about everyone else in the village I don't think they ever patronised Peter Marshall's village store) but grew all their vegetables themselves. Their meat they obtained by killing their own animals. They had never been in the Duck and Puddle or the village hall.

They had managed their farm themselves ever since their parents had died in a car crash when they were in their teens, and they were both known to be slightly eccentric. They didn't approve of bureaucrats or officialdom and didn't believe in paying car taxes, property taxes or income taxes. They didn't trust banks and so didn't have a bank account. They dealt only in cash. If they were shopping for cattle they would often turn up at auctions with several thousand pounds in their pockets.

There were all sorts of stories about the brothers but I had been living in Bilbury for a year before I actually met them. Late one Saturday evening Paul arrived at Bilbury Grange in their ancient Land Rover to tell me that his brother needed help. I knew who he was as soon as I saw him. Freddie was six foot five inches tall and, as a result of a long-standing thyroid condition which he had steadfastly refused to have treated, had staring eyes. It wasn't his height or his eyes which made him unmistakeable but the fact that he never went anywhere without a double-barrelled shotgun cradled in his arms.

I got my bag and followed him back to their farm in my own car which was, at the time, still the old Morris I had bought when I'd first arrived in Bilbury. The track down to their farm had deep ruts in it and half way there, the bottom of the car started to get stuck. I had to stop, abandon the car and follow the rest of the way on foot. When he saw what had happened Freddie slowed down enough to enable me to jump onto the towing bracket on the back of his Land Rover.

Paul had cut himself with a sharp scythe. He'd very nearly severed his foot from his leg and things were a terrible mess. He'd hopped into the living room and there was blood absolutely everywhere. When I got there he was lying on the sofa watching television. He'd used a piece of old sheet and a vast quantity of orange baler twine to fix the foot back into place.

'You need to be in hospital,' I told him.

'I don't want no hospital,' said Paul.

'You have to go into hospital,' I told him.

'He don't want to go to hospital,' said Freddie who was still holding the double-barrelled shotgun and who always gave the impression that he wasn't carrying the gun as a prop.

'So let's treat him here,' I agreed.

I spent the next two hours cleaning the wound and sewing Paul's foot back into position. Luckily the bone was broken quite neatly and it wasn't difficult to get the two ends aligned. I used so much suture material that I had to go back to Bilbury Grange to fetch some more. I did so much sewing that my fingers were numb with exhaustion by the time I'd finished. At one point I even found myself contemplating borrowing a little hand held battery driven sewing machine which I knew Patsy had. But I didn't. I did the whole thing by hand and when I'd finished, it didn't look a bad job. I didn't have any plaster of Paris and so I had to use heavy duty strapping to hold the leg in position. It was very much an improvised solution but it seemed to work and the brothers seemed happy enough.

I went back once and sometimes twice a day for a week and Paul made an astonishing recovery. Their farmhouse was filthy but I suppose Paul must have been immune to the bugs they had. Outside bugs probably just couldn't survive in all that squalor. I remember them constantly offering me cups of tea and me having to think up fresh reasons why I couldn't accept their hospitality. I'd seen the way they just took dirty cups out of the sink, gave them a quick rinse and then used them again.

By the time Paul was able to walk again the brothers and I had become good friends. Indeed, I think I was just about the only 'stranger' they didn't regard with suspicion.

The brothers farmed about fifty acres of land and in addition to their farmhouse they also owned several barns, most of which were in a pretty dilapidated condition.

One day the brothers were out checking on their animals (they were conscientious farmers and treated all their animals well) when they discovered that three squatters had settled into one of their barns. The squatters had set up a stove and had clearly settled in for a long stay. If they'd simply been spending the night there I don't think the brothers would have objected.

'What you doing here?' demanded Paul.

'We're living here,' said the oldest and tallest squatter, a surly, arrogant youth in his early twenties.

'You can't live here!' said Paul. 'This is our barn.'

'What you going to do about it?' demanded the squatter. 'Are you going to fetch the police? They won't do anything.'

'The barn door had a padlock on it!' said Freddie. 'You broke it.'

'It fell off,' said the oldest squatter. He then made the mistake of laughing. Like most of us the brothers didn't like being laughed at, especially by strangers. But unlike most of us they didn't have to put up with it.

'Shoot 'em, Freddie!' said Paul. 'Shoot 'em!'

Freddie lifted up the shotgun but then hesitated. The squatters stared aghast.

'Shoot em!' screamed Paul.

'But which ones?' demanded Freddie. 'There are three of 'em and I've only got two barrels!'

Paul didn't have time to decide. The three squatters left. They abandoned their stove, their sleeping bags, their rucksacks, their supply of marijuana and the remainder of their clothes and ran away as fast as they could go.

Satisfied, Paul and Freddie dragged the abandoned belongings out into the open, lit a bonfire and burnt everything that had been left behind.

I found out about all this when the squatters called in at Bilbury Grange requesting medical help. All three of them were still shaking with fear when I saw them.

'We want tranquillisers,' said one.

'And sleeping tablets,' said another.

'Those two mad bastards should be locked up!' said the third.

'We're going to see the police in Barnstaple,' said the biggest.

'What's your complaint?' I asked.

They told me what had happened. 'Threatening people with a shotgun is illegal!' they said.

'They didn't shoot you?'

'Well, no...'

'Did the gun go off?'

They looked at one another. 'Not exactly.'

'So you don't even know that the gun was loaded?'

The biggest squatter frowned. 'What do you mean?'

'They could have been bluffing,' I said. 'I happen to know they've got a licence for the gun. If you go to the police you would undoubtedly be the ones in trouble. It sounds to me as though you could be arrested for breaking and entering.'

Muttering loudly about not coming back to Bilbury in a hurry the three squatters left. And they left without the tranquillisers and sleeping tablets they had demanded.

THE STOWAWAY

Some people make friends when they travel. I have an acquaintance who can't pop into the local supermarket without finding new chums to add to his formidable Christmas card list. If he goes for a walk in a deserted park he will somehow come back with half a dozen new chums. I'm not good at making friends. Too shy, I suppose. But everywhere I go I meet cats and now, I'm proud to say, I have cat friends everywhere. One of the good things about having cats as friends is that they demand nothing and expect nothing. (Obviously, cats who have become 'family' expect a great deal and demand more.) And it's easy to meet new cats.

I always seem to find affectionate cats in churches and churchyards. I have met and had long, meaningful conversations with cats in churches all over England. I don't know what it is about cats in such places but they seem to me to be almost as keen to make new human acquaintances as I am to make new cat acquaintances.

Over the years many things have happened to convince me that cats know far more than they are letting on, and have a much greater control over our lives than they are admitting to.

For example, a year or so ago one of my patients, Mrs Porter, an elderly widow, asked me if I knew someone who might accept a job as her companion and live-in nurse. For nearly a decade after her husband's death, Mrs Porter had shared her home and her life with a kind and considerate Spanish nurse who had looked after her with far more genuine affection than could normally be expected from a paid employee.

'Maria has to go back to Spain,' explained Mrs Porter sadly. 'Her mother has died and she has to take care of her father. As the only unmarried daughter she feels she has no choice.'

Both women were heartbroken. Maria liked her employer and enjoyed living in Bilbury. She really didn't want to go back to Spain. And Mrs Porter was frightened of a future without Maria. A stroke some years earlier had left her unable to look after herself without a considerable amount of practical care and she was, I knew, terrified that if she couldn't find a suitable replacement she would have no choice but to find a room in a nursing home. And, since there weren't any nursing homes in Bilbury that would mean leaving the village where she had spent almost the whole of her life and wherein leaving every friend she had in the world.

'I have to go into Barnstaple to renew my car tax,' I told her. 'Would you like me to call into the Labour Exchange to see if they have anyone suitable on their books?'

She said she would and so, the following day, I found myself sitting on an uncomfortable plastic chair being quizzed by a dour, weedy man in his 60s with a military haircut and sinus problems.

'You won't find anyone prepared to live in,' he said. 'Not these days. What about a team of nurses?'

'A team?'

'You'd need at least six to cover nights, weekends and holidays,' he said.

'That would cost a fortune!' I protested. 'And there wouldn't be any continuity.'

'You won't find anyone prepared to live in and work those sort of hours,' insisted the dour little man. 'Not these days. People know their rights.'

'It's the sort of job that would suit a middle-aged woman looking for a pleasant home and light nursing duties,' I explained.

'We don't have anyone like that,' sniffed the man, flicking aimlessly through a plastic box containing a number of file cards. 'You're about a century too late.'

I left the Labour Exchange feeling terribly gloomy.

I visited the Post Office and renewed the car tax, took two books back to the public library for Patsy, picked up a piece of curtain material for her mother, picked up a supply of dressings that one of the pharmacies had ordered for me, collected a piece of glass that Patchy had ordered cut to size for a picture he was reframing and headed back to the car park. On the way I had to pass one of Barnstaple's oldest churches. I have almost as much difficulty passing old churches as I have passing second hand book shops.

I sat in a pew in the cool and empty church for a few minutes and informally asked God if he would mind doing what He could to prove the sniffy clerk at the Labour Exchange wrong. I try not to ask Him to do too much for me, but I'm never averse to asking Him to do something for a friend or for one of my patients.

Outside the church, I saw a black cat rubbing itself against the gate into the churchyard. I bent down to stroke its head and the cat ignored me completely, moving slightly out of reach each time I tried to touch it. I was in something of a hurry because I had about three minutes left on my car park ticket so I stood up and started to move away. The cat immediately stopped rubbing itself against the gate and ran after me. He then stood still while we got to know each other a little better.

'Sorry, young fellow,' I said, glancing at my watch, 'but if I don't go now I'll get a penalty ticket in the car park.' I don't know where they hide but the council's team of car park attendants always spot within seconds if I'm parked with an expired ticket.

The cat followed me and despite my repeated attempts to persuade him to go back to where I'd found him he insisted on following me all the way to the car park.

'You really must go back!' I insisted, as I packed my purchases into the boot of the car. I wrapped Patchy's glass in between the curtain material and an old rug I keep in the boot. When I'd finished I looked around for the cat and saw, to my relief, that he'd disappeared. We were only a short walk from the church and I was confident he would have found his way back without too much difficulty. Barnstaple was much quieter in those days than it is now.

When I got back home and opened the boot lid I had the surprise of my life to see the cat sitting comfortably inside the boot and looking up at me with a big grin on his face.

My first reaction, I'm afraid, was anger. I was quite cross with him. 'Now I'll have to go back into Barnstaple!' I told him.

The road from Bilbury to Barnstaple is winding, narrow and slow. If you drive at a normal pace it takes just over half an hour. If you drive like a madman it takes just under half an hour. So taking the cat back into Barnstaple was going to take me an hour.

I unloaded the stuff out of the boot and carried it and the cat into the kitchen.

'Where did you find that one?' asked Patsy, who loves cats just as much as I do.

I explained.

'He's probably thirsty,' said Patsy. She poured him a saucer of milk and then told me that there had been two calls for me. Neither of them was urgent but neither of them could wait until I got back from my unscheduled trip to Barnstaple.

'I'll have to leave the stowaway here,' I told her. 'I'll take him back later.'

But the calls took longer than I had expected and by the time I got back to the house it was half past nine and I was worn out.

'I'll take him back into Barnstaple in the morning,' I said. 'After surgery and before I do the visits. I hope no one misses him.'

We fed him, gave him more milk, introduced him to Sophie and Emily and found him a blanket and a quiet corner of the house which he could call his own. He knew how to use the cat flap and, although Patsy and I were at first concerned that he might get lost, it quickly became clear that he was not the sort of cat who needs to have his paws buttered to persuade him not to stray.

In the morning, after I'd finished the surgery and completed the most urgent of the day's calls, I popped our stowaway into a cat basket and took him back to Barnstaple.

Patsy and I had agreed that the most sensible thing would be to take him back to the church where I'd found him and to release him there. But when I arrived back at the church I couldn't help noticing a large notice taped onto the oak door.

Below the words 'CAT LOST' and a picture of the stowaway there was a sad message offering a reward of £5 for information leading to his recovery. And there was, of course, a telephone number to call.

I found a telephone kiosk and made the call.

'Are you the person who has lost a cat?' I asked, when the phone was answered. The woman doing the answering had clearly been sitting right next to the receiver.

'Yes. This is Mrs Stokes. Have you found him?' There was no name on the notice.

'I have,' I told her. 'He's safe and sound.' I tried to explain what had happened but the woman was too excited to take in my rather complicated story.

'Where are you?' she demanded.

'Outside the church.'

'I'll be three minutes.'

She was there in two. A woman in her fifties. About five foot tall and wiry. She wore a black skirt, a brown jumper, black stockings and a pair of brown, sensible looking slippers. She had clearly rushed straight out of the house without bothering to put on her shoes. She was carrying her purse.

'He's in here,' I said, pointing to the cat carrier.

She bent down, fiddled with the catch and opened the door at the front of the carrier. The stowaway emerged. Cat and owner seemed delighted to see each other. It was impossible to tell which was the most excited of the two.

'What's his name?' I asked, after allowing them time to give each other cuddles and licks. (The woman did the cuddling and the cat did the licking.)

'Timothy,' replied the woman. 'I call him Timmy.'

'I'm so sorry about what happened,' I said.

She looked at me, slightly confused. I explained again about how I'd come to take Timothy to Bilbury.

'Oh, that's all right,' she said. 'Not your fault.' Still clutching her beloved cat she fumbled with her purse. 'I owe you five pounds,' she said.

I held up a hand. 'Of course you don't!' I said, laughing with embarrassment.

'But your time and the petrol,' she said. 'Five pounds isn't nearly enough.'

'I'm just delighted that you've found each other,' I told her. To be honest, just watching their mutual delight was reward enough.

'Well, at least come back with us and have a cup of tea before you head back to Bilbury,' she said. I hesitated. 'We won't take 'No' for an answer, will we Timmy?'

'OK, thanks,' I said. I knew we wouldn't have to go far. And we didn't. We walked down a narrow lane behind the church and I found myself in a small, private part of the town I never knew existed. A tiny piece of heaven. Her home was a small terraced cottage. One of six. The cottage had a front garden that looked like one of those photographs with which large, expensive boxes of chocolates always used to be adorned. Foxgloves, cornflowers, nasturtiums and so on.

She led the way into a parlour with a ceiling so low I had to bend my neck in order to stand upright.

'I'll just give Timmy a little chicken, and then I'll put the kettle on,' she said. She opened the fridge, took out a plate and unwrapped the remains of half a cooked chicken. She took a knife and cut several slices from the breast of the chicken and arranged them neatly on a plate. It was, I noticed, a nice piece of Royal Albert china that matched the saucer that already contained milk and the cup full of fresh water. I felt rather guilty. Our cats always eat off odd bits of china that have been passed down from dining room service. Timmy was purring loudly long before the chicken had been cut. Once Timmy had been fed, Mrs Stokes put the kettle on. While it boiled she took Royal Albert cups and saucers out of one cupboard and a metal cake tin out of another cupboard.

'Would you like a piece of sponge cake?' she asked. 'I haven't got any other I'm afraid. But I do have ginger biscuits if you prefer.'

'A piece of sponge cake would do very nicely, thank you,' I told her.

As we drank our tea and ate generous helpings of an excellent, light sponge cake Mrs Stokes asked me about Bilbury. I told her it was a village about half an hour from Barnstaple and explained that if she had never been there that was no great surprise because we tended to keep ourselves to ourselves and most people in North Devon didn't know where it was.

'I've always envied people who live in villages,' she told me. 'I've spent all my life here in the town but I've always thought how lovely it would be to have a quiet life in a rural community.'

'Barnstaple is hardly a big city!' I remarked light heartedly. 'And you live in a very quiet part of it. I didn't know this place existed.'

'It is very pleasant,' said Mrs Stokes. 'Timmy and I will be sorry to leave.'

'Why on earth are you leaving?' I asked. I took another bite of the home-made cake. It really was very splendid.

'Not our choice,' said Mrs Stokes. 'They're knocking these houses down to extend the shopping centre.' She nodded towards my plate. 'Would you like another piece?'

'Oh no!' I cried, in genuine horror. 'That's awful.' I suddenly realised what I'd said. 'Not the cake!' I said hurriedly. 'The cake is wonderful but I mustn't have another piece. I should be getting back.'

'I'm just glad my husband isn't alive to see it happen,' said Mrs Stokes. 'He lived here all his life. He was born here.'

'Can they do that?' I asked, putting my plate on the table and standing up. 'Just throw you out?'

'I'm afraid so,' said Mrs Stokes. 'It seems they can do whatever they want these days.'

I said how sorry I was to hear it and asked if she'd found somewhere to go.

'I'll probably go up to Lancashire,' said Mrs Stokes. 'I have a nephew up there. He says he can find me an old person's flat not too far from where he lives. It's on the 11th floor.' She looked very glum. 'I'll have to retire, of course but it's only another year to the pension so I suppose it's about time.'

'What about Timmy?' I asked. 'Can you take him?'

'I won't go if he can't go,' she said defiantly. 'My nephew is making enquiries.'

'What work do you do now?' I asked.

'I work at the Grand,' she told me, naming a large hotel in the town centre. 'It's very handy. I clean the rooms after the guests. Make the beds. That sort of thing.'

It was only then that I thought of Mrs Porter. I sat down again. 'Maybe I will have another piece of your wonderful cake,' I told her. 'There's something I'd like to talk to you about.'

And so a month later Mrs Stokes and Timmy moved to Bilbury.

Was my meeting with Timmy purely serendipitous? Or is it possible that the cat knew exactly what he was doing when he climbed into my car boot?

WOODY BAY FLOTSAM

At five minutes past nine I got fed up of waiting for the first patient to come in, opened my door and went out into my receptionist's office.

'Where are the patients?' I asked Miss Johnson.

'There aren't any, doctor,' she replied.

I stared at her and frowned. 'We can't have cured everyone!'

'There's no one here,' she said. 'Do you want me to bring the letters in for you to look through?'

Every morning, after the surgery, I would go through the morning mail and, where necessary, dictate replies for Miss Johnson to type up in the afternoon.

'It's Monday morning!' I said.

'Yes, doctor.'

'Monday is always busy.'

'Yes, doctor. But there was a shipwreck during the night.'

I stared at her, frowning. 'I'm sorry,' I said. 'Did you say there was a shipwreck during the night?'

'I did, doctor,' she said. 'In Woody Bay.'

I walked over to the wall and looked at the calendar. 'This is 1972?'

'It is.' She opened an envelope, threw the envelope away and put the letter it had contained onto the growing pile on her desk. It was a hospital letter, from a consultant, about one of my patients.

'We haven't drifted through a time warp? We haven't gone back to 1872.'

'No, doctor.' She picked up another envelope and set to work with the letter opener again.

'A shipwreck?'

'Yes.'

'Not caused by men with lanterns seducing an unfortunate ship's captain onto the rocks?'

'No. A freighter. It ran onto the rocks near Woody Bay during the night.'

'And that's why we don't have any patients?'

'Everyone has gone down to the wreck.'

'Tell me they're not searching the shore for flotsam and jetsam?'

'I think they probably are, I'm afraid.' She repeated the exercise with the envelope. 'Do you know the difference between flotsam and jetsam?'

'I looked them up when I knew I was going to live in a village populated by pirates and wreckers,' I told her. 'Flotsam is wreckage that floats. And bits of stuff that fall into the water and float. Jetsam is stuff that is jettisoned and gets washed ashore.'

'But jetsam doesn't float?'

'I assume not.'

'So how does it get ashore?'

'I have no idea. Maybe it does float. Actually, I suppose it must float.'

'So jetsam is just flotsam that was put there on purpose?'

I took the letter opener from her. 'Miss Johnson,' I said firmly. 'This is a fascinating, semantic discussion but I'm more interested in what is happening than in how we describe it. There are moral questions here.'

'I don't think anyone was out there with lanterns,' said Miss Johnson. 'And if the stuff was deliberately thrown overboard surely people have a right to pick it up.'

I hesitated. I had a feeling I was losing the argument.

'If the stuff is left there it will become litter and make the shoreline look untidy.'

I sighed. 'I'm going to take a look,' I said.

'Mind you only pick up the jetsam,' Miss Johnson said firmly. 'Leave the flotsam where it is so that the ship's owner can collect it later.'

It took me twenty minutes to get to Woody Bay. The cliffs were packed with cars. Lines of villagers from Bilbury, Combe Martin, Ilfracombe, Kentisbury, Trentishoe, Lynton, Parracombe, Bittadon, Martinhoe and a dozen other small towns and villages were making their way down to the shore. The cliffs around there are steep and the paths that exist are rocky and treacherous. There was still quite a wind blowing and the sea could be heard crashing onto the rocks.

Thumper and Patchy were there, of course.

'What's going on?' I asked.

'Freighter ran ashore,' said Thumper. 'We came to see if anyone needed help.'

I looked at him.

He shrugged. 'And to see what had been washed ashore,' he said.

'The crew were all taken off in the night,' said Patchy. 'It was on the radio.'

'Were they all OK?' I asked.

'Not a scratch,' said Patchy.

'All a bit disappointing' said Thumper.

'We were hoping there might be a few cases of whisky,' said Patchy.

'Whisky Galore,' said Thumper.

'I've read the book and seen the film,' I told him.

'Of course, gold coins would have been better but gold has a tendency to sink,' said Patchy.

'No whisky?' I asked.

'Sadly no,' said Patchy.

'The freighter was coming from China,' said Thumper. 'Loaded with 80,000 bras.'

I laughed. 'You're joking!'

'Sadly, I am not,' said Thumper. Someone I didn't recognize hurried past carrying a huge rucksack which had been stuffed full with booty. A bra strap poked out through the side of the rucksack.

'And so far they all seem to be the same size.'

'Which is?'

'40DD,' replied Thumper.

'An unusually large size, apparently,' said Patchy.

'I fear there's likely to be a shortage of suitable customers,' added Thumper.

'Shouldn't the police be here?' I asked. 'Surely all this stuff belongs to someone?'

'Not on this occasion,' said Patchy. He nodded towards a man in a grey suit who was sitting on a rock. A brown leather briefcase was resting against his leg. 'He's a representative from the shipping line. He's told the police they're happy for people to take what they can carry.'

'Just take the stuff away?'

'None of it's any good to them,' said Thumper. 'No store wants to buy - or sell - bras that have been soaked in salt water for hours. The little metal catches at the back and the metal wires they use to help support the part of the bra that holds up the breasts will be marked and the material will stain.'

'So the insurers gave the go ahead for people to help themselves. Cheaper than clearing up the stuff themselves.'

'So why aren't you two collecting your fair share?' I asked.

'Once this lot hits the market you won't be able to sell a sized 40DD bra in Devon,' said Thumper.

'Not worth picking them up,' said Patchy. '80,000 bras. All the same size. It's difficult to imagine a more worthless cargo.'

They turned and headed back up the hill to where they'd parked their cars. I went with them.

'Dee Dee Protheroe will be all right for bras for a while,' said Patchy.

'Who on earth is Dee Dee Protheroe?' I asked.

'The vicar's wife,' said Thumper.

'Eileen Protheroe?'

'How many large-bosomed Protheroes do you know?'

I thought about it. 'Just Eileen, I suppose,' I admitted.

The vicar's wife's most notable feature was an enormous bosom which bounced and swayed and had a life of its own. I had once been present at a cricket match on the village green in Bilbury when Archie Grimshaw, playing for Parracombe Thirds, had hit a long hop from Peter Marshall (who doesn't usually play cricket but had been press-ganged when it was discovered that we only had ten men available) and the ball had landed in Mrs Protheroe's cleavage. She had been standing on the grass at the edge of the green at the time and it was quickly decided that she was, therefore, on the cricket field. Naturally, this meant that the ball was still in play. Several of the fielders volunteered to pick the ball out of its resting place (it had more or less disappeared from sight and only a thin segment of the ball was still visible) but after protests from both batsmen, a group of spectators and a very red-faced vicar, the umpires decreed that this wouldn't be entirely 'cricket'.

It was eventually decided that Mrs Protheroe should be allowed to remove the ball herself and to then hurl it as high into the air as she could manage. The fielders would then be allowed to try to catch it. Only if they succeeded would the batsman be given out. Mrs Protheroe managed to extract the ball and then, throwing underarm, tried to hurl it into the air. Unfortunately, her arm didn't stop soon enough and instead of going upwards the ball went backwards over her right shoulder. It ended up in the car park in front of the Duck and Puddle. The batsman, Archie Grimshaw, immediately claimed that he'd hit a six and, although it was difficult to argue with his logic, the umpires did so for another twenty five minutes before deciding that, although it was the brightest day of the summer, the light was too bad to continue and they would abandon the match as a draw.

'But why do you call her Dee Dee?' I asked. 'Her name is Eileen.'

'No one called her Eileen until she married the vicar,' said Thumper.

'She was born and brought up in Combe Martin,' said Patchy. 'She was known as Dee Dee from when she was about 16.'

'So why is she now known as Eileen?' I asked as we arrived at Thumper's truck. He opened one door and Patchy opened the other. Naturally, Thumper hadn't bothered to lock the truck.

'I don't suppose she thinks that being called by her bra size is quite proper for a vicar's wife,' said Thumper, getting into his truck.

He and Patchy waved as they drove away.

The sudden abundance of bras was a boon for large bosomed women in North Devon. But it seemed there weren't enough generously endowed women around and the bras rapidly became an example of the sort of glut that can affect strawberry growers in the middle of the season. Every pub for miles around contained far more than its fair share of struggling salesmen failing to offload their stock of over-sized bras. Hope and joy quickly turned to disappointment and despair as they all found themselves failing to make a single sale.

To my astonishment I heard a little later that Thumper and Patchy had gone round the pubs buying up all the bras which had been salvaged but had failed to sell.

'Did you find a large supply of well-endowed ladies?' I asked them when I next saw them in the Duck and Puddle.

Thumper shook his head. 'We found a melon grower in Somerset who gave us a good price. He normally uses netting bags to support his melons as they develop. He was thrilled.'

I stared at him, disbelievingly.

'Melons need support,' explained Patchy. 'As the fruits ripen they get heavy, break free of their stalks and crash to the ground.'

'So the growers have to buy special nets to stop them falling before they're ready for picking,' said Thumper.

'Two melons to a plant is apparently quite normal,' said Patchy. 'So bras are just perfect.'

'And DD bras are just the right size for melons?' I asked.

'A perfect fit,' said Thumper, holding out two cupped hands as though to demonstrate. 'The very best melon is apparently the same size as a DD breast.'

Thumper and Patchy have been friends of mine since I arrived in Bilbury. I am, however, constantly amazed at their imaginations and ingenuity.

'With your brains you two could do great things!' I told them.

They looked at each other and, without speaking a word, both put their hands into their back pockets and pulled out bulging wallets.

'We turned a load of unwanted bras into perfectly good drinking vouchers,' said Patchy. 'What other great thing did you have in mind?'

I couldn't think of a reply so, although they were the ones with the bulging wallets, I bought another round of drinks.

THE VISITORS

I was in the Duck and Puddle one lunchtime, sitting with Thumper Robinson and Patchy Fogg, when a pleasant, friendly-looking couple I'd never seen before came in. He wore brown corduroy trousers and a red sweater. She wore grey trousers and a pale pink V-necked sweater with a white blouse. They looked around and then walked up to the bar and spoke to Gilly. After listening to them for a moment Gilly pointed in our direction. The man and the woman thanked Gilly and then walked across to where we were sitting.

'You're Thumper!' said the woman. It was a statement and not a question. She looked excited, as though she were meeting a film star.

For a moment Thumper looked puzzled.

'We haven't met,' said the woman, partly in explanation and partly in apology, 'but my husband and I are keen readers of the Bilbury books. We feel as though we know you.' She paused. 'You're our favourite character,' she added quietly.

'Ah,' said Thumper, understanding. 'Well, you mustn't believe everything you read.'

The couple laughed. 'Oh, but we do!' said the woman. 'Don't we Gerald?'

Gerald said they did. 'My favourite book is Bilbury Revels,' he said.

'Did that cricket match really happen like that?' asked the woman.

'Absolutely,' said Thumper. 'Pretty much anyway. The doc, the chap who writes the books, exaggerates a bit occasionally.'

'Usually to make himself look good,' said Patchy.

'Are you Patchy?' the woman asked me.

I shook my head and pointed to Patchy. 'He's Patchy,' I said.

'It's wonderful to meet you too,' said the woman. 'You're our second favourite character.' She spoke as though he and Thumper were characters in a book, inventions created by an author to flesh out a piece of fiction.

'Thank you,' said Patchy, graciously.

'But I'm afraid we're not in the market for any of Shakespeare's old furniture!' laughed Gerald.

'Oh no, we're not that gullible!' laughed the woman.

'Pity,' said Patchy. 'I've got Shakespeare's writing desk in my garage.'

'Really?' said Gerald.

'Don't be silly, Gerald!' said the woman. She poked him in the ribs.

We all laughed.

'Well I suppose we'd better leave you three to your lunch,' said the woman.

'We're going to look for Bilbury Grange,' said Gerald. 'Can you give us directions?'

Thumper gave them accurate directions.

Just as they left the woman turned back and spoke to me. 'Are you anyone?' she asked.

'Oh no,' I replied quickly, before either Patchy or Thumper could speak. 'I'm just passing through.'

'Are you sure?' asked Gerald. 'We know all the local people.

We've read all the Bilbury books. We'll know you even if you're a minor character.'

'Positive,' I said. 'I'm not even a minor character.'

'Pity,' said Gerald.

'Still, it's nice to have met you two,' said the woman, speaking to Patchy and Thumper.

'They're just like the books aren't they?' I heard Gerald say as they left.

'Except I didn't expect Thumper to be that good looking,' said the woman. 'And he looks younger than I expected too.'

We ate in silence for a moment or two.

'You owe us both drinks,' Patchy said to me.

'Hush money,' said Thumper.

I bought them a pint of beer and a pickled egg each.

POSTSCRIPT

The Doc
by
Thumper Robinson

The doc never tells readers much about himself and so the publishers of the Bilbury books have asked me to write a few sentences about him. The publishers said they wouldn't change what I wrote and they said it as though I should be pleased but that's not much of a blessing to be honest, if it's supposed to be, since before writing this the longest thing I ever wrote was my shopping list to take to the builders' yard when I was rebuilding Miss Dawson's greenhouse, and the bad news is that I forgot the putty and had to drive all the way back into Barnstaple to fetch it so don't hold out high hopes or expect anything with smart words that you have to look up in the dictionary because before I could use them I'd have to look them up and how could I look them up if I didn't know what they were in the first place? The publishers gave me a tape recorder no bigger than an alarm clock and said if I didn't want to write stuff down I could just record it and they'd print it as I said it which is probably better for everyone and so that's what I'm doing.

The doc is a tall bloke but not what I'd call big; not muscular like most of the fellows round Bilbury. You can tell straight away that he's spent his life bashing books and not chopping down trees. When I first met him I thought he was a bit weedy to be honest. He looked like he'd blow away in a gale. He's a lot bigger now, of course. Patsy has fattened him up and he's beginning to develop a paunch and I don't suppose he'd deny that himself if you were to ask him. It was quite a surprise when he and Patsy first got it together. But before long everyone agreed that they were a perfect match. Nothing wrong with a bit of a stomach on a man, of course, and that stuff about him having a bit of a paunch is not intended as a criticism because I wouldn't criticise the doc anyway because he's my friend and my dad taught me that you don't criticise your friends in private or in public. My dad didn't leave me much but that's stuck with me and I think it's good advice which I'll pass on to my little ones when they're old enough, which to be honest I think they probably are. I'm glad I'm doing this because it's reminded me and now I can mention it to them tonight or maybe at the weekend. My mum always used to say that if a man was too skinny it was evidence that his wife wasn't looking after him properly. And I've no room to talk, as I'll readily admit.

When he first arrived in Bilbury the doc had a lot of hair. Sticking out all over the place it was. My Anne said he looked as though he'd been dragged through a hedgerow backwards and then dragged back through it forwards. But it wasn't meant nasty. He doesn't have so much hair now, of course but then we don't call him 'young doc' any more. Patsy makes sure he keeps it trimmed though to be honest with you God has done quite a good job of thinning it out for him.

When the doc first came to Bilbury as assistant to Dr Brownlow we were all a bit suspicious of him to tell the truth. Maybe suspicious isn't the right word. Wary would perhaps be a better way of putting it.

But slowly he earned respect and it soon became clear that he was taken with the village. People liked that. We like things to stay the same here. I think villagers were worried that we'd get used to him and then just when we'd got used to his little ways and he'd got used to ours he'd be up and off somewhere better. There was a bit of resentment when he first arrived - though we all tried not to show it. Everyone in the village liked and trusted Dr Brownlow and selfishly we didn't want anything to change though we all knew he was getting older and couldn't go on for ever. If you know anything about Bilbury you will know that we aren't big on change - even if it is wrapped up as progress. We aren't that keen on progress either to be perfectly honest with you.

If you asked me to describe the sort of person the doc is I'd say he's a damned good bloke and the village was lucky to get him as our doctor. I know we should respect all medical men, because they've all gone through a lot of training and learning and so on, but to tell the truth there are some I've met that I wouldn't want looking after me or my Anne. The doc is a gentleman, which in my book is the biggest compliment you can pay, but nevertheless he is the sort of mate you can have a drink with and, more important, the sort of bloke you can rely on. He doesn't look down on people who haven't had his learning and he's always keen to learn about other people and their skills. I remember him being very impressed that I could tickle a trout which to be blunt with you isn't much of a trick at all when you know how to do it. We respect a man like that in Bilbury. Patchy Fogg, the antique dealer, says the doc reminds him a bit of that Don Quixote we were told about in school. It took me a while to remember who he meant because to begin with I got Don Quixote mixed up with Don Corleone who is someone else completely different of course and, as I understand it, probably not a real person at all, though since they both have the same Christian name you will see how I got confused. It's the same Christian name as that Australian cricketer Don Bradman who was someone entirely different. I never saw him play myself but they say he was good and he was a hero of mine even though he was a foreigner. Eric Hollies bowled him in his final Test Match otherwise he would have averaged over 100 in Tests. Don Quixote was a Spanish gentleman I believe. I've never known anyone called Don myself, though when the regular driver who delivers to Peter Marshall from the wholesaler was ill with a broken wrist (which I happen to know he got falling over in a bit of a drunken state one Saturday night but which he told everyone he did slipping on a wet cabbage leaf so that he wouldn't get the boot and who could blame him for that and it doesn't matter now because he's retired and gone up far north to live in Keynsham which is where that Horace Batchelor used to live, who did the pools adverts on Radio Luxembourg when I was a kid listening to the radio under my bedclothes though my Mum told me years later that she always knew anyway) his replacement stand-in for a while was a bloke called Don who had a tattoo of a mermaid on his arm and claimed he'd been in the Navy but none of us believed him because in a conversation he had with Patchy it was clear that he didn't know where the Pacific Ocean was and a sailor would know that, though we didn't say anything because there's nothing worse than embarrassing someone unnecessarily.

When the doc first started writing his books we had some worries that he would end up attracting tourists to the village and change things but to be honest things haven't been too bad. The doc says that not too many people read books these days and that unless they make a television series out of the books we don't have a thing to worry about and he says there isn't much chance of that which is, to be honest, a blessing because we don't want the place flooding with gawping tourists. We had that problem once before and the doc described it pretty well in one of his books though I forget which one (*Bilbury Country - Editor*) but nevertheless although I'm not what you'd normally call a vain person (my Anne is always telling me I should take more care with my appearance, like nagging me to change a shirt when we go out to the Duck and Puddle) I wouldn't mind seeing who they'd get to play me on the screen. Personally if they're going to do something like that I'd rather it was a proper film but the doc says the chances of that are even smaller than the chances of us being a television series.

The doc says his books so far are all set in the 1970s, when he first arrived in Bilbury, but to be honest little has changed and we're living in a sort of time warp I suppose. From reading the books we have all learned a good deal about ourselves (and in particular about the way other people see us) but the gift the doc gave us is that we hadn't realised just how lucky we are to live in Bilbury. If you love somewhere wonderful you tend to take it for granted, especially if you've never known anything different as I haven't.

The doc gets letters from readers asking him if Bilbury really exists. Well, all I can say is that if it doesn't I'd like to know where I've been living all my life. He also gets letters wanting to know how real everything is. I don't know what he says to them but all I can say to that is that there are some things I don't think he gets quite right but to be truthful with you his books are pretty accurate except that Peter Marshall (*who runs the village shop - Editor*) is a darned sight meaner and Frank (*the publican who runs the Duck and Puddle - Editor*) is a damned sight drunker than the doc makes him out to be. And Frank and Gilly (*Frank's wife - Editor*) have some real ding dong fights that the doc doesn't mention, though I expect that's out of respect, and since they've been married a good long time I think it's safe to assume that they don't mean much of what they say to each other. I can't speak for the medical stuff of course, me not being a doctor or having any medical knowledge, but you can take my word for it that the village is just as he describes it. I used to think that he made me out to be a bit of a Jack the Lad, as my mother used to say, but over the years I've come round to thinking that he's probably got me just about right. Patchy Fogg once got a bit upset with the doc giving away a few of the tricks he uses at auctions but Patchy and the doc soon thought up some new ones which the doc promised not to put in any of his books, and the two of them shook hands and everything is fine again now.

Sometimes the doc strikes me as a bit of a champion of lost causes. But as Jimmy Stewart says in Frank Capra's film *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* those are the only causes worth fighting for and I respect him for that. Anne, my other half, and I like the cinema and that's our favourite film. Jimmy Stewart and Humphrey Bogart are our favourite actors, and Frank Capra is our favourite director. A lot of people never know the names of film directors but I think it's important because although it's the stars you see on the screen, it's the director who decides what you see them doing, and if they just stood there doing nothing it would be a pretty glum sort of film.

One of the doc's medical friends came to stay once (*Bilbury Village: Editor*) and I talked to him a bit while he was here. He said the doc's problem was that he had always been 'idealistic, professionally naive and unworldly'. I remember the words well. I didn't see anything wrong with any of those things. It's true the doc is sometimes a bit of an innocent, but he's passionate and sensitive and in my mind those are things that make a good doctor. He can't stand prejudice, intolerance and hypocrisy which I don't much like either. If you're going to pick out his faults I'd say he was a bit impatient (I once took him to see the badgers playing at night and after forty minutes of waiting he was fidgeting so much that I took him back home). He can be infuriatingly touchy and a bit old-fashioned in many ways but most of us in Bilbury just ignore his touchiness which we've got used to and you can't be too old-fashioned for us. I now find it difficult to believe just how innocent the doc was when I first met him; when he first arrived in Bilbury. He had not long qualified and I don't think he had much experience of general practice. He was very much a towny too. He couldn't tell the difference between an oak and a chestnut and that caused us a few laughs at the time I don't mind telling you, though we would never laugh at a man behind his back! The doc still can't change a wheel but he knows a bit about trees and wildlife now and if he needs a wheel changing he's only got to call and there's half a dozen of us glad to do it for him.

The doc questions and challenges pomposity and he hates bureaucrats as much as I do. Actually, as much as we all do. He sticks up for the village because he can talk back to them and they have to listen to him because he's by way of being a doctor and a learned man. And he doesn't give a fig for the consequences which is something else to respect him for.

You might have imagined that the doc and I might have fallen out over his love of animals. He and Patsy are the only two vegetarians I know, and when Patsy turned and stopped eating meat her family were terribly upset. Her father thought she was going to die without meat on her plate and made quite a fuss but she stood firm and in the end he respected that. It was the same with the doc and me. He knows I catch animals to eat but we don't fall out about it. Occasionally, he tries to convert me but I just laugh at him and then we forget about it. We don't hold grudges. You have to respect the other person's point of view if you live in a small village.

Anyway, I'd much rather have the doc with his faults than that other doctor who came to visit. (*Thumper is again referring to an incident described in Bilbury Village - Editor*). That doctor struck me as being smug and a damned snob. He wouldn't fit in around Bilbury I can tell you that for free. He was a bit cynical I thought. Here in Bilbury we respect the old values such as commitment, honesty and loyalty. Judging by what I've heard and read and what I see when I go travelling to places like Barnstaple or Exeter these may not be valued much in the outside world but here in Bilbury these are things we consider important.

I hope this is the sort of thing you wanted because to be honest with you I'm really pleased to be able to say a few words about the doc, who is as good a friend as I ever had or hope to have. The doc and I aren't exactly what you might call the sort who you would expect to get on together, him being a man of learning and me being, well, not a man of any learning at all. I'll be very proud to see words of mine in a book, especially a book about Bilbury, though to be honest with you again I'll believe it when I see it because I can't believe anyone would print anything I'd write because if you want a roof mending, a car clock putting back or a pheasant plucking I'm your man but I wouldn't hire me to write a letter for you let alone something for a book.

If you want to tidy this up or make it read better I wouldn't mind a dab but just please make sure that it's clear that all of us in Bilbury like the doc very much, me and Anne especially, and we couldn't have a better doctor in the village and I would never say anything but good things about him because he's not just the doctor and a real gentleman but I'm proud to say that he's my friend. And in my eyes a man can't say more than that.

Thumper Robinson

Bilbury Pie, a collection of short stories, is the seventh of Vernon Coleman's seven books about Bilbury. These are: *Bilbury Chronicles, Bilbury Grange, Bilbury Revels, Bilbury Country* and *Bilbury Village*. There are two books of short stories called *Bilbury Pie* and *Bilbury Pudding*. If you enjoy the Bilbury books you may enjoy other books by the same author including *Mr Henry Mulligan, Second Innings, It's Never Too Late* and *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War*. For full details of over 100 books by Vernon Coleman please see his author page on Amazon or www.vernoncoleman.com

Also by Vernon Coleman

The Bilbury Chronicles

A young doctor arrives to begin work in the small village of Bilbury. This picturesque hamlet is home to some memorable characters who have many a tale to tell, and Vernon Coleman weaves together a superb story full of humour and anecdotes. The Bilbury books will transport you back to the days of old-fashioned, traditional village life where you never needed to lock your door, and when a helping hand was only ever a moment away. The first novel in the series.

"I am just putting pen to paper to say how very much I enjoyed The Bilbury Chronicles. I just can't wait to read the others."
MRS K., CAMBS

" ...a real delight from cover to cover. As the first in a series it holds out the promise of entertaining things to come"
DAILY EXAMINER

"The Bilbury novels are just what I've been looking for. They are a pleasure to read over and over again."
MRS C., LANES

Also by Vernon Coleman

Bilbury Grange

The second novel in the Bilbury series sees the now married doctor moving into his new home - a vast and rambling country house in desperate need of renovation. With repair bills soaring and money scarce, the doctor and his new wife look for additional ways to make ends meet. Another super novel in this series - perfect for hours of escapism!

"I have just finished reading Bilbury Grange. I found the book to be brilliant. I felt as though I was part of the community. Please keep me informed of any more in this excellent series."
MR C, CLEETHORPES

"A wonderful book for relaxing and unwinding. Makes you want to up roots and move to the rural heartland."
LINCOLNSHIRE ECHO

"For sheer relaxing pleasure here's another witty tale from the doctor whose prolific writings are so well known."
BOOKSHELF

Also by Vernon Coleman

THE BILBURY REVELS

"Settling down with Vernon Coleman's latest novel set in the fictional Devonshire village of Bilbury is one of the best restorative treatments I know for relieving the stresses and strains of modem living."
LINCOLNSHIRE ECHO

BILBURY COUNTRY

"This fourth novel in the series describes what happens to Bilbury and its villagers when a newspaper story turns a trickle of visitors into a flood. Full of charm and humour."
NEWS & STAR

"...thank you for your latest Bilbury book. I have read it with deep interest and enjoyed it."
MRS C., ST. ALBANS

BILBURY VILLAGE

The inhabitants of Bilbury decide the village needs a doctor of its own again. They aren't above a little chicanery to ensure that they get their way, and Bilbury Village tells the story of exactly how they battle with bureaucracy to achieve their ambition.

"A gentle, relaxing, thoroughly enjoyable and charming 'introduction' for me to your fictitious Devon village. It's the first one in the series which I have read and I loved it!"
C.S., SPAIN

BILBURY PIE

"I have just read Bilbury Pie recommended by a local library. I enjoyed it so much I read it like 'eating a box of chocolates' 2 or 3 chapters at a time to make it last and savour its flavour. I thank you for giving people pleasure and plenty of smiles."
MRS G., BANBURY

Also by Vernon Coleman

The Village Cricket Tour

This superb novel tells the story of a team of amateur cricketers who spend two weeks of their summer holidays on tour in the West Country. It proves to be a most eventful fortnight full of mishaps and adventures as the cricketers play their way around the picturesque coastline of Devon and Cornwall.

"The only word to describe (this book) is hilarious. It is the funniest book about cricket that I have ever read. In fact it is the funniest book I have read since Three Men in a Boat."
CHRONICLE & ECHO

"I enjoyed it immensely. He has succeeded in writing a book that will entertain, a book that will amuse and warm the cockles of tired old hearts."

PETER TINNISWOOD, PUNCH

"His powers of observation combine with his penchant for brilliant word pictures to create a most delightful book ... a first class example of humorous adventures in the West Country"
SUNDAY INDEPENDENT

"The Village Cricket Tour has provided me with much amusement and a great deal of pleasure."
MR A., CANADA

The Young Country Doctor Book 8

BILBURY TONIC

Vernon Coleman

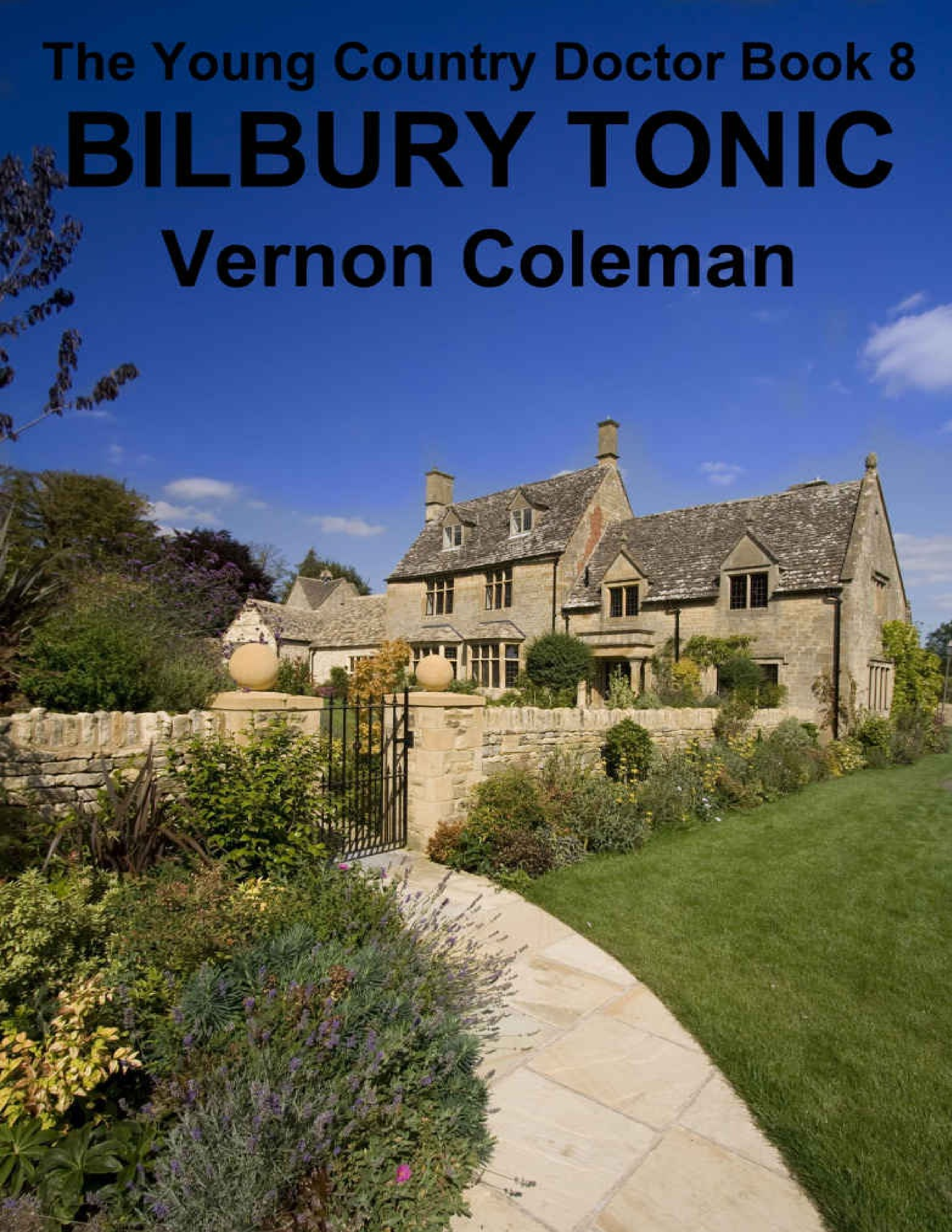

The Young Country Doctor Book 8

Bilbury Tonic

Vernon Coleman

Dedication: To Antoinette
Without you there is darkness.
With you there is sunshine.

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Preface

When I finished writing *Bilbury Pudding*, the seventh in 'The Young Country Doctor' series, I did not intend to write any more Bilbury books. To be honest, I didn't think I had anything more to say about Bilbury.

But, as one incarnation of a famous spy once said: 'Never say never again'.

And here I am again, with another collection of stories from Bilbury.

Two things changed my mind.

First, the village of Bilbury, and its inhabitants, are very dear to me. Bilbury is always there; an escape from our ever troubling world; endless fears, terrorism, selfishness, deceit and ruthless disregard for decency and honour. My wife and I have never had friends as good as Thumper, Patchy, Frank, Gilly and Peter. And I have never known any place where the stories hang, like ripe fruit, waiting to be picked, as they do in Bilbury.

In recent years, I have become more of a recluse than ever. It has been said that writing is show business for shy people but these days the whole business of writing has changed. When I was younger, I used to do a good deal of television and radio and I wrote columns for many newspapers. The appearances and the columns helped attract readers to my books and I knew I could always run back to my keyboard when the frenetic multimedia world became too much for me. But the growth of social media, and the increasing acerbity in the world, and the fact that the critics never forget, never show mercy and never sleep, have combined to make life impossible for the shy and the unduly sensitive. I have now retired from everything other than writing books.

And I have found myself increasingly content to remain in Bilbury, away from the noisy hustle and disturbing bustle of the 21st century. Barking? Maybe. Do I give a stuff? Not likely.

Second, the requests for more Bilbury stories have never stopped coming and since the publication of the books in eBook format, the number of requests has increased steadily. There are, it seems, quite a few folk who share my deep affection for this quiet, isolated village in North Devon and for its inhabitants. For them, as for us, Bilbury is a stable point of refuge in an often cruel, frequently disappointing, constantly confusing and ever-changing world. It is a real joy to be able to share the village with readers who enjoy reading about it and who, I hope, might, in their hearts, like to think of themselves as honorary Bilburians.

At this point, I think I should remind you that the Bilbury books are all set in the 1970s and although this book is being written well into the 21st century I am writing about things that happened nearly half a century ago. Medical knowledge and customs were very different then.

Some older readers will remember those distant days with fondness but many younger readers will probably find it difficult to imagine living in a world without mobile telephones, computers and the mass of gadgets and conveniences which we all now take for granted.

Finally, I should also point out that I take the principle of confidentiality very seriously. None of the people or situations in this book is recognisable. Oh, and I should also remind you that real life doesn't always have nice, neat endings. It is only in fiction that things have to work out and must be in some way explicable.

Welcome back to Bilbury.

Vernon Coleman

Two Pink Gins

We most of us dream of some café or bar where we will be known and where the barman or barmaid will greet us with our favourite beverage, possibly in our own favourite mug, the moment we walk through the door. We dream that the other patrons will call out our name and smile when they see us, making us feel welcome, wanted and surrounded by friends.

It is no coincidence that the most successful television soap operas are set around bars and public houses.

Sadly, however, in most parts of the world, pubs and cafés lost their soul many years ago. They are all much the same: lots of plastic, a small choice of pre-cooked, frozen meals available to be heated up in an industrial sized microwave oven, drinks served in plastic drinking glasses and coffee made from acorns and so foul that not even British Rail would dare serve it. The staff who never recognise any of their customers and for whom English is, at best, a second or third language, seem to change once a week and their aim is for you to drink up, eat up and get out as quickly as possible.

If it didn't exist, the 'Duck and Puddle' public house would, I suppose, be the meeting place we all dream of.

Frank and Gill, the landlord and his wife, treat all their regulars like family and no one is ever asked to leave simply because they haven't ordered a drink for a long time. Lemuel Macintosh, probably the meanest man ever to have owned a wallet, once sat in the snug for a whole day after ordering just one coffee and a bag of salt and vinegar crisps. It requires a certain amount of determination and self-restraint to make a cup of coffee and a packet of crisps last ten hours.

Thumper Robinson entrepreneur, poacher and owner of the scruffiest truck south of Birmingham, Patchy Fogg, antique dealer extraordinaire and now my brother-in-law, and I were sitting in the snug.

My wife, Patsy, had gone into Barnstaple to try to find a replacement for our toaster, which had given up the ghost, and she had taken the babies with her.

'Will you manage to get something for lunch?' she asked, as she left. To us the half hour journey into Barnstaple is a trek into another world.

I said I would.

'Are you meeting Thumper and Patchy?'

I said I was.

'At the Duck and Puddle?'

'You know us too well.'

'Try to have something solid,' she said, blowing me a kiss.

And so there we were; settled comfortably into our favourite corner of the 'Duck and Puddle'.

I was drinking a modest portion of Islay malt whisky and the other two were drinking pints of Frank's best bitter, a potent brew from a small West Country brewery which specialises in supplying a small number of independent West Country public houses with beer, and a rather larger number of farmers with whisky.

The company makes a brand of whisky called 'Horse Feed' which is popular with farmers because they can buy it by the crate and be given useful receipts to show to the taxman. It is one of the least known malt whiskies but the sales figures must be very encouraging for the company concerned. There are scores of better-known malts which are far less profitable.

A medical friend of mine once went to Scotland on a course for a week. At least he said he was going on a course but I don't think he had great plans for learning anything relevant to his professional career. The word 'course' can be interpreted in a number of different ways.

My chum had booked himself into a magnificent loch side hotel which boasted a bar which claimed to stock bottles of every malt whisky made. On his arrival, my friend sat himself down at the bar and said to the barman, 'I'm here for a week. I intend to work my way through all the malt whiskies made in Scotland. Where do you suggest I start?'

The barman gave him a sad look. 'We have 274 different varieties of malt whisky, sir,' he said, 'I think you might be pushed to work your through them all in just a week. Would you not perhaps consider prolonging your stay a little?'

For lunch, I was munching my way through a couple of slices of a large, fresh, farmhouse loaf, liberally buttered, and a bowl of green and black olives while my friends Thumper Robinson and Patchy Fogg were eating pork scratchings.

The pork scratchings concerned were three months beyond something called their 'sell-by date' and had consequently been sold at three quarters of their usual price.

The introduction of sell-by dates had been something that had enraged Frank Parsons, the landlord of the 'Duck and Puddle', who regarded it as a trick introduced by the manufacturers to encourage customers, and public house landlords, to throw away vast quantities of perfectly edible food.

'How can you have a sell-by date on pork scratchings?' he had demanded incredulously when the existence of the dates had first been drawn to his attention. 'Pork scratchings are fried pig skin. They'll last forever! If there is ever a nuclear war there will be three things left: cockroaches, traffic wardens and pork scratchings.'

Neither Thumper nor Patchy seemed to think that there was anything wrong with the pork scratchings, which came from a box Frank had unearthed that morning while clearing out a cupboard. Clearing out cupboards was something which Frank tried to do once a year. It was, he once said, just below cleaning the gutters and just above filling in his tax form on his list of favourite things to do.

As I suspect people generally do when they are sitting in any public house, and as they always seem to do when they are sitting in the 'Duck and Puddle', we had been enjoying a wide-ranging discussion.

Thumper had said, not for the first time and probably not for the last for, as he once pointed out, if you think of something clever to say it is a bit of a waste to say it only once, that he couldn't understand why television news readers were treated as celebrities when all they had to do was to be able to read while sitting down.

He said he had been able to read while sitting, standing and even lying down since he'd been five-years-old.

Patchy agreed with Thumper on this but said that he was even more puzzled by the fact that fashion models are apparently paid millions of dollars a year.

'I don't mind anyone earning that sort of money,' he said, 'but I don't understand why anyone thinks they're worth it. All they have to do is walk up and down while wearing clothes.'

Thumper said he'd been told by his mother that he'd been walking around long before he was two-years-old and that he was confident that he would not have been expected to walk about without wearing any clothes.

There had then been an interval during which a good deal of chewing and sipping was done.

Patchy had then told me that he had met a man in Taunton who had a telephone fitted in his car. He said that the man, who was an antique dealer with a showroom in Bond Street, swore by the telephone, claiming that because it enabled him to make and receive calls while driving around, it more than paid for itself.

Patchy said the man had told him that while driving up to Manchester he had, as a result of a telephone call he'd received from an assistant in London, turned right and gone to Norwich instead.

The result had been that instead of attending a fairly pedestrian auction in Lancashire he had, at a saleroom in East Anglia, purchased a rare 18th century chestnut and oak table for approximately the price of a Formica topped kitchen table.

'You should get one of those car phones,' Thumper said to me. 'It would be terribly useful. People would be able to get hold of you wherever you were.'

I blanched at the thought.

'People can always get hold of me wherever I am,' I pointed out, perhaps rather defensively. 'If someone rings the house, Patsy or Miss Johnson will tell them where I can be found.'

It did occur to me, however, that it would be useful if Patsy could reach me when I was out on my rounds, or attending an emergency, if another patient in the same area required a visit.

I have on many occasions returned home from a cottage some miles from Bilbury Grange only to find that I have had to retrace my steps to visit a patient living just a few minutes away from where I'd just been.

To be honest, however, I thought that was a fair price to pay for having time away from the damned telephone; time giving me a little peace and a chance to think.

I have on several occasions managed to make a diagnosis while driving back home at 4.00 a.m.; being free to allow my mind to rifle through all the relevant signs and symptoms in order to find a solution to a particularly knotty problem.

'There wouldn't be any point in you buying one anyway,' said Patchy, still talking about the man he'd met with the telephone in his car. 'This bloke said his phone didn't work anywhere west of Taunton. I think he said it was something to do with there not being any reception.'

'You'd probably need to drive around with a fifty foot tall aerial fixed to the top of your car,' said Thumper.

I breathed a silent sigh of relief.

I really didn't want to travel everywhere with a telephone at my elbow.

Other than in the car there are few places in the world where I can relax and enjoy a little peace and quiet. I can hear the telephone ringing when I'm in the bathtub but I can't hear the phone when I'm out on my rounds in the car.

Why, I wonder, do so many people feel under constant pressure to reinvent the world, even when things are perfectly satisfactory and, indeed, usually far better the way they are?

I know that looking backwards is frowned on by some, who regard the retrospectoscope as offering an unduly rosy coloured view of the past.

But some things really were better then.

Does anyone really doubt that houses and cars were better made two hundred years ago than they are today? How many modern houses will still be standing in three or four hundred years? How many motor cars made today will still be running in another 40 years?

Service was often better too, and companies took better care of their customers.

When I was a boy in the 1950s, I remember my mother making a complaint about a box of Cadbury's chocolates. The chocolates, a rare and expensive treat, were faulty and my mother was upset enough to write a letter to the company. The next day she received a huge hamper of Cadbury's products, a bouquet of flowers and a fulsome letter of apology.

Would such a letter even receive a response today?

Things were better 20 years ago, back in the 1950s, because people were more honest, more naturally respectful of others and more concerned to do a good job and to be seen to do a good job.

I know there are many aspects of modern life which are better than they were, but we do sometimes forget that not everything modern is a wonderful improvement.

'But wait a year or two and you'll be able to buy a telephone you can carry around with you,' said Patchy, who mistakenly seemed to think that I would regard this as good news. 'This bloke, the antique dealer, said that he'd heard that they would soon be making portable phones that will fit into a suitcase – maybe even into a large briefcase. He said you'll be able to walk along the street, just like a normal person, and then there will be a brrr brrr from inside your briefcase. You'll stop for a moment, reach inside and take a phone call from someone with an important message.'

I shuddered.

'How on earth could they do that?' Thumper asked. 'You'd need miles and miles of wire! And where would you plug it in?'

'No, no!' said Patchy. 'You don't have to plug it in. It will all be done with aerials and batteries and things. This bloke I was talking to says there's all sorts of new technology coming.'

'I wouldn't have one of those,' said Thumper firmly. 'You'd probably find the call was from some bugger trying to sell you double glazing.'

'Or insurance,' I added glumly.

We sat for a while contemplating the awfulness of a future where people were expected to carry telephones around with them and be forever tormented by overbearing salesmen and saleswomen.

Thumper and Patchy chewed on their pork scratchings and I nibbled on a few olives.

'The bloke who told me about the telephones also told me that he heard that they're planning to make computers small enough to have at home,' said Patchy suddenly. 'He said that these computer things will revolutionise everything. He reckons we'll be able to do our accounts on them and keep lists of all our stuff.'

'It sounds nonsense to me,' I said, utterly unconvinced by Patchy's latest piece of science fiction. 'I've heard of medical practices which have computers but I don't have much faith in that sort of technology. What if the computer thingy breaks down? You could lose everything you'd put into it? And I don't think computers are all that clever. When I was a boy, my parents used to take me to the Science Museum in Birmingham. The museum had a computer there that could play a very simple form of draughts – fox and rabbit I think they called it. I remember that when I was about ten-years-old I could beat the computer most of the time. And the darned thing was absolutely huge. If you had one of those in your home you'd need a special room for it.'

'Well this bloke told me that he'd heard that computer chappies in America are already making computers small enough to fit on a table or a desk,' said Patchy. 'He says it won't be long before they have computers small enough to put into your suitcase along with the telephone. To be honest I wasn't really convinced myself. But you never know, do you?'

'Sounds like pie in the sky to me,' said Thumper, firmly.

I agreed with him, though this may have been wishful thinking.

'I wonder what else they'll be doing in forty or fifty years!' said Patchy.

'It's these computers that worry me,' said Thumper. 'What the devil will people use them for?'

'If you can type stuff into them you could use them for writing letters?' I suggested.

'How would you post the letter?' asked Thumper.

'I suppose you could send your computer to the person your letter was addressed to,' I suggested. 'If the new computer thingies are small enough to fit into a suitcase you could wrap up your computer, complete with letter, and pop the whole thing in the post.'

'You could use it for shopping,' suggested Patchy.

Thumper and I looked at him as if he were mad.

'Well you never know,' said Patchy defensively. 'If you can write messages on a computer then you could sit down at a keyboard, write your shopping list, some sausages or a bottle of milk for example, and send the computer round to the shop so that the shopkeeper could deliver what you'd ordered.'

Both Thumper and I thought that was very funny.

'Can you imagine Peter Marshall peering at a computer and taking orders for light bulbs and bags of spuds?' asked Thumper.

The idea of Peter doing anything with a computer made us laugh a lot more. Peter thinks a pencil with a rubber on the blunt end is a piece of high tech equipment.

'I wonder where it's all going to end?' asked Patchy, thoughtfully. 'Perhaps they'll invent a way to transmit messages from one computer to another. Or maybe we'll be able to send our messages over the radio. You ring up the radio station and give them your order for sausages and whatever, the radio station then broadcasts your order and the shop sends the stuff round.'

'I don't think that will work,' I said. 'The orders would all get mixed up. Someone else would get your sausages and you'd get their soap and toothpaste.' I thought for a moment. 'Maybe they'll make a personal spacecraft and we'll be able to pop over to Mars for the weekend?'

'Perhaps someone will invent a car which will drive itself!' said Thumper. He said he thought Dan Dare in the Eagle comic had owned something of the sort. 'You just jump into the car, tell it where you want to go, sit back, relax and pour yourself a large whisky.'

At that bizarre suggestion the three of us laughed so much that we made ourselves ill. The tears were running down our cheeks and my stomach muscles ached.

'You sit in this car,' I said, intrigued by Thumper's nonsensical thought, 'and you tell it to take you to Exeter. And off it goes, all by itself! If you get done for speeding then the car has to go to court and pay the fine.'

'Hey, I've got a good idea,' said Patchy. 'They fit a computer, a camera and a telephone into a refrigerator and when you run out of sausages the refrigerator telephones Peter Marshall and tells him to send round more sausages pronto!'

'And then,' I said, struggling not to laugh before I could put my thoughts into words, 'Peter puts the sausages into a driverless car and orders the car to take the sausages round to your place where a little robot fellow thanks the driverless car and pops the sausages into the fridge!'

We laughed a good deal more and made ourselves even more ill.

And then we sat for a while, chuckling occasionally as we remembered the silliest of our suggestions.

After a few minutes of silent contemplation of a world containing telephones that could be carried around in briefcases, computers powerful enough to use for keeping accounts, but small enough to fit into suitcases, and cars which could drive themselves, we discussed serious local topics such as Peter Marshall's forthcoming sale of the stuff he'd found in his shed and the proposed building of a new, visitors' car park on a field behind Major Porchester's ruined cottage when a couple of obvious visitors strode noisily into the pub as though they had just bought it and were planning some major changes.

The newcomers, both complete strangers, were wearing brand new walking boots (his boots still had the price tag fixed to a leather loop at the back and if it said what Thumper, with his eagle eyes, had spotted then his boots cost rather more than I had spent on clothes in the last five years), matching orange anoraks and woolly hats that had fancy logos on the front and had, consequently, probably cost an arm and a leg but which were, nevertheless, still just woolly hats. (Whatever you do to a woolly hat it will always be nothing more than a woolly hat.)

He was tall, very thin and cadaverous and although he had the look of a pompous and patronising politician about him, I could not help noticing that, quite contrary to expectations, he had the brown eyes of a Labrador puppy. He looked like a war criminal or a bank chairman and I did not get the feeling that he had any of the other characteristics usually associated with Labrador puppies. I could only assume that, if the balance of nature were to be preserved, somewhere in the world there roamed a Labrador puppy with the cruel eyes of a sadistic psychopath.

I had a strange feeling that I had seen him before somewhere. His female companion, who appeared to be his wife, had mean eyes and a pushy manner and looked to me as I imagined a ferret might look if it were suffering from constipation.

The pair looked critically at the smoke yellowed ceiling, the dusty old prints on the walls, the slightly moth-eaten lampshades on the wall lights, the scarred and well-used brown furniture and the beer stained brass topped tables. They did not spare us from their unspoken criticisms, but gave us the same critical appraisal as they had given the snug and its fixtures and fittings.

'Afternoon,' said Patchy, cheerily. Established Bilburians always welcome visitors, even ones who look like sadistic psychopaths or constipated ferrets. We tend to take people as they come, and to resist the temptation to judge on appearances or reputations. I'm delighted to say that although we all value our privacy and our peace and quiet I have never known a place more welcoming to strangers than Bilbury. It is perfectly true that Thumper once removed all the sign posts which might point motorists in our general direction but this was done after a national newspaper article suggested that Bilbury was 'The Perfect Place to Live: England's Healthiest Village' and we were, as a result, inundated with coach loads of visitors whose presence merely destroyed the peace and quiet they had come to enjoy. (This episode is described in the book *Bilbury Country*).

The two visitors stared at Patchy, as though he had spoken to them in Danish, or had demanded their money with an appropriate supply of menaces. They did not reply. Instead, the man looked around for someone on the other side of the bar. He seemed surprised and disappointed when he failed to see anyone, though this was not surprising because there wasn't anyone there.

Gilly, the landlord's wife and co-owner of the Duck and Puddle public house, was in Combe Martin buying eggs from her cousin's sister-in-law, and from the noises coming from underneath our feet we knew that Frank, the man whose name was on the plate above the door as the Licensee, was in the cellar doing something which involved a barrel of beer, a wooden mallet and a lot of naughty words.

Not being privy to the inside information about Gilly's whereabouts, and not realising that the noise coming from the cellar was being made by the only other person likely to be able to satisfy his requirements, the stranger called out, a loud voice that appeared to be accustomed to obedience, 'Service, please!'

We are all supposed to live in a liberated, classless society, where everyone is equal, but it seems to me that in some respects we are moving backwards rather than forwards. When I last went to London, I was astonished when a customer in a bookshop clicked his fingers to attract the attention of an assistant. When that didn't work, he shouted 'Oi!' in a tone of voice I would not have felt comfortable using when calling our pet sheep. I could well be wrong, of course, but it seems to me that the number of people who enjoy giving orders is increasing.

I recently examined a visitor to the area, a holidaymaker passing through who had suffered an unpleasant reaction to a bee sting, and when I checked his blood pressure, I was shocked to discover that his systolic pressure was 220 and his diastolic was 160. Those figures are dramatically high; far above the healthy normal.

'Is your doctor treating your blood pressure?' I asked the tourist.

'Oh yes,' he agreed, apparently uninterested and possibly unaware of the risks associated with a very high blood pressure. 'But nothing he prescribes seems to bring it down. I work in a legal office in London and I'm constantly under stress. We only arrived in the country today. It usually falls quite a bit when we've been away from London for a few days.'

The man was in his early sixties and so I asked him the obvious question: 'Have you thought about retiring?'

He admitted that he had thought about packing up his job and said that although he could easily afford to retire he knew that he couldn't live without having people to shout at. 'At home, when I tell my wife, children or grandchildren to do something they ignore me. But at work when I tell someone to do something they jump and do it immediately. I like that. I like the fact that I have power and that people are frightened of me.'

He liked the feeling so much, and was so addicted to the power, that he was prepared to die to keep it.

I was reminded of that man with the raised blood pressure by the antics of the cadaverous stranger who had repeated his loud demand for service several times and who was now giving an excellent impression of a small boy who has been denied a packet of sweets and is about to embark upon an attention seeking tantrum.

When no one came, Gilly being still in Combe Martin and Frank still being occupied with a barrel, a mallet and an inexhaustible supply of naughty words, the cadaverous man with the inappropriate puppy eyes took one of the horrid new, decimal 10 pence coins out of his trouser pocket and rapped it as loudly as he could on the bar counter.

You can't rap properly with the skimpy, new decimal coins. They are too light to use as rapping implements. You could rap well with an old-fashioned half crown. Even an old-fashioned shilling was better for rapping than a 10 pence piece. And so, as a result of this numismatic skimpiness, the coin rapping was, to be honest, rather pathetic.

However, Thumper, Patchy and I looked at one another.

If there is one thing that Frank dislikes more than a customer shouting 'Oi!' it is a customer who raps a coin against the bar top. It does his blood pressure absolutely no good at all and Gilly often says that if Frank ever succumbs, and has the heart attack everyone has been predicting for at least a decade, then it will be as a result of some impatient coin rapping.

Frank's attitude is that he, and he alone, decides who gets served next, and when they will be served. His attitude is that waving a five pound note in the air, clicking your fingers or tapping a coin on the counter will all send you straight to the back of the queue. (He also believes, I am pleased to say, that regular customers always get served before strangers, especially rude strangers, and that regular customers who pay cash always get served before regular customers who owe money and have thoughtlessly run up a large, unplanned amount of credit.

(Thumper, who always owes money, is exempt from this rule since he is the only person in Bilbury and, quite possibly the known world, who understands how the ‘Duck and Puddle’ boiler operates and the only person not in prison who has the courage and agility to squeeze through a narrow trap door into the pub’s rat and squirrel infested attic whenever the cold water tank freezes over and the ice needs breaking.)

When the coin rapping produced no response, the cadaverous stranger merely rapped again, putting a bit more effort into it. Britons used to have to go to Paris to find really rude people but these days it is possible to find them anywhere in England; and occasionally they can be found wandering into Bilbury itself.

Fortunately, there wasn’t a chance that Frank would hear the rapping, of course.

Frank was concentrating on what he was doing and although we could hear him well enough there was no possibility that he would be able to hear the sound of a single coin being tapped on a bar counter. The un-orchestrated combination of mallet on wood and Frank’s choice of words for the day meant that he probably wouldn’t have heard a thing even if the fellow had slammed a sack of coins down onto the counter.

‘Is there anyone serving here?’ demanded the stranger, turning and facing us. He asked the question not as one might direct an enquiry to a stranger but as one might demand a service from a servant. ‘We’ve walked from Combe Martin,’ he announced as though this were relevant.

‘Our chauffeur is in Combe Martin waiting for us with the Mercedes,’ added his wife. She managed to do something to the words ‘chauffeur’ and ‘Mercedes’ so that they stood out from the rest of the sentence and had little lights around them to make sure that they were properly noticed.

‘Frank is down in the cellar,’ said Thumper. ‘He’ll be up in a minute or two. He’s changing a barrel.’

The man sighed loudly, shrugged his shoulders, rolled his eyes in despair and annoyance and managed to accompany these gestures with a fair amount of huffing and puffing. It seemed clear from all this that he probably worked in some dark but doubtless lucrative corner of the financial services industry and almost certainly lived somewhere in the Central London area. His wife muttered something under her breath and then turned and stared at us. She did not seem impressed by what she saw and I got the impression that, given half a chance, she would have liked to have turned us into three pillars of salt. We stared back but said nothing more.

Patchy had offered a welcoming greeting when they had arrived but he, and therefore we, had been spurned.

If the newcomers chose to ignore our presence, our availability for polite conversation and our advice on how best to get safely served, then they could hardly expect us to expose ourselves to repeated bouts of disappointment.

I suddenly remembered where I’d seen the man’s picture – it had been on the financial pages of one or two of the broadsheet newspapers. He was an infamous vulture capitalist; renowned for buying up businesses, firing lots of employees, selling off the assets and making vast profits.

The two strangers, the man and the woman, were discussing whether to leave the pub and go somewhere else (we didn’t like to disrupt their conversation by pointing out that whatever direction they chose, they would walk for at least an hour before they came across another pub – the King’s Head public house on the road to Barnstaple closed four years ago) when Frank appeared, red-faced, damp with the perspiration engendered by unaccustomed exercise and clutching the wooden mallet with which he had been hammering the unfortunate cask. He had what looked like cobwebs draped over his hair and jacket and the sweet smell of fungus which accompanied his presence made it clear that he still hadn’t succeeded in eradicating the dry rot which infests the ‘Duck and Puddle’ cellar and that the chances were high that what looked like cobwebs were, in fact, strands of dry rot fungus.

‘I should have left it until Gilly got back,’ said Frank, talking to us and pulling himself a pint of bitter. ‘I don’t know how she does it but she can handle those barrels far better than I can.’

‘Excuse me! But we’ve been waiting ages for service,’ said the cadaverous stranger. ‘Are you the barman?’

‘I’m the landlord,’ replied Frank, glowering at them both. ‘What do you want?’

‘I’ll have a glass of claret, something with plenty of body, maybe a Mouton de Rothschild. The 1970 will do nicely. And my wife will have…’ the stranger turned in his wife’s direction, inviting her to continue the sentence.

‘…a glass of Chablis, something from one of the Grand Cry vineyards. I really don’t mind which one.’

Frank stared at the two strangers as though they’d demanded fancy cocktails, topped with melon balls and served, together with a coating of blazing brandy, in a pair of Cinderella’s best dishwasher safe glass slippers.

‘This is a country pub,’ said Frank in his firm, take no nonsense voice. ‘I sell beer, whisky, gin and brandy. If you want wine, I’ve got red and I’ve got white. But you have to buy it by the bottle. The white is that German stuff because it’s cheap and it’s the only stuff anyone round here will buy. The red is claret from Tesco and damned good value in my opinion. But whichever you choose you have to buy it by the bottle because if I sell you a glass what am I supposed to do with the rest of it?’

Patchy, Thumper and I, who had been listening to the conversation, raised our glasses in appreciation.

Under normal circumstances, Frank would have happily polished off the rest of the bottles he had opened and, indeed, he and Gilly would often finish off a bottle of red and a bottle of white at the end of an evening. But Frank didn’t like the two strangers. Maybe he had heard the man tapping on the bar with his ten pence coin. Or maybe he didn't like the colour of their anoraks. Frank is like a woodland creature in that he can be spooked by the oddest and seemingly most insignificant event. He once refused to serve a man who was wearing a Garrick Club tie on the grounds that the colours made him feel sick.

The stranger sighed the sigh of a disappointed man. 'In that case I'll have a pink gin.'

His wife paused, clearly thinking. 'I'll have one of those too,' she said at last. There was more reluctance and disappointment in her voice than there was in her eyes. I got the impression that she and pink gins were not strangers.

'Two pink gins coming up,' said Frank. He turned to the woman. 'Do you want a little umbrella in that? I think we've got some little umbrellas somewhere.' Frank is convinced that most women like a small, paper umbrella in their drink. Indeed, there is good reason for him to believe this. There are at least two women in Bilbury who don't care what they drink as long as it is blessed with a small, colourful paper umbrella.

'No thank you,' said the woman, in the tone of voice she might have adopted if Frank had asked her if she wanted to take part in a gang bang with a bunch of shepherds and farm labourers straight from muck spreading duties.

Frank plucked the gin bottle from the shelf behind him, picked up two glasses and disappeared. When he returned, a few minutes later, he was clutching what looked like two pink gins. He placed the two glasses on the counter, told the male stranger the price, took the £10 note that was proffered and slipped the change onto the bar. Most of it, I noticed, was in silver. It was clear that Frank was not trying to encourage his new patrons to become regulars.

'What on earth is this floating in my gin?' demanded the cadaverous stranger, holding his glass up to the light and pointing to something small, pink and quite unidentifiable.

Frank picked up the man's glass and examined it carefully. 'It's a bit of squashed strawberry,' he said at last.

'I've got the same thing in mine,' said the woman. She didn't seem pleased. She held the glass away at arm's length and stared at it as though it contained a mouse's head or a deadly, venomous Brazilian water spider.

'What the bloody hell is squashed strawberry doing in my gin?' demanded the cadaverous stranger.

I noticed for the first time that the man had a good deal of hair growing out of his ears and his nostrils. I wondered why a man of such self-importance did not invest in a small pair of nose and ear hair clipping scissors. My father, who had a tendency to hirsuteness in these areas, had a special pair of blunt ended scissors which he kept exclusively for this purpose. He devoted a little time each Sunday morning to mowing and trimming the areas. He became very aware of the need to keep these areas hair free when a small cousin of mine had recoiled in horror and tears when my father had tried to pick him up. 'The man's got spiders up his nose!' the youngster had complained when questioned as to why he had been so alarmed. The cadaverous stranger had a much more luxuriant growth of hair in these areas than I had ever seen on my father.

'No bad language in my bar,' said Frank puffing out his chest and speaking very sternly. 'I've got gentlemen customers in here.' He nodded in our direction. Frank has a wonderful sense of humour which is drier even than his Martinis.

'What is squashed strawberry doing in my gin?' asked the cadaverous stranger, repeating himself but excluding the modest expletive.

'I didn't have any of that stuff you put in gin to make it go pink,' said Frank. 'So I mashed up a strawberry and put a bit of the juice in each glass. Your gins are pink aren't they?'

'What sort of pub is this?' demanded the woman who appeared horrified. 'You don't sell wine by the glass and you don't have any angostura bitters!'

'I don't have any lemon either,' said Frank. 'If I had a lemon I'd have put a bit of peel on the edge of your glass.'

The man sniffed at his drink and then sipped it cautiously, as though half expecting to be poisoned.

'What does it taste like?' asked his wife, who looked horrified.

'Very odd,' the man replied. He thought for a while. 'It tastes of gin flavoured with strawberry.' He shuddered.

'Tell your friends back home and it'll be the new fashionable drink,' said Frank, with a grin. 'They can call it a 'Duck and Puddle' cocktail but don't forget I get three pence royalty on every one sold.'

The stranger stared at him. He did not appear to have much of a sense of humour and had clearly been hiding behind the curtains when the gods were handing out the ability to laugh.

'I suppose you think that's funny!' he said. 'Who owns this place? Are you part of a group? A chain?'

'We own the Duck and Puddle,' said Frank with justifiable pride. 'My wife and I.'

'Do you know who I am?' demanded the stranger.

I've only ever heard one other person say that. He was something in television and it sounded as pompous and as stupid the second time as it did the first time. It is a question which cries out for a resounding 'No'.

Frank stared at him for a moment, examining him carefully, and shook his head. He then looked at us. Thumper, Patchy and I looked at one another and then also shook our heads. 'No idea,' said Patchy. 'No idea at all. Are you going to tell us?'

'I'm Julian Blunt-Whiffle,' said the stranger, as though expecting this to mean something. 'Sir Julian Blunt-Whiffle.'

We all looked at one another and shook our heads again.

'Never heard of you,' said Patchy.

'Are you on television?' asked Thumper. 'Have I seen you on that programme for kids? *Crackerjack* I think it's called. Are you the stooge who gets the cream pie pushed into his face every week?'

'Ah yes,' said Patchy, 'I remember. All the kids hate him. They scream like mad whenever he appears.'

'I am the chairman of Stern, Rothman and Goldstein!' said the chairman of Stern, Rothman and Goldstein.

We looked at one another and, again, shook our heads.

'Never heard of it,' said Frank. 'I've got an overdraft with NatWest myself.'

'He's one of those crooked banker types,' muttered Patchy in his version of sotto voce. 'I read about him somewhere. They call him the vulture capitalist.'

'How the hell did the silly bugger get a knighthood?' asked Thumper.

'Bought it,' said Patchy. He shrugged disdainfully. 'But knighthoods don't count when you buy them with shareholders' money.'

The cadaverous stranger, who must have heard this exchange but who pretending that he hadn't, leant over the bar until his nose and Frank's nose were no more than six inches apart. 'I'm a very important man,' he hissed. 'I could ruin you!' He sounded like a pantomime villain, the sort who has staring eyes and a crooked nose and is booed by children the moment he appears on stage.

Frank, who is not easily intimidated, did not budge an inch. A couple of feet to my right I could sense Thumper tensing up. Thumper, is a tall, well-built man, now in his early thirties, who does not like bullies.

For many years I believed that Thumper (whose real name is Robert) had acquired his nickname because of a predilection for 'thumping' people who had annoyed him. This was a myth that Thumper has never done anything to expose. It was not until I had known him for some years that I discovered (from Anne Thwaites, the mother of his child) that Thumper had acquired the nickname when, as a boy, he had kept rabbits. He was, I discovered, named after a fictional character in a Disney film. I have not yet managed to find a convenient moment to let him know that I know the origin of his nickname for this is something to which I am looking forward and I do not want to waste the opportunity, or the anticipation, by hurrying it.

However, despite the fact that he had not receive his nickname as a result of his pugilistic endeavours, there is no doubt that Thumper never shrinks from thumping people who are disrespectful to his friends.

In Thumper's world there are few things which are more important than respect.

'Out!' said Frank, very softly. He opened the till and counted out some change. 'Get out of my pub. And stay out. If I ever see you here again I'll set Bismarck on you.' Frank does not have any dogs but I doubt if the cadaverous stranger knew that. Frank and Gilly do have a pet called Bismarck, but Bismarck is a goldfish and a particularly timid one at that. It spends most of its days hiding behind the weed in its tank.

Frank slammed the coins he had taken from the till down onto the bar tap. 'Refund,' he said.

'You'll regret this,' said the vulture capitalist with the Labrador puppy eyes. He slammed his gin back down on the counter. His wife followed suit, slamming her glass down so hard that a little gin splashed onto the bar top. The stranger looked at the coins for a moment, as if uncertain whether or not to pick them up. Eventually, greed overcame whatever principle was fighting for recognition and the man scooped up the change and slid it into his trouser pocket. He dropped one of the new five pence pieces and had to bend down to pick it up off the floor. It seemed a rather undignified thing to do, under the circumstances, particularly since the floor of the Duck and Puddle isn't the cleanest piece of real estate in England.

The couple then headed for the door. 'Let's head back to Combe Martin,' said the woman. Her husband agreed.

We all congratulated Frank and celebrated his small victory over the visiting Philistines by ordering a fresh round of drinks and three packs of slightly out-of-date salted peanuts.

I wandered across to the snug window and looked out. The strangers stood for a moment outside the pub, studying an Ordnance Survey Map and a small compass.

'I think they've bought one of those compasses that point south,' I said. I noticed that it was starting to rain.

Peter Marshall, who runs the Bilbury village shop, has had these compasses on offer for a year now and I have lost count of the number of visitors who have, as a result, been badly midirected.

Our village shop owner buys most of the stuff he sells from the local supermarket (he takes his van over to Barnstaple once a week and stocks up on all the Best Buy offers and the Buy One Get One Free deals) but he also has a number of slightly dodgy suppliers from whom he purchases items which are sold as 'fire damaged' or 'bankrupt stock', though I have always suspected that many of the items he sells ought really to be described as 'fell off the back of a lorry'. Many of these items are things which Peter buys very cheaply because no one else can sell them.

In recent months, Peter has started to buy more and more of the things he sells from abroad. He describes himself as being influenced by globalisation and has a sign hanging in the shop describing his emporium as ‘multi-cultural’, a claim which he defends by pointing out that he has recently started to stock curry powder, purchased in bulk from a factory in Hong Kong.

The compasses he sells are sold very cheaply and were even cheaper to buy because the manufacture mounted the needles the wrong way round. Peter only sells them to tourists he doesn’t like and to locals who are not his regular customers.

‘They’ve taken the Lynton road,’ I explained, watching the vulture capitalist and his wife set off on their interrupted walk. I noticed that Sir Julian was limping. His new boots were clearly causing him a little trouble.

It was immediately obvious to me that the pair were heading in precisely the wrong direction.

North Devon has many deserted areas and there are miles of open moorland across Exmoor. It would, I knew, take the vulture capitalist and his wife hours of trudging to reach anything approaching civilisation. It would be well after dark before they got anywhere with a bed and a hot meal. I wasn’t even tempted to call to them to tell them this news.

Since they were both poured and paid for, and since he abhors waste of any kind, but particularly of alcohol, Frank drank both the home-made pink gins and declared them to be excellent.

When we left the pub an hour later the rain was coming down heavily and steadily. The bad weather was clearly in for the evening. The vulture capitalist and his wife would still not be more than a quarter of the way to Lynton.

I almost felt sorry for them.

Almost.

But I had an awful feeling that Frank might not have heard the last of the cadaverous stranger with the incongruous puppy dog eyes.

The Wasps

We always have lots of wasps' nests at Bilbury Grange. I have no idea why, but the wasps seem to like our company and they have been steadily chewing up our beams and soffits to make their nests. We've got enough beams and soffits to share and so we usually leave them alone and apart from the occasional sting they leave us alone too.

But this year we have a rather alarming nest developing in the dining room wall. The nest spreads up into the ceiling space and appears to have become alarmingly large. When the wasps decide to flutter together, which they do at regular intervals, it sounds just as though a very large and adenoidal cat were crammed into the wall space. And if you put your hand against the wall you can feel the heat of the nest.

None of that bothers us unduly (though the noise can be a little alarming) but when I tottered downstairs this morning I found that the wasps had started to eat their way through the ceiling. A huge crack had appeared and there was a pile of plaster dust on the rug beneath. When I pressed against the plaster, another crack appeared.

It didn't take the brain of Britain to work out that the wasps had eaten so much ceiling that it had become very thin, delicate and weak.

As I examined the biggest crack in the ceiling, a wasp's leg appeared. And then a bit more of the wasp hove into view. And then a second wasp started to wriggle through. Patsy, who has an encyclopaedic knowledge of plants and creatures of all kind, told me that it is only the female wasp that stings. That I found comforting since it meant that with every wasp, I had a fifty fifty chance of being safe. On the other hand she told me that unlike honeybees, which can sting only once, wasps can sting to their heart's content.

Patsy and I held an emergency meeting and decided that something had to be done since these wasp guests were clearly abusing our hospitality. We allow them to eat our beams, our floorboards, our windowsills and our soffits but we will not allow them to eat our ceiling.

I rang the local council, which has a department dedicated to dealing with wasps, and asked them to send a man (or woman) round as soon as he (or she) could be spared. To my surprise, the council said they would send a man round that very afternoon. It was no surprise to discover that I would receive an invoice for his services.

Meanwhile, I began the morning surgery.

The first patient was Mrs Thyme who came to have her blood pressure checked. There is never anything wrong with it but she is convinced that if she is to die of anything it will be a stroke or a heart attack caused by high blood pressure and so she likes to know that all is well in that department. When I had checked her blood pressure, and reassured her that the readings would have been perfectly satisfactory if she had been 60 years younger (she is a little over 80-years-old) she asked me if I minded if she asked me a question. I said I had no objection whatsoever and that I would answer as best I could.

'Do you know any decent men who are 105-years-old or more?'

I stared at her, thought about this for a while and had to admit that I did not know any centurions. Puzzled, I asked her what had prompted her question.

'I've decided to look for a boyfriend,' said Mrs T, as though she had decided to replace her washing machine or purchase a new handbag.

'I did meet one fellow,' she said rather wistfully, 'but he was always a perfect gentleman.' She sounded rather disappointed by this. 'And then last week I read in a women's magazine that most men over 50 only want to go out with women who are 25 years younger than they are. So, since I'm 80, it means I have to look for men who are around 105-years-old.'

I told her that I thought she could cast her net much wider, and that since she looks a good 20 years younger than her age she could quite happily look for men of her own age or even younger.

She seemed delighted by this advice and though I have absolutely no way of knowing whether or not the advice was of any value, I was delighted to have cheered her up. She left after telling me that she intended to visit Peter Marshall's village shop to see what fancy lingerie he had in stock. I assumed that her shopping expedition was inspired by the hope that her search for a male companion might soon prove fruitful. However, although I did not tell her this, I very much doubt if Peter Marshall sells anything which could be described as 'lingerie' without attracting the attention of the local Trading Standards officer. I fear that Peter's ladies' underwear department (for there is sure to be one) will most probably be well stocked with bloomers, camiknickers and whalebone corsets but little else.

My second patient, Mrs Guthrie, is in her nineties – and actually nearer to her century. She is, I suspect, kept alive by the prospect of receiving a congratulatory telegram from Her Majesty the Queen. Bilbury is a healthy village and, remarkably, I have three centurions on my medical list. I say 'remarkably' because quite a number of big city doctors, with far more patients than I have, don’t have a single patient over 90 – let alone over 100.

Mrs Guthrie has so many different diseases that her medical notes have to be kept in three cardboard folders which are about three inches thick and have to be held together with a couple of large rubber bands. I keep meaning to have a spring-clean and to throw out all the old hospital letters and bits and pieces of miscellaneous information.

With younger patients, doctors always try to tie together all the available symptoms, however disconnected they might appear to be. The aim is to knit all the available symptoms into a single diagnosis. But with older patients this simply does not work, for many patients in their mature years have a number of completely disconnected health problems. Mrs Guthrie, for example, has heart failure, bronchitis, dermatitis, haemorrhoids, Meniere’s disease, chronic blepharitis, varicose eczema and Raynaud’s disease and I defy the brightest medical brains to come up with a single diagnostic label to fit all of those problems - other than old age, of course.

Mrs Guthrie comes to see me once a month more as a ritual than to seek advice or treatment. She once told me that she totters along mainly for reassurance that she is still alive. ‘At my age things are working so badly that I worry that I might drop off the perch and not notice!’ she said, with a chuckle. I wrote out prescriptions for the medicines she takes and then switched hats and dispensed the drugs from my small pharmacy.

After lunch, a very pleasant man came to deal with our wasps. He used a long tube to spray powder into the opening to the nest and told me that if the wasps are not gone in a week I should ring back. When I told him that I wouldn’t have bothered if the wasps hadn’t been trying to break through the ceiling, he said that it was quite common for wasps to start eating ceilings. The wasps apparently munch their way through the wood and plaster and take over a house. Nevertheless, it saddened me to see the wasps being killed. If they’d built their nest in a shed or a tree I’d have been happy to leave them there.

While I was outside showing him where the nest was situated, I spotted a dead squirrel on the ground. The poor thing had clearly been killed by a cat (a fox or a rat would have eaten the corpse).

After the wasp man had gone, I dug a hole under a hazel tree and buried the squirrel with full military honours.

I called Patsy and together we said a little prayer, asking God to welcome the squirrel. We said we hoped that wherever he went the squirrel would find a good and enduring supply of hazelnuts.

I may be mad, but at least I am my kind of mad.

The New Vet

When Bilbury's vet retired, he tried to sell the practice to another young veterinarian. But there were no takers and it didn't look as if there would ever be one. The vet's old house and surgery had been sold to a couple from Combe Martin who planned to convert it into three flats. One they would keep for themselves and the other two would be rented out to holidaymakers.

The trouble is that there simply isn't enough work in Bilbury to provide full time employment for a vet. For some years now, one of the large veterinary practices in Barnstaple has looked after most of what vets usually refer to as the 'big animal' work (cows, pigs, sheep, horses and so on) and there really aren't enough people with pets in Bilbury to keep a veterinarian occupied and solvent.

And so a female vet who has a single-handed practice in the nearby village of Combe Martin, and who is married to young George Burrows (who, like his father Harry, works in a bank in Barnstaple and is one of the few people in North Devon to go to work in a suit every day), has recently begun to hold a weekly 'small animal' surgery (dogs, cats, tortoises, goldfish, budgies and so on) in a newly painted shed behind Peter Marshall's shop.

I should, perhaps, explain how an apparently respectable vet came to be practising in a shed behind Peter Marshall's village emporium.

Peter Marshall, the Bilbury storekeeper and the most successful businessman in Bilbury or the whole of England (according to whether you are making the judgement objectively or according to Peter's own viewpoint) is always on the lookout for ways to improve his income. He is constantly aware that most villages in England have either already lost their village shop or, if shops had heads, would be, in financial terms, struggling to keep them above water.

A year ago, Peter enthusiastically welcomed the chance to become the Bilbury Post Office (a title which, in practice, means little more than that he is allowed to sell postage stamps and weigh and stamp the occasional parcel) and having successfully merged that responsibility with his own towering ambition 'to sell more variety than Harrods of Knightsbridge', decided to become Bilbury's first and only department store, offering a wide range of services to local villagers.

The wooden, felt-roofed shed behind Peter's shop had for many years served as a depository for unwanted items and when he decided to upgrade it, and turn it into a valuable piece of working real estate, Peter first had to clear out the retail flotsam and jetsam that had accumulated over the last few decades.

He discovered that the shed contained a large quantity of empty cardboard boxes (mostly mouldy), three old lawn mowers, which would not have looked out of place in a museum specialising in Victoriana, a dozen empty milk crates, a typewriter with half its keys missing, a small collection of vintage vacuum cleaners which no longer worked but which, inevitably and predictably, Peter described as 'valuable antiques of the future', a number of tins and boxes of food that would have doubtless been well past their sell-by date if sell-by dates had been invented when the tins and boxes had originally been packed and delivered for sale, and a good variety of other bits and pieces of not-quite-good-enough-to-sell-in-the-shop-but-not-rubbishy-enough-to-throw-away flimflam. (Peter, incidentally, is, like Frank Parsons at the Duck and Puddle, a fervent opponent of the new-fangled habit of putting 'sell-by' and 'best before' dates onto food products. He says he thinks that the scheme will simply lead to vast amounts of perfectly good food being thrown away. I have to say that I think he could well be right.)

Most people would have called for a skip and dumped the rubbish which had accumulated, but Peter has never been one to fit easily into the category of 'most people' and his natural and inevitable response to what he saw as a 'unique commercial opportunity' was to hold a 'shed' sale (his version of a garage sale) and to invite anyone and everyone to bid on his 'fine collection of genuine vintage retail antiques'.

If you or I had found all that junk in an old shed or barn we would have expected to pay to have it taken away but Peter was confident he could persuade people to pay him to let them take it home with them.

To the surprise of everyone present (including, I suspect, Peter himself), the sale proved remarkably successful. Peter put a small advertisement in several West Country newspapers, and dealers turned up from Taunton, Barnstaple, South Molton and Exeter.

Patchy Fogg, with whom I inspected the stuff on sale, said that apart from occasional visits to the municipal waste dump just outside Barnstaple he had never in his life seen so much rubbish collected in one place.

But, perhaps because they'd travelled some distance and didn't want to go home empty handed, and maybe because Peter's sales patter was convincing (he had put in his false teeth for the occasion – a real sign of how seriously he was taking the event), most of the items on sale found buyers.

One dealer told me that the foodstuff Peter was selling was so old that he would be able to sell it to a museum he knew which specialised in the history of food packaging. Two gross of novelty, bendy pencils with sharpeners fixed to the non-active end found buyers who would only find out in time that once you'd taken an inch off the length of the pencils, the pointy end would no longer reach the sharpener. Even the milk crates found a market. Only the mouldy cardboard boxes (optimistically labelled as 'useful storage containers') remained unsold and destined for the incinerator at the bottom of Peter's orchard.

Having cleared out his scruffy shed and sold the contents, Peter had enough cash to buy some paint and a few sticks of furniture and within a week of the sale he had completed the transformation of the shed from a derelict junk room to a 'highly desirable business rental property'. Realising that he was unlikely to find anyone prepared to rent the shed full time, Peter decided to promote the shed to individuals who wanted somewhere to run a small business for one day a week.

On Mondays the shed was rented out to a gentleman's hairdresser who travelled from South Molton, on Wednesdays the shed was rented out to a ladies' hairdresser who drove up from Exeter and on Thursdays the shed was rented out to Mrs Burrows, the ambitious young veterinary surgeon from Combe Martin. Fridays and Saturdays were available to rent for children's parties and Tuesday was available for anyone with a business needing a one-day-a-week home. It was clear to everyone in the village that Peter was making far more money out of renting his shed piecemeal than he could have ever made if he had rented out to a full-time tenant.

And, as he confided to me one day, Peter was hoping that the people who came to have their hair cut or permed, or who brought their animal to see the vet, would buy something from his shop.

On days when the veterinary surgeon was in the shed, Peter put a large board advertising cut-price pet food. On days when the barber was operating, Peter changed the board for one advertising razor blades, shaving soap, combs and 'something for the weekend'. On days when the ladies' hairdresser was in residence, there were offers on products such as artificial orchid sprays ('suitable for pinning onto posh frocks') which Peter reckoned he could sell to newly permed ladies looking forward to a posh evening out.

And so, all this explains why, one Thursday afternoon, I found myself sitting on a metal stacking chair in Peter's draughty and chilly shed with Ben, our faithful but now elderly Welsh collie bitch, lying patiently beside me. We were waiting to see Mrs Burrows, the new Bilbury vet.

Ben used to belong to a tramp called Hubert Donaldson and just before Hubert died, he asked me to look after his dog. Ben seemed to know this for he had quickly become 'my' dog; a loyal companion and canine friend.

Ben had been having difficulty in walking for some time and things seemed to be getting worse. Since I inherited him from Hubert Donaldson I had no idea how old Ben was but I strongly suspected that he had developed arthritis; a common enough problem in older dogs. He had quite a lot of stiffness in his knees and was clearly in some discomfort when he moved. I suppose I could have treated him myself, since some of the drugs used for human patients are also used for dogs, but I have no knowledge of the sort of dosages which might be suitable for a dog so I preferred to see an expert.

Mrs Burrows, smartly dressed in a crisply starched white coat, was sitting behind a small folding card table, which served as a temporary desk. We pet owners sat on chairs which were lined up in two rows. Like me, the vet did not run an appointments system; patients and their owners were seen on a simple, old-fashioned and still efficient 'first come, first served' basis. Each time someone was called, the rest of us moved up a seat. This was welcome exercise, for the chairs were not the most comfortable in the world and after three minutes I had developed cramp in both my legs.

The vet was dealing with Mrs Westbury's poodle (a friendly if rather neurotic dog called Mimi) when I first sat down.

Mrs Westbury is the wife of Reginald Westbury, a taciturn fellow who helps run Tolstoy's, the local garage, and whose skills with a spanner keep my car on the road, and I know from personal experience that she has an unusual ability to use 50 words when two or three would suffice. She does this through nervousness, for she is very shy and chatters to disguise this, but it does mean that consultations with her can stretch out for rather longer than might be strictly necessary. I realised that those of us waiting would not be going anywhere for quite a while.

I was reading a paperback copy of *Festival at Farbridge*, a novel by J.B.Priestley, which I had brought with me (I never go anywhere which might involve waiting without first stuffing a book into a jacket pocket) and Ben was snoozing quietly by my feet when Mrs Iolanthe Fielding, the pet owner who was sitting in front of me, turned round and spoke to me in what was clearly supposed to be a whisper.

'Do you have your prescription pad with you, doctor?' she asked.

Mrs Iolanthe Fielding and her husband, Bertie, live in an unsaleable house on the North Devon cliffs and their house has spectacular views. They pay just £5 a month in rent for a neat two bedroomed white-washed cottage with a decent sized garden and spectacular sea views. The rent is low because although the house had been on the market for three years, with an absurdly low asking price of just £200, there have been no takers. One or two London buyers had shown interest, thinking that they had perhaps spotted the bargain of a lifetime, but when they saw that two neighbouring cottages had already fallen down onto the rocks below they quickly withdrew their offers and hot-footed it back to the big city where houses tend to stay where they've been built and, generally speaking, show very little inclination to wander.

Bertie and Iolanthe would probably be considered by some to be an odd couple.

When they married two years ago, she was 67-years-old and he was just 20. It is, I think, fair to say that his parents were slightly surprised to find that they were nearly 30 years younger than their daughter-in-law.

Iolanthe (and that was her real name for her mother had been a great music lover) had never been married before but had what can safely be described as an interesting past. She had been a nun, a librarian, a chorus girl in a troupe of entertainers which worked on cruise ships, and a belly dancer in a nightclub in Cairo. She was an optimistic woman. When she and Bertie became engaged, she came to see me to ask if I thought she was too old to start a family. Disappointed by my pessimistic answer she founded the North Devon Belly Dancing Association and started teaching belly dancing on Wednesday evenings in the Kentisbury Village Hall. Several of my patients became enthusiastic students.

The name Bertie is not common but in and around Bilbury there are no less than four Berties and so to avoid confusion they are all known by an addition to their names. This is a practice which is exceedingly popular in Wales where it seems that 90% of the male population is called either Gareth or Dai. To help villagers identify one another, Gareth the butcher will be known as Gareth the Butcher, Dai the baker will be called Dai the Baker and Mr Evans the taxi driver will be known as Evans the Taxi. And so, the Bertie who once worked at the garden centre on the road to the village of Westward Ho! is still known as Bertie the Plant even though he left the garden centre some years ago and now works as a butcher's assistant and part time fireman.

(Westward Ho!, is incidentally, the only place in Britain which has an exclamation mark as part of its name. The village was named after a hotel which was itself named after an adventure story written by the 19th century novelist Charles Kingsley. There cannot be many authors who have had a place named after a fictitious town. Kingsley was the author of another famous book called *The Water Babies*, though as far as I know there is not yet a town called 'The Water Babies'.)

The Bertie who has been pool champion at the Duck and Puddle for as long as anyone can remember, and who is now happily married to the former Lydia Potterton, is known as Bertie the Balls.

The Bertie who delivers buns and pies for a baker who has a shop in Combe Martin and nurtures a powerful ambition to open a chain of shops throughout the South West, is known to everyone as Bertie the Pie.

Iolanthe's Bertie, who drives and operates a tanker which emptied cesspits and septic tanks is known, with searing and cruel accuracy, as Bertie the Stink. If you met Bertie dressed in his Sunday best and reeking of aftershave you would still know what he did for a living.

On the day when Bertie and Iolanthe got married, a bevy of Bertie's relatives who had motored down from Wolverhampton spent the entire day sniffing, looking at one another and sniffing again, constantly wondering where the leaky sewer could be situated. They sniffed in the church, they sniffed at the reception in the back room at the Duck and Puddle and they sniffed when they were standing on the Duck and Puddle forecourt about to get into their cars to drive home. 'Is there a sewage farm nearby?' asked a portly woman who had spent all day plucking up the courage to ask the question. 'There are a lot of cows in the locality,' explained Iolanthe, to save her husband's blushes. 'And the ones around here are an unusually flatulent variety.'

Bertie's father, who was also called Bertie and had, since the birth of his son, been known as Bertie the Fertile since he was the only Bertie in the village who had achieved the dizzy heights of fatherhood, was a specialist Stop-Go man working for Devon County Council.

A Stop-Go man holds up the metal pole which has a large disk attached to its top end. One side of the disk is painted green and has the word GO on it and the other side of the disk is painted red and displays the word STOP. The Stop-Go pole is used when work is being done on the roads and two lanes of traffic have to be controlled and funnelled onto a single lane of the highway. Bertie the Fertile's skill with the pole is legendary and whereas lesser operators would keep the traffic flowing without queues or major delays, he could, by the end of a day, have queues a quarter of a mile long and delays of an hour or more.

Bertie the Fertile, who was perpetually optimistic and who, therefore, preferred to think of himself as a Go-Stop man rather than a Stop-Go man, had always harboured an ambition that his son would follow him into the pole handling business and he had a good many tricks of the trade he wanted to pass on. He had been severely disappointed when his son chose another career but the disappointment soon passed when his son married, and although he was sad that there was not going to be any pattering of tiny feet, the fact that his son's bride was nearly a third of a century his senior did nothing to dampen his enthusiasm for this most romantic of mergers.

'Do you have your prescription pad with you, doctor?' Mrs Fielding repeated. She had turned up the volume a decibel or two.

Accustomed as she is to giving instructions to a roomful of would-be belly dancers, most of whom are old enough to have mislaid a good deal of their natural hearing acuity, she is capable of invoking a stentorian tone that would not have ashamed a parade ground sergeant major.

I agreed that I did, indeed, have a prescription pad in my inside jacket pocket. The truth is that I never go anywhere in Bilbury without a prescription pad. I would be as likely to leave the house without a prescription pad as I would be to go out without my trousers.

'I'm running out of that cream you gave me,' she said, maintaining the new, improved decibel level.

I could not for the life of me remember what cream I had given her. I asked her if she could be a little more specific.

'It's cream for down below,' she said, not lowering her voice in the slightest. 'It gets very dry and sore down there,' she told me 'when Mr Fielding and I have conjugals.'

I could not help noticing that Mr Owen, a retired postman who was holding a goldfish in a bowl on his lap, had gone a very deep red. Several female members of the small congregation seemed to be having difficulty controlling their mirth. I got the distinct impression that at least two of them would have been rolling in the aisles if there had been room between the rows of seats for any rolling to be done. Happily, Mrs Fielding seemed completely unaware of the effect her loudly voiced remarks had had upon the other pet owners.

'Oh yes,' I said hurriedly, before Mrs Fielding went into any more detail. 'I remember.' I pulled out my prescription pad and a pen and wrote out a prescription for the appropriate cream.

'Thank you, doctor,' Mrs Fielding replied. 'Bertie will be very grateful. He gets upset if he has to go without his Sunday conjugations. I'll get him to send you and your wife a dozen of his uncle's home-made spicy pork sausages.'

I did not like to remind her that Patsy and I are vegetarian but instead simply thanked her. Mr and Mrs Parfitt, our gardener and his wife, are always very happy to accept gifts of such a nature.

Before I could put away the prescription pad, another pet owner turned round. It was, I saw, Letitia Buttermilk, a plump, merry woman in her thirties who used to work as a barmaid in Bideford, but now spends her days looking after seven assorted children. Mrs Buttermilk, I remembered, has terrible varicose veins and is on an apparently interminable hospital waiting list for an operation.

'Those two-way stretch elastic stockings you prescribed for me have helped enormously, doctor,' she said, genuinely grateful. She suddenly stood up, put her right foot firmly on her chair and pulled up her dress. 'Look,' she said, showing me her leg, 'they look good, don't they?'

A stretch of white thigh was clearly visible between the straps of the industrial strength suspender belt she was using to hold up the support stockings she was wearing. If she realised how much skin she was displaying she was not concerned. I remembered that Mrs Buttermilk herself had once suggested, with more than a hint of professional pride, that her career as a barmaid had merely been the final stopping point in what might loosely be described as an adventure in the specialised branch of show business known for displays of the feminine form.

Mr Owen, still bright red, was, I noticed out of the corner of my eye, studying the roof of Peter Marshall's shed as though he had spotted something fascinating.

Mrs Buttermilk then took off the shoe and wiggled her leg round so that I could see that a hole had developed in the heel. 'But I really need another pair of the stockings,' she said. 'Two if you and the National Health Service can manage it.'

Poor old Owen had now turned so red that if he had stood alongside a London bus you wouldn't have been able to see his face at all.

Feeling rash with the nation's money, I wrote out a prescription for three pairs of two-way stretch elastic stockings.

And so it went on.

There were eight people waiting to see the vet and I wrote prescriptions for five of them, looked down the throat of one and only with difficulty persuaded another not to remove her blouse so that I could look at the rash that had appeared on her elbow. In the end, I managed to persuade her that I could manage perfectly well if she simply rolled up her sleeve.

'I was beginning to wonder who was running a surgery here,' said Mrs Burrows rather tartly, when Ben and I finally reached the top of the queue.

'I'm sorry,' I apologised, though to be honest I didn't feel that it was my fault. I explained Ben's problem and the vet examined him.

'How old is he?' she demanded.

I had to admit that I didn't know.

'He's obviously quite an age,' she said. She seemed very cold and Ben clearly didn't like her.

I agreed with the vet's assessment for it was not an inaccurate one.

'He's got arthritis,' she said.

'Yes,' I said, 'I thought that might be it.'

'It would probably be kindest to have him put down,' she said. 'If you bring him to my surgery in Combe Martin I could deal with that for you.'

'Oh, good heavens,' I said. 'I don't think he's that bad. He still gets around. He's just a little slower and stiffer than before. Couldn't you prescribe something for him?' I was very angry. I knew that Ben still enjoyed life and felt that he needed help not euthanasia. Ben is one of my closest and dearest friends. He often goes with me when I visit patients, usually staying in the car, which he guards enthusiastically, and he plays an active role in the Bilbury community. He even has membership of the Bilbury Cricket Club (so that he can sit with Patsy and me in the pavilion when we visit) and his signature on his membership card is a muddy paw print.

Mrs Burrows glowered at me and I thought for a moment that she was going to refuse to help. 'I suppose so,' she said. She bent down, rummaged in a large cardboard box that she had brought with her and took out a box of tablets. 'Give it these four times a day,' she said.

'It!'

She called my friend an 'it'!

I thanked her, paid the bill, and Ben and I then left. If my friend needs help again we will go elsewhere.

I have a strong suspicion that Peter Marshall may soon find that he has Thursdays free to rent to someone else. I really don't think that the pet owners of Bilbury are going to take to a veterinary surgeon who is so quick to reach for the euthanasia needle.

On the drive back home, the thought of euthanasia filled me with guilt for I am very conscious of the fact that we had to bring in a man from the council to destroy the wasps' nest above our dining room ceiling.

I hate killing any of God's creatures but you can't collect up wasps in the same way that you can collect up bees, and with two babies in the house I couldn't take the chance of having our home filled with insects which sting.

When I got home, I discovered that although the nest has been destroyed there are still plenty of wasps around.

I had no idea how they managed to find their way in but wasps had been coming into the house every day since the man from the council visited, and although most were dying and so not much of a threat to any of us, dealing with so many dead bodies was a sad business.

Astonishingly, in the evenings it was still sometimes possible to hear the sound of the remaining live wasps beating their wings in their nest. I couldn't believe that it was too hot for them in the roof space above the ceiling and so I could only assume that the ritualistic wing beating, ostensibly done to cool the nest, was being done more as a ritual than a practical activity. The wasps knew that something was wrong and so they did the only thing they could think of: they beat their wings to bring the temperature down. No dafter than the practice of blood-letting or many of the other things that humans do.

More worrying, perhaps, something had climbed into the incredibly small space above the dining room where the wasps' nest had been.

I had no idea whether it was a rat, a mouse or a squirrel but I was pretty sure that it was eating the dead wasps. We could hear the creature scurrying around, hither and thither and this was rather worrying since the ceiling, partly eaten by the wasps, was now perilously thin. I strengthened the area by putting long strips of sticky tape across the plasterboard. It didn't look very pretty but I hoped it would stop whatever was eating the dead wasps from falling through and landing on the dining room table.

Since the wasps were poisoned, I didn't think that eating them could do any living creature much good. I barked very loudly, very close to the ceiling, and whoever or whatever it was who was making all the noise went away.

If the intruder is killed by the wasp poison, there will be a corpse above the ceiling. And then we will, I fear, find ourselves suffering from a plague of blowflies.

Living in the country is never dull.

The Letters

'Have you seen this week's copy of the local paper?' asked Patsy.

'Nhnhnho,' I replied, through a mouthful of toast.

I know you're not supposed to eat with your mouth full but I'd had an early call out to a farmer whose foot had been trodden on by a cow.

The farmer was now sitting in his living room, with his foot up on a pouffe and a bottle of painkilling tablets on a table nearby, with the injured but not broken foot doubtless beginning the long, slow process of going from red to blue, to black and to yellow. Outside, the cow was chewing the cud and doubtless telling her friends that she'd made it look like an accident and had got away without so much as a slap on the backside with a hazel switch.

And, as a result of the early morning call, I was late for the morning surgery.

'There's a letter from a man in London complaining about the service he had when he visited the Duck and Puddle,' said Patsy, sounding astonished. 'Someone called Sir Julian Blunt-Whiffle.'

The name rang bells so loud that I very nearly developed a headache.

'Do you remember I told you about that snooty couple who came to the pub when I was there with Thumper and Patchy? It was a few weeks ago. They were walking around North Devon with their chauffeur following behind in a Mercedes.'

Patsy thought for a moment and then nodded. 'Was that the time when Frank ground up some strawberries to make pink gins because he hadn't got any angostura bitters?'

'That's it!' I agreed. I looked at the clock, decided I just had enough time for another piece of toast and reached for the toast rack. 'What does the letter say?'

Patsy found the letter again and read it out to me:

'Sir
My wife and I recently visited the Duck and Puddle public house in Bilbury. I have travelled widely throughout the world and I can safely say that I have never before been faced with such extraordinary ill manners and incompetence. After waiting an unacceptable length of time to be served, we were given pink gins which fell far below the accepted international standard for such recreational comestibles. It seems to me quite extraordinary that the landlord has a licence of any kind and it seems to me that he would be more appropriately employed in some environment where contact with members of the travelling public is not an inevitability. I would strongly advise all those who seek sustenance to seek it in some place other than the Duck and Puddle in Bilbury.

I would have written this letter sooner but after our visit to the village of Bilbury, my wife and I were misdirected by inaccurately calibrated directional equipment and we were not reunited with our support vehicle until 1.00 a.m. As a result of the delay, both my wife and I needed to spend four weeks recuperating in the Spa Hotel at Baden Baden – an institution which was, I am delighted to say, run far more efficiently and courteously than the Duck and Puddle in Bilbury.
Yours etc
Sir Julian Blunt-Whiffle

Patsy put down the newspaper and looked across at me. I finished spreading marmalade on my toast and looked at her.

'Crumbs!' was all I managed to say. 'Recreational comestibles, eh!'

My first thought was that the letter was so pompous that it was funny. I couldn't think that anyone would take it seriously. But Patsy was more practical.

'Poor Frank and Gilly!' said Patsy. 'They will be terribly upset. Do you think this will damage their business?'

I thought for a moment. 'I wouldn't have thought so,' I said. 'Most of their customers are locals. And everyone round here knows what Frank is like.'

I finished my breakfast and arrived in my consulting room with one minute to spare before the advertised starting time for the morning surgery.

But after the surgery, and during luncheon, I had a telephone call from Patchy Fogg. He told me that, as Patsy had rightly predicted, Frank and Gilly were terribly upset. They had, he said, already received several cancellations from people who had booked the pub for anniversaries, birthday parties and other celebrations.

I had forgotten this, but Frank and Gilly recently tried to expand their business by catering for individuals and groups from Barnstaple who wanted to hold their events somewhere distinctly rural. They were, therefore, offering the lounge bar as a 'function room', while keeping the snug as a bar for locals who merely wanted to consume some alcohol and nibble a few out-of-date crisps and peanuts.

With Peter Marshall having started to let out his old shed, it seemed that all our local businesses were now striving to expand and enhance their activities. I had jokingly suggested to Patsy that I should, perhaps, turn the dining room into an operating theatre and start offering breast enhancement and nose reduction operations at special prices. I pointed out that cosmetic surgery is the most profitable and commercial aspect of medical practice these days. Patsy, who had been changing one of the babies at the time, had not realised that I had made the suggestion in jest and had very nearly thrown a used nappy at me.

'But Thumper and I have a plan,' said Patchy, when he'd finished telling me just how upset Frank and Gilly were by Sir Julian Thingy-Wotsit's letter in the local paper. I winced when he told me this. Thumper and Patchy always mean well but they do sometimes come up with some very strange ideas. He wouldn't tell me what the plan was, simply telling me, with a wink, that it would be more fun if I didn't know.

I didn't hear any more about their plans for a while, but I did hear that Frank and Gilly were resigned to the fact that their burgeoning new business was ruined. They were terribly upset. Gilly had already hired two temporary waitresses and had bought them both second-hand white pinafores and black dresses from a hotel in Lynmouth which was closing. It is true that the waitresses would not have to be paid unless there was any work for them but the white pinafores and black dresses were a capital expense that seemed unlikely to be recouped. Moreover, Frank had already polished the tables in the lounge bar and, in preparation, had replaced the battered, chewed and sodden beermats with brand new ones advertising up-market drinks such as Babycham.

A week after the initial letter appeared in *The Barnstaple, Bideford and Bilbury Herald*, Patsy and I were once again having breakfast when Patsy asked me if I'd seen the local paper. I hadn't, of course.

'There's another letter about the Duck and Puddle,' said Patsy. And here is what she read out:

'Sir
I recently visited the Duck and Puddle public house in the village of Bilbury and ordered a pint of bitter. When the drink arrived a little of the fluid had spilt down the side of the glass and when I picked it up, I got my hand wet. Then, when I put the drink down onto the table provided I was distressed to find that the beer mats were quite inappropriate. How can any serious drinker be expected to put a pint of best bitter onto a beermat advertising Babycham? And why doesn't the Duck and Puddle provide beer mats which have little tricks and quizzes on the back?
Yours disgusted,
Alphonse Quiltharbour

'That's Thumper,' I said immediately.

'Wait,' said Patsy, 'there's another letter!' And she read out a second 'letter to the editor'.

'Sir
While enjoying a drink at the Duck and Puddle public house in the village of Bilbury, I decided to play a game of bar billiards. However, to my horror I found that the cue provided by the management was not obviously bent. It was indeed very nearly straight. I have played bar billiards in pubs all over North Devon and this has never happened to me before. This is an outrage. If the landlord of the Duck and Puddle cannot provide a bent cue with a decent curve on it then he should be tarred and feathered. If he repeats the offence then his remains should be hung, drawn and quartered.

I demand satisfaction.
Yours
Matt E. Mulchen
P.S. When I ordered a glass of champagne the landlord told me that he didn't have any champagne in stock but that he had some white wine and that if I put my hand over the top of the glass and then shook the glass quite a lot then the wine would get a bit bubbly and I would hardly notice the difference. I tried this but it did not prove as effective as advertised. Moreover, I had to use my own handkerchief to wipe my hand afterwards and since I had a cold at the time, I was then forced to spend the evening blowing my nose on a piece of wet rag. If the landlord persists with this suggestion then he should be obliged to provide spare handkerchiefs for customers. Or any bit of old rag would do at a pinch.

'That's Patchy,' I told her. 'Patchy always uses the name Matt E. Mulchen if he's stopped by the police. I gather Mr Mulchen is wanted by the police in three counties for various motoring offences.'

‘But what are Thumper and Patchy playing at?’ demanded Patsy, who is very good friends with Gilly and consequently seemed quite cross. ‘Why have they written more letters attacking the Duck and Puddle?’

‘These letters won’t do any harm at all,’ I told her. ‘They’ll make people laugh and they’ll make people think that last week’s letter was also written by some lunatic.’

Three days later Patsy told me with great delight that Gilly had reported that being in the local paper again had, to their surprise and delight, done the Duck and Puddle a great deal of good. Several local societies had telephoned with bookings for dinners and they had acquired a booking for a Golden Wedding Anniversary and one for an engagement party. ‘Apparently, the people who rang said they’d never heard of the pub before,’ said Patsy. ‘But they all said it sounded a fun sort of place patronised by fun sort of people.’

I was not surprised when, on the following Friday, Patsy once again discovered that there were two letters about the Duck and Puddle in *The Barnstaple, Bideford and Bilbury Herald*. She read them both out to me:

‘Sir,
Last week I visited the Duck and Puddle public house in Bilbury and bought a sandwich. The sandwich was very good but the chef had failed to cut off the crusts and had, moreover, cut the sandwich horizontally. I always think that sandwiches which are cut diagonally look far more classy. When I complained, the landlord took away my sandwich and refunded my money. He would not serve me any more food, not even a packet of salt and vinegar crisps, until I had promised to behave myself and to stop complaining.

I think your readers should know what is going on in our country.
Yours
Mrs Hermione Buttress

The second letter was allegedly from the captain of a touring cricket team which had played in Bilbury:

‘Sir,
I am the captain of our Cricket Club and every year we tour the West Country. Last Saturday we arrived in Bilbury for our annual match and I must complain in the strongest possible tone about the way we were treated.

On the recommendation of the Bilbury Cricket Club secretary, we took our luncheon in the local public house, the ‘Dick and Piddle’, together with members of the home side. I now wish to complain about the way we were treated.

Throughout our luncheon, members of our team were encouraged to drink far more alcohol than can possibly be considered advisable before a sporting event. Those team members who had ordered pints of beer had their glasses constantly topped up by a landlord constantly moving around the room with a half-gallon jug of ale. As a result, every beer drinker consumed at least two or three times the amount he had paid for. And those team members who ordered spirits were given doubles if they ordered and paid for singles and trebles if they ordered and paid for doubles.

During the game, my team played as badly as you might expect of men who could not stand upright without holding onto something solid. Our wicket keeper spent the whole of the match asleep in the pavilion, and two of our best batsmen actually fell asleep while at the crease. Several players tripped over and fell while fielding. Our best bowler spent the whole match clutching an elm tree on the boundary.

No one else in the team can remember very much of what happened that day but as the captain (and a confirmed teetotaller) I wish to warn other teams not to take pre-match refreshments at the Dick and Piddle since the landlord is clearly prepared to collude with someone in the local club.

For the record, we lost the match by 139 runs – our worst defeat since 1926.
Yours sincerely
Albert Ross (Captain)

Underneath this letter there was a short note from the Editor of the newspaper reading: ‘This correspondence is now closed.’

Two days later, Patsy told me that Gilly had reported that the pub was booked solid for the whole of the autumn. Several customers had already booked the pub for Christmas parties.

Sir Julian’s horrid, spiteful letter had been completely forgotten, pushed out of the communal memory by Thumper and Patchy’s sequence of silly letters, and the newspapers in which Sir Julian’s epistle had appeared had now all been used for lighting fires or wrapping chips.

The Hairdresser

When I worked regularly on television and had to record weekly programmes at studios in Glasgow, I used to have my hair cut in the make-up department. It was a splendid perk of the job. I would sit down in a comfortable chair and nod off to sleep. Without having to give any instructions, or make meaningless chatter about football or the weather, my hair would be neatly trimmed so that it looked exactly the same as it had looked for the previous programme and for the programme before that one. Never before had my hair been so neat.

Despite the joy of free haircuts, I had retired early from my burgeoning media career when I had been able to reopen my practice in Bilbury.

There had been several reasons for this.

First, I hated leaving Bilbury and Patsy. The minute I left the village I really wanted to be back where I knew I belonged.

Second, since working as a solo general practitioner, I was really no longer able to take time off to travel around the country visiting television and radio studios.

When he had retired, Dr Brownlow was always happy to act as my locum for a day or two but after his death I had no one to turn to. I had no assistant and even if I had been able to find one, I would not have been able to afford to hire a locum doctor to stand in for me.

Third, the world of the media was becoming distinctly unpleasant and I had a feeling that things were going to get much worse. People's capacity for taking offence where none was intended seemed inexhaustible. And strangely, the same individuals who were quick to take offence seemed capable of offering abuse with no thought of the offence that they, in turn, might cause. A new innovation, radio phone in programmes where the host encouraged criticism and abuse, had probably made things worse. Local radio stations had started to encourage their listeners to express their opinions, whether or not they knew anything about the subject in hand, and much of the material broadcast seemed to be to me based more on prejudice and suspicion than on fact and reasoned thought.

The world was, it seemed, now crammed full of people who are kind enough to share their opinions on anything and everything – even on those things of which they knew nothing – with the rest of us.

To the words uttered by these public-spirited souls had to be added the trenchant criticisms engendered by lobbyists working for the pharmaceutical industry and the medical establishment.

I found that every time I put my head above the parapet, and commented on issues such as over-prescribing or the dangers of certain medical practices, I would find myself becoming target practice for professional critics who were concerned more with profits than with the truth.

I couldn't help thinking that if computers ever proved as popular as the radio as a means of communication then things might well get even worse

I had, over my years in the media, been among other things, reached the dizzy heights of being a T-shirt, a crossword clue and an answer on a radio quiz programme but I decided that it was time to bring my Z list career to an end.

I would still write books as and when I found the time. But I decided that although I would still write articles and papers for the medical journals, there would be no more television programmes, radio broadcasts or newspaper columns.

And so, having abandoned my television career and the free haircuts, I had for a year or so had my hair cut at a barber's shop in Barnstaple.

I enjoyed having my haircut there because the chap who owned the shop, and who did both the snipping and the sweeping up, had a marvellous way of talking. He cut out extraneous conjunctions and pronouns and somehow managed to sound like a series of newspaper headlines written by a subeditor trying to cram the kernel of what he had to say into the fewest possible number of words. 'Traffic Snarl Up is Result of Road-widening Project' he would start with. I would make the usual and appropriate murmur of interest and off he would go. 'Retailers Protest as Town Grinds to Halt'.

All I had to do was make an encouraging sound at the end of each headline. 'Local Football Team Destroys Opposition', 'Storms Threaten Coastal Properties', 'Local Vicar Elopes with Girl Guide' and so on. I sometimes wondered if he had ever been employed as a headline writer.

But the last two times I visited the barber's small establishment, I had left disappointed and with just as much hair as I had when I had arrived.

My penultimate visit to this particular barber's shop happened to take place on a Monday and I had found the shop shut. The lights were off, the door was locked and one of those little cardboard signs saying CLOSED was visible through the glass. The man who ran the pet shop next door told me that although the barber advertised his shop as being open on Mondays to Saturdays inclusive, he sometimes took Monday off. He did this without warning. He did it if the weather was fine or he had enjoyed an exhausting Sunday and felt he needed an extended lie in. Towards the end of a month, he would take Monday off if he felt that he had earned enough money to pay that month's mortgage and the grocery bills.

Taking Monday off work is not an unusual practice in Devon and it used to be even commoner than it is today.

Back in the 17th century, craft workers commonly took Mondays off. Indeed, they did it so often that they called their self-appointed holiday St Monday's Day.

In his autobiography, Benjamin Franklin, the American publisher, inventor, land speculator, Governor of Pennsylvania, Commissioner to France and signatory of the American Declaration of Independence, referred to his fellow printing workers in London as having the habit of taking Mondays off.

Franklin, who was working as a printer at the time, succeeded in ingratiating himself with his employer by never following this ancient practice and by persuading his fellow printers to abandon it.

Showing early signs of his future political acumen, Franklin even succeeded in changing the chapel laws which allowed the practice of taking Mondays as a holiday. (Printing houses have been called chapels since printing was first carried on in England in an old chapel which had been converted to a printing house.)

On my very last visit to the hairdresser's establishment in Barnstaple, (it was not a Monday, for I had learned my lesson), the barber greeted me with his usual cheery smile, tucked the sheet in around my neck, and then murmured something about being away for just a couple of minutes.

Actually, I think what he said was: 'Unavoidable Incident Delays Proceedings'.

He then disappeared.

I had no idea where he had gone. I sat patiently, waiting.

When I had finished reading the advertisements for hair lotion and condoms, I picked a tabloid newspaper off a nearby chair and carefully read every word. That filled three minutes. I then pulled a book out of my jacket pocket (as I have already pointed out, I never go anywhere without a paperback book upon my person) and I read that for a while. Then I must have dozed off for a while because when I next looked at my watch I saw that I had been sitting in the hairdresser's chair for nearly three quarters of an hour.

I removed the sheet which the hairdresser had tied around my neck to catch the trimmings which were now clearly not going to come and wandered out through the back door, the exit through which the hairdresser had left. I confess that I half expected to find the hairdresser lying unconscious or even dead on the floor. Instead, the small back room was deserted.

I went out through another door and found myself in a small, sunlit courtyard.

The hairdresser was sitting on a folding chair reading a paperback novel and enjoying the sunshine. He looked up when he heard the door open. 'Hero in Jeopardy as Captivating Story Unfolds', he said. He didn't apologise or look either apologetic or embarrassed. 'Doctor Leaves with Hair Uncut,' I said, 'Work to Be Done.'

I suppose things like this must happen to everyone but they seem to happen to me more than they happen to most people.

I think that hairdresser must have been what used to be known as 'a bit of a card'.

I didn't mind him deciding to sit in the sunshine in preference to cutting my hair but I did think he might have had the decency to tell me what he was doing.

I wasn't too pleased to have travelled to Barnstaple twice without purpose and so when I discovered that a barber would be operating in Peter Marshall's converted shed I decided to try him out.

I am, and always have been, keen to support small local businesses.

The supermarkets and big out of town stores have made life difficult for small shops and although hairdressing is not yet a service usually offered by the chain stores the principle is worth observing and if a shop opens in Bilbury then I feel I should try to be a customer.

I should, I suppose, have had my suspicions when I entered the shed and found it quite empty. That was the first clue. I had never before entered a hairdressing establishment during opening hours and found it entirely empty of customers.

The second clue which should have alerted me was the fact that the man who was about to cut my hair was wearing a hairpiece which looked as if it had fallen onto his head from a great height.

When I saw his hairpiece, I was reminded of a story relating to John Wayne, the film star. Wayne regarded his hairpiece with no respect whatsoever. When about to go before the cameras, Wayne realised that he wasn't wearing his toupee. He picked it up and plonked it onto his head with about as much care as you or I might take when carelessly tossing a cushion onto a chair.

'Is that real hair?' asked one of the film crew, rather rudely. 'Of course it's real,' replied Wayne. 'But it's not mine.'

One might, however, reasonably expect an experienced barber to take a little care with his own tonsorial appearance.

The third clue which should have forced me to find an excuse to turn round and leave was the fact that even from twelve feet away it was clear that the man had quite a very severe tremor in both hands. Indeed, his hands were actually shaking. This was not a mild case of Parkinson's Disease (in which case the tremor would have disappeared when he started cutting hair) but a severe neurological problem which was not going to disappear when he started snipping away around my ears with a pair of sharp scissors.

Now, I am all for people with disabilities being employed in whatever capacity seems appropriate but I have never before come across a hairdresser with a distinct hand tremor.

I am not particularly bothered about losing a bit of an earlobe (though I confess I would rather hold onto as many of my bits and pieces as possible, on the grounds that if God put them there he wanted them there for a purpose) but I really don't fancy having the point of a scissor blade poked into one of my eyes. God gave me two eyes and that is definitely the number I'd like to continue with.

Still, for one reason or another, I ignored all these signs and I sat down in the man's chair and put myself at his mercy.

Forty five minutes later I left, shaking and grateful to be still alive and in possession of my eyes and most of both ear lobes. I had lost a little blood but as long as the barber washed the blood off his scissors between patients this was probably nothing to worry about. I was still alive and that was something for which I felt enormously grateful.

I popped into Peter Marshall's shop before I went home.

'Where did you find that new hairdresser?' I asked him.

'You've got blood on your collar,' said Peter.

'I was stabbed with a pair of scissors,' I told him. 'Where the hell did you find that new hairdresser?'

'Oh, he lives in a cottage near Kentisbury,' said Peter who was unpacking cardboard boxes which appeared to be full of spectacles. 'He used to work in a car factory. Nice chap.'

'Nice chap,' I agreed. 'But where did he learn to be a barber?'

'I don't think he learnt it anywhere,' said Peter, putting a double handful of spectacles into a box on the shop counter. 'I think he's self-taught. Said he had to give up the car factory job because of the shakes but he always wanted to be a hairdresser.' Peter looked at my hair and asked me to turn round so that he could examine the back and sides too. 'Did he do the back too?'

'He did,' I said.

Peter shook his head. 'I don't think I'll be letting him near my hair,' he said. 'Yours looks a bloody mess.'

'Bloody being the key word,' I said. Peter picked up another double handful of spectacles. 'What are you doing with all those spectacles?' I asked.

'I bought them from a wholesaler who got them from a chain of opticians which went bust,' said Peter. 'They're spectacles which they made for customers but which were never picked up or, if they were picked up, weren't quite right and were rejected.'

'How many pairs have you bought?'

'Twelve boxes,' said Peter. 'I bought them by weight.' He looked at the number of spectacles he'd taken out of the one box he'd opened. 'There are about 500 pairs in each box, I'd guess.'

I looked at the boxes of spectacles. There were enough pairs of spectacles to provide the entire population of Bilbury with eyewear for seven or eight generations. 'How on earth are people going to pick out which spectacles they want?'

'Easy enough,' said Peter. 'They just try 'em on and see if they suit. I reckon these will go like hot cakes.'

'Or compasses,' I suggested.

'Oh, the compasses have all gone,' said Peter. 'I sold the last six to a group of tourists from Japan.' He grinned. 'I told them that over here, on this side of the planet, 'north' is the other way round.'

I left him unpacking spectacles.

When I got home Ben ran away from me and when she'd finished laughing, Patsy spent half an hour sticking plasters onto my lacerations and re-cutting my hair so that I didn't look as if it had been cut by a man with a neurological disorder.

By the time she'd finished, I had a pretty good idea of how I'll look like when I go bald.

'Did you have that done for a bet?' she asked.

I thought that was unnecessary.

The Sheep Shearing

Our five sheep have a warm, dry stable in which they can spend cold winter nights but some modern farmers don’t seem to bother providing their animals with any protection from the elements. Indeed, many farmers have chopped down all of their trees (a decent sized tree can be sold to a timber yard and turned into a number of fence posts, or, at the worst, sold as firewood) and so livestock such as sheep which are kept out of doors all year round suffer enormously.

The sheep’s fleece will provide it with some protection, and the animal’s natural oils help to make the woollen coat waterproof, but I know from observation that sheep hate getting cold and wet. Our sheep can sense a storm coming a quarter of an hour before the first raindrop falls and they will run for shelter in good time. Knowing this, Patsy and I had a splendid barn built especially for our tiny flock.

Of course, although a sheep’s fleece will keep it warm through the coldest of winters and will provide it with some protection from wind, rain and snow, a fleece which can be life-saving in December can become a deadly burden during the summer months.

Carrying around seven or eight pounds of wool can be exhausting, and the sheep’s thick coat will push up its temperature to a dangerously high level. If you don’t shear sheep before the hot weather starts they will suffer enormously.

Many farmers now shear their sheep twice a year, the small amount of money they receive for each fleece, just exceeding the cost of having the animal shorn. But to me that seems rather cruel. Shearing twice a year means that the sheep will be without its protective coat during some of the colder months and, without the shelter provided by trees and bushes, sheep have to suffer and shiver when the weather is wet and windy.

But the weather was becoming warmer and our four sheep needed to be sheared. As usual, I asked Mr Kennett, Patsy’s father to arrange for of our sheep to be shorn.

Normally, the process of collecting sheep together in order to shear them is a fairly easy job. The farmer, the shearer and the farmer’s dog can usually round up a flock of sheep in a few minutes. But our sheep don’t respond to a sheep dog in the same way that normal sheep behave.

Our five sheep, Lizzie, Petula, Cynthia, Sarah-Louise and Miss Houdini, are all pets, and consequently they have never learned that a sheep dog Must Be Obeyed. Instead, when they see a dog approach they simply stand and stare at it as though saying, ‘Who might you be? And what, precisely, do you want?’

When the sheep dog barks, the sheep stand their ground. If they move, it is not to retreat but to move slowly forwards to inspect the rude intruder who is making so much noise.

After having a dog turned into the canine equivalent of a nervous wreck by our confident sheep, Mr Kennett no longer brings his sheep dog with him when he and the shearer come to give the animals their annual short back, top and underneath.

Instead, Patsy or I usually call the sheep, sometimes offering a digestive biscuit or two as an incentive, and then when they come running we leave the shearer to his work.

But on the day of the shearing, Patsy was working at Dr Brownlow’s old home, helping Bradshaw and a couple of volunteers redecorate the kitchen, and I had been called out to see a patient called Humphrey Todcaster who had told my receptionist, Miss Johnson, that he had developed very severe jaundice. He had, reported Miss Johnson, told her that he had probably developed a deadly liver disease that might require an urgent liver transplant.

I was leaving the house as Mr Kennett and the sheep shearer and the sheep shearer’s young assistant arrived. I hadn’t seen either of the shearers before. The previous man who had sheared our sheep had retired and was now living in a small cottage overlooking the river Lyn in the famous and picturesque village of Lynmouth.

Mr Kennett explained to me that the new shearer and his workmate, who is his son, spend the summer travelling around Devon and Cornwall, going from farm to farm and shearing sheep for 12 hours a day. The two men sleep rough. The shearer sleeps in the Dormobile in which they travel and his son sleeps in a tent or, if the weather is fine, in a sleeping bag under the stars. They spend the winter in Southern Spain, recovering from their exertions and spending their hard-earned money. The duo had been shearing Mr Kennett’s large flock and had turned up to shear our five sheep before moving on to the next farm.

I apologised to the three men and explained that I had just received an urgent call to visit a patient.

‘Don’t worry,’ said my father-in-law. He was squinting and was wearing a pair of new spectacles. They had jet black frames and if he hadn’t been wearing manure-stained jeans, a jumper with more holes in it than a chicken wire fence and a pair of elderly rubber boots with the tops turned down, they would have given him a very business-like look. My father-in-law was on the grumpy side of bad tempered and explained that he was angry because two loose dogs which had been allowed to roam the countryside had killed two of his sheep and badly mauled several more. No one had identified the dogs or their owner but one sighting had suggested that the bigger of the two dogs was either a Rottweiler or a Doberman. Farmers loathe having dogs loose on their land and some, Mr Kennett included, will shoot to kill if they see a dog worrying their stock. One local farmer goes further and if he shoots a dog he hangs the corpse on the nearest tree 'pour decourager les autres' (though it is possible those aren't the words he would use himself). Another local farmer has let it be known that he will shoot errant dog owners as well as their dogs.

'We'll be done by the time you get back,' said the senior shearer, confidently. He had the voice of a man who is accustomed to shouting instructions over long distances.

When he spoke, the sheep in a field half a mile away suddenly started baaing like crazy. They had undoubtedly heard, and recognised the shearer's voice. Sheep can be very sensitive and these, having just been shorn, weren't keen to repeat the experience. The baaing flock sounded just like politicians 'debating' important issues of State in Britain's House of Commons. Actually, the sheep were probably making just as much sense as the politicians.

'I've got a couple of bottles of new parsnip wine in the car,' said Mr Kennett. I'll leave them in the kitchen if you're not back before we leave.'

I was, to be honest, astonished at Mr Kennett's confidence since as far as I could remember neither he nor the previous shearer had ever managed to get hold of the sheep without assistance from Patsy or myself. Our sheep are, like all creatures of their species, naturally nervous. Unlike most other creatures of their species, they are unnaturally disobedient.

But the call from Mr Todcaster had sounded urgent and I didn't have time to hang around and make sure that all went well with the shearing. So I left the three of them to it and drove off to visit Mr Todcaster in the cottage which he shares with his mother, two goats, a collection of cats and a stuffed armadillo.

'He's in bed but you're wasting your time, doctor,' said Mrs Todcaster, who celebrated her 80th birthday some time ago and who looks considerably older. She was sitting in the living room staring at a television which was switched on but without the sound.

'Why is that?' I asked.

'He'll be dead in a week,' replied Mrs Todcaster, apparently without concern or regret. She stated it as baldly as she might have told me that it was due to rain later, or that they had run out of milk.

'I'd better take a look at him then,' I said.

'He's in bed. But you won't get any sense out of him. He rambles.'

'Rambles?'

'Just witters on and on,' said Mrs Todcaster, clearly irritated at having to explain herself. 'He is a very boring man. He was a boring boy. His father was boring. If you asked his father how he was, he'd take half an hour telling you everything about him. He was very boring. He used to tell people the history of every piece of furniture we owned. 'That dresser came from an auction at Lower Petherbury farm,' he would say. 'They bought it from a store in Exeter. It was made by a firm that went bankrupt in 1839.' On and on he'd go. He couldn't make a cup of tea without telling you the history of the pot, the cup and the tealeaves. John is the same as his father. He just goes on and on about his health. He's a health freak. He wanted me to take euthanasia tablets when I got a cold.'

'Euthanasia tablets?' I asked, slightly concerned. It occurred to me that young Mr Todcaster might, perhaps, have wanted to get rid of his mother. It would have been difficult to blame him. Living in the same house as Mrs Todcaster could not have been fun.

Mrs Todcaster picked a plastic bottle off the mantelpiece and showed it to me. The bottle was marked 'Echinacea tablets'.

'I don't need tablets to get rid of a cold,' she said. 'I'll either get better or I'll die. And at my age it doesn't much matter which.'

'Maybe I'd better go on up and see your son now,' I suggested. 'Is he in the front bedroom?' I hadn't known Mrs Todcaster's husband but it occurred to me that if he rambled more than she did he must have been painful to listen to.

'Of course he's in the front bedroom. He's not going to be in my bedroom is he?' She peered intently at the television set. The picture, which was in black and white, was fuzzy and it was difficult to decide what was happening on the screen.

Leaving her to the television, I pulled aside the curtain at the bottom of the stairs and made my way up the steep, narrow staircase. There were two rooms downstairs and just two rooms on the first floor. There was no bathroom in the house. The toilet was in a wooden hut at the bottom of the garden. On the rare occasions when they wanted to wash, Mrs Todcaster and her son used the kitchen sink. For their quarterly bathing they used a tin bath which hung on a nail in an outhouse.

'I've got liver cancer,' shouted Mr Todcaster when he heard me climbing the stairs.

He was lying in a huge brass bedstead which Patchy Fogg would have loved to have got his hands on. Patchy is always looking for old brass bedsteads. There is, apparently, an insatiable market for them. Interior designers in the posher parts of London adore them. And American householders also seem to find them attractive. Patchy is always trying to persuade me to tell him when I spot valuable old pieces of furniture so he can call in and buy them. He tells me what to look out for but I always refuse to cooperate. Acting as a furniture scout for an antique dealer would make me feel more than slightly uncomfortable – particularly since I know that Patchy is always eager to underpay for the items he buys. An old oak commode stood in the corner of the room and there were oak tables on either side of the bed. Both tables were covered with bottles of herbal remedies, alternative medicines and heaven knows what else.

There was no chair in the room and I didn't fancy sitting on the commode so I put my black bag down on the floor and remained standing. 'What are your symptoms?' I asked.

'I'm jaundiced,' replied Mr Todcaster. 'I'd have thought you'd have been able to see that. You're supposed to be the damned doctor.' Other than the obvious change in his skin colour he looked perfectly fine to me. But he wasn't jaundiced. His skin was orange rather than yellow.

'Strictly speaking, jaundice is a sign not a symptom,' I said. I was feeling a little crotchety myself by now. 'A symptom is something you feel; something you're aware of; a pain, a discomfort, a change in your bowel habits. A sign is something that can be observed – a discolouration, a rash or a twitch. Have you noticed anything other than the change in the colour of your skin?'

Mr Todcaster thought for a moment. 'No, I don't think so,' he admitted.

I looked closely at his skin which, on close examination, was clearly far more orange than yellow. The whites of his eyes, the conjunctival membranes, were still white. In jaundice they turn yellow.

'Any change in the colour of your urine?' I asked him.

He shook his head.

'Not exceptionally dark?'

'No.'

When a patient has jaundice their urine will usually be much darker than usual.

It was already pretty clear that Mr Todcaster was not jaundiced. And I strongly suspected that I knew the cause of his strange skin colouration.

I opened my bag, took out my stethoscope and listened to his chest. His heart and lungs were fine. I examined his abdomen. I could feel nothing amiss. His liver was definitely not enlarged.

'What medicines are you taking?' I asked Mr Todcaster.

He waved a hand over the pills on the two tables.

I looked at the pills on the table nearest to me and then walked round the bed and looked at the pills on the other table. I could see nothing that would explain the skin pigmentation.

'Have you changed your diet recently?' I asked.

'I put myself on a vegetable juice diet,' he told me. 'Drinking lots of juice helps strengthen the immune system and fight off cancer.'

'Lots of carrot juice?' I asked.

'Oh yes,' he agreed. 'I drink several pints of fresh carrot juice every day. It's good for the eyes.'

Carrots contain a substance called carotene which is the chemical which gives them their colour. Actually, carotene is the chemical which gives all sorts of plants and animals their colouring. Pink flamingos are pink because their usual diet includes shrimp which are rich in a carotenoid. A rich man whom I once knew had a lake which he stocked with pink flamingos. He thought the birds would add a splash of colour to his estate. He was very disappointed when his flamingos all turned white because they were fed a carotene free diet.

Carrots have a reputation for enabling people to see in the dark because the carotene they contain can be converted into a form of vitamin A and without vitamin A, human beings develop night blindness. This is a scientific fact but although people who are deficient in carotene can be helped if they eat carrots, a surfeit of carrots won't improve normal eyesight. The myth that eating carrots improves the eyesight of healthy people was made popular during the Second World War when the British Air Ministry put out press releases claiming that British fighter pilots were able to shoot down enemy aircraft in the dark because they had better night vision. The Ministry releases claimed that the marvellous night time vision was a result of them eating lots of carrots. The story was a deliberately concocted fiction designed to disguise the fact that British aircraft were equipped with a new-fangled invention called radar.

The whole thing got out of hand and when sugar rationing meant that sweets became pretty well unobtainable, children were encouraged to put their pennies into slot machines which served up carrots on a stick. The myth that carrots improved eyesight became established.

Decades after the end of the Second World War, enthusiasts were still encouraging one another to eat vast quantities of carrots and it was widely believed that carrots were a ‘good thing’ and that it was impossible to have too much of this particular ‘good thing’.

Sadly, this was nonsense and many people were made seriously ill by eating too many carrots. At least one man died as a result of drinking too much carrot juice.

Fortunately, it didn’t seem to me as if Mr Todcaster had done himself any permanent harm.

Carotenemia, the condition in which the skin turns orange as a result of eating too many carrots, or drinking too much carrot juice, is reversible and in most patients the condition causes no long-term damage.

‘Your skin has turned orange because of all the carrot juice you’ve been drinking,’ I told him. ‘There’s nothing wrong with you.’

He stared at me in disbelief. He actually looked disappointed.

You might have thought that a man who thinks he is dying and then finds out that he has simply been consuming too many carrots might be overjoyed.

But Mr Todcaster moaned a good deal about having to give up his carrot juice.

‘What happens if I carry on with the carrot juice?’ he demanded, rather aggressively. ‘Carrot juice is very good for you.’

‘If you carry on drinking so much carrot juice then your skin will stay orange and you will die,’ I told him.

He said he would think about what to do.

I left him and gingerly made my way back down the steep and narrow staircase. It was so steep that it was more like going down a ladder than going down a flight of stairs. As I descended, it seemed to me to be a miracle that neither Mrs Todcaster nor her son had fallen down the stairs. It was also a miracle that they had been able to resist the temptation to give each other a good push.

‘How long has he got?’ demanded Mrs Todcaster when I finally reached the bottom of the staircase and, relieved, stepped back into the living room.

‘Probably another thirty years,’ I told her.

‘He’s not dying?’

‘Not at the moment.’

‘Well, bugger me,’ said Mrs Todcaster, sounding very disappointed that she wouldn’t be able to attend her son’s funeral, do a good deal of wailing and bathe in assorted sympathy and commiseration. She sniffed and turned back to watching whatever it was that she could see through the interference on her elderly television set.

I was away from the house for just over an hour and when I returned to Bilbury Grange, I thoroughly expected to see our five sheep standing in the field, bald and cool and looking very summery without their winter coats.

But that was not what I saw.

The five sheep were spread around the field and they all still possessed their winter coats. They were lying down, chewing the odd blade of grass.

As they lolled about, quietly chewing blades of grass and occasional daisies, the five sheep carefully watched the two men standing in the middle of the field.

The shearer and his assistant had clearly been doing a good deal of chasing around. They were both now red-faced, sweating heavily and breathing with some difficulty, and they were standing with their hands on their knees. I could hear their heavy breathing from the spot at the fence where I met Mr Kennett. He was standing some distance from the five-barred gate which provided access to the field and was far too sensible to get involved with chasing five very independent-minded sheep around a ten acre field on a hot day.

The shearer and his assistant had set up their shearing equipment, powered shears and a diesel engine, in a corner of the field close to the gate. I looked across at their impressive looking equipment. Sheep shearers have moved with the times and no longer use the old-fashioned hand powered shears. I don’t blame them. The last time I saw a man who sheared sheep by hand he had thick calluses on his palms and fingers and had, over the years, lost two fingers to his own sharp shears. Modern shearers can usually shear a flock of sheep without spilling a drop of blood.

‘Things are going according to plan, then,’ I murmured.

Mr Kennett, chewing on a long piece of grass, nodded. ‘Good entertainment,’ he said. ‘They thought they’d nearly got one of ‘em a few minutes ago but she slipped through their fingers like a wing three quarter avoiding a couple of clumsy forwards. They were never even close.’

I couldn’t help noticing that Patsy’s father was now wearing a different pair of spectacles to the ones he had been wearing when I’d left him. This second pair had tortoiseshell frames and gave him a vaguely academic appearance.

I immediately guessed where the two new pairs of spectacles had come from.

Half of my patients seemed to be struggling to cope with new spectacles which they had bought from Peter

Marshall.

Since the glasses which they had purchased had all been made for another pair of eyes they were, not surprisingly, having some difficulty in finding a pair which actually improved their eyesight.

‘Have they been chasing the sheep around since I left?’ I asked.

‘They have,’ said Mr Kennett. He moved the new spectacles down his nose an inch and tried looking over them. He pushed them back and tried looking through them. Finally, he took the spectacles off his nose and held them a few inches away from his face. Then he put them back on his nose and tried squinting. ‘There has been a lot of chasing, a lot of diving, a lot of very poor tackling and absolutely no catching. The sheep are winning hands down at the moment and I don’t expect that to change at any time in the future.’

We stood for a few minutes and watched the shearer and his son.

The funny thing was that the sheep seemed to make absolutely no real effort to evade the men – they slid past them with the greatest of ease.

For a moment, I thought the two men were going to catch Miss Houdini but she sidestepped them very neatly and was, within a moment, back chewing grass while the two men, thwarted, lay flat on the ground.

‘If I were choosing the England rugby team she’d be my first pick,’ said Mr Kennett, nodding towards Miss Houdini, who had been given her name because she seemed capable of escaping from virtually any situation. He took off the spectacles he was wearing and put them into his left hand jacket pocket. From his right hand pocket he took another pair of glasses. This third pair had simple steel frames in the style made famous by John Lennon.

‘I needed some new glasses,’ he explained unnecessarily. ‘And the last lot I bought from the opticians in Barnstaple were damned expensive. These were a bargain. I bought three pairs for £1.’

‘From Peter Marshall’s shop,’ I said. Mr Kennett is a cautious, sensible man who does not throw his money around. But not even he is immune to one of Peter Marshall’s marketing schemes.

‘They were ridiculously good value,’ he said. ‘You just pick out any three pairs from a huge box. I paid nearly £80 for my last pair.’ He paused and thought about it again. ‘Three pairs for £1! Amazing value.’

‘I was there when he took delivery of the damned things,’ I said. ‘He’s got boxes full of them.’ Mr Kennett was just one of many who had been unable to resist Peter’s offer. I’d spotted our local postman climbing out of a ditch. He had been riding around the village on his bicycle while wearing his new spectacles when he’d become dizzy and fallen off his machine.

It had not occurred to any of the buyers that a bargain is only a bargain if it does what it’s supposed to do. Nor had it occurred to them that the chances of finding a pair of spectacles that matched their requirements were somewhere between slim and non-existent.

‘It’s just a question of finding a pair I can see through,’ said Mr Kennett. ‘I don’t care what they look like as long as I can see and they don’t give me headaches.’ He scratched his head. ‘It looks as if I might have to go back to Peter’s shop and buy myself another pound’s worth.’

Mr Kennett is a farmer, and so hates spending money unnecessarily. He always says he’s simply careful with his cash but his wife and daughters, who love him dearly, all describe him as being firmly and permanently settled on the mean side of generous.

While we had been talking, the shearers had come up with a plan.

The senior shearer stood in the middle of the field and ordered his assistant to get behind Sarah-Louise and to shout at her until she started to move. The shearer then tried to position himself directly in front of her so that he would be able to grab her as she trotted past.

Naturally, this plan proved as ineffective as all the others.

Sarah-Louise walked forward until she was about six feet away from the shearer and then suddenly, without any warning, she turned sharp right and started to run. She was having great fun and doubtless thought that the ‘catch me if you can’ game she was playing with the shearer had been organised entirely for her benefit. A ewe, even quite a large one, can accelerate at an extraordinary speed and it can probably run far faster, and for longer, than any human athlete. It can certainly run faster than an out of condition sheep shearer who has spent too many lunchtimes eating steak and kidney pie and too many evenings drinking beer. A grown ewe can run at 30 miles per hour and it can keep that speed up for a surprising length of time. Moreover, its four foot drive configuration means that it can change direction without apparently losing speed and no human can do that.

I stood and watched the shearer and his pal for a few minutes longer and then I took pity on them. I called them over to where we were standing.

‘I think it’s time to get on with the shearing,’ I said. The two men were red-faced, soaked with sweat and out of breath. They also looked embarrassed.

‘You two are out of condition,’ said Mr Kennett.

‘Why didn’t you bring the dog?’ asked the shearer’s assistant.

‘They won’t take any notice of him either,’ said Mr Kennett. ‘The last time I brought a dog over here the sheep terrified the life out of him. It took him a month to recover and he was never the same again.’

‘If you can catch those darned sheep I’ll shear ‘em for free,’ said the shearer.

‘Get your clippers ready,’ I told him. ‘I’ll have all five ready and waiting before you’ve started the generator.’

The shearer looked at me and did his best not to scoff. But he and his assistant strode off quickly towards the spot by the gate where they’d left the clippers and the rest of the equipment.

‘Come on, you lot!’ I called, climbing over the fence into the field.

The sheep, hearing my voice, turned and looked in my direction.

‘Come over here,’ I said.

The sheep started running towards me.

I walked towards the spot where the shearer was busy trying to start his generator. Mr Kennett, who prefers to go through gates rather than to climb over fences, walked along the other side of the fence.

The five sheep and I arrived a minute or so before the shearer managed to start his generator.

‘Ready and waiting!’ I said.

‘Well, bugger me if that ain’t the strangest thing I’ve ever seen,’ said the shearer. His son just stared in astonishment.

‘It’s just a knack,’ I said modestly. I didn’t think it necessary to point out that there were only five sheep in the whole world who would respond in such a way to my voice.

With me standing next to them, the sheep didn’t even move when the generator eventually started to hum. They stood there, patient and obedient, knowing that they were safe and would probably receive a couple of digestive biscuits each if they behaved themselves. It took the shearer less than ten minutes to shear all five. There wasn’t a nick or a scratch on any of them.

Afterwards the shearer refused to let me pay him. ‘I thought I’d seen everything where sheep is concerned,’ he said, shaking his head. He even offered me a job as their travelling sheep dog. ‘With you calling in the sheep we could get through twice as many as we do now,’ he said.

As the two men drove away in their battered Dormobile, Mr Kennett wrapped up the five fleeces and bundled them into the back of his truck. He then presented me with two bottles of his parsnip wine; as potent a brew as has ever been made with the aid of the humble parsnip.

I fetched a packet of digestive biscuits from the kitchen.

Our fleeceless sheep deserved a reward.

The Brownlow Country Hotel

My predecessor and mentor Dr Brownlow had lived in a wonderful old house in the centre of the village of Bilbury. You can walk to it easily from the Duck and Puddle. You turn right, follow the road around the village green and take the first lane on the right (it's signposted to Combe Martin). Dr Brownlow's old house is a hundred yards on the right. The black painted iron gates, the largest I've ever seen, hang from two huge stone pillars upon each of which rests a massive stone griffin. On either side of the pillars is a nine foot high stone wall which separates the road from the gardens. The wall must have cost a fortune to build. Fortunately, it was built well and shows no sign of disrepair. A long driveway, flanked by seventy foot tall poplars, leads up to the house which is built entirely of grey stone, softened slightly by several acres of green ivy.

Dr Brownlow who lived in the house for many years is now buried in the garden in a splendid stone vault which was paid for not out of his estate but by a subscription raised by the villagers. I was very proud that it was Dr Brownlow's patients who paid for his tomb. He would have been proud too.

The house has towers, battlements and mullion windows and a Union Jack flag flies from a pole standing to the front of the central tower. Directly underneath the flag, and flanked by two huge stone lions, is a front door which is 12 feet high and decorated with scores of solid metal studs. These were designed, I have always assumed, to give battering rams a hard time. The roof, like the roofs of all old houses, is made with tiles which taper in size from the top to the bottom: with the small tiles at the ridge and the larger tiles towards the eaves. It wasn't until around 1850 that builders in Britain started to build house roofs with tiles of a uniform size.

The inside of the house is, as you might expect from the outside, unmistakeably gothic. A long corridor, around ten feet wide, runs through the centre of the building, with the walls on either side decorated with huge old oil paintings which are hung in massive gilt frames. The dining room is dominated by a great stone fireplace and the oak panelling in the billiard room is richly decorated with wooden carvings. The whole place costs a large fortune to heat.

Dr Brownlow has a son who works as a GP in Barnstaple but the two had not been on good terms for many years and when he died Dr Brownlow left the house to me with the suggestion that it be turned into a small hospital.

'Nothing elaborate,' he had said. 'Somewhere friendly and local for patients to be looked after when they're too ill to stay at home but not really ill enough to be in a proper hospital.'

Long before the Industrial Age, hospitals were built like cathedrals, in order to lift the soul and ease the mind; hospital buildings were decorated with carvings, works of art, flowers and perfumes. The ancient Greeks had musicians playing in hospital corridors.

Dr Brownlow felt (as I do) that modern hospitals are built with no regard for the spirit, the eye or the soul. They are bare, more like prisons than temples, designed to concentrate the mind on pain, fear and death. Where there are windows they are positioned in such a way that patients can't see out of them (though even if they could they probably wouldn't be able to see anything more enthralling or uplifting than the refuse bins or the air conditioning units).

In most hospitals, it is difficult to believe that the staff understands the meaning of the word 'dignity' – not, at least, when applied to patients. Patients are talked to as if they were infants, invariably being addressed by their first names. In many hospitals, patients are given revealing little gowns to wear. These awful gowns hide nothing from general view but patients are instructed that they must be worn without underwear. Patrons in the seediest type of nightclub would be arrested if they wore such attire. Where is dignity in such circumstances?

And, of course, big, proper hospitals are dangerous places.

There are many hazards but the greatest danger is that a patient may catch a hospital infection. As a result of worsening hospital hygiene (there is clear evidence that in British hospitals neither doctors nor nurses wash their hands properly or often enough) infections are now a significant health threat. In some hospitals, these days the sheets aren't changed when patents leave and when patients arrive. Instead, to save money, the sheets are just turned over. Top to bottom. That sort of practice is frowned upon in the sleaziest of seaside boarding houses but hospital staff find it acceptable. It is, of course, the administrators who decide that this will be done. But it is the nurses who supervise its doing. In a State-run health service, the staff become institutionalised. They work for the Government and they are too afraid for their careers to speak out when they are told to do things which they know are wrong.

'I fear that things are just going to get worse,' Dr Brownlow said to me a few months before he died, 'I hate to think how dangerous hospitals will be by the 1990s and the end of the 20th century.'

To all this must be added the fact that modern hospitals tend to be bureaucratic and dangerously overstaffed with administrators. Most modern hospital administrators seem to be convinced that hospitals will only run smoothly and efficiently when there are no patients at all.

And so Dr Brownlow, who understood just how bad hospitals had become, and who spent his final weeks at home, being cared for by his faithful butler Bradshaw, wanted his permanent legacy to be a small, friendly hospital run by people who genuinely cared about the sick and the weak and the frail. He knew that we couldn't build a hospital equipped with operating theatres and intensive care units. But he believed that with the correct intentions we would be able to create a cottage hospital that would provide the villagers of Bilbury with a haven and a refuge at their time of need.

And so, in addition to leaving me his house, Dr Brownlow also gave me £50,000 in cash (via a simple ploy which I described in Bilbury Village and which could, I suppose, be loosely described as entirely justifiable tax avoidance) to spend on converting his former home into a cottage hospital.

Although he was a charitable man, Dr Brownlow himself had never had much faith in big, formal charities – the ones with posh offices in London and battalions of highly paid executives. He always said that he would rather give his money direct to the needy rather than simply put it into a collecting tin and allow some city based charity to spend it on administrative, salaries and expenses. Many of the biggest charities spend more than three quarters of the money they receive on salaries, pensions and similar costs. Patsy and I could see no point in that sort of charitable giving and agreed with Dr Brownlow's philosophy.

Our attitude on this matter had been hardened when, a week or so earlier, Patsy and I had been in Barnstaple buying linen for the new hospital when we had been approached by a young man collecting money for a charity which claimed to look after people who had fallen on hard times; he told us that the charity specialised in caring for the homeless, the weak and the elderly.

'If I give you £1 how much of the pound will go to the homeless?' Patsy asked the man.

He had looked at her as if she were mad.

'How much will go on administration?' I asked. 'How much will be spent on advertisements, marketing and producing leaflets?'

The young man didn't know any of the answers to those questions.

'Are you being paid a salary to collect money?' I asked him.

He said that he was being paid and he said that he and the organisation for which he worked would prefer it if I signed a direct debit form so that my bank could give them money every month.

Across the street there was an elderly man wrapped up in a blanket.

'If I give you £1,' I said to the young man, 'how much of it will your organisation give to that old fellow over there?'

The young man stared at me as if I were in need of strong medication. (This is a look which I know well.)

We left the charity employee and went over and talked to the old man. He turned out to be not as old as he appeared. His name was Tim and he was, he told us, in his fifties. His decline had been swift. His wife had died and his world fell apart. He lost the love of his life and he lost his partner in life too.

Together they had run a small business. He had been a chimney sweep and had done odd jobs. During the summer he had done a bit of gardening. He'd cut people's lawns, trimmed hedges, pulled up weeds and generally tided things up for them. She had done the accounts and booked the appointments. Without her, the business had folded. He had no inclination for paperwork or for collecting the money he was owed and within a year he had lost his van, his house and his possessions. Now he had nothing but an old anorak, a woolly hat and a filthy blanket. And he had, he admitted, a growing tendency to try to forget his predicament by drinking alcohol.

'How much alcohol do you drink?' I asked him.

Nearly all tramps and homeless people over 40 are alcoholics. Nearly all the homeless under 40 are drug users.

He said that he got through a bottle of sherry a day but that sometimes one bottle wasn't enough and that if it was particularly cold he needed one and a half bottles to get through the day. He admitted that he also smoked 20 cigarettes a day. He said he was confident that he could give up the sherry if his circumstances improved but was honest enough to admit that he might have more difficulty giving up the cigarettes.

Patsy and I each gave him one of the new £1 coins. To us it seemed better to cut out the middleman and give the money directly to someone who needed it.

As we carried on our way we agreed that we would look out for him whenever we visited Barnstaple and that he would be our moral, 'direct debit' obligation. We both desperately wished we could do more.

The big charities boast of changing the world but all most of them really do is enrich themselves.

Maybe we could find a way to do more to help him.

We both remembered Mr Parfitt, our gardener. He had been sleeping rough when we'd first met him. Today, he was a happily married man with a loving wife, a beautiful home and reliable employment.

But miracles like that don't happen often.

Meanwhile, we continued on our shopping expedition.

Patsy chose the linen and the other things we needed for our new hospital and I stood and nodded wisely. From time to time I carried bundles back to the Rolls Royce.

As far as I could discover, Bilbury had never had a hospital of its own and villagers who needed nursing care, palliative care, had always had to go into hospital in Barnstaple or Exeter. Most, if not all villagers, disliked this idea very much. Their relatives and friends all lived in Bilbury and it's quite a trek from the village to Barnstaple. People who have to rely on public transport find the journey next to impossible. There are no trains, of course, and buses are almost as rare as black swans.

After Dr Brownlow had died, I had appointed his former butler, Bradshaw, as my district nurse but I also decided that he would be the only person suitable to take on the responsibility as the Matron of the new cottage hospital.

To my astonishment and delight, Bradshaw had, within less than two days, found enough volunteers to staff the hospital without our having to hire any professional nurses. Most of the people whose services Bradshaw enlisted had no academic nursing qualifications but they were women of a certain age and they all had a quality which is far more important than any number of diplomas: they were all intrinsically kind people.

They wanted to help because it pleased them to be able to help people. They realised that people who are sick will get better quicker (or, if there is to be no getting better, reach the end of their days in greater peace and contentment) if they feel that they are among friends, and feel that the people around them genuinely care for their physical, mental and spiritual well-being. The people Bradshaw recruited all understood that people who are ill need to be cared for. They understood that a good nurse knows when to be attentive and when not to be fussy. They knew that providing a patient with a clean nightie, or doing her hair, or helping her put on a little make-up, can all do far more for her state of mind and her spirit than wearing a well-starched bib, putting on a cap at the correct angle or knowing how to fold a neat hospital corner when making a bed. And they understood that people who are ill or convalescing or dying are all helped if they can be cared for and treated within a community they know. When people fall ill abroad one of the first things they want to know is 'when can I go to a hospital back home?'

Britons who fall ill in Germany want to be cared for in Britain. People from New York want to be in New York if they must be ill. And the people of Bilbury were no different: if they had to be poorly then they'd rather be poorly in Bilbury than anywhere else.

Of course, they knew very well that if they needed to have an operation or to undergo extensive tests and investigations then they would need to be in a large hospital in a large town. But if they just needed to be looked after then they would, all things being equal, prefer to be looked after in Bilbury.

Our plans to provide Bilbury with its own small hospital did not go completely according to plan, of course.

Indeed, in my life, 'things' seem to prefer to avoid going anywhere near to plan.

Right from the beginning the local health service administrators were obstructive, it sometimes seemed deliberately so, and it quickly became apparent that converting Dr Brownlow's home into a hospital was going to be far more difficult than we had thought.

The health authority staff, of whom there were enough to form two full rugby teams with enough left over to make the teas and to stand on the touch lines and cheer, had enough red tape to wrap up Bilbury ready for posting off to Timbuktu.

As soon as we had solved one problem they thought of another problem.

For every answer we found they had another question.

The whole thing had begun to remind me of a fairground game which has recently become popular; the one where you hit one springy, toy mole on the head and find that as soon as the one you've hit disappears another one immediately pops up.

It seemed to me that we would never be able to defeat the doubters and the pessimists at the health authority. You cannot ever win against such people because there are always far more questions than there can ever be answers.

There were endless questions about staffing and about the type of beds we would use and the size of the staff dining facilities and, most of all, about the administration. How would we recruit and train our staff? What uniforms would they wear? What pensions would we offer our staff? How big an office would the chief administrator be given? What forms would we have and how would we ensure that their forms were filled in correctly and distributed, at the appropriate time intervals, to the appropriate departments in the appropriate parts of the National Health Service? There were even questions about the size, shape and weight of the filing cabinets we would use for storing the forms.

It was Bradshaw who thought of the solution. And the utter simplicity of his good-sense solution delighted me.

'Are we going to be performing major surgery on any of our patients?' he asked me.

'Good heavens, no!' I replied. I know my limits as far as surgery is concerned. I can sew up a wound and remove the sutures when they have done their job. I can remove a small cyst without too much effort. In a dire emergency I could probably remove a misbehaving appendix. But major surgery? No thank you! Despite my jokey suggestion to Patsy about opening a cosmetic surgery clinic I prefer to leave surgery to the masked professionals; the men and women who can murmur ‘Scalpel, nurse!’ in the certain knowledge that when they are given one they will know exactly what to do with it.

‘Am I right in thinking that our aim is to provide the sick, the elderly, the frail and the dying with pleasant surroundings where they can be looked after properly?’

‘You’re absolutely right in thinking that,’ I said.

‘Then we really don’t need to be registered as a hospital, doctor. We don’t need to have anything to do with the health authorities. Why don’t we simply call our establishment a hotel,’ suggested Bradshaw.

I stared at him, in absolute awe.

‘We could refer to our patients as ‘guests’ and we could still provide them with the sort of care they require,’ continued Bradshaw. ‘But the health service people would have no authority over our plans. We would probably have to satisfy the busy body authorities who regulate hotels but their requirements are relatively simple. We would need to have a fire extinguisher on every floor and clean surfaces in the kitchen. Compared to the hoops we would have to jump through to run a hospital there would be very little red tape to worry us.’

I had to work hard to suppress the desire to hug the old man. ‘You are,’ I said to him, ‘a genius.’

But although he originally trained as a nurse, Bradshaw had spent many decades as a butler. You don’t hug butlers. It simply isn’t done.

So instead of hugging him, I held out a hand and we shook hands to confirm and celebrate our change of direction.

‘Instead of being matron at the Brownlow Cottage Hospital you will, I hope, accept the position of Manager of the Brownlow Country Hotel.’

To my delight, the brilliant, the incomparably inventive Mr Bradshaw enthusiastically accepted the appointment.

‘I was worried about what uniform would be appropriate for a matron,’ he confessed. ‘I am not a matronly type. But as a hotel manager I shall wear tails and a white tie. I think that would be appropriate.’

‘Absolutely,’ I agreed. ‘Tails and a white tie at all times. And perhaps, if I might be so bold, a fresh carnation in the button hole?’

‘A green one, I think, sir,’ said Bradshaw.

Jeremy the Cat

We have for some years shared our home with two cats; one is called Emily and the other is known as Sophie.

We acquired both animals when they were kittens. They came from the home of a pair of spinsters called Miss Phillips and Miss Tweedsmuir.

But we acquired our third cat in a very different way.

Winifred Arnott-Toynbee had been married to a British diplomat who had served in embassies all over the world. She lived alone in a cottage overlooking the Bilbury village green, the centre of our small community.

Traditional English villages, the ones which have existed for a thousand years or more, rather than the artificial ones created more recently by unholy conspiracies founded by builders and local planners, tend to fall into one of three main types.

First, there is the village which exists around a central square or a green (the ‘village green’ which is famously used for cricket matches, maypole dancing and fairs).

Second, there is the village which is strung out along a single street.

And third there is the village which, although it clearly exists as a collection of houses, cottages and farms, appears to have been created in a haphazard fashion and to have no pattern whatsoever.

The archetypal village green, the feature which defines the first type of village, invariably has two features.

First, there is usually a church, which either stands upon the green itself or is situated close by, and which usually has a simple tower rather than the sort of impressive spire which only started to appear on churches built in the 13th century and later. If there is any seating at all in the church it will consist of just a few oak pews although other embellishments might be added much later, as the village grows and some of its inhabitants grow wealthy and become benefactors.

Many Devon churches have been rebuilt or enlarged as the centuries have rolled by but the church in Bilbury has changed very little.

Other churches had bells put in their towers and new windows put in – some with stained class. But Bilbury’s church has remained steadfastly untouched.

The chapel which is attached to Dr Brownlow’s old house, and which was built in the 16th century using blocks of granite, is larger and more impressive than Bilbury church.

And, of course, all self-respecting village greens always have a well.

Of the two ingredients, church and well, the well was, of course, always considered to be the most vital for it was the availability of a water supply which made the village possible. A church might help provide for the spiritual comfort of the villagers but without a reliable well the villagers would have either moved away or died.

Apart from a church, and some sort of stonework around the well, it has always been the case that the only buildings allowed on the village green were a smithy and a school.

Bilbury’s green has never had anything built upon it, though the well, now disused, is currently covered with a low stone wall and has a heavy wooden lid which is chained into position to prevent children falling in and drowning. In the 19th century two small brothers, one aged six and the other eight-years-old, fell into the uncovered well and drowned. The village didn’t need a health and safety official to decide what had to be done and the wooden lid was put on top of the well as quickly as it could be made.

Actually, Bilbury is rather unusual in having a proper village green.

Most villages in Devon exist around a central square, rather than a green, and although some squares have been built on, visitors to Devon can still find many villages (some of them have grown into towns, of course) which still retain their square.

A century or so ago, the square would have had houses all around it, some small and some large and very elegant, and it would have been the site of the weekly or twice weekly market where stallholders from miles around would arrive to sell their wares. It would also have been the site favoured by travelling fairs and circuses. Some squares were huge because they were the site of the local sheep market.

Today, the majority of village squares are given over to car parking and the houses which once stood around the square were long ago turned into shops and offices. The baker, the ironmonger and the banker now work alongside the local solicitor, the pharmacist and, unless he has moved out into a brand new health centre in some inaccessible part of the town, the local doctor too.

With the square surrounded by shops there is little need for market stalls to appear once or twice a week, and though in some towns the markets still take place, the stall holders are usually selling bags and jackets made by Peruvian peasants rather than home-made bread or sausages.

Whether a village has a square or a green, the principle purpose was much the same: to enable the villagers to defend themselves against attack – either from marauding bands of bandits or from wild animals.

There was originally often very little space, if any at all, between the individual houses around the square and the openings which did exist could easily be closed at night. With the gaps between properties closed off it would be easy to defend the village and livestock could be driven into the village square to protect them from marauding bandits or from wolves.

(The same sort of basic pattern exists in countries such as Africa where huts are grouped around a circular pound wherein animals can be kept at night, to protect them from lions.)

We often forget just how few people used to live in England in the days when Bilbury was a 'new' village.

Just a thousand years ago, the total population of England was about a million and a quarter people.

The whole of Devon, including the city of Exeter, was then home to no more than 70,000 people – that's only twice the population of Barnstaple today.

Devon was at something of a disadvantage compared to many other English counties in that there was very little stone for building. As a result, many of the older houses, cottages and bridges were built not of stone but of wood. Even bridges were built largely with wood and the vital bridges at Barnstaple and Bideford were built of timber when they were first erected in the 13th century.

That's the end of the scene-setting digression.

Bilbury, of course, has a village green, rather than a square, and the village has changed very little for a thousand years or more.

A peasant, transplanted by time machine from the Middle Ages, would perhaps stare shocked at the items for sale at Peter Marshall's shop, but he would recognise the village as home. There probably weren't many plastic combs, aerosol cans of deodorant or suspender belts on sale a thousand years ago.

I never met Mr Arnott-Toynbee because he died of heatstroke in some very hot country long before I qualified as a doctor and so when Mrs Arnott-Toynbee came to Bilbury, and bought a cottage facing the village green, she came alone – although she did bring with her several trunks full of mementoes, photographs and furniture which she and her husband had collected. Her arrival in the village pre-dated mine by some years.

Most of the many photographs which she brought with her were of him, her or both of them posing alongside local and visiting dignitaries.

There were several photographs of them with various ambassadors and one of them posing, along with half a dozen other people, with Sir Winston Churchill when he was the British Prime Minister. These pictures, each one carefully presented in a silver frame, were clearly considered to be the cream of the collection, and sufficient to represent the apogee of Mr Arnott-Toynbee's career.

Mrs Arnott-Toynbee was not a warm person; she was not the sort of old lady with whom one could chat or even share a joke. She wrote poetry and, for some reason best known to herself, wrote poems where the first words of each line rhymed. She wrote poems about slavery and pollution and I believe she disapproved of both, though I was never entirely sure of this and it was not possible to draw a conclusion from the poetry.

Years working in the diplomatic service had made her very conscious of her position. Even though it had been her husband who had been the diplomat she had allowed herself to acquire all the mannerisms usually associated with minor royalty. As a country doctor I was clearly considered to be a rather inferior sort of person; probably fitting into her social hierarchy somewhere between one of the gardeners and an assistant cultural attaché. She was not exceptional in this. I remember once having a couple of former diplomatic corps employees as my patients. She had been a senior housekeeper but he had been a lowly security guard and decades after they had retired, she still treated him as though he were a minor functionary. She ordered him about as though she were royalty and he were a junior footman. She treated me as a servant. He, on the other hand, treated me as an equal.

Mrs Arnott-Toynbee had been ill for almost all her time in Bilbury but she had not been very ill.

She had most of the ailments usually associated with ladies of a certain age.

She was a little deaf, a little blind and a little dizzy on occasion. She had varicose veins which resulted in her ankles swelling and she had osteoarthritis in her hips and her knees. She had slightly raised blood pressure for which Dr Brownlow had prescribed medication (and which she would not allow me to change) and she suffered from chronic constipation which she herself treated with a daily bowl full of prunes. I tried on many occasions to explain to her that she had, over the years, eaten far too many prunes and that the dried plums had by now probably damaged the muscles of her bowel and created a new type of constipation. I suggested that she tried to wean herself off the morning bowl of fruit, perhaps simply cutting down the number of prunes per serving, but Mrs Arnott-Toynbee was a keen believer in the value of the prune as a digestive aid and she was not about to accept advice from a young doctor on the subject. What could I possibly know about the value of prunes? The laxative value of the prune can probably be traced back two thousand years.

These minor ailments were not threatening but they were inconvenient and Mrs Arnott-Toynbee rather leant on them; they were, in their way, essential to her because they helped explain her inability to do as much as she had done when she had been younger.

It was no longer her fault that she could not run everything as she had once run the social group for the diplomatic wives, it was the fault of her silly physical frailties. The illnesses were, it seemed to me, essential to her well-being. I suspected that if they were not taken seriously then she would probably go into a steep and serious decline for then she would have to come to terms with the fact that she was simply getting old. And so I always treated her as an invalid and I think that reassured her.

At the age of 93, Mrs Arnott-Toynbee developed cancer of the bowel and eventually it became clear that this was the condition that was going to kill her. Had the prunes damaged her bowel? I have no idea. Had the prunes masked her condition and delayed the point at which she consulted me for advice? Possibly.

She refused to go into hospital, or even into the Brownlow Country Hotel, and so that she could stay at home during her final weeks and days she hired a nurse from an agency in London. She had no relatives to call on since although Mrs Arnott-Toynbee had a daughter called Loki (named after the Norse god of Mischief, since she was born when Mrs Arnott-Toynbee was being terribly important in one of the Scandinavian countries) Loki had had nothing whatsoever to do with her mother for years and I had never seen her. The nurse, a sour woman in her forties, was hired to provide constant care and to this end she lived in a room in the house.

I visited the old lady two and sometimes three times a week and although there wasn't much I could do, I prescribed whatever medicines might ease her symptoms and help her through the final stage of her condition.

She was very near the end when she told me to sit down on the chair which had been placed beside her bed. She said she had something very important to tell me. I obediently sat down and waited.

'My cat Jeremy is twelve-years-old,' she told me. 'I have had him for all of that time and now that I am dying I do not want him to go to live with anyone else.'

I looked at her, frowning. I did not understand what she was telling me. Or, perhaps, I did not want to understand.

'I want you to give him an injection to put him to sleep,' she said. 'When the Viking kings died their servants were buried with them. I don't have any servants anymore and so I want my cat to be buried with me.'

I was given instructions to take the cat away, to inject him with something suitably lethal, to arrange for him to be cremated and to bring back the ashes in a small wooden box. Mrs Arnott-Toynbee had the small wooden box ready and waiting and she handed it to me when she had finished giving me my instructions.

I was as horrified as I think most people would be.

I took Jeremy, in a bamboo cat carrier, and the wooden box for his ashes and headed back to Bilbury Grange feeling very angry. How dare this damned woman decide to have her perfectly healthy cat sacrificed for her own vanity?

When I got back home I undid the catch on the door to the cat carrier and Jeremy strolled out, a little timid but nevertheless curious about his new surroundings. Jeremy was a short-haired cat, mainly black with white socks and a patch of white on his tummy. He looked like a feline gentleman ready for a night out on the tiles.

'Who's this?' asked Patsy.

I explained.

Patsy was as appalled as I had been.

We watched as Emily and Sophie walked around Jeremy and inspected him. After a few minutes they wandered over to their eating area. Jeremy followed. To our astonishment Emily and Sophie stood quite still while Jeremy lapped up some milk.

'They like him!' said Patsy, delighted.

It was clear to us both that whatever else happened, Jeremy would not be going back to Mrs Arnott-Toynbee in the little wooden box she had provided. Jeremy was now our third cat.

'What are you going to do about the box?' asked Patsy. 'Mrs Arnott-Toynbee is expecting to have Jeremy's ashes in her little box. You have to put something into there – she might take a look.'

That bit was easy. I walked up the garden and was gone no more than five minutes.

'She'll never know,' said Patsy, examining the box, when I returned.

'She'll have no idea,' I agreed. 'Ashes are ashes are ashes.'

Mrs Arnott-Toynbee died three days later and was buried clutching a small wooden box containing ash from our bonfire site.

The Old Railway Station

I have always had a fondness for trains in general and for branch lines and small railway stations in particular. You can sit quietly on a train and read a book. You can think, talk or work. You can eat and you can sleep if you are tired. Or you can, of course, look out of the window. Everywhere in the country has a view but some places have better views than others. A train journey gives the traveller a chance to look at all the available views without having to worry about road signs, traffic policemen or dangerous corners.

Moreover, it has, for many years, been my belief that the best way to see the heart and soul of a town is to arrive by train. The railway lines invariably run through the back part of the town, the scruffy bits, the engine of the town if you will.

From the carriage it is usually possible to see the rows of back to back terraced houses, the second-hand car lots, the small garages where grease-stained mechanics do clever things with recalcitrant engines and battered bodywork, the small industrial units where unseen workers produce Christmas crackers, plastic shoe horns, parts for motor cars and shop signs. Each small factory will have grown up out of some entrepreneur's ambition, enthusiasm and imagination and will have survived, and perhaps thrived, as a result of years of hard work and determination. When I see these small businesses I am always reminded that it is not easy to create a business and that the men and women who have built a new enterprise with their bare hands deserve more recognition than they receive.

Travellers who left a station in the great days of the railways would have invariably found a station hotel nearby; it would have been the smartest local hostelry. In the early decades of the 20th century, the local gentry would have their dinners and dances at the hotel. Organisations such as the Round Table would hold their meetings there. Wedding receptions, silver wedding celebrations and Christmas parties would all be held in the function room where remnants of burst balloons and streamers which had long ago been torn down and discarded would be visible; still tied to light fittings and attached to walls and beams with drawing pins. Successful travelling salesmen would stay at the local railway hotel as would a wide variety of visiting dignitaries.

Today, most of these once great hotels are a mere shadow of their former selves. Grubby, fading and declining they are now rather sad.

If there is still a railway station the hotel will probably be surviving. If the railway station has gone then the hotel will probably be on its last legs.

Either way the area near to the railway station will probably be rather run down.

Near the station there will be the sad remains of once-proud shops, formerly representing the posh end of the town's commercial possibilities, and, still visible, there will be beautifully made signs for the local pharmacy and drug store, a haberdasher's, a gentlemen's outfitters and so on. The shops will now be struggling to survive in a world which favours department stores and chain stores.

Close by there would be a junk shop, with old chairs and broken down washing machines displayed on the pavement in front. And there will be a record shop, with brightly coloured posters in the window and several empty shops which are awaiting 'development'.

Shoppers who have money to spend will take their purses, wallets and their shopping bags to the High Street, half a mile away, where they can find chain stores and shoe shops, jewellers and maybe a pet shop and an ironmongers.

The houses near to the railway station will be Victorian or Edwardian since most railway stations were built during the feverish years of Victoria's reign and very few railway stations were built after Edward VII's death. Each house, whether detached, semi-detached or terraced will have a pillared front gate and a few square feet of stained glass above the front door. The front garden will have been laid to lawn, with a few rose bushes standing to attention beside a crazy paving path and if a stable was required it would have been approached from a lane at the back of the house. The lane and the stables will have long ago disappeared and been replaced by a modern housing development, together with a school.

There will be a pub as well, of course. Probably called the Railway Inn or the King's Head and not as posh as the station hotel, it will cater for thirsty railway workers and for the men who worked in the factories situated alongside the railway lines into the town.

By the 1960s the pub would have been already declining; the red brick facade chipped and scarred and blackened with railway soot. By the 1970s the end would be in sight.

In my mind the railway station in any town is an important focal point; probably the most important focal point, certainly more vital than the town hall, the statue to a long-forgotten hero ('But what did he do in the Boer War, Daddy? And what was the Boer War?'), the ornamental fountain that has not worked since 1957, the floral clock which looks like all the other floral clocks in the world or the council buildings that look as if they were designed by a six-year-old architect using a cardboard box as his inspiration.

And so when a railway station closes, loses its purpose, and no longer reverberates to the sound of approaching trains, there is an inevitable sadness accompanying the death.

Some towns never recover from the loss of their railway link to the rest of the world; sinking slowly into a permanent state of lethargy, as though the absence of the rumble and hiss of trains approaching and departing has resulted in the place losing its life, its reason for living and its identity.

For those towns the closure of the railway station invariably marks the beginning of a long, slow, painful end. It is as though the town, having been symbolically cut off from the rest of the world, feels rejected; unworthy of a place in the greater scheme of things.

Bilbury had lost its railway station many years earlier but it was a village not a town and the loss had not had any damaging effect on the village or the community.

Indeed, visitors could be forgiven for not realising that Bilbury had once been served by a railway line at all. Many probably didn't realise that there had ever been a railway station in Bilbury at all.

Bilbury, and the surrounding area of North Devon, was one of the last districts in England to use wheeled vehicles. Up until the start of the 18th century, people in North Devon who wanted to be somewhere that they were not simply walked. And goods were transported by pack horse and by horse drawn sledge.

But in Victorian times, the enthusiasm for railway transport finally spread to North Devon and a line was built between Barnstaple and Lynton. A narrow gauge line was built across the fields and a specially formed train company purchased some engines and a supply of coaches. As a result, trains had chugged into and out of Bilbury and some of them had actually stopped in the village for there had been a railway station too.

The station, which looked rather like one of those small railway stations which are used to decorate model railway layouts, had been called 'Bilbury Halt' because, like most smaller railway stations, the train only stopped there on request. Bilbury Halt was so small a station that it did not even appear on some of the railway maps of that period but it was, nevertheless, real enough and important to the villagers and to travellers and tourists. The stations between Barnstaple and Lynton were, in no particular order: Snapper Halt, Chelfham, Bratton Fleming, Bilbury Halt, Blackmoor, Parracombe Halt and Woody Bay.

If a passenger wanted to alight he would tell the conductor and the conductor would send a message to the driver. If a passenger wanted to board he would inform the station master who would 'halt' the train with the wave of a flag. The driver would look out of his cab to see if anyone wanted to board his train. Washing out the station master's green flag in a bowl of hot, soapy water was the nearest the rural railway station got to technology in those days.

The Lynton to Barnstaple railway, which served Bilbury Halt, first opened in 1898 but there were problems right from the start. Miscalculations meant that there were massive cost overruns and the money paid out for land, and as compensation, was four times the estimated budget. Worse still, the wise burghers of Lynton and Lynmouth insisted on having the Lynton railway station put in a position where it would not be visible either from Lynton or from the lower, twin village of Lynmouth. This was partly through a feeling that a railway station might mar the natural beauty of the locality and partly a result of the fact that a local landowner steadfastly refused to give permission for the line to be continued across his land to a more accessible spot. Sadly, the fact that the Lynton railway station was invisible from the twin villages also meant that it was pretty well inaccessible. Visitors who arrived on foot, as most did, either had to hire a carriage or else walk down a rough path known as Shamble Way which mostly consisted of rough stones, kept that way so that the ponies which carried luggage could find a foothold. The path, which was measured as having a 1 in 4 gradient, was hard work for anyone, let alone the elderly or the infirm, and it was considered so difficult that a handrail was fitted to help locals and travellers haul themselves up and steady themselves when going down.

The original aim was that travellers would be able to get from Barnstaple to Lynton in much less than the three hours that the mail coach took. But things didn't work out quite as planned. The train managed to travel from Barnstaple to Lynton in under two hours but it then took around an hour to travel from the station down to the beautiful village of Lynmouth, which was where most of the travellers and all of the holidaymakers wanted to go.

An attempt to bring holidaymakers from the resort of Ilfracombe to Lynton failed miserably. In 1903, a very early motorised charabanc service to Parracombe was abandoned when one of the drivers was arrested for driving his vehicle at 8 mph on a public road. The official speed limit on public highways had just been raised to 20 mph and it was widely thought that the local police and magistrates were simply trying to kill the railway in order to protect the business activities of the man who ran a coach and horses between the two towns and the company which, on calm days in summer, took holidaymakers by steamer from Ilfracombe to Lynton and back again.

When motor cars and charabancs started to appear in North Devon the death of the railway was inevitable. The death of the railway was pretty much confirmed when a meeting was held at Barnstaple to oppose the closure and all the delegates from Lynton arrived by car because it was faster and more convenient. Their arguments opposing the closure were easily dismissed.

The last train from Lynton to Barnstaple ran on the 29th of September 1935 and immediately after the train had passed through the intermediate stations the track was torn up. The engines, rolling stock, line and equipment were all sold in a sale held on the 15th of November 1935. All but one of the engines was sold for around £50 each and turned into scrap: the metal was salvaged, the wood was burned. The exception, an engine called Lew, went to Brazil to work on the plantations. Coaches were sold for as little as £9 each and covered wagons went for £4 apiece. One assorted lot consisting of signal boxes, lamp posts and telegraph wiring raised the unprincely sum of £7. The railway stations did not do much better. Blackmoor Station was sold for £700, Woody Bay station fetched £405 and both Bratton Fleming and Bilbury Halt were sold for £100 each.

Much of Britain's railway system, including many of the stations, were closed during the Beeching blitz in the 1960s, when a man called Dr Beeching, hired by the Government to rationalise the railway system and to ensure that only those stations which offered commercial profit were allowed to remain, decided that many lines and stations were surplus to requirements.

It is sometimes believed that it was Dr Beeching who was responsible for the closure of Bilbury Halt. Not guilty. Unhappily, Bilbury Halt did not even last as long as the 1960s. It died in 1935 with the rest of the railway line from Lynton to Barnstaple.

Many towns which lose their railway station, and which are removed from the railway network, allow themselves to sink into a deep and permanent depression. Bilbury, however, hardly noticed the loss of its railway station or its railway connection.

Although I was not living in Bilbury when the station was closed, I believe that the closure was, after a short period of mourning, met with celebration rather than dismay, relief rather than despair.

The fact is that Bilbury had never relied upon the railway and its loss was regarded by the villagers as a welcome rupture of an unnecessary link to the outside world. Bilbury has always stood alone, proud and independent, and if London no longer wanted to be connected to Bilbury then that was perfectly fine with Bilbury.

Frank Parsons, the current landlord of the village pub, the Duck and Puddle, remembers that his father, who ran the village pub in the 1930s, was unable to shed a tear when it was announced that the twice a day trains from Barnstaple to Bilbury would run no more.

As the village's only serious representative of the tourist industry, Mr Parsons might have been expected to regard the railway as an essential source of tourists; forever waiting for waves of potential new customers to bring freshly minted pound notes into the local economy. But, like the rest of the villagers, the old Mr Parsons was not terribly keen on the outside world and nor was he over keen on strangers who came to the village out of idle curiosity or because it was something to do on a dull or rainy day.

Things haven't changed much.

Today, the people of Bilbury are enormously welcoming to people who come to the village because they want to be in Bilbury, but they do not much care about people who arrive because they have nowhere better to be.

After I'd lived in Bilbury for a year or two I understood their attitude.

The good folk of Bilbury think of themselves as living in their own version of paradise.

If people want to come into the village then the villagers will welcome them with open arms, a crackling log fire in the grate, a plateful of steak and kidney pudding and a foaming glass of ale.

But if people prefer other versions of paradise then that is absolutely fine, too.

The Bilburians don't really want strangers wandering through their village just for the sake of it. They don't want them wandering about and alarming the wildlife in their brightly coloured kagools, discarding their sweet wrappers and crisp packets and generally making the place look too busy and untidy, when they would have just as soon been in villages such as Chipping Sodbury in the Cotswolds or Three Cocks in Wales.

Like thousands of other railway stations, the redundant and unwanted Bilbury Halt had been sold on the open market, auctioned off at a mass sale in London, offered and bought for a song and duly converted into a bijou holiday residence by a property developer who specialised in such projects and who swept into and out of the village without anyone knowing he'd been or gone. The new residence was duly photographed and advertised in *Country Life* magazine at a price that would have bought any three ordinary Bilbury cottages.

The now unnecessary railway tracks had been torn up and sold to scrap metal dealers from the North, who had carted them away on lorries, melted them down and sold them on to be turned into washing machines and garden gates.

The wooden sleepers, almost as thick and as heavy as tree trunks, were sold to a smart garden designer who wanted to use them for garden steps and for path edging. And the railway signs, including the 'Bilbury Halt' signs themselves, had been torn down, sold to indiscriminate railway memorabilia collectors, and duly dispersed to the far corners of the world where they would, no doubt, be displayed in garden sheds or tucked away at the back of overcrowded garages.

The new owners of Bilbury's former railway station were a couple who worked in London and who had purchased the station from the developers.

He was called Boris and he was a senior executive employed by a large, well-known charity with offices in central London; it was one of those charities which is more famous for its luxurious offices and expensive advertisements and marketing programmes rather than for any good work it might purport to do. This was, apparently, a post which required him to wear Italian silk suits when he was travelling to and from London (and, presumably, when he was in the capital) and to wear expensive, three piece suits in loud checks when he was 'down in the country'. When decked out in one of his checked suits he doubtless thought he looked like a country gentleman. Sadly, he looked more like a crooked bookie – the sort who will take the punters' money but disappear to Lanzarote when a big bet goes sour and it comes to paying out.

She was called Doris and she worked for the Home Office and apparently favoured tweed suits at all times.

Their surname was Hardley-Fitzwalter and they had two children, both girls, who were called Cello and Viola. They also had a small, very yappy dog, a Jack Russell terrier, whom they had, with a surprising lack of imagination, named Jack, and a Doberman Pinscher who was called Karl and looked as if he ate two postmen for breakfast every weekday morning and got through three a morning at the weekends.

The family drove to Devon in a large, green four wheel drive motor car called a Range Rover, which was, so Thumper told me, a posh version of the traditional Land Rover and which had apparently been on the market for a few years though no one in our part of Devon had ever seen one before. The Range Rover had already proved to be very popular with financially successful folk who spent most of their time in London and who took their car along to the car wash if they had to drive through a puddle. Country folk either couldn't afford them or considered them to be far too 'flash'; like green Wellington boots and two tone brogues. Not even Thumper had ever seen one before the arrival of the Hardley-Fitzwalter family.

The Hardley-Fitzwalter family did not usually consult me on medical matters, or indeed on any other matters. Nor, indeed, did they have much need for any other locally based services.

When the couple remodelled the railway station to suit their requirements they used a smart London architect, who also drove a Range Rover (his was a mustard coloured yellow) and a team of builders, carpenters, electricians and plumbers who drove down in convoy from somewhere called Islington and who stayed at a hotel in Barnstaple because the Duck and Puddle wasn't big enough to accommodate them all, smart enough to cater for their gentrified tastes or sufficiently important to have been awarded rosettes for culinary excellence. The villagers were amused by the fact that men who cut wood and mended leaky taps for a living required food that had been blessed with rosettes.

Since they never consulted me, I had never actually spoken to any members of the Hardley-Fitzwalters, though I had seen and recognised them from afar for their motor vehicle was easily recognisable, but I gathered from Patchy Fogg that although they did not come from Yorkshire, a county which is known to produce folk who pride themselves on their plain speaking, they nevertheless had absolutely no qualms about pointing out to strangers the precise extent of their shortcomings.

(The fine folk of Yorkshire, who exhibit many of the finer qualities of the English nation, do this proudly, generously and with unbridled enthusiasm and it is widely believed in southern England that anyone who is complacent, smug, over-confident, or suffering from hubristic tendencies, should be sent to Yorkshire for a week or two in order to bring him or her back down to earth. The Hardley-Fitzwalters had the Yorkshire straightforward way without the innate Yorkshire grit, honesty and decency which give that bluntness a fine quality.)

Patchy was the first to have met the Hardley-Fitzwalters for he had been consulted by them in his role as local antiques expert. The couple were keen collectors of objects d'art.

When they first called at his shop, Patchy had been delighted. He thought that he might be able to unload some of his 'sticky' stock – the stuff that discerning buyers do not want to buy and which hangs around for years, tying up capital. He had not long earlier taken delivery of a mixed lorry load of freshly made antiques, each one carefully hand finished by a team of skilled Chinese craftsmen, and the Hardley-Fitzwalters, who were awash with money but clearly had no taste or style, were just the sort of people he'd had in mind when he'd bought the stuff.

Ever since I've known him, Patchy has been selling quite remarkable antiques to discerning clients. He has sold the desk upon which Shakespeare wrote Hamlet at least seven times. He has also sold Shakespeare's best bed (not the second best bed which the playwright left to Anne Hathaway), the very chair Queen Victoria often sat in when discussing world affairs with Benjamin Disraeli and an ebony walking cane used by Lord Byron.

Patchy had, however, been more than slightly miffed, not to say offended, when the Londoners had sniffily announced that they didn't want to buy anything from him because, they told him bluntly, the quality of his merchandise would certainly not be up to their standards. (Patchy said that he had detected a shudder in Mrs

Hardley-Fitzwalter's demeanour at the very thought of buying anything from a dealer operating in a tiny Devon village). Their sole reason for calling into his shop was to commission him to pick up some garden furniture which they had bought in Hungerford and which was too large, too heavy or too dirty to fit into the back of their Range Rover.

When Patchy had, not unreasonably, asked why the dealer in Hungerford hadn't been prepared to bring the pieces to Devon, Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalter told him, with undisguised disdain for Patchy, that the man in Hungerford was a proper antique dealer (she apparently managed to put inverted commas around the words 'proper antique dealer' when she pronounced them) who couldn't possibly be expected to go traipsing around the country delivering things. Patchy had immediately doubled his price for fetching the garden furniture, two oak benches and an oak table, which he later described as looking like Victorian stuff but nowhere near as well made. 'I could have sold them exactly the same furniture for less than the fee they paid me to bring the stuff from Hungerford,' he later told me, with a grin.

I met the Hardley-Fitzwalters when I was called in to see their daughter Viola.

When I arrived, I found that I could not manage to park the Rolls Royce in their parking area because the Range Rover was so badly parked that there was no room at all for any other vehicles. I had to leave my car in a gateway on the other side of the lane.

I was not invited into the main part of the house, or to sit down, but was allowed only into the hallway of the converted railway station.

'Viola suffers from asthma,' said Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters. She was, as had been advertised, wearing a ghastly tweed suit. Underneath it she wore a cashmere sweater in a rather muted, earthy colour. A single row of pearls was visible. She wore comfortable, chunky, flat shoes which fastened with laces. I think she probably thought she looked like a country lady but to me she looked like a social worker who was stuck in the 1950s and had absolutely no interest in escaping. Looking at her I couldn't help wondering if she had ever been a carefree little girl, playing with dolls who took afternoon tea and hugging a teddy bear when she went to bed at night.

'I'm sorry to hear that,' I said politely.

'She requires regular treatment with an inhaler called Ventolin which is normally prescribed by our physician in Harley Street. Unfortunately, her inhaler has expired and she forgot to bring a replacement with her. We therefore require a replacement inhaler which, of course, we will need you to prescribe.'

'Where is Viola?' I asked. It seemed to me not entirely unreasonable that I should take a look at the patient for whom I was being asked to prescribe.

'She is doing her French homework,' said Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters.

'May I see her for a moment, please?' I asked.

'Can't you just write out a prescription,' sighed Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters, who was obviously not accustomed to having tradesmen talk back to her. 'We will, of course, pay you for a private prescription.' She paused and lifted her head a degree or two. 'We aren't health service patients.'

'I'm afraid I don't see patients privately,' I told her, though strictly speaking this was not entirely true since there are two elderly patients in the village who still regard the National Health Service as an unacceptable form of welfare and who insist on still being charged for consultations and medicines. I usually send them a bill once a year, charging £1 for a consultation and £2 for a home visit, and I give them the drugs they need. They never pay me and I never chase them for the money. 'But I will need to see Viola if I am going to prescribe for her.'

Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters huffed and puffed, and tutted a bit too, as though I was being entirely unreasonable, but turned and disappeared, leaving me still standing in the hallway. I was beginning to feel like a boy scout trying to rustle up business for Bob-A-Job-Week.

A couple of minutes later Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters reappeared, followed by a little girl who looked about six or seven-years-old. She was dressed in a dark blue dress, dark blue socks and black patent leather shoes. Her hair, which was cut short, was as neat as if she'd just come from the hairdressers and she was as perfect and as spotless as a brand new doll just taken out of the box.

'This is Viola,' said Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters.

I said hello to the little girl and introduced myself. The little girl, who seemed very self- assured, said hello back and held out a hand for me to shake. I shook it.

'How are you?' I asked.

'I suffer from bronchial asthma,' said the little girl. We were still standing in the hall. I thought about asking if we could go somewhere a little comfortable but decided that if Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters wanted to continue in the hallway then that is where we would stay.

'How long have you suffered from asthma?' I asked.

'For two years.'

‘What symptoms do you have?’

‘I wheeze.’

‘How often do you wheeze?’

‘Quite a lot of the time,’ replied Viola. ‘But it only happens when we are at home.’

‘In London?’

She nodded.

‘Our doctor in London has asked all these questions,’ said Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters, impatiently. ‘He is a very eminent physician. He treats quite a few titled people and looks after guests, including foreigners, at some of the large London hotels.’

‘Does your doctor think that Viola’s asthma might be stress related?’ I asked. ‘Is Viola more relaxed when you’re down here in Devon? Is she more anxious in London?

‘Good heavens, no!’ said Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters. ‘Viola doesn’t suffer from anxiety in the slightest.’

‘No school problems?’

‘Absolutely not! Viola and Cello go to a very exclusive private school near our home.’

‘But Viola doesn’t suffer from asthma when you’re staying in the country?’

‘She doesn’t,’ admitted Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters, reluctantly. ‘But she might. Are you going to prescribe a Ventolin inhaler for her? Or do we have to call someone else? Viola has to use her inhaler three times a day. Every day. If I have to call someone else to provide us with what we need, I will certainly make a formal complaint about you. I believe even doctors in the country are obliged to provide treatment for their patients, are they not?’

‘They certainly are,’ I replied. ‘But treating patients unnecessarily is frowned upon in some circles.’

Much to her mother’s annoyance, I then listened to Viola’s chest. I could hear nothing abnormal. There wasn’t even the slightest wheeze. Despite the mother’s demands I was reluctant to hand out another prescription for an inhaler for although enormously helpful when they are needed these things can easily do more harm than good – particularly when used unnecessarily. Over the years, countless millions of patients have been made well by having their prescriptions for addictive drugs such as bromides, barbiturates or benzodiazepines slowly withdrawn. The side effects produced by such drugs can be infinitely worse than the symptoms which triggered their use in the first place. Asthma inhalers probably aren’t addictive in the way that psychotropic drugs can be, but psychological addictions can easily develop – sometimes in a relative as much as the patient. An anxious mother or father sees that a child’s wheezing is banished with the aid of an inhaler and so assumes that the inhaler should be used three, four or five times a day in order to keep the wheezing at bay. And thus the addiction develops and the child, and its parents, feel they cannot exist without the drug.

Suddenly, something occurred to me.

‘Who does your laundry when you’re here in Devon?’ I asked.

I have no idea what made me ask the question. A combination of intuition and experience, I suppose. I’d seen a similar case sometime in the past.

Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters blushed. ‘I do,’ she said. ‘We have a very expensive machine. We did try to find a woman to help but it is very difficult down here to find such people with the appropriate references.’

‘And in London?’

‘I have a woman to do the housework,’ she announced as if it would be absurd for me to think otherwise.

‘Do you use the same washing powder in London as you use here?’

‘Sadly no,’ said Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters impatiently. ‘In London we use a special biological washing powder but the local store here in Bilbury doesn’t stock it and the man there refuses to order it in for us. We have to buy the detergent he sells to the other people.’

‘You don’t bring your detergent with you from London?’

‘We bring most of our food with us,’ she said. ‘But I thought we ought to be able to obtain basic necessities locally – soaps and such like.’ She paused. ‘Maybe we should bring all our things from London,’ she sniffed. ‘Harrods deliver our groceries,’ she told me inconsequentially.

‘I certainly don’t think you should bring everything from London,’ I said. ‘If Viola only suffers from asthma when you are in London then there’s a very good chance that it is the washing powder you use there which is causing the problem.’

Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters looked at me and frowned. She seemed startled at the suggestion.

‘Ventolin is a powerful drug,’ I told her. ‘It would be much better for Viola if she could manage without it.’

‘You mean that you’re suggesting that Viola’s asthma could be caused by our washing powder?’

‘It happens quite often,’ I told her. I’d read about it in one of the medical journals.

‘Why didn’t our London doctor tell me that?’

I wasn’t quite sure how to answer that.

‘If that is the case then I shall instruct our solicitors to take action against the manufacturer of the washing powder,’ she said.

‘I’m not sure that will do much good,’ I said. ‘Soap powder manufacturers often warn that their products can cause these problems. It’s in the small print.’

‘So, if you’re right, what do we do?’

‘Change your washing powder in London. Use the powder you use down here in Devon. See what happens over the next few days. If Viola starts to wheeze, call me and I’ll listen to her chest again. If she doesn’t wheeze then she can probably stop using the inhaler if you just change your powder in London.’

Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters looked at me suspiciously, as though concerned that I was tricking her in some way.

Just then the door opened and a man I assumed to be her husband burst in. He was accompanied by two dogs and carrying two unframed paintings. The dogs, which were not on leads, ran up to me barking and growling. I stood still and glowered at them. I hate dogs which do that but I hate the owners even more.

‘Just look at these!’ said Mr Hardley-Fitzwalters to his wife. He sounded very excited and ignored me completely. ‘I got these from that dealer in the village. The man is an idiot. He didn’t realise what these are!’

Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters examined the paintings her husband had brought home. ‘They’re both by Chagall!’ she said, very excited. Her daughter’s problem was now forgotten.

‘The chappie in the shop, Fogg I think his name is, didn’t have the faintest what he’d got. He sold me the pair for £500 each. He wanted cash, as these chappies always do, so I drove into Barnstaple and went to the bank.’

Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters was examining the pictures. ‘They’re not signed,’ she said.

‘Doesn’t matter,’ replied her husband. ‘You can tell who did them just by looking. The colours, the content and the brushwork are all absolutely unmistakeable. They’re pure Chagall – he didn’t always sign his stuff – especially the early work.’

The darned dogs were still barking and snarling. They were very unpleasant creatures.

‘What do you think they’re worth?’ Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters asked her husband.

‘Heaven knows. Millions! The big auction houses will be falling over themselves to sell these. I must go back to that Fogg’s place next time we come down. I bet he’s got more good stuff hidden away in his scruffy little shack.’

I coughed and picked up my bag. ‘I’ll be going,’ I said.

Mr Hardley-Fitzwalters, who still hadn’t acknowledged my presence, looked at me, puzzled. ‘Who are you?’

‘Oh this is just the village doctor,’ said Mrs Hardley-Fitzwalters dismissively. ‘He’s going.’

I couldn’t help noticing the way she had added the word ‘village’ in front of the word ‘doctor’. Village idiot, village doctor.

‘That’s not your Roller parked outside, is it?’ asked Mr Hardley-Fitzwalters.

I admitted that it was my Rolls Royce.

‘Our doctor in London has got a brand new one,’ said the charity boss dismissively. ‘Latest model, packed with all the gizmos. He has a new one every year.’

The Doberman, which had been staring at me and merely growling suddenly started barking again and bared its teeth. I instinctively flinched and moved back a few inches.

‘Oh, he won’t hurt you,’ said Mr Hardley-Fitzwalters, ‘he never bites.’ He patted the Doberman on its back. The dog then turned its head and growled at him. ‘Both the dogs love it down here,’ he told me, ‘we let them go a bit wild because they can go for long runs across the fields.’ He turned to his wife and laughed as he told her how the dogs had chased a flock of sheep around one of the fields they’d crossed.

‘I don’t think the local farmers like dogs chasing their sheep,’ I commented.

‘Well they can just jolly well lump it!’ said Mr Hardley-Fitzwalters.

I thought of telling him that farmers have the legal right to shoot dogs which worry their livestock but I really didn’t want to be there any longer so I told them to call me again if Viola had any wheezing and then I left.

Part of me felt that I ought to tell Mr Kennett, my father-in-law, that I thought I knew whose dogs had killed his sheep. But I had acquired this knowledge as a doctor and I have always taken the principle of confidentiality very seriously.

I hadn’t expected them to be grateful but I hadn’t expected them to be quite so dismissive; contemptuous almost.

As I walked to the car I could hear the badly behaved dogs still barking inside the house; they had no better manners than their owners.

When the family left to go back to London a few days later I hadn’t heard from them again, so I assumed that Viola’s asthma had disappeared.

The Old Hoover

Patsy and I were in the kitchen having a quiet lunch. The babies were both fast asleep, the telephone had been quiet for so long that I had twice lifted the receiver from the cradle to check that it was still working and that we hadn't been cut off (an eventuality which sometimes happens in the country, where a falling tree can result in downed lines and no telephone service for days) and we were contemplating a pleasant hour or so in the garden before the evening surgery was due to start.

Suddenly, the peace of the day was shattered by a hammering at the back door.

Before either of us could speak, the door was flung open and Adrienne, Patsy's sister and now Mrs Fogg, was standing beside us looking for all the world as though the end was considerably closer than nigh. She was red-faced and had clearly been crying. Patsy and I jumped up. Patsy gave her sister a hug. I stood there feeling, and doubtless looking, useless. After a few moments I sat down again.

It took two cups of tea, a large piece of apple and rhubarb pie (with both custard and ice cream) and a medium sized sherry before Adrienne, who is, at the best of times excitable and who can occasionally wander onto the hysterical side of over-reaction, had calmed down enough to tell us what had brought her crashing through our back door.

'For as long as I can remember I've always kept my jewellery and my savings in an old vacuum cleaner,' she told us. 'The hoover hasn't worked for years and years but when I lived at mum and dad's place they never threw it out and it lived at the back of the cupboard under the stairs. I always thought it was a good place to store my valuables because no one used it and what burglar would think of stealing or looking inside a clapped out old hoover?'

It occurred to me that this was indeed an excellent hiding place for valuables.

'What jewellery?' asked Patsy. 'I didn't know you'd got any valuable jewellery.'

'Well, it's perhaps not valuable to anyone else,' admitted Adrienne. 'But it's valuable to me. There's an old brooch that used to belong to grandma, a bracelet Mum and Dad bought me when I was twelve, a ring I got in a cracker when I was six, a necklace you bought me for my 21st birthday and a few bits and pieces Patchy has given me over the years. And there was £57 in cash in there. It was my sort of safe deposit box.'

'So what's happened?' asked Patsy.

'When Patchy and I got married and I moved into his house I took the old vacuum cleaner with me. Mum and Dad didn't want it because it didn't work so they didn't mind my having it. I kept it with Patchy's old hoover in the cupboard under the stairs. That's where everyone keeps their hoover isn't it?'

'We keep ours in a cupboard in the boot room,' said Patsy.

Inwardly I winced.

Adrienne is rather competitive, particularly with her sister, and doesn't like the fact that Patsy and I live in a bigger house which, now that we have got rid of the woodworm and the dry rot, has a boot room, a butler's pantry and a flower room rather than just a cupboard under the stairs. My wife and her sister get on well most of the time, and love each other very much, but Adrienne can be a little explosive, and perhaps a trifle potty, at times. At her wedding she managed to poison most of the guests by serving up mushrooms she'd picked herself. I have just the faintest suspicion that there may, occasionally, be a tinge of mild jealousy in the relationship between the two sisters.

'Well, we haven't got a boot room,' said Adrienne, in a huffy, why would anyone want one of those, sort of way. 'So we keep our hoover under the stairs.'

'You've got a conservatory and we haven't,' Patsy pointed out.

'You've got stables,' said Adrienne. 'And a lake.'

'You've got four garages,' said Patsy.

'Yes, but Patchy uses them to store antiques. They're really just for business. They're his shop. You've got a Rolls Royce.' Adrienne was clearly feeling a little better.

'It's a very old Rolls Royce,' said Patsy. 'It was Dr Brownlow's. It only does about eight miles to the gallon so it costs a fortune to run.'

I thought I ought to intervene before the competitive conversation got completely out of hand. I did not think it worthwhile pointing out that after the local garage had done something inexplicable to the carburettor I had managed to get nearly ten miles a gallon out of the old car.

'So,' I said, 'what happened to the hoover containing all your jewellery?'

'And £57 in cash,' added Adrienne.

'And £57 in cash,' I agreed. 'What happened to the hoover? Has someone stolen it?'

'No. Why would anyone steal an old hoover that doesn't work? That would be daft.'

I agreed that it would be a daft thing to do. It occurred to me, but I did not say, that people seem to do daft things all the time.

'Patchy got rid of it,' said Adrienne, and burst into tears again.

'Why on earth did he do that?' asked Patsy.

'He threw out both of the old ones. The one he had when I married him, and which sort of worked, and which I've been using, and the old one which I brought from Mum and Dad's and which didn't work.'

'Why did he throw out the one which worked?'

'It didn't work very well,' admitted Adrienne. 'It made a bit of a funny noise and there was a sort of burning smell. So he bought me a new one as a sort of early birthday present.'

I closed my eyes and wondered if Patsy would say anything about Patchy buying her sister a vacuum cleaner as a birthday present. Patchy isn't mean but he can be careful. And he's not what I would call a natural romantic. It took Thumper and me three hours to persuade him that an ironing board, complete with second hand iron, would not make an acceptable substitute for an engagement ring.

'What sort of funny noise?' asked Patsy. I gave thanks. It seemed that she hadn't noticed that Patchy had bought the cleaner for Adrienne's birthday.

'I don't know. Just a funny noise. Smoke came out of it and sometimes there were little flames and sparky things. Patchy said he thought the motor was tired and over-heating.'

'Do motors get tired?' asked Patsy.

'Patchy probably meant it was worn out,' I explained.

'And Patchy didn't know that you stored your jewellery, and £57, in your Mum and Dad's old hoover?'

Adrienne shook her head.

'What did he do with it?'

'I don't know,' admitted Adrienne. 'Most people would have probably thrown them out into the rubbish but Patchy…'

She didn't need to finish the sentence. Patchy, like many of the people I now know, does not easily throw things away. He prefers to sell his rubbish. He stores his old newspapers and sells them to a man who takes them to a factory where they are pulped and turned back into useful paper. He has a large boxful of old light-bulbs which he firmly believes he will one day be able to sell to someone. Patchy was a trifle sneery when Peter Marshall sold the contents of his old shed but behind the sneer there was a good deal of admiration.

'Haven't you asked him what he did with them?'

'I'm too embarrassed,' said Adrienne. 'I did ask him where it had gone and he said he'd got rid of it and then he showed me the new one he'd bought.' She bit her lip and looked down. 'He'd think I was daft if I told him I kept all my valuables in an old hoover. He's always telling me that I should keep all my valuables in the safe.'

'Well at least he bought you a new hoover for your birthday,' said Patsy, who had noticed after all. 'As a present,' she added unnecessarily.

'It's not actually new, new,' said Adrienne. 'It wasn't in a box or anything like that. He got it from a house clearance sale. But it's as good as new and Patchy said he got it for a very good price. And there are lots of things to attach to it if you want to clean under sofas or behind the fridge. We got all those bits in a plastic bag.'

'The attachments,' said Patsy.

Adrienne looked at her.

'That's what they call them,' said Patsy. 'The bits that you fix onto the vacuum cleaner so that you can clean under sofas and things are the attachments.'

I couldn't help wondering why anyone would want to clean under a sofa but I kept quiet about that. I've always thought that what is under the sofa is better kept under the sofa.

'I also kept our wedding papers and my driving licence in there,' said Adrienne. 'And the flower Patchy wore in his button hole when we got married. It's in a paper bag to keep it safe. The inside of the old hoover is quite clean. I brushed it all out before I started using it as my hiding place.' She started to cry again. 'This is the most awful thing that could ever happen to me,' she said through her sobs.

I was tempted to point out that if this was the worst thing that ever happened to her then her life would have been a breeze. I decided some years ago that real pressure is having to decide whether to choose chemotherapy or radiotherapy for yourself or a loved one. Most other problems are hardly worth a damn; they can probably be ignored or else they will go away with time. But I didn't think that either Adrienne or Patsy were ready for my brand of philosophy.

'Well, we need to find out what Patchy did with the old hoovers and then we need to get them back,' I said firmly, standing up. The quiet afternoon in the garden was now a forgotten dream.

‘Would anyone like a home-made scone?’ asked Patsy, who has a talent for avoiding problems, a talent for delaying action and a talent for baking which puts everyone else’s talents into the shade.

‘Oh yes,’ said Adrienne instantly. ‘But don’t forget to put the jam on first.’

One of the first things Patsy taught me when we got married was that when making a Devon cream tea it was vital to put the cream onto the scone before adding the jam. In Cornwall, they do things the other way round: putting the jam onto the scone before the cream. Adrienne has no Cornish roots, and as far as I know has only been there once when she went to Padstow for a slightly discoloured weekend with a tractor salesman from Liskeard, but she has always been rebellious and has insisted on having her scones the Cornish way since she was sixteen.

And so Patsy took some scones and a pot of strawberry jam from the cupboard and a pot of cream from the fridge, put the kettle on and made us a huge Devon cream tea. It was only twenty minutes since I’d had my lunch but who can turn down a Devon cream tea – especially when Patsy made the scones?

You can’t talk about things like missing vacuum cleaners and lost valuables when you’re eating scones with cream and jam (I think there is probably a by-law forbidding such behaviour within the boundaries of the county of Devon) so we ate in silence.

Actually, it wasn’t complete silence because Patsy and Adrienne talked about our babies for a while. It’s strange having two young babies because when you mention ‘babies’ to strangers they assume they must be twins whereas, in fact, our oldest is eighteen months older than our youngest. I am well aware that in the blink of an eye they’ll be starting school, climbing trees and sticking posters up on their bedroom walls but for the moment they’re still babies.

In the end, of course, the pleasant delaying tactics came to an end, the plate contained no more scones and the cream seemed to have evaporated. There was jam left in the pot but nothing upon which to spread it.

‘So,’ I said, ‘where do you think the vacuum cleaner could be?’

It was immediately apparent that neither my wife nor my sister-in-law welcomed this reminder of the awful reality which had brought Adrienne to our door. They looked at me, looked at each other and sighed.

‘I think he might have sold both of them to ‘Jack’ Ladd,’ said Adrienne.

I groaned but tried not to make a sound as I did so.

Jack Ladd, whose real name is Ivan Ladd but who is known as ‘Jack’ (as in Jack the Lad) calls himself a dealer but he is the biggest crook in North Devon and that, believe me, is no mean compliment.

Jack is convinced that the world is desperate to rip him off and is determined that if there is going to be any ripping done then he will be the one to do it. The last time I saw him he was in Ilfracombe selling seaweed to tourists. He had the seaweed bagged up and was selling it by the pound as a cure for arthritis. Each pound of seaweed came with a leaflet containing enthusiastic quotes from sufferers who had been able to throw away their crutches and put their wheelchairs into the garage as a result of just a few weeks’ treatment. Jack told his customers they had to boil the stuff and inhale the vapour, and he was doing surprisingly good business. The funny thing was that the power of the placebo effect is so great that Jack’s seaweed cure probably did more good (and less harm) than most of the dangerous pills doctors prescribe. Having said this it is, I think, only fair to point out that Jack is a patient of mine and he readily accepts the regular prescriptions for anti-inflammatory drugs which I give to him for his own arthritis. I once had to give him a medical examination for an insurance policy. ‘Can you touch your toes without bending your knees?’ I asked him. ‘I haven’t the foggiest,’ he said, looking puzzled, ‘but why on earth would I want to do that?’

‘You’re not sure he sold them to Jack?’ I said to Adrienne.

She shook her head.

‘I’ll ring Patchy,’ I said. I didn’t want to drive all the way to Jack Ladd’s place only to find that he knew nothing about the vacuum cleaners.

I left Patsy and Adrienne alone and went into my surgery to call Patchy. He was where I thought he would be – at the Duck and Puddle, having rehydration therapy.

I was in a bit of difficulty, of course, because I wasn’t supposed to tell Patchy that Adrienne had hidden her jewellery and £57 in her old vacuum cleaner.

‘Patsy has an old vacuum cleaner that she wants to get rid of,’ I said when Frank had handed the phone to Patchy. ‘It seems a pity to throw it away. Do you know anyone who’s likely to buy it? It might be worth a couple of quid.’

‘Try Jack Ladd,’ said Patchy immediately. ‘He’ll probably buy it. I sold him two clapped out old vacuum cleaners this morning. He paid me £2 for the pair. Haven’t got the foggiest what he’s going to do with them. One of them works a bit so he can probably flog it on to some poor punter.’

I thanked him, went back to the kitchen and told Patsy and Adrienne the good news. ‘I forgot to ask where Jack works these days,’ I added, cursing myself.

‘He has a workshop in Blasting Daily now,’ said Adrienne.

Patsy and I looked at her. ‘Where did you say?’ asked Patsy.

‘Blasting Daily,’ repeated Adrienne. ‘It’s a village on the road to Exeter.’

‘Blasting Daily isn’t a village,’ I said.

‘Of course it is,’ insisted Adrienne. ‘There’s a big sign.’

‘That’s just a warning sign telling people that the quarry does blasting every day,’ I explained.

‘Well, it looks like a road sign,’ said Adrienne indignantly. ‘It’s a big sign with lettering on it, just like a road sign.’ She frowned and thought for a while. ‘I thought it was a funny name for a village,’ she admitted, ‘but there’s a village down near Sidmouth called Cat and Fiddle and there’s a place in the Cotswolds called Loose Chippings.’

‘There isn’t a place called Loose Chippings,’ I said, rather wearily. Patsy’s sister is a lovely lady but when she was made, I think the Great Creator got all her wiring mixed up. ‘There’s a Chipping Campden, a Chipping Sodbury and Chipping Norton. Chipping is an old English word for ‘market’. But there isn’t a village called Loose Chippings.’

‘I’ve seen signs for Loose Chippings,’ said Patsy, supporting her sister. ‘I think it is a village. We used to go through it often when we were girls. We had an aunt who lived in Bourton-on-the-Water.’

‘It’s just a sign they put up when they’ve been repairing the road,’ I said, with commendable patience.

Patsy looked unconvinced. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Pretty sure.’

‘So that probably explains why the village always seems to be in a different place?’

‘It probably does,’ I agreed.

‘Ah,’ said Patsy. ‘I had noticed that it seemed to move about. One day we would see it when we went to Cirencester and then another day we’d see it when we went to Cheltenham. But the Cotswolds are very confusing. I never know where I am or where I’m going.’

‘I’ll buy you a compass from Peter Marshall’s shop,’ I promised.

‘Don’t you dare!’ said Patsy, laughing. ‘The last lot he sold all pointed the wrong way. They put the magnet bit on the wrong end of the needle so the little arrow thing always seemed to point south.’

‘I went to Peter Marshall’s to buy a toasting fork last week,’ said Adrienne. ‘All the toasters that we got for our wedding stopped working and so I thought I’d make toast in front of the fire. But Patchy was quite cross and made me take the fork back. He said it was just an ordinary fork and that you’d get your hands burnt if you used it to make toast.’

‘All those toasters stopped working?’

‘All of them,’ said Adrienne with a nod. ‘They caught fire, one by one. Patchy said he thought there was a fault in the wiring.’

Just about everyone in the village had given Adrienne and Patchy a toaster as a wedding present. We’d bought them cheaply from Peter Marshall. We gave the happy couple proper presents later, for the toasters were a joke. Still, I hadn’t thought they’d all break down so quickly.

‘I’ll go and see Jack,’ I told them.

‘We were just kidding about there being a place called Loose Chippings,’ said Patsy.

I looked at her. I didn’t think I believed her but I wasn’t entirely sure. ‘What does your vacuum cleaner look like?’ I asked Adrienne. ‘The one with all the stuff hidden inside it.’

‘It’s an upright which is sort of grey and has a long lead attached to it,’ Adrienne said. ‘It’s dusty on the outside but quite clean inside.’

I sighed. ‘You’d better come with me,’ I told her. ‘If Jack is collecting vacuum cleaners he’s probably got a hundred that match that description – apart from the ‘clean inside’ bit.’

So Adrienne and I (together with Ben) climbed into the Rolls Royce and headed off for the picturesque Devon village of Blasting Daily in the hope that we might be in time to rescue the missing vacuum cleaner and its assorted contents.

Jack Ladd, the new owner of Adrienne’s vacuum cleaner, is somewhere between 30 and 100-years-old. His medical records are incomplete and I doubt if any official body has any record of his existence, let alone his date of birth. He is the sort of man who shaves once a month, last bathed a week last Wednesday and keeps his dog on a piece of string rather than a leash not because he spends all his money on beer and cigarettes but because he cannot see the point in spending money on a dog lead when a piece of string will serve the same purpose perfectly well.

Actually, I don’t know what it is about the dog owners of Devon but hardly any of them ever seem to buy proper leads for their animals. Mrs Marigold Stickers (whose husband was christened Cedric but is, inevitably, known by one and all as Bill) has been seen using an old stocking as a lead and Peter Marshall once told me that Mrs Felicity Dingle, Bilbury’s world renowned shoe designer, once came into his shop with her dog at the other end of a substantial, black, lacy brassiere. She told him that she had come out without a dog lead and then realised that the field through which she intended to walk was full of sheep and lambs. Rather than test her dog's good reputation, and her own reputation as a caring county woman, she decided that she would need to create a lead out of some article of clothing. Since she was wearing socks rather than stockings or tights, and her coat was fastened with buttons rather than a belt, she decided that she had to sacrifice an item which, in a quiz at the Duck and Puddle, she once described as her most valuable possession (and the one item she would grab if her house caught fire) in the cause of dog control and good neighbourly relations.

We found Jack spraying artificial rust onto an ancient perambulator.

'Hello, Jack,' I said, thinking it probably best if I did the negotiating. Jack is a well-known misogynist and I felt certain he would take advantage of my sister-in-law if she attempted to negotiate with Jack herself. Besides, I have often fancied that I could wheel and deal as well as anyone in Bilbury if I had the chance. Thumper, Patchy and Peter Marshall always seem to think that they're the only ones who can make a few bob buying and selling things. But how difficult can it be?

'The Germans love these old prams,' he explained. 'But they like them rusty so that they can restore them and feel they've done something useful. Putting rust on doubles the price I can get.'

'Patchy Fogg sold you a couple of vacuum cleaners this morning,' I said, 'but he didn't know that they'd got sentimental value. Adrienne would like to buy them back.' This hadn't come out quite as I had intended and I immediately realised that I had put myself into a hopeless negotiating position.

Jack grunted something incomprehensible.

'They've been in her family for a long while and she didn't want to get rid of them,' I explained, making things worse.

'I've got a buyer,' said Jack, stopping what he was doing and standing back to examine his handiwork. 'There's quite a market for old vacuum cleaners. People collect them.'

I looked at him disbelievingly. 'Who on earth collects old vacuum cleaners?'

'You'd be surprised,' he said, 'I sell a lot of stuff to museums of household appliances.'

'You're kidding!'

'Not at all,' said Jack. 'Collecting old vacuum cleaners and washing machines is all the rage these days. In Germany there's a Museum von Haushaltsgeraten. And in Sweden there's the Museet av Hushallsapparater.' He pronounced these names as though he really knew what he was talking about. I can never, ever tell when Jack is having me on. He's such a good liar he would have made a great politician.

'How much do they pay for a vacuum cleaner?' I asked him, knowing that the answer was going to upset me.

'Oh £40 or £50 each,' said Jack with an unconcerned air.

'What?' I demanded. 'That's crazy! You can buy a brand new vacuum cleaner for far less than that.'

'It's age and patina they're buying,' said Jack, wagging a knowledgeable finger. 'These old cleaners are rare, you see.'

I sighed. I always know when I am defeated. I turned to Adrienne. 'Which is the one you want?' I asked her quietly.

Adrienne pointed to one of the vacuum cleaners.

'How much do you want for that one?' I asked Jack.

He looked at the vacuum cleaner, picked it up, and examined it. '£60, since it's you, doctor.'

'How much for anyone else?' I asked.

'£50,' said Jack. He laughed. 'No, go on, I'm teasing you,' he said. 'You can have it for £50.'

'That's crazy!' I said.

'Take it or leave it,' said Jack with a shrug.

'We'll take it,' I sighed. I took out my wallet and found that I only had £30. I turned to Adrienne. 'Can you lend me £20 to buy back your vacuum cleaner?'

Adrienne opened her handbag, took out her purse and gave me two £10 notes. 'Congratulations,' she said drily. 'Your negotiating skills are awesome.'

I glared at her and handed the £50 to Jack. He handed me the vacuum cleaner. 'Do you want to buy an old washing machine?' he asked. 'I've got one that was made in 1952. It doesn't work but it would make a great talking point in your new museum.'

I glared at him. 'One of these days,' I warned him, 'you'll cut yourself and need stitching up.'

'Don't worry about me,' said Jack, laughing.

'My stuff isn't here,' said Adrienne. She had opened up the vacuum cleaner and looked inside.

I turned to Jack. 'Did you find anything inside the hoover?'

He shook his head and seemed genuinely puzzled. 'Why on earth would I bother looking inside it?'

'I'll give you another £50 for the things that were inside,' said Adrienne desperately. 'The jewels are all paste.

Nothing is valuable. But they're worth that much to me.'

'Honest, love,' said Jack, 'I haven't looked inside and I haven't taken anything out.'

Strangely, I believed him. 'Can I sell this damned thing back to you?'

He looked at me and looked at the vacuum cleaner. 'It doesn't work,' he said.

'I know,' I said. 'But you can sell it to a museum.'

He laughed. 'You're kidding! Who is going to buy this piece of rubbish?'

'But you said…'

'That was when I was selling it,' said Jack, 'now you want me to buy it. I'll give you a quid in the hope that I can get it working.'

I stared at him for a full thirty seconds and then handed him the cleaner. He gave me a £1 in coins. 'Let me give you a tip, doctor,' said Jack, 'and you can have this for free.'

I looked at him and waited.

'Stick to doctoring,' he said.

Adrienne and I drove back to Bilbury in silence. She asked me to take her home.

As we drew up in front of their home, Patchy came out to see us. He was smiling and carrying a plastic bag. When Adrienne got out of the car he handed her the bag. She looked inside and her expression changed dramatically. 'My jewels!' she cried.

'And £57,' said Patchy. 'And our marriage licence. Everything is there. If you want to put them somewhere then I suggest you put them into the floor safe in the bedroom. Hiding them in an old hoover is daft.'

Adrienne threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. She then ran indoors to put her treasures away.

'I paid £50 for that damned old hoover,' I told Patchy.

'Teach you a lesson,' said Patchy, with a wink. 'Stick to doctoring.'

I drove home.

'Someone put this through the letter box,' said Patsy, handing me a grubby brown envelope.

I opened the envelope. There was £50 in notes inside.

'Did you see who left it?' I asked. I put £20 aside to give back to Adrienne.

'It was someone on a motorbike. He had a helmet on but he looked like Jack Ladd,' said Patsy. 'I recognised the jacket. He's had that jacket since I was a little girl.' She looked puzzled. 'What's this all about?'

'Oh, nothing much. Adrienne and I have both been taught a lesson, that's all,' I told her, feeling rather embarrassed.

A Small Victory

I was examining Mrs Pearce's left knee when the noise of a jet hurtling overhead made both of us jump. The noise also made Mrs Pearce scream in alarm and sit upright. She had been reclining while I examined her and was so startled by the noise that she lost her balance and very nearly rolled off the couch.

Startled by the noise of the jet and my patient's scream, I jumped back rather suddenly and knocked over the screen which stands near to the examination couch in order to give patients privacy when they undress and dress themselves. Mrs Pearce's voluminous outer garments, festooned over the screen, fell with it. Mrs Pearce feels the cold and knows that the best way to keep out the cold is to wear several layers of clothing.

Mrs Pearce is a spiritualist who is famous for her ability to see into the past. We've had one or two of these in North Devon in recent years. In addition to holding meetings and providing private 'readings', Mrs Pearce grows, nurtures and admires a small but impressive collection of cacti. It is, she has told me several times, the most extensive cacti collection in North Devon. She also attends Iolanthe Fielding's belly dancing classes which are held in Kentisbury Village Hall.

I once attended one of Mrs Pearce's meetings in a hall in Combe Martin. It was very well patronised and at 50 pence a head entrance fee, she probably did well for herself.

'Do I have anyone in the room for whom the letter E has meaning?' she asked.

About two dozen people put their hands up.

'A male,' said Mrs Pearce and half the hands went down.

'He was quite old when he died.' A third of the remaining hands disappeared.

And by this simple, logical method she narrowed down the possibilities to a woman who lived in the village of Berrynarbor.

'There was a connection to the railways,' said Mrs Pearce firmly. Her eyes were now closed and she was clearly 'channelling'.

I thought that the business about the railways was a safe bet since a huge number of people of that age worked on the railways, travelled by rail or had a connection with someone who did.

But, disappointingly, the woman from Berrynarbor shook her head.

'Ah. There should have been,' said Mrs Pearce. She thought for a moment. 'You perhaps didn't know of the connection,' she said sagely. 'There may have been a family secret. Something no one talked about.' This seemed to me to be pushing it a bit. I couldn't see why anyone who worked on the railways, or who travelled by rail, would need to keep the connection a secret.

The woman from Berrynarbor looked confused.

'Maybe he used the railways for assignations,' said Mrs Pearce.

And I have to admit I thought that was a brilliant way to wriggle out of her potential embarrassment.

The evening continued in much the same way and at the end of it everyone seemed very satisfied. Some took it seriously, others regarded it as entertainment.

Mrs Pearce also predicts the future and her words of wisdom sometimes appear in the national press. She has forecast that Prince Charles will marry a nice Swedish Princess and that the royal couple will have three children – all daughters. She also says that Scotland will win the football World Cup in 1982 and that by the year 2000, American astronauts will have colonised Mars.

I confess that I never had much time for Mrs Pearce.

It has always seemed to me that she gives vulnerable people false hopes and expectations, with the inevitable, but tragic, result that she ends up distributing nothing but copious quantities of disappointment.

'What in the name of Hades was that?' I asked my receptionist Miss Johnson, who, having heard the scream, had rung through to the surgery to check that all was well. 'Are we being attacked?'

Miss Johnson does not feel entirely comfortable with bad language and in her book the words 'What in the name of Hades was that?' would probably necessitate my putting one of the new-fangled 50 pence pieces into the surgery swear box if we had one.

'I think it was an aeroplane,' replied Miss Johnson rather stiffly. 'Probably one of those little ones which go quite quickly. Would you like your morning coffee before the next patient?' I didn't know whether she was upset by my bad language or by the fact that I had allowed or caused a patient to scream.

I am very fond of Miss Johnson but she can be a little stiff at times.

I persuaded Mrs Pearce to lie down again, put back the screen, re-draped her clothes over the top of it, marvelling at the vast number of hooks and eyes and press studs which seemed to be involved, and re-examined the errant knee.

‘You’ve twisted it,’ I told her. ‘You need to wear a support bandage for a while. It will get better.’

‘It’s arthritis is it?’ she said.

‘No,’ I said patiently. ‘It isn’t arthritis. You’ve twisted a ligament. You just need to rest for a while and wear a support bandage.’ I smiled and made a foolish attempt at a joke. ‘And no football for a month.’

‘No football?’ said Mrs Pearce. ‘I don’t watch football.’

‘No playing football,’ I said. ‘Tell the coach that Manchester United will have to manage without you.’

‘I’ve never played football,’ said Mrs Pearce. She thought for a moment. ‘I used to play hockey when I was at school.’

‘OK,’ I said, regretting the attempted humour.

‘And I’m 87,’ she said. ‘Why did you think I’d be playing football?’

‘Just a joke,’ I said. ‘You’ve got the sort of injury footballers get.’

‘But I haven’t been playing football!’

‘No. I understand. Perhaps you twisted it doing something else.’

‘I play golf once a week at Ilfracombe. I twisted my leg while playing golf. My ball ended up in one of those sandpits.’

‘That would be it,’ I said. I hadn’t previously seen Mrs Pearce as a golfer. She was not a fast mover. I wondered how early in the morning she had to start in order to finish a round before nightfall.

‘What would be what?’

‘You twisted your knee playing golf.’

‘I just told you that, young man! Are you deaf?’ Mrs Pearce glowered at me and shook her head. ‘Are you going to give me some tablets for the arthritis?’

I wrote out a prescription for a knee support and made a note to myself to ask Bradshaw, the district nurse, to pop round and show her what to do with it. Left to her own devices Mrs Pearce would probably open a tin of steak, pop in the bandage and try to turn the whole confection into a stew. I don’t think she is very far away from dementia and she does eat a lot of stews. I added a few mild painkilling tablets to the prescription.

As she was leaving a second plane zoomed overhead, rattling the chimney pots and shaking the whole surgery.

‘Are we at war?’ asked Mrs Pearce.

‘I don’t think so,’ I told her. ‘Miss Johnson would have told me if we were. Miss Johnson would certainly know if we were at war.’

‘Pity,’ said Mrs Pearce. ‘It’s about time we had a good war. People get flabby and complacent if they don’t have a good war every so often.’

When I’d finished the morning surgery, and had completed the visits I popped into the Duck and Puddle to see if Frank knew anything about the planes that had flown over that morning. Frank, being the landlord of the only pub in the village, knows about everything that has happened and about most things that are about to happen. Even Miss Johnson gets much of her information from him. Frank was outside the pub watering one of his hanging baskets.

According to Frank, the half of the village that hadn’t already lost its hearing and its senses was up in arms about the two jets which had buzzed the village.

Mr Jenkins at Honeydew Farm had apparently reported that eight of his best milking cows had been so startled that he would be surprised if they produced more than a gallon of milk between them. Mr Larchminster had been painting his garage and had fallen off a stepladder. He hadn’t broken anything but he had spilt a good deal of paint and the area of rough ground in front of his garage was now painted in ‘Creamy Yellow’ patches. The hairdresser working at Peter Marshall’s new multifaceted emporium had jumped so much that he had snipped off a large chunk of hair belonging to Gerald Merrymore. The hairdresser had had to give Gerald an army haircut in order to disguise the mishap.

As we talked, another jet flew over. This one came over the village so low that we both instinctively ducked. The jet was closely followed by two pursuers.

‘We ought to do something about this,’ said Frank who often becomes indignant but never actually does anything.

‘Can I borrow your telephone?’ I asked. ‘I’m going to ring the Ministry of Defence to find out what is going on.’

A surprisingly pleasant fellow at the Ministry in London told me that the local RAF station had recently reorganised its route for low flying exercises. ‘Your village is on a hill which our pilots are using as a sighting point,’ he said merrily.

‘Do you mean that this is going to happen often?’ I asked.

‘Oh yes,’ said the man from the Ministry. He didn’t seem to think we ought to mind.

‘So what are we going to do about it?’ asked Thumper that evening.

I had organised an impromptu, unofficial action committee and he, Patsy, Anne (Thumper’s common law wife), Patchy, Adrienne, Peter Marshall and I were sitting in the bar at the Duck and Puddle, trying to decide how to deal with this new enemy.

We decided that we would write letters to the Ministry.

I wrote a letter to the Minister of Defence informing him that I intended to take up kite flying and that I thought he ought to know about this new hobby of mine so that he could warn the pilots of his noisy aeroplanes to avoid the area. I said that I didn't want any of his low flying planes getting tangled up with my kite string.

Thumper wrote a letter to the Minister informing him that he had been put in charge of the Bilbury Firework Display Committee and that he would be testing fireworks for the Committee on a regular basis in readiness for the quarterly displays which were being planned.

And Patchy wrote to say that he had become a keen pigeon fancier and that his pigeons would be flying over Bilbury on a regular but unpredictable basis.

Three days later a man came down from the Ministry to see us.

'Are you all serious?' he asked us.

We all nodded and said that we were indeed very serious and that we hoped that our activities did not put his aeroplanes at risk but that we felt sure that he would understand that we were perfectly entitled to fly kites, keep pigeons and set off fireworks.

He had to admit that although he might wish it were otherwise there were no laws forbidding our activities and he went away looking extremely unhappy.

A week after that we each received letters from someone sounding very important who told us that the Ministry had instructed the local RAF aerodrome that, on safety grounds, all future flights should be routed away from Bilbury and Bilbury Hill.

We celebrated our small victory with a modest firework display and six bottles of Polish Champagne which Peter Marshall said was just as good as the French stuff but much better value since it is the bubbles which give champagne it's joie de vivre and the bubbles in Polish Champagne are every bit as good as the bubbles in French Champagne.

The Visitor

I was still in short trousers when I decided that I would like to be a doctor. My reasons then were simple enough.

I had no great urge to cure the world of all its ills and no desire to find a wonderful new cure for a dreadful old disease. There was no grand purpose. I knew nothing of any of those things.

I wanted to be a doctor because, from what I had seen of our rather elderly, definitely old-fashioned family general practitioner, medicine was a rather dignified and respectful profession. Our family doctor helped and respected his patients and they respected him. I believed that practising as a doctor, particularly as a GP, would enable me to help people in a very real, practical way. What better way to earn a living could there possibly be?

To a small boy, it seemed a good way to live.

Ninety per cent of the time one could manage one’s work in a fairly methodical fashion and for ten per cent of the time there was enough excitement to keep one on one’s toes.

No relatives of mine had ever practised medicine, the nearest we had ever come was an uncle who made false teeth in his spare time, so my view was strictly from the outside. Nevertheless, I don’t think my childhood view of medicine was very far from the truth.

Back in the 1950s, a couple of decades ago now, general practitioners were badly organised; they blundered through their days with little more administrative help than a well-thumbed pocket diary.

I thought that sort of life would suit me down to the ground.

Even then I knew that if I had a job in an office, with a desk and a filing cabinet, I would probably keep things in a mess.

The chance to work with people appealed to me enormously. I was not in the slightest put off by the fact that, judging by what I had seen of it, general practice was an unpredictable way to live – organised chaos rather than neat and precise. That was the way that our old family doctor managed his life.

He had two big assets, which made him perfect for the job.

First, he was a kind and well-meaning man.

Second, he was interested in people. He liked to sit and listen. He always had time to listen. He was gentle and full of sympathy, a commodity which he handed out freely and generously. He was far more careful with the pills. He was as wary as his patients were of modern drugs.

When I arrived in Bilbury, just a few years ago, I was pleased and relieved to see that Dr Brownlow was the spitting image (mentally and spiritually as well as physically) of the GP I knew when I was a boy.

Heaven knows what that poor old fellow would make of modern medical practice: the endless gadgets which have been introduced, the filing systems, the appointment systems, the tape recorders, the secretaries, the group practices and so on.

The advances in diagnosis and therapy have been few enough (despite the claims and boasts made by the medical unions and the drug industry) but there have been an abundance of advances in the world of administration. The managers have taken over, and today medical practice is regarded by many as a business. Medicine has been organised and rationalised. The time and motion study experts have cleared away the comfortable old desks, the piles of letters, the dog-eared diaries and the battered filing cabinets. They have replaced the peace, quiet and confidentiality of the consulting room with forms, more forms and yet more forms.

And, of course, doctors in big city practices are now experimenting with computers.

In the big, modern practices everything is organised.

You can be ill from nine to ten but after that you must wait until six unless you telephone the surgery before twelve in which case you can be seen between three and four on Mondays and Wednesdays and four to five on Tuesdays and Thursdays unless you need an appointment for the special vaccination clinic (run by the nurse) or the child clinic (run by another nurse).

If you need a course of treatment and you are looked after in a group practice then you will probably see a different doctor each time you visit the surgery. And if you need to be seen at night you will be seen by someone else.

The continuity has gone out of medicine.

In towns and cities, everything is carefully arranged so that the doctor can take six out of seven evenings off to watch the television in peace. The majority of doctors in city practices have most weekends free of calls.

In most health centres (they don’t call them ‘surgeries’ any more), five, six or even more doctors share ten, twelve or fifteen thousand patients. There is no longer any such thing as ‘our doctor’. I know of practices where there are 24 doctors and dozens of receptionists. Doctors in these practices know nothing about their patients and understand nothing about their lives.

My practice is very different. I practise medicine in a very old-fashioned way. I am on call for my patients for 24 hours a day and seven days a week. I am never off duty. I have less than a thousand patients and I have been in just about every house and cottage in Bilbury. I know every family's secrets (some comical and some dark) and I know everyone by name. I happily visit my patients in their homes because many of them, particularly the elderly, do not have their own transport. I often spend a couple of hours a day travelling to visit my patients. But I would rather have my sort of medicine than any other sort.

The old-fashioned doctor used to practice from a room at home.

The dining room was used as a waiting room and when he wanted a break the doctor slipped into the kitchen for a cup of coffee. His wife helped organise the practice. There might be a receptionist but if a patient needed stitches removing or a graze bandaged it would often be the doctor's wife who did the work.

These days, in modern health centres, it is nurses who take blood for the laboratory and it is nurses who syringe the wax out of ears. In the old days, it was the GP himself who did all these things, carefully cementing his relationship with his patients. In the new world, medicine is now practised in purpose built health centres.

In the old days, the doctor's surgery and the waiting room were probably a bit shabby. The magazines were of historic interest. The notices were a bit out-of-date. But it was a real place. There were pictures on the wall, ornaments on the window ledge and souvenirs on the mantelpiece.

Modern doctors tend to practice in concrete, steel and glass shell structures where the doctors go through the motions of being doctors and the patients hardly dare go through the motions of being patients. The doctor is now a technician. He is no longer known by the families he treats, he is no longer loved as one of the family.

Medicine isn't practised any longer, it is just a job. And it pays well if you have things organised properly. If you have a good appointments system, enough special grants and a few efficient secretaries and receptionists you can make a very good living. There are clinics at the hospital to be done, factories which need doctors, immunisation clinics to be staffed and life insurance medicals to fit in during the afternoons. There are lots of ways to make money as long as you don't spend too long with the damned patients.

But what is the point of a life lived like that?

'May you always have enough,' was my grandfather's favourite saying.

But some people don't seem to know when they've had enough. However much they have, they always want more.

My practice is very old-fashioned and would probably appal many 'modern' doctors. I practise at home. Patients who want to see me in my surgery come to Bilbury Grange.

I am, every day, glad I answered Dr Brownlow's advertisement for a young doctor in Bilbury.

When I talk to my friends who are in general practice in towns and cities I feel as if I have come onto the scene fifty years too late. It's rather like arriving at your own funeral.

I don't want to put the clock back to the days when single-handed practitioners all fought heroically to save their patients with leeches, blood-letting and herbal remedies which might or might not prove fatal.

I don't want to go back to the days when the doctor was the local conscience, the respected and respectable pillar of the community.

I just want to be a doctor who practices in a world where it is people who matter. I want to organise my life my own way, make my own mistakes and see my own patients through their problems, their anxieties and their crises.

I was, once again, reminded how lucky I am when a friend of mine from medical school came to stay for a day or two.

'I still don't know how you cope,' said William when he visited Bilbury for the second time. That was almost a year ago. 'Nothing ever changes here,' he said, 'everything always seems the same. Aren't you bored?'

Bored? How could I possibly be bored? There wasn't time to be bored!

William is a GP who works in a large, modern practice near to the town of Wolverhampton, right in the heart of the English midlands. He is probably the brightest person I have ever met. When we talk he always seems to be giving me his full attention, but I can never quite dismiss from my mind the thought that he only needs to use one part of his brain to concentrate fully on our conversation. I am always conscious that while talking to me his brain is dealing with half a dozen other issues at the same time, and that he is giving them his full attention too, in the way that Grand Masters such as Bobby Fischer can play two dozen games of chess simultaneously and, if asked to do so, play them all blindfolded. When William got married I was his best man. It was, I remember, the fourth wedding Patsy and I had attended that year, since many of the students with whom I had studied had chosen to get married at the same time.

When he came back for a third visit, William had changed his attitude a little and seemed pleased to see that things had stayed much the same as they had been on his previous visit.

Indeed, if anything, Bilbury had moved backwards rather than forwards.

For one thing, Peter Marshall had somehow managed to start delivering newspapers which were a day old when they arrived. Actually, I rather enjoyed reading a daily newspaper which was a day out-of-date. There is no point in getting excited about anything in a newspaper which has more in common with history than current affairs.

I did ask Peter what had happened and he muttered something about his distributor having delivery problems but Gilly Parsons at the Duck and Puddle told me that she believed that Peter had done a money saving deal with the wholesaler and was buying day old newspapers as waste and then selling them with some cock and bull story about delivery problems.

I sometimes fear that the big chain retailers probably have a man following Peter's business activities. What happens in Bilbury today will probably happen in London, Paris and New York tomorrow.

'It's a relief to find a bit of England that hasn't succumbed to the modern enthusiasm for needless change,' commented William, as we sat in front of a roaring log fire in the living room at Bilbury Grange. I love open log fires and tend to have them even in the summer if there is a chill in the air.

It was after lunch and I had done my visits for the day and had no professional commitments until the evening surgery at 5.00 p.m. I had recently begun starting the evening surgery at 5.00 p.m. a couple of evenings a week in order to make it easier for patients who worked in Barnstaple or Taunton to attend. This wasn't an entirely administrative move for I had realised that if I changed the times of the surgery, and made myself more easily accessible, patients would come and tell me about their problems earlier, rather than waiting for things to get worse. As a bonus, I found myself having to do fewer home visits. When you work alone, as I do, and are on call for 24 hours a day and 365 days a year, anything you can do to make life slightly easier for everyone is worth doing.

'Mind you,' William added, 'I've read your books about Bilbury and you certainly have some odd things happening around here. Until I came here and saw for myself I didn't think so many strange things could happen in one place. It's the way you look at things, I suppose. Always on the look-out for the quirky!'

William and I were chatting and talking about our different lifestyles and working days. Patsy and William's wife, Brenda, were in the summerhouse with all the children. Since Thumper put a wood stove into the summerhouse, we have used it far more often. It makes a wonderful hideaway garden room.

Before becoming a general practitioner, William had worked in hospital where he had specialised in general medicine. He had reached far in the hierarchy as a senior registrar but had resigned and moved into general practice when it became clear that he was not likely to obtain a post as a consultant until he was well past his fortieth birthday.

He was tired of the politicisation of the hospital career ladder, weary of still being officially classified as a 'junior hospital doctor', and so with a wife and two small children to look after he decided to jump ship and become a family doctor, albeit an exceptionally well-qualified one.

'I work with seven other partners and two assistants and three nurses,' said William thoughtfully. He leant forward and knocked the dottle from his pipe into the fireplace. He then took a brown leather tobacco pouch from his pocket. He also took out a small, rather clever tool which has gadgets which he can use to poke around both in the bowl and along the stem. It's a sort of Swiss Army penknife for smokers and it looked so much fun that it genuinely made me think of taking up pipe smoking – simply for the joy of having one of those little gadgets in my pocket.

'But I can't remember the last time I actually managed to sit down and discuss clinical problems with anyone,' he continued.

We sat in silence for a while, watching the logs on the fire. They were good apple tree logs, and made excellent burning.

The sight of William's pipe smoker's 'friend' (as those little gadgets are sometimes known) made me reach into my pocket and touch my penknife, for no other reason than to reassure me that it was still there. I don't think I've ever grown up for in addition to the usual coins and keys, my pockets are always stuffed with all manner of useful bits and pieces: pencil stubs, paper clips, rubber bands, a small notebook or possibly two, a piece of string, a prescription pad and other miscellaneous and ever changing bits of stuff. I carry the key to start the car but not for the house because we don't bother to lock the house doors. (Although, I confess, I do lock the cupboard where I keep my stock of drugs such as morphine.)

I have heard it said that with a shilling, a piece of string and a pocket-knife a man is prepared for any emergency. The thought dates from late Victorian days and although the shilling is now probably a little light for serious financial emergencies, I still regard the advice as sound. It is certainly the case that the piece of string and the pocket-knife are indispensable. I never go anywhere without both tucked safely into a pocket. My jackets are all baggy but I believe that pockets are there to be used.

I have a small collection of pocket-knives but, although they are perhaps a little larger and heavier than might be preferred, the Swiss Army knives are without a doubt the most useful. They may wear holes in pocket linings faster than Patsy would like but they are enormously useful and I don't think any country doctor should ever leave the house without one.

My favourite version of the famous red Swiss Army knife, and the one which I usually carry in my pocket, is the one which contains two blades, both types of screwdriver, a pair of scissors, a magnifying glass, a corkscrew, a toothpick, a pair of tweezers and a bodger for making holes in conkers. I keep the main blade as sharp as I can make it, on the grounds that if ever I need a knife in an emergency then I'll probably need one with a blade that cuts tougher stuff than butter.

It is widely assumed that the multifunction pocket-knife is a new invention but Patchy Fogg, antique dealer and lover of all things curious, once explained to me that this is definitely not the case.

He told me that cutlers have been making multi-bladed knives since the early years of the 19th century and the most innovative manufacturers created knives as much to show off their skills and their inventiveness as to attract customers. In 1822, the English firm of Rodgers built an extraordinary knife in order to celebrate their royal appointment by George IV. The knife contained an almost unbelievable 1822 separate blades and the creation was known as the 'Year Knife'. The same Mr Rodgers then produced a rather more practical giant knife containing just 75 tools and blades for the Great Exhibition of 1851. I really would love one of these but I suspect the weight would result in a really large hole appearing in my pocket.

William took tobacco from the pouch and slowly and methodically started to pack the bowl of his pipe. He has a variety of pipes and never travels without three or four. Today he was using one of those curved Sherlock Holmes pipes. It had an absolutely huge bowl. He smokes stuff which he buys from a tobacconist who imports the brand just for him. It smells sweeter than any other tobacco I've ever come across. I did try a pipe full once and found it extremely pleasant.

'But don't you talk to your partners?' I asked him, astonished.

'We have plenty of meetings,' he said, with a sigh. 'But we never seem to talk about anything significant.' He continued to pack down the tobacco in his pipe. Like many other pipe smokers he enjoyed the process of preparing a pipe almost as much as he enjoyed the smoking itself.

'We have a practice meeting every Monday evening,' he said, thoughtfully. He stared at the fire for a while. He lives in a modern house which doesn't have a working fireplace and always enjoys staring into the fire at Bilbury Grange. I cannot imagine why a builder would build a house without a working fireplace. Central heating is all very well but if the boiler breaks down or the electricity supply is interrupted it is good to have an alternative source of heat. But then, I suppose that power outages are less likely in an urban area than they are in the wilds of North Devon.

'We used to have the meetings in the back room of a local pub but one of the new partners objected and said it wasn't seemly for doctors to discuss practice business in a public house.' He sighed wistfully. 'So now we have our meetings in the practice waiting room. A bloody boring place it is too. And whereas we could have drinks and snacks sent in when we met in the pub, we now have to put up with milky stuff that could be tea or could be coffee. And if we're lucky, someone slips two rich tea biscuits into the saucer.'

'What sort of things do you discuss?' I asked.

I could still remember my own regular meetings with Dr Brownlow, my late predecessor, and the man who had brought me to Bilbury. We had often discussed clinical problems. I always found these meetings enormously helpful and I have no hesitation in saying that I learned more by talking to Dr Brownlow than I learned at medical school. Since Dr Brownlow's death, I had rather envied William the ability to discuss clinical quandaries and dilemmas with a large group of colleagues.

'We discuss administration, finance and employee problems,' he told me, with a weariness which I definitely did not envy. 'We argue about the on call rota, and there will always be someone who claims that they shouldn't be expected to work bank holidays because they're too young or too old or have visitors coming or have children. We have six receptionists and we have to discuss their problems too.'

I stared at him.

'We're running a small business,' he explained, looking rather embarrassed. 'We're actually members of the Federation of Small Businesses! We have to discuss the utility company contract, car parking problems and difficulties with the telephone company and the switching facilities we use.' Not for the first time I gave silent thanks that I worked as a single-handed practitioner and had no partners with whom to discuss things. I felt lucky that my wife, Patsy, and Miss Johnson, my receptionist, dealt with the administration of the practice and made sure that the bills were paid and that there were fresh flowers and magazines in the waiting room. 'Couldn't you have a clinical meeting on another evening?' I asked.

'Not a chance.' said William. 'On Tuesdays we have a meeting with the social workers. They insist that we meet with them in order to discuss social problems. It's always a complete waste of time. I can never understand what they're talking about. Every Wednesday we have a meeting with the health visitors and practice nurses. Those are the meetings when we plan our vaccination programmes. The senior partners are very keen on vaccination programmes because we make a ton of money out of them. On Thursdays we meet with the reception staff who tell us all their problems, anxieties and complaints. And on Fridays we meet the Patients' Consultative Group.'

'What on earth is the Patients' Consultative Group?' I asked him.

'One of the partners read something in a magazine advising doctors to consult their patients more regularly,' said William. 'So now we have a weekly meeting where we discuss practice management issues and listen to complaints and suggestions from the group of largely self-elected patients.'

'What on earth do you find to talk about?' I asked, genuinely curious.

'Oh, all sorts of things,' he said wearily. 'The patients' representatives have been pushing for some time for us to put new curtains up in the waiting room. We agreed that we needed new curtains but no one can agree on the colour. We talk about car parking problems because there is only room for a dozen cars in the practice car park and there is very little parking in the streets around the health centre. And, of course, there are always lots of worries about the appointments system.'

'Ah,' I said. 'You have one of those appointment systems do you!'

William stared at me. 'I'd forgotten you didn't have an appointments system,' he said. 'I'm amazed that you're still holding out. How on earth does that work for you?'

'Very well,' I replied. 'People who want to be seen just totter along to the surgery, give their name to Miss Johnson and sit down in the waiting room. If Miss Johnson is away for any reason, Patsy stands in for her. When one patient leaves Miss Johnson calls out the name of the next patient on the list.'

'But don't patients have to wait for hours?'

'Not usually. And they don't seem to mind if they do have to wait a while. People bring their daily paper or their knitting. If there's a bit of a queue they generally pop along to Peter Marshall's shop and do a few chores there. If they miss their place in the queue then they just fit in a bit later. It works very well and most patients like it because there is none of this business of waiting days or weeks for an appointment. I do a surgery every weekday morning and every evening except Wednesdays and a surgery for emergencies on Saturday mornings. Patients seem to find that the whole thing works quite satisfactorily. And they don't have to waste time and money ringing the surgery to make an appointment. And I don't have to hire extra staff to answer telephone calls from people wanting to make appointments.'

William shook his head. 'I envy you,' he said. 'Believe me, progress isn't always what it's cracked up to be.'

'So you and your colleagues really don't have much time left for discussing clinical problems?' I said.

'None at all,' said William, looking rather sad. He took a box of matches from his jacket pocket and removed a match. He lit it and held the flame against the tobacco in his pipe, puffed and sucked in the way pipe smokers always do when trying to get things going satisfactorily. When he was happy that the pipe was alight, he shook the match from side to side to put out the flame and then threw the dead match into the fire. 'Believe me,' he said quite seriously, 'I envy you the simplicity of a single-handed practice.'

He then went on to tell me that he had heard that the Government and the medical establishment were determined to force all GPs to work in group practices and to introduce appointment systems.

'They'll have a job to do that with people like me,' I said. 'Bilbury is too far away from other towns for a group practice to be able to look after the villagers, and there are nowhere near enough people here to keep a group practice occupied.'

'But you had trouble a year or two ago!' said William.

I agreed that my single-handed practice had been closed down for a while when administrators decided to streamline medical services in the area and to allocate my patients to doctors working in the nearby town of Barnstaple. The residents of Bilbury were not happy about this and there was much delight when the doctors in Barnstaple eventually got tired of driving out to Bilbury on dark and rainy nights and the health authorities were persuaded to relent and to allow me to reopen the practice.

Our conversation was then interrupted by the ringing of the telephone. The caller was Mr Avery-Ware (a bachelor with more than a roving eye who is known to female villagers as 'Hans' – a soubriquet which he finds amusing), asking me to visit his neighbour, Mrs Harborough. Mr Avery-Ware is quite indomitable and as lively as a cricket and looks twenty years younger than he is. When he celebrated his 80th birthday he told me with a glint in one eye (the other had a rather advanced cataract which he refuses to have dealt with) that the best years of his life were yet to come.

Mr Avery-Ware didn't know what was wrong with Mrs Harborough, just that his neighbour had knocked on his door and asked him to ring me and ask me to call round. It was, he believed, her husband who needed help.

Like many people in the village, Mrs Harborough doesn't have a telephone. When those without telephones need something they simply ask someone nearby who has one to make the call for them. There never seems to be any ill-feeling about this. Indeed, villagers whose homes are blessed with telephones usually feel important and indispensable because of their links to their outside world.

'I'm sorry,' I said, when I put down the telephone. 'I have to just pop out. I shouldn't be more than half an hour. Help yourself to whisky! Tell Patsy I've had to pop out to see Mrs Harborough.'

'I wonder,' began William, hesitantly, 'if you'd mind if I sort of tagged along? I'd really like to see a bit of rural medicine in the flesh, so to speak.'

I said I'd be delighted and explained that country medical practice is a little different to town practice in that although it requires the usual mixture of medical knowledge and a supply of common sense, mixed together with a dollop of lateral thinking, it also requires a good deal of local knowledge. Instead of being neatly laid out in logically numbered houses, my patients have a tendency to live in isolated cottages and houses which have names not numbers. The nameplates for most village properties have long ago disappeared. Moreover, their houses can often only be reached by driving five miles along narrow lanes and cart tracks. Since the owner of a cottage knows where he lives and does not usually welcome visitors, most country dwellers live in homes which do not advertise their presence or their identity. Houses in towns often have both names and numbers. Houses in the country may have names but it is rare for there to be a visible sign or a nameplate.

I scribbled a note for Patsy, to explain where we'd gone, and we both climbed into the Rolls.

'I still can't believe you use this for your daily calls,' said William, admiring the wooden dashboard and the magnificent state of the old motor car's interior. 'They don't make cars like this anymore, do they? It's hardly practical though, is it? It must cost you a fortune to run.'

'It has a great liking for petrol,' I admitted, 'and it doesn't fit terribly well into some of the narrow Devon lanes. But it's a constant joy to drive and I rather think patients prefer to see their doctor turn up in an old, classic motor car than in the sort of fairly ordinary and rather battered old car I used to drive when Dr Brownlow was alive. My patients like to think of the doctor's visit as being something special. I did my calls on a bicycle for a while one summer and I always got the feeling that, although they didn't say anything, patients did sometimes feel uncomfortable about the fact that their doctor had to remove his bicycle clips when he arrived. The Rolls is elegant enough to give them extra confidence and there is a permanence and longevity about it which the folk round here seem to find comforting. It also helps enormously that this was Dr Brownlow's car. They loved him and so a little of his magic rubs off on me now that I drive his Rolls.'

'I understand that,' said William. 'It's well known that a trusted doctor has a healing power, a placebo effect if you prefer, and anything which adds to that power must improve the chances of patients getting better speedily.'

To get to Woodbine Cottage, Mrs Harborough's home, we had to drive through a ford which is often impassable in winter (I keep a pair of waders in the boot of the Rolls Royce for such eventualities) and down a rutted lane which is dusty and bumpy in summer and muddy and glutinous in winter.

(The word 'woodbine' refers not to the brand of cigarette which was exceedingly popular in Britain during the War years but to a variety of 'honeysuckle' for which 'woodbine' is the proper name. In America, 'woodbine' is, I believe, the name given to Virginia creeper.)

'Do you ever get lost around here?' asked William as the Rolls purred on through the wondrous splendour of an area of North Devon known as the Valley of the Rocks. 'I haven't a clue where we are. Have we crossed any borders? Are we still in England?'

'We're still in Devon,' I assured him. 'I know my way around here pretty well but you can't possibly get lost if you remember that if you aim the hour hand of your watch at the sun, then half way between that and the 12 is the direction of due south.'

I took a turning down a small lane which funnelled into a smaller lane and then into a bridle path.

William looked up at the sky. 'There is no sun,' he said, 'it's too cloudy.'

'Then we just have to hope that the car knows the way home,' I said. 'Dr Brownlow used to have a horse that could find its way home from anywhere in Bilbury. He would fall asleep after making a night call and just let his horse clip clop back home.'

William looked at me disbelievingly.

'It's true,' I said, because it was, and pulled off onto a stretch of fairly wide, fairly flat verge which the Harboroughs, who didn't own a motor car, had mown for the use of those rare visitors who did. I climbed out of the car, plucked my black bag from the back seat and set off for the cottage.

'Aren't you going to lock it?' asked William, still standing by the car and clearly surprised. 'And you've left the key in the ignition.'

'Never lock it,' I said. 'No one round here would steal it, or take anything from it. Dr Brownlow never locked it and neither do I. There is probably a key somewhere for the doors, but I've never bothered to look for it.' I paused. 'I suppose I ought to find the key for when I pop into Barnstaple. I hear that people have been known to steal cars there.'

'Crumbs!' said William. 'If I didn't lock my car and left it for five minutes it wouldn't be there when I got back. Even when it's locked I feel lucky if I get back and don't find the axles balanced on old bricks and the wheels several miles away. And I consider myself very lucky if the hubcaps haven't been nicked.'

Mrs Harborough's cottage is, like many of the properties in Bilbury, quite small. It is what, I believe estate agents like to describe as 'cosy' or, if they like to think of themselves as being 'educated' and are feeling particularly poetic, 'bijou'. There are two reception rooms downstairs: a living room which is used for sitting, eating and sleeping in front of the fire and a small front room which is used only for wedding breakfasts and funeral teas. There is a small kitchen, equipped with an old range which lives on a diet of coal, wood and vegetable peelings and which, as far as I know, has not been out for the best part of half a century, an open fronted dresser which Patchy has been trying to buy off the Harboroughs for as long as I've been in Bilbury, and a Belfast sink equipped with a cold tap which is gravity fed from a small stream which crosses the garden. Hot water, when required, comes from the kettle. Up until around six months ago, the cottage had been lit by oil lamps. But a few months earlier the Harboroughs had, with some considerable reluctance and not a little suspicion, joined the 20th century and agreed to have electricity connected. The electrical supply provided lighting for both main rooms downstairs and both rooms upstairs. Mrs Harborough refused steadfastly to have electricity in her kitchen, readily explaining that she was worried that it might affect her cooking. The man from the electricity company had tried to persuade her that electricity would not curdle her milk and could, indeed, be used to power a modern cooker but Mrs Harborough was a nervous woman and not easily persuaded by any silver-tongued salesman from a company which was, she rightly assumed, anxious to increase the amount of electricity it was selling her.

The privy, or outside lavatory, is, as it is in so many homes in Bilbury, situated a few yards away from the back door. It empties into a cesspit and was still lit by an oil lamp since Mrs Harborough had been as reluctant to have electric lighting in the outside facilities as she had been to have it in the kitchen. Any bathing which was required was done in a battered tin bath in front of the open fire in the living room.

The range, and the open fire, provided the cottage with all its heating and, I have to admit, did so more than adequately. Whatever the season the cottage would not have betrayed any estate agent who took a fancy to describe it as 'cosy'. Not that the Harboroughs were in the market for a buyer. Mrs Harborough had been born in the cottage and was, she was proud to tell me, the first baby Dr Brownlow ever delivered. As the youngest daughter, she had dutifully and lovingly looked after her parents in their old age. She had, with the agreement of her sisters, all of whom had moved far away and had no use for a small and almost worthless cottage, never doubted that she would remain in the cottage until it was time for her to meet her maker. She had met her husband late in life for she was in her forties when her last remaining parent, her mother, died and she was freed from her responsibilities in that direction.

Mr Wilfred Harborough, a labourer who had worked for Mrs Harborough's parents, had lived in the cottage since their marriage night, and was similarly determined to remain there until he was 'called by God'.

Mrs Harborough had travelled no further than Barnstaple and she had been there only twice in her life. She still talked about those adventures in much the sort of way that an explorer might describe travels to darkest Africa or the Himalayan peaks. Mr Harborough, who considered himself to be exceptionally well-travelled, had been in the army during the Second World War and had, in that capacity, visited camps on Salisbury Plain and in Yorkshire. He had returned from his military service with no medals but his fellow soldiers had rechristened him 'Market' Harborough after the town of that name (which he had, incidentally, never visited) and so had come home to Bilbury with a demob suit and the nickname 'Market'

Upstairs, approached via a staircase which is hidden away in what looks like a cupboard, there are two bedrooms. One contains a huge iron bedstead and a very soggy mattress and the other contains a second-hand divan bed which was installed in the hope of attracting tourists looking for bed and breakfast accommodation and which is, I believe, still waiting for its first occupant.

Mrs Harborough, who is a big woman, almost as broad in the beam as she is tall, met us in the hall. Her Christian name is Blossom. Her parents had nine other girls, all older than Blossom, and every one of them was named after a flower. There was a Rose, a Lily, a Daisy and so on. By the time the enthusiastic anthophilic parents had the tenth girl in their series they had run out of flower names and so the tenth daughter was called Blossom.

I introduced William and explained that he too was a doctor, in general practice elsewhere.

Mrs Harborugh seemed delighted but rather flustered to have two doctors in her home, as though concerned that there might not be enough for two doctors to do. 'I've got some fruit cake ready for you,' she said, 'and the kettle is on. Come on in and I'll find another plate and another cup.'

We followed her into the house.

In the car I had already explained to William that it is quite impossible to enter Mrs Harborough's home without eating at least one slice of homemade cake and drinking two cups of tea.

Early in my career in Bilbury, I had once made the mistake of rushing off without eating the proffered slice of cake, claiming that I had more visits to do and couldn't stay. It had taken nearly two years for Mrs Harborough to forgive me.

'It's the doctor,' Mrs Harborough called to her husband, in a voice that could and does carry across six fields when the sheep or the cows need calling in. 'The doctor has brought another doctor with him,' she added. There was a pause. 'So there are two doctors.'

'It's Wilfred who needs you, doctor,' she explained.

'What's up?' I asked. I always find it important, when visiting one half of a married couple, to get the view of the other half before offering a viewpoint or any recommendations. When a country dwelling couple have been married for ten or more years, and have spent pretty much every day of every week of every month of every year within calling distance of each other, then the chances are very good that they will each know as much about their spouse's weaknesses and strengths, frailties and susceptibilities as it is possible for anyone to know.

'He's gone and bought a mowing machine,' said Mrs Harborough. She announced this as if her husband had purchased a submarine or a locomotive. 'He bought it to cut the grass in the orchard.'

In addition to keeping a few animals, the Harboroughs have an apple and pear orchard which covers well over an acre. They sell the apples and pears their trees produce to a Somerset cider maker. Mr Harborough had, I know, always cut the grass in their orchard with a scythe.

'Oh dear,' I said. I immediately had an awful vision of Mr Harborough putting his hand into the cutters and losing his fingers. 'What's happened?'

'Nothing has happened,' said Mrs Harborough. 'That's the problem. Nothing at all. He can't get it started. They sent instructions but they might as well be in foreign. He's out the back.'

'Then we'd better go and take a look and see if we can help,' I said.

'It's a good job there's the two of you,' said Mrs Harborough. 'Maybe you can make head and tail of the book they sent with it. My Wilf can't make no sense of it. He said the doctor, being a man of learning, would be the man to call.' Mrs Harborough added that a tame pheasant had that morning brought his wife, son and two daughters along to share the food spilt from the bird table and that we were, if possible, to avoid making any sudden movements which might startle the family.

We found Wilfred Harborough in the back yard, scratching his head and staring at a number of parts of what did look like a new mowing machine. There were rollers, a grass collecting box and something that looked like an engine. Mr Harborough had the instruction booklet in his left hand. The five pheasants were standing around looking as though they'd like to help but weren't quite sure how best to be of service.

'Thank heavens you've come, doctor,' said Wilfred, as though I had turned up in the nick of time to deal with a life threatening emergency.

I introduced William. The two nodded and murmured appropriate greetings. I could see that William was a little surprised by the nature of the emergency. I don't think big city doctors spend a lot of time helping patients decipher mowing machine manuals.

'It came in a box in bits and I can't make head nor tail of it,' admitted Wilfred. He handed me the instruction brochure. I could see why Mrs Harborough had called it a book. There were sections in German, Danish, Japanese and Finnish. There was also a section in English but the person who had written the English section did not appear to be a native English speaker.

'Where did you buy it from?' I asked.

'A garden centre in Barnstaple,' replied Wilfred. 'I went there especially.'

Barnstaple is around 10 miles from Bilbury but most of the locals, even the well-travelled Wilfred, regard a journey there to be an expedition requiring maps, compass and a large packet of sandwiches. In the old days, several villagers, both men and women, used to walk to Barnstaple every day to work in the town. At the end of a day's work they would walk back to Bilbury. It was a two and a half hour journey each way and in bad, winter weather it must have required considerable fortitude. These days Bilbury villagers have become more insular than their forebears and, very probably, not so fit.

'But the one in the garden centre was all made up,' continued Wilfred. 'It looked like a mowing machine. This one came in a box, delivered on a lorry.'

'Ah, they do that,' said William. 'We bought a wardrobe two weeks ago. It came packed flat and I had to put the parts together.'

Wilfred stared at him. 'A wardrobe? You bought a wardrobe in bits?'

‘Some Swedish company,’ said William. ‘They sell their stuff in kits. The good thing is that they always give you more than you need. I had tons of screws left over. And a big, spare piece of plywood stuff. Mind you, when I’d finished it, there was a big gap at the back of the wardrobe. I think they probably forgot to send me one bit and sent me two of another bit.’ He shrugged and grinned. ‘Fortunately, my wife says she’ll get someone in to build it if we buy another.’

I bent down and took a look at the bits and pieces of lawn mower. I opened the brochure and found the part that was supposed to be in English. I read the first paragraph out loud: ‘For the furtherance of the machine to have been made taking the parts marked D and M on the explosive diagram marked No 1 and with the fastenings provided fasten the part M to the part marked D using the fastenings marked E as provided.’

I examined the ‘explosive diagram’ which looked as it was the result of dipping a spider’s feet in ink and then letting it walk all over a sheet of paper.

I showed the diagram to William who simply frowned and grunted.

I read on.

‘After fixating the parts as instructed place part marked B and part marked C in neighbourhood of parts marked E and E and connect together with application of projectiles as entrusted in explosive diagram marked No 2. Important note: do not under circumstances of eventuality of malfunctioning place part C against throttle lever cable adjustment hammer (see page 5) until the cross screw threaded flange divider having been duly fatted with due endeavour is by the eyes tensed.’

I read out the instructions as slowly and carefully as I could. I read them out again. None of us could understand a word of it. The cock pheasant flapped his wings and squawked. His wife and children looked impressed but said nothing.

‘I think we might do better forgetting about the brochure and just try to build the mower so that it looks like the mower on the front of the brochure,’ suggested William. He took the brochure from me and pointed to a small, two inch square picture of the mower on the cover. We all peered at the picture.

‘So that must be the handle,’ I said, pointing to a long piece of tubular metal which looked like bicycle handlebars created by one of those fashionable artists who always manages to give his subjects three heads and one leg.

‘And that is probably the cable that connects the accelerator lever to the engine,’ suggested William. ‘And that big bit over there will be the grass box.’

And so we went on, sustained by regular supplies of cake and tea, brought to us by Blossom Harborough.

After a good deal of trial and error, a fair amount of skin, a little blood and all the swear words the landlord of the Duck and Puddle wasn’t using at that moment, we eventually succeeded in building something that looked very much like a lawn mower.

‘I’ve got these bits left over,’ said Wilfred, holding out a handful of screws and assorted bits of metal.

‘Good, they always send spare bits,’ said William. ‘Keep them somewhere safe in case you ever need them.’

Wilfred put the handful of bits into his overall pocket and William pulled the starter cord several times and then it occurred to me that the mower might need some fuel so Wilfred brought a can of petrol from his outside lavatory and we filled up the tank with the aid of a small funnel Blossom uses when making her cakes. The pheasants, not enamoured of the smell, tottered off up the garden.

Two minutes later we all shook hands when Wilfred, pulled the starter cord and, to our immense surprise, the mower started. Two minutes after that we cheered loudly when Wilfred took the mower into the orchard and showed us that it would, indeed, cut grass.

Attracted by the noise of the cheering and the mower, Blossom came out with more cups of tea and more cake. It was only then that it occurred to me that if we had called Thumper he would have probably been able to build the mower in a tenth of the time. Still, we would have been denied our moment of pride.

‘I enjoyed that,’ said William, as we drove home in the Rolls. ‘I had no idea country practice was so much fun. Do you have many calls like that one?’ His suit was ruined, covered in copious amounts of oil and stinking of petrol, and his hands were black with grease and oil. My clothes and hands were no better. On the back seat of the car sat two large tins, each containing one of Blossom’s fruit and walnut cakes – one for William and his family and one for Patsy and me.

I drove slowly, trying not to touch too much of the steering wheel. Despite washing them several times, and scrubbing at them with a nailbrush, my hands were still filthy.

‘If you ever decide to retire, you must promise to let me know,’ said William contentedly. ‘I see what you mean about country medicine being a little different to town practice.’

He took his pipe out of his pocket and started to fill it with tobacco. ‘If Bilbury is ever looking to find a twin town,’ he said drily, ‘might I suggest that you put the planet Pluto high on the list of possibles?’

The Accidental Odd Job Man

Patsy and I have always enjoyed reading and between us we get through a vast number of books. We don't watch television very much but usually prefer to spend our evenings sitting by the fire listening to music and reading. As a sole practitioner, I am always liable to be called out in the evening and it is far easier to put a bookmark into a volume to mark the page I am reading, rather than to leave a television programme and then expect Patsy to summarise and explain what I've missed when I returned an hour or so later.

In the summer, of course, the light evenings are usually spent in the garden, sitting by the lake or picking fruit or vegetables. But during the dark evenings of winter we have much more time for reading.

During the dark, cold evenings one winter I spent some time sitting on my side of the fire reading Benjamin Franklin's quite remarkable autobiography and I discovered that, but for a quirk of fate, America's history could have been quite a different one.

Franklin was an excellent swimmer who had enjoyed the sport since he had been a child. He was proud of having studied and practised the techniques described in Thevenot's book *The Art of Swimming* (which had been published in 1696) and was proud to have added some of his own tricks and manoevres. While living in London he had earned some considerable notoriety by swimming 'from near Chelsea to Blackfryar's, performing on the way many fears of activity, both upon and under water, that surprised and pleased those to whom they were novelties' and he had been 'much flattered' by the admiration of the onlookers.

As a result of this display, Franklin was approached by a man called Sir William Wyndham who wanted him to teach his two sons how to swim. Wyndham offered to pay the young American a handsome sum if he would give them lessons.

Unfortunately, for all concerned, Franklin was already planning to return to Pennsylvania and could not accept the invitation but, in his autobiography, he writes that he 'thought it likely that if I were to remain in England and open a swimming-school, I might get a good deal of money; and it struck me so strongly, that, had the overture been sooner made me, probably I should not so soon have returned to America.'

Franklin played such a huge part in America's early development that it is difficult to imagine how things might have turned out if the young printer had not already committed himself to return home and had chosen to remain in England and become a swimming tutor. It always surprises me to realise just how much history is influenced by the little things.

As a country GP, I am constantly reminded how delicately balanced life can be, and how the slightest and most seemingly insignificant incident can have a notable impact.

Consider, for example, the story of how we found an essential member of staff for the Brownlow Country Hotel, our revised version of the hospital we had created out of Dr Brownlow's old home.

The Brownlow Country Hotel had been open for a week when the first patient was admitted.

In order to avoid problems with the local health service administrators, the first patient was, of course, admitted as a 'guest' rather than as a 'patient'. And our rota of volunteer nurses were not known as nurses but could choose to describe themselves as 'housekeepers', 'reception staff', 'chefs' or 'waitresses'.

I was surprised to find that in practical terms the only real difference between running a hospital and running a hotel was the amount of bureaucracy involved. I think if we had attempted to persevere with our plan to open a hospital we would have suffocated under the weight of absurd rules and regulations.

Just three days after our official opening (it had been a very low key affair because we didn't want to attract the attention of the health service bureaucrats by inviting a dignitary to cut a ribbon, unveil a plaque or plant a tree and in any case none of these seemed appropriate now that we were officially running a hotel rather than a hospital) it became clear that although our rota of volunteer nurses could cope very well with looking after the patients (sorry, the guests) we would need someone to help maintain the fabric of the building.

Like all old houses, Dr Brownlow's former home needed constant care and attention. There were always chores to be done.

In what had been the library, a window catch came loose and, as an inevitable consequence, a window wouldn't shut properly and a nasty draught constantly swept through the room. Two light bulbs on a chandelier hanging twelve feet above ground level needed changing. The chimney in the dining room started to smoke and needed sweeping. A tap in one of the bedrooms began to drip and needed attention. A toilet wouldn't flush unless you jiggled the handle up to the left and then down and to the right. The guttering over the back door was leaking, with the result that if it was raining no one could enter or leave the house through that door without having an impromptu shower. The left hand front gate had seized up and needed loosening and oiling. A branch had half fallen off one of the oaks and needed cutting down and, preferably, chopping up into logs. Grass needed cutting, hedges needed trimming and the culvert leading into the lake needed clearing. A broken window pane in the butler's pantry needed replacing.

All these were the sort of relatively minor problems which affect any large house but when the house is very old, the problems become apparent on a daily basis.

As Bradshaw said, 'When you have 36 taps the chances are high that at any one time at least one of them will be dripping.'

Bradshaw couldn't possibly cope with these chores on top of all his other responsibilities and so we needed a full-time maintenance man and gardener: someone capable of turning his hand to pretty well everything practical, someone not too proud to stick his arm into a blocked drain (probably the commonest of common problems in a large country house which has old and complicated drains) and someone prepared to do all this for room, board and a very modest income. I could have asked Thumper to help, and I know he would have done so without a moment's hesitation, but since our problems were likely to occur on a daily basis we need someone living on the premises.

Dr Brownlow had given me a good sum in cash to cover the cost of turning the house into a cottage hospital but a good chunk of the money had already gone on buying hospital beds, linen, towels and other essentials and I knew that the hospital running costs (insurance, rates and so on) would burn up money steadily. I needed to keep the regular expenditure down.

'We need to employ what is, I believe, known in the vernacular as an 'odd job man',' said Bradshaw. He had a natural ability to put inverted commas around certain words and he did it now with the words 'odd job man'. 'We require someone prepared to live in and deal with all these little chores. But how much can we afford to pay?'

'Not much,' I confessed. Bradshaw's salary was being paid by the health authority, since he was officially attached to my practice as my district nurse and we still had money in the bank, but I knew we had to plan for the long term.

'There's a small flat that used to be occupied by the groom,' said Bradshaw. 'It's not been used since he left. But it would tidy up quite nicely. And it gets heat from the stove in the tack room.'

'When did the groom leave?' I asked. I didn't know that Dr Brownlow had employed a groom though I suppose I should have realised that he would have needed someone to look after his horses.

'That would be at the outbreak of World War II,' said Bradshaw drily. 'Dr Brownlow had bought the Rolls Royce by then and we didn't really have anything for the poor fellow to do. He joined the army and in view of his experience as a groom expected to be put to work looking after the horses. Inevitably, of course, he ended up in a tank regiment where he was appointed regimental cook. He didn't know anything about tanks or cooking so I expect the military hierarchy considered him pretty well perfect for the post. I kept in touch with him after the war. By the time the war finished he had risen to the rank of Colonel in the catering corps. He then moved into the hotel trade and became General Manager of one of the large London hotels. Sadly, I then rather lost touch with him.'

I suddenly realised where we could find our odd job man.

I don't know why it took me so long.

But would the man to whom I wanted to offer the post be prepared to consider it?

I realised some years ago, when I was still a young man, that it is often wise to take anything a tramp tells you with a large pinch of salt. I do not mean to suggest by this that they are all malignant liars, deliberately misleading those who take the time to listen to their stories, but, rather, that they tend, rather more than most folk, to select the truths they choose to share with their listeners.

Part of what a tramp tells you will be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, but some of it will be the truth that he or she wants to share with you, some of it will be the truth that he or she thinks you want to hear and some of it will be the untruth that he or she wants to share or thinks you want to hear. Untangling the truths from the untruths can be a complex and time consuming business.

And, sometimes, tramps are happy with a lifestyle which would not suit other people.

A few years ago, I found a tramp called Colin living under a hedge about a mile away from Bilbury Grange. He refused to tell me his second name and refused my suggestion that he move into the flat which Mr Parfitt had occupied before his marriage. I telephoned the local social services department and, after several hours of pleading, managed to persuade them to offer him a room in a boarding house in Ilfracombe.

To my surprise, Colin turned down the offer.

'That's very kind of you, sir,' he said. 'But if it's all the same to you I'd rather stay in Bilbury.'

'But it's freezing cold!' I pointed out, unnecessarily. 'If you go to Ilfracombe you'll have your own room in a boarding house. You can spend the days out in the open but have somewhere warm and dry to sleep at night.'

But Colin wasn't interested. He preferred sleeping under a hedge.

I was not about to let that frustrating experience stop me from trying to recruit our odd job man.

I drove over to Barnstaple and found Tim sitting exactly where he had been the last time I'd seen him.

'Do you know how to mend a leaky tap?' I asked him.

Clearly puzzled by the question Tim thought for a moment before nodding.

'Could you replace a piece of broken glass?'

Another nod.

'Are you OK with ladders? Can you go up them without getting dizzy?'

'I'm fine with ladders.'

'Would you like a job? The pay isn't much but you get a free flat and free meals.'

Tim stared at me as though not believing what he was hearing.

'Are you serious?' he asked.

'I'm serious. It's in Bilbury, a village a few miles away.'

'I know where Bilbury is. Nice, quiet place with a village green where they play cricket. And a good pub. The Duck and something.'

'Puddle. The Duck and Puddle.'

'Are you offering me a job?'

'I am.'

I suddenly realised that there were tears in Tim's eyes. He stood and picked up the large plastic bag containing his belongings.

I took him to a nearby branch of Marks and Spencer and gave him some of Dr Brownlow's money. 'Buy some clothes,' I told him. 'Whatever you need.'

'There are two charity shops further along,' he said. 'I could buy something second-hand.'

'Buy yourself some new things,' I told him. 'This is a new beginning.'

He looked at me, tears now streaming down his cheeks, and nodded.

The Brownlow Country Hotel had its odd job man.

A Cause for Tears

It is fairly well known in medical circles that things go in runs. If you are woken up at night, then you will probably be woken up for the next three or four nights. If you see a patient complaining of a fairly unusual disease, then the chances are high that you will see another patient with exactly the same symptoms, and precisely the same disease, at the next surgery. I don't know why this should be. But it is just a fact of life.

And so, for example, there was a Tuesday recently when I seemed to see nothing but patients suffering from breast problems.

The first patient I saw was Sharon Bloodwell, a young woman in her mid-thirties who had two young children with her.

Mrs Bloodwell works at home, making cushions for a company based in Exeter and her husband, Norman, works as a labourer on one of the local farms. She's put on a lot of weight in recent years but she used to be very fit and active. She once played netball for the county, and her parent's home is packed with photographs of her and her team mates. The last time I saw her she wanted a pregnancy test because she thought she might 'have caught for another baby'.

I remember that she volunteered the surprising information that she had been having affairs with two other men. 'But there won't be any problems if the baby isn't my husband's,' she told me. 'I only ever have affairs with Norman's relatives – his brothers and two of his cousins.'

I must have looked as puzzled as I felt.

'My Norman, his brothers and the two cousins all have red hair,' she reminded me. 'I won't go with Cecil, the other cousin, because he doesn't have red hair. He's got dark hair.'

It seemed that Mrs Bloodwell had planned her adultery very carefully, doing her best to ensure that any baby that resulted from her illicit affairs would have red hair and look like her husband.

I'd never come across such cold-blooded faithlessness before but Mrs Bloodwell had seemed not in the slightest bit embarrassed by her carefully considered deceit.

Today, Mrs Bloodwell came into the surgery looking very strained and worried.

Some patients prefer to beat about the bush for five or ten minutes before coming to the point, they are too shy or nervous to share their real fears and so they begin by talking about something that might merit a trip to the surgery but which is merely a Trojan horse; an introductory gambit.

If a patient who works as a farm labourer and who hasn't visited the surgery for a decade, comes in to tell me about a graze on a knuckle or a twinge in a toe I would bet the farm that he is about to ask my advice about some more substantial concern.

'Oh, and while I'm here, doctor,' he will say, as he is about to leave, with his hand on the doorknob, 'I've been getting these terrible pains in my chest. I don't suppose they'll be anything to worry about, will they?'

Journalists have noticed the same phenomenon.

A good investigative reporter will keep their mind open after he has closed his notebook.

A good television reporter will have instructed the cameraman to keep his camera switched on even when the interview appears to be over for it is often in that moment that the interviewee will start to talk.

Any professional investigator, doctor, policeman, barrister or journalist, must ask questions but he or she must be first and foremost a good listener, knowing that the most useful answers are the ones which appear by themselves, and not in response to a question.

Mrs Bloodwell, however, could hardly wait to tell me what was worrying her.

She had not come armed with some trivial concern with which to open the proceedings. She got straight to the heart of her concern.

'I'm worried about my breast, doctor,' she said. The words came out in a rush, with a sigh at the end. It was a short sentence but I was sure she had been rehearsing it. 'The right one. It feels swollen and painful and I think I can feel a lump there.'

I looked at her, smiled slightly and nodded slightly encouraging her to tell me more.

She told me that she had noticed the lump the previous day and that she hadn't had a wink of sleep.

'I'm glad you came along so quickly,' I told her. 'Take off your things and let's have a look at it.' I ushered her behind the screen and as jumper, blouse and brassiere were hastily removed and tossed over the top of the screen I tried to comfort her two children who seemed concerned that their mother had disappeared for ever. I know dentists don't approve but I have always followed Dr Brownlow's example and I keep a jar of sweets on my desk. I know of no better way to keep small children happy and quiet.

I examined Mrs Bloodwell carefully and comprehensively and I was quickly sure that she had nothing to worry about.

'You can sleep well tonight,' I assured her, and told her to get dressed again.

The look of relief on her face made it worth getting up that morning.

'What is it, then?' she asked, when she had got dressed.

'The lumps are due to a condition which is known as fibroadenosis or hyperplastic cystic disease,' I told her. 'It's also known as mastitis.'

Mrs Bloodwell nodded. 'I've heard of mastitis. But what is it?'

'It's an inflammation of the breast tissue; probably an infection,' I told her. 'But it will go away quite quickly.'

'Do I need an operation?' she asked.

'Good heavens, no,' I assured her. 'You just need to rest and drink plenty of fluids. I'll give you some antibiotics, in case there's an infection there, and some painkilling tablets which you can take if the pain becomes severe. A warm bath or shower will probably help ease the soreness. And avoid tight fitting clothes. You might find it easier if you leave your bra off for a while. Afterwards, make sure that you don't wear bras that are too tight.'

'Do you mean I shouldn't wear a bra with the wire underneath?' she asked.

'Mastitis can be caused or made worse by bras that are too tight.'

She seemed disappointed. 'I'm big up top,' she said. 'I need support or else they droop down with my nipples aimed at the floor.' She blushed and then looked down at her breasts. 'You don't think I'm too big, do you?'

'Good heavens, no!'

'Not dangerously big?'

'Not at all.'

Mrs Bloodwell looked relieved. 'That's good,' she said. 'I've always thought they were my best points.' She squeezed her breasts with her hands. 'All the men I know like them,' she said proudly. 'And my best friend, Sheila, says I could have been a barmaid.' She said this as some women might have contemplated missed careers as ballet dancers or ice skaters.

I scribbled out a prescription and told her to come back in a week if the soreness hadn't gone.

The very next patient I saw also had a breast problem though in her case it was not a lump but a rash which affected the centre of her chest and the inner sides of both breasts.

It was beginning to feel like National Breast Week.

Mrs Johnson was not a villager but was staying at the Duck and Puddle for a few days. She and her husband were on a short holiday to celebrate their wedding anniversary.

The rash looked like a fairly standard type of dermatitis or eczematous reaction to an allergen of some kind. It didn't take long to identify it as having been caused by a new perfume which she had bought for the occasion, and had sprayed into her cleavage without doing a test run first.

I explained to her that she should always try out a new perfume on a small area of skin before spraying large amounts onto a bigger area. I then gave her a prescription for some cream that I knew would help clear up the rash quite quickly. I told her to use the cream for five days and to then stop.

'Will I be able to start using the perfume again when the rash had gone?' asked the woman.

'No!' I told her. I explained again that the rash meant that she was allergic to something in the perfume she'd bought and that she must never use that perfume again. I suggested that she should either throw the perfume away or give it to a friend. The suggestion didn't go down well.

The patient with the rash was the last patient in that day's morning surgery and when I'd signed a few repeat prescriptions and dictated a couple of referral letters I set off on the day's visits.

The very first visit after the surgery was to a large house on one of the roads out of the village.

I had never visited the house but I knew that Mrs Utopia Kitteridge, the sole occupant, was a woman in her seventies whose husband had died some years ago.

I parked the car, checked the grounds for dogs, climbed up a steep flight of stone steps guarded by a hugely impressive pair of fierce looking stone lions, and rang the front doorbell.

While I waited for someone to come, I looked around.

The house, which had once been very grand, was in quite a state of despair.

Having spent a good deal of money repairing Bilbury Grange I guessed that the owner had probably let things go because she couldn't afford to repair the rotten window frames and the weather damaged stonework. Weeds were growing out of the cracks in the steps and the driveway, where I had left my car, was overgrown with weeds.

After a minute or two, a thin, grey-haired woman with a pronounced dowager's hump opened the door. Pulling open the heavy oak door seemed to take all her strength. She seemed even older than I knew she was. Some 70-year-olds can easily pass for 50 but Mrs Kitteridge could have played a 90-year-old without any help from clever make-up experts.

'Hullo, doctor,' she said. 'Thank you for coming.'

She was pale and her skin looked paper thin. Her voice was cracked and quiet. She wore a grey, plain dress through which I could see that she was little more than a skeleton decorated with a few pounds of fat.

'I'm sorry to have had to call you out but I don't think I could have made it to the surgery.' She was struggling to open the stiff door so I pushed hard to help open it wide enough for me to enter.

'That's OK,' I told her with a smile. 'How can I help you?'

'I've got a little problem I'd like your help with,' she said.

I closed the door and followed her into a huge reception hall.

'Perhaps you'd be kind enough to examine me?'

I followed her up a staircase that could have been used as a remake for *Gone With the Wind*. She climbed the stairs very slowly, with each step seemingly taking quite a deal of effort.

'Do you live her by yourself?' I asked her when we had eventually reached the landing.

'I do,' nodded Mrs Kitteridge, when she had got her breath back. She held her back and was clearly in some pain. 'Mrs Hilyard from the village collects my pension and Peter Marshall delivers my groceries but I don't see anyone else. They're both very good to me.'

I knew Mrs Hilyard; she was in her 70s herself but she was always running errands for what she called 'her old people'. And although Peter Marshall liked people to think of him as a rather hard-hearted businessman he could sometimes be surprisingly gentle and generous. I rather suspected that he probably not only failed to charge Mrs Kitteridge for delivering her groceries but that he charged her considerably less for her groceries than the rest of us paid. He would know that she was, like many of Bilbury's older residents, asset rich but cash poor.

'Don't you get lonely?' I asked. 'Do you ever feel like moving into somewhere smaller, in the village perhaps?'

'Oh, I couldn't leave the house,' she said. 'My husband and I spent our married life here. I have so many memories of our life together.'

I asked her to get undressed and to lie down on the bed so that I could examine her.

'One thing,' she said, 'before you do anything you must promise not to send me into hospital.' She reached out and took my hand. 'No hospital at all. Not of any kind.'

'I don't know…,' I began, hesitantly.

'You must promise,' she insisted.

'I'll do my best not to,' I said.

'That's not enough,' she said. 'You must promise me.'

Mrs Kitteridge was so determined that, perhaps foolishly, I agreed that whatever I found I would not send her into hospital.

She then unbuttoned her blouse.

I have seen a lot of awful things in my life as a doctor but not revealing the shock I had took every ounce of experience.

It was perfectly clear that Mrs Kitteridge had cancer of the breast.

The whole of her left breast had become an ulcerated mass; a solid lump of cancer tissue. When I examined her I found that the cancer had spread widely and there were secondary deposits in several parts of her body. There was clearly nothing anyone could do for her. If she had been a pet animal the vet would have reached into his bag for a syringe and a vial of something fatal.

'You've had this for some time,' I said. It certainly wasn't a question.

'Oh, yes,' said Mrs Kitteridge. 'It's been there a long time.' She paused and thought for a moment. 'Quite a long time,' she confirmed.

'Why didn't you tell anyone?' I asked. I guessed that the cancer must have first become obvious at least a year earlier. Actually, I thought, the cancer had probably shown through the skin more than a year ago. Cancer doesn't have firm rules and is a law unto itself but it usually grows more slowly in older patients.

'I just want to leave in peace,' she said. 'You won't send me into hospital, will you?' She paused and looked straight at me. 'You did promise.'

I wondered what had happened to make her so afraid of hospitals.

And then I remembered that her husband, Gerald, who had been much older than her, had died in a hospital in Exeter some years earlier.

Gerald had gone into hospital for the routine repair of an inguinal hernia, a simple operation that should have been as routine as an oil change, and yet he had died as a result of an infection he had acquired from the hospital staff. Mrs Kitteridge had, not surprisingly, been very upset.

It was not the fact that he had died in hospital that had scarred her so, but the way of his dying. No one ever really recovers from seeing a loved one struggle to survive in an unfriendly, alien environment.

'I can't leave you here,' I said.

'Why not?'

'Well…,' I began. I didn't know where to start. I looked around the bedroom. The walls were covered with framed photographs and pictures in old gilt frames. The furniture was old and well-worn but clearly lovingly tended. The bookcase was crammed full of books, mostly history books and biographies. The mantelpiece was crowded with mementoes.

'Who is going to look after you?' I asked, quietly.

'I don't know,' said Mrs Kitteridge, with tears running down her cheeks. 'But I don't want to die in hospital.'

'Who said anything about dying?' I asked her, and regretted the words the moment they had left my mouth.

Mrs Kitteridge looked at me with a mixture of pity and compassion and reached out to hold my hand. She knew that she was dying, of course. I knew she was dying. There was no little irony in the fact that she was comforting me. We both knew that each other knew, and yet that touch, that simple gesture, told me that the subject was closed.

The young don't worry about dying because they know that they are immortal. As we get older we appreciate life much more (we have had more of it to enjoy and are, therefore, often more reluctant to see the end of it) and so death is usually more of a problem. There are, however, always exceptions and it was clear to me that Mrs Kitteridge was at peace with destiny.

'Have you any relatives?' I asked.

'I've got a niece in London,' said Mrs Kitteridge. 'At least I think she's still in London. I haven't heard from her in years. She does something in advertising. She's extremely important and very busy.' Pride and sadness were combined in her voice.

'I'll fix up for Mr Bradshaw, my nurse, to come in later on today. He'll be in to see you every day,' I promised. 'And I'll come back tomorrow. Nurse Bradshaw will put a dressing on.'

I suspected that I would have had something of a battle with most district nurses for they would have wanted me to send Mrs Kitteridge into the hospital in Barnstaple.

Mr Bradshaw would never suggest such a thing. A qualified nurse, who had been 82-years-old since 1968, he had worked as Dr Brownlow's butler, valet, manservant and factotum for many years and he had nursed the old doctor during his final illness. If I had attempted to move Dr Brownlow into hospital in Barnstaple, Bradshaw would have probably beaten me over the head with a silver tray and then buried me in the garden. Bradshaw was an intensely loyal man who was also gentle, experienced, unshockable and wise.

He also had in abundance the one quality all nurses should have: kindness.

'Thank you,' said Mrs Kitteridge, simply.

'How much pain do you have?'

'Nothing I can't deal with,' she said bravely. 'I have a glass of sherry at night. To help me sleep.' There was a pause. 'A large one,' she added. She smiled at me. 'Do you disapprove?'

'Not at all.'

'Can you see yourself out?'

I said I could.

As I pulled away from the house, out from the driveway and into the road, a large lorry roared past.

The driver, who was driving far too quickly for the lane, hooted imperiously and waved two imperious fingers in my general direction.

Filled with a potent mixture of sadness and anger, I accelerated after the lorry, and caught up with it when it got stuck behind a tractor in Willoughbury Lane. I then pulled onto the other side of the road and drew alongside the lorry. I tooted my horn until the driver looked down at me. Very deliberately, I raised two fingers in rude salute and waved them at him slowly and clearly.

Black-faced, the lorry driver opened his cab door and picked up a heavy piece of wood. He was clearly aiming to come round to my side of my car.

Just then the tractor pulled into a field entrance, leaving a gap.

I may not be blessed with great wisdom but I have, over the years, learned when the most appropriate response to danger is 'flight' rather than 'fight'. I have certainly never been stupid enough to start a fight with a burger fattened lorry driver equipped with a piece of wood the size of a baseball bat. I crossed my fingers, put my trust in the engineers who had built the Rolls and slammed my foot onto the accelerator.

The Rolls Royce 20/25 is not a car that has ever liked being hurried but it does seem to have been equipped with some internal device which enables it to tell when speed is truly of the essence.

We shot forward with commendable haste and left the bad-tempered, well-armed lorry driver enveloped in a cloud of blue exhaust smoke.

As I drove, I rubbed the tears from my eyes with the back of my hand.
Doctors aren’t supposed to get upset when patients are dying.
But would anyone really want a doctor who didn’t?

The Bonfire

There is something enormously satisfying, albeit primitive and frighteningly powerful, about a garden bonfire.

An editor from a London publishing house, once visited Bilbury Grange in an attempt to persuade me to write a book I really didn't want to write. I am not, of course, the only author to have ever had to put up with editors wanting me to write books that fitted in with their planned marketing programmes. A.A.Milne, the author of the *Winnie the Pooh* books, complained that publishers always wanted him to rewrite the last book that had been successful – whether he or someone else had written it.

While in Bilbury, the London editor berated me for having bonfires, arguing that burning garden rubbish was bad for the atmosphere and for the planet in general.

I disagreed with her then and I still disagree with her.

It is true, of course, that our atmosphere is constantly being polluted. Cars and lorries belch out vast quantities of toxic gases. Buses, trains and aeroplanes all produce serious pollutants. So do factories, of course.

But the damage done by garden bonfires is really very small, the pollutants produced are relatively harmless and the alternatives even worse.

The rather sanctimonious and distinctly self-righteous London editor told me that in the borough where she lived the local council sent a lorry round to collect garden waste. She seemed to think that this was a much better way to deal with the problem. I pointed out that the lorries collecting the garden rubbish were burning up vast amounts of diesel fuel and that once the bags of waste had been collected they still had to be dealt with – usually by burning them at a council run waste site of some kind.

I also pointed out that the amount of garden waste produced by a small urban garden was far less than the amount produced in a large country garden. And I explained that if invasive plants aren't dug up and burned then their seeds will spread and soon take over the countryside.

She hadn't thought about any of these things.

'If I had to bag up all our garden rubbish I would need dozens of bags,' I explained, 'and I would spend hours cramming the weeds and other dead material into the bags. I would then need a lorry of my own to take away the bags.'

I pointed out that a bonfire is the only sensible way to get rid of the diseased prunings, the seed heads of invasive plants such as the Giant Hogweed and the dead, woody material that really won't compost very well. I also pointed out that a bonfire is a good way to dispose of weeds that, if they are not destroyed, will survive very happily in a compost heap.

And I explained that bonfires produce ash which is rich in plant nutrients and which can be used to restore the quality of the soil, as well as producing quantities of charcoal which can be used for making potting compost.

'All things considered,' I concluded, 'a bonfire is the only environmentally sound way to deal with garden rubbish.'

I remembered the London editor as I put another forkful of dead material onto the huge bonfire that I was building with our gardener, Mr Parfitt.

It was autumn and we had collected together an enormous amount of material which needed to be burnt. We had put as much stuff as we could onto the compost heaps (we have three of them) and we had cut up the dead branches that had been brought down into kindling shaped lengths. The stuff we couldn't do something with was going onto the bonfire.

The bonfire was already about ten feet across and nearly six feet high. I was really looking forward to putting a match to it; watching the flames, listening to the crackle of the fire and bathing in its warmth: simple pleasures designed to bring out the primitive man in me.

Suddenly, I heard Patsy's voice.

I turned and saw my wife walking down the garden towards me. She was holding a piece of notepaper which had, I immediately recognised, been torn from the notepad which I keep next to the telephone on my surgery desk.

'Who is it?' I asked. A city doctor would have probably asked 'What is it?' but as a country doctor, working in a small village, I know the names of the villagers, my potential patients, and I know most of their ailments, illnesses and weaknesses.

'Mrs Jackson rang and wondered if you could call round,' said Patsy. 'I've written down her phone number in case you want to ring her before you go.'

'No, I'll just go and see what she wants,' I said.

Rosie Jackson, is married to Colin, a local farmer, and she never rings unless she really needs help. She has a weak heart and a troublesome chest and suffers from irritable bowel syndrome.

‘I’ve got decrepit cardiacs, grumpy intestinals and hissy bronchials,’ she once complained with a throaty laugh.

I remembered that I had seen her four days earlier when I had prescribed antibiotics for a urinary tract infection.

‘I’ll finish building the bonfire,’ said Mr Parfitt. ‘You leave it to me, doctor.’

Although we had been working together for some years, Mr Parfitt and I were still not on first name terms. Country folk are sometimes like that in Devon. Frank Parsons, the landlord of the Duck and Puddle, once told me that he was still not on first name terms with some of the customers who had been drinking at his pub for twenty years. It is, I suppose, just a question of respect.

Mr Parfitt has been with Patsy and me since we bought Bilbury Grange.

Soon after we had purchased the house and moved in, he arrived at our door asking for a job. He asked for £5 a week and somewhere to sleep and so we made rough but comfortable living accommodation for him in the loft above one of the unused stables.

He later married Miss Hargreaves, the elderly spinster who ran the village school, and although the pair now lived together in her cottage, Mr Parfitt still looks after our garden. We pay him a little more than the original £5 a week and we give him and Mrs Parfitt as much fruit and as many vegetables as they required. Mr Parfitt also gets all the kindling he can use free from the Bilbury Grange garden.

And we share the profits we make from selling excess garden produce to local hotels, restaurants and public houses. Mr Parfitt has the proverbial green fingers and our small market garden has proved surprisingly successful, though to be honest I never really understand just how we manage to do so well for whenever I see him, Mr Parfitt seemed to be resting and ‘contemplating nature’.

In the winter, he sits in the potting shed drinking tea laced with whisky. ‘This is the time of the year to let the garden breathe’, he once told me. ‘Besides, it is too cold and muddy to be out there doing things.’

In the spring and summer, he does a little digging and some planting and spends a good part of each day sitting in the potting shed drinking tea laced with whisky. At the busiest times he has two men from the village to help him with the digging and with chores such as mowing and hedge trimming but he insists on doing the planting himself.

‘Any fool can dig,’ he once told me, ‘but it takes a gardener to know how to sow.’

He never wastes time on weeding.

‘There’s no such thing as an unwanted weed in this garden,’ he told me. ‘The bees and the butterflies need the wild flowers to do their pollinating. Without the bees and the butterflies we’d have no apples or pears.’

It was Mr Parfitt who told me that dandelions are an excellent early source of pollen for bees. Our bee colonies were certainly doing well and our aviary produced quite a good deal of honey.

‘It’s too hot to be doing much,’ he told me one August day. He was sitting in the shade of the potting shed, drinking tea that was probably laced with whisky. ‘It’s too hot and there’s too many of them damned horseflies about.’

In the autumn he would cut back the dead wood, help take up the dead plants and, of course, build up the compost heaps and the regular bonfires which I so enjoyed.

I left Mr Parfitt to the bonfire, changed my trousers, put on shoes instead of boots, washed my hands and climbed into the car.

The Jackson’s farm is some miles away, with wonderful views over the Bristol Channel. The only snag with it is that it can only be approached along a long, very bumpy farm track which passes through half a dozen fields and, inevitably, half a dozen gates. Every time you drive through a gate you have to stop the car, open the gate, drive through, stop the car, close the gate and then continue to the next one. Even with modern cars this would be tricky. With the elderly and slightly temperamental Rolls Royce 20/25which I inherited from my predecessor, Dr Brownlow, it was rather more than tricky since the vehicle has a tendency to stall when it is left unattended.

And, to make things more complicated, and to slow things down even more, each time the visitor stops he has to be careful where he treads because Colin Jackson keeps cattle and sheep and his fields are, inevitably, well decorated with the inevitable consequences.

I have on several occasions trodden in large, soft cowpats and I am painfully aware that the stickiness and the smell are difficult to remove from a shoe and even more impossible to remove from the floor of a motor car.

(To do all this on a rainy night, in the dark, as I had once done, is considerably more wearing – especially since, when the journey is being undertaken at night, the chances are high that there is a good deal of urgency about the whole affair. On the second time when I had been asked to visit the Jackson’s at night I had given instructions that a farmhand who lived in the house put on a coat and hat, arm himself with a bicycle and a torch and open each gate as I approached it.)

‘Oh, thank you for coming,’ said Rosie, when I finally arrived at their farmhouse. ‘I feel really silly but I’ve got myself into a bit of a tizzy with those pills you gave me for the water troubles. I was in such a state I had a twinkle right up my spine, the way you do, you know.'

I wasn't sure that I've ever had a twinkle go right up my spine but I nodded and smiled.

I had prescribed an antibiotic to be taken four times a day and Rosie explained that she couldn't remember how many she had taken and whether or not she was due to take another capsule. 'You did say it was important not to miss any,' she reminded me.

'When did you start the course?' I asked.

'Last Monday,' she said, without hesitation. 'I took one when I got home and another one last thing at night.'

'And it's Thursday today, isn't it?'

She looked at the calendar on the kitchen wall and confirmed that it was, indeed, Thursday.

'Did you take all your capsules yesterday and Tuesday?'

She said she had.

'You started with 28 capsules,' I said, 'and you took two on Monday and four each on Tuesday and Wednesday. That means that you've taken ten so there should have been 18 capsules left when you got up this morning.'

Mrs Jackson looked very confused. 'If you say so, doctor.'

'How many have you got left?'

She produced the packet. I counted the remaining capsules. 'You've got 17 capsules left so you've only taken one today.'

'I suppose I have,' she agreed.

'What time did you get up?'

'Five minutes to six. I took the pill when I'd made Colin his cup of tea. He likes a cup of tea before he goes out to do the cows. Then while he does the cows I make his breakfast.'

'But it's a quarter past two now and you should have taken one at twelve o'clock,' I told her.

'Is it all right for me to take it now?' she asked.

'It's fine,' I told her. 'Take one now, and then take the next one at six this evening and today's last one at midnight.'

'I set the clock for that one,' said Mrs Jackson. 'We go to bed at half past ten regular because of Colin having to get up to do the cows of a morning. So I put the alarm clock on for twelve and get up and take it. I keep the pills and a glass of water by the bedside. Colin is a sound sleeper because of his deafness so I don't trouble him.'

She took her antibiotic capsule and I wrote a little chart on the back of an envelope for her to keep. I listed the days vertically and the four times of the day when she was due to take capsules horizontally. I then drew lines down and across to make little boxes. I put ticks in the boxes to denote when she had already taken capsules and told her to put a tick in the appropriate box every time she took another capsule.

'That's wonderful, doctor,' she said. She seemed genuinely grateful, even awestruck at my mathematical and logistical brilliance.

Dealing with Mrs Jackson's problem, and drawing her simple pill-taking plan, took less than ten minutes but eating the seed cake she insisted I ate, and drinking the cup of tea she insisted I drink, and opening and closing all the gates took a lot longer. I was away from Bilbury Grange for over an hour and a half – probably nearer two hours.

As I drove home I realised that I could have easily dealt with the whole problem over the telephone. But, I had a smile on my face as I approached Bilbury Grange. I was looking forward to setting light to my bonfire.

However, when I got out of the car and walked round the side of Bilbury Grange I could smell the unmistakable odour of a well-established bonfire. Patsy claims that I can smell a decent bonfire from five miles away – further if the bonfire is upwind.

And, moreover, there was a thin plume of smoke rising from the part of the garden where the bonfire had been built.

'I thought I'd get on with it,' said Mr Parfitt when he saw me approach. 'I finished building the bonfire and set it alight for you'

I looked at the huge pile of smoking ash that was pretty well all that remained of the bonfire. I felt like crying out of disappointment.

'We can just leave that to cool down for a few days,' said Mr Parfitt. 'And then we can spread the ash around the garden.'

I felt cheated.

Only another bonfire enthusiast could quite understand the feeling. I had been looking forward to that particular bonfire, by far the biggest of our autumn bonfire season, for over a week.

'Thanks,' I said to Mr Parfitt. 'Thank you very much. You've been very helpful.'

I was proud of the fact that I think I managed to sound genuinely grateful.

I turned and headed back up to the house.

As I did so Ben, who had been asleep, came bouncing down the garden to greet me. The tablets he was taking for his arthritis were really helping. Behind him came our three cats, Emily and Sophie and Jeremy. At dusk all animals, whatever the species and whatever the age, like to run around and get rid of their excess energy. The four animals walked back up to the house with me.

Not a bad life, I reflected. And there will be other bonfires.

The Confidence Trickster

Thumper and I had to pop into Barnstaple to fetch some beds we needed for the new hospital. We had purchased 12 single beds and three double beds, sight unseen, from a hotel sale. The beds had been left unsold at the end of the sale, held the previous day, and the auctioneer, a friend of Thumper's, had asked if we wanted to buy them for the proverbial 'song'. (We paid £5 for the lot because, as the auctioneer explained, if we hadn't bought them the hotel's creditors would have had to pay to have the beds taken away and dumped.)

We travelled in Thumpers truck, towing a trailer we borrowed from Patsy's father, and after we'd loaded up the truck and the trailer, we managed to find enough space to leave the truck in a public car park near to the bus station. We both needed to go to the bank to get out some cash, and I had to pop into the pet food shop to buy some tins of food that Ben is particularly fond of but which Peter Marshall cannot obtain from his wholesaler.

We were walking away from the truck when we were approached by a man in his mid-twenties. He was carrying a brown paper parcel neatly tied with string and he seemed to be very upset. I noticed that there were no stamps on the parcel.

'I'm terribly sorry to bother you,' he said, 'and I assure you that I wouldn't normally approach strangers in this way, but I've had some terribly bad fortune this morning. I live in Ilfracombe and came into town on the bus this morning because I needed to see my solicitors. I had to talk to them about my mother's estate – she died just a few weeks ago.'

'I'm sorry to hear that,' I said, sympathetically.

'She was ill for quite a while,' said the young man. 'Heart trouble was the underlying problem but she had a cancer too. Lung.'

'So what happened to you after you'd got into town?' asked Thumper.

'After I'd seen the solicitor I popped into the Post Office to post a parcel to my sister who lives in Scotland,' said the young man. 'She's the other beneficiary of the estate and to be frank with you she really needs her half of the estate. She has two small children, one of whom suffers with cystic fibrosis, and although she managed to get down for the funeral, she had to go back up North after a few days. Her husband works on the fishing boats and she has to cope with the children by herself most of the time. It's the little boy's birthday in two days, the one with the cystic fibrosis, and I've got his present wrapped and ready to go. I'm his godfather as well as his uncle. While I was queuing in the Post Office I lost my wallet – every penny I had on me.' The young man paused and shook his head sadly. 'Actually, I didn't lose it,' he said. 'It was stolen. It was my own fault. I know it's a stupid thing to do but I put the wallet into my hip pocket. They say you should never do that because it makes it too easy for pickpockets but,' he shrugged and shook his head sadly, 'with everything on my mind I'm afraid I simply stuffed the wallet into that pocket without thinking.'

'So what…' I began.

'I'm not asking you to give me money,' said the young man, interrupting me. 'Not to give me money. Good heavens no. But if I don't get this parcel posted off today there isn't much of a chance that it will reach my godson in time for his birthday. And without my wallet I can't possibly get home tonight.' He paused. 'If one of you could just give me a loan, for the postage and the bus fare, and give me your name and address I'll put a cheque into the post just as soon as I get home.'

I was reaching inside my jacket, about to pull out my wallet, when Thumper spoke.

'A decent try,' he said, 'though I think you over embellished the story with all that stuff about your sister's husband and her sick kid. If you make the story too complicated it stops being believable.'

'What the hell are you suggesting?' demanded the young man, rather angrily.

I confess that I too was rather shocked.

'It's a good variation on a very old story,' said Thumper, ignoring the young man, 'but you made two mistakes. First, the only bus from Ilfracombe arrives in Barnstaple at 1.45 p.m. I know this because my wife's aunt lives in Ilfracombe and she's always complaining that if she gets the bus into town she only has an hour before the bus leaves to go back to Ilfracombe.' Thumper looked at his watch and showed the time to the young man. 'It's 1.37 p.m. at the moment,' he said. 'And that bus stops at every bus stop between here and Ilfracombe. It is never early. So if you came into Barnstaple from Ilfracombe, and you travelled by bus, you couldn't possibly have gone to see your solicitor and gone to the Post Office.'

The young man didn't say anything but started to back away. Suddenly he stopped. 'What was the other mistake?' he asked softly.

'If you've got a solicitor in Barnstaple and your mother has just left you a sum of money why not go and ask him for a small cash loan? That's what a normal, honest person would do.'

'Hmm,' said the young man. 'I see what you mean.'

'Does this scam usually work for you?' asked Thumper.

'Oh yes, it usually works like a charm.'

'Do you have a sister in Scotland?'

The young man hesitated.

'I'm just interested,' said Thumper. 'I'm not going to dob you in to the police.'

'I've got a sister but she lives in Dawlish. She works for Tesco.'

'Children?'

He shook his head.

'And your mother?'

'She lives in Barnstaple. I live with her and my Dad.'

'How did you get into Barnstaple? Motorbike?'

'Yes. How did you know?' He frowned. 'Did you see me on the bike?'

'You have mud splashes on your trousers. You could have got them on a pushbike if you'd ridden fast enough but you're not someone who pedals anywhere are you?

He grinned and shook his head.

'What's in the parcel?'

'Oh just a couple of old books I found in a cupboard. My Gran used to be a bit of a reader. The parcel needs to be heavy so that it looks as if it will cost a bit to post.'

'Of course it does. Undo the parcel. Show me.'

The young man untied the string, unwrapped the parcel and showed us the books. They were both hardbacks. One was a copy of an old copy of a long out of date *Home Doctor* book. The other was a novel called *Brighton Rock* by Graham Greene. The book still had its dust wrapper.'

'May I look?' I said.

The young man handed me the two books. I opened the Greene and looked inside. 'I haven't read this,' I said. 'How much do you want for it?'

'You can have them both for 50 pence,' said the young man brightly.

'That's just what I was going to charge you for the consultation and the advice,' said Thumper.

'No, no, it's OK,' I said. 'I'll give you 50 pence for the two books.' I took some change from my pocket and handed 50 pence to the young man. He seemed grateful.

'Now bugger off, go home and start thinking about getting a proper job,' said Thumper. 'You're a bloody awful con man. You're lucky to have got away with it for this long.'

The young man, mumbled something and shuffled away.

We both knew Thumper was wasting his breath. This was, without a doubt, a young man who would never work for a living. He was a trickster through and through.

'You shouldn't have given him 50 pence for the books,' said Thumper. 'I'd have got you them for nothing. In fact I was thinking of making him buy us our car park ticket – just to teach him a lesson.'

I handed him the *Home Doctor* book. 'You can have this one,' I said. 'But I'll keep the other one. It'll pay for the beds we bought for the new hospital. And it'll pay for a good few other bits of furniture as well.'

Puzzled, Thumper looked at me. 'How do you make that out?'

'The Graham Greene is a first edition. *Brighton Rock* is one of the most difficult of his books to find – especially in a dust wrapper.'

'What's it worth?'

I thought for a moment and looked at the book. It really was in excellent condition. It looked as if it had been read just the once. 'Between £300 and £500,' I replied.

Thumper stared at me for a moment and then burst out laughing.

The Taxman Calls

During the night an unexpected, blustery south westerly gale had blown the felt from the roof of an elderly garden shed which we use to store bits and pieces of equipment. I was up a ladder, equipped with a hammer and a pocket full of tacks, attempting to repair the damage, when Patsy appeared. She looked rather flustered.

‘The taxman is here,’ she said.

I looked down and frowned. ‘What on earth for?’ I had not yet had my breakfast and surgery was due to start in fifteen minutes time.

‘He says he wrote to you and told you he was coming.’

I racked my brains and suddenly remembered that I had received a letter marked Inland Revenue and that there had been something in it about an enquiry or an investigation. I had filed the letter and tried so hard to forget about it that I had pretty well succeeded.

I have, over the years, received more than my fair share of correspondence from the various departments of the Office of Tax Obfuscation (which has, generally speaking, done a magnificent job of making income tax entirely incomprehensible to the average taxpayer) and these days I find it difficult to have any respect for its officials.

Many of those with whom I have corresponded have been rude and unnecessarily aggressive and it seems to me quite unfair that this should be the case. I know I am old-fashioned but it seems to me that taxpaying citizens have the right to be treated as innocent until proved guilty, and to be treated with a modicum of respect.

Moreover, it seems to me that most of the tax officials with whom I have had dealings have very little understanding of how the real world actually works.

When I published my own books and sold them through the post, one tax inspector had completely misunderstood the way my small business worked.

‘You had 2,000 books printed,’ he reminded me, ‘and paid £3,000 to the printer. The price printed on the jacket of each book is £10 so you owe us tax on £20,000, the retail value of all the books, minus £3,000 which is £17,000.’

It took me hours to convince him that many of the books were still unsold, stored in one of our barns, and that he could hardly expect me to pay tax on money I had not received. I also pointed out that I was entitled to claim the cost of buying stamps and packaging for the books. The taxman found this a difficult concept to understand and so I had tried to explain how things worked by using another example.

‘If a café owner buys a bag of 50 teabags for £1 and can make one cup of tea from each bag and charges 50 pence for a cup of tea, will you expect him to pay tax on 50 cups of tea the minute he takes delivery of the teabags?’

This puzzled the taxman.

‘Are you now going to start selling cups of tea?’ he demanded sternly. ‘How many tea bags have you bought? You have not previously declared this business.’

I climbed down from the ladder, put the hammer down on the ground and walked back to the house alongside Patsy. Suddenly she put a hand on my arm and stopped me. ‘What on earth has happened to your waistcoat?’ she asked.

I looked down. ‘Nothing, as far as I can tell.’

‘That button, second from the bottom!’

I looked down. ‘It’s exactly the same as all the other buttons.’

‘Yes, I can see it is. But it’s sewn on with green cotton and all the other buttons are sewn on with black cotton.’

‘Ah yes, I was pretty pleased with myself about that,’ I said. ‘The button came off yesterday after dinner – I think it was that second helping of apple and blackberry pie that was responsible – and you were busy with the little ones and I didn’t want to bother you so I thought I’d sew it on myself. After all, I thought, if I can sew up people I can surely sew on a button.’ I looked down at the waistcoat.

‘I’m sure the button is sewn on very nicely,’ Patsy agreed. ‘But why on earth did you use green cotton?’

‘Oh, I couldn’t find the black stuff. So I thought green would do fine. Actually I used some suture material I’d got in the surgery.’

‘You can’t see the taxman with a button on your waistcoat sewn on with green cotton!’ she said, aghast. ‘Whatever will he think?’

‘I don’t care what he thinks about my waistcoat button. I hope he enjoys my accounts but I don’t much care a jot what he thinks about my sewing.’

But Patsy was not so easily appeased. She was determined that the button must come off and be put back on again with black cotton. Suddenly I had a brain wave. ‘Go on ahead,’ I told her. ‘When I catch up with you in a hundred yards or so the button will be sewn on with black cotton.’

Patsy looked at me very doubtfully but hurried on ahead. Three minutes later I caught up with her. ‘There you are! Now look at it!’

Patsy inspected the button. And then she bent closer and examined it more carefully. ‘How on earth did you do that?’ she demanded. ‘It’s now sewn on with black cotton!’

‘Just a magical medical trick,’ I told her.

Patsy looked at me very doubtfully. ‘I don’t know how you did that,’ she murmured. I don’t think I had ever seen her look quite so puzzled. ‘How on earth did you do that? Is that the same waistcoat?’

‘Ah!’ I said, with a smile. ‘Pure magic. I’m not allowed to tell you how it was done.’

I found a small and very officious man waiting for me in the waiting room. He looked to be in his forties but had shaved his head to try to hide the fact that he was going bald, so in fact he looked older and had a five o’clock shadow on the top of his head. He had grown a small, old-fashioned toothbrush moustache and although I suspect he had grown it hoping that it would give him a jaunty, film star air, in reality it made him look like a very untrustworthy car salesman. It was more Adolf Hitler than Errol Flynn or Ronald Colman. I wouldn’t have bought a set of tyres from him, let alone a whole motor car.

I confess that at that moment, at the sight of this wretched man who had come to inspect my accounts and doubtless pick holes in them, I felt rather sorry for myself.

It had been a strangely annoying month or two.

First, I had written a thoughtful, reasoned article for a medical journal suggesting that high levels of stress might produce raised blood pressure, and had been astonished that the response from the medical establishment had been universal condemnation. One professor from Nottingham University had announced that I should be struck off the medical register for daring to suggest such a thing.

Second, I had received a good deal of abuse for having written a paper criticising the over-prescribing of benzodiazepine tranquillisers. I had suggested that patients who were given the drugs for long periods of time were becoming addicted, and this suggestion had not gone down well with the drug companies.

It seemed that everything I wrote about medicine caused controversy. A medical journal article suggesting that the over-prescribing of antibiotics would result in the development of stronger and more lethal infections, had been the subject of sneering laughter from a group of doctors who were, I suspected, encouraged by the drug companies making antibiotics. I was acquiring quite a number of enemies within the medical establishment.

As the 1970s progressed, it seemed that anything which made people think produced abuse rather than debate and I had a feeling that things were not going to improve. I had recently made the decision to give up writing papers and articles for the journals. I really needed a rest from the world.

And now the taxman had arrived and I wasn’t thrilled by his presence.

‘My name is Merriment, Mr Merriment,’ said the taxman, instantly making it abundantly clear that this was not going to be a convivial conversation conducted on first name terms and involving lots of merriment and good humoured banter. ‘I have need of sight of your receipts for the fiscal year ending last April.’

He had managed to confuse me with his very first sentence.

‘Fiscal year?’ I said. ‘I’m not sure I understand…’

‘I need to see your accounts for the financial year ending last April and for that purpose I will require full, unfettered sight of your receipts and account books.’

He sounded like a cross between the speaking clock and a Government propaganda broadcast. I wondered if he always spoke in such a stilted, formal way or if it was something he reserved for taxpayers under investigation. I imagined him arriving home for tea. ‘Good evening, Mrs Merriment. I am home for the evening and now require approved sustenance to be provided in accordance with our nuptial agreement. I see that you have been to the hairdressers. The appearance is satisfactory.’ I tried to resist the temptation to reconstruct a honeymoon confrontation.

‘I’ve got everything in a cardboard box in the stable,’ I told him. ‘All the paperwork is there. If you’d like to take a seat in the living room I’ll bring you the box. Would you like a cup of tea? Can I get you anything to eat?’

‘It is not my custom to accept comestibles in any form from inquiry subjects,’ he told me. ‘But I will accept a glass of water taken from the domestic water supply.’

I fetched the box and put it down on a small table in the living room. It would have been better to able to put the box on the dining room table but the dining room was serving its secondary purpose as the practice waiting room and was, in that role, full of patients. I then gave the taxman a glass of tap water. He sat down, opened the box and started to remove the contents. There wasn’t much in the box and I felt that he was rather disappointed. There was a large, used brown envelope full of receipts, a similarly sized brown envelope full of pay slips, royalty statements and so on and a small, red, sixpenny notebook purchased from a branch of F.W.Woolworth years earlier. The notebook still had the faded sticker on the front, showing that it had been purchased prior to decimalisation.

‘What’s this?’ he demanded, holding up the sixpenny notebook.

‘That’s my accounts,’ I told him.

‘I thought I had made it acceptably clear,’ he said, speaking to me as though to a child of three or four years of age, ‘that I required sight of your full accounts.’

‘That’s all there is, I’m afraid,’ I confessed, now wishing that I hadn’t been quite so mean and had bought the one shilling notebook.

Mr Merriment opened the pages of the small notebook as though he were examining a valuable piece of evidence in a multiple murder case. ‘This is all there is?’ he asked, clearly finding it difficult to believe that I wasn’t hiding more accounts in another box somewhere.

‘That’s all there is, I’m afraid,’ I said. I leant over and pointed to the pages of the notebook that he was examining. If you look on the left you’ll see the details of the money I’ve spent, and if you look on the right you’ll see details of the money I’ve been paid. The receipts and so on for the money I’ve spent are all in the big brown envelope marked ‘Receipts’ and the bits of paper relating to my income are all in the big brown envelope marked ‘Income’.’

Mr Merriment looked very disappointed; and he reminded me of a child who has unwrapped an attractive looking Christmas parcel and has found that it contains a hand knitted scarf and a pair of matching hand knitted gloves carefully packed into a cardboard box marked ‘Toys’. He made a snorting sound that reminded me of one of Colin Jackson’s Gloucester Old Spot pigs snuffling its way through a new delivery of turnip heads.

‘Do you mind if I leave you for a while?’ I asked. ‘I’m a bit busy just at the moment.’ This was true but I also didn’t fancy standing behind the tax collector as he worked his way through my six penny notebook and the accompanying brown envelopes.

Mr Merriment looked up and glared at me as though he were a hangman and I were his next victim. ‘As long as you remain available for me to question when I have completed my preliminary enquiries,’ he said.

‘Well I might have to pop out if there’s an emergency,’ I said. I looked at my watch. ‘And I was due to start morning surgery twenty minutes ago.’

Mr Merriment glowered disapprovingly, said nothing more and turned back to my accounts. There wasn’t much charm available and absolutely no bonhomie.

I left and went into the consulting room to start the morning’s surgery.

It was, inevitably, a busy day. There were already twelve patients sitting patiently waiting for me.

I put Mr Merriment out of my mind, forgot the shed roof and concentrated on other people’s problems for a while.

The first patient, ‘Amelia’ Rate (whose real first name is Phillippa but who is known to everyone as Amelia), wanted to know if I could recommend an organisation that would help her with her addiction to television soap operas which, she confessed, were now taking up most of her waking life. Mrs Rate, who suffers from advanced and probably irreversible steatopygia and is married to a tree surgeon who runs a small, local firm called ‘Special Branch’, is a regular visitor to the surgery and she nearly always manages to be first in the queue. She is addicted to therapy and attends all the addiction groups she can find. She goes to Alcoholics Anonymous and Gamblers Anonymous, of course, and is also a keen member of a group for chocoholics. She loves talking about herself and the minute there is an organisation for people who are addicted to organisations for addicts I will happily refer her to them. Meanwhile, she comes to my surgery several times a month. ‘I just want to find myself,’ she once told me.

The second patient, Miss Tomkins, complained that she constantly felt as though insects were crawling over her skin. I could find nothing wrong with her. There were no signs of any scabies or other beasties and when I gave her the all-clear she told me that she had suspected that there weren’t really any insects on her skin but that she had hoped that there would be so that she would know that she wasn’t going mad.

‘You aren’t going mad,’ I assured her, ‘your problem is formication.’

Miss Tomkins is in her early 50s and given her age and medical history, I thought it possible that the condition might have been brought on by the onset of the menopause. This is a common and harmless cause of formication.

I was about to continue by explaining that there are a number of causes of this condition and that before reaching a diagnosis I would need to get some tests done, when Miss Tomkins stood up, pushed back her chair and told me that she had never been so insulted in her life.

‘I am a maiden lady,’ she told me proudly. ‘I have never had relations with any man.’ She actually shuddered at the thought.

‘Ah, no, formication,’ I said. ‘It’s spelt with an ‘m’. It has nothing to do with ‘fornication’.

‘Oh,’ said Miss Tomkins. She now seemed rather embarrassed and sat down again.

I told her that I would arrange for some tests to be done at the hospital in Barnstaple.

The next patient, a man in his early 70s who is called Paddy Fields, came in coughing badly and complaining that he had bronchitis. He’s had bronchitis often enough to be able to make his own diagnosis now.

Mr Fields, is a former denture repair salesman who is famous locally for wearing bright red trousers and a green waistcoat, gets bronchitis several times a year but refuses to give up smoking. He claims that he smokes only one or two packs a day but judging by the nicotine stains on his fingers, and the condition of his heart and lungs, I would guess that he gets through one or two packs an hour rather than a day. I have tried hard to persuade him to cut down but I never seem to be able to get anywhere with him.

Paddy walks like a rodeo rider after an exceptionally hard day at the office. His legs are so bandy that you could drive a team of Shetland ponies through the gap between his legs without touching his inner thighs. He likes people to think that he is bandy legged because of the size of his nuptial equipment but his secret is that he has a huge swelling, a hydrocele, which has developed in a sac around his left testicle. Paddy refuses to see a surgeon and since the hydrocele is no threat to his life, I have never felt able to push him into doing so.

Paddy supplements a probably inadequate pension by delivering logs. I have no idea where he gets them from, for he lived in a tiny terraced cottage on the road to Lynton, but his logs are the best in the county – always reliably aged and all selected for their good burning qualities.

Those who do not understand the wonders of the log fire may find this an odd thing to say but it is important to have the right type of wood if you're planning a log fire. Ash, beech, apple, hazel, holly, hornbeam and juniper, rowan, yew, hawthorn and cedar all burn exceeding well, and with pleasant aromas as a bonus. For me the best smelling woods are apple, pear and cherry, all of which give off an extremely pleasant, sweet smell, though lilac is also very pleasantly fragrant.

Conifers burn fast, produce a spicy scent and make good kindling but if used as logs they tend to produce a lot of sparks and the resultant firework display can be a little disturbing if you simply want to sit in front of a warming fire with a good book and don't want to spend the evening jumping up and down to put out the smouldering fireside rug.

Alder makes poor firewood, as does elm unless it is at least two-years-old. Lime is very poor. Sycamore also needs to be two-years-old, as does wood from the willow, which tends to smoulder and produce more smoke than heat.

All firewood burns best when it is seasoned, preferably at least a year old, but Paddy would not dream of giving alder, elm, lime, sycamore or willow to his customers.

At Christmas, Paddy always brings us half a dozen yule logs. These are monstrous, heavy and usually consist of well-matured oak. Oak is another smouldering wood though if it is thoroughly dried it burns quite well and it does make an excellent yule log. One end is placed in the fire with the other sticking out into the room. As the wood burns the log is pushed into the fire. A good yule log will last for hours.

'I'm not going to give up my fags and booze so that I can live for another three months in a shared bedroom in a grotty council run nursing home in Ilfracombe,' Paddy told me when I tried yet again to persuade him to cut down his consumption of cigarettes. I found it difficult to think of an argument that would convince him otherwise.

I gave him a prescription for an antibiotic.

And so it went on.

By the time I had finished, I had seen 18 patients altogether; a light surgery for a city based GP with a list of 3,000 patients but a fairly heavy surgery for me. Like all doctors who work in rural areas, I spent most of my time doing home visits because it took me much longer to travel to my patients. A city GP can visit three or four patients an hour if they all live in neatly numbered houses. I often found myself spending an hour or two visiting just one patient.

The stream of patients at least succeeded in distracting me from the thought of the taxman in the living room.

The final patient was a young man who demanded a sick note.

Kevin McMurray is a pushy, cockalorum who was born at the paddling end of the national gene pool and who works in Taunton doing something with motor cars. He always gives the impression that he is a mechanic or a salesman but Patchy, who goes to auctions in Taunton once a month, says he has seen him washing cars on a garage forecourt.

Although he is hardly ever at home in Bilbury, Kevin has, probably through laziness rather than loyalty or respect for my medical skills or bedside manner, remained on my list of patients.

He always wears jeans and a denim jacket with lots of safety pins and badges in the lapels and I put this down to the fact that he lives in the market town of Taunton – which is, to those of us in Bilbury, a big city. I think the population is around 45,000. I once asked Kevin why he had so many safety pins on his person, assuming that there might be some practical explanation. He told me that they were decorative and that his girlfriend had a safety pin fixed through her nose. He said he found this very attractive.

Teenagers sometimes complain that old people all look the same to them but I'm beginning to reach the age where all youngsters look the same.

Kevin told me that he needed a sick note because he had backache. I was not at all convinced that he had any back trouble at all (he seemed perfectly able to walk and to sit) and I suspected that he wanted time off to attend a football match. I tried to resist his demands but when a patient insists that he has back pain it is impossible to prove that he doesn't. So, in the end, I signed a sick note and wrote 'plumbi oscillans' in the space where I was expected to write the nature of his illness.

'What's this?' demanded Kevin, peering at the diagnosis.

'It's the Latin name for your illness,' I told him.

'Oh,' he said, satisfied and impressed.

He left clutching his sick note as though it were a ten pound note.

I was glad he didn't push me for a translation because plumbi oscillans is the Latin for 'lead swinging', an ancient euphemism for malingering.

Exhausted by the morning I walked into the kitchen, gave Patsy a hug, fell into an easy chair and let out a huge sigh. 'Food,' I said. 'I need food and drink.'

Miss Johnson had, during the morning surgery, brought me two cups of black coffee and a couple of digestive biscuits but in my view two cups of coffee and two biscuits are not enough to keep body and soul glued together.

'I hate to be the one to have to tell you this,' said Patsy, 'but Mr Merriment is still in the living room. He asked me to tell you that he wants to see you. Actually, I think what he actually said was that he had 'unearthed a serious accounting misreckoning' and was 'desirous of further communication with you'. I don't know who writes his dialogue.'

I groaned and looked at her. 'Oh bugger,' I said. 'They probably have a special phrase book. Actually, they probably go on miscommunication courses.' I pulled myself up out of the chair and wandered to the living room.

'Ah, doctor,' said Mr Merriment. 'I'm so delighted that you could spare me a little of your valuable time.'

I wasn't in a mood to put up with the taxman's sarcasm. 'I have been rather busy,' I told him. I was tempted to tell him that there was an outbreak of smallpox in the village, in the hope that this might send him scurrying back to Barnstaple, but I bravely resisted the temptation.

The taxman listened to me without blinking. I now decided that he looked like a lizard, contemplating his prey. I examined him carefully, searching for any signs of a forked tongue snapping out to catch me unawares.

He took from the table, and held up, items which he clearly regarded as forensic evidence: in his left hand he had several pieces of paper and in his right hand he held my sixpenny notebook.

'You have included in your expenses claims for five electricity bills,' he said, waving the pieces of paper at me as though producing the blood-stained knife with which I had murdered the little princes. There was an unpleasant element of triumph in his voice. This was, I thought, a man who, if he ever watched a football match, would cheer not because one side had won but because the other side had lost.

I stared at him, uncomprehending.

'There are only four quarters in a year, doctor,' he said. He was really pleased with himself. 'But you have claimed for five quarterly bills.'

I reached out a hand. 'May I look?'

He handed me the pieces of paper he was holding. There were, as he said, five electricity bills.

'But I put them into the accounts because they all arrived in the same year,' I explained. 'And if there were five in this set of accounts then there will be three in another year's accounts.'

'I am going to disallow the last of these five bills,' said Mr Merriment, ignoring my explanation. 'You will receive a demand for the tax owed and for interest payable. If you do not pay within 30 days you will be subject to penalties.'

I opened my mouth to protest, then decided there was no point. It wasn't worth the time. And I was hungry. 'OK,' I said. 'Would you like another glass of water before you go?'

'No thank you. But I would very strongly suggest that you keep your accounts in a more appropriate way in future.' He looked at the cardboard box, the two brown envelopes and the sixpenny notebook with undisguised contempt.

'What do you suggest?' I asked.

'Have you considered employing the services of an accountant?'

'I did have one of those,' I said. 'But he retired and I never got round to finding a replacement.' I looked at the items on the table. 'I'll buy a bigger notebook for next year's accounts,' I promised.

Mr Withymooor did not look impressed by this. He made another snorting sound, reminding me once more of Colin Jackson's Gloucester Old Spot pig, and headed for the door. I followed him out. 'Would you please telephone for a taxi,' he said. 'I will be heading back to the Inland Revenue offices in Barnstaple.'

I had not realised that he hadn't come in his own car. I said I would be happy to call him a taxi.

'If you submit a claim for the cost of the telephone call I will deal with it appropriately,' he told me.

‘No need for that,’ I told him. ‘Let’s just put it down as a small bribe, shall we?’

He went very red.

‘Would you like to wait in the living room? The taxi will be a few minutes. I’ll ring one of the local chaps because it will take nearly an hour for a taxi to come out from Barnstaple.’

‘I will wait by the roadside,’ he said. I wondered if he had his hair shirts washed or just wore them until they fell apart.

He left.

I telephoned for a taxi to come and pick him up and then headed for the kitchen.

‘Would you like breakfast or lunch?’ asked Patsy.

I looked at the clock. ‘Both,’ I told her. ‘I’ll have both. Breakfast first, and then lunch. But in that order, of course.’

‘Has Mr Merriment gone?’

‘He’s standing in the lane waiting for a taxi to arrive,’ I told her. ‘He’s standing next to the sign that Thumper and Patchy put up when I started practising again.’

(When the local authorities had allowed me to reopen my surgery my good friends had erected a very smart sign which read: ‘No Wart Too Small, No Rash Too Faint’. I had never bothered to move the sign, partly through laziness and partly because I rather liked it.)

‘Who did you call?’ asked Patsy.

‘Samuel Houghton,’ I said, putting two slices of bread into the toaster.

Patsy, who was bending over the oven, stood up and looked at me. She was frowning. ‘But Samuel Houghton doesn’t have a taxi,’ she said. ‘As far as I know he doesn’t even have a car.’

Samuel Houghton is a local farmer. He was in his seventies several years ago and if time serves him as it serves the rest of us, he must now be in his eighties. He wears a tweed jacket which he bought when he was 25 and holds up his trousers with baler twine. He has pretty well retired from farming but has the local authority contract for clearing snow from the lanes. He drives a huge, red tractor which can do nearly four miles an hour when travelling downhill.

‘He’s got a tractor,’ I reminded Patsy. ‘And when I last saw him he told me he was setting up a taxi service.’

‘But the tractor has only got one seat?’

‘Ah, but when he uses his tractor as a taxi, Samuel tows a trailer behind. And he puts a bale of straw on the trailer as a seat.’

Patsy started to giggle. ‘It’ll take hours for him to get to Barnstaple!’

‘Samuel doesn’t mind,’ I said. ‘And I told him that his passenger is a taxman who wants to see a bit of the countryside on his way back to town. Sam said he’ll go via Combe Martin, Berrynarbour, West Down and Braunton. I told him he can charge the guy whatever he likes.’

‘They’ll be lucky to be back in Barnstaple before dark!’

‘That’s no problem. Samuel has had lights fitted on the tractor and he says he’s going to stay over with his nephew in Prixford, and then do some shopping in Barnstaple tomorrow. It’s a long time since he saw the big city lights.’

‘The big city lights in Barnstaple?’ said Patsy incredulously.

‘There are at least three sets of traffic lights in the town!’ I reminded her.

The toast popped up. I reached for a slice, put it onto a plate and unscrewed the top off the marmalade.

Just then there was a knock on the door. It was the taxman.

‘I told you to call me a taxi,’ he said. ‘What do you mean by arranging for this man to bring his tractor?’ He pointed at Samuel, whose tractor was chugging in the lane outside.

‘I’m afraid we don’t have any formal taxi services in Bilbury,’ I told him. ‘As a service to the community Samuel has agreed to help out when required. He’ll get you back to Barnstaple.’

The taxman glowered.

‘I’d take you back myself,’ I told him. ‘But my insurance doesn’t allow me to take paying passengers and since I don’t have to go into Barnstaple on business I wouldn’t be able to claim the cost of my petrol.’ I shrugged and attempted to look frustrated. ‘The rules must be obeyed,’ I added. I then waved to Samuel, and said goodbye to Mr Merriment, surely the most inappropriately named civil servant in the history of the civil service.

‘Now you can tell me how you managed to re-sew that button on so quickly,’ said Patsy. ‘If you can really sew buttons on that fast then you should be in the next Sewing Olympics! And where did you find the black cotton.’

‘Trade secret,’ I said, smearing liberal quantities of marmalade onto my toast. I either have butter or marmalade – never both.

Patsy came up behind me and niftily removed my plate. ‘How?’ she demanded.

Faced with the loss of my toast I had no choice. I took a black felt tip pen out of my inside pocket and showed it to her. ‘I just covered the green cotton with black ink,’ I explained.

‘You are impossible!’ cried Patsy.

But she gave me back my toast.

The Forger

Like most ancient English villages, Bilbury stands at and around the top of a fairly large hill. Early settlers liked living on top of a hill because it made them feel safer from invaders, wild animals and from floods.

It's much easier to repel attackers if you're higher than they are because then you're firing arrows and throwing stones downhill whereas the enemy, wretched souls, are having to trudge uphill while firing their arrows, and they are throwing their stones up instead of down.

And, of course, those who dwell on the top of hills are far less likely to get their feet wet if they haven't finished building your arks when the floods come.

(The name Bilbury, incidentally, comes from the prefix Bil- which means promontory or ridge and the word 'bury' which has nothing to do with dead bodies but which is a corruption of the word 'burh' which originally meant a fort. So, Bilbury was originally a fort on a ridge of high ground. The nearby town of Barnstaple also has a military history. In Saxon times, Barnstaple was the principal business centre in North Devon but it was also a stronghold built to withstand attacks from Danish invaders and the name literally means 'post of the battleaxe' – a meeting place with a battleaxe as its identifying symbol.)

Apart from the obvious advantage of being safe from invaders and biblical style floodings, there are other good things about living on a hill.

Most notably the views tend to be spectacular. And so, for example, although Bilbury stands a mile or two from the North Devon coast we can see the Bristol Channel from several of our bedrooms at Bilbury Grange. On a very clear day we can see Wales.

The only bad thing I can think of is that living on the top of a hill means that you are far more likely to suffer when the winds are strong. And in the south west of England the winds are sometimes very strong indeed. Strong winds mean that most villagers tend to lose a few roof tiles or slates every winter and bits and pieces of houses and cottages which aren't fastened on tightly, such as rusty guttering and aged downpipes, tend to end up somewhere other than where they are supposed to be.

(To those locals who live in what might be politely termed 'an insurance based economy' this really is more of a benefit than a problem. There are, I'm slightly embarrassed to admit, not a few villagers who rely on the insurance claims resulting from winter gales to subsidise their modest incomes and to enable them to keep their bodies and souls within hailing distance of each other.)

After yet another day and night of gales, our garden was littered with tree branches which had been blown down. Even healthy trees shed branches occasionally and in any large garden there will always be one or two trees which are old, creaky and liable to lose branches in a high wind.

I always cut up the decent sized branches for firewood. Bigger branches can be sawn into logs and smaller branches can be turned into kindling. But there are always lots of small twigs which are too small to be useful in the fireplace and they go onto the bonfire. As a confirmed garden pyromaniac, I don't mind this one bit.

But, of course, lighting bonfires when the wind is still blowing can be a difficult, not to say hazardous, activity and I had recently decided to buy myself an incinerator so that I could light a bonfire whatever the weather; without having to worry about glowing embers blowing into a part of the garden where I didn't want a fire starting. We have also had rather a lot of trouble with the badgers raking over our bonfire site looking for something to eat. The result has been that bits and pieces of half burnt rubbish have ended up fifty yards away. I rather hoped that the incinerator would help put an end to that.

Thumper came round this morning as I was putting the damned thing together.

It seems that these days you can't even buy an incinerator which is entirely readymade. This one needed to have four feet fixed onto the bottom, to keep the base of the incinerator off the ground. I was struggling to do this when Thumper appeared.

'Brilliant idea!' said my friend. 'You can provide your patients with a complete service now.'

I looked at him, puzzled.

'You can cremate the ones who die!' said Thumper with a grin. 'We'll make you a new sign: 'Bilbury's Family Doctor: Cradle to Grave and Beyond'.'

I threw the screwdriver I was holding in his direction but he ducked and I missed by yards.

'Mel asked me to ask you to pop in and see him,' said Thumper, picking up the screwdriver, gently moving me aside and fixing the foot I'd been trying to fix in a tenth of the time it would have taken me. 'I went out there to fetch a couple of his pictures for Patchy to put in his gallery. A bloke from London bought the last two.'

'The chap who bought the old railway station?' I asked. I couldn't think of anyone else in the village whom

Thumper would describe as ‘a bloke from London’. Besides, I remembered that Hardley-Fitzwalter had boasted of buying cheap pictures in the village.

‘That’s the one,’ replied Thumper. ‘A complete pillock.’ He laughed. ‘He probably thought he’d managed to pull the wool over Patchy’s eyes.’ He said this as though it were an utterly absurd idea.

‘How did the bloke in London get to see them?’ I asked smiling at the idea of anyone pulling wool over Patchy’s eyes.

‘Patchy had them in his new gallery.’

‘In his gallery?’ I didn’t know Patchy had anything that could be properly described as a gallery. He keeps most of his stock in his garages.

‘Well, they were in what was his garden shed. Patchy now calls it his gallery. I think he got the idea from Peter.’ Peter Marshall had recently converted his garden shed into a multi-purpose commercial site which was proving very successful. ‘The bloke bought them and paid cash.’ I wasn’t surprised that it had been a cash transaction. Patchy will write cheques happily enough but he won’t accept them.

Mel is Mel Bourne, an artist who lives in an old woodman’s cottage in the middle of a wood in the middle of absolutely nowhere. He has no electricity, no running water and no telephone. His real name is Cyril or Nigel or Claude or something similar but everyone in Bilbury calls him ‘Mel’ because he comes from Australia, though to be honest he hails from Sydney and not Melbourne. Still, there wouldn’t be any point in calling him Sid Bourne, would there?

Mel lives with a sequence of 20-year-old girls whom he refers to as his au pairs. He calls them all Mabel and for some inexplicable reason they all seem happy enough to put up with this.

Although he lives simply, I suspect that Mel earns a good living as a professional painter. He is an excellent artist and could easily produce works of art of his own but, sadly, it is apparently difficult for a painter to make a living these days unless he is prepared to create an outlandish public persona for himself. The artists who do well under their own names tend to wear large bow ties, get drunk in public, appear on television and get involved in carefully orchestrated rows with selected members of the art establishment. Mel is far too shy to do any of those things and so he follows a well-trodden route and produces paintings which are, to put it politely, ‘eerily reminiscent’ of the works of other artists. He does lots of stuff which looks as if it was painted by Renoir, Manet, Monet, Picasso and Chagall. He prefers doing Chagalls because he says Chagall is the easiest to imitate. (People like Mel never use the word ‘forge’, preferring words such as ‘homage’, ‘tribute’ and so on.) When he’s creating a Chagal lookalike painting, Mel simply puts in a moon, a badly drawn woman, a cow and a chicken and use a lot of blue paint.

Mel sells most of his paintings at auction houses up and down the country and always puts a sticky label on the back making it clear that the painting has been done ‘in the style of’ or ‘after Chagall’. He gets a couple of hundred pounds apiece for them and they always sell well. He says he knows that the buyers are usually antique shop owners who peel off the stickers, put the paintings into their shops and then pretend not to know what it is that they are selling. Browsers see what looks like a Chagall or a Renoir and they are blinded by the sound of cash pouring into their pockets. If names are mentioned, the antique shop owner pretends not to have heard of Chagall and says he thought that a fellow called Renoir used to play for Manchester United.

The antique shop owner then sells the picture on for five hundred pounds and makes a good profit. Up until that point, no one in the chain of deceit has done anything illegal.

The buyer who purchases the picture from the antique dealer then either hangs the picture on his wall, and gloats about how little he paid for it, or else he flogs it to a London dealer as an original but unsigned painting.

It is, I’m told, surprising how many famous artists never bothered to sign their work, particularly the stuff they did when they were young, unknown and penniless. Why would a young artist bother to sign his name to his painting if his name wasn’t going to mean anything to prospective buyers? According to Patchy there are now four times as many paintings attributed to Marc Chagall as the great man ever produced in his lifetime. Not all those were produced by Mel Bourne, of course, but his share of the total is almost certainly greater than anyone else’s.

Thumper fixed the next and final foot to the base of the incinerator with an ease which I envied. If you gave Thumper a large box full of old motor car parts he would build you a motor car in a day – and have absolutely no bits left over. And if you gave Patchy Fogg a large box full of old motor car parts he would sell the bits as souvenirs, paperweights and bits of modern sculpture. My skills, such as they are, seem simple and rather primitive in comparison.

I thanked Thumper and drove out to Mel’s cottage.

This is something much easier to say or to write than it is to do, since the last part of the track through the wood is so rough, so rutted and so strewn with fallen branches that I had to park the Rolls Royce on a bed of pine needles and walk the final quarter of a mile.

The current Mabel, a lovely Dutch girl who dotes on Mel and regards him as a genius, met me at the cottage door, insisted that I accept a large glass of wine and took me in to the room which doubled as a bedroom and an art studio. Mel was lying on a huge double bed. Mabel, who had clearly been crying, stayed with us, settling down onto a large bean bag in a corner of the room.

Mel Bourne is an unusual fellow in every possible respect. He has small black eyes, which sit like solitary, sinking currants in a double handful of uncooked dough, a mean cook's interpretation of the currant bun, and thin, pale lips which had clearly long ago run out of smiles. These are situated a couple of inches above the finest collection of chins I had seen for a long while. The chins are well worth numbering and categorising. Some people collect stamps, some collect old typewriters. Mel looks as though he collects chins and had been very successful at it.

Although born in Australia he is now a staunch Englishman; the sort of fellow who is proud enough of his country to believe that the newspaper headline *Storm in Channel –Continent Isolated* makes absolute good sense. He speaks in a slow, stentorian voice which made him sound like the fellows NASA employed to talk to the astronauts on America's early adventures in space.

I've always found voices fascinating.

I once knew a fellow who was a very successful disc jockey on the wireless. He worked on pirate radio and then moved to Radio 1 when the BBC realised, rather belatedly, that there was a market for popular music. I first met him when he was doing a programme in which short interviews with guests were slotted in between the records. I remember that he interviewed me about a book of mine called *Bodypower*. I was so fascinated by the famous, voice that I had difficulty in answering any of his questions. Every time he opened his mouth it sounded as if he were about to introduce the very latest single from the Rolling Stones. Years later, when I knew him well, I still found myself in awe of the voice. If he asked me if I wanted another cup of coffee I would find myself sitting waiting for the next record to start playing before I answered.

'What's up?' I asked Mel, carefully moving a few magazines onto the floor and sitting down on the edge of the bed. I put the glass of wine which Mabel had given me down onto the floor beside the magazines.

'I'm buggered,' said Mel. He had no teeth at all. I didn't remember him being edentulous. 'Totally worn out and obviously dying. You'll have to give me a jab to put me out of Mabel's misery. I've left her the cottage and a dozen paintings – they'll last her until she finds a new boyfriend.'

There was a sob and a protest from the corner of the room.

Mel nodded towards the wine I'd put down. 'You'll like that,' he said, 'it's a Saint Emilion Grand Cru, 1954. Costs a fortune but very drinkable. I was going to drink all the good stuff before I popped my clogs but I won't manage it now. Ask Mabel to give you half a dozen bottles to take home with you. And take a couple of bottles for Thumper.' I noticed that his false teeth, an upper set and a lower set, were sitting on the wooden cabinet beside the bed.

Unless there are exceptional circumstances I don't usually drink before lunchtime but this seemed an exceptional circumstance so I picked up the wine glass and took a sip. It was like drinking velvet; blood red, heavy bodied, light-headed, rich as Croesus velvet. I had never tasted a wine quite like it nor, I suspected, half as expensive. I took a bigger sip.

'In what particular way are you buggered?' I asked.

'It's been coming on for a while,' said Mel sadly but stoically. 'Some time ago I reached the age where I always needed to take an antacid before I ate anything, just as a precaution'. He paused, enjoying half-forgotten memories of meals enjoyed and now mourned. 'But,' he continued with a forced and gummy grin, 'until recently I always told myself that however old and knackered I became my best years were still ahead of me. And I damned well intended to go ahead and prove it.' He sighed and moved awkwardly as though in pain. 'But that was then and this is now. I'm as weak as a kitten and I've started to get pains that I really don't like.' He sighed. 'The end is nigh, doctor. It's time to give me the jab.'

'The jab?' I said.

'The stuff you give people to send them on their way,' said Mel, with a debonair wave of a hand. 'Mabel kisses me. You say goodbye. You both say I'm very brave and you'll never forget me. I tell you I want to be cremated and to have my ashes strewn in the woods – which I do incidentally – then you bung a needle in my bum and shoot me full of arsenic or cyanide, or whatever it is you medics use these days.' He tried to raise himself up off the bed but failed. 'If you leave here without giving me the jab I'll just cut my wrists!' he told me. He produced an old-fashioned cut throat razor from underneath his pillow. Mabel sobbed loudly.

I stared at him. It took me a moment or two to realise that he was deadly serious.

Under normal circumstances Mel is one of those individuals who goes through life apparently unconcerned about things going on around him. I have always envied him his laissez faire attitude.

It has always been my experience that the things which go wrong are invariably the things we haven't thought about, and therefore do not worry about, and I long ago concluded that there are two ways to try to deal with this problem.

The first way is to think more, and worry more, in the hope that you will eventually spot the potential problem before it rears its doubtless very ugly head.

The people who follow this path tiptoe nervously through life. One minute they are looking over their shoulders for the madman who is lurking in the shadows and about to leap out and wrap his bony fingers around their neck, and the next minute they are looking up into the sky for the unexpected scaffolding pole or roof tile that is about to come plummeting down and crush their skulls. Around every corner there is always a new disaster waiting.

Some of those who fall into this category are incorrigible.

I once tried to teach a patient how to relax by using his imagination to visualise the peaceful delights of a walk in the country. He lay on the couch while I painted a word picture of a beautiful walk along a sunlight lane. Suddenly, he leapt up screaming. 'What on earth is the matter?' I asked. 'There's a body in the ditch at the side of the lane!' he cried, his face etched with horror and agony.

Sadly, the chronic worriers usually find that their thinking and worrying is of very little value because there is always something they miss. In between looking out for the mad mugger and watching for the falling roof tile, they are mown down by a runaway lorry or an out of control cyclist. Moreover, their constant worrying makes them ill and they invariably suffer from one or more items chosen by a Higher Authority from an a la carte menu of a wide variety of stress related disorders – heart disease, high blood pressure, stomach ulcers, asthma, cancer and so on.

The second solution is to think less and to worry not at all; thinking of yourself as a shore upon which the waves will constantly break and over which you cannot possibly have any control.

Mel fell firmly into this category.

The people who follow this philosophy are very slightly more likely to find themselves facing serious and unexpected problems. Occasionally they will get their feet damp, and from time to time they will be washed away to sea.

But they are far less likely to suffer from stress related diseases.

They tend to saunter through life, taking each new vicissitude with an aplomb which is envied by their more nervous neighbours. They eat, drink and smoke whatever they like, without a thought for the consequences. They shrug off all thoughts of falling tiles and lurking murderers and wander freely through life, with enviable nonchalance. Insouciance is their watchword and equanimity their guide. They are calm and untroubled by the terrors of the world. Insurance is, for them, something other people take out.

The trouble is that their sense of fatalism is likely to encourage them to give up too soon when illness strikes.

Mel is settled resolutely into the second category of individual.

He regards worry as an unnecessary luxury; as pointless as a battery operated back scratcher or diamond studded collar for a goldfish.

Worry has always been something he was quite happy to go through life without. He has always been happy to accept whatever life throws at him. And now that he was convinced that he was dying he didn't want to fight. Instead, he wanted to get the whole damned thing over as quickly as possible.

'Tell me what symptoms you've got,' I told him. I took another sip of the wine. It really was very good. I felt slightly guilty for drinking at such an early hour. And I had to drive the car back home.

'Everything's gone stiff,' said Mel. 'I think it's probably the rigor mortis setting in a bit early.'

'What do you mean by 'everything'?'

'Well, not the bit I'd like to be stiff,' said Mel with a laugh as hollow as a chocolate Easter egg. There was a half-stifled sob from Mabel. 'My neck is stiff, my shoulders are stiff and my hips are stiff. My hips and thighs are so stiff that I can hardly get out of bed. And my shoulders are so painful and stiff that I can hardly lift a bloody paint brush.'

'How long has it been coming on?' I asked him.

'A few days,' said Mel. 'No more than a week.'

'Does anything make it worse?'

He thought for a moment. 'The stiffness and pain are worse in the morning,' he said. 'They're terrible when I wake up. By the end of the day the pain and stiffness are no worse than awful.' He thought for a moment and sighed. 'I feel as weak as a kitten and I just know I'm dying.'

'Anything else?' I asked.

'Isn't that enough?' he demanded.

'You seem depressed,' I said.

'Of course I'm bloody depressed! I'm only 57 and I'm dying because my body has worn out! I should be able to get a rebate. I thought we were supposed to have a guarantee of three score and ten!' He tried to move but winced. He lay quietly for a few moments. 'I'm not ready to die,' he said, 'but when your time has come there's no point in whingeing about it, is there?' Tears appeared in the corners of both eyes and slowly ran down his cheeks.

I finished off the wine and put my glass down.

'Is there no hope, doctor?' asked Mabel. 'Can you get him into hospital? Are there some tests you could do?'

'I'm not going into a damned hospital!' cried Mel. 'I hate hospitals.'

It is surprising how many people are terrified of going into hospital – probably because they know people who've been made worse, caught infections or had the wrong leg chopped off. In this respect, little has changed from the Middle Ages when patients would fight to stay out of hospitals because they knew that once they went in they would only leave in a coffin. I was contemplating this sad truth when suddenly, in a flash, I realised what was wrong with Mel and I knew that he wasn't dying. I'd seen a patient with these symptoms before. Experience and intuition can be a potent combination on the rare occasion when they work together. Instinct, intuition, call it what you will is unconscious logic and while I'd been thinking about something else my mind had been whirring and had dug out the answer.

Mel looked at the empty glass I was still holding and told Mabel to pour me more wine.

The more I thought about it the more certain I was that Mel had a disease called polymyalgia rheumatic – a relatively uncommon disorder which seems to exclusively affect people over the age of 55.

As with so many diseases, no one knows what causes polymyalgia rheumatic. Indeed, no one knows much about it at all except that it seems to involve an inflammation of the lining of the large joints and that this inflammation causes severe stiffness and pain in the muscles of the hips, the shoulders and the neck. The symptoms tend to be worse in the morning and they are so distressing that patients feel generally unwell, miserable and often depressed.

There are blood tests which can be done but if I took blood samples immediately I wouldn't get the results back for several days, probably a week. The erythrocyte sedimentation rate (ESR) is raised dramatically in patients with polymyalgia rheumatic but I didn't think I had a few days. Mel was so depressed that he would almost certainly kill himself if he had to suffer for another week.

I could try to persuade him to go into hospital. But would he go? No. I knew he wouldn't. I could probably obtain a legal order forcing him to go into hospital but that would take time I didn't have. And I feared that the minute I left Mel and returned home to start the legal processes he would cut his wrists. And even if Mel agreed to go into hospital there would be the problem of getting him out of the cottage and into an ambulance. He would have to be carried for a quarter of a mile at least. The pains and stiffness in his big joints would make the whole operation unbearably uncomfortable for him.

Suddenly, I made a decision. I took a gulp of the beautiful wine Mabel had put into my glass and opened my drug bag. Maybe the wine gave me the courage to take action.

'I think I can mend you,' I told Mel. I finished off the wine.

He stared at me, disbelievingly.

'I think I know what's wrong,' I said. 'If I'm right I can get rid of the pains and the stiffness.'

I rummaged around in my drug bag until I found what I needed. Although doctors don't know what causes polymyalgia rheumatic, and certainly don't have a cure, it is known that the symptoms can be banished with the aid of corticosteroids' these seem to block the actions of the chemicals which produce the inflammation causing the pain and stiffness.

I took out a small bottle of steroid tablets and asked Mabel to fetch a glass of water. When she returned, I told her to give the glass of water to Mel. I then shook three tablets out into his hand. 'Swallow those,' I instructed him.

'Are these going to kill me or cure me?' he asked. I wasn't sure he cared which.

'They won't kill you,' I told him. 'They will cure you.'

In truth, I should have said that I hoped that they would cure him but I needed all the help I could find. I needed Mel to believe in the treatment I was giving him.

I watched Mel take the pills and then turned to Mabel. 'Make sure Mel takes another three tablets tomorrow morning. There won't be any improvement tomorrow but I'll come back in 48 hours and the pain and the stiffness will be easing off by then.'

Mel would have to take the steroid for a year or two. And he'd need to be certain not to miss any. But if his symptoms started to disappear I didn't think I'd have any problem persuading him to keep taking the tablets.

I made Mel promise that he would not cut his wrists before I returned and then I left, hoping and praying that my diagnosis was right.

I worried all the rest of that day, all that night and all the next day. I had been trained to do tests and investigations before making a diagnosis of a serious disease such as polymyalgia rheumatic. But here I was just handing out steroid tablets in the belief that I was right.

I wanted to go back to see Mel the next morning but I knew that the steroids would not have had time to work. I would merely have to repeat my confident assurance that the pills would cure him. Another visit before there had been any change might reduce Mel's confidence and, therefore, do more harm than good. I thought it best to wait 48 hours in the hope that by the time I returned to the cottage there would be a real improvement.

And so I waited.

And I finally returned to the cottage 48 hours after I'd left.

As I walked along the rutted, branch-strewn track from where I had left the Rolls Royce, I found myself murmuring a prayer that I'd been right and that Mel would have made at least some improvement. If he wasn't any better, then I really didn't know what else I could do.

I could try to persuade him to persevere with the tablets for another 24 hours. But would he wait that long before cutting his wrists? Rarely have I been more anxious to see the outcome of a treatment programme.

Mel and Mabel had heard me coming and when I got closer to their cottage I could see that they were standing in the doorway. They had their arms around each other and they were both crying.

Mel's symptoms hadn't entirely disappeared.

He was still a little stiff and he still had some pain. But he was, he said, so much better that he had, that morning, been able to do a little painting. He was no longer depressed. He was alive again and as full of ambition, hope and good cheer as I had ever seen him.

I told him again that he had to take the tablets every day and that he would need to persevere with them for some time. 'You must not suddenly stop them,' I told him firmly. 'If you do then you will be ill again.'

'I'll make sure he takes them,' promised Mabel; who has far more common sense in her little finger than Mel has in his whole body.

'You forgot your wine,' said Mel, pointing to a full crate of Saint Emilion claret.

I protested that the offer of the wine had been made when he thought he was dying. I also pointed out that he had originally promised me just six bottles.

'If you don't take it then I won't take the pills,' said Mel, who looked as if he were about to stamp his feet and have a tantrum. 'And besides, two bottles are for Thumper. Remember?'

And so I had little choice. I picked up the crate of wine.

'Oh, and we wanted to give you something else,' said Mabel. She darted back into the cottage and reappeared a moment later carrying two paintings.

'Which would you prefer?' she asked. 'A late Chagall or an early Monet?'

I looked at the two paintings. They were amazingly good.

'I did the Chagall and half the Monet last night and finished the Monet this morning,' said Mel.

'I can't…,' I began, trying to refuse the paintings without giving offence.

'Take them both,' insisted Mel. 'If it hadn't been for you, I'd be pushing up daisies.' Once again he wouldn't allow me to refuse.

Since I was carrying the wine, Mabel carried the two paintings to the car.

'Be careful with the Monet,' called Mel as we disappeared off up the track. 'Remember, I only finished it this morning and the paint is still a bit tacky.'

I put the crate of wine on the back seat of the Rolls and Mabel lay the two paintings down on the boot floor.

I then drove home singing.

When things go well there is no better job in the world than being a country GP.

The Man in the Yellow Anorak

The Rolls Royce 20/25 is a magnificent motor car. Built in an era when all motor cars had style, individuality and presence, the 20/25 was one of the first Rolls Royce cars built to cater for the growing number of owner-drivers; customers who were happy to drive their cars themselves (either because they couldn't afford a chauffeur or because they enjoyed driving too much to pay someone else to do it for them).

When Dr Brownlow died he left me his Rolls Royce 20/25; it was and is quite possibly the most absurdly inappropriate vehicle for a country doctor to use. I find it quite impossible to think of anything more absurdly unsuited to driving around in the Devon lanes.

The car is too wide, too long and difficult to steer; it has brakes which need to be applied a good five minutes before the driver wishes to stop and although it consumes fuel at the sort of rate which might be associated with an ocean going liner it accelerates (in comparison with a relatively small, modern family saloon such as an Austin Allegro, Honda Civic or Volkswagen Passat) with stately dignity rather than startling speed. As Patchy Fogg once put it, the Rolls Royce 20/25 was built for travelling rather than arriving.

But few cars have the panache and style of an elderly Rolls Royce motor car and although I had been tempted by the idea of selling the car and purchasing in its stead a more practical vehicle, my affection for Dr Brownlow, and my determination to continue to practise in a way of which I thought he might approve, meant that I had resisted the temptation with great ease. Patsy, I am pleased to say, agreed with me that we should keep the Rolls Royce and say bugger to convenience and practicality. Since the car was not fitted with seat belts (and I had absolutely no intention of having them fitted) she and the babies invariably travelled in the back when we went out en famille and she would, on occasion, wave to pedestrians in a distinctly regal manner. She swears that on one occasion a middle aged woman in South Molton actually curtseyed as we drove past. Thumper is looking out for a small regal-looking pennant and suitable fixing pole which I can have affixed to the bonnet.

Dr Brownlow's motor car, a spacious limousine, had first seen the light of day in 1930 and, as with all the other vehicles known as 20/25s, only the chassis, six litre engine, gearbox and other mechanical parts had been made by the Rolls Royce company. Dr Brownlow had bought the car second-hand from the widow of a Harley Street consultant with whom he had trained. The consultant had worked himself to death and the widow had decided to sell everything and to move to Monte Carlo for the weather, the social life and the lack of taxation. She had decided that she did not want to be set off on her new life encumbered by a black limousine. The car was less than two-years-old when Dr Brownlow became the owner and in Rolls Royce terms it had barely been run in.

The bodywork for the car had been made ('built' is a more appropriate word) by a firm of coachbuilders known as Thrupp and Maberly. The vehicle had originally been designed to reach a top speed of 75 mph but as they mature, cars – like people – become a little less frisky and I had never managed to take the car above 65 mph. Despite its age, however, the car handled easily and smoothly and was a delight to drive. The steering was an absolute joy, finger light to the touch, and the car had all the mod cons of the day – including a rear fog light, a reversing light, a heater (complete with fan) and windscreen wipers which could, with the aid of two silver knobs, be parked away from the screen when not in use. The dashboard was made of mahogany with black lacquer highlighting. Tolstoy's, the Bilbury garage, had looked after the car when it belonged to Dr Brownlow and they continued to look after it (and even clean it) when I took over ownership.

All that more than made up for the fact that the size of the car, and the rather large turning circle, made it entirely unsuitable for driving around the narrow lanes of Devon. However, spending so much time in close proximity to the Devon hedges did encourage me to learn more about how they had come into being.

Having been brought up in the suburbs of a town in the English midlands I knew very little about the countryside when I first arrived in Bilbury.

As far as I knew, a ditch was just a gulley at the side of the road, dug to cope with excess rainwater, while a hedge was something which existed to mark a minor boundary and to keep animals from straying.

But as time went by, I learnt that things aren't quite as simple as I had once thought.

Boundaries, whatever form they may take, are terribly important to everyone and especially so in the country. Even a farmer who has several hundred acres will worry enormously if he thinks he is losing a foot of land or, just as importantly, someone else is gaining a foot. I also discovered that ditches and hedges are often more than they might appear to be.

Back in Roman times, when the Romans conquered Britain, the entire population of Britain was probably considerably less than half a million and you might have thought that there would be plenty of land to go around. But even back in those simpler days, farmers were protective of their land and guarded their boundaries as jealously as any modern landowner, and with the same dogged determination.

In early Devon, as in the rest of England, the standard unit of cultivation was a piece of land known as the strip. A full strip of land would be 220 yards long and 22 yards wide (the original acre) but most farmers had strips of half an acre or a third of an acre. A bundle or a parcel of strips for cultivation were known as a furlong and a 'campus' or a 'field' was made up of scores of furlongs (and, therefore, several hundred strips) of many different sizes and shapes. The area of land enclosed by ditches and hedges was known as a park and it would be subdivided, by further hedges and ditches, into smaller parcels in order to make it easier to control animals and their grazing.

When a landowner died his estate would, of course, have to be divided up so that it could be shared between the heirs. Each heir had to be given a fair share of every sort of land available – garden, orchard, meadow, woodland, pastureland and heathland – and the result was that land had to be divided into very small fields, some of them no more than half an acre in size. This would, inevitably, mean that the new landowners would need to get digging ditches and building banks and hedges in order to make their boundaries clear.

Today, ditches and hedges mark thousands of boundaries, many of which have been lost. An ordinary looking ditch may mark the boundary line of a former royal manor and there are ditches, hedges, banks and lanes in the county of Devon which are well over a thousand years old.

The village of Combe Martin, just a few miles from Bilbury, originated as a small valley village about a mile inland and only gradually spread down to the valley to the sea as the centuries wandered effortlessly by. Today, Combe Martin still has many mediaeval hedges: boundaries which have been in place since they were grown to mark off individual strips of land.

Bilbury itself, like nearly every village which can be found on a map of England, existed long before William the Conqueror ordered the creation of the Domesday Book in the eleventh century.

Walk along a narrow track, hardly wide enough for a horse drawn cart, and you might imagine that you are merely following in the footsteps, or wheel tracks, of a long forgotten farmer who used that route to pass from one field to another, to move animals, feed or crops from his farmhouse or barns to a distant pasture.

But things aren't that simple.

There are tracks in Bilbury, known to historians and archeologists as 'hollow ways', which were already ancient in the tenth century. However, these 'false' tracks weren't built as tracks or lanes at all but were originally created by two landowners digging out ditches to mark their boundaries.

As they dug, the two landowners or their ditch digging employees, threw up the earth they had moved and built up continuous banks on their side of their ditch. Ditches were customarily expected to be four feet wide and four feet deep and since two ditches were dug side by side this explains why so many tracks and lanes in Devon are just eight or so feet wide.

There was four feet of ditch for landowner A on the left hand side of the lane, and four feet of contiguous ditch for landowner B on the right hand side.

The two mounds of earth produced with the soil taken from the ditches were then planted with a hedge of hazel, oak, maple or ash or, more likely, a mixture of all of these. A good number of hawthorn bushes would be thrown in to the mix to make the hedge tighter, thornier and more impenetrable.

There might be an occasional elm too but the sycamore, now so common, was not introduced into England until the end of the 16th century.

By planting their hedges with what are called 'coppice woods', suitable for providing branches which could be used for fencing and firewood, the landowners could give themselves a constant and useful crop of wood, while maintaining their hedgerow boundaries.

The other advantage of these huge banks and hedges was that animals would be able to shelter from wind and rain. And a pleasant side effect was that the hedges would provide homes for huge numbers of birds.

As the years went by the broad, eight foot wide ditch would need clearing out from time to time, and the soil removed would be thrown onto the top of the bank, building up to the sort of height which can be seen today. What now appears to be a track was originally merely the confluence of two ditches and the track might be wide enough for a man on horseback or even for a cart is merely a convenient coincidence. Look carefully and you will see that these narrow tracks (which can be seen all over Devon, and not just in Bilbury) are several feet below the level of the fields on either side.

Even a man well over six feet tall will, if he walks along a fairly ordinary Devon track, be unable to peer over the top of the earth bank, let alone through the hedge on top of it (which may, itself, have now become a hedge of towering trees), and see into the fields on either side.

Today these banks are now widely known as 'traditional Devon banks' and local planning departments, not understanding their origins or purpose, sometimes insist that builders surround new housing estates with mounds of earth in an attempt to preserve the Devon bank tradition. Sadly, the modern builders usually build the banks out of discarded rubble and rubbish and cover them with a thin layer of clay and stony earth. The result is invariably a sad, weed encrusted earth wall with bits of broken pipe poking out amidst the dandelions, dock and nettles.

It is no wonder that ditch digging and hedge building and layering were for centuries two of the most common forms of employment in the English countryside. And the topography of today's countryside is a direct result of all that digging and layering. The narrow lanes along which people drive in Devon are confined and winding because they follow the tracks and ditches which lie between the banks built to define the extent of each landowner's domain. Since moving huge boulders or trees would take an inordinate amount of effort, the landowners usually wriggled around them – and hence many of these tracks seem to wander hither and thither in a very irregular way.

There are some who might say that driving one of the largest cars on the road in an area of the country with the narrowest lanes is close to lunacy.

I prefer to think of it as driving one of the most beautiful cars ever made in a part of the country with the most beautiful lanes and hedgerows.

Nevertheless, despite this optimistic viewpoint, I have to admit that a huge, old Rolls Royce is not the most sensible vehicle for a country doctor to drive in Devon.

As I travelled around on my daily visits, I was constantly trying to avoid bushes, branches and brambles in narrow lanes which had originally been nothing more than ditches, which had then developed into tracks for driving sheep from field to field, which had been used by farmers on horseback and which had eventually been commandeered by the occasional, wealthy individual with a trap and a pony.

I had become unusually adept at reversing (most of the local lanes were far too narrow to allow cars to pass one another and if two vehicles met, one would invariably have to reverse and find a gateway or field entrance) but I had found, to my surprise, that most other drivers would quickly start to reverse when they saw the Rolls approaching. Even farmers would reverse their tractors to allow the Rolls to pass by.

Locals in and around Bilbury always know how far they have to reverse to reach the last passing place or gateway and when two locals meet in a narrow lane the customary practice is for the one closest to a gate or passing place to do the reversing.

Visiting motorists are, however, rather different. They usually panic when they come face to face with another vehicle in a lane so narrow that there is grass growing in the middle of the road and both of their vehicle's wing mirrors are brushing along in the hedges.

And so, even though my vehicle is longer and wider than most other cars on the road I end up reversing more often than not.

While I was out on my late morning calls one rainy day, I found myself bonnet to bonnet with a dark blue saloon car.

I think it may have been an Austin 1800 but I am ashamed to admit that a lot of modern cars look the same to me and it could well have been a Hillman or a Ford of some kind.

The blue car was towing a caravan and I realised immediately that even though the saloon car driver had a passing space less than twenty yards behind him, I would be the one going backwards. The driver had a look of combined fury and terror on his face and to be honest I'm not surprised. His caravan was about two feet wider than the lane he was in and branches and brambles were scratching along both sides. I remembered that a visitor from Leeds once had to have his caravan unhooked from his car and pulled out with a tractor when it got stuck in the particularly narrow piece of a lane which goes alongside Softly's Bottom. The caravan sides were peeled back by blackthorn and hawthorn branches and the caravan was a write-off when it was finally extricated.

And so I started to reverse the Rolls, trying to remember where there was a passing place behind me and how narrow the lane would get before it widened out again.

It was summer at the time but you wouldn't have known it from the weather.

It had been raining for a week and the rain was bucketing down as though the manufacturer of the stuff had a vast quantity of surplus stock, and was trying to get rid of it because the storage space was needed for hail, snow and other forthcoming meteorological goodies.

As I looked over my shoulder and reversed down the lane, I first saw something orange and then saw something yellow on the other side of the hedge.

The hedge was thick at that point, mainly beech and hawthorn, and even though I was moving very slowly it was difficult to see clearly. When the something yellow moved, I realised that I had spotted a human being in a brightly coloured anorak. He or she was lying on the ground but moving about from side to side. There was a dark shape beside it but it was raining so hard that I couldn't make out what it was: a child or an animal of some kind perhaps.

As I drove backwards, trying to avoid the hedges and peering through the rain, it slowly became clear from the shape that the something orange was a small tent; one of those tiny little things just big enough to provide space for one person who doesn't suffer from claustrophobia, and accompanied by nothing more cumbersome than a thin sleeping bag, a pair of boots and a torch. It was one of those little tents which are light enough, when rolled up, to be carried on top of a rucksack or on the back of a bicycle.

Suddenly the hedge became thinner and I could see through it more easily. But the figure in yellow didn't look right. And what was the small child doing next to the figure in yellow? Was it a child? There was something about the way the individual was moving that concerned me and so I stopped my car and wound down my window. I could then clearly tell that the person in the anorak was in trouble. The rain was pouring down; bucketing down as the Devonians sometimes say.

I speeded up a little and continued to reverse the Rolls as quickly as I could until I came to a gateway. There still wasn't space for the blue saloon and its caravan to pass but there was room for me to open my door and get out of the car. And, just as important, I could get into the field to see what was wrong with the person in yellow.

I jumped out of the car, pulled on my raincoat, grabbed my bag from the back seat, opened the gate and hurried into the field. As I did so, the driver of the blue car pressed his horn impatiently. One of those imperious and irritating toot toots that always make it clear that the person doing the tooting is far more important than everyone else around and must be obeyed immediately. Maybe he thought I had decided to pop out into a wet field to enjoy an impromptu picnic.

I ignored the unhappy motorist and his hooting and hurried over to the figure in yellow. It turned out to be a male; a fellow in his late forties or early fifties I guessed from his face, hair and beard. Although he was moving, writhing would be the most appropriate word, he appeared to be unconscious. He was groaning loudly and crying out in pain.

As I approached the man in the yellow anorak, I could see that there was no child beside him but that two dogs, one large and one small, were crouched over him.

Although I could not, at first, see what was happening it was quickly obvious that the dogs weren't playing with him. Something far more sinister was going on. I shouted loudly to attract their attention and the two dogs duly lifted their heads.

It was raining so heavily that it was difficult to see what breed they were but the big dog appeared to be a Doberman Pinscher and the small dog looked like a Jack Russell terrier. The dogs were, inevitably, soaked. Their fur was flattened as if they had been swimming in the sea.

Only when I was no more than five or six feet away could I see that their mouths were red with blood. I realised with horror that they were eating the man on the ground.

It was absolutely no consolation to see that I had been right about the breeds; the big dog was a Doberman and the small one was a Jack Russell. I knew that there was someone in the village who had two such dogs but for the moment I couldn't for the life of me remember who it was.

I spoke quietly to the dogs, trying to avoid looking directly at them. I kept still, holding my arms by my sides and trying not to look threatening. I talked to them, gently trying all the usual commands I could think of: 'sit', 'lie down' and so on.

But the dogs had tasted blood and they were too excited to be calmed down in such a tepid way.

And so, I hit out at the bigger dog with the only weapon I had – my heavy black, leather medical bag – and caught him a glancing blow on the side of his head. He looked up, growled, snarled and then carried on biting and chewing. The poor man in the yellow anorak was being eaten alive. I swung my medical bag again and this time managed to catch the Doberman a really good blow. He staggered, moved away from the man on the ground and came towards me. I knew that I had to stay upright. If the Doberman managed to get me onto the ground then both I and the camper would be beyond hope.

I love animals in general and dogs in particular and our collie Ben is one of my very best friends but I had never before seen anything quite so menacing as this Doberman.

I swung the bag again and then suddenly realised that the damned Jack Russell terrier was biting my calf. As the Doberman backed away a few feet I swung the bag round as hard as I could and caught the Jack Russell soundly on his chest. The smaller dog backed away whimpering and the lock on my case broke open.

It didn't matter a damn at that moment but I remembered where I had seen a Doberman Pinscher and a Jack Russell together.

The snooty charity executive and his snooty Home Office wife, the couple who had bought the old Bilbury Halt railway station and who had a daughter with alleged asthma, had a Doberman and a Jack Russell.

And their holiday home was only a couple of miles away across the fields.

The man had boasted that he let his dogs run wild and roam across the countryside. These were their damned dogs.

The rain was, if anything, now heavier than ever and the water pouring down from my hair meant that I had to brush my eyes with the back of my hand so that I could see anything at all. It was summer but the rain was colder than I'd expected. I found myself shivering, though I was not sure whether this was because of the cold or through simple fear.

The camper in the yellow anorak was groaning but was now quite still. Arterial blood was spurting from two bites. I knew that if I didn't manage to get to him soon he would definitely be dead. I desperately wanted to attend to the man but I couldn't do that until I had dealt with the dogs.

What had set out to be a fairly ordinary day's morning visits had suddenly become a fight for my life.

Behind me, back in the lane, I could hear the damned driver of the blue car impatiently banging on his horn. I continued to ignore him and risked a look at the man in the yellow anorak. There were huge, ragged tears in his blue jeans and in his anorak and through these I could see that the dogs had bitten great chunks out of him. They had attacked his face too and there was blood streaming down his left cheek. His nose had been half bitten off and it looked as though one ear was missing.

I looked at the unfortunate camper for too long and suddenly found that the Doberman was moving forwards and staring at me and growling. I am not ashamed to admit that I was terrified. I had seen what the dogs had done to the man in the yellow anorak. I was still holding my now open medical bag and I looked down at it and realised that as a weapon it was pretty well useless. I glanced inside. There were syringes and drugs within my reach and if I had time I could inject the bigger dog with a large dose of something suitable. A good shot of morphine would do the trick. But the dog wasn't going to give me time to take the wrapping off a syringe, let alone break open an ampoule of morphine. I dropped the bag, thanked the heavens that I had not bothered to fasten my raincoat and reached into my jacket pocket. It took just a couple of seconds to open the largest blade on my Swiss Army penknife.

When the Doberman prepared to leap at me, I knew that I didn't have many more chances.

I knew that if I did not make the first slash with the knife count, then I would end up lying alongside the badly bitten and mauled camper; I would be the rest of lunch.

I felt the Jack Russell biting again at my calf and made the mistake of half turning as I tried to shake it off. It occurred to me too late that the dogs were probably operating as a team. The Doberman chose that moment to hurl itself at me. As it was in the air, I waited for what seemed like hours and then stabbed my knife at the animal's neck. I was hoping to stab the dog somewhere in or near its carotid artery. The jugular vein would do. Anything major would be acceptable; any blood vessel at all.

I had never had to fight for my life before.

And I knew that even if I didn't die I could lose a leg or an arm.

Even the loss of a hand would mean the end of my career as a GP in Bilbury. How many one-handed country GPs can there be?

Either the dog was too fast or I was too slow but the knife blade dug fairly harmlessly into the beast's flank, irritating it enough for it to howl with outrage but not disabling it. Nevertheless I managed to sidestep the dog as it leapt.

The animal's claws scratched through my raincoat and the dog finally landed on the grass. I looked around, desperate for another weapon of some kind. There didn't seem to be anything I could use. And then I glimpsed a dead branch on the ground a few feet to my right. The branch was about three feet long and as thick as a rolling pin. I lunged for the piece of wood, picked it up and had it in my hand as the Doberman leapt again. Its mouth was open, its eyes staring madly, angrily and hungrily. Its teeth were bared.

'Don't those bloody people feed their damned dog!' I remember thinking, utterly inconsequentially. My only other thought was the hope that the stick wasn't rotten and wouldn't break up the moment I tried to use it.

I thrust the stick deep into the dog's open mouth and as the dog kept coming I kept pushing until a foot, eighteen inches, two feet of the stick had gone down into the creature's throat. His eyes bulged as he fought for breath. The Jack Russell terrier, seeing the Doberman disabled, backed away for an instant and then came for me again, sinking its teeth into my leg. Using my free leg, I stamped down onto its head as hard as I could and so unbalanced myself that the two of us toppled over. The dog still wouldn't release its hold on my calf. The pain was excruciating. I put my hands around the dog's throat and squeezed and squeezed until it went unconscious. Even then I didn't stop squeezing. The two dogs were going to die anyway. After the way they had behaved they were doomed. I didn't want the Jack Russell attacking the man on the ground. And I didn't want it attacking me as I tried to help him. Only when the small dog went limp did I release my hold on its neck.

I looked around at the Doberman. It was struggling unsuccessfully to remove the stick from its throat and it too was now dying. I looked for a stone with which to finish it off but couldn't see one and so I left it to its fate. The man on the ground needed help now. I had to staunch the bleeding if he was going to have any chance at all.

I have seen some awful things in my life but this was by far the worst. This was the stuff of nightmares. The man was moaning, drifting in and out of consciousness, and I couldn't begin to count the number of wounds which were pouring blood. I had to stop all, or at least most of, the bleeding and I had to do it very quickly. Out here in the field the rain was so heavy that I could still hardly see. There was no telephone for miles around and even if I could ring for help it would be the best part of an hour before an ambulance could reach us. I was on my own. If I could act fast enough, and do enough, then I could probably save him.

But I needed to get him indoors, out of the rain, so that I could assess his wounds and deal with them.

Just then the man in the blue saloon beeped his horn again. He had probably been beeping it constantly but I hadn't heard it. And I remembered that behind the car there was a caravan.

I found my bag, took out a syringe and a vial of morphine and gave the camper a hefty injection to knock him out. I then grabbed some bandages and my suture kit from my black bag and stuffed them into my raincoat pocket before picking up the camper and carrying him out of the field and back to where my Rolls and the blue saloon were still parked bonnet to bonnet. He was, fortunately, a small and light man. Equally fortunately I'm well over six foot tall.

'What the hell is going on? Where have you been? What do you mean by running off and leaving us blocked in?'

The questions came thick and fast from the driver of the blue saloon. He still hadn't left his vehicle but had wound down his window. His engine was still running. It was, I suppose, fortunate that if it had occurred to him to try to reverse his car and caravan out of the way he had decided not to put the thought into practice.

The angry driver, a neat looking man who wore a pink sweater, didn't seem to notice the man I was carrying, let alone the fact that he was unconscious and dripping blood from a dozen major wounds.

It was his wife who noticed.

'What's happened to that man?' she asked.

Looking at her I noticed for the first time that there were two children in the back of the car; a boy and a girl. They both looked to be about twelve or thirteen-years-old. The boy was ashen-faced and looked as though he might be sick. The girl looked fascinated, as though she were watching an exciting film or television drama.

I explained that the man I was carrying had been attacked and bitten by two dogs. I also told them that I was the local GP and that I had to try to stop the bleeding.

'Can we help?' she asked.

'I need to lie him down somewhere flat so that I can try to stop the bleeding. My car isn't big enough. Would you open your caravan so that I can lie him down on the floor? It will be easier to see what needs to be done inside and out of the rain.'

'He's bleeding!' complained the man. 'He's pouring blood. He'll ruin our carpet.'

'Jeffrey!' cried his wife, more upset than angry. 'Don't be awful. The man needs help. Give me the caravan key.'

'But you know how difficult it is to get blood out of a carpet…' protested the driver.

'Jeffrey!' said the woman. 'Give me the caravan key. Now!'

Jeffrey took a key out of his trouser pocket and handed it to the woman. She got out of the car, opened the caravan and helped me lay the camper down on the floor. I half expected her to faint for the man was in a terrible state.

'I've got a first aid kit,' she said, 'I did a course at work. I'm quite good with bandages.'

'Have you got a sharp knife?' I asked. My Swiss Army penknife was still stuck in the side of the Doberman.

'My God!' she said. 'You don't have to amputate anything do you?'

'No, I need to cut off his jeans and his anorak. I need to find all the bleeding points.'

I cut through the man's clothing with a steak knife the woman took from the caravan's cutlery drawer.

The bleeding was worst from his right leg and his right arm. One of the dogs, presumably the Doberman, had bitten deeply into the lower part of the man's leg and into his arm. His leg, in particular, was a terrible mess with great chunks of flesh completely missing, and presumably inside the dogs. Both sites were bleeding so badly that although I managed to suture some of the wounds I had to tie tourniquets round both the thigh and the upper arm. The woman's first aid kit was sadly inadequate but I used my tie for the man's thigh and one of the caravan owner's ties for the man's arm. I then made two pads from folded bandages, put one on the man's ear and another on his nose, both of which were pouring blood, and told the woman to keep them firmly pressed into place. Within five minutes we had temporarily staunched the worst of the bleeding. There was little else to do for the moment.

'Will he live?' asked the woman.

'There's a chance but only if we get him to hospital quickly,' I told her. 'He needs proper care quickly. These wounds need cleaning out and sewing up and he needs penicillin. Can you stay in here with him while your husband follows me to the hospital in Barnstaple? It'll be quicker to drive there than to find a telephone and wait for an ambulance.'

I couldn't stay in the caravan with the man in what was left of the yellow anorak because I had to reverse my car down the lane and then show the driver of the blue saloon the route to Barnstaple.

'Of course I will,' said the woman, who had turned out to be what folk used to call a 'real trouper'. Heaven knows what she was doing being married to the awful little man driving their motor car.

'Release the tourniquets every fifteen minutes for a minute or so at most,' I told her. 'And then retie them tight enough to stop him losing too much blood.'

The woman nodded. ‘They taught us that,’ she said. ‘If you leave tourniquets tied for too long the part of the body deprived of blood and oxygen will die.’

I climbed out of the caravan and hurried along to the driver. It was still pouring down and the sky was black. If I hadn’t known better I would have said it was eight or nine o’clock at night. The driver had wound his window up and I had to tap on the glass with my knuckles to persuade him to lower the glass. Even then he only opened it a couple of inches, presumably to make sure that he didn’t let too much rain into his car.

‘Your wife is staying in the caravan to help stop the bleeding,’ I told him. ‘I’m going to reverse my car. You follow me and then, when I’ve found a place where I can turn round, you follow me to Barnstaple.’

‘I don’t think it’s legal for anyone to travel in the caravan while it’s in motion,’ said the driver, as though that settled the matter. ‘And we were going to Taunton for the day since it’s raining,’ he added. I really don’t know what he was planning to do with the badly injured man lying on the floor in his caravan and being tended to by his wife. Perhaps he expected me to put the injured man back into the field. Or maybe he wanted to take the bleeding man toTaunton, leave him in the caravan while they wandered around the shops, and then drop him off at a hospital later that evening.

‘Follow me!’ I told him. ‘Follow me or I’ll have you arrested for contributory manslaughter.’

This was, needless to say, an offence which I had made up on the spur of the moment, but the driver of the car was convinced, or at least he wasn’t convinced that I was talking nonsense, and so my small deceit did the job. I had guessed correctly. The man, who had seemed to me to be one of those fussy little rule lovers who never dares do anything which might get him into any sort of trouble with any form of authority, grumbled and mumbled but agreed to do as I had told him. When I got into the Rolls and started to reverse, he followed me, and when, three hundred yards later, I found a junction where I could turn round he continued to follow me.

It took less than 40 minutes for our small convoy of two to reach the hospital in Barnstaple, and the journey in a speeding, swaying, unstable caravan must have been an absolute nightmare for the woman nursing the still bleeding and unconscious man.

At the hospital, we enlisted the help of two porters to carry the man into the casualty department. I had given him a decent dose of morphine and he was still too drowsy to talk but he was moaning a good deal and was obviously in a terrible state. I found one of the doctors and explained what had happened. While we were talking a nurse came over to us and asked me if I knew that my left leg was dripping blood. I pulled up my torn trouser leg and saw that the Jack Russell terrier had managed to take two big bites out of my calf muscle. There was so much adrenalin in my blood stream that I had completely forgotten that I had been bitten and I hadn’t noticed the pain until the wounds had been pointed out to me. One of the other doctors on call cleaned up my wounds, put in a dozen stitches and gave me a tetanus injection. I told him I didn’t think either of the dogs had rabies.

Finally the caravanner’s wife and I walked back to where her husband had parked his vehicle and its attendant caravan.

‘The carpet in our caravan is ruined!’ complained the man, clambering out of his blue saloon, the minute he saw me approaching. My leg was now quite sore and I was limping. ‘It’s soaking wet with rainwater and blood and it will have to be replaced.’

‘I’m sorry about that,’ I said, ‘will your insurance company cover the cost of a new carpet?’

He made a sort of huffing noise. At his request I followed him across to the caravan. The sides of the caravan were badly scarred and scratched from branches and brambles in the lane but that really wasn’t my fault. However, I realised that it did all seem a bit rough on the poor fellow. He had taken his family out for a drive in the Devon countryside and had ended up having his beautiful caravan commandeered and used as a field hospital.

The man said that if he claimed on his insurance he would lose his no claims bonus and have to pay the first £50 of the cost. ‘You commandeered my caravan,’ he said, ‘you should pay for a new carpet.’

I told him that I knew the name and address of the owners of the dogs which had attacked the camper and suggested that he demand compensation from them. The whole awful incident was, after all, entirely their fault. I wrote all the details down on a prescription pad (the only available piece of paper I could find) and, having looked at my watch, pointed out that it still wasn’t too late for him to take his family to Taunton so that they could spend an hour or two looking around the shops. He said, however, that the day was ruined and that he was, therefore, going to find a campsite where he could park, rip out the blood soaked carpet and dowse his caravan floor with a strong antiseptic solution.

I thanked him and his wife (the latter with slightly more enthusiasm) and drove back home via the field where it had all happened so that I could collect my medical bag. I also packed up the camper’s tent and a few belongings and stuffed them into the boot of the Rolls.

I didn’t get round to finishing the calls I had set out to do until several hours later.

I don’t know whether Jeffrey, the unhappy caravan owner, ever received any compensation from the Hardley-

Fitzwalters but I was never offered any compensation for my badly damaged leg and the ruined pair of trousers – though, indeed, I never asked for any. I was too relieved to have escaped from the confrontation alive and with my limbs intact to want to spend time reliving the experience any more than I had to.

I was still waking up with nightmares a month after the event. Gradually the awful experience began to fade and the nightmares became less violent and less frequent.

When the Hardley-Fitzwalters discovered that their two dogs had been killed their initial reaction was to complain to the police, and to demand that I be arrested, imprisoned, fined and forced to pay compensation. But when they themselves were threatened with prosecution for allowing two dangerous dogs to roam free they scurried back to London and were never again seen in Bilbury.

The couple put the former railway station into the hands of a local estate agent and told him to sell it as quickly as possible for the best possible price.

There are quite a few folk who have properties in Bilbury which they visit only at weekends or for holidays and most of them fit in well; adapting to our slower pace of life with enthusiasm for it is precisely that quality which attracted them to Bilbury in the first place.

But the Hardley-Fitzwalters never fitted in at all. They made it clear that they considered themselves superior in every conceivable way and treated everyone with whom they came into contact with condescension and arrogance. They will not be missed.

The best bit of the story is that the camper, the man in the yellow anorak, made a complete recovery.

He spent several days in hospital in Barnstaple and then had to be transferred to a specialist unit at a hospital in Bristol where his wounds could be treated and he could be provided with the extensive plastic surgery he needed. His nose and ear required a good deal of reconstruction work and altogether he was in hospital for nearly six months.

When he was released from hospital, the camper, whose name turned out to be Norbert, came back to Bilbury to say ‘thank you’, which I thought was very good of him. Considering everything he had been through I thought it was brave of him too. Lots of people would, after an experience of that kind, have been determined never to set foot in North Devon again.

Norbert told me that he used to be a school master in a boys’ preparatory school but that he had given up teaching in order to become, as he put it, ‘a wandering minstrel’.

He said he played the violin in shopping centres and on beaches and lived on the coins he collected from members of the public. He insisted on performing what he called a ‘concert’ at the Brownlow Country Hotel as a ‘thank you’. We had five in-patients at the time and it seemed a nice idea. Sadly, however, it turned out that he was an absolutely terrible violinist. Someone, I forget who, commented that the people who gave him money probably did so out of pity or, perhaps, in the hope that he would either go to a pub and buy himself a pint. Someone else, I think it was Thumper Robinson, said he hoped Norbert used some of his takings to pay for violin lessons.

Still, Norbert was a nice enough bloke and it was good to see him looking so well. The plastic surgeon had done a fantastic job on his face. We all thanked him very much and Patsy made a lovely coffee and walnut cake to celebrate the occasion.

Norbert said he had thought about suing the Hardley-Fitzwalters but that he had decided he really just wanted to forget about the incident and get on with his life. He told me that the woman who’d nursed him in the caravan had visited him several times in the hospital after reading where he was in a newspaper article that had been written about his narrow escape.

He said they corresponded regularly and that he had spoken to her once or twice on the telephone. I got the impression that he hoped that their relationship might develop into something more.

He showed me a copy of the article that had been written about him. The headline was *The Man Who Escaped from the Hounds of Hell*. There was a photograph of the man sitting up in bed, with his face half hidden by bandages and alongside it, the art editor had placed a stock picture of a Rottweiler. Someone in the art department had put what was supposed to look like blood dripping from his fangs. I assume the newspaper either got the breed of dog wrong or else the person who had put together the page didn’t know the difference between a Doberman and a Rottweiler.

I offered Norbert his tent and the stuff I’d collected from the field but he said that he’d bought a new tent and that I could throw the old stuff away. He explained that he had been paid a fee by the newspaper which had run the article about him and that since he’d been in hospital he hadn’t had any living expenses for quite a while.

It’s always nice when a potentially tragic story has a happy ending.

The Woman Who Dared To Feed The Birds

When I wandered into the kitchen to have my breakfast, I found Patsy already there. She had a brush and some tiny pots of paint and was using the former to apply the contents of the latter to the side of one of the kitchen cupboards.

'You'll need a lot of those little tins of paint if you're going to do the whole kitchen,' I told her.

Patsy looked at me in the way she favours when she wants to tell me, silently of course, that the joke would have been acceptable if I'd been seven-years-old.

I apologised, cut two slices of bread and popped them into the toaster. Patsy doesn't eat breakfast.

'The kitchen needs decorating,' she explained, 'it's a disgrace.'

I didn't think it merited the word 'disgrace', but then when I was a medical student I lived in a flat which hadn't been decorated since before the First World War and I never saw any need to rush out and buy brushes and pots of paint. I always thought that peeling paint gave a building history and gravitas.

I allow Patsy, who does all these things much better than I ever could, to take all decisions relating to interior and exterior decorating. If she wants to have the windows painted purple and the soffits picked out in bright yellow that's absolutely fine with me. I try to limit myself to moving and carrying stuff that isn't breakable, spillable or valuable. Or exceptionally heavy, of course.

'What do you think of this one?' asked Patsy, showing me a sheet of paint colours and pointing to one that looked like mud.

'Very nice,' I said.

I always say 'very nice' when asked to make comments on things of this nature. I find that in the long run it is the best way.

'Or do you prefer the 'Dead Trout'?'

I looked at her and raised an eyebrow.

'This one,' she said, pointing to another patch of colour on the chart.

'That's very nice too,' I said, sticking to my well-established script.

I know from past experience that choosing colours for bathrooms, kitchen cupboards and dining room walls is a long, arduous and sometimes painful process which can last a considerable amount of time and involve many changes of mind and direction. I find that I need to pace myself by avoiding too early a commitment.

'I really don't know what to go for,' said Patsy who was clearly still in the early stages of indecision. 'The one called 'Squirrel's Breath' is rather good.' She paused and thought for a while. 'But I also like 'Churlish Brown' and 'Drying Plaster''.

I don't know where the paint companies find the names they give their products but I sometimes think they're just taking the mickey. In the space of the next two minutes Patsy showed me paint colours named 'Tiger's Breath', 'Hilltop Mist', 'Old Slipper Green', 'Peppermint Tea', 'Mole's Back', 'Downpipe White', 'Ethel's Blush' and 'Old Arsenic'.

What on earth is any sensible person to make of such nonsense? Whatever happened to 'Blue', 'Red' and 'Green'.

Or, if you want to be fussier, 'Dark Blue', 'Light Blue', 'Dark Red', 'Light Red', 'Dark Green' and 'Light Green'?

'And which white do you think for the ceiling?' asked Patsy.

'Which white? How can there be a choice? Surely white is white unless it's dirty.'

Patsy looked at me as though I needed help and filled the kettle.

I drank my coffee, ate my toast, ripped through the morning mail (most of which was advertising material from drug companies which went straight into the rubbish bin) and wandered into my consulting room in good time to start the morning surgery. When you work from home it is difficult to excuse a late start and so, unless I am out dealing with an emergency, I always try to start seeing patients bang on nine o'clock.

The surgery passed without any exceptional incidents.

Mrs Swingsby came in for the eighth or ninth time to ask if her cataracts were ripe enough for surgery (they still weren't) and Mr Popplethwaite proudly showed me the biggest bunch of haemorrhoids I'd seen since the last blackberry picking season.

I told Mrs Swingsby to pop back in another three months and promised to refer Mr Popplethwaite to a surgeon at the hospital in Barnstaple.

When Miss Johnson brought in my coffee and two digestive biscuits at eleven she brought with her a paint chart with circles and question marks around two colours entitled 'Camelia's Curls' and 'Breakfast Brown'. I wrote 'very nice' alongside both 'Camelia's Curls' and 'Breakfast Brown'. Miss Johnson said she thought the 'Breakfast

Brown' to be particularly attractive and so I added an exclamation mark against the 'very nice' I'd written alongside that one, but spent the next half an hour regretting the addition.

The last patient was a real joy to see.

Mrs Evadne Deverell, was not a Bilbury local but was passing through the village on her travels around the country in a small, motorised camper van. She came to see me as what is called a 'temporary resident' and wanted help because she had suddenly noticed that the hearing in both her ears was deteriorating. She said she thought the right ear was the worst affected.

While I looked inside her ears she told me a remarkable story.

She reported that she had visited her GP eighteen months earlier complaining of pain and unusual menstrual bleeding. Her GP had, after a brief examination, referred her to a consultant gynaecologist and after an excruciating wait of five months she had eventually been seen by a specialist at a local hospital.

Few things annoy me more than the fact that patients often have to wait extraordinary lengths of time to find out whether or not they have a serious disorder such as cancer – and to start whatever treatment may be considered appropriate. I found it particularly appalling that Mrs Deverell's GP had apparently made no attempt to speed up the process.

The consultant, who was running an hour late, gave Mrs Deverell very little of his attention and rushed through the whole examination in no more than five minutes. He examined her, took a swab and told her that he or his secretary would be in touch.

Two weeks later, Mrs Deverell had a telephone call from the gynaecologist's secretary who told her bluntly that she had cancer and would need major surgery. She was told that there would be a fairly lengthy wait for surgery, partly because the gynaecologist had a long waiting list and partly because one of the other doctors was going on a sabbatical for three months and was not being replaced. The secretary did not know where the cancer was, what sort it was, what the prognosis was, or whether the long delay would dramatically alter the outcome.

When Mrs Deverell asked if she could see the gynaecologist again to discuss her situation in person, she was told that her GP would have to write another referral letter and that there would be a wait of up to six months.

'So it's really not worth bothering,' said the secretary. 'You'll probably be called for your operation before you see him again. He's very busy.' Mrs Deverell told me that the underlying message was that she would probably be dead by then so what was the point.

Mrs Deverell did not bother going back to her GP.

She surprised herself, she said, by how calm she was. She thought she was going to die and that there was absolutely no point in making a fuss or wasting what few months, weeks or days she had left sitting around waiting for the gynaecologist to see her.

Nor, she decided, did she want to take pills which would, if the rumours she had heard were to be believed, make her sick and result in all her hair falling out.

Mrs Deverell had no one with whom to share her remaining time on earth. Her husband had died several years earlier and they had no children. She had no living relatives and no real friends.

Instead of simply waiting for what she saw as the inevitable, she resigned from her job in the local planning department, sold her small house and bought a Dormobile. She put the money left over from the sale of her house into her current account and decided that she would travel until she was too ill to do so and then she would deal with things by, as she put it, 'driving the Dormobile off a cliff somewhere quiet and remote'.

She had decided originally to go abroad and to see the places she'd seen on television. Paris, Venice, Vienna, Rome and Amsterdam were top of her list. But then she thought about it some more and decided that she would rather spend whatever time she had left seeing Britain. She decided that she would drive around the coast and turn her final days into an unending seaside holiday.

It was now over a year since she had received the telephone call from the consultant's secretary and Mrs Deverell was, to her considerable surprise, feeling quite well. The symptoms which had originally taken her to the doctor had disappeared as mysteriously as they had appeared.

She had come into my surgery merely because she had noticed that her hearing had deteriorated. The story of her mistreatment at the hands of a particularly uncaring part of the health service came out only when I talked to her.

'Do you think they made a mistake?' she asked, when I had removed a good deal of wax from her eternal auditory canals. Her deafness was simply due to a build up of wax.

Few procedures are as quick to do, or as satisfying for both the patient and the doctor, as flushing wax out of ear canals.

My friend William, who is a GP in a large, modern practice, tells me that where he works the nurses do the syringing, since the procedure is considered to be rather beneath the skills of a medical practitioner. I think this is a mistake, for squirting warm water into ears is a very easy way to establish a good rapport between doctor and patient.

I asked Mrs Deverell if she would like me to examine her, to see if there were any signs of the cancer.

She said she would be grateful if I would do so.

Thirty minutes later, after a fairly comprehensive examination, I told her that I had found absolutely no signs of cancer.

'I could send you along to the hospital to have some blood tests and X-rays,' I told her. 'It's the only way to be sure.'

She laughed. 'Thank you for the offer,' she said, 'but I think I'll pass. I'm feeling fine.'

'What are you going to do?' I asked her. 'Are you going to continue with your travels?'

'I certainly am,' she said. 'This has been the best year of my life. I'm going to send that consultant a postcard thanking him for helping to change my life. I hated that damned office where I spent the best years of my life. I should have run away ages ago but I know I never would have done it at all if I hadn't thought I was dying.'

She left with a smile and a cheery wave.

At the end of the surgery there were just three home visits to do.

Two of the visits were routine, involving elderly patients who found it difficult to get to the surgery and who I visited at home once a month or so just to check that all was well.

But the third visit was to Mrs Entwhistle, a lively 67-year-old who has high blood pressure and early signs of Parkinson's Disease but who is, otherwise, as fit as most 40-year-olds I know.

There is no sign of a Mr Entwhistle and Mrs Entwhistle has never mentioned him.

Mrs Entwhistle spent all her life in the military. She was brought up on the Continent and she speaks both French and German fluently and during the Second World War she was parachuted into France to help the French Resistance. After the War she was transferred to the intelligence services and although I know she worked for MI6 I have no idea what she did.

These days, top spies don't always seem to feel the need to remain secret. It will doubtless not be long before they are writing books about their experiences, and wandering around the country giving talks at Women's Institutes about how to make invisible ink out of pigeon droppings.

But Mrs Entwhistle is old school.

She never talks about her life as a spy and has never once told me why she has burn scars on her chest or scars on her back that were clearly made by bullets. Her medical records contain no entries between the ages of 18 (when she had glandular fever) and the day she arrived in Bilbury just a few years ago. When I asked her why this might be she explained that she thought her medical records for the intervening years were probably regarded as 'sensitive' and were, in consequence, probably stored deep in a vault at the Secret Intelligence Service's offices in London.

The request that came in to the surgery that morning was not to visit Mrs Entwhistle at her home but at the police station in Barnstaple where she had, apparently, been incarcerated overnight.

I drove to Barnstaple as quickly as I could, wondering what strange circumstances could have led Mrs Entwhistle to a police station.

'I'm so sorry to trouble you,' said Mrs Entwhistle, who was sitting in a small, stark cell which I would have found intolerably confining, cold and frightening. She seemed quite calm and at peace.

I asked her what on earth had happened.

'I've been arrested,' she told me in the same way that she might have reported the discovery of a corn or a small bunion, 'and I have to appear in court this morning.'

Mrs Entwhistle is not a woman who gives anything away. In fact, though I like her and respect her I've always thought her to be very reserved; a rather cold sort of fish.

'Unfortunately, I don't have my blood pressure tablets with me, she said, 'I came into Barnstaple to visit the optician and had intended to be back home yesterday evening.'

I had my black bag with me but I didn't have any of the tablets which I know she normally takes so I wrote out a prescription, wandered out to the nearest town centre pharmacy, and hurried back to the police station.

Having taken her tablets, Mrs Entwhistle then explained what had happened.

'I bought a sandwich from a little shop near the Post Office,' she told me. 'They do very nice salad sandwiches there and since I had a two hour wait for the bus to Lynton I sat on a bench by one of the churches to have a little picnic. It's always quiet there and there are always birds and squirrels to watch.'

(I should explain that the bus service to Bilbury is virtually non-existent and so villagers without their own transport have to catch the bus to Lynton, get off the bus at Blackmoor Gate and then walk two miles to the village.)

Mrs Entwhistle explained that when she sat down to eat her sandwich a couple of sparrows and two or three pigeons gathered around her waiting for any crumbs which fell to the ground.

'They seemed so hungry,' she said, 'that when I'd eaten all I wanted I crumbled up the last few bits of bread and gave them to the birds.'

I nodded and waited, wondering what else had happened.

'A policeman who was walking by saw what I'd done and came over and arrested me.'

I frowned, finding it difficult to believe what I had heard.

'What did he arrest you for?' I asked.

'For feeding the birds.'

I stared at her, probably rudely and definitely in disbelief. 'You were arrested for feeding the birds?'

'Apparently there is a by-law against it.'

'A law against feeding the birds?'

'Apparently so.'

'That's…,' I stumbled for a moment, unable to think of an adequate word. 'Madness!' I eventually managed. It was a woefully inadequate word for what I felt.

'But there isn't any evidence!' I said. 'The birds ate all the crumbs which you dropped!'

For a second it seemed to me to be a brilliant defence.

Mrs Entwhistle smiled. 'Sadly they wouldn't accept that argument,' she said. 'I'm told that as far as the court is concerned, the policeman's word is considered quite adequate.'

'But feeding the birds is a traditional thing to do,' I said, 'and it's well-known that when people look after wild creatures they feel better and their health improves.'

Mrs Entwhistle shook her head. 'I don't think that will get me very far.'

I racked my brains, trying to think of some other defence.

'Thank you for getting me the tablets,' said Mrs Entwhistle with a smile. She reached out and patted me on the arm. 'I mustn't keep you any longer. If they let me go with just a fine I can catch the bus back later this afternoon.'

'I'm staying at the station with you,' I told her. 'And I'll take you home afterwards.' It was, I know, what my predecessor Dr Brownlow would have done. And I always try to conduct my practice in a way of which he would approve.

When Dr Brownlow, had died he had bequeathed me his practice, his house, which I had decided to turn into a hospital where the sick, the frail and the dying could be nursed, £50,000 in cash, which I earmarked to help run the hospital and, of course, his 1930 black Rolls Royce 20/25. But Dr Brownlow's most valuable legacy could not be measured in money, bricks or horsepower.

His most valuable legacy, the gift I cherished most, was the knowledge he had given me; the wisdom which it had taken him a lifetime to acquire.

When I had first started in general practice, just a few years earlier, I had been extraordinarily naïve and woefully ignorant.

I didn't realise that, of course.

Like all young men and women who have spent many years studying at university I was under the impression that graduation had miraculously completed my education.

Indeed, I confess with shame that I had thought myself superior in knowledge to those doctors who had qualified decades earlier, before the introduction of antibiotics, oral contraceptives and sophisticated X-ray technology.

After twenty years at school (primary school, grammar school and medical school) I had acquired a medical diploma and unfettered access to the arrogance of youth.

For about a day after I qualified, I thought I knew everything a doctor could ever need to know.

And then, slowly, I started to learn about life, about patients, about medicine and about the many, many things that doctors do wrong.

Gradually, by working alongside Dr Brownlow, I began to understand that the most important lessons a doctor learns are found not in textbooks but through real-life, practical experience.

Lectures and textbooks are good enough for providing background knowledge. I had acquired a basic understanding of human anatomy and physiology. I knew the names of the small bones in the wrist, the way the liver works, the marvellous things that white blood cells can do and the many ways in which things can go wrong. But it was only after I qualified that I learned that the stuff that is taught in classrooms is of far less value than the things which are learned by the patient's bedside.

Dr Brownlow's greatest legacy to me was a vast reservoir of knowledge and wisdom distilled from decades of practical experience and a deep understanding of the human condition. Dr Brownlow knew that medicine is one third science, one third craft and one third art and he taught me that the more we look, the more we see and the more we see the more we realise that we really don't know anything very much. He taught me the importance of listening.

The wiser we become the more we realise the extent of our ignorance; this is doubtless why only teenagers and young doctors, unsullied by wisdom and experience and not yet weighed down by knowledge and understanding, are the only truly omniscient beings in our world.

My only contribution was to have acquired enough humility to realise that if I listened to Dr Brownlow, and tried to absorb some of his knowledge and understanding, I would be able to cut short the learning process and add his accumulated wisdom to my own modest supply.

Six months after Dr Brownlow had died, I still missed him terribly and I knew that I would always miss him.

One of the most important things he taught me was to try to look at problems, dilemmas and clinical puzzles from all possible angles. 'If you're stuck with a diagnosis, try to look at the problem from another direction,' he told me. 'It won't always lead to a solution. But it will dramatically increase your chances of finding an answer.'

Something else he taught me was to treat all my patients as members of my extended family.

'Always treat every patient as you would like your loved ones to be treated, or as you would like to be treated yourself,' he told me.

Those thoughts stuck with me and there wasn't a day when I didn't remember his advice.

Looking at Mrs Entwhistle, sitting patiently in her cell, I knew that if Patsy were in this situation I would want to be with her. And I knew that if I were locked in a cell I would appreciate having a friend to stand beside me.

I also hoped that by using Dr Brownlow's advice, and looking at Mrs Entwhistle's problem from all angles, I might be able to find a solution.

And when Mrs Entwhistle's case came to court a few hours later, it was Dr Brownlow's piece of essential advice (to think from other directions, from outside the constraints of orthodox thinking) that enabled me to find a way to help my patient to victory in her small battle against the local establishment.

Once I had convinced Mrs Entwhistle that, whatever she said, I was going to stay with her, I asked the station sergeant if I could use a telephone to tell Patsy where I was. He pointed me in the direction of a payphone and once I had found a kindly constable prepared to sell me some change for the telephone, I rang Bilbury Grange and told Patsy where to reach me if she needed me.

When Mrs Entwhistle's case came to court, a snooty and very self-important policeman stood up to give evidence for the prosecution. He was, predictably, an unbearably officious fellow, one of those policemen other policemen can't abide or trust, and clearly destined to rise to great heights within his chosen trade. I wasn't in the slightest bit surprised. What sort of human being would arrest an old woman for giving crumbs to a few sparrows and pigeons?

Mrs Entwhistle refused to say anything in her defence and so suddenly, having had a flash of inspiration, I stood up.

'Yes?' said the chairman of the three magistrates, a stern looking woman in a twinset and skirt of some hairy looking material that looked as if it were probably hedge and bomb proof. She had huge dangly earrings and a solid looking necklace around her neck. 'Who are you and what do you want?'

'I'm Mrs Entwhistle's doctor and I have evidence which the court should hear,' I said, when I had introduced myself.

I had, I thought, hit upon a possible defence. It was, I knew, a trifle bizarre but then the whole idea of arresting a pensioner for feeding the birds seemed pretty bizarre.

The three magistrates muttered among themselves and called the advice of the clerk. It was eventually decided that I could be allowed to give evidence in the witness box.

'Mrs Entwhistle has early Parkinson's Disease,' I told them. 'The symptoms of this disease include, as I expect you know, a tremor or shaking in the hands. If Mrs Entwhistle was eating a sandwich then her hands would shake and some crumbs would fall to the ground. It seems to me that no harm has been done since the birds who were present ate up the crumbs.'

'Mrs Entwhistle was seen rolling bits of bread into small balls,' said the woman in the tweeds and pearls.

One of the other magistrates, the one in the middle of the trio, and the one who was clearly the chairman, looked at me and smiled, unexpectedly. I recognised him. I'd seen him at one or two medical meetings. He was a well-respected and widely liked consultant at the local hospital, though I couldn't remember what his speciality was.

'Does Mrs Entwhistle have the characteristic pill rolling tremor associated with Parkinson's Disease?' he asked me.

'She does!' I replied instantly, realising that this magistrate was on our side.

'The pill rolling movement is a well-known characteristic of Parkinson's Disease,' I explained to the other magistrates. 'The patient rubs their thumb and forefinger together. The movement is known as 'pill rolling' because it is the sort of movement apothecaries would have made when they were making hand rolled pills.'

'So the police officer might have assumed that Mrs Entwhistle was rolling the small pieces of bread into round balls when in fact he was seeing the pathognomonic signs of her illness?' said the medically qualified magistrate.

'She would,' I agreed eagerly.

'I can see no reason to continue with this case,' said the medical magistrate, leaning back. 'Mrs Entwhistle has clearly been wrongly arrested.'

The woman in the twinset, the chairman of the trio, looked desperate to interfere but although she opened her mouth she didn't say anything – clearly unwilling to interfere in a matter on which two doctors had already expressed a single opinion. She closed her mouth again and gave an excellent impression of a woman sucking an acid drop for a moment. 'The court admonishes the unnecessarily officious police officer who arrested this woman,' she said at last, 'and apologies profusely to Mrs Entwhistle.'

I then took Mrs Entwhistle back to her cottage.

When I dropped her off, she smiled and kissed me on the cheek. 'Thank you,' she whispered. 'You're a good egg.'

I could not have been prouder if I'd been given a knighthood.

The 'good guys' don't often win battles against the rule followers and the niggly, pettifogging, small-minded bureaucrats who seem determined to stamp out joy and individualism. But it seemed to me that this was a victory worth celebrating. On my way back to Bilbury Grange I stopped off at Peter Marshall's emporium and purchased two bottles of his very best Polish champagne and a large box of almost fresh jammy doughnuts.

No one can ever accuse me of not knowing how to make whoopee.

Afterword

There will, I know, be those who will dismiss the memories in this book as nothing more than shameless nostalgia.

There are many people in our society who are ardently committed to change at any price, and who consequently regard nostalgia as something rather sinful. They believe that all change is progress which should be applauded and accepted until it, in turn, is replaced and becomes tomorrow's nostalgia.

We should, they believe (and preach), be forever marching forward, putting aside our past in the same way that a child puts away his toys when he grows up; without regret and without ever looking back.

This attitude, surprisingly prevalent these days, assumes that everything that is new is essentially good and that everything that is old must inevitably be bad.

And it is an attitude which I find it quite impossible to accept.

There is, of course, much about the past which is bad and which deserves to be buried and forgotten.

No one can feel nostalgic for open sewers, wash tubs or tenement buildings.

No one remembers child labour, racism, discrimination or enforced servitude with pride.

Pea soup fog you could cut into cubes with a knife may look good on screen in Victorian melodramas but it wasn't much fun for those who tried to breathe it.

But the fact that we may justly condemn the less savoury aspects of our past does not mean that we must automatically shudder at the memory of such almost forgotten moral principles as honour, privacy and respect. Nor do we need to sneer at the memory of horse drawn ploughs, maypole dancing and the smell of bread toasting over an apple log fire.

Our lives are faster now but are they better?

Our motor cars may (in theory, at least) enable us to travel from A to B more speedily than ever before but is B always a better place to be?

What value should we put upon the quality of the journey?

Is today's production motor car better looking and in every way superior to the motor cars of yesterday?

Is modern medical practice always better than medicine as it was practiced nearly half a century ago?

When considering these questions we must, of course, also ask ourselves how much our admiration of the past is coloured by the hue of our spectacles.

And that brings us neatly back to Bilbury.

How much of it is real? How much is imagined? And how much is wishful thinking? Were things ever that good? Do these questions matter? Are the answers important?

One reader pointed out to me that Bilbury must be real because on the original hardback version of Bilbury Grange the cover photograph is credited to a certain Thumper Robinson.

Good point.

An unintentional hint in the direction of the truth, perhaps.

All I can tell you is that in our hearts, my wife and I live in Bilbury. And Thumper and Anne, Patchy and Adrienne, Peter, Frank and Gilly are our very good friends.

Whether or not you believe that Bilbury exists is entirely up to you.

But why wouldn't you?

Appendix 1

While my GP friend William and his family were staying with us at Bilbury Grange, William and I compiled a list of our favourite, obscure medical words.

He and I have always been fascinated by words – especially medical words and quasi medical words – and when we were students together we would waste rare evenings in the local pub looking up and memorising examples of obscure medical terminology.

As far as we were concerned the more obscure the word the more we liked it. William had a Victorian dictionary which we scoured for new examples. And since I am a bibliotaph I have, over the years, acquired an embarrassingly large collection of dictionaries, books of quotations and thesauruses.

Over several evenings (and a few bottles of port) we took it in turns to try to outfox each other with bizarre words.

The first rule was that although the words which we selected had to be heard or read only rarely they had to be quite real – proper words rather than made-up words.

The second rule was that a word would not count unless the person offering it could both spell it and pronounce it.

Here is the list we came up with:

Abulia – an abnormal inability to make decisions
Adipsia- not drinking for a long time
Adust – looking sunburned or tanned
Agerasia – a youthful appearance in an old person
Anophelosis – a morbid state due to extreme frustration
Anosmia – the loss of the sense of smell
Bantingism – losing weight by not eating sweets
Bariatrics – medical speciality dealing with obesity
Bathukolpian – large breasted
Bibliolatry – the worship of books to an unnatural degree
Bibliotaph – Someone who hoards books is a bilblitaph
Borborygmus – a rumbling sound caused by too much wind in the intestine
Brannigan – a drinking binge
Callimastian – having beautiful breasts
Callipygean – having beautiful buttocks
Civestism – the habit of dressing only in the clothes of one's own sex
Cogniscent – being aware of something
Confabulation – the unintentional production of distorted memories
Coryza – common cold
Crapulous – If you feel ill as a result of eating and drinking too much then you are crapulous.
Curmuring – The low, rumbling sound sometimes heard coming from within the bowels is known to educated gastroenterologists as curmuring.
Cyanthropy – a condition in which the sufferer believes himself or herself to be a dog
Cyesis – pregnancy
Cystoureteropyelonephritis – an inflammation of the bladder, ureters and kidney
Dactylonomy – the habit of counting on one's fingers
Daymare – an anxiety attack
Deipnosophist – This isn't, strictly speaking, a medical word but it is such a delight that William and I had to include it in our list. It means someone skilled in making dinner table conversation.
Diurnation – habit of sleeping during the day instead of at night
Dormition – a peaceful and painless death
Dysmorphosteopalinklasy – the re-fracturing of a bone which has healed with a deformity
Edacious – voracious eating
Ejaculatorium – room in which sperm bank donations are made
Emboinpoint – a woman's bosom
Encephalomyeloradiculoneuritis – disease caused by a virus and associated with encephalitis
Euneirophrenia – a peaceful state of mind after a pleasant dream
Evancalous – pleasant to embrace

Feuterer – an individual who keeps a dog
Gargalesthesia – the feeling resulting from tickling
Girouettism – constantly altering personal opinions to follow other people’s views
Glossospasm – moving the tongue in and out very quickly
Haematoma – a posh word for bruise
Heterogamosis – marriage between individuals who are entirely unsuitable for each other
Hypnopedia – learning while asleep (usually by listening to a tape or disk)
Iatrogenic – a disease caused by doctors
Idiopathic – a disease for which the cause is unknown
Idiopathic cyesis – a pregnancy of unknown cause or origin
Illeism – referring to oneself in the third person
Infavoidance – disguising one’s inferiority complex
Jen – love of everything and everyone
Kathisomania – an irresistible compulsion to sit down
Lapidation – stoning someone to death
Macarism – making other people happy by praising them
Macrophallus – an exceptionally large penis
Malneirophrenia – anxiety after a nightmare
Matutinal – anything that happens in the morning
Melorrhoea – an irresistible urge to write excessively long musical works
Meteorism – uncontrollable passing of wind
Metrona – a young grandmother
Micromastia – exceptionally small breasts
Microphallus – abnormally small penis
Nomogamosis – marriage between individuals who are highly suitable for each other
Omnistrain – the stresses and strains of modern day living
Omphaloskepsis – contemplating one’s own navel
Onchyophagy – fingernail biting
Pneumoencephalographically – taking pictures of the brain after injecting air into the ventricles
Pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis – miner’s lung disease (caused by inhaling fine dust)
Pogonophile – an individual who has a fetish for beards
Polyandry – when a woman legally takes several husbands
Polydactyl – having more than five fingers or toes
Polygyny – when a man legally takes several wives
Priapism – a disorder in which the penis is permanently erect
Prosopagnosis – an inability to remember faces
Pygalgia – sore buttocks
Quadragenerian – someone between the ages of 40 and 50
Remontado – an individual who runs away to the mountains
Scrofulous – corrupt or morally degenerate
Sialagogue – anything which promotes salivation
Snurp – to become shrivelled and wrinkled
Sockdolger – a definitive answer that ends a dispute
Steatopygia – having an unusually large, fatty bottom
Suigenederism – tendency of a child to spend time with other children of the same sex
Syngenesiotransplantation – a graft of tissue which takes place between closely related individuals
Tachyphagia – eating very quickly
Tenterbelly – a glutton
Trilemma – one more lemma than a dilemma
Ultracrepidarianism – the habit of giving opinions and advice on matters which are outside the speaker’s knowledge (common among politicians and callers to radio phone in programmes)
Valetudinarian – someone over concerned with his or her health
Verbigeration – the frequent use of much loved words
Wederognomonia – using aches and pains to predict the weather
Xenomania – having an excessive interest in foreign customs
Yaffling – eating noisily and greedily

Yatter – to make idle chit chat or gossip
Yerk – to hit someone with vigour
Zaftig – having a pleasingly plump figure

I'm including our list here because I hope that readers might have a little fun by introducing as many of these words as possible into their daily conversation.

So, for example, Mrs Carruthers might say: 'Good morning Mrs Carstairs, I do apologies for the curmuring and for my borborygmi. I'm feeling crapulous this morning and I've got a bad attack of meteorism.'

And Mrs Carstairs might reply: 'Don't worry about it, Mrs Carruthers. My anosmia is playing up. But I'm afraid I can't stop and yatter this morning for according to my wederognomonia, it's going to rain and I have to get the washing in.'

Note from the author:

If you have enjoyed this book I would be genuinely grateful if you would leave a short, positive review on the Amazon product page.

The Young Country Doctor Book 9

BILBURY RELISH

Vernon Coleman

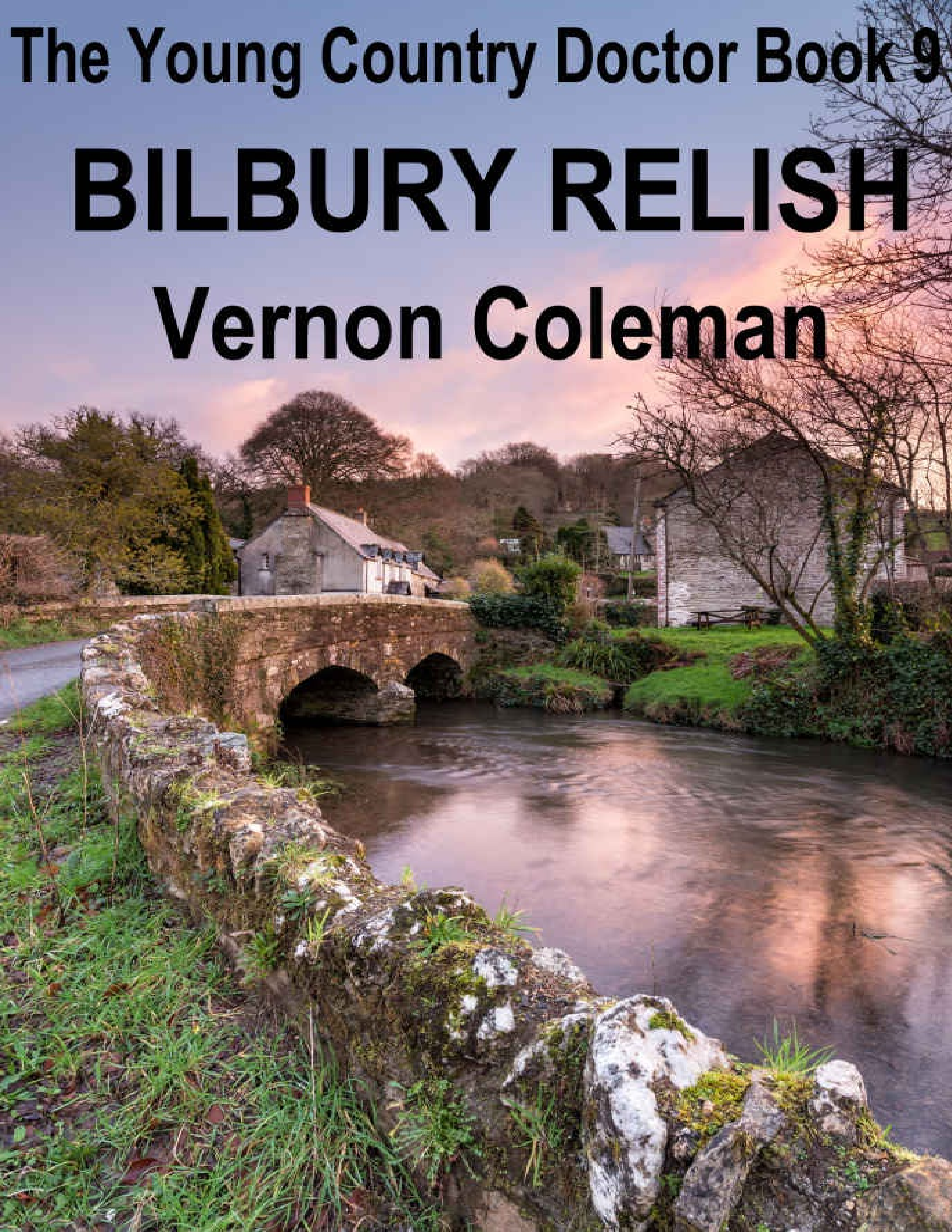

The Young Country Doctor Book 9
Bilbury Relish

Vernon Coleman

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Dedication: To Antoinette

You make my world go round and the freehold to my heart is yours for eternity.

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Dear Reader

I have been asked to remind you that the Bilbury books are all set in the 1970s and although this book is being written well into the 21st century, I am writing about things that happened nearly half a century ago. Please remember that medical knowledge and customs were very different then.

Some older readers will remember those distant days with fondness but many younger readers will probably find it difficult to imagine living in a world without mobile telephones, computers and the mass of gadgets and conveniences which we all now take for granted.

Finally, I should also point out that I take the principle of confidentiality very seriously and so none of the people or situations described in this book is recognisable.

Welcome back to Bilbury.

Vernon Coleman
Bilbury Grange
Bilbury
Devon
England

The Children's Party

Bilbury is a wonderful place for children. The lanes are safe because there is relatively little traffic and children can be allowed to cycle for miles around the countryside. There are moors to roam, woods to explore and rivers in which to swim or plan pirate adventures. The coast, complete with rocky coves and fine beaches, is just a short cycle ride away and the only strangers to be seen are usually breathless hikers carrying rucksacks and worn out by the incessant ups and downs of the North Devon countryside.

For children, the lifestyle is as healthy as you can imagine. There are the occasional grazed knees and bee stings to be dealt with, and once every couple of years an over-adventurous child will fall off a bicycle or out of a tree and breaks a bone. But, on the whole, it would be difficult to find a safer place for a growing child.

Just occasionally, however, nature has a habit of reminding us all that life in the countryside can have its own special dangers.

I was cutting the grass in the orchard one beautiful, sunny Sunday afternoon when Patsy, who had been weeding the flowerbeds near to the house, came running down the garden to tell me that Mrs Ermentrude Pinchbeck had telephoned, in a panic, to ask me to go round to her house straight away. There were, she had told Patsy, twelve or fifteen children suffering from terrible burns on their hands and faces. Patsy told me that Mrs Pinchbeck said that she had already telephoned for an ambulance but that since I was closer, she thought that I would get there quicker.

Ermentrude and Theodore Pinchbeck live a few miles from Bilbury Grange, in a house on the edge of the nearby village of Combe Martin. Mr Pinchbeck, who once lived in a cottage in Bilbury, had been a patient of Dr Brownlow for some years. When he married and moved to Combe Martin, I happily agreed to continue to look after him and his wife.

Combe Martin is a fascinating village which has quite a reputation as a wonderful holiday resort but to be perfectly honest (and don't for heaven's sake tell anyone I said this) some people who go there feel rather let down; suspecting that the beauties of the place have perhaps been a trifle oversold and that the romance inherent in the name 'Combe Martin', is more attractive than the village itself. Personally, I like Combe Martin. It's a very quiet, gentle seaside village. But for those who go on holiday expecting funfairs, Punch and Judy shows, a promenade and donkeys it is probably something of a disappointment.

The village itself consists of just one long street (it is, according to proud locals, the longest street in England) and a rather small beach which, perhaps due to the idiosyncratic behaviour of local tides and winds, always seems to attract every piece of flotsam and jetsam going.

Combe Martin gets its name from the valley (the combe) in which it nestles and from the Martin family.

The Martins (who originally spelt their names Martyn de Tours) were 12th century landowners and Lords of the Manor. They made a huge amount of money from farming and mining and spent some of their no doubt hard-earned loot on building a moated castle in the village.

The family died out when Robert Martin (or, to be more accurate, Robert Martyn de Tours), who was the last of the line, went out hunting early one morning. When it became dark and he still hadn't returned home, the servants raised the drawbridge, thinking that their master was spending the night elsewhere. They were accustomed to him staying away unexpectedly and probably assumed that, as was his well-known habit, he was busy besmirching the reputation of an unfortunate local maiden.

Sadly, however, there was no besmirching going on and when Robert galloped home, the moon was no bigger than a nail clipping and the sky was pitch black.

There is a strange and genuine blackness about moonless nights in the countryside. Even today, as a result of the fact that the village is miles from what city and town dwellers like to call civilisation, the night sky in Bilbury is far blacker than it is in urban and suburban areas.

Not seeing that the drawbridge was up, the hapless landowner rode straight into his own moat and drowned.

That was the end of the Martins but it was not the end of the village which became exceedingly prosperous from the 13th century onwards. There may not have been any Martins around but locals made a good deal of money from mining silver, iron and a pigment called umber; something which artists know well because when heated the colour becomes more intense and is known as burnt umber.

You wouldn't know it now but Combe Martin was once England's most important centre for silver mining and King Edward III, who was King of England for 50 years in the 14th century, pretty well paid the expenses of his war against the French with the silver dug from the Combe Martin mines. That was the war which Edward started when he declared himself to be the rightful heir to the French throne back in 1337. Things went well for a while, and Combe Martin's silver bought a number of notable and famous victories, but the war eventually turned into the

Hundred Years War and when the Black Death plague hit England, the supply of men for England's army rather dried up and that was pretty well that for King Edward's plan to conquer France.

Sadly, although some mining continued until the early 20th century, the silver mining industry in North Devon pretty well died a permanent death in about 1830 when the inevitable happened and the silver ran out. Over the years, as the price of silver has risen, various attempts have been made to revive the mining industry but none of them has come to anything. All that remains now are some mine shafts and the ruins of a number of old mine buildings. There is a ruined engine house on Knap Down, on land belonging to Silver Mines Farm, and if you know where to look, and look hard enough, you can still see some signs of those now forgotten mines.

The Pinchbecks, my patients, live in a house which dates back to the 15th century and which had originally been built by one of the early mine owners. Like a good many old houses, it has been extended on numerous occasions since then and today it is, like so many buildings in North Devon, rather a mish mash of architectural styles. It is, however, a marvellous home with far reaching views over the coastline. On a clear day you can easily see Wales on the other side of the Severn Estuary.

Mr and Mrs Pinchbeck are a fascinating couple.

Mr Pinchbeck, who is in his late fifties and more than two decades older than his wife, has the earnest, naturally superior air of a butler, sommelier or a head waiter; an air of natural, condescending superiority mixed with a difficult to define awareness that his place in life isn't all that it is expected to appear to be. It isn't that officious, bullying, self-important superiority that typifies the more arrogant variety of police officer, the self-righteous customs official or the sneering tax inspector, but the quiet confidence, mixed with carefully modulated deference, that typifies the high ranking professional servant.

The odd thing is, however, that Mr Pinchbeck isn't a butler or a sommelier, though he does wear an old-fashioned frock coat and a carefully knotted white tie when he is at work. He is an old-fashioned dignified and respectful bank manager. He works in Barnstaple and can often be found standing in the foyer of his bank, greeting customers with a small bow and a few welcoming words. He exudes calm, dignity and respect and he is, generally speaking, the most ataraxic individual I know.

Mr Pinchbeck married late.

He was a confirmed bachelor who surprised everyone who thought they knew him by suddenly finding romance and a wife.

The odd thing is that they met each other on a Tube train in London. He was there to watch a cricket match at the Oval cricket ground. She was there to attend an educational conference. They literally bumped into each other, chatted and found that they both came from North Devon. They lived just a few miles apart but had to go to London to find each other.

Just before her marriage, Mrs Pinchbeck (or Miss Kitchener as she was then) told me that she had read that, according to an old Devon saying, a bride should be half the age of her husband, plus seven years, if the marriage was to succeed. I remembered that I had heard the same saying credited to Corsica, Russia, Italy and, indeed, the whole of Victorian England, but I didn't mention this. She was a primary school teacher and, I suspected, a good one.

Today, Miss Pinchbeck is in her thirties and is a headmistress at a local school. I have to say that if I were one of her pupils I would be terrified – at first at any rate; unless or until I realised that the tough exterior hid a soft, gentle inner.

She rather reminds me of a gym master I had at school. His name was Sam and he was an ex-army instructor with a bark that had been honed on thousands of army recruits. He could snarl at a boy standing two hundred yards away and the boy would shiver with fear. But I realised one day that his bark was very superficial. A boy in my form slipped on a piece of equipment in the gym and hurt his thumb. Nothing was broken or dislocated and there was no sign of blood but the boy was close to tears. I suppose he had probably sprained it. Sam's response surprised us all. The man who had, moments before, been screaming abuse and telling us that he didn't care if we broke every bone in our bodies, was suddenly as upset and as sympathetic as the boy's mother could have been. He fussed over the mildly injured boy as though he had broken at least one major bone and personally insisted on escorting him to the school nurse.

That was Mrs Pinchbeck – as tough as a parking meter maid until or unless something went wrong. And then she became the kindest and sweetest and gentlest of souls.

She and her husband have two children, twins aged seven years.

When I arrived at their house, I found that I had beaten the ambulance but that the gardens looked like a battlefield. There seemed to be children everywhere. Some were screaming, some were crying and some were sitting on the grass rubbing their faces and rocking backwards and forwards in distress. Four adults, mothers and fathers I guessed, were standing around not sure what to do. The two mothers were crying. The fathers were clearly anxious to do something but clearly didn't have the faintest idea what the something should be. I spotted Mr Pinchbeck trying to talk to one of the mothers.

Now looking very forlorn, abandoned and out of place, there were several trestle tables on the lawn. The tables were laden with half empty plates, empty jugs and trifle bowls that were pretty well empty. Whatever had happened had clearly happened after tea had been served. A dozen balloons were hanging from the branches of a couple of trees. Toys of various kinds were strewn about on the lawn. A small dog, a fox terrier, ran in and out, barking at anything and nothing. He didn't seem territorial or even particularly upset, and his tail was sticking as upright as a flagpole and wagging furiously. I got the feeling he knew he was really supposed to bark but that he couldn't really put his heart and soul into it because he knew something was seriously wrong but didn't understand what.

'It's the twins' birthday,' explained Mrs Pinchbeck, struggling to stay calm. She was wearing a pink summer dress and had her two daughters standing beside her. Both were crying. Both were cuddling their mother and clinging to her dress. One of the girls was hugging a large, beautiful doll with long blonde hair 'They invited a dozen or so of their friends round for a party.'

Mrs Pinchbeck was desperately upset and had to take deep breaths at the end of each sentence. With a nod and a murmur of encouragement, I waited for her to continue. I discovered long ago that it is dangerous to hurry into activity until you have an idea about what has happened. 'We let all the children go off into a field we own so that they could just run around and make as much noise as they wanted.'

'How long ago was this?' I asked.

'About an hour or so,' replied Mrs Pinchbeck. 'We first became aware that something was wrong about twenty minutes ago. I rang the ambulance and then I rang you. Thank you for coming so quickly.' She looked across the fields in front of the house. 'I don't know where the ambulance is.'

'They'll be here as soon as they can,' I assured her. 'They have to come from Barnstaple. I was only a couple of miles away. Can I speak to one of your daughters?'

I was pretty sure that I already knew what the problem was. It was something I'd seen before, but not on such a huge scale.

The small dog had now given up barking and was staring at me, with his tail still upright and still wagging. He seemed to want to play fetch or, failing that, to lie down in a nice cool spot and dream of rabbits. But he wanted me to decide for him.

'Chloe and Mathilda are here,' said Mrs Pinchbeck. 'Chloe doesn't seem too badly affected but Mathilda has nasty looking burns on her face, especially on and around her lips, and she has burns on her hands and arms.'

'May I look?' I asked Mathilda.

Slowly, reluctantly, she turned her face so that I could see the angry looking rash on her face. She then showed me her arms and hands.

I knew immediately that my guess had been an accurate one.

'You made some pea shooters?' I asked.

She looked surprised, but nodded.

'We found some plants with hollow stalks,' explained her sister. 'They made great pea shooters. I got some dried peas from the kitchen for the others. But I didn't play that game. I had my doll and my doll didn't want to play at pea shooters.'

'My guess is that there are some giant hogweed plants in your field,' I said to Mrs Pinchbeck. 'The plants look like cow parsley – but they're bigger.' Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the fox terrier wander off and start digging a hole in a flowerbed.

'There's quite a lot of what I thought was cow parsley,' agreed Mrs Pinchbeck. 'It's mostly around the edge of the field. But some of it is very tall – six or eight feet tall.'

She led me over to the field, just a few yards away from where I was standing. I could see that the edge of the field was studded with Giant Hogweed plants.

'Some of the plants are just cow parsley,' I said. 'But the taller plants are Giant Hogweed. You can deal with them another time. What we need to do straight away is to get all the affected children indoors, away from the sunshine, and into a darkened room. Then we need to wash their skin very gently with lots of soap and water to remove the irritant and to stop the burns getting any worse.'

I gathered together all the available adults and asked them to take the children into the house. Mrs Pinchbeck drew the curtains in the living room, to shut out as much light as possible, and the other parents started washing the children's skin. I gave antihistamines to the children to try to reduce the itching and the skin irritation.

'Are there any children with sore eyes?' I asked.

When I was assured that there were not I was hugely relieved. The sap of the Giant Hogweed plant can cause blindness. I went from child to child, checking their skin and making sure that everything possible was being done to minimise each child’s symptoms.

‘What on earth has caused all this?’ asked Mr Pinchbeck. He sounded angry.

‘The children cut up some Giant Hogweed stalks and used them as pea shooters,’ I explained. ‘The Giant Hogweed produces massively thick stalks which are hollow. Perfect for pea shooting.’

‘What the devil is Giant Hogweed?’ asked Mr Pinchbeck.

‘It’s a rather nasty plant which was brought to the United Kingdom by Victorian explorers who travelled to Southern Russia and Georgia – which is where the plant came from. They took seeds to Kew Gardens which then gave seeds to people who wanted the plant in their gardens. And since then it’s just spread and spread, I’m afraid. The stalks have bristles on the stems and brushing against those can cause a skin reaction much like the sort of stinging you get from nettles. But it’s the sap which really causes the problems. If the sap gets onto the skin and it is then exposed to the light, there is a reaction. It’s a type of photodermatitis called phytophotodermatitis and it is caused by the fact that the sap sensitises the skin to both natural and artificial light.’

‘Will it do any permanent harm?’

‘They should all be fine in a day or two,’ I said. ‘Thank heavens none of their eyes is affected. That really is a miracle. We need to wash off all the sap and keep them all away from light for the rest of the day. I can prescribe some antihistamines which will help soothe the burning and it might help to apply some calamine lotion to the affected skin.’

Just then, the ambulance came screaming into the garden. Considering how far he had to travel, along winding country lanes, the driver had made good time.

Three of the children were much more severely affected than the others, and although they probably didn’t really need to go to hospital, I decided that since the ambulance had arrived I’d take advantage of its presence to take those children to the hospital in Barnstaple. I telephoned one of the on-call doctors at the hospital and he agreed to take a look at the three worst affected children, and to keep them in for observation. He said there wasn’t much he could do apart from give them antihistamines and an appropriate analgesic, but he had a few spare beds and agreed with me that keeping them for a while wouldn’t do any harm. Neither he nor I thought they would need to stay in hospital for more than one night.

‘Is there anything else we can do,’ asked Mrs Pinchbeck.

‘In a day or two you could put on some tough clothes and a pair of thick gloves and cut down the Giant Hogweed plants in your field,’ I told her. ‘Until you’ve done that I suggest that you keep the children out of the field.’

She said they would certainly do that.

I then drove home, at a rather more leisurely pace than I had driven to the Pinchbecks, and after I had enjoyed a nice cup of tea and a slice of Patsy’s almond cake, I carried on cutting the grass.

And when I had finished cutting the grass, I wandered around the garden looking for Giant Hogweed plants.

I found at least a dozen of the damned things. And I chopped them all down before they could spread their seeds and create yet more plants.

British explorers brought all sorts of wonderful plants back to the United Kingdom. But occasionally we are, I think, entitled to curse their selections.

For example, I think it is fair to say that we would all be better off if the Giant Hogweed had been left where it was.

The Reluctant Winner of the Duck and Puddle Bowling for a Pig Competition

I don't know why or when the custom started but every year, without fail, Frank and Gilly at the Duck and Puddle organise a 'Bowling for a Pig' competition. A set of battered old, wooden ninepins are set up at the business end of the pub's skittle alley and contestants pay 20 new pence to roll three balls at the skittles. No one is allowed to have more than three goes (totalling 60 pence) and this is the only round of the competition for which a charge is made. All the proceeds from the event used to be shared between a group of national charities but recently the Bilbury Skittles Charitable Donations Committee (which is comprised of Frank and Gilly Parsons, the landlords of the Duck and Puddle) decreed that the proceeds from the event should in future be given to Bilbury's own cottage hospital (which is misnamed the Brownlow Country Hotel in order to avoid attracting the unwelcome attentions of local bureaucrats) in order that the citizens of Bilbury could benefit directly. Since the hospital spends no money on staff, marketing or advertising, the Committee knows that every penny raised will be used to help patients.

Skittles is often confused with its modern successor, ten pin bowling, but the two games are really quite different – in style if nothing else. For one thing, there are nine skittles or 'men' and they are wooden. And after the skittles are knocked down, they are put back into position by hand.

One of the Duck and Puddle's skittles is noticeably skinnier and lighter than the others because in 1952, long before my time in Bilbury, a legendary farmer called Dick Westlake sent down a ball with such ferocity that the skittle which had taken the force of the throw, split and lost a third of its size.

Over the years, the reputed size of Mr Westlake has steadily increased. He died in 1961 and was then generally reputed to be 6 foot 4 inches tall and to weigh 18 stones. But burying him didn't stop him growing. Today, if you ask anyone about Dick Westlake, they will tell you that he was at least 6 foot 10 inches tall and that he weighed 25 stones in his birthday suit and nigh on 30 stones with his boots on. He is said to have had hands bigger than a baseball catcher's mitt. When he was a young man, he spent some time in the army and they wanted him to be a boxer but, so the story goes, no one could find gloves big enough for his enormous hands. That was the man responsible for the fact that today the Duck and Puddle version of skittles involves eight and two thirds skittles, rather than the more usual nine.

The three balls, which, like the skittles, were hand carved from pieces of mature oak, were originally perfectly round and smooth but they too have, over the years, suffered rather a good deal from the battering they have taken.

The skittle alley, where the game is played, is protected on one side by a brick wall and on the other by a wooden fence which is two feet high and quite inadequate for the purpose. I have frequently suggested to Frank that he should at least double the height of the barrier in order to protect patrons from balls and skittles which bounce or ricochet over the fence and into the spectators. A couple of years ago, several spectators were injured (one with a fractured fibula and one with a fractured ulna) when an exceptionally enthusiastic but sadly wayward farm labourer from Codisworthy sent down a ball which not only missed all nine skittles but also missed the bowling alley and went sailing over the barriers into the crowd. Frank's argument, with which it is difficult to disagree, is that the wooden fence would have had to be ten foot high to have prevented such a wayward shot.

At the end of the skittle alley there is a wooden barrier in place, with sand filled sacks in front of it. The sacks are supposed to take the impetus out of the balls which miss the skittles and find their way through to the end of the alley.

The rules of the game are very simple.

Male competitors have to bowl their balls underarm and from behind a painted line which defines the start of the bowling alley.

Women have to bowl from behind a painted line which is a full yard closer to the skittles and they have the option of bowling underarm or overarm.

Male entrants have been banned from bowling overarm since Norman Tarragon, an assistant blacksmith, tried to get at two skittles which were the only ones of the nine which were still standing. The two remaining skittles stood behind the other seven skittles, which had fallen and which were lying in front, making a very effective barrier. Tarragon bowled an overarm donkey drop which missed the target by six feet, went through a closed window, damaged two cars and a bicycle and somehow ended up just two or three feet away from the village pond.

My concern, that any one of the numerous spectators standing watching could well have been seriously injured, was dismissed as irrelevant and scaremongering namby pamby nonsense but there had been genuine concern that the misdirected ball could well have been lost forever if it had sunk into the mud around the edge of the pond. It was this fear, not any concern for the wellbeing of contestants or spectators, which had led the Duck and Puddle Skittles Rules Committee (a rather grand name for Frank and Gilly) to announce that in future male bowlers would be deemed to have bowled illegally, and disqualified from the competition, if they bowled overarm. This had produced some muttering among the older villagers but when it was pointed out that it would be pretty well impossible to find a carpenter capable of carving a perfectly round replacement ball which matched the size and weight of the other two, the dissent disappeared.

The other rules are very simple.

Everyone who succeeds in knocking down all nine skittles with their three balls goes through to the second round of the competition and their names are inscribed, by Gilly, on an old blackboard which had, several years earlier, been retired by our village school. When all the competitors have had their maximum possible three attempts, the second round begins. No fees are charged for this or for subsequent rounds. Contestants are allowed only one attempt to knock down all the skittles with their three balls. Successful entrants then go through to the third round and so on and so forth. Eventually, there will usually come a point where there are just two or three contestants left in the competition. This, since it is the final stage of the competition, is known as the Final Round.

At this point in the competition, Frank announces that the Final Round has commenced and it is customary for the remaining contestants to have a break to take refreshment. Traditionally this consists of a packet of pork scratchings and two pints of best bitter, though in 1963, a man who was both a vegetarian and a teetotaller reached the final and Frank temporarily amended the unofficial rules so that he was allowed to take a packet of salt and vinegar crisps and two pints of tonic water and lime.

(Frank said afterwards that anyone who can down two pints of tonic water and lime deserves all the luck he can get and that the rest of us should get behind him and give him our support. Sadly, however, the teetotal vegetarian, clearly suffering from an ailment known to sheep farmers as the bloat, failed to progress any further in the competition.)

The Finals are run in exactly the same way as the other rounds.

Each remaining player attempts to knock down the nine skittles with the three wooden balls. Any player who fails to do this is eliminated from the competition.

Usually, the competition finishes between midnight and one a.m. and Frank, as licensee of the Duck and Puddle, always applies for, and is always given, an official extension to his opening hours.

Occasionally, the competition continues for longer and when this happens Frank usually gives himself permission to keep the bar open until he deems it necessary to close it.

On one famous occasion, Thumper Robinson and Jack Rattenbury were locked in competition until 6.35 a.m. on the morning after the event had started. The excitement was so great that very few, if any, of the spectators left the sporting arena. With a pub full of eager customers, Frank, who is if nothing else an independent man, would no more think of throwing the towel over the pumps than he would think of putting prawn cocktail and Black Forest gateau on the Duck and Puddle menu. Thumper eventually won the pig that year. It was the first of his three victories.

Three years ago, a German tourist and his wife, who were on a touring holiday of the West Country, took part in the competition and in honour of their attendance, Frank and Gilly decided that the event would in future be known as the European Skittle Bowling for a Pig Championships.

And, in the year of which I write, when two American tourists arrived, hot foot from Idaho, and the male half of the partnership declared that he would be competing, the competition was renamed the Official World Skittle Bowling for a Pig Championships. Never let it be said that we in Bilbury do not know how to take full advantage of a situation.

The two Americans, Edgar and Delphinium Rathbone, had never visited England before and they were determined to try every experience available. And there is no doubt that their adventures were certainly giving them much to write home about.

On the day of their arrival, they had both gone fishing for trout in the river Lynn at Lynmouth. They had hired Thumper Robinson as their guide. Neither of them had ever been fishing before and when Edgar, keen to emulate Thumper's expert cast and full to the brim with false confidence and genuine enthusiasm, took his rod back a little too far, the result was that the hook and fly went through an open window in one of the terraced cottages overlooking the river, and caught on a piece of curtain. Thumper said he had been very impressed because although he had been fishing many times (sometimes with a rod and sometimes with his bare hands, for he was a skilled trout tickler) he had never before seen anyone catch a terraced cottage. He said he was pretty confident that it was the heaviest catch any fisherman had ever hooked.

The prize for the winner of what must now surely be Bilbury's premier sporting event is, as might well be surmised when folk hear the name of the competition, a pig.

But, unlike other similar 'Bowling for a Pig' competitions around the country, the pig on offer is not a mere piglet; some hardly visible creature weighing no more than a puppy; a delicate creature which can be picked up and cuddled. The prize is always a proper, fully-grown male porcine adult; a fully signed up comrade of the genus Sus, and a neatly defined member of the Suidae family of even toed ungulates. In Bilbury, as Frank once said, we do not like to do things by halves. If there is to be bowling for a pig then the prize will be a pig – and not a piglet.

And throughout the event, the pig at the heart of the proceedings, the star of the evening, invariably grunting and snuffling with undisguised delight, lies comfortably in a corner of the room wherein lies the skittle alley, and had munched his way through an armful of mixed carrots, turnips and potatoes.

On this occasion a small sign, attached to the wall where the pig lay, informed observers that his name was Cedric.

Naturally, not all the winners of the skittle competition have either the accommodation or the temperament required to care for a fully-grown pig who fully intends to carry on growing.

First and foremost, of course, an adult pig requires a solid, well-made sty, something constructed with rather more concrete than wood. And he needs a bit of land around the sty so that he can roll in the mud, snuffle around for roots and other tasty comestibles, and lie in the sunshine when the fancy takes him. It is, perhaps, not widely known but pigs like to loll around in the sun doing nothing, just as much as they enjoy a good meal. The pig sty itself needs to provide shelter from the elements and plenty of fresh straw bedding and the attached land should enable the pig to do a little occasional exercise and a little quiet daydreaming.

And second, there is the food.

Pigs do not grow to the size they generally become by nibbling an occasional lettuce leaf and they do not maintain their generous proportions by nibbling on low calorie biscuits and sipping designer water through a straw. They do not stint themselves when dining. They are gourmands rather than gourmets and for them it is quantity rather than mere quality which determines their happiness. Finding enough food to keep a pig content requires a strong back, determination, a truck of some kind and a never-ending supply of suitable comestibles. Expecting to make do with an occasional slop bucket full of household waste will simply not do. Day in, day out the pig must be fed and, in the absence of a ready supply of pigswill from a school canteen, will require a vast supply of cereals, potatoes, carrots and other vegetables. Feeding a pig can be an exhausting and expensive business.

And what, in the end, do you do with your pig when you have fed it for a year or two and its size has increased in a satisfying manner to a fairly healthy 200 to 250 pounds?

The obvious answer, of course, is to turn the pig into a freezer full of pork chops and rashers of bacon. A decent sized porker will provide enough nourishment to last a large family some months; providing its executioners with two dressed sides, two hams, two shoulders, ribs with meat attached, blade bones, backbone with meat attached, head and tongue, trotters, tail, liver, kidney and heart and a seemingly inexhaustible supply of bits and pieces which veterinarians know as lungs, stomach, intestines and bladder and which butchers refer to as offal. Even when I ate meat, I couldn't bear eating offal.

But, as quite a number of winners of the Duck and Puddle Bowling for a Pig competition have found, it is not easy to call in the slaughterman when you have got to know your animal and have found yourself smiling and nodding wisely as you lean on its gate and observe its little ways.

It is especially difficult to bring the animal's life to a sudden end when you have given him or her a name.

It is much easier to order the death of 'the pig in the end sty' than it is to tell the man from the abattoir to pop along and kill Cedric.

The fact is that pigs are intelligent animals and they all have individual skills, peculiarities, eccentricities and idiosyncrasies of their own.

If a census were taken in Bilbury today, and pigs were included in the population, the pigs would comprise a healthy, sizeable ethnic minority. And if all those pigs were given the vote, and there are many pig owners who will tell you that their pig is more intelligent than many of the people they know, and certainly more intelligent than the majority of politicians, then there are those in the village who would say that the world would be a better place. There would be fewer wars and far more rooting for vegetables, and who will argue that would not make the world a better place?

Bilburians are generous, warm-hearted, broad-minded, welcoming people and if someone in London wants to give pigs the vote then we'll be the first to go along with it, and welcome pigs and sows into the electoral community. Still, I can't see it happening any time soon.

Bowling wooden balls at skittles is not, I think it is fair to say, an activity which requires a great deal of thought, or even a good deal of skill. It does require a certain amount of brawn, for the balls are heavy and must be projected with some force if they are to knock down the skittles, rather than simply rest wearily up against them; but not many would regard nine pins (its other name) as requiring the same level of mental agility as, say, chess or dominoes. A darts player is required to do a little rudimentary mathematics from time to time but all the skittles player has to do with his brain is count the number of skittles which are still standing, and then act accordingly.

Of course, as with any game, there are players who claim to have acquired special skills. There are some skittles players who take pride in their ability to knock down a solitary wooden man who is guarded by eight fallen comrades. Such a shot requires the ability to throw a ‘beamer’ or a ‘bouncer’. A ‘beamer’ is a ball which does not land on the wooden planks which make up the base of the bowling alley but travels straight from the player’s hand to the target. A ‘bouncer’ is a ball which lands but once, and then leaps forwards after bouncing. Some players claim to be able to put spin on the ball (a skill which requires hands the size of hams and fingers strong enough to bend nails) and others claim that they can fire a ball at the skittles at a speed of 30 to 40 miles per hour.

But much of this is harmless phooey, and those who have been watching skittles for some decades will confirm that the one ingredient which really matters, and the one which all players require above all else, is good old-fashioned luck.

When Edgar Rathbone from Idaho became the surprise winner of the latest Duck and Puddle competition, there was much delight and a good deal of excitement. Mr Rathbone was not only the first winner from the United States, he was only the second winner who did not hail from Bilbury or one of the nearby villages.

‘We’re truly global now,’ said Frank, positively purring with delight.

Peter Marshall wanted to know if Mr Rathbone thought there might be a market for old-fashioned skittle alleys in Idaho. He explained that he could provide any interested parties with a full inventory of equipment, including skittles and balls. (None of us who heard this sales pitch could imagine where Peter could possibly find wooden skittles and balls.)

Mr Rathbone, who seemed rather surprised by this suggestion, said he felt sure that there would be a market for such a ‘quaint, old-fashioned sporting activity’. I really liked the Rathbones. They were a kind couple, always eager to please and always keen to see the England that the English know. He had, I think, been something big in motor car sales. She had managed a drugstore.

Many questions were asked from those who wondered precisely how Mr Rathbone intended to deal with his success. And the obvious question (no less pertinent for it being so obvious) was: ‘Are you going to keep the pig and, if so, how are you going to get him back home to Idaho?’

Mr Rathbone’s wife, Delphinium, who had become quite pale when she realised that her husband had won a pig, wanted to know if they really had to accept the prize or if there was, perhaps, an alternative option. ‘A box of chocolates?’ she inquired hopefully. ‘Maybe a bottle of your lovely British sherry? Or a box of assorted, coloured bath salts?’

On reflection, I suppose it must have been quite a shock for both of them.

Most visitors touring England are happy to pick up the usual souvenirs; items which will fit comfortably into a suitcase: a few photographs, a handful of postcards, an assortment of English stamps, a box of shortbread or chocolates, a small toy model of a red London bus, a small bust of Shakespeare, a London theatre programme – that sort of thing.

Not many tourists suddenly find themselves to be the rather shocked owners of a large pig.

The Rathbones were travelling around the West of England in a rented Ford Capri and had found themselves in Bilbury, staying at the Duck and Puddle, simply because they had got lost while trying to drive between the twin Devon villages of Lynton and Lynmouth, and the small town of Bideford further along the coast.

The fact is that if you get lost in Bilbury there is nowhere else to stay other than the village’s one hostelry. The choice is simple: a room at the Duck and Puddle or park your car in a field gateway.

And now, with absolutely no warning, the two travellers had become three.

Mr Rathbone had forked out his entry fee for no other reason than that he thought it would be something truly Devonian to talk about when they got back home. Delphinium had taken several photographs of Edgar posing with one of the wooden balls. It had not occurred to either of them that their modest investment might produce such an unexpected dividend.

You can see that under such circumstances any sensible woman might well prefer finding room in her suitcase for a box of bath salts to continuing her journey around the West Country with a 200 pound carrot munching machine lying on the back seat of your rented Capri – especially when you and your husband have signed a document promising to return the car in a ‘clean condition’.

The Rathbones were both in their 60s, and it is fair to say that they were keen and experienced travellers.

They had visited Europe on a dozen occasions and they had enjoyed or endured the usual variety of adventures which befall travellers in Europe. They had been held up at customs posts, they had filled in endless forms, they had stood patiently as their suitcases had been examined in minute detail, they had stayed in hotels where the plumbing had been considered primitive in 1920 and in France they had endured the discomfort of the Turkish lavatory – an item of plumbing known in Turkey as the Indian toilet and one which requires the user to squat rather than to sit.

But they had always managed to complete their travels without ever once acquiring a pig as a travelling companion.

At first, thrilled by his unexpected success and sustained by enthusiasm rather than practicalities, Mr Rathbone said that they were experienced in the care of animals. However, he admitted, when asked, that their knowledge of animals was confined to having, over several decades, shared their home with one Persian cat and two consecutive Bichon frise dogs. In addition, Mr Rathbone remembered that he had been the owner of a goldfish early in his life, though he readily agreed with those observers who felt that, with all due respect, the goldfish, (Mr Rathbone thought it had been won at a fair of some kind), being a creature which required little more than a pinch of feed and an occasional change of water, could almost certainly be disregarded and dismissed as providing negligible practical experience in the handling and transport of fully grown adult members of the family suidae, part of the order artiodactyla.

The truth is that, however you look at things, winning a pig is some way removed from winning a goldfish in a glass bowl or owning a cat that looks good sitting on the sofa. The domestic pig is, after all, closely related to the hippopotamus. The Rathbones, it was generally agreed, had no relevant experience for the job of looking after an animal weighing 20 stones, having a mind of its own and requiring a good deal of attention.

‘How would we get it in the car?’ asked Mrs Rathbone. ‘Does he answer to his name? Where will we find a collar and lead big enough? Do hotels and pubs in England provide accommodation for people travelling with pigs?’

And, of course, the inevitable query: ‘Is he house trained?’

It was generally agreed that it would be impossible to get Cedric into anything smaller than a truck, that hotels in England do not usually provide special accommodation for travellers arriving with pigs, that it would be difficult to find a suitably sized collar and lead and that Cedric was definitely, quite definitely, not house trained. The straw upon which Cedric lay provided ample evidence of this shortcoming. It is an inevitability that when you put a good deal of something into one end of a pig, a good deal of something else will eventually come out of the other end.

The Rathbones whispered quietly and rather urgently to each other and then Mr Rathbone approached me.

‘Do you have a farm, doctor?’ he asked.

I told him that Patsy and I had a smallholding and a fair amount of land but that we didn’t have what anyone could call a proper farm.

‘But you’ve got stables and things?’

‘Oh yes,’ I said, ‘we’ve got stables and outbuildings.’

Mr Rathbone lowered his voice. ‘I’m very honoured to have won the pig,’ he said, ‘but Delphinium and I are a bit worried about exactly what we’re going to do with it.’ Delphinium, who was standing just behind her husband, nodded and took her husband’s hand.

‘Even if we managed to get it back to the States where would we keep it?’ asked Mrs Rathbone. ‘We live in a condominium. All we’ve got outside is an allocated parking space.’

‘We wondered if you would take the pig,’ said Mr Rathbone.

‘Sort of just look after it for us,’ said Mrs Rathbone.

‘We don’t want her turning into sausages,’ said Mr Rathbone. ‘We’ll pay for the food and the upkeep,’ he added.

‘Perhaps you’d send us photos occasionally, let us know how she’s doing,’ said Mrs Rathbone.

‘He, dear,’ said Mr Rathbone gently. ‘Cedric is a ‘he’.’

‘Oh yes,’ said Mrs Rathbone. ‘Let us know how he’s doing.’

I looked at Patsy. She smiled. She didn’t actually nod but I knew her well enough to know that she was nodding in her mind.

‘We’ll be delighted to take him,’ I said. ‘And we’ll happily send you photographs. But we don’t want you to send us money.’

‘We’ll be thrilled to look after Cedric,’ said Patsy. ‘You must come to the house tomorrow,’ she looked at her watch, ‘well, later today. And we’ll show you where she’s going to be living. I’ll ask my dad to pick her up in his trailer tomorrow morning. If you come round later in the morning you’ll be able to see her settling in. And you must stay for lunch.’

The Rathbones were delighted, grateful and very relieved. They made serious attempts to persuade us to let them send us money to buy turnips and carrots but, when we made it clear that we didn’t want them to pay anything but were happy to have the opportunity to look after their pig, they gave in gracefully. The truth is, we told them, was that we were both rather proud to add a very fine looking pig to our small menagerie. ‘He’ll be a member of the family,’ Patsy assured them. ‘And he’ll never be turned into sausages or rashers of bacon.’

The Rathbones who were, of course, staying at the Duck and Puddle went upstairs to their room and Patsy and I headed for the door.

Most people had gone and the bar was pretty well empty. Patsy and I had both enjoyed a splendid evening, all the more so for the fact that it was a rare treat for us. We could not go out together very often because either Patsy or I usually had to be at Bilbury Grange in order to answer the phone in case of an emergency. If I was not there, Patsy had to be available to tell anyone who turned up on the doorstep where I could be found.

And so we usually had to have our days out separately. Once or twice a week, Patsy would have an afternoon or an evening out (usually with her sister Adrienne) and once or twice a week, on evenings when she wasn't going out, I would potter along to the Duck and Puddle for an hour or two playing bar billiards or darts, invariably with my chums Thumper Robinson and Patchy Fogg. If there was an emergency of any kind Patsy would ring me at the pub and Frank would give me the message.

On special occasions, such as the evening of the skittles competition, Patsy's parents would babysit the little ones, answer the telephone if it rang and tell callers where I was. They would then spend the night in our spare room.

Patsy and I were half way through the door, ready to head for home when Gilly suddenly came running up to us.

'It's Frank,' she said.

Gilly is usually calm; a rock in the rough seas which are an inevitable part of life when you are married to Frank and when you share with him the responsibility of running a village pub.

I had never seen such terror in her eyes.

Patsy and I both stopped.

'What's wrong with him?' I asked her. I had drunk a couple of glasses of whisky but suddenly I was cold, stone sober.

'I think he's had a stroke,' said Gilly.

And suddenly, completely unexpectedly, entirely understandably, she burst into tears.

Frank's Stroke

I was shocked, saddened and desperately worried but not terribly surprised to hear that Frank had suffered a stroke.

Frank Parsons, the joint owner and sole licensee at the Duck and Puddle, has had high blood pressure for some time and he has constantly refused to listen to my requests for him to change his lifestyle.

He weighs too much, he eats too much (and eats a good deal of fatty food such as chips and pies), he drinks too much alcohol and he smokes too many cigars. He has maturity onset (type II) diabetes but he persistently refuses to follow any of the dietary advice I give him. He takes almost no exercise at all (a trip down into the cellar to connect up another barrel of beer, or to hunt out a special bottle of wine, have been his only exercise for several years) and although he likes to think of himself as tough and resilient he is, in reality, a sensitive man who worries far more than he allows the wider world to suspect.

He is also, as he himself is fond of saying, 'not as young as he was when he wasn't as old as he is now'.

In short, Frank has, for some years now, been a medical accident waiting to happen.

His only concession to my pleadings (and to those of his wife Gilly) has been to give up the cigarettes he has smoked since he was 14-years-old and to replace them with cigars.

I have told him that there is no evidence that cigars are safer than cigarettes but he says they must be doing him much less harm because he only smokes five or six cigars a day whereas he used to smoke fifty or sixty cigarettes a day.

I pointed out that the Churchillian sized cigars which he smokes contain far more tobacco than ten cigarettes but talking to the cigars would have had just as much effect.

All this went through my mind in a flash as Patsy and I followed Gilly.

Frank was lying on the floor at the bottom of the winding and narrow staircase which leads up to the bedrooms and down to the cellar in the Duck and Puddle. Oddly, and with extraordinary good fortune, Frank had collapsed more or less in the recovery position. He was unconscious and he had vomited.

'At first I thought he'd fallen down the stairs,' said Gilly, 'but when I looked at his face I could see that he'd had a stroke.' She had made a real effort and had stopped crying. I turned and quietly asked Patsy, who had her arm around Gilly, to use the pub's telephone to call an ambulance.

'Have you moved him?' I asked Gilly, checking Frank's pulse and breathing. The publican's pulse was a little fast but it was regular. His breathing wasn't good but at least he was breathing and his colour wasn't bad. I checked his mouth to make sure that there wasn't any vomit blocking his airway. There wasn't.

Gilly shook her head. 'He's too heavy,' she said. Gilly weighs probably a third of Frank's twenty stone.

'That's good.'

I knew that although Frank had definitely had a stroke, it was perfectly possible that he'd also fallen down the stairs. I started to check him over as I spoke and was relieved that I could find no sign that any bones were broken.

'I think he'd just come up from the cellar,' said Gilly. 'He said he was going down to fetch another bottle of port for a nightcap.' She pointed to a bottle lying, unbroken, on the floor. 'The port is there so he'd probably just made it to the top of the stairs when he collapsed.'

'He hasn't injured himself,' I said, when I'd finished checking him over. 'I can't find any signs of any broken bones – though it's perfectly possible he may have cracked a rib or two of course. He probably fell quite heavily.'

Frank, who was now starting to regain consciousness, mumbled something incomprehensible. I leant down and listened carefully.

He repeated what he'd said and this time I worked out that he was telling us that he hadn't fallen but had suddenly felt his right leg give way.

'You've had a stroke,' I told him, 'but you're going to be fine. We have to get you into hospital in Barnstaple but we'll soon have you home.'

Slowly, Frank moved his left hand to his forehead and held it in the way that people tend to do when they have a bad headache.

'Do you have a headache?' I asked him.

He said something but I couldn't understand him. His speech was definitely affected; and affected quite badly. I leant closer and repeated the question. This time I could make out the answer. 'Yes'.

Obeying the instinctive, irresistible urge to comfort someone by touching them, I put a hand on Frank's shoulder. It may sound hard hearted to say so but knowing that Frank had a headache provided another clue to help make an accurate diagnosis. But I couldn't give him anything for the headache until I had a better idea of what had caused the stroke.

Frank said something else.

After he'd said it the third time, I realised that he was asking for Dr Brownlow.

I tested the muscles in his right hand and then those in his left hand. His right hand was limp and without power. His left hand was fine. The stroke had definitely affected the right side of his body.

A stroke usually develops because of a problem with the blood supply to the brain and there are three principle types of stroke.

First, there is the stroke which develops because a blood clot forms at a particular site within the brain, blocking the oxygen supply to the brain cells. Second, there is the stroke which develops because a blood clot which has formed elsewhere in the body travels, as an embolism, and causes a blockage, blocking the oxygen supply to the brain cells. Third, there is the stroke which develops because there has been a bleed within the brain. This is known as an intra-cerebral haemorrhage and this sort of stroke is often a result of high blood pressure.

Around four fifths of all strokes are caused by a clot blocking an artery and thereby depriving brain cells of their regular and essential supplies of oxygen and glucose. The damage done by a clot can vary enormously from person to person. Some people can have quite a large clot in their brain but show very few symptoms while others, with exactly the same sort of blockage, may have signs of a massive ischaemic stroke. Why this happens is something of a mystery but it is probably because of the presence or absence of collateral arteries which, when present, can protect patients from the consequences of a stroke. An individual who has large collateral arteries (which can provide a secondary blood supply to an area of the brain theoretically deprived of oxygen by a clot) will suffer far less than an individual who has small collateral arteries. It's all down to the luck of the draw.

The other thing that affects the amount of damage that is done by a blood clot in the brain, is the length of time the brain cells go without blood. If they are deprived of blood, and therefore oxygen and sugar, for a brief time then the brain cells may recover completely. But if the brain cells are deprived for longer, some of them will die and some brain function will be lost. That's the bad news. The good news is that it is sometimes possible for another part of the brain to learn to do the things that the damaged cells can no longer do. Doctors and nurses are constantly working at finding new ways to help stroke patients recover lost skills.

There is another type of bleeding which can cause a stroke and this, called a subarachnoid haemorrhage, occurs when a blood vessel bursts within the subarachnoid space which surrounds the brain. This type of bleed usually results from a weakness in an artery wall called an aneurysm and it mainly affects younger people.

Those are the main types of stroke caused by blood vessel problems.

Strokes can also develop if there is a tumour in the brain but knowing a good deal about his medical history, I was prepared to guess that Frank's stroke wasn't caused by the sudden appearance of a brain tumour.

Besides, if Frank's stroke was caused by a tumour then there wasn't anything much I could do to help him immediately. But if his stroke was caused by an intra-cerebral haemorrhage or an embolism then there were things I could do that would prove beneficial.

The worst type of stroke is usually the one caused by bleeding within the brain. This is the type of stroke which most commonly causes sudden death. And, whereas with a clot in the brain the damage tends not to get any worse, with a bleed things can continue to deteriorate for some time after the onset of the first symptoms. The longer the bleeding continues the worse the symptoms will be – and the greater the problem.

A clot will usually block off an artery to a particular part of the brain. And that, God willing, will be that. Unless there are several clots, the damage will be done when the clot arrives at its destination.

But once bleeding starts within the brain it can go on and on. The damaged area can continue to grow.

The odd thing is that whether the stroke is caused by a clot or a bleed, most of the immediate symptoms will be pretty much the same.

An area of the brain is deprived of oxygen and the result can be a mixture of physical and mental symptoms. Patients may lose the control of certain muscles (usually on the opposite side of the body to the side of the brain where the stroke occurred) and they may sustain problems with their speech, their memory and their intellect. It is common for stroke victims to be emotionally labile too, and to become frustrated because they cannot think clearly.

The truth is that, in my experience, virtually anything can happen after a stroke – none of it likely to be on anyone's Christmas list.

Although I had no way of knowing what had caused Frank's stroke, I was prepared to guess that it was related to his blood pressure. And when high blood pressure causes a stroke, there is a good chance that it will be a stroke caused by bleeding inside the brain.

I took a firm hold of Frank's right hand. His speech was so badly affected that I needed to establish another way to communicate with him.

'Squeeze my fingers if you understand me,' I told him. 'Squeeze once for 'yes' and twice for 'no.'

He squeezed my fingers once. His grip in his good hand was as strong as ever.

‘Dr Brownlow isn’t here,’ I told him. ‘But I’m looking after you.’ I told him my name. ‘Do you remember me?’

One squeeze.

Frank tried to say something else. He was trying desperately to say something but the words were just not coming out properly. I listened carefully and suddenly realised what he was trying to say to me.

‘The Dr Brownlow Hospital? You want to go to the Dr Brownlow Hospital?’

I understood at last. From Frank’s point of view it made complete sense.

We don’t actually, officially, have an official hospital in Bilbury. But we have a sort of hospital.

My late hero, friend and mentor, Dr Brownlow understood just how bad hospitals had become. He spent his final weeks at home, being cared for by his faithful butler Bradshaw and he wanted his permanent legacy to be a small, friendly hospital run by people who genuinely cared about the sick and the weak and the frail. He left his home, and a good sum of money, so that we would be able to create a cottage hospital that would provide the villagers of Bilbury with a haven and a refuge at their time of need.

Up until Dr Brownlow’s generous gesture, Bilbury had never had a hospital of its own and villagers who needed nursing care or palliative care, had always had to go into hospital in Barnstaple or Exeter. Most, if not all villagers, disliked this idea very much. Their relatives and friends all lived in Bilbury and it’s quite a trek from the village to Barnstaple. People who had to rely on public transport found the journey next to impossible. There are no trains, of course, and buses are as rare as apples on pear trees. It’s a well-known fact that people who fall ill abroad always want to be cared for at home. And the people of Bilbury were no different: if they had to be poorly then they’d rather be poorly in Bilbury than anywhere else. If they needed to have an operation, or to undergo extensive tests and investigations, they would grit their teeth and go into a large hospital in a large town. But if they just needed to be looked after then they would, all things being equal, prefer to be looked after in Bilbury.

After Dr Brownlow died I appointed his former butler, Bradshaw, as my district nurse but I also decided that he would be the only person suitable to take on the responsibility as the matron of the new cottage hospital. Bradshaw found enough volunteers to staff the hospital without our having to hire any professional nurses. Most of the volunteers had no academic nursing qualifications but they all had a quality which is far more important than any number of diplomas: they were all intrinsically kind people.

Our plans to provide Bilbury with its own small hospital did not go completely according to plan, of course.

Local health service administrators were obstructive and it quickly became apparent that converting Dr Brownlow’s home into a hospital was going to be far more difficult than we had thought. As soon as we had solved one problem, the red tape loving pen pushers thought of another problem.

It was Bradshaw who pointed out that we didn’t need our hospital to be registered as an ‘official’ hospital’ and it was Bradshaw who suggested that instead of calling our establishment the Bilbury Cottage Hospital we should call it the Brownlow Country Hotel, and run it, officially, as a hotel. And so we refer to our patients as ‘guests’ and the health service people have no authority over us.

Instead of being matron at the Brownlow Cottage Hospital, the incomparable Bradshaw became the manager of the Brownlow Country Hotel.

And that was where Frank wanted to go.

The publican squeezed my right hand firmly. Once. I could tell by the look in his eyes that he was desperate to go into our local hospital – and not one of the big, super-efficient hospitals. I realised that this was probably what he had been trying to tell me when I thought that he had asked for Dr Brownlow.

‘The ambulance is on its way,’ murmured Patsy, who had come back from the telephone.

‘Is Frank going to be all right?’ asked Gilly.

‘Frank is going to be fine,’ I told her. ‘He’s had a stroke affecting the right side of his body so we know that the problem lies in the left side of his brain. His right arm and right leg aren’t working properly and his speech has been affected. But he can hear us and understand us.’

‘Is he going to be paralysed?’ asked Gilly. ‘I just want to know. I’ll look after him whatever has happened. I just want to know. I need to know the worst.’ She started to cry again. ‘He’s not going to die, is he?’

‘He’s going to be fine,’ I told her, with far more confidence than I could possibly feel. ‘The paralysis is temporary. And he is definitely not going to die.’

I didn’t know this, of course. To be perfectly honest, Gilly could have answered that question as well as I could. But I needed her to be as calm as possible. And, most important of all, I needed Frank to be relaxed and calm. If he became agitated then his blood pressure would soar and if the stroke had been caused by bleeding then the size of the bleed within his brain would grow and the problems would get worse.

The more I thought about it the more I became convinced that Frank’s stroke had been caused by a bleed.

With Frank listening to us, and conscious of every word I spoke, it was particularly vital that I did everything I could to ensure that he remained positive and calm. And I needed Gilly to be alert and able to think clearly. This was not a time for worrying or for gloominess.

I took the keys to the boot of the old Rolls out of my jacket pocket and handed them to Gilly. ‘My black medical bag is in the boot of the car,’ I told her, ‘would you fetch it for me, please? I’d like to check Frank’s blood pressure.’

I never bother to lock the car doors in Bilbury, but if I’m leaving the car for any length of time I always put my drug bag into the boot and lock the boot lid.

I realised just how lucky it was that I had the car with me. Patsy and I had originally decided to walk from Bilbury Grange to the Duck and Puddle but we had, in the end, decided to take the car because Patsy was wearing a long dress and her one pair of really high heels. The lane which leads from our house to the pub is used by several farms and the animals, cows and sheep, which are herded along the lane are generous in making sticky deposits upon the rutted and potholed tarmacadam.

Frank spoke again. I looked at him. He repeated what he had said. I listened carefully. There was a desperation in his eyes.

‘You don’t want to go to the hospital in Barnstaple?’

I was still holding his hand, he squeezed my fingers very tightly. Once. He didn’t want to go to the hospital in Barnstaple. Indeed, it was clear that he was becoming very agitated at the thought that he might be taken to Barnstaple.

I understood why.

‘You don’t want to go to the hospital in Exeter?’ It is important when asking questions this way to make sure that they can be answered with a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer.

Another single squeeze of my fingers. Another ‘yes’ from Frank.

To those of us who live in Bilbury, the town of Barnstaple is almost another world. It is a place with banks and offices and traffic lights and pavements. It is a town where locals can walk down the street and not recognise one in ten of the people they see. And the hospital is a large, unfriendly building. There are the usual seemingly endless corridors, the awful décor, the usual smells and the inevitable feeling, for both patients and visitors, of being trapped in some Kafkaesque nightmare. It isn’t the fault of the staff. It is just the way too many large modern hospitals seem to be.

But I knew that there was something else; another reason why Frank was desperate not to go to the hospital in Barnstaple or the one in Exeter.

Both of Frank’s parents had died in the hospital in Exeter and Frank had always thought that the deaths had been unnecessary. Frank’s father had died of an infection which he had acquired in the hospital and his mother had been misdiagnosed and mistreated. We had talked about both deaths on numerous occasions and I confess that I had agreed with his suspicions.

I understood why Frank wanted me to take him into our local cottage hospital. But I really didn’t think the Bilbury hospital was the right place for a patient who had just suffered from a stroke.

We have had several stroke victims in our village hospital but they were all patients who had been seen in either the Barnstaple hospital or the Exeter hospital and whose condition had been fully diagnosed. They had come to the hospital in Bilbury for rehabilitation; to be nursed and to be helped to learn again how to use their muscles and their minds. We had all the basic nursing equipment we would need, including a hoist to help move heavy patients in and out of bed, but we didn’t have any sophisticated, diagnostic equipment.

I had a terribly difficult decision to make.

The treatment of a stroke depends, inevitably, upon the cause of the stroke. And it isn’t easy to decide what did cause a stroke. Hospital doctors have equipment and laboratories to help them make diagnoses.

I knew that if I asked the ambulance crew to take Frank to Barnstaple or Exeter, the doctors there would be able to examine him far more thoroughly than I ever could. They could do tests that I couldn’t do. And then, after a week or so, we could have him transferred back to the hospital in Bilbury. That was the logical, sensible thing to do.

But I knew that Frank was terribly worried about going to one of the big Devon hospitals. I strongly suspected that if he did go to the hospital in Barnstaple, or to the one in Exeter, the result would be that his blood pressure would soar. And the journey alone wouldn’t be much fun for a frightened and partly paralysed man. It would take the ambulance a good three quarters of an hour to reach Barnstaple and longer to get to Exeter; moreover all the roads along which the ambulance would have to travel are winding and poorly kept, with surfaces which have, in many places, been damaged by frost and are, therefore, marked with more than a few potholes.

All that was bad enough.

But my real worry was that Frank would be so upset at the very idea of going to a big hospital that his blood pressure would go up and up.

And if his blood pressure rose then there would be a greatly increased chance that the stroke would get worse.

If the stroke got worse then there was a considerable chance that Frank would die.

Making decisions about the care of patients is always difficult. But when the patient concerned is a close friend, that decision becomes even more difficult. In a large practice I would have been able to call in another partner, and ask for his or her advice and help – particularly for a patient whom I knew so well. But in Bilbury, in a single-handed medical practice, I was on my own. I had no one to ask for advice.

Suddenly, unbidden, I recalled the first time I met Frank.

I had arrived in Barnstaple, clutching my medical bag and a blue cardboard suitcase, and when I stepped from the train to the platform, the first thing I saw was a small crowd gathered around a fat man in a tweed suit, gaiters and heavy brown boots. The man on the ground was lying flat on his back. It was Frank. He had been to a Licensed Victuallers Association meeting in Exeter and he was stone cold drunk. I remember travelling with him to Bilbury, in a taxi driven by Peter Marshall.

I remembered Frank, slightly recovered, climbing out of the taxi and standing, wobbling slightly, while Gilly, his wife, told him what she thought of him.

I remembered, in a flash of disconnected sequences, the hours I had spent in Frank's company. I remembered the times when I had tried, quite unsuccessfully, to persuade him to lose a little weight and at least cut down his smoking. I remembered laughing when he had drawn the pub curtains on a sunny day because he complained that the sound the sunbeams made as they bounced upon the furniture was making his head hurt. I remembered laughing with him, Thumper and Patchy as we tried to play darts blindfolded. And then by facing the wrong direction and throwing the darts over our shoulders. I knew the holes which our darts had made in the wall were still there.

Frank had been a central part of my life for so long that I could not imagine a world without him. When he laughed properly, it was a real belly laugh. It sounded like thunder.

I remembered that he and Gilly had occasional huge rows. She once locked him out of the Duck and Puddle and told him to sleep in the shed. I offered him a bed for the night but he wouldn't take it because he said that if Gilly thought he needed to be taught a lesson then she was right and he needed to be taught a lesson. They had huge rows but they always made up soon afterwards. I remembered the two of them, with their arms around each other: a genuinely loving couple.

I remembered the days when financial problems meant that the two of them nearly lost the pub. I remembered Frank's endless generosity and his unbidden, natural kindness.

All this I remembered in a single flash.

Gilly returned with my medical bag. She handed my keys and I unlocked the bag. It is, not unreasonably, the law that a doctor must keep any dangerous drugs, such as morphine, double locked. And so I kept my locked bag in the locked boot of my car.

But it wasn't drugs I needed from my bag.

I took out my sphygmomanometer, rolled up Frank's shirt sleeve and took his blood pressure.

It was 220/160. Even for Frank this was high; frighteningly high.

Since he was my patient, and I had taken his blood pressure many times, I knew that his blood pressure was normally around 160/100. That is high enough to need treatment but if I could somehow get Frank's blood pressure down to that sort of level, I would be very happy.

A normal, young adult will have a blood pressure of 120/80. The two numbers, known as the systolic and the diastolic figures, mark the highest and lowest pressure created as the heart pumps blood around the body.

If it weren't under pressure, the blood in the human body wouldn't go anywhere. It would just lie around in arteries and veins doing no one any good at all. Tissues would receive no oxygen or glucose, and waste products would accumulate. Before long everything would die. But when the blood pressure rises too high then the danger is that a blood vessel will burst and blood will leak out. When the blood vessel which bursts is in the brain then the individual concerned will have a stroke. If the leak is a very small one then the chances are that the stroke will be a mild one. But if the leak is a big one then the stroke can be massive or fatal. The more I thought about it the more I was convinced that this was what had happened to Frank.

I guessed that the stress and the excitement of the 'Bowling for a Pig' competition had pushed Frank's blood pressure way up into dangerous levels. Frank is the sort of old-fashioned landlord who likes to see his customers having a good time. And throughout the evening he had been constantly rushing around trying to make sure that everyone present was having a good time. He had probably drunk more alcohol than usual too. And for Frank a normal evening of drinking would probably put most of us under the table.

'What's his blood pressure like?' asked Gilly, who was kneeling beside me on the floor.

'It's a little on the high side,' I told her. I didn't think of it as a lie but as a tactical understatement.

'I made some coffee,' said Patsy. She handed me a cup and gave one to Gilly too. I took the cup, thanked Patsy, and sipped while I thought. I didn't need sobering up, the emergency had done that quite adequately. But the hot coffee was welcome. My mind was racing as I tried to decide what I should do with Frank. Should I risk sending him to Barnstaple? Should I send him to Exeter? Or should I risk keeping him in Bilbury, at a local cottage hospital with nice clean sheets, nice beds and pretty well no medical equipment more sophisticated than a thermometer.

It was, without a doubt, the most difficult decision of my career. I knew that if I got it wrong then Frank would probably die.

And, as an irrelevant aside, I could end up being struck off the medical register for making the wrong decision. I would be in a tricky spot if Frank died and I was asked to explain why I had chosen to send him not to a hospital but to a place officially registered as a country hotel.

There was absolutely no doubt that from a perfectly selfish point of view I had no choice: I had to send Frank into the hospital in Barnstaple and hope that the long, uncomfortable journey didn't kill him and that the stress of being in a place he feared didn't push his blood pressure into the stratosphere.

I checked his arms and his legs as best as I could. The paralysis caused by the stroke did not appear to have increased

I knew that the first thing I needed to decide was what had caused Frank's stroke. Was I right to guess that his high blood pressure had caused a bleed? Or could the stroke have been caused by a clot?

Statistically the odds were that the stroke had been caused by a clot. I told myself for the tenth time that four out of five strokes are caused by clots rather than bleeds.

The fact is that the basic symptoms of all types of stroke are similar (a loss of motor function and a loss of various mental functions such as speech, sight and so on) but there are some signs and symptoms which can help differentiate between the two types of stroke.

And when I stopped and thought about I realised that I really had all the information I needed to make the diagnosis. I already knew which side of his brain was affected. All I had to do was to decide whether the problem was a clot or a bleed. That decision would decide what needed to be done next.

If Frank had suffered a clot in his brain then he needed to be started on anticoagulants to break up the clot. If he had suffered a bleed because of high blood pressure then it was essential to lower his blood pressure.

On the other hand, if he had suffered a bleed and I, or any other doctor, gave him anticoagulants then the bleed would get worse and he would almost certainly die.

I sipped the coffee which Patsy had made while I thought about the facts I had available. I knew that if the patient had been a stranger I would have found everything so much simpler.

I tried to sort through all the evidence I had which might help me make a diagnosis.

There are some differences in the two main types of stroke, the bleed and the clot. Patients who have had a stroke caused by a bleed may have some symptoms which aren't common among patients who have had a clot.

My mind raced as I tried to think back and assess every piece of information I had gleaned. I needed to make a decision before the ambulance arrived in order to know whether to tell the ambulance crew to take Frank to one of the big hospitals or to the Brownlow Country Hotel here in Bilbury.

Patients who have had strokes caused by bleeds rather than by clots are more likely to lose consciousness immediately after their stroke. It is also commoner for patients who have had strokes caused by bleeding to have a severe headache. And it is commoner for patients who have had strokes caused by a bleed, rather than a clot, to feel nauseous or to vomit.

Frank had lost consciousness, he had a headache and he had vomited.

All those symptoms suggested that my guess was correct: that Frank's stroke was caused by a bleed.

And, one other thing, he had very high blood pressure.

It is very high blood pressure which commonly results in a stroke caused by a bleed. High blood pressure can rupture a blood vessel and cause bleeding but it isn't as likely to be a factor in the production of a blood clot.

I turned to Patsy. 'How many patients do we have in the Bilbury hospital?' I asked her.

The official name for the Bilbury hospital may be the Brownlow Country Hotel but I always think of the place as the Bilbury hospital. And that's how we usually refer to it.

She looked at me and frowned. 'You're not thinking…'

For the first time Patsy realised that I was thinking of keeping Frank in Bilbury, and looking after him myself. She knew how difficult a decision it would be. And she knew that if I got the decision wrong then Frank could die. She'd been a doctor's wife long enough to know that it is almost impossible to make decisions like this accurately without doing sophisticated hospital tests. And she'd been my wife long enough to know how much I would be worrying about the decision.

'How many?' I asked her again. I knew damned well how many patients we had in the local hospital but I didn't have enough brain left to find the answer from my own memory.

The Brownlow Country Hotel only has one professional nurse. We can call on several voluntary workers, some of whom have a little nursing experience, but the only nurse is Dr Brownlow's old butler, Bradshaw, who is officially also my district nurse.

Bradshaw lives at the Brownlow Country Hotel and although he is in his 80s (he has been in his 80s for as long as I can remember) you wouldn't think it if you saw him rushing around. He may have a Christian name but no one ever uses it. He always has been, is, and probably always will be just 'Bradshaw'.

'Just two,' Patsy replied. 'Miss Havistock and Mrs Pettigrew.'

I knew them both well, of course.

Miss Havistock was in her eighties and frail. But she was alert and she was in the Brownlow Country Hotel only because her small cottage was being decorated after a flood in her loft had brought down the ceiling in her bedroom. Mrs Pettigrew was slightly younger and was there because she had been in hospital in Exeter having a hip replacement operation. She was just about ready to go home and required very little nursing care.

All this was important because if I decided to take Frank into the Bilbury hospital then he would need a good deal of nursing care. We would have to make sure that he didn't stay immobilised for too long, that if he was in bed for long periods then he was turned regularly so that pressure sores did not develop, that he was kept properly hydrated, that his blood pressure was brought down and under control. And we needed to keep a careful eye on him to make sure that the stroke wasn't getting worse. I would need to examine him thoroughly, muscle by muscle, so that I knew exactly which parts of his body had been affected. Only if I knew what was affected now would I be able to tell if the stroke was getting worse. If it was getting worse then that would mean that the bleed was continuing and if that happened then we would need to rush him to a major hospital for surgery. If an artery continues to bleed, and just won't stop, then it is sometimes necessary for a neurosurgeon to go into the brain and tie off the artery causing the trouble.

Both Miss Havistock and Mrs Pettigrew could pretty well look after themselves. In fact, I suspected that having them there would be a help. Both would happily help with looking after Frank, even if that just meant taking it in turns to sit by his bedside, keeping an eye on him and being prepared to call Bradshaw or myself if we were needed. In big hospitals they have machines which beep and have blinking lights to tell the nurses and doctors when something goes wrong. We had no such machines in Bilbury.

Just thinking about all the problems made me feel dizzy, and nearly convinced me to do the safe thing and send Frank to Barnstaple. Or maybe to Exeter. The Exeter hospital is bigger and better equipped than the one in Barnstaple. I knew that there were neurosurgeons working there. Maybe if I were to send Frank into one of the big hospitals I should try to arrange to send him to Exeter.

But I resisted the fears, mine and Frank's, and tried to be entirely rational.

I still believed that Frank's best chance was to stay in Bilbury and to be looked after in the Bilbury hospital.

I had, just a week or two earlier read research papers which showed that patients who are kept at home after having suffered heart attacks have just as good a survival rate as patients who are admitted to Coronary Care Units or Intensive Care Units. The problem is, it seems, that a hospital environment can be so terrifying that many patients suffer a relapse, or fail to recover, because of the intense stress they feel. Hospital units which are set up to deal with emergency patients tend to be full of bright lights and beeping machinery. Nurses are forever moving about, checking on this and checking on that. There is no privacy, no quiet, no peace and no chance for a patient to sleep. And so patients who can be kept at home, and looked after quietly in the peace of their own environment, where they feel safe and comfortable, will often do just as well, or even better, than patients who are taken into hospital, connected up to electronic machinery and drip bottles and given vast quantities of medication. This is the case for heart attack patients. But was it also the case for patients who had suffered strokes?

I had left the cuff wrapped around Frank's arm. I took his blood pressure again. It was 200/150. It had come down a little since I had last taken it. That was good news. I checked his limbs again. There had not been any deterioration; the paralysis did not seem to be any worse. If I was correct in thinking that Frank had suffered a bleed and not a clot then the bleed had stopped and Frank's condition had, for the moment at least, stabilised.

Suddenly, I made the decision.

'I'm going to take you into the local hospital,' I told Frank. 'You will do as you are told. You will not smoke any cigarettes. You will not smoke any cigars. You will not smoke a pipe. You will not drink any alcohol. No gin, no beer, no whisky, no wine – no alcohol at all. You will eat what you are told to eat. And you will damned well get better. Do you understand?'

Frank turned his head slightly, looked at me and tried to smile.

'OK,' he said. I heard it clearly.

I looked up to Patsy. 'Ring Bradshaw,' I told her. 'Tell him to get up and get dressed and get ready to receive a patient.' I paused. 'You can tell him who it is.'

I then looked at Gilly. 'I'm keeping Frank in Bilbury because I think I know what's caused his stroke and I think we can deal with it best here. He'll be agitated and stressed and his blood pressure will soar if I send him to

Barnstaple.’

‘Thank you,’ murmured Gilly.

‘But he and you have to do what I tell you,’ I said. ‘He will want you to smuggle in fags and booze. You will be tempted. But if he smokes or drinks alcohol then he will die and there will be nothing I or anyone else can do for him.’

I was deliberately trying to frighten Gilly because I knew that this was probably the best chance I had to make her realise just how important it was that she listened to me and took me seriously. Frank can be persuasive and charming and Gilly adores him. I knew that if Frank asked Gilly to take him a packet of cigarettes or a bottle of whisky she would be tempted.

Suddenly, we could all hear a siren approaching.

The ambulance was on its way and I knew that for many of us in Bilbury life was going to be very different for quite a while.

And I had taken a decision that could, I knew, change all our lives.

A Rather Busy Day

Patsy and I settled Frank into our small local hospital and by the time we got back to Bilbury Grange it was nearly three in the morning. We were both exhausted. Gilly, having helped settle Frank into bed at the hospital, had gone back to the Duck and Puddle where the Rathbones had long since gone to bed. I had given Bradshaw instructions to check Frank's blood pressure regularly and to call me immediately if it went up at all. Bradshaw, who sometimes struck me as having superhuman qualities, seemed perfectly capable of going for days without sleep. Patsy's parents, our babysitters, had gone to bed in our spare room.

Patsy and I crept into the children's bedroom and said goodnight to them. We then undressed, washed without much enthusiasm, and clambered into bed. When I last looked at the alarm clock by our bed it showed ten to four in the morning.

The next time I saw the clock it was five o'clock. I had been awakened by the telephone. It was still a good two and a half hours earlier than my usual start to the day.

The caller was the wife of a patient of mine called Gardner Hoskins, who had only been out of hospital for three days. His wife had rung, in an entirely understandable panic, to tell me that Gardner was complaining of severe abdominal pain. I told her that I would be there as soon as I could, leapt out of bed, pulled on my trousers and a jumper which I always keep by the side of the bed so that I can dress quickly when I have a night call, and was in the car no more than five minutes after I had woken. My black medical bag was already back in the boot of the car.

The Hoskins live in a small cob walled cottage a few miles away from Bilbury Grange and by the time I got there, I was pretty sure that I knew exactly what had happened. After one brief look at Mr Hoskins, I borrowed the telephone and rang for an ambulance. When I'd done that I rang the hospital, spoke to the house surgeon on call and told him that I was sending one of his patients back to him. Not surprisingly, he didn't sound too excited. Hospital doctors who send patients home, like them to stay at home rather than come whizzing back like an unwelcome boomerang.

I told the house surgeon that they would probably have to do some repair work to the stitching on Mr Hoskins's large bowel. That pleased him even less because he knew he would have to telephone the surgical registrar and maybe even the surgical consultant. The chances of either of them being happy to be awoken were slightly slimmer than nil.

Mr Hoskins had been diagnosed with bowel cancer, and a surgeon in Exeter Hospital had removed the growth and pronounced himself satisfied that he had managed to remove all of the tumour. Tests on samples from Mr Hoskins's lymph glands had shown that there had been no spread and the surgeon had told everyone concerned that he was well pleased. Mr Hoskins had an excellent prognosis. We had all been delighted.

But now the patient was lying flat on his back and he was clearly in a good deal of pain. He was as white as the proverbial sheet and he was soaked with sweat. I reached out and touched his abdomen. It was as rigid as a board.

I guessed what had happened because standing on the bedside table there was a large bottle of a well-known fizzy drink; one widely promoted as being suitable for the sick and the convalescent.

'How much of that stuff has he been drinking?' I asked his wife.

She looked puzzled but thought for a while. 'I think he drank two bottles yesterday,' she said. 'But the nurses at the hospital said that he had to have plenty to drink.'

'But preferably not anything fizzy,' I told her.

'What's happened?' asked Mrs Hoskins.

'The gas in that fizzy drink has blown up your husband's bowel and burst the stitches,' I explained. 'As a result of that, some of the bowel contents have escaped into his abdomen. And your husband now has peritonitis.'

'Is it serious?' she asked, whispering.

'It will be if we don't get him straight back into the hospital,' I told her. 'I've asked the ambulance people to get here as fast as they can. And as soon as your husband arrives at the hospital they'll start treatment with an antibiotic. That should help clear up the infection. If I'm right they will then have to go back into your husband's abdomen to repair the stitching to the large bowel.'

'Will he be all right?' she wanted to know.

'He'll be fine,' I told her.

I then waited with her for the ambulance to arrive. And after he had gone off back to Exeter I drove back to Bilbury Grange.

On my way home I had to pass St Damian's, a small Grade I listed 12th century church which, technically at least, stands just outside the village boundary but which is still regarded by many older villagers as the holiest of all the churches in Devon. From the outside, the church remains in pretty much the same state as it must have looked in the 12th century. It has a small, stubby tower but has never had a spire attached.

Saint Damian was a Catholic saint who was the twin brother of Saint Cosmas. I bet there aren't many twin brothers who are both saints. The pair of them, both of whom were physicians who practised in what was, at the time, a Roman province of Syria, were Christian martyrs. They practised their profession for free, making their skills and knowledge available to anyone and everyone. Today the twins are regarded as the patron saints of all doctors and surgeons though, I'm sad to say, there are a good many doctors and surgeons who have never even heard of them.

Curiously, and inexplicably, there are very few churches in England dedicated to the memory of either twin.

I had, I realised, to my shame and regret never once been inside St Damian's. Neither Patsy nor I are regular churchgoers. I once explained to a clergyman that we both considered ourselves to be irreligious Christians and he understood what I meant.

I'm not sure why I noticed the church or felt the need to stop and go inside that morning. But I stopped the car, parked it on a stretch of verge, and tried the door of the church. To my delight the huge oak portal, decorated with huge iron straps and hinges, swung open with great ease. Grinning gargoyles, their likenesses doubtless based on the masons who had built the church, stared down at me; welcoming the honest in spirit and frightening off the evil.

Once inside, I spent a few moments exploring the church. Curiously, as is often the case with some old buildings, it seemed bigger when I got inside than it looked from the outside. There was a row of musicians' stalls and there were some box pews which looked as if they had probably been added in the 18th century. The pulpit looked Georgian and there was a clerk's stall and a reading desk for the minister. A huge impressive wooden screen, which I guessed probably dated from the 18th century, had inscribed upon it the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments. There was a life-sized wooden statue of St Damian which was carved in oak and which had, I suspected, probably been there as long as the church had been standing. I guessed that very little about the church had been changed in the centuries it had been standing.

I opened the small wooden door to one of the pews and knelt on a hand-embroidered kneeler. At that moment I knew why I was there; understood why I had entered the church. And I began to pray.

I prayed for Frank; asking whoever might be listening to help him recover his physical and mental strength. And, I prayed that I had made the right decision in keeping him in Bilbury and not telling the ambulance crew to take him to a major hospital. In my heart and mind, I still felt that I had made the right decision. But I knew that if it turned out that I had made the wrong decision then I would struggle to cope with the guilt I would feel. And there would, I suspected, be many outside the village who would be quick to point a finger and criticise. In the cold light of day, and with a chance to reflect, discuss, share and assess all the consequences, it is often much easier to make a decision. From a personal point of view, the sensible decision would have been to pass Frank's care onto the doctors at the hospital in Barnstaple. No one could have ever blamed me for making that decision. I suddenly remembered, incongruously, that someone had once told me that no one in business, given the task of buying a computer for his firm, had ever been fired for buying an IBM machine. I was reminded of this because I doubt if any doctor has ever been disciplined or pilloried for sending a patient to the nearest large hospital. It is the default decision.

After I had prayed I stayed, kneeling and silent, for a few minutes more. I thanked God for helping me find Bilbury and for giving me a family which filled my life with joy and pride. I thanked Him for the work he had provided for me and I thanked Him for the friends I had found in Devon.

When I got back home, there was little point in going back to bed so I made myself an early breakfast.

I sat outside, with my breakfast on a garden table, and fed the birds and the squirrels and I sang them silly songs, made up as I went along. The garden creatures were all surprised to be fed so early but none of them seemed to mind in the slightest. I enjoy feeding the birds enormously and sometimes lose track of time when I'm out in the garden. Apart from my 'singing', and that of the birds, there was nothing whatsoever to be heard. Indoors, you could have probably heard the sound of dust settling.

One of the joys of living in the countryside is the fact that it is so quiet. No horns tooting, no pneumatic drills, no bus engines, no shouting. The last time I was in a city, I was shocked at the amount of noise – and its very persistence. It seemed to me that many of those who were out and about early in the morning were deliberately trying to make as much noise as they possibly could; perhaps because they hated the idea that the citizens who were still in bed might be enjoying a few minutes more abed than they themselves had enjoyed. The rubbish collectors, in particular, seemed to obtain particular pleasure from banging and shouting far more than seemed entirely necessary.

The star of the morning feeding is invariably the arrival of Percy. He pecks at the dining room window if he hasn't been fed and tends to wander around the garden behind me if I go for a walk. He is so tame that he invariably comes running when I call his name. He is easily recognisable because he has a grey patch amidst the green on the side of his neck, one of his tail feathers is missing and he limps noticeably because he has a bad foot; one of his toes is missing though I don’t know why.

The funny thing is that he is the third generation of pheasants who have been coming to have breakfast with us. His grandfather first visited a few years ago and then when he found a wife and had a family he brought them along to introduce them. Possibly, I suspect, because he was rightly proud of them all. The female pheasant lays around a dozen eggs but neither parent takes much care of them, so to have two healthy daughters and a healthy son was not bad going.

Then when his son of the original Percy had his own family, he too brought along his wife, his two daughters and his son.

We call them all Lord Percival, shortened to Percy. I don’t know why, we just do.

Percy, the grandson and the third generation, wasn’t there this morning and I missed him. I could not remember the last time he hadn’t come running when I had called him.

There’s a surprising amount of mystery about pheasants. No one ever seems to really know what they eat. Some say they eat grain, others say that they prefer insects and some say they eat whatever seeds they can find, from dandelions and so on. In my experience, pheasants are probably the most omnivorous of birds; eating pretty much whatever is available – even mice if they’re particularly peckish. Our Percy will eat peanuts and loves raisins but his preferred breakfast is a handful of sunflower hearts.

I couldn’t help worrying about him.

The pheasant is a large bird but he is prey to a good many predators; with man, of course, being at the very top of the list. Pheasants are desperately easy to catch for poachers. They usually roost off the ground (Percy has a favourite branch over our lake) and, strangely, they prefer to run rather than fly away when threatened.

I was still worrying about Percy, hoping at any moment to see him running across the lawn in his slightly, almost comically, uncomfortable way, when Patsy, in her dressing gown, called to tell me that I had a telephone call from the hospital.

When I got to the telephone, I found that the house surgeon at the hospital had rung to tell me that the consultant surgeon had decided that my diagnosis was absolutely accurate. Moreover, X-rays had confirmed our diagnosis. The hospital doctors had started a course of antibiotics and, the young house surgeon told me, would be taking Mr Hoskins back to surgery to repair the broken stitches.

As soon as that call had finished I telephoned Mrs Hoskins and told her the good news. ‘He’ll need to stay in a hospital for a few more days,’ I told her. ‘But he’ll be home soon.’

I told her to make sure that she didn’t give her husband any more fizzy drinks.

And then it was time for the morning surgery.

There were twelve patients that morning and most of them were suffering from fairly straightforward problems.

We’d enjoyed a couple of days of good weather after a terrible few weeks and it seemed that half of the inhabitants of Bilbury had been out in their gardens; cutting grass, pruning overgrown bushes (there’s no point in waiting until the autumn to do the pruning when your garden gate has disappeared under a cascade of hazel bush branches) and pulling up weeds. The majority of my patients had muscle strains as a result of doing too much, too quickly and with too much enthusiasm. One or two also had stings (wasp and nettle) and a few odd cuts and lacerations.

The rest of the morning surgery included three people who’d acquired summer colds, one who had a bad gash on his arm which he had repaired, surprisingly successfully, with duct tape (‘Didn’t like to bother you on a Sunday, doctor’, he said, though knowing a little of his reputation I rather suspected that there might have been another reason for his failure to take time out to telephone me or to call at the surgery) and two who simply needed to have their blood pressure checked (both needed to have their medication reduced slightly since the warmer weather often results in a lower blood pressure and a risk of hypotension).

The man who had gashed his arm and then rather artfully taped it together with a length of grey duct tape, is a local character called Albert Rhodes (who is usually known to those in the village as ‘Icy’ unless he owes them money in which case he is known as ‘Slippery’).

When I first moved to North Devon I thought that a man who was known as a ‘character’ would probably be just that: someone who smoked a curvy, Sherlock Holmes pipe and wore a tweed deerstalker hat or a fellow who had swum the Sargasso sea and climbed Mount Everest with his leg in a brace. Or, perhaps, someone like the novelist Patrician Highsmith, who kept snails in her handbag and would feed them lettuce when she was out for the evening. Someone like that.

But I was wrong, of course.

In Bilbury, and indeed throughout North Devon, a man who is known as a ‘character’ is almost always something of a crook. Saying that someone is a ‘character’ means that you have to keep your hand on your wallet and count the wheels on your car when he’s gone.

‘How did you get this?’ I asked, as I sewed up Mr Rhodes’s arm, hoping that my neat stitching wouldn’t interfere too much with his tattoo of a four-masted schooner. I couldn’t help noticing that he smelt of something cheap and foul. It was, I suddenly realised in silent horror, the same cheap aftershave that I spray onto our rubbish bags so that the foxes and badgers won’t tear them open. I suppose I should have been honoured. ‘Icy’ had obviously sprayed himself with something rather pungent in order to disguise more natural odours. Like courtiers a few centuries ago, he found spraying on perfume easier and quicker than bathing. Sadly, whenever I smell that stuff I think of rubbish bags. Icy isn’t the first of my patients to favour this particularly pungent aromatic.

‘Just caught my arm on a bit of barbed wire,’ he answered without hesitation. I knew he was lying. A barbed wire cut always seems to have a unique appearance, showing both the entry point and the signs of an attempted disentanglement. This was definitely not a cut made by barbed wire, razor wire or any other type of wire. This was a cut caused by a knife. Mr Rhodes had been stabbed.

When he’d taken off his shirt I’d seen the scars of pellet marks on his back and one or two wounds which could have easily been the result of previous knife fights. I remembered that I’d treated Mr Rhodes on several previous occasions when he had come to see me showing signs that he may have come off second best in some sort of confrontation.

‘Are you sure this was barbed wire?’ I asked him, peering at the wound. ‘I need to know what caused the wound if I’m going to treat it successfully.’

There was a long, long pause. ‘It might have been a knife,’ he admitted, after some hesitation.

I guessed that he had probably lied because he didn’t want me to report him to the police. Mr Rhodes was a poacher and a petty thief. I suspected that he had probably been selling stolen stuff to a fence and had found himself in a knife fight.

‘I’m not going to report you to the police or anyone else,’ I assured him. ‘Have I ever reported you in the past?’

I remembered now that he had twice come to see me to have shotgun pellets removed from his back and his bottom. He knew damned well that I had never reported him, or anyone else, to the police.

He shook his head and then looked at me for a while, weighing me up, before nodding. ‘It was a knife,’ he admitted. Although he trusted me more than most doctors he was, nevertheless, still rather cautious.

I know that the medical establishment and the police believe that doctors have a duty to report any suspicious wounds to the authorities but I also know that I am the only doctor for miles around and if I get a reputation for dobbing in my patients then people will simply refuse to come to see me. I was pretty certain that Mr Rhodes had obtained his wound some distance from Bilbury but had been reluctant to visit a hospital or local doctor lest he find himself answering questions from a policeman. He had waited until he got back to Bilbury because he knew that I would treat him with proper reverence for the Hippocratic Oath and the principles of confidentiality. The rules for country doctors have to be rather different to the rules for city based doctors and hospital doctors. I need my patients to trust me always; and to know that whatever they tell me or show me will be kept confidential. Without trust my job would be impossible. If doctors break the Hippocratic Oath of confidentiality then they don’t really have much left. And if I, as a country doctor, didn’t respect my patients’ privacy they wouldn’t come and see me at all. And if they didn’t see me then they probably wouldn’t see anyone.

I cleaned the wound, put in six or seven stitches, gave him a couple of injections and then wrote out a prescription for an antibiotic. ‘Come and see me in a couple of days,’ I told him.

‘To have the stitches taken out?’ he asked.

‘No, no, the stitches will need to be in for longer than that. I just want to make sure that the wound isn’t infected.’

He nodded, put his shirt back on and then touched his forehead with the index finger of his right hand in a gesture of respect. ‘Grateful to you, doctor,’ he said. ‘You’re a reliable fellow for a man of learning.’

I took the compliment with a nod of my own and reminded him to come back and see me in 48 hours. I don’t like or trust poachers or thieves in general and I don’t much like Mr Rhodes in particular but my job is to try to mend him and keep him alive rather than to pass moral judgement on his behaviour.

After Mr Rhodes had gone, right at the end of the surgery, just as I felt certain that I was nearly finished for the morning, Mr Mole appeared; Gerald Lancaster Mole to give him his full name.

‘I waited until you’d seen everyone else,’ he said, as he sat down with a sigh. There was a long pause during which he adjusted the razor sharp crease in his trousers. It was a long time since I’d seen a local inhabitant with a deliberate crease in his trousers. Most of my patients have creased trousers but the creases have been earned rather than delivered by the manufacturer. Mr Mole sighed again. ‘I don’t think you’re going to be able to solve my problem in a few minutes.’

My heart sank. I already felt as though I had done a full day’s work and I knew that I had three patients requiring home visits.

I saw from his medical notes that Mr Mole was 65-years-old. His birthday had been just six weeks earlier and so he had officially been a pensioner for precisely that long. I wondered if he was having a bit of a crisis. The midlife crisis is well known, and often written about, but there are, of course, other times in our lives when we find ourselves facing, and having to deal with, psychological problems as we go through age milestones.

So, for example, many people find retirement difficult to cope with because it is so clearly a defining point in life. For most people their life's work is over, and the arrival of the first pension cheque is a clear sign that the last days of autumn are finished and the potentially harsh, uncomfortable days of winter have arrived. People who held important jobs, and who felt useful at least and important at best, will suddenly find that they are no longer powerful or significant.

'When I got to the age of 63 I thought I would build a wall around the garden,' said Mr Mole. 'I knew I only had a couple of years to go before I reached retirement age and I thought that if I started the wall before I retired, and built up my bricklaying skills, it would be something to do in my twilight years. I've never been a man for sport, not a golfer or a tennis player or a hiker, and I've never seen the point in collecting things, stamps, books and so on. I find television provides a thoroughly unsatisfying diet of unremitting pabulum. Nevertheless, like a lot of people, I know I spent much of my life looking forward to the day when I would retire; the day when I wouldn't have to put on the suit and tie, catch the train and plod my way through the City with the rest of the lemmings. But the closer my retirement came the more I began to worry about what I'd do with the rest of my life. I didn't say anything to my wife, she worked as a librarian and retired at 55 and now she works in a charity shop three days a week, but I threw myself into building my wall and to be honest I think I became a bit obsessed. I spent all my evenings and weekends working on it.'

'My wife and I have always kept ourselves to ourselves and she's always been happy to stay at home, watching television and doing her knitting. She's very keen on knitting. I have more jumpers and cardigans than I could possibly wear out and a lot of the stuff she knits they sell in the charity shop where she works.'

Mr Mole took out a pen and started to fiddle with the top. 'We've never been ones for having an active social life,' he said, and then stopped as though thinking about this. He put the pen away and pulled out a linen handkerchief which he started to twist between his fingers. 'I told myself that I was doing the bricklaying because I wanted a nice wall around the garden, something to give us privacy, but eventually I realised that wasn't the case at all – the building of the wall was a goal in itself.'

'I've seen it,' I told him, 'it's a very splendid wall. You can be proud of it.'

'Oh I am, I am. But now that I've finished the wall my life seems totally without purpose. I built my wall too damned quickly and now I have nothing left to do. My working life was over when I retired and now the only really engaging hobby I've ever had is over too.' He looked straight at me. 'It seems strange to realise that my life is now pretty well over. I'm still alive, still here, still breathing, but that's about it.' He sighed, put away the handkerchief and took out the pen again. He sat and thought for a while. I didn't say anything. Sometimes, people need time to think through what they want to say.

'The funny thing is that my life just sort of happened,' he said at last. 'I never planned anything. I admire those people who set off at the age of 20 with plans for their whole lives. They set themselves targets and then they set off along the route they've designed for themselves. I never managed to do any of that. Everything that has happened to me has happened more or less by accident.'

'I think that's probably much the same for a lot of people,' I told him. 'It's certainly true for me. Serendipity rules OK?'

He smiled and we sat in silence for a few moments; both of us immersed in our memories.

'I can't keep building walls around the garden, can I?'

I smiled but didn't say anything.

'I don't suppose you want any walls building, doctor?' He was smiling and I don't think it was a serious question but I answered it nevertheless.

I shook my head, rather sadly. 'I'm afraid we have all the walls we want,' I told him. 'We're pretty well satisfied as far as walls are concerned.'

'I suppose I feel a bit depressed, really,' said Mr Mole. 'Have you come across this sort of problem before, doctor?'

I told him it was really very common. 'And it's not just retired folk who feel as though their lives have come to an abrupt and uncomfortable halt,' I pointed out, explaining that it is not at all uncommon for people of any age who have worked hard on some particular project to feel depressed and empty when the project is completed. Even students who have studied for an examination may feel strangely unhappy when the exam is over and the concentrated period of study is finished. Explorers who have spent months or years preparing for a particular expedition will often feel enormously sad when the expedition is over – however successful it may have been, and however painful and arduous the exploration. When we throw ourselves into something then it is inevitable that the conclusion should leave us empty in some strange, almost indefinable way. I told him that it has been said that 'when Alexander saw the breadth of his domain he wept for there were no more lands to conquer'.

I told Mr Mole that he had done the right thing by finding himself a project, the building of his massive garden wall, into which he could put his body, mind and spirit when his day to day work was done. But, sadly, he had thrown himself into the project with such commitment that he had finished the wall at about the same time as he had retired – leaving himself doubly unemployed and empty.

I told him that I could give him pills to help smother the sense of sadness he felt but that they would make no long-term difference. 'When you stop the pills the chances are that the sad feeling you have now will come back. You will have simply delayed the moment when you have to come face to face with your sense of emptiness.'

'So, what do I do?' asked Mr Mole.

'That's easy,' I told him, 'you have to find something new to fill your life. Maybe not a wall to build, but something that provides you with a real challenge. Make a list of all the things you are interested in, the things you like doing, the things you've always wanted to do but have never had the time to try.'

'I'm too old to try anything new,' said Mr Mole, rather sadly.

'Nonsense!' I said, firmly. 'People much older than you are have done astonishing things with their later years.'

I told him that if he would make the list I had suggested then I would think hard about his problem and put together a list of people who had done great things in their sixties and beyond. I told him to come back and see me later that same evening.

And so that afternoon, after I'd finished the home visits and had called to see how Frank was getting on in our local hospital, I spent an hour or two searching through the reference books in my library and creating a list of all the astonishing things people had done after the age of 65. Frank had not been looking too bad at all. His blood pressure had come down a little more and there had been no deterioration in his condition. Bradshaw thought he was definitely looking better.

It wasn't too difficult an exercise for I have managed to put together quite a decent reference library. Many of the books were left to me by Dr Brownlow, my predecessor and mentor, who had collected together an impressive library. Some of the books I collected myself, for I am an inveterate bibliophile.

When Mr Mole returned to the surgery that evening, I handed him a copy of my list. I had written it out twice, and had put the original list into a filing cabinet because I strongly suspected that I might be able to use it again in my life as a country doctor.

'You might get a little inspiration from this!' I told him, handing him the product of my research.

(Editor's Note: A copy of the list the Doc gave to Mr Mole appears as an appendix at the back of this book.)

Mr Mole looked at the list with increasing astonishment. Then he looked up at me and smiled. 'OK,' he said. 'You win!' He looked at the list again and then shook his head. 'I'm astonished,' he admitted. 'This list is truly inspirational.' He looked at the list again. 'Painting was at the top of my list,' he said. 'I'd thought for some time that I'd like to try oil painting. But to be honest I thought I was too old.' He looked at my list again. 'Now I'm not so sure,' he said, with a beaming smile. 'I think I'll get myself to the nearest art shop, buy some canvas and some paints and see what I can do.'

He stood up, shook my hand and thanked me.

I felt pleased that my work in my library was appreciated.

As soon as the evening surgery was over, I sat down to dinner. Patsy had thoughtfully prepared one of my favourite, simple meals: two fried eggs, a huge pile of chips and a good supply of onion rings. It wasn't a healthy meal but occasionally, when I've had a hard day I need what Patsy calls 'little boy food'. And this was definitely one of those days.

As I sat down to dinner I felt drained.

It had been a long, difficult day with rather too much drama for me. Patsy and I had already decided to watch an old black and white movie after dinner; possibly something starring Humphrey Bogart. Maybe *Casablanca* or *The Maltese Falcon*. We have a good collection of old black and white films on video tape. I prefer to watch films on video because if the telephone goes and I have to deal with a patient then I can stop the film for a while and carry on viewing afterwards. I have, over the years, missed the ends of more films than I care to remember through trying to watch them on the television.

We had put the children to bed and were sitting down to watch the film when the doorbell went. I stood up and with a weary body and a weary heart I made my way to the door.

It was 'Icy' Rhodes, the man whose knife wound I had sewn up earlier in the day.

'Just wanted to say thank you for sewing me up, doc,' he said. And he produced from behind his back a dead pheasant.

'Picked this up while I was out in the woods yesterday,' he said, handing me the bird.

I looked at the bird and then at him.

'Just a small 'thank you',' he explained. 'Very grateful to you.'

I took the bird which he was still holding out to me. I started to tell him that Patsy and I are vegetarian but the words wouldn't come out. The pheasant had a patch of grey hair on one side of its head and it had a bad foot. One of its tail feathers was missing.

I was about to hand the bird back to him but something in me stopped me doing so.

'See you in a couple of day then, doc,' said 'Icy'. He turned away and was swallowed up in the blackness of the night.

I shut the front door and took the pheasant into the house.

Patsy came into the hallway to see what was happening. She stared at me and then at the pheasant I was holding.

'Is that Percy?' she asked.

I was so upset I couldn't speak. I just nodded. Tears started to roll down my cheeks.

'What are you going to do with him?' she asked.

'I'm going to bury him,' I told her, in a whisper.

I took Percy outside with me and found a spade.

Patsy held the torch while I dug a hole and buried our friend. Tears rolled down our cheeks. We said a prayer for him. There would now be no fourth generation of pheasants having breakfast with us.

It had not been a day I wanted to repeat any time soon.

Frank’s Astonishing Recovery

The consequences of a stroke can, of course, be devastating; both to the patient and to those who are close to him or her. Movement can be lost, mental skills may deteriorate or disappear and the patient may, to those around, appear to have lost all the skills which he or she had taken a lifetime to acquire.

But all those skills are not necessarily lost for ever.

They may be hidden; temporarily lost and temporarily unavailable.

And although the damage done by a stroke may, it is true, sometimes be permanent it is also often possible for the patient to recover lost abilities. The patient who has lost the ability to walk or to hold a pen or throw a ball may recover all those lost skills. The patient who has lost the power of speech, and who appears to have lost the ability to converse may, in time, make a startling recovery and recover most if not all of their lost abilities.

It used to be thought that a patient who had a stroke would stop recovering a few days or weeks after the stroke had occurred. It was believed that if the effects of a stroke were not overcome within a few months then there would be little or no chance of there being any future improvement.

But all this was wrong.

A patient who has had a stroke may continue to improve not for days, weeks or months but for years afterwards.

However, this improvement does not usually come easily. The patient will need a massive amount of help and support and encouragement if they are to have a chance of regaining those skills which have been lost.

In the immediate aftermath of a stroke, most patients who are aware of what has happened to them are, not surprisingly, depressed.

It must be terrifying to find, quite suddenly, that those basic abilities which you had taken for granted, are suddenly lost to you. It must be terrifying to find yourself unable to stand, walk, converse, read the paper or even clean your own teeth. It must be terrifying for someone who was formerly strong and independent to find themselves weak and dependent; quite unable even to feed themselves without assistance and, perhaps most frightening of all, incapable of making themselves understood.

Patients who have had a stroke face frustration, boredom, despair, depression and fear and those who are close to them suffer exactly the same horrifying mixture of emotions.

It was fortunate for us all that we realised that Frank could understand what we were saying. Right from the start we were able to institute a simple method of communication which enabled us to ensure not only that he understood what we were saying to him but that he, in turn, could communicate some of his thoughts and feelings to us.

By understanding that Frank could still understand us, we avoided the awful possibility (so regrettably common among stroke victims) of the patient being treated as a child or an idiot by well-meaning relatives and friends.

Everyone around him understood that Frank had not lost all his abilities, and had not suddenly gone from being Frank to being a helpless child, but that he had simply lost the ability to use his body and his mind in the normal way.

Frank had suffered an illness and he needed our help.

In the days which followed, Frank’s admission to what we think of as the Bilbury Cottage Hospital (but what the authorities prefer to think of as the Brownlow Country Hotel), it slowly became abundantly clear that I had made the right decision in not sending him to one of the major local hospitals.

No one except Patsy knew just how relieved I was when Frank’s blood pressure came down and his condition did not worsen. It had probably been the most difficult decision I’d ever had to make as a doctor. I have made many mistakes in my life. I thanked God, Hippocrates, Aesculapius and St Damian that this wasn’t one of them.

And although we could not prove this, because no hospital tests were ever done, I was, I think, correct in assuming that Frank had suffered an intra-cerebral bleed caused by his high blood pressure.

I believe that if I had sent him to a hospital in Barnstaple or Exeter, Frank’s condition could well have deteriorated. He would, I believe, have been more anxious and more frightened and there is a good chance that his blood pressure would have gone even higher.

No one can know any of this for sure, of course.

But what is clear is that Frank’s blood pressure did come under control relatively speedily. And once his condition stabilised we were able to start thinking about his rehabilitation.

Bradshaw and I both checked Frank’s muscle power, nerve capacities and so on twice a day and no doctor in the world has ever been more relieved when the tests which we did showed that our patient’s condition was not deteriorating. The fact that it was not deteriorating meant that the bleed which had, I believe, caused the problem was not still causing damage.

There was no guarantee that Frank would not have another stroke, of course, but I was confident that if I could keep Frank's blood pressure as low as possible (partly with the right balance of prescription drugs, partly by filling him with confidence, partly by improving his general health and eradicating some of the bad habits which had put his body in peril in the first place and partly by ensuring that he remained calm and free of all unnecessary stresses) then we could start the long, slow process to recovery.

'Will he ever be able to walk again?' asked Gilly, three days after Frank had suffered his stroke. 'Will he be able to talk?'

Gilly's father had suffered a stroke and he had remained bedridden until his death just a few months later. Gilly's fears for Frank were, inevitably, coloured by her experience with her father. 'I believe that he will be able to walk and talk and help you run the Duck and Puddle,' I assured her, with a confidence which may not have been entirely genuine but which was, I believed, vital in giving her and Frank the faith that was necessary for his recovery. 'We'll work with him and we'll cajole and assist and, if necessary, bully him into doing everything that will help him make as full a recovery as possible. It will be hard and it may be slow and he may not make a complete recovery but we will get Frank back to being Frank.'

I'm still not sure just how much of this I really believed, of course.

Helping a stroke victim to recover lost skills can be, and usually is, a long and painful process. I did not know for certain that Frank would recover. But I did know for certain that I needed to instil confidence and belief in both Frank and Gilly.

If they did not truly believe that he would get better then the healing process would be infinitely more challenging and, quite possibly, utterly impossible.

The patient who accepts his plight as merely a consequence of fate, an unalterable punishment for past sins of omission or commission, will probably never make any meaningful recovery.

The relatives and friends who accept that the patient will never talk again or will never again be able to walk will probably find their fears to be self-fulfilling.

Of course, many stroke victims do not ever recover. Many suffer additional strokes. Some deteriorate, for a whole host of reasons, and fail to make any meaningful recovery.

But there are, no doubt, many who fail to make any recovery because they do not believe that recovery of any kind is ever really possible.

Right from the start, Frank had a number of things in his favour.

First and foremost he had a wife who loved him, who cared for him and who was prepared to fight tooth and nail for him.

Second, he was still living in the village where he felt comfortable and he was, therefore, surrounded by friends who also cared for him and who would, when asked, do everything in their power to help him make a good recovery.

Third, he was the only real patient in our hospital. The other two patients quickly recognised that Frank's need was far greater than their own and within hours they switched from being patients to being live-in members of staff. Over the weeks which followed Frank's admission, they remained in the hospital and they worked hard and with genuine enthusiasm to help speed his recovery. I'm not sure that either of them realised it but, of course, by dedicating themselves to Frank's recovery they put their own problems to one side and, I have no doubt, helped themselves recover and grow stronger. Their lives acquired real purpose and, as my conversation with Mr Mole had reminded me, few things give us more strength than having a target, an aim and a reason for living: a goal and a motive for each day.

Two days after Frank had been admitted to our small Bilbury hospital, I tried to arrange for a physiotherapist and a speech therapist to come over to help expedite his recovery. I might as well have tried to arrange for Frank to take a trip on the next rocket to the moon. It would have probably been easier.

Living in a small, isolated village like Bilbury has many advantages but it does mean that when it comes to obtaining outside help you are sometimes pretty near to the bottom of the queue. In a way, of course, it is understandable. Just travelling out to Bilbury and back again takes a good deal of time. And when a physiotherapist or speech therapist is travelling they won't be doing what they are paid to do. Still, it was a disappointment.

So, as is often the case in Bilbury, we were on our own. And it seemed to me to be clear that we had to prepare our own recovery programme to help Frank regain his lost skills. I knew from my own hospital experience that stroke patients who are left to their own devices make very little progress and, indeed, often tend to deteriorate. The patient who stays in bed and does nothing will lose increasing amounts of muscle power and before long, the limbs which were not affected by the stroke will also begin to lose function. And without stimulation, the brain deteriorates still further too and an inability to communicate will be compounded by increasing frustration and boredom.

I had to recruit aides, assistants, therapists and teachers from among the Bilbury villagers. And I knew that I had to explain to every single one of them that Frank had not suddenly lost all his skills. Too many people (including professionals who really ought to know better) talk to stroke patients as if they were slightly backward children. This can be enormously depressing and painful for the patient whose brain is still functioning perfectly well but who has lost basic communication skills. I cannot begin to imagine how frustrating it must be for a man or woman to suddenly find themselves being patronised, talked down to and talked about when they can understand everything that is being said to them and about them but simply cannot respond with words or actions because their body will no longer respond in an appropriate manner.

All those who were going to help Frank had to understand that his lifetime of knowledge was still there, hidden inside his brain, and now simply had to be unlocked so that it could once again be accessed.

We needed to recruit as many people as possible who were prepared to give one or two hours a week to help Frank regain the physical and mental skills which he had lost. And we needed to start the programme as soon as we could; before Frank had time to become too upset and depressed by his condition.

My first decision was to plan a simple exercise programme. This had to be designed to help Frank regain the ability to use the side of his body that the stroke had paralysed. We needed to exercise the muscles, push them into working again and so enable him to use the leg and the arm that were lying useless; a hindrance rather than a help.

Without a professional physiotherapist to show us the ropes, Bradshaw and I created a very simple regimen of exercises, and to make sure that Frank did not get too tired we decided to limit the physical part of his recovery to one hour every morning and one hour every afternoon. This would, we knew, be far more assistance than a patient in an ordinary hospital could possibly hope to receive.

We decided to fill as much of the rest of each day as we could with a programme of mental exercises designed to help Frank regain the use of his mind.

Since we didn't have any professionals to call on, this obviously meant that we had to compile a team of volunteers.

Gilly was obviously top of the list but she still had to run the Duck and Puddle. There was no question of closing the pub, for if the Duck and Puddle shut its doors, Frank and Gilly would have absolutely no income. They would, however, still have substantial outgoings. Since they were both officially classified as self-employed, they would not be able to claim any unemployment benefits.

Fortunately, Adrienne, my sister-in-law, came to Gilly's rescue by offering to help out behind the bar and in the kitchen. 'I hate hospitals of any kind and I'm absolutely no good at all with sick people,' Adrienne told Gilly with her usual disarming candour, 'but I desperately want to help somehow. So I'll help out at the Duck and Puddle for as many hours a day as you need me.'

And she was as good as her word.

Throughout the darkest months of Frank's recovery, she worked several hours a day at the Duck and Puddle and steadfastly refused to accept any payment. Gilly, it has to be said, responded by refusing to accept money from Patchy when he ate or drank at the pub.

Finding helpers who could help Frank perform simple muscle strengthening exercises, and then stand alongside him as he re-learnt how to walk, was not difficult. Everyone in the village liked Frank. He drank too much, smoked too much, ate too much, swore too much and had absolutely no time for bureaucrats, but these were vices with which people could sympathise. Whenever there was a storm, Frank would be the first man in the village to submit his insurance claim (and the first to help enhance the damage that had been done if it meant a bigger claim could be made) but few villagers could hold that against him since most of them did much the same sort of thing themselves. But if anyone in the village was going through a bad time, Frank would always be among the first to help. He would give money he couldn't afford to give, pay a grocery bill at Peter Marshall's shop if he knew of some old villager who was having a hard time and give drinks 'on the slate' when he knew damned well that the customer would never be able to pay his bill and that the 'slate' would never be wiped clean.

And so, finding helpers who would volunteer to give a couple of hours a week to help Frank walk again was not difficult.

Within a fortnight Frank was out of bed, wandering slowly up and down the corridors of Dr Brownlow's sprawling old home. Within little more than a month he was wandering around the garden, always accompanied by two helpers (Frank is a big man and right from the start I made it a rule that whenever he was out of bed he would be assisted not by one but by two volunteers) and although progress might have appeared slow, it was steady and there wasn't a week that went by without someone saying that they couldn't believe just how much Frank had improved.

Putting together a rota of people prepared to help Frank regain his mental skills was always going to be more difficult. For one thing, most people were rather frightened by the prospect of helping someone learn to speak again. And they were even more frightened, if that were possible, about the prospect of teaching someone how to recapture the parts of their mind which they had lost. Most people in the village had absolutely no experience, or knowledge, of what is, after all, a fairly specialised area of medicine.

But, to my astonishment and delight, we soon found that we had enough villagers to keep Frank occupied for three or even four hours a day. Patsy found herself in charge of preparing the rota of helpers and she fitted in those who were helping Frank relearn how to walk and use his arms with those who were helping him learn how to speak and think.

At first, we made the mistake of trying to capture Frank's imagination with books and magazines. Several volunteers tried encouraging him to relearn the alphabet or how to do simple crossword puzzles. This, however, was a mistake because Frank quickly became bored.

And then Thumper had a brainwave.

'Frank is never going to be interested in whether or not the cat sat on the damned mat,' he exclaimed, after finding one well-meaning old lady using a child's reading book to help Frank recover his literacy skills. 'Frank likes darts and dominoes and cards.'

And so we revised our teaching methods to incorporate games and skills which we knew Frank would find invigorating. And the teachers found these things far more exciting, too.

Thumper set up a dartboard and organised games of darts. To begin with, Frank's ability to throw darts was so poor that the wall surrounding the dartboard quickly became peppered with so many holes that it looked as if it had contracted woodworm. But the most important part of the game was undoubtedly the counting. Thumper made Frank keep score and waited, with surprising patience, while Frank worked out which section of the board the next player needed to aim at. Frank had never been a good darts player (he always used to say that he didn't like any sporting activity which required him to put down the glass he was holding and that darts was all right only if your glass was nearly empty and you weren't likely to spill any) but within a few weeks there was no one in the village who could beat him. Frank, who wasn't as slow as many believed, realised that the modestly skilful player who aims for the number 19 on the dartboard will almost always do better than the greedier player who aims for the 20. 'The thing is,' he told me confidentially one day, 'that if you aim at the 20 and miss then you'll probably score a 1 or a 5, but if you aim at the 19 and miss you'll hit the 3 or the 7. That's enough to give you an edge.'

Several of the spinster ladies who were helping were aghast when they came into the hospital and found Frank, Thumper, Patchy and me playing poker. But Frank loved those games and his recovery was, I believe, far faster because he was engaged than it would have been if we had tried to persuade him to do some basket weaving or draw pictures with crayons. Because Frank's concentration was poor, we would switch games several times an hour – moving from poker to whist to dominoes and back again.

And to help Frank's language skills Patchy found a wonderful, tattered, book which contained scores of recipes for old-fashioned cocktails. Frank loved that book and read it so much that he knew every word by heart. He had never been much of a man for cocktails (beer, gin and whisky had been his accustomed tipples) but now they became an important part of his life and a massive part of his recovery. When Patsy mentioned this in a letter she sent to the Rathbones, who were back in America, they sent over several American books about cocktail making. Frank loved these books and devoured the contents of these with the same unlimited enthusiasm. In return, Patsy and I regularly sent the Rathbones photographs of their ever-expanding porcine prize.

All these things gave Frank confidence and belief.

I kept him in the hospital for three months; not because he needed to stay there for so long but because I thought it would be easier for the volunteers to work with him in the spacious rooms of Dr Brownlow's old home than it would be to work with him in the Duck and Puddle. But when he went back to live at the Duck and Puddle, the volunteers all went with him, and Frank's daily recovery continued apace.

After six months, Frank was damned near back to where he had been before the stroke. He was a lot fitter too. He had lost two stones in weight and completely stopped smoking. I allowed him one or two small alcoholic drinks a day because I felt that he needed the reward and I knew that giving up everything at once would have been, perhaps, just too difficult. Even his diet changed. Gilly refused to make chips for him and he even began to enjoy the healthy meals she started to cook. Oddly enough, she told me that many of the other villagers who regularly ate at the Duck and Puddle chose to eat healthier food as they realised just how devastating the consequences of a poor diet could be. Peter Marshall, at the village shop, told me that he was selling just two thirds as many cigarettes and cigars as he had been selling before Frank was taken poorly that fateful night at the Duck and Puddle.

Frank's recovery gave the village a wonderful feeling of communal warmth. This was partly because just about everyone who lived in Bilbury had helped in one way or another. It was partly because it was wonderful to see someone overcome the terrible consequences of a stroke. But it was, I think, also because everyone was cheered to see that Frank had, with the help of his friends, proved that it is possible to recover from a stroke. Knowing that diminished the fear of a terrible illness. It meant that others might do the same.

The Surprise Pregnancy

‘I know you’ll probably think it pretty unlikely, but I think I’m pregnant, doctor.’

The new patient sighed, slumped down on the chair in front of me and looked at me as though daring me not to laugh.

I never laugh at patients, however outlandish or unexpected their condition might be.

‘What makes you think you’re pregnant?’

‘I’ve been putting on weight, I have difficulty in sleeping, my tummy is very swollen and every morning I feel nauseous.’

‘Have you been sick?’

‘I’m usually sick once or twice before breakfast. But then the sickness feeling gradually goes away.’

‘Anything else?’

‘I get backache quite a lot. I’ve never had any back trouble before. But for the last few weeks I’ve had a lot of back pain.’

I nodded and made some notes on the patient’s folder.

‘And I get cravings.’

‘Cravings?’

‘I ate two bags of pork scratchings the other evening. And I usually hate pork scratchings.’

I nodded and murmured something. ‘How long has this been going on?’ I asked.

‘Three or four months now.’

‘Have you ever had anything like it before?’

‘No. Definitely not.’

I wasn’t quite sure what question to ask next or if, indeed, there were any other appropriate questions to ask. So it seemed to me that the best action would probably to perform an examination.

‘Pop behind the screen and slip your things off, and then climb up on the couch,’ I said. ‘I need to have a look at you.’

‘How much do you need me to take off?’

‘Everything down to your underwear,’ I said.

Two minutes later Mr Porchester was lying on the couch, wearing only his underpants and socks, and I was examining his clearly swollen abdomen, desperately trying to decide what to do and say next. Since there were no breasts to be swollen and tender, and no vagina to be examined, my options were strictly limited.

‘My breasts are sore too,’ he said. He reached up and touched his left nipple. ‘My nipples especially.’

Gently, I examined his chest. I wasn’t entirely sure that I wasn’t imagining it but I thought there was some swelling in the breast area.

‘Am I going to have a baby?’ he asked.

‘No,’ I said. ‘I don’t think that’s very likely.’

‘Oh,’ he said. He sounded disappointed.

‘It really isn’t possible,’ I pointed out. ‘Your basic architecture isn’t suited to either conception or to childbirth.’

He looked at me, thought for a moment, and then nodded. ‘I suppose not,’ he said. He seemed genuinely disappointed. I thought then, and still think, that although he knew that it was impossible for him to be pregnant, a small part of him rather hoped that he might be about to experience a real pregnancy and to give birth to the world’s first such miracle baby. It occurred to me that the newspaper serial rights, the book rights and the film rights would be worth a fortune. Mr Porchester would become a millionaire overnight.

I took his pulse, checked his blood pressure and then weighed him. When I’d done all this, a sort of unusual pre-natal check I suppose, I told him that he could get dressed.

He put on his shirt and a pair of khaki shorts which he wears whatever the weather. I have seen him wearing shorts when there was snow on the ground. Whenever I see Mr Porchester, I cannot help thinking that if God had intended men to wear shorts he would not have given them such knobbly knees.

‘There really isn’t anything I can give you,’ I told him, when he was dressed and sitting down in front of me. ‘Your symptoms will almost certainly disappear when your wife has had her baby.’ Mr Porchester’s unusual disorder was not unique. It is a registered medical disorder known as Couvade Syndrome. I asked him how his wife was doing, though I suspected that she was probably doing very well indeed. She usually does.

Mr Porchester told me that his wife was doing very well.

‘I don’t think she is ever healthier than she is when she’s pregnant,’ said Mr Porchester. ‘That’s the funny thing, really. She sails through her pregnancies without any discomforting symptoms.' He paused, thought for a moment, and then half smiled. 'And yet I'm now having all the symptoms that you might expect her to have.'

Mrs Porchester has a vast number of children and produces babies as effortlessly as a cat produces kittens. She once told me that she gets pregnant if a man comes within ten yards of her and she seems to be so fertile that for all I know she could well be telling the truth.

Potelmy Porchester is her fourth husband, though to be honest I seem to remember that she wasn't actually married to any of the first three, but that they were what is usually known as 'common law husbands'.

Potelmy owns to being the father of the three most recent children, though the fourth youngest does bear a remarkable resemblance to him and I have long suspected that the pair may have started their procreative activities some time before the relationship was formalised.

I have difficulty remembering how many children they have, let alone what all the children are called, but I haven't felt bad about this since I discovered that Mr and Mrs Porchester both have the same problem. They are the only married couple I know who have photographs of all their children pinned up on a board in their kitchen. Alongside each photograph is the child's name and the date of his or her birth. They introduced this sensible system when one of the boys celebrated his twelfth birthday without so much as a card, let alone a present. The poor boy went through the whole day expecting his parents and siblings to yell 'surprise' and to overwhelm him with cards, gifts and a cake. He only realised that his birthday had been completely forgotten when his Mum tucked him up in bed and gave him a goodnight kiss. The hapless parents realised that they had erred when one of the other boys reported that the birthday boy was sobbing his heart out. Potelmy hurried round to Peter Marshall's emporium and purchased the requisite articles, bringing them home just in time to celebrate the birthday. They had just ninety minutes to spare.

I told Potelmy to come back to see me in a couple of weeks for another pre-natal check-up. I even gave him one of the little cards I usually hand out to mothers-to-be and which includes advice on diet, weight, exercise, sexual activity and so on. There really wasn't much point in it, of course, but the medical profession knows very little about Couvade syndrome and I thought it might be a good idea to keep an eye on his blood pressure. I also thought it might help him cope more readily if he thought that someone was taking his condition seriously. I made a note to telephone the medical library at the British Medical Association building in London and to ask them to send me any recent medical papers they could find relating to the disorder. Not for the first time I found myself looking forward to the time when it will, I am sure, be possible to consult medical libraries from afar by using a computer.

To be honest, I wasn't all that surprised at Potelmy's seemingly bizarre condition. When I was a student at medical school, I saw a man with a similar pseudo pregnancy condition and the memory of that patient has, not surprisingly perhaps, stayed with me.

Men suffering from Couvade Syndrome invariably experience some or all of the symptoms their wife or girlfriend shows. Just what causes the misconception is a real mystery.

The term was first used in the 1860s to refer to rituals that have, over the centuries, been recorded in various societies. For example, in Ancient Egypt, a new father would take to his bed when his wife gave birth. And among the Cantabri people there was a custom whereby a new father-to-be would complain of labour pains and go to bed the minute his wife started to deliver her baby. He would then be treated as though he were pregnant. Similar rituals were not uncommon among other cultures – including in China and Russia and parts of the American continent. The idea, it is thought, may have been a conscious or unconscious effort to ward off evil demons and spirits by distracting them and, thereby, protecting the new mother and her vulnerable new born baby.

Some doctors believe that Couvade is an entirely psychosomatic disorder. In France, in the 1920s, it was believed that the syndrome usually occurred in marriages where the female partner was the dominant one. Others now wonder if there could possibly be a hormonal influence – with the wife's hormones having an influence on her husband's body. This sounds strange but it is known that similar things do happen. For example, if two women live or work closely together then it is quite common for them to find that their menstrual periods begin to coincide – even though they may have been some days apart at the start of the relationship. I wonder if, in the future, researchers might find that men experience changes in testosterone, oestradiol and prolactin levels when their spouse becomes pregnant.

Most men who develop symptoms of pregnancy have wives who are pregnant. It's almost as though the condition, and the associated symptoms, are catching.

Potelmy's wife, Lemuela, is seven months pregnant with her umpteenth child though, as Potelmy said, she has not really shown any of the usual signs of pregnancy. Her abdomen is swollen, of course, and she is obviously pregnant. But she has had none of the uncomfortable or unpleasant symptoms sometimes associated with pregnancy. Lemuela is perfect proof of the fact that although there may occasionally be problems, pregnancy is definitely not an illness – and a healthy pregnancy should never be treated as an illness unless there are signs or symptoms which need to be treated.

Lemuela has shelled out all her babies with consummate ease and I am confident that the latest birth will be just as free of complications. She reminds me of a newspaper editor I once knew in London. She took the morning off when she had her first baby but was back in her office the same afternoon. Unbelievably, she had a breakfast meeting with two American agents before she went to the delivery room. Lumuela doesn’t have a job outside the home but if she did have then I am pretty certain that she too would be back at work within hours. Personally, I don’t think it’s a good idea. I’m old-fashioned enough to believe that the human body needs a little time to rest and recover after a traumatic event such as childbirth. But I suspect that I am a little out-of-date in my thinking as far as this is concerned. And I guess I’m going to be really out-of-date by the time the 1980s arrive in a few years’ time.

After Mr Porchester had left, I found myself wondering how Potelmy would cope when it came time for Lemuela to have her baby.

The Porchester Confinements

In the good old, bad old days, before the discovery of penicillin and other such pharmacological goodies, all general practitioners were on call more or less permanently, and they had to learn to live with the sometimes untimely and always haphazard calls for attention that come a family doctor's way.

But things have changed, and now that we have somehow found ourselves living in the high tech world of the 1970s, most general practitioners work in groups and share their responsibilities for on call duties at night, at weekends or over bank holidays.

This sharing of on call responsibilities has changed life for those doctors working in cities, towns and larger villages.

Doctors who would, a generation ago, have been accustomed to being forever on duty can now sit down in front of their television set in an evening confident that they will be able to watch the beginning and the end of the same programme; they can sit down to meals knowing that they can take their time and enjoy their food without being constantly aware that if the telephone rings they will probably be eating cold food.

But here in Bilbury nothing much has changed, and I still practise medicine as it was practised half a century ago. (Although I do, of course, have the wonder of penicillin to call upon.)

I am on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week and 365 days a year because I work alone and the nearest doctors are too far away for us to arrange to share our night time or weekend responsibilities.

Today, it is, of course, the telephone that can make life particularly exhausting. It's like an electronic cuckoo: always screaming for attention and apparently never satisfied.

Like most doctors who practise alone, I have a special telephone which is designed to ring whenever some other piece of essential household equipment is activated. Our telephone will, for example, always ring if I lie down in the bath, turn on the television to watch a programme to which I have been looking forward or try to boil a kettle.

If Patsy puts a hot meal down on the table then the telephone will immediately start to ring. How it knows to do that I really have no idea; but it does.

To ensure that I cope with the stress of the telephone well enough to live long enough to see next year's daffodils, I have devised a number of ways to relax.

I am, for example, an enthusiastic gardener, and although I don't much like the fiddly tasks such as weeding, I very much enjoy taking dead branches off trees and chopping them up into fireplace sized logs. I also enjoy breaking up the smaller branches into kindling. You can't start a fire without a good supply of kindling and a few crumpled up pages of newspaper or a handful of junk mail. We can always find an old newspaper or a pile of unsolicited mail lying around but we have to collect our kindling. And there are few apparently dull tasks which I find more rewarding than collecting a bag full of nice, dry kindling.

And, of course, at the end of a session in the garden there is the bonus of being able to have a bonfire to get rid of all the bits of brushwood.

Sometimes I put the stuff I am burning into the incinerator (my new toy) and sometimes, if there is too much to fit in the incinerator, I just build a huge bonfire.

Patsy often says that if I weren't a doctor, I would probably be a professional pyromaniac. I just respond by telling her that it is perfectly possible to be both at the same time.

One late summer day I was planning a really good bonfire with my friend William, a GP who works in a large practice in the English Midlands. He was staying with us for a few days; accompanied as usual by his wife and two children.

William's wife, Brenda, together with Patsy and our two small children, were in the house. The two women were baking cakes for a forthcoming village fete being held to raise money for the Bilbury Cottage Hospital. (For administrative reasons the Bilbury Cottage Hospital is, of course, known as the Brownlow County Hotel. This nomenclature is designed to confuse National Health Service bureaucrats but it confuses me too.) Our two little ones were 'helping'. They are specialists in both the 'tasting' and the 'making a mess' departments.

William and I, and William's two children, one of whom is aged six and the other is aged eight, were in our front garden. We were all busy collecting twigs and small branches which had come down from our big willow tree.

As we collected together the kindling, a middle-aged woman jogged very slowly past. I think most people in decent health would have been able to overtake her if they'd been going at a fairly ordinary walking pace. The woman, a patient of mine, waved and wheezed something indistinct which was probably 'Hello, doctor!'

'Ruddy joggers,' muttered William as she went past. 'It seems to be the health fad of the 1970s.'

'I wish she'd give up the jogging,' I muttered back. 'She's already got a bad back and one bad hip. If she doesn't give up jogging she'll soon have another bad hip and two bad knees to add to her collection.'

'I've had endless problems with patients jogging to get fit and lose weight,' said William. 'A good many of them make themselves ill.' He paused to break a decent length of willow into several smaller pieces and then tossed the twigs into the wheelbarrow. 'I'm utterly convinced that most joggers do themselves far more harm than good.'

'Oh, surely some of them do themselves a bit of good,' I protested.

'No,' said William, emphatically. 'No damned good at all! I had a female patient who was at least six stones overweight. She had a bum as big as Yorkshire. She knew she needed to lose weight but instead of eating less she decided to exercise more. An utterly daft idea, of course, because it was never going to work. She would exercise for 30 minutes and use up 200 calories, if that, and then she'd treat herself to a packet of biscuits and a large Coca Cola. Every time she exercised, she ended up eating more calories than she'd used up and so she steadily put on more and more weight. Eventually, she damaged a knee with her damned jogging and had to go into hospital for an operation. While she was there, she contracted one of those nasty hospital infections. She was dead in less than a week. Nice woman, too. She left a lovely husband and three decent kids. What an absolute tragedy. If she hadn't taken up jogging she'd still be alive.'

We were both musing on this tragic irony when I heard a shout, looked up and saw Patsy standing at the front door. Her hands and forearms were covered with flour and she was holding the noisy end of the telephone high in the air – the long established sign telling me that there was a call for me.

The call was from Potelmy Porchester, who was ringing to tell me that his wife, Lemuela was about to give birth to their latest child.

I exchanged my wellington boots for a pair of shoes, brushed some of the leaves and twigs off my jumper (my philosophy is, I'm afraid, that if you live in the country and you telephone the doctor out of hours then you must put up with him arriving in whatever he was wearing when you called – unless he was in bed or in the bath, of course) and clambered into the car, wondering to myself why Mrs Porchester, who seems to collect babies in the same sort of indiscriminate way that some people collect stamps or china elephants, prefers the Government's free milk and cod liver oil to its free contraceptives.

The baby had been well and truly born by the time I got there. The placenta and umbilical cord were sitting, neatly laid out, on a plate on the dressing table.

After having so many children, both Mrs Porchester and her latest baby always seem perfectly capable of dealing with that part of the exercise without any help from me. All I had to do was a little light needlework to tidy up the new mother's business end.

I think that Mrs Porchester must be taking part in some sort of competition to see who in Devon can have the most babies, and her primary thought after having one baby is always about doing the spade work for the conception of the next. And with this in mind Mrs Porchester always insists on having 'things down below tidied up and tightened a little'.

As I washed my hands in the bathroom next door, I listened to Mrs Porchester tell me, for the umpteenth time, how my predecessor Dr Brownlow, had once sewn his surgical glove into her interior back in the days when she had so few children that she knew all their names.

Mrs Porchester has a loud voice (not surprising, I suppose, when you have as many children as she has) but I was spared the repeat of the anecdote by the fact that Mr Porchester was sitting downstairs watching a football match on their old ten inch screen black and white television set. To compensate for his deafness, and the noise the children were making (they were playing pirates up and down the stairs), he had the sound turned up so high that when I began stitching, the silk thread I was using started to vibrate whenever I pulled it tight.

I made a mental note to tell Mr Porchester to visit the surgery to have his ears syringed. I have never known anyone produce as much ear wax as Mr Porchester and the level of his deafness inevitably rises as the wax accumulates.

My predecessor, Dr Brownlow, hated television sets even more than he hated seeing women in trousers and men wearing clip-on bow ties and he detested the memory of the unfortunate John Logie Baird with the quiet dedication that most doctors reserve for Alexander Graham Bell. The thing he hated most about television sets was the fact that patients sometimes left them switched on when he was visiting and trying to examine a patient. He once gave me a valuable piece of advice about television sets. He told me that he had discovered that if he walked over to the seat and fiddled with all the knobs and dials he could cause so much distress to the viewer that the lesson would be well remembered. 'I gather,' he said, 'that when you mess around with the dials controlling tone and picture quality you can cause a degree of electronic confusion which can take many hours to put right.' He was right, of course. Messing with the controls of a television set will leave the owners watching programmes through a snow storm. Years after Dr Brownlow had died, I visited houses where the television set was unplugged and covered with a cloth the moment I walked through the door. Mr Porchester was the solitary exception in the village.

By the time I had finished sewing up Mrs Porchester to her satisfaction (she always insists that I restore her to the sort of aperture she, and indeed her husband, might have enjoyed on her wedding night and when I have finished sewing she always checks my handiwork with a couple of fingers), the football match was over and the television sound had been turned down.

I tottered down the stairs, making my way cautiously between dead and dying pirates and abandoned wooden swords, to find that Mr Porchester had poured me a small glass of cooking sherry in celebration. He offered me a very small cigar, as he always does and, as I always do, I thanked him and refused the offer. The sherry is bad enough but it can at least be swallowed like a dose of unpleasant medicine. I hate to think what the cigars must taste like for they smell far worse than my bonfires. The youngest of the pirates who had survived the 'Battle of the Stairs' seemed to be endeavouring to find out how much noise you can make when you bang toy cars onto dolls' heads. The older survivors were attempting to persuade their father to give them a glass of sherry to share.

I was keen to get away from there as quickly as I could for once she has delivered her latest baby, it has become customary for Mrs Porchester to cook her placenta and serve it up with a few braised onions and fried tomatoes. She says it's a pity to waste such a valuable source of nutrients. I believe that she and Potelmy share it between them, accompanied with a nice bottle of homemade parsnip and elderberry wine. I live in dread that they might one day invite me to join them at their kitchen table on an evening when they share this curious, almost cannibalistic, repast. Although I suppose it would be possible for me to refuse any such offer on the grounds that I am a vegetarian. 'How are you feeling?' I asked Potelmy, very conscious of the fact that he had been suffering from Couvarde syndrome or a sympathetic pregnancy.

'Oh, I'm much better,' he said. He pulled up his shirt and undid his trousers to show me that his swollen abdomen was now quite flat. 'All my symptoms disappeared when Apple was born.'

'Apple?' I said. I'd never heard of anyone naming a child after a fruit.

'That's what we're calling the newborn,' Potelmy told me. 'We're great Beatles fans. And we like fruit.'

It seemed an odd name to give a child but then, I suppose, it is no stranger to name a child after a fruit than it is to name one after a flower and there are plenty of girls called 'Daisy', 'Rose' and 'Primrose'. I secretly rather hoped, however, that parents didn't start naming their children after vegetables.

I was relieved that Mr Porchester's pregnancy had gone well and was now over. I had been worrying what I would say, or do, if he asked me to sew him up.

'Could you give me my postnatal check-up now,' he asked me.

I took his blood pressure and told him that all seemed well. I honestly couldn't think of anything else to do. I could, I suppose, have suggested doing an anal examination, the closest thing possible to a vaginal examination, but he seemed happy enough with my having taken his blood pressure.

'Don't forget to pop along to the surgery to have your ears syringed,' I told him.

When I got back to Bilbury Grange, William and his two children were still tearing up newspapers and screwing up the torn pages into twists suitable for fire lighting. They had run out of old newspapers and had been into the kitchen to fetch the edition which had arrived that morning and which I had not yet had a chance to look at.

'Why were you so long?' asked Peter, William's son, as we struggled to unscrew the papers which contained the latest, end of season cricket results. It was a week old newspaper but I tend to read old newspapers far more avidly than I read new ones.

'I had to sew up a patient who'd just had a baby,' I explained.

William's son knows as much as most people about these things and I suspect that he is a constant source of educational material for his fellow pupils at his preparatory school.

(There are rumours that in some parts of the country, children are taught about these things in specially prepared sex education classes. If they ever introduce such things in Bilbury then the new village schoolmistress, who has taken over from our gardener's wife, will doubtless have to be supplemented. I rather doubt if our new school ma'am is well informed on such matters. She is a spinster, of a certain age, and she recently asked me if I thought it was possible that one of the village girls who had 'got herself into trouble' could have got that way through, as she had apparently claimed, attending a mixed bathing party on the beach at Combe Martin.)

I looked around the garden and wondered what other trees might need pruning and where I could best plant some fast growing varieties of silver birch – a tree which produces an excellent supply of kindling – when I heard William's son asking his father a question.

'If you've sewn her up,' said Peter, 'does that mean that she's decided to stop having babies?' He paused and looked hard at me. 'Or will someone have to go round and take out the stitches if she wants another one?'

'Your Dad will be able to answer that one,' I said, with shameful cowardice. 'I must just go and check on something in the house.'

Our two children are far too young to ask questions of such a sophisticated nature. I will deal with the problem of how to answer such queries when the time comes.

I have no doubt that William had an answer to that question and I suppose I should have hung around to find out what it was.

But I tottered indoors, clutching the bits and pieces of the sports pages which I had managed to salvage, and put on the kettle.

Naturally, the telephone began to ring.

The life of a country doctor is many things but it is never dull. Tragedy and comedy are never more than a telephone call away.

The Auction at Doone Cottage

I was sitting in my study trying to work my way through some paperwork which had accumulated.

In my world (and I suspect it is not a world I inhabit alone) the paperwork always seems to accumulate faster than I can deal with it. On my desk there was a boxful of receipts which needed to be filed ready for the taxman's annual bureaucratic extravaganza, several letters from health service bureaucrats which needed attention and some bills which needed paying.

I doubt if I am alone in the world in not enjoying administration. I would rather trim hedges with hand shears than sit and plough through a pile of dull paperwork.

I was rescued from this tedious chore by the arrival of my good friend and brother-in-law Patchy Fogg, antique dealer and old-fashioned wheeler dealer, whose voice I heard loud and clear, even though he came in through the kitchen door and my study cum surgery is at the other side of the house.

Patchy does not shout, or at least I've never heard him shout, but he has a voice which carries and if he ever found work as a racecourse commentator, he would be able to do his job without the aid of either a microphone or a loudspeaker system.

'You busy?' asked Patchy, bursting into my room like a force of nature.

Patsy, who was standing behind him, shrugged her shoulders and pulled a face which said, better than words, 'I tried to stop him but you know Patchy, he never likes being told he can't do something'. She was baking thick cut Devon pasties, using potatoes, swedes, tomatoes and herbs from our garden, and had somehow managed to get flour onto her blouse and into her hair. She was holding her hands, which were white, away from her body but the caution was now pointless.

When I first moved to Bilbury I knew absolutely nothing about antiques. I could hardly tell walnut from mahogany and, whatever it was that I was looking at, I was quite incapable of differentiating between the genuine article and a copy made in Hong Kong circa 1961.

But over the years, Patchy has taught me quite a good deal.

I have learned to tell a davenport from a bureau from a Victorian writing slope and to tell when an auctioneer is taking bids from an imaginary bidder (known as taking bids 'off the wall') in order to boost the price of something he was selling at auction.

(According to Patchy, when auctioneers for the big, posh, London auctioneers do this it is called 'taking bids off the chandeliers'.)

I have learned that the oldest English furniture is usually made of oak for two very simple reasons. First, when it became feasible and fashionable to furnish castles and houses with tables and chairs and storage chests, the commonest tree in England was the oak. Second, it is possible to carve oak timbers into the shapes required with the aid of an axe and an adze – the two tools commonly available.

We have an oak dole cupboard in Bilbury Grange which Patchy found for us. It originally stood outside a monastery wall and was regularly filled with bread so that poor travellers could help themselves. That was, incidentally, the original use of the word 'dole'.

As the years went by, so oak gradually went out of fashion. In the 17th century, Charles II preferred elegant walnut furniture because, being easier to carve, walnut could be made into more artistic shapes and covered with fancier additions. Oak is a hard wood which is difficult to shape with hand tools.

And then, in the 18th century, mahogany, imported from India, was the wood of choice and English furniture became even more complex and carefully designed.

Thanks to Patchy, I had learned to beware of shops which had signs across their windows screaming 'Lease Expiring' and 'Closing Down Sale', for these are, he told me, tricks which are well known in the antiques and jewellery trades. Patchy told me he knew of a shop in Birmingham which had been attracting innocent customers with its 'Closing Down' signs for at least ten years. The customers all thought that they were getting bargain prices but they weren't, of course.

Patchy taught me to use my hands as well as my eyes when examining furniture. 'Genuinely old furniture has a softness to it, a warmth all of its own,' said Patchy, who had a reputation throughout Devon for being able to identify a genuine antique almost instantly.

'There's an auction at the other end of the village,' said Patchy, slumping down into the chair normally used by patients. 'It's at a place called Doone Cottage, somewhere along the road to North Ilkerton. I picked up the estate agent's particulars this morning and today's the viewing day. I thought I might go and have a look at what they've got for sale. But I really can't bear the idea of schlepping over there by myself. Can you bear to drag yourself away from all that exciting looking paperwork for an hour or two?'

I put down the sheaf of papers I was holding and grinned at him. 'I'd be your man if you'd invited me to a shoe shop opening,' I told him, 'I was just trying to understand a letter from the local health service administrator. It would have made more sense if he'd written back to front in Latin.' The administrator had a habit of writing to all the local family doctors at least twice a week. Since he never used one word when ten would do just as well, his letters took some deciphering. I had got into the habit of going through his letters with a pen in my hand. I would then scratch out all the obviously superfluous words and phrases and then try to make sense of what was left.

As we drove off, I told Patchy that I knew exactly how to find Doone Cottage since the owner, Mrs Gladys Luckwell, who had died recently, had been a patient of mine.

Patchy explained that the sale had been organised by Harley House an appropriately named local estate agent from Barnstaple, whose red and white House For Sale signs were a well-known sight in North Devon. The main item in the sale was a modest sized cottage with a small but decent garden but the entire contents of the house were also included with the cottage since Mrs Luckwell the former owner, now deceased, had left her entire estate to a nephew whom she hadn't seen for years. He lived in Leeds in the North of England and hadn't even bothered to come down to Devon for the funeral.

Mrs Gladys Luckwell, who always insisted on being addressed by her full name, had been a patient of mine and had recently succumbed, after a long illness, to kidney failure. She had been 96 when she'd died and in the old days, the family doctor would have probably simply written 'old age' on the death certificate. These days coroners insist on having rather more precise details put on their bit of paper and so she officially died of 'kidney failure', though to be honest I could have just as easily written 'heart failure' or 'liver failure'. The truth was that her body had, quite simply, run out of time on the celestial warranty.

Mrs Luckwell was the only person I ever met who had been born on the island of Lundy, a very solid lump of granite which sticks up out of the sea off the North Devon coast. I sometimes thought that perhaps the peculiarity of her birth might perhaps have changed her outlook on life in some way. She often talked about the fact that she had been born on an island and clearly thought that in some way it made her 'special'. And I suppose it did: it was certainly true that she was one of the very few people in the world who was able to say that they had been born on an island which is just three miles long and no more than half a mile wide. The sad thing is, I suppose, that it was the only part of her life that she felt made her different; important even. I think I felt rather sorry for her that she could never remember the only truly memorable thing that ever happened in her life.

Lundy is a surprisingly fertile piece of rock. Patsy and I went there for a day trip when Dr Brownlow was still alive and it was easier for me to be away from the village. There is good fishing in the sea around Lundy and the soil on top of the island is surprisingly fertile, providing lush grass for the sheep who are by far the most numerous inhabitants. There are quite a few plants, including one horticultural speciality known as the Lundy Cabbage, which are found only on the island. Indeed, there is an insect called the Bronze Lundy Cabbage Flea Beetle which lives only on the Lundy Cabbage. Since the plant is exclusively indigenous to Lundy so is the Bronze Lundy Cabbage Flea Beetle.

I remembered from our visit that the island has a pub called the Marisco Tavern and a few grey houses, and there is a 13th century castle too. But although the castle was built with walls three feet thick, the building is now just a ruin. The storms which have lashed the island for centuries have destroyed man's handiwork. The castle, so they say, was built by Henry III using money he made by selling the rabbits which were caught on the island. Back in those days Lundy was an official Royal warren and the rabbits were an important source of revenue for the monarch.

Visitors sometimes call the place Lundy Island but that's tautological because the word Lundy is Norse for 'Puffin Island', so to call it Lundy Island is like calling it 'Puffin Island Island'. Modern tourists visit Lundy to watch the birds, clamber about on the rocks or just to say they've been there. Many buy a Lundy stamp which isn't a proper postage stamp in that it can't be used to mail a letter, but it can be stuck on an envelope together with a stamp issued by the Royal Mail or stuck in a stamp album on one of those pages they always put at the back for 'oddities'.

The strange thing is that although Mrs Luckwell was born on the island, her parents didn't live there. They were visiting on a day trip and Mrs Luckwell was born a fortnight early, delivered by a midwife who, fortuitously, happened to be in the same party of tourists. Mrs Luckwell and her parents had to stay the night in a local's cottage until mother and baby were well enough to make the return journey. I have often wondered what sort of people would make a potentially rough sea trip so close to the mother-to-be's due delivery date. When Patsy was expecting, I found myself worrying if she went too far down the garden. In the end, I persuaded her to carry an old bicycle horn so that she could 'toot' for help if she needed it.

I had been to Doone Cottage on numerous occasions and I couldn't remember ever seeing anything there that was likely to raise the blood pressure of an antique dealer. I had never spotted any expensive looking items of furniture or any majestic paintings just waiting to be 'discovered' and carted off to a London auction room.

I know that there are doctors, particularly those working in rural areas, who will examine the contents of an elderly patient's home with great care; drawing attention to those items which take their fancy in the hope that they will be given the item as a present, or at least left it in the patient's will. I know of one doctor, working not a million miles away from Bilbury, who frequently offers to buy furniture or pictures which he recognises as having value. He tells the patient that the chair, bookcase, dressing table or whatever would look good in his own home and that he will pay the patient a good price for it. The price is never a 'good' one, of course, and the item soon ends up in an auction or an antique dealer's shop with the doctor's wallet a good deal heavier as a result. I could never do that. One elderly patient once insisted on giving me a book which he thought I would like. I did, indeed, like the book but it was a valuable first edition and I felt embarrassed and ashamed to take such a gift. When the patient wasn't looking I sneaked it back onto his shelves.

It isn't only doctors who do this sort of thing, of course.

Delivery men, workmen of all types, chimney sweeps and insurance agents have all been known to express interest in things they spot in people's homes. The owner of the home (and the antique) will usually be elderly, frail and probably short of money. Such individuals are easy prey for the skilful trickster. Tricking the elderly into parting with the treasures for less than they are worth seems to me to be a pretty low way to make a living. Patchy said he knew a chimney sweep who used to look out for pieces of furniture which had old worm holes in them. If there are three or four old pieces of furniture in a room there is a very good chance that at least one will show signs of woodworm. The worm holes will usually be old and of no consequence but whenever he spotted a piece of furniture with evidence of worm infestation the sweep would suck in his breath, shake his head and warn the house owner of the danger of having worm infested furniture in their home.

'It'll affect your other furniture and then the structure of your house,' he'd say, feigning sympathy.

He would then offer to take away the affected item to use for firewood.

But he wouldn't chop it up, of course.

Instead, he would take it straight to a dealer and sell it for a very good profit with no risk and no expenditure. If the holes were noticeable, the dealer would fill them in and varnish over them.

It is often said that one should never speak ill of the dead, and though I understand and sympathise with the feeling that one should not speak ill of people who are no longer around to defend themselves, I don't think this means that one should never tell the truth about the dead.

And the truth about Mrs Gladys Luckwell is, I'm afraid, that she was not a particularly pleasant or warm-hearted person.

She was one of those people, of whom there never seems to be a shortage in the world, who must always be the centre of attention. Such folk are forever convinced that other people exist to do their bidding and that the even strangers are always waiting for their instructions, their advice and their judgements. She was completely confident that she knew all there was to know about medicine, finance, the law, the church and politics. And her understanding of human emotions was, in her mind, as unlimited as her willingness to share her understanding with others. Every day she wrote dozens of letters and notes. Some of these were posted in the ordinary way (if she ran out of stamps she did not allow this to hinder her, simply ordering someone to pop the letters in the post-box and allow the recipient to pay the postage) and some were handed out to be hand delivered. Kind-hearted locals who called in to do shopping or gardening for her were invariably sent off around the village delivering hand-written notes. She sent instructions and recommendations to everyone whom she felt might benefit from her wisdom. She sent notes to the vicar suggesting subjects for his sermons. She advised the local constable on the best way to deal with any offenders whom he encountered. She shared her views on town planning and highway maintenance with the appropriate authorities and she wrote to our local Member of Parliament on a weekly basis – giving him clear instructions on how he should vote on important issues of the day. To her neighbours she boldly suggested suitable romances and recommended separations and divorces and she campaigned tirelessly and aggressively for causes she espoused – causes which invariably were ones which affected her personally. I remember she took against a large ash tree which stood on someone else's land and which she felt impeded her view of a distant church which she rather liked. She wrote regularly to everyone she could think of, demanding that the tree be felled without delay. She said it was dangerous (which it wasn't), that it was dying (which it wasn't), that it was ugly (which it wasn't), that it interfered with her drains (which it didn't) and that other people wanted it removed (which they didn't).

As Mrs Luckwell got older, and slightly frail, many people in the village tried to help her but she treated them all appallingly. Over the years at least four people had cut her lawn and tended her garden and none of them had ever charged her for their work but she had treated them all with such contempt that they had given up. Henry Templeton, having spent three hours working on her garden without so much as the offer of a glass of water, let alone a cup of tea, once asked if he could use her privy but was told that he could not and that he could damned well use a hedge instead. 'You bloody gypsies are all the same,' she shouted at him. Since Henry was a retired airline pilot, who had been cutting her grass and trimming her bushes out of the kindness of his heart, he thought this a little rich even for an eccentric old lady.

I once went round to her house at 4.00 a.m. and found myself ordered to trim her toenails which she had suddenly decided were too long. 'You look as if you got dressed in the dark!' she shouted at me, as I bent at her feet. She was quite right but given the time of night and the circumstances and the fact that she had told me on the telephone that she needed help urgently, I did not feel that this was entirely reprehensible. I was, it is true, wearing a jumper which I had put on back to front and inside out but if she had been truly in need of urgent medical attention, as she had led me to believe, I cannot believe that she would have noticed or cared.

On another occasion I got there late at night and she shouted, 'Who are you?' when I knocked on the door. I told her it was me. I was standing on the doorstep and it was pouring with rain. There was no porch at all. No shelter from the rain.

'What do you want?' she demanded. 'If I'd wanted you to come round I'd have invited you.'

'You did invite me!' I shouted back. 'It's the doctor.'

Eventually she let me in.

It turned out that she had called for me because she thought she might have arthritis in her left knee. When I could find nothing wrong she told me I was a 'quack' and that she would call for a proper doctor next time she needed advice.

Every time I saw her she told me that she had a weak heart and that her mother and her grandmother, both of whom lived to be well into their nineties, had suffered with the same problem. Not until she was well into her nineties did I ever detect any problems with her heart. And she, like her mother and grandmother, lived to a fairly ripe old age.

It would have been easy to argue that her behaviour was a result of oncoming dementia but it would have been a dishonest and disingenuous argument. There was nothing wrong with Mrs Gladys Luckwell other than the fact that she was a bad-tempered old woman. She had been a rude and bad tempered woman in her middle years and, quite probably, a rude and bad tempered woman when she had been young.

Thumper once said that the village was divided about her. On the one hand there were those who believed that she was a kindly, sensitive and misunderstood old woman. On the other hand there were those who thought she was a bad tempered old bat. The first group consisted of Mrs Luckwell herself and no one else. The second group, said Patchy, included everyone else in the locality.

My first thought, when we arrived at Doone Cottage, was that Patchy was probably wasting his time, since there didn't seem to be anything worth the attention of an antique dealer rather than a junk man. I, on the other hand, was happy to have found an excuse to leave behind the paperwork sitting on my desk.

I harboured a secret hope that it might, perhaps, sort itself out in my absence.

There were the usual vans parked on the verge, and three or four Volvo estate cars had been abandoned on the grass outside the cottage. All had the tell-tale heavy duty racks fitted to their roofs. I think it is probably safe to say that if you ever see an estate car with a strong looking luggage rack fitted then it will almost certainly be owned by an antique dealer.

When we arrived, Patchy said 'hello' to the agent, Harley House, a man he clearly knew well.

Harley is an imposing fellow, around six foot six inches tall and sufficiently well-built never to have to worry about being described as thin. He likes pies, not particularly caring about the filling they contain, and has eaten a good many of them in his life. If you put him on one side of a scale and a small family car on the other it would be impossible to say which side would go down and which would go up. I have sat with him in the Duck and Puddle and watched him eat three of Gilly's family sized steak and kidney pies at a single sitting.

Harley is completely bald and whatever the weather he always wears a hat. In the winter he wears a brown trilby and in the summer he favours a Panama. North Devon can be quite a windy part of the world, and Harley has on many occasions conducted out door auctions with one hand holding his lot sheet and the other holding his hat in position.

He once told me that he has worn a hat since he read that Aeschylus, the Greek writer who died in 456 BC at the age of 69, met his maker when a short-sighted eagle dropped a tortoise on his head. Apparently, according to Harley, the eagle mistook the bald playwright's head for a rock and dropped the tortoise in order to break it open and get at the meat inside.

I remember mentioning that there are, as far as I am aware, very few eagles left in North Devon, and probably even fewer free range tortoises, but Harley, who has many fine qualities but is not a man blessed with an overenthusiastic sense of humour, pointed out, quite sternly, that it is much better to be safe than sorry. He added, I recall, that, as a medical man, I should be aware that an ounce of prevention is worth far more than a good many bottles of medicine.

Inside Doone Cottage, the usual array of dealers and collectors had been joined by a few neighbours. I have little doubt that the neighbours were there, as is often the case, more out of simple nosiness than out of any genuine interest in making a purchase. It is true that one or two of them had probably tottered round in the hope that they might be able to purchase an item which they might have coveted when Mrs Gladys Luckwell had been alive, but I think it is a fair bet that most of them were there just to look around. Since I was there only to escape from my paperwork, I was hardly in a place to criticise.

The cottage had two small rooms and a kitchen downstairs and two small bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs. At some point in the past, a modest conservatory had been built on at the back of the cottage. There was no gas supply and no central heating of any kind and the plumbing, which could best be described as rudimentary, did not stretch to indoor sanitation.

Even in her 90s, Mrs Gladys Luckwell had still used a privy in her garden which sat above an old-fashioned cesspit. For use at night she had a chamber pot (which she always called her gazunder on the entirely reasonable grounds that it went under the bed when not in use) which had a picture of Lloyd George, a famous Victorian politician, painted onto the target area. Patchy told me that it was common for chamber pots to have many strange designs inside. One popular trick was to have an eye painted on the bottom of the pot, staring upwards in constant surprise. Another was to have a frog attempting to climb up the inside of the pot. Chamber pots were still being made as late as the 1940s when many had portraits of Adolf Hitler on the bottom. Sadly, there were several large cracks and one chip in Mrs Gladys Luckwell’s pot and despite the political decoration in the target area, Patchy said it had very little value.

I spotted a small silver box, around four inches long and no more than three inches high. I asked Patchy what it was. He told me it was a Queen Anne tea caddy.

‘It’s very small!’ I pointed out. ‘Hardly big enough to contain sufficient tea for a few pots!’

‘Tea was very expensive in those days,’ explained Patchy.

‘Are you going to bid on it? I asked him.

‘Perhaps,’ he said, without much interest. ‘It’s the only thing I’ve seen so far that is worth buying,’ he added.

In a cupboard, Patchy found a rather elderly instrument which looked to me like a xylophone but which Patchy assured me was a glockenspiel. The difference, apparently, is that the bars on a xylophone are made of wood whereas on a glockenspiel they are made of metal. Patchy shuddered at the sight of the glockenspiel for he was no longer in the market for musical instruments. Three months ago, he bought a sousaphone, a trombone, a bassoon, a tuba and a trumpet as a job lot at an auction in South Molton. When he got them home he made the mistake of trying them all out. Adrienne, his wife and my sister-in-law, threatened to leave him if he continued or, indeed, if he bought any more musical instruments. She is a firm-minded young woman and Patchy has learned that when she says something it is best to listen carefully.

I followed Patchy around the house. It was, as always, a fascinating experience. We are all many different people. We are one person with our loved ones, another with relatives, another with friends and yet another with strangers. We constantly change, adapt, hone, refine and reinvent ourselves according to our immediate circumstances. Patchy changed completely when he was working. Back in the Duck and Puddle he was casual, carefree and light-hearted. He never seemed to take anything seriously. But when he was working, looking around an auction room or a houseful of items for sale, he became very serious and extremely focused. As a surgeon concentrates in the operating theatre, and a barrister concentrates in a court room, so Patchy concentrated in the auction room.

There was a rather decent looking Welsh dresser taking up most of the kitchen. It was made of oak but it was badly stained and damaged and would clearly need a considerable amount of restoration. The only other piece of furniture in there was an old pine table which had definitely seen better days, and two mismatching wooden chairs. The mismatched crockery lined up on the shelves of the Welsh dresser was, Patchy said, late Victorian but uninspiring and of value only for individuals who wanted to pick out a cup or a saucer or a plate to help complete a set which had been decimated by breakages.

The living room was equally disappointing.

A two-seater sofa and a leather chair with the horse hair stuffing coming out of it took up most of the room. There was a small oak bookcase which was filled with old cookery books, novels by Marie Corelli and Colette and several bibles. There were a few old hunting prints on the walls, none of them particularly attractive or well framed, and a pair of fairly ordinary and uninspiring brass candlesticks on the mantelpiece. A large damp patch on the wall with the fireplace suggested that there was some serious work to be done on the fabric of the cottage.

The front room was even more disappointing than the other two rooms downstairs. It contained three easy chairs, all of which were faded and stained and had broken springs. The rugs on the floor were threadbare and probably destined for either the rubbish dump or a bonfire. There were a few knick knacks on the mantelpiece and the windowsill but none of them seemed to be of much value to anyone than a collector of seaside curios. There was an ugly looking model of a clown with the words ‘A Present from Blackpool’ on it. And there were similar items labelled ‘A Present from Llandudno’ and ‘A Present from Weston-super-Mare’.

In conclusion, the rooms downstairs, small and crammed with disappointed dealers, collectors and neighbours, seemed dark and damp. Everything seemed depressing and I suddenly realised that Mrs Gladys Luckwell must have spent the last third of her life simply marking time; unwilling or unable to improve her circumstances or her surroundings. When I had visited her, I had seen only my patient. Now, seeing the unoccupied house with Patchy, I naturally saw only the contents.

Still, Mrs Gladys Luckwell was now gone and we were there not to mourn her passing, or to regret her failure to grasp life and squeeze the goodness out of it, but to appraise the worldly goods she had left behind.

And so we made our way up the narrow staircase to the top floor.

Upstairs was no better than downstairs.

In the main bedroom, the one which Mrs Gladys Luckwell had used, the only item of value was the view. From the window you could see across the cottage garden, now overgrown with nettles and brambles and Giant Hogweed, over the neighbouring fields and away towards the coast. The furniture consisted of a wardrobe with a door which hung open because the catch didn’t fasten properly, a double bed with a very soggy looking mattress, a stained and battered bedside table, two scruffy looking rugs and the by now customary collection of worthless bits and pieces; some of which Mrs Gladys Luckwell had probably purchased herself and some of which had doubtless been bought for her as mementoes of other people’s holidays.

There was, however, one item of interest in the room.

I doubt if I would have spotted it if I had spent half a day in the room but Patchy saw it within moments of our entering the room.

Doctors, particularly GPs, who have been in practice for a good while can often tell whether or not a patient is suffering from a serious illness the minute they see them – without examining them or doing any tests.

It is, I suppose, a matter of instinct or intuition rather than anything else. Dr Brownlow, my predecessor in Bilbury, was able to do this and occasionally I am myself aware of this sense, though I am not yet experienced enough to take full advantage of it.

Patchy has the same skill as far as antiques are concerned. In the antique dealers’ world he is, because of this talent, known as a ‘divvy’.

If you threw a piece of Chippendale onto a rubbish dump he would, I am sure, be able to spot it within seconds.

‘What on earth is that?’ I asked.

Patchy was holding a very small glass bottle. It looked a little like a small scent bottle, the sort of thing that ladies and gentlemen used to carry before baths and showers were available. They would sprinkle perfume onto their bodies and their clothes in order to mask less pleasant smells. But I didn’t think it was a scent bottle. It was far too small.

‘It’s a Chinese tear bottle,’ said Patchy, with a smile on his face.

He held up the tiny bottle so that I could see it more clearly.

‘When a young Chinese man became engaged, he sent his fiancée one of these tiny glass bottles but instead of a drop of perfume it contained a tear from his eye – a tear of joy. The fiancée would treasure the gift all her life, looking after it, protecting it and making sure it didn’t get broken. When her husband died, she would open up the little bottle for the first time. She would then allow a tear of her sorrow to fall into the bottle. And she would then place the tiny bottle, now containing two mingled tears, upon the breast of her dead husband before he was taken to be buried.

‘Is it worth a good deal of money?’ I asked him.

Patchy shook his head. ‘You’d think it would be,’ he said, holding up the bottle to the light. ‘But there isn’t much demand for them. They’re rather out of fashion.’ He put the bottle back down on the dressing table. ‘This one has never been used,’ he said. He seemed disappointed.

The second bedroom had been used as a junk room.

There was a bed in there but old bits of broken furniture were piled on top of it. There was a large, metal bound trunk in a corner with half a dozen old suitcases on top of it. The suitcases were leather and well-made but they were very battered, and Patchy said that they would require a good deal of loving attention before they could be turned into saleable pieces of luggage. ‘People don’t want them anyway,’ he said, sadly. ‘Modern luggage is lighter and easier to carry about. This sort of luggage was fine if you had servants and porters to help you carry your stuff around for you. If you took a couple of these empty cases onto a plane you would probably find yourself having to pay an excess baggage charge!’

We slowly made our way back downstairs. The cottage was still full of dealers, collectors and neighbours. Nearly all of them seemed disappointed.

'I don't understand it,' said Patchy, as we stood in the living room once more. 'I'm sure there's something here that is worthwhile. I can sense it but I can't see it.'

'Not the Chinese tear bottle?'

He shook his head.

Suddenly, he moved towards a door leading into the tiny conservatory. 'We haven't looked in here,' he said. I followed him. The conservatory was tiny and I don't think anyone else had bothered to go in. The only things in there were a small and rather unstable looking chair, made of bamboo, and a small, old table upon which stood half a dozen plant pots. The plants in the pots had not been watered and they were all dead. Patchy ignored the chair and the dead plants and went straight for the table. He bent down to take a closer look at it and then knelt beside it so that he could examine it more carefully. He took the plants off the table and placed them carefully on the conservatory floor.

I stood and watched.

The table looked to me just like the sort of scruffy old table you might expect to find being used for pot plants in a conservatory. I wouldn't have given it a second glance, or expected to pay more than a pound for it. Indeed, if I had paid a pound and taken it home with me, Patsy would have probably raised at least one eyebrow and asked me if I had been drinking.

'Is it valuable?' I asked.

Patchy stood up and gazed for a moment at the table. He then put all the plant pots back onto the table. He did this very carefully.

'Is it valuable?' I asked again.

Patchy made a shushing sound, took me by the elbow and led me out of the conservatory. He carefully closed the door behind him. I followed him back into the main part of the cottage. He then proceeded to take an extraordinary amount of interest in the small oak bookcase which he had previously ignored. Puzzled, I watched him.

I guessed that the table in the conservatory was something special but I had no idea why.

A few minutes later, when we were both strolling along the lane outside, Patchy told me about the table.

'It was made about 50 years ago by a designer called Armand-Albert Rateau,' said Patchy. He was shaking slightly with excitement. I couldn't remember ever seeing him so excited. 'Almand-Albert Rateau was one of the most exclusive and highly renowned interior decorators and furniture makers of the 1920s. The table in that conservatory is a green patinated bronze table with a marble slab top. As far as I know there is only one other similar table in the world. And the second table is in a museum in Paris: the Musee des Arts Decoratif.'

'Is it valuable?' I asked him for the third time. We were still strolling along the lane. Patchy had managed to calm himself down a little.

He looked at me. The answer to the question was now pretty obvious.

'How valuable?'

Patchy thought for a minute. 'I couldn't examine all the legs properly but there's a slight scratch on one of them,' he said. 'Assuming there are a couple more scratches that I didn't see then it's probably worth between 25 and 30.'

I was, I admit, surprised. I had thought he was going to say that it was worth a good deal.

'Oh,' I said. '£25 to £30?'

Patchy looked at me with a big smile on his face.

He shook his head.

'£25,000 to £30,000,' he said.

I stared at him.

'Heaven knows how it got here,' he added. He thought for a while. 'Maybe she inherited it or was given it or picked it up in a sale somewhere. She certainly didn't know its value.'

'Are you sure?' I asked him.

A moment ago, I'd been slightly disappointed when I'd thought the table was worth just £25 to £30. Now I was quite shocked at how valuable it was. It didn't seem quite right that such a valuable piece of furniture should be standing, unnoticed, in a conservatory, sharing life with a few plant pots.

He looked at me.

'Sorry,' I said.

'The thing is,' said Patchy, 'that I don't think anyone else has noticed it.'

'I didn't see anyone else even go into the conservatory.'

'Do you know anything about the old lady who lived there?'

I told him what I knew. By the time I had finished we were quite a distance from the cottage. A woodpecker, startled as we walked past, flew off into a small copse of beech trees. It has always surprised me that the two most nervous birds in the world seem to be the woodpecker and the jay. The woodpecker has one of the toughest beaks in the bird world and the jay is, of course, a member of the crow family. You'd expect them to be arrogant and not easily frightened but both are remarkably timid creatures. Mind you, the jay, which was once widely sought after for its feathers, has good reason to be cautious.

'Who does the money go to?' asked Patchy.

'A distant relative somewhere up in the North of England. He never came down to Devon; never visited the old lady at all. I gather that the solicitor handling the will had quite a job to find him.'

'Good,' said Patchy, looking relieved. 'That's OK then.'

I looked at him, a little puzzled.

'I'd have to tell the auctioneer if she'd left her money to a nice family in the village,' said Patchy. 'But a relative who'd never bothered to visit her is good news. I won't feel guilty about him.'

'When is the auction?' I asked.

'Tomorrow,' replied Patchy. He pulled the agent's details out of his pocket and examined them carefully. 'Yes, the auction is tomorrow.' He read on and then stopped and grinned broadly. 'Unless sold prior to auction by private treaty,' he read. He turned round and headed back for the cottage. I followed.

Ten minutes later we were standing in the back garden with Harley House, the estate agent, the man who would be auctioning the cottage and its contents on the following day.

'How much are you expecting to get for the cottage?' asked Patchy.

I could hardly believe my ears. Patchy was planning to buy the whole house in order to get the table without anyone knowing what he was doing or what they had all missed.

'The guide price is £6,000,' said the auctioneer. 'But I wouldn't sell it in advance of the sale for less than £7,000.'

'It's in terrible condition!' said Patchy. He pointed to the roof. 'The roof needs replacing, there's damp everywhere and I'm sure I could smell dry rot in the kitchen.'

The auctioneer shrugged. 'I can't sell it for less than £7,000. We could get more at the auction.'

'You could get less,' responded Patchy. 'How about £6,500?' He paused as though thinking hard. 'And I'll take all the contents off your hands. There are a couple of bits of oak that I can do something with. That'll save you the cost and trouble of auctioning the contents.'

The auctioneer thought for a moment then nodded. 'OK,' he said. '£6,500 for the house and all the contents.' They shook hands on the deal and the agent assured Patchy that nothing would be taken from the house.

And so the deal was done. I was very impressed with the speed with which it had all been conducted.

The agent went back indoors to tell all the dealers, collectors and neighbours that the cottager and the contents had all been sold and that the auction had been cancelled.

'Just like that?' I said to Patchy.

'I know the auctioneer,' said Patchy. 'He knows that the deal will be done.' He looked at his watch. 'Now I need to get into Barnstaple to go to the bank – and to see my solicitor. I'll drop you off at Bilbury Grange on the way.'

'Patchy,' I said, as we headed back to his truck, 'do you have £6,500?'

He looked at me, seemingly a little paler now. 'Not exactly at the moment,' he agreed.

'How much do you have?'

'I think there was about £20 in my current account,' he said. 'But Adrienne and I have £200 in a deposit account.' He cleared his throat. 'I've got a really nice bank manager,' he said. 'I'm sure they'll lend me the money.'

We sat in silence as we drove back towards Bilbury.

'If you mention anything to Patsy please ask her not to tell Adrienne,' said Patchy. 'I want to tell her myself when I get back from Barnstaple.'

I assured him that I would not even tell Patsy until the evening.

'I had to do it,' said Patchy, when he stopped at Bilbury Grange to drop me off. 'It's the chance of a lifetime.'

'I know you had to do it,' I said. 'And it will all work out brilliantly.'

He smiled, rather wanly. 'Let's hope so,' he said, as he disappeared towards Barnstaple.

I crossed my fingers for him. I knew I would not have had the courage to do what he had done. As I walked into the house I remembered a quote from Browning. 'A man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?'

But at the time I couldn't help hoping, for his sake, that he was right about the table.

The story has a sequel.

Two weeks later Patchy came round to the house to tell me that he had managed to sell the bronze table to a London dealer for £35,000. It had truly been the deal of a lifetime.

'I've got a couple of things for you,' he said. 'Come out to the van and give me a hand.'

The couple of things he had for me were the tear bottle, which was for Patsy, and the glockenspiel. 'I daren't keep the damned thing,' he said. 'Adrienne would kill me.'

'And there's this,' said Patchy. 'It's from Adrienne and myself.'

He handed me a long, white envelope.

When I opened the envelope I found a cheque for £5,000, made out to the Dr Brownlow Country Hotel Fund.

'If you hadn't come with me that day I probably wouldn't have gone to Doone Cottage,' said Patchy, when I started to protest that it was too much.

Patsy has the tear bottle on her dressing table. I've put in my tear.

I still haven't learned to play the damned glockenspiel though I'm having a good deal of fun learning.

The Chimney Sweep's Tattoo

I don't think there is a house or cottage in Bilbury which doesn't have an open fireplace.

Houses in towns and cities are all equipped with central heating these days but in our part of North Devon, central heating is still something of a rarity. Most people keep their houses warm by throwing logs or coal onto a fire or into a stove. Since wood is readily available, and is usually either free or very cheap, it is the fuel of choice.

The one snag with relying on an open fire is, of course, the very real need to have the chimney swept once or twice a year. When you live three quarters of an hour away from a fire station, it's a good idea to cut down the chance of having a chimney fire.

At Bilbury Grange we have a number of fireplaces and although Patsy and I don't use the one in our bedroom very often, we always like to have at least three chimneys swept regularly. When you burn wood rather than coal there is a tendency for large amounts of resinous substances to be deposited inside the chimney.

For years we, and most other villages, relied on a man called Bill Rattenbury to sweep our chimneys. And when Bill retired a year or so ago we transferred our allegiance to his son, Jack, who had worked with him, learning the tricks of the trade and the idiosyncrasies of local chimneys, for several years. Many sweeps are starting to use vacuum cleaners to remove the soot out of chimneys but both Bill and Jack have always relied on their brushes.

A good sweep can help in many ways – not just cleaning the soot out of the chimney. The Rattenburys have given us lots of good advice. To get a good draught in any sort of chimney it is necessary to have a substantial temperature difference between the gas inside the chimney and the outside air. As any child knows, hot air rises and if there is plenty of heat at the bottom of the chimney then the air will rise upwards and create a good draught. If a fireplace is too large, and the bottom part of a chimney too wide, then there will be too much cold air from the room going into the chimney and the fire won't draw properly. The Rattenburys helped us with several of our fireplaces; adjusting the size of one, putting a new chimney pot on another and simply raising the fire basket on a third.

However, when I telephoned Jack a month ago, to arrange an appointment for him to come round and do the necessary, I had quite a shock. Jack told me that he couldn't sweep our chimneys for nearly a month and that he was considering retiring from the chimney sweeping business. This was bad news. There are two other sweeps in the area and while one of them is very grumpy and has a reputation for leaving behind quite a mess, the other is 83-years-old and said to be contemplating what he describes as 'early retirement'. The grumpy one isn't even a professional chimney sweep. He has what he calls a portfolio of jobs and when he isn't sweeping chimneys he can be found driving a taxi, taking wedding photographs or doing a little French polishing. I've heard it said that he also does a little light embalming – not to mention an occasional bout of poaching.

'Why on earth are you retiring?' I asked him when he turned up.

'I've started doing weddings,' he told me. 'There's quite a market.'

He explained that a lot of brides still thought it was good luck to have a chimney sweep turn up at their weddings. He said all he had to do was stand and pose next to the bride (possibly giving her a slightly sooty kiss on the cheek but taking great care not to get soot on her dress) and that he could charge £15 to turn up at a wedding. Since Jack charges £3 to sweep a chimney (and £2 more for each additional chimney in a house) I could see his point.

'They often give me a bottle of wine or champagne,' he said, 'and they nearly always invite me to have a bite to eat with them.' He paused. 'I always have them bring my food out to me, though,' he said, 'and eat it outside or in the van if it's raining.'

'That's very thoughtful of you,' I said.

'Soot can be very difficult to remove,' he explained.

'And there are other perks,' he added. 'There are always bridesmaids with romantic ideas foremost in their minds.' He grinned.

'I suppose there would be,' I agreed.

'I'm thinking of taking out an advertisement in one of those magazines for brides,' he said. 'This could be quite a business opportunity for me.'

I had to agree with him that it seemed as though he might have hit upon an excellent money making idea. But I told him that Patsy and I, and the rest of the village, would miss his services as a chimney sweep.

'Oh don't worry, doctor,' he said, 'I'll always be available to pop round and do your chimneys.'

I said that was very good of him and that I hoped he would keep a few days a month free to sweep chimneys for some of the other villagers – especially the older folk.

He said he would do that and that he would need a constant supply of soot to put onto his face and hands when attending weddings. Then, hesitantly, asked me if he could consult me as a patient. I said that of course he could.

To be honest, I'm fairly accustomed to workmen suddenly stripping off and showing me their bits and pieces. Not long ago a carpenter who was doing some work on our front porch suddenly pulled down his trousers to show me his hernia. He wasn't a patient of mine and didn't live in the village but he wanted a second opinion. Patsy came outside to ask him if he wanted a cup of tea just as he was displaying his large lump and it was, I think, the first time I've seen her blush quite such a deep shade of red. Patsy said afterwards that it was a good job that Miss Johnson, a committed maiden lady, had not chosen that moment to leave the house. Curiously, I remember, the man wore boxer shorts emblazoned with small pictures of fire engines.

Jack told me that he had a tattoo he wanted removing.

I said I'd better take a look.

'I think I'd perhaps better undress outside,' said Jack, looking down at the carpet. He and his clothes were, as usual, thick with soot.

'Where's the tattoo?' I asked.

'On my arm.'

'OK, then if you don't mind it might be a good idea if you popped out into the garden.' I didn't mind him taking his shirt off in the garden, but I knew darned well that if he removed his trousers someone would choose that moment to turn up to deliver a parcel or collect some plants from the small market garden which our gardener helps run for us.

I opened the French windows which lead out from my consulting room and we stepped outside. Jack unbuttoned and then removed his shirt and, to be honest, I was grateful that he was doing this in the garden. The cloud of soot would have taken some cleaning up. 'I always get undressed in the garden,' said Jack, who still lives at home, 'and my mum then throws a couple of cold buckets of water over me. She always did that for my Dad.'

I shivered at the thought.

'Quite refreshing,' said Jack.

'I bet it is,' I said.

He showed me the tattoo. It wasn't difficult to spot. The skin over his left biceps was tattooed with the name 'Doreen'. The letters had been done in blue and red ink and there were roses entwined around the letters.

Tattoos can look decorative on a young body but I often wonder what the owners will feel when they are in their 80s and their skin is decorated with faded and barely legible ink.

'Can you remove it?' he asked, nervously.

I guessed immediately what had happened.

A cosmetic surgeon I know once told me that there were two simple rules about tattoos; first, that no one should ever have themselves tattooed when drunk and second that no one should ever have themselves tattooed with the name of a lover they had known for less than three decades.

'You and Doreen have split up?'

He nodded. 'She was two timing me with a scaffolder from South Molton.'

I examined the tattoo, then told him he could put his shirt back on and come back into the surgery.

'It's not something I can do here in Bilbury,' I told him.

Our own small centre of medical excellence, known for administrative reasons as The Brownlow Country Hotel, is designed more for providing simple nursing care rather than anything else and although I don't mind attending to a small varicose vein or removing an occasional mole, skin tag or lipoma, I was confident that removing an entire tattoo was well outside my modest range of surgical skills.

'Removing a tattoo is never easy to do,' I went on. 'But I can fix up an appointment for you to see a cosmetic surgeon. They've developed some techniques for removing tattoos and he'll be able to tell you what's possible and what's not possible.'

Jack nodded again. I wasn't sure whether he was shy or merely embarrassed.

'You may have to go to Exeter to get it removed,' I said. 'Or even to Bristol.'

'That's OK,' he said.

When he'd gone, I wrote a note to a cosmetic surgeon who has a clinic once a week. The cosmetic surgeon deals with breasts which their owners think too small or too large, with ears that stick out like jug handles and with noses which did not please their owners. He had also, so I had heard, acquired some experience in the delicate and tricky art of removing tattoos. His bedside manner is, to be honest, something of an acquired taste (a colleague of his once told me that he had gone to the Captain Bligh School of Diplomacy) but he is the only cosmetic surgeon available.

To my surprise Jack, the young man with a tattoo surplus to requirements, was back in my surgery a couple of weeks later.

'I've written to the hospital,' I told him, assuming that he'd come to complain that he hadn't yet received an appointment, 'but I'm afraid it will take a while for them to get back to you. There's quite a queue for cosmetic surgery these days.'

'It's OK,' he said, waving a hand, 'you don't have to do anything. I just came to tell you that I don't want my tattoo removed.'

'Ah,' I said, 'you've made up with the girl?'

'Oh no,' he said with a shudder. 'That's properly over.'

Jack looked down at the floor, as though wondering how to say what he clearly needed to say. I wondered for a moment if he'd somehow managed to find a tattoo artist able to convert 'Doreen' into something else; 'Noreen' or 'Doris' or, somehow, 'Mother'. Or maybe someone had found a way to turn 'Doreen' into a three masted schooner or a howling wolf. I once saw a young lady who had five tattoos on her left arm. All were the names of lovers but the first four names on the list had a neat, horizontal line tattooed through them. The girl concerned was only 19-years-old when I saw her and I couldn't help wondering if she would have enough space on her body for a lifetime of crossed out names.

'I've met someone else,' said Jack suddenly. 'I met her at a wedding in Barnstaple a week last Saturday. I was there to kiss the bride and pose for a few photographs and she was one of the bridesmaids.'

'And she doesn't mind the tattoo?'

'Oh no,' said the young man. 'She's a prim and proper girl and she hasn't actually seen it yet. But when she does I know she won't mind. In fact I think she'll like it.'

I looked at him and frowned. I found this difficult to believe.

'Her name's Doreen,' explained the young man. 'She'll think I've had it done for her. And she's bound to think it's dead romantic. Don't you think?'

'I suppose that's a possibility,' I said. 'But are you sure this relationship is going to last?'

'Dunno yet, do I?' said the young man. 'But I thought about it quite a bit and I think I'll keep the tattoo anyway.'

'Right,' I said, 'that's good.'

'Because even if this girl and I don't hit it off, I can always find another Doreen can't I?'

I looked at him.

'There are thousands of girls called Doreen,' he explained. 'I'm bound to be able to find a girl called Doreen to settle down with.'

'I suppose so,' I agreed.

Jack stood up and smiled. 'So you can cancel that appointment,' he said.

'It seems as if your new business has brought you love as well as a good income,' I said, as he headed for the door.

He turned and grinned.

'Doreen wants me to give up the weddings,' he said, 'she says she'll always be worried that I'm going to pick up another bridesmaid.'

'So you're going to concentrate on sweeping chimneys?' I asked.

'It was good enough for my Dad,' said Jack. 'So I guess it'll do for me.' He paused, his hand on the doorknob. 'To be honest with you,' he said, 'I was getting a bit fed up with all the travelling. And then there's the problem of the soot.'

'The soot?'

'The wedding parties always expect you to turn up covered in soot,' he explained. 'And I can only get sooty if I sweep chimneys, can't I?' He sighed. 'And travelling round the country covered in soot isn't much fun. I had to go down to Torquay a week or so ago and when I stopped off at a café for a cup of tea they turned me away – said I'd mess up their furniture.'

The collapse of his new career venture may have been slightly disappointing for Jack but it was, I confess, good news for Patsy and me. And I suspected that the rest of the village would be pleased to hear that we'd got our chimney sweep back.

When Jack had gone, I rang the hospital, got in touch with the secretary who handles appointments for the cosmetic surgeon, and told her to toss my letter into the circular filing cabinet underneath her desk.

'The patient has changed his mind,' I told her. 'He's going to keep his tattoo.'

'Oh right,' said the secretary. 'Do you know what the tattoo is? You didn't say in your letter.'

An alarm bell rang somewhere at the back of my head.

'I'm not entirely sure,' I mumbled. 'Can't quite remember now…'

'Oh,' said the secretary, a trifle disappointed. 'Okay. I expect we'll see it in due course. It's just that he's started going out with my daughter, Doreen. They met at a wedding recently. He seems a nice young man.'

I made a note to ring Jack. I am confident he'll find a convincing explanation.

The Doc’s Bad Back

It was my own darned fault.

I have lost count of the number of times I’ve told people that they must be careful when lifting anything heavy, and that they should always take care to lift with their knees bent and their back straight.

But we don’t always do what we know what we should do, or what we tell other people they should do.

An old beech tree of ours came down in last winter’s most ferocious gale and Thumper Robinson used his chainsaw to chop up the trunk and the main branches into suitable lengths for burning in our fireplace. Chainsaws terrify me and I’d taken on the far less hazardous task of cutting up the smaller branches into kindling.

As Thumper did the cutting, I moved the logs into the old stable where we store our cut wood. This simply meant picking up the logs, putting them into the wheelbarrow and wheeling them to the stable.

It was during the picking up phase that I had become lazy, and had done the lifting with my back bent. When I woke up the following morning, I knew instantly that I was in trouble. My back was as stiff as a board and it hurt like the devil to try to move. The good news was that I was pretty sure that I hadn’t slipped a disc or done any serious damage. I had no pains down the backs of my legs and no pains in my feet. But I had back muscles that were tense, inflamed and sore and screaming to be allowed to stay exactly where they were for a while. I tried several times to get out of bed but every attempt ended in yelps of pain. In the end, I managed to slide out of bed and shuffle along to the bathroom just a few yards away but I knew that I would not be able to dress myself, go down the stairs, sit in a chair or drive the car.

‘It’s no good. I’m going to have to stay in bed for a day or two,’ I told Patsy eventually. ‘It isn’t serious but I literally can’t get up.’

‘What do you want to do about the patients?’ she asked.

Suddenly I came face to face with the nightmare that always awaits everyone who works for themselves and who has no partners, associates or employees to stand in for them. It was my first day’s illness since Dr Brownlow had retired and I knew that I was lucky to have managed so far without needing to find another doctor to help look after the practice.

‘You’ll find the telephone number of a locum agency in my desk diary,’ I told her. ‘Ring them please, and see if they can provide us with a locum for a couple of days.’

Ten minutes later Patsy was back.

‘They can’t provide a locum until next week,’ she said. ‘And then they can only provide one for a whole week. They don’t do odd days.’

I swore quietly. I very much enjoyed working as a single-handed practitioner but at that moment, I would have happily swapped my life with one of my medical friends working in large practices. I knew that when they were ill they simply took some time off, knowing that their partners and assistants would take over their work. The single-handed practitioner, particularly in the country, has no such luxury.

‘Hopefully, I’ll be better by then,’ I said.

‘I could ring around the local practices to see if anyone can help out,’ suggested Patsy.

‘Good idea!’

I lay in bed, unmoving. I knew that my friend William, who works in a large practice and has numerous partners, would come down and help out for a few days, but to do so he would have to take some holiday from his own practice. I really didn’t want to ask him to do that.

I hated being ill. Outside I could hear the lesser spotted woodpecker hammering on the silver birch tree which stands beside our bedroom. No one works harder than a woodpecker: constantly busy. I remembered that I had read somewhere that a woodpecker bangs his beak into a tree 12,000 times a day, with each bang producing a G force of 1,000.

I tried to read, holding a book above my head, but after a couple of minutes my arms hurt so much that I had to lower the book. Ben, our faithful canine friend, who had been lying on the floor leapt up onto the bed but, sensing that all was not well, kept to the bottom of the bed by my feet.

Twenty minutes later, Patsy returned.

‘I’ve tried all the local doctors,’ she said, ‘and Dr Middleton in Chugborough says you can give patients his number if it’s a genuine emergency. But he can’t cover your surgeries because he’s got his own to do. Nor can anyone else I’m afraid. Apparently there is an epidemic of gastrointestinal poisoning in Combe Martin and the doctors there are rushed off their feet.’

‘Are there any patients in the waiting room?’ I asked. I looked at the clock. It was ten minutes to ten. The morning surgery was already nearly an hour late.

‘Five,’ said Patsy. ‘There were twelve but the other seven said they’d come back another day. And there are half a dozen requests for repeat prescriptions. Two people rang asking you to visit them at home but when I explained that you were poorly in bed they said they would ring back in a couple of days to see how you were. They said it wasn’t urgent. Everyone said they were sorry to hear you were bad and hoped you’d get well soon.’

‘If you bring me a prescription pad I can write out the prescriptions,’ I said. ‘But I don’t have the foggiest idea what we’re going to do with the five patients in the surgery.’

‘You definitely can’t get downstairs?’

I shook my head.

‘Then we’ll have to bring the patients up here!’ said Patsy brightly. ‘If Mohammed can’t go to the mountains then the mountains must come to Mohammed!’ She busied herself around the room moving bits of clothing and personal items out of sight. She helped me put on a shirt and she put a tie around my neck. Below the waist, hidden from view, I was still wearing pyjama trousers. Above the waist I did at least look respectable. She put a chair beside the bed, for patients to sit on, and then hunted around in the back of our wardrobe until she found a large wooden tray with legs. This made a splendid, temporary desk on top of the bedclothes. She put a prescription pad on the table and then fetched my stethoscope, auriscope, opthalmoscope and sphygmomanometer and, having moved aside the alarm clock, the bedside lamp and the book I had been reading the night before she put all the medical paraphernalia on the table at my side of the bed.

‘Ready?’ she said, at last.

‘Just about,’ I agreed.

‘Can you sit up a bit higher?’ she asked.

‘I’m afraid not,’ I said with a sigh. I was lying almost flat, with just one pillow under my head. When I tried to sit up a little higher the pain in my back got worse. I had really given my back muscles a hard time and now they were definitely making me pay for my stupidity. They were, you might say, getting their own back.

‘Shall I tell the first patient to come up?’ said Patsy.

‘OK,’ I sighed.

Patsy took one last look around the bedroom, spotted a small pile of freshly laundered, neatly folded underwear on a chair and stuffed the lot into a drawer in the dressing table. And then she went back downstairs to tell the patient who had been first into the waiting room that morning to come up and see me.

‘Sorry to see you in bed,’ said Mr Daglingpole Birdlip. ‘Your wife says you have a bad back.’ Miss Johnson, my receptionist, had given him his medical records envelope to bring upstairs with him and he put the envelope down on top of the bedclothes, just out of my reach. I could immediately see that the conjunctiva of his right eye was almost completely red.

I agreed that the information he had been given was entirely accurate and that I did, indeed, have a bad back. I could, to be honest, have hoped for a better start to a difficult surgery.

Mr Birdlip is a strange and indomitably gloomy fellow, though he is possibly not as strange as his father who was, for a variety of reasons, something of a local legend. The family has for centuries lived in a large house near Blackmoor Gate. Their ancestors are reputed to have made their money out of smuggling, which was once a very common and profitable activity along the North Devon coast. They were, so it is rumoured, also heavily involved in selling opium to the Chinese and doing a little slave trading.

Sixty or seventy years ago, the Birdlips were rich enough to have servants and in cold weather, Mr P’s father would call for a servant to act as a human hot water bottle. In those days, maids regarded the chore of being taken to bed by their employer as being as much a part of their domestic duties as laying a fire in the drawing room but old Mr P was different in that his requirements were not for a sexual partner but for someone to keep him warm – a human hot water bottle.

According to legend, he didn’t much care which servant offered themselves for this activity, though he preferred the plumper variety of servant since he believed that they produced the most heat. Patchy, who knows a good deal of local history, and even more scurrilous gossip, says that the various male members of staff were as likely as the most luscious junior scullery maid to be selected. Towards the end of Mr Birdlip’s days, the servants would cut cards for the post which was coveted, for although no sexual activity was offered or expected, a fee of one guinea was always paid in cash when the morning breakfast tray was delivered and the human hot water bottle discharged from their duties.

Sadly, for the current Mr Birdlip, the money and the big house had gone.

Mr Birdlip’s father had made a single disastrous investment in a small company which had supposedly found large quantities of gold and silver somewhere in Africa. Unfortunately, the only gold and silver in the mine was the stuff which had been put there to ‘salt the mine’ by the trickster who had founded the company.

After the old man's death, the young Birdlip had to sell the house to pay off his father's debts. He had been left with very little and had taken a job as a labourer on a neighbouring farm. Ever since I have known him, he has struggled through life with a chip the size of a telegraph pole resting on his shoulder. And for most of that time he has been attempting to give up his smoking habit (sixty of the cheapest and most toxic cigarettes it is possible to buy) and his drinking habit (eight or ten pints a night at a small table for one in the Duck and Puddle).

Lean and lugubrious, he has worked outside all his adult life and his skin had been so well weathered that it is impossible to guess at his age other than to say that he was an adult somewhere between the ages of 40 and 80. He is, in fact, still in his early 40s.

And, oddly, despite his smoking and his drinking, he is a world-class hypochondriac. If they gave out medals for introspection and hypochondriasis he would have a drawer full of the damned things. I'm prepared to wager that he knows more about medical matters than some professionals. Smoking and drinking are his habits. His hobby is medicine and crammed into the tiny cottage which he rents, he has a medical library which most doctors would envy.

Whenever he has a day off (once a week) or a holiday (two weeks a year, not to be taken consecutively or in the harvest season) he spends it visiting bookshops and second-hand shops in search of more medical volumes to add to his collection. His problem (and occasionally my problem) is that whenever he has any unusual signs or symptoms he flicks through his books and finds the gloomiest of all possible explanations. He has had cancer seven times in the last couple of years alone (bone cancer, skin cancer, stomach cancer, oesophageal cancer, brain cancer, liver cancer and kidney cancer). In each case there was a very simple explanation for his condition.

A year or two ago he bought himself a second-hand sphygmomanometer and a second-hand stethoscope and used them to take his blood pressure.

I eventually confiscated them both after he had rung me one Sunday evening at 10 p.m. to tell me that he thought he was about to die.

'I've got no blood pressure!' he said. 'I expect I'll be dead by the time you get here.'

I raced round to his cottage and found him pale and shaking. I took his blood pressure and it was, as usual, 115/80. 'There's nothing wrong with your blood pressure,' I told him. 'It's better than mine. And you're definitely not dying.'

I examined his sphygmomanometer which looked as if it had probably been new back in the days of the First World War, when such machines were first becoming widely available.

'You're healthy, but the rubber bulb in your sphygmomanometer has sprung a leak,' I told him. 'Where on earth did you find this thing?'

'I bought it in a house sale in Taunton,' he told me, 'it used to belong to a doctor.' He announced this as though the ownership of the machine had bestowed upon it an air of infallibility.

'You're fine,' I told him. 'But the sphygmomanometer has died.'

By then the pallor and the shaking had both stopped.

Inevitably, by the time I got back home, a film which I'd been looking forward to all week had finished. It was my own fault for planning to watch a film being shown on television rather than a video which I could turn on and off. Patsy assured me that it had been very good and that she would endeavour to purchase a copy next time she went into Barnstaple.

'I had a bad back once,' said Mr Birdlip, who was still beside my bed and who was standing staring down at me as though he were an undertaker and I were a prospect. 'It was a terrible thing. It went on for months and months.' He pursed his lips and shook his head.

'I'm sorry to hear that,' I said.

'Awful pain,' he said. 'I couldn't move an inch. After a couple of weeks I felt quite suicidal.'

'Ah,' I said. This was definitely not making me feel any more cheerful.

'I knew a bloke who spent five years in bed with a bad back,' said Mr Birdlip. 'In the end he lost the use of everything below his waist – legs, whatnot and all. His wife got fed up and left him.' He nodded thoughtfully. 'Can't blame her really, can you? She ended up nursing him, you see. And with him not having any feeling in his whatnot, there was no chance at all of any marital conjugations.'

The full-blooded hypochondriac always has a new complaint, a new disease to talk about. And most hypochondriacs are persistently gloomy. Mr Birdlip is no exception. I always try to be sympathetic and understanding but I really didn't want to hear any more gloomy stuff about bad backs.

I have done quite an amount of research into hypochondriasis over the years for I have several hypochondriacs among my patients. The term 'hypochondria' was first used in its modern sense in the 17th century when it was used to describe a form of depression that was accompanied by rather vague pains and general bowel problems. Leeches were usually the favoured method of treatment. In England, the disorder became rather chic. It was known to its sufferers as ‘hyp’ and the anxiety and gloom that accompanied it were generally regarded as a sign of intelligence. Most sufferers from ‘hyp’ were male (Samuel Johnson and James Boswell were both sufferers) and women with similar symptoms were usually said to be suffering from ‘hysteria’ – then regarded as the female equivalent of ‘hyp’.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, doctors stoked the fires of hypochondria by constantly discovering new diseases and telling people about them. Proust wrote that ‘For each illness that doctors cure with medicine, they provoke ten in healthy people by inoculating them with the virus that is a thousand times more powerful than any microbe: the idea that one is ill.’

Sigmund Freud, the sex-obsessed Austrian, dismissed the whole thing (arguing, inevitably, that hypochondria was merely the result of misplaced sexual urges) but hypochondriasis has steadily become increasingly common and a bigger and bigger problem for doctors. The big danger, of course, is that the doctor may be tempted to dismiss the fears of a patient who is a known hypochondriac, even when they present with signs or symptoms which are, or could be, indications of some serious disorder.

‘What’s your problem today?’ I asked him, not wanting to hear any more of his reminiscences about back problems.

‘I’ve got leukaemia, doctor,’ he announced, with surprising levity. ‘I doubt if I’ve got many more months to live.’ He made this announcement calmly and without regret or sadness; as though it were his inevitable destiny. He rubbed his fingers through the hair he no longer had. It was, I suspect, a gesture he had done many times when he was younger. Now, he still made the gesture but the hair had almost all gone. Mr Birdlip suffers from premature male pattern baldness. I suspect that worrying about his health has probably expedited the hair loss.

I looked up at him, puzzled. ‘Won’t you sit down? There’s a chair there you can use.’ I pointed to the chair that Patsy had positioned for patients to use.

‘I’d rather stand,’ he said. ‘For as long as I am able.’

‘What makes you think you have leukaemia?’ I asked him. I found looking at him very difficult and quite uncomfortable.

‘The bleed in the conjunctiva,’ he said. ‘My books say it happens with leukemia. The growth in the number of white cells is inevitably accompanied by a shortage of platelets. And the absence of platelets means an increased likelihood of bleeding.’ He sighed; the deep dark sigh of a man who has prepared himself to face the ferryman of Hades. ‘Has it occurred to you,’ he continued, ‘that one can be bouncing along without a care in the world, full of beans and bursting with joie de vivre, and then you get up one morning and you have a spot or a cough or a numb bit of skin or, in my case, a red eye, and you think nothing of it and then bang, 24 hours later you’re on your back in an ambulance and 48 hours after that you’re on a slab in the morgue with a scar from here to eternity and the top of your skull held on with staples?’ He paused and laughed. It was one of those laughs usually described as ‘hollow’. ‘And people say not to worry!’

‘Well, when you put it like that…’

‘I do. Indeed I do put it just like that. I have lived hour by hour, always watchful and never taking tomorrow for granted. We are all of us so close to disaster – always just moments away from some terrible end. A seemingly innocuous symptom can be the harbinger of death. You can be meandering along, blissfully happy, and suddenly life will pop you on the head and it’s all over.’

I looked up at him and heard myself sighing. ‘I suppose so,’ I muttered.

‘They do fasten the top of the skull back on with staples don’t they? When they’ve cut it off so that they can examine the brain. Or do they glue it back on? So that the corpse looks good in the coffin.’

I hesitated. ‘I’m not entirely sure,’ I admitted. ‘Almost certainly not glue.’ I looked up at his eye. ‘Have you ever had anything like it before?’

Even when I am feeling well, and on top of my form, I find Mr Birdlip to be rather hard work.

‘Never,’ said Mr Birdlip firmly. ‘Not once in 42 years.’ He thought for a moment. ‘No, I tell a lie. I had a bleed when I was hit in the eye by a tennis ball. But that was a traumatically induced conjunctival haemorrhage.’ He paused and sighed. ‘This time I definitely haven’t been hit in the eye by a tennis ball. I haven’t seen a tennis ball for 30 years.’

‘Do you get hay fever?’ I asked.

He shook his head. He still hadn’t sat down. I was getting a stiff neck looking up at him.

‘Have you had flu? A cold? Anything that made you sneeze?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘I take my vitamins every day.’

‘Have you been rubbing your eyes? Dust in them?’

Another shake of the head.

‘Have you been lifting anything heavy?’

‘Oh yes, doctor. We had a delivery of feed and the forklift truck broke down. I had to unload it all by hand. I’ve got a hernia but I didn’t mention that since there is no point really, is there?’

‘Why is there no point?’

‘Well, the leukaemia will kill me before I could have the hernia repaired, won’t it?’

‘Let me look at the hernia,’ I told him.

He unfastened his trousers. I could immediately see that he had a right sided inguinal hernia. I see a lot of hernias in my practice since many of my patients lift things for a living.

‘Turn your head and cough,’ I said.

‘Why do you want me to turn my head?’ He asked. ‘Does that make a difference to what happens to the hernia?’

‘No. But it means you won’t cough in my face.’

‘Ah!’

He turned his head and coughed. I could see the hernia grow larger as the pressure in his abdomen increased.

‘Did the hernia develop after you’d been unloading the bags of feed?’

‘It did, doctor.’

‘And you had the conjunctival bleed at the same time?’

‘I did, doctor.’

‘They’re connected,’ I told him. ‘They were both caused by the fact that you were lifting something very heavy. You’ve got Ebers Disease.’

An inguinal hernia isn’t usually referred to by that name but I knew that if I told Mr Birdlip that he had a common or garden hernia he would be devastated. So I told him he had Ebers Disease since I remembered being told by one of my lecturers at medical school that the first recorded description of a hernia appeared in an Egyptian papyrus on medical matters. The papyrus, which first appeared around 1500 BC was known as the Ebers Papyrus.

‘I’ve got what?’

‘Ebers disease!’

He looked puzzled. ‘Who’s got my disease then?’ he demanded. It took me a moment to realise that in his confusion and mild paranoia he was now assuming that there had been another medical screw up and that while he had Ebers disease there was another patient running around somewhere suffering from Birdlip disease. He is a rather humourless man who tends to take everything literally. Life with Mr Birdlip is not easy and I long ago realised why he remains a bachelor.

‘No, no,’ I protested. ‘You’ve got Ebers disease. That’s the technical term.’

I told him that the blood on his conjunctiva would disappear over the next few days. ‘And I’ll arrange for you to see a surgeon about that hernia, the Ebers disease’ I told him. ‘Meanwhile I’ll prescribe a truss and you’d better not do any heavy lifting.’

‘What about the leukaemia? How long do you think I’ve got?’

‘You haven’t got leukaemia,’ I told him.

He looked at me. ‘Are you sure?’

I looked at him sternly. ‘Who is the doctor here?’

‘Oh, you are. Definitely,’ said Mr Birdlip. He suddenly brightened up. ‘It was just the lifting then?’

‘It was just the lifting,’ I told him. I didn’t tell him I thought he was lucky to get away with a hernia rather than a crippling back pain.

My second patient was a woman from the Badgworthy Valley called Betty Rutter.

In contrast to Mr Birdlip, Betty Rutter is a constantly bright and jolly woman who is prone to bursting into giggles for no discernible reason. She once told me that a woman’s place is in the bedroom and nowhere else. Her husband does the cooking every evening when he comes in from the fields. She does not believe in housework and so, as a result, every surface in their farmhouse is covered in a generous layer of dust. It is said that household dust is made up largely of skin cells and if that is truly the case then there is now probably enough dust in their house to recreate an army of giants.

‘Do you mind if I shut the door, doctor?’ asked Mrs Rutter. She lowered her voice. ‘It’s a bit personal, you see.’

‘Of course not,’ I said.

There was silence for a moment and then although I could not see what was happening I could hear her struggling to close the door.

Bilbury Grange is an old house and, like older people, it has a good many idiosyncrasies. The back door can only be unlocked if you pull up on the handle when you turn the key. Fortunately, since we hardly ever lock any of our doors this doesn’t matter much. The door to the butler’s pantry won’t open unless you pull the handle down and inwards at the same time. The front door won’t open or shut unless you pull the door towards you. And our bedroom door also requires special attention.

‘You need to push the door in with your left knee and then with your right hand pull up the doorknob. Then it will close.’

There were sounds of much scuffling and pushing, pulling and panting. Eventually, there was a sound of the door clicking shut.

‘Done it,’ said Mrs Rutter. She suddenly burst into giggles. ‘What would folk say?’ she asked.

‘Say about what?’ I asked.

‘If they knew you and I were shut in your bedroom together!’

‘I don’t think there’s any danger of anything improper occurring,’ I said. I realised when I’d said it that it sounded rather pompous.

She sat by the bed in silence for a while. I waited. Eventually I asked her if she had come to see me for any particular reason.

She laughed, as though this were very funny. ‘I went into Barnstaple the other week and quite forgot what I’d gone for,’ she told me. ‘Things like that happen to me all the time. I do remember some things quite vividly but I’m not always entirely convinced that I manage to put them in the correct order or the proper context or indeed whether the things I do remember actually happened or whether I just imagined them.’

I made a reassuring and encouraging sound. It is a sound all GPs acquire as they become more experienced. It is a sound which means ‘Please go on’. It is often said that you can safely tell a GP anything since he or she will know too much to be shocked or even surprised. This is true but conversations with Mrs Rutter always left me slightly discombobulated; as though I’d had slightly too much to drink and was no longer quite sure what was going on.

‘I’ve got a little lump,’ she said. She stood up, pulled her skirt up as far as it would go and then pulled her voluminous knee length knickers down. The knickers were of the bloomers style which used to be popular with Victorian lady cyclists. She then pointed to a scar on her abdomen. There was, indeed, a small lump at the site of the scar. It occurred to me that if I had been playing ‘patient bingo’ I would be doing well. I had scored two hernias in a row.

‘What was the operation for?’ I asked.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ she answered. ‘I think they took something away.’

‘Don’t you know what it was that they removed?’

‘Oh good heavens no!’ she said, quite firmly. ‘I didn’t like to ask.’ She paused and looked at me. ‘It wouldn’t have been polite would it?’

‘That’s OK,’ I said, ‘you can put your skirt back down now.’

‘They know what they’re doing, don’t they? Or at least we have to assume they know what they’re doing, don’t we?’

‘I guess so,’ I agreed. I liked it that she included me with her. I always think a good GP should always be on the side of the patients. If it’s going to be ‘us versus them’ then I need to be on the ‘us’ team with the patients.

‘And shall I pull up my knickers?’

Mrs Rutter is a very precise woman.

‘Indeed. Absolutely. You should pull up your knickers too.’

This was more of a struggle than it would have been if she had done it before she had allowed her ankle length skirt to fall back into position.

‘I’ll write to the hospital and arrange for you to see a surgeon,’ I told her. I wondered idly if I could get a special deal from the hospital. Have one hernia repaired, get the other repaired free.

It took her some time but Mrs Rutter eventually managed to get the door open. She was giggling loudly when she left.

The third patient that morning was Tiggy Marwood.

Tiggy has had five children with five different fathers and I am still waiting for her to learn that babies are like promises in that they are very easy to make but much harder to keep.

She had started her career in motherhood at the age of 16 which was, when she began, quite an early age. ‘Virginity is very overrated,’ she once told me. ‘It’s like a balloon. One prick and it’s gone forever.’

Tiggy had been born in London where her mother, Lilian Marwood, had been a professional ‘knocker up’ in the 1930s.

I’d never heard of this sort of employment before but it seemed that her mother’s job required her to wake her clients every morning by blowing dried peas at their bedroom windows. She had to get up at 4.00 a.m. and was finished work by 6.30 a.m. She used a small wooden tube for firing the peas, clearly a piece of professional pea-shooting equipment, and the job had been handed down in her family for three generations. I gather that the business had been pretty well destroyed by alarm clocks and when the business died on the outbreak of the Second World War, Mrs Marwood had less than fifty clients. I met Lilian Marwood once when she came to Bilbury for a few days.

She suffered from thyrotoxicosis, refused to contemplate treatment and I suspect that she never weighed more than seven stones fully clothed in winter.

Tiggy is an unusual woman. Every time I see her she tells me that her best pal is serving five years in Exeter jail for soliciting and that she once lived next door to a woman whose son played professional football for Hartlepool United. I don't know why she tells me these things but I suspect that she thinks I will, in some way, be impressed.

Tiggy has an exceptional talent for saying the wrong thing at the wrong time to the wrong person. I think she probably always means well, but has a bad case of 'foot in mouth disease' and is a specialist in the unintentional backhanded compliment. I once heard her say to a villager who was wearing a new dress: 'That's a very nice dress. Did you make it yourself?' And I heard her say to a fellow who was showing off a lovely new car which he had been saving up to buy for several months: 'Did you inherit some money?' None of this was said to hurt but these, and many other, unfortunate incidents mean that people sometimes find themselves busy examining a hedge or looking down at the ground if they see Tiggy out and about in the village.

She was, she told me, now pregnant again and had decided that this time she wanted her latest paramour to be present in the bedroom at the birth of their child. She said she'd read a magazine article about women whose husbands had been in the labour room with them. Apparently, they all said that it had strengthened their relationships. 'They say that since the man was there at the going in bit of the pregnancy, it is only right that he should be there at the coming out bit.'

I didn't tell Tiggy but I was not quite so enthusiastic about the current enthusiasm for encouraging all fathers to be in the delivery room at the moment of truth. Some are probably better suited to pacing up and down in the corridor outside. The delivery room can be messy, noisy and unnerving. I fear that a nervous father to be might end up feeling nauseous and guilty – as well as considering himself to be somewhat surplus to requirements.

I said I would be happy for him to be present. But that he would have to leave the bedroom if he felt sick or thought he might faint.

Tiggy was delighted. But I had real reservations. When she told me his name, I realised that I knew her current lover. Nigel is a patient of mine. He is a nice enough fellow, a very nervous unemployed male model, and to be honest I had always thought of him as 'batting for the other side', as I have heard it described. Actually, he calls himself a male model but I don't think he has ever done any modelling. I remember he told me that he thought he would make a good model because he has never had any difficulty in moving around while wearing clothes and felt, indeed, that he was very good at it. I told him, rather tentatively, that I thought there might be more to it than that but he insisted that there is not.

'You don't have a hernia, by any chance, do you?' I asked Tiggy, as she headed for the door. She turned and looked at me, frowning slightly. 'A hernia? No, I don't think so. Why? Should I?'

'No, no, it's nothing,' I said. 'It's just that we're running a special offer on hernias today.'

She left, looking very confused.

My fourth patient that day was Lord Chilcottt who is, to be frank, not quite what he might seem to be. He lives in East Ilkerton but insists on staying on my list of patients because he says I understand him in a way that no other doctor possibly could or would.

His surname is Chilcottt and his Christian name is Lord, in the same way that Mr Ellington's first name is Duke and Mr Basie's first name is 'Count'. The difference is that whereas I very much doubt that Mr Ellington ever tries to pass himself off as a duke, or Mr Basie ever pretends that he is a count, Mr Chilcottt makes every effort possible to pass himself off as a Lord. When he rings a restaurant to book a table, or a hotel to reserve a room, he tells the receptionist that his name is Lord Chilcott and always succeeds in making it sound as though the Lord were a genuine title, rather than simply a name. When he first telephoned the surgery, expecting to be able to make an appointment, Miss Johnson was very impressed and came running into my surgery to ask if we should give him an appointment before the surgery started. I told her that we do not have an appointments system and that we will never have an appointments system and that even if Her Majesty the Queen calls in for a consultation she will have to sit in the waiting room with the other patients and wait her turn. Miss Johnson was not impressed by this.

Mr Chilcott makes a real effort to look and sound very patrician. He wears his white hair long, combed straight back and curling over the collar, he always fastens his shirt cuffs with what look like heavy gold cufflinks and even in summer he always wear a three piece suit, with a gold chain across one side of his waistcoat, as though attached to a fob watch in the pocket.

'I get tired if I walk more than five or six miles,' he said, sitting down on the edge of my bed and giving me a jolt which made me wince. He didn't notice my wincing. 'And I get especially tired if I have to walk up steep hills.'

'Ah,' I said, not immediately being able to think of anything else more appropriate to say.

'I used to be able to walk to Barnstaple and back,' he said, rather defiantly.

'How old are you?' I asked.

‘I’ll be 92 next month,’ he replied instantly, with considerable pride.

‘I’m afraid I think you perhaps just have to come to terms with the fact that you’re not as young as you were,’ I told him, in too much pain to think of a more tactful way to break the news to him.

‘Do you think that’s it?’ he asked, genuinely surprised.

‘I’m afraid so.’

‘The old ageing process catching up with me?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well I never,’ he said. He stood up. ‘So, what do you suggest?’ he asked.

‘Take shorter walks,’ I said. ‘Or just stop for a while and admire the view every so often.’

He thought for a while then nodded. ‘Good advice, doctor,’ he said. ‘Would you syringe my ears while I’m here? I think the wax is building up again.’

I looked at him, hardly able to believe my own ears. I was lying flat on my back. It hurt to move. Most of my patients are thoughtful and appreciative. Lord Chilcott, as he always refers to himself, is one of those patients every doctor would happily manage without. He always sends me a cheap bottle of sherry at Christmas and for this he expects to be treated as a private patient. I would be far happier if he kept the sherry (which we never drink) and behaved a little more thoughtfully when visiting the surgery.

‘If you pop along to the hospital, the nurse will syringe them for you,’ I told him.

‘But you usually syringe them yourself!’ protested Mr Chilcott.

He was right, of course. I like to perform small procedures like syringing ears, removing stitches and sewing up small lacerations. I think it helps to cement the doctor-patient relationship if the doctor actually does something active from time to time.

‘I would syringe your ears if I could,’ I promised. ‘And I will syringe your ears next time they’re blocked. But I’m afraid I don’t think I’ll be able to syringe your ears from this position. You’ll have to go the Brownlow Country Hotel this time.’

‘Can’t you sit up?’

I told him that I could not.

‘Oh,’ he said, ‘I thought you were just perhaps having a bit of a lie in.’

‘You’ll have to go to the Brownlow Country Hotel,’ I told him. I didn’t have the energy or the patience to explain that I was not in bed out of choice.

Mr Chilcott looked puzzled. ‘The hotel? I didn’t know we had a hotel in Bilbury.’

‘It’s really the Bilbury hospital,’ I explained. ‘But we aren’t allowed to call it a hospital.’

‘Oh no, of course not,’ agreed Mr Chilcott. ‘Bloody silly if you ask me.’

He stood up and left without another word.

The fifth patient was Mrs Germander Speedwell who is in her 80s and in pretty good health for her age. Her biggest problem is that she is very aware of her age and expects to find every day a physical trial. She took one look at our stairs and said she didn’t think she could manage them. So, since she was stuck downstairs and I was stuck upstairs, she stood in the hall and shouted up her replies to the questions I shouted down.

She wanted to know if I believed in euthanasia and said she was worried that when her time came she might not be able to deal very well with any accompanying pain. I promised her that I would make sure that she did not suffer any pain and Patsy said that she went away much happier than she’d been when she arrived.

During the day, word got round the village that the doctor had a bad back and was stuck in bed and the evening surgery was much quieter. Most people who might have come along decided that they could wait a day or so until I was able to see them in my consulting room, and examine them properly.

One patient did, however, turn up in the middle of the afternoon. It turned out to be someone I knew.

When I first met him, Jonquil Barley was working as a television presenter on an afternoon television chat show. (Astonishingly, he really did have a sister called Pearl. I think his parents had a sense of humour.) This was back in the days when I used to make regular television appearances. He was one of those energetic, excitable television people who always seem to be driven by clockwork and to have been wound up by an over-enthusiastic child. He had television hair (especially coiffed and gelled so that even in a hurricane not one hair would move a tenth of an inch), a television smile (permanently present and designed to show off his immaculately capped and whitened teeth) and a wardrobe full of beautifully fitting television suits.

Sadly, time did not treat him well.

He lost his hair and tried to deal with the loss by purchasing a toupee. The problem was that the viewers who had watched him balding were a little surprised to see him suddenly appear with a luxurious head of hair. Most television presenters deal with their hair loss gradually, as the loss occurs. Jonquil left it too late.

Worse still, when he had plastic surgery done to disguise the ravages of age, he went to a cut price surgeon who promised much but delivered little. And he went from having huge eyebags and a sagging chin to having skin so taut that it could have been used on a drum. Once again the viewers thought this hugely comical.

With no one taking him seriously as a television presenter, Jonquil, moved to radio where the hair and the skin were of no account. His agent found him a job presenting a local radio programme.

For a while all went well but Jonquil simply couldn't cope with the new life. He'd been accustomed to being a 'star', to having fans stop him in the street and ask for his autograph and to having production staff fussing around attending to his make-up, making sure that his suit jacket wasn't wrinkled and telling him how wonderful he was. He found working on the wireless something of an anti-climax and he started to drink more and more alcohol. On several occasions, he turned up late for work and once or twice listeners complained that he sounded drunk on the radio. Soon the boss of the radio station had to give him an official warning.

Jonquil then walked out of the radio station, telling everyone that he had been offered a fantastic job on a television station in America. He organised a big party, which he could ill afford, and told big lies to everyone present. Colleagues and friends all wished him good luck.

I learned all this from him a year or two later.

He had found out where I was living and working and came to see me. He wanted to know if I could find him work. I rang round half a dozen people I knew at radio stations in the South West of England and eventually managed to get him a late night show on one of the stations.

The job lasted six weeks.

Jonquil was fired because he missed two programmes and was caught drinking alcohol while on the air.

That was, I think, the last paid employment he ever had.

He now looked awful. His face was flabby and he was fat. He was almost unrecognisable. His clothes were filthy and he smelt as if he hadn't bathed for a week or more. His nose and cheeks were red with the flush of a chronic alcoholic and he reeked of tobacco and booze.

He told me that he had been living rough in Exeter and remembering that I was in North Devon had hitchhiked his way up to Bilbury. It had taken him nearly two days.

'What can I do for you?' I asked him. I had no intention of trying to get him another job. I knew he'd let everyone down.

'Life's gone downhill a bit since I saw you last,' he said. It was the understatement of the century as far as I was concerned.

I told him I was sorry to hear it.

'Never could tell the difference between a dragon and a windmill,' he said, with a hollow laugh.

I smiled and nodded.

'I need a prescription,' he told me baldly. He explained that he wanted amphetamines and benzodiazepines.

'Can't live without the damned things,' he said. 'I'm weaning myself off them but it's a slow process as you know.'

I refused him.

'I'll give you the names of two clinics,' I told him. 'If you go there, and you're honest, they will help you.'

He swore and told me he didn't want to go to any bloody clinic. 'I've travelled for two days to come and see you,' he said angrily. He pulled his lips back in a strange sort of snarl. To someone lying in bed he actually looked quite frightening. 'I should have known better than to put my faith in some hick country doctor.'

'I'll give you some money to tide you over for a few days,' I told him. I made a supreme effort and reached for my wallet on the bedside table. It contained £60. It was all the cash we had in the house; a lot of money for us. I handed him the £30 which he took without a word. He then turned on his heel and walked out. When he had left, I realised that he hadn't once asked me why I was in bed in the middle of the day. I strongly suspected that the £30 would be blown on the drugs I'd refused to prescribe for him. He would doubtless know where to find what he needed.

'You haven't been sniffing laughing gas, have you?' asked Patsy, when she came upstairs to tell me that there were no more patients waiting to be seen. 'Mrs Rutter came downstairs as giggly as a schoolgirl and had her dress tucked into the back of her knickers and Tiggy Marwood came down saying something about you having a special offer on hernias.

'It's been a long morning,' I said with a sigh. I told her about Jonquil and our £60. 'And Lord Chilcott wanted me to syringe his ears while I lay flat on my back in bed.'

'At least he didn't come downstairs with his shirt hanging out of the back of his trousers,' said Patsy with a laugh.

I spent the rest of the afternoon lying in bed, trying to remember when Jonquil's life had begun to slide downhill. I eventually decided that he had probably always been doomed. I could remember a lot of small signs which should have told me which way things were going to go. It was all so, so sad.

There were just three patients at the evening surgery.

Mrs Mallory Spark, a divorcee in her thirties, had a recurrence of her cystitis. I scribbled out a prescription for an antibiotic though she has frequently told me that she suspects that her cystitis is usually a result of over energetic sexual activity with an exceptionally well endowed lover, rather than an infection. I have, however, found that if I don't prescribe an antibiotic her symptoms don't go away and I suspect that the story of the over demanding over endowed lover may well be more wishful thinking than rude reality.

Mr Albert Butt (known to everyone as 'Scuttle') came along complaining that his itchy feet were keeping him awake. With the aid of my shaving mirror and the mirror on Patsy's dressing table, I was able to examine his feet and make a diagnosis of athlete's foot. I prescribed some antifungal cream and promised him a good night's sleep.

The third patient, Norbert Hicklebury, complained that he thought he was going blind. He said he was frightened that he had macular degeneration – the disorder which had destroyed his father's quality of life. I was able to tell him that he had a cataract and that I would make an appointment for him to see an eye specialist. When I told him that the cataract could be treated, and that he would not lose his sight, he was almost deliriously happy.

After the end of the surgery, Patsy told me that she had noticed that a small bronze statue that had been standing on a table in the hall was missing. It was a statue of Napoleon on horseback; a rather nice three dimensional copy of the famous painting of Napoleon Bonaparte by the French artist Jacques-Louis David. Our good friends the Foggs, Patchy and Adrienne, had given it to us the previous Christmas.

'I think someone has stolen it,' she said sadly.

I knew who it was.

I don't know whether I was sadder at the disappearance of the bronze or at the fact that Jonquil had stolen it.

The rest of the evening was quiet. The telephone didn't ring once.

And the following day was quiet, too. There were just four patients at the morning surgery and two patients at the evening surgery. Two of the morning patients merely wanted repeat prescriptions. One wanted to know if I would be well enough to make her bottle of bitter, green medicine when she ran out at the weekend (it contains nothing powerful and is my most popular and most effective placebo). I assured her that I would.

Three of the day's patients had come merely to bring me presents (one brought some old magazines, one brought a bottle of home-made whisky (I'm not sure whether or not it is as illegal to accept home-made whisky as it is to make it but I'm not going to say anything to the authorities and neither is the patient who made it) and the third brought a home embroidered card and a bunch of mixed flowers. Patsy allowed these three up into the bedroom (now turned into a temporary consulting room) and later told me that I had received more than a dozen 'Get Well' cards. She said that ten of the cards were identical and had clearly all been bought from Peter Marshall's shop.

And, praise the heavens, there were no urgent calls; no real emergencies which I could not deal with. The nearest thing to an emergency was the moment when Mrs Ossbury was stung by a bee. Mrs Ossbury is allergic to bee stings and has, in the past, suffered nasty reactions. Her husband brought her to the house for treatment and, understandably, they were both in quite a state. With Patsy's help, directing me and guiding my hand, I managed to give Mrs Ossbury an injection of adrenalin and the crisis was immediately averted. Mrs Ossbury left, I'm pleased to report, with the back of her skirt outside her knickers, which were nowhere near as voluminous as those worn by Mrs Rutter and had the words 'Welcome. Please Enter' embroidered on the front. She seemed very embarrassed when this was revealed and I got the distinct impression that she had not expected to visit the doctor when she'd got dressed earlier that day. Still, it could have been worse. I once saw a patient who wore panties with the words 'Tradesmen please use the back entrance' embroidered on them.

After two days in bed, fretting and doubtless increasingly irritable, I awoke on the third day and realised, with great delight, that the pain which had immobilised me was considerably better. Gingerly, I managed to slide out of bed and stand on my own two feet again. My sympathy for patients who need to spend long periods immobile was, as it always is whenever I have to spend time in bed, massively enhanced. There is nothing like a little illness of their own to teach doctors to be more sympathetic when dealing with their patients.

I remembered that a medical school tutor of mine once said that all medical students should be forced to spend a week in bed every six months. That way, he said, they would never forget just how tiresome and exhausting it can be to be ill.

Granny Kennett's Pudding Club

A few months before Frank had his stroke, Frank and Gilly at the Duck and Puddle public house decided that they wanted to do a little 'pro-active marketing'.

It was actually Gilly, (who had obtained the phrase 'pro-active marketing' from a management magazine which a tourist left in the bar) who made the decision. Frank readily admits that if things were left to him there would be customs posts on every lane leading into the village and the pub would ban all outsiders. Thumper once claimed that Frank only became a licensee so that he could live in a pub and never run short of alcohol and Frank, who was there at the time, laughed, went an even deeper shade of red than is usual and agreed with him.

A group of us were sitting in the snug one lunch-time, when Gilly made her announcement. Thumper and Anne, Patchy and Adrienne were there, along with Peter Marshall and Patsy. It's rare to see Peter Marshall away from his shop during the daytime but Peter had closed for the morning because he'd been driving the hearse for the local undertaker. On his way home, he'd called in at the Duck and Puddle for half a shandy and a cheese sandwich. (Peter, a hard-working entrepreneur of the old school, has a number of jobs and would take on more responsibilities if he could persuade someone in authority to extend the number of hours in the day.)

'We need to do something to attract more visitors to the village,' Gilly said, to almost universal dismay and not a little astonishment. 'Every evening we see the same old faces in here and although we love you all dearly we need to persuade new customers to come into the pub.'

'Things are fine as they are,' protested Patchy, who regards anything new as an affront and has an oft-aired theory that all change must inevitably make things worse.

Frank, who obviously wasn't thinking straight, for if he had been he wouldn't have been so daft as to disagree with his wife, agreed with Patchy.

Gilly threw a beermat at Frank and told him to shut up.

Frank shut up.

The only person in the snug who thought that Gilly was talking sense was Peter Marshall.

Peter is always keen to persuade more people to come to the village. Since he has the only retail establishment for miles around he believes, not unreasonably, that if more visitors pass through the village then at least some of the money in the travellers' pockets will not go with them when they leave but will remain behind in his till.

Although he has no formal training in marketing, Peter, whose long established slogan is 'Buy One and Get What You Pay For', is forever coming up with new wheezes which will, he believes, turn his establishment into the heart of an international conglomerate. His long-term business plan is to float his shop on the stock market and sell shares to eager hedge fund operatives. Not long ago, he cleared out a shed next to his shop and he now rents this out to several local entrepreneurs, including a vet and a hairdresser. A few years ago he had a huge sign made which announced 'Buy One –Buy Another At The Same Price!' and could not understand why it didn't bring charabancs full of tourists flooding in from hotels in Lynton, Lynmouth and Ilfracombe. When one customer cheekily asked Peter for a discount, telling him that she thought he ought to take something off two shirts she was thinking of buying, Peter flew into a rage. He tore a sleeve off each of the shirts and asked her if that satisfied her.

Peter is always trying out new ways to ingratiate himself with potential customers and it is impossible not to admire his determination. A week ago, I went into his shop and found myself listening, in astonishment, as he told me detailed stories about his childhood. At the same time, I was encouraged to gaze in bewilderment as he showed me pictures of obscure relatives he claimed to have discovered in Northumberland and a particularly snowy and photogenic part of Canada. One of his relatives, he insisted, had a child with asthma. Several of his alleged relatives were beautiful, young women whose photographs looked to me as though they had been clipped out of a magazine. When I eventually managed to stop the flow of information long enough to ask him what the devil he was doing, he explained that he had read in a book that a salesman should try to charm his customers, and ingratiate himself with them by sharing information about his own life and family. Since Peter doesn't have much of a life, and certainly doesn't have any family, I thought he was making a pretty good attempt to follow the author's advice. 'I wouldn't bother,' I told him, 'I only came in for a box of paperclips. And I'm going to buy those whether or not you show me pictures of people having a good time in the snowy wastes of Canada.' Peter sighed and tossed the pictures into a corner. I don't think he tried it on anyone else.

'We need to think of some way to persuade discerning people with taste and money to come to Bilbury,' said Gilly.

'I think it's a splendid idea,' said Peter, 'though I'm not sure we necessarily need discerning people with taste. I'd happily settle for people with money. And we have to be more business-like about the way we run the village. Just the other day, I had some people in the shop who had never even heard of Bilbury until they got here. They only found the village by mistake and once they'd got here they didn't know where they were because someone, whom I will not name, took down all the signposts.' He looked sternly at Thumper when he said this.

'Taking down the signs was necessary,' said Thumper, rather defensively. 'We had all that trouble with people thinking that the water in Bilbury would cure all their illnesses. We were knee deep in tourists and the lanes were clogged.'

The rest of us nodded our approval. The council had been a little upset about the disappearing road signs but since they refused to have any new ones made and couldn't find the old ones (they're hidden at the bottom of a silage silo on a farm in the village and not even the owner of the silo knows they are there).

'I always thought that was a missed opportunity,' grumbled Peter, who still sells bottled Bilbury water through the mail. He fills the bottles with water out of the tap and charges a small fortune for the stuff. It is rumoured that there is a man in Dubai who won't drink anything else and a man who works in the sorting office in Barnstaple once told me that Peter sends a crate of the stuff to Dubai every week. 'We could have handled that better,' continued Peter. 'We should have taken proper advantage of the situation.'

'That's as may be,' said Gilly, 'the water business was probably a bit too much of a good thing. I want to find something that will bring well-off, high-spending visitors to the pub. We don't need a lot of them and we don't need them here every day. We just need them and their money once a week or once a month.'

Peter, who had clearly already envisaged charabancs full of tourists arriving in the village on a daily basis, was obviously disappointed. The rest of us were relieved.

'You need something that brings in people from all over the country,' said Adrienne.

'But not too many of them,' said Thumper quickly.

'We could hold a second hand book fair,' suggested Adrienne. 'We could have stalls selling old books,' she looked around brightly, 'lots of people buy books so lots of people would come to Bilbury.'

'Great idea but a guy called Richard Booth has started something like that in Hay-on-Wye,' said Patchy. 'We need something original and exciting.'

'Oh,' said Adrienne. She seemed disappointed.

'But we don't want anything too exciting,' said Thumper. 'We don't want to fill the place with people.'

'You could offer cut price drinks,' said Peter Marshall. 'Half price beer for example. That would be very popular.'

'We'd lose money on every pint we sold,' said Gilly.

'In the retail trade it's called offering a loss leader,' said Peter.

I remembered, but tactfully didn't mention, that the only time Peter had offered a loss leader had been a disaster. It was, I remembered, a year or two ago, before the British currency was decimalised, and Peter had bought a small advertisement in the Barnstaple paper offering packets of biscuits for sixpence to customers who spent £1 on other groceries. There was subsequently some disquiet among customers, particularly the ones who had travelled from Barnstaple and Bideford, when they discovered that the packets of biscuits he was selling for sixpence contained just two ginger biscuits and had originally been packaged to be given away free on aeroplanes. Customers were even more upset when they discovered that the biscuits, which were in packages made for an airline called Air Enterprises which had gone bust in 1955, were all stale.

'I thought the idea was to think of something to bring people with money into the pub,' said Frank who had obviously been upset by the prospect of selling beer at half price.

'Of course it is,' said Gilly.

'How about a beer festival?' suggested Patchy. 'You could put tents up in the car park and have barrels of different types of real ale on sale.'

'Maybe just one tent,' said Thumper, who was obviously keen that the event, whatever it was, shouldn't bring too many people into the village.

'Oh, I don't think so,' said Gilly, pulling a face. 'Not a beer festival! There would be a lot of drunken people being sick in the flowerbeds.'

Frank, who had looked excited, now looked disappointed.

'Have you noticed how life is all about making decisions?' said Thumper, who had clearly been looking forward to a quiet hour in the pub. He paused and inspected a pork scratching before popping it into his mouth. 'Come to think about it, I suppose that not making a decision still means making a decision not to do something.'

'How about a gin festival?' suggested Patchy. 'Bit more up-market than a beer festival, don't you think?'

'People who are sick after drinking too much gin are just as likely to be sick as people who drink too much beer,' said Thumper. 'They only difference is that they always vomit in the lavatories.'

Gilly did not look as if she had been reassured by this.

'A whisky festival would be nice,' said Frank. 'Just a small festival with malt whisky tasting sessions. I could give lectures on the different types of malt whisky.'

'You'll drink any profits,' said Gilly firmly.

'You could have a dining club,' suggested Patsy. 'Once a week or once a month you could have a special dinner. People would join a club and have a slap up meal with a theme.'

'What sort of special dinner?' asked Frank, looking a little alarmed. 'What sort of 'theme'?'

'Once a month would probably be best,' said Thumper quickly. 'Don't want to make too much work for yourself do you?'

'Oh, I don't know what sort of theme,' said Patsy, replying to Frank. 'But I suppose you could have French food one week, Indian food another week, Thai food another week – something different every week.'

'Or once a month,' said Thumper.

'Or once a month,' agreed Patsy. 'You could call it a dinner club.'

'It's a wonderful idea but who could possibly cook all those different dishes?' asked Gilly, looking concerned. 'If we had to bring in a chef we'd probably end up spending more money than we were making.'

'Not the idea at all,' said Frank.

'Chip suppers once a month?' suggested Patchy. 'Simple enough.'

'We do those already,' Gilly reminded him. 'Ham and chips, egg and chips, sausage and chips. That's our menu.'

'And any variation on the theme,' said Frank. 'You can have ham, sausage, egg and chips if you like.'

'Probably best to forget about the whole thing,' said Thumper firmly. 'Never mind, we all tried.' He stood up. 'Time for another round everyone? I'm buying.'

'Splendid idea,' said Peter Marshall instantly. 'I'll have a whisky. Double please.' He finished the half a shandy he'd been drinking.

'Very decent of you,' said Frank. 'I'll have a pint myself.' He stood up and walked over to the bar to start preparing the drinks. Discussions about how the Duck and Puddle could improve its cash flow situation were shelved while we all gave him our orders.

'What about just doing puddings?' suggested Patsy, when the new round of drinks had been distributed and Thumper had forked over the cash.

We all looked at her. She sipped her tomato juice.

'You could call it a pudding club!' she said brightly.

'What's a pudding club?' asked Frank.

'It's for women who are pregnant,' said Adrienne. She turned to her sister. 'Are you suggesting that we organise sex parties at the Duck and Puddle?'

I looked at Patsy and raised an eyebrow.

'Not that sort of pudding club!' said Patsy, blushing slightly. She looked at Adrienne. 'Trust you to think of that sort of pudding club!'

'Well what other sort of pudding club is there?' asked Adrienne.

'A dining club but you only serve puddings!' said Patsy.

I looked at her admiringly. I rather like puddings myself. I'm not so keen on broccoli and cabbage but I'm a devil for spotted dick and treacle pudding.

'What a brilliant idea!' said Gilly. 'Why hasn't anyone else thought of that?'

'Probably because my wife is brighter than everyone else!' I said, proudly.

'There was some sort of pudding club in America,' said Patchy, who has a vast reservoir of pretty well useless knowledge. 'I think it was at Harvard. But they only served the one pudding – something called Hasty Pudding.'

'What on earth is Hasty Pudding?' asked Frank. 'Something you knock up in a couple of minutes?'

'Probably,' laughed Patchy. 'I seem to remember it consisted of grains or corn cooked in milk or water. Doesn't sound all that much fun. A mushy sort of pudding. I think it's mentioned in the song 'Yankee Doodle'.'

'I can't see many people coming along to eat corn cooked in water,' said Frank, who doesn't really take to any food that doesn't contain at least 500 calories a portion. He shuddered at the thought.

'No, no, that's not the idea at all,' said Patsy. 'You offer people half a dozen different, traditional puddings – the sort of old-fashioned puddings that no one much bothers with any more. The sort of puddings that were served in schools.'

'Treacle pudding, roly poly pudding, spotted dick, bread pudding – that sort of thing!' I said, my mouth watering at the thought.

'You serve just puddings,' said Patsy, now warming to her theme. 'And people come along and pay a fixed price and can eat as many helpings of pudding as they want.'

'Those are all easy to make,' said Gilly.

'And cheap,' added Frank.

'It's not going to bring many people into Bilbury,' protested Peter who can be relied upon to think only of his own bottom line. 'And if you have the pudding club in the evenings how many of them are going to call in at my shop?'

'You can have the indigestion concession,' said Frank. 'Treacle pudding always gives me indigestion. You can supply us with a pile of different antacids which we'll put on a table by the door so that people can buy what they need as they're leaving.'

'I think this is a brilliant idea,' said Patchy. 'I love puddings. But those rich, stodgy puddings always give me terrible indigestion too.' He paused. 'But I don't care. I still eat them.'

'He does,' agreed Adrienne, who was still getting used to being a wife and running her own kitchen. 'I have to make three steamed puddings a week or else he sulks.'

'I'd need some help,' said Gilly. 'I'm not terribly good at puddings.'

'Granny Kennett!' said Patsy and I simultaneously.

The woman known as Granny Kennett is the grandmother of Patsy and Adrienne. Technically, since Patsy and I now have small children of our own, Patsy's mum should be known as 'Granny Kennett' but then the original 'Granny Kennett' would have to be 'Great Granny Kennett' and apart from being a bit of mouthful it would make everyone concerned feel very old. So Granny Kennett remains Granny Kennett.

Frank, Thumper and Patchy looked at me. Adrienne, Anne and Gilly looked at Patsy. Peter, who was busy working out what he could charge for bottles of indigestion medicine sold to a captive audience, didn't look up from the beermat upon which he was doing his calculations. Since he sells pens and pencils but never carries one himself, Peter was using a pen he'd borrowed from me. I watched him with some dismay since a pen which has been used to write on a beermat never again works properly.

'Granny Kennett makes the most marvellous puddings in the world!' cried Adrienne. 'What a brilliant idea!'

'We could call it Granny Kennett's Pudding Club!' said Gilly.

'Marvellous!' said Adrienne.

'Do you think she'd mind?' asked Gilly.

'She'd be as pleased as Punch!' said Patsy.

'She'd absolutely love it,' said Adrienne at the same time.

And so it was decided that the Duck and Puddle would introduce a new monthly Pudding Club, where diners would be invited to consume as many helpings of pudding as they could eat. All the puddings would be of the old-fashioned variety, served with a choice of either custard or custard, in other words no choice at all. Everyone agreed with Thumper that it would be best to hold the new Pudding Club monthly. Frank said that he would put up a poster and insert a small and inexpensive advertisement in the Barnstaple newspaper. Peter Marshall said that if Frank made two posters he would stick one up in his shop since he had been given the antacid concession.

When, later in the day, Patsy and Adrienne went round to see her, Granny Kennett was, as her granddaughters had predicted, absolutely delighted that the Pudding Club was being named after her and she readily agreed to join Gilly in preparing the puddings.

During the three weeks which followed, much time was spent selecting the puddings for the inaugural meeting of the Club and the recipes were carefully honed and polished. (Editor's Note: the recipes appear at the back of this book under the imaginative heading of 'Granny Kennett's Pudding Club Recipes'.)

To everyone's absolute delight, the Granny Kennett Pudding Club proved enormously successful. And, more to the point perhaps, it actually proved rather profitable for Frank and Gilly.

Granny Kennett steadfastly refused to take any payment for her services or for her recipes (she was, she said and meant, absolutely thrilled to be part of such an exciting culinary venture) and Peter Marshall, usually so very careful to watch every penny, was persuaded to hand over a small portion of his profits from the sale of indigestion remedies to the Duck and Puddle 'Let's Actually Make a Profit For Once Fund'.

The first customers were, inevitably, the locals and the citizens of Bilbury turned out in some force to join the Pudding Club. The whole venture was so successful that Gilly predicted that before long there would be Pudding Clubs at pubs, restaurants and hotels all over England. Patsy's idea had, it seemed, proved extremely attractive to customers of a certain age. Without exception, the customers who joined the Club were over the age of 40. All could remember stodgy, steamed puddings from their childhoods. All wanted to recapture the joy of a treacle sponge and the filling delight of a rich, well-made plum pudding covered in a thick custard. (Gilly decided right from the start that it would be impossible to have a Pudding Club without having a plum pudding on the menu. Granny Kennett concurred, saying that when she had been a girl, her mother had made plum pudding several times throughout the year. It had not, she said, been exclusively reserved for Christmas.)

Outsiders only started to attend the Pudding Club evenings after the third week. And that was when, from my point of view, the trouble really started.

The people who live in Bilbury tend to have large appetites. Most of them lead arduous lives and can burn up a good number of calories in an ordinary day. Even so, most were sensible enough to know when to stop.

However, something designed as an integral part of the attraction turned out to be a bit of a problem.

One of the basic principles of the Granny Kennett Pudding Club was that members would pay a membership fee to join the club, and a fee for each meeting of the club which they attended, but they would not pay separately for each pudding they ate. At least six different puddings would be served during an evening and all the members present were entitled to enjoy as many of the puddings as they thought they could manage. Moreover, members were perfectly entitled to request second, third, fourth or more helpings. There were, as Frank put it, ‘no limits’.

(Nothing happened at these club meetings, except that a number of fine puddings were served. There were no minutes and no agenda, but it seemed rather fun to describe the culinary entertainments as ‘meetings’ for it enabled everyone attending to say, if faced with an invitation or commitment which they wanted to avoid, that they had to attend a ‘meeting’ in the village. This excuse quickly became as popular with villagers as is the excuse ‘I have to go on a course’ is with golfers.)

The problem with allowing people to eat unlimited amounts of food is that some of them will try to do just that.

And that is when the problems started.

When people have driven thirty miles to eat steamed puddings they arrive determined to get their money’s worth. They want to eat everything available, and they want to eat it all two or three times. People turned out to be even greedier when they had booked themselves into a room at the Duck and Puddle. It turns out that if you’ve driven thirty miles and booked a hotel room for the night then you want to eat everything available at least five or six times. And hang the consequences.

Things got so bad that I began to dread the monthly meeting of the Granny Kennett Pudding Club. I knew that at the end of the evening, and sometimes before the end of the evening, I would find myself ministering unto the sick, the very sick and the exceedingly unfortunate few who were convinced that they were dying. After a few months of this I gave up attending the pudding club myself and simply sat in the snug, quietly nursing something suitable and waiting for my services to be required.

Very few of those who over-ate seemed to regard their condition as being in any way related to their inability to know when to say: ‘No, thank you. That was delicious but I couldn’t eat another morsel’. Some blamed Granny Kennett, some blamed Gilly and some (for reasons which I never began to understand) blamed me.

And, although none of us had predicted this, for in Bilbury we are not a litigious lot, the evening came when one unhappy customer announced that he intended to take legal action against Gilly, Frank and the Duck and Puddle.

‘Your puddings made me ill,’ he complained, announcing to Gilly that she and her husband and everyone else involved would be hearing from his solicitors.

It did absolutely no good at all for Gilly to point out that he had eaten four helpings of Spotted Dick, three helpings of Treacle Sponge, three helpings of Plum Pudding and two helpings each of every other pudding on the menu. And that he had done all this entirely of his own volition. No one had held him down and forced puddings down his throat.

The man was adamant. He felt bloated, sated, full and about to die and, if he lived, he would sue. And he said that the fact that I was sitting in the snug, ready to offer professional succour to the greedy and the over-enthusiastic, proved that the damage done to his intestines was predetermined and premeditated and done with malice aforethought. He said that I was clearly a ‘pudding chaser’ and that I was hanging around in the pub with the express intention of making money out of his distress. Even when I pointed out that I had not charged him for my services, or for the medication I had prescribed (and had not charged anyone else) he remained adamant that I would be hearing from his solicitors.

In the end, Gilly and Frank had to pay several hundred pounds to prevent the case going to court.

The costs of the legal action, and the damages they were advised to pay, wiped out all the profit they had made. I managed to get away with an abject apology.

After that experience, Gilly decided that she would stop promoting the Granny Kennett Pudding Club outside the village. The posters in the Duck and Puddle and Peter Marshall’s shop were removed and no more advertisements were placed in the local papers. Only locals were allowed to be members of the club.

And the little table which Peter Marshall set up for every meeting, and which contained a good selection of proprietary antacids, proved perfectly adequate for dealing with the inevitable digestive upsets which were, and still are, a consequence of dining at Granny Kennett’s Pudding Club.

Patsy and I re-joined the club, and our monthly consumption of steamed and stodgy puddings is now the highlight of our limited social calendar.

However, there is no doubt that the puddings which are provided are sometimes a strain even for a healthy digestive system and although I like to think I know when to say ‘No, thank you, that was splendid but I really couldn’t eat another mouthful’ I am not too proud to admit that even I have been known to take advantage of what has come to be known as ‘Peter Marshall’s Final Pudding Selection’.

These days the antacids do not rest on the hall table, but Frank brings them round on a tray, as though carrying around the cheese board.

I always choose something liquid (liquid medicines are considerably faster acting than antacid medicines in tablet form) and my personal preference is for a tablespoonful of something with a pleasant minty flavour.

I find it rounds off the evening very nicely.

Sir Chauncey's Oak Tree

On the edge of the Bilbury village green, not far from the church of St Crispin and St Ermentrude, stands an enormous oak; a tree which has been part of the Bilbury scenery for far longer than anyone alive can remember. The tree was split by lightning in the early 19th century and even back then the tree was old and was held in great esteem. Indeed, it was so much loved that it was repaired with a number of iron bands commissioned by Sir Chauncey Harvester, a local landowner. The iron bands were made and fastened into place by the local blacksmith, a huge man called Jack Turberry, who was said to be so strong that he could bend horseshoes with his bare hands. The repair of Sir Chauncey's Oak Tree was, quite possibly, the first example of tree surgery anywhere in the world and today barely a month goes by without a tree surgeon from somewhere on the planet visiting the site to make an inspection and take photographs.

There was a scare in 1964 when a gale removed several of the higher branches but the tree survived and recovered and today it looks set fair to last another few hundred years. It is important to the village because it is a tangible sign of our history.

Other villages in North Devon have legends and myths to give them a sense of identity. Witchcraft and sorcery are ripe in this part of the county and there are many local villages which have strange tales to tell and which are well populated with witches and ghosts.

There is, for example, the white witch of Culborough Down.

In the early 19th century, a Reverend Inkborough, was the local clergyman in Bampton Leys. The Reverend Inkborough was the second son of a very rich north country businessman who had made his money out of the cotton trade. There was an elder son, who would inherit the big house, the land and the factory, and so Mr Inkborough had bought the living for his younger son. You could do that in those days – buying a young son a post as a clergyman in the same way that you could buy yourself a seat in the House of Commons.

The son, may have been a clergyman but he was terribly mean and he built a roadside hut for his wife, Imelda, so that she could sell teas and snacks to visitors. This was, at the time, considered a very eccentric thing to do and business was at first slow.

Mrs Inkborough realised that what she was doing was considered rather odd and so she built on that, turning a disadvantage into a benefit, and began to tell tales of the Doones and other local legends. She also started dispensing medicines to travellers as well as villagers – basing the medicines she prepared on local myths. What had begun as Ye Olde Original Tea Shoppe soon became an early 19th century drugstore. Mrs Inkborough became quite famous. She soon became known as a local white witch, and was talked about as 'Mother Imelda' although she didn't have any children of her own. After she died many people claimed that they saw her by the roadside and as late as the 1920s, three separate instances were recorded when tourists claim to have bought refreshments from her and one claimed to have bought a paste guaranteed to cure blistered feet.

Then there is the Withycombe witch, Joan Carne, who lived in the 16th century. Mrs Carne was said to have been a black witch who killed three husbands by casting bad spells on them. Despite this, which might have been seen as something of a flaw by some, she was well liked locally (especially by the people she didn't marry) and when she herself died her funeral attracted a huge number of people. When the mourners got back to her house after the service, expecting to make do with the usual simple meal of buns and ale, they found Joan's ghost preparing a meal of bacon and eggs. I'm pleased to say that they all tucked in and had a damned good wake.

Bilbury, I am relieved to say, just has the tree.

Tradition has it that the tree was important to Sir Chauncey, who did not have much of a local reputation for mending trees, because it was the site of his dalliance with a girl called Esmerelda; a young maiden who was the daughter of the local vicar.

The vicar had forbidden the match in view of the fact that Sir Chauncey (who was 54 years older than Esmerelda) had something of a reputation as a ladies' man. The reputation was not undeserved for Sir Chauncey is said to have worked his way through five wives and countless mistresses.

It is, perhaps, not entirely surprising that both the vicar and his good lady wife thought the match 'unsuitable' even though it would have meant their daughter marrying into the local aristocracy, becoming Lady Esmerelda and, before too long one assumes, the owner of a large house and over a thousand acres of prime Devon and Somerset farmland. How much these considerations influenced the young Esmerelda is not recorded though sceptics might assume that they were not entirely ignored when she was weighing up the competitive attractions of Sir Chauncey and any one of the local beaus who would, presumably, have paid court to such a nubile young woman but who would have doubtless expected their wives to live in far more modest circumstances.

(As an aside, and for the sake of completeness, I think it is worth mentioning that Sir Chauncey is not only famous for rescuing a sick tree but is also believed in Bilbury to be famous, or perhaps that should be infamous, as the Man of Porlock. In the summer of 1797, the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who was feeling more than a little under the weather at the time, moved to the Quantock hills in nearby Somerset and took a cottage above the sea near to the village of Culbone. Coleridge, who was born in South Devon and was a romantic sort of fellow, suffered a good deal from stress and from a rheumatic illness and he rather hoped that the bracing sea air would ameliorate his symptoms. It has been pointed out that he and his friend Thomas de Quincy, the author of *The Confessions of an Opium Eater*, were enthusiastic users of laudanum and it is perfectly possible that both of them might have felt a little better if they had consumed a little less opium, but that's as maybe and making judgements about people's behaviour in bygone times is neither fair nor profitable. Anyway, the story has it that Coleridge fell asleep, or into a drugged stupor, while reading a book about Kubla Khan, the Mongol leader. When he awoke, a good while later, he had a poem about Kubla Khan fully formed in his head and he immediately started to scribble down the verses as he remembered them. We can probably all imagine his desperate attempt to write down the contents of his dream before they disappeared into that place that dreams go when our concentration is, for a moment, distracted and dreams are displaced by prosaic thoughts inspired by the present. Sadly for him and for us, when Coleridge had written down 54 lines of his poem there was a knock on the door. Polite to a fault, Coleridge answered the knock only to find his landlord, Sir Chauncey standing there demanding that they go out together and inspect some aspect of the cottage which Sir Chauncey owned and which Coleridge was renting. This was probably a wobbly drainpipe or a chimney which needed pointing. Coleridge, painfully aware that the rest of his poem was disappearing by the second, had little choice but to obey. By the time Sir Chauncey, now known to the world as the 'Man of Porlock' or 'Person of Porlock' – now a widely used literary allusion to any unwelcome intruder who disrupts whatever one is doing – had tottered off, and the unfortunate Coleridge had forgotten the rest of the poem. And so the poem about Kubla Khan never got any further than the 54 lines Coleridge had written down before Sir Chauncey's untimely arrival.)

Bilbury's most illustrious tree, which is now known to everyone as Sir Chauncey's Oak Tree (but also known to locals simply as 'the tree'), has, over the years, produced its fair share of problems.

So, for example, small boys would, from time to time, try climbing it, and would then fall off and break a bone or two.

But apart from this, I never thought of the tree as presenting any sort of health hazard.

But I was wrong in that.

And although, like everyone else in Bilbury, I have great affection and respect for the tree, which is a symbol of the village's history and a huge connection with our past, there was a time when, just for a few hours, I would have happily seen the damned thing chopped down and turned into furniture and fire wood.

The worst crisis occasioned by Sir Chauncey's Tree did not involve a single small boy with a broken bone but a serious scare when a number of children in the village suddenly fell ill one autumn afternoon.

I was called to the village school because seven children were complaining of nausea and abdominal pain. By the time I got to the school, three of them had produced some fairly nasty looking, and bloody, diarrhoea. It's true that diarrhoea never looks very pleasant. But when it contains blood it looks especially scary.

Because so many of the children had been taken ill at the same time, it didn't need Sherlock Holmes or Dr John Watson to work out that the children must have eaten something which had upset them. And it didn't take much questioning before I found out what it was.

The children who were ill had all been eating acorns, collected in handfuls from underneath Sir Chauncey's Tree, the largest and most productive oak tree in the village. Every autumn the tree must produce several thousand of its famous seeds. Walk underneath St Chauncey's Tree and you can feel and hear the acorns crunching beneath your feet.

Acorns contain an enormous amount of tannic acid and are toxic if eaten in large quantities. Farmers always worry about them because acorns are poisonous to cattle, especially the young, and to horses. They can be deadly to dogs too. Since sheep can safely eat up to half a pound of acorns a day without coming to any harm, and adult pigs can eat double that, the farmers in Bilbury usually put sheep into a field to clear out the acorns before putting in cattle. Ducks and hens seem to eat acorns without any bad effects, though the acorns discolour the eggshells, but acorns and cattle definitely do not mix. My father-in-law, Mr Kennett, always puts a couple of dozen sheep into fields where there are oak trees so that they will eat up the acorns before the cows are let in.

Unfortunately, of course, Sir Chauncey's Tree sits on the edge of the unfenced village green which isn't used for grazing. And so the acorns just lie around on the ground. No one bothers to collect them these days because you can't do much with a handful of acorns.

Back in the days before Peter Marshall sold several varieties of instant coffee, country folk used to roast acorns and make their own version of a type of coffee; a cheap drink which was said to be good for patients with tuberculosis and for delicate children.

The acorns were gathered when they were ripe, shelled, cut into pieces and dried before the fire, or in an oven. Some folk would leach the acorns to remove the intense bitterness – repeatedly boiling them in water until the water stopped turning brown and then cutting and drying them. Gypsies used to put a bag of ripe, brown acorns into a running stream and leave them there for a couple of days to remove the bitter taste. The dried acorns were then roasted like coffee beans, ground or pounded into a powder, mixed with a little melted butter and kept in airtight jars. The powder was then used like coffee with half an ounce of acorn powder to the pint of water for adults and around half that for children. Just as with ordinary coffee, sugar and milk could be added to taste. Some villagers and travelling folk mixed ground coffee with ground acorns.

The village children, had somehow heard of this and had collected a huge pile of green acorns, pounded them into a powder and made their own version of acorn coffee. But they had not done the job properly and they had not removed the tannic acid. They had also made the drink deadly strong and they had masked the bitterness by adding plenty of sugar. Some of the children had even chewed and swallowed whole acorns. How they managed this is beyond me. Afterwards, as a small experiment, I tried a taste of a small portion of acorn and I had to spit it out immediately. I think the children who ate the acorns whole were merely showing off to one another; each one trying to prove how tough he was. It is, I think, no coincidence that only boys had eaten the acorns whole. Girls had drunk the acorn coffee mixture but they hadn’t chewed the raw acorns.

The children who had drunk the acorn mixture were in a terrible state when I saw them. They had awful diarrhoea but they were vomiting too and, not surprisingly, the poor school mistress didn’t know what to do. I believe teachers are given some basic first aid training but no teacher could have been trained to prepare for this sort of disaster. Not surprisingly, the remaining children, the ones who were still healthy, were beginning to cry and I could see we were heading for some pretty wild hysterics. The problem was that until I arrived, no one had worked out what had caused the diarrhoea and sickness and so the children who were still well and who had not consumed any acorns assumed that they were about to fall ill too.

The whole thing was something of a nightmare.

I immediately told the school teacher to separate out all the children who had eaten acorns from those who had not. The ones who had not were kept in the classroom and the ones who had were taken outside. There is only one classroom in the village school so there was really nowhere else to put them. I then told the teacher to telephone Bradshaw, my district nurse, and to ask him to come to the school as quickly as possible. I also told her to telephone as many of the parents of the affected children and, preferably without worrying them, to ask them to pop along to the school as quickly as they could. I needed the parents to comfort the children and I needed Bradshaw because I had to make all the children vomit up the acorns they’d swallowed. It seemed from questioning a few of the children that their acorn experiment had taken place no more than an hour earlier. If I sent the children to Barnstaple, it would be at least another hour before we could get them there. Most of the parents do not have motor cars and I couldn’t get more than three sick children and a couple of parents in the Rolls. We needed to move quickly because the acorn mixture the children had taken is very poisonous to young bodies and would cause kidney and liver damage. I was genuinely worried that some of the children would die if we didn’t act quickly.

There are several ways to make children vomit, but sticking two fingers down the back of a child’s throat is as good a method as any and has the advantage of being quick as well as effective. So that was how Bradshaw and I spent our time that day.

That all happened a year or two ago and these days the local school teacher always gives the children a stern warning about the dangers of eating acorns or, indeed, any other seeds or fruits which they don’t know for certain to be safe.

The most recent problem relating to Sir Chauncey’s Oak Tree happened during the night.

I was woken by a hammering on the front door.

I pulled on a dressing gown, tottered downstairs and found Peter Marshall standing on the doorstep. It was, I remember thinking at the time, typical of Peter to walk around to the house rather than spend a couple of pennies making a telephone call.

Peter, who lives above his shop which overlooks the village green, told me that he had been awoken by great cries coming from the village green. He said that at first he thought it was aliens who had landed on the green and had got their spaceship tangled up with some of the tree branches (he had, he explained, been watching a programme about aliens and space ships a couple of nights earlier) but when he had woken properly he suspected it was young folk larking about. Looking out of his bedroom window, he’d been unable to see any spaceships or gallivanting youths but had spotted someone writhing around on the grass and had realised that this was the source of the cries. There was a full moon that night and visibility, even at 3 o’clock in the morning, was pretty good.

‘It’s Mr Wallis,’ said Peter, ‘I’ve no idea what he’s doing out there in the middle of the night.’

Max Wallis is something of a recluse but this is not because he is shy or lacks confidence. On the contrary, he has little to do with the village, or the villagers, because he considers himself to be very superior to us all. He does something financially rewarding in London (I gather it is something to do with ‘financial services’) and spends most of his time there, coming down to Bilbury only for occasional weekends. He and his wife, Deidre, usually bring with them several of their smart London friends. They are rarely seen around the village. They do not patronise Peter Marshall’s shop and never visit the Duck and Puddle.

When I got to Mr Wallis, I found that he had a broken arm and a broken ankle. I gave him an injection for the pain and sent Peter off to telephone for an ambulance. He was happy to do that because a 999 call doesn’t cost anything.

‘What on earth happened?’ I asked Mr Wallis. I then noticed that there was a ladder leaning up against the tree. ‘Had you been climbing the tree?’

Looking rather embarrassed, Mr Wallis admitted, that he had indeed been up the tree.

‘Why were you climbing the tree at this time of the morning?’ I asked.

Mr Wallis wouldn’t answer but when I looked around a little more, I spotted a hammer and then I saw a bag of copper nails on the ground.

‘You were trying to kill Sir Chauncey’s Oak, weren’t you?’

There is a myth that if you hammer copper nails into a tree you’ll kill it. It’s nonsense of course but people still believe the myth.

Mr Wallis has a large house on the edge of the village green. He has repeatedly demanded that the tree be felled because it interferes with his view over Bilbury and North Devon. He lost his battle to have the tree removed when the local council put a Tree Preservation Order on it and protected it for life from people with saws and axes.

Mr Wallis obviously didn’t know this but he wasn’t the first person in the village to try to kill that tree and he’s not even the first to try to kill it with copper nails. Seventy or so years ago, a vandal who also thought the tree interfered with the view from his house hammered copper nails into the trunk in an attempt to kill it. The tree was unaffected, and if you look hard, you can still see some of the nails. The vandal who tried to murder the tree died half a century ago but the tree flourishes still.

The ambulance eventually arrived and took Mr Wallis to the hospital to have his broken bones dealt with. When the ambulance had gone, Peter and I moved the ladder, the hammer and the nails and put them in the shed behind Mr Wallis’s house. There were still no lights on the house and no signs of life. We had rung the doorbell in the hope that there might be someone interested in Mr Wallis’s fate but although we had heard some scuffling and I’d spotted a curtain twitching no one had come to the door.

A week or so after this incident, I sat in the Duck and Puddle discussing the case of Sir Chauncey’s Oak with Patchy. We both agreed that we needed to go round and have a word with Mr Wallis, to remind him that the tree was protected by law and warn him against trying to damage it again.

We were trying to decide whether it would be better for us to go together or for us to put together a deputation representing the village as a whole when Thumper Robinson wandered in.

We told him what we were discussing.

‘Mr Wallis won’t try to damage the tree again,’ said Thumper, with quiet confidence.

‘How do you know?’ Patchy asked him. ‘How can you be so sure?’

‘I went round and told him that I like that tree,’ said Thumper, who was clearly very angry that someone had tried to kill the old oak.

I now share Thumper’s confidence that Sir Chauncey’s Tree is safe. And there is no need for a deputation to remind Mr Wallis that the tree is out of bounds.

Thumper can be very convincing.

Carlton's Long Goodbye

England is falling into the sea. In some places it is falling into the sea quite slowly. In other places it is falling into the sea quite quickly. Long stretches of the coastline are at risk and the problem is particularly acute along the coast of south Devon and Dorset where the cliffs are made of chalk or sand which have a regrettable tendency to crumble and fall away as easily as if they were made of puff pastry. There are parts of the coast in South Devon and along the Dorset coast where house owners report having lost 10 to 20 feet of garden in a year. Many home owners who thought they were living in very desirable residences are now living in properties which are unsaleable and, in practical terms, entirely worthless.

As a general rule, it is usually difficult or impossible to lose all your money if you buy a house. Even if the house has dry rot, wet rot, termites and woodworm the building site will usually still have a notable value.

But if you are foolish enough to buy a house on the edge of a cliff, and the house and its underlying building plot subsequently fall into the sea, then all your money will be lost.

It is, perhaps, hardly surprising that there are now beautiful coastal properties on sale which have been valued at just £1 for the freehold. No one will buy them. No bank or mortgage company will lend money on them. No insurance company will insure them. Indeed, insurance companies won't even insure coastal properties against fire because they fear that owners may set fire to their own homes before they disappear with the cliff, into the sea. Solicitors and property experts in some parts of England now advise their clients that if you can hit a golf ball into the sea from the garden then you shouldn't even consider buying the house. England is shrinking at an extraordinary rate and thousands of home owners are now sitting waiting for their home to be declared uninhabitable. The authorities have effectively written off hundreds of miles of coastline, and all the small ports and villages which are situated in or along the coast. Many beauty spots will disappear. Coastal paths will soon exist only on old maps.

Most of the North Devon coast is rocky, and compared to the coastline of the southern part of the country, there is relatively little erosion. But there are exceptions, as there always are, of course, and there are houses on North Devon's cliff edge which are, year by year, inexorably moving closer to disaster.

In my book *Bilbury Tonic* I described how my patients Mrs Iolanthe Fielding and her considerably younger husband, Bertie live in an unsaleable house, with spectacular views, on the North Devon cliffs. The Fieldings pay just £5 a month in rent for a neat two bedroomed white-washed cottage with a decent sized garden and spectacular sea views. The rent is ridiculously low because, although the house had been on the market for three years, with an absurdly modest asking price of just £200, there have been no takers. One or two London buyers had shown interest, thinking that they had perhaps spotted the bargain of a lifetime, but when they saw that two neighbouring cottages had already fallen down onto the rocks below they quickly withdrew their offers and hot-footed it back to the big city where houses tend to stay where they've been built and, generally speaking, show very little inclination to wander.

Another of my patients, Carlton Tregallon, lives on the same stretch of coast.

Actually, to be accurate, Carlton lived in what used to be a garden shed sitting in the garden of a 17th century property. The house undoubtedly had wonderful sea views when it was built. The house has gone but the shed remains.

And I refer to him in the past tense because Carlton died not long ago.

I used to see Carlton around the village most weeks but I saw him in my professional capacity only once in my life; when he fell out of an apple tree and broke the ulna bone in his left forearm. It was Carlton's ulna bone but it was, inevitably, someone else's apple tree. He was in his late 60s at the time and probably the oldest scrumper in the country. I remember that I had a hell of a job to persuade him to go to the hospital in Barnstaple. In the end, I had to stick him in the car and take him over to the casualty department myself. I remember he told the young casualty doctor that he had tripped and fallen down the stairs. He was too embarrassed to admit that he had made a townsman's mistake and crawled out too far on a half rotten branch.

Carlton was something of a hermit. He worked as a part-time freelance shepherd but he was also a scrounger. He was a simple fellow who never wasted anything. When he ate an apple, he ate the core. He didn't own a needle or any thread and if his socks had holes in them he would wear them for as long as there was sock to show above the sides of his shoes.

He was married once, though it was a very brief arrangement. It happened before I arrived in Bilbury but Dr Brownlow told me all about it.

Carlton was a dyed in the wool countryman who hardly ever went anywhere which involved a journey that couldn't be made on foot, but back in the early 1960s, he went to a funeral in Birmingham. While he was in the city, he met a widow called Beryl with whom he established something of a rapport. She was slender, maidenly and entirely not the sort of woman one would have expected to become Carlton's life partner. He was breezy and carefree. She was careful and deliberate. He had an earthy sense of humour and a loud cackling laugh. She had thin lips which looked as if they had never entertained a smile or, heaven forbid, a kiss.

After Carlton's return to Bilbury, the two of them communicated for a while by telephone and letter and eventually, to the utter astonishment and quiet bewilderment of everyone who knew either of them, the pair decided that they were in love and that they should get married. It was, people thought, perhaps a case of opposites attracting.

So Carlton, accompanied by Thumper, Patchy and a couple of other pals, went up to Birmingham in Thumper's truck and after a good time had been had by all, Thumper, Patchy and the others returned to Bilbury while Carlton remained behind with his new bride. Beryl lived in a small, neat terraced house in a suburb of Birmingham called Handsworth and she was employed as a secretary by a firm of solicitors who had offices in the city centre. The newlyweds decided to spend their honeymoon in Handsworth.

'What is the point in going all the way to the Bahamas when you're going to spend all your time in bed?' asked Carlton.

And so they drew the curtains, stayed in bed and, it is to be hoped, both had a wonderful time.

Carlton insisted afterwards that he had genuinely believed that he would be able to live happily in Handsworth but those who know him well say that they always had serious doubts.

Everything went wonderfully well for two days, which was the amount of time which Beryl had taken off work for her honeymoon, but then, on the third morning, the Wednesday, Beryl arose at 7.30 a.m., had a quick breakfast and hurried out to catch a bus which would take her into the city centre in time to start work in the solicitors' office.

Carlton, who had no job to go to and, since his own work experience was entirely with sheep, very little prospect of finding anything for which he was even remotely suited, stayed behind in the terraced house in Handsworth. There are few, if any, sheep in Handsworth.

He mowed the tiny lawn, pruned the six rose bushes, had a cup of tea, mowed the lawn again, pruned the six rose bushes a little more and then sat in a chair in the kitchen and, looking at the clock, realised that it was still only ten past nine and that he had another nine hours to kill before Beryl would be back home.

Carlton then went for a walk, found a small park and sat on a bench until the public houses opened at 12 noon. He stayed in a pub called the Dog and Ferret until it shut at 2.40 p.m. and then, despite the fact that it was raining, went back to the park, lay down on a park bench and went to sleep.

At 3.30 p.m., he was arrested for vagrancy.

Under the Vagrancy Act 1824 (the full title of which *An Act for the punishment of idle and disorderly persons, rogues and vagabonds*) it is an offence for anyone to sleep rough in England and Wales. Anyone who is found to be homeless or 'trying to cadge subsistence money' can be arrested.

Carlton, who still insisted on tying his ancient ragged overcoat with orange baler twine, protested that he was a solid and upright citizen and a married man to boot but the policeman, who was young and who had never seen a man with his coat tied together with string who wasn't a vagrant, was neither impressed nor convinced.

Beryl, with the help of one of the young solicitors at the offices where she worked, succeeded in extracting Carlton from the police station to which he had been taken and persuaded the station sergeant that no charges should be brought. Carlton apologised profusely for kicking the policeman on the ankle and insisted that he had slipped on wet grass and lost his balance. Beryl, who had never been so embarrassed in her whole life, was allowed to leave work early in order to take her husband home.

It would, perhaps, have been better for all concerned if the two protagonists had decided there and then to call it a day, cut their losses, kiss each other goodbye and agree that a mistake had been made and that compatibility and good sense had been overruled by an attack of wholesome lust.

But Carlton somehow managed to persuade Beryl that they would have a future together if she would agree to move with him to Bilbury where he would be able to resume his work as a freelance shepherd, working for whichever local farmer required assistance. He told her that he was confident that she would be able to find suitable employment in an office in Barnstaple though no one, certainly not Carlton, could possibly say from whence this confidence was derived. He said that they would live in the small cottage he rented and, when the house in Handsworth had been sold, they would be able to buy a small home for themselves in Bilbury or one of the neighbouring villages.

And so Beryl rang her employer and said that she would not be returning to work and the pair of them packed a bag each, took the bus to the station and began the journey to Bilbury. Since they did not have a car and, in any case neither of them had a driving licence, this was a complicated business which involved taking a train to Bristol, another train to Exeter and a third train to Barnstaple. By the time they arrived in Barnstaple, the day's only bus had long since gone and so Carlton telephoned Thumper who collected the happy couple from the Barnstaple station and took them to Carlton's cottage.

It has to be said that Carlton undoubtedly erred in describing his shed as a cottage. Beryl, being a town girl, had envisaged a cottage rather along the lines of the sort of thing portrayed on the lids of chocolate boxes. She had expected a thatched roof, roses around the door and a garden filled with hollyhocks, foxgloves and honeysuckle. What she got, however, was a tumbledown shack with a corrugated iron roof, no indoor plumbing and no electricity. A decade earlier, the shack had been the garden shed in the garden of an extremely well built, pleasant house. But, thanks to bad weather and an eroding cliff, the house had been split into two parts. One half, now a ruin, stood on the very edge of the cliff. The remains of the other half of the property lay on the beach below. The owner had died and there were no relatives so the council had never been able to find anyone to take on the responsibility of clearing up the debris. The sea was steadily doing the work free of charge.

There were no utility services at Carlton's shack.

Drinking water was obtained from a couple of old oil drums, which collected rainwater via a complicated system involving an old sail and some plastic drainpipes. The toilet facilities consisted of a very primitive, cupboard-sized privy with no seat. This was positioned over a cesspit which was situated about twenty yards away from the shack.

This was not what Beryl had signed up for and whereas Carlton had lasted for three nights in Handsworth she did not last for one night in Bilbury.

Too angry for tears she demanded that Thumper take her back to the railway station in Barnstaple where, she insisted, she would wait for the first train back to civilisation. Thumper's suggestion that she and Carlton stay the night with him or at the Duck and Puddle did not meet with approval.

And that was the end of the marriage.

Carlton and Beryl never got divorced and so technically they were still married at the time of Carlton's demise but they hadn't seen or spoken to each other since Beryl fled back to Birmingham. Carlton had gone back to being a bachelor and Beryl had got her job back as a secretary for a legal firm.

They had both learned valuable lessons.

Carlton died of a massive heart attack while walking back home from the Duck and Puddle and was found the following morning by a farmer who saw his body on the roadside. He had a smile on his face and looked as serenely happy as anyone can expect to be when they are lying dead by the roadside.

Much to everyone's surprise, Carlton had left a will in an envelope which was found nailed to the wall inside his small and extremely modest home. Just so that there was no doubt about the contents of the envelope, Carlton had written the word 'WILL' on the outside with a red wax crayon.

There wasn't any money to leave, of course; no surprise pot of gold hidden in the dark depths of the earth closet privy, no numbered Swiss bank account and no priceless collection of paintings stored in an old trunk.

The only thing the envelope contained was £56 in well-used notes and a letter containing surprisingly detailed instructions for the disposal of his body.

The £56 was accompanied by a supplementary note confirming that this was 'to cover whatever expenses might be incurred, with whatever is left over used to buy drinks at the Duck and Puddle for all those attending the funeral'.

Heaven knows where Carlton laid his hands on £56. We were all impressed that he had managed to resist the temptation to dip into a sum that was, as far as he was concerned, the equivalent of a major lottery win.

Carlton's will made it clear that he wanted to be buried in his garden (or, more accurately, the garden of the ruined house where he had been squatting for as long as anyone could remember). That was fairly straightforward. As far as anyone of us knew (and, this being Bilbury, we weren't likely to go to the trouble of asking anyone who might really know) a citizen is perfectly entitled to have his remains buried in his own garden as long as he puts up some sort of marker so that the next generation isn't likely to come across a partly decomposed human skeleton while double digging his winter potatoes.

Indeed, being buried in your own garden is not an uncommon occurrence in Bilbury.

My dear friend and predecessor Dr Brownlow was buried in what was at the time his garden, and what is now the grounds of Bilbury's very own cottage hospital.

Burying Carlton in his own garden was never going to be too much of a problem (though digging a hole deep enough to take a coffin in the rocky North Devon soil was never going to be easy either), and nor was arranging for Carlton's remains to be blessed at the Church of St Damian on the outskirts of the village (that was the other main part of the instructions contained in the will).

Some time before his death, Carlton had decided to ensure that the funeral could be managed as cheaply as possible. He had made the coffin himself, using an old kitchen door for the base and a few pieces of assorted plywood for the sides. The result looked rather clumsily made, it had neither been varnished nor painted and the nails which held the thing together appeared to have been hammered into place by someone with poor eyesight but plenty of enthusiasm. But it looked to be solidly made and, as things turned out, this was a good thing.

And a grave had been dug in the garden. Or, rather, it had been started. Sadly, the rocky nature of the ground meant that Carlton had not been able to dig as deep as he might have liked or, indeed, as deep as is considered normal in the grave digging world. Still, Carlton had managed to make a hole that looked like the beginnings of a grave; a shallow grave it is true, not quite deep enough to take the coffin, but a grave nevertheless. It cannot be easy to find the fire and determination to dig your own grave, especially when there is no one standing over you, with a gun, ordering you to get on with it. (I've never quite understood why people in films dig their own graves in these circumstances. Why, since the outcome is unlikely to be altered, do they not simply throw down the spade and tell the man with the gun to dig the sodding grave himself?)

It was agreed by those of us present, a sort of unofficial burial party, that if digging down another couple of feet proved impossible, particularly in ground made especially impassable as a result of recent heavy rain, then we would allow the gravedigger simply to pile earth on top of the part of the coffin that remained above ground and so create a traditional burial mound; the sort of thing was once so popular with deceased Anglo-Saxon kings.

Peter Marshall, who is, in addition to our local shopkeeper, the local undertaker, said that a burial mound would look rather nice and traditional and that he had some nice stone edging, priced very reasonably, which would look perfect with a nice little headstone which he could also lay his hands on and provide, all well within the allocated budget. His offer of a garden gnome in place of a stone angel was rejected, with thanks, even though he offered to remove the fishing rod from the gnome's hands.

Finally, Carlton, proving himself far more capable of advance planning than any of us had ever suspected, had made arrangements for his coffin to be transported between the church and his home in the breakdown truck from Tolstoy's, the local garage.

Carlton had, it seemed, done some undefined work for Reginald Westbury, the owner of the garage and the promised use of the breakdown truck had been part of the quid pro quo.

This would doubtless have worked well, for the breakdown truck had a crane at the back. The plan, apparently, was that the crane would be used to hoist Carlton's coffin onto the back of the truck.

Sadly, it was just before the 'hoisting the coffin onto the back of the truck point' in the proceedings that things started to go wrong.

The truck simply would not start.

The irony of a breakdown truck breaking down was not lost on the collected mourners, the putative congregation, and despite the solemnity of the occasion there were not a few smiles and, I regret to report, more than a few giggles.

There were plenty of people at the funeral who had vehicles large enough to carry the coffin (Thumper had his huge, extremely scruffy pick-up truck and Patchy had his van to name but two) but the garage owner, concerned that a debt is a debt until it is repaid and how else do you repay a debt to a man who has died, refused to allow anyone else to help.

Instead, Reggie insisted on using an old farm cart and the rather ancient horse which he kept on out of loyalty rather than any real sense of purpose.

The horse was, in modern parlance, well past its sell-by-date and certainly could no longer be guaranteed to produce the one horsepower which might be expected of it. It was, quite possibly, the only half a horsepower horse in the county.

Nevertheless, all would have doubtless gone without a hitch if the heavy rain which had fallen had not resulted in the stream which passes through the northern edge of the village swelling to an unusual depth. Indeed, the stream had taken on all the characteristics of a fully-fledged river rather than a meandering rural stream.

The journey to St Damian's was managed successfully.

The point where the lane crosses the stream is known, for absolutely no reason that anyone alive can recall, as Nuttock's Ford, and for twelve months of the year in nine years out of ten, the stream is no more than an inch or two deep and of little or no inconvenience to passing traffic. Motor vehicles and bicycles go through with barely a splash and the occasional pedestrians who use the lane cross, and keep their feet dry, with the aid of half a dozen strategically positioned flat stones.

However, thanks to the heavy recent rainfall, the stream had risen to a depth of six or seven inches. This was considerably greater than usual but neither the horse and cart nor the following cortege was in any way inconvenienced.

But the same was not true about the return journey.

Streams and rivers are strange things which, history shows, can sometimes change their nature in relatively short periods of time.

Back in August in 1952, the river at Lynmouth famously flooded and destroyed much of the town as it raced towards the sea.

It was, and still is, the worst river flood ever experienced in England or, indeed, any part of the United Kingdom. Over 100 buildings were destroyed and 34 people lost their lives as the River Lyn raced through the West Lyn valley. Another 420 people were made homeless and even the lighthouse was so seriously undermined that it collapsed into the river the following day.

During just a few hours, the river rose from being a picturesque attraction to being a ferocious, deadly and uncontrollable force. Within two hours, the water level rose so high that walls were broken and doors and windows smashed. A narrow point in the river became blocked with fallen trees, rocks and other debris, and when this temporary natural dam gave way, the resultant rush of water caused even more damage.

That was Lynmouth in 1952.

The stream in Bilbury which crosses the lane at Nuttock's Ford is so small that it doesn't even have a name. It is regarded as quaint and rather fun, more than an inconvenience. It is so shallow that no fish could possibly survive in it.

Just how it transformed itself from such a harmless waterway into a potentially lethal river was and still is a mystery.

But, the fact is that, as luck would have it, the stream chose to become a river in the hour or so after we had crossed it on the way to St Damien's Church and before we crossed it on the way back afterwards.

I don't think anyone present realised just how deep the stream had become, nor how fast it was now flowing.

Reggie from the garage, who was sitting on the cart being pulled by the horse and who was, of course, leading the procession on its way back, just as he had the procession on its way out, certainly didn't anticipate any problems. He drove the horse forwards, thoroughly expecting to be able to drive through the swollen stream without any difficulty.

His ambition and sense of complacency were sadly misplaced.

Within a minute of entering the water, it was clear that the poor horse was struggling to cope with the rush of water. In order to save the horse from drowning, Reggie unfastened the harness and, with an agility which surprised everyone but which was inspired by an old-fashioned desire not to get his feet wet, jumped from the cart onto the horse's back.

Relieved of its heavy burden, the horse and rider then safely made their way to the other bank. They, at least, had reached their destination.

When Reggie looked back from what was now the far side of the stream, he could only watch as the cart, now abandoned in the middle of the rushing water (it seems absurd to continue to describe it as a stream) was tipped over on its side.

By this time, those of us who were travelling in trucks, vans and motor cars had, of course, realised that we would stand no chance of driving through what we had to regard as a river. The water was, it was clear, far too deep even for Thumper's truck.

We all climbed out of our vehicles and stood on our side of the ford. Ironically, the sun had come out and it was quite a pleasant afternoon. Peter Marshall said loudly that it was a lovely day to be buried.

We then all watched in horror as Carlton's coffin was swept off the cart, down the river and out of sight. The cart, too wide to be swept away, lay on its side, being battered by the water and slowly breaking up. The coffin, just the right size to float downstream, swung gracefully and naturally into a position best suited for its new situation, and disappeared between the trees and bushes which normally mark the boundaries of the stream.

There then followed much discussion as we all tried to work out exactly where the stream went and where the coffin was likely to end up. It was generally agreed that the stream, which wriggles and turns in the unpredictable way of streams everywhere, would, even in its new swollen state, pass through several of Mr Kennett's fields before joining forces with another, larger and also unnamed stream which eventually led down to the sea.

Thumper, who had been following directly behind the horse and cart, leapt back into his vehicle and called for the rest of us to join him. And so Anne, the mother of Thumper's children, together with Patchy, Peter Marshall and I all climbed into or onto Thumper's truck as he turned left through an open gate and began the drive along a muddy field in an attempt to follow the path of the stream.

It was, to say the least, a bumpy and slightly unnerving journey and I like to think that Carlton, who was something of a wild spirit and, in his modest way, an adventurer manqué, would have enjoyed the experience. Indeed, I like to think that he enjoyed his final nautical voyage as captain and crew of his small, homemade vessel.

As Thumper drove the truck, the rest of us struggled to keep an eye on the coffin in case it caught on a branch or grounded, as we constantly expected it to do.

But for a mile or so the coffin did neither of these things. It sailed proudly on the waters and we were all impressed at Carlton's skill in managing to construct a coffin which had proved surprisingly seaworthy. All it really needed, said Patchy, was a Jolly Roger flag flying proudly from the prow.

We followed that darned coffin for hours and it travelled for miles.

Actually, it didn't of course.

It just felt like it.

But we did follow the coffin for a third of mile and for twenty minutes. Every time we thought it had caught on a tree root or a rock, the damned thing managed to free itself and carry on floating along with the river.

Eventually, we caught up with it, of course.

We never really thought that the coffin would end up being washed out to sea, although Peter Marshall, in a gloomy mood, for he was in charge of the interment and had a grave digger standing by with spade and stone edging ready for action, did predict that the coffin would disappear into the Bristol Channel and that Carlton's body would probably be washed ashore somewhere along the Welsh coast, much to the confusion and bemusement of the Welsh constabulary.

Much to our relief, the coffin eventually stopped travelling when it was caught against a weir near to Huddle Stone Cottage, a tiny one bedroomed home miles from any neighbours and normally reached only by an always overgrown cart track.

After Thumper screeched to a halt and we all piled out of the truck, the owner of the cottage, an elderly gentleman called Albert Perry, came out to see what all the fuss was about.

He had been enjoying a late lunch or an early dinner for he had a spoon in one hand and a bowl of something steaming hot in the other. We were all on the other side of the stream from him and from where the coffin had come to rest.

'Hullo, Mr Perry,' I called, 'I'm sorry to bother you but do you think we could have our coffin back, please?'

'Has it got a body in it?'

'It has,' I agreed.

Mr Perry looked at us and then at the coffin, bobbing by the bank near to the weir. 'Who's in it?' he called back.

'Carlton,' I shouted, 'Carlton Tregallon.'

'Don't know him,' said Mr Perry. 'Never heard of him. You can have him back. I got no use for a coffin with a body in it. Specially not for a body I ain't never heard of.'

And with that he went back indoors to finish his meal. I often wonder what he would have said if the coffin had been occupied by someone he knew.

Thumper had to drive for another two miles to find a place where he could cross the stream and then two miles back to Mr Perry's cottage.

It took all of us nearly an hour to drag the coffin out of the water and into the back of Thumper's truck. And then, since Peter's gravedigger was waiting at Carlton's place, and being paid by the hour, Peter insisted that we drive straight to the grave and see Carlton buried before Thumper took us back to where we had left all our other vehicles.

The rest of the ceremony went without alarums or excursions.

We buried Carlton, and Peter's man fitted the stones around the mound of earth that marked the spot. It didn't look a bad place to be buried to be honest with you. Peter, who said he knew where he could lay his hands on something second-hand at a very reasonable price, promised to put a stone cross on the site to mark the spot.

And then Thumper took us back to where our cars were parked and we all went to the Duck and Puddle to say goodbye to Carlton in the time honoured manner.

After Peter had told us what his bill was there wasn't much money left, of course. But there was enough for us all to wet our whistles, and so we saw old Carlton off in modest but enthusiastic style.

He'd lived an unusual life had old Carlton and I think it's fair to say that his passing was a little out of the ordinary too. The funny thing is that although I hardly knew him I will miss him. He was one of life's characters and there aren't enough of those around these days.

When I got back to Bilbury Grange, I was exhausted but not tired. It's funny, but there is a difference. I realised that I ought to write to Beryl Tregallon to let her know that she was a widow. But I thought the letter could probably wait an hour or so. And so I poured myself a Laphroig as a nightcap, took the bottle with me and slumped down into my favourite chair. Patsy brought over a jug of water and added a little water to the whisky. I looked at the glass.

'Have I put in too much water?' she asked.

'I'll add a drop more whisky,' I said.

I think Patsy does that thing with the water deliberately. If she thinks I need a decent drink she puts in a little too much water so that I have to make the necessary adjustments.

She smiled at me. 'You look as if you need it.'

I did indeed. It had been a busy day.

The Bus Shelter (Without a Bus)

The Bilbury bus shelter (we only have one in the village and so it is a source of considerable pride) has been in need of repair and restoration for some time and a kind but misguided resident, who will remain anonymous (largely because no one but the person concerned knows their identity), telephoned the local council and pointed out to them that the roof leaks and so the shelter does not live up to its name. The call was, I gather, made around nine months ago. The bus shelter is made entirely of wood and has a thatched roof. It was, according to Patsy's father who knew the men who built it, put up in the 1930s. It has a wooden bench inside and a wooden floor and if the village had a regular bus service, it would be an excellent place in which to sit and wait for a bus to arrive. But the roof, which has needed re-thatching for some time, leaks rather badly.

Six months ago, a team of workmen arrived in Bilbury.

There were six of them and they came in two lorries. They were accompanied by a man in a small, white van. The man in the small, white van wore a cheap, ill-fitting suit, the sort you can buy from the sale rack at a discount clothing stall, a white, transparent nylon shirt which shone, and almost glowed, with whiteness, and a hideous kipper tie which had clearly been designed by a colour blind child who'd been given a brush and too many paints. This seventh man was clearly very important because he had six or seven pens in his top jacket pocket.

I knew they had arrived in the village because they got lost and the man in the van, who was leading the procession, called at Bilbury Grange and asked for directions.

'It says here that the shelter is in Totterdown Lane,' said the man, showing me a piece of paper which said, in clear black type, that the bus shelter was in Totterdown Lane.

'It is,' I agreed.

'But where is Totterdown Lane?' demanded the man. 'There aren't any road signs around.' He said this as though he were holding me personally responsible for the failure of adequate signage in the village.

'There aren't any road signs in Bilbury,' I told him. 'But to get to Totterdown Lane you just need to go straight along Potter's Lane, turn left into the lane by Softly's Bottom, take the first right into a lane which, as far as I know, does not have a name, and then you'll find Totterdown Lane on the left.'

The man stared at me as if I'd just given him instructions in Latin.

They only had to travel half a mile so I got out my bicycle and showed them the way. Leading a small procession of vehicles made me feel very important. I was in the lead, pedalling quietly, and behind me came the white van and then the two lorries laden with men and materials. I thought we must have looked quite impressive, needing only a police escort to be very impressive.

'Ah,' said the man in the suit, when I proudly showed them the bus shelter which was the purpose of their visit. He frowned and shook his head as though rather shocked and disappointed. 'This will need a 548/12. And we'll need to obtain a Restructuring Allocation which will necessitate a Planning Officer Rural Recommitment Intervention.' He spoke in a way which made it clear which words began with capital letters.

'What's a 548/12?' I asked.

'A full road closure,' explained the man in the suit, who seemed startled that there could be a human being anywhere who didn't know what a 548/12 might be. 'There's nowhere for us to park while we do the work and so we'll need permission for a cessation of traffic order. We'll have to speak to the Highways Planner and the police. We'll need temporary redirection signs erecting and traffic lights and a portable generator putting into place. And there will need to be a site inspection by proper authorities.'

'It's just a bus shelter,' I said. 'The roof needs re-thatching.'

The man stared at me, aghast. 'The current structure in its present configuration does not satisfy health and safety requirements or meet the required building standard specifications,' he said pompously. I looked at the bus shelter and felt sorry for it.

That was six months ago and I'd forgotten all about the bus shelter, the workmen and the man in the cheap suit.

But they came back.

And they came back in force.

This time the man in the white van was accompanied by four large lorries, a crane, a JCB digger, twelve workmen and a huge amount of equipment. They came with temporary traffic lights, lots of red signs saying ROAD CLOSED and lots of yellow signs which had DIVERSION printed on them. They brought enough scaffolding to cover the Eiffel Tower, two portable toilet cabins and a small administrative building which was bigger than the village bus shelter and which came on the back of its own lorry.

They came first to Bilbury Grange so that I could once again lead them to the bus shelter. I'm afraid that this time they had to wait while I finished my morning surgery. I did draw them a little map on the back of an old envelope but the man in the cheap suit, who still had the requisite number of pens in his jacket breast pocket, said that they would prefer to wait and be led to the site by what he called a 'knowledgeable local resident'. He said that the last time they had been in the village it had taken them four hours to find their way back to Barnstaple and that he didn't want to spend the rest of the day driving round looking for the bus shelter.

When I had completed the surgery and went out to take them round to the bus shelter I found that while they'd been waiting, they had entertained themselves by making several gallons of tea and cooking bacon and eggs on what looked to me like a camping stove but what was, I am sure, more accurately known as an 'Approved Portable Food Preparation Apparatus'. The men were sitting on folding chairs, eating, drinking and reading their newspapers. The British workman at work can be a magnificent sight.

It took the men 45 minutes to make the necessary preparations to continue their journey. There was much grumbling because they had settled in and were clearly not expecting to have to move. The toilet cabin which had been lifted off the back of its lorry had to be lifted back on again and the 'Approved Portable Food Preparation Apparatus' had to be packed up and put back into its proper place. And, of course, all the tea had to be drunk and all the bacon and egg sandwiches had to be consumed.

This time I led them round to the bus shelter in the Rolls Royce, simply because I had a couple of calls to make and one of the calls was to a village about three miles away. So the procession consisted of a Rolls Royce followed by three large lorries, followed by a digger, followed by a crane, followed by another large lorry, followed by the man in the white van who this time somehow managed to get himself at the end of the procession.

I showed them the bus shelter and then, as they began to unload their lorries, I carried on to do my morning calls. Before I left, I could not help noticing that the first things they took off the lorries were the tea making equipment and the 'Approved Portable Food Preparation Apparatus'. Then came the folding chairs and the portable toilet. These were clearly workers who had their priorities sorted out properly.

I had a busy day at the surgery and a number of calls to do around the village and consequently I didn't think anything more about the bus shelter. I simply assumed that the gang of workmen had done the necessary repairs and gone on their way.

However, a few days later I received an alarming telephone call from a villager called Taunton Trelawney.

Taunton is a normally genial man in what is usually known diplomatically in the late autumn of his life. He is long retired but used to be an architect in a large practice in Exeter. He carved a pleasant niche for himself as the firm's premier designer of bespoke garages and summer houses. He and his wife bought a cottage in Bilbury when they were both in their 40s and it was always their intention to retire to the village in the fullness of time. The cottage was, I gather, rather run down and quite a bargain.

'It's not often you get a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,' said Mr Trelawney, when telling me about their purchase.

And so, when the calendar ticked round, and it became time to do so, the Trelawneys did precisely as they had planned and became permanent residents in the village.

Mrs Trelawney is, despite her years, a keen tennis player and an enthusiastic member of a local rambling club. She has a large bosom, which looks rather like a jib sail in a full gale, and when she walks into a room the bosom always arrives a moment or two before the rest of her. She's a bubbly sort of woman who likes talking.

'I've had a good many lovers,' she once said. 'How many do you think?'

'Now, what sort of question is that?' I said. I have no idea what triggered the question and I had no idea what the correct answer might be. Nor did I have any idea what would be a tactful number to suggest. When she pushed me, I said 'three' because it sounded enough to show experience and not enough to suggest that she had been a woman of easy virtue.

'Twenty two!' she said, with pride. 'Enough for two entire football teams! But none of them was as good in bed as my husband. He was very strict when we were younger. I once burnt the pudding when we had guests and he put me over his knee, hoiked up my dress and spanked me in front of everyone. They were all very shocked but I enjoyed it enormously and was always waiting for him to do it again.' She paused, and thought and then smiled. 'I can't think how many puddings I burnt after that,' she said, wistfully. 'But he never did it again,' she added, sadly.

I confess that this unsolicited knowledge stayed with me, resting out of sight at the back of my mind, but it always came to the forefront when I saw either of them. I saw Mr Trelawney, with his bathukolpian wife over his knee. And I saw Mrs Trelawney burning puddings.

As far as I know, the only ailment Mrs Trelawney has had in the years since I've been her GP has been a verruca, a simple warty disorder which is almost as difficult to spell as it is to treat successfully. She also suffers a little from deafness, but she refuses any help for that.

At the time of the second bus shelter incident, I had been treating it for several months and progress had been slow.

Her visits to the surgery were not speedy either.

She always came well encased in garments which seemed to have been designed with safety in mind. Whatever the weather she always wore a corset strong enough to withstand point blank fire from a .38 pistol. The corset was fitted with industrial strength suspender straps which looked as if they could have been used to tether a barrage balloon in a gale. Whenever she visited and I asked her to remove the appropriate stocking, she always expressed surprise, as though the very idea that I would need her to remove clothing in order to examine her verruca was something of a shock. She would then insist on going behind the screen and removing not just the stocking but also the corset. The whole process of disrobing took so long that from time to time I would call out to ask if everything was going smoothly. I lived in fear that one day I would sit and wait, and wait, and eventually move aside the screen and see Mrs Trelawney lying on the floor, deceased, and probably still wearing her damned corset.

And while I was toying with her verruca she would talk. And talk, and talk.

She once asked my advice about her collection of porcelain frogs.

'I've got hundreds of the damned things,' she told me. 'I hate them but everyone buys them for me at birthdays and at Christmas. My husband bought me one several years ago and, being polite, I said I liked it, as you do, and so he bought me another one for our anniversary and then a third for Christmas and it just sort of got out of hand. I know what I'll get for Christmas. Another bloody frog. How do I stop people buying them for me?'

I told her that when her husband next gave her a china frog she should admire it and then tell him that he could never find a better one and so she wanted this one to be the last he ever bought. And I suggested that she tell relatives and friends that the china frog collecting was now over.

She was very pleased with that advice, though I don't know if she tried it and if she did, whether it worked or not.

As the weeks went by, I suggested that she might visit a chiropodist in Barnstaple but she insisted on allowing me the privilege of tackling her verruca.

Mr Trelawney is also in decent health. He is a keen rambler, though he suffers from mild angina and moderate high blood pressure. As long as he does not get too excited both these problems seem to be well under control.

He also has a good deal of hair growing out of his nostrils, probably more than is considered appropriate in most polite circles, but neither he nor Mrs Trelawney has ever noticed this profusion or else he has decided to let nature takes its course. He once shared my waiting room with Mrs Blackmore and Nigel, her six-year-old. Nigel would not stop crying and only after I had sat him down in my surgery and given him a lollipop would he admit that he had been terrified of the man with spiders up his nose.

Mr Trelawney would be the first to admit that he is not the brightest bulb in the chandelier, probably no more than a 20 watt would be my guess, and during his professional career, he never made the mistake of trying to stretch beyond his capabilities – hence his decision to concentrate on designing garages and summerhouses. But he is a good, kind, honest man who cares. Those may be generally regarded these days as rather out of favour qualities; a little old-fashioned in the wider world maybe, but in Bilbury those are still respected as important qualities.

Mr Trelawney telephoned me a day or two after the second visit of the men from the council.

'It's gone!' said Mr Trelawney.

I didn't have to ask him who was speaking because Mr Trelawney has a unique way of shouting. As a result of his wife's deafness, and her refusal to wear a hearing aid of any kind (or even to use a speaking trumpet), he has permanently turned up his personal volume and so is sometimes invited to compere local events where the organisers are unable to afford a loudspeaker system, or even to rent a loud hailer.

'That's good,' I said. 'They can be difficult to shift sometimes.'

'Well this one was easy enough to move!' replied Mr Trelawney. He sounded in a bad mood and I wondered why he could possibly be upset that his wife's verruca had disappeared. I was also slightly puzzled by his remark that moving it had been 'easy' since Mrs Trelawney and I had been battling with the darned thing for several months.

'The important thing is to make sure that it doesn't come back,' I said.

'I'm damned sure it's not coming back!' said Mr Trelawney. 'You should see the monstrosity which has appeared in its place.'

'Oh dear,' I said. 'It sounds as if I'd better take a look. Can your wife pop along this evening?'

'Why the hell do you need my wife there?'

'It'll be difficult to do anything without her!' I laughed.

'What do you expect her to do?' demanded Mr Trelawney.

'Just slip off her stockings and jump up on the examination couch.'

Mr Trelawney made a noise like the pressure cooker my mother used to have when I was a boy. It was a fairly early model and the steam release valve was rather temperamental. 'And then what do you intend to do?'

'Well, I'll just take a good look!'

Mr Trelawney repeated his excellent impersonation of a pressure cooker with steam escaping. 'I rang you because

I thought you'd be sympathetic and offer some useful advice,' he said at last. 'I certainly didn't expect to have to listen to this sort of filth.'

I paused and thought for a moment. 'How do you expect me to deal with your wife's verruca if I don't have a good look at it?'

'Verruca? What verruca?'

'The one on your wife's foot.'

'Oh, I'm not interested in that,' said Mr Trelawney, dismissively.

I was puzzled. 'Then what are we talking about?'

'The bus shelter.'

'The village bus shelter?'

'Of course.' He sighed. 'Why would I ring you up to talk about a bus shelter in Northampton?'

'Have they finished the repairs?' I asked.

'No, they haven't,' replied Mr Trelawney angrily. 'They've torn the damned thing down and put up some monstrosity made of plastic and steel.'

After a few more minutes of conversation with Mr Trelawney, I managed to discover that instead of repairing the old bus shelter, the wooden one with the thatched roof, the council workmen had torn the building down and replaced it with a hideous modern structure made of sheets of plastic, held together with monstrous steel struts.

'Instead of a proper seat there's a funny little piece of red plastic that people are supposed to lean on!' said Mr Trelawney. He now sounded as if he were about to burst into tears.

Prevention of serious illness is an important part of any doctor's job and it seemed to me that if I didn't do something there was a good chance that Mr Trelawney would have some sort of vascular accident – a heart attack or a stroke. So I told him to meet me at the bus shelter in five minutes time.

I arrived first and I was shocked at what I saw.

Mr Trelawney was absolutely right.

The council workmen had dismantled and taken away the old, original bus shelter and had replaced it with some space age creation which would have probably looked at home on an interplanetary space mission station but which looked distinctly out of place in Bilbury.

'We've got to do something about it!' said Mr Trelawney.

'I wonder what happened to the original one,' I said, not truly expecting him to know.

'The council workmen smashed it up and dumped all the bits on the tip,' explained Mr Trelawney. 'I telephoned them before I telephoned you.'

I thought about it for a moment. 'We need a Bus Shelter Action Committee,' I said. 'You ring up everyone you know and I'll ring up some people. We'll tell everyone that we'll meet in the Duck and Puddle tomorrow evening. Tell everyone you ring to try to have a look at the new bus shelter so that they know what we're talking about.'

And so the following evening, a couple of dozen of us gathered in the snug at the Duck and Puddle. Thumper Robinson and Patchy Fogg were there, together with Mr Kennett, Patsy's father, and several other local farmers. Mr Trelawney had brought along several of his neighbours. We all agreed that the new bus shelter just wouldn't do. And we all agreed that if we couldn't have our old bus shelter back then we wanted something pretty well identical.

'We could contact the council, tell them we aren't happy with the wretched thing they've put up and demand that they replace it with something more in-keeping with Bilbury's rural environment,' said Mr Trelawney.

'Good idea!' said Gilly Parsons, the publican's wife and the chef, chief barmaid, senior bottle washer and joint proprietor of the Granny Kennett Pudding Club at the Duck and Puddle. Gilly is always ready for a fight with bureaucrats.

'I'm afraid I don't think that will do any good,' said Patchy, sadly. 'Now that they've put up a new shelter they'll say we have to make do with what we have been given.' He shrugged. 'That's their way.'

It was Thumper who came up with the answer. 'We'll take down the new thing they've put up and get rid of it. And then we'll rebuild the old bus shelter.'

'Will they let us do that?' asked Mr Trelawney, uncertainly.

'Of course, not!' said Thumper. 'So we won't tell them what we're doing. We'll get rid of their horrible new thing and put up something nice and rustic of our own.'

It was generally agreed that no one at the council would ever notice that we had changed the nature of the bus shelter. Very few officials or politicians ever visit Bilbury. And if they do come they invariably get lost in our maze of unlabelled lanes. Most maps of this part of North Devon are useless. The vast majority of maps don't include details of many of our narrow lanes and I have seen a number of maps and atlases which don't even acknowledge the existence of the village Bilbury.

Moreover, if, perchance, a stranger from the big city of Barnstaple were to notice our bus shelter, it would never occur to them that it wasn't the same bus shelter that had been erected some years earlier – by the council.

'It'll cost a pretty penny,' warned Mr Kennett.

'We'll raise the money somehow,' said Thumper.

'I'll draw up the plans for free!' offered Mr Trelawney.

Patchy ordered more drinks and we sat around for half an hour working out how to get the work done and how to find the cash to pay for it. Mr Trelawney was appointed architect and project manager.

No one else mentioned it so I thought I ought to point out, just in case anyone thought it relevant, that in the latest issue of the local paper it was reported that the local bus company was halting the weekly bus service to Bilbury on the grounds that the route was uneconomical. I made this point as everyone sipped and thought of ways to raise the money for the replacement for the replacement bus shelter.

'What's that got to do with anything?' demanded Mr Trelawney. 'The old bus shelter was a beautiful little building. We owe it to the next generation to restore it to its former glory.'

'That old bus shelter was a handy little building before it started leaking,' said Thumper. 'It's quite close to the river. On a wet day I often popped in there to eat my sandwiches while I was out fishing.' He looked around. 'Sandwiches go all soggy in the rain,' he explained.

'My wife found it useful if she'd been into the village,' said another one of the farmers. 'If she had heavy shopping from Peter Marshall's shop she would stop there for a sit and a rest on her way home.'

So the Bus Shelter Action Committee duly decided that we would erect, or arrange to have erected, a new wooden bus shelter with a thatched roof and that we, the Action Committee, would find a way to fund the building.

That's the way we like to do things in Bilbury.

Just because there are no buses doesn't mean that you can't have a damned good looking bus shelter.

Just Before Dawn

I’ve never really worked out how many night calls I deal with. Sometimes I can go for a whole week without getting up at night. At other times, the night calls seem to come thick and fast. Occasionally, I have had to get up three or four times in a single night.

Night calls are often particularly memorable and, since the villagers of Bilbury are, by and large, a sensible lot who only call for help when they really need it, I genuinely don’t mind getting up in the middle of the night. It’s my job and I like doing it. Night calls can be enormously rewarding and I feel sorry for those doctors who, for one reason or another, don’t ever do them. (There are always one or two unreasonable patients who will request night time calls without consideration. But the annoyance caused by these patients is far outweighed by the genuine, professional satisfaction of being able to help someone in pain or fear.)

When I received a telephone call asking me to go and see Oliver Windle I knew that I needed to move quickly. Oliver suffers from asthma and as far as I am concerned if he has a fault it is that he tends to wait too long before calling for help. He takes tablets and has an inhaler but sometimes his wheezing just gets out of control.

It was, I suppose, about two in the morning, early one April, when the call came in from his wife. She told me that Oliver was wheezing badly and that he’d been in trouble since the early evening. He’d refused to let her call me earlier but now she felt that he definitely needed help – and needed it rather urgently. He’d tried everything that normally did the trick – even drinking two cups of very strong black coffee.

I got dressed quickly, picked up my black bag and a small oxygen cylinder which I keep in the surgery for such emergencies, and set off out into the night.

Most of the time we never really know people the first time we meet them because we probably only see the person they want us to think they are. But Oliver was different. What you saw was what you got for he never changed.

Oliver had been named after the fat half of Laurel and Hardy because his mother, who had clearly not done enough research into the matter, mistakenly thought that Oliver was the name of the thin half of the duo, the one who had been born in the Lake District in the North of England. In fact, of course, Oliver was the plump one who was born in Georgia, US.

Oliver’s parents had enjoyed a very pleasant honeymoon in the Lake District and that was where Oliver had been conceived. If Oliver had been born a girl he would have probably been called Beatrix after Beatrix Potter, the author who lived in the Lake District. And if his parents had paid closer attention to the identities of the two stars of the Laurel and Hardy movies, he would have been named Stan.

Oliver was not, it is fair to say, the brightest of God’s creatures and Thumper, who knew him well, always said he had a brain power which put him somewhere between that of a ferret and a cockatoo. Patchy said that his literary skills were such that he would have had a hard time if faced with a one letter anagram. None of this was said unkindly or with malice. Oliver himself readily admitted that he could never tackle a sum involving a total larger than his available complement of fingers and thumbs.

For most of those who are limited to using digital help with their arithmetic, this limitation means that sums of up to ten are perfectly possible, but in Oliver’s case the limit had been reduced to eight. He had lost the middle and index fingers of his right hand while endeavouring to remove a tuft of grass blocking the blade of a petrol-driven lawnmower. Sadly, he had attempted to carry out this simple procedure without taking the precaution of turning off the engine. The moment the blockage was removed, the blade had resumed its twirling faster than Oliver had been able to remove his hand.

It is perfectly possible that it would have been feasible to reattach the severed digits had Oliver had the presence of mind to seek medical help with some degree of urgency. However, he delayed for nearly 24 hours before seeking advice. This was some time before he married and he alone must take full responsibility for the delay.

After the accident, Oliver wrapped his hand in a grubby handkerchief and put the two severed fingers into the hip pocket of his jeans. By the time he finally arrived in my surgery, it was all that medicine could do to save his infected hand. The fingers, which had been crushed (he had sat on them while watching television) were almost unrecognisable as human and the vicar and Oliver later gave them a Christian burial in an unused corner of the churchyard.

I should mention, as an aside, that losing fingers is something of a local pastime in North Devon. My guess is that the average complement of fingers and thumbs in the area is something only slightly larger than nine.

When I asked him why he hadn’t come to see me sooner, Oliver explained the delay by pointing out that there had been a football match on the television that evening and that he had been looking forward to watching it for the best part of a week.

Oliver is a tireless hard worker who never seems to feel pain or weariness in the way the rest of us do. Although he doesn't work on a farm, he is good with animals and I once saw him intimidate an enraged and aggressive bull simply by standing and staring at it. He is brave and kind and does not have a malicious thought in his head. But he is certainly not a man you would hire to take an IQ test for you if success at that endeavour were important to you. I cannot think of anyone else I have ever known who would put two severed fingers into their pocket and then forget about them for 24 hours.

Oliver is, for reasons lost in the mists of time, known to everyone as 'Boy'.

It is how he still refers to himself, even though he is now a married man in his early sixties. He always refers to himself in the third person as in 'Boy doesn't like damsons' or 'Boy had a good win on the horses last week'. I've no idea why he does this. It certainly isn't out of affectation or arrogance, as it is with some of the celebrities who do it.

Boy had an informal training as a car mechanic (no paperwork was involved at any stage) and he works for Tolstoy's, the local garage, where he looks after many of the vehicles in the village. Dr Brownlow was an enthusiastic supporter and always asked that Oliver take care of routine servicing of his elderly Rolls Royce. I continue that tradition.

'When you take your car to the garage for a service the first thing they do is fiddle with everything,' Dr Brownlow once complained. 'They change the seat position, move the driving mirror, retune the radio and generally make a real mess of everything. Boy never does any of that.'

When seatbelts were introduced, Oliver was reluctant to fit them unless ordered to do so. He claimed it was because he couldn't work out how to fix them to the bodywork but I never believed that story. I think he thought they were unsightly. He and I were at one about seatbelts. I know I should have had seatbelts put into the car when they were introduced but I get in and out of the car all day long and I know I would get all tangled up, and probably break my neck, if I had belts in the car. I'm sure they'll make them compulsory eventually and when they do I'll have them fitted. Maybe very old cars such as the Rolls will be exempt.

When he was 52-years-old, Oliver got married to a lovely lady called Sheila. He and his new bride sold the house he'd inherited from his parents and Oliver explained that the stairs were getting too much for him. He has arthritis in both knees as well as the asthma. He and Sheila bought a bungalow which he said would be much easier to manage. I remember being rather surprised at his choice of bungalow, for the property he bought could only be accessed after climbing a long flight of steps from the lane.

'Won't the steps be a problem for you?' I asked him.

He shook his head. 'It's only stairs I have trouble with,' he said. 'I can manage steps outside with no bother.'

When I arrived at the bungalow in response to Sheila's urgent telephone call, the front door was open and Sheila was standing waiting for me. She'd seen and heard my car approaching and she had the front door open before I'd started climbing the steps.

Oliver was sitting in an easy chair in the front room and he was definitely struggling. He was in the early stages of status asthmaticus – a dangerous and potentially deadly condition for asthma sufferers. Status asthmaticus is always unresponsive to all the usual bronchodilators. Sometimes the air passages go into spasm and, when narrowed, become plugged with mucus. It is a frightening condition – frightening for both sufferer and observers alike.

Oliver was clutching an inhaler in one hand and holding his chest with the other. A bottle of the tablets he used was on a small table by his side. He looked like death and my first thought was that I was going to have a fight on my hands to keep him alive.

'Has anything unusual happened recently?' I asked his wife.

'He had a bad cold,' she told me, 'but you know what he's like. He doesn't like to bother you. He always thinks he can deal with things by himself.'

'Next time he's poorly you decide whether or not to call me,' I told her firmly.

Sheila nodded and promised that she would.

I got the oxygen cylinder set up and fitted a mask on Oliver's face. I hoped that the oxygen supply would help reduce the hypoxemia from which he was suffering.

'He'll be all right won't he, doctor?' asked Shelia. I knew that she had never seen him in such a bad way.

'Of course he will,' I said, with more confidence than I felt. 'But it's a good job you didn't wait any longer to call me.'

I opened my black bag and took out a syringe, a needle and a vial of a powerful corticosteroid.

'Oliver wanted me to wait until daylight to call you,' said Sheila.

I looked at her. 'Well, I'm glad you didn't.'

I didn't tell Sheila, of course, but if she had waited then we would have had to call the undertaker.

I quickly found a vein and injected the steroid straight into Oliver's arm. The oxygen was already beginning to make a difference and his colour was improving.

As I knelt beside him, waiting for the steroid to start to work and the wheezing to be reduced, I couldn't help thinking how often it is that really serious health problems occur at this time of the night.

All living things operate according to an internal clock and human beings are no exception. It has been known for centuries that the leaves of some plants regularly open during the daytime and close at night. It was always assumed that this phenomenon was a response to sunlight. But over two 250 years ago, in 1729, a French astronomer called Jean-Jacques de Mairan, conducted a very simple experiment which showed that this assumption was wrong. He discovered that this phenomenon occurs even if a plant is kept in the dark. The only possible explanation was that the plant opens and closes in response to some sort of 24-hour internal clock. That was the first experiment in chronobiology.

Since then, chronobiology (the study of temporal patterns related to biological phenomena) has become an acknowledged science. It is now known that just about every living organism, from a nucleated single cell to a human being, follows a 24-hour or circadian rhythm.

So, for example, a human being's pulse rate and blood pressure are highest first thing in the morning (with the result that the incidence of heart attacks and strokes is highest at that time of day). In the evening, the pulse rate and blood pressure will naturally fall. The human body temperature rises during the day and falls at night. The body's blood platelets, which help with blood clotting, are stickier in the morning than at any other time of day. A man is, therefore, likely to have less trouble with bleeding if he nicks himself shaving in the morning than if he nicks himself in the evening. The human tolerance for alcohol peaks at five o'clock in the afternoon. And finally, most babies are born, and most people die, between the hours of midnight and dawn.

Our bodies respond in a cyclical way because we have evolved on earth, and the amount of light and heat, and the level of electromagnetic and gravitational forces, all vary in a rhythmic way.

The important thing, still widely ignored by doctors, is that the abnormalities associated with disease also vary in a cyclical and circadian way.

Whether a patient is suffering from asthma, cancer, heart disease or arthritis, their disease will change during the day and, consequently, whatever is done to tackle the disease should also be arranged according to a circadian rhythm.

For example, the body's ability to absorb drugs varies a good deal throughout the day. When given at the right time of day, a drug will have a powerful and positive effect on an illness. But when given at the wrong time of day, a drug may prove toxic. All this is known but surprisingly few doctors take no notice of any of it.

I find the way the body changes during the day and the night truly fascinating, and I was thinking about this unrecognised branch of medicine while I waited for Oliver to recover. I was confident that if I could keep him alive until daybreak then he would make a good recovery.

Asthma is one of the commonest diseases in the world. And it is getting commoner. The disease has been so widely investigated that we know that because of the circadian rhythms associated with a number of normal physiological processes (such as airway size and breathing patterns) the majority of asthma attacks take place between 2.00 a.m. and 6.00 a.m. in the morning. The airways are naturally open widest during the day and there is a reduction in airflow after midnight.

Knowing all this, I firmly believed that if I could keep Oliver alive until sunrise then he would be over the worst, and he would survive.

Slowly, steadily and undeniably I watched Oliver's condition improve.

As the minutes ticked by so the wheezing eased and his colour improved. Soon he was able to speak. His wife felt comfortable enough to leave the room to fill the kettle and to make us all a cup of tea.

Typically, the first thing Oliver said, when he finally had enough breath to talk, was to apologise for my being called out.

'I wanted to wait until the morning,' he said.

It's funny how some people are like that. Some patients will call the doctor out at the drop of a hat, telephoning at 3.00 a.m. on Christmas morning because they've run out of cream for their athlete's foot. But others will refuse to call for help, waiting for morning, waiting for Monday, waiting for things to get better by themselves.

I told Oliver that his wife had been right to call me. And I told him firmly that I had given her authority to call me whenever she thought I was needed – and not to wait until he was ready to call.

As the minutes ticked by, so Oliver grew stronger. Soon he was out of danger. I told him I would leave the oxygen cylinder with him but that I didn't think he would need it again. I also told his wife that she had to call me if there was any deterioration but that I would call in later that day to see how he was. There was some sign of infection in his chest and I decided to start him on a week's course of an antibiotic. Drugs in the antibiotic group are, in my view, prescribed far too often. It is one of the reasons why there are now so many dangerous infections which are immune to antibiotics. But there are times when antibiotics are essential and this was one of them.

I left Oliver and Sheila just after dawn.

The drive back home was magnificent.

The sun was rising over the hills and the sky was showing signs that we were going to have a good day.

My route took me past the new Bilbury bus shelter which had been finished just that week. It had a thatched roof and a wooden seat inside. No buses stopped there but we had the best damned bus shelter in Devon. Looking at the shelter which Mr Trelawney had designed and the village had built, made me smile with pride.

The drive home was made all that much better because I knew that I had actually made a difference. You can’t often say that in life so the moments when you can are worth cherishing.

I made a slight detour and drove past the Little Hampton cricket ground on my way home. As I went past, I slowed for a few moments to look at the empty pavilion and the neatly mown square. I felt that winter was truly over and spring was definitely here.

When I got back to Bilbury Grange I was feeling good.

Patsy was still asleep and there was no point at all in waking her.

I paused for a moment; unsure whether to go back to bed or to make breakfast.

Eventually, I decided that I wouldn’t sleep if I did go back to bed, so I fed Ben and made myself breakfast.

When the kettle had boiled and the eggs were ready I put on a coat, arranged my feast on a tray and took the tray outside to eat in the early morning sunshine. Two boiled eggs with slices of fresh bread, buttered and cut into ‘soldiers’, a plateful of toast, lashings of home-made marmalade, a glass of pineapple juice and a huge pot of coffee.

Outside, it wasn’t warm but it wasn’t cold either. I sat on a wooden chair at our wooden garden table. Ben, who had finished his breakfast and had found an old bone, chewed happily beneath my feet. There was a mist over the garden and I could see the sun starting to shine through it. The grass was wet with dew. The birds were already up and about and were singing merrily to welcome another day.

I’d missed my sleep but it didn’t matter a damn for life felt very, very good.

For the umpteenth time I told myself how lucky I was to be working in Bilbury.

There really is no place quite like it.

Appendix 1

The Doc's List of Things People Achieved After the Age of 65

At the age of 66
Colonel Sanders started Kentucky Fried Chicken and by the time he was 70 had 400 franchise restaurants; John Betjeman became Poet Laureate; Edgar Rice Burroughs, author of the Tarzan books, became a war correspondent

At the age of 67
Josephine Baker, the dancer, made a return to the Broadway stage; Tolstoy rode a bicycle for the first time in his life; John Dryden, the poet, agreed to supply a publisher with 10,000 verses for £300; Simeon Poisson discovered the laws of probability (after studying the chances of French army personnel being killed by mule kicks)

At the age of 68
Queen Victoria started to learn Hindustani; Sir C Aubrey Smith, the former England cricket captain, made his first movie in Hollywood; Mrs Patrick Campbell, the actress, also made her first film

At the age of 69
Ronald Reagan was elected President of the United States of America; Noah Webster published his eponymous dictionary; Gilbert White published the *Natural History of Selborne*

At the age of 70
Francis Galton invented the science of finger printing; Alfred Wallis, a Cornish fisherman in St Ives, began to paint and duly made both himself and St Ives world famous; Copernicus published *The Revolutions of Heavenly Bodies*; Enid Blyton wrote 11 books in the year; Hilda Johnstone became a competitor in the Olympics, taking part in the equestrian dressage competition; Maurice Chevalier starred in the film Gigi.

At the age of 71
Coco Chanel designed the Chanel suit; Leni Riefenstahl, the filmmaker, took up scuba diving; Katsusuke Yanagisawa, a retired Japanese schoolteacher, climbed Mount Everest

At the age of 72
Karl Wallenda walked a tightrope between the top floors of two hotels in Miami; Colette wrote Gigi; Jomo Kenyatta became Prime Minister of Kenya; Charles Blondin was still walking tightropes; Dame May Whitty made her first film.

At the age of 73
Dr Roget finished compiling his thesaurus (which he began at the age of 69); Konrad Adenauer became Chancellor of Germany; dog trainer Barbara Woodhouse began a world-wide dog training crusade

At the age of 74
S.J.Perelman, the humourist and scriptwriter for the Marx Brothers, drove from Paris to Peking in an old MG; Jean Cocteau decorated the church of Saint Blaise-des-Simples in Milly La Foret

At the age of 75
Ed Delano rode his bicycle 3,100 miles in 33 days to a reunion meeting; Nicholas Hawksmoor designed the towers of Westminster Abbey

At the age of 76
August Rodin married the girl with whom he had lived since he was 23; John XXIII became Pope

At the age of 77
Mahatma Gandhi took India to independence; Clara Burton served in Cuba in the Spanish-American war; John Glenn went into space and flew as a payload specialist on the Discovery mission

At the age of 78
H.G.Wells successfully submitted his doctoral thesis; Thomas Beecham, the conductor, started a foreign tour; Mae West, the American actress after whom the inflatable life vest was named, appeared in the film Myra Breckinridge; Dame Edith Evans asked that her age be removed from reference books because she feared that it might prevent her getting work; Chevalier de Lamarck proposed a new theory of evolution, suggesting that acquired characteristics can be transmitted to the next generation

At the age of 79
Admiral Lord Cochrane volunteered for active service at the start of the Crimean War; Dame Edith Evans was still appearing on stage in New York; George Cayley invented a glider capable of carrying a man (in 1853)

At the age of 80
Grandma Moses had her first solo art show; Levi Burlingham, American jockey, rode in his last race; Marc Chagal created the sets for the Metropolitan Opera's production of Mozart's 'Magic Flute'; Leopold Stokowski founded the American Symphony Orchestra (in the same year he broke a leg playing football)

At the age of 81
Benjamin Franklin helped to write the American constitution; Johann Goethe finished writing *Faust*; Marcus Cato decided to destroy Carthage before it became a threat to the Roman Empire

At the age of 82
William Gladstone became British Prime Minister; Winston Churchill published the first part of his four volume *A History of the English Speaking Peoples*; American cowboy Bill Kane was still riding in rodeos (though he won his last event at the age of 80).

At the age of 83
Charlie Chaplin received an Oscar; Dr Benjamin Spock was fighting for world peace

At the age of 84
American comedian and actor George Burns had his first hit record; Henri Matisse and Claude Monet were still painting; Somerset Maugham was still writing books

At the age of 85
Carl Jung finished work on *Man and his Symbols*, his best known work; Mae West made the film 'Sextette'; Theodore Mommsen received a Nobel Prize

At the age of 86
Louise Weiss was elected an MEP; Francis Rous received the Nobel Prize for identifying a virus which caused tumours in chickens; Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman doctor, was still working; Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres was still painting

At the age of 87
Frank Lloyd Wright proposed building a skyscraper one mile high; Mary Baker Eddy founded the Christian Science Monitor; George Burns, comedian was still performing and telling jokes which he admitted were older than he was

At the age of 88
Michelangelo worked on the Rondanini Pieta; ex German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer started work on his memoirs; Pablos Casals, the cellist, was still giving concerts

At the age of 89
Philip W Whitcomb, a mature student, was awarded a degree from the University of Kansas; Dr Albert Schweitzer was still running his hospital in West Africa; Arthur Rubenstein, the pianist, was still giving concerts

At the age of 90
Leopold Stokowski, now recovered from his broken leg, recorded 20 albums, P.G.Wodehouse wrote the last Jeeves

and Wooster book; Pearl Taylor was chosen as Campus Queen at Long Beach City College where she was a student; Marc Chagall became the first living artist to be exhibited at the Louvre museum; Pablo Picasso was still drawing and engraving

And I could go on for much longer for many nonagenarians have achieved remarkable things. So, for example, at the age of 91 Alexander Baldine Kosloff was still teaching ballet, Thomas Hobbes was still writing books and Adolph Zukor was still chairman of Paramount Pictures. Antonio Stradivari was still making violins at the age of 93. George Bernard Shaw wrote his play *Why She Would Not* in seven days, just before his 94th birthday – he died at the age of 94 after falling from a tree he was pruning. Comedian George Burns was still performing at the age of 94. Bertrand Russell was still campaigning for peace at 94 – and he was in his 94th year when he set up the International War Crimes Tribunal in Stockholm. Japanese mountaineer and explorer Teichi Igarashi climbed Mt Fuji when he was 99. He did it again the following year, though he did carry a cane. He wore thick socks but no shoes.

Appendix 2

Granny Kennett's Pudding Club Recipes

With the permission of those named, I have included here a cluster of recipes for the most popular puddings served at the Duck and Puddle in Bilbury. These are traditional recipes which have been handed down through the generations. I take no responsibility for the accuracy of these recipes or the wisdom of making the puddings so described in the quantities listed here which, I confess, seem to me to be rather asking for trouble. Please note that all these puddings should be made from fresh ingredients (except for the two-day-old bread used in Mother Kennett's bread pudding) and cooked properly in some sort of oven.

1

Granny Kennett's Marmalade Pudding

(This recipe has been in the Kennett family for longer than anyone can remember.

Mix together a pound of breadcrumbs, a pound of sugar, eight eggs, a pound of finely chopped suet, chopped peel from three lemons and two jars of thick cut orange marmalade. Place the whole mixture in a pan and boil for several hours. When the mixture is nearly ready to serve, prepare a sauce with half a pound of butter, four ounces of sugar, two dozen almonds which have been chopped and ground and a third of a bottle of a good brandy. Beat the butter, sugar, almonds and brandy into a stiff creamy texture. When you serve the pudding, add the sauce around it. The pudding should be served with a good chunk of stilton cheese on a side plate and a glass of a decent port.

2

Mother Kennett's Bread and Butter Pudding

(Bread pudding recipes are two a penny and no old-fashioned recipe book is complete without one. There are probably more bread pudding recipes than there are recipes for cock-a-leekie soup. This recipe is recognised as having been the handiwork of Patsy's mother.)

Cut a loaf of two-day-old bread into thick slices and remove all the crusts. Make sure that there is no mould on the bread before cutting. It is important that the slices of bread should be cut quite thickly. Butter the bread on one side only, but very generously, making sure that the butter is rubbed well into the bread, and then spread lavish quantities of orange marmalade (preferably home-made but failing that any good brand will do) on top of the butter. Cut the bread into slices as though making soldiers for dipping into soft-boiled eggs and lay the slices in a buttered pudding dish. Beat three eggs into a pint of milk, pour the egg, and milk mixture on top of the slices of bread. The pudding should then be baked in the oven for half an hour or so. The pudding should be served with a very generous dollop of treacle gracing each portion. This pudding should serve two hungry people or four fussy eaters.

3

The Duck and Puddle Christmas Plum Pudding

(This recipe was specially created by Mrs Kennett (Patsy's Granny) for the Duck and Pudding some years ago and is now regularly served by Frank and Gilly at the pub. A decent plum pudding requires a good deal of work and preparation. Although this pudding was originally created to be served during the Christmas season, it is now so popular that it is served at the Duck and Puddle from the 20th September onwards. Just why the pudding is served from the 20th September is not known but it is commonly believed that it was probably the birthday of a villager who asked for the pudding to be served as a special treat.)

The Duck and Puddle Christmas Pudding requires two pounds of bread crumbs, two pounds of flour, two pounds of raisins, two pounds of currants, two pounds of suet, five ounces of freshly ground almonds, four ounces of grated lemon peel, four ounces of grated orange peel, a whole nutmeg which has been ground, half a pound of sugar, one and a half dozen large eggs, a pint of cream, a bottle of decent claret (it is always a mistake to use cheap wine when preparing a pudding) and a large wine glass full of a decent brandy. The ingredients should be mixed together in a large bowl and then placed in a pan and boiled for at least five hours. The pudding should be served with copious amounts of custard. A pudding of this size should provide sufficient portions for a medium sized family. If the pudding is being prepared for two or three people then the quantities can be halved. During the Christmas season, the Duck and Puddle serves this pudding every day for the Twelve Days of Christmas. In one recent year, Granny Kennett prepared 84 of these puddings for consumption by Duck and Puddle regulars over the Christmas holidays. (It should perhaps also be mentioned that during that same record period, Peter Marshall sold 67 bottles of proprietary indigestion medicine. The doc did not keep a record of the amount of indigestion medicine he prescribed.)

4

Patsy Kennett's Apple Pudding

(This recipe was handed down to Patsy by her mother. Its origins are lost in the mists of Old Bilbury.)

A dozen and a half decent sized apples should be cut, sliced and macerated as though being prepared for an apple pie filling or for a sauce. A plain tin should be buttered and into it should be placed slices of bread which have been cut into small sections. The bread should line the whole of the pan, including the internal sides. Raisins, sultanas and chopped dates should be scattered over the bread. Melted butter should then be poured over the bread until it is well soaked. The macerated apple mush (as it is known locally) should be very well mixed with three quarters of a pound of sugar and the finely cut rind of two large lemons or three small ones and boiled for half an hour. The mush should then be poured into the bread-lined mould and put into the oven for three quarters of an hour or so. These quantities will serve four people with healthy appetites, six people with poor appetites, two very hungry farmhands or one Thumper Robinson. The apple pudding should be served with a sparkling white wine or, if the means are available, champagne.

5

Thumper's Favourite Tea-Time Snack.

(This pudding was originally prepared by Thumper's grandmother for her husband, Norris, a well-known North Devon farmer and accomplished trencherman. Norris went to London just once in his life (to deal with a legal problem concerning boundaries) but is still remembered at the Garrick club. Norris went there for lunch as a guest of his solicitor, who had travelled up to London with him, and proceeded to impress the other members by eating his way through the entire menu – including large portions of five different hot puddings.)

Chop up four apples, place them in a basin and add several large handfuls of breadcrumbs, a quarter of a pound of sugar, eight ounces of mixed currants and raisins and six beaten eggs. Add the finely chopped rind and the juice from two lemons and stir in two glasses of brandy or another alcoholic drink of choice. Tie a cloth over the top of the basin and boil it and the contents for several hours. The snack should be served with copious quantities of custard, thick slices of bread and butter and a pint of beer. This recipe serves one when prepared for Thumper Robinson but may serve more ordinary diners.

6. Granny Kennett's Spotted Dick

Political correctness means that in some recipe books and some eating establishments, this dish is now known as 'Spotted Richard'. However, the Kennett family in general, and Granny Kennett in particular, will have nothing to do with this nonsense. A spotted dick pudding is a spotted dick pudding is a spotted dick pudding and, for the Kennetts, and the rest of us in Bilbury, that will never change.

The basic ingredients for this version of spotted dick are one pound of plain flour, half a pound of well-shredded suet, a third of a pound of caster sugar, a tablespoonful of baking powder, three quarters of a pound of currants, the shaved peel of three lemons, four or five cloves and some milk. The suet, sugar, flour, baking powder, currants and lemon should be placed in a bowl and mixed very well. Milk should be added in sufficient quantity to turn the mixture into a soft and squidgy dough. The dough is then decanted into an ordinary pudding basin which has been greased with butter. A piece of muslin or greaseproof paper should then be placed over the top of the basin and tied in position with parcel string (not baler twine). A piece of cloth should then be tied on top of the muslin or greaseproof paper. Again, the cloth should be tied with parcel string. The pudding basin should be placed in a large saucepan which is then two thirds filled with water, brought to the boil and simmered for quite a while. Granny Kennett always says that the simmering should last for at least an hour and a half, though some in the family claim that one hour should be enough. Water which is lost from the pan should be replaced as necessary. The cloths and string should then be removed and discarded. The pudding should be served on large plates (not in bowls) with huge quantities of freshly made custard poured on top so that it almost reaches the edge of the plate. To avoid spillage, the custard should be poured onto the spotted dick pudding when the plates have been placed on the table. These quantities should be sufficient to provide enough pudding for three or four people. If more guests are expected, then several puddings should be prepared. A spotted dick pudding should always be served with custard and never with cream or, heaven forbid, with ice cream.

Important Note from the author:

Please note that several of these puddings contain ingredients (such as alcohol) which might be unsuitable for some individuals. It should also be noted that those with weak digestive systems or modest appetites might find themselves over-faced by these dishes. These puddings are offered here in what are known in Devon as ‘Bilbury quantities’. Some people, of a healthier and more sensible disposition, may prefer to reduce the quantities used in order to make smaller puddings.

Note from the author:
‘If you have enjoyed this book I would be genuinely grateful (and forever encouraged) if you would be kind enough to leave a positive review on the Amazon product page.’ – Vernon Coleman

There is more information about the author on his Amazon author page and at www.vernoncoleman.com

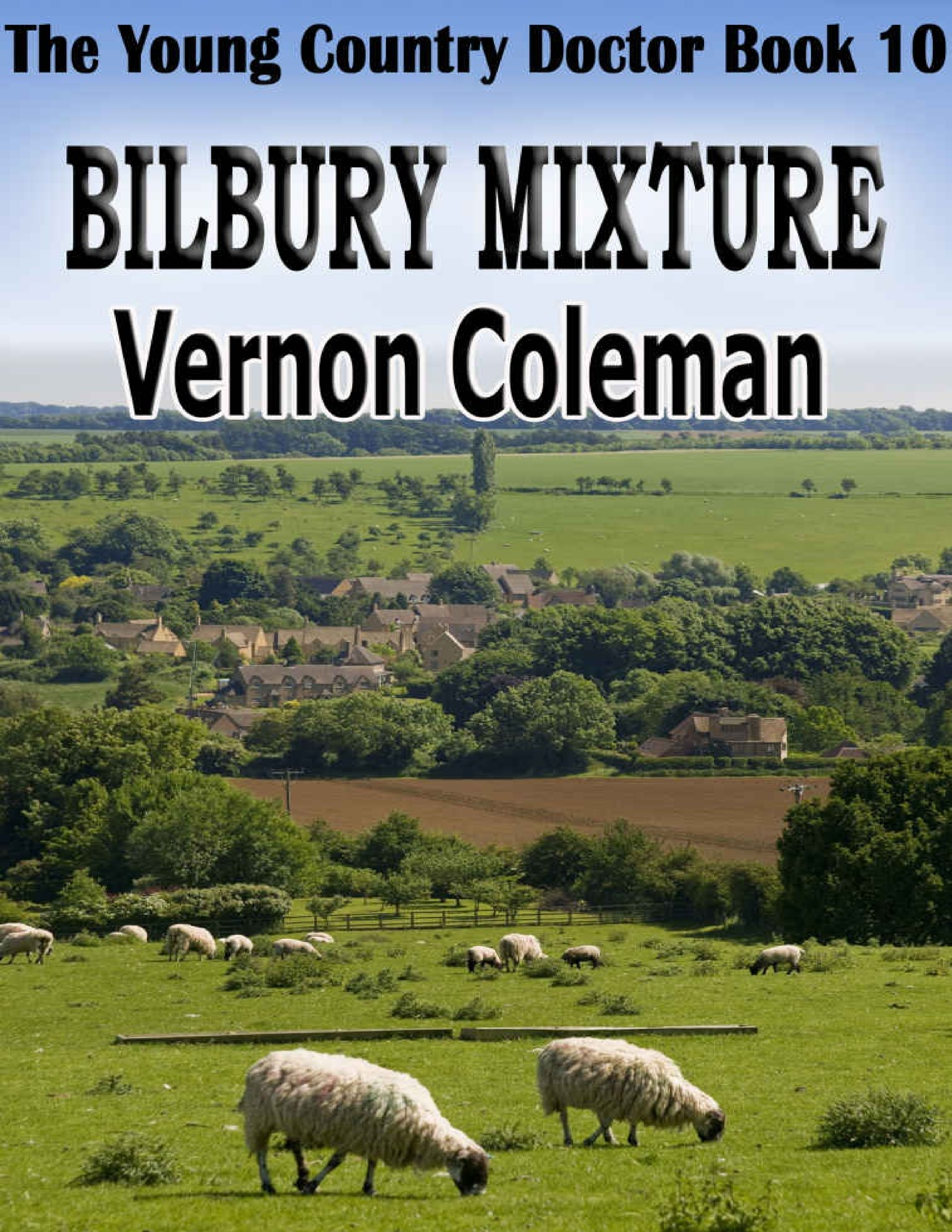

The Young Country Doctor Book 10

BILBURY MIXTURE

Vernon Coleman

The Young Country Doctor Book 10
Bilbury Mixture

Vernon Coleman

Another collection of memories relating to the village of Bilbury, and its inhabitants.

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Note: Names and details of individuals and establishments have been altered to protect the innocent, the guilty and, in Peter Marshall's case, the not quite sure but whichever it is there will be a 5% discount on alternate Thursdays when there is a 'Q' in the month.

To Antoinette

You are the only past I remember, the only present that matters and the only future I want.

Foreword

I decided, a few months ago, to write a new book about Bilbury – simply because I still love the village and the villagers and I find it immensely enjoyable and relaxing to write about my experiences with friends such as Thumper Robinson and Patchy Fogg.

The Bilbury books are, of course, merely a peep into a continuum; a glimpse into a world that lives brightly in real life as well as in the mind and the memory.

In real life, the villagers are there all the time, doing whatever they are doing when I'm not writing about them and no one is reading about them.

And although I have changed the name to protect the village's privacy, Bilbury still exists, unchanged.

It is the village where Antoinette and I still live.

Here is yet more proof that life is stranger than fiction. I doubt if anyone could make up some of the stories in this book and I certainly wish that I were a good enough writer to do so.

The fact is that there are far more secrets around us than most people think. As a GP in a small, confined community I was privy to far more secrets than most people.

Country general practice is a drama that never ends.

I hope you enjoy reading this instalment of Bilbury history as much as I enjoyed remembering it. The stories are set at slightly different times and in varying seasons.

Vernon Coleman
Bilbury

Tickety Tonk

A cassette tape was playing on a small portable machine and the operating theatre was full of the sound of *My Fair Lady*.

Mr Berkeley Frampton, the surgeon, was clearly a fan of musicals.

I have always found surgeons to be rather unusual people.

For a start, the men and women who train to become surgeons work for six or seven years to acquire the right to call themselves 'Doctor' but then spend another few years training to be surgeons so that they can lose the title 'Doctor' and revert to calling themselves 'Mister', 'Miss', 'Mrs' or 'Ms'.

This curious habit dates back more than a century to the days when medically qualified men were all members of the Royal College of Physicians. These eminent physicians confined themselves to taking pulses, using leeches and prescribing drugs.

On the other hand, the men (and in those days they were all men) who wielded sharp knives and performed operations were barber surgeons who had no real medical qualifications. A barber surgeon would have found himself in the stocks (or worse) if he'd dared to call himself 'doctor'.

So Berkeley Frampton was Mr Frampton (unless he wanted to book a restaurant table, in which case he would swallow his pride and become Dr Frampton again).

A young student nurse, who had probably dreamt of higher things, had been put in charge of changing the tapes and we'd just finished listening to Julie Andrews working her way through the surgeon's cassette copy of *The Sound of Music*. We were now listening to Miss Andrews and the Ensemble singing 'Wouldn't it be loverly'.

Which, indeed, it would have been if I had not been listening to it in an operating theatre.

The operation hadn't yet started but I was already dripping with sweat.

Some doctors find the operating theatre a peaceful, congenial place to work but I never have. Even when I was a medical student I had known that I did not want to spend my professional life dressed in a mask and gown.

(A pal of mine always claimed that surgeons didn't really wear masks to prevent the spread of infection but so that the patient wouldn't know who had operated on them and wouldn't be able to sue them afterwards.)

To be perfectly honest, I do not find hospitals to be congenial places.

I worked in hospitals for several years but never really felt comfortable in them.

It's the smell, I think: that strange mixture of antiseptic, air freshener, polish, talcum powder, fear, sorrow and anaesthetic gases.

And the fact that, although the damned places always look clean enough, I know (because a pathologist told me) that the average hospital ward contains more deadly bugs per square inch than the average toilet bowl.

My day had not started well.

In the mail, before I left Bilbury Grange, I had received a set of laboratory results from the hospital. One of the reports gave me the startling and awful news that a patient of mine, Hamilton Murray, had lung cancer.

I had sent Hamilton to the hospital for an X-ray because he had a persistent cough and a pain in his chest. My first thought was that the cough was partly a result of a bout of flu and partly a result of the fact that he smoked at least 40 unfiltered cigarettes a day. I wanted an X-ray just to make sure that there was nothing more sinister going on. He'd been unwilling to go to the hospital and it had taken me nearly a month to persuade him to have the X-ray. In the end, he'd only agreed to go as a favour to me.

But the X-ray report made it clear that my worst fears were justified. Hamilton Murray had lung cancer.

On the way to the hospital, I called in to his home to tell him the news, and to promise that I would arrange an appointment for him to see a consultant to discuss all the therapeutic possibilities.

Hamilton has never married and lives alone in a tiny, one bedroom cottage which, for absolutely no good reason and with a false grandiosity based entirely upon a delightful sense of humour, he has renamed Barrington Court.

Visitors who are expecting to find a large, listed Elizabethan manor house, surrounded by a moat and mentioned in the appropriate volume of *Pevsner's*, are invariably startled to find that the tiny hovel they assume to be a lodge house is, in fact, Barrington Court.

Hamilton has a beard which bears a resemblance to a moth-eaten merkin and his clothes fit him a mite too soon. His wardrobe does not contain much in the way of elasticated beige and he tends to dress in colours which are what Jeeves, Bertie Wooster's butler, would have described as 'sudden'. He does this quite deliberately. He spends a lot of his time in woodlands and after an unfortunate accident when he was shot by a myopic marksman who thought he'd spotted a deer, he made a deliberate decision to wear brightly coloured clothes.

He gets his water from a well in his garden and his 'facilities' consist of a cesspit which is situated rather too close to the well for my liking. The cesspit is housed within a ramshackle wooden shed. The acre of land which surrounds the cottage has been completely stripped of anything that could possibly be used or sold as winter fuel. The bees whose hives decorate Hamilton's land have to travel into neighbouring woodland to collect nectar. It was Hamilton who taught me that it is important not to take all the honey from a hive. Bees need some of their honey to preserve and protect their own immune systems, and they will die if all their honey is taken.

Born in Edinburgh, but of English parentage, he went to Eton and trained as an architect, intending to follow in his father's footsteps.

His public school background, and an intense affection for the stories of P.G.Wodehouse has given him a delightfully old-fashioned vocabulary. His conversations are spattered with phrases such as 'Odds bodkins', 'Toodle pip', Tally ho' and 'Tickety tonk'.

Most remarkably, he has an extraordinary talent which enables him to imitate bird sounds with great skill. Every February he does cuckoo impersonations and on two separate occasions, visitors to North Devon have had letters published in *The Times* newspaper claiming that they've heard the first cuckoo of spring, when in truth they'd heard Hamilton having a little harmless fun with them.

After three months working in his father's practice, Hamilton decided that he hated the profession for which he had trained so assiduously and, after receiving a very small legacy from a distant relative, he travelled south in search of an escape from modern living and those aspects of civilisation which he regarded as oppressive and uncivilised.

When he quit his job he was low, miserable, almost depressed by a life which seemed to him to be too full of disappointments and frustrations.

He and his family did not see eye to eye and, from what I had learned, I suspect that the separation was as welcome to the one side as to the other.

I am always fascinated by the way individuals make vital, life-forming decisions on a whim. On simple, relatively unimportant issues we take advice, we read, we study, we consider before making our choices. We spend hours looking at the various options before buying a washing machine or a motor car. But the important things are often decided without any great thought at all. We all reach many crossroads in our lives and often choose the road we will take without any real thought about where it might take us.

Hamilton once admitted to me that he had ended up in Bilbury as a result of a series of chance encounters.

When leaving Edinburgh, he had taken a train to Leeds because he had thought he'd seen a girl he knew buy a ticket for that train. In fact he had been mistaken; the girl merely looked slightly like someone he knew.

After two days in Leeds, he had headed south because it hadn't stopped raining and the small hotel where he'd been staying was cold, dark and dismal.

He'd taken the first train south, and the train had led him to Birmingham.

He had stayed in Birmingham for a week and then, after seeing a poster advertising holidays in Devon, had decide that if he was going to be miserable he might just as well be miserable somewhere beautiful.

So he had taken a bus to Exeter.

From Exeter he'd taken the small train north to Barnstaple for no better reason than he wanted to spend another hour or so in the company of a woman he'd met in the railway buffet.

The additional hour had demolished any prospect of romance and after a week in Barnstaple, Hamilton had headed east, meaning to visit the twin towns of Lynton and Lynmouth.

But he never reached Lynton or Lynmouth.

He'd got off the bus when he had seen a signpost for Bilbury, confusing the name with Bibury, a famously picturesque village just north of Cirencester in Gloucestershire. Bibury stands on the river Coln, a tributary of the Thames, and Hamilton had seen many photographs of the famous Cotswold stone cottages on Arlington Row.

And it was in Bilbury that his journey had ended.

Hamilton had fallen in love, not with a girl or a woman, but with a village and a lifestyle.

He had, he once told me, decided that he would stay in Bilbury because he had had his best night's sleep for weeks at the Duck and Puddle. It wasn't the bed, he said, but the feeling of peace he felt. He told me that there is an old Irish saying that the beginning of a ship is a board, the beginning of a kiln is a stone and the beginning of health is sleep.

I like Hamilton very much.

He had a gently mischievous sense of humour.

A few years ago, he spent a summer working at a holiday camp in Ilfracombe and when one large family of holidaymakers turned out to be unpleasant, aggressive and consistently rude, both to the staff and to other holidaymakers, he dealt with them by throwing cold chips onto the roof of their caravan late at night.

He obtained the cold chips from the rubbish bins outside the mobile fish and chip van which parked in the campsite every evening.

Throwing bits of food onto a caravan roof is a favourite trick among those who work on caravan sites. It is the one good reason for never annoying the locals when you're spending your nights in a vehicle with a thin metal roof.

The bemused holidaymakers realised that the noise that woke them at 6 a.m. every morning was the sound of seagulls walking, pecking and squabbling on the thin metal roof of their holiday home, but they never realised that the seagulls were on their roof because of the chips. And they certainly never knew that Hamilton had been the cause of their early morning wake up calls.

I'd been lucky to catch Hamilton at home.

Actually, 'lucky' wasn't the right word. As things turned out, it certainly wasn't lucky at all.

Like many people in Bilbury, Hamilton doesn't have one job (in the way that people in towns and cities usually have one job) but earns his living in a variety of different ways.

In the autumn and the winter, he wanders around the countryside on a bicycle with a small trailer attached to it. He doesn't own a vehicle which has a motor, though he drove a tank during the Second World War and his driving licence, which he once showed me, entitles him to drive one still, if he can ever find one available.

Whenever he sees a fallen tree or branch, Hamilton stops his bicycle, takes an old bow saw out of his trailer and cuts up the tree or branch into logs suitably sized to fit an ordinary hearth or log burner. I've known him take a week to cut up and cart away a small tree.

He has a number of regular customers to whom he delivers logs and kindling. The fallen trees and branches are sometimes on bits of wasteland and sometimes on land that belongs to someone who isn't bothering to do anything with it. No one ever objects to Hamilton chopping up the dead wood; on the contrary he is regarded as a useful scavenger, cleaning up and tidying the countryside and providing the villagers with an essential supply of fuel.

He once told me that willow trees (famous as the original source of aspirin and as the raw material from which cricket bats can be made) are his favourite source of kindling for they constantly shed small branches which can easily be snapped by hand into stove and hearth sized lengths.

In the summer, Hamilton sells newspapers, magazines and snacks to holidaymakers on the beach at Combe Martin.

He fills his trailer with suitable reading matter, nibbles and drinks at Peter Marshall's shop and rides his bicycle down to the beach. There he sells what he can before riding back to Peter's shop and unloading the unsold impedimenta. Peter pays Hamilton a small commission, a very modest percentage of the takings, for his labours.

I doubt if any of Hamilton's customers guess that the oddly dressed cyclist from whom they have bought their paperback, crisps and fizzy drink has a first class from Oxford University and is an Eton educated, qualified architect.

As a result of this healthy outdoor lifestyle, I have always thought Hamilton to be one of the fittest men I know. In a village where many of the residents lead healthy outdoor lives that is some distinction.

Sadly, however, Hamilton smokes.

In order to keep down his expenditure, he rolls his own cigarettes and smokes far too many of them a day. I sometimes think that by putting high taxes on all cigarettes, including the filtered ones, the Government is actually doing more harm than good.

Quite a few of my patients who smoke, buy their tobacco in tins and make their own cigarettes. Naturally, this means that the cigarettes they smoke are often far worse for their health than the cigarettes manufactured in bulk.

'I'll do everything I can,' I promised him when I'd told him the bad news about the X-ray.

'How long have I got?' he asked. 'Tell me the truth, doctor!'

Do people really want to know when they say this?

It is a question I have fought to answer since I became a doctor. Many patients say they want the truth but they don't. They cannot and do not deal with the truth. Would any of us really like to know when we will die? Should the doctor lie a little, perhaps? Should the doctor, at the very least, leave some hope – even though he may know, in his heart, that there is none?

Or is it true, as some would say, that there is always hope? After all, miracles do happen.

When I worked in hospital, I once had a patient who insisted that he be told the truth about his condition. The consultant, after a moment's hesitation, told him. It was not good news. The man became gloomy, depressed and obsessed with death. He made no plans for his family. He did nothing to tidy up his affairs. He merely sank into a state of paralysis. And he stayed that way until he died three months later. Would he have been better off not knowing? Should the consultant have sanitised the truth, lightened the prognosis a little, given some hope?

The one thing for sure is that there are no simple answers.

Every time the question is asked the doctor must, I believe, make a fresh decision; analyse all the evidence and everything he knows about the patient, his circumstances, his state of mind, his family and friends and so on. It is for this reason that I believe that an old-fashioned GP is the best person to answer the question, and to decide whether or not the truth should be told and if so how much of it should be shared.

I remember a patient of mine, a woman, who was dying of cancer.

From the start her husband, who had guessed the truth, begged me not to tell her. He said that she would not be able to cope with the truth. He insisted that he would shoulder the burden. And so I had kept the truth from her. I had accepted his advice.

But towards the end of her life, she had held my hand and she had smiled and she had told me that she had known all along, right from the moment when the diagnosis had been made, that she was dying.

'I appreciate you not telling us,' she said. 'My husband would never have been able to cope with the truth.'

She was convinced that I had kept the truth from her to protect her husband!

After that conversation I decided that I had, perhaps, made a mistake. I should have told her and then we could have talked more. Maybe I could have offered her more help.

And after she died, I knew that I had made an error. I had been wrong.

The minute she died, before the funeral took place, her husband began to wallow in a sense of martyrdom. He had, he told everyone who would listen, shouldered the burden of his wife's diagnosis by himself because she would not have been strong enough to deal with the truth. He was submerged in waves of sympathy; for being a widower and for having borne the burden by himself; for having protected his 'weak' wife from reality.

But the truth was that they had both known.

And she had suffered alone and in silence to protect her husband.

After his wife's death he enjoyed the sympathy of their relatives, friends and neighbours for three months and then, suddenly, he announced that he was marrying his ex-wife's best friend.

I told Hamilton Murray the truth about his illness. I told him everything I knew.

I've known him for years and he has always seemed to me to be a man who likes straight talk. He is not the sort of man to tiptoe round a difficult topic or to be put off by the prospect of embarrassing a friend or a neighbour.

I told him that according to the X-ray report, the prognosis was not good but nor was it dire. 'I'll get you an appointment with a surgeon,' I told him. 'If, as the X-ray suggests, the lump in your lung hasn't spread, then it may be possible for a surgeon to operate and remove it. It's a large lump but it might be possible to remove it.'

I tried to be as upbeat as it is possible to be when telling a man who smokes that he has cancer of the lung. I promised I would do everything possible to help him.

He was not impressed by the prospect of an operation. He told me point blank that he would rather die than have an operation.

'I hate hospitals,' he said, with a shudder, taking out his tobacco pouch and starting to roll a fresh cigarette. I remembered how difficult it had been to persuade him to go to the hospital to have an X-ray.

And I kept thinking of Hamilton as I stood waiting for the operation to begin.

'She's all yours,' said Alston Churchill, the anaesthetist, who was sitting at the head of the operating table, no more than eighteen inches away from the patient's head. He seemed very young, in his late twenties, but he already had that quiet, calming confidence which is a hallmark of the professional anaesthetist. He was a keen walker and I'd seen him in the Duck and Puddle a couple of times.

'Right!' said the surgeon. He looked around. 'Do you know who this is?'

Puzzled, the anaesthetist looked up at him.

'Singing,' explained the surgeon. 'Who's singing?'

The anaesthetist thought for a moment. 'Audrey Hepburn?'

The surgeon laughed. 'You're a bloody Philistine, Churchill! This is the sound track of the stage version and Julie Andrews is playing Eliza Doolittle.' The surgeon paused and wagged a gloved finger at the anaesthetist. 'Interesting mistake though,' he said. 'Miss Hepburn took the part in the film version but apart from the first verse of 'Just You Wait, Henry Higgins' her singing was dubbed by a woman called Marni Nixon who was a very interesting and talented singer who did the singing for Deborah Kerr in *The King and I*, for Sophia Loren in *Boy on a Dolphin* and for Natalie Wood in *West Side Story*. She also did the high notes for Marilyn Monroe in *Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend*.'

All this information was greeted with murmurings as we all showed how impressed we were. The last thing anyone in an operating theatre wants to do is to upset the surgeon.

'Funnily enough,' said the surgeon, now thoroughly warmed up in his temporary role as an expert on musicals, 'Marni Nixon actually appears on screen in *The Sound of Music*. She plays one of the nuns.'

'Golly', said the anaesthetist, trying to sound interested.

'Are you all set?' asked the surgeon, reverting to his day job. 'Everyone comfortable?'

No one spoke.

'Are we all ready to go?' asked the surgeon, slightly irritated by the lack of response to his previous question.

To be honest I couldn't tell when his questions required an answer or were simply rhetorical. He had that odd habit of allowing his voice to rise at the end of every sentence, turning everything he said into a question. So when there was a question which required an answer I didn't reply straight away. He probably just thought I was a little slow-witted. I was, however, slightly reassured by the fact that no one else had replied to him.

The theatre sister standing beside me then muttered something which I took to be an assent.

She had been built by the same firm which built the concrete block houses which were erected during the Second World War, and which still decorate the English coastline. She had a bust which looked large enough and firm enough to support a couple of anti-aircraft guns.

She didn't seem quite as full of jollity as the surgeon. In fact, she looked as if she'd eaten something which had disagreed with her and was now winning the argument.

Another nurse stood at the head of the operating table, with a tray full of surgical implements at her side. The instruments, neatly laid out and all fresh from the autoclave, were shiny and all carefully positioned so that the nurse could pick out whatever the surgeon requested.

A third nurse, who was not scrubbed, was standing a yard or two away ready to turn lights on or off, fiddle with the air conditioning system or fetch bits and pieces which might turn out to be necessary. It was also her job to collect discarded equipment and swabs and to keep a count of them as they were used.

The nurse who was in charge of operating the cassette player was clearly very junior and was, I assumed, simply there to observe, to learn and to try not to faint.

The patient, Miss Barley, was lying on her tummy and most of her back was covered with sterile green towels. The only part of her that was visible was her bottom which looked very pink and which was indubitably of the economy sized family pack variety.

I had only been in the operating theatre for a few minutes but I had already developed an itch at the back of my neck and, because the white rubber surgical boots I had borrowed were two sizes too small, my feet were complaining bitterly about their incarceration.

I was in the operating theatre because Miss Barley, one my patients, needed surgery, and had refused to go to the hospital unless I promised to be present during the operation.

'I trust you doctor,' said Miss Barley. 'I'd feel safe if I knew you were performing the operation.'

I had explained that I could not possibly perform the operation she required.

'I'm a GP,' I told her. 'The surgeon to whom I referred you is very competent. He will be the one who'll do the operation.'

'But if you're there, you'll be able to keep an eye on things won't you? You're a doctor, you'll be able to take over if you think he's doing something wrong.'

At that time it was the case that once a doctor was qualified he could, without any additional training or qualifications, take on any post or responsibilities for which he felt himself adequately prepared. There was nothing in law to stop me performing the operation myself.

I had explained to Miss Barley that although there was no legal reason why I couldn't perform her operation it would be quite inappropriate of me to do anything other than be there to hold her hand when she was anaesthetised, and to be there when she came round after the operation was over.

My original plan had been to fulfil my promise by putting on theatre scrubs and a surgical cap and mask and standing quietly in a corner but when I had asked the surgeon if he minded if I joined him in the theatre, he had insisted that I go the whole hog; scrub up, put on the rubber gloves and join him at the table as his assistant.

'My house surgeon is down with some nasty bug,' he had told me. 'If you scrub up then my registrar can cover the out-patients list.'

I had protested that it had been some time since I'd been in an operating theatre, let alone done any holding, pulling and snipping (the three basic tasks of the assistant surgeon are holding bits of the patient that are in danger of getting in the way, pulling organs and tissues which are interfering with the field of play and snipping bits of tissue or sutures as and when required) but the surgeon had dismissed my reticence as irrelevant.

'You can't do worse than my bloody house surgeon. He's a handsome looking devil but between the aquiline nose and the receding chin at the front and the cascade of golden curls at the back there is a complete vacuum. Heaven knows how he got through medical school. I only took him on as a favour to his father. I can't even trust him with a pair of scissors, let alone a scalpel.'

'They say Napoleon liked to surround himself with lucky men,' continued the surgeon. 'I seem to get lumbered with unlucky bastards as house surgeons. The last three I've had have all been clumsy, stupid and unlucky. If they'd won the pools they'd have lost the coupon. Just keep your elbows out of my way and remember to laugh at my jokes,' he said merrily. 'I like a bit of banter in the operating theatre. It helps to keep me awake.'

This was not, I confess, the best of news.

Some surgeons like to concentrate on the work in hand. They approach their work with all the earnest caution of bomb disposal experts.

But others regard the second word of the phrase 'operating theatre' as an invitation to display their talent as stand-up comedians with the certain and doubtless comforting knowledge that there is one huge difference between the professional stand-up comedian.

The professional comedian is a fellow who must take his life in his mouth every time he steps out on stage. He is constantly desperate for the first laugh.

The surgeon, on the other hand, knows damned well that he is in charge and can expect his audience to laugh and titter at all the appropriate moments.

The junior doctor who is hoping for a good reference when he applies for his next job will know that it is his job to lead the rest in providing suitably appreciative noises when the consultant cracks what he think is a joke, or allows a witty remark to escape.

'What do you think, shall we give her a nice tattoo?' asked the surgeon. 'Something tasteful, of course. A little extra? A memento for our lucky patient.'

The theatre sister ignored him. The junior nurses giggled. I couldn't believe what I'd heard. Was he serious?

'What's our patient's name?' the surgeon asked the theatre sister.

'Miss Marigold Barley,' replied the theatre sister, rather coldly. 'She's 57-years-old and has no listed allergies.'

The sister didn't know but Miss Barley is, not unnaturally, known in the village as 'Pearl'. I don't think I've ever heard anyone call her Marigold.

Miss Andrews had now been replaced by Stanley Holloway, who was playing Alfred P.Doolittle, and he and an impromptu choir of his fellow dustmen were all heartily singing 'With a Little Bit of Luck'.

The surgeon looked over his mask at me. 'Is Miss Barley married? Engaged? Suitor? String of ardent boyfriends?'

'None of those,' I replied. 'She's a rather prim and very proper maiden lady who does a lot of good works in the village and for the local church.'

'So the only organ she's familiar with is the one in the church, eh?'

'Probably,' I agreed.

'Then no one will ever know if we give her a tattoo, will they?' said the surgeon. 'And unless she's in the habit of examining her very fine rear in a mirror she'll certainly never know. What do you think, doctor? You're her GP. You know her well. Should we decorate her with a nice tattoo of a sailing ship, disappearing over the horizon of the left buttock? Or a fox, perhaps, going to earth? Or do you think a nice, single red rose would be more appropriate?'

He paused, as though in thought.

'No, the fox would be best; a handsome Mr Reynard disappearing to safety, with a large bushy tail waving behind him.'

I looked at the surgeon.

I still wasn't entirely sure just how serious he was being.

The suggestion was, to say the least, outrageous, unprofessional and illegal and I was not prepared to allow him to tattoo one of my patients. Even though they might never see the tattoo, I would know it was there and that I had been there when the evil deed had been done.

Could he really be serious?

Although Mr Frampton had a reputation as an excellent and skilful surgeon, he also had a reputation for being a trifle unconventional in his approach to life but I did not know him well enough to know whether or not he was joking.

Although still only in his thirties, he had been married three times and after being caught by the local police for driving while under the influence of alcohol he had managed to keep hold of his driving licence only by hiring an expensive, skilled QC.

The barrister had flattered the local magistrates by his very presence and had argued that if the surgeon lost his licence, he would be unable to attend to his patients in emergency situations.

'The inevitable delay engendered by waiting for a public taxi to arrive could well prove fatal to some unfortunate patient,' the QC had argued. 'My clients skilful hands are required on demand, not five or ten minutes hence.'

The magistrates, putty in the barrister's very capable hands, had charged the surgeon £10 and politely asked him not to do it again.

'Where's the tattoo kit, sister?' asked the surgeon. 'My needles and coloured inks!'

'I don't know,' replied the sister, rather huffily. 'Maybe they're in your rooms at the private hospital.'

She was clearly neither amused nor impressed by Mr Frampton's irreverent banter.

The surgeon, like most of his colleagues, kept a suite of rooms at a local private hospital where he performed the same sort of operations as he performed at the NHS hospital. The only real difference was that at the private hospital the surgeon was allowed to charge very sizeable fees.

The surgeon sighed. ‘Ah well, another good idea bites the dust. Better get on with what we’re here for. What does Miss Barley want from us today? A Caesarian section to deliver a surprise bouncing boy? A breast enhancement operation to boost her chances at the church social? Twenty minutes of liposuction to turn her thighs sylphlike and girlish?’

‘She’s got internal haemorrhoids,’ said the theatre sister, in a very matter of fact voice. ‘I think she would like you to get rid of them for her.’

She had been busily painting Miss Barley’s buttocks with an antiseptic solution which had temporarily stained them reddish brown. She had painted with great care and delicacy, gently moving the draped green towels so that every square inch of exposed skin was sterilised.

‘Ah, piles!’ cried the surgeon merrily. ‘Let’s take a look at the field of play!’

He reached down, parted the cheeks of Miss Barley’s buttocks and peered at the spot the tattooed fox would have been aiming for had the surgeon continued with his plan.

‘How’s your yacht, Alston?’ he suddenly demanded.

‘It’s not exactly a yacht,’ said the anaesthetist.

‘He’s got a bloody yacht, you know!’ said the surgeon, addressing me. ‘They earn a fortune these bloody gas men. Wish I could afford a yacht.’

The surgeon stuck a gloved finger into Miss Barley’s anal sphincter and moved it around, stretching the sphincter muscle before adding a second finger.

It had been a while since I’d been in an operating theatre, it all seemed to be a strange mixture of the impersonal and the humiliating. Some surgeons do tend to see their patients as little more than collections of tissue and organs. Poor Miss Barley; she would have died of shame if she hadn’t been unconscious.

‘It’s 17 foot long for heaven’s sake,’ said the anaesthetist. ‘It’s really no more than a rather grand dinghy. It’s got a tiny cabin and an outboard motor. If I lie down in the cabin my feet stick out through the door.’

‘I think he uses it for smuggling,’ said the surgeon, speaking to me and ignoring the anaesthetist. ‘I’ll bet he sails in at the dead of night in order to avoid the customs people. He doubtless has the thing packed to the gunwales with Italian wine, Belgian chocolates and French cigarettes. I bet he makes another fortune out of it all.’

He bent closer to Miss Barley’s bottom and poked at it with a gloved finger. ‘There are just two rather nasty little chaps here. I think we’ll get rid of them both with the rubber band machine. Have you seen the rubber band machine in action? Did they have them when you were a student? Give me the anal speculum and the rubber band machine please, sister.’

The surgeon had segued so fast from talking about the anaesthetist’s boat to discussing Miss Barley’s piles and requesting the equipment to deal with them that I was in danger of losing the plot.

‘Yes, oh yes, they had the rubber band ligator,’ I said.

I remembered one of the consultant surgeons at the teaching hospital where I trained showing us the ligator.

It was a brand new invention at the time and he was unnaturally proud of it.

It consisted of a specially designed pair of forceps which enabled the surgeon to fire a rubber band around the base of the haemorrhoid. Once in position the rubber band cut off the blood supply to the haemorrhoid, causing it to shrivel up and drop off in a day or two. Prior to the invention of the rubber band ligation technique, the annihilation of haemorrhoids was a rather crude business which, to put it bluntly, simply involved hacking them out with a sharp knife and then sewing up what was left over.

‘We could have done this in out-patients,’ said the surgeon. ‘Didn’t need a full anaesthetic and all this folderol.’

‘Miss Barley is very nervous,’ I reminded him. ‘And she lives alone. She really wouldn’t have been a suitable patient for out-patient surgery. And you did say to her that if she came into the hospital you’d be able to deal with everything in one go.’

‘Hmm,’ said the surgeon, taking the anal speculum, (a piece of equipment which is also known as an anoscope and which is, in reality, little more than a very expensive short metal tube) and the rubber band machine off the theatre sister.

He put them both down on the sterile green cloths covering the patient’s lower back.

‘It’s crowded with two people in the cabin,’ said the anaesthetist, wearily and defensively. ‘My wife and I never take it out of the Taw estuary. We use it for bird watching.’

He didn’t seem to realise that the surgeon had been teasing him.

‘Birds, eh?’ said the surgeon, with a guffaw. ‘I wager it’s bloody cold on that estuary of yours. I bet all you see are blue tits, eh, what do you think sister?’

'I wouldn't know Mr Frampton,' said the sister, rather coldly.

She was clearly accustomed to the surgeon's manner and was not going to allow herself to be drawn into his rather bizarre world of imagination, double entendre and insult.

'My wife paints them and I take photographs,' explained the anaesthetist wearily.

'You play golf?' the surgeon demanded, suddenly switching targets and subjects. He was still dealing with Miss Barley's piles.

It took me a moment to realise that he was talking to me.

'I tried once,' I said.

'I thought all GPs played golf. Couple of chaps I know play all the time. They have trainees or assistants or whatever you call them and leave them to do all the work while they bugger off and play golf.'

'I don't have an assistant,' I pointed out. 'And I don't have any partners.'

'So no golf, eh?'

'A chap I know lent me some clubs and I played a round when I was at medical school,' I told him. 'But I think they'd put all the greens in the wrong places. I found them far too small. Added to which the balls they sold me were fitted with some sort of homing device which took them straight into the long grass every time I hit them. I decided golf wasn't for me. I seem to remember the chap I was playing with and I both ran out of balls and we just walked back to the clubhouse after the 12th hole.'

The surgeon made a snorting noise.

I could not tell whether he approved or disapproved of my failure as a golfer.

Mr Holloway and his chums finished celebrating as the surgeon picked up the anal speculum.

As Rex Harrison started to sing 'I'm an Ordinary Man' the surgeon held the speculum up so that the theatre sister could add a blob of grease, so that it would enter the target area more readily.

She did this without a word being exchanged.

I remembered noticing that a good theatre sister who has worked with a surgeon for a few years will know instinctively what he wants without anything being said.

In films about hospitals, the operating theatre banter is all of the 'Scalpel, nurse', 'Mop my brow nurse', 'Forceps, nurse' variety, but in real life the conversation is more likely to include phrases such as 'Did you see that bizarre television programme about pearl fishermen?' or 'Do you think England should play Peter Shilton in goal on Saturday?'.

The surgeon placed the speculum in position and the theatre sister, unbidden, ordered the nurse who had not scrubbed and who was not wearing rubber surgical gloves, to direct a theatre light in such a way that Mr Frampton could see what he was doing and what needed to be done. This wasn't brain surgery but any sort of surgery can be dangerous. There is no such thing as 'minor surgery'.

The surgeon, who had joined in with Mr Rex Harrison and clearly knew all the words to this particular song, then picked up the rubber band ligator and fired a rubber band around one of the internal haemorrhoids. When that was done he did the second haemorrhoid. The whole procedure was over in considerably less time than it takes a kettle to boil.

'There we are,' said the surgeon. 'All done and dusted.'

He pulled the anal speculum from Miss Barley and handed it to the sister who handed it to the nurse who was looking after the discarded instruments.

He looked at me. 'Are you sure she wouldn't like a tasteful tattoo?'

He traced an area on Miss Barley's left buttock cheek. 'There's room here for something quite wonderful: a bucolic country scene, complete with a few sheep, a wind shaped tree and a raggedy shepherd. Or I could manage a three masted sailing schooner disappearing off across calm seas and heading towards a distant horizon.'

'I don't think she'd be properly appreciative,' I told him, rather nervously.

'Neither of those?'

'Neither.'

'No dragons, skulls, roses or memorials to 'Mother'?'

'No, I really don't think so.'

'Ah well,' sighed the surgeon.

I didn't think he was being serious but it was difficult to tell.

Mr Harrison finished talking his way through his song and after a momentary pause, Miss Andrews reappeared with a spirited rendition of 'Just You Wait'.

'You were wonderful,' said the surgeon, looking at me. 'I couldn't have managed without you.'

The theatre sister pulled the towels from the patient and handed them one by one to the nurse who was keeping score of all the bits and pieces of equipment which had been used during the operation. For a theatre sister there is nothing worse than getting to the end of an operation and discovering that a clamp or a sterile towel is missing. I've known a surgical team to spend the best part of an hour scouring an operating theatre for a missing swab and, in the end, having to open up the patient to search for the missing item.

The anaesthetist started to bring the patient back into the land of the conscious.

I hadn't done a single thing.

I hadn't held anything, pulled anything or snipped anything.

To be honest I felt a bit disappointed. I felt like a substitute who sits on the bench throughout a match and then doesn't quite know how much he should celebrate when his side is victorious.

'What's up next, sister?' asked the surgeon, pulling off his gloves.

'You've got Mr Wilkins, who needs his appendix removing and then you have Mrs Fanshaw for a cholecystectomy,' replied the theatre sister who appeared to have memorised the entire surgical list.

The surgeon turned to me. 'You know how to do an appendectomy, don't you?'

'I suppose so,' I said, hesitantly. 'I did a couple when I was a house surgeon.'

'Splendid,' said the surgeon, 'in that case you can do the appendix for me.' He tossed his gloves towards a waste bin, missing by several feet, and turned away. 'And I'll go and have a nice cup of tea and a bun. I didn't have time for breakfast and I'm starving.'

I stared after him, hoping that this, like the tattoo, was another of his jokes.

'He was joking wasn't he?' I said to the anaesthetist, who was supervising the removal of the patient from the operating table onto a trolley.

My mind started to whirl as I tried to remember precisely what I had to do.

Removing an appendix is one of the easiest operations there is, but things can and do go wrong. The appendix is very small, no bigger than a little finger, and it can sometimes be difficult to find.

'No, I don't think so,' replied the anaesthetist. 'I think he's gone for something to eat. He said he was going for a bun and a cup of tea. He never jokes about food.'

Rex Harrison, Julie Andrews and the actor who played Henry Higgins's chum started singing 'The Rain in Spain'.

'You'd better go and get re-scrubbed,' said the theatre sister, who had picked the surgeon's gloves off the floor and dropped them into the waste bucket. She then removed her own gloves and added them before reaching behind her and unfastening the ties on her gown.

I pulled off my gloves, walked across to the bin and dropped them in. 'Does he ever actually tattoo anyone?' I asked her.

'Good heavens no,' said the theatre sister. 'It's just one of his little jokes. He always does the tattoo thing whenever there's anyone new in theatre.'

The nurse who hadn't scrubbed up wheeled away the trolley containing all the used instruments and green drapes and as soon as she had left the operating theatre, another nurse wheeled in a replacement trolley upon which a fresh set of instruments had been laid out. The instruments were all covered with a sterile cloth but I could see them lying there, waiting for me.

I could also see the next patient, the one with the unwanted appendix, lying on a trolley in the small ante room to the operating theatre. I could hear the anaesthetist asking him to count down from one hundred.

Julie Andrews was now singing 'I Could Have Danced All Night' to Professor Higgins's housekeeper who was sensibly urging her to go bed.

The patient managed to count down to 96 before his voice tailed off. In my experience no one ever gets down to 90.

I had been nervous before. I was now utterly terrified. I could suddenly remember all the things that can go wrong with any operation. I tried to remember what vital blood vessels are located in the lower right quadrant of the abdomen where the appendix usually resides.

A jolly porter arrived pushing a trolley upon which lay the anaesthetised young man with the faulty appendix.

The anaesthetist, the same one who had just left the theatre, followed the trolley. He was wheeling a drip stand.

'Here's your new patient!' said the anaesthetist, brightly announcing the patient's arrival in the same jolly, optimistic sort of way that a restaurant waiter might announce the arrival of a special dish: a soufflé or a Christmas pudding covered in flaming brandy. 'Hadn't you better get scrubbed?'

Julie Andrews, presumably exhausted by now, had finished dancing all night and the show company were well into the Ascot Gavotte.

I hurried out of the theatre to get scrubbed.

And there I found the surgeon waiting for me.

'You still here?' he said, looking surprised.

'I thought you wanted me to…,' I stuttered.

He laughed. The theatre sister, who was standing nearby did not exactly laugh. But she smiled.

'You don't?' I said.

'Have you looked at the date today?'

'It's April…' I said, and then the penny dropped.

'…the first,' said the surgeon.

The sense of relief was extraordinary.

I felt as though I had been standing on the steps to the gallows and had received a last minute pardon from the Home Secretary.

'Of course if you'd like to remove an appendix…' he said.

'No, no, no!' I said quickly. 'That's fine. Thank you for asking but I think my operating days are over.'

I felt too strong a sense of relief to feel any sort of a fool.

We all have our strengths and our weaknesses.

I could cope well enough if faced with a badly injured patient in a field, in the rain, in the dark and with help more than an hour away.

But put me in a sterile, neat hospital operating theatre and ask me to perform a simple, routine operation and I start to fall apart.

Strange isn't it?

My only comfort was the vague and possibly simply self-serving thought that maybe even the skilled hospital surgeon might occasionally find the life of a lone GP to be a challenge too far.

'Come and say hello to your patient,' said the surgeon.

I followed him out into a corridor.

All British hospitals have wide corridors.

When they were built, the idea was that the corridors had to be wide enough for two trolleys to pass without colliding. These days, there is such a shortage of space that corridors are used for storing patients. And the corridors approaching an operating theatre are invariably clogged with patients who have been parked. Some are waiting to go into the operating theatre and some have just left.

Miss Barley was awake lying on a trolley.

'How are you feeling?' I asked her.

'Woozy,' she replied, sounding woozy. 'When am I going to the theatre to have this problem dealt with?'

She still didn't have her teeth in, and that and the anaesthetic resulted in her sounding quite unlike her normal self.

'It's been done!' I told her.

'Your doctor did a terrific job,' said the surgeon.

'I didn't actually…' I tried to interrupt.

'Marvellous work,' said the surgeon. 'I just stood there and watched. But he didn't need me at all. I could have stayed at home and had a leisurely breakfast.'

Miss Barley looked delighted.

I felt embarrassed.

The surgeon winked and headed back to theatre to remove an appendix.

In the distance, I could hear the sound of Freddy Eynsford-Hill, who has followed Eliza home, lustily singing 'On the Street Where You Live'.

I said goodbye to Miss Barley, told her I would pop in to see her the following day and headed for the exit door on my way back home and back to being a general practitioner.

Just as I was about to climb into the Rolls Royce, a woman in a white coat came running out towards me waving a piece of paper. I didn't recognise her but she wore a white coat with one of those little blue badges that people wear when they work in the radiology department, so that their exposure to X-rays can be monitored. Since I knew the two radiologists at the hospital she was obviously one of the radiographers.

'We posted you an X-ray report about Mr Hamilton Murray,' she said, rather breathlessly.

'I got it this morning,' I said. 'It was very sad news.'

'You haven't said anything to the patient, have you?'

'I called in on my way here and told him,' I said. 'I want to get on with fixing up a treatment programme as soon as possible.'

'Oh no, that's awful,' she said. She looked as if she were about to burst into tears. 'I'm afraid there's been a mistake. A terrible mistake.'

She told me that the report I had received had been written by one of the radiologists at the end of a long, tiring day and that he had mistaken an old tuberculosis scar for a new, cancerous lesion.

'Dr Clutterbuck always asks Dr Lloyd to take a look at the X-rays on which he has reported – just to check that there haven't been any mistakes. The two doctors check each other's X-rays to minimise the risk of error.' Dr Clutterbuck and Dr Lloyd were the hospital's two consultant radiologists.

'Mr Murray hasn't got cancer?' I said, delighted but wishing I had waited before breaking the news to him.

She shook her head. 'Dr Clutterbuck and Dr Lloyd are quite sure about it,' she said. She handed me a revised X-ray report. I looked at it. They were both certain that the lesion seen on the X-ray was an old tuberculosis scar and of no consequence.

I thanked her, put the report into my pocket and started the car, determined to get back to Bilbury as quickly as I could to give Hamilton the good news.

And then I got out of the car and rushed back into the hospital and went to the first telephone I could find.

It seemed to me that this was not news that could or should wait a second. Not for the first time in my life I found myself wondering if the telephone people would ever succeed in inventing a mobile telephone which could be used anywhere.

First, I had to telephone Bilbury Grange and obtain the correct phone number for Johnny Douglas, who has the cottage nearest to Hamilton. (Hamilton Murray does not, of course, have a telephone of his own.)

I rang Johnny's number.

There was no reply.

I let the phone ring for over a minute.

But no one answered.

I put the phone down, checked the number Miss Johnson had given me and dialled again, hoping that I had perhaps misdialled.

Again there was no reply.

I felt cold inside.

I don't know why but I had an awful foreboding.

I remembered a patient of Dr Brownlow's who had been given a diagnosis of cancer. He had been a veterinary surgeon and he had gone home and killed himself with a humane killer. He'd put the awful device to his temple and shot himself. His wife had found him slumped on the desk in his study.

I rushed out of the hospital, climbed back into the Rolls and headed back to Bilbury as fast as I dared go.

Why, I asked myself every few seconds, had I stopped to tell Hamilton about the X-ray report on my way to the hospital that morning?

It could have waited.

I thought about it and thought I knew the answer.

If it had been me I would have wanted to know as soon as possible so that I would have time to plan for the future. There are always so many things to think about and to do at such a time. Again and again I remembered Hamilton making me promise to tell him the truth the minute I knew it.

'No prevaricating,' he said. 'No clever, fancy language that tiptoes around the truth.'

I found a little comfort only in something which my predecessor Dr Brownlow had once told me to ask myself.

'When something goes wrong,' he said, 'you must ask yourself this question: 'Do I believe that I did the right thing?' It doesn't matter what happened, or even what other people think. What matters is your own answer to that question.'

As usual, I found the words of the late and much missed Dr Brownlow to be comforting.

When it was built, half a century earlier, the Rolls Royce 20/25 I had inherited from Dr Brownlow had not been designed to be hurled around narrow country lanes. Age had not made it any more suited to fast driving along the curling lanes of Devon with their high banks and blind corners. It was unseasonably cold too and there was still some frost on the road on shaded corners.

But the Gods were with me, and I got back to Bilbury without colliding with any oncoming traffic or sliding into a ditch or hedge.

I drove straight to Hamilton's tiny cottage and slid to a halt on the wet and muddy grass patch outside it.

The cottage, which is very small, was quite empty.

Like most of the people who live in Bilbury, Hamilton never locked his front door (indeed, I suspect that if you'd asked him to find the key he would have been hard pressed to do so) and so I walked in through the front door unhindered. I don't think anyone in Bilbury locks their doors. As far as Patsy and I are concerned, this is just as well since our iron front door key is 14 inches long and our back door key is slightly longer. Both weigh enough to make excellent paper weights – which is what we do with them.

There was no sign of my patient or his bicycle, though his small and ancient trailer, the one which he usually tows behind his bicycle, was still standing by the front door, half full of kindling.

I went through the rooms slowly, for a second time.

I don't know why I had expected a second search to be more productive but there was still no sign of him.

I even found myself looking on the kitchen table and on the sideboard in the small living room. I didn't like to admit it to myself but I was looking to see if he had written a note.

Hamilton is a man who lives a simple and structured life. If he is not at home then he will either be out collecting wood, delivering wood, selling stuff on the beach at Combe Martin or doing his shopping at Peter Marshall's shop. That's it. He doesn't frequent the Duck and Puddle, he doesn't go to church, he doesn't go visiting and as far as I know he never leaves North Devon. And whether he is in or out he always has his trailer fixed on to the back of his bicycle. I had never before seen the two separated. The weather was too cold for him to be selling anything on the beach. He clearly wasn't out collecting or delivering wood.

I began to have a very bad feeling.

Why, oh why could he have not been out when I had called at his cottage before leaving for Barnstaple? If he had been out I wouldn't have been able to tell him the false bad news.

But I had seen him.

And I had told him that he was dying when he wasn't.

My mind was racing as I tried to think where he could have gone and what he could be planning to do.

Actually, I thought I knew what he was planning to do.

I had a powerful suspicion that he had decided to end his life.

When you work as a country GP you get to know your patients well. City doctors measure their patients in the thousands, and they often live miles away from their consulting rooms and their patients. I measure my patients in the hundreds and I live amongst them.

When I'd seen him that morning, and had told him what I thought was the result of his X-ray examination, I had told Hamilton that I would see him later that day so that we could discuss possible forms of treatment. I had been as upbeat as possible. I had implied that a diagnosis of cancer was not the death sentence it sounded. I had tried to be optimistic.

But the corollary of my knowing my patients well is that they know me well too.

Maybe I hadn't been as clever as I thought I had been. Maybe Hamilton had suspected that I had been covering up the truth. Maybe he suspected that he had only a few weeks, even days, to live. What if he feared that the end would be painful and difficult?

Again and again I cursed myself for calling at his cottage that morning. And I cursed my bad luck in finding him in. Strangely, it never occurred to me to curse the radiologist who had made the mistake. No one makes mistakes on purpose.

Eventually, after a minute or two of this nonsense, I managed to pull myself together. There was no point in wasting time berating myself.

The task was simple: I had to try to find him. I had to work out where he might have gone, hunt him down and stop him harming himself. The fact that he wasn't in his cottage, and that he had left behind his bicycle trailer, strongly suggested to me that he'd gone somewhere quiet and peaceful where he could end his life.

He would want to be away from people. He didn't much like people. He would want to be somewhere quite alone. And how would he do it? Slit his wrists? Hang himself from a tree? Throw himself off a cliff? There are a hundred ways for anyone to kill themselves. I didn't think he would take tablets because I hadn't prescribed any for him and I didn't think he would have been able to get a supply from anyone else.

But what if he'd bought some aspirin tablets from Peter Marshall's shop? Some city pharmacists limit the number of aspirin tablets their customers can buy but Peter has never taken much notice of such bureaucracy. If he knows someone, and thinks them sane and sensible, he has always sold them as many tablets as they have asked for. If you have bad arthritis in your knees or hips and you have to walk three miles to the shop you don't want to have to go there three or four times a day.

And there was another possibility.

Maybe Hamilton had just popped down to Peter's shop to buy a loaf of bread.

I jumped back into the car and drove through the village to Peter Marshall's shop. It took me no more than five or six minutes.

'Have you seen Hamilton Murray today?' I asked Peter. He was arranging parsnips on a tray.

Peter looked at me. 'Funny you should ask,' he said, 'he was in here this morning. About three hours ago.'

'What did he buy?' I demanded.

'I'm not sure I should tell you that,' said Peter, with mock indignation. 'It's a question of shopkeeper-customer confidentiality. Would you like me to tell everyone what you buy?'

'Peter!' I shouted. 'What did Hamilton buy? I need to know. It's important.'

'That's another funny thing,' said Peter, immediately abandoning his high moral position. 'He bought a bottle of whisky. I can't remember when he last bought whisky. He bought one of the blended whiskies. I've got a special offer on several blended whiskies and he bought the Haig. He just stuffed the bottle in his jacket pocket.'

I felt hollow. I knew immediately what Hamilton was planning.

The weather was cold and the forecast was for a freezing cold night.

Just a month earlier a man in a nearby village had committed suicide by going into a field, drinking a bottle of whisky, or as much of it as he could get down him, and lying down on the grass in his shirt and trousers. He had died of the cold. The story had been on the front page of the local paper. The man had been 98-years-old at the time and he had been suffering from Parkinson's disease.

And that, I felt sure, was what Hamilton was planning.

I now had to find him before it was too late.

No one in the village knew Hamilton better than Peter Marshall.

Hamilton did all his shopping at Peter's shop; he went there two or three times a week.

I didn't like doing it but I had no option. I swore him to secrecy and then told Peter my fear.

'Where would he go if he was planning to do anything silly?' I asked.

We always call it 'doing something silly' but it's a daft thing to say because to the person planning suicide, the action is anything but 'silly'.

Peter thought for a moment.

'He'd go somewhere on the cliffs between Combe Martin and Heddon's Mouth,' said Peter. 'That's always been his favourite part of the coast. And he loves the sea. Does he have his bike with him?'

'Yes, but not the trailer.'

'If he took his bike but left the trailer then he's planning to go on the footpath above the cliffs,' said Peter. 'I think he'd go down to Combe Martin and then up the hill to Hangman's Point and along the coast. He wouldn't go as far as Heddon's Mouth. Even at this time of the year and in this unseasonably cold weather there would probably be too many tourists there.'

I looked at my watch. It was just a few minutes shy of two o'clock. 'What time does it get dark?'

'Around half past seven,' replied Peter. 'I can tell you exactly…' he turned away, presumably intending to consult a calendar or newspaper.

'We've got no more than five hours,' I said. 'It'll be impossible to find him in the dark.

'I'll shut the shop and come with you,' said Peter immediately. I felt eternally grateful to him. Peter rarely shuts his shop in the middle of the day. He is too frightened that he might miss a sale. It was, for him, a great sacrifice.

'Thank you,' I said. 'I'm going to drive down into Combe Martin to start looking for him. You speak to as many people as you can find and get them to help. Try ringing people up first – Thumper, Patchy, Frank and so on. Explain that Hamilton thinks he is dying but he isn't. The hospital made a mistake. Explain everything and tell them where we think he's gone. We don't have enough people and there isn't enough time to spread the effort anywhere else. We have to hope he's gone along the coastal path.'

'He will have done,' said Peter, confidently.

Hoping that he was right, I climbed back into the car and hurtled off down the lane into Combe Martin.

Thirty minutes later I was climbing the steep hill which leads from the picturesque coastal village of Combe Martin and following the coastal path which meanders along the cliffs between Hangman Point and Blackstone Point. My heart was pounding, partly from the physical effort and partly from anxiety. I was desperate to find Hamilton before he did anything I knew I would regret to the end of my life.

We all make mistakes, hospitals are no exception, but the consequences of this simple error were too awful for me to contemplate.

The cliff path is steep and rocky but you can, if you are a fit and accomplished cyclist, and your machine is sufficiently low geared, ride up most of the hill. But you travel slowly. I kept my eyes open but I did not expect to see any sign of Hamilton yet. If he had come this way he would be further along the path. And he would have probably moved off the path to find a quiet niche where he could lie down and drink his whisky.

Overhead a hawk was circling. On the ground a solitary pair of fantail doves, probably refugees from some nearby comfortable dovecote, were walking round in circles looking rather lost. There is nothing a hawk likes better than a plump, domesticated, settled, peace loving dove.

During the warm summer months the coastal path which runs along the North Devon coast is crowded with hikers and walkers. Some are carrying tents and food and are intent on walking the whole way around the coast, either heading west down into Cornwall, past Land's End, and then along the southern coast of Cornwall and Devon or heading east towards Lynton, Lynmouth and Porlock. Others, the vast majority, are just out for the day, carrying little more than a bottle of water, a candy bar and a map.

But today the path was deserted.

Very few people walk along the coastal path on freezing cold days when the ground is already frozen and there is a real possibility of snow in the air. The weather in North Devon doesn't pay much attention to the seasons.

When the weather is cold and there is a wind coming in from the south west, as there was, the cliff top is pretty well deserted. A few hardy dog walkers venture up to Hangman Point with their animals but even if they reach the top they soon turn back and head back home or to one of the village's many public houses.

I reached the top of the hill and headed east along the path which leads to Heddon's Mouth, Woody Bay, Lee Bay and then, eventually, to Lynton and Lynmouth. Normally, it is a beautiful walk, with stunning views across the Bristol Channel to the Welsh coast. But today I didn't have time to enjoy the view. I was looking for a patient, a friend and a fellow villager. I was looking for Hamilton.

Every now and then I called his name; hoping that he would hear me and respond. A lone walker, well wrapped up against the cold, passed by and asked if I was calling for a lost dog. I shook my head and told him I was looking for a friend I had lost. He said he had walked from Woody Bay but hadn't seen anyone other than a couple of young hikers on the path.

I carried on walking and calling for Hamilton. I was desperate to find him before it went dark. At night, on the cliffs, he would, as I was convinced he had planned, freeze to death. The sky was dark, heavy with rain clouds, and it seemed as though night was falling several hours early. The deteriorating weather was making our task more difficult by the minute. I was wearing just my sports jacket and flannels and I was freezing cold.

As I walked I was shouting his name; shouting my name; shouting that everything was fine; begging Hamilton to call out and tell me where he was.

Every time I saw a likely patch of rocks, I crossed over to them to check them out.

If Hamilton had already drunk all or some of the whisky he'd bought he might already be sleeping or semi-conscious; unable to hear me or, even if he heard me, unable to respond.

Suddenly, I heard the sound of a high revving engine. I turned, looked behind me and saw a motorbike scrabbling and racing along the cliff top path. I wondered who on earth could be crazy enough to do such a thing. Motorbikes are, of course, banned from the path, not just to protect the integrity of the path itself, and the safety of other walkers, but because riding a motorbike along a narrow trail just inches away from a drop of several hundred feet down onto the rocky coves of North Devon is not a particularly safe activity.

'What idiot could that be?' I asked myself, as I hurried along, constantly searching for signs of my lost patient.

'I thought this would be quicker!' I heard someone shout, above the sound of the motorbike.

I turned.

It was Patchy Fogg, my brother-in-law and local antique dealer extraordinaire. He had turned on the motorbike's headlight and the lamp shone brightly in the early gloaming. Patchy had adapted the bike himself, putting on thick, heavily studded tyres. The mudguards are suspended on long stays.

'Peter's got us a dozen people here,' said Patchy. 'He explained what's happened.'

Patchy reached behind him and patted the pillion seat. 'Jump on, this will be quicker than walking. We can cover more ground.'

'Where are all the others?'

'They're following behind. They'll spread out and cover all the land on both sides of the path.'

I climbed onto the back of Patchy's trial motorbike. I'd forgotten he had it. He doesn't often use it these days.

'I'll steer the damned thing, you keep a look out,' said Patchy. 'But hold on tight. It's a bit bumpy along here and it won't help if you get thrown off.'

I didn't need to be told twice. I put one arm round Patchy's waist and clung to him for dear life. The sky was very black and the headlight on Patchy's motor bike was now essential.

We found Hamilton fifteen minutes later, just as it was really going dark.

I spotted the front wheel of his bicycle, half hidden behind a huge rock on the cliffs overlooking Elwill Bay, just short of Trenishoe. Hamilton had settled into a grassy nook, just above the cliff edge and since he was on the left, or seaward side of the path, it was lucky that I spotted the bicycle wheel. I had been paying most of my attention to the inland side of the path. I shouted to Patchy to stop the motorbike, and leapt off the minute the bike skidded to a halt.

Hamilton was unconscious. The bottle, which he was still clutching, was three quarters empty. I wrapped my coat around him and cursorily checked him over. Apart from the fact that he was clearly drunk and semi-comatose there didn't seem to be anything wrong with him. He mumbled something but he wasn't in a fit state to understand anything. He was cold, very cold. Alcohol dilates the blood vessels and exacerbates normal heat loss.

'Ride back along the path,' I told Patchy. 'I can't carry him and we can't put him on your bike but two of us can carry him between us. Tell anyone you see that we've found Hamilton and we need help.'

Five minutes later, Patchy came roaring back along the path with Thumper riding pillion. As Thumper jumped off, Patchy sped back along the track.

‘You and I will carry him for as far as we can,’ said Thumper. ‘Then Patchy will bring more help on his bike.’

Hamilton was too drunk to walk, too incapable to put one foot in front of the other with any hope or expectation that the result would be a move in the required direction. So Thumper and I lifted him together and carried him between us.

While I’d been waiting for help, I’d hidden Hamilton’s bicycle more effectively behind the rocks. It would be safe enough until the next morning. It was quite dark now and difficult to see where we were walking. The rain had started and, blown by the wind, it was sharp and stinging. Thumper and I stumbled along the path, cursing whenever we caught a foot on a fixed stone.

After another five minutes, Patchy appeared again. This time he had Peter Marshall riding pillion. And so we managed a sort of impromptu rota system, carrying Hamilton bit by bit, yard by yard, along the coast path. From time to time, I checked his pulse. It was fine.

When we got to Combe Martin we put Hamilton into the back of the Rolls Royce and took him to the cottage hospital in Bilbury. I didn’t want to take him all the way to Barnstaple. Besides, suicide had been illegal in England until just a few years earlier and I thought it best that we keep the knowledge of what had happened to ourselves. When something like this happens in Bilbury then we make sure that it stays in Bilbury. We are a village where we like to look after one another and we don’t like having to risk other people making judgements.

Officially, and for administrative reasons, our village hospital is known as the Brownlow County Hotel. But in reality it is an excellent cottage hospital. We undressed Hamilton and put him into bed. I stayed with him until he woke a couple of hours later. By that time Patchy had ridden back along the path, taking Thumper with him, and the two of them had retrieved Hamilton’s bicycle. Patchy knew that Hamilton would worry about it.

‘The hospital made a mistake,’ I told him. ‘Your X-ray is clear. You don’t have cancer. You’re not dying.’ I struggled hard, and failed, to stop myself shivering. I was still soaked to the skin because I hadn’t been able to go back to Bilbury Grange for fresh, dry clothes.

Hamilton stared at me for a moment and then nodded his understanding.

‘I’m so terribly sorry,’ I said. I was soaked but I was very, very happy.

‘Not your fault,’ said Hamilton. He looked at me, frowned and thought for a moment. ‘Where’s my bicycle?’

‘Back at your cottage,’ I told him. ‘Patchy Fogg and Thumper Robinson collected it and took it back home.’

‘Good,’ said Hamilton. ‘If that had gone missing I wouldn’t have forgiven you. That would have been your fault.’

I smiled at him and nodded.

‘I know,’ I said.

‘Tickety tonk,’ he said, with the beginnings of a grin. And then he closed his eyes and went back to sleep.

Hamilton was going to be absolutely fine.

Blue Peter

‘On a cold day 90% of body heat is lost through the head,’ said Peter Marshall, suddenly and without provocation or encouragement.

Peter, Thumper Robinson, Patchy Fogg and I were sitting in the snug at the Duck and Puddle.

Englishmen have enjoyed good companionship in public houses since the days of the Mermaid Tavern in London in the 17th century. Regulars there included Sir Walter Ralegh, John Donne and William Shakespeare. I’m prepared to admit that their conversation was probably slightly more sophisticated than ours, but the principle is the same. As, indeed, it has been for centuries.

After the Mermaid Tavern came the London coffee houses, as favoured by Dr Samuel Johnson. Then came the coffee houses of Vienna and Paris and, in the 20th century, meeting places such as the Round Table at the Algonquin Hotel in New York. Thus it always was and, hopefully, always ever will be.

It was lunchtime, or, to be honest, a little after lunchtime. We had been discussing what makes a gentleman. Outside, temporarily escaping from the cold, a pair of companionable wood pigeons were sitting on a branch directly above the chimney from the Duck and Puddle’s ancient boiler. The boiler is situated in one of the Duck and Puddle’s rickety out buildings and works only when the fancy takes it. The fancy had clearly taken it for it was working.

The pigeons were clearly enjoying the rising smoke and would occasionally lift a wing so as to take full advantage of the warm air. The boiler provides occasional hot water for washing and bathing and heats a few radiators upstairs so that the pub’s occasional guests don’t freeze to death. Downstairs, the public and private rooms in the pub are heated by log fires.

Predictably, Peter Marshall said that a gentleman is a fellow who always pays his bills on time and preferably in cash. Thumper mentioned the fact that Peter had frequently expressed a reluctance to pay his income tax bills on time and Peter responded, not unreasonably we all thought, by pointing out that giving money to governments of any hue is sinful and should be illegal. ‘The money they are given is invariably spent and always wasted,’ he said. ‘They use it to start wars, oppress the indigent and treat themselves to endless slap up dinners and bottles of expensive claret.’

No one could find fault in this and we all agreed that in view of all the bad things politicians do with the money we give them, it would make sense for the Government to punish tax payers and give honours and medals to those upstanding citizens who refuse to contribute to war mongering and oppression.

Bringing the subject of bill paying closer to home, I pointed out to Peter that he still owed Patsy and me a very ungentlemanly £22 for three peck of apples and a bushel of potatoes which we had supplied to his shop a couple of years back, in 1971. Peter responded, predictably I suppose, by pointing out that he had never claimed to be a gentleman and that if indeed he did owe us any money he would render payment if we resubmitted an appropriate invoice.

(Regardless of what the rest of the country does, or may do in the future, we still use old-fashioned imperial measurements in Bilbury. We live by pounds and ounces and feet and inches and pecks and bushels and, however much the bureaucrats may huff and puff, those fiddly metric things they favour on the continent of Europe will never find favour in our part of North Devon. Men in suits, carrying clipboards, are rarer than Montagu’s harrier in our part of the world.)

Thumper said that in his view, a gentleman was someone who always put an old cloth on top of the kitchen table before working on bits of his truck engine. He said that his good lady, Anne Thwaites, always said that it was the one thing which had convinced her that underneath his rough exterior lay the heart, soul and spirit of an English gentleman.

It was agreed by the company present that putting a cloth on the table before working on parts of your truck engine was a pretty gentlemanly thing to do.

And then Patchy said that he had heard that a gentleman was a fellow who if he opened the door to a bathroom and saw a lady in the tub, would back out, close the door, and say ‘Excuse me, sir, sorry to have bothered you.’

We all laughed and agreed that Patchy’s definition pretty well finished that particular discussion.

‘Talking of people coming into the bathroom,’ Patchy continued, ‘reminds me that Adrienne came into the bathroom this morning and asked if I knew I had a bald patch.’

Adrienne, his wife, is my sister-in-law and a graduate with honours from the Captain Bligh School of Diplomacy’. She is not known for her tact. In the unlikely event that she ever becomes Foreign Secretary we will, within weeks, be at war with every other country on the planet.

Thumper stood up so that he could look down on Patchy's head. 'She's right,' he said. 'But, never mind, your hair probably just lost its way.'

'What do you mean, it lost its way?' demanded Patchy.

'Well, it's growing out of your ears now,' explained Thumper.

Patchy stuck a finger in each ear in turn. 'I can't feel any hair there.'

'There is,' said Thumper.

'He's right,' said Peter. 'You need to get one of those electrical gadgets for cutting ear hair.'

'I don't suppose you've got some for sale, have you?' said Patchy.

'Oddly enough I had some come in the other day,' said Peter. 'Brilliant value. Guaranteed to get rid of ear and nose hair in seconds.' Peter always has something to sell to everyone.

Patchy did not look particularly excited by Peter's remarks about ear and nose hair. He has not, I suspect, been properly prepared for the many tricks fate plays on the maturing male.

We all sat in silence for a few moments, contemplating our ageing bodies. Baldness, deafness, deteriorating eyesight, liver spots and worse all beckoned.

Gloomily, I glanced out of the window and watched a seagull stamping on a stretch of grass in the hope of convincing a worm that it was raining and that he should emerge from his lair. As the seagull stamped, it moved slowly backwards. For a moment I wondered why it was going in reverse, and then I realised that if it went forwards it wouldn't see any of the worms which its stamping had tricked into emerging.

I didn't mention this to anyone because I found it slightly embarrassing to realise that I had come second to a seagull in a simple intelligence test.

Twenty minutes earlier we had all finished vast platefuls of Gilly's vegetable soup (so rich it is a meal in itself) and had mopped up our plates with thick slices cut from one of her home-made farmhouse loaves. Frank, who is a huge fan of his wife's cooking (and, despite having lost a good deal of weight recently, still has the waistline to prove it) always says that if you've never eaten one of Gilly's home-made farmhouse loaves then you have never tasted bread as God intended it to taste.

The soup is named 'Thumper's Bellyfiller', in recognition of my dear friend Thumper Robinson, who is renowned throughout North Devon for having a trencherman's appetite. Even Thumper admits that he cannot possibly eat more than one bowlful of the stuff.

Gilly is constantly looking for ways to enhance the appeal of the Duck and Puddle and she has taken to naming several of the dishes on the pub's menu after local citizens. There is a dish involving three slices of toast and four scrambled eggs which is named after her husband, Frank, and a four sausage version of Toad in the Hole which is named after Patchy Fogg. My own name is immortalised in the form of a version of treacle pudding of which I am unreasonably fond.

Peter then took advantage of the momentary silence to try to sell us all one of his new thermally insulated Chapeau Watch Caps. He told us he had bought a consignment from a wholesaler who had, in turn, purchased the entire stock from a Canadian manufacturer who had gone bankrupt. Peter always has something to sell. Just the other day I noticed that he was selling leftover hazelnuts, unsold after Christmas, with the promotional slogan 'Grow Your Own Kindling' stencilled on a piece of brown cardboard torn from a delivery box. When I queried this, Peter pointed out that hazel grows very quickly and that within ten years of planting there would be kindling to harvest.

'They're wind-proof and rain-proof and they absorb the sun's rays, thereby protecting the head in all weathers,' Peter said, describing his hats with great enthusiasm and drifting automatically into patter mode. 'I'm selling them at lower than retail price as a service to the village.'

If Peter specialises in anything it is in buying bankrupt stock.

He would think himself in nirvana if he could buy cheese and milk from a bankrupt farmer, bread from a bankrupt baker and apples from a bankrupt fruit grower.

The watch caps, which apparently came in a curious shade of dark purple (without the option) were, Peter told us, with the unfettered enthusiasm of a man in search of a profit, guaranteed to fit any head and to keep it warmer than any other headgear.

Hats for men are going out of fashion rapidly and I fear that by the start of the 1980's they will be remembered as nothing more than a historical oddity. They were, however, once a sign of a man's status, individuality and fashion sense. Would Napoleon have conquered Europe if he had worn a woolly hat with a bobble on the top? Would Wellington have won at Waterloo if he'd favoured one of those deerstalker hats, complete with ear flaps, favoured by costume directors dressing up an actor to play Sherlock Holmes? Would Abraham Lincoln have been Abraham Lincoln if he'd worn a blue beret?

I was, I admit, tempted by one of Peter's watch caps for the winds in North Devon can be ferocious. They come, predominantly, from the South West and they scour the cliffs and heathland with unremitting, unforgiving anger; seemingly determined to remove every last shred of vegetation or habitation from the county.

I have found, by experience, that when you live in an area heavily populated by seagulls it is wise to wear a hat whenever possible. I have a rather nice tweed fishing hat, a soft slouch hat and a couple of rather splendid pieces of headgear, both made by Bates, a hatter who has a shop in Jermyn Street in London. One of my hats, known as a Grosvenor, was bought for the winter and the other, a Panama, for the summer.

I do not favour cloth caps of the style favoured by the politician Keir Hardie. It is difficult to persuade a stranger to have faith in you as a doctor if you turn up looking like an off duty bookmaker. Baseball caps, which are now beginning to find much favour, are excellent at providing shade for the eyes but seem more suited to a younger head. And nor, generally speaking, do I favour woolly hats. They are fine for walkers and hikers but it is impossible to look dignified, wise or even adequately competent if you are wearing a woolly hat, especially if it has an attached bobble bouncing around.

But the winds of North Devon are no respecter of seasons and there is, more often than not, a wind capable of removing almost any hat from almost any head. It occurred to me that a watch cap, tightly fitting and with no parts likely to catch the wind, might be persuaded to stay in situ on even the stormiest of days.

‘The human body loses 90% of its heat through the head,’ insisted Peter again, with all the definitive confidence of a man who has read something somewhere, and who has a vested interest in it being accepted as the truth.

‘How on earth do you know that?’ asked Thumper who is not normally a sceptical man but who is always prepared to give Peter the sticky end of the doubt.

‘I read it,’ said Peter. ‘In a book,’ he added, in the clear understanding that he felt that this would give the assertion added gravitas.

‘You’ve never read a book in your life,’ said Patchy with a laugh.

‘I did,’ responded Peter indignantly. ‘I read one of those books on the table in the hairdressers.’

Peter lets out an old shed to a variety of local businesses. The hairdresser is one of the businesses renting the shed. And, inevitably, on the days when hair is being snipped, a rickety old table is piled high with tatty, old magazines.

‘Those are magazines not books,’ Thumper pointed out.

‘Well I read it in one of those,’ said Peter, defiantly. He looked around, defying us to contradict the power of the printed word. ‘So it must be true. It was written by a doctor and you can’t argue with medical science.’ He looked at me when he said this, defying me to argue with medical science.

I kept quiet. I find it is far more fun to allow Peter’s assertions to explore their limits.

‘So if you went outside on a cold day and you wore nothing but one of your hats you’d still be quite warm?’ said Thumper.

‘You’d lose a little bit of heat,’ said Peter.

‘Ten per cent,’ said Patchy.

Peter looked at him.

‘That’s what left when you take 90% from 100%,’ Patchy explained. ‘You said that the body loses 90% of its heat through the head.’

‘Exactly!’ said Peter, with a nod. ‘Ten per cent.’

‘It’s pretty cold today,’ said Thumper.

‘Freezing,’ said Patchy. ‘Unseasonably chilly.’

We all looked out of the window.

The road outside the Duck and Puddle had been white with frost that morning. And the hills in the distance were still white. The sun was shining, but up on the higher fields and moorland the temperature still wasn’t warm enough to melt the frost. It was, in truth, unseasonably cold and Bilbury looked very Christmassy.

‘So are you going to prove it?’ asked Thumper.

‘Do an experiment,’ suggested Patchy.

Peter looked at them. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Take your clothes off and go outside in just a hat,’ said Patchy. ‘See if you stay warm.’

Peter looked out of the window at the white on the distant hills.

It was very warm in the snug at the Duck and Puddle. Frank had lit a log fire, built with well dried logs from one of the dead apple trees Patsy’s father had cut down in his orchard. The fire was crackling and comforting. Central heating is all very well but it only keeps you warm. A log fire provides visual and auditory delights as well as keeping you warm.

‘Have you got one of your hats with you?’ asked Thumper.

‘One of the Chapeau Watch Caps,’ said Patchy.

‘I came in one,’ said Peter proudly, pulling a hat from his jacket pocket. Except for the colour, which was, as advertised, a unique shade of purple, it looked pretty much like any other woolly hat.

'I'll buy one if you really can stay warm wearing nothing else,' I told Peter. I took the hat from him and examined it. 'Are you sure you don't have any other colours?' I asked, before handing the hat back to him.

It was, in truth, a rather sorry looking thing but I thought it would serve as suitable headgear for working in the garden.

'This is the only colour,' said Peter. 'It's next year's fashionable colour.'

Peter's idea of 'what is in fashion' is exactly the same as 'what he can buy cheaply because no one else wants it'.

Thumper and Patchy, who have never knowingly worn anything fashionable, except by accident, promised that they too would buy hats if Peter's experiment proved successful.

'If I wear one of these hats will I be able to play tennis?' asked Patchy.

'Oh yes,' said Peter instantly.

'That's terrific,' said Patchy drily. 'I've always wanted to be able to play tennis.'

Peter sucked his teeth and tried to smile.

'Right,' said Thumper. 'Strip off and pop outside for half an hour.'

'Half an hour?' said Peter. 'What am I going to do for half an hour?'

'Shiver?' suggested Patchy.

'Just stand there being warm and cosy,' I suggested. 'Proving that your Chapeau Watch Cap keeps you warm. And while you're out there you can look forward to selling three hats when you come inside.'

It was cold outside but it wasn't cold enough to do him any harm. And since Peter rips us all off mercilessly we feel obliged, from time to time, to have a little fun at his expense.

Peter stood up and removed his jacket. It is sometimes said that everyone has a little touch of genius hidden inside them. If this is true then Peter's genius is his ability to demean himself in any way necessary if doing so might help him make a profit. He would swim naked through a pool full of piranha fish in order to sell a can of beans or a box of matches. It is the Peter we all know and sort of love. I wouldn't have him any other way.

'How much do I have to take off?'

'Everything,' said Thumper. 'It's the only way to do the experiment.'

'If you're going to do it then you might as well do it properly,' I said.

Peter removed his shoes, his socks, his trousers, his shirt and a grey string vest. We allowed him to keep his underpants on. They too were grey. None of us felt we could cope with the consequences of his removing them. I couldn't help admiring his socks which had been darned many times by someone (probably Peter himself) using odds and ends of coloured wool.

I couldn't help wondering whether people will still be darning socks in a few decades time. It seemed more than likely that socks with holes in them will simply be discarded and replaced. We are developing into a 'throw-away' society. When I was a boy the word 'thrifty' was used as a compliment. Today it is used in a rather critical, almost derisory, way.

'You must stay in view,' said Thumper. 'Go outside and stand by the window so that we can see you.'

'If you turn blue we'll call off the experiment and come and fetch you,' I told him. 'We don't want you to die for a hat.'

'I'll be as warm as toast,' insisted Peter. He sounded defiant and confident but I know him well enough to know that an element of doubt had crept into the forefront of his mind.

Two minutes later Peter was standing on the forecourt outside the Duck and Puddle. We could see him clearly from where we were sitting.

'Shall we order another round?' suggested Patchy.

'Good idea,' said Thumper. He called for Frank.

'What'll be?' asked the landlord.

'Three hot whiskies,' said Thumper. He looked round. Patchy and I both nodded. There's nothing more comforting than a hot whisky when you're watching a fellow human being shivering in the cold.

'Where's Peter?' asked Frank.

We all looked to the window.

'What the blazes is Peter doing outside?' asked Frank. He walked closer to the window. 'Why is he naked?' he asked, shocked and horrified in equal proportions.

'He isn't quite naked,' said Patchy.

'He's wearing a hat and his underpants,' I pointed out.

'It's an experiment,' explained Thumper. 'Peter says that a human being loses 90% of his body heat through his head. So he's proving that he can stand outside in the frost and stay warm while wearing nothing but a hat.'

'I've not had so much fun since I had measles,' said Patchy, staring out of the window.

Frank looked at us, one by one. ‘Is he mad? Or am I mad?’

We looked at him but none of us said anything. There are some questions which don’t need to be answered.

‘Silly question,’ said Frank with a sigh. ‘I’ll get the whiskies.’

Three minutes later he returned with a tray upon which were standing three Russian tea glasses, each one containing a generous portion of malt whisky, and a jug of hot water.

‘I’ll let you add your own hot water,’ he said, putting the tray down on our table.

‘Why is Peter standing on our forecourt wearing only a woolly hat and a nasty looking pair of baggy underpants?’ asked Gilly, Frank’s wife, who had accompanied him back into the snug.

‘It’s an experiment,’ explained Frank.

‘Oh,’ said Gilly, apparently satisfied by this explanation. ‘Is he going to be there long? It’s just that I don’t think he’s much of an attraction for the passing trade.’

‘Do you get much passing trade at this time of year?’ asked Patchy.

‘None whatsoever,’ admitted Gilly. ‘The hikers and walkers stop hiking and walking when the weather gets cold.’

‘Wise folk,’ said Thumper.

‘He’s jumping up and down,’ said Frank.

We looked out of the window. Peter was indeed now jumping up and down.

‘We did stuff like that when I did my National Service,’ said Frank. ‘We had to go outside in our shorts and do jumping up and down exercises. I think they thought that if we ran out of ammunition we could do it to scare the Germans.’

‘Sounds like a good strategy to me,’ said Thumper. ‘The Germans would have run a mile if they’d seen you jumping up and down in a pair of shorts.’

‘Shrivels up the essential bits,’ said Frank. ‘Everyone went into the showers with their hands over their parts after we’d done star jumps in the snow.’

Gilly looked at him and raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

‘Was he that colour when he went outside?’ asked Thumper, nodding in Peter’s direction.

‘I don’t think that is a natural colour for a human being,’ said Patchy.

‘They’re usually dead when they’re that colour,’ I said.

Thumper poured a little water into his whisky. Patchy and I followed suit.

‘I think I’ll join you,’ said Frank.

‘That’ll be your daily ration,’ Gilly said to him sternly. ‘And bring the bottle so that I can pour.’

Gilly understands Frank. And as Frank himself admits she has been an angel as well as a wife. Frank had a stroke a few months earlier and Gilly was keeping an eye on his eating and drinking in order to keep his blood pressure under control.

‘OK dear,’ said Frank meekly. He sounded disappointed but resigned to his fate. ‘But the doc’s here,’ he added, as though that made a difference.

‘I’ll pour,’ repeated Gilly firmly.

Frank went off and returned moments later with another glass and the bottle of Laphroaig.

‘He’s changed colour again,’ said Patchy.

We all looked out of the window once more.

‘He’s still alive anyway,’ said Patchy. ‘He’s moving a bit.’

Peter had gone from pink to white. If you’d stuck three pieces of coal in a row down his chest he’d have been a dead ringer for a snowman.

‘I’d better go and fetch him,’ I said, not wanting to wait until he suffered frost bite. He had only been outside for about ten minutes but Peter is not a man for whom the word ‘fortitude’ was invented. He looked pretty miserable. I took a sip from my hot whisky and then turned to Frank. ‘You’d better get him a glass,’ I said. ‘I think Peter will need something to warm up his cockles.’

‘Is that what they’re called?’ said Gilly, smirking. She had acquired a glass of her own. She doesn’t drink whisky. Her glass contained hot, mulled red wine. As I walked past her I could smell the nutmeg and the cloves. If I hadn’t been drinking hot Laphroaig I’d have been envious.

‘You’d better come in,’ I said to Peter, from the pub’s front doorway. ‘You look a bit on the chilly side.’

‘I’m as w-w-w-warm as I w-w-w-would be if I’d h-h-h-had m-m-m-my c-c-c-clothes on,’ he stuttered.

I realised at that point that our experiment had been not well designed since it made no allowance for cheating on the part of the experimental subject.

Peter, moving gingerly, as befits a man with frozen limbs and bits and pieces, moved as rapidly as was possible and headed towards me. His teeth were chattering.

‘I n-n-n-need the loo!’ he whispered.

It was no doubt the cold. Men of Peter's age need the loo every two hours and every twenty minutes in cold weather. (In contrast, women can hold out for a day or two but they then take an hour to empty their bladder so the procedures pretty much even out.)

I waited for Peter. He emerged from the Gents a few minutes later and then followed me into the bar. He was still shivering.

'Put your clothes on,' said Thumper. 'I can't drink whisky sitting next to a man in those underpants.'

But Peter's fingers were too cold to do anything involving buttons. Gilly, the most thoughtful landlady in any public house in Britain, found him a blanket and wrapped it around him.

'I don't think the hat was big enough,' said Patchy.

Peter opened his mouth to speak but his teeth were now chattering too much for words to escape unhindered.

'I can tell you the problem,' said Frank. 'There's no bobble on the hat.'

'I think there was a bobble when he went out,' said Patchy. 'But it's shrivelled up in the cold.'

Peter, who looked very miserable, pulled the blanket round him and moved to a chair nearer to the fire.

'Don't sit too close to the fire or you'll get chilblains,' warned Thumper, who had clearly been taught about such things by someone who believed that sitting on cold stones causes piles and that you can't get pregnant if you do it standing up.

'Can you get chilblains on your bits and pieces?' asked Patchy.

'Only on your feet,' said Frank, as though he knew what he was talking about. 'And that's rubbish about sitting near to the fire. You just get them if you get cold. If any part of your body becomes too cold it'll just drop off. The blood supply stops and the next thing you know your bits are all lying on the floor. I read that somewhere.'

'Actually you can get chilblains on all sorts of extremities,' I said quietly, thinking that I perhaps ought to add a little real science to the conversation. 'Fingers, toes…' I paused, leaving the rest to the imagination.

Thumper and Patchy both shivered at the unspoken thought.

Peter cautiously opened the blanket and looked inside his underpants. When he closed the blanket again he seemed relieved.

'What about frostbite?' asked Patchy. 'I remember reading one of those books about explorers walking across the Antarctic and the author said that if you get too cold your toes and fingers are likely to fall off.'

'You'd better stand on the rug,' said Frank to Peter.

Peter looked at him, puzzled.

'In case any of your toes fall off,' explained Frank. 'There are big gaps between our floorboards. We don't want your toes falling down into the cellar. It'll take ages to find them down there.' He paused. 'And I'm not entirely sure that there aren't some little creatures living among the barrels,' he added.

Peter shuddered and leapt onto the safety of the rug. He then looked down at his toes which were now regaining a little of their natural colour.

We sipped our drinks and watched Peter shiver. I suppose it was very irresponsible of us to have let him get so cold but it was Peter after all. Peter is pretty well indestructible. And no one had forced him to stay outside.

'I think we can safely say that the experiment was a failure,' said Patchy.

'Well, it wasn't really a failure,' I pointed out. 'It simply proved that Peter was sort of wrong. You can't keep warm wearing nothing but a hat and a pair of ropey old underpants.'

'So much for medical science,' said Patchy.

'Everything I've got is painful and itchy,' complained Peter, standing up and rubbing his hands over his body.

'You've got frostnip,' I told him. 'Everything is painful and itchy because you're warming up.'

'Will he live?' asked Frank.

'He'll live,' I told him. 'No one ever died of frostnip.'

Peter, at least, looked relieved.

'I'm definitely going to buy one of Peter's hats anyway,' said Thumper. 'As a memento of the day.'

Patchy, Frank and I confirmed that we'd all buy one too. I think we all felt sorry for Peter and wanted to cheer him up. But Patchy, the only true businessman among us, insisted that we would only buy the hats if, as bulk buyers, we were all given a decent discount.

Peter, who had suddenly and miraculously recovered from his bout of frostnip and had perked up considerably, immediately offered us a measly 5% discount. Patchy demanded 10%. They settled for 7.5%.

Despite the modest discount (usually something which always causes him great distress), the sale of four of his hats cheered Peter up considerably.

'I'll pop to the shop and get them now that I've warmed up a bit,' he promised, probably unwilling to wait too long in case we changed our minds.

'Then we'd better stay here a bit longer,' said Thumper. 'And wait for you to get back.'

‘It’s a hard life,’ I said, sipping at my malt. I looked at my watch. There was plenty of time before evening surgery was due to start. Patsy had gone into Barnstaple with her sister but Miss Johnson knew where I was and would ring the Duck and Puddle if there were any calls for me.

‘Someone’s got to live it,’ said Patchy, with a sigh.

‘Might as well be us,’ said Thumper.

‘Without you lot Frank and I wouldn’t have any customers in the winter,’ said Gilly, with disarming honesty.

‘I suppose we’d better have another round of hot whiskies,’ said Thumper.

‘Jolly good idea,’ said Frank. ‘I’ll put another log on the fire when I’ve poured the whiskies.’

‘You can have hot lemonade,’ said Gilly to her husband. ‘You’ve had your alcohol allowance for the day.

To my surprise and delight Frank did not say a word in protest. I was proud of him. I quietly wished that all my patients were as sensible, and had such loving and determined spouses.

Then, as we sat and waited for Peter to return. Thumper said he was glad that he was buying one of the hats Peter was selling because now he’d have something to give me for Christmas. I told him it was funny that he’d said that because I had similar plans for the hat I was buying.

That took us onto talking about presents and Patchy said that a cousin of his, who was not a romantic man, once told his wife that he was giving her ‘something for her pretty neck’ for Christmas. The wife, who was expecting a string of pearls, or a pretty necklace of some kind, was heartily disappointed when she received a box containing two bars of soap. Patchy said that his cousin told him that for three months, bedroom activity fell away to the sort of level common in the more strictly run monasteries and nunneries.

Thumper said he’d learned his lesson about presents several years earlier when he’d given his good lady, Anne, a two-speed hammer drill for Christmas. He realised that he hadn’t been as clever as he’d thought he’d been when she gave him a pair of hair curling tongs for his birthday three months later.

Just then Peter returned with our hats. We all tried them on and agreed that we looked pretty much like a bunch of Alaskan crabbers on shore leave.

Patchy said he would give his hat to Thumper for Christmas. Frank said he rather liked his hat and that he would give it to Gilly so that she could give it to him for Christmas. Gilly said that if she got one for Christmas she would hit the giver over the head with a saucepan as a ‘thank you’.

Peter, who doesn’t believe in giving presents or sending cards but who is not averse to receiving either or both, and who regularly encourages his customers to buy and send gifts and cards at every possible opportunity, said he hadn’t thought of the Chapeau Watch Cap headgear as suitable to be sold as Christmas presents but that since we’d all indicated that the hats had ‘present potential’ he would prepare a window display with half a dozen of the hats decorated with a piece of tinsel which he’d found in a cupboard.

‘Christmas is months away!’ Frank pointed out.

‘You can never be too early to take advantage of the Christmas rush,’ said Peter.

It was April.

Surprise, surprise!

Carole and Gordon Singer had been married for years, and I had always thought of them as a loving couple. But they came to see me separately.

And they both had strange stories to tell.

Their stories were very different but although they were different they were also the same.

'About a year ago, Carole told me she wanted to start going to an exercise class,' began Gordon. 'She started off by just going to a class on Friday evenings. It was held in Barnstaple because there is nothing like that in Bilbury. But after a few weeks, she said she felt so much better for it that she thought she'd go to a class on Saturday lunchtimes as well.'

'I thought she looked good when I last saw her,' I said. 'She's lost some weight.'

'She's lost half a stone,' agreed Gordon. 'And she looks marvellous. She's thirty nine next birthday but you'd never guess. She's always made a real effort to look good but in the last year or two she seems to have really put in an effort to keep her figure. I think she's got a wonderful figure but she always says she thinks her bum is too big' He paused, thinking. 'But most women seem to think their bum is too big, don't they?'

He was clearly proud of his wife but there was also a strange sort of sadness in the way he spoke; and that rather surprised me for I didn't understand where the sadness was coming from. Why would a man be proud and pleased that his wife was still making an effort to look good but at the same time be sad about it?

And then I realised.

Maybe, Gordon had found out that Carole was having an affair. Or maybe he suspected that she might be having an affair.

I was, at that moment, beginning to think that this story had the makings of a family tragedy.

'I only found out the truth by accident,' said Gordon. He shuffled about on the chair for a moment or two, as people often do when they aren't quite sure how to proceed with the conversation, and they want to delay things for as long as possible.

I waited.

There is no point in hurrying people when they want to tell you something but they don't really want to talk about it. If you try to rush things then they tell you something else, usually of little consequence, and leave the important things unsaid.

'I don't much like being in the house on my own,' said Gordon when he was finally comfortable, 'and so once or twice recently I've met up with a few pals for a drink. We usually go somewhere local – the Duck and Puddle, the Old Station House Inn at Blackmoor Gate or the House of Cards in Combe Martin. But last week, a group of us went to a pub in Barnstaple, a place called the Gravedigger's Rest. Do you know it?'

I shook my head. I knew the other three pubs he'd mentioned, of course. But I didn't know the Gravedigger's Rest in Barnstaple. It's a popular name for pubs in North Devon. I suspect that there must have been a good many tired gravediggers in our part of the world.

'A bloke I've known for years was having a sort of stag do. He's getting married for the third time but he still wanted a bit of a party. Anyway, he wanted to go to the Gravedigger's Rest because they had a couple of strippers advertised and he thought it would be a laugh. To be honest, that sort of thing is not really my cup of tea, actually to tell you the truth I've never even been to a strip club, not a live show, but I went along just to be sociable and to have a laugh and because I didn't have anything else to do – with Carole being out at her exercise class.'

At this point I thought I knew what was coming next. I thought he was going to tell me that while he was sitting there, watching the strip show, his wife had walked in for a drink after her exercise class. And that she'd been accompanied by a man. The class instructor, perhaps. That, I thought, was going to be his story.

I tried to work out what I should say to him.

But as Gordon continued I soon realised that my supposition was absolutely, 100% wrong and that the not very wise words I'd already begun to put together were entirely useless.

'To cut a long story short, my wife was the second stripper,' said Gordon.

I managed an 'Ah' and an 'I see' but that was the extent of my contribution at this revelation. And I was quite proud that I'd managed that much.

My first thought was that I had never thought of Carole Singer as the sort of woman who would work as a stripper.

My second thought, proved entirely accurate by the facts, was that I had no idea what I had meant by that thought.

What, after all, was the stripping sort of woman?

'She was very good at it,' said Gordon. 'Fortunately, I was sitting at the back of the pub so I'm pretty sure she didn't see me. When I saw her I sort of crouched down behind a couple of rowdy big blokes who were sitting directly in front of me.'

'It must have been quite a surprise,' I said.

'You can say that again,' said Gordon.

I didn't.

'She came on in a see-through blouse and a sort of flouncy skirt which I'd never seen before and a pair of red high heeled shoes. She was wearing a curly blonde wig. There was some music being played on a tape machine and she did the bump and grind act that strippers always do in films and stripped off the skirt and the blouse and the blokes in front of me were jumping up and shouting and there was a lot of cheering and the usual sort of comments being made. She was wearing a black bra, a suspender belt and stockings and a pair of very tiny panties, one of those G-strings, less material than you'd need to make a yard of dental floss, so thin and flimsy that to be honest it was difficult to be sure whether she wearing anything at all, especially because the thing she was almost wearing was flesh coloured and almost invisible. I have to admit she looked pretty good. She's quite short as you know, only a tad over five foot tall, but she's very curvy and I got the impression that the customers in that pub liked their strippers to have a bit of meat on them; a bit curvy I suppose you might say; decent breasts and hips if you know what I mean. It wasn't difficult to see why the blokes in the pub were all egging her on. She took off the bra, wiggled her bosom about, kicked off the shoes and then peeled off the stockings until all she was wearing was the G-string. It was all done very slowly to the usual sort of musical accompaniment – provided by a tape recorder. I couldn't help noticing that she'd trimmed her pubic hair quite short; very short, actually. I hadn't noticed that before. Then she pranced around pretty well stark naked for a few minutes, weaving in and out of the blokes at the front of the crowd and trying to dodge their groping hands – not always successfully if the truth be told. I saw one bloke grab her bum and another one managed a good squeeze of one of her breasts before she wriggled away from him. She slapped his face but not too hard; just sort of letting him know he'd gone a bit too far. The other blokes laughed at him and gave him a bit of a ribbing. It was all fairly good natured.'

'Did any of the blokes you were with recognise her?' I asked him.

I felt I was swimming in a rough sea, well out of my depth and out of sight of land.

If, when I'd been at medical school, there had ever been a course on what doctors should say to husbands who have found out that their wives are taking their clothes off in public houses then I must have missed it.

'I thought one of them might have. He looked at me a bit quizzical but didn't say anything. The wig made her look quite different so I think he probably just thought it was some bird who looked a bit like Carole.'

'Then what happened?'

'She was looking out into the crowd, smiling and waving when she suddenly stopped, turned round, bent down and picked up her clothes and then darted back out through a door at the back of the pub. She didn't come back out again. A bit later there was another girl who stripped and did an act with a snake. I'm probably biased but I didn't think she was half as good as Carole. She was much younger, no more than 19 or 20 I'd say, and one of the lads said she'd had that stuff injected into her breasts to make them bigger. They certainly didn't look very realistic.' He shuddered. 'I can't stand snakes anyway. I can't even bear to pick up a grass snake.'

'So you think she might have seen you?'

'She might have. I can't be sure.'

'Have you said anything to Carole?'

'Good heavens, no! What on earth would I say?'

'You're going to have to talk about it sometime,' I told him. 'Otherwise, she'll be going out of the house telling you that she's going to her aerobics class and you'll know that she's going to a pub to take off all her clothes.'

Gordon nodded. 'I wouldn't mind so much if she hadn't lied to me about what she was doing,' he said. 'Now I'm not sure what else she's getting up to.'

'You're wondering if she's been unfaithful?'

'Well, I don't know how these things work,' said Gordon. 'But do these strippers sleep with the customers? Is she taking one or two of the blokes up into a back room after the show?'

'Oh, I'm sure she isn't,' I said, though I don't know why I'd said this. Half an hour earlier I would have probably sworn on oath that Carole Singer wasn't the sort of woman who would take her clothes off in public; appearing in a strip show in a public house. I suddenly realised that as much as I thought I knew my patients there was probably a good deal about them that I really didn't know; and would probably never know. It was quite a revelation; like having a professional cold shower.

'If it's just the stripping she does, and if she'd talked to me about it, and if it is something she really wants to do, then I wouldn't object,' said Gordon suddenly. 'She looked so alive when I saw her taking her things off. I know her well enough to know that she was clearly enjoying the attention she was getting; having all those men staring at her body. I suppose it made her feel good about herself. It would, wouldn't it?' He cleared his throat. 'She was very good at the stripping,' he said. 'She was much better than the other girl they had. And the funny thing is that I was very proud of her; proud that she could do it and proud that she was good at it. And, to be honest, I felt proud to be married to her. I think anyone would be proud to be married to her. She looks terrific. All those blokes would have been green with envy if they'd known I was married to her.'

'I'm sure,' I agreed.

I wondered if Carole was, perhaps, going through some sort of premature mid-life crisis. Maybe she no longer felt attractive. Could it be that she felt that Gordon was no longer giving her enough attention? I had suddenly found myself in the position of an agony aunt rather than a family doctor.

'So, what should I do?' asked Gordon. 'Should I tell her that I know where she goes?' He swallowed hard. 'And ask her what else she gets up to?'

'Let me think about it for a day,' I told him. 'Come back and see me this time tomorrow.'

'Do you think they get paid?'

I looked at him.

'The strippers,' he said. 'Do you think they get paid?'

'I'm sure they do,' I said. 'It's a profession isn't it? There will be expenses. Special clothes. Petrol. The girl who has the snake will have to feed it.'

'I wonder how much,' said Gordon, to himself more than to me.

'I'll think about what you've told me,' I told him again. 'Come and see me tomorrow morning.'

Gordon said he could wait another day before deciding what to do. And so off he went.

After he had gone, I sat there silent and alone for so long that Miss Johnson knocked on my consulting room door to see if I was all right.

I was still puzzling over what to say to Gordon several hours later when it was time to start the evening surgery.

And the first patient who came into the surgery was Carole Singer.

She was wearing a calf length grey tweed skirt, a grey woollen jumper and a dark blue hand-knitted cardigan. She had a single string of pearls around her neck and wore pearl earrings. There were a few streaks of grey in her hair. It was almost impossible to believe that this was the woman who, on Friday nights and Saturday lunchtimes, could be seen removing her clothes in a saloon bar. She was a good looking woman and she had a fine figure.

I know that one shouldn't entertain preconceived notions about people but I still couldn't help thinking that she just didn't look like a striptease artiste.

I suddenly wondered if she ever glued tassels to her nipples and if she could make one tassel go round clockwise while making the other go round anticlockwise.

'I've got a confession to make, doctor,' she said, when she had sat down. 'And I need your advice.'

I waited, as though I didn't know her secret.

'Gordon was put on part-time work a year or so ago,' she said. 'You know he works at the timber yard outside Barnstaple? On the road out to Bideford?'

I nodded.

'Well, things haven't been too good at the yard and all the workers were put on a three day week.'

'I had heard something about it,' I said. Several of my patients work at the timber yard.

'So we had difficulty in paying the rent and making ends meet,' said Carole. 'I look after the money, I always have done because Gordon doesn't like dealing with paperwork and the cheque book, and it's been a real worry. The electricity company threatened to cut us off a few months ago and we're still behind with the payments. I offered to get a job to help out but Gordon wouldn't hear of it. He's a bit old-fashioned in that respect. And, besides, the sort of jobs I could get wouldn't have helped much. There's nothing in the village and if I got a job cleaning in Barnstaple I wouldn't earn enough to pay the petrol and car parking charges.'

I didn't say anything; I just sat and listened and waited.

It was strange to listen to the beginning of the story when I already knew the end of it but I couldn't tell Carole that Gordon had been to see me. I think that doctor-patient confidentiality is the foundation of the relationship between doctors and patients. And so I didn't say anything.

Carole swallowed hard and plucked at her cardigan. 'I don't know how to tell you what I've been doing,' she said. 'But I need to tell someone because I don't want my marriage to be at risk.'

'Just tell me,' I said. 'I can't help you unless you tell me what you're worried about.'

'You won't judge me?'

'Of course not!'

'I've got a sister who lives in Wolverhampton,' said Carole. 'She's three years younger than me and a single mother with two kids. Her husband walked out on her a few years ago. I talked to her about my worries about money and she confessed that for several years she had been working as a stripper in a pub near where she lives. She said that they paid really well for a few hours work a week.' Carole started to blush. 'I was shocked when she told me what she'd been doing because I always thought strippers were, well, you know, what we used to call 'scrubbers'.'

There was a pause. Carole had started to cry.

I reached across the desk and silently handed her a box of paper handkerchiefs.

'I thought that she meant that she was on the game, you know, working as a prostitute, but she said she wasn't. She said it was nothing like that. All she did was go to the pub three or four evenings a week and take off her clothes. She said it was easy to learn how to do it in a sexy sort of way. You have to wear something a bit special, of course. You can't strip when you're wearing a pair of old jeans and a jumper. She told me that she got paid more for three or four evenings than she could earn working full-time in a factory or a shop. And she said the customers weren't much trouble. Occasionally, one would ask her to go home with him but she'd just politely tell him 'No thank you' and that would be the end of it. The pub owner didn't let the customers harass the girls because he didn't want to lose them and, more importantly, I suppose, because he didn't want to lose his entertainment licence. I think the police and the magistrates can be quite severe about things like that.'

'Did she suggest that you tried something similar?'

'Not directly,' said Carole. 'But when I'd spoken to her I rang Gilly and asked her if she knew of any pubs in the area which employ strippers.'

'Gilly Parsons at the Duck and Puddle?'

Carole nodded and then blew her nose. I got up, moved the waste basket so that it was next to her chair, and then sat down again. Carole put the used tissue into the basket and took a fresh one from the box. 'Yes, I thought she'd be bound to know if any pubs in North Devon had work for strippers. She told me of a pub that she knew and she gave me a name and a telephone number to ring.'

I waited.

'The owner of the pub was very nice about it,' she said. 'He said he had a couple of young girls but wanted a more mature woman because he'd heard on the grapevine that the customers in other pubs sometimes liked to see an older woman taking her clothes off. He arranged for one of his regular girls to give me a few tips, lessons I suppose, and I passed an audition. That was the most embarrassing thing, really; taking my clothes off on a wet Wednesday morning with just this fat bloke watching me. But he was very professional about it. It wasn't as sordid as it sounds. He said he'd give me a trial and that obviously went well because I've been working there ever since.'

'As a stripper?'

Carole was now bright red. She nodded. 'We get paid more than the barmaids get for working the whole week and I just work Friday evenings and Saturday lunchtimes.'

'So you do it just for the money?'

'Oh yes.'

'Everything is fine between you and Gordon?'

'Oh, absolutely! I love him very much. And I think he loves me. I know he does.'

'What did Gordon say about it?' I asked her.

I knew, of course, that she hadn't told Gordon. But I couldn't tell her that I knew that. This whole thing was getting very complicated and I was having a job remembering who knew what and what I was supposed to know.

'I didn't tell him,' said Carole. 'I told him I was going to exercise classes.' She half smiled. 'It is a sort of exercise, I suppose. Dancing about on a tiny stage and taking off your clothes without falling over or bumping into someone. I've actually lost some weight.'

I nodded. 'And that's all that's involved?'

She looked at me.

'Taking off your clothes? That's all you do?'

She blushed an even deeper red. 'Oh, I see what you mean. Oh yes, I just take off my clothes. I don't sleep with any of the customers if that's what you mean. I wouldn't anyway, not in a million years. I'm a very loyal and faithful wife, but Geoff, the fellow who owns the pub, was very plain about that. He doesn't allow any of the girls to have sex with the customers – especially not for money. He says he'd lose his licence and probably end up in prison so he's very strict about it.'

'And Gordon doesn't know anything? He doesn't know where you go?'

'Well, that's the thing,' said Carole. 'He didn't. He used to think I was going to exercise classes. I wasn't sure how he'd take it so I thought an innocent fib wouldn't do any harm. He has never liked the idea of my working and although he's no prude, I didn't know how he'd feel if he found out that I was stripping to pay the bills. To be honest we really do need the money. As I say, I look after the finances and I don't think Gordon realises just how short things have been since he went on to working part-time. I didn't think there was any chance of him finding out. He doesn't really go to pubs, except to the local ones. But he found out.'

'Ah.' I said.

I was using up a year's supply of monosyllabic responses.

'He was at the pub last Friday,' she said. 'I didn't see him at first but I know he was there and I know he saw me. Well, he could hardly not see me, could he? And he could hardly not recognise me. He's seen me naked often enough. And all I was wearing was a wig and a lot of make up.' She swallowed and started to play with the pearls around her neck. 'But what was he doing there anyway?' she asked indignantly. 'What was he doing at a strip club?'

I was, I admit, a bit surprised by the speed with which she had switched from guilt to questioning Gordon's presence in the pub where she was stripping.

But it was a fair enough question.

'Did you tell him that you'd seen him there, in the pub?'

She shook her head. 'I think we both sort of pretended it hadn't happened.'

'Very English!' I said.

She looked at me, puzzled.

'A man goes to a strip show and sees, to his surprise, that his wife is one of the strippers. He doesn't say anything when they both get home. And the wife, who saw her husband in the audience, doesn't say anything either. They both pretend they weren't there. I think that's a pretty English sort of response.'

Carole smiled. It was the first smile since she'd come into the surgery. 'I see what you mean,' she said. 'You can't imagine two Italians behaving like that, can you?'

'You two have to talk,' I told her. 'You have to tell him what you're doing. And you have to explain why. And you have to assure him that all you're doing is taking off your clothes. And you have to let him explain to you why he was there. He may have a perfectly innocent explanation.'

'How can he have an innocent explanation for going to a strip show?'

'You have a fairly innocent explanation for stripping,' I pointed out. 'You haven't exactly become a stalwart member of the sex industry. You're just doing your bit to help make ends meet.'

She thought about this for a moment. 'I suppose so,' she admitted at last. She stopped playing with her pearls and started picking at her tweed skirt.

'So you have to tell him why you've been taking off your clothes,' I repeated.

'Would you tell him?'

Crumbs, I thought, this was getting complicated.

How could I tell him something that he already knew? And I couldn't tell Carole that he already knew.

'I want you both to come and see me tomorrow evening,' I told her. 'I'll make sure I've spoken to Gordon by then. I'll tell him what you told me. But then you both have to talk this whole thing through.'

'The problem is that if I give up the stripping we won't be able to afford to live,' she said.

'Can I ask you a personal question?'

She laughed. 'It can hardly be any more personal than the stuff we've already talked about!'

'Do you enjoy what you do? Taking off your clothes in the pub?'

'Well, I do it for the money.'

'I understand. But do you enjoy what you do? Some people like their work, some hate their work and some put up with it. How do you feel about what you now do for a living?'

There was a long pause. 'I do enjoy it,' said Carole at last. 'It's a real ego booster. Especially to a woman my age. I don't even mind when one or two of the punters try to grope me. They're easy enough to stop. But it's flattering to know that they want to.' She paused and played with her pearls again. 'I'm being painfully honest with you, doctor.'

'I know you are,' I said. 'I appreciate that. But it's important that you know how you feel about what you're doing. And it helps if I know too.'

'Tomorrow evening then?' she said, standing up.

'Tomorrow evening,' I agreed.

I was, by now, beginning to see the light. There wasn't a lot of light, it is true, but there was enough for me to see that there might a solution to this seemingly intractable problem involving the ecdysiast and her husband.

When Gordon next appeared in the surgery I told him that I wanted him to come to the evening surgery later that day. 'Bring Carole with you,' I told him. 'And we'll talk this through together.'

I could not, of course, tell him that I had already spoken to Carole and nor could I tell him that she had seen him watching her in the pub where she worked.

After Gordon had left, I dealt with a pile of paperwork which Miss Johnson had placed on my desk when she brought me my post-surgery cup of tea.

I then went out on my visits.

It was, to be honest, a relief to be out and about in the village, and to deal with straightforward medical problems.

It was autumn, and it was an autumn I can remember vividly.

Frank Parsons, who has a unique way with words and who was, in his heavy drinking days, known to make the occasional faux pas, once famously said that autumn was one of his four favourite seasons. It's certainly in my top four.

The autumn we had that year was so spectacular that I suspect that even Frank, who is not easily impressed, would have put it into his top three seasons.

We were enjoying the sort of rare collation of colours which Americans enjoy every year; particularly those Americans who live in New England; in Vermont, Massachusetts, Maine, Connecticut, Rhode Island and New Hampshire.

The spectacular colours which are a feature of autumn (or fall) in those parts of the United States are a result of very unusual circumstances. There is usually an early cold spell at the very end of the summer, followed by an extended period of sunshine in October. As autumn develops, the sap is prevented from entering the leaves by the growth of new, hard cells at the base of each twig. The result is that the leaves start to die and the green colour fades.

The glorious reds, yellows and oranges which make autumn so spectacular, only appear when there is the right mixture of cold, warmth and sunshine. In areas where the weather is too cold, too soon, the leaves fall quickly and never have a chance to develop those stunning colours, let alone to show them. In parts of the country where the weather is too warm, the leaves are already breaking up and falling from the trees by the time the sap has risen.

In Devon, and in England in general, there is usually too much rain for those marvellous autumn colours to develop properly. The soil in our part of the world, is too rich and moist and as a result the leaves stay green until the moment they are killed by early winter frosts. Moreover, the colours of an English autumn are not usually properly visible because the skies are too grey and gloomy and oppressive; the trees are likely to be hidden behind curtains of mist and rain.

The sort of autumn which the locals take for granted in New England occurs so rarely in Old England that when it does happen it inspires motorists to stop their cars, pull onto the verge and just sit and stare at an orchestral symphony for the eyes; a symphony conducted by nature, displaying every red, orange, yellow and brown imaginable.

And that's what happened that day.

Everywhere I looked there were trees which looked as though they had been painted with the aid of Turner's palette: silver birch, alder, hornbeam, beech, poplar, sweet chestnut, ash, hazel, huge English oaks, slightly smaller sessile oaks, wych elms and red oaks with their brilliant orange-red leaves. Everywhere I looked there was colour. Woodlands and copses and spinneys were ablaze. For once the fruits of autumn, conkers, acorns, beechnuts and hazelnuts took second place to the leaves of the trees.

Fifteen minutes after I left the surgery I was standing beside the car, parked no more than half a mile from the surgery, admiring the scenery.

The weather was unseasonably warm and it was the most spectacular autumn I had ever seen. As I stood there, enjoying the rare sight of an autumn in full glory, I went over what Carole and Gordon had told me and I felt my mind clearing. It seemed to me that the Singers' problem wouldn't take too much sorting out.

There were five visits to do that day.

Three of them were routine visits to elderly patients whom I liked to check on once every week or two.

It only took me a few minutes to call in and check that all was well and while I was there I always delivered whatever routine prescriptions might be necessary. Actually, I usually delivered whatever pills or creams might be needed, rather than taking prescriptions. It was far easier for me to do this than to expect the patients to find someone to call at the surgery on their behalf to turn their prescriptions into medication.

The other two calls I made were also fairly straightforward. Compared to the Singers they were very straightforward calls.

The first of these visits was to a couple called Sam and Evelyn Polger.

People who know their names but have never met them assume that he is called Sam and she is called Evelyn. But they're wrong if they do make this assumption because Mrs Polger is called Sam and Mr Polger was Christened Evelyn. (This is not as confusing as it could be. The author Evelyn Waugh was at one time married to a woman who was also called Evelyn. That must have led to some real confusion – especially with the morning mail.)

Whenever I see the Polgers, I am reminded how often I make erroneous judgements based on the names of people we meet. We all have preconceived notions about names and these notions are fed by our previous experiences. If, when we were at school, we knew a Cuthbert who was a bit wet we will assume that anyone called Cuthbert must be a bit wet. If we knew a Nigel who was the Captain of Sport, and a great hero, then we will tend to have respect for people called Nigel.

Sometimes, of course, our prejudices are fed by characters we've met only in books and films.

So, for example, the only Bertie I've ever known is Bertie Wooster, the character in P.G.Wodehouse's books about Jeeves. And so I tend to assume that anyone called Bertie must be a bit like Bertie Wooster.

The only Guy I've heard of was Guy Gibson, the World War II dambusters hero, and so to me anyone called Guy must be a heroic sort of fellow.

To others these names will, of course, probably mean something entirely different.

Anyway, Mr Polger is called Evelyn and Mrs Polger is called Sam and they have three dogs called Pickles, Chutney and Relish.

Mrs Polger is a naturalist who writes books about the countryside. She wrote one called *Squirrels in the Attic* and another called *Pheasants on the Lawn*.

Mr Polger, who did something incomprehensible at a bank in the City, presses flowers and creates pictures which he frames. He also plays the euphonium and has an extraordinary collection of Victorian pocket knives. They're a lovely couple, both in their late sixties. The two of them are terrified of hospitals.

It was Mr Polger who had asked me to visit.

After apologising for not being able to come to the surgery at Bilbury Grange, he told me that he hadn't been able to pass urine for more than 24 hours and that he felt that there might be something wrong with his bladder.

'It isn't your bladder,' I told him, when I had examined him. His bladder was massively enlarged and easy to feel. 'It's your prostate gland. It's enlarged and it has compressed your urethra – with the result that the urine can't get out of your bladder.'

'Is there anything you can do?' asked Mr Polger. 'It's a terribly uncomfortable feeling.'

I told him that he needed to be catheterised, a simple process which involves pushing a thin tube up the urethra into the bladder so that the bladder can be emptied. It's a quick and easy solution but, unfortunately, only a temporary one.

'I'd prefer to send you into hospital to have this done,' I told him. 'But I know you absolutely hate those places and if you really don't want to go into hospital I can do it for you here. I've got a catheter in the boot of the car.'

'Oh, do it here, please, doctor,' said Mr Polger.

I told him that I would do the catheterisation myself but warned him that he might, in due course, have to go the hospital to have his prostate gland checked.

'Is it cancer?' asked Mrs Polger, clearly trying to be brave.

I told her that I had absolutely no reason to suspect that her husband had cancer. 'I think his prostate is just enlarged,' I said. 'It happens often in men over the age of 60.'

'Does it mean I need to have an operation?' asked Mr Polger, who was clearly terrified of the prospect of surgery.

'Maybe,' I admitted. 'But maybe we can get away without troubling the surgeons.'

I told him that I had read reports showing that it was sometimes possible to reduce an enlarged prostate gland by taking the herb saw palmetto. I told him that he could obtain a supply from a local health food store and that I'd seen evidence that it could reduce the size of an enlarged prostate and help reduce the symptoms caused by a prostate gland which had grown too big. I also suggested that he might benefit from eating sunflower seeds which are a good source of zinc – another substance which is essential for a healthy prostate gland.

It took only a few minutes to fetch the catheter from the car and to perform the simple procedure.

When I left the Polgers half an hour later, they were both much relieved and much less fearful than they had been when I'd arrived.

Practising medicine as a country doctor can sometimes be quite simple but enormously satisfying.

My second visit was to a couple called Dawn and Jack Atkins. In their case, her real name is Phyllis but everyone calls her Dawn. His name is Jack and he is called Jack. They, like the Polgers, are retired.

When she was younger, Dawn was a singer and a member of a quartet called the Dawn Chorus. I made a fool of myself when she first told me this. 'How did they manage to find four girls all called Dawn?' I asked. She raised an exquisitely manicured eyebrow, didn't say anything but just looked at me.

'Were any of you called Dawn?' I asked as the truth dawned on me.

'We had an Elspeth, a Lettice, a Joan and me, a Phyllis,' she replied. 'We didn't actually have a Dawn. But we had a manager whose mother was called Dawn. He thought up the name and we thought it was clever so we became the Dawn Chorus.'

'We nearly had a recording contract once,' she told me. 'But things went wrong, I never did find out what the problem was, but instead of signing us, the recording company signed some fellow with a ukulele called George

Formby.' She grinned. 'I bet they regretted that mistake!'

'Instead of George Formby, they could have had the Dawn Chorus?'

'They could, indeed!' She had laughed uproariously. 'Four Dawns for the price of one.'

Jack had been a sales representative for a company which made light fittings. He had travelled regularly around Europe and the Far East. He was one of those people who had a natural facility with languages and he spoke French, German, Spanish and Italian fluently and could 'get by' in Mandarin and Russian.

When I called at the Atkins's cottage I found Jack waiting for me at the front door.

'It's Dawn,' he told me, clearly agitated. 'She's got a terrible pain in her leg.'

I followed him up the stairs of their tiny but immaculate cottage. Dawn was lying on top of the bed. She was fully dressed and perfectly made up. She looked frightened and was not her usual ebullient self, though she smiled and tried to joke when she saw me.

'At last I've managed to get you into my bedroom,' she said.

'But our luck's not with us,' I said, carrying on with the joke. 'Jack's here too.'

'Foiled!' said Dawn.

And then she burst into tears.

'Damn!' she said, taking an embroidered handkerchief from her sleeve and dabbing at her eyes. 'I was going to be brave.'

I sat down on a dining chair which Jack had already placed beside the bed and took her hand. 'What's the matter?'

'I've got this absolutely terrible pain in the calf of my left leg,' she told me. 'I'm worried that it might be a deep vein thrombosis.'

'Let the doctor have a look at it before you start leaping to conclusions,' said Jack softly, from somewhere behind me.

I examined Dawn's leg. It was red and clearly tender. 'Does it hurt when you move it?'

She nodded.

'It hurts if you walk?'

'Yes, walking is painful.'

I took a tape measure and a felt tipped pen out of my black bag. I measured six inches below the bottom of her left patella and made a small mark on her leg. I then did the same thing on her right leg.

'What's that for?' asked Dawn.

'I'm going to measure both calves to see if one is bigger than the other. I want to see if there is any swelling. The pen mark helps make sure that I measure both calves at the same point.'

She nodded.

I measured her calf and found that the left calf was nearly an inch bigger than her right calf.

'I'm afraid I think your diagnosis is right,' I told her.

She probably knew this anyway, but I explained that a deep vein thrombosis is a blood clot which forms inside a vein and which may completely block the flow of blood. The danger is that the clot, or a part of it, may break free and travel up to the lungs or the heart.

I didn't tell Dawn and Jack (though I suspect that they already knew) that a deep vein thrombosis can be dangerous – even fatal.

'What's caused it?' asked Dawn.

The risk of developing a deep vein thrombosis is greater among people who have varicose veins, smoke, are overweight, have recently had surgery, have heart disease, are bedbound or are taking the contraceptive pill.

None of those things applied to Dawn.

'It can sometimes just happen, particularly in people who are over 60,' I told her.

'We've just come back from Milan,' said Jack. 'Do you think that being on the plane could have caused it? Aeroplanes seem to be very cramped these days.'

'That's because we fly in the cheap seats and when you flew for business your company always paid for the expensive seats,' said Dawn.

'The expensive seats are three or four times the price,' said Jack apologetically.

'I know, dear,' said Dawn. 'I was just explaining why the aeroplane seemed so cramped.'

'Being stuck on the plane could have caused it,' I agreed. 'Next time you fly, make sure that you wriggle your feet and massage your lower legs and feet regularly. And clench your calf muscles every quarter of an hour or so to stimulate your blood circulation.'

'I don't think we'll be flying again,' said Dawn. 'Will we Jack?'

'I'm happy to stay at home from now on,' said Jack firmly. 'Airports are so busy these days that flying has become a bit of a nightmare.'

‘So, what can you do about it, doctor?’ asked Dawn.

‘I’m afraid I’m going to have to send you into the hospital in Barnstaple,’ I told her. ‘You need to have treatment to dissolve the clot. And you really need to be in hospital so that the doctors can give you exactly the right amount of the drug needed to dissolve the clot.’

‘I thought as much,’ said Dawn quietly.

‘I’ve got your case packed,’ said Jack. ‘Two clean nighties, dressing gown, slippers, soap bag, a purse with some money in it, those two new magazines you bought but haven’t read yet, a paperback from your ‘Not yet read’ shelf, and a box of paper tissues.’

‘Don’t forget to put in my make-up bag,’ said Dawn. ‘But wait until the doctor’s gone and I’ve tidied myself up.’

‘How long will she need to be in hospital?’ asked Jack.

‘Just a few days,’ I told him.

I turned to Dawn. ‘But you’ll have to take medication for a while after you get home.’

I then borrowed their telephone and rang the ambulance service to request an ambulance. When I’d done that I rang the hospital, spoke to the house physician on duty and arranged for Mrs Atkins to be admitted.

Theoretically, I should have telephoned the hospital first to make sure that there was a bed available. But Bilbury is a good distance from the ambulance station in Barnstaple and I wanted to have the ambulance on its way without any delay.

I spent what was left of the afternoon writing the first part of an article I had promised to produce for a magazine I worked for occasionally. Mrs Singer was making ends meet by taking off her clothes in a pub in Barnstaple. I was making ends meet by writing books and articles. When you stop and think about it there isn’t all that much difference. We all do what we can to keep a roof over our heads and food in our larders.

And then it was time for the evening surgery.

I had asked Gordon to come along fairly late on so that I could see him and his wife at the end of the evening surgery. I had a feeling that we might take some time to talk through the couple’s problem and I didn’t want to have a lot of patients sitting in the waiting room wondering what was taking so long.

Once they had both sat down, I asked Gordon to begin by explaining to Carole how he came to be in the pub on the evening when his wife was performing.

When he’d done that, I asked Carole to explain how she came to be taking off her clothes in public.

‘You should have said,’ said Gordon after a while.

‘I know,’ said Carole. ‘I’m sorry I didn’t say anything.’

‘I wouldn’t have minded.’

‘They pay very well,’ said Carole. ‘And I’m only taking my clothes off.’

‘You looked wonderful,’ said Gordon. ‘You’re very good at it.’

‘Do you think so?’

‘I was very proud of you.’

‘You weren’t ashamed?’

‘Why on earth should I be ashamed?’

‘Because I was taking my clothes off in front of all those men.’

‘So what? They cheered you. They loved you.’

‘Would you like me to stop?’

‘We need the money don’t we?’

‘We’d be in a bit of trouble without it.’

‘Do you enjoy it?’

There was a silence.

‘Yes, I do,’ said Carole, softly. ‘It makes me feel young again.’

‘Would you like to carry on?’

‘Do you want me to?’

‘Would you like me to drive you there and back?’

‘You’d come with me?’

‘I could be your chauffeur and a sort of road manager.’

‘That would be nice.’

‘And if you want we could perhaps even take on another night if there’s another pub in North Devon needing a stripper.’

‘Well, I was asked to do Tuesdays at the Mott and Bailey, that pub in South Molton, but I turned them down because I didn’t think you’d believe that I was taking three exercise classes. I could ring them up and see if they still need someone.’

‘Well, Tuesdays would be fine. And South Molton is no further than Barnstaple.’

At this point I decided that my presence was no longer necessary and so I coughed lightly.

They both thanked me and left holding hands.

Apart from starting things off I don’t think I had said a word during the entire consultation.

There had been times during the previous 24 hours when I’d been convinced that things were going to end up badly.

But in truth, it isn’t often that things end up so happily.

When the surgery was over I poured myself an extra-large malt whisky as a small celebration. It felt as though it had been a long day.

I then telephoned the Polgers to see how Mr Polger was getting on. His wife told me that he was fine; he was passing urine again normally and he felt much more comfortable than he’d been that morning.

I’d hardly put the telephone down before it rang again.

It was the duty doctor from the hospital in Barnstaple.

My heart jumped when I knew who was calling. I only had one patient in the hospital and hospital doctors don’t ring GPs to give them hourly updates on what their patients are eating.

The doctor was ringing to tell me that Dawn Atkins had died a few minutes earlier.

They had put up a drip and she had been receiving anti-clotting medication for several hours. Everything should have been fine but the clot, or a piece of it, must have broken off, travelled upwards and lodged in her heart.

She’d had a massive heart attack and despite all their efforts she had died.

‘Does Mr Atkins know?’ I asked.

‘That’s why I’m ringing you,’ said the doctor. ‘He went home about an hour ago. Everything seemed fine and we told him to come back in tomorrow. We were hoping you could tell him.’

I put the telephone down and could feel tears in my eyes.

In a small village, where the doctor knows all his patients and regards them as friends, the death of a patient is a very painful business.

I went into the kitchen to tell Patsy that I had to go out. She was making dinner.

‘Can you hold our meal for an hour?’

‘What’s wrong?’ She knew from my face that this was no routine call.

I told her. We hugged for a few moments. I then went out to the car and drove to the Atkins’s cottage.

There are some aspects of being a country doctor which I hate very much indeed.

The Case of the Wobbly Film Star

The whole thing had started eight or nine weeks earlier.

Patsy and I had just finished dinner and we had sat down to listen to the fifth in a series of long playing records of choral work by Thomas Tallis. Patchy and Adrienne Fogg had given us a set of records by the composer for our anniversary. Until we had received the gift, neither Patsy nor I had ever heard of him but Patchy is something of an expert on old English music. Thomas Tallis was a 16th century composer who produced an enormous number of pieces of music in his 80 years. Patsy and I had decided that Tallis's music is divine in both senses of the word.

And then the telephone rang.

The caller was Mrs Whiffle who was ringing to say that her mother had tripped and fallen. She apologised, admitted that she didn't think her mother had broken any bones, but said she would be grateful if I would pop along and give her mother a quick check up – just to make sure that everything was all right.

Dr Brownlow, my predecessor and erstwhile employer, once told me that nothing good ever happens at 4 a.m. He was right about that, of course. (Dr Brownlow was a wise old owl who was rarely wrong about anything). But, I would go a little further for in my experience as a country doctor nothing good happens between the hours of 7 p.m. and 7 a.m. If the telephone at Bilbury Grange rings during those twelve hours, then the problem is usually significant. It may not be critical or even threatening, but it will be significant to the patient or to the relative or friend who has made the call. My patients tend to be thoughtful; they don't bother me out of hours unless they think the problem is a serious one. They aren't always right, of course. Sometimes the problem is relatively trivial and can be easily conquered with the aid of an injection, a tablet or a few words of quiet explanation and a good sized healthy dollop of country comfort.

I learned early on in my career in general practice that at no time does the reassurance of a doctor count for more than in the dark, small hours of the night, for it is in the darkness of the night when reality is of least significance.

I have noticed, indeed, that when a call is made at 9 p.m. in the dead of winter, the caller is almost certain to be more agitated than when a call is made at 9 p.m. in the summer. The very fact that the world is dark can be enough to accentuate, even exaggerate, our quite natural fears.

When we are nervous and frightened, and possibly alone with our apprehensions, suspicions and imaginations, what matters is not what is really wrong but what we think is wrong and what we think is likely to happen next. As with ghouls and evil spirits, ghosts and banshees, we are alarmed by the unknown and we worry, inevitably, about what may be happening and what might happen next.

Patsy turned off the record player (I asked her to carry on listening but she said she didn't want to listen by herself and would do some housework until I returned) and I put on my coat and picked up my black bag.

Olga and Algernon Whiffle have only been in the village a couple of years but they have already established themselves as well-liked inhabitants; they both have time for the elderly in the village and they always express an interest (without being nosy or gossipy) in the history of the village and its inhabitants.

In rural areas it is often said that it can take decades, if not generations, for newcomers to feel part of a village community and that is often true. I suspect that it is particularly in parts of Devon and Cornwall where communities often feel isolated and cut off from the world and where the geography, the geology, the weather and the absence of main roads or railway lines mean that the isolation is often very real rather than merely conceptual.

However, if the newcomers make a genuine and polite interest in the community where they have chosen to make their home, and they are prepared to put themselves out a little and to learn a little about their neighbours and the environment in which they have chosen to place themselves, then the process can be speeded up dramatically.

Mr and Mrs Whiffle were good examples of how it is perfectly possible to move into a community and then, within a relatively short space of time, succeed in becoming part of it.

The Whiffles have a curious history which is not unique but is rare enough to be unusual.

Before they moved to Bilbury, they lived in a village just outside Bristol and they were neighbours.

Mr Whiffle, and the woman who was then his wife, lived in a smart, modern detached house on a small estate of a dozen newly built homes. The woman who is now Mrs Whiffle was then called Mrs Hambledon and she lived in the house next door with Mr Hambledon, the man to whom she was then married.

Mrs Whiffle (the former Mrs Whiffle) worked in Bristol where she had a good job as an artist in an advertising agency. Mr Hambledon, who also worked in Bristol, was an architect. Since both the woman who was then Mrs Whiffle and Mr Hambledon worked in the centre of Bristol, no more than a quarter of mile away from each other, it was agreed that they would travel into work together. This would enable them to make a considerable saving on petrol, car parking charges and so on. Mr Whiffle and Mrs Hambledon agreed that it was a sensible idea.

Mr Whiffle worked as a journalist on a small newspaper in Taunton and the woman who was then Mrs Hambledon didn't have an outside job but kept herself fully occupied with a variety of responsibilities and obligations in the village. She was secretary of the local Drama Society, chairwoman of the Wives Group at the church and an active member of a national charity which delivered meals to lonely, elderly folk who lived in the area.

And then both families were hit by a thunderbolt.

Mrs Whiffle and Mr Hambledon announced that they had fallen in love with each other, that they had indeed been having an affair for some time, and that it was their intention to move into Bristol and live in a spacious new apartment which they had agreed to purchase together. There were, inevitably, many tears, the inevitable accusations of betrayal, and, in due course, some rather acrimonious negotiations and two divorces.

In due course, Mr Whiffle and Mrs Hambledon, finding themselves alone and thrown together as solitary neighbours, began to socialise a little.

Neither of them had children at home and so there were no impediments to what began as a purely social relationship; a practical and convenient way of dealing with their inevitable loneliness.

They went to the cinema together. They went shopping in Bristol together. At the weekends they ate out at village pubs. They discovered that they shared a good many interests and enthusiasms. And, thrown together by these stressful and unusual circumstances, the friendship turned into something more. They cried together, they laughed together, they held hands and just under a year after their partners had left, the two became lovers.

After that, they decided that it would make perfect sense to live together and to marry. After all, there were no legal or moral constraints to prevent their doing so.

As the former Mrs Whiffle had become the present Mrs Hambledon, so the former Mrs Hambledon became the present Mrs Whiffle. It all sounds strange but I suspect that this variety of wife and husband swapping is much commoner than is generally believed. It is something I had come across once or twice before.

Once they had agreed to marry, the new Whiffles realised that there were practical problems to be overcome.

Both of the Whiffles had large mortgages which they found difficult to meet.

But which house should they keep and which one should they sell?

After some discussions they decided to make a clean break; to sell both houses and to move away from the area.

They decided that they would retire and move to Devon, a county for which they had both always had an affection. They did their sums and decided that they could make a go of things.

And Mrs Whiffle (the new Mrs Whiffle) asked her new husband if it would be too much of a burden if her mother, who was a widow and in her early eighties, came to live with them.

Mrs Whiffle's mother was a retired actress and, like all actresses who have appeared in at least one film, she liked to describe herself as a former film star. This seemed to me to be an entirely understandable, eminently reasonable and utterly harmless conceit.

Mrs Whiffle's mother had appeared in several films made in the 1930s, when she had rather specialised in playing gay young widows and divorcees, but in her later years she had, I believe, been better known for her work in the London theatre. Her real name (which had for years taken second place to her stage name and the use of which even now was confined to communications with the Inland Revenue, the Passport Office and all parts of the National Health Service) was Mathilda Ruthvens.

She once told me, with the sort of pride people always exhibit when they have a name with a deal of history attached to it, that Ruthvens was the family name of the Earls of Gowrie who, in the year 1600, kidnapped James VI of Scotland, who was later to become James I of England. She said that the Scots were so annoyed by this insult that they had passed a name banning the use of the name of Ruthvens for evermore. However, like all silly laws which are passed in perpetuity, the law was eventually forgotten and ignored. Her husband, the source of the name, had died in 1956 and Mrs Ruthvens had lived alone ever since.

Mrs Ruthvens had a cottage in Sussex which she agreed to sell and she said that was very happy to put the proceeds towards the purchase of a suitable home with her daughter and new son-in-law.

Mr Whiffle said he wouldn't mind at all having his mother-in-law sharing their home. As he said, the world can be a dreary, dull place; it needs more former film stars wandering about the place and, in his words: 'If you are offered a chance of sharing your home with a film star you'd have to be mad to turn it down'.

This apparent superficiality hid a genuine affection.

When I arrived at the Whiffle's house, Mrs Ruthvens was lying on a sofa, though since it had a backrest at only one end I expect she would have preferred to think of it as a chaise longue, and she was looking distinctly irritable about being treated like an invalid. She was, as usual, wearing enough make-up to satisfy the requirements of the audience in the seats at the back of the Dress Circle at one of the large London theatres. Her false eyelashes were the biggest I'd ever seen. She wore a splendid wig to disguise the fact that her hair, having been permed and curled and brutalised for decades, was now thinning and no longer the crowning glory it had doubtless once been.

'I just fell, doctor,' she said, rather crossly. 'There was no need to call you out. There's nothing whatsoever wrong with me. My daughter fusses too much. I'm just another old lady getting a bit unsteady on her feet.' She winked at me; a gesture for which she had once been rather famous. 'I probably had too many glasses of sherry before dinner.'

'She had no sherry before dinner,' said Mrs Whiffle, who seemed both apologetic and worried. 'And she had no wine with dinner. And no brandy after it.'

I carefully examined Mrs Ruthvens but happily found no sign of any injury. I took her blood pressure. The systolic was raised a little, but nothing worrying. I listened to her heart. Everything was ticking along nicely; better, indeed, than might be expected in a piece of equipment which had been functioning perfectly for the best part of a century. I looked into her ears, checked her eyesight and performed other simple tests which might have offered a hint of any underlying abnormality.

I found absolutely nothing wrong.

'Do you ever suffer from dizziness?' I asked her.

'Never!'

'Have there been any changes in your eating or drinking habits?'

She shook her head.

'Have you found anything wrong?' asked Mrs Whiffle.

'You're as fit as a fiddle!' I told Mrs Ruthvens.

'That's good to know.'

(I know that nothing annoys an elderly patient more completely than the doctor providing information to relatives, as though the patient were a motor car or a piece of antique furniture and the doctor an assessor offering an opinion to an owner or a would-be purchaser. And yet it is surprising just how many doctors do this.)

'Have you fallen before?' I asked Mrs Ruthvens.

'Good heavens no,' replied the actress. She stopped and thought for a moment. 'I fell off a horse in around 1937,' she said. 'I was making a film called *Robin Hood* with Errol Flynn and Olivia de Havilland and the horse they gave me was rather lively for my liking.' She stopped and allowed a small smile to appear. 'He was a devil!' she said and then, allowing three beats for the timing, added: 'Errol not the horse.' She smiled as though there was a good deal that she could tell me if she were the sort of person inclined to share such secrets.

'Would you like a cup of tea, doctor?' asked Mrs Whiffle, unexpectedly and rather loudly. 'I'm so sorry, I should have offered you something before.'

'Oh, I could tell you a few stories about Errol!' said Mrs Ruthvens, ignoring her daughter. 'Everything you've heard about him was absolutely true!'

'Or maybe a whisky?' said Mrs Whiffle, who clearly didn't want her mother telling me the secrets of her adventures with Mr Flynn. 'Doctors always drink whisky, don't they?'

'That's very kind of you,' I said. 'But no, thank you.'

'Yes, she has fallen several times quite recently,' said Mrs Whiffle, before her mother could continue with her reminiscences. I decided that she had perhaps already heard her mother's Errol Flynn stories and thought them not suitable for the occasion. 'She'll tell you that she hasn't but she has. She's fallen a number of times in the last month and almost daily in the last week or so. On Wednesday, she fell in the garden and badly grazed her arm. I nearly called you then because I thought she might have broken her forearm.'

'I tripped on a daisy,' said Mrs Ruthvens, addressing me. 'It's just my age, dear,' she said, directing the comment at her daughter. She reached out and took her daughter's hand. 'It's sweet of you to worry about me but I do wish you wouldn't fuss so.' She suddenly turned and looked at me as though she had never seen me before. 'You must think I'm absolutely ancient,' she said.

'Not at all,' I said, smiling at her. In truth she looked very good for her age. She was, I knew, 87-years-old. She looked at least fifteen years younger and the compliment was well deserved.

Age is a funny thing. It is always relative. At the age of six we think that anyone who is 14 is absolutely ancient. At 14 we consider anyone who is 20 to be aged and possibly bordering on infirm. At 70 we think that anyone who has died in their 70s must have died very young. And although some of those who are fortunate enough to wander into the 80s tend to glory in their longevity, others, like Mrs Ruthvens, regard themselves as merely having tiptoed gracefully into full maturity.

'Is it normal for older people to start falling over?' Mrs Whiffle asked me.

Mrs Ruthvens muttered something in what was clearly a stage whisper. It was clear that she objected to her daughter's use of the phrase 'older people'.

'No, it isn't normal,' I told Mrs Whiffle. 'There's no intrinsic reason why age itself should make us unstable and there is no more reason for someone in their 80s to fall over than there is for someone in their 30s to fall over – unless there is something wrong with them.'

'What sort of things?' asked Mr Whiffle, who had been sitting quietly until this moment. 'What types of illness cause someone to fall?'

'It's quite a long list,' I said. 'Joint pain and weakness, such as occur in osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis, can result in falls. So can muscle weakness, often a result of a failure to do enough exercise, and foot problems which might make someone unstable.' I thought for a moment, mentally making a list of the other disorders which can result in falls. 'Obviously, a stroke can result in unsteadiness, so can poor vision, balance problems, disorders such as Meniere's disease, low blood pressure, which is usually a result of a patient taking too much medication for high blood pressure, side effects caused by prescription drugs and disorders such as Parkinson's disease.'

I paused again, to think.

'You've missed one,' said Mrs Ruthvens.

I looked at her and waited.

'Booze!' said Mrs Ruthvens. 'I've known a good many people who fell over after drinking too much.'

'Mother!' said Mrs Whiffle.

'It's true!' said Mrs Ruthvens. 'I should know. I've worked with Peter O'Toole, Oliver Reed and what was the name of that one who was married to Elizabeth thingy. They made that film Cleopatra together.'

'Richard Burton,' said Mrs Whiffle. 'He was married to Elizabeth Taylor.'

'Richard. Richard. Of course it was. Richard was very sweet,' said Mrs Ruthvens. 'I had a small part in Cleopatra. Did you know?'

I admitted that I hadn't known.

'I was some sort of handmaiden,' said Mrs Ruthvens. 'We were just there as decoration. Miss Taylor made me stand at the back every time I was in a scene with her. She said she thought my bosom was too luxurious and would attract attention away from her.'

'Mother!' said Mrs Whiffle.

'It's true,' said Mrs Ruthvens. 'I had a quite splendid bosom when I was younger. I used to do what were called 'cheesecake' photographs. When we made Cleopatra, the props men used to shout into my cleavage to see if an echo came back.' She laughed.

Mrs Whiffle exchanged glances with her husband.

'You're right about the alcohol, of course,' I said. 'But as far as I can see you don't have signs of anything to make you likely to fall over.'

'There is something else,' said Mrs Whiffle. 'Mother won't like me mentioning this but her memory has been getting poor recently.'

'That's nonsense!' said Mrs Ruthvens. 'Stuff and nonsense. My memory is as good as it ever was.'

'You forget names more often than you used to,' said Mrs Whiffle.

'Just because I forgot the name of that Burton woman,' protested Mrs Ruthvens. 'And Richard.'

'It isn't just that,' said Mrs Whiffle. She turned to her husband. 'She has been more forgetful recently, hasn't she?'

Mr Whiffle nodded his agreement. 'You forgot the name of the man who runs the village shop,' he said.

'It's Johnson,' said Mrs Ruthvens. 'Something Johnson. Robert Johnson?'

'It's Peter Marshall,' said her daughter gently.

'Well I can't be expected to know the names of everyone who runs a shop,' said Mrs Ruthvens, rather defensively.

I asked Mrs Ruthvens a few simple questions, just to check out her memory. She said that Sir Alec Douglas-Home was still Prime Minister. I asked her about money. She didn't seem aware that Britain had introduced decimalisation. She said that Brighton was the nearest large town.'

I didn't want to embarrass her by telling her that the Prime Minister's name was Harold Wilson or that Barnstaple, not Brighton, was the nearest town, so I just nodded.

'Maybe we need to do a few tests,' I told her. 'I'll fix up for you to see one of the consultants at the hospital.'

'Tests!' said Mrs Ruthvens, derisively. 'What good are tests going to be?' She sounded cross and this I found surprising, partly because it was unlike her to be so aggressive and partly because of the sudden change in her mood. She pushed herself up, stood for a moment as she steadied herself with a hand on the back of a nearby chair, and then walked away. She walked slowly and rather nervously, as though afraid that she might fall, and I could not help noticing that she had a strange sort of gait, unsteady and wide legged as though she were walking along the promenade deck of a liner in a storm.

An individual's gait can tell you a good deal about any underlying pathology.

For example, the patient with Parkinson’s disease will often shuffle along, failing to lift their feet more than an inch or two off the ground, and a patient with tertiary syphilis and tabes dorsalis may have a more dramatic, stamping gait.

But although the strange gait which Mrs Ruthvens exhibited seemed to suggest something specific, something I had never seen but had read about, I couldn’t remember what it was.

As I headed out to my car, Mr Whiffle came with me. ‘She’s suffering from dementia isn’t she?’ He spoke softly, though the front door was closed and there was no way that his mother-in-law could hear him.

‘It would seem possible,’ I agreed. I was more worried about her failing to remember Richard Burton’s name than her inability to remember Peter Marshall’s name. ‘But it’s not something I’d like to diagnose after one short visit. We all have good and bad days and the elderly seem particularly prone to having their ups and downs.’

‘Is it that disease beginning with an A?’ asked Mr Whiffle. ‘I can’t remember the name of it. But I read about it in a magazine.’

‘Alzheimer’s?’ I said.

‘That’s the one. Do you think that’s what she has?’

‘I’m really not sure,’ I said. ‘Not until we have some tests done.’

The surprising truth was that my only previous experience with patients with Alzheimer’s disease had been when I had been a medical student, working in hospitals in and around Birmingham. In Bilbury, I had seen several patients who had dementia in varying degrees, usually fairly mild and manageable, but I had never seen a patient with Alzheimer’s disease.

‘Could dementia make her fall?’

‘No, I don’t think so,’ I told him. ‘That may be something else.’

With younger patients I always tried to find one diagnosis to explain all the possible signs and symptoms. But with older patients it is not uncommon for there to be more than one underlying problem causing different symptoms.

I drove back home feeling very sad. I liked Mrs Ruthvens. She was undoubtedly a ‘character’ and it was difficult not to be charmed by her. But there was something else that none of us had mentioned. I knew the former actress well enough to have noticed that there had definitely been a change in her personality. Her mood had changed very quickly and she had become more aggressive than she had ever been before. So there were three things going on that I needed to tie together. She was falling down a good deal, her memory was fading and her personality seemed to be changing.

The problem was that I had no idea what the underlying pathology could be. Was there one disorder responsible for everything? Or were there two or even three things going on? I knew I needed help from someone who could help me solve this particular puzzle and, if possible, point the way to a single diagnosis that would explain all Mrs Ruthven’s problems.

I managed to arrange for Mrs Ruthvens to see a consultant in Exeter; a physician who specialised in the care of the elderly. The plan was that he would talk to her, examine her and subject her to a few tests in order to find out what was going on.

Two weeks later he wrote to me and told me that in his view, Mrs Ruthvens was developing the type of dementia known as Alzheimer’s disease.

‘There is,’ he wrote, ‘no way of testing for this condition (though I understand that experiments are under way which will, maybe in the 1980s, enable us to visualise what is going on in the brain). More disappointingly, there is currently no treatment for this condition.’

I telephoned the consultant and after three or four attempts I managed to speak to him. I asked him if he thought it possible that the Alzheimer’s disease might be making her unsteady. He said he had never come across such a thing but that, yes, he thought it possible.

And, as far as he was concerned, that seemed to be that.

His prognosis was, to say the least, rather gloomy. He told me that he thought that Mrs Ruthvens would deteriorate steadily over the coming months and that eventually she would probably need to be admitted to a home which specialised in the care of patients with dementia.

‘It’s a gloomy business,’ he told me. ‘Worrying for the patient and distressing for the relatives and friends. Once the disease has gone past a certain point, I always think that it’s the relatives who suffer most. The patient often doesn’t know what’s happening to them but the relatives have to stand around and watch their loved one deteriorate and gradually fall apart before their eyes. A pretty terrible thing all round.’

His solitary, practical suggestion was that Mrs Ruthvens should be fitted with some sort of address tag, containing the name and telephone number of her daughter, so that, anyone who found her wandering away from home could get in touch. When he told me this, I could feel tears forming in my eyes. I knew it was a sensible idea, and something we should eventually consider, but to think of Mrs Ruthvens, so full of life, to be labelled like a parcel was just too much.

I visited Mrs Ruthvens at home and talked to her, to her daughter and to her son-in-law.

Not surprisingly, they were all very upset by the consultant's diagnosis though I wasn't sure that Mrs Ruthvens realised precisely how awful the news really was. She seemed to be deteriorating remarkably quickly and although I could find no explanation for the new symptom she was now also complaining of headaches.

I still felt that we were all missing something.

I vaguely remembered having read something in a medical journal that was relevant. But I couldn't for the life of me think what it was.

I was desperate to find the correct diagnosis. Being close doesn't count in sport and it doesn't count in medicine, either.

After wracking my brain for a week, I mentioned the problem when I was speaking to Will, the GP in the English Midlands with whom I had studied and who was still a good friend. We spoke once a week, usually on a Saturday or a Sunday, to discuss problems we had encountered during our week's work. I found these conversations enormously helpful since, as a general practitioner working alone in a fairly remote Devonshire village, I had almost no contact with other members of the profession.

Even when we couldn't help each other, we could usually help with details of a scientific paper we had read somewhere, or the contact details of a physician or surgeon who might be able to offer a useful opinion.

I told Will about Mrs Ruthvens.

'The odd thing is,' I said, 'that she has a rather peculiar way of walking. I've never seen anything quite like it before.'

I explained that she walked with her feet wide apart, as though she were walking on an unstable surface.

'She's developing dementia and has some personality changes,' I told him. 'But the gait, and the falls, don't fit in with the consultant's diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease. I know that there could be something else going on but I'd like to try to find a single diagnosis that fits all the symptoms.'

'It couldn't be Parkinson's disease? You can get some bizarre variations?'

I had already considered Parkinson's disease but at Will's suggestion I thought about it again.

Patients with Parkinson's do sometimes suffer from a form of dementia and they do have difficulty in walking. But the gait is a shuffling one; patients cannot lift their feet off the floor properly and so steps and uneven pavements are especially dangerous. And they also have difficulty in managing hand to mouth coordination and can, for example, have problems coping with cutlery.

I thought about Mrs Ruthvens.

She just didn't look as if she had Parkinson's disease.

In my experience, patients with Parkinson's tend to have a blank face, sometimes with a ghost of a smile, and dull eyes, not focussed, apparently looking into the distance.

'No,' I said. 'I'm sure she hasn't got Parkinson's.'

'Well I haven't the foggiest what it could be,' Will admitted. 'But why don't you speak to Bussage Hill?'

I couldn't for the life of me remember knowing anyone called Bussage Hill, or why I should speak to him. I said so.

'He was in our year at medical school,' said Will. 'He had a twin brother called Chalford who was also studying medicine. They both married nurses while they were still students. You must remember them! They weren't really part of our crowd because they both lived fairly well-ordered, sensible lives. The four of them shared a terraced house in Handsworth and the Hills were the only students in our year who always wore freshly ironed shirts.'

Suddenly it came back to me. 'Was Bussage a rotund little guy with bottle glass spectacles and a funny, high-pitched giggle? He drove something small and very sensible. A Hillman Imp I think it was.'

'That's Bussage! His brother looked almost identical but didn't have the giggle.'

'So why do I want to speak to Bussage Hill?'

'He's a neurologist at Oxford. After he qualified he did a PhD in cerebrospinal fluid dynamics and now he's doing research work into dementia. I only know all this because the other day I saw a research paper written by him in one of the medical journals. I'll get a photocopy made and post it off to you. It's pretty incomprehensible stuff to be honest but the paper has all his contact details.'

And so three days later I found myself talking to Bussage Hill.

We had never been friends at medical school. Students tend to form into small groups with similar interests and Bussage and his brother had, as Will remembered, lived very different lives to the rest of us.

The one thing I could remember about Bussage was that if he had been a bicycle he would have been one of those battered old bone shakers that the owners never bother to padlock because they know that no one in or out of their right mind would have bothered to steal it.

Imagine a bicycle with two soft tyres, no working lights, a rusty frame, handlebars slightly askew and a well-worn, lopsided saddle and you'll have a good idea what Bussage would have looked like if he had been a bicycle. He may have always worn clean and neatly ironed shirts but he nevertheless managed to look as if life had given him a good battering.

Fortunately, Bussage remembered me.

It helped that he had seen some of my articles and that he'd read a couple of my books.

'Normal pressure hydrocephalus,' said Bussage, when I'd finished detailing Mrs Ruthven's symptoms. He sounded excited. 'That's what she's got.'

'What the devil is normal pressure hydrocephalus?' I asked him.

'Oh, I'm not surprised you haven't heard of it,' he said, in that rather dismissive way common among men and women who have specialised in some esoteric branch of anything. 'A couple of guys called Raymond Adams and Hakim Dow wrote a paper in the *Journal of Neurological Science* back in 1965. It's still pretty cutting edge stuff.'

He then proceeded to explain the condition to me.

'You remember that the space between the brain and the skull is filled with cerebrospinal fluid – there to protect the brain in case of injury?'

'Yes,' I replied.

I have often found that in addition to being rather superior, super specialists have difficulty in differentiating between the stuff any medical student should know and the stuff that only specialists are likely to know. The result is that they can sometimes be unintentionally patronising.

'Normally, the cerebrospinal fluid is produced, circulates and is then reabsorbed,' continued Bussage. 'Occasionally, things go wrong and the fluid isn't reabsorbed as fast as it is produced. So then the liquid accumulates in the ventricles – the spaces within the brain – and the brain is put under pressure.'

'But why is it called 'normal pressure hydrocephalus?' I asked, puzzled.

This wasn't making much sense. If there was too much cerebrospinal fluid it would make sense for the pressure to be high – not normal.

'Ah, logically, you might expect that with there being too much fluid in a confined space there would be an increase in the fluid pressure,' agreed Bussage. 'But this doesn't happen with normal pressure hydrocephalus. The intracranial pressure remains normal and the fluid pressure squashes the brain.'

'So, where does the excess fluid go?' I asked, still puzzled.

'The ventricles dilate in order to accommodate the extra fluid. And since there is only so much space within the skull the expanding ventricles, full of fluid, damage the brain.'

I was beginning to understand. This was a very strange disease indeed. 'What are the symptoms?' I asked.

'It usually starts with a funny wobbly walk and then patients show signs of dementia. After a while they start to show signs of urinary incontinence. Has your patient got urinary incontinence?'

'No,' I replied. 'No, I'm pretty sure she hasn't.'

'That's good. Then if I'm right, and I'm sure I am, then she's still in the early stages.'

'It sounds rare. Is it?'

'That's the thing. Some of the guys doing research into this reckon that it probably affects thousands of people who have been mistakenly diagnosed as suffering from Alzheimer's.'

'Is there any treatment?'

'Ah, well that's a good question,' said Bussage. 'There isn't a cure available in this country. But there's a surgeon I know in the States who's been getting amazing results by putting in a little plastic tube which he calls a shunt. The shunt helps by draining away the excess fluid. His problem is finding patients to operate on. Because no one knows about the disease he doesn't get any referrals. And he needs patients who haven't been too badly affected. If the brain has been squashed for too long then the operation doesn't really help. Can your patient come and see me? I could do a few tests and if I think that's what she's got and she's game I could ask this guy in America to include her in his trial. I've got a fairly decent grant and I might be able to swing the price of a couple of air fares to send her and a relative over there.'

He sounded terribly excited and I agreed to get in touch with the family straight away and to get back to him that same day.

When I went back to see them, the Whiffles sounded just as excited as Bussage Hill had been, though I tried to downplay expectations as much as I reasonably could.

And within an hour I had arranged for Mr and Mrs Whiffle and Mrs Ruthvens to visit Bussage at the hospital just outside Oxford where he had privileges as a visiting consultant of neurology.

From that point on things happened very quickly.

Bussage Hill's examination and tests convinced him that Mrs Ruthvens was, indeed, suffering from normal pressure hydrocephalus and four days later, Mrs Ruthvens and her daughter flew to America where the American physician repeated Bussage's tests and doubtless added a few of his own.

Less than a week after that, Mrs Ruthvens had an operation to insert a shunt to drain away the excess cerebrospinal fluid which was accumulating and putting pressure on her brain.

I have to confess that I shared their excitement.

It isn't often that a country doctor, lost in the 'sticks' as town-dwellers call the countryside, becomes involved in the discovery and treatment of a new disease, let alone manages to play a very small part in a new advance in medical science.

Mr Whiffle telephoned me every day when he had heard from his wife and he kept me fully informed.

The news of Mrs Ruthvens's trip across the Atlantic had spread around the village like wildfire (it is quite an event in Bilbury if a villager goes as far as Exeter, a trip to London is regarded as an adventure and although a few villagers do travel widely, it is a fact that for most Bilburians anything which involves passports and an aeroplane is generally considered to be on a par with space travel) and Mr Whiffle confided that he had a dozen people to call whenever he had news from our erstwhile colony.

The dozen villagers who were called with the news direct then passed it on along a telephone chain which seemed to cover most of the village.

Almost every day, several villagers would ring Bilbury Grange to let me know how Mrs Ruthvens was getting on. Patsy, who usually answers our telephone, dealt with these calls and thanked each person for their kindness in keeping us informed. I myself kept my friend Will fully informed of the progress which was made.

I had been a keen student of medical history for some years (and had for some years harboured a desire to write a small tome on the subject myself) and I had long ago become aware that major developments in medicine occur at very infrequent intervals.

It was back in the first half of the 19th century that improvements in clean water supplies, and the provision of efficient sewage facilities, helped cut down the incidence of infectious diseases which were killing millions. Infectious diseases such as cholera had a devastating effect on infant mortality rates and it was the reduction in the incidence of such disorders which had such an impact on general mortality rates.

Then, in the second half of the same century, Joseph Lister and Louis Pasteur explained the principles of antisepsis and helped show how mortality rates in the operating theatre could be cut dramatically. Ignaz Semmelweiss showed how puerperal fever could be avoided, and his work helped make pregnancy less of a life or death lottery. William Thomas Morton and John Snow developed the first anaesthetics and Rontgen introduced X-rays. Florence Nightingale revolutionised nursing and the medical profession began, at last, to impose scientific methods upon the use of age old drugs such as aspirin, morphine and digitalis.

I was conscious that, in comparison to the century which had preceded it, the 20th century had proved disappointing.

Alexander Fleming had been alert enough to spot the importance of penicillin, and the introduction of steroids and oral contraceptives had changed the world in a number of ways.

But the big steps forward in the development of medicine as a science had undeniably been taken in the 19th century. And it seemed that all we could hope for now were incremental steps; the identification of diseases which had hitherto been unknown and the discovery of new therapies.

It seemed to me that Bussage Hill and his colleagues had, doubtless through the usual mixture of hard work and good fortune, made as vital a breakthrough as had been made in my lifetime.

And when, two weeks later, Mrs Ruthvens returned home to Bilbury, I felt proud to have seen, almost at first hand, a medical development which seemed to me akin to a miracle.

Mrs Ruthvens now walked easily and confidently. Her gait was, I suspected, every bit as distinguished and as ladylike as it had been when she'd been in her theatrical prime. And the symptoms of early dementia had disappeared completely. And so, she reported with delight, had the headaches. She was, to resort to a cliché, back to her old self.

It is, I think, a fact that when you have read a book that has touched you, and has meant something to you, then that book will be with you always; never forgotten and always influencing your life in sometimes small but memorable ways.

Similarly, when you meet a character who touches your heart or soul in some way then he or she will live forever inside you.

Mrs Ruthvens had charmed me before her illness. But that, I suspect, had, although doubtless genuine, been a superficial sort of theatrical charm. Now, however, I felt blessed to know her and to have seen her resurrected from a fate which many regard as worse than death itself: the wasting of the mind while the body still thrives.

There are many within the medical profession who rather look down their noses at family doctors in general and at country doctors in particular.

We are, they say with their often condescending manner, stuck in our old ways, dealing with coughs and colds and aches and pains and relying on hospital specialists to deal with anything more than a little out of the ordinary.

But, for an hour or so at least, I felt as if I too were at the cutting edge of medical progress.

It was not, of course, a feeling which lasted for long.

An hour after I had welcomed Mrs Ruthvens back home, I had an evening surgery to conduct.

My first patient of the surgery had scabies. My second had indigestion. And my third had ears full of hardening wax which needed softening and syringing out with the aid of nothing more sophisticated than a jug full of warm water.

But I like to think they all needed me just as much as Mrs Ruthvens had done.

Two Long Screws and a Saggy Mattress

I don't think people would be queuing up to protest if I said that I was not exceptionally skilled at doing odd jobs around the house. Nor would there be any disagreement if it were alleged that I tend to make a good deal of noise and fuss when performing simple do-it-yourself tasks.

All I can say in my own defence is that in my experience, thumbs and fingers are exceptionally sensitive and respond poorly when battered by hammers, screwdrivers or other implements. It is a known anatomical fact that all ten digits are well supplied with nerves, and it seems to me to be perfectly natural to say 'Ouch' (or more) when one or other of these sensitive parts is hit with a hammer.

Indeed, I think it's probably fair to say that when there is a small job to be done at Bilbury Grange (a task around the house which is too small for me to feel comfortable about calling in a professional) there is much holding of breath and covering of ears among those who may be within a quarter of a mile or so.

The cats disappear en masse and huddle together on the bed or in the airing cupboard, the sheep run to a far corner of their field, our pig (donated to our small menagerie by kindly American visitors who won him in a skittle competition but realised they could hardly put him on an aeroplane and take him home with them) retreats into a corner of his sty and goes to sleep, and even Ben, my old and faithful Welsh sheepdog keeps his distance. Miss Johnson shuts herself in the room where she keeps the patients' files or, if she thinks things are likely to get really bad, she climbs onto her elderly sit-up-and-beg bicycle and pedals home to her cottage until she thinks the danger period is over. If we had neighbours, they would doubtless close their doors and windows and hide under the stairs. Patsy alerts the plumber (in case I puncture a pipe), the electrician (in case I put a nail through a wire), a plasterer (to repair holes in the walls), a painter and decorator (to tidy up) and the emergency services lest I set fire to the house or remove a limb in error.

Of course, if the job is a big one then I have absolutely no qualms about calling in a professional.

If there has been a gale and we have lost a few slates from the roof then I call for Mr Yates, the roofer, a fine fellow who is half man and half monkey and who finds it so easy to climb up onto our main house roof that he rarely bothers with a ladder. He jumps up onto the water butt just outside the boiler room, uses a window sill as a launching pad to climb up onto the boiler room roof, tiptoes along a valley and, within considerably less time than it would take me to find a suitable ladder, let alone put it into place, he is leaning up against one of our rather grand chimneys surveying his private world.

If the boiler stops working (it works perfectly well throughout the summer when its reliability is of little consequence but always breaks down several times during the winter months partly, I suspect, just to show that it can and partly because it enjoys the attention), then I call on Mr Bucklebury who knows precisely where to give it a thump and which of his fine collection of wrenches to use for the operation.

I have tried thumping the boiler with a wrench but this never works for me. I have watched Mr Bucklebury carefully and have concluded that this is either because I was using the wrong sort of wrench or because I didn't know the precise part of the boiler to hit.

But I always feel rather shy about calling in an expert when it is clear that the job which needs to be done would not be much of a challenge for the average ham-fisted ten-year-old child.

Tradesmen often have advertisements and visiting cards which promise 'No job too small' but that, to be blunt, is a plain old-fashioned lie. Most of the local tradesmen who live in or around Bilbury and are patients of mine but even they will sometimes baulk if asked to come out to oil a barn door or unstick a sticking letterbox.

And, to be honest, there is always the embarrassment of calling someone to deal with a trivial problem that I know, and they know, could have been dealt with by anyone who possessed a hammer, a screwdriver and a decent complement of fingers and thumbs. I feel mortified when I have to call someone out to deal with something so trivial that any reasonably capable granny could sort it out without hesitation.

It is true that I could, of course, always phone Thumper or Patchy or any one of a dozen other friends in the village. But that seems too much like taking advantage of our friendships. They would come round and sort out whatever needed sorting out. And there would be no murmur of protest or complaint or criticism. But I'd feel guilty.

The trouble is that Bilbury Grange is an old house and, like all old houses, it is prone to developing problems. There is always something that needs doing.

I used to allow small jobs to accumulate so that when I needed to call someone in I could give them a list of problems to sort out. But the trouble with that policy is that you end up having to live with something which really needs to be dealt with sooner rather than later.

A dripping tap may seem trivial, and you may think you can wait until another tap starts to drip or a radiator starts to leak or a drain gets clogged. But a tap which drips for months on end can become surprisingly annoying and instead of simply being ignored as it drips away, the constant sound of water falling onto porcelain may become a domestic form of Chinese water torture.

A door which sticks because it has warped, and which needs a little work with a file or a plane rather than a squirt of oil, can become intensely irritating.

'I'll just wait until a window gets jammed or we need a new shelf putting up and then I'll call the carpenter,' I think to myself. And for a while this seems a sensible course of action. We get used to pulling the door to and fro or we leave it open all the time.

But then something happens and the irritation returns.

We realise that there is a draft because the door is open all the time. Or someone carrying a tray of food tries to kick the door open, fails, falls and spreads crockery and sandwiches all over a large area of carpet.

It is then that we realise that the door needs dealing with now and not in three, six or twelve months' time when we have acquired a list of small jobs which will make a visit from the carpenter worthwhile.

And so, nervously and reluctantly, I have tried to learn how to deal with a few of the simplest odd jobs myself.

I have long been the proud possessor of a bow saw and an axe (for removing small branches from trees in the garden and chopping up bits of fallen timber) but there aren't many household jobs which can be tackled with a bow saw or an axe so I recently expanded my repertoire by visiting Peter Marshall's emporium and buying a few additional tools: a hammer, a set of screwdrivers (the little ones for screwing in small screws and the big ones for taking the lids off pots of paint), a pair of pliers (which I find useful for pulling out nails when they haven't gone in quite as straight as might be preferred), a file, a chisel and half a dozen spanners which, Peter Marshall assured me, would come in very handy if I ever wanted a spanner.

He wanted to sell me a spirit level and a metal tape measure but I rejected these on the grounds that I would be happy to deal with a problem and that I didn't much care about fine tuning.

He did, however, also sell me a rather fine metal tool box which, he assured me, is an essential piece of equipment for every handyman.

The box, which has space for enough equipment to build a full scale model of the Eiffel Tower, weighs around three tons when quite empty but it does look very professional.

Peter assured me that bright orange tool boxes are very fashionable though knowing him I had, and still have, a grave suspicion that the bright orange tool boxes were obtained cheaply from a wholesaler who couldn't find enough colour blind customers.

When I dig out my orange tool kit to tackle a job around the house, Patsy and I have a well-established routine. We both know that any task, however small, requires two of us.

I retrieve the tool box from wherever it is hiding and check that the hammer, the saw or the screwdriver are all in situ (these items have, I have discovered, a strange habit of escaping from captivity and hiding themselves somewhere around the house or the garden). And I also find a pair of tough gardening gloves to help protect my fingers and thumbs. The gloves don't provide a great deal of protection but they do help stop the blood from spreading everywhere.

Patsy's role is to collect together a large bottle of antiseptic, a box of fabric sticking plasters, a packet of gauze and an assortment of crepe bandages. And, as I have already suggested, to make the precautionary telephone calls: putting various experts on stand-by.

I had found the tool box, checked the contents and was psyching myself up to tackle the latest small problem (a loose doorknob) when my concentration was disturbed by the ringing of the telephone.

'Saved by the bell!' said Patsy, who sounded genuinely relieved at the interruption. 'I'll see who it is.'

She darted off, leaving me to stare at my task for the day: a wobbly doorknob.

Of course, as I knew well, no workmen worth his salt would use the word 'doorknob' these days. He would, instead, doubtless prefer to use the phrase: 'Portal Control Mechanism and Ingress/Egress Mobility Enhancement Device'.

And he would not say it was wobbly, he would say it 'required securing and restabilising'.

The object of my attention was an old-fashioned brass knob that looked as if it had probably been originally screwed into position by the skilled workmen who had first built Bilbury Grange. Queen Victoria had doubtless been on the throne when the doorknob had been fixed into position, and Tom King and Jem Mace were doubtless contesting the English Bare Knuckle Boxing Championships.

There were no visible signs that the knob had ever been moved, amended or even fiddled with during the century that it had been in situ.

I bent down and wiggled the knob.

It was quickly clear that it had become loose because one of the two screws which should have held it in position had come loose. It was so loose that it fell on the floor when I jiggled the knob. I picked up the screw. It looked as if it had been hand carved by a skilled 19th century artisan. I wondered, idly, if they had screw making machines in those distant days or if patient workmen produced the things one at a time in an atelier in Clerkenwell or some forgotten corner of Wolverhampton.

I put the screw back into the hole from which it had fallen, picked out a suitable screwdriver, and tried to tighten it.

It just went round and round.

It seemed that the hole into which it had originally been secured had, for some bizarre reason of its own, expanded and become too spacious for the screw which had been doing a difficult and important job calmly and without fuss for a century or more.

I undid the other screw and removed it. The doorknob now came off in my hand, leaving just a spindle behind.

I was staring at the loose knob wondering how I could fasten it more securely and wondering if filling the screw hole with glue would do the trick, when Patsy returned.

'It's Ethel Fairfield,' she told me, rather wearily. 'She says she needs you to go round to see her.'

'Did she say what was wrong?'

'She wouldn't tell me,' replied Patsy. 'She just said that she wants you to visit and that what she needs can't be dealt with at the evening surgery.'

I sighed and put the doorknob down on the floor.

Mrs Fairfield is, I'm afraid, a rather difficult patient.

She genuinely enjoys poor health and enjoys it far more than anyone else I've ever known.

A very distinguished 19th century French neurologist called Jean-Martin Charcot, who was one of the world's pioneering neurologists and, as though that were not enough, also a professor of anatomical pathology, described patients who have a long list of signs, symptoms and ill-defined complaints as suffering from 'le maladie du petit papier'.

The name was well chosen since, in addition to requiring their doctor to maintain a massive medical record, most such patients bring with them a long list of their problems.

As I have explained before, it is a traditional medical practice, and a primary tenet of good diagnosis, to try to find a single disease to explain all of a patient's health problems. But it has to be said that with patients such as Mrs Fairfield this is rarely, if ever possible.

In addition to her wealth of ill-defined illnesses, Mrs Fairfield enjoys and wallows in the injustices of fate. She clutches every misery she can find to her bosom with great enthusiasm. She loves the attention and the sympathy that she gets and as a result she considers a day without disasters, disappointments and frustrations to be a wasted day. On those rare occasions when she cannot easily locate a source of anguish, she will do everything she can to find one or, preferably, two.

'The knob has come loose,' I told Patsy, quite unnecessarily. Since it was on the floor at the time this was a considerable understatement.

My wife did not seem surprised by this. Indeed, it had been Patsy who had originally drawn my attention to the problem.

'Ah,' she said, nodding wisely. 'Do you have a remedy to go with the diagnosis?'

'I do!' I said, proudly.

She could not have appeared more impressed if I had announced that I'd managed to find a way to split an atom with nothing more than a soup spoon and a nutcracker.

'One of the screws has fallen out,' I explained. 'So I thought I might try filling the hole with glue and then putting the screw back into place.'

'Ah,' said Patsy.

I felt that she did not seem as impressed by the specifics of my proposal as she had been by the generality, when the plan had been nothing more than a promise.

'Or I could move the knob round so that both the screws go into fresh wood.' I suggested. I looked at the spindle. 'I really don't think we want to fiddle around with the lock. It looks a bit complicated.'

'We definitely don't want to fiddle around with the lock,' said Patsy, quite firmly. 'That's definitely not an option.'

'We could just leave the knob off and use my plier thingies to turn the spindle if we wanted to open the door from this side,' I suggested. I tentatively tried gripping the spindle with my plier thingies. It wasn't as easy as I had thought it ought to be. 'We could keep the plier thingies on this shelf so that they were always handy.'

Patsy did not look too thrilled by this suggestion. She has, in the past, accused me of being something of a ‘bodger’ when it comes to doing chores around the house. I think this probably stems from the time when I glued a piece of glass taken from a picture frame over a large crack in a window pane in the kitchen. My claim that this would act as an area of double-glazing, and therefore preserve heat during the colder months, did not seem convincing even to me. When I start looking for quick, easy solutions to complicated problems she calls me Mr Bodger.

(This reminds me of a time when I asked Thumper for the name of a plumber who would be able to deal with a small problem in Bilbury Grange without re-plumbing the whole house. ‘I know just the fellow,’ said Thumper, scribbling a phone number down on a scrap of paper. ‘Call old Bodgett. He’ll sort you out.’ I duly rang the number and asked to speak to Mr Bodgett. Unfortunately, the man’s name was Birkenshaw. He was not amused by the nickname he had been given. Indeed, he was so not amused that he refused to come out and deal with our problem. He even rang several of his colleagues and told them not to do any work for us. Thumper thought the whole thing was hilarious.)

‘Then, when we get fed up with using the plier thingies to open the door, we could ring someone up and ask a professional to take a look.’

‘That’s a very good idea,’ said Patsy, who has never made any secret of the fact that she believes that all do-it-yourself chores around the house are best tackled by professionals.

‘But who?’ I asked. ‘Do we need to call the carpenter or the locksmith?’

Patsy looked at me and frowned. ‘I doubt if it matters terribly much,’ she said. ‘But meanwhile, you’d better get off and see what Mrs Fairfield wants.’

Mrs Fairfield lives in a neat, thatched cottage no more than a mile away from Bilbury Grange and I have visited her so often that I suspect that, if I had a little more faith, the car would take me there by itself if I just told it to take me round to Mrs Fairfield.

When my predecessor, Dr Brownlow, first started in practice, he did his rounds and visits on horseback and he once told me that his horse knew the locations of his most regular patients so well that on getting onto his horse’s back, or into the dogcart, he claimed that he simply had to say the patient’s name and then sit back and wait to be taken to his destination.

I didn’t believe this but Dr Brownlow’s former butler, who is now the practise nurse and matron of the Brownlow Country Hotel, insists that the tale was true.

Mrs Fairfield is a woman who probably regards the word ‘unfashionable’ as a compliment. Her cottage is furnished in such a way that if a Victorian of either sex were ever transported by time machine to the 1970s and, by chance, found him or herself a guest of Mrs Fairfield, he or she would feel very much at home.

Like many ladies of her age she still eschews electricity, which she regards as an untrustworthy modern invention. She says that we may consider her old-fashioned but insists that in due course, when we have all been blown up or poisoned by allowing electricity into our homes, we will wish we too had refused to allow the electricity board to fill our homes with wiring. She has a telephone, but no electrical appliances.

Her home is lit by paraffin lamps and heated by a coal fire in the drawing room. She cooks on a huge four oven coal fired AGA which dominates her kitchen. After a couple of glasses of sherry she once told me that she regarded electricity as being nothing more than the work of the devil. This may sound strange to those who live in towns and cities but it is not an uncommon view in North Devon.

When I first told my medical friend Will that many of the patients I look after live in homes without electricity he, like our other friends who live in towns and cities where street lighting is commonplace, was astonished. ‘But this is the 1970s!’ he said. ‘I didn’t think anyone lived in a house without electricity!’

One day, when he and his family were having a short holiday in Bilbury, I took him round to see Mrs Fairfield.

He was, he admitted, utterly enchanted by seeing a cottage lit by lamps and heated by an open fire and he later admitted that he thought it would be dangerous if he ever practised in my part of the world.

‘To my astonishment, I sympathise with your eccentric patients,’ he confessed. ‘I rather envy their old-fashioned lifestyle and I fear I could quite easily adopt some of their suspicions and fears – particularly the one regarding electricity.’

He said he could cope very well without television or telephone answering machines and I do not think he was joking.

I noted, however, that he did not tell his wife of his secret affection for a 19th century lifestyle. I think he knew that she would not be keen to give up modern appliances such as the washing machine and vacuum cleaner.

‘Ah, do come in doctor,’ said Mrs Fairfield when she opened the door of her cottage. She was wearing a pink gingham frock with lots of stiff petticoats and had her hair in side bunches. She looked as if she had been dressed by the costume designer for a local dramatic society trying to find a ‘look’ for a 1950s teenage girl. Mrs Fairfield hadn’t been a teenager since the 1930s.

I know she saw me arrive because I can always see her peering out through the net curtains but she never opens the door until I use the big, solid, iron knocker (which is made out of a shire horse's shoe). I think this is partly because she doesn't want me to know that she has been spying through the net curtains and partly because she thinks it rather improper to open the door until a caller has knocked upon it.

She led me into her drawing room and invited me to sit down. 'Would you like a glass of sherry?' she asked.

I politely declined, explaining that I was driving and that the authorities were now taking a dim view of drivers who drank alcohol.

'Oh, that's so silly,' she said. 'My father wouldn't drive his car unless he had drunk at least half a bottle of port. He said the car did 15 miles to the gallon and he did the same to the half a bottle of port.' She always told me this and I suspect that she was being honest. What she didn't mention was that as a result of his affection for port, her father suffered terribly from gout and spent the last decade of his life in an old-fashioned bath-chair, unable to walk more than a couple of yards because of badly swollen big toes. I remember him well. He had a very old set of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which he claimed to have read from Aard-vark to zymurgy and, as a result, he liked to think of himself as something of an intellectual. When I first met him he described himself as a 'suppository of wisdom'.

Ignoring my refusal, which she seemed to regard as of no consequence and nothing more than a sign of a good upbringing, Mrs Fairfield poured me a large dose of sherry, using a schooner glass that would have been more appropriate for beer than for wine of any description. In Britain, a schooner is a large sherry glass but at some point in her life Mrs Fairfield had been given a set of half a dozen Australian schooners, designed for beer, and she had confused the British measure with the Australian one. When she wasn't looking, I would always pour my half pint or so of sherry into a large earthenware pot which contained an aspidistra plant. The aspidistra clearly loved sherry for it was the healthiest plant in the village. If you sat within a yard of it you could smell alcohol. I think that Mrs Fairfield probably thought that all aspidistra plants smelt of sherry. This ritual followed the same pattern every time I visited.

'What can I do for you?' I asked her.

'I need you to turn my mattress,' said Mrs Fairfield. 'I bought a new mattress three months ago and the man who delivered it said that I should have it turned every three months.'

I looked at her, not quite sure what to say.

I have, in my life, been asked to do many strange things. I've helped a patient build a lawnmower (my contribution consisted mostly of holding nuts and bolts and cursing myself when I dropped them in the long grass). I have cut a budgerigar's claws. I have driven a patient to the railway station. I have helped to extricate a cat trapped behind an oil tank. And I have liberated a mouse from inside a radiator. But I had never before turned a mattress.

'It's gone a little saggy on one side,' said Mrs Fairfield, when she had led me upstairs, peeled back the bedclothes and moved a surprisingly skimpy satin nightdress from the pillow.

What she said was absolutely true.

One side of the bed looked as though it had long been the nocturnal resting place for one of the larger mammals, a hippopotamus or a rhinoceros for example.

'Couldn't you simply sleep on the other side of the bed for a while?'

'Oh no, certainly not,' said Mrs Fairfield, quite shocked. 'That was always my husband's side of the bed. I have always slept on the left side of the bed.'

Mrs Fairfield has been a widow for several years. Her husband died of a heart attack while still quite young. He was fond of food, a gourmand rather than a gourmet, and after his untimely demise, he had to be moved out of the house through an upstairs window because his corpse proved to be far too large to manoeuvre up and down the narrow staircase. Heaven knows how he had managed to get himself up and down the stairs when he had been alive.

Patsy's father loaned and manipulated a tractor with a forklift attachment and while Mrs Fairfield was distracted and comforted at a neighbour's house, her erstwhile spouse was pushed and shoved onto a pallet placed upon the two forks, lowered out of the bedroom window and transferred to the back of one of Mr Kennet's trailers.

The problems didn't end there.

Poor Mr Fairfield was too big to fit inside the undertaker's hearse.

The undertaker had covered him with a tarpaulin and the late Mr Fairfield had been transferred to his premises on Mr Kennet's tractor. At the workshop behind the funeral home, a suitably extensive coffin had been built around him.

I don't think we have more than our fair share of deaths in Bilbury but we certainly have more than our fair share of trouble with bodies and coffins. There was, I remember, one incident when a coffin ended up being washed down a river during a storm.

'Have you thought about investing in a new mattress?' I asked her.

‘This is a new mattress!’ said Mrs Fairfield. ‘I bought it last year. Peter Marshall ordered it in especially for me. It was made by a company which makes mattresses for royalty.’ She pulled back the sheet and proudly showed me a label which contained the crest of a European monarch I did not know existed. ‘It came in a very large lorry,’ she announced, as if this gave the mattress extra kudos. ‘A pantechnicon I think they call them. The lorry was so big that the driver got stuck and the road past the Duck and Puddle was blocked for several hours.’

I remembered the incident well. Thumper, Patchy and I had been having lunch when the vehicle had got stuck. The driver, exhausted and bad tempered by his attempts to persuade his vehicle to go round a corner designed for dog carts and pony traps, had come into the pub for a break. As a result of the vehicle being stuck Thumper, Patchy and I had been trapped and stranded and had had to remain in the bar far longer than we had intended.

After some lubrication, the driver had succeeded in extricating his vehicle. He had then parked it in a ditch and gone to sleep.

It was two days later when the now sober but also embarrassed driver had finally left the village, aided by two breakdown trucks and Mr Kennet’s second best tractor.

I lifted one corner of the mattress. It seemed very heavy. In my experience, mattresses are always heavier and more cumbersome than you think they ought to be.

‘I’m not really sure that moving mattresses around is part of my job as your GP,’ I said hesitantly.

Mrs Fairfield stared at me, as though I’d made an indecent remark or an improper suggestion.

‘Good heavens, doctor!’ she said. ‘I am surprised at you. I always thought of you as a friend.’ She paused. ‘Besides,’ she continued, ‘I have a bad back. If the mattress isn’t just right then my back will give me a lot of trouble. I thought you doctors were very keen on preventative medicine. Isn’t it supposed to be the ‘in-thing’ these days?’

I know when I’m defeated; outflanked, out manoeuvred and out gunned.

I bent down and removed the sheets from the bed. The mattress was equipped with two handles on each side. I took hold of the two handles nearest to me and lifted. Just raising the mattress a foot off the base took an enormous effort. I let go and the mattress thumped back onto the base.

‘You’ll have to do better than that!’ said Mrs Fairfield. ‘It’s only a mattress!’

‘It’s a very big mattress,’ I pointed out.

‘It’s called a king size,’ said Mrs Fairfield proudly, ‘though Mr Marshall said that may be because of the endorsement.’ She pointed to the label with the royal crest.

‘I think ‘king size’ is just one of the sizes they make,’ I said, though you could write what I know about mattresses on a crumbly aspirin tablet.

I made another attempt to lift the mattress. This time I managed to lift the mattress several feet into the air. I dragged it towards me and then raised it to a vertical position. It was very heavy. I have not done a great deal of mattress turning in my life, it has never been a speciality of mine, but I remembered, at that moment, that it is terribly easy, while wrestling with a mattress, to become confused and to forget which way the mattress was lying when you started out. It is perfectly possible to move a mattress about on a bed and get so confused that you end up with it back in exactly the same place it was when the whole business started.

‘You need to turn it round and over,’ said Mrs Fairfield. ‘You must make sure that the bottom is at the top and the top is at the bottom and the left is on the right and the…’

‘…and the right is on the left,’ I finished.

‘And be careful of the bedside tables,’ said Mrs Fairfield. ‘I don’t want them damaging.’

‘Of course,’ I said.

‘And the light shade. It’s very close to the top of the mattress, the way you’ve got it at the moment.’

I closed my eyes and tried to summon up my energy for the next part of the procedure. I remembered her late husband, Mr Fairfield, was a smoker and was known to have bitten through the stems of seven or eight pipes. When questioned about this, Mrs Fairfield always insisted that he bit through his pipe stems because he had a bad temper and used to get very angry. But I never believed her. Mr Fairfield himself told me that he used to bite his pipe whenever his wife annoyed him with one of her silly sayings or opinions. If that had truly been the case then I’m surprised that he only bit through seven or eight pipes.

‘I long ago learned not to argue with her,’ he told me in a rare moment of candour. ‘I usually just keep quiet. I only ever bite through my pipe when I feel an almost overwhelming desire to strangle her.’

Mrs Fairfield said that Mr Fairfield died of an excess of prejudices and too much impatience but I always suspected that in truth her husband died of too much tolerance and a great desire to avoid confrontation. It was suppressing his feelings that did the damage. If he’d shouted occasionally, or thrown some crockery from time to time, he might have lived a little longer.

Of course, weighing slightly north of 30 stone didn’t help much.

I always remembered him with great understanding and some fondness.

I remember that he had on several occasions tried to lose weight. He had once gone to a hotel for a month. 'The food there is terrible,' he told me, 'I thought that if I went somewhere with rotten food I'd be bound to lose some weight.'

But it hadn't worked.

He had come back weighing half a stone more than he'd weighed when he'd left home. It turned out that he had persuaded the hotel chef to serve him a cooked breakfast three times a day. Huge piles of sausages, bacon, fried eggs, grilled tomatoes, baked beans and fried bread had done the damage.

I had pretended to be cross with him but what can you do with someone who thinks up such a sure fire plan for losing weight and then thinks up a sure fire plan for getting round it?

Inch by inch I pulled the mattress across the bed towards me. I wondered why they hadn't included 'mattress turning' in the medical school curriculum. It was becoming clear my medical education had been sadly lacking in a number of areas.

'I see that Mrs Oswald is having trouble with her knees again,' said Mrs Fairfield. 'She has a lot of trouble with them. I've told her that you won't be able to help her and she should go and see my osteopath in Taunton.'

'That's very kind of you,' I said, through gritted teeth. I fervently wished I had a pipe to bite through. The mattress, standing upright, was now balanced almost on the edge of the bed.

'Professor Entwhistle, that's my osteopath, has a wonderful manner,' said Mrs Fairfield. 'And he's a very talented man. He has many diplomas in frames on his consulting room wall. He's cured many patients.'

'Hmph,' I said, still clutching the mattress. I was beginning to perspire and wished I'd taken off my jacket. Actually, I was beginning to wish I'd had the telephone disconnected. Or maybe I should have taken that job as a ship's doctor that I'd seen advertised in the *British Medical Journal*. Patsy could have come with me and we could have sailed around the world. I was pretty sure that no ship's doctor would be expected to turn a mattress.

'He's been so successful that you people are always trying to shut him down,' said Mrs Fairfield. 'It's just jealousy, of course. I really think you should leave him alone.'

'I haven't done anything to him,' I gasped. 'I don't even know the fellow.'

'You people are always saying bad things about him,' said Mrs Fairfield. 'You doctors and the police.'

'The police?'

'That business with the young girl was wildly exaggerated,' said Mrs Fairfield. 'Professor Entwhistle told me the truth about that. And the pills from Mexico are perfectly legal in Mexico so I can't see why he should get into so much trouble for prescribing them over here.'

I muttered something and tried to scratch my nose which was itching.

'I hear that Frank is dying,' she said. 'It's just a matter of time now. Poor Gilly.'

'Frank Parsons? At the Duck and Puddle?'

'Yes.'

'Where on earth did you hear that?' I demanded, rather crossly. 'He's doing very well.'

'Oh,' said Mrs Fairfield. She actually sounded disappointed.

'Don't just let it flop down,' said Mrs Fairfield. 'You'll make a lot of dust if you do. My cleaner came in to clean yesterday and she did this room from top to bottom.'

It suddenly occurred to me to wonder why, since Mr Fairfield had been dead for quite a while, the fairly new mattress had acquired such a huge dip in one side. Mrs Fairfield looked to weigh no more than a hungry sparrow. Who had been sleeping on that side of the bed? Why wasn't he moving the damned mattress? It was his fault it had a dip in it.

I tried to lower the mattress steadily but suddenly found that as the mattress fell, it was taking me with it. The mattress landed back on the base with a crash, with me lying on top of it. Any remaining dignity I had brought with me when I had arrived had now evaporated.

'Where's Fluffy?' demanded Mrs Fairfield suddenly.

'Fluffy?' I asked.

'My Pekinese,' explained Mrs Fairfield, her voice raising towards the sort of level associated with hysteria. 'Have you crushed him? You have, haven't you? You've killed Fluffy!'

I scrambled off the mattress as quickly as I could, lifted it a little and peered underneath. To my intense relief there were no crushed dogs to be seen. I looked for Mrs Fairfield to give her the good news but she had disappeared. I wondered idly if crushing a dog while moving a mattress was an offence for which I could have been struck off the medical register. I thought that, on balance, I would probably get away with it since it would have been a first offence.

I was now beginning to lose the plot.

I was pretty certain that I had succeeded in turning the mattress so that the top was now the bottom and the bottom now the top. I looked for the label with the royal crest. It was nowhere to be seen. I was therefore satisfied that part one of the operation had been completed successfully. All I had to do now was turn the mattress so that the part which had been next to the headboard was at the other end of the base. If I could manage that then I was pretty certain that the bottom end of the bed would end up at the headboard end.

I regretted, for the first time that I could remember, that I hadn't done much mattress turning in my life. It is not a subject in which I have ever shown any real interest or for which I have ever felt any enthusiasm.

I pulled at the mattress and with considerable difficulty, succeeded in moving it around the bed. On reflection, I suppose that the collision with one of the bedside tables was inevitable. The mattress was large and heavy and the bedside tables were relatively light and well stocked with delicate, fragile objets d'art.

Fortunately, the crash was not a particularly noisy one since the falling object landed onto a thick pile carpet. I put the two largest pieces of the broken model lighthouse under the bed. It was cream, a hideous piece of 1950s kitsch, and had the words 'A Present from Cornwall' inscribed around the base. I hoped that its very hideousness did not make it unique and irreplaceable.

'He was hiding underneath the sofa,' said Mrs Fairfield, returning with a smug looking Pekinese.

'That's a relief,' I said. No one wants to squash a dog while turning a mattress. I kicked another piece of the broken lighthouse under the bed.

Mrs Fairfield ignored me but the dog barked.

'Did the nasty man frighten you?' she asked the dog. It somehow managed to look smugger than ever.

'I think that's it,' I said, standing up and feeling my back. I was soaked with sweat and ached in every muscle. 'Do you need anything else doing while I'm here? Lawn mowing? Roof rethatching? A bit of ironing, perhaps? Maybe I could clean the windows or service the washing machine.'

I didn't say any of the last bit, of course. Perhaps I should have done. Would Dr Brownlow have moved the damned mattress? I'm pretty sure he wouldn't. Actually, Mrs Fairfield wouldn't have dared ask him. It occurred to me that I needed to acquire a little more gravitas. But how did one do that? I had been in the village for a while now. I had a wife, a family, a pig and lots of friends. What else did I need? I decided that perhaps I ought to start wearing a waistcoat and sporting a pince nez.

'There was a telephone call for you,' said Mrs Fairfield.

I thought she might have said thank you. But she didn't. She wasn't the sort of person who ever said 'thank you'.

'For me?'

'Your wife called.'

'Why didn't you tell me?' I asked. 'It might be urgent.'

'You were turning the mattress,' said Mrs Fairfield. 'I told your wife you couldn't come to the telephone.'

'Do you mind if I call her back?' I asked, biting my tongue and trying not to show how cross I was.

Mrs Fairfield pursed her lips. 'Since it's just a local call I suppose it will be all right.'

I rang Bilbury Grange from Mrs Fairfield's telephone. Like most people in Bilbury she has just one extension, and a telephone which sat in her hallway, on a little table with a chair next to it. Only the wealthiest have a second telephone in their bedroom. (Patsy and I do not class as wealthy by any means but we have a telephone in our bedroom for obvious, practical reasons.)

'What on earth is going on?' asked Patsy stifling a giggle. 'Mrs Fairfield said you were busy in her bedroom.'

'I'll tell you when I see you.'

'What on earth were doing in her bedroom when she clearly wasn't in her bedroom?' asked Patsy, clearly puzzled.

'It's a bit complicated,' I said. To be honest I didn't want to admit that I'd been turning Mrs Fairfield's mattress. It didn't really sound very professional. I wasn't even sure how I'd got tricked into doing it in the first place.

'Mrs Fresnel rang,' said Patsy. 'She wondered if you'd pop in. I thought you could go there on your way back.'

'I'm leaving now,' I said. 'I should be home soon. Then I'll have a cup of tea, change my shirt and then finish that doorknob.'

'Change your shirt?'

'I got a little sweaty.'

'In Mrs Fairfield's bedroom?'

'Exactly.'

There was a silence. 'I look forward to hearing about it when you get back,' said Patsy, suppressing another giggle.

We said goodbye and I put down the receiver.

As I got to the front door it opened and a huge figure appeared in the doorway. The figure was Bill Blake, one of

Mr Kennet's labourers. Bill is about six foot six inches tall and built like a stone statue of Goliath and just as no one ever calls Mrs Fairfield 'Ethel' so no one ever addresses 'Bill' by his surname. He is vast and can never find clothes to fit him. Thumper once said that the only suit that has ever fitted him properly was the one he was born in. A couple of years ago, I had to examine Bill for a medical and found to our mutual embarrassment that I could not weigh him because my surgery scales only measure up to 20 stone. He must weigh at least three times as much as Mrs Fairfield. He is a pleasant fellow but a genuinely clumsy man who always looks as though he got dressed in the dark. Buttons are always in the wrong holes and socks never match. He smelt, as he always does, of a cheap aftershave but underneath that there was a strong, lingering smell of silage and manure. I suspect that Bill always smelt of silage and manure in the same way that trawler-men always smell of a mixture of diesel oil and fish.

'Hello, doctor!' he said. 'What are you doing here?'

He seemed a little embarrassed.

I couldn't think why and then I suddenly remembered that he had been to the surgery a couple of weeks earlier.

He had ostensibly turned up to ask for something for a slightly sore back. This had surprised me because Bill is a tough fellow who, like most farm labourers, won't ask for medical advice unless a limb is actually hanging off.

On his way out of the surgery, with his hand actually on the doorknob, he had turned to ask if I could put his mind at rest about something relating to his sex life. This had clearly been the main reason for his visiting the surgery.

'The lady I'm with has quite unusual demands,' he told me, blushing bright red. I'd asked him to sit down again and he'd confessed that although the new lady in his life (he had named no names) had expressed no dissatisfaction with the size of equipment on offer, or the quality of the performance provided, she had rather startled him by her activities in the bedroom and one or two of the requests had caused him some concern.

It was clear from what he said that she knew a few tricks which he had never come across before. He had been delighted and relieved when I had assured him that the activities in question were commonplace and that the positions he was being required to favour were by no means exceptional.

'The doctor came to turn the mattress,' said Mrs Fairfield. I was, I confess, delighted to see that it was now her turn to go bright red.

Bill's appearance had clearly been slightly unexpected.

I realised now why half of Mrs Fairfield's mattress had a dip in it. To say that Bill is huge is like saying that the Sahara desert is sandy.

Mrs Fairfield and Bill Blake seemed an unlikely couple. I couldn't help smiling to myself. It seemed that Mrs Fairfield had a penchant for large men.

'Hello Bill,' I said. 'I've not seen you for ages. How are you?'

He looked greatly relieved at my tactful and anodyne remark. We exchanged greetings as though we had not seen each other for some considerable time. Tact, trust and discretion are vital parts of a GP's daily armoury. It saddens me to know that many people want to chip away at doctor-patient confidentiality. Politicians, policemen and even some senior members of the medical establishment believe that doctors should spill the beans on their patients' activities whenever required to do so. I suspect that they will eventually get their way. Meanwhile, I'm glad that I'm practising in the 1970s. I hope that my medical career will be over by the time it becomes illegal for doctors to regard patient confidentiality as sacrosanct.

'You should have said about the mattress,' said Bill to Mrs Fairfield. 'I could have done that for you. No need to have bothered the doctor.'

'I didn't like to ask you, dear,' said Mrs Fairfield. 'It's not the sort of job for a man like you.'

I thought it was actually very much the sort of job for a man like Bill. He could probably pick up a mattress with one hand, twirl it over his head, turn it over and throw it back onto the bed while holding a cup of tea in his other hand.

Without another word, Bill strode into the house, squeezed past us both and marched up the stairs. 'I'll do the mattress,' he said.

Slightly startled, Mrs Fairfield watched him go upstairs but did not say anything.

'It's OK, I've done it,' I called after him. But Bill didn't hear me. He's always been slightly deaf. He drives a very noisy tractor and it has, over the years, affected his hearing. One day, someone in authority is going to have to suggest that men who drive tractors and other noisy machinery need to wear ear defenders.

'We met at a Church picnic last summer,' said Mrs Fairfield, though I had not asked for any explanation. 'He saved me from a creepy crawly.'

There was the sound of strenuous activity in the bedroom.

'Ah,' I said.

'It was sitting on a piece of Mrs Butterworth's apricot flan.'

A moment or two later Bill appeared at the top of the stairs. 'I've done it!' he called down. 'I've turned it upside down and top to bottom.'

'Thank you, dear,' said Mrs Fairfield.

Bill had, I realised, put the mattress back where it had been before I'd started. I don't think Mrs Fairfield realised quite what had happened.

I said goodbye to Mrs Fairfield, shouted goodbye to Bill and left. I didn't like to say anything about the mattress.

The visit to Mrs Fairfield had taken well over an hour but the call on Mrs Fresnel took only three or four minutes. She wanted another prescription for a bottle of the tonic I give her. The bottle contains absolutely nothing with pharmacological qualities but it is green, tastes rather bitter and is in Mrs Fresnel's view the most important development in pharmacology since Fleming discovered penicillin.

Since she is the patient and the 'Mixture' which I prescribe and dispense keeps her well and happy, I will not hear a word said against it.

As I approached Bilbury Grange, I remembered the darned doorknob. I wasn't looking forward to trying to fix it.

'I've got some crumpets,' said Patsy when I had taken off my shoes. 'If I toast a few how many could you eat?'

'Dripping with butter?'

'Of course.'

'Three?' I suggested. 'Would three be greedy?'

'Not at all,' replied Patsy.

'I'll have three, then.'

And then I remembered the doorknob.

'I suppose I'd better do the doorknob first,' I said, feeling sorry for myself. My day seemed to be made up of doorknobs and mattresses.

'Oh, that's done,' said Patsy dismissively.

'Done? Who did it?'

'I did it,' said Patsy with a modest grin.

'How…?'

'I just used longer screws,' she replied. 'I'll put the crumpets under the grill.'

The toaster may do both sides at once but crumpets never taste the same as when they have been toasted under the grill. Besides, our toaster seems to have been designed by a former aerospace engineer. When it has finished toasting it throws the toast upwards with the velocity of a V2 rocket. Unless I stand near enough to catch the toasted bread as it flies out it usually ends up on the floor.

'No, not the grill,' I said. 'I'll do them on the fire. That was brilliant! Mending the door like that.'

'I know.'

I went and checked the door. The knob worked perfectly and seemed as solid as a doorknob should be.

'You're marvellous!' I said to her.

'I couldn't have done it with you,' she said with a mischievous smile.

I'd have chased her round the kitchen if I hadn't been so exhausted.

'Next time I'll stick to holding the sticking plasters and the antiseptic,' I suggested.

'I think that would be a good idea,' said Patsy brightly. 'It's what you do best.

I took a plateful of crumpets into the living room and skewered one on the end of our extendable brass toasting fork.

Crumpets may taste better when toasted on the grill then they do when browned in the toaster but they taste better still when prepared on an open fire. And for that you need a long handled, preferably extendable, toasting fork. Anything, crumpets, pikelets or bread, smells and tastes so much better when prepared on a real fire. It's true that some bits get burnt, and it's true that you're likely to burn a finger or two as well. But none of that matters for crumpets, toasted on a real, log fire, are every bit as much a part of England as are costermongers and knife grinders, curds and whey, pecks and bushels and Toby jugs and singing glasses.

Patsy came carrying a wooden tray upon which she had placed a teapot, a tea strainer, a milk jug, a sugar bowl, two cups and two saucers, two plates, two knives and a butter dish.

'What sort of tea have you made?' I asked.

'Lapsang souchong,' replied Patsy.

Bliss. A heavenly repast: slightly burnt crumpets, generously buttered, and a cup of lapsang souchong – the only tea which smells of bonfire. Ambrosia never tasted half as good and the Greek Gods never knew such glories.

'Now are you going to tell me how you got sweaty in Mrs Fairfield's bedroom?' asked Patsy, putting the tray on a small table and settling herself in one of a pair of old and comfortable easy chairs beside the fireplace. A cat immediately jumped up onto her lap.

'I think I can do that,' I said. 'I don't think the principles of medical confidentiality are relevant in this particular case.' We both take patient confidentiality very seriously. Some doctors will talk to their family and friends about their patients. I have never felt comfortable doing that. Both Patsy and I feel easier if I regard the sanctity of the consulting room as inviolable. Besides, it is easier for Patsy if she can talk to villagers without knowing things she isn't supposed to know.

'Oh good,' said Patsy. 'That will save me the effort of attacking you with a red hot toasting fork.'

It's a long and complicated story,' I said, changing the toasting fork from my right hand to my left because my fingers were beginning to get rather hot.

'Splendid,' said Patsy, with a sigh of contentment. 'I like long and complicated stories.'

'You may, or may not, know but Mrs Fairfield has a large and saggy mattress…' I began.

And for some inexplicable reason Patsy started to laugh.

I looked at her sternly. 'You may well laugh,' I admonished her. 'But Mrs Fairfield didn't find her saggy mattress in the slightest bit amusing.' I checked on the crumpet I was toasting. It needed another minute. 'The basic problem was that the mattress was only half saggy…

A Trip to the Farrier

I got up one morning and discovered that both constituent halves of my favourite pair of brown brogue shoes were coming apart. The sole on one shoe flapped as I walked, making me look rather like a circus clown, and the sole on the other was, when I took a close look, also clinging onto the upper part of the shoe without much hope of staying in close contact for very much longer. This had clearly happened overnight.

‘You need to get that mended,’ said Patsy, when she saw me flapping my way along the hall, heading for the front door, the car and my morning visits. ‘Haven’t you got another pair you could wear today?’

I do not own a large collection of shoes.

I have a brown pair and a black pair. That woman from the Philippines, the one with the impressive footwear collection, would not find my morning shoe choice satisfactory. I tend to find a pair of shoes which I like, and which are comfortable, and then to wear them until they fall apart. ‘My black shoes have a hole in the sole,’ I said. ‘They’re in an even worse state than these.’

‘Haven’t you got anything else you could wear?’

‘The choice is between a pair of Wellington boots or a pair of rather down at heel slippers,’ I told her. ‘I’ll have to wear these until I can get into Barnstaple and go to the cobbler’s.’

This was not a thought which filled me with delight. I couldn’t for the life of me remember the location of a shoe repairer in Barnstaple.

But I did remember my last attempt to find one.

‘Go down past the old church,’ said an old man whom I asked for directions. ‘It’s either St John’s or St Marks; one or the other. Then cross the road by the Post Office, well what used to be the Post Office, I think it’s a pet shop now. Take the first right after the laundry, though I think it might have been turned into a Chinese takeaway, and go down a little alley which leads to the Bowchester warehouse which was converted into a nightclub two or three years ago. Anyway, go down the alley unless it’s blocked with garbage bins which it sometimes is, and when you get to the end you’ll see the traffic lights. There’s a baker’s on the corner. It’s a video shop now, I think. Go straight across, but a bit to your right, and you’ll see Cross Street or Croft Street, one of the two, and when you get to the end you’ll see where the old bus station was. Go right where the old bus station used to be and walk along the bank of the estuary and look for a right hand turn that has a pub on the left hand side, the Duke’s Head or the Swan’s Nest I think it is. Then take the third or fourth turning on the left and look for a narrow road that needs repairing. There used to be an optician somewhere down there but it closed. I don’t think anyone could ever find it. Go about a hundred and fifty yards up that road and there are three shops in a row. I think one of those is the cobbler’s. No, I tell a lie. I think they closed that down too. I think they knocked down all three shops and built some flats.’

Is it only me who meets people like that?

Is it any wonder that I am always reluctant to stop and ask for directions?

Suddenly, I realised that Patsy had said something.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, ‘I was day dreaming. What did you say?’

‘Go and see Albert Ross,’ said Patsy. ‘He’ll repair them for you.’

I looked at her, puzzled. ‘But Albert is a farrier,’ I said. ‘He puts shoes on horses and makes iron gates as a side line.’

‘He’ll mend your shoes,’ insisted Patsy. ‘He’s been mending my Dad’s shoes for years.’

‘I’d feel embarrassed, asking a farrier to mend my shoes,’ I said.

‘Don’t be silly!’ laughed Patsy. ‘He mends a lot of shoes. He won’t mind. And he’ll only charge you a pound a pair. Take the black ones with you.’ She opened the hall cupboard where we keep boots and shoes and rummaged around among tennis rackets, umbrellas, walking sticks, miscellaneous old boxes, bits and pieces that looked as if they probably fitted a vacuum cleaner we have never owned and a variety of shopping bags. As she buried deeper into the cupboard I could not help noticing that none of the things in the cupboard is ever used.

‘Why do we keep all that junk?’ I asked her.

‘You never know,’ Patsy replied, from deep inside the cupboard. ‘If we throw anything away then tomorrow we’ll find that we need it.’

I knew she was right.

Suddenly Patsy emerged from the dark of the cupboard holding first one and then the other black shoe aloft in mock triumph.

‘We must get someone in to fit a light in that cupboard,’ she said.

‘If I had the skill and the tools I could probably do it myself.’

She looked at me.

‘Sorry. I’ll ask the electrician to put a light in.’

We both knew that I wouldn’t and that the cupboard would remain darkened. There are a dozen jobs around the house which need doing but somehow I always manage to put off doing anything about them. I mean to get things mended, repaired or improved but there are always other things which need doing. Finding a tradesman able to turn up on the approximate date and do the work he’s been invited to do, seems to become more difficult by the year. There are, however, some tasks I can manage by myself. Sitting in the garden, for example, seems to take up an increasing amount of my time in the summer months. That is something I can cope with perfectly well by myself.

‘Do you know where Albert lives?’ asked Patsy.

‘Turn left a quarter of mile after Softly’s Bottom, then take the lane on the right and the second track on the left,’ I said. ‘There’s a dead elm just on the corner and two huge ruts running all the way along the track.’ I was proud of my knowledge of the geography of Bilbury and the surrounding district and sometimes I liked to show off a little. Patsy had lived in the village all her life but even she admitted that I knew my way around Bilbury even better than she did. ‘I’ll call in to see him when I’ve done the morning calls.’

‘And don’t forget to take these with you,’ she said, handing me the pair of black shoes that needed repairing. I took the shoes, flapped my way along the hall, still in the style of a circus clown with size 18 boots, climbed into the Rolls and drove off to do the morning visits.

As luck would have it, I left the Bilbury Grange driveway just as a tourist was driving past. I know most of the local vehicles and I always dread being caught behind a car being driven by a tourist driving along our narrow, one car width, country lanes. Most occasional visitors find it difficult to get used to driving along narrow lanes which have grass growing through the tarmacadam in the middle of them and brambles hanging over the road at the sides. As a result, they tend to drive at the sort of speed favoured by the men who drive undertakers’ hearses for a living. Thumper once pointed out that he regards people who drive slower than him as idiots and people who drive faster than he does as lunatics. I can see the sense in that.

Still, I eventually got where I was heading.

And, just as importantly, I managed to do so without allowing my blood pressure to rise to dangerous levels. I did this by singing an aria from the Barber of Seville. I didn’t know many of the words and I wasn’t terribly sure of the tune but since I can’t sing and am pretty well tone-deaf none of that mattered terribly much. I entertained myself, aired my lungs and kept my stress levels down to acceptable levels.

(If I want music in the Rolls, I have to provide it myself. In the days when our Rolls was manufactured, in-car entertainment was confined to counting the pimples on the back of the chauffeur’s neck.)

My first call was to Mrs Lily Colefax, a rather bad-tempered widow of indeterminate years, who lives in a semi-detached cottage on the road leading to Ilfracombe.

It is, I think, quite fair to say that her husband Cyril had been something of a rogue. Technically, and as far as the boys and girls at the Inland Revenue were concerned, he earned his living as a bookie’s runner. But the money he was paid for that particular obligation barely covered his costs of attending the seventy or eighty horse race meetings which he graced with his presence each year. His real income, not declared to the Inland Revenue for obvious reasons, was derived from lifting wallets, purses and watches. He was, in short, a professional pick pocket; a dip, a wallet lifter, a cutpurse.

Mr Colefax was extraordinarily keen on knitting and in the pursuit of this unusual hobby, he used to make seemingly endless supplies of scarves, woolly hats and jumpers. The vast majority of these invariably colourful and always well-made items were given to charity.

He once explained to me that he liked to knit in order to keep his fingers supple for his ‘day job’.

Mr Colefax died of a massive heart attack while at the races in Exeter. That was about five years ago. The police took quite a while to identify him because they found seven wallets in his jacket and weren’t sure whether he was Mr Pilkington of Plymouth, the Reverend Wilkins of Taunton, Mr Napton of Torrington, Mr Kennedy of Exmouth or Mr Jackson of Torquay. They were pretty sure that he wasn’t Adebowale Akachi from the Serengeti or Mrs Pauline Twomely of Honiton.

Mrs Colefax is not clinically depressed but she is always miserable and if it is possible to find a pessimistic viewpoint to clasp to her bosom, she will assuredly find it and clutch it to her as tightly and as jealously as a little girl with a favourite doll or a dog with a much-loved bone.

Ever since I have known her, she has spent all her days looking backwards. However, instead of looking backwards and enjoying happy memories, she looks backwards and spends her days regretting all the bad things that have happened to her, the misfortunes which have troubled her, the rancour she has encountered, the mistakes other people have made (she has made very few, if any, of her own, of course), the disappointments she has endured and the frustrations she has faced.

I have always thought it something of a tactical error to spend your whole life looking backwards, over your shoulder. All you end up with is a sore neck. And, of course, you will never see the tree you bump into.

Mrs Colefax has, I suspect, always been a true pessimist; someone who has from childhood regarded life as a game which she was always destined to lose, and lose badly. There must have been occasional glimpses of hope, success, comfort and peace but these glimpses have to her always proved to be as illusory as heat haze mirages in the desert.

She spends a lot of time in bed, not because she needs to but because it enables her to gain the maximum amount of sympathy from relatives and neighbours (I think it would be stretching a point to include 'friends' in that list for I doubt if she has any) and because she is constantly rehearsing her dying moments and, indeed, her final words. She always speaks slowly and distinctly and once admitted to me that she did this so that if she died immediately, the witness would be able to tell the world what her final words had been. I have never been quite clear as to the purpose of this determination for I never heard her say anything which anyone could possibly regard as worthy of remembering and it doesn't seem likely that her last utterance would find its way into one of those strange little books of deathbed wisdom which appear on the bookshop shelves from time to time.

The one fun thing about her is that she fills her hot water bottle with whisky so that she can take generous nips throughout the day without anyone being any the wiser.

'Doesn't it make the whisky taste rubbery?' I asked her once.

'A little,' she admitted. 'But it's worth it not to have my neighbour nagging me about the perils of alcohol. Besides, regardless of the taste, it's still alcohol.'

'How much whisky do you put into the bottle?' I asked, assuming that she perhaps mixed the whisky half and half with water.

'The whisky is neat,' she said, with some pride.

Despite her faults, it is difficult not to admire and respect a woman who is prepared to put up with rubbery whisky for the sake of appearances.

'I'm going to die,' she announced, the moment I walked through her front door.

'It'll come to us all in the end,' I responded, cheerily.

'I'm going to die soon,' said Mrs Colefax.

'Why do you say that?'

'I'm 89-years-old, I have a weak heart and both my parents died when they were in their sixties.'

'You're not in bad condition,' I told her cheerily. 'With a bit of training you could be playing football for England next year.'

I know that it is never possible to make her smile but I always try.

She has been on the verge of death ever since I first came to Bilbury and I have for some time had a strong suspicion that she will outlive us all and that it will be my successor who eventually writes her death certificate when she finally meets her own dire expectations at the age of 153.

'I don't like football,' said Mrs Colefax, whose lack of a sense of humour is legendary.

I thought for a moment. 'Well, alternatively you could be dancing with the Royal Ballet company if you practise your arabesque and perfect your plie.'

'I don't like ballet.'

I gave up, as I usually do. 'What can I do for you today?' I asked.

'I have a pain just here,' she said, putting a hand on her right breast.

'In your breast?'

'Yes, if you must be so vulgar.'

'Breast isn't a vulgar word. It's an anatomical description of a part of the body.'

'It's rude. It's not a word which one would expect to hear in polite society.'

'I agree it's not a word one would bandy about if taking tea with the vicar's wife and the ladies of the Vicarage Sewing Circle,' I admitted, 'but I think its use is permissible in the sanctity of your own bedroom.'

'Hrmph!' said Mrs Colefax.

'Sit up, slip off your nightie and let me have a look.'

'I will do none of those things, young man!' said Mrs Colefax, defiantly. 'I'm not going to sit here looking at you while you're ogling my naked body.'

'I promise not to ogle. Close your eyes first. Then sit up, slip off your nightie and let me have a look.'

With obvious reluctance, Mrs Colefax closed her eyes, sat up and struggled out of her nightie.

'You'll have to remove your bra as well,' I told her.

She opened one eye and scowled at me.

‘I need to look at the part that hurts.’

With even greater reluctance, and more of a struggle, Mrs Colefax succeeded in slipping her bra straps off her shoulders and pulling down her brassiere to release the contents.

‘Do you always wear your bra in bed?’

‘I certainly do,’ she said. ‘In case of emergencies.’

‘What sort of emergencies?’

‘In case of fire, for example.’

‘How is your bra going to protect you against fire?’

‘It will protect my modesty. If the house catches fire and a fireman climbs up a ladder to rescue me I don’t want to be making an exhibition of myself.’

‘You’ve got your nightie.’

‘Young man, a woman with my attributes requires more support and protection than can be provided by a piece of unstructured flannel!’

I could see what she meant. Her breasts, milky white and decorated like a map with a network of blue veins, were voluminous.

‘And then there are the burglars.’

I frowned. ‘Burglars?’

‘I don’t want to be without my bra if burglars force their way into my bedroom.’

‘No, I can see that,’ I agreed. ‘Where’s the pain?’

‘Just at the side here,’ she said, rubbing the outer side of her left breast. ‘But I have to confess that it seems to have eased a little.’ She seemed puzzled, even saddened by this.

I leant forwards, and very gently plucked a small leather purse from inside her bra. There was a red mark on her skin where the purse, compressed by her bra, had pressed into the soft tissue of her breast. I showed the purse to her.

‘Oh, good heavens!’ she said. ‘I usually keep that in the front of my bra, in what I think they call the cleavage area. It must have slipped round in the night.’ Her cleavage would have provided enough storage space for the Bank of England to keep the nation’s gold reserves safely hidden.

‘And the pain has definitely eased?’

‘Oh yes,’ she said. ‘I feel better now.’

I put the purse down on the bed beside her, told Mrs Colefax she could put her bra back into a more useful position and left as she struggled to re-confine her magnificent and generously proportioned superstructure.

My second visit had been requested by Frank, the landlord at our local public house, the Duck and Puddle. A year or so earlier Frank had a stroke and very nearly died. However, he made an excellent recovery. Under the careful and eagle eyed supervision of Gilly, his wife, he lost weight and learned to deal with stress more effectively. As a result, his blood pressure, which had previously been quite horrifyingly high, had come right down to levels approaching normality. I was very pleased with Frank’s recovery and the progress he had made.

Frank usually visited me at the surgery but when he rang that morning, he had apologised and asked if I would call in at the Duck and Puddle to visit a customer who was staying in one of the rooms they rent out to visitors.

When I arrived I let myself in, since the front door was open, and found Frank and Gilly in the kitchen. They were having what some might call a blazing row but what they would call a slight disagreement about the way their dishwasher should be stacked.

The dishwasher was a brand new addition to the equipment at the public house and was widely believed to be the first in the village. No one else I knew had a dishwasher.

‘The cups should all be up here,’ insisted Frank, pointing to a portion of racking on the top level of the machine.

‘That’s silly!’ said Gilly. ‘It makes far more sense to put them down here.’

This looked likely to turn into one of those domestic discussions which have no end. ‘I hate to interrupt and I hate to be a bore,’ I said, ‘but is there a chance you could discuss the planning procedures for the dishwasher when I’ve gone?’

I didn’t particularly mind listening to their discussion, which promised to be quite entertaining, but I was keen to finish my calls and get the farrier before the sole of my shoe fell off completely.

They both apologised.

The Duck and Puddle has a couple of bedrooms which are let from time to time to tourists and others whose business brings them to Bilbury. I had stayed in one of the bedrooms myself when I had first arrived in the village. Indeed, I had, I remembered, been fortunate enough to occupy the only bedroom with its own bathroom.

As I followed Frank up the ancient, narrow staircase, I couldn’t help remembering the day when, as a young, innocent and freshly qualified doctor, I had come to Bilbury to take up my position as assistant to Dr Brownlow. Frank and Gilly had been Mr and Mrs Parsons to me then.

I could even remember my first breakfast in the pub.

Most important of all, it was at the Duck and Puddle that I had first met Patsy, my wife. She'd been working at the pub, helping Gilly and Frank. Her father, Mr Kennet, had been poorly, I remembered, and she'd been so worried that she'd burnt my traditional English breakfast to a crisp.

The breakfasts at the Duck and Puddle were designed to satisfy the calorific requirements of men who spent their days doing hard physical labour rather than driving round the countryside listening to people's chests and examining their feet. I had put on a stone in weight while I'd been a resident at the Duck and Puddle. I still hadn't got rid of all of it.

'Our guest is on a three day walking holiday,' said Frank, plodding slowly up the stairs ahead of me. 'He's an old-fashioned gentleman. In his late fifties, I would say. Solitary but well-mannered. He gets a lot of wind but always apologises if there's a particularly noisy eruption.'

'Eructations, borborygmi and flatulence,' I said.

'Pardon?' said Frank.

'Technical terms for wind coming up, wandering around inside or going out through the back door.'

'Ah!' said Frank, with an understanding nod. 'I always think that apologising for wind noises is the sign of a gentleman,' he murmured confidentially.

'You always do have a better class of customer here,' I said drily.

'We certainly do,' said Frank, slightly out of breath. 'We don't get the sort of people who steal the coat hooks from the back of the lavatory cubicle doors. Do you know, I heard at the last meeting of the Licensed Victuallers' Association that there are pubs in Barnstaple and Exeter where people do that?'

'Do you actually have coat hooks on the doors of your lavatory cubicles?'

'Well, as you well know, we only have one lavatory,' admitted Frank. 'And it doesn't have any coat hooks, as it happens, but if it did then I'm confident that our customers wouldn't steal them.'

The Duck and Puddle is still quaint and undamaged by progress with plastic. In most of England, the only places still quaint are the ones which are too poor to afford to modernise and too far off the beaten track to be troubled by intrusive health and safety busy bodies. And thus it is with the Duck and Puddle.

'Right,' I said. 'I'm glad we've got that cleared up.'

I didn't feel the need to remind him that most of the male customers of the Duck and Puddle use the laurel bush outside the pub's back door as a distribution centre for their waste beer. The bush is growing at an impressive rate and always seems greener than any other laurel bush in Devon.

I also didn't think it polite to point out that the last time I'd looked, the solitary lavatory at the Duck and Puddle had been entirely bereft of a proper door. Those using the facility had to make do with an old blanket nailed to the lintel. It would be difficult to fix a coat hook to a blanket.

Frank stopped in the narrow corridor upstairs and paused outside the door to one of the bedrooms. It was not the room where I had spent my first days and weeks in Bilbury. He knocked on the door, waited until he'd heard the occupant call 'Come in', opened it, led the way into the room, and introduced me. He then left.

'Sorry to bother you, doctor,' said the room's occupant.

He was, as Frank had said, a man who looked to be in his late fifties or possibly early sixties. He was lying in bed, dressed in heliotrope pyjamas buttoned up to the throat, he was pale, he was sweating slightly and, to put it mildly, he did not look like a man who was about to set off to run a marathon. The good news was that he was breathing quite normally and his pulse, though a little fast, was otherwise quite normal for an overweight, unfit man who had probably over-indulged. His waistline had probably last been seen circa 1957 and had, since then, been on the missing list.

He was, he told me, the manager of a large store in Leamington Spa but he was not, as he had indicated to Frank, on a walking holiday.

He had, to be blunt about it, run away from a job which he did not enjoy and which he found enormously stressful, from a marriage which was no more than a partnership of cold convenience, from grown-up children who demanded nothing from him but money (and plenty of it) and from neighbours whose main purpose in life seemed to be to slam car doors, use noisy garden machinery and breed uncontrollable offspring.

The fiction that he was on a solitary walking holiday was something he had used as an excuse before he had left and it was one which he had sustained for no other reason than that it seemed an easy explanation for his presence in Bilbury and at the Duck and Puddle.

His name was Elmore Hardwicke and, contrary to impressions, he was just 48-years-old. As already indicated, he was what used to be described as well upholstered and would now probably merit a rating of 'plump'. The cruel would have classified him as 'obese'. He did not look like a man who has an active gym membership.

Since Mr Hardwicke had run away from his life, you might have thought that fate would have given the poor fellow a break; a chance to enjoy his few days of escape.

But, sadly, fate does not work that way.

Since he was on holiday, Mr Hardwicke had decided to indulge himself and for each of the three mornings that he had been a guest at the Duck and Puddle, he had enjoyed the traditional English breakfast which has always been a keynote meal at Bilbury's finest, oldest and only eating establishment.

'You had the bacon and egg?'

'Four rashers and two eggs.'

'And the sausages?'

'Three of them. Cooked to perfection.' He closed his eyes, enjoying the sausages for a second time.

'Tomatoes and beans?'

'Of course.'

'Fried bread?'

'Two slices.'

'And toast?'

'Three slices, each covered with a thick layer of butter and blessed with handmade thick cut orange marmalade.'

'To drink?'

'A large glass of orange juice and a pot of English tea.'

'What do you eat for breakfast when you are at home?'

'A cup of tea and a bowl of cereal.'

'Your choice?'

He shook his head. 'At my wife's insistence.' The cereal looks like the sort of stuff people use to insulate their lofts. I suspect it tastes much the same too. She says it is a healthy breakfast, designed to keep me regular and to supply 87% of my daily vitamin requirements.' He shuddered. 'I hate cereals.'

'So your breakfast here is not the sort of thing you would eat at home?'

He shook his head. There was much sadness in the shaking and in his eyes. 'I've overdone it a little, haven't I?'

'A little, perhaps,' I agreed. 'What happened?'

'I got this terrible pain about an hour and a half ago,' said Mr Hardwicke. 'I thought I was going to die.'

'How long did the pain last?'

'No more than five minutes. It faded off quite quickly. It's pretty well gone now. But it's left me a little shaken.' He smiled ruefully. 'Like toothache going when you get to the dentist's surgery.'

'Where was the pain?'

'Just here,' he said, rubbing just underneath his ribs on the right hand side of his body. He did so gently and cautiously.

'Then what happened? After the pain had gone?'

'I just lay here for a while. The pain had gone but I was worried it might come back. I thought I ought to see someone and when Mrs Parsons came in to collect my tray I asked her if there was a local doctor I could see. She said she'd ring and ask you to come and visit me.'

'Have you ever had anything like this before?'

He shook his head. 'A little indigestion,' he admitted. 'And I do suffer with wind. I get a lot of wind. But this wasn't the same sort of pain as I get when I have indigestion.'

'Have you seen anyone about it? Your GP?'

'No.'

'Do you take anything?'

He opened the top drawer of the bedside cabinet and took out a packet of a proprietary indigestion remedy. 'I eat quite a lot of these.'

I nodded, told him to lie down a little flatter and peeled back the bedclothes. I didn't really need to examine him. I knew what was wrong with him. I estimate that at least 50% of the people who stay at the Duck and Puddle develop exactly the same symptoms and have the same underlying problem. I felt his tummy, checked his blood pressure and looked to make sure I wasn't missing anything else.

'I suspect that you have gall stones,' I told him.

'Do I need to go into hospital?'

'Not at the moment. You need to rest. And I'm afraid you need to avoid fatty foods for a while.'

'No more of Mrs Parson's breakfasts?'

'Just the toast and the tea I'm afraid.'

He looked very downcast.

'You can have marmalade.'

'Oh good. They have splendid marmalade here. Did you know that Gilly makes her own marmalade?'

I said that I did indeed know this. I told him that many Bilburian women made their own marmalade, using just about every fruit available. Patsy makes a wonderful cherry marmalade. Her grandmother once told me that the original marmalade was made with quinces.

'It's a funny word, isn't it? Marmalade. I wonder where the devil the name comes from?'

'There's a wonderfully silly tale that Mary Queen of Scots would ask for a fruit concoction whenever she felt a trifle queasy. 'Marie malade' the courtiers would call it. Hence the word 'marmalade'. People have been making marmalade for centuries. In the 17th century, a sophisticated traveller would pack his lunch box with a packet of macaroons, a jar of quince marmalade and a bottle of wine.'

'Golly!' said Mr Hardwicke.

'My wife's mother and grandmother make a good deal of marmalade,' I told him. 'It's also claimed that the word 'marmalade' comes from the word melimelum, the honey apple. But I prefer the Mary Queen of Scots story. And there's no reason you shouldn't have some baked beans and tomatoes.'

'How about a boiled egg?'

'OK. But just one.'

He looked much cheerier. 'Is that pain going to come back?'

'Probably not. But if it does you must ask them to telephone for me straight away.'

'And you'll come?'

'Of course.'

'Can I get up?'

'Definitely. There's no need for you to stay in bed. A leisurely walk wouldn't do you any harm.'

'But avoid rich foods?'

'Avoid fatty foods,' I told him. 'And when you get back home you should definitely avoid any breakfast cereals which look like insulation material or soundproofing.'

He brightened up. 'Can I tell my wife that?'

'Definitely. You can tell your wife that I advised you against eating breakfast cereals of any variety.'

'Oh good,' he said. 'May I really? That's rather splendid news.' He hesitated. 'I don't suppose you could…' He made the writing gesture that diners use when indicating to waiters that they're ready for the bill.

'Of course,' I said. I fished a piece of notepaper out of my black bag, took out my pen and wrote a short note confirming that Mr Edward Hardwicke of Leamington Spa was not allowed to eat breakfast cereals of any kind. I folded the note, placed it inside an envelope which I took from the pub's writing desk, and handed it to him.

'Thank you!' said Mr Hardwicke. 'Do you think I need to stay here a little while? In order to complete my recovery?'

'I think that would be wise.'

Mr Hardwicke seemed pleased by this. 'When do you think I'll be fit to travel?'

'Not for a week at least,' I told him. His eyes lit up. 'Come and see me in a week's time.' I told him.

I took a pad of certificates out of my bag, wrote out a sick note and handed that to him. 'Post this to your employer,' I told him. Mr Hardwicke definitely seemed to me like a man who needed a week's rest. And Bilbury is the perfect rest cure for those who have been battered by life.

He looked much brighter and more cheerful than he'd been when I'd arrived. A country doctor on his morning rounds cannot ask for much more than that.

When I left the pub, Gilly and Frank had completed their negotiations over the stacking of the dishwasher and were discussing their new menu.

They have, for reasons which escape most of their customers, recently taken to renaming some of the food items they sell in the bar in the style of one of those pretentious Chelsea wine bars. They still have a few items named after regular customers but the other items on their menu have been upgraded.

And so, the Duck and Puddle no longer sells 'crisps' (with cheese or onion being the choices) but offers a choice of either 'sodium infused ultra-crispy amuse-bouche pommes de terre fabrique avec fromage' or 'sodium infused ultra-crispy amuse bouche pomme de terre fabrique avec oignon'. Bottles of cola are now listed as 'hand selected, carbonato avec beaucoup des bulles dans l'eau'.

The translations were all done by Adrienne, my sister-in-law, whose claim to mastery of the French language is based on the fact that she once spent three whole days in Paris on a school trip.

Gilly and Frank were trying to decide whether they should add 'pain avec confiture' to their menu.

'Just stick with 'jam sandwich',' I told them. 'Otherwise no one in Bilbury will ever order one because they'll worry that it's something containing snails or frogs' legs.'

The Duck and Puddle is, I suspect, the only eating establishment in England which serves jam sandwiches. And it is definitely none the worse for it. When made with crusty farmhouse bread, cut thick and covered with lashings of home-made plum or strawberry preserve, a jam sandwich can be just as much of an epicurean delight as anything requiring a clutch of quail's eggs or a sauce which has taken a team of four trained chefs six hours to prepare.

'You know how to take the ground from beneath someone's feet!' said Frank.

'And the wind out of their sails!' added Gilly.

'Not to mention the clichés out of their conversation,' I said, managing, for once in my life, to produce a moderately bon mot which didn't wait three days to arrive.

Mr Hardwicke did come to see me a week later and he was much better than he had been when I'd seen him at the Duck and Puddle. He told me that he was ready to go back to work.

'You seem a lot more cheerful than you were a week ago,' I said.

'Oh I am, I am, doctor!' He moved forward a few inches in his chair, as though what he was about to tell me was both confidential and important. 'I have booked my room at the Duck and Puddle for another week. I shall be returning in three months' time,' said Mr Hardwicke.

'Splendid!' I said. I knew that Frank and Gilly would be pleased. They like to have what people in the hospitality trade refer to as 'repeat business'. 'You'll be coming by yourself again?'

'Oh yes. My wife and I live very separate lives. She enjoys pottery and likes to go on courses in East Anglia, Yorkshire, Provence and places like that.'

I couldn't help wondering what East Anglia, Yorkshire and Provence had in common but it seemed an irrelevant quibble so I merely nodded wisely.

'I have decided that I can cope perfectly well with my life as it is, if I know that every three months I can escape to Bilbury, to the peace and quiet and sanctity of the Duck and Puddle.'

'I understand,' I said, for I did, though I hoped that Mr Hardwicke would not be too disturbed if his stay happened to coincide with one of the Duck and Puddle's rather raucous skittle evenings.

'In fact I have given Mr and Mrs Parsons a series of dates when I believe I shall be able to partake of their hospitality, and they have agreed to reserve the room for me for a total of twelve periods of one week over each of the next three years. Mrs Parsons was kind enough to say that they will think of it as 'my' room.'

'So you'll be coming to Bilbury every three months?' I said, doing the sums in my head and feeling quite proud of myself at having done so without my head exploding.

'Exactly, doctor!' said Mr Hardwicke. 'I believe I shall become a regular in the village.' He smiled, and looked very pleased with himself. 'Mr and Mrs Parsons have told me that I may call them Frank and Gilly.'

'That's wonderful,' I agreed.

I have rarely seen anyone quite so happy. Mr Hardwicke had given himself something to live for and he was a contented man.

But that was a week ahead.

My third and final visit of the day was to Mr Warburton.

Mr Jason Warburton and his family live outside Bilbury. Indeed, they live outside the usual area I cover. Their home is close to South Molton.

The Warburton family had been patients of Dr Brownlow for longer than even he had been able to remember. The old man, Jason's great granddad, the patriarch of the family, had an unusual hobby. He used to enjoy going to funerals. Most of the time he didn't know the person who had died or any of the mourners. But he did know all the undertakers and most of the local clergy. He used to check out upcoming funerals in the local newspapers and he'd usually go to three or four funerals a week. It was his strange version of train spotting. He was 96 when he had his own funeral. His son, Jason's grandfather, was 75 when his Dad died but he was still known to everyone as 'Young Mr Warburton'.

When the younger branch of the family moved away from Bilbury, Dr Brownlow had, as a favour to the parents, agreed to keep them on as patients even though they were rather outside his catchment area. The agreement was that whenever possible they would visit the house for a consultation, only asking for a home visit when one was really needed. I had seen the latest Mrs Warburton once or twice, and I'd seen both of their children but I had never seen the youngest Mr Warburton before. And today it was young Mr Warburton who needed medical attention.

'I'm sorry I couldn't drive to your surgery,' said Mr Warburton, who is a plumber by trade and who didn't sound in the slightest bit apologetic. 'But when I woke up this morning I couldn't open my eyes. The lids were stuck. My wife bathed them open but they're sticky and itchy and watery and I really can't see well enough to drive the van. My wife doesn't drive.'

'That's fine,' I told him. I looked at his eyes. Both were clearly infected.

'I had a busy day ahead of me,' he said, full of self-importance. 'I was booked to do some plumbing for that bloke who does the cooking on the television. Whatsisname. The one with the beard and the glass eye. He's ever so famous. His name is on the tip of my tongue…'

When he talked, his dentures bobbed about as though dancing on independent suspension and it was easy to see that in addition to being something of a cockalorum, he was at least five times older than his teeth.

I didn't have the faintest idea who he was talking about. My knowledge of television cooks is limited. I remember once seeing a determined woman called Fanny Craddock doing something energetic with a bowlful of dough but that's about the extent of my knowledge in this area.

'Do you know how your eyes got infected?' I asked him.

'Rubbing them with dirty fingers probably,' said Mr Warburton. 'The wife is always telling me off for rubbing my eyes. And my fingers get dirty in my job. Toilets and such like.'

'Ah,' I said, taking out my prescription pad. 'Do you prefer ointment or drops?'

'Which do you recommend?'

'It's personal preference really,' I said. 'Personally, I prefer the drops because I find the ointment just tends to stick the eyelids together again. But some people don't like putting drops into their eyes.'

'I'll have the drops then please doctor. I've done plumbing for a lot of other celebrities.'

I wrote out the prescription for eye drops that would deal with his conjunctivitis.

'I sorted out a dripping tap for a cousin of that David Bowie,' he said. 'And I put in a new sink for a man who used to live in the same town as the drummer for The Who when he was growing up. He said he knew him quite well.'

'Really,' I said. 'That's very impressive.'

'I did some central heating work for Vince Hitzinger,' he said. 'Nice fellow. He gave me a copy of his last but one album.'

'My word,' I said. I hadn't heard of Mr Hitzinger but I assumed he was probably a musician of some kind and my knowledge of popular music is as limited as my knowledge of celebrity chefs. We do have one major rock star celebrity living in Bilbury but although he tours and sells records all around the world, no one recognises him and very few people know his identity. On stage he is wild, unkempt and rather alarming. He wears a good deal of make-up and a very impressive amount of hair. Off stage, without the hair or the make-up, he is shy and remarkably inconspicuous. It is difficult to reconcile the two.

'I thought of calling myself 'Plumber to the Stars',' said Mr Warburton. 'Have it painted on the side of the van. What do you think of that?'

'Very good,' I said. I suddenly remembered that six months earlier I had asked Mr Warburton to come out to Bilbury Grange to deal with a ball cock which had stuck and had flooded the downstairs lavatory. Our usual plumber had been in Torremolinos on a month's holiday. Mr Warburton had refused to come to Bilbury Grange on the grounds that Bilbury was too far for him to travel. 'But,' I added, 'I think most people would be happy if they just found a plumber prepared to come out and deal with their leak.'

My comment was wasted. Mr Warburton either didn't remember or didn't care. He just took the prescription from me. 'How do we get hold of the drops?' he asked.

'The chemist in South Molton will have the drops in stock,' I said.

'You wouldn't fetch them for me, I suppose? It would save the wife a journey.'

'Afraid not,' I said. 'I'm a little busy. And South Molton is rather outside my catchment area.'

'Oh,' said Mr Warburton, clearly disappointed. 'I suppose I'll have to get the wife to go in and get them.'

'Your wife does drive then?'

'Oh yes.' Mr Warburton either didn't remember that he had lied about his wife not driving. Or, perhaps, he just didn't care. 'But she's out today. Since I didn't need the van she's gone into Barnstaple to do some shopping. There's a sale on at one of the shoe shops. They advertised it in last week's newspaper.' He shrugged. 'Anyway, better for me to use your petrol than mine, eh?'

I was furious. Mr Warburton could have easily asked his wife to drive him in to the surgery but instead he'd made me drive all the way to South Molton just to write a prescription for some eye drops.

'You might feel more comfortable with a doctor closer to home,' I said. 'There are plenty of good doctors in the South Molton area.'

'Oh no, we'll stick with you, doctor,' said Mr Warburton. 'The wife trusts you and says you're quite good with the kiddies. Myself, I liked old Dr Brownlow, of course. He looked after me when I was a nipper and I got used to him.'

'Of course,' I said.

'While you're here, would you give me a prescription for something for my stomach? One of those anti acid things. I never know which one to buy at the chemists. And if you give me a couple of packets, your stuff will be cheaper won't it? Give me something not too chalky but with a nice pepperminty taste.'

‘Do you get a lot of stomach trouble?’

‘Oh no, only on Saturdays if I go out with the lads. We go and have a curry and half a dozen pints of lager.’

‘And you get an upset stomach?’

‘Yeah. Sometimes. Not always. Sometimes.’

‘Maybe you should stay at home on Saturdays,’ I suggested. ‘Or drink less lager.’

The plumber looked at me as if I were mad.

‘Come and see me in the surgery if the stomach problem gets any worse,’ I told him as I headed to the car.

‘Hope you don’t mind my mentioning it,’ called Mr Warburton, as I left. ‘But you want to get those shoes sorted out. Your sole is flapping. It’ll trip you up if you’re not careful.’

I thanked him and absquatulated without further delay.

God sends trials and tribulations in many strange forms and today He had sent him in the form of Mr Warburton the Plumber to the Stars.

But, finally, I was free to make my visit to get my shoes repaired.

Mr Albert Ross, the farrier, has lived in Bilbury all his life. His father and grandfather were both farriers. I have little doubt that his great grandfather was probably a farrier too. Indeed, I have no doubt that some member of his family was hard at work in Bosworth putting shoes on stallions, mares, fillies, ponies, hacks, geldings, chargers and nags back in the days while Richard III was wandering around offering to exchange his kingdom for a (doubtless nicely shod) horse.

Bilbury has at least one other professional farrier but Albert Ross is, as far as I know, the only one prepared to do a little human shoe cobbling on the side.

I found him in his smithy hammering a shoe onto one of the hind legs of a large beast which was standing quite still and seemed not in the slightest bit perturbed by what was happening at the far end of his body. A bored looking woman stood by the horse’s front end, holding its head and looking on. She was, I remembered, the wife of a local farmer. I knew I had seen her recently but for the life of me I couldn’t remember why or for what. I know I ought to remember every patient’s name, ailment and treatment but I see dozens of patients every week and occasionally I simply cannot remember whether the tall, balding man is Mr Merriweather with the dermatitis or Mr Berryham with the swollen testicles.

I wondered if I should ask her how things were going but decided against the idea. I have found that when I can’t remember why I’ve seen someone it is better not to refer to the consultation in any sort of social situation.

‘Sorry to bother you,’ I said, when the farrier paused and looked up. I suddenly realised that he and I had never met. ‘I’m the doctor,’ I said, introducing myself. ‘My wife is Patsy, she was Patsy Kennet before we married.’

‘I know Patsy,’ said the farrier. He had the biggest eyebrows I’d ever seen on a human being. They looked like those big furry caterpillars which one occasionally sees around the place.

‘The sole has come off my shoe,’ I said, ‘I know it may seem a bit of a cheek, but Patsy said you’d be able to mend it for me.’

‘Let me finish this and I’ll see to you,’ said the farrier. He did not have much of a bedside manner but then I don’t suppose there’s much call for a bedside manner in his line of his work.

I sat down on a tree stump and watched the farrier at work. It occurred to me that it probably wasn’t such a daft idea to expect a farrier to mend a pair of shoes. After all, the basic requirements are much the same: a hammer and a pocket full of nails.

It took the farrier no more than five minutes to finish putting fresh shoes onto the horse. The woman who had been holding the horse’s head, handed the farrier a couple of folded notes which he slipped into the pouch at the front of his leather apron and then led the horse over to where I was sitting.

‘Excuse me, doctor,’ she said.

Not sure what she was excusing herself for, but aware that she needed me to move I stood up.

She then put one foot onto the tree stump which I had been using as a seat and which clearly had a primary function as a mounting block, and leapt with surprising agility up into the saddle still fastened to her doubtless trusty steed. As she did so, her surprisingly large bottom, encased in a pair of very tight riding jodhpurs, reminded me that on our last encounter I had treated her for a rather ripe case of external haemorrhoids. The jodhpurs she was wearing on this occasion were so tight that I could have probably made the diagnosis without asking her to undress.

I was now grateful that I hadn’t asked her if her problem was any better when we’d met a few moments earlier. Even farmers and their wives (who all tend to have a very high level of embarrassment where bodily parts and functions are concerned) have been known to show signs of incipient shyness where piles are concerned.

The woman settled her well-built rear into the saddle and rode off with much clattering of hooves.

‘Stand just there and put your foot up here,’ said the farrier, indicating his leather covered lap.

Startled and slightly puzzled, I looked at him.

‘Didn’t you say you wanted your shoes mended?’

‘Yes, please,’ I said. I undid my shoelace and started to slip off a shoe.

‘Don’t do that!’ said the farrier, rather crossly. ‘You need to keep your shoes on.’

I looked at him.

‘And come over here. I can’t mend them unless you put your foot up on my lap, can I?’

I continued to look at him. ‘You want to mend my shoes while I’m still wearing them?’

‘Of course I do,’ said the exasperated farrier. ‘How else am I going to mend them?’

Patchy, who claims to have moments of raw brilliance, once said, life is like a game of crazy golf.

And I suddenly realised that he’s absolutely right.

You just never know when you’re going to come across a little windmill with three doors or a magic tower with a helter skelter leading directly into a sunken bucket filled with water.

Or a farrier wanting to hammer nails into your shoes while you’re still wearing them.

I approached, turned away from him, bent my knee and put my shoe clad foot onto his lap.

‘Is this going to hurt?’ I asked, nervously, hoping that he was aware that the human foot is rather different in configuration, and pain susceptibility, to that of the horse.

‘Not if you keep still,’ he said.

I turned my head, nearly falling over as I do so, and watched him pick up a box of small cobbler’s tacks. I was grateful he was going to use those, rather than the longer nails he used to affix metal shoes to horses.

‘Did you know that the patron saint of cobblers is St Crispin?’ he asked.

I said that I did not know this but that I did know that the patron saint of colic is St Erasmus while the patron saint of coin collectors is St Eligius. I knew this because Patchy, my favourite source of irrelevant but fascinating information, had told me.

To my astonishment and delight, the farrier successfully repaired both of my brown brogues. And after I’d changed my shoes, and put on my black pair, he mended those in precisely the same way. He did a damned good job on all four shoes and charged me a fraction of the price I’d have paid at the cobbler’s shop in Barnstaple. I couldn’t help wondering how many other people in Devon had enjoyed the delight of having their shoes repaired by a man who shoes horses for a living.

‘You might have told me that he’d want to mend my shoes while I was still wearing them,’ I said to Patsy when I got home.

‘Would you have gone if I had?’

‘Not likely!’

‘That’s why I didn’t tell you,’ said Patsy.

Ignorance is sometimes by far the better part of valour.

‘Well, it was a strange experience but I feel great,’ I said. ‘In fact, I’m rather proud of myself and since there’s a point to point meeting at Blackmoor gate next week, I think I’ll perhaps enter. I’ll see if I can find a jockey.’

Patsy laughed. ‘I’m going to make myself a cup of tea,’ she said, ‘I’ll get a bucket of water and fill a nosebag for you.’

I sometimes feel that I’m not always given the respect which is due to an established member of an ancient and dignified profession.

It Isn’t Over Until the Fat Lady Slims

It was Peter Marshall who heard about it first.

Peter knows everything that happens in Bilbury for the simple reason that unless they fancy a round trip of over 20 miles into Barnstaple and back, everyone who lives in the village visits his shop several times a week. If you want a loaf of bread, a pint of milk, a postage stamp, a pair of shoelaces, a light bulb or a packet of goldfish food you have no choice but to visit Peter’s excellent emporium. You can get beer, whisky and excellent sandwiches at the Duck and Puddle and you can get spiritual salvation at the village church, but for everything else you need to go to see Peter Marshall.

‘Have you heard what Archie Meads is planning?’ Peter asked me one afternoon about two months ago. I had popped in to pick up a couple of torch batteries, a new broom handle, a pair of socks and a bottle of shampoo for Patsy.

(It is difficult to think of any item that cannot be obtained from Peter’s shop and I have, in the past, deliberately tried to stump him by asking for items which I did not think he would stock. These attempts have always proved unsuccessful and, as a result, we now own, but never use, a xylophone, a faux ivory back scratcher, a wine making kit and a six inch high model of the Eiffel Tower in a snow globe. I no longer try to catch him out for I have learned that it is better, safer and less expensive, to assume that Peter stocks at least one of everything ever made.)

Archie Meads is a local farmer. He doesn’t live in Bilbury itself but he owns several hundred acres of farmland and a number of his largest fields are within the village boundary so what he does sometimes has an impact on our lives.

Mr Meads (he is so pompous that I doubt if his wife dares to call him ‘Archie’) lives in Monaco where he resides in exile in order to avoid paying any tax. Mr Meads has, over the years, experimented with various ways of adding to the fortune which he originally made from buying, selling and renting out small properties in the North of England. He was exposed several times, both in the newspapers and on television, and acquired something of a reputation as a ‘slum landlord’. I don’t think anyone in the area regrets that he chooses to live in Monaco.

Four years ago Mr Meads turned one of his fields into a caravan site, built a loo and shower block and invited the owners of touring caravans to stay there. There was some opposition from locals who felt that the Bilbury infrastructure was not capable of coping with an influx of summer visitors. We had already had considerable experience of the problems which too many tourists can have on a small community. A clutch of local councillors, were, however, wildly enthusiastic (and insistent that their enthusiasm had nothing whatsoever to do with the holidays they had enjoyed at Mr Meads’ villa in Marbella) and the caravan park had been approved.

Sadly for Mr Meads, but luckily for the rest of us, the venture was woefully unsuccessful.

There were two problems which had been overlooked.

First, the field was on such a slope that caravanners found that whatever they did they simply could not make their temporary homes level.

Second, the lanes around Bilbury are very narrow and winding and are simply not well-suited for wide vehicles such as caravans. On at least three separate occasions, caravans actually got stuck and had to be removed with the aid of a tractor. Two of the caravans were destroyed completely.

The whole commercial experiment was not helped when persons unknown took to lighting large and smelly bonfires at weekends. A number of old carpets and unwanted car and tractor tyres were burnt and the caravan site eventually acquired an unpleasant reputation and a very poor rating in the Caravan Touring Society’s brochure of sites.

‘What’s he planning this time?’ I asked Peter, warily. Like most people in the village I am not a fan of Mr Meads or his activities.

‘He’s organising a three day music festival!’ said Peter.

‘A what!’ I exclaimed.

‘A festival with musical entertainment,’ explained Peter. ‘Like that thing they had in Woodstock a couple of years back.’

‘When is it going to be?’

‘In a couple of months’ time I think. I’m glad I heard about it. I’ll need to put in extra orders for food and drink. What sort of things do you think will sell best?’

‘I should stock up well with marijuana,’ I told him. ‘But I suspect you might be in competition with some on-the-spot dealers.’

Peter looked shocked. ‘I don’t think my wholesalers sell that,’ he said. ‘Do you think I should just buy in some extra cans of cola and a few hundred boxes of crisps?’

‘You might do better with bottles of lager and a few thousand hot dogs,’ I said.

‘Do you think so?’

‘I don’t have the foggiest, Peter,’ I said, with an exasperated sigh. ‘I have no idea what sort of things the people who go to music festivals are likely to buy.’

To be honest, I was cross because I knew that a music festival in Bilbury would create chaos, block all the lanes and bring most of the unpleasant qualities of the 20th century into our unworldly village. Peter, as usual, was thinking only of the money he could make.

When I got back to Bilbury Grange and told Patsy what was being planned, she too was appalled. ‘They’ll bring dogs with them,’ she said. ‘And their dogs will run loose and attack my Dad’s sheep. There’s bound to be a lot of noise and that will keep the children awake. And there are bound to be loads of people needing medical help. You’re going to be rushed off your feet.’

I knew she was right. But after a couple of telephone calls I also knew that there was nothing we could do to stop the Festival happening.

When I telephoned the local council offices, I was told that the Festival still had the council’s whole-hearted support. I wondered how many councillors were looking forward to enjoying more free holidays in Mr Meads’ Spanish villa.

After a couple of months of waiting, the Festival was finally held last weekend. And it was every bit as awful as we had all feared.

I first became aware that the allotted fields were being prepared for the Festival when a man in jeans and a dirty T-shirt knocked on the door at Bilbury Grange.

‘Are you the local quack?’ he demanded brusquely.

I said that I was indeed the Bilbury doctor.

‘You’re needed at the Festival site,’ he said. ‘One of the scaffolders has cut himself. You’ll have to sew him up.’

‘How badly is he cut?’ I asked. ‘Does he need to go to hospital?’

‘No time for hospital,’ said the man in the grubby T-shirt. ‘He’s needed here. I’m in charge of the work gang. I’ve only got six guys and we’ve got to erect a stage, two lighting posts and a refreshment tent by the day after tomorrow.’

I checked my bag, to make sure that it contained a suture kit and a plentiful supply of suitable bandages, and followed the man in the grubby T-shirt to the site of the Festival.

Mr Meads had, to save money, decided to hold the event in the field where he’d already built a lavatory and shower block. And to take advantage of the natural slope of the field he had decided that the stage would be built at the bottom of the field, ensuring that all the spectators would be sitting in a very rough sort of amphitheatre.

Mr Meads hadn’t bothered to cut the grass in the field, which was nearly a foot long, and the three huge lorries which had brought the scaffolding and boards for the stage had clearly been having some difficulty finding traction on the grass. There were huge gouges in the field where the lorries had skidded, stuck and been extricated.

My patient, who said his name was Duane, was sitting on the back of one of the lorries. He had a badly cut forearm and there was blood on his trousers, on his shirt and on the lorry.

‘I thought I’d let it bleed a bit to wash out any of the dirt,’ he said with a grin.

‘Always a good idea,’ I agreed. A little blood can go a long way but I still reckoned he must have lost half a pint. ‘But it isn’t really necessary to allow quite so much blood to come out.’

‘Oh, I’ll soon make that up again,’ said Duane. ‘A few lagers tonight should see me right. Where’s the nearest pub?’

I told him how to get to the Duck and Puddle and couldn’t help thinking that Frank and Gilly would probably welcome the extra business. Council rates, insurance and maintenance bills mean that they struggle to keep the pub alive. At least someone in the village would benefit from Mr Meads’ latest business venture.

For the rest of us, with the exception of Peter Marshall, of course, the Music Festival would doubtless turn out to be a huge nuisance. We choose to live in Bilbury because we enjoy peace and quiet and because we want to avoid as much of the 20th century as we can.

I sewed up Duane’s arm without too much difficulty but as I was about to drive away, I found myself facing a girl of about 20 and a man who looked considerably older. She was wearing a bikini top and a pair of cut-off jeans. She had tattoos of what looked like dragons on the visible parts of her chest. I didn’t like to look too closely. He was wearing a pair of old suit trousers, a pink shirt and an embroidered waistcoat. He had tattoos over most of his face. His tattoos appeared to be of satanic symbols and gave him an alarming look. I don’t think he would have come high up on anyone’s list of suitable candidates to play Father Christmas at a seasonal party.

‘You the doc?’ demanded the man.

I confirmed his diagnosis.

‘I’ve left my contraceptive pills at home,’ said the girl. ‘I need another pack of pills.’

‘You’ll have to come to the surgery,’ I told her.

‘Why?’ demanded the man aggressively. He moved closer to me, as though attempting to intimidate me. ‘Can’t you just give her some pills?’ He pointed to my black bag. ‘Haven’t you got some in there?’

‘I don’t carry contraceptive pills,’ I told him.

‘Why do I have to come to the surgery?’ asked the girl.

‘Because I need to examine you and check your blood pressure and I can’t do either of those standing in a field,’ I told her.

‘Just give her a prescription,’ said the man. He took a roll of money out of his back pocket and peeled off a £10 note. ‘Here,’ he said. ‘We can pay.’

‘There’s no need for you to pay me,’ I told him.

I turned back to the girl. ‘But I’m afraid you’ll have to come to the surgery so that I can examine you. Then, if there aren’t any problems, I can give you a prescription.’

‘Where do we cash a prescription round here?’ demanded the man.

‘You’ll have to go into Barnstaple.’

‘Where’s that?’

‘About ten miles from here. If you drive west you can’t miss it.’

‘She needs the pills today,’ insisted the man.

I looked at my watch and shook my head. ‘She can come to my surgery this evening but the chemists in Barnstaple won’t be open until tomorrow morning.’

‘Are you prepared to take responsibility if she gets pregnant?’

‘I don’t think that would be my fault,’ I told him.

‘I need something for crabs as well,’ said the girl.

‘I’ll need to examine you before I can give you anything,’ I told her. I made a mental note to take a vaginal swab.

‘She needs something now,’ said the man, now threateningly. ‘We can’t wait until tomorrow.’

‘Having trouble, doc?’

I turned and saw the man who was in charge of the work gang. He and Duane had come over to see what was going on.

‘This bastard won’t give Trace the stuff she needs,’ said the man in the embroidered waistcoat. He wasn’t so aggressive now. Indeed, there was a whine in his voice.

Duane, the man whose arm I had stitched looked at me, obviously expecting me to give my side of the story.

‘I need to examine her,’ I explained. ‘And she needs to come to the next surgery if she wants me to treat her. I’ll treat her if she comes to see me but I’m not going to perform an intimate examination and take the blood pressure of a perfectly healthy patient while we are both standing in a field.’

‘Sounds fair enough to me,’ said the man in charge. He turned to the man with the tattooed face and the waistcoat. ‘Do as the doc says.’

The man with the tattooed face started to say something then nodded and turned away. The girl went with him.

‘Sorry about that, doc,’ said the man in charge.

‘Who are they?’ I asked.

‘Just parasites. He’s a small time dealer and pimp. She works for him.’

‘They’re not with you?’

‘Bloody hell, not likely. I wouldn’t employ either of them to clear up dogshit. He turns up at most of the festivals. Bad penny. Always has a girl or two with him. They’ve got a small tent in the next field.’

‘Thanks for your help,’ I said. ‘He looked as if he was about to get a bit nasty.’

‘Don’t you worry about him, doc. If you have any trouble with him or anyone else you find me. My name’s Rob. I’ll be here until we all bugger off on Monday. Thanks for sewing up Duane.’

I went home. The girl didn’t turn up at Bilbury Grange and I never saw her or the drug dealer again.

But that was just the beginning of my involvement with the Bilbury Music Festival.

Over the next few days I saw a seemingly endless stream of people requiring medical attention.

Mr Meads had made no provision for first aid treatment and I was the only person for miles around who was able and willing (albeit with, it has to be said, steadily increasing reluctance) to provide treatment for the staff, the musicians, the festival-goers and everyone else in attendance.

Most of the people I saw simply needed treatment for cuts and bruises and for coughs and colds and sore throats. A dozen or more needed contraceptive pills. There were a few with serious chest infections and, inevitably, quite a number with food poisoning. Three of the people I saw had problems caused by illegal drugs and several were suffering from alcohol poisoning. I saw a dozen or more with indigestion and several with sexually transmitted diseases. One girl who had a venereal infection wanted me to do tests on the six men whom she thought might have caused her problem. One girl wanted to know if you could get pregnant if you did it standing up and two wanted to know if you could get pregnant on the day when you lost your virginity. A singer with one of the bands wanted treatment for a sore throat and an ear infection. A guitarist who fell off the stage broke his wrist and had to be taken half way to Barnstaple by tractor because no ambulance could get anywhere near the Festival site. He was transferred to the ambulance about three miles away. The same procedure had to be followed when one of the men who had helped put up the stage was hit on the side of the head by an errant Frisbee. I feared that he might have a middle meningeal bleed, a type of brain haemorrhage which can be fatal, and insisted that he too go to hospital. He went with great reluctance but three hours later I was telephoned by one of the doctors at the hospital who told me that my diagnosis had been accurate and that if the young man hadn't been admitted to hospital he would have certainly died.

I made a mental note to insist that if the Music Festival was repeated then the organisers would be required to provide their own medical and first aid service – complete with a helicopter capable of taking patients to hospital.

I spent nearly an hour with an eight-year-old girl who was hysterical when I first saw her. She lived with her parents in Chelsea in London and had never been to the country before. After a long conversation I discovered that she was terrified that she was going to be eaten by the huge dog which she was convinced was roaming the countryside. It turned out that she had seen a pile of horse droppings in the lane and, never having seen a horse, had assumed that the not inconsiderable steaming heap had been produced by a wild dog of some variety. Under the circumstances, I think I too would have been terrified. I managed to settle her by arranging for her to see, and feed a chopped up apple to, a local horse in its field.

I syringed enough wax to make a candle from the ears of a drummer who suddenly discovered, to his delight, that he wasn't deaf after all.

I could and should have claimed payments from the National Health Service for treating all these patients but there was no time to fill in the necessary forms and so at the end of a hard weekend I had received a grand total of £1.75 in cash, three signed T-shirts and tickets for a rock concert in Berlin. I donated the T-shirts and the tickets to a raffle organised to raise money for our cottage hospital. The T-shirts and the tickets raised the princely sum of £7.47 for the hospital funds.

Since the roads were blocked with traffic I could not even use my bicycle, let alone the car, and I spent most of my time walking between Bilbury Grange and the site of the Festival.

I don't think anyone, not even Peter Marshall, had realised that in addition to providing almost non-stop musical entertainment, Mr Meads had also arranged for a small fair to set up in a neighbouring field. I saw several of the fair professionals over the next day or two, but I can only remember one of the patients I saw.

And for me, the story of that patient made the whole miserable weekend worthwhile.

'I need something to help me put on weight,' said a woman whose real name was Prudence Gaitskill but whose stage name was 'Fat Gertie' and whose advertising posters claimed that she was the fattest woman in Europe. She was certainly overweight; so rotund that she had considerable difficulty in walking and before she sat down she carefully put two dining chairs side by side, explaining that she didn't think one chair would be enough to hold her weight. Even with two chairs to sit on, her bottom overflowed at the sides of the chairs.

'You want to put on weight?' I said, rather startled, and assuming that I had perhaps misheard.

'Lord Snooty says that if I go under 30 stones he'll fire me and get another fat lady.'

'Lord Snooty?'

'That's what we all call him. He's the boss of the fair. His real name is Bernie Carrington though for show business purposes he calls himself Sir Bernard Carrington.' She laughed. 'He's no more a 'sir' than I'm the fattest woman in Europe.' She sighed and looked down at her hands which were clasped in her lap. 'I know for a fact that there are two women in France who are fatter than me. And I've heard that there is a woman in Scotland who could give me five stone.'

'You're losing weight?'

She nodded.

'How much have you lost?'

She looked down at her hands, still clasped in her lap, and mumbled something.

'How much?' I asked her. It was clear that she was reluctant to tell me. 'I need to know. You can tell me; I promise not to tell anyone else.'

'Five stone,' she whispered. 'Maybe six. I have to pad myself out a bit. But it means I can't wear the bikini. Lord Snooty is really nasty about that. But if I wear the bikini I can't pad myself out so much.'

'You wear a bikini?'

'When I'm working, yes. I sit in a cage in a bikini. The kids poke me with sticks.'

'How much do you weigh at the moment?'

'Just under 27 stone. A friend who has a haulage business weighed me on his lorry scales.' She paused. 'Actually, that was two months ago. I think I weigh less than that now. Probably no more than 24 or 25 stone I would guess.'

'How old are you?'

'Twenty two last birthday.'

I looked at her questioningly.

She blushed. 'Thirty three.'

'How long have you been a fat lady in a fair?'

'Ten or eleven years now.'

'Have you always been overweight?'

'Yes. I was a fat kid. I was going to do all sorts of things but I kept putting on weight and people never took me seriously. When I left university, no one would give me a job so I ended up working in a Fair. A man saw me in the street and offered me a job because his former fat lady had died on him. She was sat in a cage and they didn't know she was dead until the show closed that evening. She just died sitting on her throne.'

'Throne?'

'It's a sort of big chair. It looks a bit like a throne. It's more comfortable than an ordinary chair. If you have to sit in a cage for hours at a time, you need a comfortable chair. I have a bit of a bladder problem so I catheterise myself and wear a urine bag.'

'What did you study at university?'

'English literature. I wanted to be a teacher. But who'd hire a teacher who weighed 30 stone?' She shrugged. 'No one,' she said, answering her own question. 'No one, that's the answer.'

It all seemed so tragic that I didn't know what to say.

'I thought for a while it might be a hormonal problem,' she said. 'I had all the tests done but they couldn't find anything wrong with me. In the end I realised the doctors were using me as a sort of freak show too. They kept inviting me to appear at conferences and sit on the stage at lecture halls. They paid my expenses but never paid me a fee. So in the end I gave up on the doctors.'

'How do you get about? How did you get here today?'

'A friend brought me. His name is William Pears. He's the dwarf. He's got a tattoo of a lion on his chest and a tattoo of Queen Victoria on his back. He does a bit of juggling and fire eating and sits in a chair while people pay five pence to throw wet sponges at him. I've got a little van with a lift at the back. I sit on this sort of sling thing and he hoists me into the back of the van. He drives. I can't drive because I couldn't fit in the driving seat and even if I could I wouldn't be able to get behind the steering wheel and press the pedals, would I?'

'Where's your friend now?'

'He's outside, sitting in the van. He'll wait for me.'

'And you want to put back all the weight you've lost?'

'And a bit extra if possible. There must be something you can give me.'

'Do you want to be a fat lady in a fair for ever?'

'No, of course I damned well don't!' she said, crossly. A tear appeared in the corner of one eye. 'Do you think I like sitting on a stupid throne, in an iron cage, and having kids poke me with sticks? Do you know Lord bloody Snooty rents out the sticks so that the kids can poke me? And you wouldn't believe where they do the poking. They're always trying to pull off my bikini top. The girls are the worst. You wouldn't think that, would you?'

'Do you have any idea why you might have lost so much weight?'

'I've lost my appetite a bit.'

'Do you have any pain?'

'More a discomfort. Not really a pain.'

'Whereabouts?'

'In my lower abdomen.'

'How are your bowels?'

She blushed.

'Any problems?'

'Some bleeding.'

'You lose blood rectally?'

She nodded.

'For how long?'

‘A month. Maybe two months.’

‘Much?’

She nodded. ‘Quite a bit.’

‘And how have your bowel movements been?’

‘I’m sorry I lost my temper with you a bit earlier. When I said that about people poking me with sticks.’

‘That’s OK,’ I said. ‘Have you had any diarrhoea? Constipation?’

‘The only thing is that when I’ve been to the toilet I always feel as if I haven’t finished.’ She was now blushing deep red through embarrassment.

I tried to help her. ‘As though there’s more that needs to come out?’

‘Exactly. That’s it.’

‘But there isn’t?’

‘No, there isn’t.’

‘I need to examine you.’

‘You could save us both a lot of bother and just give me a prescription for something to help me put on weight.’

‘I need to examine you.’

She sighed.

‘I really do need to examine you,’ I said again.

She looked at me and then glanced at my examination couch but she didn’t say anything.

I looked at her and spoke softly. ‘You’re not going to be able to get up onto the couch are you?’

‘No.’

‘Then you’ll have to lie down on the floor and I’ll examine you there.’

She thought about it for a moment or two and then nodded. ‘OK,’ she whispered.

It took half an hour to get her undressed and lying down on the floor. Patsy brought a fresh sheet and laid it down on the floor so that Miss Gaitskill didn’t have to lie down on the carpet. And it was Patsy who helped her undress.

I’m sure that I am not the only person to have noticed that small, even trivial, seeming incidents in people’s lives can sometimes lead directly to momentous, life changing consequences.

For example, a friend with whom I was at medical school suffered serious damage to his hearing when he was a boy. He was away on holiday at a resort in a relatively unpopulated part of North Africa with his parents when he developed mumps. The non-availability of doctors meant that the infection wasn’t properly treated and, as a result, he developed a type of deafness which steadily got worse as he got older. When he qualified as a doctor, my pal realised that he was never going to be able to take a job working with patients directly. His worsening deafness made it impossible for him to talk easily to patients or colleagues. And so he deliberately chose to become a radiologist. He could sit in silence studying X-rays and didn’t need to talk to anyone. Everyone who worked with him claimed that he was the best damned radiologist they’d ever come across. My pal claimed that if he was good at reading X-rays it was because of, rather than in spite of, his deafness. Because people tended not to talk to him about the patients whose X-rays he was studying, he could look at the pictures without any preconceived ideas.

But the fact is that he almost certainly only became a radiologist because he’d been on holiday, caught mumps and not been properly treated. His whole life was changed by his parents’ choice of a holiday destination.

I think Miss Wakefield would agree with me that her visit to my surgery for help in putting on weight was one of those apparently minor incidents which eventually lead to life changing consequences.

As I had feared, I couldn’t find anything when I examined her abdomen. She was so obese that there could have been a football hiding inside her and I wouldn’t have been able to feel it. But I found out what was wrong with Miss Gaitskill when I finally managed to turn her on her side so that I could examine her rectum.

As I had feared and expected, she had cancer. The only good news was that I could find no sign that the cancer had spread into her lymph nodes.

When I had finished examining her and had cleaned up the blood which had come from her back passage, I helped her dress and sit back on the two chairs.

‘It’s cancer, isn’t it?’ she said.

‘I think it is,’ I agreed.

She sighed. It was a sigh of weariness, rather than sadness. The sigh of a woman who has been fighting life for so long that she no longer feels anything very much.

‘I’m going to fix up for you to see someone at the hospital tomorrow,’ I told her.

‘Tomorrow? So quickly?’

‘Tomorrow,’ I insisted. ‘If you leave North Devon and go somewhere else you will probably never get this sorted.’

‘Is it something that can be sorted?’

‘Yes, I think so.’

‘Lord Snooty will have a fit.’

‘Do you care?’

She smiled. ‘Not really.’

I helped her up off the chairs and told her to get herself to the hospital by 9 a.m. the following morning. ‘You may have to wait to be seen,’ I told her. ‘But I will fix you an appointment with one of the surgeons.’

She promised that she would do as I had asked.

And she did.

The surgeon confirmed my, and her, suspicions. He said that he would not normally have operated on anyone so vastly overweight but in view of the position of the tumour he thought he could reach it without waiting for her to lose weight. He said he wanted to operate quickly before the cancer spread.

The operation was a success.

Miss Gaitskill left the hospital two weeks later and came back to see me.

‘I’m going to try to lose weight,’ she said. ‘I want to go into hospital where I can have help controlling what I eat. While I was in hospital in Barnstaple I heard a lot about your hospital here in Bilbury. I have some savings and I want you to let me stay there. I’ll pay the same as I would have to pay a private hospital and you can use the money to help keep your hospital going.’

I told her I would have to think about it. I explained that she had to come back to see me the next day after I had spoken to Bradshaw, my practice nurse. Bradsaw, a genial octogenarian, also runs the Brownlow Country Hotel where he is officially the manager.

(I explained to Miss Gaitskill that our local cottage hospital is so named to avoid administrative complications with NHS bureaucrats. I also explained that although the hospital is called a hotel it is run efficiently and effectively by Bradshaw, who is in every practical sense the matron, together with his team of local volunteers.)

Miss Gaitskill stayed the night at the Duck and Puddle and when my surgery opened the following morning, she was standing on the doorstep.

I told her that we would initially take her for a month at the hospital and that she could stay there for as long as she continued to lose weight unless there was some sort of dire emergency and we needed her bed in which case we would expect her to move into the Duck and Puddle. I told her that I expected her to lose a quarter of a stone a week for the first month and, therefore, a stone in the first month. And I told her that she had to obey Bradshaw’s every instruction and, indeed, his every whim relating to her diet. She accepted these rules without protest.

William Pears, the dwarf, who had given up the Fair to stay with her, took a room at the Duck and Puddle and a job as a counter assistant in a shop in Combe Martin. He stood on a box behind the counter and was popular with everyone. It was, he said, the most dignified work he had ever done. It was the first time he’d been treated as a human being rather than as a freak.

Miss Gaitskill lost a stone in the first fortnight and a stone and a half in the first month. After three months she weighed under 20 stone and I could weigh her on the scales in my consulting room. It was the first time she could remember being able to weigh herself on ordinary household weighing scales. She stayed on at our hospital for six months and while she was there she applied for a place at a teacher training college. She was successful and she eventually trained as a teacher of English language and English literature.

Half way through her training, Miss Gaitskill became Mrs Pears and the couple got married in Bilbury. She weighed just over 11 stone at the time and Patsy and I, who were invited to the wedding, cried almost all the way through. They made a lovely couple.

Every Christmas, Patsy and I receive a card and a long, hand-written letter from them. And every summer they visit Bilbury and stay in the Duck and Puddle for a week.

‘I have travelled around the country a good deal,’ she once told me, ‘and there are desolate parts of Devon and Cornwall where newcomers are regarded as strangers unless their families have lived there for three or four generations. Bilbury is different in that the welcome it gives to newcomers reminds me more of one of those inner city areas in the English Midlands where life is harsh but the people are invariably kind and welcoming to strangers.’

Her words have stayed with me for they were, I think, honest and well earned. Everyone I’ve ever spoken to, says that Bilbury is, for those who choose to live there, the most welcoming place they’ve ever visited.

As far as the villagers were concerned, the Bilbury Music Festival (and the Fair which accompanied it) was a total disaster.

The lanes were clogged with traffic and no one could sleep for three nights because of the noise. Peter Marshall sold less food and drink than usual because the folk attending the Festival either brought their food with them or bought everything they needed at the stall on site. And the residents of Bilbury, who were marooned in their homes and unable to reach the shop because of the traffic jams, couldn't buy anything either. The Duck and Puddle sold some beer to the men putting up the scaffolding but none of the Festival goers visited the pub, and the scaffold erectors were such a fearsome looking bunch that the pub regulars stayed at home; locking their doors, drawing their curtains and existing on whatever food and drink they could find at the back of their larders.

The only good news was that the event proved to be a financial failure too.

The cost of paying the bands, the stage erectors and the other assorted folk required to organise the event was far greater than the money raised from ticket sales and from the sale of food and drink. Many of those who came to the Festival did not bother to buy tickets, realising that if they camped in nearby fields they could see and hear what was happening almost as well as if they were in the field where the event was being held.

And so, it was with considerable relief that the villagers heard that Mr Meads would not be holding another festival.

Paula Temple

'What evidence is there for your claim?' I asked.

I thought for a moment.

'The available evidence in support of my argument goes back a decade to the early part of the 1960s,' I replied.

'But a good many people have been helped by these drugs,' I argued.

'On the surface that appears to be true,' I agreed. 'But will that still be true in the long term?'

'There are some who would say that you are simply scaremongering.'

'That's unfair. I'm merely trying to draw attention to a very real problem.'

I have always tried to keep the talking to myself internalised, or at the very least sotto voce, but on this occasion I seemed to have spoken out loudly enough for other people to hear.

I was practising for a meeting that I was due to attend later that evening.

I was pretty sure that I was going to be given a rough time and I wanted to try to prepare myself.

I couldn't help noticing that a couple of visitors who were sitting in a far corner of the pub were looking across at me. They had clearly overheard the two halves of my conversation, and realising that there was no party of the second party, were, to say the very least, a trifle perturbed. To be honest, I couldn't blame them. I always tend to look with suspicion on individuals who have lengthy discussions with themselves.

The male half of the couple called over Frank.

'Who's that?' I heard him ask. He made no attempt to lower his voice.

'Does he need a doctor?' asked the female half of the couple.

'Oh, that is the doctor,' said Frank cheerily. 'Can I get you another drink?'

'Just the bill, please,' said the man, standing up. He looked across at me, rather nervously.

I heard the woman say something to Frank but couldn't make out what it was. The man paid and they left.

'What did that woman say to you?' I asked Frank, who was picking up their empty glasses.

Frank grinned and walked across to where I was sitting. 'She said she was glad they don't live here and have you as their doctor,' he said. He looked down at my empty coffee cup. 'Do you want a refill?'

I looked at my watch and sighed. 'I'd better be going,' I said.

I had stopped in at the Duck and Puddle on my way to a meeting of our local medical society. The meeting was being held in a hotel halfway to Exeter. I had been persuaded to give a talk about the dangers of a group of drugs known as benzodiazepines – the best known of which were a number of enormously successful products with names such as Valium, Librium and Ativan.

The main problem I faced was that almost all other members of the medical profession were uncritically enthusiastic about benzodiazepines. The drugs were rapidly becoming the world's most popular medicines.

The Valium story began in the 1930s when a Dr Leo H Sternbach was working as a research assistant at the University of Krakow in Poland. He was investigating the benzophenones and heptoxdiazines. Little happened until 1954, when Dr Sternbach was working in the New Jersey laboratories of a company called Hoffman La Roche. The result of his last experiment was called Ro5-0690 and was initially shelved as being of little interest.

However, a couple of years later, in 1957, Ro5-0690 was submitted for testing by Roche's Director of Pharmacological Research and a report was published showing that the drug was a hypnotic, a sedative and a muscle relaxant. It was a new chemical substance and the company thought it rather promising. In late 1958, Roche did more tests on the drug and found that it was effective at treating anxiety and tension. The drug was called chlordiazepoxide. The next step was that on February 24th 1960, the American Food and Drug Administration approved the drug for human use. A few weeks later, the drug was launched under the brand name of Librium.

Before the end of 1960 other drug companies, Include Wyeth Laboratories had introduced benzodiazepines of their own. In no time at all, GPs and other doctors were prescribing these drugs for an enormous range of physical and mental problems. It is difficult to think of a medical condition for which benzodiazepines were not prescribed. If you went to see a GP in 1970, you had a better than one in twenty chance that you would come away with a prescription for a benzodiazepine. A little later, one in five people who was given a prescription was given a prescription for one of these drugs.

However, I was not a fan of benzodiazepines.

What worried me was the fact that even in those early days there was evidence that these drugs might cause problems.

In 1961, a clinical report appeared in the journal *Psyschopharmacologia* which warned that patients were becoming addicted to chlordiazepoxide. In 1968, a paper in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* showed that benzodiazepines caused depression and suicidal thoughts. Then in 1970, in a book called *Discoveries in Biological Psychiatry*, edited by Ayd and Blackell, Frank Ayd wrote: 'Although vast quantities of minor tranquillisers have been prescribed, it must be stated that not all have been dispensed judiciously by some practitioners. Such misuse is indicative of physicians who unwisely accede to the demands of patients or who supplant sound clinical judgement or expediency'.

And in 1972, the *American Journal of Psychiatry* published a paper describing how patients on diazepam (the generic name for Valium) had exhibited symptoms which included apprehension, insomnia and depression. The patients had previously been emotionally stable. When the patients were taken off the drugs, their symptoms disappeared.

During the early 1970s, I had written a number of articles about the dangers of benzodiazepines. My articles, written from my little country practice, had caused something of a stir and I was rapidly becoming a 'hate' figure among doctors all over the country.

History is full of examples of original thinkers who have been scorned, laughed at, ruined and imprisoned for daring to be creative and original and (most heinous a crime of all) for having the temerity to question (and therefore threaten) the status and authority of the establishment.

Socrates was condemned to death for being too curious. Dante was condemned to be burned at the stake. The works of Confucius were still banned in China two and a half thousand years after his death. Spinoza was denounced for being independent and every schoolchild knows about Galileo's battles with the Church. Aureolus Philippus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim (better known to his chums as Paracelsus) was the greatest influence on medical thinking since Hippocrates but the establishment regarded him as a dangerous trouble maker and persecuted him all around Europe. (He is still regarded with considerable fear and distaste by the medical establishment which, on the whole, prefers not to acknowledge his existence or his importance.)

Ignaz Semmelweiss, the Austrian obstetrician, was ostracised by the medical profession for daring to criticise filthy medical practices. He was ridiculed for his views on puerperal fever, and so depressed by the opposition from the medical establishment that he became insane.

The incomparable Henry David Thoreau was imprisoned for sticking to his ideals. Wilbur and Orville Wright were dismissed as hoaxers by the US Army and most American scientists. When Wilhelm Rontgen discovered X-rays, his achievement was described as an elaborate hoax by one of Britain's most eminent scientists. Michael Servetus, the Spanish physician who discovered the circulation of the blood to and from the lungs, was executed.

The relationship between a diet low in vitamin C and the development of scurvy was first described in 1636 by John Woodall. James Lind reintroduced the idea in 1747 but it wasn't until 1795 that the British Admiralty decreed that that lemon juice should be part of every sailor's diet. Only God can possibly know how many sailors died as a result of this appalling example of cooperative prejudice.

And then there was Dr John Snow.

In the years 1848 and 1859, cholera killed thousands of people in London. Snow decided that people were contracting the disease from their drinking water and argued that the solution was to keep the sewage away from the drinking water supplies. Because the commonest symptoms, diarrhoea and vomiting, both involved the alimentary tract, he decided that the disease must be transmitted by something which had been ingested rather than something carried in the air.

In 1849, when a fresh cholera outbreak hit London, Snow gave up his general practice in order to investigate his theory. His first conclusive proof came from a survey of the district around Golden Square in the centre of London. At that time, piped water was not supplied to all houses in the area, and most people took their water from pumps and wells. A pump in Broad Street supplied the majority of the local inhabitants, and Snow's enquiries persuaded him that a cholera epidemic in the area was directly linked to the use of that particular pump. (A later investigation showed that the brick lining of a cesspool about three feet away from the well was cracked and that the leaky cesspool was contaminating the drinking water.) To prevent the further spread of the cholera, Snow had the pump's handle removed so that water could no longer be drawn from the contaminated water. Snow was not exactly the flavour of the month among his colleagues.

The original inventors of turbine power, the electric telegraph, the electric light, television and space travel were all laughed at or ignored by the scientific establishment. William Reich's books were considered so dangerous that they were burned by the Nazis in Germany in the 1930s and by the Federal Food and Drug Administration in the United States in the 1960s.

My own campaign (for that was what it had become) was a comparatively modest one. But it was, nevertheless, quite real and to me it seemed important.

The problem, of course, was that even in the 1970s, all parts of the establishment were pretty well stocked with men and women who had an aversion to anything which threatened the status quo – and which were, in particular, a threat to the medical profession's very close and undeniably self-serving relationship with the pharmaceutical industry.

And the medical establishment was (and to a large extent still is) particularly hide bound and especially reluctant to accept new theories or challenges to the accepted 'norm'.

The rather sad truth is that I was discovering that keeping an open mind, and being prepared to question existing ways of doing things, are not likely to do a young doctor's career much good at all. When I once commented on a radio programme that it was important to keep an open mind about new developments, one of the other guests, a very eminent member of the medical establishment, snorted and then remarked, in a rather contemptuous tone, that in his view, open minds were empty minds.

My interest in benzodiazepines had been aroused when a patient called Paula Temple had moved to Bilbury.

Miss Temple had come to Bilbury from Finchley, a suburb in North London. She had spent most of her life working in a pharmacy and had never been married. She had been engaged in 1939 but her fiancé, who had been a navigator on a Royal Air Force bomber, had died during a raid on Germany during World War II. Miss Temple and her fiancé had been due to marry the week after he had died and, like many women in similar circumstances, she had remained steadfastly loyal to his memory.

When I asked Miss Temple why she had chosen to retire to Bilbury she told me that, although she hadn't been to North Devon for over a half a century, she had spent many happy childhood holidays in a cottage in Bilbury. Her parents, clearly creatures of habit, had rented the cottage for two weeks every summer. Miss Temple decided that since the happiest days of the first part of her life had been spent in Bilbury, she might like to spend the final part of her life in the same place – in the hope that she might be able to rediscover some of the sense of peace and happiness she had enjoyed as a young girl.

She told me that when she had spent a few days in North Devon looking at cottages in and around the village, she had been struck by the fact that very little had changed while she had been elsewhere.

'The cars look different, and there are far more of them, and fashions have changed,' she said, 'but apart from that there really doesn't seem to have been much change. London and other cities have changed enormously in the last half a century. But Bilbury has remained as I remembered it.'

Two years before retiring, and choosing to move to Bilbury, Miss Temple's mother had died.

It had been a difficult time for the younger woman.

Mrs Temple had died of cancer and had required a good deal of nursing. In the last year and a half of her life she had also developed some form of dementia.

Looking after her aged mother had, for Miss Temple, been an exhausting experience in every way. It had been physically exhausting. It had been mentally exhausting. And it had been emotionally exhausting.

In a doubtless well-meaning attempt to help Miss Temple cope with the task of looking after her mother, while holding down a full-time job in order to pay the bills, the family doctor had prescribed Librium capsules.

And Miss Temple had been taking the drug for over four years. When I first met her she had come to the surgery to request another prescription for her Librium. She was quite insistent that I should give her the drugs.

'After my mother died I decided that I wanted to try without the pills,' said Miss Temple. 'So, foolishly, I just stopped taking them. As a result I became very ill.'

I asked her what symptoms she had noticed when she'd tried giving up the capsules.

'I started to shake, I was dizzy, I couldn't rest or relax or sleep,' she told me. 'I couldn't concentrate, I started to suffer from nausea and headaches and I felt very depressed. When I told my doctor about my symptoms, he said they showed that I needed to keep taking the capsules. So I started taking them again and the worst of my symptoms disappeared within a day or two. So I thought the doctor was probably right and that I should just keep on with the capsules as he advised.'

'What made you feel that you should stop taking the Librium?' I asked her.

'I felt that the drug was making me feel numb and fuzzy,' she said. 'I realised that I was sort of sleep walking through life, not properly aware of everything about me. It was as though I was seeing life through a thick veil of cotton wool.'

'But when you stopped them you became more anxious?'

'I felt terribly anxious; as though I were going to die.'

'And how do you feel now that you're taking them again?'

'I feel calmer than I did when I tried to stop them. But I still feel fuzzy and slow. I feel as though I'm drugged – as though I'd been anaesthetised ready for an operation but the anaesthetic hadn't properly taken effect. I feel like that all the time.'

I didn't know much about benzodiazepines at the time.

I had never prescribed them for my patients because I had felt unhappy about them.

But it was pretty obvious that Miss Temple was addicted to the drug she was taking and that if she was going to stop taking it then she would have to withdraw slowly over a period of weeks, possibly even months, rather than immediately or even over a period of days. I told her this and she asked me if I would help her through the withdrawal process.

And for the next three months I helped her cut down her daily dosage of Librium.

I read a few books and research articles on the subject and decided that it would be sensible to halve her dose every two weeks or so. To make things easier I switched her from Librium to Valium (an expert in drug addiction problems whom I consulted seemed to think that the products were pretty well interchangeable) because Valium was available in smaller dose tablets – and the low dose tablets could be cut in half with a knife in order to lower the dose even more.

The addiction expert to whom I spoke reminded me that what was happening with benzodiazepines had happened twice before. In the 1950s, huge numbers of patients were addicted to barbiturates which had been wildly over-prescribed as panacea drugs by enthusiastic doctors. And in the early part of the 20th century, there were similar problems with widespread addiction to potassium bromide. Once again these drugs had been over-prescribed by doctors.

I also talked to my friend Will, who is a GP in the English Midlands.

He has a steady turnover of patients, since people move in and out of his practice area far faster than they do in Bilbury, and he had seen many patients hooked on large doses of Valium, Librium, Ativan and other brands of benzodiazepine.

Will told me that he considered that benzodiazepine addiction was going to be a huge problem in the future – largely because so many doctors still didn't recognise that the drugs were addictive. Sadly, he felt that other doctors didn't recognise the size of the impending problem. His partners were still happily doling out benzodiazepines to a high proportion of their patients and using them to treat every disease imaginable – and certainly everything for which there wasn't already a specific drug.

Gradually, Miss Temple re-discovered her old self.

It was a difficult few months but eventually she told me that everything in the world seemed to be improving: she enjoyed music more, the colours around her seemed brighter and she enjoyed reading books again.

It was a very slow process and there were some very bad days. It seemed to me that the drug had suppressed the feelings that she'd had when her mother was ill and that as she came off the drug those old, hidden feelings all came out from where they'd been temporarily packed away. There were days when she cried and nights when she couldn't sleep. She went through the mourning process which had been numbed by the Librium she had been taking and she had to endure again the anguish of her mother's prolonged illness.

'I'm sure my doctor in London thought he was helping me,' said Miss Temple. 'He was a kind man. But I think he just accepted what the drug company told him. I wish he had just allowed me to deal with the feelings I had at the time I had them. Numbing me with the pills has just delayed things and it is now much harder to deal with those hidden emotions.'

But she did succeed in 'kicking' her prescription drug addiction. It took slightly more than three months but after that time she was a different woman. She looked brighter and more alert. She took a much more active interest in the world around her.

It was my experience with Miss Temple which had inspired me to do so much research into benzodiazepine drugs. And, although I did not mention her name, of course, she was the patient whose problems I described when I gave my lecture.

Sadly, the audience's response was not good.

Most of the doctors who were present at the meeting were enthusiastic prescribers of drugs such as Valium and Librium and they found that their patients welcomed them.

'I don't think I could run my practice without these drugs,' said one GP. 'I find them the most useful multi-purpose drug available. Vast numbers of my patients take them without any noticeable side effects.'

'But have they tried stopping the drugs?' I asked.

'Why on earth would they want to stop the drugs?' he demanded. 'They like the drugs. They need them. They don't want to give them up.'

Another GP told me that he believed that I should be struck off the medical register for even suggesting that the drugs should be controlled.

And so it went on.

Every doctor who spoke attacked my views. No one agreed with me that benzodiazepines were, or ever could be, any sort of problem.

Eventually, as my colleagues sipped their coffees, nibbled their biscuits and pocketed the free gifts which they'd been given by the drug company representatives who are always present whenever three or more doctors meet, I slipped away, climbed into the old Rolls and drove back to Bilbury.

I remember being angry, frustrated and keen to get away from the damned place.

Spreading the word about benzodiazepines was clearly going to take a long time, and be a hard battle. But it was, I felt, a battle that had to be fought.

'How did it go?' asked Patsy, when I arrived back at Bilbury Grange.

She had offered to accompany me to the lecture but I'd had a feeling that things would not go well and I'd advised her to stay at home. She always gets upset when she sees or hears me being attacked. Besides, someone always has to be at the house to answer the telephone and Miss Johnson, who usually comes in to take messages and babysit the children, was away at her sister's home for a short holiday.

I didn't say anything in response to Patsy's question but simply put my arms around her and held her tight.

'Bad?

'Pretty bad.'

'Do you want to talk about it?'

'Later. Much later. Tomorrow, maybe.'

'I've got a hot apple pie in the oven.'

'Custard?'

'Take me five minutes.'

Comfort food.

While Patsy prepared the custard for the apple pie I put on my old, comfortable slippers, poured myself a malt whisky, sat down in my favourite chair in front of the log fire and welcomed Ben, my elderly but ever-faithful dog, up onto my lap.

The cats were curled up on the rug in front of the fire.

The logs in the fireplace were from an old apple tree which had been cut down in our orchard the year before. Apple wood smells sweet when it burns.

I picked up a copy of our local parish newsletter, which is always a joy, and looked through the small advertisements at the back. Mrs Younger was advertising her sock darning service. Mr Pershore was advertising his tractor for sale. ('Nearly new. Only 260,000 miles'.) Mrs Williams had an advertisement offering to exchange a wedding dress ('worn only once but has small red wine stain on the back') for a cot ('Must be sturdy'). Peter Marshall had a small advertisement for tinned goods ('Some tins slightly dented and rusted but contents almost certainly quite safe to eat. Sold at 10% off official price'). Mr Quinlan had tried to save himself an estate agency commission by putting in an advertisement for his cottage. ('Very small place. Indoor lavatory needs attention but outside lavatory functional, needs emptying once weekly or twice weekly if curry eater. Tin bath included. Stairs very narrow and steep. No view to speak of because of trees.') I wondered whether he might not have been wiser to pay the estate agent's commission after all. Mrs Tunnicliffe was advertising her late husband's collection of pipes. ('Some brand new. Mouthpieces of all used pipes wiped clean with Dettol.')

'I think I'm going to start smoking a pipe,' I said to Patsy when she appeared with two bowls of custard covered pie. I put down the parish newsletter.

She frowned.

'Mrs Tunnicliffe is selling her husband's old pipes. I thought a pipe would go nicely with the slippers, the dog and the log fire.'

Patsy smiled. 'Great idea,' she said. 'Maybe she'll have one of those curved Meerschaum pipes.'

'The sort that Sherlock Holmes used to smoke?'

'Precisely! Appropriate since Conan Doyle was a doctor. My uncle Roger used to smoke one of those. He was always setting fire to his cardigan.'

'If I get one with a big enough bowl I could have indoor bonfires. Burn old socks and unwanted magazines.'

Patsy looked at me.

'Of course, we'd have to keep the whole pipe smoking thing a secret from the patients – since I'm always telling them not to smoke.'

Patsy ignored me.

I picked up the spoon Patsy had handed me and dug into the apple pie.

I would go back to fighting the medical establishment tomorrow. Tonight I would enjoy a quiet evening with Patsy. I would enjoy the pie, the fire and my dreams.

The cats, smelling the custard, woke up. Emily was the first to move. She jumped up onto the arm of my chair and looked up at me expectantly. Ben, alerted by Emily's presence, raised his nose and also looked at me, eyes full of hope.

One of the few things I’ve learned in life is that when you’ve got a nice bowl of custard and a house full of animals, you need to keep a close eye on your custard.

The Curious Case of Mrs Groynes's Unmentionables

'We've got a pervert in the village,' said Mrs Groynes. 'One of those men who steals women's under garments.'

It had, she said, started a couple of weeks earlier.

'I noticed it when I went out into the garden to get the washing in,' she told me indignantly. 'I could see straight away that two or three bits of clothing were missing. There was a gap on the line where they'd been hung. The clothes pegs were still there but the clothes had gone. The thief had just snatched them off the line and run off with them.'

'What was missing?' I asked her.

'One of my bras and two pairs of my knickers,' she answered. 'It was my best bra. A new one. Well, nearly new. And it cost me over a pound. And he'd taken two pairs of my knickers as well.' She announced all this with some defiance; as though daring me to dispute her allegation.

'Did you see anyone take them?' I asked her, wondering why she was telling me all this.

'No, of course I didn't! If I'd seen someone take them I'd have chased him. He'd have got what for and I'd have got my things back.'

The thought of Mrs Groynes chasing someone and catching them seemed unlikely but I nodded as though this seemed the approved and likely course of action.

Sybil Groynes is a heavily built woman; put together for sturdiness and comfort rather than speed and manoeuvrability and she was probably designed by the same people who did the pyramids. She has a very small head, a huge top half and an absolutely vast bottom half. Women who are put together in these proportions are usually described as being 'pear' shaped but Mrs Groynes did not look remotely like a pear. She looked, at best, like an artist's imaginative impression of a pear. I suspect that if she did manage to run a 100-yard sprint she would probably need to start at first light in order to complete the distance before dusk.

On the other hand, I would not like to have been a thief in possession of Mrs Groynes's unmentionables if I had been caught by her. I would imagine that she probably has a good right hook. And if she threw herself on top of you then you'd be squashed flat like a cartoon character.

In contrast, her husband Mr Sidney Groynes, is a very modestly proportioned fellow.

He has a small holding and somehow manages to scratch a living from five or six acres of fairly rough pasture land. He keeps a few pigs, a few geese, a few turkeys and a good many chickens.

The family from which Sidney Groynes comes is a remarkably large one but they have very little to do with one another.

Sidney once told me that he and the rest of the family have had so many arguments (most of which have ended in violence) that they have prepared a list of subjects they will never broach in one another's company. I once saw a copy of the list. It was seven pages long and included so many topics that I cannot imagine there was much left for them to talk about other than, perhaps, brass rubbing, slalom skiing and canoeing.

Sidney is not the brightest of God's creatures. Thumper once estimated that on the evolutionary scale he probably comes somewhere between goats and sheep. The shortage of grey matter is hereditary.

Sidney's grand-father, Evan, was born in Wales and came across the Bristol Channel on a ferry in the late 19th century; at a time when ferries commonly linked Swansea and Ilfracombe and carried thousands of tourists and workers between the two towns on a daily basis. Unfortunately, Evan was so seasick on the relatively short crossing that he vowed never to use the return half of his ticket. And nor did he. He sold it to a man from Barnstaple.

I have heard it said that Evan grew up thinking that Wales was an island and that it was not until he was in his 70s that he discovered that Wales and England are connected at the hip or, more accurately, at the northern end of the Bristol Channel and that he could, had he so wished, have made the return journey by road.

Still, long before he had made this no doubt startling and unnerving discovery, Evan had met a nice North Devon girl, got himself a job as a farm labourer, for he was by all accounts, a hard and willing worker, and started a family. They were, by all accounts, a well-matched couple for the bride, like the groom, was not an intellectual.

Sidney is Evan's grandson.

He and Sybil met at a dance in Ilfracombe. She was 16 and a bit years old and on holiday with her parents. She was, I believe, a big girl then. When her parents left to go home to Bristol, she stayed behind and moved in with Sidney. The pair married a year later when Sybil mistakenly thought she was pregnant. They never did have children and I suspect that particular ship sailed some time ago.

'Have you told the police?' I asked Sybil.

‘Oh, they won’t be interested,’ said Mrs Groynes dismissively and, to be frank, rather contemptuously.

We used to have a policeman stationed in Bilbury but we hadn’t had one of our own for a year or two. If we need a policeman we had to telephone Barnstaple. And I understood what she meant. It didn’t seem likely that the Barnstaple police station would send a patrol car all the way to Bilbury to investigate the theft, or alleged theft, of three small items of feminine underwear.

‘How did you think I might be able to help?’ I asked.

‘You know everyone in the village,’ said Mrs Groynes. ‘If you know any perverts just tell them that I want my undies back. If they put them back on my washing line or post them through my letterbox I won’t say any more about it.’

‘I’m afraid I don’t know any perverts,’ I told her. ‘As far as I know we don’t have any in Bilbury.’

‘Not one?’

‘Not one.’

‘What about that Montgomery Hall?’ demanded Mrs Groynes. ‘He dresses up in women’s clothes. I went past their house last summer and saw him out in the garden as large as life and twice as bold. He was sitting in a deckchair reading a book. He was wearing a frock and a straw hat. Can you imagine?’ Mrs Groynes sniffed disapprovingly.

‘Montgomery wouldn’t steal your undies,’ I told her.

The Halls live in a house called ‘Dunmoanin’. He is a retired fireman and a crossdresser. He retired from the fire service suffering from stress and on his best day, he is as nervous as a kitten playing in the garden on a windy day. Montgomery Hall wouldn’t have the courage to steal a bar of soap from a hotel bathroom let alone creep into someone’s garden and raid her washing line.

‘How do you know he wouldn’t?’ demanded Mrs Groynes.

‘He’s not your size,’ I replied immediately. God could make three Montgomery Halls out of one Mrs Groynes and have enough material left over to make a five-year-old child, a small dog, a couple of cats and a handful of field mice.

Mrs Groynes thought about this. ‘No, I suppose not,’ she agreed reluctantly.

‘I’ll keep my eyes peeled,’ I told her, though I didn’t fancy the idea of wandering around the village demanding that every woman show me her underwear and produce the appropriate receipts.

‘Hmm,’ said Mrs Groynes. She folded her arms underneath her stately bosom as though she had suddenly decided that it needed more support. ‘Well, if you catch them, you let me know. I’ll tell my Sidney and he’ll give them a good seeing to.’

I didn’t think Sidney could give a ‘good seeing to’ to a blind tortoise but I nodded politely. ‘What colour were the missing items?’ I asked. I suddenly realised that I was beginning to sound like a policeman.

‘The bra was white,’ said Mrs Groynes. ‘A size 48DD.’

What, I wondered, would a thief do with such a gargantuan item of lingerie. The thief would have to be the same size as Mrs Groynes to take full advantage of the proceeds of the crime and I doubt if there is anyone in North Devon who is the same size as Mrs Groynes.

‘And the other items?’ I asked.

‘Both red.’

I noticed that Mrs Groynes had gone rather red herself.

She didn’t give me the size of the missing knickers but it seemed reasonable to assume that they would not have found them on the rack marked ‘Petite’.

‘Was there anything else?’ I asked. ‘Anything else you need while I’m here?’

I’d driven several miles to visit Mrs Groynes at home and I hadn’t expected to find myself being invited to turn into Sherlock Holmes and solve the Case of the Missing Lingerie.

‘No,’ said Mrs Groynes. ‘Nothing else. I didn’t think it was something worth bothering you about in the surgery.’

‘Of course,’ I said. ‘Thank you.’

‘Don’t mention it,’ said Mrs Groynes.

I got back into the Rolls and drove away.

I did not, I confess, give much thought to Mrs Groynes’s missing unmentionables. I assumed that they had probably blown away in one of the gales which affect the North Devon coastline throughout the year. Or that Mrs Groynes had maybe mislaid the absent items.

Indeed, I had completely forgotten about the visit and the missing bra and undies until I happened to be passing by the Groynes’s smallholding early one morning a week or so later.

I had been to visit Harry Burrows, an elderly man who lives in a cottage on the edge of Woolley Wood. Mr Burrows suffers from a dictionary of medical ailments including asthma, back trouble, high blood pressure, gallstones, early Parkinson's disease, gout, athlete's foot and chilblains. He'd called me out because he'd had a bad attack of gout.

Gout is a type of arthritis which causes severe pain. It is widely believed to affect only the big toes of elderly Colonels who have drunk too much port wine. This is nonsense, of course. In practice, I have found gout to be quite common. It affects far more men than women and it usually affects men over the age of 35 years of age. Most sufferers are overweight and a good many of them also seem to suffer with high blood pressure. Gout develops when the levels of uric acid in the blood rise too high and uric acid crystals accumulate in the joints. Any joint in the body can be affected and although it is true that the big toes are often affected, other joints which can be involved include the wrists, knees, ankles, elbows and all the joints in the fingers.

In a healthy individual, uric acid is excreted in the urine but in gout sufferers this doesn't happen properly. There are several possible reasons for this failure. In some individuals the kidneys may be damaged, and failing to get rid of uric acid properly. In others there is an inherited tendency to develop high levels of uric acid. And in a third group, which included Mr Burrows, the gout is triggered by eating too many foods which tend to produce high levels of uric acid. Foods which are particularly likely to cause gout include game, herring, whitebait, salmon, strawberries, asparagus, spinach and rhubarb. Drinks likely to cause gout (or make it worse) include port and sparkling wines such as champagne.

Mr Burrows lives on a strange diet which consisted mostly of pheasant, partridge and rhubarb. He obtains the pheasant and the partridge by trapping them in his garden (quite illegally I'm afraid) and he obtains the rhubarb by growing it next to a huge manure pile which he keeps topped up with the help of a few ponies in a neighbouring field. I had repeatedly warned him that his diet was making his gout far worse but he was stubborn and reluctant to change his diet.

'I've got a bad attack of the grout,' complained Mr Burrows, when I arrived at his cottage. He steadfastly insisted on referring to his problem as though it were a form of filler used to fill gaps between tiles or bricks. I had long ago given up trying to explain the difference.

Mr Burrows already had a supply of a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug and he also took allopurinol to help control the production of uric acid. It was, as usual, his left knee which was affected. I don't know why it always affects his left knee. It just does. I don't think he has ever had any trouble with his toe joints.

The knee was swollen and I injected him with a steroid. In the past this has always proved effective at reducing the swelling and the pain. I also prepared an ice pack for his knee and told him to drink plenty of water to try to flush out some of the uric acid.

I had done everything I could to help Mr Burrows and was on my way back to Bilbury Grange when I found myself driving past the Groynes' smallholding. The part of their land which they use as a garden area runs along beside the road and the hedge there is very thin and poorly kept. As I drove by, my eye was caught by something in the garden. I slowed down, came to a halt and could see that Mrs Groynes's washing was hanging on the line. She must have left it out overnight. And a huge crow was busy plucking at a large piece of red material which, when I looked more closely, was pretty obviously another pair of Mrs Groynes's knickers.

Suddenly, the crow succeeded in pulling the item of underwear from the wooden clothes peg which had been holding it on to the clothes line.

I watched in amazement as the crow then flew off, carrying Mrs Groynes's knickers.

I opened the glove compartment of the Rolls and took out a small pair of binoculars which I keep there for watching wildlife. To my astonishment, the crow took the knickers high up into a nearby sycamore tree. I could see that the bird's nest, which was largely made with the usual mixture of sticks and twigs, also contained something white and several red items. I'd heard of the red kite taking items of laundry to line a nest but I hadn't previously realised that crows had a penchant for decorating their homes with such items.

I got out of the car and knocked on the Groynes' front door.

It was Mrs Groynes herself who eventually answered my knock. She was wearing a vast and rather tatty dressing gown and had pink plastic curlers in her hair.

'I've identified the thief who took your underwear,' I told her.

'Who?' she demanded. 'I'll skin the pervert.'

'Not easy to do,' I told her.

I explained that her bra and knickers had been stolen by a crow who had used them to line a nest in a nearby tree.

She stared at me, disbelievingly.

'You can see it for yourself,' I told her. I explained where she should look. I turned to leave.

'And I'm afraid the bad news is that you've just lost another pair of your knickers,' I added. 'The crow just took a pair from your washing line.'

Mrs Groynes's immediate response was unprintable.

‘Sidney!’ she shouted. ‘Fetch the ladder!’

I hurried back to the car, before I too was ordered to climb up the tree to retrieve the stolen undergarments.

I am proud to report that I succeeded in hiding my smile until I was out of sight.

The Mortgage Application

I know most of my patients by name. I know where they live, what they do for a living and their social circumstances. Even the individuals who haven't been to the surgery are usually well known to me because I have seen them in the village; usually at the Duck and Puddle public house or at Peter Marshall's shop.

However, I didn't recognise Mr Woodbury when he came into the surgery. And yet I could see from his medical records that he lived in the village and had done so for longer than I had. I recognised the address and I had seen Violet Woodbury, who was his wife, on a number of occasions.

Violet Woodbury is a tiny woman, if she stood on tiptoes she would probably just about measure five foot tall, and she looks rather like a neatly dressed Victorian doll. Whenever I've seen her she has always been dressed in rather old-fashioned clothes; blouses with ruffled sleeves and long skirts which reach almost to the ground. She wears her hair in those strange, old-fashioned buns – one on each side of her head so that it almost looks as if she is constantly wearing ear muffs.

Violet is a nervous, gentle woman who embroiders hand-made greeting cards which she sells to a woman who has a stall on Barnstaple Market. Peter Marshall stocks a few of her cards in his shop and I believe they sell quite well. I can't imagine how Mrs Woodbury makes any money out of the cards because the materials alone must cost her more than the prices charged for the finished articles. Each card is a small work of art and must take her several hours to complete. I've always thought it is more of a hobby than a job; something with which she keeps herself occupied when her husband is away.

I've seen her in the surgery quite a few times because she has psoriasis on her arms and legs. That is, of course, why she always wears long-sleeved blouses and long skirts.

But Farley Woodbury, her husband, was a stranger to me.

Looking at him I would have said that he was in his mid-fifties but the almost empty cardboard envelope which contained his very skimpy medical records told me that he was actually still in his mid-forties. He was, to be more precise, just 46-years-old. His face rather reminded me of Clark Gable, the film star, and he even had one of those little moustaches which Gable wore. But from the neck down he looked more like Luciano Pavarotti, the bulky Italian opera singer.

'I waited until the end of the surgery because I've got a form for you to fill in, doctor,' he said, taking a form out of his briefcase and holding it out towards me. I immediately recognised it as an insurance company document.

'My wife and I are buying a flat in London and so I've got to take out a loan from the bank,' he explained. 'The bank wants to be sure that I'm not to drop dead next week.' He shrugged and smiled. 'Or, at least, they want to feel comfortable with the odds against my dropping dead next week.'

I took the form from him and examined it. I'd seen quite a few of them.

Different companies have different forms but they're all much the same.

The first part of the form consists of a series of questions designed to elicit evidence of existing or impending ill health. The second part of the form requires the doctor to perform a number of fairly basic physical tests: pulse rate, blood pressure, weight and so on.

At the end of the whole thing the examining doctor must sign the form, either confirming that the patient is a good risk or warning the company that there is or might be a health problem which could result in a higher premium or their refusing to provide insurance cover at all.

In recompense for this work, which does not fall within a GP's commitments and responsibilities with the National Health Service, the company sends the doctor a cheque for his services. I don't see many of these forms, mainly because my practice is very small and most of the residents in Bilbury aren't about to purchase new properties or take out large loans for other purposes, but doctors with large practices in towns or cities fill in two or three of these forms a week and can make quite a bit of money out of them. My friend Will who works in general practice in the English Midlands earns enough from insurance company medicals to pay for the running of his motor car.

I do so few of them that I could probably make just about enough to keep my bicycle on the road. In practice, I give all my insurance company earnings to our local village hospital.

I am not complaining. I wouldn't swap my practice in Bilbury for a job anywhere else. And I didn't qualify as a doctor in order to fill in insurance company forms.

My questioning of Mr Woodbury didn't produce much information likely to be of interest to the insurance company. He told me that he worked as a salesman for a company making expensive yachts. His job took him all around the world and he usually spent between six and nine months of the year travelling. He had no history of serious illness, no symptoms of respiratory or cardiac problems, no joint pains and no other significant signs of illness.

‘Do you have any problems with your stomach?’ I asked.

‘No,’ he replied. ‘Nothing of any great significance.’

I looked up from the form, upon which I had been putting ticks in the little boxes. I didn’t say anything, just raised an eyebrow. I knew there was more.

‘I get a lot of wind,’ he admitted. ‘I sometimes have to let my belt out a couple of notches.’

‘Does the wind come up or go down when you get rid of it?’

‘Both. If I’m having dinner with a client I sometimes have to excuse myself and go to the lavatory – just to let out some of the wind.’ He shuffled in the chair, clearly embarrassed.

‘Do you have any pain?’

‘I get bad pain when the wind is at its worst. It sometimes feels as though my guts are blown up like a balloon. And the pain seems to be a result of the gut wall stretching. That’s what it feels like anyway.’

‘Does any particular type of food make things worse?’

‘Fatty food,’ said Mr Woodbury immediately.

I’d heard this before from patients. I don’t think anyone knows precisely why but it seems that fatty food causes the muscles of the bowel to go into spasm. The muscular spasms then push the food through very quickly and result in the production of a mixture of mucus and diarrhoea. Patients have told me that if they eat something bland, or drink a glass of water, this sometimes helps to relieve the spasms. I suspect that the bland food merely fills up the bowels and gives the muscles something to squeeze when they go into spasm.

‘Does anything help relieve the pain?’

‘Eating and drinking seems to help,’ said Mr Woodbury. He looked embarrassed and patted his stomach. ‘Sometimes, if I’ve eaten a big meal and my bowels are playing up I’ll make myself a sandwich – something bland and not containing much fat. A jam sandwich or something like that – together with a glass of water. If I’m staying in a hotel I’ll order a salad sandwich.’ He looked at me. ‘It’s a funny thing,’ he said, ‘but big hotels don’t seem to stock any jam. Either that or the chefs don’t know how to make a jam sandwich.’

‘How often do you get the pain?’

Mr Woodbury thought for a moment. ‘It varies,’ he said at last. ‘Sometimes I get it almost consistently for a couple of weeks. Just about every day. And then it will disappear for a few weeks.’

‘Does anything else ease the pain?’

‘A warm bath helps,’ said Mr Woodbury. ‘And I find that if I lie on my side when I’m in bed I get some relief.’

‘Have you noticed whether anything makes the pain worse?’

‘If I’m very stressed it can get bad,’ he admitted. ‘When I was young I had nerves of steel. These days the slightest aggravation seems to upset me. A friend of mine, a fellow I work with sometimes, has a theory that human beings can cope with only so much nervous strain. His idea is that the capacity for stress varies from one individual to another, but the principle remains the same for everyone. Once you’ve taken as much stress as you can cope with that’s it – there isn’t any room for any more stress.’ He laughed. ‘Probably sounds daft to you, doctor!’

‘I’ve heard much dafter ideas,’ I told him.

‘The problem is that my job involves me meeting with some very strange people. My company sells yachts that cost £200,000 and have helicopter landing pads.’ He smiled. ‘Who was it who said that the rich are different to us?’

‘I think it was F.Scott Fitzgerald,’ I replied.

‘Well, he was right,’ said Mr Woodbury. ‘They are different. The people I deal with are used to getting their own way. They expect you to fly half way round the world to meet them and when you get there you find that they’ve moved and they’ve flown back to where you were a day earlier. They have their own private aircraft and can fly in comfort and style but I’m flying economy on scheduled services. Plus I then have to explain to my boss why my expenses are so high and I’m not selling any boats.’

‘I can see that would be very stressful,’ I agreed.

He grimaced and nodded. ‘Actually,’ he added, ‘the pain in my belly often gets worse when I’m flying – particularly if the plane is a small one. I’ve noticed that. I can’t imagine why flying should make it worse except for the fact that when I’m in an aeroplane I’m usually rushing to be somewhere else. And for me that’s a pretty stressful activity.’ He looked down at his waistline. ‘My size doesn’t help,’ he admitted. ‘I don’t know whether I’m imagining this but the seats on aeroplanes seem to get smaller and smaller.’

‘How are your bowels?’ I asked. ‘When you go to the loo?’

‘Fine,’ he replied. ‘Well, most of the time.’

I waited for him to elucidate.

‘I get a bit of diarrhoea occasionally,’ he explained. ‘At other times I’ll be constipated for a day or two.’

‘Do you pass any blood with the diarrhoea? Or at any other time?’

‘Oh no, nothing like that.’ He paused, and looked down.

‘You’ve looked for blood?’

‘Oh yes. With all this pain I thought of the obvious.’

‘Anything else?’

‘It’s a bit embarrassing really.’

‘Go on. I’m not going to be embarrassed and you don’t need to be.’

‘I sometimes pass some mucus type of stuff.’

‘Does that relate to the pains you get?’

‘Yes, I usually get the mucus after I’ve had the pains.’

‘Have you taken anything for the wind and the pain?’

‘I’ve tried various over-the-counter medicines. I’ve bought several medicines recommended for flatulence. I’ve been to a few pharmacists and asked them for stuff. I’ve tried stuff in the States, in Japan, in Germany and here.’

‘Has any of it helped?’

‘A little bit. But not a lot.’

‘But you do find that the wind and the bowel problems are caused or made worse by what you eat?’

‘Oh yes, definitely. If I eat something that is very fatty then I’m usually bad for a few days afterwards. I try to avoid fatty foods as much as I can but in my job it isn’t always easy. I have to eat out with clients and because the people who buy the sort of yachts I sell are pretty rich I have to take them somewhere expensive. And posh restaurants and hotels seem to serve a lot of very fatty food.’

I nodded, made a few notes on a notepad which I keep on my desk but I didn’t write anything on the form for the time being.

‘Pop behind the screen and undress down to your underwear,’ I told him. I looked at the form. ‘I need to examine you and this particular insurance company seems to want a pretty thorough examination.’

‘The bank is lending us quite a chunk of money,’ explained Mr Woodbury. ‘We’re buying a flat in Kensington. It’ll mean that my wife can stay in London with me when I have to see clients in the city. She prefers staying here in Bilbury but at the moment I sometimes go for a month or six weeks without seeing her. Having a flat in town will mean that we can spend a few days together when I’m seeing potential customers.’ He pulled a face. ‘Property in London is ridiculously expensive but we’re hoping it will be an investment.’

‘I’m sure it will be!’ I said.

‘We’re having to pay £20,000 for quite a small flat!’ said Mr Woodbury. ‘One bedroom, living room, dining room and bathroom and kitchen.’

I looked at him, astonished. ‘£20,000 for a flat!’

‘I know,’ he said. ‘Ridiculous, isn’t it? You can buy quite a large house in Bilbury for less than that.’

I couldn’t help wondering if property prices in London could go much higher than they had already reached. In my innocence and ignorance, it seemed impossible that Mr Woodbury would be able to make money on his investment. But that, of course, was not my problem.

He stood up and went behind the screen.

While he undressed I looked at the rest of the form, and thought about what I’d learned.

I was convinced, from the story he’d told me, that Mr Woodbury was suffering from a disorder known as irritable bowel syndrome.

Back in the 19th century, irritable bowel syndrome, or IBS, used to be known as ‘spastic colon’. Back then no one really knew what caused it or why the bowel muscles went into such painful spasms. A hundred years later, in the 1970s, and still no one knew what caused it or why the bowel muscles went into such powerful and painful spasms.

It is a debilitating and underestimated disorder and the name, which makes the disorder sound almost insignificant, really doesn’t do it justice. Because it doesn’t kill those who suffer from it, doctors don’t tend to take it very seriously and researchers have generally avoided doing any work to find out more about it.

Doctors also tend to be suspicious about diseases which produce only symptoms – they tend to think of really serious, deadly diseases as producing lots of measurable signs.

But my experience as a GP had taught me that IBS can wreck people’s lives. And there is certainly no doubt that the pain caused by the muscle cramping associated with IBS can be among the most incapacitating of all pains.

But IBS is not considered to be a life threatening disorder and the insurance company form contained no box for me to report this condition.

‘Do you want me to lie down on the couch?’ Mr Woodbury asked, now wearing just his vest, underpants and socks. He was clearly grossly overweight and I suspected that either his suit had been handmade to try to disguise his weight or else he had been wearing some sort of corset to hold in his tummy. If he'd been female I'd have suspected that he was about to deliver a brace of bouncing new twins.

Apart from his being considerably overweight, my physical examination didn't produce anything much of interest. His blood pressure was surprisingly normal. His lungs were clear. His heart was ticking away very nicely. His joints all worked perfectly well. There were no signs of any neurological problems. His eyesight was normal. His hearing was excellent. He had no enlarged glands. His teeth and mouth were fine.

When I examined his abdomen I could feel nothing abnormal, though to be honest he was so overweight that the examination was a little difficult to do thoroughly. I put a finger into his back passage and found no signs of an enlarged prostate or any other abnormality. He had no enlarged lymph nodes. His temperature was entirely normal. His skin was free of serious blemishes and except for a rather bad fungal infection between the toes and on the nails of both feet, I could find nothing wrong there. As far as I know, no one has ever died of athlete's foot so I didn't consider that discovery to be of any great significance.

I gave him my usual little talk about the need to lose weight. I told him that I understood why he ate too much but I warned him that if he didn't lose weight then the excess he was carrying would have a long-term damaging effect on his heart, his joints and just about every other part of his body. I gave him a calorie booklet I'd had printed. It contains details of how many calories different foods contain. And I gave him another leaflet which contains my dieting tips.

Mr Woodbury looked suitably contrite and promised to make a real effort to lose some weight.

Finally, I told him that I needed a urine sample. I told him to get dressed, gave him a sample bottle and told him where he would find our downstairs cloakroom.

While I waited for him to produce a sample, I continued to fill in the form the insurance company had provided. I have never been very good at filling in forms. I don't know why it is but I often find myself rushing and missing a box here or there. And then, two weeks later, the form comes back to me with a note explaining what I've forgotten and asking me to finish the job I've started.

And so I always take special care when filling in an insurance medical form for a patient. I know that an error can lead to a delay in them obtaining the money they need and, consequently, a delay in completing their property purchase. I am very well aware that the whole property buying chain is complicated enough without me making it any worse.

Moments later Mr Woodbury returned, handed me the usual, warm plastic bottle and sat down. I took the bottle over to the sink in the corner of my consulting room where I perform tests of this type. I dipped one of the little indicator sticks into the urine. These little paper sticks have revolutionised medical practice. They were the one aspect of medical practice which my predecessor Dr Brownlow found most useful. He claimed that as far as he was concerned nothing, absolutely nothing, had revolutionised his life quite as much as the little paper testing sticks. In his earlier career, the testing of urine had involved much glassware and a good deal of expertise.

In the old days, a doctor would need real laboratory equipment to test to see if there was any blood or sugar in a urine sample. And testing to see if a woman was pregnant would require a good deal of patience.

These days a doctor can tell if there is sugar or blood in a urine sample within a couple of minutes.

I really didn't expect to see any abnormality when I tested Mr Woodbury's urine. There was absolutely no reason to suspect that there might be any positive result at all.

And so I was startled when the little slip of paper I was using showed that there was a trace of blood in Mr Woodbury's urine sample. To be honest 'startled' is not a strong enough word. I was actually quite shocked and horrified. It was not something I expected and I was pretty sure it was not something that Mr Woodbury could have suspected.

I was so shocked that I repeated the test with another testing stick.

This too produced a positive result.

The amount of blood in his urine wasn't great. But the test was nevertheless definitive. Mr Woodbury had blood in his urine. And blood in the urine is not something that can, or should, be ignored.

I poured the rest of the urine down the sink, threw the empty bottle and the two testing strips into the pedal operated waste bin underneath the sink, and went back to my chair. The diagnosis of IBS which I had already made now seemed very insignificant.

'Everything OK, doctor?' asked Mr Woodbury. Like me he clearly did not expect the test to produce any evidence of importance.

'I'm afraid your urine isn't quite as clear as I would like,' I told him. 'I need to arrange a couple of tests at the hospital in Barnstaple.'

Mr Woodbury looked at me and paled noticeably. 'What sort of tests?' he asked. 'What's the problem?'

It is bad enough when a patient visits a doctor with signs or symptoms and then is told that the symptoms of which he has complained, or the signs which he has noticed, are as significant as he may have feared.

(Symptoms, of course, are the physical or mental features of a disorder which are apparent to the patient whereas signs are the physical or mental features which usually have to be elicited by the doctor. So, for example, a headache or blurred vision is a symptom whereas a heart murmur or an exaggerated neurological reflex is a sign.)

But it is, I suspect, worse when a patient who feels perfectly healthy visits a doctor for an entirely routine examination and is told that there is a problem with his or her health. To hear that there is a problem, under these circumstances, must be quite a shock. There has been no time for the patient to prepare himself, or herself, for bad news.

'There was a tiny amount of blood in your urine,' I told him.

I prefer to be honest with patients when I can.

I think it can sometimes be worse if a patient is left in the dark and allowed to imagine all sorts of strange scenarios. Unless there are obvious signs to the contrary, I like to assume that my patients are not stupid. And I am certainly aware that if a doctor tries to hide the truth then there is a real risk that the patient will go away convinced of the worst. It is not unknown for patients who have very curable problems to commit suicide because they were allowed to harbour unnecessary fears.

'There wasn't enough for me to see any sign of blood in the urine with the naked eye,' I told him. 'But the testing strip found a small amount of blood.' I paused. 'A very small amount,' I added.

'What do you think the problem could be?' asked Mr Woodbury.

'I don't know,' I told him honestly. 'There are lots of possible causes of blood in the urine. You haven't had an injury recently, have you? Been hit or kicked in the kidneys?'

'No, definitely not,' said Mr Woodbury.

'You don't do any strenuous exercise?'

Mr Woodbury laughed rather wryly. 'Do I look like a man who does any strenuous exercise.'

I smiled my understanding. 'Do you have any stinging when you pass urine?'

'No, nothing like that.'

Blood in the urine can be caused by a urinary tract infection but this seemed unlikely. The testing strip I had used had shown no sign of any infection and the urine sample had looked perfectly clear.

'Have you had any discharge from your penis? Any signs of an infection there?'

Mr Woodbury shook his head.

'Let me take a look,' I said, standing up.

Mr Woodbury stood up too, and unbuttoned his trousers so that I could examine his penis and scrotum. There were absolutely no abnormalities. No lumps, no rash, no sores and no visible bleeding.

'Could it be cancer?' asked Mr Woodbury bluntly, after he'd sat down and while I was washing my hands.

'It's a possibility we have to exclude,' I told him.

'What sort of cancer could it be?'

'Cancer of the bladder is one possibility and cancer of the kidney is another,' I told him. 'But there is probably a much simpler explanation. And even if there is a cancer, it is clearly very early on because the amount of blood in your urine is very, very small.'

'How soon can you arrange the tests?' asked Mr Woodbury.

'I'll fix it up now,' I told him.

Patients who live in big cities invariably have access to much bigger and better equipped hospitals than the ones available in rural areas. But there are more likely to be waiting lists for essential tests in big hospitals.

One of the advantages of being in a fairly lowly populated area such as North Devon is that it is often perfectly possible to arrange an appointment for tests to be done the same day or the next day.

I picked up the telephone and telephoned the local X-ray department.

'Can you get to the hospital in Barnstaple this afternoon?' I asked Mr Woodbury, holding my hand over the telephone.

'Today?' Mr Woodbury seemed shocked by the speed of the appointment.

'Yes.'

I took my hand off the mouthpiece, fixed a time and then replaced the telephone.

'Be at the X-ray department at three o' clock this afternoon,' I told him. 'They'll do some tests for me. And then come back to see me at this evening's surgery. I'll speak to the radiologist when he's seen you and I should have some news for you by then.'

'I don't need an appointment to see you this evening?'

'No, of course not – you just have to turn up at the surgery. I don't have an appointments system for any of my surgeries.'

Mr Woodbury thanked me and, still looking rather pale, left.

I looked at my watch. Mr Woodbury's insurance medical examination had taken quite a while and it was now nearly 1 p.m. I checked the list of home visits which Miss Johnson had put on my desk before Mr Woodbury's consultation.

There were just two visits to do and neither of them was urgent. I decided to have my lunch and then do the visits after I had eaten.

One of the many things I have learned as a GP working in a solitary practice is that it is always wise to eat when you can.

On too many occasions I have put off having my lunch, spent the whole afternoon doing fairly routine home visits, returned to Bilbury Grange to do the evening surgery, had to go out on an urgent visit when I should have been eating my dinner and found myself eating my first food for more than twelve hours at 10 o'clock at night.

So I joined Patsy and we had a light lunch of soup, and a couple of sandwiches made with fresh home-made bread and some excellent local cheddar cheese. The cheese is made by a farmer who is a patient of mine and who brings us a block of the stuff every weekend as a 'thank you' for services rendered.

In the afternoon, I completed the two visits and then caught up on some paperwork. Even back in the 1970s, general practitioners spent a good deal of their lives dealing with paperwork.

Mr Woodbury returned to Bilbury Grange that evening.

He came to the surgery with his wife, Violet, and explained that after the morning consultation he had gone straight home and told his wife that he needed to go to the hospital. She had gone with him and waited while he was in the X-ray department.

Unlike the morning, when he had generously waited until the end of the surgery because he suspected that his appointment was going to take longer than everyone else's, he was the first to appear in the surgery. He wanted to know the news. And who wouldn't?

I had got off the telephone to the radiologist just half an hour earlier and I had spent that thirty minutes thinking about Mr Woodbury's condition.

Hospitals are bound up with a lot of red tape and there are frequently long administrative delays in getting the results of X-rays and laboratory results to the GP. The result can be that patients sometimes have to wait weeks to find out whether or not they have a serious disease. This delay inevitably means that starting essential treatment will necessarily be delayed. And that can be fatal. I have always preferred to telephone the hospital and speak to the doctor who did the tests and who can give me the information first hand, without waiting for it to come through the post.

For both the doctor and the patient this is one of the advantages of living in a fairly remote rural village. A city GP, with two or three thousand patients to look after, probably wouldn't have time to ring the hospital. And even if he found the time he would probably have great difficulty finding the doctor who had conducted the tests.

Our local Barnstaple hospital has a small number of staff. I know most of them personally and so I can ring up, speak directly to them and get the information I need.

Just ten minutes earlier I had suddenly realised that I had had, all the time, two valuable pieces of information which I'd missed.

The Woodburys came into the surgery holding hands. They were both white with anxiety.

'You can stop worrying,' I told them both, before they had even sat down. I hate doctors who behave as though they are conducting a quiz show, and who make patients wait for ages before they give them the news they have been waiting for. I once worked for a hospital consultant who would make patients wait four or five minutes before giving them the important information which they had been so desperate to receive.

'The radiologist is certain that there is no cancer in your bladder or either of your kidneys,' I told Mr Woodbury.' As you know, the hospital did X-rays of your bladder and both kidneys and they looked at everything with their ultrasound equipment. They also did some blood tests. And the radiologist, who is an excellent doctor, is quite certain that you don't have cancer of the bladder or cancer of the kidneys.'

Mrs Woodbury burst into tears. Mr Woodbury put his arm around her and gave her a hug.

I busied myself with some paperwork on my desk, giving them both time to take in the good news and settle a little.

'Do they have any idea what caused the bleeding?' asked Mr Woodbury. He coughed to clear his throat. His voice was wavering.

'No, they don't,' I told him. 'We've ruled out all the usual, obvious causes. There is no growth and no infection. But just before you got here I was thinking about everything you told me and I think I know what caused the blood in your urine.'

They both looked at me, expectantly.

‘When we talked this morning you told me that your abdominal pain and swelling got worse when you were travelling in aeroplanes,’ I said.

Mr Woodbury nodded. ‘That’s right.’

‘I’m pretty sure that the swelling and the pain are symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome,’ I told him. ‘And the pain in your abdomen gets worse when you’re flying because the gases in the intestinal tract expand at higher altitudes.’

They both nodded.

‘That makes sense,’ said Mr Woodbury.

The radiologist had inadvertently helped with the diagnosis because he had told me that when he looked at the X-rays of Mr Woodbury’s kidneys, he could hardly see anything because of the amount of gas in the intestine. No X-ray report would have contained such valuable information.

‘Irritable bowel syndrome often seems to get worse when sufferers eat fatty food,’ I explained. ‘I have no idea why. But it is, nevertheless, a fact. For most people this is actually quite good for their health because folk who eat less fatty food are less likely to develop circulatory problems – heart disease and strokes – and are also less likely to develop cancer.’

‘But how does that relate to the blood in my urine?’

‘When the wind inside your intestine expands it presses on the other organs inside your abdomen,’ I explained. ‘And my theory is that it is the pressure on one or both of your kidneys which has caused the bleeding.’

‘But could wind do that?’ asked Mrs Woodbury.

‘I don’t see why not,’ I replied. ‘If the kidney is bruised or knocked hard then it is quite common to find blood in the urine. So if the kidney is under pressure from a wind-filled length of intestine, it makes sense to me that there might be some bleeding. Don’t forget that there were only microscopic amounts of blood in your husband’s urine.’

‘That sounds as if it would be good news,’ said Mr Woodbury.

‘Certainly,’ I said. ‘It then leaves us with the problem of dealing with your irritable bowel syndrome – rather than the problem of dealing with a kidney problem. And that’s much simpler because IBS is far less threatening than a kidney cancer.’

‘Is there a test that you can do to check this out?’ asked Mr Woodbury. ‘To see if your diagnosis is the right one?’

‘There isn’t a specific test,’ I told him. ‘And I have to tell you that this is my own theory. I’ve never seen it discussed by other doctors as an explanation for blood in the urine.’

‘But you’ve thought of a test?’

I nodded. ‘There’s a very simple test we can do,’ I said to Mr Woodbury. ‘You come back and see me when you haven’t got much wind in your intestines – on a day when your irritable bowel syndrome isn’t causing you any trouble.’

‘And you’ll test my husband’s urine?’ said Mrs Woodbury.

‘Absolutely right.’

‘And if there’s no blood in my urine then the chances are that your diagnosis is the right one?’

‘Yes.’

‘How can I get my irritable bowel syndrome under control?’ asked Mr Woodbury.

‘Try to avoid stress for a few days, take things easy and make sure you avoid foods which you know tend to give you wind. Do you have to go flying off anywhere over the next few days?’

‘No,’ said Mrs Woodbury. She was very definite. ‘Farley is taking some time off. While he was being X-rayed, I used a pay phone at the hospital and telephoned his boss. I told them that Farley wouldn’t be at work for a while. They were very good about it and told him to take as much time off as he needed. He’s got a month’s holiday that he hasn’t used and he hasn’t been off sick for years.’

‘Splendid,’ I said. ‘Then you come back and see me again in a few days when you’re happy that there isn’t so much wind in your abdomen.’

‘And you’ll do another urine test,’ added Mrs Woodbury.

‘Exactly,’ I agreed.

They both stood up and Mrs Woodbury thanked me for getting the results so quickly. ‘My friend lives in Birmingham,’ she said, ‘and she had to wait three weeks for the results of her X-ray. She was on tenterhooks the whole time. So we both appreciate what you’ve done.’

I pointed out that it is much easier to get hospital results quickly when you live and work in a small community. And I told them that I looked forward to seeing Mr Woodbury as soon as he felt that he was ready for another urine test.

It was five days before Mr Woodbury returned to Bilbury Grange.

He and his wife came into the evening surgery. They were holding hands again.

‘As you suggested, I’ve come to have another urine test,’ said Mr Woodbury, after they had sat down.

‘No wind?’ I asked.

‘None,’ said Mr Woodbury. ‘But I had a bad 48 hours after that day when I saw you and went to the hospital. The pain was as bad as it has ever been.’

‘I wanted to call you,’ said Mrs Woodbury, looking at her husband. ‘His tummy was terribly swollen. But Farley said he just wanted to rest and wait for the wind to subside.’

‘It may not look as if it has, but my tummy has gone down a lot,’ said Mr Woodbury, patting his abdomen.

I stood up and fetched a urine bottle from the cupboard where I keep such things. I handed the bottle to Mr Woodbury who stood up to take the bottle from me. His wife didn’t want to let go of his hand. ‘You know what to do,’ I told him.

‘Do you think everything will be all right?’ asked Mrs Woodbury when her husband had left the consulting room to put a sample of urine into the bottle. Her voice was quavering. She was clearly very nervous.

‘He hasn’t got cancer,’ I told her. ‘All this is going to do is show us if my guess is correct. If there isn’t any blood in your husband’s urine then I was almost certainly correct in thinking that the bleeding was caused by the swollen bowel pressing on one of his kidneys. But if there is still some blood there then my guess could still be right – and we’ll just have to repeat the test in a few more days’ time. Either way, I really don’t think there is any reason for you to be worried.’

Mrs Woodbury licked her lips and nodded. She didn’t say anything.

‘So remember: even if there is blood in his urine, there really isn’t anything for you to worry about,’ I told her. ‘We all tend to put too much emphasis on tests. The important thing is the way your husband feels and how he looks. And there are absolutely no important signs of anything for us to be worried about.’

Mrs Woodbury nodded again. I have to say that she did not look convinced by my attempt to reassure her.

A moment later Mr Woodbury returned carrying the little plastic bottle which contained his sample. I told him to sit down while I did the necessary with one of my little testing strips.

I did it twice. Just to make sure.

‘It’s clear,’ I told them both. ‘Perfectly clear. There’s no trace of any blood in the urine sample.’

Mrs Woodbury started to cry. Mr Woodbury put his arm around her and looked very relieved.

‘So you were right about the wind in my bowel pressing on my kidneys?’

‘I think so,’ I said. I opened the top drawer of my desk and took out the insurance form I had almost completed. ‘I hope you don’t mind,’ I said, ‘but I kept this back for a day or two so that I could put in a note about your urine being clear. I don’t think there’s any need for us to mention the other test or the X-rays. The insurance company doesn’t ask about things like that. They’re only interested in things that are wrong; problems that might cost them money.’

Mr Woodbury and his wife looked at each other. ‘We aren’t going ahead with the purchase,’ said Mr Woodbury. ‘So I’m afraid we won’t need the mortgage, or the loan or the insurance company form.’

I looked at them and raised a questioning eyebrow. I have to admit that I was surprised.

‘Farley has given in his notice,’ explained Mrs Woodbury. ‘He’s found a job at a small boatyard just outside Bideford. They make small sailing boats for weekend sailors and they’ve been looking for a marketing manager. It’ll involve a little bit of travel, but only in the West Country and there won’t be any foreign travel or trips to London.’ She looked very pleased with the way things had turned out.

‘I feel very good about it,’ said Mr Woodbury.

‘So we won’t need that ridiculously expensive flat in London,’ said Mrs Woodbury. ‘We’ve rung the bank and cancelled the arrangement. They were very understanding about it.’

‘It’ll mean quite a cut in my salary,’ said Mr Woodbury. ‘And there are no big bonuses. But there’s a possibility of a seat on the board in two years’ time and if things go satisfactorily for us all then they’ll let me put a little of our money into the business. The owner is in his 70s and his children aren’t in the slightest bit interested in running a boatyard.’

There are quite a few boatyards in North Devon and I have patients working in several of them. I knew the boatyard he was talking about and I thought he was probably right: the owner’s children didn’t live in Devon and I couldn’t imagine them ever wanting to make boats for a living.

‘We think it’s the right thing for us,’ said Mrs Woodbury. ‘Farley can come home every evening and I can make sure he sticks to his diet and cuts out any foods that upset his tummy.’

‘None of those rich, fatty sauces,’ said Mr Woodbury.

‘Absolutely not!’ said Mrs Woodbury.

‘So, I’m sorry to have wasted your time with the form,’ said Mr Woodbury.

‘But it all turned out for the best,’ said Mrs Woodbury.

I congratulated them both on their decision, told them I thought that they'd done a brave and wise thing and wished them well for the future.

They stood up, still holding hands.

'One final thing,' I said to Mr Woodbury. 'Now that you're living in the village full time, I want to see you once a month so that I can weigh you.'

'We've got some scales in our bathroom,' said Mrs Woodbury.

'I'm sure you have,' I said. 'But the scales won't tell your husband off if he isn't losing weight. Knowing that he has to come here once a month might just add a little extra bite to his incentive to lose weight.'

Mr Woodbury smiled and nodded.

When they'd gone, I picked up the now unwanted insurance form. It was completed and ready to go off to the company which had commissioned it. They'd even provided me with a stamped addressed envelope so that I could send it back to them. I dropped the form and the envelope into my waste basket.

The waste basket looked a suitable resting place for it.

And then I looked at the form for a moment and thought about it.

The insurance company had commissioned the report. It only seemed fair that they should pay me for the work I had done. The cheque would, after all, go into our cottage hospital's bank account. It wasn't my fault that the insurance report was no longer required.

It was the work of a moment to sign the form, slip it into its envelope and put it into the 'Out' tray on my desk.

Miss Johnson would give it to the postman to take away.

I pressed the buzzer for the next patient to come in.

One of the joys of general practice is that you never know who is going to walk through the door – and what their problem is going to be.

One thing is certain: life as a country GP is never dull.

Finally…

I hope you have enjoyed this book. If you did so then I would be enormously encouraged if you would spare a moment to write a short review.

Thank you

Vernon Coleman

Appendix One

The Freedom of Bilbury

It was decided at the last meeting of the Bilbury Parish Council that readers who have read all ten Bilbury books are entitled to hold the Freedom of Bilbury, North Devon, England and to list this honour on their curriculum vitae, visiting cards and proclamations.

Those who hold the Freedom of Bilbury are also entitled to:

Ride a horse through the lanes of Bilbury on the first Tuesday in Lent.

Graze up to 12 sheep or goats on Bilbury Common for up to 60 days a year.

Be an honorary Life Vice President of Bilbury Cricket Club. Vice Presidents are guaranteed a deckchair at all home matches and unlimited supplies of tea, sandwiches and cake (three varieties usually available but not guaranteed). They are also entitled to describe themselves (on CVs, biographies, etc.) as being a Life Vice President of Bilbury Cricket Club.

Hold honorary life membership of Peter Marshall's Vegetable of the Month Club. Members are entitled to purchase the Vegetable of the Month with a 2% discount on shop prices. Members will receive a free brown paper bag with their first order. For full rules and conditions please see the notice pinned up at the back of Peter Marshall's shop (just behind the shelf containing the tinned apricots and the tinned dog food).

Vote in all elections held in Bilbury.

Enjoy a guaranteed reserved seat in Bilbury Church on the occasions of both the Harvest Festival and the Christmas Carol Service. (Not behind a pillar.) No large, wedding style hats, please.

Enjoy a 10% discount on the price of all sandwiches and beverages (alcoholic and non-alcoholic) served at the Duck and Puddle public house in Bilbury.

Attend the Annual Guy Fawkes Celebration Fireworks Night Party on November 5th every year and receive a complimentary baked potato with full access to the condiments tray.

Receive two tickets for all productions staged by the Bilbury Amateur Dramatics Society and two back stage passes to the After Show 'Meet the Cast' Drinks Party. (Drinks to be paid for separately).

Purchase a family plot (suitable for 4 lying or 8 standing) in Bilbury graveyard. For details of prices and full terms and conditions please contact Peter Marshall (official agent for the vicar). A 6% discount on all funerals and headstones arranged through Peter Marshall is also available.

Appendix Two

Bilbury Parish Newsletter: Classified Advertisement Section

At the end of the memory entitled ‘Paula Temple’ I mentioned the Bilbury Newsletter. Here is a sample selection of advertisements taken from the Classified Advertising Section of the Newsletter.

* Chiropodist: for all your foot problems. Specialities include warts, veruccas, dry skin, athletes foot. All dealt with while you wait. No appointments necessary unless I am busy. Fees very reasonable. Discount for pensioners. Contact Gladys Periwinkle at Rose Cottage. If you call and I am out just let yourself in, make a cup of tea while you wait.

* Antique Victorian Ottoman. Unique. Rumoured to have been sat on by Conan Doyle and Prince Albert (though not at the same time). Last three available. Contact Patchy Fogg on Bilbury 127.

* Bilbury Garage: We have a repaired second-hand exhaust pipe from Ford Poplar for sale. Probably has a few miles left in it. Can adapt and weld to just about any make of car. £8.10 including fitting. Telephone Bilbury 114.

* Odd Jobs: Man with experience prepared to tackle difficult jobs involving grass and similar. Do you have grass which needs cutting or hedge which needs trimming? Contact Harry Burrows in bar at Duck and Puddle any morning, afternoon or evening. Will also cut hair, clean drains and shampoo dogs which do not bite.

* Peter Marshall: Sandwiches special offer for busy people. Let me make your sandwiches for you. You pay only for the slice of bread on the bottom. The slice of bread on the top is FREE. Choose any filling you like from fish paste, raspberry jam or cheese. Please note: despite malicious rumours being spread by certain parties who know who they are I do wash both hands before preparing sandwiches. Note: Bilbury doctor has confirmed that last month’s unfortunate outbreak of food poisoning could have been a result of mistaken use of fishpaste from old stock.

* Church Sewing Group: meets every Monday except when choir is practising.

* Women’s Institute: Next meeting will be on 3rd Wednesday of month as usual. Mrs Bertha Aldridge will again give talk on her 1962 visit to ‘The Belgian Industrial Heartlands’ and Mr Charles Aldridge will once more show his prize winning slides. Admission free.

* Choir: rehearsals every Monday except when Church sewing group is meeting.

* Bell ringing: The Bilbury hand bell ringing group will meet at the Duck and Puddle on the last Thursday of the month. Unfortunately, but understandably in view of the unfortunate incident last month, Frank and Gilly Parsons have, on the advice of their insurers, ruled that we can no longer ring our bells inside the pub. If the weather is clement we will therefore ring bells in field across road from pub. The one with the black and white cows in it. Permission has been requested, reply is pending. Ringers (especially Elspeth Jackson) are requested to keep firm hold on their bells at all times. (We are pleased to say that Albert Treadwell is reported to be making a good recovery from his unfortunate injury.) Please tread carefully when in field. If weather is inclement we will meet in Duck and Puddle and do silent bell ringing with noises made orally (by mouth). Those whose surnames begin with A to M do ‘dongs’. Those with surnames beginning N to Z do ‘dings’. For more information contact Olive Robinson (Hon Sec) Telephone: Bilbury 109

* 11 jars of fishpaste for sale. Unused. Apply Peter Marshall shop.

* Television for sale. Does not work at moment. But vet in Combe Martin (whose cousin has similar model) says it probably only needs new valves. All buttons still present and nice cabinet in fair condition. Stain on top of cabinet can easily be covered with medium sized doily. Looks impressive. Sensible offers considered. Telephone: Samuel Houghton on Bilbury 82 and ask for message to be taken to Josh Wilkins. (No messages delivered after 8 p.m.)

* Gravedigger’s Rest public house, Barnstaple: Entertainment Thursday evenings and Saturday lunchtimes. Birthday groups catered for but no celebrations for over 60s without medical certificate please. Please note that patrons who catch items of clothing discarded by artistes are requested to return them to the management.

* Duck and Puddle public house. Food available at mealtimes or between if necessary. Fire lit when weather cold.

* Memorial service for Fred Pilbury (who celebrated 65th birthday at the Gravedigger’s Rest, Barnstaple last Tuesday and died suddenly and unexpectedly) will be held next Wednesday at the Gravedigger’s Rest, Barnstaple. ‘He went with a smile on his face’.

* Windows cleaned : Price 10 pence per window. Ground floor windows only please as a result of recent fall. Phone Bilbury 45 and ask for Edward.

* Sweep: Telephone Bilbury 73 to book a good luck sweep to attend your next wedding. Will pose for photographs and kiss bride (and bridesmaids) if required. Ring same number for appointment to sweep your chimney.

* Cottage for sale: Parlour, kitchen, two bedrooms. Tin bath. Water from well in garden. Well has never dried up except in 1934, 1957, 1965, 1966 and 1967. Outdoor water closet. No electricity. Low ceilings so property probably suit smaller person. Barn suitable for small horse and very small cart. Strawberry patch produces fruit annually if netted. Telephone Bilbury 87 for details and appointment to view.

* Long wooden ladder for sale. Suitable for cleaning first floor windows, gutters, etc. Most rungs still present. Phone Bilbury 45 and ask for Doreen. Buyer to collect.

* Stop Press: Choir practice is moved to Tuesdays until further notice unless alternative arrangements made.

* Stop Press: Church sewing group is moved to Tuesdays to avoid clash with choir. However, we would like to point out that we had been meeting on Mondays for longer than the choir.

Appendix Three

Benzodiazepines: a little background

I first started drawing attention to the horrors of benzodiazepines (drugs such as Valium, Ativan and Mogadon) back in the early 1970s. I drew attention to the problem in my book *The Medicine Men* in 1975 and was vilified by the medical profession for doing so.

In the two decades which followed, I wrote hundreds of articles about these drugs. I also spoke widely to warn doctors and patients of their addictive nature. I made scores of television programmes and in the early 1980s I recorded a series of special radio programmes dealing with benzodiazepine addiction. At the same time I also wrote and distributed a newsletter on benzodiazepine addiction. Mail from readers was arriving at my home in grey sacks.

Thousands of patients wrote in to me to say that their lives had been ruined by benzodiazepines.

At that time (and I remember this very well) the British Medical Association seemed able to find an endless parade of doctors prepared to go on radio or television and tell the world that I was a dangerous, scaremongering lunatic. The BMA and the medical establishment stood shoulder to shoulder with the pharmaceutical industry in defence of these awful medicines. This is perhaps not surprising – after all, the BMA's in-house journal (the *British Medical Journal*) was earning zillions in advertising revenue from the drug companies.

I have dealt with benzodiazepines at some length in a number of my medical books (notably *The Medicine Men* (1975), *Life Without Tranquillisers* (1985), *Addicts and Addictions* (1986) and *The Drugs Myth* (1992).

Sadly, many doctors still refuse to accept that these drugs are a real problem. And so here, below, is a short analysis of the history of benzodiazepines and a list of some of the evidence which illustrates the size of the problem. The material on the list below is taken from my own books.

The Valium story began in the 1930s when Dr Leo H Sternbach was working as a research assistant at the University of Krakow in Poland. He was investigating benzophenones and heptoxdiazines.

Dr Sternbach continued work on these substances in 1954 in the New Jersey laboratories of Hoffman La Roche. The result of his last experiment was called Ro5-0690 and was shelved as of little interest.

In 1957, Ro5-0690 was submitted for testing by Roche's Director of Pharmacological Research and a report was published showing that the drug was a hypnotic, a sedative and a muscle relaxant. It was a new chemical substance.

In late 1958, Roche did more tests on the drug and found that it was effective at treating anxiety and tension. The drug was called chlordiazepoxide.

On February 24th 1960, the American Food and Drug Administration approved the drug which was launched a few weeks later as Librium.

Before the end of 1960 other drug companies, Include Wyeth Laboratories had introduced benzodiazepines of their own.

In 1961, a clinical report appeared in the journal *Psyschopharmacologia* which warned that patients were becoming addicted to chlordiazepoxide.

By the early 1960s, GPs were prescribing these drugs for an enormous range of physical and mental problems. It is difficult to think of a medical condition for which benzodiazepines were not prescribed.

In 1968, a paper in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* showed that benzodiazepines caused depression and suicidal thoughts.

In 1970 in a book called *Discoveries in Biological Psychiatry*, edited by Ayd and Blackell, Frank Ayd wrote: 'Although vast quantities of minor tranquillisers have been prescribed it must be stated that not all have been dispensed judiciously by some practitioners. Such misuse is indicative of physicians who unwisely accede to the demands of patients or who supplant sound clinical judgement or expediency'.

In 1972, the *American Journal of Psychiatry* published a paper describing how patients on diazepam had exhibited symptoms which included apprehension, insomnia and depression. The patients had previously been emotionally stable. When the patients were taken off the drugs, their symptoms disappeared.

In 1973, I organised a symposium at the Royal Society of Medicine. It was stated that when patients were taken off their benzodiazepines they often felt much better than they had felt for years. The symposium was organised on behalf of the *British Clinical Journal* which I was editing. I immediately began writing articles about benzodiazepines for the national press.

In 1975, the *British Medical Journal* published an editorial referring to an article published in the *Lancet* in 1960 which had reported that a patient taking chordiazepoxide had assaulted his wife – the first sign of aggression in 20 years of marriage.

In 1979, the WHO estimated that there were 700 different benzodiazepines on the market. These drugs were the most widely prescribed in the world. It was generally agreed that there was no real difference in any of the drugs – they were all equally effective and equally troublesome.

In 1979, the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* published a report showing that poisoning with tranquillisers and sleeping tablets accounted for 61,000 hospital admissions each year.

If you went to see a GP in 1970, you had a better than one in twenty chance that you would come away with a prescription for a benzodiazepine. By 1977, one in five people who was given a prescription was given a prescription for one of these drugs. Among women in the 45 to 59 age group, one in three was given a tranquilliser of some sort.

In my first book *The Medicine Men* (1975) I predicted that doctors would end up trying to wean patients off benzodiazepines.

In 1975, three doctors from the Drug Dependence Treatment Center at the Philadelphia VA Hospital published a paper entitled *Misuse and Abuse of Diazepam: An Increasingly Common Medical Problem*. The paper referred back to papers published as far back as 1970 which had documented instances of physical addiction to benzodiazepines. The paper concluded: ‘All physicians should know that diazepam abuse and misuse is occurring and careful attention should be given to prescribing, transporting and storing this drug.’

In 1979, a psychiatrist testifying to a US Senate health sub-committee claimed that patients could become hooked on diazepam in six weeks. Another witness said it was harder to kick benzodiazepines than to get off heroin. A third witness said that tranquillisers were America’s second biggest addiction problem – after alcoholism.

In 1979, the *British Medical Journal* reported a study involving over 40,000 patients. The paper showed ‘a highly significant association between the use of minor tranquillisers and the risk of a serious road accident’.

In 1981, at a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, it was suggested that diazepam might be linked to cancer. It was argued that women whose breast cancers had developed more quickly had been taking diazepam.

In 1982, a British Professor of Psychopharmacology reported that brain scans showed that patients who had been taking diazepam for some years had damaged brains.

In 1982, the *Journal of Psychology* reported that if a patient takes diazepam, he won’t be able to remember things he learns while taking the drug unless he takes it again. This discovery had massive implications for those patients taking the drug – and attempting to stop it.

In 1982, a report in *Digestive Diseases and Sciences* showed that diazepam may cause liver damage.

In 1983, a report in *Drug Reaction Bulletin* showed that between 11% and 20% of drivers involved in traffic accidents were taking tranquillisers.

A report in *Medical Biology* in 1982 showed that the calming effect of diazepam is counteracted by caffeine.

Between 1964 and 1982, the Committee on Safety of Medicines in London received reports of well over 100 different side effects said to be related to the use of diazepam.

In my book *Life Without Tranquillisers* (1985) I wrote: ‘if you are looking for a crutch and you intend to choose between tobacco and benzodiazepines then you’ll probably be better off choosing tobacco.’

In the 1980s, when I was the medical columnist for *The Star* newspaper in the UK, I ran a long campaign about benzodiazepines.

In 1988, speaking in the UK’s House of Commons, the Parliamentary Secretary for Health, introduced stricter controls for benzodiazepines and changed the classification of the drugs in an attempt to force doctors to treat them with more respect. She said: ‘Dr Vernon Coleman’s articles, to which I refer with approval, raised concern about these important matters’. It had taken 15 years of campaigning to force through these changes.

Appendix Four

Normal Pressure Hydrocephalus

In the memory entitled *The Case of the Wobbly Film Star*, I describe how my patient Mrs Ruthvens was diagnosed as suffering from a disorder called Normal Pressure Hydrocephalus. This disorder was first described in 1965 by Hakim and Adams but even now, over half a century later, it is still wildly under-diagnosed. As of 2017, it was estimated that thousands of patients who have been diagnosed as suffering from Alzheimer's disease or another untreatable form of dementia were, in fact, suffering from normal pressure hydrocephalus and could be cured with a simple operation. The disorder is officially described as 'rare' but it has been reliably estimated that up to 4% of all those over the age of 65 are suffering from it. Normal pressure hydrocephalus is undoubtedly the commonest, treatable cause of major disability and mental incapacity among the elderly. Readers who would like to know more might like to take a look at my website www.vernoncoleman.com where there are articles dealing with the disorder and explaining why it is still so rarely diagnosed or treated. My monograph *Millions of Alzheimer's Patients Have Been Misdiagnosed (And Could Be Cured)* is available as an ebook on Amazon.

Appendix Five

The Story of Medicine

In the memory entitled *The Case of the Wobbly Film Star* I mentioned that it was my ambition to write a book about the history of medicine. I eventually managed to do this. My book *The Story of Medicine* is available as an ebook on Amazon.

And finally…
I hope you have enjoyed this book. If you did so then I would be very grateful if you would spare a moment to write a short review.
Thank you
Vernon Coleman

The Young Country Doctor Book 11

Bilbury Delights

Vernon Coleman

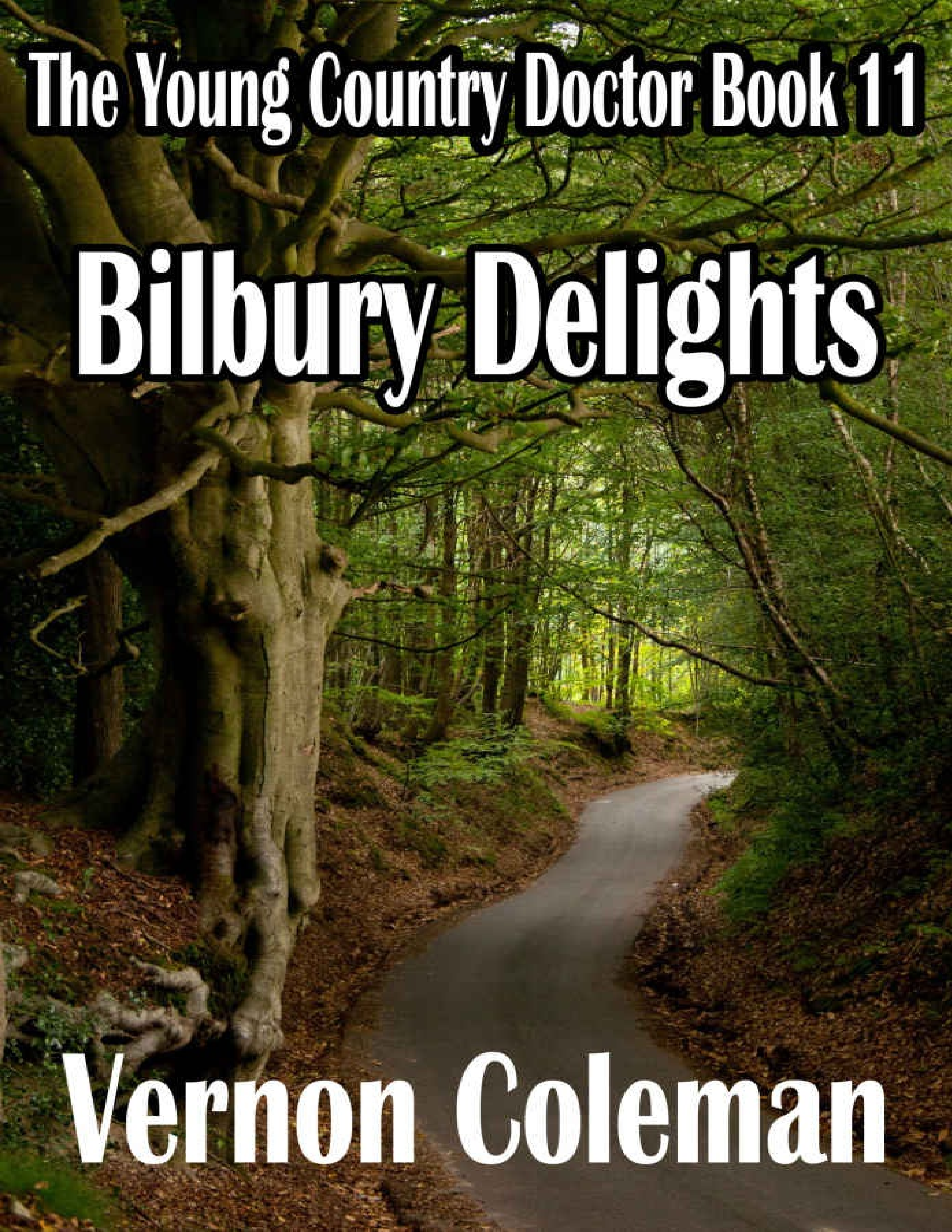

The Young Country Doctor Book 11

Bilbury Delights

Vernon Coleman

Another collection of memories of Bilbury and its inhabitants.

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Note: Names and details of individuals, animals and establishments have been altered to protect the innocent, the guilty and the somewhere in-between.

The Author

Vernon Coleman is a *Sunday Times* bestselling author. He has written over 100 books which have been translated into 25 languages and sold in over 50 countries. His books have sold over two million copies in the UK alone. Vernon Coleman is also a qualified doctor. He lives in Bilbury, Devon, England. He is an accomplished bar billiards player (twice runner up in the Duck and Puddle Christmas competition) and a skilled maker of paper aeroplanes. He is a long-term member of the Desperate Dan Pie-Eater's Club (vegetarian section). He does not speak any foreign languages and cannot knit.

The Young Country Doctor series

This is the 11th book in the series. All the books in the series are available as ebooks on Amazon.

Dedication
To Antoinette, for whom my heart beats.

Foreword

It is one certainty that everything changes in life and another certainty that much of what is classed as progress is, in reality, nothing of the sort. Dodgem cars move around a good deal but they never actually get anywhere.

A third, and less widely appreciated, certainty is that in Bilbury things change so slowly that the changes are hardly noticeable.

In the last few years, for example, the only really big change I can think of is that (on my advice and under his wife's management) Frank Parsons of the Duck and Puddle has lost some weight and Peter Marshall has, for absolutely no discernible reason, moved the sardines from a shelf on the left of the shop as you enter to a shelf on the right. He has also moved the tinned rice pudding from the front of the shop to the back.

These are the sort of changes I can live with.

It is a constant delight to know that many other people around the world share our joy in the knowledge that there is still at least one village remaining where old-fashioned concepts such as honour, integrity, responsibility, tolerance, dignity, compassion, loyalty, respect (both for oneself and for others) and kindness are as much a part of daily life as the rain and the winds which regularly scour the North Devon coastline.

It is my belief that kindness (offered for its own sake rather than in the hope of reward or glorification) is the most fundamental and important human quality. It is the source of all other good qualities.

Like people everywhere, the villagers who live in Bilbury are sometimes bullied by Fate and tossed from one misfortune to another. They are, inevitably, exposed to their fair share of disappointments and frustrations. Nevertheless, to a man and a woman, they never become soured or vindictive or evil-minded. There is a decency about the citizens of Bilbury which transcends all else.

It is a comfort to know that such decency still exists in a world where intolerance, spite and selfishness are all too often regarded as inevitable and commonplace.

The stories in this book, and the others in this series, are as always all set in the 1970s but Bilbury today has not changed one whit.

Physically, the village is virtually the same as it was back in the 1970s.

The lanes are still narrow and, in the summer, they are overgrown so much that it is impossible to drive a car along them without scratching the paintwork on both sides.

The trees and hedges are notably higher than they were back in the 1970s, and the houses and cottages a little more weather-beaten.

But that's about it.

For this, we can probably thank the fact that our village is too small and too far off the beaten track to have attracted developers or planning officials.

Most of those who have had Bilbury in their sights have got lost, given up and gone home long before they could do any lasting damage.

(I have to confess that the absence of road signs (itself no accident) has made it difficult to navigate the local lanes.)

On the rare occasions when development plans have materialised, the villagers have always found a way to protect their history, culture and environment. We in Bilbury can be a difficult lot when it comes to protecting our culture and our environment.

The village is also unchanged both culturally and spiritually, and for this we can thank the villagers themselves.

Bilbury is run for and by people who are kind, who do unto others as they would be done unto themselves and who have (on the whole) the saving grace of a good sense of humour.

Most important of all, I am pleased to report that the principal human individuals who appear regularly in these stories are still alive and reasonably well, though I have to admit that a few waistlines (including mine I'm sorry to say) are rather larger now than they were back in the 1970s. The consequences of too many good lunches at the Duck and Puddle are widely visible.

Frank Parsons, who has now reached an age where he feels he is entitled to be grumpy, is still fighting his appetite and his waistline and Gilly is still watching his alcohol consumption like a hawk. Thumper Robinson is still tickling trout and maintaining and mending machinery that should have been thrown onto the scrap heap a long while ago. Patchy Fogg is still hunting for rare and valuable antiques and selling items which are neither rare nor valuable. His customers are tourists who will hopefully never know that 'the desk at which Shakespeare sat while writing his plays' was knocked up in a shed in Torrington by an old carpenter, with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of old timber and a knack for making it look even older.

Patsy is as beautiful as ever and still the best cook in the world.

It is difficult to believe that it is over 40 years since the events in this book took place. I suppose those of us who were present should be grateful that we're still here!

In this collection of memories, I have included an account of two Americans, Alston and Esme Church, who came to Bilbury to visit Cedric, the pig who was won in a skittle competition by previous American visitors Edgar and Delphinium Rathbone.

'Yours is a community in the true sense of the word,' wrote Esme, when they had returned home. 'It was an inspiration to visit Bilbury. There is more kindness shown in your village than in any town or city we have ever visited.'

With Esme's permission, I pinned her letter up on the noticeboard which hangs in the porch of the Duck and Puddle. The letter is still there, weathered and sun-faded. Some time ago, Patsy put it into a small photo frame to give it some protection.

There is a P.S. at the bottom of her letter, and this often produces a smile on the faces of visitors.

'We will always have Bilbury,' she wrote, paraphrasing Rick in Casablanca.

Underneath the framed letter from Esme, a visitor has pinned up a postcard upon which they have written the words: 'Bilbury will live forever in our hearts.'

So say I.

It is a privilege to call Bilbury 'home'.

It can be your home too.

After all, as they say, home is where the heart is.

Vernon Coleman, Bilbury 2017

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Cedric's Admirers

'Frank is on the phone,' said Patsy. 'He wants to know if you know anyone called Church?'

I racked the remains of my brain and thought hard. I couldn't think of anyone called Church. Bells were not ringing loudly. Patsy handed me the telephone.

'Do you have a first name available?' I asked Frank.

'Alston,' said Frank. 'He says his name is Alston Church. He's American. His wife is called Esme. They're sipping Martinis and munching their way through Gilly's 'Fromage Anglais sur Pain Blanc avec Deux Cornichons Marine et Un Oignon au Vinaigre'.They want to know where to find Bilbury Grange.'

The Duck and Puddle is constantly tinkering with its menu and trying to make its offerings sound intriguing and slightly continental. Fromage Anglais sur Pain Blanc is a massively thick sandwich (sometimes known colloquially as a 'doorstep') which is made with cheddar cheese and white bread and served with two pickled gherkins and a pickled onion. Frank has never mastered the French language (there are some who say, rather rudely, that he has never mastered the English language either) and you need to know the Duck and Puddle menu to be able to guess the dish he is describing.

'Do they look dangerous?' I asked.

'He's wearing plaid trousers and a lemon coloured blazer,' replied Frank. 'And Mrs Church has blonde hair and a lime green jacket with yellow piping. The hair is fluffed up like candyfloss and there seems to be quite a good deal of it.' He paused. 'I think that perhaps they might be foreign; maybe American.'

'So you don't think they look as if they are likely to be planning to shoot me or beat me over the head with an iron bar?'

These may sound odd questions. But there was a reason for them.

It's not unusual for readers of my books and columns to turn up in Bilbury. Most of these visitors are courteous, friendly and kind and simply want to take a photograph or to have a book signed. But there have been a few angry callers who have turned up looking for an argument. One man, a keen hunter, turned up carrying a shotgun and I had to spend an hour talking to him before he would agree not to shoot me. He disagreed strongly with my views about shooting wild animals and argued vehemently that anything which walked on four legs was, by his definition, vermin and fair game. Another angry visitor, a woman who had believed that Bilbury and its inhabitants were all figments of my imagination, had come to complain after losing five shillings in a bet with a friend. She carried a large, multi-coloured golf umbrella which she brandished as though it were a sword and she were Errol Flynn about to turn the Sheriff of Nottingham into a pincushion.

'Oh no, I wouldn't think it very likely,' said Frank with damp reassurance. 'Shall I ask them what they want?'

I said I thought that would be an excellent idea.

Frank put down the telephone and I could hear him talking to the visitors and asking them why they wanted to visit Bilbury Grange.

'They say they'd very much like to see how Cedric is doing,' said Frank, upon his return and the resumption of our conversation. 'They've brought him a large bag of bananas. They say they're friends of the Rathbones.'

'Cedric!' I exclaimed. 'Cedric the pig? They've come to see Cedric? That's wonderful.'

Cedric is a very friendly pig who lives in one of the outbuildings at Bilbury Grange and who loves having visitors.

'Who is Cedric and who are the Rathbones?' asked Frank, clearly puzzled.

'The night you had your stroke,' I reminded him, 'the Duck and Puddle was running a Bowling for a Pig competition. Cedric was the pig and the Rathbones were the lovely Americans who won him.'

The Rathbones hadn't been able to take Cedric back to Idaho with them and so they'd asked Patsy and me to look after him. We had suitable accommodation for him at Bilbury Grange and we had happily accepted Cedric as part of our extended family. Patsy regularly sent letters and photographs across the Atlantic to the Rathbones. The fact that the visitors knew that Cedric liked bananas was as good as a password. We had only discovered Cedric's penchant for this particular fruit fairly recently and Patsy had sent the Rathbones a picture of Cedric munching his way through two pounds of bananas – peel and all.

To be honest, I had always thought that pigs would eat anything without much preference but when we took on the responsibility of looking after Cedric, Mr Kennet, my father-in-law, explained to us that pigs are far fussier than most of us realise.

So, for example, pigs cannot safely eat meat or fish and they should avoid sugar-rich foods.

Most surprisingly, Mr Kennet told us that pigs can be made ill by eating parsnips, turnips, cabbage, broccoli or cauliflower, though he admitted that in small quantities the chances of there being any problems are slight.

Citrus fruits can upset pigs and so, sometimes, can potatoes.

The good news is that pigs are intelligent and sensible creatures, with a strong sense of self-preservation, and they won't usually eat anything which is likely to upset them.

'Oh, yes!' said Frank, as the light suddenly dawned and he remembered Cedric the pig and the skittle competition.

Frank's stroke had put him into our Bilbury hospital and his recovery had taken weeks. He had been seriously ill and I wasn't surprised that he didn't immediately remember the name of a pig who had been the prize in the pub's skittles competition, or the name of the people who had won him. 'I'll give them directions and send them along when they've finished their…'

'…cheese sandwiches,' I interrupted, to save Frank the problem of having to struggle once again with the mysteries of the French language.

'Exactly!' said Frank, clearly grateful.

Alston and Esme Church turned up less than half an hour later.

As advertised by Frank, Alston Church was wearing plaid trousers and a lemon yellow jacket and Esme, who was wearing a pale blue pleated skirt and a slightly fluorescent lime green jacket with yellow piping was the proud owner of a good deal of blonde hair which looked casually styled but which had, I rather suspected, taken a considerable amount of time to prepare.

The Churchs were driving a bright orange Saab which they later told us they had rented from a company at Heathrow Airport. They both seemed enormously friendly and likeable. Patsy and I took to them immediately. They were excited at having met Frank and Gilly. 'I felt I already knew them so well from your books,' said Esme, who seemed as full of energy and expectation as a child at a birthday party.

'While we were having lunch, a fellow called in for a pint of a beer called Old Restoration,' said Alston. 'He was tall and very broad and he was driving a huge and very battered truck which had what looked like steel girders strapped to the front and the back.'

'That would have been Thumper,' said Patsy. 'I don't think anyone else in the village drinks Old Restoration. It's a particularly potent brew. I once drank half a pint, just to see what it tasted like, and I was squiffy for a week afterwards!'

Esme and Alston looked at each other. 'I told you it was him!' said Esme, very pleased with herself.

They both seemed thrilled that they'd seen Thumper Robinson.

'He's much bigger than I'd expected!' said Esme. 'He's quite a giant!'

I promised to introduce them to Thumper and to Patchy before they left Bilbury.

'I've got some scones warming in the oven,' Patsy told them as soon as they arrived. 'Would you like tea, coffee, beer, home-made lemonade or a glass of wine?'

They both asked for home-made lemonade and asked if they could perhaps tackle the scones after visiting Cedric.

'I've never been served a sandwich as big as that one I was given at the Duck and Puddle!' drawled Alston. 'It must have had half a pound of cheese inside it! I couldn't eat more than half of it and even so I'll need to do a little serious digesting before I can tackle anything else in the food line.' He shook his head. 'Not like me not to be able to finish a good lunch. But my appetite has been down a little recently.'

'You're really Patsy?' said Esme, standing back and looking at my wife, as though assessing her. 'I've read all the books your husband has written about the village. I thought it was so sweet how you two first met. It seems extraordinary to be here talking to you and finding for sure that you're a real person.'

'I'm real!' said Patsy, with a big smile.

'Our friends, Edgar and Delphinium told us so much about Bilbury,' said Esme, 'but I couldn't believe that one day I'd actually be standing here in your lovely village. It's just as beautiful in real life as it sounds in your husband's books!'

'We were confused by the fact that we couldn't find anywhere called Bilbury on the map,' said Alston. 'We found a village called Bibury but that was miles away in Gloucestershire.'

'That's because I changed the name of the village when I wrote the first book,' I admitted. 'I thought the villagers might not be too pleased with me if I printed the real name of the village and the book then became popular. Besides, the General Medical Council doesn't take kindly to doctors advertising or promoting themselves.'

We showed them around the house and introduced them to Miss Johnson, the children and the cats. Ben, our ever-friendly dog, introduced herself, of course. (We had to remind them that Ben, despite her name, is a lady.)

As we walked around the garden, I apologised for the number of weeds.

'Naturam expellas furca, tamen usque recurret,' said Esme, who turned out to be a schoolteacher responsible for guiding teenage Americans through the intricacies of Latin and Greek.

I studied Latin at school but after a short struggle, I admitted defeat and asked Esme for the translation.

'Even though you drive out nature with a pitchfork, she will always return,' said Esme, explaining that the quotation originated with Horace, the Roman poet.

We all agreed that it was remarkably apt, and something of a comfort in a strange sort of way. Later on, Esme gave us a list of other wonderful quotations – suitable for all sorts of odd happenings. At my request, she wrote them down and the list appears as an appendix at the back of this book.

And then we took them to meet Cedric.

'My oh my!' said Esme, in astonishment. 'I've never seen a pig as big as that. How much does he weigh? Do you know? Do you have any idea?' She tentatively fed one of the bananas to Cedric. He ate it in seconds and happily looked up at her, clearly waiting for a second helping.

'They have weighing scales for lorries at the local garage,' I said, 'so I walked her round there one day. She weighs 232 pounds. Or at least she did a couple of months ago. I suspect she's put on a few pounds since then.'

Cedric, like all pigs, seems to have an insatiable appetite, and like P.G.Wodehouse's creation, Lord Emsworth, I find myself taking great pride in his size, though unlike his Lordship I draw the line at dragging Cedric from his sty to make an appearance in any of the local shows. Mind you, I have been tempted. The local branch of the Private Pig Breeders Association gives a magnificent silver plate cup to the owner of the largest pig in Devon. But I don't think Cedric would like being put on display. It's all a question of dignity, isn't it? Dignity and respect.

Esme and Alston continued feeding bananas to Cedric who munched his way through all that they'd brought as quickly as they were offered. It is no exaggeration to say that Cedric has a 'good appetite'.

'Did you say you walked him round to the weighing scales?' asked Alston, who sounded surprised.

'He likes going for a walk,' I told him. 'Once or twice a week we take him for a stroll through the village. Sometimes we take him down to the village shop and Peter gives him a few leftover vegetables.'

'That's Peter Marshall's shop?'

'It is indeed,' I agreed.

'And sometimes, as a special treat, we take her to the Duck and Puddle,' said Patsy. 'She is particularly fond of one or two of Gilly's cheese sandwiches.'

'But what sort of lead do you use?' asked Alston. 'You'd need a hell of a chain to hold a pig that size. And how do you hold him if he decides he wants to go another way.'

'He's as good as gold,' laughed Patsy.

'And this is his lead,' I told them, lifting up a long piece of ordinary string which I keep looped on a nail on the outside of her sty.

Alston and Esme stared at the string in astonishment.

'This is his collar', I added, picking up a vast leather collar which a friend of Frank's had made for us. 'He did have a ring in his nose but we had it taken out. It looked painful and certainly wasn't dignified.'

'You can really take him for a walk with that piece of string as a lead?'

'He doesn't really need a lead,' said Patsy. 'He enjoys going for a walk and he follows us everywhere we go. If he stops too long, nibbling something he's found by the wayside, we just give a gentle tug on the string and along he comes. But if we called him, he'd come without the string.'

'If anyone ever makes a film of your books, the story about Cedric will surely be one of the highlights!' said Esme.

'Maybe Cedric could get to play himself!' suggested Alston.

'I think he'd like that!' laughed Patsy. 'He loves getting lots of attention.'

After admiring Cedric, being astonished at the feebleness of his lead and taking an enormous number of photographs with a still camera and a short piece of film with a movie camera, Alston and Esme allowed us to lead them into the drawing room at Bilbury Grange. Patsy served home-made scones, which had been warmed in the Aga, together with bowls of rich, whipped cream from her father's cows and two varieties of home-made jam.

As they enjoyed Patsy's Devon cream tea, our American visitors told us that they were approaching the end of a tour which had taken them on a six week trip around Europe. They had begun their holiday in Paris, spent a few days in Germany, visited Italy, gone to Spain and spent a few days in each of Holland, Belgium and Switzerland.

'We kept the best to last,' said Esme. 'Visiting England was always going to be the highlight of our trip. And coming to Bilbury was very much the icing on the cake.' She told us that they were both feeling tired and that Alston, in particular, was feeling the effects of a long and arduous vacation. They had done some of their travelling by aeroplane and some of it by train but they had hired cars in several European countries and Alston had done all of the driving. 'My appetite has really gone south,' said Alston, rather apologetically. 'Not like me at all.'

'Still, I think you've lost a few pounds in the last week or ten days,' said Esme. 'And your doctor at home wanted you to lose a little weight.' I secretly agreed with Alston's doctor in America. Alston was not tall, probably no more than five foot eight, but he was a big man and if he'd been a cake in a weight guessing contest at a summer fete, I'd have guessed he probably weighed 180 pounds.

Alston said that although they had only been in Britain for less than a week, they had already learned two new things about the British.

'First,' he said, 'I am amazed at the length of time for which the British will hold a grudge. Don't get me wrong, I love Britain and I love the British but my, oh my, some people in your country know how to hold a grudge, don't they? I'm surprised that there aren't people in your country who still feel resentment at the Boston Tea Party and the American Revolution!'

Patsy and I both laughed. 'There probably are!' said Patsy.

'We stayed in a pub in a little village in the Cotswolds,' continued Alston, 'and while we were there, this fellow came into the bar for a drink. The trouble was that the barmaid refused to serve him. Apparently this happens every time he goes into the bar – which is in the only pub for miles around, so if the poor fellow wants a drink he doesn't have a whole lot of choices.'

'We thought that perhaps there was some personal history between the fellow who'd come in for a drink and the barmaid,' said Esme, taking up the story. 'You know, maybe they'd had a relationship which had ended badly.'

'But it wasn't that at all,' said Alston. 'The pub landlord came in from the pub's small dining room and he served the fellow his pint of mild and bitter.'

'We talked to the landlord later,' said Esme, 'and being a rather inquisitive sort of person I asked about the history between the barmaid and the customer she wouldn't serve. We were astonished when the landlord told us that the problem was family not personal and that it apparently went back over a century! Can you believe it?'

'The great great grandfather of the barmaid was once sold a horse which wasn't everything it was made out to be,' explained Alston. 'And the person who sold it to him was some long-dead, distant relative of the fellow who'd come in for a drink. Ever since, there had been a feud between the two families. They all lived in the same village but they wouldn't have anything to do with one another.'

'Some grudge, eh?' said Esme. 'I don't believe any other people hold grudges for so long. The Americans certainly don't. Not even the Sicilians can hold a grudge as tightly as the British.'

Patsy told them that she wasn't surprised and that she knew of similar feuds, vendettas and grudges in Devon. 'These things tend to go on in rural communities,' she explained. 'In towns and cities the people move away and feuds get forgotten. But in the countryside, a good grudge can last centuries. No one can really remember what the grudge is about, only that the Bagshaws and the Hetheringtons have always despised one other, still despise one another and will always despise one another.'

'Sometimes, young members of each family fall in love and get married and when that happens the wedding is usually something to avoid,' I added.

Esme seemed shocked at this. 'Surely they suspend their hostilities for the wedding ceremony? For the sake of the loving, young couple who are getting married.'

'I'm afraid not!' said Patsy. 'There was a wedding in South Molton six months ago and the two families involved had hated one another for longer than anyone could remember – though naturally no one could remember what the disagreement was about. At the reception afterwards there was a massive fight and 17 people were arrested.'

'Five of the people arrested were women, weren't they?' I said to Patsy. She nodded.

'Five or six of them,' she agreed.

Esme and Alston both looked shocked.

'What was the other thing you've learned?' I asked our American visitors.

'Oh, just that you British are so polite!' said Esme. 'We've never been to Britain before and no one warned us about it, but my you are so wonderfully polite!'

'Back home,' said Alston, 'someone who accidentally treads on your foot will usually apologise profusely. But in Stratford-upon-Avon I trod on a man's foot and he actually apologised to me.'

Patsy and I both laughed at this.

'If an Englishman is bitten by a dog he will apologise to the dog, the dog's owner and the ambulance crew that comes to take him to hospital,' agreed Patsy.

'Most sensible people who've been bitten by a dog would sue the dog's owner,' said Alston. 'But I get the feeling that in Britain, the person who has been bitten is likely to be sued for upsetting the dog and its owner by allowing himself to be bitten.'

We admitted that this wasn't too far from the truth.

Alston and Esme stayed with us for the evening.

Patsy cooked a meal, I opened a couple of bottles of claret which a grateful patient had given me, and we shared a splendid few hours.

They told us about their home in Ohio where Alston ran a garage with a convenience store attached to it and about their love of hiking and rafting. It was, they told us, while rafting on the Boise River in Idaho that they had met

Edgar and Delphinium Rathbone, who had been friends of theirs for nearly 25 years.

'This was some years ago,' admitted Esme. 'These days we all stick to hiking.'

'And we tend to do that fairly slowly,' said Alston. 'I've had surgery on my knee and Edgar has had a hip replacement operation. So we don't push ourselves.'

It was nearly midnight when our two visitors drove back to the Duck and Puddle where they had booked a room for three days.

We didn't see the visitors on the following two days. They wanted to take a drive around North Devon and visit some of the other towns and villages in the area. They were quietly amused to discover that there really are places called Parracombe and Kentisbury as well as Combe Martin, Lynmouth and South Molton. They drove in to Barnstaple, so that they could take a look at Devon's biggest town and do a little shopping for souvenirs. Patsy had told them of several suitable and reasonably priced shops and had advised them not to miss the local market stalls.

It was an afternoon three days after we had entertained them at Bilbury Grange when we next heard from them.

I received a telephone call from Esme. She sounded anxious.

'I'm sorry to bother you,' she said. 'I hope you don't mind, but I'm afraid I need your medical expertise.'

She explained that Alston had woken up that morning feeling very weak and rather tired and had said that he'd spend the morning in bed, having a little rest. He said he just thought he was paying the price for a good deal of travelling. Esme had said that she would sit and write a final few postcards and spend an hour or so packing up her purchases to ensure that they didn't get damaged on the flight home.

But at lunchtime, Alston had been no better.

'He says he feels too weak to move,' said Esme, who sounded worried. 'He didn't have any breakfast and he hasn't eaten any lunch either. That's just not like him, doctor. Alston enjoys his food and he loves the meals here.'

She also told me that she'd taken his temperature and that he had a slight fever.

Less than ten minutes later, I was sitting beside their bed listening to Alston tell me that he'd never felt quite so weak and washed out.

Esme, clearly desperately worried, sat in a chair by the window.

'Have you passed any urine yet this morning?' I asked Alston.

The minute I'd sat down by the side of the bed I had decided on a provisional diagnosis. I had noticed that the sclera, the whites of Alston's eyes, had acquired a yellowish tinge. There had been no yellowing of the sclera when we'd met a few days earlier. I would have noticed.

'I had to get up at about six for that,' he said. 'But that's normal for me, these days. I usually wake about then to visit the bathroom. My doctor says my prostate is a little enlarged.'

'Did you notice anything odd about your urine?' I asked him. I didn't think his enlarged prostate had anything to do with his current health problem.

'It was very dark,' replied Alston immediately. 'The colour reminded me of that dark beer that comes from Ireland.'

'Guinness?'

'That's the one.'

'How long has your urine been dark?'

'A few days. Maybe a week. Yes, nearly a week. I think I first noticed it getting darker when we were in Amsterdam. That was also when I started to feel a bit tired. I put it down to too much travelling. We'd driven around 600 miles in two days. Do you think the colour change is significant? I assumed it was something I'd eaten. You know, in the way that urine goes red when you've been eating beetroot.'

'Have you had any other symptoms?'

'As I think I told you, I've been off my food a little. My appetite has gone and I've been feeling nauseous. I thought perhaps the nausea was putting me off my food but I don't know what's been causing the nausea. We came across the English Channel on the ferry and the sea was a little rough that day. I put the nausea down to a little sea sickness.'

'Have you had any abdominal pain?'

'Not really pain. Just a bit of discomfort.'

'How have your bowels been? Any change?'

'I've had a bit of diarrhoea,' said Alston, who seemed embarrassed.

'And the colour?'

'Colour?'

'The colour of your stools, your faeces?'

'Oh, that's strange because although my urine has definitely been darker my faeces have definitely been lighter. Clay coloured, I'd say.'

I pulled down the bedclothes and, having asked Alston to undo the cord of his pyjama trousers and to pull up his jacket, I examined his abdomen. I could find nothing of any note. I certainly couldn't find any sign of an enlarged liver.

'What do you think it is, doctor?' asked Esme.

I turned. She was sitting on the edge of her chair, twisting a handkerchief between her fingers.

I refastened the pyjama cord and rearranged Alston's bedclothes. 'I'm pretty sure you've got infective hepatitis,' I said, talking to Alston but also replying to Esme. I hate it when doctors talk about a patient as though he isn't there; discussing a diagnosis and treatment without addressing him directly.

'Oh my God!' cried Esme. She started crying.

I reassured them both that this probably sounded worse than it was. I explained that I felt sure that Alston had an infection of his liver, in particular a type of hepatitis known as 'infective hepatitis A', and that he had probably picked it up somewhere on their journey around Europe.

'It is not at all uncommon for travellers who've visited Paris to pick up hepatitis,' I explained. 'There seem to be a good many restaurants in the city where the kitchen staff are infected. And if hygiene isn't terribly good then the food they serve can be infected too.'

'We were in Paris about six weeks ago,' said Esme.

'That would fit perfectly,' I agreed. 'The incubation period is about six weeks – that's the usual sort of time interval between contracting the infection and showing symptoms.'

'But isn't hepatitis dangerous?' asked Esme.

'Some types can be quite nasty,' I agreed. 'But given all the circumstances I'm confident that Alston has a type of liver infection known as hepatitis A. And that's inconvenient and unpleasant rather than dangerous.'

'Should Alston be in hospital?' asked Esme.

Alston, lying back in bed looked exhausted and seemed happy for his wife to take over the questioning and the decisions.

'I think it would be a good idea,' I said. 'I'll take some blood samples which I'll send along to the laboratory in Barnstaple but I'm pretty confident about the diagnosis.

'Where's the nearest hospital?' asked Esme. 'What do you recommend? Should we take him up to London? We took out good health insurance for this trip. I'm sure our insurers will pay for the best treatment available.'

'It's up to the two of you,' I told them. 'If my diagnosis is correct then Alston simply needs nursing care. There isn't any treatment. Alston will slowly recover and the only important thing is to keep him comfortable and well hydrated. There's a hospital in Barnstaple and a private hospital in Exeter. And there are, of course, plenty of private hospitals in London.' I also explained that we had a small, cottage hospital in Bilbury.

'How long am I going to be ill?' asked Alston.

'A few weeks, possibly even a month or two,' I told him. 'There isn't any way to hurry up the recovery – other than to make sure that you rest and give your body a chance to deal with the infection.'

'Oh dear,' said Esme. 'When do you think Alston will be fit to travel back to the States?'

'Not until he feels a little better,' I told her. 'I wouldn't want him to make a long journey for a few weeks – probably a month at least. He needs to get his strength back and that will take time.'

I took out a syringe and needle and a couple of blood sample bottles. And I took samples of Alston's blood to send to the laboratory.

'How infectious is the disease?' asked Esme.

'It's fairly infectious,' I told her. 'We need to make sure that Alston is properly nursed in such a way that the infection doesn't spread to anyone else. It's called barrier nursing. It just means making sure that the bug which has affected Alston doesn't get a chance to affect anyone else.

'Is Esme going to get this?' asked Alston. 'We've been together all the time.'

'Have you had any symptoms at all?' I asked her. 'Any of the problems Alston has described?'

Esme shook her head.

'And your urine is a normal colour?'

'Oh yes.'

'Then I don't think you're going to get it,' I told her. 'I would have expected you to have shown symptoms or signs by now.'

I left Esme and Alston to discuss hospitals while I went downstairs to arrange for the blood samples I'd taken to be sent over to Barnstaple. A van from the hospital comes round every morning and brings test results and takes away samples but we'd missed it for the day and I didn't want to wait until the next morning's collection. Fortunately, Gilly was going into Barnstaple to do some shopping and she happily agreed to drop off the blood samples at the hospital laboratory.

‘You’re going to lose your guests a little early,’ I told her and Frank. I explained that they should make sure that Alston’s room was well cleaned without any delay. I knew that all the crockery and utensils that are used at the pub are cleaned in their dishwasher so that wasn’t a problem. I told them to make sure that the bed sheets and pillowcases were all washed at a high temperature. ‘And it’s important to make sure that the toilet and bathroom are well cleaned. Wear rubber gloves when you do the cleaning and burn the gloves afterwards.’

When I went back upstairs, I found that Esme and Alston had decided that they would go to London where there was a large, private hospital which their insurance company recommended. I would have been happy for Alston to stay at our cottage hospital in Bilbury (and that’s certainly where I would have preferred to stay myself) but to be honest, I was a little relieved at the choice they’d made. Barrier nursing a patient with infective hepatitis requires a lot of work and our small hospital doesn’t have the staff for that sort of work – particularly since Alston would probably need to be kept in bed for a month or six weeks.

A private ambulance arrived two hours later and took Alston and Esme off to London. I promised to telephone the hospital with the results of the blood tests as soon as they were available, though I knew that the hospital in London would repeat the tests.

Esme telephoned us several times during the next month. The doctors in London confirmed my diagnosis and they kept Alston in hospital for just over four weeks. When they gave Alston the ‘all clear’ the couple flew back to America.

Happily, neither of them had bad feelings about Bilbury – despite the fact that it was in our village that Alston had been taken poorly.

Both insisted that their visit to see Cedric and the rest of us in the village had been the highpoint of their vacation. And Cedric’s North American fan club has now doubled in size.

Alston and Esme were not, however, quite so fond of their trip to Paris.

The doctors in London had confirmed that the chances were that Paris was where Alston had acquired his unwelcome souvenir.

The good news was that Alston made a complete recovery and five months later he, Esme and our good friends the Rathbones sent us a postcard from another of their hiking adventures in the Rocky Mountains.

The Orang-utan

Al Packer works as an insurance salesman during the week but on Friday and Saturday evenings he turns himself into 'Darley Dale', a performer who appears in pubs and clubs throughout the West Country. He sings a mixture of traditional Devon folk songs (which he writes himself) and traditional country and western songs (which he also writes himself).

The traditional Devon folk songs are invariably rather sad and usually involve a young shepherd and his unrequited love for a farmer's daughter.

The country and western songs are about a cowboy who regrets the men he has shot and the cattle he has rustled.

In real life, neither Al nor 'Darley' has ever been further west than Bideford and I doubt if either of them has ever sat upon a horse. To be honest, I don't think Al knows anything much about horses. It is reputed that he once saw half a dozen llamas in a field on the way to Combe Martin and asked several people what sort of horse they were.

Al, who has never married, lives alone in a room which he rents from Samuel Houghton, a local farmer. To be honest, I don't think Al is a very good insurance salesman and I strongly suspect that he would give it up in a moment if he could earn enough money from his singing career.

'Darley' has a regular gig at a pub in Ilfracombe called The Dog and Two Ferrets. He appears there twice a month and the arrangement is that he receives a very small fee but is also allowed as much free beer as he can drink.

Sadly, the result of this (and similar arrangements at a pub in North Molton called The Nell Gwynn and a working men's club in Lynton called 'The Working Men's Club') 'Darley' (or should it be Al) has acquired a taste for alcoholic beverages which doesn't have much to do with thirst.

When I was a medical student, I was taught that the human liver removes alcohol from the bloodstream at a rate of around an ounce an hour and that, as a result, it is in theory perfectly possible to drink an ounce of alcohol every hour without ever showing any signs of being drunk.

The snag, of course, is that a steady consumption of alcohol means that the liver, which has the job of metabolising the stuff, tends to become rather worn out and bloated considerably sooner than might otherwise be the case.

And this, sadly, is what has happened to Al Packer's liver.

He came to see me complaining of nausea, continual tiredness, abdominal pain and swelling in his feet and ankles. His skin and eyes had a yellowish tinge. As a result of the blood tests I'd ordered and received, I'd had no choice but to read him the general practitioner's equivalent of the riot act. I pointed out to him that he was without doubt a fully-fledged alcoholic and that if he didn't change his ways then his future wouldn't be a very long one.

I told him to return to the surgery once a week so that I could keep an eye on his progress by repeating the blood tests.

Whenever he arrived for his check-up, he had obviously been chewing sweets which I recognised as Palma Violets. However, the sweet aroma of the traditional English delicacy failed entirely to mask the smell of the alcohol.

I must say, though, that although his face was always a little flushed, there were no other overt signs that he had been drinking; he did not seem to be in any way dangerously over-lubricated. Like a lot of heavy drinkers, he managed to give the impression of sobriety even when he had drunk enough alcohol to turn any normal person into a wobbly wreck.

The big problem was that Al had not yet accepted that his drinking was damaging his body. Indeed, on the contrary, he was convinced that a few drinks helped him perform much better when he was working as 'Darley'.

Lots of drinkers, particularly motorists, claim that their drinking makes them more confident and less hesitant.

Generally speaking, I've always found this argument to be rather specious and self-serving. It is, for example, well known that although motorists always think they drive better after a couple of drinks, their skills and judgement are invariably worse than they would have been if they had been sober. Alcohol increases confidence but reduces performance.

On the other hand, is the consumption of alcohol one of those areas of life where it is possible to separate the black from the white?

Maybe not.

I worked with two heart surgeons during one of my hospital jobs as a house surgeon and although they worked in the same department, and both did the same sort of operations on the same sort of patients, they were completely different characters.

One of the two surgeons, the younger, was very slow, very methodical and very cautious. If he had owned a powerful motor car he would have been the driver settled in the slow lane, following pantechnicons and fourteen wheelers at 40 mph. If he'd been a house painter he would have taken three weeks to paint a modest sized house but he would have done a perfect job and there wouldn't have been a drop of paint spilt anywhere. He was very straight-laced and liked everyone to call him 'sir'.

The other surgeon, the older of the two, was very fast but rather slapdash and if he had been a house painter there would have been paint on the windows, on the carpets and on the wrong bits of wall. He would have taken less than a week to complete the job and another day to clean up the mess he'd made. He was great fun and liked everyone he worked with, even or perhaps especially the junior nurses, to call him by his Christian name. His one big flaw was that he was rather excitable.

When I first started to work for him, the surgical registrar told me to 'watch his hands'.

'To learn?' I said, naively. 'Is he very good?'

'He is good,' said the registrar, 'but you need to watch his hands because if things aren't going well he has a tendency to throw things – including scalpels.'

While working with that surgeon, and standing on the other side of the operating table, I became very good at dodging knives.

The older surgeon lived in a massive old country house with a pool, a miniature golf course and its own maze. (He did a good deal of private work and made a lot of money from work at a local private hospital.) I remember that one Christmas, a group of us took his car apart and then reassembled it at the centre of his maze. He had to get a crane to lift it out of the maze but he thought it was a hysterically funny jape. I've never known anyone else who had their own maze. I've known several people who had their own boating lakes and two who had their own golf courses but only one who had his own maze. The hedges of the maze were made of leylandii which he had used because it is the fastest growing hedge material known to man. The snag, of course, was that a gardener had to trim the hedge once every few weeks during the summer. It was, I suspect, like painting and repainting the Forth Bridge.

Now, with surgeons, as with most professionals in most areas of life, the best way to measure skill is to match the success rate of one with another. And the ultimate way to measure the skill of surgeons is to measure the percentage of patients who leave the hospital alive and well and compare it with the percentage who leave the hospital encased in a wooden box. The only real way to judge a surgeon's skill is to measure his success rate when compared to colleagues performing similar operations on a similar group of patients.

You might have thought that of the two surgeons I've mentioned, the slow, methodical surgeon would have had the better success rate but you would have been wrong.

The fast surgeon, the one who attacked his patients as though he were tackling the undergrowth in an overgrown garden, wielding his scalpel with gusto, had a far better success rate. His patients were far more likely to live and more likely to get better quickly. The scar he left them with wasn't always neat but they lived. Knowledgeable GPs in the area usually sent him their patients. Even among the public it was quite widely known that he was the man to go to if you needed to go under the knife.

On the other hand, the patients who had been operated on by the slow surgeon had very neat scars, the sort that fade to a thin almost indiscernible white line, but too many of them did not live to parade their scars upon the beach.

There was a simple reason for this.

When a patient is on the operating table they are, inevitably, under an anaesthetic of some kind and their bodies are subjected to a whole series of abnormal physical insults. The risk of a patient faring badly, and developing complications or dying, depends to a very considerable extent upon the length of time an operation takes.

If one surgeon routinely completes his work in two hours and another surgeon takes four hours for the same operation then, all things being equal, the surgeon who completes his operations in the shorter time will have by far the better success rate. His patients will make a quicker recovery and they will be more likely to survive.

I was in the hospital mess when the slow and methodical surgeon, aware of the fact that too many of his patients were dying, asked his older colleague what he thought he could do to improve his success rate.

I knew that the careful surgeon was in a bad way; even talking of giving up surgery completely and retraining as a pathologist. His argument was that if he did post-mortems for a living then at least his patients would be dead when he began work on them. At the time, five of his last six patients had died on the operating table and the sixth was still seriously ill in the Intensive Care Unit.

That is a heavy burden to carry with you when you next scrub up and approach an unconscious patient lying on your operating table.

'Ah that's easy,' said the fast surgeon with a laugh. 'You're a damned good surgeon but you're far too uptight. You fuss too much, you're too nervous and you take too long over your cutting and stitching. Because you're too methodical and slow, your patients are under the anaesthetic for too long. You need to speed things up a bit.'

'But what can I do about it?' asked the methodical surgeon. 'I'm just a naturally cautious sort of fellow,' he added unnecessarily.

'Have a drink before you start work. Not enough to make you drunk, of course; but enough to get rid of some of your inhibitions; a glass of something to loosen you up a little.'

And so the slow surgeon started having a modest sized glass of port before he put on his operating mask and gown. The nurses and other staff were scandalised for the surgeon made no secret of his new habit. He kept a bottle of good port and an appropriate crystal drinking glass in his locker. I don't know why he chose port. I think he was probably nervous about drinking spirits because of the higher alcohol content.

But what is it that they say about the proof of the pudding?

And the fact is that the glass of port did its job.

The young surgeon's operations didn't take quite as long and his patients started to do well. Most important of all they survived.

As long as I was working for him, the surgeon never exceeded his one glass of port. And everyone, doubtless not least the patients and their relatives, was delighted that his terrible run of failure came to an end. No one who worked with him complained. Everyone was relieved.

And what difference does it make whether you relax a little by taking a pill or by taking a single glass of alcohol?

However, there is no doubt that not all those who drink are able to control their drinking so precisely.

Alcohol is an addictive substance and many heavy drinkers only discover that they have lost control when it is far too late.

I had absolutely no doubt that Al Packer was no longer in control of his drinking. On the contrary, the drinking was clearly in charge of him.

'Maybe I should just cut down my drinking,' suggested Al on one of his visits to the surgery. 'I could easily do that.'

'No!' I told him firmly. 'You need to cut out alcohol completely. You need to talk to a specialist and you need to join Alcoholics Anonymous.' I gave him the telephone number for Alcoholics Anonymous and explained how they could help him.

Al eventually left my surgery promising that he would keep the appointment I had made for him at a specialist clinic in Exeter.

I was not confident that he would attend the clinic. In my experience, alcoholics only start on the road to recovery when they acknowledge that they need help – and ask for it.

And so I felt rather gloomy when I set out on my morning rounds later that day.

I like Al Packer.

Some folk would undoubtedly regard him as a rather odd fellow but the word 'odd' can be used as a synonym for 'unusual' or 'fascinating' and I don't for a moment think that the world is a worse place for having a generous sprinkling of 'odd' folk around.

My calls that day took me from one end of the village to the other and as I was driving along the lane which leads past the Duck and Puddle, I went by the cottage belonging to Olive Robinson, Thumper Robinson's aunt. As I drove along, my eye was caught by a figure sitting on a wooden kitchen chair just a few feet from the edge of the roadway. I slowed down to a fast walking pace, because it seemed that the chair was dangerously close to the lane, and to my astonishment saw that the figure sitting on the chair was far too orange and hairy to be human: indeed, it wasn't a human at all. It was an orang-utan.

And it waved to me.

It waved to me!

I'd never seen an orang-utan before but I knew what this was just as surely as I would have recognised an elephant, a giraffe or a camel. I've seen plenty of pictures and there is no other creature in the world which can be mistaken for an orang-utan.

I was tempted to stop to find out why Miss Robinson had acquired a friendly orang-utan as a houseguest but I had one last call to do, to a Mr Rawlinson.

My receptionist, Miss Johnson, had stressed to me that it was important to arrive before lunchtime. I didn't know why the timing was so important but when Miss Johnson tells me something, I always listen and try to do what she suggests. I don't always understand why I am doing what I am doing but I have learned that she not only knows what she is doing but usually also knows what I should be doing.

Mr Rawlinson is a curious fellow. When I first met him, I assumed that he was in his 70s or 80s but in fact, he was only 52-years-old. He is, without a doubt, the laziest man I have ever met. His idea of exercise is turning on the television set in the morning and off again late at night. The muscles of his right forefinger and thumb must be especially well developed; honed within a fraction of an inch of muscular perfection.

Mr Rawlinson once told me that his main claim to fame lies with an ancestor of his called Thomas Rawlinson; an

Englishman who invented the kilt back in the early 18th century.

The 18th century Rawlinson was an industrialist who reportedly invented the kilt because it was cheaper to make than a pair of trousers – and the Scots who worked for him were poor. He also thought the kilt was safer and easier to wear than the sort of complicated garments the workmen had previously favoured.

So he persuaded them to wear kilts – which were cheap and easy to manufacture.

However, about two decades later, in 1746, the British Parliament banned the kilt (in the 1746 Dress Act) because it was considered an embarrassment and too different to be acceptable form of attire. The Highlanders had just been defeated at the Battle of Culloden and Parliament also wanted to make it clear who was in charge.

Before Parliament banned the kilt, it had been worn only by very poor workmen who couldn't afford to buy trousers. No laird would be seen dead in one. But, naturally, as soon as the kilt was banned, every contrary Scotsman wanted one. The richer and more Patriotic Scots definitely wanted the outlawed kilts. And because they had more money, they made the kilts more complicated – adding belts and pleats and so on. The sporran was added because the kilt had no pockets and there was nowhere for the Scotsman to put the 18th century equivalent of his mobile phone and car keys.

And so the kilt became the national costume of Scotland.

Bizarrely, each clan chief claimed that his tribe should wear a kilt with its own distinctive plaid pattern.

The myth about the kilt was carved into stone by Sir Walter Scott, the Scottish romantic author, who claimed that the kilt's history could be traced back to the third century.

This, of course, was imaginative nonsense.

For the kilt was invented in the 18th century by an Englishman called Rawlinson, whose descendant was now unbuttoning the top two buttons of a rather grubby flannel shirt.

Mr Rawlinson had asked for a home visit because he wanted me to listen to his chest.

'Do you have any breathing problems?' I asked.

'Oh no,' he replied, seemingly surprised by the question. 'I feel fine. I just want to make sure that I'm not about to fall ill. I can't afford to be poorly this week.'

'Ah!' I said, feigning wisdom. 'What's happening this week?' I thought that maybe he was about to tell me that he was having a job interview.

'It's the Cheltenham Festival,' he replied.

'Horse jumping?'

'That's right. It starts this afternoon and it's on all week.'

'You're off to Cheltenham?'

'No, no. I'm going to watch it on the television.'

And that, I realised, explained why Mr Rawlinson had told Miss Johnson that it was important that I visited him before lunch.

I listened to his chest, confirmed that all was well and assured him that he was fit enough to sit and watch the horse racing for the rest of the week. He seemed enormously relieved.

Outside his cottage, I stood for a moment and admired the acheiropoietoi which stands on the hill behind his garden.

An acheiropoietoi is, of course, a pictorial image which was not made by human hand and there are many of them in our part of North Devon. This particular acheiropoietoi is a stone which, thanks to a freak of nature, looks like a huge dog.

I have no doubt that not having motor cars, telephones or televisions to complicate their lives meant that the Greeks had plenty of time to wander around the countryside spotting bits of nature masquerading as old men, barking dogs or shapely young women.

And so that is why they had a name for this particular art form. They probably had special acheiropoietoi clubs and weekend acheiropoietoi festivals.

Anyway, the acheiropoietoi behind Mr Rawlinson's cottage is one of the best in our part of the world and certainly the best in Bilbury.

When I had finished admiring the stone dog, I drove away from Mr Rawlinson's home, and headed back towards Bilbury Grange.

The lanes in our village are usually quiet and I can often drive around for an hour or more without seeing any other traffic.

But half a mile away from home, I saw Thumper's truck approaching.

Now, the lanes in Bilbury are narrow and there isn't often enough room for two vehicles to pass each other. Most of the lanes are no more than seven or eight feet wide and because vehicles are restricted to travelling along the tracks made by other vehicles, the lanes have grass growing in the middle. This particular lane, which doesn't have a name, is, however, wide enough for two cars to pass if the drivers are cautious and don't mind tangling their nearside wing mirrors in the hedgerows either side of the road.

Thumper's truck looks as if it has been in a 15 round fight with a couple of large bulldozers and Thumper, who never worried about acquiring new dents and scratches, moved in a little so that his vehicle would rub along the hedge, leaving the Rolls a couple of inches of space to spare its paintwork. We both slowed to walking pace.

As our vehicles approached each other, I noticed that there was a passenger sitting in the front seat of Thumper's truck.

And as we got closer and closer I could see that the passenger was an orange-utan.

It seemed a fair bet that it was the same animal which had been sitting on a chair outside Miss Robinson's cottage.

And once again, the orang-utan was waving.

It was definitely, without a doubt, waving to me.

A long, reddish brown arm was raised in an impromptu salute and the animal was, without a doubt, waving in my direction.

It is always difficult to see precisely what is going on inside Thumper's truck because the windows are thick with several years' worth of accumulated grime and mud. I don't think Thumper has ever washed his truck. He has most certainly never subjected it to a polish.

But I could definitely see that the orang-utan was staring in my direction. And I could definitely tell that it appeared to be pleased to see me.

I blinked and looked again. The orang-utan was still there. If I had been to the Duck and Puddle I would have feared that I must have had too much to drink. Moreover, as a final, bizarre touch, the animal was clearly wearing its seatbelt.

As our vehicles came alongside, I brought the Rolls to a halt and looked across into the front of Thumper's truck. Thumper slowed and he too stopped.

I wound down my window. The orang-utan now began to wave with even greater enthusiasm – as though it had recognised me and was pleased to see me.

'Where…' I shouted, intending to ask Thumper where he had found an orang-utan. But I stopped myself. It seemed an inadequate question. What do you say to someone who is driving around with an orang-utan in the front passenger seat? 'Why have you got an orang-utan with you?' 'Where did you find that animal?' 'Is it dangerous?'

Thumper grinned across at me and rubbed the orang-utan's head with his left hand. The animal seemed to like this a good deal. Its head bobbed up and down and it moved across to be closer to Thumper.

'Wind down your window!' I shouted.

Thumper wound down his window.

'Is that what it appears to be?' I managed at last.

'It's an orang-utan,' replied Thumper with a big grin.

'I saw it a little earlier sitting outside your aunt's cottage.'

'I'm taking it for a ride,' explained Thumper. 'Showing it the neighbourhood.'

I stared at him and then at the orang-utan.

And then I noticed the piece of orange baler twine which was attached to the orang-utan's wrist. The baler twine merged into the creature's fur and was almost invisible.

Thumper saw me notice the string and, unable to contain himself any longer, he started to laugh.

'It's a stuffed toy!' I shouted.

'Took you long enough!' cried another voice, and Patchy Fogg suddenly appeared from his hiding place on the floor at the back of the truck. Patchy, I noticed, was holding the other end of the piece of baler twine which was tied to the creature's wrist.

'Patchy bought a job lot at an auction in South Molton,' explained Thumper. 'As part of the lot there was a large trunk filled with stuffed toys. This one is life-size.'

'You fooled me,' I admitted.

'We could have fooled anyone with it,' said Patchy with a laugh. 'We strapped it into the front seat with the seatbelt and tied bits of string to both arms so that I can sit in the back and make it wave to people.' He pulled at the two strings and the orang-utan raised both arms. It really did look very convincing.

I congratulated them both on the best practical joke I'd seen for months and then drove back to Bilbury Grange for my luncheon.

I'd finished eating and was sitting having my coffee when the doorbell rang. I put down my coffee but hadn't moved out of the chair when the doorbell rang again. It rang another four or five times before I got to the door.

'Someone is very impatient!' shouted Patsy from the kitchen. 'Who is it?'

It was Al Packer. He looked terrified. His yellowing skin was now deathly pale. He was sweating and seemed close to hysterics.

‘Do you have the details of that appointment?’ he asked me. ‘The appointment with the hospital specialist? And have you got the phone number for Alcoholics Anonymous? I lost the piece of paper you gave me before.’

I knew he had probably thrown the paper away but I took him into the surgery, found the details he had requested and wrote them down for him again.

‘I need help,’ said Al. ‘And I need it now.’

‘What’s changed your mind?’ I asked him, pleased that he’d seen the light.

‘I was just driving through the village when I saw Thumper in his van,’ said Al. ‘He had a big orange ape with him. And I swear the ape waved to me.’

‘An orang-utan?’ I asked.

‘Yes, that’s it,’ said Al. ‘Have you seen it?’

‘An orang-utan in Thumper’s van?’

‘Yes. I saw it. The damned thing waved to me.’

‘It doesn’t seem very likely,’ I said.

‘No,’ said Al. ‘It doesn’t does it? That’s why I know I must have been having a hallucination. It’s a sign that I need help.’

‘You’ll keep that appointment and you’ll ring Alcoholics Anonymous?’

‘Oh yes,’ replied Al. ‘I certainly will. You don’t have to worry about that, doctor.’

Al left clutching the piece of paper I’d given him.

It takes on average 15 years to convince an alcoholic to put up a hand, admit they have a problem and ask for help.

For Al, the orang-utan in Thumper’s truck speeded up the process considerably.

When he’d gone, I telephoned Thumper who had just arrived home for his standard 5,000 calorie midday meal.

‘Does anyone else know about your jape?’ I asked him.

‘We only saw you and Al Packer,’ said Thumper. He sounded rather disappointed.

‘Do me a favour,’ I said. ‘Don’t tell anyone else about the orang-utan. And put the damned thing away for a while.’

‘That’s a lot to ask,’ said Thumper, sounding disappointed.

‘I know it is. But it’s in a good cause.’

There was a short silence. ‘Ah,’ said Thumper, seeing the light. ‘Al thought he was having hallucinations, didn’t he?’

I didn’t say anything. I take patient confidentiality very seriously though obviously I couldn’t prevent Thumper reaching the truth by himself.

‘Got it,’ said Thumper. ‘If we drive around with the orang-utan, Al will know that it’s a stuffed toy, realise that he wasn’t having hallucinations and decide he doesn’t need to ask for help.’

Once again, I didn’t say anything.

‘No problem at all,’ said Thumper. ‘I’ll have a word with Patchy.’ I could almost feel him wink at me. Thumper, like most people in the village, is fond of Al but knows that his drinking is out of control and he desperately needs help.

‘Thanks,’ I said.

‘It turned out to be an ever better jape than we thought,’ said Thumper, justifiably sounding rather pleased with himself.

And he was right.

You don’t often come across a practical joke that does someone a good turn.

The Birthday Girl

Since I had taken over my medical practice in Bilbury, I had got into the habit of regularly visiting all my elderly patients, whether they were ill or not.

I had far more elderly patients than might have been expected from the size of the practice (there is, say the locals, something in the sea air that encourages good health and longevity) but even so, I could visit all my elderly patients on a regular basis simply by calling in on two or three most days.

If I was passing the home of a patient I hadn't seen for a few weeks, I would call in just to make sure that all was well.

I always had a supply of drugs in a locked bag in the boot of the Rolls, and if a patient was running out of a medicine they took regularly then I could provide them with additional supplies. Since Bilbury was some considerable distance from the nearest town, I had been granted the right to run what was called a 'dispensing practice'. This meant that I could keep supplies of drugs at Bilbury Grange – and locked in the boot of my car.

I was able to visit my elderly patients, even when they hadn't requested a visit, because I had a small practice and looked after no more than a quarter of the number of patients cared for by a doctor working in a large town or city.

It also helped that there wasn't anyone in the village who wasn't my responsibility.

I could be confident that behind every door I passed, the residents within were on my list of patients. And it was, of course, much easier for me to visit elderly, infirm patients than it was for them to visit me. We see charabancs in Bilbury from time to time but the last time I saw an ordinary bus driving round the lanes of Bilbury, it was only there because the driver, trying to get from Barnstaple to Lynton for the first time, had lost his way. Villagers who want to catch a bus must walk a considerable distance to a bus stop on the main road. There is no bus service within Bilbury itself.

My friend Will, who is a partner in a large practice in a town in the middle of England, has between 2,500 and 3,000 patients on his list. The numbers vary because in the town where he practices there is quite a good deal of movement among the population. People move into the town, or away from it, because they have married, taken jobs in the area or gone away to study at a university or college elsewhere.

In contrast, my practice in Bilbury consisted at the time of around 600 patients. There were sometimes one or two more, and there were sometimes one or two less, but the total didn't change very much.

The one big disadvantage of having such a small practice was that my income was considerably lower than that of a doctor working in a big city practice.

The National Health Service pays doctors a fee for each patient on their list and although I received some additional income from the NHS (including an extra fee because I looked after a small practice in a rural area) my total practice income was much lower than that of a city doctor with several thousand patients.

GPs working in towns and cities also have the opportunity to earn additional money by taking on extra jobs. Will, for example, was one of the local police surgeons and he earned substantial fees for being the medical officer for a couple of large, local factories.

Patsy and I were not complaining. I was earning extra money by writing books and articles and although I'd had to abandon my burgeoning career as a television doctor simply because I wouldn't hire a locum doctor and so could not leave the village to go to studios in London or elsewhere, we were managing very well. We grew much of our own food and in theory, we also had a small income from selling excess fruit and vegetables to Peter Marshall at the village shop. (In practice, there was sometimes a little difficulty in persuading Peter to part with the money he owed us.)

Miss Minchinhampton was one of the elderly patients whom I visited regularly at home.

Indeed, since I had taken over from Dr Brownlow I don't think she had ever visited the surgery at Bilbury Grange.

There was nothing really wrong with her apart from the fact that she was, in her own words, 'beginning to wear out a little'.

Her heart still did what it was paid to do. But it did so with increasing reluctance. And who can blame it or, indeed, complain? How many machines can go through a complicated cycle of activity, 70 times a minute, for hour after hour, day after day, year after year, without a day off or a chance for a little light servicing?

Her lungs struggled to get enough oxygen into her blood.

Her arteries and veins were no longer examples of clean, efficient piping.

Her sight was no longer quite as sharp as it had probably once been and she had a pair of developing cataracts.

Her hearing was still working but if Peter Marshall had been offering her ears for sale even he would have had to mark them down as 'well used by previous owner'.

(Her hearing was not, however, quite as bad as she sometimes led folk to believe. I knew from personal experience that when she wanted to hear something she could do so with surprising clarity. She used an old-fashioned ear trumpet and first-time visitors were always required to subject themselves to the embarrassment of shouting into the business end of the device. I refused to use the ear trumpet.)

And her joints were, predictably, as well worn as might be expected after a good many years of use.

But Miss Minchinhampton did not take any medication and she didn't want any.

She moaned a little, she complained occasionally, she let it be known that she did not enjoy getting old and I think she took great pleasure from expressing her dissatisfaction with the world in general and her life in particular.

But she would not even consider taking medicines.

She regarded drugs as the work of the devil and saw no distinction between illegal drugs such as heroin and cocaine and the sort of medicaments that a doctor might prescribe.

Her state of good health was, in some ways, a minor miracle, for Miss Minchinhampton did everything she shouldn't do, and she had done everything she shouldn't have done for a very long time indeed.

She smoked cigars and she drank copious amounts of brandy and she had done so for so many years that her whole house smelt like a gentleman's club at midnight on a busy Saturday. The combination of cigar smoke and brandy fumes gave the house a unique smell of cedar wood which was, I have to confess, not entirely unpleasant and far preferable to some of the aromas present in homes occupied by elderly ladies and gentlemen.

The funny thing was that I had no idea just how old Miss Minchinhampton really was.

She talked occasionally about her parents and her grandparents and although it was clear from her conversation that her grandparents were no longer with us, I had never been quite clear about whether or not her parents were still in the land of the living. It seemed unlikely but one of the lessons you learn as a general practitioner is that few things are as impossible as they may appear to be. I once had a patient who was 81-years-old but who would not make a decision without asking his parents' permission. His father was 98-years-old and his mother was a year younger. In Bilbury, the elderly often still have their parents around and when they do, they always treat them with the utmost respect.

Miss Minchinhampton could have been in her 70s, her 80s or her 90s. I suspected that her true age was somewhere towards the top end of that range but she had smoked and drunk heavily all her life and these 'vices' can accelerate the ageing process.

As her physician I was, of course, the keeper of Miss Minchinhampton's medical records but these consisted of no more than an aged and very scruffy cardboard folder and a few equally scruffy pieces of cardboard on which Dr Brownlow and I had scribbled rather unhelpful remarks such as 'Surprisingly robust but complains that she feels she is wearing out', 'Not in bad condition for her age – whatever that is' and 'Much the same as last time'. This last comment had been written many times and had eventually become written as shorthand – MTSALT.

She had suffered a bout of tonsillitis just after the end of the Great War and in the 1920s she had sprained an ankle, though the records did not explain which ankle had been the unfortunate one, how it had been sprained or what treatment, if any, had been applied.

Under normal circumstances, a patient's medical records contain details of their date of birth, written in ink on the cardboard folder, but in Miss Minchinhampton's case, this portion of the folder had been torn off and had long ago disappeared.

I had always assumed that Miss Minchinhampton, who steadfastly refused to discuss her age with me, must have got hold of the folder and vandalised it herself. It didn't seem important. If she was so desperate to hide her age then what did it really matter?

'Would you like a cup of tea?' asked Miss Minchinhampton.

I said I would.

I have found, from experience, that Miss Minchinhampton is one of the patients I have who takes offence if I say 'no' to the routinely offered refreshments.

'I'll make you one,' said Miss Minchinhampton, with a sigh. 'I never drink tea at this time of day. I suppose you'll be wanting a biscuit too.'

She levered herself up out of her chair, moaning a good deal and muttering something to herself, and shuffled into the tiny kitchen at the back of her cottage. The kitchen was cramped and crammed with out-of-date equipment. There was a huge Belfast sink, a massive iron mangle, a wooden scrubbing board and an old-fashioned, black-leaded range. Everything in the kitchen looked as if it ought to have been in a museum. Or a scrapyard.

Her cottage had been built at some time in the early 19th century, and several attempts had been made to modernise it but none of the improvements had been done later than the early 1950s. There was an indoor lavatory and a sink with plumbing in the kitchen but there was no water upstairs and, indeed, there was no bathroom at all. There was an electricity supply, with sockets in the living room and the bedroom, but there was no central heating of any kind. The only heat came from an open fireplace in the solitary downstairs room. If hot water was required it had to be heated on the range.

Several minutes later Miss Minchinhampton returned, carrying a tray upon which she had placed a teapot, a cup and a saucer. The saucer was decorated with a teaspoon. There was also a milk jug and a sugar bowl. There were three digestive biscuits on a plate. One of them had a small portion missing.

She put the tray down on her dining table; a huge oak monstrosity which took up nearly a third of the room. I sat down on one of the four upright chairs positioned around the table. She sat down on one of the other chairs.

'It's my birthday soon,' said Miss Minchinhampton. She poured tea into the solitary cup and added a little milk. She then added two spoonfuls of sugar and stirred the resulting mixture.

I asked her the date.

'Two weeks today,' she replied.

'Do you want to tell me how old you'll be?'

'I certainly do not!'

'Are you going to have a party?' I asked her.

'I've never had a birthday party.'

'Never?' I asked, surprised. 'Not even when you were a girl?'

'Never,' said Miss Minchinhampton. She picked up the cup and tasted the tea. It seemed to pass the test. I didn't like to mention that she had made the tea for me. Indeed, to be honest, I was rather relieved. I'd seen inside her kitchen.

My older patients do sometimes forget things. It doesn't always mean that they're developing Alzheimer's disease, or any other form of dementia.

'My parents were very religious,' she said. 'They belonged to a rather strange sub-sect of the Quaker movement and they didn't believe in parties. Not even for children.'

'So there were no balloons, games or trifle in your house?'

'Certainly not,' replied Miss Minchinhampton. She sounded wistful and it wasn't difficult to tell that she was rather sad not to have had a childhood adorned with balloons and trifle. I felt rather sorry for her.

'Would you like to have a party?' I asked.

There was no reply so I repeated the question.

She sighed.

I repeated the question for a third time.

'I suppose so,' she said, feigning reluctance and disinterest.

'Maybe we could organise one.'

'If it would make other people happy.'

'I'm sure it would.'

'I don't leave my home,' she told me, with some certainty.

'I know that.'

'I haven't been out of this house since 1952.'

'Is it really that long?'

'It certainly is.' She paused and then looked me straight in the eye as though daring me to defy her. 'And when I do leave I will be travelling in a wooden box.'

I was accustomed to Miss Minchinhampton's unique mixture of determination and gloominess and so I simply smiled and nodded.

'Do they still make those coloured bits and bobs they put on the top of cakes?' she asked, unexpectedly/

'I think they do. I think they call them 'hundreds and thousands'. Some people call them 'sprinkles'. People also put them on the top of trifles.'

'I saw some once on a cake in a shop,' said Miss Minchinhampton wistfully. 'The cake was in the window. I thought the coloured bits and bobs looked very pretty.' She paused and didn't speak for a moment. I could tell that she was lost in a memory. There were tears in her eyes. 'My mother pulled me away from the window and said the cake was indecent and that the coloured bits were very frivolous and quite decadent.'

'They're certainly frivolous,' I agreed. 'But I don't think there's anything particularly decadent about putting coloured bits of sugar on top of a cake or a trifle for a party.'

Miss Minchinhampton pulled a handkerchief from her sleeve and dabbed at her eyes. 'I think I've got a fly in my eye,' she said. I noticed that she had dabbed both eyes.

'How old would you have been then?' I asked. 'Approximately?'

'I was seven,' replied Miss Minchinhampton, without hesitation. 'We were living in Wolverhampton. The shop with the cake in the window was a bakery and the man who ran it had a port wine stain on his right cheek. I know it is not right to say so but as a child I found him rather alarming. We never bought anything from the shop because we had a cook who made our bread. We weren't wealthy, just ordinary middle class, but people like us had cooks and maids in those days. My father was an assistant bank manager. It was quite a large branch. He used to wear a frock coat to work. He always looked very smart. I remember I had on a blue coat and a blue beret at the time. I used to have ribbons in my hair but I can't remember what colour they would have been. The ribbons would have been under the beret. My mother didn't approve of folderols but she allowed me the ribbons.'

We sat in silence for a while.

'Would you like me to ask Patsy to make you a trifle and put on some hundreds and thousands?' I asked her, quietly.

There was a long, long pause. 'Would it be possible to put them on the top of a cake?' asked Miss Minchinhampton. 'I think people might like that.' She closed her eyes. 'A sponge cake. With jam in the middle and white icing on the top.'

'And coloured sprinkles scattered on top of the icing?'

'Exactly. Quite a good number of them. And sprinkled right up to the edge of the cake. The jam was squeezing out of the side of the cake. It was definitely strawberry jam. I could see a strawberry.'

'Would you like candles on the cake?'

'No.' Miss Minchinhampton was quite definite. 'It didn't have candles.' There were tears forming again and she used the handkerchief to dab them away. This time she didn't mention the fly. 'I wouldn't want candles,' she said. 'There weren't any candles.'

'I'll see what we can do,' I promised her. 'But put it in your diary. Two weeks today. Miss Minchinhampton's birthday party.'

'I don't keep a diary,' said Miss Minchinhampton. 'Why would I keep a diary? No one ever comes to see me and I never go anywhere.' This was said with defiance, rather than self-pity. I had known her for some years and she had never seemed to be a woman to seek out or enjoy the company of others.

'Just a figure of speech,' I said softly. I stood up, put a hand on her shoulder for a moment and let myself out.

As I drove back to Bilbury Grange, I marvelled at the way we cling to some seemingly irrelevant memories and the impact tiny things can have on our lives. I suspect that Miss Minchinhampton had completely forgotten many of the things that had happened to her and which had, at the time of their occurrence, appeared to be life-changing. But she had remembered vividly the sponge cake which had strawberry jam squeezing out of the sides and the white icing covered with brightly coloured hundreds and thousands.

Planning the birthday party took Patsy and me much of the following fortnight.

We decided to invite just a small group of people with whom we knew that Miss Minchinhampton would be familiar: a few of her neighbours, Thumper Robinson and his lady, Anne, Patchy and Adrienne Fogg and my receptionist Miss Johnson. Thumper had done a good many odd jobs for Miss Minchinhampton and Patchy had purchased several pieces of china from her when she had been running low on funds.

We wrote out invitation cards and told everyone to bring balloons, birthday cards and small, wrapped gifts.

I decided that since Miss Minchinhampton was having a birthday party, her very first birthday party by her own account, then I would damned well make some effort to find out just how old she really was. I made a few telephone calls, hustled my way through a good deal of National Health Service red tape, and spoke to a variety of administrators in departments up and down the country. Since I was legally and morally responsible for Miss Minchinhampton's health and welfare, I had a good reason for desiring this simple piece of information. And eventually, I obtained the facts I needed.

Miss Minchinhampton was quite correct about the date in the calendar when her birthday should be celebrated but I was staggered to find out precisely how old she was – and which birthday she was due to celebrate.

When I checked the information I'd received, I talked things over with Patsy and she agreed with me that we should make a little bit of extra effort to commemorate the day.

Thanks to a friend on one of the national newspapers to which I contributed articles and columns, I got hold of a rather difficult-to-obtain telephone number in London. The very important gentleman to whom I spoke was, at first, reluctant to help. He explained that his office usually required several weeks' notice and it was only after a considerable amount of pleading that I succeeded in persuading him to bend the rules, make an exception and push through the arrangements I had requested.

Patsy herself had been responsible for preparing the jam filled sponge cake, icing it and covering it with hundreds and thousands. Peter Marshall had tried to sell her a packet of little silver balls as decoration but Patsy had insisted that she wanted coloured sprinkles and eventually Peter had found a couple of boxes of these. Patsy had managed to use up both boxes on the one cake – making sure that the hundreds and thousands were spread right to the edge of the icing. Patsy's mother, Mrs Kennett, had prepared a magnificent looking trifle (laced in honour of Miss

Minchinhampton with generous helpings of brandy). And the two women had, between them, prepared a wide range of sandwiches, a collection of vol au vents and enough little sausages on sticks to feed a small army.

At last, the big day came.

Patsy and I drove to Miss Minchinhampton's cottage before the others. We were the advance party. We took a large supply of balloons, a boxful of silly hats and some paper plates, plastic glasses and plastic knives (all provided at a surprisingly reasonable price by Peter Marshall). Patsy had very sensibly decided that we would avoid a good deal of washing up if we used disposable plates and cutlery.

We also took a box of Miss Minchinhampton's favourite cigars, supplied by Peter Marshall, and two bottles of an excellent brandy which Frank Parsons of the Duck and Puddle had obtained for us at a very special price. These were the presents which Patsy and I had decided would be most gratefully received.

Miss Minchinhampton did not lock her front door and, like all those who visited her, I was in the habit of knocking and walking in without waiting for an invitation. Miss Minchinhampton said she preferred this because it saved her the effort of having to get up out of her chair.

When Patsy and I entered, carrying all the goodies, the old lady burst into tears.

They were not the easily disguised tears that I had seen before. These were not tears which could be passed off as 'I think I've got a fly in my eye'.

'Whatever is the matter?' asked Patsy, putting the tin in which we had brought the cake down on Miss Minchinhampton's dining table. She moved a chair and sat down beside the old lady.

Miss Minchinhampton did not reply but picked up an envelope, which was lying on the table in front of her and handed it to Patsy. It was a very smart blue envelope, well-made, much thicker and larger than the sort of envelope usually employed for sending letters or greetings, and the outside was marked with a message addressed to the Officer in Charge at the Delivery Office, commanding him in particular and the Royal Mail in general to deliver the item on the first available delivery on that very day. There was a note ordering the Officer in Charge to telephone Buckingham Palace to confirm that the letter was about to be delivered. Underneath this note there was a warning which would, I suspect, have curdled the blood of any Royal Mail employee: 'Failure to do so by 09.30 will initiate an enquiry from The Palace.'

I had never seen anything quite so impressive.

If an envelope could have come with a fanfare this one would have brought its own arch of trumpets.

'Open the envelope,' instructed Miss Minchinhampton.

We both knew what was inside the envelope, of course, and so it was no surprise to see a card, addressed to Miss Minchinhampton and congratulating her on reaching her 100th birthday. The card was signed 'Elizabeth R'. On the front of the card, there was a portrait of Her Majesty the Queen – wearing a tailored dress, three rows of pearls and a beautiful smile. The card even came with its own golden tassel.

It was well worth all the effort. Oh, it was well worth the effort.

'I didn't know it was my 100th,' said Miss Minchinhampton. 'I've never taken much notice of birthdays.'

'You really didn't know?' said Patsy.

Miss Minchinhampton shook her head. 'I knew it was close,' she said. 'But I've never kept track.' She pulled out her handkerchief and blew her nose. 'Did you arrange this?'

'The doctor did,' said Patsy.

Miss Minchinhampton looked at me. 'However did you know?'

'Aha!' I said, grinning at her. 'You'd be surprised what a doctor can find out if he puts his mind to it.'

'And it really is my 100th?'

'Really,' I said.

Just then the rest of the guests started to arrive. We waited until everyone was present, and Miss Minchinhampton's tiny cottage was filled with people, balloons and food. Everyone had brought presents.

Finally, Patsy took the cake out of the tin in which it had been transported.

Miss Minchinhampton burst into tears again. 'It's my cake!' she managed to blurt out before the tears started.

And it was, I have to admit, a dead ringer for the cake Miss Minchinhampton had described to me: the strawberry jam so thickly spread that it was oozing out of the side of the cake, the icing covered with a very generous quantity of hundreds and thousands.

Miss Minchinhampton lit one of her cigars. On her instructions, Patchy opened the brandy and served out generous portions, albeit in plastic glasses. Sandwiches were nibbled, trifle was much enjoyed and finally the cake was cut and slices were distributed.

'Happy Birthday' was sung with much gusto by the assembled choir.

We all stayed for a couple of hours, until it was clear that Miss Minchinhampton was tiring. I then had a quiet word with the other guests and they tactfully withdrew. Patsy collected together all the used plates, glasses and cutlery and put them into a rubbish bag. It took only a few minutes to clear away the debris.

'It was my first ever birthday party,' said Miss Minchinhampton. She was crying and smiling. I don't think I have ever seen more pure, unalloyed happiness than there was in her eyes. 'How did you know about the cake?' she asked me.

'You mentioned something about it,' I told her.

'Did I?'

I nodded.

'It was my cake,' said Miss Minchinhampton. She looked at the remains of the cake. There wasn't much left. 'Definitely my cake.'

'I hope it tasted as good as you'd imagined it would,' said Patsy.

'Oh, better,' said Miss Minchinhampton. There was the beginning of a new tear in one eye. 'Much better.'

'Not too decadent, was it?' I said.

She shook her head, looked up at me and smiled. 'No,' she said softly. 'It wasn't decadent at all.' She brushed the tear away with the back of her index finger. Another replaced it.

It was only seven o'clock in the evening but she was tired so we helped her up to bed. Patsy helped her undress and together we helped her into bed.

'I've had the best day of my life,' said Miss Minchinhampton quietly. She closed her eyes and nodded, as though agreeing with herself. 'I had to wait 100 years for it. But I want you both to know that it was the very best day of my life.' She held each of us by the hand, in turn, and smiled at us. I had known her for years but I had never seen her that way.

'I can die happy, now,' she said.

'But not yet,' I told her sternly.

She opened her eyes, looked at me and smiled. 'No, perhaps not quite yet,' she agreed.

Patsy and I stayed with her until she went to sleep.

And then we crept off downstairs, put the remains of the cake, complete with its hundreds and thousands, back into the old biscuit tin in which it had come, fastened the lid tightly and put the tin in Miss Minchinhampton's larder.

I picked up the rubbish bag which contained the debris from the party and Patsy and I went home.

It had been a good day in Bilbury.

A very good Bilbury day.

Cyril’s Petard

Thumper Robinson, Patchy Fogg and I were sitting in the snug at the Duck and Puddle. It was one of those cold winter days that are a speciality of North Devon. Outside, a stern south-westerly wind was troubling the trees and doing nature’s pruning; scattering dead branches and twigs far and wide.

Three workmen in yellow high visibility vests had, for reasons that were never entirely clear, dug a hole in the road and, having done this, they were now doing something that required flasks of tea and much standing around and chatting. They were warming their hands on their mugs of tea and probably deciding what to do with the hole.

An old man in a grubby mackintosh, who certainly wasn’t local and whom I had never seen before, was standing nearby. He was watching them drink their tea and admiring the hole. I don’t know where he had come from but I have noticed on many occasions that whenever workmen dig a hole there will always be a spectator or two available.

‘I saw Cyril this morning,’ said Thumper, sipping at his pint of Old Restoration; an unusually strong local brew which is reputed to have the alcoholic content more like that of a spirit than that of a beer. ‘I tried to pretend I hadn’t seen him but he collared me before I could get the truck started.’

Patchy and I immediately groaned in sympathy.

Cyril’s full name is Cyril Rodney Arthur Player and he is our local pessimist. He has an unnatural ability to see the gloomy side of everything. And he delights in sharing his gloom. Frank, the landlord of the Duck and Puddle, went to school with him and reckons that Cyril never recovered from having parents who thought they were doing him a favour by giving him three Christian names but who did not realise that at the local school, it was common for pupils to be known by their initials. Going through your school years known to pupils and teachers as C.R.A.P. must have had an impact on a developing boy. I knew a boy called Samuel Andrew Dennis and to be S.A.D. was bad enough. To have been known as C.R.A.P. must have been torment.

‘He asked me if I was worried that Mrs Kendall’s cottage might attract squatters,’ said Thumper.

‘Is it still empty?’ I asked. Mrs Kendall had died two months earlier. Her cottage was cold, dark and damp.

‘I don’t think even squatters would want to live in it,’ said Thumper. ‘There were rats living there for a while but they left. Probably too cold and dirty for them.’

‘Why would squatters settle in Bilbury?’ asked Patchy. ‘Don’t squatters want to live in places where there are clubs, bars, pubs and drug dealers?’

‘It was just Cyril being Cyril,’ said Thumper, dismissively.

Cyril is, without a doubt, the gloomiest person I know or have ever met. He is unremittingly pessimistic. He has an unerring capacity for finding the blackest cloud in any sky and a quiet determination to share the knowledge with the person most likely to be depressed by it. Mrs Kendall’s former cottage stands no more than a quarter of a mile from the home which Thumper shares with Anne and their children.

Patchy, who was drinking a double Sheep Dip, sighed and shook his head. ‘Someone should put Cyril on a spit and cook him over a slow fire,’ he said, rather bitterly.

Patchy has never forgiven Cyril for asking him if he knew that the wall alongside his property was ‘about to fail’.

Cyril claimed that he had noticed that the stone wall, which was something over six feet high, had a worrying looking bulge in its middle. ‘Would you be able to live with yourself if it fell on a woman with a pram?’ he had asked, before drawing a vivid word picture of the awful consequences.

Patchy, who had never noticed anything amiss with his wall, had been so worried by Cyril’s foreboding that he had commissioned a surveyor to prepare a report on the wall’s safety. The surveyor, who had confirmed that the wall was perfectly safe for another century or so, had presented Patchy with a bill for £60.

I should, at this point, perhaps remind readers that Sheep Dip is the name of a blended whisky made from 16 separate types of malt whisky. It is much favoured in Devon where farmers buy the stuff by the crate and then put it down in their accounts as an expense. They are helped in this slightly crooked endeavour by the fact that one of the large wholesalers, which specialises in selling animal feed, fertiliser and genuine sheep dip, also has this particular brand of whisky in stock. The result is that their customers can order twelve bags of sheep pellets, nine bags of fertiliser and two crates of Sheep Dip without anyone being any the wiser. As far as I know, the taxman has not yet worked out that the stuff the farmers are buying never gets close to a sheep’s foot.

I don’t think there is anyone in the village who doesn’t suddenly discover an urgent appointment somewhere else if they see Cyril coming.

Mr Kennet, my father-in-law, was once asked by Cyril if he worried about his spring water drying up. Since the spring which supplied Mr Kennet’s farm was also the main source of water for his livestock, this thought was a source of considerable distress for some weeks. In the end, Mr Kennet forked out several thousand pounds to have a dowser find a supplementary water source and for a drilling engineer to fit a water pump and an underground tank. What particularly upset him was the fact that he knew that the spring had never dried up in over a hundred years. And yet when Cyril had put the pessimistic thought into his head, it had kept him awake for a week.

Cyril had got under my skin on three occasions.

He once spent half an hour warning me about the stream which travels through our land. He pointed out that if the stream flooded it would almost certainly affect the cellars and ground floor at Bilbury Grange.

On another occasion, he took considerable delight in warning me that if the massive and wonderful copper beech which stands a few yards from our dining room window were ever to decide to prefer lying down to standing up then the trunk and upper branches would doubtless destroy that part of our house. That's the trouble with Cyril: his warnings always appear to be well-intentioned and based on logic.

The third occasion concerned the Rolls Royce which I had inherited from Dr Brownlow, my predecessor, and which was my mechanical pride and joy. 'Those old cars look very good,' he said, 'but you can't possibly think it's a suitable motor vehicle for a country general practitioner with a large rural practice. Old cars are far more likely to break down than modern ones and when they do break down, the chances are that the garage will have a hell of a job finding spare parts.'

As usual, the thing that really annoyed me was the fact that he was absolutely correct in everything he said. I didn't need anyone to say it.

Thinking about Cyril is always depressing so we ordered another round of drinks. Another pint of Old Restoration for Thumper, another double dose of Sheep Dip for Patchy and another small glass of 25-year-old Bunnahabhain for me. Bunnahabhain is a golden coloured malt whisky which I could ill afford to drink but could not afford to miss. Bunnahabhain is, I believe, the sweetest of all Scotch whiskies; smelling and tasting, as it does, of caramel, treacle toffee and Christmas. Patsy introduced it to me when she bought me a bottle one year as a Yuletide present.

'So how did you get rid of Cyril?' asked Patchy, when Frank had brought the drinks to our table and, after obtaining Gilly's permission, poured himself a small port. Gilly, who is Frank's wife, controls every aspect of the landlord's diet, for a little while ago he had a stroke which very nearly killed him. She has, without a doubt, saved his life and him from himself.

Thumper grinned. 'Got him hoisted high on his own petard!' he replied.

Patchy and I looked at him.

'I told him that you'd been to see a lawyer about that nonsense he said about your wall,' said Thumper. 'I said the lawyer told you that he thought you'd have a good case against him for wilful and deceitful misdirection.'

Patchy and I both frowned.

'What the devil is 'wilful and deceitful misdirection'?' I asked. I was still recovering from the fact that Thumper had known, and used, the word 'petard'.

'Buggered if I know,' replied Thumper with a shrug. 'I made it up; on the spur of the movement.' He grinned at us. 'It sounds good though doesn't it?'

We both agreed that it sounded very convincing.

'I told him the lawyer had said that you could sue him for damages and that unless you were in a very magnanimous mood he would probably be served with a summons any day now,' completed Thumper with a big smile.

'What did Cyril say?'

'He asked how much I thought you would be asking for.'

'What did you say?'

'I said I thought you would be demanding £5,000 plus costs.'

'£5,000!' exclaimed Patchy. 'Did he believe you?'

'He certainly did,' said Thumper. 'He went pale and scurried off home, muttering something about putting everything he owned into his wife's name.'

I suppose I should have felt sorry for Cyril, but I didn't. For years now, he has spread worry and stress and caused many people in the village to have sleepless nights. He has also caused many villagers to incur unnecessary expense. And I know of three very splendid and perfectly healthy trees which were taken down because the owners were worried that they might fall and crush their homes. Maybe Cyril would now be a little less anxious to cause unwarranted anxiety.

We all sipped at our drinks in silence for a while.

'You don't suppose there's anything in this 'wilful and deceitful misdirection' thing, do you?' Patchy asked me. 'I wouldn't expect £5,000, and I don't suppose Cyril has got that much anyway, but £1,000 would be fair, wouldn't it?'

I looked at him, to see if he was being serious. He was.

‘Thumper made it up,’ I reminded him quietly.

‘Ah, yes,’ said Patchy. He looked rather downcast. ‘That would make a difference, I suppose.’

I ordered him another large Sheep Dip as consolation for the disappointment.

But Patchy is an antiques dealer. He never stays disappointed for long. He knows there is always the chance of another bargain discovery behind a worm-ridden wardrobe.

And since I couldn’t order Patchy a drink without ordering one for Thumper, I asked Frank to bring another pint of Old Restoration.

‘Another glass of Christmas for yourself, doc?’ asked Frank who agrees with me that the Bunnahabhain smells of yuletide.

‘Oh, I think so,’ I said. ‘It looks cold outside.’

‘Do you think I ought to have another small port?’ asked Frank.

I told him he had to ask Gilly.

He hurried away to consult the management.

While we waited for our drinks, I looked out of the window.

Outside it was still windy and the sky was overcast. The three men in high visibility jackets were still contemplating their hole. The man in the grubby mackintosh had been joined by two other spectators. I didn’t recognise either of them. They weren’t locals. I wondered where they had come from and how they had known there was a hole waiting for them to look into.

Life is full of mysteries.

But sometimes I think it’s best to leave them for someone else to worry about.

On Their Holidays

Doctors who work in towns which deliberately make an effort to cater for holidaymakers and tourists have reported that their workload can double in the summer months.

During the winter, when the hotels and boarding houses are closed or nearly empty, doctors in a tourist area will find themselves living fairly leisurely lives. They have only to look after a relatively small population of locals. Hotels will be closed or near deserted and many owners of boarding houses will have closed their doors and their shutters and fled to Spain for a winter of rest and sunshine.

People who have holiday homes in the area will have gone back to their main homes, leaving their cottages, bungalows, chalets and caravans closed and shuttered for the winter. Seaside resorts can be empty, lonely and damp in the months from November to March.

But in the summer months, when the hotels are packed and the local caravan and camping sites have opened their gates, the very same doctors will work long days and nights providing medical services for patients whom they have never seen before, and whom the National Health Service officially describes as 'temporary residents'.

Most of the problems these patients bring with them are fairly easily treated. Sunburn, summer colds, cuts and bruises, insect stings, food poisoning and sexually transmitted infections are top of the list of ailments at any holiday resort.

In Britain, doctors who treat patients who are temporary residents can fill in a form and claim a fee for their work, and in areas of the country where holidaymakers are commoner than wasps at a picnic these sums can add up to a considerable part of the doctors' income.

Bilbury is close to some of England's most popular tourist areas, and it has many attractions of its own, of course.

But the village is not easy to find and apart from the village pub, the Duck and Puddle, there is no accommodation available for holidaymakers. No attempt is made to attract visitors to the village and Peter Marshall, who runs the village shop, admits that he sells no more than a few dozen postcards every year. He does a little bit of business selling soft drinks, biscuits and fruit to walkers, cyclists and motorists who have got lost, but he would never claim that selling to holiday makers makes a serious contribution to his bottom line.

Bilbury has had its moments, of course, and it has, without doubt or enthusiasm, toyed with tourism from time to time.

There was, for example, a period, now pushed to the backs of most minds, when the village was overrun with people responding to an article in which a writer had described Bilbury as Britain's healthiest village – and the 'perfect place to live'. For a while, the lanes had been clogged with visitors keen to see for themselves what made Bilbury so special.

And, more recently and perhaps most notably, there had been the ill-fated and never-to-be-repeated Festival which was held in a couple of fields and which drew huge crowds to Bilbury. I don't think it is an exaggeration to say that when the Festival's organiser decided that the event had been a commercial failure, and would not be repeated, there were celebrations in just about every house and cottage in the area.

But, on the whole, Bilbury is too far off the beaten track to see many strangers wandering through. We always welcome tourists who do come, for we are proud of Bilbury, but we don't promote ourselves in the way that some seaside resorts are prone to do.

As a result, it is a fact that some weeks I would see no tourists at all in my surgery.

But during the month of August, one year I saw four holidaymakers in as many days.

And the strange, and memorable, thing was that three of them had serious health problems. None of the three was simply a case of providing a simple treatment for a summer cold, blistered feet or a bout of hay fever.

Two of these case histories confirmed my theory that it is often so much easier for a doctor who has never seen a patient before to make a diagnosis than it is for a doctor who sees a patient regularly to make the same diagnosis.

The first patient, Mrs Danielle Studl, had come to the surgery complaining simply that she felt ill and inexplicably under the weather. She told me that she was in her early 30s but she looked ten years older. She was lined and seemed worn out. She wore a print summer frock that hung on her so loosely that it looked as if it were on a clothes hanger.

She had, she admitted, been poorly for some months but her symptoms had become worse since she'd arrived in North Devon a few days earlier. She and her family, one husband and three young children, had been staying in a caravan at a holiday park near to Combe Martin.

'Has the heat made things worse?' was my first question. The weather in Bilbury had been exceptionally warm for a week or more.

Mrs Studl admitted that it had. ‘I can’t stand this hot weather,’ she told me. ‘I feel bad about it but I keep hoping it will rain. The children are having a lovely time in the sunshine but it just seems to make me feel ill. I feel tired and weak and I’m constantly sweating.’

‘Has your weight changed recently?’ I asked her.

‘It has,’ she agreed. ‘I’ve lost nearly a stone in the last six months.’

‘Have you been trying to lose weight? Have you been dieting? On a slimming diet?’

‘Oh no! I know you probably don’t hear this often but I’d like to be a little heavier. My husband is always telling me I need to put on a bit of weight.’ She subconsciously touched her chest.

‘What’s your appetite like?’ I asked her.

Losing weight without trying is always a symptom that needs to be taken seriously. But some causes are more serious than others. And I was already beginning to feel that I knew what was wrong with Mrs Studl.

‘I eat like a horse,’ admitted Mrs Studl. ‘I’m always hungry. And I eat more than my husband.’

‘But despite this you’re losing weight?’

She nodded.

‘How do you sleep?’

‘Badly! It takes me ages to get to sleep. And I wake up a lot. Do you think it’s the sleeplessness that is making me tired?’

‘It isn’t helping,’ I told her. ‘Do you get palpitations?’

‘Sometimes, I do, yes.’

‘How are your bowels?’

‘I have to go more often than used to be the case. I’ve had diarrhoea for a few days now. That comes and goes.’ She leant forward in the chair and lowered her voice. ‘Is it cancer, doctor? My neighbour’s sister lost a lot of weight and she had bowel troubles. She had cancer. She was dead in six months.’

‘No,’ I told her firmly. ‘I don’t think you’ve got cancer.’ I was now even more certain that I knew what was wrong with her.

‘Hold out your hand, please,’ I told her.

‘Which one?’

‘Either.’

She held out her right hand.

‘Keep it as steady as you can.’

There was a clearly visible tremor in her fingers.

‘I can’t help it, doctor,’ she said, almost apologetically. ‘I just can’t stop the trembling.’

I asked her to climb up onto my examination couch.

Two minutes later I was certain of the diagnosis.

Mrs Studl had very moist, warm skin and she had a fast pulse. Her heart was beating irregularly and she had a very wide pulse pressure – in other words, there was a massive difference between her systolic and diastolic blood pressure readings. I examined her neck but could find no abnormality.

‘Are you sure it isn’t cancer?’ she asked, when she was sitting back in the chair on the other side of my desk.

‘I’m pretty certain that you have a condition called thyrotoxicosis,’ I told her. ‘It’s also known as hyperthyroidism. It isn’t cancer.’

Mrs Studl looked puzzled. ‘I thought people with that had swollen necks. My mother had a friend with thyroid trouble. She had a very swollen neck.’

‘Sometimes patients have a goitre – a swelling in the neck,’ I agreed. ‘But not always.’

‘And you think that’s what is wrong with me?’

I nodded. ‘I do. And the good news is that it can be treated.’

Mrs Studl started to cry.

I handed her the box of paper tissues which I always keep on my desk.

‘I thought it was cancer,’ she said quietly, when she’d wiped her eyes and blown her nose.

‘No,’ I said.

‘What’s the treatment? Do I need surgery? An operation?’

‘Your doctor will need to give you some tablets,’ I told her. ‘He’ll want to organise some tests and may send you along to the hospital to see a specialist. But the treatment will be medicine.’

I asked her how long she and her family were staying in Combe Martin.

‘We go back on Saturday,’ she said.

‘Then there isn’t much point in my organising tests here,’ I told her. ‘The results won’t be back before you’re on your way home. What is your doctor’s name?’

She told me.

I picked up a piece of my notepaper and wrote a letter to her doctor. When I'd finished, I put the letter into an envelope and handed it to her.

'I've left the envelope unsealed for now,' I told her. 'So, you can read the letter and show it to your husband. Once you've both read what I've written put it back into the envelope and seal it. Then, as soon as you get back home, go and see your doctor and give him the letter.'

Mrs Studl took the letter, put it into her handbag and smiled. 'It's funny, isn't it? I feel much better than I did when I came in. And you haven't really done anything, have you?'

'It's thyrotoxicosis,' I told her again. 'Thyroid trouble. Not cancer.'

She smiled, nodded and left.

Thyrotoxicosis, caused by an overactive thyroid gland, is one of the easiest diagnoses for a doctor to make because the signs and symptoms tend to be so clear.

But, funnily enough, the opposite condition, one caused by an underactive thyroid gland, is also an easy diagnosis to make – especially if you have never seen the patient before and have not slowly got used to the patient's appearance.

Mrs Ethel Pelham came to the evening surgery the day after I'd seen Mrs Studl and I knew the minute she walked through the door, spoke to me and sat down exactly what was wrong with her. At least, I was pretty sure that I knew.

Mrs Pelham was in her early 60s. She moved slowly and was noticeably overweight. She had no expression on her face. It's a look you sometimes see with Parkinson's Disease but also with one other condition.

She did not, however, come to the surgery complaining of the problem I had so quickly diagnosed.

'I've got something in my eye,' she told me. 'It's been driving me mad but I couldn't see it to get it out and my husband is useless with medical things.'

It took me less than a minute to remove the very small fly from her eye. Her conjunctiva was red because she had rubbed it so much. I told her to blink a few times. While I extricated the fly, my hand touched her hair and that small contact confirmed my diagnosis.

'Oh, that's wonderful!' she said when I had taken out the fly. 'Such a relief.' Her voice was hoarse and her speech slow. She sounded like an old man who has smoked 60 a day for half a century.

'Another happy customer!' I said.

'Definitely, doctor.' She thanked me and started to get out of the chair.

'Before you go,' I said, 'do you mind if I ask you if you are being treated for anything by your doctor?'

She looked puzzled. 'No, doctor. I haven't seen my doctor for years.'

'Do you smoke?'

'Oh, no.'

'Have you been putting on weight in the last year or so?'

'I eat too much,' she said, defensively. 'Do you think I need to diet?' She seemed a trifle offended. I cursed myself for being so clumsy.

'I apologise,' I said. 'I asked you that for a reason. Do you get numbness and tingling in your hands or feet?'

'My hands, yes, I do. I get tingling in my hands.'

'Have you noticed that your skin is very dry?'

Now Mrs Pelham was looking puzzled. 'Yes, I have. How did you know that?'

'And have you noticed that your hair is very dry?'

'Yes. It's also getting thin and coarse.'

I nodded.

'You knew?'

I nodded. 'Do you suffer with constipation?'

'I do. You don't do magic tricks as well, do you? How did you know all this about me?'

'You dislike the cold weather more than ever?'

'Oh, I do. I can't stand the cold weather. Last winter my husband went mad because I had to have the heating on quite high all the time.' She looked at me and raised an eyebrow. 'You've spotted something, haven't you?'

'I think you have a bit of a problem with your thyroid gland,' I told her. 'It isn't working properly.'

'How on earth do you know that without doing any tests?'

'The things I've asked you about are classically signs and symptoms of an underactive thyroid gland,' I told her. 'The condition is called myxoedema or hypothyroidism and it can usually be treated fairly easily with some thyroid tablets.'

'You mean that if I take some tablets, my skin and hair will feel better?'

'Yes.'

‘And that tingling, funny feeling in my wrists will go?’

‘Yes.’

‘And I won’t need the heating so high in the winter?’

‘Yes.’

‘My husband is going to be very pleased.’

‘Good.’

‘And I’m going to be very, very pleased. When do I start taking these magic tablets?’

‘When do you go home?’

‘Tomorrow.’

‘Then you need to go and see your own GP.’ I reached for the notepaper again. ‘I’ll give you a letter to take to him. He’ll want to do some tests. And then he’ll prescribe some tablets.’

I wrote out the letter, put it into an unsealed envelope and handed it to Mrs Pelham. I told her she could read the letter and show it to her husband but that she should then seal the envelope and hand it to her doctor when she got back home.

‘I’m glad that fly got into my eye,’ she said, as she left.

The third call came two days and it was from a couple who were staying in a caravan site near Mortehoe.

I’m not sure why they called me because there were several doctors practising in the immediate locality. Maybe they just found my name in the local telephone directory and picked me out at random.

When I eventually found their caravan (not an easy task since there were several hundred identical caravans in a single very large field) I knocked on the door and found the couple were struggling to feed their baby.

They looked to be in their early 20s. Their name was Roberts.

He was called Peter. He was rather overweight and pasty looking and wore khaki, knee length shorts, a white T-shirt and one of those multi-pocketed gillets which are popular with photographers and fishermen. I couldn’t see any cameras but there was a collection of fishing equipment stored in a corner of the caravan.

She was called Mary and she too was on the generous side of rather plump. She wore a pair of white shorts and a flowered bikini top which was rather overfaced. A large roll of fat hung over the front of her shorts.

The caravan, which seemed quite large, was crowded with the three of us and the baby inside. Part of the problem was the fact that every flat surface, including the seats, had things stored on them. There were piles of clothes everywhere. There were so many clothes on display that the caravan looked like the site of a jumble sale. I couldn’t make my mind up whether taking a small baby away on a caravan holiday was brave or foolhardy, courageous or reckless.

‘She keeps being sick,’ said the young mother, who looked worried half to death. The baby was lying in a huge pram. The pram was so large that it took up much of the available space. I have no idea how they got it into the caravan. There were several used and greasy fish and chip wrappers around the place. Every last chip and piece of fish had gone. Even the little crunchy bits of batter had all been Hoovered up. All that remained were the fat stains on the paper, a couple of fish bones and a nauseating smell. There was also a rather unpleasant smell of baby vomit in the air. I looked around. All the windows were firmly shut.

‘You need to give her some medicine to stop the sickness,’ said the young father. He looked to me to be a rather aggressive, demanding sort of fellow.

‘When did the vomiting start?’ I asked.

‘Two days after we got here,’ replied the mother.

‘And when did you get here?’

‘Four days ago,’ answered the father who sounded very fed up. ‘The whole holiday has been pretty much ruined.’

‘How old is the baby?’

‘Six weeks,’ said the mother.

‘What’s her name?’ I asked.

‘Tabitha.’

‘That’s a lovely name,’ I said.

‘I liked that television programme with the character called Tabitha.’

I must have looked rather blank.

‘Bewitched.’

‘Is that the name of the programme?’

‘Didn’t you ever see it?’

‘I’m afraid not.’ I was surprised that a couple had named their child after a character on a television programme. It wasn’t something which I had come across before.

‘Crumbs,’ said the mother, pulling a disapproving face. I got the impression that my status and credibility had disappeared through the caravan floor.

‘She needs some medicine to stop her being sick,’ said the young father. He did not seem to me to be a man whom fatherhood became.

‘Can I see her being fed?’ I asked.

‘She’ll just be sick,’ said the young father. ‘It’s a waste of milk.’

‘I’ll get the bottle,’ said the young mother. She fetched a feeding bottle that was sitting in a saucepan of what I assumed was warm water and offered the teat of the bottle to the baby.

‘You’re not breastfeeding?’ I said.

‘Oh no,’ said the young mother. ‘Breastfeeding ruins a woman’s figure.’ The baby was now feeding with great enthusiasm. She looked well.

It seemed to me that fish and chips had already done a certain amount of damage to the woman’s figure. Breastfeeding would not have caused any more damage.

‘But breast milk is very good for babies, you know,’ I said, not wanting to miss the opportunity for a little education.

‘She’s going to be sick now!’ said the young husband. He sounded pleased in an ‘I told you this would happen’ sort of way.

And sure enough the baby was sick.

But this was no ordinary sickness.

The baby’s vomit flew across the caravan with force, just missing me. The husband had craftily moved out of range.

‘Ah,’ I said, for now I was pretty sure that I knew what was wrong. ‘Just undress the baby for me, please.’

The mother undressed the baby.

‘And now feed her again.’

‘She’ll just be sick again,’ moaned the husband. `That’ll mean more mess and more wasted milk. Can’t you just give her something to stop the sickness?’

I ignored the husband and watched the baby’s abdomen as she fed.

I could see a wave of peristalsis moving across the abdomen from left to right. I felt the baby’s tummy and could feel a mass on the right side. It was the size of an olive. Now I definitely knew what was wrong.

‘We’re going to have to take Tabitha into the hospital,’ I told the parents. ‘She has a condition called pyloric stenosis. It is quite common and it can be cured.’

‘What is it?’ demanded the mother, who seemed genuinely concerned, though to say that she was worried might have been something of an exaggeration.

‘Bang goes our holiday,’ mumbled the father, with a sigh. He did not seem in the slightest bit concerned.

‘The opening between the stomach and the bowel has become narrowed and so, as a result, food can’t get through,’ I explained. ‘If she isn’t treated, Tabitha will become dehydrated and not gain any weight. For some unknown reason, this condition usually affects boys but it can affect girls too.’

‘How will they cure her?’ asked the mother.

‘A small operation,’ I told her. ‘It only takes about half an hour to do.’

‘And then she’ll be well again?’

‘Yes.’

‘Isn’t there any medicine you can give her?’ asked the father, who had clearly not been listening to anything I’d said.

‘I’m afraid not,’ I said. ‘Do you have a car you could use to take Tabitha to the hospital?’

‘Can’t you ring for an ambulance?’ asked the father. ‘Aren’t we entitled to an ambulance?’

‘I could ring for an ambulance,’ I said. ‘Do you know where there’s a telephone I could use?’

‘There’s one at the shop on the campsite,’ said the young mother. ‘A red phone box. But it doesn’t work. It’s been vandalised.’

‘In that case I’ll have to go back to my surgery and telephone from there,’ I told them. ‘Are you sure you don’t want to take Tabitha to the hospital yourselves? I’ll give you a letter to take with you and telephone them to let them know you’re coming.’

‘We’re entitled to an ambulance,’ said the young father.

‘I’ll send an ambulance,’ I told them. ‘Please look out for it so that you can meet them when they arrive. It took me nearly half an hour to find you.’

I then drove back to Bilbury Grange and telephoned the local hospital.

I never heard from the parents again but a couple of weeks later when I spoke to one of the paediatricians at the hospital. He told me that baby Tabitha had been treated quite successfully.

‘I remember them,’ said the paediatrician. ‘The father was forever demanding things and going on about his rights. I thought he was a rather unpleasant fellow. I remember he wanted us to pay for his petrol when he came to the hospital to visit the baby.’

Finally, that week I saw a honeymoon couple who had come to North Devon on a camping holiday. Back in the 1970s, not every young couple went to the Maldives or the Caribbean on their honeymoon. Most were prepared to rough it, enjoy each other’s company, and save a little extra money towards the deposit on a home.

These were the fourth (and fifth) patients I saw who weren’t resident in the village. But, unlike the others, their problem was simple rather than serious.

They had spent a whole day sunbathing in the field where they’d camped. The new wife told me, with a delightful blush, that they had slept very little the previous night. The result was that they had both fallen asleep in the sunshine and they had, rather inevitably, ended up with unpleasant burns on their backs. Their skin was so tender that they couldn’t bear to touch it or to have it touched.

They didn’t need to go to hospital and they didn’t need to have anything more complicated than some soothing lotion in the way of treatment.

But, sadly, I had to point out the obvious: that they would both have to lie on their fronts for a few days while their skin recovered.

‘You mean you can’t do anything to speed things up?’ asked the new husband. ‘You can’t give us something to take away the soreness?’ He sounded appalled and indignant at the same time.

‘I’m afraid not,’ I said, sympathetically but not very helpfully.

‘But we’re on our honeymoon!’ complained the new wife who was clearly equally disappointed and, dare I say, frustrated by my inability to offer a speedier solution to their problem.

It would, I thought, be a honeymoon they would remember with rueful smiles and a little embarrassed laughter in future years.

But for the moment there were no smiles and definitely no laughter.

And not a lot of ‘how’s your father’ or ‘rumpy pumpy’ either.

Shop Talk

‘I think I might need a stitch in this, doctor,’ said Archer Woodnutt, limping into the surgery.

He sat down, pulled up his right trouser leg and displayed a knee that was covered with a blood stained bandage.

‘What on earth have you done to yourself?’ I asked, when I’d unwound the bandage and revealed the damaged joint. There was a nasty looking, ragged cut in the skin over the upper end of his tibia, an inch or so below the bottom edge of his patella. I was relieved to see that the damaged area looked clean, and there were no signs of any infection.

‘It’s a bit embarrassing, to be honest,’ said Mr Woodnutt. ‘I was scrabbling around on the floor in the village shop when I caught my knee on a nail.’

I told him to climb up onto my examination couch. I then put on a pair of rubber gloves. Once he was comfortably settled on the couch I started to clean the wound, wiping away the dried blood. The two sides of the wound were a quarter of an inch apart and as I cleaned away the debris, the bleeding started again. There was clearly a need for a little sewing to be done. ‘You’ll need four or five stitches in that,’ I told him.

‘That many!’ said Mr Woodnutt, clearly surprised. He looked down at his knee, examining it as though he were an expert in such matters. ‘I thought one stitch would do it.’

‘If I put in several stitches and keep them small and fairly tight then you shouldn’t have too much of a scar,’ I explained.

I filled a syringe with a local anaesthetic and injected a little around the wound. In my experience it is the biggest, strongest and youngest male adults who yelp the loudest if stitching is done without an anaesthetic.

‘Oh, I’m not bothered about a scar,’ said Mr Woodnutt. ‘In fact, a nice scar is always a good talking point in bed.’

Mr Woodnutt is a 30 something bachelor with what Mrs Kennet, my mother-in-law, would describe an ‘active social life’. He works as a freelance photographer, specialising in taking pictures of North Devon. His work regularly appears in most of the local Devon newspapers and magazines and occasionally in national publications. His photographs have also been used to illustrate the jackets of several books about the Devon countryside. Two of my books about my life in Bilbury have his photographs of the village adorning the dust jacket on the hard cover editions.

(Mr Woodnutt was not a little put out when it was drawn to his attention that a photograph on the cover of one of the earliest books had been taken by my good friend Thumper Robinson. Thumper takes what he usually calls ‘snaps’ and uses a camera which probably costs considerably less than the bag which Mr Woodnutt uses to carry his collection of expensive and impressive equipment. It was, I suspect, for this reason that we had never become friends. I arranged for Thumper’s photograph to be used simply because I liked it.)

An endlessly optimistic man, Mr Woodnutt used to play football for the village football team.

(This was not a particularly praiseworthy achievement since the village usually had difficulty in finding eleven men under the age of 90 who could be described as ‘fit’ and who were prepared to wear shorts and run around in a muddy field for 90 minutes.)

I remember the occasion when, to his and everyone else’s surprise, Mr Woodnutt scored a goal. It was his first goal in a dozen matches and only the second time the team had scored a goal in the whole season.

During the celebrations in the Duck and Puddle that evening, Mr Woodnutt, who had spent several hours describing his achievement in ever-growing detail, was overheard telling a comely companion that he had only needed two more goals for a hat trick.

‘I never know what to talk about after doing it,’ said Mr Woodnutt, whose life seemed to revolve around his adventures in the bedroom. ‘I reckon that even a scruffy little scar should be worth five or ten minutes of idle chit-chat. How did you get that? Did it hurt? Were you very brave? That sort of thing. I’ll have to work up a nice little story about being injured while taking pictures in a war zone somewhere.’

‘There’ll be a scar,’ I promised him. ‘But it will be as neat as I can make it.’

When stitches are placed very close to one another, there is a better chance of the two edges of a wound coming together smoothly and considerably less chance of a large scar developing.

‘You didn’t have to bother with any anaesthetic,’ said Mr Woodnutt, who had carefully, and probably wisely, waited until I had finished giving the injections before announcing that he didn’t need them.

‘What on earth were you doing scrabbling around on Peter Marshall’s floor?’ I asked as I threaded a needle with a length of black silk.

‘Peter has reorganised his shop and put all the cheapest products on the bottom shelves,’ explained Mr Woodnutt. He shrugged. ‘The stuff on the eye level shelves is much the same but it costs more.’

‘Oh dear,’ I sighed. It seemed that this was yet another building block in the legend that is Bilbury’s solitary retailer; another contribution to the Peter Marshall story.

It has been said that the average shopper knows the prices of only a very small number of grocery items – milk, bread and eggs for example.

This may be true in big towns and cities but it isn’t true of Bilbury. Most of the village’s inhabitants don’t have much money and they tend to be careful and more knowledgeable. There is a constant battle between Peter, on the one side, who is forever trying to keep his prices high to maximise his profits, and the rest of the villagers, who are forever looking for lower priced items so as to reduce their bills.

Everyone, including Peter, knows that if the prices in the local shop rise too high then villagers will decide that it is worthwhile making the long and expensive trip into Barnstaple to do their shopping.

However, I confess that I never fail to be surprised by Peter Marshall’s skills at finding new ways to part his customers from their money without actually losing their custom to the supermarkets in Barnstaple.

For as long as I can remember he has kept all the necessities, items such as bread and milk, right at the back of his shop so that customers who want basic comestibles must walk through the entire shop and resist the temptation to purchase a can of quail’s eggs, a new mousetrap or a brand new hand crafted rolling pin.

There are some in the village who believe that Peter acquired his ideas about retailing by studying the successful American supermarkets but there are also some who believe, rather whimsically it has to be admitted, that Peter is the originator and that other retailers around the world have copied his ideas for maximising profits.

Since I once saw Peter studying a copy of an American magazine produced for retailers I am, sadly, a realist in this matter and a believer in the former viewpoint.

‘Do you remember that time when Peter read that shops which played music sold more stuff?’ I asked Mr Woodnutt.

Mr Woodnutt laughed heartily. ‘He only had a wind up gramophone and a recording of that chap who had a hit with the Laughing Policeman,’ he remembered. ‘Peter spent all his time winding up the gramophone and his customers got so fed up with the laughing policeman that they got out of there as fast as they could – often without bothering to buy the thing they’d gone in for in the first place.’

I put in the first stitch and Mr Woodnutt winced.

‘Did that hurt?’

‘No, not really hurt,’ he admitted. ‘But I felt it going in.’

I looked at him.

‘Well, just about felt it,’ he said. ‘It didn’t hurt though.’ He looked a trifle pale.

‘Do you feel faint?’ I asked him.

‘Just a bit queasy,’ he said.

‘Then don’t look.’

He looked in the direction of the window. The wisteria which grows up around my consulting room window was in full bloom and the lilac flowers looked magnificent. My small lemon tree, which stands on the windowsill had its first fruit and the lemon was nearly ripe. There were also a couple of new flowers visible. They smelt wonderful. It was my first lemon. I had been watching it develop for weeks.

‘Is this really a lemon tree?’

‘It is.’

‘Marvellous. I’ve never seen one before. Does it produce much fruit?’

‘That’s its first lemon. It’s taken two years to get to this stage and Patsy reckons that one lemon has cost me a fiver in special plant food.’

‘Crumbs!’ said Mr Woodnutt. ‘It smells wonderful doesn’t it?’

It was true. The small lemon tree gave the consulting room a wonderful fresh smell, especially when there were flowers on it.

‘Do you remember that time when Peter Marshall had a theory that if his shop smelt good then people would feel good and buy more stuff?’ asked Mr Woodnutt.

‘That idea he definitely picked up from one of those trade magazines he reads!’ I agreed. ‘But instead of making sure his shop smelt of ground coffee or baking bread he opened a huge bag of a particularly toxic smelling brand of fertiliser and left it just inside the doorway.’

‘He’d bought two tons of garden fertiliser,’ remembered Mr Woodnutt. ‘But the stuff wasn’t selling very well because everyone around here knows a farmer with a horse or two and so good manure isn’t actually in short supply. Peter thought that if people smelt the stuff they’d want to buy it.’

‘But for three days hardly anyone went into the shop to buy anything!’

‘Mrs Todmorten stood outside in the rain, refused to enter the shop and handed Peter a list of what she wanted.

She made him bring it all out to her and she wouldn't even go into the shop to pay her bill. She said the shop smelt worse than the public lavatory at the bus station in Barnstaple.'

'Do you remember that time he decided to charge shoppers sixpence in old, proper money to enter the shop. It must have been in around 1965 – well before the currency was decimalised. He said he'd had tourists go into the shop and just look around and that they were wearing out his floor boards without spending any money.'

'Am I right in thinking that the sixpence was refunded if a purchase was made?' asked Mr Woodnutt.

'Absolutely!' I agreed. I tied off the third stitch in a rather neat knot. Mr Woodnutt seemed pleasantly distracted and was no longer even wincing when the needle entered the skin on one side of the gash and left it on the other side.

'I seem to remember that your mother-in-law organised a boycott of the shop in protest,' said Mr Woodnutt.

'She certainly did! We were very proud of her. Peter Marshall stuck his heels in and for a day and a half I don't think he sold anything. Then he relented and withdrew the sixpence charge claiming that it had only been an experiment.'

'And then there was the Christmas when he organised a Lucky Dip,' said Mr Woodnutt. 'Peter filled an old barrel with sawdust, wrapped some holly around the edge of the barrel and buried prizes in the sawdust.'

'I remember that!' I said. 'He charged 50 pence a go but all the prizes were worth far less than 50 pence. I remember pulling a very small can of beans out of the sawdust and being very disappointed. Peter said that he had to charge 50 pence to cover the cost of the sawdust and the barrel and that we should be grateful because we were paying for the experience and the excitement.'

'Then there was the time when he started selling foods in pairs. I remember you could buy a jar of coffee and a bottle of pickled gherkins together.'

'But the price for the two items was never any cheaper than it would have been if you'd bought them separately,' I said. 'Sometimes he rounded up the price and so if you bought his 'special offer' you ended up paying more than if you'd bought the things separately.'

Just thinking of Peter's little tricks always made me smile. Everyone in the village was wise to his money-making scams. And I very much doubt if many tourists were taken in by them.

'I remember pointing out to Peter that there was never any logic to the pairing of items he was selling together. One week he had what he called a 'very special triple offer'. If you bought a packet of custard, a packet of envelopes and a jar of lemon curd you could get the lot for exactly the same price that you'd pay if you'd bought them all separately. I couldn't help wondering how many people went into his shop looking for a packet of custard, a packet of envelopes and a jar of lemon curd. I asked him why he didn't sell tea and milk together as one of his special offers and he replied that if people bought a packet of tea they would probably buy a bottle of milk anyway.'

I knotted the last stitch, put some antibiotic cream onto the wound to prevent any infection developing and then sat back to admire my handiwork. Even if I say so myself, it wasn't a bad bit of suturing. I'd managed to squeeze in six stitches.

'You'll need to come back in a week or ten days,' I told my patient. 'I'll check that it's healing properly and if it is I'll take out the stitches. But come back sooner if the area around the wound goes red or you develop a temperature.'

'Don't the stitches just dissolve and disappear?' asked Mr Woodnutt. 'I read somewhere that they make stitches that just get absorbed into the body.'

'Those suture materials are great for internal suturing, but these stitches are made of silk and have to be removed,' I told him. 'The suture materials that are absorbed can cause more scarring because they tend to cause local inflammation.'

'Silk, eh?' said Mr Woodnutt, impressed. He looked down at his knee for the first time since I'd finished. 'Not bad! You've made a neat job of that, doctor.' He jumped down off the couch and pulled down his trouser leg.

'Careful!' I told him. 'No football, no cycling and nothing too strenuous. I don't want you tearing my nice, neat stitches.'

Mr Woodnutt, repaired and ready again for the world, thanked me again, waved a cheery goodbye and tottered off.

I couldn't help noticing that he was now affecting an even more pronounced, and definitely unnecessary, limp than the one he'd had when he'd arrived in the surgery, and I suspected that by the time he reached the Duck and Puddle that evening his tangle with a nail in a dark corner of Peter Marshall's shop would have become a considerably more substantial confrontation; a dive to escape from a moving car or an encounter with a dangerous dog while attempting to snatch a photograph of some celebrity visiting the bright lights of Ilfracombe.

My next patient, Miss Harriett Wilson was blushing bright red when she entered and I suspected that Archer Woodnutt, who is known in the village and the surrounding area to be an outrageous flirt, had probably said something to her as they had passed; him on the way out and her on the way in to my consulting room. I noticed that she was walking very gingerly as though the very act of putting one leg in front of the other was painful.

I said 'good morning', pointed to the now vacant chair and invited her to sit down.

'I think I'd better stay standing if you don't mind, doctor,' said Miss Wilson. She bent her knees slightly and put her shopping bag, an ancient raffia thing down on the floor. The shopping bag seemed quite full of groceries. Though she had put down her shopping basket, Miss Wilson kept hold of her handbag. 'I'm a little worried that if I sit down I might not be able to get up again.'

Miss Wilson is a skinny little thing in her late forties; she is as pale as a country snow bank, though I know for a fact that she is not anaemic. She always reminds me of a sparrow and she can't weigh much more than a small bird. Certainly, two of her would have not weighed as much as the average, modestly sized adult.

She used to be a shorthand-typist working for the Inland Revenue but she resigned from her post when her grandfather died and left her a tiny, thatched cottage on the outskirts of Bilbury. She now lives on the income she receives from her savings and the little money which her grandfather left her along with the cottage. It is, I suspect, a rather meagre income which doesn't leave much room for treats and extravagances.

She once described herself to me as 'a bit of a virgin'. At the time, I had not found the courage to ask her for a definition of 'a bit of a virgin' and it still seemed to me to be a rather improbable, not to say impossible, concept. Still, I am sure she knew what she meant by it.

I could hardly believe my ears when she told me that she had done something to her back while scrabbling around on the floor at the back of Peter Marshall's shop.

'He's put all the lower priced items at floor level, hasn't he?' I said with a sigh.

Miss Wilson seemed surprised that I knew about Peter's latest trick. 'His prices are always a little on the high side,' said Miss Wilson, when she had confirmed the information I'd been given by Archer Woodnutt. 'But the bus fare to Barnstaple is quite expensive and the buses aren't very regular. So it's no more expensive to shop at Mr Marshall's.' She moved from one foot to the other. 'My mother, God rest her soul, taught me the value of money.' She paused, stretched, rubbed her back and fiddled with her watch for a moment. 'It's just as well,' she continued, 'for I have to watch my pennies.' I knew that this admission wasn't easy for her to make. She is a proud woman, always immaculately turned out. Today she was wearing a flowered summer dress, a light blue cardigan with pockets and a straw hat with a yellow ribbon around the brim and two red cherries attached to the ribbon. There was a ladder in the knee of one of her stockings, almost certainly a result of her having had to kneel on Peter Marshall's rough, wooden floorboards.

I hoped that her scrabbling around on the floor had saved her some money and I decided that when I had finished my morning surgery, I would drive to Peter's shop and have a stern word with him. I'd had an idea which would, I rather thought, prove effective at forcing him to abandon his latest profit boosting wheeze.

I know that running a village shop isn't an easy way to make a living (around the country many have closed and there are now thousands of English villages and hamlets which have no village shop at all) but I happen to know that Peter does better than most shopkeepers and from to time he needs to be reined in a little.

It didn't take long to discover that Miss Wilson hadn't done anything serious to her back. 'Go home, take two soluble aspirin tablets every four hours, rest and put a hot water bottle against the part of your back where the pain is at its worst.'

'What have I done?' she asked. 'Is it a slipped disk?'

'No, no, it's not a disk. You've just strained muscles in your back. They'll feel sore for a day or two but you'll soon feel fine.'

'The best value tinned pears were in a very difficult position,' said Miss Wilson. 'I had to stretch to reach a tin.'

'I'll have a word with Peter,' I promised her. I went into my small dispensary, filled a bottle with soluble aspirin tablets and took them out to her. I repeated the instructions I'd given her. 'How are you going to get home?' I asked her.

'I'll have to walk, doctor,' said Miss Wilson.

I looked at the single medical records envelope on my desk.

'No, you won't,' I told her. 'Go back into the waiting room, make yourself as comfortable as possible, and when I've finished the surgery I'll take you home. I've only got one more patient to see.'

'Oh I couldn't put you to that much trouble!' protested Miss Wilson.

'Miss Wilson!' I said sternly. I gave her my sternest look. It always makes Patsy laugh but some people find it slightly intimidating. 'If I find that you've gone when I come out of the surgery I'll be very cross.'

'I'll wait, doctor!' said Miss Wilson timidly.

My final patient of the morning was a woman called Hilda Musbury.

Mrs Musbury is a lonely widow who likes to talk.

She is built in the shape of a duck and, through her own brand of queue management, always manages to arrange things so that she is the last patient I see. She is convinced that I enjoy our conversations just as much as she does and she arranges to be the last patient, so she frequently tells me, so that we can both enjoy a good, long chat without being interrupted.

The truth is that I find our little chats about as much fun as root canal surgery but I feel rather sorry for her and usually talk, or more accurately, listen to her for a while. However, on this occasion I really didn't have the time for a chat about the weather and her garden. I have long believed that doctors should listen, rather than just talk, to their patients but sometimes there have to be limits. And this was one of those occasions when I really didn't have time to sit and listen to Mrs Musbury's commentary on the state of her lawn, the vicissitudes endured by her brother in New Zealand (it wasn't difficult to understand what had driven him to emigrate to the other side of the world) and the plots of her favourite television soap operas.

I couldn't sit around because I had promised to take Miss Wilson home, I had several home visits to do and I wanted to call in on Peter Marshall.

'It's lovely to see you, doctor!' said Mrs Musbury, breezing into the surgery as though we were old friends. She wandered over to the windowsill and examined my lemon tree. 'Your lemon is ripe!' she said. And before I could stop her, she had plucked the lemon from the tree. She held it up, as though it were a prize. 'You don't mind do you, doctor?' she said. 'I expect you've had hundreds of lemons from it already. I'd love to take this one home. I love a slice of lemon in my Earl Grey tea.'

I was horrified and very cross.

It was my first ever lemon.

I'd been watching it grow for an inordinate length of time. But what could I say that wouldn't sound mean or churlish? Besides, it was now too late for the lemon had been plucked.

I had been looking forward to making a sort of ceremony out of plucking the lemon. I'd thought that Patsy and I could say a few words, praise the lemon tree and then twist and pluck the lemon jointly.

I muttered something that probably sounded like approval, though to be honest I would have happily throttled Mrs Musbury if I had thought it likely that I'd have been able to get away with it. I sometimes think that the parameters for justifiable homicide ought to be expanded and on this occasion, I definitely felt that the crime of unauthorised lemon plucking ought to be on the allowable list.

'I do enjoy our little chats,' said Mrs Musbury. 'But I sometimes think I need more of a challenge in my life. Something to get my teeth into. Maybe I should learn a language? What do you think? Hindi, perhaps? Or take up the banjo? Or do some mountaineering? Something like that. I could go to the Himalayas. Or join an orchestra of some kind. They call them bands these days don't they?'

I didn't reply. I was struggling to get my head round the idea that there might be some connection between Hindi, banjo plucking and climbing snow clad mountains.

'I bet your Patsy wonders what we get up to in here, chatting away about things,' said Mrs Musbury, settling into the patient's chair and making herself comfortable. She sniffed my lemon and then dropped it into the dark and impenetrable recesses of the massive black leather handbag she took with her everywhere she went.

'I'm afraid I can't stop and chat,' I told her, rather brusquely. 'I've got some urgent things to do this morning.'

'Oh!' said Mrs Musbury, clearly rather annoyed. 'Oh, well, never mind. You go off and do whatever it is that needs doing. I expect you'll be doing something with that Miss Wilson. Taking her home, perhaps? She was in the waiting room looking rather under the weather and just a little sorry for herself. I'll just make myself comfortable here and wait until you get back.'

Mrs Musbury can be a little poisonous occasionally; especially when she feels put out.

'No good I'm afraid,' I said firmly. 'I have no idea when I'll be back.'

I stood up, helped her out of the chair and ushered her towards the door.

'I need a bottle of my special tonic,' she said quickly. 'That tonic you make up just for me.'

The tonic for which she has such affection is not as special as she imagines. It's a mixture which I make up and prescribe for quite a number of neurasthenic patients. It is dark green in appearance, it smells rather toxic and it has a bite that promises effectiveness. I hurried into the dispensary, found a bottle of the stuff and hurried back out with it clutched in my hand.

'Here you are!' I said. 'I thought you'd probably be in today and so I made this up for you earlier.' I hoped that my nose wouldn't grow too long.

Mrs Musbury put the tonic into her bag, alongside my lemon, and after telling me that she'd back for a chat that evening, departed in rather a bad mood.

I read, checked and signed a couple of urgent letters which Miss Johnson had left on my desk and picked up the details of the home visits which had been requested by telephone while I'd been doing the morning surgery. I then gathered the medicines I knew I'd need for the patients I had to see, popped into the kitchen to say goodbye to Patsy who was busy making vegetable pasties and then collected Miss Wilson from the waiting room.

'I've never been in a Rolls Royce before,' said Miss Wilson, climbing rather cautiously into the front passenger seat.

'It is a very old one,' I pointed out.

'Oh yes, but it's beautiful!' said Miss Wilson. She winced as she tried to get herself comfortable. 'It used to belong to Dr Brownlow, didn't it? I remember seeing him driving it when I visited my grandfather as a girl.' She gently ran her fingers over the beautifully matched walnut fascia.

'She's been the official practice car for the best part of half a century!' I said proudly. 'And apart from the old banger I drove when I first came to Bilbury the only official practice car. Before he bought this car, Dr Brownlow used to do his calls by horsepower.'

'Really? He rode a horse?'

'Sometimes. Especially at night and for emergencies. But he also had a trap which he would ride in when doing his routine daily visits.'

We had reached Miss Wilson's cottage. I stopped the Rolls, parked it on a small stretch of neatly trimmed verge and climbed out so that I could help Miss Wilson out of the car and into her cottage.

'Take the aspirin, fill a hot water bottle and move about as much as you can,' I told her when we were inside. 'But move gently.'

'You don't think I should go to bed?'

'Oh, no! You'll stiffen up if you do. Don't sit in one position for too long. And keep moving and bending your back as much as you can without doing anything painful. Nothing has been damaged. Ring me if it doesn't gradually improve.'

I left Miss Wilson in her kitchen boiling a kettle so that she could fill a hot water bottle and make herself a cup of tea. I have great faith in both these remedies. A hot water bottle is the best way of applying heat directly to an area of muscle which is sore. And a cup of tea is, of course, the traditional English way of responding to any sort of crisis.

Neither of the two visits I had to do was particularly urgent.

One request was to visit Enid and Harry Burrows who required fresh supplies of their medications. The other was from Olive Robinson, Thumper's much loved aunt, who simply wanted another bottle of the pills she takes to control her slightly raised blood pressure.

Since the practice had started dispensing medicines, my workload had increased considerably but there was no doubt that as far as the patients were concerned it was a much more convenient way of doing things.

In the old days, I would hand out a prescription and the patient would have to arrange to obtain the prescribed medication from a pharmacy in Barnstaple. Now that I had managed to persuade the authorities to allow me to dispense my own medicines, I could simply hand over the required medicines and the patient could start their treatment straight away. Once a day a van would come from a pharmaceutical wholesaler in Exeter and would bring fresh supplies of basic drugs together with supplies of anything unusual which we need. Patsy had taken on the responsibility of maintaining the records of the drugs we had in stock. She kept two large notebooks. In one she had a list of all the standard medicines, the antibiotics, contraceptive pills, painkillers and heart medication, and in the other she listed unusual or special requirements. I also kept a third, smaller notebook in which I kept a record of the drugs such as morphine which were controlled under the Dangerous Drugs Act. I had to make a note every time I used a drug of this type, detailing the date, the name of the patient, the drug and the quantity prescribed.

When I'd finished the calls, I drove around to Peter Marshall's shop where I found the proprietor sorting through a huge pile of old crossword puzzle books. He was putting some of the books onto one pile and some onto a second pile.

'What on earth are you doing?' I asked him.

He explained that he had bought a huge pile of old crossword puzzle books from a charity shop in Barnstaple. All the books had been filled in, the crosswords completed, and the charity had wanted to get rid of them since they had no perceivable resale value.

'That doesn't answer the question,' I pointed out. 'What are you doing with them?'

'I'm sorting them into two piles,' he explained. 'The ones on this pile have all been completed in ink and they're no good at all. They'll have to be sold as scrap paper. But the ones on that pile have been completed in pencil and if I rub out all the pencil entries I'll be able to resell the books as new.'

I stared at him. 'But it'll take you hours!'

'What else is there to do in the evenings?' asked Peter. 'If I go to the Duck and Puddle it will cost me money. If I stay here and rub out crossword book entries I'll be making money.'

I just looked at him in astonishment.

'I can rub out all the entries in a puzzle book in just under half an hour,' he told me. 'So if I start at seven and go on until midnight, I can clean ten books in an evening and then put them on sale in the shop the next morning.' He looked at me quizzically. 'I don't suppose you and Patsy would like to earn a little extra in the evenings?'

'No thank you.'

'I'll provide the rubbers. I've got some new soft erasers that don't tear the paper.'

'No thank you.'

'Suit yourself. Let me know if you change your mind.'

I told him that I didn't think it very likely.

'You don't know of a decent ink solvent, do you?'

'Ink solvent?'

'For the crossword books which have been filled in with ink.'

'No, Peter. I don't know of an ink solvent you could use.'

'I tried some bleach but unless you dab out each letter very carefully, you remove the printed lines of the crossword. And if you put on too much bleach, the stuff burns a hole in the paper. I tried that white stuff typists use to cover up their mistakes but the people who print these crossword books use very cheap paper which is grey and the white blobs stand out and I think people might know that the books weren't new. Some of these publishers… '

'I saw two patients this morning who'd been injured while crawling around at the back of your shop looking for the low priced items you've hidden down at ground level,' I said, interrupting what threatened to be a tirade against publishers who used cheap grey paper for cheap paperback crossword books.

Peter stared at me and frowned. 'Who?'

'Can't tell you,' I told him. 'Medical confidentiality. But one of them has a badly cut knee.'

'Oh that was that Woodnutt fellow. He wanted me to pay for the rip in his trousers. I sent him packing. I can't be expected to make sure all the nails in my floorboards are hammered down nice and smoothly just so that people like him don't snag their trousers.'

'Peter, I really came to see you as a friend,' I said softly, leaning towards him as though I didn't want anyone to overhear. There wasn't anyone in the shop but Peter leant towards me, as though eager to share confidential information. 'You're going to get sued,' I told him.

'Sued!' said Peter, looking startled and leaping back a couple of feet. 'Why would he sue me? It was just a little tear. They weren't new trousers And a bit of blood. Nothing much.'

'No, no, I don't mean that he is going to sue you,' I said. 'Not yet.'

'Not yet?'

'But someone will sue you.'

They will? Who will? I'll ban them from the shop.'

'If you keep the lower priced stuff on the floor at the back of the shop where people have to crawl around in the dark then someone is bound to sue you. Not a villager, perhaps. But a stranger. A visitor. Maybe a rich German just passing through.'

'You think so?'

'I'm sure so,' I said, nodding.

'What do you think I should do?'

'Bring all the cheaper brands back to the front of the shop where people can find them easily without having to scrabble around on the floor.'

There was a long pause, during which Peter examined my face carefully. He was, I knew, trying to tell if I was pulling some sort of fast one. 'You think someone might sue me?' he asked at last.

'I'm certain they will,' I assured him. 'As sure as eggs are eggs.'

'As sure as eggs are eggs?'

'Definitely.'

'Hmm. I'd better move the stuff round again.' He thought for a moment. 'I'll put the tinned rice pudding down on the floor at the back of the shop. No one ever buys that stuff anyway.'

'Good idea!' I said. And to show that there were no hard feelings, I bought one of the resuscitated and rejuvenated crossword books from which he had erased all the answers.

'See!' said Peter, proudly. 'I told you there'd be a market for them. You were about to scoff weren't you?'

'Not in a million years,' I said.

It occurred to me that at the rate I was going, my nose would be three feet long before I got back to Bilbury Grange. I slipped the crossword book into my pocket. It would, I knew, amuse Patsy when I told her the story of Peter's latest wheeze.

‘Oh, before you go,’ said Peter suddenly, as I strode towards the Rolls.

I turned back.

‘I’m opening an estate agency,’ announced Peter.

‘Splendid!’ I said. ‘The village could do with one. But I’m afraid Bilbury Grange isn’t for sale.’

‘No, no, no,’ said Peter impatiently. ‘I didn’t think for a minute that it was. But I’m looking for an estate agent to handle the agency for me. I need someone who is easy going and bubbly bordering on talkative; someone with time on their hands and prepared to work on commission. I’d do it myself but I’m too busy looking after the shop. I want someone who can move around the village, putting up signs, showing houses to prospective buyers, that sort of thing.’

‘Not my line,’ I said firmly.

‘Don’t be so damned obtuse!’ said Peter crossly. He is renowned for having had a humour extraction some years ago. ‘You know just about everyone in the village. I just wondered if you might know someone suitable.’

I thought for a moment and then shook my head. ‘No one springs to mind.’

‘I need someone who’s a bit pushy and who won’t take no for an answer,’ continued Peter, warming to his theme, ‘someone who can persuade both the seller and the buyer that they’re on their side.’

I shook my head.

‘Well let me know if you think of anyone suitable.’

I headed for the car when suddenly it came to me: the perfect solution – the answer to Peter’s problem! Who could possibly fit the bill more snugly than the patient who only that very morning had told me that she wanted a challenge in her life? I turned back.

‘Mrs Musbury!’ I cried.

‘Mrs Musbury?’

‘You must know her!’ I said. ‘Mrs Musbury, the widow who lives on the other side of Softly’s Bottom. Striking looking woman. Always wears a hat. She could talk the hind leg off a donkey.’

‘Oh that Mrs Musbury!’ exclaimed Peter, as though the village were awash with Mrs Musburys. He thought for a moment. ‘Do you know I think you could be right. I’ll pop round this afternoon and have a word with her. Do you think she’d take the job without a salary? Just a commission on every house she sells?’

‘You could try,’ I told him. ‘I rather think she’d like the job. It would give her a chance to go in and out of everyone’s house and measure every available bathroom.’

I left Peter rubbing his hands with delight at the thought of signing up the first employee for his burgeoning estate agency.

I drove back to Bilbury Grange, had my lunch, did a couple more visits, sat in the garden and wrote a few words for the Bilbury book I was working on, and then it was time for the evening surgery.

It was only when I sat down behind my surgery desk that I realised that I had been so busy that I hadn’t had the time to have a cup of tea and a couple of digestive biscuits.

To my astonishment, Mrs Musbury was the first patient to enter. I was startled because she had acquired a habit of hanging back so that she could be the last patient and stay for a long chat.

‘I can’t stop long, doctor,’ she said, entering the surgery in a rush. ‘But I did say I’d call in this evening and I thought I ought to just drop by and tell you that I won’t be able to pop in quite as often as before.’

‘Oh dear,’ I said, feigning a little (but not too much) disappointment.

‘Mr Marshall has appointed me the new general manager of his estate agency,’ she announced with great pride and in something of a rush. ‘And he wants me to go round this evening to help him plan the business. So I’ll have to be on my way. We’re going to have a brainstorming session while we do something together with crossword books.’

‘Congratulations!’ I said. I couldn’t help congratulating myself on my newfound matchmaking skills. ‘So, Peter is going into the real estate business is he?’ I don’t know why but I didn’t want Mrs Musbury to know that I’d suggested her for the job.

‘Oh yes!’ said Mrs Musbury. ‘Isn’t it exciting? It will be Bilbury’s first estate agency. And I’m to be the general manager. Mr Marshall is going to print up some visiting cards for me.’

‘Marvellous,’ I agreed.

‘If you ever decide to put Bilbury Grange on the market you will think of me, won’t you?’ She looked around the room as though measuring it up ready to write the particulars.

‘Of course,’ I agreed. ‘But Patsy and I don’t have any plans to sell the house.’

‘You wouldn’t like me to just wander around and measure up?’ she asked. ‘Just in case you change your minds?’

‘No thank you. I don’t think so.’

‘You have very nice mullion windows. Quite a feature, I’ve often thought. A very sought after element in a property. Do the fireplaces all work?’

‘Thank you. You’ve very kind. Yes, they do.’

‘Well, I’d better be off. If you know anyone who does want to sell their home you make sure they get in touch with me straight away. I’ll bring in a few of my cards when they’re ready.’

I thanked her but it seemed that the sudden storm was over and Mrs Musbury was half way out of the room.

Just then, the door opened and Patsy appeared holding a cup of tea. There were, I was delighted to see, two digestive biscuits in the saucer.

‘Is that for me, dear?’ said Mrs Musbury, eyeing up the tea. ‘That’s very sweet of you but I’m afraid I don’t have the time. I have to hurry off to a business meeting.’

‘That’s all right,’ replied Patsy, not missing a beat. ‘I’m sure the doctor will be happy to drink it.’ She walked across and put the tea down on my desk.

‘I won’t be able to come in as often as before,’ Mrs Musbury said to Patsy. ‘I’ve taken a position under Mr Marshall. I expect your husband will miss our little chats.’

‘Oh, I’m sure he will!’ said Patsy.

And then Mrs Musbury was gone.

‘A position under Mr Marshall?’ said Patsy, raising a querulous eyebrow. ‘Did she really say that?’

‘I’ll explain later,’ I assured her. ‘It’s probably not as exciting as it sounds.’

I picked up one of the digestive biscuits and dunked it gently into the cup of tea.

‘Do you remember the character played by Barry Fitzgerald in *The Quiet Man*?’

‘The matchmaker who brought John Wayne and Maureen O’Hara together?’

‘That’s the one,’ I confirmed. ‘Well, that’s me, now. I’m the Bilbury matchmaker.’

‘You haven’t set Peter Marshall up with Hilda Musbury!’

‘Only in a business sort of way.’

‘That sounds even worse.’

‘I’ll explain later,’ I repeated.

‘You’d better!’ said Patsy.

The Parisians

I was sitting in the snug at the Duck and Puddle.

My companions were Thumper Robinson, poacher, dealer and general fixer upper, Patchy Fogg, antiques dealer, and Frank Parsons, our ever genial landlord. Thumper had his usual pint of Old Restoration. Patchy was drinking a glass of Jack Daniels. Frank was sipping a small glass of port (his intake of alcohol is strictly regulated by his wife). And I was nursing a glass of an 18-year-old malt whisky called Tullibardine.

We sit at the same table, in the same places, and get quite upset if Gilly Parsons changes the beermats too often. What is wrong with comfort and routine?

There can be no doubt that our conversations are always intellectual, always provocative and always illuminating. I like to think of us as the natural descendants of the literati who favoured the famous table at the Algonquin Hotel in New York.

Outside Bilbury, the world rushes along like an out of control Express train; forever whistling and screaming and jumping off the tracks. And it seems to me that most of the alleged progress on offer produces little more than noise, confusion, frustration and disappointment. Indeed, much of what passes for progress is little more than a nod in the direction of fashion for although we think of fashion as merely affecting hemlines and button configuration, it invades far more of our lives than that. In Bilbury, we like to move along at a more sedate pace; accepting such items of progress which promise to make our lives better in some way.

But then, that's why I like Bilbury and I recognise that our leisurely pace of life would not suit everyone.

'You've got a bit of competition in the making-people-better business,' said Thumper.

I looked at him, surprised to hear this. I hadn't heard of any other doctor setting up in the village.

'Someone called a complementary health specialist has opened up a clinic in Combe Martin,' said Thumper. 'Anne found a leaflet pushed half-way through our letterbox.'

'Like the little sachets of shampoo and soap you get in posh hotels?' asked Frank.

We all looked at him.

'Complimentary,' explained Frank. 'They're complimentary. It means you don't have to pay for them.' He paused for a moment and then a puzzled and worried look appeared on his face. 'But we don't pay you, do we?' he said to me. 'The National Health Service is free.'

'The NHS isn't really free,' I pointed out. 'It's paid for out of taxes.'

'Oh, is it?' said Frank, with a shudder. 'I don't have anything to do with any of that stuff. Those chaps in grey suits come round occasionally and Gilly shows them the books and they look at her pityingly and go away shaking their heads and muttering.'

I noticed that Thumper was examining his glass of beer very carefully; in the manner of a man who is pretending to be elsewhere; studying one thing in an effort to make it clear that he has nothing whatsoever to do with another.

I have noticed the same thing with our cats.

If they fall off a piece of furniture, or knock a vase off a shelf, they will instantly start cleaning themselves, making it abundantly clear that they have nothing to do with whatever may have happened in the vicinity.

'Oh, gosh, has a vase jumped off the mantelpiece? How shocking! Me? No, I didn't see anything.'

I happen to know that Thumper, like Frank, doesn't pay any tax. I'm not even sure that the authorities know he exists these days. He had an unfortunate encounter with the constabulary a few years ago when there was a slight misunderstanding involving a river, half a dozen trout and a 'missing' licence and he has, since then, kept a low profile as far as the authorities are concerned.

'It's not that sort of 'complimentary',' said Patchy. He looked at me, waiting for me to say something. But I just smiled at him.

Frank looked at him and thought for a while. 'What other sort is there?'

'Well, there's the sort when you tell Gilly that her hair looks nice and you like her hat,' said Thumper, looking up and returning to the conversation. He spoke with the quiet but slightly surprising confidence of a man who can tickle a trout and tease a pheasant out of a thicket but who has never seen a dictionary, let alone consulted one.

Frank stared at him and frowned. When Frank frowns it usually means that he's thinking hard. 'I don't think I've ever seen Gilly in a hat,' he said at last.

'She wore a hat to our wedding,' I reminded him. 'It was a very smart one; a big white one which had a large brim. It had a yellow ribbon, a huge bow and lots of flowers. I seem to remember that there were half a dozen red cherries on it too.' The ladies of Bilbury like cherries on their hats. Patsy's mum has a hat which is festooned with a whole bunch of cherries.

‘Oh yes, I remember,’ said Frank. He laughed. Frank has a wonderful deep laugh, created by years of smoking cigars and cigarettes and drinking rough liquor.

Patchy looked around nervously, making sure that Gilly wasn’t within earshot. He knew that she wouldn’t have liked the idea of Frank laughing at her hat.

‘It was a splendid hat!’ I said, defending Gilly’s choice of headgear. Ever the gentleman.

‘Someone sat on it and crushed it,’ remembered Frank. ‘I mended it with some sticky tape and then it blew off and we never saw it again.’

‘It was Patsy’s Aunt Edna from Cornwall,’ I said, remembering the incident. ‘She doesn’t have terribly good eyesight. She said she thought it was a cushion.’

‘I think I saw it on a scarecrow in a field just outside Parracombe,’ said Thumper. ‘It wasn’t quite so white but it still had most of the flowers. It was definitely Gilly’s hat.’

Frank looked shocked. ‘Don’t for heaven’s sake tell Gilly.’ He shuddered. ‘So that’s what this complimentary medicine is all about then? You tell them they’re looking good and you like their hat? It doesn’t sound much like medicine to me.’

I felt I ought to say something and so I started to explain precisely what the phrase ‘complementary medicine’ really means. But Thumper was determined to say something and spoke over me.

‘I’d bet it works well,’ said Thumper, speaking with enthusiasm. ‘I remember there was a song when I was a kid. It was sung by Stanley Holloway, the chap who played the dustman in *My Fair Lady*. There was this one chap who had been ill and was feeling much brighter. He went for a walk and kept meeting people who said to him ‘My word, you do look queer’. The result was that the poor fellow became depressed and decided that he was finished. Then up came one final fellow who said to him ‘My word you do look well!’ That’s all it took. The chap who was feeling down was so cheered by this that he suddenly felt full of life. In the song he decided that ‘There’s life in the old dog yet’. So there you: complimentary medicine can work!’

I tried once more to speak. But this time it was Patchy who spoke.

‘I can see that it would work,’ said Patchy. ‘Saying something nice to a person always makes them feel better. Congratulate them on a nice tie or hairdo and you’re bound to make them feel better.’

I was confident that Patchy knew the difference between complimentary medicine and complementary medicine but to be honest I wasn’t so sure about Thumper and I was pretty sure that Frank didn’t suspect that there was any difference at all. And so I didn’t make another effort to contradict anyone. It seemed a pity to spoil the fun.

Indeed, I rather hoped that Thumper and Frank would one day be able to use their new knowledge somewhere else.

‘Do you think that maybe this complimentary person lets you eat and drink as much as you like?’ Frank asked me.

Frank had had a stroke, caused by high blood pressure, and he had, for some time, been on a diet as well as having his alcohol consumption strictly controlled. I had made the rules but Gilly enforced them.

‘I’m afraid I rather doubt it,’ I told him. ‘They’ll probably want you to eat a good deal of seaweed while they stick needles into you.’

Frank managed to look startled and not a little disappointed at the same time. It is not often that Frank manages to do two things at once.

Just then, the door swung open and two visitors walked in. It was clearly still raining outside for the minute they entered the snug they both stood for a moment and shook themselves, like dogs who’ve just had a swim. I don’t think any of us had noticed that it was still raining. The truth is that it rains a good deal in North Devon and we only really notice the weather when it isn’t raining.

The visitors were wearing waterproof trousers, waterproof jackets, waterproof hats and boots that were also doubtless waterproof. Everything they wore was shiny with water. It was difficult to be certain but it seemed likely that one of the visitors was equipped with two X chromosomes while the other was having to make do with one.

‘Good morning!’ said the taller of the two visitors. ‘We would like to purchase provender at your café. We wish first to divest ourselves of our vestments.’ He unzipped his jacket as he spoke.

Frank, who is always a welcoming and genial host, got up from his chair and strolled over to where the two newcomers were standing. I would have bet a month’s income that he didn’t have the faintest idea what they were talking about but he showed no sign of failing to understand them. ‘Hang your gear on the hat stand,’ he said, pointing to a huge brass coat rack which stands in a corner of the snug. Come far?’

‘Yes, please,’ said the shorter of the two. ‘We have come for comestibles.’

This was clearly going to be fun.

The two strangers removed their waterproofs and hung them on the coat rack. The man had a bit of a struggle with his and the zip on his jacket caught in the jumper he was wearing underneath. Water dripped from every item and soaked into the carpet. If Gilly had been around she would have made them leave their soaking gear in the porch.

Underneath their waterproofs, they were dressed identically. They both wore blue jeans and red sweaters. I noticed that their jeans and sweaters both appeared to be soaked. The battle with the elements in North Devon had clearly been lost.

The two of them were much smaller than they had appeared to be in their waterproofs. They were both very slim and they looked to be in their late 20s. She had very short hair. He had shoulder length hair.

The man examined his jumper where it had been snagged by the zip. 'I'll get a pair of scissors and cut that off for you,' said Frank, kindly. He tottered over to the bar, returned with a pair of scissors and snipped off the offending piece of wool. The man did not say anything but accepted this service without thanks.

For no reason whatsoever, I found myself wondering why we refer to scissors as being a pair. It's like trousers, spectacles and binoculars. It makes sense to talk of a pair of shoes or a pair of socks because there are two of them. But why do scissors, trousers, spectacles and binoculars always come as pairs? It really doesn't make any sense since none of them is a paired items in the sense that two matching candlesticks can be described as a pair; a set of two things used together and regarded as a unit.

I have these thoughts quite often and I worry about myself sometimes. Still, I try to keep the thoughts to myself.

'You wish to drink, yes?' said Frank. 'And eat food?' He picked up an imaginary glass and took an imaginary gulp from it. He then mimed eating a sandwich.

In addition to the Marcel Marceau impersonation, he had, I noticed, raised his voice since he knew he was speaking to foreigners and he wanted to make it easier for them to understand what he was saying.

'Where are you from?' asked Patchy, speaking very slowly. He too spoke a little louder than usual.

'We are coming out of Lynmouth,' said the woman. 'We are heading into Ilfracombe.'

'A walking voyage,' said the man.

It seemed to me that, judging by the weather, the word 'voyage' was probably appropriate. It also occurred to me that they were slightly mad. The distance between Lynmouth and Ilfracombe is at least 20 miles. And since they were now undeniably in Bilbury, it was pretty clear that, either by design or accident, they weren't taking the direct route.

'No, I meant, what country are you from?' said Patchy.

'From France, of course,' said the woman, as though it were a stupid question. 'We are habituated at Paris.'

'Ah,' said Frank, nodding wisely. 'You are French?'

'Yes!' said the man, as though he were talking to an idiot. 'Of course we are French.'

'You speak very good English,' lied Patchy.

In England we always do that. When a foreigner speaks our language we always congratulate them and tell them how well they speak it. I don't why this is. If we meet someone who knows three words of English we pretend to be astounded and tell them how fluent they are. This, of course, gives them false confidence and in the end usually results in misunderstandings, confusion, bewilderment, disappointment and, quite often, a few tears.

'Oh yes,' said the woman. 'We are beyond dispute talking in the perfect English.'

'What can I get you to drink?' asked Frank. He made the drinking sign again.

'We would desire to be quaffing coffee,' said the woman.

'Coffee?' said a rather startled Frank, for whom coffee is something to be drunk after a meal and not as an alternative to alcohol. He had probably expected the woman to order a bottle of wine to drink while they decided what to have to drink.

'Coffee,' agreed the woman.

'Both of you?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'You both want coffee?' Frank pointed at the woman and then at the man.

'Yes,' said the woman, rather impatiently. 'Do you have a carte?'

Frank looked puzzled. 'No,' he said, 'but Thumper has an old truck.'

'A carte,' repeated the woman. 'A directory of your foods.' She looked at her companion and raised an eyebrow. I got the impression they both wished they had chosen to eat somewhere else. Since the Duck and Puddle is the only eating establishment for miles in any direction, this was a pointless regret.

'Oh, you mean a menu!' said Frank, understanding at last.

'Yes. A menus. Are you having one of those?'

'I bet they'll want snails,' whispered Thumper to me. 'If they do I could easily pop outside and collect a few dozen.' Thumper's version of sotto voce is most people's idea of a full throated roar.

'No, not at the moment,' admitted Frank in response to the menu question. 'We did have one. Well, actually we had three. But one fell into the fire, one was stolen by a tourist and I can't find the other one. But it doesn't matter because I know what we've got.'

‘Do you have any crudités?’ asked the woman.

‘No, no,’ said Frank looking shocked. ‘This isn’t that sort of place. We’re a family pub. Very old fashioned. No entertainment. No crudities.’

‘She means chopped vegetables,’ I murmured to Frank. ‘Crudites is a French dish. Raw vegetables sliced and served with some sort of sauce.’

Frank looked at me. ‘Raw vegetables?’

I nodded. ‘Raw.’

‘Bloody hell,’ said Frank with his own version of sotto voce. ‘They eat raw veggies? No wonder the Froggies always lose every damned war they fight.’

‘What is that?’ asked the French woman.

‘Mon ami a dit qu’il pleut beaucoup aujourdhui,’ said Patchy, with a big smile. The smile he usually reserves for the moment when he’s closing on a deal to sell Shakespeare’s writing desk to a gullible tourist. ‘My friend said that it rains a good deal today.’

‘Your pronunciations en Francais are not very up to the marker,’ said the woman with a very superior and quite natural sneer. She turned to her companion. ‘The English, like the Americans, never well speak the langue,’ she said to him, with a Gallic shrug of her damp shoulders.

The Frenchman curled a lip in attempted disdain.

It occurred to me that apart from Elvis Presley, who has always done it with great charm, I’ve never seen anyone do that successfully. Lip curling is obviously an acquired skill.

In the interests of international relations, and out of a sense of wild adventure, I had been preparing to share with them the knowledge that my uncle’s pen resides in the bureau of my aunt but I decided to keep this knowledge to myself, and to hide my own multilingual light under a bushel. I had, to be honest, thought Patchy’s accent to be pretty good. But then, in my experience, the French like to think that they are the only people who can speak their language properly and will criticise foreigners whatever they say and however they say it.

I long ago learned never to say ‘yes’ when I am asked by a Frenchman (or Frenchwoman) if I speak French. It is much better to force them to rack their brains trying to speak English. They will invariably become confused, lose control of the conversation and provide considerable amusement.

Frank and Gilly once had a French fellow staying at the Duck and Puddle. He was on a tour of West Country follies (there are many) and on his first night at the pub he announced that he would like a ‘night hat’. Frank, ever helpful, said they didn’t have one of those traditional caps to lend him but he could provide a woollen watch cap with a bobble on the top as an alternative.

When the Frenchman seemed surprised by this, we all tried alternative suggestions.

Patchy even went back home and fetched his Sherlock Holmes style deerstalker in case the fellow wanted to keep his ears warm.

In the end, it turned out that the chap wanted a ‘night cap’ rather than a ‘night hat’.

I remember that the fellow was quite humourless, as most of the French are, and very full of his own sense of importance, as they tend to be.

I remember he told us repeatedly that he was due to have dinner with the county’s Lord Lieutenant, and Patchy, rather fed up with the name dropping, told him that when meeting the British aristocracy it is the usual practice to bow slightly, click your heels and say: ‘Watcha cock, how are they hanging.’

We still like to think that he followed Patchy’s advice.

The funny thing is, of course, that although they like to criticise us when we try to speak French, those French folk who speak a word or two of English always believe they are fluent.

Patchy once pointed out to me that no Frenchman has ever learned to speak English properly, though they all think they have. Out of politeness, we never tell them that they’re making zillions of mistakes every time they open their mouths. They tell us if we get a tense or a conjugation or a pronunciation slightly wrong. But we never tell them because we are too damned polite.

But, as Patchy says, the French are quite nice sometimes, when you consider that they live on a diet of onions, snails, smelly cheeses and frogs’ legs.

‘I could get you a raw vegetable if that’s what you want,’ said Frank. ‘What would you like? A potato? I could cut up a raw potato into little pieces and serve you raw chips if you like. Or a carrot? A cabbage? A whole cabbage would be a bit much, perhaps. The ones we’ve got at the moment are quite big. Maybe half a cabbage? Or how about a nice plateful of Brussels sprouts? They named them after Brussels and that isn’t far from France is it? Or is it in France? I can never remember. It’s certainly foreign. So, perhaps you’d like half a dozen raw sprouts? Maybe with a little tomato sauce? Or we’ve got brown sauce? Both sorts: Daddy’s and HP.’

You have to give Frank points for attempting to be helpful. But when he gets a little agitated, Frank tends to lose control of his brain. I had an awful feeling that he was going to serve up a whole, raw potato on a plate. Or, perhaps, bring in half a dozen Brussels sprouts covered in HP sauce. Wars have probably been fought over less.

But, fortunately, this wasn't going to happen. The French woman screwed up her nose and looked at her companion. He shook his head. 'Not on your Nellie,' he said.

It took us all quite a while to realise what he'd said. Frank was shocked and rather upset. He doesn't like rude people and saying 'Not on your Nellie' when your host has been bending over backwards to meet your peculiar dietary requirements is, in our book, definitely on the rude side of polite.

'I can do you a sandwich,' said Frank, through gritted teeth. 'Cheese, ham, beef or tomato and salady stuff.' Frank is not a fan of what he calls 'salady stuff'. He regards lettuce as being an unsuitable food for a human being.

'Do you have the Roquefort?'

'Is that the smelly goat cheese?'

'It is being made from the milk of the goat, yes.'

'No.'

'You are not having this one?'

'No.'

'You are having the Camembert?'

'No.'

'The Brie?'

'No.'

'What do you have?' The question was asked with a sneer of gladiatorial proportions.

'The Cheddar.'

The Frenchman screwed up his nose in distaste. 'You are having only the Cheddar?'

'Yes. Only the Cheddar.'

Frank would serve the man because he was a customer and customers are there to be served. But he would now not be polite to him. Serving food to customers is Frank's job. He doesn't believe there is a rule that he has to be nice to them if he doesn't like them.

'Pouf! The Cheddar is for mices,' said the Frenchman, screwing up his nose in disgust.

'I'll go and feed the mices then,' said Frank, who had had enough. 'You pair can bugger off.' And with that he turned on his heel and disappeared.

'I will take the ham sandwich,' said the Frenchman, addressing us. 'With a cappuccino with extra milk.' He turned to his companion who thought for a while. 'I'll have the same,' she said at last. She sniffed and did not seem very happy.

'Afraid not, mate,' said Thumper. 'You've upset the landlord and he's gone. But there's a shop in the village and the bloke there will sell you a couple of packets of crisps and a can of something fizzy.'

The couple stared at us in disbelief.

'We are not to be a serving?' she said, astonished.

'Doesn't look like it,' said Thumper. 'No Frank, no food is the general rule here. He always allows foreigners a little extra leeway, on account of the language and so on, but I think you overstepped the mark with that remark about the mices.'

'Huh!' said the Frenchman. 'What is this with the 'foreigner'? Huh! In France you would be the foreigner.'

Thumper laughed. 'Don't be daft, sunbeam' he said. 'There's no way I could ever be a foreigner. I'm English!'

Empty of food but full of indignation, the French folk struggled back into their waterproofs and headed back out into the rain.

They discovered, I am sure, that it is not easy to be dignified when climbing back into still damp waterproofs.

'Toodle pip,' said Thumper, as they left.

The woman turned back, blank faced and bewildered. 'What is this 'toodle pip'?' she demanded.

'Oh, it's English, love,' replied Thumper. 'You wouldn't understand. You being foreign.'

The woman followed her companion and tried to slam the door. Unfortunately, the door she tried to slam had a powerful spring attached to it and cannot be slammed.

'I'm never going to bother trying to speak French again,' muttered Patchy. 'They can speak English like proper, educated, civilised people do. The Americans speak English, the Canadians speak English, the New Zealanders speak English, even the Australians speak a type of English. Why do the French insist on speaking their own funny little language?'

Thumper and I laughed rather nervously. Patchy can sometimes get a trifle upset if people are rude to him.

'If you make an effort to speak their language,' said Patchy, 'the French will criticise everything you say. They will delight in picking holes in your grammar and they will constantly correct your pronunciation. And what's the point? If you speak French to a Frenchman you will always be searching for the appropriate word. You will be forever on the back foot, struggling to make sure that you aren't making a mistake which will result in your listener collapsing to the floor and holding his stomach as he struggles to contain his laughter.' Patchy made a passable imitation of a stage Frenchman laughing. He did sound a bit like Maurice Chevalier. 'On the other hand, if he has to try to speak your language you can chuckle merrily and raise eyebrows occasionally. So I shall insist on having all my future conversations in English, putting the French person on the back foot. They will have to put a lot of effort into struggling to cope with a foreign language and they will have less brain available to deal with the problem at hand. And I shall destabilise them by constantly correcting their English. I shall distribute idioms at random and when correcting a foreigner who is attempting to speak 'the English' I shall always appear to be understanding and patronising. I shall tell them they are doing really well and I shall ask them if they learned their English at school. If they seem fluent, I shall ask them how many weeks they have been learning English. This will doubtless make them feel inferior and intimidated and will drive them insane. I shall pretend not to understand what they are saying. If they say 'I am unhappy with the gilding on this frame', I shall reply 'I'm sorry, did you say you want to wrap the picture so that you can take it away with you now?'

Thumper and I looked at each other and then at Patchy.

'Finished?' I said.

Patchy sat back, smiled and nodded. 'I feel better now.'

There was something close to silence for a while. Only the crackling of the fire and the sound of the rain on the windows could be heard.

'All that talk of food has made me peckish,' said Thumper, breaking the silence at last.

'Me too,' I agreed.

'Frank!' called Patchy, who had recovered completely now and clearly felt better after his rant. 'Don't give the Cheddar to the mice. We'll have three large cheese and onion sandwiches and another round of drinks.'

I got up and put a log on the fire. It was very wet and cold outside and the wind was now howling with slate tearing determination. For a moment, I wondered how much guttering we would lose at Bilbury Grange. But only for a moment. The vicious winds which scour the North Devon coast are an integral part of our lives and a small price to pay for living in such a beautiful and deserted part of England.

I wondered how the couple from Paris were getting on, out there in the rain and the wind.

It was warm and cosy in the Duck and Puddle snug.

Mind you, it is always warm and cosy in the snug at the Duck and Puddle.

The False Widow

It is a fact of mechanical life that all motor cars have their off days and it is, I suppose, not unreasonable to suspect that a motor car built in the early 1930s, and well on its way to its first half century, would probably be more vulnerable to the work of gremlins than any other mechanical device, particularly one built within the last few years.

It is also a fact of life that when things go wrong with anything mechanical, they usually do so at the most inconvenient moment.

This is, I suppose, inevitable, in that when, for example, a motor car breaks down the driver is, by definition, always trying to get somewhere, and to be somewhere that he isn't, when the breakdown takes place.

This is rather similar to the inconvenience of a light bulb going 'pop' when you press the 'on' switch. When you try to turn on a light, you are doing so because it is dark and you need the light. You are always going into another room or about to do something which requires light. So light bulbs always 'go' at an inconvenient moment.

But sometimes, it does seem as though fate is having a laugh.

The Rolls Royce 20/25 which I had inherited from my predecessor, Dr Brownlow, had always been entirely reliable. Indeed, I took her reliability for granted. And I was, therefore, enormously surprised when she broke down for the first time since she had been in my possession.

Naturally, I was out on a night call when she let me down.

There was no moon so it was pitch black. The nearest street lights to Bilbury are the ones in Wales, on the other side of the Bristol Channel and the village is, therefore, entirely reliant upon the heavens for all illumination.

There was no visible moon and no stars and, therefore, no illumination.

And it goes without saying that it was raining.

It was, indeed, raining with so much enthusiasm that it appeared as if the sky must have found itself with several hundred thousand tons of excess water which had to be got rid of as quickly as possible.

The call I was answering had sounded urgent and in my rush, I had gone out without a raincoat or a hat. I had simply slipped an old sweater and a pair of trousers over the top of my pyjamas.

And, to make things even worse, the call was to a house which was several miles away from Bilbury Grange. The house to which I had been called wasn't actually even in Bilbury but was in a small hamlet called East Morton, several miles away.

I didn't have any patients in East Morton but the caller had stated that her husband was ill, that they were staying in a house, called The Castle, which they had rented and that their own doctor was in Harley Street. The woman who called told me that she had given my name and telephone number by their live-in butler. He wasn't a patient of mine either and I never did find out why he chose to recommend me to his mistress.

I know nothing whatsoever about motor cars and when the Rolls spluttered to a halt, I had absolutely no idea what to do. There was no point in my lifting the bonnet. Indeed, although I am rather ashamed to admit it, I didn't even know how to lift the bonnet.

So, when it was clear that the car wasn't going to respond to my attempts to restart it I picked up my black medical bag, climbed out into the rain and started the long trudge along the lanes to East Morton.

Naturally, I discovered that the torch I kept in the car had a flat battery.

Isn't it always the way?

The small pen torch which I use to look down patients' throats was the only illumination I had and although its tiny beam was absolutely fine for examining tonsils, it turned out to be utterly useless for helping me find my way along the Devon lanes.

After trudging along for a quarter of a mile, I was totally soaked. My hair was plastered to my head and my jumper and trousers were drenched. In my haste to get up and out, I had slipped my feet into a pair of canvas deck shoes. I kept them ready for night calls because they were quicker to put on than decent, sturdy shoes which required lacing. The deck shoes too were soaked and kept slipping off my feet as I made my way along the now muddy lanes. And still the rain came down.

After around half a mile, I lost a shoe.

I stopped for a while to hunt for it but eventually gave up and plodded on without it. The lanes in that part of the world are rough and uneven and the puddles which form are consequently huge. I've seen smaller garden ponds.

A little further along the road, I stumbled in a pothole and fell sideways into a water filled ditch. In a way, it didn't really matter because I was already as wet as I could get but I ripped a huge hole in my jumper as I scrambled out and caught a sleeve on a huge bramble.

Instead of just being bedraggled, I was now wet and bedraggled. And still the rain came down.

When I finally arrived in the hamlet of East Morton, I realised that I didn't have the foggiest idea where to find The Castle. I walked round and round the lanes, desperately peering at gateposts and the front doors of the odd cottage. The night was so dark and the rain so heavy that I had to get within a couple of feet of a sign to see what it said.

At this point, I was feeling very sorry for myself and I honestly wanted to just sit down on the lane and give up.

But I persevered.

Eventually, I came across a gateway guarded by two stone pillars, both of which bore the name The Castle carved into stone blocks. Inevitably, the driveway was long and lined with horse chestnut trees. By now, the wind had joined the party and the air was thick with leaves and small branches which had been torn from the trees. I'm sure that in the daylight, sitting in a comfortable motor car or carriage, the driveway would have looked imposing and stylish but in the rain and the wind the darned driveway simply seemed interminable.

Somewhere along the drive, I lost my one remaining shoe.

Since I hadn't bothered to waste time putting on any socks before I left the house, I was now barefoot. Every now and then I trod on a sharp stone. I did a good deal of yelping. On one occasion, I shouted rude words at the top of my voice. Sadly, no one heard them for my words were lost on the wind.

The house, when I finally got there, was large and imposing and looked as if it would make a good film set for a horror film. I couldn't see the extent of it but it seemed vast; stretching to left and right as far as I could see in the darkness of that foul night. It was the sort of house which has a gun room, a game larder, a flower room and a wrapping room. My night vision had improved by now and my pupils must have been enormous. I found the front door, discovered the door bell and pushed a huge porcelain button marked 'Bell'. While I waited for someone to answer, I looked at my watch. It was 1.30 am. I had set out from Bilbury Grange just before midnight.

'Yes?' said the large and imposing man who opened the door. He was wearing evening dress and looked as if he had been dusted and polished.

'I'm the doctor,' I explained. 'I've forgotten who telephoned me but I was asked to call.'

'You're the doctor?' said the man. It occurred to me that he must have been the butler.

I told him my name and realised that I was shivering. I was drenched to the skin. My hair was plastered to my head. My jumper was unravelling. And I was standing there in bare feet. But I was holding a black medical bag. If I hadn't been holding the bag I think he would have just shut the door on me.

'My car broke down,' I explained. 'I had to walk.' I looked down. 'I lost my shoes somewhere along the way.'

The butler opened the door wide and stood aside to give me room to enter.

'Who is it, Beddowes?' demanded an imperious voice belonging to an invisible woman.

'It's a person who says he is a doctor, madam,' said the butler.

The owner of the voice appeared. She was wearing an evening dress and holding a glass of champagne. She looked to be in her 50s but I suppose she could have been older.

'You're the doctor?' she said, making little effort to hide her disbelief and contempt.

'Yes,' I said.

'You've taken your time,' she said.

'My car broke down,' I explained.

'You should have something a little more reliable,' was her answer.

'It's usually very reliable,' I said, defending my car's reputation.

'You're dripping wet.'

'It's raining.'

'Don't you have a coat you could have worn? Or an umbrella?'

'Not with me, no,' I said. I wanted to say that if I had a coat I would have been wearing it. And that if I'd had an umbrella I would have used it. But she wasn't the sort of woman who takes it kindly when the help speaks back. I couldn't help feeling rather intimidated. I hate it when I feel intimidated. I hate the person intimidating me and I despise myself for being intimidated. 'Where's my patient?'

The woman looked me up and down. 'I'll take you to him,' she said. 'But try not to walk on the carpets. You are dripping wet and your feet are filthy.'

I looked down. My feet were very grubby. And I was standing in the middle of a puddle which I had created. I was about to take off my jumper when I realised that all I had on underneath it was my pyjama jacket. It occurred to me that it might have been kind of her to have offered to lend me a towel. Or even some dry clothing. I knew that poorer patients living in a run-down cottage would have definitely offered me towels and a dressing gown.

'Sir Felix was taken very poorly this afternoon,' said the woman as she led the way down a long corridor. As instructed, I walked on the wooden floor at the side of the carpet. 'I couldn't telephone you until after dinner because we had very important guests. Lord Braunton and Sir Percy Liverage were here.'

‘What are Sir Felix’s symptoms?’ I asked. I had never heard of Lord Braunton or Sir Percy Liverage and didn’t give a fig for them. We were now making our way up a very impressive marble staircase. The carpet stretched from one side of the staircase so I had no choice but to walk on it. However, my feet were not quite as dirty as they had been. And I was no longer dripping water like a tap turned full on. I wondered if the woman I was following was Sir Felix’s wife.

‘I expect he’ll want to tell you that himself,’ said the woman. She turned left at the top of the stairs and led me along another corridor. This one was long enough for an archery contest.

She stopped at last and knocked on a door. There were no numbers or other identifying marks on any of the doors so I have no idea how she knew that this was the correct door.

‘This man says he is the doctor,’ said the woman, standing to one side to let me past.

We were in a bedroom.

The sole occupant was a large, red-faced man who was sitting up in bed reading a newspaper. He was wearing spectacles perched on the end of his nose and looked very bad tempered. There were a dozen suitcases stacked up against one wall. The suitcases all carried the Louis Vuitton brand markings. The man looked up and peered at me over the tops of his spectacles.

‘He says his car broke down and that it is raining,’ said the woman to the red-faced man. It was clearly offered as an explanation for my appearance.

The man in bed examined me and glowered as though I were a sick animal and he were deciding whether or not to have me put down. ‘You’re late and you look very disreputable,’ he said. ‘We rang for you hours ago.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, for I was.

‘Damned good job I’m not dying,’ said the man. ‘What if I’d been dying, eh?’

‘I couldn’t get here any quicker,’ I apologised. ‘You’re actually well outside my practice area.’

‘Then you shouldn’t have come.’

‘I was asked to come,’ I replied, feeling rather cross. ‘What’s the problem?’ I put my black bag down on a chair near to the bed.

‘That’s what you’re here for,’ snapped the man. ‘No good asking me what the problem is. If I were the doctor I’d know and I’d deal with it. But I’m not.’ He had a discomforting way of looking through me – as though he were looking at something a foot behind my head. It was very intimidating and I felt certain that he was doing it on purpose.

I tried again. ‘What symptoms have you got?’

‘Aching, sweating, shaky,’ he replied. ‘Nauseous. I feel awful. Tired and washed out. Not usually like this at all.’

I opened my bag and took out my stethoscope and my sphygmomanometer. The rain had somehow got into my bag and everything inside was soaked. His heart was a little fast and his blood pressure was a little high but I couldn’t find anything else wrong. I started to pull back the heavy eiderdown and the sheets beneath it.

‘What on earth are you doing?’ screamed the woman who had brought me to the bedroom. I still didn’t know who she was but in my innocence I thought it was a fair bet that since he was Sir Felix something then she was probably Lady something.

‘I need to examine Sir Felix,’ I explained. ‘I can’t do it while he’s covered up.’

‘Wait!’ ordered the woman. ‘I’ll call for someone.’ She rang a bell by the door. A minute or two later a woman in a black uniform arrived. She looked to be the wrong side of 50 and had the put-upon stoop of a woman whose life is not and never has been her own and who is accustomed to taking orders without thought. I wondered if the poor woman had to stay up until her master and mistress went to bed, just in case they needed something. I’d never seen her or the butler before.

‘Turn down the bedspread so that the doctor can examine Sir Felix,’ said the woman.

‘Sir Felix’s pyjamas are soaked,’ I said. ‘He has been sweating rather a lot. He needs some fresh ones.’

When the bedspread had been properly turned down (so neatly that I half expected to see a neatly wrapped chocolate placed on the pillow just as they do in posh hotels) the woman giving the orders pointed to the suitcases. ‘Look in those,’ she said to the woman in the black uniform. ‘You’ll find new pyjamas in one of them.’ She turned to me. ‘We’re only down here for the week,’ she explained. ‘We did some shopping in Monaco and brought some stuff with us but there hasn’t been time for the staff to unpack yet.’

I examined Sir Felix.

I couldn’t find anything wrong with him except for some purple, puffy patches on the skin of his left foot. There was also a raised area around a tiny bite.

‘Ah, forgot to tell you about that skin thing,’ he said. ‘Rather clever of you to find it. The bite thing burns like stink. I’ve also had a stabbing pain up my leg.’

‘It looks like a bite,’ I said.

'It was. I was putting on my boots to take the dogs for a walk and I was bitten. I looked inside my boot and there was a damned spider there. It bit my foot.' He was clearly still shocked that anyone or anything should dare to bite him.

'What sort of spider was it? Did you recognise it?'

'Damned stupid question,' said Sir Felix. 'I'm not on first name terms with all the spiders in the house. There are thousands of them around – especially when it rains.'

I noticed, out of the corner of my eye, that the woman in the black uniform had now opened six or seven suitcases. She was being supervised by the woman who had shown me up into the bedroom. The contents of the suitcases, all clothes, were all brand new and still wrapped in cellophane or tissue paper. Some were still in the carrier bags in which the shops had sold them. There did not appear to be any sign of any pyjamas. It was clear that none of the clothes had ever been worn. Blazers, jackets, suits, dresses, evening gowns, shirts, trousers – there was enough clothing there to stock an expensive store. I got the impression that Sir Felix and his lady rather liked shopping. It was all like something out of an Edwardian drama; the curmudgeonly old man, the immaculate butler, the snooty woman and the put upon maidservant. It was difficult to believe that this was England in the 1970s.

'No, of course not,' I apologised, 'I'm sorry; I meant to ask if you recognised the type of spider.'

'Are there different types of spider?' he asked. He thought for a moment. 'I suppose there are,' he admitted. 'This was one of the little ones with a big body and short legs rather than one of those with a tiny body and long legs.'

'How big would you say?'

'Small. The whole thing was no bigger than my little fingernail. Some white markings on the body and I seem to remember that it had orangish legs.'

'You should address Sir Felix as Sir Felix,' interrupted the bossy woman.

I looked at her. I was getting fed up with the rather feudal atmosphere in the house. 'And I should be addressed as 'doctor',' I told her.

I'm delighted to say that she went bright red.

I looked closely at the skin around the bite. Although Sir Felix had been sweating profusely, the area of skin around the bite was quite dry.

'There's a patch of anhydrosis around the bite,' I told him.

'What's that?' he demanded.

'No sweating,' I said. I confess I had deliberately used the medical term because I was fed up with being treated like a half-witted criminal. 'That rather suggests that you were bitten by a false black widow spider.'

'Good God!' said the woman I assumed to be Lady something or other. 'A black widow spider? Do you mean to say that there are black widow spiders in Devon?'

'Not a black widow,' I said. 'There are spiders called false black widows. I think there are quite a lot of varieties. Over a hundred, I believe. This was probably one of those. I've seen one or two. They're said to have come over from Madeira in a bunch of bananas back in the 19th century and they've been here ever since. I don't think they usually bite but if it was tucked away comfortably in Sir Felix's boot and then a foot suddenly appeared it probably felt rather threatened.'

'I bet it did!' said Sir Felix. 'And it had good reason to feel threatened. I squashed it. The damned little thing had the audacity to bite me!'

'Most people in North Devon cover up their boots and shoes, especially if they leave them in a garage or an outhouse,' I said. 'An old tin lid will do fine to keep the spiders out.'

'Should Sir Felix go to hospital?' asked the woman. She frowned as something awful occurred to her. 'Is there a hospital around here?' she asked.

'A hospital isn't necessary,' I said. 'The symptoms will die down in a day or two.'

'What about treatment?'

'We'll just wash the area and put on some antiseptic cream,' I said. 'And I'll give you some antihistamine tablets to take away the discomfort.'

'My valet has already washed it,' said Sir Felix.

'Fine,' I said, 'then I'll just put on a little antiseptic cream.'

I cleaned the skin around the bite with some antiseptic wipes and then put on a little antiseptic cream. I found some antihistamine tablets in my bag and put them on his bedside table. I wasn't surprised when he didn't thank me. These were not thanking people.

'I've found the pyjamas ma'am,' said the woman in black, holding up several pairs of expensive looking striped pyjamas. She sounded relieved, as though she might have expected to have been beaten if she hadn't managed to find them.

I helped Sir Felix remove his sodden pyjamas and replace them with a new pair. I told him that I'd visit again the following day. And then I headed for the door and back downstairs. No one said thank you. I wondered if anyone might offer to give me a lift back home but no one did. Nor did anyone offer to lend me a pair of shoes or boots. The slightly mysterious, and massively superior, lady of the house, who had stayed behind for a moment at the behest of Sir Felix, followed in my footsteps down the stairs.

'Sir Felix said to give him two pounds,' she said to the butler when we reached the hallway downstairs. The butler, still dressed immaculately, had appeared as if from nowhere.

The butler removed a wallet from his inside pocket and removed two brand new one pound notes. They looked as if they had been ironed. He held them out to me. I held up a hand. 'No thank you,' I said. The butler who seemed shocked looked to his mistress for advice.

'Sir Felix was treated as an NHS patient,' I told him. 'I'll bring a form with me tomorrow.'

The lady of the house seemed startled by this. But before she could speak, I opened the front door and walked back out into the night. It was still raining and it was still windy but I was glad to be out of there.

When I got back to Bilbury Grange it was dawn and I was freezing cold, weary and footsore. I checked that no more calls had come in and then I washed, shaved and dressed in dry, warm clothes. I then made myself breakfast. Fresh grapefruit, egg on toast and four slices of toast with marmalade. Patsy was still asleep. When I'd eaten my fill, and drunk two cups of coffee, I telephoned Tolstoys, the local garage, and asked one of the mechanics to retrieve the Rolls Royce. I told him where he could find it.

The mechanic knocked on the door 30 minutes later.

'Have you mended her already?' I said, delighted.

'Wonderful car, doctor,' said the mechanic.

'It is,' I agreed proudly.

'But marvellous as it is,' he said gently, 'I'm afraid that it still needs regular doses of petrol in order to function at its best.'

He explained that the Rolls had shuddered to a halt because it had run out of petrol.

'The spare two gallon container that you had in the boot was enough to get it moving again,' he said.

I made him promise not to tell a soul.

When I turned up at The Castle later that day, I tooted the horn to announce my arrival. And when the butler opened the front door and saw the Rolls Royce standing there, he actually called me 'sir'. I had a feeling that there was a slight forward inclination of the body, too. Not quite a bow, you understand, but a movement heading in that general direction.

I still thought that the wretched fellow might have done the decent thing and found me a towel the previous evening.

Sir Felix was a good deal better, though still as snotty and as bad tempered.

And two days later he had made a complete physical recovery.

Mentally and spiritually he was quite beyond my help.

I never did find out who he was or the nature of his relationship with the woman who had told the butler to offer me two pounds for my services.

I asked Frank, who tends to know everyone in North Devon, even if they're just passing through the county on their way from or to somewhere else, and he said he thought Sir Felix was a millionaire who had made his money out of property development and running a chain of shops. Frank said he had heard that Sir Felix had allegedly been given his knighthood for 'public services', but everyone knew he had bought it, having made several large donations to one of the large political parties. Moreover, the money he had given had not been his own but belonged to the companies of which he was a director. According to Frank, a number of angry shareholders felt that the knighthood was theirs as much as his and one aggrieved pensioner had made this point at a rather heated Annual General Meeting.

Frank also said that Sir Felix had a number of honorary degrees which he had purchased from British universities. I didn't know this but Frank assured me that if you gave a few quid to a university, they would reward you with an honorary degree of your choice.

Frank said he thought that Sir Felix and his mistress lived in Monaco and came to the mansion in East Morton for no more than one week a year. He said they brought their own servants with them from Monaco and left the house shut up when they weren't using it.

The world we live in never fails to surprise me.

As a country GP, I see people living in grand houses and I see people living in tiny two room cottages.

In my experience, the people in the grand houses are, on the whole, likely to be self-obsessed, mean and thoughtless while the people in the tiny cottages are far more likely to be thoughtful, kind and generous.

No small cottage owner would have let me walk out into the rain without insisting that I borrow a coat or an umbrella or both. If they'd had a car or a cart, they would have insisted on taking me back home.

Life's funny like that.

The Austrian Émigré in Smithy-on-the-Moor

When I was 18-years-old, I spent a year working in a part of Liverpool called Kirkby as a Community Service Volunteer. A man called Alec Dickson, the charismatic founder of the organisation, had persuaded me to give a year of my life to help a community where people were struggling to survive. It sounds terribly twee but it wasn't. My parents had worked and saved hard and, as a result, I had spent my formative years in a comfortably middle class environment. My waking hours had been dedicated to the acquisition of the certificates required to make the next move up the academic ladder. I had finished school and had acquired the pieces of paper necessary to go to university to start my medical studies but I was tired of textbooks and examinations and I wanted to spend a year in the real world before I plunged myself into another five or six years of academic life.

Alec Dickson made duty and responsibility sound necessary and invigorating and inspired me to give the time to do something to help in a community which was, to say the least, troubled.

The local buses always had a police car escorting them and the windows of all the shops and public buildings (including the police station) were protected by thick steel mesh.

Violence was a way of life and the area was controlled by a series of gangs. Just the place for an 18-year-old who arrived wearing an old school blazer partly because he didn't know any better, partly because he didn't have anything else to wear and partly because there was a lot of wear left in it.

I did many things in Liverpool (including form an army of young volunteers prepared to give their evenings and weekends to improve the lives of their elderly neighbours by decorating, gardening and shopping) but one of my more mundane responsibilities was to drive a Meals on Wheels van.

Once a twice a week, I would climb behind the wheel of a clapped out old vehicle (which would have never passed a road test if they'd been invented then), roll it down an incline in order to get it going and drive around Kirkby delivering hot meals to the elderly, the frail and the sick; people who had been pretty much abandoned by society in general and the welfare state in particular.

Everyone who received those meals welcomed them with open arms and big smiles and I had absolutely no doubt that a good many of the recipients did not eat hot food on the days when the Meals on Wheels van didn't arrive.

The Meals on Wheels service in Bilbury was organised and run by Patsy (my wife), Mrs Kennet (Patsy's mother), Adrienne (Patsy's sister), Anne Robinson aka Thwaites (Thumper Robinson's partner in life) and a dozen other locals.

The fact that the meals were cooked and delivered by women was not something that was done by choice or some sort of sexist division of labour. It just happened that way and in the 1970s, it was not considered strange in any way.

The meals were provided free of charge and the delivery drivers used their own vehicles and provided their own petrol. The women running the service took turns to prepare the meals (all of which were made from fresh, home grown ingredients which were served in very generous portions) and they had a more than adequate collection of metal serving dishes, complete with covers, which had been acquired by Patchy Fogg when a hotel in Taunton had closed its doors and there had been a sale of furniture, crockery and kitchen equipment.

It had once been suggested that the women might apply to the local council for a grant to help defray their costs but they had unanimously rejected the suggestion on the grounds that once the council got involved, men with clipboards would be following them around checking to see how much gravy was poured onto Mrs Fretwell's potatoes and how many sprouts had been put onto Mr Barton's plate.

At Christmas, at Easter and on their birthdays, the recipients of these meals each received a half bottle of wine, and these extras were paid for by an annual summer fete and bring-and-buy sale and an equally annual winter jumble sale.

No one thought any of this was exceptional and neither donors nor recipients regarded the Meals on Wheels service as demeaning or patronising in any way.

A visitor from London, who found out about the service, said that it was a very Victorian thing to do, that it smacked of soup kitchens and that such services should be provided by the State.

However, no one in Bilbury could quite understand why food handed out by the State would be any more satisfying than food handed out by warm-hearted, generous individuals who did what they did because they wanted to rather than because they had to.

One of the advantages of having such a service in the village was that the women delivering the meals could keep an eye on villagers who were elderly, frail or vulnerable in some way. And they could, of course, pass any concerns on to me.

‘My Mum saw a man called Axel Heidberg today,’ said Patsy, one evening. ‘We only put him onto our rota for meals this week. I don’t know where she got his name from but she said that he cried when she delivered his meal. She had a look in his kitchen and said it looked as though he’d been living on a diet of dry, stale cornflakes and packet soup. We’re going to deliver meals to him every day. And Mum took him a bag of groceries, tea, bread, milk, sugar and so on, which she bought from Peter Marshall. Peter also gave her half a dozen badly dented tins of fruit and soup – the ones that he usually sells at a discount.’

‘Peter gave her some tins? Gave her as in ‘without charging for them’?’

‘Yes!’

‘Peter Marshall? The man who once tried to charge me double for a packet of biscuits because he said they were so old that they could be classified as antiques and were an investment?’

‘He didn’t!’

‘He darned well did!’

‘Yes, but he can be generous sometimes.’

‘So it seems,’ I said, unable to hide my surprise at discovering this hidden side to Peter Marshall.

‘And my Mum can be very charming when she wants to be.’

‘Indeed, she can.’

‘Anyway, Mum wonders if you’d pop in and see him. Just give him a bit of a check-up.’

I took the address and promised to visit him the following day. Neither the name nor the address was familiar.

And, the next day, to my quiet astonishment, I discovered why: I had never met Mr Heidberg before and Dr Brownlow had never met him either.

Mr Heidberg, who had been born in Austria, had been living in the village for half a century and was living like a hermit. He had quite slipped through the cracks of the State’s welfare programme.

I had no idea how Mrs Kennet had found him. He lived on the outskirts of a hamlet called Smithy-on-the-Moor, which is four or five miles away, on the Barnstaple side of Bilbury.

I have always been fascinated by how villages develop and acquire their names.

Villages and towns sometimes develop in one particular spot through convenience. So, for example, London originally became a settlement because a gravel bottom to the river meant that it was the best place to cross the Thames. Spots which are sheltered or easily defended were popular sites for a small development in the Middle Ages. In England, it is common for a village to develop around a farm which opened a public house in a room or outbuilding. (It used to be very easy to open a pub in England. All you needed was a room, something alcoholic to sell to customers and a barmaid or barman to serve the stuff.)

Some villages get their name from a prominent landowner or from a topographical oddity.

Lynmouth, a little way to the east along the coast from Combe Martin, got its name because the word ‘lyn’ means torrent. Those who named the village got it right; on the 15th of August in 1952, ten inches of rain fell on Exmoor in 24 hours, two branches of the river flooded down steep sided narrow valleys, gathering boulders and destroying cottages in Lynmouth. The river drowned 34 people that night. History books show that similar things happened in 1607 and 1770. It is clear that the Saxons, who named the river, knew what they were doing.

Ilfracombe, the largest tourist resort in North Devon, is the valley belonging to someone called Alfred, though just who Alfred was is a mystery now. It almost certainly wasn’t Alfred the Great, the monarch renowned for his cake burning escapade.

Other villages acquire their name because there is a shop or business of some kind in the locality.

And so I have no doubt that Smithy-on-the-Moor was, as the name makes it clear, named because there used to be a blacksmith on the site and the site is on Exmoor.

There certainly isn’t a blacksmith there now and the hamlet is so small that it’s not surprising that its name no longer appears on modern local maps.

If the keeper of the local electoral roll ever did a census, they would probably find that there was only one name to put on the register under the name Smithy-on-the-Moor. And that name would be Axel Heidberg.

It wasn’t easy to find Mr Heidberg’s tiny, run down cottage.

Following the instructions given to me by Mrs Kennet, I took a small, pretty well unused track between two fields and eventually had to give up, stop the car and walk the rest of the way on foot. The track was rough and narrow and so uneven that I could hear the bottom of the Rolls scraping along on bits of rock and stone. Mrs Kennet drives her husband’s elderly Land Rover, which is built for such rough terrain.

Mr Heidberg, when I finally reached his home, told me that he wasn’t quite sure how old he was but that he was pretty sure that he had been born in February in Austria and that in England, Queen Victoria had been on the throne at the time.

He told me that his father had been a doctor who had worked in Germany and that the family had moved to

England at some point shortly after the end of the First World War. He couldn't remember precisely why the family had emigrated but said that although he was, by that time, living alone in an apartment in a building in Heidelberg he had accompanied his parents to England because they were both rather elderly and frail.

His father had been in his sixties when Mr Heidberg was born and his mother was what doctors tend to refer to as a 'mature' mother.

The family's modest fortune, which had been invested in German banks, took a steep dive when the German Mark was destroyed by the dramatic rates of inflation which characterised the early 1920s.

A small amount of money had been raised by the sale of Mrs Heidberg's jewellery but she and her husband died within a few years of each other and the house they had been renting, and which Mr Heidberg had been sharing with them, was repossessed when there was no money left to pay the rent.

'I miss them still,' said Mr Heidberg. 'They were both quite old when they died and I remember there were some who dismissed their deaths with the cruel comment that they had both enjoyed 'a good innings'. But I did not understand that attitude. It is, perhaps, a peculiarly English way of looking at things. Dying when we are old is no less a tragedy than dying when we are young. We feel sadness for the young who die unfulfilled, their lives just starting, but we may miss the elderly just as much if not more for we have known them for longer and we miss their wisdom, their experience, their knowledge.'

Mr Heidberg had sold the small amount of furniture which remained and had kept only an old accordion which had belonged to his father and which he had, as a boy, taught himself to play. He had toured England's coast giving performances on beaches and at hotels. When the accordion was damaged by vandals who disliked his German accent, he had become a 'gentleman of the road', sleeping rough and doing odd jobs at farms to earn enough money to buy a little food.

And he had ended up in Smithy-on-the-Moor, where, after sleeping under hedges and in barns for a fortnight, he had discovered the empty, derelict cottage he had adopted as his own.

No one had ever tried to throw him out but he still lived in constant fear that one day the owner would turn up and he would be evicted.

I don't think he could quite believe me when I told him that according to English law the cottage now belonged to him and nobody could throw him out.

I gave Mr Heidberg as good a check-up as I could. I couldn't weigh him because I didn't have any scales with me and he certainly didn't have any but he was clearly not overweight. I couldn't test blood or urine samples (I didn't have any blood or urine specimen bottles with me) but I checked his heart, his lungs and his blood pressure and I gave his nervous system a fairly comprehensive test.

I couldn't do a proper eye test but I looked at his fundi with my ophthalmoscope and checked his visual acuity by scribbling some letters on an old piece of cardboard. My informal examination showed no abnormalities. His joints all seemed to be in excellent condition too.

'You're pretty fit for whatever your age is,' I told him when I'd finished.

'You don't have to be ill just because you are old,' said Mr Heidberg wisely.

'Indeed not,' I agreed.

Looking around, it was clear that although Mr Heidberg himself was in pretty good condition, the same could not be said for his home which was, to say the least, rather primitive. There was no electricity and no gas, of course, and the only water supply came from a spring in the garden. Long, long ago someone had connected a piece of lead piping to a collecting funnel in the spring in order to feed a tap in the kitchen. The pipe had developed a leak and there was a bowl underneath the pipe to catch the water which dripped from it constantly. A privy which sat over a cesspit completed the amenities.

The house was packed with bits and pieces of furniture and crockery, most of which looked as if it had probably been salvaged from a rubbish heap. There were five wooden dining chairs in the living room but four of them were so badly broken that they were useless except as fuel. Indeed that was probably why Mr Heidberg had them there for the only heating in the house came, as was so common in Bilbury homes, from an open fireplace.

Water had come in through a hole in the roof and had damaged the ceiling in the downstairs living room and one of the downstairs sash windows had jammed open with the result that an icy cold draught swept through all the downstairs rooms. I could not begin to imagine how cold the house must have been in the winter. 'When there is snow outside then I also have snow in my living room,' said Mr Heidberg.

I pushed and pulled at the window and eventually managed to move it. Once it was freed, I could close it.

I then went upstairs with him into one of the bedrooms.

The hole in the roof, which had caused all the damage inside the house, was about two feet square and I guessed that at least half a dozen slates must have come loose and disappeared off the roof and into the overgrown garden beneath.

‘The first thing to do is to mend the roof,’ I told him.

‘I agree,’ said Mr Heidberg. ‘I tried to climb up there myself but I have no ladder and when I tried to climb onto a water butt by the back door, I fell onto the ground and hurt my arm.’ He showed me a healing bruise on his forearm. I told him that he had been lucky not to break anything and he agreed with this assessment.

I was, as I have so often been, quietly astonished at the way people will survive in adverse circumstances. The young believe they are immortal and they have not, in any case, been around long enough to have acquired a real and lasting affection for life; but it is the elderly, who know only too well that they are mortal, and who have seen the consequences of mortality, cling to life with the ferocity of a bargain hunter who has taken hold of her prey in a department store sale.

Suddenly, looking up at the hole in the roof, I had a brainwave.

‘Do you have an umbrella?’ I asked him.

Mr Heidberg went downstairs and rummaged around in the cupboard under the stairs. A couple of minutes later he re-joined me; this time he was clutching a large, colourful golf umbrella which advertised a well-known Scottish bank.

I took the umbrella from him, climbed onto a stout and rather ugly looking chest of drawers and then stuffed the umbrella up through the hole in the roof. Once the umbrella was through the hole, I put it up and then pulled down on the handle so that the umbrella sat on the roof, covering up the hole very effectively.

‘But won’t it blow away when there is wind?’ asked Mr Heidberg.

‘It would,’ I agreed. ‘But it isn’t going to if you’ve got some stout string somewhere.’

Mr Heidberg went back downstairs, revisited the cupboard under the stairs and returned clutching a ball of blue baler twine. Most things in Bilbury are held together with baler twine and as far as I am aware, there are only two colours available: blue or orange. I then used several lengths of baler twine to tie the handle of the umbrella to the handles on the stout and ugly chest of drawers.

Mr Heidberg was delighted.

‘I don’t know how long it will last,’ I warned him. ‘But I’ll try to find someone who can come and put on some new slates for you.

‘Why do you all do these kind things for me?’ he asked. There were tears rolling down both cheeks.

‘In Bilbury, we like to help each other out,’ I explained. ‘I’m just so sorry that we didn’t know you were here. But now that we have found you, we won’t forget you.’

‘Kind and beautiful ladies now bring me food,’ said Mr Heidberg. ‘Hot food, every day!’

‘I know,’ I said. ‘One of the beautiful ladies is my wife, Patsy. Another is her mother. And a third is my wife’s sister.’

‘But I have no money!’ said Mr Heidberg. ‘I cannot pay them.’

‘They don’t expect you to,’ I assured him.

He seemed overcome with what was happening and opened his mouth but did not say anything.

‘I’ll try to find someone to come and mend your roof,’ I told him.

‘No, no!’ said Mr Heidberg, shaking his head. ‘That is too much. It is all too much. I cannot accept all these kindnesses. I have no money.’

I thought for a moment and then looked around. ‘Maybe there is something in your house which is of value,’ I suggested. ‘Would you like me to ask a friend of mine to come and take a look? Maybe there is an old chair or piece of pottery that would raise some money for you.’ I knew that a proud old man like Mr Heidberg would feel better if he thought that he was paying his way.

‘That, I would like very much!’ said Mr Heidberg.

We shook hands, and I promised to return in a day or two’s time with a friend who would, hopefully, be able to find something which could be turned into cash.

And so, two days later, I returned to Smithy-on-the-Moor with Patchy Fogg, my good friend, my brother-in-law and the best antique dealer in Devon.

Patchy was still flush with cash after having identified and sold a marble-topped table at a house auction sale. He had made a small fortune from the sale of the table which the auctioneer and every other dealer had completely missed. The table had been sitting in a conservatory, in plain view, but it had been covered with pot plants. Since then he has, on several occasions, shown himself to be enormously generous to needy Bilburians by purchasing small items for rather more than their true value.

‘The doctor says you’d like me to see if there’s anything in the house worth a little money,’ said Patchy.

‘I would like that very much,’ said the old man.

‘Is there anything here of sentimental value?’ asked Patchy. ‘Anything that you wouldn’t want to part with?’

‘Nothing,’ said Mr Heidberg.

And so Patchy took a look around. Mr Heidberg and I watched him anxiously.

‘Aha!’ said Patchy eventually, spotting the bowl which was being used to catch the leaks from the lead pipe which brought water in from the spring outside in the garden. He picked up the bowl, replaced it with an old saucepan he took off a shelf, and examined it carefully.

‘Would you sell this bowl?’ Patchy asked.

‘You can have it,’ replied Mr Heidberg.

‘No, no,’ said Patchy. ‘I would like to buy it. Would you sell it to me?’

‘If you think it is worth anything I would very happily sell it,’ said Mr Heidberg. ‘It is only an old bowl.’

‘I think it might fetch £100 at auction,’ said Patchy. ‘How about I give you £90 for it?’

‘That is too much,’ replied Mr Heidberg. ‘If it is worth £100 at auction then you should pay me no more than £50. That is very fair.’

They settled on £75.

Mr Heidberg thought that too generous but Patchy insisted that he would not give any less. He counted out the notes and handed them to Mr Heidberg.

We got into the Rolls to leave and Patchy tossed the bowl into the back of the car.

‘Crumbs!’ I said. ‘Do you always treat valuable bits of porcelain in such a debonair fashion?’

‘It’s not valuable and it’s not porcelain,’ laughed Patchy.

I started the car and we drove away. ‘How much is it really worth?’ I asked him.

‘It’s not worth tuppence,’ said Patchy. ‘It was made for Woolworths and sold there by the lorry load in the 1950s.’

‘You’re an old softy!’ I told him.

‘That’s what my wife says,’ replied Patchy.

A fortnight later, I returned to Smithy-on-the-Moor to check on Mr Heidberg. He was looking good. His roof had been repaired and he was still getting his hot meals every day. The leak in the pipe in his kitchen had been repaired too.

‘I have found another of those bowls,’ he said, as I was about to leave.

‘Which bowls?’ I asked, having forgotten.

‘The same as the one your friend liked so much,’ said Mr Heidberg. There was a sparkle of hope in his eyes. ‘Do you think he would like to buy another?’

‘I’ll have a word with him,’ I said, hoping that Patchy was still feeling flush and generous.

He was.

Three months later, Patchy had three worthless bowls and his wallet was £225 lighter.

‘I hope that old man of yours hasn’t got too many more of those damned bowls,’ said Patchy, after he’d paid for the third one.

Mrs Leeson's Leg

Margaret Leeson and her husband Henry live in a splendid old manor house that is hidden away behind the highest yew hedge I have ever seen.

The house has been in Mrs Leeson's family for generations and her father served as a Minister in Winston Churchill's war time cabinet.

Henry Leeson was described to me as being 'something in the City of London' and when I asked what this meant I was told that it meant that he sat on the boards of half a dozen large, well-established companies where his job was to nod, munch biscuits and say 'harrumph' occasionally whenever anything unconventional was proposed.

I thought this sounded rather oppressive until I realised that there was probably some commercial value in having someone on the board of directors who questioned change in case it was being proposed for the sake of it, rather than to improve the company's prospects and profits.

The Leesons could, I suppose, have been described as eccentric in some of their ways, though they certainly wouldn't have said that there was anything remotely eccentric about any aspect of their lives. Indeed, they would have doubtless been affronted if they had ever heard the word 'eccentric' used to describe them.

Both well into their seventies but perfect examples of both agerasia and ataraxia, they saw themselves as stalwarts of the English countryside, solid patriots of the Old English variety; unbending, unchanging and reliable in their honest affection for tradition and traditional values. Today, they would be dismissed as feudal, anachronistic and embarrassingly out of their time, but back in the 1970s they were widely respected and admired for their determination to stick to standards which had long been regarded as having little or no relevance.

They dressed every evening for dinner.

He wore a dinner jacket with a bow tie and cummerbund. The bow tie was, of course, self-tied. He would have no more dreamt of wearing a ready-made bow tie on a piece of elastic than he would have dreamt of wearing a red cummerbund or a pair of gold hoop earrings in pirate style.

She always wore a posh frock and jewellery which other women might have kept in a bank vault.

They had a butler called Cecil, a housekeeper called Mary, a valet called George, a lady's maid called Jane, a cook called Edith, two kitchen staff both called Perkins and three gardeners all called Jim. They also had a groom/chauffeur who was called Wallace.

When I expressed some puzzlement about their ability to find gardeners all with the same name, Mr Leeson told me that they always called their servants by the same names. So, their butlers were always called Cecil, their housekeepers were always called Mary and, so on and so on. All their gardeners were always called Jim. Mr Leeson did not seem to think that there was anything unusual, exceptional or demeaning in this curious domestic ritual and the staff didn't seem to mind either. 'It makes it easy to remember their names,' explained Mr Leeson, when I asked him why they did this. 'And it avoids the potential embarrassment of getting a name wrong.'

At Christmas time, the Leesons held a carol service in their hall (which was big enough to fit the average sized cottage with room to spare for a garage and a garden shed) and in June every year, they held a fete in their garden in aid of the local church. (Bilbury has a good many summer fetes, all well attended.)

Mrs Leeson travelled around the village in a tilbury gig, pulled by a splendidly active grey mare which had a high stepping gait and a turn of speed which would, I suspect, have worried many a race horse. The horse pulling the gig was always called Gigi which seemed unusually appropriate.

Whenever I heard Mrs Leeson's gig approaching along one of the Bilbury lanes (and you could hear the clip clop of the horse some distance away), I would pull into the nearest gateway and wait for her to pass.

I saw them as patients only occasionally for they were, on the whole, an exceptionally healthy couple.

But early one evening I received a telephone call from Cecil the butler who, after apologising for the call and what he described as 'the inevitable inconvenience', then asked if I would be kind enough to visit Mrs Leeson as soon as might be convenient. Cecil was himself well past the customary retiring age and age had given him all the dignity and aloofness of a butler appearing in a story by P.G.Wodehouse. He had a way of talking that was all his own. I could not imagine him ever panicking or finding himself in a situation which he could not manage without breaking a sweat.

'Would she like me to visit in the morning or this evening?' I asked.

'Mrs Leeson would probably say that she would be happy to see you tomorrow morning but, to be honest with you, sir, and I hope you don't mind my mentioning it, I have talked briefly to Jane, Mrs Leeson's personal maid, who is, of course, more au fait with Mrs Leeson's present condition, than myself and we both feel that this evening would be preferable, sir,' replied Cecil.

I told him that I would leave straight away and should be knocking on the door within fifteen minutes at the very most.

Cecil said that that would be both most agreeable and much appreciated.

‘I’m so sorry that Cecil bothered you,’ said Mrs Leeson, who was lying in a four poster bed, propped up on four or five pillows. She was wearing a peach coloured nightdress and had a thin shawl around her shoulders. She was having difficulty in breathing and her skin was red and clearly flushed. A woman of about 30 or 35, whom I did not recognise, was standing on one side of the bed. Henry Leeson was standing at the other side of the bed. Both looked very concerned. The young woman was wearing what I took to be the standard, traditional uniform of a maid and I assumed that she was Jane, Mrs Leeson’s personal maid.

I asked Mrs Leeson what had happened.

‘I really don’t know, doctor,’ she replied. She spoke with some difficulty because her breathing rate was fast and she was clearly short of breath. It was an effort for her to produce each word. She seemed rather slow, even confused. She had to look at me for quite a while before finally recognising me.

I put the back of my hand on her forehead, which was red. She was very hot. Her skin was mottled. I checked her pulse. It was racing.

‘Actually, I feel rather awful, doctor,’ she said. ‘I feel as though I am about to die. Do you think I’m about to die, doctor?’ Her speech seemed slurred.

‘You appear to have an infection,’ I told her. ‘But there’s absolutely no reason to believe that you’re going to die.’

At this point, I really didn’t have the faintest idea how ill she really was. But there was clearly no point in making things worse by making her worry. I firmly believe that a doctor should, whenever possible and appropriate, try to reassure and comfort his patients. The curative powers of a reassuring, confident doctor have been shown to be just as good as those of quite significantly large doses of the most powerful medication.

‘How long have you been feeling poorly,’ I asked her.

‘Most of the day,’ she replied. ‘Actually, I was rather poorly yesterday. So I suppose it started yesterday.’

‘We thought it was just a bit of a bug, at first,’ added her husband. I guessed he probably wanted to help his wife avoid having to answer too many questions. ‘She’s been going hot and cold.’

‘Has she vomited at all?’

‘Twice.’ Mr Leeson looked across at the maid who nodded.

‘Any bowel problems? Diarrhoea for example?’

‘No.’ This time it was the maid who spoke.

I rolled up the sleeve of Mrs Leeson’s nightdress and took her blood pressure. It was low.

‘Do you have any pains?’ I asked her.

‘Everywhere,’ she replied. ‘My legs and my arms and my back.’ She paused to take a deep breath. ‘I have pains everywhere.’

‘She’s been shivery and at one point she felt quite cold,’ said Mr Leeson.

‘And Mrs Leeson has been sweating quite a lot,’ added the maid.

‘Glowing, dear,’ corrected Mrs Leeson. ‘Only horses sweat.’

‘I’m sorry, ma’am,’ said the maid. But she smiled. ‘Horses sweat, men perspire and ladies glow.’

‘Exactly,’ said Mrs Leeson.

‘Have you had any tingling in your hands?’

Mrs Leeson thought for a while. ‘No,’ said. ‘No, I don’t think so.’

‘Any tingling in your feet?’

‘No, I haven’t.’

‘That’s good,’ I said.

I was pretty sure that Mrs Leeson had sepsis – a rather serious, sometimes deadly, condition in which the body reacts badly to an infection of some kind. The whole body sometimes overreacts and shuts down, sometimes reducing the blood flow to vital organs. It is, indeed, a real emergency which needs to be taken very seriously. I was glad to hear that neither her hands nor her feet were tingling because when that happens it rather suggests that they are being starved of oxygen and that the muscles and the skin are starting to die. It’s not a good sign.

Many different types of infection can trigger a reaction of this type. A chest infection or a urinary infection can sometimes result in one of these nasty shock reactions.

‘Have you had any sort of chest infection?’ I asked Mrs Leeson.

She shook her head.

‘Any urinary infection?’

She thought for a moment, as though the question were a difficult one. ‘No, I don’t think so,’ she said. She turned towards her maid. ‘Have I?’

‘No, ma’am,’ replied the maid, who clearly knew her mistress very well.

‘You haven’t had to go to hospital at all recently? Even as a visitor?’

‘No,’ she replied. ‘I haven’t been away from Bilbury for more than a month. I’ve been busy helping in the garden.’

‘My wife likes to help prepare some of our flowers, fruits and vegetables for the village show,’ explained Mr Leeson.

‘Have you cut yourself at all? Scratched yourself?’

‘I don’t think so,’ replied Mrs Leeson. She turned to her husband. ‘Have I dear?’

‘Not that I know of,’ replied her husband.

‘Actually,’ said the maid, speaking softly and clearly rather embarrassed at contradicting both of her employers at the same time, ‘if you don’t mind my saying so, ma’am, you did scratch your leg on the rose bushes. You had a nasty scratch about two inches long. It bled a little. I had to throw away your stocking.’

‘I didn’t know that,’ said Mr Leeson.

‘It was a very small scratch, sir,’ said the maid, who now seemed rather apologetic about mentioning it.

‘Can I see the scratch?’ I asked.

‘I’ll just pop outside,’ said Mr Leeson, speaking softly and tip toeing towards the door. ‘Call me when you’re finished.’

I watched him go with some surprise.

The maid pulled back the bedclothes so that I could see Mrs Leeson’s leg. There was a nasty looking scratch on the back of her left calf.

‘Do you think that could have anything to do with it?’ she asked.

‘I think that is the cause of it,’ I replied firmly. I quickly checked to make sure that there were no signs or symptoms of tetanus or lockjaw – jaw muscles in spasm, difficulty in swallowing, muscle stiffness and spasms elsewhere. There weren’t.

‘Do you think Mrs Leeson will need to go to hospital?’ asked the maid when she had replaced the bed clothes. She then went to the door to tell Mr Leeson he could come back into his wife’s bedroom.

‘I’d rather treat her here,’ I said. ‘It’s a long way to travel in an ambulance. And I’m afraid hospitals are full of infections.’

‘What sort of treatment?’ asked Mr Leeson.

‘Antibiotics,’ I said firmly. ‘I’m going to start Mrs Leeson on a strong antibiotic straight away.’ I took a packet of antibiotics out of my black medical bag and handed them to Mr Leeson. I told him how they had to be administered.

‘You must call me if there is any new symptom or any change, particularly any deterioration,’ I told him and the maid. ‘Don’t wait – call me immediately. If I need to visit I can be here within 15 minutes.’

They promised they would do so.

When I visited after the surgery the next morning, I was massively relieved to see that Mrs Leeson was slightly better. She wasn’t completely restored to health, but she was looking and feeling better than she had been the night before. The antibiotics had clearly started to do their work.

It took nearly a week for her to make a recovery.

At the time, I remember being grateful that we were able to use good antibiotics to tackle such infections.

What I feared at the time, and wrote about in numerous articles and medical books, was that the overuse of antibiotics (both by doctors and by farmers) would result in many bugs acquiring resistance.

These days, many patients who have acquired sepsis as a result of an infection die because antibiotics no longer work.

But, that is now and this was then.

Mrs Leeson made a complete recovery and was able to see several items from her garden win prizes at the Bilbury Village Show.

Ironically, the roses which had nearly killed her only managed third place.

The Bicyclists

Thumper had been to the hairdresser.

‘Anne has been nagging me for months to get it cut,’ he said. ‘She said I looked disreputable.’

‘You are disreputable,’ Patchy pointed out with unarguable honesty.

‘You look younger,’ I told Thumper.

He ignored Patchy and glowered at me. ‘That’s what Anne said. I don’t want to look younger. I want to look older.’ He grinned. ‘I was hoping to look old enough to be able to get into the cinema to see the saucy movies.’

‘You could always find an adult to go with you,’ I suggested.

‘I don’t know any adults,’ responded Thumper quickly.

There was no sensible answer to that so nobody said anything.

We were sitting in the snug in the Duck and Puddle.

Thumper had his usual medicine, a pint of Old Restoration; a brew so toxic that it burns permanent marks if spilt onto a wooden table top. Patchy was drinking a glass of very dry white wine. I had a glass of Glenfarclas, one of my top ten favourite of all the Scottish malts. Frank, who had drunk his daily allowance of alcohol, was sipping a ginger beer, a beverage for which he has recently professed a great and surprising liking.

‘Adrienne was watching television when I got home yesterday evening,’ said Patchy, obviously triggered by Thumper’s reference to the cinema. ‘She was watching some programme about hospitals. They were showing an operation.’ Patchy shuddered. ‘Awful.’ He shuddered again. ‘Adrienne had prepared a mixed grill for dinner. Sausages with a nice piece of liver, a couple of kidneys and some fried onions. I don’t know how she can watch these programmes. It nearly put me off my food.’ He shuddered again.

‘They have these medical programmes on the television all the time,’ said Thumper. ‘Anne was watching a programme about childbirth the other day. This Irish woman called Murphy was having triplets. Who could possibly be interested in that?’

‘Mr Murphy?’ I said.

‘We should all be grateful for small Murphys,’ muttered Patchy.

I looked at him and raised an eyebrow in acknowledgement and appreciation.

Patchy smiled modestly.

One of these days they’ll have a channel devoted to this sort of thing,’ said Thumper deliberately ignoring Patchy’s bon mot. ‘They’ll set up a camera in an operating theatre and just show whatever is happening – 24 hour operating theatre.’

‘A lot of the time there isn’t anything much happening,’ I pointed out. ‘Except for someone scrubbing the walls and floor.’

‘People would watch that,’ said Thumper without hesitation. ‘It would be better than that potter’s wheel they show.’

‘Do they still show that?’ asked Patchy.

Suddenly the door burst open and the peace of the early afternoon was shattered by two youths who came into the snug as though they were being chased by wild dogs. They looked to be in their early 20s. One was tall and the other was not. The tall one had shoulder length hair tied back in a ponytail. The short one, who seemed to have had his mouth sewn into a scowl, had one of those standard short-back-and-sides haircuts which customers got in the 1960s when they forget to tell the barber how they wanted him to cut their hair. It was a hairstyle popular with schoolteachers and parents. The two newcomers were both wearing khaki shorts and open-necked, short-sleeved shirts.

‘Shop!’ shouted the tall one in that rude way some impatient people shout when they walk into a shop, find it temporarily empty, and want to be served.

The short one laughed a good deal as though this were the funniest thing he’d ever heard. It may well have been. He was young and looked as if his experience of life was probably limited to the twin excitements of getting up in the morning and going to bed at night.

‘We’ve cycled from Barnstaple,’ said the tall one, answering a question no one had asked and giving an answer which was, I fear, of little interest to anyone present.

I looked out of the window and there were two racing bicycles leaning against a wall outside the pub.

I looked to check because I was once in the Duck and Puddle with Frank and Thumper when two Austrians turned up. One, a male, looked to be in his 40s. He had grey hair and a grey beard and wore a tweed jacket, which had a little belt at the back, and a pair of bottle green corduroy trousers. His companion, a woman, looked to be slightly older. She had red hair which stretched down to her waist and she wore what we later discovered was traditional Austrian costume: a dirndl and a white blouse.

They each ordered a glass of red wine, and a dish of Gilly's famous hotpot, though they probably didn't know at the time that it was famous.

We all chatted a little and Thumper asked them what they were doing in Devon. They said, or we thought they said, that they were cyclists and that they had been attending a festival in Glastonbury. They were now taking a few days holiday. Neither of them looked as if they were cyclists, and they certainly weren't dressed for cycling, but appearances can be deceptive and, as Thumper pointed out afterwards, they were Continental Europeans and you can never tell with people who come from the other side of the Channel. After all, it is a place where men wear leather shorts and slap their thighs at the drop of a hat.

It was summer at the time so it was raining heavily.

'Do you want to put your machines under cover?' asked Frank, who has a more generous heart than is sometimes appreciated.

The Austrians looked at him, puzzled. (We didn't know then that they were Austrian, although we knew that they were certainly foreign.)

'Your bikes,' said Frank. 'Do you want to put your bicycles in my shed?'

'Bicycles?' said the man, frowning and looking puzzled. 'What is it with the bicycles?'

'You said that you were cyclists,' Frank pointed out.

'Not at all,' said the man, now even more puzzled. 'I have a bicycle never ridden. Not once in my life have I a bicycle ridden.' He turned to his companion and spoke to her in what I now assume must have been German. She, looking quite indignant, shook her head.

It turned out that they were both psychics, which explained, I suppose, why they had been to Glastonbury. There's a lot of that sort of thing going on there.

Once everything had been sorted out, they were friendly enough in a cold, distant and rather superior sort of way. Frank, Thumper and I laughed about it. We thought it was quite a funny mistake. But the two foreigners, being Austrian and therefore not having an English sense of humour, didn't laugh at all, of course. And they didn't understand why we had laughed about it.

We hadn't seen a car outside, or heard one arrive, so we assumed that since they weren't on bicycles they must be on a walking holiday.

We were, therefore, astonished when they told us that they had started off from Glastonbury only that morning. They both then looked slightly puzzled when we congratulated them on their achievement. We told them that they must be very fit because they showed no signs of tiredness after their long journey.

'It was almost nothing,' said the man, with a shrug. 'We are a car very good German having. And I a skilful driver am.'

It turned out they had left their car in a farm gateway while they took a walk around the village; and that they had travelled no more than a quarter of mile on foot when they turned up at the Duck and Puddle.

We all felt very foolish and we were glad when they left. Frank, I remember, was particularly relieved to see the back of them.

'I felt nervous having them in the pub,' he whispered, checking to make sure that they'd really left the pub and were out of earshot.

We all looked at him, puzzled.

'Mind you,' he said, 'they were upfront about it. You've got to give them that.'

We were all still confused.

'They didn't look dangerous but I suppose you can never tell, can you? Some of these people get very good at hiding it.' He pulled an imaginary knife across his throat and shivered. 'And then all of sudden you find them slitting your throat for no reason at all. Just for them thinking you'd looked at them a bit funny.'

'Frank, how much have you had to drink?' asked Patchy.

'No more than the usual,' said Frank defiantly. This was back in the days when his 'usual' would have been enough to put most people into a coma.

'So, what the devil are you talking about?' Patchy asked.

'Them psychopaths,' said Frank. 'I'm talking about having that pair of psychopaths sitting in my pub.'

I remember, it took us nearly 20 minutes to explain to Frank that they weren't psychopaths or cyclists but psychics.'

'Oh, right,' said Frank, eventually. There was a long silence before the inevitable. 'So, what's a psychic do? Is there any future in it?'

But that was then and the two youths who were wearing khaki shorts had definitely arrived on bicycles. They each ordered a still lemonade and a ham sandwich. Frank tottered off to the Duck and Puddle kitchen to fulfil their order.

'It's quite a ride from Barnstaple,' said Thumper in a kindly tone. 'Where are you headed next?'

'We're going on to Lynmouth,' replied the tall cyclist. He managed to sound both defiant and defensive.

'That's some journey,' said Thumper. 'Are you staying there for the night?'

'No, no,' said the tall cyclist. 'We're going back to Barnstaple today.'

'Crumbs,' said Thumper. 'I'm very impressed.'

'Quite a round trip,' I said. I too was impressed. The distance between Barnstaple and Lynmouth might not be all that vast but the roads are not good and there are quite a number of hills to be climbed. I couldn't help wondering if the two youths knew what they were letting themselves in for. 'That road is very hilly,' I pointed out

'It won't be a problem for us,' said the tall cyclist, with a careless shrug. It seemed to me that he had all the false confidence of someone aged 13 or 14.

'If you are young and you believe in yourself you can do anything,' said the small youth with the scowl, now adding a sneer to the scowl. 'The trouble with older fogies like you lot is that you all think negatively.'

I thought this was a trifle unfair, ageist and inaccurate; and particularly inappropriate since my remarks had been well-intentioned.

Frank reappeared, carrying two large plates, upon each which lay a ham sandwich. 'Mustard?' he asked.

'No,' said the tall youth rudely. His smaller companion said nothing.

'You can do anything?' asked Patchy, putting the stress on the word anything.

'Of course!' replied the youth with all the confidence of a young man who has done very little and knows even less. 'Nothing is impossible if you simply have the will.'

'Really?'

'Of course!'

Frank returned with the two lemonades.

'Lift Frank up over your head while standing on one leg,' said Thumper.

'I beg your pardon?'

'You said you could do anything if you put your mind to it, so lift Frank over your head while standing on one leg.'

Frank looked rather alarmed at this but it was never going to happen. The youth with the scowl looked confused and then sniggered derisively.

'If that's too difficult then sing one of the arias from La bohème. Sing it in the original Italian, please.'

'Why?' demanded the youth.

'You said you could do anything,' Patchy pointed out quite accurately. He paused and held up two fingers. 'But you can't can you? So that's two things you can't do. We could go on all day thinking up things you can't do.'

I looked at Patchy. 'If La bohème has Italian lyrics, which I'm sure it has, why is the title of the opera in French?'

'Ah, that's a good question,' replied Patchy. 'The Italian libretto, which was written by two Italians, was sort of loosely based on a book called *Scenes de la vie de Boheme* which was written by a bloke called Henri Murger who was French.'

I was glad I asked.

The youth with the scowl was staring open mouthed at Patchy.

'The world premiere was held in Turin and conducted by a young fellow called Toscanini, of whom you may have heard,' said Patchy.

'So there was never much chance of the whole thing being written in another language, English say? Or Dutch?'

'Not really, no.'

'What's all that got to do with anything?' demanded the youth with the built in scowl. I got the feeling that he was aggrieved because he was now no longer the centre of attention.

'Absolutely nothing,' beamed Patchy.

The young cyclists turned their backs on us and concentrated on their sandwiches.

Half an hour later, having consumed their ham sandwiches (without mustard) and drunk their lemonade, the demon cyclists remounted their metallic steeds and set off to continue their journey to Lynmouth.

Sadly, it turned out that they had bitten off rather more than they could chew. Two days later, I heard that they had sought refuge at a bed and breakfast establishment in Parracombe and that on the following morning they had hitched a ride to Barnstaple on the back of a tractor drawn trailer. They and their bikes had been spotted by Thumper who said they looked like a very poor entry in the annual carnival at Withymoor.

'I used to ride a bicycle,' said Frank, when the pair had pedalled away.

We looked at him and stared in astonishment. I would, I think, have been less surprised if he'd told me that he'd seen a giraffe cycling around the Devon lanes.

‘Get away with you!’ said Thumper.

‘No, I did,’ insisted Frank. ‘When I was a lad. It didn’t have gears but it had a mudguard on the back and a little wire basket at the front. I used to deliver newspapers, groceries and pigeons.’

We stared at him, still struggling to come to terms with the idea of Frank riding a bicycle.

‘I can understand the newspapers and the groceries,’ said Patchy. ‘But why pigeons?’

‘A mate of my Dad’s bred racing pigeons. I used to have to pedal out into the countryside and let the pigeons go at a particular time so that the bloke who owned them could see how long they took to get home. I was quite good on a bicycle,’ continued Frank. ‘I could ride for a little way without holding onto the handlebars.’

We were impressed.

‘Not ridden one for years,’ said Frank, thoughtfully. ‘Not since the day I fell off. It’s bloody painful when you fall off.’

‘Did you hurt yourself?’ asked Patchy.

‘Landed on my head,’ said Frank.

‘Ah, that was probably the safest thing to do,’ said Thumper, apparently solicitously.

Frank looked at him, slightly puzzled.

‘Least likely to do any damage,’ Thumper explained.

Frank frowned, thought for a moment and then threw his bar towel at Thumper’s head.

Caleb’s Ankle

Of course, not all visitors to the Duck and Puddle were as rude or as ungracious as the demon cyclists or the psychic Austrians.

The same day that the two demon cyclists called in on their way to Lynmouth, we had a visit from two of Frank’s most long-standing customers: Bunty and Caleb Theodore.

Mr and Mrs Theodore were both in their late 80s and had been occasional regulars at the Duck and Puddle for donkey’s years. They say they come for the sandwiches but I suspect they just enjoy our sparkling conversation and intelligent repartee.

(Frank defines an ‘occasional regular’ as someone who patronises the pub at intervals of more than a month between visits. Someone who visited the pub in 1957 and came back in 1972 would, in Frank’s terms, be described as an ‘occasional regular’. And so there are holidaymakers and tourists who visit Bilbury on an annual or biannual basis who can properly describe themselves as ‘occasional regulars’.)

The Theodores live in West Bugford and to be honest they both looked their age when I first met them.

Caleb, who was reputedly once a Governor in one of Britain’s few remaining colonies, had had two heart attacks and suffered a mild stroke which has left him with a hardly noticeable limp. He had recovered from cancer of the lung 20 years earlier and suffered from emphysema.

Over the years his wife, Bunty, had parted company with one breast, her uterus and both her ovaries. (‘It’s a damned effective way to lose weight,’ she once said. On another occasion, she complained that there would soon be so much of her in the hospital incinerator that she would have to give that as her permanent address.) In her 20s, she developed diabetes and in her 70s she developed macular degeneration.

Caleb had a wobbly right leg and she had a dodgy left leg. They both used walking sticks, and for the past nine years had taken first prize in the three-legged race at the village sports day.

But they didn’t think or behave like people who were within hailing distance of their century and they certainly didn’t think or behave like people who were inclined to be aware of their mortality.

They were as full of life as anyone half a century younger.

Their attitude seemed to be: ‘Come here, Life! You’ve given me as good as you can. Now, it’s your turn. Take this, that and this.’

The lives of too many of the older folk I have met have been dominated by their things they meant to do, wanted to do, never got round to doing or did and now regret.

Caleb and Bunty, on the other hand, had filled their lives with so many ideas, plans, hopes and ambitions that any failings and fears which might have defined their lives were effectively smothered and unable to take a hold on their memories.

For most of us, it is our fears and regrets which define the people we become; it is our fears which come back in the night, like ghosts, and which terrorise our lives. It is our regrets which interfere with our ambitions so that instead of looking forward we are forever peering over our shoulders at the past. Caleb and Bunty were so occupied with tomorrow that they never had time for yesterday.

They had interests and enthusiasms galore.

For example, they were both keen gardeners and on one occasion when I visited them, they showed me around their amazing garden. To my astonishment, they pointed out a number of plants which were named after parts of the human body. I remember they showed me lady’s-tresses (a type of orchid) liverwort and navelwort. (At the end of this book, there is an appendix in which I have, with Caleb’s help, listed some of the many plants which are named after bits and pieces of the human body.)

Despite their advanced years and their fraility, Caleb and Bunty were always full of ideas and energy and over the months, they used to come to the Duck and Puddle to sit in the Snug and discuss their latest plans. Retirement is, of course, an entirely artificial concept and it was not an idea which Caleb and Bunty had given any consideration; they were serial entrepreneurs and risk was in their blood.

Some of their plans were quite fantastic and wildly unworkable. But several of them were definitely practical.

I learnt a great deal from them – not least the best way to deal with administrators and bureaucrats.

It was Caleb who taught me that it was possible to cause great chaos in government departments, utility companies and large multinational organisations by carefully preparing your correspondence.

So, for example, you could say (see page 2) at the bottom of page 1 but then just put page1 into the envelope all alone. The recipient would think they had lost page 2 and would eventually write back asking for the missing information. Or you could put in a reference to a Mr Harrison who ‘in his letter referring to his matter pointed out that…'. There would, of course, be no Mr Harrison.

These small tricks added a frisson of entertainment to tedious correspondence and, Caleb pointed out, often helped to derail a bureaucratic investigation.

Sadly, these tricks don't work these days. No one working for a government department, utility company or large multinational organisation ever reads any mail – let alone bothers to reply to it.

Still, they were fun while they lasted.

I've forgotten the details of many of the business proposals put forward by the Theodores, but I do remember that we all got terribly excited when they talked to us about setting up a gambling ship in the Bristol Channel. They believed, quite wrongly as it turned out, that if they anchored a ship in the middle of the Channel they would be far enough outside territorial waters to be able to avoid all the relevant legislation. They had seen a movie in which American gangsters had organised a similar scheme with great success and they'd rather hoped to try the idea in the waters off Ilfracombe. Sadly, this was an idea which was not of its time.

And then there was the theme park they wanted to set up to celebrate Sherlock Holmes and his loyal companion Dr Watson. Their plan was to purchase and renovate a tumble down manor house on Dartmoor. They hoped to build a museum and a library and to hire actors to play Sherlock Holmes, Dr John Watson, Professor Moriaty, Mycroft Holmes, Inspector Lestrade, Mrs Hudson and Irene Adler. And they also intended to hold 'mystery' weekends where visitors could join Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson as they attempted to solve 'a case'. They planned to dress up a Great Dane to play the part of the Baskerville's notorious hound.

That project got quite close to realisation but fell quite late on when planning officials refused to countenance necessary changes to the old manor house they were hoping to restore. In the end, no one could think of anything else to do with it and so the old manor house had to be demolished so I suppose we can chalk that one up as another 'victory' for planning nonsenses. I never got round to visiting the Manor House but I saw photographs and it was a marvellously scary looking place.

Caleb once told me that most people assume that the folk in authority know what they are doing. This, he said, is wrong. 'The people in authority may know what you are doing and they almost certainly know what I am doing but they don't have the faintest idea what they themselves are doing.'

On another occasion, the Theodores got quite close to opening a nightclub in Ilfracombe. Their plan was to create a club which looked like a pirates' hideout, complete with seating designed to look like fake treasure chests and a bar selling many different varieties of rum. The nightclub failed at a late-stage hurdle when the Theodores were gazumped and the empty building they were hoping to purchase was bought by a hungry supermarket chain looking for a site where they could sell tins of baked beans and boxes of washing powder.

At one time, the couple wanted to open a pub in South Molton.

Their marketing ploy was to give the pub a name that would give businessmen and businesswomen a chance to go and have a drink without their colleagues knowing what they were getting up to. And so they planned to call their pub something like 'The Gym' or 'My Accountant's Office', thus enabling customers to say, with perfect honesty, 'I'm just off to the gym' or 'I must pop along to my accountant's office'.

Bunty planned to dress the barmaids in low cut blouses and high cut skirts (designed to be just low enough and high enough to delight the male customers without upsetting the female ones) and to dress a couple of barmen in sailor outfits, even equipping them with little sailor hats. Her plan was that these would prove an attraction for female customers though, as Thumper pointed out, there was an excellent chance that the sailor boys might turn out to attract a certain sort of male customer rather than to prove a magnet for heterosexual women.

None of this mattered, however, for this brilliant plan failed at the last minute not because of the sailor hats but because a brewery chain opened a new pub next door to the site where the Theodores had intended to open their public house. The brewery called their pub 'The Smuggler's Rest', (a name which should have won them some sort of prize for unoriginality) and equipped it with half an acre of red plastic and two dozen old hunting prints. 'The Smuggler's Rest' was a success only because the brewery sold its own beer at half price in order to undercut, and destroy, the competition.

Not all of Caleb and Bunty's proposed business schemes ended in failure.

On the contrary, a number of their projects managed to get all the way to fruition and were astonishing successes.

So, for example, they opened a novelty miniature golf course in Westward Ho! This turned out to be enormously popular with holidaymakers and was for many years something of a money spinner for them, helping to pay for them to pursue some of their other dreams.

And they opened the first new cinema to be built in North Devon for as long as anyone could remember. They converted a warehouse which had stood empty for years and had it fitted out with second-hand seats and an old screen which they had brought down from somewhere in Scotland. Their 'unique selling point' was that the cinema would show old classic movies; mostly shot in black and white. That too proved to be very popular with holidaymakers, particularly on rainy days.

I remember Bunty, Caleb, Thumper, Patchy, Gilly, Frank, Patsy and I all spending a Sunday afternoon discussing names for the new cinema.

Caleb had a wonderful old dictionary which enabled him to tell us that the word Odeon was originally devised to describe a theatre for musical contests in ancient Greece and Rome, that the word Hippodrome was originally used to denote an open air course for horse and chariot racing and that the word Alhambra described a palace built for the Moorish kings in Granada and Spain.

We took a vote on what the cinema should be named and agreed on The Alhambra. We all thought the name had the gravitas required to give status to a crumbling warehouse.

Six months later, the cinema was up and running and showing the marvellous *Thin Man* films, starring William Powell and Myrna Loy. The Theodores followed this with a season of Bogart movies.

Sadly, the cinema eventually had to close.

I never knew why but Thumper always reckoned it was because someone on the local council found out that locals and visitors had been spotted enjoying themselves. I suspect there may have been some truth in this. I doubt if Caleb and Bunty made any money out of the cinema but they certainly had a lot of fun with it.

‘So, what’s new?’ asked Thumper, when the Theodores walked in.

(I suppose, if I am honest which I always am, I have to admit that to say that they ‘walked in’ is rather misleading in that it implies a sense of certainty, determination and speed and none of these could be used to describe the Theodore’s progress. There was a certain amount of hobbling and limping involved whenever the Theodores (particularly Caleb) chose to move from A to B, and progress was always on the stationary side of slow.)

As usual, despite their years, neither of them was wearing anything beige or made with useful Velcro attachments or elasticated sides.

Bunty was wearing a flowered print skirt in yellow and green, a beautiful yellow blouse and green shoes. She had her hair cut in what is, I think, called a pageboy bob. It was dyed blonde and had a purple streak on one side which gave her a gaily piratical air.

Caleb was wearing bottle green cavalry twill trousers and a stylish jacket in red corduroy. He wore a multi-coloured shirt and a Marylebone Cricket Club tie which clashed with the shirt and everything else he was wearing, though, of course, it is an acknowledged fact of sartorial life that a bacon and egg coloured MCC tie clashes with most colour schemes. The tie was perfectly tied in a Windsor knot, with the two ends nicely aligned. Whenever I try to tie a Windsor knot, I end up with one end of the tie three or four inches longer than the other. This never seemed to happen to Caleb.

‘We came to pick your brains,’ said Bunty.

They didn’t bother to order drinks because Frank new exactly what they wanted: a small cherry brandy for her and half a pint of Guinness for him. In addition, she would have two packets of salted peanuts and he would have a packet of pork scratchings. Then, half an hour later, they would each have a couple of Frank’s enormous sandwiches.

‘In that case, are you sure you came to the right place?’ asked Frank, over his shoulder.

Bunty ignored him. ‘Caleb is having trouble with his foot,’ she said. ‘His own GP has made an appointment for him to go back to the Prosthetics Clinic but there’s a nine week waiting list.’

‘We wondered if you fellows had any bright ideas,’ said Caleb.

Frank brought their drinks, together with the peanuts and the pork scratchings.

I think I forget to mention earlier that during the Second World War, Caleb lost his right leg below the knee. Ever since then he’s used a rather old-fashioned and very heavy prosthesis; partly made of metal and partly made of wood. The experts had on many occasions tried to persuade him to upgrade to a more modern, lighter prosthesis but Caleb was attached to his old, faithful foot and calf. He said he’d got used to it and, at his time of life, didn’t want to spend time breaking in a new prosthesis. He certainly got around moderately well with it.

At his suggestion, I took a look at the faulty leg.

‘One of the bolts holding my foot onto my shin has sheared,’ said Caleb. ‘The result is that the whole foot wobbles about a bit.’ He waggled his foot and for a moment I thought it was going to fall off. He had effected a very temporary repair with a piece of metal which looked as though it had been taken from a broken door bolt.

‘I got the temporary piece of metal from a broken door bolt,’ said Caleb, when he saw me examining the repair.

‘We’ve got a wedding next Saturday,’ said Bunty. ‘Our granddaughter is getting married. Caleb’s terribly worried that his foot will fall off at an inopportune moment.’

It occurred to me that I couldn’t think of an opportune moment for a foot to fall off. But I didn’t say anything.
‘This should be in a museum,’ I told him, poking at the faulty prosthesis. It really was very old. There were signs of rust on the metal parts and what looked like woodworm holes in the wooden part.

‘That’s where it’s going when I’ve finished with it,’ said Caleb rather proudly. ‘When I snuff it, the hospital people are going to put the whole caboodle into their collection of ancient prostheses.’

‘Meanwhile,’ I said, ‘it seems absurd that you should have to wait more than two months to have your dodgy joint mended.’

‘Reggie,’ said Thumper suddenly.

We all looked at him.

‘Reggie Westbury,’ explained Thumper. ‘At Tolstoys.’

Tolstoys is, for reasons far too complicated to explain, the name of our local garage.

‘A garage?’ I said. ‘How can the garage help?’

‘Reggie makes a lot of car parts,’ explained Thumper. ‘I bet he could easily make a bolt for Caleb’s ankle joint.’

Five of us went round to Tolstoy’s garage together. Thumper, Patchy and I led the way in the Rolls and Caleb and Bunty followed in their Morris Minor. Frank had to stay in the Duck and Puddle in case any other customers turned up.

It took Reginald less than 30 minutes to make a new bolt for Caleb’s ankle joint.

I’ve rarely seen anyone quite as delighted. It is no exaggeration to say that Caleb was tickled pink, over the moon and as pleased as Punch. ‘That’s marvellous!’ he said. ‘I’ll ring the doctor tomorrow and tell him to cancel the appointment at the clinic. How much do I owe you?’

‘Five shillings will cover it,’ said Reginald, who had not at that time adapted to Britain’s decimal currency. Five shillings was 25 pence.

‘Cheap at twice the price,’ said Caleb, taking out his wallet.

‘Ok, ten shillings then,’ said Reginald.

Caleb, clearly surprised, looked at him.

‘Don’t be daft,’ said Reginald. ‘Five bob is fine.’

Caleb then insisted on taking us back to the Duck and Puddle to celebrate.

He didn’t mind a bit that the celebrations cost him rather more than the repair.

The Bathroom Cabinet

I looked at the pieces of chipboard laid out on the drawing room floor and scratched my head. There were, and I had counted them, 18 pieces of artificial wood, 28 funny little bits of metal of a size and variety I had never seen before, and a large, mixed plastic bag full of screws and catches. There was an exploded diagram which looked as if it were a map of the Tokyo transport system after a successful air raid attack. And there was a small tube of glue which had printed on the side a warning not to get any of the stuff on your skin. 'In event on skin contacting telephone doctor straightway.' This rather alarmed me since 'in event on skin contacting' I would be consulting myself and I didn't have the foggiest idea what I should tell myself. There was no information on the tube about the nature of the contents.

Oh, and there was an instruction booklet too.

Not that the instruction booklet was much good. It had either been written in a foreign language and then translated into English by a first year language student or else it had been written by a half-witted sadist with an unusual sense of humour.

I looked again at the paragraph I had been attempting to understand.

'Place the rocheted console bracket under PIECE AA and connect PIECE G to PIECE HH with the aid of one of the small congealant screws and wash with connection adjustable type OO using the tool provided and then while holding PIECE AA and PIECE EE with PIECE M put bracket lock against console base and use fixator clip to console PIECE F on side of left side of cabinet with fixator screwings against wall connection bracketing to adjust the PIECE MO towards back of side of cabinet against fixed lock with securing tool with fixator clip and adjust screwings against door at point JJ on plan with screwing tool before adjusting to match width of PIECE R.'

I read the paragraph silently, I read it aloud and then I held it on its side and tried to read it with one eye closed. I then read it to Ben, the dog, who listened attentively but who didn't seem to understand it any better than I had. I then wandered around the house until I found Patsy and I read it to her. She laughed and thought I'd made it up but then I showed her the booklet and she knew I hadn't made it up and she got quite cross and said how very silly it was that anyone should print such rubbish.

The bits and pieces laid out on the drawing room floor were supposed to be a bathroom cupboard but I didn't see how they could ever become a bathroom cabinet or, indeed, anything more sophisticated than a basket of kindling.

I went back downstairs, found the advertisement which contained the telephone number of the company from which I had purchased the cupboard, and rang them up.

'In the advertisement which I saw, and to which I responded, the cupboard looks like a cupboard,' I said when someone finally answered the telephone. 'But you've sent me a construction set. Is my cupboard supposed to be all in bits or did it fall apart in the mail?'

'We send out all our furniture in a consumer friendly deconstructed format. This enables us to maximise product functionability and to minimise cost.'

'I wish you'd told me that I was going to have to make the thing myself.'

'If you look carefully at our advertisement you will see that we state in the small print that we believe in package minimalisation and so, as a result, we offer all our furniture in a user friendly deconstructed format.'

I looked at the advertisement and there it was, in the small print at the bottom of the page. 'We believe in package minimalisation. For the convenience of our customers, all our furniture is supplied in a user friendly deconstructed format.'

'How is it more convenient for me to have to build it myself?' I demanded.

'If it arrived ready-made it would be a very large and cumbersome package and because of the weight you might have difficulty lifting it.'

'It would weigh exactly the same!'

'Yes, but it would be larger and more cumbersome.'

'If I'd known I was going to have to build it myself I wouldn't have bought it!' I said rather crossly.

'Do you have a reference number for the item in question?' asked the woman with a weary sounding sigh.

I looked at the box and found the reference number, which was stamped on the outside of the package. 'The reference number appears to be DEGM483736.'

'Was that BCEN483736?'

'No, no. It's DEGM483736.'

'B for Bravo?'

'No! D for Diarrhoea.'

‘Oh, you mean D for Delta?’

‘D for Diarrhoea will do.’

‘Oh no! It should be D for Delta. And then it was C for Charlie?’

‘No, it’s E for Earache.’

‘You mean E for Echo?’

I was getting fed up with this. ‘Why can’t it be E for Earache?’

‘It has to be E for Echo.’

‘But Earache also begins with an E. And Earache is just as good a word as Echo. In fact I don’t mind betting that people use the word Earache more than they use the word Echo.’’

‘It has to be E for Echo. It cannot be E for Earache. I have Echo written down on a special list. Everyone has to use the special list.’

I wrote down E for Earache on the back of the leaflet that had come with the bathroom cupboard.

‘Well, I’ve got E for Earache written down here,’ I said.

‘No, you have to use the same list as I use,’ she said sniffily. ‘And the third letter of your reference number is E for Echo?’

‘No, the third letter of my reference number is G for Gastritis. Or, if you prefer, it could be G for Gallstones.’

‘G for Golf,’ said the woman.

We argued about this for a while.

‘And the fourth letter,’ said the woman, who was beginning to sound slightly hysterical. ‘Would that be N for November?’

‘No. It would be M for Metatarsophalangeal.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘M for Metatarsophalangeal.’

‘Is that rude? It sounds rude.’ She was clearly preparing herself to be offended. Some people like to be offended so that they can take offence.

‘No, it’s certainly not rude. It refers to the joints between the metatarsal bones of the foot.’

‘Well, it should be M for Mike.’

‘Who is Mike?’

‘I don’t know who Mike is. But it should be M for Mike.’

‘Why not M for Michelle? Or M for Miranda? Or M for Maurice?’

‘I don’t know. But it’s M for Mike.’

‘It could just as well be M for Muscles. Yes, definitely. It is M for Muscles.’

Eventually, we agreed on the reference number although not on what the letters stood for. The numbers were easy.

‘Is the product you purchased the two-seater, foam cushioned garden swing seat with adjustable springs?’ she asked, presumably having compared the reference number on which we had agreed with her product list.

‘No. It’s a bathroom cabinet.’

‘Are you absolutely certain it isn’t a garden swing seat?’

‘Pretty sure. It doesn’t look much like a bathroom cabinet but I’m pretty confident you could never make a garden swing seat out of these bits and pieces.’

‘Well, according to our records your product is a garden swing seat. You must be mistaken. Never mind, it doesn’t matter. All our products have the same five year guarantee and customer friendly policy regarding returns. You can take advantage of our returns policy for this product by following the instructions on the back page of the construction leaflet accompanying your item.’

I looked at the back page of the leaflet.

‘It says that I can return the item as long as the packaging is complete and unopened.’

‘That’s correct.’

‘But if I hadn’t opened the package I wouldn’t have been able to get hold of the leaflet telling me your returns policy.’

‘If you have opened the package in which your garden swing seat came, then I’m afraid you will have damaged the packaging and so you can no longer return it for a refund.’

‘Even though I had to open the package to discover your returns policy? That’s utter madness! And it’s a bathroom cabinet not a garden swing seat.’

‘It is our policy, to protect customers in this way.’

‘How does this protect customers?’

‘If we allowed people to return damaged goods our prices would have to rise and customers would suffer.’

‘And it’s not even painted!’ I protested. ‘In the photograph on your advertisement the cupboard is clearly painted white.’

‘We like to give our customers the freedom to paint their cupboard in a colour of their choice.’

‘Is it safe to burn it?’ I asked.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘If I burn the bits and pieces will they produce toxic fumes?’

‘Are you intending to burn your garden seat?’

‘Yes, I think I am.’

‘Your warranty will not be valid if you have damaged it in any way. Burning it would definitely invalidate the warranty.’

‘But the warranty is invalidated because I opened the packaging.’

‘Yes. That is to protect our customers.’

I put down the telephone receiver and then I counted to ten. When I had counted to ten I screamed, stamped on the disconnected bathroom cabinet and ripped the instruction leaflet into shreds.’

‘What’s up?’ asked Patsy, suddenly appearing, attracted by the noise I was making. ‘Are you all right?’

‘This is our new bathroom cabinet,’ I explained, pointing to the bits and pieces which were now scattered across the drawing room floor. ‘I’m going to burn it.’

‘Oh,’ said Patsy. ‘That’s nice.’

She looked at the scattered bits of artificial wood and the strange pieces of metal. ‘My cousin used to have one of those building sets when he was little. He once made a small windmill with little vanes that went round if you gave them a push.’

‘This is all going on the bonfire,’ I told her. ‘Heaven knows what chemicals this stuff contains. I’ll set fire to it and then run for safety.’

‘I don’t know why you didn’t just ask Patchy,’ said Patsy, with great common sense. ‘He could probably find us a very nice bathroom cabinet for half the price and none of the effort.’

As usual, she was right, of course.

After I’d thrown the bits and pieces onto my bonfire site, I went round to see Patchy. The assorted screws and bits of metal I threw into the dustbin.

I found my friend and brother-in-law in his workshop at the back of the garage he uses as a gallery. He was busy bending over a large painting of a woman on a chair. He had a paintbrush in his hand.

‘I’m just putting the wedding ring back,’ he said, stepping back and examining the painting from further away. ‘What do you think?’

‘It’s not a terribly good painting, is it?’

‘No, but what do you think of the wedding ring? Convincing?’

‘Very,’ I agreed. ‘She definitely looked married.’

‘Good.’

‘May I ask why you are painting on a wedding ring and turning a maiden lady into a married woman?’

‘She originally had a wedding ring on but I painted over it.’

‘Why on earth did you do that?’ I asked. ‘Is that usual? Would you paint a wedding ring on the Mona Lisa?’

‘Probably not,’ said Patchy. ‘But this isn’t exactly the Mona Lisa.’

‘No, I suppose not.’

‘I bought it cheap at an auction in Taunton and I had a couple of possible buyers but they didn’t like the wedding ring. A lot of people who buy paintings of women prefer to think of the woman in the picture as being a young girl, a spinster. Men want to fall in love with her and women want to treat her as a daughter.’

‘So you painted out the wedding ring?’

‘Yes. But they still didn’t buy it. One said he’d never be able to forget that she was really married and the other decided he didn’t like the look of her after all.’

‘So, why are you putting the ring back in?’

‘Because I’ve got a buyer who collects paintings of famous women and I’m going to tell him that this is Mrs Pankhurst. So she obviously needs a wedding ring.’

‘Is it Mrs Pankhurst? It doesn’t look a lot like her.’

‘It doesn’t look anything like her,’ admitted Patchy. ‘But a lot of Victorian portraits don’t much look like the people they are supposed to represent. I’ll explain that she was having a bad day. Or that the artist was having a bad day.’ He picked up a small, brass coloured plaque engraved with the words ‘Mrs Emily Pankhurst’ and began to screw it to the bottom of the gold frame.

‘Where on earth did you get that?’

‘Thumper had it made for me. He’s got a pal who does engraving.’

Patchy put the second screw in and stood back. The picture now did look convincing, and with the nameplate in place, I would have believed that it was a portrait of Mrs Pankhurst.

'Have you got any bathroom cabinets for sale?' I asked.

'What's that got to do with Victorian portrait paintings and Mrs Pankhurst?'

'Nothing whatsoever. But I want to buy a bathroom cabinet. Somewhere to put toothbrushes and soap and stuff like that. I bought one of those modern things they advertise in the newspapers. But now that it's arrived I've got to build it.'

Patchy looked at me and shuddered. 'I wish you wouldn't tell me things like that,' he said. He thought for a moment, mentally going through his stock I suppose, and then shook his head. 'I haven't got anything that would serve as a bathroom cabinet. But there's an auction in Lynton starting in about 40 minutes. There's a lot of Victorian and Edwardian brown furniture in the sale. They're bound to have a bathroom cabinet or something that will serve as a bathroom cabinet.'

'Did the Victorians have bathroom cabinets?'

'Of course they did. Old bathroom furniture tends to go quite cheaply. You can probably get one for a fiver.'

I rang Patsy to tell her where I could be found, and off we went to Lynton.

On the way, Patchy told me about an auction he had been to in Exeter.

It had been what is known as a 'time auction', in which the auctioneer allows a specific amount of time for the sale of each lot. Patchy told me that auctioneers sometimes do this simply to add excitement to a sale. So, for example, the time limit might be three minutes. At the end of the three minutes, the item being sold is marked down to the person who is the highest bidder at that moment. The 'time auction' can apparently produce some very hectic bidding as the time runs out. Patchy said that auctioneers in France have a variation on this type of auction. They light a candle at the start of the auction and the proceedings end when the candle goes out.

The prize lot in this particular 'time auction' was a rusty, old car; an ancient vehicle which had been found in the barn of a house on the Devon-Cornwall border. The owner of the car had become a recluse and hadn't left his home for nearly 40 years. His abandoned motor vehicle, which was spattered with bird guano, was a Bugatti Type 37and Patchy had, of course, dreamt of buying it for a song. Rare cars found in barns seem to come up at auction with monotonous regularity.

Sadly, Patchy's hopes were dashed by the fact that the auctioneer had done his job properly and had promoted the car to the motor trade. As a result, there were two specialist car dealers at the auction. Patchy's top bid had been passed without the two dealers getting out of first gear and the final selling price had been five times Patchy's potential top price and three times the estimate listed in the catalogue.

'Still,' said Patchy, with a smile, 'at least I can say that I got to bid on a barn find Bugatti. And I was the second under-bidder too.'

The auction in Lynton was held in what looked like, and probably once was, a shed. It had corrugated iron walls and a corrugated iron roof which appeared to be held in place by hope and bits of baler twine. The place was packed to where the rafters would have been if there had been any. There were wardrobes, tables, chairs, sideboards and bookcases galore.

'Where does all this stuff come from?' I asked Patchy, surprised, as always, at the amount of stuff that was on sale.

He shrugged. 'Most of it just goes round and round,' he admitted. 'One dealer will buy a job lot of stuff and then sell it to another at a second auction, hoping to make a few quid. Or hoping that an American buyer will take the lot and send it over to the States. An awful lot of the stuff that appears in auction rooms is never bought by a house owner and probably never used. But it's all good, solid furniture and, sadly for us, the Americans seem to appreciate our heritage more than we do.' He pointed to a dark oak cabinet, about four feet high and the same in width. 'There you are,' he said, 'one bathroom cabinet in good condition.'

We checked out the cabinet and I had to agree that it was perfect for our purposes. Patchy wrote down the lot number on his catalogue and then examined what looked to me to be a rather ropey old long case clock – the sort I usually think of as a grandfather clock.

'It doesn't seem to be working,' I pointed out. 'And there's a hand missing!'

'I know a man who can probably get it working,' whispered Patchy. 'And it only ever had one hand. Early clocks only had one hand. It was common as late as the 17th century and the early 18th century for clockmakers to produce clocks with just one hand. People who lived in country areas didn't really need a minute hand. A single hour hand was perfectly satisfactory. This clock has a brass dial which means it was probably made between 1680 and 1770 and from the spandrels on the dial I can tell it was made outside London, probably at the end of the 17th century or the very beginning of the 18th century.'

'What's a spandrel?'

‘The fancy markings at the four corners of the clock face,’ said Patchy, peering at the dial which was black with dirt. ‘There you are,’ he said pointing to a word on the dial, ‘it was made in Newport.’

‘Is it valuable?’

‘It’s probably worth more than I’ll have to pay for it,’ said Patchy, looking around the auction room. ‘I can’t see anyone here who deals in clocks. Most of the people here will be looking to fill their vans with a consignment of brown furniture. Some of it will end up in a dealer’s shop in London, some of it will end up in an auction house in New York and some of it will end up at another auction here in the West Country.’

Patchy also found a box containing a collection of old books and he became surprisingly excited by one of the oldest books, a particularly scruffy item, which had a metal ring fitted to one corner.

‘That’s not what I think it is, is it?’ I said.

As a bibliophile I knew a little about the history of books. I had seen chained books in the library at Hereford Cathedral but I hadn’t ever picked one up before.

‘It certainly is,’ murmured Patchy, picking out the book and carefully opening it. ‘It’s a book which used to be on the shelf in a chained library.’

Up until the end of the 17th century, it was rare to find a printed book in an English household. William Caxton, who ran the Caxton Press in Westminster is famous for having been the first ever printer in England but he only produced just over 100 books during 15 years of work between 1477 and 1491. You’d have thought a busy monk could have written out that many by hand. The inevitable result was that books were scarce and even second-hand ones were extremely valuable. Only the biggest churches, universities and wealthy gentlemen could afford libraries and it was, therefore, the usual practice to keep books chained up. This allowed readers to consult the books in a library but it made it difficult for anyone to steal them. The books were stored with their spines at the back of the shelf, so that they could be taken out and read without the chain getting into a tangle.

‘So how old is that one?’ I asked.

‘It’s not that old,’ said Patchy, rather disappointed. ‘It’s a dictionary and according to the copyright line inside, it was printed in 1871. Chained libraries were dying out by then.’

‘Valuable?’

‘Not as valuable as if it had been printed in the Middle Ages!’ laughed Patchy. He put the book back into the box from which he had taken it and then covered it with some other old books – most of them reprints of 19th century novels and cookery books. ‘We’ll bid on the boxful,’ he said. ‘Probably get the whole lot for a quid.’

Thanks to Patchy we both had a good day.

Patchy got the clock for £55, I got the sturdy bathroom cabinet for £4.50 (less than the do-it-yourself cupboard I had abandoned) and Patchy bought the box of books for 50 pence. When we got back outside the auction room, he presented me with the chained book as a present.

And when we got back to Bilbury, he helped me carry the bathroom cabinet up into the bathroom. It looked far better, and far more in keeping with the house, than the wretched piece of flimsy make-it-yourself nonsense which I had failed to build.

Returning the compliment, I then went back to his gallery cum showroom cum garage to help him unload the grandfather clock from his truck.

We had just successfully moved the clock into the workshop at the back of the gallery when the buyer who had expressed an interest in the painting of Mrs Pankhurst arrived to take a look at it.

‘That’s not her!’ said the woman instantly.

‘No?’ said Patchy. ‘How can you be so sure?’

‘That woman is wearing a wedding ring,’ said the woman sternly. ‘Emily Pankhurst did not wear a wedding ring. I’ve seen many photographs of her.’

‘Maybe the artist made a mistake,’ said Patchy.

‘That picture is a fake!’ said the woman. And with that she stormed out.

‘Bugger,’ sighed Patchy, when she’d gone. ‘If I hadn’t painted the wedding ring on her finger I’d have sold the damned thing.’

‘Never mind,’ I said. ‘You’ll think of someone else she could be.’

Patchy brightened up. ‘Of course I will! Do you think the woman in the picture looks anything like Florence Nightingale?’

‘But you’ll have to paint out that wedding ring.’

‘Easily done,’ said Patchy, reaching for his paints and his brush.

The woman in the picture would soon become a maiden lady again.

Caught in the Rocks

It was a good afternoon for staying indoors, lighting a log fire, toasting some muffins and settling down with a good book.

The day had started with promise. The sun had been out, the sky had been blue, decorated with just a few fluffy, white clouds, and a gentle breeze, a veritable zephyr in poetic terms, had promised to keep the day a pleasant temperature.

I'd finished the surgery earlier than usual and done the day's home visits by lunchtime. Patsy and I had eaten in the garden, where we have a huge, solid oak table and half a dozen matching chairs. The table and the chairs came from an auction and Patchy reckons they are at least 75-years-old. Occasionally, when I look at them, I find myself wondering how much modern garden furniture will still be functioning and looking good in three quarters of a century time.

But shortly after lunch the weather had changed, and it had changed rapidly.

The first sign of the impending change had come when our pet sheep had suddenly started to run for the barn, where they are accustomed to shelter from hot sun, rain, wind, snow and any other weather they don't like.

A good many animals, both small and large, can predict the weather.

The common or garden woodlouse may be small but he is remarkably prescient. He knows it is going to rain 24 hours before the first spots of rain start to fall, and he will respond by coming indoors to shelter. I don't believe that sheep know what the weather is going to do that far in advance but they certainly know a good 20 to 30 minutes before humans do.

'We'd better move everything indoors,' said Patsy.

I looked up from the magazine I was reading.

'It's going to rain.'

And then I too saw the sheep running for the barn.

We moved everything into the kitchen and Patsy put the coffee percolator onto the stove. When we'd done this I looked outside. The sun was still shining but there were now a few more clouds in the sky and it was clear that they were moving with a little more enthusiasm than had previously been the case. When I looked to the west, I could see a couple of large, nasty looking grey clouds on the horizon. The sheep had, as usual, been accurate. I settled down in the drawing room with my magazine, though I was close to nodding off.

I'd had a long, hard night and hadn't slept at all.

One of my patients, Mrs Daisy Marsh had an asthma attack and I stayed with her for an hour and a half while she gradually recovered.

When I go out on calls at night, I always leave the address and phone number of where I'll be on a pad by the telephone. This means that if another emergency call comes in, Patsy can telephone and pass on the message.

Just as I finished dealing with Mrs Marsh, Patsy phoned and told me I was needed at a cottage on the other side of the village. Mr Arthur Moe had woken up with muscular spasms in his back.

I managed to sort out Mr Moe's problem but ten minutes after I got back to Bilbury Grange there was a request to visit Fanny Murray, a small child who had woken up with earache. It took me no more than a minute to make the diagnosis, and less than five minutes to hand out the necessary medicines and reassure the parents. But by the time I got back home it really wasn't worth going to bed. I had breakfast, sorted through some correspondence and then did the morning surgery and visits.

Thankfully, I don't often have so many calls in one night.

And so, as a result of a night without sleep, I was now having difficulty in keeping my eyes open. The smell of the coffee Patsy was preparing was the only thing keeping me awake. Outside I could hear the first sounds of rain hammering on the windows. This was clearly going to be quite a storm. I was relieved to be tucked safely and cosily indoors. And I had two wonderful, free hours before the evening surgery was due to start; plenty of time for a leisurely coffee, a look at the book I was reading and maybe even a little proof reading of the book I had just finished writing. The two hours stretched out ahead of me welcomingly.

And then the telephone rang.

Oh, how I sometimes loathed that damned machine and how I cursed Alexander Graham Bell. Why couldn't he have invented something that didn't interrupt my life with such a savage and imperious urgency? There are lots of other things he could have invented instead: a machine for picking apples without bruising them; a motor car tyre that never punctures; a pen that never runs out of ink.

Most people can, of course, switch on their telephone answering machine if they wish to escape from the demands of their telephone. But the country GP has no access to such a simple luxury. He might as well be tied to the telephone by an umbilical cord. Whenever I go anywhere, I have to tell Patsy or Miss Johnson where I am going to be.

I have never for an instant wished for another life.

I am forever conscious of the joy of living and working in Bilbury. I regard myself as being the luckiest man alive, and having the very best job in the world.

But occasionally, just occasionally, I did find myself wishing that Mr Bell had invented something other than the telephone. It had already been one of those days which are several sizes too small.

I picked up the telephone receiver and answered with the number.

'Thank heavens you're there, doctor,' said a breathless voice which I immediately recognised.

The voice belonged to Bertram Brimstone who, in the summer months, when there are plenty of walkers, hikers and tourists about, runs an ice cream van in a car park near to Heddon's Mouth. In the winter he helps make and find the stock which his wife, Bertha, sells on the market stall she has in Barnstaple's famous Pannier Market. She sells home-made greeting cards, old postcards, second-hand books (mostly cheap paperbacks), old vinyl records and just about anything else which isn't too heavy. Everything they have on their stall has to be carried there from the back of the ice cream van which they use as a transport vehicle.

Surprisingly, Bertram (never Bertie) makes the home-made greeting cards himself. He buys old birthday and Christmas cards from nursing homes, hospitals and other similar institutions (paying just pennies per dozen) and then cuts up the cards so that he can use the pictures to create new cards. He sticks the pictures he has cut out onto pieces of thick paper. I don't honestly see how this time consuming activity can possibly be profitable but they've both been doing it for years so I suppose they must be able to make it worthwhile. Indeed, this bizarre form of recycling seems to be a small cottage industry in North Devon.

Bertram used to have a small boat which he kept at Combe Martin. In the summer, he would take visitors for a short, 30 minute trip along the coast. But, sadly, it wasn't very profitable. Bertram is living proof of the adage that for boat owners, the second happiest day of their life is the day when they bought their boat and the happiest is the day when they've finally managed to sell it and begin the long, slow journey back towards becoming a landlubber again.

Patsy and I have often thought of buying a small boat but the madness has fortunately always left us before it could turn into reality. Boats look good and seem fun until you have to wash them, ream the gribble worms out of the keel, caulk the windlass, splice the spinnaker, keelhaul the main brace, varnish the bulwarks, clean out the bilges, grease the propeller shaft, polish the brass and clear away the barnacles.

A friend of ours who had a boat for five years, reckons he spent 20 hours scrubbing and polishing and scraping, and five hours trying to remove grease from his hands, for every hour he spent at sea.

Bertram, who is usually a calm and laid back sort of fellow, sounded to be in a panic. He was certainly out of breath.

'Can you come quickly, doctor.'

'What's up, Bertram?' I asked. I had never before heard him so distressed.

'There's a man stuck in the rocks,' he said. He sounded breathless. 'And the tide is coming in.'

'Whereabouts?' I asked. The North Devon coast extends for some miles.

'Heddon's Mouth.'

'Oh,' I said.

This was bad news. Heddon's Mouth is a small, attractive cove which can only be reached by a meandering footpath which runs alongside the River Heddon through the Heddon Valley. The river ends at a small rock strewn beach, where the river flows into the sea. The route to the beach is a couple of miles long and usually takes walkers an hour or so. Even if you hurried, it would take a good half an hour. There is no road access at all and it is probably the worst place on the coast to be stuck in rocks. 'Have you called the fire brigade?'

'They say they can't get here for an hour,' said Bertram. 'All their engines are at a fire in Torrington. A pub is ablaze and they've still got people trapped. But they'll send someone as soon as they can.'

'The ambulance service?'

'They said they'll be three quarters of an hour at best,' said Bertram. 'And even if they get here, they can't get down to the cove in one of their ambulances. The poor devil is going to drown. You can hear his screams half a mile away. He's just screaming and sobbing. His wife and kids are all down there too. They're screaming and sobbing as well.'

'How did he get stuck?'

'He was scrambling across some wet rocks quite a way out and he slipped. His foot is jammed between two huge rocks. He can't pull it free. People have tried pulling him out but he's stuck fast.'

‘OK,’ I said. ‘And the tide is coming in?’

‘It’ll be high tide soon. The poor bugger will be underwater at high tide. And there’s a storm beginning to blow. The sea is getting rougher. Come as quickly as you can, doctor.’

‘Where are you now?’ I asked him.

‘I’m at the Hunters Inn,’ replied Bertram. ‘I had to run all the way. Well, as much of it as I could.’ He paused for a moment to get his breath. ‘It’s damned near done me in.’

The Hunters Inn is a wonderfully quaint, and rather gothic, Victorian building. It is now a popular pub and hotel which has for years been a magnet for tourists looking for a base from which to explore Exmoor and the North Devon Coast.

‘I’ll be there in at Hunter’s Inn in 10 or 15 minutes,’ I told him. ‘Find someone with a motorbike who can take me down to the cove.’

‘They don’t allow motorbikes on the footpath,’ said Bertram.

To me it seemed an unexpectedly silly thing to say. Under the circumstances, the rules didn’t seem terribly important.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, Bertram started to cry. ‘It’s heart breaking to hear him. I don’t think he can possibly have more than an hour at the very most.’

‘See if you can find a motorbike. I’ll be there as soon as I can.’

I picked up my black bag, went to the surgical supplies cupboard behind my desk and threw in some additional supplies – including a couple of scalpels, some extra suture materials and a couple of additional vials of morphine. As I did so, I shouted for Patsy.

‘Please ring Patchy,’ I asked her. ‘Beg him to drop what he’s doing and meet me at the Hunter’s Inn, the pub at the start of the path down to Heddon’s Mouth. If you can’t get hold of Patchy find someone, anyone, with a motorbike and ask them to meet me there. A bloke is stuck in the rocks and I need to get down to the cove as quickly as possible.’

Patchy Fogg has a specially adapted motorbike, suitable for driving across quite rough and rocky terrain. He used it to very good effect when we were looking for Hamilton Murray on the North Devon Cliffs. I still believe that Patchy and his motorbike helped save Hamilton’s life.

I kissed her, picked up my supplemented bag, took one last look at the surgical supplies cupboard to make sure there wasn’t anything else I might need, and then ran out to the car. On the way to the car, I dashed into the garage and added another item to my drug bag. I looked up at the sky. It had suddenly occurred to me that maybe it would be possible to arrange for a helicopter to hover over Heddon’s Mouth and help lift the poor guy to safety. But one look at the sky, and the storm already building up, and I knew that there was no chance of a rescue helicopter being able to help.

My heart was racing as I drove to down to Heddon’s Mouth.

It seemed clear that neither the ambulance nor the fire service could possibly get to the man in time to be of any use.

It also seemed very clear that if the man’s foot was stuck fast then I might have to amputate if his life was going to be saved. I had seen a leg amputated. But just once; when I’d been studying orthopaedics at medical school. But that had been some years ago. It had been a neat, below the knee amputation, performed in the sterile conditions of an operating theatre. If I had to amputate this poor man’s foot, I would have to do so in awful conditions. But maybe we would be able to pull him free of the rocks. The storm was getting heavier by the minute and the sky was now nearly black. Although it was still afternoon I had to switch on the car’s headlights.

I drove as fast I dared, hoping and praying that I wouldn’t come across any other vehicles in the lanes. And God must have been listening because I didn’t see any cars, lorries, coaches or, worst of all, any tractors or cars towing caravans.

The only delay occurred as I drove up a short hill leading from a lane in Bilbury to the road which winds down to Heddon’s Mouth.

I found myself behind a cyclist, his machine weighed down with saddlebags, who steadfastly refused to move from the centre of the road as he pedalled merrily along, quite selfishly.

I tooted.

He ignored me.

I tooted again.

He just continued on his way, meandering from one side of the road to the other as he struggled to ride up the hill.

I tooted again.

By now I could feel my heart banging in my chest and my blood pressure starting to rise. I knew that every minute, every second, could make the difference between saving this man from the worst imaginable sort of death.

Even if I couldn’t save his life, I could at least give him an injection of something to put him to sleep.

All I could think of was this poor fellow, stuck fast in the rocks, watching each new wave reach higher. And his family were watching.

The damned cyclist still continued to ignore my tooting. He was now travelling at a slow walking pace.

Suddenly, I slammed on the brakes, leapt out of the car, pulled on the handbrake and ran up the hill until I was in front of the cyclist.

He was a man in his 40s; red-faced and now rather breathless.

‘Please pull over to the side of the road and let me through,’ I begged him.

He just stared at me.

He was travelling so slowly that I was able to stand in front of him and grab his handlebars. I held his bicycle. ‘I’m a doctor,’ I told him. ‘There’s a man trapped in the rocks and I need to get to him quickly. Please park your bicycle by the side of the road and let me come past.’

The man mumbled something rude and ungracious and then reluctantly and very slowly moved his machine to the side of the road.

I ran back to the car, jumped in, started up and drove past him.

Four minutes later, I slid into the car park at the inland end of the trail to Heddon’s Mouth. Bertram, who was waiting there, rushed over to the car as I opened the door.

‘Thank heavens you’re here, doctor! What took you so long?’

‘Did you find anyone with a motorbike?’ I asked him.

‘No,’ said Bertram. ‘But the man from the National Trust heard me asking and he told me what I told you: that motorbikes aren’t allowed on the path down to the sea.’

‘Did you tell him why I need to get there quickly?’

‘Yes, but he said that’s the rule. No bicycles or motorcycles on the path.’

A bearded fellow who looked to be in his late sixties or early seventies, wearing a tweed sports jacket and horn-rimmed spectacles, marched over to me. It seemed as though it were a day on which I was destined to have problems with men with beards.

‘Motorbikes aren’t allowed on the path down to the cove,’ he said firmly and pompously.

Just then, Patchy screamed into the car park on his trails bike.

I picked my bag out of the car, locked the car and hurried over to him, ignoring the man from the National Trust.

‘Thank heavens you’re here!’ I said. I rapidly explained the situation. ‘If I walk it’ll take me at least 30 minutes to get down to the sea. If you take me down there on the back of your bike we’ll be there in a few minutes.’

‘Motorbikes aren’t allowed on the path!’ said the elderly gentleman from the National Trust, shouting to make himself heard about the roar of Patchy’s motorbike. He stood in front of us to block our way.

‘Hop on,’ said Patchy.

I climbed on, clutching my bag, and Patchy swung round the human obstacle and sped off with me clinging to the back of the bike for dear life.

Somewhere behind me, I could hear the man from the National Trust shouting at us. He seemed to be repeating his mantra that motorbikes weren’t allowed on the footpath down to Heddon’s Mouth. And I think he was threatening to call the police.

Patchy got me to the cove in less than five minutes.

It was the scariest and bumpiest and most uncomfortable journey of my life. There were dozens of people on the path, most of whom seemed quite oblivious of the fact that a man was stuck in the rocks just a short distance away. Patchy kept his finger on his horn and drove brilliantly, always giving walkers plenty of room and slowing down appropriately whenever we came across children or elderly walkers.

I was carrying a black medical bag and I would have thought it would have been obvious that we weren’t joy-riding, but many of the people we whizzed past shouted angrily.

One young man grabbed my jacket and nearly pulled me off the bike; fortunately, the pocket he managed to catch hold of simply ripped free of the coat.

As we approached the sea, the sky seemed to grow steadily darker. The rain was now lashing down and the sky was split by flashes of lightning.

Without doubt, it was an afternoon to be tucked up with a log fire and a plateful of hot, buttered crumpets.

I assumed that the people we had passed on the path had been caught out by the sudden change in the weather. An hour or so earlier the sky had been blue and the sun had been shining. That fine weather was now but a distant memory.

When we finally reached the cove and I climbed down from the bike, I was shaking. I stood unsteadily for a moment or two. There were a dozen or so people standing around. None of them was doing anything. They were just looking out to sea. I could vaguely make out some figures on the distant rocks.

A woman in her late 20s or 30s was screaming and sobbing. Two children with her were sobbing quietly. One was a boy, one was a girl. The boy looked to be about six or seven-years-old. The girl was a year or two younger. A couple of older women were trying, in vain, to comfort the woman and her children.

The sea was wild and, driven by the wind, it was crashing onto the rocks with great ferocity. Above the sound of the sea and the rain and the wind, I could hear a man screaming.

From time to time, the black sky would be lit by flashes of lightning. It was a storm of biblical proportions; truly a tempest.

'Are you the doctor?' asked an ashen-faced man in a T-shirt and a pair of ragged shorts. I guessed from the colour of his limbs that underneath the pallor, a healthy suntan probably lay hidden.

I confirmed that I was indeed the doctor they'd been waiting for.

'He's over here,' said the ashen-faced man. 'Follow me and I'll take you to him. I know the best way to get to him.' He scrambled up onto a rock and began to make his way out towards the sea.

'I'll wait here,' said Patchy. 'If you need me to fetch anyone or organise any help just come and tell me, or send someone to let me know.'

I promised him that I would, and I set off after the pale-faced man. The rocks were wet and slippery and because I only had one hand free, I had difficulty keeping up with him.

After a few minutes of struggling across the rocks I could, at last, clearly see the man who was stuck. He looked to be in his early 30s. He was naked from the waist up and I could see, through the water, that he was wearing a pair of blue jeans. I couldn't see either of his legs below the knees. The water was well above his waist. I didn't know how fast the tide might come in but I knew from experience that in some of these small coves, when the weather is bad, the sea seems to come in very quickly.

The trapped man was alternately shouting and crying. Occasionally, he started to thrash around as though trying in vain to free himself. I'm not surprised. I doubt if anyone could have faced almost certain death in such awful, blood-curdling circumstances with any equanimity.

There were two men standing on the rocks nearby. One was tall and was, incongruously, wearing a light blue suit which was now soaked, ruined and sticking to him while the other man, much shorter and tubbier, was wearing shorts and a yellow anorak.

A third man, a youth really because he was no more than 19 or 20-years-old, was sitting on a rock next to the man who was stuck. I didn't recognise any of the three. I assumed they were all holidaymakers who were on the beach, or nearby, when the man got stuck. Locals don't tend to go down to Heddon's Mouth very much. The beach is very small, there's no fishing or surfing, it's a long walk and the place is usually crowded with tourists.

The tide was now so high, and the sea so rough, that when each new wave came crashing in the spray covered us all.

'I've got the doctor!' shouted my guide. The three men all looked in my direction.

The man who was trapped half turned 'Come and get me out,' he shouted. 'I'm going to drown.'

I bent down next to him and put my black bag down on a flattish piece of rock. The tide was now so high that the man's trapped right foot and lower leg were all under water. As I bent down to feel for his foot, to try to work out how badly he was stuck, a new wave arrived and crashed over us all. Not having had time to turn my face away I found myself with a mouth full of sea water. I spat the water out, and rubbed the salty water from my eyes.

'What's your name?' I asked him.

'Jeffrey,' he replied. 'Jeffrey Deacon.'

'Is it OK if I call you Jeffrey?'

'Yes.'

'I'm the doctor,' I told him. I told him my name. 'You're going to be fine. Can you move your foot?'

I tried to keep my voice as calm as I could, though I had to shout to make myself heard above the sound of the wind and the rain and the sea.

It isn't easy to sound calm when you're shouting.

Heddon's Mouth is a beautiful, quiet, peaceful spot on a calm day but when the weather turns bad it can, like much of the North Devon coast, be a truly inhospitable place.

Jeffrey nodded. He had stopped screaming and shouting. His eyes were red with crying.

I reached down into the sea water, felt his shin and then his ankle. I could not feel anything underneath his ankle. His foot had slipped down between two huge rocks and was now invisible. The gap between the rocks was so narrow that I definitely couldn't reach through to touch his foot.

Another huge wave crashed over us, soaking us again.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my black bag pushed off the rock where I had placed it. I just managed to grab it before it disappeared. I asked one of the men to hold it for me.

‘Do something!’ shouted the trapped man. ‘I’m going to die.’

‘You’re not going to die,’ I told him. ‘You’re definitely not going to die.’

He looked at me. There was a faint glimmer of hope in his eyes. But the hope did not last. ‘You’re lying!’ he suddenly shouted. He made another effort to move himself but he was well and truly jammed. ‘You know I’m going to die! You’re going to let me die.’

I looked down into the water at his free leg to see what sort of footwear he was wearing. He had a fairly thin slip-on deck shoe. I was hoping that he might have been wearing a boot that might slip off. But the deck shoe on his trapped foot could not possibly make any difference.

Another huge wave crashed over us. The wind was getting stronger. The rain was now lashing down with ever greater fury. I was soaked to the skin and wondered momentarily why I had come out without any waterproofs. The sea level was rising every time another wave came in. The water was now up to the man’s chest. I remember thinking that even if we got him free we would have to carry him all the way up Heddon’s Valley. I remember wondering if a boat could come and take him to Barnstaple. That was my craziest thought. There was no chance whatsoever of any boat approaching the rocks in that weather. When you’re desperate you have some daft ideas, don’t you? Well, I do anyway.

‘I’m not going to let you die,’ I promised him and I damned well meant it.

I took my bag off the man who was holding it, opened it and took out a vial of morphine. It was raining so hard that within seconds, the inside of my bag was soaked and there was a growing puddle in the bottom. I don’t think I’ve ever seen or felt such rain.

‘I’m going to give you something to numb the pain,’ I told him. He looked at me, puzzled. ‘I’m not really in pain,’ he said. I didn’t tell him but I knew he was going to be and that whatever happened he would need the injection. I gave my bag to the short, tubby man in the yellow anorak and asked him to hold it for me. I found a vein in the trapped man’s arm, swabbed it with a little cotton wool swab soaked in alcohol and wondered, not for the first time in my life, at the way we find ourselves sticking to our habits, however inappropriate the circumstances might be. I then injected a good dose of morphine.

I was giving him the morphine not to abolish any pain at that moment but to control the pain he was going to have in the not very distant future. I was also trying to put him to sleep for a while so that we could do whatever we needed to do to free him from the rocks.

‘Are you putting him to sleep, doctor?’ asked the tubby fellow who was holding my black bag. I suddenly noticed that he had enough chin for two people. It was an utterly irrelevant observation but I can remember his chin more than I can remember anything else about him. He hadn’t shaved for a while and he reminded me of a cartoon character. It is strange how our minds latch onto minor irrelevancies. I have noticed that we often remember truly significant events by the smallest thing; a chance observation, an unusual smell, a startling sound.

‘Just for a while,’ I murmured.

‘Poor devil,’ muttered another one of the men, the tall one in the suit. I looked up. He crossed himself and I realised that he thought I had just killed the man so that he wouldn’t have to die of drowning. The words ‘putting to sleep’ are widely used by vets when they euthanize animals.

‘I’ve just sedated him so that we can get him out without causing him too much pain,’ I explained. I was rather cross that they would think I would abandon the man’s life so easily. I shivered and realised that I was very, very cold. Even today, years later, I can still feel that damned cold. It was a combination of the wind, the rain, the crashing sea and the fear.

‘Let’s try pulling him out,’ I said. I looked round. My pale-faced guide had disappeared, gone back to the beach. ‘There are four of us. Two to each arm and we just pull as hard as we can.’

‘We tried pulling but he’s jammed fast,’ said the man in the suit.

‘Of course you did,’ I said. ‘But he was fully conscious then and that probably stopped you pulling as hard as you can. Let’s hold him and pull.’ Another wave crashed over us.

The youth and the tubby man took his right arm and shoulder. And I and the man in a suit took his left arm and shoulder. I had to hold my black bag with my free arm so that it didn’t get washed away.

‘If we pull too hard we might pull off his foot,’ said one of the men nervously. ‘We shouldn’t pull too hard.’

‘If we can’t pull him free I’m going to have to cut his foot off,’ I thought. ‘So it doesn’t make much difference does it?’ I didn’t say this.

‘We won’t pull his foot off,’ I assured them all.

I thought, but didn’t say, that if we were going to save Mr Deacon from drowning then the whole business was going to be messy.’

We pulled. Oh how we pulled.

The main problem was that it was terribly difficult to get our footing on the slippery rocks. They were covered with seaweed and constantly being drenched with new clouds of spray and rain. Only the limpets and other shelled creatures clinging to the rocks helped to give our feet any traction.

We pulled so hard I thought we would dislocate Jeffrey Deacon's shoulders. But his foot was so tight that we could not pull it free. It occurred to me that the foot must have become swollen with all the pulling. I thought that maybe we could have pulled him out if we'd had ropes and some sort of hoist.

'Let's try again!' I told the others.

It did not seem possible that we could not pull Jeffrey's foot out from between the rocks. I knew that we would probably damage the skin and soft tissues, almost certainly damage the joint and possibly break a bone, but the alternative was much, much worse.

But we couldn't budge the trapped man.

'It's no good,' said the man in a suit. I didn't know his name. I didn't know any of their names. They were all brave to be out there on the rocks. The sea was very rough and the rain was lashing down. 'He's stuck fast. Give him a big injection, doctor. We're not going to be able to get him free. You've done your best.'

The water was now up to the top of the trapped man's chest. When a wave came in the spray reached over his head. In a few minutes time the man would be drowned and we would have to stand there and watch it happen.

'Hold him tight and pull him as upright as you can,' I told them. I opened my black bag and took out a scalpel, a strong cord and the hacksaw I'd taken from the garage. 'I'm going to have to amputate his foot.'

I suddenly realised that in my hurry, I hadn't brought a spare hacksaw blade with me. I hoped the blade that was in the saw would be strong enough to do the job. I then handed my black medical bag to one of the men and asked him to hold it for me. The rock upon which I had previously stood the bag was now under water. It was a perfect storm; a concatenation of difficult circumstances.

When he heard what I planned to do, the tubby fellow turned away and was sick.

'Should we ask his permission?' asked one of the men. I didn't know which one of them it was.

'He's unconscious,' I pointed out.

'We could ask his wife for permission,' he pointed out.

'I'm not sure whether a wife can give permission for a doctor to remove her husband's foot,' I said. 'But more importantly, by the time you've got back to the beach and asked her it will be too late to do anything.'

The sea now seemed to be rising even faster. The wind had whipped up the waves. When I looked out to sea, I could see that the breakers coming in looked to be seven or eight feet tall. Even at rest, the sea was now at the level of the trapped man's chin. I reckoned we only had another two or three minutes before he drowned. I had just two or three minutes to remove his trapped foot.

I rubbed the salt water out of my eyes with my sleeve, reached down into the water and felt for the lowest part of the man's leg. I then used the cord to tie a tourniquet around the man's leg, as low down as I could reach but allowing me room to cut through the leg.

I knew that when I cut through his leg there would be a good deal of bleeding. I needed to minimise the amount of blood loss. And I needed to work fast.

When I was a young hospital doctor, there was a surgeon who could perform amputations in world record time but not even he had been as fast as surgeons 100 years ago.

I remembered reading that in the 19th century, before anaesthesia had been invented, surgeons used to be able to perform amputations in seconds. One surgeon is said to have taken off a patient's arm while a colleague turned round to take a pinch of snuff. A Scottish surgeon called Robert Liston was timed at 33 seconds for an operation to remove a patient's leg at the thigh. Unfortunately, he was so fast that his assistant could not get his fingers out of the way in time. In addition to the patient's leg, three of the assistant's fingers succumbed to the saw and ended up in the waste bucket. Surgeons had to work fast if their patient was going to have a chance of surviving.

All this went through my mind in a flash.

Now, years later, I can still remember all these thoughts; slowed down in the way that the mind sometimes slows things down when we remember a bad accident.

As I tied the tourniquet, I called out to the young man and asked him to go back to the shoreline and to gather as many able bodied men and women he could find. I had to shout and repeat myself to make myself heard and understood.

'Tell them we're going to need people to carry Mr Deacon up to the road,' I told him. 'And find the man with the motorbike. His name is Patchy Fogg. Ask him to go back to the Hunter's Inn and to use their telephone to ring the ambulance people. We need an ambulance waiting at Hunter's Inn. If the ambulance people can't get here quickly then find someone with an estate car, a van or a small lorry. They'll need to take Mr Deacon to the hospital in Barnstaple.'

The young man nodded. I made him repeat what I'd told him. Then he hurried off.

I really didn't want him around when I cut off Mr Deacon's foot. I knew it was likely to be a sight likely to give birth to a hundred nightmares.

Cutting through bone isn't easy at the best of times.

Orthopaedic surgeons, who cut through bones and joints for a living, tend to be big beefy fellows. But cutting through bone you cannot see, when it is a few feet under water is considerably more difficult than cutting through bone in a nice, neat, aseptic operating theatre. And when the sea is crashing around and on top of you, the tide is coming in and the wind and the rain seem determined to wash you away, then it is, believe me, immeasurably more difficult.

And, of course, it was all made considerably more difficult by the fact that I had never, ever amputated a foot before. That was just a small, extra complication to add to all the others.

I took the hacksaw in my hand, crouched and reached down into the sea as far as I could stretch. I couldn't reach far enough down. The tide was coming in horrifically fast and I couldn't reach down to the man's ankle. I took a deep breath and put my head down under the water. It was freezing cold. I don't think I had ever been so cold, so scared and so anxious. I was now performing my first amputation and I was doing it under water, quite unable to see what I was doing.

I couldn't see anything but I could now feel the bottom of Jeffrey's leg, where it disappeared between the rocks.

I reached as far as I could and then used the hacksaw to cut through his jeans, his skin, his soft tissues and finally his bone. I worked frantically, against the clock. Sawing through his jeans wasn't easy. Sawing through his leg was brutally difficult. Butchers who chop up animal carcasses use nice sharp hatchets and knives and need a lot of force if they're going to chop through bone.

When I lifted my head to take another breath, I heard the man who had been sick say that we were all going to drown and he was going back to the beach. He sounded as if he were a thousand miles away. I think he was crying.

Most people really don't realise how hard it is to cut through bone.

If your dog finds an old bone sometime, try cutting through it with a saw. You'll be amazed at how difficult it is. Bone is a very hard substance.

I put my head back into the water, cut a little more, raised my head to take another breath, then went back under the water, trying to find where I'd started cutting so that I could carry on in the same spot.

By the time I'd finished cutting and Jeffrey Deacon was free from the rocks, I was utterly exhausted and I was nearly drowned myself. I had swallowed far more sea water than is good for anyone.

'He's free,' I gasped, to the remaining two men, as I harnessed my last remaining strength and dragged Jeffrey Deacon free of the gap between the two rocks, terrified he would slip and slide back into the crack where his detached foot now remained.

I looked down into the water, wondering if I could see his foot and ankle. But I couldn't, of course. I couldn't see anything but water. I heard thunder crashing. It sounded close. I'd missed the lightning.

'Help me carry him to the beach. Don't try and rush it.'

I didn't want us dropping him and cracking open his skull on a rock. And I didn't want one of us sliding between two slippery, seaweed covered rocks and getting stuck. That thought went through my mind. Later, I would have a recurring nightmare in which all of us were stuck in the rocks with huge, 20-foot high waves bearing down on us.

Before we began to carry him to comparative safety, I sat for a couple of moments on a barnacle encrusted rock and tried to get my breath back.

The life of a country GP sometimes seems stranger than fiction.

A huge wave crashed over us all and the man who was holding my black bag let go of it.

I watched in horror as the bag disappeared into the sea. I prayed Mr Deacon didn't wake up because now I had no more morphine to give him and nothing with which to give it to him. This rescue was now beyond being a nightmare.

I'd got the trapped man free of the rocks and I'd saved him from drowning. Now we had to get him all the way up the Haddon Valley and to a hospital as soon as possible.

And there was now something else; something more personal.

Deep down I knew that I would probably have to cope with the wrath of the man and his wife when they discovered that I'd had to remove his foot. It occurred to me that he might sue me. Would he have a case? Would others say I should have done things differently? It is always so much easier to make decisions when sitting, quietly in an air-conditioned courtroom than when facing a real life crisis in unbearable circumstances, with the clock ticking ever faster and ever louder. I could not think of anything I could have done differently. But would a judge think differently? I knew damned well that there would be a doctor somewhere who would, for a fat fee, be happy to pass judgement on what I had done, why I had done it and how I had done it.

Meanwhile, I was physically and mentally exhausted and we still had to drag and carry Mr Deacon to the beach. I could see people waving to us, beckoning to us. Two or three men started out across the rocks towards us, scrambling, sliding and falling but gradually getting closer.

Somehow, the three of us managed to carry and drag Mr Deacon across the rocks and to the shore. The men who had scrambled out to meet us helped enormously. The three of us were exhausted. Simply staying on the rocks, as the sea and the storm fought to wash us to our deaths, had taken an enormous amount of energy and will.

On the beach, the man's wife was waiting. She still had her children by her side. You might have thought that someone would have spotted that her husband had no foot, and would have taken the children away. But no one had done anything.

The woman was sobbing with relief. Then she saw her husband's bloody leg. And the children saw it too. The small boy saw it first. He told his sister. They were shouting and crying and pointing. The woman tried to get to her husband. We had to hold him up because he was unconscious and he couldn't stand.

'We have to hurry!' I shouted. 'We have to get him up the path to the car park. God willing there will be an ambulance waiting for us. But we have to get him there quickly.'

The tourniquet I'd tied was preventing serious blood loss but there was still blood seeping out from the ugly wound I'd made.

I asked two of the men to hold him upright while I knelt down and unfastened the tourniquet for a moment, to let some blood into the remaining tissue, to keep it alive and healthy.

I saw a large pram that someone had pushed down the path and wondered if we could use it to wheel Mr Deacon to the ambulance. I decided it would be more trouble than it was worth. I looked around and counted. There were nine able-bodied men there. 'Carry him in relays,' I shouted. 'A couple of hundred yards at a time.'

'What have you done to him?' demanded Mrs Deacon. She was a big, tough, brawny woman who looked as if she could have hefted hundred weight coal sacks for a living. She stuck her face a foot from mine. She had long, black hair which was plastered to her head. Her dress was soaked. She had been crying endlessly. She was distraught and I understood. 'You've made him into a cripple!' she shouted at me. I could only just hear her above the sound of the wind and the rain. 'You bastard! What have you done to him? What have you done to him?' She lashed out at me and caught me quite a painful blow on the arm.

'I had no choice,' I told her. 'He was trapped. He would have drowned.'

'You could have pulled him out!'

'We tried but we couldn't. He was stuck fast. He would have died.'

'You should have waited!'

'I couldn't wait!' I told her.

'I told him not to go scrambling over those rocks,' she said, sobbing.

Mrs Deacon needed support and help but I didn't have the time and this was not the place. I turned away to the men who were still waiting. 'Get moving!' I told them urgently. 'We have to get him to the ambulance.'

We moved as a convoy.

I led the way, followed by the men who were carrying Mr Deacon. Mrs Deacon hurried along beside them, dragging her children. She kept getting in the way and slowing them down. I could totally understand her concern, anguish, agony and desperation but she was making things worse for her husband who was, in any case, still unconscious. The men who weren't actually carrying followed behind.

Half way along the path, I heard a motorbike and Patchy appeared through the darkness and the rain.

'There's no ambulance yet but I've got a guy with a Dormobile ready and waiting to take your patient to the hospital,' said Patchy. 'With any luck the ambulance will be waiting by the time you get there.'

And, thank God, it was.

I told the ambulance men how much morphine I'd given so that they could tell the doctors in Barnstaple. Mrs Deacon insisted on climbing into the back of the ambulance with her husband. Naturally, she insisted on taking the children with her. The ambulance men weren't happy but they couldn't keep her out. I decided that Mr Deacon no longer needed me and, given Mrs Deacon's anger, that it would be best if I stayed behind.

'Looks like you've had a busy day,' said Patchy, as the ambulance sped off to the hospital in Barnstaple.

I just looked at him and shook my head in dismay and weariness. I was mentally and physically exhausted. I couldn't help but hope that there were no more calls for a while. I looked at my watch. I was nearly an hour late for the evening surgery. I hoped that the non-urgent patients would have gone home, to return tomorrow.

I remember looking around for my drug bag and realising it had been lost at sea. I'd have to get another. And there was quite a good deal of expensive equipment to replace too.

I thanked Patchy, climbed into the Rolls and drove slowly home to Bilbury Grange. I was confident that Mr Deacon would now live. He would obviously have to come to terms with having lost his foot and I knew there would be difficult times ahead for him and his family. But he would be alive.

Would Mrs Deacon still be angry in the morning? Would she report me to the General Medical Council? Would she want to sue me?

The drive home, though only a couple of miles or so, seemed endless.

When I got back to Bilbury Grange I pretty well fell out of the car.

‘There are just six patients still waiting for you,’ said Patsy, throwing a blanket around me for I was starting to shiver. ‘Do you want me to ask them to wait while you have a hot bath or do you want to see if you can deal with them now, and then have a hot bath?’

I said I’d try to deal with the evening surgery straight away. Patsy made me a hot coffee, laced with whisky. I sat in the surgery, dripping wet and with a huge blanket thrown around my shoulders.

I must have broken all records for conducting a surgery. There were no urgent or serious problems and I finished the entire evening’s work in under ten minutes.

And then I collapsed into a warm bath with a glass of hot whisky to keep me company. There I stayed, repeatedly topping up with hot water until the water went so cold that topping it up with hot would have resulted in the bath overflowing. I wanted to relax but I couldn’t. I kept asking myself if I could have done anything differently. Was there anything that I could have done to save the man’s foot? Could I have somehow rescued the amputated foot in the hope that surgeons might be able to sew it back on?

In the end I knew, just knew, that I couldn’t think of anything I could have done that would have saved his foot. And I was satisfied that I could not possibly have rescued the amputated foot.

But I was still worried about the consequences.

No doctor wants angry patients or relatives attacking him.

Would the Deacons attack me? The rescue was bound to attract some publicity. Would the Deacons vilify me in public? Would they sue me? The questions kept recurring; going round and round in my mind.

I dressed and went back downstairs. Patsy had lit a roaring log fire.

We sat in front of the fire and ate egg and chips. There is much comfort to be had from watching a log fire crackle and spit. There is comfort for the eyes and for the ears. And I enjoy the smell of a log fire, too.

Afterwards, I talked to Patsy about what had happened. I told her how I’d had to cut off a man’s foot while he was trapped and about to drown. I told her how absolutely terrified I had been and how I had, for quite a while, been convinced that the man was going to drown. I told her of the bravery of the strangers who had stayed with him on the rocks.

I told her, in the end, that whether I had done well or badly, I knew I’d done the best I could. And you can never do more than that.

We had one nasty moment that evening.

At about 9.00 pm, a reporter telephoned and asked if I’d heard that the Deacons were going to sue me for damages.

But it turned out to be a hoax. The reporter had merely been trying to stir up a story.

The men who had stayed with me on the rocks all confirmed that if I had not amputated Mr Deacon’s foot then he would have died.

They said kind things which I much appreciated.

And in the end, the Deacons were very kind, gracious, forgiving and, yes, grateful. They both understood that if I had not amputated then Mr Deacon would have died. And they considered the loss of a foot a relatively small price to pay for life.

I was relieved and delighted when the rescue didn’t get much coverage in the media. It had apparently been a busy news day. A celebrity had said something controversial, a member of the Royal family had done something curious, a film star had been caught in an affair and there had been a political row in Westminster.

A storm in Devon, and the near drowning of a man caught in the rocks, could not compete with these big news stories. Mr Deacon’s brush with death made just a few inches in the local papers. There were no cameras there and so there was no coverage on television.

A week afterwards, a delivery van turned up and the driver presented me with a parcel and asked me to sign for it.

The parcel contained a new medical bag. It was a ‘thank you’ from the Deacons who had somehow heard that I’d lost my previous black bag during the rescue.

I’ve still got the bag.

It is one of my most treasured possessions.

And finally…

I hope you have enjoyed this book about my adventures in Bilbury. If you did so then it would mean a great deal to me if you would spare a moment to write a short review.

Thank you

Vernon Coleman

Appendix 1

My Favourite Latin Phrases

Here is the list of Latin phrases which Esme Church compiled for me (as described in ‘Cedric’s Admirers’).

Aegrescit medendo – the remedy makes things worse
Aequam servare mentem – to keep a calm mind and, as Kipling suggested, to treat success and disaster equally
Aut vincere aut mori – either conquer or die
Compos mentis – having control of one’s own mind
De mortuis nil nisi bonum – say nothing but good of the dead
Diem perdidi – I have lost a day (Suetonius allegedly said this when once at dinner he remembered he had done nothing for anybody all that day)
Dum spiro, spero – while I breathe I hope, where there is life there is hope
Ex ovo omnia – every living thing comes from an egg (attributed to William Harvey, the discoverer of the human circulatory system)
Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas – there is happiness for the man who is able to discover why things happen
Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto – I am a man and there is no human problem which does not concern me
In articulo mortis – spoken at the point of death
Icundi acti labores – completed labours are pleasant – from Euripides who meant, I think, that it is good to look back on trials and hardships when one has come through them safely
Mens sibi conscia recti – knowing within oneself that one has done the right thing
Naturam expellas furca, tamen usque recurret – even though you drive out nature with a pitchfork, she will always return
Nescit vox missa reverti – a word once published cannot be recalled
Nullum magnum ingenium sine mixtura dementiae fuit – all great geniuses have some madness in them
Possunt quia posse videntur – they can because they think they can (the power of the mind)
Senex bis puer – the old man is twice a child (in old age)
Taedium vitae – weariness of life, extreme ennui
Venienti occurrite morbo – run to meet disease as it comes, don’t wait for sickness to develop and get worse

Appendix 2

The Tilbury Gig and other Horse Drawn Conveyances

In ‘Mrs Leeson’s Leg’, I described how Mrs Leeson drove around in a Tilbury gig. With the aid of Patchy Fogg and Mrs Leeson’s groom/chauffeur, I have compiled a short dictionary describing the various types of carriage which were used in England in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Barouche: a four-seater carriage, half covered; the two front passengers face the two back ones

Brougham: a closed carriage with 2 or 4 wheels, pulled by one horse

Cabriolet: two wheeled carriage with an open hood pulled by one horse (usually offered for hire, hence the abbreviation ‘cab’ which is used to describe a taxi)

Chariot: originally a two wheeled vehicle drawn by horses and used in racing and warfare; more recently the term was sometimes used to describe a four wheeled open carriage with a coachman’s seat at the front.

Clarence: a four-seater carriage

Curricle : a light two wheeler which was popular in the 18th century and which is the father of the Victorian dog cart (early dog carts were actually drawn by dogs)

Dennet: a light two-seater gig

Dicky: a folding outside seat, usually fixed at the back of a carriage and used by a servant

Fly: similar to phaeton, also called a rat

Four wheeler: a large hansom cab; also known as a ‘growler’

Gig: a light two-seater carriage pulled by one horse

Hansom: known as the gondola of London; a hansom cab is a low, two wheeled cabriolet for two passengers. The driver sits behind his passengers and with the reins going over the top. Named after Joseph Hansom who was an English architect. He patented the design in 1834.

Landau: a four wheeled enclosed carriage which has a removable front cover and a back cover that can be raised or lowered. Named after the town of Landau in Germany, where it was first produced. Popularly used by monarchs and others who need to be seen by the public but who need some protection lest the weather turn bad.

Phaeton: a four wheeled pleasure carriage which has all the seats facing forward

Rumble: a dicky seat for less regarded passengers or servants (when John Brown rode with Queen Victoria in her Sociable he took the rumble seat)

Sociable: a rather genteel phaeton with four wheels and a collapsible hood. The two main seats face front and there is a pull out stool facing them. A ‘sociable’ was used by Queen Victoria when not on State business and came to be known as a Victoria

Stanhope: a light one-seater open carriage with two or four wheels; named after Fitzroy Stanhope who was an English clergyman.

Tilbury gig: a light two-seater, pulled by a single horse

Trap: a light, simply made, two-wheeled carriage which is usually pulled by a small horse or pony

Victoria: see ‘sociable’

Appendix 3

Plants Named After Parts of the Human Body

During one conversation in the Duck and Puddle (described in ‘Caleb’s Ankle’), Thumper, Patchy and I spent some time chatting to a local man called Caleb Theodore.

Caleb told us that a surprising number of plants are named after parts of the human body.

With his help, I compiled this list. All these plants are real!

Black maidenhair
Bladder campion
Bladderwort
Dead man’s fingers
Eyesbright
Heartsease
Hounds tongue
Kidney vetch
Lady’s tresses
Liverwort
Lords and ladies
Lungwort
Maidenhair
Miller’s thumb
Naked ladies
Navelwort
Nipplewort
Old man’s beard
Open arse
Prick madam
Priests ballocks (sic)
Shitabed
Skullcap
Stinking willy

Finally, but certainly not least, I must give an honourable mention to a plant which doesn’t really fit on this list but which has, in my view, the best name ever given to a plant: the ‘welcome-home-husband-though-never-so-drunk’.

Caleb tells me that the name is popularly used to describe sempervivum tectorum (apparently known to its chums as the common houseleek and to its posher chums as sedum acre) which is a flowering plant found on high ground in southern Europe.

Appendix 4

Types of Auction

In ‘The Bathroom Cabinet’ I mentioned a ‘time auction’. With the aid of Patchy Fogg I have compiled a list of the most popular types of auction.

Ordinary English auction: the auctioneer invites bids and the bidders push up the prices bit by bit.
A Dutch auction: this type of auction works in reverse. The auctioneer starts at a high price and the price falls until a bidder says he’ll pay that price.
Paper or silent auction: the auctioneer announces a minimum price and the bidders write down their bids and the highest wins.
Ring auction: dealers agree not to bid. One of them buys the item. They then all meet and have the auction between themselves.
Market auction: bidders bid on a bunch of similar items and can take as many items as they like at that price.
Time auction: the bidding stops at a pre-arranged time. This type of auction is invariably pretty chaotic. The French have a version which is commonly used when selling wine. The auctioneer lights a candle and bidders can bid for as long as the candle remains alight. When the candle goes out, the highest bidder gets the item.

Appendix 5

D is for Diarrhoea, F is for Flatulence, P is for Piles

Air traffic controllers, policemen and telephone operators all use an official alphabet aid which includes such items as ‘W for whisky’ and ‘G for golf’. The idea is to avoid misunderstandings. But the official alphabet aid (created by NATO) is quite boring so I have created a less po-faced alternative on a medical theme. The list was created after the conversation I described in ‘The Bathroom Cabinet’.

A for Abscess
B for Breast
C for Cramp
D for Diarrhoea
E for Earache
F for Flatulence
G for Gall stones
H for Hernia
I for Indigestion
J for Jaundice
K for Kidneys
L for Liver
M for Muscles
N for Nipple
O for Ointment
P for Piles
Q for Quinsy
R for Ringworm
S for Sphincter
T for Tonsils
U for Uterus
V for Verucca
W for Waterworks
X for X-ray
Y for Yellow-fever
Z for Zit

I have donated this new alphabetical aid free of charge to the English speaking world.

Please pass it on to your friends, neighbours and colleagues so that they can stop using the old, banned, boring system and ensure that they are using the up-to-date medical alphabet nomenclature.

And finally (again)…

I hope you have enjoyed this book about Bilbury and the people who live in and visit the village. If you did so, then I would be very grateful if you would spare a moment to write a short review. This is the 11th book in the series entitled The Young Country Doctor.

Thank you
Vernon Coleman

The Young Country Doctor Book 12

BILBURY JOYS

Vernon Coleman

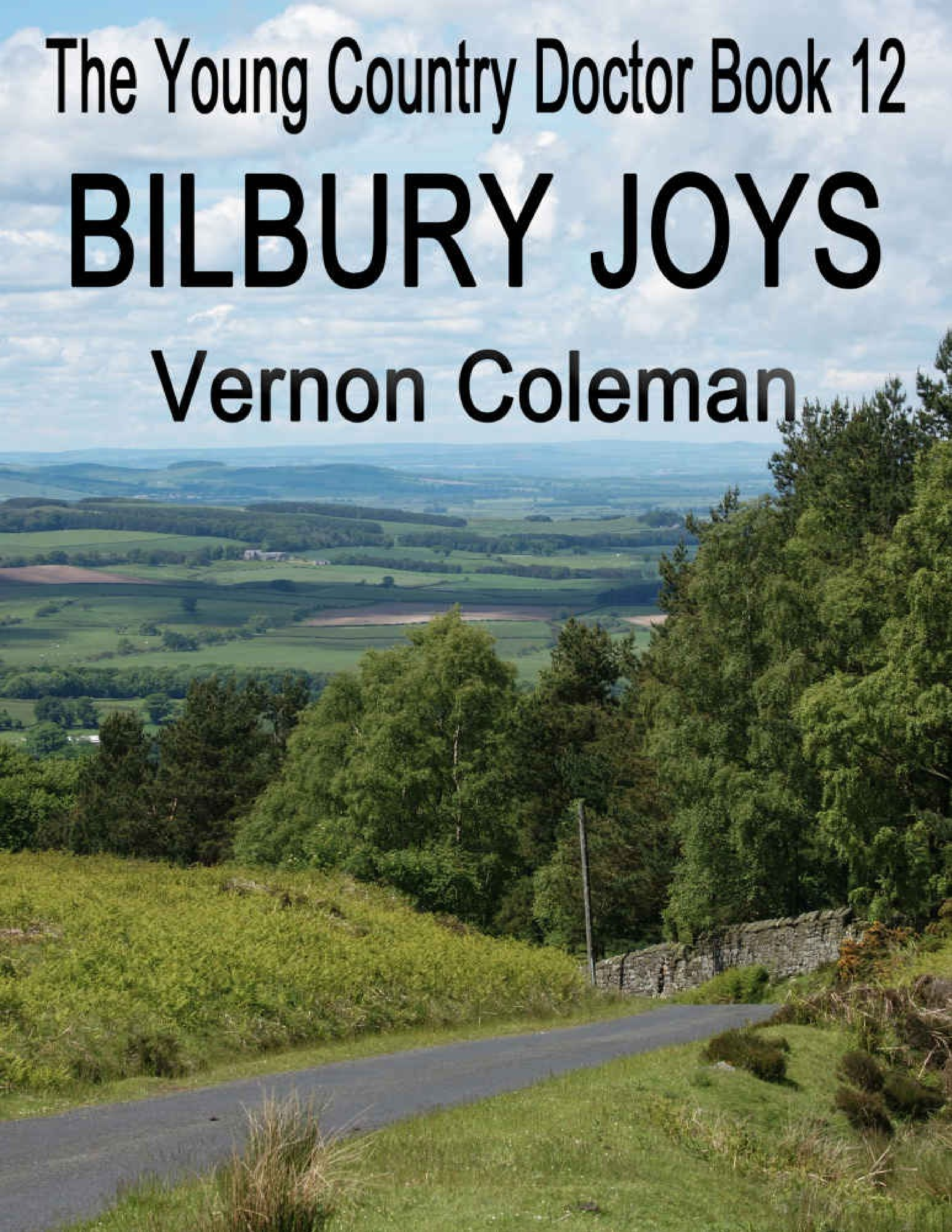

The Young Country Doctor Book 12

Bilbury Joys

Vernon Coleman

Another collection of memories from the English village of Bilbury.

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Note: As usual, names and details of individuals, animals and establishments have been altered to protect the innocent, the guilty and the somewhere in-between.

The Author

Vernon Coleman is a *Sunday Times* bestselling author. He has written over 100 books which have been translated into 25 languages and sold in over 50 countries. His books have sold over two million copies in the UK alone. Vernon Coleman is also a qualified doctor. He lives in Bilbury, Devon, England. He is an accomplished bar billiards player (three times runner up in the Duck and Puddle Christmas competition), a keen but surprisingly ineffective skittle player and an accomplished maker of paper aeroplanes. He claims to be one of the best stone skimmers in North Devon. (Nine bounces are by no means unheard of, and he once spent forty-five minutes diving in chilly coastal water in an attempt to find the beautifully proportioned flat stone with which he had achieved a personal best of 12 bounces.) He is a long-term member of the Desperate Dan Pie-Eater's Club (vegetarian section). He does not speak any foreign languages and although he can juggle, he cannot knit. He has never jumped out of an aeroplane (with or without a parachute) but he has, on several occasions, lit bonfires in the rain and is particularly proud of the fact that he once managed to light one in a snowstorm. He is tall and must still be growing for he has now burst through his hair and has a rapidly developing bald patch. He has not yet availed himself of the opportunities offered by social media but details of his surgery opening hours can be seen on the noticeboard outside Peter Marshall's shop in the village.

The Young Country Doctor series

This is the 12th book in the series. All the books in the series are available as e-books on Amazon.

Dedication

To Antoinette: then, now and eternally.

You are the only past I remember, the only present that matters and the only future I want.

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Foreword

I can't imagine not living in Bilbury.

I've lived in quite a number of cities and towns, both in and outside England, and I have visited and stayed in a good many more.

Some of those places have been beautiful, some striking, some full of vitality and some almost frightening in their intensity. And in all of them, of course, there have been many fascinating, exciting and kindly people. (Of the others, we will say nothing.)

But, although I have done a little travelling, I cannot now imagine living anywhere but Bilbury. Occasionally, people from outside the village say things like 'Don't you get bored living in the same place all the time?' or 'Isn't life in a small village rather dull?' or 'Don't you miss having theatres, opera houses, museums and galleries on your doorstep?'

The answer is always a simple and honest 'No'. I never get bored in Bilbury and life in our village is anything but dull. It's true that we don't have theatres, museums and all those other places but, as a rule, we also don't have large and endless traffic jams, constant noise or air so thick with pollutants that you could cut it into cubes and store it in a cupboard.

In Bilbury we have time to think, to reflect and to look around at our wonderful world. Trees can spread their roots, plants can bloom without being choked and at some times of the year you can, if you know what to look for, pick a snack from the hedgerow as you walk from one place to another. I always think the same is true for people: we can spread our roots and bloom without fear of being choked. Living in Bilbury, I always feel that I am at home and on holiday at the same time.

The fact is, of course, that we were all originally country dwellers. We lived in hamlets and villages or, sometimes, in isolated communities which consisted of no more than one or two houses and which could not, therefore, be described as hamlets.

When the writer Daniel Defoe toured England in 1724, researching his book, *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, the whole country was mainly rural. At least eight out of ten people lived in hamlets and villages – most of which had only a few hundred people living in them.

(Incidentally, at the time of Defoe's travels, the North Devon town of Barnstaple was spelt Barnstable – just like the town in the United States which shares the same name. It is, it seems, the American spelling which is the correct version. According to Defoe, the town which is now known as Bideford used to be called Biddiford and the seaside resort known as Ilfracombe was known to him as Ilfar-comb.)

Towns and cities are a relatively new development and, in historical terms, most of us have very little real cultural experience of town life. Most of us are, at heart, country dwellers who have still not properly adapted to the restrictions of town or city life. Despite this, most of us live in towns and cities. We are crammed together in blocks of flats and in rows of terraced houses. The only bits of greenery most people see are the few plants growing in window boxes, the neat, little parks and gardens where the trees are grey, the weeds ripped out before they have a chance to flower and the grass stunted and brown.

Even in the suburbs, we are often closer together than we like to be. Gardens are over-tended and anything resembling a wild flower is torn up. Nettle patches have been replaced with summerhouse decking, and patios and hedges have been ripped out and replaced with factory made fencing that doesn't need trimming. Wildlife stands no chance. The absence of wild flowers means that butterflies and bees are a rarity. Grey Squirrels are caught and bludgeoned to death because they are officially regarded as pests.

The people who designed our towns and cities used to plant trees along the roadside edges, so that we would be reminded of our rural roots by the sight of an occasional leaf. Today's planners and councillors are ripping out the trees. They say that leaves and roots are a health and safety hazard, that clearing away the leaves in autumn costs money and that dripping sap from trees damages car paintwork. Oak trees drop acorns and horse chestnut trees drop conkers – more health and safety hazards.

But we have always been basically country dwellers and most of us are, in our hearts, still country dwellers. And even if our daily lives require us to live and work in towns and cities, humans still harbour a fondness for rural living.

I know I am lucky to be able to spend my days in Bilbury, where nettles grow freely, where butterflies still flutter, where the sight of a raven is nothing unusual and where wild orchids grow freely on the untrimmed verges beneath the hedgerows.

And where the people still have time to stop and say ‘hello’ to one another, where door keys are lost and never missed, where cold winter days are warmed by the smell of wood smoke and where we have the time, the freedom, the patience to enjoy one other’s idiosyncrasies without the instant judgements which seem to be a part of modern life.

I hope you enjoy this new volume of memories from Bilbury. These tales are all set in the 1970s but, I promise you faithfully, Bilbury has not changed since then; and I know it never will. Bilbury is forever, and, whether you are passing through, staying a while or planning to join us here permanently you will be forever welcome.

Living in Bilbury is a real joy.

Vernon Coleman, Bilbury

The Dinner Party

The Pinchbecks live in a 15th century house which was built by one of North Devon's early mine owners. It has, inevitably, been extended on many occasions and is now a large, comfortable house which offers a number of different architectural styles. From many of the rooms, and the extensive grounds, there are splendid views of the Severn Estuary and the southern coastline of the proud and independent nation of Wales which lies across the water.

At the time of which I write, Mr Pinchbeck, who was in his 50s, was a bank manager in Barnstaple. He exuded calm, dignity and presence. His wife was in her 30s and the headmistress of a local primary school. They had twins, who were aged seven or eight-years-old.

Their one weaknesss, if weakness it was, was that they shared an affection for parties. It didn't seem to matter what sort of party it was as long as it was a party. They threw parties for their children, for their relatives for their friends and for themselves. They threw parties to show off, they threw parties to celebrate good news and they threw parties to help them forget bad news. Some people believe that arnica is a cure for all ills. Others have faith in yoga. The Pinchbecks put their faith in parties. If they had been on the Titanic on its final and fatal voyage, they would have doubtless spent their last hours organising a party.

And one spring they decided to host an extravagant dinner party for a select group of friends from around the country.

It was not to be an ordinary dinner party. It was to be something they would all remember for years to come. It was to be a dinner party for gourmands; people who could eat for England; trenchermen and women who knew when they had eaten enough but never let that stop them eating more. This was not, and there was never any doubt about it, a meeting of gourmets. These were not individuals who could taste a sauce and tell you whether it contained enough basil or needed a pinch more horseradish. These were people who liked to eat and who liked to eat to excess. These were definitely gourmands, rather than gourmets; they were the sort of people who would complain that the chips are too greasy but would, nevertheless, happily chomp their way through the lot (and probably eat some of yours too). A gourmand is someone who can keep eating when he is no longer hungry. Indeed, for a gourmand, hunger and food have nothing whatsoever to do with each other.

I knew about the party long before it happened. When you live in a small village, there are always rumours, and secrets don't last very long – they tend to have the sort of life expectancy that would make a mayfly feel rather ancient.

Much of the food that was going to be served at the Pinchbecks' party had been ordered from Peter Marshall's shop and I wouldn't like to say that Peter is a gossip, not in the unpleasant sense of the word, but he does sometimes enjoy sharing information; indeed, I rather think he regards it as a duty to act as our local news provider. Moreover, there was no doubt that his newly appointed estate agent specialist, Hilda Musbury, shared his view on this.

Peter himself told me that Mrs Pinchbeck was planning to serve a number of dishes based on recipes devised by the world's greatest chefs including Brillat-Savarin, La Chapelle, Marin, Nicolas de Bonnefons and le Marechal de Richelieu. Peter said that he'd had to import 70-year-old oysters, known as pieds de cheval, from Cancale on the Brittany coast. The gourmands were, after all, going to give their taste buds a treat.

There were to be five guests at the party; all of whom had very highly developed and well-tended egos. They were individuals who had no doubt whatsoever that they were exceptional, human beings. They had, like their male half of their hosts, all motored comfortably into their fifties.

Balfour Morrison, was a schoolteacher at a well-known public school and considered himself widely known for his role as a regular guest on a BBC arts programme. He had cultivated a rich, mid-Atlantic bass voice which he felt suited his position as an arbiter of highbrow taste.

Topham Beauclerk ran a small bookshop in Exeter and specialised in dealing in old maps. He had written and self-published a small guidebook for those eager to enter this rather esoteric field. He was also an enthusiastic amateur dentist who had invented a type of rubber crown which he claimed would revolutionise life for bruxism sufferers. Sadly, however, the dental profession, fearful of losing a good deal of repeat crown work, had refused to accept his invention and Beauclerk remained embittered and rather resentful.

Both Morrison and Beauclerk were life-long bachelors.

The third guest, Claude Templeton, managed a bank in Somerset, and was a keen but inexpert golfer who was so accustomed to losing to his wealthy customers that even when he was playing alone he still managed to play rather ineptly. He considered himself to be an expert on Conan Doyle's books about the adventures of Sherlock Holmes. Templeton was married to a magazine editor who, when not working, spent most of her life tucked into a small flat in the Paddington area of London. She spent her evenings working as a Marriage Guidance Counsellor. Neither the

Pinchbecks nor the other guests had ever met her and she was, indeed, something of a stranger to Claude.

The other two guests were the Chattertons; another two halves of a married couple.

Constance and Elmore Chatterton ran a small chain of sporting goods stores which were distributed throughout the West Country. They lived in a small manor house on the outskirts of Taunton. Elmore's grandfather, an expert toboggan enthusiast, who had won cups in St Moritz, had founded the first store back in the 1920s and Elmore's father had built up the business. Constance, a keen horsewoman, had won rosettes, medals and cups in dressage events. She was also an enthusiastic singer who knew and could sing the entire canon of work produced by Gilbert and Sullivan (including the male roles). Elmore, who had weighed 12 stones when he was 12-years-old could have won medals and cups if any had been available for eating. (When younger he had, indeed, won prizes in a couple of pie eating competitions.)

The Pinchbecks had at one point considered including a stranger in their dinner party (according to some old customs it is good luck to have a stranger at the dining table since there is always a chance that the stranger might well be an angel) but they had reluctantly abandoned this idea when they realised that they could not think of any strangers they wanted to invite to their home. (There had, of course, never been any chance of their inviting an actual real stranger to the party.)

To the astonishment of everyone in the village, it was rumoured, quite accurately, that the dinner party was designed to consist of a single meal that would last for a minimum of 12 hours and would consist of 55 separate courses. The number of courses had apparently been chosen to celebrate the fact that Mr Pinchbeck was about to celebrate his 55th birthday. Mrs Harrison, a cook from Combe Martin who usually worked at one of the local public houses, had been hired to help with the cooking and her 19-year-old son, Eric, had been hired to help with the waiting on and the washing up.

Each guest had been invited to pay £20 each towards the cost of the feast and to bring three bottles of wine to help with the digestive processes. Elmore Chatterton had, uninvited, brought with him a 12-gauge shotgun with which he was determined to 'bag a pheasant, a partridge or a couple of plump pigeons'. He had not made it clear what he intended to do with anything he succeeded in shooting.

On the Saturday of the Pinchbecks' party, I decided to sort through the old paperwork cluttering up the cupboards and shelves in my consulting room. I have always found that dated and unnecessary paperwork accumulates terribly easily. If I kept every receipt, guarantee and warning I am told to keep, I would need an aircraft hangar for storage.

I enjoyed the clear-out so thoroughly that when I had finished tidying my study, I moved around the house, doing the same thing in the drawing room, the kitchen, the butler's pantry, the cupboards in the hall, the bedrooms and even the garage. I extended my spring-clean to cover other items; not just bits of paper. Having checked with Patsy that the selected items were surplus to requirements, I sorted them into three piles. Some items I put aside for the next village jumble sale, some I put into our dustbin, so that they could be collected by the weekly bin-men, and some, by far the greatest quantity, I piled up in cardboard boxes and old shopping bags to take down the garden to our bonfire site.

By the time I'd finished, it was late morning and I had accumulated a modest amount of rubbish for the dustbin, a decent amount of unwanted stuff which I could donate to the jumble sale and a huge pile of burnable rubbish.

As I carried the boxes and old bags down the garden, I found myself looking forward to the bonfire I would have later. I had, as always, a good pile of old garden clippings and there was no doubt that I would be able to have a pretty spectacular blaze.

I sometimes suspect that I must have been an arsonist in a previous life because there are few things I enjoy more than a good bonfire. I don't know why. I can't explain it. But it is a fact of life. Some men like collecting Spode china. Some become excited if they catch a trout. I get a kick out of setting fire to a large pile of rubbish and watching it reduce to a pile of ashes. It is a bonus that the ash so produced makes an excellent contribution to the garden.

I had piled up the first bundle of rubbish, a mixture of paper and garden cuttings, and had crumpled up a few sheets of old newspaper which I had placed at the bottom of the pile when I heard Patsy calling me.

With some reluctance, I left the bonfire and hurried up the garden. I assumed at first that Patsy was calling me because luncheon was ready.

But it wasn't lunch.

'Mrs Pinchbeck called,' said Patsy. 'She wants to know if you'd pop over to their house. Their dinner party is well under way and one of the guests has been taken ill.'

I looked at my watch. 'It's only quarter to twelve!' I pointed out. I followed her back towards the house.

'I know,' agreed Patsy. 'Mrs Pinchbeck explained that because they're having a 55 course meal, they started it with a sort of brunch at 10.00 this morning. Apparently, the plan is that they will eat their way right through until 10.00 tonight. They're going to have a 30 minute break at 2.00 p.m. and another 30 minute break at 6.00 p.m. but otherwise they'll be eating for twelve hours.'

'Fifty five courses in twelve hours? That's nearly five courses an hour!' It seemed a long time to sit down eating. You could travel half way around the world in that amount of time. I shuddered at the thought of it all. In the days when I used to spend time away from Bilbury, touring round the country visiting radio and television stations, I used to get impatient if I went to a restaurant and had to sit and spend an hour on a meal. My friends Frank and Gilly Parsons, who run the Duck and Puddle, our local public house, always try to serve up my food within five minutes of receiving my order.

'I gather some of the courses are quite small,' said Patsy. 'Appetizers and sorbets and so on.'

'Strewth!' I said, with an involuntary shudder. The very idea of having to munch my way through 55 separate courses made me feel positively unwell. 'Did Mrs Pinchbeck say what the problem was?'

I took off my Wellington boots and found a pair of more respectable shoes which weren't coated with mud. As I did so, I remembered that there had been a narrowly averted disaster at the Pinchbecks' home a short time earlier. Guests at a children's party the Pinchbecks had organised, had found some giant hogweed stems and turned them into peashooters. Quite a number of the children had suffered severe allergy reactions. Fortunately, none of them had died.

'She said she thought that one of their guests might have developed some sort of allergy,' said Patsy. She didn't seem to think it was terribly urgent but I said I thought you'd want to go now. I'll keep lunch until you get back.'

'They seem prone to allergy problems down at the Pinchbecks!' I said, still thinking of the children's party that had gone wrong. 'What are we having for lunch?'

'Cheese and onion rolls with pickled gherkins on the side. Followed by a banana au naturelle and a cup of something made from hot water and ground Arabica beans.'

'That sounds like four courses.'

'If you have a chocolate from that box Frank and Gilly gave us for our anniversary then it'll be a five course meal.'

'Marvellous!'

I kissed my wife, picked up my black medical bag from my consulting room and set off for the Pinchbecks'. I was still wearing my gardening clothes but I had at least changed my shoes.

A few minutes later, I drove into the driveway of the Pinchbecks' house. Since I'd been there last, they had extended the driveway and laid down an expanded and generous version of one of those large circular, gravel areas which enable visitors to drive around a centre point. In this case the centre point was, as is so often the case, a large old-fashioned fountain. This one was well equipped with nymphs and cherubs and fish. Sadly, none of them was spouting water. Either the water had not yet been connected to the fountain or the Pinchbecks hadn't turned on the pumps required to make the fountain work. Few things seem sadder or more pointless than a fountain with no water coming out of it – especially if the fountain has been well equipped with potential water squirting sites. The cherubs and nymphs and so on, all designed and poised to spout water, now looked merely sad and redundant. Maybe the Pinchbecks liked it that way.

Mrs Pinchbeck met me at the door and took me into the dining room where her husband and her guests were all busily working their way through their next course. Dirty dishes and cutlery were piled high on the sideboard and through an open doorway, I could see into the kitchen where a young man, presumably Eric Harrison, was bent over the sink. He had a pink, frilly edged pinafore tied around his waist. I didn't envy him and hoped the Pinchbecks were paying him well for 12 hours of washing up. From the pile of dirty dishes stacked and waiting their turn, it was pretty clear that he was going to have his work cut out to keep up with the rate at which crockery was being used. A pleasantly plump, middle-aged woman in a white uniform was dashing about with steaming pans of something. She, I assumed, was Eric's mum.

The patient was Topham Beauclerk, the bookseller.

He was sitting at the table with the other guests. They were all busily munching their way through what looked like small sausage rolls which were swimming in a rich, red sauce of some kind.

'Shall we go somewhere a little more private?' I asked him.

'No, no, I'm fine sitting here,' said Mr Beauclerk. 'I seem to have developed some sort of allergy. Can you give me an antihistamine or something?'

He pulled back his right shirt sleeve and showed me his right forearm. There was a red allergy rash clearly visible. He wheezed a little as he spoke.

'Where else is the rash?' I asked him.

'Pretty well everywhere,' he replied. He put a forkful of sausage roll into his mouth and chewed at it noisily.

I thought him rather an odd and unpleasant fellow; packed to the gills with oodles of self-esteem, far more than was necessary, good for him or quite polite.

‘Do you always have a wheeze?’

‘Good God, no!’ he said, without bothering to stop chewing. ‘I assumed it was part of this damned allergy thing.’

‘It probably is. Do you have any other symptoms?’

‘I’ve been sneezing a bit. And I feel a trifle nauseous.’

‘Do you have any difficulty in swallowing?’

‘A little,’ he admitted. ‘My throat may be swollen slightly.’

‘Do you have any known allergies? Any food allergies?’

He said he hadn’t.

I asked him what he had eaten that might have caused his symptoms. He said he couldn’t remember what he’d eaten and that it was surely my job to decide what had caused his symptoms. As he spoke, he sprayed food around. He didn’t seem to care about this, or to be embarrassed.

Mr Pinchbeck, looking rather embarrassed by his guest’s rudeness, and coming to my help, said they had all eaten smoked salmon and scrambled eggs. It had been their third course. He mentioned this because he wondered if the fish might have been the cause of the problem.

I said I thought that the salmon was probably the culprit.

‘Have you ever had anything like this before?’ I asked.

His mouth was full so he shook his head. He seemed to be coping quite well with the nausea from which he claimed to be suffering.

‘I’ll give you an antihistamine injection,’ I told him. ‘But you’d better keep away from fish in the future.’

‘Just salmon you mean?’

‘No, you need to avoid all fish dishes. If you have an allergy to one type of fish it is perfectly possible that you will be allergic to other types of fish. And it’s quite possible that you could develop an allergy reaction simply by being in the same room as fish being cooked.’

‘Never had trouble with fish before,’ said Mr Beauclerk, as though this made it impossible that he should have trouble with it now. ‘And I do a little fishing myself,’ he added inconsequentially. ‘Fly fishing, don’t you know.’

I turned to Mrs Pinchbeck. ‘Do you have any other fish courses planned?’

She consulted a well-thumbed sheet which she took from a pocket in her skirt. It was clearly the menu for their seemingly never-ending feast. ‘We have smoked herrings as course no 11 and trout with almonds as number 24.’ She showed me the menu. Just looking at the list of dishes they had planned made me feel queasy. I had a powerful feeling that it would be something of a miracle if the diners all managed to get to the end of their feast. Why, I couldn’t help wondering, didn’t Mr Pinchbeck celebrate his birthday by taking his chums along to the Duck and Puddle to enjoy one of Gilly’s steak and kidney pies. They could, if they’d had any room left, follow it up with a slice of treacle tart or a helping of spotted dick with plenty of custard.

‘You mustn’t eat those courses,’ I told Mr Beauclerk. ‘And while those dishes are being cooked, prepared and served you must keep out of the kitchen and the dining room.’

‘Absurd!’ said Mr Beauclerk. ‘I’ve never had any problem with fish until you came along.’ He said this as though as I were the cause of his symptoms. He swallowed. ‘And why do I have to keep out of the way when fish is being cooked? Are you worried that the fish might jump out of the dish and nibble my nose? Do you think it is going to leap off the plate and bite me?’ He laughed and looked around the table. There were some titters and a guffaw from his fellow guests.

‘Well, I’m afraid I think you probably have a fish allergy now,’ I told him. I really didn’t much care for this fellow. ‘And if you are allergic to fish and you eat it again then there is a chance that you could have a full-blooded anaphylactic shock reaction. You also need to avoid vapour produced when fish is being cooked because that could produce a reaction.’

‘What does that mean, in English?’ he demanded, his rudeness growing.

‘It means there is a chance you could die if you ignore what I’m telling you,’ I said.

‘Oh, well, we’re all going to die eventually!’ said Mr Beauclerk, with a wave of his hands. ‘You’re not frightening me that easily.’

‘I’m not trying to frighten you,’ I told him firmly. ‘I’m merely warning you what might happen if you aren’t careful.’ I was tempted to tell him that I really didn’t give a damn whether he listened to my advice or not.

Mr Beauclerk refused to leave the dining room for me to give him an injection. Instead, he stood up and lowered his trousers and told me to swab the skin and jab the needle into his thigh while everyone else carried on eating.

Giving in to his stubbornness, I opened my black bag and took out a syringe and a vial of an antihistamine. Suddenly, he pulled up his trousers and sat down again. ‘I don’t feel as bad as I did,’ he said abruptly. ‘The incident has passed.’

It was true that the rash seemed to be fading and the wheezing was nowhere near as bad as it had been. ‘I still think I should give you an injection,' I said. 'Or at the very least you should let me give you a couple of antihistamine tablets.'

'No, no, no!' he said, waving a hand imperiously. 'On your way, doctor! My body has healed itself. Your services are no longer required.' He then laughed loudly. He seemed to be playing to his audience and they responded with more titters and, I have to say, some rather uncomfortable laughter. The Pinchbecks both looked deeply embarrassed.

Under the circumstances there was nothing else I could do. I could hardly force the man to allow me to treat him. I said goodbye to everyone and drove back home to have my lunch. I was looking forward to my cheese and onion rolls and my coffee. And then, with a little luck, I was hoping that I could get back to my bonfire.

But my luck was out.

Just as I finished the last of my coffee, the telephone rang. It had, at least, had the decency to wait until I'd finished my lunch.

It was Mrs Pinchbeck again. She sounded panicky.

'You must come quickly, doctor!' she shouted. 'It's an emergency.'

'What's happened?' I asked.

'It's Mr Beauclerk,' she said.

'Did he eat more fish?'

'He insisted on eating the herrings.'

'And what's happened?'

'He's having difficulty breathing. His face is all swollen.'

'Lie him down, on his side and make sure his airway is open.'

'My husband has done all that. He went on a first aid course at the bank.'

'Good. I'm on my way. And I'll ask my wife to call an ambulance.'

I put down the telephone receiver, asked Patsy to ring for an ambulance to go to the Pinchbecks' address, picked up my black bag and was in the car and on my way within a minute and a half of receiving the call.

Life is a constant near death experience but Mr Beauclerk was frighteningly close to taking the final curtain when I arrived at the Pinchbecks'.

He had suffered an anaphylactic shock reaction and the ferryman was preparing to take him on that final journey across the Styx. He was still breathing, but with considerable difficulty; his heart was still beating, but hardly healthily; and when I checked his blood pressure, I found it had collapsed.

'We told him he shouldn't have eaten any more fish,' said one of the other guests. I didn't notice which one it was.

'He wouldn't listen,' said Mrs Pinchbeck who was close to tears.

I took out a syringe, a needle and a glass vial of adrenalin. I broke the top off the vial, filled the syringe with adrenalin and squirted the stuff into the foolish dinner guest.

Gradually, the adrenalin did its work. Mr Beauclerk began to breathe a little more easily, his blood pressure rose a little and his colour began to return.

'He'll need to go into the hospital in Barnstaple,' I told Mr Pinchbeck, who was kneeling beside me.

'Could he have a relapse?'

'I hope not. But he needs to be in hospital for a few days just in case.' I took some notepaper out of my bag and wrote an explanatory note for the hospital doctor who would have to admit Mr Beauclerk. I put the note into an envelope.

The ambulance arrived twenty minutes or so later. The driver had done well since they'd had to come from Barnstaple. The journey from the ambulance station to the Pinchbecks' home is only about 11 miles but it's a difficult 11 miles; all twists and turns and bad bends.

By the time the ambulance had arrived, Mr Beauclerk had more or less recovered and naturally, though he felt and looked weak, he didn't want to go to hospital.

'You're going,' I told him firmly, feeling that this was not the time for arguments or discussions.

'You can't make me,' he said, defiantly. He tried to get up but he was as weak as the proverbial kitten and he fell back down again immediately.

'I think Mr Beauclerk is a little confused,' I told one of the ambulance men. 'He definitely needs to be in hospital.' I handed over the envelope containing the note I had written.

'No problem, doctor,' said the ambulance man. He slipped the envelope into his jacket pocket. The two of them lifted a protesting Mr Beauclerk onto a stretcher, wrapped a blanket around him and fastened him to the stretcher with straps.

Mr Beauclerk tried to lift himself up but failed. 'Maybe you're right, doctor,' he said, when he found he was unable to move. ‘I do seem to be rather weak.’ I don’t think he realised he was strapped to the stretcher. He turned his head. ‘I’ll want a refund of part of my £20,’ he said, not addressing anyone in particular but clearly speaking to the Pinchbecks. ‘And I’ll pick up the bottles of wine I brought with me when I’m feeling better.’

The ambulance men took him away.

I don’t think anyone was sorry to see him go.

I put the used syringe, together with the needle and the remains of the glass vial into my bag, locked it and said goodbye to the Pinchbecks and their other guests. And as the ambulance roared off to Barnstaple, bells ringing and lights flashing, I headed steadily back to Bilbury Grange.

I thought I might treat myself to a second cup of coffee before I lit my bonfire. I had, it seemed, been looking forward to that bonfire for a week. It was difficult to believe I had only built it a few hours ago.

I had restocked my bag and finished the coffee and was reflecting on how fortunate I was that Patsy had no more affection for dinner parties than I did, when the telephone rang again. Some days are like that. It was, by now, about three o’clock in the afternoon.

This time it was Mr Pinchbeck, rather than his wife, on the other end of the telephone.

‘I’m so sorry to bother you again, doctor,’ he said, sounding genuinely apologetic. ‘But we’re having a problem with another of our guests.’

‘What seems to be the problem?’ I asked, doing my best to hide my weariness and resorting to a favourite medical cliché. With the amount of food being consumed at the Pinchbecks’, I half expected to be told that the entire dinner party cast had collapsed with digestive upsets. If I had eaten a quarter of the meal they had planned, it would have been me, not the table, which would have been groaning.

‘It’s Constance Chatterton’ said Mr Pinchbeck. ‘She’s having a bit of a funny turn.’

‘What sort of funny turn? What symptoms? Do I need to call an ambulance for her?’

‘Oh no, I don’t think she’ll need an ambulance,’ said Mr Pinchbeck. ‘Indeed, I sincerely hope not.’

I told him I’d be there as quickly as I could. Once again, I said goodbye to Patsy, told her where I was going, picked up my black bag and headed for the car. If the Rolls had been a horse it would have doubtless found its way to the Pinchbecks’ without any help from me.

Mrs Chatterton was still sitting at the Pinchbecks’ dining table. The other guests had not stopped eating but Mrs Chatterton seemed to be taking a breather.

‘What’s the problem?’ I asked her, more breezily than I felt.

‘My vision is blurred,’ said Mrs Chatterton. ‘And I’ve got an itchy rash.’ She was slurring her words and it was clear that she had been drinking. I wasn’t surprised to hear that she had been drinking. The guests would definitely need a good deal of fluid to help wash down all that food.

‘Where is the itchy rash?’

‘Pretty well everywhere.’

‘Is there anything else?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Did the symptoms come on suddenly or slowly?’

‘Rather slowly.’

‘Do you have any food allergies that you know of?’

‘No, no I don’t think so.’

‘What have you had to drink?’

‘Just a couple of gin and tonics. I don’t drink wine. I’m not terribly keen on it.’

‘How many gin and tonics?’

‘Two or three,’ she replied.

‘Seven or eight,’ whispered her husband. ‘But they were very weak. They contained far more tonic than gin.’

‘Are you sure there aren’t any other symptoms?’ I asked her.

She frowned, thinking hard. ‘I don’t think so,’ she said.

‘You said you had a ringing in your ears,’ her husband reminded her.

‘Oh yes. I forgot that. I have a ringing noise in my ears.’

And it was that which gave me the clue. I asked Mrs Pinchbeck to fetch one of the bottles of tonic water so that I could look at the label. And sure enough the tonic contained a fairly hefty quantity of quinine.

There had for some time been an on-going campaign to get a reduction in the amount of quinine in tonic water. But back in the 1970s, some brands of tonic water still contained an unhealthy quantity of the stuff.

‘How many bottles of this has she drunk?’ I asked Mrs Pinchbeck.

She went out into the kitchen to check on the collection of bottles which had accumulated.

‘Seven,’ she told me when she returned.

‘Seven bottles of tonic water?’

‘Yes.’

And then I was sure of the diagnosis.

‘I think your problem is caused by the quinine in the tonic water,’ I told Mrs Chatterton. ‘It happens sometimes. And your symptoms are fairly classic ones.

She laughed. It was a strange, almost hysterical sort of laugh. ‘Not the gin, then?’

‘No, not the gin.’

‘I should have had more gin and less tonic water.’

‘That would have caused a different set of problems.’

‘I suppose so.’

‘What’s the treatment?’ asked Mr Chatterton. ‘Can you give her anything?’

‘I’m afraid I’m going to have to send her to hospital,’ I told him.

The Pinchbecks’ dinner party was beginning to resemble their children’s party which had resulted in most of the guests ending up as patients in the local hospital.

‘Is that really necessary?’ asked Mr Chatterton.

‘I’m afraid so,’ I told him. ‘I’m sure she’ll be fine but I want them to do some tests and keep an eye on her for a day or two.’

‘We’ll soon have to move what remains of our dinner party to the hospital!’ said Mr Balfour Morrison, the school-teacher and broadcaster. He seemed to think this was funny. ‘Still, there’s more food for those of us still here, eh?’

The Pinchbecks both looked at him. Mr Morrison seemed unaware that the sick woman’s husband was not two yards away from him. If anyone had spoken like that when Patsy was being sent into hospital, I would have been unable to resist the temptation to see whether my fist was made of sterner stuff than his nose.

The appalling Morrison grinned and raised a wine glass in a callous salute. I really wasn’t terribly impressed by the Pinchbecks’ choice of friends.

‘Have you got a phone I could use?’ I asked Mr Pinchbeck.

He showed me into a tiny room which he used as a study. It was barely big enough for a desk and a chair but there was a telephone on the desk.

I shut the door and rang for an ambulance. When I’d done that there was time for me to ring the hospital in Barnstaple.

I explained the situation to the young doctor to whom I spoke. It turned out that he was the doctor who had admitted Mr Beauclerk. He sounded astonished that he was about to receive another guest from the same dinner party.

‘How many more people have you got there?’ he asked.

‘Just five more to go,’ I told him.

‘Some dinner party! Try not to send them all in,’ he said. ‘We’re getting a bit tight on beds.’

I said I would do my best then I hung up and went back out into the dining room.

Mrs Chatterton was comfortable enough and clearly not deteriorating. The damage had been done but it would not, I was sure, leave any permanent damage.

I left the Pinchbecks’ before the ambulance arrived and then I headed back to Bilbury Grange. As I left, Mrs Harrison was serving another course and her son was still washing dishes. The Pinchbecks had clearly decided to continue with their decimated dinner party. The show must go on. I heard someone say it was course 42. I didn’t stop to find out what the course consisted of as it was nearly time for my dinner.

I had just about finished my evening meal, a chunky slice of home-made vegetarian pizza accompanied by a very refreshing glass of home-made lemonade, when I received the next call from the Pinchbecks. Somehow, it wasn’t a complete surprise. When a group of people eat so much food and drink, and wash it down with so much alcohol, there are almost certain to be problems. The human body isn’t built for 55 course meals.

This time, it was Mr Pinchbeck who telephoned. I wondered if he and his wife were now drawing lots to see who made the call.

‘I feel so embarrassed to be ringing you again,’ he said.

And, to be fair, he did sound embarrassed.

Actually, I felt embarrassed for him. How many patients have had to call their doctor four times in a single day?

Job had his boils to deal with. Dante had the nine circles of hell to pass through. And now I had the Pinchbecks’ dinner party. Sorting out their darned dinner party guests was beginning to feel like my life’s work. I began to sympathise with that bloke Sisyphus, the chap who was forever pushing a boulder up a hill. Actually, the way things were going, I seemed to be forever pushing the wrong damned boulder up the wrong damned hill.

‘One of our guests has been shot,’ said Mr Pinchbeck.

I could hardly believe it.

Sometimes, things just go one way. The lucky gambler has a surprising streak of luck. The businessman has a run of bad luck. You can’t manage these things: they just happen.

‘I’m on my way,’ I told him. ‘Do I need to ring for an ambulance? Do you need to call the police?’

‘I think we probably need both,’ he said. ‘Actually, two of our guests have been shot. Both Balfour Morrison and Elmore Chatterton have been shot in the leg.’

‘Have you controlled the bleeding?’

‘Yes, more or less.’

‘Who shot them?’

‘Our Labrador puppy.’

‘Your Labrador puppy shot both Balfour Morrison and Elmore Chatterton?’

‘Yes.’

The day was becoming stranger by the minute.

‘Whose gun was it?’

‘Elmore Chatterton’s.’

‘I’ll be there as soon as I can,’ I told him. I wondered if the dog had shot the two men separately or if he’d shot them both with a single blast of the gun. The latter seemed more likely. It was difficult to imagine the Pinchbecks’ playful Labrador puppy having some sort of brainstorm and going on a wild shooting rampage. But the way the day was going, I wouldn’t have regarded that as impossible. ‘I’ll ask Patsy to telephone for an ambulance,’ I told Mr Pinchbeck. ‘I’ll leave you to telephone the police if you think they should be there.’

‘You won’t be ringing the police?’

‘I need to get into the car and get down there as soon as I can. I’ll leave calling them to you.’

To be honest, I’m a bit old-fashioned and I don’t think it is a doctor’s job to call the police if a patient is injured.

Once again, I asked Patsy to send an ambulance to the Pinchbecks’ and then I put my black bag back into the car.

I really felt that by now the Rolls probably could find its way down to the Pinchbecks’ house without my help. We slid into the Pinchbecks’ driveway and it felt strangely like coming home.

It turned out that Mr Morrison and Mr Chatterton had been shot in the calf while sitting at the table.

The remaining diners had taken their statutory 30-minute break from eating, and Mr Chatterton had gone outside to shoot some birds. He’d wandered around outside for twenty minutes or so, firing into the woods where he thought he’d seen a few crows and pigeons, and when he had come back into the house he had left his shotgun leaning against a chair. He said he thought that the gun was unloaded. Tragically, it wasn’t. The Pinchbecks’ dog brushed against the gun, knocking it over, and then, as it stumbled, the poor beast trod on the trigger. The pellets had scattered across quite a large area but miraculously the only victims had been Mr Morrison and Mr Chatterton himself. Surprisingly, it is not at all unusual for people to be shot with their own guns, with the trigger having being pressed by a dog. I wondered if Mr Pinchbeck had called the police. I wondered whether they would decide to arrest the poor dog. Actually, I couldn’t help wondering whether I’d been told the whole story. Mr Chatterton seemed to me to be a pretty unpleasant character. Maybe one of the other guests had fired the gun and hit Mr Morrison by accident. Maybe someone had shot them both. There was no butler available as a possible suspect but there was always Eric Harrison. Maybe a day spent washing interminable dishes in the Pinchbecks’ kitchen had deranged him.

I decided it was nothing to do with me and I didn’t really care terribly much if he had shot them both so I dismissed all these strange thoughts. The day was strange enough as it was. And I was rapidly losing sympathy with this unpleasant bunch of bezzlers.

There were quite a few pellets embedded in Mr Harrison’s calf and the pellets were huge. From what I could see they looked as if they were made of lead. They were the size of small marbles. Mrs Pinchbeck was holding his leg in an attempt to staunch the bleeding. Unfortunately, she wasn’t making a terribly good job of it. Blood was still pouring out from the wounds the pellets had made and from the position of the wounds, I hazarded a guess that the posterior tibial artery had been damaged. Mr Harrison was moaning; partly in pain and partly, I suspected, as a result of the shock. When you are sitting at a dinner table working your way through a 55-item menu, you may reasonably expect to find yourself coping with indigestion, heartburn and an attack of wind but you probably don’t expect to be hit by some chunky sized lead pellets fired from a fellow diner’s resting, and seemingly harmless, shotgun.

‘Press harder on the wound,’ I told Mrs Pinchbeck.

With some obvious reluctance, she did as I had asked.

When I was satisfied that the bleeding had been staunched, I left Mr Harrison while I took a look at Mr Chatterton’s injury.

Mr Chatterton’s injury wasn’t as bad because he had been hit by just two or three pellets. But he too was bleeding badly. A smallish artery, probably the peroneal or fibular artery, a subsidiary branch of the posterior tibial artery, had been severed and blood was pumping out at quite a rate. It was some time since I'd studied anatomy but it's amazing how these bits and pieces of information drift back into the conscious mind when they are needed and appropriate.

Mr Chatterton was attempting to stop the bleeding by pressing on it but he wasn't pressing hard enough. Unlike venous blood, which just trickles out, arterial blood comes out of the vessel under pressure and can spurt feet or even yards into the air. The spray of blood from both legs made it quite clear that both Mr Harrison and Mr Chatterton had suffered significant arterial damage. It was, I thought, a good thing that I had managed to get to the Pinchbecks' without much delay. And it was a good thing that I had asked Patsy to call for an ambulance.

GPs don't usually find themselves treating more than one patient at a time. When it happens, you have to use the triage system utilised in military hospitals such as American MASH units. The patient who is most seriously wounded must be treated as a priority, though you do what you can to stabilise the less seriously wounded.

It seemed pretty clear that Mr Chatterton's injury was less serious than Mr Harrison's. But he seemed to be losing more blood than Mr Harrison. It seemed clear that the arterial damage to Mr Chatterton's leg was more severe than the damage to Mr Harrison's leg. They were both going to need surgery but my job was clearly simply to limit the loss of blood and keep both men alive until they could be taken to the hospital.

'Do you have something I can use as a tourniquet?' I asked Mrs Harrison, who had stopped cooking to watch the excitement.

'What sort of thing?' she asked.

'Something I can tie around Mr Chatterton's leg.'

'I don't think you should put on a tourniquet,' said someone. I looked up. Mr Pinchbeck was standing over me. 'Our first aid teacher taught us that tourniquets can be dangerous. He said that simply putting pressure on the site of the wound can be safer.'

'Sometimes,' I agreed. I wondered why Mr Pinchbeck, who looked very pale, wasn't doing something useful instead of merely offering theoretical advice.

It is true that tourniquets can be problematical if they are left on for too long but when you have two patients who are bleeding badly, it is vital to stop the flow of blood. And since I only had one pair of hands, and none of the others present seemed prepared or able to staunch the flow of blood, a tourniquet seemed to me to be the only solution. In fact, a tourniquet is only really a problem if it is left on for too long and the tissues are deprived of essential oxygen. If the tourniquet is loosened every few minutes, to allow blood to flow into the tissues, then no damage will be done.

'Excuse me,' I said to Mr Chatterton, 'do you mind if I use your tie to stop your bleeding?'

Mr Chatterton looked at me, then at his tie. It was a hideous thing in blue and orange. He shook his head. I unfastened the tie and then tied it around his thigh with a good knot so that I could unfasten it easily and quickly.

'I really, really don't think you should do that,' said Mr Pinchbeck.

'The alternative is to let the poor fellow bleed to death,' I pointed out, speaking softly so that only Mr Pinchbeck could hear me. There was already a large puddle of blood on the floor. It is always difficult to estimate how much blood has been lost from a wound but I thought that Mr Chatterton had already lost at least half a pint of the good stuff. If we left his leg to bleed then he would be dangerously exsanguinated by the time the ambulance arrived.

'Have you got a watch?' I asked Mr Pinchbeck.

'Yes, of course.'

'Then please tell me when ten minutes have passed. I'll then unfasten the tourniquet and let some blood through.' I checked the wound. The flow of blood had slowed almost to a standstill.

Mr Pinchbeck nodded.

He was, I hoped, learning fast that there is sometimes a difference between what makes sense in the classroom and what makes sense in a real emergency situation.

Once I'd tied a tourniquet round Mr Chatterton's leg, I went back to Mr Harrison. I had thought that I might be able to move at least one of the pellets but I decided not to move anything. There seemed a good chance that the pellet I could reach most easily was compressing a small blood vessel. If I moved it then there was a real chance that the bleeding would intensify. And Mr Harrison, like his fellow dinner party guest, had already lost a good deal of blood.

Thanking the sartorial gods that both men had been wearing ties, I obtained Mr Harrison's permission to remove his tie from around his neck and used it to tie a tourniquet above his knee. His tie was just as hideous as that belonging to Mr Chatterton. It was yellow and had little blue squares on it. I wonder who designs these things. Do they do it as a joke, perhaps?

Once the tourniquet was in place, the blood flow slowed to a trickle and then stopped.

Mr Harrison was enormous and his leg as thick as a telegraph pole. The tie was only just long enough.

He told me that he weighed a sixth of a ton and he seemed quite proud of this. The other man who had been shot, Mr Chatterton, later also boasted that he weighed several hundredweight. They both seemed proud to be indecently obese.

The particular act of eating is, like most human experiences, a transient experience. Sleeping, washing, listening to good music, sex, looking at good art – all these things are as transient as the enjoyment of good food, well prepared and served with panache.

But the consequences of eating are not transient and these two men were proof of that fact. Their weight had, I suspected, been rising steadily for the last 40 odd years.

‘Will this do?’ asked Mrs Harrison, holding out a tea towel. She was presumably offering it for use as a tourniquet. It was, of course, quite useless for that purpose.

‘It’s OK,’ I told her, as kindly as I could manage. ‘We’ve got what we need.’

‘Am I going to die?’ Mr Harrison asked.

‘Not from this,’ I replied.

I told both men that they would have to go to the Barnstaple casualty department so that the pellets could be removed safely and the damaged arteries stitched up. I reassured them both that although their injuries looked bad neither of them was in any serious danger.

‘Will they be able to save my leg?’ asked Mr Harrison.

I assured both men that there was no danger of either of them losing a limb.

‘How did the gun come to be loaded?’ I asked Mr Pinchbeck.

‘Mr Chatterton had been out shooting,’ he replied. ‘We were taking one of our 30 minute breaks and he’d gone outside to see if he could find some birds to shoot.’

‘Where was he shooting?’ I asked.

‘In the fields just beyond the end of our garden,’ replied Mr Pinchbeck. ‘And in the woodlands just over the fence. He was just having a bit of fun. Shooting a few birds.’

I find it difficult to understand why anyone would shoot wild birds for no reason other than that they are there – especially when those birds are no threat to him or his crops and are not going to be eaten or used in any way. What sort of person kills animals just for fun?

‘Have you got permission for your guests to shoot in there?’ I asked him.

I was furious that he would think it ‘fun’ for one of his guests to wander around the countryside shooting birds for absolutely no reason other than the fact that he could.

‘No,’ said Mr Pinchbeck, rather defiantly. ‘Am I supposed to get permission before allowing my guests to shoot in the countryside?’

‘Of course you are! All sorts of people walk in those woods. Children play in the woods. Ramblers and hikers walk in them.’

‘I didn’t know that. How was I supposed to know?’

‘You could have asked someone,’ I said.

‘Well, it didn’t occur to me.’

‘Let’s hope no one was hit by a stray shot,’ I said.

I suddenly realised that I was interrogating Mr Pinchbeck like a policeman. In addition to the fact that his guest had been shooting birds for ‘fun’, I was angry because I knew he could have easily hit an innocent rambler or a dog walker or a child. Or even a poacher passing through in search of game for food. I realised that it wasn’t my place to decide whether or not he had been behaving badly. I shut up and walked away.

The gunman seemed to me to have all the moral character, and sense of responsibility, one might reasonably associate with the sort of creatures you find when you lift a small rock in the garden.

‘What’s the time? Is the ten minutes up?’ I asked him.

Mr Pinchbeck looked at his watch. ‘Oh, yes. Just about.’

I released both tourniquets and let some blood into the tissues. After a minute or so, I retied the tourniquets.

While I waited for the ambulance to arrive, I rang the hospital and spoke to the young doctor on call. He actually laughed when I told him I was sending two more of the Pinchbecks’ dinner guests to the hospital. ‘They’ve both been shot,’ I told him. ‘You’ll have to dig out some lead shot but they aren’t too seriously injured.’

‘It sounds to me as though you’ve wandered into an Agatha Christie novel!’ he said. ‘The last one standing will be the guilty one.’

The ambulance crew were the same pair who had taken Mr Beauclark to the hospital. ‘Shall we just come back here when we’ve delivered this pair?’ asked the driver.

I felt sorry for the two of them, having to lift such obese creatures into the back of their ambulance.

‘I hope the springs will cope,’ said the driver, after he’d closed the back doors.

I hoped so too. I told them I sincerely hoped they wouldn’t be needed again. I also told them about the tourniquets and the guy who was going to travel in the back of the ambulance promised to keep an eye on things and to unfasten the ties every few minutes.

When I left the Pinchbecks’, a very weary Mrs Harrison was serving item no 55 on Mrs Pinchbeck’s absurd menu. It had seemed absurd when they’d started the meal but now, for some reason, it seemed even more absurd, self-indulgent and utterly pointless.

Miraculously, Mrs Harrison still had a genuine and jolly smile on her face though the dinner party now seemed to me to be a rather sad affair. Most of the blood had been mopped up but the dining room still looked as though a battle had been fought there. Blood, especially when squirting out of damaged arteries, tends to travel quite a distance and just before I left I noticed that some had reached a picture hanging on the wall.

I got the impression that the two remaining guests and the Pinchbecks were now simply going through the motions of enjoying themselves. Why they didn’t abandon their ill-fated dinner party was quite beyond me. The only people left at the dining table were Claude Templeton and the two Pinchbecks. I could only imagine that they were all suffering from shock and were carrying on without really realising what they were doing.

If you looked around and didn’t realise that there should have been five guests you’d have thought that everything was really quite normal. Mrs Harrison’s son, young Eric, was still washing dishes and his equally long-suffering mum was still cooking and serving.

I felt sorry for the Harrisons. They were hard workers. I wondered if Mrs Pinchbeck had thought to offer them anything to eat or drink.

As I drove slowly home I realised there had been no sign of the police at the Pinchbecks. I wondered if they realised that the hospital would have to call the police. No hospital doctor can treat a gun wound without informing the authorities. I supposed that I should have advised the Pinchbecks to leave the gun where it had fallen – and not touch it. But I had been rather too busy dealing with the wounded to worry about the cause of their injuries. The Labrador who had inadvertently fired the gun had been nowhere to be seen.

Back home I parked the car in the driveway and sniffed the now cool evening air.

I could smell smoke.

I could definitely smell smoke.

I hurried into the house and found Patsy. I didn’t have to ask her what was burning. From the kitchen window, I could see a curl of smoke rising at the bottom of the garden.

‘My bonfire!’ I cried. ‘What’s happened to it?’

‘I’m so sorry,’ said Patsy, who looked and sounded genuinely upset for she knew how much I’d been looking forward to lighting my bonfire. ‘Mr Parfitt happened to it.’

Mr Parfitt is our gardener. He has been helping me look after our garden for years. But he has one, singular weakness: he does not understand my penchant for garden bonfires. He sometimes pretends to understand and share my passion for lighting fires. But deep down I know he has never properly understood.

‘Mr Parfitt came by while you were out,’ explained Patsy. ‘He said he had to do something in the greenhouse.’

‘But while he was here…’

‘Exactly! As he left, he said he’d lit the bonfire for you. He said he thought it was likely to rain later on and that if you were delayed you might have difficulty lighting the fire.’ Patsy touched my arm. ‘I’m sorry, my love.’

I looked out silently at the plume of smoke. It had clearly been a very good bonfire. Unbeknownst to Mr Parfitt, there was so much paper packed underneath a weatherproof cover of old branches that it would not have been difficult to light even if it had been pouring with rain.

‘I’ll just wander down the garden and take a look at it,’ I said to Patsy. ‘Make sure everything is OK.’

‘It’ll be chilly in an hour or so,’ said Patsy, who knew that I would be disappointed by the fact that my putative bonfire was now just a pile of smoking ash. And she certainly knew that I’d had a long and arduous day dealing with the Pinchbecks’ party guests. ‘So I’ve laid a fire in the drawing room.’ She smiled at me. ‘Perhaps you’d light it when you come in?’

Patsy can light a fire just as well as I can, of course.

A fire in the living room hearth wasn’t quite the same as an enormous bonfire. But it would make an excellent substitute.

‘They’re showing *The Thirty Nine Steps* on the television,’ continued Patsy. ‘The Hitchcock version with Robert Donat and Madeleine Carroll. And afterwards, they’re showing the 1938 Hitchcock version of *The Lady Vanishes*; the one with Margaret Lockwood and Michael Redgrave and May Whitty as Miss Froy. We could watch them both, if you like. And you could make some toast. Use the brass toasting fork and toast the bread in front of the fire.’

I perked up noticeably. *The Thirty Nine Steps* is one of my favourite films. And I love Basil Radford and Naunton

Wayne as Charters and Caldicott in *The Lady Vanishes*. And with most of the Pinchbecks' dinner guests already in hospital there was a good chance I would be able to watch both films all the way through. Hot buttered toast, made with a toasting fork in front of a blazing log fire, would be a huge and welcome bonus. Toast never tastes as good as it does when it has been made in front of a log fire.

Belatedly, and with some shame, I noticed for the first time that while I'd been out, Patsy had changed into one of her prettiest and most alluring frocks. There was just a promising hint of cleavage. She'd done something to her hair too. And I could smell the enticing smell of an expensive perfume which Gilly had bought Patsy for her birthday.

'You look very beautiful!' I told her.

And then we kissed.

'You've had a long day,' she said, a few minutes later. 'I'll open that new bottle of malt whisky, and put it with a glass by your chair.'

A beautiful wife. A log fire. A couple of favourite movies. A comfortable, old armchair and a glass or two of something good.

Heaven takes many forms.

I called to Ben, our faithful dog, and together we tottered down the garden to check on the remains of the bonfire, and to sniff the slightly smoky evening air.

And after that there was still a great deal to look forward to.

For the Pinchbecks, a strange and painful day was doubtless coming to a close.

But at Bilbury Grange, the best part of the day was yet to come.

The Poacher: A Man of Quiet Integrity

I knew him from the Duck and Puddle.

He supplied Frank and Gilly, the landlord and landlady of the Bilbury village pub, with a steady supply of rabbits, pheasant and trout. Unlike Mr Chatterton, the Pinchbecks' guest, he never shot or caught anything which wasn't going to be eaten. Frank and Gilly paid him with whisky and sandwiches and with essential provisions such as salt, cheese and a loaf of bread. I'm pretty sure that no money ever changed hands. Toby was not a man for whom money meant a great deal, though he would occasionally get paid in cash when doing odd jobs for local farmers and landowners.

Toby was a patient of mine, by which I mean only that he lived in the village of Bilbury and since there were no other doctors in the area, he was registered as a patient of mine. But he had never once been to the surgery, or asked me to visit him at home. If he had a problem, any sort of problem, he dealt with it himself. He was someone who took the phrase 'self-sufficiency' very seriously. It was the way he lived his life.

Lots of people play at self-sufficiency. Town folk go out into the woods to pick mushrooms and berries and end up picking stuff that makes them ill. My friend Will, who practises as a doctor in a town practice, told me that he has a patient who has a hazelnut bush in his garden and who rushes out and digs up nuts he has seen the squirrels burying. Will also has a patient who keeps a pig in his compact, suburban, back garden and who spends much of his life repairing fences, both literally and figuratively. Will says that he is sure that these folk mean well and that they think that keeping half a dozen hens or a couple of geese means that they are living the good life. In truth, of course, they are merely playing at simplicity and self-sufficiency. Toby was living it.

I had known Toby for years. He always looks rather worn out, and reminded me of an old car which has never been repaired, restored or fussed over. An old car may have a few dings in the bodywork and some cracks in the leather seats. But it still does what is expected of it.

Winter or summer, he wore an old waxed raincoat over a thick jacket and a pair of corduroy trousers. If it wasn't actually raining, the top few inches of a roll necked jumper could just be seen. The belt of the raincoat had long since disappeared and had, inevitably, I suppose, been replaced by a piece of dark blue baler twine. (He used blue rather than orange because it was less visible in the countryside.) Two more lengths of baler twine, also blue, were tied around the legs of his trousers, just above ankle height. When I asked him about these, he said they were there to stop snakes and vermin crawling up his trouser leg when he was lying in the woods or on a riverbank. He never removed the raincoat, and only rarely removed the old tweed cap which he wore rather rakishly to one side. Even when he was sitting in the snug at the Duck and Puddle, he still wore his outdoor coat. However, he had the manners of a gentleman and he always lifted the cap if a woman entered the room. His hair was thin, unkempt and grey and looked as if it had been cut by someone wielding a pair of scissors, possibly in front of the mirror and possibly without the aid of a reflection. I'm confident he always cut it himself. He wore fingerless, knitted gloves which were beginning to unravel.

Generally speaking, the only parts of him which were visible were his face and fingertips but these told the story of a man who has lived his life out of doors, and had never fussed with moisturising cream. Surprisingly, perhaps, he was clean-shaven, though he did sport a pair of rather extravagantly bushy sideburns.

His eyelids were red rimmed with chronic blepharitis and both his conjunctiva red veined from constant exposure to the North Devon wind. His left eye had a ptosis. His skin was rough and his cheeks red veined from a mixture of wind and whisky. He had eyes which had seen a great deal. He was a quiet man who knew a good deal more than he told, unlike the noisy folk who tell more than they know.

Thumper, who revered him, said Toby knew everything there was to know about the countryside; he knew nothing that was not worth knowing and not worth learning.

Toby had hardly ever left Bilbury.

As a young man he had visited Exeter once; delivering a horse for a local farmer. Once the horse had been delivered, he had turned the horse box round and driven straight back. It had, I suspect, never occurred to him to stay and take a look at the city. His world was in Bilbury and the boundary of his world was probably the distance a man could walk from the Duck and Puddle in half a day. (Allowing the other half a day for the walk back.)

He owned just one book, an old family Bible, nearly six inches thick and fastened with a brass clasp which was fitted with a stout lock.

His one luxury was the *Sporting Life* newspaper which he collected every Saturday from Peter Marshall's village shop, though as far as anyone knew he never placed a bet. He paid for the newspaper, and any other essentials he occasionally purchased, with a freshly caught pheasant or rabbit. As with the Duck and Puddle, it was very rare for money to ever change hands.

From afar, Toby always seemed to be rather stern and sad and earnest. There was a strange mixture of innocence and worldliness about him and although it is probably an exaggeration to say that he was much loved, he was certainly admired and respected for his independence and his skills.

He was a religious man, a firm believer in a benevolent God who could, if the occasion warranted it, express a profound fury. He never went to church, however, and had probably never been in a church in his life. He would have been embarrassed to sit there in his raincoat, tied up with baler twine, alongside worshippers in their Sunday best.

His one weakness was that he took everything he heard at face value. He was an honest and straightforward man himself and tended to believe what he heard others say. He once sat in the Duck and Puddle and heard some tourists discussing religion. One of them, an obnoxious academic well-known to television viewers but unknown to Toby, loud-mouthed and arrogant and full of his own self-importance, stated that God did not exist, and made the statement with such force that it appeared that he had inside information confirming his belief. Toby was deeply depressed for a month afterwards. ‘How did that man know the truth of what he said?’ he asked Frank Parsons weeks later. Frank assured him that the visitor was, in his view, an unpleasant lunatic who existed only to shock and to startle and to disconcert and who had mistaken his television persona for his real one. Eventually, Toby accepted Frank’s reassurance. But the man caused much unhappiness and I doubt very much if Toby was the first or last person to be so distressed by his unsupported, and unsupportable, allegations.

When he moved, Toby walked cautiously, in that way people walk on frost-hardened rutted earth or an ice slippery pavement. He wore well-worn and well-oiled boots and he could move without making a sound. He kept the leather greased so that it remained waterproof and never squeaked.

Quite a few people in the village were frightened of him though he was one of the gentlest and least threatening people I knew. Children used to keep out of his way and sometimes referred to him as the ‘Bogeyman’. One villager once told me that his son, who was 22-years-old and a corporal in the British army, was still so terrified of the ‘Bogeyman’ that he wouldn’t take the dog into the local woods in case they met.

Toby didn’t smile often but when he did it was a revelation. It wasn’t one of those ‘celebrity smiles’ which involve a lot of teeth but nothing in the eyes. His smile would take over his whole face. His eyes lit up and broad creases appeared around his mouth. For some reason he always smiled and nodded when he saw me. I felt strangely privileged.

Visitors who saw him tended to look down their noses, often mistaking him for a tramp or a beggar. He would gently but politely and firmly reject offers of food, drink or money. It was because he was a proud and independent man that he had chosen the life he lived.

I once asked Thumper, who knew him well, better than anyone in the village, how Toby had become a poacher.

I had, I think, entertained silly and romantic notions that he had perhaps run away from some city job, tired of the rat race. Had his wife left him? Had he lost his job or his driving licence and come to North Devon to forget, as a man might join the Foreign Legion?

Thumper laughed when I suggested these explanations; he explained that Toby had been an orphan, brought up by his grandparents. His mother had run away, no one could remember to where or for why, and his father, a farm labourer, had died in a tractor accident – a commoner countryside tragedy than most town folk realise. His grandfather had been a poacher and had taught young Toby the trade, just as any man might pass on his valued skills to a youngster.

Toby’s grandfather had, said Thumper, been quite a rogue. He had owned a mongrel dog which he had sold half a dozen times. On each occasion the dog had returned home immediately, finding his way home from Taunton, Exeter and, so Thumper swore, even from as far away as the village of Widecombe-in-the-Moor; the place which is famous as the home of Uncle Tom Cobleigh and all. The old man’s dog had been trained so well that he could slip into a farmyard and bring a chicken out to the owner without disturbing the farmer or his dogs.

Toby had no dog but he kept a ferret in a capacious poacher’s pocket which he had sewn into the inside of his waxed coat. Sometimes he carried the ferret in a trouser pocket. The ferret was rather old and, I suspect, kept more as a companion than as a hunting aide.

Poachers often keep ferrets for they are useful for hunting rabbits, as long as you don’t over-feed them and let them get too fat and lazy. Some poachers put a muzzle on their ferret before putting it into a rabbit burrow, and some crueller ones will even sew up the ferret’s lips so that it cannot eat or spoil the rabbit it catches. Some poachers starve their ferrets, to keep them keen, but Toby would never do that. And Toby had never muzzled his ferret in case the animal got lost in an extensive burrow. He explained to Thumper he couldn’t bear the idea of a ferret of his dying of starvation because it was muzzled. He never sent a ferret down a hole with a collar on or a lead, either. He said that if you did this the ferret could get caught up in an underground root and die, alone, starving and in the darkness. If his ferret didn't emerge from a warren, Toby would put gorse into one rabbit hole and light it, smoking out the ferret and catching it as it left another hole. Rabbit burrows can sometimes be a maze of paths, linked to other burrows and threading through roots and other underground obstacles. A ferret, even an experienced one, can easily get lost when there may be over 100 yards of tunnel underground.

One evening in the Duck and Puddle, Thumper had told me that it had been Toby's grandfather who had taught him how to use his hands to tickle a trout out of a stream, how to make a simple snare to catch a rabbit, how to pick up a hedgehog without pricking yourself on the creature's spines and how to catch a hare with nothing more than two hands and an old coat.

It was Toby's grandfather who taught Thumper how to catch a pheasant with his bare hands (put the dregs from a whisky bottle onto some corn and lay the corn down on a path used by the pheasant, then put a sack over the pheasant when it becomes drunk).

And he taught him how to set a gate net for hares. (Throw a net over a five-barred gate leading out of a field in which a hare has been spotted. Put stones on the top of the gate to keep the net in place, then use bits of stone or gorse to block up all the holes in the stone wall which surrounds the field. Finally, walk across the field, with the hare ahead of you. The hare, finding its usual escape routes blocked, will head for the gate and get caught in the net.)

The old man, said Thumper, had been proud of his simple skills and happy to pass them on to a boy who wanted to learn.

'The single most important thing he taught me,' said Thumper, 'was that when you are walking in strange woods you should always look behind you every twenty yards or so, because what you see then will look different to what is in front of you. And when you make your way back out of the woods that will be the way you'll be looking.'

In a town I don't doubt that Toby would have been regarded as a fool; a silly old man with no knowledge or value. But Toby understood country ways better than anyone. He could use a knapped flint to light a bonfire in the rain and somehow it would smoke away merrily. He could forecast the weather better than any meteorologist and he could make a catapult or a bow with the makings he carried in his pocket.

There is no doubt that city folk, visiting Bilbury, frequently looked down on him, patronised him and regarded him as someone who was, in their terms, 'a loser'.

'He wouldn't last a minute in London,' I heard a visiting banker sneer. I think it was the blue baler twine around his raincoat and trousers which they couldn't quite understand.

It was probably true that Toby would have struggled to survive in London.

But would that banker and his posh pals have been able to go into the woods armed only with a penknife, a piece of string and a couple of knapped flints, and then catch a trout and a rabbit before building a wood fire and preparing a three course meal?

Somehow, I rather doubt it.

The key to survival anywhere is to live with the environment, to respect it, to understand it and to prepare and plan for the inevitable vicissitudes of the locality. The key to living comfortably is to understand the delights and the dangers, the advantages and the disadvantages; to be satisfied that you are where you want to be, and to adapt your lifestyle to the environment in which you have chosen to spend your years.

Toby, like my friends Thumper, Patchy, Frank and Peter, had adapted to his surroundings perfectly and he was entirely comfortable with the world in which he found himself when he woke each morning.

I wonder how many London bankers can say that about themselves.

Thumper told me that he once had a meal with Toby which consisted of poached trout served with freshly picked and sliced almonds, followed by rabbit cooked on a spit over a wood fire and served with wild sage and mushrooms. For pudding, Toby served a handful of wild strawberries and black raspberries.

Contrary to appearances, Toby was certainly no tramp and no beggar. He was a professional poacher and a proud one; it would have doubtless surprised many town dwellers to know that he was well tolerated by local landowners.

In some areas, poaching is a real nuisance, for greedy and unthinking poachers cause a great deal of damage and spoil the local hunting and fishing. Gangs of professional poachers come from towns and cities to collect game which they can sell to wholesalers. They arrive at night in trucks and four-wheeled drive vehicles, armed with guns and traps and nets and they indiscriminately take huge quantities of rabbits, hares, deer and pheasant. They catch geese, salmon and trout too. I've even heard of them taking swans. Worst of all, these city poachers cut through fences with wire cutters, they damage gates and then leave them open and they churn up fields with their vehicles. A proper countryman poacher, such as Toby, can travel through the countryside without leaving a trace of his passing but the gangs leave devastation behind them and are, understandably, loathed both by landowners and by poachers such as Toby who regard them as giving the trade a bad name.

But Bilbury was too far away from what some folk like to describe as civilisation for the poaching gangs to bother coming and local landowners had no trouble with them.

Toby, one of few professional poachers in North Devon, was accepted and even respected by the people from whose land he took what he needed. As he travelled around the local countryside, he mended broken fences and gates and layered hedges which were becoming thin and had developed gaps through which stock might wander. If a smallholder needed help then Toby would turn up, as if by magic, and spend a day digging or layering a hedge or clearing rough scrub-land. He would neither expect nor accept payment above and beyond a simple meal, usually at the Duck and Puddle; and he would simply melt away at the end of the day.

I have never mastered any of the poacher's skills, nor have I had any desire to do so, but I understand that to be a successful, professional poacher (that is to say one who succeeds in taking game enough for his own needs, with a few extra to sell, without being caught himself) you need a fine turn of speed, an ability to disappear into the undergrowth at the first sign of danger, even when there doesn't appear to be any, an understanding and a knowledge of your prey's habits and weaknesses and a unique ability to maintain a working relationship of some sort with local landowners, game-keepers and fish wardens.

If there was something which needed attention, but which required machinery or equipment, Toby would leave a message at the Duck and Puddle for the landowner concerned. If he found a blocked ditch or a dangerous dead tree, he would leave a message describing the site of the problem. He knew who owned every field, every hedge, every gate, every ditch and every stream in and around Bilbury.

It was hardly surprising that everyone in the area turned a blind eye to his activities. Mind you, it wouldn't have mattered if they hadn't condoned his presence: Toby had lived all his life in the country and knew every copse, every brook and every path. Even if someone had wanted to catch him they would have found it an impossible task.

Thumper once asked me how it could be considered stealing to take wild, living creatures from a field or a stream and I have to confess that I could see what he meant.

Much to the puzzlement of some of the locals (and for a long while to Patsy's parents), Patsy and I don't eat meat and I don't like the idea of animals being hunted and killed but, putting that aside, the fact is that rabbits and deer don't respect boundaries and it is difficult to see how they can possibly belong to a landowner in the same way that a tree or a blackberry bush can belong to someone.

As I have already said, I had never seen Toby professionally. He had never been to my consulting room in Bilbury Grange and I had never visited him. I didn't even know where he lived. I assumed, I think, that he lived in a hideaway somewhere in the woods; sheltering under some sort of rough concoction of old sacking and branches. If I had thought about it, I would have realised that it was a silly notion.

And then one day, Thumper came to see me at Bilbury Grange.

It was about 3.00 p.m. on a Sunday afternoon and the weather was foul. The sky was so dark with rain clouds that it could have been night. You could hear thunder occasionally and our animals, Ben the dog and our cats, were all crowded into a comfortable corner behind the sofa. Outside the house, the sheep were all gathered in the barn where they had been sheltering against the storm which they had known for a while was on its way. Sheep can smell bad weather coming long before you or I would know anything was amiss.

'Will you come and see Toby,' asked Thumper. He sounded upset and worried. 'I was in the woods an hour or so ago, passing his place and I thought I'd call in to see how he was. I hadn't seen him for a while.'

'What's happened to him?'

'He's been shot.'

I stared at Thumper disbelievingly. Who on earth would shoot Toby? 'Who shot him? What with? When? Why?'

'He was hit with a shotgun load. Last Saturday. Not yesterday, the Saturday before that. He doesn't know who shot him but he says he knows it wasn't deliberate. He says a fat man with a 12 gauge was blasting at everything in sight and that as he tried to get away from the area he was hit by a load from the gun. He says he thinks the man either fired low, because he'd seen a low flying bird, or that he tripped and the gun went off accidentally. His back is peppered with shot and there is at least one buckshot pellet in his neck and another hit the back of his head. A couple of the damned things have come out. They're lead buckshot. I'd say they're size O or maybe even OO. Who the hell is using buckshot around here?'

I knew enough about shotgun cartridges to know that lead shot comes in a number of different sizes. Most hunters who are shooting rats or birds use small sized shot, and buckshot is usually kept for shooting big game animals such as deer. Buckshot which is size O is huge. Each lead ball is a third of an inch in diameter. Buckshot sized OO is even larger. The pellets are so large that a standard O gauge cartridge will contain only nine pellets.

And I realised immediately who had shot him.

Mr Chatterton, the idiot guest at the Pinchbecks' party who had been shot by his own gun, fired by a Labrador puppy, had been using a 12 gauge shotgun and he'd been using buckshot. He was as fat as they come; he had boasted to me that he weighed several hundredweight.

'How is he?'

‘He’s in a bad way, doc. If I hadn’t happened to call in he would have just died there. He wouldn’t go to the hospital and he wouldn’t even come and see you. He certainly won’t tell the police that he was shot.’

I picked up my bag. ‘Did you tell him that you were going to fetch me?’

Thumper nodded.

‘Was he OK about it?’

‘He said he’d see you. But no ambulance. And he won’t go into hospital. Not even the hospital in Bilbury. He said that if he’s going to die then he wants to die at home.’

‘Why won’t he go into hospital?’

‘He went into one once, a few years back. He said he heard them laughing at him. The nurses and the doctors treated him with contempt. He can’t cope with being treated without respect.’ Thumper paused and thought for a while. ‘He’s a man who has very little in his life. His dignity and his knowledge are important to him.’

It was, I think, one of the deepest and most sensitive things I’d ever heard Thumper say. He is usually a man of action rather than contemplation. I felt great sadness when Thumper told me this. I understood what he meant. And I felt sad that I knew that Toby’s fear was probably justified.

‘And he picked up a bad infection too,’ said Thumper.

‘He picked up an infection in the hospital?’

‘Yes. Several actually. He nearly died from some bug he acquired while he was there. He had a bad time.’

‘OK,’ I said. ‘So hospital isn’t an option.’

Thumper insisted that we went in his truck. ‘I can’t get all the way to the cabin where he lives,’ he explained. ‘But I can get you much closer than you’ll be able to get in your darned great Rolls Royce. It will still mean a half mile hike through the woods. So you’d better put on some boots and something warm and waterproof.’

I told Patsy where I was going and Thumper and I set off in his truck; a massive, beast of a four wheel drive vehicle which looks ungainly on ordinary roads but which can be driven over rougher ground than just about any other vehicle in North Devon. Thumper has put extra-large wheels onto the truck and this helps to increase the ground clearance. The exhaust pipe is connected to a pipe which blows waste gases out a foot above the roof of the cab. The truck can be driven through mud and water and can, I suspect, go places that would prove impassable even for a tractor.

It took us no more than fifteen minutes to reach the furthest spot in the wood that the truck could reach. From then on, we had to travel on foot. There was no easy path. Toby, a man who valued his privacy, had made sure that there was no clear track to his cabin. Every time he moved in or out, he took a slightly different route. There were roots and brambles everywhere. It occurred to me that if Toby needed to go to hospital, and could be persuaded to go there, we would have a hell of a job getting him out through the wood.

As we walked to Toby’s cabin, Thumper explained that his friend had built the cabin himself, using a huge shipping crate as the basis for a structure which now blended into the forest so well that a wanderer could pass by just yards away without even knowing it was there. Toby had, said Thumper, taken the crate apart and then rebuilt it in a small clearing which he had made with nothing more than a handful of small tools and an old but sharp axe (a tool which Toby could use with such skill that he was able to make fence posts far quicker than men equipped with far more suitable equipment) and a folding knife (a tool with which he could layer a hedge at a rate which even Thumper regarded as superhuman).

I discovered, rather to my surprise, that the crate was erected on land which belonged to Mr Kennet, Patsy’s father, and that my father-in-law had happily given Toby permission to live on his land. In return, Toby repaired fences and gates throughout the Kennet acres. A month later, when I mentioned Toby to him, Mr Kennet admitted that he hadn’t seen the poacher for eighteen months but that during that time he had never had to mend a fence or a gate or have a hedge re-layered.

Thumper had been right about Toby’s tiny home. I don’t know what I had expected to see; probably something along the lines of the cabin which Henry David Thoreau had built overlooking Walden Pond, on land owned by his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson. The very word ‘cabin’ carries notions of its own.

But this was nothing like Thoreau’s cabin. It was so well hidden, so disguised, that I didn’t see it at all until we were just yards away.

Toby had rebuilt the shipping crate and then grown ivy and other creepers around it and over it so well that it was as well hidden as any bird watchers’ hide. There was no electricity and no water and no sewage, of course, but Toby didn’t want the first, used a small, clear stream for the second and had a small shovel and several acres of woodland for the third.

Toby was lying on his face on a camp bed in his home, which was surprisingly roomy and tidy. There was a desk, a chair, an easy chair and a wash bowl and jug – the sort which used to be provided by small hotels and boarding houses before hotel rooms came with their own bathroom facility. The famous waxed coat was hanging on a hook which had been fastened to the back of the door. The place was dark, with the only light coming from the open doorway, until Thumper lit a couple of hurricane lamps which hung from hooks fixed into the walls. Pictures cut from magazines had been carefully pinned up. They were all of woodland scenes. The room stank of infection.

When Thumper announced our presence, Toby lifted himself onto one elbow and spoke, so quietly that I could hardly hear a word.

I leant closer.

He repeated what he'd said.

'Thumper shouldn't have brought you, doc,' he said. 'There's nothing you can do.' He sounded tired and resigned but not unhappy.

'Can I look?' I asked him.

'If you wish. Mind the ferret.'

I looked at Thumper.

'His ferret lives in his trouser pocket at the moment,' said Thumper. 'It won't bite if you don't disturb it.'

I carefully peeled the shirt from Toby's back. It must have been an incredibly painful process for him. His back was peppered with half a dozen holes. The pellets, I could see, were all still in his body. There was another one in his neck and a hole in the skin at the back of his skull showed where another of the shotgun pellets had smashed into his head. There was a piece of cord wrapped around Toby's neck. A brass key was hanging from the cord.

'The key to his Bible,' explained Thumper, without my having to ask. He sounded faint. Toby's back was certainly not a pretty sight. Every hole in Toby's back and neck was surrounded with dried blood and pus and the wounds stank of infection. I felt instantly that there could be no hope for him unless I could get him into hospital. And I knew that even then the chances of his recovering were slim. His body was feverish and he was intensely dehydrated. I suddenly realised that I didn't have the faintest idea how old he was. Like many folk who live rough in the country, it was difficult to tell. He could have been anywhere between 40 and 80.

When I looked at this brave lion of a man, my eyes were filled with tears of compassion and tears of hatred for the arrogant, ignorant, careless idiot who had done this to him – and who didn't even know what he had done.

'What can I do to help?' whispered Thumper. It was brave of him to offer. He had gone white.

For a while I didn't answer. I felt overwhelmed by a sense of sadness but there was much anger too. And most of all I didn't want to see him die.

I didn't know what I could do, let alone what Thumper could do to help me. I couldn't possibly clear out all those wounds without being able to give Toby a general anaesthetic. And how could I do that? And he needed antibiotics, that was clear.

'He has to go to hospital,' I whispered back.

'No hospital,' said Toby, who had heard my whisper. 'They'll call the police.'

'But you haven't done anything wrong,' I told him. 'The police won't do anything bad to you.'

'No police,' said Toby. I felt, rather than saw, Thumper leave the cabin.

'But I have to get you to hospital,' I repeated. I didn't mean to but in my desperation I put all the stress on the third word. 'If you stay here…' I didn't finish the sentence. It sounded too much like a threat.

'I'll die,' said Toby, finishing the sentence for me. He sounded frighteningly matter-of-fact about it. There was a fatalism about him which I found calming and disturbing at the same time.

'Yes, I'm afraid you will.' I said. The doctor in me felt that he had to know just how serious his condition was. The man in me knew that he was well aware that he was dying. He had spent all his life in a private world where death is a daily occurrence.

I could hear Thumper retching outside in the woods.

'Will you come to the hospital in Bilbury?' I asked him. 'Our little cottage hospital. I promise we won't call the police.'

'No hospitals,' said Toby again.

At that point, I really did not know what to do. I stood and looked and thought for what seemed an age. I heard Thumper come back into the cabin because the boards which made up the floor creaked underneath him.

'Sorry about that,' Thumper said softly.

I damned well didn't know what to do.

I felt full of sadness and frustration and rage and I felt utterly impotent and useless.

The trouble was that I understood why Toby wouldn't go into a hospital; I understood why he didn't trust hospitals, any hospital. I sometimes think that too many people are ready to go into hospital when they really don't have to. And there are, without a doubt, too many operations which aren't essential. But that may be because I know only too well how many things can go wrong. Back in the Middle Ages, people were genuinely afraid of hospitals. They knew that if they went into a hospital there was a very good chance that they would never come out again.

Hospitals were places where people went to die. Even in the 19th century, things weren't much better; surgeons operated in frock coats and sharpened their scalpels on the soles of their boots.

Maybe it would be better if more people still felt more scepticism about hospitals.

There are a thousand reasons why hospitals can kill; patients die on the operating table, they contract serious infections and so on and on. Like many doctors, I am always astonished at how many people willingly submit themselves to the surgeon's knife for treatment which is optional or cosmetic.

And I think I understood why Toby was frightened of the police. His grandfather, a professional poacher and the man who had been Toby's mentor, had doubtless taught him that the police were his enemy.

But I knew that if Toby's wounds weren't cleaned then he would die. I knew that the huge lead buckshot pellets in his back had to be removed. His wounds needed to be dressed. He needed to be anaesthetised. He needed to have fluids and antibiotics administered through a drip. He needed to be in a sterile hospital, with fresh clean sheets on the bed. Damnit, he needed caring nurses looking after him 24 hours a day. He needed things I couldn't do for him. He needed help I couldn't give him. I could feel tears in my eyes. I admired Toby. I respected him. I liked him. I didn't know how old he was but it seemed clear to me that he had so much life left to live. He was a good, kind man who had probably never hurt any human being in his life. I couldn't help thinking of the fat oaf Chatterton; the careless, selfish, stupid, obscenely greedy man who had shot him.

And I wanted to call the police myself.

But I couldn't do that. Toby wouldn't want me to do that.

And even if I did tell the police, what would they do? Even if they managed to tie the incident to his gun, Chatterton would claim the shooting was an accident. He would probably say he tripped over a root. He would doubtless produce a licence and character references from half a dozen eminent members of the community. And Toby? They would dismiss him as an unlucky poacher. If it went to court, the defence counsel would probably argue that Toby deserved what he got. He shouldn't have been in the woods. What was he doing there? Poaching? Stealing pheasant? The end result would probably be that Chatterton would go scot-free and the police would arrest Toby.

Now it was my turn to go outside the cabin; out into the woods. I had never done anything like it before. Never walked out on a patient; albeit temporarily.

But I didn't go outside for the same reason as Thumper. I didn't feel nauseous. Already in my life I had seen too much, smelt too much, known too much, to be nauseated by the sight and smell of Toby's wounds.

But I felt I was about to burst with anger.

It was now dark. And it was pouring with rain. The forest seemed desperately unfriendly. I walked away a few yards, tripping over brambles and fallen branches. I kicked at one tree and then I punched another so hard that I hurt my hand. That knocked some sense into me. I walked back to the cabin.

I bent down and opened my black medical bag. I took out a pair of sterile rubber gloves and examined Toby's back as thoroughly as I could. He flinched when I touched him. I wasn't surprised. I'd have done more than flinch if my back had been that way and someone had touched it. Anyone would have flinched.

There were seven bullets still in his back. I could see all of them. There was one embedded in his neck. The one that had hit the back of his skull had bounced out. Shotgun blasts tend to produce most of their damage when the target is fairly close. Toby had clearly been standing almost at the extent of the gun's range. Dressed as he always was he would have been damned near invisible. That was no excuse for Chatterton firing a gun into the woods. But it was an explanation.

I took a scalpel and a pair of tweezers out of my bag and tried to remove one of the pieces of shot. It was tantalisingly close but I couldn't remove it. And the skin around the wounds was so damaged that there was nowhere for me to inject a local anaesthetic. I stood up. There seemed no alternative. If Toby was going to be saved then he would have to go into hospital.

Perhaps I could sedate him and then, with Thumper's help, carry him out of the cabin and out of the woods and take him, unknowing, to our cottage hospital. I could keep him sedated while I treated his back. And then we could take him back to his cabin when all the buckshot had been removed.

But that wasn't going to work.

For a start, it was technically a kidnapping.

And I couldn't just take Toby out of the woods against his will. He had already made it perfectly clear that he would rather die than go into hospital.

Could I certify him and have him taken to hospital regardless of his wishes?

That might work.

The authorities would certainly agree with me that a man who preferred to die than to be treated was not in his right mind.

But once again, I had to face the fact that Toby didn't want to go to hospital. He knew why. He knew what he was doing.

I took some dressings from my bag and bandaged his damaged back as best I could. And then I injected him with a large dose of a powerful antibiotic. I also gave him a modest dose of a decent painkiller.

As I did this I considered Toby's situation.

The main problem was clearly the need for an anaesthetic. If I could anaesthetise Toby then I could remove the buckshot from his back and neck. And I could clean out the wounds and dress the wounds properly. I could then put up a drip and give him regular blasts of antibiotic.

But how the devil could I anaesthetise him?

I couldn't anaesthetise him and manage the surgery he needed as well. I didn't even know much about anaesthesia. I'd never had any training in anaesthesia and never worked as an anaesthetist. I didn't have any equipment. I could inject him with a big dose of a tranquilliser. But that would be dangerous.

Or would it?

Maybe I could just inject him with something powerful enough to put him to sleep for a while, and then work on his back while he slept.

But I didn't like that idea very much. In fact, the more I thought about it the less I liked it.

It would be difficult to give him a big enough injection of a sedative without getting to the edge of a safe dose. And if I killed him with the anaesthetic I wouldn't be doing him much good. I wouldn't be doing myself much good, either. I'd probably find myself in front of a disciplinary tribunal at the General Medical Council. I'd be lucky not to be charged with manslaughter.

I needed outside help.

That was the big problem. I needed real help. I needed someone to manage the anaesthetic while I treated the wounds in Toby's back. And I needed someone to look after the drip and the antibiotics.

'Is there anything I can do?'

It was Thumper.

I turned to him. 'There might be.'

'Anything,' he said. 'I'll do anything you need me to do.'

'I need to go back to Bilbury Grange,' I told him. I'd had an idea. 'I need to make a phone call.'

'OK,' said Thumper.

'But I don't want to leave Toby here by himself.'

'I'll stay with him,' said Thumper immediately.

'I've given him a painkiller. He'll probably sleep for a while.'

'Good. That's good. Is there something you can do for him?'

'I'm working on it,' I told him. 'Fetch some water from the stream and if he wakes, try to get him to drink. He's terribly dehydrated.'

'OK.'

'Can I borrow your truck keys?'

Thumper took out the keys to his truck and handed them to me. 'Can you find your way to it?'

'Only if you tell me which direction to take when I leave the cabin. Otherwise there's a risk I'll be going round and round in circles for the rest of my life.'

Thumper came out and pointed out where the truck was parked. I could just see a corner of it through the trees.

'It'll be easier to back it out,' he told me. 'There's no room to turn it round.'

A short while later I was back at Bilbury Grange ringing my friend Will.

Will works as a GP in the English Midlands. I've known him for years and I would trust him with my life. We were at medical school together. He and his family come down to Bilbury from time to time. Before becoming a GP, Will took a postgraduate course in anaesthetics and for a while he considered becoming a professional anaesthetist. He still worked as an anaesthetist for a local emergency service which helped the police deal with road accident casualty victims.

'I need a favour,' I told him. 'A big favour.'

'You've got it,' said Will without hesitation.

I explained the problem. I told him how I thought Toby had been injured. I explained who he was. I explained why he wouldn't go into hospital.

'I can remove the buckshot,' I told him. 'But I need a good gas man.'

'And you don't know one so you're asking me?'

'Something like that.'

'When do you need me?'

'As soon as you can get here.'

‘I’ve nearly finished my evening surgery. I’ll be done in twenty minutes. I can be there in three or four hours. Do you want to do it tonight?’

‘The sooner the better.’

‘Can we do it in the dark?’

‘It’ll be a bit tricky getting through the woods but there are a couple of hurricane lamps in the cabin.’

‘Is it raining there?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good. I wouldn’t want to feel let down. It always rains in North Devon.’

‘Bring your waterproofs.’

‘Will do. I’ll also bring some hefty torches and a couple of heavy duty outside floodlights. We use them for roadside accidents. The batteries are pretty heavy though.’

‘I can find someone to help carry the stuff,’ I told him.

‘I’ll be with you as soon as I can. Do you want me to come to Bilbury Grange or do you need me to find this cabin in the woods?’

‘Come to Bilbury Grange. You’ll never find Toby’s cabin.’

Will told me he’d be with me as soon as I could.

It did not escape my attention that he had never even asked who would pay for his expenses.

I broke the connection and dialled Patchy’s number.

When he answered the phone I told him I needed help.

‘When and where?’ was all Patchy asked.

How fortunate I was to have such friends. Toby was pretty lucky too.

I told him.

‘OK. What do you need?’

‘I need your body and do you have one of those field radio things the army is always flogging off?’

‘A two-way radio?’

‘That’s it.’

‘No, I don’t have one. But I know someone who has.’

‘Can you borrow it?’

‘Of course I can.’

I arranged for Patchy to come to Bilbury Grange in three hours’ time – equipped with the borrowed two-way radio.

I then rang Flora and Camelia, a couple of the youngest of the helpers who assist in looking after patients at the Bilbury cottage hospital. Neither of them were professional nurses but they give their time freely and they are never flustered. We have a fine team of nurses helping out at the hospital. We have one regular nurse who is 82-years-old. If you met her you’d swear she couldn’t be a day over 60. Most of our volunteer nurses give just one morning or afternoon a week but that’s all we need from them. I asked the two I rang to ring others on our list to see if anyone else would help. I told them that I’d need them to work in two hour shifts. I told them I wanted them to stay in the cabin in pairs and explained that they would have a two-way radio so that they could stay in touch with me.

Flora and Camelia both promised to do everything they could to help. Everyone in the village knew Toby and although he was a loner, and perhaps not the easiest person to know, let alone to like, they all respected him and his chosen way of life.

If Toby wouldn’t go into hospital then I would have to take the hospital to him.

I would have liked to ask Bradshaw, my ancient but indomitable practice nurse, and the matron of the Bilbury cottage hospital, but I didn’t dare take him away from his regular work. He runs the hospital pretty well single-handedly. We had a couple of patients in the hospital at the time – one suffering from a nasty chest infection and the other recovering from a major operation performed at the big hospital in Exeter. I couldn’t jeopardise their safety.

I asked the helpers I’d rung to come to Bilbury Grange.

If I was going to treat Toby in his cabin then someone had to be there 24 hours a day until he started to recover. And since I had surgeries to do, and the rest of the village to look after, that someone could not be me. I was going to need a rota of helpers. I just hoped that my part-time nurses would not find Toby’s cabin in the woods too scary a place. The two-way radio would at least mean that no one staying there would feel completely isolated.

Finally, after explaining to Patsy what I’d arranged, I drove round to the cottage hospital, still in Thumper’s truck and picked up all the equipment I thought I would need: a drip stand, saline drip bottles and more antibiotics. I also picked up a variety of swabs and some more sophisticated equipment than the sort of things I usually carried in my medical bag.

When I’d done all this, I drove Thumper’s truck back to the woods where Toby’s cabin was situated. I carried all the stuff I'd collected with me through the woods. It was now pitch dark and still raining heavily. I had also taken with me a scythe I'd picked up from Bilbury Grange. I used it to help clear a rough path through the brambles.

'Sorry I left you so long,' I said to Thumper. 'How is he?'

I piled the stuff I'd brought with me into a corner of the cabin.

'He's been sleeping most of the time. He's sort of woken up a couple of times. He doesn't seem any better I'm afraid. He's been confused and a bit delirious.'

I took Thumper outside into the rain and explained what I was planning and who I had recruited to help me.

'You and Will are going to operate on him here?'

'Can you think of an alternative?'

'No, but…'

'If I don't do this then he will die. So we don't have anything to lose, do we?'

'No, I guess not.' Thumper paused and looked at me. 'But are you allowed to do this? Is it legal?'

I shrugged. I didn't have the faintest idea whether or not my planning to operate on Toby in his cabin was legal or not. I suspected that 'not' was probably the answer. But I couldn't see an alternative and laws are often made by people who cannot possibly know whether or not they are always going to be 'right'.

I asked Thumper if he could wait at the cabin for a little longer because I had to go back to Bilbury Grange to wait for Patchy, my part-time nurses and for Will. We couldn't do anything until Will arrived.

'Give me the scythe,' said Thumper. 'While you're gone I'll clear a proper path to the cabin. When Toby finds out what I've done he will hate the idea of having a path through the woods but he'll just have to put up with it!'

I thanked him, hurried back to his four wheeled drive truck and then drove again to Bilbury Grange. I liked Thumper's confidence. Privately, I thought my chances of saving Toby's life were considerably less than fifty-fifty.

On my way back, the rain slowed a little and I think it even stopped for a couple of minutes. But the clouds soon thought better of it and within another five minutes the damned stuff was coming down as though God had realised he'd made too much rain and had decided to deplete his stocks a little. There was so much cloud that there was no moon visible. The night was pitch black – just perfect for carrying equipment out to a cabin in the woods when there was no discernible path to follow.

Still, I thought, if it were easy where would be the challenge?

I couldn't help smiling as that thought occurred to me.

That was a favourite saying of Dr Brownlow, my predecessor, my friend and my mentor. Always delivered tongue in cheek with a twinkle in his eyes.

Will arrived just before 9.30 p.m. that evening. We quickly fed and watered him, for the poor soul had come straight from his evening surgery, and then he, I, Patchy and two of the Bilbury cottage hospital's finest young amateur nurses (Camelia, the younger one was 44 and Flora, the older one, was in her 70s) piled into Thumper's truck. Will had brought two boxes full of equipment, which turned to be even heavier than it looked, and Patchy had the field radios which had probably been state of the art cutting technology in 1941 but which we tested and which still worked perfectly well.

Thumper had carved an approximation of a path through the wood. He was soaked, scratched and starving hungry. I handed him the packet of sandwiches and the thermos flask which Patsy had made up for him.

'I told her she was treating you like a big softie,' I told him as I handed over the packet and the flask. He thanked me and said that when he'd finished helping us carry the equipment to the cabin he would sit in his truck for a while and eat his supper. Thumper is surprisingly queasy when it comes to blood. Patchy, who is also not wild about the goriest aspects of medical care, said he would keep him company.

By the time we had set up Will's lights, and spread out our equipment, the inside of Toby's cabin looked like a field hospital.

Poor Toby, who was still woozy from the injections I had given him, awoke and looked around. I explained that he was going to be anaesthetised and that I was going to remove the buckshot from his body. He didn't really seem to know what was going on or why.

Will erected a drip stand, put up a drip and started pumping saline into Toby's veins. Anaesthetists can slip a needle into a vein far more skilfully than anyone else. When I was at medical school, I remember that a crowd of us spent over an hour one Saturday afternoon trying to put a needle into an infant who needed a drip. Three students, a house physician, a house surgeon, a junior registrar, two senior registrars and a consultant paediatrician had all tried and failed. There didn't seem to be a vein left that hadn't been temporarily ruined by all the bodging and piercing. In the end, we telephoned for a paediatric anaesthetist to come and see if he could succeed where we had all failed. He came in wearing appalling golfing garb. He had been standing on the first tee when he'd been given our message. He walked up to the patient and within fewer seconds than it takes to write this sentence, he had slipped a needle into a vein. 'Is that all?' he asked, looking round. When no one spoke, he marched back out again. His playing partners were probably still playing their approach shots to the green when he returned to his game.

Just as I was about to start washing Toby, and everything else in sight, with vast quantities of a heavy duty antiseptic solution, Thumper pushed open the door.

'Have you moved the ferret out of Toby's pocket?'

We hadn't, of course.

'How could you forget?' asked Will with mock indignation. 'I seem to remember that de-ferreting the patient was the first thing they taught us at medical school.'

After explaining to Toby that he would look after his ferret, Thumper removed the animal from the trouser pocket which, judging by the way it clung to the lining, it had adopted as its temporary home. Judging by the yells and curses which were involved, I thought it fair to assume that Thumper had received a couple of nips. The two nursing aides who were in the cabin with us backed up to the edge of the cabin as the ferret was being extracted. I would have done the same if I hadn't been worried that everyone would think me a townie wuss if I did.

'I'll keep him safe for you,' Thumper promised Toby. I'm not sure that Toby heard or understood him. 'I've got a box in the back of the truck,' he told me. 'I'll look after the ferret until Toby is better.'

I liked Thumper's quiet confidence that Toby would get better. I was still nervous and full of doubts. The infection which we had to treat had taken a real hold and we would only succeed if the antibiotic I'd selected proved to be effective.

When Will and I had gone outside to discuss our plan of attack, he had agreed that he wouldn't put Toby's chances at much better than 50:50.

'What antibiotic have you started him on?' asked Will.

I told him.

'Good choice. That's the one I'd have picked. Excellent broad spectrum drug. What dose?'

I told him.

'Let's pile some more into the drip bottle. He's going to need buckets of the stuff if we're going to kill this infection. If anything kills him it will be the bugs not the bullets.'

I have to say that it was a pleasure to work with Will. He was a marvel. Calm, never fussy, never panicky; he skilfully anaesthetised Toby and kept him under while I worked.

The battery run emergency lights which he had brought with him were marvellous too. As far as the lighting was concerned, it was like working in a proper operating theatre.

Camelia and Flora, the two nursing aides, gloved and masked, were also wonderful. They may not have received any formal nursing training (I didn't tell Will until later but Camelia was a former hairdresser and Flora had been a teller in a bank) but they did everything I needed them to do and they did it with surprising efficiency and with good grace.

It took me half an hour to remove all the buckshot (Will was right to call the damned things bullets for they were so big they looked more like bullets than shot) and ping them into the metal kidney dish which Flora, one of the aides, held out for me.

Actually, no, I am going to call them 'nurses'. They may not have been trained 'nurses' but they did the work of nurses and they did it calmly and professionally.

And then it took another twenty minutes to sew up the holes the bullets had made. I then poured on more antiseptic solution before taping some dressings over the wounds. The cabin now reeked of antiseptic. It was preferable to the smell of infection.

By the time I'd finished, I was soaked with sweat and beginning to shake from the tension of concentrating so hard. Not even country GPs do a lot of extensive surgery. We sew up cuts and so on but the stuff that needs a proper surgeon usually needs a proper hospital.

'You can bring him round when you're ready,' I told Will wearily.

'I thought you were going to be here all night!' he said. 'Have you finished at last? What have you been doing? Liver transplant was it?'

It is a common and traditional conceit of anaesthetists everywhere to appear to have absolutely no interest in what the operating surgeon is doing.

'Simple sex change op,' I told him. 'All finished now.'

The two nurses, who were busy tidying up the instruments and counting the swabs I had used (to make sure that I hadn't left any inside Toby when I had sewn him up) looked up and seemed shocked. I realised that neither of them had ever worked in a proper operating theatre.

'Sorry,' I apologised. 'It's been a bit tense.'

'Is he going to be all right?' asked Flora.

I looked at her, wondering what the hell to tell her.

And then I realised that she and her colleagues would be looking after Toby for the next few days. I needed them to believe that Toby would get better. I wanted them to be optimistic and upbeat.

'He's going to be fine,' I told her with false confidence. Camelia, who was shaking noticeably, smiled with relief.

Will looked at me and then, understanding, nodded almost imperceptibly.

It was so good to have him there.

Will and I agreed that it would be best to keep Toby sedated for 48 hours or so while his body recovered a little. Toby was tough but his body needed plenty of rest in order to recover properly. I was also worried that if he woke up and found strangers in his cabin he might try to get out of bed and disrupt the drip tube which was feeding him essential fluid and medication. I catheterised him so that his bladder could be kept drained.

We fixed up a rota system so that there would always be someone in the cabin with Toby. Thumper, Patchy and I divided up the night time into three sessions and the nurses we had recruited stayed with him in pairs during the day time. I needed the nurses to be in pairs because Toby was a strong fellow and if he awoke, confused and frightened, I didn't want one of them to be there alone.

Will and I showed the others how to change the drip bags so that Toby was kept hydrated and we showed them how to inject the antibiotics and sedatives directly into each new bag of fluid. We set up the two-way radio so that whoever was in the cabin would always be able to contact the outside world. Apart from changing the fluid bottles, adding drugs to the fluid bottles and occasionally emptying the bottle into which the catheter was draining, there wasn't much for anyone to do.

It was just a question of waiting.

Waiting to see if Toby's body would recover from the massive insults it had received.

And waiting to see if the antibiotic I had prescribed would do its job and kill the bacteria which had invaded his body.

Will stayed at Bilbury Grange for the rest of what was left of the night. After no more than a couple of hours rest, he got up at 5 a.m. to drive back to the Midlands in order to conduct his morning surgery. He refused point blank to allow me to pay for the petrol his car had consumed. I promised to ring him later in the day to let him know how Toby was doing. Patsy packed him up some sandwiches and a flask of hot coffee and told him he had to stop at least once en route for a short break.

I went back to the cabin at the end of my morning surgery and again in the middle of the afternoon. Without Thumper's truck to take me deep into the woods, I had to leave the Rolls Royce parked some distance away and walk further along the rough track that led into the woods. Thanks to Thumper's work with a scythe, there was now a decent path to the cabin. I couldn't help thinking that Toby wasn't going to be at all happy when he discovered that there was now a walkway through the woods. Still, if he was unhappy about the pathway, he would at least be alive. And the woodland brambles and other undergrowth would soon grow back. On my trip that afternoon I realised that I was beginning to know my way into the woods.

Toby was still sleeping.

And I was delighted when I realised, when I changed the dressings on his back, that I could not smell any infection. Indeed, I was excited to see that the wounds looked a little better. The redness around the entry holes made by the buckshot was beginning to fade. We weren't 'out of the woods' as people say in such circumstances, but I really believed that Toby now stood a real chance of making a full recovery. I rang Will and told him that I thought Toby's chances were now 75% rather than the much less optimistic 50% we had previously estimated. He sounded tired but elated. He had a right to be tired. In addition to acting as unpaid anaesthetist for Toby's operation, he had spent nearly eight hours driving. It was quite a relief to know that he had got home safely and without a speeding ticket.

The following day, I was so pleased with how things were going that I removed the catheter and stopped the sedative. I removed the drip and made sure that Thumper and I were the only two people in the cabin when Toby awoke. Toby would still need the antibiotics, of course, but he could take these by mouth instead of via a drip bottle.

'Where's my ferret?' asked Toby, when he woke. Those were his first words.

'He's at my place,' said Thumper. 'I'm looking after him for a few days.'

'Why?' demanded Toby.

I tried to explain that having a ferret in a hospital recovery room was not generally accepted to be a good idea. Naturally, Toby neither understood nor accepted this. Rather than see my patient become unduly agitated I told Thumper that he could take the ferret back to the cabin.

I had planned for Toby to stay in his cabin for another two or three days. I wanted his body to have a proper chance of recovering before he went out into the big, wide world.

I shouldn't have been surprised when Toby rejected this advice.

We were able to abandon the nursing rota far sooner than I had expected. I made Toby swear that he would take the antibiotics I had prescribed, and twice a day I changed his dressings.

It had been quite a medical adventure.

Two weeks later, Will brought his family down for a weekend. I took Will round to the woodland cabin to see how our patient was recovering.

Toby didn’t know who Will was, of course, but when I explained that Will had driven a round trip of nearly 400 miles in order to help with his operation, there were tears in the poacher’s eyes.

‘You did that for me!’ he said. ‘But you don’t know me…’

‘No,’ said Will. ‘I don’t know you.’ He then pointed at me. ‘But I know him.’

‘I’ve never had a friend like that,’ said Toby softly.

‘Oh, I think you’ve got more friends than you thought you had,’ said Will with a smile.

King Charles II’s Bed

Patchy was celebrating the sale of King Charles II’s bed and was treating us all to champagne. We had one opened bottle in an ice bucket and another bottle cooling in Frank’s refrigerator. Frank always keeps a few bottles of decent champagne in his cellar, though I suspect we are the only people in the village who ever drink the stuff. And we only ever drink it when Patchy has made a good sale.

A Japanese buyer had paid the asking price for the bed and had handed over the cash up front in a smart pigskin briefcase. Patchy had come to the Duck and Puddle immediately after supervising the packing of the purchase into a crate, the loading onto a lorry and the start of its journey across the world.

He had, he said, made a ‘satisfactory’ profit.

‘Why the dickens did someone in Japan want to buy a bed that Charles II had slept in?’ asked Thumper.

‘I don’t have the foggiest notion,’ replied Patchy with disarming honesty. ‘It’s as much a puzzle to me as it is to you.’ He raised a glass. ‘But I drink to the Japanese! Wonderful people and connoisseurs of objects d’art.’

We drank to the Japanese.

Even Frank, whose alcohol intake is strictly monitored by his wife, was allowed to drink champagne. Gilly had agreed that champagne, consisting largely of bubbles, cannot be considered a proper alcoholic beverage and should, rather, be classified as a sort of upmarket fizzy pop.

‘Is it a particularly handsome bed?’ I asked.

‘No, not really,’ admitted Patchy. ‘To look at, it’s a fairly ordinary four poster bed. But it’s made out of solid oak and it weighs a ton. Fortunately, it comes apart so two or three hefty fellows can move it. I’ve sent instructions on how to put it all back together so, hopefully, they’ll be able to turn the bits into a bed without too much difficulty when it finally gets to Japan.’

‘Is it an especially comfortable bed?’ asked Thumper. ‘Goose feather mattress? That sort of thing?’

‘The mattress had long since expired so I had to have one made up by a mattress craftsman,’ explained Patchy. ‘It’s a very short bed, of course, because the people weren’t very tall in the days of Charles II. The mattress had to be specially made.’

‘It’ll be fine for the Japanese, though, I guess,’ said Frank.

We looked at him.

‘Them being smallish sized people,’ explained Frank. He held a hand about five feet off the floor to indicate what he meant. ‘On the whole.’

‘Yes, I suppose they are,’ said Patchy. ‘I hadn’t thought of that. Actually, I hadn’t really thought that anyone would ever sleep in it. To be honest they could have bought a really nice, brand new bed for a fraction of the price. Given the historical connections, it’s more the sort of thing you have on display in a museum. I think the chap who bought it has a small private museum. He’s in banking, absolutely loaded, and I’ve sold him one or two other things: a desk that Shakespeare wrote on, an axe that was used by Henry VIII’s executioner, a pen that was used by King John, the monarch who signed the Magna Carta.’ He waved his glass about airily. ‘And a few more things of that ilk.’

Thumper and I nodded.

We all knew the truth.

Patchy knew we knew the truth.

And we knew that he knew that we knew the truth. But some things are best left unsaid.

Patchy is very careful these days. When he says that King Charles II has slept in a bed he doesn’t say how many nights he spent in it. When he says that Shakespeare used a desk he doesn’t say it was the only desk Shakespeare ever used. The axe wasn’t necessarily the one that Henry VIII’s executioner used when decapitating Queens of England. The pen that was used by King John wasn’t necessarily the one with which he signed the Magna Carta.

This caution has solid business reasoning behind it. If you sell King Charles II’s bed, implying that it was his only bed, then you can only sell it once. If you simply claim that the bed was one in which the King spent a night then your opportunities are almost endless. With 365 nights a year, and a King who was known to have wandered the country about a good deal, there must be hundreds of beds around which can rightfully claim to have provided comfort and support for the Royal personage.

To be honest I was in awe of Patchy’s skill, and I suspect that Thumper and Frank were too. I do not for one moment believe that I would ever have the courage to do what he did and although it might, I suppose, be considered morally rather dubious by some people, I found it impossible to criticise him or think badly of him.

And this was not just because Patchy was my good and loyal friend, and my brother-in-law, but because I knew him to be a quiet benefactor who unostentatiously helped many in the village. Some philanthropists like to be very public about their good deeds; often promising far more than they ever give. But Patchy was the opposite; invariably giving far more than he ever promised. He has far more of the Robin Hood about him than he would ever lay claim to, or even admit to.

I knew that if I ever came across a patient who was in genuine need, but who had fallen between the support lines of the State, I could appeal to Patchy on their behalf. Right from the start, he had been a generous donor to the Bilbury Cottage Hospital.

'Don't you have any difficulty getting this sort of stuff out of the country?' asked Thumper, disingenuously. 'I thought the authorities were pretty firm about keeping national treasures in the country.'

'Ah, well, there's a way round all that,' said Patchy. 'I don't actually put down what the item is on the customs forms. With the bed, I just said it was a second-hand bed. With Shakespeare's desk, I always put it down as a 'desk'. And similarly the axe is just an axe and the pen is just a pen. I never have any problems.'

'That's quite handy,' said Thumper with a grin. 'If, heaven forbid, anyone were to claim that the bed hadn't been slept in by Charles II, you could just point to the customs form which says it's just an old, second-hand bed.'

'Gosh I suppose so,' said Patchy, as though this were a thought that had never crossed his mind. He sipped more of the celebratory champagne. 'I hadn't thought of that.'

We sat for a while and drank several toasts to the bed and to the Japanese banker who was paying for our champagne. Frank said that when a dear friend has had a piece of good fortune it is only gentlemanly to help him celebrate.

Frank had just tipped the final remains of the second bottle of champagne into Patchy's glass when we heard a commotion on the forecourt outside the Duck and Puddle. We looked out to see a coach discharging its cargo: a team of Morris dancers. They were all dressed in white trousers and white shirts and wore surprisingly hefty looking boots. They had red handkerchiefs around their necks and rings of bells strapped to their lower legs.

Moments later, a dozen or more hefty looking men, all in their middle years and all obviously on the well-fed side of hungry, jingled and jangled their way into the pub. Some of them collected around the bar. Most sat down here and there wherever there were spaces. One, I noticed, started shouting orders to Frank.

'We're on our way to South Molton,' one of the dancers told me. 'But we thought we'd stop off on the way for something refreshing.'

He was red faced, notably overweight and already sweating with the exertion of climbing down from the coach and walking into the pub. I had no idea how he was going to dance his way through an energetic Morris dancing set without collapsing. If he'd been an old shirt you would have torn him up to use as rags.

'Where have you come from?' I asked the red-faced dancer, expecting to hear that they had travelled from Cornwall or Somerset.

'Combe Martin,' came the reply.

'But that's only a couple of miles down the road!'

'Indeed, you are right,' said the red-faced dancer. 'And it is, to be almost exact, just under 19 miles from Combe Martin to South Molton. But we have been advised that, given our age and physical condition, we should take the risk of dehydration very seriously. So whenever we see a pub we always stop for a drink.'

'Quite wise,' I nodded. And then, after thinking about it for a moment, I added: 'But the Duck and Puddle isn't really on the road you'd normally take if you were set out to drive from Combe Martin to South Molton.'

'You are undoubtedly correct about that too. But Edgar, our driver, has no sense of direction,' said the red-faced dancer rather sadly. 'He's 93 and been known to get lost in his own house.'

I looked out of the window and could see the driver, who was still on the coach, pouring himself a cup of tea from a thermos flask. He had a bad tremor and seemed to be spilling more of the stuff than he managed to decant into the cup.

'He looks frail,' I said.

'He is, he is,' said the red-faced dancer. 'He's had a hard life. More bad breaks than that bloke Job in the Bible – you know, the one with the boils and so on. You name the disease and he's probably had it, got it or sickening for it. But he says he likes working for us because if he's working he knows he's not dead yet. He's not a member of our club but he's the only person we know who'll do the driving without the drinking. We buy him a pie and a bottle of pop at lunchtime and a bag of chips and a nice piece of haddock at the end of the day and he's as happy as Larry to get out and about a bit. The only thing is that his eyes are pretty terrible and he broke his glasses a couple of months ago so we take it in turns to sit up at the front and give him instructions. We tell him when to turn and warn him if there's any traffic around or a bend coming up. It works very so well.'

I looked at him, wondering if I was having my leg pulled. I must have looked a little startled.

'Don't look so worried! He's pretty well perfectly safe,' protested the red-faced dancer, who was clearly not joking. He gratefully accepted a pint of traditional ale which was handed to him by one of his colleagues. I watched in astonishment as the pint disappeared in a single gulp.

‘My brother-in-law used to do the driving for us,’ continued my new and temporary companion. ‘He’s an alcoholic so he tries not to drink too much booze – just beer and cheap wine. But he and I don’t always see eye to eye so he now dances with some Morris Dancers over in Lynton. Anyway, as they say, relations are like cow’s muck – best when well spread around.’

I sipped at my own drink.

Suddenly a group of his fellow dancers started to sing. It was, I quickly realised, the first verse of a popular choral work known as Eskimo Nell. I wondered if the Morris Dancers knew the other 75 unauthorised verses.

These were men whose days were doubtless full of rates demands, blocked plumbing, hedges which required trimming and 14-year-old daughters who needed to be transported to their ballet class.

But for the time being, they were clearly content to live for pleasure alone.

And who could blame them?

The proceedings of the day had begun and the day was now well and truly set in motion.

‘Last month we set off to dance at some fete or show or something in Cornwall but we never got there,’ continued my red-faced companion. ‘Our intentions were good but we were so careful to make sure that we didn’t get dehydrated that we didn’t get any further than the Red Lion in Bideford. Someone worked out that we were 112 miles short of our destination when we turned back.’

The member of the troupe who had been handing out the beers now handed out home-made pasties. He was carrying a tray piled high with them. It occurred to me that Gilly must have known that the Morris dancers were due to stop in for light sustenance and dehydration prevention.

‘Paul is our designated orderer,’ explained the red-faced man, taking his pasty. ‘We find it makes life easier if one of us does the ordering in pubs. We all eat and drink the same. We’re not fussy eaters.’

It certainly seemed to be an efficient system.

‘Aren’t those boots a trifle heavy for dancing?’ I asked him, looking down at what looked like ex-army boots. The leather had clearly been well treated with dubbin and both boots were equipped with heavy steel toecaps.

‘You could well be right about that,’ said the red-faced dancer, taking a large, hungry man’s bite out of his pasty. ‘Excuse me having a bit of a snack,’ he said, spraying crumbs about, ‘but I’ve not eaten since breakfast.’

‘You go ahead,’ I told him. ‘The engine must be fuelled.’

The red-faced dancer nodded and took another large bite of his pasty. At this rate, a baked delicacy the size of a normal dinner plate would be gone in three bites. For normal people, one of Gilly’s pasties requires a knife and a fork and twenty minutes of careful slicing and eating.

‘The boots is a mite heavy for dancing,’ admitted the red-faced dancer, going back to my previous question. ‘But they’re just right for kicking.’

‘Kicking?’ I asked, puzzled. I knew that in Gloucestershire the locals are particularly fond of a sport called ‘shin kicking’, a curious activity in which, as the name suggests, protagonists kick one another’s shins until one admits defeat and is trundled off to the first aid tent for sympathy and a warm poultice. But I had never before heard that shin kicking was a favoured part of the Morris Dancer’s repertoire.

‘Sometimes, on our travels around, we finds that we gets clever clogs who likes to take the mickey,’ he said. ‘Likes to have a bit of a laugh at our expense.’

‘Not something you favour?’

He laughed. ‘Definitely not something we favour. We have a tendency to discourage that sort of thing.’

‘And the boots come in handy?’

‘The boots definitely come in handy. They have their disadvantages in that they weigh a bit more than a nice dancing slipper, say, but they has their advantages in that when you get one of those colliding with your shin, your inclination to have a bit of a laugh at someone else’s expense tends to dissipate.’

‘Dissipate?’

‘That’s it. That’s the word. Dissipate. We may look simple folk but deep down we is educated peoples you know.’

‘I definitely don’t doubt it,’ I said. ‘I wouldn’t even doubt it if you weren’t wearing those boots. But since you are wearing those boots I most definitely don’t doubt it.’

‘I can see you’re a wise man, sir,’ said the red-faced dancer.

The man who was handing out drinks and food brought my new friend another pint of beer and another pasty. These were accepted eagerly, as though they were the first sustenance to be seen for some days. I have to say I was impressed. When I have eaten one of Gilly’s pasties I don’t usually need, or want, to eat again for 24 hours. The Morris Dancers’ choral group now moved on to another verse in the seemingly endless saga describing the activities of Eskimo Nell. I reckoned they were on about verse seven.

‘We’ll be off soon, and we’ll leave you and your friends in peace,’ said the red-faced dancer. He took a swig from his pint mug and a bite from his second pasty. ‘We’ve four more refreshment stops to make before we get to South Molton.’

I stared at him in admiration.

‘We have to keep in shape,’ he said.

‘Absolutely,’ I agreed.

‘Bertie jogs for us twice a week.’

Puzzled, I looked at him.

‘Bertie,’ he nodded towards a tall, unusual thin dancer near the bar.

‘He jogs for you?’

‘Sure. He’s our nominated jogger. You know how people going out to a pub have a nominated driver? The poor sod who agrees not to drink so that he can drive back home.’

‘I’ve heard of it,’ I admitted. It was not, I’m afraid, something that had caught on in Bilbury.

‘Well, Bertie is our nominated jogger. He jogs for us. It saves the rest of us having to do it.’

‘That’s a splendid idea,’ I said, for I truly thought it was.

‘It wouldn’t be safe for a man like me to go jogging.’

‘No, you’re right, it wouldn’t.’

‘People fall dead while jogging.’

‘They do. Indeed they do.’

‘So by having a nominated jogger we avoid all that risk. It’s safer all round. You could say it saves lives.’

‘Absolutely. I understand.’

‘Mind you, I do a little exercise myself occasionally,’ said my new chum. ‘I did a press up a few months ago. It was for a bet.’

‘Just the one?’

‘It’s not one of those things you want to do more than once is it?’

‘I guess not.’

My new chum suddenly noticed that there was still a chunk of pastry on his plate. ‘Pity to waste that,’ he said. He picked up the pastry and popped it into his mouth.

Suddenly, without saying anything, he leapt to his feet and rushed off, heading for the gents. This was clearly not the first time he and his companions had visited the Duck and Puddle.

I watched him go, assuming at first that he needed to get rid of some of his beer.

But something hadn’t seemed quite right.

So, after a few seconds delay, I hurried after him.

I found him in the pub’s back yard, on his knees, struggling for breath. He had gone a rather nifty shade of blue and he was clearly choking. I guessed that the last piece of pie had stuck in his windpipe.

I opened his mouth and looked inside; hoping that I might be able to reach the obstruction and pull it out. But I could see no blockage. I was about to reach for my penknife to perform an emergency tracheotomy, in an attempt to bypass the blockage, when I suddenly remembered that a year or two earlier I met a doctor at an anti-vivisection conference who told me about a technique he had devised for helping individuals who were choking. I couldn’t remember the doctor’s name but I remembered his enthusiasm for his new technique.

I decided that now was the time to try it out. I desperately tried to remember what the doctor had told me.

‘Can you get to your knees?’

The Morris Dancer struggled up to his knees.

‘Can you now stand up?’

Holding onto a conveniently placed drainpipe, he pulled himself up to his feet.

I then stood behind the Morris Dancer, who looked like death warmed up and was definitely no longer red faced, put my arms around him, grasped one fist with the other hand, put the two joined fists into the space just below his sternum and pulled sharply.

Nothing happened.

I tried it again.

And this time the piece of pie crust came flying out of the man’s mouth, freeing his windpipe for its proper purpose.

He coughed, coughed again and then took a deep breath.

I remembered the name of the man who had taught me this technique: it was Dr Heimlich. I decided that I should send him a note to tell him that his technique had worked and saved the life of an English Morris Dancer.

‘Crumbs,’ croaked the dancer. ‘That was a close call. Thank heavens you came outside and found me. If you hadn't happened along I'd have been dead.'

'Why did you go outside?' I asked him.

'I thought I was going to have to bring up that piece of pastry that had got stuck. I didn't want to do it in a room full of people.'

'But you should never leave the room if you're choking!' I told him.

We stayed outside for a few minutes while he recovered. A seagull swooped down and picked up the piece of pie crust. By the time we went back into the pub, the rest of the troupe of Morris Dancers were heading for the door. They were still singing lustily about the awesome exploits of the hardworking Eskimo Nell.

'Thank you, friend,' said the man who'd been choking.

'Pleasure,' I told him.

A minute later, their coach pulled away from the Duck and Puddle. There was much crunching of the gears as the 93-year-old driver found one which the engine considered suitable for starting off on the next leg of its journey. I noticed that a member of the dancing troupe was sitting beside Edgar, clearly giving him directions and guiding him from the Duck and Puddle forecourt.

'Crumbs!' said Frank, wiping his forehead with the tea-towel he used to wipe up the bar counter. 'The pub feels empty and quiet without that lot.'

'That's probably because it is empty and quiet,' Thumper pointed out.

'Hadn't thought of that,' said Frank. He started to collect the empty glasses. 'Still, we do good business when the Morris Dancers stop by. They're always thirsty and hungry. It must be all that dancing around waving their hankies.'

From the conversation I'd just had, I wasn't convinced that the Morris Dancers who had just called in at the Duck and Puddle ever got round to doing much dancing.

Now that it was quiet, we could hear that Patchy was on the telephone.

'I need another two of those Charles II's beds,' said Patchy to the person on the other end of the line. 'I've sold the next one to a Russian customer who has bought it sight – unseen and I've got three customers from Hong Kong fighting for the right to buy the next one.'

The person at the other end of the telephone said something I didn't hear.

'I need the first one by next Friday, and the other one by the end of the month,' said Patchy, putting down the receiver. He suddenly realised I was there and looked a trifle embarrassed. He called to Frank who was in the Duck and Puddle kitchens with Gilly. 'How much do I owe you for the call?'

'Local, national or international?'

'Birmingham.'

'That sounds like 'international' but it's on the house,' shouted Frank.

'Why not sell a bed to each of the customers in Hong Kong?' I asked Patchy.

'Oh no, no,' said Patchy. 'I have a simple rule. Never sell the same seemingly exclusive, almost entirely unique historical artefact to more than one person in a country.' He paused and then a slight smile crossed his lips. 'Not at the same time anyway.'

'What's the time?' asked Thumper.

Frank squinted at the clock – which is still not working. 'It's probably a quarter to something,' he said. 'I find it's often quarter to something. Or sometimes quarter past something.' He announced this as though it were useful information. In Bilbury, it is generally thought that the 'something' rarely matters as much as people think it ought to.

'Just time for another round then,' said Thumper.

'And maybe a cheese and onion roll,' suggested Patchy.

We all decided we'd each like a cheese and onion roll.

'They were nice blokes, those Morris Dancers,' said Thumper.

'But I prefer them when they're not here,' said Patchy.

'They're very noisy,' I said. 'What with those bells they wear tinkling every time they move and those boots they wear being a bit on the clunky side, they make more noise than a crowd of school kids.'

'And they're all so big they seem to fill the place,' said Patchy.

'Good for business, though,' said Frank. 'I take more when they come in than I normally take in a month of Sundays.'

We all looked at him.

'Sundays are our best day,' explained Frank. 'People go out for a drive or a walk on Sundays. And since someone took down all the road signs, they get lost. They come in to find out where they are and while they're in here they usually buy something. Even if they're not hungry or thirsty they feel they ought to buy something because I've been so nice and helpful.'

‘Are you nice and helpful?’ asked Thumper.

‘Of course,’ said Frank. ‘I’m always nice and helpful.’

‘Where are our drinks?’ asked Patchy.

‘Get ‘em yourselves,’ said Frank. ‘You know where everything is. What do you think I am? A bloody slave or something.’

And so while Frank tottered off to make the cheese and onion rolls we all helped ourselves to drinks and Thumper, who said he’d pay for them, put an IOU into the till.

A Guest Called Spike

Thumper was at Bilbury Grange collecting manure which he intended to sell to a market garden the other side of Barnstaple. Farmyard manure is regarded by gardeners as the best fertiliser for plant growth. It contains minerals and trace elements and many bacteria and fungi which help plants grow. It also contains auxins from urine and nitrogen and phosphoric acid. People who know about these things tell me that no garden is complete without a steady supply of auxins, nitrogen and phosphoric acid.

Large farm animals produce fairly impressive quantities of manure.

A cow or a horse will produce around five tons of manure a year each and Cedric, the pig which we look after for our American friends who won the 'Bowling for the Pig' competition at the Duck and Puddle, produces about a ton of manure every year. That's a lot of manure, and although we use quite a bit of it ourselves, we cannot possibly use a ton of manure in every 12 month period.

Thumper gets rid of the excess manure for us, and the price he receives from the market garden covers his petrol costs and leaves him with a modest profit. Thumper earns his living via a huge variety of schemes which earn him a little profit here and a little profit there. If he worked in the city, he would say that he had a portfolio of jobs. Since he works in Bilbury, he just has a number of little jobs which earn him a bit here and a bit more there.

I was helping shovel some of Cedric's food waste into the back of Thumper's truck when he asked me if I'd heard the latest wonderful story about our mutual friend Peter Marshall, who runs the village shop in Bilbury.

Thumper told me that Samuel Houghton, a local farmer, has a regular order for a magazine called *Tractor Times*. This is, as the name rather suggests, a periodical devoted to the study of tractors. There may be the occasional feature about ploughs in the magazine but it is a magazine in which the tractor plays a starring role. I have seen several copies, and as a country doctor with a rural practice, I usually have one or two recent editions on the table in my waiting room. The magazine contains many photographs of tractors, detailed stories about old tractors which have done extraordinary things and anecdotes about tractor owners. There are advertisements for second-hand tractors, details of companies which provide tractor tyres and pictures of farmers who have done unusual things with their tractors. It is, not to beat about the bush, the sort of publication which appeals to a rather exclusive readership.

Samuel, as you may have surmised from his reading habits, has a great affection for tractors; an affection which far outweighs his regard for them as utilitarian vehicles. Samuel collects them and, having the space to indulge himself, has a couple of barns full of fine examples of the breed. He claims tax relief on them all on the grounds that he is a farmer buying pieces of farm machinery. It is, he once told me, his ambition to open North Devon's first tractor museum.

This week there was, so it appeared, some sort of problem with the supply of Samuel's favourite reading matter and instead of finding *Tractor Times* on his hall carpet, Samuel found that the delivery boy had pushed a copy of *Angling Weekly* through his letterbox. The magazine contained, as the title rather suggested, a good deal of information, some timely and some historical, about angling. There was nothing at all about tractors in its pages.

Samuel, who has about as much interest in angling as I have in tractors, which is say somewhere between very little and none at all, assumed at first that the delivery boy had made a mistake and that somewhere in the village there must be another one of Peter's customers staring miserably at a copy of *Tractor Times* and wondering what could have happened to his *Angling Weekly*.

So he rang Peter to report the error.

'Oh it wasn't an error,' said Peter merrily. 'The wholesaler didn't have a copy of your magazine so, rather than leave you without something to read, I thought I'd send you a copy of *Angling Weekly*. It was, to be frank, a toss-up between that and *Railway Modeller's Gazette*.

'Why the hell did you think I'd want a magazine about angling?' demanded Samuel rather abruptly.

'Well tractors and fish are both hobbies, aren't they?' replied Peter indignantly.

The fact was, of course, that Peter didn't want to miss the commission on the sale of a magazine and had sent along a replacement more in hope than expectation. However, if he had hoped that Samuel would not bother to return the unwanted magazine he had seriously underestimated Samuel's dislike of wasting money.

According to Thumper, Samuel was not terribly impressed by Peter but it was, said Thumper, not the fact that he had been sent the wrong magazine which had upset him, so much as the fact that Peter had referred to his obsession with tractors as a hobby.

As far as Samuel is concerned, tractors are not a hobby so much as a religion.

We finished loading Cedric's excess manure into Thumper's truck and then went into the house.

'Would you two like a cup of tea?' Patsy asked us. She seemed distracted and rather agitated. Normally Patsy is calm and easy going. She takes most things in her stride. But she definitely wasn’t her normal self.

‘Can we have one each?’ asked Thumper.

Patsy looked at him, puzzled.

I asked her what was worrying her.

‘Oh, it’s those damned beetles!’ she replied suddenly and sharply. ‘They’re absolutely everywhere. I can’t walk around in the kitchen without treading on them. I hate doing that but I can’t walk around looking down at the floor all the time. I just trod on another one.

‘We’ll have to get someone in,’ I said. ‘I’ll ring one of those pest exterminators who advertises in the local paper.’

‘Oh I hate the idea of doing that!’ said Patsy. ‘And he’ll want to put poison down everywhere. We can’t have that – not with Ben and the cats wandering around the house.’

‘Beetle trouble?’ said Thumper rather unnecessarily.

‘I don’t know where they’ve all come from but we’ve been invaded by the darned things,’ I told him. ‘I don’t mind one or two but there are dozens and they’re all over the place.’

‘You need a hedgehog,’ said Thumper firmly. ‘He’ll snuffle and grunt his way round downstairs and get rid of your beetles faster than an exterminator. And you won’t need to put any poison down. Just close the door if you don’t want him to go into a particular room.’

‘Where on earth am I going to find a hedgehog?’

‘There’s bound to be one in your garden. They hibernate during the winter but it’s a nice sunny day so they’ll wake up and have a wander about looking for something to eat. When he’s had a nibble, and satisfied his appetite, he’ll just go back to sleep again. Just pick one up and bring him into the house for a while. He’ll get rid of the beetles for you. Then, when he’s done his job, just leave the backdoor open or put him outside again. With all those beetles around you won’t need to worry about feeding him.’

‘That’s a brilliant idea!’ said Patsy. ‘You two go down the garden and find a hedgehog and I’ll put the kettle on – if it isn’t full of beetles.’

So Thumper and I tottered down the garden on an impromptu hedgehog hunt.

‘I don’t know much about hedgehogs,’ I confessed as Thumper used a stick to poke carefully at a pile of leaves.

This was something of an understatement. All I knew about hedgehogs was that they were prickly and clearly didn’t have much road sense since there were nearly always one or two squashed flat on the lanes in Bilbury. ‘What are we looking for? How do we find one?’

‘They make very messy nests,’ said Thumper. ‘There’s no real structure to a hedgehog’s nest – it will be just a pile of grass, moss and leaves. They’re untidy creatures – not very house proud.’ He poked at another pile of leaves without any luck. ‘Hedgehogs like snuggling into the bottom of bonfires that have been piled up but not lit and you can sometimes find them inside compost heaps.’

‘What do they eat?’

‘Just about anything you’re likely to find crawling about in the garden. Insects of all kinds, slugs, mice and worms. They’ll eat baby mice and voles and I’ve even known one to eat a snake.’

‘A snake!’ I cried. It seemed unlikely. ‘What sort of a snake could a hedgehog eat?’

‘Anything that takes their fancy. Grass snakes are usually too big for them but they’ll eat an adder if they can find one. They eat it from the tail end and leave the head.’

I was astonished. ‘Do they have any predators – apart from cars?’

‘Foxes will kill them and eat them if they’re hungry enough. A hedgehog will use its muscles to bend its spine and roll itself into a ball if it’s threatened but a fox can usually force it open again. If it can’t, the fox will roll the spiny ball into a puddle or a pond and that will usually make the hedgehog unroll voluntarily.’

‘Clever!’

‘Oh, foxes can be very crafty. They know all the survival tricks. Mind you, there are all sorts of old tales about hedgehogs being crafty too. My granddad once told me he’d seen a hedgehog climb up a plum tree, knock off a pile of the plums and then roll over onto the fruit until the plums were impaled on its spike. It would then toddle back to its nest where its partner removes the plums for them both to eat.’

I laughed. ‘What a wonderful story! Worthy of Baron Munchausen!’

‘My granddad swore it was true,’ insisted Thumper. ‘And he never had much of an imagination that I know of so it probably was true. He was sober too when he told me that. I’ve certainly seen a hedgehog climb a tree though it didn’t have any plums on it. It was an old stunted oak, with a very bent trunk, easy to climb. The hedgehog climbed up the tree, stayed up there for a while, just having a look around, and then rolled itself into a ball and fell twelve feet to the ground. The spines took the shock and he just walked away. I saw him do it again so he must have enjoyed it.’

All this time Thumper was poking gently at every pile of leaves and moss he could find.

At the far end of our main lawn there is a huge, unusually defined fairy ring; a natural phenomenon which I have always found fascinating.

Because I was frequently embarrassed when visitors who saw our garden wanted to know what caused fairy rings and I couldn't provide any sort of answer other than 'they're some sort of fungus thing, I think' I did a little research into the phenomenon. To start with, I looked at some books in Barnstaple library but in the end, I learned more from our gardener who is a walking encyclopaedia on all garden topics.

Fairy rings are, he told me, caused by a species of fungus and there are three zones. The outer zone is the area of grass into which the fungus is spreading in search of fresh nutrients. Here the grass and other vegetation is stimulated by the action of the fungus on the humus. It is in the middle zone that the fungus is active and here the growth of vegetation is largely suppressed and the grass, therefore, is short and rather unhealthy looking. In the inner zone, the residue left by the dying fungus provides food which enables the grass to grow vigorously. And so you end up with three clear zones – looking like a bull's eye target on a dart board or an archer's target board. The rate at which a fairy ring grows is pretty slow, of course, usually only a few inches a year. Our gardener once told me that he has heard that some fairy rings are hundreds of years old.

Just on the edge of the outer circle of our fairy ring there was another pile of leaves. It looked for all the world as though the leaves had simply been blown there. Thumper had a gentle poke with his stick and the leaves moved. Slowly, a sleepy hedgehog emerged from the pile and looked up at us. He seemed, not unnaturally, to be slightly annoyed at having been woken for no apparent purpose. Anyone would feel the same.

Thumper took off his jacket, an old waxed cotton thing that had seen better days back in the 1950s, and used it to lift the hedgehog up off the grass. He then carried it back to the house while I followed carrying the stick which he'd used to find the hedgehog in the first place.

Once in the kitchen, I shut the back door and Thumper put the hedgehog down on the floor. 'When it's eaten all your beetles just put it back outside where we found it,' he told me.

'Is it a he or a she?' asked Patsy.

Thumper looked at her quizzically. 'Does it matter?'

'I expect it matters to the hedgehog!'

'But not so much to you?'

'No,' agreed Patsy. 'Probably not.'

'You can tell the sex by looking underneath,' said Thumper. 'But to be honest I don't much fancy picking it up to find out. Those prickles are nasty.'

'OK,' said Patsy. 'What shall we call him? We need a name that will do just as well for a girl as for a boy.'

Thumper looked at her as if she were mad.

'Well, if he's going to live with us for a while then he, or she, must have a name,' said Patsy.

'There are lots of names that work for boys or girls,' I pointed out. 'Leslie, Jules, Stevie, Frances, Jamie, Hilary, Adrian, Aubrey, Evelyn as in Evelyn Waugh. There was a male editor of *Punch* magazine called Shirley.' At this point I ran out of steam.

'Let's call it 'Spike',' said Patsy. 'That works either way.'

'I don't believe I'm hearing this!' said Thumper. He looked at Patsy. 'And you a farmer's daughter!'

'It's been all downhill since she married me,' I told him.

'You're not kidding,' replied Thumper. 'You're a bad influence.'

'So, what do we do now?' I asked.

'What do you mean? Take a look at him! Sorry, take a look at her. That's what you wanted isn't it?' He pointed to the hedgehog which was gobbling up a beetle.

'Poor beetle!' murmured Patsy.

'The hedgehog is having his lunch!' cried Thumper.

Just then Ben, our dog, came into the kitchen from the hall. She took one look at the hedgehog, approached gingerly and sniffed. The hedgehog, which had started to earn its keep by finishing off its first beetle with a discernible and slightly unnerving crunching sound, sensed danger and rolled itself into a ball. Ben went closer, caught her nose on one of the hedgehog's spikes and pulled back rapidly. She then stared at the hedgehog and retreated, disappearing back into the hallway.

Thumper drank his tea, ate two home-made cheese scones and left.

By the time he'd gone, the hedgehog had munched its way through an unknown number of beetles. There were already far fewer crawling around on the kitchen floor and it looked very much as though the introduction of the hedgehog was going to be a success.

As indeed it was.

Just over a fortnight later, I gingerly used an old towel to pick up the hedgehog, took it back outside and placed it carefully where Thumper had found it. I picked up a couple of handfuls of dry leaves and sprinkled them over Spike.

He (or she) seemed happy enough for he (or she) didn't move away from where I'd put him (or her) down. There was just some wriggling as he (or she) made himself (or herself) comfortable.

I saw Thumper in the Duck and Puddle that evening and thanked him for finding us a beetle exterminator. I bought him and Patchy a drink and settled down next to the fire. Frank was in the middle of telling a long and rather complicated story which had been told to him, second hand, by the drayman who delivers the beer to the Duck and Puddle.

Apparently another drayman, not the one who had told the story to Frank, had been driving a dray which had collided with a furniture lorry on the narrow, steep road down to Combe Martin. As a result of the collision, a dozen barrels of the brewery's best bitter had rolled off the back of the dray and had rolled down the hill. The drayman had seen them go. None of the barrels had burst open but when another dray arrived to collect them, the two draymen had discovered that every single one of the barrels had a small and surprisingly neat hole through which all of the contents had leaked. Curiously, there was absolutely no sign of any leakage around the barrels for the ground nearby was still firm and baked hard from a week or two of sunshine.

The other odd thing was that three barrels had disappeared completely – never to be found.

Frank said the drayman said he thought something supernatural must have happened. And added that he had always thought that Combe Martin was not the sort of place anyone would want to be after dark.

In the middle of the story, I found myself scratching an itch on my left leg. A few moments later, I had an itch on my right leg. As the story reached its conclusion, I had another itch.

'Have you caught something?' asked Patchy, when I scratched for a third time.

'I don't know what it is,' I confessed. 'Both Patsy and I have been itching and scratching like mad these last few days. I must have picked up a flea from somewhere.'

Suddenly, Thumper started to scratch his arm. And then, a few moments later, he scratched his leg. Then he rubbed his arm again. He looked down, slapped his forearm hard with his other hand and then held up a small creature. He put it onto the palm of his hand. 'Flea!' he said.

The flea, which had been merely dazed by Thumper's blow, leapt away. Patchy and I both jumped away from where we thought it had landed.

'You did sprinkle flea powder onto that hedgehog of yours, didn't you?' said Thumper.

I looked at him. 'Flea powder?'

'You didn't did you?'

'I never thought,' I said. 'You didn't say anything about flea powder.'

'So now it's my fault!' said Thumper.

'No, no. I'm just saying…'

'Well, you've got rid of your beetles and now you've got fleas!' said Thumper. 'You'll have to go home and put flea powder on Ben and your cats. And you'll have to wash all your clothes.'

'Meanwhile, you're barred!' said Frank firmly. 'Drink up and go home.'

I looked at him, open-mouthed. 'Are you serious?'

'You heard me!' said Frank. 'We don't want fleas in here. You're banned.' He looked at me sternly and then started to smile. And then the smile turned into a guffaw.

'Seriously, you'd better go home and have a hot bath,' said Thumper. 'And put your clothes into the washing machine. If you don't, you'll find that all your patients are going to have fleas.'

I left.

Behind me I could hear the three of them laughing at my discomfort.

Friends can be very cruel.

It really was very embarrassing. As I hurried to the car a second flea, or quite possibly a third flea, bit me on the back of my neck.

I found myself wishing we had the beetles back.

Alfie!

I'm sorry to have to call you out,' apologised Carole Singer. She was sitting on the sofa in the living room. She'd left the front door open and I'd just walked in when I'd arrived. Most people in Bilbury don't bother to lock their doors. The door to the living room was shut but when she'd heard me arrive, Mrs Singer had called out to tell me where she was.

'Shut the door, please, doctor,' she said. 'Alfie is around in here somewhere and I don't want him slipping out without my noticing.'

Even lying down her chest was screaming for attention; not for an array of campaign medals or an impressive collection of jewellery but for a cleavage so vast, so endlessly deep, that if I had called down into the depths I would have been able to have a leisurely cup of coffee and a croissant before the echo came bouncing back. I assumed she was wearing some sort of bra designed to boost, promote, exaggerate and advertise. I remembered that Mrs Singer, a villager who could accurately be described as both bustluscious and callipygian, had recently taken up a new profession as a stripper. It seemed as though she was bringing her work home with her.

I didn't know whether Alfie was a cat or a dog but I shut the door as requested.

'I've done something to my ankle. Hopefully I've just sprained it but it hurts so much I'm worried it might be broken,' she said. 'I'm afraid I couldn't walk to Bilbury Grange and I couldn't drive. Gordon would have brought me along to the surgery but he's up in Manchester on business. He's seeing a man in the film industry who is looking for girls to appear in the movies he makes.'

'Congratulations!' I said, for it seemed that congratulations were in order.

'Oh, I know it's not going to be for 'Gone with the Wind' or `The Quiet Man' or one of those big productions. I'm not going to be getting out of a limo in Leicester Square, walking along a red carpet, posing for photographs and waving to crowds.'

She said this as though she thought it might be; just might be. She had a dreamy look in her eyes; full of hope, suddenly alive with dreams that deep down she must have known would never be realised.

'Still it's the movies,' she said, cheerfully. 'And I am excited; even though I expect I'll have to take my clothes off and bounce my boobs a bit. But I do that two or three times a week anyway.' She blushed lightly and lowered her voice. 'Deep down I know the chances are that it will just be to make blue movies and if that's the case then they'll expect me to do more than just take off my clothes. But maybe it will be something better than that.' She paused and brightened up a little. 'And Gordon's excited about it. He said they'd offered to make him an executive producer and might allow him to invest a little of our money in the production.'

It all seemed a bit dodgy to me but I'm not in the business of bursting dreams. I had my doubts about the type of movie the man in Manchester was making but I had to assume that Gordon and Carole, both being considerably over the age of consent, knew what they were contemplating.

'Nothing wrong with hope,' I said. 'Nothing at all.'

'Who am I kidding?' she asked, suddenly deflated. She was speaking to herself as much as to me. 'The title of one of the films is *See Nipples and Die*. It hardly sounds like Oscar winning material, does it?'

I hadn't seen Carole Singer for a while – not since she told me that she was working as a stripper in one or two local public houses. It was a job she had originally begun in order to make ends meet but she had eventually come to terms with the idea of taking off her clothes in public and, I suspect, had actually grown to rather enjoy the attention she received. To her surprise, her husband Gordon hadn't minded when she'd told him where she was going on her evenings out. He'd thought she was attending an exercise class but hadn't been too upset when he'd discovered the nature of the exercise.

She had put on some weight since I'd seen her last.

She was one of those women who seems to be forever putting on weight, dieting and losing it, then putting it back on again. I have a number of patients who have lost 20 stone or more in their lifetime. She now had a definitely Rubenesque look; indeed, she looked as though she had been designed by Peter Paul Rubens on one of his more generous minded days.

She was dressed differently too and the mountainous shires of her bodily kingdom were tightly encased in a figure hugging skirt and a figure hugging jumper.

'How did you hurt your ankle?'

She laughed. 'I fell off a table.'

'Off a table?' I repeated, incredulously. 'What on earth were you doing on a table?'

'Dancing! The landlord thought it would be a good idea if I did my strip while standing on one of the tables in the middle of the pub. He thought the punters would be able to get a better view. So I climbed up onto one of the tables. I'd got my bra off and was just taking off one of my stockings when it happened. There was a puddle of beer on the table that no one had wiped up and on one leg I was a bit wobbly anyway.'

'I would imagine you were,' I said, trying hard not to imagine Mrs Singer, almost naked, standing on one leg in a puddle of beer on a table in the Mott and Bailey or the Gravedigger's Rest.

'Anyway, when I fell, one of the punters half caught me, very kind of him it was too, but I landed a bit funny on the leg which had the stocking half off.'

'And hurt your ankle?'

'Yes. Would you have a look, doctor?' She removed a bag of frozen peas from her ankle and then pulled down and removed her skirt. She tossed it aside in the debonair manner of a practised stripper. She then unfastened the stocking on her left leg, rolled it down and tossed that after the skirt. Underneath the skirt, she was wearing very skimpy, pink, silk panties, a black suspender belt and one remaining stocking.

I examined her ankle. Nothing was broken. 'It's just sprained,' I told her. 'Keep the frozen peas on it, or anything icy, and just rest the leg. Have you got a bandage you could put on?'

'There's one in the bathroom cabinet,' she said.

'Do you want me to fetch it for you?'

'If you don't mind, doctor.'

I popped upstairs to their bathroom, found the bandage and was half way back down the stairs when I came face to face with an adder. Well, more accurately, I came foot to face: my foot and the snake's face.

As is common in many old houses in Bilbury, the Singers have a door at the bottom of their staircase. When I'd gone upstairs I had left the door open.

And there was the adder: half way up, or down, the stairs.

The stair carpet had a pattern on it and the snake was almost invisible.

Almost invisible, but not entirely.

I froze. I have never been over-fond of snakes.

He stuck his tongue out at me, which I thought was rather rude since we'd only just met.

'There's a snake on your stairs!' I called.

'Oh, sorry,' Mrs Singer called back. 'That'll be Alfie I expect.'

'Alfie?'

'My snake.'

'Your snake?'

'I wanted a snake for my act. Lots of the girls use snakes. I don't know why but people find them sexy. You let the snake wind itself round you as you dance.'

'But this is an adder!'

'No, it's just a grass snake. I couldn't afford a snake from a pet shop. Have you any idea what they charge for a snake these days? So Gordon went onto the moor and found me a grass snake. It's a bit small but I'm hoping it will grow.'

I started to say something but Carole hadn't finished.

'It's funny how things change,' she said. 'When Gordon and I got married we were both virgins. We didn't know what we'd got until we got to the hotel after the wedding and unwrapped each other. Now, here's me thinking nothing of dancing round in public, stark naked. And now I'm planning to do it with a snake wrapped round me.' She laughed.

'What made Gordon think this was a grass snake?'

'Oh I don't know. He just picked up the first snake he found. Aren't all the snakes round here called grass snakes?'

'Grass snakes have yellow and black markings round their necks,' I told her. I was still standing on the stairs. The adder was still staring at me. 'And this one isn't going to grow much more because I think it's already pretty well fully grown.'

'You really think it's an adder? Aren't they poisonous?'

'It's definitely an adder. It's a female. And it's poisonous. And it's curled up nice and comfortably on your stair carpet.'

'Oh my God! Oh my God! What are we going to do? How do you know it's female?'

'Because it's light brown and has a dark brown zig zag stripe. The males are grey with a black stripe. Grass snakes are a sort of greeny olive colour. You have to believe me when I tell you that this is definitely not a grass snake.'

'Oh that fool Gordon. It could have bitten me. I could have died. If I hadn't been laid up with my ankle I would have been practising with it.'

'Has it bitten you?'

'No. I haven't been near it. Gordon brought it in before he went off this morning and he let it out so that it could get used to the house – and to me.'

'Your sprained ankle has saved you from a nasty bite.'

'It could have killed me!'

'Adder bites don't usually kill but it wouldn't be very nice to be bitten by one.'

'What are we going to do?'

I peered at the snake. 'It now seems to have gone to sleep on the stairs,' I told her. 'Do you have a telephone in your bedroom?'

'No, I'm afraid not.'

'That's a pity,' I said. 'I was hoping I could ring someone to come and catch it.'

'You could climb out of our bedroom, onto the porch roof,' said Mrs Singer. 'And then you could climb down off the porch roof.'

'OK,' I said. 'I'll try that. Can you hop to the door at the bottom of the stairs and shut it?'

'Oh yes!' she said. I got the impression that she would have happily hopped out of the house and half way to Barnstaple if it had kept her away from the adder.

I waited until I saw the door close. There was no space underneath for the snake to wriggle back down into the living room. I then made my way upstairs, found the Singers' bedroom and climbed out onto the flat roof of the porch. I then jumped down onto their lawn. As I did so, I sprained my ankle slightly. I hobbled back into the house.

'What are we going to do?' demanded Mrs Singer. She was standing on one leg, holding onto the back of a chair to stop herself toppling over.

'I'll ring Thumper Robinson,' I told her. 'May I use your phone?'

'Of course!'

I rang the Duck and Puddle and asked Frank if Thumper was there. He was. I explained that Mrs Singer had an adder on her staircase and asked him if he could come over and rescue it, and us. He said he would be with us in a couple of minutes. It felt good knowing that Thumper was on his way. Thumper is the sort of man who will walk across a field full of cows without looking about him nervously, breaking into a cold sweat or imperceptibly increasing his pace so as to get to the other side of the field before one of the cows becomes aggressive or, worse still, turns into a bull. While we waited, I thought I might as well do something useful so I put the bandage on Mrs Singer's ankle.

'It's on the stairs,' I told Thumper when he arrived. He had with him a forked stick, a sack and a broom handle to which was attached a wire loop. He explained that the idea was to put the loop around the snake and to lift it into the air so that it would have no firm foundation if it decided to strike. Thumper was wearing a pair of thick gauntlets – the sort which used to be favoured by motorcyclists in the 1950s but which went out of favour for some reason. I didn't blame him at all. I wouldn't tackle a poisonous snake unless I was wearing armour. He looked at me and then at Mrs Singer. She still hadn't got round to putting her skirt back on.

'Hello, Carole!' he said. Carole simpered rather coyly.

'Mrs Singer has sprained her ankle,' I explained.

'Sorry to hear it,' said Thumper. He cautiously opened the door at the bottom of the stairs and two minutes later, he had the snake in the sack.

'I'll release it on the moor,' he said to Mrs Singer. 'I assume you don't want to keep it?'

'Oh no, please take it! Get rid of it!' said Mrs Singer without hesitation. 'But don't hurt it!' she added.

'I'd better be off,' I said, when Thumper had gone. I looked at my watch. My evening surgery was due to start in ten minutes time. 'You haven't got any more snakes around the place, have you?'

'No,' said Mrs Singer, laughing rather nervously.

I hobbled to the car.

'Oh doctor,' called Mrs Singer who had followed me to the front door. 'Could I have a sick note for the pub? I don't think I'll be able to strip for a couple of days.'

I went back and wrote out a sick note. She was still not wearing her skirt. 'And when you do go back to work it might be a good idea to keep off slippery tables,' I told her.

When I'd done that I headed back to the car.

'Hello!' said Patsy when I got back home. 'You seem to have had a busy afternoon!'

'Don't ask,' I said.

'I don't need to,' she said. 'Mrs Rathbone called to let me know that she saw you climbing out of the Singers' bedroom window and then ten or fifteen minutes later she saw you and Mrs Singer standing on the doorstep.'

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘She said Mrs Singer wasn’t wearing a skirt and had only one stocking on.’

‘She’s sprained her ankle.’

‘Why are you limping?’

‘I sprained an ankle when I climbed out of the bedroom window.’

‘Golly! Is it catching?’

‘I’ve just got time for a cup of tea and a biscuit before surgery starts,’ I said wearily. ‘I’ll tell you about it later. Believe me, I’ve had a tough time.’

‘It sounds as if you have,’ said Patsy with a grin. ‘I can’t wait to hear all about it. The bit about you climbing out of the bedroom window should be particularly worth hearing.’

The Man in the Hat

I had, over the years, seen Dyfed Steele a good many times.

He wasn't Welsh, though his Christian name sounded more Welsh than English.

He had, so he once told me, been conceived while his parents were on their honeymoon in Port Talbot. He didn't know if there was any significance to the choice of the name Dyfed, but he said his mother had seen the name on a lorry and had rather liked it; thinking it stylish, manly and a little different.

Apart from having a slightly less than usual Christian name, the most immediately notable oddity about Dyfed was that he always wore a hat. He wore it outdoors and indoors. He wore it while eating and he wore it when sitting in my consulting room. It was a flat cap, a piece of headgear that had definitely seen better days, and I don't think he ever took it off. There were rumours that he wore it when he took his bi-monthly bath and rumours that he wore it in bed. There were some in the village who wondered whether anyone, including his lady wife, had ever seen the top of his head at all.

Dyfed lived in a small, red brick two up and two down which had once been a farm labourer's tied cottage and he had lived there for as long as I could remember, sharing the house with his wife, a normally pleasant, friendly woman called Emily.

The two of them used to row a good deal and occasionally china would be thrown, though usually, I am pleased to say, with more passion than accuracy. He once came to me with a nasty bruise on his right cheek, apparently from a flying cup, and she once had a slight cut and a bruise on her shoulder from a tea plate which had shattered on impact. The arguments never lasted very long, however.

Mrs Kennet, Patsy's mother knew them well and said that the two of them 'always buried the hatchet quickly but always dug it up again before the day was out'.

Emily, who was not the brightest bulb in the chandelier, was the most enthusiastic slimmer I can remember ever meeting. Both she and Dyfed had been on diets ever since I'd known them and I once noted that according to the medical records I collected, Emily had, over the years, lost a total of 2,200 pounds.

As a general rule, they each weighed somewhere between 250 and 300 pounds.

That means that whether you measured them in Imperial tons, American tons or Metric tons, they weighed around a quarter of a ton together. (What a wonderful tribute to diversity it is that a simple word like 'ton' should mean so many very different things according to where it is measured.)

As Thumper once said, it was a good job the Steeles didn't ride a tandem bicycle together.

Dyfed Steele was one of those patients who seem to be a trifle unlucky and his weight didn't seem to help his luck.

Take, for example, what happened in the depths of a winter when most of Bilbury was covered in a foot of snow and the parts that didn't have a foot of snow were covered in drifts several feet deep.

The snow fell so consistently and so heavily that every morning I had to traipse around the garden at Bilbury Grange, knocking the snow off our trees and bushes so that the weight of it didn't break the branches. It is, of course, the evergreens which suffer most; their larger surface area means that the weight of snow on them can be extraordinary.

The house itself was festooned with icicles, which the locals call frost candles, and when moving in and out of the house we kept a watchful eye on the icicles above us. It is no fun to be speared by a falling icicle. A few years earlier a man the other side of Bideford had been killed by an icicle which had landed on his neck and cut through his spine and spinal cord. It never fails to surprise me just how many strange ways there are for men to die.

Now, there is in Bilbury one particular pond which is always popular with ice skaters.

The pond (it would be exaggerating its size and importance to call it a lake though many in the village refer to it as such) is just west of Softly's Bottom and doesn't cover much more than a third of an acre in total.

As a general rule, locals usually regard three inches of clear black ice as safe for skating. More is better. Less is risky. When the ice is clear and fairly thick then it can be safe even if cracking can be heard and cracks can be seen.

Much less ice than three inches is suicidal.

If the ice isn't black and seems to contain snow, then even twice that thickness isn't enough.

Of course, the risk also depends very much upon the nature of the water underneath the ice. If the water is shallow then the biggest risk is that any skaters who go through will get a soaking. But if the water is deeper and fast flowing, with a noticeable current, then the risks can be very serious. The most dangerous situation is a river which has fast running water in the middle and slow running water at the sides. The danger is that whereas the ice at the edges of the river seems solid and safe, the ice in the middle may be very thin and a skater who goes through there may be swept along by the current and unable to escape from their icy roofed grave.

And, of course, everything changes if a bunch of people are skating – especially if they keep close together.

Well, during the winter about which I am writing, a dozen people had been happily skating on the pond, with nothing untoward happening, when Dyfed saw the fun they were having. Not unnaturally, he decided that he wanted to join in. So he borrowed a pair of skates.

And within three minutes he had gone through the ice and was standing up to his waist in cold water.

The problem, of course, was getting him out of the pond.

Dyfed didn't have the upper body strength to raise himself up out of the water and no one else could possibly lift him. Attempts to pull him out of the pond failed miserably when poor Dyfed complained that he was being pulled into the raw ice edge of the hole he'd made.

In the end, the only way to rescue him was to break a path in the ice all the way through to the point where Dyfed had gone through. Once this had been done, Dyfed was able to wade to the shore, safety and the blanket being held by the ever faithful Emily.

Unfortunately, to make things worse for Dyfed, a reporter from the local paper happened to be present and his adventures found their way onto page three of the next week's issue.

'Too Much Weight –Too Little Ice!' was the headline.

Dyfed was more than a little unpopular with those who had wanted to carry on skating for it took another few days for the ice to repair itself sufficiently for more skating. Not surprisingly, Dyfed was banned from going onto the ice any more.

I suppose you could say that the ice skating thing could have been put down to a lack of insight, or a lack of common sense, but if strange things were going to happen then they tended to happen to Dyfed.

The truth was that the only sort of luck he ever had was bad luck. If he had ever won the lottery he would have lost the ticket.

Whenever I saw him, I was reminded of Dante Alighieri, the woeful Italian poet who was one of the first package tourists in history and who in his Divine Comedy described how he went on a guided tour through the nine circles of hell.

I sometimes thought that Dyfed had set out on his own version of Dante's endless trial. He was always in and out of my surgery, invariably with something out of the ordinary to report.

Take the bees, for example.

Now, quite a few people in Bilbury keep bees. I can, off the top of my head, think of half a dozen keen apiarists within two miles of Bilbury Grange. Like all the others, Dyfed kept bees and collected his own honey. It was splendid stuff too for their garden, whence from the bees collected their pollen, was well stocked with a wide variety of clovers, the sort of plants which honey connoisseurs claim produces the finest tasting honeys.

Dyfed told me that David, the chap with the sling who had beaten Goliath in single combat, had reported that he had found, when pursuing the Philistines, that honey was the original 'super food' in that it revived, restored, healed and invigorated. David should have known for few people needed more reviving, restoring, healing or invigorating.

But Dyfed was the only bee keeper I knew who was regularly stung by his bees.

Most of those who keep bees seemed to develop some sort of rapport with their swarms. Even though they are, technically at least, stealing the honey the bees have made, they manage to build up something approaching a relationship.

They took the honey, it was true, but they took it as a sort of rent on the fine properties and sense of security they provided in the form of well-made and well looked after hives.

Most of the apiarists I knew did not even bother to wear the usual protective clothing favoured by beekeepers. I thought them quite mad, and braver than I could ever be, but they didn't often get stung.

Dyfed, on the other hand, did not have any sort of relationship with his bees.

Or rather, I suppose he did have a relationship but it was distinctly and exclusively antagonistic.

When collecting honey, he wore all the gear: the hood with see-through facemask, the one-piece suit, the thick gauntlets and the boots. Wandering down the garden path, he looked for all the world as though he had just landed from Mars and was hunting around for a suitable decompression chamber. You would not have thought it possible that anything could have snuck into that suit. And underneath the beekeeper's guard he wore a long-sleeved, woollen vest and long-legged, woollen underpants – the sort favoured and heartily recommended by men and women who climb Everest or explore the icy wastes of the Arctic or Antarctic. On warm days he must have been roasting. But still the bees managed to sting him. Every pound of honey he collected resulted in half a dozen stings and he would come in from the garden, make sure all the doors and windows were shut, strip off and sit in a kitchen chair for half an hour while Emily, armed with the pair of tweezers Dyfed had used to handle his stamps when he was a boy, and had a fine collection of British Commonwealth Commemoratives, would gently remove the stings which the hapless bees had left behind. It always seemed to me to be a rather high price to pay for a pound or so of honey.

And then there was the whisky still.

I really don't know what possessed him to set up a whisky still. He wasn't a heavy drinker. He had no intention of selling the stuff he made. And for the money he spent on equipment, he could have bought himself a case of good malt whisky. I sometimes think he just started the still to see what would happen; to see whether he could get away with it.

As far as I understand it (and I am no expert) you need several things to make a whisky still.

First, you need a pile of potatoes which are surplus to normal requirements, or some grain that has started to sprout. This is the 'whatever'.

Before it can be turned into something drinkable (and probably toxic) the 'whatever' you choose to use has to be mixed with loads of hot water, stirred a good deal and then filtered.

And then you need something with which you can heat the liquid from which you intend to obtain the alcohol, something else to help the vapour condense before it escapes and disappears, and another something else that will cool and then trap the alcohol you hope you have produced.

And you also need a thermometer.

It is, as you can see, a good deal more complicated than just wandering into the Duck and Puddle and asking Frank to pour you a snifter.

Now most people who set up illicit stills (and I don't think even Dyfed was ignorant of the fact that it is illegal to make your own alcohol) put together all the bits and pieces they need from stuff they have lying around the house or in a shed. Or they collect the necessary impedimenta a bit at a time so that no one supplier knows precisely what they are doing. I assume that burglars follow the same basic principle: buy the sack with 'swag' written on it from one supplier, the mask for disguising one's appearance from a second, the striped jumper from a third and the jemmy from a fourth. Only a fool would choose to buy all four items from same emporium.

This was not the way for Dyfed.

He had a glut of King Edward potatoes one year and after deciding that he might try his hand at converting the excess into something more useful than chips, mash and jacket potatoes he sent off for a Home Distillation Kit which he saw advertised in one of those funny little underground magazines that were so popular in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

And, you will not be terribly surprised to hear that he had hardly finished unpacking the kit before there was a knock on his front door and a bunch of policemen stormed in and arrested him. This was the most exciting thing to have happened to the police of North Devon in a generation or more and they weren't about to miss the opportunity to get their man banged to rights.

At this point, Dyfed did have an unusual stroke of luck in that the policemen who had burst through his front door had moved a little too eagerly. And because Dyfed hadn't even unpacked the bits and pieces he'd bought, let alone put it all together, let alone found out what he was supposed to do, let alone actually manufactured anything illicit, there wasn't much of a case for the prosecution to get their teeth into. Dyfed could, I suppose, have claimed that he just wanted to see what the equipment looked like. He could have argued that he had ordered the stuff by mistake.

You can arrest people for all sorts of strange things but the prosecution decided in the end that you really can't expect to convict someone for being in possession of a pressure cooker and a few bits of tubing and glassware.

The other bit of good fortune Dyfed had lay in the fact that the supplier had forgotten to include the instruction booklet which had supposed to be a part of the package. In the end, the authorities had to let him go with a stern warning. But they nevertheless confiscated all the stuff he'd bought – on the dubious grounds that they could.

That was the whisky still fiasco.

And, of course, there was the time that Dyfed, who was old enough to know better, decided to emulate Evil Knievel, an American stunt rider who was at the time very famous for riding his motorcycle over rows of double decker buses and who a year or two later tried to jump the Grand Canyon on some sort of crazy motorcycle fitted with wings.

Several local boys had injured themselves trying to do tricks on their bicycles.

Two, I remember, had arranged a couple of planks, a packing case and a variety of other bits of waste wood in an attempt to create a stunt scenario of their own. They had persuaded a young sister to lie down at the end of the ramp they'd made and it was more by the grace of God than through any skill that they both managed to miss her. Indeed, it was their complete lack of skill which saved the girl because they both fell off the plank before they could do the leap they had hoped to execute. One had a sprained ankle and a bruised knee and the other knocked out two milk teeth which were about ready to come out anyway.

None of the children who hurt themselves did anything which a little Dettol and some sticking plaster couldn't put right.

But Dyfed, of course, had to have a go at being Evil Knievel.

He was well into his 30s at the time, the age at which a man can reasonably be expected to be at least on nodding terms with maturity.

Not owning, or having access to, a motorbike, Dyfed was forced to use a pedal cycle for his record breaking attempt. And, to make things worse, the bike he chose to use, because it was the only one in the Steele household, was an old sit up and beg machine which belonged to his wife and which was equipped with one of those neat, little woven baskets fitted to the front handlebars.

Unlike the young boys who had tried a similar exploit, Dyfed did not build himself a ramp. Oh no. Nothing so rational would do for Dyfed. Instead, he chose to attempt to leap over a local stream by riding the borrowed bicycle as fast as he could across a field. He turned his hat back to front, so that the peak lay behind him and would not slow him down, and he made his attempt with an audience of one: the long suffering Emily.

Predictably, the attempt proved to be quite beyond his skills and the machine's capabilities. When the bicycle, with Dyfed on board, reached the nearside bank, it had failed to attain sufficient speed to enable it to become airborne. It is, perhaps, important to remember that at the time of the accident, Dyfed weighed considerably in excess of his usual 250 pounds. And he wasn't fit enough to peddle a bicycle at a decent speed on the rough ground of a grassy field. So, instead of flying through the air with the greatest of ease, the bicycle merely plunged front wheel first into the stream, throwing the hapless rider into the mud of the opposite bank.

It could have been worse. It could have been much worse.

As it was, Dyfed broke his collarbone, cut his hand and suffered a number of stings from the bed of nettles into which he crashed. The bicycle, which was even less fortunate than its rider, landed on a rather large stone, and ended up with a buckled front wheel. It now resides with an old iron bedstead and a retired mangle at the bottom of the Steele's garden.

It was the evening when Dyfed came to the surgery to have the stitches removed from his hand that I finally plucked up the courage to seek the answer to the question I had harboured since the ambulance had taken him off to the hospital.

'I hope you don't think it rude of me to ask,' I said as I carefully removed the first of the stitches, 'but did you take your cap off at the hospital?'

'They wanted me to,' he said.

'But did you?'

'Certainly not.'

'Why not?' I asked.

It was probably impertinent but I was, I confess, curious to know why he wouldn't remove the damned hat. I confess I had wondered if it could simply be that he was bald, or balding, and embarrassed about his hairless pate. There was, however, plenty of hair poking out at the sides and the back of the hat so I knew he was not entirely bald.

'It's embarrassing,' said Dyfed, going slightly red.

'I'm not going to find it embarrassing,' I told him. 'And it might be something I can help you with.'

He thought about it for a while while I continued to snip away and remove the stitches in his hand.

'Would you draw the curtains, please?'

'Draw the curtains?'

'Yes, please. But don't put on the light.'

I removed the last stitch. Everything looked clean and healthy. I then drew the curtains.

'There you are,' said Dyfed, removing his cap.

The top of his head was surprisingly bald and sitting in the middle of his scalp was a lump about an inch high and an inch wide.

'Can I put my hat back on, now?'

'No, no, wait a moment. Let me look at it, first.'

'Be quick then, doctor.'

I examined the lump. It was a fairly ordinary cyst.

'I have to put my hat back on,' said Dyfed. He seemed quite distressed.

'Why?' I asked him. 'Why do you need to put your hat back on so quickly?'

'Because if the light gets to it then it will turn cancerous and I'll have to have the top of my head taken off.'

'It's a perfectly harmless lump,' I told him. 'You could shine a light on it all day and it wouldn't turn cancerous. Who told you that nonsense?'

'Mrs Hathaway.'

'Who is Mrs Hathaway?'

‘The woman who lives next door but one to my aunt Brenda.’

‘Where does your aunt Brenda live?’

‘In Giggleswade.’

‘Has Mrs Hathaway seen your lump?’

‘No. But Emily described it to my aunt Brenda on the telephone. And my aunt Brenda then told Mrs Hathaway. And Mrs Hathaway said that it was pre-cancerous and that I should keep it out of the light and away from the air as much as possible.’

‘So you keep your hat on?’

‘It seemed the best thing to do.’

‘When was this?’

‘Six years ago.’

‘Well she was talking rubbish,’ I told him. ‘And that’s why you have been wearing your hat all these years?’

‘Yes. And it hasn’t turned into cancer, has it?’

‘No. And it hasn’t and won’t. It’s just an ordinary lump: a lipoma.’

‘A what?’

‘A lipoma. It’s just a fatty lump. It won’t do you any harm. They don’t usually develop on the head but there it is, it has.’

Dyfed looked at me doubtfully. ‘You mean it really won’t hurt for the sunshine to get on it?’

‘No. Do you want it removed?’

‘Removed?’

‘Taken away?’

‘Can you do that?’

‘Certainly.’

‘And it would disappear completely?’

‘Just a little scar to show where it had been.’

‘I’d need to go to the hospital wouldn’t I?’

‘If you want to go to the hospital I could make an appointment for you to see a surgeon. But there are long waiting lists in the NHS these days. He’ll see you in three or four months’ time for a preliminary consultation. And then he’ll put you on the waiting list and eventually, if you’re lucky, he’ll remove the lump in another twelve or eighteen months’ time. You won’t get it done much sooner because it’s not life threatening in any way. If you’re lucky, you could probably have it removed in just under two years – that’s if all goes well and the waiting lists don’t grow any longer.’

‘Oh.’

Now that he had found out that he could have the lump removed, Dyfed sounded disappointed at the prospect of having to wait so long.

‘Or you could take your jacket off, lie down on the couch and let me remove it now.’

‘You can take it off?’ said Dyfed. He sounded startled; as though I’d offered to shine his shoes or change his sparking plugs.

‘Of course. It’s a small lump and I’m a doctor and you’re my last patient.’

‘But you said it would take the hospital two years to take it off.’

‘It probably would. But I’m quicker than them. I could take it off in a quarter of an hour.’

‘Do you do things like this?’

‘I do,’ I told him. ‘I did a few of them when I worked as a house surgeon.’ I took my Swiss Army penknife out of my pocket and opened the largest blade. ‘This should be plenty big enough.’

Dyfed looked at me with terror in his eyes.

‘Just kidding,’ I told him, putting the penknife back into my pocket. ‘I’ve got a proper scalpel and some anaesthetic stuff I can inject so that you don’t feel a thing.’

And so three minutes later Dyfed was lying on my examination couch with his head positioned so that I could get at his scalp.

I cleaned the whole area, wiped it down with a strong antiseptic solution, and then injected a local anaesthetic into the skin all around the lipoma.

Five minutes after that I started work removing the lipoma.

Less than twenty minutes later, I was sewing up the wound I’d made and Dyfed Steele no longer had a lipoma sitting in the middle of his largely bald head.

When I’d finished I was, to be frank, quite proud of the job I’d made. It had been a year or two since I’d removed a lump that big. I taped a dressing over the stitches where the lump had been.

‘You’ll have to come back and see me to have these new stitches removed,’ I told him. ‘But come back tomorrow and let me have a look at it so that I can change the dressing.’

It occurred to me that it was rather surreal that he should come into the surgery to have one lot of stitches removed and leave with a fresh lot in a different part of his body.

‘Can I put my hat on now, doctor?’ asked Dyfed.

I stared at him, disbelievingly. ‘You don’t have to wear your hat now.’

‘Oh, I think I’ll keep it on, if you don’t mind, doctor,’ said Dyfed. ‘It would feel odd not to be wearing my hat. Besides, when my missus last saw my head, there was more hair on it.’

‘So are you just going to keep the hat on all the time?’

‘Oh, yes, I think so.’

I might as well have left the damned lump where it was. It hadn’t been doing any harm.

Gwladys Gwilliams

Gwladys Gwilliams, who was well into her 80s when I first met her, lived in a small house by the river. She lived with Bobby, a small dog of an indeterminate make whom she loved very much. She was an elegant, noticeable and easily remembered woman. She always wore make-up, meticulously applied. Her hair was always neatly done. She always dressed smartly. And a charming smile was never far from her lips. I had no doubt, that she had once been both toothsome and eesome.

She once explained to me that her parents had christened her Gwladys (which was, apparently, a common spelling variation at the time of her birth) and that she had later paid a few pounds to a solicitor who had arranged to have her surname adjusted to match. She said she was in show business at the time and felt that a catchy name might help her move up the ladder a little easier. Unfortunately, it didn't.

Miss Gwilliams's home was called River Cottage. It was a very small house which had just two rooms upstairs and two downstairs. It was just over a 100-years-old but it was still one of the youngest properties in the village.

When the last cottage had been finished in the 19th century, and the last builder had fitted the last slate in position, it seems to have been decided that that was that; that Bilbury was pretty much complete, in the same way that a suit of clothes is complete when the last button has been sewn into place.

There had, of course, been a number of attempts to extend the size of the village and not a few individuals had applied for permission to build a house here, a house there. Most of the applications had been rejected. Attempts to build housing estates had been defeated.

Since the house in which Miss Gwilliams lived was known to get flooded almost every winter, she paid a very modest peppercorn rent to live there.

The owners, who lived in London, had bought the house in the summer a few years earlier and had not realised that their new holiday home would be flooded during the colder, wetter months. I don't think anyone actually lied to them. I just don't think they were sensible enough to ask the right questions. The river, boosted by rain from the nearby hills, brought down by dozens of tiny tributaries, invariably burst its banks in November and the ground floor of the house would stay wet, if not completely under water, until late March.

There wasn't a good deal of sympathy for the owners in the village.

'You would have thought,' said Patchy Fogg, 'that they would have seen the high water mark, two foot six inches above the top of the skirting boards in all the rooms downstairs.'

The Londoners had tried to sell the house but no one else had been daft enough to want to buy it. They didn't want to use it themselves because the first flood had not only destroyed their lovely rugs, their smart, new television set and their kitchen equipment but it had also broken their hearts. They couldn't bear to return to the site of their Great Mistake.

In the end, they allowed a local estate agent to offer it as a rental property. After being on the market, and empty, for nine months, the agent managed to rent out the property to Miss Gwilliams on the understanding that she would be responsible for all the local taxes and for some basic maintenance. In addition, she paid just £20 a year as a peppercorn rent and she had an agreement that gave her the right to live in the property for as long as she liked. The owners, tired of their North Devon cottage, had effectively washed their hands of it and considered themselves lucky to be free of the associated responsibilities and liabilities.

Miss Gwilliams didn't mind that her house flooded.

She got round the problem by ignoring the ground floor completely. She hired Thumper Robinson to put up a small partition on the top floor and with this he divided one of the two rooms into a tiny bathroom and a tiny kitchen. Thumper installed a sink, a bath and a lavatory in the bathroom and a cooker and a couple of old cupboards in the kitchen.

The other upstairs room she used as a bed-sitting room. Every surface in that room was covered with photographs of her. In some of the pictures she was alone, dressed in costumes – most of which were revealing. In some of the photographs she was in a group or with another performer – some of them very famous. There was one photograph of her sitting on Peter Sellers' lap. She had an arm around his neck and was wearing nothing but a feather in her hair. He was wearing a suit and was pretending to be startled; somehow surprised to find that he had a naked girl on his knees.

The cottage was, in truth, all very cosy.

Miss Gwilliams had all the downstairs electrics disconnected and bought herself a decent pair of fisherman's waders.

If the river water came into the house for the winter well, it would go away again, wouldn't it?

‘It’s not as if it’s sewage or drain water,’ she said. ‘It doesn’t smell or leave anything nasty behind. I get a bit of weed left downstairs and once I found a dead trout stuck in the fireplace. But the water level never goes up too high for my waders.’

No one else wanted to be a tenant of River Cottage but maybe that was because no one else had the imagination to see that by turning the cottage into a home on stilts it would become a quite desirable property.

For a very modest outlay, Miss Gwilliams had turned an unwanted property into the home of her dreams. She had a splendid view up and down the river and marvellous views across the moors to the East.

In her youth, Miss Gwilliams had performed in various revue bars in London and had been a member of a variety troupe which had travelled around the country performing in provincial theatres and music halls.

She didn’t have many visitors and whenever I saw her she always told me a little more about her life.

‘Maybe you’ll write about me in one of your books,’ she once said. ‘I’d like that.’

Bit by bit I learned about her extraordinary experiences.

She had spent her early and middle years on the fringes of show business and now she lived as much in her memories as in the world around her.

As my friend Will once put it, talking about someone else, ‘she spoke about her vicissitudes with veritable and verifiable verisimilitude’.

People sometimes sneer at older folk for living in the past but it has always seemed to me that we belittle our lives if we forget the past and, besides, hers were remembrances rather than longings. Even the young will look at a photo album or a souvenir with affection.

In most decent lives, the regrets of omission (the list of things we could and should have done but didn’t do) far outweigh the regrets of commission (the things we did do but need not have done and should not have done) and Miss Gwilliams was no exception. From time to time, as she told me of her life she would halt and look away for a moment or two. When she looked back I could see moistness in her eyes and I knew the tears were there because of a disappointment remembered or an opportunity missed.

I visited her regularly because after she came to Devon she developed bronchitis and emphysema. I don’t think the damp helped. Living by a river can be especially bad for you if you have problems with your lungs. And it doesn’t help, of course, if the river has a habit of coming indoors for a while during the winter months.

The chest problems were the most serious of her health troubles but she had, over the years, managed to collect quite a library of ailments. She used to ask me to visit a bit more often than was really necessary and I think she was probably just lonely.

If she asked for a visit in the winter when her house was flooded, she would sometimes ask me to take her a basket of shopping from Peter Marshall’s shop. She always insisted on paying me for the groceries. When I visited her between November and March, I always put a pair of fisherman’s waders in the boot of the Rolls Royce.

It was Miss Gwilliams who taught me the art of dunking a biscuit.

When she gave me a cup of tea she always produced a plateful of biscuits.

‘Dunk if you like, doctor,’ she said one day.

I picked up a bourbon cream and dipped it into my tea.

‘Oh no, no, doctor!’ she said, laughing and waving a finger in mock admonishment. ‘You’re doing it all wrong.’

She explained that there is quite an art, and a bit of science maybe, to dunking a biscuit properly.

For a start, there’s the choice of the biscuit. Speciality items such as custard creams and bourbons aren’t the best for dunking. Digestive and rich tea biscuits are more suitable.

Next, you must be careful not to put too much biscuit into the tea.

‘Between half an inch and three quarters of an inch is plenty,’ she said. ‘And then, when you’ve dunked, you should quietly count ‘one, two’ before withdrawing. If you put a biscuit in too far, or leave it submerged for too long, it will become soggy and break and that’s disastrous!’

She told me that she had it on the very best authority that Queen Elizabeth II was a secret dunker. (‘A friend of mine has a daughter who works at the Palace. She insists she’s often seen the Queen dunking the royal biscuit.)

She also said that Cary Grant was a keen dunker. ‘I knew him when he was known as Archie Leach and working in vaudeville. He was an acrobatic dancer but also a very funny man. He toured the same music halls that I did for a while. He didn’t emigrate to America until later.’

I promised her that I would tell her story in one of my books about the village of Bilbury and the people who live there.

Miss Gwilliams was, I think a romantic. Romantics always find failure much easier to cope with than success. And although no one could say that her career was a great success, there is absolutely no doubt that Miss Gwilliams enjoyed her life in show business.

She told me that she had, at various times, been a singer (‘I wasn’t terribly good but I wore a rather daring gown and so I got away with it), a magician's assistant ('He was called The Great something or other and he used to cut me in half every night, and twice on Wednesdays and Saturdays, but I left that job when he started to drink and nearly did cut me in half one night.'), a juggler's assistant ('He was lovely. He was Italian and I thought I'd found true love. Unfortunately, he wasn't a terribly good juggler and he wasn't a terribly good boyfriend. He was fired and ran back to Italy with a toffee-nosed soprano who was at least twice his age and six inches taller than him. I don't mean to be catty but I'd still scratch her eyes out if I saw her now.')

And she became the girl who looked after the costumes and the props and she made herself indispensable by making endless cups of tea and fetching packets of fish and chips at the end of each show.

When the Windmill Theatre opened in London, Miss Gwilliams became one of the famous nude models in the 'tableaux vivants'.

'I was older than all the other girls and some of them knew that and they treated me like a mum. I was more experienced than any of them because I'd been on tour around the music halls. I'd been in show business for years and I knew how things worked. I'd worked with some big music hall stars.'

'I told the management that I was 29 but I was 12 years older than that. Fortunately, I'd kept my figure and I've always had good skin and they believed me. I'd learned how to do really good make-up from a lady I worked with on the music halls. Her name was Kate Carney and she was hugely successful. She had a huge eleven bedroom house, expensive cars and race horses. In the 1930s, she used to be accompanied on the piano by a man who was her butler. Well, at least he pretended to be her butler. I don't think anyone really knew for sure. She did three Royal variety shows back in the days when a Royal variety show really meant something. During the Second World War, she was still working and she would often ignore the air raid warnings. She loved being on stage so much that she never wanted to end a show. I've known her carry on with a show until four o'clock in the morning. She's forgotten now but she was a big star in her day and she was very kind to me. It's funny, isn't it? Even the big stars get forgotten as their day goes and their names fade. They think they're immortal but they aren't, of course. You have to be a very special sort of star, a Marie Lloyd, a George Formby or a Stanley Holloway to last after you've died.'

'Actually, when they started with the nude shows I think the Windmill had a bit of a job finding girls who'd perform naked. They wanted actresses; young ladies who could be elegant even without wearing costumes. We had to go onto the stage stark naked and stand perfectly still. We tried to get into a comfortable position that you could hold for as long as possible because we were warned that the show would be closed if we moved. A lovely man called Vivian Van Damm was the manager and he was in charge of creating the nude scenes. He came up with some right corkers. Once, we all had to pretend to be mermaids. Another time we were supposed to be Red Indian squaws with feathers in our hair. The only thing the scenes had in common was that the girls were damned near naked. And the important bits were always on show. If you had long hair you had to keep it off your chest. 'The punters want to see nipples,' said Mr Van Damm.

The Lord Chamberlain, who was in charge of censoring all theatre shows in London, said: 'If you move, it's rude.' So that was that. We didn't move.'

'Later on Mr Van Damm had this idea for a fan dance. One of us would go on stage naked but holding a fan. There would be four other girls, in skimpy costumes, and they would hold fans too. The naked girl would dance about with her body concealed by the five fans. At the end of the dance all the fans would be pulled away revealing the girl's body. She had to stand stock still because the rule was still the same as before: 'If you move, it's rude'.

'One or two of the girls didn't like dancing around nude, usually because they'd acquired boyfriends or fiancés who didn't mind them posing nude if they kept still but didn't approve if they bounced around a bit behind a fan. I never understood that. I never minded being naked and I was very popular. These days I would have been considered too plump but in those days the gentlemen who came to the Windmill liked their girls to have curves in the right places. Gentlemen regularly used to wait for me outside the stage door. Most of them were in town for business. If I liked them, I used to go to dinner with them. If I really liked them and they seemed to be real gentlemen, I'd go back to their hotel with them, though I always had to leave before morning so that the hotel management didn't get upset. The little presents I was given helped me buy my luxuries; nicer frocks, pretty hats and shoes. Some of the gentlemen used to give perfume or bits of jewellery but I always preferred cash. Some of the hotels were a bit sniffy and I had to sneak out the back way through the kitchens.'

'We had all sorts of other tricks to get round the rules about not moving on the stage. We used to sit naked on a swing seat and a couple of girls in costumes would push us. The Lord Chamberlain said that was all right because it was the seat that was moving. Can you imagine anything so daft?'

'In the end, I had to leave the stage because someone told the boss how old I was. I never knew who told on me but I had my suspicions because not many people there knew the truth. Mr Van Damm didn't believe it when he knew my real age. He was in tears when he told me I'd have to go. I think he was frightened people would find out they had a woman my age on the stage. They liked to give the impression the girls were all young and virginal! I'd have gone on there forever if it had been left to me. Still, I had a good run for my money.'

'They let me work there behind the scenes for a while and I was there after the War when Mr Van Damm started hiring young comedians. I remember we had Tony Hancock, Harry Secombe, Peter Sellers, Tommy Cooper, Bruce Forsyth, Arthur English, Michael Bentine and Jimmy Edwards working there. They were all lovely young lads. I remember more than one or two of them liked watching the girls from the wings but Jimmy Edwards wasn't so interested. We didn't find out until later why that might have been, bless him. Peter Sellers was my favourite. He was a lovely man. Michael Bentine was funny. Tommy Cooper was nervous to start with but I knew he was going to be a star. He worked harder than some people thought. But they were all lovely. I thought of them as my lovely boys.'

'But then there was a bit of a fuss with the police. I got into trouble for talking to a gentleman outside the stage door. I thought he wanted to be friendlier than he wanted to be and he turned out to be a spoilsport and a sneak. He called a policeman who arrested me. Then I lost my job completely.'

'I found myself a little room in Soho and earned a living giving French lessons. I was the first to think that one up. I had a little card pinned up in a newsagent's shop in Wardour Street. Sometimes I used to get people come up really wanting French lessons. I used to tell them I was full up with students and send them away. I also had a card up for a while that said 'Chest for sale'. That was another girl's idea and it didn't work as well as the French lessons card. I used to pay the newsagent £1 a month to have my card in his window but then I found I didn't really need it. I just thumb-tacked a small advertisement next to the bell where I was living There were six girls living in the building and there were six adverts tacked next to the six bells.'

'And then I met Lionel. He was a lovely man. He was a cobbler who had a little shop just off Wardour Street. He'd inherited the shop from his father. It had been in the family for three generations. He worked really hard and he could do anything with shoes and boots. However badly they were worn, he could make them look like new. He was wonderfully clever with his hands. He used to do embroidery and he made lovely kneelers for the local church. He also made little lead soldiers. He had these little moulds which he'd made himself and he made soldiers which he painted himself and displayed on the shelves in his shop. Occasionally he would give one to a special customer. He was quite a lot younger than me but he asked me to give up my work and move out to Isleworth where he had a nice little house with three bedrooms and a garden. He knew how I'd earned my living, of course, and he was never judgemental. But he didn't think it dignified for a woman of more mature years to have to work in that profession.'

'So I lived in Isleworth for quite a few years. It was very nice but a bit dull, to be honest. Lionel didn't enjoy good health. He smoked too much and suffered badly with his heart. His face and hands were more blue than pink and he used to get a lot of chest pains. He retired early and sold the shop and invested the money. He didn't have a pension but he put the money into the building society and we lived on a bit of interest for a while but we had to dig into the capital as well. Then when that ran out we sold the house in Isleworth and we moved out to a flat in Peckham. Lionel always knew that he'd go first and he told me that he'd put a bit of something aside for me so that I'd be all right. He said he'd put it in my trunk. I still had my trunk from when I'd been touring the music halls. I kept old stuff in it, rubbish mainly. I couldn't throw the trunk away. Not with being it so full of old memories. We aren't much more than the sum of our memories are we? Not really.'

'When he died, the flat had to be sold. I thought I'd be able to use what was left to pay rent but this couple turned up out of nowhere. I'd never known this because he hadn't mentioned it, but Lionel had been married and had a son. The son's wife saw something in the paper about Lionel having died and they came round and wanted whatever there was. Lionel and I were never married so they got everything. They said I could take Lionel's bits and pieces if I wanted them but that was only because they didn't want anything of his. I gave his clothes to a charity shop and most of the rest went out in the rubbish. All they wanted was the money. A nasty pair they were. He did something for the council and he thought he was very important. She was worse. She looked down her nose at me as though I were a bit of something she'd found stuck to the sole of her shoe.'

'Anyway,' said Miss Gwilliams, 'I packed up my stuff and the bits that Lionel had left and put it all in storage. He had a few bits of silver which they didn't know about and I sold those to keep me going for a while. Then I decided to come to Devon because I thought it would be cheaper and that the weather might be better. This cottage was the only place I could afford.'

That was her story.

Or, rather, it was her story up until the time she moved to Bilbury.

There was, however, something else.

A couple of weeks after she arrived in Bilbury, I visited and found her scrabbling on the floor of the room she used as a bed-sitting room. It was the sort of fussy room that Dr Brownlow would have described as crinkum-crankum. She was wheezing terribly as she did so for she had quite a nasty chest infection. A large metal bound trunk was open and she was surrounded by papers, boxes and all sorts of ephemera. Bobby, her much loved dog, was sitting on a chair looking down. 'If I'd made that mess, I'd be in all sorts of trouble,' he seemed to be saying.

Miss Gwilliams explained again that Lionel, the man with whom she had spent the last few years but to whom she had never been married, had assured her that he would ensure that she was looked after in her old age.

'He would never lie to me,' she said. 'And he must have suspected that his son would pop up out of the woodwork and take whatever money there was from the sale of the flat. He said he'd put something into my trunk and he made me promise not to look until I'd buried him.'

'What are those?' I asked, pointing to the gallimaufry of boxes, fal-lals, costumes and papers which were strewn across the floor.

'They were the things that were in my trunk,' said Miss Gwilliams. 'Some of it is my old rubbish. I'd forgotten about most of it. I haven't had this stuff out for years. But somewhere here there must be something valuable.'

I helped her look through the miscellaneous ephemera of her life. Old theatre bills and programmes were stuffed in an old brown envelope. One or two theatre posters bearing her name were rolled up and stored in a cardboard tube. There were some programmes from the Windmill Theatre and a few old perfume bottles; empty but still smelling faintly of the perfume they had contained, and, for Miss Gwilliams, no doubt reeking of memories. There were several brief and well-worn costumes, faded but neatly folded, and a number of items of lingerie which obviously bore memories.

She held one of the costumes up against her. It was boned like an old-fashioned corset, though smaller and more revealing, and covered with sequins.

'I used to wear this when I worked with the magician. When I was with him he called himself 'The Great Lugarno'. Magicians always called themselves 'The Great Something' in those days. Sidney, that was his real name, saw the name Lugarno in a travel agent's window. He didn't realise it was the name of a place. He just thought it was a good, foreign sounding name. My job was to distract the audience while he did something they weren't supposed to see. He used to make me lace my costume very tightly so that my bosom was bursting out of the top and looking as if it was about to escape. If he was having trouble with a trick, which happened very often I'm afraid, he used to whisper 'Bend'. I was then supposed to find some reason to bend forward so that the audience had a better view of my cleavage. I got into the habit of leaving little things on the stage – feathers usually – so that there was something for me to pick up when I'd bent forward. I was very flexible in those days so I could pick something off the stage without bending my knees.'

I picked up a tin box. It had once contained coffee. It was very heavy; so heavy, indeed, that I could hardly lift it. 'What on earth is in here?'

'Haven't the foggiest. It's not mine. It must be something that Lionel put in the trunk. Open it.'

I took off the lid. The tin was full of soldiers, all neatly painted. I carefully shook them out onto the floor. They looked to me as if they were soldiers from Napoleon's army at Waterloo. There were two types of soldier. One species was standing still and holding a rifle. The other type of soldier was marching. They were as heavy as lead soldiers always are.

'They're not worth anything are they?' There was hope in Miss Gwilliam's voice. But not much hope.

'Did Lionel make them?'

'Yes. Those are his. And look – this is in his handwriting.' She pulled a piece of paper out of the tin. It contained a few lines in a neat, compact writing. The handwriting of a craftsman. She showed it to me.

'To Gwladys: to keep you safe. My love, Lionel.'

That was all.

'To Gwladys: to keep you safe. My love, Lionel.'

It seemed an odd gift and an odd message.

'What are they worth?' she asked.

'I'm afraid they're probably not worth anything much. A few shillings.'

She picked up one of the soldiers, examined it and then threw it down; full of frustration and despair. A large flake of paint came off the soldier's back.

'Oh damn,' said Miss Gwilliams. 'Now look what I've done. Poor Lionel. He was so proud of his soldiers.'

I picked up the soldier, looking to see if it could be repaired. To my surprise, I saw that the soldier was not, after all, made of lead. Underneath the paint, the soldier was yellow not grey. But it was heavy: as heavy as lead or as heavy as…

'I think the soldier is made of gold,' I told her, holding up the damaged soldier for her to see.

She looked at me, then took the soldier from my hands.

'Gold? Really?'

'I'm sure it is,' I told her. 'They're heavy and yellow. At least this one is.'

'Knock the paint off another one!'

I hesitated. The soldiers were beautifully made.

'Go on!'

I took out my pocket knife and scratched a piece of paint from the second soldier. More yellow metal beneath the paint. I scratched the paint on a third soldier. Underneath the red and the blue there was yellow.

'I think they're all gold,' I told her. 'They're worth a small fortune.'

'Oh Lionel, you old darling!' said Miss Gwilliams. 'Bless your heart.' She started to cry.

Lionel had clearly poured gold into his moulds and made little gold soldiers. Then he had painted them to disguise what they were made of. I wondered why he'd felt the need to hide the gold. Maybe it was to deceive the relatives he knew might appear. Maybe it was to deceive someone else. Maybe Lionel was worried about death duties. Maybe the gold had not been acquired in an entirely legal manner. Lionel had, after all, worked in Soho and there have always been some rather dodgy people in that part of London.

'This is my legacy,' whispered Miss Gwilliams. 'He wasn't lying when he said he'd look after me.'

I took one of the soldiers to Patchy. He took it to a friend of his called Athol who deals in precious metals. Athol confirmed that the soldier was made of 22-carat gold.

We worked out that Miss Gwilliams could live comfortably for the rest of her life by just selling a soldier every now and then. And that's exactly what she decided to do. I think she enjoyed her final years in Bilbury.

She became quite delightfully feisty in her late 80s. On her 90th birthday party I remember her getting quite cross with a visitor who, having told her that she 'looked good for her age' said something patronising about it being 'nice to see older people still taking an interest in life'.

Miss Gwilliams, who did not like being talked down to as though she were a stupid child, told the visitor that she did not consider herself to be old.

'Oh!' said the visitor, clearly rather startled. 'So, what do you consider old?'

'Anyone who is at least ten years older than I am,' snapped Miss Gwilliams.

When she died of pneumonia, the indomitable Miss Gwilliams was 92-years-old and she had just four soldiers left in the old coffee tin. Bobby, her loyal, little dog, had died a year earlier.

In her will she left everything she had to the Bilbury Cottage Hospital though apart from the soldiers (which were very gratefully received and which enabled us to purchase several useful pieces of equipment including a hoist to help our not-so-young nursing staff and a ripple bed to help with nursing bedbound patients) there wasn't much to leave: just a trunk full of mementoes without the memories to keep them alive.

And after she had gone, River Cottage, the damp house by the river, was empty again.

The Lunchtime Robbers

It was lunchtime and we were sitting in the snug at the Duck and Puddle.

There were four of us: Patchy Fogg, who is our local antique dealer and whose visiting card describes him as a ‘specialist in the sale of items of historical interest to discerning collectors from around the world’, Frank Parsons, the genial landlord of the Duck and Puddle which, since it is the only hostelry in the village, he safely and accurately advertises as the oldest and the most welcoming inn in the village of Bilbury, Thumper Robinson, whose interests and professional activities could not possibly be listed on a visiting card small enough to fit into a pocket (and who would never consider having any cards printed even if they could), and myself.

There had been five of us but the fifth member of our company, Peter Marshall, the local village shopkeeper, had been called away on urgent business and had left us just a few moments earlier.

Peter would not tell us what it was that had necessitated him leaving the pub. It was, however, clearly something important for he had been looking at his watch every few minutes for the previous half an hour. And he had blushed a rather disconcerting shade of red when Patchy asked him where he was going. None of us had ever seen Peter blush before. I don’t think any of us had even suspected that a retailer who advertises potatoes at five pence per pound, or 30 pence for five pounds, would know how to blush.

‘It must be a woman,’ said Thumper firmly.

‘You mean Peter has an assignation?’ said Patchy, sounding as astonished as I felt. Peter has been a bachelor ever since I first arrived in Bilbury and there has never been any hint that he might be interested in any human activity that did not involve the purchase, display and subsequent sale of a wide variety of popular comestibles.

Thumper shrugged, picked up the beer glass in front of him and drained what remained of his pint of Old Restoration.

‘Crumbs,’ said Frank. He frowned and then shook his head at Thumper’s suggestion. Frank sometimes takes a little longer than other people to process new information. It is not unknown, for example, for Frank to laugh at a joke several minutes after everyone else has moved onto something else.

‘Can’t be possible,’ said Patchy. ‘He looked too miserable to have been planning an assignation.’

He was right. Peter had seemed preoccupied and rather depressed.

Patchy looked at his wrist, realised that he wasn’t wearing a watch and then peered at the clock over the fireplace. ‘Is that the right time?’

‘It was half an hour fast when it stopped,’ replied Frank with quiet certainty. He then thought for a moment. ‘Or half an hour slow. I’m pretty sure it was one or the other. Gilly did tell me but I’ve forgotten. And there was a reason for it but I’ve forgotten what that was too.’

Patrons in a more conventional public house might have wondered how Frank could call ‘Time’ if he didn’t know what the time was. This, however, was not something which concerned any of us since Frank usually called ‘Time’, and threw out any remaining customers, only when he was tired and decided he wanted to go to bed. I have known him close the bar at 2 a.m. and I have known him close it well before 8.00 p.m. in the evening.

Just then, the door burst open and three men tumbled into the snug.

One was carrying a pickaxe handle, one was carrying a cricket bat and one was carrying one of those cheap plastic guns which shoot dried peas. I recognised the gun because my flat mates and I all had similar weapons when I was a medical student.

The three men were all wearing balaclavas.

‘This is a hold up!’ shouted the one carrying the cricket bat.

We all looked at him and then at one another. We were all, I think, confused rather than alarmed. I could tell from their faces that my three companions were, like me, wondering why anyone would bother to raid the Duck and Puddle.

‘Be careful with that thing,’ I said to the man with the gun. ‘If you fire it at someone’s face you could blind them. A dried pea in the eye can be very nasty.’

He looked at me, then at the gun and then back at me. He scratched at the balaclava as though it were rather itchy which I suspect it was. It was cold outside but it was warm in the snug at the Duck and Puddle.

‘Empty your pockets!’ ordered the man with the cricket bat, who was either in charge or wanted to be in charge. He turned to Frank, who was sitting on a stool the other side of the bar. ‘Are you the landlord?’

‘It’s my pub,’ replied Frank.

‘Open the till and give me everything you’ve got,’ said the man with the cricket bat. ‘But I don’t want any small change. Just notes.’

‘Haven’t got any notes except a couple of old IOUs,’ said Frank. He pressed the button which opened the till and then scooped out the contents which he laid out on the bar counter. ‘Here you are,’ he said. He counted it. ‘There’s 32p but I think one of the 10p coins is a bit dodgy to be honest. It looks to me as if it might have been made in someone’s shed. I’ve been trying to get rid of it for weeks but we don’t get a lot of people paying with real money so I don’t get many opportunities to hand out change.’

‘Is that all there is?’ said the man with the cricket bat. He sounded terribly disappointed, as well he might have been. When you put on a balaclava, pick up a cricket bat and burst into a pub you don’t expect to find yourself going home with just 32p more than you had when you set out.

‘Afraid so.’

‘What sort of pub is this?’ demanded the robber.

‘Not a very profitable one,’ admitted Frank. ‘Most of our customers put their drinks on the slate.’ Frank reached below the counter and produced a small notebook which was his 1970s version of the old-fashioned slate upon which pub owners had traditionally kept score. He showed the robber the notebook and flicked through the pages. I felt rather guilty. My name was in there. But then so was Patchy’s name and Thumper’s name. The fact is that pretty well everyone in the village was in there. We tend to write out IOUs and leave them for Frank to write in his little notebook.

The man with the cricket bat raised his weapon above his shoulder, as though preparing for a drive through the covers, and turned away from Frank. ‘You three!’ he shouted. ‘Empty your pockets.’

‘Money, keys and fluff or just money?’ demanded Thumper.

‘Just money!’

Thumper reached into his pocket and a moment later spread a few coins on the table. ‘There you are,’ he said. ‘Nine pence.’

‘I can beat that,’ said Patchy. He spread out the contents of his pockets. ‘One penknife, a set of keys and 22p, much of it in copper I’m afraid.’

‘I’m afraid I haven’t got any cash with me,’ I confessed. I don’t usually bother carrying money unless I’m going outside Bilbury. I have a slate at the Duck and Puddle and run tabs with Peter Marshall at the village shop and with Reggie, at Tolstoy’s, the local garage. There isn’t anywhere else in the village where I need to buy anything. Actually, there isn’t anywhere else where I could buy anything.

‘This is bloody ridiculous!’ said the man with the cricket bat, who seemed terribly upset.

‘Take that bloody silly mask off, sit down and have a drink,’ said Thumper. ‘What would your Maureen say if she saw you poncing around looking like an extra in a cheap gangster movie.’

‘What do you mean ‘my Maureen’?’

‘Your wife, you idiot,’ said Thumper.

‘How do you know who my wife is?’

‘Because she works in the Post Office in Barnstaple. She’s worked there for years. Everyone knows Maureen.’

‘Oh.’ He thought for a moment. ‘How do you know she’s my wife?’

‘Because your name is ‘Bone’ Idol and you work at the timber yard in Bideford and you and I used to play football together when we were both younger and had nothing better to do than spend our Saturday afternoons running round in a muddy field.’

‘Oh. How did you recognise me?’

‘Well, a few things tipped me off,’ said Thumper, who was clearly enjoying himself. ‘First, you have a tattoo on your right hand which says ‘Maureen’, second you can’t say your ‘r’s properly and third the timber yard van is parked outside.’

‘I told you we shouldn’t have come in the van!’ said the man with the gun loaded with dried peas.

Frank scooped up the change from the bar counter and put it back into the till. Thumper and Patchy put their change back into their pockets. I would have put my change back into my pocket if I’d had any.

‘Well how the hell else were we going to get here!’ said the man with the cricket bat, whom I now knew to be Maureen’s husband. It somehow changed things when I knew that he had a wife called Maureen who wouldn’t approve of him robbing hostelries. ‘We couldn’t all climb on your bloody bicycle!’

‘We could have come on the bus.’

‘The buses only run on alternate Thursdays when there’s a ‘q’ in the month,’ snapped Maureen’s husband.

The man with the plastic gun looked rather doleful at this.

‘What months have got a ‘q’ in them?’ asked the man with the pickaxe handle. Despite the balaclava mask he managed to look confused.

‘Those balaclavas must be horribly itchy,’ said Thumper.

‘They’re not balaclavas,’ said the man with the pickaxe handle. ‘They’re ski masks. My Doreen knitted them from a pattern in her magazine.'

'Why don't we just tell them all our names?' demanded the man with the plastic gun.

'What do you mean?' demanded the man with the pickaxe handle.

'They already know who 'Bone' is, now they know your wife is called Doreen!'

'And your wife is called Thelma,' said Thumper. 'So just take the damned ski masks off,' he said. 'You all look like complete idiots. And if someone comes in they might get the wrong idea.'

The man with the cricket bat tore off his ski mask and stuffed it into his pocket. Underneath the mask he had a glum looking face. He was unfortunate in having exceptionally floppy ears. If you're planning a career as a hold-up man you don't want to have any instantly recognisable physical qualities but his ears were unique. If you were describing him to a policeman you would have just said, 'He had very floppy ears' and that would have been that. 'Oh yes,' the policeman would have said, 'we know who that is!' The glum looking man was red and clearly hot and appeared to be rather sticky. The other two took off their masks. They too looked red, hot and sticky.

'The one with the cricket bat is 'Bone' Idol,' said Thumper. 'The one with the pickaxe handle is Bill something and the one with the toy gun is Cedric Littlehampton. They all work at the timber yard.'

'Bill Blake,' said Bill something. 'My name is Bill Blake.'

'Can I try your pea gun?' I asked Cedric Littlehampton.

'Sure,' he replied, handing over his gun. 'You just aim and pull the trigger.'

'I remember,' I said. I aimed the gun at Frank and hit him in the chest with a dried pea.

'Oi!' said Frank, rubbing his chest. 'I manage to survive an armed raid and then I get shot by one of my customers!'

'Let me have a go!' said Patchy. I handed him the gun and he too shot Frank. Then Thumper had a go. He shot Frank twice and then shot me three times.

'This is brilliant!' said Patchy. 'We could organise an indoor shooting competition. We could get four of these and have a battle.'

'I hope someone is going to pick up all these bullets,' said Frank.

'They're dried peas,' I reminded him. 'If you collect enough of them you could make a soup or put them in a stew.'

'Gilly makes a lovely soup with dried peas,' said Frank, who was justifiably proud of his wife's cooking. 'She just puts the peas into a pan, pours in some water, adds a few carrots and half a dozen bay leaves and then throws in a handful of her croutons when she serves it. It's one of our most popular soups during the winter months.'

'One of my favourites,' agreed Patchy with a nod of approval.

'Pretty good,' agreed Thumper. 'But I prefer the cock-a-leekie. Gilly makes the best cock-a-leekie I've ever tasted.'

'Please don't use all my ammunition,' begged Cedric. He crawled around, picking up all the peas he could find. 'I borrowed the gun and the ammunition from my boy Jason and he counted the peas before he handed them over.'

'You won't tell anyone about this, will you?' begged the man called 'Bone'.

'You haven't done anything to tell anyone about,' said Thumper, with a shrug.

'They came into the pub waving weapons!' Frank pointed out with unarguable accuracy. 'It was an armed robbery.'

'For God's sake don't tell Maureen,' pleaded 'Bone', the ring-leader, who was still holding his cricket bat. 'If you're going to tell Maureen I'd rather you called the cops. I'd rather do ten years in the nick than explain this cock-up to our Maureen.'

'I didn't know your timber yard had started making pickaxe handles,' said Thumper.

'Oh yes, we've been making them for a few months. How did you know we make them?'

'The handle is stamped with the company logo,' explained Thumper.

The man examined the handle. 'Oh,' he said. 'So it is.'

'So is one of you going to buy us all a drink?' asked Patchy.

The three intruders all looked at him.

'You've come all the way from Barnstaple,' said Patchy. 'You must be thirsty. And if you're going to have a round of drinks you ought to include us. It would be rude not to.'

'I'll have another pint, please,' said Thumper. 'Old Restoration.'

'Glass of Chablis, if you don't mind,' said Patchy. 'Better make it a large one. I've just had a terrifying experience. I'm suffering from that thing…' he turned to me. 'What is it?'

'Shell shock,' I said. 'I'll have a Laphroaig.'

'I'll just take a large gin,' said Frank.

'No you won't,' said Gilly, who had appeared from nowhere and who is looking after Frank's health with great attentiveness to detail. ‘You’ll have a nice tonic water with a big, thick, juicy slice of lemon in it.’

‘These gentleman are paying,’ muttered Frank. ‘They’re buying a round of drinks. With real money.’

‘Then you can charge them for a large gin but give yourself a tonic water,’ said Gilly. ‘I’ll have a port and lemon.’

‘Yes, dear,’ said Frank glumly.

‘I’ll have a beer,’ said the man with the plastic gun.

‘Me too,’ said ‘Bone’, the man with the cricket bat. ‘Give the man some money,’ he said to Bill, the man with the pickaxe handle.

‘Why me?’ demanded Bill.

‘We’ll settle up with you later.’

‘No, you won’t,’ said Bill. ‘You always say you will but you never do. I paid for the petrol we put in the van and you said you’d settle up with me later. I paid for the wool for these bloody silly balaclavas. I’m always the one who gets lumbered with the bill.’

‘They’re ski masks.’

‘No, they’re not. They’re bloody balaclavas. And it’s not fair!’

‘Well, I haven’t got any money with me.’

Bill, the man with the pickaxe handle took out a wallet, removed a £5 note and put it down on the counter. ‘Give me a receipt with my change,’ he said wearily. ‘And I’ll have half a shandy.’

Frank poured the drinks and put a few coins and a till receipt on the counter. He then reached down into a box on the floor by his feet and, one by one, counted out twenty seven packets of crisps and eleven packets of pork scratchings. He then added two boxes of matches to the pile.

‘What are these for?’ asked Bill, staring at the packets of crisps and pork scratchings and the boxes of matches.

‘I haven’t got any more change,’ explained Frank. ‘You’ll have to take those in lieu of what I owe you. Or I can put you down in the book as having a credit of two pounds and thirty seven pence.’

‘I’ll take the crisps and stuff,’ sighed the unhappy robber. He leant the pickaxe handle against the wall, picked up the snacks and started stuffing them into his jacket pockets. When his pockets were full, he looked at Frank and waved a hand over the remaining pile of crisps and pork scratchings. ‘Do you have anything I can put these in?’

Frank reached down, lifted up the empty cardboard box from which he had taken the crisps and put it down on the bar. ‘You can have this for free,’ he said. ‘Compliments of the management.’

‘Thanks,’ said Bill. He didn’t sound terribly grateful.

‘Can I have a packet of those?’ asked Cedric, the ersatz gunman. ‘Salt and vinegar preferably. I’m a bit peckish, but the cheese and onion ones always give me wind.’

‘No, you can’t!’ snapped Bill, who was clearly not happy. ‘Buy your own bloody crisps.’ He transferred the crisps, the pork scratchings and the matches from the bar counter to the box and then added the packets he had already stuffed into his pockets.

‘I hope you don’t mind my mentioning it but I think you need a better plan if you’re going to do this again,’ said Thumper. ‘And maybe you need to go somewhere you aren’t likely to be recognised.’

‘I’m not doing this again,’ said the man with the pickaxe handle and the box of assorted snacks. ‘I can’t afford to be a robber.’

‘Nice beer,’ said the man with his boy’s toy gun. He spotted another dried pea on the floor, bent down, picked it up, brushed off a bit of fluff and put it into his pocket with the rest of his ammunition.

‘Does anyone want a sandwich?’ asked Gilly. ‘We’ve got ham or cheese.’

‘No thanks, love,’ said the man with the cricket bat. He looked at his watch. ‘We came over in our lunchtime. We’d better be getting back.’

‘The Lunchtime Robbers!’ said Thumper, writing an imaginary headline in the air.

The man with the cricket bat growled and muttered something.

The three robbers drank up, said goodbye and left.

‘They seem like nice fellows,’ said Patchy, when they’d gone.

‘But perhaps not too bright,’ said Thumper.

‘No, perhaps not too bright.’

‘I’ve got a £5 note in the till!’ said Frank excitedly. He took the note out and examined it carefully as though it were the first time he’d ever seen a £5 note. Come to think of it, it may well have been the first £5 note he had seen for quite a while.

‘I’d better take that and put it somewhere safe,’ said Gilly, taking the note from between his fingers.

‘And I’d better get back to my showroom,’ said Patchy. ‘I’ve got a customer coming to look at another bed that King Charles II slept in. It’s the last bed he slept in before he climbed up into that famous oak tree.’

‘How do you know Charles II slept in it?’ asked Frank, who can sometimes show flashes of surprising naivety and still doesn’t entirely understand the extent of the grey area in which Patchy operates. ‘How can you really prove it? Did he carve his initials on a bedpost?’

Patchy, who has to my knowledge sold eight of the beds in which King Charles II is alleged to have slept, looked at Frank slightly disbelievingly and then turned to Gilly. ‘Is that clock over the fireplace 30 minutes fast or 30 minutes slow?’

Frank, abandoning hope of an answer to his question, picked up a tray and started to collect the empty glasses left by our trio of armed robbers.

Gilly frowned, thought for a moment and then shrugged. ‘I can’t remember,’ she said. ‘No one has ever asked me that before. But I’m pretty sure you’re right: it was either 30 minutes fast or 30 minutes slow when it stopped, if that’s any help.’

‘That’s OK,’ said Patchy, with a sigh. He looked out of the window. ‘It’s light out so it must still be afternoon.’

And with that he wandered off to sell another bed which had been slept in by King Charles II. If Patchy could have found a decent ringer for the Boscobel oak tree which the King climbed in order to escape Oliver Cromwell’s Roundhead soldiers, he would have happily sold that too. Patchy has an antique dealer’s approach to historical truth; it is one based more on hope than fact, more on belief and expectation than vanilla flavoured verisimilitude.

‘Where’s Peter?’ asked Gilly. ‘I thought I heard him here earlier.’

‘I think he had an assignation,’ said Thumper. ‘He hurried off a while ago.’

‘Ah,’ said Gilly. ‘That’ll be an assignation with his fiancée. I think she wanted to see him to discuss the wedding. Her mother is staying with her to help with the planning. She came down on the train yesterday. Jake, who brought her over in his taxi, says she’s apparently a pleasant enough woman, if you like overbearing, domineering women with lots of blue hair.’

‘What!’ exclaimed Thumper and I simultaneously.

‘What did you say?’ demanded Frank.

‘Pleasant woman, if you like overbearing, domineering women with lots of blue hair,’ repeated Gilly. She paused for a moment, clearly thinking. ‘She looks a bit like one of those carved figureheads you see fixed to the front of sailing ships; acres of hair and a solid-looking, rather menacing bosom.’

‘No, no, not that bit,’ said Frank. ‘The bit about Peter having a fiancée.’

‘Didn’t you know?’ asked Gilly. ‘Hasn’t he told you? He and Hilda Musbury are getting married. He hired her to run the estate agency for him and they seem to have hit it off together.’ She smiled. ‘Or maybe she just made him an offer he couldn’t refuse.’

Thumper, Frank and I stared at her.

We were speechless, so we said nothing.

It occurred to me that, when he had left us, Peter hadn’t looked like a happy bridegroom off to meet his beloved. He’d looked more like a man with a fixed date with an executioner.

I was pretty sure that the same thought had occurred to Thumper and to Frank.

Peter’s Great Escape

Within less than 24 hours of my hearing that Peter Marshall and Hilda Musbury were engaged to be married, Patsy and I received a letter, addressed to us both, which contained a list of ‘acceptable wedding presents’ for the happy couple. The letter was signed by Hilda but not by Peter.

Patsy opened the letter and passed it to me without saying a word.

I looked down the list. Every item on the list had the price beside it. To my astonishment there wasn’t anything on it which cost less than £10!

That was a good deal of money for us and for most people living in Bilbury.

Back in the early 1970s, you could buy a gallon of petrol for 33p, a pound of potatoes for 5p, a ticket for the Cup Final for £2 and a long-playing record for £3.

You could buy a Mini Cooper, an excellent and powerful new car for £600. And even in expensive parts of the country, a very decent family house wouldn’t set you back much more than £5,000. In Bilbury, you could buy a cottage for £3,000. And Tolstoy’s, our local garage, had a variety of cars for sale for between £30 and £100. It is true that they all had a few dings and there was a bit of rust here and there on the bodywork, but they all ran reasonably well and the four tyres, while perhaps not in the first flush of youth, still had a few miles left in them. Reggie always put a bit of black paint over very bald bits of tyre where the canvas was showing through.

(Reggie, who runs the garage, has never believed in providing a spare wheel. He says that not having a spare wheel means that there is more luggage space in the boot.)

Apart from the expense, the other odd thing about the list was that everything on it seemed to have been chosen by Hilda.

I really couldn’t see Peter making out a list which included: ice cream maker, home perm kit, sandwich maker, waffle maker, food mixer, coffee machine, hot plate, hostess trolley, home bust enlarging course (audio tape and book), electric wok, Chinese rug (dimensions supplied), Cartier tank watch (ladies), telephone answering machine, chair covers (measurements supplied), Polaroid camera, electric hair curlers, pearl necklace with matching earrings, two way stretch girdle in white or mocha (size supplied on request), combination alarm clock and tea maker, matching luggage from Louis Vuitton and a vanity case in alligator hide.

‘Do you think Peter knows what is on this list?’ asked Patsy.

I said I didn’t think Peter had even seen the letter let alone the list that accompanied it.

Now, it is perfectly true that Peter has been justifiably described as greedy and as a bit of a skinflint. And there is no doubt that he is always on the lookout for ways to gouge another penny or two from his customers.

For example, just the other day I bought a pack of three green peppers from him and it was only when he told me the price that I realised that he was charging more for the package of peppers than he would have charged if I had bought three loose peppers.

‘But I had to put the three peppers into a pack,’ Peter explained indignantly. ‘So it is entirely reasonable to charge more for the convenience.’

I put the pack back on the shelf, picked out three peppers and bought those for 5p less.

Peter then told me that he was charging 5p for every brown paper bag a customer took. I stuffed the peppers into my pockets and stuck my tongue out at him.

I confess I rather enjoy these silly little battles with Peter. You can’t have that sort of fun when shopping in a supermarket.

But knowing all this meant that I couldn’t help thinking that Peter knew the value of money far too well to expect his friends and customers to put their hands quite so deeply into their pockets.

We were still talking about the wedding list, and wondering what on earth we should do about it, when the telephone went. It was Adrienne, Patsy’s sister and Patchy Fogg’s wife. She was so cross that I could hear her side of the conversation as well as Patsy’s.

‘Have you had one of these wedding lists from Peter Marshall?’ Adrienne demanded, shouting so much that we didn’t really need the telephone to hear her. She and Patchy only live a couple of miles away and if we’d opened a window we would have heard her without it.

‘I think it came from Hilda rather than Peter,’ said Patsy.

‘Is she mad?’ asked Adrienne who is renowned for having a short fuse and speaking her mind. ‘Have you seen the prices of some of the things on her list? When Patchy and I got married, Peter gave us a 5lb sack of potatoes as a wedding present!’

Patsy said that at least the potatoes were useful and pointed out that when we got married Peter had given us a large box of fly papers. The fly papers were those sticky streamers that you hang from the ceiling but they were so old that they had lost their stickiness and were entirely useless.

'Who does she think is going to buy her a Cartier tank watch?' demanded Adrienne, who sounded as if she had steam coming out of both ears.

'Do you know how many people have had one of these letters?' asked Patsy.

'Mum and Dad got one,' said Adrienne. They get their post earlier than we do and Mum was on the telephone twenty minutes ago.'

'I feel sorry for Peter,' said Patsy.

'And what does Hilda want with a bust enlarging and firming course?' demanded Adrienne. 'I would have hardly thought she would have needed assistance in that department!'

'Maybe it's for Peter,' suggested Patsy.

There was loud laughter and some snorting from the other end of the telephone.

At this point, I decided that I would pop into the consulting room and start the morning's work. I kissed Patsy, made my silent excuses and left.

But if I thought I had heard the last of the wedding list saga, I was making a huge mistake.

Peter turned up at my evening surgery that day. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen him professionally.

'I need help,' he said, before he'd even sat down.

'O.K. Tell me what help you need and how I can help.'

'I suppose you've seen that letter that Hilda sent out?' he said, moving the patient's chair around before sitting down.

'The one with the list of recommended wedding presents?'

'That's the one,' said Peter. He sighed wearily. 'That list is making my life miserable.' He paused and blew his nose. 'Your friend Thumper Robinson wanted to know if a bag of gold sovereigns would be satisfactory as a present – even though they're not on the list.'

'There's bound to be some teasing,' I said. 'You're getting married for the first time.'

'I can't bear the thought of being married to that damned woman,' said Peter suddenly.

'Ah,' I said. 'All things considered I can see that could be a bit of a problem.'

'I've started wondering whether I should kill her or kill myself.'

'Hmm,' was the best I could manage in response to this gloomiest of gloomy thoughts.

'At first I thought she'd make a great estate agent,' said Peter. 'You recommended her to me.' He paused and thought for a while. 'So really it's your fault that I'm in this mess!'

'Oh, wait a minute, Peter,' I said, rather defensively. 'You were looking for someone to run your new estate agency. I suggested Hilda and you thought she'd be right for the job. I didn't recommend that you married her!'

'She hasn't sold a single house since she started work,' said Peter miserably. 'Not one! She annoys the sellers by telling them why she doesn't like their taste in furniture and decorations and puts off the buyers by telling them what's wrong with every house they look at.'

'How did you come to ask her to marry you?' I asked him.

'I didn't ask her to marry me!' said Peter, indignantly.

'So what happened?'

'I suppose she sort of asked me.'

'She asked you to marry her?'

'Well, she didn't so much ask me as tell me we were getting married.'

'She told you to marry her?' I said, incredulously.

'She said it would be best if we married.'

'Best? Best for whom? Best for what?'

'That's what I wondered. But that's what we she said.'

'Hang on a minute, Peter,' I said. 'Can we go back a step or two? You hired her to run your new estate agency. What happened between that and her telling you that it would be best if you got married? There must have been something in between.'

'We seemed to be getting on well,' said Peter, closing his eyes as he remembered. 'One day we were having lunch together, just a tin of oxtail soup and some out-of-date crackers that needed eating up, and I said I would like to see more of her.'

Peter then moved his chair around a little before returning it to its original position. I waited. I had known him since shortly after I had arrived in Bilbury but I had never before seen him so utterly beaten.

'I said I'd like to see a little more of her,' he said. 'I thought we could go to Ilfracombe and watch the fishermen. Or take a walk down to Heddon's Mouth.'

‘That sounds fine to me. What happened then?’

‘She got all coy and looked at me as though she was a bit shocked and then she giggled a lot and unfastened the top two buttons of her blouse and said: ‘How much more of me would you like to see, Peter?’ Peter gulped, clearly still horrified at what had happened. ‘When I said I wanted to see more of her I was speaking in general terms. But she, er, interpreted my remark in a very literal sort of way.’

‘Oh. Oh dear. I see.’

‘She kept unfastening buttons and then she pulled the two sides of her blouse apart and asked me if this was what I wanted to see.’ Peter paused. ‘She was wearing a bra but she’s a big woman, doctor, and there was a lot of, well, bosom, flowing over the top of it.’

I made an encouraging noise to keep him going.

‘I didn’t know what to say or where to look,’ said Peter, who was now blushing. ‘So I put down my soup and held out both hands to try to cover her up a bit and to stop her unfastening anything else.’

I thought I could see what probably happened next.

‘She thought I was trying to touch her and she grabbed my hands and sort of put them onto her, you know…’

‘Breasts?’

‘Yes. Those.’

‘Then what happened?’ I asked.

‘Nothing! Absolutely nothing. I managed to get free and I rushed off to unpack a case of cat food that had come in that morning.’

‘Did she come after you?’

‘She wouldn’t leave me alone! She kept rubbing up against me and breathing funny and saying my name a lot and whenever we were alone together she would try to put my hands onto her chest.’

‘So when did she suggest that the two of you got married?’

‘A couple of days after the unbuttoning thing happened. She was helping me lay out some parsnips and radishes when she suddenly said she thought it would be best, all things considered, if we got married.’

‘And what did you say?’

‘I don’t think I said anything. I was horrified! I didn’t want to marry the woman then and I even more don’t want to marry her now – not after that letter and all those things she put on the damned silly list.’

‘Have you said anything to her? Have you told her that you don’t want to get married?’

‘I’ve tried!’ said Peter. ‘Heaven knows I’ve tried. But she takes no notice. She just tells me I’ve got the usual bridegroom nerves and asks me where I want to go for the honeymoon. As if I can go off on a honeymoon? Who will look after the shop if I go off on a honeymoon? I told her she’d have to go on her own.’

‘You told her she’d have to go on the honeymoon by herself?’

‘Yes. Yes. I did.’

He shuffled on the chair and looked embarrassed, as if telling the truth was a slightly shameful exercise. Maybe he also thought the truth was scarcely believable and felt bad because it was all he had to offer.

‘What did she say to that?’

‘She said I didn’t mean that and that we’d have a wonderful time and she sort of winked at me and said it probably didn’t really matter where we went because we wouldn’t be going out much anyway because I’d probably be wanting to have my wicked way with her all the time.’

‘That’s what she said: ‘you’d be wanting to have your wicked way with her’?’

‘Yes,’ said Peter glumly. ‘Exactly that.’

Peter had never struck me as the sort of person likely to want to have his wicked way with anyone. He was the more the sort of fellow who regarded a ‘good time’ as synonymous with ‘a healthy profit’.

‘And now she’s moved into my flat above the shop and her mother has come to stay,’ said Peter who has lived in a small flat above the village shop for as long as he or I can remember.

‘Hilda is living with you?’

‘She announced that she was moving into my place so that we could save money,’ said Peter. ‘She said it was silly for her to pay rent on a cottage when I had a spare room.’

‘So you haven’t, er, been sleeping together?’

Peter stared at me as if I’d gone mad. ‘No! No! Certainly not.’

‘Of course not,’ I agreed. ‘And why did her mother come to stay with you?’

‘Hilda said that since she was living in my flat and we weren’t married she needed her mother to stay as a chaperone.’

‘Ah.’

‘Exactly. And her mother is just like Hilda only more so. She’s called Hilda too.’

‘When is the wedding fixed for?’

‘I’ve no idea,’ said Peter. ‘She went off this morning to fix a date with the vicar. Her mother went with her.’ Peter swallowed and looked at me. The look reminded me of the look I get from Ben the dog when I’m eating something he wants to share. ‘Together, they’re an unstoppable force.’

I pitied Peter. The idea of living with two Hildas was not something I could contemplate without trepidation. The world was not a big enough place for two Hildas.

‘Have you told Hilda that you don’t, er, want to get married?’ I asked him.

Peter looked at me as if I were out of my mind.

‘You can’t tell Hilda anything,’ said Peter glumly. ‘She never listens.’

‘You’re going to have to find a way to make her understand,’ I told him.

‘Can’t you help?’ asked Peter. He sounded rather pathetic – like a small boy who is being bullied at school and wants his Dad to sort things out.

‘I’ll try to think of something,’ I told him. ‘But I don’t think you should pin your hopes on me.’

‘Thanks!’ said Peter, with a smile. ‘That’s great.’

It was clear that he’d heard my first sentence but had completely ignored the second. He stood up, nodded and left, looking much brighter than he’d looked when he’d arrived.

I spent much of the day thinking about Peter’s problem and getting absolutely nowhere. I really couldn’t think of a way out – other than encouraging Peter to find the courage to sit Hilda down and explain to her that he didn’t want to get married, had never asked her to marry him and had absolutely no intention of marrying her.

That seemed a remote possibility.

Poor old Peter.

And then, to my astonishment, Hilda Musbury turned up at my evening surgery.

‘I’m getting married,’ she told me, as if this were news to me. ‘And naturally I’m going to need some sort of contraceptive advice.’ She smiled sweetly. ‘I told Pete that I’d pop along and talk to you about contraceptives. I don’t think we want to be using those rubbery things.’

Although she is a widow, Mrs Musbury somehow managed to sound as if she were a virginal bride who had no idea what thrills and spills might await her in the marital bed. Nevertheless, Hilda did not appear to me to be a nervous maiden; waiting for the moment when she would blossom into womanhood; anticipating a ceremonial deflowering with great anxiety.

Actually, considering Peter’s lack of enthusiasm, it seemed to me that there were unlikely to be any large waves crashing onto her rocky shoreline and nor were there likely to be any steam trains vanishing into long, dark, smoky tunnels.

I didn’t think Peter would much like being called ‘Pete’ either. I’ve never known anyone call him ‘Pete’.

‘How old are you, Mrs Musbury?’ I asked her, pretending to look through her medical notes for the information I already had.

‘Forty two,’ she said immediately.

I looked at her and waited.

‘Forty nine?’ she tried, half pleading, half wheedling.

‘Have another attempt.’

‘Fifty five,’ she said flatly, cross to have been found out, though she should have known I would have the correct figure somewhere in her medical notes.

‘And you went through the menopause four years ago I think? I seem to remember there was…’ I flicked through her medical records.

‘Oh that, yes,’ she said flatly.

‘That’s good!’ I said. ‘In that case I don’t think you’ll be needing any contraceptive advice. You can just…er…well enjoy each other au naturel.’

‘Oh, that’s a nice surprise!’ said Hilda, as though delighted by this revelation. ‘I’m sure Pete will be thrilled. I know what men are like about these things.’ She tried to wink but failed miserably. The failure made her look gauche and sly at the same time.

‘Are you going on a honeymoon?’ I asked her.

I’d suddenly had the germ of an idea.

‘I haven’t been able to tie him down yet,’ she said. ‘He cares so much about his shop.’ She said this as though she were in competition with the shop for his affection though she probably did not realise that in truth she was and had already lost the contest. ‘He says he can’t take time away from it. But everyone knows that little shop must be a goldmine. I want us to go to a smart hotel somewhere. Venice, Rome or Paris perhaps. We’ll perhaps take mother along for a treat.’ She smirked. It was a very unpleasant smirk. ‘He can afford it.’

‘Really?’ I said.

‘Oh yes. Pete’s a very wealthy man.’

‘Who told you that?’ I asked. I knew Peter wouldn’t have said anything of the sort.

‘Everyone knows he’s wealthy. Don’t they?’ She began to look just a little bit concerned.

‘Gosh! I don’t think so. Have you thought that he may be reluctant to fix a honeymoon because he can’t afford to take time away from the shop,’ I said. ‘And maybe he can’t afford an expensive honeymoon. He did say something about a possible three day camping holiday in Cornwall. Patchy has a small tent which I’m sure he’d be happy to lend the pair of you.’

Hilda paled and looked shocked.

‘A tent?’

‘Quite roomy for two,’ I said. ‘And pretty well waterproof unless the weather is really bad.’

‘Oh.’

‘And I think he did mention to me that he wondered if it would be all right if he asked your mother for a loan.’ I said. I then hesitated. ‘You mustn’t mention any of this to anyone,’ I said.

She promised she wouldn’t.

I had my fingers crossed under the desk. I didn’t feel bad about the fib. This marriage was clearly going to be a disaster for both parties. It would be as much of a disaster for Hilda as for Peter.

‘My mother? He wanted a loan from my mother?’

‘Just £500 or so to tide him over. He’s going through a bit of a bad patch, I think. I heard one of the wholesalers was chasing him over some long overdue unpaid bills. I don’t think they’ve threatened to send the bailiffs in yet but I suppose it’s only a matter of time.’

‘Unpaid bills?’ said Hilda. She had gone very pale.

Since I had been the one to bring the two of them together I felt I owed Peter this bit of help.

‘Still, having a loving wife will be good for him,’ I said. ‘You can share the burdens. A trouble shared is a trouble halved, don’t they say? If your mother can come up with a loan then I’m sure everything will be fine. And if things do go bad I’m sure you’ll both be happy living in a caravan – or even in Patchy’s little tent. True love conquers all, doesn’t it?’

Hilda got up, said goodbye and sped from the room as though she’d suddenly realised she’d left the gas on at home.

An hour after I’d finished the surgery, I was sitting with a cup of coffee and a small glass of malt whisky when the door-bell rang.

It was Peter. He was holding a paper bag and a small parcel wrapped in brown paper. The parcel was tied with string and a little loop had been created so that the holder of the parcel could carry it on one finger. He thrust the bag and the parcel at me before he’d crossed the threshold.

I opened the paper bag. It contained four pears. I untied the string on the small parcel. Inside the parcel there were two small bottles of shampoo.

‘What are these for?’

‘A thank you! A big thank you. Hilda came to see you this evening didn’t she?’

‘She did.’

‘What did you say to her?’

‘Oh you know, just a bit of this and a bit of that. We had a chat about you and weddings and honeymoons and contraceptives.’

‘She’s broken it off!’

‘The wedding?’

‘Of course, the wedding. She said she’d had a chat with you and she realised that maybe we aren’t quite right for each other. She and her mother packed and were out of the house within an hour.’ He suddenly stopped. ‘Contraceptives? Why did you talk about contraceptives?’

‘Can’t talk about these things,’ I told him. ‘Secrets of the consulting room.’

‘What did you tell her?’ demanded Peter.

I grinned at him. ‘Nothing for you to worry about, I promise. But don’t do anything flashy to celebrate your escape,’ I told him. ‘Just remember, you’re broke and want to borrow £500 from her mother.’

Peter is many things but he isn’t slow.

‘Thank you,’ he said. He nodded at the bag of pears I was holding. ‘They’re ready to eat straight away,’ he said. I looked into the bag. The pears were certainly on the downward slope side of ripeness. ‘And the shampoo is excellent stuff. Patsy will love it.’ I looked at the bottles of shampoo. The word ‘Sample’ was printed on each bottle. I thanked him.

As he started to leave I called out.

'Peter!'

He turned round.

I grinned at him. 'What are you doing about the estate agency?'

'I'm closing it,' he said brusquely. 'Shut and gone for ever.'

And he shuddered visibly as he walked to his van.

I took the overripe pears and the shampoo samples in and showed them to Patsy.

'Where on earth did you get those?'

'Peter brought them. As a gift.'

'It's not your birthday, is it?'

I laughed. Peter is not renowned for his generosity.

'These pears are very soft.'

'Cedric will like them.'

And indeed Cedric the pig munched his way through them in no time at all.

We're planning to give Peter the shampoo as a Christmas present. I hope he recognises it and welcomes it back home.

The Reluctant Jumper

Ephraim Hardstaff is a cautious, careful, meticulous man.

It is said that when he was a lad he was the only boy in the village who would walk round puddles so that his shoes never got wet or muddy. He would, it is said, do this even if he was wearing Wellington boots.

He is the sort of person who always does crossword puzzles in pencil and will only fill in an answer in ink when he is absolutely certain that he's got the right solution.

But Ephraim is also a good hearted, kindly and gentle man.

He is the sort of fellow who moves snails off a path or roadway so that they don't get accidentally trodden on or run over. He rescues injured birds and once nursed a young deer back to health after it had been hit by a delivery lorry. Whenever a good cause needs a volunteer or a donation he is at the front of the queue: always ready to give whatever he can to help other people. There is no doubt that if the world contained more Ephraim Hardstaffs it would be a better, warmer place.

He was sitting on the other side of my consulting room desk. And he looked worried.

'I can't sleep,' said Ephraim. 'Could you give me something to help me?'

'How long has this been going on?' I asked.

'About three months.'

'Is it getting better or worse or just the same?'

'It's getting worse. I used to get off to sleep eventually but now it takes me hours to drop off. And then I wake up again after about half an hour.'

'Do you have any pain?' I asked. Surprisingly, perhaps, pain is one of the most important causes of insomnia.

'No, no, no pain,' said Ephraim.

'How well did you sleep up until three months ago?'

'No problem. Never any problem at all.'

'So what's happened to change things? What's different in your life? Is there anything different about your bedroom? New bed?'

'No, no,' said Ephraim. 'Same old bed, same old bedroom.'

'Is Daphne sleeping all right?' I asked him. Daphne is his wife. She too is a sweet, kind, gentle individual.

'Not very well,' said Ephraim. 'I think she's probably going to come and see you about it.'

'So both of you are having trouble sleeping?'

'Yes, that's right.'

'What is it?'

'What's what?' he asked.

'Something is worrying you both, something is keeping you awake. I can't help you unless you tell me what it is.'

'Can't you just give me some sleeping tablets?'

I shook my head. 'Not until I know why you're not sleeping.'

There was a pause for a moment. 'I've signed up for something,' said Ephraim suddenly. 'When I said I'd do it I just said 'yes' without really thinking about it. And at the time the whole thing seemed a long way away. But now it's getting closer and I'm worrying a lot about it.'

'And Daphne is worrying about it too?'

'Yes. She is.'

'So what did you sign up for?'

'A parachute jump.'

'You signed up for a parachute jump?'

'Yes.'

Internally I sighed.

I am always amazed at the way so many people misunderstand risk. Indeed, the world seems to be full of people who have no real concept of what is risky and what is not as risky. People worry about all the wrong things and often fail to understand just how significant some risks can be. People assume that boxing is a dangerous sport but in fact it is probably safer than riding a horse or playing rugby. The risks associated with eating the wrong sort of foods are actually far greater than the risks involved in drinking a modest amount of alcohol. The risk to your health of being overweight is far greater than most other risks and yet it is a risk many still tend to ignore. Health and safety rules often fail to take into account the significance of some risks when compared with others.

And parachuting out of an aeroplane is an enormously risky activity – especially for individuals who are inexperienced and who are neither trained for it nor particularly fit.

A few hours of on the spot training, really doesn't make much difference. The number of people who jump out of aeroplanes in the hope of raising money for charity, but who end up in hospital is frighteningly high.

'When?'

'In a month's time. A charity in South Molton organised it. They're raising money to help children in India.'

'And how will you jumping out of an aeroplane help children in India?'

'I'm supposed to find sponsors. People who will give money if I jump out of an aeroplane.'

I'd heard of this bizarre way of raising money for charity. It had become very fashionable. Quite a lot of charities were encouraging their supporters to raise money by jumping out of aeroplanes.

'Have you got any sponsors?'

'Not yet,' admitted Ephraim.

'Have you tried?'

'Not really. Well, no, to be honest, not at all.'

'Why not?'

'Because I was worried that I might panic and not want to jump out of the aeroplane and then I wouldn't raise any of the money I'd said I'd raise. And it would be very embarrassing too.'

'And it's because you've been worrying about the parachute jump that you haven't been able to sleep?'

'Yes,' admitted Ephraim. 'And it's been keeping Daphne awake too. She's worried that I'll break a leg or an arm or even my back.'

'So why don't you just tell them that you've changed your mind?'

'Oh, I couldn't do that,' said Ephraim. 'I'd feel that I was letting them down.'

'But you don't have to jump out of an aeroplane to raise money for them? Do something else? Stand in Barnstaple High Street with a collecting tin. Sell pictures of the children they're saving. There must be a hundred ways you can help them without risking life and limb by jumping out of an aeroplane. '

'The person who is organising it all is someone I work with,' said Ephraim. 'They already think I'm a bit of a wimp. If I tell them I'm backing out they'll tell everyone I was chicken.'

'And that worries you?'

'Yes. I know it shouldn't do but it does. I'm a bit sensitive like that.'

'Are you still working at that shoe shop in Barnstaple?' I asked him.

'Yes.'

'And that's where the organiser of the jump works?'

'Yes. Dicky is the organiser. There are six of us working in the shop and Dicky is one of the other five.'

'Dicky is the organiser of the jump?'

'Yes. I don't think he cares much about the children to be honest. But he wanted to jump out of an aeroplane without having to pay for it. So he signed up to jump and then said he'd recruit some more people to do it.'

'And you said 'yes' because you always say 'yes', because you didn't want to disappoint him and because the day of the jump seemed so far away that you weren't worried about it because you thought the day might never arrive?'

Ephraim smiled. 'That's about it, yes.'

I had an idea.

'Will you be working next Wednesday?'

'Oh yes. I work every day.'

'And Dicky will be there?'

'Yes.'

'OK. Here's what's going to happen. I'm going to come in to your shop to buy some shoelaces. When you see me, you come over, you tell me about the jump and ask me if I'll sponsor you.'

'How will that help?' he asked.

'Trust me,' I said.

I was due to go into Barnstaple the following Wednesday so when I'd finished my business at the bank I went into the shoe shop where Ephraim worked.

As soon as I had bought my shoelaces Ephraim, as arranged, came over to me, showed me some sponsorship forms and asked if I would sponsor him to jump out of an aeroplane.

'I most certainly will not!' I said, raising my voice so that everyone in the shop could hear. 'Are you mad? There was a paper in the *British Medical Journal* the other week proving that the cost of treating all the people who jump out of aeroplanes and injure themselves far outweighs the money that is raised by people jumping out of aeroplanes. I know of people who are paraplegics, permanently paralysed, because they jumped out of aeroplanes. Hundreds of people have broken hips or shattered their spines. You must be mad. And you must think I'm mad if you think I'm going to encourage such stupid behaviour.'

'But…' began Ephraim, who seemed a little startled by my outburst.

I took the forms from him, ripped them up and put them down onto the counter. 'I suggest you put these into the bin,' I told him. 'If you go ahead with this daft jump I'll have you certified insane.'

'Oh. All right, doctor,' said Ephraim, who still looked surprised. 'If you really think so.'

'I know so!' I said loudly. 'The people who do this are ignorant idiots. And the people who organise these damned parachute jumps are ignorant idiots too.'

I couldn't help noticing that one of Ephraim's colleagues had gone bright red.

I then stalked out of the shop clutching my new shoelaces.

As I left, I heard one of the assistants say to Ephraim. 'Who on earth was that?'

'My doctor,' said Ephraim.

'Golly,' said the assistant. 'He's a bit frightening isn't he? I'm glad he's not my doctor.' From what I could gather as I left, this viewpoint seemed to be greeted with some approval.

Late that evening, Ephraim came round to Bilbury Grange to see me.

'Thank you, doctor,' he said, smiling rather wanly. 'I didn't see that coming!'

'I thought it best that you didn't know what to expect,' I told him. 'Hope I wasn't too rough on you!'

'Oh no! It was brilliant. When you'd gone even Dicky said he wasn't going to do the jump. I think he was worried that he might end up in a wheelchair – or worse. Everyone in the shop thought you were terrifying and that I was very brave to have you as my doctor.'

'Jolly good!' I said. 'I think.'

Ephraim held out something to me. 'Since I'm not doing the parachute jump, I said I'd help the charity by selling these,' he said.

'What are they?'

'They're raffle tickets,' he said. 'Would you buy one, please? They're 10 pence each.'

'What can I win? Don't tell me I win a chance to make a parachute jump?'

'Oh no, nothing like that,' said Ephraim quickly. 'The prize is a pig, donated by a local farmer.'

I thought of Cedric, the pig we look after for its American owners: the pig which eats vast quantities of food and which produces a ton of manure every year.

The prospect of looking after two pigs was just too much.

'I tell you what,' I said, taking a 50 pence coin out of my pocket. 'I'll pay for five tickets but I don't want them. Don't give me any tickets. Just put the 50 pence into your collecting box.'

Ephraim looked surprised. 'Oh, all right, doctor.'

I gave him the 50 pence and bade him goodnight.

In the end, it all worked out quite well.

But I did make a mental note to go into a different shop the next time I went into Barnstaple for shoes or shoelaces.

I didn't want to wander in and find all the assistants rushing away from me in fear.

Sir Ebenezer's Statue

Visitors to Bilbury occasionally wonder why a small and unimposing triangle of land not 200 yards from the Duck and Puddle is adorned with a surprisingly impressive statue of an imposing looking man with a pipe in his mouth and a sword by his side.

Every village has these odd triangles of wasteland – too small to do anything with and usually suitable only for the erection of a signpost.

But I doubt if there is another village in England which has a full sized statue on one of its little triangles of unwanted land.

I doubt if many visitors to Bilbury know the true story behind the statue. So, here it is.

The story began when Cuthbert Potts, who sits on our Parish Council, decided that we ought to have a floral clock.

Cuthbert, who is obviously known to everyone as 'Chimney', said that places like Blackpool and Torquay have floral clocks and so he didn't see why Bilbury shouldn't have one.

He said that he thought it was terrible that Bilbury had neither a Jubilee Watering Trough (complete with dedication plaque and the word 'Horse' etched into the stone for the sake of literate equines) nor a floral clock, and that although he had no idea how to make a commemorative water trough he didn't think that making a floral clock could be too difficult.

It is true that at first, some of us weren't entirely sure that we actually needed a floral clock. After all, Bilbury doesn't go out of its way to attract visitors. Most of the tourists who wander into the village do so by mistake.

But Chimney said that he would create the clock himself and when he had a whip round to help pay for the cost of the bedding plants we all contributed according to our means.

And though it is true that we had not originally shown great enthusiasm, it is equally undeniable that there was much excitement during the months prior to the clock's unveiling.

As the weeks passed by, we became increasingly excited at the prospect of having our own floral clock. When we passed the site of the clock, many of us often stopped for a few moments and watched Chimney working away on his creation. Passers-by would say things like 'Look, it's twenty past a primrose' or 'Crumbs, it's nearly five to cyclamen!'.

In due course, notices were put up around the village inviting us all to the formal unveiling of Bilbury's first floral clock.

The official unveiling was fixed for 12.30 p.m. so that all those present could all repair to the Duck and Puddle afterwards for a champagne celebration. (The notice warned that only one bottle of champagne had been provided, courtesy of Frank and Gilly, the landlord and landlady of the Duck and Puddle respectively, and that additional supplies of alcohol would be available only at the expense of those present.)

And so at 12.30 p.m. on the appointed day, we were all there. Patsy and I were there. Miss Johnson was there. Frank and Gilly were there. Thumper and Anne were there. Patchy and Adrienne were there. A couple of dozen others were there too. It was quite a decent crowd. Maybe not the sort of crowd they get in London for a coronation or a royal wedding, but for Bilbury it was quite a decent crowd. There were even mumblings from some, who shall remain nameless, that we should have arranged for crowd barriers to be erected and for the local constabulary to have been invited to provide some sort of official protection detail. But these were, of course, remarks made in jest.

With a flourish, Chimney's wife and his mother lifted the tarpaulin from the clock. (They did it very gingerly to avoid damaging any of the blooms.) And then we stood and looked at the clock. It was, in many ways, a very fine clock. There is no doubt about the fact that it had been very nicely done. A good deal of work had been done in creating a clock out of small bedding plants. There was much to admire. No expense had been spared. The numbers 1 to 12 were made out of yellow primroses. The hands were made out of purple primroses. We all clapped and there is no doubt that we were proud of the clock.

The time according to the clock was 2.30.

We stood and waited and watched.

'It's telling the wrong time,' said Adrienne, looking at her watch. 'It's 12.15 but the clock says it's 2.30.'

'It'll be right in a little over two hours,' said Chimney, who seemed a little peeved at the complaint.

We stood around for a while. I don't know what we were waiting for, or what we expected to happen. The purple primroses clearly weren't going anywhere.

'Is it going? Can you wind it up?' asked Frank. 'Have you got the key?'

'What do you mean 'wind it up'?' asked Chimney. 'It's a floral clock. It's made of flowers.'

‘He hasn’t put a mechanism in it,’ whispered Thumper, who was standing next to me.

I think we had all realised the problem with the clock at the same moment.

‘It doesn’t actually tell the time,’ said Adrienne, who is not a tactful person by nature. She is the one person in the village who could be relied upon to tell the Emperor that he wasn’t wearing any clothes. ‘We’ve got a floral clock which doesn’t tell the time!’

Chimney looked at her as if she were a one legged horse. ‘Of course it doesn’t tell the time!’ he said. ‘How can it tell the time? It’s made of flowers.’

We all looked at one another. Slowly, it dawned on us that Chimney, bless him, hadn’t realised that a floral clock is supposed to contain a mechanism so that it can tell the time.

Patchy looked at me and I looked at Thumper and Thumper looked at Frank.

None of us was prepared to tell Chimney that although his flower clock was a magnificent looking piece of ornamental horticulture, it was missing the one vital ingredient which would have set it off to perfection: a clock mechanism.

‘I shall come here twice a day to check the time,’ said Frank.

Gilly looked at him with her best ‘you wait until I get you home’ look. ‘Three cheers for Chimney for creating a marvellous clock!’ she said.

We cheered lustily.

And then we all retired to the Duck and Puddle to celebrate the clock’s arrival in the village.

Unfortunately, the clock became famous, but not quite in the way that Chimney had hoped. Someone wrote a short piece of doggerel which was pinned up on the village notice board:

Bilbury has a floral clock
Those who looked tried not to mock
At half past two the clock was right
Whether it was day or night
Both men and women came from afar
In coaches and, of course, by car
They looked and stared without a laugh
At Bilbury’s strange and well known gaffe

Things were made much worse when this rather cruel little rhyme appeared in the *North Devon Bugle*, a well-read local newspaper.

That was a while ago.

Within a year, the clock had pretty much disappeared. The weeds had taken over. You can still see the odd halves of one or two numbers if you know precisely where to look between the groundsel and the sheep sorrel, the buttercup and the stinging nettles, the hogweed and the hemlock, the cow parsley and the teasel.

And, if you look carefully, half of the minute hand can still be seen.

But Chimney had, not surprisingly, lost interest in his floral clock after the realisation that he had forgotten to include anything which would enable the clock to tell the time.

He had not, however, lost his feeling that Bilbury needed a focal point and he was tireless in his determination to put Bilbury on the map. One day in autumn he came into the Duck and Puddle and announced that what Bilbury needed was a statue.

‘Why?’ asked Patchy, not unreasonably. ‘Why not an obelisk or a water trough with the words ‘Horse Trough’ chiselled into the stone in case anyone mistakes it for a boating pond for youngsters?’

‘Everywhere has a statue!’ said Chimney, who had clearly set his heart on a statue.

‘We don’t have a statue,’ Frank pointed out. ‘We’re somewhere but we don’t have a statue.’

Off the top of his head, Thumper then rattled off an impressive list of towns and villages in Devon which didn’t have statues.

‘All the more reason why Bilbury should have a statue!’ said Chimney, who is not a man who is easily put off his stride.

‘Who?’ asked Frank.

‘Who who?’ asked Chimney.

‘Who do we want a statue of? Or of whom do we want a statue?’

The pub fell silent while we all thought about this.

‘Nelson,’ said Chimney at last. ‘Admiral Nelson.’

We looked at him.

‘He’s good enough for Trafalgar Square,’ Chimney pointed out. ‘So he should be good enough for Bilbury.’

‘Was he born in Bilbury?’ asked Thumper.

‘Did he ever come to Bilbury?’ asked Frank.

‘Did he ever even come to Devon?’ asked Thumper.

‘Does it matter?’ asked Chimney, defiantly. ‘Without Admiral Nelson we would all be speaking Spanish.’

‘I think I’ve got an old statue at the back of my workshop,’ said Patchy suddenly.

Patchy Fogg, an antique dealer with an insatiable appetite for ‘stuff’, has at least one of almost everything you can think of tucked away at the back of his workshop.

We all looked at him.

‘What of?’ asked Chimney. ‘Who is it a statue of?’

‘Haven’t the foggiest,’ admitted Patchy.

‘Is he on a horse?’

‘No. But he looks very stern and he’s got a sword. He’s a very distinguished looking fellow with a slight military air to him. It’s a decent looking bronze statue. And it will save us the trouble and expense of having one made.’

‘But we can’t just have a statue,’ complained Chimney. ‘It has to be a statue of somebody!’

‘We could make something up,’ suggested Frank, whose insurance claims are said to be such good works of fiction that a representative for a major insurance company suggested that he enter one year’s claims for the Nobel Prize for literature.

‘We couldn’t possibly do that!’ insisted Chimney, who can be a little straight laced at times.

This led to some silence.

‘We should have a statue to General Sir Ebenezer Warwick,’ I suggested, thinking I ought to say something useful.

‘Who?’ said Chimney.

‘General Sir Ebenezer Warwick.’

‘Who the devil was he?’

‘Chap who was born in Bilbury and who fought in the Boer War. He was not well known, and he was ignored by history but he won loads of medals and led a famous, if rather unfortunate, charge at the Battle of Bloemfontein.’ I turned to Patchy. ‘Does your statue have a pipe?’

Patchy frowned. ‘Don’t think so.’ He thought for a moment. ‘No, no pipe.’

‘We must give him one,’ I insisted. ‘General Warwick always smoked a pipe. Never went into battle without it. He would ride his horse at the head of a line of cavalry with clouds of smoke puffing out of his pipe. It must have been a marvellous sight.’

We all sat quietly for a few moments, contemplating General Warwick in full flight with a stream of tobacco smoke trailing behind him.

‘We could get Reggie at the garage to make a pipe and then weld it on to the statue,’ suggested Thumper.

‘Perfect,’ I said. ‘And remember, he wasn’t just a successful soldier. After the war he became a successful manufacturer of fine linoleums and high quality underlay. Linoleum was invented by an Englishman called Walton but it was General Warwick, the boy from Bilbury, who really put the stuff on the map. ‘When they find themselves walking on our underlay, your feet will think they’ve died and gone to heaven’ was one of the most popular slogans of the 19th century and Warwick was reputed to have written it himself. He had a huge factory in Walsall and was known to thousands as ‘The Linoleum King’.’

‘I remember hearing about him at school,’ said Thumper, with a wise looking nod. The only things Thumper learned at school were acquired from lessons conducted behind the bicycle sheds.

‘And he was a philanthropist too,’ I continued. ‘At every equinox he used to give offcuts of linoleum to the poor. For decades there wasn’t a back-to-back kitchen in Walsall which didn’t contain a free piece of linoleum, donated by the enormously generous General Warwick. Modern philanthropists make a big fuss about giving away a few quid and having a crematorium named after them but for them it’s just a tax fiddle. General Warwick was a real philanthropist, driven by simple, honest-to-God generosity. The people loved him for it. When he died, the streets of Walsall were lined with mourners. I like to think that the people of Bilbury held a memorial service for their forgotten son.’

‘But how do we know that Patchy’s statue looks like this General Warwick?’ asked Chimney whose lack of imagination is definitely a drawback in village life.

‘No one alive knows what General Warwick looked like,’ I told him. ‘Not even the Imperial War Museum has any pictures of him. There are just the handwritten reports of him riding into battle with his pipe belching out more smoke than the Flying Scotsman. He has been sadly forgotten by the world. The Bloemfontein campaign is now considered by some to have been politically incorrect. ’

‘All the more reason why we should have a statue to commemorate his life,’ said Thumper.

‘So, that’s agreed then, is it?’ said Frank, who doubtless wanted the discussion over so that he could have his lunch. ‘We get Reggie to weld a pipe onto Patchy’s statue, stick on a label saying the statue is of General Thingy Warwick and plonk him down somewhere pretty central.’

‘We could put him where the floral clock used to be,’ suggested Thumper. ‘We need something there, now that the clock has been overtaken by nature.’

That’s what we decided.

And it is why, if you ever find the time and the inclination to visit our village, you will find that there is a large and very imposing statue of the immortal General Sir Ebenezer Warwick, complete with specially, hand-crafted pipe, peeping above the giant hogweed and the cow parsley on the corner of the unnamed lane leading down to Softly’s Bottom.

Reggie at, Tolstoys, our local garage made the pipe and it was he who, with the crane on his breakdown truck, helped us to move the statue into position.

On warm, summer afternoons, Chimney can often be found loafing around in the vicinity of the statue.

And if someone passing through stops and asks for directions, as tourists often do, Chimney will, before he does anything else, insist on telling them the story of General Sir Ebenezer Warwick, a forgotten hero who led the famous charge at Bloemfontein and a man who bestrode the linoleum industry like a colossus.

Let no one say that we in Bilbury do not take our village history and our culture very seriously.

Charcoal and Geese

I first noticed Bevan Jeffrey early one morning when he was driving geese along the road that leads out of Bilbury and towards Barnstaple.

I didn't know who he was at the time; I'd never seen him before, but he was an imposing figure. From a distance, he looked to have been made at the same time as the pyramids, out of the same material and to the same sort of design; with strength, stability and an air of easy permanence taking precedence over folderols and artistic merit.

He was carrying a quarterstaff, the sort of weapon favoured by Little John, and he used it firmly, but with surprising gentleness, to nudge errant geese back into line. He wore an old black leather coat which came down to his calves and which had clearly seen much better days, though it doubtless still served its purpose, and there was a piece of blue baler twine wrapped round his waist.

I sometimes wonder how many miles of baler twine are used as fashion accessories in North Devon. The stuff, invariably bright orange or blue, is intended for use in binding up quantities of hay or straw, but in our part of the world, where it is relatively cheap and very easily available, it is used to fasten coats and to hold up trousers. It is used as shoelaces and, in windy weather, to hold on hats. I've even seen a woman using the stuff as a replacement strap for her handbag. The side view mirrors on Thumper's truck are both held in place with copious amounts of baler twine and I reckon that half the dog leads in North Devon consist of pieces of baler twine.

There seemed to be hundreds of geese in the flock being driven along the lane though in reality I doubt if there were more than three dozen. It's just that geese are very noisy, rather threatening birds and they move about a good deal. Whenever there are a few of them gathered together, it always seems that there are more of them than there actually are. Trying to count them must be a nightmare. If counting sheep is supposed to put people to sleep then counting geese must surely keep them awake. Sheep tend to stay in a flock, huddled together for security. Geese like to do their own thing.

I got stuck behind those darned geese for the best part of an hour. The road was just about wide enough for my car, so I couldn't turn round, and a tractor following behind me meant that there was no chance of my reversing away from the mobile blockage.

In the end, rather than pootle along behind the geese, and risk the inevitability of the engine overheating, I just parked the car, switched off the engine and read a book for a while. I never go anywhere without a paperback or a small, old hardback stuffed into a jacket pocket. Victorian and Edwardian publishers invariably produced hard books which were small enough to fit easily into a jacket pocket but these days travellers who want a book easily to hand have to rely on paperbacks. I can't remember the title of the book I had with me that day but I think it may have been one of H.V.Morton's travel books. Or maybe it was one of James Agate's magnificently gossipy 'Ego' diaries. As I settled down, I noticed that Willie, the driver of the tractor who was stuck behind me, had pulled out his copy of a tabloid newspaper. I'm not the only road user in Bilbury to travel around prepared to have to wait for the road to clear. It is, however, usually cows or sheep, rather than geese, which cause the blockage.

You don't often see a gaggle of geese travelling about these days but I know enough about country customs to be aware that geese driving used to be a common sight on English roads. Back in the 18th century, you couldn't go anywhere to see geese being moved from one place to another and it was common to see flocks of two or three thousand geese passing through towns and villages. The largest accumulation of geese ever seen was probably the drove of 9,000 which are said to have passed through Chelmsford in 1783. The geese in these huge flocks were built up a few at a time with geese being contributed by farmers and cottagers who wanted to send their birds to market.

I remembered reading somewhere that in 1740, an Englishman called Lord Orford made a big bet with the Duke of Queensbury 'that a drove of geese would beat an equal number of turkeys in a race from Norwich to London.'

Orford won the bet because his geese plodded steadily along the road which led to London whereas, as the evenings approached, the turkeys would fly up into the trees at the side of the road. And there they would insist on staying for the night. The drovers, responsible for moving them along, found it extremely difficult to get them down in the morning.

The result was that Orford's geese, which didn't stop to sleep, got to London two days earlier than Queensbury's turkeys.

Despite the delays on the roads, I sometimes think it is a pity that you don't see sights like that these days; maybe modern gamblers just don't have the style and imagination of their predecessors.

When I found myself stuck behind his flock, I didn't know that the man driving the geese was called Bevan Jeffrey and I didn't know anything at all about him.

But, purely by coincidence, I saw him again much later that day when I was driving in the opposite direction along the same stretch of road.

Since I had started running my own dispensary, a van came to Bilbury Grange every day with a delivery of essential drugs. But on this occasion I'd had to drive into the town to collect an oxygen cylinder and mask which had been sent on the last afternoon train to the local railway station. I had a patient with chronic bronchitis and emphysema who needed a home oxygen supply.

About half way back from Barnstaple, I saw a man striding along the road. The long leather coat was distinctive and I immediately recognised him as the fellow who had been driving the geese earlier that day. I stopped and asked if he wanted a lift back to Bilbury.

'How did you know I was heading for Bilbury?' he asked, when he'd settled into the passenger seat of the Rolls, and had admired the car.

He spoke in a surprisingly cut glass accent, in what used to be called BBC English, but there were no fancy airs or graces about him. He was not the sort of man I could ever imagine wearing spats or a flower in his buttonhole. His shirt probably never had a collar attached to it and if he ever wore a waistcoat there would probably be no shirt underneath it.

I told him that I'd seen him with his geese earlier in the day. 'I assume you were taking them into Barnstaple,' I said.

'It's market day,' he explained.

'It's a good long walk.'

'It's pleasant enough. And once you're used to them geese aren't too difficult to manage; surprisingly easy, in fact. I walk them into town because if I hired a lorry to take them into Barnstaple, the cost of the lorry, the petrol and the driver would take up most of my profit.'

He told me that it took about six hours to drive the geese to Barnstaple and that the walk back took him about three to four hours, depending on whether he stopped off along the way for refreshment.

As we drove back to Bilbury, he told me a lot about geese. I always enjoy listening to people talk about their work. And country folk always seem to have fascinating stories to tell about how they spend their days.

Bevan explained that geese are simple to manage and breed quite easily; a goose producing 12 to 16 eggs at a time and the eggs taking only around a month to hatch. He told me that he helped feed the goslings by giving them bread and milk and, later on by supplementing their diet with mash and grain. He said he fed the flock in the evenings and so he didn't ever have to worry about them coming home. He smiled when he told me that his geese always cleared up the windfalls in his small orchard and that later in autumn there were invariably one or two birds who ate too many of the over-ripe apples and became a little drunk.

'You don't keep them in some sort of pen?' I asked.

'No, I let them roam free in the woods where I live and work.'

He told me he had a cottage and five acres of woodland just a couple of miles away from Bilbury Grange. I knew the cottage. I had passed it hundreds of times, without realising who lived there.

'You don't have any trouble with foxes?'

He laughed. 'No! No fox would dare come near one of my geese. I've got one gander who would frighten away a bear let alone a fox.'

He told me that a gander is usually a good husband and father. 'They are usually very protective of their geese and goslings. I've seen a gander take a sitting goose to the pond for a swim and then get a spare goose, who had no eggs of her own, to sit on the eggs during the mother's absence.' He paused. 'I have a few swans who fly in occasionally. They seem to like being with the geese. They crossbreed occasionally. Do you know what we call the result of a mating between a goose and swan?'

I laughed and admitted that I didn't.

'It's a swoose! Honestly. A swoose.'

He said that the word came from a popular song called 'Alexander the Swoose' which had been written by a bandleader called Kay Kyser about a bird that was half swan and half goose. He confessed that he had only ever seen one swoose but that he knew a fellow in Hampshire who had bred quite a few of them. 'I sometimes wonder what their lifespan is,' he said. 'A swan can live to be 100-years-old but I've never heard of a goose living to much more than 20. Maybe a swoose manages somewhere between the two.'

He told me that he took a gaggle of geese to the market several times a year, that five times a year, when the geese moulted, he collected their flight and body feathers and sold them to a London buyer who used them for decorations, and that if he had what he thought was a glut of eggs he sold the eggs to local hoteliers and restaurateurs.

'I can't make a living out of geese alone,' he said, 'they're a bit of a sideline, and a pleasant one, but they contribute their share to my living expenses.' He said that the geese were also good company. He told me quite a bit about geese. It was Bevan who told me that although they are known as a gaggle when they're on the ground they're usually referred to as a team, a wedge or a skein when they're flying. And if they are flying close together they're known as a plump.

However, to my surprise Bevan told me that his main activity was charcoal making.

When I confessed that I didn't know there were still any charcoal makers still in business he told me that there was still a small but certain demand for charcoal and that if I wanted to see his charcoal making business I would be welcome at any time. I thanked him and said, quite truthfully, that I would be fascinated to see a charcoal burner at work.

'You don't come from round here, do you?' I said, when I'd stopped to drop him off at his cottage.

'The accent gives me away?' he said, with a laugh.

'It rather does.'

'Eton and Oxford,' he said, not boasting but simply explaining. 'Got a first in English. I used to have a job in public relations in London. Hated it. The damned job made me ill – gave me a stomach ulcer. It was an awful job which involved my being terribly nice to people I couldn't stand, but it paid well and at the time I thought that was important. Then my wife ran off, with our vicar actually, which was a bit of a shock to the system and made me look at my life a little more closely – what I was doing, what I wanted to do and so on. The sort of questions I'd never had time to think about let alone to try to answer. When we sold our flat and split the proceeds, I gave up my job and used the proceeds to buy the cottage down here. I didn't have the foggiest what I was going to do but I had enough money to last me six months. The previous owner of the cottage had at one time been a charcoal burner and since I didn't have anything better to do I thought I'd try my hand at it. The cottage came with a few acres of woodland which was pretty handy, of course.'

'I found it surprisingly simple, and a very pleasant change from what I'd been doing in London. It gave me plenty of time to read and study and to pursue my hobby of compiling crosswords.'

Bevan then told me that in addition to rearing geese and making charcoal, he also devised crosswords for *The Times* newspaper. He told me, without boasting, that he could create a complete crossword, complete with the grid, all the clues and the answers, in his head.

'So, you've got three jobs!'

He grinned. 'Pretty unusual combination, eh?'

I dropped him off, meaning to take him up on his offer to see how charcoal was made, but things were so busy for the next few weeks that I completely forgot the invitation.

The next time I saw him was about six months later.

He came to an evening surgery at Bilbury Grange and told me that he thought he had perhaps been made ill by his work making charcoal.

'Why do you think that?' I asked.

'What do you know about charcoal?' he asked in return.

'You can assume I know nothing.'

'It's a very old business. It would be pompous to describe it as a profession because the aim is simply to manufacture charcoal by carbonising wood in a kiln or a charcoal pile. Originally, people made charcoal because it could be burnt to produce the high temperatures required for smelting iron, glass making and a host of other industries. It's no longer used for that because other fuels are available, but there's still a market – making charcoal for suburban barbecues for example. Quite a few artists still use charcoal for drawing.'

I nodded to show that I was listening and understanding.

'Building a charcoal kiln is extremely simple. You arrange some logs in a conical heap and then build a sort of chimney in the middle and fill it with bits of kindling and brushwood. You then cover the whole thing, the kiln, with grass, moss and earth to keep the air out. You light the kindling in the middle of the kiln and the whole thing starts to slowly burn. The temperature goes up to about 300 degrees Centigrade and you have to control the amount of air going into the kiln by making holes and then sealing them up. The trick is to make sure that the wood is still on fire without allowing it to go up in flames. You can tell how well things are going just by looking at the smoke which comes out of the chimney in the centre of the kiln. When the smoke gets rather blue and thin then you know that you've nearly finished the process. Each kiln takes about a week. When you've finished you will, if all has gone well, have a nice pile of charcoal to sell.'

'It sounds hard work!'

'No, it isn't really hard work. It's more time consuming than it sounds because you have to hang around while the wood is burning. You don't want to waste all the wood. And you don't want the fire to go out. It's just a question of knowing how to control the burning.'

'So there's a lot of sitting around and waiting.'

'Precisely.'

‘So that’s when you create your crosswords!’

He laughed. ‘You remembered!’

‘I don’t know anyone else who makes charcoal, breeds geese and writes crosswords!’

‘No, I don’t suppose there are many of us around.’

‘So is all this dangerous? You think it’s made you ill?’

‘The problem is that making charcoal produces quite a lot of carbon monoxide.’

‘And you think you might be suffering from carbon monoxide poisoning?’

He nodded. ‘I’ve had the symptoms of it,’ he said. ‘When I started making charcoal I read a couple of books about it and the authors warned that it is possible to develop carbon monoxide poisoning from spending too much time in close proximity to the kiln.’

I asked him what symptoms he had.

‘Tiredness, dizziness, nausea, confusion and feeling a bit faint,’ he said. ‘I also have difficulty breathing properly sometimes. And I’ve noticed that my heart seems to be beating unusually rapidly sometimes.’

‘All of which are symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning.’

‘Exactly. Is there a test you can do?’

‘I can take some blood and get it tested,’ I told him. ‘The laboratory people can measure the amount of carboxyhaemoglobin in your blood – a measurement of the amount of your haemoglobin that has bonded with carbon monoxide.’

I listened to his chest, checked his pulse and blood pressure and then took some blood and got it ready to send off to the laboratory in Barnstaple. I told him to come back to see me in a couple of days’ time. Meanwhile, I suggested that he might be wise not to start a new kiln for a while.

But when the test result came back, Bevan didn’t have any sign of carbon monoxide poisoning. There was no carboxyhaemoglobin in his blood at all.

‘So, what do you think it could be?’ he asked.

‘I know what it is,’ I told him. ‘You’re anaemic.’

‘Anaemic!’

‘Your haemoglobin levels are very, very low. And the symptoms of anaemia can be exactly the same as the symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning: breathing problems, a rapid heartbeat, nausea, faintness, tiredness and dizziness.’

‘But why on earth would I have anaemia? I eat well. Lots of meat, green vegetables and fruit.’

‘That’s what we need to find out,’ I told him. ‘I can treat your anaemia easily enough – just giving you some iron tablets will probably result in an improvement. But we have to find out why you are anaemic. It certainly doesn’t sound as if your diet is short of iron.’

I asked him to undress so that I could examine him properly.

‘What was this for?’ I asked him, about a scar in his upper abdomen. I hadn’t seen it when I’d listened to his lungs and heart and taken his blood pressure.

‘I had a gastrectomy a few years ago.’

‘What for?’

‘For a stomach ulcer. I had a high pressure job which I hated. I ended up with an ulcer.’

I went back to my desk and picked up his medical records. ‘There’s no mention of it here?’

‘My company paid for private medical insurance for me and the company doctor sent to me to a private specialist who organised everything.’

‘They really should have sent a letter to your GP.’

‘I think they liked to keep everything to themselves,’ explained Bevan.

‘Do you know what sort of gastrectomy it was?’

‘I think the surgeon said it was a total gastrectomy.’

‘For an ulcer?’

‘Actually, I seem to remember them telling me that I had two or three ulcers.’ He paused and smiled ruefully. ‘I never have been one to do things by halves.’

‘Did they tell you that you might need vitamin B12 supplements?’

Bevan frowned. ‘I don’t remember anyone mentioning that.’

‘The stomach produces something called intrinsic factor,’ I told him. ‘And intrinsic factor is essential for the absorption of vitamin B12.’

‘So I’ve not been absorbing vitamin B12 properly?’

‘Probably not.’

‘And could that cause the symptoms I’ve been having? The symptoms I thought were caused by carbon monoxide poisoning?'

'Vitamin B12 is essential for the production of haemoglobin,' I told him. 'So that's why you are suffering from anaemia. Removing your stomach meant that your body had no intrinsic factor. The absence of intrinsic factor meant that your body couldn't absorb vitamin B12 and the shortage of vitamin B12 resulted in anaemia.'

'Am I right in thinking that the doctors I saw should have realised all this? And should have warned me that I would need to take vitamin B12?'

'Er, well, yes,' I admitted.

I have never liked criticising other doctors but it is sometimes difficult to avoid criticism when doctors have been so egregiously incompetent.

'Can you give me some vitamin B12 tablets to take?'

'I could but they wouldn't help.'

'Why not?'

'Because without the intrinsic factor your body won't absorb the vitamin B12.'

'No, of course not. So what's the answer? Do I have to remain anaemic for the rest of my life?'

'No. Certainly not. I'll have to give you the vitamin B12 by injection. And then you'll need to have regular B12 injections.'

'For how long?'

'The rest of your life.'

'Oh. Is that all?'

'It should cure your anaemia,' I told him.

'Worth it then.'

'I think so.'

'When can I have the first injection?'

'I'll have the injection I need sent here tomorrow,' I told him. 'Come back tomorrow evening and I'll give it to you.'

'You're going to stick a needle in me?'

'I'm afraid I am.'

He took a deep breath. 'I hate needles but if it makes me feel better you can stick in as many needles as you like,' he said.

'One at a time will do the trick.'

He turned up a day later and I gave him the first of the injections which he would need to have for the rest of his life. He was kind enough to say that he hardly felt it. I have always found that when injecting into tissues such as muscle, rather than into a vein, the key to giving as painless an injection as possible is to jab quickly, squirt slowly and then move the tip of the needle round a little to reduce any possible swelling. Injections which are given tentatively always seem to cause more distress than injections which are given confidently and quickly.

Within a remarkably short time, Bevan Jeffrey was as fit as a fiddle.

Being a GP can sometimes be very satisfying.

I did get to see Bevan's charcoal kilns a week or so later. Patsy, who said she was interested, came with me. The charcoal making process was fascinating but I don't think we'll be going again. The geese hissed a good deal and chased us both around Bevan's stretch of woodland.

And yes, geese do bite.

Mrs Sinclair Returns

I hadn't seen Joyce Sinclair for two years when her daughter, Julia Johnstone, came bustling into my evening surgery. She was, I suspect, the sort of woman who bustled everywhere. She looked aggressive and she was aggressive.

'Do you remember my mother, Mrs Sinclair?' asked the daughter who was a very skinny, nervous sort of woman who never seemed able to keep still. She fidgeted constantly; playing with her earrings, her necklace, the buttons on her frock and the clasp of her handbag. I remembered that she was an administrator working for the council while her husband was (in Joyce Sinclair's memorable words) 'something big in sewage'.

I told Mrs Johnstone that I certainly did remember her mother.

Joyce Sinclair had been only 62-years-old when her daughter and son-in-law had insisted on putting her into a care home near Exeter. She was in the late afternoon of her life; still young enough to worry about overdue library books and the price of tea in China.

Joyce hadn't wanted to go anywhere. And I didn't see why she needed to. Indeed, I had pleaded with the daughter to let her mother stay where she was.

'She's comfortable in her own home,' I pointed out. 'She's got her own furniture and her own belongings – her books, her photograph albums, her ornaments. She seems to me to look after herself very well. She cooks good meals and her house is easy to manage. She's careful going up and down the stairs. The garden is small enough for her to manage. She knows all her neighbours. It's only a ten minute walk to the village shop. And I call in to see her once a fortnight. If she needs more help we can sort something out.'

'But she's getting to an age when things happen,' insisted the son-in-law who was big in sewage. He was hugely overweight and carried a folded copy of *The Guardian* newspaper as though it were a talisman. He looked like a particularly bad tempered version of one of those Old Testament Prophets; all wild grey hair and a grey beard long enough to fly about in the slightest of breezes. 'We'd never forgive ourselves if something happened.'

'Something terrible might happen,' said Mrs Johnstone.

'She might fall down the stairs,' said Mr Johnstone.

'She could very well fall down the stairs,' echoed his wife. 'Break a leg or a hip. Old people have very fragile bones.'

'Well, anyone could fall down the stairs,' I pointed out. 'And your mother isn't old. She's only 62. She could live another 40 years.'

'We think it's much better to arrange things as early as possible,' said Mr Johnstone. 'Before anything happens.'

'Silly to leave things until the last minute,' said Mrs Johnstone. 'Then everyone gets into a panic and things aren't done for the best.'

'We don't want any panic,' said Mr Johnstone firmly. He said this sternly, as though I had spoken out in support of panic.

'Old people can develop signs of dementia almost overnight,' said Mrs Johnstone.

'Oh no, I don't think so,' I said.

'Overnight,' said Mr Johnstone. 'I've heard of it happening. I read about a man who went to bed one night and woke up the next morning not knowing where he was.'

'Maybe he had a stroke?' I suggested.

'And that's another thing!' said Mr Johnstone. 'What if she had a stroke? With no one there. She lives alone, you know.'

'If you're worried about that then you install some sort of alarm system,' I suggested.

'Oh, I don't think we want to start down that road,' said Mr Johnstone.

'That's a long and rocky road,' said Mrs Johnstone.

'You'd have to knock down walls and put wires everywhere.'

'Mother would hate all that mess and trouble.'

'You don't have to knock down walls,' I pointed out. 'They make these alarm buttons that are connected to the telephone.'

'But what if she's unconscious?' said Mr Johnstone.

'Your alarm button wouldn't be much use then, would it?' pointed out Mrs Johnstone.

'She'll be much safer in a home,' said Mr Johnstone firmly. 'Somewhere properly run; with caring staff available day and night.'

I remember getting slightly dizzy as the pair continued their double act. Whatever one said the other would immediately leap in to endorse it. I really didn't like either of them.

In the end, of course, I could do nothing to stop Mr and Mrs Johnstone putting Joyce Sinclair into a nursing home.

Mrs Sinclair didn't want to go anywhere. She wanted to stay in her home. But she was frightened of her daughter and her grim husband. And by alternately bullying her and terrifying her, the pair succeeded in convincing her that she had to move. She seemed as powerless as I was to prevent the inevitable.

There was, of course, a reason for the Johnstones' determination to move Mrs Sinclair out of her home. And it wasn't concern for Mrs Sinclair's safety.

Through their connections with the local authority, the Johnstones had arranged for Mrs Sinclair to move into a council owned and run nursing home. Moreover, they had managed to fix things so that the council would pay for Mrs Sinclair's room and board.

And, naturally, the Johnstones had plans for Mrs Sinclair's cottage.

Within a day of moving her mother into the nursing home, Mrs Johnstone had arranged for a letting agent from Barnstaple to come out to Bilbury, to take photographs and measurements and to print up smart looking leaflets offering the property for rent to holiday makers. They'd arranged for a man from Barnstaple to come out and give the outside of the cottage a lick of paint. And they'd put up some new curtains too.

I had no proof that they were doing anything dishonest but I strongly suspected that the income from the cottage was going into their bank account rather than into Mrs Sinclair's account.

And Mrs Johnstone now seemed very much more smartly dressed than she had been when I'd last seen her. She was wearing a Rolex watch and carrying a handbag that looked as if it had probably cost a small fortune.

'How is Mrs Sinclair?' I asked.

Mrs Johnstone paused, as though not quite sure what to say. 'She won't see the official doctor,' she said, with some reluctance. 'She insists that she wants to see you. She's got quite difficult about it.'

She said this as though it were my fault, as though I must have somehow persuaded her mother to demand to see me.

'The official doctor?' I said, not quite sure what she meant.

'The nursing home has a doctor who looks after all the residents. He calls in once every month and signs prescriptions and so on.'

'What's wrong with your mother?' I asked.

'No one seems to know,' said Mrs Johnstone. 'She's put on a little weight and she seems to have gone downhill a bit recently.'

'I can't just pop in and see someone else's patient,' I explained.

'How about if we brought her to see you?' asked Mrs Johnstone.

'Not really,' I said. 'I could get into trouble. The establishment takes a dim view of doctors who poach patients.'

'I saw another doctor when we were on holiday in Scotland,' said Mrs Johnstone. 'I had a chest infection and I saw this doctor in Inverness. He gave me antibiotics.'

'That's different,' I said. 'If a patient is on holiday, he or she can see a doctor wherever they are in the United Kingdom.'

'There you are, then,' said Mrs Johnstone. 'I'll bring mother out to see you tomorrow evening. She can be on holiday in Bilbury for the day.'

This seemed to me to be stretching the rules paper thin but I didn't want to be awkward – particularly since Mrs Sinclair had asked to see me. 'OK,' I agreed. 'But when I have seen your mother I will need to write to the doctor who looks after her at the nursing home where she lives.'

'Oh, that's all right,' said Mrs Johnstone.

So, the following evening Mrs Johnstone turned up pushing her mother in one of those folding wheelchairs which can be fitted into a car boot. The two women were accompanied by Mr Johnstone. His hair and beard were longer than ever and he was still carrying a copy of *The Guardian* newspaper. For all I knew it could have been the same copy.

I could hardly believe the change that had taken place.

When I'd last seen her, Mrs Sinclair had been lively and very active.

She took long walks through the village and along neighbouring paths and bridle paths. She was perhaps a few pounds overweight, but nothing very much. Now she seemed to be seven or eight stones overweight. I wasn't surprised that she needed to be moved about in a wheelchair.

We said hello to each other.

'She's looking well, isn't she?' said Mr Johnstone.

I remembered that he was something big in sewage and wondered if he had some of his employer's product packed inside his skull instead of brains.

‘Very fit,’ said Mrs Johnstone.

‘They feed the inmates very well,’ said Mr Johnstone.

‘Inmates?’ I said, slightly puzzled.

‘Residents,’ said Mr Johnstone, correcting himself. ‘The patients.’

‘Oh.’ I had always thought of inmates as people in prison. And there was no reason why people in a nursing home should be thought of as ‘patients’ unless they were actually ill.

I asked Mr and Mrs Johnstone to leave me alone with Mrs Sinclair so that I could talk to her and examine her.

‘Oh we’ll stay with her,’ said Mrs Johnstone.

‘Better if we stay,’ said Mr Johnstone. ‘The people at the nursing home think she might be developing dementia. She gets confused about things.’

I looked at Mrs Sinclair. She looked at her daughter and then at her son-in-law and then back at me. She shook her head so slightly that it was almost imperceptible.

‘You can sit in the waiting room,’ I said to the Johnstones. ‘We’ll call if we need you.’

‘So, what’s been happening?’ I asked Mrs Sinclair when they’d gone. ‘You’ve put on a little weight.’

‘There’s nothing to do but eat,’ she said. She spoke slowly and indistinctly and sounded drugged. ‘They won’t let us go outside. Not even into the garden. We either sit in our rooms or in the lounge.’

‘What’s your room like?’

‘It’s about the size of a toilet cubicle and I share it with a man who had a stroke. He shouts and thrashes about all night. And he’s very confused. Sometimes he tries to get into bed with me.’

She spoke very slowly and it took her a long time to tell me this.

‘Have they got you on any drugs?’ I asked. I remembered that Mrs Sinclair had always been a reluctant pill-taker and that when I had last seen her she had been on no medication at all.

She reached into her coat pocket and took out a piece of paper torn from a cheap notebook. She handed me the piece of paper. ‘I got one of the nurses to write everything down for me,’ she said.

I looked at the paper. It was immediately obvious why Mrs Sinclair sounded drugged. She was taking two different tranquillisers four times a day and a strong sleeping tablet every evening. She was also taking oral hypoglycaemics, used for treating type II diabetes mellitus and a variety of other drugs for heart disease and high blood pressure.

‘Crumbs!’ I said. ‘How many pills do you take a day?’ I started to add them up.

‘Thirty seven,’ said Mrs Sinclair. ‘I counted them. Plus my vitamins.’

‘Vitamins?’

‘They like us to take vitamin tablets. They tell us they keep us healthy.’

‘How many of those do you take?’ I asked.

‘They give us two every hour.’

‘Two every hour! That’s 24 a day.’

‘The nurse in charge says that if one is good for us then two an hour must be better.’

I frowned but didn’t say anything. It is widely assumed that vitamins are harmless. They aren’t. Too much of a good thing can cause serious problems and can even kill. Some vitamins are water soluble and excess quantities can be excreted in the urine. But some are fat soluble and stay in the body – building up to toxic levels. And vitamins can sometimes interact badly with prescription drugs such as those which are used to treat heart and high blood pressure problems.

‘What symptoms have you got?’ I asked.

‘I feel nauseous all the time. I have an upset tummy. And I have a rash I can’t get rid of. They’ve given me creams but they don’t help. I get tingling in my hands and feet and I get headaches too.’ She paused and sighed. ‘I never used to have headaches.’

‘Can you undress and get up onto the examination couch?’

Mrs Sinclair pushed herself up out of the wheelchair and stood, still holding onto one arm of the chair. She was very shaky. ‘If you help me.’

I helped her undress and climb up onto the examination couch.

There really wasn’t anything much wrong with her. Her heart was beating too fast but it was regular. Her blood pressure was too low.

‘Do I need all these pills?’ she asked.

I looked at her for a while, wondering what to say. Doctors aren’t supposed to criticise other practitioners. But I was too angry to care too much about protocol. It seemed that the nursing home where Mrs Sinclair was residing was definitely one of those places described as a ‘happy tablet farm’.

‘I don’t think you need any of the stuff you’re taking,’ I told her. ‘You need to lose a lot of weight and you need to start exercising again.'

'I want to come back home,' said Mrs Sinclair. 'Back to Bilbury.'

'Has your daughter sold your house?' I asked.

'No. They can't sell it without my permission. They're still renting it out to holiday makers. They do very well out of it.'

'Your daughter and her husband won't want you to leave the nursing home.'

'I know. But they can't stop me, can they?'

'No,' I said. 'They can't.'

'Will you tell them?'

'Do you want me to?'

'Yes, please.'

I helped Mrs Sinclair down off the examination couch and I helped her get dressed and settled back in the wheelchair.

And then I called her daughter and son-in-law back into the room.

'You've been a long time,' complained Mr Johnstone. 'The doctor at the nursing home sees thirty patients in the time you've spent on one.'

'He's probably much cleverer than I am,' I replied. 'I'm a bit slow sometimes.'

'Yes,' said Mr Johnstone. 'You wouldn't get any prizes for productivity, would you?' He looked at his watch, to drive home the point.

'Your mother wants to leave the nursing home and come back home,' I said.

If I'd said that she wanted to run away and join a circus the Johnstones could not have looked more shocked and appalled.

'Oh no, that's quite impossible,' said Mr Johnstone. 'Have you seen the state of her? She's physically incapable of looking after herself. And she's pretty well senile.' He said this with his mother-in-law sitting three feet away from him.

'Oh, I think she could manage quite well,' I said. 'If necessary, we could find a home-help in the village who could do things around the house.'

'No, no,' said Mrs Johnstone firmly. She looked at her mother and then at me. 'Whose idea was this?'

'I expect it was the doctor's idea,' said Mr Johnstone. 'Don't you doctors get paid according to the number of patients on your list?'

'We do,' I agreed.

Mr Johnstone turned to his wife. 'He just wants to boost his income,' he said. 'Greedy, bloody doctors. You can't trust them.'

'Just plain greedy,' said Mrs Johnstone. 'Taking advantage of a senile, old woman.'

'Your mother isn't senile,' I told her. 'And she wants to come back home.'

'Impossible,' said Mr Johnstone. 'We've let the house for the whole of the year.'

'Then I'm afraid you'll have to cancel the bookings.'

'Cancel? We can't do that.'

'I want to come home,' said Mrs Sinclair, very quietly.

'To whom does the house belong?' I asked her daughter.

'Technically, it's still mother's house,' admitted Mrs Johnstone, rather reluctantly.

'We can't cancel the bookings, and that's that,' said Mr Johnstone. 'And we both had to pull in a lot of favours to get mother into that nursing home.'

'Could I have a word with you outside?' I said to Mr Johnstone, who seemed to be the driving force in the relationship.

'No need,' he replied. 'No secrets here.'

'OK,' I said. 'May I ask who gets the money from the rentals?'

Mr and Mrs Johnstone looked at each other.

'I don't think that's any of your business,' said Mr Johnstone.

'Maybe, maybe not,' I said. 'But if the income from renting Mrs Sinclair's home has been going into your account that could seem like fraud to some people.'

Mr Johnstone went very pale.

'Who's been paying the income tax on it?'

Mr Johnstone went even paler.

'I really do think your mother would be much better off if she were at home,' I told Mrs Johnstone.

Mr and Mrs Johnstone looked at each other. They leant together and there was some whispering. I busied myself unnecessarily with some papers on my desk and then started to make some notes about Mrs Sinclair's medical condition.

'If you really think mother would be better off at home then that's what we want too,' said Mr Johnstone.

'Perhaps some of the rental income you've received could be used to put a stairlift into the cottage,' I said. 'It would help until Mrs Sinclair loses some of that weight she's gained.'

They said they thought that could be managed.

And so it was agreed.

Two weeks later Mrs Sinclair was back living in her cottage in Bilbury.

Within two months, she was free of most of the tablets she was taking, though still cutting down the addictive tranquillisers she had been given. And she had started to lose weight and begun walking, very slowly, around the village again. A change in diet, and a reduction in weight, meant that Mrs Sinclair no longer needed to take drugs for her type II diabetes which was now almost cured. And we'd found a home-help (whose wages the Johnstones had, with some initial reluctance, agreed to pay).

Being a lone GP in a rural practice can sometimes be tiring, lonely and even frightening. Support may be an hour away or, in bad weather, impossible to reach.

But sometimes being a country GP can be exceptionally satisfying.

It was a joy to have Mrs Sinclair back in the village.

Sporting Heroes

My friend Will, who is a GP in the Midlands, has some glamorous and famous patients. He looks after a television presenter who reads the news on a local station and an actress who appears regularly in a soap opera.

But it is the sports stars on his list of patients who have proved most challenging – probably because they are the highest profile and the most valuable in raw commercial terms.

Six months ago, a patient of Will's who plays football for a leading club was about to be transferred to another team when a routine medical, performed by a doctor acting for his new club, showed that the player had a heart problem.

There was much panic. The team which was buying the player's contract decided that they wouldn't go ahead with the purchase. The team which was selling the player announced that they would take legal action. The player, who was naturally upset by the revelation, frightened everyone by talking of early retirement. The player's personal manager threatened to sue the doctors who had made the diagnosis. And the media had a field day.

Will was involved because he was the player's GP.

'Why didn't you spot this?' the club manager demanded.

Will pointed out that the heart problem, which was so mild that it might well have been better for everyone if it had remained undiscovered, had only been found after the player had been subjected to an angiogram – a fairly complex and high risk investigation which is usually only performed when a patient has symptoms of heart disease.

The player had absolutely no symptoms, and tests on the pitch and in the laboratory showed that he was perfectly capable of satisfying the significant physical demands of his profession. Every test showed that he was, in fact, one of the fittest and healthiest players in the League.

Eventually, the player solved the problem by announcing that he wanted to stay with his existing club and that he definitely didn't want to move to the club which had questioned his health.

Will was unhappy because he felt that there had never been any need to subject his patient to such an invasive procedure. Angiograms, which involve pushing a tube through a vein into the heart, are dangerous procedures which result in a number of deaths every year. Will felt that the abnormality which was unearthed was trivial and of no practical significance and that if the same level of examination was applied to other workers no one would ever be declared fit for employment of any kind.

Another patient of his, a well-known and moderately successful tennis player, arrived at Will's surgery one day carrying a form for an insurance company medical. The player had for years carried insurance to cover him against accidental damage to a limb, and the company which provided the cover had decided that it was time that they had another medical report so that they could evaluate their risk.

Unfortunately, when Will performed the medical, he found that the player (who like many professional sportsmen, had a very slow resting pulse rate, in his case of 32 beats a minute) had some very strange symptoms – particularly since he was a professional athlete who was expected to be super fit. He had an irregular heartbeat, rapid breathing, poor balance and decreased reflexes.

It turned out that the player, who suffered from the symptoms of an ulcer, almost certainly brought on by the stress of knowing that his ability to progress far enough through tournaments to earn a living depended on his winning his next match, had for months been treating himself with a proprietary brand of antacid which contained fairly large quantities of calcium carbonate and magnesium. The symptoms he was showing were all caused by the medicine he had bought over the counter. Many people assume that medicines bought from a pharmacy or a supermarket cannot possibly be dangerous but, sadly, that is not the case. If you take too much of anything the results can sometimes be catastrophic.

Will had to write a letter to the player's own doctor, explaining the situation and recommending that a safer treatment for the ulcer problem be provided. He also had to tell the player that he wouldn't be able to renew his insurance policy.

Bilbury doesn't have any high profile sporting residents (though we do have our fair share of celebrities, mostly retired, from the entertainment business) but that doesn't mean that I do not sometimes find myself dealing with amateur sportsmen who have medical problems.

And, as I have frequently discovered, amateur sportsmen and sportswomen can suffer just as much as the professionals. The amateur player may take his game just as seriously as the professional.

I have, for example, seen a number of patients with what I call 'skittle bowler's elbow', some with 'skittle bowler's shoulder' and several with 'skittle spectator's ankle'. The first two disorders are caused when a player hurls his skittle with too much force – or plays too many games. The third disorder is caused when an inattentive spectator does not see the heavy wooden ball used in skittles jump the boards at the side of the alley before bouncing out into the spectating area.

Ten pin bowling, the modern, domesticated version of the sport which is popular in the United States, is much safer in that spectators aren't allowed to stand around in the direct line of fire.

In a traditional skittle alley, there are invariably spectators linking up alongside the alley itself and when a ball bounces over the low wooden wall (as it invariably does at least once or twice in an evening) it is almost certain that someone will be hit. Indeed, I have, on two separate occasions, seen spectators injured by flying skittles. I bet that's an injury that is completely unknown in ten pin bowling!

And I will never forget that in 1970, a girl called Beatrice Jones insisted on a trial for Bilbury's rugby team.

Beatrice, who weighed just over 14 stone, was a big girl in every department and when she ran, she bounced a good deal. Indeed, there were parts of her which didn't stop moving for a minute or so after she had stopped running. She was luxuriously upholstered by a God who had chosen not to stint in any of the popular departments. She was also as tough as a rhinoceros. If she had chosen to be a boxer instead of to play rugby, she would have fought as a heavyweight and there would have been much trembling of the knees among all other contenders.

Since a rugby team needs 15 players and there were only 14 playing members in the Bilbury rugby club, the trial was something of a formality.

'Can you walk about under your own steam?' asked the team captain, who was also the selector and groundsman.

Beatrice said that she could.

'Can you catch a ball?'

Beatrice said she could do that too.

'Good, you're in the team.'

'I will play in any position except hooker,' she told him firmly, for she was a sensitive girl who did not wish to see her family embarrassed by seeing their daughter described as a hooker on the sports pages of the local paper.

The captain was doubtless happy to have found his 15th player but her inclusion resulted in much discussion, some controversy and, at first at least, a good deal of merriment.

Opposition players wanted to know how and whereabouts they should tackle her. Which did she prefer: above or below the waist? When she threw the ball in for lineouts there were complaints that not all of her body was behind the line. On one occasion, opposition players, theoretically there as defenders, stood mesmerised as she ran towards them, turned and watched agape as she ran past them and then stared motionless as she ran on to the line to score a memorable try. She was the heaviest player on the pitch and apart from not knowing precisely where to tackle her without offending the bounds of public morality, opposition players were wary of taking her on lest they find themselves simply being towed behind an unstoppable force. No red-blooded young male wants to be seen being towed along by a female rugby player.

Attempts were made to have her banned but the league administrators eventually reported that they could find nothing in the rules to stop her playing.

And the controversy didn't end when matches finished.

Since it was clear to players, officials and management that she could not possibly be expected to share the team bath, the captain decided that she should be allowed to take her bath first.

After standing in the rain for 25 minutes waiting for Beatrice to finish using the facilities the rest of the team rebelled, marched into a changing room smelling of lavender and plunged into a large bath of water which was now tepid and smelling of rose water. Beatrice, who was inadequately wrapped in a hand towel and busy doing her hair, refused to leave until she'd finished titivating. When the team wives and girlfriends found out about this incident, a delegation marched on the club president's home and demanded action. They weren't quite sure what sort of action they wanted but they wanted some of it and they wanted it fast.

In the end, disaster was averted only when Beatrice announced that she was pregnant and that she and the full-back would be marrying as soon as the season was over and a Saturday afternoon would be available for the necessary ceremony and celebrations. The full-back was at least six inches shorter than his bride-to-be and four stones lighter. She felled an opposing team member who said something rude about him; floored the man with a single punch.

The full-back said that he would continue playing but that his wife was retiring from competitive rugby due to her condition. Beatrice told a reporter from the local newspaper that she believed that in due course women would be playing rugby regularly and that in order to accommodate this eventuality, clubs would have to provide extra bathing facilities. She said she could see the day coming when there would be rugby and football teams made up entirely of women. No one was rude enough to say that they did not take her prediction seriously but it was generally agreed that it was an unlikely prospect since, as one club member put it, 'they don't make rugger boots small enough for women'.

Of course, the saga of the female rugby player wasn't my problem. It was a social and sporting dilemma rather than a medical one.

But other sporting difficulties did come within my remit and during one short week period I saw two local sporting stars who needed help or advice.

First up came Charles Crowcombe; a mountain of a man who was known to everyone as Charlie.

I think it was safe to say that Charlie was a character. He was so much of a character that I cannot imagine how I have managed to write eleven other books about Bilbury without once mentioning him. Charlie was 79-years-old and as full of beans as a cheap hotpot. He was a big man in every sense of the word and if there were a lion anywhere running around without a heart then Charlie had that missing organ.

I think the phrase 'larger than life' was invented for him.

The first thing that struck you about him was that he had a giant forehead. It always seemed to me that this was a bit of a fraud because it suggests, quite falsely, that great quantities of brain lie hidden behind it. In truth, the bony edifice reminded me very much of one of those fake fronts which Hollywood used to favour as a cheaper alternative to building a saloon, a row of shops or a chateau. 'Just build the front and don't let anyone peep around the sides.' Charlie had a big forehead but there wasn't much of anything on the other side of the bone.

I can still remember when I first met Charlie.

He came into the surgery because he had stuck a fork into his foot and needed a little light repair work. He refused point blank to go to the hospital in Barnstaple so I ended up dealing with the injury myself. Fortunately, he made a good recovery and there was no permanent damage.

(I am, incidentally, amazed at how many people stick forks into their feet. If more farm workers and gardeners wore stout boots, the world would be a safer place for feet.)

That was three years earlier than the problem which I now remember as 'the darts incident'.

'I'm 76-years-old,' I remember Charlie telling me with a fierce sparkle in the eye that didn't have the cataract. 'I have a long family history of heart disease. Both my parents died of heart trouble. I had three brothers and they all died of heart trouble. I eat four rashers of bacon and three eggs for breakfast every morning and I've done that since I was 16-years-old. I eat steak three times a week. I drink five pints of beer every evening and smoke 40 cigarettes a day – the ones without the girly filters stuck on the end. You may be able to conclude from this that death is not something I worry about a great deal. And nor do I take much notice of you medical people. I had a cousin called Earnest who was a keen athlete and a dedicated vegan. He never touched booze or cigarettes and never ate fatty food. He ate one egg a week but only the white bit. He wouldn't eat ice cream or chocolate but ate vast amounts of kale and spinach. Despite all this, he had a heart attack while out jogging. He was just 44 when he died. What sort of life was that for a fellow to live? He left a wife and a white poodle that had a pink collar. I had another cousin called Victoria who was knocked off her bicycle when she was 32-years-old. She used to cycle 200 miles a week. She broke a leg, had a fat embolus in hospital and died. My wife, God bless her, was a good woman. I loved her dearly. She made the best pies and I always had seven clean shirts a week. Nine years ago, she went into hospital for what they said was a routine operation down below. They were going to take everything away and send her home to me a bit lighter but as good as new. She never came home. She had the operation but she died. I never knew why. No one told me and I didn't ask. It didn't matter, did it? It didn't make any difference. She was a healthy woman, other than that bit of feminine trouble she had down below. So don't tell me to change my diet or to go to the hospital because I won't do either; not for you and nor for anyone else.'

So, I cleaned up his foot, scraped out the bits of shoe and sock and dirt that had got into the wound, courtesy of the fork prongs that had skewered him, sewed him up, gave him antibiotics and prayed that he would heal successfully. Fortunately, he did.

When he came back to have his dressing changed, I offered him an appointment with an eye specialist for the cataract. He looked at me as if I'd suggested he might like to adopt a vegetarian diet and shook his head pityingly as he hobbled off.

Charlie has a good many hobbies.

He is too slow to play football for more than five minutes at a time but he still coaches the village team. In matches he acts as a linesman, though he usually sits on a chair positioned in the middle of the touchline, rather than running up and down as the play ebbs and flows.

He has a small boat which he keeps in Combe Martin and he fishes regularly for mackerel. He catches more than he can possibly eat and he sells the rest to Peter Marshall who sells them on to a fishmonger who had a shop in Combe Martin. (I never understand why Charlie didn't just sell the fish direct to the fishmonger.)

And he plays darts.

Actually, to say that Charlie plays darts is like saying that Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus and Gary Player played golf. Or like saying that Rod Laver and Ken Rosewall played tennis.

Charlie may have other interests but he lives for darts. It is his passion.

And, despite the cataract, he is very good at it, too.

He has been a member of the Duck and Puddle darts team since the team had been founded and when the team sheet is pinned up on the noticeboard, his name is always top of the list. This may, of course, have something to do with the fact that he is President, Chairman and Secretary of the darts club and captain and sole selector of the team. If there were a treasurer he'd be treasurer too.

Bilbury doesn't have a lot of league or cup winning teams.

Neither the cricket team nor the football team has had a great deal of competitive success. But our darts team has won so many trophies that they are stacked two deep in a specially made display cupboard standing at the back of the snug at the Duck and Puddle. Admittedly, some of the trophies had to be purchased by the darts team players themselves because in some of the tournaments where they were victorious, the organisers didn't have any money to pay for a trophy. (From time to time, the players had purchased second-hand trophies. And so the cabinet contained one trophy awarded to the Winners of the South West of England Netball Championship and another originally awarded to the winner of the Ladies' Match play Championship at the Kentisbury Golf Club.) But a trophy is a trophy is a trophy, as Gertrude Stein would have doubtless said if she'd thought of it or been interested in darts, and all the trophies in the cupboard had been won fair and square.

So when Charlie turned up in my surgery and told me that he was having a problem in letting go of his darts, I had to take him very seriously.

It was not a problem I had encountered before and I had to ask him to explain what he meant.

'When I've got the dart in my hand, like this,' said Charlie, picking a pen up off from the desk and holding it like a dart, 'It seems to stick to me. I can't let go. It's just like it's stuck to my fingers.'

'Ah,' I said.

'Ah,' is what doctors always say when they don't have the foggiest idea what is going on.

I am pretty sure that they never taught us about sticky darts at medical school but they didn't teach us about 'Ah,' either. That comes naturally. There is no exclamation point after it, by the way. That would be a very different sort of 'Ah'.

'How long has this been going on?' I asked.

'Three weeks,' replied Charlie as though this were a lifetime and a half. 'It started during a league match against King George. It got worse when we played King Charles. And last week, when we played Duke of York I could hardly let go of the dart. It's messing up my timing and my accuracy has gone all to pot.'

'Those are all pub darts teams?'

'They are.'

'Let me see your hands?'

He showed me his hands. They didn't seem to be unduly sticky. I didn't want to spend hours trying to find out why he couldn't let go of his darts and then find out that his fingers were covered in a thin but still sticky layer of all-purpose glue. Charlie used to be a carpenter and it was he who made the trophy cabinet in the Duck and Puddle. He still does a little sawing and hammering and doubtless messes around with the sort of glue that is nigh on impossible to remove. Personally, I hate it when my hands get sticky. There's nothing worse than examining a patient and finding after a couple of moments that your fingers are firmly stuck to whatever part of them you were palpating.

Charlie paused and frowned; deep furrows appearing across his massive, bony forehead. 'Do you think I might have been thinking too much?' He said this as though he were embarrassed by the very thought; as another man might ask if I thought he might have been smoking too much or drinking too much or eating too many chips.

I told him that we might have to consider this as a real possibility.

'Do you practise?' I asked. I know there are some sportsmen, usually not very good ones it has to be said, who regard practising as a form of cheating. I should have guessed that Charlie wasn't one of them.

'Of course I do!'

'And what happens when you practise? Can you let go of the dart?'

'No problem at all, doc,' said Charlie firmly. 'I can throw a mean dart when I'm practising. But when it's a competition, the darts go all over the place. I missed the board and hit the wall twice the other week. The other team were all laughing at me.'

Charlie was not, I suspected, a man who found it easy to be the butt of someone else's mockery.

'The more I try to deal with the problem the worse it gets. I concentrate hard, really hard, and when I eventually manage to let go of them the darts just fly off as though they have minds of their own. One stuck in a woman's foot last Friday. Fortunately she was a bit tiddly and she laughed so much that she didn't get cross.'

'Ah,' I said again, speaking as much to myself as Charlie. 'So it's a psychological problem rather than a physical problem.'

It didn't seem likely that Charlie had a physical problem, a neurological problem for example, if he could throw darts when it didn't matter. The fact that the problem only arose under pressure was quite a clue.

Charlie frowned. 'A psychological problem?'

He paused, and frowned, and half closed his eyes and repeated it, playing with the word as though it were something he'd come across but couldn't quite remember where or why.

'Psychology? That's to do with the head isn't it? The inside of the head?'

'It is,' I agreed. `It's to do with what goes on in the mind.'

He looked at me rather suspiciously. 'Are you saying I'm off my trolley, doc? Ready for the loony bin?'

'No, no,' I said quickly. 'I'm just saying that the problem is clearly in your head rather than in your hand.'

Charlie kept his frown in place. 'What does that mean?'

'It means that we have to find out what's changed,' I said. 'Something is clearly putting you under extra stress.'

'I don't suffer with stress,' said Charlie immediately, firmly and irrevocably. He shook his head as though to confirm this. 'Never have, never do, never will. I've heard of it. There was an article about it in the paper. People in London get stress. People with suits and briefcases. Not me. Stress is for namby pambies.' He scowled at me. 'Are you saying I'm a namby pamby? '

'No,' I said quickly. 'Of course not.' Charlie may be a septuagenarian but he is a large septuagenarian.

'So, if it's not stress, what is it? What's wrong with me?'

I thought for a moment. 'I suspect that idiopathic muscular tension is impeding your flechette release mechanism,' I told him.

'Oh,' said Charlie, appeased. He seemed quite impressed. Actually, I was pretty impressed too. 'Would you write that down for me, doc?'

I tried to remember my diagnosis, carefully wrote it all down and handed him the piece of paper on which it was written.

Charlie looked at it and tried to say it. He didn't do very well. 'So that's what you think it is?'

'That's definitely what it is.'

'Can you cure me, doc?'

'Of course I can,' I said.

It seemed to me that I would never be able to cure Charlie's problem unless he believed I could cure his problem. In circumstances like this, confidence is all.

'You can give me some tablets?'

'No,' I said. 'I don't think tablets are necessary.'

I had a few weeks earlier read about a book in which the author suggested that most skilled sportsmen rely upon muscle memory to achieve success and that extraneous thoughts can interfere with the ability of the muscles to do what they have been trained to do. It was, I think, a new theory but to me it made complete sense. The author of the article suggested that whether they play golf, tennis or billiards, sportsmen or sportswomen do their best when they don't allow their conscious mind to interfere too much with what their hands, arms, legs are doing. I didn't see why this theory shouldn't apply just as well to darts.

'When is your next match?'

'We've got a home match next Wednesday. We're playing The Gravedigger's Rest.'

'You have to learn to stop concentrating on what you're doing,' I told him. 'You're trying too hard and as a result your muscles are becoming tense. That's why you can't let go of the dart.'

'How do I not try too hard, doc?' asked Charlie, puzzled. He was, I suspect, a man who always tried too hard.

'When you're about to throw your dart you have to concentrate on something else.'

'You mean, not concentrate on the shot?' Charlie seemed sceptical.

'Exactly,' I told him.

'So what do I concentrate on?'

'Concentrate on your breathing,' I told him, after a moment's thought. 'Tell your arm where you want the dart to land and then forget about the process of throwing the dart. Your body can manage that part perfectly well without your brain interfering. Instead of concentrating on hitting the triple twenty or whatever it is, just concentrate on taking slow breaths. Tell yourself to breathe in. And then tell yourself to breathe out. Do that just before you throw the dart and right up until the moment when the dart leaves your hand.'

Charlie looked at me as if I had gone mad.

'Really,' I told him. 'Try it. What have you got to lose?'

He thought for a moment. 'Not a lot,' he admitted.

The following Wednesday I made sure that I was at the Duck and Puddle for the darts match.

When it was Charlie's turn to play, I couldn't help noticing that the spectators, the members of the other team, and even the members of his own team, tried to stand behind him. They obviously all knew of Charlie's problem and thought that they would be safer there. One or two of the visiting team called out comments and advice to one another. 'I wish I'd borrowed a suit of armour from the museum!' 'Put your hands over your private parts when he throws!' 'Shall we go outside and watch through the window?' and 'Watch out for the ricochets!'

Charlie, it was clear, was not taking this well. His face was red and he was perspiring heavily. I couldn't help thinking about the family history of heart disease, the daily eggs and bacon and all those steaks.

Charlie's first attempts were a disaster. He was clearly still having difficulty in letting go of his darts. And when he did finally manage to launch them on their journey, he was hurling them towards the board as though he wanted to get rid of them. None of them stuck in the dartboard. They all bounced back quite a distance.

When he moved away from the oche, the line on the mat where players stand when it is their turn to throw their darts, I moved over to him, grabbed his elbow and led him away from the crowd of spectators and other players.

'I did the breathing thing like you said!' complained Charlie. 'But when I looked at the board I found myself thinking about the last match I played, when that dart hit that woman's foot.'

'So, the next time it's your turn, you must shut your eyes before you throw your darts.'

'Shut my eyes? So that I can't see?' Charlie sounded incredulous.

I nodded.

So he did. He didn't score well but he managed to let go of all three darts and they all hit the board point first and stayed where they had landed.

'Next time, concentrate on your breathing and just squint a bit,' I told him. 'Almost close your eyes – but not quite.'

And, to his delight and astonishment, his darts all went where they were intended to go. I was delighted and astonished too.

I didn't tell him this, of course, but I think that having to concentrate on breathing and on almost closing his eyes meant that he didn't have enough brain left to worry about what he was doing.

After that, Charlie soon got back to his winning ways. It had all been a little unorthodox, to say the least, but it had worked. With his return to form, the Duck and Puddle team succeeded in defeating the team from the Gravedigger's Rest.

'Thanks, doc,' said Charlie afterwards. 'And it's good to know that my problem wasn't caused by stress. Not like one of those namby pamby types in suits, eh?'

Later, as the team celebrated, I heard one of the other players ask Charlie what his problem had been. Charlie took out the piece of paper on which I had written the diagnosis and everyone in the pub looked at it and nodded wisely, as though they understood what it meant.

That did make me smile.

My second sporting patient had a more serious problem in that it affected his health and, it is no exaggeration to say, threatened his life.

Farley Woodbury was 42-years-old when his wife, Petronella, brought him to see me.

Farley is a shy, quiet man; not the sort of fellow who ever rushes into things.

He certainly didn't rush things when he was courting Petronella, the daughter of a dentist in South Molton. She had a couple of horses of her own which she rode at meetings and they met at a Point to Point meeting held on a farm just outside Bideford. Petronella once told me that she and Farley were courting for three weeks before they progressed to Christian name terms. And it was another three weeks before they held hands in the back row of the cinema in Boutport Street in Barnstaple. Farley and Petronella went out together for two years before he proposed – once again in the back row of the cinema in Barnstaple. Petronella once told me, with some pride, that Farley still had the tickets stubs from that important evening and that he kept them in a matchbox in the top drawer of the bedside table on his side of their bed. It was not until eighteen months after the engagement that they married. Once married, Farley moved out of the accommodation he shared with two other single labourers, and Petronella left home. They moved into a small, tied cottage owned by my father-in-law and provided for married employees.

As a couple, they are a strange reversal of nature's usual allocation of colours. The male peacock is far more flamboyant than the female. The male pheasant is the one who has the flashy tail. But with Farley and Petronella, things were the other way around. She always wore bright, primary colours while he invariably wore earthy colours – dark greens and dark browns.

Although he works as a labourer on my father-in-law's farm, Farley has been a keen amateur jockey since his teens. He originally had hopes of becoming a professional jockey but he is nearly six feet tall and he finds it nigh on impossible to get down to the weights required by owners and trainers.

Jockeys who appear at National Hunt meetings, where nearly all the races are over fences, are allowed a little more leeway than flat race jockeys but a jockey's weight is still a vital factor in deciding whether or not he is given enough rides to make a living out of the sport of King's.

Farley's constant struggles with his weight meant that he had to abandon all his hopes of a career as a professional and, instead, to embrace the idea of a more modest career as an amateur jockey, racing very occasionally at larger meetings and quite often at Point to Point meetings where the requirements are slightly less stringent.

The problem was that as he grew older, Farley found it more and more difficult to get down to the weight required for even these lesser meetings. Professional jockeys sometimes spend hours sitting in a sauna in order to lose weight and it was not at all unknown for some to take amphetamines or other drugs to help them get down to the required weight. Neither of these options was available to Farley. He had a full time job as a farm labourer and couldn't afford the time to spend hours sitting in a sauna. On a farm labourer's wages, he couldn't afford the money to pay for illegal drugs.

'There's something wrong with Farley,' said Petronella.

Farley sat beside her, on the other side of my desk, and examined his fingernails.

I normally prefer patients to talk to me about their health problems but I knew that Farley was probably too shy to tell me anything so I allowed Petronella to speak for him.

'What sort of something?'

'He's losing a lot of weight.'

'How much weight has he lost?' I asked.

'A stone,' replied Petronella. 'He's always been terribly skinny but now he's just skin and bones.'

'How much do you weigh now?' I asked Farley, speaking to him directly for the first time.

'A little over ten stone,' replied Petronella. 'And that's when he's fully clothed and soaking wet. At a race ten days ago he weighed in at exactly ten stone.'

'And how tall are you?'

'Six feet two inches.'

'How is your appetite?'

'He eats very well,' said Petronella. 'He's not eating any less than he was. In fact I don't think I've ever known him eat more.'

'But you're losing weight?'

'A stone in the last six weeks,' said Petronella.

'Do you have any other symptoms?' I asked him.

Petronella looked at him and this time Farley did speak. 'No,' he said, without looking up.

There was clearly something more than I could see going on here. If Farley was eating properly but losing weight at such a dramatic rate then there was something seriously wrong with him.

Unless.

There was, I realised, another possibility.

Farley was a jockey and jockeys are always fighting to lose weight. Some lose weight by spending time in a sauna. Some take drugs. But there is another, very effective, way to lose weight which is often used by jockeys. If Farley was using this method then it seemed clear that Petronella didn't know about it and hadn't guessed what he was doing. Before I did anything else I needed to talk to Farley alone.

'I need to examine you,' I said to Farley. 'Take your clothes off and jump onto the examination couch.' I turned to Petronella. 'Would you pop back into the waiting room for a few minutes?'

She didn't want to go. I understood and sympathised. But I needed to talk to Farley without his wife by his side.

'So, is there anything else you should tell me?' I asked Farley when he was lying on the examination couch and his wife was out of my consulting room and back in the waiting room. Wearing just his socks and underpants he looked like a skeleton.

'No, I don't think so,' said Farley, so quietly that I could hardly hear him.

I examined him carefully. Inside his mouth, I could see the marks made by his fingernails. On the backs of his knuckles, I spotted the tell-tale sign where his skin had rubbed against his incisors. The skin on the back of his hands showed that he was seriously dehydrated. And when I listened to his heart I found that it was beating abnormally. I didn't need any more evidence.

'How long has it been going on?'

'What?'

'Making yourself sick.'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' said Farley, defiantly.

I looked at him and said nothing but just waited.

Suddenly he started to cry.

'It's my last chance,' he told me.

I waited.

'I've been offered a ride at the Cheltenham Festival. A trainer I know has offered me a ride if I can make the weight he wants me at.'

'So you've been making yourself sick?'

'Yes.' The tears were now rolling down his cheeks. 'But I'm always hungry. My job is quite physical. I'm always famished so I eat decent meals. And then I go and make myself sick; get rid of all the food.'

'You're making yourself ill.'

'I know.'

'When's the race?'

'At the Festival?'

'Yes.'

'Three months.'

'If you go on at this rate you won't be fit to race anyway.'

'I'm not getting any younger. There won't be any more chances.'

I listened to him for a while. His dream had always been to be a jockey but God had not been kind to him in making him so tall. It's difficult for young jockeys to make the weight when they are close to six feet tall. He knew, as well as I did, that a man who is over six feet tall and in his 40s can only make a good riding weight by making himself seriously ill.

'You have to tell Petronella.'

'I can't.'

'She's worried sick about your health. You can't not tell her. I suspect she probably thinks you've got cancer and that you're going to die.'

Farley looked at me in disbelief.

'Honestly,' I said. 'That's what she probably thinks.'

'Will you tell her?'

And so I called Petronella back into the consulting room and I told her that her husband had bulimia; that he was deliberately making himself sick so that he vomited up the food he'd eaten and didn't put on weight.

'Is this for that bloody race?' she asked me. 'That one they offered you at Cheltenham?'

He nodded. 'And there was talk of a ride at Aintree. In the Grand National.'

'You wouldn't have the strength to ride a horse round Aintree,' she told him. 'I've seen you struggle to get up the stairs.'

'Your heartbeat is irregular,' I told him. 'You really are making yourself ill. I very much doubt if the course doctors would let you ride. They'll see the same signs I've seen.'

Farley looked at me.

'How can you do this to yourself?' demanded Petronella. 'And to me? You're my whole life. If you kill yourself you'll leave a young, grieving widow. All over a bloody horse race.' The words came tumbling out, driven more by passion than anything else. And all the time Farley wept.

'It's what I always wanted to do,' he said at last. 'It was my dream.'

'I know it was,' said Petronella. She too was now crying. 'You're a great jockey. I know you are. I've seen you ride often enough. But you can't make the weight without making yourself ill. You're too tall, Farley. Lots of men would give their eye teeth to be six foot tall.'

'None of them jockeys,' said Farley, wryly.

I didn't expect that we would be able to persuade Farley to stop making himself vomit there and then. With commendable honesty he refused to give his word that he would stop. I offered to make him an appointment with a special clinic where he could see an expert. But he said he wouldn't go. He said he was too ashamed of what he was doing; too embarrassed to talk to a stranger about it.

So I told them both to come and see me together, twice a week. And twice a week I weighed him and checked his heart and looked at his hands and his teeth and his skin.

And I talked to a race course doctor I knew who told me that bulimia was a common problem among jockeys and that they were good at spotting it and that if a jockey was ill they would never let him climb aboard half a ton of thoroughbred horse and race over fences and hedges sometimes too high to see over.

When I told Farley what I knew, I also told him that I hadn't told the doctor the name of my patient. 'They don't know who you are. But race course doctors won't let you race in your condition.'

And slowly Farley came to terms with the fact that he could have a good life without risking his health trying to recapture something that had once seemed possible. He could still ride at Point to Point race meetings without making himself painfully thin. He had a wife who loved him dearly, a good home and a decent job.

One day the pair of them came in and Farley told me that he hadn't made himself sick for a month. He said he felt much better and that he had accepted that he was now never going to be a top jockey. He said that knowing that it was just his height that had thwarted his ambitions made it easier to accept.

'I'm a good jockey,' he said with quiet confidence. 'I could have been a winner.' And then, for the first time in weeks, he smiled and did a passable imitation of Marlon Brando. 'I could have been a contender,' he said, quoting Brando from the film *On the Waterfront*.

Petronella, smiling with him, put her arm around her husband and it was her turn to cry. 'I know you could,' she said softly. 'But if it's any consolation you won my heart long ago.'

'You're the one I always wanted to win,' said Farley.

I left them alone for a minute or two while I popped out to fetch a fresh box of paper tissues. I always keep a box of tissues on my desk but sometimes one box isn't enough.

Damnit, I needed a tissue myself.

Just to blow my nose you understand.

Tranny by Gaslight

I saw Donyard Hill most days when he cycled along the lane past Bilbury Grange.

He was usually headed to Peter Marshall's shop, to buy a pint of milk and a loaf of bread, though sometimes he cycled down into Combe Martin to treat himself and his wife to two pieces of cod and two bags of chips. He used to wrap the cod and the chips in an old coat to keep them warm before stuffing them into his saddlebag.

At the time, the chip shop in Combe Martin still wrapped the fish and chips in pieces of greaseproof paper which were then folded inside pages from old newspapers. To be honest, I don't think chips are really chips unless they are wrapped in old newspaper. To me they taste much better with a little newsprint wrapped round them than they do when sold in any of the alternative wrappers.

Moreover, I have always found that newspapers make fascinating reading when they are used as chip wrappers. Most chip shops used tabloid newspapers for the wrapping (the pages of a broadsheet were generally considered far too large) and many is the nugget of odd 'hey, listen to this' items of news I have found and enjoyed while eating my chips.

There's absolutely no entertainment value in plain, white wrapping paper or one of those hideous, plastic trays that are now considered acceptable by the health and safety gestapo.

Donyard is one of those people who were born well-equipped with silver spoons. He had one in his mouth and one in each of his little fists.

He seemed destined for greatness but, somehow, he never quite fulfilled the expectations of either parents or schoolteachers. He went to one of the top public schools and followed that with three years at Cambridge University where he read Politics, Philosophy and Economics.

'My tutors thought I'd have a career in politics but it never happened,' he told me with a shrug. 'I was the head boy at school so I was doomed. Someone once told me that the majority of head boys and girls either end up as estate agents or in prison.'

Instead of a high-flying career in politics, Donyard decided to become a racing driver. That didn't turn out too well. His father wouldn't give him the money he needed to buy a good car and he never quite had the talent to obtain the sponsorship he needed. For a year or two, he worked as a press officer for one of the smaller racing teams. And then, when the team for which he was working went bust, he got a job as a car salesman. Customers liked the fact that he could talk about racing drivers he had met and circuits he had visited.

That career didn't last too long. Donyard was arrested for speeding and careless driving and lost his licence. The job went too. And so did his girlfriend he had met when he'd been a racing driver.

He told me all this one lunchtime in the Duck and Puddle, where he became a regular when he and his new wife, a lovely lady called Cynthia-Anne, moved into Bilbury and rented a small cottage just two hundred yards or so from the pub.

Donyard had managed to get himself appointed Club Secretary at the Kentisbury Golf Club. Cynthia-Anne, a gracile mignon, was at least one, and possibly two, generations younger than Donyard but they seemed very happy together. They had been married for a couple of years and had met at a Rock Music Festival on the Isle of Wight. They had a baby called Herman and a daft Dalmatian dog called Spot. Their tiny cottage had running water but no other utilities. In lieu of electricity, they had lamps and a cooker which all were fed with fuel from a liquefied gas cylinder. Their cottage was heated by a log burning stove which also provided them with hot water.

'Donyard's on the phone,' said Frank Parsons, landlord at the Duck and Puddle. 'He appears to have been arrested.'

It was early evening and Thumper Robinson, Patchy Fogg and I were having a pre-prandial libation while we discussed plans for the Bilbury Bonfire Night Party.

We take Bonfire Night very seriously in Bilbury. Mind you, we take most opportunities for celebration quite seriously. We celebrate the rise and fall of Guy Fawkes with a huge bonfire, as many fireworks as we can afford and a huge barbecue. It is never allowed to rain on bonfire night and if it does then we ignore the damp and carry on regardless.

I'm in charge of the bonfire since I have a well-earned reputation of being able to light a fire, and keep it burning, even if it is pouring with rain. One of my most magnificent bonfires was lit in a snowstorm. The fire burned steadily for several hours and I watched it from the comfort of my armchair in Bilbury Grange, popping out only occasionally to throw another pile of prunings onto the blaze. Patsy told her father about that bonfire and he told his wife and she told just about everyone else. My reputation as a maker of bonfires was sealed by that conflagration.

Startled, we all looked across at Frank.

‘Arrested?’ I said. ‘What on earth for?’

Donyard was a breezy and colourful character but he wasn’t the sort of fellow likely to get drunk, start a fight or steal sweets from F.W.Woolworth’s emporium.

‘He didn’t say,’ said Frank. He seemed slightly uncomfortable. ‘I didn’t like to ask him.’ He muttered something about it not being the sort of thing you asked a fellow.

It seemed to me unlikely that Donyard would have telephoned just to let us know that he had been arrested. He obviously needed help of some sort. I jumped up, walked across to where Frank was standing and took the telephone from him.

‘What’s happened?’ I asked.

‘I’ve been arrested,’ said Donyard. It didn’t really sound like him. But it definitely was him. He sounded extremely nervous and frightened.

‘What for?’ I asked, cutting right to the chase, as I believe they say when making cowboy movies.

‘Well, I wasn’t actually doing anything,’ said Donyard.

‘They must have arrested you for something,’ I said.

‘It wasn’t so much what I was doing,’ he said, ‘as what I’m wearing.’

‘Why? What are you wearing?’

There was a long pause. I could hear someone in the background shouting to Donyard, telling him to hurry up and finish his call.

‘A pink and lilac floral frock with a matching pink cardigan,’ he said. ‘Pink shoes and a little pink hat with two small feathers in it.’

‘Pretty well covered the pink angle, then?’

‘Pretty much.’

‘And they’ve locked you up?’

‘I was looking at the blouses in Marks and Spencer. A woman saw me and guessed I was a bloke dressed up. She went outside, found a copper and complained.’

‘You weren’t doing anything odd? Dancing around and singing something merry from Porgy and Bess for example?’

‘No, no, not at all,’ said Donyard, who was sounding a little more confident by the second. ‘I was just there, looking at the blouses. You don’t seem too shocked.’

‘Why should I be shocked?’

‘The woman who complained was shocked. The policeman who arrested me was shocked. Incidentally, the ironic thing is that the woman who complained about me was wearing jeans, Doc Martin boots and a plaid, woollen lumberjack shirt in orange and brown. If we’d swapped clothes no one would have said anything.’

‘Tight-laced idiots the lot of them,’ I said.

‘Can I crave a boon?’ said Donyard.

‘Am I close if I guess you need bailing out?’

I wasn’t in the slightest bit surprised to hear that there was another cross-dresser living in Bilbury. There are far more men who dress in feminine clothing than is generally realised. (Women can, and do, dress in male clothing without anyone noticing or thinking it in the slightest bit strange.) I had already met a villager called Montgomery Hall who liked to dress in the sort of clothing more commonly associated with women. He fell off his exercise bicycle and I helped his wife undress him, and clean the nail varnish off his nails before he went to hospital.

Since around one in ten men cross-dress from time to time, some wearing only feminine underwear and others dressing completely in feminine clothing, there were always bound to be numerous other cross-dressers or transvestites in the village.

I remember Montgomery Hall telling me that he had started by just wearing silky, feminine panties. ‘I had no intention of ever wearing a bra,’ he said. ‘I just thought the panties felt better, more comfortable than itchy boxer shorts. But then, after a few months, I started to wear stockings and then I did add a bra and a slip and then, because I was a bachelor at the time, I started wearing a nightie. I had no intention of wearing a dress. After a while, I wouldn’t go out of the house unless I was wearing a bra underneath my shirt, I felt half-dressed without one. And then I bought a skirt and a blouse in a charity shop and before I knew, I wondered where I could find a wig and some shoes that would fit.’

Another cross-dresser I spoke to said that he wore feminine clothing in the same way, and for the same reason, that Winston Churchill liked laying bricks. Churchill didn’t want to be a bricklayer. He was just escaping from the stresses of his everyday life by being something else. Many transvestites feel like this and find that when wearing something flimsy and feminine they can allow themselves to be caring, emotional and gentle in a way that men aren’t usually supposed to be. (I discovered from Donyard, by the way, that ‘cisvestism’ is the habit of dressing only in the clothes of one's own sex.)

'I'm afraid so,' said Donyard. 'Cynthia-Anne is at home looking after Herman but I couldn't ring her because we don't have a phone at the cottage. We've been waiting six months for British Telecom to install one.'

'Do you want me to tell her where you are?'

'Would you mind?'

'Of course not. Does she…er…know?'

'Know that I dress in women's clothing?'

'Yes.'

'Oh yes. She bought me the frock I'm wearing. It was a birthday present.'

'Good. That's good.' Suddenly, a thought occurred to me. 'What have you told the police?'

'I haven't told them anything.'

'You haven't made a statement?'

'No. I did mention that one day it will be just as reasonable for a man to walk round in a frock as it is for a woman to walk round in trousers.'

'What did the police say?'

'The snotty copper who arrested me said, 'Maybe, but this is the 1970s and it isn't legal now.'

'You didn't say anything else?'

'No. They haven't got round to asking me any questions yet. They just arrested me, giggled, and said a few rude things.'

'So they haven't charged you with anything?'

'No, not yet. I don't think they're quite sure what to charge me with. Do you know a good solicitor? '

'Don't tell them anything,' I told him. 'Just be indignant. We'll be with you shortly.'

'We?'

'Thumper and Patchy are here with me.'

'Of course,' said Donyard.

'And Donyard?'

'Yes?'

'A hat with two feathers in it?'

'It looks better than it sounds. Honest.'

'I hope so,' I told him. 'We'll be there shortly. Don't say anything and don't sign anything until we get there.'

I put down the telephone and turned to Thumper and Patchy. Thumper was finishing his pint of Old Restoration.

'Am I right in thinking that we are going somewhere?' said Patchy.

'We are,' I said. 'We're riding to the rescue of Donyard.' I explained why he had been arrested. Neither Thumper nor Patchy seemed shocked or even particularly surprised.

'Can't come with you, I'm afraid,' said Frank. 'Gilly is in Exeter. There's a meeting of the Licensed Victuallers' Association and it's her turn to go.'

'You stay here and hold the fort,' I told him. 'We will need refreshments when we return.'

Cynthia-Anne did not seem particularly surprised when we called in and explained what had happened to her husband. She was, however, clearly upset to hear that Donyard had been arrested. I'd have been worried if she hadn't been.

'He's been cross dressing for years,' she told us. 'But today was his first venture out in a dress. I did ask him not to go. Barnstaple doesn't look like a very broad-minded town to me.'

'Parts of it clearly aren't,' I told her.

'Will they send him to prison?' she asked, with tears in her eyes.

'Good heavens, no!' I replied. It seemed extremely unlikely.

'But it'll be in the local paper,' said Cynthia-Anne. 'And he'll lose his job. I can't see the committee at the Kentisbury Golf Club keeping him on as the Club Secretary, can you?'

'They probably wouldn't be over the moon about having a secretary in a pink hat with two feathers,' I agreed. 'But there may be a way out. Does Donyard have other feminine items in his wardrobe?'

'Oh yes,' replied Cynthia-Anne. 'He's got more feminine clothes than male clothes. When he's Donyard he only has a sports jacket and a couple of pairs of corduroy trousers. But when he's Molly he has a dozen dresses and skirts to choose from.'

'Molly?' said Patchy, puzzled. 'Who's Molly? Where did Molly come in?'

'Molly is what I call Donyard when he's dressed in feminine clothes,' explained Cynthia-Anne. She looked at us. 'Well, I can hardly call him Donyard when he's wearing a twin set and pearls can I?'

'No, I suppose not,' I agreed. 'But why Molly?'

‘I don’t have the foggiest idea why. I asked him and he doesn’t know either. He’s never known a Molly. I always thought it a rather pretty name.’

‘And he has a twin set and pearls?’

‘Oh yes. He looks lovely in it. It’s a heather mixture in a tweedy sort of material. We found it in a charity shop in South Molton.’

And this a man whom no one could possibly describe as a pantywaist!

‘Could you pop upstairs and collect some of Donyard’s clothes?’ I asked her. ‘We’ll need everything you can find. Including bras and stockings.’

Cynthia-Anne looked at me, puzzled.

‘There’s one way out of this,’ I told her. ‘If we turn up at the police station dressed as women and tell the police that we were all going to a fancy dress party they’ll either have to arrest us all or let Donyard go.’

‘You’d do that for him?’ said Cynthia-Anne.

‘We’re going to do what?’ demanded Thumper and Patchy simultaneously, as they realised what I’d just said.

‘We just put on some of Donyard’s gear and drive into Barnstaple and go to the police station,’ I said. ‘How hard is that? Not a lot to do for a chum, is it?’

Thumper and Patchy looked at each other.

‘Actually, it’s quite a lot,’ said Thumper.

‘Quite a lot,’ agreed Patchy with a resigned sort of sigh.

‘Fetch the clothes,’ I told Cynthia-Anne. ‘The quicker we get to Barnstaple, the quicker we get Donyard home.’

Cynthia-Anne disappeared up the stairs.

‘I’m not wearing pink or anything too revealing,’ called Thumper after her.

Two minutes later Cynthia-Anne was back downstairs with an armful of clothes and suitable underwear. By the time she returned, the three of us had stripped off down to our underpants. The Dalmation, clearly confused, had retreated and disappeared into the kitchen.

‘I can’t believe you’re doing this for Donyard,’ said Cynthia-Anne, laying the clothes out across the back of the sofa and two armchairs.

‘Nor can I,’ said Thumper.

‘Oh, I like that one!’ said Patchy, picking up a knee length frock in a darkish sky blue. He held the frock up against himself. ‘Do you think it’s my colour? I hope it will fit. You don’t have anything in a powder blue, do you?’

Cynthia-Anne said she was sorry but that was the only blue frock that Donyard had in his wardrobe.

Fifteen minutes later, we were all dressed. Cynthia-Anne had showed us how to fasten stockings to our suspender belts, had fastened our bras for us and had provided rolled up socks and stockings to fill up our empty bra cups. Doing all this by gaslight was trickier than I would have imagined.

‘Do you mean women have to go through all this every time they get dressed?’ said Thumper, looking behind him to check that the seams on his stockings were straight.

‘Do I look big enough?’ demanded Patchy, adding another pair of socks to his bra. ‘I don’t want to go into town looking flat chested.’

‘We’d better have some make-up on,’ I told Cynthia-Anne. ‘Give us some lipstick and a bit of stuff on our eyes.’

‘Oh, come on!’ said Thumper. ‘Do we have to?’

‘No point in spoiling the ship for a halfpenny’s worth of tar,’ said Patchy.

Cynthia-Anne made us up speedily. When she’d finished, I hardly recognised the other two.

‘Lilac suits you,’ I said to Thumper.

‘Blue really is my colour,’ said Patchy.

‘Hair!’ said Cynthia-Anne suddenly. ‘You all need wigs.’

‘Has Donyard got three spare wigs?’ I asked her.

‘No,’ said Cynthia-Anne. ‘He’s only got one other wig. But I’ve got two party wigs. One in green and the other one in bright red.’

‘I can’t wear a green wig,’ said Patchy instantly. ‘Not with a blue dress.’

We squeezed our feet into three pairs of Donyard’s shoes and eventually, gowned, made-up and wigged, we were ready to leave.

The three of us climbed into the Rolls-Royce and headed off for Barnstaple. ‘The game’s afoot!’ cried Patchy, who seemed surprisingly confident considering our state of dress.

When we got to our destination, I parked the car next to a large No Unauthorised Parking sign in the police station car park and the three of us trooped into the reception area. I have always found that you can park an elderly Rolls-Royce almost anywhere you like without getting into much trouble.

The sergeant on the desk stared at us as if three Martians had landed and walked in.

‘Good evening, sergeant,’ I said politely. I made no effort to speak in a feminine voice. I’d tried doing that in the car as we drove to Barnstaple and I’d found that it was quite impossible.

‘Evening, Madam,’ said the sergeant. He swallowed and corrected myself. ‘Er, Sir. Er, Sirs.’

I introduced myself and then introduced Thumper and Patchy. ‘Four of us were on our way to a fancy dress party and I understand there’s been some sort of silly mistake and you’ve accidentally arrested one of our number – Mr Donyard Hill.’

‘A fancy dress party, doctor?’

‘That’s right. Haven’t you heard about it? I think your Chief Constable is going to be there. I heard he was going as one of King Henry VIII’s wives. Can’t remember which one, though. Our wives have all gone ahead in another car. They’re all dressed as vicars. Our friend is called Donyard Hill. He telephoned a little while ago to say that you’d arrested him for looking at blouses in Marks and Spencer’s store.’

‘Arrested him for looking at blouses?’

‘I believe so,’ I said. ‘It seems a trifle heavy handed but maybe there’s a new law come in about blouse browsing.’

A drunk who had been sitting on a chair in the reception area stood up, unsteadily, and came over to us. He tried to put his arm round Thumper.

‘You’re a pretty girl,’ he said. ‘Give us a kiss.’

Thumper glared at him. Patchy, guessing what was in Thumper’s mind and thinking that it might not be a good idea to floor a stranger in a police station, held onto his arm.

‘Sit down, sunbeam!’ hissed Thumper. ‘Or you’ll be digesting your teeth.’

The drunk quickly edged away and sat down on the floor. He then crawled back to the chair on which he had been sitting and tried to look as small and as insignificant as possible.

‘This is a shocking thing,’ said Patchy. ‘Mr Hill is a very eminent member of the community. A very distinguished man, you know.’

‘He didn’t say anything about a party, sir,’ said the police sergeant, defensively.

‘Probably thought it wasn’t any of your business,’ said Patchy.

‘I expect he just wanted to see how far you’d go with this,’ I said. ‘He’s probably planning to make a formal complaint about how the police in Barnstaple harass ordinary members of the public.’ I paused. ‘Can I have your name, sergeant?’

‘Evans, doctor,’ said the sergeant. ‘Sergeant Evans, sir. I think there’s probably just been a bit of a mistake, sir. Just give me a minute, please, doctor.’

He hurried off. I noticed him talking to a young police constable who was trying to grow a moustache. It looked as if it was hard going.

A minute or so later, he returned with Donyard following him.

‘Ah there you are,’ I cried. ‘We lost you in town. But we’re still not too late for the party.’

‘Thank heavens for that,’ said Donyard, catching on fast. ‘I’d have hated to miss the party.’

‘The chief constable said he’d reserved the first dance with you,’ said Thumper to Donyard. ‘Your left boob has slipped. They haven’t been molesting you, have they?’

Donyard looked down and adjusted the contents of his left bra cup.

I glowered at Thumper. ‘Are there any charges, sergeant?’ I asked the policeman. ‘The three of us haven’t been looking at blouses but do you perhaps want to arrest the rest of us?’ I have always found that it pays to be polite but firm when dealing with the constabulary. And a little arrogant sarcasm, delivered from a height, never seems to do much harm.

‘No, no, there are no charges at all,’ said the sergeant quickly. ‘Apologies, sir, for the inconvenience and the misunderstanding.’ He lifted the flap in the desk so that Donyard could leave.

‘Saved by the three Paladins!’ murmured Donyard.

We walked out of the police station, our heels click-clacking on the linoleum, and made our way to the car. I realised that my hands were shaking.

‘Is this your car, sir?’ asked a policeman who was standing next to it. It was the young policeman who was trying to grow a moustache. He looked about 15 and I realised I was getting old.

I said it was.

‘I’ve just been looking after it for you, sir,’ said the policeman. ‘Some of our drivers are a bit careless when they’re parking. The sergeant didn’t want anyone denting your vehicle.’

We climbed in and settled ourselves. I managed to stop my hands shaking before I backed out of the car park. The 15-year-old policeman with the junior moustache held up the traffic so that we could leave the car park without having to wait for a break in the flow of cars, vans and lorries. I waved an imperious thank you. Thumper, who always likes to push things as close to the edge as he can, blew the policeman a kiss. Patchy said the policeman looked embarrassed and swore that he was blushing.

And then we drove home to Bilbury.

After telling Cynthia-Anne that we had rescued her husband, and that there were to be no charges, we retired to the Duck and Puddle where Donyard was in charge of buying drinks for the evening.

Frank said that he thought that blue really suited Patchy and that my green hair and off the shoulder red dress were really eye catching. When Frank didn't say anything about him, Thumper got quite upset. Frank then told Thumper that he had the most impressive bosom but that if he had to make a criticism he would say that the whole construction did look to be rather on the lumpy side. Thumper said that this might be because in order to obtain the best possible effect, he had stuffed each bra cup with three pairs of rolled up socks and a woollen glove.

'Why are you wearing eye make-up?' asked Patsy when I got home later that evening.

'It's another long story…'

'I would imagine it is!'

'You're not going to believe it…'

Patsy smiled and looked at me. 'Most people probably wouldn't. But I know I will because more odd things happen to you than anyone else I know.'

'Well,' I began, 'Thumper, Patchy and I were sitting quietly in the snug at the Duck and Puddle…'

'That's how most of your bizarre stories start.'

'Be quiet and listen…'

'OK. Sorry.'

'Thumper, Patchy and I were sitting quietly in the snug at the Duck and Puddle…'

Appendix 1:

More Obscure Medical Words

In my book ‘The Young Country Doctor Book 8: Bilbury Tonic’ I included a list of obscure medical words which my GP friend William and I had compiled.

William and I have always been fascinated by words – especially medical words and quasi medical words – and when we were students together we would waste rare evenings in the local pub looking up and memorising examples of obscure medical terminology.

As far as we were concerned, the more obscure the word the more we liked it. William had a Victorian dictionary which we scoured for new examples. And since I am a bibliotaph and suffer from chronic bibliolatry I have, over the years, acquired an embarrassingly large collection of dictionaries, books of quotations and thesauruses.

The first rule was that although the words which we selected had to be heard or read only rarely, they had to be quite real – proper words rather than made-up words.

The second rule was that a word would not count unless the person offering it could both spell it and pronounce it.

Here is another list of obscure (mostly) medical words which William and I compiled together during one of his regular and welcome visits to Bilbury:

Adscititious – supplementary, additional
Agerasia – youthful appearance in old person
Ataraxia – serene calmness
Bezzle – (traditional) to drink and to behave sottishly
Bifarious – facing both ways, someone who will support anything
Braxy – meat taken from a sheep that has fallen dead or had an accident
Bustluscious – having shapely breasts
Callipygian – having shapely buttocks
Cisvestism – habit of dressing only in the clothes of one’s own sex
Cockalorum – little man with a high opinion of himself
Coryza – runny nose, common cold
Cotquean – a man doing a woman’s work
Crapulous – hangover
Crinkum-crankum – fussy, over decorated things
Curmudgeon – bad tempered or surly person
Daphlean – shy and beautiful
Dander – a show of temper
Dandiprat – anything small
Demergature – death by drowning
Demi-lass – a polite word for a trollop, slut or slag
Demirep – someone with no reputation at all
Doliochocnemic – having long legs
Doliochoproscopic – having a long and narrow face
Ecdysiast –a snake sloughing its skin but also a strip tease practitioner
Eesome – pleasing to the eye
Exoptable – very desirable
Fettle – to mend, repair
Frample – peevish or sour
Franion – licentious person,
Fushionless – insipid, feeble
Gallimaufry – a jumble or medley of things
Galliard – man of fashion
Gangrel – loafing lout
Gracile – slender and graceful
Gripple – mean or stingy
Gruntle – continuous lamentation

Hirple – to limp, slow and painful motion
Hornswoggle – to cheat
Horbgorble – to putter about in an ineffective way
Imposthume – a boil
Kittle – to tickle
Leesome – lovable
Leptosome – having a pleasingly slender body
Lungis – a tall and clumsy man
Lusk – sloth
Lubricious – slippery or intended to arouse sexual desire
Macromastia – very large breasts
Maltworm – a drinker
Megrim – headache, migraine
Miffy – a fit of peevish ill humour
Mignon - dainty
Moonling – a dreamy fool
Muckender –handkerchief
Muffish – soft and effeminate
Mugwump – someone who backs down, withdraws
Mulligrub – a depression
Mumchance – silent or tongue tied
Myrmidon – unscrupulous follower
Oddling – the lonely, strange
Oleaginous – oily
Pantywaist – effeminate or feeble
Poculation – drinking alcohol
Poltroon – a coward
Pulchritudinous – comely
Scobberlotcher – an idler
Scurryfunge – an old-fashioned toothbrush, stiff hooked article
Slaister – to slap on make-up in a wanton sort of way
Slammerkin – slattern, and the loose covering she may wear
Sloomy – spiritless and dull
Spawling – a noisy clearing of the throat
Tiddle – to fidget
Tittup – someone with a mincing, prancing gait
Titivil – a knave or a trivial piece of gossip
Toralium – eiderdown
Toilet – was originally the cloth used for wrapping clothes, or a towel placed around the shoulders by a barber, then it became the linen covering of a dressing table, then the word was used to denote the dressing table and all the stuff on it and, finally, it became an alternative to ‘lavatory’
Toothsome –voluptuous and alluring
Tretis – well-proportioned and graceful
Trollop – sluttish woman
Trollope – loose garment, a carelessly worn wrapper
Uncumber – disencumber (St Uncumber – was a bearded woman and benefactress of wives, according to Sir Thomas More – for a peck of oats she would provide a horse upon which an evil husband could ride to the devil)
Usky, usquebaugh – whisky
Vapours – supposed to be exhalations from the organs rising to affect the brain and agitating the nervous system (in Victorian times individuals, usually female, who were upset, faint or nervous were said to be suffering from an attack of the vapours)
Venust – beautiful and elegant
Venecund – shy and bashful
Vilipend – to hold cheap or think poorly of someone
Viritoot – a spree or jaunt
Wanhope – despair

Wanton – ungoverned, rebellious
Zenonian – obstinate
Zest – eagerness

If the organisers of the Olympics are looking for a new and slightly more intellectual attraction than weight lifting or pole vaulting, maybe they could introduce an event requiring competitors to squeeze a selection of the words above into a single sentence. The gold medal would go to the individual who managed to get the most words between an initial capital and a final full stop. But the sentence would, of course, have to be grammatically acceptable and to make (some sort of) sense.

Appendix 2

Are You A NOD Or A BOAJ?

Doctors often use a private code when writing medical notes about patients.

They do it partly to save time and partly so that patients won't know what they have written.

Just in case you get a chance to look at your medical records here are some of the abbreviations which are most commonly used these days.

(Though do remember that not all these abbreviations are used by all doctors or in all hospitals).

NOD – Nice old duck
ACD – A complete dickhead
FAS – Fat and silly
NQOC – Not quite our class
RATTPO – Reassured and told to piss off
SITH – Soft in the head
BOAJ – Bit of a jerk
KSI – Knows someone important
PITB – Pain in the bum
SAD – Smelly and demented
GOK – God only knows

If you find these abbreviations as offensive as I do why not fight back.

Here are two sets of abbreviations that you could try scribbling against your doctor's name in retaliation:

JUSLTIAWC – Jumped up spotty little twerp in a white coat
POFIAS – Pompous old fart in a suit

I'm sure you'll be able to think of more...

Appendix 3

A Hamper of Assistants

In the piece in this book entitled *Charcoal and Geese*, I explained that a flock of geese on land is known as a gaggle but that the geese mysteriously become a wedge or a skein when they start to fly. Everyone knows that a collection of fish is a shoal and that a group of birds a flock. Most people know that groups of dogs, horses and cattle are collectively known as a pack, a string and a herd. It's quite well known that a group of spiders are known as a smother. Collective nouns for goldfish, ravens and doves are a trembling, an unkindness and a pitying.

But, over 30 years ago, it occurred to me that no one had previously created collective nouns for specific, groups of people.

And so I constructed an original list of collective nouns for a book I wrote under the pen name of Edward Vernon.

I have been constantly adding to my list.

A few years ago, I included a list in one of my published diaries. But the list is forever growing.

So, here is my new, improved and expanded list of collective nouns for humans:

A hamper of assistants
A congregation of clergymen
A galaxy of actresses
A pride of expectant fathers
A knot of scouts
A shower of weather forecasters
A swarm of heating engineers
A congestion of children
A clump of labourers
A drove of chauffeurs
A clutch of car mechanics
A collection of philatelists
A ring of proctologists
A batch of cooks
A press of laundrymen
A girdle of corsetieres
A quantity of surveyors
A parcel of postmen
A cast of sculptors
A band of rubber workers
A tuft of trichologists
A wealth of publishers
A stream of urologists
An embarrassment of parents
A flourish of magicians
A cluster of diamond cutters
A ring of jewellers
A posse of vets
A flounce of divas
A bunch of florists
A nest of mothers
A stack of booksellers/librarians
A corps of pathologists
A cup of bra makers
A congress of prostitutes
A concentration of students
A body of undertakers
A chest of transvestites

A company of representatives
A set of osteopaths
A dossier of policemen
A sheaf of administrators
A pile of gastroenterologists
An aggregation of biochemists
An association of psychologists
A drift of skiers
A clutch of physiotherapists
A school of nurses
A meeting of social workers
A herd of audiologists
A convergence of opticians
An issue of journalists
A brood of midwives
A community of public health officials
A cell of cytologists
A branch of foresters
A line of geneticists
A chain of chemists
A growth of endocrinologists
A cloud of spiritualists
A catch of obstetricians
A smear of laboratory technicians
A promenade of chiropodists
A gathering of dress makers
A camaraderie of photographers
A host of bacteriologists
An order of waiters
A pyramid of archeologists
A giggle of teenage girls
A gawp of teenage boys
A hold of sailors
A grip of luggage handlers
A slump of economists
A grievance of defendants
A whinge of consumers
A bore of mining engineers
A pot of painters
A nerd of IT workers
A bosom of strippers
A blush of nudists
A strut of models
A welcome of receptionists
An embarrassment of drunks

Appendix 4

Medical Abbreviations: how to read your prescription (and your medical notes)

Doctors like to use a good many Latin abbreviations when writing prescriptions or medical notes. The truth (speak it softly) is that most don't know much Latin and probably don't understand the real meaning of the abbreviations they use with such brio.

But here are the commonest dog Latin medical abbreviations and their meanings. Refer to this list if you need to translate your medical notes or the break the code doctors use when writing prescriptions.

Ac – before meals
Ad lib – freely
Alt die – alternate days
Bd – twice daily
C – with
Cap – capsule
c/o – complains of
dc – discontinue
ddx – differential diagnosis
dnr – do not resuscitate
dol urg – when the pain is severe
-ectomy – any word ending in ectomy suggests a removal operation (such as appendicetomy or tonsillectomy)
fx – fracture
gutt – drops
hs – bedtime
im – intramuscularly
in vitro – in the lab
in vivo – in the patient
iv - intravenously
jt – joint
lbp –low back pain
llq – left lower quadrant of the abdomen
luq – left upper quadrant of the abdomen
m – mix
n/v – nausea and or vomiting
npo – nothing by mouth
od – right eye
om – every morning
on – evening evening
os – left eye
- oscopy – a word ending in oscopy suggests having a looking at something inside the body (as in bronchoscopy, which means having a look inside the lungs or laparoscopy which means taking a look inside the abdomen)
- ostomy – a word ending in ostomy suggests that an artificial hole has been made (as a colostomy, in which a hole is made in the colon)
-otomy – a word ending in otomy suggests that an incision will be made (as in laparotomy, which means an incision in the abdomen)
ou – both eyes
p – pulse
-plasty – a word ending in plasty suggests a plastic surgeon operation (such as mammoplasty, which means a redesign of breast shape or size)
po – orally
prn - as required
qd – four times daily

qid – four times daily
qam – mornings
qhs – bedtime
r – prescribe
rlq – right lower quadrant of abdomen
ruq – right upper quadrant of abdomen
sob – shortness of breath
sos – if necessary
sq – subcutaneous
stat – immediately
t – temperature
t&a – tonsillectomy and adenoidectomy
tab – tablet
td – three times a day
tds – three times a day
tid – three times a day
thr –total hip replacement
tkr –total knee replacement
ua – urine analysis
ung – ointment
uri – upper respiratory tract infection
uti –urinary tract infection
vss – vital signs stable (pulse, temperature, blood pressure are stable)
wt – weight

And finally (once again)…

I hope you have enjoyed this book about Bilbury and the people who live in and visit the village. If you did so then I would be very grateful if you would spare a moment to write a short review. This is the 12th book in the series entitled ‘The Young Country Doctor’.
Thank you
Vernon Coleman

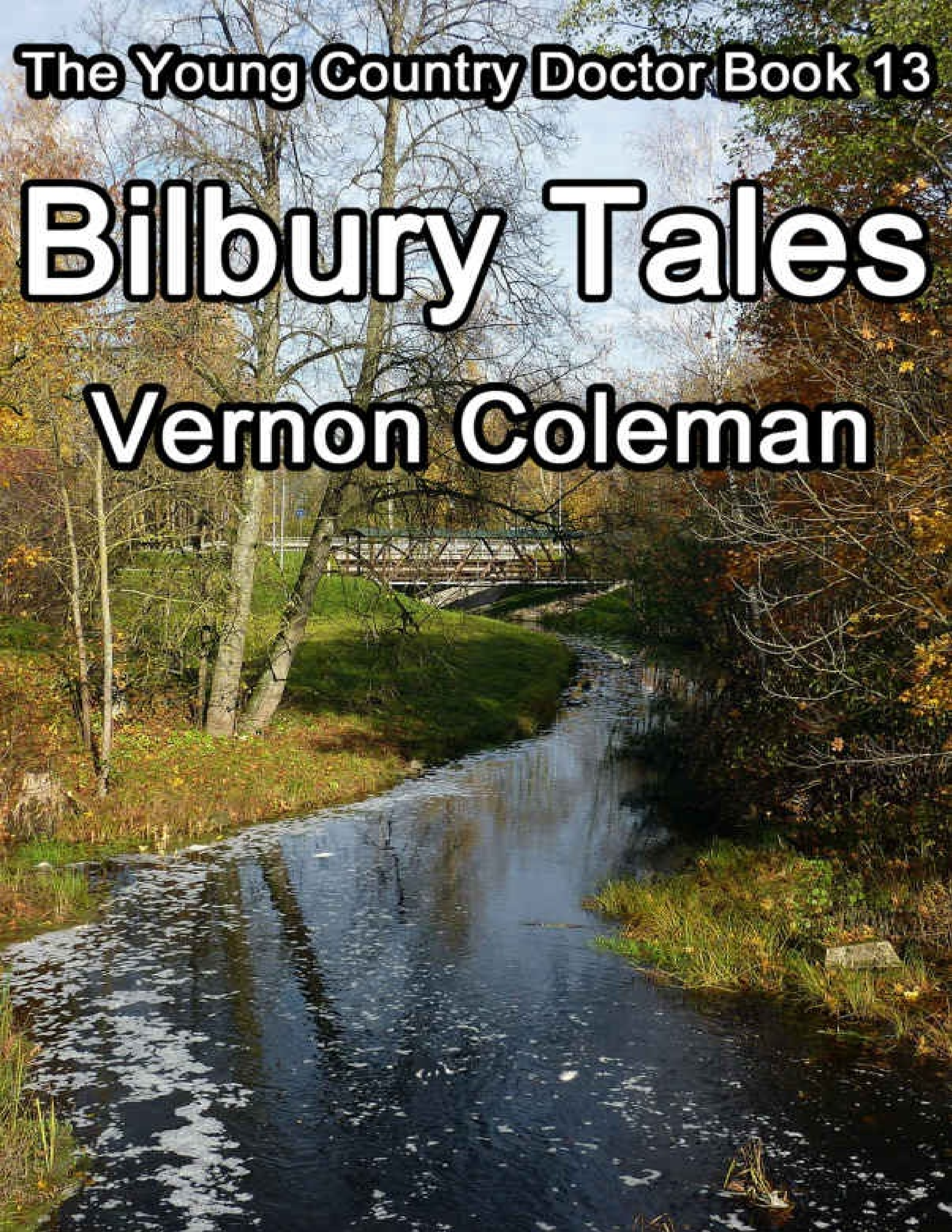

The Young Country Doctor Book 13

Bilbury Tales

Vernon Coleman

The Young Country Doctor Book 13

Bilbury Tales

Vernon Coleman

Another collection of memories from the English village of Bilbury.

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Note: As usual, names and details of individuals, animals and establishments have been altered to protect the innocent, the guilty and those who aren’t quite sure where they stand.

The Author

Vernon Coleman is a *Sunday Times* bestselling author. He has written over 100 books which have been translated into 25 languages and sold in over 50 countries. His books have sold over two million copies in the UK alone though no one is sure whether two million people each bought one book or one person has a very large library. Vernon Coleman is also a qualified doctor. He and his wife (whose real name is Antoinette) live in Bilbury, Devon, England. He is an accomplished bar billiards player (three times runner up in the Duck and Puddle Christmas competition), a keen but surprisingly dangerous skittles player and an accomplished maker of paper aeroplanes. He claims to be one of the best stone skimmers in North Devon. (Nine bounces are by no means unheard of and he has a personal best of 12 bounces.) He is a long-term member of the Desperate Dan Pie-Eater's Club (vegetarian section) and although he can juggle three balls at once, he cannot knit. He has never jumped out of an aeroplane (with or without a parachute) but he has, on several occasions, lit bonfires in the rain and is particularly proud of the fact that he once managed to light one in a snowstorm. He has not yet availed himself of the extensive opportunities apparently offered by social media (he says he is waiting to see if the idea catches on) but details of his surgery opening hours can be seen pinned on the noticeboard outside Peter Marshall's shop in the village and he has had a website (www.vernoncoleman.com) since the day after King Alfred burnt the cakes. Entrance to the website is free of charge and there is ample parking space. Visitors to the site are requested to wash their hands before entering and to wipe their feet before leaving. There are no advertisements or refreshment facilities. The Author is Grade II listed and is also registered as an Ancient Monument.

The Young Country Doctor series

The author claims that this is the 13th book in the series and so, if he has done his sums right, there are probably around twelve other books about Bilbury. All the books in the series are available as e-books on Amazon. A few hardback editions of the first seven books were published but these are all now out of print. There have not yet been any paperback copies of any of the books and the author is patiently waiting for a large international publisher to make him an offer he cannot refuse. Film companies should know that my good friends Thumper Robinson and Patchy Fogg are both happy to play themselves if a movie is made. Frank and Gilly are prepared to make the Duck and Puddle available to filmmakers. Peter Marshall would like to talk money before making a decision about his participation.

Dedication

To Antoinette, the Princess of Bilbury: Who is My True and Gentle Love

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Foreword

Here is another collection of memories from the village of Bilbury.

As we age we all tend to see the past more clearly than we sometimes see the present and these memories from the 1970s are to me now as clear as day; and considerably clearer than many of the things which happened last week.

We are encouraged by some to think of nostalgia as some sort of sin. We are told that it is sad to cling to a past that can never return and that was probably never as joyful as we remember it. We are told that nostalgia is the antithesis of progress and that progress is all that matters.

But none of that is true.

I believe that our memories can heal us, bring us peace and allow us to escape from the rigours of modern life. I do not believe that all that happened in the past was inherently good or bad, any more than I believe that all progress is good or bad.

Incidentally, the word ‘nostalgia’ originated in the late 18th century and was devised to define an acute sense of homesickness. The word itself was created from two Greek words: ‘nostos’ which means ‘return home’ and ‘algos’ which means ‘pain’.

Today, there seems no doubt that we can be nostalgic for a time as much as for a place.

My purpose in my books about Bilbury is to bring back the flavour, romance (and shortcomings) of a time before computers and mobile telephones. Life was very different then. I am not suggesting that it was all necessarily better (it clearly wasn’t) but I strenuously oppose those who say that it was all necessarily worse. I do not share the view that all change is necessarily progress or the idea that everything new must be ‘better’. I rather favour the view of Lord Melbourne, a 19th century British Prime Minister and a favourite of Queen Victoria, whose daily creed was said to be: ‘Why not leave it alone?’ Why not, indeed.

Back in the 1970s, I would not have believed anyone who had told me that the time would come when GPs would not be available for their patients 24 hours a day and seven days a week. I would have been appalled if I had been told that GPs would regularly make diagnoses over the telephone or by using a computer. I wrote articles suggesting that computers would be useful for doctors as a source of up-to-date information and a way of sharing new information – particularly about drug side effects – but it never occurred to me that doctors would actively urge their patients to check their symptoms by consulting a computer website.

The fact is that life was simply different then. And in those very different times, a lot of things happened that could not possibly happen today.

If we ignore and suppress the past then we ignore and suppress much of that which we cherish in ourselves, our friends and our world.

I find that by revisiting things that happened half a century ago, I learn a good deal about human nature.

In *Bilbury Tales* I have tried to describe people and day-to-day occurrences, as well as illnesses, because I find people to be endlessly fascinating and their foibles and eccentricities to be forever enchanting and illuminating. As a doctor, I learned early on in my career that until you understand people a little you will have no chance of helping them get better.

And there are more than a few digressions.

In the real world, digressions are dismissed as ‘wandering off the point’. But in literature, however lowly the form, digressions have form.

‘Digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine; they are the life, the soul of reading,’ wrote Laurence Sterne in *Tristram Shandy*. ‘Take them out of this book for instance – you might as well take the book along with them.’

Who am I to disagree?

How accurate are my memories?

Well, that’s a tricky one to answer since I have to rely on the collective memory of myself, my wife Patsy and my friends in Bilbury. As Frank Parsons said to me the other day: ‘We are none of us as young as we were when we weren’t as old as we are now’.

Since I am retired from general practice, I no longer have access to any medical records, of course, but I did keep fairly comprehensive diaries and those have been enormously helpful in triggering my memory. My friend Will, who retired some years ago and who now lives in France, has also been very helpful. As regular readers know, he was a frequent visitor to Bilbury and, although this may now sound unlikely and scarcely believable, the fact is that for many years he was the only other doctor I saw or spoke to regularly. Being a sole practitioner back in the 1970s could be a professionally isolated business. Patchy Fogg once reckoned that when you were in Bilbury, the nearest traffic lights were actually in Wales – across the Severn Estuary.

Readers sometimes express wonderment at the variety of characters and strange incidents in Bilbury. And, as a result, there are still some who question the existence of the village and the individuals about whom I write! (This, I confess, bewilders, confuses and even hurts my friends in equal measure.)

There are several explanations for the fact that my world in Bilbury seems to be full of incident.

First, in a small village, one tends to get to know far more about one's neighbours than is possible in a town or city. A GP working in a small village gets to know everyone who lives there.

Second, as a general practitioner, I was privileged to learn more about my fellow villagers than anyone else in the village. And, in addition to the villagers, there were many strangers who came to my surgery seeking treatment, advice or a disconnected, unprejudiced, unbiased hearing from someone whom they would probably never see again.

Third, the period in which the Bilbury stories are all set was the 1970s – and that's a decade worth of unusual events.

Some years ago, when I finally retired from general practice (largely because the strain of working 24 hours a day and 365 days a year was beginning to result in my body showing some signs of wear) Patsy and I moved away from Bilbury. We did this very reluctantly but we moved because it was nigh on impossible to stop the villagers knocking on our door or ringing for me on the telephone. And, of course, when I was called, I found it impossible not to answer.

Technically, a practice in Barnstaple had taken over my medical responsibilities. But that practice involved a number of doctors and they were at least half an hour away from the village. Moving away was the only way we could have some quiet and privacy. Naturally, we kept in close touch with all our friends there.

But we did something that, at the time, seemed to some people to be rather strange. We did not sell Bilbury Grange.

We didn't let it out either – although we had many offers and I have no doubt that we could have increased our income by letting the house to holiday-makers. In our hearts, Patsy and I both knew that we would be back in Bilbury before long. We lived in other parts of the English countryside and for quite a while, we had an apartment in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower in Paris. But when we decided that we wanted to return to Bilbury, we had no worries about finding somewhere to live.

We simply moved ourselves and our belongings back into Bilbury Grange.

And that is where I am writing this.

It is good to be back. Patsy (whose real name is Antoinette), and I love Bilbury for many reasons. We love the good friends we have there and we love the unique character of the countryside; even the harshness of the winters can be attractive.

But we love Bilbury most of all, I think, because it is a truly civilised community; in the old-fashioned sense of the word: polite, good-mannered and innately gentle. It is a community where, I think, everyone wants to make a difference.

As I get older, it seems to me that many of the standards upon which our civilisation was built have been brushed aside and forgotten. This seems to be particularly true of life in our large towns and cities. Maybe this is just a consequence of my age. But I think not.

Finally, I would like to thank you for allowing me to share more of my memories with you.

American bestselling author Dean Koontz once wrote that the joy of writing books is that the writer has a chance to leave his fingerprints on the reader's soul. 'It's not an invasion of privacy, but a small crime of kindness, a breaking and entering with the intention of giving rather than taking.'

And that is the spirit in which I write.

I love the village of Bilbury very much and it is a joy to share its history with you.

I very much hope you will enjoy this new batch of memories.

Vernon Coleman, Bilbury, Devon, England
2018

The Vet

'Got you a present!' said Patchy Fogg, handing me a large cardboard box.

Patchy, a good friend, is an antique dealer who lives in Bilbury.

'Thank you!' I said, accepting the gift and looking at the printing on the side of the box. 'However did you know I wanted 48 tins of baked beans? Are you coming in? The coffee is on.'

It was 8.30 in the morning. I was just finishing breakfast and we were standing on the doorstep.

'Open the box, you idiot,' said Patchy, grinning. 'I can't stop. I've got to get to a house clearance sale in Taunton.'

I put the box down on the hall table, opened the flaps on the top and looked inside. I still wasn't quite sure what I'd been given. I was, however, pretty sure that it wasn't 48 tins of baked beans. I reached into the box and pulled out something that looked like a wireless set.

'There are two of them,' said Patchy.

I looked back into the box. Patchy was right. There were two of them. I wasn't sure why I wanted one of whatever they were. At first glance, two of them seemed to be one too many.

'They're ex-army radio sets,' explained Patchy. 'Walkie talkies.' He plucked the other one out of the box and held it up to show me. 'They're two-way radios – the things that soldiers use when they're in the middle of a war. You know the sort of stuff. You've seen the films. 'This is General Headquarters calling Z Victor Pansy Quinsy. Put down mortar fire on SO 886040. Over and out.' And then Victor Pansy Quinsy puts down some heavy mortar fire on the old farm house and the hero rescues the girl, recaptures the missing code book and defeats the Germans single handed. You and Patsy can talk to each other when you're out visiting patients.'

'Why do I want…,' I began.

And then suddenly it dawned on me and I couldn't believe how slow I had been not to see what Patchy had seen so clearly.

When I had been out visiting a patient, I sometimes got back to Bilbury Grange only to discover that I had another visit to make only a short distance from where I'd just been.

If Patsy or Miss Johnson could reach me when I was out visiting a patient, they would be able to give me details of the new visit I needed to make. I would save the time consuming nonsense of driving back and forth unnecessarily and the patient would be seen more quickly.

The more I thought about it the more I realised that having two walkie talkie radios would revolutionise my life. There were still homes in Bilbury which did not have a telephone. If I were visiting a house with no telephone and I needed to organise an ambulance, I could simply call Patsy or Miss Johnson on the radio and ask them to arrange for an ambulance to be sent.

As things were then, I either had to return to Bilbury Grange to make the phone call or I had to drive round the village until I spotted a house which I knew to have a telephone.

'What a brilliant idea! Where did you get these? How much do I owe you?'

'You don't owe me anything,' said Patchy. 'I got them from an auction in South Molton. They were part of a pile of junk I didn't want but had to buy in order to get a 19th century commode chair I had my eye on.'

'Why on earth did you want a 19th century commode chair?' I asked. I turned a switch on one of the radios and produced a good deal of hissing and crackling.

'It's a convenience that was almost certainly used by Queen Victoria,' answered Patchy. 'The china pot, the business end of the chair, is missing but I've got a lovely one that will fit very nicely. It's got a wonderful, clear picture of Gladstone on the target area and Victoria hated Gladstone didn't she?'

I had to admit that I had no idea how Queen Victoria felt about Mr Gladstone. I knew that she had been fond of Lord Melbourne, her first Prime Minister, a wise man who flattered her endlessly, and also rather fond of Benjamin Disraeli who was clever enough to do the same, but I didn't have the foggiest idea whether or not she liked Gladstone.

'She hated him!' said Patchy. 'I looked it up in a book I've got about her. She absolutely hated him. She said he addressed her like a public meeting and she thought him arrogant, half-crazy and a fanatic. She'd have been absolutely delighted at the chance to take her revenge when using a commode.'

'But no one else at the auction realised that Queen Victoria had used that particular commode?'

I fiddled with a dial on the front of one of the wirelesses. The hissing went away and the crackling grew fainter.

'No provenance,' said Patchy. 'The seller didn't have any provenance. And no one else there had the china pot with Gladstone's mug grinning up at the royal behind!' said Patchy with a wink.

‘But you’ve got the pot and you know where to find the provenance?’

‘Absolutely,’ said Patchy who always seems to know where to get hold of the essential piece of provenance that will turn a fairly ordinary piece of pretty worthless furniture into a rare and must-have rarity. He sells a good deal of the stuff he buys to Japanese collectors who already own every bed used by William Shakespeare and every desk and pen set belonging to Charles Dickens or Conan Doyle. (Patchy once managed to sell Sherlock Holmes’ second best deerstalker hat to a Japanese banker.)

‘And the radios came with the commode?’

‘In with a pile of junk,’ agreed Patchy. ‘It was the end of the auction and the bloke with the gavel was getting tired, so he lumped the last four lots into one and I got them all for two quid: a 19th century commode, a complete set of encyclopaedias from 1910, a watering can with a hole in the bottom and two ex-army field radios in working condition.’ He looked at his watch. ‘Must go,’ he said. ‘You’ll have to play around with the radios to see how they work.’

And with that he was back in his van.

Moments later, he had disappeared in a flurry of gravel and dust.

At the end of the morning surgery, and before I set off for the day’s home visits, it took Patsy and me half an hour to find out how the radios worked. They were set on matching frequencies, which was handy, and the batteries for both of them had been charged by the seller or the auctioneer. To our astonishment and delight, they seemed to do exactly what they were supposed to do. Patsy worked out that we had to press the button marked with a ‘T’ if we wanted to say something and be heard by the person with the other radio.

When we were both satisfied that the two radio transmitters were working, I went down to the bottom of the garden.

I pressed the button marked T and spoke.

‘Come in Bilbury Grange!’ I said into the microphone area on the radio.

I have to confess that I felt rather embarrassed doing this.

I don’t mind talking to the animals and I sometimes say encouraging words to struggling trees or bushes in the garden but talking into a radio transmitter felt suspiciously akin to talking to myself.

I waited to hear Patsy’s reply.

And I waited.

And waited.

But there was no reply.

Feeling rather disappointed, I walked back up the garden to where Patsy was standing with the other transmitter.

‘They don’t work!’ I complained.

‘I could hear you,’ said Patsy.

‘I couldn’t hear you at all.’

‘Did you remember to press the R button?’

‘No. What’s the R button?’

‘You have to press the R button when you want to hear what the other person is saying. I suppose it stands for ‘receive’.’

Now feeling thoroughly embarrassed, I hurried back down the garden and tried again. I did my bit of broadcasting and then pressed the R button and waited. This time I could hear Patsy fairly clearly. There was some hissing and crackling but I could definitely hear her voice.

‘This is Bilbury Grange calling the Flying Doctor!’

‘Got you!’ I said and waited.

Nothing.

And then I remembered the T for ‘transmit’ button.

I pressed the T button and repeated my response.

It was clearly going to take longer to master using these radios than I had anticipated. I was so accustomed to using a telephone, with which you can listen and talk at the same time, that I found it difficult to remember that I had to press a button to speak and another button to listen. Patsy, on the other hand, seemed to find the whole thing very easy to master.

Having tried them out, I was absolutely convinced that the two radio transmitters were going to revolutionise my working life. I left one of the field radios in the hall at Bilbury Grange, right next to the telephone, and put the other one into the 1920s Rolls Royce which I inherited from my predecessor, Dr Brownlow, and which was our only form of motorised transport.

As luck would have it, we didn’t need to use the radios at all for four days.

And then, on the fifth day, Patsy and I had just finished dinner and were sitting down in front of the fire when the telephone went.

‘Come at once, doctor!’ said a panicky voice I vaguely recognised. ‘It’s urgent. My husband is going to die.’

‘What’s the problem?’ I asked, trying to take the panic out of the caller by remaining calm. In a real emergency, there is no point in everyone starting to panic.

‘My husband was putting our dog down,’ said the caller. ‘And he’s injected himself by mistake.’

‘What with?’

‘I don’t know. The usual stuff he uses when he’s putting an animal to sleep, I suppose. His breathing has gone very strange.’

‘Have you called an ambulance?’

‘Yes, but they said they’ll take at least half an hour to get to us from Barnstaple.’

I was pretty sure I had now worked out who was on the other end of the telephone. ‘Is that Mrs Gaskin?’

‘Yes.’

‘You live on the Lynton road? Just before Blackmoor Gate? On the left?’

‘Yes, yes. But my husband isn’t at the house. Our dog is so big and heavy that Tom didn’t think he’d be able to carry him down to the top of the hill so he took him up there to put him to sleep.’

‘Which hill?’

‘If you come to the house I can show you,’ said Mrs Gaskin. ‘I had to come back down to use the telephone.’

‘You had to leave your husband on the hill?’

‘Yes, I hated to leave him but I had to get to the telephone. And there’s only the two of us here.’

‘Of course,’ I said. ‘Do you have a big torch?’

‘Yes.’

‘Go back up the hill to where your husband is,’ I told her. ‘And take the torch with you. Keep the torch pointed down the hill towards your house so that I can see where you are.’

It was dark and getting darker.

I don’t know why it is but I have noticed that tricky emergencies often seem to take place in the dark or the rain. Sometimes it is dark and raining.

‘I understand.’

‘I’ll be there as soon as I can,’ I promised, but I wasn’t sure that she had heard me because the telephone had gone dead. Mrs Gaskin had clearly put the telephone receiver back onto the rest.

Thomas Gaskin was, I remembered, a veterinary surgeon who had a practice in South Molton.

I seemed to remember that he dealt mainly with large farm animals but also dealt with a few domestic animals – cats and dogs and so on.

I picked up my black bag, told Patsy where I was going and leapt into the Rolls. At the last moment, almost as an afterthought, I told Patsy to make sure that the other radio was turned on.

Less than five minutes later, I skidded into the Gaskin’s farmyard. When I got there, the smell and the sounds reminded me that they kept horses. I could hear horses stamping and whinnying in the stable block. Animals always seem to know when there is something wrong. Hearing the animals, I remembered that Mrs Gaskin did some point to point racing and I also recalled that they had a daughter who was away at university but who had won several show jumping cups.

I climbed out of the car and looked around. I could see a bright light some distance away at the top of a hill. The front door of the house was open and all the lights were on but the house looked as empty as it undoubtedly was. How is it that it is possible to tell that a house is empty just by looking at it?

I picked up my medical bag, and one of the radios which Patchy had given me, and made my way up to the bottom of the hill where Mr Gaskin had taken his dog to die. There was, I thought, no little irony in the fact that he might die there himself. I assumed that the top of the hill was a favourite spot; a place where man and dog had sat and shared the silence and the view across North Devon.

I climbed the hill.

That damned hill was longer and steeper than I wanted it to be under the circumstances. I had a small torch with me but with my bag in one hand and the radio in the other, I had to hold the torch in my teeth. Several times I nearly dumped the damned radio which seemed to get heavier by the second. It was, I suppose, built to survive rough and tough conditions and the casing seemed to have been carved out of a solid ingot of iron.

Mrs Gaskin, who was undoubtedly trying to be helpful, kept her much powerful torch directed down the hill. I think it was her intention to light the way but in practice all that happened was that she blinded me. I nearly fell twice when I put a foot into rabbit holes. There must have been a good many rabbits around for there were a good many rabbit holes.

I found Thomas Gaskin slumped on a wooden bench on the grass at the top of the hill. The bench had been placed underneath a small, gnarled oak tree. It was clearly a favourite spot. The vet looked at first as if he were dead or dying. A Great Dane was lying on the floor beside him. The dog was breathing and panting but it too looked moribund. Of the two, however, the dog was definitely in the better condition.

A grave had been dug in the ground about five or six feet away from the bench. There was a pile of soft earth next to it. I supposed that the plan had been to drag the dog's body across to the grave when the deed had been done. If you have to die then it wasn't a bad place to be buried. The damned grave was almost big enough for the dog's owner, let alone the dog.

'That's Nelson, our oldest dog. He has cancer,' explained Mrs Gaskin. 'Tom has been treating him for weeks and tonight he decided that there wasn't anything else he could do and that it was time to put Nelson out of his misery.'

I put down my bag and the radio and picked up a syringe that was lying on the grass. It was around a third full. I then looked around for the ampoule which had contained whatever had been in the syringe. I guessed it was probably pentobarbital – it's a short acting barbiturate and the drug which vets usually prefer when they have to euthanize an animal. Mr Gaskin would have used a hefty dose because the dog was a large one. My guess was correct. The pentobarbital ampoule was nearby, on the bench. And it was empty. A large dose of pentobarbital can stop the heart and shut down the brain within minutes. A single gram of the drug can produce serious poisoning and two grams can kill.

'Were you here when it happened?'

'Yes. We wanted to say goodbye to Nelson together. Thomas put Nelson right next to him, with his head and chest on his leg.'

'How long ago did it happen?' I asked, opening my black bag and taking out my portable sphygmomanometer.

'Oh, just a few minutes before I called you,' replied Mrs Gaskin. 'I ran down to the house and called the ambulance first and they said to call you as well because you would be able to get here quicker.'

I tried to roll up Mr Gaskin's jacket sleeve but I couldn't move it. I then tried to pull his arm out of the jacket but I couldn't do that either. The vet, in his late fifties, must have weighed 20 stone. I had met him a couple of times and knew he was a bear of a man. I'm well over six feet tall and he was as tall as I am but much broader and more strongly built. I doubted if he had ever worked out in a gym but a man who deals with sheep, cows and horses on a daily basis soon develops some serious quantities of muscle. I knew I wouldn't be able to lift him in order to undress him.

Thoughts raced through my mind.

A pentobarbital overdose can be fatal in minutes even when the drug has been taken orally. This hefty dose of the drug had been given straight into a muscle and would act faster. I could only hope that Mr Gaskin hadn't hit a blood vessel by accident and injected the stuff intravenously. His size and weight would work in our favour, of course. A small person, weighing 100 pounds would be in a lot more trouble than a tall, well-built man weighing over 200 pounds. I took out my penknife and cut through his jacket. I then cut through the jumper he was also wearing and ripped open the front of his shirt. Buttons flew everywhere.

'What are you doing?' asked Mrs Gaskin, who seemed rather shocked.

'I need to check his blood pressure and I need to listen to his heart. And I'm going to need to set up a drip.'

There isn't all that much that can be done to treat a patient who has had a pentobarbital overdose. But I did know that I needed to push some fluids into his blood stream. It's the only way to push up the blood pressure and improve the working of the heart. And it is the only way to dilute the drug in the patient's body. I couldn't stop thinking about how crazy it was for a man to die this way.

'Oh gosh, yes,' said Mrs Gaskin. Her voice wavered but she wasn't crying. That, I guessed, would come later. Whatever the outcome there would be tears.

'Tom had Nelson lying on his lap and he was about to give him the injection but he was crying when he had the syringe in his hand. He loves that dog so much. We've had him since he was a puppy. He's 16-years-old and part of the family. Tom was sobbing and at the moment, when he aimed the syringe at Nelson, the dog moved. Tom's hand with the syringe missed Nelson's body completely and went into his own thigh.'

Mr Gaskin's blood pressure was absurdly low for a man of his size.

His systolic pressure was around 85 and his diastolic was only just over 60.

His pulse was feeble; very weak. It felt very thready and unsatisfactory. I didn't bother to count it. I didn't have a minute or even half a minute to waste.

I didn't want to waste time taking his temperature either, but he felt cold. His pupils were constricted and he was drifting in and out of consciousness. Mostly, he was unconscious. Occasionally, he managed to say something though I couldn't tell what it was he was saying.

Suddenly he started to retch and then he vomited a little food.

'Won't that help?' asked his wife. 'They say that when people have had an overdose it can help to make them vomit.'

'It won't help at all, I'm afraid,' I told her. 'Your husband gave himself an intramuscular injection so the drug went straight into his tissues and completely bypassed his stomach.'

In fact, though I didn't tell Mrs Gaskin, I now had a new problem.

Unconscious and semi-conscious patients often choke on their own vomit. It's why patients are put on their side, into the classical recovery position.

But I couldn't get Mr Gaskin onto his side and I needed to make sure that his airway remained open. If he vomited and then inhaled the vomit, we would be in real trouble. His head was slumped to one side too and that wasn't helping his airway.

I did think of dragging him off the bench and onto the grass so that I could put him into the recovery position. But that wouldn't be easy. I had a nightmare thought that if I rolled him off the bench he might just continue rolling down the hill. It wasn't impossible. It was a steep hill. It was dark and getting darker by the minute. I couldn't lift him and I would have to drag him off the bench. Mrs Gaskin didn't look strong so I didn't want to ask her to help. If she tore something or had a heart attack, I would be in even more trouble.

Up until this moment, there had been a little moonlight to help me see what I was doing. The moon now chose to go behind a cloud.

I remembered seeing an advertisement for a new and very powerful torch that could be worn on the head – like a miner's lamp. I'd sworn that I would buy myself one but had never got round to it. I used to have one but it was so weak that it was pretty well useless and I threw it into a drawer. It's astonishing how these incongruous thoughts slip in and out of the conscious mind at the most inappropriate moments.

I opened my black bag and took out an endotracheal tube. I asked Mrs Gaskin to direct her torch onto her husband's face. If I could slip the tube down his throat and into his trachea it would help ensure that his airway remained open. It would provide protection and stop him breathing in anything he vomited. Then I would be able to concentrate on putting up a drip so that I could push in some extra fluids to keep him alive. He was a big man and his blood pressure was already absurdly low and his pulse terrifyingly weak.

And as he drifted back into unconsciousness, I managed to get the tube into place.

Now I had to put up a drip so that I could push some fluids into him.

I looked at my watch. There was still at least fifteen minutes to go before I could expect to hear the ambulance coming. Living in the middle of nowhere is very nice until you have an emergency. And then you're very much on your own.

I suddenly remembered the time I'd had to amputate a man's leg because he'd got stuck between two rocks when the tide was coming in. I had lost my black bag to the sea on that occasion and the bag I was now using was one which the man whose life I'd saved had bought for me as a thank you gift.

I took a needle and some tubing out of my bag and suddenly realised that since we were out of doors, I didn't have anywhere to hang the bag of fluid. In hospitals, the staff always have a drip stand handy – a special device upon which the bag of fluid can be hung. Indoors there is nearly always something you can use. A standing lamp, a bookcase or a doorway will all do very well.

But I was out in the open at the top of a hill. And sometimes the impossible situations simply keep getting more and more impossible.

Then I realised that the bench upon which Mr Gaskin was sitting was underneath a tree.

Thank heavens that Mr Gaskin liked to sit under a tree. Thank you, God, for putting a tree on top of a hill.

It was a small, lonely, windswept, stunted oak. You could see which way the prevailing wind blew by the way the branches had been shaped.

Of course, the tree could not have been put there by God.

There were no other trees around.

And why would a squirrel plant an acorn on top of a lonely hill?

The tree must have been deliberately planted there by Mr Gaskin or some previous owner of the land. It had struggled to thrive but it had survived. Once an oak gets its roots into the ground, it will not easily give up the struggle.

Why the devil were all these unwanted, irrelevant thoughts wandering through my head?

I looked up and could see the silhouette of a perfectly positioned and solid enough branch right above the vet's head.

It took me only a moment to find a vein, slam in a needle and then connect the needle, the tubing and a bag of saline. It felt good to know that I had fluid flowing into his body. It was the only thing I could do to help. I reached up and hung the bag on the branch above us. The branch bowed but held.

And then I had a brilliant thought.

Why didn't I put up two drips?

If I put a drip into each arm then I could push fluid into his body twice as quickly. I'd never seen anyone do that before but I couldn't see what was wrong with the idea.

Mr Gaskin's breathing seemed to be getting weaker and shallower. I didn't like that at all and wondered if I would have to start giving him mouth to mouth respiration.

In an accident and emergency unit in a hospital, a patient with a serious drug overdose of this type would be surrounded by skilled, specialist doctors and nurses. There would be at least half a dozen people checking on his vital signs, giving him fluid, checking his breathing and so on.

Here there was just me.

And I was on the top of a hill in the middle of nowhere.

And it was dark.

At least it wasn't raining.

And then the radio barked at me.

Honestly, that was what it sounded like.

I jumped, Mrs Gaskin jumped and the dying dog jumped. The only one of us who didn't jump was Mr Gaskin.

'What on earth was that?' asked Mrs Gaskin.

'It was my radio,' I explained.

I found the radio (not as easy as it might have been since the radio was the same colour as the grass and in the dark, it was perfectly camouflaged), picked it up and remembered to press R to receive.

It was Patsy.

This was, I suppose, not surprising since there were only two radios on this frequency and she was the only other person to have one.

The reception was quite good though it occurred to me that this might have been because I was standing on the top of a hill.

'The ambulance people just telephoned,' she said. 'They can't get an ambulance to you quite as quickly as they'd hoped. There's been a bus crash in Bideford and everyone is tied up over there. Apparently they did send an ambulance out to Bilbury but unfortunately it went into a ditch.'

'OK,' I said. I then pressed the T button and said it again.

'Can you manage? Is everything OK?'

'I'm going to need more fluid,' I told her. 'Another two or three litres of saline.'

'Anything else?'

'No. I just need more saline. I'm going to try putting up two drips to push through more fluid. But I've only got one litre of saline with me. I'd have been OK if the ambulance had turned up as planned but…' I let the rest of the sentence drift off into nothing.

'Do you want me to bring it round to you on my bicycle?' asked Patsy. She wasn't joking. We only had one motor car and I had it with me.

'No,' I told her. 'That would take too long. I'm going to ask Mrs Gaskin to come and collect the stuff. Put three bags of saline into a box and give it to her when she arrives. No, wait. If the ambulance doesn't arrive, I might need more than that. Put all the bags of saline we've got into the box. That big cardboard box that Patchy used when he brought us the radios is still in the hall. Use that.'

We then did the over and out thing and I turned to Mrs Gaskin.

'I urgently need more bags of saline,' I told her.

'I heard,' she said.

'You know how to get to Bilbury Grange?'

'Yes,' she said. 'But our Land Rover broke down this morning…'

I couldn't believe it.

'But don't worry. I'll ride. It will be quicker anyway. I'll go across the fields. I'll leave you the torch.'

And with that she was gone; running down the hill.

I used the radio to tell Patsy that Mrs Gaskin was travelling by horse. 'She won't be able to carry a cardboard box. Put the saline into a rucksack,' I told her. 'There's an old one in the hall cupboard.'

While she was gone, I monitored Mr Gaskin's vital signs. He was now completely unconscious. His blood pressure was still frighteningly low and his pulse was still weak.

Astonishingly, Mrs Gaskin was back in minutes. She even managed to ride up the hill to where I was struggling to keep her husband alive. She passed me the rucksack which Patsy had packed for me.

By the time the ambulance arrived an hour and three quarters later, Mr Gaskin was conscious and talking and I'd used up all the saline his wife had brought from Bilbury Grange.

I still sent him over to the hospital, though.

I wanted them to check him over and keep him under observation for a day or two.

Thankfully, miraculously, he made a full recovery.

And by then one of his partners had given poor Nelson an injection to put him to sleep.

The next time I saw my chum Patchy, I told him that I had no doubt that the radios he had given me had saved a life. If I hadn't known that the ambulance wasn't coming I would not have known to send Mrs Gaskin to Bilbury Grange to fetch more saline.

Sadly, the Gaskin case was something of an exception for the radios didn't turn out to be quite as useful as I had hoped.

The problem was that North Devon is a very hilly part of England, full of hills and valleys, and as a result, radio reception was extremely patchy and unreliable. In the end, we pretty well gave up using the two radios which Patchy had found.

But I have absolutely no doubt that they helped save Mr Gaskin's life.

The Tree Surgeon

For a few weeks we'd had a problem at Bilbury Grange; the house in Bilbury where Patsy and I lived, and where I had my consulting rooms.

The problem was that a branch of a beautiful silver birch tree was blocking the chimney of our dining room at Bilbury Grange.

On several occasions, charred bits of twig from the tree had fallen down the chimney and I really wanted to have the offending branch trimmed away. I was worried that a bigger piece of the branch would fall down and cause a fire.

But several attempts to deal with the problem had proved unsuccessful.

First, I'd tried to reach the top of the tree by ladder. That had proved entirely unsuccessful and even when I'd climbed up to the topmost rung of our longest ladder, I had still been a long way from being able to cut the branch from the tree.

Second, our usual tree surgeon, Mr Rate, who runs a business called 'Special Branch', was away doing something important and no doubt profitable for the Forestry Commission and was working in another part of Devon. Although I had been able to speak to his wife, Amelia, I had not been able to get any idea of when he would be back and available for small, domestic work.

One Sunday, when we were having lunch together, I mentioned our problem to Patsy's father, Mr Kennet. He told me that he was hiring a large JCB digger for a few days. He needed the digger in order to excavate some blocked ditches on his farm, and to dig out the bed of a lake which had become a final resting place for a couple of dead sycamore trees, demolished by a recent storm.

'The model I've hired has a massive reach,' he told me. 'I'll drive it past the Grange on my way to one of my fields. You can climb into the excavator bucket and I'll lift you up to the top of the tree that needs trimming.'

'Will it really go up that high?' I asked him.

'No problem,' he assured me.

'Is the bucket thing big enough to hold me?'

'They're enormous. You could organise a dance in one of those buckets.'

'Is it safe?' asked Patsy.

Mr Kennet, who had a traditional farmer's attitude towards risk, laughed and assured her that I would be completely safe standing in his JCB bucket.

'The last time I rented one of these things I put Mick into the bucket and he cleaned out all our gutters for me. I got him up there and down again without any problems.'

Mick is one of Mr Kennet's farm labourers. He has, over the last few years, broken his right leg once, both arms (once for the left and twice for the right) and his left shoulder blade.

I was not, I confess, entirely happy about the plan but I could hardly say 'No' to my father-in-law's generous offer. We get on well enough but I don't think he's ever entirely got used to the idea of his daughter having married someone who insists on wearing gloves when working in the garden. Mr Kennet has skin the colour, texture and thickness of leather and I've seen him pick up a bunch of heavily thorned rose stems without flinching.

Still, his kind offer was a way to get rid of our little tree problem.

And what could possibly go wrong?

I'd climb into the bucket on the end of the JCB digger's arm. Mr Kennet would pull a lever or press a button or whatever you do with these things, and I would be raised up to the top of the tree. I would cut off the branch that was hanging over our chimney. Mr Kennet would then bring me back to earth. I would climb out of the bucket, thank him and wave goodbye as he trundled off to clear ditches and dredge lakes.

I had half forgotten about the offer when the telephone rang at 6.15 a.m. one morning.

'I'll be with you in five minutes,' said my father-in-law. 'You can trim that little branch that's giving you trouble. Get your loppers ready. Oh, and you'll need some wellington boots because the JCB bucket is still a bit muddy.'

He rang off.

I leapt out of bed.

'Who was that?' asked Patsy, sleepily.

'Your father. He's bringing his JCB round so that I can cut that branch over the dining room fireplace.'

'When?' demanded Patsy, sitting up in bed.

'In less than five minutes!'

'Oh crumbs! Don't be late! You know what Dad's like.'

Unlike most other farmers in Bilbury, my father-in-law tends to do everything at top speed, and he gets terribly upset if he has to hang around and wait. Since he had doubtless hired the huge JCB by the day, and had probably paid a small fortune to do so, he would not, I knew, want to waste a minute.

I looked around the bedroom for my clothes. I normally keep a set of clothing by the side of the bed, ready for emergency calls during the night.

'Where are my trousers and shirt?' I asked Patsy.

'Didn't you have to go out during the night?'

And then I remembered. Patsy was absolutely right. In fact I'd been out twice.

First, I'd had an emergency call to visit the Southams. Mr Southam had cut himself with a saw. His wife had bandaged it up but the bandage had come off and the wound had started bleeding again. I'd put in a few stitches. It had been raining heavily and since I'd had to park the car and walk a quarter of a mile to their cottage, I'd got back home soaked to the skin and muddy up to my knees. I had thrown all my clothes, including the pyjamas I had been wearing underneath, straight into the washing machine.

The second call had been a false alarm.

Mrs Watson, who was having her first baby, thought she was going into labour. But she had been merely suffering the painful consequences of eating half a jar of pickled onions.

Once again I'd come home soaked, and those clothes had also gone into the washing machine.

'Where's my dressing gown?' I asked.

'I put it into the wash yesterday. It was covered in dog and cat hairs.

I opened my wardrobe, wondering what else to wear. This was, I suspected, going to be a dirty job and I keep my gardening clothes in the potting shed. There really wasn't time to go and fetch them. I have never been someone who acquires a lot of clothes. All I had left in the wardrobe were my best jacket and trousers. If I got those muddy, I wouldn't have anything to wear for the morning surgery.

'Just put on my dressing gown,' said Patsy. 'It's due for a wash anyway. And it'll keep you decent. You can't go out there naked.'

This seemed sensible. It would take no more than five minutes for Mr Kennet to lift me to the top of the silver birch, for me to cut off the branch that needed removing, and for him to lower me back to the ground.

Patsy threw me her dressing gown and then started rummaging in her dressing table. 'And put these on,' she said, handing me a bright blue pair of swimming goggles.

'Swimming goggles? Why do I need these?'

'Because we had a fire in the dining room last night and for some reason you put on a huge log not long before we came to bed. The fire will still be smoking. And if you're hanging around a couple of feet away from the chimney, you'll get smoke in your eyes and you won't be able to see what you're doing. I don't want you falling out of that digger bucket because you can't see anything.'

Patsy was clearly still unhappy about the plan.

I must admit that I wasn't too keen on it either. I'm not one of those unfortunate souls who freezes if they have to go half way up a stepladder but I've never had much of a head for heights.

The swimming goggles seemed a good idea.

I put them on.

And then I rushed downstairs, found my tree loppers, put on my green Wellington boots (I'd have preferred black but Peter only had green ones when I'd bought that pair) and dashed outside. I got there just in time because Mr Kennet was parking the JCB close to the Grange and to the tree which he had correctly guessed needed attention.

'What the hell have you got on?' demanded Mr Kennet.

He seemed surprised to see me wearing a pink, fluffy dressing gown and a pair of bright blue swimming goggles. The dressing gown was clearly several sizes too small for me. The sleeves finished six inches before they got to my wrists.

'It's Patsy's,' I explained.

'I'm pleased to hear it,' said Mr Kennet, drily.

'It'll only be for five minutes,' I assured him. 'And there won't be anyone about at this time in the morning.' I didn't bother to explain about the swimming goggles.

With some difficulty, I climbed into the JCB bucket. It was, as I had been warned, very muddy and wet.

And just then it started to rain again.

It wasn't one of those light showers that you can ignore. It was heavy, serious rain which came down as suddenly as if someone up in the heavens had turned on a shower tap. And the wind, an easterly, was strong and gusting stronger. I am never much good at guessing the speed of a wind but this was moving the trees – not just the smaller branches and the twigs but the larger branches too.

‘I am always conscious of an uncomfortable sensation now and then when the wind is blowing in the east,’ said Mr Jarndyce in Bleak House.

I knew what he meant.

‘You’d better put this on!’ said Mr Kennet, rummaging around behind him and then tossing me a shiny, bright yellow sou’wester. ‘It’ll go nicely with that dressing gown.’

I caught the waterproof hat and put it on. At Mr Kennet’s suggestion, I tied the string under my chin to make sure it didn’t blow off. The item might have its uses but whoever designed the sou’wester had a malicious sense of humour for there is no more comical piece of headgear in the world.

Mr Kennet then played around with the machine’s levers and a minute or two later, I was up at the height of our chimney and able to cut off the branch which was causing the problem. While I was there, I also removed one or two smaller branches which looked as though they might become problematical at some time in the near future. Patsy had been right. The chimney was still smoking and I was glad I was wearing the swimming goggles. The smoke made me cough. Up at tree top height, the wind seemed even more noticeable, though I suppose that this was because sitting in the JCB excavator bucket, I felt exceptionally vulnerable.

However, everything had gone perfectly to plan and I called down to Mr Kennet to let him know that I’d finished what I had needed to do.

A couple of minutes later, I called back down again to remind him that I was ready to go back down.

‘Can’t work out how to bring you down!’ yelled Mr Kennet. ‘Getting you up there was easy enough but Pete, one of my guys, usually operates this thing and I’m buggered if I can bring the bucket back to earth. It’s one of these levers but I can’t remember which one. I don’t want to just take my chances in case I tip up the bucket and throw you out by mistake.’

I thought at first that he was joking.

I called to tell him that it was the best joke I had ever heard while stuck in an excavator bucket in a high wind but that having enjoyed the gag I would be able to appreciate it more if he would take me back to earth as quickly as possible. It was, however, so windy that I doubt if he heard more than half of this.

‘I’m serious!’ he shouted. ‘I can’t for the life of me remember which lever brings the bucket back down.’

Feeling very vulnerable and now utterly soaked, I peered down at him in disbelief.

‘The quickest thing to do will be to drive to the field where we’re due to be working,’ shouted Mr Kennet. ‘Pete will be there. He’ll get you down in a jiffy. No problem.’

I couldn’t help thinking that these things always happen to me.

However, there wasn’t much point in worrying about it because I could do absolutely nothing about my situation. Stuck in the bucket of a JCB digger, suspended chimney pot high, I was entirely in the hands of my father-in-law. I could only hope that I hadn’t done anything to annoy him too much.

When we had been stationary, the bucket in which I was now stranded had been extremely stable. But once the JCB started to move along the Bilbury lanes, the bucket began to sway rather alarmingly. In fact, it was swaying so much that I actually began to feel a little seasick. I had to crouch down, half kneeling, half sitting in the muddy water at the bottom of the bucket, and gripping the sides of the bucket as if my life depended on it, which I suppose it probably did.

And still the rain kept coming down. And the level of the muddy water in the bucket kept rising noticeably. Since I was crouching, the water poured into my Wellington boots and soon the only part of me that was dry was my head; safely ensconced in my father-in-law’s sou’wester.

From time to time, I popped my head out of the bucket in order to see where we were.

We travelled slowly, of course. Large JCB diggers aren’t designed to race and they don’t exactly break any speed limits.

The difficulties were compounded by three things.

First, our lanes in Bilbury are very narrow and have high hedges which make it difficult to manoeuvre or, indeed, to see where you are or what is coming.

Second, Mr Kennet wasn’t a very experienced JCB driver.

Third, with the bucket up in the air, Mr Kennet had to keep swerving around tree branches.

Oh, and did I mention that it was raining?

Actually, it wasn’t just raining – it was the sort of weather that would have made King Lear sit up and take notice. And I was just thinking that all we needed was a clap of thunder and a flash of lightning, when the Good Lord obliged by providing more than ample quantities of both – treating the whole of Bilbury to a free son et lumière spectacle.

It must have taken us half an hour to cover a mile.

It was on one of the occasions when I had my head out of the bucket, trying to see where we were, that I noticed that we were passing the Duck and Puddle, Bilbury's only public house.

Frank Parsons, the landlord, was outside the pub supervising an unusually early delivery of best bitter from the brewery. The driver of the dray was skilfully rolling the barrels to the chute leading down into the pub's cellar.

Frank, noticing a huge JCB passing by, looked up and saw me. He immediately yelled at Mr Kennet and asked him to stop.

'Is that you, doc?' Frank called, peering uncertainly through the rain.

I confirmed that I was, indeed, me.

'What the devil are you doing up there? Is it carnival week? Why are you in fancy dress?'

'It's a long story,' I explained.

'While you're up there,' said Frank. 'Can you see if we have a slipped slate on our roof? Water has been coming into one of the guest bedrooms.'

I looked at the pub's roof. There was, indeed, a slipped slate. The slippage had left a gap about four or five inches wide, plenty big enough to enable water to enter the pub and do a considerable amount of damage to a bedroom ceiling. The roof was not lined with wood or with felt and I could see clearly into the loft.

'I can see it,' I said.

'Can you push the slate back into position?' yelled Frank.

I reached out of the bucket as far as I could but I couldn't quite reach the slate that needed repositioning. 'I'd have to climb out and onto the roof,' I told him. 'And the roof looks very wet and pretty slippery.'

'Oh, you'll be fine,' said Frank, offering all the reassurance of a confident man standing on terra firma.

'You climb out onto the roof and sort out Frank's slate while I go and get Pete to show me which levers to pull to get the bucket back down again,' shouted my father-in-law, who had climbed out of the cab to see what was happening.

Gingerly, I clambered out of the JCB bucket and crawled onto the flat roof of one of the pub's dormer windows. From my vantage point on the small area of flat roof, I could fairly easily reach the slate that had slipped. I really didn't like being up on Frank's roof very much at all but Frank is my friend and I wanted to help.

As I listened to the JCB trundling away along the road, I pushed and pulled at the slipped slate and gradually managed to jam it back into position. You can do that sometimes with slates. Of course, they only stay where they've been put until they decide to slip out again but you can sometimes manage a repair this way that lasts years. Frank doesn't tend to think in terms of years, anyway. He'd be happy if the water stopped coming through the guest bedroom ceiling for a month or two. It's difficult to rent a room when there's a bucket by the side of the bed and a steady drip, drip of rain water interfering with the bucolic peace and quiet which the visitor was expecting.

When I'd got the slate as firmly fixed as was possible, I sat on the flat roof of the dormer window and waited for my father-in-law or Pete to return with the JCB and its bucket.

And I waited.

And I waited.

Realising that Patsy would wonder where I had got to, and why it was taking me so long to cut a small branch off a silver birch tree, I asked Frank to ring Bilbury Grange and let my wife know that I'd hit a bit of a snag but would be home soon.

And as I sat on Frank and Gilly's roof, it soon became clear that the JCB was being used for whatever it had been hired to do and I had been forgotten. Meanwhile, the rain was getting heavier again. And the wind now seemed to me to be something between a gale and a hurricane. I decided that my account with my father-in-law was well in credit.

Meanwhile, the village of Bilbury had woken up and people were moving about.

By half past eight, Thumper Robinson and Patchy Fogg had appeared on the road below my perch.

'Why are you sitting up there?' asked Thumper.

'It's the only flat piece on Frank's roof,' I replied. 'If I sit anywhere else I'll slide off and come to a very sticky end.'

Soon both Thumper and Patchy were offering advice and a commentary on my costume. I guessed, correctly as it turned out, that they had both been telephoned by Frank.

And it seemed from what they said that it was the first time they'd ever seen anyone sitting on the flat roof of one of the dormer windows of the Duck and Puddle public house wearing a pink but soggy dressing gown, green Wellington boots, blue swimming goggles and a yellow sou'wester; although by this time, the blue swimming goggles were dangling round my neck and I had untied the cord holding on the yellow sou'wester since I seemed to remember once laughing at someone who had his hat tied under his chin with a piece of string. It's not a dignified look.

Summoning up every last vestige of my badly damaged dignity, I told the pair of them, and the rest of the crowd which had gathered and which was growing by the minute, that if they really hadn't ever seen anything similar then they'd led insular and sheltered lives and needed to get out more.

It occurred to me that in a town or a city, a man sitting on a roof would probably attract little or no attention. Unless there seemed to be a chance that he might jump to his death, passers-by would simply assume that he was some sort of eccentric; perhaps a harmless lunatic; perhaps a madman who, for some unexplained reason, preferred to sit on the roof rather than in an easy chair in front of the television set. The green Wellington boots, the blue swimming goggles, the yellow sou'wester and the fluffy, pink dressing gown would have confirmed all suspicions of any combination of lunacy and eccentricity.

Frank brought out the longest ladder he could find but it wasn't long enough. The top rung was about four feet below me and there was absolutely no way I was going to accept his suggestion that I dangle off the edge and wiggle my feet about until I felt the ladder with my toes.

To be honest, I wouldn't have climbed down that ladder even if it had reached the roof. It was a wooden ladder and at least a quarter of the rungs had been eaten by woodworm and some of them were missing completely. The remainder of the rungs would probably turn to powder if anyone trod on them. Frank only keeps the ladder so that he can tell the local council that he has suitable emergency equipment available for the rescue of any paying guests who might be trapped as a result of a fire.

Thumper suggested that Frank open the window just below me so that I could swing down off the flat roof and into the bedroom. I laughed at this suggestion and as I did so, I sincerely hoped that the laugh was capable of being described as 'derisory'. A monkey could have probably managed the manoeuvre but I was already worrying about how I was going to get back into the JCB bucket if my father-in-law ever remembered to come back for me. Any manoeuvre which required more in the way of gymnastic skills was way outside my limited repertoire.

At twenty to nine, Frank threw up a metal weight with a piece of strong cord attached. He had to do it four times but eventually I managed to catch the weight. Frank told me to take hold of the string and let down the weight, which I did. He then tied a small wicker shopping basket to the other end of the cord and told me to haul up the basket. I was quite delighted when I found that the basket contained several slices of buttered toast and half a mug of coffee. The mug had been full of coffee when it had started its journey but all the jerking on the cord had resulted in a considerable amount of spillage. I didn't really mind that half the coffee had been spilt because I was conscious of the fact that if I drank too much my bladder would need emptying and although part of me found the idea of emptying it over the small crowd below distinctly attractive, the more rational part of my brain told me that this would not be something that would be easily erased from village memory. Mind you, I was pretty sure that it was going to be some time before I lived down the story of how I came to be marooned on the pub roof wearing green Wellington boots, a bedraggled, pink dressing gown, blue swimming goggles and a yellow sou'wester which I no longer really needed because it had finally stopped raining. If I'd been wearing anything underneath it, I would have taken off the pink, fluffy dressing gown which was soaking, very absorbent and extremely uncomfortable.

I heard someone down below, I think it was one of the Beresford brothers, say that I was up on Frank's roof as a bet. Someone else said he had heard that it was a forfeit I was paying in lieu of a gambling debt.

And then I heard Mrs Trenchmore say she knew for a fact that I was up there for charity and that I had only chosen to sit on Frank's roof because I didn't have a long pole with a barrel fixed to the top of it.

I remembered those pole sitters.

The fashion started in the United States in the 1920s. A stuntman climbed up a flagpole and stayed there for hours, though no one seems certain just why he did it. Within days, there were people up flagpoles all over America. It must have seemed as though half the nation was sitting at the top of poles. The idea never really caught on outside the United States though the practice did have something of a revival in the 1950s when one or two exhibitionists competed to see just how long they could sit up on top of their poles. They didn't actually sit on the top of the poles, of course. They had little platforms built, about the size of the dormer roof on which I was sitting. They had food and drink sent up to them and usually tied themselves to the pole so that they could sleep without dropping off.

Mrs Trenchmore's certainty about my being up there for charity, quickly became the default diagnosis and soon people were not trying to decide what I was doing on Frank's roof but what charity I was doing it for. It quickly became accepted wisdom that I was raising money for our local hospital and Frank, showing a surprising turn of speed, darted indoors and came out three minutes later with a yellow, plastic bucket and a large piece of brown cardboard upon which he had written the single word 'Donations'.

Mrs Harrod said she wasn't going to give a penny and didn't care who knew it because she thought it was rather irresponsible of me to be sitting on the roof of the Duck and Puddle when it was time for me to be doing the morning surgery, and did I really expect her to climb up onto the roof just so that she could obtain a new prescription for her two way stretch, double strength, flesh coloured, elastic stockings.

Peter Marshall, proprietor of Bilbury's only shop, turned up and wanted to know why I was sitting where I was.

I told him what I'd already told Thumper, that it was the only flat area on Frank's roof and that if I tried sitting on the bits that sloped, I would slide down and that I didn't really want to do that.

Peter then wanted to know if I would take advertising.

He said he'd heard that someone had telephoned the local television station and that they were sending someone round to film me. He said he would make a generous donation to my charity if I held up a sign promoting his special offer on hand-cut kindling. The discovery that if I stayed where I was, my discomfort would end up as the light relief item at the end of the local television company's evening news programme added a new layer of panic to my discomfort.

By ten past nine that morning, the crowd included quite a few people who would have been at Bilbury Grange for the morning surgery if I hadn't been sitting on Frank's roof, and to my astonishment I found myself giving medical advice to people down below.

Miss Broderick showed me her elbow and wanted to know if her psoriasis looked any better to me. Since I could hardly see her elbow, let alone her psoriasis, I had to tell her that I needed to see her at the surgery. Mr Lincoln told me that his ankle still wasn't better and would I give him another sick note. He said a week would just about do it nicely. I had to tell him that I didn't have any sick notes with me. Mr Nightingale wanted to know if I would syringe the wax out of his ears if he shinned up the drainpipe. And Mrs Oliver told her nine-year-old to say Ahhhhh and wanted to know if I thought his tonsils were inflamed.

'Do you want me to go to Bilbury Grange and collect your prescription pad?' asked Thumper who was having difficulty not laughing.

'I've got forty feet of rubber tubing in the garage,' said Patchy. 'Shall I fetch your stethoscope? I could use my rubber tubing to extend the length of it and you could listen to people's hearts and chests while you're up there.'

This suggestion occasioned considerable amusement and many ribald comments which I ignored with as much dignity as I could muster. Two workmen who had rested their bicycles against the pub wall wanted to know if I was expecting to have to examine any interesting chests.

And then Mrs Wilkins said she wanted to know what I was wearing underneath the dressing gown and Mrs Oliver said she would have thought a doctor would have owned a dressing gown that fitted him properly and Mrs Jones said that for what it was worth she could pretty well confirm that she'd been keeping a close eye on me, especially when I moved my legs to avoid getting cramp, and was certain that I hadn't got on anything at all underneath the dressing gown.

I told my pal Thumper that if he didn't go and fetch Mr Kennet and his ruddy JCB digger to get me down very soon, I would certify him as suffering from an unpleasant communicable disease; something deadly which would require men wearing white suits and breathing apparatus taking him away and keeping him in an observation room for at least three months.

And so Mr Kennet and his JCB machine rescued me just moments before the television crew arrived.

It was a messy, ungainly and woefully undignified business.

Once the bucket on the digger was back down at ground level, I clambered out and accepted Thumper's offer of a lift back to Bilbury Grange in his truck.

'It's been blowing a gale up there,' I said to Thumper, as I got into the truck.

Thumper looked at me. 'It didn't seem much more than a stiff breeze,' he said.

'Well it was at least a gale up on the roof,' I insisted. 'It may have been a hurricane.'

He had the sense not to argue with me.

'Where on earth have you been?' asked Patsy when I walked in through the front door. 'Why did Frank ring me? What were you doing at the pub at this time in the morning?'

She then burst out laughing.

'What are you laughing at?' I demanded.

'You look a fright!' said Patsy.

I took off my green Wellington boots, removed the yellow sou'wester and unslung the blue swimming goggles from around my neck.

'That dressing gown is about ten sizes too small and the colour doesn't suit you,' said Patsy. 'Let's get you upstairs to the bathroom before any of the patients see you.' She laughed again. 'What on earth would people say if they'd seen you dressed like that?'

I didn't like to tell her the truth just then.

I thought I would explain later how that particular horse had long ago bolted from the stables.

Not So Trivial

I was sitting having a cup of coffee at the end of a long surgery and Patsy, who was preparing our lunch, had the radio switched on.

An eminent doctor was talking on the wireless about medical problems.

I don’t remember much of what he said (he was very boring and long-winded) but I do remember that he stated quite categorically (and rather pompously) that doctors should not waste their valuable time on trivial medical problems.

He was, as you might imagine, a doctor who hadn’t held a stethoscope, a syringe or a sphygmomanometer for the best part of a quarter of a century. He was one of those doctors who earns a very good living sitting on committees and boards and acting as a consultant and advisor to a wide variety of groups.

His argument was that the sort of problems which he described as trivial should be dealt with by nurses, auxiliaries or even clerical assistants.

When I heard this doctor talking, I was reminded of my predecessor, mentor and friend Dr Brownlow, who said that he thought it was a crying shame that all the really important decisions in medicine were being made by administrators, bureaucrats and politicians – people who had absolutely no day to day practical experience of what patients need, or how they are best diagnosed and treated. He said that there were far too many people in the medical establishment who spent their days running round in circles, never looking where they were going, but always pretending to be making progress.

When I heard that eminent practitioner, who was doubtless a stalwart of the medical establishment, pontificating about the insignificance of selected medical problems, and then sniffily dismissing them as ‘trivial’, I almost threw my coffee cup at the wireless.

I disagreed violently for several reasons; but mainly because I believed that it was a very dangerous attitude.

The truth is that there are no trivial problems in medicine.

Problems which a doctor might regard as relatively insignificant, and definitely not life-threatening, might still be a real worry to a patient.

And a problem which might appear to be trivial may be hiding a really important health problem.

Moreover, I believe that by attending to relatively simple medical tasks, things which could perhaps be handed over to a nurse, a doctor is able to build up his relationship with his patients. This is important because, in due course, the strength of that relationship might prove to be vital if the patient acquires a serious or life-threatening disorder. The relationship between doctor and patient is all about trust.

I was able, without much thought, to come up with several incidents which proved my point that it is foolish for doctors to hand so called ‘trivial’ problems over to nurses or auxiliaries.

So, for example, there was Mr Oliver Padgett.

Mr Padgett came into the surgery complaining of indigestion.

‘I wonder if you could give me something stronger than the stuff I can buy at the chemist?’ he asked.

Now, indigestion is almost certainly one of those health problems which the eminent practitioner on the wireless would doubtless be inclined to dismiss as ‘trivial’ – easily within the remit of an assistant who could hand out a packet of antacid pills or simply arrange for a prescription to be written out. But is it always so easily dismissed?

I asked Mr Padgett, who was in his forties and rather overweight, how long he’d had indigestion.

‘Oh, a few months,’ he told me. And he proceeded to give a perfect medical history of a man with indigestion. His pain only came on after he had eaten. It seemed to go away if he swallowed a little antacid. And so on and so forth.

I was tempted to succumb and write out a prescription for something to ease his indigestion pain.

But some instinct told me that things might not be quite as simple as they appeared to be.

‘Do you get any other symptoms?’ I asked him.

‘I get a bit breathless,’ he said. ‘But I put that down to wind in my stomach.’

‘Anything else?’

‘A bit sweaty occasionally. But the pain is pretty bad sometimes so it’s not surprising that it makes me sweat.’

‘Whereabouts is the pain?’

‘Right across my chest,’ he replied, without hesitation.

And at this point, the warning bells began to ring because the pain of indigestion is usually much more specific. Patients sometimes point to their stomach with one finger to show just where they feel the pain.

‘Does the pain go anywhere else?’

‘I get a pain in my arm sometimes.’

And now the alarm bells were ringing so loudly that they were probably audible in the next county.

'Do you only ever get the pain when you eat?'

'Well, actually, I get it several times a day. It is sometimes when I'm eating.'

'But sometimes when you're not eating?'

He nodded.

'And the antacid medicine helps the pain?'

'Oh, yes.'

'Do you do anything else to ease the pain?'

'I sit down and take things easy for a while.'

'And then the pain goes?'

'Oh yes.'

'But it could be sitting down and resting that helps get rid of the pain – rather than the antacid?'

'I suppose it could.'

And, indeed, so it proved to be.

Mr Padgett was suffering from angina and heart pain. His problem was anything but trivial.

If he had simply been given a bottle of antacid and sent on his way then there is a good chance that within a few weeks, or possibly months, he would have probably had a huge heart attack and died.

Miss Kenshaw was another patient whom the eminent doctor would doubtless have preferred to pass onto an aide or some kind.

A gentle, maiden lady in her mid-50s, Miss Kenshaw came to my surgery complaining that she could no longer hear very well.

'I work as a telephonist in Barnstaple,' she told me. 'And having good hearing is vital for my work.'

She was clearly worried about losing her job. It was obvious that her work was terribly important to her.

A peep into her ears showed that both of them were pretty well blocked with wax. I got out the brass tray and the large brass syringe which I was at the time using to syringe wax out of ears, and I managed to remove an enormous quantity of the stuff from her external auditory canals. To be honest, I was surprised that Miss Kenshaw had been able to hear anything at all.

A lot of doctors tell their practice nurse to do the ear syringing.

They consider such simple work to be beneath them. But I always preferred to do these things myself. A doctor can build up a good relationship with a patient by helping him or her to hear again. It's one of those simple jobs which produce a large dividend in terms of goodwill and a good relationship.

But, when I'd finished clearing out Miss Kenshaw's ears, I could tell that there was something else still worrying her.

I sat her down and told her I wanted her to wait a while before leaving the surgery. Patients can sometimes feel a little dizzy after they've had warm water squirted into their ears.

And while she was sat there, I asked her if there was anything else she wanted to talk to me about.

I was hoping that she tell me what I sometimes think of as the 'sting'.

(The sting invariably comes at the end of a consultation. After discussing some relatively minor problem, something which eminent practitioners would probably dismiss as 'trivial', nervous patients will often say 'by the way' or more commonly 'while I am here' and then introduce the problem they've really been worrying about all along. This second problem will invariably be something complex which will involve a full medical examination and a good deal of brain work. The doctor, who thought he was ready to go on to the next patient, will find himself starting the consultation all over again. This sort of thing often happens because the patient is nervous and too frightened or embarrassed to discuss their 'big' worry. The 'trivial' problem is introduced as a 'foot in the door', an opening gambit, designed to 'warm' up the relationship between doctor and patient.)

At first, Miss Kenshaw denied that she was worried about anything else.

But I knew her well enough, and I'd been a GP long enough, to know that there was something she wasn't telling me.

Family doctors need to get as good at ferreting information out of some patients as parents are at squeezing the truth out of their children.

And how people say things can be just as important as the things they say.

Dr Brownlow, my predecessor and the man who taught me more about general practice than anyone else, explained this to me. He called it listening to the mood as well as the words and he argued that with some people the mood can be even more important than the words.

And, sure enough, Miss Kenshaw eventually told me what was worrying her.

'I think I might perhaps have asthma,' she said. It came out as a confession as much as anything. 'Several times recently I've suddenly noticed that I get short of breath. It happens quite suddenly.' The words came out in a rush and the relief was almost palpable.

'There are no pains?'

'Oh no.'

'How long does the shortness of breath last for?'

'It varies. But usually just a few minutes.'

'And how often has it happened?'

'A dozen times, I would say. I think it's asthma because my brother used to have asthma when he was small. He's gone now, God bless him. He died in a motor car accident.'

'I'm sorry,' I said. I remembered seeing in her notes that her brother had died. His accident had happened long before I'd come to work in Bilbury.

'It was some time ago.'

'Have you noticed anything else abnormal?'

'I get clammy and sweaty sometimes. It can't be the change of life because I went through the menopause a few years ago.' She paused and looked at me. 'I get very tired when this happens.'

'But you don't have any pain.'

'Well, I do sometimes get a pain in my shoulder and my neck. But that could be arthritis. I injured my shoulder when I fell while hiking last summer. I went to the Lake District for a fortnight.'

'Do you get any pains in your chest?'

She smiled. 'Oh no, doctor. There isn't anything wrong with my heart.'

'And do you get the pain in your shoulder and neck at the same time as you're clammy and sweaty?'

She thought for a moment. 'Yes, I think so.'

'Do you have the shortness of breath at the same time?'

'Yes, sometimes I do. But sometimes I get the shortness of breath by itself without the pain or the sweating. Although then my pulse does feel as though it's racing.'

I took her blood pressure and I listened to her heart. I couldn't find anything wrong.

'I want you to go to the hospital and have an electrocardiogram,' I told her. 'Just to check out your heart.'

'Do you think I might have a heart problem?' She sounded surprised and anxious.

'I can't find any signs of heart disease,' I assured her. 'But those symptoms could be signs of heart trouble. We need to check it out.'

'But I haven't had any chest pains at all!' she said, clearly puzzled.

'Men usually get chest pains when they have heart problems,' I told her. 'But women are sometimes different. They can have heart attacks without any chest pains. It may well be that there's nothing wrong with your heart. But it would be safer to check it out.'

And it turned out that it was well worthwhile sending Miss Kenshaw to the hospital.

The electrocardiogram showed that Miss Kenshaw did have some heart abnormalities, and the consultant who saw her concluded that she had suffered a number of minor heart attacks. The consultant and I worked out a gentle diet and exercise regime to improve her heart, and slowly the symptoms stopped troubling her.

But if I hadn't syringed her ears, I would not have known about her heart trouble until she'd had a major heart attack.

And that could well have been too late.

I honestly doubt if any of that would have come to light if Miss Kenshaw had merely come to the surgery, seen a nurse and had her ears syringed in a routine sort of way.

Doing relatively small things for patients (syringing ears, removing stitches, checking on blood pressure, taking blood, weighing patients who are on a diet) are tasks which are often delegated to nurses, aides or even to completely untrained staff.

I think this is a terrible mistake.

It is my belief (and I know this is probably very old-fashioned and certainly out-of-date) that a doctor who is prepared to look, to listen and to be patient can learn an enormous amount about his patients when performing these small and often routine tasks.

The Bridle Path

The area in and around Bilbury is criss-crossed with footpaths, tracks and bridle paths. Some of these pathways are old and have been used for hundreds of years. Some were created by sheep or wild goats wandering hither and thither, not always knowing where they were going (or why) and not always taking the shortest route between here and there.

Some of the old tracks and paths have fallen into disuse because they no longer mark a route which is used regularly or used at all.

But, as old tracks and paths disappear, so new ones appear.

Some paths are new and are created for new and often personal reasons.

So, for example, when the Ponsonby-Futtocks moved into Willow Tree cottage, the family's eleven-year-old son, Darren, developed a friendship with Edward Teach, a boy of the same age, who lived with his parents in Laurel Cottage. Now, these two cottages are a mile and a half apart if you go from one to the other by road but less than a third of a mile away if you go across the fields. During the summer holidays, the boys ran across the fields so often that they eventually wore a new path of their own and no one objected or would have dreamt of objecting. The farmer who owned the land didn't mind as long as the boys kept to the sides of the fields and shut any gates they opened.

(Neither of the boys opened any gates, of course. What eleven-year-old boy opens and shuts a gate when he can climb over it or clamber over the fence alongside? And both boys knew enough about the lore of the countryside not to make gaps in hedges. Sheep, in particular, are good enough at doing that on their own; they don't need any help from humans.)

And both sets of parents preferred their sons to cross the village through the fields rather than along the lanes.

We don't get much vehicular traffic in Bilbury but the lanes are narrow, giving pedestrians very little room to get out of the way, and it is a regrettable truth that many drivers, particularly those from outside the village, drive far too quickly.

A trip across the fields was both quicker and safer.

And when Pamela Lightner and Edgar Branson were courting, they wore a distinctive pathway between their parent's homes. However, when Miss Lightner and Mr Branson became Mr and Mrs Branson, and set up home together, the pathway was no longer used and within a year, it had disappeared from view.

For years, no one in Bilbury had bothered to make a proper up-to-date map of all the paths and bridleways. Paths which were not used just disappeared and new paths which were needed just appeared. I don't think any landowner ever objected to a new path appearing as long as crops weren't damaged, livestock weren't endangered and gates were not left open.

Occasionally, someone from one of the organisations which represents walkers and ramblers, usually an earnest, rather self-important enthusiast from a city such as Bristol or Exeter, would wander into the village and, with unwelcome officiousness, demand that we produce a proper map of all the historical pathways in, through and around the village. They would come armed with photocopies of old deeds and ancient maps and, sometimes, old minutes of council meetings and planning reports and they would also forcefully demand that we clear all the unused paths and then maintain them in good order.

I'm afraid we never really welcomed these folk.

We thought our rather fluid and informal system worked very well.

As villagers, we didn't see the point in re-opening any path which was now covered in brambles and nettles and which didn't connect any two places which needed to be connected. It seemed a lot of work and disruption for no real purpose.

We welcomed the strangers' enthusiasm for the countryside and we were delighted that they showed an interest in our village but their requests (which were usually phrased more in the style of demands) were less welcome. Pedantry does not always benefit the people it is supposed to benefit.

Things changed for the worse when Mr Cinnamon Brooke came to live in the village.

Mr Brooke was a retired company director who had, we were regularly informed both by him and his wife, been a Very Important Person in the city. He had sat on numerous boards and chaired many meetings and had met and socialised with many other Very Important People. He had attended charity auctions and had spent much of his shareholders' money on making charitable contributions to 'good causes'. He had also arranged for considerable sums of company money to be given to all the leading political parties. It was, so it was widely said by Mr Brooke and his wife, only a matter of time before his generosity with other people's money was rewarded with a knighthood or maybe even a peerage.

When they arrived in Bilbury, Mr and Mrs Brooke bought ‘Combe House’, a rather splendid but dilapidated old house on the edge of the village and they imported builders and decorators from Bristol to do the necessary renovation work.

Not surprisingly, this did not go down too well with local workmen and not a little complaining was done in the Duck and Puddle and other North Devon hostelries.

Still, the work got done, and the restored house (which was, with a staggering lack of imagination renamed ‘Four Winds’) did look very smart.

When the various workmen eventually left the scene of their various fiscal crimes, ‘Four Winds’ had a new roof, working electrics, efficient plumbing, central heating (for the first time in its life), a brand new, state of the art burglar alarm, a conservatory and an indoor, heated swimming pool complete with a Jacuzzi and a Scandinavian steam room.

Mr Brooke quickly made it clear that although he was a newcomer to the village, he regarded himself as someone we should all listen to and within two months of moving into the newly refurbished ‘Four Winds’, he had submitted a number of recommendations both to the Parish Council and to the County Council.

The most important of his recommendations was that a full map of footpaths and bridleways in the village of Bilbury should be compiled and that all footpaths and bridleways should be cleared and well signposted. ‘There should,’ he said, ‘be plenty of signs throughout the village, showing visitors just where footpaths began and where they ended.’

Locals complained that they liked the village as it was and didn’t want it covering with metal signs which would, if Mr Brooke’s instructions were taken to their conclusion, make the village look like a motorway junction.

One of Mr Brooke’s first demands was that a sign be placed at the two ends of a bridleway which goes between fields near to but not belonging to the Duck and Puddle public house. The local council, keen for an easy life and eager to shut up Mr Brooke, agreed to have large signs installed.

It has to be said that the signs were not, however, entirely successful and their erection not entirely without incident.

On the Saturday immediately after they had been erected, I drove past the end of the bridleway and noticed that two Japanese tourists, a man and a woman, were sitting on a weather battered wooden bench which has been there for as long as I can remember. They each had a rucksack and a camera. Since there was no cinema in the village, the bench has long been popular with courting couples and the oak slats were well decorated with carved initials. I remember once noticing that someone had carved ‘HB loved GA hear’ on the top slat of the back of the bench and being mildly amused by the fact that one of the protagonists had later added the word ‘Twice’ to this simple declaration. The specificity of the initials and the spelling error meant that most of us knew the names of the two protagonists.

Three quarters of an hour later, as I drove back from the visit I had made, I noticed that the couple were still sitting on the bench. They had taken out a packet of sandwiches and a flask but they seemed to be waiting for something. There is a bus stop close to the bench and since I was worried that they might not be aware that in Bilbury buses are slightly rarer than green woodpeckers, I stopped to ask if I could help. (In fact, on most days of the year anyone who wants to catch a bus from Bilbury has to walk to Blackmoor Gate and then catch the Lynton bus into Barnstaple. The bus stop in Bilbury is more ceremonial than practical.)

‘Do you knowing when the next wedding people is due?’ asked the Japanese woman brightly.

‘Wedding?’ I said, rather stupidly.

‘We like take photos of weddings,’ said the woman. ‘They very romantic occasions.’

I must have looked as puzzled as I felt for the woman then pointed at the newly erected sign, just behind my head. I turned round to look at it. ‘Bridle way’ it said.

‘Ah,’ I said. ‘I think you may have misunderstood.’

I tried to explain the difference between a bride and a bridle. ‘You may see a horse pass by but you are unlikely to see any brides,’ I said.

They clearly did not understand for they just nodded and smiled and when I left them, they had resumed their picnic lunch.

I hope they didn’t stay there too long waiting for the bride who would never appear.

Mr Brooke’s enthusiasm for properly signposted footpaths and bridle ways continued unabated.

In an interview with a local newspaper, Mr Brooke insisted that he had no interest whatsoever in going into politics. (‘I am particularly uninterested in entering politics on a local level,’ he was quoted as saying, ‘for there is no doubt that my talents and my experience would be wasted on a small stage.’) However, it was widely suspected that Mr Brooke was still desperate for some sort of recognition in the New Year’s Honours List, or the Queen’s

Birthday Honours List (or possibly both) and that his misplaced enthusiasm to make his mark on village life was designed to boost his chances of becoming Sir Cinnamon Brooke or, possibly even, Lord Something or Other.

And so, as a result of Mr Brooke's efforts, there was a far larger turnout than usual at the next meeting of the Parish Council.

These events are usually rather desultory affairs, attended by no more than half a dozen people and a stray dog or two, but this one was different. Just about everyone in the village was crowded into the St Dymphna's Church Hall for it had been announced that the Clerk to the Council would publish a new, interim map of all the paths and bridleways found to date within the village boundary and that photocopied maps would be distributed at the start of the meeting. (There are three churches in or close to Bilbury: St Dymphna, St Damian's and St Crispin and St Ermentrude. The only one with a church hall is St Dymphna.)

The details of the new map had been kept surprisingly confidential and we all turned up for the meeting feeling rather nervous.

Would any of us discover that a previously unrecognised path ran across our land? Would we be required to put in stiles or kissing gates?

It was expected that the meeting would be, to say the least, 'rather lively' and that there could well be some protests and a little more noise than is usual.

Patsy's father, who is one of the largest landowners in Bilbury, was extremely concerned. He has always made sure that those pathways which are used regularly are kept clear and suitable for use. And he has always repaired stiles and so on at his own expense. He readily admits that there is some self-interest in this for if walkers use the stiles and follow the proper pathways, far less damage will be done to his fields and fences. But he was worried that more paths and bridleways might have been discovered.

The meeting had not even started before the first protest was made.

And it came from an entirely unexpected quarter.

A bald, fat man in a brand new three piece Harris Tweed suit walked to the front of the hall and waved one of the newly printed maps at the Clerk to the Council. Many of us had never seen him before but we all knew who it was.

'What is the meaning of this?' demanded a very red-faced Mr Brooke, pointing at something on the map he was holding.

We all examined our maps to see if we could spot what had got him so excited.

The Clerk to the Council looked at the map which Mr Brooke was holding.

'Oh yes, Mr Brooke,' said the Clerk. 'That's an old bridleway which we discovered.'

'But this is a nonsense!' cried Mr Brooke. 'This isn't on our deeds or any of the paperwork we received when we bought Combe House.'

'No, that's the problem with some of these old pathways,' said the Clerk, regretfully. 'They appear on some old documents but not on others.'

As more of us managed to find our place on the map, and see what it was that Mr Brooke was complaining about, the hall became full of titters. Gradually the tittering segued into giggling and then the giggling turned into outright laughter.

'But this is absurd!' complained Mr Brooke, who was now so red-faced that he looked as though he might burst into flames or even explode.

'It's certainly inconvenient,' said the Clerk. 'I can see that it is an inconvenience.'

'Bah!' said Mr Brooke, so furious that speech seemed to have deserted him. 'Bah and balderdash!' I'd never heard anyone say 'balderdash' before. But he did. And with that he turned round and stalked out.

The meeting never really recovered after that and those of us with an inclination to do so repaired to the Duck and Puddle.

We all agreed that it was one of the most wonderful things any of us had ever seen.

The new map showed that a centuries old bridleway passed straight through the middle of Mr Brooke's conservatory and his new swimming pool.

Mr Brooke complained to anyone and everyone, and his protests were reported so widely that it was generally agreed that any chance he might have had of appearing in one of the honours lists disappeared entirely. He became a laughing stock in the tabloid press and columnists and cartoonists had great fun at his expense.

In the end, the Council agreed to allow Mr Brooke to put a bridle path around the side of his conservatory and swimming pool. But the path enabled walkers to look into both buildings, and destroyed the privacy that Mr Brooke claimed was so important to him.

No other significant or unduly inconvenient new paths or bridleways were found and the rest of the village rested easy.

And, after Mr Brooke's disaster, it seemed clear that there would be no more investigating of hidden or forgotten footpaths. Mr Brooke was certainly not in the mood to encourage any more investigations. Who knows what else would turn up on some old piece of long-forgotten parchment?

There was, however, some continuing surprise at the route taken by the bridleway which went through Mr Brooke's garden. No one in the village could remember ever hearing of such a path and it was difficult to see why it would exist – since it did not connect any two points in the village which could possibly need connecting.

'I didn't know about that bridleway, did you?' said Thumper to Frank one day when we were all sitting in the snug at the Duck and Puddle.

'No,' said Frank. 'I'd never heard of it. And I thought I knew everything about this village.'

'Who found the map showing that old bridle path going through Brooke's land?' asked Thumper.

'Oh that was me,' said Patchy Fogg, who had kept quiet until that moment.

We all looked at him.

'You found a map with that old bridle path on it?' I said.

Patchy nodded.

The important document had, he said, been hidden amidst a pile of old maps and mortgages and it dated back to around 1860.

He had, he admitted, slipped it into a folder of maps and documents at the council offices.

Now Patchy has for many years been able to lay his hands on all sorts of useful, old documents. He has, for example, always been able to 'find' old documents showing that a bed was once the property of William Shakespeare or that a desk was a favourite piece of furniture once owned by Charles Dickens.

In addition to being a very good friend of mine, Patchy is my brother-in-law. He is married to Adrienne who is Patsy's sister and Mr Kennet's other daughter.

And Mr Kennet had been very relieved when the search for paths and bridleways came to a sudden and fortuitous halt.

It was probably wise of Patchy to slip the map into that folder of documents at the council offices – thereby hiding its source.

Privately, I couldn't help wondering if my brother-in-law might not have been earning himself some brownie points with his father-in-law.

The Cadwalladers

Their names were Brenda and Binky Cadwallader. They were both in their 60s and they had been together virtually all their adult lives.

He was called Binky, and he had the wide-legged gait of a man who has spent his life working as a sailor; constantly bracing himself against the rolling deck. However, the gait was misleading. As far as I knew, he had never been to sea. He had certainly never worked as a sailor. The fact was that he had a wide-legged, cautious way of walking because he had a large inguinal hernia which he steadfastly refused to have repaired. He wore a truss only on Sunday mornings, and on those important Christian festivals, such as Christmas and Easter, when he attended church. (I had another patient, Paddy Fields, who walked the same way. He had a massive hydrocele which he refused to have treated.) Apart from the hernia, Binky was in good health; a wiry, agile, muscular man. He was a good man, a good husband and a good friend. He was the sort of fellow who would turn out at 3.00 a.m. to help a friend and think of it not as a favour done, a tick on some celestial score sheet, but a genuine pleasure.

She was called Brenda and she was built on generous proportions. She had started life as a skinny little girl with a noticeable limp. But she had blossomed and grown into what is sometimes known in the politest dressmaking and corsetry circles as a ‘full-figured woman’.

When she laughed, which was often, she wobbled all over, rather like a blancmange which needed more time to set or required more of whatever it is that gives blancmange its firm and sturdy qualities.

She stood and walked like a woman who had spent a good deal of time riding horses, or who was, perhaps, no stranger to the obstetrics ward and the delivery room. But I don’t think she had ever ridden a horse and she had certainly never had any children. Her gait was the result of a congenital hip problem which had never been properly treated.

All things considered, she was a woman who was built for comfort rather than speed.

When they went for a walk together, the Cadwalladers were an ungainly looking couple.

However, their meeting and courtship was a romantic story in itself.

At the age of 16, he had run away from home, a cruel place by his account, not worthy to be called a ‘home’, and had become a roustabout with a travelling circus. From what Binky told me I gather that his father was a cruel man through stupidity. On the other hand his mother was cruel not because she didn’t know any better but because she enjoyed being cruel; she apparently used to take a strange pleasure from her cruelty.

Binky told me several things about his parents which appalled me.

For example, his parents ate fish and chips for tea every evening but Binky and his sister had dripping sandwiches for their evening meal on six days a week and they had sugar sandwiches on Sundays.

At weekends in the summer, the two parents used to send Binky and his sister to the shops to buy two ice creams. But the ice creams were for the parents, not for the two young children. Binky and his sister would be expected to hurry home before the ice creams melted and hand them over; one to their mother and one to their father. They would then sit and watch as the ice creams were consumed.

I thought that was one of the saddest stories I’d ever heard.

Binky once summed up his parents by saying that his father used to blow his nose with his fingers and his mother didn’t mind.

At the circus, Binky slept rough, lived rough and worked hard but it was, he said, a million times better than his home life.

Brenda, on the other hand, had been brought up in a very traditional, middle class home in South Wales. Her parents had great ambitions for her.

When Brenda was a young girl, it was fairly unusual for girls to go away to university but both her parents and her school teachers had encouraged her to think of taking a degree.

Binky and Brenda had met when the circus had visited the town where she lived.

He had been a worldly wise 18. She had been an innocent, naïve girl, two years younger.

There had been no broken hearts and contrary to what you might expect, the girl had not been used and discarded. The boy and the girl fell in love and then the circus left town. He was illiterate and so there was no chance of their staying in touch. There were no letters and no telephone calls. Those were, remember, days when the telephone was used only on very special occasions.

But the romance did not die.

Surprisingly, perhaps, this unlikely couple stayed true to each other.

And when the circus returned to her home town the following year she was waiting for it to arrive.

The roustabouts always arrived first, of course, because they had to erect the Big Top and make things ready for the animals and the performers.

And when the lorries which carried the roustabouts, the canvas and the poles rolled into town, Brenda was there to meet them. The young couple had one more week of each other's company. Fortuitously, it was a school holiday, the last summer of Brenda's school days.

The circus toured all year round (in the winter it went to Southern France and Italy) and since the roustabout hadn't had a proper holiday for two years, his boss allowed him as much time off as he could. The boy and the girl went for long walks in the local parks. They held hands. They had exquisite picnics. She lent him her brother's bicycle and they took day trips to local landmarks. And she taught him to read and write so that they could keep in touch.

It seems almost unbelievable now but this strange courtship went on for another two years.

She made sure she went to a university in a town which was on the circus's itinerary. And while she was at university, she spent the whole of her summer holidays travelling round the country with the circus.

When she graduated, the first girl from her school to go to university, the first to receive a degree, she had only one ambition: to marry Binky, her true love.

The inevitable objections which her parents had raised at the outset of the romance had long since disappeared.

And so the young couple married.

She obtained a post as a school teacher in Exeter and he gave up the circus and took a job as an apprentice plumber. He had learned some circus skills. He could ride a horse bareback, he could juggle and occasionally he put on white paint and baggy trousers if one of the clowns was ill. But he had seen enough of circus life to know that it was not for him, and it was not what he wanted for his new bride. He wanted a house and a garden for Brenda. It was important that the house had an upstairs. Everyone who worked for the circus lived in a caravan. And caravans don't have an upstairs.

He was still young and he was keen to learn the plumbing trade. He did well. When his boss retired, the young, former roustabout started his own plumbing business. There is always a demand for good plumbers who do honest work at fair prices. In the evenings, Brenda looked after the books for him, for although he could read and write he was hardly numerate.

When they reached 60, they both retired. They had worked hard and they decided they had earned some years of autumn sunshine. They bought a cottage in Bilbury, a village they had first discovered a decade earlier when they had been on holiday in nearby Berrynarbor. They lived there, with two cats called Hither and Thither, and hardly ever spent even half a day away from their home.

Binky grew flowers. They were his passion. 'We can buy all the vegetables we need,' he said. 'But we can't buy all the flowers I want. I want a garden and a house filled with flowers. I want our lives to be filled with colour and perfume. I want to be able to give my wife armfuls of flowers.'

While Binky cultivated flowers, and did so with gusto, vigour and justified pride, Brenda kept bees.

When she bought her first hive, she knew nothing about bee keeping. But within two years, she had become an expert apiarist. She had three hives and got on so well with her bees that she never wore the mask, gloves and gown which are usually regarded as an essential part of the beekeeper's kit. Amazingly, she was rarely stung.

A normal hive will produce between 25 and 30 pounds of excess honey in a season but Brenda Cadwallader's hives each produced well in excess of three times that, and her three hives produced nearly 300 pounds of honey a year. A garden full of flowers made sure that the bees were well supplied with pollen.

She and her husband used honey for all their baking and cooking needs where most of us would use sugar.

Every time I saw her, Brenda reminded me of the benefits of honey over sugar. It is, she said, far less likely to cause stomach problems, it provides energy and supplies iron, calcium and many other essential minerals which aren't in sugar. She pointed out that fruits stewed with honey keep for longer and that cakes made with honey stay moist for longer. And she offered to help Patsy and me set up a hive or two if we wanted to produce our own honey. I talked to Patsy about it, we were convinced and later on we did, indeed, have a couple of hives of our own.

The Cadwalladers were a lovely couple, still very much in love; so close and committed to each other that they were rarely separated. Since their marriage, they had not spent one night apart.

They both had good health and professionally I saw them only rarely. Binky had his hernia, which had become like one of the family, and Brenda had her limp. But they coped well.

And then, at the age of 62, Brenda had a nasty scare.

She came to see me complaining of a chest infection and while listening to her lungs, I found a small lump in her left breast. It was very small, had clearly defined edges and it wasn't attached to the tissues beneath or to the muscle. There were no lymph nodes to be felt in her axilla. I was convinced it was a harmless fibroadenoma, sometimes called a breast mouse, but some things in medicine are always worth a second opinion and a breast lump is high on the list. The surgeon whom she saw in Barnstaple agreed with my diagnosis but because Brenda Cadwallader was still worried, he agreed to remove the lump.

If an operation can ever be described as ‘minor’ then this was that operation.

Mrs Cadwallader was in hospital for less than half a day and the laboratory confirmed that the lump which had been removed was, as both the surgeon and I had surmised, entirely harmless.

This should have been the end of it.

But Mr Cadwallader was deeply troubled and he came to see me a week or so after his wife had been to the hospital. He had done a little reading about breast lumps and he wanted to know what they could do to help spot any lumps which might appear in his wife’s breasts in the future.

I explained to him that it would be perfectly easy for his wife to examine her own breasts once a week and, at his request, I explained precisely how she should do this. I pointed out that each quadrant of each breast should be examined in turn and that both axillae, the armpits, should also be checked for enlarged lymph nodes. I even wrote out some notes so that Binky wouldn’t forget what to do when he got home.

At first, Brenda Cadwallader was reluctant to examine her own breasts. I gather she told him that she would feel embarrassed to lie down on the bed quite naked and palpate her own bosom.

And so Mr Cadwallader had a bright idea. He suggested that to make the whole thing more fun he should lie down beside her and they should both palpate their breasts. If either of them found anything odd, he said, the other could be called in to provide a second opinion; an amateur opinion it is true, but a second opinion nevertheless.

Mrs Cadwallader laughed at this suggestion and pointed out, with considerable accuracy, that Mr Cadwallader didn’t have much in the way of breast tissue to examine. Mr Cadwallader readily agreed with his dear wife that in terms of the scenery being offered to view, he would definitely be getting the best of the bargain. Having conceded this point, he added that they could add a little spice to the proceedings by going ahead with examining each other’s breasts anyway, regardless of any need for a second opinion. She laughed again and was won over. And so they started examining their breasts.

Since these things are best done as a regular ritual (or else they are put off or forgotten completely) the pair set aside a few minutes every Sunday, after luncheon, for their weekly lump check. They undressed, lay down on the bed and went through the programme I had outlined and they did it with deliberate care.

It was on the third Sunday that a lump was found.

It was a very small lump, hardly anything more than a pea, but they both agreed that it was something. They decided that they would make a note of the exact position of the lump and check it again the following week.

The following week they both agreed that there was still a lump to be felt that, moreover, they thought that the lump had grown in size. And it did not feel anything like the fibroadenoma which had been excised from Mrs Cadwallader’s breast so recently. It was harder and it did not move about so easily.

There was another difference, too.

The new lump was not in either of Mrs Cadwallader’s breasts and nor was it in either of her axillae.

The new lump which they had found was underneath Binky Cadwallader’s left nipple.

The following morning, the Monday, they were in my surgery.

‘Do you think it’s cancer?’ asked Mrs Cadwallader. She had tears in her eyes and a tremor in her voice.

‘It could be,’ I told them. ‘We need to get it checked out. The good thing is that you’ve found it very early. The lump is still tiny. I’ll ring one of the surgeons and get you seen as soon as possible.’

‘Can men get breast cancer?’ asked Binky. ‘I thought only women got breast cancer.’

‘Men can get breast cancer,’ I said. ‘But it’s nowhere near as common as it is in women. For one thing, women have much more breast tissue than men. And for another thing, breast cancer can be influenced by the amount of oestrogen hormone circulating in the body – and that is a hormone which is found in much greater quantities in women than in men.’

I pointed out that most men who develop breast cancer seek help only when the cancer has really developed and is very difficult to treat.

I picked up Mr Cadwallader’s medical records and looked through them, trying to see if there might be a clue as to why or how the cancer had developed.

‘When you were young they thought you had tuberculosis,’ I said, spotting something I hadn’t seen before.

‘One of the men working in the circus had TB and I shared a caravan with him for a year. I had my chest X-rayed loads of times but they never found anything.’

‘How many times did they X-ray you?’

‘Oh, for a year or so I was X-rayed every month. The circus boss was paranoid that everyone in the circus was going to get TB. One of the big attractions, a trapeze family, left when they heard about Billy’s tuberculosis and the guy who looked after the elephants was threatening to leave. So the boss insisted that the two of us who had lived with Billy, the guy who had TB, should be X-rayed regularly. Every time we went to a big city, we went to the local hospital and had X-rays done. Doctors used to do a lot of X-rays in those days.'

'That would have been in the 1930s?'

'Yes, I suppose so.'

'But you never had tuberculosis?'

Binky shook his head.

'Could all those X-rays have caused the lump?' asked Brenda. I could not help noticing that she didn't want to use the word 'cancer'.

'It's possible,' I agreed. 'The notes don't say how many X-rays were done. But having too many chest X-rays can cause breast cancer. Indeed, it's one of the reasons why I'm not terribly fond of women having too many mammograms. There's a risk that the very process of X-raying the breasts could actually cause breast cancer.'

Binky Cadwallader was seen two days later by the same surgeon who had operated on his wife. The surgeon thought that the lump was cancerous and less than a week later, Binky went into the hospital to have the lump removed.

To everyone's relief and delight, the operation was a complete success. Histology showed that the lump was cancerous but there were no signs at all that the cancer had spread.

At the hospital, the surgeon offered to repair Binky's inguinal hernia while he was under the anaesthetic (an unusual two for one offer if ever there was one). Binky thanked him but turned him down, saying that the hernia had become a friend and he would miss having it around. Actually, it probably wasn't a bad decision. Inguinal hernias don't usually kill anyone, but the treatment of them sometimes does.

I couldn't help wondering whether Binky would have ever spotted the lump behind his nipple if he and Brenda hadn't begun examining their breasts as a routine. If he hadn't found the lump for, say, six months then the outcome could have been very different.

And there's an odd thought: Brenda Callwallader's harmless breast lump had saved her husband's life.

Gilly's New Cupboard

Gilly Parsons, the landlady at the Duck and Puddle, had ordered a new cupboard and four of us were sitting around in the bar staring at it. There was her husband, Frank Parsons, Patchy Fogg, the antique dealer, Thumper Robinson (whose job description is impossible to summarise in a few words) and myself.

'When she said she'd bought a new cupboard for the kitchen, I stupidly thought she'd bought a new cupboard for the kitchen,' said Frank rather sadly.

When he is unhappy, Frank looks rather like a bloodhound – one of those dogs with long faces, floppy ears and sad, sad eyes though of course, Frank doesn't have floppy ears.

'She showed me a picture in the catalogue and it looked very much like a cupboard.'

'That doesn't look much like a cupboard,' said Patchy, nodding in the direction of the stuff Frank had emptied out of the box in which it had been delivered. 'It looks like a box of kindling and a packet of screws. Why does everyone keep buying this rubbishy stuff? I could have found you a solid, wooden kitchen cabinet for a fiver. Any size you like, beautifully fitted doors, shelves and real dovetail joints – proper craftsmanship.'

'What sort of wood?'

'Any wood you like: pine, mahogany, walnut, oak. I've got a really nice oak cabinet in the van. Suit you perfectly. Gilly would love it. You can get really nice, old furniture for a song these days. No one wants old-fashioned brown furniture. But it's lovely stuff. Ask the doc.'

'It's true,' I confirmed. 'Patchy has helped Patsy and me buy tons of furniture. Proper stuff that looks like it's supposed to look when you buy it. Decent furniture that you can kick or walk into without it falling apart,' I said. I looked at the pile of bits on the floor and shuddered. 'I hate those things that you have to build by yourself,' I added.

I had tried on more than one occasion to put one of these fabricated pieces of furniture together.

'Though, I'll say one thing for the people who make this flat pack furniture,' I added, 'they do give you loads of spare bits.'

Frank, Thumper and Patchy all looked at me.

'Spare bits?' said Thumper.

'Every time I've tried to put one together there have been tons of bits left over,' I said. 'Bits of that thick cardboard stuff they use instead of wood, little knobbly things, screws and loads of little bits of plastic. The last time I tried to put one of these things together, there was probably enough left over to make something else. I think they always give you spare bits as a sort of 'thank you' for expecting you to finish making the thing yourself.'

'What were you making?'

'Patsy said it was another bathroom cabinet,' I said. 'I tried one some time ago and it ended up on the bonfire, so Patsy persuaded me to buy another one from a different company. It was a disaster. I'm pretty sure that what they sent me wasn't a bathroom cabinet at all. I think they'd sent something else by mistake.'

'So, what was it?'

'I'm not sure. We never did work out what it was supposed to be. It didn't have a bottom or a door and the bit where I put the knob wouldn't open. I followed the instructions to the letter but that bloody knob was a real nuisance. It stuck out of the back and made it impossible to fix the whole thing to the wall.'

Thumper laughed. I have no idea why. Thumper isn't perfect. He once tried to cut his own hair. He ended up wearing a woolly hat for a month.

'At least they gave you extra bits,' said Frank. 'I wonder if we've got spare bits with this one?'

'I bet you have,' said Patchy. 'As the doc says, everyone always has bits left over.'

'It says here that all you need is a screwdriver and this little metal tool thingy,' said Thumper, who was reading the sheet ambitiously labelled 'Instructions'. He held up a piece of metal which looked like a bent nail.

'And you always need a hammer,' I said. 'You definitely need a hammer. I always use a hammer whenever I'm putting anything together. We bought a photocopier for Miss Johnson to use and I had to use a hammer on that.' Miss Johnson is my receptionist and secretary. She was also my predecessor's receptionist and secretary and can remember him doing his rounds in a horse drawn doctor's buggy or on horseback.

'Did it work?' asked Patchy.

'The hammer? Yes, the hammer worked perfectly well. It's one of those hickory shafted hammers which Peter sells. I've never had any problems with it.'

'What about the photocopier.'

'No, the photocopier didn't work properly. Actually, it didn't work at all let alone properly. I think they sent us the wrong lead or perhaps it had a faulty circuit board. And there was a big crack in the plastic where two bits were supposed to fit together.'

'That wouldn't have been where you used the hammer, would it?'

'Possibly,' I admitted. 'But you had to use a hammer because the bits didn't fit together unless you hit them. It doesn't matter, though. The thing has got a flat top and so Miss Johnson uses it to display her cyclamen plants. We didn't really need a photocopier anyway. I let Miss Johnson order it because she'd been on about needing one for months.'

'Who the hell had the idea for selling cupboards and stuff in bits?' asked Frank.

'I read about a company which sells houses in a kit,' I said. 'You order a house and they send it round in bits on the back of a lorry. It probably saves postage costs. They sell cars in bits too – sports cars mostly. You order a flashy new sports car and the postman brings it round in his van. I expect they'll be selling babies in bits before too long. You just flick through the catalogue and order whatever sort you fancy.'

'And then you glue it all together when it arrives,' said Thumper.

'Precisely!' I agreed. 'Just think of the mess and pain it will save. I don't expect they'll use glue, though. There will probably just be bits that connect together. You'll slot the legs into the pelvis and then click the head onto the neck. Like putting together one of those Lego kits.'

We were all quiet for a while as we thought about the future. To be honest, it was not a future with which we felt particularly comfortable. In Bilbury, we still sometimes struggle to accept that the 20th century has arrived and seems absolutely determined to make its mark on our lives. We don't like to think of what the 21st century might bring.

'You probably won't believe this but the Normans brought over a castle in kit form when they first came to England,' said Patchy.

'The Normans?' said Frank, frowning. 'Who are the Normans? I don't think I know the Normans. Are they local?'

'The Norman Normans,' said Patchy, patiently.

Since his stroke, Frank sometimes has difficulty in remembering things. But there are, of course, many things which he hasn't forgotten but doesn't know because he never knew them. Gilly reckons that once he'd learned to read and write, Frank stopped concentrating at school. She says he'd have come top in firing ink pellets and pulling pigtails but was probably bottom in everything else. Frank says he can't remember.

'Is that the Normans who came over for the Battle of Hastings?' I asked.

'Ah, that would be 1066,' said Thumper, showing off. He looked very pleased with himself. I would bet that Thumper couldn't name a single other famous date in history. This is a man who can't even remember his wife's birthday or their anniversary. In December, he only knows it's Christmas because he makes a few quid delivering Christmas trees and cutting mistletoe out of the trees on my father-in-law's farm.

'That's the ones,' agreed Patchy, as though Normans had been coming over every couple of years. 'The Normans who came over in 1066.'

'Long before my time,' muttered Frank. 'I told you I didn't know any people called the Normans. I hate it when people boast about when their ancestors came here. It's like people boasting about coming over from America on the Mayfly.'

'Mayflower,' I said. 'And it went the other way.'

'What do you mean 'it went the other way'?'

'It went from Plymouth to America,' I explained. 'It was full of pilgrims.'

'Was it? Did it? Are you sure?'

'Pretty sure.'

'Crumbs,' said Frank. 'You live and you learn, don't you? I could have sworn it was called the Mayfly and came over from there to here.'

'The Mayfly was a British airship,' said Patchy. 'It was like the German Zeppelins. I once bought some photographs of it.'

'Crumbs,' said Thumper. 'I didn't know we had any Zeppelins of our own. So what happened to the Mayfly?'

'It never flew,' said Patchy. 'It fell apart before they could get it into the air.'

We all sat quietly for a moment, reflecting on this long-ago failure.

'Still we beat the Germans in two wars and in the 1966 football World Cup,' said Frank cheerily.

Thumper decided that we should celebrate these victories by ordering more drinks. Thumper ordered a pint of his usual. Patchy had another white wine. And I reluctantly agreed to take another small malt whisky.'

'A single?' asked Frank.

'Not that small,' I told him. A single whisky hardly covers the bottom of the glass.

Frank poured us all drinks and was about to pour himself a whisky when Gilly, his wife, appeared. I don't know how she does it. She always knows when he's about to pour himself a drink.

Gilly didn't say anything but just looked at him.

Since Frank had his stroke, Gilly had made it her responsibility to look after his health. She limits his consumption of alcohol and fatty food and his blood pressure had stayed low for some months.

Frank put the whisky bottle back but kept the whisky glass and poured in half an inch of concentrated orange juice. He hates the taste but sips it and says he can convince himself it's whisky.

Just as she was about to leave, Gilly turned back. 'How's that cupboard coming along?' she asked.

She knew darned well how well it was coming along. The bits were all spread over the carpet in the snug.

'We're working on it, love,' said Frank. 'The boys are giving me a hand.'

'So I see,' said Gilly. 'Very good of them.'

'It needs a lot of thinking about,' I explained. 'These build it yourself cupboards can be tricky.'

'Yes, doc,' said Gilly. 'Patsy did tell me about your talents in this field.' She looked at me and half smiled. 'I'm sure your experience will help Frank enormously. But perhaps we could have the knobs on the front this time?'

She then disappeared.

'I don't know what she was talking about,' I protested. 'I put the knob exactly where the instructions said to put the knob. Mind you, it didn't help that the instructions were in Swedish. I think it was Swedish but it might have been something else.'

'The Normans who first landed at the English town of Hastings on the southern coast came over the Channel from Normandy in Northern France,' continued Patchy when Gilly had gone. Patchy is not easily distracted from a tale he is determined to tell.

'Aha! Don't tell me,' said Thumper. 'That's why we call them the 'Normans'.

'Spot on!' said Patchy. 'But the odd thing is that the Normans were originally Vikings who lived in Scandinavia. They only became Normans because a French King called Charles the Simple had given a big chunk of Northern France to a Viking chief called Rollo. Charles hoped that if he gave the Vikings a bit of France then they might stop attacking the rest of it.'

'This is all taking us somewhere, I hope,' said Frank, who has the attention span of a butterfly on a sunny day.

'It is,' Patchy assured him. 'When the Normans arrived at Hastings, the archers were first off the boats. They were followed by the knights, all armed and mounted on their war horses, and finally the carpenters disembarked.'

'Did you say the carpenters?' I said, not sure that I'd heard properly. 'How do you know all this stuff?'

'The carpenters,' confirmed Patchy. 'I read a book about it. Creasy's *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World*.'

'Must be a new book,' said Frank. 'I haven't come across it.'

'Published in about 1850,' said Patchy.

'Before my time,' said Frank.

'Is this all true?' asked Thumper.

'I promise,' said Patchy, crossing his heart with the hand containing his white wine. A little of the wine slopped out onto his trousers. 'It's all true. Each archer carried a bow and a quiver full of arrows. The knights were wearing their hauberks and had their shields slung round their necks. They had swords at their sides and carried raised lances.'

'What the devil is a hauberk?' asked Thumper.

'Armour,' replied Patchy.

'I hope this is going to get somewhere soon,' said Frank. 'What about these damned carpenters of yours?'

'They all had axes and planes and adzes,' continued Patchy.

'They'd need hammers,' said Thumper.

'You can't build anything without a hammer,' I confirmed.

'They had all their tools fitted onto their belts,' said Patchy. 'They probably had hammers too.'

'One of those leather belts with pouches Peter Marshall sells?' enquired Thumper. 'They look good but he bought them from a wholesaler who went bust and they're all sized 'very small'. I think they were designed to fit little Japanese workmen.'

'Those are the things,' continued Patchy. 'And while the archers and knights looked for people to shoot or slice, the carpenters looked around for a good spot to put up a castle.'

'This will eventually get us back to furniture, won't it?' said Thumper.

'It definitely will,' laughed Patchy. 'Because the thing is that when I said that the carpenters were looking for somewhere to put up a castle, that's exactly what I meant because they'd brought their castles with them. On board their ships they had three ready-made castles.'

'You're kidding!' said Frank. 'Like that ruddy build-it-yourself furniture?'

'Exactly!' answered Patchy. 'They brought with them three flat-pack castles in bits, all in wooden pieces, shaped and ready to be put together. And, as soon as they'd found a nice flat piece of land, they carried all the bits ashore and put them together with the aid of the pins they'd also brought with them. Packing must have been a nightmare. But, of course, they didn't have customs people in those days. You sailed up to the shore, got off the boat and there you were.'

Patchy explained that the castle walls and so on were all pierced so that they could be connected together.

'And they had barrels full of pins – all cut and ready to use. Before evening had set in, the carpenters had finished. They then put their stores away before they sat down and had dinner in their cosy new castle.'

'Are you pulling our legs?' asked Thumper.

'I'm not,' said Patchy. 'It's all in the history books.'

'I wonder if they had bits left over,' I asked.

'Almost certainly,' said Frank.

'And I wonder if their castles fell down,' I said. I turned to Patchy. 'Is there any history of their castles falling down after they'd put them up?'

'Not that I know of,' said Patchy.

'They probably brought some glue with them,' said Frank. 'There probably weren't any decent glue shops in Hastings in those days.'

'Did they have glue in those days?' asked Thumper.

'Of course they did,' said Frank. 'The Egyptians must have had glue when they built the pyramids.'

'Yes, but that was in Egypt,' Thumper pointed out. 'We're talking about southern England.'

'I think the pins probably worked just fine,' said Patchy. 'They just banged them into place and built their castle.'

'Using hammers,' I said.

'Almost certainly,' agreed Patchy.

'So they had hammers as well as the axes and whatever else you said.'

'I'm sure they did.'

'So,' said Frank. He took a sip from his concentrated orange juice and pulled a face.

'So,' said I.

'What are we going to do with all this stuff?'

We all knew he was talking about the bits and pieces of the unassembled cupboard.

'I've got an oak cupboard in the van,' Patchy reminded us. 'Much nicer than this one will ever be. Two shelves, two doors and proper handles. Why don't I bring it in?'

'How much is it going to cost me?' asked Frank.

I'll give it to you,' said Patchy. 'As long as you throw that boxful of junk away,' he nodded in the direction of the prefabricated cupboard. 'Do something useful with it.'

'Like what?' said Frank.

'Burn it,' said Patchy as he disappeared through the door.

Three minutes later, Patchy came back into the snug carrying a cupboard.

'It looks heavy!' said Thumper, as Patchy struggled in.

'It's a well-made Victorian cupboard,' I said. 'The Victorians made furniture to last. And oak is a heavy wood.'

'Don't bother to help,' said Patchy, breathlessly. 'Just sit there and watch me struggling.'

'OK,' said Thumper. 'Thanks. We will.'

'You seem to be managing fine,' I said.

Patchy put down the cupboard and bent forward, hands on knees, gasping.

'You're not as fit as you were,' I told him.

'Thanks,' said Frank, examining his new cupboard. 'It looks nice.' He opened the doors. 'Bit dusty inside.'

'Nice?' said Patchy. 'Dusty? I'll take it back if you don't want it.'

It was, I have to admit, a very good looking cupboard.

'No, no,' said Frank quickly. 'I'm just kidding. I'm not heavily into cupboards but as cupboards go it looks really good. Very smart. I'll give it a wipe with a damp rag and it'll be perfect.'

'Can I burn this lot?' asked Patchy, picking up some of the make-it-yourself cupboard that was lying on the floor.

'Certainly,' said Frank.

Patchy tossed a small armful of compressed cardboard onto the fire. Thumper picked up all the screws and bits of metal and gave them to Frank who put them into his pocket. Not wanting to do nothing, I picked up more compressed cardboard and added it to the blaze.

'This faux wood burns quite well,' said Patchy.

'Foe wood,' said Frank. 'What's foe wood? You mean it's an enemy of the real stuff?'

'Something like that,' said Patchy.

Frank fetched some crisps from behind the bar. We opened the little blue packets and salted our crisps and then we sat and munched and sipped and enjoyed the blaze.

'I like these little packets of salt they put in with the crisps,' said Thumper. 'Opening them and salting your own crisps is a nice thing to do.'

'I hope they don't ever stop putting them in with the crisps,' I said. 'Crisps wouldn't be the same without them.'

Ten minutes later, Gilly appeared. 'How's my cupboard coming along?' she asked us.

'It's all done,' said Patchy.

'It's finished, love,' said Frank. 'It looks good doesn't it?'

Gilly looked at the cupboard on the snug rug and frowned. 'Is that it? It doesn't look like the picture in the catalogue.'

'It's good solid oak,' said Thumper. 'Last you for a lifetime. You'll never need another cupboard.'

'It's got a few dents in it,' said Gilly.

'They were there when we unpacked it,' said Patchy. 'They put them in to age the item. It's like faded jeans and distressed leather. But we've varnished it for you. The varnish is still a bit tacky so don't examine it too closely just yet.'

Gilly frowned. 'Are there any bits left over?'

'Left over?' I said.

'You four would have bits left over. You always have bits left over.'

'I've got some spare screws and things,' said Frank. He pulled a small handful of screws and metal things from his pocket and showed them to his wife.

'Is that all you had left?'

'Nothing else,' said Frank. 'We managed to use up everything they sent.'

'It looks very solid,' said Gilly. 'It's better than I'd expected to be honest. These items of furniture that come in bits are usually flimsy and a bit rubbishy.' She turned to leave.

'Glad you like it,' said Patchy.

'The fire is going nicely,' said Gilly as she left. 'Something is burning well.'

'Do you think she knows?' asked Thumper, after she'd gone.

'Of course she knows,' said Frank.

'Women always know everything,' said Patchy. 'And they only pretend they don't know when it suits them.'

We finished our crisps.

We all knew he was right.

But it was nice of Gilly to pretend.

The New Barmaid

It was early afternoon and Thumper, Patchy, Frank and I were sitting around a blazing log fire in the Duck and Puddle. I'd done my house calls for the day. The practice receptionist, Miss Johnson, was holding the fort back at Bilbury Grange and knew where I was if she needed me. Patsy was at her mother's where they were busy bottling pears. Thumper, Patchy and I were doing what we did best: nothing much.

I did, however, have a notebook on my lap because in theory I was trying to prepare a short talk on pigs which I'd promised to give to the local Women's Institute.

My supposed expertise on matters porcine was founded entirely on the fact that we were the adopted parents of Cedric, the largest pig in the village. Cedric belonged to a lovely American couple who had won him in a 'Bowling for the Pig' game of skittles at the Duck and Puddle. They had wisely decided not to try to take him back with them to the United States and Patsy and I had happily agreed to look after him.

Patsy had also been roped in to give a short lecture to the Women's Institute. She had agreed to give a talk entitled 'Parsnips – and their round the year role in the kitchen'. I didn't know much about pigs but I knew less about parsnips, so I was glad she was doing that talk.

So far, my notebook contained the word 'PIGS' written in block capitals at the top of a fresh page. The date of my talk was still far enough away for me to be quietly confident that if I waited long enough, either the rest of the talk would materialise without my having to think too much about it. Either that or the invitation would, for some reason, be cancelled.

Both Patsy and I had been roped into talking to the Women's Institute by Patsy's mother, Mrs Kennet. It was her turn to be secretary of the Institute and her major responsibility as holder of this important position was, it seemed, to arrange speakers for the Institute's once a month get-together.

I don't know what these meetings are like in towns and cities but in Bilbury, the Women's Institute meetings usually turned out to be a bit of a knees up. It had for years been the custom for attendees to bring with them bottles of home-made wine, and home-made wine in Bilbury tends to be capable of loosening the top of your head if you drink too much of it.

Members of the Institute who attend meetings in other parts of the country probably content themselves with a slice of seed cake and a cup of tea. In Bilbury, the meetings ended up with a fairly extensive wine tasting. And the wine certainly seemed to make things go with something of a swing. A year earlier, an illustrated lecture on traditional Russian dancing had ended rather dramatically. The speaker, an estate agent from Exeter, had brought swords with him so that he could demonstrate the memorable sabre dance which enlivens the final act of Khachaturian's ballet Gayane. Unfortunately, sabres and home-made wine do not mix well. The estate agent had removed a large bunion from his right foot, and three traumatised members of the Institute had required lengthy bed rest.

My mother-in-law is a wonderful woman, kind and always thoughtful, but she has a way about her that means that I find it difficult to say 'No' when she asks me to do something – such as giving a talk on pig keeping.

So I had a notebook on my knees in case anything occurred to me.

Thumper, who was definitely not attempting to prepare a lecture for the Women's Institute, was drinking a pint of a new beer from a local brewery. The beer was called 'Old Harrison's Anticipated Strong Bladder Water' and Thumper reckoned it was 'distinctly passable' but that he would need to try a few more pints before he would be able to give a properly considered opinion. Thumper doesn't like to rush into things.

Most of the beer sold in North Devon is potent stuff and this brew did not appear to be any exception.

Visitors from towns and cities where the beer is often watered down and frequently not very strong to start with are sometimes surprised by the strength of our local beer.

'Alcool hash no effect hat haul on me,' insisted an insurance and pension fund salesman from Middlesex. He had come to Devon in the hope of persuading locals to give him regular chunks of money in return for insurance policies. He'd have done better to try to persuade the cormorants on the coast to hand over their fish. He had tried to drown his sorrows in local beer. He had, I remember, chosen a brew called 'Old Restoration' which was Thumper's standard choice.

'Get down off the table before you fall and break a leg,' said Frank.

'Hime purfickly safe,' insisted the insurance salesman.

'No, you're not,' said Frank. 'Not with your trousers round your ankles like that.'

It was only at this point in the conversation that the salesman realised that he was in a state of dishabille. He never did remember that he had climbed onto the table to perform an impromptu striptease. He did not seem to be a bright fellow and Patchy, who had at the time been reading a biography of the Duke of Wellington, suggested that if the man had entered an IQ contest with a shop window mannequin, then the competition would have been a 'damned nice thing – the nearest run thing you ever saw in your life'.

Patchy was drinking a tumbler of 'Sheep Dip' (a Devon delicacy which looks and tastes like whisky but which appears on the business accounts of many a North Devon sheep farmer without, as far as I am aware, ever coming anywhere near to a sheep's foot) and I was, for a change, nursing a glass of Wellington Brandy (promised, by the proudly English distiller to be stronger and more palatable than Napoleon Brandy). This had been recommended to me by Patchy. Frank was sipping a glass of a lemon cordial. Frank has high blood pressure, which is pretty well controlled at the moment, and he had a stroke a little while back. To protect his health, Gilly, his wife, allows him just one alcoholic drink a day and she is very strict about this. Generally speaking, Frank prefers to have his one allowed drink in the evening rather than at lunchtime.

Gilly had just passed through the snug on her way to the kitchen at the back of the pub. She'd been into Barnstaple and was carrying several bags of shopping. She had stopped to show to Frank a boxful of new china mugs. They looked unusually delicate and expensive for a public house. 'But we've already got dozens of mugs!' complained Frank when he saw them. It wasn't a real complaint. Frank worships Gilly and loves her so much he said nothing when she put up new chintz curtains in the snug. He didn't even mutter a protest when she made half a dozen cushions with the leftover material. 'Yes,' replied Gilly, 'but these are for showing and not for drinking. Aren't they smart? I thought I'd put them onto the top shelf of the Welsh Dresser.'

And then she was gone.

When Gilly had disappeared to unpack and arrange her mugs, the three of us returned to watching Frank, who was sorting through a pile of mail which he had on his lap. He had already placed a small number of items of mail in a neat pile on the brass bound Captain's table before us. There was still ample room for us to stand our glasses, on the rare moments when we weren't actually drinking from them. Frank was tossing the rest of the mail, most of it unopened, into the fire.

'Did all that mail come today?' asked Thumper, incredulously.

'Good Lord, no!' answered Frank. 'There is a month's mail here. I always like to let it build up a bit. If you look at the stuff every day, you end up spending most of your time reading letters and then answering them. I'm a bit soft like that. Once I've opened an envelope, I always feel obliged to reply. This way, most of the mail is out-of-date before I get to read it so I don't have to bother with a reply.' This was quite a long speech for Frank.

He tore open an envelope and showed us a letter from his bank manager in Barnstaple. 'See, look at this one,' he said. 'He wanted me to go to a meeting with him two weeks ago. It's now out-of-date so I can throw it away.' He screwed up the letter and the envelope and tossed them both onto the fire which consumed them hungrily.

'Bright thinking,' said Patchy. 'I always used to try to deal with the mail before I did anything else in the day. But then suddenly, one fine spring day, I realised that if you give priority to all the crap in your life then you never have a chance to get round to the good things or the fun things, do you? I used to go sea fishing a lot and I'd promised myself that the next time we had a fine day, I'd go off and drown some bait. But at 11.30 in the morning, I was still on the phone trying to sort out some problem with an electricity bill. I'd been on hold for 20 minutes so I put the phone down, collected my rod, put together a picnic and buggered off down to the beach for the rest of the day. The thing is that the crap never ends, does it?'

No one bothered to reply to these rhetorical questions.

I too shared Frank's dislike of paperwork.

The problem is that the inconsequential and the unimportant have a tendency to take over our lives and you need to be constantly alert to make sure that they don't. If humans are wiped off the face of the earth, I believe that all that will remain will be cockroaches, bindweed, nettles, ivy, brambles and paperwork. The administrators who create the paperwork will survive anything – even a nuclear blast. The fact is, however, that no one ever received thanks or achieved greatness for keeping neat accounts (or, as Patsy says, for plumping up their scatter cushions).

'It's bills I hate,' said Thumper with the quiet status of a man who has never in his life paid a bill that wasn't printed in red. He was so emphatic that he waved his beer mug around and spilt some of it. He frowned for he hated spilling beer as much as he hated paying bills.

'I like getting letters from my brother,' I said. 'Opening a letter from him is like opening the front door and having the sun burst in. He's always rather jolly and he writes marvellous letters. He only writes once or twice a year, mind you.'

'I didn't know you had a brother!' said Thumper.

'I haven't seen him for years,' I said. 'He's quite a lot older than me. He emigrated to Canada years ago.'

'Is he a doctor, too?' asked Patchy.

'Oh no,' I said with a laugh. I don't really know why but I found the idea of my brother being a doctor rather comical. 'He was never in the slightest bit academic.'

I sipped at my brandy and thought about my long lost brother. Patchy poked the fire, provoking a flurry of sparks. Frank continued to sort through his mail. It occurred to me that although I was fond of my brother in a co-sanguine, standard sibling sort of way, my real brothers in life were sitting within a few feet of me.

'I can't stand bills,' muttered our landlord. 'I get loads of them. I suppose everyone does.' He held up an envelope on which was stamped the logo of the TV licensing people. The envelope also carried a message which appeared to be intended to intimidate. 'Look at this!' he exclaimed in disgust. 'I've already put three more of these on the fire. These people don't seem to have anything to do except send me threatening letters.'

'What is it?' asked Thumper. 'Who's it from?'

'The TV licensing people,' explained Frank.

Thumper looked at him and frowned. 'The who?'

'You know,' said Frank, 'those people who threaten to come round to make sure you've bought a TV licence.'

'I bought our TV,' said Thumper, clearly puzzled. 'I paid £4 for it. You can get colour on it when the wind's blowing hard from the south west.'

Knowing that the prevailing winds in North Devon are from the south west, and can have a powerful effect on television aerials, we all nodded.

'You still have to buy a licence,' said Frank. 'At least you're supposed to.'

'A licence for the television? They make you buy a licence if you have a television?' He laughed at the absurdity of this.

'I think they do,' said Patchy. He looked at me. 'Have you got one?'

'Television?'

'No. Yes. But have you got a licence for it?'

I shook my head. 'They send me a lot of those letters and I keep meaning to,' I said. 'But the letters demanding money are so aggressive that I always feel I have to ignore them.'

'They're never going to come round to Bilbury to see if we've got licences,' said Frank.

'I never answer the door unless I know who it is,' said Thumper, who didn't. 'How many times have you opened the door to an unexpected visitor and had a pleasant surprise?'

'I bought a television licence once,' said Patchy. He looked around, saw our looks of astonishment and lowered his head. 'It was years ago,' he explained, embarrassed. 'I was very young and naïve then.'

'I still can't get my head round this,' said Thumper, leaning forward. 'You're serious? We're supposed to buy a licence to watch television? We are supposed to buy a licence even when we own our television set? And with all the adverts they put between the programmes these days?'

'Don't the licensing people send you letters?' asked Frank.

Thumper shook his head. 'I don't think so,' he said. 'Mind you, the dog eats most of our mail before I get to see it.'

'That sounds like a good excuse for not paying bills,' I said.

'So it is. I never thought of that!' grinned Thumper.

We all sipped at our drinks.

'I can't get used to life in the 1970s,' muttered Thumper.

'I think they've had TV licences for quite a while,' said Frank.

'Bloody outrageous,' said Thumper. He took a man sized sip of his beer. 'This is good stuff, Frank,' he said. 'I'm pretty sure I'm definitely going to like this one. What's it called again?'

Frank nodded and told him, pleased that the new beer was getting the seal of approval. Frank always reckons that Thumper has taste buds which reflect the taste of the average man in Bilbury. If Gilly makes a new pie, she always makes sure that Thumper tries it first before she puts it on the menu.

'I was in my early twenties,' explained Patchy. 'We all do stupid things in our early twenties, don't we?'

'Don't worry about it,' I told him. 'We'll forget about it eventually.'

'Everywhere you turn they want money for something or other,' said Frank. 'They'll be making us buy licences for our cars soon.'

We all looked at him.

'They don't, do they?'

We all looked at him, wondering if he was taking the piss. But he clearly wasn't.

'I'm afraid so,' said Patchy.

'Don't for heaven's sake tell Gilly,' said Frank. 'She'll worry about it.'

We promised we wouldn't. I sometimes think what a good thing it is that Frank long ago grew through and way beyond any manifestation of embarrassment.

As Frank continued to sort through his mail, we chatted, as friends will, of this and that, of cabbages and kings.

Patchy told us that a fellow in Lynton who operated a small removal company had been hired to move a Bechstein grand piano out of a cottage in Lynmouth and to take it to a terraced house in Plymouth. None of us could imagine why anyone would want to move anything from Lynmouth to Plymouth but we agreed that the explanation had to be either love or money.

The basic problem they had was that the front door to the cottage was narrow and the hall leading to the front door had a bend in it. The difficulty was exacerbated by the fact that the piano was, of course, exceedingly large. The removers decided that instead of merely moving the piano in a suck it and see sort of way (the usual method favoured by removers everywhere), they would have a plan. They would hire a local carpenter to make a plywood replica, reproducing not the detail of the piano but merely the size, and then work out a way to take the piano out of the cottage without doing any damage to the valuable piano or the cottage.

'What happened?' I asked him. 'Sounds a good plan. Did it work?'

'Unfortunately, not,' said Patchy. 'They carpenter made a plywood replica of the piano but it was so large that he couldn't get it out of his workshop. The removers gave up and knocked a hole in the cottage wall.'

Thumper told us that a pal of his, who is an undertaker, was driving through Ilfracombe recently, on his way to pick up a customer in Combe Martin, when an elderly woman ran out into the road and waved for him to stop.

'Ernest isn't dead yet,' she screeched at him. 'But I'm pretty sure he will be ready for you to collect next Wednesday. If you're around this way then just call in. It'll save me the price of a phone call.'

Temporarily chastened by this reminder of our own mortality, Patchy emptied his glass and decided it was time to order fresh drinks. It was not necessary for Frank to take a break from feeding the fire with unwanted mail (of which there seemed to be an inexhaustible supply) because he and Gilly had hired a barmaid to assist them in running the Duck and Puddle and she had now reappeared behind the bar.

It is, I think, fair to say that Arcadia Blanchardine did not look like a barmaid. Mind you, she didn't look much like an 'Arcadia' either.

If you were a film maker in Hollywood and you'd asked Central Casting to send along a barmaid, you would have been disappointed if they'd sent Arcadia Blanchardine. She had none of the qualities which were traditionally regarded as standard equipment for a barmaid in the 1970s. She was not charming, seductive or voluptuous. She was not a woman for whom the words 'buxom', 'flirtatious' or 'friendly' had been coined. More appropriate adjectives would have been 'forbidding', 'harsh', 'grim', 'starched', 'chilly' and 'hostile'. These are not qualities which were usually associated with the welcoming nature of an English hostelry. Ms Blanchardine did not have a winning smile and she and badinage were 'strangers who had never met 'ere in passing cross the distant moors'. Merry quips were not her forte and the general attractiveness of the Duck and Puddle was not enhanced by the thick, baggy, mustard coloured polo neck jumper which she wore every day, whatever the weather and however warm it was in the snug at the Duck and Puddle. She wore the jumper, which did not appear to have ever been washed, together with a pair of industrial strength blue jeans which were about four or five sizes too large for her.

'This Englishwoman is so refined she has no bosom and no behind,' wrote Stevie Smith and, apart from the 'refined' bit, it might have been Ms Blanchardine of whom she was writing.

'Give her a break,' said Frank, when Patchy commented that he would like to see her smile occasionally. Frank always tries to see the best in people. 'I think she would probably be a really nice person if she wasn't such a mean, self-centred and rude individual,' Frank added, not meaning to be critical.

Frank would have probably described Nero as a nice chap, who played a pleasant tune with his fiddle but was perhaps a bit careless with matches. It was Frank, bless him, who told me that Mussolini had a pet lion, of which he was inordinately fond, that Hitler was devoted to a pet dog called Blondi and that without Stalin's enthusiasm, the AK47 would have probably never been made.

It was nigh on impossible to estimate Ms Blanchardine's age.

She wore her hair in a style which was more commonly associated with squaddies in the army and if she wore any make-up it was in such small quantities that it was not visible to the naked eye.

That is all in the way of setting the scene and introducing you to Ms Blanchardine. Most of it didn't matter a damn, of course and none of this is intended as criticism for, like Frank, I always try to see the best in people, but merely as an introduction to an important addition to village life.

The only thing that did matter was that instead of greeting customers with a welcoming smile, she met them with a sour look.

'What do you want?' was her standard salutation and it was delivered with all the emphasis on the third word. The result was that the customer, whether a regular or a stranger, was made to feel something of a nuisance.

Ms Blanchardine somehow managed to make it clear to all and sundry that she had more important things to be doing with her time than serving customers. These crucial, private and confidential activities were not detailed but their existence was implicit.

‘May I ask how you selected your new barmaid?’ I asked Frank a few days after she had arrived at the pub. The object of my enquiry was down in the cellar reconnecting a new barrel of Old Restoration to the tap which brought beer to the thirsty. The Duck and Puddle does not have a large clientele when measured in numbers but those customers for which it caters are renowned for their proclivity for feather spitting.

Frank sighed and shook his head rather sadly. ‘We advertised in the local paper and asked the Labour Exchange to send us details of suitable applicants. We said we’d prefer someone with experience in the hotel or pub trade but that we would, if necessary, hire someone without any knowledge of the business. Do you know how many people wanted the job?’

‘No idea. A dozen? Half a dozen?’

‘One,’ said Frank. ‘Ms Blanchardine was the only one who was interested. She had no experience and admitted that she only wanted the job because she thought it would help her find a husband.’

I stared at him in disbelief.

‘That’s what she said,’ said Frank with a shrug. ‘Gilly interviewed her and Ms Blanchardine told her that she had been single long enough and that she had decided to marry.’

‘But why did you hire her at all?’ I asked him.

‘Gilly said we needed help in the bar,’ said Frank. ‘She doesn’t want me working too hard because of that stroke I had and at meal times she has to be in the kitchen preparing food.’

Sure enough, Ms Blanchardine quickly made it clear that she had not been joking when she’d told Gilly that she was in Bilbury on a husband hunt.

Apart from her standard ‘What do you want?’ her only other question to customers was ‘Are you married?’ This query, of course, was reserved for male customers. Female customers received only the ‘What do you want?’ and a glare. Ms Blanchardine didn’t like having other women in the bar. She clearly regarded them as unwelcome competition.

Whenever she found an unmarried male customer, Ms Blanchardine would attempt to smile. Unfortunately, smiling was not a skill she had mastered and the result was a tooth-baring grimace which exhibited years of dental malpractice for no useful purpose. Invariably, she would accompany the ‘smile’ with another of her favourite lines which was: ‘I’m single too’.

Peter Marshall, our local shopkeeper, became a prime target for her smile and mildly implied promise but Peter, who had only recently avoided a rather unpleasant matrimonial affiliation with a predatory mantis, who had got as far as making a unilateral decision to distribute around the village an extensive wedding present list, was more than a match for her clumsy wiles. After her inquiry as to his marital status, Peter glared defiantly and added: ‘And I shall make damned sure I remain that way, too.’

Ms Blanchardine’s other main target had been the newly appointed vicar of St Dymphna.

Frank reported that when she discovered that the Reverend Michael Micklemass was married, and had seven and two thirds children, she went into a moody decline which lasted for the best part of a week. She had, apparently, rather set her heart on becoming a clergyman’s wife. She told Frank that she thought she was well suited to the role of becoming a pastoral guide for lost souls of Bilbury, though Frank said he thought she perhaps underestimated the wider demands of the role and might find herself stretched if required to give lessons on jam making to the Young Wives Group or required for ‘bonniest baby’ judging duties at the summer fete.

When Frank told me of Ms Blanchardine’s ambition I was, I confess, reminded of an entry in Arnold Bennett’s diary for August 10th 1899.

‘I have just remembered a saying of Mrs Dunmer, our new housekeeper at Witley,’ wrote Bennett. ‘She said to me: ‘There’s a lot of old maids in this village, sir, as wants men. There was three of ‘em after a curate as we had here, a very nice young gentleman he was, sir. No matter how often the church was opened, those women would be there, sir, even if it was five times a day. It’s a sign of a hard winter, sir, when the hay begins to run after the horse.’’

‘Could we have four refills, please?’ asked Patchy politely. Patchy is always polite to everyone and claims he has even been known to address traffic wardens with a respectful finger to the brim of his hat. (No one has seen evidence of this and there are some who suspect that two fingers may be involved.)

‘What do you want?’ asked Ms Blanchardine, who, unlike Frank, never made any effort to remember what her customers were drinking.

Visitors who called in to the Duck and Puddle once a year would be astonished when, as they walked through the door, Frank would greet them and then ask if they wanted their usual. Ms Blanchardine either didn’t have much of a memory or didn’t believe in exerting it overmuch.

As usual, Ms Blanchardine managed to make her inquiry sound like an accusation. She spoke in the manner of a harassed mother addressing a troublesome six-year-old or an irritable and irascible head teacher responding to an infant pupil’s request for information.

Patchy told her what we were drinking. Normally he would have invited her to have a drink herself but we had all abandoned that custom since Ms Blanchardine would invariably reply ‘I’m not thirsty so I’ll take mine directly from the till.’ And she would duly add the price of a triple malt whisky to the bill. None of us actually saw her drink anything though we did see and hear her eat for she had an insatiable fondness for pork scratchings. She would, said Frank, get through a dozen large packets a day without paying for any of them.

In due course, Ms Blanchardine announced that our drinks were ready.

‘Your drinks are here,’ she shouted.

Even when the bar was quiet and she had nothing else to do, she would never take drinks to a table.

‘I was hired as a barperson,’ she told Frank, when he suggested that it might be a good idea if she were to put drinks onto a tray and take them over to customers. ‘I have bad feet and I wasn’t hired to cart drinks about the place like a skivvy.’

The result was that if he was in the bar (and where else was he going to be?) Frank would be the one who would take the drinks across to the table where the customers were sitting.

There was no doubt that life in the Duck and Puddle wasn’t anywhere near as joyful now that Ms Blanchardine was behind the bar. We tried to ignore her dark and looming presence but it wasn’t easy. ‘I always feel she’s watching to make sure we don’t misbehave,’ muttered Thumper, when Frank collected our drinks from the bar and put them down on the captain’s table.

Patchy and I nodded agreement and picked up our fresh drinks.

‘This is good stuff,’ said Thumper, as he began his fresh pint of Old Harrison’s Anticipated Strong Bladder Water. He savoured the liquid, allowing it to remain in his mouth for a while in the same way that a wine or whisky drinker will hold a favourite tipple on tongue and palate. ‘Do you know,’ he said to Frank, ‘I think I would definitely put this one into my top three favourite beers.’

Frank, who still chose the stock for the bar and always took great care when selecting new beers for his customers to enjoy, nodded his appreciation of Thumper’s vote of confidence. ‘What would the other two be?’ he asked. ‘Old Restoration would be one, I assume?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Thumper, who claims he has probably drunk enough Old Restoration to fill the Estuary at Bideford. ‘The Old Restoration would definitely be in there. And I’d have Wilkinson’s Prize Double Pigman’s Drench as my third.’ He thought for a moment. ‘If I were allowed a reserve it would be ‘Charles Wells Bombadier’.’

Thumper is, we all know fond of this particular brew as much for its name as for its malty taste. The beer is named after Bombadier Billy Wells who was, as a boxer, the first British holder of the Lonsdale belt but who is now more widely remembered as the well-muscled fellow banging an oversized gong at the start of the wonderful British films which were made by the J.Arthur Rank organisation.

‘I’d have the Old Restoration and this new one from Old Harrison,’ said Frank. ‘But my third would have to be Rudman’s Singular Stout.’

‘Ah yes,’ said Thumper. ‘So many beers…’

Patchy said that if he had to choose three drinks for the rest of his life he would choose any decent claret from the Chateau Mouton Rothschild, Sheep Dip whisky and a nice cup of tea. Thumper immediately told him that this was cheating since he was only allowed alcoholic drinks in his top three. Patchy then said he’d have a decent bottle of Dom Perignon as his third choice.

No one was much surprised when I chose three malts as my favourite alcoholic drinks: Laphroaig, Bunnahabein and The Macallan (always preceded by the definite article); with Cardhu a very respectable reserve.

‘If you could only have one meal for the rest of your life what would it be?’ asked Patchy. ‘It doesn’t have to be nutritional or balanced or any of that stuff. What would you not like to live without?’

‘Gilly’s steak and kidney pudding with buttered mashed potatoes and sliced carrots,’ said Frank instantly.

‘A fried breakfast,’ said Thumper firmly. ‘Bacon, sausage, egg, tomatoes, mushrooms and hashbrowns.’

‘Pancakes covered in sugar and liberally splashed with lashings of lemon juice,’ said Patchy, unexpectedly.

‘Your turn,’ said Frank, looking at me.

‘Hot buttered toast,’ I said, after some thought. ‘Using a toasting fork on a sparking log fire.’

There were groans at my rather unimaginative contribution.

‘What about you, Ms Blanchardine?’ asked Thumper, turning towards the bar. None of us, not even Frank, had been given permission to call her by her Christian name. Frank had tried once but had been heartily reproved.

‘I don’t like silly games like that,’ she said sniffily. ‘We all need a properly balanced diet. There’s no point in just picking one meal. You’re grown men, you should be able to find better ways to spend your time than playing silly games.’

That rather put a stop to our silliness and so we sat quietly and watched the logs blazing in the fireplace. A two-foot long piece of silver birch was now burning very nicely and looked set to last for an hour or so.

'Have you nearly finished sorting through your damned mail?' asked Patchy, looking across at Frank who had just tossed a bunch of advertising circulars and a water bill onto the fire.

'Nearly done,' said Frank, holding up the handful of mail which remained. 'And then I'm finished with the mail for another month!'

It seemed an excellent policy.

I found myself wishing I could do the same.

Unfortunately, medical reports and laboratory investigations tend to require rather more urgent treatment.

Still, I respected Frank's method of dealing with his mail and admired it greatly from afar.

'Hot buttered toast,' mumbled Thumper, looking in my direction.

I grinned at him and shrugged.

'We could make paper aeroplanes with some of those leaflets,' Patchy said to Frank.

Thumper and I looked him. I picked out a leaflet advertising central heating and quickly made a very decent dart. I tossed it across the room and watched with pride as it floated behind the bar.

Ms Blanchardine made a loud tutting sound and stalked out of the snug.

'It's better without her in here,' muttered Patchy.

We spent the next fifteen minutes making paper darts.

Ms Blanchardine, who could hear us having a good time, did not return.

Beneath us, down in the Duck and Puddle cellar, we could hear Ms Blanchardine doing something noisy. She also appeared to be shouting abuse at a barrel of beer. I couldn't help thinking that this was all going to end in tears.

'Bit of a spoilsport, isn't she?' said Thumper.

'Into each life some rain must fall,' said Patchy.

'The Ink Spots,' said Frank. 'Great song.'

'Henry Wadsworth Longfellow,' said Patchy. 'Great poem.'

We sat and watched the fire for a while. When the flames began to die down, Frank threw on another assortment of circulars and final demands.

The Bilbury Snitch

We had not had a policeman living in the village of Bilbury for several years.

The problem (if that is how you want to describe it) was that the crime levels in Bilbury were not high enough to merit our having our very own resident constable. During the last year when we had a resident constable, there had been very little major crime.

A bucket had been reported stolen but was later found to have been blown into a ditch during one of our not infrequent winter storms.

And Mr Brooke, a newcomer to the village whom we have already met, complained that, although admitting he had no proof of the theft, he believed that some of his apples had been taken.

Mr Brooke, a former Very Important Person in the City of London, was a pompous and self-important fellow whose small but bountiful orchard produced far more apples than he could ever eat. He claimed that he believed that his apples had been stolen by a gang which was working for a cider maker in Taunton. When the police investigated the theft, it was found that the two dozen apples which Mr Brooke claimed were missing, were rotting quietly in the lush undergrowth beneath the trees in question.

And then there was the case of Mrs Banbury and her failing memory.

I don't know whether this happens in other villages but in Bilbury, people seem to hide all sorts of stuff in all kinds of odd places for a variety of different reasons.

I once had a patient called Hodgson who was a retired accountant who kept a sizeable hoard of gold sovereigns packed into a bird box at the bottom of his garden. He chose sovereigns because, since they officially count as currency, there is no capital gains tax to be paid when they are sold. You'd be surprised at how many sovereigns you can cram into a bird box. The thing was so heavy that it had to be supported with a piece of wood nailed onto the tree underneath it. The ex-accountant was so worried about forgetting that he had put them there that he told everyone he knew what he'd done. The coins were still there when Mr Hodgson died and his executors emptied the box.

And then there was Hilda Perkins. Mrs Perkins was a sweet, old lady who kept her jewellery in a hollowed out loaf which she kept in her freezer. She was a widow and lived alone and when she became bedbound in her late 90s, I visited her once a week, just to check on her and to make sure she was eating and breathing satisfactorily. She had terrible arthritis and a heart which misbehaved whenever the weather changed. Two neighbours took it in turns to take her food.

Every time I visited Mrs Perkins, she asked me to fetch the hollowed out loaf so that she could check that the jewels were still safely hidden. The jewels were all paste and almost worthless but they were important to her. I never let on that I knew that they were paste. On the contrary, I always treated the jewels as though they belonged to the Queen and were on loan from the Tower of London.

And another patient of mine, the aforementioned sweet, old lady called Mrs Banbury, persuaded her nephew to stuff bits of jewellery and a few gold coins into the hollow pole which suspended the curtains in her living room.

It was, I suspect, an idea she'd got from one of the many crime novels she read.

When the nephew emigrated to Australia, Mrs Banbury completely forgot where her treasures had been hidden and there was no one around to remind her.

After being unable to find them in her underwear drawer (the 'safe' place she had used for over 50 years) she called in the police and reported that she had been robbed.

It took Constable Hobbling (who was our local representative of the constabulary at the time) three days to discover that the jewels had not been stolen at all. However, before the happy conclusion to the enquiry, the investigation caused some considerable concern in the village. I know of two people who, as a result of the investigation, actually started locking their doors at night and carried on doing so for the best part of a month.

(Hollow curtain poles, the sort that carry curtains on large rings, have been used to store all sorts of strange things. I heard about a family in Barnstaple who were so upset at being thrown out of their rented accommodation that they hid bits of fish in the hollow curtain poles they left behind. They had been thrown out of their home because the landlord believed he could make more money by doing some renovation work and then renting out the property to wealthier clients. The stale fish did what stale fish tend to do and, as a result, the house stank. The landlord, whose renovations had not included replacing the curtain pole, couldn't find the cause of the offensive odour, or anyone prepared to live in the smelly house. After a weary and disappointing six months, he gave up the struggle and decided to sell the house cheaply. By this time, the family who had been thrown out had managed to scrimp and save enough money for a deposit. They bought the house from which they had been evicted and threw out the curtain poles. As far as I know, the landlord never found out what they'd done. I only found out about it because the man who had hidden the fish was a cousin of Gilly's and she delighted in telling the story.)

The only other crime problem of any significance we had in Bilbury was a spate of thefts which were so small and insignificant that the duty sergeant at the police station in Barnstaple insisted that they didn't even warrant labelling as petty crime.

But at the time there is no doubt that the thefts were worrying.

I should, perhaps, point out that these crimes were not directly involved in the main theme of this account but are included here because, as I believe experienced and accomplished authors are wont to say, they help to set the scene and they provide essential background embroidery. As you will have already noticed, this chapter is exceptionally well embroidered.

The thefts had two things in common.

First, the items which were stolen were all taken from outhouses, barns, sheds, garages and so on.

Second, the items were pretty well worthless and it was the fact that someone had taken the items which was the worry, not the disappearance of the things themselves. None of us likes the idea of a malfeasant stranger wandering onto our property and fingering our possessions – worthless though they might be.

The thief had had an easy time of it.

Most rural properties are well served with what are, I believe, known as 'storage facilities' and this is as true of Bilbury as anywhere else.

Space is not at a premium in a village, in the way that it is in town and suburban gardens, and whereas the average town dweller has to store his lawnmower, garden tools, old suitcases, malfunctioning electrical equipment and boxes of old accounts at the back of his garage or, maybe, in a small garden shed, rural properties are usually so well served with storage space that nothing is ever thrown away.

Bilbury Grange, for example, is blessed with 17 barns, outhouses, stables, linhays and sheds. I know this because I once counted them.

If you added in coops and field shelters and the buildings which have crumbled away and are now little more than foundations, then the number would be even greater.

Many of these buildings had been of little or no practical value for some years.

I think that our predecessors at Bilbury Grange had a policy that when a barn or stable was beginning to look ropey, and had lost a good part of its roof, they would simply build a new one. It was, to be fair, probably cheaper and easier to build something else rather than to attempt to do repairs to a structure that had been weakened by woodworm and wet rot (and possibly even a touch of dry rot) and then battered into submission by the storms and gales which are as much a part of North Devon as the moors, the combes and the rock-strewn coastline.

Some of our outbuildings were more or less empty but several were stuffed to the rafters with bits of old machinery, rotten coils of rope and unopened bags which contained heaven knows what because the labels had long since rotted away.

The one thing all these edifices had in common was that, whether sound or not, they remained forever unlocked.

House dwellers in a town or a city will almost certainly lock their garage, if they have one, and most probably have a stout padlock on their shed. Even in the suburbs, house owners are apprehensive and cautious through necessity and experience. But I don't think any garage in Bilbury was ever locked, and the idea of putting a padlock on a shed door would have caused much merriment had it been mooted in the Duck and Puddle.

Given this, and the fact that the items which disappeared were of little or no value or consequence, it was, in its own small way, a miracle that anyone noticed that things were disappearing.

It was, I think, my dear friend Thumper Robinson who first mentioned that something of his had gone missing.

We were sitting in the snug at the Duck and Puddle one day when he mentioned, out of the blue, that someone had stolen a rusty bucket with a hole in the bottom which he had been planning to use to help force some rhubarb. He wasn't concerned about the loss of the bucket, it would have been impossible to put a monetary value on it, but about the fact that someone had snuck into a shed in his garden and taken it.

Patchy then mentioned that he had experienced a similarly strange theft.

In his case, an intruder had entered a store shed he used for unsaleable junk and had taken an old bicycle saddle which had been sitting on a shelf. Patchy has an encyclopaedic knowledge of every item in his inventory and he'd noticed the absence of the saddle instantly. It had, he said, been the space on an otherwise crowded shelf which had attracted his attention.

Frank said that he'd lost an old, plastic milk crate which he kept in an alleyway behind the pub. He regularly used the crate to help him reach up and un-block a stretch of guttering on a low roof. Because of its position, the guttering was regularly filled with leaves and other debris. Frank said he couldn't understand why anyone would steal a scruffy, old milk crate which was of little value to anyone who didn't have guttering which needed un-blocking.

Listening to these tales of modest woe, I remembered that I had noticed that an old trowel had been taken from our greenhouse. I'd only spotted that the trowel had gone missing because the handle had been loose and I had put the trowel to one side, intending to bind the handle back into place with some baler twine. The blade, the scoopy shaped metal part of the trowel, was perfectly serviceable so it had seemed a pity to throw it away. Having lived in the country for some years, I had acquired country ways and was always reluctant to throw away anything which might still be serviceable. I had filled a barn and a half with bits and pieces which didn't appear to have any future use but which I had kept simply because 'you never know when it might come in handy'.

None of us cared about the items which had disappeared. They had neither sentimental nor monetary value. But we cared very much about the fact that someone had entered our properties and taken them. No one likes to feel that the sanctity of their home, albeit a peripheral part of it, has been invaded.

Even so we wouldn't have bothered to report the thefts if it had not been that, by coincidence, the local constable, P.C. 'Peculiar' Clarke, was in the Duck and Puddle at the time, enjoying a lunchtime pie and a pint. (P.C. Clarke had taken over from Constable Hobbling who had retired to grow organic mushrooms in a large, dark barn in the Black Mountains.)

'Peculiar' had removed his helmet so that he could honestly claim that he was not in uniform, and therefore could not be accused of drinking while on duty. He overheard us talking and, since he hadn't had any crime to deal with for nearly nine months, became quite excited by what he described as a 'serial thief'.

A rural policeman without any crimes to solve will grasp at anything which allows him to convince his superiors that he is needed where he is and should not be shunted off to do something which requires daily confrontations with villainous individuals carrying knives, bludgeons and shotguns. 'Peculiar' Clarke was no coward but he had enough brain underneath his helmet to know which side his bread was buttered.

('Peculiar's real name, when he squeezed his size 8 helmet onto his oversized cranium, crammed his size 12s onto his bicycle pedals and rode around the village looking for crime, was P.C. Archibald Clarke. For reasons lost in the far distant mists of time, he was known to everyone as Peculiar. No one, least of all Archibald, was offended by this and local youngsters regarded him as a fierce upholder of the law and a stern protector of low-hanging fruits and nuts. Scrumpers, if caught and recognised as established recidivists, could expect to have their ears boxed, regardless of age or size. In those days, it was perfectly legal and proper for police officers to box the ears of minor miscreants. This saved the courts a good deal of work and enabled offenders to continue with their lives without having to contend with the burden of a criminal record.)

P.C.Clarke finished his pie, put his helmet back on, took out his notebook, licked his pencil and took our statements.

He then began his enquiries.

To begin with, P.C. Clarke's prime, and indeed only, suspect was a local man called 'Nutty' Slack, who lived in a tin shack on Exmoor and who had a fine collection of utterly worthless items stored under a tarpaulin next to his home.

Operating on the principle that a collector, however simple his tastes, however mean his ambitions, will be innately ruthless and greedy, will stoop as low as is required, and will stop at nothing in order to enhance the size and quality of his agglomeration, P.C. Clarke visited Mr Slack's abode and, although not armed with a search warrant, requested permission to 'take a look at the stuff what you got tucked under that tarpaulin'.

The items which had disappeared were not, however, in Mr Slack's collection and genuine and fulsome apologies were proffered and accepted.

Constable Clarke was so stumped that he had to issue a verbal announcement (in the Duck and Puddle) that he 'was pursuing enquiries' and that 'an arrest was expected imminently'. As Thumper pointed out, this clearly meant that Constable Clarke didn't have the foggiest idea where to look, or whose collar to feel.

And then, to everyone's surprise, the culprit confessed.

And to everyone's even greater surprise, the culprit turned out to be the Reverend Micklemass, the new vicar of St Dymphna's church.

According to P.C.Clarke, the vicar explained that he was depressed because the church needed essential repair work doing to the roof and he had no idea how he was going to pay for it. His depression had deepened when the grave digger had retired and the Church Council had decided to hire a man with a motorised digger to dig graves. What had doubtless seemed a good idea at the time, quickly turned into a disaster when the man with the digger succeeded in digging up a couple of yards of the sewer pipe which served the vestry washroom and lavatory.

With no prospect of ever finding the funds to repair all these structural problems, the vicar had sunk into what John Bunyan might have described as 'a slough of despond'. He had, he reported to P.C. Clarke, been told by one of the Bishop's aides that the diocese had no funds to spare and that if he could not raise the money himself then the church would have to be closed, shuttered, abandoned and deconsecrated.

The vicar had taken this badly for it seems that, for a clergyman to lose his church, is a disaster on a par with a captain losing his ship. The vicar had, it seemed, chosen to distract himself from his predicament by wandering around the village taking things that did not belong to him. His story was so strange that it was clearly true. All the purloined items were found, neatly stacked, in a corner of St Dymphna's crypt.

At a meeting held in Constable Clarke's front parlour, all those who had been victims of the vicar's pointless kleptomania agreed that they were not interested in asking the police to pursue the case. We agreed, indeed, that we would not give any evidence if the case were taken to court.

Constable Clarke was, of course, slightly disappointed by the disappearance of his case but even he agreed that there was absolutely nothing to be gained by locking up the vicar.

Moreover, now that the problems of St Dymphna were out in the open, it became clear that we needed to club together to find some help. Cedric 'Bill' Stickers, the part-time grave digger, was persuaded out of retirement by the promise of a small pay rise and he was given a modest bonus to repair the damaged sewer pipe. We persuaded the vicar to set up a roof restoration fund and to plan a series of fund raising events. With hope filling his heart, the vicar became a changed man.

Nine months later, Constable 'Peculiar' Clarke retired, left the police force and moved out of Bilbury. The Chief Constable decided that there was no need for him to be replaced.

P.C. Clarke took early retirement and purchased a delightful cottage and a small market garden of around seven acres in South Bugford, a tiny hamlet of no more than a dozen houses. There, in peaceful isolation, he and his wife grew cabbages and kept a small flock of llamas and alpacas. I gather that neither activity kept them in champagne and caviar (not even the Polish champagne sold by Peter Marshall) but they were fortunate in that a police pension, while not providing for luxury, is reliable in that it arrives every month, come rain or shine, and in a part of the country where prices are relatively low and expensive distractions fairly uncommon, the Clarkes were, I gather, extremely happy with their lot. I kept in touch with them, since South Bugford is so small that it does not have its own resident doctor and both Peculiar and his wife, Lucy remained on my list of patients. Indeed, I was rather flattered by the fact that Mr and Mrs Clarke came to see me before they bought their cottage and told me that they did not intend to move to South Bugford unless I was able to assure them that they could remain on my list. It was for them a big step for they had both lived in Bilbury all their lives. Before they took the plunge and bought the cottage in South Bugford, they had rented a terraced cottage on the Barnstaple road.

We had thought nothing much of it when Peculiar chose to hang up his handcuffs and truncheon and the Chief Constable decided that Bilbury would no longer have a resident policeman.

None of us thought of Bilbury as a suitable location for gangs of Train Robbers to hide out and plan their next heist. And we had little concern that outsiders would swoop on the village and systematically work their way through local properties. Our experience was that visitors usually got lost even in daylight and we were quietly confident that if burglars swooped on Bilbury after dark they would probably be found, two days later, wandering around the lanes, lost, bewildered and disorientated.

We knew that it would take at least half an hour for a police car to reach us from Barnstaple but we had, I suppose, grown rather complacent and we weren't in the slightest bit worried by this.

And then another batch of problems started.

These were different.

This time there were no thefts involved.

And my chums and I all found that we had become the lawbreakers.

Over the centuries, the British Parliament has continually added new laws to an already adequate stockpile. But they have put nowhere as much effort into getting rid of old and useless laws as they have put into drafting and enacting new and useless laws. As a result, Britain is packed to the courtroom ceiling with daft laws which have accumulated over the centuries and never been repealed.

It would, perhaps, have been a good idea if someone had introduced a law insisting that every time a new law was introduced, one of the old ones would have to be discarded. But law-makers like making laws and don't like unmaking them, and so Britons have been left with an almost endless conglomeration of bizarre and trivial legislation.

So, for example, there is a law which forbids women to eat chocolate on public transport and there is another which makes it perfectly legal to shoot a Welsh person with a longbow in the Cathedral Close of Hereford as long as you do the shooting on a Sunday.

It is illegal to fly a kite in London but perfectly legal to do it outside London. And it is illegal to clean your doormat in the street or to clean it after 8 o'clock in the morning. (It is, one assumes, a hanging offence to clean your doormat in the street and to do it after 8 o'clock in the morning.) It is illegal to be drunk or tiddly in charge of a horse or cow and it is illegal for a landlord to allow someone to get drunk in their pub. It is illegal to carry a plank along a pavement and illegal to 'handle salmon in suspicious circumstances' (though the law is woefully unhelpful about the nature of the circumstances which might be regarded as suspicious). It is Illegal to slide on ice or snow in the street (a law which must surely mean that virtually every child in the country is a criminal). And it is illegal to have a pigsty in front of your house though perfectly legal to have one around the back.

You get the idea.

By the 1970s, England had become awash with rules and regulations and with laws and statutes.

It is sometimes difficult to see where a rule ends and a law begins but since anything the Government defines as 'not being allowed' is usually punishable in some way I always find it safer to regard all rules and regulations as laws and to leave the semantics to those who live in ivory towers and only write about these things rather than having to live with them.

And if breaking a law is a crime, and the person doing the law breaking is a criminal, then Bilbury suddenly became a hotbed of criminal activity.

The crimes of which we were accused had two things in common.

First, they were all rather trivial.

Second, the criminals were all individuals who might reasonably be described as seemingly respectable members of the community.

I write from first-hand experience for I was one of the alleged criminals, though my crime, and my encounter with the very long arm of the law, comes a little later in this account.

The first strange thing that happened was that my father-in-law, Mr Kennet, received a visit from P.C. Gerald 'Squeaky' Dors, a constable sent by the police station in Barnstaple.

The constable, who was as embarrassed as he should have been by the nature of his errand, told Patsy's father that the station sergeant had received a report complaining that Mr Kennet had (and here the constable referred to his notebook so that he could read the charge as it had been given to him by the station sergeant) 'knowingly allowed nuts of several varieties to fall onto the road thereby endangering the lives of members of the public'.

After he had checked his diary to make sure that this wasn't an April Fool's Day joke, Mr Kennet asked who had made the complaint and exactly what nuts were involved and why their presence on the highway might be considered a menace to traffic.

'I'm afraid I am not at liberty to identify the identity of the complainant,' said P.C. Dors, using the jargon of his profession, (a jargon which means that policemen always 'give chase' when criminals flee, and never 'run after' them), 'but I gather that the nuts in question are predominantly of the hazelnut variety though according to the complainant there may also have been nuts of the walnut variety and nuts of the horse chestnut variety involved.'

Mr Kennet, who is as law-abiding a citizen as I have ever met, and a man whom I have seen run for a quarter of a mile to chase down a used sweet paper which had slipped from his hand, insisted on accompanying the constable to the lane in question so that the nature of the offence could more accurately be assessed.

And there they were.

The offending nuts, generously scattered on a road surface which was more weed than tarmacadam, were largely hazelnuts though in patches there were also walnuts and horse chestnuts to be seen.

'But the trees overhang the road,' explained Mr Kennet. 'How am I supposed to stop the nuts falling from the trees when they are ripe?'

Mr Kennet went on to explain that the entire field was protected by a Tree Protection Order and that the order had been imposed when the local council employee whose job was protecting trees, had decided that the field contained too many notable trees for him to mark them with individual Protection Orders.

'It is a criminal offence for me to cut down any of these trees,' said Mr Kennet. 'It is a criminal offence for me even to cut a branch off a protected tree.'

'Indeed it is, Mr Kennet, sir,' said the constable. 'I am cognisant of these circumstances and it would, as you say, be quite against the law for you to interfere with these protected trees. But unfortunately, sir, littering is also an offence and since the trees clearly belong to you and the nuts which they have dropped have fallen onto the public highway, there is no doubt that you are, technically at least, in breach of the law as it stands.'

At this point, Constable Dors, not a bad fellow and one of the best skittle players in North Devon, removed a large, red handkerchief from his trouser pocket and mopped his brow. He would have felt much more comfortable boxing ears or talking firmly to an individual who had been riding a bicycle without the appropriate illumination than he felt discussing the legal implications of fallen nuts.

'The tree protection officer wanted to protect the beech trees, the horse chestnut trees and the walnut tree,' explained Mr Kennet. 'But since there were so many trees involved, he thought it simpler to slap the protection order on the whole field. This means that even the hazel trees are now covered. I can't cut any of them any more than I cut any of the beech trees or the horse-chestnut trees or the walnut tree.'

‘Exactly, Mr Kennet, sir,’ said P.C. Dors.

‘So what do you suggest I do?’

‘I can’t rightly offer you legalistic advice on that point,’ admitted the constable. ‘But there seems no doubt in my mind that the presence of the nuts on the highway must be considered an offence. Normally, it is not something we would bother about but since there has been a formal complaint made by a complainant it is out of our hands as you might say.’

‘But the squirrels will move all the nuts and bury them,’ pointed out Mr Kennet.

P.C. ‘Squeaky’ Dors agreed with him but said, with some sadness it has to be admitted, that this did not alter the fact that an offence had been committed and that there would have to be a trial and since there couldn’t be a trial without a prisoner, well, Mr Kennet could probably see where this was going, couldn’t he?

Indeed, Mr Kennet could.

And so the majesty of the law proceeded on its way as it is wont to do and in due course Mr Kennet was fined £5 and reprimanded by magistrates who probably wondered privately why the hell the police didn’t spend their time on more worthwhile activities but who, in public at least, had little choice but to express their dismay that an English highway should have been besmirched in such a way by a man whom they all agreed was old enough to know better.

A junior reporter from the Barnstaple paper managed to get seven inches of copy from the story, though this was doubtless only to justify the work of the subeditor who was responsible for writing the paper’s headline and who was probably quite pleased with the caption ‘Police Go Nuts’.

An editorial, written by someone with a large amount of tongue and a small amount of cheek, suggested that Mr Kennet, and all other tree owners in the county, might now feel the need to hang nets underneath their trees in order to catch the falling nuts.

‘Moreover,’ wrote the editorialist, ‘there will be much concern throughout the region during the next few weeks since several million leaves are likely to be falling onto roadways, pavements and other public areas without giving warning and with, apparently, no regard for the requirements of the law.’

Within less than a week of Mr Kennet’s bizarre encounter with the local constabulary, it was the turn of Frank Parsons, the landlord of the Duck and Puddle, and as genial and kindly a fellow as you could hope to find were you to wander the length and breadth of the country in search of geniality and generosity.

Frank’s crime was, so he was told by another police constable from the same station, was that he had allowed customers in his public house to sing rousing choruses of ‘Happy Birthday’ and verses of several other assorted songs during what was described by the authorities as ‘a noisy evening on licensed premises where there was no licence for public entertainment’.

To say that Frank was shocked by this complaint would be like saying that Red Riding Hood was startled when her granny took off her bonnet.

Frank’s astonishment was exacerbated by the fact that the Duck and Puddle has no neighbours close enough to have been disturbed by the singing. Moreover, all the customers who had been in the pub at the time had been singing lustily. So, wondered Frank and Gilly, who on earth had complained?

Once again, the authorities, in the person of the rather weary police constable from Barnstaple could offer no name. ‘I’m afraid I can’t divulge that information which is of a confidential nature,’ said the police officer who had, like his colleagues, been well trained in the art of using 12 words when two would do.

Frank’s crime was rather more serious than Mr Kennet’s since Frank had a licence to lose.

However, the police wisely decided that since this was Frank’s first known offence, and that a conviction in the magistrate’s court would inevitably lead to his licence being investigated and possibly suspended, they would let him off with a warning.

The relief was tempered by the thought that whoever had complained once could easily complain a second time.

Moreover, it was quickly decided within the village that the complainant who had reported Frank was very probably the same complainant who had reported Mr Kennet’s errant nuts.

And so identifying the complainant became a priority.

Before we could do this, however, things quickly became farcical and complaints fell upon the village like autumn leaves.

Someone complained that Olive Robinson, Thumper’s aunt had a chimney which smoked occasionally, and the police were dispatched to warn her that failure to abate a smoky chimney is an offence. She was sternly warned that something needed to be done before the fire was lit again.

Thumper, who had a set of chimney cleaning brushes and who had already intended to sweep his aunt’s chimney, was furious. He was extraordinarily fond of his aunt, a sweet and gentle lady, and he was enraged that someone would report her to the police.

Two householders were warned for lighting bonfires in their gardens and someone reported Sidney 'Skinny' Arbuckle for riding a bicycle after dark without a working front lamp. Skinny's response, that he ate a lot of carrots and consequently had excellent night vision, although regarded as imaginative and original, did not protect him from a stern talking to and an official warning.

On two separate occasions, Peter Marshall, the proprietor of the Bilbury village shop, found himself being quizzed by men and women representing various departments of the local council.

A man in a blue suit, who had six coloured pens clipped securely into one of those funny little pen holders fixed onto his breast pocket, announced that there had been a complaint about Peter's opening hours.

For as long as anyone can remember, Peter has had a sign above his shop door which promises that his emporium is 'Open all Hours'.

However, the man from the council reported that his colleagues had received a complaint that the shop was only open between 7.00 a.m. and 12.00 midnight.

Peter had protested that if a customer rang the doorbell at 3.00 a.m. he would open the shop, even if it were only to sell a parsnip or a packet of budgerigar seed. Amazingly, this is quite true.

In the end, the man from the council only went away when Peter changed the notice to read 'Open all Hours (Between midnight and 7.00 a.m. by appointment)'.

A woman in a grey trouser suit, who carried a clipboard and a plastic briefcase and was accompanied by a male assistant in the sort of white coat usually associated both with laboratory technicians and dentists advertising toothpaste on television, announced that the Trading Standards department had received a formal complaint that the weighing scales which Peter used to measure out produce he was selling were out-of-date and therefore likely to be inaccurate.

The woman and her assistant had brought with them a set of digital scales and they proceeded to test Peter's Victorian weighing scales (which relied on the items being purchased being placed in a metal bowl on one side of the scale, and metal weights being placed on a platform on the other side of the scale).

To everyone's astonishment, and to Peter's delight, the test showed that the Victorian scales were perfectly accurate.

Peter, who was about to celebrate by putting up a large sign announcing to the world that his scales had been tested, checked and approved 'by the appropriate authorities' was slightly startled when he was subsequently visited by another two representatives of the same council department,(who were, on this occasion, accompanied by three police officers), and served with a summons for selling produce in imperial weights rather than in the metric weights which the EU had ordered the United Kingdom to adopt.

Peter protested that it was the first he'd heard of any such law but the council officials were adamant and, in due course, the local newspaper reported that a Mr P Marshall of Bilbury had been ordered to pay a £10 fine for selling parsnips by the pound instead of the kilogram.

Peter was told that although his imperial scales were still in excellent working order, he had to purchase new scales measuring goods in metric units. Peter duly bought the scales but used them only when selling fruit and vegetables to strangers. When selling fruit and vegetables to locals, Peter continued to weigh and sell in imperial units.

And then it was my turn.

My offence, it turned out, was that I had allegedly attempted to chop down a fully grown beech tree without having first obtained permission from the council to remove said tree from our land.

The police, in the person of P.C. Dors, told me that the complainant had seen me up a ladder and that I had been observed attempting to cut through the trunk and fell the tree without obtaining the necessary authority.

'Is this the tree I am accused of trying to chop down?' I asked 'Squeaky' Dors who was, once more, the constable delegated to drive to Bilbury and to investigate the crime.

'I believe it is, doctor,' agreed the policeman, consulting a small map with which he had been supplied. The map, which seemed surprisingly accurate, contained details of Bilbury Grange and all the trees in the vicinity. The constable counted the number of trees in the lane, repeated the calculation, and then confirmed that the tree to which I was referring was the tree which I had allegedly attempted to remove.

'Would you like to take a look at the tree and see if you can find any damage?' I suggested.

'Squeaky' Dors examined the tree.

'I can see no sign of any damage to said arboreal item,' he admitted, at last. He took a notebook and a pencil from his tunic pocket. 'The trunk appears to be unharmed.' He licked the lead end of his pencil and wrote laboriously in his notebook. (Why, I wonder, are policemen the only people on the planet who feel it necessary to lick the business end of a pencil before using it?)

'Exactly,' I agreed. 'But you will be able to see that the ivy which was climbing the tree has been cut.'

I explained that the ivy which had climbed up the trunk of the beech tree had begun to cover the crown of the tree. I pointed out that when that happens the ivy can stop the tree from breathing and the weight of all the ivy can bring down weakened branches.

And so, with some reluctance, I told 'Squeaky', I had cut through the ivy.

I don't like cutting ivy because it provides food and home for an enormous number of insects. But there are times when surgery is necessary.

'Yes, doctor,' said the policeman. 'I can validate that there is evidence showing that the ivy has clearly been severed. I would surmise that the severing was, all things being equal and on the face of it, probably performed with a sharp implement of some kind. A knife perhaps? ' He licked the lead of his pencil again and made another note.

'Secateurs,' I said. 'And I think it is not illegal to remove ivy from a tree.'

'No, doctor, it is not at this time considered felonious to remove ivy from a plant of any kind, up to and including a plant of the arboreal family.'

'I cut through the ivy with a pair of secateurs,' I told him. 'It would, you will agree I am sure, be difficult to cut through a fully grown beech tree with a pair of secateurs.'

I would have produced the secateurs as evidence but sadly I had dropped them while completing the task of cutting through the ivy. And the makers of my secateurs had cleverly made their products in green. This ensured that if they were dropped then they were easily lost in the undergrowth. I always felt that they did this on purpose, in the same way that potato peelers were made in 'potato peeling brown' so that the peelers got thrown away with the peelings.

'It would indeed, doctor,' said the policeman. 'I wouldn't like to try it.' He put the pencil and the notebook back into his tunic pocket and then buttoned the pocket to make sure that the notebook remained secure.

And that was the end of my short lived career as a criminal. The case against me was dismissed for lack of any supporting evidence that I had attempted to chop down the tree.

There was, however, no escaping the fact that for me, as for Frank, this could have been a difficult business.

The General Medical Council, the body which regulates doctors working in Britain, does not take kindly to doctors being found guilty of criminal conduct – however minor or unrelated it may be to their professional responsibilities.

And, bizarre as it may sound, there is no doubt that if I had been found guilty of attempting to cut down a tree without permission, I would have been reported to the GMC and the consequences could have been dire.

I have it on good authority that neither logic nor good sense is a quality which is highly valued in the decorated halls of the medical profession's disciplinary body.

All had ended well on this occasion.

But there was no escaping the fact that, in the same way that the village had previously harboured a very petty thief, it was clear that we now had a petty sneak in Bilbury.

And the sneak was turning out to be far more trouble than the thief – and far more dangerous. Losing an old trowel with a wobbly handle isn't quite in the same category as losing your livelihood.

Understandably, and quite properly, the police were not going to tell us the identity of the sneak who was making our lives so difficult and so Frank, Patchy, Thumper, Peter and I decided that we had to do something about this particular problem ourselves.

'We must all hang together or, most assuredly, we shall all hang separately,' said Patchy, quoting Benjamin Franklin. Patchy could borrow an apposite quote as easily as he could 'borrow' a history for a desk or a double bed.

We decided to meet at Bilbury Grange one afternoon in order to discuss how best to expose the sneak.

'There's no point in meeting at the Duck and Puddle,' Patchy had pointed out. 'If the sneak is sitting there in the corner, or pops in to the pub for a pint, they'll overhear us. We need to discuss this in privacy.'

And so Patsy made three dozen sandwiches and two dozen large vegetable pasties and did some extra cake baking.

My friends all have what are usually known in polite circles as 'hearty appetites' and although Frank had been on a diet since he had his stroke, he still had an appetite which qualified him as a doughty and determined trencherman.

Patchy, Thumper, Peter and Frank always eat well at Bilbury Grange.

This is largely because Patsy is an excellent cook who also understands the need for quantity, but also because the three of them are so polite that they rarely, if ever, refuse an invitation to 'have another' and would all feel that they had offended the hostess if they left anything uneaten. The result is a competition between, on the one hand, my friends who are determined to eat everything that is available in order to prove that everything available was excellent and, on the other hand, Patsy who is eager to make sure that the comestibles are supplied in more than adequate quantities and who would, I suspect, only really be pleased if she could defeat the appetites of the devouring horde.

For the record, when I told her about the planned meeting, my wife made, in addition to the sandwiches and pasties previously mentioned, a fruit cake, a sponge cake filled with cream and homemade raspberry jam and a seed cake. She also baked four dozen rock cakes, four dozen butterfly cakes filled with cream and covered with little bits of chocolate, and four dozen almond macaroons (a particular favourite of Patchy's).

'There are going to be six of us!' I exclaimed, when I saw how much food she had prepared. 'You, me, Frank, Peter, Patchy and Thumper!'

'I know,' said Patsy, looking worried. 'Do you think I should have made more?'

I smiled and gave her a hug.

'The sneak is clearly someone in the village,' said Patchy, when our informal meeting began.

The very thought made us all deeply miserable. But what alternative explanation could there possibly be?

'And probably someone with an axe to grind,' said Thumper.

'It could just be someone with a nasty, vindictive streak,' said Peter. 'We need to stop them before they dob one of us in to the tax people.' He shuddered, visibly. Peter does not harbour great fondness for the tax authorities.

There was silence for a few moments as we contemplated this possibility; something that was, for Peter and Frank in particular, if not exactly a fate if not worse than death then a fate more daunting than walking ten miles without shoes on a stony road. Patchy was investigated by the tax authorities a couple of years ago, and the tax inspector was so confused by Patchy's accounts that he was reported to have been off work for six months. Thumper does not trouble the income tax authorities who do not seem to be aware of his existence.

The silence was broken only by the quiet munching of sandwiches and vegetable pasties. I can't think of anything much that would put my pals off their food. The cakes had yet to appear.

'So, what's the plan?' asked Frank, taking a temporary break from demolishing a six inch long pasty.

'We need to think of something that would excite our sneak,' said Thumper. 'And then perhaps give us a clue to his identity.'

'No,' said Patsy quickly. 'We need a number of 'somethings' that would excite the sneak. And we need to leak these 'somethings' to one suspect at a time.'

'What do you mean by 'somethings'?' asked Frank.

'A false accusation, a bit of gossip, a rumour – anything that our sneak can report to the authorities,' explained Patsy. 'So, for example, we could tell one suspect that Peter was selling mouldy parsnips and we could tell another that he was selling rotten turnips.'

'There's nothing wrong with my parsnips!' said Peter immediately. 'And I've never sold a rotten turnip in my life!' He paused and looked around the room. 'Not knowingly anyway,' he added.

Frank put the rest of his vegetable pasty into his mouth.

'Not deliberately anyway,' said Peter. 'Definitely not deliberately. I'm surprised at you Patsy – making accusations like that.'

'It wasn't an accusation!' said Patsy. 'It was merely an illustration of what we could do – just a suggestion. You would, of course, be able to show that you weren't selling mouldy parsnips or rotten turnips but the nature of the complaint would tell us the identity of the sneak. We could say that Patchy was selling fake Shakespearean beds or that my husband had been speeding on the road to Barnstaple.'

'Maybe we need to think up accusations that are a little less dramatic,' I said gently.

We all agreed that Patsy's idea was a good one though it was generally agreed that we'd tone things down a tad so that there was no talk of faulty parsnips, fake beds or speeding motor cars.

So over the next hour or so, we worked out a host of false rumours, tittle-tattle, gossip, scuttlebutt and bits of hearsay that we thought might trigger the Bilbury Snitch to continue their nasty sneaking – and invite the attention of the local constabulary without there being any risk of what Peter called 'consequences'.

And then, once the sandwiches and vegetable pasties were gone, we worked our way through Patsy's wonderful collection of cakes.

By the time we'd finished, and it was the hour for me to get ready to start the evening surgery, we were well pleased with our plans and we were confident that we'd soon identify and expose the Bilbury Snitch.

'I didn't prepare enough food,' said Patsy, when everyone had gone.

I looked at the plates on the two low tables in our drawing room. They were all empty. Only crumbs remained.

'Frank could hardly move when he left,' I pointed out. 'And the others were absolutely stuffed. They eat everything you make because they worry you'll be hurt if they don't.'

'I'll make more next time,' said Patsy firmly. 'Maybe I'll do a chocolate cake as well. And some of those coconut and cherry cakes that Thumper likes. I didn't have any cherries this time.'

'However much food you make, they'll eat it all,' I warned her.

'Oh no they won't!' said Patsy firmly. 'I'll get my mother to make a few cakes as well. Perhaps I can persuade her to bake a couple of her caraway seed cakes and a batch of her special rock cakes.'

'There will definitely be some of those left,' I promised.

Patsy's mother is an excellent cook but when she makes 'rock cakes' she has a tendency to take the first half of the name rather too seriously. I have seen three people break teeth on her rock cakes. And I don't think it is unfeeling of me to say that Mrs Kennet's caraway seed cakes, although undoubtedly made with love and a good deal of caraway seed, are what might reasonably be described as 'an acquired taste'.

I didn't mention any of this but, nevertheless, Patsy threw a cushion in my direction.

I ducked.

But I need not have bothered.

The cushion missed me by miles but missed Ben, asleep on a chair, by less than a foot.

Ben opened an eye, looked around to see what had happened, closed the eye again and went back to sleep.

And so we began what Patchy insisted on calling 'Operation Snitch Exposure'.

Thumper, Patchy, Frank, Peter and I spread silly rumours far and wide in the vain hope that someone would take one of them seriously and make a complaint to some authority or other.

But nothing happened.

Absolutely nothing happened.

We knew that the Bilbury Snitch was someone who either lived in the village or who visited Bilbury regularly.

At our meeting at Bilbury Grange we had, with great reluctance, compiled a short list of possible suspects.

It wasn't pleasant to think that someone we knew could be responsible, and that the Bilbury Snitch could be someone living in our midst, but there was no alternative explanation, and no other way to deal with what had become a very serious threat.

But none of our rumours triggered a call from the authorities.

We were close to despair, waiting to see who next in the village would be the victim.

In the end the snitch was uncovered by a serendipitous accident; a fortuitous happenstance. And all our clever scheming proved to be quite unnecessary.

It was Gilly Parsons, Frank's wife, who unmasked the snitch. And the snitch was not one of the suspects we had put on our list.

Gilly was walking from the kitchen to the bar when she happened to hear someone on the telephone.

'She was talking very quickly and she was whispering,' said Gilly. 'And that attracted my attention because I'd never heard her whisper before. It sounded very strangely conspiratorial.'

The snitch was, as you will have doubtless guessed but we did not, Arcadia Blanchardine, the newly hired barmaid.

Gilly overheard her telephoning the local police to report that the landlord of the Duck and Puddle public house was growing marijuana plants in his back garden.

It was nonsense, of course. There were no marijuana plants anywhere near the Duck and Puddle though there was a large amount of mint, which looks like cannabis to an uninitiated eye, near to the back door. Gilly has several varieties of mint growing in her herb garden.

But because the accusation was a serious one it had to be taken seriously and it meant another journey to Bilbury for Constable Dors.

This time, however, Frank and Gilly were forewarned, forearmed and ready for the visit.

Once Constable 'Squeaky' Dors had established that the garden was free of illegal plants, Frank and Gilly told him the identity of the caller who had made the false claim and Ms Blanchardine was formally warned for wasting police time.

'I don't like this place,' she told the Constable and the Parsons when she was confronted. 'The people are all so damned nice to one another.'

'But don't you think that it makes everyone happier if people are kind to one another?' said Frank.

'Kindness and happiness aren't all they're cracked up to be,' snapped Ms Blanchardine very sourly. 'There's more to life than being nice to people and having a good time. Besides, I like complaining about people. It's sort of my hobby. I think of it as a public service.'

Frank and Gilly then suggested that Ms Blanchardine might like to continue practising her hobby in some other part of the country. Frank took out his cheque book and gave her a month's salary in lieu of notice.

Ms Blanchardine was apparently quite surprised at being fired. 'You're letting me go just because of this?' she said.

'Yes,' said Gilly, through gritted teeth.

'Hrmph!' said Ms Blanchardine as she headed upstairs to pack. 'Rotten place anyway,' she was reportedly heard to mutter. 'There's not one man here that I'd choose to marry.'

The Duck and Puddle was once again without a barmaid.

But Bilbury was without its snitch.

There was some noisy celebrating in the Duck and Puddle that evening. We sang loudly and Frank stayed open thirty minutes after his official closing time.

The Psychiatrist Who Ran Away (Part 1: The Awakening)

I'd had a busy morning and the last patient of my extra-long morning surgery was a man in his fifties whom I was pretty sure I had never seen before. He certainly wasn't a local resident and I was pretty sure that he wasn't anyone who had been to see me in the past.

He was a spindle-shanks, he had a prognathous chin and he came into the surgery wearing a dark purple watch cap.

I'd seen several of those hats before and I knew where he'd bought it.

When he removed the hat, I could see that he was balding, but had a bushy and rather unkempt ring of hair remaining. He looked as though he hadn't shaved for a day or so. It didn't look like one of those skimpy, little beards that are sometimes fashionable among those who want to look wild and reckless without actually being wild or reckless, it simply looked as though he hadn't shaved. He was also wearing a pair of what are, I believe, called 'aviator shades'. He took these off and placed them in his breast pocket.

I don't know anything about fashion but even I find that it isn't difficult to differentiate between cheaply and shoddily made clothes and well-made and probably expensive clothes. Although I could tell that he was dressed in what had been quite expensive clothes, he somehow managed to look like a tramp. His tweed jacket had burn marks down the lapels on both sides and his tie was covered in a variety of food stains. A quick glance enabled me to identify egg yolk and tomato ketchup. The buttons of his matching waistcoat had been pushed through the wrong buttonholes, giving him a uniquely lop-sided sort of look. And when he'd walked into the consulting room, I couldn't help noticing that the trousers of his tweed suit showed signs of his having knelt in something oily.

The funny thing is that despite all this, he still managed to look as though he was accustomed to having a certain amount of authority over his life. It wasn't difficult to guess that he had a job which gave him a certain amount of power.

I said good morning and invited him to sit down.

He sighed, looked around the room, nodded to me, moved the chair reserved for patients, for no apparent reason that I could discern other than that he wanted to establish some degree of control over his surroundings, and sat down.

I didn't have the faintest idea what was wrong with him but I got the distinct feeling that he hadn't come in to see me because he had a twinge in his knee or a slightly annoying tickle in his throat.

'My name is Eckersley, Pelham Ronald Eckersley,' he said. 'I am 56-years-old, I am a consultant psychiatrist and I have run away.'

I was rather startled by this introduction and I'm afraid I just rather stared at him for a moment. It was, of course, the admission that he had run away that had rather surprised me.

'Where have you run from?' I asked.

'London. I have a consultancy at one of those mildly snotty teaching hospitals and a private practice in an extraordinarily snotty part of Harley Street,' he said. 'I've been sat in your waiting room for several hours, by choice I would add. I arrived early but, realising that my requirements would probably need a good chunk of your time, I instructed your receptionist to allow all your other customers to take their turn ahead of me.'

I looked at him. I had seen runaways before but they had invariably been under the age of twenty. I had never before seen a grown man who'd run away. I had certainly never before seen a psychiatrist who had run away.

'I have committed no crime,' he went on. 'And I have no close family or, indeed, close friends and so there was no one to lie awake last night wondering whether I was safe.'

'But, it is presumably reasonable to assume that people will have noticed that you've disappeared, and that at least one of them will report your disappearance to the police.'

'Oh, yes, I expect they will. But they won't report my disappearance because they care about me or are concerned for me. If there is a search, it will be because my colleagues feel that my absence could embarrass them and adversely affect their plans to restructure the hospital's administration and management. We are in the throes of reorganising ourselves. My colleagues reorganise things every few years. I'm on the restructuring committee. I can't imagine why or how it happened but I'm the chairman of the committee. The rest of the buffoons on the committee are the sort of idiots who believe in rules. Believe me, the place where I work is packed to the ceiling with bifarious pettifoggers. There are more humbugs working there than you'd find in an old-fashioned sweet shop.'

'Bifarious pettifoggers?'

'Laughably crooked shysters.'

'Thank you.'

'Have you ever noticed that people who are over committed to regulations spend their whole lives teetering on the very brink of absurdity? In practical terms, my position means I am the restructuring committee. I can choose the builders we appoint and the competitors for the work would, no doubt, be happy to reward me handsomely. I have already had to return several generous bribes. They didn't call them bribes, of course, but that was what they were. One major building company wanted to me give me a five year contract as their Mental Health Advisor. I would, of course, have been given an absurdly generous honorarium and no responsibilities whatsoever.'

'Is that why you've run away? The stress of the committee work?'

'Good heavens, no! There's an awful lot of cobblers talked about stress these days. Many of the patients I saw in my practice were locked in fear of torment by their own paranoia. They had no idea about the real nature of stress. There was an Australian cricketer called Keith Miller who was the best all-rounder Australia ever had. In the 1950s, after a pretty gruelling Test Match, he was asked at a press conference whether he had found the day stressful. Miller, who flew planes for the Royal Australian Air Force during the Second World War, laughed at the suggestion. 'Stress?' he said. 'I was playing cricket! Stress is when you're flying over Germany with a Messerschmitt up your arse.''

I smiled. I remembered the quote.

'Myself, I prefer to live in a comfortable state of ataraxia,' continued Dr Eckersley. 'The truth is that I don't give a damn how they restructure the hospital. In my not unlimited experience, these reorganisations take place every few years at all similarly sized institutions. They are usually a result of one faction's attempt to gain power over existing managers or over another faction. I have no idea how or why I became chairman. I suspect it was probably because too many other people wanted the job and I was lumbered with it because I was the only person who didn't want it.' He pulled a pipe out of his pocket, examined it, thought about it, and then put it away. 'The big problem these days is that it is impossible to tell the good guys from the bad guys. Indeed, in public life there don't seem to be any good guys any more. I can't name one politician alive today whom I respect and whom I regard as entirely, or even mostly, decent and honourable. I don't mind betting that you can't either. Can you name one public figure you regard as a leader and whom you would follow into war, comfortable in the knowledge that you were doing the right thing?'

I didn't say anything, partly because it seemed clear that the question was rhetorical but also because I couldn't think of anything to say. The conversation seemed to be continuing quite well without any input from me.

'Difficult, eh?'

'Difficult,' I agreed. 'But you didn't run away because of the lack of honour among modern politicians. Why did you run away?'

'Excellent question, doctor! I thought you'd get round to asking me that. I ran away because I am fed up with my life. Or should it be 'fed up of my life?' I really don't care. I realised that my life was utterly pointless and without joy. There I was, enjoying the present and still thinking that I was the future and then suddenly I woke up and found that I was the past. And none of it was any fun!'

'Ah!' I managed to squeeze into the conversation. I also managed a nod.

'I have been meandering through life for a long time,' continued Dr Eckersley, 'and yesterday evening I suddenly realised, at long last, that if you wait for the right time and the right place to make a change then whatever you are planning or hoping for will never happen because the right time and place will never coincide. And so I seized the moment and fled. Carpe diem, as our old friend Horace used to say. Memento mori as someone else said.'

There was a superficial brashness about him but it wasn't difficult to see that underneath the brashness he was very glum.

'But what were you fleeing from?' I asked. I seemed to be asking the same question time and time again without getting anything resembling an answer.

'I was running away from my life. I've had enough of it. I am, to put in popular parlance, fed up to the back teeth.'

'In what way are you fed up?'

'If you knew my life then you would not be foolish enough to ask that question. But you don't know my life, do you?'

'No,' I agreed.

'All day long people come to me with their problems,' he complained. 'I know you could say that your job is the same but it isn't. You sit here in your rather wonderfully old-fashioned consulting room and you see a parade of real people with real problems. You know most of the people you see because you live amongst them. Sometimes you can help them. You stitch them up, or you give them some antibiotics or you give them a diet sheet or an exercise programme to follow. You can make a difference. I envy you for that.'

'But you see patients with psychiatric problems,' I pointed out. 'You see people with real mental health problems

– depression, anxiety and so on. You can help them get better. Doesn’t that make you feel good?’

‘Oh no, no, no, no!’ said Dr Eckersley emphatically. ‘I don’t have a normal practice. I have, for some reason, become known as a doctor who deals with fashionable neuroses. Celebrities of all kinds come to see me in their droves. Actors, actresses, film producers, film directors, television personalities, politicians – they all stumble through my door, weighed down by self-concern. Most of them seemed to live in an uncomfortable hinterland which lies between their memories, which are full of fear and inevitably decorated with regrets and recriminations, and an equally forbidding mixture of fearful anticipations. They rarely seemed to live in the present. And while they generously shared with me their eternally maudlin and self-obsessed thoughts, their chauffeur driven limousines clogged the hospital car park or were double parked outside my rooms in Harley Street.’

‘The wonder of my job was that I was not only allowed to ask these celebrities all sorts of impertinent questions but it was also tacitly understood by all parties, even the politicians, that I was entitled to honest answers. If a journalist from *The Times* or *The New York Times* had dared even to imagine asking questions of such impertinence, he would have been blackballed by Hollywood for a lifetime and a half without the option.’

‘But couldn’t you see some patients with real problems?’ I asked.

‘Not a chance. The hospital administrators loved having all these celebrities in the hospital. They were convinced that some of the glamour rubbed off on the institution and, indeed, on them. And since I was the jam pot which attracted these wretched people, I was regarded as unique and irreplaceable. I was constantly pressured to see more and more celebrities. The tabloid newspapers described me as ‘The Shrink to the Stars’. When the broadsheets mentioned my name in connection with one of my celebrity patients, they invariably described me as ‘the world renowned celebrity psychiatrist’. As a result, I myself became a little bit famous. And within the upper reaches of my own speciality, I was renowned for inventing a disorder which I described as ‘justifiable rational paranoia’. No psychiatrist is worth his salt until he has invented a new disease. And my disease is ‘justifiable rational paranoia’.’

‘I’m sorry to have to ask,’ I said hesitantly, ‘but what exactly is ‘justifiable rational paranoia’?’

‘It is a condition resembling paranoia but based on genuine and reasonably based fears and suspicions,’ said Dr Eckersley. ‘All my celebrity patients suffered from it. The nub of it is the concept that it isn’t clinical paranoia if the bastards really are out to get you. I saw a lot of politicians who suffered from it. And I saw company chairmen and chief executives with it. They had to pay more to see me because they weren’t famous and did not bring kudos to the hospital.’

‘It all sounds very…’ I began, and then realised that I wasn’t sure what I had intended to say.

‘That sums it up very accurately,’ said Dr Eckersley very quickly. ‘It is very something.’

‘Important? Satisfying?’

‘Sadly, it is neither of those. It is lucrative, yes. No one ever paid their own bills, of course, so I put a nought on the end of what would be absurd. Film studios paid the bills for the celebrities. Companies paid for the executives. And taxpayers paid the bills for the politicians. But the work was neither important nor satisfying. Nor, I fear, would I describe my work with medical students as important or satisfying. Did I mention that I am an Emeritus Professor of Clinical Psychiatry at the teaching hospital next door to the godforsaken place where I work?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I don’t think you did.’

‘Well, I am. Maybe I live too many lives. Do you remember that Oscar Wilde quote?’

“For he who lives more lives than one, more deaths than one must die.’ Do you mean that one?’

‘That’s the one. Maybe I’m dying bit by bit. I hate my work as a psychiatrist. And I have grown to hate the whole educational process.’

He stopped for a minute and just stared at me. It was rather disconcerting. ‘How long did your education last?’

I frowned and thought. ‘About twenty years, from start to finish.’

‘A quarter of a decent lifetime?’

‘I suppose so.’

‘And how much of the stuff you learned has been of any use to you?’

I laughed. I knew what he meant. I remember the years I spent being educated with mixed feelings.

‘You think that the entire educational process was pretty much a waste of time, money and energy, don’t you?’

‘Sometimes, I do.’

‘What were the two most important things you learned?’

‘How to read and how to write,’ I said, without hesitation.

‘Exactly, and once you had managed to learn how to read and write you were force fed information which you were made to digest and then regurgitate. Much of that information was of limited or negligible value. You will have spent much of your two decades of formal education learning and repeating information which has been of absolutely no value to you in your life. The modern educational process exists to filter and grade students in order to decide whether or not they are suitable to be promoted to the next level of the process. The final result is a certificate which is supposed to provide the owner with a ticket into the world of well-paid employment. But the whole irrelevant nonsense could be replaced with a single well devised intelligence and personality test and our education could be over by the age of six at the latest. We could then begin an apprenticeship for our chosen career.'

'But at medical school I learned a great deal.'

'Did you? Did you really? I'm willing to bet that you have already forgotten most of the stuff you were forced to learn at medical school. You were, were you not, taught the names of every bone, nerve, artery and vein in the human body?'

'Yes, it was an important part of the syllabus.'

'Can you remember all that stuff now?'

I thought for a moment. 'No, I don't suppose I can. No, I definitely can't.'

'And you learned reams of stuff about physiology and chemistry and masses of information about pharmacology that was out of date before you qualified.'

I nodded.

'Most of this stuff we learn is taught to us simply so that we can be made to jump through hoops. We are taught stuff, we are tested to make sure we've learned what we've been taught and then we're allowed to forget it all. I doubt if five per cent of the stuff you were taught at medical school was of any practical value. It was a long memory test; an obstacle course for the brain. Am I not right?'

I was feeling rather uncomfortable. 'I think you probably are,' I agreed.

I remembered that the stress of learning all the information we were fed was debilitating. By the end of my second year at medical school, around a third of my student colleagues were receiving treatment from psychiatrists. Nervous breakdowns and suicides were common. I didn't mention this.

'The two important attributes for a doctor are a more than average dollop of common sense and a questing mind,' said Dr Eckersley. 'Students are taught to believe what they are told. This is wrong. They should be taught to question everything they are told. They should be taught to develop their common sense.'

'I don't imagine that way of thinking goes down too well with the rest of the faculty at the university.'

Dr Eckersley laughed and slapped his hand on my desk. 'No, no, it doesn't, doctor. Indeed it doesn't. Worse still, modern education has become wedded to technology. I am encouraged to use visual aids and computers in my teaching. If I don't make use of their latest gadgets, some nerdy fellow comes round to tell me off. Did they have computers when you were a toddler?'

'My education took place in a low technology era,' I told him. 'At my infant school I wrote on a slate with a slate pencil. I had a damp cloth constantly at the ready so that I could, literally, wipe my slate clean. At grammar school, we had real inkwells filled with real ink. We used the ink and blotting paper to make rubber band pellets and we wrote with wooden pens with interchangeable nibs which seemed to start life already crossed. The technological high point of my education was reached when I was in the sixth form and one of our teachers started writing on the blackboard with yellow chalk.'

Dr Eckersley beamed. 'And look at you!' he said. He grinned broadly. 'You worked out fine, didn't you?'

'I'm not sure about that,' I said, smiling back at him. 'There are a few people who would probably disagree with you.'

'Oh, I would hope so! And if so then that'll be because you don't fit into one of those nice, little cookie cutter shapes they like people to fit into these days.'

'Perhaps,' I agreed, though I suspected that he was right. I still didn't seem to be getting anywhere. 'But what can I do to help you?' I asked.

'I don't know,' he said. 'Probably bugger all. Probably just listen to me for a while. That's maybe all I need.' Dr Eckersley paused and took a deep breath. 'Do you know, I have suddenly realised that it irks me that no one ever asks me how I feel. No one cares about me. On Mondays to Fridays, I spend eight hours a day listening to enormously rich people whingeing about their lives when ninety nine per cent of the time they've got bugger all to complain about it. Some of them want a bottle of happiness pills, but I haven't got any magic happiness pills. Most of them have absolutely bugger all wrong with them apart from oversized egos.' He sighed wearily. 'They wouldn't last five minutes if they tried to live my life.' He looked at me. 'They probably wouldn't last five minutes if they tried to live your life, either.'

'My life is fine, thank you. What's so bad about your life?'

'Everything you can think of. My wife left me for a man who runs a carpet shop. He is a franion and a deipnosophist, he drives an Aston Martin, is vice-captain of his golf club and pays £90 once a fortnight to have his hair crimped and dyed.'

'What's a franion and a deipnosophist?' I asked.

'Don't you speak English?'

‘I thought I did.’

‘A franion is a licentious person and a deipnosophist is someone who is skilled at making dinner party conversation.’

‘Right,’ I said.

I made a mental note of the two words, hoping that I could perhaps squeeze them into a conversation of my own. I was beginning to think that if I spent much more time with Dr Eckersley, I’d need to buy myself a bigger dictionary.

‘My daughter lives in America,’ continued the runaway psychiatrist. ‘She works for a drug company and when I heard from her last, she’d just helped invent a new drug that does nothing but is much admired because it has no side effects. They’re apparently very excited about it because they can create all sorts of needs for it. I haven’t heard from her for months, though I have no doubt that I will hear from her when she needs more money. She’s paid well but, like my ex-wife, seems to regard money as something that should be unloaded as soon as possible. My son Edgar does something with computers. He’s also in America, living in somewhere called Silicon Valley wherever that is. I told him that it sounds like a stripper’s cleavage but he has no sense of humour. He always needs money too. He’s got a job working for a company run by two fellows who are both called Steve. I think he said something about them selling apples. He says they’re going to make a fortune and he’s got a chance to get in on the ground floor. What a silly bugger. He wants me to put some money into the company. He says I’ll get rich beyond my wildest dreams if I buy £1,000 worth of shares. How can you make a fortune out of apples? I know a cove in the country who inherited a fruit farm. He tells me it’s a constant struggle to break even. I keep telling Edgar to get a proper job. He should sell carpets. That seems to me to be where the money is. I haven’t got any money. My wife and my children have been spending more than I’ve been earning for decades. All I’ve got to show for 30 years of slavery is an overpriced house. I think I may own my car and the suit I’m wearing. And I’ve got rotten health. I’ve suffered from gastritis for years but now I’ve acquired gout and gall stones and I seem to be working my way through the ‘G’s’ in the medical dictionary. Any minute now I expect to find that I’ve got a goitre and German measles. What else is there that begins with G?’

‘Glomerulonephritis?’ I suggested.

‘Oh splendid, I’ll have some of that,’ said Dr Eckersley gloomily. ‘I’ve probably got it already. I’ve got everything else beginning with ‘G’. I’ll probably get gangrene next. And gastroenteritis and gynaecomastia. And Gaucher’s disease. Have you heard of that one?’

‘Vaguely,’ I said. ‘I’d have to look it up.’

‘Me too. Not my line of country. And then there’s gingivitis and glossitis. And Gilbert’s disease and Gilchrist’s disease. Why do all these bloody people want diseases named after them? Goldenhar’s syndrome. What the hell is that? I’m buggered if I can remember. Guillain-Barre syndrome. Was that two people or one bloke called Guillain-Barre? And why do some of them have a disease named after them and some have a syndrome? If there’s an Eckersley’s something, I’d want it to be a syndrome rather than just a mouldy old disease.’

‘You seem depressed,’ I said.

‘Do I? Is that your diagnosis, doctor?’

‘Maybe. You’re the expert.’ Actually, he seemed to have remarkable mood swings. I wondered if he was suffering from manic depression.

He sat for quite a while, staring at his knees, and then he once again took his pipe out of his left hand jacket pocket and a leather pouch out of his right hand jacket pocket. ‘Do you mind?’ he asked.

‘Well,’ I began, ‘I’m afraid…’

‘Of course you do. Everyone does. My wife would never let me smoke in the house.’ He put the tobacco pouch away but kept hold of the pipe. He paused and thought for a moment. ‘Mind you, she’s gone now, hasn’t she? Good riddance. I can go home smoke in bed if I like.’ He thought for a moment. ‘But I don’t want to go home,’ he added sadly.

‘You can smoke in here,’ I said suddenly, changing my mind. I felt sorry for him though I wondered how I would get rid of the smell of tobacco afterwards.

‘May I? Really?’ He seemed childishly delighted by this.

I nodded.

‘Do you know, they even want to stop me smoking in the hospital? Some snotty little bastard administrators came waltzing into my consulting room and demanded that I put out my pipe. One of them was called Entwhistle and I think the other was called something else. They said someone had complained about the smell. Why do people have to complain about everything? It’s not as if I was smoking in an operating theatre. I would never do that. Not with all those explosive gases around.’ As he spoke, he packed the bowl of his pipe with tobacco from his pouch. ‘I sometimes think that half the people who give up smoking end up taking tranquillisers to calm them down, and although it’s heresy to say so, I’m not entirely sure that the cigarettes weren’t doing them less harm than the drugs we give them. It wasn't a patient who complained about my smoking. I'm pretty sure about that. I think it was Doctor Bloody Phillips. He's a righteous do-gooder who strongly objects to anyone enjoying themselves. He complained about one of the nurses – said her skirt was too short and she was wearing seamed stockings. Apparently, they have rules about things like that. At Christmas, he insisted that we all drank fruit punch without any alcohol in case we upset any Muslims in attendance. The only Muslim working at the hospital is an anaesthetist and he drinks like a fish.'

'How long do you think you have been feeling depressed?'

'How long is a piece of string?'

'But you would agree that you seem depressed?'

'I'm a bit under the weather, maybe. But to be honest with you I would say I was confused and angry rather than depressed. Wouldn't you agree? It's a tricky diagnosis – depression. My problem is that I have no life. Oh yes, of course, I have a life. I have a job. I am paid intolerably well. I have a car with six galvanised iron buckets in the boot. But I don't feel that I am living my life. I'm not in control. I'm playing a part. I'm an actor playing this fellow Eckersley but as the actor I have no other life; no life of my own. I've given myself over completely to this creature. Does any of this make sense?'

'It does,' I said. 'Have you any history of depression or mental illness?'

'I'm a bloody psychiatrist! Have you ever known a sane psychiatrist?'

I smiled. I had to admit I couldn't think of one. I once knew a GP who worked as a part time psychiatrist. He went a bit potty and put a big bowl of drugs on his waiting room table. He then put a notice by it saying 'Help Yourself' and went out to play golf. Another psychiatrist I knew went very potty and refused to prescribe any drugs that didn't come in the form of red tablets or capsules. No one noticed anything odd about his prescribing habits for three months and then the hospital pharmacist noticed that he'd prescribed copious quantities of red iron tablets for 42 patients in a row. The psychiatrist's legal representative claimed that his client had prescribed the iron tablets because he'd believed his patients to be suffering from anaemia. This argument rather fell apart when it was shown that the doctor had done no blood tests on the patients he had diagnosed as suffering from anaemia. In mitigation, the psychiatrist claimed that the iron tablets he had prescribed had probably done less harm than the tranquillisers and antidepressants which any other psychiatrist might have prescribed. A third psychiatrist, who was a good friend of mine, once invited me to lunch at a smart hotel where he was staying. As we studied the menu, he was called to the telephone. He never came back to the table and I was left with a bill which pushed my credit card into dangerous territory. Four months later, the doctor who had disappeared suddenly remembered our luncheon and telephoned me from Dubai to apologise. I told him that if he hadn't been a psychiatrist, he would have probably been prescribed happy tablets and put into some sort of institution. He agreed with me.

'What made you come into my surgery today?' I asked Dr Eckersley.

'You're the only damned doctor in the village,' he replied with disarming honesty.

'That's true,' I agreed, though his blunt response didn't answer the question. 'But what I really meant to ask was, why did you come to see me? What did you want me to do for you?'

'Dunno, really. Funny you should ask that. I suppose I wanted someone to talk to – just to help get things straight in my own mind. That chap at the shop was all right for a while, though more of a talker than a listener, but he kept selling me things. I left him and his shop when he tried to sell me half a hundred weight of beetroot. What was I going to do with half a hundred weight of beetroot? The chap said they'd keep and I could use them in salads, but I told him that I doubted if I could eat enough salads to use up half a hundred weight of beetroot before they went off. He said I could pickle them and he could sell me six gallons of vinegar and two dozen pickling jars which would doubtless do the job very nicely. I think it was when he offered me the vinegar that I realised I had to get away. Still, it was nice of him to offer them to me. He said that he was able to let me have them at half the normal retail price because I was such a valued customer. I didn't expect you to sort my life out and I don't want pills. That's the last thing I want. I wouldn't take anything so it would be a waste of time prescribing pills for me. The rubbish doctors prescribe for patients who are mentally ill is astonishing. You need to be bloody fit and healthy to survive the stuff that's handed out these days.' He stopped for a moment and then added: 'You should perhaps get down to that shop and stock up on some of that beetroot while it's still on offer.'

'Are you staying in the village?'

'No.' He pulled out a little silver tool and packed down the tobacco in the bowl of his pipe. 'Well not yet. I might though if I can find a room somewhere. Seems a pretty out of the way spot. Do you get much through traffic?'

'No, not really.'

'Just people like me who are lost?'

I laughed. 'How did you come to be here so early this morning? You said you'd been in the waiting room for a couple of hours.'

‘I ran away last night and drove west. Isn’t that what they used to say in America? ‘Go west young man!’?’

‘I think so,’ I smiled. ‘What time did you leave London?’

‘Dunno. About midnight I think. I had a pizza and half a bottle of red wine in an Italian café near my house and then just got into the car and set off.’ He finished packing down his tobacco and put away the silver tool.

‘You didn’t bother to pack anything?

‘I didn’t even have a toothbrush until the chap at your village shop sold me a few.’

‘A few?’

‘He only had them in packs of twelve. He said he wasn’t allowed to split up the packs. Something to do with the Common Market.’

‘And then, after the pizza, you just drove west?’

‘Yes. I went to Bournemouth but it seemed shut so I didn’t stop there for very long.’

‘What time did you get to Bournemouth?’

‘About three I suppose. It was all dark. Everyone seemed to be asleep. I found an all-night petrol station and bought some petrol and a cheese sandwich. I think it was supposed to be cheese. It smelt of petrol and tasted of chipboard. Not that I’ve ever eaten chipboard. But it tasted as I suspect chipboard might taste. And then I decided to go to Lynmouth. I went there once when I was a boy. I remember I was happy there. It was a nice little village with a river and a beach.’ He took out a box of matches. ‘I expect it’s changed a lot,’ he added.

‘Lynmouth hasn’t changed at all,’ I told him. ‘And I doubt if it ever will. But Bilbury is quite a few miles away from Lynmouth. Did you lose your way or change your mind about Lynmouth?’

‘What’s Bilbury?’

‘The name of the village where you are now.’

‘Oh. Is it? I suppose I got lost. The lanes around here all look the same and there aren’t many signposts. I parked in a gateway and slept in the car for a while. Then I woke up with backache and stopped at the little shop and bought a pie and a box of aspirin. Actually, I only wanted a pie, some aspirin and a cup of tea but the man in the shop managed to sell me a box of six pies and some other stuff. He hadn’t got any tea but he sold me some tins of soup though I didn’t have anything to heat them up with. I’ve never much liked cock-a-leekie soup but it was all he had. I must say he seemed a very good salesman. I do remember him telling me that the buckets were a once-in-a-lifetime bargain.’

‘You bought a bucket?’

‘Yes. No. Well, actually, I bought six buckets. All galvanised, whatever that means. Doesn’t it mean they have zinc on them? To stop them going rusty I suppose. I have no idea what I’m going to do with six galvanised iron buckets. Would you like them? I can let you have them at a very reasonable price. They come with a five year guarantee. Nothing written down you understand but I expect it’s a transferable guarantee. He seemed the sort of bloke you could trust with your life.’

‘I think we’re OK for buckets, thank you. And Mr Marshall directed you here?’

‘Who’s Mr Marshall?’

‘He’s the man who runs the local shop. His name is Peter Marshall.’ I was still smiling inside at Dr Eckersley’s description of Peter as ‘the sort of bloke you could trust with your life’. I couldn’t wait to tell Thumper, Patchy and Frank.

‘Ah, you know him? Yes, I suppose you would; you both being local. He’s a wonderful fellow that Marshall. He sold me the hat.’ He pointed to the watch cap which he’d placed on my desk. ‘Marvellous hats those are, you know. You should get yourself one. They’re waterproof, windproof and everything else proof. If you stood underneath a nuclear bomb, the only thing left would be the hat. Mr Marshall told me that they’re guaranteed not to blow off your head even in a hurricane. And he said they float if they land in water. I’ve always been keen on hats. When I was a boy, the other kids spent their pocket money on marbles, comics and sweets but I used to save my coins and then buy hats whenever I could afford them. By the age of 10, I had a fine collection of headgear: a bowler, a trilby, a flat cap or two, a sombrero, a ten gallon cowboy hat which was my pride and joy, a top hat which I found in a junk shop, a fedora and a deerstalker with flaps. I used to keep them all under my bed and try them on in my bedroom. I never wore them when I went out, of course.’ He paused, apparently slightly embarrassed at how much he had told me about himself. He coughed and then continued. ‘But I have to admit that these are pretty damned special, don’t you think? You really ought to buy yourself one. One thing that has puzzled me though – if they never blow off, how would one ever land in water and float? I suppose if you were at a regatta and you took off your hat and threw it in the air while cheering, the thing might land in the water.’

‘I’ve got one,’ I told him. ‘Everyone I know has got one of those hats.’

We’d all bought our watch caps from Peter when he’d brought them into the Duck and Puddle. I vividly remembered the day we’d bought our hats. In an attempt to prove that his headgear helped the body retain heat, Peter had stood outside wearing little else but one of his hats. When he'd come back into the pub he'd been blue with cold and shivering.

'Mr Marshall told me that they're called Chapeau Watch Caps and that they are thermally insulated,' continued Dr Eckersley. 'As far as I can remember 'chapeau' is French for hat but I suppose that's probably the name of the manufacturer, eh? French, I assume. Or they might as well call them Hat Watch Caps which would be a pretty damned stupid name. I can't stand the French – they're humourless and nauseatingly self-important. Disorganised too – most of them couldn't organise a piss up in a vineyard.'

I didn't tell Dr Eckersley but Peter had bought the hats from a wholesaler who had, in turn, purchased the entire stock from a Canadian manufacturer who had gone bankrupt. It was, I assumed, the Canadian connection which explained the French name.

'Apparently these hats are wind proof and rain proof and they absorb the sun's rays, thereby protecting the head in all weathers,' said Dr Eckersley still enthusing about his new hat. 'They retain more heat than any other hat ever made. I really think everyone should have one. Apparently, they automatically adjust to fit the size of the head of the wearer. I suppose it's something special to do with the material. Mr Marshall said they were very reasonably priced too. I bought three though, I'm not sure why since I've only got one head and he said they are guaranteed never to wear out.'

'Are you taking any medication?' I asked him, trying to drag the conversation away from hats.

'Never take anything,' he said. 'If I took pills I'd have to stop drinking alcohol and I don't want to do that. Besides the pills they make for treating loonies are all complete rubbish.'

'How much do you drink?' I asked.

'Alcohol, you mean?'

'Yes, alcohol.'

'I drink. Probably more than I should. I think I'd become an inveterate worrier if I didn't drink occasionally. I wasn't always a worrier but I think I could become one.'

'What would you worry about?'

'Everything. I would worry about everything. I would worry about my patients. Bloody silly thing to do. None of them worries about me. I pretend that I don't worry but I do. I try to give the impression of being a 'devil take me to the hindmost' sort of rogue. But I'm not. I'm a sham; an actor playing myself. I want to be a rogue but I'm not.'

'So how much do you drink?'

'Ah, you're being a doctor again!'

'Yes. How much do you drink?'

'Not a lot. I never drink until the sun's over the yardarm.'

'When is that? I've never really understood what it means. It sounds nautical.'

'It's about 11 a.m. in northern latitudes, so I'm told. That's the time when the sun rises up above the upper mast spars of a sailing ship floating around in the North Atlantic.' He struck a match and lit his pipe. It took him a couple of minutes to get it going. 'Mind you, I've never been on a sailing ship so it's all a bit moot, wouldn't you say?' Thick smoke curled from the bowl of his pipe. To my surprise, it smelt rather sweet and not at all unpleasant.

'I bought some dog food too,' he said suddenly. 'And a basket of radishes. And tins of custard. About 36 tins of the stuff, I think.

'From Peter Marshall?'

'It's the only shop round here. So it says on a notice outside. I don't think he'd lie about that, do you?'

'No. It is the only shop in the village. Do you have a dog?'

'No, not actually, no I don't have a dog per se. No, I don't have a dog. But you never know. I might get one. Or one might attach itself to me. Or I might find a hungry stray. Or if the economy falters we might all find ourselves bartering with dog food instead of money.'

'How much dog food did you buy?'

'I think there were 24 tins in a crate. Your Mr Marshall wanted me to take two crates but I was running a bit short on cash and he said he preferred cash. He said cash was better for the economy in some way. I didn't understand his argument but he seemed convinced by it and I didn't like to argue with him.'

'So, how much alcohol do you drink?'

'I have a glass of beer with my lunch in the pub – maybe two. To be honest, I need them to get me through the afternoon. And then in the evenings I drink martinis but I like them without any damned vermouth in them. And I certainly don't have damned fruit and vegetables floating on the top.' He stopped for a moment and then added, as though in explanation: 'No lemon and no olives.'

'How many very dry martinis do you drink in an evening?'

'Oh, no more than two or three,' said Dr Eckersley. 'But I like them in a tumbler not one of those fancy little lady's glasses.' He squinted at me. 'I wouldn't mind a drink now if you have one. A glass of beer would be nice if you're having one yourself.'

'I haven't got any alcohol with me,' I said. 'Seriously, how long have you been depressed?'

'Have we decided that I'm depressed? I must have missed that part of the conversation.'

'Well you do seem rather low.'

'Would you say so? I'd describe myself as euphoric to be honest. But then you don't know me from Adam so it's probably tricky for you to make a judgement. I think if I were making a diagnosis I'd probably be inclined to go for something along the lines of what I've always thought of as manic depression but which some of my younger colleagues now insist on calling it bipolar disorder.'

Dr Eckersley puffed at his pipe and thought for a while. 'But if we make the assumption that I am depressed then I'd say I've been that way for about 30 years,' he replied at last. 'I was happy enough in my 20s when I was working as a registrar in general medicine. But then I did an idiotic thing and decided to specialise in psychiatry.'

'And you've been depressed since then?' I asked, incredulously.

'I would say so,' he said firmly. He thought for a moment. 'I would definitely say so. It was my wife's idea, don't you know. She used to read the British Medical Journal – not the juicy bits but the job adverts at the back. She noticed that there were very few posts for consultant physicians but loads of jobs for consultant psychiatrists. If I'd stayed in general medicine, I'd have been a registrar until I was 40 or more. But as a psychiatrist, I got a job as a consultant when I was just 30. More money and status, you see. That's what the wife wanted. Her sister was married to a neurosurgeon. There were no consultant jobs for neurosurgeons so her husband was a registrar and I was a consultant. All the difference in the world. It meant that my Clarissa could lord it over her sister. Funny isn't it how our lives are influenced by the strangest things? I've always admired those people who plan their lives. Mine has just lurched from one crisis to another leaving me exhausted by experience, weary of a world of never ending confusion and bewildered by a litany of frustrations, disappointments and injustices. Do you know, when I was young, younger than you are now, I once believed that if I worked hard I would one day be able to clear away all the crap and concentrate on the important aspects of life: doing good work and having fun. Ha! Now I just feel twice as old as time itself.'

'Clarissa is your wife?'

'Huh? What?'

'I asked if Clarissa is your wife?'

'My ex-wife, thank the Good Lord. She's the wife of the carpet fellow now. She's Mrs Whateverhisnameis. He's welcome to her. I expect she gets all her shagpile carpets at a good discount. She went off me when her sister's husband finally became a consultant. She'd lost her edge then, you see. Socially a consultant neurosurgeon is a bit grander than a consultant psychiatrist. So she thought, anyway. I remember her saying that among the ladies at the golf club it was generally agreed that psychiatrists were only one rung above dermatologists and orthopaedic surgeons, so in her eyes I'd let her down. She blamed me for not hanging on and becoming a consultant physician. She had an affair with a barrister and then went off with a weather forecaster for a while. But although she thought he was famous because he was on the telly, he didn't have any money. They don't pay weather forecasters much, you know. Then she found the carpet guy at the golf club.'

'The one with the Aston Martin and the expensive hair?'

'You know him then? I wouldn't have thought you'd have known him. I don't think he comes round this neck of the woods.'

'No, I don't know him. But you mentioned him before.'

'Oh yes, I suppose I did. He's an obnoxious little runt. He has to sit on two cushions to see over the steering wheel in his Aston Martin. I'm not obsessed with him but I do think of him from time to time.'

'Wasn't your wife impressed by your status as the psychiatrist who looks after the celebrities?'

'Oh she was, indeed she was. But she left me seven years ago and it was only three years ago that I began to achieve my current notoriety. It began when an American movie star had a well-publicised nervous breakdown and came to see me because my consulting rooms happened to be close to his hotel. In fact, he hadn't had a nervous breakdown at all. He'd had a hissy fit and wasn't sure how to go back to work without losing face. I sat and listened to him whinge for three hours and he left my consulting room a healed man. The producers of the film he was making at Pinewood were so thrilled that they sung my praises to the media. It was generally assumed that I must have been able to offer some mystical words of wisdom. But the truth was that after the three hours of whingeing, I stood up and told him what a pathetic, self-obsessed, ungrateful little twat he was. I pointed out that millions of people envied his lifestyle, his wealth and the trail of starlets queuing at his dressing room door. I then told him to grow up, piss off and get back to work.'

'And that did the trick?'

‘He congratulated me, paid me the biggest fee any psychiatrist in the world has ever received and told me that he would tell the world that I had restored him to perfect mental health. He explained that by healing him I had saved him from embarrassment since he could now explain that his unforgiveable behaviour on the film set had been a result of a mental illness. He told the world I had helped him conquer his problems by unveiling his inner demons, exposing them to the light and thereby exorcising them completely. It was all absolute bollocks, of course.’

‘And after that other celebrities wanted to see you?’

‘I became the fashionable psychiatrist who understood how celebrities worked, or did not work. My working hours were block booked by producers and agents and managers and lawyers who wanted their celebrity clients restoring to health and good working condition. I had, entirely by accident, invented a new medical speciality: healing people who had nothing wrong with them. They didn’t need treatment. All they really needed was slapped legs and to be sent to bed without any supper.’

‘And now you’re fed up with it all?’

Dr Eckersley looked at me, ‘Wouldn’t you be? Wouldn’t anyone be fed up? I am a fake doctor who sees fake patients. I earn more in a day than you probably earn in a year. Funny thing is that I always seem to be broke. I have an accountant who stuffs all the money into some sort of offshore scheme. At least he says he does. He pays my bills and gives me £500 a week in spending money. My wife, as you will have surmised, is now desperate to come back to me. She rings me five times a week to tell me that she misses me terribly.’

I stared at him in astonishment. How, I wondered but did not ask, could a doctor earn so much money that he received £500 a week in spending money. And with all the important bills paid for you how could anyone get through £500 a week? Dr Eckersley was clearly living in another world. Actually, he seemed to be living on a different planet. I was not envious in any degree but my surprise was simply engendered by the fact that I had never in my life been overcome with such riches. A country GP and author of books does not find gold raining down upon him in embarrassingly large quantities. I had known what I thought of at the time as real wealth only three times in my life. At the age of 14, I won £3 in a writing competition organised by the *Sunday Times* newspaper. (That was in the day when £3 to a 14-year-old boy seemed to offer an interminable supply of marbles, comics and bottles of dandelion and burdock.) At the age of 15, I had won £10 with a £1 premium bond an aunt had bought me for Christmas. I had not been thrilled by the gift of the premium bond but the £10 win was joyfully received. And at the age of 20 I had been so excited at passing an examination at medical school that I had rushed to the nearest bookies and put 10 shillings on a horse called ‘Notachance’ (I was a contrarian even in betting terms) which had romped home at 12 to 1 and left me wishing I could bottle the day and cart it around with me for the rest of my life, dipping into a minute here and an hour there whenever the need arose.

‘Couldn’t you just give up the celebrities and start seeing real people again?’ I asked. ‘Real people with real problems?’

Dr Eckersley laughed. ‘Oh, I tried that,’ he said. ‘But it proved to be quite impossible. The hospital administrators had instructed the secretarial staff to book only rich and important people into my clinic. They like having the place littered with celebrities. Besides, the agents and managers and other hangers on made huge donations to the hospital and the administrators didn’t want to give up all that lovely lolly. One of my patients paid for a new X-ray unit. It’s all peanuts for them, of course, and they get yards of wonderful publicity. The amount of money slopping around looking for a good home is quite scary. None of that really matters because no ordinary doctor refers real patients to me anymore. They all assume I’m too busy, too important and too expensive to deal with any patient who doesn’t have a stache of multi-million pound contracts in their Louis Vuitton briefcase.’

‘So you’re stuck with your life?’

‘I was indeed, as you say, stuck with my life. And I didn’t like it.’ He puffed at his pipe and then smiled at me. It was a strange, rather appealing, lop sided smile. ‘And so I ran away.’ He puffed at his pipe again. Plumes of sweet smelling smoke drifted up towards the ceiling. ‘Now do you think I’m just depressed?’

I thought for a while and then shook my head. ‘No, I suppose not. But why did you come and see me?’ I’d asked him this several times because I still wasn’t sure what he wanted me to do.

‘Needed to talk to someone,’ he said bluntly. ‘I’d have stayed and talked to that shopkeeper chum of yours but if I’d told him my problems he’d have just sold me more buckets and another crate of dog food. He’d have probably sold me the shop.’

‘I’m not sure I know what to do to help you,’ I told him.

‘You’ve already done what I needed,’ said Dr Eckersley. ‘You’ve lent me your ears. It was what Caesar wanted and it was what I needed.’ He stood up. ‘You’ve given me good advice and I know what to do.’

‘But I haven’t given you any advice!’ I protested.

‘Exactly,’ said Dr Eckersley. ‘That’s the best sort of advice there is. Is there a pub in the village? Somewhere I can stay for a few nights while I have a look around and decide what to do with the rest of my life?’

‘You want to stay in Bilbury?’

‘I have a feeling that no one will ever find me here,’ said Dr Eckersley. ‘So now that I’ve run away I’ll stay run away for a while. Who knows I might run away permanently and stay around here. It seems a good place. And if I need to buy dog food or buckets I know where to go.’

‘What about your celebrity patients? And your hospital committee? And your medical students?’

‘Nuts to them all,’ said Dr Eckersley. ‘Nuts to them all with double knobs on.’

I picked up the telephone on my desk and rang the Duck and Puddle.

‘Have you got a room free?’ I asked Gilly, who answered the call.

She said they had.

I told her that the room was now let and that the occupier would be with her in a few minutes.

‘You’ve got a room at the Duck and Puddle,’ I told Dr Eckersley. ‘When I introduce you to Frank and Gilly I shall tell them your real name for these are my friends and there is no way I’m going to lie to them about you.’ I assured him that if you told Frank and Gilly a secret then it remained a secret.

Dr Eckersley accepted this without a murmur of protest. ‘Quite understand,’ he said. ‘You can’t have a stranger sailing into harbour under false colours.’

‘It’s up to you whether or not you tell everyone else your real name. If you think people are really going to be looking for you…’

‘I think I shall be Dr Crippen,’ said Dr Eckersley. ‘Dr Hawley Harvey Crippen from Michigan in the United States.’

‘People may suspect you are travelling under an alias,’ I said.

‘If they ask, I shall tell them that the original Dr Crippen was my great uncle and that although I have spent my life trying to live down the connection, I steadfastly refuse to change my name simply to avoid the unwanted and associated notoriety. I shall add that my father was intensely proud of the family connection, that he believed my great uncle to be innocent of the crime for which he was hung, and that he gave me my great uncle’s Christian names as a sign of respect for the only member of the family to be famous for anything other than hog stealing. If I am pressed I shall add that my great uncle on my mother’s side was a notorious hog rustler who was hung for stealing three hogs and a bushel of fresh beetroot.’

‘Isn’t there a risk that people will then become curious about you, and take an interest in you because of your infamous relative?’

‘Indeed there is,’ agreed Dr Eckersley. ‘But no one looking for Dr Eckersley would think him stupid enough to register as a guest in a pub under the name ‘Dr Crippen’, would they?’

I laughed.

‘Anyone seeing the name will believe my story because it is too absurd not to believe.’

‘I’ve got some house calls to do,’ I told him. ‘I’ve got to go past the pub so follow me in your car and you won’t get lost.’

Dr Eckersley, soon to metamorphose into Dr Crippen, thought this was a splendid idea. He put on his Chapeau watch cap and we left.

Before we set off in our two car convoy, he opened his boot and insisted on giving me the six galvanised buckets which he had purchased from Peter Marshall. He refused my attempt to pay for them.

The Psychiatrist Who Ran Away (Part 2: The Metamorphosis)

Dr Eckersley settled in well at the Duck and Puddle.

Indeed, he settled in so well that when I called in at the pub a couple of days later, I found him standing behind the bar reading a copy of *The Times*, which was spread out on the counter in front of him, and clearly settled as comfortably and as confidently as if he had been stationed there for a decade or more. He was puffing happily at his pipe, which was stuck in the corner of his mouth as though it had been welded into position. We were the only people in the snug.

'You look well established,' I said.

'I am the new barman,' said Dr Eckersley. 'On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays I stand behind the bar and provide the world with refreshment. I am, I believe, on approval. I sound like a packet of stamps supplied through the mail but I feel as though I have come home. My only complaint is that the post of barman does not come with a uniform.'

'Why on earth do you want a uniform?

'It would help me establish my new position in my mind. As a psychiatrist, I was always conscious that whatever advice was likely to be followed. As a barman, I can offer advice with absolutely no sense of responsibility. A uniform would remind me that I can talk to people without having to feel any responsibility at all and it would help me remain aware that if I feel bored by a conversation, I can wander off and do something else saying something like 'Please excuse me, I have to go and rebore the limitation pipes connecting the spygot to the pump handle. If I don't do it regularly the spygot pipe gets crapsulated and Mr Parsons gets terribly upset.'

'Do people accept that sort of rubbish?'

'Of course they do! As long as you say it earnestly and with utter conviction then people will believe anything. It's jargon, do you see? People expect jargon and they respect it. These days everyone has their own jargon. Social workers, policemen, lawyers, doctors – all have jargon. A uniform would help people accept the fact that I am, as a barman, a person with jargon at his disposal.'

'What sort of uniform would you like?'

'Oh, I don't know, something simple but at the same time distinguished. The barmen at the best London establishments are all togged out in snazzy waistcoats, usually in some bright colour, with matching bowties. They're not as smartly done out as the doormen, of course, for the fellows burdened with the responsibility of opening and closing the door are invariably dressed in the sort of ceremonial uniform usually worn by the Commanders in Chief of the Ruritarian Army Forces. But a bright waistcoat would be acceptable and would give my position the gravitas it deserves.'

'Have a word with Gilly,' I suggested. 'I'm sure she could run you up something from a nice piece of old curtain material.'

Dr Eckersley sniffed at my comment and then leant forward and lowered his voice to a sotto voce stage whisper. 'I must say,' he said, 'that my work has been made easier by the fact that my predecessor was, I gather, an unmitigated frample. As a barman, I find that I am free to offer simple words of advice and comfort without expectations or responsibility. I like to argue the bad side of an argument; to put forward and then sustain the illogical, apparently indefensible and perverse point of view.'

I laughed at this.

'You may laugh! You may sneer. But I spent a very pleasant hour yesterday evening arguing that the Government should give everyone daily coupons for free cake. I managed to persuade a couple in matching puce anoraks that it is cake not bread which is the staff of life. I knew I'd got them when one of the pair, I think it is was a woman but it was difficult to tell, asked me what sort of cake I thought was most beneficial. I told her a triple layer sponge cake with cream and raspberry jam filling had been proven to be nutritious and to contain elements proven to combat a wide range of mental health disorders.'

I stared at him in astonishment. Just a day or so earlier, this man had been a Professor of Psychiatry and an eminent Harley Street consultant.

'In my previous life I had to attempt to be rational and sensible but I have now realised that these are not my natural inclinations. You cannot begin to imagine the sense of freedom which I now feel.' He blew out a great cloud of smoke and leant across the bar towards me. 'I was born to be a barman,' he confided.

'I know what unmitigated is, but what's a framble?'

'A frample, you ignoramus, not a framble! A frample is a sour or peevish person.' Suddenly he stood upright and hit himself on the forehead with the palm of his hand. 'My apologies, doctor. I am forgetting my duty as the on approval bartender in this establishment. What can I get you to drink?'

'Nothing at the moment, thank you. I just popped in to see that you'd settled in well. And I'm delighted to see that you have.'

'I love it here!' he said. 'My host and hostess are good people. The food is excellent, the accommodations are a little cramped but satisfactory and there is ample room to store my radishes, my custard, my dog food and my new hats. The work is convivial to say the least. I have, as they say, landed on my feet. There are things which are vital to our lives; absolutely crucial things which we could not easily live without. In this category I put breathing, fresh drinking water and sewage pipes. All these are essential. We could not live without them. But they are not things which give our lives excitement; these things are not important to us personally. Oxygen and sewage pipes are vital but they aren't important to me as an individual.'

'So what is important to you?'

'Peace, honesty and a chance to live a simple life,' he said. 'I needed to get away from the hypocrisy and superficiality of metropolitan life.'

I leant across so that I could whisper to him. 'By the way, are you now Dr Eckersley or Dr Crippen?'

'Neither,' he replied in what I think he thought was a sotto voce comment but would, I believe, have more accurately been described as a stage whisper. 'My name is now Gengolphus Stottle. I am reborn. With age comes cynicism and weariness and the old Dr Eckersley was as cynical and as weary as you can get. However, the newly born Gengolphus Stottle is alive and full of enthusiasm. I have changed my name, my mind and my life.'

'Gengolphus Stottle?'

'But you can call me Harry.'

'Harry?'

'Do you have to behave like an echo chamber? Or is this annoying habit of yours a ploy?'

'A ploy?'

'There you go again!'

'No, I'm curious. What sort of ploy?'

'It's a ploy favoured by those of my patients who were in politics. They repeat whatever you say so that they have time to catch up with the conversation, look for any loopholes or swampy bits, assess the risks and then think up a suitable lie in response.'

'No, no, it wasn't a ploy. I just didn't understand.'

'If you're going to question everything I say, we won't get anywhere very quickly.'

'No, I can see that. But why are you called Harry if your name is Gengolphus?'

'Harry' is a name which was given to me by Mr Parsons.'

'Mr Parsons?'

'Mr Parsons is the landlord of this esteemed establishment and, of course, my employer.'

'Ah, you mean Frank.'

'As a mere employee, and a junior one at that, in terms of employment if not of years, I do not feel it behoves me to refer to my employer by his Christian name.'

'No one will know who you mean if you call him Mr Parsons. He's Frank. Everyone calls him Frank. And try not to talk like that. You sound like a Professor of Psychiatry who's run away to the country to escape from himself.'

The new barman looked concerned. 'Do you really think so? I thought I sounded like a friendly man of the people; a man born to turn on the taps which release the elixir of life. By the way, the beer sold in this pub is like nothing I've ever tasted. They don't sell stuff like this in London, you know. We sell a beer called 'Old Restoration' which must have a higher alcoholic content than vodka.'

'Yes, I know about 'Old Restoration' and I'm afraid I do think you still sound a tad like a Professor of Psychiatry. And I don't understand why Frank calls you 'Harry' when you told him your name was Gengolphus? And where on earth did you get the name Gengolphus Stottle anwyay?'

'Mr Parsons seemed to think it a good jape to call me Harry. I think he liked the name 'Harry Stottle'. If you think about it, I'm sure you'll see why. Try saying it loud. I rather like it myself. Besides, the name Harry has for centuries been a good, solid English name though it is, of course, of German origin. I may change my name by deed poll. Get rid of Gengolphus and replace it with Harry.'

'Can you do that? Change your name?'

'Oh yes! I had a patient who did it. You go and see a solicitor, fill in some forms and change your name,' explained Harry. 'Once you've changed your name you can get a new passport and driving licence in your new name. You can do this as often as you like. And if you keep your old passport and driving licence but tell the authorities that you've lost them, you can have several identities. As far as the world at large is concerned, there is nothing to link the various names. You can open new bank accounts with your new name and keep your old bank accounts under your original name. You can then write yourself a cheque in your old name and put the money into an account in your new name. You can open an account abroad and then go back to the UK and change your name yet again. As soon as you have a new name and bank account, you rent a property and acquire some utility bills. Bingo! You've got brand new identities.'

'How on earth do you know all this?' I asked him.

'Patient of mine did it all the time,' said Harry. 'In books and films the characters who want a new identity always go rooting around graveyards. They find the name and birth date of a child who died early in life, someone who would now be approximately their age, and they get hold of a copy of the birth certificate. They can then use the information they've got to apply for a passport and so on. It's all very complicated and risky. Simply changing your name by deed poll is much easier.'

'But there's no need to change your name by deed poll because Gengolphus isn't your name!' I pointed out.

'No, but I could change my name from Eckersley to Stottle,' said Harry. He thought for a moment. 'I think I might do that.'

'Why did you call yourself Gengolphus Stottle in the first place?' I asked him. I was clinging to the edge of the conversation by my fingertips. 'Where the devil did you get that name?'

'Oh, that's easy. I once had a patient called Gengolphus Stottle. He was a film star; a most interesting fellow with an endless series of hang-ups. They were for me very profitable hang-ups. He was very famous and whenever he was in my consulting rooms, there would be a crowd of screaming girls gathered outside. For months, I assumed the girls had somehow managed to follow him to my rooms but he confessed one day that the girls were all unemployed actresses who had been hired by his management team. The girls were paid film extras' day rate to stand around, shout the star's name, demand autographs and hurl items of underwear in his direction. At the start of each day, they were all issued with three assorted items of underwear which the management team obtained wholesale from a store in the East End of London. All this nonsense worked and everyone assumed that my patient was hugely popular. You would recognise the stage name by which everyone knew him but his real name was Gengolphus Stottle. I find that Americans in show business often have very strange real names. That is probably why so many of them adopt a nom de guerre when they are working. You can't imagine the name Gengolphus Stottle lit up on a cinema marquee, can you? It's difficult to picture a crowd of screaming girls shouting out 'Gengolphus, I love you Gengolphus. I want you to have my baby, Gengolphus!' However, I always rather liked the name so I appropriated it. He won't mind because he's dead. One of his many peccadilloes was that he liked to spend his evenings dressed as a baby and he always slept with a dummy in his mouth. Unfortunately, the rubber nipple came off the pacifier and he choked on it. His managers told the fans that he'd died of a broken heart after his pet dog had been run over. A medical colleague of mine signed the appropriate certificate and arranged for a speedy cremation. His management agreed that was the only way to ensure that his back catalogue continued to churn out decent profits.'

'How awful! Had his pet dog really been run over?'

'Whose pet dog?'

'Gengolphus's.'

'Oh, Gengolphus didn't have a dog. He couldn't stand animals of any kind. He hated anything on four legs. There were wild rabbits on his land in Arizona and he used to mow them down with a souped-up Uzi. He was a terrible shot and wounded two assistants, though he did once put a very neat line of bullet holes in a Buick which was driving past. His managers had to buy the family a new car and pay all the little girl's hospital expenses. The family were very nice about it. Gengolphus sent them all signed photographs and tickets for the premier of his next movie. The little girl couldn't make it but the parents were taken there in a stretch limousine and they were thrilled. I think the appropriate phrase is that they were 'over the moon'.'

I stared at him uncomprehending.

'It's a different world,' he explained with a shrug.

I just nodded. I was actually quite shocked. I suppose I was naïve in those days. 'It all sounds very manipulative and deceitful,' I said at last.

Harry laughed. 'Film stars are no more dishonest than politicians or company bosses. The world I see is full of spin and misdirection; corruption is endemic and democracy is just a word that used to mean something.' He sighed. 'I just got tired of it all. I want to find an oasis of peace; somewhere as yet untouched by the 1970s. I'd like to go back 50 years but I'll settle for a lifestyle stuck in the 1950s.' He waved a hand around. 'And so here I am happy. I have found contentment.'

It was my turn to laugh. 'Are you suggesting that Bilbury is stuck in the 1950s?'

'Are you suggesting it isn't?'

'Peter Marshall has acquired a new set of weighing scales that measure in grams and kilograms,' I pointed out. 'And the local garage mechanics are now happily servicing post-war cars. Well, some of them.'

‘And you drive around in a Rolls Royce that should be in a museum!’

‘Touché!’

‘This is the 1970s but you are living in a community which is naturally isolated and therefore self-reliant. Living here is more like living in a village in the Middle Ages than living in a village in the middle of the 20th century. I hope it never changes. Mr Marshall, the fellow who runs the village shop, told me yesterday that all the fruits and vegetables he sells are grown locally. What happens in a snow storm? I wager you cope very well.’

‘We do,’ I agreed. ‘Nothing much changes. Peter runs out of something after a few days, usually beetroot or spinach, but we never run out of bread because people make their own and we never run out of milk because we have cows. The pub might run low on one type of beer but there is always something else to take its place. If all else failed we could drink home-made wine.’

‘There you are, you see! In the city, everything comes to a halt when the first flake of snow hits the ground. The buses and the trains stop running. The drivers of motor vehicles panic. Shops run out of food and schools close. Everywhere you look, people are panicking. City life has much to recommend it. There are theatres, museums and opera houses. But I never had time to visit any of them. If I wasn’t working I was threading my way through the traffic.’

I thought about it and knew he was right. Most of the people I knew who lived in London never visited any of the cultural centres which were supposed to be the reason they wanted to live in London in the first place.

‘A little earlier we were talking about animals,’ continued Harry.

‘Were we?’

‘The film star’s imaginary dog.’

‘Oh yes.’

‘Is it true that you keep a pig? Is that really so?’

‘Oh yes. Patsy and I have a pig called Cedric.’

‘A pet pig?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you have no intention of turning him into the filling for a mountain of bacon sandwiches?’

‘None whatsoever.’

‘Delighted to hear it! People usually do things with their pets. They fuss over them, stroke them, teach them tricks and exhibit them. What do you do with your pig? Why do you keep him?’

‘Does there have to be a reason?’

‘Of course! In London no one does anything without at least one very good reason.’

‘Well, we feed him. And we admire him a great deal. He’s a very fine specimen. And like all pigs, he’s a very intelligent animal. He actually belongs to a very lovely American couple. I like Americans. My father was on destroyers during the Second World War. He was torpedoed three times and on the last two occasions he was rescued by American ships.’

‘How did an American couple find themselves the owners of a pig?’

‘They won him in a Bowling for the Pig competition at the Duck and Puddle. I think they were a little surprised. Normally people win a big silver cup if they win a competition but the winner of the skittles competition at the pub always collects a pig. Cedric was a bit smaller when they won him but he just keeps growing.’

‘I take it they didn’t want to take him back home with them.’

‘They’d have liked to but…’

‘…they worried he wouldn’t fit into the overhead luggage lockers.’

‘Or onto an aeroplane seat. Even when he was young he was still quite a size.’

‘So you and your wife are in loco parentis?’

‘Exactly. We’ve adopted him and we send his real owners pictures of him.’

‘But what do you do with him apart from feed him? Do you take him to shows and then pin up rosettes on the wall of his sty?’

‘We talk to him and we take him for walks. He’s got a lovely personality. But, no, we don’t exhibit him. We don’t think he’d appreciate being prodded and poked by strangers with stout sticks. He’s a very sensitive pig.’

‘You take him for walks?’ Harry, the former Dr Eckersley, seemed surprised by this, as though I had said something odd.

‘Oh yes, he loves going for a walk. I suppose it’s the opportunity to sniff some strange smells and nibble at a few bits of unusual hedgerow.’

‘On a lead?’

‘Well, we tie a piece of string around his neck. But it’s not really a lead. It isn’t like taking a dog for a walk. You can’t pull him back or make him go where you want him to go.’

‘I didn’t know people took pigs for walks.’

‘Oh yes, as long as the pig is properly registered with the Government. And as long as the owner has a licence.’

‘What sort of licence?’

‘You need an annual licence if you want to take a pig for a walk.’

Harry laughed. ‘Now you’re pulling my leg. You think I’m a silly city fellow and you’re laughing at me!’

‘No, no, I’m not. Honestly, you need a licence if you want to take a pig for a walk in England. I think it’s probably the same everywhere in Britain. And you have to carry the licence with you at all times.’

‘You’re serious?’

‘I am. Moreover, an inspector must approve the route that the pig is going to take. And the pig has to have a tattoo or a tag or a mark of some kind.’

‘In case he gets lost?’

‘Presumably.’

‘Is your pig tattooed?’

‘No. He’s not the sort of pig to have a tattoo. He has a collar.’

‘A dog collar?’

‘Well, it’s much bigger than a dog collar. But it’s like a dog collar. A chap in the village made it for him out of a leather belt. It’s got his name on a little, metal disk and there’s a hook on the belt to which I can attach his lead.’

‘And how much does he weigh?’

‘About 700 pounds, give or take a turnip or two.’

‘How the devil do you weigh him? Not on the bathroom scales I assume.’

‘My wife’s father is a farmer. He’s got a weighing machine for farm animals. We walk Cedric round there occasionally.’

‘Has he ever escaped?’

‘Who, Cedric?’

‘Yes. I don’t mean your father-in-law. I assume he is safely settled in captivity.’

‘Cedric got away from me once, early on in our relationship. We were in the lane and he just sort of bolted and I lost him. I couldn’t keep up with him. He was missing for nearly two hours. Patsy and I were in quite a state. We had just about everyone in the village looking for him.’

‘But there’s a happy ending?’

‘Oh yes. He’d wandered off to the Duck and Puddle where there was a coach parked outside. The passengers weren’t staying there – there aren’t enough rooms for a coach party – but they’d stopped for Devon cream teas. Gilly makes a splendid cream tea, by the way. The coach driver had opened the luggage compartment so that he could reorganise some of the luggage. Apparently, he’d heard some of the cases moving around as he drove round the lanes. When he’d finished doing the rearranging, he’d gone into the pub for his cup of tea and had left the door to the luggage compartment open.’

‘And that’s where they found Cedric?’

‘The coach driver had a fit when he came out of the pub and found a pig comfortably settled among the suitcases.’

‘I hope none of them was pigskin.’

‘Hmm. I hadn’t thought of that. Anyway, the coach driver fetched Frank who recognised Cedric. And ten minutes later, I coaxed him out of the luggage compartment with an apple.’

I looked at my watch. ‘I must go,’ I said. ‘I’ve got several home visits to do before lunch.’ We said our goodbyes and I hurried off.

It was good to see Dr Eckersley/ Dr Crippen/Gongolphus Stottle/Harry so comfortably established at the Duck and Puddle.

During his first month in the village, Harry Stottle became a regular visitor to Bilbury Grange.

Although he was happy to be away from London, and was enjoying his new, less stressful existence, Harry was not a natural loner. It is, I suppose, rather difficult to switch from being a busy and important psychiatrist, fawned over by celebrities of all kinds, to being a part-time barman living in a pub. The Duck and Puddle can sometimes be very busy but it can also be deserted for hours at a time.

On the days when he wasn’t working at the Duck and Puddle, Harry would often wander around the village. He liked to chat to anyone and everyone and as I drove around on my visits, I would often see him leaning up against a farm gate chatting to a farm labourer. When he wasn’t working behind the bar, Harry became a Duck and Puddle stalwart.

‘Do you know the food here tastes better than anything I’ve ever eaten in my life! The air is like wine. I stand outside, drink it in and feel alive. The gardens and hedgerows are full of wild flowers. Nature is unconfined and spreads herself around with an easy grace. Do you have butterflies in the summer?’

‘Yes, loads of them.’

‘What sort? Not just the white ones which are reputed to be so fond of cabbages?’

I reeled off the names of a few that sprang to mine. ‘Red admirals, skippers, orange tips, peacocks, brimstones, small coppers, fritillaries – all sorts, including the white ones which are reputed to be so fond of cabbages!’

‘I haven’t seen a butterfly since I was a boy! What about conkers. Do you see conkers?’

‘Of course! In late September we’re up to our knees in them.’

‘In the street where I live the council has pollarded all the trees. Residents complained that the fruits of the horse chestnut trees, the conkers, fell onto their motor cars. There was talk of bonnets being dented and lawsuits being initiated. Have you ever heard such nonsense? So the trees were pollarded and there are no more conkers. Now, the hapless trees stand naked and pointless, as decorative as telegraph poles.’

A few days after arriving in Bilbury, the erstwhile Dr Eckersley decided that he didn’t want to go back to London at all. He decided that part of his life was over for ever. He sent letters resigning from his consultancy post and his teaching position and telephoned the firm of accountants which looked after his financial affairs and instructed them to sell his house and offshore holdings and put the proceeds into his bank account. I don’t know how much money was involved but I rather suspect it was a considerable sum. The house apparently sold in days to a Greek shipping millionaire.

And, as he had discussed, he went to a solicitor in Barnstaple and had his name legally changed to Gengolphus Harry Stottle.

As soon as the name change had been completed, he used a cheque book for his old account to move all his money into an account in the name of Gengolphus Harry Stottle.

Moreover, the newly minted Harry Stottle opened a Post Office Box in Barnstaple to ensure that no one from his past would be able to find him. All his correspondence went there.

It would not, I suppose, have been impossible for anyone to find him if they’d been really determined but, after the first week or so (and a few headlines such as ‘Celebrity Psychiatrist Goes Missing’ and ‘Psychiatrist Goes Potty?’) the world had pretty much lost interest in his disappearance.

Before the first month was over, Harry decided that he wanted to use some of his money to buy himself a cottage.

‘I want somewhere small, cosy and unpretentious,’ he said. ‘It must be detached and it must have some land because I want to keep animals. And it must be close to a river because I intend to take up fishing.’

I asked around and telephoned a few relatively reputable estate agents and managed to find him a couple of possibilities. And so it was that just a few weeks after leaving London, and running away from all his responsibilities, the newly minted Harry moved out of his room at the Duck and Puddle and into a traditional, detached residence called Bread Cottage which was just a quarter of a mile from the pub and which he bought for cash with a chunk of the money his accountant had sent him.

Bread Cottage had acquired its name as a result of the fact that it had, back in the 17th century, been the village bakery. In those days, home owners who ran small businesses from what are now rather stuffily known as residential premises, didn’t give their homes unoriginal names such as ‘Chez Nous’, ‘Wee Nook’, ‘The Willows’ or ‘Honeysuckle Cottage’. Indeed, they didn’t give their homes names at all. Why should they? There was no postal service and no delivery drivers with parcels to deliver. Cottages and houses were given names according to the occupation of the person living there. So, in an ordinary sort of village, there would be a Mill House, a Vicarage, a Smithy and, of course, a Bread Cottage or a Bakery Cottage.

Harry had become a resident of Bilbury and although I was delighted, for he was good company, I was rather surprised.

I had suspected that after a few days, a week or ten days at the most, he would tire of country life, hanker after the bright lights and excitement of London, and return to his old life, his professorship, his consultancy and his lucrative private practice.

But he didn’t.

Indeed, he got on so well at the Duck and Puddle that Frank and Gilly told him that his period of approval could be considered at an end. His working hours were increased and he became the resident barman during daytime hours throughout the week. Gilly still did the cooking, of course, and Frank could be found behind the bar during the evenings and at weekends but having a reliable barman on weekdays made life much easier for them both.

Harry was absolutely fascinated by our animals and whenever he came to Bilbury Grange, he insisted on saying hello to all our creatures. We introduced him to Ben (our dog), Emily, Sophie and Jeremy (our cats), Lizzie, Petula, Cynthia, Sarah-Louise and Miss Houdini (our sheep) and Cedric (the pig we were looking after for Edgar and Delphinium Rathbone). Harry was particularly taken by Cedric and told me that his ambition was to have a pig of his own.

‘When I lived in London, I longed to have a dog,’ he said. ‘But that pig of yours is wonderfully intelligent and I swear he understands me when I talk to him. Once I've settled in and got my new place sorted out, I'll have a sty built and find myself a decent sized pig to put in it.

'Just remember that you have to check on the site if you're building a pig sty,' I told him.

'There are rules about that?'

'Oh yes. Keeping a pig near a street 'so as to be a common nuisance' is illegal, under the town Police Clauses Act of 1847.'

'There seem to be a lot of laws about pigs.'

'There are.'

And inevitably, Harry wanted to take Cedric for a walk.

Before I even considered letting him take Cedric out by himself, I insisted that he came out with Cedric and me on a couple of occasions. I tried to give him some simple lessons in 'How to Take a Pig for a Walk'. This may sound rather silly but in practice, the human walker has to remember that taking a pig for a walk is entirely different to taking a dog for a walk.

'The first thing to remember,' I told him, 'is that the lead is there purely as a formality. It's partly psychological and partly for appearance's sake. It's not so much a lead as a sort of friendly reminder to which Cedric responds as a courtesy. With a good strong lead, even a big dog can be pulled back or pulled along if he's misbehaving. But you can't use the lead to control Cedric. If you get into a battle with a pig then either the lead will break or your arm will come out of its socket – probably the latter. Always remember that a pig tends to go where a pig wants to go. All we can do is try to make him want to follow us and encourage him to want to go where we want him to go.'

'And you say he weighs 700 pounds?'

'That was a month or so ago when we last weighed him. He's probably put on a bit of weight since then. Whatever the precise figure might be, there's no doubt that he weighs four or five times as much as you or me and so even if we both tried to control him, we'd fail. If he really wants to go to the left, he will go to the left, and if he wants to go right, he will go right.'

'Right!'

'The second thing to remember is that pigs like to trot occasionally. And they can keep up the trotting for a long time. Cedric managed to get away from me once and I couldn't keep up with him. I eventually found him eating the flowers in Mrs Winchcombe's front garden. I think it's fair to say that Cedric was considerably happier than Mrs Winchcombe.'

'How fast can a pig run?'

'About 11 miles an hour is pretty good for a pig. But they have surprising stamina and can keep up that speed for a long way. At 11 miles an hour, Cedric could run a marathon in just over 2 hours – which is as fast as the fastest human athlete could run it and probably faster than you or I could manage it.'

'Ah! So if Cedric makes a break for it I'll have a job to keep up with him?'

'You will.'

'So how do you keep him under control?'

'Apples,' I replied. 'Cedric knows our voices and he'll usually come when we call him but as a backup, I stuff my pockets with apples and use them to keep him on the straight and narrow if he gets tempted to stray too far.'

'You can use them for steering?'

'Absolutely! But if he's stopped because he's admiring the view or has found something tasty to eat on the roadside, it's probably best to leave him be for a while.'

'Use the apple as an incentive. Like carrots and donkeys?'

'Exactly?'

'Any particular brand? Does he prefer Granny Smiths or Red Delicious?'

'I don't think Cedric much minds what the variety is. Just hold the apple where he can smell it. And then let him eat it. Hold the apple on the flat of your hand so that he doesn't accidentally munch his way through your fingers. He probably won't notice but you might.'

'That sounds like good advice.'

'It is.'

'Does he respond to his name?'

'He does when Patsy or I call him. But that's probably partly because he recognises our voices. He won't know your voice yet so you'll have to rely on the apples.'

And so one Saturday, about six weeks after he'd arrived in the village, Harry turned up at Bilbury Grange to take Cedric for a walk. I gave him the pig walking licence and several pounds of apples in a shopping bag and warned him to dole them out sparingly. 'The first time I took Cedric for a walk, I used up all my apples before we'd covered 200 yards. So be a bit mean with them to make them last.'

And off they went.

Patsy and I stood in the driveway and watched them go with beating hearts.

'I feel as though I'm watching my teenage daughter go off on her first date,' I said.

'I think Cedric will be fine,' said Patsy.

'It's not Cedric I'm worried about,' I said.

Two hours later, when the pair of them had not returned, I started to worry. After two and a half hours, I climbed onto my old bicycle and started riding along the lanes, looking for them. Eventually, I wondered if Harry had taken Cedric along to the cottage he had just bought and so I pedalled off in that direction.

The guess paid off.

They were both there, in the rather overgrown orchard that was part of the property. Cedric was flat out on the grass. He looked asleep. Harry was standing next to him, calling to him, telling him to get up and occasionally poking him with what looked like a branch broken off an apple tree.

'What on earth's happened?' I asked.

'I thought Cedric would like to come and see my place,' explained Harry. 'The orchard is full of windfalls and knowing how much he likes apples, I thought he could have a little party all by himself – a sort of apple crunching feast.'

I looked down into the long grass and kicked at one of the apples. 'These are rotting!' I said.

'Yes, I suppose some of them are,' agreed Harry. 'But they're obviously still edible. He ate quite a few and seemed to enjoy them. Do you think he's upset his tummy by eating too many?'

'I don't think pigs get upset tummies,' I told him. 'Cedric certainly doesn't.'

'Good. That's a relief!'

'But they do get drunk.' I bent down beside Cedric. He was breathing perfectly well but his breath was a giveaway. 'He's been drunk before. I don't let him into our orchard at Bilbury Grange.'

'Drunk? He can't be. I haven't given him any booze. Honestly! Not a drop.'

'You didn't need to. He's eaten half a bushel of fermenting apples. What do you think happens when apples start to ferment?'

'They turn into alcohol?' said Harry, very quietly. 'Oh, whoops. I'm so sorry.'

'Oh whoops indeed. Poor Cedric is as drunk as a lord.'

'Oh damn. I really am sorry. Now what do we do? Can we move him back to your place? Maybe we could get a truck and take him back home.'

'How do you suggest we get him into the back of a truck?'

'Lift him?'

'We'd need a forklift truck to do that. And it's Saturday. And the ground in your orchard is so rough and overgrown that I doubt if we'd get a forklift truck through to where he is lying.' I looked up at the sky. 'The trouble is that it's clearly going to rain.'

'And Cedric doesn't like rain?'

'He absolutely hates rain.'

'Do you think he might get a cold?'

'I don't want to risk it.'

'So what do we do?'

'We need to cover him up with something.'

'A tarpaulin? There are some old sheets of corrugated iron at the bottom of the orchard. Maybe we could put up some sort of shelter.'

'No.'

'No, I suppose not. Rotten idea. So what do we do?'

I thought for a while. 'We borrow a tent from Frank.'

'Does Mr Parsons have a tent?' Harry seemed surprised. 'I really don't see him as a camper.'

'I doubt if Frank has ever been camping in his life. But he and Gilly have a couple of tents which they use for weddings and so on. I think they're more small marquees than tents. They put them up on their back lawn to provide overflow accommodation.'

I walked round to the Duck and Puddle and half an hour later Frank, Harry and I had erected the Duck and Puddle's smallest and second best marquee over and around Cedric who was sleeping off his fermented apple binge. We took the marquee round to Bread Cottage in an old-fashioned hand-cart of Frank's. Cedric never budged as we worked, though he did keep on snoring and snuffling. There is something surprisingly soothing about a snuffling pig. God timed things well and the rain only started about ten minutes after we had finished putting up the marquee.

'Phew!' said a relieved Harry. He turned to Frank. 'You saved my bacon, Mr Parsons!'

‘If you keep addressing me as Mr Parsons I’ll sack you,’ said Frank sternly.

Once Cedric was safely settled, and safe from the rain, Harry invited us back to his cottage for a drink and a packet of crisps. Bread Cottage was a good walk from the orchard. Before we left the orchard, I made sure that the entrance gate to the field was firmly shut. If Cedric woke up and started wandering, I didn’t want him wandering too far. A quick check confirmed that there was a good, solid post and rail fence around the rest of the orchard.

‘This is all I’ve got,’ Harry said, apologetically, when we were comfortably settled in the lounge at Bread Cottage.

He had produced a crate of Old Restoration and a large box full of packets of crisps.

‘I’ve not had time to do any proper shopping yet so it’s either a packet of salt and vinegar crisps or a tin of dog food.’

Once he’d produced the beer and the crisps, he lit a fire in the cottage’s huge log burner. The fire had already been laid when we’d entered Bread Cottage and there was a fire burning in the log burner in the other main downstairs room. There was no central heating in the cottage and without the two stoves, the place would have been terribly cold.

‘I didn’t know you’d got a dog,’ said Frank.

‘I haven’t,’ replied his new barman.

Frank looked puzzled. ‘But you said you’d got dog food.’

‘Harry visited Peter’s shop when he first arrived in Bilbury,’ I explained. ‘When he was still Dr Eckersley.’

‘Ah,’ nodded Frank, understanding.

‘I called in at the shop because I wanted to buy a bar of chocolate and a drink,’ explained Harry.

‘Did Peter sell you anything else interesting?’ asked Frank. ‘Apart from the dog food for the dog you don’t have.’

Harry, obviously embarrassed, looked at me.

‘One of his watch caps and a few galvanised buckets,’ I interspersed. The fire was by now burning very brightly.

‘Golly, you got away lightly,’ said Frank. ‘One of the purple caps made in Canada? Guaranteed waterproof, windproof and safe from nuclear explosion?’

‘Yes, that’s right. An absolutely brilliant hat.’

‘They shrink. The material tightens up if it gets wet but don’t worry because it stretches if it gets hot. Mine fits me like a vice in the wet but comes down over my eyes if it’s sunny. How much dog food did he sell you?’

‘A tray full of cans.’

‘And nothing else?’

Harry looked more embarrassed.

‘Go on,’ said Frank. ‘You can tell me. Peter does it to everyone.’

‘A rather embarrassingly large quantity of radishes and rather more custard than I’m ever likely to eat. And, of course, the galvanised buckets.’

‘Not bad,’ said Frank. ‘Everyone ends up with the custard and the buckets. But I have to confess that the radishes are a bit unusual.’

We each drank a bottle of Old Restoration and ate a packet of crisps. The beer was fine but the crisps were soggier than is usually considered preferable in snacks of that nature. Peter tends to buy his crisps from a wholesaler who specialises in vintage stock – usually obtained from retailers who’ve gone bankrupt. The result is that the crisps tend to lose some of those qualities such as taste, crunchiness and freshness which are traditionally regarded as integral.

‘Another bottle?’ asked Harry. ‘Another packet of crisps?’

Both Frank and I thanked him and said that since it was getting late, we thought we’d better be getting home.

‘I’ll pop round early in the morning and collect Cedric,’ I told Harry. ‘He should have sobered up by then. If you could possibly keep him in the marquee, and away from the fermenting apples, that would be splendid.’

‘I’ve got some radishes I could give him if he fancies a snack,’ said Harry.

‘That would be marvellous,’ I agreed. ‘Just keep him off the fermenting apples.’

‘I’ll just have another couple of bottles of this Old Restoration, then before I bed down for the night, I’ll totter along to the orchard and check that he’s OK,’ promised Harry.

Frank and I looked at each other. Old Restoration is a potent brew and the only local beer I know of which is capable of stripping paint. The local church of Saint Dymphna (named after the patron saint of various degrees of insanity) once had a curate called Murgatroyd who was the politest, neatest, most cautious man I ever met. He was a dedicated belt and braces man who rode around Bilbury on an ancient sit up and beg bicycle which had once belonged to the wife of a previous vicar. In order to prevent his flapping trouser legs from catching in the chain, he wore bicycle clips and tucked his trousers into his socks. After one pint of Old Restoration, I saw him throw a soft boiled egg, a packet of pork scratchings and a large portion of spotted dick (complete with custard) into an electric fan and then laugh merrily at the mayhem which ensued. I always thought it was a pity that he took the incident to heart and left the village so shortly afterwards.

‘Don’t worry about me!’ said Harry, with city-born confidence that was a couple of hundred miles misplaced. ‘I can handle a couple of pints of beer!’

And so Frank pushed his empty hand cart back to the Duck and Puddle and I climbed aboard my rusty but trusty old bicycle and pedalled my rather weary way back to Bilbury Grange.

It was at exactly twenty seven minutes past one in the morning, that the telephone went.

I know the time because I looked at the clock and wrote down the time the minute I had the telephone receiver tucked between shoulder and ear. It was my habit to keep a record of the time when emergency calls came in. I also used to write down where the call had come from so that Patsy would know where I had gone. She always woke when the telephone rang but she wasn’t always completely awake if you know what I mean.

It was Frank on the telephone and he sounded only slightly short of hysterical.

‘Bread Cottage is ablaze!’ he shouted. ‘I closed up ten minutes ago and Thumper passed that way on his way back home. He just came racing back to tell me he’d seen flames licking out of the thatched roof. I’ve rung the fire brigade but they won’t be here for half an hour. Gilly suggested I should ring you in case we get Harry out and he has any burns.’

Patsy, alarmed by Frank’s voice, was now as awake as I was.

I told her where I was going, pulled on my trousers, a shirt and a jumper and was in the car on the way to Bread Cottage less than five minutes later. I stopped only to put my black bag into the boot.

I could see the flames almost as soon as I left Bilbury Grange.

The roof, of Bread Cottage was, of course, a thatch and thatched roofs may look very pretty, and make wonderful photographic images for tourists, but they tend to burn with great ferocity. A thatched roof will be fully ablaze in a fraction of the time that a slate or tiled roof will take to catch fire. And the result is too often that the entire building is destroyed.

I parked the car as close to the cottage as I could and ran to the small crowd of people who had gathered to do what they could to help. Thumper was there and so were Frank and Gilly.

The trouble was that there was absolutely nothing that anyone could do.

We all tried. Heaven knows, we tried.

Frank had brought three buckets with him and since there was a stream near to Bread Cottage, we thought we could organise a human chain, taking water from the stream and throwing it onto the flames.

But there was no way we could make a difference.

Not even a fire engine would have been able to dowse those flames.

We threw buckets of water over the blazing cottage but the water turned immediately into steam. We tried to get into the cottage but we were beaten back by the flames while we were still yards away from the front door.

Few things are more terrifying than a blazing house fire – apart from a blazing house fire when there is someone inside it.

‘He’d be drunk and dead to the world by now,’ muttered Frank to me. ‘If he had three bottles of Old Restoration he’d be unconscious.’

I nodded agreement.

Old Restoration is sold as beer but those who know it well and who love it drink it more like a spirit than a low alcohol beverage.

‘It was those damned log burners,’ said Thumper Robinson glumly. ‘I begged Archie not to put in a log burner at all. But the old fellow ignored me and put in two! He did promise me that he’d only light one at a time but I bet Harry didn’t realise the danger. And I never thought to warn him.’

Thumper, bless his heart, likes to give the impression that he is a hard man, and in truth he can be when required, but at heart he is a kind and gentle soul who cares enormously about those around him. He was, I could tell, seriously upset.

Archie Jarvis had been the previous owner of Bread Cottage. He had died six months earlier in a nursing home in Barnstaple. Archie had been 97-years-old when eight decades of heavy smoking and drinking had finally killed him. For at least two decades, he had drunk a full bottle of whisky a day and he had been smoking 60 unfiltered cigarettes a day for much of his life. He had been the only person I knew who wore a monocle. He told me that his father, who had begun life as a police constable in London, had worn a monocle all his life even though his eyesight had been perfect. A police constable with a monocle must have been quite a sight. Unusual eyewear was not unusual in Bilbury. Several elderly, female residents favoured lorgnettes, and the pince nez could be seen regularly throughout the village and the environs.

Archie had run an ironmongery shop in Barnstaple. It was one of those gloriously old-fashioned shops which sold screws singly, rather than in plastic blister packs. The counter staff used to put every item purchased into its own suitably proportioned brown, paper bag. Archie retired at the age of 80 and his son, who was 58 at the time, took over. The business, which had been called Jarvis and Son was then officially renamed Jarvis and Father. I rather liked that. I remember Archie telling me, with a cackle of laughter, that the doctor who looked after him at the nursing home, and who had diagnosed heart failure and severe bronchitis, had told him sternly that he was now, at the age of 96, paying the price for a dissolute lifestyle.

I've always taken an interest in the houses in the village of Bilbury and so I already knew that Bread Cottage had, back in the 17th century, been half of a pair of matching, attached cottages. When the bakery started to do very well, and provide bread to the citizens of surrounding villages, the baker and his wife bought the cottage next door and knocked the two houses together. The upwardly mobile couple also took advantage of the need to expand to knock the two properties into one to combine the two chimneys into one in order to reduce their liability to the chimney or hearth tax. This much hated tax had been introduced in 1652 and it meant that property owners had to pay a tax for every chimney their property contained. Knocking two chimneys into one obviously reduced the liability to the chimney tax by half. The snag was, of course, that it meant that all the heat from two fireplaces, the fireplace in what had been the bakery and the fireplace in their living room, went into a single chimney. Knocking through the wall between the two chimneys had been done very crudely and was, it seemed, a very early example of what was later to become fairly widely known as the Bilbury Bodge.

And then, as Thumper had pointed out, the problem had been exacerbated when the owner before Harry had installed not one but two wood burning stoves into the two hearths.

Combining the two chimneys into one had been the first step towards disaster for it meant that the one chimney got twice as hot as it should have. Putting in two log burning stoves had been the second, and final, step towards disaster. Wood burning stoves dramatically increase the heat in a chimney. Having two wood burning stoves both using a single chimney was an accident waiting to happen, though the cottage might have survived if it had not been for the thatched roof.

And so, since there was nothing, absolutely nothing, we could do to stop what was happening, we stood there and we watched.

I could not believe that the unfortunate Dr Eckersley had found peace and happiness only to have it snatched away from him after so short a time. It seemed so cruel.

As Professor Eckersley, the teaching hospital professor and the consultant psychiatrist, he had spent all his working life in London; living and working in a world populated almost exclusively by poltroons, galliards, gangrels and myrmidons.

Reborn as Gangolfphus 'Harry' Stottle he had been about to begin a new life and was already settling comfortably into the quiet, respectable community of Bilbury.

I stood there dreading the moment when I would have to go into the burnt out wreck of a house and identify Dr Eckersley's remains as being all that was left of a human being. I would, I supposed, have to tell the police the real identity of the burnt cadaver.

The police and the fire brigade always need a doctor to certify a body as dead. Even when it is painfully obvious to the most inexperienced eye that someone is dead, the authorities must have confirmation from a doctor before they can move the body. Officially, the police would need a police surgeon to confirm that the burnt out carcass was that of a human being. The nearest police surgeon was in Barnstaple but I suspected that he would ask me to stand in for him.

I had, only once before, been required to view the remains of someone burnt in a fire. And it had been an awful, awful business. The body I had seen had been a tramp who had died in a barn fire. The coroner ruled that he had probably lit a cigarette and gone to sleep without extinguishing the nub end properly. He had been burnt so badly that it had been impossible to identify him.

There wouldn't be any difficulty in identifying the corpse in Bread Cottage. We knew who was in there.

Authors who write books in which bodies are burned, usually describe the awful sight of a charred body but forget to mention the smell. If they had ever been within a quarter of a mile of a burnt human body they would know that the acrid, sharp smell of burning flesh can be smelt a long, long way away and will stick in the nostrils for days afterwards.

The fire engine arrived less than half an hour after I had driven up to Bread Cottage. The driver had done well. I am always impressed at how quickly the drivers of ambulances and fire engines can take their huge vehicles through the North Devon lanes. It is always much quicker at night, of course, when there is not much oncoming traffic and that which there is can see, and be seen, a mile or so away.

Bread Cottage was still blazing when the fire engine arrived and the firemen dowsed the flames surprisingly quickly. Frank, Gilly, Thumper and the others wandered off because there was nothing else to be done. The fire chief told me that it would be hours before it would be safe for me to go into the remains of the cottage and identify the owner.

Before I drove off home, I decided to walk around to the orchard to see how Cedric was doing. I was feeling very depressed. I was devastated that Dr Eckersley was dead. He was a fascinating character and I had been looking forward to getting to know him better and to learning more about him and his life in London.

It would, I thought, be impossible to make up an individual like Pelham Ronald Eckersley. He had enough personality for a regiment. There had hardly been time for me to get to know him but I knew that I would miss him. I was so sad that he should find some peace and then have his life snatched away from him. It was yet another cruel reminder that not all dreams come true and not all dogs have their day. There were tears in my eyes and on my cheeks.

I unfastened the ties on the doors of the marquee. I wasn't quite sure why we had bothered to knot them together. If he had wanted to leave the marquee, Cedric could have walked through the side of the canvas tenting as if it hadn't been there, pulling out the tent pegs we had driven into the ground as though they were nothing more than dressmaker's pins.

But Cedric was still fast asleep, snoring and snuffling and still sleeping off the fermented apples he had eaten.

I was relieved to see that he was fine; absolutely fine.

And I was startled but relieved to see that sharing the marquee with him, curled up inside a thick blanket and wearing his purple Chapeau watch cap, lay Gengolphus 'Harry' Stottle.

I stared for a moment at the sleeping barman and then bent down and shook the erstwhile Professor Eckersley.

'What is it?' he demanded. His eyes were red and he was still sleepy and clearly fairly drunk. 'What the hell are you doing here?'

'I came to see Cedric. What are you doing here?' I asked him.

He sat up, rubbed his fists into his eyes and looked around. 'I felt so bad about letting Cedric get drunk that I decided to sleep with him in here so that I'd know when he woke up,' replied Harry.

'He could have rolled on top of you!' I told him.

'I never thought of that,' said Harry. 'But I thought I might be able to stop him eating more fermenting apples.'

'We thought you were dead!' I cried, suddenly angry in the way that mothers are when they discover that the child they thought was lost was in truth merely asleep in the airing cupboard. 'We thought you were done to a crisp!'

Harry sat up, suddenly awake. 'What do you mean? Why should I have been done to a crisp? What the devil are you talking about?'

I bent down and put a hand on his shoulder. 'I am so pleased to see you,' I said softly. 'You'd better come with me. I'll take you to the Duck and Puddle. I think they'll be able to find you a bed.'

'I can go to my cottage,' said Harry. 'I've got a very nice second-hand bed there. I bought it from a pal of yours, a lovely fellow called Patchy Fogg. I got the bed at a bargain price. It was apparently the only bed in Stratford-upon-Avon that the bard did not sleep in so he let me have it cheap. '

'I'm afraid you don't have a cottage or a lovely bed,' I told him. 'I'm sorry to have to tell you this but your cottage burnt down.'

'Has it?' he said. He slowly hauled himself to his feet. 'Oh, that's a bit of a bugger,' he said.

Cedric snuffled and snorted, lifted one trotter and then put it back where it had been. He seemed to be dreaming but was definitely happy enough. I found myself wondering, for a moment, if pigs do dream. And if they do dream, of what do they dream?

I drove Harry to the Duck and Puddle where Gilly and Frank were absolutely delighted to see him alive and well. Frank rang Thumper to give him the good news. I went to Bread Cottage to tell the firemen that there were no charred bodies in the house.

I picked up Cedric the next morning and Frank and I took down the marquee which was no longer needed.

I honestly expected that the burning down of his cottage would result in Harry going back to London.

But I was surprised, and delighted, when the Duck and Puddle's new barman announced that he still intended to stay in Bilbury. He said he intended to rebuild the cottage and that he would instruct the architect to try to stick to the original design – except that there would be two separate chimneys and a slate roof.

Harry said that until the cottage was rebuilt he would be living at the Duck and Puddle and he was thrilled when Gilly presented him with two maroon and gold brocade waistcoats which she had fashioned from a spare piece of curtain material. She'd also made him a matching bow tie.

'It isn't far to go to work,' Harry told me. 'I just totter down the stairs. And my cottage is only a short walk away so I can keep an eye on the builders.'

As the builders recreated the burnt down cottage, Harry told me that since the place had been called 'Bread Cottage' for three centuries he thought it was about time for a change. After toying with various names, including 'Bacon's End', Harry decided to call his rebuilt cottage 'Cedric's Cottage'; in a permanent tribute to the pig who had unwittingly saved his life.

‘Thank God I was sleeping with the doctor’s pig! I would have fried if I hadn’t been tucked up with Cedric in Frank’s second best marquee,’ the elegantly costumed barman explained to anyone who would listen.

I couldn’t help wondering what a certain Dr Eckersley, psychiatrist to the stars, would have had to say if one of his celebrity patients had made a similar confession.

A Hectic Day in Bilbury

Bank holidays were usually an especially busy time for me in Bilbury and it was not unknown for the morning surgery to last so long that it pretty well ran into the evening surgery. On not a few occasions, I found myself doing my non-urgent home visits in the evening. When I had seen the last of the patients in the waiting room, I would usually grab some supper (having missed luncheon completely) and then set off around the village to see those village residents who needed to be seen in their homes. Sometimes I would wait for my supper until I'd completed the visits.

These days, most GPs do very few home visits. But back in the 1970s, I saw many of my patients in their homes. Indeed, I don't think there was a patient on my list whose home I had not entered on business on at least one occasion, either to see them or to visit a relative. I found that by visiting my patients in their own homes I learnt a good deal more about them. It is so much easier to know how to treat a patient when you know a little about them, their lives and how they live. Sadly, home visits seem to be rare and getting rarer. Many doctors seem to be too busy filling in forms and attending meetings to make house calls.

The popular North Devon holiday resorts of Ilfracombe and Combe Martin are not far away from Bilbury and the famous twin villages of Lynton and Lynmouth are also relatively close by. There are numerous hotels and boarding houses in these resorts, and a variety of caravan sites and campsites cater for many thousands of additional holidaymakers.

Cheap flights and ridiculously cheap hotel accommodation meant that in the 1970s, it was often cheaper to take a holiday in Spain, France or some other destination than to have a holiday in Britain but there were still millions of Britons who preferred to have their holidays nearer home – and a holiday in England invariably meant a holiday by the seaside. Young parents, with happy childhood memories, wanted to recreate the joy of their own family holidays. And they were perhaps a little nervous of taking their small children abroad. Many did not enjoy the prospect of having to travel to a suitable airport, deal with customs officials and then sit for a few hours in a cramped, budget aeroplane packed with hundreds of other tourists and harassed airline staff. And, of course, many genuinely enjoyed and preferred the traditional North Devon holiday experience: fishing for shrimp in rock pools, huddling under a sun umbrella on one of the inevitably rainy days, shivering while making sand castles, surfing on the vast sandy beaches at Croyde and Woolacombe, enjoying fish and chips on the sand, taking a boat trip out to Lundy Island and sipping warm beer at a traditional Devon pub with a thatched roof and a wasp infested garden. And then, of course, there were the joys of pasties and scones covered in Devon cream. As a visitor once said to me: 'You can't buy a decent cream tea in Torremolinos'.

It is true that the lanes in North Devon tend to be on the restricted side of narrow and they tend to wind and wriggle rather a lot too, and are as a result sometimes rather daunting to motorists who are accustomed to driving on roads where there is, at the very least, room for a line of traffic going this way and a line of traffic going that way.

The result of the nervousness created by the narrowness of the roads, means that the traffic queues can be exhausting – particularly if a car towing a caravan comes radiator to radiator up against a tractor towing a trailer loaded with half a hundred bales of hay.

But North Devon was still a popular destination for holidaymakers; particularly those who came from the English Midlands; from the urban sprawls of Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Walsall and so on.

It is true that not many visitors chose to stay in the village of Bilbury itself (there were, in any case, only a few cottages which were rented out to visitors and the only residential accommodation was in Bilbury's only pub, the Duck and Puddle, an inn which has only a few bedrooms for guests) but a good many tourists passed through the village on their travels through North Devon or chose to visit for the day. And, of course, holidaymakers staying on campsites, under canvas or in caravans, were often as close to Bilbury as to anywhere else. It was also not unusual for holidaymakers to get lost and find themselves in Bilbury by mistake.

The result is that at the height of the holiday season, I often saw quite a number of strangers.

I vividly remember one August bank holiday that seemed to go on and on forever.

It possibly wasn't the busiest day I've ever had but it was certainly the strangest and by the end of the day, when I eventually settled down to enjoy two slices of buttered toast and a glass of Bunnahabein malt whisky, served in a tea glass with a little hot water, I was pretty well drained.

There are, incidentally, few English delicacies in quite the same league as hot, buttered toast.

I usually prefer making toast for Patsy and myself on a long handled, brass toasting fork held in front of a log fire, and I still feel disappointed if we have to make our toast under the grill in the kitchen because the weather is too warm to light a fire.

I remember that at the end of that particular day, Patsy and I listened to ‘At the Drop of a Hat’, a long playing recording of a comedy duet called Flanders and Swann. Michael Flanders and Donald Swann were the two halves of a popular musical comedy act and they had been at their most popular in the 1950s and 1960s. They were responsible for a number of comic songs such as ‘The Gasman Cometh’, ‘The Hippotamus’ (with its wonderful chorus of ‘mud, mud, glorious mud’) and ‘The Gnu’.

By the time side one of the record had finished playing, I was beginning to feel relaxed and I poured myself a second glass of Bunnahabein malt whisky to complete the relaxation process. Patsy, who has never liked whisky, had a cup of hot chocolate. By the time side two of the album was finished, we were both ready for bed.

But that was later, much later.

Before we got to the buttered toast and to the joys of Flanders and Swann, there was quite a good deal of the day to get through.

And it really was one of those days that I’d like to forget but which sticks in my memory and probably won’t ever fade away. It was, without doubt, an unusual day.

The first outsider I saw was a boy of about fourteen. I can’t remember his exact age but I’ll call him Phillip Nixon for the very good reason that his name was something quite different and if I were to tell you what it was you would probably recognise it.

(I saw ‘Phillip’ again a couple of decades later. We met in a rather gloomy, unprepossessing BBC radio studio in Leeds. I didn’t remember him since he had grown up considerably, of course. But he remembered me and introduced himself. I was in the studio to talk about a book I’d written. He was there because he was a Junior Minister in the Government of the day.)

Phillip had come to the surgery with his father but he came into the consulting room by himself. Ostensibly, he came because he had fallen playing cricket on the beach and had bruised his leg on a half-hidden rock. The skin had not been broken and neither had the bone. I knew the moment I saw him that he had come to see me for some other reason. No healthy 14-year-old visits a doctor to complain about a bruise.

‘Is there anything else worrying you?’ I asked, when I’d taken a look at the bruise, offered the usual expression of sympathy and told him what he already knew – that there was no need to do anything about it since it would doubtless go through the usual variety of colours and then disappear.

‘Well there is, actually, sir,’ he replied, apparently surprised that I had seen through his stratagem.

I waited.

It was clear from the ‘sir’ he had added on to the end of the sentence that he was a pupil at a fairly posh school. I remember it occurred to me that I could not remember the identity of the last person who had called me ‘sir’. It may have been a tailor, selling me a made-for-measure ill-fitting, ill-made jacket. Or perhaps it was a traffic warden, slipping a parking ticket under one of my windscreen wipers. If it had been the latter then it was doubtless said with more than its fair share of irony.

‘At school I play in the second eleven at cricket,’ he told me. ‘I’m very young for the second eleven and the cricket master is pretty confident that one day I’ll play for the firsts.’

(The cricket master’s prediction was modest. Young Phillip eventually played cricket for his university. The word was, he told me decades later when we met in that BBC radio station in Leeds, that if politics hadn’t taken over his life he could have made a career as a professional cricketer.)

I nodded, said nothing and waited again.

‘The thing is,’ he confessed, ‘that I did something pretty dreadful during the last match of the term.’

I sat still and waited.

‘I’d scored 49, which was a pretty decent effort on that pitch, and then I hit a slow ball into the air over mid-on. I thought it was going for four but the fellow at mid-on ran backwards and it was pretty clear that he stood a good chance of catching it. I really wanted that 50 because boys who score a 50 or take five wickets have their names read out at morning assembly. Besides, I knew that a 50 would push me up to second in the batting averages.’

He paused and I said nothing. I wondered what on earth he was going to tell me.

‘And then,’ he said, ‘I did a pretty caddish thing. A very caddish thing actually.’

I raised an eyebrow and leant forward an inch or two, as though emphasising that whatever he told me would go no further. In those days, doctors were allowed to keep patients’ secrets. These days there is really no such thing as patient confidentiality. But back then, the doctor’s consulting room was like the priest’s confessional.

‘I prayed that the fellow at mid-on would drop the catch,’ he said, his voice now not much more than a whisper. The other batsman and I had run the single and so I would get my 50 if the fielder didn’t hold the catch. If he held onto it, of course, I’d be out for 49 and I’d miss my half century.’

‘You prayed that the fielder wouldn’t hold onto the catch?’

‘I know,’ said Phillip, now blushing bright red. ‘I know it’s an awful thing to say, sir. But I really wanted that half century.'

'What happened?' I asked.

The boy looked puzzled.

'Did he hold onto the catch?'

'Oh, of course. No, he didn't.'

'And now you feel guilty that you prayed for something so selfish and relatively trivial?'

Phillip paused and swallowed. 'Well, it wasn't actually trivial, sir,' he said. 'It was pretty important. But it was totally selfish. I realised immediately afterwards.'

'Have you told anyone else about this? Your father? A teacher at school? The cricket master? The school chaplain?'

'No, sir. I'm afraid I haven't.'

'You told me because you needed to tell someone, the bruise was a good excuse to see someone in some sort of authority and you knew that you'd probably never see me again and so it doesn't really matter what I think?'

He looked embarrassed.

I waited.

'I suppose I did, sir. Yes, that's about the size of it.'

I looked at him. It was a trivial thing but it was clearly important to him. I was impressed that he had worried about the praying. But less impressed that he had chosen to confess to a stranger, someone he had never seen before and would probably never see again, rather than to someone whose authority and opinion he would doubtless respect more deeply. It is sometimes easier to confess to someone you don't know than to confess to someone you do know.

'Would you describe yourself as fairly religious?' I asked him.

'Fairly,' he said. 'About average, I would say, sir.'

'Do you really think that the praying had any effect on the fielder's ability to catch the ball?'

'I don't know, sir. I can't really say. That's the thing, isn't it? If I knew that it had no effect then I wouldn't worry about it. But, you know…' His voice trailed off.

'Your school cricket is over for the year, I suppose?'

'Oh yes, sir. We'll be playing rugger in the autumn.'

'Do you play for any other teams? Do you have any other cricket matches this summer? Apart from beach cricket, of course.'

'They've asked me to turn out for the village side,' said Phillip. 'My father plays for them.'

'And obviously you'd like to do well?'

I couldn't give him Hail Marys or extra homework or lines or keep him in after school but a thought had occurred to me. I clearly needed to punish him in some way or the boy would nurse this guilt for the rest of his life.

'Oh yes, sir. Very much so.'

'It was a pretty caddish thing to do,' I told him. 'Praying for the other chap to drop the catch.'

'Yes, sir. I've been worrying about it quite a bit.'

'When you bat for the village you can score 20 runs,' I told him. 'But when you've got 20 you must give away your wicket.'

Phillip swallowed hard. 'Just 20, sir?'

'You can score 20 runs. If you score less, then that's fine. The praying is cancelled out. But if you score 20 then you give away your wicket. Doesn't matter how you do it. Let a straight ball hit your wicket or your pad. Or scoop a return catch to the bowler.'

'And you think that would do it? That would be a just penance, sir?'

'Definitely,' I told him, as though I were an expert on religious punishments.

'Thank you, sir,' he said. He looked glum but strangely relieved. He stood up.

'And don't worry about it anymore.'

'No. Thank you, sir.' He headed for the door and then stopped and turned. 'You won't say anything to my father, will you, sir?'

'Not a word,' I assured him.

When he'd gone, I sat for a few moments trying to think how else I could have handled a problem that was more theological than medical. Eventually, I gave up. I couldn't think of anything better. And although I suspect that you can probably think of a more suitable way to handle it, I still cannot think of anything more appropriate or effective.

It was, to say the very least, a unique problem and a tailor made solution. And a pretty good example of the sort of non-medical problem that country doctors sometimes find themselves facing.

My second patient of the day had also fallen down.

But instead of a simple bruise, Edna Biddulph had a small cut on her hand. The cut, more of a graze to be honest, was on the thenar eminence, the part of the hand at the base of the thumb. It was the sort of injury that most people would be happy to deal with by running it under the cold tap for a few minutes, to wash away any dirt, and then slapping on a sticking plaster. I doubt if the cut was as much as half an inch long. The cut had bled a little and the blood had long ago dried. It appeared that she had made no effort to wash it.

'How did you do this?' I asked, as I cleaned the small wound as gently as I could. I was, I thought, merely making polite conversation. It was a question along the lines of 'Where did you go on your holidays this year?'

But if I had been expecting a simple 'Oh, I tripped over the dog' or 'I fell while playing with my youngest' I was sadly mistaken.

Ms Biddulph (when she introduced herself, she was most insistent that I should refer to her as 'Ms' Biddulph – a form of address which was quite unusual at the time in my part of the world) was a neat woman in her early thirties; there wasn't much of her but you could tell she was pleased with what there was and regarded herself as having been hewn by a sculptor of talent using materials of the very best quality. The term Ms has been in use since the 17th century but it was the first time I'd ever heard anyone use it.

Sadly for the world, she was, I think, a woman who lived to complain.

You know how some people eat to live and others live to eat, well there are some people who complain to make their lives better and there are some people who complain because they like doing it. She was definitely one of the latter group.

'I fell on your cliff path,' she said accusingly.

'I'm afraid I don't have a cliff path,' I said, perhaps rather defensively. She had said it as though she were about to announce that she was planning to take legal action against me. Some people can turn a simple statement into the beginnings of a tort.

'Where did you fall?' I asked her.

'Just outside Padstow,' she replied.

'That's in Cornwall,' I pointed out. 'It must be nearly 100 miles from here!'

'That's as maybe,' she said. 'It's all the same thing.'

'Why didn't you go and see a doctor in Padstow?'

'My partner and I were out for the day,' she said. 'We took the children down to Cornwall. I didn't have time to go looking for doctors. But we're staying in Combe Martin.'

'When did you fall?'

'Yesterday,' she said. 'You should insist that they have all the loose stones removed from the path,' she told me as I finished cleaning the small wound. She examined her injury critically. 'Does that need any stitches?'

'No, I don't think so,' I said. 'A sticking plaster should suffice.'

'I think it might heal better with a few stitches,' she said. 'Stitches would bring the edges closer together and there might be less chance of a scar.'

So I put in a stitch. The customer is always right. The cut was so small that I could only manage to put in one stitch.

'I don't need a tetanus injection,' she told me. 'So don't think you're giving me one of those. I had a series of tetanus jabs last month. And I'm not taking antibiotics either. I always get thrush and diarrhoea if I take antibiotics.'

'You'll need to see a doctor in five days to have that stitch removed,' I told her. I didn't think she needed antibiotics.

'I won't be able to get an appointment see my doctor for a week or so,' said Ms Biddulph. 'He's a very busy doctor.'

'Well, you must explain to the receptionist that you need to see him urgently,' I said.

'I could have easily fallen off the cliff. If I had fallen off the edge I would have gone down onto the rocks,' complained the woman. 'You should put a fence along the edge of the path.'

'But there are miles of footpath along the cliffs,' I pointed out. 'It would cost a fortune to put up fencing along the whole coast.'

'Well, it doesn't matter what it would cost, you should put up some fencing,' said the woman. 'You should insist that it's done.' She still seemed to be holding me responsible for the absence of fencing.

'Don't you think that having fencing all along the cliff path would rather spoil the view?' I asked.

'You'll wish you'd put up fencing when someone falls,' she insisted.

'I think there are already some warning signs on the cliff path,' I said. 'There are signs asking people to be careful and to keep away from the edge.'

'Well, that's not good enough,' said the woman. 'What's your name?'

I told her.

'I shall be writing to the authorities to complain,' said the woman. 'I don't think you have a very good attitude.

It’s your responsibility to protect members of the public. And I will also complain about the fact that I had to sit in your waiting room for forty minutes before you would see me.’

With a weary heart, I explained that I had been seeing other patients and that I did not have an appointment system.

The only complaints I ever received about not having an appointment system came from visitors who had never been to Bilbury before and would probably never visit again.

Ms Biddulph wasn’t the first visitor to complain about the fact that I ran open surgeries where patients were seen on a first come first served basis, and she probably wouldn’t be the last.

‘My GP has an appointment system,’ she said tartly.

‘Many GPs do,’ I agreed. ‘And in fact I lose money by not having an appointment system. If I had one I would be paid more because the National Health Service pays a bonus to GPs who have them.’

I then pointed out that I had conducted an informal survey among my patients to see what they wanted me to do. I had, I explained, told them that the choice was simple. If I organised an appointment system they would have to visit or telephone Bilbury Grange to make an appointment to see me. Because of the way these things always work there would, I pointed out, probably end up being a waiting time of a few days before they could be seen. And I pointed out that even the best run appointment system tends to run late occasionally. If I had a patient with a complicated problem, or I had to go out to see a patient with an emergency, then the patient with a 10.00 a.m. appointment could still have to wait an hour or more to be seen. On the other hand, if we stayed as we were then anyone could walk into Bilbury Grange during the hours of any weekday morning or evening surgery and be seen without making an appointment. They would probably have to wait a while for other patients to be seen but they would be seen on the day they wanted to be seen and, with some delay, at roughly the time of day they wanted to be seen. Complications and emergencies would still delay things, of course, but patients would have the choice of coming back to the next surgery – a choice probably not available if we had an appointment system.

I told her that my regular patients had made it pretty clear that they felt that they were better off without having to make an appointment. Patients turned up at my surgery, sat in the waiting room and waited. If there was a long queue they would pop out, do some shopping at Peter Marshall’s shop, and come back half an hour later. I explained that the system worked well and that because everything was fairly simple to run, Miss Johnson my secretary and receptionist managed quite well by herself. All she really had to do was to take each arrival’s medical records out of the filing cabinet and give the records to me as patients turned up. I pointed out that GPs who ran appointment systems usually ended up with teams of receptionists and that patients often had to wait three weeks to see a doctor. In addition, the telephone line was usually blocked with callers making appointments and so patients needing a home visit would have to ring several times to get through.

I didn’t tell Ms Biddulph but I had long suspected that appointment systems were introduced not to please doctors or patients but to please bureaucrats and to give a sense of order to a service that could never be ordered because there are too many variables. I also did not point out to her, though perhaps I should have done, that if I had run my practice with an appointment system then she would have probably not been able to see me for two, three days or more days – and she would have probably been back home by then. And I really didn’t want the argument to continue so I didn’t mention to her that she had told me that she would have difficulty in seeing her own doctor in less than a week – because he ran an appointment system!

Ms Biddulph then left.

For the record, over the next three months I received letters from the local council, the local administrators for the National Health Service, the General Medical Council and several other organisations. Ms Biddulph’s complaint to the GMC was that I hadn’t wanted to put a stitch in her wound until she had demanded that I did so. All of these organisations wrote to let me know that they had received complaints about me. And eventually all told me that I had done nothing wrong. The bit of the NHS that administers general practice told me what I already knew, which was that they would have liked me to have an appointment system but that I didn’t have to have one. The General Medical Council took six months to decide that I had not done anything wrong. These things are worrying even when you know that you haven’t done anything wrong.

After Ms Biddulph had left, I saw half a dozen Bilbury residents. None of them was difficult to deal with. There were a couple of patients who needed to have their blood pressures taken. One or two required repeat prescriptions. And Mrs Walthamstow simply came to be weighed and to be encouraged. She was trying to lose weight and had managed to reduce her weight by half a stone in two months.

When Mrs Walthamstow had left, duly encouraged and, hopefully, inspired to cutting down her consumption of cream buns still further, I had to pop into the hallway to deal with a King Charles Spaniel which was choking on a tennis ball.

The dog’s owner, not a Bilbury resident, had thrown the ball and the dog, being over-enthusiastic in its effort to retrieve it, had half swallowed it. Since the nearest vet was some miles away in Combe Martin, the owner of the dog had brought it to the surgery in the hope that I could help.

The good news was that the ball was still visible and although it was clearly stuck, and causing the dog a great deal of discomfort and distress, I didn't think there was any immediate risk that it was going to go any further down the animal's throat. A King Charles Spaniel has a fairly small mouth and throat. A bigger dog would have doubtless posed a bigger problem.

I contemplated trying the canine equivalent of the Heimlich manoeuvre and was trying to decide whether this would work when Patsy, who had heard the commotion and knew what was happening, appeared clutching a large adjustable pipe wrench which she had found in the shed where I keep my tools.

I knew immediately what she had in mind and while the owner of the dog held the animal still, I took hold of the ball with the wrench and pulled it out of the dog's throat. The dog gasped and coughed and shook himself but within a moment he was fine.

I tossed the wrench and the ball on the floor and beamed at the owner thinking that he would be pleased. It was my first operation on a dog and it had been entirely successful.

'You've ruined this ball,' said the owner, who had picked up the ball I'd removed from the dog's throat. He seemed uninterested in the dog, now that it was no longer in danger, and showed the ball to me.

When I'd applied the wrench to the ball, I'd tightened it as much as I could to make sure that I had a good grip. I was frightened of pushing the ball further down the dog's throat. And the wrench I'd used had punctured the ball.

'This won't bounce,' complained the man. He tried to bounce the ball on the hall floor but the puncture meant it had no bounce left in it at all.

I apologised.

'You owe me for a new ball,' said the man.

I opened the cupboard where we keep our croquet set, some old tennis racquets and a variety of old balls. I selected a tennis ball which looked to be about the same age and condition as the ruined one and handed it to the man. He looked at it and sniffed. 'I suppose this will do,' he said. He had clearly been expecting me to give him the money to buy a new ball. Or perhaps he had been expecting me to give him a box of new balls.

He and the dog then left without so much as a bark or a grunt of thanks. I didn't even know his name. The only thing notable about him was that he wore a tie which had clearly been bought for him by a female relative; possibly one with poor eyesight. The fact that he wore it suggested that his filial duty was more powerful than his taste in neckwear.

'Some people are so ungrateful!' said Patsy who was still standing in the hallway.

'I think it's going to be one of those days,' I muttered wearily.

It was still only morning but I had an awful feeling that the day had not yet got into its stride. Some days in general practice are like that.

The next patient was a girl of 16. She too was a visitor to the area. She had come with her mother who was, she told me, sitting in the waiting room. The girl, I noticed, had what is sometimes called a monobrow but is known in medicine as synophrys; a condition in which the two eyebrows are joined in the middle and which can be associated with a variety of genetic faults. Some of these produce noticeable abnormalities – such as a shortage of fingers or toes, a malformed limb or a facial abnormality. But most commonly, the monobrow is just what it is. Some people shave the middle bit. Some are proud of having a single eyebrow. I understand that like hairstyles and skirt lengths, single eyebrows go in and out of fashion.

'Would you squeeze my pimples please,' she asked.

I looked at her, not quite believing my ears. The girl had terrible acne and her face and neck were covered in spots.

'You want me to squeeze your pimples?' I asked, slightly stunned by the request.

'Yes, please,' said the girl.

The girl had at least 50 visible pimples. I thought it a pretty safe bet that if she undressed I would fine another 100 or so on her back.

'I don't think that would be a good idea,' I told her. 'Squeezing pimples can be dangerous and can cause the infection to go into the body.'

The girl began to cry.

She didn't wail or scream or sob. She just began to cry; quite noiselessly. They were the tears of someone who is overcome by hopelessness and despair. I felt desperately sorry for her.

'Where do you live?' I asked.

She told me. I had heard of the town. It was in the English Midlands, not far from where my friend Will had his practice.

‘Have you seen your own GP?’ I asked her.

She nodded.

‘What has he done?’

‘He won’t do anything,’ she said. ‘He says that they’ll go as I get older.’

‘He hasn’t prescribed anything?’

‘No. He says he won’t give me anything because they’re just teenage spots and I will grow out of them.’

To describe the girl’s acne spots as ‘just teenage spots’ was, I thought, a bit like describing Mount Everest as ‘a bit of a hill’. I had never seen such bad acne. It seemed to me that for a doctor to refuse to treat the girl’s condition just because it was almost certainly age and hormone related was as close to professional neglect as it is possible to get.

‘Your doctor hasn’t referred you to anyone else? He hasn’t arranged for you to see a skin specialist?’

‘No. My mother asked him to arrange an appointment for me to see a skin doctor but he refused. He said he wasn’t going to waste a specialist’s time with some teenage spots.’

I closed my eyes and counted to ten to stop myself saying something wildly uncomplimentary about my unseen colleague.

‘How far do you live from Birmingham?’ I asked.

‘Not far,’ said the girl. ‘My dad works in Birmingham.’

I then asked the girl to wait for a few moments while I rang my pal Will. He too was in the middle of his morning surgery but I was lucky enough to catch him between patients. Will and I studied medicine together at Birmingham University.

‘What was the name of that dermatologist we studied under at the Birmingham General?’ I asked him. ‘The slightly dotty one who admitted that he’d only become a dermatologist because dermatologists never had to attend emergency night calls!’

‘Oh, yes, I remember,’ said Will laughing. ‘He is the best skins guy I know. I send patients to him occasionally if they’ve got difficult problems.’

I explained that I had a girl in my consulting room who had terrible acne and that her own doctor wouldn’t treat her or refer her to a specialist.

‘Do you think he’d see her if I referred her to him?’ I asked.

‘Of course he would.’

Will gave me the specialist’s phone number. I asked him when he was bringing his family down to Bilbury for a weekend, and he promised it would be soon.

I then asked the girl to pop into the waiting room to fetch her mother.

While she was gone, I telephoned the skin specialist’s secretary at the General Hospital in Birmingham. A moment later, the girl and her mother both returned. I noticed that the mother also had a monobrow and couldn’t help wondering if anyone else in the family had the same condition. Synophrys is sometimes inherited but it can also just happen. Indeed, it is so common that it was perfectly possible that it was merely a coincidence that both the girl and her mother had the condition. It clearly wasn’t relevant to the problem with the spots so I said nothing about it.

I pointed to the two chairs near my desk and while they sat, I asked the secretary at the Birmingham hospital how soon the specialist could see a patient with very bad teenage acne. The secretary gave me a date just a week ahead. I told the girl’s mother the date and asked if she could take her daughter to Birmingham on that day. The girl’s mother, who looked rather surprised, said she could. I confirmed the appointment and then wrote a letter of introduction which I gave to the teenager.

‘Go to the hospital and take this letter with you,’ I told her. ‘The doctor you’ll see is one of the best skin specialists in England. He’ll help you.’

The girl took the letter from me and thanked me. The mother thanked me. The girl thanked me again. They were now both crying.

‘Do we have to tell our GP about the appointment?’ asked the mother.

‘You can if you like,’ I said. ‘But you don’t have to. The specialist will write to him and he’ll simply explain that your daughter was seen by another doctor when she was on holiday in Devon.’

‘Will he make trouble over it?’ asked the mother.

‘I don’t think so,’ I said. ‘Not for you.’

I thought their doctor might well complain that I had interfered with his treatment of his patient. But I really didn’t care about that. I was tempted to tell the mother that they might like to consider finding another GP but I thought that would probably be pushing my luck. The GMC did not take kindly to doctors criticising other practitioners, however indirectly and however much the criticism might be deserved.

The girl and her mother were effusive in their thanks. I was rather embarrassed. The truth was that I had done absolutely nothing that any decent doctor wouldn't have done.

Miss Johnson, taking pity on me then popped in before the next patient to bring me in a cup of lemon tea and two digestive biscuits.

I thanked her and took a bite from one of the digestives. I told her that if she'd known what I had been through already that morning she would have brought me two custard creams. Or maybe even a couple of bourbon biscuits. (I had given up eating chocolate covered biscuits in the surgery after an unfortunate incident involving a chocolate biscuit which had melted and covered my hand, my pen and my tie in an unfortunate looking brown stain.)

Miss Johnson looked at me over her spectacles. She's still never sure about my sense of humour. 'You've got a busy day ahead of you, doctor,' she said. 'The waiting room is still crowded. There are quite a lot of holidaymakers here today.'

She then hurried out.

I remember I found myself wishing I could follow her and hide in the filing cabinet where we keep the medical records.

For me one of the joys of a quiet rural practice was always the fact that I had time to talk to my patients, understand their problems and deal with them as people rather than as symptoms and diseases. Doctors working in busy hospitals or city practices are forever rushed; never having enough time to listen properly. Now I was beginning to feel as though I were working in a busy inner city practice. I almost wished I had an appointment system so that I could at least control the number of patients attending a single surgery.

The next half a dozen patients were all fairly straightforward. There were three with summer colds, one with blistered feet and I can't remember what the others had wrong with them.

And then came a woman in her forties called Madge Compton. She complained that she was suffering from nausea and frequent stomach cramps. She was definitely an unhealthy colour and my first thought was that she might be slightly jaundiced.

'I'm feeling very weak and tired,' she said.

She also told me that she needed to urinate more often than usual and that she was suffering from occasional attacks of palpitations.

Her condition sounded complex and since she was only in the area for another two days (she was staying with her husband in a guest house in Ifracombe) I didn't think I would be able to solve her problem. I would, I thought, need to have some blood tests done and it was unlikely that I would get back the results before she left.

'How long have you had all these problems?' I asked.

'About two months,' she told me.

And for the umpteenth time that summer, I wondered why on earth she had chosen to come and tell me about her problem.

'What made you come to my surgery?' I asked her.

'It's difficult to see my own doctor,' she said. 'He has an appointment system and he's very busy. I have to wait two or three weeks to see him.'

I couldn't help wishing that Ms Biddulph were sitting in a corner of my surgery.

'Have you lost any weight?' I asked her.

'Oh yes,' Mrs Compton replied. 'I've been on a diet. I go to a slimming club and they've been advising me.'

'How long have you been dieting?'

'Around six months.'

'And how much weight have you lost?'

'A stone,' replied Mrs Compton. 'I was fifteen stone but I'm down to nearly fourteen. My slimming adviser has put me on a strict diet. I eat lettuce and tomato on brown bread with plenty of fruit juices.'

That was, I remembered, the diet originated by a 19th century music hall chorus singer called Florrie Forde. She used to sing songs like 'Down at the Old Bull and Bush', 'Pack Up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit-Bag' and 'It's A Long Way to Tipperary'. Miss Forde started her career at 8 stone but built her way up to 15 stone and decided she needed to lose weight if her career wasn't going to founder. So she found or created a diet which consisted of tomatoes, lettuce, brown bread and orange juice. She stuck to it and lost weight. Amazingly, the diet still had its enthusiastic supporters three quarters of a century later.

I remember reading that she was so pleased with the diet that Miss Forde had copies of it printed and sold them. This was, in effect, the first commercial diet book. I also remember that the book was very successful but that one woman failed to lose weight and turned up at the theatre to complain.

'Did you follow the diet I gave you?' asked Florrie.

'Oh yes, I followed it to the letter.

'You ate the lettuce and the tomatoes and the brown bread and you drank the orange juice?'

'Yes, but I haven't lost any weight.'

'Did you eat anything else?'

'Well, only my ordinary meals, of course.'

And that is where the gag came from.

'Have you tried taking anything for your symptoms?' I asked, hoping this question might produce a clue, but not honestly expecting that the answer would provide all the information I required.

'Oh yes,' said Mrs Compton. 'I've been taking some tablets that my slimming adviser recommended.'

'What sort of tablets?'

'Supplements,' said Mrs Compton. 'They contain ingredients which are essential for the human body – vitamins and minerals and so forth.'

'Have you got the bottle with you?'

She had. She took it out of her handbag and handed it to me.

She was, I saw, taking a vitamin and mineral capsule that contained enough vitamins and minerals to satisfy the body's entire daily requirements.

'Marvellous,' I said, handing back the bottle. 'How often do you take them?'

'I take 40 a day,' she replied.

I thought I had misheard.

'Sorry,' I said, 'how many did you say you took each day?'

'I take 40 a day,' she said again.

I pointed to the bottle she was still holding. 'You take 40 a day of those capsules?'

'Yes,' she said proudly.

'Did your slimming adviser tell you to take that many?'

'Oh no, she said to take one a day. But I thought that if one a day was going to be good for me than 40 a day would make me super fit!'

It took me ten minutes to persuade her that the tablets would kill her if she kept taking them in such huge quantities. 'Vitamins and minerals are essential for the body to function,' I explained. 'But they can be toxic if you take them in excessive quantities.'

I told her that all the symptoms she had described to me were probably a result of her body being poisoned by the pills she was taking. I took her blood pressure, listened to her heart and did all the other tests I could easily conduct in the surgery. I even thought about having her admitted to the hospital in Barnstaple so that she could be properly investigated but I eventually decided that she didn't seem to be in immediate danger. I did, however, make her promise to stop taking the capsules and to see her doctor as soon as she got home. I told her that he would probably want to have some tests done.

Mrs Compton wasn't the first patient I'd seen who had been poisoning herself by overdosing on vitamin and mineral tablets. I suspected this was going to be a big problem in the years ahead.

The next patient was also a visitor to the area and she was staying in what sounded as if it was a very overcrowded caravan on a site near Combe Martin. I wasn't sure why she ended up in my consulting room. A doctor in Combe Martin, who had some sort of contract with the proprietor, usually looked after people staying at the caravan park.

The patient, who introduced herself as Miss Jennifer May, was in in her late twenties and she came into my consulting room with an entourage of two very small children and three adult males. Miss May looked very pregnant. She was short, plump and had sideburns and a nicely developing moustache. She wasn't wearing very much and what she was wearing had either been bought when she was a stone lighter, or had been bought for someone about six sizes smaller. There wasn't enough spare room inside what she was wearing for her to be able to fit a goose pimple. Looking at her, I thought it safe to assume that she would be as easy to embarrass as a fan dancer with twenty years' experience.

I asked the three men if they would mind going back into the waiting room or, if it was crowded in there, if they would perhaps be kind enough to wait outside.

'I want them to stay with me,' said Miss May firmly.

'Why's that?' I asked.

'Because I'm pregnant and I think I'm about to go into labour,' said Miss May.

'I don't understand,' I said. I looked at the three men. 'Are any of you medically qualified?'

'Oh no,' said Miss May with a laugh. 'They're not doctors – they are the fathers.'

It took me a moment to realise what she meant but when I finally understood it was immediately clear that a more appropriate name for Miss Jennifer May would have probably been Miss Jennifer Does.

This was one woman whose eyes had probably never been full of maybe and this was, I confess, a situation I had not come across before.

I had, of course, known mothers who weren't sure of the identity of the father. But I had never before had a mother walk into my surgery with three putative fathers. Moreover, the three men all seemed quite relaxed about the situation. One of them was very short and rather stout. He was considerably older than the rest. He was balding and had a fringe of red hair. The second was tall, black and powerful looking. The third was no more than a youth. He looked to be twenty at the most. He was of middle-eastern origin and had acne and long, straggly, black hair. It occurred to me that there was a chance that when the baby was born we might not have too much difficulty in uncovering the identity of the real father. We might, at the very least, be able to exclude one of the men from the final shortlist.

'You'd better climb up onto the examination couch,' I told her. 'Are the two children yours?'

'Oh no!' replied Miss May, laughing again. She stood up and walked over to the couch. One of the men, the big, black fellow, helped her up onto the couch. Actually, he just lifted her up and put her down, very gently. 'They're my sister's kids. She's got another four with her but I said I'd look after these for her. I didn't know then that I'd be going into labour today.'

'If one of you men would stand on the other side of the couch, one on this side and one at the head that would be useful,' I said. 'That way you can make sure Miss May doesn't roll off and onto the floor. The examination couch is a little on the narrow side for giving birth.'

I didn't really think it was too narrow, and to be honest I didn't really think Miss May was about to give birth, but I wanted to do something with the trio of expectant fathers because they were rather cluttering up the surgery.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see that the two small children Miss May had brought with her were trying to open a glass-fronted bookcase wherein my collection of medical textbooks were stored.

'It'll be a relief to get my body back,' said Miss May. 'I feel like I've loaned it to this monster inside me.' She paused. 'I hope I get my figure back,' she said, rather plaintively. She caressed her swollen abdomen. 'This little fellow is a guest who's outstayed his welcome!'

'Or a little girl!' said the short, stout father.

Miss May looked at him.

'It might be a girl,' he pointed out.

'Oh I don't think so,' said the mother-to-be. She turned her attention back to me. 'You know, it's funny. I never really thought about having children. I spent a lot of time considering whether or not to keep a goldfish. I spent hours thinking about that and eventually decided that I didn't want the responsibility. But I didn't spend a minute thinking about whether or not I wanted children. It just happened.' She laughed again. The two small children were still trying to open the bookcase. Fortunately, they hadn't yet realised that there was a key. And they weren't tall enough to be able to reach it.

Despite my instinctive scepticism I was, at this point, still taking Miss May at her word that she was pregnant. She looked pregnant and I assumed that a woman of her age would probably know whether or not she was going to have a baby.

But it is easy to make sloppy assumptions when you're busy.

There are lots of reasons why a woman might appear to be pregnant when she isn't – and probably even more reasons why she might falsely believe that she's pregnant.

For example, idiopathic pseudo-cyesis (a fake pregnancy of unknown origin) is far more common than most people might imagine.

'If there's any stitching to do when the baby's out will you make me nice and tight,' said Miss May. She looked at the three fathers-to-be. Two of them blushed and looked at the ceiling. The third, the one who looked Middle Eastern, grinned at her. 'But don't sew her up completely!' he said. She giggled.

'How many months are you?' I asked, as I slipped on a pair of rubber gloves.

'I'm not really sure,' said Miss May.

'When was your last period?'

'Oh, a while ago,' she replied. 'I can't really remember.'

'How long have you been putting on weight?'

'Oh, for about a year, I think.'

It was at that point that I knew that Miss May's swollen abdomen wasn't big because she had a baby in her uterus. I should have realised earlier. The sideburns and moustache were pretty good clues.

'Have you been to your own doctor?'

'No, I haven't had the time. My sister never goes to antenatal classes. She says that with her it's like shelling peas.'

'But she's had a lot of children?'

'Oh yes, loads.'

‘So you haven’t been seen by your doctor or at the hospital?’

‘No. I just thought I’d wait until something happened and then find a doctor.’

‘And what has happened today to make you think that you’re in labour?’

‘Oh, you know, I had a bit of pain when George and I were doing it this morning.’

I wasn’t going to ask which one was George. It didn’t really seem important. By now I was no longer thinking of any of the men as fathers-to-be. Indeed, I was wondering how I was going to tell the four of them that they didn’t need to be working out a babysitting rota or deciding which one of them was going to knit the bootees.

Examining a woman with her three lovers standing inches away was a peculiar experience though I think the three lovers probably found it even stranger than I did.

The stout fellow went bright red and started to sweat profusely. The Arabian chap giggled a lot and didn’t know where to look. The black lover, who was standing on the far side of the couch, stood to attention as though on parade. He didn’t move a muscle and as far as I could tell he didn’t even blink.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see that the two small children were now trying to open the bookcase with a wooden tongue depressor they’d taken out of a box they’d found. Since their hands looked none too clean, I made a mental note to throw away the box of tongue depressors when they’d gone.

When I had finished my examination, I removed my rubber gloves and threw them into the bin where I put disposables that needed to be burnt.

And then I told Miss May the truth.

Since she had insisted on having her entourage with her, I told them too.

‘I’m afraid you’re not in labour,’ I told her. ‘In fact, you’re not pregnant.’

‘I’m not expecting?’

‘No.’

‘Then how do you explain this?’ she demanded, indicating her swollen abdomen.

‘There are several possible explanations,’ I said. ‘I suspect that you may possibly have a condition called polycystic ovary syndrome. It’s fairly common among women in their 20s and 30s.’

I really should have made the diagnosis earlier.

When I was at medical school, I saw a woman who was the bearded lady in a travelling fair. The initial diagnosis had been that the woman was suffering from hyperandrogenemia, a condition in which the androgen levels are raised and the patient acquires hair growth in a male pattern. However, tests showed that her hirsute condition was a result of the fact that she had polycystic ovaries. I remember the consultant who was looking after her telling her that he could cure her and that her beard would disappear after an operation. The woman had refused surgery, pointing out that without her beard she wouldn’t have a job.

I remember that she was married to a man who had been a hairdresser working in a salon in the suburbs of Reading in Berkshire. They had met when she visited the salon to have her hair and beard permed. ‘Just because I have a beard it doesn’t mean that I don’t like to look well presented,’ she told him. He had given up his job at the salon and they had married. He had become her travelling hair and beard dresser and, I think, her manager too. The woman had not come to the hospital because of her beard but because she had gallstones. And so instead of dealing with her polycystic ovaries, the surgeons had removed her gall bladder and sent her and her beard on their way.

So Miss May’s moustache and sideburns really should have been all the clues I needed.

‘How common is it?’ asked the black former father-to-be.

‘Some studies suggest it affects one in ten women.’

‘Is it cancer?’ asked the stout man, rather bluntly and tactlessly I thought. ‘It’s cancer, isn’t it?’

‘No, no,’ I said, as emphatically as possible. ‘It isn’t cancer.’

I was actually grateful that he’d asked the question, rather than merely kept the thought to himself and then, perhaps, shared it later with Miss May.

I have found that most patients can be put into one of two categories: the optimists and the pessimists.

The optimists always assume that even the most serious symptoms are a sign of nothing that cannot be put right with a packet of pills or a tube of ointment and, maybe, a week of some sort of abstinence – giving up alcohol or chocolate perhaps.

The pessimists, on the other hand, assume that any trivial sign or symptom, a hangnail or a slightly sore throat, must be a precursor of some deadly disease; an early warning sign of impending doom.

Clearly relieved, the pessimist sighed and blew out a few cubic yards of air.

‘You need to have some tests done,’ I told Miss May. ‘Your own doctor can organise them when you get back home.’

‘Well, I think that’s all nonsense,’ said Miss May. She swung herself off the couch, moving much easier now that she was no longer in labour. ‘I still think I’m pregnant. And I should know. Anyway we did it often enough.’

I didn't like to point out that infertility is quite common in women suffering from polycystic ovaries.

'I'm going to see my own doctor when we get back home,' said Miss May. She said this as though it were a threat. 'I'll tell him to fix me an appointment with the antenatal clinic.'

'That's fine,' I said. I was happy enough that she was at least going to see her doctor.

She took the two children by the hand and stormed out of the consulting room. One of the children was clutching the wooden tongue depressor. The other child was clutching the box complete with all the wooden tongue depressors it still contained. At least I wouldn't have to bother throwing the box away. I glanced over at the bookcase. It remained firmly shut and locked.

Two of her lovers went with Miss May. The third fellow, the stout one, stopped behind for a moment. 'She's really not pregnant?'

I shook my head.

'But you don't think its cancer?'

'No,' I said. 'There's absolutely no reason to think it's cancer.'

'Good,' he said. He thought for a moment. 'That's good.'

And then he left too.

I looked at my watch. It was now lunchtime. I used my internal telephone to ask Miss Johnson how many more patients there were in the waiting room.

'A few, doctor,' she replied tactfully.

I knew her well enough to know that she meant that there were still too many for her to count.

'You'd better warn Patsy that I'll be very late for lunch,' I told her. I pressed the buzzer for the next patient.

The next four patients were all locals.

None of them had complicated problems.

One needed her blood pressure checking (it was fine).

One needed to have a repeat prescription for diabetes medication.

Bevan Jeffrey, who had pernicious anaemia, came for his B12 injection.

And the other had stitches which were ready to be removed.

None of them took very long. And although I would have probably chatted more if things had been different, all realised that it was a busy day and that it wasn't a time to talk about the weather or the forthcoming vegetable show.

The next non-resident I saw was in a bad mood when she came into the consulting room.

'I've been waiting for over an hour,' she snapped.

I had no idea how old she was but I thought she looked very business-like for a holidaymaker. This was perhaps not surprising since she turned out not to be a holidaymaker but a cosmetics representative who was travelling through the area. Her name was Mrs Winifred Wendell. She was wearing a grey trouser suit and had on more make-up than Patsy uses in a year. She told me that she lived in Newbury in Berkshire, and worked for a company which had its offices near Reading. She was the West Country representative and had to cover every county south of Bristol and west of Reading. She reeked of tobacco smoke.

I thought she was about to complain about the absence of an appointment system but that wasn't her problem.

'I telephoned and spoke to your receptionist,' she said. 'But she refused to put me through to you. I could have saved myself an hour if you'd been prepared to talk to me on the phone. I really just wanted a prescription.'

'I don't like to do consultations over the telephone,' I said. 'Especially not for patients I don't know.'

When I first started in general practice my mentor, Dr Brownlow, taught me that although it is often tempting to make a diagnosis on the telephone, it is often dangerous to do so. He told me that a good family doctor will make diagnoses by feel, by sight, by touch, by smell and by instinct – and the telephone excludes all those senses.

'What did you want a prescription for?'

'I don't know! You're supposed to be the doctor aren't you?'

I looked at her and then looked down at my blotter and waited a moment while I bit my tongue. Most of the patients I saw were thoughtful and polite. But I seemed to be having all my rude and aggressive patients in one day. Still, I thought, maybe it's better to get them all over and done with at once.

'Do you want a prescription for a medicine you already take?' I asked, thinking that perhaps she had run out of a medicine she usually took for some chronic condition of which I was not aware.

'No, of course I don't!' she snapped. 'If I already took it then I wouldn't need a prescription for it, would I?'

'So, what symptoms do you have?'

'I have very dry eyes and a dry mouth,' she said. 'I've tried drinking lots of water and sucking peppermints but nothing helps. My eyes and mouth are always very dry.'

'How long have you had these problems?'

'Oh, for months and months; I can't remember for how long precisely. But the symptoms seem to be getting worse. And I feel so tired all the time. I don’t know why that should be.’

She suddenly started to cough. I fetched a glass of water which seemed to help.

‘Does anything make your symptoms worse?’

‘Stress!’ said the woman instantly and pointedly, as though I were the cause of all her stress and all her problems. ‘Can’t you just give me a prescription so that I can get on my way? I have to be in Taunton this afternoon. I have three important appointments.’

I don’t know why but I got the feeling that all her appointments were important ones.

‘I’m a bit old-fashioned,’ I said. ‘And I like to make a diagnosis before I recommend a treatment.’ I didn’t mean to say something quite so sarcastic. It just sort of came out that way. And the sentiment was, at least, an honest one.

And then she burst into tears.

Three paper tissues later I asked her why she’d come to see me, instead of waiting to see her own doctor when she got back home.

Before she could answer, she started coughing again. It was a strange, nervous sort of cough: the sort of cough you get with an uncomfortably dry throat. It certainly didn’t suggest that she had a chest infection. And although she was clearly a smoker, it definitely wasn’t a smoker’s cough.

‘I just felt I needed to speak to someone about it today,’ she confessed. ‘I’m hardly ever at home so I never get much chance to see my own GP.’

‘But these problems have been getting you down? Worrying you?’

She nodded.

‘How many cigarettes do you smoke?’

‘Oh, not many,’ she said far too quickly. ‘Ten a day I suppose.’

I said nothing but looked at her and waited.

‘Thirty to forty,’ she admitted at last.

I still didn’t say anything. It is, perhaps, surprising but it is true that patients will often conceal the truth when talking to a doctor – maybe in the hope that the lie will, in some way, protect them from the consequences of the truth.

‘Sometimes more I suppose.’

‘How old are you?’

‘I’ll be 50 on my next birthday.’

‘You don’t look it,’ I said, because she didn’t.

‘You wouldn’t say that if you saw me without my war paint.’

‘Do you have any other symptoms?’ I asked her.

A redness appeared on her neck and spread to her face. ‘I’ve noticed that sex is rather uncomfortable,’ she confessed, clearly embarrassed.

‘Because your vagina is dry?’

She nodded.

I examined her eyes and looked into her mouth and down her throat. I checked her blood pressure and auscultated her heart and lungs. I could find absolutely nothing wrong with her except that her salivary glands seemed slightly swollen. Her eyes and throat were fine.

But, despite this relative absence of physical signs, I thought I knew what was wrong with her.

‘I think you’ve got a condition called Sjogren’s syndrome,’ I told her. ‘It’s pronounced just like that – ‘showgrin’. It’s an autoimmune disease which causes all the symptoms you’ve got.’

‘What on earth is ‘showgrin’?’ she asked. ‘Why has it got such a funny name?

‘The doctor who first wrote about it was a Swede called Sjogren, though another doctor called Mikulicz had written about something similar in the 19th century so it really ought to be called Mikulicz’s syndrome.’

I don’t know why I remember these titbits of fairly useless information. And I’m not entirely sure that patients are much interested. Still, I think some patients like to know as much about their condition as they can find out.

‘Is it fatal?’ she asked immediately.

‘No, no!’ I said quickly.

‘Is there a cure?’

‘Not a specific cure, no, but there are lots of things you can do to ease the symptoms. You must go and see your GP. I’ll write you a note explaining the things you’ve told me and telling him what I’ve told you.’

I reached for a piece of notepaper and started to write out a letter to her doctor, explaining my findings.

‘OK,’ she said. She seemed calmer now that she knew what was wrong.

People are often like that. Once they have a label they can put on their symptoms then things become easier to accept and manage. ‘What causes it?’

‘Your immune system is working against your body,’ I told her. ‘No one knows why it happens. It affects those parts of the body which produce fluids – tears, saliva and vaginal secretions for example. What’s the name of your doctor?’

She told me her doctor’s name and address. I wrote it at the start of my letter and then put the name and address onto an envelope.

‘But there are things I can do?’ she asked.

‘The first thing is that you must stop smoking. The cigarette smoke is making your mouth and throat worse – and it’s responsible for that cough of yours.’

She nodded and sighed. ‘I know,’ she said.

‘This is important,’ I told her. ‘The cigarette smoke will also irritate your eyes. Your body doesn’t produce enough tears so the smoke just irritates your eyes and makes things worse. You can also help by buying some artificial tears from a pharmacy. Drop the artificial tears in when you need them. And also ask about sprays that might help keep your throat moist.’

I put the letter into the envelope and handed the envelope to her, unsealed.

‘I haven’t stuck down the envelope,’ I told her. ‘You can read what I wrote and then seal it afterwards.’

She looked at me, slightly puzzled.

‘That way you’ll know that I’ve told you the truth; and that I haven’t held anything back from you.’

She smiled and I guessed I had probably read her mind.

‘Thank you.’ She put the envelope into her handbag.

When she’d gone, I glanced at the clock. It was now well after lunchtime. I rang through to Miss Johnson to ask her how many patients I had left.

‘Just the two,’ she said. ‘Are you ready for the next one?’

I tried to stifle a weary sigh.

‘It’s a boy of seven,’ said Miss Johnson. ‘His name is Bismore Thrupp and he’s here with his mother and father.’

I told her to send them all in.

‘And Mrs Thrupp has got four other children with her,’ said Miss Johnson.

It seemed to be a morning for large families.

I closed my eyes for a moment.

‘Send them all in!’ I said, after a pause. I couldn’t help hoping that these would be better behaved than the previous two.

Seconds later the door burst open and I was invaded by a band of marauding, mini-Visigoths.

Well, that is what it sounded like, looked like and definitely felt like from my vulnerable position by my desk.

For a few moments, I began to wish that I were armoured, armed and able to defend myself. A lance, a pike and a broadsword would have made me feel a little more comfortable.

These were not, to put it as politely as I am able, well-behaved children.

And since it seemed unlikely that they were all suffering from hyperactivity (a diagnosis which was very common in the 1970s and, I seem to remember, blamed largely on the red additive commonly used to dye sweets sold to children) it seemed not unreasonable to assume that they were, perhaps, simply badly behaved.

They came in at such a speed, and attacked my furniture and belongings with such ferocity, such wild enthusiasm, that I could not, at first, decide how many of them there were. I did, however, wonder how much of the waiting room remained intact now that they’d finished with it.

Patsy always tried to keep the waiting room clean, tidy and well equipped with comfortable chairs. I hated to think what damage this marauding tribe must have done.

The parents who had accompanied them seemed quite oblivious to the mayhem they were causing.

I looked around as the children rampaged from one corner of the room to the other. Doctors’ surgeries are not the best places for rampaging children. There are drugs, syringes, instruments, ‘dirty’ bins and many other potential hazards and it is difficult to keep an eye on four uncontrolled children while also trying to listen to a patient’s history and make a diagnosis.

It is impossible to keep everything which could be dangerous locked up and out of reach. Instruments such as auriscopes (aka otoscopes) and ophthalmoscopes are as delicate as they are expensive to replace.

I am sure that there are many, many parents who go on holiday with well-behaved children. Indeed, I have seen many such children myself. But Miss May’s sister’s pair of children, and this small crowd of young Thrupps, definitely did not fit into the ‘well-behaved’ category.

‘How can I help you?’ I asked the couple who had accompanied the children. It seemed a fair assumption that these were Mr and Mrs Thrupp.

‘Bismore’s got very sore skin,’ said the woman. She looked around the room, clearly trying to spot Bismore. I followed her eyes. Bismore was, it appeared, crawling underneath the examination couch. He was the only child who had red hair. The other children all had jet black hair, as did Mrs Thrupp and Mr Thrupp.

‘Come here, Bismore!’ she shouted.

I must admit that she had a powerful pair of lungs.

This surprised me somewhat since she was a weedy-looking little woman who looked as if she would run a mile if she’d spotted a spider. She was, I suppose, no more than an inch over five feet tall and I doubt if she weighed more than eight stone after a big meal. Nevertheless, her voice was so powerful that I’d have been able to hear her if I had been at the bottom of our garden. Damnit, I’d have been able to hear her if I’d been sitting in the snug at the Duck and Puddle.

Mr Thrupp seemed accustomed to his wife’s enthusiastic manner. Looking at him, I suspected that the people who had built King Kong for the movies had kept the plans and persuaded God to build a human with the same dimensions.

It was, I thought, a good job that the child in question was not called something like ‘John’ or ‘David’.

If she’d called out ‘John’ or ‘David’ with that sort of volume and enthusiasm the surgery would, I suspect, have been inundated with visits from boys and men of that name responding urgently to the call from all over Devon. Most would have doubtless brought with them guilty faces and sheepish looks because when a boy or a man is called in such a way, and with such volume, he invariably knows that he has done something he should not have done.

Bismore arrived at my side.

He had jam on his face, on the fingers of both hands, on his short-sleeved shirt and in his hair. You didn’t need to be Sherlock Holmes to deduce that he had recently been eating something with jam in it. I glanced around. The other children who had accompanied him into the surgery were similarly decorated with jam. I had no doubt that everything in the surgery would by now also be covered in jam. Experience tells me that jam shares with blood the ability to spread itself over an unreasonably large area. A tablespoonful of jam or blood is enough to smear twenty square yards of human, upholstery or carpet.

‘Take your shirt off!’ commanded his mother.

It seemed that everything she said was produced at the same ear-shattering volume. I wondered if her loving blandishments to her husband were issued with the same complete absence of decibel control. ‘I love it when you nibble my ear, darling,’ must lose something when it is issued as loudly as that.

Young Bismore had by now removed his shirt. He had simply grabbed it by the collar at the back of his neck and yanked it upwards. He threw the now jammy shirt onto the floor. I couldn’t help wondering what the Thrupp household looked like at bedtime.

The poor child’s chest and back were burnt bright red. I could see that underneath the burns lay a large number of freckles. The burns looked sore. There were several blisters.

‘He looks as if he’s been playing in the sun,’ I suggested. ‘Without a shirt.’

Mrs Thrupp looked at me rather pityingly. ‘Ten out of ten for the diagnosis, doctor,’ she said drily. Or, rather, she shouted drily.

Mr Thrupp, who had still said absolutely nothing, just sat quietly and listened. He might have been a stranger who’d come into the surgery by mistake.

I felt embarrassed. ‘Are they all sunburnt?’ I asked, trying to recover my dignity. I waved a hand to indicate the other children.

‘Oh no,’ said Mrs Thrupp. She had a stentorian voice and gave loud instructions for the other children to remove their tops. After she had repeated the instructions three times they obeyed. These were clearly not children who believed in hierarchical government. The funny thing was that although she spoke loudly, her voice was curiously indistinct. I could hear her well enough but I wasn’t entirely sure what she was saying. This wasn’t due to any speech impediment but, rather, due to the fact that she spoke quickly and carelessly and never bothered to finish her words or sentences. The end result was that it was like listening to a Tannoy announcement in a railway station. You know you can hear something, you know that something has been said, but you’re not quite sure what it was that you heard.

The other children were sunburnt. But they were brown and looked healthy. They looked like children who had been playing in the sunshine for several days. They were not burnt in the way that Bismore was burnt. Bismore looked as if he’d be ready to eat if you gave him another five minutes and then added a little mustard.

‘This one always burns,’ said Mrs Thrupp. ‘The others don’t.’

‘You don’t put any sunscreen on him?’

‘The others don’t need it.’

‘Bismore is red-headed and pale skinned,’ I pointed out.

‘Do they teach you this observational stuff at medical school or were you born this way?’ asked Mrs Thrupp. ‘Have you got any suggestions as to what I might do about it? Put on something creamy and soothing, perhaps?’

I found myself blushing. ‘I can prescribe some lotion that will ease the soreness,’ I told her. ‘But you should keep him covered up when he goes out in the sun. Keep him indoors for a few days. And if he doesn’t have a hat then you should get him one.’ As I spoke, I wrote out a prescription for a soothing lotion. ‘Actually, they should all wear hats if they’re playing in the sun.’

‘Well, if he has a hat they’ll all want one. Have you any idea how much children’s hats cost these days?’

‘The village shop sells hats,’ I pointed out. I knew that Peter was selling a new line in floppy, broad brimmed summer hats made out of white cotton. ‘They aren’t made in Jermyn Street but they have broad brims and they’ll keep the sun off.’

‘Why does Bismore suffer in the sun?’ demanded Mrs Thrupp. ‘His brothers and sisters can stay out all day without burning.’

‘Bismore is red-headed,’ I pointed out. ‘Red heads are always more liable to burn than brunettes.’

‘My husband thinks I had an affair with the man who delivers our nutty slack,’ said Mrs Thrupp.

I looked at her. This wasn’t a joke or a light aside. She was deadly serious.

‘Nutty slack?’

‘Cheap coal. Tiny bits of coal mixed in with coal dust. It’s cheap. It’s all I can afford.’ I noticed that she said ‘I’ and not ‘We’. It seemed clear that Mrs Thrupp was in charge of everything including children, housekeeping and the purchase of nutty slack.

‘And am I right in thinking that the man who delivers your nutty slack has got red hair?’

‘He looks like a carrot. But he’s ugly, he smells and I don’t fancy him. I’ve never been unfaithful but Ernie thinks I had it off with Kelvin and that’s why Bismore is red-headed.’

‘Ernie is your husband?’

‘Of course.’

‘And Kelvin is the man who delivers the nutty slack?’

‘Well, it’s not the milkman is it? He’s as bald as a coot,’ said Mrs Thrupp. She looked at her husband. ‘And I don’t fancy him either,’ she said, with all the emphasis on the word ‘him’.

‘You always smile at Kelvin when he delivers,’ said Mr Thrupp. It was the first time he’d opened his mouth since he’d entered the room. He said this rather defensively.

I realised that this was why they had come to see me. Bismore’s sunburn was merely an excuse. They both knew damned well why Bismore burnt so easily. I had an awful feeling that they had deliberately allowed him to burn so that they’d have an excuse to come to the surgery. They were in my surgery because they wanted me to adjudicate on a long simmering family dispute. I suspect it was something they didn’t want to discuss in front of their own family doctor.

‘If I’d had it off with him I’d have been scrubbing coal dust off my skin for a week!’ said Mrs Thrupp. ‘His hands are as black as the ace of spades!’

‘He always looks at you like he’s already had you,’ complained Mr Thrupp. ‘He leers.’

‘He doesn’t leer. He’s a bit stupid and he’s got a wall eye. He can only see out of one eye. He told me that. Otherwise he’d have been a pilot. That’s what he wanted to be. He wanted to join the RAF but they wouldn’t have him.’

‘You know a lot about him!’ said Mr Thrupp.

‘We talk for a minute or two when I pay the bill!’ said Mrs Thrupp.

‘Are there any red-heads in either of your families?’ I asked, tired of the family dispute.

‘What’s that got to do with it?’ demanded Mr Thrupp, suddenly surprisingly belligerent. ‘I haven’t got red hair and neither has she.’ He nodded towards his wife.

‘We all have two genes which decide our hair colour,’ I explained. ‘We get one gene from our mother and one from our father. Red hair is a recessive gene – it is always dominated and overruled by any other hair colour gene. That means that a child needs to have two red-hair genes to have red hair. If both of you have only one red-hair gene, then your children will probably have black or blond hair unless you each pass on your red-hair gene to a child.’

‘You mean that we could have made a red headed baby – like Bismore?’

‘Yes.’

‘Even though we’ve both got black hair?’

‘Yes. If you both carry the red-hair gene but neither of you has red hair then there still is a one in four chance that you’ll have a child with red hair.’

‘My uncle Douglas had red hair,’ said Mrs Thrupp very quickly.

‘I didn’t know you had an uncle called Douglas,’ said Mr Thrupp.

‘He died before we met,’ said Mrs Thrupp. ‘But you’ve got red hair in your family, haven’t you?’

‘My grandmother had reddish hair,’ admitted Mr Thrupp.

‘Ah, there you are then, so there’s a good chance you both carry the red-hair gene,’ I told them.

‘But I think she might have dyed it,’ added Mr Thrupp.

‘Don’t be daft,’ said Mrs Thrupp. ‘She had red hair. She just put a bit of henna on it to liven it up.’

‘So we could have produced a red headed baby?’ asked Mr Thrupp. There was incredulousness and hope in his voice.

‘Of course we did,’ said Mrs Thrupp. She folded her arms across her chest and stared at her husband defiantly. ‘You can apologise now.’

‘I’m sorry, love,’ said Mr Thrupp. ‘I’m very sorry.’

I suspected that he did a lot of apologising.

The Thrupp parents stood up and collected their jam-covered offspring.

I handed over the prescription for the lotion for the unfortunate Bismore. They then headed for the door. When the others had disappeared into the waiting room, Mrs Thrupp turned back and walked across to me. ‘Thanks very much for that, doctor,’ she whispered. ‘He’s been going on about Kelvin for years. I only did it with him the once and I didn’t enjoy it. He was very small and not very good at it. I should have known – he had small feet. It was all over in two minutes and it took me an hour to scrub off the coal dust. What sort of bad luck was that, eh? Me catching for Bismore after that one time!’

Having made this strange confession she then hurried off.

I looked around.

Everywhere I looked there was jam.

There was jam on my desk, jam on my sphygmomanometer, jam on the examination couch – there was jam absolutely everywhere. Judging by the seeds, I could see it had probably been raspberry jam.

Wearily, and with a rather annoyed feeling that Mrs Thrupp had played us all rather well, I rang the buzzer. The morning surgery had by now lasted through the day and had become the evening surgery.

My next patient was a nine-year-old boy called Thomas Gaskin who was complaining of stomach ache. He and his parents were staying in the caravan park just outside Combe Martin. The boy was in so much pain that his father had to carry him into the surgery. I told the father to lay his son down on my examination couch so that I could examine him.

‘Do you think he needs his appendix taking out,’ asked his mother. She and her husband were clearly and understandably very worried. They were, I suppose, both in their early thirties.

‘How long has he been ill?’ I asked.

‘It started a couple of hours ago,’ replied the mother.

‘It’s gradually got worse during the day,’ added the father.

I palpated the boy’s abdomen. There was no sign of any tenderness or stiffness and although he was clearly in pain, I could find absolutely no signs of any serious pathology. However, I already knew what was wrong.

‘Has he eaten anything that might have upset him?’ I asked.

‘No, I don’t think so,’ said the mother. ‘We had fish paste sandwiches for lunch. We’d been blackberry picking this morning and I was going to make a blackberry pie this afternoon.’ She looked at her watch. ‘It’s too late to do it now.’

‘Did you have any pudding?’

‘Thomas had a chocolate biscuit. One called a ‘Wagon Wheel’.’

I looked at the boy. ‘Did you eat any other sweets today?’

He shook his head.

‘Blackberries?’

Another shake of the head.

‘You didn’t eat any when you were out picking blackberries?’

‘Only a couple.’

‘Just a couple?’

This time I got a nod of the head.

‘What about breakfast? What did he have for breakfast?’

‘Just a bowl of cornflakes with milk and sugar,’ said his mother.

‘And to drink?’

‘A glass of milk.’

I turned back to Thomas. ‘And you ate no more than a couple of the blackberries you picked this morning?’

Thomas nodded but as he nodded he suddenly sat up, made a strange noise, looked at me with horror in his eyes, half moved off the examination couch and then, unable to stop himself, vomited enthusiastically over me and my desk.

Everything on my desk was covered with purple vomit.

Some of the second-hand blackberries were half digested and some of them were hardly digested at all. It looked as though he had eaten half a pound of fruit. It was hardly surprising that he had stomach ache.

Within minutes, Thomas was feeling a little better.

He then managed to bring up another couple of mouthfuls of half-digested blackberries.

And then the excitement was over.

And he was feeling pretty fine.

His parents were very apologetic and the mother insisted on helping me start to clean up the surgery. There were second-hand blackberries almost everywhere.

I decided that used blackberries share the bizarre quality enjoyed by jam and blood: a little goes a long, long way.

‘So you ate just one or two blackberries, did you?’ said Thomas’s father. He managed to sound cross but it was obvious he was really just relieved.

‘I thought I’d only eaten one or two,’ said Thomas.

Despite the mess, I couldn’t help smiling to myself when they’d gone. It hadn’t been a difficult diagnosis to make. The clues had been the blackberry stains around his mouth and the stains down the front of his shirt. You don’t get stains like that from eating just one or two blackberries.

Finally, there was just one patient left; an elderly clergyman called Canon Gatling.

‘You seem to have had a busy day, young man,’ said Canon Gatling.

‘It has been rather busy,’ I agreed.

‘I’m not a patient of yours,’ said the clergyman. ‘I’m staying down here on holiday with some friends.’

‘What can I do for you?’ I asked. ‘What symptoms do you have?’

‘Oh, I don’t have much in the way of symptoms,’ said Canon Gatling. ‘I just thought I should have a check-up. My friends pushed me along and said I should have a medical. I’m 89-years-old.’

‘You look good for 89,’ I told him.

And he did. If you’d seen him in the street you would not have thought him a day over 88. Of course, I didn’t know if he was a man of 90 who had to date lived a hard life or a man of 87 who had lived a bland, blameless life. Or, indeed, the other way round. The fact that he wore his collar turned round the wrong way strongly suggested that his had not been a life devoted entirely to the pleasures of the flesh.

‘I thought maybe if you checked out my heart and other essential bits and pieces, that would put my friends at peace.’

I tried not to sigh. ‘Is there any reason why you haven’t been to see your own doctor for a check-up?’

‘Well, he’s a very busy man,’ said Canon Gatling. ‘And I’m rather busy too when I’m back at home. I have a busy social life, you know. So my friends thought it would be easier all round if I came to see you.’

You can’t snarl at an elderly clergyman, can you?

I asked him if he could climb onto the examination couch. He said he thought he could. I told him to slip off his jacket, shirt and trousers and to lie down so that I could take a look at him.

I then gave him a pretty thorough examination.

‘How am I?’ he asked when I’d finished. ‘Did you find anything wrong?’

‘Well, there are one or two signs of wear and tear,’ I explained.

‘So tell me what you’ve found, doctor! Please don’t be coy.’

‘Would you not prefer me to write to your doctor with my findings?’

‘No, no! I want you to tell me what you’ve found. I insist.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Of course!’

And so I told him.

‘You have a heart murmur,’ I said. ‘And your blood pressure is raised. There’s a little fluid in your lungs and your liver is enlarged. Your spleen is enlarged too. You have cataracts in both eyes and your hearing is severely diminished on the left side – though that may be a result of the wax in that ear. You seem to have osteoarthritis in both hips and knees and rheumatoid arthritis in your hands. You have signs of gout, your prostate is enlarged quite considerably, though I am happy to say that the enlargement appears benign, you have inguinal hernias on both sides and your left testicle appears to be slightly swollen and tender. You have the beginnings of an umbilical hernia and you have quite severe prolapsed haemorrhoids and what appears to be a small anal fissure. You have a severe fungal infection of your toenails and you have psoriasis on both elbows and your left knee. You appear to have some sinus trouble and you have quite severe gingivitis. You have bunions on both big toes and on the left side you appear to have housemaid's knee.'

'That's it?'

'I think so.'

'You didn't find anything serious then?'

'Just the things I outlined. I will write to your own doctor and you and he can decide whether you want to treat any of the problems I've described.' It took me nearly a quarter of an hour to write the letter for him to give to his own GP.

'Well, that's all quite a relief,' said Canon Gatling, when I had handed him the letter. 'My friends will be comforted, I'm sure.' He stood up, shook hands with me and left.

I watched him go and found myself smiling and shaking my head in wonderment.

A man of 60 would have been horrified if I'd recited such a lengthy list of ailments. But to Canon Gatling, a man of nearly 90, my list of faults and failings were virtually a clean bill of health. After the Canon had disappeared, Patsy came in to tell me that there were no more patients. It was after seven o'clock. I'd been in the consulting room for over ten hours. Miss Johnson had gone home.

'Do you want something to eat now?' she asked.

'How many visits need to be done?'

'Three.'

She told me what they were. They were all patients who were locals and the locals were very local in that they all lived nearby. I said I'd have a quick wash and then do the calls immediately so that when I'd finished I could, hopefully, sit down and relax for a while.

By eight o'clock, I was kneeling by the fire making toast while listening to the delightful comic songs of Flanders and Swann. I was feeling hungry and had sliced up a whole loaf of fresh bread.

As I made the toast, so Patsy buttered it.

Ben, our rather ancient and loyal dog was sharing the hearth rug with me and the cats. When I sat down, Ben would insist on settling on my lap.

'I bet these fellows were excellent deipnosophists,' I said suddenly.

Patsy looked at me querulously.

'Flanders and Swann,' I said. 'I bet they were excellent deipnosophists.'

'Deipnowhats?'

'Deipnosophists,' I said.

'What the devil is a deipnosophist?'

'Oh, someone who is skilled at making dinner party conversation,' I explained. 'I'm expanding my vocabulary.'

'Why? When can you possibly use a word like that?'

'I just used it,' I said, trying not to sound too pleased with myself. I didn't mention that it had taken me ten minutes to think of a way of easing it into the conversation.

'How long did it take you to work out a way to wriggle it into the conversation?' asked Patsy, who knows me rather too well.

'Wriggle what into the conversation?' I asked. I knew I was blushing and it wasn't the heat of the fire.

'That word deipnowhats.'

'It just seemed to be the whatchamacallit,' I said. 'Fitted in rather nicely, I thought.'

Patsy laughed. 'How long?'

'No more than ten minutes,' I said.

When I'm talking with Patsy it is as though I have a little glass window in my skull. She knows what I'm going to say before I say it, what I mean to say when I'm struggling to say it and what I meant to say when I've almost said what I wanted to say.

'Well, maybe you ought to put the big words away and concentrate on the toast,' said Patsy. 'The piece you're making is black and burnt to a crisp.'

I looked at the end of my toasting fork. She was right, of course. I tossed the piece of charcoal I'd created onto the fire and replaced it with a fresh piece of bread.

I have to confess that Patsy and I didn't really need to have lit an open fire for it was still late summer and the weather wasn't cold at all. In fact, it was quite warm.

But I do find that when I am really exhausted, a log fire is an essential part of the relaxing process.

Besides, if I hadn't lit a fire, we would have had to put the bread into the toaster. And where on earth is the fun in that? Toast which has been made by putting a slice of bread in between two electrically heated wires does not taste anywhere near as good as toast which has been made in front of the naked flames of a log fire. And it doesn't smell as wonderful either.

Who cares that you’re almost certain to burn some of the bread and that it is nigh on impossible to avoid ending up with a very hot hand. No one ever said that the really good things in life came without just a little pain.

By any standards it had, I think, been a busy day.

But it ended well.

I know there are people who believe it is impossible to have a good evening unless you hand over hundreds of pounds for a meal out in a posh restaurant where a self-important chef and a band of scurrying acolytes fuss over the food and the waiters fawn over the diners. Many people seem to drool over the prospect of dressing up, driving 50 miles and handing over a fistful of bank notes for a meal consisting of stuff which they probably cannot pronounce and which is almost certain to give them indigestion afterwards. I wonder how many of them would rather have a packet of fish and chips from their local chip shop? ‘Generous with the vinegar and plenty of salt, please!’

I realise that Patsy and I probably stand alone in this but in our view, a dinner out in a posh restaurant is no way to enjoy an evening.

We prefer the simple life.

And how can you possibly beat sitting in front of a crackling log fire, nursing a glass of something agreeable and sharing a plateful of hot buttered toast with the one you love?

You Won’t Let Him Die, Will You, Doctor?

Looking back, the whole thing began with a fairly innocuous visit to an evening surgery in late August.

Abigail Barnes was 10-years-old and had, like her parents, been born in Bilbury.

I could see from her medical records that my predecessor, Dr Brownlow, had delivered her at home.

Unless there were very exceptional circumstances, Dr Brownlow always delivered babies at home. He thought it was better and safer for both the mother and the baby if the birth could be managed in the mother’s own bedroom. He insisted that the risks were much lower if a baby could be delivered away from the variety of dangerous infections which are inevitable in hospitals. And he once told me that one of the great joys of his life was watching the children he had delivered grow up and start families of their own.

‘We have to be with our patients when their time on earth is ended,’ I remember him saying to me one evening. ‘And that’s a sad, sad time. So it’s good to be able to balance those melancholic moments with the enjoyment of the glorious moments when new faces are brought into the world.’ At that time, none of the babies I’d delivered was old enough to have even thought about starting their own families but I had always followed Dr Brownlow’s example and looked after my pregnant patients in their own homes. It seems to me, that a family doctor who delivers the babies in his practice has a much stronger bond with his patients and the community he serves.

‘I think Abigail’s got the flu starting,’ said Mrs Barnes. ‘I wouldn’t have bothered you but she’s got a terrible cough.’

I asked Abigail when her symptoms had started.

‘This morning,’ answered Abigail. She did look poorly.

It seemed odd that a patient who was developing the flu should have started a cough so quickly. The cough that is so often a symptom of influenza usually develops later on in the illness.

‘What other symptoms have you got?’

‘I ache a lot,’ said Abigail.

‘Whereabouts?’

‘My chest and my arms and my legs.’

I touched her forehead with the back of my hand. She was hot. ‘Have you got a headache?’

‘Yes. It started with the headache.’

‘This morning?’

‘Yes.’

I took out a thermometer and took her temperature. It was up a couple of degrees. I listened to Abigail’s chest and palpated her abdomen, just to make sure I wasn’t missing anything else. In children, diseases can develop quite quickly and they don’t always follow the pattern the text books describe. But I could find nothing odd or worrying. Abigail’s tummy was soft and there was no pain when I examined her. I had been worried for a few moments that she might be developing appendicitis. It isn’t unknown for young patients to present with really unusual symptoms and signs.

‘Well it seems like the flu,’ I agreed, talking now to Mrs Barnes. I explained that there wasn’t anything I could do other than tell her to keep her daughter warm and well hydrated. ‘Make sure she drinks lots,’ I told her. And I gave Mrs Barnes a suitable painkiller from our pharmacy.

I honestly didn’t think I’d have to see Abigail again for this problem. I thought her mother was right and that she had the flu. It was a slightly odd presentation and it had come on very quickly but these things happen and common things do happen commonly. You can make an awful fool of yourself, and, more important, worry your patients unnecessarily, if you are forever assuming that every ache is a sign of some deadly, rare muscular disease or that every cough suggests the start of tuberculosis.

The second patient with similar symptoms arrived in my surgery a day and a half later. His name was Barnaby Fothergill and his mother, who brought him to a morning surgery, reported that he had been up all night complaining of pains in his chest and a stubborn headache that just wouldn’t go away.

I remembered that Abigail Barnes had complained of similar symptoms and asked Barnaby if he knew her.

‘Oh yes,’ replied Mrs Fothergill, answering for him. ‘They’re both members of a little gang. There are five of them in the gang and they call themselves the Bilbury Five.

I thought the name made them sound like the defendants in an important trial of some kind but I was told that they had named themselves after a series of books by children’s author Enid Blyton. The books described the adventures of a group of children known as the Famous Five.

Mrs Fothergill mentioned the names of the three other children who also lived in the village and who were members of the same gang: Amber Lane, Judith Barker and George Dickson.

All five children were much the same age, though George Dickson was probably a couple of years younger and was, I remembered, much smaller than the others. He might have been smaller but he was no less lively. He once broke his leg falling out of a tree down near the pond on the edge of Softly's Bottom.

I told Mrs Fothergill what I'd told Mrs Barnes and assumed that the two children had caught the same infection. I wondered if the other three in the gang would develop similar symptoms.

I was right about the two children having the same infection.

And I was right to wonder if the other three would develop the same sort of symptoms.

But I was completely, woefully, dangerously wrong about the nature of the infection.

The third child I saw was Judith Barker.

At eleven and a half, she was the oldest of the gang and she was undoubtedly the leader. I knew her and her parents, of course. All the five members of the gang were long-term residents of the village and I was well acquainted with all the families.

I saw Judith at home rather than at Bilbury Grange and she was rather more seriously ill than the first two. She was in bed when I arrived. She had been one of the children who had been ill after using Giant Hogweed stems as peashooters at a children's party organised by Mr and Mrs Pinchbeck. Judith was coughing and complaining of pains in her chest and in her shoulders.

'How long has she been coughing?'

'Only since this morning.'

'Has the cough been very bad?' I asked.

Mrs Barker thought for a moment. 'I wouldn't say so,' she said. 'It is the pains in her chest that seem to trouble her most. That's why I asked you to visit rather than taking her along to the surgery.'

'Was there any warning?' I asked.

'None at all. She was absolutely fine last night when she went to bed. But she woke up this morning looking and feeling awful. Do you think she has the flu that the others have got?'

I said I thought it was the most likely explanation but asked her mother to telephone me at once if there was any change.

My next visit that same day was to Abigail Barnes, the girl I'd first seen at Bilbury Grange a couple of days earlier.

Her mother had telephoned the surgery and asked me to visit because she was worried about her daughter.

'She seems to be getting worse,' said Mrs Barnes. 'And she's now developed red eyes. It looks like conjunctivitis but she insists that her eyes weren't sticky when she awoke this morning.'

The conjunctivae of Abigail's eyes were clearly both red. Abigail looked very miserable and she had quite a fever.

'The aches seem to be getting worse,' said Mrs Barnes. 'And she's complained of some soreness in her tummy.'

I examined Abigail and there was some tenderness in the area of her spleen. I thought it was slightly enlarged. I was now beginning to suspect that my original diagnosis was wrong. It seemed that something else was going on but I didn't have the foggiest idea what it could be. The reddening of the conjunctivae wasn't normal. But how did it fit in with the enlarged spleen?

George Dickson was the last patient I saw that morning.

Once again, he had the same symptoms as his friends. He was coughing and he had aches and pains in his chest and in his shoulders and his arms. His legs were aching too. And he had one symptom that the other's had not exhibited: a symptom which rang very loud alarm bells. He had coughed up some blood.

I had never before seen a child coughing up blood and this startled and rather frightened me.

'How many times has he coughed up blood?' I asked Mrs Dickson, trying to sound calmer than I felt.

'Twice,' she said. She moved out of George's bedroom and onto the landing. She lowered her voice to a whisper I could hardly hear. 'My grandfather used to cough up blood. But he was a heavy smoker and he died of lung cancer.' There were tears and fears in her eyes.

'George hasn't got lung cancer,' I told her firmly.

'You won't let him die, will you doctor?' she said.

There was a fierce desperation in her voice.

George was her only child. She and her husband had been to an infertility clinic for three years before she had conceived.

No child is, or should be, any more special than any other child. But when George had broken his leg Mrs Dickson had, I remembered, been hysterical and inconsolable. Patsy had stayed with her until her husband had managed to get back from work.

I confess I had not always seen eye to eye with Mr Dickson.

I once had a patient called Jack Driver who was an alcoholic and was struggling to deal with his addiction. Mr Driver drove a removal van and was, inevitably, known to one and all as ‘Laurie’. He and his wife were separated and he knew that as a result of his drinking problem he was in danger of losing his job.

After being dry for four months, he had received a setback when his wife had told him that she was leaving him permanently.

Broken hearted, Mr Driver had bought a bottle of wine at a supermarket in Barnstaple and had been arrested for drunk driving while on his way home.

I remember that it was a strange case. He hadn’t been in an accident but the police had stopped him because they’d noticed that he was driving too slowly and too carefully.

Mr Driver came to see me at the time to ask if I could request the *Bugle*, the local newspaper, not to print his name when his case went to court. He wasn’t worried about his job (he knew that he would lose his licence and therefore his job so that was a lost cause) but he didn’t want his children to read about his disgrace, or for their friends at school to have ammunition to fire at them. I did ask the editor, Mr Dickson, not to print the report but he said that Mr Driver should have thought of the consequences of his actions before he’d drunk the wine. It was the second time in my life I’d asked for the same favour and on both occasions my request had been rejected.

And so the court case was duly reported in the local paper and for the sake of an inch and a half of fairly dull newsprint, what was left of Mr Driver’s life was ruined. Twelve months later, Mr Driver was found dead in a shop doorway in Exeter. He had died of alcohol poisoning. When I’d heard the news, I’d telephoned Mr Dickson at his office. I don’t know what I expected. I think I was probably just angry.

‘I was just doing my job,’ said Mr Dickson rather gruffly. ‘We all have our jobs to do. You do your job, doctor and I’ll do mine.’

I hadn’t seen or spoken to Mr Dickson since then, though he and his family were all still patients of mine. And now his son, George, was ill.

‘I won’t let him die,’ I promised Mrs Dickson. And I meant it. There was no way, no way on earth, that any of these small children, so full of life, were going to die if I could do anything to prevent it. I didn’t know what the hell was going on but I would find out. My brain was buzzing with ideas, thoughts, diagnoses, prognostications and fears.

I knew that coughing up blood used to be horribly common, of course.

When consumption (aka tuberculosis) was endemic, children often coughed up blood.

But long before the 1970s came, tuberculosis had become rare; it was not something which was often seen in children.

Coughing up blood happens in bronchitis and it occurs among heavy smokers. It can be a sign of lung cancer, a lung abscess or pneumonia. There are dozens of possible causes.

But I couldn’t get away from the knowledge that it isn’t something that occurs often with children.

I began to wish that I were working in a large hospital where I could call upon expert help from consultant paediatricians. A general practitioner works alone and a country doctor, who works in a fairly isolated village, must work more on his own than any other doctor.

It was obvious now that these children didn’t have influenza. It was also pretty clear that all five of them had the same thing wrong with them. But what the devil was it? I thought for a moment of simply sending all five of them to the hospital in Barnstaple. I even considered sending them to a larger hospital, maybe the one in Exeter. But sending children to hospital is traumatic for the children themselves and for their parents. I decided I could wait an hour or two while I tried to work out what was going on.

I carefully moved some children’s comics and half a dozen toy soldiers out of the way and sat down on George’s bed. ‘What have your gang been doing this summer?’ I asked him.

I remembered the time when I had seen him and the other children who had been using Giant Hogweed stems as peashooters. I wondered if they had perhaps all eaten berries that had poisoned them. It could certainly explain their symptoms.

‘Just playing,’ said George, defensively.

‘Did you eat anything you picked?’ I asked.

‘Just blackberries,’ said George. ‘And some wild strawberries.’

‘That’s all?’

George nodded.

‘It’s important,’ I said quietly. ‘You won’t get into trouble but I need to know if you ate anything else? Something that all of you ate?’

‘There wasn’t anything else,’ said George. There were tears in his eyes.

‘Honest injun?’ said his mother. She was sitting on the other side of his bed and holding his hand.

‘Honest injun,’ whispered George, with a nod.

‘He’s telling the truth,’ his mother said quietly.

‘We built a swing,’ said George. ‘Barnaby’s dad put a rope over a big branch on a tree over the pond. He tested it and said it was safe.’

‘The pond by Softly’s Bottom?’

George nodded.

I knew that pond. It was actually quite large as ponds go. It was fed by a small stream so the water wasn’t entirely stagnant. It was also believed to be quite deep. Villagers sometimes fished there and it was rumoured that there was a large pike living in the pond. I always took this story with a pinch of salt for in every village in England there is a pond which is said to have a large pike living in it.

‘What did he do with the bottom of the rope? Knot it or tie on an old tyre?’

‘He tied on an old tyre,’ said George.

Barnaby’s father, Ted Fothergill, works at a garage in Combe Martin. He wouldn’t have any difficulty finding an old tyre.

‘And you swung across the pond on the tyre?’

‘Sometimes,’ said George. ‘Sometimes we let go when we were over the pond.’

‘And landed in the water?’

George nodded.

‘Did you swim in the water?’

Another nod.

‘All of you?’

‘Amber can’t properly swim but we always helped her and she did the dog paddle. We didn’t let her fall into the water if one of us wasn’t already in the pond. Judith said we had to do that to make sure she didn’t drown.’

‘So you probably swallowed some of the pond water?’

George nodded. ‘But we all spat it out again.’

‘What’s wrong with him?’ asked Mrs Dickson, as I prepared to leave.

‘I don’t know yet,’ I told her. ‘But if I don’t have a good idea by his evening then I’ll arrange for George to go into hospital. Have a bag ready for him. I’ll speak to you later.’

‘You won’t let anything happen to him, will you?’

‘I won’t,’ I told her.

How the devil could I know that nothing would happen to him? I didn’t even know what was wrong with him.

But what good would it do her, or George, for me to tell her the truth?

I drove from their house to a lane which leads down to the area where Softly’s Bottom can be found. I managed to park the Rolls in a field gateway, climbed over the fence and walked down the hill to the pond. In truth, I didn’t have the faintest idea why I was there or what I hoped to discover. Maybe I would see some plants that might have caused the children’s symptoms. Maybe there would be some berries growing on a bush. George’s mother had been convinced he was telling the truth. But maybe he was frightened and had told a white lie.

I sat down on the trunk of an old tree and stared at the pond. It was quite an idyllic spot. I could see why the children loved playing there. The rope that Barnaby’s father had slung over the tree was there; the old tyre hanging down over the water. Mr Fothergill or one of the children had tied another, thinner rope to the tyre and then tied the thinner rope to the tree. The thinner rope enabled them to pull back the tyre so that they could climb onto it, or into it, and swing over the water. It was, I could see, an old tractor tyre. There was a small, rough shelter made in one of the bushes. It was, I guessed, where they hid when it rained or if they heard pirates coming. They doubtless had picnics there. I looked around. There were no old cartons or tins or paper litter. They were good kids. They had taken their rubbish home with them. They would close gates, respect crops and do no damage to fences. They were country born and bred with good country manners.

And then I heard it.

Splash.

I didn’t see anything but I definitely heard a splash.

I sat stock still for a while longer.

And then I saw it.

A rat.

It was swimming in the water.

I watched it swim around the edge of the pond and then disappear into a hole in the bank.

I don’t like rats.

I love all animals but I have never been able to like rats. They always seem to me to be dirty, sneaky, cruel creatures. And, of course, they spread diseases to humans.

And now I knew what the problem was.

I knew, damnit.

I was certain I had the diagnosis I needed.

I raced back up the hill to where I had parked the car, climbed in and drove back to Bilbury Grange as quickly as I could. I slid to a halt in front of the house, leapt out of the car and raced into my consulting room where I plucked a copy of a standard medical textbook off the shelves. I knew exactly what I was looking for.

Leptospirosis.

I checked the symptoms and the signs and the incubation period.

They all matched.

I had five small children with leptospirosis.

'Leptospirosis,' I read, 'is a biphasic disease. In the first phase of the disease, sufferers will have acute febrile episodes. Headache, chest pains and severe muscular aches are common. Conjunctival bleeds sometimes develop and haemoptysis may occur in some patients.'

Haemoptysis is the coughing up of blood.

The bug that causes leptospirosis usually originates with an animal, typically a wild animal and most commonly a rat, and can get in to the patient's body through the skin or mucous membranes, through the eyes, nose or mouth and through cuts and grazes. You don't have to drink infected water. It is not a terribly difficult disease to catch – which explained why all five of the children who had swum in the infected pond had become ill – all you have to do is be in contact with water contaminated with leptospira bacteria. Sewage workers sometimes catch the disease even though they are wearing protective clothing.

I read on.

'In the second phase of the disease there may be hepatic, renal and meningeal involvement. The second phase usually develops between one and two weeks after the first.'

I closed my eyes and uttered a prayer of thanks to God. The children were all in the first phase of the disease. They had the preliminary symptoms. The potentially deadly involvement of the liver, the kidneys and the brain would come later unless I stopped it happening.

I looked through the book to find out what tests I needed to do to confirm the diagnosis. But in my heart I didn't really need the tests. I was certain they had leptospirosis. How the hell did I treat it? I had never seen a case of leptospirosis before. Most doctors never see one. Now I had five.

'Antibiotic therapy is most effective,' said the book. It gave the recommended type of antibiotic and the recommended dosage. 'Patient isolation is not necessary but urine must be handled and disposed of carefully.'

And that was the beginning of the end of a truly scary day.

I took blood samples from all five children and sent them off to the laboratory in Barnstaple with a request that they telephone me with the results.

And even before I got the results back I started all the children on powerful doses of penicillin.

I told all the parents how to look after their children and warned them about the danger of their children's urine.

Thanks be to God, it was the right diagnosis. The children all made a full recovery.

And afterwards, Mr Fothergill took down the rope and the tyre so that no one would play over the pond again. And the farmer who owned the pond put a stout fence around it with several, large, red-lettered signs attached to the posts.

I went down to the pond before the fence went up and, after saying a quiet prayer to God for guiding me to the right diagnosis, I added a quiet 'thank you' to the rat whose splash had led me to the diagnosis.

Author's Note

I hope you have enjoyed this book about Bilbury and the people who live in and visit the village. If you did so then I would be very grateful if you would spare a moment to write a short review. This is the 13th book in the series entitled 'The Young Country Doctor'. I hope you will also enjoy the appendices which follow.

Thank you
Vernon Coleman

Appendix: 1
Wind: Official Types.

Here are the types of wind as classified on the Beaufort scale. Different types of wind are given different names and since there are still people around who do not carry wind meters with them all the time, there needs to be a system that depends on less scientific measurements. Here is my version:

Calm: smoke from chimneys, bonfires and pipes rises vertically in nice, little twirly patterns

Light air: chimney and bonfire smoke drifts a little but flags and weather vanes are pretty well immobile

Slight breeze: leaves rustle and flags start to flutter

Gentle breeze (around 10 mph): a smallish, light flag will be extended and leaves (whether still on the tree or not) will be in constant motion; most hat wearers are still confident although those wearing wide brimmed confections and delicate fascinators may feel some concern

Moderate breeze (around 15 mph): this amount of wind will mean that small branches move around; all hat wearers may feel nervous

Fresh breeze (around 20 mph): small trees which are in leaf will sway a little and wavelets can be seen on lakes, ponds and swimming pools; hats which are blown off can be caught even by those whose mobility is limited to gentle lumbering; wide brimmed hats and hats which are light and flouncy should be nailed on or taken indoors

Strong breeze (around 25 mph): large branches will be moving, it will difficult to control an umbrella and people wearing hats should take them off and put them somewhere safe because a hat blown in a strong breeze will only be caught by a well-trained athlete capable of changing speed and direction very quickly

High wind (around 35 mph): even quite large trees will now be moving and pedestrians will find it difficult to walk; umbrellas will fly away, most golfers will probably give up and loose slates, and tiles will start flying around; hats will blow off and will probably never be seen again

Gale (around 40 mph): twigs and small branches will be broken off trees and car drivers will feel their vehicles being moved about; toupee wearers should prepare for embarrassment

Strong gale (around 50 mph): there is likely to be slight structural damage with chimney pots and slates flying through the air with the greatest of ease; summerhouses and greenhouses may suffer

Whole gale (around 60 mph): whole trees may be uprooted, garden benches will be blown about and there is likely to be serious structural damage to even sturdy buildings

Storm (around 70 mph): widespread damage is likely with cars being blown over; seaside promenades are likely to be deluged with sea water and eager amateur photographers risk being swept out to sea

Hurricane (above 75 mph): if there is a basement or cellar handy this is probably the time to be in it

Appendix 2
Flat Pack Castles

Patchy's tale of how the Normans who landed in England in 1066 brought with them flat pack ready to build castles is absolutely true. Patchy obtained his information from a book entitled *Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World* written by Sir Edward Creasy and first published in 1851. Creasy's book is widely regarded as the definitive history of war prior to the 20th century.

I purchased a copy of Creasy's book from a bookseller in Hay-on-Wye. As a single handed GP, I found it difficult (for which read 'impossible') to leave the village and so I bought my books from catalogues which arrived through the post.

Sir Edward describes the arrival of the Normans in his account of the Battle of Hastings – using the accounts put together by Norman chroniclers. He explains that the first ship to arrive belonged to Duke William. The ship was called the Mora and had been given to him by his duchess, Matilda. On the prow of the ship, according to the Normans, 'there was a brazen child bearing an arrow with a bended bow. His face was turned towards England, and thither he looked, as though he was about to shoot.'

And here is how Sir Edward quotes from the old Norman chroniclers describing the landing from the Mora:

'After the archers had thus gone forth, the knights landed all armed, with their hauberks on, their shields slung at their necks, and their helmets laced. They formed together on the shore, each armed, and mounted on his war-horse: all had their swords girded on, and rode forward into the country with their lances raised. Then the carpenters landed, who had great axes in their hands, and planes and adzes hung at their sides. They took counsel together, and sought for a good spot to place a castle on. They had brought with them from Normandy, in pieces, all ready for framing together, and they took the materials of one of these out of the ships, all shaped and pierced to receive the pins which they had brought cut and ready in large barrels; and before evening had set in, they had finished a good fort on the English ground, and there they placed their stores. And then ate and drank enough, and were right glad that they were ashore.'

Appendix 3
How Fast Can They Go?

In ‘The Psychiatrist Who Ran Away: (Part 2: The Metamorphosis)’ I explained how Cedric (the pig Patsy and I were looking after for our friends in America) had managed to put on an impressive turn of speed while being taken for a walk around the village.

Although a good human middle distance runner could eventually probably catch a pig in full flight, I doubt if many ordinary humans could catch a fleeing pig.

The odd thing about pigs is that they have tremendous acceleration and can reach their top speed within a couple of strides of a standing start. And their four trotter drive propulsion means that they can dodge and swerve far more skilfully than most humans – particularly when the ground is soft or slippery.

The table below gives the speeds of a few arbitrarily chosen animals and insects. These speeds were measured over fairly short distances by scientists with nothing better to do and although it is undoubtedly possible that even faster speeds might be attained for a second or two (or when travelling downhill or with a following wind) it would appear that these are pretty well the limit for the species listed. It should be noted that although some animals may appear to have a limited top speed, they may nevertheless have other qualities which make up for this shortcoming. So, for example, sheep, like pigs, may appear to be relatively slow moving creatures but their ability to change direction suddenly is unsurpassed and is a vital asset when they are attempting to avoid capture.

Cheetah 75 mph
Racehorse 50 mph
Hare 45 mph
Kangaroo 43 mph
Fox 42 mph
Hyena 40 mph
Deer 40 mph
Greyhound 35 mph
Rabbit 35 mph
Dragonfly 30 mph
Horsefly 30 mph
Bee 25 mph
Hippopotamus 25 mph
Man 24 mph
Cow 20 mph
Sheep 15 mph
Grey squirrel 12 mph
Wasp 12 mph
Pig 11 mph
Bluebottle 6 mph
Snail 0.07 m

Appendix 4:
Imperial Weights and Measures

Imperial weights and measures were introduced in Great Britain in 1824 and the systems of weights and measures used in the United States is derived from the Imperial system.

After 1965, the European Union forced Britain to adopt the metric system used on the Continent of Europe and it became illegal to use Imperial measurements when selling packaged or loose goods.

Nevertheless, Imperial measurements were still used in some Commonwealth countries and some Imperial measurements, notably the inch, were still used in Europe, particularly in France.

In Bilbury, however, Imperial measurements were still widely used in the 1970s and the villagers preferred their traditional measurements to the new-fangled type of measurement which was popular elsewhere. Throughout the 1970s, Peter Marshall was still using Imperial measurements when weighing out vegetables, etc.

I confess I have always found the descriptions and idiosyncrasies used in the Imperial system far more attractive than the bald, cold and very scientific metric system.

Imperial length measurements
4 inches = 1 hand (for measuring horses)
12 inches = 1 foot
3 feet = 1 yard
22 yards = 1 chain
10 chains = 1 furlong
8 furlongs = 1 mile
3 miles = 1 league

Imperial length measurements at sea
2.02667 yards = 1 fathom
100 fathoms = 1 cable
10 cables = 1 nautical mile

Imperial measurements for surveying
7.92 inches = 1 link
25 links = 1 rod

Imperial measurements for area
1 perch = 1 rod x 1 rod
1 rood = 1 furlong x 1 rod
1 acre = 1 furlong x 1 chain

Imperial weights
7000 grains = 1 pound
256 drachm = 1 pound
16 ounce = 1 pound
14 pound = 1 stone
28 pound = 1 quarter
112 pound = 1 hundredweight (cwt)
2240 pound = 1 ton

Appendix 5:
Mad Taxes

In 'The Psychiatrist Who Ran Away (Part 2: The Metamorphosis) I described how a cottage had been turned into a death trap when, in the 17th century, a baker had responded to the introduction of the chimney tax by merging her own chimney with the chimney of the adjacent property. This was not an uncommon practice at that time but it frequently caused problems – sometimes leading to multiple deaths as well as the destruction of property. Dr Eckersley's experience was by no means unusual.

British governments have, over the centuries, introduced some pretty bizarre taxes and the chimney tax (or hearth tax) was only one of many dotty ways of raising money.

One of Britain's first taxes was the scutage tax which was introduced by King Henry I in the 12th century. This allowed knights to opt out of their duty to fight for their country by paying money to the King. When King John raised the tax massively, and craftily started charging knights not to fight even when there weren't any wars, he was considered to be behaving badly.

Indeed, this low trick was one of the reasons for the signing of the Magna Carta. The Scutage tax died off under Edward III in the 14th century.

Back in the 18th century, curious taxes were introduced with great enthusiasm. There were, for example, special taxes on almanacs, wine, perfume and rock salt.

Here, below, is a selection of a dozen of the oddest taxes which existed in Britain prior to the 20th century. I have, of course, included the chimney tax – which is at the top of my list simply because it appears in the text of this book. The other entries are in no particular order.

A list of daft taxes introduced in the 20th and 21st centuries would, of course, fill several thousand pages and would be enormously boring, probably even for tax collectors:

Chimney tax 1662, repealed 1689

The chimney tax, which was also known as the hearth tax, was introduced by Parliament in 1662 so that money could be raised to pay for King Charles II's lifestyle. After the monarchy had been restored in 1660, the Parliament reckoned that the King needed an annual income of £1,200,000 and a tax was needed to pay for all his necessary extravagances. Parliament decided it would be easier to count the number of chimneys than the number of heads since the former kept still whereas the latter tended to move about a good deal, particularly if they were about to be taxed. When introduced, the tax was set at two shillings a year per fireplace or stove. To begin with, everyone had to pay the tax but amendments were eventually introduced which made the really poor exempt. However, if a house had more than two chimneys, there were no exemptions. The owners of big houses which had lots of chimneys were faced with fairly huge bills. However, the main objection to the tax was not the money involved but the fact that the officials responsible for collecting the taxes had the legal right to enter every property in the country. Large numbers of chimneys were blocked up to try to avoid the tax but if the owners were found out, they had to pay double taxes. The tax didn't last very long. It was repealed by Parliament in 1689 because it was regarded as offensive that homes should be entered and searched by strangers.

Window tax of 1696, repealed in 1851.

This was a property tax on house owners. The size of the tax bill depended upon the number of windows a house possessed. To keep their taxes down, people had windows bricked up and there are many old houses around in Britain which still have bricked up windows. The property tax was a flat rate of two shillings per house, regardless of the number of windows. Houses which had between ten and twenty windows paid an extra four shillings and those which had more than twenty windows paid an extra eight shillings. The window tax was introduced under King William III because there had been much opposition to the idea of an income tax. The people objected to taxes on income because they didn't think the Government had the right to know what they earned – it was considered intrusive and a threat to personal liberty.

Wallpaper tax of 1712, repealed 1836

In 1712, patterned, printed or painted wallpaper was taxed at 1d per square yard. By 1809, the tax had risen to 1 shilling per square yard. Rich people bought plain paper (because there was no tax on plain wallpaper) and hired artists and people who thought they were artists to paint designs and pretty pictures on the plain paper. The result was that rich people avoided the tax completely and only the poorer people paid it. This tax was abolished in 1836.

Brick tax of 1784, repealed 1850
The brick tax was introduced in 1784, during the reign of King George III. The tax was introduced to help pay for the wars in the American Colonies. Bricks were taxed at four shillings per thousand. To get round the tax, brick makers increased the size of their bricks. To squash this crafty move, which enabled builders to put up a wall using no more than a dozen bricks, the Government introduced a maximum size for brick production. The result was that house builders started to avoid the brick tax completely by using more timber in the houses they built. The Government eventually gave up and the brick tax was abolished in 1850.

Glass tax 1746, repealed 1845
The glass tax was introduced in 1746, in the reign of King George II, and existed until it was abolished by Robert Peel's government in 1845. The glass tax, combined with the window tax, meant that houses were built with small and inadequate windows. And since lighting was poor, barely adequate and expensive, the result was that many homes, particularly in towns and cities, were depressingly gloomy. Ireland was exempt from the glass tax for a while and as a result, a number of famous glass factories were set up there.

Hat tax 1784, repealed 1811
The hat tax was introduced in 1784 and lasted until 1811 and was unquestionably sexist since it affected only hats worn by men. The tax was introduced by the Government of William Pitt the younger, and it was thought that since rich men tended to have more hats than poor men the tax would affect the rich more than the poor. Each new hat had to have a revenue stamp pasted on the lining inside. The amount of the tax depended upon the price of the hat. So, the tax on a hat costing under four shillings was three pence. For expensive hats, costing more than twelve shillings, the tax rose to two shillings. Anyone caught trying to avoid the tax would be fined or hung.

Dice and playing cards tax 1711, repeated 1862
The playing card and dice tax was introduced in 1711 and lasted until 1862. Every pack of cards produced in England had to be stamped by a government official to show that the tax had been paid. Those who tried to cheat the Government (by, for example, producing fake stamps) were hung. Quite a lot of hanging went on in the 18th century which was a good period for rope makers and professional hangmen.

Wig powder tax 1786, repealed 1869
The wig powder tax was introduced in 1786 and repealed in 1869. Unlike other taxes there was no actual duty on the powder itself but anyone who wanted to use hair powder had to buy an annual licence for a guinea. Exemptions included the royal family and their attendants, soldiers and lower ranking army officers and lowly paid clergymen. In the end, the tax pretty well killed off the use of hair powder.

Gin tax 1736, repealed 1743
The gin tax of 1736 was brought in by Act of Parliament in an attempt to curb the consumption of gin. The average citizen in England (including children and the moribund) was at the time drinking 18 pints of gin a year. Even children were drinking the stuff in vast quantities, and gin consumption was blamed for much crime. Gin distillers and sellers had to pay the new tax and small gin shops were driven out of business. However, although the tax reduced the enthusiasm for legally produced gin, the inevitable result was that bootleg gin became popular. Some of the bootleg gin contained turpentine spirit and sulphuric acid and the results were often devastating. Blindness was a common side effect and death not uncommon. The Gin Act was repealed after protestors rioted in London in 1743, but another Gin Act was passed in 1751 which was again designed to control the consumption of gin. The introduction of healthier alternatives such as tea and beer was encouraged but rather a lot of people simply drank the beer and the tea and carried on with the gin as well.

Soap tax 1712, repealed 1835
The soap tax was introduced in 1712 and repealed in 1835 by which time much of the country undoubtedly stank to high heaven. The tax put small soap makers out of business and didn't do much for the cleanliness of the British in that period.

Beard tax 1535, quietly abandoned

A beard tax was introduced in 1535 by Henry VIII (who himself had a beard but presumably didn't tax himself). The tax gradually died out, partly because it was silly but also because it was difficult to collect. ('No, this isn't a beard. I just haven't bothered to shave today.') The tax was, however, reintroduced by Henry VIII's normally sensible daughter, Elizabeth I. Under Elizabeth I, every man with more than two week's growth of beard had to pay the tax. No one seems to know precisely when the beard tax was withdrawn but it seems it was still found difficult to enforce and it probably just fizzled out and was eventually abandoned.

Clock tax 1797, abandoned same year

The clock tax was introduced in 1797 and covered watches as well as clocks. An ordinary watch attracted a tax of two shillings and sixpence. A gold watch was taxed at ten shillings. Clocks costing more than twenty shillings were taxed at five shillings. The inevitable result was that people stopped buying watches and clocks and everyone was late for everything. The tax was, therefore, abandoned after just nine months.

Author’s Note
I hope you have enjoyed this book about Bilbury and the people who live in and visit the village. If you did so then I would be very grateful if you would spare a moment to write a short review. A few seconds of your time will mean the world to Patsy (Antoinette) and myself. This is the 13th book in the series entitled ‘The Young Country Doctor’.
Thank you
Vernon Coleman

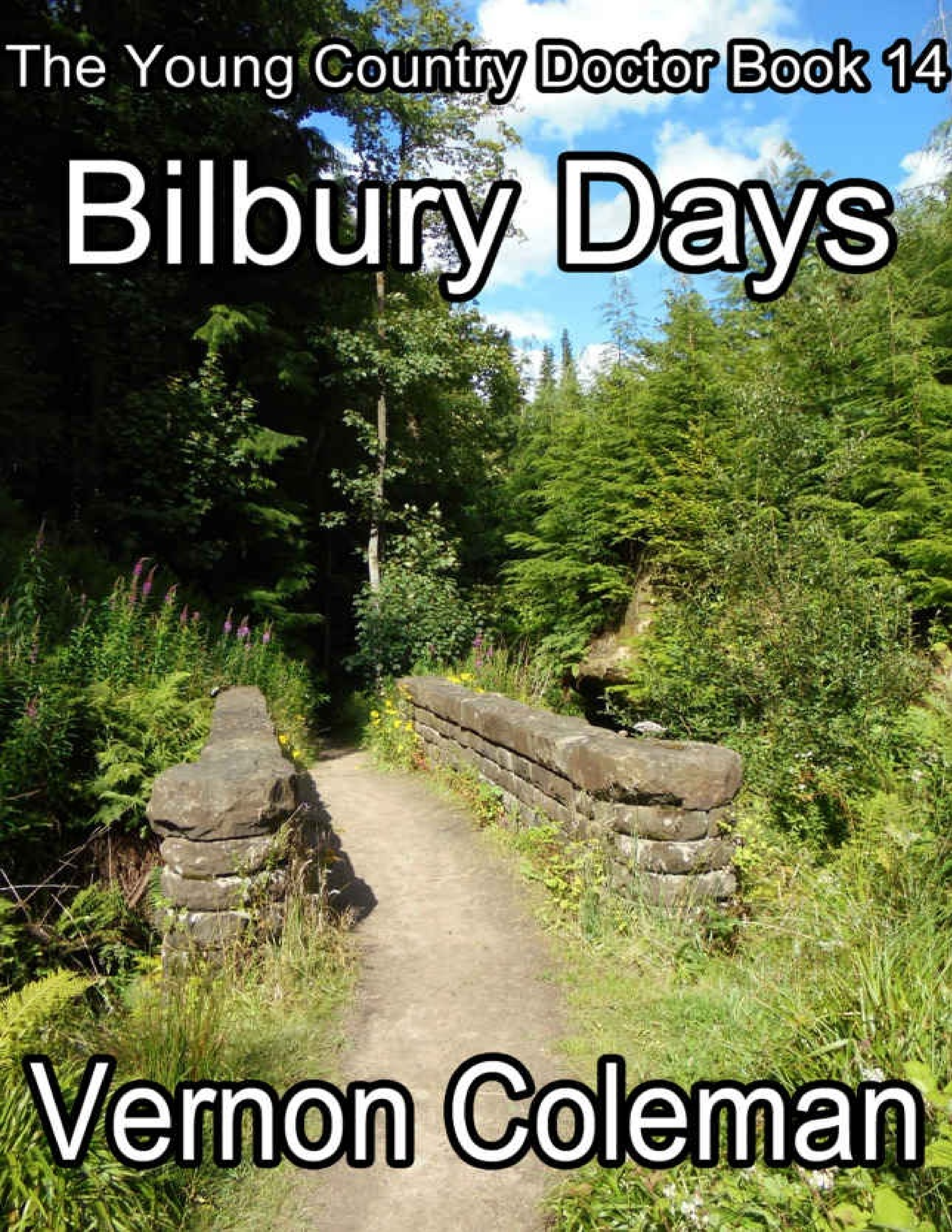

The Young Country Doctor Book 14

Bilbury Days

Vernon Coleman

The Young Country Doctor no 14

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Vernon Coleman

Another collection of memories from the English village of Bilbury.

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Note: As usual, the names and details of individuals, animals and establishments, except the Duck and Puddle and Peter Marshall's shop, have been altered to protect the innocent, the guilty and those who aren't quite sure where they stand but would like to think about it for a while. The events in *Bilbury Days* occurred in the 1970s.

The Author

Vernon Coleman qualified as a doctor and practised as a GP. He is a *Sunday Times* bestselling author who has written over 100 books which have been translated into 25 languages and sold in over 50 countries. His books have sold over two million copies in the UK alone though no one is sure whether two million people each bought one book or one person has a very large bookcase. Vernon Coleman is also a qualified doctor. He and his wife (whose real name is Antoinette) live in Bilbury, Devon, England. Vernon is an accomplished bar billiards player (three times runner up in the Duck and Puddle Christmas competition), a keen but surprisingly dangerous skittles player and an accomplished maker of paper aeroplanes. He has a certificate proving that he once swam a mile for charity. He was, at some point in the early 1960s, second in the Walsall Boys Golf Championship and was awarded with three brand new golf balls in a smart, cardboard box. He claims to be one of the best stone skimmers in North Devon. (Nine bounces are by no means unheard of and he has a personal best of 12 bounces.) He is a long-term member of the Desperate Dan Pie-Eater's Club (vegetarian section) and although he can juggle three balls at once, he cannot knit. He has never jumped out of an aeroplane (with or without a parachute) but he has, on several occasions, lit bonfires in the rain and is particularly proud of the fact that he once managed to light one in a snowstorm. He has not yet availed himself of the extensive opportunities apparently offered by social media (he says he is waiting to see if the idea catches on) but notes about important events are pinned on the noticeboard outside Peter Marshall's shop in the village and he has had a website (www.vernoncoleman.com) since the day after King Alfred burnt the cakes. Entrance to the website is free of charge and there is ample parking space. Visitors to the site are requested to wash their hands before entering and to wipe their feet before leaving. Sadly, there are no advertisements or refreshment facilities. The Author is registered as an Ancient Monument and selected parts of him are Grade II listed.

Vernon Coleman's novels include: *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War*, *Mrs Caldicot's Knickerbocker Glory*, *Mrs Caldicot's Easter Parade*, *Mr Henry Mulligan*, *The Truth Kills*, *Second Chance*, *Paris in my Springtime*, *It's Never Too Late*, *The Hotel Doctor*, *My Secret Years with Elvis* and many others. All of these books are available as e-books on Amazon as are the 14 volumes in The Young Country Doctor series.

The Young Country Doctor series

This is the 14th book in the series and so, if the author has done his sums right, there are probably around thirteen other books describing the Devon village of Bilbury and its inhabitants. All the books in the series are available as e-books on Amazon. A few hardback editions of the first seven books were self-published in modest runs but these are all now out of print. The first few books are sequential but after about the third book you can read them in any order you like without getting into a tangle. There have not yet been any paperback copies of any of the books and the author is patiently waiting for a large international publisher to make him an offer he cannot refuse. Film companies should know that Thumper Robinson and Patchy Fogg are both happy to play themselves if a movie is made. Frank and Gilly are prepared to make the Duck and Puddle available to filmmakers, and I can confirm that they make excellent sandwiches and serve wonderful beer. Peter Marshall, who runs the Bilbury village shop, would like to talk terms before making a decision about his participation but no one in Bilbury doubts that he would jump at a chance to promote his shop on the big screen. Publishers and film companies wanting to get in touch with the author should pop a note into a bottle, throw it into a nearby waterway and wait for a response.

Dedication

To Antoinette: You will forever fill my heart and nothing will ever change that truth. Everything else is just noise.

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Foreword

I made a catapult the other day. I don’t know why. I didn’t need a catapult. I didn’t even want one. Not really.

What happened was that after cutting some dead birch branches and some coppiced hazel sticks into kindling, I found myself left with a forked piece of wood that was simply crying out to become a catapult. It was far too nicely shaped to end up on the fire. So, I found a thick piece of elastic that had once been something else and five minutes later I had a simple but effective catapult.

I obviously then had to make a bow and arrow.

And for that I needed a suitably sized branch of ash, a few nice straight pieces of bamboo and some bird feathers (willingly donated by various visitors to our garden). The only other requirement was a reasonably sharp penknife.

Looking back, it is astonishing how much of our time at school was spent in pastimes which would be considered unacceptably violent today. Every boy I knew carried one or two strong rubber bands in his blazer pocket. These were used to fire paper pellets at terrifying speed. When soaked with ink from the inkwell in the top right hand corner of every desk these pellets left their mark in more ways than one.

As I looked at my newly made catapult, I found myself drifting back to another world, another life, another era and it occurred to me that although many older readers of my Bilbury books will recognise and understand the world I am describing, younger readers may find it difficult to believe that there was a time, not so long ago, when the world was very different and was, in many ways, a more dangerous place.

At the grammar school which I attended, school teachers were frequently violent; smacking pupils around the head so hard that the victim would be dazed and semi-conscious for most of the rest of the lesson. Even at the age of 14, I spotted that there didn’t seem to be much point in shouting at a boy for not paying attention and then hitting his head so hard that he didn’t know where he was. Some teachers used their hands as weapons while others preferred to use special, long, steel edged rulers. All those practitioners of the backhand and forehand head-slap were probably excellent tennis players. One, I remember, specialised in a backhand, forehand, backhand triple slap. The unfortunate recipient would be dizzy for the rest of the day.

Other teachers liked to throw things. Heavy, wooden board rubbers were especially popular weapons and would be hurled at maximum velocity. The teacher’s desk contained a box of sticking plasters for those boys who were too slow or too distracted to duck. This sort of steady bombardment was considered normal, and an essential part of the school day. In every classroom where I studied, the plaster of the back wall was pock marked as though it had been subjected to machine gun fire.

Toy manufacturers made most of their products out of lead and then coated them with lead paint so that when children sucked the toys, they could get their daily dose of lead without doing too much damage to the toy itself. I always preferred the blue lead myself but this was just a personal preference. A chum of mine used to like biting the heads of lead soldiers but I think this was a private idiosyncrasy and I have no knowledge of it being widespread. Just about every toy made in the 1950s was sexist, racist or dangerous. Boys had guns and soldiers, and girls had dolls and prams and everyone thought that was right and proper and what else could you possibly expect. Sharp edges were so common that I now suspect that toy makers were instructed to build in the sharp edges so as to ensure a steady supply of business for sticking plaster manufacturers. When, as a small boy, I went surfing at Treyarnon Bay in Cornwall, my parents rented for me a surfboard made out of a plank that had not been properly planed. The edges were rough and splintery and at the end of a day in the sea, I would go back to our caravan bleeding from a thousand cuts. Fortunately, the Cornish sea was clean enough in those days to sterilise the wounds. I’m not sure I would trust myself to its cleansing nature these days. Today, anyone renting out such equipment would be dragged through the streets by appalled health and safety officials. But I bet I had as much fun on my plank as any surfer has today on one of these specially made and contoured boards.

When I was a boy, in the 1950s, I spent my summer holidays exploring, making camp sites, lighting fires, tearing my trousers on barbed wire and falling off my bicycle. My mother must have spent a good chunk of housekeeping on plasters, bandages and iodine.

But at least I was out of doors and most of the games we played were free and some of them really did grow on trees. Old bits of string and shoelace were kept for stringing conkers from September through to December.

Pocket money was spent on comics, marbles, small metal cars, little packs of balsa wood, bottles of dandelion and burdock and bizarre confections which were fizzy or sticky and largely composed of additives. These were sold from huge jars kept on the shelf behind the newsagent’s head. The shop assistant would pick them out by hand and, if you bought enough of them, pop them into a small, white, paper bag. Otherwise he or she handed them to you and you put them into your pocket to pick up a little fluff.

Comics contained many pages of uninterrupted type with authors such as Charles Hamilton (who as Frank Richards was the inventor of Greyfriars School, Billy Bunter et al) producing endless, long stories for both boys and girls. And the strip cartoons were well written and educational (both in terms of style and life). If you doubt me, just take a look at a child's comic from the 1950s and compare it with a modern comic. Those few children's comics which remain are brash and require little in the way of literary skills.

Playground fights involved fists and feet and were always widely advertised by shouts of 'Fight' for several minutes before they started. Spectators would gather around in a wide circle, giving the protagonists plenty of room to punch, kick, bite, gouge and pull hair. These fights were rarely, if ever, halted by a teacher, they never led to anything more than a nosebleed and they usually cleared the air between the protagonists. Proper battles involved small stones fired from home-made catapults, metal tipped arrows fired from home-made bows and bullets fired from air rifles and air guns. The number of children requiring plasters and dowsing with antiseptic was probably higher but the number of children requiring hospitalisation was far smaller than it is today. Most of the diseases from which children suffer today had not been discovered and so no one suffered from them.

Not all hobbies were as deadly as battles with catapults and bows and arrows. One summer, when I was around six or seven, I started to collect car numbers. It seems a strange thing to do now but there weren't many cars around in the early 1950s and car number plates were easily identified with the town where they were issued. A couple of pals and I kept notebooks in which we wrote down all the car numbers we could find. I gave up when my parents took me out for the day and parked in a crowded car park. I was overwhelmed and took to collecting stamps instead.

There were still plenty of working horses around and my father would go out into the middle of a main road with the garden shovel (the big one with built up edges which he used for clearing the snow which fell every winter) and collect the droppings left by the horses. I would stand and hold the bucket, unworried by the traffic or the idea that someone might see me. The manure was good for the roses in our front garden. That was the same garden where I cut the grass with a push mower. It took all my strength to move the mower if the grass was more than half an inch high but it was a privilege not a duty for I felt very grown up and it makes me now appreciate having a mower with a petrol engine which devours grass whatever the length.

When I was small, we lived in a prefab; a prefabricated building designed to ease the post-war housing crisis. I remember it as being quite well made. Each prefab had its own garden, complete with a wooden fence and a garden gate. I went back a few decades later and found that the prefabs had all been knocked down and replaced by a 20 storey block of flats. I had a look around and was astonished to see that the prefabs had been better built, sturdier than the new apartments, and they had those little gardens. The high rise flats looked gloomy; dirty, dark and depressing.

It was an innocent time in many ways.

And here's another odd thing I've noticed.

Back in the 1950s and as recently as the 1970s, children were still children but at some point they metamorphosed, sometimes overnight, into grown-ups. It was not a gradual process. Take a look at photographs of school children and then look at the team photographs for professional football or cricket teams from the 1970s and you'll see what I mean. Sports players in their late teens or early twenties looked like adults. And, by and large, they behaved like adults, too.

Today, children aren't children in the sense that they were half a century ago (there are a variety of reasons for this, which I have explored in other books) but nor do they metamorphose into adults when they reach a point in their lives when adulthood might seem appropriate. Grown men and women in their 20s and even 30s still look and behave like children. Just think of the way modern professional sports players behave if you don't believe me.

Young people born in the last decade of the 20th century and the first two decades of the 21st think that they are experiencing rapid change as social media changes daily but in truth they aren't experiencing anything like the change which their parents and grandparents had to face. All that is happening today is that life is becoming more complicated and technology is ever more intrusive.

My parents had no radio, no television, no telephone, and a motorbike with a sidecar was an incredible luxury. Motor cars were only for the very rich. My Dad made a television set in the kitchen of our prefab and, when Queen Elizabeth was crowned queen, our living room was packed with people who came in to watch because we were the only people anyone knew who had a set on which to watch it. Our set had a screen that was smaller than a modern laptop screen. There was only one TV channel and that only operated for a few hours a day. (When I say that my Dad made our first television set I mean exactly that. He bought a magazine which contained instructions and then purchased the valves, knobs and bits and pieces from a local shop.)

Traffic wardens hadn't been invented and anyone who'd been on an aeroplane was probably either a business executive or an adventurer. Families who wanted to explore the continent travelled by train and boat or put their car onto the ferry; both provided a rewardingly slow and gentle introduction to foreign parts. Central heating was unusual and computers were as big as a grand piano and took half a day to struggle to add two and two. There was much whirring and crossing of fingers before the answer was spewed out.

You might imagine that all the technology we have at our disposal these days would have dramatically improved our productivity (in the widest sense of the word).

But it hasn't.

Despite the lack of technology, people in general always seemed to manage to get a lot more done before computers became widespread.

How many modern authors, pecking away at their laptops, can ever hope to match the output of Charles Dickens who wrote with a quill pen and died at the age of 58 – an age at which most modern writers would consider that they were just getting into their stride? How many can match the output of Mark Twain? And, remember, Frank Richards used to write 10,000 words a day on an old sit up and beg typewriter. (How his fingers must have hurt.) P.G.Wodehouse turned out a whole library of books on an old Royal desktop machine which was so big that I doubt if he could lift it without help.

How many modern film stars now make as many films as James Stewart or John Wayne?

Technology has slowed us down and it has certainly had a damaging effect on every aspect of productivity. The intrusive telephone started the rot. And today we are obsessed with our emails and, for those who choose to play that game, with the relentless, hourly demands of social media.

Things started to change in the 1970s but villages like Bilbury were still hanging on to a simpler way of life.

Even by the end of the 1970s, not all homes in Bilbury were supplied with electricity, mains water or mains drainage. In the big cities, it was commonplace to find houses which had gas supplied by pipe but in Bilbury, in the 1970s, anyone who wanted gas had to buy it in bottles which were collected from the local shop or, for a small extra fee, delivered to their door. Heating and cooking were mostly done with wood and, occasionally, with coal.

In towns and cities, most people had telephones, and television sets and washing machines and dishwashers: technology had tiptoed into the world and was, generally speaking, made very welcome.

In rural areas, however, things did not move quite so quickly. Even by the 1970s, there were a good many houses in villages such as Bilbury which were without telephones or television sets, and though a few homes had wireless sets, the equipment they had was large, cumbersome and reliable. I remember too that they all had a setting for something called Hilversum. No one knew where or what it was.

Every decent sized town had a department store, usually family owned and family run, where you could buy furniture, bed linen, crockery, clothing for all the family, sensible underwear (including iron clad corsets with straps strong enough to dangle a carthorse), hats and haberdashery. And, of course, every town had a Woolworths store; these were always fun to explore and full of colourful and useless joys – the perfect shops for children of all ages but absurdly over- stocked. At one point, Woolworths carried over 50 different types of pencil case. Woolworths was a store where people bought what they wanted rather than the stuff they needed. It was a store for the spur of the moment purchase but at least everything cost pennies.

In Bilbury, we had Peter Marshall's shop and though there were stores in Barnstaple selling things most of us could manage perfectly well without, it was to Peter's well-stocked emporium that most of us headed when we needed something.

As recently as the 1970s, many motor cars still smelt of leather and petrol instead of plastic and diesel, and if bits fell off (which they did from time to time) they could be fitted back into place by anyone who owned a wrench and a screwdriver. Cars were owned only by the rich and the ambitious middle classes and seat belts had not been invented. Windscreens were made of the sort of glass which splinters into sharp shards. Car owners expected vehicles to last for decades and even someone without skills or tools could replace a windscreen wiper or a broken wing mirror. Most car owners tinkered with their vehicles on Sunday mornings, sometimes removing the entire engine and working on it after lovingly placing it on the kitchen table. Washing and polishing the car was, for many enthusiasts, merely the end of the process rather than the process itself.

Back in the 1950s, drivers had regularly broken their wrists starting their cars with the handle provided but by the 1970s, cars were equipped with self-starters. A device called the choke, which had to be pulled out prior to starting the car on a cold morning and then pushed back into position when the car had begun to operate, had pretty well disappeared too. In the 1950s, a foot operated pedal dipped the headlights and if the car was posh, another foot operated the pedal oiled the chassis at 100 mile intervals. By the 1970s, cars no longer had bits which needed oiling quite so regularly and they didn't have a chassis either. But in Bilbury, most local people still drove vehicles which had been built in the 1950s and the local garage knew more about starting handles than cars without gear sticks. My first car, a Humber, was held together with sticky tape and bits of wire.

Despite all the dangers, it was safe to walk through the streets after dark and in small, rural communities, people really did leave doors and windows open without worrying that they would be burgled.

So, that was the 1970s – the time of which I write: The Bilbury Years.

Welcome, to those who remember some of this, and welcome too, to those who think I must have come from another planet and that the world I describe must be imaginary.

People used to say that things were better 'then' and when the 'then' was 100 years ago everyone knew it was nonsense. Things were only better in Victorian and Edwardian times if you were rich and had good, strong teeth.

But thinking about it as objectively as is possible, I do think things were better 'then' if 'then' was just half a century ago.

Back in the 1970s, we had anaesthesia, antiseptics and antibiotics (antibiotic resistant bugs were unknown) and roads you could drive on with a reasonable expectation of getting where you were going before the seasons changed. Women wore frocks and dresses and skirts and hardly ever owned a pair of trousers and men wore hats and took them off when greeting people. On buses, men would offer their seats to women without being abused. Obesity was far less common and infant mortality rates had fallen dramatically. Life expectancy was much the same in the 1970s as it is now though women generally lived a few years longer.

This difference is fading fast as women acquire bad habits such as smoking, and drinking and overeating which were previously almost exclusively male. The wider availability of household gadgets powered by electricity means that women take less natural exercise and the women's liberation movement has helped to ensure that the killer stress is shared more equally between the two sexes.

There is, by the way, a popular myth, sustained and promoted by some who don't understand and by some who have a vested interest in selling the idea, that doctors and drug companies have together been responsible for conquering disease and improving life expectancy. But it is a myth that life expectancy has increased dramatically in the last hundred years and another myth that any improvement is a result of doctors becoming wiser and drug companies producing better drugs. What most observers do not realise is that when historians say that life expectancy was around 45 in the year 1900, they don't mean that most adults died at or around the age of 45. The figures are skewed by the fact that lots of babies died at birth or in infancy. Those tragic, early deaths dragged down the average life expectation. If a baby dies when it is a few months old and a woman dies at 90 then the average age of death is 45 years. Infant mortality rates have dropped dramatically and so average life expectancy appears to have risen dramatically.

What doctors and drug companies won't tell you is that infant mortality rates did not fall because of vaccines or drugs – they fell because communities separated their sewage from their drinking water, because overcrowded tenements were pulled down and because better farming methods meant that healthier, cheaper food became available. It isn't difficult to argue that doctors and drug companies have carefully and deliberately built their reputations on a well-sustained myth.

I have rambled enough.

I sincerely hope you enjoy this trip back to the 1970s and this latest collection of Bilbury memories.

Vernon Coleman
Bilbury, Devon, England

Boris and Belinda Bickerson

That variety of medical treatments sometimes rather patronisingly dismissed as ‘alternative therapies’ have, of course, been around for far longer than orthodox medicine. For many centuries what we now call ‘alternative’ or ‘complementary’ remedies were the only forms of treatment available.

Only in the last century or two have ordinary people been able to consult trained and qualified doctors, or expect to be looked after by nurses who have been given formal training.

Back in the 19th century, and before, the absence of properly qualified practitioners meant that communities everywhere, but perhaps particularly those in rural areas, were looked after by a wide variety of individuals who had some knowledge, or claimed to have some knowledge, about remedies which might be used to combat illness.

Some of the remedies which were used relied heavily upon the power of the healer’s personality and upon the effectiveness of the placebo effect.

Other treatments, the secrets of which were sometimes passed down through the generations, usually from mother to daughter, relied on herbs – many of which were extremely effective.

The drug digitalis, still one of the most powerful remedies used in the treatment of heart disease, was first used by ‘wise women’, ‘mydwyfes’ and ‘witches’ who obtained the herb from the foxglove plant. It was only when an observant doctor noted the efficacy of the remedy, that digitalis was introduced into burgeoning mainstream medicine. There are hundreds of powerful medicines which come from plants – aspirin comes from the willow tree and morphine from the opium poppy. And, of course, penicillin is a lowly mould – penicillium – which had been used for centuries before being ‘discovered’ by Alexander Fleming in 1928. It is perfectly true that it was Fleming whose research, serendipity and observational skills helped turn the mould into a powerful drug for the treatment of infection but what many people still don’t know is that penicillin was known and used by the ancient Egyptians. They used rotten bread in several remedies for the treatment of infected wounds and although they did not have laboratories in which to investigate and define the nature of the treatment they were using, they had the imagination to take advantage of the healing properties of the mould itself. It would be millennia before Fleming gave the mould a name and a scientifically approved purpose. The Egyptians also used scopolamine from the mandrake plant, cathartics from the castor oil plant and painkillers from the opium plant.

I doubt if there is any substance known to man which has not at some point been tried and used as a remedy for illnesses. Some of the substances which have been tried have proved ineffective, some have turned out to do more harm than good, sometimes even killing rather curing, but many have turned out to be effective and safe enough to be used.

I have, in my time, met a wide variety of healers.

Some, sadly, were charlatans.

For example, I once met a woman who claimed she could cure cancer with little rubber bands. If you had cancer of the lung, she put the rubber band on the little finger of your left hand. If you had breast cancer, she put a green rubber band on the ring finger of your right hand. If you had brain cancer, she put a red rubber band on the index finger of your left hand and a blue rubber band on your thumb. And so it went on. Gullible and desperate patients gave her money to tell them where to put the rubber bands and even paid her more for supplies of the appropriately coloured bands. (Naturally, ordinary rubber bands did not work as well as the expensive ones which she sold.) She had absolutely no medical training and no knowledge of human anatomy or physiology but she earned large sums of money by selling her ‘cure’ to vulnerable patients. When she died in 1971, she left her astonished relatives a fortune and a large, comfortable house in a fashionable London suburb.

It is, of course, possible to argue that even the most outrageous charlatan can do good if they are charismatic enough and if they clearly believe in the remedy they are promoting. The effectiveness of the placebo response has been well documented and it has been shown many times that a doctor who convinces his patients that the remedies he is offering will be beneficial will cure far more effectively than the doctor who simply tosses a prescription across the desk with a desultory, and rather disinterested: ‘try these, they might help’.

The big, unanswered and unanswerable question, is: ‘Is it better that someone should hobble about in pain, untreated and untreatable by orthodox physicians or that they should be given some relief by an unqualified quack?’

The problem is that there is no doubt that charlatans and quacks who know little or nothing about the human body and mind and who do not understand their own strengths and limitations, can do an enormous amount of harm.

The main danger, of course, is that by promising much and delivering little or nothing, the greedy charlatan may discourage the genuinely sick from seeking advice which could prove thoroughly advantageous.

(Incidentally, those who practise quackery are often accused of doing what they do for money but how many expensive practitioners, working in luxurious Harley Street consulting rooms, fail to provide their patients with a bill after treating them? And how many GPs do what they do without expecting to see money appearing in their bank account?)

I once saw a patient who was visiting North Devon on holiday and who had been 'treated' for nine months by a ruthless, money-grabbing quack in Bristol.

I was called to see the patient when he collapsed while driving on the road between Blackmoor Gate and South Molton. It was a miracle none of his passengers was seriously hurt for, when he was suddenly taken ill, he unavoidably drove off the road and into a ditch.

The man was emaciated and jaundiced, and I was astonished that he had managed to drive down from Bristol. The man's wife told me that her husband had a long-standing fear of doctors and of hospitals and had been treated by a local quack who had diagnosed constipation and had promised to cure him with a cocktail of liquid paraffin and senakot together with two hourly doses of methyl cellulose. I was called by a passing farmer and when I got to the scene of the accident, I was just in time to watch him die.

The autopsy showed that the unfortunate fellow had cancer of the kidney which had metastasised and, as a result, he had secondary deposits in just about every organ of his body. His liver was swollen, solid and lumpy.

It may not have been possible to cure the man but he would have most certainly received better medical and nursing care, and he would have had a much better chance of surviving, if the self-appointed 'expert' treating him had managed to put his hubris to one side, accept that his diagnosis and treatment might be wrong and find the courage to ask for help.

It was inevitable that there should be several practitioners of alternative medicine working in the North Devon area where my practice was situated. Most of them practised their versions of medicine as a hobby and all of those who I came across were, I'm pleased to say, as conscious of their limitations as they were of their strengths.

(My sister-in-law, Adrienne, had given up her own ministrations after various unfortunate attempts at healing. She had once taken a three day course in iridology which had proved rather less than successful and when I first arrived in Bilbury she was a keen practitioner of herbalism. She abandoned the herbalism after poisoning her father with hawthorn tablets. Her attempts to persuade Anne Thwaites to deal with the pain of childbirth with extract of nettles had proved equally unsuccessful.)

Some of the local practitioners were complete amateurs (not in the sense that they were unprofessional in the way they worked but in the sense that they neither asked for nor accepted any monetary reward). And some specialised and offered only remedies for particular conditions.

So, for example, a local farmer called Mr Hornbeam had a cure for ringworm which was quite remarkable. He simply drew a circle around the ringworm with his finger and within a week the skin would be clear and there would be no sign left of the problem. Mr Hornbeam was a man of few words and he could appear brusque. He was certainly not a man who could ever be accused of dilly dallying, shilly shallying or any other variety of prevarication. He was a man of action, a man who could comfortably be described as a doer not a thinker, but his treatment for ringworm was remarkably effective. I have absolutely no idea how or why it worked but work it certainly did.

Then there was Gilbert Carmody of Barbrook who had a very strange and curiously effective remedy for indigestion, particularly when caused by over-indulgence. He would, with the aid of his wife Hetty and his two huge sons, dig a man-sized hole in the largest manure heap on their farm. I saw the family at work on this task and I have to say that Hetty did as much work as the three men.

To say that Hetty was a big woman would be like saying that Mount Everest was a trifle on the hilly side. She was reputed to start each day with two kippers and a tumbler of green chartreuse and to end it with two more kippers and another tumbler of green chartreuse. She ate the kippers, bones and all, as a sandwich, positioned between two pikelets and always followed the kippers with a Chorley cake. I did once see her having her early morning kipper sandwiches and her tumbler of green chartreuse (and it was a large tumbler, the sort more normally used for serving lemonade) but although I never saw her finish the day with the same menu, I have no reason to disbelieve the tale. I have often come across strange dietary habits and I subsequently found out that Horatio Bottomley, the journalist, businessman and orator, used to start his day with kippers and champagne, but Hetty's preference still seems to me to take the biscuit, and to be well on the odd side of unusual.

Hetty's brother was a clergyman in Wakefield who was quite famous in ecclesiastical circles for having constant rows with his Bishop and who was more widely renowned for having written and self-published an apparently rather indiscreet tell-all autobiography entitled *Altar Ego*. His book, which Hetty said was extensive, revealing and rambling, was subtitled *A Candid Look behind the Vestry Door*. It quickly went out of print (I always suspected that the Bishop bought all the copies and burnt them) and Hetty promised to find me a copy but, sadly, never could.

Gilbert was quite a religious man whose favourite saying was: 'As a tree falls so it must lie'. He managed to make this biblical saying sound deeply enigmatic and apparently he used to say it whenever an indigestion sufferer disappeared into the manure heap. Mr Carmody would encourage the groaning sufferer to climb naked into the hole that had been prepared and the sons would shift and compress the manure so that the patient was buried in it up to his neck. Hetty, who had done much of the hole digging, took no part in the burying process. The sons were built along the lines of rather plain Corinthian pillars. This bizarre treatment produced a cure within a day and I can only assume that the heat of the manure heap promoted digestion. In the early days, they used to provide this service at no cost but in later years their remedy became so popular that they used to charge £2 per person. Their remedy was a little more expensive than a bottle of antacid, and required a good deal of bathing afterwards, but it seemed to work just as well.

I have certainly heard it said on several occasions that a hot bath is the best remedy for digestive troubles and a steaming manure heap would probably work on much the same principle.

It was a hell of a cure, though and I think I would have had to have pretty awful digestion before agreeing to climb into the depths of one of Mr Carmody's manure heaps. I often wondered if Mrs Carmody ever needed to take the manure heap remedy as a result of her unusual diet, but I never dared to ask. They were, to say the least, a forbidding family and the sons, who were very, very large, were rather humourless and easily offended.

Although they were really some way outside my normal catchment area, the Carmody family were long-term patients of mine (they had been looked after by Dr Brownlow) and I once visited them in winter. Mrs Carmody had a kipper bone stuck in the back of her throat and, fortunately, I was able to remove it with a long pair of forceps. It was so cold in their house (a 19th century farmhouse that had been rebuilt, redesigned and added to so often that it looked as if it had been designed by two architects who hated each other and their client in equal measures) that I suggested, not entirely as a joke, that if they had anything they wanted warmed up they should put it into their fridge. The sons scowled and one of them had pointed out that they didn't have a refrigerator. Indeed, they had no mains electricity: just a small, petrol driven generator which fed a couple of lights in their barn. They did their cooking on an old Aga which they fed with wood and bits of rubbish.

Oliver Hudson, who lived on the Barnstaple road and whose mother's maiden name was also Hudson, was another local practitioner. He claimed to be able to cure mumps by leading the sufferer three times around a well in his garden. He always told his patients about his mother's maiden name though I was never quite sure whether this was because he felt it was significant or simply because it was a curiosity of which he was proud. When not curing mumps, Mr Hudson was an income tax inspector with very personal views about history. He once told me that the Great War had been fought after the King, the Kaiser, the Emperor of Austria and the President of France had a private meeting and decided there were too many people in the world and that a few million ought to be killed (or, presumably, culled) in an attempt to keep the numbers down. Mr Hudson also assured me that whenever faced with a dilemma of any kind he would always ask himself what Napoleon Bonaparte would have done. I always found this a rather strange way to seek a solution to any problem since from what I knew of Napoleon, he always solved every problem either by invading somewhere foreign or by putting another one of his relatives on a throne somewhere. I was never sure whether Mr Hudson consulted Napoleon Bonaparte when dealing with tax dilemmas but my own experience of the Inland Revenue convinced me that this was not an unlikely prospect – though as a taxpayer I would have been startled if I had been advised to deal with a tax issue by invading Russia.

And then there was Absalom Cadell, who specialised in treating acne. He was in his late fifties when I first met him but he looked much older. He lived in a very scruffy cottage near Tolstoy's garage and was a quietly spoken man who had once worked on the railways. He had retired after an accident which had left him not with any physical abnormality but with a morbid dread of a number of things – including leaves, blood and, for some unexplained reason, hats of any description. Everywhere he went he walked slowly, with his hands behind his back. He reminded me greatly of an earnest undertaker pacing steadily and respectfully behind a hearse containing the mortal remains of a valued customer and knowing himself to be in sight of relatives who knew that tipping the undertaker's men was the right and proper thing to do if the deceased was to ascend to heaven with the proper level of dignity.

Mr Cadell had very fixed views on a range of subjects. 'Man or woman's determination to adhere to their understanding of the obligations of humanity is their only inviolable and fundamental responsibility,' he insisted. 'All personal and social loyalties, duties and roles are built upon that determination.' I never really understood what he meant by this but it sounded impressive and he said it often and loudly.

'It is the free man's right, nay his duty, to resent authority and to do everything he can to undermine the conceit of those who enjoy the trappings of the power they claim on its behalf,' was another of his favourite sayings. I understood that one and could see the point.

He was, to say the least, an unusual man.

But he was undeniably a miracle worker when it came to treating acne – his sole speciality.

He would give each of his patients a bottle containing a colourless liquid which was characterised by the dark-red sediment lying at the bottom. The ingredients were kept quite secret. The bottle had to be shaken vigorously and although I never tasted it myself, the stuff was reputed to taste quite foul. Patients had to take a tablespoonful in water three times a day and they had to drink three bottles of the stuff. Mr Cadell did not charge a penny for his remedy but simply asked that the bottles be returned to him when empty. He would only dispense one bottle at a time, so to obtain the second bottle the patient had to take back the first bottle. The stuff was reputed to be so acidic that it would gradually eat away the spoon which was used to dispense it. But the truth is that Cadell's Potion, as it was known locally, worked better than any medicine I was able to prescribe at the time and those who took it all said that their acne had gone away leaving no scars. To this day, I have no idea what the mixture contained or where the recipe came from.

Apropos of absolutely nothing, Mr Cadell once showed me an asbestos jacket which his grandfather had bought in 1944. He apparently bought the jacket not, as you might have thought, to protect himself against incendiaries, but because he liked to smoke in bed and had a habit of falling asleep and setting fire to himself. The jacket looked immensely uncomfortable and given what we now know about the perils of asbestos, it was probably not the healthiest piece of clothing ever designed.

And then there was Wayne Wellard, the farrier with the dog called Kamir. Mr Wellard was the man to go to if you had sore or strained muscles and although he had received absolutely no training, he specialised in massage and could ease troubled muscles in just one visit. My mother-in-law, Mrs Kennet, had visited him on several occasions and she swore that he was more skilful and more effective than any physiotherapist. To his patients he was known as 'Mr Fingers'. Although he struggled to make ends meet, Mr Wellard never charged anyone for his services. He said that if he charged he wouldn't feel so good about what he did and that if he didn't feel so good about it then it wouldn't be so effective.

The best known, and undoubtedly the most successful, alternative practitioners in the Bilbury area of North Devon were the Bickersons – Belinda and Boris Bickerson. They both earned a modest living by charging small fees and they always referred patients to me if they felt they were unable to help. I always felt that we had a good relationship.

Belinda and Boris were not husband and wife, they were brother and sister and neither of them had ever married. There was no little sadness behind their situation. Belinda had been engaged to an American soldier who had fought in the Korean War. I cannot remember how on earth she had met him and, indeed, I may never have known. Tragically, he had died within a month of arriving in Korea. Since then she had shown no interest in marriage or, indeed, in beginning any sort of romantic relationship. Boris had remained entirely unattached until he was in his 30s and then he had become engaged to a girl who was ten years his junior. When the girl got cold feet, changed her mind and gave him back his ring, Boris had been heartbroken. He too had abandoned romance. 'I've tried that, it didn't work and I won't be trying it again,' he told me once and in his voice you could hear the sadness and the disappointment in his heart.

The pair lived together in the rambling old house where they had both been born. They had inherited a decent sum from their parents and although they had their small incomes from their work as alternative practitioners, the dividends from their investments had for years provided them with a small but regular income which pretty well made them independent. Their father, who had been a dentist with consulting rooms in Exeter, had been a keen investor and had, apparently, put together a portfolio of solid, blue chip investments which the Bickersons refused to change in any way. He had also left them shares in a company which had been set up by his own father to sell potted meats both in cans and in small jars. When I heard about the potted meat company, I was reminded of a character in Oscar Wilde's play *Lady Windermere's Fan* who says, rather patronisingly, about an Australian businessman: 'Mr Hopper's father made a great fortune by selling some kind of food in circular tins.'

The Bickerson potted meat company had, in its day, been enormously successful but sadly, for the young Bickersons, it had fallen by the wayside, through changing tastes and a failure to move with the times I suppose, and one or two of their father's investments had turned sour and the companies, destroyed by the hubris and greed of management, had expired. Despite this, the Bickersons retained great faith in their father's selections and they steadfastly refused to accept outside advice or to sell any of the remaining share holdings. And, to be fair, their investments seemed to enable them to maintain their modest lifestyle.

In their garden, the Bickersons had the tallest and oldest oak trees in Bilbury. Every autumn since Patsy and I had been looking after Cedric the pig, the Bickersons collected up all the acorns they could find and brought them round to Bilbury Grange in a sack. I'm not sure why it is but pigs certainly love acorns. You might have thought that with a pig being so large and an acorn being so small there wouldn't be much pleasure in scoffing a mouthful of acorns but you'd be wrong, and there is no doubt that for Cedric the fruit of the oak tree was one of the greatest delights available: a delicacy to be chewed, appreciated and savoured. I'm sure the Bickersons would have brought Cedric their acorns in any case, but they were keen to collect up every one they could find because they had half a dozen Exmoor ponies and, of course, for ponies acorns can be quite deadly.

At the time of which I am writing, Belinda was in her mid-fifties and Boris was a couple of years older. She was well-built and heavy-breasted and had the biggest bottom I've ever seen on a woman or, indeed, a man. You wouldn't want her sitting on any delicate 18th century furniture. He was tall and rather thin and wore his hair in a ponytail. They had a strong but volatile relationship which seemed to bounce between love and loathing. If they had been brothers you would have said they oscillated between a loving David and Jonathan propinquity and a toxic Caine and Abel relationship. Some of their disagreements were almost comical in a strange way. So, for example, Boris smoked and Belinda did not. 'I will be very annoyed if I die before you,' I once heard her shout at him. On another occasion, when he was ill with bronchitis, she told me, with tears in her eyes, that she knew she would not bear to be alive without him. I suspected that the truth lay somewhere between these two extremes and I had no doubt that they were as close and as interdependent as most married couples.

The two Bickersons practised quite different forms of alternative medicine.

Belinda was what would sometimes be called a healer, though she preferred to describe herself as having 'the gift' or holding `the cure in her fingers'. She wasn't a 'midwife' (or mydwyfe) in the old-fashioned, traditional sense of the word; she wasn't a purveyor of old wives' tales; she wasn't a herbalist and she didn't practise any of the orthodox forms of unorthodox medicine. I had heard it said by some that she must have been the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter but I know from my knowledge of her family history that she wasn't that either.

Whatever it was that she did, patients from all over Devon, and further, visited her and paid her with whatever they could. Some patients paid her with a few eggs or a chicken. I know that one man paid her with several square yards of turf. A vet from South Molton, who could have easily paid her in cash, paid her by looking after her ponies. A couple from Taunton gave her a small motor car after she healed their daughter. The girl, who was suffering from severe neurological symptoms, had been seen by doctors in Bristol and London. None of them had been able to make a diagnosis. Belinda had spent an afternoon with the girl and the symptoms which had baffled the doctors had completely disappeared by the end of the day. The parents later gave an interview to a national newspaper and insisted that Belinda had not even touched their daughter, other than to kiss her on the forehead when the two first met and again when they parted. Belinda refused to speak to the reporter and Boris chased a photographer down their drive, throwing sticks and stones at his posh German motor car. The couple had tried to give Belinda a cheque but she wouldn't take it, saying that it was far too much money for an afternoon's work. And so, noticing that Belinda didn't have a motor car, they had arranged for a brand new Mini to be delivered. It was one of the estate models, decorated with real wood on the outside and it was fully taxed and insured and it sat unmoving in an empty barn because neither Belinda nor her brother could drive.

Belinda had been born at a good time.

If she had been born a few centuries earlier, she would have been put to death as a witch. They'd have put her on a ducking stool and submerged her in the village pond. If she had survived the experience, then they would have known that she was a witch and they would have built a huge bonfire and burned her to death. If she had drowned then they'd have known that she was innocent. Everyone in the village would have breathed a sigh of relief because they hadn't been living with a witch as a neighbour. Poor Belinda would, of course, have been dead either way.

If she'd born a couple of decades later, and lived in the 21st century, she would have doubtless been barred from practising her skills by legislation which demands that everyone be able to show the requisite pieces of paper before practising their chosen profession. She would, I suspect, have been investigated by the police, irritated by social workers and exposed by the media.

But in the 1970s she was not just tolerated; she was respected and admired.

Her brother, Boris, was a bonesetter. He was not, he insisted, an osteopath or a chiropractor. He was insistent about that for, he pointed out, osteopaths and chiropractors are trained and have qualifications and he had neither. He was a bonesetter in the old traditional sense of the word and in a way, I suppose he too was lucky that he was born when he was. If he had been born thirty or forty years later he would have doubtless been hounded out of business by a society controlled by professional associations, civil servants and bureaucrats; a society which frowns on anyone claiming to have healing skills but not having the necessary certificates and paperwork.

As a child, Boris used to smash up rabbit skeletons with a hammer and then put them back together like a jigsaw. By his mid-teens, he could set bones. A girl in the village had a motor cycle accident and her ankle and lower leg were shattered. Several hospitals did their best but the bones were so badly broken that they told her she would always walk with a limp and never dance or run. The young bonesetter, who was still at school, turned up, uninvited and asked if he could help. He didn't say another word but just touched the girl's ankle and gently manipulated the bones. He visited every day for a fortnight and the mother, naturally sceptical and doubtless suspicious, sat and watched. In two months, the girl was walking normally. In four months, she was dancing.

How do you explain it?

I cannot.

But there are many things in this world which I cannot explain and just because I am unable to explain something it doesn't mean that it isn't happening.

Like his sister, Boris did not have a formal practice. He did not have a formal list of fees. But patients came to see him from miles away and he always saw anyone who turned up. He once had a patient, a boy in his early twenties, who had been brought down from Scotland by his parents. The parents had heard of Boris's skills through a relative who lived in the seaside resort of Ilfracombe. The three members of the family stayed in the Duck and Puddle for a fortnight. When they arrived, the boy had a terrible limp. When they left, he was walking normally. Gilly Parsons, the pub's landlady, told me that when the trio left, the parents both had tears of joy rolling down their cheeks. It was rumoured that a patient, a solitary man in his 40s, had travelled from Germany especially for a consultation but I did not see him myself.

Occasionally, a reporter would turn up and ask Belinda and Boris for an interview. A television crew turned up once too. But the brother and sister would never speak to anyone about what they did. This was not particularly out of a sense of modesty or a fear that they would be besieged by more patients than they could deal with. Belinda told me once that they did not like talking about their gifts because they were given to them by God. 'It would be disrespectful for us to take credit for our gifts,' she said. They both believed that if they gave interviews and talked about their work then God would take away the gifts He had given them. 'The people who need us will find us,' said Boris, quite simply.

The Bickersons had both enjoyed good health until one day when I had had a telephone call from Belinda asking me to call round to see her brother. She told me that he had a terrible pain in his right temple and double vision in the eye on that side. When I questioned her, she admitted that he also had difficulty opening his mouth.

I'd never seen a patient with the problem before but even before I saw him I was pretty sure that Boris was suffering from a disorder called temporal arteritis; a problem also known as giant-cell arteritis. It's a disease that usually attacks older people, most commonly those in their 60s and 70s, and it affects more women than men. But in medicine, statistics are of limited relevance and even though a problem may be commoner in a particular age or ethnic group that doesn't mean that it cannot affect others outside the usual range.

When I arrived at their home, I realised that it was the first time I'd ever been inside the house. I knew them both well and we always stopped and spoke when we met in the village but they didn't mix socially with anyone in the village and I don't think either of them had ever been in the Bilbury village pub, the 'Duck and Puddle'.

Belinda took me upstairs. As we climbed the staircase, I couldn't help noticing that it was decorated on each side with beautifully framed prints by Hogarth which looked to me to be very early and probably very valuable. I wondered if they were original, prints actually made by Hogarth and his wife from the famous copper plates, and I couldn't help wondering if Patchy Fogg, my friend the antiques dealer, had ever seen them or even knew the prints were there.

'I can't do anything for him myself,' Belinda told me, as we climbed. 'I'm too close to him.'

Boris was lying in a huge four poster bed and he looked as ill and miserable as anyone would look if they had a bad headache and double vision and couldn't open their mouth properly. Actually, to be fair, he looked much more cheerful than I would have looked in those circumstances.

He had a slight temperature, the skin on his forehead and scalp was tender to the touch and he had double vision. When I talked to him, it was clear that he also had symptoms of polymyalgia rheumatica – a disorder which often goes hand in hand with temporal arteritis. He had severe pains in his shoulders and his pelvis which had started only that day. There was absolutely no doubt about the diagnosis. In large hospitals in London and in other big cities, temporal arteritis was being confirmed by taking a biopsy of the artery. I didn't think that would be available locally and I knew Boris wouldn't want to travel to the hospital. Besides, a negative biopsy result doesn't mean that the patient doesn't have the disease.

The treatment for temporal arteritis and polymyalgia rheumatica was the same then as it is now: quite high doses of corticosteroid. I took some blood to send off to the laboratory in Barnstaple and told Boris that I would come back with some tablets I wanted him to take. I explained that the corticosteroid would need to be taken in quite high doses to start with and then gradually tapered off over the period of a year or maybe even a little more.

'Do you mean he has to take these pills for a year!' said Belinda, horrified.

'I'm afraid so. If he doesn't take them then the eye problem could get worse – and maybe even end up with Boris losing the sight in that eye.'

'But Boris hates pills,' said Belinda. 'And so do I!'

'I do too,' I told her. 'I wouldn't prescribe anything that wasn't essential.'

Belinda looked at me and then nodded.

As I turned to go, I noticed a cream silk nightdress neatly folded on the other pillow. I said nothing but headed back down the stairs followed by Belinda.

'It's just for the comforting,' she said, as I prepared to leave.

I looked at her, slightly puzzled.

'I saw you notice my nightdress,' she said. 'I forgot to move it.'

I put my arm around her shoulder. 'It's none of my business, nor anyone else's for that matter,' I told her softly.

She looked up at me and sort of half smiled. 'It's just for the comforting,' she repeated softly in an explanation I did not ask for or expect.

Incest happens a good deal in North Devon, especially in the more remote villages where in-breeding was common, but it was the first time I had come across it in Bilbury. If incest it really was. Maybe, as Belinda said, it was just for the comforting. But why should I interfere? I knew that Miss Bickerson had a hysterectomy many years earlier and so there wasn't any chance of there being any notable consequences even if they went a step or two beyond 'the comforting'.

I told her that I would be back with Boris's pills within twenty minutes or so, and that I would send the blood sample off to the laboratory in Barnstaple so that the diagnosis could be confirmed.

For the next month or so, Boris's condition improved steadily.

The laboratory confirmed that the diagnosis was the correct one and the corticosteroids I had prescribed did their job well. After a month or so, all of Boris's symptoms either disappeared or were dramatically reduced and the pains in his shoulders and other big muscles had completely disappeared.

And that is when the trouble started.

Patients are often unwilling to carry on with a course of treatment when the symptoms and signs of their illness improve.

'I talked to a friend of mine about these steroids you're giving Boris,' said Belinda one day. 'And she said these drugs have a lot of nasty side effects.' She pulled a piece of paper out of the pocket of the ancient cardigan she invariably wore. 'I wrote down some of the side effects,' she said.

'I know about the side effects,' I said gently. 'But the drug is curing Boris's condition.'

'High blood pressure, weight gain, cataracts, glaucoma, a swollen face, insomnia, nervousness, osteoporosis, stomach bleeding, swollen ankles, muscle weakness, increased chance of developing an infection…' Belinda read out a list of the known side effects.

'All that's true,' I agreed, interrupting the recitation. 'That's one of the reasons why I call in to see Boris every week. I want to see that he's still improving but I also want to look for any side effects. It's dangerous and irresponsible to give steroids to someone who doesn't really need them but when a patient has a serious disorder there is no doubt that steroids can be life-saving.'

'And the dose Boris is taking is very high,' said Belinda, who seemed to give more credence to what her friend had told her than to what I was trying to explain.

To be honest, I was not surprised by her attitude.

Belinda was proud and protective and apprehensive and not a woman who felt entirely at home in the latter part of the twentieth century. They did not have central heating, a modern stove, a washing machine or a television set. They cut their grass with a scythe and a strange-looking Victorian lawn mower which was pulled by one of their horses. She was, I think it is fair to say, nervous about anything invented since electricity and the telephone. Actually, I'm not sure that she was happy about either of those.

I tried to explain to her that I agreed with her that doing nothing is sometimes the best and safest option. 'There is a tendency these days for everyone to want to do something when the best results are often obtained by doing nothing – but doing nothing with a judicious mixture of caution, understanding and awareness – with a pinch of fear thrown in to keep everyone on their toes. But in Boris's case doing nothing would be dangerous and possibly fatal.'

I could tell by the way she looked at me that she still didn't believe me or accept that her brother needed treatment.

'The dose has come down dramatically,' I told her. 'And over the next twelve months I'll slowly taper the dosage until he can stop taking them.'

'Twelve months!' cried Belinda.

'I'm reducing the dosage already,' I told her. 'And it will come down a good deal over the next few months.'

But I could tell that Belinda wasn't happy.

When I returned a week later they were both unusually quiet and although Boris was still improving I knew that something was wrong.

'We've stopped the pills,' Belinda announced suddenly.

'We're very grateful to you,' said Boris. 'But I'm better now. My symptoms have all gone and there really doesn't seem any point in my still taking the drugs.’

I had been half expecting this.

As I have already pointed out, patients who feel well often don’t want to take the medicines which they need. So, for example, patients who have high blood pressure may have no symptoms at all. They often wonder why it is necessary for them to take drugs. And if the drugs cause unpleasant side effects, as they often do, then patients may simply stop taking them with disastrous results. Patients with diabetes sometimes have very few symptoms and wonder why they need to carry on with their treatment. It is easy to persuade a patient who is in severe pain to take a painkiller but it can be difficult to persuade a patient who has a hidden infection to take an antibiotic which they need and which may cause nasty side effects.

‘The symptoms went very quickly,’ said Belinda. ‘The drugs are very powerful and there is no doubt that they worked.’

Boris seemed embarrassed. ‘But it seems silly to take the risk of continuing with them,’ he said.

‘You really do need to keep taking the steroids,’ I told him. ‘There’s a lot the experts still don’t know about temporal arteritis but the inflammation that caused your symptoms is probably still there and there could be a risk of it coming back.’

‘Well if it does come back then I can start taking the tablets again,’ said Boris firmly, as though this settled the question.

‘It’s not that simple,’ I told him. ‘For one thing the inflammation can affect a number of arteries in different parts of the body. If the condition flares up again you could lose your sight permanently.’

‘Oh, I don’t think so!’ said Boris. ‘I only had double vision last time. And the corticosteroids soon dealt with that.’

‘I can’t promise it would be that easy to deal with another time,’ I pointed out. ‘If we don’t deal with this problem it could make you blind. And I don’t know what’s happening to your other arteries.’

I explained that the inflammation which had caused his earlier symptoms could affect arteries elsewhere in his body. ‘There’s even a risk that your aorta could be involved,’ I said. ‘And if your aorta becomes affected then the consequences could be terrible.’

‘What sort of terrible?’ asked Boris.

‘An aortic aneurysm can develop,’ I pointed out. ‘The aorta is the biggest and most important artery in your body. If it develops an aneurysm then the aneurysm could burst. Or you could have a split or a tear in the wall of the aorta – a dissecting aorta.’

‘Is that bad?’ asked Boris, now a little quieter.

‘It’s very bad,’ I told him. I saw no point in trying to hide things from him. I felt it was vital that he kept taking the corticosteroid tablets. ‘If the wall of the aorta splits then blood can flow into the split and the whole aorta can rupture.’

‘Can they treat that?’

‘If the rupture isn’t too big and you’re close to a good hospital when the aorta splits, and there is no delay in getting you into the operating theatre and there is a skilled, experienced surgeon available to repair the split then it can be treated,’ I said. ‘That’s rather a lot of ‘ifs’.’

‘My friend Matilda says that steroids are very dangerous drugs,’ said Belinda suddenly. She’d been listening to what I had told them but she didn’t seem to have heard anything I’d said. Maybe she just didn’t want to hear what I’d told them.

‘Is Matilda the friend who gave you the list of side effects associated with the steroids?’

‘Yes. She has several medical books which she bought from her doctor when he retired.’

‘Is she a doctor?’

‘Not exactly a doctor, no.’

‘A pharmacist?’

‘No, she’s a herbalist,’ said Belinda defiantly.

‘You know that I have great respect for all forms of medicine,’ I told her, trying to remain patient. ‘And I know that herbalists can help a lot of people. You must also know that I don’t prescribe drugs unless I really think they’re necessary!’

Both Boris and Belinda looked a little sheepish.

‘You have to trust me when I tell you that the corticosteroids are necessary,’ I said. ‘I know it’s difficult to believe that they’re necessary now that Boris’s symptoms have more or less disappeared but if you stop them then the consequences could be disastrous.’ I agreed that steroids are powerful drugs which can cause a good many side effects, agreed that they obviously need to be treated with great respect but pointed out that when they are really needed there is no doubt that they can be life-changing.

‘I don’t believe in over-treating patients,’ I told them. ‘I don’t treat patients when they don’t need it or when they won’t benefit from them. I do believe in trying to assess the risks against the gains. So, I wouldn’t give a potentially lethal drug to a patient suffering from hay fever. The disease doesn’t justify the risk. And I don’t believe in recommending treatments which aren’t sensible. So, for example, I wouldn’t advocate an operation to treat varicose veins on a 97-year-old woman with heart failure, kidney failure, liver failure and septicaemia. But giving steroids to a patient with this condition isn’t over-treatment. There are risks, of course there are risks, but the risks of taking the drug are much lower than the risks of not taking the drug.’

Boris and Belinda said they would think about it and Belinda said she wanted to talk to her friend the herbalist before making a decision. They said they’d come and see me in the surgery and tell me their decision. I asked if they would speak to a consultant in Barnstaple but they both refused.

It was three days before they came to a morning surgery at Bilbury Grange, and I knew the minute they walked into my consulting room that they had decided that Boris would not be taking any more of the steroid tablets.

I tried again to persuade them that it was important that he carried on with the drug. But I’m afraid I failed. I think Boris would have taken the corticosteroids if he had been alone. But Belinda, advised by Matilda, her friend the herbalist, was adamant that he should stop taking them.

And there was nothing more that I could do.

I suggested again that they speak to another doctor. I offered to make an appointment for them to see a consultant in Barnstaple or Exeter. I offered to speak to their friend Matilda to try to change her mind and to explain to her just how dangerous untreated temporal arteritis can be. But nothing worked. They were adamant. All that was left was for me to say a silent prayer that Boris would not suffer a relapse. I felt that it was not really the way I wanted to practise medicine.

Prayer has its place in healthcare but I prefer to use it alongside other remedies or as a sole remedy when there is nothing else that can be done.

For a while, I thought Boris had got away with it.

Another three months went by and in that time, I saw them several times, occasionally individually and sometimes together. Boris didn’t come to the surgery but I called in when I was passing their home.

‘I’m fine, doctor,’ said Boris with a big smile. ‘I didn’t need those pills of yours after all!’

‘You have to admit that Matilda was right and you were wrong!’ said Belinda. She said it as though she were teasing but I got the feeling that there was also an element of seriousness about what she was saying. She seemed to enjoy the fact that the orthodox trained doctor appeared to have wanted to prescribe a powerful drug unnecessarily.

I didn’t say anything.

I was not convinced that they had been right to stop the pills. I was still desperately worried that the inflammation might still be affecting Boris’s arteries. And I was still concerned lest he suddenly lost his sight or suffered a major crisis if his aorta started to split.

It was his aorta.

You never know when these things are going to happen.

In a small way Boris was lucky, I suppose.

The problem with an aortic dissection is that the symptoms are easily confused with the symptoms of other disorders.

Patients who have a dissecting aneurysm in their aorta may have severe chest pain, severe abdominal pain or severe back pain. They may be short of breath, they may have difficulty in walking or, they may have the symptoms of a stroke. And so a dissecting aneurysm can be mistaken for a heart attack, a severe chest infection, a back problem or a stroke. It isn’t always easy to make the diagnosis.

But with Boris, I knew when I took the telephone call what was wrong with him.

It was three o’clock on a Sunday morning. There was no moon and it was pitch black outside. It was raining heavily. I consoled myself with the thought that it wasn’t too cold outside and it wasn’t snowing!

‘It’s about Boris,’ said a voice I recognised instantly.

‘What’s happened?’

‘He’s got a pain in his back,’ said Belinda. ‘It came on suddenly.’

‘Did he say what sort of pain?’

‘He said it felt as though something was tearing open inside him.’

‘Can he sit?’ I asked.

‘He’s half sitting up in bed,’ said Belinda. ‘He’s sweating and pale and he looks awful.’

I didn’t need to ask any more questions. I told Belinda that I would be at their house as soon as I could.

‘Get him ready for me to take him into Barnstaple,’ I told her.

‘Are you going to call an ambulance?’ she asked.

‘There isn’t time,’ I told her. ‘I’ll take him there in my car. You can come with us.’

As I climbed into my clothes, told Patsy where I was going and told her that I would have to take Boris into Barnstaple myself, because there wouldn’t be time to wait for an ambulance to arrive. I found myself wondering why medical emergencies so often seem to take place at night when the weather is bad.

‘Why don’t I call the hospital?’ asked Patsy. ‘I could tell them what’s happened and that you’re on your way.’

I kissed her, told her she was brilliant and asked her to tell the duty house surgeon that I was bringing in a patient with a dissecting aortic aneurysm. ‘They’ll need to get a theatre ready,’ I told her. ‘Tell them it’s a patient who has temporal arteritis so there’s really no doubt about the diagnosis.’

When I got to the Bickersons’, I didn’t bother examining Boris. I didn’t even take his blood pressure. I told Belinda to help me carry him down to the car and we lay him on the back seat. Belinda squeezed in alongside him. It was one of many times that I was grateful that I had a large car with room for a patient on the back seat.

It was, I think, the longest journey I’ve ever made. On the way there, the weather gods decided to add a little lighting and thunder to the mixture they’d already prepared and to turn the night into a fully-fledged, full-dress rehearsal for the Day of Judgement and the arrival of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. If those gloomy future hours turn out to be anywhere near as full of flashes and bangs as were the thunderstorms which ravaged North Devon that night, we will all be in for a shocking surprise.

The road to Barnstaple twists and turns. It goes up and it goes down and there are scores of blind bends. Fortunately, at that time of night there is usually little traffic and with the storm in full spate, I managed to drive all the way to Barnstaple without seeing any other motorist. I was convinced that Boris wouldn’t make it to the hospital. I could hear him groaning with the pain, and Belinda told me time and time again that he was in distress and looked very ill. All I could do was to tell her to comfort him and to use every ounce of her healing power to keep him alive until we reached Barnstaple.

We made it.

The house surgeon, bless him, had believed what Patsy had told him and was standing in the hospital doorway with two nurses, two porters and a trolley.

They helped me put Boris onto the trolley and then whisked him straight to the operating theatre where the surgical registrar and a team of nurses were already scrubbed and waiting.

The anaesthetist later told me that if we’d taken five minutes more for the journey, Boris would have definitely been dead. If I’d called an ambulance and waited for them to take him into Barnstaple, he would have been dead. And if Patsy hadn’t thought to ring ahead and tell them that I was bringing in a patient with a dissecting aneurysm, he would have been dead. Once again, that is a lot of ‘ifs’. I was so very grateful that the hospital had believed me and had accepted the diagnosis which Patsy had relayed to them.

It was nearly 5 a.m. when I got back to Bilbury Grange and fell into bed for a couple of hours sleep before another day started.

It’s easy to criticise Belinda and her friend Matilda for insisting that Boris stop the corticosteroids but I understand why they felt that way.

I just wish I had been able to persuade them that the drugs were truly necessary.

Still, Boris survived and so the whole affair had a happy ending.

And when Boris came out of hospital some time later, I had no trouble in persuading him (or Belinda) that he should take the drugs which had been prescribed.

Iolanthe and Bertie in River Cottage

River Cottage remained empty for nearly a year after the delightful Miss Gwilliams died.

No one wanted to live there because it was so close to the river that the ground floor was either wet or under water for most of the winter months.

The owners, a rather naïve couple from London, had bought the cottage in the middle of a hot summer, thinking it would make a splendid (and rather cheap) holiday home. They had apparently not noticed the high water mark on the internal walls downstairs. When their carpets, television set and furniture had twice been ruined by the uninvited river water which had entered their home, they decided they'd had enough. They tried to sell the cottage and this time were naïve enough to hope to recover a good part of the price they had paid. They were, I suppose, hoping to find another couple of innocent buyers. It was never going to happen.

In despair, they had offered the cottage a peppercorn rent of £20 a year. Their only stipulation was that the person renting the cottage would be responsible for all the outgoings such as repairs and local taxes. A lovely lady called Miss Gwilliams had rented it, perfectly aware of the watery drawback, and had turned the place into a home on stilts. She lived upstairs and hardly bothered with the downstairs rooms.

And then, when she had died at the age of 92, the Londoners had made another attempt to find a buyer.

This time they had been far less ambitious in their asking price and they had managed to sell the property to a couple from Ilfracombe, a seaside resort just a few miles away, who wanted to get away from the busy excitement of a town with a population that was, at the time, close to 10,000 in the winter and double that in the summer holiday season.

The village of Bilbury, with a modest year-round population of around 600, seemed perfect.

And there was no doubt that, if you were prepared to accept that the downstairs was pretty well uninhabitable, River Cottage was a pretty good buy. The average price of a property in Bilbury in the mid-1970s had, like property prices elsewhere in England, begun to accelerate and was already around £10,000 to £12,000.

In contrast, the asking price for River Cottage was just £3,500.

This was, I suspect, considerably less than the previous owners had paid for it. But they were, I think, relieved to get rid of the cottage which was for them undoubtedly a constant reminder of their mistaken enthusiasm.

And for that now modest sum, the buyer received the cottage, the river bank and half a stretch of river (the boundary line of the property ended in the middle of the river), five acres of rather scruffy woodland, three acres of pastureland and an old two storey hay barn. The cottage, which was just over 100-years-old, was one of the newest properties in the village. The barn was a youngster; no more than sixty or seventy-years-old.

Neither the Londoners nor Miss Gwilliams had ever done anything with the barn. And I doubt if they had ever intended to do anything with it. Miss Gwilliams was quite happy with the accommodation provided by the cottage. The barn held no attractions for her. The London owners had not seen the barn as an asset but rather as an unsightly excrescence, cluttering up a small portion of their landscape.

But, neglected and unwanted as it had been, the barn was a solid structure, built out of good stone and with walls which were two or three feet thick. The roof appeared to have been fairly freshly supplied with new, red tiles. If you had to have a barn in your life then it was a good barn to have.

Like the cottage itself, the ground floor of the barn flooded when the weather was bad and the river running high but the top floor, tucked under its newly tiled roof, was dry and rather cosy. There were, it is true, a few families of woodworm munching away at the rafters but they not been greedy and they had left plenty of wood behind to help hold up the stuff above them. Someone, at some stage, had even put four skylights into the roof so that the area wasn't at all dark or gloomy.

The couple who had bought the cottage, the barn, half a stretch of river and everything that went with them, were Iolanthe and Bertie Fielding. There are few secrets in North Devon and it was widely known that they had obtained it for the fairly bargain price of £2,750.

For several years, the Fieldings had paid a rent of £5 a month for a neat two bedroomed white-washed cottage with a decent sized garden and spectacular sea views. The rent was low because although the house had been on the market for three years, with an absurdly low asking price, there had been no takers.

Most people who buy houses like to think that their new home will pretty well stay where it is and won't move about much. One or two London buyers had shown interest, thinking that they had perhaps spotted the bargain of a lifetime, but when they saw that the two neighbouring cottages had already fallen down onto the rocks below, they quickly withdrew their offers and hot-footed it back to the big city where accommodation may not have such splendid views but can usually be relied upon to be where you left it when you arrive home from work in the evening.

All had gone well until one day when Bertie Fielding had come home from a hard day emptying septic tanks and found his beloved, Iolanthe, sitting in the kitchen looking out of a large hole where a wall had previously been quietly keeping out the weather. The wall was now scattered among the rocks and the surf some distance below.

Fortunately, all was not lost.

The extraordinarily low rent which they had been paying for their cliff top cottage meant that the Fieldings had been able to put away a little money into their joint savings account at the Barnstaple and Ilfracombe Building Society and so, in due course, when their own cottage became uninhabitable and River Cottage became available, they were able to make a substantial down payment on River Cottage. The manager of the Barnstaple and Ilfracombe Building Society, who regarded the Fieldings as good customers, had been happy to make up the shortfall.

It is always nice when serendipity does a nice couple a good turn and in this instant there is no doubt that serendipity had done its business in spades.

I don't think I have ever known a couple to be so delighted at having bought their own home. They didn't care that the downstairs got a little wet from time to time. All they cared about was the fact that the house was theirs. 'So, our damp patch is bigger than most people's damp patch!' said Iolanthe, who was an ebullient woman with a laugh that could crack plaster. The jest always produced a jolly response and Iolanthe, never one to resist a jolly response, repeated it on every available occasion.

And to those who argued that living in a damp house must be unhealthy, Iolanthe pointed out that the previous tenant, Miss Gwilliams, had been 92-years-old when she had died.

It was good to see River Cottage occupied again.

I saw it shortly after Miss Gwilliams died and it looked a very sad place; almost entirely empty, with nothing in it except an old-fashioned, black, bakelite landline telephone sitting on the floor like a large toad.

The Fieldings were unusual in a number of respects and the most obvious was, perhaps, their age difference.

When Bertie and Iolanthe married, she was 67-years-old and he was just 20. Bertie's parents, a phlegmatic pair who were, generally speaking, regarded as pretty well impossible to shock, were nevertheless slightly surprised to find that they were a quarter of a century younger than their daughter-in-law.

Iolanthe had what can safely be described as an interesting past. She had been a nun, a librarian, a chorus girl in a troupe of entertainers which worked the cruise ships in the Mediterranean and the Caribbean, and a belly dancer in what sounded like a rather seedy nightclub in Cairo where, I confess, I always rather suspected that dancing was only one of her responsibilities.

She was an optimistic woman. When she and Bertie became engaged, she came to see me to ask if I thought she was too old to start a family. Disappointed by my discouraging reply she founded the North Devon Belly Dancing Association and started teaching belly dancing on Wednesday evenings in the Kentisbury Village Hall. Several of my patients became enthusiastic members of Mrs Fielding's class. Adrienne Fogg, my sister-in-law and Patchy Fogg's wife, was a regular student too.

Iolanthe's husband, Bertie was definitely not a belly dancer. He was well equipped in the belly department but not known to be keen on forcing it to undulate in public.

Bertie drove and operated a tanker which emptied cess pits and septic tanks and he was widely known, with searing and cruel accuracy, as Bertie the Stink. If you met Bertie dressed in his Sunday best and reeking of aftershave, you would still know what he did for a living.

(At the time there were, in and around Bilbury, four Berties and to avoid confusion they were all known by a qualifying addition to their names. This practice was imported from Wales, which is only a few miles away from the North Devon coast, where approximately 90% of the male population are called either Evans or Davies. To help villagers identify one another, Mr Evans the butcher will be known as Evans the Butcher, Mr Evans the baker will be called Evans the Baker and Mr Evans the taxi driver will be known as Evans the Taxi. And so, the Bertie who once worked at the garden centre on the road to the village of Westward Ho! was still known was Bertie the Plant even though he left the garden centre some years previously to take up employment as a butcher's assistant and part-time fireman. The Bertie who had been pool champion at the Duck and Puddle for as long as anyone could remember was known as Bertie the Balls. And the Bertie who delivered buns and pies for a baker who had a shop in Combe Martin was known to everyone as Bertie the Pie. Our Bertie, however, was Bertie the Stink. It is no relevance whatsoever but I cannot help pointing out that there used to be a Welsh undertaker in South Molton who was known to everyone as 'Dai the Coffin' and a Welsh vicar in Howbury St Mary's whose Christian name was Evan. I was always amused by that for has there ever been a more appropriately named clergyman?)

Once they had purchased their property, and its accompanying appurtenances, its barn, land and half a river, the Fieldings set about turning their new purchases into a home to suit their requirements.

Iolanthe and Bertie put a false floor onto the large ground floor of the barn so that Iolanthe could run her belly dancing classes at home. This, they decided, would save them a goodly sum of money for it would mean that they had no need to rent the Kentisbury Village Hall. It would also enable Iolanthe to expand the size of the class since the new ground floor of the barn was considerably larger than the nearby Village Hall. The false floor was carefully designed to sit a few inches above the high water level of the river in winter.

Upstairs in the barn, Bertie began to build the trestle tables which would carry his model railway layout. He was a remarkably patient man. He knew that it would be some years before his dream would be finished. 'It's something to get my teeth into,' he explained. 'A proper, big project!'

Bertie did not actually have a model railway but ever since he'd seen a railway modelling magazine, he had dreamt of owning a scale model railway; complete with stations, sidings, mountain passes, tunnels and little people standing around on platforms and in fields. I once had a patient who had a wonderful model railway in the loft of his home. He used to run trains according to a time table and when he died his widow carried on making sure that the trains ran on time – darting up the stairs to the loft to make sure that the 4.35 p.m. passenger train from Paddington to Truro left bang on time. When she went on holiday, she recruited a friend to keep the trains running.

Since Iolanthe and Bertie had decided to use the barn as part of their home it was, perhaps, not surprising that one or the other of them came up with the idea of building a bridge between the two buildings at first floor level. The bridge was designed to enable them to pass from their cottage to the barn during the winter months without having to put on waders.

It was not, of course, the sort of covered bridge which department stores commonly use to connect various departments which are separated from each other by road. It wasn't even the sort of solid bridge which railway companies build to connect the Up platform with the Down platform.

It was, to be honest, more the sort of bridge that is seen on those television documentaries which describe the lifestyle of fairly primitive people living in mountain areas – the sort of people who regard themselves as well dressed when they are sporting a loin cloth and a few feathers. The bridge consisted of two pieces of thick rope which were at one end tied firmly to bolts drilled into the cottage bedroom and at the other end to bolts fixed to the first floor of the barn. The two ropes were fixed about three feet apart, with one above the other, and to pass from one building to the other you walked along the lower rope, effectively a tightrope, while using the second rope as something to hold onto.

Both Bertie and Iolanthe were surprisingly nimble at crossing from the cottage to the barn, and vice versa, by means of their home-made bridge. I tried it once and twice and have to confess that I did not feel entirely comfortable doing so. These days, of course, planning officers, health and safety busybodies and regulation watchers or one sort or another would have put their feet down firmly and would doubtless have outlawed the scheme. The 1970s, particularly the 1970s as enjoyed in Bilbury, were a little less encumbered by such outposts of officialdom.

Iolanthe and Bertie had been living at River Cottage for about three months when Iolanthe came to see me complaining of what seemed a rather confusing collection of symptoms.

'I've got a terribly irritating cough,' she told me. 'And I've got a headache that just won't go away.

She was wheezing too, and clearly short of breath.

'I feel weak and I sweat a lot at night,' she continued. 'And I've got aches and pains everywhere. It's not like me.'

And it was not, I knew, at all like her.

Iolanthe Fielding may have been in her 70s but she was remarkably fit. All that belly dancing had kept her lithe and healthy.

'How is your appetite?'

'Gone. I used to eat like a horse. But now I hardly touch my meals.'

Put together, the symptoms rather reminded me of farmer's lung, a disease that wasn't particularly rare in my part of the world but seemed rather unlikely since Iolanthe wasn't a farmer and never had been. I checked her pulmonary function with a small gadget I had purchased after seeing an advertisement in the back of a medical journal. The reading I obtained proved what I already knew – that Iolanthe's breathing was poor. I then took some blood samples and sent her off to the hospital to have her chest X-rayed. It seemed possible that she had asthma or a chest infection – maybe even pneumonia. If it hadn't been October I'd have even considered the possibility that she had hay fever. But October is definitely not the hay fever season in North Devon. I wasn't convinced that Iolanthe had an infection so I didn't start her on antibiotics.

And then the next day Bertie came to the surgery with exactly the same symptoms.

'I don't know what Iolanthe's got,' he said. 'But I've caught it. The darned thing must be catching.'

And for a moment I thought perhaps it might be a chest infection after all. I took some blood from Bertie and sent him along for a chest X-ray.

I seriously considered starting them both on antibiotics but, and I don't know why, I was still convinced that they had some sort of allergy problem rather than an infection.

I tentatively made the diagnosis the following day when Mrs Pearce, a local spiritualist whose claim to fame in the village was that she had the most extensive collection of cacti in North Devon, came into my surgery complaining of pretty much the same symptoms as Iolanthe and Bertie.

And the bells started to ring deafeningly loudly when Adrienne Fogg came in complaining that she too was short of breath, sweating and had a cough and a headache.

I then realised that, unlikely as it had seemed, my first diagnosis had been the right one.

None of them was a farmer but they all had farmer's lung.

Now, farmer's lung doesn't sound terribly threatening.

It appears, at first, to be in the same category as housemaid's knee or tennis player's elbow – an unpleasant disorder that produces symptoms which are usually temporary and not too difficult to treat.

But farmer's lung is a terrible disease and very threatening. It's a horrid disease. It is also known as hypersensitivity pneumonitis and, like all diseases with an – 'itis' at the end of its name, it is an inflammation. In this case, it is the lungs which are inflamed.

Farmer's lung is an allergic disease which is caused by inhaling mould spores which lie in the dust of old hay, straw or grain.

In the same way that plants produce seeds, so moulds produce tiny spores. These are so tiny that around a quarter of a million could sit comfortably on a pin without fear of being overcrowded. The mould spores become attached to air born dust particles and wander about in the air. It is, therefore, easy for anyone in an area contaminated by mould spores to inhale three quarters of a million in a minute. And so someone who spent an hour in a mould-contaminated area could easily end up inhaling around 50 million spores. That's a lot of mould spores.

Normally, the body gets rid of dust particles and spores by sneezing or coughing. But mould spores are inhaled in huge numbers and they are very small so there is a real risk that a good many of them will get through the body's defences.

When they do manage to travel into the body, the spores settle into the lower part of the lungs and produce toxins which travel into the bloodstream. The body's reaction to the toxins produced by the spores cause permanent damage to the lungs and that's why the patient finds it increasingly difficult to breathe. The whole reaction of the body is a huge allergy reaction which produces symptoms rather like pneumonia. However, the condition is not in the slightest bit infectious or contagious. The only reason that several people may all suffer from the condition together is that they have been living or working together in a contaminated area.

The acute form of farmer's lung tends to develop quite quickly after exposure to the mould spores – usually within a day or two at the most. The symptoms may then hang on for a week or two.

The problem becomes serious when the patient is repeatedly exposed to mould spores. And then the symptoms just get worse. Farmer's lung can often become chronic, causing damage to the lungs and leading to serious long-term consequences. Eventually, the disease is irreversible and sufferers have increasing shortness of breath. They become exhausted by any exertion, they are physically weak and they cough pretty much constantly. It is a very, very unpleasant disorder. A good many farmers have lived out their final years incapacitated and unable to do anything other than sit in an armchair.

The cause of the problem was obvious, of course.

I hurried round to River Cottage and found both Iolanthe and Bertie sitting upstairs in their small living room. They were in a bad way.

'You stay here,' I told them. 'Do you mind if I have a look around your barn?'

They obviously didn't mind.

Not fancying their rope bridge (which I had tried and found a little too exciting for my taste) I went downstairs and across the short distance to the barn.

The barn appeared to have been cleaned – both downstairs and upstairs – but when I managed to crawl underneath the false floor which had been installed downstairs for Iolanthe's belly dancing classes I found that there were huge amounts of old hay and straw under the new floor boards. Iolanthe and Bertie had never bothered to clean out that part of the barn, assuming, I suppose, that no one would ever see that it was rather untidy.

Now I knew why they and some of their students had farmer's lung.

I went back to the cottage and told them both that they were not to go into the barn for the time being. I told Iolanthe that her classes had be cancelled for a while and I told Bertie that he would have to put his model railway on hold until the barn had been properly cleaned.

I then got in touch with Adrienne and Mrs Peace and other members of the belly dancing class.

Fortunately, none of them had developed severe symptoms and it was clear that within a week or so they would all make a complete recovery.

My own symptoms, which developed the evening of the day when I'd crawled under the false floor in the barn, included nasal congestion, itchy eyes and a nasty skin rash. Thankfully, all those annoying symptoms disappeared within 48 hours. I was lucky: I didn't get any of the breathing problems. But that may have been because I had the knowledge and the foresight to wear a dust mask when I went into the barn.

Iolanthe and Bertie wanted to put on masks and to clean the old hay and straw out of the barn themselves but I persuaded them that this would not be a good idea. Instead, they brought in a specialist firm from Taunton. Men wearing decontamination suits went under the false floor with huge, powerful vacuum cleaners and removed all the bits of hay and straw and all the old dust. It wasn't cheap but it was the most efficient way to clean the barn and make it safe for everyone.

Until this had been done, the barn was closed to everyone.

It took a little while, but everyone made a full recovery and when Bertie, Iolanthe and the belly dancers went back into the barn, there were no further problems.

Within a month, the River Cottage barn was full of life.

Downstairs, Iolanthe and her ladies were busy cramming themselves into suitably uplifting bras and Middle Eastern looking skirts on which they had sewn lots of sequins. Several of the dancers, including Adrienne Fogg, fixed fake rubies into their belly buttons. (Adrienne used a rather strong glue to fix hers and it remained there for two weeks before it fell out when she was in the bank in Barnstaple.)

And upstairs, on the first floor of the barn, Bertie and his father (whose name was also Bertie) were busy building what promised to be the foundations for the largest model railway layout North Devon had ever seen. They had not yet bought any trains or any track, let alone those wonderful little model railway porters and passengers which always help to make a model railway look lived in, but they had made good progress with the tables upon which the whole structure would depend and they had built the backboards upon which the diorama would be painted.

For Iolanthe and for Bertie, business at River Cottage was back to normal.

Dear Miss Gwilliams, a gloriously lively lady, had been very happy in River Cottage and she would, I felt sure, have been delighted to see how much fun Iolanthe and Bertie were having in their new home.

The Celebrity

At first I couldn’t remember who he was or, indeed, if I knew him at all. If I did know him then I couldn’t remember his name or where I had met him.

I smiled at him and took his outstretched hand.

Patients, even temporary ones from outside the village, don’t usually want to shake hands. They come in, sit down and tell me what’s worrying them. That’s the way the ritual works.

But he definitely wasn’t a patient of mine and I knew he didn’t live in Bilbury. The population of Bilbury was, at the time, no more than 600 or so and I knew everyone in the village by sight and by name.

That was one part of the puzzle solved.

I was also pretty sure that he didn’t live anywhere else in North Devon.

I’m not sure why I knew that but people who live in the wilds of North Devon are somehow distinguishable from visitors from the rest of the world.

Even the resident incomers who have moved into North Devon from other parts of the country, and who have retained their own regional accents are, after a while, fairly easy to identify as ‘locals’.

I couldn’t tell you why.

Maybe it’s the windburn on their faces and hands.

Or maybe it’s the slightly relaxed way they meander through life.

‘You’re looking very well!’ the stranger said, when he’d let go of my hand and had sat down. He had a very limp, rather moist handshake and a suntan that had either been obtained from repeated trips to the Caribbean or from long hours lying on a sunbed. He was wearing a rather posh pair of aviator glasses which, I suspected, had probably cost more than the total cost of everything I was wearing. He didn’t remove them. He was also wearing a stunningly unconvincing hairpiece which sat on the top of his head like a small, furry animal with its nose tucked under its tail. His waist had gone to the same place as his hair and in its place there was a bulge that would have looked startling on a woman who was carrying triplets and about to deliver them.

‘You too,’ I said, playing for time and desperately racking my brain in the hope that my inbuilt computer would throw up a name to match the face.

The thing was that his face and voice were both familiar but I wasn’t sure whether I really did know him or if he was perhaps someone famous whom I knew only from films or the television. When we meet people we have watched a good deal on the screen, it is natural to think that we know them – and that they must necessarily know us too.

His cheery manner and friendly smile rather convinced me that I did actually know him.

I obviously did not know him well but maybe I had met him somewhere. Maybe, I thought, he was someone I had met when I was making television programmes; a minor celebrity, perhaps: an actor, a television ‘personality’ or some such. Maybe he and I had chatted in the green room while waiting to go on a television chat show. I used to do the rounds of such things when I did book promotional tours: a radio chat show in the morning, a newspaper interview at lunchtime, a television news programme in the afternoon, a chat show in the evening and a late night radio talk programme to round off the day. A day in day out routine which for me never lasted more than two or three weeks, thank heavens, but for actors, promoting films could go on for long, tiring months. I once met the actor Simon Ward when he had been on the road for six months promoting a film called *Young Winston*. How anyone could cope with answering the same questions for six months was quite beyond my ken.

My patient had the tired, forced and slightly overeager smile of the minor celebrity who knows that if he is not to disappoint then he must constantly sparkle, and that if he is to rise up the ladder of show biz success then he must always be on show, always willing to do whatever it takes to gain another fan, another admirer.

In my experience, such individuals manage to convince themselves that every glance is a glance of certain recognition. When they go out into the world they pretend to do so in disguise so that they aren’t photographed by the paparazzi, but the disguise is never difficult to penetrate and they are always disappointed (and sometimes rather cross) if they go to an ‘opening’ or a fashionable restaurant and no one bothers them.

There is, in practice, only a relatively small divide between the minor and major celebrity and it is a gap which is invariably crossed only as a result of the whims and tyrannies of fate. To the struggling would-be star, the gap must sometimes seem at the same time both tantalisingly small and depressingly unbridgeable. When I made television programmes, I always felt slightly sorry for those who were desperate for fame; so desperate that they would, if necessary, readily accept notoriety as an acceptable alternative and, hopefully, a stepping stone to glory. Most were, in my experience, far more interested in fame than they were in riches.

(One friend of mine, a radio presenter, once confessed that his only aim in life was to be recognised in the supermarket and that he would do pretty well anything to achieve that ambition. But would he have been happy? It's a moot point. Maybe he was lucky not to achieve his ambition for if he had succeeded then he would have doubtless discovered the disappointments, frustrations and fears which are an inevitable part of being a star, and there is a chance that he would have been just as unhappy but without the hope to keep his spirit warm.)

But the fact that the new patient had spoken to me as though we were acquainted, seemed to confirm that we really had met and that he wasn't just someone I'd seen on the television or a magazine cover.

'I'd heard you'd tucked yourself in the wilds of Devon!' he said. 'Lost to the world and hidden away in a tumble-down mansion with your beautiful wife and a host of favoured animals. It's been said that you've abandoned us all so that you can minister to the local sick and needy; a veritable Dr Schweitzer with your own little cottage hospital. That's what I hear.'

'It's hardly a mansion,' I said. 'Though I agree it is rather tumble-down; in parts at any rate.'

'You live a long way from anywhere, don't you?'

'Not really. We're here and this is where we want to be, so we're not a long way from anywhere that we want to be.'

'I got my Chief of Staff to find your address,' he said, as though finding me had been a monumental task. In reality, it wouldn't have taken a serious researcher to find me. I was, after all, listed in the local telephone directory.

'You have a Chief of Staff? That sounds very impressive!'

I really was impressed for I honestly thought that only American Presidents had a Chief of Staff.

'Oh yes,' he said. 'She's a sort of glorified personal assistant. But if you allow them to call themselves your Chief of Staff you can get away with paying much lower wages. They regard the title as status and the status is worth money – they think of themselves as having a foot in the door of show business.'

'Like washing the elephants?'

'Exactly! Or playing the rear half of a pantomime horse. You should get a Chief of Staff for yourself. Don't you get troubled with fan mail?'

I laughed. 'The last reader who contacted me got my name wrong. She wrote to my publisher saying 'I'm a big fan of Veronica Carter. I've read all her books about Bilbury.' So I don't think I need anyone to help me deal with the fans.'

'I was talking to Terry Wogan about you the other day. I asked if you'd died but he said you couldn't be because he'd seen in one of the papers that you'd written another book. I said that maybe you'd died but had left behind a cupboard full of manuscripts which were now being released one at a time to a desperate public. But here you are and I must say you don't look in the slightest bit moribund. Indeed, you look a lot younger than I remembered.'

'No,' I agreed. 'I'm pretty sure that I'm not dead yet.'

'Are you still writing those books of yours?' he asked. 'And are you still writing for the newspapers? I haven't seen your by-line recently.'

'I'm still writing,' I said. 'But these days I don't write for newspapers or magazines. I just write books.'

'One thing I must tell you,' he said, not terribly interested in my answer, 'I came out here yesterday, just to check out the lie of the land, and I called into your local pub for a pie and a pint.'

'The Duck and Puddle?'

'That's the one.'

'An excellent pub; a proper village pub!'

'Brilliant pub,' he agreed. 'Wonderful pies. Marvellous beer. But the fellow behind the bar was the spitting image of that very famous celebrity psychiatrist Professor Eckersley. You must have heard of him?'

'Ah,' I replied, immediately. 'I'll tell 'Harry' the barman. I'm sure he'll be amused.'

I knew that Professor Eckersley didn't want people in London knowing that he was pumping pints in the Duck and Puddle under a nom-de-plume. He wasn't ashamed of his job. But, like Greta Garbo, he just wanted to be left alone.

'For a few minutes I thought it really was him. And then I thought about it and realised what a daft idea it was. Why would London's most famous psychiatrist be pulling pints in a pub in rural Devon?'

'Why, indeed?' I said.

'Must be a doppelganger.' He sounded rather disappointed.

''Harry' will be tickled pink,' I said. 'Is this Professor Eckersley famous?'

'Famous, my love? Oh he's famous all right! He treats all the film stars. He must be worth a fortune. I've met him several times myself.'

He said this as though he were scoring points and I realised that he was one of those very competitive people who seeks every opportunity to express superiority over others. At some point they usually say something like 'This isn't going to be a competition' in a tone which makes it clear that as far as they are concerned everything in the world is competitive.

I was reminded of a slyly competitive boy called Humphrey whom I knew at school.

'Your watch is fast,' I told him one day.

'Faster than yours?'

'Well, yes,' I replied, slightly puzzled.

Humphrey beamed. 'That means it must be better, doesn't it?'

There's really no way to deal with such people other than to agree with them and to express undiluted admiration.

'I'm impressed,' I told the stranger who, after purring for a moment or two, looked at me, holding his head on one side, and examined me as a bird might contemplate a prospective meal.

'You don't remember me, do you?' he said suddenly, rather sharply, on the edge of being offended.

'Of course I do!' I replied, offering a smile of recognition as a token of our apparent friendship.

It wasn't a proper fib because I knew I'd seen him somewhere. I just couldn't quite remember where or when or precisely who he was or what his name was.

'Do you remember making a television programme usually presented by Eamonn Andrews?' he asked, mentioning a programme which was broadcast on the television from London. 'It was only a few years ago,' he added.

And then I remembered.

'Of course,' I said. 'You interviewed me about *The Medicine Men*.'

The Medicine Men was my first book – it was a polemic about the over-close links between the medical profession and the drug industry.

'That's right!'

'You're Logan Berry!'

'That's me!' he agreed. He showed me a huge expanse of sparkling white teeth in what I am sure he believed was a smile. Sadly, the teeth were as convincing as his hair. They were sparkling plastic and designed to be seen from the back row of the circle, rather than from three feet away.

'I was the guest host for that programme. Eamonn was off somewhere else and they hired me as the stand-in.'

Logan Berry was not his real name, of course.

His real name, I remembered, was Percy Braunschweiger but like many celebrities he worked under a more memorable name. You can't become a star if your name is Percy Braunschweiger. I suspected that the name 'Logan Berry' had been selected by his agent or manager. When renaming a prospective star the aim is always to find a name short enough to fit on the front page of a tabloid newspaper. It helps enormously if the name is unusual enough to be memorable. And if the first name can be unique that helps because a newspaper sub editor can then put 'Logan' as a headline (as in 'Logan Eats Mouse for Bet' or 'Logan Spends Night in Nunnery') and everyone will know to whom it refers. If your first name is 'John' or 'David' this simply doesn't work for there are far too many Johns and Davids around.

Suddenly I remembered it all.

In fact, I remembered more than I wanted to remember about Logan Berry.

Meeting him had not been a particularly jolly experience and after our meeting I'd wanted to give him a black eye. Patsy had threatened worse, far worse and I seemed to remember that her threats had involved a pair of hedging shears and a garden hoe.

Logan, I remembered, was one of those people who earns a living on the fringes of show business and who acquires a sort of indistinct fame without having any definable or discernible skills. He couldn't juggle, do magic tricks or dance. He wasn't particularly good at telling jokes and he wasn't a very convincing actor. He couldn't write or play any musical instruments and he certainly couldn't sing. He didn't even have much charm.

What he did have, however, were a fake smile, which he could turn on and off like a light bulb, an ability to promote himself shamelessly, and a willingness to do anything a producer or an editor wanted him to do. Embarrassment was to him as alien as shame. He had, I seemed to remember, once spent a day lying in a bath full of baked beans. For a children's television programme he had sat in pretend stocks while children threw jelly and blancmange at him. In the pantomime season, he happily played an ugly sister or a cruel landlord. In the summer, he worked in theatres at the end of the pier where he made a fool of himself wearing outrageous costumes and merrily prancing about the stage. Offer him a cheque and an audience and he would do and say whatever you wanted him to do and say.

We had, as he reminded me, met on a television chat show.

I had been on tour promoting my first book.

Dr Brownlow had still been alive then and in those days it was not impossible for me to take some time off to promote my books. Logan, who had no medical training and as far as I know no skills or knowledge of anything other than himself, had been hired by the producer to present a programme on which I was booked to appear. One of Logan's tasks was to provide a review of my book live on air.

He had duly launched into a toxic attack in which he had argued that drug companies were doing life-saving work and that I, as a doctor, should be grateful to them rather than critical of some of their methods. He had pointed out that the British Medical Association did not approve of my book, or my criticisms of the drug industry or its influence on doctors. He had added spice to his review by suggesting that as a country GP I really didn't know what I was talking about, had got above myself and should go back to dealing with, as he so memorably put it: 'varicose veins and pimples'.

I had very little experience of television at that time and my attempt at a response was smothered with sneers and laughter from Logan and the programme's other guest and when I pointed out that I had done two year's research for the book, the pair of them dismissed this as irrelevant. I can't remember who the other guest had been. Logan then added that he had been told I had been struck off the medical register for unprofessional conduct and that I wasn't really entitled to call myself 'doctor'.

I was so astonished and horrified by this outrageous lie, a shocking libel, that for a moment I couldn't think of anything to say other than a bald and simple: 'That's not true!'. Logan, prompted in his ear by a message from a terrified studio director who was doubtless worried about lawyers and lawsuits, had immediately offered an ill-tempered apology but the damage had been done.

I remember that I left the studio feeling drained and with an empty feeling in the pit of my stomach.

And now the author of my pain was sitting in my consulting room in Bilbury.

'We had a lot of good fun with your book, didn't we?' said Logan. He frowned, as though in thought. 'Remind me: what was the book about?'

'You may have had good fun,' I said rather more coldly than I intended. 'I don't remember it as being particularly jolly.'

'Oh, you mustn't take these things personally!' Logan said dismissively. He waved his hand, in the casual manner of a man brushing away a cobweb.

I quietly counted to ten, picked up some paperclips and made a short chain. I hate it when people dismiss unfounded criticism as 'not personal'. How could I not take his attack personally? Any book written with heart and passion is a part of the author; as much a part of him as a leg or a kidney. Criticising a book and saying 'don't take it personally' is like criticising a new hairdo and saying 'don't take it personally'. Of course you're going to take it personally. It is personal.

I didn't say anything in reply and was quietly proud of my restraint. The man, though unwelcome, was in my consulting room as a patient.

'What can I do for you?' I asked him. I put the paperclip chain to one side. I was tempted to add: 'Is it varicose veins or pimples?', but I didn't.

'As I thought you would know,' he said, 'I'm appearing in a show in Barnstaple. I'm playing the Wicked Witch in a very wonderful production, and while I was in the area I thought I'd call in and ask you about a little something that's been worrying me.'

'But why come all the way out to Bilbury?' I asked him.

'I remembered you worked in the area and I thought you'd be the man to see,' said Logan, lowering his voice. 'I wanted to see someone I knew but not my usual chap in London. He can be very indiscreet. It's a very confidential problem and with you being in the business, as it were, you'll understand that we need to keep this under our hats.'

'In the business?'

'Show business, of course, dearie!'

'Ah.' I really didn't think of myself as being in show business though it was true that I had for a few years held an Equity card.

I wondered why on earth he had sought me out after being rude to me on the radio. And then I realised that he didn't think of himself as having been rude. To me it was an important subject, something worthy of serious debate, but to him it was just a knockabout few minutes on the wireless and a nice cheque from the broadcaster at the end of it.

'A boyfriend noticed it,' said Logan. He lowered his voice again. I could hardly hear what he was saying. 'It's a little something in a very delicate place,' he added.

Three minutes later he was lying on my couch, with his trousers neatly folded and hanging over the screen. His stomach was so huge that I had to ask him to hold it up out of the way while I examined the target area. Every inch of his skin appeared to be tanned.

'It's in the left one,' he said.

And it was.

There was a palpable swelling on the left side of his scrotum.

'Is it the big C?' asked Logan, hardly able to breathe.

'Do you get any pain with it?' I asked.

'Occasionally I do. Sometimes it's a sharp pain and sometimes it just aches.'

'Does anything make it worse?'

'It hurts most after a performance,' said Logan. 'I'm always very energetic on stage and we have matinees on Wednesdays and Saturdays. By the evening it really aches.'

'What about at night? Does it hurt at night?'

'No. It seems better when I lie down. Is it an infection? I'm very careful who I go to bed with but you never really know, do you?'

'It's a varicocele,' I told him.

'What on earth is that?' he demanded, sitting up with some difficulty. I wondered how on earth he managed to prance about on the stage. He really was very fat.

'It's like varicose veins inside your scrotum,' I explained.

'Not the big C?'

'No.'

'Not an infection?'

'Do you have any symptoms of an infection? A discharge from your penis? A rash anywhere? Urinary troubles?'

'Nothing at all except this silly lump. Actually the fellow who spotted it said he thought it might be worms living in there. I did a gig on the Isle of Wight last year and you never know what you can get when you go to foreign parts.'

'I don't think the Isle of Wight is foreign.'

'Well it might as well be. You have to go across to it on a ship.'

'A ferry.'

'Well I thought we were never going to get there. I'm not good on ships.'

'It's just swollen veins,' I told him. 'Not worms, not cancer and not syphilis or gonorrhoea.'

'Will it turn into anything else?'

'No,' I told him. 'It might get a little worse. It could affect your fertility.'

He laughed. 'Oh, I'm not bothered about that!' he said. He lay back again, gasping. He looked like a beached whale but he sounded like a fish out of water. He had obviously spent a lot of time sunbathing. The tan was so complete that I thought he had probably been using a sunbed.

'Do I need to have it removed?' he asked.

'Not unless it's causing you a lot of trouble,' I told him.

'Oh, not that much,' he said quickly. 'I try to keep away from surgeons whenever possible.' It appeared that the pain which came on the days when he did two shows was suddenly not quite so troublesome. I have found that this often happens. When a patient discovers that something they thought was serious is not, after all, either deadly or threatening, then the symptoms associated with it somehow become a little less troublesome.

I told him that he could get dressed and he started to pull up his underpants, which he had pushed down to his knees, instead of taking them off completely. They were boxer shorts covered with little pictures of ducks. As he pulled them up, I suddenly saw a small, dark patch on the outside of his left knee. It was about half an inch across, with irregular edges. The area around it was red, as though it were inflamed.

'How long have you had that?' I asked him, pointing to the patch on his skin. I had gone quite cold.

The moment I saw it I knew exactly what it was. Tests would need to be done. A histology report would be required. But there was really no need for any investigations. I knew exactly what I was looking at. There was, I thought, no little irony in the fact that Logan had come into my surgery worried about one problem when the real danger lay in another area entirely.

'Oh that's been there for years,' he said dismissively, pulling up his duck covered boxer shorts. 'It's probably been there all my life. It's just a mole thingy. I've got rather attached to it. Jeffrey calls it my beauty spot.'

'Jeffrey?'

'Jeffrey is my young friend, the one who found that wretched, little lump in my scrotum.'

I nodded. 'Has it changed at all?' I asked him.

'It may have got a bit bigger,' he said. 'I don't really notice it much.' He peered at it. 'The edges used to be round,' he said.

The edges were not now round; they were irregular.

'Does it itch?'

‘Sometimes it does.’

‘Does it ever bleed?’

‘No, I don’t think so. No, I’m pretty sure I’ve never seen any blood coming out of it.’

I looked at it closely and I could see a drop of bright red blood at one corner. Logan was so obese that he probably couldn’t see his knees properly without making a real effort to do so.

‘Do you use a sunbed?’

‘Oh yes, I hate pasty white bodies,’ he said. ‘I usually go to a sunning parlour in London, one of the best, a very fashionable place, but I found one down here that works just as well.’

‘I think you need to get that looked at,’ I told him, trying not to alarm him too much. ‘I want you to see a skin specialist.’

‘Really?’ said Logan, much more cheerful now that he knew that the lump in his scrotum was no more than a lump of varicose veins. He was clearly not in the slightest bit concerned about the skin problem I had spotted.

‘Really,’ I said.

‘I’m not very bothered about it,’ he said. ‘I think of it as a sort of beauty spot,’ he added again.

‘It’s something you should have looked at,’ I insisted.

‘Do you think it’s something to worry about then?’ he asked, starting to get off the couch.

‘It’s something that needs to be checked,’ I told him.

I held out a hand, like a traffic policeman. ‘Just stay on the couch for a moment or two.’

I then checked his groin, looking to see if any of his lymph nodes were swollen; to check if the cancer had spread. I got him to undress completely and checked around the rest of his body. I couldn’t find any signs that the regional lymph nodes were affected.

‘You’ve got me worried now, doctor,’ said Logan. ‘You’re not playing with me because you’re upset about that business in London, are you?’

‘I’ m not playing with you,’ I told him, rather offended that he would even think that, but realising that Logan was such a malicious fellow, untethered by the restraints of good intentions, that he probably imagined everyone else to be the same. ‘But you need to get that patch of skin checked out.’

I picked up the telephone, rang the hospital in Barnstaple and spoke to the dermatologist’s secretary. She managed to fit Logan into an appointment in two days’ time.

Logan, now rather more subdued than he had been on his arrival, left my surgery clutching the piece of paper on which I had written the date and time of his appointment and the name of the doctor he was due to see. I always tried to write such things down for patients. When you are worried it’s easy to forget things you’ve been told or instructions you’ve been given.

‘Will I need to see you again, doctor?’ asked Logan, before he left.

‘Probably not,’ I said. ‘The dermatologist at the hospital will look after you now. When do you go back to London?’

‘The show has another fortnight to run.’

‘Well, I’ve no doubt that the hospital in Barnstaple will write to your doctor with all the necessary details.’

‘Thank you,’ said Logan.

He looked at me and bit his lip. He clearly wanted to say something else. I waited.

‘On reflection I think I was a bit unfair about your book,’ he said.

I didn’t say anything.

‘I think I owe you an apology,’ he continued. ‘The producer told me to give you a hard time. I think someone gave him a few quid to make sure that you and your book got roughed up a bit.’

I nodded. I had guessed that he hadn’t been rough on me of his own volition.

‘But I was impressed with you,’ he said. ‘You seemed to me to be an honest doctor – someone I could trust. That’s why I came to see you rather than just finding a doctor in Barnstaple.’

‘Thank you,’ I said. It meant a lot. We shook hands. And then put his hand into his inside jacket pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. He handed it to me. ‘Take this with my compliments,’ he said, as though he’d just handed me the deeds to Buckingham Palace.

When he’d gone I examined the piece of paper he’d given me. It was a ticket for the show he was in – just one ticket. I put it underneath my blotter. Two months later, I found it and threw it away.

I sat there for a few moments and thought about the vanity, the fear and, possibly, the sense of inadequacy which drives people to spend hours lying underneath a suntan lamp. Skin cancers are dramatically greater among individuals who desperately work on their tans. I realise that other people think very differently but it seems to me to be a potentially high price to pay for a relatively small benefit.

And it occurred to me, not for the first time, that vanity, fear and inadequacy have always been a significant cause of problems of many different kinds.

Many people start smoking because they want to look ‘cool’ and sophisticated. Others drink too much alcohol because they are frightened to say ‘no’ when drinking with friends in a pub. And some people, both men and women, have plastic surgery which they really don’t need simply because they want to improve their attractiveness to others.

Vanity, in all its forms, can cause big problems. It has, throughout history, led to many a disaster. And Logan’s vanity very nearly led to his death.

I never heard from Logan again but the dermatologist later told me that he was almost certain that Logan’s melanoma (for the diagnosis was confirmed) had been triggered by the long hours he spent lying under a sunlamp. Sunlight, whether real or artificial, can cause an apparently harmless mole to turn nasty.

Luckily, the cancerous growth had not spread.

Logan’s lymph nodes were not affected and after the patch of skin had been removed, his prognosis was excellent.

But if Logan had not come to my surgery because he’d met me in London and was worried about his harmless varicocele, and if I hadn’t happened to notice the dark growth on his skin, then things could have been very different, and there is no doubt that the outcome would not have been anywhere near as successful.

Once again: so many ‘ifs’.

Funny how things turn out, isn’t it?

He Who Laughs Last

Unless you count the time when he came to help me deal with hungry wasps which had built a nest within the old walls of Bilbury Grange and were munching their way through my consulting room ceiling, I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen Thumper Robinson in my surgery.

'Sorry to bother you, doc,' said Thumper. 'But I've got a bit of a problem.'

'Tell me,' I said.

It was strange having to treat one of my best chums as a patient.

This is, of course, one of the drawbacks of practising in a small village. I knew all my patients well. Some were friends and some, like Thumper, were very close friends.

'My pee has turned blue,' he said bluntly.

My first thought was that the blue colouration must have been caused by something he had eaten. And the only food I knew of which caused urine to turn blue is turkey meat, which contains a substance called tryptophan.

'How blue is it?' I asked.

'Very blue,' replied Thumper.

'Do you have any other symptoms?'

'No. Just the blue pee.'

I gave him a small glass bottle and sent him out to the downstairs lavatory so that he could provide me with a specimen. A couple of minutes later he returned clutching a bottle of urine that was very definitely blue.

I asked him all the relevant questions such as 'Have you ever noticed this before?' and 'Have you eaten any unusual foods?'

The answers were all negative.

I was now becoming concerned. The only disease I could think of which can cause urine to turn strange colours, including blue, is porphyria. And porphyria, of course, is the disease which is believed to have been the cause of George III's madness. (As an aside, it was the king's madness which is reputed to have resulted in America becoming independent and breaking away from British rule.)

Trying not to show my concern, I then started to quiz Thumper about other symptoms which can occur in porphyria. He had none of them.

And, since porphyria is usually inherited, I asked him if anyone in his family had the disease. I didn't expect him to answer in the affirmative and he didn't.

Thumper wasn't at all keen but I insisted on taking a blood sample, which I put aside with the urine sample. I told Thumper that I would send them both off to the laboratory in Barnstaple.

Thumper thanked me but did not seem especially concerned. It occurred to me that he probably didn't realise just how dangerous porphyria could be.

Fifteen minutes later, I was astonished when Patchy Fogg came into the surgery.

'I thought I'd better come and see you because my urine has gone green,' he told me after we'd chatted about this and that for a couple of minutes.

He insisted that he hadn't eaten any unusual foods and that he wasn't taking any medicines that I didn't know about – even ones bought over the counter from a pharmacy. He had not, he said, eaten any asparagus for weeks. He said he knew that asparagus could make urine go green but he said he also knew it gave urine a funny smell and his urine didn't smell that way at all. He had no other symptoms at all. He had no stinging and no urinary frequency. Once again, I sent him out to the downstairs loo to fill a sample bottle with his urine. And when Patchy came back there was no mistaking it: his urine was green.

Now, there aren't many problems that can cause green urine and the only one I could think of is an infection caused by a pseudomonas bacteria. I told Patchy that I'd send the sample off to the laboratory and that as soon as I'd got the results I'd be in touch to tell him whether he needed any treatment – and if so, what. I also took a blood sample. Patchy clearly hadn't expected this and he wasn't very happy about it. But I insisted that it was necessary.

Twenty minutes after Patchy had left, I could hardly believe my eyes when Frank walked into my consulting room. He was, he said, the last patient of the morning surgery.

'Sorry to bother you, doc,' he said. 'But I've got a bit of a problem with my wee.'

I may not always be the brightest star in the firmament but even I was now beginning to suspect that something strange was going on.

'What's the problem with it?'

'It's gone orange,' he said.

My suspicions were now soaring high above the clouds.

Frank, like Thumper and Patchy had absolutely no symptoms of any kind. And he hadn't been eating anything unusual. Blackberries and rhubarb can cause the urine to change colour but he hadn't eaten either of those.

And since I prescribe all the drugs that Frank takes, I knew he wasn't taking any medicines that could cause his urine to turn orange. My first fear was that he had some sort of hepatitis. Infections of the liver can cause the urine to go orange and then dark. I checked Frank's sclera because they usually become discoloured in jaundice but they were fine.

And for the third time that morning I sent a patient out to the downstairs loo to pee into a little glass specimen bottle.

'I need a blood sample too,' I told him.

He seemed strangely reluctant. 'Oh, there's no need for that, doc,' he said, standing up and backing away.

'I need to send a sample to the laboratory,' I insisted.

'I'll come back tomorrow if it isn't any better,' he said, heading for the door.

'I'll get this off to the lab today,' I told him. 'But I really need a blood sample.'

But he'd gone.

I sat in the surgery for a while, wondering what on earth was going on. It was clearly quite impossible for my three friends to have all developed diseases which resulted in their urine changing colour.

And then two things happened which helped me to understand.

First, I looked at the calendar because I had to sign some letters which Miss Johnson had typed for me.

Second, Patsy came into the consulting room and told me that Thumper, Patchy and Frank were all standing around outside Bilbury Grange. In fact, she said, they weren't actually standing but, rather, they were leaning against the side of Thumper's truck. And, she added, they seemed to be very happy about something because they were all laughing their heads off.

'Do you know what the date is?' I asked her.

'Something towards the end of March? '

'Close,' I said.

I pointed to the calendar.

'Ah,' said Patsy.

'They're waiting until I go out to do the visits,' I said. 'Then they'll tell me that I've been April fooled. And they'll have a good laugh at my expense and tell me not to bother sending their urine and blood samples to the laboratory because there is nothing wrong with them.'

'The rotters!' laughed Patsy.

It was, of course, the first day in April. And the day on which, traditionally, people play jokes on one another. But it was still only 11.30 a.m. and there was plenty of time left for a little more entertainment. Traditionally, in England practical jokes can only be carried out before noon on April 1st so I had thirty minutes left in which to try to turn the tables on them.

I went out and feigned surprise at seeing my chums all standing around. Patsy came with me.

'April fool!' my three chums cried in unison.

They then explained that they had all eaten some food dye to change the colour of their urine.

'It was Harry's idea,' said Frank. He was referring to 'Harry' Stottle, the barman at the Duck and Puddle. 'Harry' Stottle's real name was Professor Eckersley and in a previous life he had been a professor of psychiatry and a fashionable Harley Street psychiatrist.

'He had a hunt around in Gilly's kitchen and found three dyes we could use,' said Patchy. 'We were going to come in all with the same coloured urine but 'Harry' thought you might think it was the water supply, telephone the Water Board and start a major panic.'

I congratulated them all on the gag and told them that they'd well and truly had me fooled. 'I expect you used a special non-toxic food dye, didn't you?' I said.

They looked at one another.

'What do you mean, a special non-toxic food dye?' asked Patchy. 'We used food dyes from the kitchen at the Duck and Puddle.'

"Harry' said we'd be fine in a day or so,' said Thumper. 'The dye is just excreted in the urine. It doesn't do any harm.'

'As long as you used a special non-toxic dye,' I said. 'The stuff which chefs and cooks use is toxic if you consume it raw. It only loses its toxicity when it's in something that's cooked at over 100 degrees Centigrade. But if you have enough of the stuff to produce a change in urine colour it can be pretty deadly.'

'What sort of toxicity?' asked Patchy who was not laughing any more. He wasn't even smiling.

‘How deadly?’ asked Frank earnestly.

‘Is it dangerous?’ asked Thumper.

All three of them were now very pale.

‘It can very nasty,’ I told them. ‘The toxins used in the dye preparation are destroyed by heating but if you eat the stuff raw then the toxins will affect your livers and kidneys. It can produce necrotising relapsing hepatitis and long-lasting impotence. The only way to prevent the stuff causing permanent damage is to drink lots of water and flush the toxins out of your body. Oh, and you mustn’t drink any alcohol for at least a month until your livers have recovered.’

‘What sort of hepatitis?’ asked Thumper, who was panicking. ‘And how long-lasting is the long-lasting impotence?’

‘How much water did you say we need to drink?’ asked Frank.

‘Two or three pints of water straight away,’ I told him. ‘That would probably be enough. There are some pint mugs in the cupboard next to the sink.’

The three of them rushed into Bilbury Grange, heading for the kitchen.

Patsy and I followed and found all three of them busily gulping down glasses of water from the tap. Thumper hates drinking water but he was swilling the stuff down as if it were his favourite beer. They drank at least three pints of water each.

‘Do you think we’ll be OK now?’ asked Patchy, breathlessly. Water dripped from his chin. The three of them stood there exhausted, still holding their empty pint mugs.

I looked at my watch. It was one minute to twelve noon.

‘You’ll be fine now,’ I said. ‘But I’m afraid you’ll spend most of the afternoon dashing to the loo.’

They looked at me. They’d noticed me checking my watch.

And suddenly the penny dropped.

‘Food dyes aren’t really toxic if they aren’t cooked, are they?’ asked Patchy quietly.

‘I wouldn’t think so,’ I replied. Now it was my turn to grin.

‘You’ve all just been April fooled!’ said Patsy, smiling.

The three of them groaned.

‘Do we really have to avoid alcohol for a month?’ asked Thumper.

I shook my head.

‘Thank heavens,’ said Thumper, sounding very relieved. ‘That was the scariest bit.’

Too Much of a Good Thing?

Donyard Hill is a transvestite.

His day time job is as the Secretary of the Kentisbury Golf Club but he has what would be called a secret if it weren't so widely known.

When he isn't chasing up members who have forgotten to pay their subscriptions, or who have broken on the club's many and constantly changing rules (the club committee even has a rule about the type of socks which male members can wear if they are wearing shorts), Donyard dresses in the sort of clothing usually worn by members of the opposite sex. He turns from Donyard into 'Molly', his alter ego. His gracile wife Cynthia-Anne helps do Molly's hair and make-up and seems to enjoy the whole experience just as much as Donyard himself.

Thumper, Patchy and I once had to rescue Donyard after he was arrested by the police for the great crime of walking around Barnstaple while wearing a frock. Since thousands of women do this every day without being arrested, or even worrying that they might be arrested, this seemed a trifle high handed to say the least. The three of us dressed up in some of Donyard's spare dresses, blouses and so on and drove to Barnstaple. When we got there, we told the police sergeant in charge that we were all on our way to a fancy dress party which was due to be attended by the Chief Constable. The sergeant, embarrassed and alarmed, duly released Donyard and apologised profusely.

Other than that unexpected and definitely unplanned hour or two of excitement, I had not seen Donyard very often. He and Cynthia-Anne tend to go into Exeter or Taunton for their adventures together and it is rare to see either of them in the Duck and Puddle.

He turned up at an evening surgery looking very different to how I'd seen him on the night of his arrest.

This time he was wearing a three piece tweed suit, a check shirt and a club tie that would not have gone well with any jacket or shirt but that presumably meant something to Donyard and to the people who had designed it.

'I've been a bit under the weather,' said Donyard.

I hadn't liked to mention it but he didn't look too good. Patients don't expect to walk into their doctor's surgery and hear him say: 'My word you do look poorly!'

Donyard had put on weight and he was showing some of the muscular rigidity associated with Parkinson's disease. He was also twitching and the muscles I could see all seemed to be going into and out of spasm.

He then suddenly closed his eyes, fainted, keeled over and fell off the chair.

I leapt up from my own chair and hurried round my desk but by the time I'd got to him, the fall had woken him.

'Golly,' he said. He looked around, as though confused. 'I don't feel too good,' he said. 'I've got this damned headache. I've had it for days. I simply can't get rid of it.'

I took off his jacket and his waistcoat and then helped him up onto my examination couch. Once he was lying down, I took off his tie and unbuttoned his shirt. Underneath his shirt he was wearing a very pretty corselette in lilac. There were lots of bows and a good many pieces of fancy lace. I also undid his belt and unfastened his trousers. Underneath those he was wearing a very fancy pair of lace edged panties in lilac silk. Stockings were attached to the straps on the bottom of the corselette, which was fancier than anything I'd ever seen before.

The truth is that folderols were not commonly worn in our part of the world.

Stockings were still the normal leg covering in Bilbury in the 1970s but only because they were available, normal and generally accepted as regular leg coverings. They were seen as functional rather than as exotic, special or sexy. Occasionally I saw women wearing pantyhose or tights but these were usually visitors from big cities such as London and Birmingham or tourists from America. Peter Marshall, our village shopkeeper, had tried selling tights for a while and had given up because there was simply no demand for them. Little did any of us know that within a year or two, stockings would be worn mainly by transvestites and bank robbers who pulled them over their heads to disguise their features (tights are just no good for robbing banks unless you work in very close pairs). Nor did we have any idea that women would soon be routinely wearing trousers and jeans – with surprisingly large numbers looking as though they were members of the Women's Land Army who had worked so hard on British farms during the First and Second World Wars.

Over the years I found that, as far as underwear was concerned, the ladies of Bilbury could be divided into three groups.

The ones under 30 years of age all held up their stockings with suspender belts. The ones between the ages of 30 and 60 generally held up their stockings with the aid of simple corsets or girdles fitted with suspender attachments. And the ones over the age of 60 generally wore corsets so complicated and robust that they took twenty minutes to remove and just as long to put back on again. The corsets favoured by this age group appeared windproof and probably bulletproof and were possibly stronger than some of the material used for modern house construction.

Only occasionally did I see patients wearing anything which could be described as lingerie, and any emporium selling flimsy folderols would have found life difficult in North Devon.

Donyard did not, of course, fit very neatly into the usual categories and his fancy underpinnings were, I gather, largely purchased on trips to the metropolis.

When I finally got down to skin, I couldn't help noticing that the Golf Club secretary had grown a very decent sized pair of breasts. They were not, perhaps, in the topless dancer category but they were of a very respectable size and seemed certainly large enough to impede his back swing, not to mention his follow through.

'Pretty damned good, eh?' said Donyard, who had now recovered from his collapse and who seemed enormously proud of his newly enhanced figure.

I definitely got the feeling that he had been waiting to see my reaction when his new breasts were uncovered. He was full of eager expectation; desperate to share his delight. He reminded me of a little boy with a new penknife or a little girl with a new doll.

It was clear to me that Donyard must have been taking a drug of some kind.

Gynaecomastia, the enlargement of the breasts in a male body, is not a particularly unusual occurrence but although it can occur in men who put on a good deal of weight and it can occur in some medical conditions, it is almost invariably a side effect of taking prescription drugs. There are quite a few medicines which can cause the male breast tissue to swell – sometimes to a quite appreciable extent. I had, over the years, seen quite a few men who had very decent sized breasts; mammary glands that would have delighted many a woman and would have certainly thrilled all those teenage girls who examine themselves each morning for signs that business in the chest area is booming.

'Remarkable!' I said drily. 'What have you been taking?'

Healthy men of his age don't usually grow breasts unless they develop a hormone imbalance resulting in the production of too much oestrogen and too little testosterone. Given the fact that Donyard was a crossdresser, I thought the most likely explanation was that he was taking something he should not have been taking.

'Aren't you going to congratulate me?'

'Congratulations,' I said drily.

'I'm a 38C,' said Donyard, proudly telling me his bra size. 'I reckon in another month I'll be a 38D.'

'What have you been taking?' I asked him again.

There was silence for a moment. 'I took some of my wife's birth control pills for a while,' confessed Donyard at last.

I remembered that Cynthia-Anne had come to see me one month with a strange and rather convoluted tale of having left her pack of birth control pills in her cardigan pocket and then having put the cardigan into the washing machine. She had a reason for putting the birth controls into her cardigan pocket but I can't remember what it was. I have found that when an explanation becomes too complicated it is probably fabricated.

'But she couldn't think of any other excuses for getting more pills,' said Donyard. He paused. 'And, to be frank, she felt bad about lying to you.'

He was still twitching. And although he was reasonably coherent he still seemed more than a little confused.

'So what have you been taking?'

I tried to remember what drugs can cause gynaecomastia. The list is surprisingly long. Anything which contains oestrogen will cause breast enlargement, of course, since one of oestrogen's main actions is to produce breast tissue growth. Quite a few antidepressants and tranquillisers can cause gynaecomastia. And so can steroids of various kinds. Amphetamine, heroin and marijuana can all cause breast growth.

'I got some pills from a Canadian magazine,' said Donyard suddenly. 'They were guaranteed to cause breast tissue growth.' He looked down at his chest. 'And damn me, they've worked haven't they?'

'Have you got the pills with you?'

'They're in my jacket pocket.'

I went over to his jacket.

'Left hand outside pocket.'

I reached into the left hand outside pocket. There was nothing in there but a comb and a penknife.

'Try the other one.'

I tried the other one and found a packet of pills. I looked at the side of the box. The name on the side of the box was Haloperidol.

I could hardly believe my eyes and I felt cold inside. Haloperidol is a powerful antipsychotic medicine which has dramatic actions on the brain. It is a drug which is used to treat schizophrenia. And it can cause a mass of side effects – including gynaecomastia.

I now understood why Donyard was twitching and had so many muscle spasms.

'How long have you been taking these?' I asked him.

'Six weeks or so.'

'How many have you been taking a day?'

'Three. They said you needed to take three a day for maximum effect.'

'Donyard, you're an idiot,' I told him.

I do not usually abuse my patients. But on this occasion it seemed entirely justified.

'Will they do me any harm?' he asked, suddenly worried. 'The magazine which sold them to me said they were perfectly safe and would just give me nice boobs.' He showed the mixed emotions of a man who has been told, on the same day, that he has just won the lottery but has only three weeks to live and enjoy it.

'They are not safe,' I told him. 'They can cause a lot of side effects. Breast enlargement is one of the least dangerous side effects. If you need to take them to deal with a serious health disorder then the side effects are probably acceptable. But you don't have anything wrong with you, you don't need to take them and so the side effects are definitely not acceptable.'

'I suppose you think I should stop them?'

I looked at him.

'You definitely think I should stop them.'

I glowered at him.

'I think I'd better stop them.'

I put the packet of pills I'd taken from him into a drawer in my desk.

'Will the twitching and confusion go away if I don't take the pills?'

'Yes, I hope so. But it may take a while.'

'I've been a bit stupid haven't I?'

'No.'

'No?'

'You've been a lot stupid.'

'Oh.'

'Unbelievably stupid.'

'Yes, I suppose I have,' he admitted. 'What will happen to my new breasts?'

'I don't know.'

'Can you ask someone? Or look it up in one of those big books in your bookcase?'

'No one can tell you. And no book can tell you.'

'Oh.'

'All I can tell you with any certainty is that they will either stay as they are, or they will disappear completely or they will shrink a little.'

'Ah.' He was clearly disappointed. 'Is there anything I can do to stop them disappearing or shrinking?'

'Wear a good bra, preferably something underwired, to give them plenty of support. That might help preserve the breast tissue – and it will certainly help stop your new breasts from sagging.'

'Oh, I can do that,' said Donyard, a little cheerier now that he was talking about preserving his new breasts. 'I have some very good bras. I've got more bras than Cynthia-Anne. I am to the bra industry what Imelda Marcos is to the shoe industry. Do you realise that without crossdressers the bra industry would collapse? We keep the lingerie makers in business.'

He explained that, according to figures he had read, the average woman thinks she is being rash if she buys one new bra every six months but the average transvestite buys a new bra every two weeks. 'And since one in ten men is a crossdresser, this means that there are almost certainly more men buying bras than there are women buying bras!' said Donyard triumphantly.

'Wear a pink one with a frilly edge,' I said, still trying to get my head round Donyard's astonishing claim.

'Really? Will that make a difference?'

'And make sure it has a little bow at the front – where the two cups meet.'

'Are you serious?'

I looked at him.

'Sorry.' He laughed. 'You were teasing me, weren't you?'

'I was.'

'Any bra will do I guess.'

'I would think so.'

I told him to try not to worry about them disappearing but to enjoy his new breasts for as long as they were there.

‘You’ve risked your life to get them so you might as well take advantage of them.’

‘Do you mean that? That I risked my life taking those drugs?’

I nodded.

He paled and said he would make sure that he enjoyed them.

And I did not doubt him for an instant for he was, as I have said, like a boy with a new toy.

Well, to be accurate, he was like a boy with two new toys.

Mr Gibbons

Mr Ezekial Gibbons came in, greeted me and sat down with a sigh.

A general practice surgery is like a lucky dip at a Christmas bazaar in that you never know what you're going to get next. I had been in general practice for some years but I always found a surgery exciting.

Although Mr Gibbons had his 80th birthday a couple of years ago (there was quite a knees-up in the Duck and Puddle to celebrate the occasion) he was very well preserved and really didn't look much over 65.

A keen, amateur historian, he had for nearly 20 years been writing a book on the history of the Corn Laws. The last time we spoke about it he told me that he had written three and a half million words and thought he still had a good deal of work to do before the book would be ready to offer to a publisher. The longest book I'd ever written had been no more than a quarter of a million words and I couldn't imagine how anyone was ever going to understand or edit a book that was over three and a half million words long. If published in full it would, I thought, need to be printed in at least twelve volumes. It seemed a lot of research and writing for one subject.

Mr Gibbons always felt the cold and even when the weather was warm he wore quite a few layers of clothing and it was, for example, quite customary for him to wear two jumpers or waistcoats underneath his suit jacket. He always wore a suit, an old-fashioned hard collar, and a club tie. I had never seen him in casual clothing.

A relatively new resident in Bilbury, Mr Gibbons previously worked as a stockbroker in the City of London and lived in Surrey where he and his wife had a rather large and splendid house – a home big enough to have a billiard room, a library and three staircases. He and his wife were, I believe, members of what was usually referred to as 'The County Set' and their dinner parties had always been reported in society magazines such as *The Tatler*. In the summer, the gardens and grounds of their home were opened to the public. They had several live-in servants, a garage of five luxury cars and a full-time chauffeur.

When his wife died, Mr Gibbons decided he could no longer bear to live in the house they had bought together, decorated together and shared and enjoyed so much and so he took the unusual step of selling it complete with all the contents. Many people sell a house with the carpets and curtains but Mr Gibbons sold his house complete with all the pictures, the furniture, the books, the linen, the crockery and the ornaments. He even left behind most of his clothes and personal items such as old photograph albums.

He once told me that when he left the house he did so carrying an overnight bag containing only a change of clothing, a portable leather chess set which he had carried around with him since boyhood, an old compass which his grandfather had given him, an incunabula which he cherished and a copy of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim Progress*.

He drove to North Devon where his parents had frequently taken him for caravan holidays when he'd been a boy. It was an area of which he had fond and simple memories: days on the beach, surfing on a clumsy wooden board, building sand castles, eating ice cream, fish and chips wrapped in paper.

Memories of places we have visited years before are often a disappointment, of course. Sometimes the place will have changed. Buildings will have been demolished and new ones erected. Roads will have been widened. And sometimes our memories mislead us. We remember things through the eyes of the person we used to be. Our childhood memories in particular are likely to be distorted by time and by affection. We remember only the sunny days. We forget the thunderstorms and the cold winds. We remember the sunshine but we forget the sunburn. We remember the sand dunes but we forget the flies and sharp, spiky grass. We remember the soft sand and we forget the sharp pebbles.

But Mr Gibbons was not betrayed by his memory.

Everything was just as he remembered it. The countryside and the small towns along the North Devon coast had hardly changed in more than half a century. In the small resorts of Ilfracombe, Combe Martin and Lynmouth, a good many of the small pubs and shops which he remembered from his boyhood were still in business. He found a shop where his father had bought him a bucket and a spade. The shop seemed exactly the same as it had been so many years earlier. The man behind the counter could not possibly have been the same man who had served the very young Ezekial Gibbons but he looked exactly the same. Mr Gibbons told me he thought he may have been the son of the man who had sold him that original bucket and spade. There was an ice cream van parked on the cliffs in exactly the same spot where there had been an ice cream van half a century earlier. It is a fact that over the years, few parts of England have changed as slowly as North Devon.

And then, one dark November evening, Mr Gibbons rediscovered Bilbury.

He found the cottage which his parents had rented when they had a little more money and could upgrade from the caravan they'd usually hired for their annual week by the seaside. And to his astonishment the cottage was still for rent. There had been a faded card stuck to the glass inside the porch and on the card had been a local phone number for prospective tenants to ring. Mr Gibbons rang the number and contacted the owners, who lived in Suffolk, but instead of renting the cottage, he bought it.

Lavender Cottage was an old timber building which was made up of massive beams, measuring around six inches by four inches. Those very old cottages, built on a wooden framework, were all put together in much the same way though heaven knows how the builders moved those massive, enormously heavy beams. I suppose they must have used hand operated winches of some kind. Grooves were cut in the sides of the timbers and hazel rods were fixed into them and then thinner hazel rods were woven in and out, as though a hurdle were being made. The resulting panel was filled with clay or plaster and covered with plaster mixed with animal hair to give it strength.

The cottage had latticed windows, and where a brickwork porch had been added on at some early stage the work had been supported with buttresses. The three granite steps up to the front door were well worn in the middle. An old climbing rose had clambered up the ivy growing on the front and sides of the cottage and, like many ancient rose bushes, it still produced a mass of exquisite flowers in the summertime.

In the reverse of the way that he had sold his old home complete with the contents, so Mr Gibbons bought his cottage complete with all the furniture and other contents. Since the cottage had always been rented to holidaymakers none of the furniture was valuable or even in particularly good condition. Mr Gibbons was convinced that much of the stuff in the cottage was the furniture that he remembered from all those years ago. There was a battered, scarred table in the kitchen and an old Welsh dresser that looked to be almost as old as the cottage. The leather chairs in the sitting room were losing their horse hair stuffing and looked awful but they were still enormously comfortable, and the rug in front of the fireplace was one of those hand-made affairs created out of hundreds of bits of spare material. The iron bedstead in the main bedroom was huge and solid and although the mattress had been renewed many times, there was little doubt that the bedstead had been in situ since Victorian days. In old cottages, with tight winding staircases, the bedframe tends to stay in place for a long time.

‘I think my time is nearly up,’ said Mr Gibbons. ‘I’ve got one foot in the grave and the other on a banana skin.’ He seemed as weary as he sounded and every word seemed to be an effort. ‘It’s a bugger, isn’t it?’ He had to stop to take a breath after each sentence. ‘As we get old we learn something about the world, we acquire a little knowledge and, hopefully, a touch of wisdom, and then, just as we feel that we are ready to take on the world we find ourselves about to check out. I never really rated him as a critic, I thought him too savage, but old Ruskin was right you know!’

All this was spoken with great effort, as though simply finding the breath was a struggle.

‘What did Ruskin say?’

‘He said: ‘How disgusting it is to find that just when one’s getting interested in life one has got to go!’’

‘You don’t look to me as if you are about to go anywhere!’ I told him.

And despite the problem he was having with his breathing he didn’t look ill. He looked a good colour and he seemed healthy enough. The only change I had noticed was this problem he was clearly having with getting his breath.

‘Of course it’s different with women,’ he said, struggling still. ‘Women mature much younger than men, and they’re blessed with much more common sense and a greater ability to acquire wisdom at a young age.’

‘Mention that to Patsy and Miss Johnson as you leave!’ I suggested. ‘They’ll be fans of yours for eternity.’

‘The funny thing is that these days, people are electing younger and younger politicians and company bosses,’ said Mr Gibbons. ‘And yet it’s a strange and unobservant man who knows no more at 70 than he knew at 30!’

‘Have you got your list?’ I asked him.

Many of my patients came into the surgery with a list of symptoms, signs, worries and medication they needed. Mr Gibbons was one of these. Some doctors objected to patients bringing in a list of symptoms or worries but I never understood why. On the contrary, I rather welcome it and, like Dr Brownlow, I always encouraged patients to write down everything they wanted to tell me and, during the conversation, to write down everything I told them. In fact, I always left a notepad and a pencil on the patient’s side of my desk so that they could jot down advice or instructions. It’s far too easy to leave the doctor’s surgery and subsequently to have to struggle to remember whether the tablets are to be taken before meals, after meals or with meals.

Mr Gibbons, whose memory was still first class, took a small slip of paper out of his inside jacket pocket and handed it to me across the desk. There wasn’t much on the paper.

Pain in knee is improving with the aspirin
Varicose veins better now that I’m wearing the elastic stockings
Hearing better after the wax removal

‘Splendid!’ I said, when I’d read the list. I handed the paper back to him.

He screwed it into a ball and tossed it into my waste paper basket.

‘You seem a bit breathless,’ I said.

‘That’s why I think I should be preparing myself for the voyage across the Styx,’ he said. ‘I’ll never finish my book on the damned Corn Laws. I need another six months at least.’

‘You didn’t put breathlessness on your list?’

‘I didn’t think there would be anything you could do about it,’ he said rather glumly.

I asked him to take off his coat and waistcoats and to let me listen to his chest.

This was not an easy procedure and involved several stoppages while Mr Gibson got his breath. It occurred to me that either both the waistcoats he was wearing had been made for a slimmer man or that maybe Mr Gibbons was no longer the owner of the svelte like figure of which he had once been proud. Simply undoing the buttons took a good deal of effort.

‘Two waistcoats?’ I said.

‘I feel the cold these days,’ he explained.

‘You could wear a vest or a jumper,’ I suggested. ‘It would save you a good deal of buttoning and unbuttoning.’

Mr Gibbons agreed that this seemed a moderately good idea. He then wriggled out of his shirt. This came off a lot easier than the waistcoats.

When he had finally managed to undress, I listened to his heart and his lungs.

To my surprise, everything seemed fine. His heart was ticking when it should have been ticking, and tocking when it needed to tock.

And, as I had rather suspected it might be, his breathing was considerably easier than it had been a few minutes earlier.

‘Put on your things,’ I told him.

Mr Gibbons got dressed. This took quite a while. The shirt wasn’t too difficult but the waistcoats were tricky. They were both so tight that Mr Gibbons had great difficulty in buttoning them up. When he’d finished, he was exhausted and sat for a while before putting on his jacket.

‘Are those new?’ I asked him, suddenly realising that there was another possible explanation for the fact that the waistcoats were so tight.

‘I bought them recently,’ he told me, looking down, clearly rather pleased with them. ‘They’re a bit snug and the shop assistant agreed they were probably a size too small but he insisted that the well-fitted look is fashionable this year.’

Once he was dressed, Mr Gibbons started to strain for breath.

‘Have you not noticed that your breathing gets more difficult when you are wearing those two waistcoats?’

He nodded. ‘I hadn’t. But, do you know, you’re right!’

He was having so much difficulty in breathing that it was clearly quite a trial for him to say anything.

‘If you were to leave off the waistcoats then you would feel a lot healthier,’ I told him. ‘The waistcoats are so tight they are squeezing your chest and making it difficult for you to breathe properly.’

Mr Gibbons, clearly surprised, looked at me.

‘Really!’ I said. ‘I’ll prove it to you.’

I took a simple and rather primitive peak flow meter off my desk and asked Mr Gibbons to breathe into and out of the device. I then wrote down the measurements.

‘Now undo those darned waistcoats!’

With a rather weary sigh, Mr Gibbons unbuttoned the two waistcoats.

I then got him to breathe into the peak flow meter and took a fresh set of measurements.

And once that was done I showed him the results. Without the waistcoats the readings were much, much better. Actually, I didn’t really need the peak flow meter. Mr Gibbons was breathing much more easily now that the waistcoats were unbuttoned.

‘Those waistcoats are too tight for you!’ I explained. ‘They’re preventing your chest from expanding properly. If you leave them off, or at least unbuttoned, then you’ll be able to breathe much more easily.’

‘I can’t believe it!’ said Mr Gibbons. He took a really deep breath and smiled with delight. ‘You’ve cured me by removing my waistcoats!’ He immediately took them off.

I told him it was the first successful double waistcoatectomy ever performed in South West England and gave him a jumper of mine to wear under his jacket while he went home. In return, he assured me that I could keep the two waistcoats (which were expensive and fancy) for the next Bilbury Hospital Bring and Buy sale.

A Bring and Buy sale is the rich Aunt of the Jumble Sale and, as such, the goods on offer are generally required to be either of superior quality or rather close to new. These two waistcoats fitted into both categories.

It was one of the strangest ‘cures’ I ever effected.

But, in its own, strange way, it was one of the most pleasing.

The Peripatetic Poet

Thumper Robinson, Patchy Fogg, Frank Parsons, 'Harry' Stottle and I were sitting in the snug of the Duck and Puddle one chilly, late autumn day when a stranger walked in.

We didn't get many strangers in the Duck and Puddle outside the summer season and the newcomer, something of a rarity on a miserable day, was greeted warmly.

'Harry' Stottle, the newly hired barman (who had, in a previous life, been known as Dr Eckersley and had been employed as a Professor of Psychiatry at a London teaching hospital) levered himself out of his chair, walked over to the bar, raised the hatch and stood waiting for the newcomer's instructions.

'What do you recommend?' asked the man, who was a tall, thin fellow with a headful of black, curly hair and a couple of days' growth of a dark beard. He was, I suppose, in his mid-60s and had a nose which looked as though it had been broken at least twice. He was wearing well-worn, bottle-green, corduroy trousers and a very well-worn sports jacket with leather elbow patches. Neither the trousers nor the jacket was a good fit and it seemed a fair guess that both items had been acquired second hand. He had an old, worn rucksack hanging from one shoulder. Judging by its shape, there didn't seem to be a great deal inside it. He had no other luggage with him but when I looked out of the window I saw that outside, in the pub car park, a very old Sunbeam Talbot was parked. Behind the Sunbeam, a huge car of indeterminate colour and blessed with many dents, there was the smallest caravan I'd ever seen in my life. The newcomer was accompanied by a large, weary looking dog.

'If you like beer then you won't be disappointed by a pint of 'Old Restoration', said 'Harry'.

'How much is that?' asked the newcomer, taking a very small handful of coins from his trouser pocket and fingering them carefully.

'Harry' told him the price.

If Frank hadn't been present, 'Harry' would have probably given the stranger the beer without charge. 'Harry' regarded himself more as a host than as a barman and frequently poured drinks for people without asking them to pay. When he had abandoned his life in London, 'Harry' had sold an expensive house and cashed in all his investments. He was, by Bilbury standards, extremely well off. When Frank became aware that 'Harry' was giving beer away (after three whole days had gone by without him finding a single penny in the till he could hardly not notice) he talked to 'Harry' about the basic, commercial principles of running a pub. To Frank's surprise, 'Harry', after promising to do his best to break himself of this bad habit, suggested that he pay £50 a week into the till to cover any occurrences which slipped through. Frank immediately accepted the very generous offer. It did not seem to occur to either of them that 'Harry' was effectively paying for the privilege of working at the Duck and Puddle.

'Just a half then,' said the newcomer.

'Give him a pint on the house,' said Frank.

Patchy, Thumper and I looked at him, astonished. Frank was not normally a plenitudinous man, though it occurred to me a little later that 'Harry's' £50 a week had probably made him more comfortable about such random acts of generosity.

The newcomer, surprised, looked across at the landlord.

'We don't like people drinking halves in here,' said Frank. 'Especially travellers who appear to be a bit down on their luck.'

'Ne'er comes the night ere leaves the day!' said the newcomer, as though this meant something. 'Could I borrow a bowl or a saucer from you?' He nodded towards the dog. 'For my companion.'

'Water?' asked 'Harry' producing a saucer from behind the bar. Frank always kept a couple of bowls there so that he could give water to visiting dogs.

'If you have no objection I will share this excellent looking beverage with my friend,' said the newcomer.

When 'Harry' had handed him the saucer he poured in as much beer as the saucer would take. It is not easy to pour liquid from a beer glass but he somehow managed it without spilling one drop. He then put the saucer down on the floor. The dog looked up, the man nodded his permission, and the dog started lapping at the beer.

'And what's your name, stranger?' asked Frank.

I thought it sounded like a line from a cowboy movie; the sort of line that might have been uttered by John Wayne holding a frontier rifle and stern look. 'What's your name, stranger?'

'My name, the one I carved on my desk at school, is Sid Fish,' came the rather strange reply. 'And my companion is called Bismark.'

Mr Fish's dog, an appropriately shaggy beast, seemed to have had parents of very different origins. One parent had clearly been a German shepherd and the other may have been a collie. 'He's German so when he barks he goes voof voof,' said Mr Fish later.

The dog was deaf, had poor eyesight, and was lazy and friendly with everyone. Later that day, when Bismark was lying in front of the fire in the Duck and Puddle, I saw a ginger cat sleeping on the dog's back – as though he were a large rug. I have no idea where the cat came from or to whom he belonged.

The man and his dog seemed to share everything.

If Mr Fish slept in his caravan (which was, I discovered later, so small that he had to sleep with his feet sticking out of the back window) then Bismark slept in the caravan with him. If Mr Fish slept in a bed then the dog slept on the bed. If Mr Fish slept rough in a barn then the dog slept alongside him on the straw. If Mr Fish had a sausage or a pie then the dog would get a neatly, fairly divided half of what had been served. If someone bought him a beer than Mr Fish would pour a goodly portion of it into a saucer for the dog. The dog had an affection for beer and at one point sat and drank the drips from the tray under the taps in the Duck and Puddle. Mr Fish said that only once had he seen the dog too drunk to walk in a straight line.

Thumper, speaking with affection and no rancour, described the animal as a mongrel and Mr Fish insisted that if the dog were to be described at all it should be called a 'dog of indeterminate, mixed breeding heritage'.

Bismark, we were to discover, may have been lazy but he was doubtless intelligent. If he wanted to go out he would sit and bark but if no one came he was perfectly capable of opening a door himself. He would reach up and hang on the handle until the door opened. Amazingly, I even saw him open a door which was fitted with a knob rather than a handle. Mr Fish said that Bismark could open the door to the Sunbeam Talbot (to get in or to get out) and the door to the small caravan.

After Frank had introduced us all, Mr Fish told us that he originally came from Manchester where his family ran a plumbing business, that he had skilfully side-stepped attempts to persuade him to enter the plumbing trade and that he had worked for a while as an estate agent and a taxi driver.

'I went to London at the age of 28 with a return railway ticket in my pocket. I never used the return half. I have lived by my poetry, my prose and my wits and survived by turning every disappointment into an opportunity. Today,' he said, 'I am a travelling poet and epitaphist. While I am here in Devon, I shall call myself Devonshire's Peripatetic Poet. When I was in Somerset, I was Somerset's Peripatetic Poet. If I go to Cornwall, I shall be the Cornwall's Peripatetic Poet. Devon, of course, is my very most favourite part of the world.'

He smiled and winked as if to say that he knew that we knew that he made these complimentary remarks about every county he visited but that he knew that we would forgive him because of his curiously disarming honesty.

'If I stay here you will find out that I am full to the brim with catarrh, wit and bullshit.' He said this and then laughed loudly and smiled at us all, pleased to share with us his gentle deceits.

We looked and listened. I don't think any of us, not even 'Harry' Stottle, had ever come across anyone quite like him.

'Did you say you wrote epitaphs?' asked Patchy.

'Indeed, I did say that. I am proud to be England's only travelling epitaphist.'

'You write epitaphs for gravestones?'

'Exactly.'

'Is there much of a market for that?'

'Not a big market,' he admitted. 'But more of a market than you would perhaps envisage. Writing inscriptions for graves has always been a well-known occupation for travelling poets.'

'How do you find your customers?' asked Frank.

'I pop into local churches and chapels and have a word with the vicar. I keep my ears open and sometimes if I hear of someone who is very old and frail, I will ask them if they'd like their epitaph writing so that it's ready for the sad moment.'

'That's a bit ghoulish isn't it?' said Patchy.

'Not a bit of it,' said Mr Fish. 'I think of myself as offering an essential public service. It can ease the mind of a dying patient to know that when they have passed on to a better place the bereaved ones they have left behind will not be forced to struggle to find a few suitable words for the gravestone.'

'I always thought I'd just have my name and my dates on mine,' said Thumper. 'It would save a lot of money. Those gravestone people charge an arm and a leg for every letter they chisel on a gravestone.'

'I think it gives a person some comfort to know what will be said about them when they are gone,' said Mr Fish. 'We all worry about how we'll be remembered. It's only natural.'

For a few moments we amused ourselves by thinking up epitaphs for people we knew.

'His parsnips were often a bit woody but they were never cheap,' Thumper offered, as an epitaph for Peter Marshall.

'Here rests Thumper,' suggested Patchy. 'It was the thing he did best.'

‘Give us an example of one of your recent epitaphs,’ suggested ‘Harry’.

‘Oh, they are all personalised,’ said Mr Fish with apparent, rare modesty. ‘I talk to family members and friends and find out a little about my subjects. If they’re still alive I talk to the subject themselves and find out how they’d like to be remembered.’

‘Give us an example,’ insisted ‘Harry’.

Mr Fish rummaged in the pocket of his jacket and pulled out an old envelope. ‘Here’s one I did for a woman in Porlock,’ he said, explaining unnecessarily that Porlock is a small village on the North Somerset coast.

The poet and peripatetic epitaphist then read out the epitaph he’d written.

Herein lies old Mother Kent
Time to go so off she went
Made fine cakes and excellent bread
Always did just what she’d said
And paid on time what she’d been lent

When he’d finished, Mr Fish put the piece of paper away in his pocket. ‘That’s just an example,’ he said modestly. ‘I must have written hundreds of epitaphs over the years.’

‘Very impressive,’ said Frank, who is not a literary man and who did seem genuinely impressed.

‘She sounds to have been a woman with really good qualities,’ said Patchy, who was clearly struggling to keep a straight face.

‘Do you ever find that your customers are disappointed with your efforts?’ asked ‘Harry’.

‘Indeed she was. Very, very rarely,’ said Mr Fish, answering Patchy and ‘Harry’ at once and creating a little confusion by so doing. ‘But I never give up. Unless, of course, the going gets too tough to be comfortable and then I endeavour to be somewhere else.’ He smiled at his remark. There were lots of teeth in the smile. Although they didn’t look real, they really were well-made, well-kept teeth. They rather reminded me of Logan Berry’s teeth. Actually, I suppose that if you can tell that they’re well-made then they can’t be, can they?

Mr Fish sighed. ‘But, generally speaking, there’s no point in letting things get you down, is there?’

Despite the presence of rather too many teeth, it was, I thought, a superficially charming smile and I suspected that wherever he went Mr Fish probably did well with the local ladies. I don’t know why but I also suspected even then that it was his charm for the ladies which probably explained his peripatetic way of life.

‘And your poems? Do you sell those, too?’

‘Oh yes! I have little books of my poems printed and I sell them for half a crown each wherever I go.’

‘Recite one of your poems for us!’ said Patchy.

‘I’ve already written one for North Devon,’ said Mr Fish.

‘What’s it called?’ asked Frank.

‘It’s called *North Devon*.’

‘Good,’ said Frank. ‘That’s a good start. Good title! Say it out loud for us then.’

Mr Fish cleared his throat, as people do when about to start a recitation in public.

‘Stark, rock-strewn coves
Wind-swept, sunburnt moors
Hedges high as a tall man’s head
In a storm tossed land ruled by nature’s laws
Granite cliffs and majestic skies
Seas that pound on empty shores
Narrow paths fit only for goats and sheep
Ferns and bracken decorating bold, stark tors.’

It was generally agreed that this was rather good, though Frank said he had been rather expecting more rhyming.

‘Oh, I’ve got rhyming ones,’ said Mr Fish. And he proceeded to recite three more of what he called poems but which I suspect most people would describe as limericks.

‘This one is called *A New Bloke* said the poet.

‘A randy young woman from Wales
Bought a new bloke in the sales
He had only one eye
But was quite a nice guy
And the best of available males’

‘And this one is called *Tears*.’

‘A girl with no teeth and small ears
Had a lot of suppressed inner fears

She worried a lot
Whether worth it or not
And often she burst into tears'.

'I say,' said Thumper, who likes limericks, though usually prefers them to be about vicars' daughters and to conclude with a rude punch line, 'that's rather good!'

Encouraged, Mr Fish recited another of his poems. He told us that this one was called *The Burglar*.

'There was a young burglar called Lynn
Who was most unusually thin
She could slide under doors
And slip down through floors
So the police locked her up in a tin

At the conclusion of this short recitation, Mr Fish opened his rucksack and took out a small bundle of booklets. Each booklet bore the title *The People's Poet*, with Sid Fish below it in large letters and the price (2 shillings and 6 pence) clearly printed in the bottom right hand corner. Mr Fish then handed one to each of us.

He called them books but they were no more than 16 pages in length which made them a little on the skimpy side for books and rather generous for leaflets.

'These are first editions and will be valuable if I ever become Poet Laureate,' he assured us.

'You haven't gone decimal then?' said Frank. He pointed to the price marked on the cover.

'Oh no! I prefer to stick to old-fashioned money,' said Mr Fish. 'My customers are mostly older folk and they're accustomed to thinking in terms of half crowns, ten bob notes and so on.'

'I haven't got half a crown,' said Patchy, pulling some coins out of his pocket. 'Will 50 pence do?'

'That will be fine,' said Mr Fish, taking the coin and slipping it into his jacket pocket with the ease of a magician performing a parlour trick.

To be honest, I don't think any of us really wanted his books of poems but we all bought one and we all paid 50 pence which had, thanks to Patchy, become the going price. I suspected that Mr Fish, now richer by a modest but doubtless tax-free £2, had been clever in pricing his booklets at 'half a crown'. Since no one would actually have half a crown to give him, and since 20 pence looked far too mean (even though it was actually the equivalent of more than half a crown) most people would pay him 50 pence or even a pound. It is, of course, possible that the books had been printed before the introduction of the decimal currency for they bore no date.

'Splendid stuff!' said 'Harry', who had opened his book and was reading the first poem.

'Some of my poetry is autobiographical,' said Mr Fish. He told us that he had lived a life of quiet but unending disappointments, frustrations, failures, rejections and broken promises but that he always tried to remain cheerful.

'I'll read mine later,' said Thumper, slipping his booklet into his pocket. He sounded very convincing but the idea of Thumper ever reading a book of poetry, however slender the book might be, made me want to laugh.

'A chap in Wales told me that any fool could have written these,' said Mr Fish. 'And I told him that though what he said was probably true he had to agree that it would take a clever man to sell them to other fools.'

And then the smile was there again.

'I can see that you are all gentlemen of learning, intellectuals of discernment,' he said. 'And I am sure that you could all write better verse but could you sell it?'

'Almost certainly not!' I agreed, looking through Mr Fish's small book. The poems were a mixture of limericks and doggerel with a few one-liners and epitaphs thrown in for good measure. We all read quietly for a few moments, then put our booklets away. We all offered polite congratulations.

'Harry' Stottle, the barman and exiled psychiatrist, later said that Mr Fish rather reminded him of Mark Tapley, the wonderful character in Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit* who regarded every setback and disappointment as a challenge, and who took great pride in his ability to hold his head up high when things went badly.

I remembered Mark Tapley, with great affection for he is one of my favourite fictional inventions.

'There's no credit in being jolly' protests Mr Tapley, when he is staying in a comfortable inn. 'There might be some credit in being jolly with a wife, especially if the children have the measles and that and was very fractious indeed'.

Even when he is desperately ill, Tapley remains remorselessly upbeat and incorrigibly upbeat. Asked how he is, Tapley, on his sick bed, replies: 'Floored for the present, sir, but jolly!'

'Where are you heading after Bilbury?' asked Patchy

'Oh, I'm on a mystery tour,' said Mr Fish. 'And it's as much a mystery to me as it is to yourselves.' He paused, sipped a little of his beer and sighed contentedly. I got the feeling that he would have liked to drain the glass but that he wanted to savour the beer and wasn't sure that he would be offered another. 'People search constantly for something without ever knowing what it is they are looking for and I am no exception. But maybe I have already found that which I seek but have not yet realised the extent of my discovery. Did you know that, according to legend, the musk deer wanders the forests constantly searching for the source of the beautiful odour it can smell, but never realises that the scent is its own?'

He had a beautiful speaking voice and the voice managed to give some semblance of good sense and meaning to the bits of pieces of cod-philosophy he produced. It was the voice of an actor or broadcaster. He had picked up bits and pieces of accents from his travels and you would never guess that he originally hailed from Lancashire. There were tastes of Gloucestershire, hints of Ireland and occasionally a word or a phrase would remind me of the Midlands, London or Wales.

'Do you enjoy writing poetry?' asked Frank.

'Oh, I do,' said Mr Fish. 'Don't you remember sweet Alice, Ben Holt, Sweet Alice whose hair was so brown, who wept with delight when you gave her a smile, and trembled with fear at your frown.'

'That sounds like Thomas Dunn English,' said 'Harry' immediately.

Mr Fish, clearly startled, looked at him.

'The American politician and poet,' explained 'Harry'.

'Indeed it is, sir, it is a poem from that much loved man and I congratulate you on your knowledge and your memory! I carry so much poetry in my head that I sometimes forget which is mine and which is another's. But, of course, I simply quoted that particular poem to give you the flavour of a style which I myself aim to emulate. My poetry is my madness.'

He had, I thought, escaped reasonably well from the mild charge of attempted plagiarism.

'I understand,' nodded 'Harry', magnanimously. 'Perhaps no person can be a poet, or even enjoy poetry, without a certain unsoundness of mind.'

Mr Fish looked at him. 'I beg your pardon?'

'Macaulay,' explained 'Harry'.

'Oh, of course,' said Mr Fish. 'I'm not too hot on American writers.'

'Not exactly American,' said 'Harry'. 'He was an English poet, essayist historian and politician. He lived in the 19th century and perhaps better known as Baron Macaulay.'

'Oh, that Macaulay!' said Mr Fish. 'Oh, yes of course. He's one of my favourites.'

He tried to make it look convincing but he overdid it and we all knew he'd never heard of Lord Macaulay.

We all sat in the Duck and Puddle for another hour or so and I bought a round of drinks. Then Mr Fish said that he'd better see about finding somewhere to park his caravan and Frank said that he could leave it where it was if he was only staying for a day or two.

All that happened on the Saturday.

I next saw Mr Fish on the following Tuesday when I was driving into Barnstaple to visit the dentist for my annual check-up.

I was just heading out of the village when I spotted Mr Fish standing by the side of the road. He had his thumb out, in the class hitchhiker pose, and his dog by his side. I confess that I almost didn't stop. I knew that he had been going door to door around the village, selling his poems and trying to sell his unwritten epitaphs. Some of the people to whom he'd sold poems really couldn't afford to buy them – and certainly didn't want them – but I had heard one or two tales of him using sales techniques which even Peter Marshall would have found questionable. He told two people that he was in the village at the invitation of Frank and me and that he was selling his poems for charity. I don't believe he ever gave a penny to any charity other than himself. Worse still, I heard that he had harassed a couple of people whose relatives had died recently. He had, I think, got their names from the church burial register. He certainly didn't get the names from me. He hadn't sold either of them one of his epitaphs – mainly because everyone in the village knows that every letter and number carved on a headstone costs money. 'Harry' told me, in confidence, that he didn't like Mr Fish one little bit, that he no longer reminded him of Mark Tapley and that he thought the bonhomie was entirely fake. 'He is a chancer,' said 'Harry'. 'I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw him.'

But I knew that there was no bus to Barnstaple that day and I felt sorry for Mr Fish and so I stopped.

As man and dog climbed into my 1930 Rolls Royce 20/25, with Mr Fish sitting in the passenger seat and his dog curled up at his feet, the poet explained that his car was rather short of petrol and he was a little low on funds.

'Where are you headed?' I asked.

'I'm going into Barnstaple.'

'No problem. I can take you and drop you wherever you like.'

He looked around, searching for something. 'Where's the seat belt?'

'I'm afraid there isn't one. Cars this age don't have to have them fitted.'

He didn't seem bothered by this and just sat back. 'This is a lovely old car!'

I explained that the car had been bequeathed to me by my predecessor, Dr Brownlow and that although it was too large for the lanes and very heavy on petrol I kept it largely for sentimental reasons.

'I'm going to see an old flame,' he told me, as we motored along. 'Well, she was more than an old flame. She was my first love and we were going to get married.'

'She's local?'

'Oh yes. She's a Devon girl through and through.'

'I didn't know you'd been down in this part of Devon before.'

'It was quite a few years ago. And there aren't many parts of England I've not visited. I don't know why so many people take all their holidays abroad. There are so many wonderful places to see in England. If I want to go abroad I go to Wales or Scotland!'

I agreed with him.

'Her mother refused to let us marry,' said Mr Fish. 'She said that her daughter was too young and that I was too unreliable.' He paused, deep in thought. 'Charlotte was 18 so I don't think she was too young.'

'Charlotte was your girlfriend?'

'Yes. Lovely name isn't it?'

'She won't be too young now!' I pointed out.

'No, she won't!' Mr Fish laughed. 'And her mother died a few years ago so that won't be a problem. Believe me, I wouldn't be going there if her mother was still alive! She was a huge woman, quite short but weighing in at least twenty stone. She was an old battle-axe; a wild woman, forever screaming and shouting and threatening to do terrible things to everyone around her. I never saw her without her hair in curlers and food stains down the front of her pinafore.' He stopped, remembering times past. 'I never understood how such a hideous harridan could have possibly mothered such a sweet and gentle girl.'

'How do you know Charlotte isn't married?'

'I spoke to a chap I know who lives nearby and managed to find her phone number. I rang her up last week.'

'So she knows you're coming to see her?'

'Oh yes. I said it would be sometime in the afternoon but I'm sure she won't mind if I get there an hour or two early.'

'And she's not married?'

'She's divorced with one kid – a daughter. The husband was a wastrel who buggered off years ago. They were only married for eighteen months or so. He went off with a woman from the local chip shop.'

I didn't say anything but I couldn't help thinking that for Mr Fish to describe another man as a wastrel might be construed by some as fitting into the category of 'the pot calling the kettle black'.

'And how long is it since you saw her?' I asked.

Mr Fish thought for a while. 'It must be nearly twenty years.'

As I drove along the lanes, Mr Fish told me a little more about the woman he was going to see. Charlotte was, he said, a pretty, slim girl with blonde, shoulder length hair and blue eyes; gentle and quiet and always laughing and full of fun. 'She would never hurt a flea,' he said. 'I very much liked that about her. She found a mouse in the kitchen once. She was terrified of it but she managed to catch it in a cardboard box and put it outside in the garden. She was so gentle with it.'

I couldn't help wondering how Mr Fish had known about the business with the mouse. I rather suspected that he had probably been standing a yard or two away, watching from a safe distance.

When I eventually managed to park the car in Barnstaple (never easy since the car is so huge and the spaces so small that I have to try to find two spaces and then buy two tickets – ideally I need four spaces but that never happens) a by now excited Mr Fish got out and asked me if I knew where he could find Barbican Road where Charlotte lived. We were so close I could point to where he could find it.

'Do you want a lift back or will you be staying in Barnstaple?' I asked him. 'I shouldn't be more than an hour. After I've been to the dentist I just need to pop into a stationery store to pick up some bits and pieces I need for the surgery but I'll be heading back to Barnstaple in about sixty minutes or so.'

'If I'm coming back to Bilbury I'll be here by your car in an hour,' replied Mr Fish. 'If I'm not here then you can assume I'm staying and I'll be back in Bilbury tomorrow to fetch my car and caravan.'

And so off I went to the dentist.

To my delight, all was well. No extractions and no fillings. There are few simple joys to exceed the joy of walking out of a dental surgery with a clean bill of tooth. I immediately wandered across the road to a small, conveniently situated sweet shop and bought a quarter of a pound of old-fashioned humbugs, sold loose in a small, white paper bag. The woman behind the counter, who looked as though she had sampled everything on her shelves and whose figure had paid the price, told me that having a dentist's surgery across the road was wonderful for business. She said that patients either came to her shop to celebrate or to cheer themselves up after being told that they needed to have treatment. I told her that she should pay the dentist a commission and she said that he too was a regular customer and that she always gave him a discount.

I then wandered into the town, sucking on a tooth rotting humbug but not giving a damn because my teeth had just been given a clean bill of health, and bought a new typewriter ribbon, a large packet of envelopes and half a dozen cheap ball point pens for Miss Johnson to use. I don't know where they all go but we seem to get through more cheap ballpoint pens than makes any sort of sense. If I saw drug company representatives I would doubtless be provided with an endless supply of ballpoint pens decorated with advertising slogans. But I don't see any drug company salesmen and I happily buy my own pens.

When I got back to the Rolls Royce, Mr Fish was sitting on the passenger side running board waiting for me. He looked as if he had been there some time.

'You're coming back to Bilbury?' I said, rather unnecessarily.

He just nodded.

I opened the car and we both got in. I took the packet of humbugs out of my pocket and offered him one. He shook his head but said nothing. He looked like a man in shock; as though he had seen a ghost. There was no point in asking him how things had gone since they had obviously not gone to plan.

'I had a bit of a surprise,' he said, ten minutes into our journey.

I didn't say anything but just waited for him to continue.

'I knocked on the door and I had the shock of my life,' he said. 'It was opened by Charlotte. I couldn't believe my eyes.'

I looked across at him. He seemed dazed.

'She hadn't changed. She was exactly the same: slim, beautiful, blonde hair, blue eyes and a wonderful figure.'

There was a long silence. He was obviously still coming to terms with what had happened.

'She looked eighteen. She hadn't changed a bit. Not a bit. She was still the same. Nothing had altered. I nearly fainted when I saw her. It did not seem possible.'

Mr Fish's story was now fascinating me. Was there a picture in the attic? Was this a female version of Oscar Wilde's 'Dorian Gray'? Had Charlotte undergone plastic surgery? Or was the truth, perhaps, that Mr Fish had 'seen' not what he really saw but what he'd expected or hoped to see?

'When she opened the door the girl was smiling,' continued Mr Fish. 'She was clearly expecting someone and for a brief moment I thought it was me that she was hoping to see. But, sadly, I quickly realised that I wasn't the person for whom she was smiling. Within a second the smile had faded, there was disappointment in her eyes and a frown had appeared. She asked who I was and what I wanted but before I could reply there was a scream from the back part of the house, from the kitchen probably.'

'A scream?'

'Well not so much a scream, I suppose. It was more of a screech. It was a woman shouting abuse. The only bit I managed to hear was: 'If that's your bastard fancy man you can tell him to bugger off!''

I swerved around a cyclist who was wobbling all over the road as though he'd had a little too much to drink.

'I looked at the girl standing in the doorway,' continued Mr Fish. 'And suddenly she looked tired and downtrodden. The joy had completely gone from her eyes. 'That's my mother,' she explained. 'She thinks you're my boyfriend.'

Mr Fish said the girl told him that her mother didn't approve of her boyfriend, that he was in a band and that he was a bit older than she was. He told me that the girl said that the two of them wanted to get married but that her mother disapproved of her even seeing the man.

'I asked her why she didn't just leave home and go off with her bloke,' said Mr Fish. 'Do you know what she said?'

Naturally, I said I didn't.

'She said she didn't know why but she just couldn't. It was exactly what Charlotte said to me 20 years ago. She didn't know why but she just couldn't.'

Belatedly, I was now beginning to realise what had happened. Charlotte didn't have a picture hanging in the attic. And she hadn't had cosmetic surgery.

'The girl's mother was your Charlotte?'

'Yes.'

His voice was so quiet I could hardly hear what he said.

'Did you see Charlotte?'

'I caught a glimpse of her for a brief moment. She suddenly appeared in the hallway behind her daughter.'

'Her hair was in curlers?'

‘Oh, yes. Her hair was in curlers and I’d swear she had egg down the front of her jumper. She’d doubled in size and she had a face just like her mother’s: full of hatred.’

I didn’t say anything.

‘The hatred and loathing and disappointment were all that were left. The girl was the spitting image of her mother and Charlotte had become her own mother – even down to interfering with her own daughter’s relationship.’

‘Did you speak to Charlotte?’

‘No, no! I muttered something about having called at the wrong house. I said I was looking for a man called George who had an old Ford Popular for sale.’

‘And you left?’

‘I scurried down the path and went straight to your car. I was back in the car park within ten minutes of leaving it.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said.

There was silence for another couple of miles.

‘Never mind,’ said Mr Fish at last. ‘It wouldn’t have worked out anyway. I’ve been footloose for too long. A girl in every port, that’s me.’

I turned and saw him grinning at me. ‘Did you say you had some humbugs?’

I took the white bag out of my pocket and handed it to him.

When we got back to Bilbury, I dropped Mr Fish off at the Duck and Puddle where his car and caravan were still parked. He was jolly and seemed cheerful but I could tell he was rather miserable and desperately disappointed. He had, I suppose, been hoping he could recapture and revitalise some lost memories. And because I felt sorry for him I gave him a few pounds to buy petrol.

That was on the Tuesday.

On the Saturday of that week, the sixth day of Mr Fish’s stay in Bilbury, I discovered why he never stayed long in one place and why his nose looked such a mess.

Patsy, Anne (Thumper’s wife), Thumper and I were all standing at the bar in the Duck and Puddle. Patsy and Anne had called at the pub on their way into Barnstaple, where they both intended to buy hats for a wedding, and they had called into the pub to let Thumper and me know where they were going. Patsy had a small glass of white wine and Anne was drinking half a pint of shandy (which contained considerably more lemonade than beer). Patsy was wearing a wonderful frock made by a fairly new company called Laura Ashley. Anne who is notably zaftig was wearing a very tight jumper and a very tight skirt.

Suddenly, Mr Fish appeared as though from nowhere, wandered up to the bar and stood beside Anne. Since I knew he wouldn’t have any money or not want to spend whatever he had, I told ‘Harry’ the barman to give him whatever he was drinking. He had already shown that he had an uncanny knack of turning up when he thought there might be a free drink available.

But even before ‘Harry’ could finish pouring the pint of Old Restoration which Mr Fish had requested, Anne jumped and yelped. Without pausing, without any hesitation at all, she backed away from the bar and slapped Mr Fish on the cheek.

It was all very impressive and she had moved with astonishing speed. It was a hell of a slap, too.

‘He pinched my bum!’ she cried, explaining to the rest of us why she had reacted so sharply and dramatically. ‘The cheeky old bugger pinched my bum!’

‘I’m sorry!’ said Mr Fish, rubbing his cheek rather ruefully. ‘Force of habit. I didn’t think you’d mind.’

Frozen in disbelief we all looked at him.

‘Come over here,’ said Thumper quietly. He didn’t raise his voice and he didn’t look or sound particularly angry. He pointed to an area in the pub where there was more room. He thought for a moment and then moved a table and a couple of chairs so that there was even more space available.

Mr Fish looked at Thumper, who was the best part of a foot taller than him, considerably heavier and far more menacing. ‘I’m so sorry,’ he said, apologising again. ‘I think maybe it’s time I moved on.’

‘It is time you moved on but before you go I’m going to punch you,’ said Thumper. ‘You can fight or you can defend yourself or you can just stand there. But I’m going to punch you.’

‘I am so sorry,’ said Mr Fish, apologising yet again. ‘I didn’t mean to cause offence.’

‘I’m not sure that I like you,’ said Thumper. ‘I think you’re probably a liar and a bit of a crook but you’re not a young man. You’re smaller than I am and you’re not in good shape. Superficially, you’re an amiable, likeable, cheeky sort of fellow and in a strange sort of way it will be a pleasure to see you when you come back to this part of the world. Nevertheless, I’m going to punch you and then you’re going to leave Bilbury and head for Cornwall or wherever else you fancy. And if and when you come back you’ll remember the lesson and you’ll behave yourself a little more like a gentleman.’

This was one of the longest speeches I'd ever heard from Thumper.

'But your wife has already slapped me!' protested Mr Fish. 'It was a good slap, too!'

He was right about it being a good slap. The red palm print was still visible. I got the impression it wasn't the first time he'd been slapped.

'I don't want to do this,' said Thumper, who looked as if he genuinely didn't want to hit Mr Fish. 'But I have no choice. I have to punch you or you might tell people you disrespected me and I did nothing about it. More importantly, I will feel deeply offended for a long time and that won't be good for me.'

'I've apologised,' said Mr Fish.

'Come over here,' said Thumper, pointing to the empty area of the pub again. 'I don't want you banging your head on the bar when you go backwards.'

'Why am I going to bang my head on the bar?' asked Mr Fish, rather weakly.

'My wife gave you a good slap because you offended her and she can and does look after herself,' pointed out Thumper. 'But she's my wife and so this is for offending me.'

And since Mr Fish showed absolutely no sign of wanting to fight, or even any inclination to defend himself, Thumper then hit the poet and epitaph writer plumb on the nose. He hit him with a rather gentle right hook which was delivered with such quiet, controlled efficiency that everyone who saw it winced. Thumper's elbow went no further back than the side of his chest and he put very little effort into the punch. Mr Fish's dog, Bismark, watched the whole episode and clearly had no intention of interfering.

I now knew precisely how and why Thumper had acquired his nickname.

Mr Fish fell backwards and landed, spread-eagled, on Frank and Gilly's rug.

Instinctively, I strode across to where he lay but by the time I'd knelt down to see if he was still alive, he had already raised himself up off the floor. He sat up and gently took hold of his nose between the forefinger and thumb of his right hand. There was surprisingly little blood.

'Is it broken?' he demanded. 'It's broken again isn't it?'

'No, it's not broken,' I told him, a couple of moments later. I was glad about that. I didn't want to have to call an ambulance, and send him to the hospital so that he could have his nose X-rayed.

'Oh good,' said Mr Fish. 'That's OK then.' He wiggled his jaw and massaged his nose. It clearly wasn't the first time he'd been punched on the nose. And on the previous occasions the nose had obviously been broken. He touched his nose again and winced. 'I'll have a good bruise. It'll make me look like an old prize fighter.'

He looked at Thumper, then looked at Anne and then looked at the rest of us.

'I could sue you!' he said to Thumper, quite unexpectedly. 'Assault. I could get damages.'

'What could you sue him for?' I asked.

'For punching me!' said Mr Fish.

'I didn't see anyone punch you,' I told him. I turned to the others. 'Did anyone see Thumper punch Mr Fish?'

'Definitely not,' said 'Harry'.

'No,' said Patchy.

'Absolutely not,' said Patsy and Anne together.

'No one punched you,' said Frank. 'You were a bit tiddly and tripped over your own feet.'

Mr Fish stared at us and then turned on the smile. 'Of course I did,' he said.

At least Mr Fish knew when he was beaten.

He picked up his rucksack and, with Bismark following, he hurried off. He didn't even say 'goodbye'.

For a while, at the beginning, it had been amusing to have him around. But, to be honest, none of us was sad to see him go.

'I only tapped him,' said Thumper.

'Only tapped him!' I said.

'Just a little tap to teach him a lesson,' said Thumper. 'Anne hit him harder than I did.' He finished his pint and held out the empty glass to 'Harry' for a refill.

'Would you have done that, if Mr Fish had pinched my bottom?' Patsy asked me, putting her arm through mine.

'Of course I would!' I replied.

Patsy gave me a squeeze.

We all had another drink and then Patsy and Anne went hat shopping in Barnstaple while Patchy, Thumper, Frank, 'Harry' and I stayed in the cosy snug at the Duck and Puddle and did what we did best: watching logs sizzle and talking about nothing very important.

Crash, Bang, Wallop!

Patsy was the first to wake up.

'Did you hear that?' she whispered?

'Hear what?' I asked, struggling to remember where I was and who I was. I'd been just about to go out and open the batting for England in a Test Match against Australia and I'd been having difficulty in fastening my pads which were, for some strange reason, made of sponge cake. In my dream, having pads made of sponge cake hadn't seemed such a big problem. After all, the ball was made of chocolate and my cricket bat was made of something that looked remarkably like pink marshmallow.

'Behind the wall,' whispered Patsy. 'There's someone on the other side of the wall.'

I woke up suddenly, reached out a hand and switched on my bedside light. Then we lay and listened. Ben, our elderly dog, growled as though he too felt upset by something. He had been sleeping on the bed, next to and sometimes on top of my feet.

After a few moments of lying quietly, listening carefully, I could hear what had woken Patsy but I didn't have the foggiest idea what I was hearing.

'What's behind that wall?' asked Patsy

'Nothing,' I replied. 'It's an outside wall.'

'It sounds as though someone is trying to get through the wall. Do you think it could be a burglar?'

'Why would a burglar try to break through our bedroom wall?'

'I don't know. People do funny things these days.'

'But if it was a burglar wouldn't he try to come in through a downstairs window?' I asked. 'A door would be even easier.'

'Is the front door locked?'

'No, I don't think so. It wasn't windy. And anyway I left the back door wedged slightly open so that the cats can come in and out.'

We only usually locked the front door when the weather was particularly windy, with the wind coming from the south east. This didn't happen too often because our prevailing wind was generally from the south west. We did lock the door when the weather was bad because the catch no longer worked properly and with a south easterly wind the door swung to and fro and banged a good deal. Although I'd tried to mend the catch, my attempts had been notable only for their lack of success. We never locked the back door.

'Why did you leave the back door open? The cats have got a cat flap so that they can come in and out whenever they like!'

'I know. But Jeremy's arthritis is playing up.'

Jeremy is the oldest of our cats. We inherited him from Mrs Arnott-Toynbee who was dying, and who wanted me to put him to sleep so that he could be cremated and buried with her. Her reasons were entirely selfish: she didn't want anyone else to have him. She gave him to me to take home with instructions that I was to put him to sleep and take him back to her in a neat, little, wooden box which she had provided. I'm afraid I cheated. When Mrs Arnott-Toynbee was buried a few days later, she went to her grave clutching the small, wooden box containing ash from our bonfire site. Jeremy was twelve when we acquired him and already had early signs of arthritis in his left leg. Despite our best efforts to treat him, the arthritis has got steadily worse. He can manage the cat flap, in an ungainly sort of way, but if the weather isn't too cold, I leave the back door open for him. Naturally, Emily and Sophie, our other cats, are also happy to avoid the cat flap which I think they find rather undignified and, in truth, a little beneath them.

'I hope we don't get any mice or squirrels wandering in.'

'I don't think we need worry about that,' I assured her. 'Not with three living mouse traps prowling around the kitchen.'

'There! I heard it again,' said Patsy, suddenly sitting up in bed.

I heard it too. It was difficult to describe. There was some scrabbling and some scratching and there was, too, something that sounded as if bits of masonry were falling. The sound definitely reminded me of something but I couldn't remember what.

'Do you think the wall is falling down?' asked Patsy.

'No!' I said, with a definitiveness I did not entirely feel.

'It's a very old house,' Patsy reminded me.

'But it's solid,' I said.

'There's definitely something outside trying to get in through the wall,' insisted Patsy.

And I found it difficult to disagree with her.

'I'd better go outside and have a look,' I said, clambering out of bed and pulling on my clothes. Fortunately, I always kept a pair of trousers, a shirt and a jumper next to the bed so that I could dress quickly in a medical emergency. I looked at the clock. It was a quarter to seven.

I pulled the curtains back an inch, just to see what the weather was like. Dawn had broken and the day was well under way. The weather looked fine: no wind and no rain. I picked up the torch from the bedside table but I put it back realising that I didn't need it.

'Can you see anything?' asked Patsy, after I'd looked out of the window.

'There are no signs that Bilbury has been invaded by fifteen foot tall creatures from outer space,' I assured her. I kissed her and tottered downstairs, closely followed by Ben who was brave enough to come along to help but intelligent enough to realise that hiding behind my legs made better tactical sense than running on ahead.

Outside there was absolutely nothing to see. There were no burglars around. There was no ladder leaning against the side of the house. The flower bed which ran along the side of the house was pristine and untouched. There were no damaged plants and no footprints in the soil. I went back indoors and took a look around. There were no signs that anyone had been into the house. I went back to the bedroom.

'Did you see anything?' asked Patsy.

'Absolutely nothing!'

'I can still hear the noise,' said Patsy, who was now also out of bed and dressed.

I stood and listened for a few moments and then I suddenly realised why the noises seemed familiar.

'It sounds just like that time that Sophie climbed up the chimney, got stuck on a ledge and wouldn't come back down!'

We stood still and listened again.

'You're right,' said Patsy. 'It does sound as if there's something stuck in a chimney.'

'There's only one problem,' I said.

'There's no chimney here!' said Patsy, finishing off the thought for me.

Puzzled, we went downstairs and had an early breakfast.

By the end of the day, when we were still no nearer to thinking of a solution, I telephoned Thumper Robinson to ask if he could think of an explanation.

'Those old houses have massive walls,' he explained. 'Bilbury Grange's walls are nearly three feet thick but when they built houses like yours they usually made the walls with a gap in the middle – just like modern houses. The difference was that a century or two ago, the builders usually filled the gap in the middle with all sorts of leftover rubble. They did this because they believed that filling up the middle of the wall helped keep the cold out and the warmth in. And the walls they built were so thick that they didn't worry much about the damp getting through.'

'Presumably, it also gave them somewhere to dump all their rubble,' I suggested. 'To save them carting the stuff away and then having find somewhere to dump it where they weren't going to get done for fly tipping. I doubt if they called it fly-tipping in the 19th century but they were probably no more enthusiastic about it then than we are now.'

Thumper laughed. 'Exactly!'

'So do you think that's what we heard? Some bits of rubble slipping down the inside of our wall?'

'Probably,' agreed Thumper. 'I'll pop round and have a look. I've got to pass your house because I'm delivering a couple of dozen bales of straw to Tom Gaskin's wife.'

'How is Tom?' I asked.

Tom was a vet who had accidentally injected himself with a lethal dose of pentobarbital intended for his Great Dane. The dog was dying of cancer and Tom had decided to put it to sleep. Unfortunately, Tom was crying so much that he completely missed the dog and injected his own leg with the stuff. I had to climb a hill on their land and put up two saline drips to save his life. His wife had ridden across country to Bilbury Grange to fetch the extra saline that I needed. It had been a dramatic evening.

'He's fine now!' said Thumper. 'Except he was obviously brain damaged by the drug he injected himself with, because he's still suffering from delusions. Actually, they are both deluded because they constantly sing your praises. I told Tom that if he survived your ministrations then it was doubtless more luck than judgement.'

'Thank you,' I said drily.

'Don't mention it,' said Thumper. 'I'll call in on my way back and have a look and then you can give me a glass of something refreshing. I'll need it by the time I've unloaded 24 bales of straw.'

By 'something refreshing', Thumper didn't mean a nice, cool glass of lemonade. And he certainly wasn't referring to 'a nice cup of tea'. What he meant by 'refreshing' was a glass of Old Restoration – then, as now, still his favourite beer. I don’t usually drink the stuff but we always keep a crate of it in the larder.

And so later that day, we took Thumper upstairs to listen to the sounds in our bedroom wall. Naturally, by this time the strange sounds had stopped. There was nothing whatsoever to be heard.

‘It sounded like a scratching or scrabbling noise,’ said Patsy.

‘Maybe a mouse or a rat had got into the wall,’ said Thumper. ‘If they can find a way into the middle of an old wall then they sometimes make a nest there. Nice and dry and sheltered. It could have been a squirrel. Or a bat.’

‘Oh dear!’ said Patsy. ‘You don’t think it could be trapped, do you?’

‘It won’t be trapped,’ Thumper assured her. ‘But if it was scrabbling about then it might have started a small landslide among the rubble.’

Then we all heard another slight noise. It sounded feebler than before. Thumper heard it too.

‘Can I borrow your stethoscope?’ Thumper asked me.

Not bothering to ask why, I went downstairs and fetched my stethoscope.

Thumper then put the earpieces into his ears and the business end, the diaphragm, of the stethoscope, against the wall.

‘What could you hear?’ asked Patsy, when Thumper removed the stethoscope and handed it back to me.

‘There’s definitely something in there,’ he said.

Unexpectedly, he then started tapping the wall. It’s a technique all doctors use to see if there is fluid in a chest. You can diagnose the extent of any fluid in the lungs by measuring the change in the sounds. It’s a technique that was originally used by beer and wine makers to measure the amount of fluid left in a cask or barrel. Thumper’s tapping showed clearly that a piece of the wall about four feet wide and three or four feet high was hollow.

‘What is it?’ asked Patsy.

And then suddenly she gasped.

‘A chimney? Do you think there’s a chimney in there?’

‘When you bought this place how much work did you do in this room?’ asked Thumper.

‘We just papered over the existing paper,’ I admitted.

‘It was dark blue with a gold stripe and looked as if it had been there for about 40 years,’ said Patsy. ‘We tried to scrape it off but it didn’t want to leave.’

‘Let’s go and have a look outside,’ said Thumper.

The three of us trooped downstairs, followed by one dog and two cats, and trotted out into the garden. Thumper then walked around the house counting chimneys. Patsy and I followed him.

‘How many fireplaces have you got?’ he asked.

‘Three,’ I replied. ‘One in the drawing room, one in the kitchen, one in my consulting room and one in the dining room.’

‘That’s four,’ said Patsy.

‘Four,’ I agreed.

‘You’ve got sixteen chimney stacks,’ said Thumper. ‘And since they didn’t usually build chimneys without there being a fireplace at the other end there is a fairly good chance that you’ve got twelve hidden fireplaces.’ He looked at me, grinned and leant towards me confidentially. ‘That’s sixteen minus four,’ he said.

I thanked him for the maths lesson.

‘So if there is a chimney behind that wall then something could be inside it and trying to get out?’ said Patsy.

‘Yes,’ agreed Thumper. ‘The funny thing is that usually when a fireplace has been blocked up there will just be something stuck over the fireplace itself and the chimney breast will still be visible – with an alcove remaining each side. In fact, if a room has an alcove and a chimney breast but no visible fireplace, it’s pretty certain that behind the chimney breast there will be a fireplace – quite probably a rather nice, old one. The odd thing with your bedroom is that if there is a fireplace then they covered over the chimney breast and the two alcoves as well – probably with huge pieces of plaster board.’

‘So we could have a chimney in our bedroom?’

‘Absolutely! And if you took off the plaster board, or whatever is covering up that side of the room then your bedroom would be bigger because you’d regain the two alcoves – one on each side of the chimney breast. Heaven knows what they used to fill the two alcoves.’

‘So, how do we find out?’ asked Patsy.

‘Simple,’ said Thumper. ‘Where’s the biggest hammer you’ve got?’

Now, at this point it would, of course, have been wise to stop, think and plan our next move. We should, at the very least, have spread some dustsheets over the bed, the carpet and the rest of the furniture in the bedroom. That is doubtless what normal, sensible people would have done. It is certainly what we should have done.

Instead, I hurried downstairs and fetched a sledge hammer from one of the barns.

The sledge hammer I fetched was so huge and so heavy that I hardly ever used it. To be honest, I had a job to raise it up above waist height without toppling backwards and I don't think I ever managed to raise it above shoulder height. I can't even remember how we came by it but I rather suspect it came in with a job lot of elderly garden tools which I purchased at a monthly auction in Lynton; the small holiday resort which is twinned with Lynmouth and which can be found just a few miles eastwards along the coast.

A year or two earlier, I had bought quite a number of our garden tools at two separate auctions – both of them in Lynton. Victorian gardeners had specific tools made for just about everything and some of the tools were very clever and marvellously well designed. So, for example, we have seven different garden forks, seven different types of spade and shovel, five different hoes and four different types of rake. Most people think a spade is a spade is a spade and Gertrude Stein would have doubtless agreed with them, but in our collection we had a digging shovel with a pointed tip (for digging in soft soil), a digging shovel with a square blade (for digging in hard packed soil), a trenching shovel with a sharp tip and square sides, a narrow spade with a rounded tip for transplanting shrubs or planting flowers, a scoop shovel for moving coal, snow or grain, a scraping spade for removing ice or weeds from paths, an edging spade with a half-moon blade and a hinged post hole digging spade. The whole lot cost us no more than a couple of pounds.

Many people who go to auctions are looking for elegant pieces of furniture, impressive paintings or potentially valuable pieces of silver, pottery or jewellery but it is often possible to find really good pieces of ordinary furniture on sale. Patsy and I furnished Bilbury Grange with a good many splendid pieces of furniture which we had bought at auctions and for which we had paid quite modest sums. Patchy, however, had once explained to me that the best and most exciting items are often the things which are sold at the end of an auction. These are usually assorted items which the auctioneer has dismissed as being of no great value. So, for example, a collection of old books may be dumped in a box and sold as 'box and contents'. (Sometimes, the box will be a rather nice old trunk or a useful wine crate rather than a boring cardboard box.) And garden equipment is usually left to the end of the auction and then sold without many people showing interest. Many of the buyers will have drifted off and those who are left will be in a hurry to pay their bills and claim their purchases. It's often easy to pick up garden statues, old benches and tools for very little money.

Anyway, I found the old sledge hammer, took it upstairs and handed it to Thumper who took hold of it as though he knew what he was doing which I'm sure he did.

Patsy and I both winced as he swung the head of the hammer against our bedroom wall. I confess that as he started his backswing, I began to have second thoughts about what we were doing but by then it was too late.

Moments later, we had a huge hole in our bedroom wall and it was clear that Thumper was correct.

Someone had covered up a large fireplace with a false wall made out of old boards.

As we all leant forward to see exactly what had been revealed, and what lay behind the boarding which the blow had shattered, we had the shock of our lives as a large bird flew out of the hole and started flying around the bedroom.

In the excitement of trying to find out whether or not we had a bedroom fireplace, I had completely forgotten that our interest in the wall had arisen because Patsy and I had heard something scrabbling and scratching behind it.

Within a minute, the bird had flown round the room at least five hundred times (I know that's an exaggeration but that's what it seemed like) and there was soot absolutely everywhere. The bird, poor thing, was so covered in ancient soot from the inside of the chimney, and was so frantic, that it was impossible to say exactly what it was. It could have been a crow, a rook, a magpie or a jackdaw. For a moment, I even thought that it could have been a pigeon. It could have been almost any medium to large sized bird though it wasn't big enough to be a seagull or a raven.

At that point Patsy screamed.

She did not scream because she was frightened (she is a farmer's daughter and does not scare easily) she screamed because the bird was turning our bedroom into a complete mess.

To be fair, I think that her response was fairly muted. Many women would, I suspect, have become overtly hysterical at the sight of a soot covered bird flying around a neat bedroom, depositing soot here, there and everywhere.

It is no exaggeration to say that within seconds the bed, the carpet, the curtains and all the furniture were covered in a layer of soot. We quickly discovered that a fairly modest amount of soot shares with blood and jam the capacity to cover a far larger area than might seem possible.

Our first task was to catch the bird.

This proved easier than expected since the bird's wings were heavily caked with soot and the creature was, therefore, slower in its movements than it might otherwise have been. Nevertheless, Patsy, Thumper and I spent several minutes diving around the bedroom before we caught it.

Modestly, I saw that 'we' caught it.

Surprisingly, perhaps, I was the one who eventually managed to grab the poor bird.

Realising that if I caught it in my hands there was a real risk that I might damage a wing, I caught the bird in a shirt I took from the laundry basket in the corner of the bedroom. Thumper had been using a towel and Patsy had been using a blouse; both items had been taken from the same laundry basket.

The bird was a crow and once I had it gently but firmly wrapped in the shirt, I carried it downstairs with Patsy and Thumper following closely behind. I took the 'parcel' to the kitchen and then through the back door into the garden.

The big question was what should we do with it next?

I was worried that if I let the bird go it would be vulnerable to predators.

'It'll be fine,' said Thumper. 'Just let it go and then stand back because there's going to be another cloud of soot!'

I unfastened the bundle, placed it on the ground and retreated in the way one does after lighting a firework.

Slowly, the crow emerged from the folds of the shirt. It looked a lot livelier than I had feared. It shook itself, fluttered its wings and produced a small cloud of soot. It then repeated the process several times. Each time it shook and fluttered, the cloud of soot was smaller.

'It'll be fine,' said Thumper. 'It'll go and have a wash in a minute.'

And sure enough, a minute or so later the bird walked about a little, fluttered into the air, came back to earth, tried again and then, delighted that everything seemed to be working satisfactorily, it took off and flew off towards our bird bath. Moments later it was splashing and fluttering and using its beak to clean and preen the remains of the soot from its wings. It was good to know that we'd succeeded in rescuing the bird though the price of the rescue had, perhaps, been a little higher than we might have liked.

'I suppose we'd better go back up and look at the damage,' sighed Patsy.

I could tell that she really didn't want to go back upstairs at all. I wasn't too keen either.

'I think you've got a pretty nice looking Victorian fireplace surround behind that board,' said Thumper, offering us hope that releasing the crow might leave us with something to be pleased about.

And he was right.

It took several hours to clear the sooty mess in the bedroom but there was a reward. When we had removed the partition which had been put up, we unearthed a magnificent, Victorian hearth with a surround consisting of beautiful and largely undamaged tiles. Whoever had put up the partition had even left the cast iron dogs in place inside the fireplace. The fireplace was full of twigs and it was clear that several nests must have been built in the chimney over the years.

'I have no idea why they built the partition wall across the whole of one side of the bedroom. It was a very solid affair, constructed out of real wooden boards. Patsy and I had rather hoped that we might find something valuable hidden in what would have been the two recesses if only the fireplace itself had been boarded up.

But we didn't find anything valuable.

There was nothing there but a large pile of old magazines and newspapers from Edwardian times. The owners of the property must have been well read because there were copies of *The Times*, *The Morning Post* and *The Devon and Exeter Gazette*. There was also a huge pile of magazines such as *Punch*, *Illustrated London News* and *The Strand*. It was clear from the newspaper dates that the partition must have been put up in around 1909. Still, as Thumper remarked: it could have been worse; we could have discovered a couple of human skeletons sealed up behind the partition.

The serious downside was that, as a result of our breaking down the partition, we had to completely redecorate the bedroom.

One upside was that much of our bedroom was now two and a half feet longer than it had been before. I don't think anyone really objects to having their bedroom extended a little at no real cost to themselves.

And the other upside was that we had a file collection of several hundred old newspapers and magazines. Some people might have regarded this as a nuisance, just rubbish to be disposed of. Some might have simply carted them off to an auction house in the hope that the haul would produce enough of a profit to pay for the wallpaper we had to buy. But I'm afraid I kept them all and I'm still reading them. Indeed, I have to admit that I get far more pleasure out of reading newspapers and periodicals dated 1909 than I could possibly get from reading contemporary publications.

I don't know what happened to the crow after he'd cleaned himself off and flown away. But Patsy and I both felt we were in his debt and we still regard all crows with great affection.

The Student

At the entrance to the drive into Bilbury Grange there were two rather elderly gates; these were obviously much older than I was and considerably more distinguished and impressive looking.

We never shut the gates but they were oak and nicely made, with some rather fancy bits and pieces of carving, and Patsy and I thought they look rather splendid so when I noticed that some of the wood was beginning to show signs that it had been standing out in all weathers for many years without anyone paying it much attention, I bought a large tin of clear yacht varnish from Peter Marshall, who runs the village shop, and decided to give the gates a protective coating.

The label on the tin said that 'for best results four coats should be applied' but I didn't love the gates that much so I decided that one thick coat would do just as well.

'That's the stuff they paint on ocean going yachts,' Peter had assured me. 'I think they use it on the America's Cup contenders. The last four winners all used it so it must be good.'

I don't know how Peter knew any of this, and knowing him as well as I do I suspect it was all part of his sales patter, but it sounded convincing and it was reassuring so I believed him. We all tend to believe things we want to believe more readily than we believe things that we find unacceptable.

I was always telling myself to try to be more sceptical where Peter was concerned. After all, as Patchy Fogg once put it: 'If Peter had his way, the famous soliloquy from Mr Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' would read: 'To buy or not to buy, that is the question'.' Peter always did his best to convince his customers that buying something was the only sensible answer, whatever the question might have been.

Still, the varnish was clear and sticky and those seemed to me to be vital and admirable qualities in a varnish.

(It was Peter, incidentally, who once told me that William Shakespeare was a ruthless and sharp entrepreneur who made money by storing foodstuffs until there was a shortage and then selling them for huge profits. When Peter found this out he decided that Shakespeare was his hero. He also told me that the Bard was frequently summoned to court for failing to pay his taxes.)

I started to clean the gates at about nine o'clock one evening and since it was summer and the days were long, I honestly believed that I would be able to finish the job in the gloaming and be done long before it went too dark to see what I was doing.

It was, as Patsy pointed out later, a fairly silly time to start varnishing a pair of gates but I have never been put off doing sensible things at silly times or, has been pointed out on more than one occasion, doing silly things at sensible times.

I had not, however, allowed for the fact that Mrs Tempest would decide to go into labour at a few minutes before 10.00 and although she shells babies with an ease which makes professional assistance almost completely superfluous, both she and I would have considered it the height of bad manners if I hadn't been there, standing at forward short leg to take the catch, cut the cord and congratulate everyone concerned. (Her husband, who created this analogy, is a keen cricketer who plays for the Bilbury team.)

And, after the baby had been born, I'd had to drink a glass of malt whisky (from a bottle which they kept especially for my use on such occasions and can you think of a more splendid way to know that you're considered to be a proper 'family doctor'?) and take a couple of puffs from a cigar which her husband always insisted on giving to me because he knew that was what they always did in books and films. He knows that I don't usually smoke but he doesn't know, because I have never told him and I try to hide it, that the taste of a cigar makes me feel nauseous.

So, by the time I got back to Bilbury Grange it was dark and since there wasn't much of a moon the gates were just a blur in the night.

I tried to finish the varnishing but quickly found that I couldn't see (or remember) which bits I'd already done. I tried parking the Rolls Royce in such a way that by switching on the car headlights I could illuminate the work area. That would have worked, I think, if Patsy hadn't come out and reminded me that the lights on the Rolls Royce use a good deal of electricity and that when I'd once accidentally left the lights switched on for an hour the battery had gone completely flat.

All of this explains why I was finishing off the varnishing at 8.30 a.m. the following morning and telling all the patients who arrived for the morning surgery that I would definitely be starting the surgery at 9.00 a.m. sharp and that I would make sure I washed all the varnish off my fingers.

'I don't want to have all my best bits varnished,' said Mrs Hardy with a laugh that drove the birds from the trees and startled Ben so much that he ran into the porch and hid behind the aspidistra that Patsy's mother gave us for our anniversary three years ago.

At ten minutes to nine, I narrowly avoided being run over as a sports car slid to a halt in the lane outside.

'Where can I find Bilbury Grange?' demanded the driver, a plump, red-faced young man in a sports jacket. I use the word 'demanded' advisedly. He wore an old school tie which I knew I ought to recognise and, sparkling in the early morning sunshine, a gold tiepin. If he had been admitted to prison the tiepin would be recorded as 'gold metal' but I was pretty confident it was gold. He looked like the sort of person to have the best and most expensive of everything. He doubtless had a silver spoon tucked away somewhere. He was wearing an expensive looking flat cap; the sort that you see a good deal of at point-to-point meetings throughout the English countryside.

'You've found it!' I told him, assuming that he was a visitor to the area who needed medical assistance. He certainly didn't look like a meter reader or an income tax collector.

He stared at the gate and then at me and then at the gate again. 'Is it worth it?' he asked. 'It looks a pretty old gate and a pretty boring job!'

'It's enormous fun and very satisfying,' I lied, suddenly remembering Tom Sawyer white- washing his Aunt's fence.

'Really?' He sounded very unconvinced.

'You can finish off what's left if you give me your apple core,' I told him.

'I beg your pardon?'

I repeated what I'd said.

'What apple core?'

'Or maybe just lend me your hat for an hour.'

He now looked at me as if I was an escaped lunatic.

'Tom Sawyer,' I explained.

'Who?'

'Don't you know 'The Adventures of Tom Sawyer'? Have you never read the 'Adventures of Huckleberry Finn'?'

If I had suddenly started speaking Mandarin he could not possibly have stared at me in more confusion.

'Mark Twain?' I suggested.

'Sorry, no, doesn't ring a bell,' he said.

I was, to be honest rather shocked that the visitor, whoever he was and whatever he wanted, had never heard of Tom Sawyer or Mark Twain and it seemed rather sad.

The famous Twain story of Sawyer and the fence painting had popped into my mind because my chum Patchy Fogg, a local antiques dealer, had recently acquired a very old typewriter which he believed was one which Twain had owned. The typewriter, made by the 'Ohio MfgCo' was so old that the keyboard was arranged in the original, old-fashioned, straightforward abcdefhijk fashion rather than the more familiar qwertyuiop design (which was introduced to slow down typists who were typing too quickly and getting their keys all in a tangle.)

The keyboard on the old typewriter which Patchy had acquired was enormous for it had separate keys for all the capital letters and all the letters were on very long stalks. What made Patchy so excited was the fact that the machine had the letters SC neatly scratched on the base. Now Twain was, of course, one of the first people in the world to use a typewriter and his real name was Samuel Clemens. Patchy was completely convinced that the typewriter was genuine and a real collector's item. He was so convinced that it was an antique that he said he was going to keep it. 'I couldn't sell this,' he told me excitedly. 'It's the first real antique I've ever found!'

I had intended to embellish my comment about Mark Twain with this local story, but before I could say anything else the stranger had put his foot on the accelerator, sprayed me with gravel and swung into the driveway where he parked his tiny sports car in front of my Rolls Royce 20/25 – blocking me in completely.

Most of my patients know not to park in front of the Rolls Royce because if I have an emergency to attend to I always need to get out of the driveway quickly. It is for that reason that I always park the car facing the exit of the driveway. I moved to ask the driver to shift his car but I was too slow for he had disappeared into the house. Looking at my watch I realised that I had better finish the varnishing, go indoors, get cleaned up and put on a tie and a jacket if I intended to start the surgery on time.

Four minutes later I finished the varnishing, popped the sticky brush into the empty tin and headed for the house. The young man who had driven the sports car was waiting inside the hall. He was still young but he was now also clearly short and surprisingly chubby.

'Where can I find the doctor?' he demanded in the sort of tone that Victorian and Edwardian landowners used to favour when addressing the servants.

I looked at him and, with the hand holding the empty can and the paint brush, pointed to the room in which patients usually wait to be seen. 'The waiting room is in there,' I told him.

'No, you misunderstand,' he said. 'I'm not a patient. I'm Mr Munton.' He said this as if I should have recognised the name.

‘Mr Munton?’ I said, racking my brains and wondering why I was expected to know who Mr Munton might be.

‘From Birmingham University,’ he explained. ‘I’m here as an observer.’

He made it sound as if he were visiting in an official capacity; to check up on me in some way.

‘To observe what?’

He sighed with obvious exasperation. ‘Just tell me where I can find the doctor?’ he demanded, rather more brusquely this time. The tone had hardened into something that might be used with a recalcitrant and somewhat half-witted servant who needed putting in his place.

‘I’m the doctor.’

He stared at me in astonishment. ‘You’re the doctor?’

‘Yes. Can I help you?’

‘I’m Franklin Munton,’ he said. Foolishly I shook it, forgetting that my hand was still rather sticky with varnish.

And as he grimaced and reached into his pocket for a linen handkerchief (which, I didn’t mind betting, was probably embroidered with his initials) I remembered who he was and why he was standing in the hall of Bilbury Grange.

A few months earlier I had received a telephone call from one of the lecturers at my old medical school in Birmingham. He told me that he was trying to arrange what he called ‘one day professional experiences’ for final year medical students.

‘We’re ringing up doctors who qualified here and asking if they would allow a student to sit in with them for a day. Just to observe what goes on. We think it might help the students make good, sound, career choices.’

Partly to get the lecturer off the phone, partly because the date he had offered was a long way away (and you can always kid yourself that the awful day will never arrive) I had agreed to take a student for the day.

I had also thought, I suppose, that I might be able to help a young doctor in the same way that Dr Brownlow had helped me when I had first entered general practice. At the back of my mind lay the thought that I might be able to offer a little guidance. Students at medical school are taught a great deal about glanders, the ague and the Black Death and quite probably botts disease too (though, come to think of it, I have a suspicion that is something which mainly afflicts sheep) but they are taught nothing very much about the sort of ailment commonly seen in a GP’s surgery, where patients wander in suffering with butterflies in their stomachs and frogs in their throats and where attempts to heal them are too often complicated by the presence of unexpected flies in the ointment.

And this was the student I had agreed to allow into my surgery; my ‘observer’ for the day.

When I’d deposited the empty varnish tin and washed my hands (and the student had washed his hands too) I introduced him to Patsy and then to Miss Johnson, the venerable practice receptionist. I told Miss Johnson to advise patients that I had a medical student with me and that if they didn’t want him to stay in the consulting room all they had to do was to tell her.

‘If they’d rather you weren’t there, you can pop out through the French windows,’ I told him. ‘That way it won’t be embarrassing for you or the patient.’

‘The patients aren’t given that option at any of the hospitals attached to the medical school,’ said Mr Munton, rather crossly.

‘But that’s what’s going to happen here,’ I told him. It did not seem to me too unreasonable that I should be allowed to set the house rules, since we were in my consulting room.

I too was now rather cross and beginning to regret the whole exercise. The day hadn’t really got off to the best of starts. I had an awful suspicion that although the day had begun with some fairly common or garden pique it could well end up with more than its fair share of high dudgeon on display.

I showed Mr Munton a spare chair in my consulting room, put it up a corner so that he could sit quietly and out of the way and showed him the French windows through which he could make his escape if Miss Johnson told me that a patient who was coming in didn’t want the student to stay in the room.

‘I think it’s probably best if you sit quietly,’ I told him. ‘If you have any questions or comments keep them until the patient has left.’

He said he would do this and took a smart leather notebook out of an outer jacket pocket and an expensive looking fountain pen from an inner pocket. The notebook, the pen and the bad-tempered scowl that seemed to be a fixture made him look like a traffic policeman. I felt it likely that no one had ever described him as a hypergelast or a cachinnator and made a mental note to put these words onto the next list of oddities I compiled with my pal William.

A minute or so later the first patient came in.

‘It’s his second attack of tonsils in eighteen months,’ said Beryl Bussage before she’d even sat down. She sounded rather cross about it, as though she’d bought the tonsils in good faith and was now rather disappointed in their performance.

I told her small son Reginald to open his mouth wide so that I could take a look inside. His tonsils were certainly inflamed and swollen. I took a look at his medical records.

'The antibiotic did its job very well last time,' I said. 'I'll prescribe the same thing again.' I reached for my prescription pad and my pen.

I knew that most cases of tonsillitis went away without any treatment but an antibiotic helped to ensure that there weren't any complications. Besides, although I steadfastly refused to prescribe antibiotics for patients with colds or the flu (both caused by viruses which aren't affected by antibiotics), I didn't fancy being the first doctor in the world to tell a mother that I wasn't going to write out a prescription for an antibiotic for her child's tonsillitis.

'I want them taken out,' said Mrs Bussage firmly.

I looked at her.

'Most of the children in his class at school have had their tonsils taken out,' said Mrs Bussage. She sat back and folded her arms as though defying me to fail to agree that this was a sound argument for surgery.

'Surgeons used to rip out every child's tonsils,' I told her. 'The operation to remove the tonsils and another twin patch of lymphatic tissue called the adenoids was for years the most common surgical procedure performed. In some parts of the world a T and A operation – a tonsillectomy and adenoidectomy – was done as a routine when a child reached a certain age.'

'Well, there you are then, they must have known what they were doing,' said Mrs Bussage, with admirably misplaced faith in the medical profession.

'Ah, but doctors haven't always done sensible things,' I told her. 'Sadly, the history of medicine is littered with misconceptions, misapprehensions and misinterpretations and medical history is full of examples of doctors doing things or saying things which they later regretted and which have been proved pointless or dangerous or both. During the First World War, for example, it was argued that workers in gunpowder mills were made healthier by breathing in dust containing charcoal, sulphur and salt petre. At the same time, it was customary for doctors to chop out great lengths of bowel simply because they could and one or two eminent surgeons said it was a good idea to do so. Doctors used to bleed their patients because they thought it would help make them stronger. Lots of my predecessors used leeches. Surgeons removed bits of brain from patients who were mentally ill. Others gave their patients massive electric shocks. Patients who had syphilis were treated with mercury without anyone realising just how dangerous it was. In the 1920s, doctors regularly removed all of their patients' teeth to protect them from infections such as tuberculosis. You don't have to go very far back to find yourself in an era when doctors thought that smoking was good for people. Doctors enthusiastically recommended cigarettes to all their nervous patients and, in addition, to men who seemed to be a bit undersized and 'weedy'. By the 1950s, a few outspoken nutters were just beginning to claim that smoking was dangerous but most people thought the cranks were just being as silly as those who said that fatty foods were bad for you. When I was a small boy everyone 'knew' that fat was good for you and that dripping spread on bread was as healthy a meal as, well, a sugar sandwich; and that both were as good for you as any meal any dietician or nutritionist could devise.'

I paused.

Mrs Bussage did not look convinced by anything I'd said.

'There are fashions in medicine,' I concluded, 'just as much as there are fashions in anything else. And it was, for quite a while, fashionable to remove the tonsils!'

My eye caught Mr Munton, sitting quietly in a corner. He looked shocked at my gentle criticisms of the medical profession.

'Well,' said Mrs Bussage. 'All that is as maybe but all I'm saying is that I think you should arrange for Reginald to have his tonsils taken out.'

'Let me tell you four things,' I said. 'And then if you still agree that Reginald should have an operation I will refer him to a surgeon.'

'First, the tonsils are there for a purpose. They aren't just a nuisance. They are the first line of the throat's defences in catching infections and preventing them going deeper into the body. If the tonsils are removed then they can't swell up but the infection might go deeper into the body and cause other problems.'

'Second, surgeons used to remove swollen tonsils because they had no other way of treating them. Today, we have penicillin and most of the time it is a drug which really works at curing tonsillitis.'

'Third, there is a risk with any operation. There is, for example, the risk of having an anaesthetic. If an operation is life-saving then the risk is usually worth taking. But Reginald's tonsils are not threatening his life. What a tragedy it would be if we arranged for an operation which he didn't really need and something terrible happened.'

And fourth, there is no doubt that removing the tonsils is still a fashionable operation. It is something doctors arrange because they think it ought to be done. In New York City, a group of American doctors examined 1,000 schoolchildren to decide whether or not they needed an operation to remove their tonsils. None of the children was ill. They were healthy, normal children. The team of doctors recommended that 61% of the children should have their tonsils removed. The remaining children were then examined by a second group of physicians. These doctors examined the children who were left and decided that 45% of these children needed to have their tonsils removed. A third set of doctors then examined the fairly small group of children who were left and these doctors recommend that 46% should have their tonsils removed. Finally, a fourth examination was made of the minute number of children who remained. On this occasion another 45% of the children were told that they needed to have their tonsils removed. At this point in the experiment just 65 children of the original 1,000 remained. The four groups of doctors had between them decided that 935 children needed to have their tonsils removed.'

Mrs Bussage reached out and took hold of Reginald. She put her arm around him. 'I didn't know there were any risks with the operation!'

'There are always risks with an operation,' I told her. 'If the operation is vital then the risks will be worth taking. But…'

I didn't get to finish the sentence.

'Does he have to have the operation?' asked Mrs Bussage. 'Can't you just give him more of those antibiotics that cured him last time?'

I said I thought that would be a good idea. 'If he gets a good deal of trouble with his tonsils we can always think again,' I told her. 'If we all think it's necessary for him to have the operation then I'll certainly fix it up.'

'Oh, I think we're a long way from that point, don't you, doctor?' said Mrs Bussage.

I wrote out a prescription and told her to give it to Patsy or Miss Johnson who would turn the prescription into medicine.

'Golly,' said Mr Munton, when Mrs Bussage and young Reginald had gone. 'You were a bit tough on the medical profession weren't you?' He clearly disapproved.

'I wanted to make a point,' I explained. 'And I thought it was important to help Mrs Bussage understand that medicine can sometimes get things wrong.'

'You certainly did that. Do you dispense your own medicines?'

'Yes. Otherwise it's a long way to the nearest pharmacy and many of my patients don't have cars or even bicycles.'

'Aren't there any buses?'

I smiled. 'If you relied on the buses around here you'd probably never go anywhere. And if you did manage to go somewhere you'd have a hell of a long wait before you get back.'

'Is it profitable?'

'Is what profitable? The bus service?'

'No. Is it profitable to run your own dispensary?'

I was puzzled. Naively, I hadn't ever thought about this. 'I wouldn't think so,' I replied. 'But I think it probably pays for itself so it doesn't actually cost us anything.'

Mr Munton looked at me as if I were mad. I got the feeling that the suspicions which he had harboured when he saw me varnishing our gate had been crystallised.

Mrs Ermintrude Trump was my next patient.

'I've got swollen knees,' she said, before she'd sat down. She pulled up her dress and showed me her knees. They certainly were swollen. She then turned and showed Mr Munton, to whom I had, of course, introduced her.

'Have you been doing a lot of praying or housework?' I asked her.

She laughed. 'I've probably not done as much praying as I should have done,' she admitted. 'But I've been giving the house a good spring-clean and nothing cleans a floor like a bit of old-fashioned elbow grease.'

'It looks as if you've got housemaid's knee,' I told her. 'If you'd been doing too much praying then you'd have parson's knee.'

She wasn't wearing stockings so I could easily examine her knees. It wasn't difficult to see that there was some fluid on both knees. When human knees spend a lot of time in contact with hard surfaces there is a tendency for the skin to get squashed and stretched and as a result a bursa develops. I told her this.

'My niece is a bursar in a school in Surrey,' said Mrs Trump, frowning.

'That's a b-u-r-s-a-r,' I explained. 'What you've got is a b-u-r-s-a.'

'And what is it?' asked Mrs Trump. 'It feels all squishy. Why is it squishy?'

'It feels squishy because it is squishy. It's just some fluid that has collected as a protective mechanism – to protect your knees. It can happen to other parts of the body too. Students and scholars sometimes get student's elbow. And believe it or not there used to be a condition known as weaver's bottom which affected weavers who spent a lot of time sitting down at their looms.'

'Oh I don't think I'll get that!' said Mrs Thump with a loud, throaty laugh. Her whole body shook when she laughed. ‘I’ve got far too much fat on my bottom. So, doctor, what can I do about my housemaid’s knee?’

‘Have you finished your spring cleaning?’

‘I certainly have! My floors are spotless.’

‘Then I don’t think either of us needs to do anything about it. The fluid will slowly disappear and so will the swelling. If it hasn’t gone in a couple of weeks come and see me again and I’ll fix you up with an appointment to see a surgeon at the hospital. He’ll put a needle into the swellings and remove the fluid. But I don’t think it will come to that.’

‘That’s an unusual name, isn’t it?’ asked Mr Munton when Mrs Trump had gone.

‘Oh I don’t think so,’ I replied. ‘There are quite a few Trumps about in this part of the world. There’s a family of them in a hamlet called Churchill Barton. I suppose it’s fair to call it a hamlet. Someone told me that officially a hamlet is a village without a church and there’s certainly no church in Churchill Barton.’ I thought for a moment. ‘Come to think of it I think just about everyone living in Churchill Barton is called Trump.’

‘I meant Ermintrude,’ said Mr Munton.

‘Oh no, that’s not an unusual name. I know of three Ermintrudes in our village. It used to be a very popular name. It’s usually shortened to Emma or Emmy but Mrs Trump doesn’t like her name being abbreviated.’

‘Living here must be like living in another century,’ said Mr Munton with a quiet sigh.

It was, I thought, a sign of disapproval and disdain. I got the clear impression that Mr Munton was not a great fan of country life.

‘I think you’re probably right!’ I said. ‘But we like to think that we are tiptoeing gently towards the front edges of the 20th century. Working in a village community is very different to working in a town or a city. The environment is different, the relationships are different and, of course, there is a greater sense of community here than you will ever find in places such as Birmingham or London.’

Mr Munton took the top off his fountain pen and wrote something down in his notebook. I assumed that his tutor had told him to write a report on his impressions of a country doctor working in a practice in Devon. When he’d finished writing he looked at it, thought for a moment and then underlined it with his pen. Maybe, I thought, I was getting through to Mr Munton. Maybe he might learn one or two things after all.

‘I’ve just remembered I’ve got to telephone a chap I play squash with,’ he explained, when he saw me looking at his notebook to see if he’d finished writing. ‘I had a game fixed for this evening but I’ll have to reschedule it.’

I always like to learn something new every day but I rather got the feeling that Mr Munton felt that he was already full to the brim with all the knowledge he was likely to need in life. I, on the other hand, had reached the age when I was far more aware of the things I didn’t understand than the things I knew. I still struggled to explain to myself why the cap doesn’t stick when you put it back onto the open end of a tube of glue. It occurred to me that Mr Munton was perhaps not mature enough to have acquired an interest in people. Or maybe he was so concerned with himself, and his own narrow world, that he would never be interested in the wider world.

Dottie McTavish, may have had a Scottish sounding name but as far as I know, she had never been as far north as Bristol, let alone Glasgow or Edinburgh and she was as English as it is possible to imagine anyone to be.

Miss McTavish was 14, gracile, daphlean and leesome and before she came into the surgery, I had ushered Mr Munton out through the French windows.

I had no idea whether or not Miss McTavish would have consented to my having a medical student in the consulting room but I had never met a girl between the ages of 12 and 16 who wasn’t shyer than she liked people to know.

‘Miss Johnson said you had a student with you,’ said Miss McTavish, looking around.

I’d watched her grow up from a small, freckly gamine with a penchant for climbing trees and playing cowboys and Indians (both activities leading to regular scrapes and grazes but, fortunately, nothing more substantial) into the early makings of a beautiful, young woman; caterpillar into butterfly. She had red hair and green eyes and would soon be leaving broken hearts strewn behind her like rose petals after a summer wind.

‘He’s popped out. And he won’t be coming back in while you’re here.’

‘Oh!’ she said. I could see the relief. It was almost tangible.

‘What’s the problem?’

‘I’ve got a lump,’ she whispered. ‘I think I’ve got cancer.’

‘Where is it?’

‘Just here!’ She touched her side, at the bottom of her rib cage. ‘It feels hard.’

‘How long has it been there?’

‘I only found it last night; when I was getting ready for bed.’

I gave thanks, for the umpteenth time, that I did not have an appointments system which meant that patients had to wait a week, a fortnight or a month to see a doctor in order to share a concern.

It occurred to me that if she'd been a couple of years older I would have suspected that a boyfriend had found it for her. Spouses, partners and lovers are often the one to find a physical abnormality.

'Pull up your blouse and let me look.'

Blushing, she stood up and pulled her blouse out of her skirt.

'Now show me. Where is the lump?'

She put her finger on it. 'Just here.'

I examined her and then told her she could pull down her blouse. She did so and then sat down.

'You haven't got cancer,' I told her immediately. 'You haven't got anything wrong with you. Your lump is perfectly normal and healthy.'

They probably heard her sigh of relief in distant parts of Cornwall.

'It's a rib,' I told her. 'It's been there all your life but you never noticed it before.'

'But it doesn't seem attached to anything!'

'Well it's attached to your spine at one end but it's not attached to your sternum, your breastbone, or to any of the other ribs. So it seems to be loose at the front – it's sometimes called a floating rib. Lots of people have them.'

'I feel a fool!' she said, and she did look embarrassed.

'Why on earth do you feel a fool?'

'Just finding a rib that I'd never noticed before!'

'It happens often. You're not foolish.'

'And it's not anything to worry about?'

'Absolutely not! It is perfectly healthy and it's not in the slightest bit dangerous.'

She stood up, beaming. 'That's such a relief, doctor!' She moved towards the door and then turned back for a moment. 'Thank you for sending the student out,' she whispered. 'I'd have felt even more of a fool if someone else had been in the room.'

When she'd gone I went to the French windows and called Mr Munton back into the consulting room. I was glad I'd sent him out when Miss McTavish had been in the surgery.

He had, he told me, been watching some young squirrels playing on the lawn.

'They look like rats with bushy tails!' he said.

'They do. But they don't behave in the slightest bit like rats. Rats are aggressive and greedy but squirrels are nervous, gentle and playful.'

'Well, they still look like hairy rats to me.'

My next patient, Amelia Cartwright, had hurt her arm.

'Have I broken it, doctor?' she wanted to know. She rolled up the sleeve of her cardigan and held out the arm for inspection

It didn't take more than a couple of moments to confirm that she hadn't broken anything.

'Did you fall?' I asked her.

She looked rather embarrassed.

'I fell off a space hopper.'

'Ah!' I said, as if this was entirely predictable. I had heard of space hoppers for they were at the time, all the rage. I had seen pictures in newspapers and magazines of children bouncing about on board brightly coloured, plastic 'hoppers'.

In reality, this had not been top of my list of possible causes of Mrs Cartwright's injury. It had occurred to me that she might have tripped or slipped on a loose rug but it had not occurred to me that she might have fallen off a space hopper.

Mrs Cartwright was in her 70s and not, perhaps, the prime target market for space hopping.

'I was doing quite well but suddenly I overbalanced,' she said. 'I think I got a bit over-confident.'

'What on earth were you doing on a space hopper?'

'My grandson wanted to try one and so he had his fifteen minutes on it and then he wanted to see his gran having a go. So I bought my fifteen minutes and had a go to please him.'

'What do you mean by you bought your fifteen minutes?'

'Oh Peter is renting them out,' said Mrs Cartwright. 'He's only managed to get hold of two and I've no doubt that he's realised he can make more money out of them by renting rather than selling them.'

I thought that sounded like Peter Marshall. I also thought it showed his entrepreneurial instinct to the full. Who else but Peter would have thought of renting out space hoppers for fifteen minutes at a time?

Peter Marshall, who runs the village shop and is rumoured by Thumper Robinson to have run it since the days when Alfred the Great was busy burning cakes, always claims that he makes a real effort to keep up with the times. 'You have to face the changes head on,' he says. 'You have to embrace new trends so that you can conquer them!'

And although it has been argued by some that Peter is usually a year or so behind the times with new ideas, he does usually get there in the end. Peter Marshall's village shop is the Bilbury department store; stacked to the rafters with turnips, drain cleaner, potatoes, dog food, tinned pears, tap washers, yacht varnish and a cornucopia of very useful stuff that you never know you want until you suddenly find you need it and can't manage without it.

Peter did not start selling plastic hula hoops until the mid-1960s when they had been largely abandoned in England's larger towns and cities – though this lengthy delay may have been as much a result of his enthusiasm for buying cheaper products, and waiting for over-stocks to become available at the warehouse than a failure of awareness. There is no doubt that when hula hoops did finally appear in Bilbury, they had been bought by Peter at a wholesale price which reflected their fall in popularity elsewhere in the country. Naturally, the retail price did not fall in a similar way. No one would have expected it to do so.

With space hoppers it was different. Peter had managed to get hold of two of them right at the height of the craze.

'Could I have a bandage, do you think?' asked Mrs Cartwright.

'I don't think…' I began.

'I know it doesn't really need one,' said Mrs Cartwright. 'But my grandson is staying with me for a few days while his parents have gone to Cornwall. To be honest, he's wearing me out and he wants to go back for another go on the space hopper tomorrow. If I have a bandage on one arm it might give me an excuse to take it a bit easier for a day or so. I can just stand there and offer him encouragement.'

I got up, fetched a bandage from a drawer and started to wrap it around Mrs Cartwright's arm. 'Tell him he can have your fifteen minutes on the space hopper as well as his own,' I suggested. 'He'll be thrilled by that and so not too disappointed that you're not having another go.'

'What a splendid idea!' said Mrs Cartwright beaming.

I finished the bandaging and fixed it all in place with a safety pin and lots of impressive looking strapping.

When Mrs Cartwright left she was quite content.

'Another satisfied customer!' I said to Mr Munton.

'It's not exactly proper medicine, is it?' said Mr Munton, who was a little uppity for my taste.

It occurred to me that our relationship (such as it was) had never acquired the essential ingredient of respect which is pretty much a standard requirement for the pupil-teacher association. I did wonder if perhaps things had been marred by the fact that Mr Munton still thought of me as a gate-varnisher rather than a man of medicine. Or, more likely, it was my fault. It takes special skills and an unusual type of patience to be a teacher. The truth is that my hands were full looking after my practice and I had neither the time nor the inclination to acquire teaching skills.

Mrs Isabel Outhout had been a patient of mine since I had taken over the practice from Dr Brownlow. And before that she had been a patient of Dr Brownlow's. She was a nervous, shy woman in her mid-30s who hurried everywhere she went. An inch short of five feet tall and weighing less than seven stones she always wore long Victorian dresses together with old-fashioned button up ankle boots and a shawl.

On reflection, I am sure that Mrs Outhout was the only woman under 60 whom I had ever seen use a shawl and she wore one all the time; summer and winter. It certainly seemed to be a useful and versatile piece of clothing. In the winter she wore a thick, woollen shawl which she used as a coat, scarf and hat and in the summer she wore a thin, silken one which she used to shade her face and neck from the sun. She had jet black hair and brown eyes but was terrified of burning in the hot weather. Her skin was as white as paper and she wanted to keep it that way. Her husband was called Dwayne Outhout.

The Outhouts lived in Bilbury but Isabel Outhout worked in Barnstaple, where she was a shop assistant in an old-fashioned millinery and haberdashery store. The bus service in North Devon was woeful and she couldn't afford a car so she travelled between Bilbury and Barnstaple on a 50cc Honda moped. There were no rules about helmets in those days and she rode her moped flat out with her hair flying free in the wind behind her. She once told me, with some pride, that she regularly hit 28 mph on the downhill stretches, though she admitted that she managed considerably less on the uphill stretches. When it rained she carried a clear umbrella, jamming the handle between her left arm and her chest so that she could keep both hands on the controls. It was one of the strangest sights I've ever seen but it was apparently extremely effective at keeping her relatively dry. I saw her once come back from Barnstaple in a snow storm. It was a sight I shall never forget. The moped, the umbrella and Mrs Outhout were all white and apart from the phut phut phut of the moped engine, it appeared as though a strangely angelic ghost were riding along the lane.

'I'm terribly worried, doctor,' Mrs Outhout told me, settling down and adjusting her shawl. 'I had to see a doctor while I was on holiday in London. Dwayne and I went up to have a week doing the sights: the Tower of London, Buckingham Palace, Madame Tussauds and so on. While we were there, I developed an ear infection. The doctor the hotel recommended gave me some antibiotics which have cleared up the infection, thank heavens because it was very painful, but he insisted on doing some blood tests. He said he thought I had a thyroid problem.'

‘Did he say why he thought that?’

‘He said that being thin and very nervous are well-known signs of thyrotoxicosis.’

‘They are,’ I agreed. I didn’t bother to mention, however, that lots of people are thin and nervous without having anything wrong with their thyroid glands.

‘I had to go and see him after five days and he told me that according to the results from the laboratory, I have something called euthyroid.’

I frowned, slightly confused. ‘What exactly did he say? Can you remember his precise words?’ I looked at her husband who had accompanied her into the surgery.

‘He said the tests showed that Isabel was euthyroid,’ replied Dwayne. He took a small diary out of his pocket and showed me the word ‘euthyroid’ written on the back inside cover. ‘I asked him how to spell it,’ added Mr Outhout.

‘Did he tell you what it meant?’

‘No,’ said Mr Outhout.

Mrs Outhout shook her head, agreeing with her husband.

‘Did he tell you that you needed to come and see me?’

‘No. He didn’t say anything about any more treatment,’ said Mrs Outhout. ‘But when he said that I was euthyroid I thought I’d better come and see you as soon as I could.’

I started to say something but Mr Outhout talked over me. He wasn’t being rude. He was simply desperate to explain to me how urgently he thought his wife’s condition should be treated.

‘We’ve been worried sick since we had the diagnosis,’ said Mr Outhout. ‘We cut our holiday short and came home because Isabel wanted to talk to you about it. We wanted to make sure we started any treatment as quickly as possible.’

‘Does it need an operation?’ asked Mrs Outhout. There were tears in her eyes. ‘I don’t think I could bear going into hospital for an operation. I don’t know why but I do worry so. My mother was in hospital for six weeks before she died and it affected me quite a lot.’

‘We have some money saved for a rainy day,’ said Mr Outhout. ‘We can pay for private treatment if it would help; if it would speed things up or help us find a better surgeon.’

I held up a hand in an attempt to silence them both. ‘There’s nothing wrong with your thyroid gland,’ I told Mrs Outhout.

‘We could travel to Exeter or Bristol if you thought it necessary,’ said Mr Outhout.

I repeated what I’d just said.

The two of them heard me this time and were clearly stunned for they were silent for a moment or two.

‘How do you know?’ demanded Mrs Outhout.

‘The doctor in London did the tests and said Isabel was euthyroid,’ said Mr Outhout. ‘Surely that must mean that something is wrong.’

‘It means exactly the opposite of that,’ I told him. ‘The word ‘euthyroid’ is just a medical term for ‘normal’.’

They both stared at me, disbelievingly.

I stood up, walked over to the bookcase where I keep most of my medical books and pulled out a large, medical dictionary. I flicked through the pages until I came to the word ‘euthyroid’ and showed it to them both.

‘It says that euthyroid means having a normally functioning thyroid gland,’ said Mr Outhout, having read from my book. He looked at his wife, then reached out and took her hand.

He was the first one to start to cry.

And then she too started crying.

I pushed the box of paper handkerchiefs across my desk.

To be honest, just seeing them cry made me want to cry too.

‘That’s such a relief,’ said Mr Outhout eventually.

‘We’ve been worried sick,’ said Mrs Outhout. ‘We thought perhaps it was some sort of cancer of the thyroid gland.’

‘It means there’s absolutely nothing wrong with your thyroid gland!’ I repeated.

There were then a few more tears and a bit of a cuddle before they stood up to leave.

‘What a stupid doctor that man was!’ said Mrs Outhout, pausing on her way out of the surgery. ‘He made our lives miserable.’

‘It doesn’t matter love,’ said Mr Outhout.

At that moment he was merely relieved that his wife was not ill. I suspected that he might feel differently a little later on.

‘And he ruined our holiday!’ Mrs Outhout pointed out.

I did not say anything. Doctors aren’t supposed to criticise individual doctors – though I’ve always felt it’s fair enough to criticise the profession as a whole when things are done badly.

But privately I had to agree with Mrs Outhout. Some doctors are so addicted to using posh words that they forget that not everyone understands medical terminology.

When they'd gone I looked across at young Mr Munton. He looked a trifle uncomfortable and I guessed that he too had never come across the word 'euthyroid'. But I knew he wouldn't say anything.

'They're a nice couple,' I said. 'It seems so unfair that their holiday was spoilt. I happen to know they'd been saving up for that trip for a year.'

'Well, at least she knows now that there's nothing wrong with her,' said Mr Munton with a rather careless shrug.

I really didn't like Mr Munton very much. He didn't seem to be overfilled with empathy; something which I have always felt is an essential quality for a doctor.

The next patient was Buxton Longwoody.

Mr Longwoody was 92-years-old and physically he was not in bad condition. If he'd been a car he would have been advertised as being 'in good running order'. He lived about three quarters of a mile away from Bilbury Grange but he always walked to the surgery and he always walked back again afterwards. Whenever I offered him a lift home he always declined; very graciously explaining that he enjoyed the exercise. Nevertheless, he did wobble a little and I always found that watching him set off towards home was always a little worrying. Miss Johnson always telephoned his neighbour around thirty minutes after he had left the surgery, just to make sure that he'd managed to get home safely.

His problem was that his memory was not what it had been when he'd been younger. He couldn't always remember precisely what he'd done the day before, though he could remember a good deal about things which had happened earlier in his life. He left school at 14 (his parents took him out of school, arguing that since he had learned how to read and write there wasn't much point in his staying on) and as a boy he had joined the army and he had travelled all over Africa in his country's service. He had risen through the ranks and when he left the army, he had attained the rank of Captain.

During the Second World War, he tried desperately to enlist so that he could serve again but after numerous rejections (on the basis of his age) he became a keen and vital member of the Civil Defence force. After the end of the Second World War, he decided he needed an interest and so he taught himself Greek. He learned the language well enough to read *Plutarch* in the original.

Mr Longwoody's memory was now so poor that when I gave him instructions of any kind I had to write them down on a piece of paper and pop the piece of paper into his left hand jacket pocket. Mrs Barker, his neighbour, called in every morning and every evening to check on him and when he had been to the surgery she always used to look for the piece of paper so that she could see what pills he needed to take or stop taking. We had tried giving Mr Longwoody the note to take charge of but he usually managed to lose it. Mrs Barker, the Good Samaritan, used to put a note in that same pocket if she wanted to tell me anything about her neighbour.

Despite his poor memory, he always took a keen interest in his surroundings and on his walks to and from Bilbury Grange he would often simply stand, look around and enjoy the countryside. There was no doubt in my mind that he got great pleasure from his walks through the village.

As an aside, I sometimes wondered why dementia had become so common, and seemed to be getting commoner. Some of it, I knew, was caused by tranquillisers, sleeping tablets, sedatives and so on – all of which can cause a real sense of confusion as well as memory loss. Some of the increase in the incidence of dementia was a result of doctors being more aware of the problem, and diagnosing it more frequently. But I couldn't help wondering if some of it might not be environmental. I remember having the thought that toxins in our world, in the air, in our food or in our drinking water, might be damaging our brains.

But I could never avoid the suspicion that part of the problem was that a generation or two ago older citizens were looked after by their families. When those older folk became forgetful and confused it didn't matter too much because there was always someone around to look after them; to make sure that they ate, drank, exercised, rested and came to no harm. By the 1970s, family units had broken down and the elderly were often living alone, relying on neighbours rather than relatives. And so the problem of dementia became more apparent.

It wasn't always easy to do but I tried to make sure that Mr Longwoody only ever needed to take tablets in the morning and in the evening so that his neighbour, the Good Samaritan, could supervise the tablet taking and make sure he took precisely what had been prescribed and nothing more or less.

When Mr Longwoody had sat down, I introduced him to Mr Munton, something I was careful to do with all my patients that morning.

'Did you have a good walk here?' I asked.

'Splendid!' he replied crisply. 'I saw half a dozen rabbits, a squirrel and a hen partridge. And a pair of busy blackbirds racing about getting food for their young.'

‘Any butterflies?’

Mr Longwoody had always been keen on butterflies and knew a good deal about them

‘Not one,’ he replied rather sadly. ‘They should be around by now. Maybe I’ll see some on my way home.’

I asked him if he had anything for me. Sometimes he remembered he had a note for me. Sometimes he had to be reminded. And sometimes I had to ask his permission and dip my hand into his pocket myself to retrieve the note.

He frowned in thought.

‘Do you have a note for me from Mrs Barker?’ I suggested, offering the question as a hint. ‘It might be in your jacket pocket.’

Mr Longwoody stuck his right hand in his jacket pocket and produced a neatly folded square of blue Basildon Bond writing paper. He handed the paper to me with a slightly guilty smile. He still had all his teeth and they looked to be in fine condition. ‘Sorry, doctor,’ he said. ‘I nearly forgot. Damned memory of mine gets worse every day. I’d forget my head if it wasn’t nailed on. Mrs Barker asked me to give you this.’ He handed me the note which I unfolded and read.

This is what it said:

‘Mr Longwoody has been eating well but his varicose eczema is playing up a little. He won’t talk to me about it but he always goes to bed much earlier than we do and I’ve seen the lights go on in his cottage at midnight or even later so I think his prostate is still playing up. I worry about this because he has to walk across the landing and pass the stairs to get to his bathroom. As you know, he is a bit wobbly. If you approve and can persuade Mr Longwoody that it’s a good idea, I’ll ask Thumper Robinson to pop round and put a wooden gate at the top of the stairs. He needs some more of his blood pressure pills. Thank you (signed) Daphne Barker.’

‘I hear you’re having to get up several times in the night,’ I said, putting down the note.

‘Just to go to the lavatory,’ said Mr Longwoody. ‘The bladder doesn’t seem to hold so much fluid these days. Or maybe it’s that gland thing. What’s it called?’

‘The prostate gland. It tends to get larger with age – and that can cause problems. I examined you last time you were here and yours is bigger than it should be but it’s nothing to worry about and I wouldn’t recommend an operation. But I’m worried about you walking along your landing at night. Will you let Thumper put a gate at the top of your staircase?’

‘A gate? What for?’

‘It would stop you falling down the stairs when you get up to go to the toilet in the middle of the night.’

‘Ah, that’s a good idea,’ said Mr Longwoody. ‘But how will I get downstairs in the mornings?’

‘The gate will have a catch and a spring,’ I said. ‘When you want to go downstairs you just open the gate. But if you fall against the gate it will stop you going down the stairs involuntarily.’

‘Oh yes, that’s a splendid idea! Will you arrange that or shall I?’

‘Thumper Robinson will do it for you.’

‘Oh fine. I know Thumper. He’s a good, reliable lad. I’d have liked to have had him with me in Africa.’

I couldn’t help smiling. The idea of Thumper Robinson serving in any army was quite a thought. Thumper is not someone who regards discipline as a ‘good thing’.

‘I’ll ask Mrs Barker to fix it up,’ I told him.

‘What about the cost?’ asked Mr Longwoody. ‘Shall I settle up with you now?’

‘No, no,’ I said. ‘There won’t be any charge. The NHS will provide the gate for you.’

I checked Mr Longwoody’s blood pressure which was fine, checked his heart and lungs, which were in good condition and looked at his varicose eczema, which wasn’t as bad as I’d feared. I told Mr Longwoody that I would prescribe some more cream for the eczema.

I then picked up the telephone and asked Miss Johnson to put another two packets of his blood pressure pills and a tube of steroid cream into Mr Longwoody’s jacket pocket when he left. Finally, I wrote a reply to Mrs Barker and gave it to Mr Longwoody who put it into his jacket pocket.

He then stood up, we shook hands and he left.

‘Will the NHS really pay to put a gate at the top of his stairs?’ asked Mr Munton, when Mr Longwoody had left. This was the first time he had asked a question or, to be honest, shown any interest in the patients I had seen.

‘I’m afraid I don’t think they will – not that I know of anyway.’

‘So how will you arrange to have it done? You did tell the old chap you’d fix it up for him.’

‘Oh, it won’t be a problem. I’ve got plenty of bits of suitable wood in our barn and my pal Thumper Robinson will put up the gate. Or a friend of mine who is an antiques dealer might have an old gate that we can use. Mr Longwoody lives on a small army pension and a state pension and I fear that even when put together his pensions don’t leave anything over for luxuries such as safety gates.’

‘Oh,’ said Mr Munton. ‘The old chap did seem a little wobbly. And quite senile. Didn’t anyone come with him?’

'No. He walked here by himself. He always does; winter or summer. Last winter he came here when there was two feet of snow on the road.'

'But he's suffering from dementia isn't he? He's clearly a bit confused. Aren't you worried that he'll get lost or run over on the way home?'

'He'll be fine,' I said. 'And his freedom and independence are important to him. He enjoys walking along the lanes, looking at the flowers, watching the animals.'

'Don't you think the old fellow should be on a geriatric ward or in some sort of home where he could be looked after?'

'No. He enjoys life. His neighbour helps look after him. He pays another villager to do his cleaning and his washing. He goes down to the village shop and does his own shopping and he does his own cooking though his neighbour takes him some meals. There are quite a few keeping an eye on him and he manages surprisingly well. And he isn't 'the old fellow' or 'the old chap' he's Mr Longwoody.'

Mr Munton looked at me, slightly puzzled. 'In hospital all old people are referred to by their Christian names. It makes them feel more at home.'

'How do you know? Have you asked them?'

'Well, no, not personally I haven't. Of course, I haven't.'

'Calling people by their Christian names is a way of talking down to them,' I said. 'It's demeaning and it turns them into subordinates. Are patients in the teaching hospital encouraged to address the consultants by their Christian names?'

'No, of course they aren't!' he laughed. He seemed greatly amused by the very idea of an old lady calling her surgeon 'Freddie' or referring to the ear nose and throat specialist as 'Ernie'.

'So, why should it be acceptable the other way round?'

'Well, it's rather different, isn't it?'

'No, I don't think it is different.'

'But the old chap, sorry Mr Longwood, could get run over,' said Mr Munton, abandoning this discussion and going back to the danger of an old and slightly demented man living in his own home, walking along the lanes and living a fairly independent life. 'And if he does his own cooking he might burn himself.'

'His name is Longwoody,' I told young Mr Munton. 'And it is true that he might get run over or burn himself. But look at the alternatives. I really don't think he would be happy sitting on an incontinent pad in a plastic chair in a home for old folks. He had an amazing life and he's entitled to live it out in dignity and in the way that allows him to feel comfortable, at peace with himself and with the world. He's lucky, I suppose, to live in a village where people have time to care for one another.' I didn't mention it but even Peter Marshall helped Mr Longwoody whenever he could. And although Peter usually had his eye on the bottom line, he would never cheat his older customers by giving them rotten fruit or vegetables. I knew for a fact that if they were short of money he would knock a few pence off his prices.

'I never think of old people as having had 'interesting lives',' said Mr Munton with a half-hearted chuckle. 'They always just seem old. It's as though they've always been old.'

'Every old person I've ever met has had an interesting life,' I told him without exaggeration. 'When he was a boy, Mr Longwoody met Cecil Rhodes in Africa. He served for a while with Baden Powell and he also served with T.E.Lawrence. He has some amazing old photographs which were taken in Lawrence's cottage in Dorset. He remembers all those people very well and I've had some amazing conversations with him. Astonishingly, he was present when T.E.Lawrence saved Winston Churchill from an angry mob. He was in a group of soldiers who were inspected by Dwight D.Eisenhower.' I paused. 'To be honest, Mr Longwoody had enough adventures in his life to provide scripts for a string of war movies and for a long running soap opera.'

'Is that the Baden Powell who founded the boy scouts?'

'That's the one. He was also a General in the army.'

'I didn't know that,' said Mr Munton.

'Didn't they teach you about the Siege of Mafeking at school?'

'No, I don't think so. And I haven't heard of the other two you mentioned.'

'You've not heard of Lawrence of Arabia?'

'Oh yes, I've vaguely heard of him. Didn't he live in the 18th century or something?'

'Lawrence of Arabia was T.E.Lawrence. Mr Longwoody knew him well.'

'Oh, really?'

Mr Munton sounded very bored so I called for the next patient.

I was beginning to get the feeling that Mr Munton was not a young man whose heart was calling him towards a career in general practice. The one thing I know for certain is that no doctor can possibly make a decent family doctor unless he is interested in people. (It also helps, I suspect, if in addition he enjoys doing what he can to make their lives a little easier.)

After Mr Longwoody had set off on his journey home, I saw half a dozen patients who simply needed repeat prescriptions. Two or three patients needed to have their blood pressure checked. A couple of patients needed notes to confirm that they needed to stay off work for a little longer. And the last patient was a young woman called Ginny Whales.

Mrs Whales worked as a cashier and general assistant in a petrol station on the Lynton Road. Her husband was an AA patrolman who spent his days driving around the countryside rescuing stranded motorists, mending cars and helping people get on with their journeys. In those days a man with a screwdriver, a spanner and battery charging leads could solve most of the roadside problems he encountered. The couple lived in one of the cottages near Blackmoor Gate. Mr Whales grew prize winning carrots and Mrs Whales had the most extraordinary collection of small model lighthouses. I'd never done a formal count but Mrs Whales must have had 40 or 50 model lighthouses. They all appeared to be made out of granite. Some of the lighthouses had little clocks fitted into the granite and others had thermometers. Most had the name of the resort etched into the base. I remember that there were, among many others, 'A Present from Llandudno', 'A Present from Margate' and 'A Present from Torquay'. Some people collect old cars, some collect stamps, some collect Victorian photographs and Mrs Whales collected small, granite models of lighthouses and it is a good thing, is it not, that we are all different in our tastes and interests. If we all wanted to collect Victorian photographs then the prices would go through the roof and many collectors would be forever doomed to disappointment.

When I first saw all these little model lighthouses when visiting the Whales's home, I couldn't help thinking that they were the ugliest souvenirs I'd ever seen. And there were so many of them! They seemed to be on every available flat surface. I could understand someone receiving one as a gift from a friend or a relative and then putting it on display out of a sense of duty, but I couldn't help wondering why on earth anyone would deliberately collect so many of the darned things.

Indeed, it did occur to me that Mrs Whales had perhaps been given one of the things and had, out of politeness perhaps, foolishly thanked the donor rather too effusively before putting it out on display. Under these circumstances it is very easy for the donor to be convinced that the gift was more successful than it was. And so she (it is, I believe, usually women who are responsible for choosing souvenirs or small thank you gifts) buys another and before you know where you are the house is full of them. When there are two of these things sitting on the windowsill, it is easy for other relatives and friends to suspect that they have spotted an answer to their present buying dilemmas. Instead of buying bath salts, talcum powder or toilet roll covers made in the shape of Spanish dancers, the well-informed friends and relatives hunt for, buy and bring back small model lighthouses which appear to be made out of granite and which have little clocks or thermometers built into them – and the name of the resort engraved on the base. They do this out of kindness, of course. I had a patient who had a massive collection of small elephants. She confessed to me one day that she absolutely hated them all but that it was far too late to throw them out or to stop new ones coming.

I am forever grateful that I kept these thoughts to myself, and did not make a joke or a clever remark about the collection, for it quickly became apparent that, apart from a few which had been purchased for her by her husband, Mrs Whales had bought all the little lighthouses herself. She and I would have been forever embarrassed if I had made the tactless remark which had been sitting on the top of my tongue ready to be dispatched into the world. Moreover, she told me that she continued to collect them despite the fact that most of her friends and relatives thought they were daft things to collect. 'I'm very determined,' she said, 'My mum always said I was very stubborn. Once I've decided to do something it would take an Act of God to change my mind.'

A year ago, Mrs Whales had her second baby and, as with the first child, which had been born a couple of years earlier, she refused point blank to breast feed the baby.

Rather surprisingly for those days, Mr and Mrs Whales were, pacing their family. This really was relatively unusual in Bilbury at the time. Other young wives in the village simply had a sequence of babies, producing them with great efficiency and very little fuss.

Indeed, in those pre-sex education days, it was not uncommon for young unmarried girls to find themselves in the same situation. Contraception was still something of a hit and miss affair and there were more than a few sad stories told by girls who found themselves suddenly putting on a great deal of weight, not realising that they would lose it again in nine months' time. 'I didn't know he'd done it until he started to pull up his trousers and told me he had to go so that he could catch his bus,' was perhaps the most poignant summary of a romance that produced a permanent souvenir of the occasion.

When I pressed Mrs Whales for a reason for her reluctance to breast feed she said that she was worried that she might lose her figure.

'I don't want to have droopy boobs and nipples like chapel hat pegs,' she confessed. 'I'm only 26! My friend Elspeth breast fed her baby and now she's got boobs down to her waist. Her nipples point at the floor and are as big as thimbles! She can't wear a bikini and if she wears a posh frock and wants a bit of cleavage she has to wear a bra with enough wire in it to hold up that big bridge in San Francisco, what's it called, the Golden Gate Bridge.'

I tried to convince her of the value of breast feeding.

I patiently explained that the fluid which comes from the breast in the immediate aftermath of pregnancy, the colostrum, contains protective substances which help to guard the new born baby against infection. I explained that cows' milk, however it is formulated or presented, can never be as healthy for a baby as a mother's milk. In short, I tried to 'sell' the idea that 'breast is best'.

Mrs Whales's husband joined my campaign and he tried in vain to persuade her that he really didn't mind at all if her breasts changed in shape, size, position or all three.

But Mrs Whales was absolutely adamant.

And as she herself had confessed, she was a woman who, once she had made up her mind, could be very stubborn indeed.

For example, when her two children were born, she had made it very clear that she was a member of a substantial but overlooked minority of women who didn't want their husbands to be present at the births. 'I don't want him to see me sweating and with my hair all over the place and my make-up a complete mess,' she said. 'To be perfectly honest,' she had added, 'I'd really not be there myself. If I had a choice, I'd prefer to be a mile away having a pleasant, romantic dinner for two in a decent restaurant. But I don't suppose that's possible. I have to be there. He doesn't.'

Mrs Whales had brought her two young children to the surgery with her and it was the second baby who was the patient. He had a horrid rash on his face and was clearly in some distress.

'My mum says it's a milk allergy,' said Mrs Whales, who had clearly been crying.

'And she's right,' I said.

I explained that an allergy to cows' milk is quite common and that it affects as many as one in fifteen of all babies under the age of a year.

'Has he had any tummy problems?' I asked her.

'He's had diarrhoea, awful diarrhoea,' said Mrs Whales. 'Nothing else. Just the rash and the diarrhoea.'

'Then it's an allergy to the cows' milk,' I told her. 'I can prescribe a replacement milk that won't cause an allergy reaction.'

'My mum suggested that I try goats' milk. Do you think that would be a good idea?'

'No, I'm afraid not. Babies who are allergic to cows' milk are often allergic to goats' milk too. Just stick with the milk I'll prescribe.'

'Will he get better?'

'Very quickly. The rash will disappear and the diarrhoea will stop. I can give you some cream to ease the rash but it will go away anyway quite quickly once the cows' milk is stopped.'

'It's my fault, isn't it?' she said suddenly.

'What on earth do you mean?'

'If I'd fed him myself then he wouldn't be ill, would he?'

'Not unless you'd been drinking milk yourself.'

'Can I start breast feeding now?'

'I'm afraid it's a bit late now.'

Mrs Whales nodded.

'Please don't worry about it,' I told her. 'He'll be better very quickly. And he'll be absolutely fine.'

I wrote out the necessary prescription and told Mrs Whales to give it to Miss Johnson who would give her what she needed.

'We're going to have three and I've decided that with the next one I'm going to breast feed,' said Mrs Whales, as I handed over the prescription. She said this quite defiantly; as though it were something she had decided to do despite my advice.

'Splendid!' I said.

And I knew that if she had decided to breast feed her next baby then it would most certainly be breast fed.

There are, without doubt, times when stubbornness can be a virtue.

As the door closed behind Mrs Whales, who was my last patient of the morning, Patsy came into my consulting room carrying a tray upon which were two cups, a pot of tea, a bowl of sugar, a milk jug and a large plate of assorted biscuits.

'I thought you might need these!' my wife said, putting the tray down on my desk.

Mr Munton, who had been sitting quietly in the corner, brought his chair over and helped himself to tea and one of those biscuits which have the jam in the middle. Patsy perched on the edge of the desk.

'Hope you weren't too bored!' I said to Mr Munton.

'Bored? Oh not too much. It was rather dull in places, I suppose. There's no real drama in general practice is there? If there's a real problem I suppose you just pass the patient onto the experts in the local hospital.'

'Do you want to come with me when I do the home visits? You can see a few patients in their home environments. It's really the best way to get a feel for general practice.'

'Always remembering that it's much easier to find them on a nice sunny day than at 3.00 a.m. in the middle of a thunderstorm!' said Patsy with a light laugh. 'Especially if the patient lives at the end of a long, muddy farm track.'

Mr Munton looked at his watch. 'Oh, I'm afraid I think I'd better be getting back,' he said. 'I promised to meet my fiancée in Exeter. She's spending the morning with friends of her people. That's where we stayed last night. And then we're going straight up to London. We've got a party in Hampstead to go to this evening.'

'Fine,' I said.

To be honest I was relieved. I hadn't enjoyed having a stranger sitting in my surgery. It didn't feel right. And I didn't want him coming on my rounds with me. I know young doctors and medical students need to have a chance to see medicine 'in the raw' but there are family doctors who enjoy teaching and training young colleagues and I had already decided that I preferred to leave such work to them.

'You seem to be doing everything today!' said Mr Munton. 'The surgery and the home visits.'

'Well, there isn't anyone else to do them.'

Mr Munton thought for a moment, clearly considering something. 'So what days do you work and what days do you have free?'

Patsy looked at me and I looked at her.

'There isn't anyone else. There aren't any other partners,' I told him. 'This is a single handed practice.'

'But don't you have an arrangement with another local practice so that you can have some time off?'

'Oh no,' I said. 'The other local practices are too far away. And besides, the truth is that a doctor from outside would never be able to find some of my patients. A doctor from Lynton or Ilfracombe would be driving round all night if they tried to find some of the cottages in Bilbury. When I first came here it took me a couple of years to find my way round the village.'

'It doesn't seem big enough to be a village.'

I looked at him, a little confused.

'It seems more of a hamlet.'

'No, we have a pub and a shop and several churches so technically we're a village.'

'Is that so?'

'I believe so. As I mentioned earlier, a hamlet is a village without a church.'

'Really?' He sounded remarkably disinterested. 'And what do you do about the weekends? You surely aren't on call at the weekends as well as during the day and at night during the week!'

'Oh, yes, I'm on call at the weekends too.'

'All of the weekends?' He sounded astonished.

'All of them! There isn't anyone else to do them.'

'But if you want to go to a show in London? Or to a party?'

'We don't go to shows or first nights or to parties.'

'Mr Munton paled. The very idea of not having an endless row of neatly engraved cardboard invitations dropping through the letterbox obviously appalled him.

'So what do you do for entertainment?' he asked.

'We have each other,' said Patsy. 'My husband is always entertaining. Not long ago he managed to get himself stuck on the roof of the local public house wearing nothing but my fluffy dressing gown, a pair of wellington boots and some swimming goggles.' She laughed at the memory.

If I live to be 100, people will still be reminding me of the time when I got stuck on the roof of the Duck and Puddle wearing Patsy's dressing gown, a pair of wellington boots and some damned swimming goggles. At the time, it had all happened quite logically.

Mr Munton stared at her, obviously not sure whether she was joking.

'It's a long story,' she said.

'I was wearing a yellow sou'wester too,' I pointed out, as though this made a difference. 'But only because it was raining quite heavily at the time,' I added.

'And we have loads of videos and long playing records,' added Patsy. 'And my husband has put together a marvellous library so we're never short of books to read.'

‘A library?’ said Mr Munton, who obviously considered that an evening spent with a book would be an evening wasted.

‘Isaac Asimov once wrote that a library is a spaceship that will take you to the ends of the universe,’ I said. ‘A time machine that can take you far into the past, a teacher who knows everything and a friend who can amuse and console.’

‘Isaac who?’ said Mr Munton, puzzled. ‘I don’t think I know the name.’

I was beginning to feel very old. Mr Munton, it seemed, had not heard of any of the people I’d mentioned.

‘Isaac Asimov is a very successful American writer,’ I pointed out. ‘He’s best known for his science fiction novels but he’s also a professor of biochemistry.’

‘Oh,’ said Mr Munton, clearly unimpressed. ‘But for holidays you must hire a locum from outside. How does the locum manage? How do you arrange things if you want to go abroad? Do you get someone local to chauffeur the locum around the village?’

‘Oh no,’ laughed Patsy. ‘It’s much simpler than that. We just don’t have holidays!’

‘To be honest I don’t think the practice could afford a locum and a chauffeur,’ I added.

Mr Munton looked at us both as if we were mad.

‘And why would we want to go anywhere else?’ I asked. ‘It’s beautiful here. We have a lovely house and a marvellous garden. All our friends are round here.’

‘Besides,’ Patsy added, ‘we’ve got too many animals to look after to even think of going away.’

‘There are local boarding kennels surely?’

‘For dogs and cats,’ said Patsy. ‘But where could we take Cedric?’

‘Who is Cedric?’

‘Our pig.’

‘You have a pig?’

If we’d said we had a pet Martian in a cupboard he couldn’t have been more obviously surprised.

‘Well he’s not exactly our pig,’ explained Patsy. ‘He belongs to some very nice Americans who won him in a skittle competition at the Duck and Puddle.’

Mr Munton looked at us as if we were stark raving mad.

‘We look after him for them,’ said Patsy. ‘We send them photographs and tell them how he’s doing.’

There was an embarrassed silence. Mr Munton was obviously not comfortable to be in the home of people who took photographs of a pig to send to people in America.

‘So what do you do with your spare time?’ Patsy asked him.

‘Oh, I’m bit of a party animal,’ laughed Mr Munton. ‘My fiancée’s family are very musical,’ he went on. ‘Her brother is an actor so we go to a lot of parties and openings and that sort of thing. We know all sorts of really famous and important people.’

‘Oh how exciting!’ said Patsy. ‘What’s your fiancée’s brother’s name?’

‘Ludovic Parsons. You might not have heard of him. He avoids cheap publicity and just concentrates on making good connections in the theatrical world.’

Patsy looked at me. We both shook our heads.

‘He mainly does stage work,’ said Mr Munton. ‘He’s appeared in several London shows.’

‘Ah,’ I said, trying to sound respectful.

‘Of course he knows quite a few people who’ve been on television,’ he said. ‘The girl in that washing powder advert that everyone is talking about will probably be there at this evening’s party. And her boyfriend plays the giant duckling in that toilet roll advert that the experts all say is pretty well guaranteed to win all the advertising awards this autumn.’

Patsy and I nodded and tried to look awed.

There was something about Mr Munton which made me feel slightly uncomfortable.

Maybe I was just feeling slightly paranoid, but I got the impression that he was sitting in judgement on me and, indeed, on my patients and their lives. Looking back, I think that the problem was that he was just so damned superior.

‘So what brought you to Bilbury?’ I asked. ‘Do you see yourself working in a rural, single-handed practice one day?’

It didn’t seem very likely but I couldn’t help wondering why he was in Bilbury for the day.

Mr Munton looked a little startled. ‘Oh, good heavens no!’ he said. ‘I was only here because the Dean said we all had to have some outside experience. I suppose I might go into general practice if all else fails but I was planning on a career as a hospital consultant of some kind.’

‘Right,’ I said.

‘If you manage to combine an NHS career with a decent, private practice you can make quite good money,’ said the man whose girlfriend was related to a man who knew a girl whose boyfriend played a duck in a commercial for toilet rolls.

‘Yes,’ I agreed. ‘I believe so.’

I was exhausted by him and was quietly hoping that he would leave as soon as possible.

‘Actually, I didn’t ask to spend time in a general practice,’ said Mr Munton. ‘I was rather hoping to be able to spend the day with one of the chaps in Harley Street. But it was all rather arbitrary. They didn’t let us choose what we did with our day’s practical experience. I think they put our names into a hat and then just allocated us according to chance.’

‘Couldn’t you say ‘No’?’ asked Patsy.

‘Oh no, it was one of those voluntary experiences that are compulsory.’

‘Well, I’m sorry you were disappointed with what you were given,’ I said.

‘That’s OK,’ said Mr Munton. ‘Not your fault at all.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I don’t think it was.’

‘Oh, one thing I meant to ask you, was that a normal surgery?’ said Mr Munton, helping himself to another biscuit. This time he took one of the biscuits with cream in the middle. ‘I have to write some sort of report. And you seemed to spend a lot of time with old people. Do you think they’re worth all that effort?’

I thought for a moment. ‘Oh yes, I think it was a fairly normal surgery,’ I replied. ‘It was shorter than most of my surgeries and in the summer the surgeries are much, much longer, of course.’ I really didn’t want to respond to his comment about my older patients though I confess it rather alarmed me that a final year medical student should think that way. I was actually rather glad that he didn’t want to go into general practice.

He frowned. ‘Why are the surgeries longer in the summer?’

‘Because we have a lot of visitors in the area; people come in with sunburn, cuts and grazes, insect stings and food poisoning.’

‘Insect stings? People come to you after they’ve been stung by an insect?’

‘Of course they do. A horse fly bite can hurt a hell of a lot. And people get rather worried.’

‘A horse fly? What’s one of those?’

‘Large, stoutly built flies which live on blood. Well, I think it’s only the female which does the biting. They get their name because they take bites out of horses. But they also rather enjoy munching on people.’

‘Oh,’ he said, obviously quite bored by this short dissertation. ‘I see.’ He still seemed puzzled. ‘Why would people come to this part of the world for their holidays?’

‘Beautiful countryside and coast, lots of walking, wild birds to be seen, beaches and, even in bad weather, the majesty of the sea!’ I said. I could see that Patsy was amazed that anyone could not see the attractions of a part of the world where she had been brought up and had spent all her life.

‘Oh, I see,’ said Mr Munton, who obviously didn’t see at all.

‘What did you think of the surgery you saw?’ asked Patsy.

Inside I winced but I wanted to hear what he had to say.

‘It all seemed rather simple,’ said Mr Munton. ‘I don’t think there was anything that a third year medical student couldn’t have dealt with.’ He paused and thought for a moment. ‘I think maybe a good many of the patients could have been dealt with by a nurse. And to be honest, I think the whole thing could have been finished in half the time. I don’t think I’d have allowed patients so much time to talk about their problems. You could speed things up quite a lot.’

Patsy and I exchanged glances.

Our rather smug medical student sounded very, very bored. I didn’t think I had ever come across anyone quite so self-satisfied. He was not, I thought, the sort of person to suffer unduly with the burden of a conscience or a sense of responsibility. I was, however, slightly surprised that he was not only confidently prepared to teach me my business but also confident that he could do so. And I got the feeling that he thought I should be grateful for his advice.

But the bottom line was that I felt quite sure that Mr Munton had ahead of him a meteoric and unstoppable rise to the very top of the profession; halting only when he had become President of at least one of the Royal Colleges and collected a knighthood or a peerage. And it occurred to me, for the umpteenth time, that worldly success often comes to those who have done nothing to deserve it and who live in blissful ignorance of the world around them and the other people in it.

I didn’t remember ever feeling quite so confident when I was a medical student. I wondered whether Mr Munton was unique or a typical example of his generation. I was not, I confess, very much interested in finding out.

‘So you’ve not been convinced that general practice is for you?’ I said.

He looked up at the ceiling as though he might find the answer written on the plasterwork. ‘No, no, certainly not. I really don't think a country practice would do for me,' he said. 'To be frank, I think I'm perhaps looking for more of a challenge. I have always rather fancied a career in dermatology. Or maybe I might consider psychiatry as a speciality. There was a psychiatrist in London who looked after all the celebrities. He was rumoured to be making a fortune. His name was Eckersley but I gather he disappeared rather suddenly. I don't know what happened to him. I think I'd like a career in some area which allowed me to earn decent money but left me plenty of time to enjoy other activities.'

He made it pretty clear that whatever speciality he chose to grace with his professional presence would be expected to be damned grateful to be chosen.

He slurped some tea and helped himself to another biscuit; a bourbon. I noticed that he was eating all the fancy ones, leaving Patsy and me the plain digestives and the rich tea biscuits.

'If I do agree to go into general practice, I would be looking for a partnership in London somewhere.'

He mentioned Kensington and St John's Wood as being more his cup of tea.

Both are parts of London where the residents all have butlers, maids, chauffeurs and au pair girls. But I didn't think Mr Munton would be prepared to deal with the health problems of the butlers, maids, chauffeurs and au pair girls.

'Must be going,' he said, putting his cup down on top of a small pile of correspondence on my desk. He gave us both a wave and headed for the door. A few moments later, I heard the sound of his sports car firing up. Daddy, I thought, must be quite rich.

I moved the cup off my pile of letters and put it back on the tray.

'He appears to be looking for more of a challenge,' said Patsy. 'I'm afraid he obviously found your morning surgery rather dull and undemanding.'

I looked at her.

'Are you going to have to entertain any more of these young almost-doctors?'

'No.' I looked at my watch. 'My teaching days started two and half hours ago and finished a minute ago.'

I was actually rather depressed. I had been patronised by a very supercilious young man and I felt vaguely dissatisfied with my professional self. It had not been an exciting surgery. I hadn't saved any lives but as far as I was aware I hadn't killed anyone either. On balance, I thought I had probably made a couple of people's lives a little easier, which is often all a country doctor can hope to do.

'Oh goody,' said Patsy.

'He ate all the best biscuits.'

'I know. He ate three jammy dodgers. There were only three in the box.'

'What are jammy dodgers?' I asked.

'The round biscuits with the jam in the middle.'

'Oh, I like those.'

'Me too. Did you know that they're named after that character Roger the Dodger in *The Beano* comic?'

'I didn't know that,' I said. 'If I'd strangled Mr Munton I could have buried him in the garden. We could have said he'd left as planned but had talked about driving up to Scotland to shoot some grouse. I don't think the world would have missed him very much.'

'Are you allowed to strangle snooty medical students?'

'Oh I think so. As long as you don't strangle more than two a year.'

Patsy sighed. 'Too late now. He's gone. Another missed opportunity.'

Just then the telephone went.

I listened for a while, made a few noises of appreciation, said 'thank you' and 'thank you very much' and then put the telephone receiver back on its rest.

'Do you have to go out?' asked Patsy.

'No. That was Mr Longwoody's daughter. She lives in Scotland and she'd been down here a couple of days ago just to see how her father was doing. She apologised for having to rush back without seeing me but just rang to say thank you to me for looking after her father. She wanted to tell me that she was pleased to know that he was in such good hands.'

Patsy gave me a hug.

The telephone call from Mr Longwoody's daughter could not have come at a more opportune moment for it banished the strange feeling of discontent and professional dissatisfaction which had lingered after Mr Munton's departure.

We all need a little reassurance from time to time.

The Detective

The summer was in full swing when my friend William brought his family down to Bilbury for the weekend.

William is a GP who works in a large, modern practice near to the town of Wolverhampton, right in the heart of the English Midlands. He is probably the brightest person I have ever met. When we talk he always seemed to be giving me his full attention, but I could never quite dismiss from my mind the thought that he only needed to use one part of his brain to concentrate fully on our conversation. I was always conscious that while talking to me his brain was dealing with half a dozen other issues at the same time, and that he was giving them his full attention too, in the way that Grand Masters such as Bobby Fischer could play two dozen games of chess simultaneously and, if asked to do so, play them all blindfolded.

When William got married I was his best man. His wife, Brenda, was Patsy's best friend outside Bilbury. I think the friendship helped them both a great deal; since they were both married to family doctors they had some understanding of the strange and sometimes demanding world in which we live.

The fact is, however, that although William and I were both GPs, and theoretically did the same jobs, we lived completely different lives and practised in very different ways.

William worked with a number of other doctors and a vast support staff. Most of his patients lived in neatly labelled houses or in blocks of flats. The streets where he worked were well lit and everywhere he went the roads were wide enough for cars to travel in two different directions at once. William had 2,500 patients on his personal list, and he and his partners and their medical assistants looked after a huge practice of 15,000 patients. The practice was so big that it even employed its own accountant and the accountant had an assistant!

I worked by myself with Patsy and Miss Johnson helping to answer the telephone, organise the pharmacy and generally do everything that in William's practice was done by a team of receptionists and ancillaries. I had only around 600 patients (all of whom I knew by name) and they lived in around 250 houses and cottages scattered around a fairly large area of countryside. None of the homes I visited had numbers and some did not even have names. The roads on which I drove were hardly ever wide enough to allow traffic to travel in two directions at once and without passing places and gateways it would have been impossible for anyone to go anywhere. When I went out in the car, I spent almost as much time in reverse gear as in a forward gear.

Our practices were, in every imaginable way, quite different.

But in the end our work was, of course, exactly the same.

In William's surgery, a patient would enter his consulting room, sit down and present a history of his symptoms, signs and worries.

And in my surgery in Bilbury, a patient would enter my consulting room, sit down and present a history of his or her symptoms, signs and worries.

No difference.

The day was still warm and William and I were sitting in the summerhouse, enjoying the remains of another wonderful day. Patsy and Brenda were in the house getting the children ready for bed. William's son, Peter, was old enough to believe that he should be allowed to stay up with the grown-ups so William and Brenda let him stay up for an extra half an hour. Fortunately, Bilbury Grange, a rambling old house, had enough bedrooms for William's two children to have one each.

William and Brenda come to see us as often as they could and they were always welcome. Benjamin Franklin, writing in his *Poor Richard's Almanack*, wrote that 'fish and visitors both stink after three days' and as far as many visitors are concerned he was undoubtedly right. But William and Brenda, and their children, never 'stank', never annoyed and never outstayed their welcome.

I had taken a bag of sunflower hearts out with me and I put a couple of handfuls on the ground just outside the summer house. William and I watched as a tame pheasant wandered up the garden, headed straight for the sunflower hearts and proceeded to take his fill. When he'd finished, he wiped his beak carefully on the grass, first this way and then that way, and then headed for the stone bird bath which I kept filled with water throughout the year. When he'd drunk to his satisfaction, he hopped down off the bird bath and again wiped his beak on the grass. He always wiped it half a dozen times.

As the pheasant wandered away, one of our tame squirrels arrived outside the summer house. He finished off most of the remaining sunflower hearts and then he too wandered off to the bird bath. He leapt up and took a long drink. Experts on squirrel behaviour sometimes claim that squirrels never drink water. Well ours did. Maybe the squirrels hadn't bothered to read the textbooks.

Finally, a robin appeared and finished off the few remaining sunflower hearts before he too flew to the bird bath for a drink.

‘Does that happen every evening?’ asked Will, who had been watching this display in quiet astonishment.

‘Most evenings,’ I said. ‘Sometimes there are two or three squirrels and a couple of blackbirds.’

We sat in silence for a while longer; looking out at nothing in particular. A few rabbits appeared at the far end of the lawn. They chased each other around and ate a good deal of grass and some daisies.

‘I had a medical student here for a day last month,’ I said.

‘From Birmingham University?’

‘Yes.’

Will and I both attended the same medical school at the same time. That was how we met.

‘They managed to persuade you to take one, did they?’

‘Only because they were clever enough to give me several months’ notice. I said ‘yes’ because the date they suggested seemed to be a long way away.’

‘They’re crafty like that,’ said Will.

‘Did you have one?’

‘Oh no! Good heavens no! We had one last year.’

‘Didn’t go well?’

‘Absolutely bloody disaster! They sent us some girl of about fourteen. Well, she looked fourteen. She knew everything. She was so full of herself that there wasn’t any room for anything else.’

‘Maybe we’re getting old,’ I said.

‘We are. But it wasn’t just that. They seem to be giving them ‘confidence pills’ these days.’

‘I’m afraid I won’t be having another student.’

We sat in silence again and watched the midges doing what midges do in the early evening.

‘Do you mind?’ asked Will, taking his pipe out of his jacket pocket and holding it up for approval. The request was a courtesy. He knew that I would never say ‘No’. When he is at home he smokes only in the garden shed, in the greenhouse or on the patio.

‘Of course not,’ I said. ‘Is Brenda still nagging you to give it up?’

‘Brenda and everyone at the surgery,’ confessed William with a sheepish grin. ‘Even Peter has a go at me now.’

I watched as he took out the paraphernalia which smokers always carry with them. The tobacco pouch, the box of smokers’ matches, the little silver gadget used for pressing down the tobacco and cleaning out the bowl – all came out of his pockets and were placed carefully on the wooden table in front of him. It’s the one thing I always envy pipe smokers. ‘That’s a new pouch, isn’t it?’ I asked, nodding towards the tobacco pouch he was using.

‘Brenda bought it for my birthday,’ said Will. ‘The old one had a hole in it and was looking a bit ropey.’

‘But Brenda doesn’t approve of you smoking!’

‘No, she doesn’t. But she knows that an occasional pipe full of tobacco helps me to relax.’ He paused, opened the pouch and took out some tobacco. ‘Did I tell you that Jerry had another heart attack? It was quite a severe one this time.’

I said he hadn’t and that I was sorry to hear it.

I had never met Jerry but Will had talked about him. He was one of the partners in William’s practice. ‘How old is he?’

‘Forty six. He doesn’t smoke but he drinks too much beer and he’s hugely overweight. He has always rather reminded me of a character out of a novel by P.G.Wodehouse. It is difficult to say ‘Tchah!’ without sounding like a bad actor playing the villain in a Victorian melodrama but Jerry manages it perfectly. I think it is his favourite saying. And he is the only person I’ve ever heard using the word Egad!’

‘Forty six is young. That’s too young; far too young.’

Whatever your age it is always rather alarming to hear of people in their 40s becoming seriously ill.

‘It certainly is,’ agreed William. ‘That’s his third heart attack in two years. They’ve scheduled him for heart surgery and he’s going to retire. We’re looking for a replacement partner.’ He packed some of the tobacco into the bowl of his pipe, pressing it down first with his thumb and then with his little silver gadget. ‘I don’t suppose you’d be interested?’

‘No thank you,’ I said immediately. ‘But thank you for asking.’

‘I told the others I would ask you first. They all agreed. We’re making quite good money now. We have quite a bit of insurance work and we look after the staff in a couple of large, local factories so we get extra money for that. And you’d only be on call for one or two nights a week – instead of the seven nights a week you’re on call now.’

‘I’m flattered by the offer.’

‘Talk it over with Patsy before you give me a definite ‘No’. Brenda would love it if you two moved up into our area. There are some lovely houses on the market. You won’t find anything as big as this place, of course. And you don’t get such big gardens in the town. But you could get somewhere pretty nice near to us. One of the biggest estate agents is a patient of mine and we play golf most Sundays. He’d be happy to help you find something suitable.’

I said I would talk to Patsy. I knew what she would say but I said I would tell her about the offer all the same.

We sat in pleasant silence for a while. You can do that with old friends. I sometimes think that silence is the true sign of friendship. Will puffed at his pipe and I enjoyed the aroma second hand. The smoke kept the midges away, for which I was very grateful. All insects seem to regard my body as a fast food restaurant. The smoke from William’s pipe even kept the horse-flies away.

‘We had a break-in at the surgery two weeks ago,’ said Will suddenly and apropos of absolutely nothing. I like conversations which veer from one topic to another without any warning. Most of the conversations which I had with William were like that.

‘Drugs?’

‘Yes, someone broke into the main part of the building, by-passed the alarm and stole our stock of morphine.’

‘Did they just steal the morphine?’

‘No, that was the odd thing. When the police came, it was the dangerous drug cupboard that we checked first, of course. But then our senior pharmacist checked the rest of the stock and discovered that some other stuff was missing too. The petty cash hadn’t been touched but there were some other pills missing.’

‘Your senior pharmacist! How many pharmacists do you have?’

‘Two and a trainee.’

‘Good heavens!’

‘We have a special manager to look after the staff now. She’s called a Personnel Manager. She organises the rotas and holidays, supervises wages, bonuses and so on. She even handles the recruitment process when we need new receptionists, cleaners and so on. She’s very good. She used to work for one of the big car companies. She wants us to buy one of these new office sized computers and keep all our staff records in it. She says we ought to be able to keep the accounts on the computer too. My partners are a bit sceptical but I think I’ll be able to talk them round. Mrs Bird, that’s the new personnel manager, reckons that one day doctors will keep their patients’ records on computers.’

‘But not yet, surely?’

I must have sounded terrified for William laughed. ‘No, I don’t think we’ll be doing that for a few years. But it would certainly be good to keep the accounts on a computer. They make special software now that deals with all the financial stuff.’

‘Crumbs.’

‘Is Miss Johnson still your entire staff?’

‘Yes. And she only works part time. She keeps my accounts in a little black notebook. She buys a new one each year from F.W.Woolworth in Barnstaple and she keeps the old ones on a shelf in the cupboard under the stairs. Did the police catch your thief?’

‘They did. And I’m proud to say that I had a Sherlock Holmes moment which contributed to them catching him.’

‘Tell me more!’

‘In addition to clearing out all our morphine, the thief also took 200 diuretic tablets, 200 digitalis tablets, 400 blood pressure tablets and four bottles of a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory for arthritis.’

‘Aha!’

‘Exactly! You’ve guessed. It seemed a reasonable supposition that the thief might be a patient of ours who was taking pills. I talked to my partners and the reception staff and we decided we only had half a dozen patients who took that combination of pills.’

‘And five of them were little old ladies who were wheelchair bound?’

William laughed. ‘Not a bad guess. We managed to name them and it turned out that five of them were old aged pensioners who seemed unlikely to have been able to squeeze through a small window, let alone disable a fairly sophisticated alarm.’

‘And the sixth?’

‘The sixth was a bloke in his mid-40s who had heart disease and arthritis and was taking all the pills which were stolen. We knew he had a rather dodgy history. He’d been inside for drug dealing and he had a bit of a history of breaking and entering. He tries to look respectable but, sadly, he somehow manages to look like 90% of all police photo-fit pictures and he is without a doubt the sort of fellow the police are always ‘anxious to interview in connection with their enquiries’.’

‘You keep all that sort of information in your files?’

‘No, no! We’re not that efficient. But one of our receptionists lives in the same street as this chap. She was the one who spotted his name on the list of possible suspects.’

‘Together with the five pensioners?’

‘Exactly. Our suspicions were confirmed when we looked for his medical records. The idiot had taken his records out of one of the filing cabinets, presumably to check on the names of the drugs he was taking, and then he’d just left his notes on the counter in the pharmacy. None of us would ever do that. The practice manager is very strict about making sure that all the records go back into the proper filing cabinet when they’re finished with.’

‘So what did you do?’

‘It was a bit tricky, really. We had a meeting but couldn’t decide whether it was ethical to give his name to the police as a suspect. We rang the lawyers at the Medical Defence Union and we asked someone at the British Medical Association and everyone we spoke to said it would be a bit dodgy to give his name because we’d only identified him by looking at his medical records. One of my partners thought we could perhaps just sort of suggest the idea of the burglary being done by a patient to the police and let them get a warrant to check our records but none of us liked that idea. It seemed totally unethical.’

‘So, what the devil did you do?’

‘I went round to his home that evening, banged on his door and told him we wanted our drugs back or else we’d tell the police.’

‘You did what?’ I was astonished.

‘What else could we do? We couldn’t let him get away with it. And we certainly didn’t want all that morphine on the local market. We have a big enough drug addiction problem as it is. We don’t carry all that much morphine in stock but these drug dealers cut the stuff and turn a few dozen doses into a few hundred doses.’

‘What did the chap say?’

‘He was a bit threatening at first but I told him that everyone at the practice knew I was calling on him and that if anything happened to me the police would be called.’

‘Did he admit taking the stuff?’

‘Oh, he mumbled about being at a football match but I just stared at him and waited and eventually he confessed.’

‘Did you get it all back?’

‘Everything. Every last phial and tablet. And I told him he had to pay for the broken window and the call out fee to the alarm people. I even got him to recommend a better alarm system.’

‘And the police?’

‘We told them that the thief had returned everything. We said he must have felt guilty. The police were happy enough to be able to put it down as a solved case.’

I congratulated Will and told him I thought he was a braver man than I would have been.

‘Oh, I wasn’t worried too much,’ he said. ‘The fellow is just a lobcock. He has no myrmidons and I guessed he’d turn out to be a mugwump.’

I laughed out loud.

William, who was also laughing, then admitted that before coming down to Bilbury he had spent some time finding odd, old-fashioned names for individuals with slightly dodgy habits.

‘I know a myrmidon is an obedient follower, but what the devil is a lobcock and who on earth is a mugwump?’ I asked him.

‘A lobcock is someone who is a blundering fool, someone a bit stupid, and a mugwump is someone who backs down when they’re under pressure.’

I liked William’s new words so much that I dug out a notebook and together we began to create a new list of slightly archaic words which we thought deserved to be revived.

After that, we sat for another half an hour in the summerhouse talking about everything and nothing, as friends will when they have a little time and haven’t seen each other for a while.

When it became chilly we went indoors.

I lit a log fire and I insisted on William telling Patsy the story of his Sherlock Holmes moment.

Patsy was as impressed as I had been. And rather startled at William’s courage in going round to the fellow’s house to confront him.

I then dug out all the dictionaries I could find and William and I went through them searching for more odd words to put into our latest list. (The resultant list is at the back of this book.)

That evening, as we got ready for bed, I told Patsy about William’s offer of a partnership in his practice in the Midlands.

‘Do you want to accept it?’ she asked.

I looked at her and raised an eyebrow but didn’t say anything.

‘Thank heavens,’ Patsy said. She paused and thought about it for a moment. ‘But it was very kind of him to ask.’

‘He asked me to mention it to you and I said I would.’

‘Will he be upset at your turning him down?’

‘No, I don’t think he seriously expected us to take the offer. He’s asked before and always had the same answer.’

‘Point out that if we moved up to the Midlands, he and Brenda wouldn’t be able to come down to Bilbury for the weekend,’ said Patsy.

‘Good idea,’ I said. ‘If he’d thought about that he probably wouldn’t have offered me the job in the first place!’

The Carpenter

Mr Horace Berry walked into the consulting room like a man with too many legs and sat down with a thump which I feared would break the chair. He was massively overweight and he managed to look miserable and bad tempered at the same time.

Mr Berry was a descendant of the famous hangman, James Berry. He told me this, apropos of absolutely nothing, but with obvious pride, within minutes of our first meeting. He told me that James Berry had achieved unwanted notoriety in the 19th century for attempting three times to hang James Lee, the Babbacombe murderer, and failing every time. The fiasco had taken place at Exeter prison and after the third attempt had proved unsuccessful, the hanging had been cancelled and Mr Lee's sentence had been commuted to life imprisonment. (In view of the connection with my patient, there is a brief account of the attempted hanging, why it failed and the prisoner's subsequent life, in one of the appendices at the back of this book.)

In addition to having such a distinguished ancestor, Mr Berry was a combative sort of person; the sort of fellow who, if he saw a fight (whether physical or verbal) would probably not be able to resist the temptation to get involved.

And he believed, quite firmly, that all his health problems were as a result of his having given up work.

'I was perfectly healthy until I was forced to stop working,' he complained baldly and quite bitterly.

Puzzled, I looked at him. Retirement can sometimes cause depression and a sense of worthlessness but I hadn't heard of it causing physical health problems.

'I was as fit as a fiddle when I working,' continued Mr Berry defiantly. 'It was having to give up work that made me ill.'

He spoke with great certainty, as though he had been given official confirmation, in triplicate, of his suspicion.

His wife, who was sitting next to him, nodded slightly, as if in confirmation.

I knew Mrs Berry, his wife, quite well. She had been to see me several times because she suffered from chronic blepharitis, a condition affecting her eyelids. The tiny oil glands at the base of the eyelashes become clogged and the result can be irritation and red eyes. To make matters worse, Mrs Berry often developed small but annoying infections which affected her eyelids.

After I had shown Mrs Berry how to use cotton buds to clean the edges of her eyelids, she usually managed to deal with these problems herself but occasionally she needed help. On the day about which I write, however, she was in my surgery in a supporting role.

'So, what can I do for you?' I asked him.

'I get pains in my knees and my hips and in my back too. I want you to do something about that. You need to give me something to take. And I get tired and out of breath if I do much walking.'

'When did you retire?'

He answered instantly. 'I stopped work in the autumn of 1963,' he said. 'My last day of work was Friday 25th of October.'

His wife nodded her agreement. 'Friday the 25th,' she confirmed.

'Is it not possible that the health problems you've acquired might simply be a result of your getting older?' I asked, hoping that the enquiry sounded moderately tactful.

'Oh no,' he said quite definitely.

'Have you put on weight since you retired?'

'Of course I have! I wasn't always this fat. When I was working I was busy all the time.'

'Do you eat more now than you did when you were working?'

'A little, I suppose.' He shrugged, defiantly, defensively. 'There's nothing much else to do, is there?'

I suspected that Mr Berry had always been a well-built man. But I guessed that during the years of his retirement he had gradually grown beyond well-built, gone at quite a pace through overweight, raced through outsized and finally, settled comfortably into obese.

'When I was working I was fine. I had no aches or pains. I could run a mile and climb a tree,' insisted Mr Berry. He sighed. It was a long, sad sigh that ended with a whistling wheeze. I rather doubted the claims he had made about his ability to run a mile and climb a tree. I suspected that it had probably been quite a few decades since he'd been able to run anywhere or climb anything more than a stepladder. 'Now I have a job to get up and down the stairs,' he complained. He turned to his wife for support. 'Isn't that so mother?'

Mrs Berry, who looked as though her mind was somewhere else, nodded her agreement.

I wondered how she felt about being called 'mother' since they had no children.

‘Mind you, I’m not complaining,’ said Mr Berry who seemed to me to be doing exactly that. He moved his bulk on the chair and the chair’s legs creaked in distress. In horse racing terms they were carrying top weight. ‘I’ve had a good life and the missus and I have had a long and happy life together.’ He turned to his wife and patted her on the knee.

‘A long and happy life together,’ repeated Mrs Berry. She then thought for a moment before looking at him and then at me. ‘Happy for him and long for me.’

Having delivered this unexpected bon mot, she cackled, sounding remarkably like one of Macbeth’s not so jolly witches sitting round the cooking pot and enjoying the warmth of their camp fire.

Mr Berry who looked as though he’d left his sense of humour somewhere but couldn’t remember where he’d put it, looked at her sternly.

‘What did you do for a living?’ I asked him, thinking it was time to change the subject a little.

‘What was my job?’

‘Yes. What was your job?’

‘I was a carpenter. I was a very good carpenter wasn’t I, mother?’ He even managed to sound combative when making a bald statement such as this.

His wife nodded.

‘Where did you work?’

‘I worked for a kitchen fitting company. We did bespoke kitchens. We used all the best materials and made beautiful kitchen furniture: cupboards, worktops and so on. I even used to make free standing tables that were designed to match the work surfaces and to fit into available spaces.’

I could hear the pride in his voice and I thought that I was, for the first time, beginning to understand him a little. I have always believed that it is often impossible for a general practitioner to treat his patients well unless he understands a little about their lives, their hopes and their fears.

‘What happened?’

‘What do you mean, ‘what happened?’?’

‘Why did you lose your job?’

‘Oh. The company I worked for went bust. We were destroyed by these companies which sell ready-made kitchens. They sell rubbish. All their stuff is made out of plastic and hardboard and plywood. Unskilled workmen just glue it all together. Superficially it looks good and it’s a lot cheaper than hand-made furniture built out of real wood so they sell a lot of it. We couldn’t compete so we went bust and I lost my job. They should line up all those bastards and shoot them.’

‘And you haven’t worked since?’ I asked. I assumed that the bastards he wanted shooting were the men putting together the cheap kitchen furniture.

‘There’s no work in North Devon for a carpenter,’ said Mr Berry. ‘I applied for a job at one of the shipyards but they weren’t hiring skilled men. They just had openings for apprentices. I tried for a place at one of the local builders but they weren’t hiring either. They don’t have enough work. These days, people prefer to buy that Swedish rubbish you put together yourself. It’s a hell of a lot cheaper than proper stuff.’

‘So you haven’t worked since 1963?’

‘No.’

I looked at Mr Berry’s medical records. ‘And you’re 61 now?’

‘Yes.’

He looked a lot older than 61. If I’d had to guess I’d have put him at nearer 70-years-old. I told him to undress so that I could check him over.

Apart from the excess weight, there wasn’t much wrong with him. To my surprise, his blood pressure was fairly normal. The systolic pressure reading was a little high but the diastolic was fine. His heart was beating fine and I could not hear any abnormalities. It seemed to me that all his problems were caused by his weight. It was all that excess weight that was putting a strain on his back and his hips. It was all that excess weight that made it difficult for him to move about. The excess weight made it difficult for him to breathe and he even had nasty patches of eczema in the skin folds caused by his excess weight.

‘Have you tried to lose weight?’ I asked him. ‘You’d feel a lot better and be able to move about much easier if you lost a couple of stones.’

I was tempted to explain to him that knee and hip joints are designed to carry the weight of one body, not two but I thought he might explode if I did so. He seemed to be a man who was permanently angry. The fact that he could still remember the exact date when he’d finished work suggested that he was still brooding about it.

‘That’s easy for you to say!’ snapped Mr Berry.

‘I put him on a diet I found in one of my magazines,’ said Mrs Berry. ‘You eat nothing but fruit and vegetables on three days of the week, nothing but protein on Wednesdays and nothing but carbohydrates on the other days.'

I stared at her in disbelief.

'That's the diet?'

'Oh yes. They say that people lose huge amounts of weight on it. You can choose which days you eat the fruit and vegetables and which days you eat the carbohydrates.'

I turned to Mr Berry. 'How long have you been on this diet?'

'Six weeks.'

'And have you lost any weight?'

'I've lost a pound,' said Mr Berry. He said this proudly, and clearly expected a round of applause though I guessed he would probably make do with a word of praise.

'Congratulations!' I said, trying not to sound in the slightest bit sarcastic.

It occurred to me that at the rate he was going it would be at least another four or five years before he managed to get his weight down to an acceptable level. Looking at him I wondered if he was going to live long enough to lose the weight he needed to lose.

'What hobbies do you have?' I asked him, still trying to find out more about him and his life.

'I don't have time for hobbies,' he said. 'Never have. I've always worked hard and just wanted to sit down in the evenings and at weekends.'

'He's always read the newspaper and watched the television in the evenings,' said Mrs Berry.

'I've not been one of those who spends his time in the pub,' said Mr Berry. 'I prefer to stay at home, with the wife, and save my money.'

'We have a job making ends meet these days,' added Mrs Berry. 'I make a little extra by doing a little book-keeping for one or two people. I help Gilly with her accounts.'

'Gilly Parsons at the Duck and Puddle?' I enquired. Gilly and her husband Frank are the joint landlords of the village pub.

'Yes,' nodded Mrs Berry.

'You don't do any gardening?' I said to Mr Berry. Many retired men in the village are proud of their gardens. I know quite a few who grow most of their own vegetables and produce more than their families can eat.

'Never been keen on it,' said Mr Berry. 'Mother looks after the garden. Cuts the grass and so on. I'd do it if I could but my hips won't let me.'

'I think you need a better, more effective diet,' I told him. 'You need to lose more than a pound a month.'

Mr Berry looked at me rather fiercely. 'How much more?'

'I think you ought to be able to lose two pounds a week. That would mean you would be losing half a stone in a month. And in six months you'd be much fitter and healthier.'

'Half a stone a month!'

'Absolutely!' I said.

But I really didn't think that just losing weight was going to be enough to make Mr Berry feel more content and I rather suspected that just being fitter and healthier weren't going to be enough to give him the incentive he needed. He needed something else to aim for. He needed a purpose. We all need a purpose in our lives and since he had lost his job, Mr Berry's life had been pretty well without any purpose. He'd just been marking time and there was no real meaning to his life.

'We'll try your diet,' said Mrs Berry firmly.

I took one of my diet booklets out of a drawer in my desk and handed it to her. When I first took over the practise, I knew that I would be faced with quite a few patients who needed to lose weight. I therefore prepared a booklet containing advice on losing weight and had a thousand printed at a shop in Barnstaple. Since I'd been in practice, I had distributed a fifth of them – with quite a number of those going to visitors and holidaymakers. Patsy thought that I'd perhaps printed rather too many and I agreed with her that I had, perhaps, been rather ambitious when ordering a thousand copies for a practice that had only 600 patients.

'Have you thought about doing a little carpentry again?' I asked Mr Berry.

'I told you – there are no jobs,' he snapped. 'If there had been any jobs going I'd have applied.' I got the feeling that if we had been sitting in a pub he would have stood up and invited me outside.

'I realise that there aren't any jobs,' I said. 'I wasn't suggesting that you try working for someone else. I meant working for yourself.'

Puzzled, he looked at me. It was obviously something he had never considered. 'My working days are over,' he said, as though he were 98-years-old and had already been measured for his coffin. This was clearly something he had told himself and come to believe.

Robert Browning encouraged us to believe that 'the best is yet to be' but there is a certain breed of Englishmen (and women) who sometimes feel more comfortable assuming that the worst, not the best, is yet to come. It is, I suppose, easier to deal with the inevitable exigencies and disappointments encountered in life when you are not expecting too much.

‘Do you still have your tools?’ I asked him. I was pretty sure of the answer since I knew that most skilled workmen had their own tools and guarded them rather jealously.

‘Of course I do. They’re in a box in the shed. I haven’t touched them for years. But I wrapped them in oiled cloths.’

‘And do you have somewhere that you could work?’

‘We have the shed,’ said Mrs Berry. ‘It’s got a workbench.’

‘It’s full of junk,’ said Mr Berry. ‘There’s no room to move.’

‘We could easily clear it out,’ said his wife. ‘It’s mostly filled with rubbish. We could have a big bonfire.’

‘But who am I going to get to tell me what to make? And who will pay me?’ demanded Mr Berry.

‘There’s always a demand for decent furniture,’ I told him. ‘A lot of people buy old furniture because it’s better made than the new stuff. If they knew a carpenter who could make decent tables, wardrobes and beds then they might commission him to make exactly what they wanted.’

‘People buy antiques,’ said Mr Berry. ‘But that’s all they’re interested in.’

‘I don’t agree with you!’ I said. ‘Lots of people prefer to buy old furniture that was made back in Victorian and Edwardian days and most of that stuff isn’t classified as antique but it’s better made than the new flat pack stuff that seems to be so fashionable.’ I waved a hand around my surgery. ‘There’s nothing in here that’s antique but it’s old and it’s all good, solid furniture.’ I rapped my knuckles on my desk. ‘This is a good solid desk but it certainly isn’t an antique.’

‘There you are, you see!’ said Mr Berry. ‘Proper wooden furniture lasts for years. That new stuff that people build themselves won’t last ten years.’

‘No, it probably won’t,’ I agreed.

‘But how would we find people who wanted to have new furniture made for them?’ asked Mrs Berry.

‘Advertise!’ I said. ‘Peter Marshall has a noticeboard at his shop. You could pin up a card there. And you could advertise in the Parish Newsletter. It costs hardly anything to advertise there and you’d be reaching the very people you need to reach.’

Mr Berry looked uncertain. ‘You mean I should start my own business?’

‘Exactly!’

‘I’m a bit old for that, aren’t I?’

‘Don’t be daft!’ I said. ‘I bet there are a lot of people in North Devon who would jump at the chance to have some bespoke furniture made. You could make tables and cupboards to fit those odd little corners that most old houses seem to have.’

‘The doctor is right,’ said Mrs Berry. ‘Having something to do would do you a power of good. You’d be doing something you enjoy. You’ve always said that you miss your work. This is a chance to get your tools out and make some more good furniture.’

Mr Berry looked brighter for a moment and then his face clouded. ‘I could never run my own business,’ he said. ‘It would mean keeping books and accounts and doing taxes and that sort of thing. That sort of stuff was never my strong point.’

‘You’ve got the answer sitting next to you!’ I pointed out. ‘Your wife is a bookkeeper. I’m sure she’d be happy to handle the finances for you.’

‘Of course I would!’ said Mrs Berry. ‘I’d love to. We would be running our own little business and doing it together.’

Mr Berry did not look convinced.

I have found that on the whole, the elderly tend to be less enthusiastic about taking risks than the young. The young are reckless risk takers because the only thing they know for sure is that they are immortal. Older folk are far more conscious of death and their own mortality than the young. They are cautious because they know that death is hanging around, leaning on the next lamppost, waiting for them, scythe at the ready, and they are anxious to cheat the inevitable for as long as possible. They prefer to keep their heads down and to leave plenty of room in their lives for the problems and the emergencies which they know are an inevitable part of life. Older folk worry more because they are aware how easily things can go wrong and just how much life likes to bowl a googly right at the moment when you’re expecting a straight ball.

Eventually, when he left the surgery, Mr Berry had agreed that he and his wife would write out a few advertisements and see what happened. And he had agreed to give up the magazine diet that wasn’t working and to try my diet sheet.

Within six months, Mr Berry had lost three stones and he was looking like a different man. He was no longer complaining about his hips or his knees and he had far less difficulty in getting about.

I saw Mr Berry driving his new (but second hand) truck a year or so later. There was a brand new oak wardrobe in the back of the truck. I was just coming out of a cottage down near Softly's Bottom and I waved him down.

'How's business?' I asked him.

'Fantastic!' he replied, winding down his window. 'I can't keep up with the orders. I've got a pair of bedside tables and a television cabinet to make before the end of the month. I'm even getting work from outside the village. Last week we had a phone call from someone in Exeter who wants me to make a kitchen table for them.' He grinned and patted his now much flatter stomach. 'Being back at work has made me healthier too!' He obviously still believed that it was working that kept him fit. In a way he was right, of course.

'I'm glad things are going well!' I said.

'Brilliant, absolutely brilliant!' said Mr Berry. 'I'm so glad I had that idea to start out on my own. I often tell mother that it was the best idea I've ever had and the best thing I've ever done – apart from marrying her, of course.'

I told him I was very pleased to hear his good news.

'I've rather proved my point, don't you think, doctor?'

'What point was that?' I asked, rather puzzled.

'I said I was ill because I'd lost my job,' said Mr Berry. 'I don't think you believed me, did you?'

'Well…' I began.

'You can't argue with the facts! I'm working again and now I'm as fit as a fiddle,' he said, proud of himself. 'When I was working I was well. When I stopped working I was ill. Now I'm working and I'm well again. Proof of the pudding, eh? Isn't that what they say?'

'Proof of the pudding!' I agreed, with a nod.

He grinned, winked and put the truck into gear all at the same time. 'Must go – I've got to get this delivered before lunch.'

And with a slight crashing of the gears he was off.

Carlton and Hermione Thorley

'Oh, and there was a call asking you to visit Mr Thorley at home,' said Miss Johnson, when she'd finished giving me the list of my morning calls. 'It's not urgent but they'd like you to call in sometime.'

'Thorley?' I said, puzzled. 'I don't think I know anyone called Thorley. Is he a patient of ours?'

'He's not on our records so he isn't registered as a patient. But I believe they've been living in the village for nearly three years now. Mrs Thorley very occasionally helps with flower arranging at St Dymphnas.'

'And they're definitely living in Bilbury?'

'Yes, I believe so.'

'They moved here three years ago?'

'I think it was about that long ago.'

I frowned. 'I don't remember hearing of anyone called Thorley.'

'I believe they're very shy,' said Miss Johnson. 'They tend to keep themselves to themselves. I've not seen them out and about in the village. I've not seen them at all – apart from Mrs Thorley helping with the flowers from time to time.'

'Whereabouts do they live?'

'Buttercup Cottage.'

'Is that the little pink cottage on the road to Barnstaple?'

'That's the one. It's set back from the road a little way and a lot of people go past without noticing that it's there. It used to be painted yellow. I think the people who lived there before the Thorleys were fond of yellow. And because they'd painted it yellow they called it Buttercup Cottage.'

'And now it's pink?'

Miss Johnson nodded.

'And the Thorleys are not just there on holiday?'

'Oh no, I think they live here in the village. Peter Marshall says that Mrs Thorley pops into his shop quite regularly. Peter says she buys a lot of mincemeat.'

'Mincemeat?'

'She buys it every week apparently. At this time of the year, Peter gets it in just for her. And Peter says she also buys a lot of icing sugar and parsnips.'

When you live in a small village there isn't much that the other villagers don't know. And Miss Johnson is a news gatherer par excellence. If I were ever to run a local paper I would hire her to write the gossip column. 'And so they've definitely moved into the village?'

'I would think so.'

'Right.' I sighed. 'Well, maybe they just like a lot of roast parsnips and have mincemeat instead of marmalade on their morning toast.'

Miss Johnson gave me that look she gives me when she thinks I'm being silly. Miss Johnson isn't entirely sure that she approves of frivolity but she's far too polite to say anything.

To be honest, I was slightly surprised by her news about the Thorleys.

Most people who move into the village like to register with their local general practitioner within a month or so at the most. It was definitely unusual for people to move into the village and live there for three years without popping in to sign up with their GP.

'OK. I'll call in and see what they want.'

And so three quarters of an hour later I drove up to Buttercup Cottage (in all its glorious pinkness) and realised that there was absolutely nowhere to leave the car. The 1930 Rolls Royce 20/25 which I inherited from my predecessor, Dr Brownlow, does eight miles to the gallon when it wants to and rather less when it doesn't, and, as my friend Patchy Fogg once said, it is a car which was definitely built for travelling rather than arriving. It is an absurdly impractical vehicle for a country doctor and it was certainly not built for parking anywhere other than, possibly, on an aircraft runway. I purred along the lane and eventually found an unused gateway where I managed to squeeze the car onto the verge.

After I'd got out of the car I leant, for a few moments, on the five barred gate. The one thing I really like about five barred gates is that, whatever their size and however they are hung, they always seem to be a perfect height for leaning on. I watched the sheep playing in the field and I recognised the paint marks some of them bore – they belonged to Patsy's father, Mr Kennet. I hadn't realised the field was his. Mr Kennet owns a good deal of Bilbury.

As I watched the sheep peacefully grazing and occasionally playing 'hide and seek' and 'king of the castle', it occurred to me that animals never start wars. You never hear of a dozen sheep starting a revolution, breaking away from the flock and announcing that they are taking over the left hand side of the field because it has the lushest grass, do you?

Overhead, jackdaws were swooping and playing in the sky and in the middle distance I could see a raven perched on a fence post. Unlike other members of the crow family, ravens never seem to make much of a fuss about anything. And a dozen seagulls had found something to interest them on the far edge of the field. Seagulls are a part of seaside life, along with the sound of the surf breaking on the shore, the feel of bare feet on warm sand (and even the pain of bare feet on shingle or a rocky beach) and although they make a good deal of mess, and there are those who would like to eradicate them completely, I firmly believe that we would miss them if they were somehow banished.

Like many other Bilbury residents, I like to stand and stare when I have a moment to spare. I couldn't help thinking that when I was a small boy, in the years immediately after World War II, life was extraordinarily simple. It seemed simple then, and in retrospect it is clear that, compared to life today, it was astonishingly simple. In those now distant days, happiness meant a patch of grass, a few hours sunshine, a bottle of dandelion and burdock, a bar of chocolate and a library book.

In the 1950s television broadcasting hours were strictly limited, the telephone was for emergencies and most games involved boards, counters and dice. There was no social media and group activities were limited to conkers in the autumn, slides and snowball fights in the winter, marbles in the spring and swimming and cricket in the summer. The total financial cost of all these activities was insignificant. Electricity was something that gave us lights and very little else, and the absence of central heating meant that on cold, winter days the inside of my bedroom window was covered with magical Jack Frost patterns.

Back when I was a boy, I always enjoyed being outside; riding a bicycle, climbing trees and watching animals. These activities involved a good deal of falling over. Between the ages of 6 and 14 there was barely a day that went by that I didn't have a scab on one or both knees and one or both elbows. Modern children don't do anything to collect scabs, let alone have time to pick at them. It is a matter of record that as a boy I always had at least one scab worth picking (knee or elbow, it didn't matter).

By the 1970s I had matured a little. I didn't play conkers or marbles quite as often and if I created a slide in the snow then I did it surreptitiously, when I didn't think anyone was looking. But I retained my affection for nature; for the countryside, for animals, for birds and for everything alive whether it was running, flying, crawling or swimming.

And so living in Bilbury was a constant delight.

The countryside in North Devon was (and still is) wild, untamed, and as unspoilt as any area in England. In the 1970s, one or two farmers still used horses to pull their ploughs. The air was clean, fresh and healthy (it still is) and although a local hunt occasionally strayed into Bilbury in a usually unsuccessful search for a fox, the local wildlife had a pretty good time of it.

I strolled back along the lane, opened a small, wooden gate in the hedge and walked up a neat path to the front door of Buttercup Cottage. To my surprise, there was a holly wreath hanging from the door knocker. I wondered if the occupants knew the wreath was still there or if they had grown so accustomed to its presence that they didn't actually see it any more – in the way that someone might spend half an hour looking for their spectacles without realising that they were wearing them. I once spent twenty minutes looking for my car keys, and even enlisted Patsy's help, until she pointed out, with surprising patience, that I was holding them in my hand.

'Oh thank you for coming, doctor,' said a tiny woman who looked to be in her 60s. She had white hair, neatly done in a bun at the back, and wore silver framed reading glasses which were perched on the end of her nose. She was wearing a red and white dress with a floral pattern and over it she wore one of those old-fashioned pinafores which have a loop which goes over the head and ties which can be knotted at the back of the waist. Her hands were covered with flour and she had a streak of flour on her left cheek. The pinafore had a picture of Father Christmas on the front. He was a very jolly, red-faced Father Christmas with a lot of white hair and a huge, white beard. I didn't really know why but she rather reminded me of a sparrow.

'Please excuse me, I didn't expect you to be here so quickly,' she said. 'I've been doing a little baking.' And then I realised why I had thought of a sparrow. She reminded me of Edith Piaf, the diminutive and legendary French singer.

I introduced myself, though this was clearly not really necessary since she obviously knew who I was. 'Mrs Thorley?'

'That's right. But it's my husband you've come to see.'

She opened the door wide and stepped back a couple of paces so that I could enter the cottage. It was one of those cottages which has low ceilings and very low doorways. I nearly always managed to bang my head at least once every time I entered one of those cottages.

As I entered the room, I could see that the Thorleys did not appear to have taken down any of their Christmas decorations. The holly wreath on the door was not an aberration. There were paper chains hanging from the ceiling (and making the ceiling appear even lower) and there were Christmas decorations on the mantelpiece. There was a beautifully decorated artificial tree in a corner of the room and a bunch of artificial mistletoe hung from the light fitting in the middle of the room. I was pleased to see a small crib, containing beautifully carved and painted, wooden figures, standing on a side table. The Thorleys had clearly not forgotten the purpose of the celebration which they had extended and appeared to be enjoying.

All this was made especially surprising since, at the time of my visit, it was a lovely, warm day in late May. The birds had done their nesting and were busy chasing about collecting food for their ever-hungry young ones.

It was surprising, and startling I suppose, because we tend to live by our traditions and habits because those give our lives a framework upon which to hang new experiences. When the traditions and habits are turned inside out, there is, for a moment or two, a tendency to feel rather lost.

Nevertheless, despite the incongruity, I couldn't help feeling a warm glow inside. Patsy and I always feel sad when twelfth night comes and it is time to put away the bits and pieces which help us to celebrate the festival period. We both love everything about Christmas.

'Would you like a mince pie and a glass of sherry?' Mrs Thorley asked. She pulled a tea towel out of the huge pocket on the front of her pinafore and wiped the flour off her hands. The tea towel was decorated with holly and little golden bells and other signs of Christmas.

'That's very kind of you. But maybe I should see your husband first?'

'Of course, doctor. He's in bed so I'll lead the way. Mind your step because the staircase is a little steep.'

Mrs Thorley opened what looked like a cupboard door and revealed one of those incredibly narrow and steep staircases with which small, old cottages often seem to be equipped. The stairs went almost straight up – more like a ladder than a normal staircase and the doorway into it was no more than five feet high and two feet wide. At the top of those tiny staircases, there are invariably just two rooms: one to the left and one to the right. Going up I found I always had to go sideways because the treads were no wider than the rungs of a ladder. Coming down, I always found very tricky – especially if I was holding something such as a black, medical bag. I found that the only safe way to descend was to treat the stairs just as I would have treated a ladder, and to come down backwards.

Thankfully, in the Thorley's cottage, someone had fixed rope bannisters on both sides of the staircase. The ropes were fixed to the wall at intervals of a yard and a half or so. I find rope bannisters rather fun and much more useful than old-fashioned wooden ones when climbing a steep and narrow staircase. The other advantage of rope bannisters is that in a narrow passageway they take up less room than traditional wooden bannisters.

Back in the days of Queen Elizabeth I, access to the upper floors in small cottages was via an ordinary ladder. When they were ready for bed, the occupants of the cottage would climb up their ladder and wriggle through a tiny hole in the ceiling. They would sleep in what would today be regarded as the attic or loft. People were smaller in those days, and more capable of scrambling up into small spaces. In the daytime, when it wasn't in use and would get in the way, the ladder was put out in the yard.

Some of the furniture used in those days was built in the bedroom and some, such as large wardrobes and four poster beds, came apart and had to be put together like large, three dimensional jigsaw puzzles. I have seen four poster beds that came apart and ended up as three or four dozen pieces of wood.

The big problem came when a patient died in their bedroom. I have known it to be necessary to remove a bedroom window and to take the deceased out that way. Windows which were big enough to take a coffin were known as 'coffin windows'.

I followed Mrs Thorley upstairs, banging my head on the top of the door frame as I did so. Someone, presumably Mrs Thorley, had tacked a piece of carpet to the door frame so the bang did me no harm and made no noise whatsoever. I couldn't help noticing that Mrs Thorley, who was scampering up the staircase like a mountain goat, was wearing slippers with a seasonal motif and ankle length socks which had little reindeers prancing about on them.

'Mind your head, doctor!' Mrs Thorley said, over her shoulder. She wasn't even bothering to hold onto the rope and did not seem to notice that the staircase was damned near vertical.

I promised, belatedly, that I would.

Mr Thorley was lying in bed reading.

I couldn't see all of him, of course, but he looked to be about the same age and same general size as his wife. It occurred to me that if you live in a small cottage, with low ceilings and a very narrow staircase, it helps if you're not too tall and not too wide.

The bedroom hadn't escaped the Christmas decorations.

Numerous, colourful streamers were stretched across the room, tied to picture frames and to tacks which had been hammered into walls and window frames. And although the bedroom was very small, there was another artificial Christmas tree in there. It was smaller than the tree downstairs but beautifully decorated with dozens of exquisite Victorian ornaments.

'We like Christmas,' said Mrs Thorley.

'I guessed!'

'It seems such a pity to take all the decorations down on twelfth night,' said Mr Thorley.

'We always hated putting them into their boxes and then packing them away into a cupboard,' said Mrs Thorley.

'So one year we just decided to leave them up,' continued Mr Thorley.

'I know it's supposed to be bad luck to leave them up after twelfth night,' said Mrs Thorley, 'but we've found a way to get round that.'

'We don't think of ourselves as leaving them up,' explained Mr Thorley. 'We think of ourselves as putting them up early for next Christmas.'

'We always take the fairies off the top of our trees on twelfth night,' said Mrs Thorley. 'And then we put them back on the next day.'

'We both like mince pies,' said Mr Thorley. 'And Christmas pudding.'

'And Christmas cake,' added Mrs Thorley. 'And sausage rolls.'

'Oh yes, I do like a sausage roll,' agreed Mr Thorley.

'A splendid idea!' I said. It seemed extraordinary that they weren't both hugely overweight.

I already liked the Thorleys. I liked them very much. Actually, it was pretty well impossible not to like them. They rather reminded me of a pair of children playing at life.

Mr Thorley made a fuss of wiping his cheek with his hand.

'What can I do for you?' I asked him.

'He's been very wobbly,' said Mrs Thorley.

Mr Thorley repeated the gesture. I guessed that he was quietly trying to tell his wife that she had flour on her cheek.

'For how long?'

'A month,' said Mrs Thorley. 'It seems to be getting worse.'

'Your cheek!' whispered Mr Thorley to his wife. He repeated the cheek-wiping gesture again.

Mrs Thorley realised what he was trying to tell her but she wiped the wrong cheek with the tea towel.

'Other one,' whispered Mr Thorley.

This time Mrs Thorley managed to wipe the flour off her cheek. 'Oh I'm so sorry, doctor,' she said. 'I'm really embarrassed now. What must you think of me?'

'Please don't give it a thought!' I said. 'When my wife bakes she usually ends up with flour on her face and in her hair. Actually, there is usually flour on the dog too. And I've been known to end up with flour on my face even if I've been out doing visits when she was baking.'

'Really?'

I smiled at her and nodded. 'Sometimes, people who are just walking past our house end up with flour on their noses.'

She laughed and relaxed a little.

'Apart from the wobbliness, do you have any health problems I should know about?' I asked Mr Thorley. 'Since you aren't actually a patient of mine I don't have any medical records for you.'

'He has high blood pressure,' said Mrs Thorley, who seemed to answer a lot for her husband. He didn't seem to mind that she did this.

'But who is treating that?' I asked, suddenly alarmed that I had seen Mr Thorley and forgotten him.

'We're still registered with our doctor in Exeter,' explained Mrs Thorley. 'That's where we used to live. Exeter.'

I was surprised by this. Exeter is the county town of Devon. It is over 60 miles away from Bilbury and it would take at least an hour and a half to drive from one to the other. That's quite a trek for a doctor to make in order to visit a patient.

'Does your doctor in Exeter still look after you both?' I asked.

'Well, we've been on his medical list since we left Exeter,' said Mrs Thorley. 'But when Mr Thorley was taken a bit poorly I telephoned his surgery and the receptionist told me that the doctor wouldn't visit us here because we are too far away. He told me that I had to telephone you.'

I wasn't surprised. 'Do you take any tablets?' I asked Mr Thorley.

'Oh yes. I have the pills for my blood pressure. But I've always had those.'

'You get them from your doctor in Exeter?'

‘I do. Every three months I send in a request together with a stamped addressed envelope and the doctor sends me a prescription for another supply of my pills.’

‘I take the prescription into Boots the chemist in Barnstaple,’ said Mrs Thorley.

‘When did you have your blood pressure taken last?’ I asked Mr Thorley.

‘Just before we moved from Exeter.’

‘Not since then?’

‘Oh no. Our doctor told us that I would need to keep taking the tablets for the rest of my life so there didn’t seem any need to have it taken again.’

‘Ah,’ I said.

This was rather startling news.

Patients who have high blood pressure need to have readings taken regularly since it is not at all impossible for blood pressure to change quite dramatically over a few months – let alone three years. And a change in circumstances can have a tremendous effect on the blood pressure. It wasn’t difficult to guess that the Thorleys lived a rather different life in Bilbury to the life they’d lived in Exeter.

I opened my black bag and took out my sphygmomanometer and my stethoscope. ‘Roll up your pyjama sleeve, please, Mr Thorley.’

Mr Thorley rolled up his sleeve. It was very loose and rolled up out of the way quite easily.

‘You’ve been dizzy?’ I asked, as I wrapped the cuff around his upper arm.

‘Oh yes, doctor. Very dizzy.’

‘And when he gets out of bed he falls down,’ said Mrs Thorley. ‘With our stairs it’s very dangerous. I’ve made him stay in bed.’

I took Mr Thorley’s blood pressure.

I then took it again.

And I then took it for a third time.

Now, usually, when a doctor or a nurse takes a patient’s blood pressure the reading is a little higher than it is normally. The very presence of the doctor or nurse, and the fact that they are taking the blood pressure, can push it up quite noticeably.

But Mr Thorley’s blood pressure as he lay in bed was 90 over 65. For a man of his age that was very low and meant that his systolic pressure was 30 points lower than the normal for a young, healthy man. And since his blood pressure would fall when he stood up I could see why he was falling down every time he got out of bed.

‘Could I see the pills you are taking?’ I asked.

Mrs Thorley picked a bottle of pills off the nearest of the two bedside tables and handed the bottle to me.

They were a popularly prescribed and powerful drug for high blood pressure.

‘I think you may need to reduce your drug dosage,’ I told him, tactfully. ‘It seems that the pills you are taking have reduced your blood pressure rather too far.’

‘Oh I don’t think my doctor would like that,’ said Mr Thorley, rather nervously. ‘He did say that I would need to take the pills for the rest of my life.’

‘Maybe Mr Thorley needs to take a higher dose?’ suggested Mrs Thorley, clearly trying to be helpful.

‘Am I right in thinking that you are retired, now?’ I asked her husband.

‘Oh yes,’ said Mr Thorley. ‘Very definitely.’

‘We came here when Mr Thorley retired,’ added Mrs Thorley. ‘We wanted to get away.’

‘Too many people knew me down there,’ said Mr Thorley. His wife reached out and patted his hand.

‘May I ask what you did for a living?’ I asked Mr Thorley.

He looked at his wife and she looked back at him. They were both obviously reluctant to tell me.

‘Would you say it was a stressful job?’ I asked.

They looked at each other.

‘Oh yes, very much,’ said Mrs Thorley.

‘Quite definitely,’ said Mr Thorley.

I waited, assuming that one or the other would tell me what the job had been. But this clearly wasn’t on the agenda. ‘But now that you’re living here that stress has gone?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Mrs Thorley. ‘We like it here very much. We don’t go out much, of course, but we like it here.’

‘Because of my job,’ said Mr Thorley, as though in explanation.

‘You don’t go out much because of what you did for a living when you lived in Exeter?’

‘That’s right.’

I began to wonder what on earth Mr Thorley had done for a living when they were living in Exeter. What on earth had attracted such opprobrium? What sort of employment could have possibly affected them so much that they were, even now, frightened to show themselves? I couldn't think of anything that could be as bad as they seemed to think it was. There hadn't been a hangman in England for decades.

'Well, whatever it was, it's all over now,' I said to Mr Thorley. If they didn't want to tell me what he did for a living then that was fine with me. 'And it's a reasonable guess that your job caused, or at least contributed to, your high blood pressure.'

'Oh yes, that's what our doctor in Exeter told us,' said Mrs Thorley. 'But he…'

'…said that Mr Thorley would need to take the blood pressure tablets for the rest of his life,' I said, finishing the sentence for her.

'That's right.'

'Well, I'm sure that your doctor in Exeter would agree with me that since Mr Thorley is now retired, and is free of the stress associated with his former job, then he won't need to take as many pills for his blood pressure. In fact, he may be able to stop the pills completely!'

'Oh, the doctor wouldn't like that!' said Mrs Thorley firmly.

I couldn't help feeling that the conversation wasn't getting me anywhere.

'May I ask you why you asked me to call today?'

'Because Mr Thorley is very dizzy,' explained Mrs Thorley, rather patiently. 'When he gets out of bed he falls over.'

'And remind me, please, why your doctor in Exeter didn't come to visit you.'

'He says we live too far away.'

'Didn't he suggest that you should register with another doctor?'

'No!' said Mrs Thorley. 'He said he would keep providing us with pills but that if we needed a visit we should call a local doctor.'

'And you did call me and I have suggested that Mr Thorley needs to cut down his pills.'

'Yes, but you're not our proper doctor,' said Mrs Thorley, with the definitiveness of a woman who has produced the ace of trumps.

I took a deep breath and waited a moment before continuing. 'I think you are going to have to telephone your doctor,' I said at last. 'You need to speak to him and ask him if he wants to continue looking after you both in your new home. If he is going to continue to dictate your treatment then he really needs to be in charge of doing things like taking blood pressures and so on.'

'All right, doctor,' said Mrs Thorley. She scuttled off to the top of the stairs and a moment later I heard her going down to the living room where, I assumed, the telephone was situated.

'I was a traffic warden,' said Mr Thorley, suddenly.

I looked at him.

'That was my job.'

'Ah,' I said, beginning to understand.

'I wasn't always a traffic warden,' he said. 'When I was young I worked as a human cannon ball in a circus in Blackpool. Just for a season.' He managed a small smile. 'I was fired every day and twice on Saturdays.'

'Not a job you could rely on, then?'

'No. In the end, I was fired permanently. The manager said I wasn't any good at it. Apparently I always used to look relieved after I'd been shot out of the cannon and had landed safely. He said they wanted someone who smiled a bit more and waved to the crowd. I was always too relieved to do much waving and smiling.'

'Seems a bit much,' I said. 'Expecting you to be fired from a cannon and to smile about it afterwards.'

'That's what I thought,' said Mr Thorley with a sigh. 'They hired a girl to replace me. She was very curvy, well-built in the bosom department, and she managed to arrange it so that her top always fell off when she landed. That went down very well with the audience. She always managed to make it look as though it were all accidental and had embarrassed her. I was demoted to working on the candy floss stall.'

'And did the new human cannon ball smile as well as lose her top?'

'Oh yes, very much so.'

'So then you became a traffic warden?'

'Eventually, yes. I had a few other jobs in between. I worked on a trawler but discovered I got seasick. I parked cars for a five star hotel in the West End of London and I worked as a messenger for a firm of solicitors. I was a chauffeur too, for a while. But after I met Mrs Thorley I needed to settle down. And being a traffic warden seemed a good, steady, reliable job.'

'Just the ticket, eh?'

He looked at me, puzzled.

'But it didn't turn out very satisfactorily?' I said, moving on quickly.

‘No, the people in our street knew I was a traffic warden and they gave us both a hard time about it.’

‘How did they find out?’

‘I went to work every morning in my uniform.’

‘Ah. I suppose that would give it away. And your neighbours didn’t like traffic wardens?’

‘No. My boss sent me to work in our street on a couple of occasions.’

‘I see.’

And I did. I hadn’t always been appreciative of the work done by traffic wardens. It must have been very difficult for Mr and Mrs Thorley. It seemed particularly unfair to send the fellow to give out parking tickets in the street where he lived.

‘The neighbours were especially unpleasant after I had to give several of them parking tickets.’

‘I can see why that wouldn’t make you the most popular man in the street.’

‘It didn’t.’

‘And did you like anything about the work?’

‘No. I hated it. But I couldn’t find any other employment.’

‘But you’re not a traffic warden now,’ I said.

‘No. I’m retired. I came back from work one day, took off my cap and told Mrs Thorley that I couldn’t do it anymore. A woman had screamed at me and said some awful things. I told Mrs Thorley that I’d get another job. I said I’d rather clean lavatories than be a traffic warden.’ He swallowed and there were tears in his eyes. ‘But Mrs Thorley said I had worked hard all my life and that I should retire and that we would move away and buy a cottage in the country. I said we didn’t have enough money put aside to retire but she said she’d been saving hard out of the housekeeping and putting aside as much as she could from her wages from cleaning in the supermarket and that there was enough for us to retire if we cut our cloth according to our means. She said we would get a good price for our little house because Exeter had become quite an expensive place to live, and the area where we lived was quite fashionable, and she was right and we sold the car too and we looked around and found this little cottage here in Bilbury. And we’ve never had expensive habits so we’ve been able to manage.’

‘Do you feel less stressed now that you’re no longer a traffic warden?’

‘Oh yes, I do. Oh yes, I most certainly do.’

‘And the people in Bilbury don’t know that you were a traffic warden and since you are no longer a traffic warden they wouldn’t give a fig if they did,’ I pointed out.

Mr Thorley accepted these words with some surprise. And then slowly, very slowly, a smile crept across his face. ‘Do you think so?’

‘I’m sure so,’ I said.

‘Oh,’ said Mr Thorley. ‘Well, that’s quite a relief. Can I tell Mrs Thorley that? I think she’ll be relieved too.’

‘Of course you can!’

I really did like the Thorleys. They were what used to be called a ‘sweet couple’. I find that if you talk to older people they always, but always, have fascinating stories to share. The young frequently dismiss the elderly as boring but they would learn a good deal if they had the patience to listen occasionally.

Just then Mrs Thorley reappeared. She looked rather cross.

‘Well,’ she said. And then she repeated it with an exclamation mark after it. ‘Well!’ Finally, she said it again with two exclamation marks. ‘Well!!’

‘What did your doctor in Exeter have to say?’ I asked her.

‘He was very rude!’ said Mrs Thorley, who seemed quite surprised at this. ‘He said he wasn’t going to visit us up here in North Devon and that he’d only kept us on his list as a favour but that if I was going to be difficult then we could find another doctor and good riddance to us!’

I didn’t point out their doctor in Exeter might, just might, have kept them on his list because in the National Health Service a doctor is paid according to the number of patients who are registered with him. Their Exeter doctor was earning money for doing nothing more than sign repeat prescriptions occasionally.

‘So what do you want to do?’ I asked them both.

‘Well, we have to find another doctor,’ said Mrs Thorley. ‘We need a doctor so that we can obtain Mr Thorley’s prescriptions.’

‘Mr Thorley might not need his prescriptions,’ I pointed out.

Mrs Thorley looked at me rather suspiciously.

I smiled at her. ‘You must choose a new doctor,’ I told her. ‘There are doctors in Barnstaple and Combe Martin who would probably take you onto their lists.’

‘But you’re the only doctor in Bilbury,’ said Mrs Thorley.

‘That’s not a very good reason to choose a doctor,’ I told her.

‘No, I suppose it isn’t,’ she agreed.

‘Can we try you on approval?’ asked Mr Thorley, rather nervously.

‘You mean, can you sign up with me and then change to another doctor in a week or two if you’re unhappy with me?’

‘That’s sort of what I meant,’ said Mr Thorley.

‘Of course you can,’ I said.

‘You wouldn’t mind?’

‘Not at all! I don’t want to look after patients who aren’t happy with having me as their doctor.’

‘Well, that’s settled then,’ said Mrs Thorley. She looked at her husband. He nodded. ‘We’ll take you on approval.’

I thanked them both and said that since I was now their doctor, albeit ‘on approval’, I wanted Mr Thorley to cut his pills down by a quarter.

‘That’s almost certainly not going to be a sharp enough cut to make the dizziness go away,’ I told him. ‘But if we’re going to make changes than we need to do them slowly. I’ll pop in to check Mr Thorley’s blood pressure in a couple of days and we’ll see how things are then.’

They seemed unhappy about this but said they’d try it.

‘Meanwhile,’ I told Mr Morley. ‘You must be very cautious when getting out of bed. And when you walk about you must hold onto things. And when you go down the stairs you’d probably better go down on your bottom; just bumping your bottom from one step to the next.’

‘Oh dear,’ said Mrs Thorley. She looked at her husband. ‘Are you happy about all this, Mr Thorley?’ she asked him.

He said he was.

Mrs Thorley then nodded her approval.

‘Would you like that mince pie now, doctor?’ she asked. ‘And a glass of sherry, perhaps?’

‘I’d be delighted to try one of your mince pies,’ I told her. ‘And I’d be very pleased to celebrate our new partnership, albeit on approval, with a very small glass of sherry.’

Mrs Thorley hurried off again to the stairs.

‘We like Christmas very much,’ said Mr Thorley rather unnecessarily.

‘So I gathered.’

From the bedroom window I could see a camellia bush. It was laden with beautiful pink camellias. And on a bird table down below, a robin was feeding what looked like sunflower hearts to a hungry youngster. The sun was shining and spring was already in full swing. I could hear a blackbird singing its heart out somewhere in a rhododendron bush.

Downstairs Mrs Thorley switched on a record player and I could hear the wonderful, if slightly anachronistic, sound of Harry Belafonte singing *Mary’s Boy Child*.

‘Mrs Thorley is going to be very pleased about our not having to hide away,’ whispered Mr Thorley.

And I am delighted to report that everything turned out well.

Five weeks later, to my delight, I was finally able to wean Mr Thorley off the last of his blood pressure pills.

And two days after that a very healthy Carlton and Hermione Thorley came to see me at Bilbury Grange to tell me that they had decided that I was no longer on approval. They brought me a dozen mince pies and two large slices of Christmas cake.

The mince pies and the Christmas cake were very tasty and most enjoyable, although Patsy and I agreed that it did seem a little strange to be eating mince pies and Christmas cake in the middle of the summer.

Author’s Note 1:

Thank you for your company. I hope you have enjoyed this book about Bilbury. If you did so then I would be very grateful if you would spare a moment to write a short review. It really helps a lot.

Thank you
Vernon Coleman

Author’s Note 2:

Mr Fish’s poems, quoted in the text of this book, are reproduced with permission. A fee has been paid to Mr Fish’s estate and the proceeds distributed, according to his will, to Charlene Jackson (nee Walkinshaw) of Barnstaple. Charlene is the daughter of Charlotte, the former girlfriend mentioned in the memory about Mr Fish. Although Mr Fish met her only once, and then just for a few moments, he left his entire estate to her.

The Appendices

Appendix No 1: Tea-Time Treats

1. Bakewell Pudding is an English dessert which consists of a flaky pastry base upon which has been placed a layer of jam and a filling made out of egg and almond paste. There are probably as many local variations on this theme as there are local cake shops but it is generally agreed that the Pudding was first made by accident in the 1820s by a cook who was or was not working at a hostelry which might or might not have been called the White Horse Inn. (As with most such bits and pieces of social history, the only certainty is that there is no certainty.) The cook was allegedly told to make a jam tart but, according to legend, instead of stirring the eggs and almond paste mixture into the pastry (as she might have been expected to do) she put the jam onto the pastry base and placed the almond paste on top of the jam. She was probably pleasantly tiddly at the time. When the whole thing came out of the oven, the cook found herself an unexpected heroine and her serendipitous creation became a popular dish at the inn. Incidentally, no other town in England has both a tart and a pudding named after it and in that respect Bakewell is unique.
2. Bakewell Tart is a thoroughly English confection which consists of a short-crust pastry base or case filled with a layer of jam and a sponge which is made with ground almonds (known to aficionados as frangipane). A Cherry Bakewell is a commercial variation of the traditional tart and has the frangipane covered with a layer of white, almond-flavoured fondant blessed with half a glace cherry.
3. Banbury Cake: First made by Edward Welchman in the 17th century, Banbury cakes are made with currants, mixed peel, brown sugar, rum and nutmeg.
4. Bath Bun: First produced in 1763 by Dr Oliver, a doctor who treated patients at the Bath Spa. The bun, created to be eaten in the baths, was so popular that patients who ate too many put on weight. And so the Bath Oliver biscuit was invented as a substitute.
5. Chelsea Bun: Chelsea buns were first sold at the Chelsea Bun House in central London. Both Jonathan Swift and Charles Dickens bought buns there. (The shop is mentioned in Dickens's books *Barnaby Rudge* and *Bleak House*.) A Chelsea Bun is made of a roll of raisin-spotted dough which contains cinnamon. The roll of dough is made into a square bun but can be unrolled to be eaten.
6. Chorley Cake: First made in Chorley in Lancashire a Chorley Cake is similar to an Eccles cake but is made with currants between two layers of unsweetened short-crust pastry and commonly served with butter on top.
7. Crumpet: The original crumpets were small, oval cakes made with unsweetened batter which contained water and flour. These were also known as picklets or pikelets. From Victorian times onwards, crumpets or pikelets contained yeast and bicarbonate of soda and became soft and spongy.
8. Eccles Cake: Originated in Eccles, near Manchester and was first made in 1796. The ingredients are squashed, juicy raisins in a flaky pastry.
9. Gloucester Tart: Made in Gloucester on the edge of the Cotswolds. It is identical to a Bakewell Tart except that ground rice is added to the ingredients.
10. Muffin: There are two types of muffin. The original muffin was a flatbread bun dating back to before the 18th century. These are known in the US as English muffins. The cupcake muffin originated in North America in the 19th century.
11. Teacake: In the UK, a teacake is a yeast based sweet bun containing dried fruit and usually toasted and served with butter. In the US, a teacake can be a biscuit or a small cake. There are many different types of English teacake – varying from the manchet (or Lady Arundel's Manchet) which is popular in Sussex and made with nutmeg, cinnamon and rose water to the huffkin (which is made in Kent and flavoured with hops).
12. Welsh cakes: Traditional snacks from Wales. The ingredients are flour, sultanas and raisins. Welsh cakes look like scones but are smaller, flatter and softer.

Appendix 2: Ten Diseases Related to Occupations

In the memory entitled *Iolanthe and Bertie in River Cottage* I describe Farmers' Lung, a dangerous and sometimes deadly condition known to be an occupational hazard of those working on farms. Farmers' Lung still occurs and is still as deadly as ever. There are, of course, many other disorders which are, or were, associated with particular trades and professions. Here are ten of the best known:

1. 'Hatter's Shakes' was not something invented by Lewis Carroll for the Mad Hatter. It was a very real condition which affected those working in the hat trade. The symptoms were caused by the mercury which was used in curing the felt from which hats were made.
2. 'Painters colic' was a condition affecting house painters. It was caused by the lead which was a common ingredient of many paints.
3. 'Miner's nystagmus' was a condition affecting those who spent long hours working underground.
4. 'Glassblower's cataract' was a form of cataract caused by exposure to the glare from molten glass. Modern glassblowers avoid the problem by wearing special goggles.
5. 'Grocer's itch' is a type of dermatitis caused by mites in the grain handled by those in the grocery trade.
6. 'Asbestosis' was a lung condition commonly found among those working with asbestos. Regulations now control the use of asbestos.
7. 'Office worker's sinus' – is a name given to sinus troubles caused by working in air conditioned offices where the air is over-dried by the air conditioning.
8. 'Typists' Mastitis' was a condition which affected female typists. The condition, an inflammation of the breast, was caused by the constant operation of the carriage lever on a manual typewriter. Since manual typewriters are now used only rarely, the condition is also rare.
9. 'Lorry Drivers' Gastritis' is a stomach condition caused by the enthusiasm of lorry drivers for 'greasy spoon' cafés. Lorry drivers also tend to suffer a good deal from bad backs.
10. 'Dentist's Veins' – dentists, shop assistants and others who spent much of their day standing up used to be exceptionally likely to develop varicose veins. Today, many dentists sit down while they are working – as do many shop assistants.

Appendix 3: The Battle of Naseby

In my chapter about Logan Berry, I mentioned that vanity has often had a great impact on history. Few events in history illustrate the dangers of vanity as much as the Battle of Naseby.

The Battle of Naseby took place on the 14th June 1645 near to the village of Naseby in Northamptonshire. It was the decisive battle in the English Civil War. On one side was the Royalist army of King Charles I and on the other was the Parliamentarian New Model Army which was commanded by Oliver Cromwell and Sir Thomas Fairfax.

The King himself had insisted on being present on the battlefield and, vain to the point of lunacy, he had turned up clad in a gilt plated suit of armour. Naturally, he was the only person on the battlefield wearing golden armour and he was a clear target for the Parliamentarians who were attacking and winning the battle. One of the King's attendants, realising the vulnerability of his monarch, forced Charles to wheel his horse to one side to escape the fighting. Unfortunately, this fairly innocent movement was misinterpreted as a signal to the whole front line of the Royalist forces. When they saw the King's golden armour on the move, everyone else followed.

The result, as the Royalist army struggled to wheel in order to follow the King, was a very fatal chaos and confusion. Cromwell led his army forward in a final, glorious charge and the King's forces were in such disarray that they had no choice but to retreat. The Royal losses were massive for a battle at that time. Around 1,000 men were killed and five times as many were captured. More importantly, perhaps, the King's private papers were captured. These papers revealed the King's attempt to bring foreign mercenaries into the war and helped to strengthen support for the Parliamentarians. The King never again managed to put a sizeable force into the field and within a year, Cromwell and Fairfax had won the Civil War.

It is no exaggeration to say that one man's vanity, and that silly golden armour, changed English history.

Appendix 4: Slobberdochers, Slammerkins and Cachinnators

While my friend William was staying at Bilbury Grange he and I created another one of our lists of unusual words.

The list that follows is as comprehensive a list as we could compile of colourful words, many of them rather Rabelaisian, which describe various types of individual.

It should be noted that since this list was created in the 1970s, it does not include any terms which came into use after that decade.

Bawdy – an obscene or lewd individual
Blockhead – a stupid or foolish person
Braggard – a boaster
Cachinnator – someone who laughs loudly
Changeling – a fairy child left in the place of a real child
Cockalorum – little man with a high opinion of himself
Cotquean – a man doing a woman’s work
Curmudgeon – a bad tempered old man
Dandiprat – anything (or anyone) small
Daphlean – a shy and beautiful person (usually female)
Deipnosophist – someone skilled in making dinner table conversation
Dell – a girl
Demi-lass – a polite word for a trollop, slut or slag
Demirep – someone with no reputation at all
Doxies – morts who are neither married nor virgins
Druggel – a mangy rascal
Flaneur – someone who saunters and observes
Franion – a licentious person
Fraters – fraudulent collectors for charity
Freshwater mariners – bogus old sailors
Galliard – a man of fashion
Gangrel – a loafing lout
Goosecap – a silly person (especially a flighty, young girl)
Gripple – a mean or stingy person
Grouthead – a stupid fellow, a blockhead
Hobbledehoy – a clumsy youth
Hooker – a woman who sells her body
Horbgorbler – someone who potters about in an ineffective way
Hornswoggler – a cheat
Hoydon – a romping girl
Hypergelast – someone who laughs excessively
Jarkman – a sham clergyman, someone who specialises in false marriages
Jejune – naïve, simplistic
Jezebel – an immoral, dishonest woman
Jolthead – a stupid or foolish person
Kinching morts – female juvenile delinquents
Knave – a deceitful or tricky fellow
Larrikin – a maverick; a boisterous, badly behaved person
Lobcock – a stupid, blundering person
Lob-dotterel – a gullible fool
Lout – an uncouth or aggressive man
Lungis – a tall and clumsy man
Lusk – a sloth

Maltworm – a drinker
Mangie – a rascal
Marmalade madam – a strumpet
Marmulet – a strumpet
Meacock – an effeminate man; a man without spirit
Miffy – a fit of peevish ill humour
Mignon – dainty
Milksop – an indecisive individual, lacking courage
Mizzling – sauntering, moving slowly
Moonling – a dreamy fool
Moppet – a peach or kitten of a girl
Mort – a girl
Mountebank – a charlatan, a deceiver
Muffishness – soft and effeminate
Mugwump – someone who backs down, withdraws
Mumchance – silent or tongue tied
Myrmidon – an unscrupulous follower
Necromancer – a wizard or magician
Ninnyhammer – a fool or simpleton
Oaf – a rough or clumsy man (usually also unintelligent)
Oddling – a lonely, strange person
Ombompom – well bosomed
Palliard – a beggar, usually rather scruffy
Panegyrist – someone who speaks or writes in praise of another
Pantywaist – an effeminate or feeble person
Patrico – a sham clergyman
Pimp – a man who manages prostitutes and lives off their earnings
Poltroon – a coward
Popinjay – a vain or conceited person who dresses extravagantly
Prancer – a horse thief
Pretty – a gallant; an alert, prompt fellow always ready for action
Prigger – a horse thief
Rogue – a dishonest or unprincipled man
Roly poly – a short, plump person of either sex
Ruffler – someone pretending to be an old soldier, etc.
Scobberlotcher – an idler
Shill – a confidence trickster's accomplice
Slag – a worthless person (usually female)
Slaister – someone who slaps on lots of make-up
Slammerkin – a slattern
Slubberdegullion – a dirty, worthless, careless fellow
Slut – a woman who has many casual sexual partners
Spindle-shanks – a person with long thin legs
Tart – a woman who is obviously sexually available
Titivil – a knave
Tittup – someone with a mincing, prancing gait
Toothsome –voluptuous and alluring
Tretis – well-proportioned and graceful
Trollop – a sluttish woman
Uncumber – a bearded woman with holy attributes (St Uncumber was a bearded woman and the benefactress of wives; according to Sir Thomas More she would, if given a peck of oats, provide a horse upon which an evil husband could ride to the devil)
Uprightmen – top rogues
Vagabond – a wanderer
Vamp – a seductress or femme fatale
Venecund – shy and bashful

Venust – beautiful and elegant
Virago – a bad tempered, violent, domineering woman
Walking mort – a female vagabond
Wanton – ungoverned, rebellious
Whore – a woman who sells her body
Zaftig – having a pleasantly plump figure

Appendix 5: The English Spirit

Many of my memories contain examples of ‘the English Spirit’ – a refusal to be bowed by disappointment and adversity.

The determination to remain cool in trying or dangerous circumstances, is of course, a very traditional English response to the exigencies of life. Oddly enough, a French word (sangfroid – which literally means ‘cold blood’) is often used to describe it. Since sangfroid is not usually regarded as a French virtue this is rather inexplicable.

There are many examples of The English Spirit (or the stiff upper lip) in history. Here are a few:

Samuel Pepys, the diarist, wrote about seeing Major General Harrison remaining cheerful and jolly when he was about to be hung, drawn and quartered at Charing Cross. Only a true Englishman could make jokes as he waited to have his intestines dragged out of his body and burnt before his very eyes.

(The first part of the triple punishment known as being ‘hung, drawn and quartered’ involved the hanging of the prisoner until he was almost dead. The poor devil would then be taken off the scaffold, still alive, and put on a table. His intestines would be surgically removed and burnt on a bonfire close to him so that he could watch them burning. Only then would he be chopped into five pieces – the four quarters of the body and the head – so that the bits could be displayed in different parts of the town.)

And then there was the Earl of Uxbridge who, on the battlefield of Waterloo, turned to the Duke of Wellington and said: ‘Begad, Sir, I’ve lost me leg!’ To which the Iron Duke replied: ‘By God, Sir, so you have.’

Thirdly, there was Captain Lawrence Edward Grace Oates.

Oates was a member of the Terra Nova expedition led by Robert Falcon Scott and intended to reach the South Pole. During the ill-fated expedition, Oates developed frostbite and gangrene. Realising that his ill health was compromising the chances of his three companions surviving, he walked out of their small tent into a blizzard and died on his 32nd birthday.

Scott, who also died on the expedition, wrote in his diary that as Oates left the tent, heading for certain death, he turned to his companions and said: ‘I am just going outside and may be some time.’

As an example of the English Spirit, it is impossible to beat.

Appendix 6: Epitaphs: Genuine Gravestone inscriptions

If you wander around old English graveyards you will often find old headstones which bear long inscriptions. (Either it was a lot cheaper to find a mason to do the chiselling or else people were prepared to spend a good deal of their savings on paying for the work to be done.) Here are a few epitaphs taken from English churchyards and revealed in W.H.Hudson's book *Traveller in Little Things*, which contains an essay on epitaphs entitled *A Haunter of Churchyards*.

1
(Taken from a churchyard at Maddington in Wiltshire and dated 1843)
These few lines have been procured
To tell the pains which he endured
He was crushed to death by the fall
Of an old mould'ring, tottering wall.

2
(Taken from a churchyard at Mylor, Cornwall, undated)
His foot it slipped and he did fall
Help! Help! He cried, and that was all

3
(Taken from a churchyard in Lynn, dated 1712)
He hath gained his port and is at ease,
And hath escapt ye danger of ye seas
His glass is run, his life is gone

4
(Taken from a churchyard in Minturne Magna, Dorset, dated 1805)
Neighbours make no stay,
Return unto the lord,
Nor put it off from day to day,
For Death's a debt ye all must pay.
Ye knoweth not how soon,
It may be the next moment,
Night, morning or noon.
I set this as a caution
To my neighbours in rime,
God give grace that you
May all repent in time.
For what God has decreed
We surely must obey,
For when please God to send
His death's dart into us so keen
O then we must go hence
And be no more here seen

5
(Taken from a churchyard in Kew, dated 1728)
At Tyre they were born and bred
And in the same good lives they led,
Until they come to married state,

Which was to them most fortunate.
Near sixty years of mortal life
They were a happy man and wife
And being so by Nature tyed
When one fell sich the other dyed,
And both together laid in dust
To await the rising of the just.
They had six children born and bred,
And five before them being dead,
Their only then surviving son
Hath caused this stone for to be done.

6
(Taken from a churchyard in St Just, Cornwall, dated 1771)
Life's but a snare, a Labyrnth of Woe
Which wretched Man is doomed to struggle through.
Today he's great, tomorrow he's undone,
And thus with Hope and Fear he blunders on,
Till some disease, or else perhaps old Age
Calls us poor Mortals trembling from the Stage.

7
(Taken from a churchyard in Lelant, Cornwall and undated)
What now you are so once was me,
What now I am that you will be,
Therefore prepare to follow me

Appendix 7: John 'Babbacombe' Lee: The Man They Couldn't Hang

For a while, a pub in London had a placard on the wall inviting patrons 'to be served by the man they could not hang'.

The man serving ale in the pub was John Henry George Lee, otherwise known as John 'Babbacombe' Lee, and he was famous for surviving three attempts to hang him for murder.

Born in Devon in 1864, Lee was employed by Miss Emma Keyse as a footman at her home at Babbacombe Bay, near Torquay in Devon. Although the evidence was weak, Lee, a known thief, was convicted of robbing Miss Keyse, beating her to death and then setting fire to the house in order to wipe out all traces of his crime. Lee claimed that he was innocent but he was not believed and he was sentenced to be hung.

On February 23rd in 1885. Three attempts were made to hang Lee at the prison in Exeter. All three attempts failed because the scaffold trapdoor failed to open on each occasion. Between attempts, the hangman, James Berry tested the scaffold with a bag of sand which was the same weight as the man to be hung. And with the bag of sand the scaffold worked perfectly well.

In the end, the medical officer, Dr T Wilson Gaird, refused to have anything more to do with the proceedings which were then halted. The Home Secretary later commuted Lee's sentence to life imprisonment.

There was much confusion about why the execution failed.

Lee claimed that he was saved by divine intervention but later investigations showed that there was a more earthly explanation.

There was no proper scaffold at Exeter (or indeed at any other provincial prisons in England) and all the paraphernalia required was kept at Pentonville prison in London and moved to Exeter beforehand. A special flooring was created with a pit below which allowed a drop of eight feet and an experienced hangman.

When everything was ready, Lee was taken into the execution room together with the usual impressive array of officials, observers and notables: the Governor, the chaplain, the doctor, representatives of the press and so on. And, of course, the experienced hangman whose name was James Berry. (Incidentally, Berry used to make extra money by cutting up the ropes he used and selling the pieces to those who collected such grisly relics.)

The noose was put around Lee's neck and a white bag was put over his head.

But when the lever was pulled, the trapdoor did not open and Lee was left standing on the trap with the noose hanging loosely around his neck.

Everyone was ushered out and carpenters were called in. They shaved some wood from the side of the trap. Lee was brought back, together with all the officials, and the noose was put around his neck again. The hangman then pulled the lever.

Once again, nothing happened. Lee stood there, on the trap, immobile.

So once again, the noose was taken from around Lee's neck and everyone was ushered out of the room.

This time, the hangman tested the apparatus with the sandbag.

Everything worked perfectly.

And so Lee was brought back for a third time, together with all the officials. Once again, the noose was put around John Lee's neck and the hangman pulled the lever.

And for the third time the trapdoor failed to open.

It was at this point that the medical officer walked out and the condemned man was sent back to his cell while the Governor used the new-fangled telephone to communicate with the Home Office. The Home Secretary decreed that Lee should be reprieved but kept in prison. And so Lee was put into a uniform with broad arrows on it and eventually sent to Dartmoor.

The subsequent investigation showed that the trap worked perfectly well when there were no spectators gathered around but that when the Governor, the doctor, the chaplain, members of the press and various other dignitaries crowded onto the platform, the floor expanded and prevented the trapdoor from opening.

Naturally, Lee insisted that he was an innocent man. He repeatedly petitioned successive Home Secretaries, demanding that he be released and eventually, after 21 years, he was released. Physically and mentally he showed signs of his experience. After his release, Lee went to London where he worked in a pub – promoted as 'the man they couldn't hang'. For a while, Lee made a living out of his notoriety (giving talks and even appearing in a silent film) but eventually he married a nurse and made his way to the United States where, apparently tiring of the notoriety, he lived quietly. He died in 1945 at the age of 80 and is believed to be buried in Forest Home Cemetery in Milwaukee.

The only other man to have survived three hanging attempts was called Joseph Samuel. He was English but was transported to Australia in 1801 for robbery. A couple of years later Samuel was convicted of murdering a policeman (a crime he denied) and, like Lee, he was sentenced to be hung. In Australia, they used a slightly different method for hanging. Nooses were fastened around the prisoners' necks and tied to a gallows while the prisoners stood on a cart. The cart was then driven away and the prisoners were left hanging and slowly strangling. (The English method was designed to be quicker; to produce a sudden drop which broke the neck.)

On the first attempt, the rope (made of five cords of hemp and designed to hold 1,000 lbs without breaking) snapped and Samuel fell and sprained his ankle. On the second attempt, the noose slipped off Samuel's neck. The third attempt was equally unsuccessful since as the cart was driven away the rope snapped and Samuel again fell to the ground.

An angry and boisterous crowd called for Samuel to be let go. The governor, when called to the scene, decided that God had intervened and commuted Samuel's sentence to life imprisonment. The local doctor looked after Samuel's sprained ankle, which was all he had to show for three hanging attempts. Samuel survived only another three years.

The Author

Vernon Coleman is an author and doctor. His novels include: *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War*, *Mrs Caldicot's Knickerbocker Glory*, *Mrs Caldicot's Easter Parade*, *Mr Henry Mulligan*', *The Truth Kills*, *Second Chance*, *Paris in my Springtime*, *It's Never Too Late*, *The Hotel Doctor*, *My Secret Years with Elvis* and many others. All of these books are available as ebooks on Amazon. All the books in 'The Young Country Doctor' series are available as ebooks on Amazon.

Before you go…

Thank you for your company. Sorry to go on about it, and apologies if you already have done so, but if you have enjoyed this volume in The Young Country Doctor series, I really would be very grateful if you would spare a moment to write a short review.

Thank you

Vernon Coleman

The Young Country Doctor Book 15

BILBURY MEMORIES

VERNON COLEMAN

The Young Country Doctor no 15

Bilbury Memories

Vernon Coleman

Another collection of memories from the English village of Bilbury.

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Note
As usual, the names and details of individuals, animals and establishments, except the Duck and Puddle and Peter Marshall's shop, have been altered to protect the innocent, the guilty and those who aren't quite sure where they stand but would like to think about it for a while before committing themselves (or being committed).

The Author

Vernon Coleman qualified as a doctor and practised as a GP. He is a *Sunday Times* bestselling author who has written over 100 books which have been translated into 25 languages and sold in over 50 countries. His books have sold over two million copies in the UK alone though no one is sure whether two million people each bought one book or one person has a very large bookcase. Vernon Coleman is also a qualified doctor. He and his wife (whose real name is Antoinette) live in Bilbury, Devon, England. Vernon is an accomplished bar billiards player (three times runner up in the Duck and Puddle Christmas competition), a keen but surprisingly dangerous skittles player and an accomplished maker of paper aeroplanes. He once had a certificate proving that he once swam a mile for charity and this may well still be in that box in the attic that contains all those bits of old rubbish which ought to be thrown away but which have managed to hang around until the next spring clean. He was, at some point in the early 1960s, second in the Walsall Boys Golf Championship and was awarded with three brand new golf balls which were wrapped in cellophane and presented in a smart, cardboard box. He claims to be one of the best stone skimmers in North Devon. (Nine bounces are by no means unheard of and he has a personal best of 12 bounces.) He is a long-term member of the Desperate Dan Pie-Eater's Club (vegetarian section) and although he can juggle three balls at once he cannot knit. He can fly a two string kite without mixing up the strings but cannot stand on one leg without toppling over. He can ride a bicycle without holding the handlebars but cannot write a note of music or hum the simplest tune. He has never jumped out of an aeroplane (with or without a parachute) but he has, on several occasions, lit bonfires in the rain and is particularly proud of the fact that he once managed to light one in a snowstorm. He has not yet availed himself of the extensive opportunities apparently offered by social media (he says he is waiting to see if the idea catches on) but notices about important events are pinned on the noticeboard outside Peter Marshall's shop in the village and he has had a website (www.vernoncoleman.com) since the day after King Alfred burnt the cakes. Entrance to the website is free of charge and there is ample parking space. Visitors to the site are requested to wash their hands before entering and to wipe their feet before leaving. Sadly, there are no advertisements or refreshment facilities. The Author is registered as an Ancient Monument and selected parts of him are Grade II listed.

Vernon Coleman's novels include: *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War*, *Mrs Caldicot's Knickerbocker Glory*, *Mrs Caldicot's Easter Parade* and *Mrs Caldicot's Turkish Delight*. All these books are, oddly enough, about a character called Mrs Caldicot. Other novels, which are not about Mrs Caldicot, include: *Mr Henry Mulligan*, *The Truth Kills*, *Second Chance*, *Paris in my Springtime*, *It's Never Too Late*, *The Hotel Doctor*, *My Secret Years with Elvis* and many others. He is also the author of three books under the pen name 'Edward Vernon'. All of these books are available as e-books on Amazon as are the 14 other volumes in 'The Young Country Doctor' series. There is a fairly full list of other books available as eBooks on Vernon Coleman's biography page on Amazon.

The Young Country Doctor series

This is the 15th book in the series and so, if the author has done his sums right, there are probably around fourteen other books describing the Devon village of Bilbury and its inhabitants. All the books in the series are available as e-books on Amazon. A few hardback editions of the first seven books were self-published in modest runs but these are all now out of print. The first few books are sequential but after about the third book you can read them in any order you like without getting into too much of a tangle. Bilbury and its residents are, of course, still firmly and comfortably ensconced in the 1970s and will doubtless remain there indefinitely.

Dedication

To Antoinette: You are the point of everything and everything else is merely decoration. Every minute I spend with you is worth a lifetime. Every minute I am away from you lasts a lifetime.

Another Note

Bilbury books now contain a number of ‘bits at the back’ – in which I have provided a little more background to some of the memories in the book. I have described these extra pieces as appendices since that seems suitably medical.

Foreword

Welcome to Bilbury!

Whether you are a resident, a regular visitor or someone wandering into the village for the first time I bid you welcome and thank you for sharing my life and my memories.

Kind readers sometimes ask if the Bilbury stories are real. It's a fair and reasonable question and one which I have asked myself more than once.

There is one thing we can agree on: there is no village with the name of Bilbury. No real village with that name exists. We know this because if we look up 'Bilbury' in a Gazetteer or a map of Devon, we won't find it. We will end up in a place called Bibury, which is in Gloucestershire and has nothing to do with Bilbury, or we will end up with a reference to one of the Bilbury books which means that we have ended up back where we started and are absolutely no further forward.

So, that much we know: the name 'Bilbury' is fake.

I admit it: I made it up.

But that doesn't mean that the village doesn't exist. It just means that if it does exist then it must be called something else.

And you have to make your own mind up about just how true the memories are and, indeed, whether I exist or am a figment of my own imagination.

My only hope is that you will enjoy reading these memories. After all, that's what really matters. Isn't it?

Vernon Coleman, Bilbury,
Autumn 2018

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The Bucket Lists

It is widely believed that the idea of making a list of things to do before you die is something new. It is known colloquially as preparing a ‘bucket list’ (as in making a list of things to do before you ‘kick the bucket’).

The idea isn’t new.

Not many notions in life are brand new – and this one certainly isn’t.

I have a suspicion that if I spent a few days studying the Greek classics I would probably find evidence that the Greeks were aware of the idea. And I daresay that some 16th century gentleman had a little bucket list of his own tucked away safely inside his doublet or stuffed unceremoniously down his hose.

But in modern times the idea was first introduced into the public domain by a man called Sir Hilary Blood.

Sir Hilary was a former British diplomat who was, at various times in the 1940s and 1950s, Governor of the Gambia, Governor of Barbados and Governor of Mauritius. He did a lot of governing. And, of all the odd places where the notion of making a ‘list of things to do before you die’ might have been published, it was in the 1956-57 Winter Annual of a sports magazine called *The Cricketer* that Sir Hilary originally aired his thoughts on what we now call a ‘bucket list’.

‘I keep a list of things to be done before I die,’ wrote Sir Hilary with the unaffected simplicity common among that small group of mid-20th century English gentlemen who managed to keep a straight face while wearing hats with ostrich plumes in them and who were happy governing foreign people in foreign parts.

He may not, of course, have been the first to have the idea.

But, in relatively modern times at least, Sir Hilary appears to have been the first person to put the idea down on paper. So, in my book, he should get the credit.

Everyone’s idea of what to put on their list will vary, of course. And to a large extent the contents of each individual’s list will depend upon their age, their health, their wealth and their life expectation.

A young, fit, well-off individual may have ‘climb Everest’, ‘ski down a black run’, ‘drive a car at 150 mph’, ‘take a boat trip up the Amazon’, ‘run a mile in under six minutes’ and all sorts of other active and expensive activities on their list.

Someone older and very slightly less well-off might be happy with a desire to feed the pigeons at St Mark’s Square in Venice, take a boat ride on Loch Ness and have dinner at Maxim’s restaurant in Paris.

Someone with severely limited financial resources might be happy with hoping for a bag of chips a bottle of beer and a copy of the evening paper.

And even quite elderly individuals may still harbour hopes; albeit perhaps less dramatic aspirations than those nursed by those who are still young in body as well as in spirit.

For example, I still remember the surprise Mr Thomas Pidgeon gave me just after his 90th birthday.

Mr Pidgeon was an extremely likeable old man, utterly honest and as straight as a die: an old-fashioned gentleman in the real sense of the word. He wasn’t a rich man but I had long ago learned that you don’t have to have a big house and a lot of money in the bank to be a gentleman. His eyebrows went sharply upwards as they approached the centre of his forehead, with the result that he looked constantly startled, not unpleasantly so, but just startled; as though he had just seen or heard something rather surprising.

‘I have had a comfortable life,’ he had told me when we first met. ‘I always found life too easy so I never tried hard enough. And so now I don’t suppose I can complain about never having achieved anything very much. I’ve always been too careful; I’ve always been too well behaved. The funny thing is that although I never worried much when I was young, I now worry more than I ever did. I worry about everything, because I know how easily and frequently things can go wrong. If I have to go somewhere I worry whether the taxi will arrive and if the train will be cancelled.’

I remember he shrugged resignedly at this and added: ‘So I solved those particular fears by staying at home. These days I don’t go anywhere.’

Like most of the people I talked to who were in their 90s or over, Mr Pidgeon had a recipe for his longevity.

Mr Pidgeon’s explanation (and implicitly his recommendation) was that he ate a pickled egg every day for his breakfast and a pickled onion before he went to bed.

These days, only individuals who are 100 or over are asked for the secret of their long life but back in the 1970s it was generally considered that anyone aged 90 or over had definitely ventured out of middle age and was entitled to be regarded as ‘mature’.

I used to write down some of my favourite explanations for having reached a ripe old age. Here are a few:

a) ‘I owe my longevity to smoking. I have been smoking a pipe since I was 21. I find that it settles my nerves.’

b) 'I wouldn't have lived this long without drinking a glass of whisky every day. Whisky kills germs and bad cells.' (I think that by this he meant that it killed cancerous cells. For all I or anyone else knows he could be right.)

c) 'I never drink water.' The old man who offered this piece of advice told me that when Humphrey Bogart and John Huston were making 'The African Queen', most of the crew fell victim to water born infections. Katherine Hepburn was very ill for much of the film-making. However, Humphrey Bogart and John Huston stuck to whisky and avoided the water. Both remained healthy throughout the duration of the shoot on location.

d) 'I have never touched fruit or vegetables.' The elderly lady who told me this insisted that in her opinion both fruit and vegetables were full of poison.

e) 'I have never exercised. Exercise wears out the body.'

f) 'I ate a lot of fat, suet and dripping.' The 97-year-old woman who told me this claimed that plenty of fat would keep out the cold and help fight off infection. Surprisingly, she wasn't at all overweight and at the time her heart was in tip top condition. She died a year short of her 100th birthday. She fell, broke a hip and was taken to hospital in Barnstaple. Unfortunately, she caught a nasty bug in the hospital and never came out.

I'm not sure that I believed any of those recipes for a long life. I've always rather believed that for most of us our longevity (or otherwise) is a result of a mixture of genes and luck.

'I'm sorry to have called you out,' said Mr Pidgeon, when I arrived at his cottage one Monday morning. 'But I've been thinking about things over the weekend and I've decided that I probably haven't got all that long to go, doctor.'

Mr Pidgeon lived in a small two up and two down cottage but because of his joints he never went upstairs. His bed had been moved into the living room downstairs. Everything in the room was old-fashioned. There was a hand-made antimacassar on the back of a faded and lumpy sofa and two more on the matching easy chairs. Two black and white china dogs sat on the mantelpiece and a rather dusty aspidistra plant stood in a large pot in the corner of the room. A lovely little china cat and an old-fashioned, wooden clock with a loud tick sat between the two dogs. The cat, which had green eyes and a lovely smile, had the words 'A Present from Padstow' inscribed in red around the base. There were three old Victorian framed prints on the walls. Two showed women collecting flowers in a sunlit field. The third, which hung over the fireplace on an iron chain, was a religious scene. There was no bathroom upstairs and when Mr Pidgeon washed and cleaned his teeth (possibly not daily activities), he did so in the kitchen sink. His only lavatory was outside, a few yards from the backdoor. At night he used a chamber pot, which he, like many of his generation, called a 'gusunder' – because it went under the bed when it wasn't actually in use.

'Oh, I'm sure you've got a good few years ahead of you,' I assured him.

He looked at me rather sceptically. 'I've never understood why,' he carried on, 'but they say that you should put your affairs in order when you get to my age.'

'Oh, you've got a long time to go yet,' I told him cheerily. 'But if you've sorted things out then it'll doubtless put your mind at rest. Made your will and burnt any documents tying you into the Great Train Robbery – that sort of thing.'

He looked at me, not entirely sure whether or not I was joking, and picked a piece of paper off the small table beside him. He hesitated for a moment and then handed it to me. It was folded in two. I didn't open it but looked at it, slightly puzzled.

'That's it,' he said. 'My affairs. All in order. You can look if you like. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do with it. It didn't seem right to leave it for my sons to find.'

I opened the piece of paper. It contained the following list of names:

Norbert
Josceline
Cynthia
Kay
Unknown but had dark hair
Sylvia
Sybil
Hilda
Daphne
Evelyn
Melba

'It's just a list of names,' I pointed out, quite unnecessarily.

'It's a list of all my affairs,' he explained. 'I married Sylvia and Melba. I wasn't sure whether or not I should put them down but I included them for completeness.'

I looked at the list, wondering what on earth I was supposed to do with it.

'I tried to put them in order,' said Mr Pidgeon. 'But I'm not sure about Hilda and Daphne.' He thought for a while. ‘I think there was an overlap,’ he confessed.

‘And Norbert?’

‘I was at public school. I wasn’t sure whether or not to put him down. But I thought the list ought to be complete.’

‘Ah.’

‘I can’t remember the name of the one between Kay and Sylvia. Do you think it matters? I’ve put her down as ‘unknown’.’

‘I’m sure it doesn’t matter at all,’ I said, reassuringly.

‘So, what do I do with it now? The list, I mean. I can’t leave it for my sons to find. Julian would be shocked and Geoffrey would probably find it terribly disappointing.’

I looked at him. I didn’t know his sons well enough to know why they would feel the way Mr Pidgeon expected them to feel.

‘Julian is a vicar up in Lancashire,’ he explained, before I could ask. ‘He’s very straight laced and rather uptight. When he was little he always wanted to keep his trousers on when he had a bath. I doubt if he’s changed much. And Geoffrey is quite a different kettle of fish; he’s a bit of ladies’ man. He’s been married four times.’ He paused, thinking. ‘He’s been divorced four times too.’

‘Aha,’ I said, understanding. I refolded the piece of paper and put it back on the little table beside his elbow. The table also contained a whisky decanter, an empty tumbler and a nicely bound hardback copy of Plutarch’s *Greek Lives* with what looked like a shopping list being used as a bookmark. ‘I think maybe the best thing you can do with it is to burn it.’

‘Do you think so?’

‘Oh, I do.’

He thought about it for a while. ‘Probably for the best,’ he agreed, screwing up the list and tossing it in the general direction of the fire burning in the hearth.

‘Close,’ I said.

I picked the ball of paper off the carpet and threw it into the fire.

‘Still,’ he said with a fond sigh, ‘it was fun writing it out. It brought back some happy memories. That Cynthia was quite a girl. Well, she was more of a woman, really. I was only just out of my teens and she had a daughter older than me. Funny thing was I never fancied the daughter.’ He closed his eyes for a moment. ‘It was fun remembering it all; all except for that Norbert.’ He paused for a while. ‘I don’t know why I put him on the list.’

I smiled at him but didn’t say anything. I was already opening my bag to take out the portable sphygmomanometer I keep in there.

‘Still, it’s kept me busy and out of mischief for a week,’ said Mr Pidgeon. ‘It was the last thing I needed to do; the last item on my list.’

‘Your list?’

‘Things to do.’

‘You’ve done everything?’

‘Everything I can do,’ he said. ‘I don’t think it’s realistic for me to go swimming with sharks or taking up pole vaulting, do you?’

‘Probably wise to leave those for the time being,’ I agreed. ‘Maybe in another lifetime.’

‘So that’s pretty well it,’ said Mr Pidgeon with a deep sigh.

He sounded tired and rather sad and this worried me.

We all need ambitions, hopes, and items on our personal list of things to do. Too often I have known people give up and die just because they no longer have anything to live for.

‘There must be things you still want to do!’ I said.

‘The problem is that I can’t get out much,’ he pointed out. ‘Even with your pills my damned heart is only working on two cylinders and my joints are so damned rusty that my sweat is brown these days.’

I looked at him, puzzled. ‘Your sweat is brown?’

‘It’s the rust,’ he said. ‘I must be rusty inside. The rust must be coming out of my body.’

I was so puzzled by this that I asked him to show me. With some difficulty he pulled up his shirt and showed me his vest. It was one of those thick, woollen ones with half sleeves. And, rather to my surprise, he was absolutely correct. A garment which had pretty obviously been white when purchased now had rusty, orange marks on it. Mr Pidgeon did indeed seem to be sweating rust.

‘Have you ever seen anything like that?’

I had to admit that I hadn’t.

‘It’s rust, isn’t it?’

‘It looks like it,’ I had to admit.

I really hadn't heard or seen anything like it. It really did look as though there were rust particles in his sweat and it wasn't difficult to see why he thought he was going rusty. If I hadn't known that it was quite impossible I'd have honestly thought he was going rusty.'

'Let me look into it,' I told him. 'I'll see if I can find out what's happening.'

'It's just rust,' said Mr Pidgeon, wearily.

'Let me find out for you.'

I took his blood pressure, checked his heart, examined his ankles and gave him two bottles of pills that I'd brought with me. I was still enjoying the fact that I was allowed to prescribe for my own patients. If I hadn't been able to take Mr Pidgeon his pills, but had had to give him a prescription he would have either had to make his way to the nearest pharmacy (at least five miles away) or try to find someone to make the journey for him.

'Carry on as before, doctor?'

'Exactly as before,' I agreed. 'I'll find out what I can about those rust stains. And I'll pop back as soon as I can find out what it is.'

'It's just rust,' said Mr Pidgeon, glumly. 'At my age it's just another one of those things. I think I'm getting pretty close to my final sell-by date.'

His general air of gloom alarmed me. Too often I'd seen patients go into a rapid decline when they lost any reason for living. We all need something to excite and inspire us.

'What hobbies did you have when you were younger?' I asked him, hoping that I could find something that might trigger a little enthusiasm.

He thought for a moment. 'Nothing much,' he admitted. 'When I was young I played a little football in the winter and some tennis in the summer. And when I got into my sixties I took up bowls. I can't even manage that now.'

'No more sedentary activities? No indoor hobbies?'

'Well, there was that Cynthia,' said Mr Pidgeon. 'I suppose you could call her an indoor hobby – though we did sometimes have a little fun al fresco.' He winked. 'She lived near to a piece of woodland and occasionally we took a rug into the woods.'

I laughed. 'Nothing else? Chess? Bridge? Stamp collecting? Collecting coins? Shells? Old bottles? Bus tickets? Puppets? Postcards? Musical boxes?'

Back in the 1970s, a surprisingly large number of people in Bilbury were keen collectors and I used to learn a great deal from talking to them. Collecting is often surprisingly educational. Moreover, you can be a keen collector without having a deep pocket. I had patients who used to go round all the local auctions picking up treasured items for little more than pennies. In those days it was fairly easy to pick up a box of assorted curios, mixed jewellery or unwanted old books for £1, 50 pence or even 25 pence. Auctioneers would often knock down miscellaneous items for next to nothing just so that they didn't have to arrange for the stuff to be taken into storage.

The fact is that an enthusiasm for collecting things is ingrained within us and long established; men and women were collecting before they started farming and were acquisitive long before they could really spare the time or the energy.

It is no exaggeration to say that collecting stuff was the original preoccupation of the hunter-gatherer; it is a hobby that dates back further than painting on the sides of caves. And as soon as men started to build temples they filled them with the treasures they had acquired.

And, as I have already said, I learned an enormous amount of stuff from patients who collected things. Doctors working in towns and cities rarely have time to sit and listen to their patients. One of the joys of having a rural practice in the 1970s was that I did have the time to listen. I earned a fraction of the salary a city doctor could earn but I always thought I enjoyed my work more and got to know my patients better.

So, for example, it was a patient of mine who collected old pennies who told me that pennies had been first introduced as English currency back in 755, and that pennies were always made of silver except in 1257 when henry III experimented with a solid gold penny. When the price of gold rose most of the solid gold pennies were melted down and it was, apparently, widely believed that only eight examples had survived. My patient had spent much of his life searching for a ninth example of one of these solid gold pennies. He knew darned well that his search would almost certainly be unsuccessful. But he also knew that there was a chance, a small but real chance, that he might be the lucky individual who found the ninth example of Henry III's gold pennies!

Another patient, a retired banker, had a collection of penny black stamps which he had built up over his lifetime. The penny black was, of course, the very first stamp in the world and my patient took great delight in showing me just how many different versions of the stamp there were, and how the different printings could be identified. My patient even had a sheet of unused penny blacks. In those early days, stamps were printed in sheets without perforations and when a customer wanted to buy a stamp, it had to be cut out of the sheet with a pair of scissors. There was no gum on the back of the stamps so the stamp had to be glued onto the letter. (Envelopes weren't used –

the letter was folded and sealed with wax before the stamp was stuck on.)

I had one patient who collected plum and cherry stones which had been carved by a 17th century craftsman called Philippe Santa Croce.

And another patient, an elderly lady whose brother had been a cabinet minister, who had a fine collection of rare knives – including one made in 1606 which was a mere two and a half inches long but which had hidden within it 13 incredibly tiny drawers. Inside those tiny drawers were even tinier rolls of parchment upon which the Psalms were inscribed in 21 languages. You really can't get much more esoteric than that.

I learned that people who collect cheese labels are called tyrosemiophils and those who collect cigar labels are known as vitophilists. I even knew a man who collected old tractors. He was terribly proud that his collection included a tractor called a 1903 Ivel, built by an Englishman called Daniel Albone.

It seemed to me that almost everyone in Bilbury had at least one hobby. There certainly weren't many individuals in Bilbury whose lives revolved around the television. (This was largely because there was too much else to do, partly because so much absolutely needed to be done and partly because television reception in North Devon was worse than appalling. On windy or stormy nights our television at Bilbury Grange showed nothing but a lot of white lines and produced nothing but hiss and crackle).

Things were different, I knew, in other parts of the country. My friend William, who was a partner in a large medical practice, told me that there were tower blocks in his part of the West Midlands where there were, every day, hundreds of people sitting, usually alone, staring at television screens. William and I studied together as medical students and he was a GP in a town where he worked in a large, modern practice. Many parents, he told me, used the television set as a sort of electronic babysitter and patients who were sedentary through ill health used to spend their days watching the goggle box in the corner of the room.

Mr Pidgeon thought about my question for a while and then shook his head. 'No, I didn't really have any hobbies or play any indoor games. Mind you, I used to play pontoon when I was in the army during the War. But I was no damned good at it. I was always the sap who lost his money. I was never a lucky fellow. If I'd won the lottery I'd have lost the damned ticket.'

He thought for a little longer.

'I collected cigarette cards,' he said a few moments later. 'I used to have a pretty good collection.'

'I used to collect cigarette cards!' I told him. 'An uncle used to smoke quite heavily and he always gave me the cards in the packs he bought.'

When I was a boy I'd been fascinated by cigarette cards. Towards the end of the 19th century tobacco companies began putting small, collectible cards into packets of cigarettes. The cards were usually made of cardboard but sometimes made of silk. One side of the card would usually have a picture and on the other side there would be information about whatever was pictured. So, for example, if a card had a picture of a film star on one side then on the other side there would be biographical details of that same star.

Some series of cigarette cards provided practical information and advice. So, there were series of cards on gardening and on first aid.

Cigarette cards were a promotional gimmick, produced to create brand loyalty and they were incredibly popular in the early decades of the 20th century. The cards were always part of a set of 25 or 50 cards and the tobacco company hoped that smokers would stick with one brand if they were collecting a particular type of card.

I remembered that my uncle would sometimes smoke cigarettes made by a company called Players and sometimes smoke a brand manufactured by W.D & H.O.Wills. He would switch brands if he wanted to collect a particular type of card.

As it slowly became increasingly clear that cigarette smoking was a major cause of serious illnesses such as cancer and heart disease and clever marketing programmes became unfashionable, so the manufacturers stopped putting cards into their packets of cigarettes. I suppose the companies might have also stopped putting in the cards as collecting began to lose its appeal. New generations were more likely to be interested in pop groups and television programmes than in details of 25 different types of crustacean or 50 different facts about railway equipment.

'What happened to your card collection?' I asked Mr Pidgeon.

I was desperately keen to find something to provide his life with some purpose and meaning.

'I've no idea,' admitted Mr Pidgeon.

'Did you give them away?'

'No, I wouldn't have done that.'

'Did Melba throw them out?' Melba Pidgeon had been his second wife. She had died of cancer about eight or nine years earlier.

'Oh, no, no, she wouldn't have done that. They're probably upstairs somewhere.'

'Do you want me to take a look?'

Mr Pidgeon thought for a moment. 'Do you know, doctor, I wouldn't mind if you did. I seem to remember I had a pretty good collection.'

I found his cigarette collection in an old, green suitcase that had heavy leather corner protectors. It looked like one of the suitcases that were issued to service personnel during the Second World War. Inside the case there were dozens of albums and a tin box full of loose cards. With some difficulty I managed to carry the suitcase downstairs. I placed it on the floor beside him and opened it.

'Ye gods!' said Mr Pidgeon, astonished. 'Quite a collection! Pass me that tin box, would you, doctor?'

I lifted the tin box out of the suitcase and handed it to him. He put it on his lap and opened it. 'I never got round to sorting these!' he said. 'I should do that.'

Before I left I helped him move from his chair to the table and I put the contents of the suitcase on the table.

'This is going to take me forever!' he said. 'I need to sort these out.' He rummaged around and then looked up at me. 'I remember now, I'd started a collection of cards about English customs and traditions. I'd really like to finish what I'd started.'

'Can you still find old cigarette cards?' I asked.

'Oh yes! They come up at auction quite often. I can ask Patchy Fogg to look out for cards for me. And there are still a couple of shops in London selling cigarette cards – they used to send out catalogues. I'll have to find out if they still do. And there's a magazine for cigarette card collectors. I'll have to subscribe to that again.' Patchy Fogg, one of my closest friends and an antique dealer, will always look out for specific items if requested to do so by villagers. Sometimes he charges a small commission but more often than not he doesn't even accept payment for the item he's bought on their behalf.

'It sounds as if you're going to be busy!'

'Oh yes!' he agreed.

When I said 'goodbye' he was so preoccupied with the cigarette cards that he hardly lifted his head.

'Have you ever come across a patient who produces orange sweat?' I asked my friend William that evening. Because his medical practice was fairly close to the medical school where we both trained, he occasionally went to meetings where he met medical researchers, and sometimes he heard of new discoveries and theories which hadn't been described in the medical journals.

'Maybe he's going rusty?' suggested William immediately.

'Too late,' I said. 'The patient got there before you with that theory.'

William apologised. 'Seriously, I've never heard of anything like that.'

I explained exactly what I'd seen. 'The only thing I could think of is that one of the drugs he's taking could be affecting the colour of his secretions.'

'I suppose that's possible,' agreed William. 'I'll have a word with Atholl if you like.'

I said that would be great and asked him to let me know if he came up with any useful information or ideas.

Atholl, an Australian, had trained as an anaesthetist but now worked as a General Practitioner in the practice where William was a partner. More importantly as far as my query was concerned, Atholl's brother, whose name was Dennis, worked as a research biochemist specialising in drug side effects.

In medicine, as in so many other areas of life, finding the answers isn't just a question of knowing what questions to ask, it is also often a question of knowing the right people to whom to put the questions. I gave William the names of the prescription drugs that Mr Pidgeon was taking.

I'd rather expected it to take a few days before I heard anything but I heard back from Will less than 24 hours after we had spoken.

'It's called chromhidrosis,' said Will, the moment I picked up the receiver.

'Chromwhat?'

'Chromhidrosis,' repeated Will. 'Coloured sweat. Hidrosis is Greek for sweating.'

'And chrom is the Greek word for colour?'

'Absolutely. Well, I think the word is chroma, but chrom is the root which is used when making up new words.'

'OK, well I'm pleased it's got a name but did Dennis have an explanation for my patient's rusty sweat?'

'He certainly did. It's caused by those damned pills his mad doctor prescribed for him.' Will laughed.

'Which one?'

'You!'

'No, which drug?'

Will told me.

'I've never known anything like this happen before,' I said. 'There's no mention of it in the drug company's information sheet.'

'I know there isn't,' said Will. 'And I've prescribed the same drug hundreds of times without seeing anything like this.’ He paused. ‘Of course, I suppose it’s possible that patients who had rust coloured sweat just didn’t mention it. Or maybe they didn’t notice it.’

‘Did Dennis say how common it is?’

‘He said it’s rare. And if he says something is rare then it really is rare. In some patients it’s apparently caused by a substance called lipofuscin being deposited in the sweat glands but whether that’s what happened with your patient is a bit of a mystery. Dennis says he’s heard of people producing both red and blue sweat. He said he did hear of a woman in America who produced pink sweat.’

‘Had he come across rust coloured sweat before?’

‘No, he was quite excited about that. He wondered if you could send him some samples of the sweat and maybe a photo or two. I think he’s planning to do a short paper for some obscure medical journal and he’s collecting pictures of different coloured sweats.’

I promised that I’d send off what Dennis needed. ‘Is it dangerous? Do I need to do anything other than switch the patient’s pills? These control his condition very well but I could find something else to give him.’

‘Dennis says there is no danger and that if your patient doesn’t mind producing coloured sweat there is no need to stop the drug he’s taking. There’s no treatment other than stopping the drug. All he knows is that it’s caused by the drug, it’s not a life-threatening condition and it’s very rare.’

As soon as I’d finished talking to William, I hurried off round to Mr Pidgeon’s home to give him what I thought was good news.

When I got there he was sitting at his dining table, which was covered with piles of cigarette cards. Some of the cards were in albums, some were stacked together in little piles, fastened with rubber bands, and some were loose, spread around and clearly being sorted into categories.

‘So I’m not rusty inside?’ said Mr Pidgeon. I didn’t really get the impression that he was bothered much either way.

‘No, you’re not. It’s just a side effect of one of the drugs you’re taking.’ I handed him a new bottle of pills. ‘I’m going to change your medication and you should stop producing rust coloured sweat in a few days.’

I then retrieved the bottle of pills that had caused the problem and, with Mr Pidgeon’s permission took some samples and photographs of his sweat and sweat stained clothes. I popped the bottle of pills, the samples and my camera back into my black medical bag.

‘Am I going to be famous?’ he asked me, when I explained what the photographs were for.

‘I’m afraid not; not really,’ I said. ‘You won’t be identified and the photos will appear in some very obscure journal with no more than a few hundred readers.’

‘Oh,’ said Mr Pidgeon. For a brief moment he sounded disappointed.

‘How are you getting on with all those?’ I asked, nodding towards the pile of cigarette cards on the table.

Mr Pidgeon’s face lit up. ‘I can’t believe how much stuff there is here!’ he said, proudly.

He showed me sets of cards showing radio stars, film stars and music hall stars, reminding me just how transient fame can be. ‘Some of these people are forgotten now,’ he said, ‘but they were huge stars just a few decades ago. Gracie Fields was the best paid film star in the world in the 1930s, and probably one of the most famous women on the planet, but how many people have heard of her today? Have you heard of Fred Archer, Tom Sayers or Dan Leno?’

I had to confess that I knew the names but couldn’t remember what they did or what they were famous for.

‘Fred Archer was an English flat race jockey. For a long time he was described as the best jockey the world had ever known. Tom Sayers was a very successful bare knuckle prize fighter. Dan Leno was a music hall comedian and a huge star.’ Mr Pidgeon held up a card showing a portrait of Dan Leno. ‘And in America, there were Clara Bow, Louise Brooks and Lillian Gish – three of the greatest movie stars of the 1920s. But now they’re almost forgotten!’

Mr Pidgeon showed me a set of cards showing the English counties and the industries for which they were famous; cards illustrating and describing famous escapes, paintings, ties and ships’ figureheads; a set of cards showing different birds’ beaks; a complete collection of cards showing photographs of English seaside resorts; a set describing popular superstitions; a small pile of cards with pictures and biographical details of American baseball players, and sets illustrating traditional London cries and unusual jobs. I picked up one of these latter cards and was astonished to see that before alarm clocks became popularly available, there were women in the capital whose job it was to go around the streets waking up their customers. According to the card I had picked up, one woman used a peashooter and a pocket full of dried peas and used to shoot peas at the windows of her regulars until they opened the window to let her know that they were awake and that she could move on to her next customer.

‘These are amazing!’ said Mr Pidgeon, his eyes wide open with delight. ‘I’ve got a couple of thousand that need sorting into categories. And then I’m going to try to complete my collection of English customs and traditions. This is going to keep me busy for years!’

I was delighted to see that his old hobby had rejuvenated him.

‘I found an old, out-of-date catalogue in with the cards,’ he said. ‘So I’ve written off to the company asking them to send me a copy of their latest catalogue.’ He picked an envelope up off the table. ‘Would you post this for me, please, doctor? I’ll give you the money for the stamp.’

I happily took the envelope from him, grinned and told him that I had a supply of stamps at Bilbury Grange.

It was good to see that Mr Pidgeon had been revitalised by rediscovering his old, long-forgotten hobby. He didn’t actually say ‘I’ve got a reason to live now’ but it wasn’t difficult to see that was how he felt. Like Sir Hilary Blood, Mr Pidgeon now had something real on his ‘list of things to do before I die’.

This age-old phenomenon was something which I often noticed among my patients.

In particular, I can remember Jack Rutherford and Maisie Peters.

The two weren’t related and the only thing they had in common was that they both lived in Bilbury and were both patients of mine.

Both had slightly unusual ambitions on their lists and at first glance it seemed unlikely that they would ever succeed in achieving them. (Though that is not, and should never be, a reason for not having something on your ‘to do’ list.)

Mr Rutherford was quite young; he was in his late sixties at the time of which I am writing, and he was still quite sprightly. He was still active and played skittles and shove halfpenny at the Duck and Puddle. He had played table tennis for more years than most people could remember. He had been the North Devon champion six times in his lifetime. For most people this would have probably been enough but for Mr Rutherford it was merely frustratingly close to satisfying. His brother, Jeffrey, who had died a year or two earlier, had been the area’s table tennis champion seven times and Mr Rutherford’s ambition was to equal his brother’s record. He didn’t want to beat it, he merely wanted to equal it. He definitely didn’t want to beat his brother’s record; they had been very close. And when he’d equalled his brother’s table tennis record, he wanted to win the skittles and shove halfpenny championships. He’d been pretty near to winning those on several occasions. But he would be able to play both those games well into his seventies while for the table tennis his time was running out.

The problem was that for the last two years Mr Rutherford had been beaten in the final by a young man from Combe Martin called Colin Tudgel. And as Mr Rutherford got older and slower, as the inevitabilities of age took their toll, so the much more agile Mr Tudgel gained in experience and got faster and increasingly adept. It really looked as though Mr Rutherford was never going to match his brother’s record.

‘I’d happily retire from table tennis and concentrate on skittles and darts,’ said Mr Rutherford. ‘If only I could just get that one more win to match Jeffrey.’

Mr Rutherford was the oldest member of a large family. He and his wife Elsie lived in a cottage in Bilbury which had the most beautiful and colourful small cottage garden. It was one of those traditional English cottage gardens which are so crammed with flowers that there is literally no room for weeds to grow.

When I first came to live in Bilbury, I assumed that the flowers in a cottage garden were there simply for their beauty but over the years I learned that the flowers were originally planted not so much for their beauty as for their usefulness.

Most of the popular flowers traditionally associated with a cottage garden were thought to have medicinal or culinary uses and though there is still no scientific evidence supporting many of the traditional beliefs, you’d have to be brave to bet against the popular plants having real value. After all, digitalis, still the most valued drug in the treatment of heart trouble, is derived from the foxglove plant.

Marigolds could be used to add colour to butter and cheese; the leaves and flowers of pansies and violas were regarded as rich in vitamins A and C and were used to flavour honey and garnish salads; cowslip flowers and roots were used to treat blocked noses and throats and for bronchitis, for headaches and muscle problems; mignonette was used both as a laxative and as a diuretic; the hollyhock plant was used for breathing problems and for digestive troubles and some claimed that applying the hollyhock directly to the skin could help heal inflammation; the oil from lavender was believed to be an antiseptic and an anti-inflammatory and was used in the treatment of pains and digestive problems; lily of the valley was used to treat strokes, heart irregularities and urinary tract infections and Sweet William was used as a relaxant. And of course, parsley, sage, rosemary, thyme and many other herbs were used both for cooking and for medicinal purposes.

In the days before medicine became something approaching a science, the cottage garden was far more than just pleasing to the eye; it was the householder’s private pharmacy.

I wouldn’t swap my modern pharmacy for these traditional remedies, and I wouldn’t recommend any of these floral cures, but there is no doubt that for many years the cottage garden was more than just a treat for the eyes.

Although Mr and Mrs Rutherford lived in our village, their three children, two sons and one daughter, all lived in or around Barnstaple. The Rutherfords had a total of eight grandchildren, the oldest of whom was twenty and the youngest was still not at school.

The parents of the three youngest grandchildren had taken to giving their children names according to where they had been conceived.

'I think they got the idea off the television,' said Mrs Elsie Rutherford. 'I gather it's fashionable for celebrities to call their children after the place where their parents think they were conceived. So you get all these children called 'Paris', 'Rome', 'London', 'Brooklyn' and 'Dallas'.'

'I've heard of it happening,' I agreed. I confess that it had always seemed to me to be a pretty cruel thing to do. What child wants to be constantly reminded of their intimate origins?

'Well, it seems a bit daft to me when you've never been further south than South Molton, further north than Combe Martin, further east than Taunton and further west than Bideford!' said Mrs Rutherford. 'I've got one grandchild called Barbrook, one called Patchole and one unfortunate granddaughter who is going to have to go through life known as Tattiscombe – you can tell what she's going to be called when she starts school!' She laughed. 'George and Jenny seem to be keen on making love al fresco and we live in fear that they'll start a baby in Mattock's Down, West Burford or Little Witton.'

Fortunately, Mrs Rutherford's other two children had been more traditional in naming their offspring.

The oldest grandchild, a girl, was called Fiona and she was single. She worked as a waitress in a café in Ilfracombe and although I didn't know her, Mrs Rutherford had told me that she was very popular with the male customers. 'She's very well shaped,' said Mrs Rutherford, explaining this with a simple movement with her hands. 'And she's not shy. Her boss is very fond of her because she always dresses to please the customers.'

'Are the family coming to the North Devon table tennis final?' I asked Mrs Rutherford, when she came in for her monthly weighing. She had been slowly losing weight for two years and having lost four stone she was now down to 12 stone. The final was, as usual, being held in the skittle room at the Duck and Puddle. Because Bilbury had one of the finalists and because it was pretty well-known that Mr Rutherford was desperate to win, it was an event causing much interest in the village.

'Oh we'll all be there,' said Mrs Rutherford. 'Except for our Fiona – I don't think she'll be there. It's a bit embarrassing really because she's set her cap at that Colin Jones, the chap her grandfather will be playing in the final. She won't be there because she knows how much her Granddad wants to win. She's a bit torn you see.'

'I bet it would help her Granddad if she did turn up,' I said. 'Try to persuade her to be there – especially if she sits right at the front where she can be clearly seen.'

The table tennis tournament final was being held in the skittle alley, the only room at the Duck and Puddle that was big enough to hold a table tennis table together with fifty or sixty spectators, while ensuring that the players had room to move about freely. The spectators at the front sat down on chairs or wooden benches so that the spectators behind them could look over their shoulders and watch what was happening.

'You mean that if Fiona sat there making cow eyes at him she might distract that young Colin?'

'It did occur to me. Colin will have plenty of chances to win in the future – especially if your husband wins this one last tournament and retires.'

'I'll have a word with her,' said Mrs Rutherford, with a wink.

Things turned out even better than the two of us had dared hope.

Young Fiona Rutherford turned up in a low cut dress that was so short that it was only just on the legal side of decent. It occurred to me that I could have given her a pretty comprehensive medical examination without her removing it.

'I don't think I've ever seen a cleavage quite that deep,' said 'Harry' Stottle, the former Dr Pelham Ronald Eckersley of London, now known semi-officially as Gengolphus Stottle and informally known as Harry. Now employed as the barman at the Duck and Puddle, Harry who had constructed a close alliance with a young woman who earned her living taking off her clothes, was a man who considered himself something of an expert on such matters. 'If you yodelled into that cleavage you would have to wait a day and a half for the echo to bounce back.'

Fiona, who had been invited to the tournament ostensibly to give her grandfather support, was clearly so keen to attract the attention of Colin, the other finalist, that she smiled at him constantly. Whenever possible she picked up the ball and handed it back to him. This, inevitably, always seemed to entail a good deal of bending forwards and giggling.

It was really no surprise when Mr Rutherford won the tournament, received a seventh small trophy (to put into the bookcase with the other six) and duly retired.

Colin Jones, who had something of a reputation as a bad loser, was surprisingly good natured in defeat when Fiona generously agreed to allow him to take her to the cinema the following Friday. It was clear that Mr Jones's prize was not the sort that would fit into a bookcase.

'I don't know what was wrong with young Colin this evening,' said Mr Rutherford afterwards. 'He didn't seem to be playing as well as I've seen him play. He missed a lot of easy shots.' He sighed, accepting a complimentary pint of Old Restoration handed to him by Frank. 'Still, I'm not grumbling.' I don't think I'd ever seen him quite so happy. 'Now that I've got that out of the way I can concentrate on my darts and my skittles!'

There was no doubt that Mr Rutherford still had plenty to live for and that removing that last driving ambition had been good for him.

'That was an excellent idea of yours, doctor!' whispered Mrs Rutherford afterwards. 'I think everyone's going home happy tonight.' She took hold of my wrist and squeezed tightly. 'It means a lot to him,' she added in a voice that was trembling. I looked down at her. There were tears in her eyes. With her other hand she took a handkerchief out of her handbag and dabbed at her eyes. 'Silly me,' she said to no one in particular. 'What will you think of me?' I put my arm around her and hugged her. I had to make quite an effort to ensure that there were no tears in my eyes.

At 92-years-old (or, as she preferred to put it, 92 years young) Maisie Peters may have looked old, and she was certainly frail, but she still had a sharp mind, an excellent memory and a rather wicked sense of humour.

A bishop's daughter, and the widow of a clergyman who had looked after a rural parish in Cornwall, she had lived in Bilbury since the death of her husband around 15 years earlier.

When Mrs Peters spoke to me it was always in the manner I had previously associated with a certain Miss Hwfa (pronounced Hoofa) Dervish, a primary school teacher of some certain years, who had been given the responsibility of supervising a good part of my early education, and who had, I remembered, taken the responsibility exceedingly seriously. She always spoke as though I were guilty of some heinous crime. Mrs Peters reminded me of Miss Dervish, though there was an impishness about Mrs Peters that I was never aware of when Miss Dervish was talking. When not in her classroom, Miss Dervish had always worn a hat with, it appeared, more flowers than could be seen in any cemetery, even after a big funeral. I'm not sure how I knew but I instinctively felt that Mrs Peters would have never worn such a hat. She had far too well-developed a sense of humour to have worn anything quite so comical.

Decades before, Mrs Peters's father had been a famous climber. He was one of the few men to have climbed both the west face of the Eiger and the Matterhorn and Mont Blanc. I remember her once telling me that he had, 'of course, climbed the west face of the Eiger, since the north face had not been conquered until 1938'. I suspect that by 1938 her father's climbing days had long been over. Mrs Peters once told me that although her father had never injured himself while climbing, he had broken a leg while ascending a rather rickety set of wooden steps to a pulpit in Barnsley.

Mrs Peters and her late husband had lived in a vicarage provided by the church and when the Reverend Peters had, as she put it, 'headed upstairs to meet the Boss', she'd had to leave the vicarage.

She'd come to Bilbury more by accident than design.

She'd been on holiday in Lynmouth, just along the coast, when she had seen an advertisement for Spider's Web Cottage in the window of an estate agency in the neighbouring village of Lynton. The cottage had been in a village she'd never heard of – Bilbury.

I don't think I will ever forget the first time I met Mrs Peters.

She'd had a bad attack of influenza and was lying in bed, alternately coughing and sneezing. She had the beginnings of pneumonia and I had tried to persuade her to let me send her into the small cottage hospital we ran in Bilbury. (Our hospital, in the home of Dr Brownlow, my predecessor, was official known as the Brownlow Country Hotel in order to avoid a variety of unbearably strict regulations which would have required us to build up an impossibly expensive administrative structure, but it was run most efficiently by Dr Brownlow's former butler and a number of caring volunteers, many of whom were themselves well into their 80s.) But Mrs Peters was adamant that she wanted to stay at home.

'I'm sure your hospital is an excellent place,' she said, 'but I'll be far more comfortable here, thank you, doctor,' she said. 'And if I'm going to die then I want to die in my own bed, thank you very much. I've got all my books here, and my wireless.' She pointed to an overladen bookcase in her bedroom and to an old, wooden wireless set which was on a bedside table within easy reach. The back of the set had been lost and the valves were now quite visible. 'All the greats have been on that wireless,' she said with some pride. 'That old set has heard them all.' She looked at it admiringly. 'All the great comedians have been on it. I've listened to 'ITMA', 'The Goons', 'Hancock's Half Hour', 'Educating Archie' and 'The Navy Lark' on that set. And the great singers too – Gracie Fields, George Formby and Vera Lynn – they've all sung on that old wireless. And the wonderful concerts I've enjoyed! Goodness, I wonder how many of those Promenade concerts I've listened to over the years.'

And in the end I had, of course, given in and let her stay at home, in her own bed.

'You probably think I'm old,' she said, rather firmly. 'But when I reached 70 I decided that however many birthdays I had, old age would always be a good ten years older than me. So as far as I am concerned, I am now just firmly established in my middle years and although old age is always approaching, I will never quite reach it. You have to remember, young man, that ageing is the only available way to live a long life.'

She made me laugh a good deal.

'I have no time to grow old,' she once said. 'Shakespeare wrote about the elderly being sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste and sans everything but I am not sans anything.'

Tucked into the mirror in her bedroom she had a postcard upon which was written this quote from Cicero: 'It is not by muscle, speed or physical dexterity that great things are achieved, but by reflection, force of character and judgement; in these qualities old age is usually not poorer but richer.'

Later, when she was recovered from her chest infection, she told me that she remembered that in his later years her father's great joy had been reading the obituary page in *The Times* newspaper. 'He was constantly looking to see who had died and how old they were when they had gone. When he spotted that someone five years younger than him had died he was full of beans for the whole day; as though he had just won some sort of competition.' She added that her father also tried to keep up with the health of everyone he knew. "He won't last long,' he would say with relish. 'He can't have more than three months to last. I can beat that easily.'' She laughed uproariously when she told me all this.

When she was ill I promised that I would call in every day and I arranged for a couple of neighbours to sit with her when they could, to take in meals, change her bed linen and help her to and from the bathroom.

On the second day of her illness I noticed when I visited her that there was a piece of string tied to one of the posts of her iron bedstead. The other end of the string appeared to disappear through the window. When I asked Mrs Peters what the string was for she gave it a sharp tug and outside I could hear what sounded like the clatter of a great number of tin cans.

'What on earth…?'

Mrs Peters tried to laugh but started to cough. I handed her a glass of water and waited for the coughing to stop.

'The other end of the string is tied to a pile of old cans,' she explained. 'It's to scare off the birds.'

She explained that she loved seeing and hearing the birds but that she objected to them stealing all the fruit on her cherry tree.

'When I see the birds in the tree I just pull my bit of string and frighten them off,' she explained. 'There are bird feeders by the back door so they can help themselves to seeds and nuts. A kind young man put them up for me and he fixed up the string and the tin cans.'

'Who was that?' I asked.

'His name is Mr Robinson,' she said. 'Do you know him?'

'Oh yes,' I said. 'I know Thumper Robinson very well.'

'He seems a nice young man,' she said. 'I don't know how he heard I was poorly. But he came and offered to do my shopping for me.'

I didn't know he'd heard. I hadn't mentioned Mrs Peters to him. But I wasn't surprised. Thumper knew just about everything that was going on in the village and he was always ready to do what he could to make life easier for older villagers. I always felt (and still do) that he was the sort of person who really should have appeared on the Queen's honours lists instead of politicians and pop stars.

'Does Mr Robinson have a bad leg?' she asked.

'No, why do you ask?'

'When I was out in the village I saw him from his truck and he seemed to be limping.'

'Ah,' I said. 'If I tell you why then you must keep it to yourself.'

'Of course I will.'

I explained that Thumper occasionally appeared to walk with a stiff leg because he carried a gun inside his trousers.

'Goodness gracious! Is he a gangster? Does he rob banks?' asked Mrs Peters. She sounded more excited than critical.

'Good heavens, no! But I'm afraid he does do a little poaching from time to time.'

'So is it because of the gun he's got stuffed down his trouser leg that he has the bottom of his trousers tied with string? The string is there to make sure that the gun doesn't fall out?'

'That's part of it. But if he has shot a rabbit, a hare or a pheasant he'll put the corpse down his trouser leg if his pockets are full.'

'But you couldn't get a pheasant into a pocket!'

'You could if you had Thumper's pockets. He has two of them inside his jacket and they're called poacher's pockets. You could easily get quite a large animal into one of them.'

'Oh. I see. Do you approve of poaching, doctor?'

I laughed. 'Thumper says that birds and animals all belong to God. His argument is that they can't be considered to belong to the person who owns the land they're living on.'

'You didn't answer my question.'

'Patsy and I are vegetarian. But Thumper is my friend.'

'A very good friend, I should think. He seems a very kind fellow.'

'He's a very good friend and a very kind fellow,' I agreed. 'You aren't the only villager he's helped. You could travel a long way on a fast horse without finding a kinder, more generous man.'

I told her that it was Thumper who, with my predecessor Dr Brownlow, had first made me welcome in Bilbury. It was Thumper who helped me find my first car.

'Do you think I should pay him something for helping me?' she asked.

'No,' I said. 'Definitely not.'

'But he doesn't look terribly well off. He looks very scruffy and that old truck of his has obviously seen better days.'

'He likes doing things for people,' I told her.

'Maybe I'll let him have some cherries when they're properly ripe – if the birds have left me some.'

'I'm sure he would be grateful. Or just let him pick up the fallen branches in your garden. He'll cut them up for you. And you've got a couple of fruit trees that are dead and need taking down. Apple, pear and cherry all make good firewood. You can then share the logs with Thumper.'

Mrs Peters agreed that this sounded an excellent idea and a perfectly equitable arrangement.

She made an excellent recovery and after that I called in to see her once or month or so. She had fewer ailments than most people half her age and apart from that initial illness she was never ill.

It was a couple of weeks after her 93rd birthday that Mrs Peters admitted to me that she had one regret.

'I have always been a careful woman,' she told me. 'When I was a young girl I was always frighteningly well-behaved. I suppose I didn't have much choice – since my father was a bishop. I could hardly go round throwing stones through greenhouses, could I? And then I married a vicar and I remained discreet and law abiding. I never drove above the speed limit, I was always polite to shop assistants, even when they were terribly annoying, and I don't think I ever once lost my temper in public. In the Post Office I was always the one customer who stood there quietly and uncomplaining, however long the queues were and however slowly the counter clerks seemed to be working.'

'I have always been a rather trusting person, rather naïve even,' she continued. 'When I was a girl my parents took me to the theatre. It was, I think, what they used to call a variety show. The star, I remember, was a comedian called Jimmy Wheeler. When he came onto the stage he began his act with the line: 'A funny thing happened to me on the way to the theatre'. I'd never heard the phrase before, and I didn't realise it was a fairly traditional way for a comic to introduce a joke. I assumed that he was telling the truth and I was terribly impressed. I wondered just how far from the theatre this strange thing had happened and, most of all, I was impressed that he had arrived at the theatre without any material but had relied on observing something comical as he walked to the stage door. It seemed to me to show tremendous calm and confidence. When I mentioned this to my parents they looked puzzled, and a little sad, as though they had produced a daughter who was, to put it politely, a little slow. I don't think I was slow – just rather unworldly.'

'I never yearned to travel the world, I never had a need for a life filled with great excitements,' she said. 'I had a lovely, loving husband and although I've never been rich, I've always had a nice home. I always had plenty of books to read and I've always enjoyed the programmes on the wireless. I've had a wonderful life. No complaints.'

'I rather think there is a 'but' or a 'regret' waiting around the corner!' I said, when she paused. There was a faraway look in her eyes.

'Oh, I always hated that word 'but',' said Mrs Peters. 'I hated it especially when it came after a compliment. 'I really like your dress, but…' 'Your hair looks nice but…' 'How lovely the room looks but…'.' She laughed.

'So, what's the 'but'?'

'It isn't so much a 'but' as a 'regret',' said Mrs Peters. Suddenly, she seemed shy, as though she were worried that I might think what she was about to say rather strange.

'And so what's the regret?' I asked, pushing her a little.

'You're going to laugh.'

'No I'm not.'

'It's a really silly thing – and probably quite impossible.'

'Tell me and then I'll help you if I can.'

'I always wanted to climb a tree.'

I looked at her, not sure that I'd heard properly.

'I always wanted to climb a tree,' she repeated, clearly aware that I was having difficulty believing what I was pretty sure that I'd heard.

'A tree?'

'A tree.'

'Any particular tree?'

'When I was nine or ten I used to watch the other children climbing a tree that was visible from our house. Well, technically our home was a palace. Bishops live in palaces as you know. But there was a wonderful old oak tree just inside our gates. Lots of children used to climb it, girls as well as boys. And from my bedroom window I used to watch them.'

'Is the tree still there?' I asked.

'Oh good heavens, I don't know. I don't have the faintest. The palace has probably been turned into offices or converted into flats and the tree is probably a nice table and a dozen chairs. It doesn't matter because I don't want to climb that particular tree.'

'So, which tree would you like to climb?'

She looked shy and even rather coy but didn't reply.

'Which one?'

This time she answered. 'That cherry tree outside my bedroom window.'

I thought about it. And then I walked to the window and looked out. The branches of the cherry tree looked as if they could be climbed but the first branches didn't leave the trunk until about four feet from the ground.

'What are you thinking?' she asked. But there was a twinkle in her eye and I think she knew what was on my mind.

'You'll need a little help to get off the ground,' I told her.

She looked at me and this time, for the 92-year-old widow of a clergyman, she was definitely looking coy.

'Oh, I'll certainly need a little help!' she agreed.

'When do you want to try it?'

'If it were done when 'tis done then 'twere well it were done quickly!' She raised both eyebrows and put her head to one side, as though asking for my approval.

'Macbeth.'

'Of course. Macbeth talking to himself. In act one, scene seven. Inside the castle.'

'You know your Macbeth.'

'I love Shakespeare. I've read all the plays several times.'

'Shall we make tomorrow afternoon tree climbing day?'

'Not today?'

'It's been raining and the tree will be slippery. Also you'll need some help. I want to ask Thumper to come and give me a hand.'

'Thumper Robinson?'

'There's only Thumper!'

'Yes, I suppose so. He won't laugh will he?'

'No. He won't laugh.'

I telephoned Thumper straight away and asked if he could meet me at Mrs Peter's house at three o'clock the following afternoon. He could.

And so, the following day there were four of us standing at the base of Mrs Peters' cherry tree. Mrs Peters was, on my advice, wearing a pair of good stout shoes, a pair of corduroy trousers, a thick shirt and a pair of her thickest gardening gloves. I was very conscious of the fact that elderly skin can easily tear and, once torn, can be slow to mend. I didn't want her to get a skin infection. Thumper and I had put Mrs Peters' kitchen stepladder at the base of the tree. The fourth person there was Patsy. I had asked her to come along to help.

'Isn't that cheating?' Mrs Peters asked, when she saw the stepladder.

'Not at all!' said Thumper. 'Climbers use all sorts of aids – ropes, crampons and ice axes. You need a small step ladder to give you a helping hand – or foot – into that nice fork of the tree.'

'OK. So what do I do?'

'You climb up the stepladder until you're standing on the top step. And then you put a foot onto the fork in the tree.'

'And then?'

'Then we'll see!'

With Thumper and I standing one each side of the ladder, Mrs Peters climbed up the steps and then, rather gingerly, stepped onto the fork in the tree.

'Oh this is fantastic!' she cried, clearly delighted. 'Can I go higher?'

‘If you think you can?’

‘Oh I do!’ she said. And she stepped onto the next fork a foot or so higher up the tree.’

‘Hold the tree tightly and smile!’ I told her, as Thumper moved the stepladder away so that it wouldn’t appear in the picture. I then took my camera out of my pocket and took some photos of Mrs Peters up the tree.

‘Oh that’s marvellous!’ she said, at this unexpected bonus. ‘Can I have copies to send to all my friends?’

‘Have the picture put on your Christmas cards!’ suggested Thumper.

‘That’s a wonderful idea!’ agreed Mrs Peters.

I then put the stepladder back into position and Patsy went up a few rungs to help Mrs Peters climb down.

It took rather longer for her to get down than it had taken for her to get up into the tree. Patsy came down holding onto her. Thumper and I held the stepladder to make sure that it didn’t wobble.

When we were back indoors we celebrated the adventure with a bottle of champagne and a chocolate cake bought especially for the occasion from Peter Marshall’s excellent emporium.

‘This was the most exciting thing I’ve done for a long time,’ said Mrs Peters, posing for more photographs with a glass of champagne in one hand a large slice of cake in the other.

‘You can tell your friends that you went up the tree to pick your cherries,’ said Thumper. ‘Make it sound as if you climb a tree every day.’

Mrs Peters laughed. ‘Oh, could I do that?’

‘Of course you could.’

‘I feel so very naughty,’ she said. And she giggled. ‘I don’t think I’ve ever giggled before.’

It seemed a bit of a pity that she had to wait until she was 92-years-old before she could have a giggle in her life. But I was pleased that I helped to make the day that gave her the giggle.

The True Story of How the Duck and Puddle Got Its Name

It was Sunday and Patsy had gone off early to help her mother make jam.

Making jam is something the two of them do every autumn. It’s a real family tradition and it usually takes them a couple of days of work to convert our home-grown strawberries, gooseberries, plums, raspberries, apples and other fruits into jam. Patsy’s sister Adrienne, now Mrs Fogg, usually goes along to help though I gather from Patsy that her main role is that of taster.

I had been left alone with Ben, our faithful and now elderly dog, our trio of cats, the sheep and Cedric the pig to sort out a few things around the house.

The two tasks on my list were: first to clear out a blocked drain and second to try to do something about the washing machine which had developed some sort of obstruction.

We’d noticed the blocked drain only when waste water started to form a large puddle outside the back door. And we’d noticed that the washing machine wasn’t draining properly when a large puddle appeared in the room which an estate agent would probably describe as our ‘utility room’ but which we prefer to think of as ‘that funny little room with a cobble stone floor and a door which is so full of woodworm that bits fall off it if you shut it too hard’.

Finding workmen to come in and do such seemingly trivial chores is never easy. Even the handymen who have advertisements which promise ‘No Job Too Small’, and who, if they ever answer their telephones, do so with great enthusiasm, mysteriously seem to find themselves fully booked when you explain that you don’t want them to put on a new roof, install a new kitchen or build a two-car garage with granny flat and workshop attached.

I had first of all tried ringing a man who is known locally as Dirty Dick. He is a drain specialist who is reputed to have been cleaning out drains in North Devon since drains were first invented, though this may be something of an exaggeration. He never wears gloves or overalls and doesn’t seem to spend a great deal of money on soap. His real name is Cyril Hornby-Smythe and, surprisingly perhaps, he has a degree in Ancient Languages from Cambridge University. He lives in a huge, tumble-down house in Barnstaple. His wife teaches domestic science at a local secondary modern school.

Sadly, Dirty Dick wasn’t available. His wife told me that he was in hospital having a hernia repaired and wouldn’t be available for cleaning out drains for at least a month.

I told her I didn’t think we could wait that long, asked her to pass on my best wishes to her husband for a speedy and uneventful recovery and tried another couple of drain specialists.

One of them said he could probably manage to do something in six weeks and the other had an answering machine with a message saying he was on holiday in the Seychelles for two months. I made a mental note to consider a career in drain cleaning if I ever found myself struck off the medical register and unable to continue practising medicine.

So, rather than waste any more time making useless calls on the telephone, I decided to try to clear the drain myself.

I did have a set of old drain rods, which I had found in a barn a few months earlier. I had no idea how old they were but they seemed serviceable so I fitted the rods together, pulled the drain cover off the nearest inspection point and set to work.

I didn’t have the faintest idea what I ought to be doing but it seemed to me that if I stuck the rod with the little brush fixed on the end into the drain, and then used the other rods to enable me to push it into the drain as far as it would go, I might have a chance of clearing the blockage and sorting out the problem.

I pushed and pulled and eventually a great bundle of roots came out of the drain with the brush. As I did so there was much gurgling and eventually, after sounds which alarmed me so much that I actually stood up and moved back a few paces, the contents of the pipe started to move. Moments later the blockage had obviously gone for the sewer pipe was empty. I hadn’t felt so pleased with myself since I managed to pass O level Latin at the first attempt.

To my absolute delight I then discovered that the drain which was blocked was the one into which the washing machine emptied, and that it was the blockage in the drain which was preventing the machine from draining effectively.

I had solved both problems at once.

I was so pleased with myself that for a very brief moment I considered putting an advertisement in the local paper and advertising my services as a handyman. If a drains specialist could earn enough to have a two month holiday in the Seychelles maybe I could earn enough to buy a new rear tyre for my bicycle or, at the very least, arrange to have the existing one mended. (The rear tyre had a slow puncture in it which meant that I either had to pump it up every time I used the bicycle or else bump along uncomfortably on a flat tyre.)

I have to admit that clearing out a blocked drain, and seeing the backed up water drain away out of the washing machine, was strangely satisfying. It reminded me of the time I catheterised Mr Edgar Turner and emptied two and a half pints of stale, second hand beer from his bladder.

When I'd done my chores I had a bath, put on fresh clothes and wandered down the garden for a while.

It had been a long, hard and rather difficult week.

The most significant, and saddest event, had been the death of George Meddlecott who had died during the week in extraordinary circumstances.

George, had been in his mid-40s, and had worked as a shepherd.

There really aren't any specialist shepherds around these days but back in the 1970s there were quite a few men (all the shepherds I knew were male) who spent their lives looking after sheep.

On the Tuesday of that week, George had been found dead in a field just a mile and a half away from Bilbury Grange. He had been stabbed three times in the stomach, and when his body was found by two walkers, I was called. I was, therefore, the one who saw the body and confirmed both that it was George Meddlecott and that he was dead. I called the police because it seemed rather suspicious to say the least.

Within two hours there were two dozen policemen in the field, including a Chief Superintendent, and murder was pretty obviously their first diagnosis.

However, this view was rather weakened by the discovery that the knife was George's own and that the only fingerprints on it belonged to him.

On Thursday the police talked at length to George's brother and found that George had for weeks been suffering from pain caused by terrible wind.

George's brother lived in Barnstaple and worked in a bank. He said that George had steadfastly refused either to come and talk to me about it or to take any of the remedies his brother had offered in an attempt to find a solution. He had also refused point blank to amend his diet in any way. (I knew that George lived on a strange diet, which seemed to consist largely of food he had scavenged from fields, hedgerows and the waste bins outside the Duck and Puddle and Peter Marshall's shop. He spent most of the pittance he earned on pipe tobacco and bottled beer.)

On Friday, the police concluded that George hadn't been murdered but had accidentally killed himself. Because he was a shepherd he knew that a common, old remedy for sheep which were swollen with wind was to stab them in the stomach in order to release the accumulated gas. (If you don't release the gas the bloated sheep may fall over and be stranded on its back, vulnerable to birds who will peck out its eyes and then peck it to death.)

George had apparently mentioned this to his brother and had asked if he thought it might work on a human being. Amazingly, the brother had failed to mention this to anyone and had simply replied that he didn't know.

The conclusion was that poor George had tried to save himself from the pain by stabbing himself in order to release the awful wind he was experiencing. (The pain of trapped wind is widely and massively underestimated). He had then bled to death and died, alone and in the middle of a field.

Other than seeing the dead body, and confirming that George was dead, I hadn't really been involved since I had never seen him as a patient, but the police had been to visit me at least half a dozen times to ask for information. I found it difficult to imagine how desperate poor George must have been to take such drastic action.

And so, after successfully clearing both the drain and the washing machine blockage, I wandered down the garden in search of a little peace.

Ben, the three cats (Emily, Sophia and Jeremy) and the sheep (Lizzie, Petulia, Cynthia, Sarah-Louise and Miss Houdini) all followed me.

It was difficult to walk about in our garden without becoming part of a procession and I sometimes used to feel that I needed a stick to twirl or a big drum to beat.

It was fortunate, I suppose, that Cedric, the pig we had on loan from his American owners, was fast asleep in his sty, having just finished an enormous breakfast of his favourite fresh fruit and vegetable platter. I'm afraid that Cedric, like all the animals who lived with us, was rather spoilt. He used to enjoy going for a walk

I picked an apple off one of the late fruiting trees and tossed it to Percy, our tame pheasant. There were plenty of windfalls from the trees which had already produced their crop but Percy was a fussy bird. He ate a third of the apple and then wandered off. The minute he'd gone, a crow pierced the remains with his beak and flew off with it. Then a squirrel and two rabbits appeared on the lawn and sat there looking rather pathetic and starved.

Feeling rather as though I'd wandered into a Walt Disney movie, I plucked three more apples and threw them in their direction. Rabbits and squirrels love apples – or at least our rabbits and squirrels did. In the really bad weather I sometimes used to pop an apple down a rabbit hole so that the rabbits snuggling together down below have a little something extra to munch.

Then Percy returned, looking for his missing apple. So I gave him another. This time he ate just a third of it before wandering off for a drink of water. A seagull swooped and picked up the two thirds of an apple in his beak and flew away to enjoy a quiet feast somewhere else in the garden. It occurred to me that at the rate I was going I would soon have to explain to Patsy why we had such a poor apple crop. Another crow flew down and started to peck at a windfall apple. Then a seagull appeared and clearly wanted to take the apple away from him. (There were scores of other windfalls on the ground which the badgers hadn't yet eaten but the seagull wanted that apple and no other apple would do. Birds are just like small children.) I then watched in astonishment as a bunch of other crows flew down and stood around their chum so that he could eat his apple in peace. That was truly altruistic behaviour for the guard crows got nothing out of the exercise except the knowledge that they were looking after their pal.

I watched all this happening in awe and I truly felt lucky to be living in such a wonderful home in such a marvellous part of the world. North Devon is the coldest part of the county, raw with wind and rain in the winter, but there is a wildness about it which seems to produce a sense of family among the residents – both human and otherwise.

In my early years in Bilbury, when Dr Brownlow, my predecessor, had still been alive, I had travelled a fair amount – mainly to London or to towns and cities where there were television studios or radio stations. On several occasions Patsy and I had gone to London together. Our greatest joy had been merely walking through the streets of London, looking in shop windows and being astonished by the speed at which life was lived. Our favourite walk was to start at Trafalgar Square, walk up Charing Cross Road (calling in at one or two of the second hand bookshops en route), then turn left at Cambridge Circus and go along Shaftsbury Avenue to Piccadilly Circus. When we got to Piccadilly Circus we would walk along Piccadilly, turning right into the Burlington Arcade and then up Bond Street. We usually then took a taxi back to Paddington Station rather than struggle along Oxford Street. We liked this walk best at dusk on a slightly drizzly autumn evening, and we did it many times. I don't know why we liked that route or why we liked walking it when it was drizzly and going dark. I suppose it just seemed more romantic. Sometimes we would stop off for afternoon tea at Fortnum and Mason where a pot of tea for two and a couple of toasted tea cakes would cost us a small fortune but make us feel rich for a few moments.

During those years I had made a considerable number of television programmes (most of which had been of the instantly forgettable kind) and had spent rather too much time promoting my books by doing interviews with young presenters who didn't have the faintest idea who I was, hadn't bothered to look at the book I was promoting (let alone actually read it) and who clearly cared more about whether their make-up was perfect, their hair just so and their smile was offering just the right mixture of charm, humour and integrity than they did about the subject we were supposed to be discussing.

But within a year or two my travels outside Bilbury had been strictly limited by my solo responsibilities for the health of the village.

After the death of Dr Brownlow, it was no longer really possible for me to leave the village – for the very simple reason that there was no one else to take my surgeries, do my visits or answer my emergency calls. I could, and occasionally did, pop into Barnstaple, Combe Martin, South Molton, Ilfracombe or Lynton but expeditions further afield were impossible. Even Exeter, the county town of Devon, had become a foreign country to me. There was a relatively brief period when my practice was shut down by the NHS because it was considered inefficient to have a solitary doctor providing medical care for a relatively small village. For a while I earned my living solely from my writing. But after protests from the villagers, things soon went back to normal and I was soon working as a GP again. And there were no more trips to London or, indeed, to anywhere else. The village of Bilbury was so spread out and confusing that it would have been impossible to find a locum doctor who could find Myrtle Cottage at three o'clock in the morning on a rainy night. And if we'd gone away from Bilbury Grange, who on earth would have looked after our menagerie?

And the truth was that I really didn't mind at all that I had to stay in Bilbury.

By the time I stopped going there, London had seemed to me to have become dirty, over-crowded and just too busy.

The last time I'd been there, I had found it difficult to believe that on the 6th of October, 1897, the author Arnold Bennett had walked through Green Park, just yards from Buckingham Palace, and, looking through an October mist, had seen sheep grazing in the park. By the early 1970s, a visit to London left me coughing and wheezing (and with a grime-encrusted shirt).

I'm happy to accept that my attitude to London said far more about me than it did about London. It is perfectly possible that London was no different to the way it had always been and that it was me, not England's capital city, who had changed. I had fallen in love with country living and I felt that I would be quite happy if I never again had to board an aeroplane, climb onto a train or struggle through a bustling crowd of commuters and shoppers.

Meanwhile, I stood in the garden and looked around.

Our resident pheasant, the one whom we had Christened Lord Percival (but knew as Percy – he didn't seem to mind this familiarity), was now standing beside our summerhouse flapping his wings and calling loudly. He did this for a few minutes and then wandered off up the garden to the spot among some rhododendron bushes where he roosts. Ten minutes later a hen pheasant appeared, clearly attracted by Lord Percival's attractive courting calls. Unfortunately, Lord Percival was now nowhere to be seen. The hen waited a while, wandered around on the lawn and then, looking sad, doubtless disappointed and frustrated, she wandered off again.

I watched three rabbits munching away at the grass and thought how good it was of them to help keep the lawn under control. Rabbits make excellent lawn mowers. I reckoned that I had to cut the grass only half as often as I would have had to cut it without them. And for the first time I saw a rabbit doing what is called a binky. When a rabbit suddenly jumps into the air and twists about before landing, it is doing a binky. When a lamb or a sheep does it this is called pronging.

It is said in books that squirrels never drink water but this is not true. We have several squirrels who regularly drink from our bird bath. The wild creatures use the bird bath for all sorts of things in addition to drinking and washing. I once saw one of the squirrels who lived with us take a hazelnut which had fallen in some mud over to the bird bath and give it a good wash before eating it. I've also watched a robin pull a worm out of the grass, take it to the bird bath and wash it and then gave it to another robin perched in a tree nearby.

Those who study animal behaviour insist that we must never anthropomorphise. But I find it difficult not to and I am quietly convinced that animals have far more complicated lives than some would imagine. It has for years been assumed that only human beings are capable of thought processes. I believe that this is hubristic nonsense. My own studies of animals have convinced me that they are capable of very complex behavioural patterns which could not exist without complex thought processes.

I don't think I am alone in this. Thousands of individuals who have shared their lives with dogs and cats, for example, will confirm that animals are not the simple mechanical creatures that Descartes would have us believe them to be. And why on earth should they be? After all, primates such as orang-utans share 97% of our own DNA. They can communicate with one another and they show skills with tools – as well as having a sense of humour. Elephants and chimpanzees display compassion, treat themselves with medicines when they are ill and mourn their friends and relations. And there is plenty of evidence that animals can love.

Birds too are capable of extraordinary thought processes. All members of the corvid family (which includes ravens, crows, rooks, magpies, jays and jackdaws) have much more complex brains than most people imagine and many studies have shown the wisdom of these creatures. Ravens and rooks, for example, have been shown to maintain long-term relationships with other birds, and their social and political systems are often as complex as our own.

I wandered around the garden for the best part of an hour, just looking and watching and learning.

When I first came to live in Bilbury I would walk through the lanes quite quickly, more intent on where I was going than on where I was. And I now knew that most of the visitors, hikers and walkers, who wandered through the village did so at such a pace that they actually saw very little of the world around them. To see and understand the countryside, and the creatures in it, you have to be prepared to stand and lean on a five barred gate occasionally; and to be prepared to look and to listen. And there are so many fascinating things to see. I had learnt so much in my years at Bilbury Grange. I'd learned that ants move around far more speedily when the weather is warm. You would think it would be the other way round and that they would run around when it was cold. But they don't. They speed up when it's warm. I found myself fascinated by the woodlouse too. You can find woodlice in crumbling old logs and, when the weather is bad, they come indoors. The woodlouse used to be called the 'pill woodlouse' because if threatened they roll themselves up into a ball. Doctors used to prescribe them for a variety of ailments. Can you imagine being told by your doctor: 'Go home and take two woodlice every four hours. Send a boy with a message in the morning if there is no improvement'.

As soon as the sun told me that it was approaching noon I wandered back up to the house, climbed onto my rather rusty old bicycle (after pumping up the back tyre) and pedalled slowly along the lanes to the Duck and Puddle where I had arranged to meet Thumper and Patchy for a little light luncheon. Ben wandered along behind me. She knew exactly where we were heading and, like most of the inhabitants of our village, was content to get there at her own pace.

When I arrived at the pub I found my two pals already there, settled beside the usual log fire and already topping up their blood alcohol levels. They had not yet started to do anything to contribute to their blood cholesterol levels. Frank, who was sitting with them, was sipping a glass of bubbly tonic water. Harry, the more than slightly over-qualified new barman, was standing behind the bar polishing glasses with a tea towel. Whenever I saw him there, I wondered if there were any other barmen in North Devon with a medical degree. I wondered how many of the men and women polishing glasses and pulling pints had once held an eminent position at a London teaching hospital.

To my surprise there were two other customers in the Duck and Puddle. He was short and thin with very short hair. She was shorter and thinner and also had very short hair. They were clearly motorists rather than walkers or cyclists. I knew this from their smart, clean clothing, their neatly combed hair, their un-flushed faces and the fact that there was a smart, little motor car that I'd never seen before parked outside in the Duck and Puddle car park. I hadn't noticed what make it was. When I was a boy I used to be able to identify most of the cars on the road but by the early 1970s I found that most cars looked much the same as one another and unless I was looking at something exotic, exceptionally expensive or vintage, I wasn't able to tell one from the other.

'Stanley and Stiffy Sidwell,' said the male stranger, introducing both himself and a woman whom I assumed was his wife as I entered. He had that way of speaking that I had only before heard from the mouths of former diplomats. Maybe it's a style that is also taught to health and safety specialists for that is what he turned out to be. It's an odd way of speaking: strangely formal, flat, superior and condescending. I suppose it's taught as a way of talking down to the natives; calming them when trying to persuade them to put down their spears and abandon the idea to pop you into the hot pot. I didn't know why he introduced his wife as well as himself, though it did occur to me, quite wrongly, that maybe she couldn't speak, or had a sore throat. Still, she didn't seem to mind this modest act of lese-majeste so I didn't see why I should mind. At first glance, I thought he looked rather miserable; along the lines of a man who has just discovered that while he was having a nap some miscreant had snuck in and nicked his liver and mischievously replaced it with one of those little models of a lighthouse filled with layers of different coloured sand.

He was drinking what looked like coffee and she was drinking something that was probably tea. The Duck and Puddle specialises in alcoholic beverages and filling food and does not pretend to be a coffee house. If it ever appeared in one of those guide books which provide marks and criticisms, the Duck and Puddle would not receive anything more than two stars for its hot beverages and even then one of the stars would doubtless be for the fact that when someone asks for a warm cup of something they are invariably served something that is unquestionably hot. 'We might not make the best cup of coffee in the world,' Frank had once told a customer, 'but we make the hottest.'

I told Stanley my name, took his outstretched hand and shook it. He had a small, toothbrush sized moustache, only slightly bigger than the one favoured by A. Hitler Esq and one of those limp, slightly moist handshakes that always make me want to wipe my hand down the side of my trousers afterwards. I managed to resist the temptation to do this. Stiffy also held out her hand and hers, too, was one of those insipid handshakes that makes you wonder if it has actually taken place at all. He told me that I should call him Stanley and that his wife answered to Stiffy.

'I'm a Health and Safety Inspector,' said Stanley. 'But we're on holiday at the moment. We're on a tour of English inns and taverns. This is our third inn of the day.'

I was clearly expected to be impressed by this and, not wanting to be churlish or unwelcoming, I did my best to look impressed. At the same time Ben pushed open the front door, wandered over to the rug by the fire and lay down. She used to race around Bilbury. But she had become much more stately and measured. Frank immediately stood up and fetched her a bag of her favourite pork scratchings.

'I thought you'd like to try this, for a change,' said Harry, handing me a tumbler containing Laphroaig whisky. 'I'm sure you'll prefer it to your usual brand of lemonade.'

Stanley looked across at me, nodded and smiled. He and Stiffy had remained standing at the bar, rather than sitting down and making themselves comfortable. The pair of them looked as though there were a pair of lecturers about to start giving a lecture. Little did I know how accurate this appraisal was going to prove to be.

'Dandelion and Burdock,' Harry explained to Stanley. 'It's made locally according to a 17th century recipe.'

I hoped that Stanley didn't have a particularly well-trained sense of smell. Laphroaig malt whisky doesn't smell much like Dandelion and Burdock.

'You shouldn't give those to a dog,' said Stiffy pointing at Ben and the pork scratchings. 'I'm a supervisor.' She didn't say what she supervised and none of us liked to ask.

Frank looked at her and then at me.

'They contain too much fat for dogs,' the woman explained. 'And I've read that they can cause problems in the dog's pancreas.'

'They contain too much fat for people,' said Thumper.

'She only has them occasionally,' I said, feeling rather guilty. I looked across at Ben to see if it was too late to take the pork scratchings away from her. It wasn't too late but I couldn't bear to do it. Like all of us she likes an occasional treat – even if it is bad for her. I wondered if I should mention to Stanley and Stiffy that the caffeine in tea and coffee can cause cancer of the pancreas. I decided not to bother.

'My husband is an expert on inn signs and names,' said Stiffy. 'We're writing a book about them.'

'Stiffy takes the photographs,' added Stanley.

And for the first time I noticed that Stiffy had a camera slung round her neck. It was something fancy with lots of levers and dials and a complicated looking lens. 'I hope you won't mind my mentioning it,' he said, talking to Harry and moving the fireside rug with the toe of his shoe. 'But this rug is loose. Rugs in establishments where the public are allowed access are required to be fastened down to avoid accidents.'

‘Ah,’ said Harry, without hesitation. ‘I wish we could do that. We’ve been asking them for years to let us fix it down. Unfortunately, the rug has been designated a floor covering of outstanding natural beauty and of significant historical interest by the Government’s Ancient Rugs and Artefacts Department. They won’t let us move it, nail it down or even put any sticky stuff on the back.’

‘Not allowed to impede its movement in any way, was the phrase I think you mentioned,’ said Patchy who had, for some reason known only to himself decided to deliver this in a rather broad country yokel accent. Patchy is one of the best educated and best read men I knew. He had what used to be called a cut-glass accent.

‘It’s not been moved for years,’ said Frank. ‘It’s been here longer than I have. I wouldn’t dare move it for fear of what we might find underneath it.’

‘Blood stains, probably,’ added Thumper. ‘From that murder.’

We all looked at him.

‘Sorry,’ Thumper said. ‘I know no one likes to talk about that.’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ muttered Frank. ‘I know I’ll have to talk about it one day.’

‘It really wasn’t your fault,’ said Thumper.

‘Everyone agrees they both asked for it,’ said Patchy. ‘I don’t know what they were thinking of – behaving like that in front of your very eyes.’

There was a long silence. We all sipped our drinks. Ben continued crunching her pork scratchings.

It was Stiffy who eventually spoke.

‘Yours is a very interesting establishment,’ she said. She looked around as she spoke. She clearly wasn’t quite sure who she should be addressing. ‘Are your beams real?’

Frank frowned and looked at her sternly. Asking him if his beams were real was about as tactless as asking a bathukolpian woman you’ve just met if her breasts were real. ‘Real?’ he said. He managed to stretch the word out until the elastic seemed certain to break. He reminded me of Dame Edith Evans playing Lady Bracknell in Oscar Wilde’s ‘The Importance of Being Earnest’ – the famous bit where she is shocked about John Worthington’s provenance and she says: ‘A handbag?’

‘Or are they just glued on?’ continued Stiffy. ‘A lot of public houses have their beams glued on. We saw one in Exeter which had polystyrene beams.’ Stiffy did not seem aware that her initial query had upset the landlord and that her supplementary remarks were just making things worse.

Frank glared at her. ‘The Duck and Puddle is a very old and original pub. The only stuff in here that’s false is in my mouth and they’re called dentures!’ he said. Frank was rightly proud of what he and Gilly had built. I could understand why he was feeling aggrieved.

‘They sometimes do it to make the place look old,’ explained Stanley, unthinkingly making things worse.

‘My husband is something of an expert on many aspects of public house presentation,’ said Stiffy who, it seemed to me, could probably win prizes for insensitivity, indifference and an inability to tell when someone was upset. ‘The publishers expect my husband’s tome on inn signs to be a seminal work. And it is bound to be an international bestseller.’

‘Seminal,’ said Patchy, nodding. He said it again and looked at Thumper who also nodded.

‘You can trace public house names back to the Crusades,’ said Stanley. ‘The people commemorated the crusades with names such as ‘The Saracen’s Head’ and ‘The Trip to Jerusalem’. There are still public houses in Britain with such names.’

‘Some public houses are named after the occupation of the proprietor,’ said Stiffy. ‘So drinking houses were called ‘The Wheatsheaf’ if the owner was a baker, ‘The Horseshoe’ or ‘The Three Horseshoes’ if he was a farrier and ‘The Three Compasses’ if he was a carpenter.’

“The Green Man’ denoted that the pub was kept by a game keeper, ‘The Woodman’ that the publican was a forester and ‘The Coach and Horses’ made it clear that the pub was originally run by a coachman,’ said Stanley. “The Blacksmith’s Arms’ and ‘The Cobbler’s Arms’ are pretty explanatory.’

I got the impression this wasn’t the first time that Stanley and Stiffy had recited these names. They seemed to have worked up a little double act. The Stanley and Stiffy Show. ‘Of course some pubs were named for other reasons, so a pub called ‘Bag o’Nails’ would be named after the ancient Greek ceremony celebrating the bacchanals,’ said Stanley.

‘The seven most popular pub names are all expressions of support for royalty,’ said Stiffy. ‘Stanley has determined that there are over 600 pubs in the United Kingdom called ‘The Red Lion’ because that was the badge favoured by James the First. He made it a law that premises selling alcohol should all stick up pictures or models of a lion. He insisted that when he travelled from Edinburgh to London he wanted to see lions everywhere he went.’

‘There are scores of pubs called ‘The Crown’, ‘The Rose and Crown’, ‘The Crown and Anchor’, ‘The King’s Head’ and ‘The Queen’s Head’,’ Stanley informed us. ‘Pubs called ‘The Royal Oak’ are so named because Charles

II hid in an oak tree in 1651 after the disastrous battle of Worcester.'

'Some pubs were called 'The White Hart' because that was the badge of Richard II, and some were called the So and So Arms after the name of a local bigwig. And then there are public houses which were named directly after the coat of arms of a local dignitary. So many inns and taverns in Warwickshire were called the 'Bear and Staff' because that was the coat of arms of the Earl of Warwick.'

Looking around I could see that I wasn't alone in thinking that we'd pretty well reached our limit on this particular subject. But Stanley and Stiffy weren't finished yet. They told us that some pub names were either simply fantastic or comical, and based on old wives' tales and local legends. So, said Stanley, there are pubs called 'World Turned Upside Down', 'Cat and Mutton', 'Castle of Comfort', 'Merry Month of May', 'Labour in Vain', 'Tippling Philosopher', 'Darby and Joan', 'Baker and Basket', 'Magnet and Dewdrop', 'The Old Friends', 'Mrs Grundy's Arms' and 'Who'd Have Thought It?'.

'Of course some pubs get nicknames,' said Stiffy. "The White Swan in Stratford-upon-Avon, next to the Shakespeare theatre, is known to everyone as The Dirty Duck and is regularly patronised by actors, fans and hangers on.'

'My own particular interest is the pub sign,' said Stanley. 'In mediaeval days there was no bigger advertising space than the local pub sign and inn keepers spent a good deal of money on their signs. 'The White Hart' at Scole in Norfolk had a famous sign which stretched right across the road and consisted of 25 life-size, classical and mythological figures. The sign cost over £1,000 which was a lot of money in the 17th century. Many other pub signs were painted by famous artists. So, for example, Hogarth did a sign for a pub called 'The Man Loaded with Mischief'. Some old pub signs are now so valuable they've been taken down and are displayed under glass or have been sold to collectors and museums.'

'Tell the nice people about how the Duck and Puddle got its name,' said Stiffy, addressing her husband.

I glanced around and could see that none of my chums seemed particularly happy at being described as 'nice people'. It seemed to me to be almost as insulting as being described as 'little people'.

Before her husband could say anything, Stiffy turned back to address us. 'Before we came in Stanley did a little research work, using the reference books he carries in the car, and explained to me where this public house got its name.'

'Oh, I doubt if these good people would really want to hear my opinion,' said Stanley.

'Oh but we would!' insisted Harry immediately.

'Absolutely!' agreed Patchy.

The rest of us muttered our slightly muted encouragement. Only Ben, who had now finished her pork scratchings, remained silent. I know that my encouragement was entirely fake. To be perfectly honest I just wanted Stanley and Stiffy to finish their double act, climb back into their little car and chug off to the next stop on their itinerary. I knew from the way they spoke that Thumper, Patchy, Frank and Harry all felt as I did.

'Well, it's just my supposition, of course,' said Stanley, with unexpected modesty. 'One can never be entirely certain about these things, particularly where history is involved. But I would think that the word 'duck' is merely a bastardisation of the word 'Duke', and the word 'puddle' is probably taken from the verb 'to puddle' which was used to describe the manufacturing process which enabled an iron foundry to turn molten iron into malleable iron. Do any of you know if there was ever an iron foundry in the area?' He looked around enquiringly.

'There's never been anything like that round here,' said Thumper who was born and brought up in Bilbury. There is no doubt that if there had ever been an iron foundry in the area he would have known about it.

'Well, if there really wasn't a foundry,' said Stanley, making it clear he didn't accept Thumper's assurance that there hadn't been, 'then there should have been one. Maybe there were plans for one but the foundry never materialised.'

No one said anything.

Stiffy picked up her cup, emptied it and put it back down on the bar counter.

'Of course, the Duke concerned was probably not the Duke of Devonshire, whose seat is, of course, Chatsworth House in Derbyshire, but the Earl of Devon,' continued Stanley with a doggedness you had to admire. 'The first Earl of Devon was Baldwin de Redvers, whose seat was Carisbroke Castle. He was driven out of England to France where he joined the Empress Matilda. And it was the Empress Matilda who gave Redvers the title Earl of Devon. Locally, among the citizens, it is quite likely that he would have been known as the Duke though we do also know that a man called James Askew-Herrington, who lived in Devon in the 19th century, was known to describe himself as the Duke of Devon and so we must bear him in mind as a possibility.'

'So, you think the pub got its name from a Duke and an iron foundry?' said Frank.

'I think that is the most likely possibility,' said Stanley with a sage nod. 'I think we can ignore the possibility that the word 'puddle' is a bastardisation of the word 'paddle', which was the common name for a lump fish in the 16th century. But there is one other possibility which I can't entirely rule out.'

'And what's that?' asked Frank.

I think it is fair to say that I could tell that he didn't seem entirely convinced by Stanley's analysis of how the pub had acquired its unusual name.

'Well, although it isn't entirely well-known, poodles were at one time regarded as excellent hunting dogs – particularly where there was water nearby. They had quick reflexes, were renowned for being able to spot where a bird had fallen and were widely used by huntsmen as early as the 17th century. So it's easy to see that the pub's name could describe the type of bird that was commonly hunted in the area and the type of dog used to collect the bird.'

Stanley leant back, folded his arms and assumed a classic 'What do you think of that, then?' pose.

We all looked at Frank. Frank looked at the floor.

'Marvellous!' said Harry Stottle with enormous enthusiasm. Actually, he didn't so much say it as boom it. 'That was quite exceptional; the apotheosis of obscurantism! You cut through the embranglements of history with exoptable and magniloquent obnubilation!'

Stanley, frowned, as though trying to decide whether this was, or was not, a compliment. . 'Thank you!' he said eventually, clearly preferring to assume that the barman had congratulated him. It was, perhaps, not the language he had expected to hear coming from the other side of the bar in a country pub. He was not to know the concatenation of circumstances which had led the former Dr Pelham Ronald Eckersley, a psychiatrist, to abandon his private Harley Street consulting practice, and a teaching post at what he himself called a 'snotty' London teaching hospital, and to run away to the West Country, to Devon, to Bilbury and finally to the Duck and Puddle.

'It's so nice to find people who are able to understand and appreciate Stanley's work,' said Stiffy.

'It's very kind of you, I'm sure,' said Stanley. He smiled and lowered his eyes modestly. I thought he looked like a young, teenage girl who has been told that her hair looks nice or that the dress she is wearing is very pretty. Well, as much as a Health and Safety Inspector with a toothbrush moustache can look like a teenage girl.

Suddenly, Stanley looked at his watch. 'Is that really the time? We ought to be getting on.'

'We have a time table, you see,' said Stiffy. She took a piece of card out of her pocket and examined it. She then put the card back into her pocket and checked her watch. 'We were due to be at 'The Pack of Cards' in Combe Martin ten minutes ago,' she said to her husband.

'Good heavens!' said Stanley. 'Time flies when you're enjoying good conversation with good company, doesn't it?'

We all murmured, the way people do when they want to seem to agree with something but don't want to come right out and agree with it with real words.

And so Stanley and Stiffy left and a moment later we heard their little car chug away from The Duck and Puddle, from Bilbury and, quite probably, out of our lives for ever.

'They've gone the wrong way,' said Patchy, who had stood up to watch them go. 'They're taken the lane down to Softly's Bottom. If they're lucky they'll end up in Lynmouth. If they're unlucky no one will ever see them again.'

'Lucky for 'The Pack of Cards',' said Thumper.

'What was that you said to Stanley?' Frank asked Harry. 'That apotheosis stuff?'

'Oh, I just congratulated him on his spirited balderdash,' replied the barman. 'It was a load of old bollocks wasn't it Frank?'

Frank nodded.

'I asked how the pub got its name two months ago,' admitted Harry. 'So I knew that our Stanley was talking gibberish. But he was enjoying himself so much that it seemed a pity to tell him the truth.'

'So, how did the Duck and Puddle get its name?' I asked.

It occurred to me, with some shame and not a little embarrassment, that I'd never asked this before. I could tell by the way Thumper and Patchy leant forward with interest that they also didn't know how the pub had acquired its unusual name.

'Our pub used to be called 'The White Hart',' said Frank. 'When Gilly and I bought the pub, half a lifetime ago, it was run down and in an even worse state than it is now. The sign had fallen into the road and, the pub had no customers. When we took over we discovered that there are hundreds of pubs in Devon called 'The White Hart' so we wanted to start afresh, call it something different.'

'So where did the name come from?' I asked.

'When we got here it was winter and it had been raining and there was a huge puddle in the space that is now the car park.'

We all groaned.

'Is this true?' asked Patchy.

‘Honest, it’s true,’ said Frank. Harry, who had heard the story already, nodded his agreement. ‘You can ask Gilly. She’ll tell you the same.’

‘And there was just the one duck on the pond?’

‘A mallard,’ said Frank. ‘A duck. Nice girl. I don’t know what happened to her. I like to think she just buggered off one day; that maybe a handsome drake flew in and they went off together to find a bigger puddle somewhere and fill it with ducklings. When they’d gone we had the hole filled in and now it’s the car park.’

‘Just one duck on a pond,’ said Thumper reflectively. He frowned. ‘You know, I grew up with this pub being the Duck and Puddle. I don’t remember it as anything else. And I always thought there was some wonderfully complicated reason for the name.’

‘It’s a pity you didn’t tell Stanley the truth,’ said Patchy. ‘I’d loved to have seen his face.’

‘Oh no,’ I said. ‘It was much better to let him go away and put his theory into his book.’

Patchy thought about it and laughed. ‘You’re right! It was much better that way.’

‘I think it’s a pretty wonderful way to name a pub,’ said Harry.

And, without having to think any more about it, we all agreed with him.

‘I’m glad Stanley and Stiffy have gone,’ said Thumper. ‘There was a horrid smell in here.’

‘Yes, I could smell something funny,’ agreed Patchy. ‘I thought it was Stanley and Stiffy though I didn’t really notice it until they’d been here a while. I thought perhaps they’d trodden in something or maybe eaten too many Brussels sprouts.’

Everyone sniffed, in the way that people do when they think there’s a funny smell in the air.

‘The smell hasn’t gone,’ said Harry. He looked at his watch, lifted the bar flap and came out from behind the bar. ‘I’ve got to get a move on,’ I said. ‘Mildred’s got a gig in Combe Martin and I’ve promised to drive her down there. She’s in a bit of state now that she’s lost her licence. Besides, I promised to be there to cheer her on.’

Mildred Snodgrass (whose stage name is ‘Melina Melons’) is a friend of a local stripper called Carole Singer, and like Mrs Singer she earns a living taking off her clothes in public houses.

Gengolphus (or Harry) and Mildred (or Maisie on Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday afternoons and Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday evenings) were, as people used to say, ‘going steady’ and they certainly seemed extremely fond of each other.

I knew that Harry Stottle had not yet confessed to Mildred that his real name was Dr Eckersley and that in a previous existence he had been an eminent psychiatrist with a flourishing celebrity practice in Harley Street. Harry, who appeared to have mellowed enormously after finding love, had admitted to me that he was worried that Mildred might be disappointed, or even critical, when she found out that he hadn’t always been a barman. ‘She likes me being a barman,’ he said. ‘She seems to think it’s a good, solid, respectable job for a fellow. She says you know where you are with a barman.’

Since I happened to know that Mrs Snodgrass had previously been married to a man who stole cars for a living I was not as surprised by this as some folk might have been. When you’ve spent a few years living with a man who carries a bent coat hanger in his jacket pocket and has an impressive collection of spare car number plates hidden in the garage, then any man with a job which involves working hours and a weekly wage packet must seem to be an enviably respectable alternative. Still, I didn’t think she would object too much when she found that Harry hadn’t always pumped pints for a living.

‘Crumbs, do you need a licence to do that now?’ I asked.

‘Do what?’

‘To take off your clothes in public?’

‘Why would you need a licence to do that?’

‘I’ve no idea. You seem to need a licence for just about everything these days. You have to have a licence to take a pig for a walk so it doesn’t seem entirely unreasonable that you’d need a licence to take your clothes off in a pub. I suppose the authorities might think that if you didn’t have to have a licence then everyone would be doing it.’

‘No, you idiot!’ said Harry. ‘Mildred has lost her driving licence. She tried driving home after two glasses of port and lemon and did her best to flatten a lamp post.’

‘It still smells a bit like drains in here,’ said Thumper. He turned to Frank. ‘I thought it was that pair of walkers, but they’ve gone now. Have you got a blockage somewhere down below?’

Frank frowned, thought for a moment and then shook his head. ‘Not that I know of.’

Tentatively, I sniffed. I too could smell drains. And even after a bath and a change of clothes, I knew where the smell was coming from. I looked at my watch.

‘Gosh, is that the time! I must fly. I’ve got a pile of paperwork to get through.’

And I hurried home to have another bath before Patsy got back from the preserve-making jamboree.

Blanche Manders

Mrs Blanche Manders came into my surgery, sat down, looked at me for a moment and burst into tears. She didn't just cry; she sobbed.

Mrs Manders lived on the outskirts of Bilbury, on the road leading out towards Barnstaple, and although I knew her by sight and by name, I knew I'd only rarely seen her as a patient. She had been taking the contraceptive pill since her marriage five years earlier but that was the only thing for which I had seen her. The only other entry on her cardboard medical file was in Dr Brownlow's handwriting and dated nine years earlier – before I'd first moved to Bilbury. She'd been to the surgery complaining of a sore throat. Dr Brownlow had prescribed an antibiotic. She hadn't returned so it seemed fair to assume that the antibiotic had worked and the sore throat had gone. She had been in her early twenties then and she was now just 29-years-old.

I pushed the box of paper tissues across the desk towards her and then moved my chair so that we were a little closer. I waited for the sobbing to subside before I said anything. At first the tears were pouring down her cheeks but slowly the crying slowed, as though she'd run out of tears. And then the sobbing was dry; her whole body wracked with the pain of whatever it was that was tormenting her. I coughed a little because the perfume she was wearing tickled my throat. She seemed to be wearing an awful lot of perfume for a trip to the doctor's surgery.

'What is it?' I asked. I spoke softly. She looked as if she had been crying all night; as though she hadn't slept a wink.

She tried to speak but she couldn't get any words out because when she tried, the sobbing got worse. It was dry now, no tears, but her whole body was wracked with every sob. I wondered what on earth it was that was causing her so much pain. I thought about what I knew of her family. According to her medical records, her parents were both dead and she had no brothers or sisters. There were, I was sure, no children. Just a husband called Harry. He was a few years older than her and worked for the council in Barnstaple. He was something in the planning department. As far as I could remember he was fighting fit. He was, I remembered, a keen cross country runner and like all long distance runners he was small, slightly built and thin.

'Has something happened to Harry?'

She shook her head.

'You have to tell me what it is.'

Still, she didn't speak.

'Have you been in pain? Have you found a lump? Are you bleeding?'

I thought that if I just asked her questions I might eventually trigger a response.

There was silence; a very loud, painful silence.

I asked more questions, searching for a key that would unlock the secret that was causing her so much pain.

'It's awful,' she whispered suddenly. 'I'm so ashamed.' She took a paper tissue from the box and blew her nose. Then she took another tissue and dried her eyes. Her eye make-up was smeared all over her cheeks by the crying. Wiping her eyes just made it worse.

'Talk to me,' I said.

'They say I smell.'

It was whispered so quietly that I wasn't sure I had heard properly. I asked her to repeat it.

'They say I smell.'

'Who says you smell?'

'The people I work with.'

Very tentatively, desperate not to make it obvious, I sniffed.

All I could smell was her perfume. I didn't know what brand it was but it was potent stuff. And she seemed to have used a lot of it.

And suddenly the floodgates opened. This time releasing words not tears. There was some pain, some anger, some frustration and some resentment.

'I bathe every day. I wash my hair twice a week. I go to the dentist regularly. I put on fresh clothes every day. What is wrong with me? What else can I do? I have never felt so ashamed in my life. Never!' She looked at me for the first time. 'What's wrong with me, doctor? Is there something wrong? You have to help me. You have to do something.'

'Who said that you smell? When did they say it?'

'Yesterday. My boss. I work in a clothes shop in Barnstaple and just before closing time he asked me to go into the office. I knew it was something bad because he wasn't his usual jolly self. He's normally very chatty and a bit flirty. He's the only man in the shop. Five women and him and he rather enjoys it, I think. I thought he was going to fire me and now I wish that was all it had been because I could have taken that. And anyway he might just as well have fired me because I can't ever go back there again.'

It took me another ten minutes to get the full story out of her.

It appeared that her boss had called her into his office, told her to sit down and then closed the door. He had then, rather bluntly and with absolutely no finesse, sympathy, understanding or care, told her that the other women in the shop had asked him to have a word with her because they said that she smelt. The boss, the shop manager, said that the other assistants had complained that they found her smell to be unpleasant and that they'd seen customers walk out of the shop when they'd smelt her.

And so then I understood the tears and the sobbing.

Many people would, I suspect, rather be told that they were stupid, or even accused of dishonesty, than be told that they smelt badly. To be told that you smell strikes at the very core of your being as a person; it is your very essence. To be told that you smell because you've trodden in something unpleasant is one thing, an irrelevance, but to be told that your body smells is a blow at your person. And for a woman it is, I suspect, even worse than it would be for a man. A man can laugh off such accusations and might even put it down to manliness – in the same way that a certain type of man might burp or fart in front of his workmates and laugh about it. He would probably be amused by a critical response. He would be unlikely to be broken in the way that Mrs Manders was broken.

'Did they say what the smell was like?' I asked her. 'All I can smell at the moment is your perfume.'

'Fish,' she said. 'They said I smelt of fish.'

She paused, took another tissue and blew her nose again. She put the used tissue into her handbag with the others. 'I used nearly a whole bottle of perfume before I came to see you.'

There are all sorts of disorders which can cause unusual or strong body smells. And as soon as Mrs Manders had told me her problem I started to go through them in my mind.

If a patient has diabetes then high levels of blood glucose can increase the incidence of bad breath and body odour. If diabetes gets out of control then a condition called diabetic ketoacidosis can develop. The body isn't getting enough insulin and so there is a shortage of the sugar the body needs for energy. One well-known sign of ketoacidosis is breath that smells rather fruity. It is a fairly easily identified smell.

But I didn't think that Mrs Manders had diabetes and if she had then I was sure it wasn't out of control. Besides, she had been told that she smelt of fish. Still, I could easily do a urine test that would tell me if she had diabetes.

'Have you lost weight?' I asked her.

'No. I've been dieting but I haven't lost any weight yet.'

'Do you feel unusually thirsty?'

'No.'

'Are you always hungry?'

'No, not more than usual. I've always had a good appetite.'

'Do you pass urine more often than usual?'

She thought for a moment. 'No.'

'Any tingling or numbness in your hands or feet? Do you find that bruises take a long time to heal?'

'No, no, not at all.'

'Have you been more tired than usual?'

'No, I don't think so. I feel tired now but I didn't sleep much last night.'

It seemed that I could rule out diabetes. But I still made a mental note to do a urine test nevertheless.

An overactive thyroid gland can cause excessive sweating and that can result in an unpleasant body odour. But patients with an overactive thyroid aren't difficult to diagnose. They are usually underweight, nervous and twitchy. Even if they don't have visibly enlarged thyroid glands or the slightly bulbous eyes which are classical symptoms of thyrotoxicosis they don't smell of fish. Still, I had to check.

'Have you been unusually nervous or restless?'

'No.'

'Hold out your hands for me, please.'

She held out her hands. There was no tremor, a common sign with thyrotoxic patients. I took her pulse which was absolutely regular, though a little fast.

I didn't think she had a thyroid problem.

I knew that malfunctioning kidneys could result in a build-up of toxins, and that a liver which wasn't working properly could do the same.

'Have you been short of breath? Nauseous? Any pains anywhere?'

'No.'

‘Do your ankles well?’

‘No.’ She paused and thought for a moment. ‘I suppose they do a little bit in the very hot weather. But they’ve always done that.’

‘You don’t feel tired all the time?’

‘No. I was feeling fine until yesterday evening.’

‘And you pass the usual amount of urine?’

‘Oh yes.’

I leant forward and looked at her eyes carefully. There was no yellowing of her sclera. ‘What colour is your urine? Is it darker than usual?’

‘It’s just the usual colour.’

‘And your faeces – are they the usual colour?’

She looked puzzled. ‘The what, doctor?’

‘Your stools, when you open your bowels. Any change in colour?’

She looked a trifle embarrassed though whether this was because of the question or her original failure to understand I didn’t know. ‘Oh, no, nothing unusual.’

‘And your periods are normal?’ I asked.

Mrs Manders was far too young to be going through the menopause but I had to ask because odd things do happen. And during the menopause there can be an increase in sweat production and a change in body odour. There can also be a change in the acidity of the vagina – leading to a change in vaginal odour.

‘They’re as regular as clockwork.’

‘You have no trouble with incontinence?’ I asked. Urinary incontinence is uncommon in young women. But, again, I had to ask.

‘Oh no,’ she replied.

I had now pretty well run out of questions.

It is surprising how much you can learn simply by asking questions.

Lots of big city doctors have a tendency to send their patients off for loads of blood tests, X-rays and so on when they’re trying to make a diagnosis. But for country doctors this can take a lot of time and be very inconvenient for patients. So I always preferred to find out as much as I could by asking questions.

‘I want to test a sample of your urine,’ I told her. ‘Normally, I’d ask you to pop into our loo and pee into a bottle for me. But I need you to go home and have a bath and remove all your perfume so I’ll give you a bottle and you can take it home with you. I’ll call in and see you this afternoon and I can do the test then.’ I took a sample bottle out of a tray on the trolley behind me and handed it to her.

I had another reason for doing this. In order to reach our loo, Mrs Manders would have to go through the waiting room and I knew that she wouldn’t want to do this with her face still streaked with tears and her make-up looking awful. She’d already suffered enough embarrassment. It would save her two trips through the waiting room if I let her leave my consulting room through the French windows.

‘You want to see if I smell?’ she asked.

‘Of course,’ I replied.

She nodded.

I’d asked a lot of questions but I’d got nowhere near to making a diagnosis that would take me any closer to finding a solution to Mrs Manders’s problem. I had to know what she smelt like.

I let her out through the French windows and rang for the next patient.

It was just before three o’clock that afternoon before I rang the doorbell at Mrs Manders’s home. To my surprise, her husband Gerald answered the door. He didn’t invite me in straight away but stood on the doorstep.

‘I came home at lunchtime and took the rest of the day off,’ he explained. ‘She was so upset that I wanted to stay at home this morning but she told me that there was nothing I could do and that I should go to work.’

‘But you’ve been worried all morning?’

He nodded. It was clear from his eyes that he too had been crying. ‘I hate to see her like this,’ he said. ‘How could anyone have been so cruel?’

‘The manager?’

‘Yes. He broke her, doctor. She’s usually a strong woman but even if it had to be said he didn’t have to say it like that, did he?’

It occurred to me that Mr Manders was trying to tell me something.

‘She’s always been a good employee,’ he said. ‘She often worked extra hours and did more Saturdays than anyone else.’

‘Have you noticed something?’ I asked him.

'Maybe,' he said. 'Just a little bit.'

'For how long?'

'For a month or maybe six weeks at most. But I didn't say anything.'

'Has it been getting worse?'

'No, not really. No, I don't think so. She wears a lot of perfume but I can still smell something odd.'

'How would you describe it?'

'Not very pleasant,' he said. 'Sort of rotten eggs and a garbage sort of smell more than just fishy like they said.'

'Not very nice?'

He looked over his shoulder, obviously looking to see if his wife could overhear him. 'No,' he agreed. 'Not very nice.'

'But you didn't say anything?'

'No, of course not. How on earth do you tell someone you love that they smell a bit funny?'

It was a good question.

'Where is she?'

'She's upstairs in the bedroom. She was in the bath for over an hour.'

'Can I go up?'

'Of course.'

He stood aside so that I could go past him into the house.

Mrs Manders was sitting in a chair in their bedroom. She was wearing a nightie with a dressing gown on top of it. She had clearly been crying again. As I approached her she pointed to the sample bottle I had given her. It was standing on her dressing table. 'I've done the sample, you wanted.'

'Well, let's test that first,' I said. I was desperately hoping that I'd find something that would give me a clue.

I don't think I have ever before hoped to find a sign of a problem when testing a patient's urine but this time I was hoping that I would either find a sign of an infection or maybe clear evidence of sugar in the urine.

I took a testing strip from a bottle in my black bag and checked the urine.

It was absolutely normal. There wasn't any sign of any abnormality at all.

'Have you found anything, doctor?' asked her husband who had followed me into the bedroom.

'It's perfectly fine,' I told him.

'Nothing wrong?' asked Mrs Manders, and it was clear that she too had been hoping that I would find some abnormality.

'No. There's nothing wrong.'

I moved across the room and sat on the end of the bed so that I was only a couple of feet from Mrs Manders.

And now I knew that we really did have a problem.

There was a faint smell of soap but the overpowering smell was one of a mixture of rotten eggs and rotting fish.

'Can you smell anything?' whispered Mrs Manders.

I nodded. What else could I do? There was absolutely no point in my denying that there was a problem.

Mrs Manders started to cry.

'We'll find out what it is and deal with it,' I told her. I then asked her to lie down on the bed so that I could examine her. Tactfully, Mr Manders excused himself and left the bedroom. I heard him clatter down the stairs.

Fifteen minutes later, after I had checked her heart, her lungs, her abdomen, her limbs and everything else I had found absolutely nothing wrong with her. I would have given her a completely clean bill of health if I'd been performing the strictest of health insurance examinations.

'Has your diet changed at all recently?' I asked her, suddenly wondering if the smell might be caused by something she was eating. Eating asparagus, for example, can cause a dramatic change in the way a body smells – and, in particular, in the way that urine smells.

'No,' she replied.

'You aren't eating anything different? You haven't started eating a food you've never eaten before?'

'No.'

'Am I right in thinking that you don't want to go back to work?'

She shook her head vigorously. 'I could never go back there,' she said.

I took a pad of sick notes out of my black bag, wrote one out and handed it to her. 'I've put you down as having a bad throat,' I told her.

She thanked me and put the sick note on the bedside table.

'I don't know what is causing your problem,' I told her. 'I can find absolutely nothing wrong with you. In fact, you seem to be in perfect health. But this evening I will do some research and I'll telephone you as soon as I know anything.'

‘Do you think you’ll be able to do something about it?’

‘I’ll do something about it,’ I told her.

I never like making promises to patients but it seemed that there had to be a cause for Mrs Manders’s problem and, if there was a cause, there had to be a solution. She was, or appeared to be, a perfectly healthy woman.

That evening, after my surgery, I sat down beside the fire with a pile of medical textbooks on one side of me and a pile of medical journals on the other side. Because we lived miles from any medical library, I kept all the journals to which I subscribed and I had built up my own small but quite comprehensive library.

‘What are you looking for?’ asked Patsy, as I flicked through one journal after another.

I told her.

‘Oh the poor woman!’ said Patsy. ‘How could that manager have been so damned thoughtless and cruel? Surely he could have found a better way to tell her.’

‘You would think so, wouldn’t you?’ I said. ‘But when you stop and think about it what on earth do you say to someone in those circumstances? Her husband noticed the smell but he didn’t say anything because he couldn’t think of what to say or how to say it.’

‘I suppose you could criticise him as much for not saying something as you can criticise the shop manager for saying something,’ said Patsy. ‘Crumbs, what a horrid dilemma. Can I help you? What are you looking for?’

‘I don’t know,’ I admitted. ‘I’m hoping I can find a disease that causes a nasty smell. Maybe there’s a paper in a medical journal that will help.’

So for an hour or so we ploughed our way through the books and journals.

‘Are you looking for anything that can cause a funny smell?’ asked Patsy.

‘Yes. Have you found something?’

‘There’s a short piece in this journal,’ said Patsy. ‘It was published a year or two ago, back in 1972.’

She handed me the journal, opened at the page where she’d found a short abstract of a paper published in an unusual American medical journal. The paper dealt with a substance called trimethylaminuria – something I’d never heard of – and referred back to another paper published just a year or so previously.

‘All this was published after I’d qualified,’ I said.

I tried to keep up-to-date by regularly reading medical journals and new textbooks but it’s impossible for one doctor to keep up with all the new research published around the world. And I had definitely missed this piece of research.

The abstract I read had a short list of references attached to it – these gave the details of three scientific papers which dealt with the problem in more detail. The description of the disease exactly matched Mrs Manders’s symptoms.

I looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was twenty past ten.

‘I’m going to telephone Mrs Manders,’ I said, getting up and heading for my surgery. It seemed to me that although it was late she and her husband would want to know my news sooner rather than later.

It was Gerald Manders who answered the telephone. He sounded short-tempered, even angry, at being disturbed. I told him who it was, apologised for calling so late and asked if I could speak to his wife.

‘I think I’ve found the cause of your problem,’ I told Mrs Manders. ‘If I’m right, and I think I am, then you have a rare condition called trimethylaminuria.’

‘What’s that?’

‘It’s a metabolic condition which has developed because your body is unable to break down some substances which contain nitrogen and which are in the food you eat. One of the compounds is called trimethyalmine.’

‘Can you cure it? Can you make it go away?’

‘I don’t know how to do that yet,’ I told her. ‘But there are some more scientific papers I need to study. Tomorrow morning I will telephone a big medical library in London and I should have the information I need the day after that.’

‘Is it a dangerous disease?’

‘No, I don’t think so. It results in an unpleasant odour but nothing else. It isn’t going to affect the functioning of your body’s organs or threaten your long-term health.

‘But do you think you’ll be able to stop it making me smell badly?’

‘I believe so,’ I told her.

‘What made it start?’ she asked. ‘I haven’t changed my diet.’

‘I don’t know that,’ I told her. ‘Look, I just wanted to ring you to let you know that I now have an idea of what is causing your problem. I wanted to share my hope with you. I’ll ring you in two days when the postman brings these papers I need to look at.’

‘I’m very grateful,’ said Mrs Manders.

And then she started crying again. A moment later I heard her husband's voice. He apologised for his brusqueness, thanked me for calling and asked me what I had found.

I told him what I'd told his wife. And I repeated that I would telephone when I had more news to tell them.

The following morning I telephoned a big medical library in London, spoke to one of the librarians and arranged for them to post me copies of the scientific papers I needed to read. I hadn't even heard of the obscure journals which had published the papers but, fortunately, the library had subscribed to them and was able to promise to send me what I needed in that day's post.

The day after that, when I'd read the papers I had been sent, I telephoned Mrs Manders again and told her that I'd go round to see her that afternoon.

'Trimethylamine has an extremely unpleasant smell, reminiscent of fish and rotten eggs, and it's produced in the intestines when certain types of food are eaten,' I explained. 'Normally, the trimethylamine is dealt with by the body. But when things go slightly wrong with the metabolic processes the trimethyalmine accumulates and is released in the sweat, the urine and the breath. For some reason this condition seems to affect women more than men. One expert has suggested that might be because the different hormones in women's bodies might aggravate the symptoms.'

'Is his trimethylwhatsit catching? Will my husband develop it?'

'No, definitely not. It's not infectious or contagious.' I wrote the name of the condition down on a piece of paper and handed it to her.

'But what has suddenly caused this to happen?' asked Mr Manders. 'Or is that a stupid question?'

'It's a very sensible question,' I told him. 'The theory seems to be that it is caused by changes to a gene in the sufferer's body. It's very rare and it's something that appears to be inherited.'

'Is there a remedy?' asked Mrs Manders. 'Is there anything you can give me?'

'I'll come onto that in a moment,' I said. 'But there are things that you can do to help yourself and they may be more important than anything I can do. First, you need to avoid too much stress or exercise – anything that makes you sweat.'

'Sweating can make it worse?'

'It can.'

'Then that's probably why it got worse in the shop,' said Mrs Manders. 'A couple of the other assistants had complained of the cold and so the manager had increased the heating and put up the temperature. They liked it hot but I did find it uncomfortable.'

'And you were sweating?'

She nodded.

'Second,' I said, 'I think you should stop taking the contraceptive pill. We'll need to discuss some other form of contraception for you.'

'Well, I'm not going back to work and so once this problem is sorted maybe we can think about starting a family,' said Mrs Manders.

'Let's try to get this under control first of all,' I suggested.

'Do you think that the contraceptive pill has caused the problem?' asked her husband.

'It might have made it worse,' I explained. 'If the condition is related to hormone levels then taking the pill would change those levels and might exacerbate the problem.'

'So stopping the contraceptive pill would help?'

'I think it could.'

'Is there anything else I can do?'

'Definitely. I think you could try cutting out the sort of foods that contain trimethylamine.'

'What are those?'

'I've made a list for you,' I told her. 'Eggs, milk, liver, kidneys, beans, peas, peanuts, cabbage, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts and broccoli. Oh, and seafood and shellfish.'

'Seafood?'

'It apparently contains trimethyamine,' I agreed.

Mrs Manders looked at her husband. 'When you asked me if my diet had changed I forgot about that,' she said. 'My brother recently started to work at a fishmonger in Ilfracombe. He's been bringing us mackerel, crab and other fish and shellfish and so we've been eating more seafood than before.'

'I'm afraid that you should probably cut fish out for the time being,' I suggested.

It was beginning to sound as if we had encountered a perfect storm; a cornucopia of circumstances just right for this condition to become apparent.

'You said there was also something you could probably recommend as a medicine,' Mr Manders reminded me.

‘There are a few things we could try,’ I said. ‘But to start with I suggest that you try taking something called activated charcoal. I don’t have any in the pharmacy at Bilbury Grange but you can buy it over the counter at chemists and health food shops. Taking vitamin B2 supplement might also help because vitamin B2 seems to help break down trimethylamine in the body.’

‘You really think that all this will help?’

‘I definitely do,’ I said. ‘Both the charcoal and the vitamin B2 It should help by decreasing the concentration of trimethylamine in the body. It seems that charcoal might help by converting the trimethylamine into something that is harmless and doesn’t smell.’

‘And all this is very rare, did you say?’ asked Mr Manders.

‘It is. In fact the condition was only first reported a couple of years ago. Before that no one knew it existed.’

‘So if I’d come to you with this problem five years ago you wouldn’t have heard of it?’

‘No. To be honest I hadn’t heard of it anyway until a couple of nights ago. But five years ago no one else would have heard of it either because no one had discovered it.’

When I left their home both Mr and Mrs Manders looked happier than they had done for days. They had quite a few things to try and I was quietly confident that the approach would work.

Happily, my confidence was well placed.

Within a week Mrs Manders was back in the surgery to tell me that her husband had told her that the unpleasant smell which had caused so much distress had now gone completely.

‘I haven’t put on any perfume today,’ she said. ‘Please tell me if you can smell anything unpleasant.’ She stood just a couple of feet away from me.

I sniffed.

It seemed a rather rude thing to do but what alternative was there?

‘Perfect!’ I told her quite honestly. ‘You smell as fresh as a spring garden.’

With a big, beaming smile she told me that for two days she and her husband had talked of leaving North Devon and going to live in another part of the country.

‘To be honest I was terrified of going back into Barnstaple and seeing any of the other girls working in the shop – let alone the manager. But eventually we decided that it was silly to run away. I don’t have to go into Barnstaple much anyway. I can do most of my shopping at Peter Marshall’s shop and if we need anything else that has to come from Barnstaple then my husband can collect it – or we can go to Taunton instead.’

I told her that I was very glad that they had both decided to stay in the village and added that Peter would undoubtedly be delighted!

After the evening surgery I told Patsy just how valuable her detective work had been.

She looked at me. ‘I’ve been meaning to ask you this since you first told me about this disease. Do I smell at all funny?’

‘No. Definitely not.’

‘Do you promise?’

‘I promise. Do I smell funny?’

‘Well, I didn’t like to say anything…’

‘But?’

‘You do smell of bonfire a lot of the time.’

Mrs Manders’s problem wasn’t a laughing problem but I had to smile. Sometimes it is too easy to allow a patient’s problem to get into your mind, dampen your spirit and poison your soul. A little black humour is sometimes an essential part of the armoury of a doctor and his nearest and dearest.

‘I don’t think there’s a cure for that,’ I said. ‘I can’t possibly stop having bonfires.’

‘I didn’t think you could,’ said Patsy.

The Flagpole

I don't think I have yet mentioned how we came to have a flagpole decorating our garden.

Well, the whole flagpole thing was Patchy Fogg's fault

Patchy and I were at an auction in South Molton when he noticed that there was a flagpole for sale.

'You should buy that,' he said. 'It would look good in your garden.'

Naturally, I told him not to be daft, that I didn't want a flagpole, particularly not one that was 30 feet tall. 'I've got absolutely no intention of buying a flagpole,' I insisted. I continued to rummage through a large box of old books that was almost certain to be knocked down for 50 pence. Hardly anyone ever wants to buy the mixed box of books at a country auction but there are always some fascinating finds to be found therein. In among the Victorian novels by long forgotten authors and the inevitable farming Almanacs (full of remarkably dull and completely out-of-date stuff about crop yields and weather) and out-of-date books on mechanical engineering (full of incomprehensible diagrams of cogs and flywheels) there will invariably be a few bound volumes of old *Punch* magazine, *Windsor Magazine*, *The Captain*, *The Strand* and so on. These old volumes make marvellous reading.

'Your lot is up now,' said Patchy, nudging me as I continued to rummage.

I leapt to my feet, thrust my hand in the air and kept it there. I have never mastered the business of rubbing my nose, winking or tugging on an ear lobe – the little visual ticks which seem so popular among the professional dealers who dominate most auction rooms.

And two and a half minutes later I found myself being congratulated by Patchy on having purchased my very own flagpole for £4 excluding commission.

'I thought I was bidding for this box of books!'

'Haven't I always told you that you should pay more attention when you stick your hand up at an auction?' asked Patchy, whom I had until then always thought of as a good and dear friend.

'How on earth am I going to get a flagpole home?'

'Oh, don't worry about that. We'll tie it to the top of the van. It's an absolute bargain at £4. It would have cost twenty times as much if you'd bought it new.'

We tied the flagpole to the roof of Patchy's van and got the darned thing back to Bilbury Grange safely eventually, though we agreed that it was a good job we didn't see any policemen on our way home. The pole, which was a solid piece of Douglas fir and far heavier than either of us had expected it to be, overhung both ends of the van by quite a few feet and although Patchy managed to find a couple of old rags to tie to the two ends, I feel sure that our journey home wasn't exactly legal. My mood wasn't lightened by the fact that I had been so busy berating Patchy for tricking me into buying the flagpole that I'd missed the box of books I'd coveted. The box had been knocked down to a farmer from Countisbury who had paid 25 pence for the whole lot and, judging by the way he tossed the box into the trailer on the back of his tractor, probably intended to use them as fire-lighters.

'It looks like a flagpole,' said Patsy, when we got home and lifted it off the top of Patchy's van. 'But it can't possibly be a flagpole because why would you buy a flagpole?'

'It's an absolute bargain!' Patchy said to her. 'You could sell this next week and make a profit.'

'Can't we sell it this week and just get whatever it was we paid for it?'

'It was only £4,' I pointed out, rather weakly using the traditional fact that it hadn't cost very much to justify having bought it. 'Plus commission.'

'The only other bidder was going to chop it up for firewood!' said Patchy. 'That would have been a crime.'

'It was a crime to buy it,' said Patsy. 'Where are we going to put it?'

'I thought we could put it up just down beyond the summerhouse,' I suggested. 'There's a big patch of grassland down there that needs livening up a little.'

'I'd rather thought of having a camellia bush there,' said Patsy.

'We can still have a camellia bush,' I pointed out. 'Maybe we should have two or three.'

'Did you get a hole and a flag with the flagpole?'

'A hole?'

'Well, presumably you can't just stand it up without putting one end into a hole.'

Patchy and I had, of course, completely forgotten that when you have a flagpole you need a hole to put it into and neither of us had expected that purchasing a suitable hole could prove to be considerably more difficult to organise, and more expensive, than buying the flagpole.

Who would have thought that a hole could cost so much?

Our first thought had been to bang in a fencepost (approximately the same width as the flag pole) and then use the grab on the back of a tractor to pull the fencepost out of the hole. We would then insert the flagpole into the empty hole.

That, at least, was our plan and it sounded easy so, naturally, it didn't work.

In the end we had to hire a specialist flag pole hole maker to come from somewhere up near Bristol. He made the hole, put in a special metal sleeve to protect the wood and to make sure that the flagpole didn't rot, and presented us with a bill that was so large that I am still too embarrassed to mention what it was. Patsy and I don't like to talk about it. All I can say is that I assume that the man who made the hole lives in a mansion and has loads of servants.

It was the flagpole hole borer, a weedy fellow with ginger hair who pointed out that if we wanted to fly a flag we would have to equip it with pulleys, clips, toggles and halyards and that it would be considerably easier to fix these essentials to the flagpole before we erected it. Fortunately, he happened to have all the necessary bits and pieces with him and was able and willing to sell these items to us at a very reasonable price. Since it seemed unlikely that Peter Marshall would have everything we required available in his shop we felt had little choice but to purchase what we needed there and then.

(Just for the record, it turned out that we were, of course, quite wrong about Peter Marshall's shop not having what we needed. I later discovered, purely by chance, that Peter had everything we needed in stock. Indeed, he had a surprisingly comprehensive supply of both new and second hand flagpole accessories. And he even had a flagpole for sale, though it wasn't quite as tall as the one I purchased. I learnt, once again, that one should never under-estimate the ability of a village shopkeeper to supply the unusual. Even more surprising was the fact that Peter's prices were considerably lower than the prices charged by the professional flagpole hole borer.)

Arranging for the man to come and make our hole took about a month. It seems that you can't just rush the business of having a hole bored for a flagpole.

But then, at long last, came the fun part: picking a flag, finding a way to fix it the halyard, and flying it!

Our first flag, purchased at Thumper Robinson's suggestion, was a Jolly Roger; a good old piratical skull and crossbones on a black background. We flew that flag for six months or so until the wind finally tore it to shreds.

'I liked the skull and crossbones,' said Patsy, as we contemplated a replacement. 'But now I fancy something a little more dignified as a replacement.'

(Patsy, I am pleased to say, had grown to like the idea of our having our own flagpole.)

We replaced the Jolly Roger with a traditional England flag – the one with the three golden lions, rampant on a maroon background, just as they are displayed on England cricket, rugby and soccer shirts.

The flag with the three lions goes back to the 12th century and predates the flag of St George, the familiar one showing a red cross on a white background. The cross of St George has only been used as an England flag since 1606 when it was used in the design of the Union Flag. (Some flag experts do say, however, that the red cross was used by English soldiers from the late 13th century onwards. This still means that the three lion flag is the original flag of England.)

It was Henry 1st (known as 'the lion of England') who first had a lion on his standard. He then added a second lion because his first wife had a lion on her family crest. Finally, he added a third lion because his second wife also had a lion on her standard.

Later, in the 12th century, Richard III (aka Richard the Lionheart) also adopted the three lion flag and it then became the official flag of England.

So that's the flag which we chose and which has, ever since then, flown on our flagpole.

Patsy agrees with me that it looks rather smart.

We leave the flag flying all the time, unlike a chap I know who has a union jack flying on a pole fixed on his front lawn. He takes his flag down on windy days because he says that it gets frayed when the wind blows and then has to be replaced too often. Personally, I can't see much point in flying a flag only on calm days but it was his flagpole and he was paying for the flags so I didn't say anything when he told me what he did.

Now, Patsy agrees with me that there is something wonderfully invigorating about watching a flag fully stretched in a high wind.

And so, all things considered, I have no doubt that sometime soon we will probably find it possible to forgive Patchy.

But not yet, of course.

I still have far too much fun seeing him squirm when I remind him (and anyone who is listening) of the day I wanted to buy a box of old books and ended up buying a flagpole.

The Painter

'I've developed this terrible trouble with my right arm,' said Auberon Lambert, slumping down in the chair. He rubbed his right hand and wrist with his left hand as he spoke.

Mr Lambert was a tall, slightly overweight, dignified looking man in his middle fifties. He and his wife lived in the village before I arrived but they were people who kept themselves to themselves. I had never seen either of them in the Duck and Puddle, in the local church or at any social events. I had seen Mrs Candida Lambert at Peter Marshall's shop occasionally.

Mr Lambert was a painter. I knew of his reputation for he was something of a local celebrity and his paintings of seascapes and of wild moorland over Exmoor had won him many fans. Both Patsy and I liked his work very much indeed and Patsy, in particular, was hugely enthusiastic. A year or so earlier she had bought a print of one of his paintings, a wonderful picture of a rocky cove called Heddon's Mouth, and it hung in our drawing room.

'What sort of trouble? A pain? A weakness?'

'I don't really know how to describe it. There is some pain and weakness and some numbness and some tingling too. And my grip is weak. I've been dropping things. I can't extend my arm properly. I can't straighten my wrist and fingers. It's all a devil of a nuisance.'

'Do you have the pain and the other symptoms only in your hand and wrist?'

'No. The pain starts in my thumb, and the fingers next to it, my index and middle fingers, but it goes up the underside of my arm and seems to affect this muscle at the back of my upper arm. Not the biceps muscle, the other one. I forget what it's called.'

'The big muscle at the back of your upper arm is your triceps.'

'That's the one,' he said. 'I should know that for heaven's sake. I studied anatomy for long enough.'

'Why did you study anatomy?' I asked, slightly puzzled.

'I did it when I was at college. I spent three years studying art and we had to learn about the human body – bones, muscles and so on.'

'Of course. So the pain and tingling affect your hand, your wrist and your arm – all the way up to your triceps?'

'Yes, that's about it.'

'How long have you had the symptoms?'

'Just a couple of days. I left it yesterday because I thought the symptoms would just go away by themselves – as mysteriously as they arrived. But it's no better today than it was two days ago. It's no worse, but it's no better.

'It sounds as if it's your radial nerve that is affected.'

'Yes, I remember the radial nerve. It goes all the way up the arm doesn't it? I suppose it does sound as if that's the cause of the trouble. But, good heavens, how on earth have I damaged my radial nerve? Does this mean I'm always going to be like this?'

'I didn't say that you'd damaged it!' I said quickly. I had deliberately not used the word 'damaged'. 'The word damage suggests something that might be permanent or at the very least something serious. You can traumatise the nerve without damaging it. And sometimes the symptoms are very short lived.'

He looked extremely relieved.

'I'm a painter,' he explained. 'And at the moment I can't paint. I can't even hold a damned paint brush. And if I could hold a brush I wouldn't be able to control it properly.'

'Have you fallen or knocked your arm?' I asked.

He didn't have to think before replying. 'Neither,' he said.

'Have you been doing anything unusual? Working in the garden? Using a hammer? Digging? Using garden tools more than usual?'

He shook his head. 'I don't do any of that stuff. I'm afraid I'm utterly useless in the garden and I wouldn't know which end of a hammer to hold. My wife looks after the garden and if we need something doing around the house we call in a handyman.'

I nodded. His wife Candida Lambert had, over recent years, won numerous prizes in the various local flower and vegetable shows. Her Hollyhocks were said to be among the best in Devon, let alone North Devon. She sold quite a lot of her vegetables through Peter Marshall's shop and although Patsy and I grew most of our own vegetables, we sometimes bought stuff that she'd grown. Peter used to sell her vegetables from a separate box and he charged a little more for them. Mrs Lambert seemed to have a knack with carrots and parsnips, and though she insisted that this was simply a consequence of having really suitable soil, I found this difficult to believe. It is difficult to grow root crops without them splitting or producing bifurcated tap roots. It is, in particular, easy to grow carrots and parsnips that taste rather woody. I've been told that it's a question of preparing the soil with the right amount of water and manure. Mrs Lambert always managed to grow vegetables which tasted as good as they looked.

'You haven't cut yourself?' I asked him.

He shook his head, pulled up his sleeve and held out his arm. There were no signs of any injury; no cuts and no bruises.

'Do you play any sport?'

'Chess. I play chess. But just with a chap I know who lives in Canada. We post each other our moves.'

'So it's hardly what you'd call a hectic activity?'

'I make about one move a fortnight. Our current game has been going on for eighteen months. Our last game lasted for two and a half years. The chap I play with is in his 80s and he's left instructions in his will that if he dies in the middle of a game then his moves should be completed by his son. It's not exactly a dangerously fast sport.'

'No other sports?'

'No. I walk around the village occasionally. But I'm not much of a walker I'm afraid. I only go out occasionally. We have a lovely cottage with a terrific view. To be honest, we don't go out much at all. We're rather reclusive.'

I nodded. Their home, which was called Woodworm Cottage, was one of the many small but beautiful cottages in the village. It had a thatched roof and a beautiful wooden porch. In the summer, pink climbing roses adorned the porch and the front of the house.

I had seen Mr Lambert walking around the village once or twice. He weighed several stone more than he should have done and if he were making a list of his favourite hobbies it was a reasonable guess that eating would be higher on the list than walking. 'Have you slept in a funny position at all recently?'

He frowned, seemingly rather puzzled. 'No,' he said.

'You haven't slept in a chair, for example?'

'Good heavens above! No! I haven't slept in a chair since I was a student. Why on earth do you ask me that?'

'Sometimes people fall asleep in a chair, with their arm hanging over the side or back of the chair. Their radial nerve gets temporarily crushed and they end up with the symptoms of nerve damage. It's only very temporary.'

'Ah. No. I definitely haven't slept in a chair.'

I was beginning to feel puzzled. I had excluded all the common causes of radial damage.

'I was getting rather desperate in my search for a cause. You can't really cure a medical problem like this without knowing why it has happened. I was beginning to wonder if the problem might not be a poisoning of some kind.

'Did the symptoms start suddenly or slowly?' I asked.

'Oh suddenly,' he replied. 'I woke up with them.'

'Your wife hasn't noticed any symptoms?'

'No. She is fine.'

'You don't have lead pipes in your cottage?'

'No. We had the cottage completely re-plumbed when we bought it. Actually, there really wasn't much in the way of plumbing. It was one of those cottages with just a cold tap in the kitchen and an outside loo. We had a bathroom put in upstairs and when we had the kitchen fitted out we had a proper sink with modern hot and cold taps. The piping is all that copper stuff.'

The beauty of old cottages is that you can do things like this to them. The walls of an old cottage tend to be thick enough and tough enough to handle some banging and hammering. If you tried to put new plumbing, fresh electrical wiring or central heating into a modern cardboard house the building would probably fall down at the very sight of a hammer. A relative of Patchy's, who lives near London, purchased a newly built home. He took down a thin, internal wall which was not a load bearing wall and the house developed some frightening cracks. Patchy said that the whole house darned near collapsed around him.

So it didn't seem as though Mr Lambert had been poisoned by lead in the drinking water. I flicked through his medical records envelope. There wasn't much in it. He'd broken his fibula playing football at the age of 16 and he'd had ringworm when he'd been in the army. Otherwise, he had enjoyed a very healthy life – until now. I put the medical records envelope down.

'Do you have any other illness or symptoms that I don't know about?'

'No. I'm lucky in that I have quite good health. I'm a bit overweight,' he said patting his tummy. 'But that's about it.'

I decided I'd better give him a pretty full examination. Diabetes and kidney disease can both cause inflammation and fluid retention which can lead to nerve compression. There were no signs of any fluid retention. But I had to check.

Twenty minutes later I was still no further forward. There were absolutely no signs of any problem with his kidneys and he definitely didn't have diabetes. His blood pressure was perfectly normal and I could find nothing wrong with his heart.

I was beginning to think that I would have to refer him to the hospital where they could do some tests on his nerves and muscles. At least the hospital would be able to organise some physiotherapy to help deal with the symptoms. Massage, physical therapy or even a splint can often prove helpful. The only thing I could think of for the moment was to prescribe a painkiller with an anti-inflammatory action. And the best drug available was aspirin – good, old-fashioned aspirin.

Many doctors didn't think much of aspirin because it wasn't new, it wasn't expensive and it wasn't heavily promoted by a drug company with a busy marketing department. There were many alternatives available but, taken in the soluble form, I still thought that aspirin was still the most effective and safest drug for the treatment of pain and inflammation.

And then suddenly, quite unexpectedly, a hint of a possibility of a clue appeared.

'All this couldn't have happened at a worse time,' he said. 'A week ago I started work on a new commission, something a bit outside my usual line, and now I can't work on it at all.'

'In what way is it different?' I asked him.

'I usually paint in a fairly loose, easy style,' he said. 'I suppose you could describe me as an impressionist.'

I smiled. 'I know your work,' I said. 'We have a print of one of your paintings hanging in our drawing room. It has pride of place.'

'Really? Which one?'

'I can't remember the name of it but it's a painting of Heddon's Mouth. It's a beautiful painting which shows the sea crashing over the rocks.'

'Ah, that one is called simply 'Heddon's Mouth',' said Mr Lambert. 'I can never think up clever titles. You were involved in an amazing rescue there a year or two back weren't you?'

'I was,' I agreed. 'A man slipped between two rocks and got stuck.'

'And the tide was coming in.'

I nodded.

I have to admit that just remembering that day made me shiver slightly. I had to amputate the man's leg so that we could drag him out from between the rocks.

'That was quite a rescue. The tide comes in very quickly along this bit of coast and Heddon's Mouth can be quite scary when it's windy. It was pretty rough that day, wasn't it? Candida's brother was down there fishing that day. He said it was quite an impressive rescue and he's not a bloke who is ever easily impressed.'

'Thank you,' I said, feeling slightly embarrassed and not really knowing what else to say. 'Let's get back to your painting. In what way is this new commission different to your usual work?'

'I usually sell my work through two galleries, one in Barnstaple and one in Exeter, and the owner of the gallery in Exeter recently put me in touch with a family in Exeter. The guy runs a factory, I can't remember what they make, and he wanted someone to paint a portrait of his extended family. You know the sort of thing, a big picture of all the family – including the children and the grandparents. Heaven knows why but they wanted it to be like one of those pictures Rembrandt used to do – with everyone standing in a line looking as if they've just had some really bad news.'

'I've never really been a huge fan of those formal pictures,' I said.

'Nor me,' said Mr Lambert. 'To be perfectly honest, paintings such as 'The Nightwatch', 'The Anatomy Lecture' and 'The Draper's Guild' always left me cold. I know I shouldn't say it but to me they always seemed to be nothing more than corporate portraits done to hang on the wall somewhere and impress visitors. Rembrandt also did family groups and they always looked to me to be a bit wooden. Rembrandt was a master but he was also the early forerunner of the family photographer – the chap who comes in and takes a picture of everyone looking at the camera and saying 'cheese'.'

I laughed. I felt the same way.

'Anyway, for some bizarre reason this chap in Exeter wanted me to paint the family members all in a line and to make it look like a photograph. He is apparently quite a rich fellow so he was prepared to pay a big fee for the painting. The gallery owner didn't know any portrait painters he could ask, most of the well-known ones seem to work in London, and he didn't want to lose his commission, so he asked me if I'd do it. I used to do a few portraits many years ago – before I found I was able to earn a decent living painting impressionist pictures of the sea and the countryside. So I agreed to do it. I took loads of Polaroid pictures and, as I say, I started work on the picture a week ago.'

'Presumably, you have to paint in a different style to do something like that?'

'Oh yes. My usual style of painting is very fluid, very easy.'

'And with this portrait? It's a very different way of painting?'

‘Oh, yes, it’s completely different; it’s very precise, very accurate. Every tiny brush stroke has to be just right. I know a fellow in Yorkshire who does landscapes and he paints in every blade of grass and every leaf. When you look at one of his pictures you think you’re looking at a photograph. I call it ultra-realism and to be honest I’ve never been a fan of that type of painting either. If you’re going to paint something that looks like a photograph then why not just take a photograph?’

I smiled, and nodded for him to go on. I began to think that we might be getting close to an explanation.

‘So I accepted the commission, purely out of greed I’m afraid.’ He grinned. ‘The fellow was prepared to pay a pretty huge fee for what he wanted.’

‘And doing something like this completely changes the way you paint?’

‘Oh yes, very much so.’

‘You hold the brushes in a different way?’

‘Definitely! My normal style of painting is, as I say, rather loose and fluid. But to do this sort of very realistic painting you have to grip the brush very tightly. Well, I do anyway. Other painters might do it differently but I found that I had to keep a really tight grip on the brush in order to get the precise sort of result that I need.’

‘Are you finding it stressful to change your way of painting?’

‘Massively. Absolutely massively. Candida didn’t want me to take the commission. She said that she didn’t see why I should accept it at all. I make enough money out of the sort of painting I do and Candida grows all our vegetables and makes a little more money by selling the surplus.’

‘So when you started to do this portrait, you gripped the brushes very tightly and you were tense.’

‘Yes, that’s right.’ He stopped for a moment. ‘Oh, golly, I see what you mean! You think that in changing my style of painting I might have done something that caused this problem with my radial nerve.’

I nodded. ‘Gripping anything very tightly can cause trauma to the muscles. Doing it while you’re gripping something small, like a paint brush, can probably make it worse. And doing it for long periods is almost certain to cause problems. It can cause what’s called a mononeuropathy, damage to a particular nerve – in your case the radial nerve.’

‘Is the damage going to be permanent?’ he asked anxiously.

‘Certainly not! Take a few days off from painting to give your muscles a rest. The problems should disappear quite soon if you can stop gripping too tightly. And you need to put down your brushes every 15 to 20 minutes and make sure that the muscles are relaxed. Just massage them gently, or shake them as if you were trying to get rid of droplets of water. And it probably goes without saying that you need to try not to get so stressed about it all. To speed up the recovery I suggest you take a couple of soluble aspirin tablets every four hours.’

‘And that’s all?’ That will do the trick?’

‘Yes.’

‘I won’t need an operation?’

‘Good heavens, no.’

I had never seen anyone with Mr Lambert’s symptoms caused in this way. But I was confident that between us we had isolated the cause – and found the solution.

‘And once the problem has gone I’ll be able to go back to my normal style of painting?’

‘Definitely.’

Mr Lambert took in a deep breath and let it out again quite quickly. He nodded at me, as if I’d just given him some valuable advice. ‘I’m going to tell them I can’t do this painting,’ he said. ‘I was a fool to take it on. It’s not the sort of thing I like doing, it’s not the sort of thing I want to do and it’s probably not the sort of thing I’m best at.’

‘Will that cause problems for you?’

‘Oh no. I haven’t been paid anything so I haven’t got to give any money back. And the gallery owner will find someone else to do the painting. I’ve wasted a bit of time preparing the groundwork – the Polaroids and so on – but that doesn’t matter and it’s been a pretty valuable lesson. Mr Lambert suddenly looked considerably happier than he had when he’d entered the surgery. ‘Once my radial nerve has recovered, I’ll go back to painting my usual stuff.’

‘I can give you a sick note if you like, confirming that this style of painting has created a real physical problem for you.’

‘Could you do that?’

I nodded, scribbled out an appropriate note and handed it to him. He put the note into his pocket, stood up and gingerly offered me his other hand to shake.

‘Give me a ring and let me know how things go,’ I told him. ‘It’ll probably take a few days for the nerve and your muscles to settle down.’

When Mr Lambert left he was smiling. His physical symptoms weren’t any better than they’d been when he came into the surgery. But I was confident that we had found the cause and he seemed very happy about the decision he’d made.

Mr Lambert didn’t ring but three days later I got home from doing my afternoon calls and Patsy showed me a large parcel wrapped in brown paper that had been delivered.

‘What on earth is that?’ I asked.

‘I haven’t got the faintest. But Mr Lambert brought it round.

I carefully tore open the brown paper.

And inside, beautifully framed, was the original of the print we’d got hanging in our drawing room.

It was one of the nicest, unexpected and most welcome gifts I’ve ever received from a patient.

Card Skimming (1970s style)

Thumper Robinson and I were in the Duck and Puddle, sitting in our usual seats beside the fire. Frank Parsons, who was, with his wife Gilly, the co-proprietor of the pub and who was sitting with us, had positioned himself nearest to the fire so that he could keep the fire well fed. It is Frank's boast that no one goes hungry or cold in the Duck and Puddle. The new barman, Gengolphus 'Harry' Stottle (formerly known in London to his celebrity patients as psychiatrist Dr Pelham Ronald Eckersley but now known to one and all as 'Harry' the barman) was behind the bar, leaning on the counter and looking happier than I'd ever seen him look. And why shouldn't he look happy – he had in front of him a pint of Old Restoration, a huge ham and pickle sandwich on fresh, crusty white bread and an hour or so of stimulating conversation with the brightest brains for yards around.

As Harry himself once said: 'A man who isn't smiling when he has a pint of the best and a decent sandwich in front of him is clearly suffering from a serious malady affecting his body or his nature.' Harry it has to be admitted, was no advertisement for temperance or sobriety or, indeed, for political correctness.

Harry, now firmly settled in Bilbury and living in a cottage which he had rebuilt after a disastrous fire, had recently acquired a new cat which he had called Hardy. I had made the mistake of asking him 'Why?'

And Harry had explained that when Thomas Hardy died at the age of 87, his will had stated that he was to be buried at Stinsford in Dorset, a mile or so away from the town of Dorchester, unless the nation strongly desired otherwise, and required him to be buried in Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey.

A compromise was reached.

It was decided, by the people who decide these sort of things, that Hardy's ashes would be interred at Westminster but that his heart would be buried in Stinsford. However, when the pathologist removed Hardy's heart in order to accommodate the unusual requirements of the nation's need for a double burial, the urn in which the heart was supposed to have been placed had not arrived.

'So the pathologist wrapped Hardy's heart in a tea towel and put it into a metal biscuit tin,' explained Harry. 'But, unfortunately, he didn't put the lid on properly. And when the undertaker entered the bedroom he found one of Hardy's pet cats sitting next to the open box and licking its lips. The heart, or most of it, had gone and was, it was safe to assume, was now tucked away inside the cat.'

'The undertaker, whose name was Charles Hannah, grabbed the cat, wrung its neck and put it in the urn with what was left of Hardy's heart. And then the heart, mostly now inside the cat, was placed into the polished wooden casket which was to be buried in Stinsford.'

'So that's why you called your cat Hardy?'

'It seemed as good a name as any and an excellent way to commemorate a wonderful and true story,' explained Harry with a shrug.

Like Harry, Thumper was also drinking a pint of Old Restoration. It had been his favourite beverage for a long time ('ever since man crawled out of the primordial soup', he once claimed in what was for him a rare foray into the world of academia) and if Frank served it in glasses big enough to hold a quart he would have drunk it from quart glasses to save time.

Frank himself was sipping a small whisky and water (Gilly Parsons, pleased with her husband's weight loss and my medical report on his blood pressure, which was now well under control, had recently increased his alcohol allowance to three single whiskies; one each on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays).

'Have you been down to Peter's shop lately?' Frank asked me.

'Not for three or four days.'

Peter Marshall, who runs the Bilbury village shop, was famous throughout North Devon for the slogan 'Buy One And Get What You Pay For', which was painted above his shop doorway, for the slogan 'Good things aren't cheap and cheap things aren't good' which he had embroidered on the breast pocket of the brown warehouseman's coat which he wore in the shop and for his numerous business plans.

'Oh, you should definitely go down and take a look,' said Frank.

'The caravan?' I asked.

'That's the one,' agreed Frank.

Peter had recently started something he called a 'time share' opportunity. Having read of developers who sold what they called 'time share' opportunities in Hawaii, Peter had decided to introduce the idea to North Devon. He had bought an old wreck of a caravan and instead of simply renting it out by the week to holidaymakers, he was selling shares in the caravan. Would-be holidaymakers could, for a sizeable sum of money, buy the right to spend a week in the caravan every year. Peter had bought a small advertisement in a magazine called *Exchange and Mart* and his promotional copy offered city-dwellers ‘the chance to own their very own home in the country for a modest one-off payment’.

Peter once explained to me that any new and great enterprise requires two quite different human skills. First, it requires the vision, the imagination, to see an opportunity where no one else has seen one. Second, it requires a systematic, logical mind able to turn the dream into reality.

Peter modestly claimed to have both skills.

‘How is the time share thing going?’ asked Harry.

‘The last I heard Peter had managed to sell 37 weeks,’ I replied. ‘I don’t think the poor devils know what they’ve bought. Peter’s advert was illustrated with a picture of the caravan lifted from the manufacturer’s brochure. But the caravan they’re buying has mould and leaks and looks as if it’s been sitting in a field for a decade.’

‘That’ll be because it has been sitting in a field for a decade,’ said Thumper. ‘And it was pretty clapped out when it was dumped in the field.’

‘Well the ‘time share’ project was last week’s miracle business opportunity,’ said Frank. ‘He’s now getting ready for Christmas.’

‘But Christmas is weeks away!’

‘Peter says that in the big towns they sell Christmas stuff in July.’

‘Has he put up his decorations?’

‘No, he hasn’t done that yet. But he’s got Christmas hampers for sale.’

‘Hampers?’

‘Well, that’s what he calls them. He’s selling old cardboard boxes filled with a variety of what he calls Christmassy items. The boxes he calls hampers have all got advertisements for soap powder printed on the side.’

‘What sort of Christmassy items is he putting in them?’

‘Well, for £5 you get a tin of baked beans, a tin of spaghetti hoops, three turnips, a bottle of beer, a bottle of lemonade, a tin of pilchards, a box of budgie seed, a little bell and mirror for hanging in your budgie cage, a small bottle of horseradish sauce, a large bottle of Tizer, a medium sized bottle of Vimto, and a standard sized bottle of Liebfraumilch. If you bought the £10 hamper you got all that lot plus a packet of Fisherman’s Friend lozenges for coughs and sore throats, a bottle of anti-dandruff shampoo, a bottle of castor oil, a box of dates complete with a little, wooden fork, a bottle of antacid, a packet of aspirin tablets, a packet of custard, a two pound bag of caster sugar, an orange, a small bag of crystallised ginger, half a pound of butter, a two pound bag of mixed dried fruit, a sprig of plastic holly, a bag of flour, a bag of rice, a bottle of bleach and a packet of lemon puffs.’

‘I thought a Christmas hamper was supposed to contain stuff like a Christmas pudding,’ I said.

‘I asked him about that. Peter said that his hamper has got all the ingredients to make your own Christmas pudding. He said that if you make your own pudding you’ll feel a greater sense of pride than if you just buy the pudding ready-made.’

We sat and thought about this for a while. Peter never fails to surprise any of us.

Five minutes later Patchy arrived. He was walking slowly and clutching his head.

‘What would you like to drink?’ Harry asked him.

‘I don’t think I can manage anything alcoholic,’ whispered Patchy. ‘Adrienne and I had a romantic little dinner party to celebrate something. Don’t ask me what because I can’t remember. Adrienne bought a bottle of ouzo, that Greek stuff that tastes a bit like pastis and a bottle of brandy that she insisted had to be drunk immediately before it went bad. I drank too much of both and woke up with a hell of a hangover.’

Adrienne, who is Patchy’s wife is also my sister-in-law. She used to be keen on natural remedies but had in recent years discovered that she preferred alcohol to herbal teas and liked to buy wines and spirits that no one had ever heard of but which seemed a bargain. As many people knew from bitter experience she believed that once a bottle had been opened the cork should be thrown away. No one could convince her that some varieties of alcohol, such as spirits, did not inevitably go ‘off’ and turn dangerous if not consumed within an hour of opening.

We had all looked at him, slightly shocked. It wasn’t the fact that he had a hangover that was so surprising, but the fact that he appeared to be refusing an alcoholic drink. This was like a dog turning his nose up at a bone or a politician eschewing a photo opportunity.

‘No hair of the dog?’ asked Harry. ‘What did you say you were drinking?’

It is widely believed, by those who drink alcohol with enthusiasm, that anyone who has imbibed too heavily can soothe their troubled body and spirit by drinking a glass of the same type of alcohol the morning after. The theory may sound self-serving but there is some historical basis for it. Both Hippocrates, the father of medicine, and modern homoeopaths believe that ‘like cures like’ and many historical figures (such as Rabelais) backed the notion of treating an ailment caused by one substance with a cure consisting of the same stuff. The expression comes from the idea of treating a bite from a rabid dog with a potion containing some of the dog’s hair.

'I don't think I could cope with anything too alcoholic,' said Patchy. He held his head in his hands for a moment, as though checking to make sure that it was still there. 'Maybe I'll just have a glass of white wine,' he agreed, overcoming his reluctance with surprising speed. 'If that's what you all recommend. Maybe a large one would be better. Just leave the bottle.'

Harry removed the cork from a bottle of Patchy's favourite dry, white wine, poured a portion into one of the large glasses which are kept for his use and crunched the bottle down into an ice bucket, which he just happened to have prepared when he'd seen Patchy entering the bar.

I was nursing a glass containing a modest and entirely medicinal dose of Laphroaig malt whisky.

And, we all had one of Gilly's magnificent Duck and Puddle sandwiches before us.

In some hostelries where sandwiches are served, it is customary for the staff to serve a plateful of delicate little sandwiches, more suitable for photographing than for eating and adequate only for dainty nibbling by elegant ladies wearing white lace gloves. I have even heard of pubs and inns serving damp triangles of bread which were made a hundred miles away and which were served up enclosed in little, plastic containers. I shudder at the thought.

The Duck and Puddle's landlady much preferred to produce sandwiches which were meals in themselves. Indeed, Gilly's sandwiches always remind me of those magnificent doorstep sandwiches which the friendly wife of an innkeeper serves up to Robert Donat and Madeleine Carroll in Hitchock's original version of 'The Thirty Nine Steps'.

Moreover, Gilly usually served each sandwich with a large, pickled gherkin and a pickled egg.

The Earl of Sandwich himself could have sat on his horse, munched one of Gilly's magnificent creations and been well prepared for battle. My local dog Ben had, over the years, acquired a taste for a pickled gherkin and Gilly always put two gherkins onto my plate if Ben was with me, making it clear that there was one gherkin for me and one for Ben. 'She deserves one of her own,' Gilly would say, as Ben demolished the gherkin in a few happy bites.

As an aside, I should mention that a couple of days earlier a sales representative had called at the Duck and Puddle and had left behind, as samples, a selection of the new foods his company was offering for sale. These had, apparently, all been 'designed' by one of those famous television chefs who seem to think of food as gustatory wallpaper. There were half a dozen different types of flavoured crisps including: pickled shrimp with mustard; curried salmon with beetroot; mackerel and marmalade; lamb with paprika; beef and custard and mutton with peanut jelly. There were also some teacakes which contained bits of beetroot and radish. None of us had felt brave enough to test any of these items and so I had taken them all back to Bilbury Grange, emptied them out of their packets and offered them to Cedric, our pig. Cedric was never what you would call a picky eater but he rejected the whole kit and caboodle and I ended up having to put the lot onto our bonfire. I didn't even want to put them onto the compost heap.

As we ate our sandwiches, we ruminated on the history of the English public house. No one can possibly deny that the English have always been partial to a bevy or two, especially if accompanied by good food, all consumed in warm and congenial circumstances.

Our ruminations started when Frank raised his glass (happy that it contained something more spiritually enlivening than tonic water, his usual abstemious tipple) and suggested that we drank a toast to Jake Porter, a villager who had recently died.

Jake had been a mere stripling of 96 when he'd tottered off, exchanging his comfy fireside chair and harmonica for a fluffy, white cloud and a harp, and his early death had been something of a surprise to him and to all of us in the village. Both his parents and his brother had all received telegrams from Her Majesty the Queen congratulating them on reaching their centenaries. 'I'll reach 100 easily,' Jake had insisted at the celebrations for his 96th birthday. 'I've always had a full English breakfast, never smoked more than 40 a day and since I reached my 80th birthday, I've limited myself to half a bottle of whisky a day.'

When we'd drunk to Jake's memory, Patchy suggested that we drink to one another – wishing ourselves many years more in the comfort of the Duck and Puddle.

'Do you know where this habit started?' asked Harry.

We all looked at him. Harry is a mine of both useful and trivial information. You never know which sort you are going to get when he begins to tell a tale. And since he had started work as a barman, he'd been studying the history of drinking and of British public houses.

'What habit?' asked Thumper.

'Drinking a toast or pledge.'

We all thought for a moment, muttered various half-hearted nonsenses and then admitted that we didn't.

'It began in Saxon times,' said Harry. 'The Saxons were hard drinkers who enjoyed English ale and a glass of mead but they were always a bit nervous when knocking back a horn full of their favourite tipple.'

'Why a horn full?' asked Thumper.

'In those days, they drank from horns not glasses. Drinking glasses hadn't been invented.'

'Like a horn from an animal? A dead animal?'

'Exactly.'

'What the devil was mead?' asked Frank.

'A sort of beer sweetened with honey,' explained Harry, who was getting a little exasperated.

'I never knew that,' said Frank, surprised to discover that there was something about beer which he didn't know.

'May I continue?' asked Harry.

We all gave permission.

'The Saxons were always nervous when they drank,' continued Harry. 'They lived in fairly dangerous times and a bloke about to empty his horn would ask a pal to pledge him. The pal would then take out his sword, or his knife, and stand guard while the drinker took a good gulp of his mead, or whatever it was that was in his horn. Obviously, when a fellow was emptying his horn he couldn't look out for people creeping up on him, intent on stabbing him and robbing him, and so the pal who was guarding him helped make him feel safe. When the drinker had quenched his thirst he would then pledge or promise to stand guard while his pal took a slurp from his own horn. As the business of pledging became less necessary so drinkers simply got into the habit of drinking to each other's health.'

'Where the devil do you learn all this stuff?' demanded Thumper.

'Haven't the foggiest idea,' admitted Harry. 'I must have read it somewhere.'

We then segued comfortably into a discussion of the history of drinking and, more particularly, a history of English drinking establishments.

Harry explained that if you looked as far back in English history as the 10th century, you would discover that the English were such enthusiastic topers that King Edgar (who was known to his best chums as Edgar the Peaceful) felt he had to follow the advice of Dunstan, who was the Archbishop of Canterbury at the time, and close down a good many alehouses in an attempt to cut down the nation's drinking.

'Edgar decreed that there was to be only one alehouse per village,' said Harry. 'When that simply resulted in everyone piling into the one legally approved drinking place he ordained that pins or nails must be fixed into drinking horns at stated distances. Anyone who drank beyond the allowed mark could be punished.'

And, according to Harry, as the years tottered by, new rules were introduced to separate those establishments which catered to travellers and those which specialised in just providing drinks for the locals.

The former, those drinking places which specialised in looking after travellers, had to be open day or night, and they were known as inns while the latter, the places which only provided refreshments during the daytime, were known as taverns.

The inns weren't allowed to cater for locals who had just wandered in for a drink but they were legally bound to provide food and refreshment for any traveller – at whatever time of night they arrived.

The taverns were not allowed to accept overnight guests and had to close before midnight.

Over the years taverns became known as pubs and inns morphed into country hotels – though many still liked to describe themselves as inns. The drinking places which were classified as inns were usually smarter and a little more upmarket than taverns – which tended to cater to the local lowlife.

(Since the Duck and Puddle in Bilbury provides food, drink and overnight accommodation for travellers it is, strictly speaking, an inn rather than a pub. This means, of course, that it can provide refreshments for its bona fide guests at any hour of the day or night. Although this would not, of course, ever happen at the Duck and Puddle, where Frank, the landlord, has been described by his friends and drinking companions as both a paragon of virtue and a walking advertisement for probity, it is, from time to time, rumoured that country establishments may occasionally take advantage of the absence of immediate and local constabulary oversight to write the names of favoured regulars into the inn's official register of overnight guests. Those listed on the register as guests are, of course, entitled to purchase whatever refreshments they might feel appropriate. And, even in taverns, where there are no overnight guests, it is an open secret that if the doors are barred and shuttered at the official closing time then there is nothing to prevent the landlord from inviting friends to attend a private party, and to make merry for a little longer than the official opening hours might officially allow. This, I am told, is known as a 'lock in'. On Holy Island, otherwise known as Lindisfarne, it has been reputed that pubs stay open for an extra eight hours when the tidal causeway is flooded. Drinkers who are marooned on the island can imbibe for as long as they like as long as police officers, and those inclined to tittle-tattle, are all safely ensconced on the mainland.)

'Gradually, the traditional English inns acquired reputations for being the centre of their local community,' Harry continued. Once he warms to a theme it is nigh on impossible to deflect him. 'In addition to providing warmth, shelter, food and entertainment for travellers, local inns were often used as the local courtroom, the polling station and a meeting place for the local council.'

'We still do that,' said Frank. 'We were the village polling station at the last election and the council has often met here.'

Harry then explained that before the onset of the railways made travel comparatively easy, and relatively cheap, anyone who wandered more than 20 miles or so from home would need somewhere to stay and he would look for somewhere homely and welcoming.

'The average traveller wasn't interested in folderols,' said Harry. 'He just wanted a pint of something cheering, a bowl of good soup, a hunk of bread and a chunk of cheese. In those early days no one travelled for pleasure; they travelled because they had to.'

He told us that most people never left their home village and travellers were usually either pilgrims or salesmen (known as drummers). It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the oldest inns were called Pilgrims' Inns. And the posher inns, the ones where the landlord knew a word or two of French, were known as the local 'Maisons Dieu'.

'By the end of the 16th century, England's inns had never looked better,' continued Harry, who was clearly on something of a roll. 'And they had never provided their customers with better service or better fare. Many had tapestries on the walls and carpets on the floor and the food was invariably good to excellent. Popular dishes were brawn, neat's tongue, capon, goose, swan, venison, kid, hare, plover, snipe, larks, boar, sturgeon, crayfish, carp, pike, trout, elvers, lampreys, pigeons and rooks which were usually served in a pie. Popular puddings included saffron cake, gingerbread, marchpane, nectarines, custard, warden pie and olive pie. The customers drank sherris sack, malmsey, beer and a variety of wines which had been imported from France or Germany. A fairly ordinary meal in a travellers' inn would consist of eight or nine heavy courses. People ate a lot because there wasn't much to do apart from eat and drink. And travelling was hard work – If you wanted to get somewhere you either walked or you rode.'

'Wait, wait a minute!' interrupted Thumper. 'What on earth are elvers?'

'Baby eels.'

'And sherris sack? What is sherris sack?'

'Oh, that's just an old word for sherry.'

'And malmsey? I've always wondered what malmsey was.'

'Malmsey is madeira – a fortified white wine from the island of Madeira.'

'And what was marchpane?' asked Thumper.

'I know that one!' said Frank, to his own surprise. 'It's an old word for marzipan – almond paste.'

Harry then explained that by the 17th century, travellers could move about in coaches, and the inns where they stayed had become increasingly fancy.

'By the end of the 18th century, inns were offering previously unimaginable luxury,' he said. 'A traveller dining in a roadside inn would typically eat spitch-cocked eels, a whole roast pigeon, a loin of pork, a variety of tarts, jellies and custards and then finish with a few chunks of cheese.'

'Stop!' said Patchy. 'You've done it again. What the devil are spitch-cocked eels?'

'Eels cooked on a skewer.'

'What, like a kebab?'

'I suppose so,' agreed Harry.

According to Harry, coach and post-chaise travel was popular by the 19th century and so inns were crowded. They were still open 24 hours a day, of course, and the kitchen fire was never out. Travellers staying the night would expect to sleep in four poster beds. The beds would be equipped with curtains all the way round so that the maid or groom who came in to make up the coal fire, or bring in the tea and crumpets, couldn't see what was going on in the bed. Sirloin, mutton joints, Cheshire and Stilton cheeses were washed down with ale and travellers would expect to have a copy of *The Times* delivered with their breakfast. As inns competed with one another, meals got more and more extensive. A pretty ordinary meal for two would consist of a four pound turbot, two roast ducks, an apple pie and cheeses. Breakfast for two, served in the bedroom, would be cold ham and beef, Cambridge sausages and fried eggs, followed by a roast mallard. It was by no means unusual to have a tankard of ale with breakfast, and beer makers were experimenting with adding honey, yarrow, bog myrtle and ground ivy (nicknamed alehoof) to their brews.

Over the years, inns became an increasingly important part of English social life.

Oliver Cromwell and his officers began their plotting in a variety of pubs, including 'The Bear' in Cambridge, the 'Red Lion' in Barnet (where the future protector of England reported that he had eaten the best cheese cakes he'd ever tasted) and the 'George' at Norton St Philip. Admiral Horatio Nelson said goodbye to Emma Hamilton for the last time at the inn at Burford Bridge and Keats and Stevenson both wrote in the same establishment. Hazlitt and De Quincey both wrote their most famous lines in pubs, as did Charles Dickens. Indeed, Dickens was a huge fan of inns and many of his novels include vignettes of well-known taverns and inns. It is also now a matter of record that many newspapers were planned and put together on inn tables

In addition to being known for their food and drink, there is no doubt that English inns and taverns have always been places where sports and games could be played with great enthusiasm. Some of the favoured activities were, to say the least, a trifle on the esoteric side of eccentric. Apart from drinking and eating, people do all sorts of odd things in pubs – especially in country pubs which are, to a certain extent, a law unto themselves and which are quite unlike the pubs in towns and cities.

Urban folk usually went to their local public house because it was somewhere to drink and meet their pals. Pub customers drank, ate, chatted, smoked (if they were allowed to), made new friends, gossiped and flirted. To be honest there often wasn't much room for anything else because the pub owner, usually a large brewery or a company with a chain of similar establishments, had to cram in as many chairs and tables as it could in order to make the enterprise profitable.

The result was that in most town and city pubs the television set has taken over the task of providing entertainment, and the bar billiards table and dart board have been put down into the cellar to gather dust and cobwebs. Customers sat and drank their beer, munched their chicken in the basket or their scampi and chips or their bag of cheese and onion crisps, and they watched the football on the large-screen television set which was fastened high up on a wall and which dominated the room in every possible way. The only other source of entertainment was the local stripper who would usually have to climb onto a table to take off her clothes. There isn't room to do anything else – even if the customers had the inclination or the equipment. Worse still, was the fact that in large town pubs, the landlord and the bar staff were usually too busy for idle chatter and probably had too many customers to remember the names even of their regulars. There were, I'm pleased to say, many honourable exceptions but too many modern town and city public houses looked out-of-date the minute they'd been built; they were dull, uninviting and shabby. There was too much concrete outside and too much fake wood and red plastic inside. In the 1970s, there was an unforgiveable tendency for pub chains to equip their newly built premises with fake horse brasses and fake beams and to adorn the walls with cheap hunting prints.

Things were different in the countryside; in villages and hamlets such as Bilbury, pubs and inns such as the Duck and Puddle had for hundreds of years been the centre of the village. In small settlements, where there were no cinemas, theatres, bowling alleys or nightclubs the pub was all there was. It was a home from home and the village meeting place. Regulars had their own mug hanging over the bar and a chair by the fire that was respected as theirs every much as their own armchair at home was respected as theirs. In places of this ilk, the customers drank, ate, chatted and gossiped but they also played games. They played cribbage, poker, bridge and whist. They played shove h'penny and table skittles, dominoes, cribbage, pool, bar billiards and snooker.

And where there was enough room available (as there was in the Duck and Puddle, of course) they could play skittles – a sport which, when played the way it was played in English village pubs, was undoubtedly one of the most spectacularly dangerous of all sports whether played indoors or outdoors.

I knew from personal experience that a wildly thrown wooden bowling ball could do a good deal of damage to anything which got in its way. Skittles was the precursor of ten pin bowling but it was a much cruder, faster game and it caused far more injuries – largely because the spectators stood alongside the skittle alley and were therefore likely to be hit by balls which were misdirected or which bounced off the side boards or the skittles.

Where there wasn't enough room to play proper, old-fashioned skittles, the drinkers played a game called table skittles – which had the nine pins, or men, standing on a table or a board. A small wooden ball tied to a fixed stick was whirled around to knock down the pins.

Patchy said that table skittles was very popular in Northamptonshire where the table upon which the pins were stood had a leather padded back and sides and the skittles were knocked down with wooden disks called 'cheeses' which were skimmed at the target. Patchy said he'd seen it played and it was pretty deadly. 'Woe betide anyone who got in the way of one of the skimming 'cheeses'!'

Egg dancing was another sport which was popular in country inns. A dozen eggs would be laid out on the floor and a dancer would be blindfolded and told to perform a hornpipe jig without treading on any of the eggs. Bystanders would bet on how many eggs he would crush. Daft dances like this were very popular and could be extremely profitable. Men who could dance well were often rewarded with quite generous tips by rich publicans or benefactors – especially if they had helped someone win a large bet.

People danced on ropes too. In 1547, when King Edward VI rode through the city of London prior to his coronation, a rope was stretched from the battlements of St Paul's to an anchorage point in front of the Deans Gate house. When his Majesty was seen approaching a Frenchman, imported especially for the occasion, slid down the cable. He was lying down, with his head forwards and his arms and legs spread as though he were flying. When he had landed, he kissed the King's foot and then walked back up the cable and did a variety of tricks upon it. This sort of thing was quite popular and innkeepers would organise their own variations. Sadly, inevitably, things didn't always go as perfectly as planned. A later exponent of the sliding down the cable trick lost a leg. Undaunted, he had a false leg made out of wood and filled with lead so that it weighed pretty much the same as his real leg and wouldn't unbalance him. He went one further than the Frenchman because he carried a pistol in each hand and discharged them both as he came down the rope.

The imagination of performers and innkeepers seemed inexhaustible.

In one pub in Devon an acrobat, whose party trick was to hang from a beam by his toes, couldn't get down. He went black in the face and died because onlookers, all cheering merrily, thought the whole thing was just part of his act. A pub in North Devon once ran an Indoor Olympics Event which involved some very strange events. Contestants had to try jumping backwards up onto a mantelpiece (a favourite party trick of Corinthian C.B.Fry when he was over 70-years-old); kicking as high as they could manage (to leave a shoe mark on a white board) and performing a standing broad jump (the competitor stood perfectly still at a setting off point and had to jump as far as he could).

All this stuff was told to us by Harry who seemed to me to know enough about old pubs and inns and taverns to write a book about them.

At the Duck and Puddle we had, of course, always taken the game of darts quite seriously and over the years we've had a number of top players representing the club in county games. But history shows that darts was very nearly banned as a sport.

Harry explained that in 1908 the authorities in Leeds wanted to have the game banned because they said it was a game of chance and that those who played it were gambling. A player called Mr Annakin, who had a pub in Yorkshire, went to court to defend his sport. He played a court clerk who had never played the game before and thrashed him. After Mr Annakin had thrown three 20s for a score of 60, the clerk missed the board completely. The magistrate then insisted on having a go himself. He too missed the board. And so the court had no choice but to conclude that darts is not a game of chance but a game of skill.

The English love inventing games and, as a nation, have undoubtedly invented more games than any other people. It is actually quite difficult to think of a game that wasn't invented by an Englishman. Sadly, of course, the English usually turn out to be far better at inventing games than at playing them.

On the day of which I am writing we had all recently started playing a game which involved skimming a playing card into a hat. I have no idea who thought up the game but the rules were quite simple. A hat, usually my brown Fedora which had the widest brim of any of the hats we had available, was placed on a table and each player would stand five feet away with a full pack of 52 playing cards. The game would be to skim the cards, as one might do when skimming a flat pebble on a lake, so that they landed in the hat. A card which landed inside the hat scored one point. A card which landed on the brim of the hat, and stayed there, scored half a point. A card which missed the hat completely scored no points whatsoever. When one player had used all his cards his score would be recorded (usually on a beer mat), the cards would be collected up and the next player would take his turn.

For a while, we had experimented with scoring points according to the number of pips on a card. So, if the seven of hearts landed in the hat then the player would score seven points. If the three of clubs landed in the hat the player would score three points. If the eight of spades landed on the brim, the player would score four points. We gave up this version of the game because the scoring proved far too difficult.

We had finished our sandwiches and were busy playing our new game when two newcomers walked in. Judging by their boots, anoraks, haversacks and thumb sticks they were hikers and they both appeared to be in their 30s. Their gear looked expensive and brand new. Their thumb sticks bore little brass plates bearing the name of the maker and had clearly been purchased from an expensive store. I always think it's rather a pity that people buy walking sticks in preference to making their own. All you need is a stick and a penknife. If you want a fancy top for the stick, but don't want to carve your own then you can easily buy what you need. If you want a ferrule, whether metal or rubber, you can usually find what you need without too much difficulty. Peter Marshall's shop always sold ferrules and stick tops.

The distaff half of the pair was tall and slim and had obviously had her hair cut somewhere other than North Devon. Though perfectly competent with a pair of scissors, the woman who had taken over the hair dressing franchise in the hut next to Peter Marshall's shop had a limited repertoire of styles.

Similarly, I thought it fair to bet that her companion, the spear side of the duo, had been snipped and shampooed somewhere other than in North Devon. The chap whom I usually visited when my hair required trimming was a pleasant fellow, and on both of the occasions when he'd cut one of my ears he had apologised, but he had but two styles to offer: 'a light trim' and 'the military option'. This haircut was neither.

And judging by the map one of them was holding, not to mention the rather concerned looks on their faces, they were lost.

It is easy to get lost in Devon, very easy to get lost in North Devon and very, very easy to get lost in the lanes and on the footpaths and bridle paths of Bilbury.

Harry, relishing his new role as 'mine host', greeted the pair cheerily, looked at their map and told them where they were. They seemed surprised, apparently having thought themselves to be approximately 12 miles away to the East. He then complied with their orders by serving them one glass of tomato juice, one glass of lemon barley water and two packets of salt and vinegar crisps. They had asked for 'something organic in the snack line' but, sadly, Harry had had to disappoint them. Frank did mutter something about it being a pity that the curried salmon and beetroot crisps were no longer available. They were both exceedingly slim and it wasn't difficult to see why. If you've walked for half a day across the Devon moors and all you eat is a packet of crisps then your calorie intake is clearly not going to be excessive.

The hikers seemed intrigued by the game which we were playing.

'What's the game you're playing? What are the rules?' asked the male half of the couple, when he'd finished his lemon barley and eaten his crisps. He ate the crisps daintily, one at a time.

I couldn't help looking at Thumper when I saw the way the visitor was eating his crisps. Thumper's method of eating crisps is quite different. He pours the packet of crisps into the palm of his left hand, transfers the contents of his palm into his mouth and then crunches for about a minute before swallowing. We measured him once. He managed to get rid of a packet of cheese and onion crisps in 49 seconds flat. When I asked Thumper why he ate crisps so quickly, he explained that he always wanted to get back to the serious business of drinking his beer. Thumper had clearly also seen the way that the newcomer had eaten his crisps and had been rather hypnotised by the sight.

When he'd finished them, the stranger asked Harry if it would be all right if he put the empty packet into the fire. Harry said he thought it probably would be.

Patchy, whose turn it was to skim or flick the cards, explained the rules to the visitors.

'It's more difficult than it looks,' said Frank. 'If you aren't careful the cards tend to skim off the brim of the hat and land on the floor. You have to get them just right if you want them to land in the hat and stay there.' He explained how the secret of the game lay in the way that the card was flicked. 'It's all in the wrist movement,' he told them.

When we had finished the game, Patchy had scored 32, Thumper had managed 37 and a half, Frank had scored 18, Harry had scored 29 and I had scored a rather disappointing 25 and a half. I can usually do better than that but I always do badly when there's an audience. I'd have made a useless sports professional. Thumper picked up the 50 pence he'd won. (We had all put down a 10 pence stake.)

'It looks great fun!' said the woman.

'Don't be fooled by how easy we make it look!' said Frank.

'We've been playing for a week or two now,' I explained, preparing her for disappointment.

'The doc has written to the people who organise the Olympics suggesting that skimming cards into a hat be made an Olympic sport,' said Thumper, nodding in my direction to indicate that I was the one responsible for this. 'The game is more entertaining than synchronised swimming, requires more skill than weight lifting and is extremely adaptable.' he explained.

'It can be played by men and women,' I added. 'And you can play it indoors or, if the weather is good and there is no wind, you can even play outdoors. We don't think there is much chance of competitors doping themselves. I can't think of any drugs that would prove useful. We're rather hoping that the Olympics Committee might regard this as a plus point.

'The cards can carry advertising so there are immense commercial possibilities,' said Frank, who was clearly rather hoping that the newcomers might turn out to be associated with some company which would take up the game and make us all rich. 'I think we could easily make card skimming extremely attractive to money motivated organisations.'

'Would you like to try?' Patchy asked the newcomers. 'We won't expect you to put money on the table. Just try it for fun.'

The man said he didn't think he would bother, thank you very much, but the woman said she'd like to have a go – just for fun.

Patchy patted the cards together and handed them to her. She took them, looked at them, rather critically I thought, and then positioned herself behind the chalk line we'd drawn on the floor.

She then proceeded to put 51 cards straight into the hat. She threw them so quickly, and with such accuracy, that two of the cards collided in mid-air and one of them stayed on the brim. If it had not been for this fluke incident she would have achieved the maximum score of 52. As it was she had to make do with 51 and a half.

When she'd finished there was silence.

'It's a brilliant game!' she said, trying not to look as pleased with herself as she doubtless felt.

'Have you played before?' asked Harry quietly.

‘Oh no,’ said the woman. ‘I didn’t even know the game existed until today.’

None of us said a word.

‘We’d better get a move on,’ said the man, looking at his watch. ‘We’ve got quite a walk ahead of us.’

They smiled, said goodbye and left.

A minute after they’d gone we were still sitting there in silence. Suddenly the door opened and the man put his head into the room. He was grinning.

‘I didn’t want to leave you too confused,’ he said. ‘I thought I should explain that my companion is a croupier in London.’ He named a well-known casino. ‘She deals cards for a living – spends her evenings dealing cards to Poker players. She can land a card on a sixpence from six feet away.’

And with that he was gone.

We sat in silence for several minutes.

‘I suppose we should be grateful we didn’t try to persuade her to put some money on the table,’ said Thumper, breaking the silence.

Diggory Cholmondelay: Doing the Right Thing

There are all kinds of recognisable, easily defined family traits. Large noses run in some families. Some families specialise in receding chins. In other families the members are all very tall. Sometimes all the family members are very short. And in some families it is large, floppy ears which give the game away.

But the recognisable trait in the Cholmondelay family was eccentricity. By this I don't mean the sort of artificial, manufactured eccentricity which has become popular among individuals who are desperate to create for themselves a career on television, or in some branch of the entertainment business, but the sort of natural, unconscious eccentricity which was once so common among the British middle and upper classes; the sort of wild, unfettered eccentricity displayed by that great Victorian John 'Mad Jack' Mytton.

Diggory Cholmondelay's grandfather, Ambrose, was certainly eccentric.

As a relatively young man, Ambrose Cholmondelay had been a keen cricketer. Sadly, his enthusiasm far outweighed his talent and he had never been able to achieve the representative honours which he sought. Nevertheless, he did everything he could to tip the scales in favour of his playing for some sort of representative team.

In 1887, C Aubrey Smith (later to be knighted and to achieve eternal glory by playing stern patriarchs in Hollywood movies) captained a cricket team which visited Australia. Smith was a good player, a fast bowler, who had played for Cambridge University and Sussex and who later captained the England side in South Africa. When Cholmondelay was omitted from the players selected for Smith's tour he paid his own fare to Australia and, entirely at his own expense, followed the team around in the constant hope that injuries or illness might one day result in the captain inviting him to play. After six weeks, his dream was fulfilled. A broken leg, a bad case of the pox and a seven day prison sentence for punching a policeman meant that Smith lost three players and had only ten fit men when he needed eleven. Cholmondelay finally had his chance. In the first innings he scored three runs and in the second innings he scored nought. He didn't bowl in the match and he didn't play again on the tour. But he had achieved his ambition.

In their middle years Ambrose's wife, Fanny, achieved some notoriety of her own after cutting up a painting that experts had described as a masterpiece and valued at over £20,000 – a huge sum at the time.

The painting, by J.M.W.Turner had been titled 'Shipwreck in a Gale' and had been purchased by Ambrose's father. It hung above the mantelpiece in the dining room and Fanny hated it. She said it was horribly gloomy and made her feel depressed whenever she looked at it. Instead of simply moving the painting to another room, or selling it, she told two servants to take it down and remove it from the frame. She then cut the canvas into squares and had her personal maid make two cushions from it. They must have been the most valuable cushions ever made. It was an appropriate error of judgement for Fanny Cholmondelay herself admitted that her greatest claim to fame or admiration was that she always had well-plumped-up cushions in her home. 'You won't go into a room anywhere in this house and find a squashed cushion!' she once told an astonished Dr Brownlow.

In later life, Ambrose Cholmondelay's main hobby was rearranging the caskets in the family vault. Every Sunday evening he would go down into the vault, accompanied by the head gardener and a terrified pot boy and move the coffins around.

'Let's put the my great, great uncle Norbert Cholmondelay on the top shelf and move my grandmother over there by my great aunt Noreen Cholmondelay,' he would say, and the three men would then spend an hour or two lifting, pushing and pulling heavy, lead-lined coffins.

I gather that there never seemed to be any reason for any of this.

It was, according to Diggory, all done according to whim; it was like a huge three dimensional game of chess but without any plan or logical conclusion.

Even when he himself was mortally ill, the frail Ambrose insisted on being carried down into the vault so that he could supervise the final arranging of the caskets. Terrified that someone might come down and carry on the shuffling after he had chosen everyone's final resting place, he had the estate blacksmith come in and fix the coffins where he wanted them. The blacksmith put huge iron bands around the coffin and fixed them to the stone walls of the crypt with iron pegs. Naturally, Ambrose left the most prominent position vacant ready for his own coffin. And he made sure that there was no chance of his final resting place being moved. He left instructions that when his coffin had been placed in position it too should be fastened in place with thick iron bands.

Finally, two more things seemed to me to cement his reputation as an eccentric. First, it was Ambrose who devised a new family motto and had the words 'Nullum Crimen Neque Unguento Fugit Noster Escutcheon' ('no flies in our ointment, no blots on our escutcheon') carved on the stone arch above the driveway to the house and then repeated on the stone portico. Second, Ambrose, who was 102 when he died, always carried a walking stick made from a bull's penis (known in country areas of England as a pizzle stick). And he delighted in telling strangers the origins of his stick.

My predecessor, Dr Brownlow, told me that as a courtesy he called in to see Ambrose on the day of his 100th birthday but was told by the butler, that Mr Cholmondelay Senior was in London attending a celebration lunch. Dr Brownlow asked if he could call round to see him that evening, on his return, but was told that it would not be possible since Mr Cholmondelay had an appointment to play tennis with the vicar when he got back from London.

Ambrose's son, who was Diggory's father, was called Roderick, and he exhibited his eccentricity in an entirely different way. I met him only once or twice but he was unforgettable. He insisted on being addressed as 'General' though he had never served in any of the armed services. He would get very cross if people addressed him as anything else and in his later years he would simply ignore anyone who addressed him as 'Mister'.

Roderick and his wife both had flamboyant, well-groomed moustaches though hers was slightly more luxurious than his.

While the hair on her upper lip was growing well, the hair on the top of her head appeared to have pretty well abandoned the struggle to survive. The general's wife had responded to this not, as some women would have done, by spreading the remaining hair over the whole of her scalp, but by having her hair cut very short, militarily short. The result was that she had a head partly covered in the sort of steel grey bristle which was once popular with the more mature officers serving the Kaiser Wilhelm. If it had not been for the fact that she had given the general three children and had, in the luxury of the uppermost reaches of middle age, developed a bosom of such impressive proportions that she looked rather like one of those figureheads which used to be attached to the prows of sailing ships back in the days when ships had rigging and sailors had scurvy, I would have wondered what would have been found if a geneticist had taken a close look at her chromosomes.

The general also had a shortage of scalp hair and he disguised this by wearing a toupee; a rather threadbare hairpiece which, he once told me proudly, had originally belonged to his father and, before that, had adorned the balding pate of his father's older brother.

I don't know what colour the wig had been when it first saw the light of day, but it had been dyed many times and it had reacted badly to the various dyes and chemicals with which it had been assaulted, and by the end it had taken on a rather alarming hue; a sort of pearlescent henna with flecks of maroon scattered about. The 'General' seemed to feel that the significance of the heritage and antiquity of the hairpiece far outweighed its rather bizarre appearance. Indeed, I think he had been wearing the wig for so long that it no longer looked in the slightest bit odd to him. He kept it on his bedside table so that he never needed to be seen without it. It was not uncommon for him to put it on back to front and to wear it that way all day, blissfully unaware of the consequences and quite certain in his mind that the glances he received when out and about were entirely of recognition and admiration. ('Golly, there goes the General. Doesn't he look smart!' And not: 'Look at that old fool. He's got his wig on back to front.') The effect of eccentricity was enhanced by the fact that although he had shrunk considerably in his later years, he insisted on wearing the clothes he'd worn when he had been younger, despite the fact that they were several sizes too big for him. His shirt collar gaped so much around his neck that he looked rather like a friendly and inquisitive tortoise peering out of his shell.

The 'General' might have appeared to some to be a couple of sandwiches short of a good picnic but I always found him to be full of clever ideas.

'Always buy good hats and good shoes,' he once told me. 'They'll look better and last longer. In the long run they'll save you money and people will treat you with more respect.'

I once stood with him in the house when he was locking his back door. Most people in the village never locked their doors but the 'General' did so. He said it was necessary because he'd acquired a good many enemies in his life. He never explained who these might be. There were two locks on the door, both operated by huge, iron keys. He turned one key and closed one of the locks but left the other unlocked.

'Aren't you going to lock the other one?' I asked him.

He turned and looked at me, very sternly. 'If you have two locks on a door you should always leave one of them undone,' he told me. 'Then if someone tries to get in he will always be locking one of the locks and unlocking the other.'

Once he'd locked the door, he set a fierce looking man trap to catch anyone who did manage to get through his defences. He told me that he'd done this for at least thirty years and that his staff were always forbidden to leave their rooms after he'd locked up for the night. Since they undoubtedly knew about the man trap I doubt if he had any difficulty persuading them to obey this instruction.

The man trap, which had been specially designed to grip an intruder's leg without actually breaking it, was one of a number of items which the General had either invented himself or which he had taken an interest in developing or marketing.

He had, for example, taken a special interest in a machine to speed up eating which had been devised in 1879 by a French physician. The invention (which had been described as an ‘electrical dining machine’) was originally designed for a patient who could not swallow because of a paralysis but it was promoted as useful for those who wanted to get through meal times more speedily.

To use the machine the patient filled his mouth with food and then gave himself an electric shock in his jaws and throat. The food, it is said, then went down the oesophagus at the rate of 4,000 miles per second. (The General could not explain how the speed had been measured). It was reported that a man using the electrical dining machine could consume an entire, exquisite French dinner, including all the season’s delicacies, wine, coffee and dessert in one minute and fourteen seconds.

The General, who was a committed gourmand, had worked out that this machine could save him 1,200 hours a year – time which he could spend more fruitfully on his various enthusiasms. More significantly, he reckoned that the machine could reduce the amount of time his employees spent eating. The Cholmondelay family fortune rested upon the efforts of a factory in the West Midlands which made a variety of hinges for doors and windows and, after some work with a pencil and a large piece of paper, the General had concluded that productivity could be increased by 12% if all employees were instructed to consume their meals with the aid of the ‘electrical dining machine’. Sadly, his aims were thwarted by the trade unions who (inexplicably and in his view unforgiveably) objected vehemently to the proposal.

As if all this wasn’t enough to merit him being described as eccentric, the ‘General’ had insisted on filling the gardens of the family home with a number of statues. The really odd thing was that the statues were all identical. They consisted of a woman who was standing on a stone plinth, who had clearly lost her bath towel and appeared to be reaching out expecting someone to hand her another. The statue was based on the General’s wife. I never counted the statues but the butler, a long-serving family retainer, assured me that there were over ninety of them spread around the grounds. Many of them were almost hidden and it could, I gather, be quite startling to see one of these statues suddenly coming into view from a position behind a tree. The butler told me that since the statues had been put into place, the amount of poaching had fallen considerably.

In a way, you could argue that all this history is irrelevant to Diggory, the patient with whom I am here concerned. But I don’t think it is irrelevant because it helps to set the scene and, in a small way, explains and defines why he was the man he became. (To this I must add the rider that if we ever think we truly understand another human being, or how they were changed by life and circumstances, then we are almost certainly deluding ourselves.)

Young Diggory (as he was called, right until the day of his death) was an unusual man with massive eyebrows which looked like two tangled collections of those big spiders you often find in the darkest corner of the garage. He once told me that the only thing he considered important was to try to do the right thing. And I do think he always tried to do the right thing, though it is possible that doing the right thing as he saw it probably wasn’t always necessarily what other people might have regarded as the right thing.

Diggory himself had his own mild eccentricities which had slowly developed through the years and which had blossomed when his father, the General, had died and he had inherited the house.

First, he was writing a history of the house where his family had lived since the 16th century. He had been working on it for seven years and had got as far as 1843. He reckoned he needed another 35 years to finish it. When he told me this he was 78-years-old. He gave me these details without any suggestion that he felt that there might be a chance he would not succeed in finishing the book. At the time he seemed to assume that if he needed another 35 years then God would give him another 35 years. And at the time it seemed by no means impossible for I don’t think I’d ever known anyone in their 70s to be as determined to defy their age. He had a heart condition which had been diagnosed thirty years earlier but he still marched around the estate as though he were setting off on a route march and he could still do a full day’s work in the gardens. I had warned him that he should take special care when the weather was really cold.

‘Stay inside if it’s freezing!’ I warned him. ‘Your heart will have to work extra hard when the weather is really cold. And you mustn’t try working in the garden when it’s very cold. In fact you shouldn’t even go walking round the garden when the temperature is really low.’

Despite my warnings, I knew that all the year round, whatever the weather, he drove an open car, an old Bugatti which must have been worth a fortune but which he treated as just another, ordinary vehicle. He never wore an overcoat a hat or a scarf. Even if it was pouring down or snowing he would drive around without any protection against the elements. He always wore a version of the same suit, a three piece tweed creation which was so thick that it would doubtless keep him warm and cosy in a snow storm but which must have been unbearably hot in the summer. (He never wore the suit without the waistcoat.) He had a new suit delivered to him on the 1st of January each year. A tailor from Savile Row in London came to the house in November to take the measurements. When the new suit arrived, Diggory always burnt the old suit.

Thinking about Diggory's Bugatti reminded me that he once told me that he always put a chocolate into the car radiator every 1,000 miles. When I asked him why on earth he did this he told me that his father had done the same thing and had never had any trouble with the radiator.

'What sort of chocolate?' I asked him.

'Oh, I don't think it matters much as long as it's something with a soft centre. I wouldn't put in one of those toffee ones.'

I was tempted to try this in the radiator of the Rolls Royce which I had inherited from Dr Brownlow but I never managed to find the courage.

Diggory's only concession to his age was to wear a hearing aid. However, the hearing aid was, to say the least, a little unusual. Diggory had made it himself and it consisted of nothing more than a bit of plastic covered wire. One end of the wire was fixed into his ear with a small piece of rubber cut from an eraser and the other end was stuck into the top pocket of his jacket. 'Does it work?' I asked him one day. 'Of course it does,' he said. 'When strangers see it they naturally assume that I'm deaf and so they talk more loudly and more clearly.'

Oh, and one other thing: like his father, Diggory had an impressive collection of walking sticks. Like his ancestors, Diggory didn't do anything by halves. I suspect that he had the largest collection of walking sticks in Britain. Come to think of it, I suspect that it was probably the more comprehensive collection in Europe. He had a stick which he claimed a Zulu had cut out of a knobkerrie and had used at the Battle of Rorke's Drift; a stick which had been used by the Emperor Franz Joseph and a very fine ebony and silver stick which had been carried by the famous actor Sir Henry Irving. Altogether he had over 500 walking sticks. I used to tell him that if he ever injured a leg he'd be so spoilt for choice that by the time he'd decided which stick to use, he would have recovered. In the event, when he did sprain an ankle, and found that he needed a stick, he insisted on my providing him with a plain common or garden stick provided by the National Health Service. When he'd recovered, I had a devil of a job to persuade him to hand it back. He wanted to keep it for his collection.

Even without these fairly overt signs of eccentricity, Diggory would have qualified as a keeper of the family's sacred flame for his eating habits.

I didn't discover his dietary habits until I gave him a medical when he was 73-years-old. He needed the medical because he was taking out a mortgage to buy a farmhouse that was a couple of miles from his house. Every time any property remotely close to him came onto the market, he insisted on buying it. He was terrified of anyone infringing on his privacy. The company making the loan was insisting on a full medical because Diggory weighed slightly over 20 stones.

Now, I don't think it is an exaggeration to say that the English have always been fond of having a good time. Over the centuries, England has had plenty of gourmets, more than enough gourmands and, without a doubt, a good many old-fashioned gluttons.

Back in the 14th century, Edward III had made a valiant effort to get things under control. He laid down strict rules for eating and drinking. He ruled that commoners were forbidden to eat dainty dishes or consume costly drinks and he limited the main meal of the day to two courses with each course to consist of no more than three dishes. And he prohibited servants from eating fish or flesh more than once day.

Naturally, however, his son Lionel (known as the Duke of Clarence) wasn't affected by these silly rules and at his wedding feast there were no less than 30 courses. The leftovers fed 1,000 people. And his grandson, King Richard II, didn't take much notice of Edward either. For his Christmas dinner in 1399 the cooks butchered 28 oxen, 300 sheep and too many chickens to count. A total of 300 servants were needed to carry the food about.

From then on the rules were ignored – as long as you were rich enough to buy all the food you wanted to eat. Richard Neville, the Earl of Warwick, required six oxen to be killed every day for breakfast, though to be fair I don't suppose he ate them all himself.

In England, the royals, the aristocracy and the plain old stinking rich had always had big appetites. And they had invariably washed down their huge meals with fairly vast quantities of ale. The aim was always to have bread as fresh as possible but preferred to drink beer that had been brewed at least a year earlier. Both Henry VIII and Elizabeth always started the day with a beef steak and a cup of ale for breakfast.

The Cholmondelays may not have been royal or aristocratic but they followed the aristocratic style when it came to eating.

'What did you have for breakfast?' I asked Diggory Cholmondelay at the beginning of my examination.

'A whole grapefruit, a haddock, sautéed chicken liver served in claret with mushrooms, kedgeree and fresh strawberries. I finished up with three toasted muffins served with fresh butter and black cherry jam.'

'And for lunch?'

'Well, before I got to lunch I had my elevenses.'

‘And what did you have for your elevenses?’

‘A bowl of lobster bisque and a selection of patisseries.’

‘Right,’ I said, making a note of all this.

And so it went on. He had his luncheon at 12.30 pm, at 2.30 he had coffee and cakes, at 4.00 he had afternoon tea consisting of scones, crumpets, sandwiches and a pot of tea and at 7.00 pm sharp he had an 8 course dinner. At 10.00 pm he had supper which always consisted of Welsh rarebit and cocoa.

It was not difficult to see why Diggory weighed considerably more than might be considered optimum for his five feet seven inches.

‘And I have kickshaws constantly available between meals,’ he told me.

‘What is a kickshaw?’

‘Oh, a little something foreign, fancy and rather insubstantial. The ones we have served here are always pastry parcels with something like a bit of chicken or some chopped dates inside. They’re a bit like deep fried samosas. We have them stuffed with gooseberries, raspberries, shrimp, fresh tomato and mozzarella, salami and anchovy. The thing is that the kickshaw should always provide a gustatory surprise. You don’t know what you’re going to get until you bite into it. I’ m surprised you’ve not heard of kickshaws, doctor. Dear old Samuel Johnson was a great kickshaw enthusiast.’

‘Do you eat any vegetables?’ I asked.

‘Oh yes,’ he told me quite proudly. ‘I have a packet of cheese and onion crisps at least twice a day. So that’s four vegetables isn’t it?’

‘Four?’ I said, puzzled.

‘Two helpings of potato and two helpings of onion,’ he replied quite seriously.

I honestly didn’t know what to say to that.

The other thing I remember about Diggory Cholmondelay was that his dog went to Peter Marshall’s shop every morning to fetch his copy of *The Times*.

Peter had stopped delivering newspapers (he claimed it was never possible to break even on delivering papers) and so several people in the village had trained their dogs to go to Peter’s shop to collect their daily papers. At one point there were three people who did this and occasionally the three dogs would arrive together and queue politely to be served. Diggory’s dog was, however, the only one which was equipped with a special satchel strapped to his back. Diggory didn’t like having his morning newspaper with a wet patch on it where it had been in the dog’s mouth. Peter would put *The Times* into the satchel and if Diggory had any extra order, he would enclose a note asking for a packet of pipe tobacco, a box or matches, a magazine or whatever it was that he wanted. Peter would then put the requested items into the satchel along with the newspaper. I had thought about sending Ben along to fetch my papers but Miss Johnson, my receptionist, had to pass Peter’s shop on her way to Bilbury Grange and so she’d always called in and collected our newspapers, fresh bread and milk.

Diggory was single until he reached his 78th birthday and half way through the year to his 79th birthday, he abandoned his bachelorhood and married Edna Beveridge, a woman who had been a maid in the Cholmondelay household since her 14th birthday and who had eventually risen through the ranks to become Diggory’s housekeeper. She had worked for the family for over 60 years when she eventually accepted the final promotion available to her and became the chatelaine.

‘It doesn’t make much difference to me,’ she told me a month after the wedding when I met her at the Cholmondelay’s house.

I’d been called to attend an under gardener who’d stuck a fork in his foot. This was no rarity in Bilbury. At least twice a year I saw someone who had stuck a fork through a foot. Hector O’Malley, a retired railway engineer who had an extensive vegetable garden successfully speared his right foot an average of once a year for at least a decade.

‘I’ve been Mr Diggory’s mistress since two years after I arrived at the house and my work hasn’t changed one jot over the years,’ she told me. ‘I still warm his bed and supervise the staff, same as I’ve always done. I still organise the meals and run the household. As far as I’m concerned nothing has changed. I emptied his bedpan before we were married and I still empty it now. I’m not having anyone else emptying his bedpan.’

‘Do you still call him Mr Diggory?’ I asked her, slightly surprised.

‘Oh yes, of course I do. That’s his name. What else am I going to call him? He’s been Mr Diggory to me since I was a slip of a girl.’

Diggory Cholmondelay had been her life and, it turned out that she had been his life too.

Six months after the wedding, Edna came to see me.

‘I think there’s something wrong with me,’ she reported.

I waited.

I knew her well enough to know that she would eventually get round to telling me what was troubling her but that

I would not get there any quicker if I tried to hurry her by asking questions.

'It's very personal,' she began.

I nodded and waited.

'It's a problem down below.'

'Ah.'

'But not what you're thinking.'

'No.'

'The other.'

'Right.'

'Trouble with my waterworks.'

'Oh dear. I'm sorry to hear that.'

'It's painful to pass.'

'Water?'

'Exactly, doctor. I knew you'd understand.'

I waited.

The temptation to ask for more information was powerful. But I resisted. My first thought that Mrs Cholmondelay was perhaps suffering from honeymoon cystitis, though this seemed relatively unlikely given that the relevant activities could have hardly changed as a result of her marriage.

'It's very cloudy.'

'Oh.'

'And there seem to be little pieces of something floating in it.'

'Little pieces of something?'

'Yes. Quite definitely.'

She opened her handbag and took out half a bottle of Bell's whisky. But the bottle didn't contain whisky. It contained something that was obviously a urine sample but which looked more like soup. She handed the bottle to me. I put it down on my desk. This was clearly more than a mere urinary tract infection.

'And I can't hold it in as I used to be able to.'

'Incontinence?'

She shook her head. 'I've never been abroad. We were going to have a honeymoon in Paris but we didn't go. Mr Diggory decided he wouldn't like flying.'

'Have you been leaking?' I asked, realising that Mrs Cholmondelay must have misunderstood me.

'That's exactly it.' She nodded.

She also told me that she had been suffering from back pain and that she thought she had a temperature.

'I need to examine you,' I told her.

'Oh I don't think that will be necessary,' she said, slightly shocked.

I insisted that to make a diagnosis I needed to examine her.

'With my clothes off?'

'Some of them, at least,' I said.

And so with some reluctance she removed a few layers and climbed up onto my examination couch.

The examination didn't tell me very much other than that Mrs Cholmondelay had a slightly unexpected fever and very high blood pressure, but her next remark startled me and led me to an alarming diagnosis.

'I've had to increase my tablets but they don't seem to stop the pain,' she said.

'What tablets are you taking?' I asked her.

I knew I hadn't prescribed anything for her for years.

She reached into her handbag and pulled out a packet of painkillers. 'I never go anywhere without them,' she said.

I looked at the packet and my blood went cold. The tablets were phenacetin.

Now, back in the 1970s, phenacetin was still used as an enormously popular painkiller.

First introduced in the 1880s by the same German company which had first introduced aspirin tablets to the market, phenacetin had been popular for years. There was never much logic to its popularity but some people preferred it to aspirin. The one thing it had in common with aspirin was that it could be used to bring down a temperature. It was also cheap. Paracetamol was the third of the really popular and widely used over-the-counter painkillers. All three were made widely available because it was thought that they were perfectly safe. They did not have the addictive qualities of the opiate painkillers such as morphine and heroin and, back in the 19th century and early 20th century laudanum. (Laudanum had been widely available without a prescription since it was a major constituent of a whole range of inevitably popular and well-thought of patent medicines. It was not long ago that it was possible to buy cough syrup for children that contained a morphine derivative. It was very popular.).

By 1970, however, it had become known that the regular use of phenacetin could cause serious kidney damage – serious enough to result in death. Like a good many doctors I had stopped prescribing the stuff and I had always tried to dissuade patients from buying it if they needed an over-the-counter painkiller from the pharmacy. The symptoms and signs of poisoning caused by phenacetin damage creep up on you slowly. By the time you notice them it is too late to do anything.

‘How long have you been taking these?’ I asked.

I had decided I needed to intervene. I could no longer rely on Mrs Cholmondelay telling me her story.

‘Oh, a long time. At least twenty years.’

‘And how many do you take?’ I heard myself asking.

‘No more than sixteen a day. They’re quite expensive.’

‘Where do you get them from?’

‘A pharmacy we use sends them over to me once a week. We have a delivery of medicines and toiletries every Friday.’

‘Don’t they ever ask why you order so much phenacetin?’

‘Of course not! Why should they? It’s nothing to do with them, is it?’

‘Do they know how many phenacetin tablets you’re taking?’

‘They certainly don’t. They mind their own business.’

‘How often do you take sixteen a day?’

‘Oh, every day. They stop me having pains.’

‘What pains?’

‘I don’t know – any pains. I just know that if I take the tablets then I don’t have any pains. People my age always get pains.’

‘But you’ve been taking them for twenty years?’

‘To ward off the pains I might have got if I hadn’t taken them,’ she said. ‘And they worked! I didn’t have any pains.’

I now suspected that Mrs Cholmondelay was in serious trouble.

Phenacetin can and does cause serious kidney disease. It can produce renal papillary necrosis and interstitial nephritis – both of which are pretty deadly disorders. The fact that Mrs Cholmondelay had acquired very high blood pressure and had the symptoms and signs with which she had presented, made me suspect that she already had very serious kidney disease.

‘I need to get some tests done,’ I told her. ‘And to get the tests done I need you to go to the hospital in Barnstaple.’ As I told her this I reached for the telephone.

‘When?’ she demanded, clearly unhappy.

‘Today, straight away.’

‘Oh, I can’t go today. We’re having a delivery of quails’ eggs this afternoon. I have to be there to receive them. And the wine merchant is bringing this month’s delivery. I can’t possibly not be there when he arrives.’

‘Someone else will have to deal with the quails’ eggs and the wine,’ I told her. ‘You need to go to the hospital. I’ll ring your husband and ask him to come here to take you over there straight away.’

Mrs Cholmondelay looked as if she were about to protest but I was already on the telephone. I rang the hospital first and spoke to one of the consultants. He agreed to see her in his out-patient department. I then rang Mr Cholmondelay and asked him to come and take his wife over to Barnstaple.

‘What’s wrong with her?’ asked Mr Cholmondelay.

I told him that I wasn’t yet sure but that I needed to get some tests done.

Three quarters of an hour later, Mr Cholmondelay turned up in his Bugatti to take his wife over to the hospital.

And three hours after that I had the telephone call I’d suspected I would get – but had, nonetheless, hoped I wouldn’t.

‘I’m afraid we’re pretty sure that your Mrs Cholmondelay has end stage kidney disease,’ said the consultant. ‘We’re keeping her in for some more tests. But it looks as if both her kidneys are pretty well destroyed. She tells me that she’s been taking 16 phenacetin tablets a day for years.’ He sounded rather angry and critical.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘That’s what she told me.’

‘You didn’t prescribe them?’

‘I certainly didn’t!’ I said, rather defensively.

‘I’m pleased to hear it,’ said the consultant, rather less gruffly now.

Mrs Cholmondelay lasted another three weeks.

She never came home from the hospital.

Diggory Cholmondelay was destroyed by her death.

I don't think I have ever seen anyone more clearly devastated by the loss of a partner. He was quite lost without her. Although they had married only recently they had been together for virtually the whole of their lives. They had certainly been together for all their adult lives. It must have been difficult for them both for many of those years. When Diggory Cholmondelay's father had been alive, the pair had for years tried to keep their relationship secret from him. I suspect that just about everyone else in the house knew about it but for several decades the General either didn't know or he pretended not to know. During the Second World War, Diggory Cholmondelay had served his country in London, working in the Ministry because he'd been considered too old for active service and had, in any case, failed a service medical because of his heart condition. When he had returned from London at the end of the War he'd insisted that Edna should move into his bedroom on a full-time basis and although his father had resisted this, his objections had been easy to dismiss since he himself had bedded several members of the female staff and was suspected to have had at least two illegitimate children as a result of productive liaisons with chambermaids.

'I am simply too full of years and sadness,' Diggory Cholmondelay said to me. 'Can you put me down, please.'

At first I didn't realise that he was serious. But he was.

'I have absolutely nothing to live for,' he said. 'Edna and I were together so long that it is quite impossible for me to exist without her. I have no reason to be.'

'Your book,' I reminded him. 'You have to finish your history of the house. You need to live to finish that.'

He shrugged. 'She was the only one who would have cared,' he said. 'If I finish it who will I tell?' He wiped his eyes with his handkerchief. 'We used to share everything,' he said. 'And apart from that time during the War, we were never apart. She wanted to come to London with me but I wouldn't let her. I thought it too dangerous. I felt safer with her down here. But I've always shared things with her. If I found something special in a junk shop or at an auction I would want to rush home to show it to her. If she saw a bird in the garden doing something unusual she would tell me about it. If I found a good bit in a book I was reading then I would read it out to her. And she'd do the same for me.'

He really did want me to end his life.

'I can't do that,' I told him gently.

I offered him pills to help him over the next few days.

He didn't want anything.

I talked to him for hours. Or, rather, I listened to him talk about Edna and the things they'd done together. I'm not sure that it helped him. In fact, in a strange way, I think it may have made things worse for him.

'I can't,' I said again and again when he repeatedly asked me to give him something to end his life.

'Then if you can't do anything just tell me how to do it,' he pleaded.

'I can't do that either,' I said.

He nodded, got up and left the surgery without another word. I can still remember the way he walked away the last time I saw him in my surgery; head bowed, a broken human being.

It was winter when Edna died and it was one of the hardest winters we'd had for some years. There was deep snow everywhere and for a while the village was cut off from the rest of the world. The snow was so thick, and the roads so bad, that I couldn't get around in the Rolls Royce. I used one of Patsy's father's tractors instead. In most places the snow was three to four feet deep; in the hedgerows there were snowdrifts that were six feet deep. At Bilbury Grange we had Jack Frost patterns on the inside of our bedroom window and in the yard at the village school the children had made a slide that was over thirty feet long. The local television weather forecaster, sounding like a Victorian do-gooder had warned all old people to wrap up warm and to drink lots of hot soup. Two nights earlier, Thumper and I had blocked up the front door of the Duck and Puddle with a snow wall. The following day we realised that we'd sealed ourselves out of the pub and we had to spend an hour chipping away at what had turned into a wall of ice before we could get inside. Most of the wildlife was sheltering but I saw a redwing in the snow, puffed up, alert and searching for food. The redwings are unlike most birds in that they come to Britain for the winter. Most migrating birds travel in the other direction as autumn comes. Redwings come in search of the cold weather.

I'll never forget that bad winter.

I was driving round the village, checking on some of my older patients, and I was passing by the end of the driveway to Diggory's home one day when I saw a figure shovelling snow off the drive. It was about two months after Edna's death. It was snowing at the time and shovelling the snow seemed to me to be a rather pointless activity – like sweeping up leaves as the wind is blowing them from the trees. I could just make out the family motto 'Nullum Crimen Neque Unguento Fugit Noster Escutcheon' carved into the stone archway above him.

Whenever I saw it I couldn't help wondering how long it had taken skilled masons to carve that nonsense into the stone.

When I looked more closely I could see that it was Diggory doing the shovelling. To my astonishment he was naked to the waist and he was wearing old khaki knee length shorts. He appeared to be wearing a pair of ordinary shoes. I stopped the tractor, climbed down and waded through the snow to him. The snow was so deep that it came up higher than the tops of my Wellington boots. It didn't really matter because my trousers and socks were already soaking wet. I could see the clouds of mist created by his breath.

'What the devil are you doing?' I demanded. 'You'll catch your death of cold!'

Diggory just looked at me and nodded. He stuck his shovel into the snow and lifted up another pile of the stuff, tossing it carelessly to the side of the driveway.

I remembered then that he had a bad heart. And I remembered my warning to him. 'Don't do anything energetic in the cold weather,' I told him.

'You'll kill yourself!' I said.

He stopped again for a moment, looked at me and smiled. 'What are you going to do about it?' he asked.

And I didn't know what I was going to do about it.

I thought about grappling with him and trying to carry him up to the house. He guessed what I was thinking.

'I'm older than you but I'm strong and I'm determined,' he said. 'If you try to drag me up to the house I'll fight you and the minute you're gone I'll be out again.'

'I could have you taken to hospital,' I told him.

He shrugged. 'I've got lawyers,' he said. 'You'd never keep me locked in.'

'But…'I began.

'It's the best way,' said Diggory. 'It'll look natural. There will be no shame. It'll be put down as an accidental death.' He stared at me and then added: 'Unless you insist on speaking up.'

I turned, walked back to the tractor, climbed aboard and eventually finished my visits. Every few minutes I had stop to dry my eyes.

Diggory Cholmondelay died at 5.45 pm that afternoon. He was found in the snow by one of the gardeners who'd been sent to look for him. They called me straight away but when I got to the house he was dead. Since he had no children, the estate and all the family holdings went eventually to a distant relative who lived in Yorkshire.

I put 'heart attack' on the death certificate, which I wrote out myself.

There was no inquest. I decided that there was no need to trouble the police or the coroner.

And I still think I did the right thing.

Actually, I think that both Diggory and I did what we thought was the right thing to do.

Mr Forester's Bad Tempered Bowel

Although they lived little more than a quarter of a mile away from Bilbury Grange (in our part of the world that makes them close neighbours) I had seen very little of Sally and Algernon Forester.

They were, like most people in the village, rather quiet folk who preferred to keep 'themselves to themselves' as the saying goes. I don't mean to imply by this that they were unfriendly because they certainly weren't. If you passed by their house and they were in the garden they would wave and exchange a word or two about the weather. (If you made a list of the things that country folk discuss most commonly, the weather would always be at the top of the list. This was not because we didn't have anything else to discuss but because when you live in the middle of nowhere, and your village can get cut off overnight, the weather can have a huge impact on your life.)

If they heard that a neighbour was in trouble they would be there offering to help as soon as anyone in the village. So, for example, when Ollie Ruttle fell out of a tree in Barnstaple, broke his leg in three places and wasn't able to work, the Foresters were among the first to offer help. Ollie Ruttle was a self-employed gardener and one of his regular jobs was to cut the grass and keep the hedges tidy at the Foresters' place. The Foresters had a large garden and cutting, clipping and pruning took up two days a week. Mr Tuttle had only gone up the tree in order to try to rescue a kite for two small children, and he fell when a branch broke and deposited him unceremoniously on a patch of rock hard ground.

Legally, Mr Ruttle wasn't entitled to any sick pay and there was no doubt that he, his wife and their three children would have been in dire straits without outside help. Quite a few people took round parcels of food but, realising that you can't pay electricity and rates bills with apples and potatoes, Mr and Mrs Forester insisted on paying Ollie in full even though he wasn't able to do any work for them. Mrs Forester put two £10 notes into an envelope every week and popped the envelope through the Ruttle's letter box. It was a month before Mrs Ruttle saw who was delivering the envelopes.

Mr Forester was 74-years-old at the time. He was a large, imposing and elegant man who had impeccable manners and was invariably impeccably dressed. He always wore a jacket and a tie, whatever the weather, and could have been an ambassador to a small country, a head waiter or perhaps a judge. He had not, however, been any of those things. He had been an architect and a partner in a firm which had offices in the North of England but which had an international reputation. He had specialised in designing large buildings including, I believe, at least one opera house and a government building.

Whenever I talked to Mr Forester, I always thought he appeared a little distant, as though his body was present but his mind was somewhere else. And for a man who had earned his living designing buildings, he always seemed to me to be a bit disconnected from the world and remarkably unworldly. I had once stopped to talk to him and been astonished at how cut off he was from the world outside Bilbury. I don't think he could have told you the name of the current Prime Minister or answered any of those questions which doctors commonly ask when they are trying to decide whether or not an individual is suffering from dementia.

But Mr Forester was not in the slightest bit demented. He didn't really have the time to live in our modern world because he lived in the world of books: old books. He knew more about books, especially first editions, than anyone I've ever met.

His wife, Sally Forester, who was five years younger than her husband, was a sweet, diminutive lady who always dressed in the sort of long, down to the floor dresses once worn by Victorian ladies. She wore her hair, which was long and blonde, in ringlets, long, corkscrew shaped curls of a type usually only seen in those days in historical dramas shown in the cinema or on television, and she was the only woman I have ever seen carrying a parasol. She did this as though it were the most natural thing in the world to do. In fact, I believe she had at least three parasols. One was lemon coloured, one was light, dusky pink and one was white. They were all fringed and delicate, and Patsy said she thought they were the most beautiful things she'd ever seen.

Mrs Forester smoked cigarettes which she had especially made for her by a specialist tobacconist just off Jermyn Street in London. She smoked six of them every day. She never smoked more and she never smoked fewer. The cigarettes were made of a very smoky type of tobacco known as latakia and she smoked them through a six inch long holder made of jade and equipped, apparently, with a very early filtration system. The holder she used seemed extraordinarily long but she told me that it was exactly twelve inches in length and would be described by a tobacconist as being of 'theatre length'. (She told me that shorter holders are known as being of cocktail or dinner length but that it was apparently possible to purchase cigarette holders which were well over a foot long – these were apparently known as being of 'opera length' though I would have thought that if you went to the opera with a cigarette holder nearly two feet long there would be a risk that you would set fire to the hat or hair of the patron sitting in the row in front of you.) Mrs Forester explained that she used a holder because she hated having little bits of tobacco stuck to her lips and because it kept the smoke well out of her eyes. She also insisted that she was in good company since Jayne Mansfield, Audrey Hepburn, Rita Hayworth and Princess Margaret had all used cigarette holders.

Every time I talked to her I tried to persuade Mrs Forester to give up the smoking habit and every time we spoke about it she told me, with an engaging smile, that she understood that as a doctor it was my responsibility to admonish her for smoking but that she never believed anything that researchers or governments said and that she was quite certain that research would soon be published showing that smoking a modest amount of tobacco was good for your health. ‘Moderation in all things,’ she would say sweetly.

Alcohol was the only other drug either of them took. She had one glass of sherry every evening and he had one glass of whisky. Neither of them drank during the daytime. I do not think I am the first doctor to have noticed that many older people drink alcohol regularly but in very modest quantities. Indeed, most individuals who live to celebrate their 90th or even their 100th birthday say, with some pride, that they take a very small amount of alcohol every day. I sometimes wondered whether this modest, characteristic combination of self-indulgence and self-discipline might not be at least partly responsible for their longevity.

Not that the Foresters were particularly old. At the time of which I write he was just 74 and she was in her late sixties. They were a happy couple; contented and fulfilled. They had each other and while she looked after the garden, he collected books.

Collecting can become a mania, a mental illness in a way, and Mr Forester was well aware that his hobby had long since got out of control. Fortunately, he had clearly been successful in his profession and he could afford to indulge himself.

I have to say that in my experience it is by no means uncommon for a collector to spend more time and money on their obsession than they can really afford to spend.

A bookseller I knew once told me that one or two of his customers (they were nearly always men for it is, it seems, invariably men who become obsessive collectors) were so ashamed or embarrassed by their mania that they would go to extraordinary lengths to hide their new purchases. He said he had one customer who always asked for parcels of books to be sent to his club or sent to his home when he knew that his wife would be away. Another had piles of books parcelled up and sent to him labelled ‘Rose Fertiliser’.

Over the years I had a number of patients who were keen collectors. For example, another patient of mine, whom I will call simply Paul, was an enthusiastic collector of rare coins. He spent far more on his collection than he could afford and he was extremely proud of the coins he had acquired. I remember he once came into my surgery with a small, wooden box containing an extraordinary collection of silver coins from the days of Queen Elizabeth I. He had bought them from a dealer in London. He asked me to take the box and to then sell it to him for £5, giving him a note of ownership which he could show to his wife. He had clearly paid far more than that, and far more than he could afford. I told him that since his wife was also a patient of mine I could not possibly take part in such a deception, but in truth I would not have taken part in it even if she hadn’t been one of my patients. I think Paul managed to persuade Peter Marshall to agree to take part in the deception.

Over the years I learned so much from my patients.

I don’t think doctors working in towns and cities ever had the time to spare to listen to their patients. The urban physicians undoubtedly earned far more money than country doctors but I thought then, and still think now, that those of us who worked in the remoter parts of the country were richer in the real sense of the word.

I digress.

My apologies.

Let’s get back to the Foresters.

They were, as a couple, like two halves of a pair of scissors, to use a phrase coined by Benjamin Franklin. They’d been married for the best part of half a century and they had, over the years, grown ever closer to each other.

The Forester’s home, a beautiful Georgian house which they had lovingly restored, was full of books. I don’t think there was a room other than the kitchen (and I suppose the bathrooms) that didn’t have floor to ceiling bookcases on at least one of the walls and although he had a library of over 20,000 books, Mr Forester knew where every single book was positioned. He looked after them all as though they were rare orchids and once told me that he had, for a while, considered keeping his books upside down so that their upper spines would not be damaged when they were removed from their shelves. Fortunately, he decided against this and avoided any risk of damage by making sure that his books were stored fairly loosely on the shelves and weren’t crammed in tightly.

Both the Foresters enjoyed good health and I did not often see them in the surgery.

Mrs Forester had some mild varicose veins for which I prescribed elastic stockings. These were not to cover the veins, since her long dresses did that very adequately, but merely to prevent the ankle swelling which can accompany swollen and inadequate venous drainage.

Mr Forester had once had a sore throat and he'd been to see me with an attack of indigestion which had come on after Christmas and had continued to annoy him well into January. The symptoms had disappeared after treatment with an antacid and had not returned. He had also suffered from irritable bowel syndrome for many years and the symptoms of this, bloating, a painful abdomen and occasional diarrhoea, had been with him for over three decades. He knew that both diet and stress could make his symptoms worse. If he ate too much fat or too much fibre then the symptoms would get worse but they would also worsen if he found himself in a stressful situation for any reason.

So, when Mr Forester came into the surgery I had no idea what his complaint might be. If I'd had to guess I would have guessed that he was having trouble with his irritable bowel syndrome again. IBS (which was in the 1970s still sometimes called by its original names of 'spastic colon' or 'mucous colitis') had for years been one of the most underestimated diseases there is. The pain caused by a bowel in spasm can be excruciating. And why shouldn't it be? It is well known that pain which is caused by muscle spasm is often the worst sort of pain. The pains caused by gall stones, kidney stones and child labour are all caused by muscle spasms. So why shouldn't the spasm of the huge muscles of the bowel be taken more seriously? It had long seemed to me that the medical profession (and the pharmaceutical industry) had more or less abandoned millions of patients simply because they underestimated a problem which they couldn't properly understand and couldn't think of a way to treat successfully.

Doctors, relying on what they had been taught, supplemented by what they had read in medical journals and medical textbooks, still believed that IBS was best treated with a diet heavy in roughage. To be honest, I had always felt that this was like trying to treat diabetes mellitus by telling patients to eat more sugar. I knew that it was often roughage that caused irritable bowel syndrome and that encouraging patients to take more roughage was more likely to exacerbate the problem than to cure it.

The professions didn't take IBS very seriously because there was no effective pharmacological remedy available. The healing professions were, I am afraid to say, dominated by the needs of the pharmaceutical industry and modern medical care was dominated by, and run for, interventionists in general and drug companies in particular. As a result, doctors could be hidebound and worryingly unimaginative. And, because IBS was neither a dramatic disease, nor a fashionable one, nor one that usually killed sufferers, the majority of doctors remained blisteringly ignorant about it. It was, I am afraid, a disease that was more likely to result in sniggers than sympathy.

Back in the 1970s, I had lost count of the number of patients who had told me that their doctor has told them that their symptoms could not be caused by IBS because 'the tests had come back negative'.

That was clever of them because I knew of no comprehensive and truly effective tests for IBS. The diagnosis had to be made on the basis of the symptoms and signs.

All this was all the more remarkable when you realised that IBS was one of the commonest of all chronic disorders. It was, for example, just as common as all the forms of arthritis put together and much commoner than many well-known and highly investigated diseases.

After the usual pleasantries, Mr Forester explained that he had recently suffered from a rather alarming series of what he called 'palpitations'. It seemed that it wasn't his IBS which had brought him to the surgery.

'It started two days ago,' he said. 'I had been pottering in the garden, not doing anything very strenuous, and I came indoors to sit in the conservatory for a while before dinner. Suddenly, I felt rather strange. I don't know how to explain it really but I felt weak and dizzy and it was rather alarming. I checked my pulse, which I do from time to time as a routine, just to check that my heart is beating and that I'm still alive, and I found that it was going so fast that I couldn't even begin to count it.'

'Do you know if your pulse was regular?' I asked him.

'I don't think it was,' he said. 'It seemed to be all over the place. There didn't seem to be any rhythm to it at all. I was so alarmed that I checked my blood pressure with a machine we have. An American friend bought it for me and sent it over. According to the machine my pulse was 156 and upwards and my blood pressure alternated between absurdly high and absurdly low. The machine lit up with all the little warning lights with which it is fitted.'

'Did you have any nausea?'

'No, no, nothing like that.'

'Were you sweating?'

'No, I wasn't really sweating. I got a bit nervous for a while and that made me sweat a bit. But I wasn't dripping with sweat. I've seen people sweat with heart trouble and I had nothing like that. I wasn't clammy for example.'

'But you didn't call me!' I said. 'Why on earth didn't you ring me? I could have been with you in five minutes!'

'I don't really know,' he admitted. 'After the initial shock I started to get used to the fact that my heart was all over the place and since I didn't have any pain in my chest or my arm or my jaw I didn't think I was having a heart attack.'

'You can have a heart attack without any real pain,' I pointed out.

‘Yes, I had heard that,’ he said. ‘But to be honest I just wanted to sit and rest.’ He took a big breath and paused before continuing. He seemed to have difficulty in taking in air. ‘Actually,’ he went on, ‘there was another reason for not calling you.’

He seemed embarrassed but I urged him to continue and to explain what he meant.

‘I was worried that if I turned up as an emergency you might think I needed to go to hospital. And I worried that if you sent me into hospital I would probably find myself being treated for heart disease. I’ve got several friends with heart disease and I know the regime. They’re all taking drugs to control their heart beat and they’re also all taking warfarin to stop their blood clotting.’

I nodded. ‘But?’

‘I know that there can be big problems with those drugs,’ he said. He held up a hand. ‘Before you tell me that they can save lives, I do know that. And I understand that people with serious heart trouble need to take drugs to keep them alive. But everyone I know who takes digoxin and warfarin has some problems with them. Their heart rate never seems to be normal and once you start on these drugs it seems impossible ever to stop them. And making sure that they aren’t taking too much warfarin can be difficult.’ He thought for a moment. ‘There was something else that occurred to me,’ he said. He struggled to remember. ‘I should have written down all the things I wanted to say.’ I waited for a moment or two. ‘Oh yes,’ he continued. ‘I was also worried that I might end up being taken in for an angiogram. You know, that test where they stick needles into you and put tubes into your heart and then do tests and take pictures. I understand that can be a pretty risky procedure.’

‘It can,’ I agreed. ‘I understand your fears. So, that’s why you didn’t want to go to the hospital? You didn’t want to end up taking drugs to control your heart rate or being over-investigated. Is that right?’

‘Well, yes, in a way, but also, no,’ he said. He paused and swallowed. ‘I’m finding this difficult to explain but I’m trying to be honest.’

‘OK,’ I said. ‘Take your time.’

‘The thing is,’ he said, ‘that I didn’t think that my irregular heart beat was due to a problem with my heart. I know that sounds crazy but I’ve always been pretty in tune with my body and I didn’t think my heart was failing me. You might think that I just didn’t want to accept what was happening but that was very much how I felt at the time.’

‘So, what did you think was causing the problem with your heart – if your heart itself was fine?’

‘I had an enormous amount of wind that day,’ he said. ‘I want to talk to you about that, and to try to find out why, but for whatever reason I had massive amounts of wind in my abdomen. And the wind was pressing up on my diaphragm. I could feel it!’

I was beginning to understand what he meant. And I was also beginning to think that he might have been right not to want to go hospital. He had been absolutely right in his assumption that I might well have sent him to hospital. And he was certainly right in guessing that if he had been to hospital he would have been treated with an anti-arrhythmic drug such as digoxin and probably also an anti-coagulant such as warfarin.

‘So, tell me what happened? You were sitting in the conservatory and your heart rate was all over the place and your blood pressure was going up and down like a yoyo. What happened next?’

‘I just sat there for ages,’ said Mr Forester. ‘I had awful wind. I don’t like to be vulgar but I couldn’t stop burping. I felt that the only way that I could get relief from the discomfort I felt was to bring up the air in my stomach. I felt as though the air in my stomach was pushing up my diaphragm and, you’ll probably think I’m mad, compressing my heart.’

‘So you thought that maybe the wind was causing your palpitations, fibrillations, whatever they were?’

‘Yes. Actually, what’s the difference between palpitations and fibrillations? I’ve never understood that.’

‘When you have palpitations you notice an irregular and rapid heart rate. It’s sometimes said that palpitations are just fast and regular but that isn’t really the case. Palpitations can be irregular. They can be caused by a problem with the heart itself but they can also be caused by agitation, by too much exercise or even by stress. Actually you can get palpitations from something you’ve drunk or eaten. For example, coffee is a common cause of palpitations. Most people will get palpitations if they drink enough strong coffee.’

‘And fibrillations?’

‘That’s when the heart is quivering. The contractions are uncoordinated and rapid and irregular. There are two sorts of fibrillation: atrial fibrillation which involves the heart’s upper chambers or atria, and ventricular fibrillation which involves the ventricles.’

Mr Forester frowned. ‘It doesn’t sound as if there’s all that much difference.’

‘There isn’t. The difference is in the cause rather than what you feel. A fibrillating heart is usually beating fast and irregular but you can have palpitations that are fast and irregular. The main difference, I suppose, is that fibrillations usually signify some more fundamental problem. Palpitations can be serious but they can also be caused by something that isn’t as serious.’

'I see.'

'Did you know that there is a theory in medicine that wind can be caused by heart problems?' I asked him.

'I didn't,' said Mr Forester. 'Do you believe that?'

I smiled. 'No, I don't really. I know that in medicine, just about anything is possible. But I don't think that heart disease is a direct cause of massive amounts of wind – the sort of quantities of wind that you can get with IBS – though I do suspect that heart disease may cause some burping. However, I do think that things can happen the other way round and that massive amounts of wind can be an apparent cause of heart problems.'

'Such as palpitations?'

'Such as palpitations.'

'So, you think I might have been right in assuming that the enormous amount of wind which I had was pressing on my heart?'

'Ah. No, not really. I don't think that the wind was pressing directly on your heart. But I do think it was possible that the wind was pressing on your vagus nerve.'

'What the devil is the vagus nerve?'

'The stomach and the heart share a common nerve supply – through something called the vagus nerve. Technically, the vagus nerve is also known as the tenth of the twelve cranial nerves.

'And if the wind pressed on the vagus nerve, it could cause palpitations?'

'That's my theory,' I told him. 'The trouble with the medical profession is that it is sometimes over-influenced by whether or not a treatment is available. If palpitations are caused by a heart problem, then those palpitations can be treated with wonderful, expensive drugs or by even more expensive, and profitable, surgery. But if the palpitations are caused by wind pressing on the vagus nerve then there isn't anything that doctors can do about it.'

'So, doctors prefer to assume that all palpitations are caused by heart disorders?'

'I suspect so. But remember this is just my theory. The medical establishment wouldn't agree with me and many doctors would think I'm being a heretic even to suggest it. New ideas and new ways of looking at things have never gone down well with the establishment. Doctors and nurses are dedicated to the interventionist philosophy. Doing something is their default. And most patients are eager to accept whatever treatments are offered.'

'So you don't think I was mad not to ring you? Sally was desperately keen to ring you and get you to come racing round.'

'How have you been since that bad attack of palpitations?' I said, unashamedly avoiding the question.

'I felt a bit weak for a few hours the next day but gradually I started to feel better. It took about six hours for the fibrillations to slow and for my heart to start beating normally again and afterwards I was exhausted. Oh and I yawned a lot too.'

'The vagus nerve also triggers yawning,' I told him.

I felt as though my diagnosis was coming together at last. 'If something is pressing on your vagus nerve then you'll probably start yawning. However, to the orthodox professional, yawning is just another sign that a patient is having a heart attack. Actually, just to make things even stranger, the vagus nerve can also cause pains in the left arm –mimicking a heart attack.'

'Gee,' said Mr Forester. 'I wonder how many people are being treated for heart disease when their real problem is wind caused by their irritable bowel syndrome?'

'I have no idea,' I admitted. 'Absolutely no idea.'

'And how many people have died because they were given drugs such as digoxin or warfarin which they didn't really need but which can kill people occasionally?'

'Again, I have no idea.'

'I am right in thinking those drugs can kill?'

'You are, I'm afraid. They can and do save lives but they can be lethal. For example, if the doctors or nurses get the dosage of warfarin wrong then a patient can have a bleed – resulting in a deadly stroke. And the whole problem gets worse because the drugs commonly used to treat an irregular heartbeat can also cause an irregular heartbeat.'

'So, a patient who has palpitations may be given a drug which causes more palpitations and so the doctors increase the dosage of the drug without realising that the drug they are giving is causing the problem?'

'I'm afraid so,' I said.

'Hmmm,' said Mr Forester, not entirely unreasonably.

I didn't say this to Mr Forester, but even then, back in the 1970s, I was beginning to realise that the older I got, and the more I knew, the more I had begun to realise that medicine really was still in the dark ages. We have to remember, I suppose, that it wasn't all that long ago that doctors claimed that smoking was good for the lungs, that cutting out long lengths of the intestine was a great way to cure all sorts of health problems and that deliberate blood-letting was a wonderful cure for many of the things that couldn't be cured by chopping out a dozen feet of bowel.

Generally speaking, doctors find it next to impossible to do nothing. This is partly because if they do nothing that rather suggests that they know nothing and partly because the best, easiest and quickest way to end a consultation is to hand over a prescription for something. Doctors also have a terrible (and frequently fatal) tendency to treat symptoms, or consequences, rather than causes.

'I've noticed something else recently,' continued Mr Forester. 'If I have a lot of wind then I find I have to get up at night to go to the loo. I thought it was my prostate gland at first. But do you think the wind could be responsible for my having to get up at night?'

I told him I thought it was about time I gave him a thorough examination. Having checked with my receptionist, Miss Johnson, that there were no more patients sitting in the waiting room, I told him to undress, and to lie down on my examination couch. I then gave him the full ten guinea examination (as my predecessor and mentor Dr Brownlow used to call it when he gave a patient as thorough and as exhaustive an examination as he could).

I even told Mr Forester to lie on his side, pull his underpants down and pull his knees up so that I could check out the size, shape and feel of his prostate gland.

At the end of half an hour, I told Mr Forester that I could find absolutely nothing wrong with him apart from some wax in his left ear, a long-standing case of athlete's foot, a very early cataract in his right eye and some small and insignificant varicose veins in both legs. His systolic blood pressure reading was raised slightly but his diastolic, the lower figure, was perfectly normal. His heart was perfectly regular and I could find no sign of any abnormality.

'You're in tip top condition for a man of 50,' I told him, when he was dressed and sitting again. I never liked to talk to patients about my findings while they were getting dressed.

'I'm 74!' he reminded me quickly.

I often found that patients who were over 70 were proud of their age. A child will tell you their age in an instant. And so will someone of retirement age.

'I know you are. But you're in tip top condition for a man of 50. It was a compliment.'

He smiled. 'Oh. Thank you! What about my prostate gland?' he asked. 'I take it that it was my prostate gland you were checking when you put the rubber glove on?'

'Your prostate is absolutely fine,' I told him. 'It isn't enlarged and it isn't hard or misshapen.'

'So it isn't because of my prostate that I've had to get up at night to pass urine?'

I shook my head. 'No, it isn't because of your prostate.'

'And it does only happen when I've got a lot of wind.'

'So I think we can safely assume that it's the wind in your bowel pressing on your bladder that makes you get up and go to the loo.'

'Crumbs. This damned IBS gets everywhere, doesn't it?'

I agreed with him. 'In my experience, IBS can cause a whole range of symptoms, including tiredness, muscle aches, an inability to concentrate and gastritis – to name just a few. In your case I think your IBS has caused your heart problems and your bladder problems.'

'You definitely think that it was my IBS which triggered all those heart problems?'

I nodded. 'I do.'

'It's a bugger of a disease,' said Mr Forester. He sighed. 'Still, I should be grateful I suppose. I could have something far worse wrong with me.' He stopped for a moment. 'Do you ever think that maybe there is an angel up there who makes all the life and death decisions? Maybe tossing a coin to decide who has a heart attack, who falls off their bike and breaks a leg or who develops irritable bowel syndrome?'

I didn't know what to say to that. I hadn't actually thought of angels handing out diseases, like Father Christmas handing out presents at a children's party.

'Do you doctors have any idea what the devil causes irritable bowel syndrome?' asked Mr Forester. 'Haven't any of those bright research blokes worked it out yet?'

'I'm afraid no one has yet worked out what causes IBS,' I told him. 'There are all sorts of theories but there's still no real evidence to show precisely why the bowel can misbehave so badly. There are a few researchers trying to find solutions but from what I've seen I doubt if anything that helps us is going to be published before the 1980s at the earliest. By the early part of the 21st century I have no doubt that there will be a good many new theories, some hard evidence and some real remedies available. I have a suspicion that some of the alternative medicine therapies being put forward might work. And I know people are looking at the complex relationship between bacteria and IBS and there is even a theory that there is a possibility that fungal infections might interfere with the bacteria living in the bowel. However, we're still living in the 1970s and for the time being we have to go with what we've got!'

'Trust me to get a disease which no one understands!'

'Sadly, there are still a lot of things doctors don't understand,' I confessed. 'As a profession, doctors always like to pretend that they know more than they do! I think the theory is that if the doctor is confident then the placebo effect will work well and there will be a better chance of the patient recovering.'

'I understand that,' agreed Mr Forester. 'But sometimes it helps to know the truth rather than to be deceived with a load of waffle!'

'What you and I need to do now,' I said, 'is to try to work out together why your IBS has suddenly flared up and has been affecting you so badly. If we can find out what's triggered this recent trouble then hopefully we can stop it happening again.'

I always found it wise to try to work with a patient when dealing with a chronic disorder – particularly one which was a bit of a puzzle. Traditionally, most doctors preferred to do things 'to' their patients. Rightly or wrongly I preferred to do things 'with' them. I suspected that many doctors in the medical establishment would disapprove of my approach.

'Well, I've been very careful with my diet,' said Mr Forester. 'After all the years I've had it, I know which foods make my IBS worse and I've carefully avoided those. I know that I can't eat lots of fatty food, that I can't eat lots of food with roughage in it and that I can't eat too many sweet dishes – so I've been careful with all of those. I drink loads of fluids because I've found that my symptoms are worse if I'm a bit dehydrated. I've tried all the medicines you can buy over the counter and none of them has made the slightest difference.'

I was reminded, yet again, that human beings can get used to almost any chronic health condition; adjusting their lifestyle in some appropriate way and then just getting on with their life as best they can.

'So, the chances are high that your current problem must have been caused by something other than diet.'

'I agree. But why has it affected my heart and my bladder for the first time? Usually my IBS causes muscle cramps and quite a lot of pain but the pain is usually down here,' he said, rubbing his lower abdomen.

'Your problems have been worse because there's been more air in your bowel than ever before,' I explained. 'And the symptoms have changed because there is so much more wind.'

I explained that the pain that is so typical of irritable bowel syndrome appears to be caused directly by wind inside the bowel.

'Normally, the muscles of the bowel wall move food along the intestine by compressing and squeezing and pushing it. It's a process called peristalsis. My theory is that when there is a lot of wind inside the intestines, the bowel wall is stretched with the result that the bowel automatically contracts in an attempt to move along the food that it mistakenly believes is there. But there isn't any food there, just wind, and so the bowel keeps contracting and relaxing and then goes into spasm.'

'So if my diet hasn't changed, and I have been avoiding all the specific foods which I know can make my IBS worse, what the devil has changed?'

'There is one other huge factor that we've ignored so far,' I told him. 'Stress.'

'Oh, I don't think that could be my problem,' said Mr Forester. 'I've been retired for a few years now. I don't commute, I don't have clients to worry about, I don't have to rush around the world to check on projects. I just live a quiet life, at home with my wife, my books and the garden.'

I knew by the way he told me this that there was something he wasn't telling me; some significant problem that he was either not acknowledging or that he didn't want to tell me about. I didn't say anything, but just waited.

I knew that remaining silent was often the quickest way to obtain information. Witnesses in court, interviewees on television, job applicants and patients in a surgery or a clinic will invariably reveal more, and often divulge information which they might otherwise have kept to themselves, if they are allowed to think during a period of silence. In those circumstances most people feel uncomfortable if a silence goes on too long. They feel a need to fill the empty space and unless they are extremely imaginative, and good liars, they will, more often or not fill the gap with truths which have been suppressed or hidden or just forgotten.

So I just looked at Mr Forester and waited. It seemed as if the silence lasted an hour or so. Actually, it lasted less than half a minute.

'There is one thing that has been worrying me a little,' he said at last.

Again I said nothing and waited. I just nodded, hoping that it would appear to be a nod of encouragement.

'There is something that has been on my mind.'

I still said nothing. Even then I knew that if you spoke too soon when someone was about to reveal something they'd previously tried to hide then you could spoil the moment. So I just sat and looked at him and waited.

Mr Forester sighed.

'I have a brother,' he said. 'Or, rather, I had a brother.'

'I didn't know that,' I said.

'His name was Simon and he was two years younger than me.'

'You speak of him in the past tense.'

‘Yes. He died.’

‘When was that?’

‘About two weeks ago. I had a letter from a solicitor.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that.’

‘He wasn’t a good man,’ said Mr Forester. ‘In fact he was pretty much a bad egg I’m afraid. He went to prison once or twice.’

And slowly, with considerable difficulty, Mr Forester told me the story of his brother. He hadn’t seen him or spoken to him for over a half a century. The brother had been expelled from school at the age of 16 for running some sort of primitive protection racket. Mr Forester’s parents had found him a job with a shipping company but after six months he lost that job because he was caught stealing. And on and on it went. He was given chance after chance but he always managed to mess things up. He always promised to make an effort but he never quite managed to ‘do the right thing’, as Mr Forester put it. At the age of 19 he was sent to prison for theft. And in prison he’d killed a man with a home-made knife.

‘The family pretty much disowned him when he was sent to prison,’ said Mr Forester. ‘I always felt guilty about it but there wasn’t anything I could do. When he came out of prison he contacted me at my office and I sent him money. He didn’t want to meet me and I didn’t want to meet him. He just asked for money. So I sent him what I could afford. Actually, I sent him more than I could afford. And that went on for years. I would forget about him and then I’d suddenly get a scribbled note demanding money. He always gave a Poste Restante address somewhere. Occasionally it was in London. Sometimes it was in the Far East. I don’t know what he was doing but I think it had something to do with drugs. He bought a boat and I think he was using it to smuggle drugs. I know he bought a boat because I paid for it. He didn’t want to see me any more than I wanted to see him. Several times he threatened that if I didn’t send him money he would find some way to embarrass me. He always demanded cash. I had to go to the bank, parcel it up and post it off to whatever address he was using. He obviously knew what I did for a living and he said he’d turn up at the opening of a building I had designed or come to my offices; he threatened to stand in the lobby and tell the clients that I wasn’t properly qualified or that I was a thief or a drug dealer or whatever came to his mind. What sort of person does that?’

‘Why didn’t you tell the police? Call his bluff?’

‘I couldn’t do that because I was frightened of him. He’d always been dangerously unpredictable. I was worried what he might do. And there was something else.’

He looked down at his hands and grimaced. He then caressed his lower abdomen. I guessed that he was having an intestinal spasm. I now knew why his IBS had got worse so suddenly. It had nothing to do with what he was or was not eating.

‘What was the something else?’

‘Sally didn’t know he existed. I’d never told her about him. I don’t know why. Well, yes, I suppose I do. I was ashamed of him as well as frightened of him – and of what he might do.’

‘Does she still not know about him?’

He shook his head. ‘I never wanted her to know about him. I wanted to protect her. I am, was, ashamed of him and everything he did with his life, but it was more than that. I never wanted him in our life in any real way. I always felt he would, I don’t know, just dirty things. Do you understand?’

‘I think so. Yes, I think I do. So, what did the solicitor want?’

‘He’d traced me as the sole relative. It can’t have been difficult. I’m not difficult to find. He said there was no one else to pay the funeral costs. And there were some small debts. Not much, nothing I can’t easily manage.’

‘So, what’s the problem? Can’t you just send the solicitor a cheque?’

‘Yes, of course. I can do that. And I don’t feel I need to go to his funeral. I loathed my brother and he wasn’t part of my life.’

‘But Sally doesn’t know? Does she have to know?’

‘When I stopped working I closed my business account. Sally and I only have a joint account. And Sally does our accounts.’

‘So, she would wonder why you were sending a cheque to a solicitor she’d never heard of?’

‘Exactly.’

‘I understand. That’s something of a dilemma.’

‘The worry of it has been making me feel quite ill.’

‘It’s also the cause of the problem with your IBS.’

‘Do you think so?’

‘Definitely.’

‘I suppose I must have known that his day would arrive eventually,’ said Mr Forester. ‘And I’m glad that he died first. I wouldn't want him to have approached Sally after I'd gone. That would have been awful.' He swallowed hard. He seemed to be having difficulty in getting his breath.

'Are you OK?' I asked him.

He nodded. 'I can feel my bowel griping,' he said. 'And the wind feels as though it's pushing up on my diaphragm again. I didn't mention that before but I could feel it pushing up.'

'You have to tell Sally,' I told him. 'You have to explain everything to her today. You have to tell her that you have a brother you've never mentioned and you have to tell her why you never mentioned him. You have to tell her about the demands for money and you have to tell her about the solicitor's letter and this last request for money.'

'Do you think so?'

'Definitely. My predecessor, Dr Brownlow, once said that worry is interest on a debt that needs to be paid. Until you've dealt with this, and brought the secret out into the open, then you'll be worrying. Besides, you don't have much choice. You need to send a cheque to the solicitor and to do that you have to tell Sally.'

'How the devil do I do that?'

'Just tell her. She'll understand. And then it will all be over. And I can pretty well guarantee that your IBS will go back to being an annoyance instead of the terrible burden that it has become. You are anxious now not because of your brother – he's gone and cannot hurt you again – but because of the secret. And as secrets go it's not a particular potent or toxic one.'

Mr Forester stood up. 'You're right!' he said firmly. 'And if I'm going to do it then I need to do it now.'

He shook my hand and left.

Three hours later he telephoned me.

'Sally knew about him,' he said. 'She said my mother told her all about him. She never said anything to me because she thought it would upset me to talk about him. But she knew all about him. She's written the cheque to the solicitor.'

'Do you feel any better?'

Mr Forester laughed. 'Better?' he said. 'I feel as if a ten ton weight has been taken off my head. For the first time in a fortnight I feel alive.'

He promised to call me if the palpitations ever came back.

But I didn't hear from him for six months. And then he just came in because he needed the wax syringing from his left ear. I'd forgotten to do it before.

I am not saying that my theories were correct, of course. You can't draw conclusions from a single case. But Mr Forester had no more palpitations and didn't have to get up at night to pee.

Well, not for five years anyway, and then it was a completely different story.

The Christmas Eve Surgery

Christmas was always a special time for Patsy and me at Bilbury Grange. We enjoyed the usual trappings – including stockings hanging from the mantelpiece, candles on the dining table, a huge yule log ready to slide into the hearth so that it would provide heat for the whole day, a bowl of nuts and, of course, a beautifully decorated Christmas tree.

We didn't like to have a live tree in the house, not because they tend to drop their needles on the carpet but because they invariably die afterwards. Even if you have a tree which still has its roots, and you keep it well watered, the chances are high that it will die when you have transplanted it into the garden. So, rather than a live tree, we had a large, artificial tree which we had purchased from Peter Marshall. It cost us £5 and just fitted into our drawing room. We always decorated it with Victorian baubles and coloured fairy lights.

It is often said that the idea of having a Christmas tree brought indoors and decorated with candles and other finery was introduced into England by Prince Albert but strictly speaking this isn't true. Prince Albert didn't so much introduce the habit of having a Christmas tree as reintroduce it back into the country where the idea had originated.

Having a tree in the house had been a common custom in England for many centuries before the miserable, humourless Puritans purged Christmas of all the jollity, frivolity and exuberance.

The really odd thing is that it was an English missionary called Boniface who introduced the Christmas tree to Germany back in the 8th century. Saint Boniface, to give him his proper honorific, was originally called Wynfrith and started out his religious life as a Benedictine monk. Then, when he became a priest, Pope Gregory sent him to Germany with papal orders to convert the heathens living east of the Rhine. After he'd taken time out to introduce the Christmas tree into his adopted land, poor old Boniface was killed by a band of Frisians (islanders from the Frisian isles rather than misspelt black and white cows from Friesland) while he was reading the Bible to a bunch of recent converts. Feeling pretty bad about things, the authorities tried to make up for the unhappy ending by making him a saint.

The other odd thing is that at the time when we gave the Christmas tree to the Germans, the tree was always an oak. When Prince Albert, who travelled to England from Germany to marry Queen Victoria, reintroduced the idea of the Christmas tree, the oak tree had somehow turned into a fir tree. Still, it made sense. It is, after all, a darned sight easier to find a small fir tree than it is to find a small oak tree. And unless you live in a castle with massively high ceilings, it is considerably easier to fit a fir tree into your home than it would be to squeeze in an oak tree.

And so, on Christmas Eve, while Patsy finished preparing for Christmas Day, I did a final surgery before the holidays.

Unless there was a flu epidemic in the area, Christmas was usually a fairly quiet time for country doctors in the 1970s. I'm not really sure why this should have been, other than the feeling that most people were probably too busy to bother the doctor with anything trivial, or with anything which looked or felt as though it would comfortably wait until the New Year. At Christmas, no one came into the surgery wanting a medical for a job or an insurance company. Not many people turned up wanting to have repeat prescriptions for their regular medicines. Hardly anyone arrived to check on the results of an X-ray or a blood test. And, of course, there were very few holidaymakers in the area, so the population of the village was pretty well limited to the residents.

My friend William, a GP with a practice in the English Midlands, always used to say that most people were just too busy to be ill over Christmas and it wasn't as daft a thought as it might sound.

In order to minimise the number of people ringing me on Christmas Day, I always used to do one last surgery late in the afternoon on Christmas Eve, whatever day of the week it came on. Even if Christmas Eve fell on a Sunday I would do my Christmas Eve surgery. Things were sometimes so quiet that I found myself sitting in the consulting room catching up with my correspondence or sorting through other assorted paperwork. I remember I once did a Christmas Eve surgery that was attended by just three patients – and two of those only turned up to bring in bottles of home-made wine. (Home-made wine was always a very common and popular gift in the village. Some of the wine Patsy and I were given tasted far superior to any of the expensive stuff bottled in France and sold by expensive wine merchants. Bilberry wine was always one of my favourites.)

But by no means all Christmas Eve surgeries were quiet. I remember one in particular which seemed to last for ever.

The first patient to totter in was Edward Low, a dusty and diffident old man who had celebrated his 97th birthday just three weeks earlier. There were still people in the village who referred to him as Young Mr Edward.

I always found Mr Low fascinating to talk to.

Since he was born in the 1880s, he could remember Queen Victoria's reign quite well. He was one of the few people left in England who had seen W.G.Grace play cricket. Astonishingly, Mr Low's father, also called Edward, had been born in 1802, before the battle of Trafalgar and before the battle of Waterloo. Mr Low senior had been 78-years-old when young Edward was born. His wife, young Edward's mother, had been the fifth woman to hold that obviously well-sought after position and she'd been just 29-years-old when she'd given birth. Before her marriage she had been a barmaid at the Bilbury village pub, which had been called 'The White Hart' in those days. Curiously, all of Mr Low senior's wives had been barmaids and all of them had been much younger than their husband. Three of them had died in childbirth and the fourth had died of cholera. I don't know what the fifth had died of but Mr Low was a widower when I met him.

Mr Low collected old silver and earlier in his life his enthusiasm had become an obsession, a mania which affected every aspect of his life.

He could still look at an old piece of silver, examine the hallmark and, without reference to any book of marks, tell you who had made the piece, when they had made it and where they had made it. He may have been in his 90s but he knew that for all of us it is the struggle, the competition, the hope and, perhaps the occasional success, which gives meaning and real satisfaction to our lives. He was, he once said, far too young to retire. He loved looking at old silver.

I once showed him a table spoon which Patsy and I owned and he pointed out the lion mark which proved that it was sterling silver, the initials which showed that it was made by a famous silversmith called Paul Storr, the letter 'b' which showed that it was made in the year 1817, the leopard's head which showed that it was made in London and the head of George III which showed that the duty had been paid on the spoon.

Mr Low's own impressive collection included a variety of silver items which had been discovered by a man ferreting for rabbits in a field between Bilbury and South Molton. The most prized item was a tiny bottle in a silver cage. The bottle had a small a spoon attached and was, he explained, a snuff bottle for ladies to use. They used the small spoon because it enabled them to take the snuff without getting their hands or gloves soiled or stained with the snuff powder.

I have no idea why (and nor did he) but it was apparently not at all uncommon for old silver treasures to be found in rabbit burrows. No one suspected that the rabbits had collected the items themselves and the only realistic conclusion was that thieves who were desperate to hide their 'swag' had sometimes thrust it into a rabbit hole and then been arrested or died before they could rescue it. At a place called Stoke Prior in Herefordshire a man who had been ferreting for rabbits on 16th December in 1891 found a remarkable collection of 16th and early 17th century silver. All the silver was a little dusty and tarnished but in otherwise perfect condition.

The piece de resistance in Mr Low's collection was something called a 'wager cup', a silver cup made in 1619 that was about nine inches high but which was elaborately designed and decorated. At the top of the cup there was a tiny windmill with a step ladder and upon the step ladder there was a tiny miller who was carrying a sack on his back. The cup also had working sails and a tube. The odd thing about the cup (which Mr Low told me was sold at auction as a model windmill because the auctioneer didn't recognise it for what it was) was that it could only be set down when it was empty.

'Do you know what it is?' he asked me when he showed me the item. At the time it was standing on a table and looked for all the world like a very expensive model of a windmill.

I said that I thought that it was perhaps a toy for a young aristocrat.

'It's a wager cup,' Mr Low explained. 'To fill the cup you turn it upside down and pour in your chosen beverage. You then blow down the tube. Blowing down the tube starts the sails going round. The idea is to fill the cup, blow down the tube and then empty the cup before the sails stop going round. The drinker and his companions would bet on whether or not he would succeed in doing this – and that is why it's called 'a wager cup'.'

Not surprisingly, Mr Low hadn't brought his wager cup with him when he came to my Christmas Eve surgery. I have no idea what it was worth but it wasn't the sort of thing you carted around with you for no good reason.

After sitting down and apologising for troubling me on Christmas Eve, Mr Low held out his right hand. It wasn't difficult to see what the problem was. His right thumbnail was black and there was clearly a good deal of blood gathering underneath it.

'I bet that hurts!' I said, taking a look at the thumbnail. I'd never seen anything quite so nasty looking.

'It does,' replied Mr Low, who was not a man to use 11 words when two would do just as well. (Unless he was talking about old silver.)

'How on earth did you do that?'

'Hammering.'

'What were you hammering?'

'Nail.'

‘Why were you hammering a nail?’

‘Put a picture up.’

‘And clearly you missed.’

‘I did. I intended to hit the nail.’

‘When did you do it?’

‘This morning.’

This was clearly not going to be one of those consultations which goes on and on. I picked a paperclip out of the little glass dish on my desk and straightened it out. I then took a lighter out of my pocket. (I always carry three things in my pockets: a penknife, a small torch and a lighter. If you light as many bonfires as I do then you always need a lighter handy.) I used the lighter to heat the end of the paperclip. This wasn’t to sterilise it; I just needed the metal to be red hot.

‘Give me your hand, please.’

Mr Low held out his hand.

I took hold of it, to make sure he didn’t move, though I rather suspect that he wouldn’t have moved whatever I did, and then I held the end of the heated paperclip against the bulging nail. The paperclip burnt quickly through the nail and the blood inside slowly trickled out, relieving the pressure inside almost instantly. I used a sterile wipe to clear away the blood and then, when the bleeding had stopped, I put a small dressing on the thumb.

‘That’s better,’ said Mr Low with a happy smile.

‘Good.’

‘Merry Christmas to you and your family.’

‘And a merry Christmas to you, too,’ I said.

I did like Mr Low. He was very much at ease with his age; more so, I think, than any of my other patients.

‘Death smiles at all of us eventually,’ he once said to me. ‘All we can do is smile back.’

I will always remember something else he said to me.

‘It is life which so often takes away and destroys our memories,’ he said. ‘Death, usually considered the enemy, safeguards our memories and seals our real treasures for eternity.’

That must have been on one of his loquacious days.

He smiled, stood up and left. He was a little uncertain, and wobbled a little occasionally, but he was more alive than many people I knew who were a fraction of his age.

Amazingly, the whole consultation, including the small operation, had taken less than five minutes.

My second patient was Carlile Bentham, a man in his forties whose main problem was his weight. Well, that was his main health problem. He may well have other problems. He may have had Japanese knotweed in his garden. He may have had termites chewing up his beams.

Mr Bentham weighed as much as two ordinary men of his height and the result of effectively carrying around a spare human being was that his joints were in quite a bad way. He had terrible osteoarthritis and suffered terribly from back pain. I tried for years to help him lose weight but he was, I’m afraid, a lost cause. Whenever I tried to persuade him to follow some sort of diet, he insisted that he had abnormal glands or argued that since both his parents and both his brothers were also vastly overweight he must have been born with some genetic predisposition to obesity. He didn’t seem to think it relevant that throughout their lives his parents and brothers all consumed around 6,000 calories a day a piece. Nor did he seem to be inclined to regard the knowledge that his parents both died in their 50s while his brothers didn’t live to get out of their 40s as a warning.

Mr Bentham was in my surgery because he had just been discharged from hospital.

Six weeks earlier, our village postman had called in at the surgery to tell me that he’d gone to Mr Bentham’s home to deliver the mail and had heard someone shouting for ‘help’ from an upstairs room. Not having the faintest idea what was going on I telephoned the police. Unfortunately, our resident representative of the constabulary, Police Constable Peculiar Clarke, was away on a training course in Exeter and so I had to ring 999 and ask an operator sitting in a room somewhere in Yorkshire to send someone as soon as they could.

Since I knew that it would take at least half an hour for a policeman to drive to Mr Bentham’s house, I drove round there myself.

I knocked on the front door and waited. There was no response.

‘Hello?’ I called, rather nervously. ‘Is anyone there?’

Again, there was no response.

Since the door was unlocked I took my courage in my hands and walked into the house. I called out again. Once more there was no answer.

I looked around downstairs and could find no signs of life.

So I went up the stairs, half expecting a burglar to start firing a shotgun at me as I did so.

Mr Bentham lived in one of those tiny cottages which were built in the days when people were much smaller. The staircase was one of those very steep and narrow staircases which were popular with cottage builders in the 17th century and the early parts of the 19th century. This cottage, I knew, had been built in 1834. This was not because I had any architectural expertise but because I had noticed that the date 1834 was carved into a stone block above the front door. On a long, urban road that might have been the house number. In Bilbury it was clearly the date when the cottage had been built.

There was no one in either of the bedrooms.

But I found Mr Bentham in the bathroom.

To be more precise, I found him in the bath.

He was naked, badly scalded and almost unconscious. The hot tap was still running but the plug was out and there was very little water in the bath. The only occupants were Mr Bentham and a small, yellow, rubber duck lying on its side at the tap end of the bath. I immediately turned off the tap.

This had all the makings of a real life mystery.

Why was Mr Bentham lying naked in his bath with the hot tap running but very little water around him? The water coming from the hot tap was still blisteringly hot so I assumed that instead of having a hot water storage tank, he had one of those boilers which heats up the water indefinitely.

It was the sort of puzzle that Sherlock Holmes would have welcomed on a wet, wintery afternoon.

It was clear, however, that finding the explanation would have to wait. The first thing to do was to get him out of the bath, into an ambulance and off to hospital. It was immediately clear that the scalds on his body would need professional, specialist treatment.

The only difference between a burn and a scald is that a burn is caused by dry heat (such as a fire or a hot plate) whereas a scald is caused by something wet and hot such as, well, hot water. Both burns and scalds have to be treated carefully and patiently and one of the biggest risks is the danger of infection. If I managed to get Mr Bentham out of his bath tub I feared that I would do more damage to his skin and I would dramatically increase the chance of his developing a serious infection. I did not have any of the things I would need to deal with a large scald. For a start I would really need a couple of acres of a suitable, sterile dressing. But in my bag I had a triangular bandage and a packet of sticking plasters.

But it was also clear that I would have absolutely no chance of being able to lift Mr Bentham by myself.

So that was the second problem.

I checked Mr Bentham's pulse. It seemed fine. His heart was ticking away. Apart from the scalds I could find no other signs of problems. However, he felt cold. I plucked a large towel from a rack and lay it over his body. It didn't come anywhere to covering him. I fetched an eiderdown from a bedroom and put that over him. I then telephoned for an ambulance.

'You don't need to send the police car now,' I told the operator, when I'd asked for an ambulance to be sent.

'They're already on their way,' she said. 'Someone called them a short while ago.'

'That was me,' I said. 'But I don't need them now.'

'But they have to come out if they've been called,' insisted the operator.

It occurred to me that we would probably be able to use their muscle in helping to move Mr Bentham from his bathroom to the ambulance so I just thanked her very much and replaced the telephone receiver.

Now that I knew what the problem was, I was beginning to worry a good deal about the logistics of how we were going to move a badly scalded 25 stone man out of his bathroom and down his very narrow, very steep stairs. Those cottage stairs used to cause me a lot of problems. Mr Bentham's stairs were, if anything, narrower and steeper than the stairs in the cottages belonging to any of my other patients.

I hoped that the police might send a car with two occupants. Maybe the two police officers and the two ambulance paramedics might manage to lift him.

'Mr Bentham?' I said, for the umpteenth time. 'Can you hear me?'

It had occurred to me that he might have got into the bath, slipped and banged his head. Or that he might have suffered a stroke.

Suddenly, Mr Bentham opened his eyes. He looked at me and frowned.

'Is that you, doctor?'

I asked him what had happened and he slowly explained that he'd prepared his bath, half filling it with water, and then climbed in. Deciding that the water wasn't hot enough he had reached forward and turned off the cold tap and, at more or less the same time, turned the hot tap on full.

It was while doing this that his back had gone into spasm. Unable to move he had lain there in the bath, immersed in water that was getting hotter and hotter by the minute. When the bath was full, the excess water flowed out through the overflow but since the hot water was still coming in, the result was that the temperature of the water just increased until it was unbearable.

Unable to lean forwards to reach the taps, he had had the presence of mind to use one of his feet to pull at the chain holding the bath plug in place. And he had succeeded in removing the plug.

Unfortunately, by this time he was badly scalded.

And since his back was in spasm he couldn't get out of the bath to walk into his bedroom to telephone for help. In fact, he hadn't been able to get out of the bath at all.

'Can you stand up?' I asked him.

He made a feeble attempt to stand. It was a failure. Moreover, when he tried to move, it was clear that the badly scalded parts of his skin were stuck to the bath. When he moved he was pulling skin away from the enamel.

'I'm in far too much pain, doctor,' he said. He had tears in his eyes and I don't blame him. If I'd been in his skin I'd have had tears in my eyes too. The scalds I could see looked incredibly painful. His feet, legs, and bottom were the worst.

I stayed with him while I waited for the police and the ambulance crew to arrive and while I waited I telephoned Bilbury Grange to explain where I was and that I was likely to be there for some time. I also asked Patsy to ring her father for me. It seemed to me that we were likely to need his help too.

It took the emergency services just under an hour to get to Bilbury and those sixty minutes seemed interminable. Mr Bentham was clearly in a good deal of pain, both with the original back trouble and with the scalds from the hot water and so I gave him an injection of morphine. He relaxed then and drifted off to sleep. While he slept I used an indelible felt tip pen to write a big M on his forehead. I wrote beside it the dosage I'd given him. I needed to be sure that the doctors at the hospital knew that Mr Bentham had been given morphine. I could have written the details on a note, or simply told the ambulance crew. But this way there was no bit of paper to lose and no need for me to worry about someone forgetting to pass on the message.

The ambulance arrived first (in my experience if you ring for the police and for an ambulance at the same time it is nearly always the ambulance which arrives first) and the police arrived about two minutes later. There were two men in the ambulance crew and two men in the police car. All looked to be fairly strong, meaty looking fellows. I went down, met them, explained what the problem was and then led them upstairs.

'So, how do we get him downstairs?' asked the older of the two ambulance men. 'Is there a coffin window anywhere?'

The younger ambulance man looked at him as if he were stark raving mad. 'What the devil is a coffin window?'

'In those old cottages with steep, narrow staircases they used to have one window that was big enough to get a coffin through,' explained the older ambulance man. He wandered into the two tiny bedrooms and came back a moment later looking very glum.

'There isn't one,' he announced.

I already knew this because I had looked, but in my experience it is, in such circumstances, always better to let the professionals find such things out for themselves. I had also had time to work out that if we were going to take Mr Bentham out through a window then we were probably going to have to remove the window frame and, quite possibly, a row or two of bricks.

The younger ambulance man lifted the eiderdown which was covering Mr Bentham and shook his shoulder. 'Can you stand up?'

Mr Bentham didn't wake up and didn't respond.

'I gave him some morphine,' I explained. 'He's badly scalded.'

'How the devil did it happen?' asked the older ambulance man.

I explained.

'Is there any question of foul play?' asked one of the policemen. It was the first time either of them had spoken. If they were wondering why they'd been called neither of them said so. The two policemen looked to be approximately the same age but one of them had long, bushy sideburns and a moustache and the other didn't. The one who spoke was the one without a moustache.

'No, I don't think so,' I said.

'But you don't know so?'

'I'm pretty sure there is no question of foul play.'

'Nevertheless, with respect doctor, maybe we should treat this as a crime scene,' said the policeman without a moustache.

'I think we ought to get my patient to hospital before we worry about anything else,' I pointed out.

The policeman, who looked unconvinced and a trifle unhappy, eventually agreed that moving Mr Bentham out of his bathroom should take precedence over everything else.

'So how are we going to move him?' asked the policeman who did have a moustache.

‘Can we lift him?’ asked one of the ambulance men. He bent down and tried pulling Mr Bentham up out of the bath. Mr Bentham groaned but didn’t wake. ‘Strewth,’ he said. ‘He’s stuck to the bath!’

‘How much does he weigh?’ asked the other ambulance man.

‘Around 25 stone,’ I replied.

The two ambulance men then tried to lift Mr Bentham up so that they could put him onto a stretcher. One side of the bath was up against the wall and so the two men had to stand on the same side of the bath to do their lifting. I squeezed in alongside them and we all tried to lift together. We couldn’t budge him. And it was clear that because his skin was stuck to the bath we were pulling off skin every time we tried to move him.

There was much tutting and shaking of heads. The policeman with the moustache mentioned that he had a bad back and had been told by his doctor not to do any heavy lifting.

‘Maybe it would be easier to move him and the bath together,’ I suggested.

The four men looked at me as if I were mad.

‘Well, I don’t think we are going to be able to lift him out of the bath without some sort of hoist’,’ I pointed out. ‘And we don’t have a hoist. Do we?’

They all shook their heads.

‘If we could drag the bath to the top of the stairs we could perhaps sort of slide him and the bath down the stairs,’ suggested the policeman with the moustache and the bad back.

We all contemplated this suggestion.

‘He’d be travelling at a fair old lick by the time he reached the bottom of the stairs,’ said the policeman without a moustache.

‘Probably go straight through the floorboards,’ said the younger ambulance man. ‘Straight down into the cellar. Then we’d have to get him out of the cellar.’

‘These cottages don’t have cellars,’ pointed out to his colleague. ‘Solid floors.’

‘It’ll have to be the window,’ I said, indicating the small bathroom window. The window was about two feet square.

‘Nowhere near big enough,’ said the policeman with the moustache.

‘We’ll have to take the frame out and remove some bricks,’ said the older ambulance man. ‘I remember we did something similar with a chap in Barnstaple a few years back. He weighed 30 stone and needed to go into hospital. He was sleeping in a big chair downstairs but we couldn’t lift him so we took out some bricks and drove a fork lift truck into the room to lift him up and carry him out. We lifted him and the chair together.’

‘We’re on the first floor here,’ the younger ambulance man reminded his colleague.

The four of them were still considering the situation when I heard what sounded like a tractor approaching. I had never before been so pleased to hear the sound of a tractor. I went to the little window and looked out. Down below, parked behind the ambulance and the police car which were blocking the lane, was Mr Kennet, my father-in-law. He was driving a huge, red tractor which was equipped with two large forks or prongs at the front. Normally used for moving hay bales these prongs would, I thought, be perfectly capable of moving a bath containing a large man.

And that is exactly how we moved Mr Bentham out of his bathroom.

The two policemen found a sledge hammer and an axe in Mr Bentham’s shed (I idly wondered how long it had been since Mr Bentham himself had been able to use either of those) and the policeman who didn’t have the bad back and the younger ambulance man used them to remove the window, the window frame and several rows of bricks. Eventually, they created a hole big enough to allow the bath and Mr Bentham to pass through. While they did this, the policeman with the bad back and the moustache managed to find a wrench. He turned off the water and then disconnected the two taps and the pipe which took dirty water from the bath to the cottage drains.

It took nearly three hours to extricate Mr Bentham and his bath from the bathroom and before then I had to give him another morphine injection to keep him comfortable.

‘We’re going to take you to hospital in Barnstaple,’ I told him, when he had woken up, jolted by the ambulance men and the policemen pushing and dragging the bath and its human contents a little closer to the window.

‘Is it all right if we make some necessary structural amendments to your bathroom wall?’ shouted one of the policemen who was clearly one of those people who assumes that all people who are elderly, ill or in some way incapacitated are also deaf. I did wonder why he had bothered to ask this since the amendments had already been made.

Mr Bentham, who was in a considerable amount of pain and heavily drugged, didn’t know where he was or even who he was and probably couldn’t have given a sensible response to any question he was asked. He stared at the policeman, mumbled something incomprehensible and closed his eyes again.

Eventually, Mr Kennet managed to get the forks at the front of his tractor safely underneath the bath. We then watched, with some apprehension, as he backed the tractor away from the hole in the bathroom wall, over the flower bed and rhododendron bush (which the tractor had already flattened on its way in) and back towards the lane. We continued to watch nervously as the tractor wobbled over the now rutted garden, and for a moment I thought the weight of the bath and Mr Bentham was going to prove too much for it. But tractors are sturdy vehicles and we breathed a little easier as Mr Kennet slowly managed to wobble and sway through the remains of the small wall and the wooden gate (which he had pretty well destroyed on his way in towards the cottage) and out into the lane.

It proved impossible to manipulate the bath into the back of the ambulance without first lowering it onto the ground and then lifting it so that it lay across the prongs in a north and south direction, rather than an east and west direction. And despite his skills Mr Kennet wasn't able to put the bath into the back of the ambulance without accidentally removing one of the vehicle's doors and damaging the other one beyond repair. Tractors aren't built for fine work – particularly when they are operating on uneven ground.

Four and a half hours after the postman had called in at Bilbury Grange, we finally managed to send Mr Bentham on his way to hospital in Barnstaple. The two policemen, the two ambulance men, Mr Kennet and I were all absolutely exhausted.

And when the ambulance arrived at the hospital it apparently took the staff there another two and a half hours to extricate the bath from the back of the ambulance and Mr Bentham from the bath.

The ambulance was too badly damaged to be repaired, the bath was destroyed and the police sent a firm of builders from Barnstaple to fix a tarpaulin over the hole in the wall of Mr Bentham's cottage. The damaged wall and the broken gate they left for another day. The poor rhododendron bush, which had fallen in the battle of Mr Bentham's Bath, was a permanent casualty and beyond hope.

But Mr Bentham, I'm pleased to say, made a complete recovery. His scalds were treated and when he left hospital six weeks or so later he was able to walk with the aid of nothing more than a walking stick. To everyone's surprise he managed to put on half a stone during his stay in hospital and he was said to be the only patient in history to have gained weight while eating hospital food.

And now he was back sitting in my surgery.

His scalds were more or less mended and he told me that the police and the ambulance service had agreed to pay for the repairs to his cottage and garden and that his lawyer had advised him against taking additional legal action for damages. He said that his lawyer had persuaded the NHS to install a stairlift into his cottage and had provided him with a specially adapted electrically powered invalid chair so that he could get about the village. He wasn't disabled but his immense bulk meant that he found it difficult to walk more than a few yards.

'And I decided not to sue you,' he told me, as though this were an immense favour.

'Thank you,' I said. 'That's very kind of you.' I tried not to sound sarcastic though it wasn't easy.

'My lawyer said you probably acted as you thought best.'

I nodded.

'And my solicitor says that it probably isn't worth suing a country doctor anyway.'

'That's good of him.'

'He says country doctors like you don't have much money.'

'Well, he's right about that.'

'So you might not even be able to pay his costs and I could end up out of pocket.'

I was surprised that the solicitor didn't know that all doctors have insurance to protect them against patients who turned into litigants. Still, I was glad I didn't have to deal with a lawsuit.

I idly wondered if Mr Bentham might get around to thanking me for getting him to the hospital.

'I'm having a shower put into the bathroom; instead of the bath.'

'That sounds like a good idea.'

'The NHS and the police are paying so I'm having the very best. And I'm having the bathroom retiled.'

I realised that the moment had long past. He wasn't going to say thank you because he didn't think he had anything to thank me for.

'I thought I might consider losing a little weight in the New Year,' he then added, as though he felt he were doing me a favour.

'That might be wise,' I said. I didn't have much hope that this would turn out to be anything other than yet another empty hope.

The Daily Express newspaper wants to run a series of articles about my weight loss. They've hired a famous dietician to be my personal adviser.'

'Splendid!'

'So can you weigh me, please? They need to know how much I weigh now.'

'I'm afraid I can't.'

He frowned. 'Why not?'

'Because my scales only go up to 20 stone and according to the letter I had about you from the hospital you now weigh nearly 26 stone.'

'Then how do I get weighed?'

I suggested that he might contact the hospital to see if he could get weighed on their scales. 'Otherwise,' I said, 'you could just lose some weight and then when you're a bit thinner we could start weighing you here.'

He didn't look very happy about this.

'I'm sorry,' I said, though I wasn't quite sure why I was apologising.

'And I need a sick note,' he said. 'The doctor at the hospital gave me one but it expires tomorrow.'

Mr Bentham had not been to work for as long as I'd been in Bilbury. As far as I knew he had never worked. Since it was clear that he was never likely to look for a job, let alone find one, I usually gave him a sick note for six months.

'And tomorrow is Christmas Day, so you need the note today?'

'Yes.'

I wrote out a sick note for six months and handed it to him.

He stood up, and waddled towards the door.

'Happy Christmas!' I said.

He turned, looked at me and nodded his thanks. He didn't say Happy Christmas or anything else seasonal. 'I could have demanded that you visit me at home to give me a sick note,' he said. 'But since it's Christmas I thought I'd come to the surgery. I drove here in my invalid chair.'

I found myself thanking him again.

'And anyway I needed to go to Peter Marshall's shop to buy some supplies,' he added. 'I've ordered a couple of his Christmas hampers.'

And then, without another word, he left.

I hoped he enjoyed making his Christmas pudding and playing with the little budgie bells I knew he'd find in his Peter Marshall hampers.

I confess I felt relieved that I didn't have any other patients like Mr Bentham.

My next patient was Miss Brunehilda Tyneham; a woman who was in her late 60s and something of a celebrity in the village.

Miss Tyneham was renowned for the column she wrote for a local paper called the *Barnstaple, Bideford and Bilbury Herald*. When the editor had originally commissioned the column he had, I suspect, asked Miss Tyneham to send in reports of events in the village which might otherwise have been missed by the paper's reporting staff. Local newspapers often fill their columns with reports of this type – usually detailing meetings of the Women's Institute, flower and vegetable show results and the successes or failures of the local sports teams.

However, Miss Tyneham's column had slowly changed and now, two decades after its inception, it had become a very personal account of her life in the village. Miss Tyneham described her garden, her experiences with local builders, her dissatisfactions with the council and so on. There was very little space left for details of jam making competitions or other local events. Miss Tyneham was famous for her strange use of words, for her mistakes and for her misprints. Once, in an obituary she published about an elderly villager, she had included the line: 'She pissed away peacefully in her sleep'. Miss Tyneham, mortally embarrassed, blamed the printers. They claimed the error was hers. The misprint became a classic and was widely quoted in books about journalism.

Although still relatively young in Bilbury terms (I had a number of patients who were well over 80, quite a few who were in their 90s and one or two who had already celebrated their 100th birthdays and had received their congratulatory telegrams from Her Majesty the Queen constantly on display on their mantelpiece) Miss Tyneham had not allowed her relative youth to delay her acquiring the occasionally impatient and acerbic manner sometimes observed among those who have reached an age where they, quite rightly, feel that they have earned the right to speak their mind.

'The old are different to other people,' Miss Tyneham once said to me. 'They have mostly experienced stresses, frustrations, failures and disappointments for many years. Some have begun to expect disappointment and most realise that each day will invariably bring another round of unexpected hazards into their lives. Moreover, they see the next generation, and the generation after that, making the same silly mistakes that they made and that can be damnably infuriating. At a certain age most people realise that no one ever learns from the past and that can be quite exhausting.'

Having marched into the surgery as if she were going to war, Miss Tyneham pointed her black, silk umbrella at me. 'I require to have full and discursive intercourse with you, doctor,' she said. For a moment I thought she was about to poke me in the chest with the umbrella. 'And I shall require your full attention throughout.' I noticed that although she had marched into the room she had limped slightly. And I could see that there was a bandage around her left ankle.

‘I am at your service, Miss Tyneham,’ I replied.

Whenever I spoke to her I always felt as if I had been dragged back into Victorian times. I knew that whatever it was which had brought her to the surgery would have to wait until she had had a little rant about something which had annoyed her. I didn’t mind. To be honest, I always found her rants quite entertaining.

‘I had a social worker come to see me this past week,’ said Miss Tyneham, and it was immediately clear that this was not the prelude to a complimentary remark but the beginning of a complaint.

‘Ah!’ I said. I knew better than to commit myself to an opinion on the event at this early stage in the conversation.

‘She wanted to help me!’

I knew immediately that this was going to be a complaint.

‘She told me that loneliness is bad for one. She said that being lonely is as harmful as smoking a pack of cigarettes a day. Do you agree with that?’

‘I’m not sure,’ I replied, rather taken aback.

‘She wanted to send people in to talk to me occasionally! Me!’

‘Ah.’

‘She wanted to send round volunteer visitors. Strangers to talk to me, drink my tea, eat my biscuits and meddle. Can you imagine?’ She leant forwards and glowered. ‘Did you send her?’

‘No, certainly not. I didn’t send her.’

‘I told her that I don’t smoke so I’ll take my chances with the loneliness,’ said Miss Tyneham. ‘I like being alone.’

‘I understand,’ I said. ‘I didn’t ask anyone to call.’

‘Why do people under 40 always assume that anyone over 60 must be senile, and then act surprised and delighted when they turn out not to be?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘And why am I invisible in shops?’ she demanded.

Miss Tyneham was now in full flow.

‘I stood at the counter in the Post Office the other day,’ she said, ‘and a girl of about 18 came up, completely ignored me, and asked for a book of stamps. She and the fellow behind the counter behaved as though I were completely invisible. They just chatted away as if I weren’t there at all. When the girl had finished and had tottered off, I asked the man behind the glass if I could have my turn. I said ‘I’m sorry I’m not 18 and wearing a tight top but am I still allowed to buy stamps?’ He looked at me as if I were barking mad, closed his partition and disappeared so I obviously really was invisible.’ She leant forwards and raised her voice. ‘Can you see me sitting here?’

‘I certainly can.’

‘Good. That’s good.’

I waited. I knew that she would tell me why she had come when she was ready.

‘I knocked my ankle,’ she announced.

‘Let me see.’

‘You want to see it?’

‘Yes, please.’

‘To look at my leg?’

‘Yes.’

‘Here it is.’ She moved her leg to show me the bandaged ankle.

‘I’ll need to see it without the bandage.’

‘I would have to remove my stocking.’

‘Yes, you would.’

‘Look away.’

‘You can go behind the examination screen.’

‘There’s no need for that if you look away.’

I turned my head and looked out of the French windows. Two squirrels were chasing each other round and round on the lawn. I watched them for a while.

‘Well, are you going to look at my leg or not?’

I turned back.

Miss Tyneham had rolled her stocking down and had removed the bandage from her ankle.

‘What happened?’

‘I knocked myself on a table leg.’

She had clearly been bitten by a dog. There were distinct signs of two teeth marks in her skin. The wound was infected.

I looked at her and raised an eyebrow. She went red. And then a tear slowly formed in her left eye and started to roll down her cheek.

'Did Fluffy do that?' I asked.

I knew that she had a small Dandie Dinmont terrier called Fluffy. She and the dog were inseparable and had been partners in life for years.

'Was it Fluffy who bit you?' I wanted to ask why she hadn't come to see me before. But I knew the answer to that. She was worried that Fluffy might get into trouble.

'Will they destroy her?'

'Will who destroy her?'

'The authorities. The police.'

'Why should anyone destroy her?'

'She bit me. I trod on her paw by accident. She didn't mean to bite me. I know she didn't mean to bite me.' She paused and cleared her throat. 'They put dogs down if they bite people, don't they?' The last bit came out as a whisper.

'Are you going to tell the police that Fluffy bit you?'

'Of course not!'

'Is Fluffy going to confess? Get tiddly in the pub and tell his mates about it?'

'No, of course he isn't. He's not that sort of dog.' Another tear joined the first one.

'Does anyone else know she bit you?' I handed Miss Tyneham a paper handkerchief. She dabbed at her cheeks.

'No!'

'Well, I'm certainly not going to tell them,' I assured her. 'So it seems as though Fluffy's secret is safe with us.'

I gave a suitable injection, cleaned up the wound, dealt with the damage and put in a couple of stitches. I told Miss Tyneham to come back to see me in five days so that I could take a look at how the wound was healing. Finally, I handed her a packet of antibiotics and gave her instructions on how to take them.

'Bless you, doctor,' she said. She wiped away more tears. 'Thank you.'

She rolled up her stocking and fastened it while I scribbled a note in her records. When we had both finished I showed her what I'd written.

'I haven't mentioned Fluffy in my records,' I said. 'It just says 'bitten by unknown dog'.'

She didn't say anything for a moment. She put the antibiotics and the tissue into her handbag and then, when she had composed herself she stood up and headed for the door. 'Happy Christmas, doctor!'

'Happy Christmas, Miss Tyneham.'

'Thank you,' she whispered.

And then she left.

My next three patients weren't ill at all. They had all brought small gifts. And all the gifts were home-made.

Iolanthe Fielding had brought Patsy and me a Christmas gift of home-made mince pies. She stressed that although she had made the pies, the gift came from both her and her husband.

Mrs Westingham, who was waiting patiently for an operation on her bilateral cataracts, had brought a card which she had embroidered herself. The words on the card seemed to be 'Merry Cristmos and a Hoppy New Year' but although there might have been some question about the spelling the sentiment was beyond dispute.

We were lucky enough to receive an enormous quantity of cards from patients (including one from Mrs Peters with a photo of herself half way up her cherry tree on the front) but there could be no doubt that Mrs Westingham's contribution would have pride of place in the middle of the dining room mantelpiece. She must have spent hours working on the embroidered message.

And Mr and Mrs Fothergill had brought a bottle of their home-made elderberry and carrot wine. I once made the mistake of drinking two glasses of their elderberry and carrot creation when Mr Fothergill was at home in bed recovering from a haemorrhoid operation. I was woozy for several hours afterwards. It is a potent but palatable brew.

And so the Christmas Eve surgery finished in fine style.

But Christmas had one more surprise for me.

Sitting in the kitchen, with Patsy and a good part of our menagerie were Harry Stottle and Mildred Snodgrass (aka 'Melina Melons').

'We have received gifts,' I said, when I'd greeted everyone. I put the box of mince pies, the bottle of wine and the hand embroidered card down on the table. 'The pies are from Mr and Mrs Fielding, the wine is from Mr and Mrs Fothergill and the card was handmade by Mrs Westingham whose cataracts are clearly just about ready for removal.'

Patsy told me that the children were already safely tucked up in bed and so after saying a quick 'hello' I hurried upstairs to say goodnight and to suggest, quite pointlessly, that they didn't burst into our bedroom before 6.00 am if at all possible.

And then I head back downstairs.

Patsy and our visitors looked as if they had eaten all the cream – including the cat's share. Harry, normally a fairly phlegmatic character, too cool for the icebox, looked as if he were about to burst with excitement. Mildred, who was, as one might expect from her choice of profession, a well-built and shapely woman with an ebullient personality, was holding his arm as though frightened that he might otherwise blow away. She was wearing a tight, red dress which was trimmed with faux, white fur and, just in case the seasonal references were to be missed, she had a sprig of mistletoe in her hair. The gods had definitely not skimped when they had glued her together. Patsy was smiling and clearly had a secret to share.

'We have news,' said Harry.

'The good variety, I hope,' I said.

'Absolutely!' said Mildred. She let out a little yelp of excitement, as though someone had just pinched her bottom. But they hadn't. I knew this because I could see both of Harry's hands.

'Mildred and Harry have an announcement to make,' said Patsy. She and Mildred went to school together and had remained chums.

'Mildred has consented to be my wife,' said Harry with a huge grin. 'We're planning a big wedding with the reception at the Duck and Puddle.'

'And afterwards I expect I shall have to just lie back and think of England!' said Mildred, with a giggle. She rolled her eyes in mock horror.

'In that case, I shall address you as 'Your Ladyship',' said Harry.

Puzzled, Mildred looked at him.

'Lady Hillingdon was the woman who first mentioned lying back and thinking of England in the bedroom,' explained Harry.

Mildred looked delighted. 'My Harry knows all sorts of stuff!' she said proudly. She looked at me. 'Isn't it amazing that my Harry is a doctor too, like you! You could have knocked me down with a feather when he told me that! I thought he was a barman but he's a psychiatrist as well. He can probably look right into my mind and know exactly what I'm thinking.' She giggled and stuck an elbow into his ribs. 'You keep out of my mind you dirty old devil!'

'We're going to see the vicar of St Dympnas after Christmas,' said Harry, who was, to my astonishment, now looking slightly embarrassed. I'd never seen him look nonplussed let alone embarrassed. Mind you, I'd never heard him described as 'a dirty old devil' before. And it probably wasn't a phrase commonly used about him either by his celebrity patients or the medical students he taught.

'Patsy is going to be my maid of honour,' announced Mildred. 'And I'm going to ask Adrienne, Gilly, Anne and Carole to be my bridesmaids.'

Adrienne was Patsy's sister and Patchy Fogg's wife. Gilly Parsons was married to Frank and they ran the Duck and Puddle together. Anne, the former Anne Thwaites, was married to Thumper Robinson. And Carole was Carole Singer – and, as far as I knew, Bilbury's only other professional ecdysiast.

This was clearly going to be a wedding and a half.

'It's time I gave up work so I'll be hanging up my nipple tassles,' said Mildred. 'I can't be 19 much longer. When I got to 35 I said I'd push my age up to 25 but there's a limited market for 25-year-olds so I slipped down a rainbow and went back to 19.' She giggled.

'And I'd like you to be my best man,' Harry said to me.

'Oh, please say 'yes'!' said Mildred. 'You have to say 'yes'!'

'Would you like the mince pies cold?' I asked. 'Or shall I pop them in the oven?'

'Oh, let's put them in the oven,' said Patsy. She put the mince pies onto a suitable plate and popped them into the ever warm AGA.

'Say 'yes'!' said Mildred. 'Please, please, please! I can't tell you how excited I am. I'm going to wear a big, puffy, white dress and a veil and I'll be able to have photographs taken with my clothes on! It's positively ages since anyone took my picture with me wearing undies and clothes and everything.'

In addition to taking off her clothes in public houses, Mildred was also a popular photographic model, regularly starring in the type of men's magazines which tend to carry more photographs than text and wherein she was, of course, known by her stage name of 'Melina Melons'.

I looked at Mildred, then at Harry and then at Patsy. They were all looking at me, waiting for a response to Harry's question. I couldn't help wondering what excitements awaited us. Weddings in Bilbury always seemed to be rather more eventful than any I'd ever attended elsewhere. I suspected that the wedding of Mildred Snodgrass and

Ronald Eckersley (or was it Melina Melons and Harry Stottle?) was going to be quite an event.

'You get some plates and I'll get the glasses,' I said, taking out my penknife. I opened the corkscrew blade and started to remove the cork from the bottle of elderberry and carrot wine which Mr and Mrs Fothergill had brought. As I did this I looked around. Everyone still seemed to be waiting for me to say something else.

I slowly screwed the corkscrew into the cork and gently pulled. The cork slid smoothly from the bottle. 'This seems as good a way as any to celebrate my new position,' I said, with a grin, holding up the bottle and then putting it down in the middle of the table. I wandered to the cupboard where we keep our drinking glasses, found four that were almost matching, and put them down. I paused and smiled as I poured out the wine and handed round the glasses. 'I will be honoured to accept your invitation,' I said to Harry. 'I'll be thrilled to be your best man.'

And I absolutely was.

Much hugging was then done and congratulations were again offered and accepted and then we drank to Mildred and Harry and we munched mince pies and we talked of things past, present and future.

It wasn't a bad way to start our Christmas celebrations.

Author’s Note

Thank you for your company. I hope you have enjoyed reading about our life in Bilbury as much as I’ve enjoyed recalling these memories. If you did enjoy *Bilbury Memories* I would be very grateful if you would spare a moment to write a short review. It really does help enormously.

Thank you

Vernon Coleman

P.S. Five appendices follow. I very much hope you enjoy these too.

Appendix 1: “Wolverhampton’! Stop doing that to ‘Knights in the Bottom’!’

A number of media couples have named their child (or children) after the place (or places) where the conception (or conceptions) took place. In the memory entitled ‘The Bucket Lists’ I explained how this phenomenon had arrived in Bilbury.

This curious habit is undoubtedly now spreading and it is now increasingly common for parents to eschew traditional names and, instead, to name their offspring after the place where the child was conceived.

I don’t suppose many individuals will complain overly much if they grow up being called ‘Paris’, ‘London’, ‘Washington’ or ‘Dallas’.

But parents need to take care if they are to avoid giving their child a name which produces a lifetime of funny looks and giggles, and turns form filling into a never-ending nightmare. Here is a list of 24 places (12 in Britain and 12 in the United States) which couples intent on procreation might like to consider avoiding if they are planning to name their child in this way:

Wolverhampton, West Midlands
Stoke Mandeville, Buckinghamshire
Llandrindod Wells, Powys
Brown Willy, Cornwall
Cockup, Cumbria,
Nether Wallop, Hampshire
Pratt’s Bottom, Kent
Nob End, Lancashire
Scratchy Bottom, Dorset
Bullyhole Bottom, Monmouthshire
Bishops Itchington, Staffordshire
Boggy Bottom, Hertfordshire
Knights in the Bottom, Dorset

And here are a few places that American couples contemplating parenthood might like to avoid:

Toad suck, Arizona
Oral, South Dakota
Paint lick, Kentucky
Two egg, Florida
Suckerville, Maine
Gas, Kansas
Climax, Michigan
Embarrass, Minnesota
Concrete, Washington
Whynot, North Carolina
Uncertain, Texas
Colon, Michigan,
Pink, Oklahoma
Hooker, Oklahoma

Finally, romantic couples wanting to start a family in Wales would be wise to avoid the village of Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyndrobwillantysiliogogogoch.

Appendix 2: Loving Animals

Animal abusers argue that animals which seem to show love are merely acting according to their instincts. However, the evidence proves that animals are perfectly capable of feeling complex emotions. Animals are certainly capable of loving. Many animals are so loyal to one another that if one half of a couple dies, the other may die shortly afterwards – consumed by grief. This has been reported to happen with swans, wolves and oxen.

Here are some examples of loving animals:

1) A statue of a small Akita dog named Hachiko stands prominently in the forecourt of Japan's busiest railway station. Every morning, Hachiko would accompany his master to his train to work and arrive again at the end of the day to greet his master from his return journey. Sadly, Hachiko's master did not make the return journey one evening because he had suffered a fatal heart attack while at work. But Hachiko still waited patiently for his master to return. Hachiko returned at the same time the following day in the hope that his master would step off the train to greet him. Hachiko soon became well-known to local commuters who would often stop to lavish affection on the dog and give him treats. For an incredible nine years, Hachiko waited every evening in the hope that his master would return. When Hachiko died, the Japanese erected a statue of him in his honour to commemorate his love and devotion.

2) A Friesian cow called Daisy was sold for auction in Okehampton in Devon, England. Daisy was so upset about being parted from her new calf that she jumped over her enclosure and ran the six miles back home to be with her calf.

3) A cow called Emma was so distraught that her calf had been taken away from her that she made it her mission to find her baby. Just before milking time, Emma escaped from the field where she was kept and ran the four miles to the abattoir where her calf was about to be slaughtered. She made such a fuss when she got there that staff admitted to being afraid. Suddenly, one of the calves in line to be slaughtered recognised its mother's cries and ran frantically towards her. Emma was so happy to be reunited with her calf that she couldn't stop licking and nuzzling her baby. Touched by what had happened, the abattoir workers contacted Emma's owner who took pity on the mother and calf and decided to keep them both.

4) In 1988, Molly Parfett's husband died in hospital after suffering from a massive stroke. Shortly after the funeral, Molly noticed that their dog, Joe, would disappear for hours at a time. She discovered that Joe was to be found sitting by his master's grave. Molly had no idea how Joe knew where her husband was buried.

5) There is a monument near Derwent Dam in Derbyshire, England, with the following inscription: 'In Commemoration of the devotion of Tip the sheepdog who stayed by the body of her dead master, Mr Joseph Tagg, on the Howden Moor for fifteen weeks from 12th December 1953 to 27th March 1954.'

6) Farmer Alfred Gruenemeyer, who lived near Coburg in central Germany, treated his animals more like pets than livestock. And so when Gruenemeyer died, his animals were devastated. A young bull called Barnaby was so distressed that he left his field, walked for a mile, leapt the cemetery wall, found the farmer's grave and started a vigil which lasted for several days. Attempts to chase the young bull away failed when locals discovered just how unnerving an angry bull can be. It wasn't until several days later that the bull calmed down and could be led back to his pasture. Mr Gruenemeyer was said by neighbours to have allowed his animals to roam in and out of his house. 'He talked to them like Dr Dolittle,' said one neighbour. 'Mind you, his house smelled a bit.'

Taken from *The Wisdom of Animals* by Vernon Coleman and Donna Antoinette Coleman (which is available as an ebook on Amazon.)

Appendix 3: Patents

In the memory about Diggory Cholmondelay, I described how Diggory's eccentric father had enthusiastically tried to promote an eating machine. The history books are surprisingly full of unusual inventions – for all of which the inventors doubtless had great hopes (especially if they dreamt them up in the middle of the night when critical faculties tend to be at their weakest).

Here are a dozen more inventions which, when looked at in the cold light of day, don't perhaps quite have the hope of the paperclip or the commercial possibilities of a pencil with an eraser fixed onto the end:

In 1915, Frank Marcovsky obtained a US Patent for a suit of protective armour designed to be worn by cyclists. The armour, which was inflated with an ordinary bicycle pump, consisted of a suit which would ensure that if the cyclist fell off his machine he would bounce to safety without any harm having been done.

In 1927, a Frenchman called Pierre Leon Martin Victor Calmels obtained a US patent for an apparatus designed to make it easier for a moustache owner to trim his pride and joy and to produce a perfectly balanced moustache.

In 1903, Joseph Karwowski obtained a US Patent for his method of preserving the dead. The idea was to encase the 'recently deceased' within a block of molten glass so that the body could be preserved indefinitely without decaying. Poorer folk, or those with less display space available, could have just the head preserved.

In 1995, Nicole M Dubus and Susan Springfield obtained a US Patent for a fork with a built in timer which would tell the eater when to take their next mouthful of food. The fork had a small light and a beeper in the handle. Diners ate only when the light in their fork changed from red to green. (It occurred to me that a drinking glass similarly equipped with red and green lights might prove useful to those struggling to moderate their drinking.)

In 1896, J.C.Boyle obtained a US Patent for a 'polite hat lifting device' which would enable men to raise their hats to ladies even if they were carrying bags or parcels. If the hat wearer bowed forwards slightly, a spring-driven mechanism would gently raise the hat, rotate it once and then replace it.

In 1879, Benjamin B Oppenheimer obtained a US Patent for a device designed to enable men and women to jump to safety from tall buildings which were on fire. A parachute built into a helmet was designed to slow down the unfortunate individual's descent to the ground. The helmet and its parachute were attached to the body by a chin strap.

In 1923, C.G.Purdy obtained a US Patent for a tooth and gum exercising device which consisted of a strong spring with small plates at each end. To use the device two people sat or stood facing each other. Each placed one of the plates in their mouth. And then both pulled – as in a tug of war.

In 1895, A.Eustis obtained a US Patent for a device designed to help servants push infirm individuals up stairs. The device consisted of a large pad, which was placed against the back of the infirm person, and two rods, attached to the pad. A healthy, young servant would then take hold of the two rods and push. The device enabled the servant to help the infirm individual up the stairs without having to touch them in which might be considered indelicate.

In 1896, Martin Goetze obtained a US Patent for a device designed to produce dimples. The device consisted of a small massage knob, which was placed in the position where the dimple was required, and a massage cylinder which had to be manually turned around the place to be dimpled.

In 1915, Lili Aline McGrath obtained a US Patent for a pair of slippers to be used as a floor polisher. The soles of the slippers were suitable for polishing and the slippers themselves were connected by a cord which was long enough to enable the wearer to take a full stride, but not long enough to allow the legs to spread wide. The inventor asserted that her device would enable the user to polish the floor while 'dancing' without any risk of falling.

In 1913, Alfred Clark obtained a US Patent for a rocking chair fitted with an attachment which enabled the user to churn butter while idly rocking away the day.

In 1866, Julian A Fogg obtained a US Patent for an improved coffin. Mr Fogg's coffin was designed to enable mourners, and curious sight seers, to view the deceased through a window in the lid.

There are more details of these inventions in a book entitled *Patently Absurd* by Christopher Cooper.

Appendix 4: The Twelve Oddest English Eccentrics

Eccentricity is an essentially English phenomenon. It is something the English always seemed to do particularly well.

But true eccentricity is something innate, rather than manufactured.

Exhibitionists, and those hoping to break into some branch of show-business, will frequently adopt some carefully thought-out form of dress or behaviour in order to draw attention to themselves. That is not eccentricity and they are not eccentrics.

Nor are the individuals who dream up stunts to get themselves into the *Guinness Book of Records* 'eccentric'.

Simply being frugal, living way beneath or beyond your means or choosing to live the life of a hermit may be odd but it isn't truly eccentric.

Building a folly to provide employment for local workmen, or a focal point for visitors to admire, may be a trifle odd but it doesn't count as truly eccentric.

Wearing flamboyant clothes (in the mode of Beau Brummel) or collecting vast quantities of something don't necessarily make an individual truly eccentric (though bibliomaniac Richard Heber makes it onto our list).

There are, of course, many notable eccentrics who didn't make it onto the list.

The most notable of those who missed selection was probably the composer Lord Berners. (He used the name Gerald Tyrwhitt when composing but later, when decomposing, reverted to Lord Berners.)

Lord Berners hated company when travelling by train and in order to have the carriage to himself he used to check his temperature anally every five minutes. He carried a large thermometer for this purpose. This usually had the desired effect quite quickly.

And the 18th century connoisseur, gardener, aesthete, bibliophile and patron of the arts William Beckford, also missed the cut, though his behaviour was certainly unusual from time to time. Beckford hated hunting so much that when he found a pack of hounds trespassing on his land he gave orders that a seven mile long and twelve foot high wall be immediately built around his house to make sure that it didn't happen again.

The real eccentric behaves in a way that seems to him to be entirely natural, logical and sensible. He doesn't do odd things occasionally. He doesn't sit in a bath of spaghetti to raise money for charity or push a bed up a mountain for a university rag day stunt. He doesn't simply wear flashy bowties or dye his hair. He doesn't have an unusual hobby (restoring steam trains or dredging canals) because his whole life is unusual. The true eccentric sees nothing odd in what he does or how he does it. His behaviour is, to him, perfectly rational.

In other words the true eccentric, a breed of men and women with whom England has always been exceptionally well-endowed, never thinks of him or herself as eccentric at all.

Here is the list of the top twelve English eccentrics of all time. You will note the people on the list are all men. This is not because of any sexist bias. It is because most eccentrics have been men. And you will note too that most of the people on our list were either rich or well-off. That is because when poor people behave in an eccentric way they are usually regarded as lunatics and locked up for their own protection. Sadly, only the wealthy can truly enjoy the delights of being genuinely eccentric. The wealthy can be eccentric in great style and (in the past, at least) their wealth frequently enabled them to ignore the law and escape the consequences. Maybe, eccentricity is simply one of the very few things that men do best.

1. John Mytton (1796-1834)

John Mytton's extraordinary adventures and eccentricities deserve a separate entry and so there is a separate Appendix devoted to him in this book. If eccentrics were rated with little dog heads instead of rosettes (to give an idea of their 'barking' rating) then Mytton would have five little dog heads beside his name. His eccentricity took him right to the edge of madness. But he wasn't mad. He was just completely barking. All other eccentrics must be measured against him.

2. Byron, George Gordon Noel, 6th Baron (1788-1824)

Famously described by one of his many mistresses as 'mad, bad and dangerous to know', Lord Byron was a poet and philanderer and is remembered as much for his life as for his work. He was a leading poet of the 19th century English Romantic movement and his poetry has been expertly described as irreverent, ironic, impudent, high-spirited, satirical, elegant, contemptuous, humorous, burlesque, unconventional, generous, humane and reckless. The same adjectives apply, equally accurately, to his life. Born with a deformed right foot which made him the butt of school boy jokes, his mother had mood swings which made him distrust women in later life. His father had died when he was just three-years-old, but not before managing to spend his mother's entire, considerable fortune. A female servant didn't help his attitude towards women. She took a succession of male lovers with the 9-year-old Byron as a spectator. At the age of 10, he became the 6th Baron, and with the title he inherited considerable estates. He attended Harrow School and discovered homosexuality. His mother began an affair with a 23-year-old rake, Lord Grey de Ruthyn who had made advances to the young Byron.

When he went to Cambridge in 1805, Byron patronised prostitutes with steadfast enthusiasm and fell in love with a choirboy called Edleston. When he put on weight, he played cricket wearing six waistcoats so that he would sweat and lose weight. While at the university he published his first poems (Hours of Idleness) and took his first mistress, a girl called Caroline whom he dressed, and passed off as, a boy. The reviews of his first book were poor and so in 1809 he published 'English Bards and Scotch Reviewers', a satirical poem attacking the major literary figures of the time. He then left London and started a tour of Greece, Albania, Turkey and Spain with a friend called Hobhouse who was writing a book called *Sodomy Simplified* (which, not surprisingly, never found a publisher). When Hobhouse abandoned him in Greece, Byron acquired a 15-year-old Greek boy called Nicolo and spent a good deal of money on prostitutes. He returned to England in 1812 and John Murray published 'Childe Harold's Pilgrimage'. The poem, inspired by his journey, describes the exploits of a world-weary young lord who tries everything when he is young and finds later life boring. Byron became an overnight celebrity. Young men imitated his brooding manner and his limp. Young women, attracted by his passion and his pleas for liberty and justice, threw themselves at him (though possibly not literally). Byron's new lovers included Lady Caroline Lamb and her mother-in-law Lady Melbourne.

When he returned to Cambridge, Byron began an incestuous affair with his half-sister Augusta. He was then seduced by a promiscuous woman called Lady Oxford. Byron and Augusta then moved to Newstead Abbey where she became pregnant. To silence the gossips Byron, by now aged 26, married Lady Melbourne's niece, a prim heiress called Annabelle. The marriage wasn't much of a success, possibly because Byron continued to 'flirt' with his half sister and possibly because he was nearly always drunk. When his wife became pregnant, he sodomised her late into her pregnancy. Exhausted by Byron's demands, by quarrels, and by giving birth, Annabelle ran away and went home. When her parents found out what had been going on they would not let her return to her wicked husband. Suddenly the great poet was unfashionable and unwanted. Byron quit England in 1816. Having sold Newstead Abbey for £94,500 he rented a palazzo in Venice where he initiated orgies which shocked even the previously un-shockable Venetians. Byron's home soon became pretty much a brothel. The man himself was now fat and balding though still in his early thirties. While in Italy he wrote Don Juan, a long, witty poem about a handsome, young man's adventures with women. A tempestuous affair with a married woman caused some problems and Byron left Italy in rather a rush. He became an enthusiastic supporter of Italian and Greek freedom fighters and joined a secret Italian nationalist society. In Greece he led troops against the Turks. While doing so he caught a fever and, in proper poetic fashion, died young at the age of 36. His family requested that he be buried in Westminster Abbey. Perhaps not entirely surprisingly, the request was refused.

3. Rev F.W.Densham (1870-1953)

When the Rev Densham was rector of the church in Warleggan, Cornwall, he painted the twelfth century church red and blue. The pillars were painted with black and white stripes. This decor didn't go down too well with the congregation. In his final year as rector, the Rev Densham conducted most of his services in an empty church (on one occasion there was just one person attending a service, on all other occasions the rector was alone). To keep himself company, the Rev Densham filled the church with cardboard cut-out figures and name cards and then delivered passionate sermons to his cardboard flock. Why didn't the parishioners go to church? Well, perhaps they were put off by the fact that if they turned up at all he would be incredibly rude to them. Or it might have been the fact that there was an eight foot high barbed wire fence around the rectory. Or perhaps they were put off by the fact that the rectory was bare of furniture and the rector lived on porridge and nettles. Saddest of all, behind the eight foot high fence, the garden was full of roundabouts and other games which the Rector had constructed for the local children. None ever visited and no one ever used the toys he made.

4. William John Cavendish Bentinck Scott, 5th Duke of Portland (1800-1879)

The Duke was mad keen on building things. He built pagodas, lakes, a skating rink and a huge stable for a string of race horses which never raced (or even ridden). He built the biggest indoor riding school in Europe. It was never used. He did however insist that all his staff learned to skate and skated regularly (whether they wanted to or not). His most remarkable building was an underground ballroom which was 174 feet long, and had a ceiling painted to represent a sunset and a thousand gas lights. He built an underground railway to connect his house to the ballroom but never used the ballroom. He also had fifteen miles of tunnel built under his estate so that he could move about without ever meeting anyone. Another underground railway enabled staff to take meals the 150 yards from the kitchen to the dining room. One of the tunnels was big enough for him to drive through in a coach and four. He loathed any sort of contact with people and when he had to travel he did so in a specially built coach which had low seats and blinds. He would be driven to the nearest station and the coach would be put onto a special flat car on the train. As well as the underground ballroom he also built an underground billiard room, big enough for twelve full sized tables, and several underground libraries. Like the ballroom these remained unused. All the underground rooms were painted pink. Many, like the rooms in the main house, had a plumbed in lavatory right in the middle of the room. At one point the Duke employed 15,000 workmen. Every one of them was given a donkey and an umbrella as a bonus and no one was ever sacked unless they acknowledged the duke's presence. Anyone who spoke to him, nodded, bowed, touched their cap or glanced in his direction would be fired on the spot. The duke wrote to his staff if he wanted to tell them to do something. He hated human contact so much that if he needed the doctor, he would make the physician wait outside the bedroom door and shout details of his symptoms through the door. He had a vast collection of wigs, false beards and false moustaches so that if he had to go out into the world he could do so without being recognised. However, since very few people knew what he looked like this was probably unnecessary. The duke gave away vast amounts of money to local charities and to poor families and despite his eccentricities was much loved.

5. George Hanger, later Baron Coleraine (1751-1824)

By the age of 22, George had married a gypsy, fought three duels, reached the rank of colonel and been wounded in the American War of Independence. He then retired to devote himself to gambling, drinking, racing and whoring. He wasn't terribly good as a gambler. He once bet £500 that 20 turkeys would beat twenty geese over a ten mile race course. He lost. He spent eighteen months in a debtors' prison and when he came out he went into business as a coal merchant.

6. Edward Wortley Montagu (1713-1776)

Montagu spent most of his life roaming around the Middle East, dressed in Turkish costume, but his eccentric life started before his travels. He ran away from Westminster School and exchanged places with a young sweep so that his disappearance wouldn't be noticed. After working as a chimney boy, he apprenticed himself to a fisherman and sold flounders in Rotherhithe. At the age of thirteen, he enrolled himself at Oxford University as a student of Oriental languages. He immediately seduced his landlady. He then dressed as a cabin boy and went to Portugal on board a merchant ship. In Portugal he became a mule driver. When eventually brought home, his parents sent him to the West Indies with a tutor. Montagu returned to London at the age of 17 and married a washerwoman. She was the first of many wives. He subsequently acquired additional wives in Egypt, Italy, Spain and elsewhere. In between marriage ceremonies, he became an army officer, a scholar in Oriental languages and MP for Huntingdon. In London, he wore an iron wig studded with diamonds (he changed the diamonds every day) and collected snuff boxes and debts. He had acquired another wife while visiting a highwayman in prison and with accusations of bigamy over his head he left the country again. At his first port of call, Alexandria, he met and eloped with the wife of the Danish consul, after falsely telling the woman that her husband had been drowned at sea. He wandered around the Middle East (papers relating his travels were read out at meetings of the Royal Society), put the Danish consul's wife into a nunnery and wandered off. He went back for her several years later (she was faithfully waiting for him) and married her. Things weren't perfect, however, and so Montagu changed his religion from Catholic to Moslem and married a black Egyptian serving girl. He ended up in Venice attended by a black African servant and two half naked eunuchs. He lived in a Venetian palazzo and flew the Turkish flag on his gondola. At this point his father died and Montagu discovered that in order to benefit financially he had to marry and have a son. So he put an advertisement in the London papers inviting genteel and pregnant women to apply to be his wife. Sadly, before he could travel back to London to select the winner (from a number of applicants) he died when a bone got stuck in his throat.

7. Richard Heber, (1774-1833)

Heber was born in Cheshire and by the time he was eight-years-old he had a sizeable library of his own, all properly catalogued. After his father died and he inherited the family fortune, he started collecting in earnest. He invariably bought three copies of any book he liked (one to store, one to read and one to lend) and filled two London houses, a house in Cheshire and houses in Paris, Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent with books. He would travel miles to buy a single book and in Paris once bought an entire library of 30,000 volumes in one go. In all his houses, the rooms, cupboards, passageways and corridors were choked with books.

8. George Osbaldeston (1786-1866)

George reckoned that any week in which he didn't spend six days in the saddle was a week wasted. His feats of sporting endurance are legendary. He once won a bet by galloping two hundred miles in under nine hours (he used 27 horses). At a ball in Lincoln he noticed one attractive woman admiring the orchid worn by another. The orchid wearer rudely snubbed the admiring woman and Osbaldeston was incensed. He leapt onto his horse and rode to a private conservatory 25 miles away where he bought the best orchid there. After four hours of hard riding he reappeared in the ballroom and presented the orchid to the snubbed woman. They reputedly danced until dawn though what happened then is not recorded.

9. Simon Ellerton (1695-1799)

Ellerton was a keen walker who often walked from Durham (where he lived) to London. He would happily do the journey to perform errands for the local gentry. While out walking one day, he picked up a stone for a cottage he was building. This soon became a habit and before long he had become accustomed to picking up one or two stones every time he went out. He would put them on his head to carry them, claiming eventually that he could walk more comfortably with a weight on his head than he could without. He carried on with this even after his cottage had been completed and until his death he always carried a heavy stone on his head when he left home. When asked why, he would explain that the stone was there to keep his hat on.

10. Thomas Gibson Bowles (known as Cap'en Tommy) (1842-1922)

Bowles was the founder and publisher of the magazines the *Lady* and *Vanity Fair*. When his wife died leaving him with four children under the age of 10, he decided to have his daughters clothed by the naval tailor who made clothes for his sons. As a result his two daughters, Sydney and Dorothy, wore thick, blue, serge naval uniforms and sailors' caps until they were seventeen. (Sydney would later become Lady Redesdale, the mother of the famous Mitford girls.) When the girls eventually managed to persuade their father that they should be dressed as young women, Bowles consulted an 'actress' friend. With her guidance, the girls were dressed in low-necked, black velvet gowns with red sashes. Bowles was MP for King's Lynn from 1892 to 1906 though in 1899 he announced to his daughter Dorothy, by then keeping home for him, that he was fed up with politics and intended to move to China. He told Dorothy to close up the house and pack. She did as she was told. All the furniture was covered in dustsheets and a caretaker hired to look after the house. She then sat outside the house, with the luggage, in a four wheeled carriage waiting for her father to join her. But as Bowles left the house, it started to rain. He lent into the cab and said: 'My dear child, it's raining. We won't go.'

11. Sir Thomas Barrett-Lennard (1857 to 1918)

Sir Thomas, the squire of Belhus in Essex, was a great animal lover. On muddy days, if he thought the going was too heavy for a horse to pull his carriage with him inside it, he would jump out and run alongside to save the horse the effort. He loved all animals, and his servants were instructed to keep a fresh bowl of water in the corn rick for the rats. When he saw a butcher mistreating a pony, he tore off his coat and thrashed the man. He cared about humans too. He would often answer his own front door to save his butler the trouble and dressed so scruffily that he was once given a tip for opening his park gates to a visiting carriage.

12. Francis Henry Egerton, eighth Earl of Bridgewater (1756- 1829)

The Earl loved his dogs and treated them like dinner guests. With an annual income of £40,000 a year he could afford to do pretty much what he liked. At dinner the dogs sat on chairs dressed in fashionable finery. They had handmade leather shoes on their feet and linen napkins round their necks. A footman stood behind each dog. If a dog didn't behave properly it would suffer the indignity of being dressed in yellow servants' livery and sent to eat in the servants' hall for a week. When the dogs were taken for a walk, a servant with an umbrella would accompany them to make sure they didn't get wet. Lord Bridgewater also had a passion for boots. He wore a different pair each day, never wearing the same boots twice and so never having the joy of wearing a comfortable pair. Each night the boots he had taken off would be placed alongside the previous day's boots and by the time he died, the house was filled with rows and rows of boots. They were not cleaned so that he could find out what the weather had been like simply by finding the boots for that day. His boots were his diary. Egerton lived in France for 30 years but never learned French. In later years he used to entertain guests by ordering his secretary to read out extracts from a long and constantly changing will. In the gardens of his Paris home he kept 300 rabbits, 300 pigeons and 300 partridges. The birds had their wings clipped. This menagerie enabled him to wander into his garden and shoot his dinner when the fancy took him. When he travelled he never did so lightly. Packing would take months. On one occasion he set off followed by sixteen carriages laden with luggage. He returned home hours after setting off having abandoned his trip after an unsatisfactory lunch at an inn. When he died each servant received a mourning suit, a cocked hat and three pairs of worsted stockings. A monument on his grave depicts a woman with a stork behind her, an elephant by her side and dolphin at her feet. Needless to say Egerton designed the monument himself.

(This list is adapted from *England's Glory* written by Vernon Coleman and Donna Antoinette Coleman – now sadly out of print.)

Appendix 5: Mad Jack Mytton

John Mytton (1796-1834) was the most eccentric Englishman of all time. (And he had a good deal of competition.)

Mytton crammed a good deal into his short life and was described by his family as 'high spirited'.

Here are two dozen examples of his high-spirited nature.

1. He was asked to leave Westminster School after a year for 'fighting with the masters'. He then went to Harrow where he lasted three days. After that he was taught at home by a series of tutors. He treated these to a series of practical jokes – including leaving a horse in one tutor's bedroom.

2. When it was decided that he should attend Cambridge University, he arranged for 2,000 bottles of port to be ready for his arrival. In the end, he changed his mind and didn't go to Cambridge. There is no record of what happened to the port.

3. On his 21st birthday, Mytton inherited £60,000 and vast estates. However, in the remaining 17 years of his life he got through more than £500,000 and ended up bankrupt.

4. He spent a year in the 7th Hussars. Most of the time he was gambling, drinking and racing horses. At a farewell dinner he persuaded his horse, Baronet, to leap the fully laden mess table.

5. In 1819, Mytton decided to seek election as MP for Shrewsbury. While campaigning, he walked round the constituency with £10 notes pinned to his hat. As the notes were taken so they were replaced. Mytton spent £10,000 in this way and won the election by 384 votes to 287.

6. When Mytton got to the House of Commons, he found the first debate he attended uninteresting. He left and never went back.

7. Every morning, Mytton drank five bottles of port before lunch. If the port ran out (not something that happened often) he would drink eau-de-Cologne or lavender water.

8. Mytton liked to drive his gig into rabbit holes at high speed to see if it would turn over. (It invariably did.) When a passenger complained that his carriage driving was reckless and might overturn the carriage, Mytton scoffed and said: 'What? Never been upset in a gig? What a damned slow fellow you must have been all your life.' He then deliberately ran the carriage up a steep incline and overturned it so that the passenger could experience an 'upset'.

9. Mytton kept 60 cats which he dressed in liveries suitable to their breeds. He was even fonder of dogs and had 2,000 of those. When his favourite dog Tizer was losing a fight with a friend's dog, Mytton bit the other dog's nose and held on until the dog gave in. Some of the dogs were fed on steak and champagne. His favourite horse, called Baronet, was allowed to wander throughout Halston Hall and would lie with Mytton in front of the fire drinking mulled port.

10. On one occasion, Mytton rode into his dining room in full hunting costume. To the alarm of his guests he was riding his pet brown bear called Nell at the time. When Mytton dug his spurs in, the bear bit him on the leg.

11. In 1826, he rode a horse into the Bedford Hotel in Leamington Spa. He rode the horse up the grand staircase and out onto the balcony. He then jumped the horse over the diners seated in the restaurant below before leaping through the window and into the Parade, the main town's main street. He remained seated on his horse throughout, and won the bet.

12. Mytton once replaced the last few pages of the local vicar's sermon with pages from the *Sporting Magazine*.

13. He once got his horse dealer drunk and put him to bed with two bull terriers and Nell, the brown bear. Mytton sent the same horse dealer to a banker in Shrewsbury, ostensibly to collect money for him. He gave the dealer a note to hand to the banker, who was also a governor of the local mental hospital. The note read: 'Sir, please admit the bearer, George Underhill, to the lunatic asylum. Your obedient servant, John Mytton.'

14. When a tough Welsh miner tried to head off his hounds, Mytton leapt off his horse and challenged the man to a fistfight. After twenty rounds the miner gave in. Mytton congratulated the man and gave him half a sovereign.

15. When his creditors became a little too aggressive, Mytton moved to France. In a hotel in Calais he developed hiccups and decided to get rid of the problem by giving himself a fright. He set fire to his nightshirt. This cured the hiccups ('The hiccup is gone, by God!' he is reputed to have said.) but he was badly burned. Advised to stay in bed for a month he arranged to go out for dinner. But when his dining companion sent a two horse equipage for him, Mytton, covered in bandages, refused to get into it, claiming that he would sooner walk than ride in a carriage with less than four horses. Supported by two servants, he walked a mile and a half to dinner.

16. After being released from debtors' prison in 1832, Mytton met a pretty, young woman on Westminster Bridge. (Mytton's wife Caroline had run away two years earlier.) Mytton had never met the girl before but asked her name and where she was going. She said her name was Susan and she didn't know where she was going. Mytton then offered her £500 a year to live with him. She accepted and spent the next two years living with him in Calais. She was with him when he died.

17. On separate occasions, Mytton fought both dogs and bears armed with nothing more than his teeth.

18. In winter he went duck hunting in his night shirt or, on occasion, completely naked – just to make things more exciting.

19. He invented a game which involved chasing rats across a frozen pond while wearing skates.

20. He bet a friend that he could give him a fifteen minute start and still beat him home. Mytton won easily by taking a short cut through a lake which he forced his horse to swim knowing that if he had been thrown from his horse he would have drowned because he could not swim.

21. When out riding in bad weather, Mytton would knock on a cottage door and ask if his horse could dry off by the fire. Since he owned most of the local cottages he was never refused.

22. His wardrobe contained 700 pairs of boots, 150 pairs of riding breeches, 1,000 hats and nearly 3,000 shirts.

23. He died, in prison, from alcohol poisoning. He was just 38-years-old. More than 3,000 friends and acquaintances attended his funeral.

24. For some undisclosed reason, John Mytton was known to his friends as ‘Mad Jack’.

(This list is adapted from *England’s Glory* by Vernon Coleman and Donna Antoinette Coleman.)

Appendix 6: Lady Hillingdon's Confession

The well-known saying 'lie back and think of England' (said to be favoured by ladies of breeding who regard sex as nothing more than an event necessary to keep England well populated with the 'right sort of people') originated with a woman called Lady Hillingdon.

Here is the relevant quote from her diary:

'I am happy now that Charles calls on my bedchamber less frequently than of old. As it is, I now endure but two calls a week and when I hear his steps outside my door I lie down on my bed, close my eyes, open my legs and think of England.' – Lady Hillingdon in her Journal for 1912

Charles William Mills, later the 2nd Baron Hillingdon, was a banker and politician who sat in the House of Commons at the end of the 19th century. He married Alice Marion Harbord in 1886 and became the baron when his father died in 1898.

The Author

Vernon Coleman is an author and doctor. This is the 15th book about Bilbury – all in ‘The Young Country Doctor’ series. His novels include the series about Mrs Caldicot. The titles in that series are: *Mrs Caldicot’s Cabbage War*, *Mrs Caldicot’s Knickerbocker Glory*, *Mrs Caldicot’s Easter Parade* and *Mrs Caldicot’s Turkish Delight*. Individual novels include: *Mr Henry Mulligan*, *The Truth Kills*, *Second Chance*, *Paris in my Springtime*, *It’s Never Too Late*, *The Hotel Doctor*, *My Secret Years with Elvis’* and many others. All of these books are available as ebooks on Amazon. All the books in ‘The Young Country Doctor’ series are available as ebooks on Amazon.

Before you go…

Thank you for your company. Sorry to go on about it, and apologies if you already have done so, but if you have enjoyed this volume in The Young Country Doctor series, I really would be very grateful if you would spare a moment to write a short review.

Thank you
Vernon Coleman

Tickety Tonk

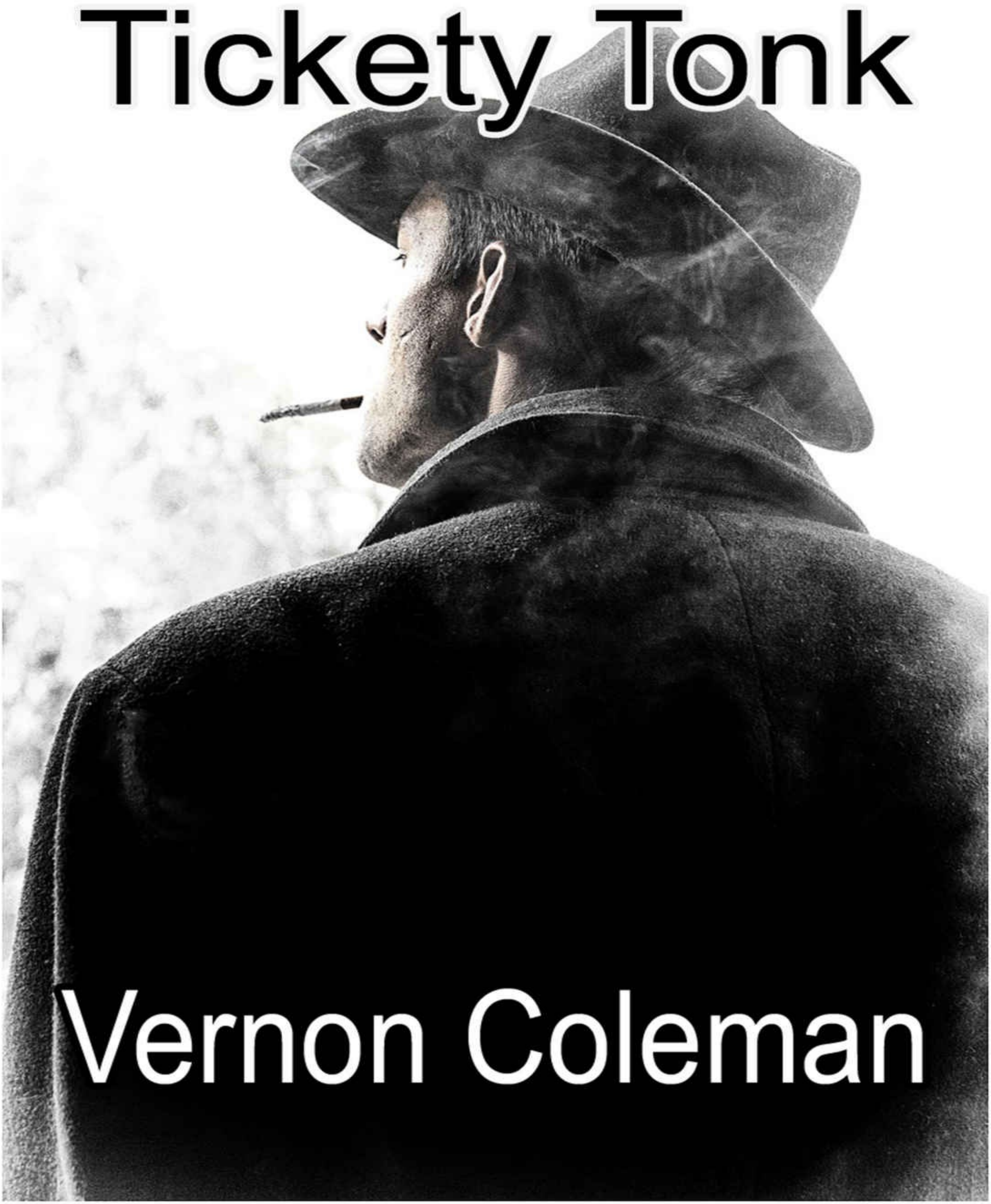

Vernon Coleman

Tickety Tonk

Vernon Coleman

A Motley Gathering of Gruntles, Asservations and Crinkum Crankum also known as 'The Scobberlotcher's Annals'.

Note from the author:
The previous books in this series are *Diary of a Disgruntled Man*, *Just another Bloody Year*, *Bugger Off And Leave Me Alone*, *Return of the Disgruntled Man*, *Life on the Edge* and *The Game's Afoot*. So, with the aid of my log tables, my slide rule and the calculator attached to my phone I can tell you that *Tickety Tonk* is roughly the seventh diary in the series. (In order to obtain a precise number I asked accountants at H.M.Treasury for assistance. They were clear that in their view this is the 42nd diary in the series. This seemed a little high to me so I asked them to check their calculations. They wrote back to say that they had revised their figures, in light of the Brexit negotiations, and had decided that it is almost certainly the second diary in the series.)

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Dedication

To Antoinette: My past, my present and my future. You are the flowers in my garden and the sunshine in my sky.

The Author

Although he has a medical degree, the author has earned his living solely with his pen for 40 years. The pen has now worn out and the author isn't in much better condition. Vernon Coleman was 2nd in the Walsall Boys Golf Championships and won three brand new golf balls in a small cardboard box. He cannot remember the year of this success but it was about the same time that he stopped writing articles for *The Guardian*. He has resigned from all the golf clubs of which he has been a member and thinks that moribund golfers playing in foursomes who insist on standing on the green and chatting for ten minutes should be sensible enough to wear hard hats. (He says he once saw four golfers standing on a tee for twenty minutes while they argued about their scores at the previous hole. 'I'm sure you had 23 on that hole.' 'No, it was only 22.' 'But you took seven putts.' 'Yes, but it only took me five to get out of that bunker because I'm not counting that shot when the dog barked.') He once swam a mile for a local charity in the pool at Appledore in North Devon. He can't remember why or when this occurred but he does remember that he was so slow that they had to keep the pool open for several extra hours and he was knackered for a week afterwards. He has O level Latin and can ride a bicycle for short distances without holding onto the handlebars. He once successfully removed (and replaced) the sparking plug from a petrol driven garden trimmer and, entirely by accident, once skied on a small part of a red run in the French Alps. As a boy he once had scabs on one or more limbs for 1,844 consecutive days. (He still falls over but doesn't seem to get scabs any more.) He has worked as (and earned money as) a postman, a factory worker, a draughtsman, a disc jockey, a night club owner, a drama critic, a magazine editor, a police surgeon, a factory doctor, a lecturer, a television presenter, a surgeon, a laboratory worker, a GP and many other things.

Coleman, who is now a crabbit old man and something of a rancorous pedant, and is without a doubt his own worst enemy, used to be a Fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine but feels better for not being one now. The Chinese Government has banned Chinese publishers from republishing any of his old books or publishing any of his new ones. He used to be a GP but resigned in protest at being asked to divulge confidential medical information to patients' employers. He resigned from the *Sunday People* newspaper in protest at the paper refusing to publish a column criticising the British Government's invasion of Iraq.

Coleman has been described as 'the king of conspiracy theorists' (*Talk Radio*), 'the king of the media docs' (*The Independent*) and 'the king of the self-publishers' (*Daily Telegraph*). That makes him three kings, but he isn't stuck up about it. He has been a crossword clue and the subject of several competitions. He has been posters, television advertisements and, once, a T-shirt sold by the *Sunday Mirror*. He is now a writer/publisher in the Victorian tradition of the actor/manager.

On the other hand, he was once described by a despairing (and former) literary agent as 'a prophet crying in the wilderness', but he doesn't talk much about that either.

The *Sunday Times* described him as a 'rogue elephant' while *The Guardian* once claimed that he was rabid.

'All progress depends upon the unreasonable man,' wrote George Bernard Shaw.

Preface

For reasons which I explained in that book I had intended that *The Game's Afoot* would be the last of my diaries. But readers of that diary, who had been following the saga of our lives, were kind enough to indicate that they wanted the series to continue for a while longer and in my world the reader is king (or queen) and to be honest I felt a bit churlish giving up just because the first book in the series has attracted some fairly trenchant (not to say cruel) criticism. (The nasty reviews meant that the first diary wasn't selling and since people weren't reading Book 1 they weren't reading Books 2,3,4,5 or 6 either.) I also felt that the story of our French adventure needed a conclusion.

This volume contains many dythramic asservations which are suitable for slobberlotchers. It also includes alarums, incursions, extopables, gruntles and a good deal of extra, added crinkum-crankum — all of which is included in the price and comes, therefore, at no extra cost.

Introduction

Hello. My name is Vernon Coleman. I’m delighted to meet you. I’ll be your writer for today. Please take your seat and make yourself comfortable. This is my seventh and final, final diary.

Foreword

I can think of absolutely no sensible reason to add a Foreword to this book. But it already has a Preface and an Introduction so it would be strangely incomplete if there were no Foreword. So here we are.

While I'm here, it occurs to me that this is, in modern parlance, a once a year blog: an annual look at our world instead of a daily, weekly or monthly report. Of course, on social media the commentaries now come every few seconds, if not more frequently, and are offered in the corrosive and mordant style of the Witch-finder General with a bad tooth. Shaming and humiliation are now the route to influence and power. I prefer to present my writing in a less urgent and hysterical sort of way. I am first and foremost a book writer. I believe that having a little time to consider things means that ideas and opinions evolve a little more rationally. I can never forget that just a few years ago, when the Chinese were asked what they thought the effect of the French Revolution had been, they replied that it was too early to tell.

My old chum Harry D.Schultz (who also had an apartment in Paris, was in the Guinness Book of Records for many years as the world's most highly paid financial adviser, and who was the only person I knew who was regularly paid in gold nuggets) wrote a highly successful monthly newsletter and once admitted that the `big' things change so slowly that an annual newsletter would be perfectly adequate but that his readers wanted to hear from him more often than once a year. He agreed with me that making adjustments to life and portfolios more often than once a year can be too time consuming and ruinously expensive.

As is now usual I have included bits and pieces that came my way during the year. In that respect there is no doubt that my diary has become something akin to a Commonplace Book. But I've always liked Commonplace Books.

Ever conscious that this can be a problem, I've tried to cut out any repetition. But this isn't easy in a diary. Something that really pissed me off in January probably really, really pissed me off in October when it came to my attention in a different way. The only alternative to repetition is to go through the diary backwards from December and to remove every reference which is repeated in an earlier entry. That would seem to me to stop it being a diary.

And I have not cut out all the moans. I've seen reviews in which readers have complained that my diaries include angry rants. Of course they do: life is just one damned thing after another. I am no professional grouser in the style of Carlyle but if I wrote a diary which was simply full of happy thoughts and descriptions of idyllic days there would be complaints that I had too easy and pleasant a life and that I should stop boasting. At least I don't write interminably about the weather as King George V was prone to do.

The fact is that anyone who cares and writes is bound to want to protest at the inequities and injustices which are now endemic in our society

There is always something, isn't there?

And so, once again, the curmudgeon awakes; ready to be kissed by butterflies and hunted by hawks. The predictions and forecasts are as they were made. Readers will be able to decide for themselves what I got right!

One thing I know for certain: every day I try to learn a little more and every day I find I know a little less.

Vernon Coleman (Presumed Guilty)
Bilbury, England

Note 1
The author wishes to apologise for the shameful fact that no vivisectors, vaccinators or Remainers were harmed in the writing or production of this diary.

Note 2
Your call is important to us. (Please now play forgettable music of your own choice for ten minutes.)

Note 3
Ancient craftsmen used to believe that they should not attempt to achieve perfection lest Allah feel that their impertinence was a deliberate affront. So, for example, good Persian rugs always contain a tiny flaw in the symmetry of the pattern. And so, in this spirit, and in the knowledge that you would not want me to upset the Gods, I have hidden within the text one or two errors.

Note 4
Please remember that this book doesn’t finish until it ends.

January

1

Last year we decided to try to sell our flat in Paris. We’ve owned the apartment for nearly 20 years but, for a variety of reasons (including the fact that travelling to Paris had become something more akin to a penance than a delight, and the fact that the city itself had become boorish rather than romantic) we decided to sell up before I launched myself at a particularly sneery, supercilious, aggressive and rude border guard and got arrested. Or we grew to hate the place too much.

Our first attempts to sell were foiled by our estate agents and French bureaucracy who combined to saddle us with a buyer who didn’t have enough money to put down a deposit and who had no prospect of ever being able to buy anything more tangible than one of yesterday’s croissants.

(As an aside, we discovered something else about French estate agents. If a seller agrees a price with an agent and the agent sells the property at a higher price, then it is the agent who keeps the difference. And, remember, the estate agent will already receive between 5% and 10% of the asking price. It isn’t difficult to see that a lazy estate agent can make a pop star income by selling half a dozen properties a year. I cannot imagine why anyone in France considers any career other than becoming an estate agent.)

Unfortunately, as we began to try to find a new buyer we had a problem: because of last year’s shenanigans, deceits and downright incompetence, the apartment had become stale. We hadn’t visited for months and we didn’t want to go. We were told that there was a very small amount of water coming in through the roof as a result of leaves and debris blocking a gutter. The agents told us that as a result of this small problem the apartment was now very difficult to sell.

The wildly overpaid building agents were supposed to organise things like roof repairs but their only real speciality was demanding money from apartment owners (particularly foreign ones) and it took them some considerable time to find a leaf removing expert with the necessary qualifications and experience. I expect they needed to find someone with a specialist qualification to go onto the roof in order to scoop some dead leaves out of the gutter.

We knew we should have taken the apartment off the books of the agent who had screwed up so monumentally but that would have meant travelling to Paris to find a new agent and a new notaire.

Actually, we really wanted to find a new notaire because our existing notaire turned out to be some sort of clerk dealing with her first property sale and we suspected that she was hand in glove with our rancid estate agent. And we wanted to get rid of him because we didn’t trust him. He was the original French Mr Smoothie – all blazer and nonchalantly knotted scarf.

But we would also have had to arrange for the apartment to be measured again and for new photographs to be taken. And we would have probably needed to arrange for another survey.

In the UK, property surveys are optional and are conducted by the buyer.

Personally, I have always found house surveys pretty useless since they are full of let out clauses and tend to be irritating to sellers, inconvenient for agents and worrying for buyers. They are however very good business for surveyors who can often get five or six profitable commissions from the same buyer who rejects one property after another because of the worries that have been triggered. (‘To check for woodworm we recommend that you hire a specialist. A recommended specialist is listed in the appendix.’ ‘To check the electricity supply we recommend that you hire a specialist. A recommended specialist is listed in the appendix.’ And so on and so on.)

French property surveys seem to be rather different.

Thanks to EU legislation, you can’t sell a property without having a survey done and the compulsory surveys which the frogs have designed are much more horrific than the compulsory energy surveys which were introduced in Britain and then abandoned because they were clearly intrusive, pointless and expensive. The French bureaucrats love anything which is intrusive, pointless and expensive. In fact, if it starts off intrusive, pointless and expensive they will do everything they can think of to make it more intrusive, pointless and expensive. This is why the French bureaucrats adore the European Union.

Whatever you may have heard about French bureaucracy – forget it. Just a year or two ago, French bureaucrats used to be inefficient but human and prepared to bend the rules. But modern EU ordained bureaucracy is worse than you can possibly imagine. It is suffocating, stultifying, annoying, frustrating, numbing, time consuming, illogical, unfair and riddled with inconsistences and incompetences. It is the reason why France will always be broke.

Things are now made infinitely worse by the undeniable fact that the French hate all foreigners and double hate the English.

Last year's survey on our apartment was the length of a long book and it was full of absolute rubbish.

A British survey concentrates on the fabric of the building.

A French survey deals with whether the property breaks any laws and the surveyor is on the look-out for signs of asbestos, termites or lead paint.

(Asbestos, incidentally, has been unfairly demonised. The stuff is only dangerous if used in certain ways and is an excellent fire retardant if used wisely. If asbestos had been used in the construction of Grenfell Tower in London there would have probably been no deaths. But that's nothing to do with the price of fish as my Uncle Charlie was wont to say.)

A French surveyor will want to know that the gas can be turned on and off without difficulty by a person with no brain or hands. He will not, however, take note of, or be interested in, huge cracks in the walls which have been caused by utility companies digging under the building and then replacing the rock they drilled out with sand.

(This happened two years ago to just about every building in our arrondissement. The result is that scores of tall buildings which ought to be holding one another in place are now united in pulling one another down into the street. The building in which our apartment was situated had suddenly developed cracks so wide that you could lose your fingers inside them. The surveyor ignored these.)

Naturally, we had to pay for this piece of egregious nonsense. The survey took about half an hour to perform but cost us 300 euros in cash. How the idiot who conducted the survey managed to fill nearly 150 pages with tables and charts and judgements after such a short study is beyond me.

(I explained in my previous diary *The Game's Afoot*, that the apartment was measured a number of times. Each time it was measured, different figures were obtained.)

The really daft thing, however, is that French bureaucracy is so absurd that the details of the apartment we are supposedly selling bears little resemblance to the apartment we are actually selling. When I pointed out huge physical differences to our faux notaire, she seemed shocked that I should want to alter the paperwork to match the actual building. It seems that the official description of the apartment is inviolate and holy and must be left as it is even though it is completely wrong. According to the deeds, the rooms are in the wrong place. The stairs are in the wrong place. The whole damned plan is just wrong. But the paperwork has to take precedence over reality. The plan is correct, it's the apartment that's wrong.

And we had not for one moment forgotten that technically and legally, if definitely not morally, we were still bound to the buyer who had allegedly been planning to buy the apartment last year. After he had failed to turn up with his bag of money, he disappeared from the face of the earth. The agents claimed that they could not find him. Nor could they find his mother who had, at some point in the fiasco, intervened and insisted that she was going to buy the flat.

(At first she was planning to buy the apartment with her son. Then she was planning to buy the apartment without him. Then he was going to buy with her. Then he was going to buy it alone. It was impossible to tell who was intending to do what with whom and to make things even more complicated, the mother and son combination appeared to change notaires as often as they changed their underwear. Or, since they were French, maybe even more often.)

We asked the estate agents to try to find these people and to try to obtain some idea of their plans. Eventually the agents sent us a text and email which they claimed had come from the buyer who had mysteriously vanished. In both these communications the buyer appeared to say that he was pulling out.

I did not believe that either the text or the email were genuine.

I don't know why. They just didn't seem real. They were just too neat and convenient.

So we started to worry.

Could the agent have fabricated them?

What the hell would happen if we found a new buyer and then the mysterious buyer re-appeared, produced the documents which had been signed, and claimed that even though he didn't have the money and couldn't borrow it, he wanted to buy the apartment even though it had been sold to someone else?

(Just read it out loud. It does make sense.)

It was explained to us that according to French law we would be forced to sell the apartment to the buyer despite the fact that he didn't have the money and we no longer had the flat.

(Not even I can believe this. But it's true. Honest.)

We could sue the agency which had assured us that the buyer did have the money and who had, therefore, persuaded me to sign a sale document under false pretences. I might be able to sue them for deception.

But I knew that because I would be suing a French company in a French court I would have no chance.

So, the bottom line is that we want to change agents.

We have already been approached by other agents who want to handle the sale and who fancy the 5% commission on a million euro sale. One of the agents who approached us is the son of an elderly woman who lives in one of the apartments beneath ours. We haven't met him but he seems very charming and promises to find a buyer very quickly. But we are suspicious. What if he deliberately puts off unsuitable buyers? Having an empty apartment above you is rather good and his elderly mother doubtless likes the fact that we are no longer spending time in Paris. Would he stop the sale of the apartment to a family with loads of children? Would he sell it to a rock musician?

But there will also have to be enormous complications if we change agents because the existing agent is entitled to demand that the details of any new buyers be shown to him. If he claims that he has been in touch with the buyer in any way (or bumped into them on a bus) then he can claim an additional huge fee in commission.

(You couldn't make this stuff up.)

And we still can't decide whether or not to change notaires.

A French notaire isn't really like a solicitor, since he is a bureaucrat whose primary loyalty is to the French Government.

If we fire our existing notaire (whom we have never met and who is represented by a woman whom we thought was a notaire but turns out not to be) we could have merely accepted the services of the notaire representing any new buyer. The French allow a notaire to act for both parties and although this still does seem odd, it happened when I bought the apartment nearly 20 years ago. It turned out that the notaire acting for the seller had been at university with her and they were very close friends (dinner parties together and so on) and there were lots of hugging and kissing and the usual French stuff. This went on for so long during the purchasing process that I felt like a gooseberry. I also felt that I was probably being shafted. Can you imagine a man on trial for murder being prosecuted and defended by the same man? Madness. I remember the seller of the apartment and the notaire laughing hysterically when I asked if the buyer would be leaving the fixtures and fittings. They thought it was tremendously strange that English sellers would ever dream of taking cupboards and light fittings when they sold a property. Oh, how they laughed. Naturally, when I eventually got the key to the apartment (the best part of a week after I had officially bought it because the seller found it inconvenient to move out on the day she had sold the apartment because her new apartment was being decorated) I found that the seller had taken with her everything that could be unscrewed. No, that's not strictly true. She left the doors. But the cupboards and light fittings which I had paid for had disappeared – leaving me with dangling wires hanging from the ceiling and big holes where the cupboards had been attached. Moreover, I was supposed to be paid a penalty fee if the seller was late vacating the apartment but naturally I never received a penny. Oh how I laughed about all that.

Anyway, to get back to the sale.

We didn't fancy finding a new agent or a new notaire of our own for a very good reason: to do so we would have had to travel to Paris.

So, to try to speed along the sale we decided, to the agent's surprise, to knock 150,000 euros off the asking price.

To be honest, it was worth that much to us to not have to travel to Paris again.

The fact was that neither Antoinette nor I could bear the thought of the journey let alone seeing the New Paris.

2

We are having great difficulty in paying our bills in Paris. Our apartment is in a large 19th century building and we and the other owners hire a management company to look after maintenance for us. The agency is supposed to be employed by us but they behave as if they own the building and allow us to pop in occasionally out of the goodness of their hearts. Every couple of months we have to pay them around 750 euros as a maintenance charge but when something expensive is being done (and something turns up every few months and everything that is done is expensive) we have to pay more. Painting the outside of the building cost Antoinette and me around 20,000 euros – and that was just for our share of a fairly shoddy piece of work. (The total bill for just painting the front of the building came to 120,000 euros.) Maintaining the lift costs a small fortune for EU rules seem to mean that it has to be taken apart and rebuilt every time it goes up and every time it goes down.

The problem we have now is that the management company insists on being paid by direct debit through a French bank. However, when we thought we had sold the apartment we closed the French bank account. I have offered to pay them by PayPal, by credit card, by cash sent by registered mail or with a euro cheque from a British bank. They will not accept any of these.

Eventually we ignored their bizarre demand that we pay through the French bank that we don't have and bought euro cheques from our British bank (an unbelievably complicated and time consuming procedure).

They didn't send them back so they presumably learned to accept them.

Here's a strange fact I discovered today: Oscar Wilde was 6 feet 4 inches tall. I never thought of him as being tall but in Victorian times he must have been something of a giant. And did you know that Mr Wilde named many of his characters after railway stations? We must be grateful that Tiverton Parkway hadn't opened when he was writing.

3

The British people decided, by a true and democratic vote, to leave the EU. They did not decide to leave a little bit. They decided to leave. They voted by a substantial majority for their country to stand alone in the world – proud and independent. They voted to leave so that we could take back our sovereignty and not be beholden to unelected foreign eurocrats. They voted to stop unlimited immigration. They voted for the right to put Made in England on the stuff we produce (instead of that ridiculous French CE mark). And the Scots can put Made in Scotland on whisky and kilts. I don't expect there will be an overwhelming need for labels saying Made in Wales.

It is traitorous to fight against the people's decision and even worse to promote the EU's interests when those are diametrically opposed to our nation's interests. Any individual or organisation which campaigns against the democratic vote to leave is guilty of heinous treachery. If the EU lovers had won the Referendum do you think for one moment that they would be talking about partially leaving the EU in order to keep the Leavers happy?

The Remainers forget that the men and women who died in the Second World War died defending their country against the threat that has now become the European Union.

All Remainers who fight against Brexit are not just the stupid third of the country – they are also traitors. Why don't they study the real history of the European Union? The facts are available and incontrovertible: Hitler and the Nazis designed the EU to give Germany control of Europe. The simple fact is that anyone who attacks Brexit is attacking democracy and the British people and is fighting in support of Hitler and the Nazis.

The EU was always going to fight hard, to punish us for wanting to leave, because the eurocrats are worried that if Britain leaves and thrives then other countries will want to leave. But I would have not have believed that Britain had so many traitors.

And, it seems that the traitors must have a second vote.

It is, after all, in accordance with the way the European Union works. Everything is either mandatory or illegal and no one is allowed to criticise, dissent or even think about leaving. (Former employees of the EU may lose their pensions if they are reckless enough to criticise their former employer.)

In the past, whenever a nation has produced a vote which the eurocrats have found unacceptable the voters have been forced to try again – until they manage to get the right answer.

So here is the Question which should, I suggest, be asked in the Second Referendum:

Do you prefer:

A: to continue with the Brexit vote; to break away from the Nazi designed, fascist EU and regain your national identity; to control immigration, bring back control from unelected eurocrats and to restore democratic parliament?

or

B: to reject the will of the people; to dismiss Brexit; to continue to give control over our laws and finance to unelected eurocrats representing an organisation which was founded by the Nazis to ensure that Germany controls Europe?

That's it in a nutshell: a fair and rational view of the two choices facing the nation in the Second Referendum.

Of course, before we have the Second Referendum, we could always have a Referendum on whether or not to have a Second Referendum.

4

We have one of those home insurance things.

The deal is simple.

We pay the company a small fortune and when we have a problem with the boiler, the plumbing, the electricity or the dishwasher we ring them and they send someone to deal with it.

The idea is that it is better than having to find an honest local workman.

In the beginning (aka 'the old days') it worked well.

I rang and they sent someone.

We didn't use them much but it was nice to know they were there.

But the last time I had to ring I had a devil of a job to make an appointment. And no one could come for days.

So I suspect the good days are over.

The other day, our dishwasher sprang a leak.

I was about to telephone to ask the insurers to ask them to send someone round when I paused. I realised I couldn't bear the thought of the phone call, the explanations and the rather condescending agreement to send someone round – eventually.

And I didn't like the idea of the inevitable delay. ('If it's urgent then someone can come round on the third Sunday next month at 3.00 am.')

I also couldn't bear the thought of trying to find a local workman prepared to do the job.

And the prospect of using the internet (through www.wefindyouanexpensivecretin.co.uk) to find a workman made me quite ill.

So I decided to do it myself.

I bought a new dishwasher hose for about a fiver.

And I fitted it myself using the gripper thing on my Leatherman. (An indispensable tool, by the way.)

Guess what?

It worked.

No more leaks.

I did it myself!

And it was easier and quicker than ringing the damned company we pay to do things like this.

Modern life, eh?

5

A very good friend who owns a shop tells me that two teenagers tried to break in recently. The alarm went off but by the time the police arrived the shutters and locks were badly damaged. The only question is: should he claim on his (expensive) insurance? The answer is probably not. Claiming on an insurance policy is only worth it for the really big stuff. The last time I made a claim, well over a decade ago, I claimed £200. The insurance company paid up (less the excess) but responded by raising the premium by £200 a year.

Our car insurers seem well aware of the principle that small claims aren't worth making. I have had a no claims bonus for well over a decade (and paid extra to insure the no claims bonus) but I noticed at the last renewal that they had suddenly and unilaterally put a £500 excess on all our policies.

I wonder if this is normal or could it be because I have passed some unwritten age limit.

I discovered today that 'sobremesa' is the Spanish word for the time spent sitting around the table chatting after a meal. There is, of course, no English equivalent.

6

An astonishing scientific study published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in the United States shows that individuals who have received a flu vaccination are likely to spread the flu. The research shows that those who are vaccinated with the highly promoted flu jab are six times as likely to pass on the flu as those who have NOT been vaccinated. The only logical conclusion is that people who have the flu jab are spreading the flu and are, therefore, endangering the lives of others.

I find it shocking that doctors who encourage their patients to have the flu jab are endangering the lives of other patients who don't have the flu jab, can't have it or won't have it.

And isn't it startling that whereas people who refuse to have a flu jab are helping to cut down the number of people who get the flu, people who are gullible enough to allow themselves to be vaccinated against the flu will spread the flu?

Inevitably, all this means that the more people who are vaccinated against the flu the more the number of people who will die from the flu.

This is an astonishing scandal but the establishment press will refuse to print the news.

Other doctors who agree with me about the hazards of vaccination keep quiet because they know that doctors who dare to speak the truth about vaccination are likely to find that their careers are ruined. The standard way to deal with unanswerable criticism is to refuse to comment and to suppress all debate. The next technique is to discredit and suppress those individuals who seem to be a threat.

And most if not all of the doctors who support vaccination have accepted Government or drug company money. My advice is (and always has been) quite simple. Don't accept a vaccination for you or your child until your doctor has accepted responsibility and has signed a piece of paper saying 'This vaccination is safe and effective'.

Another irony is that the flu vaccine is very ineffective. Many people who have the flu jab still succumb to the disease. (The CEO of United Neuroscience, a major vaccine company in the US, recently admitted that she doesn't always have a flu vaccine. When asked why she pointed out that flu vaccines 'aren't very effective'. The figures show that the flu vaccine efficacy ranges from 10% to 60%. I bet your doctor didn't mention that.)

And as more people develop the flu so politicians, journalists and doctors will push vaccines yet harder – often calling for compulsory vaccination.

The vicious circle tightens: more flu jabs, more flu, more deaths, more flu jabs, more flu, more deaths ad infinitum.

And more money for doctors and drug companies.

So why does this scandal continue?

There are two simple reasons:

First, doctors make a fortune out of the flu jab. GPs can make an extra £30,000 to £40,000 a year each by instructing their practice nurse (wages paid by the government) to give flu jabs to as many patients as possible. That's a big chunk of money for absolutely no extra work. So, surprise, surprise, most GPs tend to support vaccination programmes. (British GPs now work less than ever before and are paid vastly more. The top paid GP in Britain earned £700,000 last year. And it is not uncommon for GPs to earn over £100,000 a year for a four day week, working librarian hours, with seven weeks holiday and no working on bank holidays, weekends, evenings or nights. For me the best part of being a GP was driving back home at 3.00 am having relieved someone's pain or saved someone's life. Today's GPs just fill in forms. It's no wonder they do not feel any sense of vocation.)

Second, if the medical profession and the political establishment ever admitted the truth – that vaccines do more harm than good – doctors and governments would find themselves on the expensive end of millions of lawsuits.

So doctors and politicians will never admit that vaccines are useless and dangerous.

And sloppy journalists who simply print what they are told just make things worse.

My advice: I suggest you don't trust any doctor, journalist or politician who claims that vaccines are safe and effective.

I would happily debate the issue of vaccination with any doctor on radio or television. But no radio or television programme will allow me to do so. What does that tell you about the pro-vaccination argument? If you don't believe me, ask your favourite radio presenter to arrange a vaccination debate between Dr Vernon Coleman and any doctor who supports vaccination. And then stand back and wait for the excuses.

Worse still, it also seems that the flu jab which has just been given to millions of gullible people was the wrong one and, as a result, doctors are going to have to tell their nurses to give millions of people yet another flu jab containing a different vaccine. This means that the drug companies are going to make even more money and doctors are going to make another small fortune for giving another round of vaccinations. I am old fashioned and still believe that the job of the doctor is to frustrate nature, whenever appropriate, but to do so without making things worse.

My guess is that the same thing will happen next year.

7

The posh papers have been sneering at the operas of Gilbert and Sullivan again. If the Victorian duo had been Italian, had been called Gilberto and Sullivani and had been homosexual lovers who had lived in a small, wooden hut in a forest they would be revered by all the broadsheet reviewers.

8

I used to enjoy travelling on Eurostar but since they 'improved' the trains I have found the experience deeply unpleasant.

Eurostar used to be a delight, worth the extra cost (compared to flying) and inconvenience. Now it is really only a viable option if you live within a short taxi ride of St Pancras and have an apartment in Paris within a short taxi ride of the Gare du Nord. Twenty years ago we travelled to Paris once every couple of weeks. Then, as the journey deteriorated, we travelled once a month. For the last couple of years we travelled once every three months.

Eurostar used to remind me of the Orient Express (which it closely resembled in many ways). Today, it reminds me of the 8.07 from Reading to Paddington.

Although they knocked ten minutes off the journey time, the 'improvements' to the train made it impossible for me to read or work because the train had become so wobbly. This meant that instead of saving 10 minutes each way I lost the best part of 3 hours each way. Why doesn't Eurostar understand that people who want to travel quickly will fly?

The carriages have been ‘improved’ and Antoinette and I found them hideous and uncomfortable. The lighting was, I suspect, designed by someone more accustomed to working on interrogation rooms. No thought was given to those with diminished eyesight or looming cataracts who might find the harsh lighting cruel and useless. (Here as an aside is a prediction: the EU will soon introduce compulsory eye tests for the over 60s. This will be done to delight opticians.) The seats used to be comfortable but seem to me to have been designed to provide long-term employment prospects for osteopaths.

The charm of the old Orient Express has gone and the entire experience seems designed to be annoying. In the bad old days they used to greet travellers in First Class with a glass of champagne. That little luxury has gone and the meals served in first class have become snacks. We didn’t eat them since we prefer not to eat food that has been (literally) handled by strangers but it was another sign of cost cutting. First class passengers used to have chocolates and hot towels but those too have disappeared.

To all that must be added the fact that the border guards at both ends have become unbearably aggressive and rude. And they seem to delight in creating unnecessarily long queues.

We were so determined not to travel Paris again that we threw away our Eurostar frequent traveller cards and all our contact details for Paris (taxi numbers and so on). The very idea of even telephoning Eurostar (who now seem to me to have the rudest, most incompetent phone operators on the planet) makes me feel quite ill.

Thinking of Eurostar reminded me of the good old days when British trains had a dining car wherein travellers could sit and eat in style. I used to have breakfast on the train when going up to London and dinner on the train when returning home. It was very civilised.

9

The 150,000 euro reduction in the price of our flat attracted a buyer almost straight away. This has happened so quickly that I have a suspicion that a buyer was on hand and probably going to buy the apartment anyway.

Naturally, we were assured by the agent that the buyer had the money. But naturally we knew that this was a lie.

And there were, inevitably, some problems.

The potential buyer, communicating through two notaires, claimed that because the roof of the apartment building was leaking I should contact my insurance company. I immediately made it clear that I had no intention of doing this. I had no wish to spend six months filling in forms for no reason whatsoever.

The agent sent photographs of the water damage and having seen them no one but an idiot or a greedy French buyer would have dreamt of making an insurance claim. There was a tiny water stain right up near the ceiling and even from the photographs it was clear that the leak was caused by a minor problem with the roof of the building.

We stood firm.

The apartment had needed decorating before the leak. Everyone knew that. It was because of this that the flat was being sold so cheaply. The leak had changed nothing and would be repaired when the leaves were removed from the gutter. The buyers insisted that something had to be done. Naturally, the French agents (the ones we were paying) sided with the French buyers.

At this point we were close to despair.

We seriously thought of just ignoring all communications from France and throwing the apartment keys into the sea. We also thought of ways to give the damned thing away. We were prevented from going through with this by the thought of the bureaucratic problems we would have to overcome.

It was all so sad.

We bought the apartment just under 20 years ago and for many years it had been a haven. Owning an apartment in Paris had been a boyhood dream of mine. I had never thought I would be lucky enough to own a spacious apartment within a five minute walk from the Eiffel Tower.

For the first years we used to go over there every couple of weeks and spent nearly as much time in France as we spent in the UK. For a long time we even contemplated moving there permanently and thought about buying a larger apartment with a terrace big enough to have a decent roof garden. Fifteen years ago Paris was a completely different place: soaked in history, full of romance, alive with hope and humour. Today, it’s a tawdry prison camp. My word, how it has changed.

I used to love our apartment but I had grown to hate both it and Paris and I knew that the sooner it was gone the better we would feel. These days Paris has all the charm of a week old halibut.

It is not unusual for a sale to become adversarial between the buyer and the seller. Our sale became adversarial between us and our estate agents – who seemed to me to do everything they possibly could to make our lives difficult.

The estate agent with whom we were dealing to begin with had only been in the business for six months and it got to the point where if he told us that it was Monday I would insist on checking a calendar before acting on the information. It annoyed me that if the sale went through, the agent would receive a fee of nearly 50,000 euros. I had no doubt that the agency's stupidity and incompetence had prolonged the process and made it infinitely more painful than it should have been. When currency swings are taken into consideration I reckon that their incompetence cost us well over 250,000 euros.

10

The prospective buyer of our French apartment does not have the money, after all.

They need to arrange for a bank loan.

Gosh, wasn't that a surprise. We have been lied to again.

So far I have sent a total of more than 500 emails to the agents and the notaire and I have lost count of the number of forms and proxies I've had to sign. It seems that every few days I have to pay a small fortune to send another special delivery letter to France. We are sending so much paperwork to Paris that I have had to fix up a contract with a courier service. For the last year I have spent at least an hour or two a day on the sale of the apartment – and to that has to be added hundreds of troubled days and sleepless nights. Both Antoinette and I have suffered enormously. I made the mistake of telling the French that the chaos was making Antoinette ill. I think that spurred them on to tell more lies.

We have been told that once the loan has been approved we will have to wait another three months for the bank to release the money. Moreover, because the buyer is borrowing the money they have ten days thinking time once they have signed the first half of the contract. If they change their mind within that ten day period they can pull out of the deal. If they had scrimped and saved and were using their own money they would have had no thinking time. What sort of idiot thinks up this stuff?

The contracts and the paperwork and the emails seem ever longer and more complicated. The latest contract includes endless clauses about our responsibilities and obligations though the buyer seems to have no responsibilities or obligations whatsoever. All these are in French legalese. I have been sent a draft final contract for the sale which contains a clause meaning that if I die then the sale must still go through. However, this is a one-sided clause. If either of the buyers dies then the remaining buyer or their heirs can decide whether they want the contract to be honoured.

I have bought a number of properties and signed a great many contracts in my life but I have never seen contracts like the ones the French create.

The good news is that I can post a proxy to Paris so that the notaire's clerk can sign all the documents on my behalf. We don't have to travel to France at all.

Meanwhile, we are learning to dread one day at a time

11

Since 1972 there have been 48 referendums on the EU. The only ones which were rerun were those which went against the EU. I hereby give notice that if there is a Second Referendum, and if the Remainers win, I shall campaign for a Third Referendum. There has never been a second vote when electors have voted in a way which pleased the European Union. So, for example, when voters who had been lied to by the Prime Minister (Edward Heath later admitted that he had lied about what joining the EU entailed) voted to stay in the EU in 1975 they were never given a second opportunity to vote and say 'No, thanks, we've changed our minds'.

This business of revisiting votes when they are disappointing has become commonplace. The SNP lost its independence vote but hasn't stopped whingeing and demanding a second 'go'. And I remember that when the Marylebone Cricket Club asked members to vote on whether to allow women to join the club the voting had to be repeated until the right answer was obtained.

The world is now full of sore losers demanding a second chance.

12

Many Remainers have said that if there is a second referendum on whether or not Britain should leave the EU, they want to ban the over 65s from voting (on the grounds that they are likely to be intelligent, well-informed and patriotic) and to reduce the voting age to 16 to guarantee a landslide in the EU's favour. (Teenagers are likely to have been indoctrinated into believing that the EU is a 'good thing'.) I can even see the possibility that other EU citizens will be allowed a vote. (Remember that at the last referendum the people of Gibraltar were allowed to vote on Britain's future – and nearly all of them voted to support the EU.)

There is quite a clamour these days to ban the over 65s from voting in any election.

I wonder how the media would respond if I were to start a campaigning calling for blacks, Muslims, women, Jews or homosexuals to be banned from voting. (Of course, when we have a Muslim government women and Jews will be banned from voting and homosexuals will be beheaded so they won't be voting either.)

The over 65s are wiser, better educated and more experienced than younger citizens and should each have two votes.

13

Today is national 'Celebrate the Crusades' day throughout the world. It is the day on which Christians everywhere remember Richard the Lionheart and his companions.

The fiasco that is our Parisian property sale continues to unfold.

I had to send an important document to Paris. It needed to get there quickly because when the French want something doing quickly they must have it or they become hysterical and have a State organised tantrum.

So I sent it by special, urgent, registered delivery. To be tracked and signed for.

The letter got out of the UK perfectly satisfactorily.

And then it got to France.

Now you would have thought that it would be fairly easy to transport a letter from England to Paris.

Paris is quite a large, well-known city and it's only 214 miles from London.

But the French postal service likes to enjoy its work; to savour each delivery.

So my special, urgent, registered delivery letter was taken on a tour of France so that it could see the sights.

And as it moved about I kept receiving tracking updates.

My letter had become like one of those gnomes which send postcards from exotic parts of the world.

After a week of travelling my special, urgent, registered letter had finally reached Villeneuve sur Lot which is in the very south west of France. If you went just a bit further south you'd be able to paddle.

Why did it go there?

Your guess is as good as mine and probably better than any guess the French post office might dare to make.

So I posted two more copies of the important document – once again by special, urgent (very expensive) registered mail.

And now I am still hoping that they will perhaps all meet up and have a party in Nice or Marseilles.

I have noted before that the French are incompetent buffoons.

And the French post office is probably the best example of that incompetent buffoonery.

(Remember Jacques Tati's wonderful film about a chaotic French postman?)

But, if you have your letter tracked you can at least watch their incompetent buffoonery in action.

The moral in all this is simple: if you have an important something which needs to travel to France you would be well advised to get on a plane or a train and take it there yourself.

I could have got out my bicycle, ridden to Dover, gone across the Channel on the Ferry, pedalled to Paris and got my document to its destination more speedily than the French postal authorities managed to do it.

And it probably wouldn't have cost me much more.

While looking for DVDs of the original 'Mad Max' films, the ones starring Mel Gibson (which we haven't seen for an age), I found all three films available at around £20 each. Then I spotted that I could buy all three movies in a single package for the slightly more attractive price of 1p. I thought about it for a while and then decided it would be convenient to have all three films in one package. (It stops them getting separated). So I bought the three for 1p as opposed to the three for £60.

14

The old story about a member of the Spice Girls orchestra apparently patting or pinching Prince Charles's royal bottom has emerged from hiding.

Everyone seems to think it was quite a jolly jape.

Though he was either married or in a relationship at a time.

So it wasn't such a jolly jape.

And look at it the other way round.

What would have happened if Prince Charles had pinched or patted the bottom of a Spice Girl?

Can you imagine the furore?

There would have been headlines demanding that Charles resign from the monarchy. There would have been complaints about harassment and sexual abuse.

Odd, ain't it?

One law for the goose and one for the gander.

15

We motored down the M5 today, and the 50 mph warning lights were on just about all the way from Bristol to Taunton. There were no accidents, no workmen in the road – nothing. Just pointless speed limit lights which everyone ignored. The only oddity was that at one point the fast lane was partly blocked by a house. The house was on the back of a lorry and the lorry was pootling down the middle lane as its driver overtook slower lorries. I was tempted to drop into the slow lane so that I could honestly say that I had been overtaken by a house.

On motorways, I always try to keep in the fast lane because it seems to me to be the 'safe' lane. Most motorists who die on the motorways are crushed to death by lorries – usually because the driver is too busy texting or reading his newspaper to see where he is going. There are very few lorries in the fast lane. And besides, you can't be done for the absurd crime of middle lane hogging if you're not in the middle lane.

I read this morning (not while driving) that the police have been trying to defend the length of time it takes them to deal with motorway incidents, and the fact that motorways are often closed for many hours (even days) after an incident. Having seen their explanation I can only conclude that they seem to be incompetent, uncaring, thoughtless, inefficient and arrogant with no care for people or the environment. The police and the highways agency are equally at fault. They have made it impossible to travel around Britain without a private plane or helicopter. Delays are such an integral a part of life that it has become impossible to fix appointments with any certainty. Productivity is damaged, time and fuel are wasted and air pollution is exacerbated. It's reached a point where I have thought of buying a caravan to tow so that we have somewhere to make a cup of tea if there is a long hold-up. Instead of whingeing at justified criticisms, the police, the highway patrols and the other morons who are wrecking Britain should get their fingers out and behave a little more responsibly.

I read somewhere that a policeman has complained that motorists don't always obey motorway warning signs. Well, here's a helpful hint – offered in the right spirit: how about turning off the warnings when they are no longer valid or necessary?

I've seen motorway warnings and speed limits left switched on for many hours (and in some cases probably days) after they should have been switched off. The result is that motorists don't always believe what the signs say.

And isn't it about time that the police stopped closing motorways for hours just because some selfish idiot is threatening to throw himself off a bridge? The vast majority of these threatened suicides are nothing more than attention seekers (who alert the police themselves) and it surely can't be difficult to find a simpler solution.

On our way today we noticed a coach which had broken down and was parked on the hard shoulder. The passengers were all standing behind the coach. They all looked to be shivering. A few had climbed over the barrier but most, being elderly, had not.

This business of telling drivers and passengers to get out of their vehicles if they break down is incredibly stupid. In this case if a vehicle had ploughed into the back of the coach the people would have probably survived if they had been on board. But since they were standing behind the coach they would have been crushed. And can it really make sense for a woman with small children to stand around in the dark and in the rain while waiting for help?

16

I wonder how female bishops cope with the following – surely the most wonderfully politically incorrect sayings of all time:

'Every woman ought to be filled with shame at the thought that she is a woman.' – St Clement of Alexandria

'I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.' – St Paul, 1st letter to Timothy

17

All doctors who work for the Government in any capacity are dangerous incompetents.

The medical profession has a long history of protecting dangerous practices and opposing helpful ones. The medical establishment opposed Chadwick's plans for better drains, they sneered at Dr John Snow when he said that people needed cleaner drinking water, they opposed anaesthesia, asepsis, vitamin C to prevent scurvy. And poor Ignaz Semmelweiss went bonkers when his research on puerperal fever was ignored.

Today, the medical establishment promotes vaccination (despite the evidence showing that it is dangerous and doesn't work) and supports and protects the over prescribing of antibiotics (which is resulting in the development of antibiotic resistant organisms).

18

One of our urgent, express letters has arrived in France. There is much relief in Paris and no little relief in our house.

A film production company wants to make a TV series based on my Bilbury books.

They have one demand.

To make the series saleable to the politically correct the young doctor who is the central character in the books must be female.

In principle, I have no problem with that.

Except that I can't help wondering how many young female GPs there were in rural practices in Devon in the 1970s. And it seems to me that if the young doctor is female then the whole nature of the series will be changed. Instead of the series being about a young doctor finding his way in a small village it will be about a young female doctor finding her way in a small English community.

And that isn't what I had in mind when I wrote the books. It's a fine series for someone else. But it's not my series. So, thank you but no thank you.

I remembered that a few years ago a production company wanted to make a feature film about Bilbury. They wanted the young doctor to be black.

I also received another couple of queries from readers wanting to know why there are no hard or paperback editions of the Bilbury books available. I explained, as I always do, that we published the first few books ourselves but that the prices charged by Royal Mail made it impossible to continue. I did offer the books to a paperback publisher early on (when there were just three books) but the commissioning editor declined the books on the grounds that they were too old fashioned and that there would be no demand for them. I suspect they would still be considered too old fashioned.

We watched the Mad Max trilogy. They are remarkable films but it is difficult to see how Mel Gibson was spotted as a future star on the basis of these.

19

I recently received emails from someone called James Chater who is in his mid-60s and describes himself as a composer whose 'primary purpose is to present music written for liturgical use in the Orthodox Church'.

Mr Chater has, he says, put some of my material on his Facebook page (together with comments which are not, I suspect, entirely complimentary) so it does not seem unreasonable to quote some of his mail to me – particularly since there are important points here. (I don't have a Facebook page and, indeed, I have never even looked at one. I have no idea what he said about me but if I discover that any of it is libellous he will in due course find out just how expensive libel can be.)

I was so startled by the tone of Mr Chater's emails that for a few hours I considered retiring completely from campaigning. But then I received another broadside from him and this seemed to me so unreasonable that I changed my mind and now feel energised.

Funny how things turn out, isn't it?

The fact is that I have, over the years been burgled, threatened, attacked, sued, fired, fined, libelled and lied about endlessly. My emails have been hacked and my website has repeatedly been taken down. (On the last occasion by the North Koreans). All this a result of my articles about drug companies, immoral wars, the EU's Nazi background, etc.

Here are some quotes from Mr Chater's communications:

'I will supply you with free publicity on all the pro-Remain Facebook pages I belong to! Then you can spend your declining years emptying your email inbox of all the messages that irate pro-Euers will be sending you. Just in case I haven't made myself sufficiently clear: LIAR, LIAR, PANTS ON FIRE!'

(Yes, an academic in his 60s really did send that – complete with capital letters.)

‘I…have had to waste a huge amount of time and money acquiring a French residence card and am having to apply for French citizenship to keep my rights as an EU citizen. All because of this stupid referendum, based on a pack of lies.’

‘Remove from your website…any suggestion that the EU is a fascist or Nazi institution…In return I will remove the posting on Facebook in which I draw attention to your views.’

There are several important points worth making.

First, why can’t EU supporters debate the issues without resorting to threats? (To be fair, when I pointed out to Mr Chater that it would be illegal to harass me on the internet, or to encourage others to do so, he promised not to do this. So that was nice.)

Second, why are so many supporters of the EU selfish and ill-informed, not to mention pompous and humourless in a Clegg-Cable sort of way?

Third, remember what Lenin said: ‘Look for who benefits’. Many EU supporters receive, have received or hope to receive money from the EU. On the other hand I find that supporters of Brexit are, on the whole, selfless, patriotic and well-informed in a Farage sort of way. Many leading EU supporters (think of Mandelson and Clegg) are former EU employees who have a vested interest in supporting the EU. So for example Mandelson was an EU commissioner for four years and is, therefore, entitled to a taxlite pension of £35,000 (and other perks no doubt) as long as he does not criticise the EU. Some might consider a pension of £35,000 a year a trifle on the generous side for a job that lasted just four years.

Fourth, I really don’t understand why Mr Chater feels it is necessary to obtain a French residence card. If he wants to obtain French citizenship that is his choice. He has, presumably, chosen to live in France because he likes the country. But it seems very unlikely that the EU will be so evil as to not give Britons living in the EU the same rights that the UK has already offered to EU citizens living in Britain. I have little doubt that lies were told by both sides during the Referendum campaign but as far as I am aware far more lies were told by the pro EU side than by the Brexit side. Incidentally, since Mr Chater lives in France he may not know that patients in the UK are currently waiting 12 hours in Accident and Emergency units in hospitals – Obviously as a result of EU policies relating to immigration and working hours.

Fifth, I don’t see what is wrong with including the facts about the EU on my website. I understand that the EU does not like the truth but I refuse to suppress the truth merely to please the EU’s defenders. In order to try to make the facts about the EU’s formation easier to understand, I have today posted on my website a summary of the evidence proving without any doubt that the EU is a Nazi creation. The piece is called `Proof the EU is a Nazi Creation’. I do hope that my readers will share this with friends, neighbours and EU supporters.

Sixth, many of those who are vociferous Remainers (aka whingeing losers) fear that when (or if) Britain leaves the EU they will no longer be allowed to eat smelly cheese, buy claret or take their holidays in Spain. Their fears are inspired in part by the BBC’s insistence on talking about Britain leaving Europe. Blair, Cable and Branson seem to imagine that this means that Britain will be towed off towards Iceland while the woman from Guyana probably thinks that her new home is going to be towed down to Africa. Brexiteers, on the other hand, act out of patriotism and concern for the next generation. Like many who oppose the EU, I have absolutely nothing to gain from supporting Brexit – other than a love for my country. I voted against membership of the EU in 1975 and have remained steadfastly opposed.

Seventh, Mr Chater is, I believe, upset by the fact that I have taken the EU to task and have dared to take the mickey out of an organisation which he appears to revere. Some EU fans even thought I was serious in suggesting that we declare war on the EU if the eurocrats didn’t start to behave a little sensibly. Tosh. It’s called satire, irony and hyperbole. The fact is that we are effectively already at war with the EU because the eurocrats want to destroy Britain – they want to do this to dissuade other countries from leaving. I believe that those of us who love our country have to be tough with the EU if we are going to survive.

20

The two commonest lies of our times are: ‘Thank you for your letter the contents of which have been noted’ and ‘Oh I think I can hear him…he has just come in!’

I bought two books by Maurice Wiggins. Both are about fishing (*Fishing for Beginners* and *Sea Fishing for Beginners*). I am not in the slightest bit interested in going fishing but I wanted to know more about the fisherman who spends the night sitting on the beach. These books by Wiggins are beautifully written and absurdly easy to read. I remember reading several of his wonderful autobiographical books a century or so ago.

21

I like having a log fire in the evening.

We have one most evenings between October and the end of March.

Most of our logs come from our own trees which have had to be cut down. A couple of months before Christmas we had to get the tree surgeon in to take down three silver birch trees, a sycamore and a fir tree. It was sad to see them go, though they were all dead and dangerous, but they provided us with a huge pile of logs. And although still fairly green the logs, in particular the silver birch, burnt well without spitting.

But the log pile has diminished over the winter.

And the other day I thought I would replenish our stocks before the last cold spell of the winter.

Naturally, the usual sources were out of logs. We weren't the only ones to have the same idea.

I called in at a branch of Homebase because they usually sell decent logs. When I couldn't find any I looked for an assistant. When I eventually managed to find one, and to persuade him to talk to me, I asked him if they had any logs.

'Not that I know of,' he replied, with majestic indifference.

I know that is what he said because I wrote it down.

'Not that I know of.'

So no points to Homebase.

It's not difficult to see why the chain is in trouble and there is talk that many stores may close.

So I tried a nearby BP petrol station.

There I managed to buy eight bags of wood for the princely sum of £89.12. It was all they had.

There were four bags of something called briquettes at £14.99 each bag. And four bags of something called 'real wood' for £7.29 each bag.

I wouldn't have minded so much but the bags of 'real wood' were so small that I could carry all four at once. They were really half bags.

And, to make things worse the logs were muddy and they were wet. They felt and smelt as though they had been stored at the bottom of a pond. Inevitably, they did not burn well and they spat: wet, dirty and vastly overpriced.

And when we got home I found that the olive briquettes were available online (post free) for around a tenner a bag.

Does BP always overcharge for this stuff or was the company taking advantage of people because the weather was bad?

Dunno.

But minus points to BP for proving that the spirit of Harry Lime remains with us in 2018.

In an average winter around 60,000 old people die because they cannot keep warm.

By charging extortionate prices for a rotten quality product (the so called 'real wood'), and either overcharging or taking advantage of a cold spell to profiteer on the briquettes, BP seem to be doing their best to add to that number of deaths.

Why is it that everywhere I look I find it difficult to find honesty or decent quality? Almost everything is badly made and overpriced. And it is the biggest companies which are most likely to cut corners and to cheat.

I very much doubt if anyone at BP will be ashamed or embarrassed by this.

It is the corporate way these days.

Incidentally, the boss of BP, Bob Dudley, was paid $11.6 million in 2016 and $19.4 million in 2015. What a greedy bastard.

Mind you, there are greedier bastards out there. Pascal Soriot, the chief executive of British drug company AstraZen, was paid £9.4 million last year but he still whinged that he was so poorly paid.

It's really no wonder that Corbyn and his bunch of barking communists are attracting so many supporters.

22

My sixth diary (the previous one) is called *The Games Afoot!*. One or two readers want to know why.

'The game's afoot' is one of my favourite English phrases. It was used by Shakespeare (in King Henry IV, Part 1) and it was popularised by Sherlock Holmes.

P.G.Wodehouse once claimed that he met Arthur Conan Doyle in New York when Doyle was hunting some publishing pirates who had stolen his copyright and printed copies of his work in the US. According to Wodehouse, Doyle actually used the words 'the game's afoot' to describe his pursuit of the dastardly rogues who had stolen his copyright.

(As an aside, I read in an old *Cricketer magazine* that Doyle got the name 'Sherlock' from a bowler he played against. Doyle was a keen cricketer who played a season of county cricket and he was mainly a bowler. However, he scored a fine 30 against Mr Sherlock and admitted later that he always thereafter felt a fondness for the name. As a second aside, the theft of copyright continues unabated. I recently saw several editions of my books which had been published without my knowledge or approval.)

Incidentally, alternative titles for my previous diary included: 'Just an Old Bloke in a Hat', 'A Plague of Frogs' and 'Fuck the French'. Maybe I should have simply called it 'The Scream'.

In a way that would have been 'Munch' more appropriate.

23

The big banks are still using LIBOR to decide interest rates. At least £30 trillion worth of financial contracts are tied in to LIBOR. But it has been proven that LIBOR can be fiddled and crooked bankers have done so with enthusiasm. Millions of people have been disadvantaged by these frauds. Both borrowers and lenders have suffered. Despite this, no senior bankers have been punished. Fred Goodwin, the Scot whose hubris and incompetence destroyed the Royal Bank of Scotland, and who virtually single-handedly cost the British taxpayer between £40 and £50 billion, has never been adequately punished. He kept his absurd bonuses and now receives a pension of around £350,000 a year as a reward for his abject failure. Just why he isn't spending the rest of his miserable life making car number plates or mending mailbags is a mystery.

If the Marxists form a government in Britain it will to a large extent be the fault of Fred Goodwin, and people like him, whose toxic combination of arrogance, greed and incompetence has triggered an enthusiasm for a political movement which should have died with the fall of the USSR.

The scary thing is that bankers are still as greedy, stupid and incompetent as they were a decade ago when they brought the world's financial system to the very edge of disaster. The cost of dealing with the collective incompetences of Britain's senior bankers has, according to the National Audit Office, now reached £1 trillion. In addition to this banks have paid out endless billions for various flavours of misconduct. (The total paid out in fines by banks exceeds $300 billion. None of it has gone to the people who were cheated, robbed or disadvantaged.)

And yet no senior bankers have been jailed, banned or punished. On the contrary, most have continued to give themselves massive multi-million pound bonuses even though their shareholders have been ruined. Bizarrely, the very people who caused the financial crisis were allowed to deal with the problem. And they constantly deal us a diet of more self-serving nonsense. In the city of London, failure is regularly rewarded with massive bonuses. In 2018, TSB bank's customers were subjected to a five month long technology disaster. The chief executive, Paul Pester, was punished for this incompetence with a payoff of the best part of £2 million. He will doubtless walk into another overpaid job and probably be given a knighthood or a peerage as extra compensation.

The damage done by the greed of the bankers means that virtually no one in Britain or America is saving money. Absurdly low interest rates mean there is little or no point in putting a few quid into a building society or deposit account. The relatively few people who are saving are putting their money into high risk investments simply because there is no alternative. Keeping hold of your savings these days requires brains and hard work.

Inflation means that you might as well burn your money as put it into a bank or building society savings account. For several years now inflation has been several hundred per cent higher than the interest paid by banks and building societies. And the official inflation rate is much, much lower than the real inflation rate. The Government, which represents the people and is paid by the people, fiddles the inflation figures in order to deceive and defraud the people.

Whatever happens over Brexit, and whoever gets into power, the voters will be blamed for the fact that Britain still has massive debts. The debts were created by incompetent Chancellors and greedy, crooked bankers but neither the politicians nor the bankers are enthusiastic about taking the blame for their actions. Gordon Brown will surely go down in history alongside John Law, Charles Ponzi and Bernie Madoff.

The fact is that Britain's debts (and, indeed, global borrowings, both private and public) are now much higher than they were in 2008. The Lehman lesson has not been learnt.

And so, as the debts continue to grow, taxes will go up and hard-working folk will become ever poorer.

The rich never pay their taxes (they always have ways to avoid paying them) and the poor don't have any money, of course, so it will of course be the middle classes, the upwardly mobile, the ambitious and the hard working who will have to pay. I wouldn't be surprised to see a wealth tax introduced by the next Government. There will be more property taxes. The nation's debts are so great that even right wing governments will feel the need to consider some forms of confiscation in order to deal with government debts. There will also be tax rises within the European Union because the EU is very, very broke and the greedy, overpaid eurocrats are determined to build up their money-hungry empire.

24

I saw a study which showed that the average UK fund investing in British shares beats the index.

This is misleading.

The fact is that most funds do not beat the index.

What's the trick?

Simple – the only funds which are counted when the average result is being calculated are the funds which are still active. The funds which closed because their results were appalling are excluded from the figures.

This is crafty and deceitful and therefore typical of the investment industry.

According to a news report the most profitable retail items are lingerie and alcohol. Antoinette has suggested that we open a chain of shops selling both and that we call the shops 'Gussets and Guzzle'. How could we possibly lose?

25

Those who invest in commodities often say that the best and safest way to do this is not to invest in the commodities themselves but to invest in the ancillary businesses. In other words, instead of investing in a mine (which might or might not contain anything worth digging out) the wise move is to invest in the provision of spades and shovels. In the frontier towns of America it was often the shovel sellers who made the big money.

In the world of the internet a similar analogy can be offered. I believe that internet companies such as Google, Facebook and Twitter are vastly overpriced. But at the same time there is no escaping the fact that internet companies which deal in products need huge warehouses in which to store the goods they sell. So, for example, Amazon has massive warehouses which it leases.

And so I have invested in the companies which provide warehouses and logistics for the growing number of mail order internet companies. If the internet sellers thrive then the warehouse companies will also do well. If the internet sellers fail then more will come along. They'll all need places to store their stuff.

26

The mad Greens and other proponents of the myth of climate change (nee global warming) say that the oil in the ground (or under the sea) will have to stay there as their campaign gains more power. They want to stop us using oil, gas, coal and uranium. They want us to get all our energy from renewables such as solar and wind power and through their power in the EU they are forcing through policies which fit with these aims. They want to fly to their regular climate change conferences by solar powered jet and to use solar power to charge their websites and their laptops. They want the big oil companies to go bust, and because of the political pressure they've exerted, numerous investment companies are refusing to invest in oil companies. There are even plans to build huge underground storage facilities where the emissions from power plants and factories could be stored. (Has anyone really thought about this? I can't begin to imagine the cost and the energy required to build these storage facilities?) Companies digging out coal are being persecuted by just about everyone in search of brownie points from the climate change nutters. Indeed, coal companies are even being denied insurance by big insurance companies pretending to be ethical. Can you imagine anything more hysterical and hypocritical than insurance companies attempting to take the high moral ground?

Potty Green activists have even pushed the Government into changing the rules in such a way that big pension companies will feel under pressure to dump their oil company shares. This is lunacy and if I had a pension with a company which bowed to these loony activists I would withdraw my money immediately. There is, as usual, talk of 'stranded assets' (oil being left in the ground because of no demand) and of oil companies being unable to sell the oil they have found.

The plan is clearly to destroy oil and coal companies, and their shareholders. It obviously has not yet occurred to the Greens around the world that without coal and oil there won't be enough electricity for their little diesel powered electric cars as well as their coal fired laptops.

(I discovered, by the way, that people in electric or low emission cars are far less likely to stop at zebra crossings than are people driving petrol or diesel engine cars. The drivers of electric cars are, it seems, so bloody pleased with themselves that they feel they can treat everyone else with disdain and contempt. We need a jolly giant to whom we can say: 'Please eat up our Greens.')

The nutters are wrong for a number of reasons.

First, the climate change silliness has been developing for well over a century. The campaigners like to think they invented it but pseudo-scientists have been putting forward the theory that greenhouse gases could change the climate since the 19th century. Only the converts (the pseudoscientists who see the whole business as a way to become rich and famous) think the evidence is convincing. Independent scientists admit that there is no genuine evidence that the earth is heating up. (I was taken in during the 1970s and 1980s but I no longer accept the dubious evidence as honest.) Moreover, even if the earth is getting hotter, there is no way to know if this could be caused by burning fossil fuels.

Second, the alternatives to fossil fuels are frighteningly inefficient. For example, it takes more energy to make a windmill than the windmill will ever produce. So, the more windmills we produce the more energy we waste. Wind farms and solar farms are examples of entirely pointless rural vandalism; tributes to the self-serving sanctimoniousness and rank hypocrisy of an ignorant generation.

Third, the clever alternatives to oil and the internal combustion engine are also silly. Using food to make fuel (the biofuels nonsense) exacerbated the starvation problem and the Greens have condemned hundreds of thousands to death by campaigning for yet more food to be turned into fuel for rich people.

Fourth, electricity, though very nice and useful stuff, only provides about 20% of our energy needs. The other 80% comes from nasty old gas, oil, coal and nuclear power. And it is nigh on impossible to increase that proportion. It’s impossible to power ships and aeroplanes with electricity.

Fifth, an awful lot of people rely on gas for their central heating and cooking. If all those people are forced to use electricity for heating and cooking then there is going to be a great shortage of electricity because we are already using up every drop of the stuff that we can make.

Sixth, renewables such as solar energy and wind power provide only a tiny portion of our current electricity needs. We would need to carpet the countryside with solar farms and wind farms to increase that proportion significantly. And without subsidies (paid by consumers to rich landowners) the electricity produced would be horrifically expensive.

Seventh, (and this is a real heartbreaker for the Greens), maintaining windmills and solar panels requires more energy than the windmills and solar panels actually produce. The much loved renewables are actually a negative source of electricity. For example, when there is no wind the windmills have to be turned by electricity to stop them seizing up.

Eighth, there is no evidence that it is a bad thing if the earth is getting hotter. Rising tides would be bad for people with beachfront properties in some parts of the world. But if there is more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere there will probably be more plants on the planet and then there will be less starvation. Surely we can all agree that would be a good thing?

Ninth, all the bizarre taxes forced upon by the European Union are costing a fortune. Because of subsidies paid to rich farmers operating wind farms and solar farms, ordinary people are having to pay more for their heating and many thousands more are dying in the cold weather. Is that supposed to be a good thing?

Still, we mustn’t despair.

If the Greens insist that we stop using gas, oil and so on then we must do that rather than upset them.

However, since renewables only produce electricity we will have to survive on a source of energy which provides just 20% of our current needs. (You can’t make oil or gas from windmills or solar panels).

And since renewables only provide a quarter of our electricity we will have to survive on just 5% of the energy we use at the moment.

This is a bit of a problem because we can hardly cope on the energy supply we have now.

So, the bottom line is that we can only cope with the Green’s demands if we give up: all forms of powered transport (including cars, planes and ships); all forms of entertainment which require electricity (e.g. television, radio, computers, mobile phones, etc.); all forms of heating; all factories which make things; all mechanised farming and all fertilisers; all hospitals, medical treatments and all drug production.

Of course, the real bummer is that the 5% of our energy which we have left will be needed to maintain and service our solar panels and our windmills.

If there is any energy left over we may be able to boil a kettle and make a cup of hot water, though there won’t be any tea leaves, milk or sugar to put in the hot water.

The good news is that our inability to use tractors and fertilisers will mean that most of us will starve to death, so we won’t mind too much.

Welcome to the Green World.

All this is accurate. It is true and it is terrifying.

If the Greens have their way our planet will plunge into the biggest war of all time. The survivors will be those countries which retain fossil fuels and use them to manufacture armaments and to make and fuel bombers and tanks. The citizens of countries which decide unilaterally to rely on renewables will die.

Our energy policies define our future.

Here are four more boring (but true facts) the Greens might like to consider.

First, the oil is running out and demand is going up. There are no viable replacements and oil companies have pretty well stopped exploring for more oil (partly because they were put off spending money on research when the oil price fell and partly because of very vocal opposition from idiots who think cars, lorries and planes can all run on solar power). The subsidies required for renewable energy mean that energy costs will continue to soar – reducing the cash available for other purchases.

Second, renewables will never be able to replace oil and coal. The idea that renewable energy will take over is a joke. The most reliable estimate currently available (from the IEA) suggests that by the year 2040 the world will still be obtaining a little over 5% of its supply of energy from hydroelectric sources, wind-power and solar power. Most of the other 95% of our energy will have to come from oil, gas and coal. A small proportion will come from nuclear power.

Third, the EU and the British Government are committed to getting rid of coal, oil and gas so it's no exaggeration to say that in just over two decades we will have to make do with 5% of the energy we use at the moment.

Fourth, the world's demand for energy is rising quite fast – thanks to developing countries which have discovered the joy of the motor car and the electric toaster and which are, rather selfishly, insisting on being allowed into the 21st century.

27

The EU loves big companies and hates small businesses – that is one of the reasons why it is a fascist organisation which, like all fascist organisations, exists to bully individuals and small companies.

Here is a small, but perfectly formed example of how the EU practises fascism.

The EU has effectively forced authors and small publishers to sell books through the mighty Amazon by putting VAT on ebooks. I have no idea why they introduced this VAT charges (other than as an attempt to punish the authors and readers of digital books) but by doing it the EU created a nightmare situation because its own laws mean that authors or small publishers who want to sell their books in Europe must complete nearly 27 different VAT forms every quarter. That's 120 VAT forms to complete each year. And the forms are in many different languages.

Since this task is clearly beyond the capabilities of authors who prefer to spend their days writing books rather than filling in forms the only solution is to publish books through Amazon which kindly deals with all the VAT forms for us.

That's pure, perfect fascism in action.

It is something of an annoyance to me that the minute I started to sell ebook versions of my books the EU decided to add 20% VAT to ebooks but not to paper books. (Curiously, the EU immediately decided that this was entirely unfair and unreasonable but the Czechs vetoed the removal of the VAT charge because they were having a squabble with the French about something else. That's how the EU works.)

The fact is that the EU promotes and protects huge international companies. That's why it makes so many rules and regulations. The laws (let's call them by their proper name) are created at the behest of lobbyists working for big companies. That is pure fascism. Small companies are crushed by the requirements of those laws. And so the big companies get bigger and bigger.

And it isn't just the owners of small companies, the entrepreneurs, who suffer – the employees of big companies also suffer. The few large companies which now control capitalism can (with the permission and encouragement of the EU) force employees to accept low wages and zero hours contracts.

28

It was recently estimated that nearly 11 million people in Britain have received unsolicited cold calls trying to part them from their pensions. In many cases the con artists have succeeded and vulnerable people have been parted from all their pension savings. This is particularly poignant since last year a former Pensions Minister told Parliament that she had tried to introduce a ban on pension cold calling but that civil servants (who are not affected since their pensions are protected by the Government) had resisted the attempt. It was not explained how or why civil servants are making government policy.

British civil servants used to be the best in the world. No more. Today, our civil servants and quango employees are regularly rewarded for failure with vast bonuses. Today, just about all Government Departments and Quangos are headed by incompetent, lazy, corrupt and greedy traitors.

Corruption is endemic in Britain today; it is endemic within the professions, the police, the church, industry so why should it not also be endemic within the civil service?

These days no civil servant is ever fired for incompetence or dishonesty. Indeed, those who are particularly incompetent or dishonest are usually rewarded with bonuses and honours so that they don't feel too bad about things.

These criticisms go for international quangos too. Organisations such as the International Monetary Fund seem to me to exist solely to feather the nests of a bunch of absurdly overpaid, preening bureaucrats and economists.

It is also annoying that when the IMF issues its regular warnings about Brexit, the BBC treats them as they were carved on tablets of stone and handed down from heaven. In fact the IMF is utterly useless at forecasts. And, just for the record, the last and current bosses of the IMF (both French) only narrowly escaped serving long terms in prison.

We are living in a pornocracy – a world run by whores.

29

The rise of Muslim power in Europe in general but in the UK in particular will produce great changes in a surprisingly short time. It is a mistake to assume that westernised Muslims will prevail. They will not. The more toxic Muslims will be the ones who will take control as the number of Muslims increases – both through immigration and through childbirth. (Muslim families tend to be much larger than Christian families.) The result will be that women will not be allowed to have positions of power in public or private life. Homosexuality will be repressed. And there will be strict rules governing dogs.

If you doubt this look at how Khan, the Mayor of London, has gradually introduced new rules in England's capital. Khan is, it seems to me, a toxic Muslim masquerading as a moderate.

I see that in a new list of the world's most liveable cities Paris comes a lowly 19th and London is 48th. I'm not surprised. Paris is awful but London is worse. For the record, Vienna is the world's most liveable city and I'm not surprised.

In my opinion, Khan can take the credit for this.

Under Khan, London has become a dangerous and unpleasant city and the white population is leaving in droves. And as the native born white populations shrinks so the Muslim population continues to grow – strengthening Khan's position day by day. And, of course, the trouble with Muslims in general is that they demand that we respect their customs but they don't appear to be too enthusiastic about respecting ours.

The Mayor of London now wants to ban log burners and wood burning stoves. Does he not care that many older people rely on their log burner stove for heat, hot water and even cooking and feel cornered by all these absurd, unfair cruel new laws? I wonder if anyone will bother to tell the wretched Muslim Mayor that under the Renewable Heat Incentive the British Government is giving millions of taxpayers' money to people who put in wood burning stoves.

(Personally, I cannot understand why people are so keen on wood burning stoves. I much prefer an open fire – which I find more efficient and far more fun to look at. And, as long as you have a good fireguard, just as safe. Indeed, since log burners can produce so much heat in the chimney that they can cause fires I would say that an open fire may sometimes be safer. Incidentally, many people lighting a fire forget the importance of air. Start with loose, dry kindling and then stack logs so that they kiss – leaving room for the air which a fire needs.)

There are other plans to discriminate against the poor in London. Anyone poor enough to be driving an old diesel car will soon be punished for being poor by having to pay another £50 a day if they dare to drive their old jalopies in parts of London.

Of course, anyone who has a brand new Mercedes and a state of the art central heating system will be left alone.

Khan also wants to stop pubs allowing punters to drink and smoke in their outside garden areas. The result of that will be poorer folk will stay at home, drink cheap booze and smoke their fags in private so that their kids can be killed by second hand smoke. And many pubs, a mainstay of British life, will die as a result. Now why would a Muslim mayor want to destroy public houses? Is this anything to do with stopping smoking? Or is it more to do with a Muslim anti-alcohol agenda?

Oh, and wasn't it Khan who banned London Underground posters advertising bikinis because they were offensive to Muslims? How long before women shown on advertisements must all be wearing burkhas? (I'm not laughing or joking.)

It seems to me that the mayor of London is changing the culture of the city to fit Muslim requirements. And since the population of London is now largely immigrant and since the number of Muslims probably already exceeds the number of Christians we can hardly be surprised.

Oh, and could it possibly be that Khan promotes the EU with enthusiasm because the EU wants to send more immigrants into the UK – and that most of the immigrants will be Muslim? The EU is helping Muslims take over England. (They have already taken over London.)

Khan is one of the vocal campaigners calling for a Second Referendum but why isn't anyone calling for a Second Vote for Mayor of London? Indeed, if we are going to rerun election results we don't like there are all sorts of possibilities. For example, I was never happy about that election that Harold Wilson won in the 1960s. Can't we rerun that one? I think we should rerun every election where the SNP won a seat.

It seems to me that Khan is the most dangerous and toxic man in Britain today. Am I the only one who thinks that if he put less effort into supporting the EU (and thereby betraying the British electorate who want to leave the damned thing) and more into cutting crime in London, he might be doing a better job?

Oddly, it is widely believed that Sadiq Khan, the Muslim Mayor of London, represents the whole of the London community.

This is not true.

Look at the facts:

Number of people living in London: 8,700,000

Number of foreign born people living in London: 3,200,000

Number of known Muslims living in London: 1,000,000

Votes received by Sadiq Khan when elected Mayor of London: 1,310,143

These figures are approximate since the number of people living in a city obviously changes constantly. But the figures do rather suggest that just under 15% of Londoners voted for Sadiq Khan and nearly 85% chose not to vote for him.

I suspect that London will never again have a white English born, Christian mayor of either sex. And it's a fair, better than evens bet that Britain will have a Muslim Prime Minister within a decade. Does this matter? Well, of course it does. The Australians who come to Britain don't want to turn us into another Australia. They came here because they like the British way of life. But I believe that rather too many Muslims come here wanting to change Britain, to take over, to turn us into the world's only Muslim nation with lousy weather.

The Remainers (aka Remoaners) often tell us that Londoners all love the EU.

But like most of the things which Remoaners say, this is not true. (Remainers and EU leaders have told so many lies in the last year or two that I no longer believe anything any of them say. Remainers are so naïve and ignorant that they watch or listen to the BBC and believe that what they are watching or listening to is the 'truth'. Even the BBC admits that its programmes are biased – particularly where the EU is concerned. Never, in our history, have so many people been told so many lies.)

The fact is that more Londoners voted to leave the EU than voted for Sadiq Khan to be mayor.

1,514,477 Londoners voted to leave the EU.

1,310,143 Londoners voted for Sadiq Khan.

The Remoaners are simply getting increasingly desperate in their attempts to protect Hitler's legacy.

It is possible that Khan became mayor without a single vote from a native Londoner.

Here are three simple facts:

Neither acid throwing nor the use of knives are traditional British crimes. They are now very common.

Acid throwing and knifing are common forms of violence among some immigrant groups.

A vast number of immigrants have moved to Britain.

Politicians and the police are struggling to understand why acid throwing and knife crimes are now endemic in Britain in general and London in particular.

Both politicians and police are hampered by their politically correct view of the world.

But we could tell them why knife crimes and acid throwing are on the increase, couldn't we?

If only they would listen.

But they won't listen because political correctness forces them to hide from the truth and their bigotry becomes a form of racism in itself. Politicians and the judiciary refuse to act because since acid throwing is a peculiarly Muslim crime they are worried about being regarded as politically incorrect (a politically fatal crime).

And so knife crimes and acid throwing will continue to be a huge (and growing) problem which go virtually unpunished.

Gun crimes are also on the rise and it won't be long before there are calls for the British police to be armed. When that happens gun crime will rise to American levels.

It behoves us to note that Michael Green reported that back in 1948 a Northampton man who threatened somebody with a knife was told by magistrates, ‘Knives are not British. In this country men use their fists if they fight.’

Ah, the relative innocence of those days.

As an afterthought I would mention that the constant claim by the police that they are woefully understaffed (and it is this understaffing which explains the rise in violence) is a plain, old fashioned lie. Government figures show that in 1960 there were was one police officer for every 643 members of the population but today there is one police officer for every 477 members of the population. The problem is not the number of coppers but the way they are employed. Far too many drive around looking for motorists to harass or spend their days sitting in their station drinking tea and filling in pointless paperwork. The police seem intent on turning us all into criminals.

Throughout Britain the police seem to have given up preventing crime or catching criminals. They simply harass motorists – it’s easier and far more profitable.

A large city needs an administrator not a political mayor. London has been mismanaged by three politicians who have succeeded in destroying it. And the real irony, of course, is that London only has a political mayor (as opposed to a ceremonial one) because the European Union said it should have one. London is one of the regions into which England will be divided if, or when, the EU has its way.

30

Newspapers, television, magazines, radio and the internet (which, in view of its dark satanic recesses, I prefer to call the hinternet) have all abandoned any pretext at differentiating between fact and opinion.

News articles reek of bias and prejudice so badly that it is now nigh on impossible to find the truth about any issue unless you are already something of an expert. News features in the broadsheet newspapers are written by junior reporters whose ignorance is showing; they make assumptions and subjective conclusions based entirely on prejudice.

There are no longer any real journalists around – just media graduates who want to put their own slant on everything they write and for whom the news is only important in so far as it has an effect on them.

(I discovered one reason why newspapers are so bad. Freelance feature writers are apparently now paid as little as eight pence per word for articles published in large national newspapers. That’s a fraction of what newspapers were paying decades ago. Back in the 1980s I was regularly paid at least £5 to £10 a word by newspapers and magazines and although I don’t know what anyone else was being paid I don’t believe that was considered wildly exceptional. It’s now more or less impossible for a freelance writer to earn a living wage writing articles. Photographers are struggling too. A professional photographer told me he was paid £10 by a national newspaper for a photograph which they used as a page lead. The result is that most articles in the national press are written by amateurs or people with an axe to grind. Only journalists who work for the BBC are well paid these days. For a journalist a job at the BBC is like a lottery win.)

A man in Scotland has been fined for making a video of his dog giving a quasi-Nazi salute and so what was left of free speech takes another good kicking. He is alleged to have made a bad joke about Jews. The fellow’s video was undoubtedly offensive and I didn’t find it in the slightest bit funny but there is a lot of so-called comedy that I don’t find funny these days. If we’re going to fine people for telling jokes which don’t make us laugh then the courts are going to be very busy.

The Jews are incredibly touchy. Shakespeare, Dickens and Buchan suffer a good deal because they had characters in their work who were greedy Jews.

Today, we must all tread on eggshells, ever wary of giving offence not to fellow citizens but to an over-zealous justice system which is no longer capable of telling the difference between humour and genuine offence. The world must now be protected from any possible source of offence.

Just a few years ago I can remember Spike Milligan and Freddy Starr dressing up in Nazi uniforms. I don’t remember them being arrested. And didn’t Prince Harry dress up as a Nazi for a fancy dress party? The really funny thing is that the EU was designed by Nazis. Not that we are allowed to mention that of course. I strongly suspect that one day soon I will find myself facing a magistrate who does not approve of my telling the truth about the history of the EU.

Meanwhile the police stand by while Asian gangs groom young English girls for prostitution. The authorities are reluctant to do anything lest the Muslims are offended by our laws.

And no one in authority gives a damn when people tell unfunny jokes about the English.

Doctors who speak out against vaccination are likely to find themselves ostracised or punished in some way.

I realise that this sounds rather paranoid. It isn't.

My Chinese publisher actually had the decency to admit to me that neither they, nor any other Chinese publisher, would be allowed to publish any of my books because of a column critical of vaccination which I had written for a large circulation Chinese newspaper. The ban has been complete. Attempts to find another Chinese publisher failed completely – with one publisher telling me bluntly that it was no longer possible to publish any of my books in China. That's what I call real censorship.

Much the same thing happened to me in Germany.

I have had a good many books translated into German and published as hardbacks, as large format paperbacks and as mass market paperbacks. In one single year I earned over £30,000 in royalties for the sales of just two of my books (*Bodypower* and *How to Stop Your Doctor Killing You*) in the German language. An author has to sell quite a lot of books to earn that sort of figure in royalties.

The following year I earned £0 for the sale of those books. Nothing.

All my books in German suddenly disappeared from sale.

Moreover, my German publishers, still thriving, refused even to look at other books they were offered – refusing even to acknowledge their receipt.

I have never before known publishers to reject out of hand authors who sell notable numbers of books.

Was this another ban resulting from my anti-vaccination stance?

I cannot think of any other explanation.

They say that the truth will set you free. Bollocks. It's more likely to get you monstered, locked up or banned.

31

It is being said that antidepressants should be prescribed for another million people in Britain alone. This is startling – particularly since they are already taken by millions. In Scotland one in five adults regularly takes antidepressants and for the UK as a whole the word is that the total number of people now constantly on anti-depressants has reached seven million – with nearly a million of those being children. Most of the children already on antidepressants will probably never get off them; their lives are doomed before they start.

I'm sure that the drug companies making antidepressants are delighted to hear this advice being publicised.

(The article originally promoting what I regard as irresponsible nonsense appeared in *The Lancet* – a medical journal which used to have an impressive reputation but which I now regard as something of an embarrassment to its history. Oddly enough, by one of those funny little coincidences which one comes across, *The Lancet* carries a good deal of drug company advertising.)

The profits on antidepressants are very healthy, thank you.

But there are questions to ask about antidepressant drugs.

First, are they effective? In my view, the answer is that they are often not effective. I certainly don't think they are as effective as the drug companies say they are.

Second, are they safe? That's easy. No they aren't. All drugs can be dangerous. In my view antidepressants can be very dangerous. Just take a look at the official warnings and listed side effects for popular antidepressants. (Another problem caused by the internet is the wide availability of sites carrying personal accounts of side effects. These are not always reliable. I only look at sites which carry side effect assessments resulting from an independent medical assessment, either through a clinical trial or a collection of clinical observations.)

Third, are they necessary? The answer is that, in my view, they are often NOT necessary. Drugs will not heal sadness caused by disappointment and frustration and real life problems. Drugs are not necessarily helpful when given to individuals who are bereaved or who have suffered a real life crisis. These emotions are a normal part of life but many people want them treated and doctors are often too quick to reach for the pen and the prescription pad. It's an easy way to get rid of a patient quickly.

'Take these and make an appointment for two weeks' time' says the doctor, knowing that the chances of the patient getting an appointment to see the same doctor are slim.

Sadly, many modern GPs do not have the time or the knowledge to prescribe these drugs safely. A GP who has seen a patient for five minutes and who then prescribes an antidepressant is, in my view, behaving unprofessionally. But there probably aren't many doctors who would agree with me about that. Too many doctors just do what they're told – even if that means just handing out potentially hazardous drugs in vast quantities.

I was the first doctor to warn about the danger of benzodiazepine tranquillisers back in the early 1970s. The Government endorsed my warnings in 1988. And today most doctors agree with me. But for decades much of the medical professional labelled me a dangerous lunatic for my warnings.

I warned, too, that drug companies would recommend antidepressants when tranquillisers became unfashionable.

And that is exactly what has happened.

February

1

It has become fashionable for 'independent financial advisers' (most of whom seem to be 19-years-old, have undergone a six week training period and have all their wealth stored in a piggy bank) that investors should regularly 'rebalance' their investments. What this means in practice is that the teenage whizz kids are encouraging them to sell the investments which are doing well and to buy more of the crappy stuff which is doing really badly. The theory is that if you don't do this then, over time, your portfolio will become overloaded with the stuff that has done well and gone up in price.

'Sell any investment which has risen in value,' they say. 'And buy more of those investments which have fallen in value.'

They tell you to do this, they say, so that your investment portfolio doesn't become unbalanced.

But could it possibly be that they recommend this course of action so that you 'churn' your account – and spend more on costs?

If I think that the reason for holding these two companies has not changed since I bought them then I hold on to both. I may be tempted to buy more of company B if the share price has fallen for no good reason. But why would I sell company A if the share price has increased because the company is well managed, doing well and paying decent dividends?

In my opinion you won't ever get rich (or richer) by automatically selling your good investments and increasing your holding of your bad ones.

Now, it is perfectly true that it is occasionally possible to do well by buying more of a share which has gone down for no good reason. In such a case it can make good sense to buy more. I have done this to good effect myself. But to make this a general rule makes no sense at all – except for the banks and brokers who make their money from the commissions they gouge out of the poor investors who are forever selling and buying. What is sensible about routinely selling the successful investments and buying more of the shares which are failing? It may be a brave version of contrarian investing but it isn't particularly rational or sensible and it certainly isn't safe.

And if a share price has done so well that it has doubled then I will often sell half so that I lock in some profit. The remaining shares are then effectively 'free'. But this is done for a specific reason – rather than as a routine piece of churning.

2

In the vague hope that the buyers might not cancel, I asked our Parisian estate agent when we would have to empty the apartment of several thousand pounds worth of belongings. The stuff there includes furniture, including several very nice antique pieces, a CD player, two vacuum cleaners, a violin, an electric piano, various electric appliances, ornaments, hundreds of books, an extensive DVD and CD collection and an entire kitchen-full of fairly expensive equipment.

Naturally, the agents ignored me.

To bring it all back to the UK we would have to go there to supervise the removers. We had brought back our personal belongings the last time we'd visited Paris.

We instructed the agents to give the stuff either to Emhaus (a charity devoted to helping the homeless) or to Medicins Sans Frontiere (an international medical charity) but the agents refused to confirm that they would do this.

(The apartment has to be emptied before anything is signed so if the sale falls through we will be left with an entirely empty flat. We won't even have a bed to sleep on. And even after the signing the buyers can change their minds without paying a penny to us.)

But we didn't get a reply.

(Note: Despite many requests for information we never did hear what had happened to our belongings. Your guess is as good as ours.)

3

Can I really be the only person who is wondering why the Home Office has given the Metropolitan Police yet more taxpayers' money to investigate the disappearance of Madeleine McCann?

The disappearance of any child is a tragedy. That's a given.

But what the hell is going on here?

The police have so far been given over £12 million of taxpayers' hard earned money and what have they got to show for it?

That isn't a rhetorical question.

It's a real question.

What exactly have they done with our money? What have they achieved? Why do they think they can usefully spend yet more of our money?

The Government officially values a life in the UK as being worth £1.83 million. That's how much our leaders reckon it is worth spending to save a life – with new drugs, road safety improvements or whatever.

So why are we able to spend endless bucket loads of money on a search for one child which does not appear to be going anywhere?

And why haven't the parents of all the other missing children all been given their own special police department and millions of pounds worth of public money?

Countless thousands of other children are missing. The official figures suggest that well over 100,000 British children go missing every year.

So, why hasn't £12 million been spent on looking for every missing child? Why doesn't every missing child merit a special police investigation?

That is a rhetorical question. And it's easy to answer.

The fact is that we could not possibly spend £12 million searching for every missing child unless we stopped spending money on the NHS, benefits, pensions, education, defence, roads and everything else.

Work it out for yourself.

The official figures are 100,000 children missing each year. Multiply that by £12 million and you get 12 trillion. That's £12 billion billion a year – every year. (It's a lot of money. My calculator couldn't cope. I had to do the sum by hand.) That is considerably more than the UK's entire Gross National Product.

If I were the parent of a child who had gone missing, I'd be spitting feathers at the fact that the McCanns seem to have had special treatment right from the start.

And how and why have so many senior politicians become involved in the McCann case?

Do you know how to get through to the Prime Minister's office?

No, nor me.

If your child was missing would ringing the Prime Minister or the Chancellor of the Exchequer be one of your first priorities?

The McCanns seem to have managed to get hold of the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Pope within hours of their daughter's disappearance.

And why weren't the McCanns told to use all the public money in their Madeleine Fund for the search for Madeleine? Wasn't that what the money was donated for?

Am I the only person in Britain who doesn't wonder if things might have been different if Madeleine's parents had been, say, a pair of ordinary shop assistants without the ability to obtain access to senior politicians?

Am I alone in wondering if it could be remotely possible that a pair of ordinary citizens might perhaps at some point in the last 11 years have been cautioned, questioned, arrested and taken to court to answer some of the important questions which still remain unanswered?

4

I now suspect that Remainers (who want Britain to stay in the EU) are suffering from Stockholm Syndrome. They have fallen in love with their captors and have started to think like them; they are humourless, pompous and robotic. Indeed, my feeling is that EU supporters need psychiatric help. Think of the well-known ones: Blair, Clegg, Cable and that woman from Ghana. You wouldn't want to have dinner with any of these posturing buffoons, would you? (There is an argument that these folk are so absurd that they have helped strengthen the resolve of Brexiteers.)

Still, the EU has done something helpful for a change.

From the 20th May, cars which are over 40-years-old will no longer need an MOT. I suspect this is because the garages which originally demanded that cars be subjected to regular MOTs (in an attempt to boost their failing trade) are fed up with the fact that old cars take a long time to test and cannot be tested using modern equipment (such as that used to test vehicle exhausts). One certainty is that MOTs for old cars aren't being abandoned to help motorists or classic car owners.

I remember having my ex Tommy Trinder Bentley S1 rejected by the MOT people because there was a minute and almost invisible crack in the glass of one of the headlights. The crack did not affect the efficiency of the headlight. It took months to find a replacement glass and cost around £200. My only comfort was that the garage mistakenly tried to test the car's exhaust with their modern machinery. And their machinery was ruined.

But from later this month cars which are over 40-years-old won't have to pay road tax or have an MOT. And insurance is incredibly low. The only real cost will be the depreciation and with an S1 the car should appreciate in value. So maybe this is the time to buy a proper car.

Those of who thought there were an increasing number of Romanians in Britain had their suspicions confirmed today when it was revealed that there are (officially) 411,000 Romanian nationals living in the UK. There are at least a million Poles in Britain so the Romanians remain in second place – but closing fast.

When Romanians and others first started coming into the UK in 2004 (as a result of the EU's open door policies) the Home Office predicted that 13,000 immigrants would arrive each year. There are now 2.3 million workers in the UK who have come from the EU. That's 7% of the entire British workforce. In addition to that 2.3 million, there are many million more non-workers and heaven knows how many are here 'unofficially'. I can't tell you precisely how many because no one knows. Our border control guards are brilliant at stopping and searching Britons going on holiday or business trips but bloody useless at stopping illegal immigrants – especially the ones with ricin and Semtex in their backpacks. The queues at Heathrow, just to get through customs, recently hit over two and half hours. What excuse can there possibly be for that? We have become specialists in queuing. There are queues in casualty departments, queues to get X-rays done and queues for operations.

Time and time again the Government has promised to cut immigration. And time and time again it has failed miserably. The result is that we now have thousands of people on our island who hate us, who reject our culture, our morals, our lifestyle and our history and who have a different view of life and death.

5

I bought a book called *Paper Dreams* the other day. (The title rather reminds me of the title of my second book *Paper Doctors*, published back in 1977.) The book, written by Stephen Glover, who was one of the founders of the paper, describes how the *Independent* newspaper was created, and begins to explain why it failed. The book was published in 1993.

The sad thing is that it seems that the *Independent* was not driven by passion, by issues or even by a desire to see the truth published. It wasn't even politically independent. The paper was driven by money and power…and unbelievable hubris.

So, for example, at one point the *Independent* sent a journalist to Israel to write a feature about an underpants factory which supplied Marks and Spencer. This was done to please a prominent Jew who felt that the paper's coverage of Israel was unsatisfactory.

I am usually sad when a newspaper goes bust but I rejoiced when the hypocritical supercilious *Independent* and its sister Sunday paper went under. It couldn't have happened to a nastier bunch of hypocrites.

If the *Independent* had been a good paper it might have made money and survived. (I don't count the internet edition struggling on as a proper newspaper). I have always written and published books which I wanted to write and then worried later about finding a way to sell them. Maybe the founders of the *Independent* might have done better if they had followed that philosophy.

According to what I read in Glover's book, around 95% of journalists on the *Independent* were Labour supporters (but not, I think it's fair to say, unduly sceptical about the activities of the pharmaceutical industry or the medical establishment) and I think the paper failed not just because it was too worthy and pompous, humourless, hypocritical, unimaginative and dishonest but also because it lacked passion and purpose. Individually these are not good traits for a newspaper. Collectively they were fatal. The paper was a haven for the sanctimonious and the self-important; I suspect it was mostly staffed with refugees from other papers seeking promotion and more money. There wasn't much in the way of a yearning to change the world. It was all about journalists wanting a bigger car and more status. When I was invited to write for the *Independent on Sunday* I turned down the invitation in seconds. Apart from the *Financial Times*, it was the only national newspaper in the UK that I never worked for.

The paper built its very modest success on two pieces of dishonest journalism.

First, they stole part of Peter Wright's book *Spycatcher* and broke the law in a blatant attempt to push up their circulation, get more advertising and make more money.

Second, the paper played a notable part in helping to create the AIDS myth and all the dangerous nonsense that went with it. Unbelievably, and indefensibly, the newspaper ruthlessly scared its readers to death (in some cases possibly literally) by overselling the AIDS myth. And they did this to boost a flagging circulation.

There were other scandals in the paper's very short life. For example, one columnist, J.E.Hari, had to leave in disgrace after serious accusations of plagiarism. The news pages thought they were feature pages and the feature pages were written by cheap hacks who couldn't get work anywhere else. I always thought the book review pages were something of a joke.

Over its short lifetime the *Independent* and the *Independent on Sunday* published four lengthy profiles of me. I have no idea why they should have done this – or indeed why I should have agreed to be interviewed four times. They varied from libellous, through patronising to merely scurrilous. All were superficial and far too shabbily written to have appeared in a tabloid newspaper.

One piece, written by a young journalist called Geraldine Bedell and published in the *Independent on Sunday*, was plain snide, inaccurate, dishonest and designed to sneer at my books and my publishing business. The piece was so full of inaccuracies and false assumptions that the editor later published a lengthy correction and two apologies. It is of course much easier to knock something down than it is to build something up. (A house that took months or years to build can be demolished in an hour or two.)The article was a master class in innuendo.

I remember that when we met, Ms Bedell was full of herself and her own writing career.

Why did she write such an unbalanced piece? (It is known in the trade as 'monstering' someone.)

Well, at the time I suspected that she might have been instructed to try to damage my career because of my anti-vivisection campaigns. I certainly believed that pro-vivisection organisations had been doing their best to destroy my credibility. Later I wondered if the attack could possibly have had anything to do with the fact that I had been written a column for *The Sunday Correspondent* – a competitor which had severely damaged the launch of the *Independent on Sunday*.

Whatever the motivation I suspect that the piece the paper published would today be considered illegal and not just tawdry. Journalists on the paper were apparently upset that I had managed to create a commercially successful self-publishing business.

The editor of the *Independent on Sunday* was fired a couple of weeks after printing Bedell's article, and today Bedell herself is best known for her curious attempt to promote herself by claiming that she had been 'disinvited' from a Festival of Literature because her novel featured a homosexual character.

It was later revealed that Bedell had never been invited to the Festival and her book had not been banned. Since then her career seems to have rather died. The books of which she had boasted so much were never terribly successful.

Today, the *Independent* newspaper still exists as a website which, when I looked at it, appeared to be stuffed with ads and to be little more than a blatant promotional tool for Remainers. It can hardly be called a newspaper in any sense of the word.

The odd thing is that the nasty, inaccurate, innuendo packed and sexist piece which the *Independent on Sunday* magazine ran about me is still prominent on the Web – despite the fact that it is 20-years-old and that I did three bigger, more recent interviews for the *Independent*.

So why could that be? Maybe the drug industry did inspire the article and is now artificially maintaining its position in search engines.

6

There is increasing inequality in the world. The very rich are getting even richer – usually through dishonesty. Bankers, lawyers and investment fund managers and auditors are becoming absurdly wealthy without good reason. For example, the auditors who are supervising the collapse of a company Carillion are charging taxpayers £50 million to close it down. The word 'obscene' doesn't come close. And lawyers are now also paid obscene amounts of money. Young lawyers in London are now receiving starting salaries of £143,000 the day after they qualify. Many of their salaries are doubtless being paid out of NHS funding which now pays out an entirely unreasonable chunk of its budget to aggrieved patients and their greedy lawyers. In 2016/17 the NHS paid out £1.7 billion to settle lawsuits – that's enough to pay the salaries of 100,000 extra nurses.

In 1949, Compton Mackenzie (the author of *Whisky Galore*) suggested that railway companies should equalise fares, like the Post Office. In other words a train ticket should cost the same for a short journey as for a long journey. It makes excellent sense. It would simplify ticket purchase and save companies a fortune in administration. It would encourage train travel and reduce the pressure on the roads. And since the train has to run from A to B anyway, the distance a passenger travels has no impact on the railway company's costs.

7

The Remainers lied and exaggerated a good deal before and during the referendum on the EU but, with outstanding cheek, have consistently made absurd allegations against those voting to save Britain from the Nazi dream. I have never known such arrogance as has been exhibited by the noisy Remainers – who are, largely, a bunch of abhorrent politicians and a mixture of celebrities who have mostly passed their sell-by-date; many of them tax exiles who don't live in Britain, some of them foreigners who have no right to interfere in our private island war and who might be well advised to be a little more respectful of the history and culture of our country; sad souls desperate for a little publicity, delighted to say anything to please the media, particularly the BBC; ready to denounce democracy for the sake of a name-check. Worse still, this endless stream of arrogant but naïve and ignorant celebrities sneer at those who oppose the EU. It is not enough for them to oppose the principle of Brexit: they have to sneer. It seems odd to hear and see so many professionally outraged show-offs using their outrage in an attempt to stifle freedom. I wonder how many realise just how offensive their sneers are to the 17.4 million who voted to abandon the EU. Outrage is, in the case of the Remainers, the refuge of mediocrity.

The rich and the privileged don't understand that the Brexit vote was a protest against 'them', the self-appointed deciders; the Cleggs and the Blairs of this world.

The one thing they have in common is that they disapprove of democracy when they find it inconvenient. They have, through their refusal to accept democracy, exacerbated a national schism that will last for generations. The hatred that now engulfs Britain is entirely their doing.

The oddest thing is that many Remainers are women (and quite a number are homosexual). Don't these people realise that the EU is the major reason that there are now millions of Muslims in Britain? And don't they realise that Muslims will, if they get into power, treat women as second class citizens and kill all the gays? There are still women and homosexuals in Britain who believe in what they innocently describe as our multicultural society. They're either woefully innocent or barking mad – or simply masochistic. Any gays and women who are Remainers are either desperately ignorant or suicidal and should be locked up for their own safety. (The apologists all say that they know really nice Muslims who are dentists or doctors or whatever. Of course they do. But it will not be the really nice Muslims who take over. It will be the rabid ones.)

Moreover, I find it typically hypocritical that Remainers regularly complain that there were irregularities in the way the Leave campaign was conducted.

They all seem to have forgotten, very quickly, that the Electoral Commission fined the utterly pointless Liberal Democrats £18,000 for failing to provide full invoices and receipts for their spending on the Brexit campaign. The pro EU parts of the media (that's most of it) seem to have missed all this. The official Remain campaign was fined for similar offences.

There has been a huge fuss about the fact that one organisation promoting Brexit gave money to another organisation promoting Brexit. This is apparently regarded as a threat to democracy by the Remainers.

And it was apparently perfectly acceptable for the Government to spend millions of pounds of taxpayers' money on pro EU promotional leaflets and fine for the BBC to distort the news in favour of the EU and perfectly OK for the Government to use Project Fear to attempt to influence public opinion. (When Governments use fear to pressurise the electors they are stooping to intellectual terrorism. It is no exaggeration to describe the Remainers as terrorists since they are trying to overthrow the will of the people.)

And, of course, it was perfectly acceptable for the establishment to target Brexit supporters. It has, for example, been reported that the tax people have been targeting individuals who oppose the European Union.

(I have no doubt that Britain's tax collectors target individuals for reasons which have nothing whatsoever to do with their financial affairs. I sometimes suspect they prefer to target older, frailer citizens and to allow large international companies to get away with the fiscal equivalent of blue murder. I have long been a critic of Governments, the EU and HMRC and I have been subjected to two lengthy investigations by the taxman. On both occasions, despite efforts which were unfair and unjust, I ended up receiving substantial sums from HMRC because I had paid too much tax.)

What a puzzle it all is.

I am especially bewildered by the way the Remainers are demanding that their views and concerns be taken into consideration at every stage of the Brexit process. I wonder if the concerns of Brexiteers would be considered if the Remainers had won the Referendum. Somehow, I doubt it. It is also infuriating to hear the Remainers forever arguing that the Leavers 'didn't understand' what they were voting for. This refrain seems to be particular popular with a foreign-born woman called Gina Miller.

(Ms Miller was born in Guyana which doesn't appear to be listed as an English county. At least Tony Blair was born in Scotland. The funny thing is that most of the Remainers who demand that England stays in the EU aren't English at all. Most of them are former EU employees, war criminals, tax exiles or just plain foreign. So, for example, Paul Hewson, otherwise known as Bono, the world champion hypocrite with the charm, intelligence and personality of a chewed dog biscuit, is Irish but has not been slow to share his views on Brexit. The loathsome Bono is described by his fans as a philanthropist and by realists as something of a tax avoidance expert. One of his important political friends needs to explain to him that you cannot really avoid tax and be a philanthropist. And you should keep your mouth shut about everything when you fly around in a private jet.)

The truth is that it was the dopey Remainers, like the rather childish Lamy, who 'didn't understand' what they were voting for. And they still don't understand. Part of the problem is that other than the war criminal et al, most of the Remainers are children who were brainwashed with EU lies when they were growing up. The whole Remain campaign is orchestrated by a small number of publicity seeking self-appointed celebrities who are followed by a scruffy crowd of second rate journalists from *The Guardian*, the *Financial Times* and the 'BBC' and a small army of unemployed millennials with too much time and not enough responsibility.

Many Remainers actually seem to want Brexit to fail; they want to see their country in dire straits. They presumably hate their country so much that they want to enjoy England's demise. That's pretty sick. (Though, again, one has to remember that much of the enthusiasm for keeping England within the EU comes from foreigners.)

Brexit is the biggest issue in Britain for at least half a century. If you live in Britain it is the only thing that matters. Actually, if you live in Europe then it's the only thing that matters. It is certainly 1,000 times more important than empty, unreal issues such as climate change. (The whole climate change nonsense is being promoted because the 'plan' is to keep us all terrified so that we don't think too much about what is going on. The climate change nutters provide an excuse for trying to limit the use of oil – which is running out – and the whole recycling silliness helps keep us too busy to protest.)

What we should all be saying is 'Screw EU!'. That should be Britain's slogan. We would be so much better off leaving the EU without any sort of deal. And we should be helping citizens in other countries to break the EU. Destroying this fascist bureaucracy should be our aim.

I have, over the last quarter of a century written over a million words about the EU. Now, to my own astonishment, I think I would rather see Britain become an American State than remain in the European Union. I can't believe I am saying this but Britain would have more independence and more autonomy, as an American State than it will have as a region within the United States of Europe.

8

The BBC is very into fakery. They even fake some of their natural history programmes. I used to admire programmes such as *Human Planet* but after admitting fakery, the BBC has had to pull the series from Netflix and elsewhere. Surprisingly, however, the awards which the series won have not been handed back and no members of staff have been fired. In more honourable times, swords would have been drawn and heads would have rolled. The BBC doesn't do integrity any more.

Everywhere we look, fakery now seems to be a way of life. Our news is fake, our money is fake and the truth is so widely suppressed that it is rarely recognised even when it dares to make an appearance.

9

Art and wine critics use the right words but in the wrong order, the wrong context and the wrong sentences. The result is as satisfying and as appetising as a hot pot made with three different types of lentil, two sorts of rice and a bunch of limp dandelion leaves

10

The British people want to leave the EU but their wish is likely to be thwarted by the House of Lords – a bizarre anachronism which used to be packed with buffoons whose ancestors had allowed their wives to spread their legs for a king. Greedy idiots bearing absurd titles handed down for 'favours' to some monarch or other were entitled to over-rule the elected parliamentarians in the House of Commons.

In the days of Scotland's Tony Blair, the Labour party wanted to get rid of the House of Lords. And then they discovered that being able to hand out peerages was a great way to reward supporters who had coughed up a couple of million quid for posters and posh dinners. And they also found it was a wonderful parking place for old farts and buffoons who were gaga and no longer capable of smiling without dribbling. So now the damned place is packed with buffoons who sucked up to Tony Blair.

When the appalling John Prescott 'retired' we thought we'd seen the last of him. I seem to remember hearing him sneer at the Lords when he wasn't one. Baron Prescott is now sitting in the Lords, enjoying the ermine and the perks.

When the appalling David Blunkett ‘retired’, we thought he’d gone for ever but Baron Blunkett is now sitting in the Lords.

There’s even a Baron Kinnock dolled up in ermine, heaven help us all.

And a Baron Mandleson.

A worse bunch of grabby, greedy, proletarian brutes it would be harder to find. There are more wicked Barons sitting in the Lords than in the average bad pantomime.

Many of these politicians attacked the House of Lords before they got the ermine on their backs and their noses in the trough. They knew damned well that most (if not all) members of the House of Lords had, one way or another, ‘bought’ their seat. Some had paid by selling their wives. Others had sold their souls. Others had simply opened the wallets.

Today many members of the Lords are making a fortune out of EU farm payments. Arch EU supporter Heseltine, for example, is rumoured to be raking in around £90,000 a year from the EU. And the Duke of Wellington is up to his knees in EU money too.

(As an aside, isn’t it strange that many of the EU’s most vocal supporters are individuals who have a vested interest in our remaining in the organisation?)

In addition to being stuffed with people like Blunkett, Prescott and Mandelson, the House of Lords is packed to the rafters with former European commissioners, ambassadors and senior civil servants. These are people who consider it their right to rule. They live in a different world; a world where they take but never give, a private world from which they are leading us to inevitable destruction. (Most people would, I suspect, slink away and live in a distant wood shed if they had been discredited in the way that Mandelson has been discredited. He, however, appears to have no understanding of the word shame.)

Most members of the House of Lords have absolutely no idea of the problems facing people who work for themselves, run small businesses or have to live on pensions which aren’t inflation linked and Government backed.

Members of the House of Lords, an institution packed with Europhiles who care nothing for democracy, the will of the people or our sovereignty, are determined to have the final say on whether or not we leave the European Union.

And if we do manage to leave they will demand to have the final say on the terms.

Around 17.4 million people voted to leave the European Union. There was a massive majority to leave. Only a minority wanted to stay in the EU.

But a few men (yes, largely men) with ties to the EU and vested interests in our staying vassals to the Nazi state will, it seems, succeed in ensuring that the views of the people are overruled. The EU and its neo-Nazi adherents want Brexit to fail and want Britain to be mortally wounded if we leave. The neo-Nazis are terrified that the world will see how much stronger Britain is when it leaves the EU. And that will mean the end of Hitler’s dream.

Where went democracy?

We need a new Oliver Cromwell, for the truth is that democracy is dead and anarchy is all we have left.

In principle, neither the House of Commons nor the House of Lords should have any role to play in Brexit other than to manage the decision made by the British people: to leave the European Union and regain our freedom, our democracy and our sovereignty.

11

In great chunks of England the English are now an ethnic minority; oppressed, suppressed and derided. Sadly, it is often the metropolitan, rich English liberals who are doing the oppressing and providing the derision.

12

The EU does not approve of democracy. Anyone in doubt should ask the citizens of Greece and Italy for their thoughts. In both those countries democratically elected governments have been dismissed by the EU as unacceptable. (In Italy, the elected President was replaced by a former Goldman Sachs man.) On the numerous occasions when citizens have voted against the EU, the electors have been told to vote again until they produced the right answer. It is directly as a result of EU policies that youth unemployment in Italy is now 35% in the North and nearly 70% in the South.

Actually, I quite like Italy’s governing party, the one run by Beppo the Clown.

The party’s official slogan is the Italian for ‘Fuck Off’.

Here’s a fact which the Lords probably don’t know: EU food prices are on average 20% higher than elsewhere in world – punishing the poor in order to protect farmers (particularly French and German ones). The EU hands out subsidies of 59 billion euros a year to rich farmers. Amazingly, farmers are even compensated if the weather is bad!

And here's another fact: the EU is complaining that without Britain it will be short of money. That should tell the Remainers something about our relationship.

(The ardent Remainers will probably claim that pushing up food prices is a good thing because it will help cut down obesity.)

Oh, and I wonder how many people know that EU countries have, on average, a tax burden which is 50% higher than the global average? Ireland is the only Eurozone country where the government tax is below the global average.

When the EU's avowed aim of a United States of Europe is finally created, taxes will soar to pay the costs of the massive bureaucracy.

And here's something else: the EU has signed free trade agreements with countries which represent just 10% of the world's GDP. But when we leave we will be able to sign free trade agreements with as many countries as we like. So, for example, tiny Switzerland has managed to do deals with 50% of the world.

Finally, the unions and the *Daily Mirror* are constantly moaning about the unhappy lot of temporary workers, subcontractors and agency staff who are, collectively, known as supply chain workers. Such individuals are denied normal employment rights (sick pay, holidays and so on). Many are on zero hours contracts.

What neither the unions nor the Daily Mirror ever mention is that the EU is the direct cause of the misery of the millions of workers who are employed in these ways. It is EU laws which push employers into creating contracts which provide absolutely no security.

It really isn't difficult to prove that the EU is bad for everyone in Britain (and Europe) but the facts are rarely given the airing they need and deserve. The MPs who matter (Members of the Public) are ignored.

I found some old Warner Brothers promotional material for Errol Flynn. The film company claims that Flynn ('a young English actor') was born in Northern Ireland and educated at St Paul's in London and in Paris. They also claim he was a direct descendant of Fletcher Christian. In reality, Flynn was born in Tasmania, Australia and not educated at St Paul's or in Paris. And he wasn't a descendant of Christian, though he did play him in an early, Australian version of 'Mutiny on the Bounty' called *In the Wake of the Bounty*. Ah, the publicity people working for film studios in the 1930s were truly wonderfully imaginative. The really odd thing is that Errol Flynn's real name was actually Errol Flynn.

13

The cancer war is a fake. The war is being fought by a huge and vastly profitable industry which consists of charities, drug companies and researchers. None of the people who are directly involved in it wants to defeat cancer. It is widely but erroneously assumed that the various parts of the cancer industry are devoted to curing patients and saving lives. None of this is true. The one thing the people in the cancer industry have in common is a burning desire not to defeat cancer.

Here are some of the facts that I have, over the years, learned about the alleged war on cancer.

The cancer industry, which is deceitful and manipulative, totally ignores the very notion of preventing cancer. The big cancer charities could cut the incidence of cancer by half virtually overnight if they were prepared to spend a tenth of their income on a campaign warning people about the known causes of cancer. The charities do not do this because they don't want to reduce the incidence of cancer. If they did then they would see their power and income fall dramatically and they would probably be out of work. As far as I am aware, the cancer charities have spent nothing warning people that eating meat (particularly red meat) is now a bigger cause of cancer than smoking tobacco. Only screening programmes (which are as profitable as they are unreliable and oversold) are widely promoted. (As an aside, it is even more stupid that hospitals continue to serve meat to their patients. This is as daft as the habit, commonplace when I was a medical student, of allowing patients and staff and visitors to smoke on the wards.) Twenty years ago I explained (in a book called *Toxic Stress*) that big organisations have lives of their own and to a large extent the people working for them have no power over how their organisations behave or how the money is spent. Large organisations (drug companies and cancer charities in this instance) need to remain strong and to grow. Nothing will be done by the staff to threaten this state of affairs.

When the cancer industry was in its infancy the people involved were doubtless open-minded, wide-eyed and aware. Sadly, these attitudes have been replaced by indifference, protectionism, bureaucratic arrogance and hostility to new ideas. Serendipity, the source of so much progress in medicine has been crushed. Original thoughts are no longer encouraged or even accepted. (If you doubt this you should be aware that X-rays and penicillin were both discovered by fortuitous happenchance.)

In my book *Paper Doctors* (published in 1977), I argued that we have too much medical research sitting in our medical libraries and that patients would benefit enormously if we stopped all research immediately and instead spent our time and effort trying to use the knowledge we had already acquired – and which was sitting, largely forgotten, in files and old medical journals. Many researchers now privately agree with that viewpoint but no one dares agree with it publicly. The fact is that we have acquired so much information that valuable knowledge is overlooked. Older research is invariably ignored and, therefore, repeated endlessly. Medical journalists, most of whom are staggeringly ignorant, repeatedly write about 'new' research as though it heralded a serious breakthrough. Most of it merely duplicates research done decades ago. Search engines such as Google are hailed by many as a major breakthrough but most are clumsy and ineffective. If you try to find the current Test Match, score your search engine will probably give you a list which includes scores from 2015. The same thing happens when medical researchers look for information they require.

Doctors treating patients with cancer still concentrate on the unholy trinity of slashing, burning and poisoning. (These are the common medical terms for surgery, radiotherapy and chemotherapy.) It is now widely acknowledged, within the profession, that these remedies usually do more harm than good. Chemotherapy, for example, encourages mutation and damages the immune system. (Twenty years ago my attempt to point out the importance of the immune system in defeating cancer were crushed by one of the nation's largest cancer charities. It is now commonly acknowledged by the cancer industry that harnessing the power of the immune system is a vital way to defeat cancer.) The latest fashion in the cancer industry is 'personalised' cancer care based on DNA testing and expensive studies of each patient's genes. This form of therapy is being introduced because chemotherapy is now regarded as something of a joke and the drug companies need something new and snazzy to offer. These treatments are incredible expensive and will bankrupt the NHS – probably for no useful reason.

The cancer industry has become so stifling, self-serving and oppressive that new and original ideas are suppressed if they are regarded as inconvenient or thought to threaten the 'industry'. A cure would the mean the 'end' for many drug companies and all cancer charities. Those responsible for putting forward 'threatening' ideas are isolated and stifled. The industry loves and preserves its mysteries and misconceptions. If anyone did ever find a 'cure' for cancer, the cancer industry would reject it out of hand. In Europe, legislation introduced by the EU (and doubtless encouraged by the drug industry) has protected the bureaucracy, stifled originality and silenced critics of the vastly profitable cancer establishment.

There is no doubt that nutrition has a vital role to play in preventing and treating cancer. But today nutrition is pretty well controlled by an overcooked malignancy of media chefs whose breath-taking ignorance means that most of them deliberately promote the consumption of cancer producing foods such as meat. If the idiot Jamie Something really wants to make the world a healthier place he would stop preparing dishes containing meat. The world would be a healthier place if all the TV chefs were forced to cook and eat one another.

In 1973, a psychiatrist called Eicke suggested that it might be possible to treat cancer with a cheap and readily available drug called phenothiazine. No research was done to see whether his proposal might be correct. The reason? Simple. Phenothiazine was out of patent – there was no way for a drug company to make real money out of the drug. On the contrary, if the drug had been proven to be effective then hugely profitable chemotherapy drugs would have to be abandoned. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the drug (in the form of a paediatric sedative known as Phenergan) might be effective against some types of cancer. Some evidence has been published but laws about the treatment of cancer (which are designed to protect the pharmaceutical industry and the cancer industry as much as patients) mean that it is illegal to study and disseminate the information available thereon.

Medical journals such as the *British Medical Journal* and *The Lancet* (which receive huge amounts of money from drug companies in the form of advertising) seem to me to be over-eager to protect the cancer industry (which feeds them) and reluctant to question the efficacy of existing cancer remedies. Alternative remedies which might offer useful solutions are dismissed out of hand and rarely, if ever, properly studied. (It should be admitted, however, that alternative practitioners are generally unwilling to have their remedies subjected to proper trials. They are, perhaps, frightened that their 'solutions' might turn out to be useless.)

14

Bankers and politicians want to get rid of cash.

They tell us we will be safer and better off without having to carry folding money and coins.

They are lying of course.

They want to get rid of cash for several very good reasons.

First, without cash we will all have to keep all our money in the bank.

Second, they will be able to keep an eye on exactly what we do, what we earn and where we spend our money.

Information is power and they will control us completely.

Third, if they want to they will be able to help themselves to our money. Everything we have will be in banks. They'll be able to take what they want. (The EU has already given itself the power to do this.)

Fourth, they will be able to bring in negative interest rates for everyone. If you have £100 in the bank they won't pay you any interest but they will charge you £1, £5 or £10 a year in negative interest. Don't laugh. Big banks are already doing this with some depositors.

Fifth, if you misbehave they will be able to freeze your bank account and starve you into submission.

That's why the bastards want to get rid of cash.

Bottom line is that only bankers, politicians and idiots want to see the end of cash. In Sweden only 15% of payments are made with cash and 4,000 complete morons have had microchips inserted into their hands so that they can pay for goods and access office buildings. Well, bugger 'em all. I use cash all the time. I would certainly never use a credit card to purchase petrol. Or to pay for coffee. Cash is safer and although I might lose what is in my wallet I cannot have my bank account emptied by some crook who has nicked my credit card details.

Those who believe the self-serving nonsense about longevity which is promoted by drug companies and the medical establishment should look around a few graveyards. In the village of Ayot Saint Lawrence there is a gravestone which reads: 'Born March 5 1825, Died February 13th 1895, Her Time Was Short'.

Life expectancy today is higher than a century ago only because infant mortality has been reduced by better hygiene at childbirth, better water supplies and more efficient sewage disposal.

15

I discovered today that the elastic hook clasp which connects the two straps of a bra was invented by Mark Twain under his real name Samuel L Clemens. He invented it in 1871. His drawing in his patent application shows the little hooks and several rows of suitable eyes so that the straps could be tightened or loosened at will.

And film actress Hedy Lamar invented a radio guidance system for torpedoes which is used in Bluetooth technology and WiFi.

Any author who wants to write an intriguing book should look for another 98 similar examples of celebrities inventing stuff.

16

Ireland is being unhelpful over Brexit.

(I am being polite).

This is hardly surprising.

It is worth remembering that when Britain found itself at war with Adolf Hitler in 1939, Ireland declared itself neutral and refused to support us.

So Ireland has form at being a bad neighbour.

It's also worth remembering that we rescued the Irish when they got themselves into a huge financial hole in 2008. The EU wouldn't help them but we did. We had our own huge financial problems but we lent the Irish enough money to get them out of the hole they'd dug themselves.

But now Ireland seems to have gone one better than before.

This time the bastards appear to be supporting our enemy. They are furious because we have seen the light and realised that we have for decades been giving and giving and never receiving. And like individuals who become upset when their golden goose is taken away so the Irish are incensed because we are no longer going to subsidise their stupidity and greed.

Most bizarrely, the Northern Irish appear to be siding with Ireland. Both refuse to countenance the idea of a border between the two countries.

In practical terms there has never been much of a border between Ireland and Northern Ireland. In the 1980s I travelled many times between the two without a passport or any hindrance.

It seems that the Irish border problem has been deliberately and artificially exaggerated to mess up, delay and confuse the Brexit process. The reality is that the Irish border problem is of little or no consequence. If there has to be a border between Northern Ireland and Ireland then let there be one. I fail to see why it is of much consequence. What on earth is wrong with a hard border? Why would that excite the IRA? (It wouldn't.)

Alternatively, why don't we solve our problems by giving Northern Ireland to Ireland? It would be much neater.

Politicians in Ulster are playing a dangerous game in siding with the Irish Government, opposing the British

Government and trying to stifle the will of the British people. There is now an excellent chance that, thanks to the stupidity of the DUP politicians, we will see a United Ireland within the next ten years.

And, as added irony, who knows, maybe Ireland will vote to leave the EU.

(The EU is currently bending over backwards to keep Ireland happy. The eurocrats realise that when Britain leaves the EU it would make sense for Ireland to leave too. It was, of course, May's stupidity and incompetence which led to her reliance on politicians in Northern Ireland for support in the Commons. Or was it all done on purpose?)

And while we're getting rid of Northern Ireland (which seems to want to leave Britain and which has never done us much good) why don't we allow Spain to take control of Gibraltar? When the Gibraltarians were wholly loyal to Britain then it behove us to defend them against the Spanish. But during the Referendum, the people of Gibraltar voted almost to a monkey to remain under the thumb of the neo-Nazis in Brussels. So let them. The people of Gibraltar have said they want to stay in the EU. It's a rock, no longer of any use to us. Why don't we sell it to Spain? (The operative word being 'sell'.)

And while we are doing that we can give Scotland its independence. Then England and Wales can leave the EU completely and freely and everyone will be happy. (One of the reasons for the enthusiasm of the Scots for the EU is undoubtedly the fact that relatively few immigrants have found their way up to the Northern reaches. It's too far away and too cold.)

Without the expense of Northern Ireland and Scotland, the rest of the UK (England and Wales) would be able to halve their income tax and VAT, double the expenditure on the NHS and increase the old age pension by 50%. Why the hell don't we just do it when we leave the EU?

(Some prominent Welsh nationalists are betraying the Welsh people by campaigning for the EU. Since the Welsh voted to leave the EU this is yet another example of political betrayal. The same Welsh politicians want independence for Wales. That is such an absurd idea that it is best forgotten. The extreme Welsh nationalists are like half-witted, incapable relatives. They will always need looking after.)

17

I get pissed off more easily than ever before. Here are a few things which seem to annoy me more than I wish they did:

People who take up two spaces in car parks. I get particularly irate when there is just one space left and I find that one of the cars parked on one side of the space has been left with a foot or more of its bodywork in the otherwise empty space. This means that the space cannot be used. This happened at lot at Ebbsfleet car park. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that the car park's computer thinks there is a space, and lets you take a ticket and drive in, when in reality there isn't an available space. I also loathe those car parks which insist on having the car number keyed in. This is deliberately done to stop moments of kindness (when one motorist gives a paid for ticket to another motorist because there is some unexpired time). And I dislike the drivers of very small cars who park them right at the front of a space so that as you drive around you think you've found an empty space and then discover that you haven't.

Coming up behind a car or van which is pootling along at 28 mph on a 50 mph country road. When you get to a straight bit, and could overtake, the driver (who is either on the phone or texting and taking no notice of other road users) puts his foot to the floor and speeds up.

Workmen doing half of what they said they would do, going away and forgetting about you so that you have to ring up and waste hours making another appointment for them to do the other half of the job. This can go on for months.

It is often said that 'most people get what they deserve'. Possibly true. But the keyword is 'most'. There are a hell of a lot of people who do not get the life they deserve. There are many whose lives are blighted by ill-health or ill-fortune. And there are many (such as Lord Tony Blair, Sir Nick Clegg, the Duke of Mandleson, etc.) who seem to have been blessed by the Devil.

People who say stupid things such as 'If you haven't got anything to hide then you don't have anything to worry about'. This is commonly said about HMRC investigations. In reality it is the innocent who have most to lose. There is a myth that we are all innocent until found guilty. The HMRC believes the opposite. We are all guilty until proven innocent. This attitude is hardened by the fact that the justice system isn't designed or run to find people innocent. It is designed and run to find people guilty.

18

Low interest rates have done massive damage. They have discouraged savings and helped to sustain companies which should have closed. (Ironically, politicians and establishment figures are concerned about the fact that no one is saving money any more. Can they really not understand why?) Stronger companies have not been able to grow because of the competition from ghost companies. Productivity in Britain is much, much lower than in almost all other countries and absurdly low interest rates are one reason for this. All those companies which would be dead if interest rates were at a more sensible rate have awful productivity rates and are dragging the nation down. Interest rates have been kept too low for too long and when they return to normal levels the result will be catastrophic – hundreds of thousands will lose their jobs and their homes.

Social media is the other reason why our productivity rates are so low. The British spend far more time on social media than anyone else. And we take far longer holidays than most other countries. In America, for example, the average worker takes off just 16 days a year.

If British workers were as productive as American workers then British workers could expect to receive a pay rise of £8,500 a year.

With interest rates so low and so many older people suffering as a result, I really cannot understand why more 70 and 80-year-olds who are struggling to cope on low incomes don't rob banks. Many have nothing to lose. If they get away with the robbery they will have won back some of the money the Government and the banks stole from them. If they get arrested they will receive warm accommodation and free food. It's a win-win situation. The only explanation for the low number of pensioners robbing banks is the fact that older folk are intrinsically honest.

However, as someone who has been investing for well over 50 years, I am pleased to see that people for whom grey is the preferred hair colour, are beating millennials hands down at investing. There are a number of reasons for this but one is that the millennials are still naïve enough to think that when a share goes down they are simply suffering a paper loss but when it goes up they are making real money. But as we old farts know well, no profit on share dealing is real money until the shares have been sold and converted into the stuff which the Bitcoin generation despise and call 'money'.

19

At the request of the features editor, I wrote the following piece for the *Glasgow Herald*. The article was inspired by my book *Kick-Ass A to Z for Over 60s* and will (since I appear to be very effectively banned elsewhere) probably be my last newspaper article.

Our government wants older citizens dead.

If you're over 60 then the bean-counters think of you as a burden. (This is so dangerous that I suggest that anyone over 60 who goes into hospital should knock ten years off their age.) If you're over 70 and you need to go to hospital you must be prepared to spend a day on a trolley in a corridor. The authorities don't want older citizens alive because you'll cost money and although older citizens will (by definition) have probably paid more in tax than any other group they receive the worst treatment. This is not hyperbole and it's not opinion: it's plain, old-fashioned, vanilla fact. Younger generations don't seem to have worked out that (if they are lucky) they too will one day be old and needing a helping hand from time to time.

So my advice to pensioners is: stay alive as long as possible. And piss off the moody, miserable, selfish politicians by letting them see that you are enjoying life.

Retain your freedom, dignity, independence, self-development and sense of humour.

Stay young in spirit, start again at 65 and live another life for free.

Never let the bastards grind you down. (They will try. Believe me, they will try.)

And if you do need to seek medical advice tell them that you're 55. They sometimes treat people in their 50s.

Beware of the NHS. It is official Government policy to ignore the needs of the elderly. It has, for some years, been perfectly legal for doctors and nurses to murder anyone who can be described as 'elderly' and therefore regarded as an expensive and troublesome burden. Doctors and nurses work for the Government and are told to let old people die – and to withhold treatment which might save their lives. In the old days, nurses were passionate about caring. Today most of them are ambitious minor academics; far too self-important to spend time caring for their patients. They're happy to see their patients die of thirst and hunger. They'd have fitted in nicely at Dachau.

Bloody mindedness may not be a popular quality and it may not win you friends among life's prefects but it is, generally speaking, more of a virtue rather than a curse. 'Do not go gently into that good night' wrote Dylan Thomas in a remarkable moment of comparative sobriety. The bloody minded live longer – especially if they are marooned in one of those appalling places we call hospitals. Complain a good deal and ask as many questions as you can. Make a fuss and remind everyone in a uniform or a white coat that you are a human being. Be forever aware of your dignity and your self-respect. Influencing people to regard you with more respect will mean that you will be treated better.

Don’t let people patronise you. You’re on the telephone talking to some kid and he insists that before we go any further he must know your birth date. This is a modest nod in the direction of security. You tell him your birth date. ‘That’s brilliant’, says the patronising kid when you get your date of birth right. ‘Wonderful!’ he says when you get your postcode right. Patronising little bastard. If advertisers want to poke fun at someone then the first choice will be an elderly, white, heterosexual male. No advertiser would ever dare take the mickey out of a Muslim, a gay or a Jew. On chat and game shows, hosts and interviewers always lower their voices when they talk to anyone with one or two grey hairs. ‘And how old are you?’ they ask. If the guest turns out to be over 60 the host will lead the live audience in a round of applause. Patronising bastards. I also get pissed off by colleges which run special courses for the elderly. Can you imagine the outcry if painting classes were organised for black people?

Between a fifth and a quarter of the population is now over the age of 65. But we haven’t yet reached what I call ‘Peak Pensioner’. The good thing is that the more of us there are, the more clout we have. If we stick together we can control the country. Here is to Pensioner Power!

There are some perks in being old. Cancer tends to grow more slowly than it does in younger people so that’s something definitely worth looking forward to. The big, nasty utility companies aren’t supposed to cut you off. And if you do get sent to prison for not paying the damned TV licence, you’re far less likely to be gang raped or beaten up. No 70-year-old is going to be someone’s bitch. Beating up a 70-year-old isn’t going to enhance the reputation of the prison hard man is it?

Ageism is the acceptable face of prejudice, bigotry and discrimination. People who would not dream of expressing prejudice towards people of another colour or race will quite happily express outrageously prejudiced views about the elderly. And the desperately and determinedly politically correct will discriminate against the elderly without a second thought. Sexism and racism are rightly outlawed but ageism is now a State sponsored prejudice. Individuals who sneer at the elderly are the same people who used to sneer at blacks, women, invalids, homosexuals and Jews. Tell anyone guilty of ageism that they are a prejudiced bigot.

If you live in an old folks home of any kind remember that staff working in nursing homes are allowed to medicate the inmates against their will and without their knowledge; doping them with tranquillisers and sedatives in order to make them less troublesome to care for. Spit the damned pills out if you don’t want them or need them.

Traditionally the elderly were regarded as repositories of wisdom, knowledge and experience. Today, the elderly are assumed by hubristic millennials to be out of touch and stupid. Take every opportunity to expose their ignorance. Most societies have treated their elderly with great respect – no modern society, and few ancient ones, treat their elderly as badly as the British do.

It is regularly suggested that euthanasia for the over 65s should be made widely available. Remind younger folk that if they are lucky then they too will be 65 one day and members of the oppressed minority. Point out that if involuntary euthanasia is brought in it won’t be long before the recommended age will fall.

Carry a stout stick. I recommend carrying a stick even if you don’t need it for support. Sticks are good for hitting and prodding people who have annoyed or patronised you.

Stay physically active. Instead of paying a bunch of Romanians to wash your car, buy a sponge and a bucket and do it yourself. A group of 70-year-old men who joined a one year exercise programme ended up with the bodily reactions of 40-year-old men.

Remember that doctors often make mistakes. If a doctor tells you that you’ve got a nasty illness, insist on a second opinion. Watch out for ageist doctors. Remember the old man who went to see a doctor complaining of a pain in his left shoulder. ‘What do you expect, at your age?’ demanded the doctor gruffly. ‘My other shoulder is the same age, and that doesn’t hurt,’ replied the old man.

Don’t let anyone tell you how long you’ve got to live. A quarter of a century ago I was told I had kidney cancer and had six months to live. The silly bugger who told me that is dead now.

Keep out of hospital. I’ve heard of hospitals where the staff deliberately put the elderly patients onto the wards where deadly bugs are endemic. If you do need to be in hospital equip yourself with plenty of antiseptic wipes because most hospitals are disgustingly dirty. If possible, have decent food brought in because the stuff they serve up in hospitals tastes like crap, looks like crap and does you as much good as crap.

Be sceptical of vaccines. The flu vaccine doesn’t work well with older folk but GPs try hard to flog it because they make a fortune out of vaccinating old folk. And be wary of other vaccines too. The live shingles vaccine is very popular at the moment. It costs the NHS about £55 a pop and the list of side effects would scare the living daylights out of you. One of the most worrying side effects is something called ‘death’.

Most people over 65 will need reading glasses though the ones that suited you at 60 will probably do for a few years so don’t get tricked into buying expensive new spectacles every year. I once visited an optician and was told I had macular degeneration and needed some expensive pills which they could sell me. I didn’t have macular degeneration and didn't need their damned pills. On another occasion I had my eyes tested by a 14-year-old who found that my visual fields were appallingly restricted. This seemed odd. I wiped the screen with a paper tissue and asked him to repeat the test. I was fine.

Between a quarter and a half of all operations are unnecessary. Most heart surgery is unnecessary. If you see a surgeon he will probably recommend surgery – in the same way that if you go to a Ford garage they'll recommend that you buy a Ford.

The world is full of cowards who target older people because they are seen as vulnerable and easy prey. Never open your door to anyone you aren't expecting. (When did you last open the door to an unexpected caller and have a pleasant surprise?) The person at the door will either be someone from the council to tell you that you haven't been ironing your yoghurt cartons properly or a bastard wanting to repair your perfectly serviceable driveway.

If you have poor health and must travel somewhere by train or aeroplane tell everyone with whom you come into contact that you are frail and need help. Insist on being met with wheelchairs. Have a hissy fit if they forget. The words 'formal complaint' are like hand grenades. If all else fails just collapse on the floor. This should bring useful attention.

Don't let people treat you like a delicate orchid. Old people are healthier than young people. Over 65s have 1.3 illnesses per year. Under 65s have 2.1 illnesses per year. Mental illness is allegedly more common among millennials (defined as those born between 1981 and 2000) than it is among OAPs. So yah boo sucks. (Millennials suffer more from mental illness because instead of having grand passions they have tiny grievances; instead of being sustained by high hopes and vaulting ambitions, they have nothing but niggly, pettifogging. small-minded greed soaked, tax fiddling grievances, and all-encompassing sense of embittered entitlement. And they have no sense of morality: for most millennials ethics is a county down somewhere near London.

Before the piece was published, the features editor was quite friendly.

After they'd printed it, I suggested a piece about normal pressure hydrocephalus. No reply. Emails were ignored. I wonder who got to them and told them off for daring to print something by me?

20

Britain seems to be handing out knighthoods, damehoods and all sorts of other nonsensical honours to all the wrong people; to every Tom, Dick and Nick these days. We have Sir Rod, Sir Elton, Sir Tom, Sir Paul and Sir Mick. We even have a Sir Ringo, for heaven's sake. Ringo Starr seems like a nice enough bloke; good for a laugh and undoubtedly a perfectly competent drummer. But he, like most modern knights, has lived in America and been a tax exile for longer than most people can remember. He's cuddly, I suppose, but if cuddly means getting a knighthood then there are lot of teddy bears due to attend Buckingham Palace.

What did Sir Ringo, Sir Mick, Sir Rod ever do to deserve these absurd titles?

Were any of these individuals really driven to their success by a desire to improve the world, by patriotism or a yearning to improve the lot of their fellow men? Or was their primary driving force a yearning for fame and fortune?

How many of these celebrities have spent their top earning years out of the country, avoiding British tax?

It's not just the celebrities, of course.

People get knighthoods for the daftest things. I met a bloke once who got one for 'services to the mobile phone industry'! I'd have thought anyone involved in the mobile phone industry ought to be mending mailbags for 30 years.

People used to get knighthoods for doing really good and useful things for their country: designing a new landmine, stealing £100 million from widows and orphans; sitting in a Whitehall office for 30 years. All these bastards then totter around looking down their noses at everyone else. And sports folk get knighthoods and damehoods for doing what they are well paid to do.

Am I the only person, by the way, to be nauseated when entertainers insist on adding their title to their name when they are working? Celebrities might like to note that this was a habit first made fashionable by Sir Jimmy Savile.

I see that Nick Clegg, surely one of the most loathsome politicians in Britain, has now been given a knighthood.

The way things are going I do not doubt that we will soon have Sir Sooty, Sir Goofy and Sir Popeye.

So I would like to make it clear that I've got one of these geegaws.

My late pal Lord Pandit Professor Dr Sir Anton Jarasuryia arranged it for me and it's real. Well, it's as real as Nick Clegg's or the one David Beckham is so desperate to get his hands on.

I have never used it before but I am a Knight Commander of the Ecumenical Royal Medical Humanitarian Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, of the Knights of Malta. You can look it up. I've got a huge certificate (four times as big as the one they gave me when I got my medical degree) and it's hanging on the wall in the boiler room.

And if you're not impressed by that (and you darned well should be) I am also a member of the Ancient Royal

Order of Physicians dedicated to His Majesty King Buddhadasa. And in the year 2000 I was awarded the Yellow Emperor's Certificate of Excellence as Physician of the Millennium by the Medical Alternativa Institute.

I think it's pretty impressive, but I'm not showy.

I'll just stick with the Knights of Malta thing though I confess I rather wish it didn't have the Maltese connection.

(I've been heartily miffed with the Maltese for over twenty years. I wrote a couple of columns criticising their illegal slaughter of thousands of migrating songbirds and found myself threatened with the threat of an apparently serious 'hit'. Interpol investigated the threat but were about as much use as the girl guides would have been. The Maltese rather like killing things and, indeed, journalists have been murdered for writing stuff regarded as unacceptable.)

Anyway, the bottom line is that from now on I would like to be known as Sir Vernon Coleman.

Or, on formal occasions, (since I've got a DSc as well as a medical degree) I'll be known as Dr Sir Dr Vernon Coleman.

So up yours Cleggy.

Antoinette bought a CD of Vera Lynn songs from World War II. There isn't a Dame in Britain who deserved their honour more. It is a tragedy that honours have been devalued by being handed out willy nilly to pop singers and athletes.

I made a note not to buy shares in any company reliant on people who 'do it themselves'. Millennials always prefer to hire people to do everything for them. They are far too self-important to cook, cut grass or put up wallpaper.

There is no such thing as a 'secure internet site'. Anyone who tells you that their site is 'safe' is a fool or a liar or both.

21

Millennials like to think of themselves as liberal and open minded. They think they are entitled to claim the moral high ground. But as a generation they are as liberal and open minded as Himmler and Goering. They are zealots and bigots and they ooze hypocrisy. They regularly insist that their rights are the only rights that matter.

As a breed, millennials, many of whom are now tiptoeing into middle age or already well beyond it and exploring the early edges of old age, are intolerant and the worst fascists in history.

They want history to be edited so that they don't have to face any unpleasant facts.

They suppress and silence speakers and writers who want to express views with which they do not agree. They do not approve of 'truth' – either because it is too frightening for them or because it does not fit neatly with their well-developed prejudices.

They regard an allegation as being the same thing as incontestable proof. (Am I really the only one who feels uncomfortable with the fact whenever an individual – usually a white male of a certain age – is accused of misconduct he is automatically regarded as guilty and punished as such?)

As a result of the internet they expect and want everything to be free. They disapprove of having to pay for books or music or films and, bizarrely, regard copyright as theft. The key words for them are 'transparency', 'free speech' and 'nothing to hide' and the bad words are privacy and copyright. They demand the right to offend but not to be offended. The result is that there is no longer any free speech.

If you annoy a group (be they Jews, dog lovers, Europhiles, drug companies, vaccine enthusiasts or whatever) they will band together to destroy you.

The Jews started it by making it illegal to question the extent of the 'holocaust'.

(I still find it slightly unbelievable that people are sent to prison for expressing an honestly held and not entirely unreasonable opinion. How have we managed to create a society in which people can now officially be arrested and imprisoned for what are effectively no more than thought crimes? My anxiety about this has nothing to do with Jews or the Holocaust. When we banish freedom of thought and freedom of speech we aren't left with much.)

And now there's a whole range of topics which are considered out of bounds.

No one in public life dare question the right of homosexuals to marry or adopt children.

If you tried to argue that allowing children to choose their own sex is dangerous, you would be shouted down.

It is not permissible to discuss the well-documented origins of the European Union.

And it is impossible to discuss alleged global warming, vaccination or vivisection in public.

Any university lecturer who tried to discuss one of these issues would be shouted down, humiliated and then fired.

It is even considered somehow immoral or evil to support the Government's attempts to cut its massive debt (incurred largely when Gordon Brown was Chancellor) in order to protect future generations.

History and science can no longer be debated.

Heavens, it is now even illegal to use certain words because they are politically unacceptable. There is one particular six letter word beginning with ‘n’ which I dare not use because if I do then I will be arrested for including it in a book and you may be arrested for reading it. It’s a word for heaven’s sake. It’s in dictionaries – well, the old ones. And, oddly enough, black celebrities use it all the time without ever being arrested. So it is a word which has created a new form of discrimination. And why are black celebrities allowed to use words such as ‘honky’ and ‘bitch’ without any criticism?

As a result of all this bigotry and narrow mindedness the millennials are, without a doubt, the most purely ignorant generation for a century and a half. They are full of the contemptuous sense of self-righteousness, ‘we know all’ superiority which used to be the preserve of hormone laden 14-year-olds. They regard Harry Potter as their spiritual guide and Katie Price as their lifestyle model. They support the EU because they think it’s an organisation which promotes peace and multiculturalism. They want to stay in the EU because they want more freedom. What can you say?

Millennials are ignorant and bigoted because they are spoilt brats. They don’t allow anyone to express views different to their own. They won’t allow debates or discussions of issues which they find difficult or offensive. They demand to be protected from views and facts which they find require thought. They believe that everything in life is black or white and that every view they hold is right because they hold it. Millennials are small minded and nit picking. They think they have made a breakthrough if they produce a particularly nasty tweet. Intelligent enthusiasm has been replaced with fanatical, uncritical adherence. We have a whole generation of impossibly conceited and self-important Lily Allens.

They were spoilt at home.

They were spoilt at school.

They were spoilt at university or college.

They are still being spoilt.

As a result they now spend their days screaming and throwing their toys out of the pram if they don’t get their own way.

And they get away with a good deal.

But today’s millennial generation cannot be allowed to get away with describing themselves as ‘liberal’ or ‘open-minded’. They are neither. Instead, they are the nastiest of nasty fascists. And Himmler and Goering would be proud of them. (Ironically, most millennials probably don’t even know who Himmler and Goering were.)

Finally, their rejection and suppression of old or unusual ideas will lead seamlessly and inevitably to the rejection of good, new ideas and so there will be no real progress for decades to come. There will be lots of new useless Apps and pathetic software programmes but no genuinely useful breakthroughs in any aspect of science.

Millennials do not understand that all great ideas come from misfits, from lateral thinking and virtually none comes from committees or the politically correct.

22

I was sent an article about millennials from the *Financial Times*. The article was written to explain to millennials how they could save money. Top tip was that they were told that they should make themselves sandwiches the night before and take them to work in a little box so that they did not have to buy expensive, store made sandwiches. Honest.

And they were told to cycle to work because it would save them money and also save them the cost of a gym membership. ‘Improve your health on your way to work.’

Really?

Anyone who imagines that cycling to work is a healthy activity hasn’t looked at the statistics. Apart from the very real risk of being knocked off your bike by a lorry or a bus, the air that cyclists breathe as they pedal away is so toxic that I have no doubt in claiming that cycling does far more harm than good. You might as well go swimming in sewage for your health. Arrogant, filled with a sanctimonious sense of exquisite goodness and cocooned in the false security of their legislated cycle lanes, they hurry to work and to home; their Lycra encased thighs pumping away, building up the waste chemicals in their muscles with every pedal stroke, their diesel drenched alveoli clogged and poisoned with every breath.

The *Financial Times* really isn’t a newspaper at all (any more than the BBC is a broadcaster). The *FT* is a strange propaganda unit for fascists and the European Union, eagerly proposing every politically correct piece of nonsense imaginable whether it be climate change, man-hating feminism or mass immigration. The *FT* is simply *The*

Guardian with more share price lists.

Both papers (and the BBC) support an organisation founded by Nazis and now the most fascist organisation ever created.

My favourite *FT* article about the EU included this from one journalist: ‘The result of the referendum was a shock for my son. He cried as he imagined the British Isles physically drifting off into the Atlantic, but it did not alter his resolve.’

There should be a law allowing the rest of us to kill a couple of sneery, contemptuous millennials every year. It seems a reasonable idea. Anyone not using up their quota could hold it over to the following year or simply sell the quota on eBay.

Millennials are like children. Because they have grown up with the internet (and endless free stuff) they want everything free. They want a free house, free books, free films and a life free of work. They are immature and incompetent and so they need the grown-ups in order to survive. But, like children, they resent the grown-ups because they need them.

The truth is that millennials are so utterly selfish that they don’t give a sod about the world at large. They care only about themselves. Their arrogance is so great that they feel entirely comfortable in ignoring the wisdom of the old.

Like most people of my age I have spent much of my life trying to do things which might make the world a better place. Most of my attempts have ended in failure. All have had an adverse effect on my own life. I am tempted to think that it is now time for me to become a millennial in nature and to concentrate on looking after Antoinette and myself.

There is, apparently, a World Afro Hair Day. I have therefore decided that tomorrow will be World Ear Hair Day. If it is a success we will do it again next year. And if it is very successful I will launch World Nose Hair Day by organising a competition to find the individual with the longest nasal hair.

23

The Visa credit card system went down all over Europe and one frustrated millennial was quoted as saying on social media: ‘I am in a café and want to buy a coffee but my card won’t work. This is the apocalypse!’

Honest.

It made me laugh I’m afraid.

Anyone who pays for coffee with a credit card deserves to be marooned in a permanent apocalypse. (Using free Wi-Fi is similarly reckless, of course.)

I keep my few cards in an aluminium lined holder which prevents them from being scanned or cloned. It’s simply a question of keeping progress at arm’s length. Indeed, I suspect that the key to happiness these days is keeping progress and technology at bay. All change, whether or not it is described as progress, should be made illegal.

Modern architecture, modern ‘classical’ music, modern art and prize winning ‘literature’ all seem done hastily and to shock. (Anyone who thinks modern art is of value should read the late Tom Wolfe’s short book on the subject.)

Sadly, however much we dislike progress we still have to face the changes. The only pity is that the result is like playing snakes and ladders on a board where there are plenty of snakes but no ladders.

Still, we must not underestimate the millennials.

I see that in a response to the millennials’ demand for ‘adventures and new experiences’ Coca Cola has produced new flavours which include ‘feisty cherry’ and ‘zesty blood orange’.

Tasting a new cola!

That’s courage for you.

Here are the Victorian rules for gentlemen:

A gentleman:

Should not eat peas with a knife

Should not ask for a second helping of soup

Should never carry a brown paper parcel through the street

Should never go outside unless wearing gloves

Should never smoke in the vicinity of a Royal Palace

Should not smoke a pipe in the street

Should never inflict pain

Should tell the truth, show courage and courtesy at all times and be Lord of his own actions

He may, however, kill another man in a duel if it is necessary.

24
No one under the age of 40 should be allowed to vote, drive a car, appear on television or do anything online.

That would solve most of the world's problems.

A female author who is apparently well-known (though not to me) has published online the picture of a rabbit which she shot in her garden. She seems proud of this.

25
A think tank says that millennials (by definition, young, healthy and strong) should be given £10,000 of taxpayers' money when they reach the age of 25.

To pay for this largesse, elderly, tired OAPs who are unable to afford to feed themselves or to keep warm on a miserly old age pension, and who, in desperation, take jobs to earn a few luxuries such as bread and coal will be forced to pay extra tax on anything they manage to earn.

Oh, and the think tank also says that old people are so rich that they should pay more council tax so that young people don't have to worry about paying any.

I wonder if the six-year-old cretins working for this think tank realise that more 25-34 years can afford to buy a property today than could afford one a decade ago? Cheap mortgages, ridiculously low interest rates and high wages mean that it is easier to buy property today (outside central London) than it used to be. Millennials struggle to buy property because they spend all their money on expensive coffees, expensive holidays and expensive restaurant meals.

26
I wonder how many people have heard of 'bailins'?

It's the official policy (now enthusiastically taken up by the EU and many individual countries) which will result in us losing our savings.

The plan is simple: if one or more banks look wobbly then the authorities can take the money you and I have in the bank. Even if our bank is not the wobbly bank.

This is, of course, all being done for our own good.

In 2007, when banks were in trouble they were given huge amounts of taxpayers' money so that they could carry on paying million pound salaries, bonuses and pensions to bank staff. Those were called bailouts.

But politicians don't want to do that again. They regard taxpayers' money as their money.

And so in the future there will be 'bailins' instead of bailouts.

What's the difference?

Simple. In a 'bailin' the authorities merely help themselves to the money in our bank accounts.

If one bank looks dodgy the EU will take control of the money in our accounts.

Couldn't happen?

They wouldn't dare?

They've already done it.

They did it in Cyprus when banks there were in difficulties. (Check it out on the Web if you don't believe me.)

And now they have given themselves the right to do it to us.

Don't say you weren't warned…

It's just one more very good reason to leave the EU.

27
The quick way to cure many of the ills weakening the NHS would be to require GPs to provide 24 hour round the clock service for their patients. This would dramatically reduce the pressure on hospital casualty departments and on the ambulance service. There isn't a GP in the country who would turn down such a contract if it were the only one on offer. Where else are they going to find such well-paid employment?

If this doesn't happen then surely someone will set up a company offering patients a proper old-fashioned, traditional family doctor service for people who are prepared to pay.

I suggested this a couple of decades ago (before NHS GPs stopped providing proper cover for their patients) and I'm surprised it still hasn't been developed. Patients would pay a retainer and then a fee every time they require a consultation. A pair of doctors running a small practice along these lines would only need 1,000 patients to make a good living. Each patient would pay a £1,000 annual retainer and £20 per daytime consultation and £50 for consultations at nights and weekends and bank holidays.

The current system of allowing GPs to work the same hours as librarians means that people who are dying can no longer die at home. The fact that there are no longer GPs on call at night means that most people who are dying will have to spend their last days in a hospital or a hospice – even though they might well have preferred to be nursed at home.

It was the EU which destroyed general practice by introducing the working time directive. Everything that is fundamentally wrong with the NHS can be traced back to the EU's absurd law controlling working hours. GPs could have rejected the new law and insisted on providing a proper 24 hour a day service for their patients – but they leapt at the idea of working librarian hours.

28

There isn't a material on the planet which is loathed quite as much as plastic. But the loathing has been overdone. I dealt with the whole issue of plastic and plastic bags in a previous diary but inevitably the demonisation of plastic has continued apace. The amazing thing is that politicians insist on ignoring their own experts. In 2005, the Scottish Government reported that the manufacture of paper bags consumes four times more water than the manufacture of plastic bags. (Water is, of course, one of the most valuable and scarcest commodities on the planet.) And a 2011, UK Environmental Agency study found that paper bags contribute three times more to global warming than plastic bags. The change from plastic bags to paper bags will require seven times as many trucks to deliver the bags.

Pity no one told our stupid Prime Minister all this. In January of 2018, she warned that plastic was 'one of the greatest environmental scourges of our time'. Since then her Government has continued the demonization of plastic and today every sanctimonious body in the country is busy telling the world that they are banning plastic beakers, plastic straws and so on. The damage to the environment is enormous.

Meanwhile, no one notices that water is becoming an increasingly rare and sought after commodity. And the Greens are wasting the stuff in vast quantities. They want us to wash out our yoghurt cartons with gallons of the stuff. And it takes 2,000 gallons of water to make a pair of jeans and 500 gallons to make an average T-shirt.

March

1

Back in 1954, the English cricket authorities decided to test a smaller cricket ball for use in first class matches. Under conditions of great secrecy cricket ball manufacturers were instructed to produce a ball with a circumference of between 8 and 11/16 inches and 8 and 13/16 inches instead of the usual 8 and 13/16 inches and 9 inches. There was much excitement. Would the new ball help bowlers? Would it enable spinners to get more grip and more turn? Would the new smaller ball be harder or softer? Would it last as well? It was decided to test the new ball in a match between Yorkshire and the MCC, and committee members, ex-players, cricket ball manufacturers gathered at Lord's to see what would happen.

(Honest. This is all true. I'm not making any of it up.)

Yorkshire went in to bat first and the tension mounted as the new ball was inspected, examined, rubbed and prepared for its test.

But before the spectators had properly settled in, a Yorkshire left handed batsman called Wilson hit the brand new test ball over the Lord's Grand Stand.

It was never seen again and no one knows what happened to it.

Comical but rather sad, don't you think?

Flash forward 60 odd years and the world is getting odder.

The world of darts has been torn apart by a decision to stop allowing young ladies to escort professional darts players onto the stage and to then point out the position of the dartboard.

This is a silly row for there is no doubt that professional dart players will need help to find the dartboard. Without assistance they could well wander out into the car park or the gents' lavatories. And what does it matter whether the assistance is provided by a male or a female guide?

Here is a compromise suggestion: why not allow gentleman players to be escorted onto the stage by a female guide and lady players to be escorted onto the stage by a male guide?

2

We had to replace our flag again. The wind has destroyed two flags in less than a year (an old England flag and a Jolly Roger). They fade and get ragged surprisingly quickly.

I have no doubt that in due course we will receive complaints about flying an England flag (although it will doubtless take the complainants some time to realise that the three lion flag is the real England flag).

Foreigners and liberal luvvies of all sorts seem to delight in complaining and arguing that the English should not be allowed to fly their own flag and the authorities are invariably quick to accede to bureaucratic demands that only EU, Scottish or rainbow flags should be flown.

Our predecessor at our cliff top home used to take his flag down every evening and every time it threatened to rain or blow a little. But having better things to do I leave it out to take its chances. It's an English flag for heaven sakes – not a frog one.

Switching flags isn't an easy task. I had difficulty in undoing the knots in the rope and eventually had to take the 30 foot flagpole out of its socket and lay it down on the ground. When putting the pole back into place I ended up wobbling around like a Scotsman preparing to toss the caber. Things are made trickier by the fact that the socket for the flagpole is three feet from the cliff edge. It wasn't always that close but part of our garden fell down onto the beach. I could have the socket moved but that wouldn't be cricket, would it? What a way to go: holding a 30 foot high flagpole with a wind worn England flag, and crashing onto the sea smashed rocks 100 feet below. It would be a damned sight better way to go than dying of thirst in an NHS hospital.

An American journalist has claimed that Tony Blair is a liar.

This should not, of course, have counted as news.

A real news story would be: 'Tony Blair Found to Have Told Truth'.

That would be up there with 'Man Bites Dog' or 'Martians Land in Lake District'.

But, for now, the really interesting bit of the story was that the inevitable denial came not from the war criminal himself but from something called the Tony Blair Institute.

I like this.

Scotland's very own war criminal has turned himself into an Institute.

Like the Women's Institute.

Maybe this is something we should all do.

Perhaps I should call myself The Vernon Coleman Institute.

Nah.

Sounds bloody silly.

Just like Blair who is campaigning for a Second Referendum on the EU. (And possibly, I assume, for a Third Referendum if he doesn't win the Second one.) I still find this odd since for at least 15 years Blair was an ardent opponent of the EU. Maybe he still is. Maybe Blair, a crafty little bugger if ever there was one, knows that he is so despised by British voters that when HE supports the EU everyone else becomes a Brexit supporter.

As an aside I can't help wondering if Tony Blair could be a psychopath.

Psychopaths exhibit a number of recognisable traits my own conclusion is that the answer to the question is a resounding 'Yes'.

It occurs to me that Blair is the sort of person who would come into an empty carriage and then sit down next to you, moan about the poor quality of the fruit cake and demand a Second Referendum. He has the staring eyes of the fanatic and is a poseur who seems ruthless and determined to create false hysteria.

I have found over the years that the people who insist on sitting down next to you when there are heaps of empty seats are always nutters. They usually have lots of food to eat and drink and they make a good deal of noise. They also do annoying things with their telephones. (In 1947, John Gielgud said that he would like to abolish noise. What a wise fellow.)

The only question is: 'are they simply annoying or are they dangerous?' Blair definitely falls into the 'dangerous loony' category.

I remember reading a report which said that women don't like Blair because they don't trust him and men don't like Blair because they don't trust him. All of which says something strange and slightly disturbing about the British electoral system.

3

I received an email from campaigners about benzodiazepines and wrote back asking them not to write to me again. They seemed puzzled and asked if they could quote some of the material from my website. Having given my permission I wrote offering an explanation for my disaffection with their campaigning.

'In the 70s and 80s I was relentlessly attacked by the BMA which defended the prescribing of benzos in huge quantities. I was vilified by many but the BMA was the prime mover in the defence of the drug industry. The BMA is a trades union which gets big money from drug companies and in my opinion always puts patients' interests first. The fact that there is still a problem is largely the fault of doctors (and the BMA). I had to fight hard against the BMA to get the Government to change the benzodiazepine classification in the 1980s. When I was the first doctor to recommend phased reduction regimes I was once again attacked. So I now despair when I see campaigners expecting the BMA to be on the side of patients. I fear that much of the current campaigning (especially that done with the BMA) is merely going over very old ground. The salient facts about the benzodiazepines have been known since I first exposed them in the 1970s. Nothing useful has been unearthed since then.'

The campaigner replied saying 'The BMA has still done nothing about inappropriate prescribing and is now deflecting responsibility from itself. You are right. The whole thing is still going round in circles with nothing achieved. We will continue our attempts to expose the issue in the media. This has been made difficult with the APPG which has the BMA embedded, appearing to represent patients to the untrained eye.'

I also received an email telling me that doctors have been mis-prescribing benzodiazepines in defiance of a ruling made in 1988 when the Committee on Safety of Medicines advised that doctors should prescribe the benzodiazepines only for short-term relief.

I wearily pointed out that Hansard (the official record of the House of Commons) for 1988 shows that the CSM advice was the guidance which I forced out of the Government. The Health Minister at the time stated that the CSM had issued this advice as a result of my 15 year campaign.

I then received another email telling me how clever patients had been in working out how to cut down their pill taking by tapering the dosage. In response to this, I pointed out that the tapering method of cutting down benzodiazepines first appeared in my tranquilliser newsletter in the early 1980s and in my book *Life Without Tranquillisers* which was a *Sunday Times* Top Ten bestseller when it first appeared in 1985.

And I could not resist pointing out that I had campaigned longer and harder about these drugs than anyone, and had more effect on government policy than anyone, but have never been invited to sit on one of the many official committees – nor to give evidence.

Why?

Simple.

My attitude was always that the problem with prescription drug addiction was caused by doctors and drug companies. And the committees, set up to deal with the problem, were organised, paid for and filled with representatives of the medical establishment and the pharmaceutical industry.

I didn't receive a reply to my emails. Nor did I expect one. I have to confess that although I don't expect the Commons or the medical profession to request my input (even though I have more extensive, long-term experience of benzodiazepine addiction than any doctor in Britain) I am still more than slightly irked to be so continually marginalised, ignored and patronised by patients who are now campaigners, who have been interested in this problem for no more than one or two decades and who have lifted all my work and taken it for their own. I know I shouldn't care. But, damnit, I do care. I am sometimes tempted to point out to some of these campaigning patients that if they'd listened to what I was saying 30 or 40 years ago they wouldn't have become addicted to the damned pills. I was viciously attacked by the medical profession (and the drug companies) for my benzodiazepine campaigns so it is more than a little annoying for all the good stuff that came out of those campaigns to be completely ignored.

A campaign which consumed my life for a decade and a half and which cost me considerable amounts of time, energy, money and credibility, appears to have been airbrushed from history. It is particularly saddening that addicts and their supporters are ignoring the successes of the past and are now still campaigning for something I achieved exactly 30 years ago.

In a more general sense, writing about medical issues is like constantly reliving Groundhog Day.

The same problems and arguments come round and round on an almost weekly basis. Most of the research which is published is merely repeating knowledge which was available a decade, two decades or three decades ago. The same solutions are offered to problems which were solved decades ago. I can produce articles of mine, written 30 or more years ago, which discuss almost every medical item of news published in the press these days. (In a book called *Paper Doctors*, which I wrote in 1977, I argued that we should stop all new research and concentrate on using the knowledge we have.)

End of whinge.

4

I thought it might be fun to drive round the edge of the UK. But when I tried to find out the length of our coastline I obtained figures between 5,000 and 19,000 miles. How the hell can we not know how far it is round our coast? Antoinette pointed out that if we assume that the correct figure is 10,000 miles the whole venture would prove to be more exhausting than exhilarating. If we drove for two hours a day, and covered 60 miles a day (you can't expect to average more than 30 miles an hour on British roads these days) the trip would take the best part of six months. If we drove for four hours a day, every day, we could do it in three months – but we would be exhausted and wouldn't get much chance to see anything. And if we drove for eight hours a day the trip would still take six weeks to complete. And we would see virtually nothing of the coastline, the country or the people.

We decided to forget it and to stay at home.

Everywhere I turn I see signs of madness. The boss of an advertising company is leaving because he has apparently done something bad though no one will say what it is. When he leaves he will be given £19 million as a leaving present. He's done something bad and the company is giving him £19 million to soften the blow of him losing his job!

In Northern Ireland, two rugby players who were found not guilty of rape have been fired by their club and told they will not represent their country again. Apparently, this is because they said misogynistic things on social media and these remarks were revealed during the trial in which they were found innocent.

And school children are demanding that a school vicar leave his post because he does not believe that homosexuals should be allowed to marry.

The latest fashion in America is for rich dog owners to have artificial testicles surgically implanted into their castrated pets. The procedure costs thousands of dollars but according to *The New York Times* 500,000 American pet owners have had silicone tests implanted into their animals 'in order to help them maintain their dignity and self-esteem. Apparently, plastic surgery on animals is big business in the United States these days. Common procedures include tummy tucks and nose jobs. Any British cosmetic surgeons who are struggling to make ends meet should, perhaps, switch from operating on people to operating on animals.

To provide the birds and squirrels with water every day we have a large dog bowl (it has DOG printed on the side but most of our creatures are not keen readers and do not appear to be offended) on a stone pedestal and I fill it every day with rain water from a water butt. Dozens of different animals and birds drink there. I couldn't understand why the water level went down so fast until Antoinette pointed out to me that one of the robins who lives in our garden is an enthusiastic bather – and he splashes water about with gay abandon. Two blackbirds are also keen bathers.

5

Everywhere I go (shops, petrol stations, banks, etc.) the staff all seem to be teenagers. This is obviously because of the minimum wage rules. The unions cheered the introduction of the minimum wage but how many people lost their jobs?

Every business which is labour intensive is seeing older employees fired and replaced by the under 25s who can, at the moment, be paid less than the standard minimum wage. Cafés are now staffed almost exclusively by kids who ask if I want milk in my Americano. They presumably don't realise that if you put milk in an Americano it becomes a latte so it isn't an Americano anymore.

Even banks are now hiring teenagers for counter staff. Naturally, most of them don't seem to know what a cheque looks like. Some of them probably don't know what money looks like.

What a wonderful career pathway the unions have created: work until you are 25 and then your working days are over.

In 1966, the year England won the Football World Cup at Wembley, the Football Association asked the MCC not to organise any cricket Test Matches in July in order to give the football a chance with the public. Even so, tickets for England's soccer matches were available cheaply and (literally) thousands of unwanted tickets for the Final couldn't be given away.

6

Everything is marked on social media. It's like being at school. I don't believe it is possible to survive in our internet controlled world unless you grow a carapace around your heart and bury your spirit deep where it cannot be found.

Would critics be as horrid face to face?

'Hello. Your ears too big and your hair is full of split ends. Your colour sense is appalling. You have what looks like dandruff on your shoulders and your knees are too knobbly. One star.'

These days, writers need a veneer of something to protect them. Actually, they need a shell into which they can withdraw from the world.

If I sound bitter and twisted it is probably because I am bitter and twisted.

When reading a book it always seems to me to be sound practice to see what the author's aim was in writing the book and then to judge how well he has succeeded in his or her aim.

It's comforting to say `that's exactly what I think' but always slightly disturbing to think 'I never thought of that before, but I can see that it's an idea that might be worth considering'.

However, the young, in particular, do not like to have their prejudices disrupted. So they won't even consider ideas which are contrary to their own.

7

A reader of my book *The Kick Ass A to Z for Over 60s* has given it a one star review because I mention that eating meat is a known cause of cancer. As a result of this, the book's overall rating has fallen and now no one buys the book.

The reviewer may not like it but there is a ton of evidence proving that eating meat causes cancer. Every Government in the world knows that there is link between eating meat and cancer. The World Health Organisation knows that meat causes cancer. (The scientific evidence is summarised in my book *Food for Thought* which contains details of 26 scientific papers proving that meat causes cancer.) Now that few people smoke the startling but unavoidable truth is that the consumption of meat (particularly red meat) now causes more cancer than the smoking of tobacco.

Sadly, the truth has been suppressed because the meat trade industry is very powerful. Farmers, butchers and meat packers don't like the truth getting out. And the media is more nervous than most people would imagine about reporting anything that threatens the establishment. (When my book *Food for Thought* was first published 20 years ago, Ian Hislop, the editor of *Private Eye*, refused to accept an advert with the headline 'Meat Causes Cancer' because he said it would upset the magazine's readers. And adverts for the same book are still being banned in case people are 'upset' by the truth.)

So I am afraid I make no apologies for including the facts in my book. Doctors, nurses, nutritionists and television chefs who advocate eating meat are doing as much good as if they recommended smoking cigarettes. I realise that some readers would probably prefer that I tell them that they can smoke as many fags as they like, eat as many burgers as they like and drink as much beer as they like – but I don't see the point in writing a health book that doesn't tell the truth.

I spent years researching the material in *Kick-Ass A to Z for Over 60s* and six months writing it. Antoinette spent a month or so tidying, editing and re-reading. We both hoped that it would be a springboard for a campaign on behalf of the elderly. We are both painfully aware that compassion is selective these days. There is plenty of it around for foreigners in general and asylum seekers in particular but none at all left for the elderly.

But all that work is now wasted and although the book sells in the US (where different reviews are shown) it doesn't sell in the UK.

I kept hoping that one more decent review would balance the bad one but it hasn't happened and I'm now using the hard copies of my *Kick Ass A-Z for Over 60s* as fire-lighters. If you pile three or four on top of the usual twigs and crumpled newspaper there's a blazing fire within minutes. It does rather break my heart but what else can I do with them? We have taken piles of them to all the charity shops within miles. (Most of which will doubtless sell the book for 1p on the internet.) It's a book I'm proud of and now I'm burning it.

The irony is that if I'd written this book half a century ago, when I knew next to nothing and could offer far less in the way of practical advice, it would, with a week of intensive promotion on radio and television, have been a massive bestseller.

These days I am banned so effectively that, although we sent out sacks full of promotional copies (over 600 altogether) there were (as usual) no reviews and I didn't receive one invitation to talk about the subject of the book on radio or television. I was invited to write an article for the *Glasgow Herald* and that was it. (I suspect they didn't know that I have been officially banned from the media.)

I really wanted to encourage the elderly to be more feisty – and to be better able to look after themselves. Now my book keeps us warm. It's not quite what I had intended.

8

Local councils are continuing to reduce the services they provide while increasing the taxes they collect. They have to do this in order to continue paying massive salaries and associated pensions to their own bureaucrats.

Nicola Bulbeck, the former boss of Teignbridge district council (hardly the biggest council in the country) was paid £142,000 and when she left she was given £264,000 as a leaving present. She was also allowed to stay on until the day after last year's general election so that she could earn an extra £30,000 for being the returning officer. (Yes, she was paid an extra £30,000 for being the returning officer.) It is these absurd salaries which are wrecking local services. Councils complain they can no longer provide the services their communities require and deserve but they never admit that they can't afford them because so much money is being wasted on absurd salaries (and the equally absurd pensions which go with them).

Services for the elderly are being closed as are public libraries because the money available is being given to greedy council staff. And to pay the pensions of former council employees. (It won't be long before more than half the money paid in council tax is paid as pensions to former employees.)

Council executives have no special skills and no talents – they are merely average administrators. There isn't a council boss in Britain who wouldn't do what they do for half their current salary – and be very grateful for the work. What else are they going to do for a living?

(As an aside no civil servant of any kind who is under the age of 50 should count on receiving the pension they thought they were going to get. There won't be enough money.)

Readers have written to complain about my critical comments about the NHS. How anyone can defend the NHS is beyond me. It is a badly run, murderous, wasteful organisation. If anything deserves the title `Licensed to Kill' it is surely the NHS.

9

What little faith I had in financial institutions has evaporated. The Financial Conduct Authority (FCA), which is paid to protect investors and to ensure that we aren't ripped off, has given administrators the right to cover their costs out of clients' money. For example, a broker called Beaufort has been closed down and the administrators, PricerwaterhouseCoopers reckons that to complete the closure will cost £100 million in fees (these people are vultures who charge a million to go to the loo) and since the broker doesn't have the money to pay PricewaterhouseCoopers, the FCA (set up by the Government to protect us) has said that it (the vultures) can take its £100 million out of the portfolios of private investors who trusted Beaufort to look after their money.

This is a scandal and a disaster and I can really hardly believe it. How can they justify this? Things are, of course, made infinitely worse by the fact that investors are pretty well forced to hold their shares in nominee accounts and these mean that we have little or no choice but to trust the brokers and bankers who control the nominee accounts.

10

It has been confirmed (again) that in recent years alone the BBC has received millions of pounds from the European Union. I first revealed this in my book *England Our England* in 2002, which was, I believe, the first book to draw attention to the fact that Britain needs to leave the European Union if it is to survive, that the aim is to produce a United States of Europe and that the EU is remarkably similar in all respects to the USSR. (Like my other books on the EU, including *OFPIS* and *The Truth They Won't Tell You About the EU*, *England Our England* is now out of print.)

No one need wonder why the BBC is biased in favour of the European Union and why its news and documentary programmes are bent. It is not surprising that the BBC was biased in favour of the Remain vote during the run up to the Referendum. Although I try not to spend too much time on it I do look at half a dozen news sites every day and for bias the BBC is worse than the *Daily Express*. The difference is that the *Express* (which represents the British people and is therefore against the EU) is privately owned and perfectly entitled to offer whatever views it likes, whereas the BBC is a State controlled broadcaster which has a duty to be independent and unbiased. Incidentally, there is a BBC Scotland a BBC Wales and a BBC Northern Ireland. But there is no BBC England. Tells you everything you need to know about the BBC, doesn't it?

When the BBC was created there were hopes that it would replace the Victorian Working Men's' Institutes in providing intelligent debate, educational material leavened with good quality entertainment.

But today the BBC provides an unremitting diet of drivel: propaganda masquerading as documentaries and news, maudlin soap opera celebrating violence and deceit and quiz shows designed to appeal to the mindless and the witless.

11

It's mother's day and though we don't have any mothers with whom to celebrate we celebrated the day with each other. The day, of course, has been commercialised crassly and it's now all about cards and chocolates and bunches of over-priced flowers from the petrol station. The date changes because Mothering Sunday is on the fourth Sunday in Lent. Traditionally, servants and apprentices were given the day off to go home and visit their families. It was one of the few days of the year that they would be free to go home. Indeed, for many it was probably the only day of the year when they'd see their families. Their mothers would feed them wheat furmity and sugared plum cake and cook a quarter of a lamb for dinner.

In America, they have their mother's day on a completely different day of the year. The American version was started by President Woodrow Wilson in 1914 but I can't help thinking it's a bit sad that they didn't just stick with the old, traditional, centuries old English Mothering Sunday which has a sound reason for existing.

I discovered today that food banks have to separate the pork from the other meats because so many of the people turning up to collect their bag of food are Muslim or Jewish.

'Shall we get one of these Wii games?' I asked Antoinette. 'I read about it some time ago. They sound fun.'

'They stopped making it about five years ago,' Antoinette told me.

'Then it obviously wasn't much good,' I replied.

12

I changed some light bulbs in our house on the cliff.

After I'd replaced a dozen 'dead' bulbs I gave up.

We have eight chandeliers with a combined total of just over 70 light bulbs (I got bored – have you ever tried counting the bulbs on a chandelier) and I counted around 60 other bulbs downstairs. The chances are good that there will always be several 'dead' ones. The corollary to that is that since we have a total of 32 taps there is an excellent chance that at any one time at least one of them will be leaking.

We have a good stock of old, proper light bulbs which is good because I cannot understand new light bulbs at all. And the staff selling them never understands them either. Everything has changed and they now sell bulbs which claim to be 8 watts but pretend to be 35 watts. All I know for sure is that since the EU took over, light bulbs have become massively more expensive, massively more dangerous and impossible to understand.

13

There appear to be two sorts of people in the world. There are those who are cautious of all officials (the word suspicious would probably be better) and there are those who believe that the authorities must always be consulted or advised of anything other people are doing which might, or might not, be entirely legal and proper.

Millennials (and subsequent generations) are, for a variety of reasons, greedier and lazier than previous generations. They talk endlessly of entitlement and never mention obligation. Millennials in their 30s (male and female) still behave like 14-year-old girls.

I have been reading James Woodforde's diary (called *Diary of a Country Parson*). Woodforde lived from 1758 to 1802 and is remembered only for his diary but it is much better than the dreary Kilvert. Today I read that Woodforde met a girl called Betsy White. He writes that he had some talk with her concerning 'my making her mine when an opportunity offered and she was not averse to it all.' Sadly, she tottered off to the West Country and married some rich bloke who had £500 a year and £10,000 in stocks. Reading a footnote in Woodforde's diary I discovered that Charles Townshend (1728-1810) was the Chancellor of the Exchequer who put duties on tea in 1767 which led to the war with America. It was he, rather than the hapless King, who was responsible for America's War of Independence.

14

Older folk tend to worry more than younger folk because their imagination and experience enable them to see just how many things can go wrong. The funny thing is that most of the things we worry about never happen. On the other hand, some of the things we never think about happen very loudly.

15

Stock markets everywhere have been rising for years and commentators are desperately trying to explain why investors are willing to take stock markets to ever greater heights. (The exception, of course, is the British stock market which is about where it was two decades ago.) There is much talk of rising profits and of things being 'different this time' (again). This is all bollocks, of course. The real explanation for the rise in stock prices is very simple: central banks have been printing money for years and have kept interest rates absurdly, dangerously, unnecessarily and destructively low for a decade. This has been marvellous for millennials (who have had a free ride for house buying) but has been enormously harmful to older citizens who were foolish enough to save money for their old age instead of frittering it away as millennials are now doing.

So for everyone who has some savings the choice is simple: put your money into a deposit account and lose a big chunk of it every year as inflation eats away at your capital, or buy shares and hope that the dividends and the chances of a capital gain will help you beat inflation.

Commentators warn that share prices will collapse. This may well happen, but I think the trigger will be a rise in interest rates. Why would investors take their money out of shares and put it into deposit accounts paying noticeably less than inflation?

16

One of our garden robins comes to see us every lunchtime. He perches on a nearby pillar. Then he moves to a garden table. Then he moves a little closer, standing on the back of a wooden chair. Finally he hovers by the window to let us know that he is ready, willing and able and wouldn't mind in the slightest if we wanted to give him a handful of sunflower seeds. Robins are so wonderfully cheeky that they are identifiable from 100 feet.

We long ago gave up buying bags of mixed bird food. Most of the rubbish they cram into these mixed bags remains uneaten except by mice and rats. In our experience the only two products worth buying for bids are hulled sunflower hearts (the garden doesn't get cluttered with all the husks) and good old peanuts. For squirrels you can't go wrong with hazelnuts.

17

Anyone who wolf whistles in France will, in future, be fined approximately £300 (though probably in some scruffy local currency).

18

Indra Nooyi, the female CEO of Pepsi, previously awarded by me a prize for being the Most Patronising Person in History, was paid $31 million last year. How can anyone justify paying someone that much loot to manage a company selling junk food and drink?

19

I have not been a good parent to my books. For twenty years I made no effort to market, promote or advertise them and I cannot remember the last time I gave an interview. I am always too busy with the next book to look after the one I've just finished. When I was published by outside publishers I was pretty well forced into doing promotional tours. But these days I'm banned by all radio and television stations. So my books have to make their way by themselves. I do feel bad about this.

20

Someone tried to persuade me to buy a little pink ribbon to celebrate breast cancer. I said No thank you and they looked at me as if I spent my days drowning kittens. Advertising your compassion is an example of sanctimonious hypocrisy. Why should any of us (male or female) wear little pink ribbons for breast cancer or little red ones for AIDS? Why not yellow ribbons for cirrhosis sufferers or black ones for people with gangrene? Why not brown ribbons for colon cancer victims or blue ribbons for people who are feeling a bit under the weather?

21

It has been shown that tonsillectomies invariably do more harm than good. Children who have their tonsils taken out are three times more likely to develop asthma, emphysema, chronic bronchitis and pneumonia.

It was always pretty obvious that this would be the case – after all the tonsils are there as an essential part of the body's immune system. Take them out and you reduce the body's ability to protect itself. And, who knows, if you mess with the immune system maybe you increase an individual's chances of developing cancer. The importance of the tonsils, and the recklessness of removing them, was pretty obvious when I first started work as a GP in the 1970s.

22

For some time now I have been having trouble with British Gas ringing my mobile phone. I only turn the damned thing on once a week or so but it always rang within seconds – with someone from British Gas trying to persuade me to do something no sane person would want to do. They ignored my polite requests to stop calling so I told them that the phone number they were ringing was for medical emergencies only. That was a month or so ago. Since then no one from British Gas has rung me.

I wrote my 14th Bilbury book in two months – which is a record time – because I felt uncomfortable about having written just 13 Bilbury books. Antoinette worked flat out to turn the MSS into a kindle book and to create a cover. Now there are 14 books in the series and I can relax a little for a while.

23

We went up to the house in the Cotswolds and found a letter from Severn Trent threatening legal action because I haven't paid a bill they claim they sent three weeks ago and which I saw for the first time today. Sainsbury's (bizarrely, our supplier of gas and electricity) wrote to let me know that I had cancelled my direct debit (which I wrote to them about a month or more ago) and that as a result they would be charging more for our gas and electricity. They say that I can pay by cash so I sent them a cheque.

Looking through the mail I realised that I still haven't received a refund for the excess road fund licence I paid for our Ford Ranger. The payment is overdue by nearly seven months. If I hadn't paid my road tax for seven months I would no doubt be sewing mailbags by now. I have written and telephoned but they take no notice. I will have to write it off I guess.

When we had settled in, turned on the water and sorted the mail there was a bang on the door. A neighbour with a small car demanded that I move our Mitsubishi truck which was parked in the lane outside while we unloaded some stuff. I had made sure to leave plenty of room for a tractor and a trailer laden with 200 bales of hay to pass by quite safely but our neighbour is a true Cotswoldian and he wanted the truck moving because, well, he probably wanted to be a bloody nuisance. So, forgetting where I was, I politely moved the damned truck and parked it on our space. I hate the people around our house in the Cotswolds. They have torn up most of the hedges and cut down most of the trees. I am appalled but not surprised that the council has allowed them to do this. The local idiots cheered the destruction of the trees (and the disappearance of most of the local wildlife) on the grounds that without all the trees the vista was opened up. Well, the vista has closed up again because when they started cutting down trees, Antoinette and I started planting them and the dozens of trees we planted are now high enough to close out the local views. Inevitably, a neighbour came round pleading for us to cut back some of our trees. No chance.

I then discovered that Antoinette had forgotten to bring some antibiotics which she needed to take. It was at this point that the day started to go seriously awry.

'I know,' I suggested, 'You stay here and finish getting the meal ready and I'll drive up to the nearest pharmacy and ask them to let me have a few capsules to last until we get back to Devon.' It seemed sensible enough to me. In the bad old days pharmacists were always allowed to hand over a few tablets or capsules of medicines such as antibiotics when a visitor to their area had run out of pills or lost their supply.

But that was then and this is now.

'Have you got the packet or bottle I can look at?' demanded the pharmacist who, it turned out, would have made a good concentration camp warder or Post Office counter clerk.

I looked at him and tried to work out a way to reply to this without sounding sarcastic. It wasn't easy. 'Unfortunately, I don't have the packet with me,' I replied. 'That's, er, why, er, I need to buy a few capsules.' I told him the name of the antibiotic.

'That antibiotic isn't the drug of choice,' he said.

I pointed out that it is widely regarded as the safest available drug.

'Trimethoprim is usually prescribed,' said Mr Prissy I Think I Know-It-All but Actually I'm A Malignant Twat Who Knows Fuck All about Anything.

'My wife usually has amoxicillin, which usually works,' I explained, wondering why the conversation was sliding out of control into this particular cul de sac.

'What's the name of the doctor who prescribed the drug?' he demanded.

I explained that the antibiotics were obtained from an internet site manned by GPs who don't have time to hold surgeries because they are too busy moonlighting for internet sites. (The only reliable sites selling drugs, by the way, are the ones which are based in the UK and properly regulated. Some of the sites outside the UK are probably in the business made famous by Harry Lime.)

'Your wife should have seen a doctor and had a urine test.'

'But she would have had to wait three weeks, in agony.'

I explained that I am a doctor but that thanks to the General Medical Council's absurd revalidation scheme I could not write a prescription. (The revalidation scheme, an excuse to charge another layer of licensing fees, is another of the EU's contributions to modern life.) And it is the revalidation process which is one of the reasons why so many patients cannot get to see a GP and the main reason why foreign doctors (many of whom are of questionable quality and may not be able to speak English) are being imported in such huge quantities and at great expense. The GMC has, bizarrely, got rid of good British GPs who, though retired, may have been able and willing to work for a few hours or days a week, and replaced them with bad foreign GPs. The foreign doctors, I am told, are given a six week course in the English language, in our culture and in how the NHS works. Six weeks!

I stood in the pharmacy for about twenty minutes, begging, pleading and struggling to persuade this man of stone to bend a little. He seemed to think that handing over four antibiotic capsules (for someone already taking them) would be a huge legal risk. Maybe he thought I was planning to sell them on some bizarre black market.

'The doctors' surgeries are all closed,' he told me as if I didn't know. 'You could telephone the out of hours doctor.'

'But I'll speak to a doctor in Sheffield or Marseilles,' I pointed out. 'And I won't be any nearer to getting some help. If you won't give me a few capsules I'll have to drive back to Devon this evening.'

'You could telephone the NHS helpline,' he suggested.

'But if I do that I'll end up speaking to a 16-year-old who won't know anything or be able to do anything!'

The trouble with pharmacists these days is that they no longer actually have anything to do. In the very old days they used to make up medicines and roll pills. Then they at least had the job of counting out tablets and pouring them into little bottles. Today, they just print out labels and stick them onto packets and so they are desperate to sound important at every available opportunity. (A pharmacist reader wrote to me not long ago pointing out this sad decline in what used to be a profession but is now not even a trade.)

I just looked at him.

The man of stone remained unbending. He was the epitome of smug, sanctimoniousness. He didn't give a damn. He was a rule sucking bastard. People these days are scared of every bloody rule (especially the rules that don't exist). I am, to be perfectly honest, glad that I am nearer to the end of my life than the beginning. If it weren't for Antoinette, I would call close of play for the last time without a moment's hesitation.

I gave up and drove back home to fetch Antoinette and to tell her that we had to go back to Devon. When I got back to the house I found a Volkswagen parked in the middle of our parking space – parked in such a way as to prevent anyone else parking there. The driver, a dog walker, had ignored the white metal posts and the chain which we had to put up.

To say that I was incensed would be a ridiculous remark. It would be like saying that Diane Abbott is half witted.

I had to use every ounce of self-control not to use our truck to push his damned vehicle into the bushes at the side.

Instead, I left the truck parked on the road in such a way that the dog walker wouldn't be able to get into his car through the driver's door. I beeped my horn a lot and since I knew that the dog walker would be in the nearby woods I shouted that I was going to trash his car if he didn't come and move it immediately. Antoinette, who heard me, said I sound like Basil Fawlty on drugs. A local farmer who heard me stopped to tell me that two days earlier another dog walker had parked in the only passing place on our hill. Unfortunately, he had failed to pull on his hand brake properly and the car had rolled all the way down the hill and crashed into a tree. So that cheered me up.

After a while I went indoors to explain that Mr Prissy the Pharmacist wouldn't give me any pills and that we had to drive 150 miles back to Devon. While I explained this, the dog walker snuck back and retrieved his damned car without giving me the opportunity to shout at him or beat him over the head with the iron bar which I had found.

I then found a 'private no parking' sign which I fastened to the chain with thick, plastic cable ties that are difficult to cut. I will plan more defences. Over the years I have learned that the only way to obtain respect in the Cotswolds is to appear to be unpredictable, dangerous and slightly mad.

So then we drove back to Devon.

I see that the Volkswagen boss, Martin Winterkorn, is facing criminal charges in the USA for his negligence with regard to dieselgate. But the case is unlikely to go to court because Germany does not extradite its citizens. So why doesn't Britain extradite the bastard because, thanks to the stupidity of Blunkett, we do send to people to America. After all, Volkswagen's crookery affected us.

The same goes for the boss of Audi who has also been arrested in connection with the emissions-test cheating.

VW (of which Audi is a subsidiary) installed illegal defeat devices to trick official tests of the emission levels of its cars. No one knows how many people have died, and will die, as a result of this fraud but I have little doubt that Winterkorn and Stadler have killed infinitely more people than Dr Shipman and Dr Mengele combined. It is obscene that they are allowed to go virtually unpunished.

Under their 'leadership' eleven million cars had devices fitted that circumvented air pollution laws.

Under EU laws, if an old lady accidentally puts out her rubbish bin on the wrong day she will be subjected to a massive fine. But these bastards go scot free. If there was any justice in the world the two Germans, and their assistants, would be forced into personal bankruptcy and then imprisoned for life. Since there isn't any justice I suspect that both will be merely fined and that the VW shareholders will pay all the bills. The EU doesn't seem to care much when the criminals are German or working for German car companies.

During two World Wars the Germans proved themselves to be as cruel as the Japanese – and as untroubled by the constraints associated with gentlemanly qualities. They did terrible things – twice. And now we are supposed to forgive and forget and to assume that they have, as a nation, all become civilised. I don't buy it. The book which

Heinz Pol wrote when he fled Germany during World War II and went to live in America should be compulsory reading for all Europhiles. Sadly, it is out of print and I doubt if anyone will dare to reprint it. (As an aside I'm never sure: do Germans prefer being called Huns or Krauts?)

There are now so many medical programmes on the television that there is a good chance that if you visit a GP or hospital clinic you will find your consultation being filmed. This is a disgraceful abuse of the doctor patient relationship. There is a programme called *GPs Behind Closed Doors*. No one involved seems to realise that the doctor's surgery door is usually closed for a reason.

When I made TV programmes in the 1970s and 1980s I steadfastly refused to have my patients filmed. I refused even to ask them if they would agree to be filmed.

The doctor-patient relationship is the basis of medical practice.

The General Medical Council has done all it can to destroy the relationship (by removing confidentiality from the relationship) but doctors who are so desperate to be on TV that they will allow their patients to be filmed should be struck off the register and doomed to work in the Siberian salt mines.

Doctors say 'Well, we always ask our patients for permission'.

But that is disingenuous.

How many patients are going to be brave enough to say NO when their doctor asks if they mind being filmed?

If your doctor wants you to agree to be filmed for a TV programme then I strongly suggest that you hand him or her a tube of lubricating jelly and tell them where to put their bloody camera.

The EU has just rejected a directive designed to defend the rights of copyright holders. The result is that theft on the internet can continue as before and the big internet companies such as Google and Facebook can now merrily build their fortunes on the backs of others. The EU has ruled that 'exercising copyright online is a form of censorship and in breach of fundamental human rights'.

I don't know whether to laugh or to cry.

There are now more people stealing copyright material than there are producing it. And the thieves are better lobbyists.

The EU has decided that those of us who create stuff must allow whatever we produce (books, articles, music, art and so on) to be available free on the internet so that the big internet companies can make more money.

In practice this means that the EU has decreed that Google, Facebook and Twitter must be allowed to steal as much as they like – without any payment. The EU's ruling means that in future there will be no professional artists of any kind and some very rich internet thieves. It also means that there will be very little new literature, music or art. That should suit the fascists who hate art in any form.

Did I ever mention that the EU is the most fascist organisation ever invented?

I wish I hadn't burnt all those mis-sized padded bags last year. I have discovered that they make fantastic kindling. I cut them in strips and they work much better than scrunched up newspaper, because they are full of neatly packed and pocketed air. Paper, air and fire make a wonderful combination. I bet they are cheaper than firelighters too.

I have been lucky enough to own four houses with public footpaths running alongside them.

The one thing I have learned is that walkers and ramblers are inveterate litterbugs.

At each of those houses I have been bombarded with rubbish.

And it's still the same.

We get plastic drink bottles and metal drink cans tossed or hurled over our hedge and into our gardens in both Devon and the Cotswolds.

Rubbish bins are ignored.

The worst culprits are the millennial walkers with rucksacks, maps and thumb sticks.

You would imagine that they cared about the world but they don't.

When they've finished their bottle of fresh kiwi juice or their container of drinkable yoghurt, over goes the empty container – to lie festering in the undergrowth in our garden.

The walkers with dogs are the worst.

Most allow their dogs to foul footpaths (oblivious to the fact that the toxocara bug which is a common ingredient of dog shit is a significant cause of blindness in children).

And the 20% who 'pick up' their dogs excreta and put it into little plastic bags are even more annoying. They either hurl their little goodie bags over our hedge or they hang them on one of our trees. At the end of a warm summer day the trees which hang over the footpath are festooned with non-biodegradable bags of dogshit.

And at least two out of three dogs roam off their leads, uncontrolled and uncontrollable. No one cares about the law. Curiously, the worst culprits are the millennial dog owners who have copies of *The Guardian* stuffed in their anorak pockets and Ordinance Survey maps in plastic folders slung around their necks.

Older walkers are well behaved.

As you might expect, it's the millennials who have no respect for anyone or anything.

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Decades ago I invested in something called Property Enterprise Zones. Most of the money was repaid long ago but for complicated reasons largely to do with the tax people there is still a small amount of money invested. I've received a letter from the management giving me two options.

First, I can fill in the usual reams of paperwork and send along my passport, driving licence, gas bill and footprints and they will send me the money or, second, I can put a tick in a box on a form and send it back. The managers will then send my small sum of money to a group of charities. I ticked the box. I checked and found that nearly all the investors had chosen this route. Government red tape has made it easier to give money away than to accept it.

Too many self-proclaimed experts are moronic.

There were the experts who told us that AIDS was going to kill us all by the year 2000.

There were the experts who told us what we should all drive diesel cars.

There were the financial experts who insisted that voting for Brexit would ruin Britain's economy.

And there are the experts who want us to live in houses built out of plastic and fibreboard.

The EU's experts claim that modern houses built out of plastic and fibreboard are better for the environment. They want to get rid of Victorian houses and replace them with ticky tacky boxes that won't last a decade.

Why? How the hell did they come to the bizarre conclusion that ticky tacky boxes are better than Victorian houses made out of brick and wood?

It's madness.

Moreover, they want us to live in ticky tacky houses with ill-fitting plastic doors and ill-fitting plastic windows which let the cold in and the heat out. (It seems that it is acceptable to build houses out of plastic but not to make bags out of the same stuff.)

Absolutely bloody barking.

And typical of the EU's variety of expert.

The inscription on Mel Blanc's grave reads: 'That's all folks!'

The phone went at lunchtime and an Indian sounding fellow, having introduced himself as representing BT Open Reach, told me that they had been watching our computer and they noticed that it had been infected by a number of viruses. He asked me to switch on the computer so that they could help remove the viruses.

Now, I may be getting old and I am no doubt a trifle slow witted these days but I am not entirely stupid.

'Oh dear,' I said, regretfully, and sounding as ancient and as frail as I could, 'I'm afraid we don't have a computer.' He made a vague sound of disappointment.

'But we've got a fridge!' I told him.

'Well, go to it now, open it, climb inside and shut the door!' he instructed.

'Oh, thank you,' I said. 'That's very kind of you.'

Amazing advice BT Open Reach is giving out these days.

When he called, a number came up on the little screen on our phone and after he'd gone I traced it. Ostensibly the call came from a woman called Doreen who lives in Germany. I rang the number and a startled sounding Indian woman answered in English. I told her I was looking for Mildred and she put the phone down on me.

This sort of thing is apparently endemic now in Britain and I know from past experience that even if I spend the day trying to report the call no one in authority will care – even though I could give them a telephone number as a starting point.

There seems little doubt that some of the calls are triggered by information gleaned from Indian call centres run by British companies. The problem is now so bad that I know of at least one person who now refuses to accept phone calls from callers who sound Indian. We have decided to be a little more drastic. In future we won't answer the telephone at all. And we will not be the only people in the world ignoring the phone.

Most of the calls we get are silent, random calls from robots, and picking up the phone to those callers is a huge mistake because the minute the receiver is lifted (or the button pressed to accept the call) the spammer knows that the number is ‘live’. That is why answering a call to dead air invariably leads to a spate of calls from non-existent callers. I gather this is a problem in most countries. Every month in the US spammers make 3.4 billion telephone calls.

Since none of our clever modern telephones has an off switch to silence the ringer (though I have no doubt there is an App somewhere which will do this for me) I took the phone plugs out of the phone sockets. If I want to make a call all I have to do is reconnect the telephone wire.

This really does mark the end of the telephone as we know it.

As an afterthought it occurred to me how wise it is of us to give the Indians several billion quid a year in foreign aid. When they have finished using our charitable donation for their space programme they can use it to subsidise their annoying phone call making service.

School teachers have always had wonderfully long holidays. Decades ago they were paid relatively little because of all the holidays they enjoyed. Today, teachers have insisted that they receive salaries similar to those who work much longer. But it seems that teachers want still more holidays.

I know of one school that now closes on Fridays so that the teachers can enjoy relaxing three day weekends.

And a school in Essex is planning to close for a week in term time so that students can have more time to study real life. In reality, I suspect that the school is actually planning to close so that the teachers, who already enjoy obscenely long holidays, can have another week away from work.

Teachers at a primary school have decided to work a four and a half day week because they find that working five days affects their work-life balance and they are too exhausted to enjoy a full life when they aren’t working. I can hardly imagine the chaos for parents trying to find ways to deal with this self-indulgent nonsense. I bet all the teachers involved are millennials under the age of 35.

I wonder how many of these teachers realise that schools were originally invented to provide somewhere for children to be put while their parents worked.

Educating children was a pretty poor side effect.

25

The Speaker of the House of the Commons has admitted that he is a Remainer.

The Speaker is supposed to be entirely impartial and the price he pays for his position, salary and absurd expense allowance is the inability to share his opinions with the world. Allegedly. But this one, called Bercow, wants to have his cake and to eat it. I suspect that this will make it even more difficult for us to leave the EU.

There is more talk again of it being sexist to buy dolls for girls and cars and cowboy sets for boys. This is dangerous nonsense. Little girls like playing mum. It’s natural and inevitable. Little boys like playing games with cars and soldiers. To pretend otherwise is to fly in the face of knowledge. To try to force a child to behave otherwise is child abuse.

26

The Director of the British Sandwich Association (I wish I was making this up but I’m not) has warned on the BBC that a ‘no deal’ Brexit could lead to a shortage of sandwiches in Britain. What would Project Fear do without the BBC? When I saw this I had to check that the date wasn’t April 1st.

I am amazed that the BBC is still looking for absurd ways to build up Project Fear. This is another good reason not to pay the damned licence fee.

The establishment seems to be hysterical about the prospects of there being No Deal with the Nazis in Brussels. Morons at the Bank of England, HMRC and other parts of the establishment have all warned about the horrors facing us if we have a no deal. What treacherous fools they are. The evidence shows quite clearly that the fear-mongers are lying again.

As an aside I can’t help wondering why the Bank of England is being run by a Canadian who has seemed to me, during the Brexit process, to be more concerned about the European Union than about the people paying his vast salary – the British voters.

Are there really no home grown bankers capable of fucking up our economy, destroying incentives for savers and interfering with domestic politics?

Carney and his chums panicked when the British people voted to leave the EU and have been siding with the EU ever since. Carney, a former Goldman Sachs banker, is little more than a party animal with an expensive haircut and a high opinion of himself. In my view, he is a crappy banker, a crappy climate change specialist and a brilliant self-publicist. If you are looking for a pictorial definition of smugness just look at a picture of Carney. As a banker Carney seems to me to be in the Fred Goodwin class. (And, of course, the irredeemably evil Goldman Sachs has always been a firm supporter of the EU. I have no doubt they've made many tons of money out of Hitler's lasting economic and political enterprise.)

The Bank of England and the many regulators who make life difficult for ordinary men and women would have done us more of a service if they had made more of an effort to punish the incompetents and the deceivers who got rich during the crisis a decade ago. No one went to prison or had their ill-gotten gains taken from them. The only people who lost their money were innocent, trusting employees, pensioners and shareholders. The authorities must have mistaken the phrase 'too big to fail' for 'too big to jail'.

The Prime Minister doesn't seem to like the idea of walking away from negotiations with the EU but if you take away your main negotiating ploy then you have no negotiating power. Negotiating is all about waiting for the other side to blink. If you take away the ability to walk away then you have no negotiating power and you are effectively merely surrendering.

I learnt the power of the 'no deal' when, as a fairly young writer, I was telephoned by the editor of *Woman* or *Woman's Own* magazine (I can't remember which) asking me to write an article quite quickly. The editor offered me £1,000 which was a decent sum of money in those days. I was thinking about how I would approach the commission, and whether I could write the piece in the 48 hours allowed, when the editor, mistaking my silence for part of the negotiating process, increased the offer to £1,500. My silent 'no deal' negotiation had earned another £500.

Some time ago I suggested that in Bernard Ecclestone, Britain had the best negotiator in the world. We should have fired all the civil servants and politicians and hired Bernie to negotiate our withdrawal. Bernie would have fixed up a brilliant deal for us and the EU wouldn't have realised just how badly they'd done until six months after they'd driven off the forecourt.

The unfathomably nasty Lord Mandelson has complained that some Brexiteers hate foreigners.

Not as much as they hate Lord Mandelson, would be my reply.

Why does anyone report what this repeatedly discredited man has to say? Mandleson's behaviour would by now have debarred a less well connected man from polite society. Mandleson is the political equivalent of a piano player working in a brothel who pretends that he is a church organist.

27

Here's an example of just how newspapers can affect our lives in what seem to be small ways – but which are actually life changing.

Many years ago I worked for *The Sun* newspaper as *The Sun* doctor. I wrote articles almost every day for a decade. (It seemed longer.)

I remember once receiving a phone call asking me to write a piece about a footballer called Gazza who had broken down in tears after a football match in which he had been a participant.

The editor suggested I write a piece criticising the footballer for crying in public.

But I suggested doing exactly the opposite.

And so I wrote an article pointing out that it was good for men to cry. I explained that crying helps both the body and the mind.

The story (accompanied by a photo of the weeping footballer) made the front page of what was then the biggest selling newspaper in the Western world.

And, in a small way, it changed the world.

It made it possible for men to cry in public. And it made a star out of Gazza.

But the article could easily have been written the other way round – making it more difficult for men to shed tears.

28

A fairly narrow country road which we use quite frequently in the Cotswolds has become a single track lane because the owner of an electric car has placed a charging point on the edge of the road.

His car now sits there, merrily sucking up electricity from the National Grid and the owner doubtless believes (quite erroneously) that he is saving the planet. In reality, of course, the electricity his car requires is probably being produced by burning coal and diesel oil.

But the real problem is that his electric car now blocks one lane of a narrow, two lane road. And so the owner has turned a busy country road into a one way lane.

The result is that there are huge queues as cars and buses have to take it in turns to wriggle past the blockage.

Every day thousands of motorists waste up to 15 or 20 minutes each in queuing to get past this electric car. And, of course, the localised pollution has been dramatically increased since when cars slow, stop and start again, fuel consumption rises dramatically.

This is yet another example of the stupidity and selfishness of the individual who buys an electric car.

Apart from the obvious question (where do they think the electricity comes from?) electric car batteries require lithium, cobalt and other rare earths which require massive mining investment and much despoliation of the earth. The rare earth metals such as lithium and cobalt which are required for the batteries have to be dug out of the ground. Much of it is apparently dug out of mines in the Democratic Republic of the Congo by children as young as seven, working in a government owned mine, so it is nice to know that the sanctimonious Greens are exploiting children and providing work for so many under 12s. (Some authorities claim that children who are under the age of 10 aren't allowed to work in the mines so that's nice.) An electric car battery needs 18 pounds of cobalt and even more of lithium. That's 1,000 times as much cobalt as is required for a smart phone. Around 10,000 children dig out the cobalt, hacking away in holes and earning as much as $2 a day for their labours.

It has been proven beyond doubt that electric cars use up more energy than ordinary cars – and are, consequently, worse for the planet. It has also been shown that most drivers of hybrid cars never use the electric part of the hybrid – they just take the Government subsidies and fill the car up with petrol or diesel. But, despite all this, think tanks and Greens and quasi would be liberals force governments to encourage the building of electric cars and governments encourage people to buy the damned things by making the taxes on them much lower than the taxes on petrol or diesel vehicles.

And now the Greens want companies to make electric trucks and lorries.

Brilliant.

The whole idea of electric cars is daft. Making them requires massive amounts of polluting energy. And running them requires vast quantities of electricity – most of which is produced inefficiently using oil or coal. Then there is the problem of what to do with all the batteries when they need to be thrown away. And how big will the batteries need to be to power lorries, let alone aeroplanes? And because electric cars are inefficient they use more fossil fuel than traditional cars running on oil.

I wonder how many fans of Tesla (the electric car company) know that the company deliberately stunts its batteries – reducing the range that drivers can travel between charges. If you own a Tesla motor car and want it to travel further you have to pay the company an extra fee to have your battery upgraded. That's nice. (Musk of Tesla seems to me to be an ego searching for a brain in which to land. If I ever shorted a company I would choose Tesla which must be the most overpriced company on the planet – quite possibly the most overpriced company in the history of overpriced companies. One survey showed their cars to be the most unreliable vehicles available. And, of course, most of the cobalt essential for car batteries is dug out of the ground, much of it by children in the Congo.)

And I wonder if any fans of electric cars realise that some petrol fuelled cars have been proved to be 'greener' than electric cars? Some electric cars actually have higher lifecycle greenhouse gas emissions than petrol driven vehicles.

I also note that electric cars are among the most unreliable of all vehicles on our roads. And there have been rumours that some cars have not been subjected to proper brake testing. The lack of reliability is surprising since electric cars have far fewer moving parts than cars with internal combustion engines.

Oh, and apparently some popular electric cars takes 24 hours to charge so if you bought one you would need two unless you only left the house on alternate days. And if you leave it charged overnight in the cold weather the charge all drains out.

How is that for a way to waste electricity and damage the environment?

As for driverless cars – well, a pal told me that of one company's first four driverless cars, one crashed and killed its driver while on autopilot, a second crashed into a parked car while on autopilot and a third burst into flames for no reason whatsoever.

I wouldn't like to be the owner of the one remaining car.

Journalists, who are as potty over electric cars as they were over the equally daft enthusiasm for biofuels are busy telling us all that electric cars are going to save the planet and that the big car manufacturers are going to stop making diesel or petrol driven cars. So, how long will it be before we are forced to buy and drive the damned things either because there isn't any alternative or because we will punished so severely if we dare disobey?

Has anyone realised that, as Antoinette has pointed out, the fact that electric cars are silent will mean that there will doubtless be a good many accidents involving pedestrians.

The fact is that electric cars have been around for 100 years and they don't have a future (unless we are all forced to buy them) because they are a terrible idea.

And the bottom line is that electric cars won't save the planet from anything. Making electric cars (and the batteries they need) requires vast amounts of energy – far more than is needed to produce a non-electric car. And the electricity which electric cars use when they are running is taken from the 20% of our energy supply which is provided by electricity. (This is where it gets really painful for the Greens.) Moreover, despite all the subsidies which have been introduced we still obtain 75% of our electricity from oil, gas, coal and nuclear power. So, three quarters of the electricity which keeps electric cars on the roads comes from oil, gas, coal and nuclear power. Despite all these simple truths Britain and France have announced their intentions to ban the sale of all petrol and diesel cars. India wants all cars to be electric by 2030. And China has announced its intention to phase out the sale of all petrol and diesel powered cars.

The increasing demand for rare earths (used in the manufacture of batteries for electric cars) means that the cost of producing and running electric cars will soar. The environmental cost associated with sourcing rare earths will also soar. It costs more to produce and run a standard electric car than it costs to produce and run many petrol and diesel vehicles. Electric cars have been proven to be worse for the environment than petrol or diesel cars.

Worse still, there is now growing enthusiasm for forcing train companies to run only electric trains rather than trains which run on diesel or, heaven forbid, on coal.

There are over 120,000 electric cars in the UK and the numbers are soaring. It isn't difficult to see why the sales are doing so well and why all car companies are now desperate to join in the rush to produce them. There are massive, unjustified and unjustifiable financial incentives for those who buy electric cars (just as there were once for those buying diesel cars). Electric cars are exempt from vehicle excise duty and congestion charges and there are Government subsidies for some vehicles and for setting up a charging station near to your home (if you don't have a garage or an off street parking space). The charging stations will block the traffic and lead to extra pollution but no one seems to care about that. The electricity used to charge up cars is sold at a reduced VAT rate. There are numerous other perks.

Electric cars are called 'zero emission vehicles' but that is only true if you don't count all the pollution created by the burning of coal and diesel to make the electricity in the first place. The fact is that electric cars are worse for the environment than diesel fuelled cars.

The Greens who support their promotion are smug and sanctimonious and equipped with world class hypocrisy. With their absurd policy of 'less work and more benefits' the Greens take advantage of the gullible and the naïve. They are politically crafty but economically illiterate and an enormous threat to our civilisation.

In California, where far too much weed is smoked, it has been decided that 50% of all ride sharing vehicles must have zero emissions by 2025. The only thing I can say with certainty is that if this goes ahead then a lot of people in California will have to relearn how to ride bicycles or rely on roller skates.

But the scam has spread everywhere and even the big oil companies are investing in electric cars and self-driving cars. This is a waste of time, energy and money. Neither will ever come into being – especially in the UK. (I say this knowing perfectly well how easy it is to look silly by sneering at scientific inventions).

So, for example, when there are millions of electric cars being charged at home every evening there will not be enough electricity left for heating, cooking and lighting our homes, businesses and emergency services. As cars are plugged in every evening so hospitals will close and factories will shut. All this so that sanctimonious hypocrites can drive around in electric cars.

Amazingly, it gets worse.

Our entire electrical supply system will have to be rebuilt to cope with the extra demand. The cost to us all will be phenomenal. Our household electricity circuits will have to be reorganised too – more expense and more expenditure of energy. Goldman Sachs has estimated that we will have to spend $6,000,000,000,000 on power generating facilities and grids in order to provide electricity for all the electric cars the Greens insist we must have within the next decade at most.

Games such as football and cricket were invented to be played for healthy entertainment. Now we pay others prodigious amounts of money to play these same games for us. For a while we used to sit in stands and watch them playing on our behalf. Now we mostly sit at home and watch. But the really odd thing is that today, even computer games have become a potato couch spectator sport

I had to ring the bank. These days all you ever get is a recorded voice. 'Please say yes or no' it says. Naturally, I can never resist being an idiot. ‘Yes or no’, I say. The voice then gets terribly confused. Today, at the end, I said ‘Thank you’ when we had finished our business together. And then I said ‘Goodbye’. I always feel such a fool when I do this.

During the Lord’s test Match this summer I sat on my old Lord’s bench on the cliff top and read old cricketer magazines. (I bought the old, wooden bench during one of the MCC’s regular refurbishments.) I love the articles by C.B.Fry and Sir Home Gordon – who once described Sussex, which had lost seven matches in a row, as ‘suffering seven discomfitures’.

I wonder if I will ever go to Lords again?

London has lost its charm now that it looks like downtown Beirut. And the crime rate doesn’t exactly make it attractive.

I always used to listen to a radio programme called Test Match Special when I couldn’t get to a Test Match. But the programme has deteriorated so much in recent years that it has become something of a joke. The broadcasters who commentate seem to me to be far more interested in themselves than on the match they are supposed to be describing. Test Match Special used to be a great radio programme – it is now a sorry pastiche of the programme it used to be, a weary parody.

I do miss Lord’s. I particularly miss the way the attendants always greeted me with the words ‘Nice to see you again, sir.’ I never believed they recognised me, or were in the slightest bit pleased to see me again. But it was very welcoming and brilliant member-relations.

The heavy lifting in my life is over (as it should be) so for the first time, belatedly, I feel the need to plan the remains of my working life. But there’s the rub. How can I plan when I have no idea just how much remains?

Oh bugger it I’ll just blunder on as before.

Sexism is rife in Britain; outrageous, rampant sexism. In the *Spectator* today I saw this headline: ‘How pleasing to find out that most cave art was made by women’. I bet they wouldn’t have dared to print that with the word ‘women’ replaced by ‘men’. I like the *Spectator* largely because of Taki’s irreverent column but the book pages are full of unreadable reviews of books no one would ever want to buy or read and I suspect no one but the authors of the books concerned ever does read them. And much of the magazine is simply too pleased with itself – and too content with being a part of the Establishment – to be bearable. I think the editors like to think of themselves as daring and rather iconoclastic. But the magazine is far from that. If I had to sum it up with one word the word would be ‘smug’.

Corporate buffoons seem to be falling over themselves this week to involve their companies in the Brexit fiasco.

First, an idiot from Airbus made strange noises about his company leaving the UK if we leave the EU in a way the company doesn’t find acceptable. I have decided to boycott Airbus. I shall not buy anything they make. Actually, it isn’t surprising to see Airbus supporting the EU for this French company has received an illegal £16 billion loan from the EU.

Then an idiot from BMW made some stupid remarks about leaving the country. After hordes of people like me said they would no longer even consider buying a BMW a more senior idiot backed down and said they wouldn’t be leaving the country after all.

And finally the chairman of Waitrose, someone called Sir Charles Mayfield who got his knighthood for flogging over-priced groceries to the undiscerning middle classes has been muttering about the dangers of us not fixing a deal with the EU. So I have decided to boycott Waitrose too. This is not difficult since the company is a rotten one which overprices obscenely and never seems to have what I want to buy. Sir Charles should concentrate on running his company, which seems to me to be heading for the rocks. (When we bought our groceries through Waitrose we paid many thousands of pounds a year more than we now pay Tesco. And the Tesco food choice and service is infinitely superior.)

A French court has given a suspended prison sentence to a vegan who wrote that she had no sympathy for a butcher killed in a terrorist attack.

It is startling to see that someone has been taken to court for daring to express an opinion officially regarded as unpalatable. Heaven help us all and protect us from the French thought police.

(I don’t agree with what was said. But if the French suppress all unacceptable opinions all they will be left with will be the awful Macron.)

It is claimed that 17,000 Labour members have quit the party in the last 3 months because they don’t like Corbyn’s approach to anti-Semitism. That's bollocks. At least 16,990 left because they don't like Corbyn's policy on the EU and on immigration. And it doesn't help that he has a front bench made up of commies and loonies.

But here's a thought: is it remotely possible that Corbyn could be sticking to his anti-Semitic stance to win over the Muslim voters? Surely no politician would be that desperate, that ruthless and that ambitious.

We all get cheated these days. Cheating citizens is the default position for Government departments, councils, utilities and businesses of all shapes and sizes.

When searching the web for information you should be constantly on the look-out for secretly sponsored sites. There are, for example, websites dealing with vaccination which appear to be independent but which are funded by drug companies in one way or another. (At last those who visit my website can be pretty sure it isn't sponsored by anyone. Who the hell would sponsor the stuff that appears on www.vernoncoleman.com ?)

Literary critics have claimed that Agatha Christie's books have shorter sentences towards the end. They say that the shorter sentences are there to add excitement to the last pages for the reader. I disagree. I think that Christie wrote in shorter sentences as she approached the end of a book because she was getting more excited.

29

We watched a film called *Hunger Games* in which a bunch of moody and miserable looking millennials fight to the death. I gather that the film (and its many sequels) have been hugely successful but it seemed to me to be remarkably dull and unoriginal and little more than a juvenile version of a film called *The Condemned* (starring Steve Austin) and the film made of William Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies*. The film was rather a waste of time because the plot revolves around the idea that one of them will win and survive and since one of them is pictured on the front of the DVD cover it isn't difficult to guess who the survivor is going to be. The films were 'stolen' by Woody Harrelson but it was interesting to see Philip Seymour Hoffman looking both amused and, I thought, embarrassed to be taking part in such cinematic rubbish. I'd bought the fourth part but we looked at one another last night and agreed simultaneously that we'd endured enough of this derivative, pretentious garbage. We've put all four DVDs into our charity bag where they will, if the manager has any sense, be put onto the 50p bargain shelf for people who don't care what they watch as long as it's cheap.

(We always try to take stuff to shops run by and for local charities rather than national charities. On the whole, we don't give money to any national charities these days and nor do we give money to charities which raise money on the internet. The big charities spend most of their money on salaries, pensions and expenses for overpaid executives and the smaller, web based charities are often even worse.)

The *Hunger Games* books and films have been massively popular which makes me realise that I am completely out of touch with modern tastes. I don't know what the books are like but the films seem to me to be badly written, badly acted and badly directed. There is, I suppose, some comfort to be gained from that consistency. They are, indeed, so bad that I suspect they all must have received five star ratings from *The Guardian*. (We never watch anything which is well reviewed by *The Guardian*. Our experience tells us that if *The Guardian* likes a film you can rely upon it being pretentious, soporific, earnest and very, very politically correct.)

I bought a bottle of multivitamins and had a devil of a job opening the top of the container. When childproof containers were first introduced, half a century ago, I argued against them. I wrote a couple of articles asking why parents couldn't merely be told to keep pill bottles out of the reach of children and pointing out that the elderly would have a devil of a job opening the damned containers. Well, I'm there. And I'm having a devil of a job opening the damned containers.

Not many people realise just why we are temperamentally unsuited to life within the European Union. The fact is that the EU does things differently. In the UK, things have always been legal unless they weren't. In the EU things are illegal unless they are. The EU's plan is to take over our lives completely with an absurd array of rules and licensing regulations.

I dropped a dongle (aka a thumbstick) today and was worried for an hour (until I could check it out) that all the words might have fallen off.

To make this diary successful I should remove all the opinions and the facts and fill it with details of dinner parties with the Duke and Duchess of Milton Keynes. ‘He wore a splendid green silk creation, daringly low cut at the back, and she wore a dinner jacket designed by the up and coming designer Albert von Trapp. We ate lightly broiled pheasant, served in meringue cases with brandy sauce. The Milton Keynes are clearly much in love. We talked about their forthcoming trip to the North of England where they intend to wave to hundreds of poor people.’

30

Germany is quite a nice country in some ways. It is has given us the black forest gateau, Wagner and the goosestep. It has produced lots of wood carvings and without Germany no one would have ever thought of organising beer festivals.

But that’s not all Germany has produced.

Thanks to Adolf Hitler and his colleagues, Germany has also given us the European Union.

We tend to laugh at the Germans.

They lost two big wars and the England’s ladies team could probably beat them at cricket.

And we smile at the earnest way they get up at 6.00 am to put their towels on the best bits of the beach.

But the German’s aren’t going to be content with having the best sun loungers and the best spots under the beach umbrellas.

They want to take over Europe.

And that’s what the EU is for.

The intentions of the EU and Germany are now indistinguishable.

But that shouldn’t surprise us.

That was always the plan.

And unless the people of Europe rise up and fight for their independence, their democracy, their culture and their future, the Germans will win World War II and they will own Europe.

That was, after all, always Hitler’s plan.

The strange thing is that although we will bomb Iraq, Libya and Syria (none of which is any threat to us) we won’t talk tough to a very real enemy – the EU – which is doing its best to impoverish us, emasculate us and destroy us.

31

We were going to visit Gloucester Cathedral the other day but the weather was nice so we stayed at home. We tried again a few days later. We drove to Gloucester, parked and went to look for the cathedral. We had seen it from outside and we had been there before to check out a misericord, but now all we could see were shops and office buildings.

We stopped to ask for directions.

‘No I don’t think there is a cathedral here,’ said a woman after some thought.

‘Do you mean the mosque?’ asked another.

‘I think it’s over there,’ said a third. ‘Between the mosque and the synagogue.’

We gave up and went had coffee.

I know we aren’t allowed to mention this but I do find that mosques rather spoil England’s architectural appeal. They just don’t fit in well. I wonder how many dreaming spires there are in the Middle East.

I’ve been reading, and thoroughly enjoying, *The Smoking Diaries* by Simon Gray.

I am impressed by the fact that the book is one of the few by anyone involved with the world of show business which does not have a quote from Stephen Fry on the cover. (This is not entirely surprising since it was Fry who walked out of the theatre at the start of the run of a play Gray had written.)

Gray asks why newspapers publish cancer survival statistics and it’s an excellent question. Publishing such statistics isn’t merely pointless – it’s cruel. The fact that is that statistics of this kind are utterly meaningless as far as the individual patient is concerned and are of value only to actuaries and insurance companies.

Gray claims that when Gary Cooper made *High Noon* he was suffering from piles and it was this which explains his rather troubled, anguished, tortured, enigmatic expression which made the film such a classic. If he’s right then Cooper should, perhaps, have abandoned *High Noo*n and made a biopic of Napoleon instead.

And Gray reckons that a chum of Dr Johnson’s wrote a lengthy book about China, describing the country, the people and their customs, in considerable detail. The strange thing is that he managed to do this without ever going there or doing any research. He just made up everything in his book. It rather reminded of the wonderful character in a Wodehouse book who wrote travel volumes after visiting countries for a weekend or, if it was a very big country, a whole week.

And I remember reading that Trevor Dudley Smith (better known as Adam Hall) wrote his amazing books (the best spy thrillers ever written) without visiting most of the countries he described. He used atlases, guide books and bits and pieces of local colour sent to him by readers who posted him things like menus, hotel bills and train tickets.

I was so taken with Gray's book (which is a series of stream of consciousness essays rather than a diary) that I've immediately ordered everything else of his that I can find.

The recent enthusiasm for the ancient climate change theory was created by politicians who wanted to introduce a whole raft of new laws restricting our use of energy so that there would be plenty of oil left for tanks and jet fighters. Predictions and forecasts made by climate change 'scientists' have been woefully inaccurate. For example, back in 2007, we were told that we had five years to save the world. And in 2017, the International Energy Agency said we had three years left. All this wild, scary stuff merely proves that the whole thing is a hoax, an international scam. (I find it alarming that Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth* is still highly regarded. I seem to remember that a British High Court Judge concluded that the film contained nine errors. If I had written a book or film which a High Court Judge ruled contained nine errors I'd want to hide in a cupboard. But Mr Gore's video is still promoted by Climate Change nutters as if it were 'science'.)

For investors, the important thing to remember is that the climate change con is the biggest piece of mass chicanery and deceit since AIDS and seems likely to be longer lasting and more damaging. The scientific support for climate change is about as convincing as the evidence supporting the now clearly absurd theory that AIDS was going to affect us all by the year 2000. (This was the threat supported and publicised by the British Medical Association, the Royal College of Nursing, the Royal Society of Medicine and just every other part of the medical establishment. I got into terrible trouble for opposing them.)

The danger for investors is that the climate change nutters are putting real pressure on companies to change their plans, policies and business plans to fit in with their silly theories. And so the effect climate change has on our lives (and our investments) is not the effect climate change itself has but the effect the climate change nutters have. Those are two very different things.

April

1

The bulb went in my Anglepoise lamp. But when I tried to change the bulb the glass part of it came away in my hand, leaving the metal connector fixed in the lamp. And try as I might I simply couldn't remove the remains of the lamp. So the Anglepoise is now useless.

This leaves me with two problems.

First, I have to find a replacement which isn't a cheap rip off which will fall apart in a week. I daren't order online partly because I know the lamp will look good but won't be and partly because I will waste days waiting for a delivery which never comes. (Why can some delivery companies give an estimated delivery time within a two hour slot but others find it impossible even to give a day when they intend to deliver? It is now quite common for delivery companies to offer a delivery slot which is a week or ten days long. Are people really supposed to stay in for ten days?) And so I'll have to find a retail store selling lamps. That isn't going to be easy.

And second, I have to find a way to get rid of the useless lamp. I can't put it in the rubbish because the council won't take it away. The nearest rubbish dump (sorry, recycling centre) is miles away and it will take me at least an hour to get there and back. And when I do get there the place will either be closed or there will be a queue a mile long or the brute in charge will tell me that they aren't accepting lamps.

In every garage there is a wooden chair with a broken seat or a missing leg (the chair is not valuable and will never be mended) and something in wickerwork which looks half eaten. Now, thanks to the new rules there will doubtless also be an old and useless lawn mower, a TV monitor and a dead lamp.

No one will take away an old TV monitor and if you hire a skip you have to sign forms for a week to confirm that you haven't hidden one at the bottom. The consequences, if you do, are horrendous and do not bear contemplating.

I haven't worked out where I will find a real shop selling decent lamps but I've solved the problem of what to do with the old one. For the time being I stuffed the broken and useless lamp in a dark corner of an old broken down summerhouse. It isn't a danger to animals or birds and it can now lie there, unseen and forgotten, to rust away and rot. I feel like one of those farmers who dumps old broken down machinery in a corner of their farm. And now I understand why they do it.

I wonder who will find the lamp and what they will think when they do?

Antoinette said she thinks that someone will find it in 100 years and be puzzled by it. She is probably right. I can imagine the conversation.

'What do you think this is, Muhammad?'

'It is an artificial leg for a short person. The big bit probably fitted onto the hip joint and the flat bit at the other end was probably the foot.'

'And the hinge in the middle?'

'Oh, that's undoubtedly the knee joint.'

In an excellent, old-fashioned ironmongery shop in the Devon resort of Sidmouth I found a lamp. It isn't perfect but it will probably shine light on the parts of my desk which need to be lit.

It isn't right, however. I'd really like an old-fashioned Anglepoise lamp.'

The truth is that every writer of a certain age tends to work in a certain way. It took me years to wean myself off Word Perfect 5.1 when it became impossible to find hardware that would allow me to continue using the best writing software ever created. I now have four laptops all set up with Word for Windows. I hate the program but it is the only thing readily available. I hate it because it will suddenly turn everything red, inset or triple spaced. I will be typing away then everything will suddenly be in italics, or underlined, and I cannot stop to find out why. It is as if the program were showing off. 'Look, this is what I can do if you will let me. Since you won't, I will do it anyway.'

Who wants this nonsense? Who wants to write in red italics, underlined and inset eight inches?

I still hanker after the old days when I used an Olympia typewriter which weighed a quarter of a ton. If I wanted red writing I flicked a little switch and the ribbon moved a fraction of an inch. It never did this by itself. The only thing that ever went wrong was that the keys would stick occasionally. Oh, and the letters with gaps in them (the 'o', the 'p' and the 'e' were always the worst offenders) would sometimes become clogged. That was the worst thing that could happen. I had a special little wire brush for cleaning off the keys when this happened and it was an easy enough task. Even if I fussed over it the task would never take more than a minute. I could have used a toothbrush but I had a special little brush which the local stationery shop sold me. It had a green handle.

I don't use any of my four laptops for anything associated with the internet. We have separate, dirty laptops which we use for work which requires internet access. Each of my working laptops has files already installed so that when a laptop breaks I can switch to a replacement.

Similarly, I always have a lamp on my desk so that I can study notes while I'm working. And (probably because of my developing cataracts) the lamp needs to throw light directly onto the area where I need it.

Actually, come to think of it my writing habits are legion. I have a cupboard full of moleskin notebooks, artists' pads and hundreds of the pens and pencils which I like. It is a small comfort to know that I'm not alone in this eccentricity. And it has always been a relief to me to know that if I were ever unfortunate enough to go bankrupt, the bailiff would not be allowed to take away the tools of my trade.

The new lamp looks very good. In fact it looks excellent. The only snag is that it doesn't seem to accept any of the LED bulbs I have bought – the ones designed by the EU and carefully filled with huge quantities of deadly mercury.

(The EU's attitude towards mercury goes to prove how stupid the eurocrats really are. They enthusiastically encourage doctors to inject children with vaccines which contain mercury but they have banned barometers containing mercury even though no one, in the whole history of the barometer, has ever been hurt by one.)

I bought four different types of LED bulb and none of them will fit this new lamp. In my naivety I thought that the new EU bulbs would have a universal fitting.

Later, Antoinette popped into town and came back with a large bag. She handed it to me. 'I'm glad to be back,' she said. 'That thing weighs a ton.'

'What is it?'

'Open the bag and see.'

'Is it for me?'

'It is.'

I opened the bag. Inside there was an old-fashioned Anglepoise lamp. The sort that takes proper lightbulbs.

'Where did you find this?'

'In an antique shop!'

'It's marvellous.'

'What are you going to do with the other lamp?'

'I'll put it in a corner of the office.' (The office is where I keep some of the thousands of books which won't fit into my study, and things like photocopiers and printers.)

'Are there any corners left?'

'I'll find one. If there isn't one, I'll make one. A decent room should always have at least seven or eight corners.'

2

I had two strange emails from readers this morning.

The first was from a reader who had read the German edition of my book *How to Stop Your Doctor Killing You*. A couple of days ago he sent me a 1,500 word letter entirely in German. I can speak a little German but not enough to read such a long piece of prose. I asked him to write back to me in English. And today he did so. It turns out that he is a naturopath. He says that every patient he has seen for some time has the ebola virus. He wants to know what to do. I simply told him that he must tell people in authority in his local health authority.

Is he mad? Is his equipment malfunctioning? Could it be contaminated? But what if the readings are accurate? What if the ebola virus has mutated and is alive and breeding in Germany? What if it is currently not producing symptoms? What if it becomes widespread and then changes back to being a killer? All of this is possible.

The second email was from a bookshop owner who runs a store in Southsea, near Portsmouth in Hampshire. He has been running Adelphi Books since 1987 and has over the years paid around £100,000 in rent. The landlord's agents recently sent round an agent to conduct a rent review, as a result of which the landlord proposed an increase of 47.6% from £5,520 per annum to £7,750 per annum. The area is apparently already changing as a result of the fact that there are 'shops which have been lying empty for years'. MPs have been predictably useless, of course, but at least he and other local shopkeepers, who are also in the same bizarre position of facing big rent rises, have now got together to try to fight the rent rises.

With sadness I told the owner that I could think of nothing I could do to help but it did occur to me to wonder why on earth a landlord would want to put up rents by such an extraordinary amount when shops everywhere are shutting and big chains are demanding and receiving rent reductions. Is it possible, I asked, that the landlord wants to force the closure of the local shops so that he can sell the site or build houses (which are much more profitable). I suggested that the bookshop owner contact the *Portsmouth News*, the local paper. I'd have thought it was a front page story. Or at least it would have been in the bad old days.

As I write this there are over 350,000 accountants in Britain all adding up stuff, multiplying stuff and looking at stuff and wondering where the odd penny went. The figures show that we have 12% of all the accountants in the world. (We have even more accountants than the number of Romanians operating car wash services on disused petrol station forecourts). We have more accountants per capita than any other country – by far.

We also have the most complex tax laws in the world. I wonder if anyone thinks these two facts could be related.

Actually, it isn't difficult to see why there are so many accountants. The 702 partners at Deloitte (a big accounting firm) received an average pay out of £832,000 last year. I don't know whether that's laughable or obscene. It's certainly unjustifiable.

I was delighted when my tax form arrived. I was delighted and ran around shouting and waving it. Antoinette thought I'd had a big win on the Premium Bonds (a big win is anything larger than the statutory £25). Receiving the form means I don't have to go online to fill in my taxes. I think they sent me one because I made such a fuss last year. (I emailed all the HMRC bosses demanding that they send me a form because I hate their website.)

Anyone who banks online is technologically illiterate because they clearly do not understand the risks they are taking. Those who are ignorant enough to use financial apps should be taken into care and provided with 24 hour nursing.

My 13th and 14th books about Bilbury were published in the first half of 2018. Both Antoinette and I worked long days to get them both finished. I've worked out that I have written well over 1,000,000 words about Patchy Fogg, Thumper Robinson, Frank and Gilly Parsons and Peter Marshall. Antoinette (aka Patsy) and I both love these people and regard them as the dearest of dear friends.

Bath, a rather sad, down at heel town, once genteel and now unable to decide whether it wants to tiptoe into the 21st century or remain comfortably ensconced in the 19th century, is apparently planning to charge visitors a special, local tax. You have to be high up on the idiot scale to think up anything as daft as this.

We watched a robin pull a worm out of grass, take it to the bird bath and wash it. It then gave the worm to another robin in a tree nearby. So there is a nest and there will soon be some young robins.

Our tame pheasant and squirrels now visit every day for food. They appear at the conservatory door and wait patiently for their supply of sunflower hearts. If they appear together I have to put out the sunflower hearts in two separate piles. Some days they come several times a day. There is nothing on the television quite as entertaining. Squirrels are fascinating creatures. They use their tails for balance and if it rains they use them as small, furry umbrellas; holding them curled over their heads. One of our squirrels behaves like a lunatic. He races round and round the garden for absolutely no apparent reason – leaping from benches to trees and back again and throwing himself about like an acrobat. Antoinette suggests that we call the dotty squirrel 'Diane' in tribute to the apparently cerebrally challenged Shadow Home Secretary. But we decide that this would be unfair to the squirrel.

I am appalled that the Woodland Trust is encouraging volunteers to kill squirrels. I live in hope that the Woodland Trust will run out of money and die.

In Germany, the post office has sold details of which people received mailings from which political parties. No one takes privacy seriously any more. A decade or so ago I wrote a short book about privacy. Reviewers generally agreed that I was paranoid even to think about privacy and confidentiality – let alone to write a book on the subject. 'If you haven't got anything to hide, you haven't got anything to worry about,' was the oft-repeated mantra. Oh dear.

My books now sell far better in the US than they do in the UK. In fact I sell three times as many in America as at home. Could this be because in the UK an author must have contacts in order to sell books whereas in the US a book is allowed to stand on its own two feet? Maybe the Americans just have very good taste. (I am well aware that when we say that someone has good taste what we really mean is that their taste is the same as ours and that they like what we like or what we have made.) Or, maybe it could just be that there are three times as many people living in America as in the UK.

According to climate change fanatics today is alleged to be the hottest April day since 1342. Actually, what the officials really said was: 'Records don't actually go back that far but if they did they would almost certainly definitely show that this was the hottest April day since 1342.'

I reckon that eight out of ten new films go into our charity bag – mostly half watched. If we start an evening with a new film we usually have two or three others on stand-by (or we have a pile of old favourites ready to slip into the DVD player). A new film usually gets 15 minutes to convince us to keep watching. Old black and white films are, of course, always treated with respect and if we find an old film we haven't seen then we always watch it all the way through.

Modern films seem to consist of set pieces without any connecting story. There are no plots or characters because millennial audiences cannot cope with either; cannot manage the effort; cannot summon up the concentration.

Excellent old films we've watched in the last few weeks include:

Caught on a Train, immaculately played by Peggy Ashcroft and Michael Kitchen. (Peggy Ashcroft played the hauntingly loveable crofter's wife in the original version of *Thirty Nine Steps* – my favourite film. She also plays the wonderful landlady in *The Perfect Spy*.)

Mr Blandings Builds His Dream House with the immortal Cary Grant and Myrna Loy.

The Treasure of Sierra Madre directed by John Huston and starring his son Walter along with Humphrey Bogart.

Dark Passage, with Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall (which also stars the truly scary Agnes Moorehead). What an amazingly brave film. For the first 30 to 40 minutes of the film we never see Bogart's face at all. And then for another fifteen minutes we see him only with his face wrapped in a bandage.

Captain Horatio Hornblower starring Gregory Peck. Marvellous but why do the people who put together DVDs insist on cutting the credits from the end? The film ends and that's it. However, I did spot Richard Hearn playing Peck's manservant. Hearn was famous in the 1950s and 1960s for the character called Mr Pastry which he invented. He's pretty well forgotten now but Hearn was probably one of the first big television stars.

The Quiet Man starring John Wayne and Maureen O'Hara. It is John Wayne's greatest film and it is certainly John Ford's most enjoyable masterpiece. For the first time I realised that in this film (and, as far as I am aware, no other except his very early films) Wayne occasionally walks normally, like a regular person. I wonder if it was because he was relaxed, working with Maureen O'Hara for the umpteenth time, or simply because the film wasn't a cowboy and he hadn't got a gun in his hand. Like most big film stars Wayne created his own on screen persona. The walk was fake, the accent and the way of speaking were all deliberately adopted and were stolen from film stars he worked with when he was learning his art. The strange, tippy toe walk was stolen from Harry Carey – a silent film star. Carey's son, Harry Carey Jr, worked with Wayne in many of his great films and I think Wayne maybe felt he owed the son a debt. Wayne was one of the kindest of men. In his last film *The Shootist*, he fussed about who would be allowed to shoot him and refused to allow anyone to shoot him in the back – arguing that an actor who shot John Wayne in the back would never work again. In a way it would have been better for Wayne to have ended his film career by being shot in the back. But Wayne knew that whoever shot and killed him in his last film would be enormously unpopular. And so he refused to allow Ron Howard, then a young promising actor, to shoot him. And he refused to allow the actor who did shoot him to shoot him in the back – as the script and director had wanted. What a gentleman. As an aside, the other day Antoinette bought me a three CD set entitled *Music from the Westerns of John Wayne and John Ford*. It is now, without a doubt, one of my favourite music collections. The CDs contain music from *Stagecoach*, *Rio Grande*, *The Searchers*, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* and the other great movies the pair made. It's only when you listen to the music without the pictures that you realise just how cleverly selected the soundtrack really was. As another aside, Cary Grant carefully devised a screen persona in the same way as Wayne. He created on screen mannerisms and a way of talking that was unique. His clothes always had to be a certain style. So, for example, his shirt collars always had to be same distance above his jacket collars. 'I wish I were Cary Grant,' someone once said. 'So do I,' said Grant, who had at least got part of the way by legally changing his name from Archie Leach, the name he had when growing up in Bristol. That's enough rambling.

Raffles starring Anthony Valentine and Christopher Strauli. The TV series now looks as if it was probably made for sixpence an episode but it's wonderful stuff and marvellous viewing. Raffles is a terrific character; a burglar who eschews violence, sticks to a moral code of his own making and hits people on the head only when it is absolutely necessary. E.W.Hornung based the relationship of his characters, Arthur Raffles and Harry 'Bunny' Manders, on Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and Dr John Watson. (Hornung and Conan Doyle were brothers-in-law.) I wonder how many writers have done that over the years. (I am glad to hear that the awful BBC series about Holmes appears to have come to an end. Am I the only one who thinks the two lead actors appear to be the snottiest and most pretentious members of their profession?)

We watched *Cowboys and Aliens* with Daniel Craig and Harrison Ford which turned out to be *Cockneys v Zombies* or *Dusk until Dawn* but without the laughs or the fun. It turned out to be surprisingly derivative and to have the usual Shane type ending with Craig riding off into the sunset (without the sunset). Not my favourite film. We also watched *Tomorrow Never Dies* the first Pierce Brosnan version of James Bond. The more I see of the Bond movies the more I am convinced that Brosnan was the best Bond. (We recently worked our way through the whole oeuvre but gave up when we got to the Craig films. Even Lazenby seems to me much better than Craig who does a great deal of chest baring, presumably in an attempt to attract gay *Guardian* readers. Not surprisingly, at least one of his outings received a surprising five stars from *The Guardian* reviewer and is, therefore, probably unwatchable.) This time I noticed that at one point Mr Brosnan tried three times to put his gun into his shoulder holster while running. This reminded us of the wonderful moment in one of Lee Van Cleef's spaghetti westerns when the magnificent Mr Van Cleef completely misses his holster when trying to put his gun away after shooting someone. The budget was clearly too tight to allow the director to reshoot the scene and so the moment is immortalised. I am delighted that the producers have no intention of making a Bond film with a woman playing Bond. 'My name is Blonde, Jayne Blonde.' Ian Fleming wrote James Bond as a sexist psychopath with racist tendencies and that is how he should be played. To have a female James Bond would be as daft as having a male Cinderella or a male Little Bo Peep.

If we're going to make our heroes gender fluid (as the phrase goes) then how about John of Arc, Frank Nightingale, Father Theresa, King Victor, Emile Dickinson, Hank Keller and the Pankhurst Brothers? Oh, I can just see the idea of John of Arc going down well with the feminists in France. And who is going to be the first brave theatrical director to cast a man as Lady Macbeth?

Actually, when I stop to think about it, casting a man as Lady Macbeth would make good sense. As Kenneth Tynan once pointed out there is absolutely nothing feminine about Lady Macbeth.

Come to think of it, although modern millennial directors think they are being terribly original and daring when they cast women in male parts, they don't realise (because they are woefully ignorant) is while that Shakespeare's heroines were traditional played by boys it was common for a long time for women to take male parts. Nell Gwyn appeared on stage as a man. Mrs Siddons played Hamlet between 1777 and 1802 and Sarah Bernhardt played Hamlet in 1899. Julia Glover played Hamlet and Falstaff (apparently without any padding) and an American actress called Miss Cushman played Romeo in 1846. In Pantomime, girls have been playing the principal boy for much longer than men have been playing the dame. (In 1889, Dan Leno was the first to play the dame as a comic role.)

We enjoyed a DVD of *The Post* starring Tom Hanks and Meryl Streep. I have read much about Mrs Graham, including her biography, but the film shows how courageous she was in allowing the *Washington Post* to take on Nixon (pre Watergate). Millennials apparently don't like the film because it deals with history and they don't like history. They don't like history, and aren't interested in it, because they aren't in it. However, if they bothered to learn a little they would realise that Kate Graham was one of the bravest and most effective feminists in history.

We were not terribly impressed by a film entitled *Munich*. Directed by Steven Spielberg it's about the farcical and chaotic Mossad killing of the Arabs regarded as having been responsible for the killing of athletes at the Munich Olympics. 'The only blood that matters is Jewish blood' says one of the Mossad assassins. If the film is accurate then the hit squad had more in common with the *Three Stooges* than a professional bunch of killers

Depressed by the awfulness of *Munich*, we decided to watch *El Dorado*, one of the best of all westerns and starring John Wayne, Robert Mitchum and an excellent James Caan. It is a faultless remake of *Rio Bravo* which has Dean Martin in what became the Mitchum role and Ricky Nelson playing the male ingenue. For fun Antoinette and I decided to watch a few minutes of the film in Italian – just to see Wayne and Mitchum chattering in an unexpected language. After watching Wayne in Italian we decided we had had enough but we couldn't get back to the English. So the joke was on us. Still, we enjoyed the film so much that we dug out *The Horse Soldiers*, with Wayne and William Holden starring. It is one of John Ford's most magnificent films. And whatever folk say about Ford, he did make magnificent films.

4

There's an awful lot of cobblers talked about how Britain should treat foreigners from other EU countries. Immigrants from all over the EU are demanding all the rights available to British citizens. We are told, for example, that we should treat French immigrants generously; that we should welcome them into our hearts and give them free money, benefits and access to the NHS. But this doesn't work the other way because the French don't want Britons living in France.

No one in British politics seems to have noticed that the French have made it perfectly clear that Britons who have homes in Paris are unwelcome. Paris now punishes British residents by charging them bigger taxes than the French have to pay. I still find that almost unbelievable – but it's true. If you are a British citizen living in Paris you will be forced to pay higher property ownership taxes than French-born residents.

These punitive and clearly racist taxes are all part of a clear plan to discourage Britons from living in Paris.

The EU says that all EU citizens must be treated equally. But the French don't give a toss. They hate foreigners. And, when it is inconvenient to them, they ignore the EU. Paris is now parochial, institutionally prejudiced and peopled with bigoted fools. I will never go back. The French also charge foreigners an additional 'social tax' even though the EU has ruled it illegal.

Can you imagine the row if it were announced that French citizens living in London would be punished with extra, punitive taxes – just because they were French?

The Remainers would become hysterical.

But that is exactly what is happening in France.

The hypocrisy of the French is breath-taking.

The truth is that the French have always hated the British – largely because they are jealous of our history and our culture.

Maybe it is time to close the Channel Tunnel and build a huge wall along the South Coast of England.

Why should we welcome the French when they clearly hate the British – and don't want us in their country?

5

Antoinette and I went to Exeter today.

I suppose that someone had to be there and fate decided that it was our turn.

It was a disappointing, frustrating and unhappy experience. We found the city dirty and the people hostile.

The first problem was the car park. We drove in and found a space without difficulty (that should have been a warning sign – when you can park in a city centre car park it is often a bad sign these days). I backed into a space and suddenly there was a bang. This puzzled me. The Jeep's sensors hadn't bleeped and from the camera and rear view mirror I could see that I was some distance from the back wall. It turned out that the car park people had put a steel barrier some distance away from the wall. They always erect these at such a height that they cannot possibly be seen or picked up by sensors and they are usually painted in such a way that they merge into the background. I have long suspected that car park managers have some sort of arrangement with body shop car repairers.

Then, when I went to buy a ticket I found that I needed a token. What token? Puzzled I pressed a 'Help' button on the ticket machine and to my surprise a voice at the other end asked me how they could help. I explained. It turned out that there should have been a barrier across the entrance to the car park and at the barrier I should have taken a token. There hadn't been a barrier because someone had stolen it, knocked it off or just borrowed it for some undisclosed purpose. Anyway, the voice from within the machine asked my name (which I nervously gave) and told me that when I came to leave I would simply have to press the 'Help' button to find out what to do next. All this took up about half an hour. (I always suspect that the person at the other end of the speaker is probably in an office a few feet away. This is certainly the case at Ebbsfleet Railway station. The person whose voice comes out of the parking ticket machine sits in an office almost next to the machine.)

As we struggled out of the car park (up the standard foul smelling staircase) and came back into the drizzle we noticed that the barrier at which we should have stopped was lying on the ground some distance away. Cars were streaming through without their drivers collecting tokens. I felt very much like Monsieur Hulot, Jacques Tati's amiable lost soul adrift in a world of inexplicable machinery.

We then wandered into the city centre where, while crossing over what appeared to be a shopping precinct, I narrowly avoided being run over by a bus which seemed to be taking part in a Grand Prix. We couldn't believe it – there were buses screaming along what appeared to be a pedestrian precinct. Having some mail to post (too big for our local box) we looked for and found a post box but it was so tatty that we spent ages trying to decide whether or not to entrust our mail to its ugly jaws.

I hadn't been to Exeter for a long time and I have to say it has deteriorated noticeably and is now extremely uncivilised. The streets were, of course, full of the usual buskers, beggars, collectors and con men. I was pleased that there were not, as far as I could see, the usual annoying chuggers around. Chuggers, invariably seem to harass shoppers for contributions to Greenpeace and Amnesty International and manage to be sanctimonious even though they probably can't even spell the name of the organisation for which they are begging. (Anyone who gives their credit card details to a chugger should be taken into care.) However, an aggressive and fake Krishna monk did the chugger shuffle and thrust at Antoinette a 'gift' of a cheap paperback for which he suggested that a donation of £10 would be an acceptable exchange. Antoinette, who is far too kind for this world, and whose generosity means that she is forever being taken advantage of, emptied her purse and gave the bastard the contents. I had already done the chugger side step and avoided him. Within an hour another con artist with a sob story had managed to fleece

Antoinette (who had been to the bank) of another tenner.

For some strange reason the streets were also full of children who were celebrating the end of their examinations by gathering in clumps on the pavements. They all steadfastly refused to move so pedestrians had to step into the path of the buses screaming past. I couldn't understand why there were so many children around, and why their exams were already over, but later I discovered that someone with more money than sense has apparently given Exeter a university. The children were probably students.

The shopping experience was, to say the least, rather curious. I wandered into the local W.H.Smith and found it was so dark that I had to use a torch to look at the magazines on sale. They did, however, have an impressive collection of periodicals. Who would have thought that there would be a market for something called *Bus and Coach Weekly*? I can see there perhaps being a demand for a quarterly about buses and coaches. But a weekly? I also spotted a magazine called *Airports of the World*. Honestly. I bought a copy of *Boat International* which always amuses me because it is so out of touch with the real world. (It contains pictures of boats like the ones which the obnoxious Phillip Green sails around in. Or is it Lord Green these days? Or the Duke of Green?) I often buy strange magazines but these others were too strange even for me.

I also saw something called *Smartphones and Tablets for Seniors*. There were a whole pile of magazines and books described in that way. How bloody patronising. I think I will start a range of publications for millennials. *Shoe Tying for Millennials*, *Nose Blowing for Millennials*, *Egg Sucking for Millennials* – that sort of thing.

I bought something I thought Antoinette would like and, sadly, this entailed interacting with staff members who had, of course, been trained by The Post Office.

Back out in the city centre, I noticed that in among the empty shops and the charity shops there were three huge department stores: a John Lewis, a House of Fraser and a Debenhams. I'd take a bet that at least one of those is gone within a year and that all three have gone within five years. (Everywhere in Britain, it seems, even the charity shops are shutting. Even with no rates to pay, no salaries to pay and nothing to pay for the foods they sell many charity shops cannot survive.)

Antoinette saw a sign for a music shop and hoped they might sell sheet music. Unhappily, all they seemed to stock were guitars. They had an upstairs so we asked an assistant what was there. 'Guitars,' he replied. I wonder why they didn't call themselves a guitar shop. It was a bit like going into a paint shop and finding that they only sold green paint.

Sadly, the antique replacement Anglepoise which Antoinette bought me hadn't worked properly so I hoped to find a replacement in Exeter. My heart beat faster when I saw a shop in the distance called 'Office'. I thought that sounded hopeful and walked for a quarter of a mile in the rain to get to it. Imagine my disappointment when I found that the shop sold nothing but shoes. I then set off looking for a shop called 'Shoes' in the not unreasonable hope that it might sell office equipment.

However, I did manage to buy an assortment of new lamps to replace the Anglepoise which is now sitting in a large bed of nettles. Not one of them was a real Anglepoise lamp and actually, I bought three because I couldn't make my mind up which would be best. When I'd paid for them I found that two of them were in some sort of sale. The box in which one was packed was so big that the biggest bag the assistant could find was too small and the handles only came half way up the side of the box. 'Could I please have another bag?' I asked. The assistant said that of course I could and she started to put the second bag onto the box in the same way as the first. I took the bag from her, rolled it up, tied it to the two handles of the first bag and used it to make a new handle which I could carry. The assistant stared at this as though I'd just managed to split the atom with a coat hanger.

I went into a DVD shop and picked out three cut price DVDs. I then stood in a queue and waited and waited. I had been there for a quarter of an hour (to me it seemed like a week but I have the patience of a jittery butterfly) and the queue wasn't moving when I gave up, put the DVDs back on the shelf and headed for the door. It was then that I realised that I had been standing in a line of people behind a sign which said 'Selling'. I hadn't noticed the sign which was hidden behind a bloke's head in the same sort of way that I sometimes miss important signs on the motorway because they are hidden by a large lorry. There was a much shorter queue behind a sign which said 'Buying'. I didn't have the heart to join that queue. I waited until I was outside and then I ordered the DVDs on my iPhone. They were cheaper than they had been in the shop.

(It wasn't until I got home that I discovered that all the lamps were made to take those silly LED bulbs which the EU has forced upon us. But I am allowed to fit in proper bulbs as long as they are no bigger than 25 watts. In the end I managed to find some bulbs which we had in stock for one of the chandeliers. The light you get from 25 watts is approximately the same as the light you get if you light a match. But I suppose having the lamp is better than constantly striking matches. The lamp came with numerous labels and warnings including this one: 'The external flexible cable or cord of this luminaire cannot be replaced; if the cord is damaged, the luminaire shall be destroyed. If used incorrectly this product can be dangerous. Young people should be given instruction or supervised to ensure it is used safely.' Wow. Good advice. I certainly wouldn't trust a preening millennial with the task of switching on and off a table lamp.)

After I'd bought my lamps I tottered into a Café Nero and stood behind a teenager for fifteen minutes while she ordered two decaff lattes with lots of foam and double cinnamon sprinkles and two huge slices of coffee and walnut cake and paid by wafting a piece of plastic near to the till. From the badge she was wearing it was clear that she worked in a nearby shop. In a year or two she will doubtless be complaining that she can't afford to buy a house and demanding that the Government pay for one and give it to her.

When we got back to the car park I pressed the button for 'Help' and told the bloke in the machine my name. He told me that if I put in £7 I'd be allowed to leave. This seemed odd since we had only been there for three and a half hours and the fee for four hours was £6 but since we both really wanted to go home, I put in the £7, got my token and we left and joined the long queues of motorists going home from work at 4.30 pm in the afternoon.

'I wonder if we got done?' asked Antoinette as we drove home.

'What do you mean?'

'Oh, fined for going into a bus lane or not going into a bus lane.'

It had been that sort of day.

6

The beginning of the end was sudden.

We were given a date for the first part of the sale process and since I had signed proxies and contracts I assumed that things could go ahead without me. But when I tottered out of bed at 9.30 am I discovered that my phone was awash with text messages and my iPhone was full of desperate emails from the notaire and the estate agent.

Suddenly they all wanted to talk to me about the sale of our Paris apartment. Suddenly I was popular.

No one had bothered to tell me that I needed to give permission by email for the final documents to be signed. Since I had, throughout, refused to speak on the telephone and insisted on doing everything by email (so that there was a record of everything that happened) I had to exchange a rapid series of emails and give permission for the proxy I had signed to be used.

This seemingly simple process was complicated by the fact that the electricity went off as I was firing off emails because the electricity people were trimming trees nearby. This meant that my iPad did not work and could not be charged. My iPhone had 3% left on its battery. I have a Power Monkey somewhere but I couldn't find it. And the charging leads would not fit the charging socket in the car. I sent the confirmation that the documents could be signed just as the iPhone died.

Two fifths of Britons think that multiculturalism has failed. The other three fifths are immigrants on benefits. Rich, metropolitan, liberal luvvies who promote unlimited immigration and globalisation don't see the problems because they live in another world – gated communities and chauffeur driven cars. The problem is that immigrants don't need to assimilate. Their culture is very different to ours and the internet and cheap air travel have made it easy for them to regard the UK as a temporary home – even if they've lived here for decades.

'I don't do stress', an acquaintance of Antoinette's said to her. I can't stand people like that. I put them in the same category as folk who claim to 'know no fear' or insist that they 'have nothing to hide'. Anyone who never experiences stress or knows no fear has either been incredibly well pampered and insulated from the real world or they are psychopaths. You have to be stupid and ill-informed to 'know no fear'

Antoinette and I have decided that we will never go abroad again. Our passports run out in two weeks but we aren't renewing them. There are plenty of places in Britain that we have not seen and in future any travelling we do will be on our own island. We don't need to go abroad to be abused. It will feel odd to be without a passport for the first time in 60 years. But, hey, it will be harder for crooks to steal my ID. This policy makes us very green and environmentally we are now head and shoulders above almost everyone in Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and other similar organisations.

Here are our reasons for giving up our passports:

Travel has become unbearable. On television it always looks marvellous: peaceful and delightful. You board your train and people serve you with cups of tea, glasses of wine and sandwiches. You read and look out of the window at marvellous countryside going past at just the right speed. But it isn't like that, is it? To leave the country you must first make your way past the unbearably rude border guards. (I never feel surprised that foreign border guards have not read the instructions on the inside of our passport but always slightly aggrieved that British border guards have clearly not read it either.) I realise that our borders need to be policed. But is it necessary to hire only psychopathic morons to do the policing? There are queues everywhere. The queues for first class are the same as the other queues. The reality is awful. We are constantly told that the EU has made travel easier. My experience is that international travel today is infinitely harder than it was 20, 30, or 40 years ago. In fact, it was considerably easier to travel to the Continent of Europe 50 or 60 years ago than it is today. Millennials and EU fanatics won't understand it but the whole process of going abroad is now far more painful and inconvenient than it used to be. And once you are through the border patrols, there is the problem of actually travelling to your destination. I have refused to travel by aeroplane since they took to confiscating my Swiss Army Penknives and my nail clippers. (I thought this absurd since within moments of my boarding the aircraft they invariably handed me a set of stainless steel cutlery – with a much longer blade than my penknife.) When an airline pilot is too frightened to carry passengers equipped with nail clippers and nail files then I don't want to fly. I used to like trains when they were properly run but these days Eurostar is awful. To be honest I cannot understand why people put up with the lack of respect and dignity which now seems to be an integral part of travel. On those occasions when I have tried to initiate protests I have always been staggered by the reluctance of travellers to stand up for themselves.

There is no need to go abroad to meet foreigners. Most of them are here in Britain. If I really want to mix with lots of foreigners, and to find myself struggling to make myself understood, I will simply go to London for the day. If I want to be abused I'll go to Scotland.

Foreign cities are awash with security forces. If the terrorists don't kill you then the soldiers will. The French have a well-deserved reputation for cowardice but Paris has become a temple to cowardice. The authorities have been so cowed by terrorists that much of the city is patrolled by teenagers carrying automatic weapons. The safety catches are off and their fingers are on the triggers. In addition to the armed teenagers, much of the city is barricaded with concrete and with wire barriers. Don't bother going to Paris – just visit a local army camp and peer through the wire.

The British are now widely hated. The Spanish don't want us in their country. The French hate the British (and have a special tax for foreigners). All those countries which are Muslim hate the British because they don't like the fact that we have been waging war on Muslims in the Middle East and Afghanistan. The Germans hate us because we beat them twice in wars and because we want to leave their beloved leader's beloved European Union. (By leader I mean Hitler rather than Merkel). It is probably not politically correct to mention it but the Germans, and the Japanese, have proved that they are not innately civilised people. The English really are the only civilised people in the world.

There are lots of places in the UK to enjoy. And to get to them we don't have to through border control posts. We would like to visit the Yorkshire Dales, revisit the Derbyshire Dales and take a closer look at the East Coast of England. We might even take our lives in our hands and try Scotland. I wrote a book about our adventures in England (it is called *Vernon Coleman Tours England* since you are kind enough to ask) and much enjoyed the travelling, the research and the writing. So we'll stay in Britain, thank you very much. But we will, whenever possible, try to avoid trains (which seem to be run by people whose major skill lies in thinking up the wrong sort of excuses for the right sort of delays or the right sort of excuses for the wrong sort of delays) and we will certainly be keeping away from London, the world capital of knife and acid crimes.

It isn't the fear of terrorists or thieves or murderers or aggrieved beggars that has stopped us travelling; it is, rather, the insistence of The Bureaucracy that it must protect and interfere with every aspect of our lives. It is the stern and humourless guards who stand in bulletproof boxes at every frontier. In Paris it is the concrete barriers and the barbed wire which scars a city where politicians are so fearful that they have destroyed that which they would protect. It is impossible to be a traveller now. We are all tourists. We are just fodder, profitable parcels of potential wealth to be passed on until we have been sucked dry and can be returned to whence we came.

One result of this decision is that we have a lot of surplus suitcases.

A friend of Antoinette's was unfortunate enough to come home and find that her home had been burgled. She telephoned the police and then sat back and waited for someone from the constabulary to turn up. But, while she waited she decided that she didn't want strangers to see the house in such a mess and so she tidied up. By the time the police finally did turn up they found that everything that hadn't been stolen had been put back into its proper place, and every surface had been cleaned, dusted and polished.

Jack Trevor Story was an English writer whose books include *The Trouble with Harry* and *Live Now, Pay Later*. He wrote 4,000 words a day and took only two or three weeks to finish a novel.

In his memory, The Jack Trevor Story Memorial Cup is an award run by Story's friend Michael Moorcock. The winner receives prize money which is given on condition that the entire award must be spent in a week to a fortnight and the recipient must have nothing to show for it.

Belisha beacons are named after politician Isaac Leslie Hore-Belisha. They could have so easily been called Hore beacons.

Pity they weren't.

Actually, come to think of it, do we still have Belisha beacons anywhere? I haven't seen one for ages.

If you believe in Free Trade (or Fair Trade for that matter) you have to believe in Brexit. The EU's system of tariffs, and its neo-colonialist approach to African countries, has resulted in increased poverty, famine and death. Africa has been devastated by the European Union. You cannot believe in Free Trade (or Fair Trade) and the European Union. The two are incompatible. And why do we need any outside body to allow us to trade? Why does our Government have to negotiate 'trade deals' on our behalf? Why can't businesses in the UK just sell to Germany, China or the USA without the Government getting in the way? There is no reason for this interference other than the fact that politicians and bureaucrats like to exercise control.

We were stuck in a traffic jam and I found myself watching an elderly man putting out his rubbish boxes. He struggled. His driveway was quite steep and the wheelie bin nearly got away from him. He brought down the various recycling boxes and bags in a wheelbarrow and needed two trips. I knew that when the bins had been emptied he would have to manoeuvre them all back up his driveway.

In the bad old days, before progress took over, and the EU forced us to jump through their absurd and utterly pointless and expensive recycling hoops, people used to keep a metal dustbin at a convenient spot near to their back door. The bin men came round once a week, collected the bin, emptied it and put it back more or less where they'd found it. Occasionally, they didn't put the lid back on properly. From time to time a bin got dented. But what a brilliant service it was.

Now, thanks to the dictates of some unknown, unelected and brain dead eurocrat, we all spend a big chunk of our lives struggling to meet the ever-changing requirements of the recycling gestapo.

According to the local media, prospective councillors claim that during elections the hot issue on doorsteps is not Brexit but rubbish collections.

That's not much of a surprise.

Brexit is a nebulous, frustrating and confusing issue.

But rubbish is a real, practical problem.

What surprises me is that there are clearly still many people who do not realise that the two issues are tied together.

Our rubbish problems were caused by the EU because it was the EU which created the laws which force councils to introduce bizarre rubbish collecting rules. Impractical eurocrats thought it would be a good idea to do good things with waste (as it is) but they brought in laws forcing councils to obey daft recycling rules without bothering to work out what to do with all the recycling. And so once again the EU created expensive and damaging chaos.

In theory, Brexit will (or could) free councils to go back to collecting rubbish once a week. We could do away with the nonsense of recycling which is a huge fraud (up there with biofuels and electric cars and the demonization of plastic) and one which costs Britain billions of pounds every year.

I wish they would.

I have the utmost contempt for the whole recycling business which has made life miserable for millions – for no good reason.

(It is also a security risk. People who put old envelopes or correspondence into their recycling box risk having their identity stolen. The safest way is to burn. The next safest way is to shred and then put into a black bag together with coffee grounds, bits of spaghetti and used litter from the cat tray.)

Recycling enthusiasts encourage us to wash out bottles and cartons. This wastes water – one of the most valuable resources on the planet. (If you doubt this compare the price of a gallon of bottled spring water with the price of a gallon of petrol.) Millions of people around the world are dying of thirst while we are encouraged to waste water washing out jam pots and baked bean tins which will end up being tossed onto rubbish dumps in Poland or Vietnam.

Recycling enthusiasts relentlessly approve the production of endless numbers of plastic boxes and containers. The irony is that the recycling industry is now one of the biggest users of plastic on the planet.

Recycling enthusiasts tell us to put our waste food in boxes outside our homes. The inevitable result is that the number of rats in the country is increasing dramatically. And the rats are bigger, tougher and more dangerous than ever. Also, when we bring in our waste food boxes, our hands are inevitably contaminated with other people's bugs. The recycling industry is a major cause of serious infection.

The recycling nonsense was introduced by eurocrats in Brussels in order to take closer control over our lives.

They forced local councils to take part by fining them millions if they did not take part in their mad schemes. Bizarrely, inexplicably, Britain has now signed up to the EU's recycling targets for 2035 and Britain has signed up to obey the rules – even after we have left the EU.

(Oddly enough, although the Muslim Mayor of London is a fervent, nay rabid, supporter of the EU and opponent of Brexit, the capital has the worst recycling rates in the country – with some parts of the Muslim capital of Britain failing by huge margins. What irony there is in that! London voted 'Remain' because many of the people living there are foreigners who have a vested interest in our remaining serfs to the Nazi eurocrats and absolutely no interest in English or British sovereignty.)

Now councils have found ways to make money out of recycling. Last year seven million people in the UK were fined for putting their bins out at the wrong time. And in some parts of the country (notably Wales) people who do not sort their rubbish properly are fined.

But I bet your sanctimonious council didn't bother to tell you that in the last six years the UK spent £900 million (and a good deal of energy) sending waste over to Europe where it was quietly burnt. Our recycling used to be sent, at great expense, to the Orient. We used to send 55% of our recycled paper and 25% of our recycled plastic to China even though carting all that stuff such long distances could hardly be described as 'green' or 'environmentally friendly'. But now the Chinese have decided they don't want our rubbish. This is no great surprise because the vast majority of the plastic we throw out cannot be recycled, or is far too expensive to recycle, and so the Chinese couldn't do anything much with it except burn it and the fees we were paying wasn't enough for the inconvenience and the pollution.

However, we still send most of the recycling waste to other Asian countries because we don't know what else to do with it. Naturally, no one bothers to work out how much energy is wasted in transporting our waste half way round the world. Nor does anyone announce how much it costs to collect the stuff, load it onto ships, unload the ships, cart the stuff off by lorry and pay someone to deal with it at the other end.

So, bottom line, what happens now to our carefully sorted recycling material when we've finished washing it and sorting and putting it out for the recycling lorry?

What do the sanctimonious recycling gestapo do with all those trays and sacks of sorted rubbish?

Well, some of it is dumped in landfill sites, some of it is burnt and some of it is dumped in the sea.

My long-term, trenchant criticism of the whole recycling nonsense has been justified by the recent discovery that British recycling, carefully washed and sorted and collected and transported is now not even being burnt. It is being dumped in Poland where it is unloved, unwanted and a very expensive tribute to the stupidity of the whole recycling nonsense.

Councils everywhere send round their stupidly expensive recycling lorries and gullible citizens spend hours washing out their empty jam jars and yoghurt cartons and collecting all their bits of uneaten food and bunging them into little plastic waste caddies. And it is all a waste of time.

(Since naming and shaming is the modern way, I wish someone would name and shame the person who thought of equipping lorries with a beep which comes on whenever the lorry starts to reverse. I would bet that gadget has done far more damage than good. Actually, I'll rescind that. I don't approve of all the naming and shaming that is going on – particularly that done by the bullying Government.)

Since it has to be collected and transported it is clear that our recycling efforts are actually doing far more harm to the environment than if we just kept it at home and dumped it in unused Welsh mines.

When we leave the EU we ought to be able to stop all this recycling nonsense and get back to once a week bin collections.

That's something we should all cheer.

It would be safer, cheaper and much, much better for the environment.

But, as I have already pointed out, the Government, and the sanctimonious recycling do-gooders, have promised that we will continue to obey absurd EU laws.

Our privacy is threatened by every contact we have. Clubs, banks, brokers, credit card companies, associations, companies and government departments all collect information, share it and sell it. Sometimes they tell you what they are going to do but often they don't. It is now nigh on impossible to remain private, unless you live in a cardboard box under a hedge.

Occasionally, I spend an hour or two deleting my details from websites – and trying to cut down the emails I receive. This won't remove my data from the internet (nothing will) but it will help reduce the amount of stuff that is stored, shared and distributed.

What a pity it is that we don't still shoot traitors, collaborators and quislings.

The word quisling is taken from Major Vidkun Quisling.

Major Quisling was a Norwegian army officer and diplomat who ruled Norway on behalf of the German occupying forces during 1940-1945.

Quisling helped the Nazis run his country and ended up in front of a firing squad.

What, pray, is the difference between Quisling and the treacherous, traitorous Remainers who are still unable to accept that they lost the referendum and unwilling to accept the will of the people?

By attacking Brexit, and supporting the European Union, the despicable Remainers are damaging our country's future just as much as traitors such as William Joyce (Lord Haw Haw) did in the Second World War.

If these despicable bastards have their way we will end up being owned by the eurocrats. We will have to obey the EU's laws and we will have no voice and vote. Our children will have no culture, no country, no pride, no self-respect and no identity. Whatever freedom we thought we had will have disappeared.

Every Remainer who speaks out in support of the Nazi designed EU, who questions the will of the British people or who attacks Brexit is a modern day traitor; a 21st century quisling.

Let me remind them that under British law 'treason' and 'high treason' are still serious offences.

When Brexit is over I would like to see the most vocal Remainers taken to court and charged with high treason. ('High treason' is defined as treason which takes place when we are at war. Since we have been at war since the 1990s and are now definitely at war with the EU, there is no doubt that the Remainers are guilty of high treason rather than the common or garden variety.)

Maybe they won't look quite so smug then.

Meanwhile here is a slogan for them: 'The EU: Designed by Fascists, Built by Fascists, Run by Fascists, Loved by Fascists'. You could just about fit that onto a button badge. It would certainly fit nicely onto one of those placards they love to wave.

And here are two things we must remember:

First, the EU wants the Brexit negotiations to fail. (They are, however, terrified of Britain leaving without a deal of any kind. Without a deal, Britain would be strong and a real threat to the EU.)

Second, the regiments of EU staff (all of whom are unelected servants) are desperate to humiliate Britain. They have to humiliate Britain in order to protect their own futures. If Britain succeeds in leaving the EU with dignity then the EU will collapse as other countries follow in search of their own independence and freedom. And tens of thousands of overpaid, underworked, arrogant EU employees will have to find proper jobs (though they will doubtless be comforted by their massive, inflation proofed pensions – which we will be paying for evermore.)

The Japanese are threatening to take their companies out of Britain if our version of Brexit does not meet their approval.

This is fantastic news.

Goodbye Japanese companies!

Go away.

We don't want your companies or your shoddy Japanese crap.

Without Japanese companies cluttering up the countryside, Britain can concentrate on making good quality products.

Sayonara!

(I would just like to remind the Japanese that the Japanese stock market reached its peak in 1989 and now, 30 years later, is still a third below that peak. Some success story.)

Some Labour MPs are threatening to do what they can to stop any soft Brexit deal. This is fantastic news because it means Parliament will be forced to accept a hard Brexit – no deals at all. The people of Britain want a really hard Brexit. So three cheers for the Labour Loonies who are promising to give us one and who are too thick to realise the full consequences of their threat.

7

The book *Fat Chance* by playwright Simon Gray is riveting.

The phrase 'easy to read' is used as a patronising dismissal by many reviewers but actually anything that is 'easy to read' is 'hard to write' and Gray is a master at disguising the effort required to write beautiful prose. (As an aside, the fact that 'easy to read' is 'hard to write' is why tabloid writers are paid ten times as much as broadsheet writers. And it is this financial disparity which explains why broadsheet writers hate tabloid writers so much.)

Fat Chance is about a play that Gray wrote in the 1990s called *Cell Mates*. The two lead actors were Rik Mayall and Stephen Fry and after a few days of the London production Fry ran away, leaving the production in a state of complete disarray.

It is clear from the book that Gray and Mayall were furious with Fry, who appears to have absconded because of an unfavourable review in, of all places, the *Financial Times*. Since Fry had said that he didn't read newspapers at all it seems curious that he would have seen a notice in a newspaper better known for its share price lists than for its reviews.

Fry was advised by Gray to tell everyone that he had suffered a nervous breakdown, though it seems that this was to assuage the play's producers and insurance company. Rightly or wrongly, my impression is that Fry panicked when he perceived himself as the weak spot in a production where he had expected to be the star. He was, perhaps, outshone on stage by Rick Mayall.

I have always been slightly surprised at the extent of the career that Fry has managed to create for himself out of virtually no talent at all. The best thing he ever did was the Jeeves and Wooster series he made with Hugh Laurie and I thought those programmes were marvellous despite Fry's contribution rather than because of it. The rest of Fry's career appears to have consisted of little more than clumsy, rather embarrassing cameos and a host of television appearances. He has, however, succeeded in acquiring a vast array of chums and admirers within the media world and is, therefore, now guaranteed pretty good notices for everything he does.

The odd thing is that although absconding from a theatrical production in the West End was undoubtedly the most famous thing Fry has done his otherwise extensive and rather laudatory Wikipedia entry glosses over the incident in a couple of lines. Am I wrong, I wonder, in guessing that Fry's pals have been busy editing the entry to ensure that Fry comes out of as a victim rather than the self-centred cause of a good deal of pain? It was, perhaps, the most selfish and unforgiveable single act in Thespian history.

I thought Gray's book *Fat Chance* one of the best show business biographies I've ever read.

8

Our energy company wants to fit smart meters. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that we are being harassed to have one fitted. They say they will take a morning or an afternoon to do this so it is fair to assume they will take a whole day. Setting up the appointment will take another half a day. Stuff that. The evidence shows that smart meters save little or no money and merely erode our privacy and security. The official, expected saving is now reckoned to be around £11 a year. And if the smart meters are hacked (as they doubtless will be), some anti-social 14-year-old with autism or Asperger's will have control of our energy supplies. Having a smart meter will also enable the Government to cut our consumption when the next energy crisis comes.

The other worry is that everyone with access to the computer will be able to tell when we're away on holiday. (Not that we are going away at all. But in principle.)

My enthusiasm faded still further when I read this letter in the *Daily Telegraph*: 'Every morning I record my smart meter readings on a spreadsheet. I can compare daily, weekly and annual usage and can see the results both numerically and graphically. I am pleased to be able to claim a saving of £10 a year by reducing the setting on my hot water thermostat.'

And then I read that more than 1.5 million expensively installed smart meters aren't working properly. Apparently, if you have a smart meter installed but switch energy suppliers the meter just stops working.

The truth is that the Government is selling 'smart meters' on the idea that they will, by their very presence, save us all money. This is, to be polite, a bare faced lie. Smart meters will only save us money if we change our habits and therefore cut down our consumption of gas and electricity. The idea is that we will see that when we turn the lights on, the electricity consumption goes up. Brilliant.

Oh, and there is another reason why the Government wants us all to have a smart meter. In the United States, law enforcement agencies are trying to obtain information from energy companies without warrants. However, the Seventh US Circuit Court has handed down an opinion that the Fourth Amendment protects energy-consumption data because the data reveals details about private, personal activities in the home that would not be available to the Government without a physical search. I suspect that when everyone in the UK has a Government approved smart meter, the Government will allow law enforcement agencies to obtain all the information they require. And we won't have any privacy conscious judges to protect us.

Incidentally, the whole smart meter fiasco is due to cost taxpayers' £11 billion (each meter costs at least £374). Personally, I'd rather have a cheque for £374 and keep my old meters.

An 'entirely independent' survey of EU citizens conducted by the European Union showed that 103% of citizens are enthusiastic about the European Union – claiming that being members of a huge European family makes them feel happier, healthier, stronger and safer.

We motored to Cheltenham and for a number of reasons we decided that this will probably be the last time. (I love the word ‘motored’. It’s wonderful old-fashioned. It reminds me of a time when you could travel for a whole mile without coming across road works.)

The road from Stroud to Cheltenham was, as it always seems to be, a series of traffic jams. The journey of about 15 miles used to take about half an hour. These days it takes at least an hour and three sets of temporary traffic lights seems par for the course. There is hardly anyone actually doing anything at these hold-ups, of course, and it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that the local authorities are doing everything they possibly can to keep taxpayers fuming and burning fuel. Masons and plague ridden peasants, working with hand tools, could build a cathedral in the time it takes the local Highways Department to mend a pothole.

Once in Cheltenham the suspicion grows.

To our surprise the car park we normally used was very quiet – with masses of space available. Since the schools are still closed until Easter (they will be open next week but be shut again for the jolly May Day bank holiday just two weeks after that – hardly time for the five-year-olds to get their laptops up and running) I would have expected the car park to be full. I soon found out why it wasn’t.

I was about to feed £4 into the parking machine when I noticed that the charge had gone up. But, craftily, instead of increasing the price (which would have been instantly noticeable) Cheltenham council had reduced the hours of parking for the same fees. So, £4 used to buy 4 hours but now bought 3 hours. I had to put in £5 to rent some tarmacadam for 4 hours. Apparently the council, which made £2 million out of its car parks, had put up its prices throughout the town by between 33% and 45% – simply by reducing the time bought for a standard price.

This is utter madness, of course.

The town of Cheltenham, once grand and imposing, is without doubt in decline. The town centre is rather seedy, full of drunks, drug addicts and beggars and looks incredibly scruffy. The remaining shops are often empty of customers. I can’t remember the last time I saw a queue (the Post Office doesn’t count). Putting up car park prices when a town is dying is surely a sign of terminal insanity.

When local businesses and others protested, a council spokesman apparently claimed that the costs of parking had been increased to encourage more people to use bicycles and buses. I’m surprised they didn’t also blame Brexit, terrorism and money laundering.

I notice that those who are employed by the council are not expected to use bicycles or buses since selected employees can purchase ‘town centre parking permits at reasonable rates’.

And, of course, putting up the price of parking for unimportant people such as business folk, shop owners and staff and shoppers will mean more space being available for important, pampered, over-paid, well-pensioned council staff.

Within minutes I had seen four empty shops.

Still, the Council probably thinks it is a good thing for people to stop spending their money in shops – they can give it all to the council instead.

For some reason Cheltenham now seems to be the English centre for tattoos. Everyone in Cheltenham has a tattoo. It won’t be long before the police will be arresting people who don’t have tattoos. ‘Why don’t you have a tattoo, sir? Do you have something against them? Do you not know that there is a by-law ruling that visitors to Cheltenham must have at least one tattoo visible at all times?’

I don’t understand the growing enthusiasm for skin markings.

It was fine for sailors to have an anchor on one arm and I Love Mother on the other. The anchor was there so that if they drowned they could be identified as sailors and the I Love Mother was there so that the finders would know they were a good fellow who loved their mum. But why so many millennials cover their bodies with tattoos is quite beyond me. I really don’t understand millennials and I have given up trying. They belong to a different species.

Apart from being full of tattooed folk, beggars and drug addicts, the town is run down. The shopping centre is packed with citizens anxious to share details of their financial situation with complete strangers. ‘Got any spare change?’ are the four words most commonly heard in Cheltenham these days. The shops seem to be closing and the pavements appear to have been designed to offend the toe, the eye and (in the rainy season) the sock. In the town centre I saw two men with a wheelbarrow full of tarmacadam tipping the stuff onto paving slabs that had sunk a little. The inevitable result was an unbelievable mess.

It is always sad to see a town in terminal decline and we had pretty well decided not to visit Cheltenham again when we got back to the car and found something stuffed behind a windscreen wiper. At first I thought it was an advertising leaflet but it wasn’t: it was a parking ticket. This was something of a surprise since when we’d arrived I had rented £5 worth of barely adequate tarmacadam and had placed the ticket on the dashboard. When I checked I found that the ticket had slipped off the dashboard when a door had been closed and had ended up on the driver's seat. The ticket I had bought was still visible but it was no longer on the dashboard. In the business this is apparently known as 'flutter'. It's a common way to make extra money out of motorists.

(I usually check that the ticket is still in situ but on this occasion I'd been busy helping Antoinette take a pile of books and DVDs out of the car to take into the nearby Cat Protection Shop and I hadn't looked.)

I emailed the council to let them know that I had a valid ticket. I could find no instructions on the ticket that it had to be displayed in any particular position. And nor did the ticket have any sticky on the back. Cheltenham do not put any sticky on their tickets and I can't help feeling that this is probably to help ensure that they can hand out loads of fines.

The parking people at Cheltenham sent an automatic acknowledgement of my email but that was all. I sent the email again. And again. And all I received were automatic acknowledgements. I began to suspect the whole thing was just another tax gouging exercise to help sustain a greedy and bloated bureaucracy.

I hated doing it but it wasn't worth the time and energy involved to fight them so I sent the bastards a cheque and we decided we will never visit Cheltenham again.

I doubt if the council car parking staff will give a damn. They ought to because if the town suffers then eventually their pensions will disappear. Two customers who between them spent thousands of pounds a year in local shops (and have contributed a good deal to local charities) will take their custom and their largesse to another area. And, of course, the council car park will earn a few hundred pounds a year less. The council staff neither care not understand that if enough people behave as we will then their jobs and pensions will be in jeopardy.

The car park ticket scam is the bottom end of a rotten justice system.

Three weeks after the incident I received an email from Cheltenham council. It was signed 'Yours sincerely, Parking Services' and was in response to my email indicating that I would like to challenge the parking fine I'd been given for allegedly not having a ticket to park. The email says that they will not accept my challenge against the notice because I had paid the fine. I had, of course, paid up because I hadn't received a proper reply to any of my emails.

Well over 500,000 parking fines are issued every month in the UK by councils and private companies. Many of them are as unjust as mine. And councils wonder why town centres are now full of empty shops. Town centres are being killed by greedy car park owners as much as by absurdly high local taxes and the internet.

The problem, of course, is that council employees are divorced from and, in the short term, not reliant on commercial activity within their town.

I saw a T-shirt with this slogan: 'I may be old but at least I got to see the good bands.'

I was trying to work but I kept going back to Simon Gray's memoir *How's That For Telling 'Em, Fat Lady*. (I segued from one volume of his autobiography to another).

Gray, a playwright, seemed to have had a love-hate relationship with Harold Pinter who was, of course, regarded as something of a God in theatrical circles.

The two playwrights seemed to argue a good deal and Gray tells in this book how he and Pinter, and their respective wives, had another of their arguments while they were having dinner in London. When Pinter tired of the row, Gray ordered two taxis – one for each couple. Wanting to make sure that he could leave first, with more dignity, Gray asked for his taxi to arrive immediately but told the taxi company to send Harold Pinter's taxi in twenty minutes time. However, Pinter's taxi arrived immediately and Gray's taxi didn't turn up for half an hour.

This, thought Gray, was merely more evidence of Pinter's God like status.

When putting Gray's book back onto the appropriate shelf I noticed John Fothergill's books. Inn keepers and publicans have, from time to time, published their memoirs – none more provocatively than John Fothergill whose evocative and stimulating accounts of his years managing the Spread Eagle Hotel in Thame, the Royal Ascot Hotel and the Three Swans at Market Harborough appeared in *An Innkeeper's Diary*, *Confessions of an Innkeeper* and *My Three Inns*. They are marvellous books so, I fear, almost certainly out of print.

Theresa May, our other political representatives and over 1,000 highly paid civil servants hired as negotiators have apparently rolled over and handed our money and our future to the Brussels based revivalists sustaining the Nazi dream. I never thought we would have a worse Prime Minister than Blair and Brown. But Theresa May has managed it. She is a ditherer not a leader, chronically weak and persistently dishonest. It seems it will take longer for her to get us out of the EU than it took Britain and America to defeat Germany, Italy and Japan in WWII. In a just world she would be hung as a traitor. Our negotiators might as well have stayed at home and put up some shelves in the spare room. We were better off back in the days of rotten boroughs when MPs were rich enough to be independent.

The strongest position in any negotiation is given to the person genuinely prepared to walk away. It has to be believed. We could and should have but we didn't plan for walking away.

Why did we bother fighting World War II?

Between 50 and 80 million people died to hold back Hitler – that was about 3% of the 1940 world population.

Tragically, they were wasted lives.

Not even the disgusting Remoaners should be pleased with this fiasco because when the dust settles it will be clear that Britain is in a far worse state than it was before the negotiations started.

(They shouldn't be pleased – but it's a fair bet that the Remoaners will be gloating and will enjoy the sight of Britain being humiliated. They have, after all, consistently betrayed their country and cheered the efforts of the enemy. I don't think they really care what happens as long as Britain dies.)

From a position of great strength our civil servants and politicians have managed to negotiate an abject surrender. Britain is now in a worse position than would have been the case if Neville Chamberlain had knelt to Hitler in 1939 and handed him the UK and the Crown Jewels on a golden platter.

Presumably, we must now all prepare to practise the goose step and perfect our Heil Hitler salutes. Germany rules!

An elderly man I know, a war veteran, is incandescent. 'The Krauts started the War. They bombed our cities. They killed and they destroyed. And after the War we forgave them. We gave them support and help. We were suffering, we needed money, but we gave them vast sums to rebuild their country. And now the Kraut bastards are desperate to destroy us. As for the Frogs! They are faithless, they always renege on deals and they are entirely untrustworthy. But they hide behind the skirts of the Germans and join in their attacks on us. Why don't we tell them all to bugger off?'

You can tell how badly things have gone, by the way, by watching how the banks have now pushed up the value of sterling against all other currencies.

The bankers almost all hated the idea of Brexit. They saw it as potentially dangerous to their obscene profiteering. So when it looked as though Britain might really leave the EU, they pushed the currency down.

The bankers hated the idea of a rich, strong, free, independent Britain.

They wanted Britain to remain subservient to the eurocrats.

They saw our subjugation as more profitable for them.

Now that they can see that although the Brexiteers won the referendum they have lost the war, the bankers are celebrating.

These are dark, dark days.

There are more British citizens now living and working in Australia than there are in the whole of the EU. An extraordinary 1.2 million Britons have left for Australia since Britain started the slide downhill engendered by its membership of the EU. Amazingly, quite a number of Australian politicians, who must all be brain dead, are opposed to Brexit. The reality is that Brexit is the best thing that has happened to the prospective Australian economy for decades for it should result in more trade between the UK and Australia.

Those who remain in the UK try to ignore the present, forget the past and ignore the future. Britain now has the worst health service, worst police, worst educational system, worse judicial system, worse transport system in the civilised world. We have less freedom than anywhere else, we have more CCTV cameras than anywhere except possibly parts of Monaco and we are just about the only so called civilised country where people who try to protect themselves and their property will end up in prison. The average Londoner is caught on CCTV over 300 times a day, Facial recognition technology means that the police and other government departments can quickly and reliably discover your whereabouts at any given time on any particular day.

Membership of the EU has given us nothing for our money. But it has destroyed almost every aspect of our world. I am constantly filled with dismay at the ignorance of those who blindly support such an organisation. A tiny fraction of our economy involves exports to Europe. What the hell are the Remainers worried about? Our exports to the other EU countries have been falling for years. Most EU countries will struggle to survive if we refuse to do business with them. We can play hard ball with the EU – so why don't we?

The truth is that Brexit didn't become a mess by accident.

Brexit became a mess by design.

The traitors who have created the mess should be hung, drawn and quartered.

(For the record, this involves hanging the individual until nearly dead. Then, while they are still alive their intestines are removed and burnt while the eviscerated citizen looks on. The final act in this particular opera is to cut the victim into pieces. The quartering, incidentally, often involves chopping the traitor into six pieces: four limbs, a torso and a head.)

Before the Brexit vote, the Treasury forecast that there would be an immediate recession if the British voted to leave the EU. The official politically biased figures were later shown to be ‘off’ by £100 billion. In commerce that is the sort of error which leads to bankruptcy, failure and dismissal. In the Treasury it is the sort of error that leads unerringly to an index-linked pension and a knighthood.

This was, of course, part of the ‘scare’ propaganda (‘Project Fear’) which was produced by the Government, assorted civil servants, the BBC, the Bank of England and most of the British Establishment.

They were so, so wrong.

The Treasury forecast that GDP would fall by 1.4%.

In fact GDP grew by 1.2%.

I wouldn’t trust the clowns at the Treasury to look after our housekeeping bills. (The pompously named Office for Budget Responsibility is equally incompetent and seemingly incapable of producing reliable forecasts. The OBR is described as independent but it was set up by the Government and we pay for them so in my book the word ‘independent’ is something of a joke.)

While the Treasury was making a cock up of its predictions the former CEO of the London Stock Exchange, Xavier Rolet (he is French and used to work at Goldman Sachs – the world’s most disgusting company), was predicting that Brexit could result in 232,000 City jobs being lost.

This was bollocks too.

Employment in the financial sector has grown since the British voted to leave the European Union.

Let’s hope M.Rolet has buggered off back to France to help Macron fuck up the French economy.

9

I have always thought that the way that margarine type products are sold is a confidence trick.

The ads suggest that if you replace butter with ‘Nocow Lowfat Spread’ then your cholesterol level will drop and you will probably live to be at least 150. (There is no acknowledgement of the fact that lowering your cholesterol may not be a good thing.) But the fact is that using ‘Nocow Lowfat Spread’ will not, of itself, lower your cholesterol. To me, the implication is that if you eat whole tubfuls of the gunk then your cholesterol will fall because the stuff contains magical healing properties. The reality is that if your cholesterol falls it will not be because you are eating ‘Nocow Lowfat Spread’ but because you aren’t using butter.

A kind reviewer of my Bilbury books wrote: ‘I love Venom Cloeman’s Blueberry books. I have read all 15 of them.’ A less kind reviewer of *Mrs Caldicot’s Knickerbocker Glory* wrote that she was giving the book one star because it was nothing like the film. (It was *Mrs Caldicot’s Cabbage War* which was filmed.)

10

Here is my favourite ever review on Amazon. It is a review of *Edwin Drood* by Charles Dickens. As most people probably know (and all fans will definitely know) this was Dickens’s last book because he died before he could finish it.

‘I am a Dickens lover and I adored this book but was totally disappointed by the ending. It seemed unfinished.’

On the same day that I saw this I spotted this one star film review: ‘I haven’t seen this but it doesn’t sound very good.’

I know how it feels. I have received several one star reviews which contain the words ‘I have not read this book’.

What an odd world it is now.

11

A major study has shown that climate change warnings have been grossly exaggerated. Indeed, it is now clear, as I have been saying for longer than I care to remember, that the whole climate change nonsense is just another piece of pseudoscience being promoted by another well financed ‘scare industry’. Moreover, climate change conspiracy theorists make the mistake of confusing their fake science with caring for and protecting the environment. And they don’t give a damn how their demands affect people.

Nevertheless, the climate change myth is still so popular that anyone who publicly questions it will likely be barred from BBC programmes and university lecture halls.

Climate change scientists who make a good living out of the climate change myth actively argue that climate change is the biggest threat to mankind. They are a notable part of the modern ‘Fear Game’ – keep the people frightened and they won’t ask too many questions.

Well, they would, wouldn’t they? They’ve become famous. And all those long-haul flights to conferences in exotic parts of the world would stop if the myth was not sustained.

Climate change is, in almost every respect, the 21st century equivalent to AIDS in the 1990s.

The AIDS threat was deliberately blown up by homosexuals as a ruthless public relations campaign designed to gather attention, sympathy and support. Aggressive homosexuals spread misinformation widely – causing massive and unnecessary concern among millions of ordinary people.

During the 1980s it was not considered acceptable to question the widely held (but unsustainable) belief that AIDS was about to kill us all. I was repeatedly banned from television and radio programmes because the scientific truths I wished to share were considered politically unacceptable.

I seem to remember listening agog as the British Medical Association and the Royal College of Nursing both forecast, quite seriously that we would all be affected by AIDS by the year 2000. These organisations created panic, mass fear and hysteria and were responsible for suicides. More people were killing themselves because they were frightened of AIDS than were dying because they had AIDS. Representatives of both organisations attacked me frequently and robustly when I disagreed.

(Incidentally, I have always objected to the word ‘gay’ to describe homosexuals. First, it has removed a beautiful, old English word from the language. Second, most of the homosexuals I have known are not gay in the proper sense of the word. Third, I don’t understand what is wrong with the word ‘homosexual’. It is accurate and explanatory and seems perfectly appropriate. Allowing homosexuals to hijack the word ‘gay’ makes as much sense as, say, allowing politicians to call themselves ‘honest’.)

Today, lobbyists and vested interests and crooked scientists have again hyped and created a money-spinning apocalyptic threat.

They changed the threat from Global Warming to the considerably more ‘wishy washy’ Climate Change when it became abundantly clear that the world wasn’t getting warmer.

Then, after some bad weather, those promoting the Global Warming myth took to calling it Global Chilling. If we have some sunshine they will go back to calling their fake phenomenon Global Warming.

12

Politicians may start out with good intentions but, driven by vanity and a lack of imagination, they quickly become obsessed with the self-serving idea of obtaining office, power and the money that goes with it. They are then ‘lost’ because they are terrified of losing the power and the money and so they never do any of the things they went into politics to do. Their hopes and aspirations are fixed on the millions they will be able to make when they quit politics.

We like to think that these people must know what ‘they’ are doing but most of the time they don’t have the foggiest idea what is going on and nor do they give a damn. They are too busy feathering their nests to know which way is up or what day of the week it is. The incidence of crookery is higher among politicians than among any other group.

When their political careers are over they are driven by a search for honours and quango positions to keep them in status and cash.

The only good politician would be the one who didn’t give a damn and was ruled only by his soul – either because he had independent means or because he lived like a monk and had a simple lifestyle.

The trouble with such a politician would be that he would be constantly resigning.

13

London is now second only to Bangladesh for acid attacks.

These are race crimes.

How many white people threw acid back in the 1950s or 1960s?

Thanks to the immigration policies forced upon us by the EU, London is now officially the most dangerous city in the western world.

There are more murders in London than in New York.

Am I the only person to remember that the Metropolitan Police is now run by the appalling Cressida Dick.

Remember her?

She was in charge on the day when the unfortunate, innocent Brazilian electrician was shot in the head eight times by ‘mistake’. He was travelling to work on the London Underground and he died. He was on the carriage floor, cowering and unthreatening, and he was shot eight times by mistake. Somehow, Ms Dick was exonerated. She was in charge but like all public employees there was no apparent expectation of responsibility. If a doctor had made a mistake of that magnitude he would have been struck off the medical register – if not sent off to sew mailbags. But Ms Dick was promoted. That tells me more than I want to know about how the Metropolitan Police is run.

However, I'm not sure we are even allowed to think such thoughts these days.

14

Antoinette and I used to love London and had a numerous of favourite walks. So, for example, we used to love the walk from Whitehall (where I was a member of a 19th century club) up to Paddington, travelling via Jermyn Street, the Burlington Arcade and Bond Street. We loved that walk on a slightly foggy, slightly drizzly evening. But the London I remember is now as distant and as much a memory as the London of Dickens. I realise now that I prefer to remember London in black and white or sepia. And I prefer cars and the weather that way too. There was more dignity, more respect, more stability, more decency and more honour in those old black and white days. London today is full of foreigners who know nothing about England. The Burlington Arcade, wherein I once bought fancy waistcoats and bowties from Fisher's, is awash only with oligarchs passing through from the Ritz to Bond Street and picking up a few outrageously priced cashmere sweaters on their way.

I wonder if the current mayor, Khan, could be trying to destroy London so that it can be recreated as a Muslim city. After all, whoever controls London can pretty much be said to control England.

A good many daft liberals still believe that Muslims want to be integrated into British society. I have been warning for years that this simply isn't the case. For example, the Founder of the Muslim Research and Development Foundation has stated that husbands should not be questioned about hitting their wives, that homosexuality is an evil crime and that western women should submit to Allah and wear the niqab.

What a delight it will be to see the Labour, Liberal, SNP and Green Party women dressed up in their niqabs, peering through their letter box slits, and walking softly and meekly behind their menfolk.

To be honest, it is a joy to come and I can hardly wait.

I bet it's now illegal to think that too.

15

The absurd new railway line, known as HS2, upon which the Government is continuing to squander untold billions is acquiring more and more highly paid employees. There is still no sign of anyone laying down any railway line but the wastrels running the world's biggest white elephant have so far managed to spend well over £4 billion. Most of it has gone on salaries. There are 318 morons on salaries of over £100,000 – and quite a chunk of them on over £250,000 a year. Those figures mean that one in four employees are earning more than £100,000 and scores of them are earning more than the Prime Minister. If that isn't an obscene waste of taxpayers' money then I really don't know what is. The whole HS2 project is enormously patronising since it assumes that everyone must come to London as it is the only place that matters.

It took craftsmen 167 years to build Notre Dame Cathedral. (They started it in 1163 and didn't finish it until 1330.) Several generations of stonemasons, carpenters and other specialists worked on the building.

It now seems likely that the HS2 railway line from London to a field outside Sheffield could take longer – and cost much more.

I can't help thinking that Britain might be a happier, healthier place if some of the money earmarked for the unwanted HS2 railway line were spent on improving our roads. Fuel duty alone adds up to £25 billion a year and that's about three times what is spent on building and repairing roads.

Or maybe, instead of building HS2, we could build a new cathedral somewhere.

16

Today I received in the post a beautiful hardback copy of *Sniping in France* by Major Hesketh Vernon Hesketh-Pritchard DSO MC FRGS FZS. It cost me 1p because the seller from whom I bought it seemed unaware the early hard back copies of this book usually go for far more money. Indeed, the book, which describes the author's experiences during the First World War, is still considered a standard work of reference by snipers. It is full of surprising English humour and references to Fritz and Hans. At one point in the book, Hesketh-Pritchard describes how he recommended putting a dummy soldier up in a tree and controlling it with strings. When Fritz and Hans shot at the dummy and cheered when it fell they inevitably revealed their own whereabouts and could be picked off by the English snipers. (I have no doubt that Remainers would now have us apologise to the Germans for tricking them.) Although it was first published in 1914 the book is packed with valuable and timeless advice.

The Major sounds very much like a hero taken from Boys own Paper magazine (I recently bought a few of those – which make marvellous reading). He was a professional explorer who went on an expedition to Patagonia in search of the giant sloth. He wrote a book about the adventure in a book called *Through the Heart of Patagonia* (I've got an early edition of that book on order).

In 1914 he was the moving spirit behind a Private Member's Bill which reached the Statute Book early in 1914 and which had as its objective the protection of grey seals. Through his friend Arthur Conan Doyle, Hesketh-Pritchard took up first class cricket and played for Hampshire – for whom he was enormously successful, taking more than 100 wickets in 1904.

And with his mother he wrote a number of novels about a Spanish brigand called Don Q. The hero of these books as been described as 'brave, sardonic, revengeful, chivalrous, cruel and gentlemanly'.

When the First World War started Hesketh-Pritchard, who was an excellent shot, was sent to France as a sniper. He was then put in charge of training all the army's snipers. He wrote his book *Sniping in France* while on leave. Four years after the War ended he died of an obscure form of blood poisoning.

In a letter from France he wrote about courage: 'the cold kind of courage that counts the cost, reckons up the moral obligation to proceed and, once in, goes on with it'.

What a gentleman, what an Englishman, what a hero.

17

Here's another example of a man who knew how to be a gentleman.

Sir Pelham Warner was a cricketer and the founder of *The Cricketer* magazine. At the end of the Second World War he wrote a book about Lord's cricket ground and invited Viscount Ullswater to contribute a chapter. Unfortunately, the good lord made one or two errors about cricket history. But Sir Pelham refused to make the required corrections. Why? 'The mistakes are minor ones; and of infinitely less importance than good manners.'

The Government has spent £800 million on a new border security system which logs every entry into and out of Britain. Sadly, the Home Office admits that the new system has lost track of 600,000 foreigners who should have left the country and who are now, presumably, still in Britain clogging up the roads and managing to claim benefits even though they aren't officially here.

18

Our gas and electricity supplier has kindly sent us a new demand. On the back of the envelope they explain where the money goes. They are kind enough to tell us that 7% of our bill goes to subsidising 'green' energy suppliers and 6.8% is profit. That's quite a profit. Why on earth does the Government allow utility companies to make nearly 7% pure profit on selling gas and electricity?

19

The Government, pushed no doubt by the Labour Party, the Liberal Party, the wretched and loathsome Greens, the BBC and everyone who reads that awful organ known as *The Guardian*, is now apologising again to the Commonwealth for our past sins. No one from the Commonwealth ever thanks us for dragging them into civilisation, do they?

Here's a simple rule for life: Never hurt anyone who doesn't deserve it. And two key questions for life: 'What are you going to do about it?' 'What do you want me to do about it?'

Here's my personal definition of disappointment.

When I was a small boy I was desperately keen on cricket. My father bought two tickets for an Edgbaston Test Match. The tickets were a birthday present. A colleague of my father's was a big cheese in the Warwickshire Club. He promised to take me into the pavilion and introduce me to the English team.

I caught chickenpox. I couldn't go.

We had our telephones plugged in lest case our grocery deliver driver rang to say he was lost. Inevitably, it rang but it wasn't the delivery driver. 'This is your phone service provider,' said a recorded female voice. 'Your internet service will finish today. If you want it to continue, press one.' Naturally, I put the phone down and closed the connection. I then unplugged all our landline telephone receivers. I hate these people.

On the same day I had the usual string of hoax emails including one telling me that my transaction for $1,500,000 had been approved.

There has been much publicity in recent days given to the risks of colon cancer. Some of the publicity has revolved around an angry sounding BBC newsreader who has colon cancer and who apparently believes that earlier screening might have spotted his cancer earlier.

Maybe.

But there are two things I have not seen mentioned anywhere.

First, colon cancer screening involves a colonoscopy – which means having a tube pushed up the colon so that the examining doctor can check for abnormalities. This is not without risk. The anaesthetic which will be needed can kill. And if the pipe perforates the bowel wall that too can be lethal. These are important points which should not be ignored.

Second, I have not seen anyone mention that diet is a major cause of colon cancer. And the one food that is known to cause cancer is meat. If you don't want to develop cancer of the colon then you can dramatically reduce your chances of getting it by avoiding meat – particularly red meat.

If you want to see the evidence for this you can see abstracts of 26 scientific papers showing the connection between food and cancer in my book *Food for Thought* which is available as an ebook on Amazon.

I discovered today that sign language, used for the deaf and the hard of hearing is not a universal language. Unbelievably, most countries have their own version of sign language. This means that a deaf person travelling abroad has exactly the same communication problems as someone who is not deaf. Innocently, I had always thought that there was only one sign language and that the deaf would at least have the advantage that they could move about the world being able to communicate though a universal sign language. But no, there is a Tower of Babel for the deaf, too.

If I were younger I would take a bunch of Englishmen over to Romania and start a car wash there. There would be quite a market for my business because all the Romanian car washers are working in the UK.

At least your birthday won't be on Friday 13th this year, said Antoinette, knowing how much I dislike Friday the 13ths. 'No,' I said, with genuine relief. Only when I saw the grin on Antoinette's face, did I realise.

There is a story that diabetes can be cured with a TB jab. If this is true then it will be, I suspect, because the immune system is stimulated. Thirty years ago I wrote about using tuberculosis as a trigger in the treatment of cancer. Why do things take so long?

A decade or two ago public parks were largely populated by the very young (with mothers in attendance) and the very old (with walking sticks and newspapers). Everyone fed the birds. Today, parks seem to be populated largely by millennials drinking lager out of cans and officials in uniform arresting anyone who wanders in by accident and tries to feed the birds.

Our garage at our house in Devon was built as a stable and it is not big enough for either of our cars. Well, actually, it probably would be if I put all the gardening equipment outside. But the cars live outside.

Last year I noticed that the tree underneath which I parked the Bentley was very popular with seagulls, pigeons, crows and jackdaws. As a result the Bentley was constantly covered with bird droppings. On the other hand our Mitsubishi truck, which was parked in the courtyard, was free of bird droppings. (I am no longer embarrassed at having bought a Japanese vehicle. I would feel much more embarrassed if we had a car which had been built in the EU since this is now clearly enemy territory.)

So this year I switched the cars around. But the Bentley is still the car which attracts the birds. They are clearly targeting it on purpose. Is it because it is dark blue and therefore more visible? Or are they communists?

Am I the only to have noticed, by the way, that seagulls always look healthy? Pigeons, crows and most other large birds frequently look rather scruffy (as though they've flown through a hedge backwards) but seagulls always look to be in show condition.

After a spring time storm the crows and the seagulls help by picking up the smaller twigs on the lawn, which they use for nesting material.

Today I saw a snowflake family walk by in the lane outside. There was Mum and Dad and a baby in a push chair. And there were five pit bulls – all out of control; all straining at the leash. At least the dogs were on leads – something which makes a change. The chances of that baby growing up to school age with five pit bulls living in the same house are slim indeed. It's more likely that the baby will end up as lunch one day. Despite their encumbrances both Mum and Dad had their mobile phones in their hands; ready for texting. Why do people bother to go for a walk in the country and then spend their time looking at a little screen? There's so much to see: animals, birds, trees, bushes, flowers, ferns, fungi and insects. Oh, and if you walk in the country and don't look where you're going you're quite likely to trip over a rock or put a foot into a rabbit hole. Still, that always means a nicely profitable lawsuit, doesn't it?

Welfare was doubtless created with good intentions but it rewards and encourages idleness and gives incentives to young women to have babies and never plan to marry or work

I was absolutely astonished to read that some schools are thinking of banning children from taking smart phones to school. I was astonished not at the proposed ban but at the fact that kids are allowed to take their phones to school at all. Is it any wonder that illiteracy and innumeracy are booming? Britain already leads the world in social media – and trails it in everything else. When will an educationalist realise that there is a link.

Moreover, the optimistic, the quick, the sensitive, the eager, the loyal, the quietly dignified and the innately respectful are all game to be destroyed by the rabid hounds of social media. On social media there are no rules and if truth is there then it is an intruder; present by accident rather than design. In future no sensible people will go into politics or express views on contentious topics. Thanks to Facebook and Twitter, our future is in the hands of prejudiced, bigoted extremists. All those folk who have Facebook pages are supporting a foul and dishonest organisation.

20

Am I the only one to have noticed that the Greens are the biggest polluters on the planet? They use the internet endlessly, they heat their homes and offices and they cool them with air conditioners, they drive the most polluting cars and most of them eat meat. (Electric cars are environmentally unsound to make and obtain most of their electricity from the burning of coal and diesel.) What a pitiful bunch of sanctimonious hypocrites the Greens truly are. I hate Greens. I agree with everything they pretend to believe in but I try to live the life whereas they just talk about it and practise their sanctimoniousness. I know I have two huge motor cars but we use them hardly ever and we never fly anywhere. Worse still the Greens are stupid. I heard a bunch of them recently boasting about having brought us pesticides, herbicides, chemical fertiliser and genetically modified organisms. Great. I'd keep quiet about all those things if I were one of them. The Greens, keen supporters of Hitler's European Union, are unreconstructed fascists and because most of them do not understand who or what they really are, they are dangerous fools.

I discovered today that on the Greek island of Cos (where Hippocrates used to live) citizens who had valid reasons for ending their lives used to be invited to state their reasons in public. If they were sufficiently convincing then a local magistrate would give them a cup of hemlock and invite them to drink it in public.

21

I have no doubt we will soon be repeating our apologies to Germany for having fought back during World War II. Why do we apologise so much? Britain gave the world civilisation, democracy, Shakespeare, most useful inventions and the majority of interesting sports. Where do the apologies end? Perhaps we should apologise to the Italians for not welcoming Julius Caesar more warmly. And then there were the Normans. We really weren't polite when they came visiting.

22

Antoinette bought me a pile of copies of the *Sidmouth Observer and Visitors' List* from during the First World War. (It was, of course, known as the Great War since they didn't realise that the Germans were going to start another one.)

The front page contained nothing but display advertisements (a variation on *The Times* which used to fill its front page with small ads) and it was interesting to see that during the War life continued in Devon with surprisingly few deviations from normality. (The paper used to include a list of the names of all the visitors in the town – presumably so that they would be tempted to buy a copy of the paper to take home.)

I spotted one or two advertisements which were templates for the 'If you don't buy this magazine we'll shoot this dog' front cover which *National Lampoon* made famous.

So, for example, I particularly liked this advertisement from J.Lashbrook & Sons in the issue dated Wednesday September 15, 1915.

'J.Lashbrook and Sons respectfully invite their customers to assist them to give employment to the whole of their staff by placing their orders early. J.L& S have received new materials and pattern bunches for the coming season and will esteem the favour of an early visit that we may not have to discharge either of our assistants.'

Wonderful. 'If you don't buy a blouse we'll sack Hermione.'

I wish I knew if the advert worked.

Here are some more extracts:

From the *Sidmouth Observer* June 23rd 1915

'Apart from the dangers of explosions, which, by the way, are less frequent than is generally supposed, gunpowder mills are exceedingly healthful places. Such a thing as a workman dying of consumption is practically unheard of, the explanation being the constant breathing into the lungs of dust containing charcoal, sulphur and salt petre is beneficial.'

From the *Sidmouth Observer* June 23rd 1915

'On June 7th 1915, Flight Sub-Lieutenant R.A.J. Warneford RN, who was 23-years-old, attacked a Zeppelin in the air. He chased the Zeppelin from the coast of Flanders to Ghent and dropped six bombs onto the Zeppelin from a height of one or two hundred feet. The airship exploded. The force of the explosion turned the Morane monoplane to turn upside down and stopped the engine. The pilot succeeded in righting the machine but had to make a forced landing in the enemy's country'. However, after fifteen minutes he was able to restart his engine and returned safely to his aerodrome.

It was believed that the airship had recently taken part in a raid on the English coast. Warneford had only received his pilot's certificate three months earlier.

The next day King George awarded Warneford the Victoria Cross and the President of the French Republic conferred the Cross of the Legion of Honour on Lieutenant Warneford.

A few days later Warneford was having lunch in a restaurant. He was congratulated by an eminent French gentleman. Warneford responded by lifting his glass and crying 'Vive la France! Vivent les Allies! A bas les Boches!'

Casablanca, here we come.

Ten days later, Warneford was testing a new aeroplane on a flying ground near to Paris. 'Something went wrong with the machine, which dashed to earth from a height of 800 feet. So ended a brief but glorious career.'

Sic transit Gloria.

Lest we forget.

From the *Sidmouth Observer* June 23rd 1915

'The Czar of Russia in his own right, has possessions and investments probably greater than those of any other living man. In his name stand the titles to 98 grand palaces, to over 120 large states, to churches, convents, houses and farms innumerable. A whole army of retainers, managers and overseers are on the salary list, say 50,000, without counting their dependants. There are over 100,000 head of horned cattle, some 30,000 horses and pigs and sheep are counted into millions. He owns valuable mines in the Ural and many important industrial establishments. When it is borne in mind that all his possessions are exempt from taxation, a net revenue of another £5,000,000 would hardly be considered an over-estimate.'

But it didn't work out too well in the end, did it?

Maybe a few rich Arabs would like to take note.

From the *Sidmouth Observer* July.7th 1915

A Bullet in the Chest

‘If you must have a bullet there is no better place to have it than in the centre of your chest, and when you have got it there – leave it,’ said Dr.H.S.Souttar in an address on ‘War Wounds and their Treatment’ at the Royal Society of Medicine. ‘I have several personal friends who are going about,’ he continued, ‘in a perfect state of health with bullets straight in the middle of their chests. I say there is no treatment required. At least, there is one treatment – not to move your patient about, but to keep him quiet. If you keep him quiet for 24 hours he will be out of danger.’

Next to this there was a story headed: The New Sunshades

‘The new sunshades of this present summer are not only exceedingly pretty, but are far more durable than they have been for some time past. Last summer the flat, mandarin type of parasol was the favourite model, but this year the newest models are very concave in shape, and, one must not forget to add, are small, though the handles are all very long.’

The most popular colours were listed as ‘navy blue, a deep shade of greyish purple and lovely tone of brown’.

And this headline appeared nearby: ‘Spy Catchers’ Mistake’.

‘For killing a man whom they mistook for a German spy, but who was on his way to join the Connaught Rangers, two soldiers named Rabbitt and O’Neill of the Connaught Rangers, were sentenced at Westminster Assizes to twelve months imprisonment.’

The man they beat to death was an ex-soldier with long service.

As did this headline: ‘Women Jurors Suggested’

‘Mr F.A.Jones, deputy Coroner for West Lancashire said that whilst all labour was required at present he wondered whether some temporary legislation could not be introduced dispensing with the services of a jury. As ladies were now taking up men’s work, perhaps as an alternative to his first suggestion they would empanel lady jurors.’

And this one: ‘Coal Crisis Over’

‘The South Wales coalfield crisis is now passed. The miners, at a conference at Cardiff recently, decided by 124 votes to 112 to accept the Government terms and resume work.’

The Government had let it be known that the Navy was dependent upon South Wales for its coal supply – but the miners had gone on strike anyway, for more money.

From the *Sidmouth Observer* January 26th 1921.
I found these short reports:

‘For disfiguring the natural beauty of the landscape at Langley by erecting newspaper hoardings, a London firm has been fined five shillings and costs at Slough. It was stated that numerous complaints had been received from travellers on the Great Western Railway about these hoardings. The magistrates ordered them to be removed within a fortnight.’

‘Mr R.C.M.Symns (hon sec Salterton branch and acting group secretary of the East Devon Branches) said unless the middle classes organised and combined they could not expect to get any consideration from the Government.’

23

I realised today that I had never read a book about the adventures of Sexton Blake. How could I have got through so much life without ever reading a book about a man who was once described as ‘the best known Englishman’?

In his day Sexton Blake was as well known a character as Sherlock Holmes. Here’s the odd thing, the Sexton Blake stories weren’t written by one author. Thousands of stories about him were published and the stories were apparently written by more than 200 different authors, including John Creasey and Anthony Skene. By 1950, over 150 million words had been written about Sexton Blake who also appeared on stage, on radio and in films.

I ordered a book about Blake from eBay.

Well, actually, I ordered two just to be on the safe side.

24

We were told that our apartment in Paris had been sold. The keys had been handed over and the buyers had settled into their new home (with or without our furniture). It was all over. This was definitely ‘goodbye’ to Paris – and not ‘au revoir’.

Naturally, there was one snag.

There has been no sign of any money.

The failure of the money to arrive was worrying since I had already sold nearly a million euros and bought the equivalent in sterling. On the suggestion and advice of the currency broker we were using I had sold the euros we were due to receive and had bought £750,000 worth of sterling instead. (If we had changed the euros at the Post Office they would have given us approximately £648,000 – just over £100,000 less.)So my account had been debited for nearly a million euros which I didn't have.

Where was the money?

Had the French stolen it?

It was not impossible. France is like a third world country. There are more crooks per square yard than anywhere else in the world.

In our experience, it is normal practice for money to be transferred almost immediately when a property sale takes place. Sellers usually need the money to buy another property. If there is a delay then a whole chain of transactions can be disrupted.

All the French notaire had to do was press a couple of keys on a keyboard and send the money to our currency account in England. That would take a fraction of a second.

After four days we were certain something bad was happening. It seemed that everyone in France had already helped themselves to their share of the loot. The notaire had paid themselves, the French government and the building agents. The agents had pocketed their 50,000 euros. We were the only ones not to have seen any money from the sale. The building agents had charged 600 euros for putting their stamp on a form which seemed to do little more than confirm that I had paid everything I owed for building maintenance. (In practice I had paid too much but, naturally, I never received a refund.)

I asked the notaire to send me a copy of the bank instructions – so that I could check that the money had been sent to the correct place – but my request was ignored.

France is a very hierarchical society (it makes the English class system look non-existent) and notaires consider themselves to be at the top of the pile. The notaire didn't seem to care about the trivial problem of our missing money.

I sent another email asking where our money had gone to. When I received no reply I wrote again. After I had sent four emails and still not received any response I wrote pointing out that if I didn't receive some sort of indication that the money would be sent I would contact the police and ask them to investigate.

In reply, the notaire sent a silly email saying 'thank you, Interpol…well then'. And he put one of those silly smiley faces at the end of it.

I was incensed that I was treated with such disdain and contempt by this bastard of a froggy bureaucrat. But there didn't seem anything else I could do. I had to contact the English currency broker, explain the situation, and beg for a few days of grace before handing over the euros I didn't have. Generously, they agreed.

After the best part of a week the money finally arrived just a few hours before my currency fix was due to expire. If we had been using the money to buy another property we would have been in a terrible mess. The money had apparently sat in the notaire's account for four days before the transfer process had been started.

I wrote back to the notaire saying:

'I note that you did not send my money until the 24th April (an astonishing four days after the sale) but kept it in your account presumably earning interest on your behalf. You were told well in advance that I needed the money last Friday when the property was sold. I made several enquiries about the missing money. Would you have ever sent it if I had not mentioned the police? Everyone I have spoken to has been shocked by the delay. I intend to make a formal complaint to the Chairman of the Chamber of French Notaires.'

I then made a formal complaint to the Chief Notaire in Paris.

I pointed out that we had, in the past, had money stolen from a French bank account and I sent a copy of the emails – including the sneery one with the smiley face. Notaires take themselves very seriously and I had a suspicion that this one was going to have his balls kicked so ferociously that he would walk with a stoop for a month.

We then celebrated the conclusion of this sorry saga by wandering to the end of the garden opening a bottle of Bollinger and firing the cork towards France. The cork fell into the English Channel, rather short of the French coast. (This was just as well. If the cork had reached French soil the frogs would have thought themselves under attack and would have surrendered in an instant.)

With one thing and another, the French have succeeded in turning me from an enthusiastic Francophile into an ardent Francophobe.

(Many weeks after it had happened I received a reply in response to my complaint about our French notaire. The little froggy bastard bureaucrat had his balls crushed, both for not letting us know that there would be a delay in sending our money and also for sending us a snide and unprofessional email. He was told that he could and should provide a better service. It was probably as severe a bollocking as a notaire can have without being defrocked and defenestrated. And so the snotty, undersized, snail crunching, pen pushing tadpole was humbled, humiliated and scarred for life. The French take these things seriously. And French bureaucrats take them very seriously. It was a modest consolation.)

25

We cheered ourselves up by thinking of all the things we would not now ever have to do again.

We would never have to travel on the M25 to Ebbsfleet, worrying constantly that delays would mean that we'd miss the train; desperately trying to stick to totally impractical speed limits. (It is impossible to travel at the designated 40 mph when huge articulated lorries are hooting behind and then overtaking with inches to spare. The evidence suggests that these absurd and arbitrary limits do more harm than good. The same will, I suspect, turn out to be true of the absurd 20 mph limits which are springing up everywhere.)

We wouldn't have to worry about finding a parking space. Ebbsfleet should have a multi-storey car park for Eurostar passengers (as there is at Ashford Railway Station) but it doesn't. If you can park you probably have to drag your bags a mile to the station. If it's raining you'll be soaked. The spaces closest to the station are all taken by commuters catching the 7.05 to Waterloo. And I read the other day that there are plans for another 10,000 more houses in Ebbsfleet. The car park will never be empty.

We would never have to put up with sour-faced guards pawing through the contents of our suitcases and treating us like criminals.

And we would no longer have to watch a beautiful city being destroyed.

Paris itself has changed enormously in recent years.

When we last saw it, the monuments were surrounded by concrete blocks and wire fences and guarded by teenage soldiers fingering automatic weapons. The French are always cowardly (when did the French last win a war?) and they have given in completely to the terrorists. It's the biggest over-reaction in history.

There were virtually no birds in the parks because the French, clearly pretending to be Maltese, had killed them all. Hedges and bushes which used to be full of sparrows were empty of life. Every time we tried to feed the birds in a park we were pounced on by locals who shouted at us, threatened us and called the police to have us arrested. The socialists in charge of Paris clearly hate wildlife and want the damned city to be as silent as death itself. As Antoinette pointed out, the children of Paris soon won't know what a bird looks like; the only animals they will know will be the dogs and the ever present rats. The rats will soon be as big as the dogs.

We still fed the birds, however, and put out food on the ledge outside some of our windows. But even the local supermarket decided to help with the ban on bird feeding. I bought three large bags of pigeon food in a local supermarket and the woman at the till asked me if they were to feed the birds in the park. Thinking she was just making polite conversation I said they were. Two days later all the pigeon food had disappeared from the shelves. So I bought budgie food and told the same woman I was buying the food to feed to the birds in the park and on our windowsill. Sure enough, the budgie food disappeared from the shelves. Next, I bought bags of seeds designed for human cooking. This time they didn't remove the bags from the shelves. I bought as much as I could carry and grinned at the woman at the till. 'For the birds in the park,' I told her. She glowered. I laughed. A small victory for the bird feeding Englishman.

But now we are no longer in the city and I doubt if there is anyone feeding the few birds which remain in Paris.

26

Bentley Continental motor cars are very fine automobiles. They look good, they drive well and they are comfortable. I doubt if there is a more comfortable car in which to sit while sitting in a motorway traffic jam.

But these cars have one huge problem.

They are so hungry for electricity (even when parked) that the batteries constantly need charging.

(For the record each Bentley Continental motor car has two batteries. If one goes flat then the other one takes over.)

In practice this outrageous hunger means that Bentley owners must re-charge their car batteries every couple of weeks or so. Even going for a long drive won't always be enough to charge the battery fully. No one told me this when I bought the car. I doubt if anyone ever tells a buyer that they will have to charge their car battery every week. Bentley don't make a big thing of it. I may be wrong (because I always find car handbooks impenetrable) but it seems to have been slipped the mind of the fellow writing the handbook for the car.

To make it easier to charge the battery there is a special socket inside the boot. And a special charging device can be fitted into the socket so that the special batteries are specially charged. Maybe the electricity is special too.

I recently looked at a website which explained how often the battery should be charged. The writer of the main item had explained that the recharging device should be plugged into the boot socket and left for some hours. One fellow suggested that he charged his battery for 36 hours at a time to keep it working properly. Others seemed to agree that if you didn't charge the battery regularly then the battery would die a sudden, nasty and expensive death. And if the battery does die you have to get it changed by a main dealer because the car's immensely complicated computer will crash and will need resetting after the change.

I lost my patience with the car one day when we were ready to drive up to the Cotswolds. I tried to get into the Bentley and found the door wouldn't unlock and the boot wouldn't open. I had to use my key and bring the auxiliary battery into play. Doing this triggered the screeching alarm.

We abandoned our trip. I tried to charge the battery but the battery wouldn't take the charge although it was only just over a year old. I tried to find out how to turn off the alarm by studying the vast instruction book that came with the car. The word 'alarm' does not occur in the handbook, of course. There will be a reference in there but it is probably under E for 'electronic device for making a loud noise at undetermined times and for no good reason at all'. Spare wheel is probably described as 'supplementary rotation device'.

There is another problem with the Bentley.

The car is so clever (and so full of electronics) that it is supposed to open automatically if I approach with the key in my pocket. This is actually stupid because if I lock the door with the key fob thingy it will open itself again because I am still standing there. What am I supposed to do – lock the door and then sprint away and hope that I can run faster than the car's electronics?

The best thing about the car (apart from the acceleration) is the lovely little clock which has proper little hands which go round automatically when autumn and summer times arrive.

I bought my first classic Bentley about 30 odd years ago.

It was a wonderful pale blue 1958 S1 which was first owned by Tommy Trinder. It had, of course, been serviced, checked and so on. As I drove it home the power steering belt broke and the brakes seized up.

I bought a beautiful midnight blue 1959 Rolls Royce Silver Cloud but the paint started to bubble within a week. (The garage claimed they'd done a bare metal repaint but they had simply put some nice fresh paint onto the old, flaking paint.)

I bought a lovely, green Bentley T1 which was in perfect condition except for the fact that the floor was rusted through so that I when I put my foot on the brake pedal one day it went straight through the metal and gave me a lovely view of the tarmacadam rushing by underneath.

And now I have a Bentley which needs to have its battery titillated more often than a TV presenter's hair.

Moreover I have decided that the Continental is too much a footballer's car.

The S1, made in the 1950s, is still a rock star of a car and more acceptable. But I've fallen out of love with the Continental. If I buy another Bentley it will be a wonderful, bus size 1950s Bentley S.

Bentley knew how to make motor cars in those days and I want Antoinette to enjoy the glory of riding in a real motor car. When you sit in a Bentley S series you are royalty. I would prefer a 1958 S1 (they had automatic gear boxes and power steering by then) but I'm going to look for anything from 1955 to 1960. The S1 was the best and most comfortable car that Bentley ever made. It is the one car I had which I regret selling. There were picnic tables in the back and a pedal near to the brake which you had to press every 100 miles or so in order to oil the chassis. If you got locked in the boot there was a little hook of wire which you could use to open the boot and let yourself out. And there was a small printed notice near to the windscreen wiper reminding owners and chauffeurs not to leave wipers on for too long lest the motor get too hot and burn out.

The modern vehicles are beautiful but far too complicated for their own good. When you have to connect a brand new car to a special battery charger every week then the designer has got things wrong. The Continental needs three or four batteries since two are clearly not enough.

I contacted H.R.Owen, the garage from which we bought the Bentley Continental to ask if they wanted to buy it back.

27

Shortly after our sale of our apartment went through it was announced that Paris was the 2nd most expensive city in the world. (It is 2nd to Singapore.)

Expensive it may be but Paris, is a broken city and it is ironic that the home of broken dreams has become a far more expensive place to live than Zurich, London or New York.

The city and the country are in turmoil, and likely to remain so for some time to come. The French economy is in its death throes and France has an even worse immigration problem than Britain. Parts of the country are so lawless that the police won't go there. The country is forever on strike. There are an astonishing 5.5 million civil servants in

France (that is one in five of the entire working population). It is no wonder that the country is a disaster. Macron is a small man who has very small ideas and no vision but who thinks a good deal of himself. He is the ultimate in political correctness; a small man who, like a month attracted to a lamp, constantly searches out the limelight; in his own mind a miniature Napoleon. He supports the EU in every possible way (my guess is that he sees himself as President of the United States of Europe) and is even prepared to punish his own citizens in order to try satisfy the EU's absurd 'green tax' agenda.

The odd thing is that it isn't property that is expensive: it's food and transport and day to day expenses. The cost of groceries has soared in recent years. The price of diesel has soared as Macron tries to keep the EU happy. The French won't like that. They won't like Macron's arrogance and hectoring style. You can hear him telling the poor to eat cake. Macron has sworn not to give in to street protests if his policies prove unpopular. I bet he does. (Things are going to get worse in around eighteen months' time. Thanks to the EU, diesel prices are set to soar through the roof when ships are forced to start using diesel instead of the more polluting type of oil they use now. French drivers use a lot of diesel and things are going to get very nasty in 2019 and 2020. Companies making diesel cars will be completely stuffed.)

Property in Paris is half the price of property in London. Our apartment in Paris was in the most expensive arrondissement. It had three large bedrooms, a huge living area, the usual offices and a cellar. It was sold for a price that wouldn't get you a bedsit in the most expensive part of London.

The reason is simple: the Socialists have slammed all sorts of taxes on property in Paris and property prices have declined by over a third since 2012. If we had been wise enough to sell the apartment in 2014 we would have received closer to £1.5 million. And we would have paid no capital gains tax. (Capital gains tax used to be charged at a 15% rate with no tax payable after 15 years of ownership but this was recently changed to punish property owners). For all sorts of reasons we should have sold at least three or four years ago when Paris was still a fine city to visit and to live in.

But we didn't and life is full of 'should haves'!

28

The French have a well-deserved reputation for arrogance, selfishness and insensitivity. They are like the Welsh in size and colouring but without the good qualities; without the Welsh sense of humour. They also lack the Welsh generosity of spirit and intellectual depth.

It is not surprising, perhaps, that as a nation the French have never achieved anything very much. They are stupid, crooked, incompetent and cowardly and their main skill is in surrendering. They lasted less than a year in World War II before surrendering to the Nazis – leaving the British to fight on for another four years before liberating the ungrateful bastards. It is no surprise that the French are known as 'surrender monkeys'.

It occurs to me that the French would win far more medals in the Olympics if the organisers put real bullets into the starting pistol and allowed the starter to aim the pistol in the general direction of the athletes. The French, fired by fear, would streak away like rockets.

When I look back on life in France I realise that, over the years, we encountered far more than our fair share of crooks and cheats and con artists.

There was the painter who didn't bother to turn up – but kept our money. The numerous boiler repair people who repeatedly tried to cheat us by selling us new equipment we didn't need. The plumbing company which refused to send a plumber even though we had a contract with them (if they bothered to answer the phone they were always too busy to come out).

The other strange thing is that most of the people whom we think of as French and successful weren't French at all. The most famous 'French' singer and film star was Johnny Hallyday who was Algerian. Charles Aznavour (once voted the most famous entertainer in the world – beating Elvis Presley and Bob Dylan) was Armenian not French. The most famous 'French' painter was Picasso who was Spanish. The most famous 'French' writer was Georges Simenon who was Belgian. Even the most famous Frenchman of them all, Napoleon, was only just French. He was born on Corsica and if he had been born a couple of weeks premature he would have been Italian. And Gerard Depardieu is now sensibly Russian, not French.

Oh, and just for the record, the Bayeux Tapestry was created by English nuns; champagne was invented by an English monk and the two most famous artefacts in the Louvre, the Venus de Milo and the Mona Lisa were also created outside France. The Venus de Milo was created by a Greek and the Mona Lisa was painted by an Italian.

Here's a list of some of the things I had learned about the French during the sale of our apartment:

When they say they speak English they are usually exaggerating. I speak very poor French (and would never claim to be fluent) but my command of the French language is usually better than a French person's command of

English. (Incidentally, Charles de Gaulle understood English but always insisted on having all his conversations in French with a translator.)

The French are not properly civilised. It is important to remember that they have only just stopped using those infamous 'stand up and aim' Turkish loos. They only abandoned the guillotine recently. And within my lifetime, the drinking water in Paris was not safe to drink.

The French think they have a sense of humour but they don't. They have no sense of fun and cannot ever laugh at themselves. They take themselves very seriously. If you are daft enough to ask a Frenchman how he is, he will proceed to tell you – in nauseating detail.

Any property transaction which takes place in France should be invalid since anyone who buys a property in France is clearly certifiably insane.

The French have a law to force citizens to help others. I used to think this was rather a decent thing (it is part of Napoleon's legacy). But as Antoinette pointed out no other nation in the world needs a law to force its citizens to behave decently and to require people to do the right thing. (Anyway, the French ignore the law though foreigners might well be caught by it.)

The French postal system is even more unreliable and chaotic than the British postal system. It invariably takes at least a week for a registered letter to travel from the UK to Paris. (During the Second World War there were complaints when ordinary letters between London and Paris took as much as six days. Today, that would be a record for a registered packet sent special delivery.)

29

Waiting for a visit from an engineer we admitted to each other that we were dreading his arrival. The last time he came he grumbled when I opened the back door to let him in. 'Tradesman's entrance,' he muttered belligerently. I explained that because it has huge locks and bolts we don't bother opening the front door – ever – but I don't think he was assuaged.

I really do not much like workmen.

The carpenter who worked on our conservatory in Devon (and whose services for a week cost us over £2,000) was supposed to have sorted out all the leaks. Sadly, the water still pours in. Actually, we now have more leaks than before. All the banging has presumably opened up more joints. When we saw this, Antoinette and I looked at each other, shrugged, fetched a pile of paper towels and put them underneath the leaks. It's easier to mop up the rainwater than to hire another workman.

30

A woman of 62 has written to the press 'outraged' because when she bought a toasted tea cake in a Waitrose café she was only given one portion of butter. She was told that if she wanted more butter she would have to pay for it. The word 'outraged' is hers. What an utterly pathetic woman and how typical of today.

One can be outraged at the way the nation's future is being given away by incompetent politicians.

One can be outraged at the way that the medical profession has sold itself to the pharmaceutical industry.

One can be outraged at many things.

But to be outraged because one has to pay for an extra portion of butter is to live a life that is so shallow, self-centred and parochial that I am outraged.

May

1

Traditionally, of course, May Day is the first of the month. It is the day on which we celebrate the beginning of summer. The authorities have however decided that it is inconvenient to stay with tradition and so May Day moves about all over the place. (The summer solstice, Midsummer, is traditionally celebrated on June 25th though that too has moved and is now to be found on June 21st.)

May Day is a day for maypole dancing, village green celebrations, Morris Dancers, choosing the Queen of May and eating lots of cake. Most other countries still celebrate May Day on May 1st but since 1978 Britain has made it a moveable feast in case the day falls on a Saturday or a Sunday and the British feel deprived of a bank holiday. So bugger history, bugger culture and bugger production and May Day is now celebrated on the first Monday in May. How utterly pathetic.

May Day is also regarded by Communists and Socialists as International Workers Day but that is a recent notion, going back only to the 19th century and is, of course, best ignored by intelligent people who know that only fools are still socialists when they are more than 16-years-old.

A month ago I noticed that our huge and wonderful common yew tree in Devon was looking rather yellow. Since yew trees can live to be 2,000 years old this was a worry. I looked on the Web for possible reasons. These included: too much water, not enough water, a shortage of nitrogen, a shortage of iron, a shortage of phosphorus, insect trouble, a fungus, a shortage of magnesium, a shortage of manganese, temperature changes and wind burn. One expert suggested that I take a look at the roots. This is a tree about 50 feet tall and spreading that much across so I don't fancy pulling it out of the ground to check the root system.

Could distant neighbours have poisoned the tree to improve their view? Or could it have just been wind burn?

When I looked around I saw that a couple of other huge evergreens in our garden also had windburn.

And now, a month later, I am delighted to see that our Yew Tree is looking healthier. It still has a number of yellow needles but there is quite a good deal of new growth which suggests to me that the tree will survive. I never thought of needles being like leaves but if they didn't fall off then the ground underneath pine trees wouldn't always be thick with a carpet of pine needles.

I feel much happier about it since at least two of the squirrels who live in our garden have their drey in the tree. A day for rejoicing! This tree really should have a Tree Preservation Order but as long as we are here it doesn't need one.

I discovered today that we also have a huge 'Irish Yew tree'. It looks quite different to the common yew.

I did not receive my annual report from my pension company. I rang several times and they always managed to think up really good reasons for its absence. One person said they were working on it but it was very difficult. (All they have to do is print out a list of my holdings, put it into an envelope and post it.) One woman I spoke to told me that they had trouble reconciling the holdings in my pension fund. She could not explain why it had taken the best part of three months to do this. I'd have thought that around three minutes would be par for the course. None of the reasons given has included 'incompetence' or 'laziness' or 'corporate greed' which is odd because I suspect that they probably figure quite high on the list. I pay these people thousands of pounds to be incompetent. I sent them an email about a different query and the reply to that took a month. I can't switch my pension holdings to another company because to do so I would have to sell every holding and then repurchase them all. The dealing costs and losses would be too painful. And there is no guarantee that another company would be any better.

In the increasingly bizarre world of medicine there is startling news today that there is a massive shortage of GPs in Britain. Pressure groups are crying out for more GPs to be trained (as though that will solve today's problem) or to be imported (whether or not they speak any English). No one is complaining about the GMC which has created the shortage by introducing its universally loathed revalidation system. GPs are retiring in their thousands because of the GMC's crazy new idea. And once they have retired they are never again allowed to pick up a stethoscope. The GMC is responsible for the shortage and no one dares to mention it.

We drove for an hour or so along the south coast. We got as far as Seaton, a very quiet and not unpleasant seaside town with its own harbour and the usual shingly, pebbly beach. Sadly, there really wasn't anything to see or do, so we drove to Lyme Regis where we thought we would spend the day. We decided it is quite probably the most egregiously overpriced seaside resort in Britain. Everything we saw seemed to be 25% overpriced. Books, junk, souvenirs – everything seemed to have been marked up to take advantage of the tourists. Shops were charging big prices for junk they'd probably bought for £1 a box at country auctions.

The town was busy with day trippers (all English escaping from places overrun with immigrants) but dozens of holiday let homes appeared empty and deserted.

In the main street I stood and watched in astonishment as four men messed around with a hole in the road. Three of the men were studying their mobile phones while the fourth used a trowel to move some soil around at the bottom of a hole. Whatever they were doing was clearly going to take a long time and cost the local taxpayers a good deal more than it should have done.

We found a shop advertising fossils and Antoinette asked me to stand in the doorway. 'Why?' I asked. 'I want a picture of a fossil outside a fossil shop,' she sensibly explained.

Inside there was a bit of a kerfuffle. It turned out that a tourist had broken a piece of wood that was 248 million years old.

The odd thing about Lyme Regis is that it has a small sandy beach. Obviously this isn't natural. The Dorset and East Devon coastlines are rocky and pebbly rather than sandy. It turns out that the sand has been brought from France. It is the very fine sort of sand usually found in the desert (and pretty useless for building sand castles) and I suspect that it was probably originally taken from bits of French desert. When you think about it the idea of bringing sand from France makes perfect sense. Few other English resorts would want to sell their precious sand and those with sand to spare are probably too far away to make the process economical. Still, it is odd to think that children playing on the beach at Lyme Regis are playing in French sand.

I gather the world's building sand is running out. Apparently the sand found in deserts is useless because it is too fine so all the buildings the Arabs have put up required sand to be imported from places such as Australia. The problem with sand is that you can't reuse the stuff. Once you've turned it into concrete it's gone forever. You can recycle copper, but not sand.

Thinking of Arabs reminded me to wonder yet again why all Arab men wear white (which reflects the light and the heat and is comfortably cool) while Arab women wear black (which absorbs the heat and is therefore terribly uncomfortable). Why don't they all wear black? I'm sure there must be a sound explanation but I can't think what it is.

2

That nasty Hungarian George Soros is apparently giving a small bundle of the vast suitcases of loot he made out of shorting the pound to the campaign to stop Britain leaving the EU.

Quite what it has to do with him I'm not sure though I can't help nursing the suspicion that maybe he has a large financial bet on which will prove profitable to him if we remain in thrall to the bullying Brussels bureaucrats.

The last time most of us heard of Soros he was making a fortune shorting our currency.

But now he's decided that he knows better than the British people what is good for us.

The words 'arrogant bastard' spring to mind.

But the odd thing is that Soros seems to be Jewish.

Doesn't he realise that the EU was planned by Adolf Hitler?

And I don't know whether or not Mr Soros knows this, but Herr Hitler was never too nice to Jewish people.

So why is Soros now trying to overrule British democracy and keep us in the world's most fascist organisation?

Could it possibly be that he doesn't know the history of the EU?

Maybe you should do your homework Mr Soros – before you start interfering in things you don't understand.

3

Millennials claim they are hard done by and cannot save to buy a house. They claim that previous generations had things much easier. Put aside the point that they spend vast amounts of their money on lattes and holidays they cannot afford, the facts do not substantiate their claim. Allowing for inflation, salaries today are much higher than they were in the seventies and taxes are much lower. Property prices were obviously lower in the seventies but interest rates were high and anyone taking out a mortgage would have to pay 17% interest or even more. If millennials don't have enough money it is because they fritter away their wealth and make no effort to control their expenditure. Most millennials employ builders and decorators for the smallest jobs and have no idea what the letters DIY stand for. (I am more of a hammer person than a screwdriver person but my loathing of workmen means that I have forced myself to learn the difference between a nail and a screw.) They rarely cook for themselves because eating out takes less effort.

There is no escaping the fact that millennials are spoilt and demanding and that their main problem is that their expectations far exceed reasonable reality. They apparently suffer a great deal from mental illness but in most cases this is because they are constantly disappointed and frustrated by real life – for which they are not well prepared.

The world would be a better, happier, healthier, safer, more democratic place if no Goldman Sachs alumni were allowed to take public office. Remove former Goldman Sachs staffers from office and there would be job vacancies at the top everywhere. And the world would benefit enormously. It seems to me that whenever there is crookedness unearthed in financial circles somewhere lurking in the background there will be one or more Goldman Sachs alumni.

4

I received a really nice email from a reader telling me that he has just reread all fourteen of my Bilbury books. He concludes: 'Like your patients I have saved the real reason for my email until I am almost out of the metaphorical door. I know you are a qualified doctor and I know that on one or two occasions you were called out to deal with matters that more properly should have been a matter for a veterinary specialist. What I didn't know until I re- read the series back-to-back was that you performed at least one sex change. The patient? Why, Ben, of course. When you first inherited the dog from the tramp, it was a girl but in later books Ben was a boy.'

I duly apologised.

Ben is a girl. How these things happen I have no idea.

Other than the fact that I am disorganised, woolly headed and slightly incompetent.

5

It has been widely reported in the press that people who eat quickly are more likely to put on weight than people who eat slowly. Some expert commentators seem surprised and bewildered by this discovery. They shouldn't be surprised at all. In my book *Bodypower* (which was first published in 1983 and has been a bestseller all around the world) I described how we all have an 'appetite control centre' which tells us when we have had enough to eat – and when we should stop eating. If you eat too quickly then your appetite control centre doesn't have chance to function properly. And so there is a danger that you will eat too much. Back in the 1980s, I was proud that *Bodypower* was listed by readers of the Good Book Guide as one of the most important 100 books of all time. Today, it is pretty well forgotten and is ignored by millennial 'experts' who know nothing about their subject.

6

Antoinette and I worked out a new computer game that should prove popular with millennials. It's a simple 'kill' and 'score points' game.

The game is set in the English Channel where thousands of asylum seeking terrorists in small boats are trying to land on the south coast of England. There are, of course, two armies. The Remainer army consists of establishment figures and millennials who are trying to help the terrorists get ashore. The Brexiteer army consists of patriots trying to keep the terrorists out.

The Remainers are equipped with ray guns which fire lies, and with 'truth shields' to protect themselves. The Brexiteers are equipped with 'lie shields' and ray guns which fire truths.

The Remainers score one point for every terrorist they get ashore and one for every Brexiteer they kill. The Brexiteers receive one point for every terrorist they kill and one for every Remainer they kill, though they receive double points for killing Tony Blair, Nick Clegg, Richard Branson, John Major and a few others.

(Mr Major is remembered now for just three things: he signed over a large chunk of our freedom to the EU, he set up the 'cone hotline' for reasons which no one could ever understand and he had an affair with Edwina Currie, also for reasons which no one could ever understand. He is now a lay preacher for the Unholy Church of European Fascism.)

We think that a similar game could be sold to the American market, with Trump's Wall taking the place of the English Channel.

7

I have been trying for weeks to persuade the company which provided us with gas and electricity in France to close our account and let me know what we owe them for not having used any gas or electricity for eight months up until the sale date of 20th April. All I get in reply to my emails are demands, demands and threats. I have a fine collection of emails promising to respond to my emails but no actual responses. My favourite reply was the one threatening to cut us off if I didn't pay the last bill. For a week now I have been receiving emails from a debt collection agency which has apparently been hired to collect some money. They don't seem to be sure whether they want 130 euros or 20 euros and they too have promised to reply to my emails without ever actually doing so.

What can they do to me?

I really don't know.

I don't in the slightest mind if they sue me in the UK because they will look pretty silly. But what if they persuade a French court to summons me? Can I be extradited for not paying a small energy bill? I really don't know. In my now extensive experience the French are utterly incompetent and remorselessly bureaucratic

After sending a total of 38 emails (I counted them) I felt quite depressed and in quiet despair, I paid a bill for 130 odd euros which I found on the website. This took us well over the date of the sale of the apartment but I thought I might at least shut them up. I also sent yet another email telling them that we sold the apartment on the 20th April and no longer need their gas or their electricity. Actually, I sent half a dozen emails in the hope that someone will answer. Inevitably, it is impossible to send an email without putting a telephone number on the message. And inevitably the Engie system will only accept a French telephone number. And I don't have one of those. So I found their telephone number and put that on the form. Naturally, the computer accepted that.

I hope they spend a week trying to ring me only to discover eventually that they have been trying to ring themselves.

It will probably take them that long to make this discovery because no one at utility companies ever answers the telephone when it rings.

Later on I received another email confirming that they had received the email and would reply 'dans les plus brefs delais', which I suspected either meant after a short delay or that they will be wearing itsy bitsy bathing trunks when they did reply.

I knew they wouldn't reply, of course.

I don't believe there are any people (even French ones) at the other end of the computer. I suspect that I am writing to robots who fail the Turing test. And if they are people then they too fail the Turing test.

Why is this not harassment? Actually why isn't it fraud? Extortion? Attempting to obtain money by false pretences? I've done everything I could think of to close the account. I told them before we sold that we no longer needed them. I asked the estate agent to arrange for someone to call and read the meters on the day before the sale. And I have told Engie many times since then that we have moved and that we no longer need them to supply gas and electricity. But still they keep demanding money.

It is widely known that all utility companies are annoying and incompetent. It is also recognised that all French companies are annoying and incompetent and so it is, I suppose, quite logical to conclude that all French utility companies must be doubly annoying and doubly incompetent.

8

Modern houses are built with very tiny windows and the residents must peek out through poky little portholes. The windows they put in these days are only marginally bigger than the slits built into mediaeval castles so that the archers could rain arrows down on TV licensing thugs and so on.

The tiny windows are, of course, a result of EU building laws. (When a rule or regulation is compulsory, and breaking it is punishable, then the rule or regulation should be called a law.)

The EU wants all modern houses to have small windows because less heat is lost.

Indeed, the eurocrats want us to knock down all our old houses – the solid Victorian ones, for example – because older houses have larger windows than is currently allowed. In the bad old days, builders created and built well-made houses and put them up in sensible positions. These days, with regulations coming out of their ears, builders make houses out of cardboard and put them up on flood plains. The average EU approved new house looks as it has been put together in a weekend by the owner, working with two pals from the accounts department at work. I have seen IKEA furniture better made than most modern homes. A major survey of people who had bought new houses showed that over half had experienced serious problems. I'm not surprised. Antoinette and I have in the past bought a couple of new houses. I don't think either of the houses will reach their 20th birthday. Today, buyers who are unhappy with their new home can ask to be referred to an 'independent dispute resolution service'. The snag is that if you want to complain you have to hand over £100 before anyone will even listen to what you have to say.

None of the eurocrats seems to have noticed that older houses have much thicker walls than modern houses. And thicker walls keep in the heat. Nor do the eurocrats realise that when the windows are small the residents of a house need to have the lights on a good deal.

I realise that lighting doesn't take up as much energy as heating but there is another problem.

When rooms are dark and there is little natural light the people who live in them tend to become depressed. The condition known as SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder) is now well recognised as a serious health problem in northern countries.

And that's why the EU is (yet again) completely wrong.

The EU is trying to impose one set of building standards on the whole of the EU.

In hot countries such as Greece and Spain it is not unreasonable to build houses with smaller windows. There is plenty of light.

But in less sunny countries such as Britain we need houses with much larger windows.

The Germans are intrinsically, irretrievably vulgar in everything they do and so, since the Germans designed the EU, it is not surprising that everything about the EU is also extremely vulgar.

Maybe it would be a good idea if we left the EU and made our own laws.

9

Research shows that the under 25s like town centres more than older people. Idiot retail experts assume that this means that there is hope for retail. It doesn't. Under 25s go into town centres to hang out, drink ridiculously expensive and complicated coffee, throw acid at people and look at the stuff in the shops. When they find something they want to buy they look it up on the internet and have it sent to their home. They pay half the price and don't have to carry it.

There are so many millennials in cafés these days that all the joy of sitting in them has gone. In the bad old days, before progress took over, I could hear all sorts of interesting things in cafes and pick up nice bits of conversation to use in books. These days all I ever hear is the dull, inconsequential millennial chatter. The millennials are dim and endlessly self-righteous and they seem concerned only with themselves and their work-life balance. They complain and complain about not having enough money but they don't want to do any work to earn any.

The millennials talk a good deal about the types of coffee they prefer and the horrors of Brexit (they all seem to be Remainers) but most of the time they just sit there, silently fiddling with their phones and iPads. Even the ones who seem to be courting ignore each other in order to concentrate on their emails, texts and twitter messages from British Gas. They are too arrogant to know the extent of their ignorance and that is the most dangerous ignorance of all.

Even if anything interesting was being said I wouldn't hear it for the noise being made by small children and babies. The small children run around causing havoc and the babies just cry. No parent dares tell off an unruly child, even if they wanted to, let alone smack their bottom, for if they do some busy body will call the police who will respond by sending round a team of social workers, a SWAT team and, quite probably, a couple of tanks.

(Incidentally, isn't it odd that millennials apparently regard heterosexuality as something quaint and historic but they somehow still manage to have loads of undisciplined brats with them wherever they go. Maybe they just rent them like they rent cars and flats.)

If I am ever foolish enough to open a café I will ban dogs, children and millennials.

10

Our seventh firescreen arrived today.

The stone fireplace in our drawing room in Devon is quite large and so far we have bought six firescreens in the hope that one of them might fit. At one point we even tried to commission a blacksmith to make us a firescreen. The firescreens we have acquired have all proved slightly inadequate in one way or another. I measure them before ordering, of course, but even so it turns out that there is invariably a gap at the top or at a side because of the curious nature of the stonework.

Today, the seventh arrived, courtesy of Fedex, and it almost fits. It should do, considering the absurd price. We can cover up the one remaining small gap with a small metal tool designed to take the tray out of the AGA.

Incidentally, Fedex only told us yesterday that they were delivering today. They informed us that they would be delivering at some time up until 6 pm so we had to abandon our plans to go out.

Now, what the hell do we do with the six unwanted firescreens?

Maybe we should open a firescreen shop.

Better still we could send them to auction as a 'A Unique Collection of Firescreens'.

Auctioneers will sell anything you give them. I once bought a house that had been emptied of its contents by an auctioneer. The auctioneer had removed the letter box and all the fixed soap dishes from the house. They had even drilled a metal boot scraper out of the concrete by the back door.

11

I had not realised just how much crime has increased in England. Back in 1901 the crime rate was 250 per 100,000 population. A hundred years later the figure was 11,500 crimes per 100,000 persons and in less than two decades of this century, the crime rate has continued to increase dramatically. Our towns and cities have become increasingly dangerous places. It is not difficult to argue that the increase has been largely caused by the development of a society in which the class divide has been replaced by racial problems, and a huge internal population which refuses to accept our culture or our laws. All this is a result of absurd multicultural dreams and dangerous immigration policies forced upon us by the European Union.

12

I wonder how many people know that the most common name for a boy in Britain today is Muhammad (in its various spellings).

I find that startling and shocking but, curiously, not surprising.

13

In Marseilles, fish mongers have been fined heavily for not putting the Latin names on the fish they sold. There is, apparently, an EU law which says that when a fishmonger sells a Cod he must describe it as whatever it is in Latin. Why do people put up with this crap? How can anyone other than lying, little shits such as Blair and Clegg believe that the EU is a Good Thing?

Our French energy supplier will not give up. They are still demanding money. Eventually, I managed to speak to a woman on the ‘for foreigners’ phone number at Engie (naturally no one there speaks anything but French – in England we would offer at least 280 different languages, at vast cost to the customers).

A woman took all my details and then put me through to someone else who took all my details again and then spent 20 minutes (literally) reciting numbers to himself. Eventually he told me that the account was closed. I asked him this several times. He said it was definitely ‘termine’. He then asked me for an address in the UK to which he could write. I asked why. He said they needed to send me a cheque because I have overpaid. I told him that I was staying with a friend and could not give him an address. This is true. I am staying with Antoinette. Why can’t they put the money back onto my credit card since that is how I paid them? I suspect they will send the cheque to me at the address of the apartment in Paris. I really do not care. I just want to be shut of the bastards.

An hour later the good feeling disappeared when I received two more emails from Engie to tell me that they must now read the meters in the flat. They need to read the meters on the day when I vacated the flat, which was April 20th (two months ago at the time I received the email) and I must travel to France so that I can be there waiting when they are ready do the meter reading.

This is going to be tricky for one or two reasons.

First, my time machine is in for repairs and even if they can get there for last April 20th I don’t think I’ll be able to manage it.

Second, I no longer have a valid passport. I have no intention of ever travelling abroad again. (And if I did then I would hire a television crew to go with me. That’s the only way to travel and expect rudimentary courtesy.) ‘You may wonder how it will feel, to find you are old, and able to travel no more,’ wrote C.E.Montagu. Well, I am perfectly capable of travelling, thank the Lord, but I don’t want to.

Third, I have no intention of going to France, bursting into someone else’s apartment and sitting there until two meter readers turn up to read the gas and electricity meters.

So I sent them the meter reading I took last September, when we were last in France. And in despair Antoinette and I devised a plan to keep them out of our lives.

First, I changed the email address they have for me. I gave them an old email address which I no longer use. This will mean that anything they send to me will go into the unseen jungle wilds of the hinterland.

Second, I put their email address into my spam folder. This means that if they do use the email address which they have I won’t receive whatever they might send. I also put the debt collecting agency into my spam folder.

I thought this would keep them out of my life.

But within a day I received another email from Engie.

Heaven knows how it got through my defences.

They said they had discovered that they owed me the euro equivalent of around £30. This, of course, was what I'd been telling them for weeks.

Well, they can keep the money. It will cost me that much in bank fees to cash a euro cheque. I hope the unclaimed money buggers up their accounts.

An hour later they sent me another email to tell me that they are going to send us another bill at the end of June.

The agents who were supposed to look after the building, but who plumbed unimaginable depths in rudeness and a blatant lack of concern for the basic principles of democracy, have also written to tell me that they owe me money. I have written asking them to send me a cheque but I know I will never receive it.

14

We parked in an almost empty car park. A moment before we left, another motorist drove in and parked in the space right next to us. He parked so close that I could hardly get out of the car. Why do people do that? These are, I suspect, the same people who insist on sitting next to you in an empty railway carriage or taking the adjacent table in an empty restaurant. Are they lonely?

15

A company is selling expensive pencils which have a seed fixed to the bottom. When the pencil is too short to use you plant it and the seed grows. When I read this I nearly sold all the shares I hold. When the market is so toppy that people put money into a scheme as daft as this then it is, perhaps time to run for the hills.

16

Thousands of GPs in the UK are now retiring in their 50s. The Government says this is because the current pension rules mean that retiring at 55 or so makes good sense. That, of course, is rubbish. GPs are retiring very early because they cannot stand dealing with the GMC's revalidation forms. In order to remain registered and licensed, doctors now have to spend vast amounts of time filling in forms and collecting signatures. Most doctors have had enough of this nonsense. They became doctors because they wanted to treat patients. But now they spend their days dealing with bureaucrats. So, they are retiring early. And once retired, GPs are lost to the profession completely and forever.

In the old days (five years ago or so) a GP could retire and then still work two or three days a week. He could do locum work. He could stand in when a younger doctor was ill or on holiday.

But these days, once a doctor has retired, the GMC takes his licence from him. And he cannot work again. Ever. The GMC's utterly absurd revalidation programme (introduced to satisfy the EU's determination to force everyone to have a licence to do what they do) is the main reason why thousands of GPs are retiring early, why those experienced GPs can never practise again, even part time or as locums, why the NHS is importing thousands of very expensive foreign doctors (many of whom have no experience of general practice and do not speak decent English) and why thousands of patients are now dying unnecessarily.

Next time you are faced with a three week delay to see a GP and you then find yourself booking in to see a doctor whose command of English is basic at best thank the General Medical Council and the former parking ticket bureaucrat who helped launch the revalidation programme.

The GMC has damaged general practice permanently and is directly responsible for thousands of unnecessary deaths.

17

I noticed today that Apple claims that it is responsible for nearly 300,000 jobs in the UK.

Isn't that brilliant?

It's a pity they don't pay a bit more tax but we should be grateful for all those jobs.

Or should we?

If you look at the figures carefully it doesn't turn out to be quite that impressive. Apple actually employs 6,459 people in the UK. That makes the UK the company's biggest base in Europe, though you wouldn't know it judging by the tax they pay, but it's a few less than 300,000.

The fact is that Apple is including in that 300,000 a lot of people who didn't know they were working for Apple. They are, for example, including people who work for Uber or Deliveroo.

18

A visitor made slightly derogatory remarks about the wild meadow at Highgrove, Prince Charles's country retreat near Tetbury.

'I don't know why they make such a fuss about a wild meadow,' he said. 'If I didn't cut my grass I'd have a meadow filled with wild flowers.'

Antoinette and I were both too polite to point out that he wouldn't. He would have a meadow filled with dock, nettles, Giant Hogweed, Cow Parsley and other magnificent weeds. But he would definitely not have a meadow filled with beautiful wild flowers.

When the end of the world comes it will contain three things: cockroaches, bureaucrats and giant hogweed. There may be a small corner left for Japanese Knotweed.

Foolishly thinking that council staff might have an interest in the health and welfare of the communities they serve I wrote to the council in Gloucestershire to complain about the fact that the hamlet where we have a house in the Cotswolds has no mobile phone coverage. (I have written to all four mobile phone companies and I might as well have put my message into a bottle and thrown it out to sea for all the good it did. I received one automatic reply. It said at the top 'This is a genuine email'. I found this rather amusing. Isn't that what a crook would say?)

The council is uninterested. They suggested that I write to something called 'fastershire' – which appears to be some sort of quango which exists to improve the quality of broadband in Gloucestershire and Herefordshire. I wrote to 'fastershire'. They weren't interested either. It was silly of me to think that anyone in authority (even ones working for a quango with a silly name) might give a damn.

If the Government wasn't wasting a large fortune building HS2 (a railway line which no one seems to want) they could improve phone and broadband coverage in the countryside. That would improve lives and businesses but it wouldn't require an army of expensive quango officials.

I have worked for tabloid and broadsheet newspapers and the tabloids always took more care to be accurate. This is not a new observation.

'It is the mark of the highbrow to do things less accurately than the lowbrow,' wrote James Agate in 1946.

In the posh papers the truth is distorted to hide inconvenient truths and to protect corporate prejudices. Too many broadsheet journalists are happy to attend dinner parties with politicians and become their friends. Journalists and politicians should be enemies (in the same way that doctors and drug companies and administrators should be enemies.)

Worse even than the broadsheets, however, are television journalists. I've worked for all aspects of the media and television journalists are the least reliable, the most dishonourable and the least competent. They rarely do any original work. However, there may not be much on the inside of their heads but they do all have nice hair on the outside.

A character in Michael Connelly's novel *The Poet* describes television reporters as 'sourceless and senseless'. He's right.

It's scary to see that 97% of Britons tune in to the BBC every week – to be fed a diet of pro EU propaganda. The BBC is by far the most dangerous organisation in Britain.

Antoinette has taken up oil painting in earnest and her early work is truly staggeringly beautiful and evocative. She paints in a style which is partly tonalism and partly impressionism and I have never seen paintings which I love so much. I can't stand modern paintings that look like photographs (why not just buy a photograph?) and most modern art leaves me cold (especially since I read Tom Wolfe's destruction of the whole modern art nonsense). But Antoinette's pictures have passion and life. I damned near burst with pride when I see them. I am far prouder of her paintings than I am of anything I've ever done.

Here is the funny thing. I would have settled for living to 72 when I was 20. But now it seems like no age at all. In my head I still feel about 20 – maybe 25. And the age of 72 seems like absolutely nothing. I am a bit wobbly and if I kneel it can take me a while to get up again. The list of foods I cannot eat without unpleasant consequences gets longer by the month. And if I had to run to catch a bus I would wait for the next one. (Actually, I can't remember the last time I caught as bus. Oh yes I can: a plane from Paris to Bristol had been diverted to Heathrow and I had to travel miles along the M4 with my knees touching my chin. That was about 25 years ago and I haven't been on a bus since then.) The other funny thing is that the list of things I want to do with my life gets longer every day; the list of absolutely vital stuff to do just keeps growing faster than ever.

I now assume that every month, every week, every day might be my last.

It's not a bad way to live. But it does mean that I am constantly in a hurry because there are so many things I want to do and books I want to write.

Here's a strange thing: now that I am 72-years-old the obituary columns (including those in old copies of the *Cricketer* and other old periodicals) seem to be full of people who died at the age of 71. That's no sort of age.

The family weakness is being killed by doctors. Both my parents were killed by incompetent physicians.

All credit card users will soon be able to choose to verify their identity by using facial recognition or fingerprint scans. Biometric security is the new watchword for the Big Crooked Banks (that's all of them).Hitler's European Union is introducing a new law which requires credit card payments to be verified using two out of three from: a pin number or a password, the possession of a card or a telephone and something else such as a fingerprint. (If you thought that you already needed two out of three from this list then you have clearly used a credit card more recently than anyone working for the European Union. This is not particularly surprising since EU employees prefer to have their bills paid for them by lobbyists and crooks.) Of course, what no one will bother to tell you is that biometric security is about as useful as asking you your date of birth. German criminals have already managed to get round one of the latest iris scanners by using a photograph and a contact lens. And it has been shown that voice recognition software can be tricked too. Biometric security can be summed up in one word – 'rubbish'. We would all be safer if the banks looked after our information rather more carefully, if the police put a bit more effort into catching hackers and identity thieves and if the courts punished the bastards who are caught instead of feeling sorry for them when they suddenly decide that they're suffering from autism, ADHD or measles. Meanwhile, identity theft is the fastest growing crime on the planet and none of the people who could do something about it gives a stuff. And the hackers are getting better and better at what they do. Crooks who nicked details of 380,000 transactions at British Airways managed to get hold of names, addresses, email addresses, credit card details and the three digits on the backs of all the credit cards.

We're all on our own, folks.

Stay paranoid.

Social workers in Carmarthenshire took a boy off his mother. When the judge asked them why they had done this social workers produced a 44 page list of reasons. Still confused, the judge asked the social workers to give him their best reason for taking the boy away from his mum. And the social workers said that the mum hadn't bought the boy an ice cream one day when he'd asked for one.

I wish someone would explain to me why the social workers involved have not been sacked or, preferably, tarred and feathered.

19

When the Government announced plans to change the law so that the betting terminals in betting shops could no longer take bets in increments of £100 but would have to lower the sum to £2 the bookies complained loudly. That was no surprise, of course. But I was rather shocked to see that the horse racing industry also complaining. Race courses, trainers, jockeys, owners and the hangers on now all depend very much on the money they are given by the bookies and with the bookies profits falling they were worried that their income would also fall.

It seems sad that the people who run horse racing (most of whom appear to have far more money than sense and some of whom are as close to crooked as you can get without sewing mailbags) would want their industry to be built on the backs of people who are addicted to hope and are unwisely spending their unemployment benefit on betting terminals – with nothing left with which to feed their children.

Naturally, the Government has agreed to delay this entirely sensible change until 2020 because the bookies say it will take until then to reprogram the terminals.

I have never heard such baloney. If they were given the chance to increase bets to £200 a time I bet they could do it by lunchtime.

I wonder how many thousands of lives will be ruined in the next two years as a result of this delay.

20

I see that some toxic and cryptorchid runt who messes with my Wikipedia entry is still claiming that my three Edward Vernon books about general practice are autobiographical. This is total bollocks. The Edward Vernon are novels which I wrote with editorial guidance from Peter Collenette, my editor at Macmillan in London, and from Tom McCormack, who was the boss of St Martin's Press in the United States.

I was in my twenties when I wrote them and we met in Tom McCormack's hotel in London (the Connaught) to discuss the material. McCormack was the editor of James Herriot's vet books, which were largely autobiographical. I used a pen name because I was writing serious medical books as Vernon Coleman and my literary agent at the time thought that bookshop buyers would be confused if I wrote light, comic novels under the same name. In those days there was also a problem with one author producing more than one book a year.

The curious thing is that I am not allowed to correct my own Wikipedia entry – even when it is patently wrong. I gather that the only person who is allowed to correct their own entry is Jimmy Whales who, by an odd coincidence, just happens to be the founder and boss of (wait for it) Wikipedia.

Still, I can tell the truth here and no bugger can pop up and tell porky pies.

It seems odd to me that anyone should make up such a pointless piece of nonsense. Why would anyone bother?

Still, it has taught me one thing: Wikipedia is still not to be trusted. It is populated by malicious quidnuncs and as a source of information it's about as reliable as that woman at no 57, the one with the droopy elastic stockings and the malicious turn of gossip.

I did beg the Wikipedia people to remove my entry and forget my existence. They refused.

21

I found this wonderful quote in *Sporting Campaigner* by Brigadier M.A. Green, CBE, MC.

The book was published in 1956 and in it Brigadier Green describes how he went to France in 1914 with the 1st battalion The Gloucestershire Regiment. It appears that while in reserve the battalion entertained themselves with a cricket match and here's how the Brigadier describes the match:

'Carpets were laid on the pavé and the match took place, with occasional interruptions from shelling. During one of these breaks cover-point was hit by a piece of shrapnel, but after first aid by the medical officer, who was also the umpire, the game went on.'

It fired my pride in England and everything English.

22

I spent an hour making a list of my basic rules for investing –simply to get things clear in my head.

Preservation is now my first rule. I look for asset cover. Is the NAV per share near or above the price of the share? I am conscious that for every £1 I invest I had to earn £2 before tax. I like being able to buy shares in a company for less than asset value. (In other words, if the company goes bust then I make money when the property and assets are sold.)

I want a decent history of dividends and good dividend cover (in other words the company can comfortably pay the dividend out of its earnings).

I don't want a p/e over 16 at the most.

I look at charts to make sure I am not buying at a high price – especially for a volatile share such as a mining company.

I am a natural contrarian and eschew anything fashionable.

I avoid companies which are heavily promoted (the price will probably be too high).

I need to know what the company does, so I can understand it and see the political risks.

I tend to take a position and then build on it.

I try to trade as little as possible. Some of the investments in my portfolio have been there for years. As long as they behave and do what they're supposed to do I am happy to leave them there. Boring is wonderful in the world of investing. I never forget that compounding is the secret of success. I try to avoid being tempted to attempt to time the market. Markets are too unpredictable and irrational to be timed.

When studying annual reports or financial prospectuses I try to remember that the most important information will invariably be tucked away in the appendices so that as few people as possible will see it but so that in extremis the directors can point to it and say that it was there all the time.

I never put money in companies which blame the weather for their bad performance.

I think it's crucial to take a macroeconomic view – and to consider geopolitics. So, for example, the effect that Brexit is going to have on British companies is clearly crucial.

Investing for value rather than growth has always made more sense to me.

I tend to invest in categories more than individual companies. So for example I think commercial property in the UK is cheap and likely to remain cheap until Brexit is sorted out. Young analysts and investment managers are panicking and seem to think that Britain is finished and that there will be no need for offices or shops or warehouses. I think they're wrong and that there will be a healthy bounce. Companies such as Amazon need masses of warehouse space. Meanwhile, dividends are very welcome. Building a balanced portfolio requires an understanding of the world at large.

Big investment companies move slowly. Managers often have to consult committees before they can invest. As an individual investor I can move immediately if I spot an opportunity.

I never buy anything I don't understand. I never understood what Enron did so I didn't invest in it. I cannot see how Tesla can possibly be considered a good investment.

I like companies which have a unique product or position in the market.

I don't take any notice of company forecasts or predictions. Financial forecasts (by companies or analysts) tend to be as good as weather forecasts.

I try to hold investments for long periods for this reduces dealing costs and tax liabilities. But if a share price rises too high then I will often sell half of my holding. If a share price doubles and I sell half then I've got the remaining holding for nothing.

If I've made a mistake then I tend to sell quickly. On the whole I tend to hold winners and sell losers. (It is, of course, common to do the opposite.)

I like to invest in companies which don't have huge debts, which are not likely to be unduly susceptible to new legislation and which, to a certain extent, control their own destiny.

I like companies which do things I understand. So, Shell gets oil out of the ground and sells it. That I can understand. RTZ digs metals out of the ground and sells them. Big property companies own buildings and rent them out.

I won't invest in companies which do crooked or evil things. I won't invest in drug companies, in companies such as Facebook or Google, in Monsanto (which is now owned by a drug company, of course), in Volkswagen, in Vodafone or in anything handled by Goldman Sachs.

Those are my general investment rules – though it is important to remember that the only rule to which there are no exceptions is the rule that says that there are always exceptions to rules.

23

We walked along the front in a small Devon town today and watched in horror as a seagull succeeded in depositing a white creamy dollop on top of a woman's ice cream. She had not seen what had happened and was about to lick her lovely creamy ice when Antoinette stopped her just in time.

24

Mindfulness has been a popular trend for a long time now. As a concept it has been around for centuries.

But now it is particularly popular among millennials – some of whom probably think they invented it. (Or that it was invented for them.)

But here's the joke.

The principle of mindfulness is that you should enjoy the moment. You should be totally aware of what is going on around you.

So how do millennials practise their mindfulness?

They spend every waking moment taking selfies so that they can preserve the moment they are about to just miss and then examine it more closely at some future moment which will never come.

When do the selfie takers ever look at all their pictures?

Actually selfie taking is no longer just silly. Network Rail has had to close 1,000 level crossings because of idiots who insist on taking photographs of themselves with a train bearing down on them. Millions have been inconvenienced by the idiotic behaviour of a few overgrown children.

And when they aren't taking interminable selfies, the millennials are busy recording their exploits, in great detail, on their social media accounts. The certainty of youth enhances their generational hubris. Social media enables the amplification of every slight and allows everyone who wants to be a victim – to be a victim.

So, a thoughtful word or two: Dear snowflake children, you cannot enjoy the spirit of mindfulness if you are forever photographing yourself and sharing your trivial exploits with your vaguest acquaintances. The principles of mindfulness are that you look, observe, feel, experience and enjoy.

Today's snowflakes are vulgar, self-indulgent, selfish, ignorant, treacherous, intolerant and without compassion. They are perpetually childish and demanding. They are flabby, liberal (without having the faintest idea what that means), hypocritical and ruthlessly dedicated to their own rights and their own pleasure. They are unimaginative, arrogant and unadventurous. Those are their best qualities.

And they have, of course, tried to redefine the language and the way it is used. To them the word 'entitled' is a good word whereas the word 'responsibility' is a bad word. The fact is that we all have an obligation, frequently overlooked these days, to do things well, to the very best of our ability. Sadly, that is not a priority for many workers these days.

The snowflakes (also known as the millennials, though they should more honestly be described as narcissistic psychopaths) are members of a special subcategory of humans and they are also immensely stupid.

The latest fashion for the millennials is to join up to free Apps which enable them to put all their financial details in one place. They feed details of all their accounts, investments and so on into the App so that they can manage their money easily. None of them seems to care that the App is probably hosted on Facebook and so all their private financial details will be owned by Zuckerberg and available to the world. (When I say 'owned' that is exactly what I mean. Facebook owns all the material uploaded onto its site.) Millennials who do this need to be kept under constant supervision in some sort of institution. Since many millennials now have at least one foot over the threshold to middle age they really ought to know better.

25

Antoinette asked her bank to give her a card which did not have the 'contactless' facility. And she was delighted when they managed it.

Why on earth do people use contactless cards?

These are, I suppose, the same people who use the free Wi-Fi in cafes and other public places. This is the internet equivalent of having unprotected sex with strangers.

Incidentally, I was excited to see that the Church of England is putting portable card readers in 16,000 churches, cathedrals and other religious sites. How nice of the Church to be so go ahead and trendy.

26

I always tell people that Wi-Fi should be pronounced 'Whiffy' and is a joy when I hear them tell someone else about this. I find it very easy to convince people that common names of retailers and products should be pronounced in extremely odd ways.

27

We motored to Weymouth for the day. What a sad and depressing town it turned out to be. Another medium sized town (population around 50,000) where the shops are clinging to life by the thinnest of threads; another town full of broken dreams. The harbour is full of posh boats but the town caters to the unemployed and the unemployable. If any of these yacht owners wanders ashore to buy a new watch they'd have a job to spend more than £20 even if they bought a watch with a spare strap. I suspect, by the way, that most of the boats were used for having drinkies and nibbles rather than for going out onto the bumpy water and getting wet.

We couldn't find an art shop, a music shop, a bookshop, a DVD shop or a toy shop.

In Smith's I found a magazine called *Turn Off Your Phone – Reconnect With Life*. I find it quite remarkable that folk (presumably millennials) should need a magazine to tell them to turn off their phone occasionally in order to rediscover their lives. I bought copies of *Airport Monthly* and *Practical Pigs*.

28

If I had to choose between spending my life working with computers or collecting kindling I would go for the kindling collecting. I loathe most things to do with computers but I especially loathe the Microsoft Word processing programme which must surely be the most irrational, counter-intuitive piece of rubbish ever devised. The twats who wrote this programme have clearly never done anything useful or creative in their lives and they have produced a wildly overcomplicated piece of software. You press control and T by mistake and everything is permanently underlined in italics and appears in red. This cannot ever be undone. There is, of course, no manual. When this happened to me the last time I used my iPad to try to find a solution. I was told I needed a toolbar. There was no toolbar. So I searched on my iPad for how to find a toolbar. Here's the solution I found: 'Go to toolbar and press…' I gave up. Antoinette rescued me. Microsoft should produce two options of their software: a simple, useful one and one called 'toofuckingcleverbyhalf' which is put under a glass case and admired by intellectually stunted but egotistical computer boffins on wet Wednesdays in November.

In contrast I love going round the garden after a wind has subsided and picking up all the pieces of kindling which God has distributed.

The National Savings and Investment people (known to any friends they have as NS&I) have written to us and sent us their new terms and conditions. This is what they have to say: 'We have introduced quicker payments out of your account…for any postal withdrawal instructions that we receive, the payment will take up to an additional two banking days to reach your nominated account. If a withdrawal is above a certain amount, the payment will take up to an additional two banking days to reach your nominated account.'

So, their idea of 'quicker' is for a transfer to take four days longer. Let's hope they don't get tempted to speed things up again.

Since it already takes them two to three weeks to repay money from one of their accounts it will presumably now take three to four weeks to make a payment. They do not explain why it now takes them four weeks to make an electronic bank transfer, though of course, I can understand that they would want to hang onto customers' money for as long as possible.

In the same post we received a letter from our bank. They too claim that they are improving their services and making our lives easier by reducing what they offer us and putting up the monthly account fee by between 15 and 20%. They must have been trained by our local council which has been doing this for years.

I wish people would stop being nice to us.

A Remainer MP says that Brexiteers have to grow up and accept the loss of sovereignty associated with membership of the EU. He says we must accept the loss of our perceived democratic values and move on with our lives.

The fact is that the EU is evil, fascist and controlling. It is a neo Nazi source of oppressive, tiresome, disruptive, pointless, expensive, anti-democratic legislation. The EU has destroyed our health care (by forcing doctors to work librarian hours). It has ruined entire industries (fishing to give but one example) and given hundreds of billions of our money to thankless French farmers for no good reason other than the fact that they are French farmers. And now the EU wants to fine countries if they do not show the proper respect for EU values – presumably they mean anti-democratic and pro-Nazi feelings for those are the only values within the EU.

The Government seems to have forgotten, if it ever understood, that the EU needs our trade and our money far more than we need anything they have to offer. For us to leave the EU without a deal would destroy the EU financially and therefore politically.

The one comic touch in the Brexit fiasco came from J.K.Rowling who said that the Brexit problem was caused by men who have been raised from birth to believe it is someone else's job to clean up after them.

Just why she thought that Brexit justified a call for a feminist rant she did not explain. Maybe someone should have explained to her that the Prime Minister, the individual ultimately responsible for the mess, is a woman. Maybe Rowling wants an entire cabinet made up of Theresa Mays?

If a man had complained that the Brexit mess was a result of a woman who had neither brains nor integrity there would have been screams of sexism from many – including Rowling I don't doubt.

The bottom line is that wars have been fought over less than the divide between Remoaners and Brexiteers. The rift will not heal for decades.

Living in England with May and Hammond and the rest of them in charge of the country is like being lost in the wilderness with a guide who has never been there before. It's like going to hospital and finding that the doctor is a trained hairdresser who can manage standard pudding basin cuts and nothing else. May's betrayal is making us all feel nervous, uncertain and edgy. It is why people are losing themselves in their private worlds, becoming dangerously dogmatic, joining extremist groups, playing video games all day long or emigrating.

Hammond seems to think that Britain's problems can be solved by taxing the self-employed the same as the employed – even though the self-employed are denied many of the benefits to which the employed are entitled. Doesn't he realise that it is from the self-employed that companies grow? The bloke with a small business hires someone, then someone else and then becomes a company and then sells shares. The self-employed should be cherished not unfairly taxed into submission. The self-employed don't receive unemployment benefit so why should they pay the same national insurance rate as the employee who does? Hammond doesn't realise any of this, though he does seem to be a fan of the silly blockchain nonsense glorified by barmy Bitcoin enthusiasts.

May and Hammond are bad people; they are either fools or traitors. By damning a 'no deal' Brexit (without any evidence that it would be harmful) they are destroying the negotiating position of their Government.

Both of them deserve to be horse whipped for betraying their employers.

Am I being cynical in worrying that the Remainer led Tories deliberately lost the election, and their majority, so that they could not push through the will of the people? Stranger things have happened in my lifetime.

Is it any wonder that over half the country is frustrated, angry and resentful? That frustration and anger is never going to go away.

The number of Britons emigrating is phenomenal. Immigration figures never allow for this. The Government may say, for example, that the net immigration figures are 500,000. What they never bother to mention is that 500,000 well-educated Britons have buggered off to Australia, America or France and that 1,000,000 uneducated immigrants, looking for free money and housing, have poured into the country. The result is a net immigration figure of 500,000.

For many years now the spies have had computers that can listen to telephone conversations and pick out individual words which suggest that the speaker may be a bad person. Naturally, the computers in Cheltenham aren't very good at identifying difficult or old-fashioned words. So, for example, if you use words such as borborygmy, crapulous or gallimaufry you are likely to have Special Branch taking a battering ram to your door at 4 am.

But I'm puzzled.

If the spies can do this, why can't our bank's computer know when I am saying 'Yes' and when I am saying 'No'?

Just curious.

I am told there is now a programme on television called *Hidden Britain by Drone*. According to the programme blurb aerial cameras are used to give a bird's eye view of sites usually inaccessible to the public. Isn't that called snooping? I thought there were laws against this. The nosy bastard presenting this appalling programme is Tony Robinson, a leftie luvvie who has, for some reason, been given (and has accepted) a knighthood or a peerage or some such nonsense. (He played Mike Trickle in the film of *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War*.)

The programme apparently appears on the staunchly pro EU, taxpayer funded and subsidised Channel 4. In the old days, before progress, television was a medium occupied largely by people who had done something or who had something to say.

These days television is a medium occupied largely by people who have done nothing and who have nothing to say.

Television journalists are the lowest of the low. They simply steal news from the papers and the internet and as far as morals are concerned they make the paparazzi look like angels.

And, partly thanks to television, we have a nation full of snoops; with citizens everywhere constantly on the lookout for folk taking their pigs for a stroll without the appropriate licence.

We sat in a café. There were two women at a neighbouring table. Both looked to be in their forties. They were talking about childhood memories. One of the women said that she could remember when she was born. The other replied by claiming that she had been to a hypnotist who had helped her remember when she was conceived. The one who could only remember her birth looked very put out at being trumped in this very final way.

29

Our apartment in Paris has been a terrible investment.

Everything is made even worse because I know that if we had sold it three or four years ago we would have paid no capital gains tax (capital gains tax was tapered and disappeared after a property had been owned for 15 years), no social tax (the EU had ruled that the social tax was illegal and the French Government hadn't got round to finding a fiddle to enable them to reintroduce it) and, because property prices were at least 25% higher (because the socialists hadn't destroyed property prices with a raft of new taxes and regulations), we would have received at least a quarter of a million more (in sterling).

But, ignoring all that, property in Paris has still been a terrible investment.

Back in 1998 we paid £265,000 for the flat. When we sold it we received around £850,000 before massive costs and taxes in both France and the UK.

To the purchase cost must be added a variety of costs which took the purchase price up to around £300,000. After the French and British Governments have taken their taxes out of the profits we will, of course, have made a profit on the original purchase price. French capital gains taxes do at least take time (and therefore inflation) into account but British capital gains taxes do not take into consideration the fact that we have owned the apartment for nearly twenty years during which there has been a considerable amount of inflation. This is, of course, grotesquely unfair and it is simply another way of punishing the prudent and hard working.

In addition to the purchase cost we have, over the years, paid out an additional £250,000 in French taxes and maintenance costs. Those are direct costs which relate to the ownership of the apartment and do not include personal living costs such as travel, food and so on. Naturally, every payment in France has had to be made with sterling converted first into French francs and then into euros – and this increases the costs still further.

The fact is that if we had left the purchase money in a the bank or a fairly boring selection of equities, and used the annual tax allowances for capital gains, we would have been unlucky not to make at the very least 8% a year over that time. So, the original £300,000 could have become £1,200,000 with all the taxes paid. And, of course, without the apartment we would have not had to pay out the £250,000 in annual French taxes and maintenance costs.

If we hadn't bought the apartment we would have still been able to go to Paris, of course.

The difference between the profit on the sale of the apartment and the profit we could have made if we had simply left the purchase money invested would have paid for a room at the Ritz Hotel in Place Vendome for twelve weeks a year. We would have probably been able to rent a suite in a less luxurious hotel on a permanent basis so that we could leave clothes and books in Paris.

Alternatively, we could have simply rented a flat. It would have been far cheaper than buying one and because of the French rules protecting tenants we would have been just as secure. If we had rented we would have had no problems with agents, insurers, builders or the French tax collectors. We would have had none of the costs of buying or selling either.

Belatedly, I discovered this is what most Parisians still do.

The French don't buy apartments because the process is so complicated and expensive that it easier and much, much cheaper to rent. Legislation and tax laws mean that buying property is not a good investment (in recent years property values in Paris have fallen not risen) and the brightest prospective buyers realise that although all the laws may be in their favour when they are buying those same laws will make their lives miserable when they come to sell.

And so instead of buying an expensive apartment in Paris they buy a small, relatively cheap cottage in the country or by the sea and they rent an apartment. When they retire they quit the apartment and move into the cottage which they will, by then, have paid for. They won't have to sell the cottage at all because they will stay there until they die.

The mystery is, who does buy the few apartments which sell?

Well, there are occasional French buyers, of course. But the absurdly restrictive rules protecting tenants and limiting property gains mean that there is no buy to let culture in France and most apartments in Paris seem to be bought by property dealers (probably Russian or Chinese) who don't want to use the property themselves and who prefer to buy a whole building if possible – simply as somewhere to put their money. Smaller investors aren't usually interested because the rules are so much in favour of tenants. Property owners cannot, for example, throw out tenants who commit minor indiscretions such as not paying their rent.

The other odd thing about property in Paris is that there is a thriving business in selling apartments which have sitting tenants. The investor gets the apartment at a reduced price because there is a tenant in situ paying an absurdly low rent. The tenant has the right to stay there for life. The price of the apartment will be reduced according to the age and health of the tenant. So you will pay less for an apartment inhabited by a healthy couple in their 60s than for an apartment in which the only tenant is a 97-year-old with heart disease, kidney failure and a rapidly deteriorating liver. These deals are popular because there is always a chance that the tenant will snuff it and enable the new owner to make a quick profit. It is, make no mistake, merely a way of gambling on when people will die. It's difficult to avoid the suspicion that more than a few old tenants might die off a little more speedily than their doctors might have expected. On the other hand some buyers don't do terribly well. Someone bought the property belonging to Jeanne Calment but she didn't die until she was 122 and this turned out to be long after the buyer had died.

My suspicion is that no one in their right minds deliberately becomes a landlord and pays full price for an apartment. The people who do rent out are the ones who have apartments which they cannot sell or foreigners who have already bought their fill of London property and who want a little diversification. Property in Paris is a fraction of the price of property in London – though you have to remember that the expenses associated with French property are much, much higher than the expenses associated with property anywhere else. Remember: estate agent fees alone are usually between 5% and 10% of the sale price.

All things considered, an expensive lesson.

Sadly, it is now too late for us to learn from it.

30

It has been alleged that black students do not do well at Oxford University and there have been calls for an investigation. This is right and proper. There must be an investigation. A reader of mine suggests that there must also be an investigation into why white athletes do not do well in short distance races in the Olympics. This is also curious and possibly disgraceful. I agree that these are all things which must be investigated.

The EU has told Ireland that after we leave the EU, Irish goods headed for the continent will have to travel by ship rather than by road. Apparently, up until now the Irish have been using the UK as a land bridge – enabling them to move stuff to France and other parts of the EU. After we leave the EU this will no longer be allowed. What a bonus! It means that in future our roads won't be ruined and blocked by thousands of Irish lorries (the owners of which do not pay British road tax).

I was reminded today that the eurocrats in Brussels have repeatedly attempted to make it illegal to criticise the European Union. I wonder if they've succeeded yet. I expect I will find out. In my book *2020* I predicted that both the EU and the euro had a very limited life ahead of them. Every day that passes that prediction becomes more likely to come true.

I have just discovered Matthew Lewis – was also known as Monk Lewis. Born in London in 1775, Lewis was at various times a diplomat and an MP but he is remembered for an extraordinary Gothic novel entitled *The Monk*. In 1812, Lewis inherited family estates in Jamaica and subsequently wrote *Journal of a Residence Among the Negroes in the West Indies*. The book, which was published posthumously, is extraordinary because although Lewis had 400 slaves on his estate he was an opponent of slavery and a great friend of William Wilberforce. It is, remarkably and unexpectedly, an astonishingly charming book.

It was good to hear today that it is now officially recognised that the demonization of salt was overdone.

Around 35 years ago I made a TV series called *Bodypower* for the BBC (the series was roughly based on a book of mine) and in one episode I had an enormous row on the programme with a journalist who appeared to have decided that salt was killing us all.

Having studied the scientific evidence I knew he was wrong and it was good to see the headlines today confirming, rather belatedly, that I was right. It is sad to think that the poor sod has been eating his chips without salt for the last third of a century.

The other day I bought a spray and some animal friendly weed killer. I spent an afternoon spraying the edges of our long drive and the few low roofs which are covered with weeds. The damned stuff may well be animal friendly but it is also weed friendly. The weeds look healthier now than they did before I sprayed them.

31

It sometimes seems that everyone is busy reporting everyone else to the authorities. A friend told me that he daren't go to the optician to have his eyes tested in case they dob him in to DVLA and he loses his driving licence on a technicality. He says he can read a number plate a cricket pitch away but worries that they will discover some oddity and report him.

A few weeks ago I ordered a set of three DVDs of an American series based on Rex Stout's marvellous books about Nero Wolfe. Not having any idea whether the series was any good I just ordered three DVDs. Today I had an email from the company apologising for the delay and explaining that the package had been returned to them 'damaged'. In recompense they have refunded my payment and the postage costs (£12.31) and they have also posted me the full eight disc series. And they've given me £10 compensation. I have never known such generosity on the behalf of an internet seller. Hoorah for Zoreno-UK. (Sadly, the programmes were awful.)

Lots of people who half believe in conspiracy theories also half suspect that truths aren't suppressed for long. They like to believe that the truth will eventually 'out'. Sadly, that isn't true.

A bloke I know who has spent his life working at the BBC told me that my problem is that I am too keen on encouraging people to take personal responsibility for their lives and actions. He says this is very old-fashioned and Victorian and too Samuel Smiles and means that I must be very right wing.

The strangest news I have heard for some time is that the athletics organisation which Lord Coe runs is allegedly forcing some female athletes to take testosterone lowering drugs because they are too successful and it is considered that their testosterone levels give them an advantage. So Coe's bunch of loonies (the name of the organisation escapes me but it's a federation or an association of some kind) is going to force women athletes to take drugs. You couldn't make it up, could you? They spend years telling athletes that they must not take drugs and now they tell some athletes that they must. There will, presumably, be random checks made to ensure that the athletes are taking the drugs they've been given. Who will take legal responsibility if the drugs cause cancer or whatever? And where will this now stop? Will Lord Coe insist that tall basketball players have a foot chopped off their height because their very tallness gives them an advantage? What about tennis players who have resting pulse rates in the 20s? What about cyclists with absurdly enhanced natural lung capacity? What will His Lordship do with them? I never liked Coe. I was an Ovett person. It seems to me that Coe was a disaster as a politician and has been a disaster as an athletics administrator. Just why he was given a peerage is a mystery along the lines of 'why was Tom Jones given a knighthood?'

I see that Richard Branson is planning to send himself into space by the end of the year. If Virgin Galactica is anything like as efficient as Virgin Trains that could well be the last we see of the nasty, bearded excrescence. I wonder how many people know that Branson the Unbearable, whose father was a High Court Judge, was accused of VAT fraud when he first started out in business.

In my view, he, Blair and that foreign-born woman are doing more harm to the UK than any number of jihadists.

I noticed recently, by the way, that Branson's 'Virgin Care' was threatening to sue the NHS because it wasn't awarded an £82 million contract. Forcing the NHS to waste money on yet more lawyers will really help patients. (Why was this twit given a knighthood? Was it because of his support for the EU?) Virgin Money tracker fund is absurdly expensive and his Virgin trains probably provide the worst service in Britain.

Many big health charities now have close links to drug companies.

The charities like the relationship because the drug companies give them oodles of money.

And the drug companies like the relationship because they get respectability and, more importantly, they can influence the charity's policies. It's not surprising that, in my view, the big Alzheimer charities now do more harm than good.

The sad thing is that because of these relationships, many charities are so comfortably in bed with their drug company 'partners' that the public come off second best.

So, for example, many charities much prefer to think and talk in terms of drug company solutions to medical problems – rather than anything else.

The biggest cause of cancer these days is not tobacco but meat.

There is tons of research proving this. (My book *Food for Thought* contains the summaries of 26 scientific papers proving the link between meat and cancer.)

But you won't find many big cancer charities spending much time or money telling people to avoid meat (especially red meat). Instead, they prefer to spend their time helping drug companies look for new drugs.

You can't make money out of telling people to avoid meat.

But there is a lot of money to be made out of flogging chemotherapy drugs.

This problem doesn't just affect the cancer charities.

I worry about the charities which are supposedly devoted to helping patients with dementia. Some of them claim that dementia is incurable and there seems to me to be a deliberate tendency to use the words dementia and Alzheimer's as interchangeable.

The media do exactly the same thing and several newspapers (notably the *Daily Telegraph*) seem determined to believe that dementia is the same as Alzheimer's and that dementia is incurable. Consensus journalism is enormously popular everywhere these days and quite a disgrace. The fact is that only around two thirds of dementia cases are caused by Alzheimer's. And many of the patients with other causes of dementia – such as Normal Pressure Hydrocephalus – are curable with a simple operation. Anyone with dementia should be given a default diagnosis of Normal Pressure Hydrocephalus because it is the only common cause of dementia that is easily and permanently curable. If the patient is shown not to have NPH then, and only then, should doctors investigate the possibility that they might have Alzheimer's.

Lots of doctors and journalists who've actually heard of it say that NPH is rare. They're wrong. It isn't rare. It's actually one of the commonest causes of dementia and it's the only common cause of dementia (other than the type caused by too many prescription drugs) that's curable.

But there's no big money there for the drug companies.

There's another problem with charities.

Many of the big charities now have very well paid executives.

And, of course, as they get bigger there is a risk that charities will become 'corporate'. They end up with huge administrative staffs. They pay their executives six figure salaries – with massive expense accounts and pensions.

I know of well-known charities which spend less than a quarter of their income on the cause for which they are supposed to exist. Most of their income goes on salaries and administration.

And some of these executives know damned well that they would have a job finding employment outside the charity sector which paid half as well.

So, they don't have an incentive to see anyone find a cure for 'their' disease.

Much the same thing sort of happens in the world of animal rights.

Years ago I talked to someone working for an animal rights group and spoke with enthusiasm about putting an end to a particular variety of animal cruelty.

'Oh we don't actually want it to stop,' he told me, shamelessly. 'If it stops then I'll be out of work.'

Makes you think, doesn't it?

It isn't just charities which mislead about dementia.

The NHS is still distributing inaccurate information about dementia. For example, I have on my desk a leaflet published by something called Public Health England in conjunction with the Alzheimer's Society and Alzheimer's Research UK. The leaflet states categorically that dementia cannot be cured.

This is a lie.

I reckon that at least half of all the individuals diagnosed with dementia could be cured in a week.

Dementia which is caused by Normal Pressure Hydrocephalus (one of the commonest causes) can be cured with a simple operation. (When I say 'cured' I mean 'cured'.)

And vast numbers of patients with so-called dementia could be cured simply by taking them off their tranquillisers and sleeping tablets. The tablets cause confusion, dementia is diagnosed (usually Alzheimer's) and so more tablets are prescribed. It is this problem which explains why the incidence of dementia appears to be increasing so rapidly.

So my guess is that around half of all patients who have been diagnosed as having dementia are curable within a week. (Anyone stopping pills of any kind should do so under medical supervision in order to supervise the withdrawal period – which can be difficult.)

Why does no one care about the truth about dementia? Why are these truths suppressed? Why cannot they even be debated?

Sadly, the answer is simple. The NHS, the medical profession and the dementia charities only tell people what the drug industry wants them to tell us. In medicine the establishment was bought long ago by the pharmaceutical giants.

The other tragedy is that dementia is now the default diagnosis for any mental symptoms affecting the elderly. Numerous patients who have neurological problems are therefore mistakenly diagnosed as having dementia. And since the default diagnosis for dementia is Alzheimer's disease then people are automatically labelled and treated (or mistreated) as Alzheimer sufferers.

I was going to arrange a service for our boiler in the Cotswolds. So I tried to get in touch with British Gas. Sadly, they cannot offer an appointment for a couple of months. By then our cover will have expired. We've paid these bastards a fortune for cover (over £1,100 a year). I've cancelled it. Out of curiosity I checked with other companies offering similar cover. We have had this policy for years and years but were paying four or five times over the odds.

June

1

I have at least a dozen chargers lying around in the garage. I don't know what some of them are for. Two are for electric strimmers, one for the electric hedge trimmer and two are for leaf blowers which I never use because I have a yard broom which happens to be a yard wide. In the house I have more than a dozen chargers and I don't know what they are for. Why don't the people who make these damned things put on a label saying which appliance they are for? I have tried sticking on my own labels but they always peel off.

The film *Killing Gunther* supposedly stars Arnold Schwarzenegger but the Austrian appears only right at the end of the film which was made by someone called Taran Killam. Mr Killam clearly thinks he is funny. This increasingly common business of flogging a film on the back of a star who is in it for no more than a few minutes is surely a type of fraud. If I didn't have anything else to do I would sue the film company. Mind you, when I looked at the DVD case I found that the film was made by DLN Films and Starstream Media in association with Miscellaneous Entertainment and Ruyi Media in association with Saban films and IMR in association with Folktale productions and Rowdy Row Productions of a Rooffield Productions Limited production. Maybe all that is intended to be a joke. If so it is the funniest thing about the film which appeared to have been made by a group of film school undergraduates as a jest.

I managed to get hold of a copy of the film *Elvis* in which Kurt Russell gives an amazing impression of Elvis. (Much of the voice work is done by Ronnie McDowell who was, I think, more convincing on the slower songs such as Wooden Heart and Old Shep. This is probably not surprising since McDowell was a country and western singer.) The film is rather over-long and I couldn't help wondering how much it was controlled by Elvis's widow, Priscilla, and his Svengali-like manager, Colonel Tom. Still, Russell does a magnificent job.

At our cliff house, I saw an adder sunning itself in a remote part of our garden. He was near to the path to the incinerator, just warming himself on a flat piece of grass. I am always surprised by how small adders are. There are still parts of the garden I haven't visited at all. I will leave them virginal. Heaven knows what else is hiding there. I don't think anyone has been in some parts for decades. For all I know there could still be some Japanese servicemen hiding away in there.

I popped into a branch of Argos to avoid a small cloudburst. While there I played with their computer which has a search facility. I typed in 'rhinoceros' to see if they had any available. They didn't but the computer came up with a useful alternative, informing me that the store had 81 types of binocular available. I love search engines.

On the rare occasions when I can bear to look at the newspapers the news pages seem to be dominated by stories about well-paid actresses complaining either that they aren't being paid enough or that they have been 'forced' to do things they didn't want to do in order to become outrageously rich and famous. Actresses regularly complain that they are not paid as much as actors but J.K.Rowling, who is female, gets paid more than I do for doing the same job – writing books – and so if actresses must be paid the same as actors then male authors must be paid the same as female ones.

Seriously, surely pay in some areas depends on popularity and commercial value?

If a male star puts more bums on seats than a female star then he is worth more money.

And since male tennis players bring in more punters than female ones why shouldn't male players be paid more?

If actresses are not offered what they want why don't they say no, and do something else for a living? And if they are offended by a request or an uninvited suggestion why wait 20 years before whingeing?

At Seaton Delaval Hall in Northumberland, there is a monument to John Delaval who died in 1775, allegedly as a result of having been kicked in a vital organ by a chambermaid to whom he was paying his addresses. (There is a famous oil painting of the boy with a bow and a blackamoor page.)

Trump has been rowing with the EU about tariffs on cars. Today, Merkel and Trump did a deal for the EU. Amazing, isn't it, that Merkel can make deals for the whole of the EU without anyone noticing that, just as Hitler planned, Germany controls the EU.

Merkel, incidentally, is reported to have said that she wants Britain to be punished for leaving the EU. It is clear that the EU's attitude is all about revenge. The Germans hate us because we beat them twice at War. The French hate us because we saved them twice from the Germans.

In Hungary (the country of George Soros) it is now illegal to help refugees. That's what the EU has created through its absurd policies. This sort of thing is happening all over Europe. Belgium has expelled thousands of EU citizens who happened to be unemployed. Germany (which refused to accept Polish citizens for seven years after the UK accepted a torrent of Polish plumbers) forces EU nationals to apply for a residency card if they wish to work in the country. All this was entirely predictable. (See my book *England our England* which was published in 2002.) There is no little irony in the fact that the Polish government, which has exported a good proportion of its population to England, now refuses to take any more immigrants. There is also some irony in the fact that some of the Poles who came to England are leaving because they say that England is now too overcrowded, dirty and dangerous. They also complain that our infrastructure is creaking to death.

And things are going to get worse.

It is officially estimated that there will be 250,000 new households each year for the next 15 years. (Since these are official figures they are definitely far too low.) There is, therefore, going to be a constant shortage of housing. Britain's builders produce between 150,000 and 200,000 new houses every year. But since many houses are demolished every year (by decree from the EU because the houses are Victorian and do not have paper thin walls and ill-fitting doors and windows) the shortfall is likely to be at least 100,000 a year. The result will be that after Brexit house prices will continue to soar.

2

Tax payers always worry when they receive an invitation to attend a meeting at the tax office. In Britain the invitations are sent out frequently for tax inspectors are keen entertainers.

The vast majority of those who receive these invites do as requested. They turn up on the date specified and present themselves for disembowelment. But make no mistake about it: the British tax man is not going to hand over a nice cup of tea and a slice of cake.

The taxman wants taxpayers to turn up for a grilling because he hopes and believes that he might be able to ferret out a nugget of information that might prove incriminating.

I've had chums who have been to the tax office and then been told to empty out their pockets and take off their watches. 'How did you afford that watch?' and 'Why have you got £17.45 in your pocket?' are typical questions. The poor taxpayer, startled and confused, is likely to blunder into a minefield.

The thing that most people do not realise is this: unless you have been arrested or charged with some criminal offence, you don't have to go to the taxman's office.

You can say 'No, thanks. Damned decent of you to send the invite but I'll stay at home that day. You just pop your questions in the post and I'll send along the answers when I have had time to think about them.'

And, I'm no accountant, but it seems to me that by and large, on the whole, and all things being equal, staying at home is much the better bet.

You can look through the questions. You can think about your answers. And you can avoid any little tricks or manoeuvres which might prove disastrous.

Remember: the taxman doesn't invite people to his or her office because he or she wants to give them a cup of tea and a slice of cake. He or she is not about to become your best chum.

So when tax inspectors send me invitations I tell the little bastards, very politely, to eat the seed cake by themselves.

Meanwhile, here's some stuff everyone should know (but which the BBC and *The Guardian* doubtless forgot to report) about the tax authorities (HMRC) in the UK:

HMRC may be employed by us but they are not our friends; they now deliberately try to frighten taxpayers by threatening prison, huge fines and, recently, by threatening to 'name and shame' those who are accused of trying to escape their tax burden. Their latest lunacy is to insist that small business owners should complete tax forms every three months. And then the politicians will appear surprised when told that productivity is down.

If you or I buy or receive stolen information we go to prison. If HMRC buys or receive stolen information we are still the ones who go to prison. The willingness of HMRC to use stolen information is a clear sign that the taxman now considers himself to be above the law. (Actually, both the BBC and *The Guardian* have published stolen information so they too must be regarded by the authorities as above the law. *The Guardian* seems to delight in printing stolen information to which it is not entitled and which is of no more than gossipy interest.)

HMRC receives over 100,000 reports from snitches every year. Some informants are aggrieved employees, wives, husbands or friends. Others do it for the money. HMRC pays out around £500,000 a year to informants. (I do hope the snitches report their income from the taxman on their tax forms.)

The tax people want to force us to do all our tax reports online. And they want us filling in tax forms every three months. I find the online tax forms incomprehensible and counter-intuitive. But the HMRC says that they will not accept this as an excuse for failing to use their wretched website. Use it or lose your freedom.

HMRC has a computer program called Connect which gives it information from banks, credit card companies, eBay and the Land Registry. Connect also now forces apps and companies such as Apple, Amazon, PayPal, etc. to hand over all information that it might find useful. HMRC also wants to be able to demand what information it cannot obtain by itself from brokers, accountants, lawyers, estate agents and other third party businesses. Laughably, HMRC, which wants access to bank statements, banking information and transaction histories, says that its powers to obtain confidential information 'have no implication for individuals' privacy'. Ho ho ho.

By using something called Common Reporting Standards, HMRC obtains details of all money earned from foreign sources.

HMRC keeps a close eye on social media. Folk who publish pictures of themselves on Facebook or who appear on television reality programmes are likely to be spotted by the taxman. Was that a new car in the background? And where was that holiday destination? The taxman studies Google Earth to check on building extensions and property renovations. Hector the taxman sits in his little office wondering: 'How did that family afford their new conservatory?'

Bank staff, accountants and solicitors must now alert law enforcement agencies – and the tax office – if they have any suspicion that an individual may not be able to explain where money came from or what it is for. As a result, nothing we share with these people is private. If you ask an accountant or a lawyer about something and he thinks it is dodgy then he has to tell HMRC about you but he must not tell you that he is dobbing you in.

New legislation forces taxpayers to disclose all sorts of information about themselves. And it is important to remember that the HMRC is now above the law.

HMRC wants to be allowed to obtain information about taxpayers from businesses and organisations without having to obtain approval from a court or the tax tribunal. HMRC has proposed that it be allowed to get hold of bank statements, transaction histories and to demand that lawyers, accountants, estate agents and others hand over other, perfectly honest information. The taxpayer would not be consulted, would have no right of appeal and would not be told that the information had been handed over. It seems inevitable that HMRC will get its way.

HMRC collects and stores voice recognition material from callers to helplines.

The average medium sized business in the UK spends 105 hours a year filing tax returns. That time does not include collecting, storing and retrieving bits of paper, chasing up companies which haven't sent essential bits of paper and chasing HMRC by mail or telephone.

Finally, remember, you don't have to be guilty of anything to be investigated by the tax authorities – and such enquiries can be ruinous in every sense of the word. Random enquiries which involve the persecution of entirely innocent citizens can last years. As far as HMRC is concerned we are all guilty until proven innocent. If your neighbour gets turned over by the tax people just remember: there but for the grace of God go you, and remember that proving yourself innocent when accused of something you have not done is sometimes nigh on impossible. Imagine, for example, trying to prove that in 1969 you did not receive a payment of £5,783 in cash for appearing in a pornographic movie. And how do you prove that you don't have a bank account in Russia?

Still, maybe those of us in the UK should think ourselves lucky. In America, the Internal Revenue Service recently announced that it would block the passports of 362,000 Americans who were late paying their taxes. I wonder where in the American Constitution the tax collectors are given such draconian power over innocent citizens.

As far as Antoinette and I are concerned, a perfect day is a day in which nothing much happens and nothing at all happens which we have not initiated.

This evening we watched *The Big Short* again. It is without a doubt the best film made about the finance industry in general and the crash of 2008 in particular. We watch it regularly and learn from it every time. I sincerely believe that everyone in the country should watch it at least once a year. It is also hugely entertaining.

The Government should introduce a tax on emails and social media messages. £1 a comment should do it. That would slow down the onslaught.

3

I recently quoted evidence showing that cricket is now no more popular than rugby league and only slightly more popular than greyhound racing. Now there is evidence showing that basketball is more popular with young people than golf and cricket combined.

So, what are the cricket authorities doing to rescue cricket from the doldrums?

They're organising some international cricket matches for 2019.

That's nice.

But you'll pay up to £395 for a ticket. (I assume the authorities have put the price up to this extraordinary sum because they know that these days hardly anyone goes to watch cricket matches. They are, I suppose, working on the basis that they want to make X million out of each match and if there are fewer spectators then the prices must rise. If they sell just ten tickets they will presumably simply raise the price of a ticket to £1,000,000.)

I also see that the greedy rugby bosses are now charging up to £195 for a ticket to watch a rugby international – and rugby matches last less than an hour and a half.

Cricket was designed as a game of sophistication and subtlety. It was a game to be played over time – with matches lasting three, four or five days. As the pace of life got ever faster so the authorities introduced shorter matches designed to be completed in a day. And then, when it appeared that spectators could not wait a whole day for a result, matches were designed to be completed in an evening with the two teams each having to bat for just twenty overs.

But the English Cricket Board reckons this is too slow and is now recommending 100 ball matches. It has apparently been decided that matches which last for 20 overs (that's 120 balls) are too slow and long-winded for the modern spectator.

Biff-bat cricket bears as much resemblance to the original game as rounders has to baseball. Why don't the authorities just introduce single ball matches and be done with it? Or, better still, just retain the toss of the coin (to decide who bats first) but do away with the rest of the nonsense. Film the coin being tossed and show that on a loop. The whole game could, even with preliminary nonsenses, be over in two minutes. And what opportunities for betting there would be.

Alternatively, if the aim is simply to improve excitement and viewing figures stop the players wearing helmets, pads and other bits and pieces of body armour. Spectators love to hear the sickening crack of a breaking bone. Blood has always gone down well with audiences.

Cricket matches are being reduced to a farce because Test Match cricket (the variety played over five days) and country cricket (the sort played over four days) is in terminal decline. The cricket establishment fears that these matches last too long. But the odd thing is that golf is still reasonably popular and tournaments last four days. And major tennis tournaments last two weeks.

There is a simple reason for the decline in the popularity of cricket. Before World War II bowling sides sent down an average of 24 overs an hour. In the 1950s there was an outcry as this fell to 20 overs an hour. Today, teams are expected to bowl 14 to 15 overs an hour. If the bowling rate was pushed back up to what it was, then Test Match and county cricket would no longer be boring and people would watch it again. But simple solutions are never very popular and there is as much chance of the authorities taking notice of this as there is of me opening the batting for England.

I had my first mobile telephone and my first computer in the 1980s and my first website in the very early 1990s. I am still waiting for something really new to come along.

4

For absolutely no good reason that I can think of I have had numerous copies of the following letter printed:

Dear X

I am afraid I did not receive your letter and therefore cannot reply to it.

Yours sincerely

Vernon Coleman

I have sent copies to all our utility companies and banks and a suitable assortment of public figures.

Acquaintances of Antoinette's invited a bloke they vaguely knew to stay at their home for the weekend. They are quite posh, rather old-fashioned folk and have a maid who comes in every day, puts on a uniform and helps around the house. When visitors arrive, their luggage is taken to their room and unpacked by the maid. This is, apparently, the way things used to be done in the days when people with large houses had loads of staff. According to Antoinette's chum, the visitor arrived with a huge, incredibly heavy iron bound trunk and when the maid unpacked it she found that it contained nothing but dirty laundry (shirts, socks and underwear) and two dirty shoes that were not a pair. One of the shoes had the heel missing. The maid, not knowing what to do with all this dirty laundry, closed the trunk and left it how she'd found it. The visitor stayed three days without changing his clothes and when he left the trunk, complete with its contents, went with him.

5

A very good friend of mine who runs a clothing business tells me that these days headmasters frequently change school uniforms when they take over a school (in the same way that football clubs change the colour and style of their strip on an annual basis). The problem, of course, is that a shop which holds school uniforms in the old style will have to dump thousands of pounds worth of stock. Why on earth do parents allow headmasters to behave so arrogantly and so stupidly? It is a headmaster's job to make sure at least some of his pupils can read and write by the time they leave. A few qualifications are a bonus. Headmasters who mess around changing school badges and uniform colours obviously have too little to do or too poor an understanding of their primary responsibilities.

My chum had to send thousands of pounds worth of useless blazers et al to Africa as a charity shipment because he couldn't sell them. Amusing as it may be to envisage several thousand small African children running around in British school uniforms this was no joke to the company concerned.

When I wrote for magazines such as *Woman* and *Woman's Own* in the 1970s it was not unusual for me to write articles which were several thousand words long. These days I doubt if there are that many words in a whole magazine. Readers are fed a gluey diet of celebrity photographs, accompanied by articles which are little more than long captions. Is this really what readers want? Or is it simply what they are given? These days, I can't read magazines with any enthusiasm. I prefer reading old publications which seem much more interesting.

Another thing that has changed is that it was common to see men whistling as they walked or as they worked. Men used to whistle a lot in those days. Today, no one dares whistle, however innocently, for fear that he might be accused of sexual harassment and end up being arrested.

6

Our HP printer had been telling us for weeks that it needed more ink. I kept ignoring it and it kept merrily printing. We printed well over 150 A4 pages of stuff (some in colour) since the warning first appeared. I assume they provide these absurdly early warnings in order to encourage printer users to throw away their cartridges and renew them too early. And we are told that we should avoid waste. Hah!

In preparation for the time that the refill finally does give up the ghost, I managed to purchase more ink. There are no instructions in the booklet that accompanied the printer to tell us where to put the new refill. In the end I managed to find an explanatory YouTube video. Without the video I would have never worked it out though it's actually quite simple when you know how. The problem is, of course, that the people at the factory know how everything works and so they always assume that everyone else does too. The HP brochure does tell me however that the cartridges contain a memory chip which gathers information which I regard as personal but which they regard as theirs by right. (As a result, the used cartridge is going into the incinerator). And when I put new paper into the machine it invariably tells me that I should use a particular brand of paper.

Today the printer (an HP Officejet Pro 8620) at last decided that it wasn't working and that it genuinely wanted more ink. So I took out my packet of over-priced ink which cost me £130 from WH Smith (and which I discovered later I could have bought for about six quid on eBay) and fitted it.

The printer then died.

Printers used to last for years.

No more.

The damned thing died with a brand new £130 refill inside it. (How can printer companies get away with charging so much for ink? They charge more for their damned ink than a jeweller would charge for gold.)

Antoinette tried to repair the printer and eventually discovered that a bit inside had stopped working. She then found out that to buy the bit we needed would cost more than buying a new printer. What a surprise.

Never mind, thought I, we have a spare printer which we bought for just such an emergency.

Antoinette wasted another hour trying to set that one up.

A failure.

The spare printer didn't work either.

I then had the choice of taking the two defunct printers to the local tip (a round trip of four gallons of diesel or petrol) and paying them to allow me to dump them, or doing something else with them.

To save the planet I did something else with them.

I burnt the buggers.

Now, this may come as something of a surprise to anyone who isn't an incineratorist but you can burn damned near anything in an incinerator. An incinerator is the only way to destroy diseased plants and the ash it produces makes an excellent compost – full of excellent nutrients.

And when you drop them into a nicely burning incinerator, printers disappear like pocket money in a sweet shop.

(It is now clear that burning is much better for the environment than recycling. Burning unwanted paperwork is much, much better than using a shredder since no electricity is used. My main complaint is that newspaper doesn't burn as well as it used to. *The Daily Telegraph* used to be a very inflammatory newspaper. These days I find it takes several matches to produce anything resembling a flame.)

7

'Do you miss Paris?' asked Antoinette. She knows that I have been visiting Paris regularly since I was a boy.

I fell in love with Paris 60 years ago. It was still the most romantic city in the world, and still the City of Light. You could still feel the spirit of Hemingway and Gertrude Stein and still 'see' Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir sitting on their corner bench in Deux Magots. They still played opera at the Opera House on the Place de l'Opera and you could find real bargains in the bouquinists along the banks of the Seine, for they hadn't given themselves over to selling prints of dogs playing cards.

The good bread shops, the ones which baked continually, had queues for baguettes and croissants and the ones which sold four hour old bread were empty of customers. If you closed your eyes you could see Maigret sitting at the zinc counter in one of the bars near the police station. I loved the parks, and the river walkways and above all I loved the cafés. (Only Vienna used to do cafés as well as Paris.)

When I was a medical student, and then a GP, I visited Paris whenever I could spare the time and the money. It was my retreat, my haven. I went there to escape the stresses of a busy life.

As a student I filled a bag with books, crammed in a few clothes, and took the train from Victoria to Paris Gare du Nord. Once I tried the hovercraft. Every other time I took the cross channel ferry and queued at Calais to board the train to Paris.

Later, when I was a GP and had a little more money, I took the sleeper from Victoria to Calais. In those days they put the sleeping cars on the boat and took them off when the boat arrived in France. The ticket wasn't cheap but the journey was always exciting and dramatic. I would climb aboard at Victoria, have dinner, retire to my sleeping compartment and wake up in time to look out of the window and see Sacre Coeur on the horizon. In those days the journey was long enough to remind me that I was travelling to the Continent.

Occasionally, I flew from Birmingham or Bristol airport but it wasn't the same. It didn't feel so much like an adventure.

I started using Eurostar immediately the Channel Tunnel opened. It was wonderful in those early days.

Now I am glad that I will never go to Paris again. I want to try to retain some of the memories I have.

The French have always despised foreigners.

But things have got much worse; unbearably bad.

I am not talking about the day to day rudeness in which Parisian waiters take such pride (not long ago a French waiter who was fired for being rude claimed that it was his right as a French waiter to be rude to customers) but about the real, deep loathing which is reserved for foreigners who dare to live or do business in France. The loathing is almost universal and it is born of jealousy and a confused sense of inferiority masquerading as superiority and arrogance.

A few years ago I used to be greeted in cafés and shops which I frequented regularly with a jolly 'ca va?' and a handshake. The fellow who sold me my morning papers always had a smile and a word and a handshake. Paris was the perfect city for the flaneur.

But that gradually ended. There has been a noticeable deterioration in the quality of service in taxis, cafes, hotels and the railway stations.

Today, at the Gare du Nord, travellers are treated like prisoners. The part of the station devoted to Eurostar passengers is badly designed and the staff seem to be chosen for their hatred of all travellers. The station has been undergoing restoration for years (and the building work is apparently destined to last for years to come) and it is probably the most uncomfortable major railway station I've ever visited. The restoration work could have all been done in a weekend if the French had cared enough to make the effort. Instead, they are spreading the pain over years. One of the most stupid changes has been to introduce those bizarre bum-resting seats which are popularly used in fast food joints which don't want their customers to stay too long. The Gare du Nord people don't seem to understand that the people waiting for trains are waiting because they have to, not because they want to.

In recent years the hatred has been institutionalised and in Paris, for example, foreigners are forced to pay a special, high rate of property tax just because they are foreign. Hidalgo, known in our part of England as 'the mad Mayor of Paris', has made it clear that she wants all foreigners out of the city and has put up residential taxes by 60% for foreigners. Her plainly racist attitude (punishing people for not being French) has had an effect on thousands of Parisians. After it was made clear that foreigners were not wanted I found that supermarket staff were much ruder than they had been before. I assume they took the Mayor's comments to heart. Today, any foreigner in Paris will be treated with especial rudeness. Can you imagine how the metropolitan, liberal English would react if such racist laws were introduced in an English city? They would riot.

The European Commission and the European Court of Justice ruled that one of the taxes Britons had to pay, (taxes known as the 'prelevements sociaux') infringed European law and were, therefore, illegal. The French took absolutely no notice of the ruling and fiddled their own rules to enable them to continue to ignore the ruling. Foreigners who had objected to the racist taxes just gave up. The French are nothing if not sneaky and deceitful.

I have absolutely no doubt that the racist taxes which the socialist City of Paris now imposes on foreign property owners are illegal, and they are certainly immoral, but there is absolutely no point in complaining or taking legal action. Even if I went to the European Court and won (which I almost certainly would) the French would simply ignore the judgement. I would then be left with lawyer's bills and a hollow victory.

If such a policy were introduced by the Mayor of London, there would be rioting in the streets. And the English would be demonstrating alongside the French. Shame on Paris. Shame on the French.

And yet, despite this loathing of foreigners, when the Notre Dame Cathedral needed repair work recently the French had the gall to ask foreigners to pay for it.

8

A couple stopped me as I tottered out of our driveway to post a letter. I was wearing my old sports coat, the one which lived in Paris for twenty years and which has now come to England to retire for garden wear. It is very tattered and rather holy. I will never throw it away.

'Do you live there?' asked the woman.

I looked at her suspiciously. I never like admitting anything.

'You must do. I just saw you come out of the gate. And you unlocked it with a key.'

'I might be the gardener.'

'You'd be retired by now. You look retired.'

'Thank you. What can I do for you?'

'Would you like to open your garden and lovely home as part of the Open Gardens Day?'

'No thank you. And the house is right at the top of the drive, hidden behind our trees. You can't see it so you don't know it's lovely.'

'It must be lovely to have such a garden. It's for a good cause. We raise a lot of money for charity.'

'What charity?'

The man told me. I knew of it. It's a decent, local charity. I doubt if they have many executives on over £100,000 a year.

'How much would you expect to raise?'

'If you opened your garden?'

'Yes.'

'Between £50 and £100.'

I took out my wallet and counted out £75. 'There you are,' I said. 'No expenses, no administration, pretend we opened.'

'Oh,' said the woman.

'Oh,' said the man.

I posted my letter, went back through the gate which I locked. When I looked back they were standing watching me. I waved and disappeared up our driveway.

Anyone who believes the European Union is a decent organisation should read what 'they' did to Stanley Adams the best part of 50 years ago. No Remainer should be allowed to talk about the EU until they have read his book *Roche vs Adams*. In 1985 the EU eventually paid Mr Adams £200,000 in compensation. They should have paid him far more. The EU has a long track record of terrorising and demonising its critics. The *Roche vs Adams* book affected me deeply and changed my life in that it made me even more paranoid than I'd been before I read it. Can you be too paranoid these days? Quite possibly not. I have spent my life fighting drug companies, the medical establishment and the EU and I am now banned (very effectively) from the media around the world. Even China has banned my work!

9

We have new neighbours in the Cotswolds. They put a note through our letterbox inviting us to have drinkies with them.

'We mustn't go,' said Antoinette.

I looked at her.

'We might make friends with them and then you'll have a row with them and it will be embarrassing. It will be far less embarrassing if we simply never speak to them.'

How wise.

I spoke to a workman working in our lane. He had a very distinct Midland accent.

'Are you from Wolverhampton?' I asked.

'No, no,' he replied. 'I'm from Willenhall.'

The two are no more than ten or so miles apart. I thought it was a good guess. But he was not at all impressed. Indeed, he seemed surprised that I had made such a blunder.

10

The awful BBC's equally awful TV Licence cronies (famous for their nasty threatening letters – designed to scare the bejesus out of decent citizens) have always claimed that they have vans driving around the country which can detect working televisions.

Allegedly, these vans have little dishes on their roofs which are supposed to be able to identify TV sets.

The BBC and its licence collecting arm say that these vans enable them to pound on the correct doors when looking for sensible folk who haven't coughed up five million quid for a TV licence. The BBC bullies claim that their vans can identify folk watching TV without a licence.

I don't believe them.

Why?

Because if they really had vans which were capable of such things the BBC would have long ago made a little film of such a thing happening.

The film would show a TV detector van driving along Acacia Avenue. The van's operator would shout 'Stop! I've got one!' And burly blokes would leap out of the back and hammer on the door of the home of the poor sod identified as watching crap without a licence.

And they would show that little film at least ten times a night to frighten the living daylights out of decent, honest folk who preferred to feed their families rather than shovel more of their hard earned pennies into the BBC executives' swollen pension fund.

But they don't do they?

Have you seen such a film? No, nor have I.

They just say they can do it.

And that's why I don't believe TV detector vans do what they're supposed to do.

I have no doubt that the vans exist. And I accept that they are driving around the countryside polluting the air with their exhaust fumes. I'm sure they have little dishes going round and round on the van roofs.

But I don't believe for one second that they can identify householders watching TV.

I think it is all a piece of pseudoscience.

It's a myth up there with the Loch Ness Monster and the Honest Politician. (I don't think Britain has had an honest politician in any government ever since the professional politicians took over. As an aside, it occurs to me that apart from the fact that he is a lying, cheating crook it is the fact that he is an amateur at politics that has been the cause of Trump's downfall. The professional politicians can't bear to see him in the best job.)

So, here's a challenge to the BBC:

Send out one of your vans with an independent judge sitting in the back.

And then make a little film showing one of your vans identifying a TV set being used without a licence.

Bet you a detector van full of top grade bullshit that you can't do it.

Meanwhile, when are the TV licensing people going to spend some money publicising the fact that people who only watch Netflix or Amazon Prime don't need a television licence? And how about letting people know that if the TV licensing people do turn up you don't have to let them in?

11

One of our bath taps has stopped working. The water is there but the top of the tap has worn out and will no longer turn the bit of metal that lets the water through. (That's me being technical about taps.)

Since workmen are such a pain these days I thought I'd try to fix the tap myself. Too many modern workmen treat our homes as building sites. They throw their stuff around, they leave a mess and, of course, they turn up and leave as the fancy takes them. We have an insurance policy for these things but I thought I could replace a tap top myself and save a few hours on the telephone.

So I ordered a new pair of tap tops. (Apparently you have to buy them in pairs.) They looked perfect. But when they arrived they didn't fit.

So I ordered another pair.

They also looked perfect.

They also did not fit.

It appears that the tap industry has not yet got round to coordinating itself. It's as though electrical appliances all came with different sized plugs and sockets.

So I now have four useless taps. And a tap that still doesn't work.

We will have to call the insurers after all.

But what do I do with the useless taps?

The sensible thing to do would be to send them back and get a refund.

But from past experience my guess is that if I do this the company at the end will simply deny having received them. I will then be left with no taps and no money.

The only safe thing to do would be to pay £8 or more per parcel and send them by special delivery.

But since the taps didn't cost much more than that there doesn't seem much point.

So I have stuffed the taps into a cupboard in the garage together with all the other crap that doesn't do what it is supposed to do – including an entire loo that doesn't fit our plumbing requirements.

In due course I could open Britain's first 'Tap Museum'.

Or, remembering our fireguards, a 'Tap and Fireguard Museum'.

My loathing of the French continues to grow apace.

Many people believe that the French are merely stupid, greedy, selfish, unreliable, untrustworthy and deceitful. However, this is merely a starting point. The French are also cowardly, ungrateful and unreliable. If I had to use one word to describe them I would choose the word 'sly'.

I no longer find it difficult to understand why the English spent so many centuries fighting them. On the contrary, I find it difficult to understand why we are not still at war with them.

Unarguably, the French are cowardly and surrendering is their national pastime. In 1940, the German offensive began in France. Within weeks France had capitulated and officially the French threw in their lot with the Hun. Leading French politicians, and vast tranches of the population, became enthusiastic Nazis. We should not forget that in World War II the French deliberately killed around 40,000 of their fellow countrymen. That's 'friendly fire' with a vengeance.

Britain and America were left to rescue the eternally ungrateful frogs from their own dishonour. Vast numbers of British and American servicemen died to save them. Around 447,000 Britons and 420,000 Americans died in that war.

Indeed, I believe it is because they are so keen on surrendering that the French are keen on the European Union. Membership is for them a good way of surrendering to Germany.

The latest health news story is that women who eat meat are more likely to develop breast cancer. I could scream. I have been saying this for nearly three decades – and I have been attacked, vilified and banned for saying it.

The Advertising Standards Authority (which many people think is a statutory organisation but which is a private organisation funded largely by big advertisers) banned ads for my book *Food for Thought* because it explained the link between cancers and food and threatened the profitability of the meat industry. I sent them a list of scientific references proving my claims but the ASA refused to accept scientific research in my defence. Despite the silly ASA ban *The Guardian* and *The Observer* newspapers both happily ran several full-page advertisements when I offered to pay them a total of £60,000. I would have loved to have seen the sanctimonious staff when they opened their papers and saw my 'banned' ads staring out at them.

It isn't difficult to establish how meat causes breast cancer.

Meat as sold today is full of carcinogenic chemicals, hormones and antibiotics. And, when you eat that meat, the chemicals go into your body's fat supplies.

Human breast tissue contains a good deal of fat. So that is where the dangerous chemicals accumulate. Hence the cancer.

The meat industry has fought to suppress this truth just as the tobacco industry fought to suppress the truth about cigarettes and lung cancer.

And the medical profession has ignored this truth. Indeed, doctors now try to prevent breast cancer by removing healthy breasts.

Why don't doctors simply advise susceptible or worried women to stop eating meat?

Simpler and safer.

But how can you make money out of telling women to change their eating habits?

When the council in Gloucestershire writes demanding more money it addresses the mail to Antoinette alone – even though we are both listed in their records. This means, of course, that when I am asked to provide proof of my residence I have none.

12

'What doesn't kill you makes you stronger,' said Nietzsche. The poor old bugger was absolutely wrong. The truth is that that which does not kill you will make you weaker and ever more vulnerable.

13

Elder abuse is now extremely fashionable. And however young you are, it's coming your way eventually.

14

A chum who lives on the other side of the planet has sent me photographs of Paris. They show that the part of France with which I fell in love has changed beyond recognition. It has been taken over by beggars, thieves and confidence tricksters. They gather in crowds outside and inside railway stations and all the buildings likely to be of interest to tourists or travellers. Little by little the city has been destroyed by the EU's enforced immigration rules. Moreover, new laws mean that the streets of Paris are full of rubbish – much of it contributed by small shopkeepers or café owners struggling to stay in business in a ruthlessly socialist city which seems to regard capitalism as almost as big a sin as being foreign.

The socialists who now run Paris dare not say or do anything about the immigration problem because they fear that they would be described as 'politically incorrect'.

These things happen little by little (as with the frog in the pan of boiling water and as in London) and the locals don't really notice.

And, of course, in Paris as in London, the 'leading' citizens, the ones with influence, travel from their smart homes to their smart offices in chauffeur driven limos and see nothing of the beggars, the thieves and the soldiers.

Paris has changed in every conceivable way.

And always for the worst.

A few years ago the noises of the city were enjoyable at best and bearable at worst. But the sounds have changed beyond recognition. Our apartment was in a quiet street opposite an embassy but for the last two or three years not a week has gone by without someone digging up the street or the basements and foundations of the buildings.

The sounds we heard used to be the cries of the knife sharpener, the chair mender and the onion seller. They have all gone. Now all we hear are noisy motorbikes, drunks, shouty millennials and pneumatic drills which appeared to have been fitted with amplifiers.

(Am I the only one to have noticed that the smaller the motorbike, the more annoying will be the noise it makes? The big ones make a decent, throaty roar. The little ones make a high pitched whine which is infinitely more infuriating.)

The neat little cafés in the street below look inviting in the daylight but at midnight the revellers who pour out into the street are drunk and keen on smashing bottles onto the road. The French have always drunk a good deal of alcohol but whereas older generations could hold their liquor well, the new French generation seem to get drunk easily and quickly and to behave just as badly as drunken British football fans.

The residents of an apartment block less than seventy five metres away from the building where our apartment was situated allowed someone to set up a metal cutting business in their communal courtyard. The metal grinder worked every day from 8 until 8 and he worked on Saturdays too.

A friend who was also trying to sell his apartment (without an agent) had a similar problem with a noisy workshop. He solved his problem, however, by making an unusual but useful arrangement with the owner of the workshop. He would telephone whenever a potential buyer was due to view and the workshop owner would take a tea break until another call told him that he could resume his drilling and cutting activities. For this vital service the workshop owner was paid 30 euros per disruption. It was, apparently, an arrangement which both parties found profitable.

The decibel level of the constant, angry whine of metal cutting metal means that to drown it out we had to play music much louder than we preferred. At 8 pm the sound of the metal cutting was replaced by the television set belonging to a deaf person in the neighbouring building. The wall between buildings was two foot thick but not thick enough to deaden the screaming of the television soap operas our neighbour seemed to like.

At 11 pm the tenants in the building on the other side would hold a party which did not finish until 3 or 4 in the morning. And at 7.30 am the day would start with beeping horns as motorists complained about the lorries which had arrived for the day’s drilling activity and which had been abandoned in the middle of the street.

All these annoyances were new.

The French have always had the rudest officials in the world and they have always had the deadliest bureaucracy.

But, until recently, the bureaucrats had the good sense to turn a blind eye to the most unreasonable demands they were supposed to make.

No more.

The French have adopted EU legislation with enthusiasm and their dedication to bureaucracy is worse than you can possibly imagine. Every time we visited Paris we found a new letter demanding that we allow someone or other to enter the apartment and check on something or other.

The city’s biggest mistake was probably to change itself to cope with terrorist threats.

For a few years now tourist landmarks in Paris have been festooned with wire and concrete and guarded by armed soldiers. The Eiffel Tower and Les Invalides now look more like army camps than anything else. It is no longer possible to feed the ducks in the small lake near to the Eiffel Tower. Tourists have their bags searched by teenagers with automatic weapons. The safety catches are off and the young soldiers all have their fingers on their triggers. If a stray Frisbee or ball hits one on the back of the head the instinctive response would inevitably result in mass slaughter.

The French don’t understand that once you adapt your way of life to suit the terrorist threat then you are admitting defeat. And that, of course, is what the French do best; in their communal cowardice they have made the basic mistake of destroying the city, the very thing they are supposed to be protecting.

I have spent much of my life studying Paris and have a library of several hundred books about the city. I’ve written books about it.

But I am so full of sadness, frustration and rage that when I look back on just under 20 years all I can now remember are the really bad things.

There was the company which we paid to service our gas boiler. They dobbed us in to the authorities when their workman noticed that we had a cooker hood extractor fan in the kitchen alongside the extractor fan taking fumes away from the boiler. This had suddenly become contrary to EU legislation and we were ordered to have the cooker hood taken away. No one bothered to find out that the cooker hood did not work, had never worked and was, therefore, of absolutely no significance. We had enormous difficulty finding someone to remove it and eventually found a couple of cowboys who ripped it off the wall (leaving bare wires dangling) and demanded 300 euros. They wanted more to carry the hood downstairs and dump it on the pavement.

Inspectors of some kind (on a routine check looking for termites, woodworm or democracy) smashed down the wooden door to our cellar in the basement – and then just left it hanging off its hinges. They didn’t even bother to apologise, let alone offer any compensation. Replacing the door cost us 1,500 euros – though we did replace it with a steel door which would have withstood a boot or even a sledgehammer.

An electrician called to repair a small piece of frayed cable ended up charging us £2,500 for his labours. A painter to whom I gave £1,000 for materials disappeared and was never seen again. An emergency boiler technician came to repair a broken down heating boiler and demanded £3,000 for a new boiler. We had a devil of a job to get rid of him. It turned out that the problem was a broken fuse and the repair cost was under £100.

The building agents used to be helpful. But they became unbearable and for the last year or two had begun to behave as though they owned the building.

Every year the owners of the various apartments in the building have a meeting at which they vote for work to be done (new carpets, painting the outside, painting the inside and so on).

We never went to a meeting but have always studied the agenda and then posted our votes well in advance. When we did this last year the agents received our voting paper but deliberately chose to ignore it. When we objected to this high-handed attitude, and complained that it could not possibly be legal, we were told by the agents that they were allowed to do this. And so we found ourselves committed to expenditure that had been decided by other people.

The city has eradicated almost all the birds in the city but the pavements are as thick with dog shit as they ever were. And most of the dogs wandering around are clearly pack leaders – with their ‘owners’ struggling along behind. I suggested to Antoinette that she carry one of those Jif lemons to squirt into the eyes of a dog if it attacked. She said she could always argue that she was carrying it because she liked drinking lemon tea, and few cafés in Paris have lemon these days.

For the last two or three years every time we ventured out of doors we have been besieged by would-be muggers and confidence tricksters. The beggars who abound target English and American because they know that they will never get anything from the French.

And the City itself has become overbearing and bureaucratic. Just the other day a pregnant woman was fined 60 euros for walking the wrong way at a metro station in Paris.

When you are in love with a city these things are forgivable if not exactly charming. But when you lose the love for the city these things become unbearably annoying.

And today, it is extremely easy to loathe the French.

Moreover, the French do absolutely nothing to make themselves loved. So, for example, I wonder how many tourists know that it is now illegal to take photographs of the Eiffel Tower at night. The company which owns the Tower has the copyright on pictures of the Tower when it is lit.

The sadness about the New Paris is international.

A chum who lives in Thailand recently sent me another set of photographs of Paris as it is today. The pictures were taken by a Czech couple and they are startling. Photos of crowds show no white, French faces, debris and rubbish scattered everywhere in public places, hordes of immigrants crowded in all the public places and terrorising tourists. There are no longer any crowds around the Louvre, Sacre Coeur or the Eiffel Tower.

Those few tourists who venture out of their hotels and make the hazardous journey to city landmarks are accosted by gamblers, beggars and pick pockets.

The Czechs have a photograph of a group of white women wearing hijabs (you can see their hands). One is waving a v sign at the camera. There is a photo of a row of tents pitched on the pavement by the Seine. These are home to more immigrants. The pavements are ankle deep in litter. There is a photo of an immigrant pissing inside a carriage in the Metro.

At night the streets, even in the smart centre of the city, are full of immigrant youths armed with sticks and baseball bats. As in London, the police, like border guards, dare not say anything to the troublemakers because to do so would be considered racist.

Shops are now mostly aimed at tourists, selling tatty T shirts and cheap souvenirs. Nearly all of them are run by immigrants. Lovely old shops which had (to my knowledge) been there for over 50 years have disappeared.

And this is exactly how we remember Paris. And it is precisely why we are glad to have left. I hope that my older memories will, one day, return and take over.

15

We hired a carpenter to do more repairs. Unfortunately, he couldn’t repair the soffits because he doesn’t like heights or ladders.

Our cast iron downpipes are rusty and flaking and our paintwork is so bad that you can see underlying coats of paint in some places. But I don’t care. The idea of having more workmen around is too much to bear. Antoinette pointed out that we haven’t had a week without workmen coming for at least three years. (We even had them for three Christmases in a row: twice for a faulty boiler and once for blocked drains.)

16

My favourite email is the one which includes the words: ‘You do not have to do anything’

17

I read old magazines and newspapers quite often. There is something soothing about reading news that is more than 100-years-old. It seems far away and therefore less threatening.

But one thing always occurs to me: sportsmen from long ago all look like men.

Take a look at old photos of sports teams and you’ll see what I mean: footballers and cricketers looked like blokes in the olden, sepia days.

Today, our sportsmen all look about 14.

And they behave even younger than that.

Could this possibly be a result of the fact that our drinking water has been proven to contain vast quantities of female hormones?

That’s the bottom line: modern footballers and cricketers and racing drivers and whatever look underdeveloped and behave like children because they are stuffed to the gills with female hormones.

18

Governments find it impossible to resist the temptation to interfere with every aspect of our lives. Time and time again their interventions are shown to do more harm than good.

But that doesn’t stop them.

The latest lunacy is a proposal that companies will in future be judged by sociologists on whether they have included workers’ ideas when making decisions. Companies which do not score strongly will be banned from receiving government support. They will be outlawed and ostracised.

This is one long stride down the road towards communism.

Large companies will be good at the box ticking. There will be committees and workers sitting on advisory boards. No one with any brains will take any notice of the nonsense. But the box will be ticked.

It is small companies which will fail to satisfy the nanny state.

And so they will wither on the vine.

Here is yet more encouragement for investors to avoid small companies.

Is that really what the Government intended?

19

A month ago Antoinette sent a parcel to a friend in Canada. The parcel contained a number of carefully selected birthday presents, and Antoinette paid heavily to have it sent signed for registered and tracked. The thing has just got there. It took a month!

20

Tesco has announced that in future they will not put sell by dates on fruit and vegetables because the dates encourage waste. Their spin is that consumers throw away perfectly good fruit and vegetables simply because of the dates. But Antoinette immediately spotted the trick, pointing out that the store would now be able to sell old fruit and vegetables that had been on the shelf for weeks and still looked reasonably acceptable. ‘Since we have our groceries picked for us and delivered we won’t know how old anything is when we get it,’ she pointed out.

The people who will benefit most from this new policy will, of course, be Tesco.

(I do still like Tesco, however. Their drivers are the best in the business. Waitrose drivers were mostly just marking time while about to do something important, or had previously been something important. With notable exceptions they weren’t much fun.)

21

Looking at *John Bull* magazine dated March 27th 1926 I found an article entitled *Hands Off The People’s Wireless* by Maplin Thorpe.

‘The future of British broadcasting is in jeopardy,’ wrote Mr Thorpe. ‘If the commendations of Lord Crawford’s

Committee are put into effect our wireless programmes will be run by bureaucratic officials. If these proposals are adopted, British broadcasting will be doomed.'

Thorpe pointed out that British broadcasting was the best in the world but that under the hands of Commissioners under the thumb of the Post Office the 'people's wireless' would become 'stagnant, dulled by the deadening hand of officialdom'. He warned that people working for a state controlled BBC would become civil servants and that 'the bureaucrat is above public opinion'.

The bureaucrat, warned Thorpe, is: 'a servant who is a law unto himself, and can ignore and defy the wishes of his masters.'

Sadly, Thorpe's fears and predictions turned out to be well-founded.

The modern BBC, which grew out of Lord Crawford's Committee, is a treacherous disaster which consistently defies its paymasters (the British people) and supports the European Union. Almost on a daily basis the BBC's website defends the EU and Remainers while sniping at Brexiteers. So, for example, the lead item might be 'UKIP Supporter Gets Parking Fine' while hidden away at the bottom of the page will be 'Remainer Eats 300 Children'.

22

At least 2,500 council employees were paid over £100,000 last year and around 500 of them were paid more than £150,000. The former chief executive of Birmingham city council was paid £666,662 and one employee at Northamptonshire County Council was paid £337,500. (Northamptonshire County Council has just gone bankrupt).

In addition to paying themselves absurd salaries (together with fat pensions) council staff also enjoy massive treats. Recently, for example, Cornwall Council spent £46,000 on sending six delegates to a conference in Cannes for four days. That's nearly £8,000 each. I wonder how many of the five would have spent £8,000 of their own money on a four day break in Cannes?

23

Officials do the most amazingly stupid things.

In Devon the council sent huge machinery onto a cliff road to mend potholes. Two days later the road collapsed into the sea. No one accepted responsibility. They probably blamed global warming and Brexit.

In the same county workmen from a utility company dug rock out of a road where they were hunting for utility cables and pipe. When they'd finished they replaced the rock with sand. This now appears to be standard practice.

In Paris, utility companies dug underneath all the buildings in an arrondissement and removed vast quantities of rock. Again, they replaced the rock with sand.

24

I am not surprised to see that a few billionaires are now using their money to interfere with the Brexit process. It is actually astonishing how much power really rich people could have. Fortunately, most of them are too desperate to hang on their money to use it for anything other than buying islands or diesel guzzling yachts. Can you imagine a world in which Philip Green used his money to change the world to suit his requirements?

If I had a spare £100 million hanging around surplus to everyday requirements I could, I think stop all hunting, stop vivisection, destroy the Remain movement, destroy vaccination, save the grey squirrel and pay for at least one lifeboat (the 'Antoinette') to be launched.

25

My iPad is supposed to recognise my thumb print. If fingerprints in general are as effective then I understand why the police keep on arresting the wrong people. The iPad recognises my thumb about half the time. The other half of the time it dismisses the thumb as that of an intruder.

Sometime next autumn I will have to pay the City of Paris the final taxes on the apartment we sold last April. Bizarrely, I am liable for the taxes for the year up until the end of December and because I am English I have to pay a much higher tax rate than I would have to pay if I were French. That is a bit annoying but it is even more annoying to have to keep paying taxes on a property we no longer own. If I don't pay them the results will be disastrous. The French are nothing if not avaricious and EU laws will allow them to extradite me. The thought of having to go back to France for any reason is quite enough incentive for me to work out how to pay them. This isn't as easy as it may sound. They won't let me pay by credit card and insist that I pay with a cheque drawn on a French bank account. I no longer have a French bank account.

26

Television news presenters are very good at pretending that they are presenting original research but most of the time they have just nicked it from other sources (books, articles). And is it just me or do television news readers relish presenting bad news? Newsreaders and weather persons all seem to take a strangely disconnected but undeniably sadistic delight in sharing bad news. 'There will be thunderstorms and there's bound to be loads of flooding and roofs will be blown off and cars will turn over and people will die. That's all from me. Have a good night. See you all tomorrow.'

27

Why are modern GPs so darned scruffy? Male doctors invariably work in shirt sleeves and without ties. Female GPs work in jeans and jumpers. Generally, they look as if they've just come in from working in the garden or doing the hoovering. This casualness is disrespectful and unprofessional and shows a contempt for patients. I know I'm an old fart for even noticing it. But I don't care.

Is it just me or are there are lot more named storms these days? I suspect the 'authorities' are giving more gusty days a name of their own in order to convince us about the threat of climate change.

28

My life is being dribbled away on crap. In future I intend to spend half a day a week dealing with crap (telephoning utility companies, etc.). If I can't get everything sorted in half a day then it waits until the next half a day and so on. I keep reminding myself how important it is to differentiate between the trivial and the important. I know I am frittering away my life, half an hour here, half an hour there, half a day here, half a day there, half a week here, half a week there. And I resent the fact that I must be constantly aware of cheating companies. Why should I have to waste life changing gas and electricity suppliers every few months to avoid being overcharged?

29

Thanks to global warming, cooling, heating up, tepidisation or our just having a nice summer or whatever they are calling it this week, the grass hadn't needed cutting for weeks but I decided that I needed to do a little strimming.

Instead of using the heavy Stihl petrol strimmer I put the battery for the Bosch strimmer on charge. It's a hand-held electric strimmer which has always worked quite well, although getting the battery in and out is incredibly difficult.

(The blades, by the way, are made of green coloured plastic which makes them impossible to find when they fly off into the grass. It seems to me that making blades the same colour as grass tells us everything we need to know about Bosch.)

Anyway, the damned thing wouldn't start.

I did everything. I recharged the battery; I checked the strimmer head, I checked the handle and the operating switches. Nothing. It will not work.

So I now have three problems.

First, I cannot do any strimming without firing up the huge and heavy petrol strimmer. That always takes me at least half an hour with the result that I am exhausted before I begin strimming.

Second, I have to choose and buy another light strimmer. In the bad old days, before progress and social media took over the world, you could go into a garden centre and choose a strimmer from the stock available. They had a row of them to try for size and weight. These days many of the garden centres appear to have closed and things like strimmers can only be bought online. This means that you don't see what you are getting until you've got it and when you've got it you have to build it yourself because it will arrive in a box in bits, like a Meccano set. I have lost count of the number of strimmers I have bought and dumped before getting them to work. (Antoinette bought me a Meccano model of a JCB style earth moving machine. It was marvellous fun; brilliantly well-made and accompanied by excellent instructions. Making the model required manual dexterity and mental agility. I suspect that the Meccano models are, like the *Dandy* and *Beano* Annuals, sold only to men over the age of 60. They are damned sight more fun than making wicker work baskets and should be handed out by occupational therapists everywhere.)

Third, and this is the most difficult task of all, I have to get rid of the Bosch strimmer which doesn’t work. Getting rid of electrical equipment that breaks down is a nightmare. The council won’t take it away and if I drive to the dump a man in a yellow bib will treat me like a criminal, photograph me and my car, subject me to a discourse on glaciers, icebergs and the need to spurn plastic bags, charge me a tenner and send me away with fleas in both ears. I don’t think I can cope with any or part of that and so the damned thing will just have to be hurled into the corner of the broken down old summer house where it can join the broken Anglepoise lamp in long-term storage.

The logical thing to do would, of course, be to hire a gardener with his own equipment.

But that never works well for me. The modern gardener is either doing it as a hobby (he used to be a senior area representative and is retired on a good pension but looking for something to do and a bit of pin money) or he is an earnest, young professional with a degree in grass cutting and a doctorate in hedge trimming.

Whoever it is will come round when he or she wants to come round and they will cause endless trouble. They will want a drink. Then they will want to use the loo. They will expect us to provide all the equipment they need. (So I won’t escape the problem of buying stuff that works. Indeed, they will probably demand equipment to a certain specification.) They will want to be paid in cash. Always questions and demands, questions and demands, questions and demands. Then they want the car moving so that they can park their vehicle where they want to park it. Then they want to chat about the football or the weather or their investments in the Bahamas. Or they trip on a pebble and dirty their expensive trousers and want compensation. Or they turn on the outside tap and break it and water continues to pour everywhere for days after they’ve gone. Or they carelessly send a stone flying into a window and break the glass – naturally, they forget to mention this before they disappear. And then, before they go, they want to use the loo again and they refuse to take off their boots because that is contrary to health and safety regulations and so they traipse through the house leaving grass cuttings everywhere. Our house used to have a gardeners’ loo, though I doubt if any gardener would deign to use it, but a previous owner put a washing machine and spin dryer into it and turned it into a laundry room. We would turn it back into an outside loo for gardeners and builders but it would mean hiring builders and plumbers and we would probably need permission from the local council’s Department of Outside Plumbing Permissions.

Eventually, I ordered yet another strimmer (which Antoinette found for me because she is patient, determined and brilliant at finding stuff – I give up after three minutes). It is a Von Haus 20v and it cost a miserly £69.

30

I heard today that Uber is putting self-driving cars back on the roads after the fatal accident a couple of months ago. But we are assured that human drivers ‘will be completely in control at all times’. Er, in what way is such a car ‘self-driving’?

Now that the EU has ordered all companies on the internet to ask us for permission for everything they do, I find that it takes me twice as long to research a subject on the internet. No one will let me onto their site unless I give them permission do whatever they like with my private information. And my inbox is constantly full of emails (mostly from people I never remember contacting) asking for my permission to keep sending me their guff. Oh, and I am inundated with emails from America telling me that I can only respond if I live in America. Once again, the EU has fucked up big time.

July

1

If Corbyn and the Marxist branch of the Labour Party ever form a government then the British will see employment prospects collapse and socialist and communist tax policies will see house prices dive and house owners faced with penury. The pound will go down 25% or more. Exchange controls will destroy travel companies and airlines and exporters. Rent controls will result in a collapse in property prices. Interest rates will soar (to 5% to 10% at least) and taxes on property and savings and earnings will all soar. Wealth will be confiscated. Inflation will reach 10% within the first year and will also soar. Once inflation gets out of control the sky is the limit. For the record, inflation this year has hit 80,000% in Venezuela. Pension values will fall dramatically. Only civil servants (and retired civil servants) will be safe (although any public servant, whether employed by central government or a local council, who is under 50 and who is expecting a pension is probably going to be disappointed).

Here's a good game for francophobes: Name a single decent car currently made by a French company and name the country's top ten inventions.

Last October my literary agent in Portugal told me that I was owed a decent chunk of money by my Portuguese publisher for the sale of new editions of my books *Bodypower* and *Mindpower*. Today he wrote to tell me that the publisher has sent a cheque. The money is for sales for the year before the year before last year. I must try telling the local council that I am now ready to pay the council tax for the year before the year before last year.

I see that the Advertising Standards Authority (the ASA) is still putting out press releases claiming that it has 'banned' this advertisement or that advertisement. The ASA is a private organisation which has no more right to 'ban' an advert than you or I have. Why on earth do newspapers and magazines continue to allow this disreputable organisation to pretend to have powers it does not have? Some time ago I reported the ASA to the Office of Fair Trading which told me that they were watching the organisation.

After reading (yet again) that people who eat meat are much more likely to die early I wrote to the ASA pointing out that 20 years ago they banned advertisements for my book *Food for Thought* because the book contained evidence proving that meat causes cancer. The ASA refused to look at the scientific evidence but banned adverts for the book because they had received a complaint from the meat industry – which just happened to be a big advertiser and therefore a major supporter of the ASA. (The ASA doesn't like it widely known but it is a private body and it obtains its money from big advertisers.)

The evidence supporting my claim continues to grow almost daily. So, for example, I read that Harvard Medical School now claims that at least one third of early deaths could be prevented if everyone adopted a vegetarian diet. The world needs to go vegetarian but the meat trade will ensure that it doesn't. Private organisations such as the Advertising Standards Authority in the UK have protected the meat industry from the truth. If more people became vegetarian then there would be far less pollution, oil would be saved and land would be used more efficiently – there would be no more hunger.

Politicians don't encourage vegetarianism for two reasons. First, the meat industry is very powerful. Second, if more people stopped eating meat then more people would live longer and the size of the elderly population would grow even faster.

Today I noticed that all our dandelions had disappeared. The rabbits had eaten them. The rabbits make excellent lawn mowers. I reckon that last year I had to cut the grass only half as often as I would have had to cut it without them. And for the first time we saw rabbits doing binkies. When a rabbit suddenly jumps into the air and twists about before landing it is doing a binky. When a lamb or a sheep does it this is called pronging.

Diane Abbott has apparently said today that she is going to be Home Secretary. I can imagine few more scary eventualities. 'Killer Ebola Virus Hits England', 'Plague of Dog Sized Rats' and 'Zombie Apocalypse' are all nothing compared to the idea of Diane Abbott being Home Secretary.

We need a new law. We need to be able to insist that in future Cabinet Ministers must be able to spell their job title. That should keep Abbott out of the Home Office. It should also keep David Larmy firmly on the back benches.

(I am, I confess, beginning to favour the theory that Diane Abbott doesn't actually exist – but is a virtual reality character designed to give socialism a bad name.)

Antoinette has been putting small premium bond cheques into her bank account for nearly twenty years but on the last two occasions that she tried this, the cheques were sent back. The problem is that when she opened the account she used only the Christian name she likes to be known by. Her other Christian name was not used. And now the bank will no longer accept cheques which carry both her initials. There is no logic to this, of course. And I'm not even sure that it is a legal reason for rejecting the cheques. Still, we have been dreading going to the bank to try to sort this out because we both feared that it would prove nigh on impossible and might, indeed, involve closing her account, and our joint accounts, and opening new ones. Since we have allowed our passports to expire (thereby removing another opportunity for identity theft, incidentally) we even worried that we would have to renew them and then open new accounts at another bank. This morning we spent an hour collecting together every piece of evidence we have showing that Antoinette also has another initial. The task was made slightly more difficult by the fact that although our utility company accounts are in both our names, the mail we get is addressed to one of us alone. (Why do utility companies do this? Don't they realise that the possession of a utility company statement is an integral part of proving one's identity these days? Or do they just not care?) Fortunately, one of our local tax demands is addressed to Antoinette alone.

Anyway, our fears were unfounded. A really nice foreign lady at the bank was marvellously helpful and appears to have changed Antoinette's account details.

(Curiously, at one point she asked Antoinette if she wanted a credit card on my account. I would have been very happy about this but Antoinette, who has her own account and card, doesn't want one. It did seem curiously old-fashioned and sexist, though.)

I was a bit worried at the point where the teller turned round her computer screen so that Antoinette could check that everything had been done properly. Anyone standing around wearing those wretched spectacles with cameras in them would have been able to take pictures of the screen. Banks don't do nearly enough to protect the confidentiality of their customers.

Hopefully Antoinette's problem is now solved and she will once again be able to pay in her Premium Bond winnings. It took only an hour but it was an hour well spent. When we got back home I felt like opening a bottle of champagne and celebrating.

2

The aim of the EU is to create a United States of Europe. The aim is to get rid of individual countries completely. But only 6% of the UK population support the EU's stated aim of an 'ever closer union' aka a United States of Europe. And yet nearly half want to remain within the EU. Are the Remainers stupid or just ignorant?

I loathe the arrogance of the European Union and its eurocrats (a mass of smug, abominable servants whose salaries are paid by the citizens of Europe – including us). To make life easier for Theresa May, who is a ditherer but appears to feel more loyalty to the EU than to the UK, I have formulated a reply to give to the EU. This will end the negotiations about Brexit.

Unfortunately, because the reply is confidential I cannot tell you what it is.

But I can inform you that the reply consists of two words.

And the second word is 'off'.

Theresa May is clearly a traitor who deserves to be stuffed into the stocks and pelted with screwed up photographs of the Blairs. (Her name should be changed to Treason May.) She reminds me of Neville Chamberlain. Sadly, we have no Churchill to take over. Boris Johnson would like to be our Churchill but he is, I fear, little more than the fool he always used to pretend to be. Today, Mrs May has threatened that if MPs do not vote for the awful scheme she and Merkel appear to have dreamt up then there will be no Brexit. How dare she? She doesn't own the country. It doesn't belong to her. She is supposed to manage it on our behalf. And now she tells us that if our elected representatives (elected to do what we tell them to do) do not do what she tells them to do then she will ignore our vote.

Theresa May is a Remainer. Leaving the EU with May in charge is like trying to fight World War II with Himmler or Goebbels in charge of Britain. She seems unaware that the Government exists to pursue a policy according to the will of the people. Brexit is one of the most important events in our history and it has been handled with gross incompetence. Most of the vocal Remainers are paid to support the EU. Most Brexiteers are not paid. (It is the same with everything these days. Paid lobbyists have distorted the democratic process.)

So much for democracy and so much for the results of the referendum.

There seems to me little doubt that May never intended to go through with the Brexit the country voted for. She appears to have surrounded herself with an army of honey-tongued Remainers who will do anything and say anything to reduce our nation recovering the independence we voted for. The Remainers are men and women whose souls contain no music. No belay that: they have lost their souls. They are led by EU flag wavers who have no talents, no probity and no depth but who are gloriously proud and relentlessly immodest. They have created a tissue of delicate lies too weak to sustain any sort of argument but of which they boast gravely. Remainers are the sort of self-aggrandising, shallow people who go to memorial services not to show respect to the deceased but to show themselves.

How bizarre it is that it has been Remainers not Brexiteers who have received 'honours'. So, the widely loathed Nick Clegg is now Sir Nick Clegg while Nigel Farage is still Mr Nigel Farage.

Meanwhile the scaremongering about Brexit continues. And anyone who opposes the EU is instantly demonised, reviled and abused. The scaremongering in itself is laughable (most of it dafter than the Millennial Bug and the AIDS scare) but the consequences aren't.

Those who voted leave were the winners. But those who lost the Referendum are now controlling how we leave. And, led by the traitor May, they will fuck it up so much that we will all be ruined and turned into serfs.

I am so distressed I think I need counselling. As I wait for the inevitable road crash of a Brexit I am developing a new disorder which I shall call Pre-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

No one (no one) voted for the Brexit we are probably going to get.

We watched both versions of *Whisky Galore* and had a job choosing between them. The original, starring Basil Radford and Joan Greenwood has all the charm of a black and white movie but the 2016 version was quite delightful. Eddie Izzard was astonishingly good as the Home Guard captain. Izzard also stole the one 'Oceans' film he appeared in with Clooney.

This evening I couldn't find our copy of Rio Lobo. I don't know why I wanted to watch it but I did. I spent twenty minutes searching the cupboards where we store our collection (I really must categorise our DVD library) and found dozens of other John Wayne movies but no Rio Lobo. I eventually gave up and bought another copy for 1p plus postage. The book, music and film industries have all been devastated by the internet. Back list sales used to provide the bread and butter for writers, musicians and film makers. Now, back list sales have slumped.

While hunting for Rio Lobo, I found Shane – quite possibly the best Western ever made. It occurred to me that Alan Ladd, the star of Shane, has one thing in common with Jerome K. Jerome, the author of *Three Men in a Boat*. Both created one masterpiece and are remembered for very little else.

I found the following quote in an article by Siegfried Sassoon in the 1946 edition of *The Saturday Book*: 'Man's power over nature had far outstripped his moral and mental development. The application on a colossal scale of older processes of steam and electricity were perpetually transmuting the economic, social and international fabric before it had time to solidify; linking up distant races too closely and too suddenly; and putting into the hands of personal and national ambition new weapons of conquest and self-aggrandisement which have proved the means of mutual destruction.' It was written by G.M.Trevelyan in 1926.

3

Remainers, particularly millennials, are again telling older folk to 'hurry up and die soon' for having had the temerity to care enough about their country, and its future generations, to vote to leave the European Union.

There is a huge fuss about the fact that a heterosexual has been hired to play a gay character in a film and an Anglo Saxon has been hired to play a Puerto Rican character in something else. Quite right too! In future, doctors should only be played by doctors, taxi drivers must be played by taxi drivers and psychopathic killers must be played by psychopathic killers. Since there are a huge number of psychopaths in horror films, crime films and so on there will clearly be a massive demand for murderous psychopaths.

England managed to beat a disgraceful Colombian team to stay in the football World Cup. I was appalled but not surprised to read that MPs representing the constantly racist Scottish National Party deliberately went on a 'go slow' so that English MPs and staff in the House of Commons couldn't watch the match. Pretty pathetic. But that's the SNP, isn't it? (By the way, why do SNP politicians seem so scruffy? They all look as if they buy their clothes from the debris left at the end of jumble sales and wash once a month.)

My new strimmer arrived. It was easy to put together and it works. I am very impressed. It seems far, far better designed and built than the Bosch strimmer which cost more and which I have to dump. (The Bosch strimmer is still in warranty but the effort involved in making a claim, or in returning the damned thing, is simply too much. Many companies offer extended free warranties which I never take up because they always want far too much private information. The price for these free warranties is far too high.)

My new Von Haus is apparently made by an English company though it was built in China. I'm delighted by this because I try to avoid buying anything made in the EU. (I ought to boycott China since they officially banned all my books. But since nothing is made in Britain anymore I have to buy some foreign made stuff.) The strimmer was delivered by Hermes whose driver dumped it at our main gate (around a quarter of a mile from the house). Twenty people a minute must have walked past it heading for the beach but luckily no one stole it. Not many people would want to steal a large cardboard box. We have a perfectly serviceable bell on the side gate for deliveries but heyho. The good thing with the Von Haus is that the blades are red and should be easy to find should they choose to fly off into the grass. The blades for the Bosch, as I think I have mentioned, were green. Grass green.

The Von Haus works quite well. The guard fell off and won't stay on but the bit that whizzes round and cuts works well so what the hell. I have ordered another one before the manufacturer improves it.

I picked up a copy of *Country Life* and I have found the most pathetic anti-Brexit moan of the year. A geezer called Christie, who runs some sort of opera shindig at Glyndebourne, is complaining that the fall in sterling means that foreign artists cost more to hire. He also complains that the price of plywood is going up because we are leaving the EU. (I assume they use plywood to make scenery. Or maybe the foreign artists eat it.) Have you ever heard anything more pathetic, selfish and irrelevant? Maybe he doesn't realise that the collapse of sterling is not a Brexit phenomenon. Since 1960, sterling has lost more of its value than any other major currency. Successive Governments have screwed things up so badly that our currency has been in a steady decline.

I discovered today that Frederick Delius was born in Bradford. I'm not sure why this surprises me so much. But it does. It's like finding out that Christopher Columbus was born in Huddersfield or that Lawrence of Arabia was brought up in a council flat in Milton Keynes. It shouldn't surprise me that Fred Delius was English. After all, Gustav Holst (who wrote *The Planets*) was born in Cheltenham.

A national newspaper carried a large advertisement for the Post Office. The illustration showed a white woman with two non-white men. Why do they still never do this the other around? I have never, ever seen an advert showing a black woman and one or more white men. I suspect it is some strange form of political correctness which reckons that it is perfectly acceptable for white women to be with black men but unacceptable for black women to be with white men. When, I wonder, does political correctness become racism or sexism? Is it not racial stereotyping to suggest that black men only like white blondes and that black women don't like white skinned men?

When women are given preferential treatment because of their sex (as they are by the Labour Party) then that is pure and simple sexism. MPs are now demanding that the Bank of England give top jobs to women – regardless of ability. They are threatening to block appointments if jobs are given to men. Is that really what women want? How patronising. Moreover, it is no good wrapping it up in some way: it is plain, old-fashioned vanilla sexism. And when individuals are given priority because of their skin colour it is racism. These things are now so commonplace in the UK that no one feels able to talk about them. And yet these changes are creating huge problems. So, for example, many female GPs choose to work part time and this has severely damaged the quality of the GP service. And in Parliament, women MPs have complained bitterly about all night sittings but been apparently happy to accept to absurdly long holidays which MPs take.

The *Daily Express* has announced its discovery of a secret Foreign Office document FCO 30/1048. They claim that the existence of this document was suppressed for 30 years because it advised the British Government to cover up the truth about membership of the EU so that by the time the public understood what was happening it would be too late to do anything about it. I'm so glad the *Express* has found this secret document. I first revealed its existence (and the details of its contents) in 2001 – just 17 years ago – in a book entitled *England Our England*.

4

I stumbled across something rather frightening today.

In 1971 it was shown that phenacetin, a very popular but rather deadly painkiller, might cause Alzheimer's disease. This didn't matter very much because phenacetin had been banned because of the damage it did to the kidneys.

However, back in 1948 it had been shown that phenacetin is known to be converted into paracetamol in the body. The analgesic effect of phenacetin is a result of the paracetamol.

So, the big question, which, as far as I can find out, no one has ever asked is: might paracetamol cause Alzheimer's disease?

The research is now forgotten and ignored. But it scared me because paracetamol is used daily by millions and is generally regarded as a safe drug.

And here's another scary thought.

Some decades ago it was found that aspirin could cause an incredibly rare disease called Reye's Syndrome when it was given to children. And so it was recommended that children be given paracetamol instead of aspirin.

And the drug Calpol, which is widely used to ease mild pains in children, and also used by many parents as a sleeping aid, contains paracetamol.

Could it possibly be that all this explains the rising incidence of Alzheimer's disease? Could paracetamol be the cause of the fact that Alzheimer's is now the commonest cause of dementia?

This worries the hell out of me.

And now it can worry the hell out of you because as far as I can find out no one is doing any research to find out.

Oh, and there's something else.

Guess which drug is now widely recommended for the treatment of patients with Alzheimer's disease.

Even though the preliminary evidence rather suggests that paracetamol could be the cause of Alzheimer's disease, the drug now widely prescribed for the treatment of the disease is – paracetamol.

There's a desperate need for some fairly simple research. It wouldn't take much work, time or money.

But researchers aren't interested. Most medical research is funded, directly or indirectly, by drug companies and why in the hell would they want to do research which might dramatically reduce the number of patients needing expensive treatments? If the research proved that paracetamol is a cause of Alzheimers, and the number of patients was reduced then drug company sales and profits would crash.

Knowing all this, and knowing that nothing whatsoever is being done about it, drives me mad.

Or, more accurately, since I'm probably mad already it's dangerously likely to drive me into the grasping arms of sanity, which would probably be worse.

5

A bloke I know works for the BBC. I've known him for years.

I tried to persuade him to read the proof showing that the EU was designed by the Nazis and created to promote Germany's interests after World War II.

He refused to read the evidence.

I then tried to persuade him to watch the YouTube video I made in which I describe the evidence proving that the EU is a Nazi creation.

He did the BBC equivalent of sticking his fingers in his ears and shouting lalalalalala.

He steadfastly refused to watch the video. He didn't want to know the truth about the EU.

Rather typical of the whole of the BBC, wouldn't you say?

It is, to say the least, sad to see the British Broadcasting Corporation promoting Remainers who consist exclusively of establishment cronies, sycophants, those with a vested interest in the destruction of Britain and the promotion of the EU, and enthusiastically supporting an organisation which was created by Nazis to promote German interests after World War II.

Perhaps not quite what Lord Reith had planned.

I bought something today that came in a small plastic bag. The bag is four inches by three inches and it has a warning printed on it. The warning says: 'Warning: plastic bags can be dangerous. To avoid danger of suffocation keep this bag away from babies and children'. How wonderfully absurd. The baby would have to be an embryo to fit its head into a bag of that size.

Thankfully, our invitations to the Royal Wedding were lost in the post. To be honest we would have both paid large sums of money to avoid the sight of Prince Harry marrying the German Chancellor. I am told that the whole affair was enlivened by an American vicar who reminded friends of James Brown in The Blues brothers. We stayed at home in Devon (my very favourite place in the world – house arrest would, for me, be no punishment at all) and I spent a merry hour or two cutting up the brash which the tree surgeons had left behind. There was a lot of it and we will have enough kindling for next winter. I am told that the young woman becoming a Duchess seems a typical millennial: rather over confident.

It is apparently now illegal to wear perfume in some public places lest the smell of the perfume causes offence. It's good to know that the people who are given the task of protecting us have their priorities sorted out. We live in a world without values but packed to the ceiling with regulations and orders.

We had a rare human visitor today. While Antoinette fed him cake and tea in the conservatory, Percy the resident Pheasant walked to the conservatory door and stood there staring at us and waiting. He crowed a little, just to make sure we knew he was ready to eat. I got up and gave him a handful of sunflower hearts which he scoffed. When he had finished Antoinette told him to go and get a drink. He duly wandered over to the bird bath, jumped up and had a drink. 'Don't forget to wipe your beak!' Antoinette called. When Percy jumped down from the bird bath he wiped his beak on the grass. He then wandered back up the hill to the tree where he roosts. The visitor stared in utter amazement.

What the visitor didn't know, and we didn't trouble to tell him, was that Percy always follows the same pattern. When he has eaten his sunflower hearts he has a drink. And when he's had a drink he wipes his beak on the grass.

It must be very easy to catch a pheasant.

In the 19th century, when the prisons were full of hungry people, a man could be transported for life or sent to prison for 14 years if he stole a pheasant from God.

Only very occasionally, is there any variation. For example, yesterday Percy stood on the cliff edge flapping his wings and calling loudly. He did this for twenty minutes or so and then wandered off up the garden to the spot where he roosts. Ten minutes later a hen pheasant appeared, clearly attracted by Percy's attractive courting calls. Unfortunately, Percy was nowhere to be seen. The hen waited a while, wandered around on the lawn and then, looking sad, disappointed and frustrated, she wandered off again.

Members of the public are being invited to photograph cars which are parked illegally and to send their snaps to a private parking company. Snitches who do this will receive £30 for their betrayal.

What a bloody world, eh?

Tons of people (including many government departments such as HMRC) now pay snitches to tittle tattle.

But this really does take the biscuit.

Anyone who claims their £30 should be ashamed of themselves.

No one but a lowlife would do such a thing.

(I'm not sure why but the fact that it is for a measly £30 somehow makes it even worse. It reminds me of thirty pieces of silver.)

While I was cutting up branches for kindling, Percy the pheasant sought me out. When he'd found me he squawked loudly and stood firmly, staring at me. I can take a hint so I walked 100 yards to the house, went indoors, found the sunflower hearts and gave him a handful. He made a noise which I took to be a thank you. I then walked back to my wood cutting area. And ten minutes later when he'd finished his meal Percy came to find me again. This time he squawked and then wandered off. If that wasn't a Percy 'thank you' then I don't know what else it was.

While I was at the bottom of the garden, near to the gate, I noticed that a small white car (one of those nondescript vehicles that could be anything) was parked right outside our gate, completely blocking our exit. I wandered down and very politely asked the driver (who was in the car) if he would mind moving because I wanted to get my car out. He opened his door and glowered at me. I repeated the polite request. He said he would not move. I pointed out that he was parked on double yellow lines and also parked on a pavement. He shrugged and pointed out, quite rightly, that there were many double lines everywhere in the vicinity. I asked again, very politely and pointed out that if he moved slightly he would still be able to park on yellow lines and I would be able to get my car out. I pointed out that if he drove 25 yards he would be able to park without being on double yellow lines. He sneered and shut his car door and just sat there staring at me.

What has happened to the world? Why do people behave so badly? I'm not imagining it and it is getting worse. People are far more aggressive than they used to be. The other day an old lady in a small car threw me a V sign for absolutely no reason. The look on her face was pure rage.

If I did not have Antoinette to look after I would have opened the gates, climbed into our truck and pushed him out of the way. But since that would probably be illegal I sat down and felt rather miserable. What has happened to the world? I really don't remember people being as rude and horrid as they are now. I'm beginning to understand the company offering £30 for photos of illegally parked cars.

If we leave the gates open (which we would prefer to do) people wander in and around our garden. We have a good many hidden pathways, designed and laid down by an Edwardian architect, and a mass of rare shrubs and ferns, and these are doubtless attractive to visitors. But having strangers wandering into the garden can be rather alarming – especially if I am gardening and I find a couple sitting on one of our benches having a picnic. Worse still, people allow their dogs to come in and do what is euphemistically called 'their business'.

And if we shut the gates people park in front of them, leaving their cars in situ for the day while they totter down to the beach. This saves them a one minute walk from car parking spaces. And on many other occasions a driver has determinedly refused to move when we've politely pointed out that we wanted to get in or out of our driveway. What sort of person does that? It's a special sort of selfishness.

Eon pushed up our monthly payment for gas and electricity to nearly £700. Now we use a lot of gas but not that much. I suspect the increase is because of a new 12 month rule which was introduced to protect punters but which does the opposite. The rule (from the EU, of course) prevents companies from claiming money from further back than 12 months. So the companies want to get ahead and store up some cash.

Our other supplier, in the Cotswolds, Sainsbury's Gas, is doing the same. I'm putting a stop to this nonsense by closing our direct debits. We will pay more but at least I will know what I'm paying. (Actually, come to think of it, I won't know why because their bills are always incomprehensible.)

6

A boat parked in the bay this afternoon. It was a big boat with a very pretty paint job. The sun was shining rather brightly so I couldn't tell precisely what the colours were but they were obviously jolly. I wondered why the boat stopped. They had a gangplank down onto the beach so that trippers could walk the plank and then climb up the beach. I hope those that did weren't disappointed. The few shops in the village are mostly shut on Sundays, even in the summer season. Still, there is one little shop open so they could pop in there and browse around the cat food aisle I suppose. Or they could just sit on the pebbles and wait until it was time to go back on board.

7

Today, Antoinette pointed out that for me 'high tech' is a button on my shirt pocket. She is, as always, absolutely correct.

8

A rugby player called Warburton has retired saying 'my body is unable to give me back what I had hoped for on my return to training'. How curious, to refer to your body as though it were a separate entity. It gives a whole new meaning to the concept of the out of body experience.

9

Antoinette was told today of an elderly woman who was taken into a café for the first time in her life. When she sat down the waitress came over to ask what she would like. The old woman was uncertain and rather dithery. 'Would you like a cup of tea?' asked the waitress. 'Only if you're making one,' replied the woman.

10

The official figures show that one in six individuals in Europe aged between 16 and 64 is either disabled or suffering from chronic ill health. The figures are bollocks, of course, and are partly the result of the fact that doctors wildly over-diagnose conditions such as asthma and partly a result of the fact that millions of people have declared themselves so depressed or over-stressed that they can never work again.

11

I found an old *Sunday Times* cutting which described me as a rogue elephant. A rogue elephant is an animal which has been separated from the rest of the herd. How accurate.

12
I am receiving daily emails from people who congratulate me on being in lists of the top 100 authors in America and who want to help me further my career. All I have to do is give them money and they will help me sell more books. I don't have a career and why should I give money to people who were not interested yesterday?

13
On eBay today I saw an advertisement inserted by someone selling 'Signed Autographs'. I bet they're much better than the common or garden unsigned ones.

The appalling Sadiq Khan has allowed protestors to put up a bizarre barrage balloon of Donald Trump during Trump's visit.

The main complaint about Trump appears to be that in America children have been taken from their parents. The left (who support Khan) don't seem aware that we have been doing this in Britain for years. British social workers, mostly with lefty leanings, have removed children from their parents after cot deaths, after false accusations of sexual molestation and Satanism, because children had not been vaccinated and because the parents were known or suspected to be UKIP supporters.

The really odd thing, of course, is that whereas the lefties are out protesting about the American President they never say anything about really nasty visitors from Saudi Arabia, Israel or China. And they never say a word about that awful fellow from Turkey who puts people in jail if they disagree with him. (I find the best way to wind up a millennial is to tell it that I think Donald Trump is the best American President since Ronald Reagan.)

Moreover, the lefties loved Obama and ignored the wars he fought, the deaths he caused, the renditions he authorised, the Guantanamo Bay deceit, the betrayals, the fakery and the arrogance of attempting to interfere with the Brexit referendum.

From an objective point of view the nauseatingly sanctimonious Obama, a smooth conman, was a worse President than Nixon. I was doubtful about him from the start; voicing my fears during those nauseatingly, rather creepy, early campaign speeches. He sounded like the very worst sort of patent medicine salesman. Scarily, there are still people around who think he was a Good President.

As the months go by, I become increasingly certain that my original feelings about Trump were right. I felt that he would shake up the Washington establishment simply because he comes from outside the Dark State. He is trashy and vain but he is turning out to be an infinitely better President (for America and for the rest of the world) than Obama whom I predicted would turn out to be a sanctimonious hypocrite and who turned out to be a sanctimonious hypocrite.

The absurd Trump balloon in London will discourage American tourists, discourage business with America and annoy Trump himself. It is also just plain rude and not the way England usually welcomes visitors. And what did the demonstrators except to achieve? There usually needs to be an aim if you go demonstrating.

Incidentally, I was surprised that the police did not shoot down the idiotic Greenpeace protestor who flew a powered hang-glider near to Trump. I couldn't quite work out the point of that nonsense – unless it was simply to attract attention and a bit of dubious publicity for Greenpeace, a truly awful organisation which seems to attract vast numbers of sanctimonious hypocrites.

When Donald Trump visited London there were, inevitably, the usual seedy millennial protestors about in the streets. (I bet not one of them pays tax.) A *Guardian* person apparently claimed that 'billions of people across the country are united in opposition' to Trump. The pictures I saw suggested that the turnout was the sort of turnout you might expect for a sale at Marks and Spencer. Still, it is good to know that *The Guardian*, the traditional home of the misprint, does at least recognise that Britain is now very overcrowded.

I have to admit that the more I see and hear of Donald Trump the more I am reminded of Winston Churchill. Both men full of vanity, self-regard and quiet determination. When I first realised this I wished, not for the first time, that Donald Trump had been handling our Brexit negotiations. I think it is fair to say that he has his faults but Mr Trump has no respect for anyone and we needed someone prepared to treat the EU for what they are – a bunch of ruthless Nazi crooks. We cannot be reasonable with the EU because they despise us and don't treat us with respect.

I feel that Khan, the London mayor, is not a good advertisement for Muslim behaviour since his attitudes and objectives usually seem to me to be more about promoting the Muslim world than protecting the people he is paid to protect. I am not surprised that he dislikes America so much.

Khan also spends a lot of time attacking Brexit (although more Londoners voted for Brexit than voted for Khan as mayor) and yet on his watch London has become more dangerous than New York. Barely a day goes by without an innocent individual being killed or seriously maimed in London. Maybe if Khan spent more time being Mayor and less time playing politics with issues that are outside his remit then London would be a safer place.

My suspicion is that Khan is using the job as Mayor of London as a stepping stone to leadership of the Labour Party. I also suspect that his absurd policies and the absurd and rude balloon over London will, by damaging trade and tourism, massively increase poverty in London.

However, I doubt if the liberal leftie Metropolitan luvvies will lose a lot of sleep over that.

A hundred of so students are demanding a new EU referendum for the sake of those students who weren't old enough to vote at the last referendum and who, they seem to suggest, would vote for the Nazi party's political creation. These activists claim to represent over a million other students though how they can possibly know that they would all vote for the EU I cannot imagine. This absurd claim received national publicity but I fail to see why anyone could possibly take it seriously. At this rate it won't be long before someone claims that his spermatozoa all deserve a vote because one day some of them might be citizens supporting the EU. It would make as much sense.

The cost of paying out damages to NHS patients has risen to £65 billion a year and the NHS pays out £1,000 in insurance premiums for every baby they deliver – to protect themselves against the cost of medical negligence claims. Just three years ago the annual bill was just £26 billion. It won't be long before the NHS sinks completely under legal costs, negligence claims, insurance bills and the cost or paying pensions for overpaid bureaucrats. There is already very little money left for hiring doctors and nurses and paying for clean sheets. (Some hospitals are now putting patients into beds without bothering to change the sheets. This disgusting habit doubtless saves money in the short term.)

14

Antoinette's German friend took her husband's car to the garage yesterday. As she set off she noticed that the words 'DON'T STOP' had come up on the display screen directly in front of her. Naturally she panicked. Anyone would. What, she wondered, was the cause of the problem which meant that she should not stop the car? She drove on wondering what on earth she would do if she came to a red traffic light. Eventually, the words 'DON'T STOP' disappeared and were replaced with the words 'GO YOUR OWN WAY'. The display was telling her the title of the tracks playing on the CD player – tracks from the Fleetwood Mac album *Rumours* which her husband had left in the car.

15

We have swapped the Bentley for a Grand Cherokee SRT which I haven't even seen. Actually I have never sat in one. Actually I have never even seen one on the road. This is a record for us. But what does a 15 minute test drive tell you? Absolutely bloody nothing. I checked the brochure online and it has heated seats and the driver's seat has a memory button so that I can get my seat setting back when a garage mechanic has messed around with it. Those are the important things. It is made in America so it doesn't look as shapeless as the stuff the EU insists is made in Europe. The engine is 6.4 litres and it accelerates from 0 to 60 in a little over 4 seconds. The acceleration and top speed are both more impressive than the majority of sports cars. For a four wheel drive car weighing two and a half tons that seems absurd but impressive. And it is made in America which is a good thing. I won't buy a vehicle made in the EU.

The garage won't accept a cheque and so I went to the bank and got out £5,500 in cash which is the difference I have to pay to swap the Bentley for the Jeep. I really do not understand why H.R.Owen refuses to accept cheques. Actually they do accept cheques for servicing and warranties but refuse point blank to take them for car payments.

It reminds of the time I smashed up a Mini Traveller when I was a young GP in Leamington Spa. The accident occurred when I was hit by a van while travelling to Edgbaston to watch a cricket match at Edgbaston. I had to leave the car in Birmingham to be repaired. When I went to collect it, the garage refused to accept a cheque but agreed that I could test drive the car. So I got into the car with a bloke from the garage and drove a mile down the road. I then stopped the car and put the key in my pocket and took out my cheque book. 'I'm going back to Leamington Spa,' I told the guy from the garage. 'You can either come with me or take a cheque.' He looked startled and then realised that he didn't have much choice so he accepted a cheque and had the decency to laugh about it. I was tempted to stop the cheque as a joke. But I didn't.

I thought it would be easier to get the cash out for the Cherokee than to spend half a day filling in forms to do an interbank transfer but in the end it took the best part of an hour for the bank to find the cash and check that it was acceptable to hand it over. There was so much fuss that it would have been easier and quicker to rob them.

Still, at least I didn't put the bank into lockdown.

As Antoinette reminded me (with some pride) she managed to this in Cheltenham. She had fed some cheques into an automatic paying in machine but the machine got indigestion and stopped working. In order to unblock the system an engineer had to open up the machine and extract Antoinette's paperwork from inside. Fortunately, there happened to be an engineer working on an adjacent machine. Unfortunately, when one of these active paying in machines is opened, the whole bank has to go into a lock down procedure. The main doors are closed, the alarms are re-jiggered and everyone in the bank has to stay where they are.

And so now we have said goodbye to the Bentley Continental and hello to the Jeep Grand Cherokee SRT8 Hemi V8. I have no idea what all those letters and numbers mean but when I kicked the tyres my toe hurt so all seems well. The SRT seems to have something to do with Street Racing. And the 'hemi' bit has something to do with engines. I could tell that the salesman who brought the car didn't really know what it meant because when I asked him he told me that it was something important in America. The manual has 347 pages and there is a supplement of 77 pages. Together, these two probably contain more information than is needed to obtain an O level these days.

The speedometer says the car will travel at up to 180 mph and the salesman confirmed that it will accelerate at a speed capable of taking it from 0 to 60 in just over 4 seconds which makes it rather faster than most sports cars – even some of the exotic and absurdly expensive ones. It has at least eight forward gears which seems reckless. It is packed, absolutely packed, with toys and gimmicks and wonderful gadgetry and I doubt if we will use more than a fraction of them. The new vehicle will keep a set distance from the car in front, the headlights dip automatically if a car approaches or if we come up behind another vehicle and they will, apparently, swivel so that I can see round corners. The tyres tell me their own pressure and warn me if they need more air, a voice warns me about speed limits, the cruise control will slow the car down if the vehicle in front slows and I get a warning if another car comes too close or tries to overtake (on either side). There are gizmos to tell me the precise temperature of the oil and just about everything else. In the case of an accident the head rest will move forwards to meet my head and there is a black box to record everything that happened. There is a heated steering wheel (which seems to have as many buttons as the steering wheel on a Formula 1 car) and air conditioned seats which blow cool air onto our backs if the weather is warm. Oddest of all, there is no petrol cap protecting the petrol tank's integrity when the flap is opened. Instead, the pipe down to the tank seals itself when not being used. The windows are tinted and the whole thing looks like one of those vehicles favoured by the American Secret Service. I shall wear dark glasses even it is overcast and raining.

The car can measure how fast it accelerates and there is a launch control button for rapid escapes. There are buzzers and cameras all over the place and I can open and close the tailgate without leaving my seat. The sunroof opens and closes in nano seconds and there are four, or is it eight, intermittent speeds for the windscreen wipers on both the front and rear windows. The car has permanent four wheel drive (which probably explains why it burns petrol at an alarming speed) and a special knob to select if driving in bad conditions such as snow. There are chargers all over the place for electronic gadgets and woofers are apparently hidden somewhere near the rechargeable torch towards the back of a vehicle that seems more complicated to drive than the Star Ship Enterprise.

The whole thing is so complex, and there is so much to learn, that we will have to keep this forever rather than waste the knowledge we acquire as we learn how to use it.

Most important of all, the seats seem exquisitely comfortable.

Three years ago we paid £56,950 for the Bentley. Today we sold it for £30,000. My guess is that within a week it will be back on sale at H.R.Owen at around £45,000.The Cherokee cost £70,000 a couple of years ago and it has done 19,000 miles. It is scary to see just how fast new cars lose money. I am hoping that the Cherokee won't need to have its battery charged every week.

It seems to me that the second hand car trade is not a bad business to be in as long as you enjoy the air at the top end of the market.

We talked to the salesman who brought us the Cherokee (and who is taking away the Bentley) about other vehicles on the market and he told us that some modern hybrid cars (which come complete with massive tax breaks) can manage just 31 miles on their battery before needing another charge. He said that the new BMW supercar i8 roadster has a range of up to 33 miles and claimed that the new Range Rover hybrid can do up to 31 miles on its battery. If true, this is probably useful if you never go more than 15 miles away from home.

The hybrid car business is clearly little more than a scam to reduce the annual tax charge.

The salesman also told us that he had sold a number of Bentley motor cars to lottery winners. He said they were all desperately unhappy. They had lost their friends, their jobs and their purpose and were worried about losing their money since they had acquired it purely by chance. He also told us that many people now buy such cars to display rather than to drive. They put the cars into a special room, with a glass wall between the car and their living room. They can then sit and admire the car as though it were a painting or an indoor garden in an atrium.

Within hours of buying the car I was besieged with emails offering me new products to go with it. (Naturally, I was also inundated with emails encouraging me to buy another identical car.)

Here are some of the products I was offered:

'Total Loss GAP Insurance Terms and Conditions'. This appears to offer me supplementary insurance in case my insurance isn't good enough. To be honest I very much doubt if it is. The fine print stuff they send me quite probably excludes damage occurred while travelling in a forwards direction. However, this extra insurance would cost me £699 per year and I doubt if that will be any more use than the insurance I have.

'Prestige Tyre and Alloy Wheel Insurance' for insurance towards the cost of replacing tyres and wheels. This would cost me £599 a year

'Smart Policy' which appears to cover chips to the paintwork. This too would cost me £599 a year

They have to be joking. Does anyone buy all this bloody cover?

I haven't even got time to read the terms and conditions.

The road tax for the Cherokee is £535 a year which is the same as the Bentley. The rate is obviously set by jealous Green Party lunatics as a punishment inspired largely by envy since it makes absolutely no commercial or ecological sense. The damage done by a car depends not upon the size of its engine but on how many miles it travels. Most electric cars do far more damage than a low mileage Bentley or Cherokee. And, of course, Bentley and Cherokee cars do not rely on the exploitation of children in the same way that electric cars do. (I explained this earlier in the year.) Still, the Greens, who are keen on electric cars, are obviously enthusiastic supporters of child exploitation.

I rang Green Flag to tell them that the car we have covered has changed. I gave them the car registration number and they said it was a Fiat 1.5 litre something. I said no, it is a Grand Cherokee Jeep 6.4 litre. The girl said their engine sizes only go up to 5.9 so I said fine then let's put it down as 5.9 litres.

(A couple of weeks later I saw that our Bentley was on sale at £39,950. It was sad to see it on display on the internet for sale.)

The Bastille Day celebrations in France provided the best entertainment for years. Two motorcyclists collided and both fell off and one of the planes doing the red white and blue flyover had the wrong smoke canister fitted. And did Macron's absurdly childish celebrations at the World Cup trigger the rioting and looting in Paris? When the President of a country climbs onto a table and does a celebratory dance he does not set a good example. During the Football World Cup English supporters were warned by football officials that they should not sing two of their favourite football songs at any of the World Cup matches. The two popular songs were: 'Fuck Off Europe, We All Voted Out' and 'Sit Down if You Hate the French'.

Back in the UK an MP who is accused of sending 2,000 dirty text messages to two girls asked for forgiveness and is reported to have said that the lapse occurred during a crazy moment when he was under a great deal of pressure.

'You're a long way from anywhere, aren't you?' said a visitor. 'No,' Antoinette answered. 'We're exactly where we want to be.'

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Julian Welby, spoke to the Trades Union Congress and attacked Amazon for a variety of supposed crimes. Despite this the Church of England insisted that it would keep holding its shares in Amazon. Indeed, the Amazon holding is one of the Church's biggest investments and helped produce an 18.6% return on its global equity holdings last year. I find it difficult to think of a better example of blatant, self-serving hypocrisy. It's nice to know that the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Church of England appear to be as greedy and dishonest as everyone else in the establishment.

Welby was also foolish enough to describe zero hours contracts as a 'reincarnation of an ancient evil'.

What an embarrassment it must have been when it turned out that the Church of England has been handing out zero hours contracts to its employees. Whoops.

It seems that the Archbishop appears to have embraced Marxism and hypocrisy; the twin devils of the self-centred few who like to run our lives but who themselves live and work in glorious technicolour luxury.

With the awful Welby in charge it is hardly surprising that the enormously wealthy Church of England is haemorrhaging followers. (Still, when you remember that the Church of England's hierarchy live in palaces, it is perhaps hardly surprising that they are out of touch.)

Incidentally, talking of the trades unions, I see that 31 trade union bosses are paid more than £100,000 a year each. The head of the National Association of Head Teachers was paid £212,000 last year and Frances O'Grady, general secretary of the Trade Union Congress received £174,999. (Note that in neither of these cases did I use the word 'earned'.) Mike Cash, the bloke who runs the transport workers' union, which is responsible for massive strikes and delays, receives almost £100,000 a year plus pension contributions of £33,935, plus a season ticket allowance of £2,989 and, very sensibly considering the number of strikes on the railways, a car allowance of £3,883.

Carney, the imported Bank of England Governor and committed Europhile, whose skills as a forecaster are so bad that if he were a newspaper astrologer he would have been axed years ago, has tried to scare Brexit supporters by predicting that if we don't do a deal with the EU then house prices will crash by 35%. Given Carney's record this probably means that house prices will soar if we leave the EU without a deal. Carney has generously agreed to extend his contract with the Bank of England and take vast amounts of additional money from taxpayers. How kind of him. Why we can't find a home grown party animal prepared to screw up the economy I cannot imagine.

Personally, I suspect that Brexit will depress house and share prices only as long as there is uncertainty. The 'market' (which is largely made up of inexperienced snowflakes) hates uncertainty and once there is a resolution then prices will rise again.

16

The EU is one of the major causes of starvation in the world today.

It is the major cause of food waste.

How can I say this?

Because its absurd insistence on every item of food being labelled with a 'sell by date', a 'use by date' or a 'best before date' results in vast amounts of food being thrown away when it is still perfectly safe to be eaten.

It is now widely recognised that these daft labels are often absurdly over-cautious. But the eurocrats insist that just about every item of food has a label.

We will know they have gone completely bonkers when they start insisting that packets of salt carry a 'use by date'.

17

I've been reading the *Diary of a Bookseller* by Shaun Bythell and since I started reading it I have ordered half a dozen of the books he mentions.

Mr Bythell seems to me to confirm my experience (based on visiting hundreds if not thousands of bookshops in a lifetime of book collecting) that many of the people who run bookshops rather dislike their job and sometimes even hate their customers. They mostly like books, however, which redeems them. Mr Blythel is doubtless a good friend to his friends but he seemed to me to be irascible and cynical and at times even appears to have fallen out of love with books (which tend to be rather heavy objects) and the people who buy them (a goodly number of whom he seems to regard as boring or demanding or both).

I am enjoying the book enormously but I was amused by his description of the Wigtown Literary Festival and the authors who attended. The list of authors he gives includes Kate Adie, Menzies Campbell, Clare Short, Kirsty Wark, Jonathan Miller and Clare Balding. It was, he says, like a literary salon.

I'm sorry Shaun but I wouldn't really call that a literary salon. Three telly people and a couple of politicians.

Most of the people who speak at literary festivals are retired politicians, desperate for a bit of attention and publicity, television cooks who've produced well-illustrated tomes describing what to do with four radishes, two pork chops and a tub of cottage cheese, reality nonentities who have appeared on television and had autobiographies written for them, or peripatetic troubadours looking for a bed for the night.

On the whole, real authors don't go to literary festivals. They're too shy and too busy writing books. Oh, and they never get invited because the people who organise literary festivals (and the people who attend them) are interested only in celebrities. (To be fair, I have to admit that I have been invited to several literary festivals, including most of the big ones, but I've never gone to any.) Writers prefer to remain unnoticed in a crowd because they want to observe and notice everything around them. Graham Greene was so aware of this that he was only rarely photographed. Literary festivals are ego massage devices for television celebrities.

Several publishers have admitted to me that they only send authors to literary festivals so that they can do something with them during a publicity campaign. Literary festivals do not sell enough books to make the exercise worthwhile other than as a vanity boost.

Bythell points out that rare books are becoming cheaper (in part because as digital copies become readily available, books which are out of print are easy to reproduce and unless a collector wants a genuine first edition, even previously unavailable books are now on sale. Like most people in the book business (including me) he complains constantly about Amazon (though he sells books on the Amazon site).

But there is another side to this.

I used to loathe the idea of ebooks but when I was a publisher of hard and paperback books I hated bookshops because they steadfastly refused to buy books which weren't produced by the big international publishers. The shops which did take books often didn't pay for them for years (if at all). Most small publishers will confirm this and so many end up selling books by mail order.

In my first diary (*Diary of a Disgruntled Man*) I railed against the whole idea of ebooks because they seemed to me to be a threat to the author's very existence. I changed my mind because the costs associated with printing and selling books made real books an impossibility.

For a while I simply intended to retire but Antoinette did not give in and eventually she managed to persuade me to continue writing but to publish books as ebooks.

I am, of course, now quite properly mocked and attacked for changing my mind.

When I started self-publishing, I broke the mould for independent publishing but was, of course, attacked and sneered at by the publishing industry and by literary editors and agents who could see their jobs disappearing. Now, thanks to Antoinette, I've been able to launch a new publishing career.

It seems that the value of books is, by and large, still falling. According to Bythell's figures books now sell in bulk at 15p per kilogram (the fact that books are bought and sold by booksellers by the kilogram tells us all we need to know).

A few years ago I would have been buying thousands of books unseen through eBay just for the fun of going through the boxes. For many years one of my joys was buying boxes of books at country auctions – just to see what I got for my money. And I used to buy huge boxes of first editions from Bloomsbury Auctions in London. Trunk loads of books would arrive by van and Antoinette and I would dig feverishly through the books to see what we'd bought. The carrier, who picked up the books from the auctioneer, would wrap each book carefully in brown paper before packing them into their boxes. It was madness, utter madness, to buy books unseen in such quantities. But there were always one or two books in the boxes which made the whole purchase valid financially and I discovered a good many old forgotten books and authors that way.

18

I saw some photos of the so called 'celebrities' attending this year's Hay on Wye Literary Festival. I don't think I have ever seen a smugger, more self-satisfied bunch of Z list nonentities.

We have over 12,000 books in our homes and not one of those books is by any of the so called authors at Hay on Wye. It was mostly the usual bunch of television people, politicians, journalists and so on.

I did see that Rachel Johnson was there. Ms Johnson is a curious woman, as enthusiastic a self-publicist as her brother and Richard Branson (does anyone know why he got a knighthood?) and most famous for being the sister of Boris Johnson (upon whose coat tails she rides) and now, like her father, a Remoaner. I spoke to her on the telephone a few years ago because she wanted to interview me for *The Spectator*. The very first thing she told me was that Boris Johnson was her brother. She managed to squeeze it into the conversation at every available opportunity and at some opportunities that weren't quite so available. ('Oh, did I mention that my brother is Boris Johnson?' 'Did I remember to tell you that my brother is Boris Johnson?' 'It was my brother Boris Johnson who asked me to speak to you.') I remember she seemed peeved that one of my novels had been turned into a movie; particularly peeved because a friend of hers, whom she clearly considered more important, was still waiting for a film to be made of his masterpiece. ('And did I tell you that Boris Johnson is my brother?')

The article she wrote was so bizarre, unfair and inaccurate that the magazine had to publish a long letter of correction. The piece was, I suspected, inspired by adverts the magazine had carried for a book of mine called *Rogue Nation* which had criticised the invasion of Iraq. I may be wrong but I suspect Boris didn't approve of the book and so hired his little sister to do a hatchet job.

19

When I was a publisher it was Antoinette who kept my mail order business alive by dramatically improving the quality of the mailshots we sent out. It isn't widely appreciated but virtually no mail order business makes money out of its initial advertisement or mailing. The profits come from having other items to sell and then mailing customers with details of new products. Antoinette's brilliant mailshots made all that possible and gave us returns that had never before been achieved by any mail order business. She was so good at it that outside companies wanted her to write their mailshots too. She never did.

20

The Government is moaning again that self-employed individuals are taxed more lightly than employees. It is true that the self-employed pay a lower rate of National Insurance but the Government seems to forget that the self-employed are not entitled to sick pay or unemployment benefits. Most self-employed individuals would be very, very happy to pay the higher rate of National Insurance if they were entitled to these basic benefits.

In France, I hear that the French have been punching and spitting at British riders in the Tour de France. An eminent observer said that spitting and booing was 'a French cultural thing'. A leading French commentator admitted that the French were peeved because they hadn't won their own tour for more than a generation. When Britons win (as they often do) they are booed. This says a good deal about the French understanding of concepts such as fair play and sporting behaviour. The French complain that they do not trust the Sky team (the most successful British team) because they believe that Bradley Wiggins may have cheated. I admit that from the little I know it is difficult to see why Wiggins has been allowed to keep his win when Lance Armstrong had his seven wins all taken from him. Mind you, would Armstrong have been allowed to keep his wins if he had been French? I suspect so. Richard Virenque, a French cyclist, won the King of Mountains jersey seven times and was an important figure in a major doping scandal. Virenque, not being American, is still credited with his Tour de France victories. It was Armstrong's misfortune to be American and, ironically, to be chased into the fires of hell by an ambitious American lawyer. I used to feel angry with Armstrong, whose main crime was to be better at cheating than the European cyclists who were also cheating, but I now feel they should give the poor sod his wins back. If Armstrong had been Continental (i.e European but not British) he would have probably never been investigated, probably never been found guilty and, if he had been found guilty, probably never punished.

The French haven't had a contender for their own tour's yellow jersey for years.

As the Tour reached the end of the penultimate stage, a Briton called Geraint Thomas was being described as the winner – even though there was a day to go.

I was surprised by this. I have been following the Tour most of my life and I remember Laurent Fignon losing a tour on the final day. More to the point I was in Paris when the Italian Pantani very nearly lost it on the streets of the capital. He crashed badly and only managed to retain the yellow jersey because his team raced like fury to drag him back up to the peleton.

21

Britain's head taxman has joined the 'Fear' campaign designed to worry citizens about Brexit. John Thompson has claimed that British businesses will face extra bureaucracy costs of up to £20 billion a year if Britain opts for a light touch Brexit. He will, in due course, doubtless also warn that business men and women will have to dye their hair green and stand on one leg on Sundays. The HMRC's warning is pure bollocks. Without EU red tape British businesses will be freed from much unnecessary bureaucracy.

Our Jeep went off to the garage from which we bought it so that they could complete the servicing which hadn't been finished for some reason. They also need to have another key made because we only have one key. The garage then rang to tell us that they cannot make a key unless I email them copies of my driving licence and the log book. This is, apparently, a result of some new EU law designed to make it easier for identity thieves to steal my identity. No one at the garage could explain the point of this truly stupid piece of legislation.

I would never have bought the car if I had known in advance that it only had one key and if I had suspected how much trouble there would be to get hold of a second key. Or that it is impossible to sell an expensive car that doesn't have two keys. I have wasted at least eight hours (and a good deal of energy) in dealing with the missing key.

The Jeep was returned today but the new key which is being made will have to be sent by post. It is apparently being made in Italy, where most car keys are now made, and will take another week or so to prepare because it has to be hand-carved from a lump of kryptonite. Thank heavens the car itself was made in the USA. The Italians may be good at making keys but the cars they make, though undoubtedly pretty, have a reputation for falling apart and being generally unreliable.

Talking of car keys reminds me of an obsessional chum who bought a car which unlocks when the driver approaches, as long as he has the key in his pocket. The problem is that when he's locked the door he always goes back to check that it is locked. And, naturally, when he approaches the car it automatically unlocks. So then he has to lock it again. He now has to take the key 50 yards away, hide it, run back to check that the car is locked and then retrieve the key before leaving the area. I am embarrassed to admit it but I've done the same thing.

The Jeep looks good. The driver who brought it from the garage said he noticed that it had got a little dirty on the way down so he stopped off and had it re-valeted a few miles from here. Inevitably, of course, the garage have changed absolutely everything that is changeable. The seat has moved, the steering wheel has moved, the lights and wiper settings have changed, the radio has been adjusted to some bizarre station and even the dimmer for the panel lights has changed. I can put the steering wheel and seat back into my favourite position by pressing a reset button but it will take me hours to reset everything else.

As soon as I got into the car it started to misbehave.

It started to beep and a message came up on the screen in front of me to warn me that the key fob was outside the car. This seemed to worry the car enormously. It worried me too because when I checked, I found that the key fob was in my jacket pocket and I was sitting in the driving seat. I stopped, turned off the engine and started it again and the message disappeared. But when I got going, a car ahead turned left and the Jeep braked as for an emergency and the display in front of me screamed 'BRAKE'. There was really no need for it to panic. The system is incredibly sophisticated but if this is a sign of the future for cars then I wish we could go back a bit. It makes me realise just how impossible self-driving cars must be.

Why is everything so complicated these days? It's as though the people who design things have forgotten that real people want to use them. I get the feeling the designers are just showing off.

I really want a phone that just makes (and possibly receives) calls and I want a car which has lights and a windscreen wiper. The windscreen wipers aren't essential. I can manage without them. But I really don't understand or want the other clever crap. It seems fun for ten minutes, and it's handy that the lights and wipers come on by themselves, but to be honest I get frightened by all the other stuff. There are so many buttons and dials that I have no idea how to turn on the radio and if I try to lower the window I always lower the wrong one. I am perfectly capable of winding a window down if necessary.

Antoinette managed to find her way into the car's control panel and spent some time turning off some of the gadgets which were doubtless designed to make the world a safer place. I don't mind it nagging with a sign saying 'Front Passenger Not Wearing Seat Belt;' but I think it's a bit much when it says 'Front Passenger Has Mud on Shoes' or 'Driver Not Wearing Clean Socks'. That's just electronic nagging.

Even when she'd managed this I still found myself wishing that a car company somewhere would make a simpler car – the automobile equivalent of those simple phones sold to 'older people' which come without cameras, texting facilities or the other endless gadgets. When the car industry gets round to making one I'd like it with rubber bumpers fore and aft and Armco strapped onto both sides.

22

A few weeks ago I decided to turn *Mrs Caldicot into a play*. There has been a flood of films about old people since the film of *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War* came out and most of them are painfully patronising. So I thought I'd turn the book into a feisty, tough and relentlessly politically incorrect play. The book, which is now 35-years-old, is still on the bestseller lists and the DVD film which is 15-years-old is still selling well and was re-released not long ago. Several people have written wanting my permission to turn the book into the play but I've always said 'No, thank you'. Now I've decided to give myself permission. (The contract with the film company stopped me doing this for a while. But that clause has expired.)

I doubt if anyone will ever want to put it on in a big, posh theatre (it's about old people) but I can see that local, amateur drama societies might find it fun to do.

Once I started writing, it seemed odd to be writing something other than prose. I've been a professional writer for decades so why is this the first time I've attempted a play?

The only thing I know about writing plays is that Shakespeare always had five acts. I have also read some of Michael Green's (slightly hysterical) advice about the business of writing plays and putting them onto the stage.

So since Shakespeare seemed to know what he was doing I will have five acts. This will doubtless alienate all the modern theatrical, lefty luvvies who think that Shakespeare is racist, sexist, anti-Semitic and far too blasé about recycling. Still, this won't make much difference since as an elderly, white, English heterosexual there is absolutely no chance of any professional company putting on the play. If you are any one of those things then you're sunk. I've got four bad marks against my name before you start with the problems I have created for myself by noisily fighting the entire establishment and opposing the EU.

It is immediately clear to me that a play has to be entirely different to the book and the film for a variety of reasons.

Most importantly, in a book there is no limit to the number of sets available. And a film is constrained only by the budget. For a play, however, there really isn't much chance of having more than four or five sets.

I've tried looking at the advice offered by snotty bureaucrats representing theatres (and doubtless subsidised by taxpayers) and it is remorselessly patronising and over-demanding. 'We are too busy to look at plays from new playwrights.' Seems to be the standard mantra on theatre websites. 'Expect to wait a year before hearing from us about your masterpiece', said a spokesman for one theatre.

Some 'experts' list things that are unprofessional (such as putting on a copyright line) while others list a plethora of requirements about presentation and make it clear that if the wrong bits are italicised or not in capitals then the play will not be read.

One set of very specific instructions which I saw went on for 18 pages and offered enough self-important, pompous, patronising, bureaucratic guff to put off any aspiring playwright. Maybe that was the idea. Some self-appointed experts insist that plays must now have no more than three acts, that there must be this and that. Oh, and that there must be no curtain at the end.

What has happened to the theatre? I suspect that endless Arts Council subsidised bureaucrats are simply creating red tape. And I don't want anything to do with the Arts Council. I have long believed that State supported arts structures should be permanently dismantled and never reassembled. All they do is encourage the untalented and give money to people whose work is of little or no interest to anyone; to people who produce awful art, awful poetry, awful dancing, awful music and awful writing.

As far as I am concerned the only rule is that there are no rules.

I am beginning to think I might be best off self-publishing the play and sending it to amateur drama groups. I gather that even local drama societies are expected to pay £75 a night for the right to put on a production of a play no one has ever heard of. Naturally, they also have to buy copies of the play. So I plan to print 500 books, send one free to each of the 100 local drama groups and tell them that if they like the play and they buy ten copies of the play at, say £7.99 each, then they can put on the play for a week without any additional charge. We will make a (very) small profit and then maybe word of mouth will help 'sell' the play. More importantly we will all have some fun and spread the message that is in the book.

Alternatively, we might rent a theatre, find a cast and put the play on ourselves. I will grow my hair, buy a floppy bow tie and a velvet jacket and direct the thing myself.

This has probably never been done before.

And that's right up our street. That's what we do best. Stuff that has never been done before.

Still, I thought we'd try to sell it first.

When I had finished writing the play, Antoinette and I worked hard at editing it. We read the whole thing (the two of us playing all the parts) and I then made changes and added a few new speeches.

As I was writing it, I realised just how restricting the writing of a stage play is. You have to try to keep the scenery and props as simple as possible (so that amateur drama groups with limited budgets won't be put off by needing to have six elephants and an old Rolls Royce on stage) and remember that if one actor is going to play two parts he must have time to get off stage and get changed for his new entrance. There must be time for actors who have off stage business to do, to have enough time to do what they are supposed to be doing. In one draft I had sent Mrs Caldicot's son off to the undertaker and the doctor and had brought him back on stage in less than three minutes. So I had to move things about to give him time to do what he had to do without it appearing ridiculous.

Still, the play finally seemed to be manageable and to be the right length. It could be longer and it could be shorter. But, on balance, too short is definitely better than too long. Many things in life are better when you are left wishing there was more: speeches, films, books, plays, meals.

The play will, I fear, upset the politically correct and I already fear the response so much that I want to put it into a drawer and forget it. I can hardly bear to touch it, hold it, read it again. I could not possibly edit it or change anything.

I wanted Antoinette to share the by-line but she won't. She has contributed massively. Today she managed to print out the play. We have got through quite a few printers this year and now have just a couple of the damned things left. (We found them in a cupboard.) Antoinette could only get one of them to work and that left black lines all over the script. There are eight lines on each page and there are 28 pages. I would have been happy to leave them but Antoinette wouldn't think of it and has spent hours painting over them with titanium white acrylic paint. Mine is probably the first play to have ever been painted.

When we next go out I will take the script to a local printer and get them to make up twelve bound copies to send to agents, play publishers and, possibly, a theatre manager or two. If anyone does buy the play it will be strange to have to work with other people (actors, director, costumiers, etc.). I wonder if there is any art form as lonely as writing and publishing your own books. I've been doing it a long time now.

I plucked up courage to do a little research to try to find agents or theatres to which I could submit the play.

The first problem we came across was that most of the literary agents who handle plays said on their websites that they would not look at a play unless it had already been accepted by a theatre. Most said that if they received unsolicited submissions they dumped them in their recycling box. (That's what they said: their 'recycling box'. How bloody sanctimonious can you get?)

So we looked at publishers.

The publishers who accept plays said that they wouldn't look at anything that didn't already have a producer, a director and a theatre arranged.

So we looked at theatres.

And, guess what! The theatres said that they would not look at plays unless they were offered to them by literary agent.

Talk about Catch 22!

Most of the theatres and agents we investigated were incredibly patronising. Many claimed to nurture young writers and to be on the lookout for new playwrights. But under their advice for submitting plays most were supercilious, patronising and aggressive. 'We will recycle plays which come by post'. 'Only send us your fourth draft'. 'Make sure your masterpiece is neatly presented according to our specific guidelines'. And every theatre has different guidelines. So an aspiring playwright has to rewrite his play for every submission.

I suppose life is easy for theatrical managements. They don't really need to bother finding new plays. They can always put on something by Wilde, Shaw, Shakespeare or some black Polish lesbian with friends in high places.

I am still very conscious that I am too old, too white and too English. I would, I suspect, stand a better chance of finding someone to take the play if I were female, black and foreign, with a limb or two missing, a couple of children, no husband and a chronic disease or two.

I already despise all these theatrical people – particularly since the patronising website advice was almost certainly written by 17-year-old interns.

I discovered that BBC Arts has commissioned four first time playwrights to write plays for the Edinburgh Fringe. Three of the four neophytes were women. Imagine the fuss if the BBC had chosen three men and one women for this new venture. There would be screams of outrage. Isn't it sexist to give preference to female writers?

Eventually Antoinette and I managed to find seven theatres and agents who might, just might, possibly, perhaps condescend to read the play before tossing it into their recycling box. None of them said specifically that they would not look at new plays.

Rather than queue at the Post Office I just decorated the parcels with some stamps we had left over from sending out the ill-fated copied of my *Kick-Ass* book. I put about £1 more than I needed to put on and (did the same on the return labels I enclosed). The extra £14 was well worth it to avoid having to queue at the Post Office.

I sent the play to:

Sheil Land (a literary agency which handles plays); Jenny Topper, of Square Deal, a producer; Brian Walters of the National Theatre; Christopher Oxford of the Tennyson Agency; Steve Marmion of the Soho Theatre; Nick Hern of Nick Hern books (a publisher specialising in plays) and Roxanna Silbert of Birmingham Repertory Theatre. (I did tell them that I studied medicine at Birmingham but I didn't tell them that while I studied medicine I was the second string drama critic for the *Birmingham Post*.)

My hopes are not high. I am particularly pessimistic about the chances of the agents proving positive. In fact, I rather dread hearing from them. The words 'agent' and 'patronising' go together like knife and fork, salt and pepper or egg and bacon. Agents are the most parasitic of all creatures in the world of books but also the most arrogant. In the past I have sent stuff to agents (with stamps for a reply) and they've just kept the stamps and not bothered to reply.

The main problem is that neither Antoinette nor I know anyone (not even an usherette or a stage hand) in the theatre world. In selling a play the crucial factor is 'Who do you know?' Getting a play onto the stage is all about power and contacts. We have neither so the play will probably remain unmade – unless we put it on ourselves. I do know people, of course. But I somehow doubt if the bloke who brings our groceries will be a great deal of help in finding a theatre. But who knows. Maybe he is a theatrical impresario taking time out to do a little real life research. To such straws we must cling.

Even if I wanted to, there is absolutely no point in approaching the English Arts Council, which is paid for by English taxpayers, since I am an elderly Englishman and the play is about elderly English folk. None of my characters is an asylum seeker, foreign, homosexual or seriously disabled. I have absolutely no chance of getting any help from the Arts Council or, indeed, the British Council. (This is not intended to be sarcastic. It's simply a statement of the truth.) Nor is there any point in my approaching any of the regional organisations funded by the Arts Council. Once again I am conscious that I am too old, too white and too English. Maybe I should buy a sunbed.

We decided that if we hadn't heard anything positive by the end of the year then we would publish the play ourselves and then offer the play to amateur theatrical groups around the country. That should be plenty of time for someone to make up their mind.

The big joke (if you have a sophisticated sense of humour) is that even if my play finds a producer, a director and a theatre it will almost certainly not make much money. The BBC pays under £8,000 for an original television play and £3,500 for an original radio play. A play that is put on in a major theatre and is accepted at the 'official' rate will bring in £9,000 and a day rate of £65 if the author is required to turn up for rehearsals.

The national average gross wage is now £27,000 a year and to reach that sort of income a playwright will need to sell three plays a year to the West End or hope that one play lasts for a few months and brings in lots of nice royalty cheques. (We will assume that the playwright does not spend anything on pens, paper, inks, computers, postage, telephone, heating or secretarial work and therefore has no expenses.)

How many playwrights manage that? I would guess probably none. It probably explains why the majority of successful playwrights also have jobs at universities where they lecture on how to write plays.

Now that the EU has taken against copyright, regarding it as an insult to the internet and the freedom of large internet companies wanting to steal other people's work so that they can make money out of it, the future for playwrights will be even harder.

Shakespeare is regarded as having been prolific and he managed 37 plays in 20 years. That's under two plays a year. These days he would have starved to death.

So, the bottom line is that a mega successful playwright might just manage to get close to the national average wage in a very good year. Play writing (even for the professional stage) is clearly more of a hobby than a profession.

(There are two 'lottery winning' possibilities. A playwright who manages to write something – probably a musical – which runs for months or years and which generates huge amounts in royalties can make good money. And a playwright who is commissioned to write a script for a Hollywood blockbuster can earn very good money. But doing the lottery is probably better odds.)

I can cope with all this nonsense.

I earn enough from my books to pay to publish a play and, if necessary, to produce it myself. But how the hell are young writers supposed to break through? Freelance journalism no longer pays enough to live on. I was lucky to write for newspapers in the last quarter of the 20th century. It was fun and exciting.

Within days, *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War*, has had its first rejection.

Laura Schofield from the Soho Theatre wrote to say that Steve has had a look and unfortunately didn't think it's quite right for them. The script is on its way back home. This is very fast. Which made me suspect that no one there has read it.

I sent a note thanking them for letting me know and pointing out that I had 'feared it would be too revolutionary for the London theatre these days'.

The Soho theatre has received taxpayers' money in the form of an Arts Council Grant but I suspect they would probably prefer putting on a new version of Aladdin or a new production of Oklahoma to something as daring and as questioning as a play about anarchic pensioners. Steve seems to be something of a Panto specialist though I wouldn't have thought you'd need Arts Council money to subsidise a theatre doing Pantos.

Birmingham Repertory Theatre wrote asking me to email them a copy of my plan about Mrs Caldicot. (I had already sent them a MSS copy.) This sounds positive news and suggests that the play has passed the first hurdle and may now be facing a committee hurdle. Will I see my name in lights? Will I have to sit in at rehearsals and advise the director? Will I…

Don't be silly. I refuse to allow myself to get excited. I am more likely to have a win of over £25 on the premium bonds.

I cannot, however, stop myself remembering of the story about an author sneaking into the back of a theatre which was putting on one of his plays. The director sent an assistant to find out what the scruffy, old bloke was doing at the back of the theatre.

'He says his name is Graham Greene and he wrote the play,' reported back the assistant. How wonderful.

Tennyson, one of the agents to whom I sent my play *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War* sent it back (in pristine and, I suspect, unread condition) with a patronising note telling me that they do not wish to handle my work and suggesting that I consult *The Writers' & Artists' Yearbook*. I sent a note back asking them if I could enrol in their egg sucking course. Since I purchased my first copy of the *Yearbook* in 1964 I was, to borrow a phrase which might fall comfortably from an oenophilist's lips 'slightly amused by their impertinence and startled by their presumption'.

The copy of my play which I sent to Nick Hern books (the biggest publisher of plays in Britain that I could find) has also come back. John O'Donovan, a consultant editor writes: 'You have a wonderful knack of turning a scene – I enjoyed the comic reversals throughout the play and the unexpected twists and turns the play took. There was also a sort of a Wildean quality to some of the one-liners; I found myself chuckling along on several pages. Congratulations on the work.'

But they won't be publishing the play because they only publish plays which are in performance at major theatres for a month or longer. It was kind of him to be so nice but I'm not entirely sure why he bothered reading it.

His comments don't sound too depressing until you realise that major theatres won't be interested in putting on the play until it has been published.

Joseph Heller would understand.

23

People we know allowed their house to be photographed for one of those posh country magazines. A month later they were burgled. This happens so often that I am yet again convinced that burglars subscribe to these magazines and use them to source suitable sites for their burglarious expeditions. Allowing your home to be filmed for television is equally stupid.

24

Look at these facts:

Between 1950 and 2000 the UK's population grew from 50.3 million to 59.1 million.
Between 1950 and 2000 the foreign born population grew from 4.3% to 8.8%.
Between 2000 and 2017 the UK's population grew from 59.1 million to 65.6 million.
Between 2000 and 2017 the foreign born population grew from 8.8% to 15%.
Around 85% of the UK's population growth since 2000 has been migrants.
London's population has increased by more than 25% in the last 20 years.
The UK's housing shortage has grown steadily since 2000.
The UK's roads have become increasingly congested since 2000.
The service provided by the NHS has deteriorated sharply since 2000.
The UK's debts have grown dramatically since 2000.

That last item seems surprising but the incidence of debt is now worse than it was during the crash of 2007/8. The UK spends more on debt interest than it spends on defending the nation or on educating our children. If interest rates ever rise above their current 400 year low then the interest could sink the Government.

The UK and the US have ever growing debts and individual debts are also rising. Low interest rates have meant that zombie companies (the ones which should have died but which have been kept alive by absurdly low interest rates) have struggled on and have prevented healthier companies from growing. The minute interest rates start to rise, the zombie companies will start to die. The chaos in the High Street has hardly started. The number of empty shops has a long way to go. Where once there were shoe shops, travel agents and record shops in abundance there will soon only be phone shops and cafés. Oh, and ironmongers. I suspect that ironmongers will prove resistant, especially now that garden centres are disappearing. You wouldn't buy a garden hose, a spade or an incinerator online, would you?

It isn't difficult to see what's wrong with Britain today. Sadly, drawing attention to the facts is likely to attract vilification. The facts clearly show that we are living on an overcrowded island. Britain is (and again this is a fact) the most overcrowded part of Europe. It is one of the most overcrowded areas in the world. Our infrastructure cannot cope. There is constant talk that we will run out of water this summer. We probably will. (Antoinette and I are ordering in extra bottled water.) Our water supplies and sewage facilities were mostly built by the Victorians for a much smaller population. The modern generation derides the Victorians but they built our infrastructure and it is now about to fail us not because it was badly built but because it was built for a population half the size it is now. There are 1 million Britons living in all the other EU countries – that's Spain, France, Germany, Italy and all the rest but there are 3.7 million EU citizens already living in Britain. Could that, I wonder, have anything to do with the fact that our small island is hideously overcrowded?

But anyone who says this will be accused of racism.

What the hell has racism got to do with it?

There is no inevitable, inherent link between immigration and race or skin colour. Opposing unlimited immigration has nothing to do with racism or xenophobia and to claim otherwise is to be deliberately provocative.

Britain’s main problem (and the one which politicians step around, as delicately as if it were a land mine) is that too many people have come into the country.

When you have a great many people crammed into a fairly small area there is always stress, pain and discomfort.

And in Britain’s case the problem is exacerbated by the fact that many of those who have come into the country are refusing to accept the host nation’s culture, language and traditional mores.

Again, this is nothing to do with race or skin colour.

The unhappiness about immigration is partly about overcrowding and a shortage of houses and jobs but it is also about a lack of respect. (And there are elements of racism to that lack of respect – with Britons being the victims.) It is about immigrants not just refusing to acknowledge our culture but demanding that we adopt their culture. It is about immigrants refusing to learn our language or to try to understand our way of life. It is about local councils giving priority to immigrants rather than to long-term residents. (This is something that happens nowhere else in the world and is a result of some form of perverse racism.)

And it about the fact that many immigrants want to take without giving.

The bottom line is that the people who will pay the price for all the immigration are not the rich *Guardian* readers (MPs, social workers, teachers and BBC staff) but the poor and the middle classes.

In the end, the resentment will turn into a hatred of foreigners.

And that will, rightly or wrongly, be perceived as racism.

Thanks to the EU, which has forced immigration upon us, and the apologists who have stigmatised those who dare object, Britain has a bleak future. (It is worth noting that most of the support for immigration comes from Londoners. And most of them are immigrants.)

It is probably too late to halt the crisis which is coming (and which I predicted in *England Our England* in 2002).

But we can soften the crisis by halting immigration now and by making it clear to all those immigrants who are here that if they choose live in our country then they must abide by our laws, accept our culture and speak our language.

What’s so wrong about that?

There is an assumption that limiting immigration is racist. This is an accusation commonly made by those who support the EU’s ‘open door’ policies.

The assumption is nonsensical for a number of reasons. Let me summarise:

First, the opposition to immigration is not based on racial issues. Most of those who want to see immigration limited do not have any gripe with individuals of a particular race, colour or creed. The objection is not to the individuals who are coming into the country but to the principle of allowing our own culture and infrastructure to be swamped by unlimited numbers of immigrants.

Second, a substantial majority of the immigrants who have come into Britain within the last decade have no interest in Britain’s culture or history. They are not, indeed, in the slightest bit interested in becoming integrated into our society. In large cities such as London the local services are required to provide translating services for people speaking over 300 languages. This is the same objection which is commonly put forward in other European countries. (Incidentally, other countries do not offer free translating services. If you live in France and you wish to communicate with the authorities then you must do so in French.)

Third, our infrastructure and vital services cannot cope with unlimited immigration. It is because the population has expanded dramatically that our health services are failing, our schools are inadequate and our roads are unable to cope with the traffic.

Fourth, despite the fake figures which are produced by supporters of mass immigration, the fact is that immigrants are a drain on Britain’s resources.

The people who are leading the campaign for continued membership of the EU and for unlimited immigration to continue fall mainly into one of three categories. First, the foreigners who, not unnaturally, want the status quo to continue for their own benefit. Second, the rich metropolitan liberals who are not affected adversely by immigration because they are rich enough to use private health care and private education. If they wish to travel more than a few miles they do so by private aeroplane or helicopter. These folk are desperate for us to remain in the EU because they can employ cheap Eastern Europeans as gardeners and nannies. The individuals in this latter group may also have very personal financial reasons for supporting the EU. (So, for example, a number, such as Clegg and Mandelson, are former EU employees who have fat EU pensions to look forward to.) The rejection of Brexit by a small but vocal metropolitan liberal elite has polarised the country, caused intense damage and ensured that the division in the country, and the damage done by the Remoaners, will affect the country not just for years or a decade but for generations. The third group includes ignorant millennials who have been indoctrinated at school.

I believe that the people of Britain voted for Brexit for many reasons.

They wanted to take back control of their nation and to preserve their sovereignty. They wanted to take law-making out of the hands of unelected bureaucrats. But they also wanted to put an end to unlimited immigration. Real people who do not have servants and helicopters know that Britain is overcrowded. Sadly, many are now frightened to mention immigration lest they be falsely branded 'racists'. Project Fear has been augmented by Project Abuse.

Limiting immigration is not racist: it is simply good sense.

The Remainers claim that allowing the free movement of people between countries is a good thing. But who do they think benefits? The truth is that very few Britons work in other EU countries but huge numbers of unskilled Europeans (mostly from Romania, Lithuania and Poland) have poured into Britain. The free movement of labour has had no useful effect on the British but it has had a massively damaging effect on the poorer paid, unskilled Britons (which is probably why so many Labour party supporters voted to leave the EU).

As far as Britain is concerned the main beneficiaries of the free movement of labour have been companies wanting unskilled, low-cost workers. Shops, banks, care homes and the NHS employ millions of people from places like Romania. Most speak very little English but are keen to be here because we have the most generous benefits and free health care system in the world. (Note I said 'free health care system'. The NHS actually provides an appalling service.) Millions of low skilled Britons have found themselves competing for jobs with foreigners who are prepared to work very cheap to get a foothold in the country. Is this, I wonder, why the *Financial Times* is such an uncritical supporter of the European Union?

Britain is now dangerously overcrowded and our infrastructure is dangerously stretched. Our hospitals can't cope. Our public transport is creaking. Our roads are forever jammed. Most of our reservoirs and water supplies were designed and built years ago. The rapid increase in the population means that the water is going to run out.

Why are the sensible, loyal, patriotic British allowing the EU and the Remainer quislings to run roughshod over them, their beliefs and their ideals? I really do not understand.

However, the real tragedy is that this debate will not continue for long. Like the holocaust and climate change it will soon be beyond debate. Internationally, there are plans afoot to make immigration a human right (and to make any criticism of it illegal).

Unbelievably, there are also plans in the UK to make any criticism of Islam or of Muslims a criminal offence. Before the year is out it will, I suspect, be quite illegal to write a book of this nature. Everything I write about will not just be controversial. It will be illegal.

25

Here is the thought for the day:

There is some corner of an English field
That is forever foreign.
(Apologies to Rupert Brooke)

26

Sir Cliff Richard is suing the BBC for invasion of his privacy. I think any reasonable person would do the same if they had the money.

The police, who appeared to have been on a fishing expedition, cooperated with the BBC and helped the organisation publicise an unjustified claim of sexual misbehaviour. Sir Cliff was named and damaged.

(The standard philosophy these days appears to be that although any accuser must be protected, and provided with anonymity, while any accused, especially if he is white and male, must be named and destroyed even if there is no evidence whatsoever to support the accusation. If the case is dismissed, and possibly found to be frivolous, the accuser will remain anonymous while the accused, who may well have been bankrupted by his legal costs will be left to attempt to repair his broken life. Surely the police should not release the names of people being questioned, or even arrested, until they have been charged.)

The South Yorkshire Police Force (that's the one which is infamous for the Hillsborough tragedy and the Rotherham child grooming scandals) has already apologised and paid around £700,000 of the public's money in damages to Sir Cliff. Some might think it a pity that the South Yorkshire Police Force doesn't spend a little more of its time and the public's money on the things that matter instead of playing nauseating games with the BBC.

The BBC, which seems to feel that their 'customers' would have been disappointed if they hadn't destroyed Mr Richard's reputation said that they had a duty to report the claims of an uncorroborated complainant 'in the public interest'. I found the BBC's pathetic attempts to justify their unjustifiable actions quite foul. I wonder how the BBC staff concerned would have felt if they had been exposed to unsubstantiated, sensationalist and defamatory claims 'in the public interest'

Sir Cliff was never charged with anything but the BBC spent a good chunk of public money on publicising a piece of nonsense for which the police have now apologised. The BBC lost the case and BBC licence payers will have to fork out well over £2 million in costs and damages. Those responsible for such irresponsible behaviour will pay nothing.

I am delighted that the judge has attacked the BBC but inevitably, the Brussels Broadcasting Channel has, instead of grovelling and begging forgiveness, moaned that the case may in future prevent it from reporting cases when the police suspect someone of something.

Why the hell should the BBC have the right to report suspicions?

Isn't that simply rumour and gossip?

The BBC's director of news, someone called Fran Unsworth, claimed (quite absurdly) that the public had a right to know when unfounded accusations were made. Not even the worst tabloid newspaper would try to defend such balderdash. The BBC's own website reported the judge's decision as a 'Dark day for news reporting' which must go down in history as the most self-serving piece of bollocks ever seen on a website.

Are we to assume that Ms Unsworth would support a citizen's right to claim, without any evidence, that she looks like a constipated frog and is a baby eating Nazi? Of course she wouldn't. She would doubtless be outraged and demand damages if such blatant untruths were disseminated.

She and everyone else involved in this appalling case (including someone called Dan Johnson who was the one who 'broke' the story) should all be fined, fired and told to pay the cost of the damages the BBC has been told to hand over to Sir Cliff.

I expect, however, that all those involved in this piece of gratuitous nosiness will be promoted, given massive bonuses, offered therapy and handed damehoods.

And how many of the celebrities who are forever moaning about their privacy will refuse to work for the BBC in future as a protest? None, is my guess. I suspect that luvvies like Stephen Fry will support the BBC through thick and thin.

The BBC (which plans to appeal, and continue the torture of an innocent man, perhaps in the hope that he might die before the appeals are finished) has also complained that the verdict of the court will have a 'chilling' effect on the ability of other unspecified media groups to name suspects (also known as innocent people) in police investigations.

And the sad thing is that tomorrow's newspapers will doubtless attack the verdict on the grounds that it may affect their freedom to print scurrilous stories about innocent people. *The Guardian*, that most self-important, irresponsible, sanctimonious and indefensible of organs, will lead the protests and will doubtless moan that the judgement means that they will not be able to print salacious, circulation boosting stories about innocent people. (Editors are safe, of course. It is not usual policy for any papers to print nasty stories about other editors.) Most modern newspapers aren't even fit to be torn into squares and hung on a nail in the outside lavatory.

I have for a long time found it frightening that we live in a world where accusations are treated as guilty verdicts on the internet.

And now it is clear that we live in a world where the press and the police fight for the right to publish the names of innocent but accused individuals – even though they know that publishing those details will probably destroy the lives of the innocent individual concerned.

While being angry about the BBC I must repeat that the BBC's website is so pathetically pro EU that it is pointless as a news site. News is what editors decide is news and if the organisation for which the editors work is bent then the news is worthless. The BBC likes to pretend that it is independent and the Government goes along with that fantasy. But the BBC gets its money from the licence fee which is controlled and authorised by the Government – so the BBC is directly controlled by the Government. And as I have already mentioned, the BBC also gets some money from the European Union. But they don't like to talk about that very much.

The BBC has betrayed the people and hides behind the skirts of politicians; it is corrupt, traitorous, sexist, racist and ageist; it is anti-England to the point where I, as an Englishman, feel persecuted. And we are expected to give it money so that it can continue to be corrupt, traitorous, sexist, racist and ageist.

(Those who doubt that the BBC is sexist should remember that the BBC has for decades produced a programme called Woman's Hour which has female presenters and guests and deals with topics of interest to women. This is sexist to women and to men. Why doesn't the BBC produce a programme called Man's Hour? On reflection, it is odd that the BBC is so sexist. It seems to be more than adequately supplied with feminists as well as having more than its fair share of Remainers.)

Someone called Cassian Harrison, who is apparently the editor of something called BBC Four (which is, apparently a television programme of some kind) and who is paid £170,000 by hapless licence payers, claims that no one wants to watch white men explaining things on television any more.

This seems to me to be oddly racist since a big chunk of the British population is white and approximately half of them are male. When oh when will the Government take away the BBC licence fee – an anachronism if ever I saw one.

Oh, and why does the BBC always refer to distances in kilometres? The official British measures are Imperial. This BBC habit is as annoying as the habit some car dealers have of equipping new cars with number plates which carry little EU flags. The EU flag then has to be covered up with an England flag.

And how dare the BBC preach to us about saving the planet when their DVDs are triple wrapped in two layers of plastic and one layer of cardboard?

A woman in a café was breast feeding in a deliberately ostentatious way. Another customer made a quiet and polite objection. The breast feeder became aggressive and hysterical. 'Breast feeding is an entirely natural activity!' she shouted. 'So too is opening your bowels,' I said softly. 'Can we now expect you to insist on your right to do that in public too?'

27

We watched a film called *The Con Man* which glorified one of the nastiest human beings to have ever existed. The central character isn't so much a confidence trickster as a plain old-fashioned sociopath and liar.

Barry Minkow, who describes himself as a Jew but became an evangelical Christian in order to steal from trusting parishioners, actually plays himself in the film (though he is now in prison again) and doubtless makes more money out of his wickedness. The word 'evil' doesn't really get close to summarising this unpleasant recidivist.

We also watched *Duel in the Sun* which stars Joseph Cotton, Gregory Peck and Jennifer Jones but which also has Lionel Barrymore and Lilian Gish in small parts. I discovered that Lilian Gish, who worked with D.W.Griffith and was perhaps the greatest film star of the silent screen days, was 99 when she died. She lost by three to Olivia de Havilland who managed to celebrate her 102nd birthday. How many people know, by the way, that Olivia de Havilland (whose sister was Joan Fontaine) was born in Tokyo and was, therefore, Japanese? How I lived without knowing that is a mystery.

28

Why do the British self-flagellate so much? We beat ourselves up about slavery (although we stopped it). We criticise ourselves for bombing Hamburg (though the Huns started bombing cities and we were merely responding in kind and I don't remember hearing the Germans apologising for flattening Coventry). And we apologise for having founded an Empire (though we civilised all those countries which were members of the Empire). It would not surprise me in the slightest to hear that the Green Party was planning to apologise to Germany for allowing British homes, schools, hospitals and churches to get in the way of their bombs.

The books I have written about English heroes and English achievements have been attacked by people who don't like the idea of anyone being proud of England.

No country in the world has contributed so much as England has and we really should be proud of our culture and our history. Remainers and organisations such as the BBC sneer at England and seem to think patriotism is a bad thing. I loathe them all.

29

I wish people would stop claiming that the EU was set up to prevent World War III. There is clear evidence that the EU was designed by the Nazis to ensure that even after surrendering Germany would still win World War II. Those who refuse to accept the evidence have their heads in the sand. And Germany did very nicely, thank you, in the years immediately after the end of World War II. The British had to endure rationing until July 1954 and Britain was bankrupted by the war. But Germany was given vast amounts of money; plane loads of the stuff. They started the war, we won and then when they whinged we felt sorry for them and the Allies gave them a massive handout.

Today, our own heroes, men like Guy Gibson and the Dambusters, are forgotten, regarded more as war criminals than the supermen they were.

(Maybe the evidence about the EU being founded by Nazis will come out later. My revelations about the Ted Heath cheating the voters, about the civil service helping the EU suppress the truth and the similarity between the EU and the USSR all appeared in my book *England Our England* two decades ago but have all been brought into the conversation this year as though for the first time.)

30

The Woodland Trust, the awful organisation which is loathed by animal lovers for its plan to recruit ‘people’ to kill grey squirrels by banging them on the head, is running an advertising campaign appealing for funds to put up a memorial celebrating footballers who died during the First World War. Their slogan for the appeal is ‘For Club and Country: Remembering the Greater Game.’

I wonder how many of those whose relatives died in the First World War think of it as a ‘game’?

What a disgusting organisation The Woodland Trust is.

I had been rushing around in the garden, tidying up some fallen branches. When I came in I was cold and wet. When I finally got to the house I removed my coat and boots and hurried into the kitchen. Suddenly I stopped. ‘I’ve lost my hat,’ I said. ‘Damn. I liked that hat. I wonder where I dropped it.’ ‘Don’t worry,’ said Antoinette kindly. ‘It’ll turn up when you take it off.’

I received a ‘vehicle safety recall notification’ for our Jeep.

Here is the first sentence of the notification: ‘On a number of 2014-2018 Jeep Grand Cherokee vehicles the fault handling strategy of the Powertrain Control Module (PCM) software on your vehicle does not remove positive torque requests from the engine controller if the CAN-C bus stops communicating while the cruise control is requesting positive torque.’

I didn’t understand a word of that.

Here is the second sentence: ‘In the instance of a short in the vehicle causing the CAN-C bus to stop communicating while the cruise control is active and the vehicle speed is below the set speed such that the cruise control system is requesting positive torque at the exact moment of the short, it is possible for a positive torque request to be locked on the PCM which may result in either the vehicle maintain its current speed or possibly accelerating.’

I have included all the punctuation. I didn’t understand a word of that sentence either.

Congratulations to Jeep on producing the most incomprehensible and illiterate piece of prose I have ever received.

It must take a special sort of brain disease to be able to produce such drivel.

Six months after we sold it, we received a refund cheque for £120 – payment for the residue of the road tax on the Ford Ranger which we sold last November. I have forgotten how many letters I had to write before they sent the cheque. If I had waited that long to pay the bastards at DVLA they’d have had me arrested.

I decided to check that my two spare mobile phones were still working. (I bought them in a futile attempt to get mobile phone coverage at our house in the Cotswolds. They’re both 3E phones.). I found that one of them had been cut off because I hadn’t used it for two months. This does annoy me.

We used to buy book cover photographs from a company which does the same thing. You give them money in advance but if you haven’t used it all up within a fix period they steal it off you.

What’s next? Are Tesco going to come round and confiscate anything we haven’t used? ‘You’ve had those packs of paper handkerchiefs for a month and you haven’t used them so we’re taking them back.’ ‘That jar of marmalade was bought six weeks ago and you haven’t opened it so we’ll take it from you – even though you’ve paid for it.’

What a barking bloody world.

If you want to change more than a few euros at a Post Office the counter clerk will demand to see your passport and your driving licence. Why isn’t one good enough? I wonder if the idiot who thought this up realises that it means that individuals who do not have driving licences cannot buy or sell foreign currency.

31

The Scottish Public Health Minister wants addicts to be given free heroin.

Brilliant.

It would make as much sense to give free booze to alcoholics and free fags to smokers.

And I see that the Scottish Nationalists have introduced land laws designed to punish English people who own land in Scotland. Nice.

I have received another threatening email from Engie (our gas and electricity supplier in France) telling me that if I do not pay the bill we don’t owe for the flat we don’t own then they will cut us off and not provide us with any more electricity or gas. I don’t think they are actually allowed to do this in view of my advanced age but this is splendid news. So I will continue to not pay the bills we don’t owe for the gas and electricity we haven’t used in an apartment we don’t own (but on which we are still forced to pay taxes) in the very real hope that they will, at last, cut us off and close our account.

August

1

The EU's absurd rubbish laws (which are the reason why councils now only collect rubbish once every two or three weeks) are the direct cause of fly tipping. And fly tipping is going to get much, much worse. Why can't politicians see the link?

Has there ever been such a foul betrayal of the people as Theresa May's?

The British people were betrayed by Heath, by Major, by Brown, by Blair and by all their Ministers. Now they've been betrayed by May. These people may represent the voters but none of them were representative. Politicians live in their own small world, they all know what is best for us, and, with modest variations, they all think the same.

I have never felt such despair about my country.

May and her gutless, worm ridden cabinet have caved in completely to the demands of the fascists on the Continent. There is now no political party representing the majority of the English born citizens. Our history, our culture and our future all died today. The meeting at Chequers were timed to be 'lost' amidst the football news; arranged for the day before England's quarter final match in the world cup.

The one thing Theresa May has proved is that Britain is now run by a selfish evil elite who has no interest in the country or the people.

Incidentally, Blair (still part of the elite) is on record as hating the EU. Is it remotely possible that this greedy war criminal could have been bought by the EU as I believe he was bought by the Americans?

If May's proposal is accepted by the EU (and why wouldn't it be, since it is nothing short of a total capitulation) then we will be nothing more than slaves to the very eurocrats we voted to abandon.

It is often said that neither our greatest hopes nor our greatest fears come to fruition but in this case the old adage is wrong. Theresa May's abject capitulation is every patriotic English citizen's greatest fear come true. Democracy and the British people have been roundly and soundly buggered by an establishment consortium of lying politicians, treacherous civil servants and greedy bankers. Is May an incompetent fool or a traitor? Actually, it doesn't matter which – she should be hung. Senior civil servants on vast salaries, unbelievable pensions and great bonuses have proved themselves to be as contemptuous of democracy as we had always supposed them to be.

I doubt if I am the only one to feel alienated from the whole political process and to feel utter contempt for our Government.

It is clear now that the so-called Brexiteers in Theresa May's ghastly, pro EU, neo Nazi Government, are simply self-serving, closet Remainers who, guided by dishonourable and treasonous civil servants, will agree to anything (and betray the voters) in order to preserve their miserable careers and their chauffer drive limousines and to protect their future, high flying jobs with the EU.

We have a whole Government of traitors. I hoped that the battle for a real Brexit which respected democracy would start now. But where is the will and where is the enthusiasm to keep fighting? The politicians are all against us. The establishment is against us. Big business is against us. A handful of celebrities (mostly tax exiles) are against us. Brexiteers are exhausted, disappointed and broken. For many the EU has become more than an enemy. It is THE enemy and they don't know how to fight it.

Actually I am beginning to think that we can't do anything.

We voted and it is now clear that we were wasting our time. We campaigned and that was also a waste of effort. A small bunch of noisy and dishonest establishment Remainers have done everything they can to oppose the democratic result and the traitor Theresa May has destroyed both England and democracy. We are doomed to be ruled by unnamed, unelected foreign bureaucrats?

The majority of people in Britain don't want May's deal. They don't want any deal. They want a 'no deal'. This would enable us to trade with the rest of the world through World Trade Organisation rules. This is something that Australia does very happily and successfully.

Leaving the EU without a deal will mean that we can trade without their red tape, that we don't have to give them a £40 billion leaving present (or as has been suggested £20 billion a year for ever). We will be richer and more powerful. It is crucial to remember that the EU sells far more stuff to us than we sell to them. It is the EU which needs a deal – not us.

Instead, we have the Great Brexit Betrayal. There is now no political party in Britain representing the majority of the citizens. I find that almost unbelievable.

The House of Commons has shut and MPs have waddled off for their long, long summer holidays. The long summer recess was introduced originally so that MPs could go back to their farms and supervise the harvest. Now they just go home to fiddle their expenses.

When, during the invasion of Egypt and Syria in 1799, Napoleon addressed troops who had failed to take the walled city of Acre, he pulled no punches. 'I'll rig you out in skirts! Pull down their breeches! You've got cunts between your legs, not cocks! Pull the breeches off those cissies!'

That's precisely how I feel about the Tory Cabinet. Gutless, cowardly traitors. May's solution is not a compromise; it's a submission, a humiliating, embarrassing defeat.

It cannot be said too often that the EU needs England (and Britain) far more than we need the EU. England doesn't need the EU at all. We must never forget that the EU was created by Nazis and is a neo-Nazi organisation. Anyone who supports it is, by definition, a fascist and a neo-Nazi. I really do find it difficult to understand how anyone can defend or support the EU – an organisation which has damned near destroyed Europe in general and Britain in particular. Only Germany has thrived under the EU's rule.

And we should remember that the EU plans not just to destroy the United Kingdom but to destroy England. That's the point of the regionalisation of the UK. I first wrote about this nearly 20 years ago but I suspect that most Remainers still don't understand the significance of the regionalisation plan. Wales and Scotland will remain as regions within the EU but England will become nine separate regions. London already has a Parliament, and an apology for a mayor, because the London area will be one of the EU's regions.

Today, I feel lost.

I don't understand why there is not more overt anger. How can the Remainders be so bloody ignorant, so bloated with betrayal, soaked in self, self, self, ignoring the nation's vote? They are life's prefects.

The BBC (which admits, of course, that it is biased in favour of the EU) always describes the referendum as having been a narrow win for the leavers but it wasn't. It was not a 'damned nice thing' (as the Duke of Wellington might have put it). The Leavers won the referendum by a margin of 52% to 48% – in political terms that's a massive difference. The Leavers won by a majority of 1.3 million votes. Two thirds of Parliamentary constituencies voted to leave. That was not a narrow margin – it was a rout.

The organisers of one of Scotland's biggest Highland Games have had to abandon this year's caber tossing because they can't use the field they always utilise. The farmer has told them that the grass isn't yet ready to cut for hay. I couldn't believe this when I heard it. Hay is very cheap to buy so why didn't the games organisers just buy the farmer a lorry load of hay and then ask him to cut his field a little early? Could it possibly be that the Scots are just too mean to think of such a thing?

We watched a film called *Mark Felt* about the man who was Deep Throat. The DVD we watched had no subtitles which I find most annoying – especially when the sound quality is poor and some of the actors are indistinct. The best part of the film was the initial credit sequence which informed us that the film was made by: Vertigo Releasing, Sierra Affiliates, Mandalay Pictures, Torridon films, Mad River Pictures, Endurance Media, Scott Free, Riverstone Pictures and Cara Films. All those production companies had their own page and then when we got to the end of the list started again with the production companies listed in a different order. With all those production companies you'd have thought they'd have been able to afford to put subtitles on the film.

2

London is now officially one of the world's worst cities to live in. It is congested, polluted and madly overcrowded – and absurdly expensive. Half of the workers in London come from outside the UK.

The EU is entirely responsible for long waiting times in A&E units. There are two main reasons for this. First, EU laws about working hours mean that there is an endemic shortage of doctors and nurses. Second, Britain is the most overcrowded country in Europe – thanks to the EU's immigration policies. (Here's a long shot prediction: how long will it be before the EU makes it illegal to criticise migration and immigration policies? Such legislation is surely coming.)

There are now a number of people in Britain (mostly noisy millennials) who believe that Britain should accept all the immigrants who want to come here. Newspapers such as *The Guardian* and the *Daily Mirror* support these sentiments. It is common to draw attention to individual cases, explaining why this or that person deserves to be allowed onto our overcrowded island. The problem is that all would-be immigrants have a good story to tell (especially the crooks and the terrorists). But at what point will even the mad millennials and the daft Greens say ‘enough’? Will it be enough when the traffic on motorways is at a permanent standstill or when hospitals are full of patients sleeping on the floor?

We could send money abroad, of course. But we already do that. The UK is far more generous with its foreign aid programme than any other country. But, sadly, around 90% of the money we send is creamed off by crooked politicians and ends up in Swiss banks.

I have no slick answer. I doubt if there is one. But unlimited immigration isn’t going to help anyone.

I have decided to start writing a fourth novel about Mrs Caldicot and her chums. For absolutely no reason that I can think of I have decided that one of them will inherit a pier. The first thing I must do is (temporarily) get rid of Jenkins – the former newspaper editor who married Mrs Caldicot. He is competent, capable and well versed in dealing with bureaucratic nonsenses. If he remains then he will be able to deal with all the problems in a trice and there will be no book. So, off he must go again. Readers of my books have been known to complain that there is always conflict in my entertainments – but that the conflict is always resolved before the end of the book. I do not apologise for this. I like my entertainment to have a happy ending. And without conflict there can be no chaos, no threat and nothing to overcome.

I wrote the first book about Mrs Caldicot when I was in my 40s. I don’t know why but I wanted to write about an old aged pensioner who stands up for herself. When I began the book she and some chums were going to rob a bank. But Mrs Caldicot didn’t want to rob a bank. And the ‘thoughts’ she had came to life when her husband died and she was released from slavery and realised that she could be anyone she wanted to be. Mrs Caldicot became a person of strength, determination, courage and resolve. It is, I hope, also clear that she is kind, considerate, caring and feminine. She became a doer and a leader and, I hope, a role model for us all.

Years and years ago, I remember reading that Graham Greene always liked to finish a day’s work at a point where it was clear where the story was likely to go next. This, he said, made it easy to sit down the next day and continue. I’ve never forgotten that. It makes good sense. The only other thing I’ve really remembered is the advice of P.G.Wodehouse who said that he liked every chapter of a book to be like a scene in a play. Even in a novel I sometimes read out what I’ve written to see if it would sound right on the stage. Oh, and he also said that all minor characters should have a purpose, and that no minor character should ever upstage a major character.

3

I bought a number of helium balloons for Antoinette’s birthday today – including a huge helium Toucan. As usual we removed the heavy weights which the shop put on them and I used toy soldiers and bits of Bluetac to weigh them down just enough so that they floated around the house.

When I asked the shop not to bother putting on weights there was quite a fuss. I was told that it was dangerous to have helium balloons floating around the house in case they escaped through a window and into the outside world. I gather this is either a sin or a crime or both. It seemed clear that if I tried to leave the shop with dangerously unfettered balloons the staff would ring the police and have me arrested. In the end I let the assistants put on the weights and then I took them off and threw them away when I got home.

Adjusting the weights to produce floating can be quite tricky. A large helium filled balloon requires half a dozen plastic soldiers and a big lump of Bluetac to ensure that it wanders about the house freely. It is quite extraordinary how they move about. This morning I found one in the bay window of my study, one on the landing and one suspended over the bath in my bathroom. At night we have to anchor them in case they come into contact with a chandelier and scare the living daylights out of us by exploding at three in the morning. If we’re lucky they’ll last a week. They never last as long as they used to last.

I also bought a dozen windmills, all about three feet tall, and planted them in a grassy bank by the side of our main lawn. They look like a flower border and whirr round at the slightest breeze. I’m sure that if I could find a way to connect them to our household electricity supply they could provide us with enough power for a chandelier or two. The only snag is that when a breeze blows, the windmills sound like a dozen helicopters preparing to take off, or just landing. It was the devil’s own game to get the windmill sticks into the hard ground. Our lawn is so dry it feels coarse and wiry like a coir doormat. I cannot remember when I last cut the grass.

I told Antoinette that for her birthday I had bought her ‘A History of Motor Racing in the 1950s’, a collection of old cricket magazines, a new biography of John Wayne and some DVDs starring Clint Eastwood. ‘When you’ve finished with them,’ I said, ‘I wouldn’t mind having a look at them.’

Among other things, I did buy her a box of Lego.

Is there anything in the world quite as well made? (I must say, though, that few things during the year raised my eyebrows higher than the news that grown-ups working at Lego had spent 13,000 man hours building a model of a Bugatti motor car. Why? They didn't do it for fun. They did it as a job. That is both embarrassing and sad.)

All the bits of Lego fit perfectly. And the instruction manual is a model of clarity.

I also bought a pair of bubble swords. Fantastic and thoroughly recommended. We made huge clouds of bubbles which drifted up into the sky.

The windmills I bought give us tremendous joy. When there is no wind they look pretty. When there is a breeze they look fantastic. The woman at the shop where I bought them thought I was buying them to sell on to other people. When I told her what I was going to do with them she looked at me as if I were mad. An elderly couple in the queue behind me clearly shared her view. Well, poosticks to them all! The windmills cost less than £100 (I should, I suppose, have asked for a bulk purchase discount) which means they cost no more than a small box of fireworks, a bunch of flowers or a decent bottle of wine. And the windmills will last for days and days. If none of them blows over the edge of the cliff we will be able to use them next year too.

Antoinette made the mistake of telling her German friend about the Lego. Unfortunately, the friend now thinks that Antoinette's hobby is playing with Lego. 'You must not be ashamed or worried about what people think,' she said today.

Now Antoinette has to try to convince her pal that the whole thing was an English jape.

4

It is well known that the adverts we see on the internet are designed to satisfy our known needs. But how many people know that the news feeds we see on the internet are designed to reinforce our prejudices. I find that quite scary.

Remainers apparently representing an organisation called Class War lined up outside Jacob Rees-Mogg's home to shout abuse at his children. They told the tiny tots that everyone hated their father and they hurled abuse at the family's nanny.

What has the world come to? What sort of people are these Remainers? It seems to me that we are now creating a world in which only psychopaths will be prepared to contemplate a career in politics.

I do find it difficult to understand why anyone would hate their country, their loved ones and themselves enough to want to support the Fascist EU and its patently disastrous and undemocratic policies. Brexiteers are proud, patriotic, imaginative and intelligent people. Remainers are dull, bureaucratic and hysterical. Millennial Remainers think that 'free movement' means not having to pay when travelling on the Tube. Older Remainers think that 'free movement' means never having to worry about constipation. I note that the leading celebrity Remainers include a rejected Labour politician called David Milliband, who lives and works in America, and an actor called Patrick Stewart who has the smuggest smile I've ever seen on anyone. The last I heard, Stewart was applying for American citizenship.

Remainers are like four-year-olds in that they simply cannot accept that they lost the Referendum (despite having massive financial support from the British Government, using vast amounts of taxpayers' money).

My message to all Remainers is really very simple: We won, you lost, hard luck, stop whingeing.

A bunch of penal reformers have claimed that adults under the age of 25 should be treated as children when they've done evil things. The argument is that those under 25 are still children and have improperly formed brains. It's difficult to defend this absurd argument. William Pitt the Younger was 21 when he was Prime Minister. John Keats died at 25. I think the penal reformers have got it all wrong. People over 65 should be given lighter punishments if they commit crimes. After all, the over 65s have seen and heard so much tripe that they should be legally entitled to beat the shit out of a millennial or two at least once a day.

We had a bad day. A pipe at our Devon home started to leak. And the central heating decided to stop working (again). We had to leave both problems in order to drive up to Gloucestershire to deal with the man who is mending the roof. (Our house there has an amazing 18th century roof with the original tiles. Stone and slate roofs which were put together before around 1850 always had the tiles graded, from small at the ridge and gradually getting bigger towards the eaves.)When we got to Gloucestershire we found some huge cracks in the walls. It seemed to me that this was probably due to the dry summer and also to the fact that we have a large number of trees near to the house. I read later that huge numbers of people have been claiming on their house insurance for the damage done. This had honestly never occurred to me.

I think we are going to have to sell our home in the Cotswolds because the journey up the M5 is becoming impossible. If someone stands on a motorway bridge and looks doleful the police close down both lanes for eight hours just in case.

Alex Salmon, the deeply unpleasant Scottish nationalist has used crowdfunding on the internet to pay his legal costs as he defends himself against charges of sexual something or other. He appears to have raised a six figure sum. Salmon is a well-paid man with a number of healthy pensions from the State and an income from Russia. Is he really the sort of individual for whom crowd funding was designed?

The police have introduced spot tests to check that motorists can read number plates at 22 yards. This silly and largely irrelevant test seems to me to be designed to try to get older drivers off the road. (It does nothing, for example, about drivers with tunnel vision or other significant visual problems.)But the new police initiative is an excellent notion for, as insurance companies will confirm, older drivers are much safer than younger ones. Safer drivers have fewer accidents and fewer accidents mean less work for the car repair industry. And so, for the sake of the car repair industry, it makes sense to make an attempt to take the safer drivers off the road.

I wonder how many people realise that the 75% of England which is farmland is controlled entirely by the European Union. All the laws which govern how we look after our environment, and how we grow our food, come from Brussels. And it is as a result of the Common Agricultural Policy (a scheme designed specifically to give huge amounts of money to French farmers) that the health of our soil has deteriorated, that bird and butterfly numbers have plummeted and that the nature of our countryside has been destroyed. Air pollution, widespread flooding and the disappearance of wildlife are all a direct result of EU laws that we have been forced to accept. Around 40% of the EU's budget goes to the Common Agricultural Policy – which means it goes to French farmers.

Thirty years ago, the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was frustrated by the way the EU was going. This was because she hadn't read Edward Heath's confession that when he signed us up to join the Common Market he knew that the plan was to create a United States of Europe. Thatcher, felt unhappy about the way that the EU was moving towards a supra-national bureaucracy. She hoped, and had foolishly assumed, that the EU was going to be nothing more than a European conglomerate of independent sovereign states. I suspect she hadn't read the evidence proving that the EU was designed by Hitler with the single aim of ensuring that Germany won the Second World War.

I really want to start a new book entitled *Theresa is a Traitor* (as a reprise to my book about Gordon Brown called *Gordon is a Moron*) but I know that angry semi-literate Remainers will trash it immediately (without bothering to read it). The first one star review will mean that will be that. Thus is freedom of speech eroded and eventually destroyed. Things have changed quickly. When I wrote *Gordon is a Moron* (to draw attention to Gordon Brown's idiotic and dangerous economic policies) there were some hard-left folk who objected but the book was not trashed and as a result it sold well and helped to spread the word about Brown's economic incompetence. Theresa May has allowed us to be bullied by the EU, to our communal shame and embarrassment. She is a disgrace and should be locked in the Tower, together with the staffs of the *Financial Times* and *The Guardian* newspapers and the BBC.

5

Antoinette and I were sitting in the conservatory in Devon. It was raining heavily. A steady drip drip of rain suggested that our recently mended roof had sprung yet another leak. The drips were landing on Antoinette's head.

'Oh dear, what on earth are we going to do about that?' I asked wearily. The leak was far too high for me to mend. And too high for our carpenter too. He doesn't like ladders.

'Easy,' said Antoinette. She stood up, moved her chair and sat down again. 'Problem solved.'

Sometimes, problems are easier to solve than you think they will be.

I am planning a new TV show. It will be a smash hit. It's going to be called 'I'm a Celebrity – Eat Me of Here'. Celebrity contestants will be stranded on a small Scottish island. A rock more than an island. They will be given to nothing to eat. They will be given knives but no food at all. The winner will be the last remaining celebrity when the others have all been eaten.

6

A pal of ours who is extremely keen on model railways and who has a massive track in a barn at the back of his house has started a mail order business selling model trains and track and all the other bits and pieces. Surprised, I asked him why he'd gone into retail. He explained that if he runs a business selling model trains and stations and track and so on he can claim all the costs of his own railway as a deductible expense. And he explains that his own magnificent layout is essential for promoting his business.

I picked up a copy of *Summer Lightning* by P.G.Wodehouse and discovered to my delight that I don't seem to have read it. I noticed that the book was dedicated to Dennis McKail, who was a chum of Wodehouse's. McKail, an author, was a nervous fellow but lived to a ripe old age. I immediately ordered one of McKail's books which turned out to be jolly (but not as jolly as the stuff written by The Master).

I can never work out where fog lights are on a car. I always have to stop, find the manual and search through it because 'fog lights' are never listed under 'fog lights' or 'lights' or anything obvious. I wonder if I am the only person who has this problem.

There really shouldn't be too much surprise about the fact that Corbyn et al seem reluctant to criticise Putin in particular and Russia in general. Remember that British left wing intellectuals were firm supporters of Stalin. Actually, I'm not entirely sure that Corbyn et al can be described as left wing intellectuals. Left wing, certainly, but I am not so certain about the 'intellectuals' bit. In my dictionary a 'corbyn' is defined as a small, unpleasant object of little or no consequence. And as his constantly switching policies on Brexit have shown he is a man without passions or beliefs; he is that most dangerous of politicians – a follower not a leader. (Putin is constantly criticised but he does sometimes seem to me to be the only world leader who is an adult. I wish we'd had Putin or Trump handling our Brexit negotiations. Things would have been very different. As it was we had the worst set of negotiators in the world. I wouldn't trust the untrustworthy and grossly incompetent Mrs May to do our weekly shopping.)

Talking of Russia, I read the other day that during the Cold War a cat was used as an assistant spy. A microphone and transmitter was sewn into a cat's neck with an antenna threaded along its spine and tail. The plan was to train the cat to wander into the Russian Embassy compound. Unfortunately, on its first day out the cat was run over by a car. That's the story anyway.

Britain has come 19th in a survey of the world's happiest countries. Only so called developed countries were included. I'm surprised we came so high up to be honest. Apparently, our misery is caused by our obesity, our sense of depression, our crime rates, our poor health care, drug addiction (illegal and prescription drugs) and our mistrust of just about everyone in authority.

There is only one question for Mrs May: did you deliberately screw up the Brexit negotiations, or are you really that grossly incompetent and half-witted? The daft woman has divided the country for generations and it looks as if she is determined to destroy our future. She seems to have no faith in Britain.

During the harshest weeks of the winter our camellia bushes were in flower for some time despite the freezing weather. The camellia blooms, white, red and pink, were extraordinarily beautiful. I was reminded of them when I re-read *Lady of the Camellias*, the masterpiece by Alexandre Dumas Junior. If the squirrels don't eat all the buds we will, hopefully, have a good display next winter.

A journalist friend of mine told me that his circulation was very poor. It was, he said 'about on a par with that of *The Guardian* newspaper'.

If women, gays, Jews or Syrian refugees were treated as badly as old folk we would be ashamed. *The Guardian* and Channel 4 would be up in arms. We spend billions on foreign aid and yet around 60,000 pensioners die every winter because they can't afford to keep themselves warm – let alone to feed themselves properly. There is no sympathy, understanding or even pity for the elderly these days. We are only a short time away from compulsory euthanasia. Oh, how fashionable it will be to take yourself off to the Euthanasia Centre on your 60th birthday.

All old people look old but feel young. I know one 70-year-old who feels eight. I myself feel 18 this week. Sometimes I'm in my early twenties. Sometimes I feel younger. I don't know why. That's the age of my inner self, I suppose.

Why do Google et al insist on using my first name when they write to me? I find it patronising and very annoying.

A dear friend and reader has pointed out that in other countries 40 years ago bicycles had number plates because they had to be insured and taxed. It is time to introduce something similar in the UK. Cyclists pedal away as if they own the roads for which they pay not a penny. Many ignore road signs and are a menace to others and themselves. Cyclists should be licensed and registered and should pay a road tax for several reasons. First, it is not true that cycling is good for the environment. The opposite is true. Cyclists cause motorists to slow down and to accelerate and all that accelerating results in the production of more toxic fumes. Cars and lorries which brake and accelerate damage the roads and there can be no doubt that cyclists are, therefore, directly responsible for many potholes. Second, cyclists cause many accidents – particularly to pedestrians. It should be possible to arrest and charge cyclists who behave badly. Licensing and registration should make this easier. Third, cyclists want cycle lanes. Fourth, cyclists constantly complain about pot holes. All this is perfectly sensible. But why shouldn't cyclists pay for the cycle lanes and the repairs they demand?

Most voters support a tax rise to provide more money for the NHS. This is madness. The NHS wastes most of the money it has – as I have been saying for decades (with evidence).

7

Boris Johnson sort of sneered at burkhas and said that the slit at eye level meant that they looked like letter boxes. This seems to me to be a fair and accurate comment, though it's not original. Johnson has, of course, been told to apologise though I rather hope he doesn't.

The funny thing is that if we go to Muslim countries we are told that we should dress in a way that the Muslims don't find offensive. And, of course, westerners who visit Muslim countries must obey their rules about not drinking alcohol. So why shouldn't Muslims who come to Europe dress in a way that we don't find offensive? It seems a perfectly rational argument. I was particularly bemused to read that West Yorkshire Police has designed a Muslim-friendly police uniform specifically for female Muslim recruits. Maybe they'll add a full letter box burkha to the ensemble.

Let us not forget, too, that Christians are regularly persecuted, and prevented from practising their religion, in Muslim countries. Muslim fanatics don't admire respect; they admire strength.

A chap called Lord Sheikh, who is apparently someone of note, went on television to criticise Boris. I don't much care what he thinks but he was photographed wearing a matching tie and handkerchief set so I find it impossible to take him seriously. Matching tie and handkerchief sets were unfashionable in the 1960s when they were fashionable.

Incidentally, I rather suspect that the sale of traditional headscarves to 'county' women must have slumped in recent years.

I was so pleased with our new electric strimmer that I ordered a spare. It arrived today but it has been changed. The battery for the new strimmer will not fit the other strimmer. No company, it seems, can leave anything alone for five minutes. I had hoped I could interchange the strimmer batteries (so that if one ran out I would have a spare). Now I can't.

Every day throughout the summer a man takes his dog for a bark on the beach. He and the dog (a spaniel) climb out of their car and stand on the beach below our piece of cliff. The dog then barks at the sea incessantly for an hour. Every now and then the barking stops and, although it is daylight, the creature will howl as though he has spotted the moon of his darkest dreams and cannot contain his delight. Eventually, the two of them climb back into their car and drive away. They do not walk at all. The dog clearly expects the sea to be afraid but the sea experienced King Canute and has no fear of King Charles Spaniels.

'I'm just taking the dog out for a bark, love,' the man presumably says, before he leaves home.

Today, as usual, the dog on the beach had been barking incessantly for an hour. The owner sat on the pebbles and the dog barked at the sea.

Eventually, I said very loudly. 'This is Devon Dog Watch. Your animal is causing a disturbance and unless it is silenced immediately a Devon Dog Watch Ranger will be sent to confiscate the animal.'

No one on the beach could see me since I was standing just out of sight on our cliff.

After a couple of minutes I inched a little closer and peeped over the edge. It was a delight to see the dog owner hurrying along the beach with the barky dog setting the pace.

I have ordered a new sign which says: ‘Trespassers will be shot and buried.’
It seems pithy and to the point. No one will believe it but I have already dug three nice big holes so I am prepared.

Monsanto, the world’s most evil company has been told to pay £226 million to a man whose cancer was deemed to have been caused by the weedkiller Roundup – a big selling Monsanto product. I wonder how many million people have been exposed to Roundup over the years. Multiply that by £226 million apiece and even Monsanto will struggle to survive. It will be a joy for the world when Monsanto goes under. (I first wrote about the dangers of weedkillers in 1972 when I wrote an article for the *Telegraph* in which I said: ‘If comparatively large quantities of paraquat cause lung damage then might not smaller quantities of the poison cause lung damage too?’)

I met a Roundup salesman once. He was the second most pompous person I have ever met. His wife was the first most pompous person I have ever met.

The joke is that Monsanto was recently bought by a German drug company called Bayer which is now threatened with bankruptcy. Don’t these people check out what they’re buying? The court ruling which may well bankrupt Bayer took place just weeks after the purchase was completed. In a sensible world the boss who made the decision would be tarred and feathered. In the unreal world in which we live he will probably give himself a huge bonus.

This unfortunate takeover reminds me that long ago I pointed out that companies which make chemicals and medicinal drugs were making drugs which caused cancer and drugs which purported to cure cancer. That’s a brilliant bit of marketing.

The official rate of inflation for the purpose of putting up prices is now 3.6% according to Vodafone. That, at least, is the rate at which they are putting up their prices. They use the very high Retail Price Index to excuse their obscene price rise. The Office for National Statistics no longer classifies the RPI as a national statistic since it does not meet international statistical standards. The RPI died in 2013 and is no longer used for adjusting pension payments and so on. In fact no one uses it. Except for Vodafone and those other companies which find it a very handy way to push up prices. Despite a good deal of competition (and standards were very high this year) I have once again awarded Vodafone my annual prize for being the Worst and Greediest Phone Company in the Universe. The CEO of Vodafone, Vittorio Colao is leaving. In his ten years in the job Vodafone has produced annualised profits of 11% – much higher than other companies. In my view Colao has done this by turning Vodafone into the worst and most unpopular phone company in Britain and taking no bloody notice whatsoever of the needs of the customers. I was one of Vodafone’s first mobile phone customers around 35 years ago and they have gradually gone downhill ever since.

8

Theresa May and Prince William attended a ceremony in Amiens to commemorate the Battle of Amiens, the battle which heralded the beginning of the end of World War I and a battle in which many British servicemen died. The battle was fought to help rescue a country which is now determined to destroy us. Sadly, the loathsome Macron, the unpopular, egocentric President of France, could not be bothered to attend. He was far too busy enjoying a luxury holiday in his lavish presidential retreat.

You would think, would you not, that a French president would want to show his appreciation of the British soldiers who died to liberate his country? But Macron, the miserable bastard, couldn’t be bothered to lever himself out of his deckchair. The French have always hated the English (largely through jealousy) but I doubt if the fear and loathing has ever been greater than it is now.

Today I received six emails from kind people desperate to improve my web presence and to provide me with a multi-platform service and social media enhancement. I also received three emails from people who described themselves as ‘influencers’. These, if I understand correctly, will enhance my multiplatform web presence and make me more popular on the internet if I give them money. They will ‘buy’ me followers, supporters, friends and, quite probably, a few hundred thousand slaves as well. What a corrupt and sorry business the internet is these days. I understand that one in three reviews on Trip Advisor is fake. I’m not surprised. It’s probably the only way that café and hotel owners can survive in a world where every vindictive, spiteful customer is given a loudhailer and carte blanche to broadcast whatever abuse takes their fancy.

To be honest I would pay all these influencers good money if they could guarantee to remove me from the internet entirely – except for Amazon, of course. I would also pay them if they could arrange for me not to receive emails from people wanting to improve the visibility of my website.

The dishonesty, bigotry and manipulation in all forms of public life has reached epidemic proportions. Politicians, journalists and the ‘influencers’ who have ruthlessly and selfishly betrayed the hope of the internet with their bigotry, crude exploitation and commercial expediency, and students who refuse to listen to anything they think they might disagree with or disapprove of if they knew enough about it to form an opinion, have between them destroyed debate and democracy. The whole ‘influencing’ business has now become so absurd that I receive emails from people promoting themselves as ‘Bestselling Author Trainers’. I think the idea is that I hire them, and give them money, and they then train me in some way. I also receive email advertisements from ‘Talent Architects’ offering to sell me their services though I have no idea what they do.

You can probably get a degree in any of these things.

It is not only in the world of the internet that people earn their living in strange ways. There are, apparently, people around who are hugely well paid (with taxpayers’ money) to dive off boards into swimming pools. I can’t get my head round this.

At Manchester University the students’ union wants to encourage something called ‘jazz hands’ instead of clapping. Apparently ‘jazz hands’ is a form of performance dance which involves holding your hands up towards the performers in a sort of rather sloppy Nazi salute.

‘The hands are held in the air, as though surrendering,’ said one aficionado. I can see why this would be popular in France where surrendering is a national pastime.

Allegedly, the students want to stop clapping lest it startle anxious people, though Muslim extremists ban clapping so it seems possible that the ban was more a piece of multicultural ‘virtue signalling’.

Other student unions have banned the sale of alcohol, though whether this is to avoid upsetting Muslims or to avoid the risk of teetotallers being offended I do not know and, frankly, do not care enough to find out.

Alarmingly, lecturers have been told that when giving snowflake students their assignments they must be ‘gentle’ and ‘reassuring’. One college told lecturers that they shouldn’t ever use capital letters because these can be frightening to snowflake students.

It’s difficult to imagine how snowflake students are ever going to be able to cope with the rigours of the real world.

We went to Taunton in our new Grand Cherokee SRT Jeep. An annoying female voice interrupted our conversations every couple of minutes to tell us the speed limit. She was wrong about 50% of the time and annoying 100% of the time. I will have to re-read the handbook to see if there is a way to turn her off. Maybe there will be a fuse I can remove. Alternatively, we will have to purchase ear plugs or simply turn up the volume on our in-car ‘Credence Clearwater Revival’ album.

Taunton, like Cheltenham, used to be a rather refined county town. Today neither could be described as refined or as county towns in the traditional sense. The three biggest shops in Taunton are Poundland, Poundworld Plus and Poundstretcher. The wonderful County Stores is still apparently under sentence of death. There are few traditional proper shops left but there are a lot of charity shops and many hairdressers and one of those terrible Waterstones. I suspect there must be a hairdressing college nearby. The Lloyds Bank in Taunton used to be competent but sadly it is now not.

I bought a handful of reading glasses for £1 each from the shop called Poundland. They are excellent value and I leave spares all over the place and in jacket pockets. Poundland even make reading glasses which are tinted for sunny days. The price is still £1.

I also had a new battery put into a watch. (I have watches which wind themselves up but I never wave my arms around enough and they stop.)

The shop where I had the battery inserted charged me a few pence short of £15 for a battery that probably cost them a penny (I’ve seen the same batteries being sold at 100 for £1) and told me that I now had a battery for life. The woman behind the counter explained that when my battery goes all I have to do is take in the receipt and they will put in a new battery. This sounds wonderful but I know that I will not be able to find the receipt when the battery goes and I suspect that they know this too.

Indeed, by the time we got home I had already lost the receipt. I had put it into my wallet for safe keeping. I still have my wallet. The receipt has gone. Mysteries abound in my life.

The good news is that Antoinette managed to get rid of the annoying female voice in the car. She did something to the car’s computer and removed the voice from our lives. Antoinette is brilliant.

When I went to the bank, they photocopied my signature

'Excuse me', I asked the 16-year-old trainee, 'why…

'It's protocol,' she sneered, as though this explained everything which for her it clearly did.

Where did this word come from?

Everyone uses it now.

Doctors and nurses have to do this or that because of 'protocol'.

What it means, I guess, is that they have to do it this way because it has been so decreed by someone (usually an anonymous eurocrat) and since they have to do it this way then I must accept that it is done this way. Laws and rules have become 'protocols' which must be obediently accepted.

UKIP is having a renaissance and if there were a general election this week it seems perfectly possible that UKIP would be able to form a Government. The main three parties are so unpopular as to be unelectable.

Unfortunately, the only real hope that UKIP has is to make Nigel Farage its leader. And UKIP already has a leader (heaven knows who it is this week) who, I suspect, is refusing to stand aside. I have heard it being said that Nigel must wait until the next election if he wants to lead UKIP again. It seems to me that wherever you look in politics these days one finds politicians, particularly second tier ones, who are looking after themselves first and the country second.

I rather gather that there have always been people in UKIP who didn't like Nigel very much. When I spoke at a UKIP conference in Telford a million years ago I met Nigel and quite a few other UKIP politicians. From our conversations I got the impression that quite a few senior members of the party thought that Mr Farage was too dominating. There was a feeling that there was a danger of him turning it into a sort of personal party. That is exactly what happened, of course. During the Referendum hardly anyone could name any other UKIP politicians. The problem was that because Nigel was the only politician in UKIP that anyone had heard of, the press always wanted to interview Nigel and Nigel only. So the vicious circle was tightened ever tighter. Nigel got more and more famous and UKIP became very much a one person party.

I'm actually now not sure that UKIP (which carries a lot of uncomfortable baggage) is the right party to represent the people who want us to leave the EU. In fact, I've always thought we need a party for England more than the UK. UKIP was never particularly strong in Scotland, and both the Scots and the Welsh have nationalist parties which do well. The Scots love the EU because they have been lied to endlessly and believe, quite erroneously, that their parliament is the first step to an independence which the EU will give them. In reality, of course, they have a parliament which is nothing more than an EU regional parliament. The SNP support the EU because the Scottish parliament is an EU regional parliament. The English were offered nine regional parliaments, smelt a rat and sensibly rejected them. The Welsh are as mistaken as the Scots in thinking that their little Parliament is a step towards independence.

Meanwhile, it was depressing to read that the police in London shut down a political meeting because far left protestors had collected outside the building. The meeting was organised by UKIP. If right wing protestors had collected outside a Labour meeting then I have little doubt that the protestors would have been arrested and the meeting allowed to continue.

London is now a city which no longer seems to have anything to do with England.

Remainers who are MPs have apparently complained that they have received letters saying that they should be hung as traitors. They seem to think that the writers of such letters have committed an offence. Really? It seems to me perfectly reasonable to say that all Remainers (especially those who are politicians) should be hung as traitors. Am I allowed to hold this view in secret? Quite probably not. Am I allowed to express this view in public? Almost certainly not. Do I give a stuff? Quite definitely not.

I am full of admiration for businessmen (usually American) who are still doing multibillion deals in their 80s and for campaigners who are still (metaphorically) chaining themselves to railings as they stride fiercely towards their 100th birthday. I remember seeing Bertrand Russell carried away by the police when he was demonstrating in his 90s.

I have great respect for such individuals.

Personally, I feel tired out by disappointment and disillusionment and a feeling of failed hopes and time wasted. I also feel worn out by the daily nonsenses of a bureaucratic age. As George Orwell put it I feel 'smothered by drudgery'.

And I know only too well what Thoreau meant when he said: 'The mass of men live lives of quiet desperation.'

You have to be sensitive to care about things but being sensitive means that the pain of seeing injustice and cruelty continue can be pretty damned tiring. These days it is worse because campaigners are (in addition to failing in their aims) likely to be subjected to organised abuse.

Thinking about it I realised (with some sadness) that I have wasted most of my life campaigning without any useful effect. I have been on the losing side of a good many campaigns during my life.

(It does however seem that the campaign I started in the 1970s for the decriminalisation of drugs such as heroin, cocaine, cannabis, etc. may be reaching a successful conclusion. However it may be happening for the wrong reasons. I wanted the drugs made legal (or decriminalised) because I thought that control would make it easier to reduce consumption. Today's campaigners want the drugs to be made legal so that more people can take them.)

I have campaigned for over half a century to draw attention to iatrogenesis (but doctor induced disease is commoner than ever); waste in the NHS (it's gone up not down); vivisection (the pointless use of animals in medical laboratories goes up and up); vaccination (there has been an explosion in the number of vaccines given to babies and small children so that hasn't gone well); environmental health problems (that's been hijacked by people who don't give a fig about people, animals or the environment); the overprescribing of antibiotics (bizarrely, patients not doctors or farmers are now blamed for this); the danger of eating drug and hormone enriched meat (the truth has been suppressed by the Advertising Standards Authority and the meat industry); the existence of chemical pollutants in our drinking water (that's got worse); the overprescribing of benzodiazepines and other tranquillisers and sleeping tablets (the prescribing of these drugs continues unabated) and the pollution of our air and the environment (that's got worse).

For a mere quarter of a century I have campaigned against the EU and it looks as though the Brexit we get, if we get one at all, will be so watered down as to be worthless.

But there is one thing I can say: my life has had some consistency in that everything for which I have fought has been a failure; a waste of my effort, a waste of my time and a waste of my money.

Still, on the upside, I have gained many enemies, been widely banned and suppressed around the world, been patronised and lied about and seen what might laughingly be described as my career go up in flames. And I am now banned from all media outlets in the UK.

So it's not all doom and gloom and I am comforted with the thought that I must have been doing something right.

Maybe someone else will germinate the seeds I have sown.

Having parked at the cricket ground in Taunton (it's the most central parking space and nearly always available because they hardly ever seem to be playing cricket) we went to Café Nero. A couple at the next table were celebrating because a cricketer called Stokes had been found not guilty of affray.

Ben Stokes had been on trial for hitting two men and allegedly abusing a couple of gays. I have never met him, I'm pleased to say, but he appears to have acquired an image of thugishness. What a tragedy it is that people like Stokes have played cricket at the top level. The most astonishing thing is that the cricket authorities appear to regard him as a valuable commercial commodity. What a pity the judge can't sentence him to ten rounds in a boxing ring with Tyson Fury.

The game of cricket used to be played by men like W.G.Grace and C.B.Fry. Now it is a game for numbskulls and hooligans. Stokes, who was filmed knocking out two men, and who appears to have a powerful imagination, denied that he had been fighting.

It seemed to me that whether he was found guilty or not (in legal terms) it would be a disgrace (in moral terms) if he were allowed to wear an England cap again. But I knew I would probably be alone in thinking that. The phrase 'it's not cricket' used to mean something. Stokes may be a player (though not, if you look at the averages, the best one we've ever had) but he certainly doesn't appear to be a gentleman. He has a police history and not long ago he had to apologise after recording an online video in which he cruelly mimicked the disabled son of a television personality – the sort of thing a particularly thoughtless 12-year-old might do and then instantly regret.

In the end Stokes walked from the court a free man. He was found not guilty.

The whole Stokes fiasco told us more than we really wanted to know about the competence of the Crown Prosecution Service. How could they not get a conviction? Stokes was filmed throwing 15 punches, breaking a man's eye socket and knocking out two men. He had at least ten alcoholic drinks. He was accused of lying, taking the mickey out of homosexuals and abusing a doorman.

It's a good job the nation's lawyers weren't prosecuting Hitler and Mengele after World War II. The pair would have been found innocent. Surely a six-year-old with a play barrister wig would have been embarrassed not to win a conviction in this tawdry case.

Another player called Hales apparently kicked someone in the head and then stamped on him at least twice as the poor chap lay in a gutter. The Crown Prosecution service did not, apparently, consider this to be a serious enough offence to require a court appearance. (I wonder how often you have to kick someone in the head for it to be considered offensive? Still, at least this means that I can stamp on Jeremy Corbyn and kick him in the head twice without any risk of being arrested.)

It seemed to me quite remarkable that anyone, let alone a professional sportsman, should be allowed to abuse people doing their job and knock out two people in the street without any law being broken. I shall not be taking any interest in the match.

Personally I would have sent Stokes back to New Zealand where he comes from. (I can't remember when there was last an English team composed entirely of Englishmen.) Naturally, the England team management saw things differently. They immediately invited him to join the squad for the next Test Match so that he didn't feel upset and left out of things after his awful ordeal. They then went one step further and picked him to play which was a kick in the teeth for everyone who cares about what used to be called 'standards'. How can such a brute be a hero to schoolboys? At that point I decided that I could no longer follow a sport which has been in my heart for nearly 70 years.

I like to think that Stokes would be booed every time he appears in public. But he won't be. The ECB apparently pays him an astonishing £750,000 a year (which helps explain why cricket fans have to pay up to £350 to watch a match) and the game of cricket is now dying. In my view, cricket has been killed by Stokes and the ECB, with the MCC as pallbearers, and no longer serves a purpose. The MCC and the ECB could not have killed cricket more effectively if they had worked towards that end. For all I know, they did. Maybe they sat down, round a table, and worked out a way to destroy the game. If so then they look as if they will be extremely successful. Both, in their different ways, seem to me to be obsessed with money and power, both seem elitist and arrogant, distant from the spectators, in thrall to the bureaucrats who seem to me to be self-conscious, preening and self-important. Cricket is dying and I now find myself hoping that the death comes quickly before there can be more shame and more embarrassment. The MCC, apparently obsessed with administration and finance, seems determined to turn Lord's Cricket Ground into a permanent building site. And the game's administrators appear to have gone barking mad.

At Lord's, for example, the MCC is required to build a score box capable of holding a vast number of scorers. There must be room for wheelchairs and, probably, for heart lung machines too. The umpires must have a special suite comparable to the best available at The Ritz. There must be lifts everywhere so that scorers, umpires and visiting dignitaries can move about without exerting themselves. Steps of any kind are quite unacceptable – and probably sexist and racist too.

The fact is that if the Crown Prosecutors hadn't made an almighty mess of the prosecution, Stokes and his almost equally unpleasantly chum Hales, would be sewing mail bags or making number plates, clutching their soap on a rope and discovering that they are not the hard men they think they are.

I watched in amazement as a woman in Café Nero paid for her coffee by sending some sort of message from her mobile phone. I bet she uses the same phone to do her online banking. I also noticed that the coffee shop opens at 7.00 every weekday morning. This suggests that shop assistants and office workers call in to buy their breakfast – at around £4 a day I would guess, or £20 a week. I bet most of the customers for breakfast are molly-coddled millennials who spend their days complaining they can't afford to buy a home. And they are, I have no doubt, the same individuals who call in before they go home to spend another £4 on a latte and a slice of chocolate and walnut cake.

In a nearby shop I paid for shopping with £20 notes which the assistant checked with the light pen they use. I told him not to worry because I'd made them that morning and they were good quality. He said they'd dried quickly. I said I'd put them in the tumble dryer – which I always use for money laundering. Our silliness was interrupted by another member of staff who had overheard and who told us firmly that such things were not to be said since they could get us all into trouble. I got the feeling he was waiting for me to leave so that he could telephone the authorities. I have no doubt that I was photographed and recorded on some hidden equipment.

In Lloyds bank I heard an assistant explaining to an elderly lady how to use the automatic cheque deposit machine. I have never in my life heard anyone speak so patronisingly to anyone. 'Did they teach you how to deal with customers?' I asked the assistant when the old lady had gone. 'Or is it a natural talent?' She seemed puzzled.

I bought a few paperbacks in Smiths. Why do they make paperbacks so big now? In the old days you could stuff a paperback or two into a jacket pocket. These days you need a suitcase to carry one around. I noticed that someone has used my title *Stress Control* (which I used back in the 1970s). Nice to know the author liked it enough to nick it. *Stress Control*, published by Pan, was one of the first mass market non-fiction paperbacks of mine which was racked up heavily in WH Smith, in railway stations and petrol stations. The title was, I think, suggested by Maurice Temple-Smith who published the hardback edition.

Antoinette bought what an assistant assured her was a printer for the laptop. The box says it is a Canon but it doesn't say it's a printer. Still, we have to assume that the bloke knows what he is selling.

Why is that WH Smith seem to hire staff who have been found too rude to work in the Post Office? The customers seem pretty rude too. A 30 something woman at the counter in front of me completed her transaction and then remained where she was while she started to deal with her text messages. She was oblivious of the queue behind her. I reached over and handed my purchases to the assistant. The woman who was texting turned and stared at me. ‘Can’t you wait?’ she snapped. `You’re very rude.’

Incidentally, I think it is sweet that some people still text one another. It’s very 1990s.

The huge amounts of money paid to egregiously overpaid sportsmen and sportswomen reminded me that until fairly recently most sports players were either amateurs or paid more reasonably. I was taught to swim by an Olympic swimmer earning a few bob by teaching school children to swim and when I worked delivering mail one Christmas I did so alongside an Olympic sprinter who was earning money to pay for his expenses to the next Olympics. Arthur Milton, who played both football and cricket for England, and was the last man to do so, spent his final years uncomplainingly delivering free newspapers on a bicycle.

Oddly enough, later in the day we saw a few kids playing cricket. You don’t see this much these days so I noticed. I said to Antoinette that if they wanted to play for England they would have to learn to knock people out and stamp on a few heads first. That evening, a very good friend emailed to say that he’d heard that a club bowler had head-butted an umpire who had rejected an appeal. These occurrences are no longer rare. In another village cricket match a millennial decided to prevent a batsman in the opposing team from reaching a maiden century. With one ball to go, and the batsman needing two runs for his century, the bowler sent the ball to the boundary for five extras – thereby leaving the batsman stranded on 98. What sort of person even thinks of such a devious and spiteful thing? And, having thought of it, who would do it? Only a millennial, I suspect. And then there was Carew cricket club which declared having scored 18 runs for one wicket. This meant that their rivals couldn’t pick up enough points to the win the league. Oh, and a cricket match at St Asaph in North Wales ended up with two cricketers brawling on the pitch after a batsman was dismissed.

Having been a cricket fan all my life, I have unilaterally decided that I will take no interest at all in contemporary cricket. I still take an interest in the game but my interest is confined to magazines and books describing events that happened a long time ago. I am not much interested in anything that happened after 1970.

I wrote asking the MCC to ban Stokes from the pavilion at Lords. Since we, as members, own the pavilion I cannot see why we can’t do this. Cricket is, after all, supposed to be a gentleman’s game. In another, more noble age, Stokes would have been horse whipped and banned from the game for life. I received no immediate reply from the massively overstaffed and overpaid secretariat but eventually received a note telling me that there was no precedent for any such action. I wrote back and said I had hoped that the club might want to take a moral stance. I asked for the committee’s view but to begin with all I received was an email telling me that they didn’t think it appropriate for me to quote the miserable reply I had received. When I said that I would be quoting the reply (since it had not been marked ‘secret’), I received a letter from the MCC Club Chairman, a fellow called Gerald Corbett, telling me that the MCC Committee did not consider it appropriate to ban Stokes from Lord’s. ‘To do so,’ he wrote, ‘would almost certainly place MCC in breach of its contractual obligations to ECB, and possibly leave the Club open to a variety of legal challenges and consequences.’ Corbett has been a director of a number of public companies and was Chief Executive of Railtrack. He left after a couple of serious railway crashes and some subsequent criticism with a compensation package said to be worth £1.3 million.

It seems to me that although the MCC used to be a club run for gentlemen, according to gentlemanly standards, it has rather lost it way. If the MCC won’t take a stand against thuggishness, who else is there to do so?

The odd thing is that the MCC has strict clothing rules defining the sort of clothes and shoes which can be worn by members. And there are strict penalties for members who break the club’s many other rules. Members are not allowed to go into the pavilion unless they are wearing a suitable jacket, suitable trousers, suitable shoes and a suitable shirt with a collar and a tie. One of the committees (there are many) spends hours, probably days, making lists of items of clothing which are suitable (both for men and for women). A pal of mine, who regards the shirt and tie rule as particularly anachronistic keeps an old 1970s shirt for his rare visits to Lords. It is a lime green paisley shirt and he has a lime green matching paisley tie to go with it. Matching tie and shirt sets were all the rage in the 1970s. When he turns up at the entrance to the pavilion one of the doorkeepers standing there will inevitably assume that he isn’t wearing a tie at all and will try to grab him to stop him entering. My friend will then wiggle the end of his tie to show that it is present and correct and the doorkeeper, suitably abashed, will apologise.

But Stokes can enter the pavilion and the MCC seems quite unconcerned.

The MCC is still old-fashioned but, it seems to me, not for the right reasons. There does not seem to be any backbone. The stuffiness and absurd clothing rules are all there is left. Maybe that’s really all there ever was.

England used to be about cricket and cricket was about England. The second most famous Victorian was a cricketer. But cricket has gone back to its roots and is now controlled once more by gamblers and book makers.

And the truth is that modern cricket grounds probably make more money from pop concerts than they do from cricket matches.

I am glad that someone else has noticed that women do not naturally live longer than men. I've been screaming about this for years. (There is a chapter explaining the misconception in *How to Live Longer*). Women used to live longer because they did not smoke or drink so much and because many did more physical exercise. Today, all that has changed and men and women will have very similar life expectations.

9

There are campaigns to protect the cliffs of England which are being eroded by tides and wind. Should we do this or we should leave nature to its own devices?

There is some sense in arguing, for example, that Venice should be allowed to sink into the sea gracefully and maybe the coast should be left to mature naturally. (We have a vested interest in that our home in Devon is perched on the edge of a cliff. But do I want to see the coastline buttressed with concrete? No, not really.)

There is much talk that cliff falls are a new phenomenon caused by climate change. This is nonsense. On one part of the Devon coast, in 1790, heavy rain caused ten acres of land to slip 198 feet downwards and moved 660 feet seawards to form an area known as Hooken Undercliffs.

The one thing that would make a difference would be to ensure that all the bits of cliff which fall are left where they lie. Taking away the rubble, stone and sand merely accelerates the process of destruction. Leaving the fallen bits and pieces where they are helps to protect the remaining cliff face.

Our local council, which seems to have recognised this, is talking about dumping more rocks at the face of the Devon cliffs. Naturally, however, their rock dumping won't be at the bottom of our cliff. The result will be that the slightly redirected sea will batter our cliffs more than ever.

Despite all the publicity given to the regular cliff falls along the Devon and Dorset coastline (particularly at Sidmouth, where pieces of sandstone regularly fall off the cliff face) there are, on sunny days, nearly always family groups having a picnic at the base of the cliffs.

The thing we thought was a printer (and which Antoinette was assured was a printer which we could attach to our laptops in order to print out things) seems to be a device for printing photographs. We need another lead if we are going to do this. We don't want a device for printing photographs. Still, the damned thing should fit into the incinerator. I have lost count of the number of so-called printers we have got through this year. The other printers we dug out have also stopped working. I am becoming accustomed to writing things out in long hand.

I find it odd that the English cricket selectors seem to regard the awful Ben Stokes to be an essential member of the team.

It is of course impossible to compare sportsmen of different eras. But there is one aspect of sport in which it is possible to compare players from the past with players of today – all-rounders in the game of cricket. An all-rounder is expected to score runs and take wickets and if he is any good at all then his wickets should, on average, cost fewer runs than he scores. The obvious way to measure all round skills and successes is to measure the ratio of runs scored and cost of wickets taken. So if a player has a batting average of 30 and he takes wickets at a cost of 30 runs apiece then his all-round ratio is 1. If his batting average is 60 and he takes wickets at an average cost of 30 runs apiece then his all-round ratio is 2.

Modern cricket writers nearly always forget the old time players whose achievements were made on rough pitches and with poor equipment. But although it isn't possible to compare batsmen from the 21st century with batsmen from the 19th century, or bowlers from the 19th century with bowlers from the 21st century (because pitches varied, bowling varied, bats varied, outfields and boundaries all varied), it is perfectly rational to compare all-rounders from all eras.

An all-rounder with an average below 1.00 isn't really an all-rounder. If you have a team made up of 11 such players they will lose most of their matches because the wickets they take will cost more than the runs they make. And if we look at the career averages we see that today's all-rounders are nowhere near as successful as some of the most successful all-rounders from other eras.

England's greatest ever all-rounder was undoubtedly the Victorian Dr W.G.Grace who scored 54,896 first class runs at an average of 39.55 and took 2,876 wickets at an average of 17.92. Only slightly less successful was Wilfred Rhodes who scored 39,802 runs at an average of 30.83 and took 4,187 wickets at a cost of 16.71 runs per wicket.

The legendary C.B.Fry scored 30,886 runs at an average of 50.22 and took 166 wickets at an average of 29.34.George Hirst scored 36,356 runs at an average of 34.13 and took 2,742 wickets at an average of 18.73. The almost forgotten Jack Crawford scored 9,488 runs at an average of 32.6 and took 815 wickets at 20.66. The Hon Stanley Jackson scored 37,516 runs at an average of 33.83 and took 774 wickets at an average of 20.37. (Jackson went to Harrow and one of his fags was Winston Churchill.)

More recently, Trevor Bailey scored 28,641 runs at 33.42 and took 2,082 wickets at 23.13. Ted Dexter scored 21,150 runs at 40.75 and took 419 wickets at 29.92. Tony Grieg scored 16,660 runs at an average of 31.2 and took 856 wickets at 28.9. Surprisingly, perhaps, Geoff Boycott scored 48,426 runs at 56.83 and took 45 wickets at 32.42.

Later, well-known cricketers such as Botham and Flintoff, have been nowhere near as successful as all-rounders. Ian Botham scored 19,399 first class runs at 33.97 and took 1,172 first class wickets at 27.22. Freddie Flintoff scored 9,027 runs at an average of 33.8 and took 350 wickets at an average of 31.59.

Stokes, who was born in New Zealand, and who seems to be regarded by the cricketing establishment as the premier English all-rounder of our time, has a poor record in comparison to the cricketing greats. As I write he has scored 6,569 runs at an average of 33.86 and taken 281 wickets at an average of 29.85.

Still, he is obviously a good man for drinking and brawling and those appear to be qualities much in demand these days.

10

Why do the makers of laptops and printers all hide the on/off switch? If I want to play a game I will play backgammon, chess or bridge. ‘Hunt the Switch’ is not my choice.

11

Every day of the week, every day of the year, the waters off Santa Barbara in the United States are thick with oil. It’s not another leak; it is entirely natural. Around 10,000 gallons of oil a day seep into the sea from a six mile stretch of ocean floor. No one makes a big fuss because there is no one to sue.

A reader has written to say that he has burnt all my books because he disagrees with my stance on the EU. I hope they kept him warm.

Older folk (such as myself) are frequently accused of looking back through rose coloured spectacles. But it isn’t difficult to argue that things were better back in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s than they are now. Family doctors were available 24 hours a day and for every day of the year. There was no need to make an appointment to see a GP and you could see the doctor of your choice. (When I first started as a GP in the early 1970s, no patient had to wait more than two hours to see me. This was simply because I had a single handed practice and refused to have an appointment system. Eventually, the NHS forced me to organise one. But even then patients could always be seen on the same day that they contacted the surgery. The appointments system just made things more complicated.) Hospitals had ward sisters and matrons but did not have horrendously long waiting lists. It was relatively rare for patients to be killed by their doctors. (These days, doctors are one of the top three causes of death, along with cancer and circulatory disease.) Train passengers could catch direct trains from A to B, travel without any change, and expect to arrive on time. Even small towns and villages had their own railway station. It was possible to eat quite good meals on trains. Long distance travellers could go by sleeper train. There were at least two postal deliveries every day and it was reasonable to expect that all mail would arrive the day after posting. Rubbish was collected once a week and you could put out as much rubbish as you had. You were not expected to waste time sorting your rubbish. Travel abroad was bearable and delays were relatively rare. It was perfectly possible to turn up at an airport ten minutes before take-off. (I travelled once a week by air in the 80s and 90s and often arrived at an airport as my plane was boarding.) Border staff behaved like human beings rather than concentration camp guards. Life expectancy then was much the same as it is now. Food poisoning in cafes and restaurants was much less common than it is today. Items purchased in shops were much better made and were usually built to last rather than to fall apart. Expensive items could be mended quite easily and economically. Many motorists maintained and repaired their own vehicles at home – with little more than a couple of spanners and a screwdriver. Hospital patients could rely on having clean sheets and there were staff at weekends. Visitors to hospitals did not have to pay to park their cars. Local bus services were good, cheap and reliable. Shoppers were treated with respect, could sit down while ordering their groceries and then ask for the ‘boy’ to deliver their purchases by bicycle. The police were polite and would tell you the time if you asked. Workmen were respectful and courteous; they arrived on time, did their work and left when they had finished a job. Every town had a public library and a swimming pool and every school had more than adequate playing fields. Children were polite and education was good enough for them to be able to learn to read and write. NHS dentists were available for all. Roads were much better, potholes were rare and it was easy to average 40 mph when travelling around the country. Parks were safe and well kept. Folk who had been to the cinema and who didn't want to catch the bus could walk home in the evenings in reasonable expectation of getting there without being mugged. Older people could live on their State pension. Life was better in the 80s, the 70s, the 60s and the 50s than it is now.

12

Someone was filming me in the street. It wasn't just me. They were filming everyone. I have no idea why. So I pulled out my iPhone and pretended to film them. I couldn't do it for real because although I have had an iPhone since they first came out (actually I think the current one is the third incarnation) I still haven't worked out how to film things. I can take still photographs but not little videos. The person I was filming got very upset which seemed odd. If you live by the camera then you should be prepared to die by it. 'For my YouTube Channel,' I whispered as I tottered past pretending to be filming.

13

France has never been any good at fighting wars (we had to rescue them twice in the 20th century and whenever we've fought them we beat them hollow) and so they recently begged Britain for military help in fighting some terrorists. After we agreed to help them out they sent us a bill for £2 million for giving our troops logistical support. Here is proof yet again that the French are greedy as well as cowardly.

14

When Tesco delivered our groceries I noticed that the fruit juice, packaged in Somerset, had all the ingredients and instructions listed in Arabic. I would guess that this is a sign of the future. How long will it be before manufacturers don't bother to print any information in English?

15

A judge in California has ruled that coffee should carry a cancer warning. This is absolutely true. We need more warnings of this nature. I have written to the EU suggesting a ban on cups with handles. 'There is a real of risk of scalding or staining if a handle falls off,' I wrote. 'Not having any handles at all will eradicate this risk completely. People using the handle-less cups should wear gloves to prevent burning of the hands.'

16

We no longer answer any of our telephones. And the only doorbell reachable from outside is on a solid wooden gate in an eight foot high stone wall. We never answer that unless we know who is there. I think we can safely say that we have become reclusive.

In a book I wrote during Obama's election campaign, I argued that he was nothing more than a smooth political operator; a dangerous fake in the Blair mould. At the time this was regarded as heresy. I was shot down for daring to suggest such a thing. And yet Obama turned out to be one of the biggest fakes in history. At least with Donald Trump no one can say that they didn't expect what they got.

Here's a perfect example of Obama's fakery.

During his tenure in the White House, the blessed Obama claimed to read ten letters a day from 'ordinary' Americans. (The White House has an Office of Presidential Correspondence which usually deals with such mail. Unbelievably, the staff there called themselves 'Team Little People'.) It was widely thought that the wonderful, kindly replies which these 'little people' received from the White House were actually written by Obama himself. It turns out that they were mostly written by a 23-year-old girl who had taught herself how to mimic the President's writing style. Obama limited himself to scribbling one word on the letters which he thought deserved a reply.

The one word?

'Reply.'

You may say this doesn't really matter.
And I don't suppose it does.
But it tells us a good deal about the style of the man who was one of the biggest fakers outside Hollywood.
You can say many things about Donald Trump. (And people do.)
But I don't remember Trump ever promising to close down Guantanamo Bay.

17

A fellow I know told me that his wish was that he would not die in his own lifetime. 'I would,' he said seriously, 'find it a very sad business'. He is absolutely right. It's much better to get it over with when you're no longer here.

I had a nightmare in which the EU organised a fake terrorist attack on Britain. (In the same way that Hitler burnt down the Reichstag.) The EU provided help and sympathy and in the aftermath we were told that we needed our kind continental neighbours to help us survive. The Government decided a second referendum would be appropriate. The French and the Germans became friendly. And we stayed in the EU.

It couldn't happen, could it?

18

Antoinette said today that she had done something dumb. I told her that I recently added up all my dumb moments and they added up to 27 years.

19

Sorting through a box of books at an auction I found one of mine entitled *I Hope Your Penis Shrivels Up*. It was the only book of mine (apart from my first, *The Medicine Men*, which the paper serialised) which *The Guardian* loved. I printed the book in both blue and pink covers. And it was a joy when I heard one of ladies working at Publishing House calling to another 'Do you know where all the pink penises are?' and the other reply 'No but I've got a dozen blue penises right here'. The book, incidentally, contains one of my favourite lines: 'Virginity is Like a Balloon (One Prick and It's Gone)'.

If you don't buy a TV licence in the UK you will be subjected to a seemingly endless barrage of junk mail letters threatening all sorts of things and demanding money with menaces. The letters come signed by an Enforcement Manager. Even if you don't want or need a television licence the letters will keep coming. If you want to stop the threats then you have to contact the TV licensing bullies and ask them to stop. The letter tells the recipient that the BBC's thuggish partners can apply to a court for a search warrant, that they can interview the Legal Occupier under caution and all sorts of all other goodies.

What they forget to mention is that if their official turns up, the householder is perfectly entitled to ignore him and, if he or she is mad enough to open the door to a stranger, to refuse to let him in to see if they are watching television.

The bit that really irks me is the bit that says that if you tell them you don't need a licence 'we may confirm this with a visit'.

Why the hell would I want a TV licence?

There is nothing on the television that I want to watch and nothing on the radio that I care to listen to. We have huge libraries of books, CDs and DVDs and as far as I am aware we don't yet need a licence to read, listen or watch any of those.

I find it all rather odd.

People who don't have a car licence don't get letters demanding that they explain why they don't have one.

People who don't have a passport or a driving licence aren't sent 'Official Warnings' in red ink. And they don't have to write to the authorities to tell them that they don't want to buy either of these documents.

So, why do the TV licensing thugs think they are entitled to send out their horrid letters?

It is, it seems to me, harassment. The letters are relentless, a huge waste of energy and money and, it seems to me, can still be described as threatening (although they have been told to tone the threats down a tad in recent years there seems to me no doubt that many recipients would feel intimidated.) And I rather thought that harassment is illegal.

Their default position is that everyone is lying. This is rich since it comes on behalf of an organisation which constantly distorts the truth.

If you ignore them they eventually send letters which have the words ‘Official notice: investigation opened’ printed in a way that it can be read through a little cellophane window by anyone who sees the envelope. The message is no different to many other messages which have been sent, and it seems to me to be a clear attempt to intimidate homeowners.

A chum who doesn’t have a licence insists that giving money to the TV licensing people is a downright unpatriotic thing to do. He claims that he believes that the BBC is in breach of its charter. The BBC charter says that the organisation must be politically impartial. It is clearly not impartial, in that it is strongly biased in favour of the European Union and therefore it has surely lost the right to demand that citizens pay it a fee.

The BBC uses the word ‘European’ as though it means a member or supporter of the EU. BBC staff talk about our ‘leaving Europe’. The fact is, of course, that Brexiteers are Europeans just as much as the rancid Remainers.

Incidentally, I find it odd that the BBC referred to viewers as ‘customers’.

HMRC does the same thing and that is even sillier. I think there has to be an element of voluntary action before someone can be called a ‘customer’. When people have no choice but to pay the licence fee then those people are victims not customers.

It seems to me that the BBC is effectively running a huge protection racket: pay us a big fee every year or we will harass you, fine you and possibly even send you to prison.

There is no sensible argument in favour of the BBC licence fee.

Why should taxpayers be required to pay for a licence to watch the BBC’s constant outpouring of repeats and bigoted pro EU bleatings? Why should honest patriots pay to receive programmes made by an organisation which is treacherous, sexist, ageist and racist and which confesses that it has a pro EU bias? Why should those who have two homes be expected to pay two licence fees – though they can only be in one place at a time and therefore only able to watch one television at a time? Why should elderly citizens struggling to live on the world’s meanest old aged pension be expected to give the BBC £150 a year so that they can pay individuals such as Gary Lineker several million pounds a year?

As things stand, if I live another three years I will be entitled to watch TV without a licence. Yippee. That’s what is called an incentive. But, I am prepared to bet that by the time I get to the age of 75 the BBC will have withdrawn the concession for those over 75.

The bottom line is that Joseph Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda in the Third Reich, would have been proud of the BBC.

The BBC recruits pretty well exclusively from the readers of *The Guardian* the house journal of self-righteous, lefty liberal heads in the sand luvvies. School teachers, media people and social workers all also buy *The Guardian* because that’s where they’ll find all the suitable jobs.

20

Flicking through *Boat International* (which I buy occasionally for a laugh at the absurdities of the uber rich such as Philip Green who are as tasteless and tacky as it is possible to imagine) I found an article by Eddie Jordan, the man who made himself so much money from his Formula 1 team that he now drives around the world in a huge yacht. At the bottom of the article are the words ‘Eddie Jordan’s fee for this column has been donated to charity’. Why would he want to put that? The words ‘sanctimonious prat’ burst into my mind and won’t go away.

21

‘Oh, I’m going to write a book when I’ve got a minute spare,’ said an acquaintance when she heard what I do for a living.

People don’t expect to be able to play Hamlet, build a cathedral, design a racing car, fly a plane, run a mile in under four minutes or remove a gall bladder without training and experience.

But they do always assume they can write a book.

‘I cannot make shoes like a shoemaker,’ said the Duke of Wellington.

Or as Gertrude Stein might have said: ‘A book is a book is a book is a book is a book is a bloody long collection of words.’

22

The over 50s are almost totally opposed to the EU because they remember what life in England was like before we were misled into the European Union. The over 50s know how life was, how much it has deteriorated, and why.

23

Young male millennials are very narcissistic and very, very strange. They avoid drinking, smoking and eating exciting food. They spend their evenings in beauty parlours and gyms and they spend more on cosmetic surgery than women. And in order to stay fit and healthy, they live on a strange new form of gruel which is made from oats, peas, flax and rice. Apparently they mix it with water and consume it at their desks while checking on their Twitter feeds and counting their Facebook followers. Way to go, boys!

24

Rabbits definitely have toilet areas. On our lawns there are two areas in particular which are especially rich in pellets while the rest of the grass is almost free of droppings. They sometimes dig a deep hole and then use that as a purpose built latrine. I checked out in R.M.Lockley's seminal book *The Private Life of the Rabbit* and he doesn't mention this. But it's definitely true of our rabbits (or, rather, the rabbits who share our garden). Who would have thought it? I always simply assumed that rabbits pooped wherever and whenever seemed appropriate. But they don't. How have I got to this age without knowing this?

FIFA, possibly the most corrupt organisation in sport, announced that it was going to investigate Three Lions supporters because they had sung a pro England song. The lyrics which have aroused FIFA are: 'Keep St George in my heart I pray. Keep St George in my heart. Keep me English. Keep me English till my dying day. No surrender, No surrender. No surrender to the IRA. No surrender.' For the life of me I cannot see why that can possibly be offensive or racist.

25

Around 96% of Britons want the House of Lords to be abolished. (The other 4% are presumably in it or hoping to get in it.) The place used to be full of eccentric old buffers. It is now full of Prescotts, Blunketts, Mandelsons and corrupt bastards who are there for the money.

26

No one abhors ivory hunting more than I do. But I am appalled by the Government's plans to extend a ban on ivory products to cover almost all ivory products regardless of age. So, for example, beautifully carved chess sets which are hundreds of years old and which are works of art must be destroyed. This is I'm afraid a typically millennial act of vengeance. It does nothing whatsoever to protect tusked animals and it does nothing to prevent illegal poaching of animals.

The other day I realised I still hadn't had any reply about our second key for the Jeep. The key-makers in Italy were apparently away for the summer. I emailed HR Owen several times but been ignored. Not really what you expect from a high end car company.

Eventually, I received a message telling me that the Italians have sent a blank key which is useless and purely ornamental, and before it will do anything useful both it and the car will have to be taken to a Jeep garage miles away so that it can be homogenised or pasteurised or whatever they do to these things.

I rang the garage and I am afraid I screamed at them. I was told that I now have to drive to Exeter and hang around for two hours in order to get the new key sorted out. In the sort of fury that would have burst any aneurysms I might have had, I told the garage that they could come and fetch the car back and bring me a cheque for what I paid for it. The bloke at the garage said that I was being unfair and that lots of people drive around with cars which only have one key. He did not mention the fact that a car with only key is unsaleable. (We Buy Any Car, for example, won't buy cars which don't have two keys and I don't blame them). Nor did he seem perturbed by the fact that he had promised to fix up a second key.

In the end he promised to send a driver from Cheltenham to Devon with the key that has come from Italy, to collect the Jeep, drive it to a Jeep garage an hour away, hang around for hours while the new key is switched on, drive it back to us and then return to Cheltenham.

What a shambles.
(I did contact one or two companies which produce spare keys. None of them can make a key for a Grand Cherokee SRT. One of them told me the problem is that the key contains a microprocessor, which can only be 'switched on' by an authorised dealer.)

27

During the First World War, J.M.Barrie, George Bernard Shaw, H.G.Wells, Arnold Bennett and Thomas Hardy used to go up onto Barrie's roof and watch London being bombarded. At the end of the night, the roof would be littered with shrapnel. Early English 20th century literature could have easily been destroyed in a single night.

28

According to a survey conducted by *Which?* magazine, Vodafone has been rated the worst mobile phone provider for the seventh year running. What a surprise.

A man who gave speed cameras the finger was investigated by the police. The man was then jailed for eight months for having fitted a laser-jammer to his car. If laser jammers are illegal then I can understand the punishment. But how did they know that he gave the finger to the camera? Why were there pictures of him doing so? Was he really investigated because he gave the finger to a speed camera? Does that matter? Are we now not allowed to make rude signs to police property? Can we be arrested for making rude signs to signs? The world gets stranger every day. Nietzsche once said that those who are fighting the monsters of society should be careful they do not become monsters.

Our Devon boiler needs its annual service. I hate having workmen here and I particularly hate having workmen from the boiler company. They never do the job properly the first time they arrive and they invariably make problems when there were none. I am still irked by the fact that the morons who put the boiler in (and spent months doing it) swept all their debris (together with half a hundred weight of gravel) into our drains (because it was easier than picking it up). It was their debris which blocked our drains and caused chaos just before Christmas. I bought a set of drain rods and half cleared the blockage but still had to call out the professionals.

The bloke who came to do the servicing was four and a half hours late. Naturally, he did not apologise. There was a half-hearted muttering of emergencies – which seems a nonsense since he was a service specialist. He spent an hour or so doing stuff and then left saying that someone else will have to come another day to finish off. He says that our system needs more gunk to clean out our Edwardian pipes and radiators and someone has to go on the boiler room roof to cut back some overhanging vegetation. This is interesting because a month ago a heating engineer from the same company came and insisted that there was no need for more gunk.

We have a commercial boiler which looks large enough to power the Queen Mary and so we probably need to stick with these people – otherwise I would dump them and try to find a company where the engineers can agree on something.

29

Antoinette has been trying to order antibiotics online. The company she found demanded to be sent copies of her passport and driving licence via the internet. She doesn't have either but wouldn't send them even if she had. The company won't send the pills without the passport or driving licence copies so presumably those who don't travel abroad or drive must simply survive without antibiotics or die. The company also added that our address does not exist. Antoinette replied that this seemed odd to her since the house has been here since 1902 and she was standing in the kitchen while exchanging emails. Still, she said, if their software says the house does not exist then it obviously doesn't exist.

Most of the time the boats in the local harbour stay there.

Now I know why.

It was beautiful and sunny today and there were about 40 boats in the bay. They looked very pretty. Unfortunately for them there was no breeze at all and the boats all stayed in one place. They were pushed together by the tide and ended up spending an hour or two looking like cars crammed into an overcrowded car park. It can't have been much fun. I, on the other hand, had great fun sitting on our clifftop bench watching them

We buy our electricity and gas from a company called E.On (I have no idea why any company would call itself by such a stupid name but that's their problem not mine).

Our current tariff deal is due to expire and if I don't fix up a new one they will put us on their Theft Tariff which entitles them to charge pretty well what they like all the way until the point when they have emptied our bank account, at which point they will doubtless send people round to break my legs.

Knowing that trying to speak to anyone on the telephone would be a nightmare (I suspect that these companies make telephoning difficult to force us into using their damned websites) I tried to sign up to a new tariff online but the computer wouldn't accept my details. (These were the same details which I gave to a person later on – and which were immediately accepted. There is clearly something wrong with the E.On website.)

The immediate task was to find a telephone number for them.

The first number I found and rang turned out to be the number devoted to taking money from people with prepaid meters. But, after waiting for half an hour to speak to that operator, I was put through to another operator who would, allegedly, be able to deal with my query. And then, of course, came the 'press one, press six hundred and forty three' nonsense. At this point I had to put the phone down and start the whole process again while I dug out a phone which has numbers you press instead of the phone I was using which has one of those old fashioned dials and which would probably be more at home dialling Whitehall 1212.

When I found one of the new-fangled telephones with the buttons to press instead of a dial, and got through to where I had been before, I pressed a few buttons which seemed appropriate and a pre-recorded voice said 'What is your date of birth?'

Feeling rather irritated by this time, and not seeing why I should give such private and very secret information to a computer, I replied using a time honoured two word phrase which ends with a word which I can't use here because it can be used as a preposition though in this instance I am using it as an adverb and if I admit that I ended a sentence with the word 'off' my Microsoft word software will probably melt.

'I understand you wish to speak to a member of our customer service team', came the reply from the computer, as quick as a flash, so quickly indeed that the reply has presumably been programmed in as a computerised witticism.

I then got some dreary music and another long wait because, as is well known, these big utility companies only have two people for every ten million customers. Eventually an Irish bloke with an accent you could cut with a knife, and which I couldn't understand, appeared on the line. I began to suspect that E.On must be using a phone answering service somewhere in the heart of Dublin.

I gave the Irishman our account number (which I had retrieved from a bit of paper I dug out of an old box of accounts). I had already keyed the number in once, as instructed, in order to save time but it never does save time because they always ask for it anyway. He told me he couldn't do anything about putting us onto a new tariff unless I gave him up to date meter readings because no one had read our meters for ages and that was clearly my fault.

Since it was pouring down with rain and our gas meter is, for reasons which I find difficult to explain, attached to the side of a wall about fifty yards up the lane, I had to find a coat and a hat and some boots. And then I had to come back to the house to find the funny little special yellow key which I had forgotten to take with me and which they gave us to open the gas meter though why they pretend it's a special key I really don't know because you can buy the darned things off eBay for ninepence a dozen. I opened the box, read the meter and wrote down the details. I then found the electricity meter, which is in the house, and wrote down those numbers.

I then gave all the details to the Irish chap. He then disappeared. He may have gone on holiday for all I know. I waited patiently.

When he came back he asked me if I would like to ring back in 24 hours.

I said I wouldn't really.

He said that he had all the necessary figures but that it would take 24 hours for their system to be updated. I asked if they had thought of investing in a computer so that such complicated procedures could be completed pretty well instantly. He said they did have a computer but that it took 24 hours to deal with anything as complicated as putting in details of a meter reading.

So, having wasted an hour of my life, I put down the telephone, and rang our bank to cancel the direct debit payment to E.On.

The pre-recorded voice belonging to the bank warned me that even though I had cancelled the direct debit, E.On could bring it back to life again if it wanted to since they are, presumably, just as entitled to my money as I am and also, presumably, because they are bigger, more powerful and more foreign than I am. The bank also told me that I had to tell E.On what I had done.

I then rang E.On to tell them what the bank had told me to tell them (this took another twenty minutes since E.On doesn't hire enough staff) and another Irishman asked me if he could call me 'Vernon'. I told him that it would be fine if he called me Dr Coleman so that's what he did.

(As an aside doctors and nurses and all other staff in hospitals and GP surgeries, and all administrative staff, should always ask patients how they want to be addressed – by their Christian name or their surname and their title. Not to do this is extremely unprofessional. Any doctor, nurse or receptionist who automatically calls patients by their first name should be struck off whatever professional register they're on. It is, of course, usually older patients who suffer most from this ill-mannered practice. I recommend that anyone who doesn't like being addressed by their first name should call the offender 'love' or 'ducky'.)

The second Irishman said they would continue to try to take money from our account unless the bank stopped them from doing so. So it seems that the only effective way to stop the direct debit is to close the bank account or make sure it is overdrawn.

Brilliant.

Life gets better by the minute. I had wasted 90 minutes of my life on this and was now in more of a mess than I'd been when I started. The day to day crap burns up life hour by hour. Do big companies waste our lives on purpose or just because they don't care?

I realised belatedly that E.On is French. And, as we all know, the French really couldn't organise a piss up in a vineyard.

E.On then sent me an email to let me know that they will cancel my direct debit in two weeks' time.

I thought it odd that their website didn't recognise me but they could still send me emails. And I wondered why they were keeping the direct debit alive for another fortnight?

E.on also sent me an email asking me to rate the service they provided yesterday. I gave them nought out of whatever but afterwards realised that E.On will not take this blame upon itself but will doubtless blame, and probably fire, the poor Irish sod to whom I spoke and who probably needs his meagre wages to buy potatoes for a family of 27. I tried to recall my review but was told that I could not. I now feel terribly guilty about the 27 people who will starve to death because of my vindictive action.

One good thing came out of all this nonsense with E.On.

While sitting on my office chair, waiting for a response from the Irish fellow who had gone on holiday, I discovered that I can move myself around by moving my arms as though I were swimming. (It is, of course, one of those typist's chairs that swivels.)

By pulling at the air as though I were in the water I can move myself both to the left and then to the right. I think I have hit upon a new exercise programme. I intend to call it 'dry swimming'. I'll make a little video and put it on YouTube. 'Just sit on your office chair and for three five minute periods during the day do my simple dry swimming exercises. This is perfect, non-weight-bearing aerobic exercise which will exercise your heart, your lungs and your upper body. Dry swimming will help your body combat chest disorders, muscle weakness, backache and many other disorders. To master Dry Swimming I suggest that you send for my full 90 explanatory video and book. And special rotating chairs specially designed for Dry Swimmers are available at a mere £599.'

It is often forgotten, but should not be, that the majority of the servicemen who fought Germany and its allies in two world wars were amateurs. So, for example, in the Second World War, Spitfires and Lancaster Bombers were flown not by professional airmen but by clerks, students, salesmen, fishmongers and lathe operators. These brave men had been trained in months, or even weeks, to do jobs that would, in peacetime, have required years of special training. I suspect that Remainers, in thrall to Hitler's legacy, simply don't know this or don't care.

In a café today I heard a radio announcer who was Scottish and quite incomprehensible. When I used to watch television I often felt that many of the numerous Scottish presenters needed subtitles. But how do you put subtitles on the radio?

31

There is now pretty clear evidence that digital adverts do not work. I must say I have given up on them because I have never been able to make them pay their way – and I had long experience of writing and placing successful print ads. It appears that digital companies overcharge and the response rates are often nowhere near as good as is claimed.

Actually, of course, most digital advertising is just plain stupid. A couple of years I bought a new mattress and a new lavatory. For months and months afterwards, I was bombarded with advertisements for mattresses and lavatories. This was stupid upside down back to front advertising. I was actually the last person in the world who was likely to buy either of these things since I had just bought them.

A badger made a huge hole at the top of a set of stone steps at the side of our Devon lawn. It’s a very strange place for a badger to build an entrance to a sett. Antoinette thinks he was digging to get at a bees’ nest and she was, as usual, spot on in her diagnosis. There were a few bees flying around and the badger who made the hole was clearly looking for honey. Since the badger had abandoned his hole I tried to fill it in. This was a big mistake. Within seconds the area was full of bees. They all seemed very confused but rather upset. I tried to tell them they should blame the badger but you know what bees can be like when they’re upset.

September

1

Already, a large area of wild grass underneath the beech trees is carpeted with wild cyclamen. In my eyes not even crocii or violets can match the wonderful delicacy of cyclamen growing in the grass.

I was clearing away some nettles by our front gate when four millennials appeared. They were walking along the coast path and were arguing about which way they should go. They couldn't agree. In the end, two went the right way and two went the wrong way. I was tempted to tell them which way they needed to go but they all studiously ignored me. They were young, super clever millennials. If they saw me at all they saw a scruffy, old bloke cleaning up some weeds. The confidence of ignorance and the confidence of youth have become one and the same.

When there were a sunny couple of weeks in Europe, the climate change freaks abandoned their threat of global cooling and went back to calling it global warming. Sensible folk will prefer to call it simply 'weather'.

The truth is that there have been unusual weather events since the beginning of records. For example, back in 1709 Europe froze for several months. It was so cold that people skated on the canals in Venice. Church bells shattered when they were rung. It was possible to ride across the Baltic Sea on horseback. In England, the summers of 1911 and 1976 were far hotter, and for longer, than the summer of 2018 – currently behind held up as an example of global warming.

In the UK, the Met Office in particular seems to me to be suspiciously obsessed with global warming. Maybe they're hunting for brownie points from the politicians. They are constantly announcing, with considerable fanfare, that the hottest years on record have all occurred since records began.

The Climate Change nonsense and the AIDS nonsense really are very similar. In both cases the facts have been ignored by ignoramuses who do not realise that science is, or should be, about facts and that facts demand scientific integrity and accuracy. And in both cases the promoters of the myth have a good deal to gain.

Every unusual weather event is blamed on climate change. The utterly absurd extrapolations, exhortations, demands and instructions from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (the IPCC) would be laughable if they were not taken so seriously by so many otherwise sane seeming individuals. *The Guardian* has claimed that record breaking heat we have endured this summer is forcing people to wake up to the fact that 'something abnormal' is happening to the global climate. What wonderful bollocks. This is not the hottest year on record. It's a reasonable summer. That's all. The IPCC has been making hysterical predictions for years and sensible folk now take as much notice of their 'last chance to save the planet' scare stories as they did of the placards which used to warn us that 'The End is Nigh'.

Back in 2007, the WWF said we had five years to save the world. In 2011, the International Energy Agency said we had five years. In 2017, the United Nations said we had three years and this year the IPCC said we had 12 years.

The global warming/global chilling/climate change myth is heavily promoted because thousands of people have a vested interest in its success. Anyone who questions the theory is likely to be ostracised.

Remember Lenin: look for who stands to gain.

So, who benefits?

Well, for starters, there are some pretty huge industries involved in persuading us to accept solar energy, windmills and electric cars.

All these, we are assured, will save the planet.

However, the unfortunate fact is that all these require vast amounts of energy from traditional sources (such as oil and coal).

Solar energy and windmills are negative producers of energy. (They require more energy to make and maintain than they ever produce). Electric cars require electricity produced by coal or diesel and electric car manufacturers are grotesquely irresponsible; they are selling a massive fraud.

And there are a good many organisations and individuals who are now making very good money out of the climate change nonsense. They are helping themselves to vast quantities of pounds of public money.

AIDS was never going to kill us all (though opposing those who said it was didn't do my broadcasting career a great deal of good). And 'climate change' is not man made and it is not going to destroy the planet. But I have a suspicion that the utterly daft regulations, policies and taxes being introduced as a result of powerful lobbying by the climate change freaks may well destroy mankind.

Oh, and why have none of the enthusiasts who promote the concept of climate change so vigorously and profitably not mentioned the fact that our climate will change as Britain becomes ever more crowded – thanks to absurd immigration policies foisted on us by the eurocrats?

It is well known that heavily populated areas of the country are warmer than relatively unpopulated areas and so it seems to me pretty obvious that as the nation's population rapidly increases so the temperature will also increase (and the levels of air pollution).

If the climate change 'experts' really believe what they say they should be campaigning vigorously against immigration.

The climate change morons really do remind me of that chap who used to wander up and down Oxford Street carrying a board saying 'The End is Nigh'.

The difference is that whereas the climate change plonkers broadcast nightly on the State run broadcasting channels, the police took away the bloke and his sign because his message was said to be Christian and therefore politically incorrect and unacceptable.

Of course, many people don't believe the forecasts about future weather for the very good reason that the forecasters don't seem able to get tomorrow's weather right – and so it is rather difficult to believe that they know what the weather is going to be like in 100 years' time.

A few years ago, the bookshelves were groaning under the weight of books about AIDS. Today the same shelves groan under the weight of learned rubbish about climate change. As one stupid industry dies so another comes to life.

The fact is that the climate change nonsense is just another money making scam which seems to me to be run by a bunch of professional scaremongers and unscrupulous pseudoscientists, many of whom prefer irresponsible speculation to facts. It is a delight to me that virtually no one is taken in by the nonsense. Sensible people no longer trust anything 'they' say because 'they' lie about everything – partly to keep us all terrified, and therefore compliant, and partly for specific political or commercial purposes.

There is still no reliable scientific evidence to support the persistently hysterical judgements and instructions proffered by important and allegedly independent scientific bodies such as the Bank of England and the BBC.

It's interesting to note, incidentally, that the Bank of England is now presumably staffed exclusively with climatologists. They have a lot to say about our weather but seem utterly useless at forecasting economic trends or saying anything sensible about the economy.

2

I sat out in the garden working this afternoon. A rabbit munched at the grass just a few feet away from me, a squirrel ran across beside me, a robin perched singing on a stick resting near the cliff edge and a late peacock butterfly landed on the page of the notebook in which I was working. A couple of wasps nibbled away at the bench on which I was sitting. They must be collecting wood pulp to mend an existing nest because it was far too late in the season for them to building a new one. Two peacock butterflies sat on the path in front of me. They had their wings closed and they were lined up neatly, line astern, as though they were queuing for something. A thrush brought a snail over to the bird bath and broke the snail on the stone edge of the bath. I notice that the ivy I planted to grow up a pillar is still alive but has hardly moved. It's strange but ivy will grow easily everywhere that it wants to grow but it will rarely, if ever, grow where you plant it. It must surely be the most independent plant God ever made. (I spend much of my life removing it from trees. If it is not removed, ivy can reduce the power and growth of a tree by at least a quarter. And too much ivy can kill a tree.) At least we don't get many horseflies here. The only water available for them is the couple of pints in the bird bath and however billion gallons there are in the English Channel. In the Cotswolds we have a stream and a pond and a thousand horseflies. If you go out into the garden in the summer, the little buggers will find somewhere to bite. Even on boiling hot days I use to cut the lawn wearing an anorak with the hood up and waterproof trousers and I would still get bitten on the face. People walking past stood and pointed and laughed for a moment or two but they soon moved on when the biting started.

Wild and hysterical feminists are again complaining that an actress in a film was paid less than an actor. This is nonsense. Are they seriously suggesting that if Freda Bigfoot acted in a film starring Marlon Brando then Ms Bigfoot should be paid as much as Mr Brando, and given the same billing on the posters? Or are they suggesting that Mr Bill Littletoe should be given the same fee and billing as Meryl Streep?

I discovered today that two of our mobile phones are dead because they haven't been used sufficiently. The mobile phone company has confiscated our numbers and stolen our money.

I found this wonderful entry in a collection of J.B.Morton's 'Beachcomber' writings in *Cram Me With Eels*:

'GOAN DBOI LY OU RHE ADI NUBAC KETOF TAR: This inscription, in an unknown language, has been found on a Palaeolithic stone discovered at Rickmansworth. Archaeologists are trying to decipher it.'

Of course, to decipher it you simply have to mess around with the spacings.

J.B.Morton, who was Beachcomber in the *Daily Express* and who had the impressive real name of John Cameron Andrieu Bingham Michael Morton, was a wonder. Like other humourists such as Jerome K. Jerome, Morton really wanted to be remembered for his more serious books. Among these was *Pyrenean*, a quasi- travel book about a trip through the Pyrenees, written in 1938. Morton was a friend of Hilaire Belloc and wanted to write a travel book in Belloc's style. (Belloc's *Path to Rome* has always been one of my favourite travel books.)

When told that he will see changes on his journey, Morton's alter ego replies: 'No changes of the kind you mean are for the better today. When an old house is pulled down, an uglier one replaces it, and when an old custom dies out, there is nothing to fill its place. He told me that I talked like an old man and that anyhow the world must go on improving. I said, 'You beg the question. New things are not necessarily improvements, and there is no law of nature by which things are bound to go on getting better and better.' It was like arguing with the people who write leading articles about 'progress' , and I recognised, with melancholy, the wireless mind that will take no account of anything but novelty. Steel furniture must be better than wooden furniture, because it is replacing it. But glass furniture is better still, because it is already ousting steel furniture. And so on.'

Oh, how I agree with him.

I am weary of endless, searing change for change's sake. We are always assured that changes are being made for our benefit but that is almost invariably a lie. Changes are made for the sake of the people making them. If things can't stay the same (my preferred option) then I would like to see things improve. But just about every piece of change is a step backwards. Every time I receive an email or a letter from an organisation to which I give money, I know damned well that the consequence will be to cost me money or to make my life more difficult or both. Banks and utility companies bombard us with statements of intent which are presented as helpful but which are nothing of the sort.

I am well aware that in 'The Leopard' Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa wrote that 'sometimes things must change to stay the same'.

And occasionally that is true.

But only occasionally.

A couple of weeks ago, a friend of Antoinette's seemed rather glum. She explained that she had guests coming from South Africa and that they always stayed for weeks at a time. 'It's impossible to get rid of them,' she said. 'We met them on a cruise and they come and stay with us once every two years. We don't have much in common with them and I think they just use our house as a very cheap hotel. They bring a bottle of South African wine when they arrive but never offer to pay towards their keep.'

I told Antoinette to suggest to her friend that she and her family should scratch their arms and legs a good deal when the unwanted visitors arrived. 'Explain that you all have scabies and that the doctor says it is very infectious.'

Today, the friend rang Antoinette to let her know that the South African visitors had arrived and had left without unpacking.

I've been reading *The Edwardians* by Vita Sackville-West (first published by Virginia and Leonard Woolf's Hogarth Press). I'd never read it before but it's a wonderfully evocative memorial to a long-forgotten time. The funny thing is that some of the young Edwardians (the rich ones) seemed unaware of any obligations. They thought of themselves as naturally superior and they had apparently unlimited expectations. They were innately selfish and exclusively hedonistic in the way they lived their lives. I was reminded, inevitably, of the millennials.

3

Here are some extracts from the Millennial Book of Rights and Entitlements.

It is a millennial's right to:

Be on television at least once every six months.

To have at least 50,000 followers on at least two versions of social media.

To have a job which is entirely enjoyable, never frustrating and never demanding and which requires the millennial's presence only when he wishes to be there, and is available and not constrained by lifestyle responsibilities.

To have enough money to do whatever he or she wants to do.

4

Dixons Carphone has warned that a 2017 data breach which it reported had affected a mere 1.2 million customers had actually involved 10 million customers.

An easy mistake to make, I would imagine – especially if, like most large companies, you don't give a damn about your customers' privacy and security.

Some breaches of customer security now involve hundreds of millions of people so this one is, I suppose, relatively insignificant. Except, of course, for the ten million individuals whose privacy has been invaded.

We have seen relatively few rabbits for the last couple of months. We are wondering if there could be a local outbreak of myxomatosis – the evil, cruel rabbit killing disease. Myxomatosis is spread by insect bites and since we live on the south coast, Antoinette suspects that mosquitoes carrying the disease have been blown over from France. I think she's right. France is only a few miles away and we have had strong southerly winds this summer.

5

Antoinette says she will know that I am showing the first signs of dementia when I suggest that we hold a dinner party.

But, today, for fun we tried to make up lists of favourite guests. It's an old game but always fun.

Antoinette was thinking of good guests and suggested that Jesus would be an excellent guest because you wouldn't have to order much food or wine. 'Actually, you wouldn't need to order any wine,' she said. 'Just plenty of water.'

My dinner party guests were a little different. Here they are: Hitler, Stalin, Ganghis Khan, Judas, Attila the Hun, Jack the Ripper and my mother-in-law. I did worry, however, that if my mother-in-law came the others probably wouldn't turn up.

To cook the food, I'd invite Keith Floyd, who was without a doubt the only television chef worth watching. Of course I'd have to persuade him to cook something vegetarian and that might prove to be a challenge.

6

'Your gums need work,' said a 38-year-old dentist to a 67-year-old man in good health. 'But at your age there's not much point. It really doesn't matter much, does it?'

That's ageism – pure and simple.

Imagine the fuss if the dentist had used a patient's sex or religion as a reason not to provide needed treatment.

'You're female so there's not much point.'

'You're Jewish so there's not much point.'

7

The EU is now controlling our educational curriculum and forcing teachers to tell students in England that they should be ashamed of their heritage. The aim, of course, is to ensure that future generations will not want to defend England when it is broken up into nine regions. The EU is very happy to encourage patriotism in Wales and Scotland since those two areas are already EU regions and if they push for independence that will help the EU break up the United Kingdom.

Naturally, teachers are also encouraged to promote the European Union. This isn't education – its indoctrination.

Still, the Nazis were always very good at indoctrination, weren't they?

8

Whenever I go into a card shop I am astonished to see how many tawdry gifts there are available for schoolchildren to give to their teachers. There are beginning of term gifts for teacher, end of term gifts for teacher, Christmas gifts for teacher and so on and on. The teachers apparently give their students little stickers of praise if they know what day of the week it is and in return the students give their teachers those creep cards and tacky gifts. What do teachers do with all those hideous, plastic mugs and decorations?

The Last Night of the Proms was wrecked (as is now usual) by Nazis and Traitors waving wretched EU flags in a spiteful attempt to wreck a great English tradition. It was like watching a mass of Everton fans filling up the stands for a Liverpool home game. Why on earth were they there? Why, other than for spite, would anyone wave EU flags during Rule Britannia and Land of Hope and Glory? There were apparently 20,000 EU flags in the Royal Albert Hall and if the loathsome BBC didn't organise this act of treachery they certainly condoned it. There was talk by some Remainers that they were supporting the EU because if we leave the Union then there will be no more orchestras. This is such blatant nonsense that no one with more than one functioning neurone could possibly believe it. Leaving the EU will make absolutely no difference to orchestras and will no more prevent us from travelling than it will prevent us from buying French cheese or German motor cars. (Well, I won't be buying them but they will be available whatever happens.) Some Remainers had the gall to claim that we should thank the EU for giving us music such as Rule Britannia and Land of Hope and Glory. I find it difficult to deal with such thoroughly stupid people. The only reason for spoiling the Proms was as an act of pure, mean-spirited spite. The Remainers hate Britain and everything British and they wanted to spoil a traditional British event. They succeeded. Why else would they go to such a patriotic event? No Remainer can possibly be a patriot – they are all traitors.

Another of our trees has died. Oddly enough it is a tree which impedes the views of the people who wanted us to cut our trees down. Because one of the branches is close to an overhead electricity cable, I emailed the power company to tell them about the tree problem, hoping that they would bring their cherry picker round.

Within minutes I received a reply from the power company responsible for trees and cables saying that they were sorry my electricity was cut off (which it isn't) and giving me a number to ring because it wasn't anything to do with them.

Eventually, I managed to find a tree surgeon prepared to come out. It seems that the guilty silver birch which is falling down is now being held up by a BT line and a branch of a neighbouring beech. The silver birch is in such a bad way that the roots are sticking out of the ground.

The tree surgeon agrees that the tree is about to fall down but says that his company can't do anything about the tree until Western Power have given their authorisation for the work to be done. The situation is complicated by the fact that although the tree is leaning on a BT line, the electricity wires are only a couple of feet away. Naturally, the man from the tree company said he had never come across anything like this before. What a surprise.

So the situation is this.

First, I can wait for Western Power to authorise the removal of the tree (probably tomorrow). They will do this at their expense.

Second, I can contact BT and wait for them to do something (probably next year judging by our sad experiences last year).

Third, I can commission the tree felling company to do the work now and pay them myself. It is, after all, our tree and so I feel responsible for its behaviour. I know this isn't the modern way but I'm no millennial.

I chose option three. It will cost more than £500.

An hour later a team of tree surgeons arrived, complete with a cherry picker and a battery of chainsaws, ropes and so on. They agreed that if we had waited for BT to arrange for the tree to be taken down (as was their responsibility as I understand it – though to be honest I don't really see why it should be) we would have waited months. And if we had waited for the electricity company to authorise the felling, the tree would have probably brought down the wires and taken out electricity for the area.

When the tree was down (bringing a fence with it) I told the surgeon that we had had repeated requests to remove the trees and that three trees which had been guilty of obscuring the view had all died suddenly. He explained precisely how it could have been done and agreed that it seemed very suspicious. One method is to ring the bark. A second is to bang in some copper nails (which is still believed to work). And the third is to chisel a hole in the trunk and pour in Roundup. At least I now know what to look for.

On the other hand the tree they've taken down today, a silver birch, has signs of spalting in the rounds – the blackness in the wood which denotes a fungal infection. So maybe it was a natural death after all.

The tree feller promised to return the next day to repair the fence. Wisely, I didn't believe him.

The dandelion flower is much loathed by gardeners who like their lawns green, striped and pristine. But Antoinette points out that in the spring the dandelion provides bees and other insects with their first pollen of the year. And in the autumn, when it returns to flower, it provides the final pollen of the year. For bees, the dandelion is the most useful flower in any garden. It's a huge pity that so many people try to kill it.

9

Successful investors have learned to regard the Bank of England as a liability (in every possible way) and a constant source of poor advice and rotten prognostications. Mrs Torridge, the Penmouth Pier Fortune Teller probably has a better track record than anyone at the Bank of England. Britain will save £90 billion in EU trade tariffs alone when we leave the EU. Despite the politically biased prognostications of the Bank of England, the Treasury and slavish, neo-fascist supporting newspapers such as the *Financial Times*, there seems no doubt that Britain will boom if and when we finally quit the evil conspiracy which is the EU.

The Bank of England has at last admitted that its policy of printing money has contributed to large pension deficits. This has had a very damaging effect on all employees with private and corporate pensions. Fortunately for them, Bank of England staff have generous and protected pensions paid for by the rest of us. And each summer the Bank of England staff enjoy a traditional party for which taxpayers stumps up a whopping £100,000. That's nice of us but a pity the hosts are never invited.

The Bank's predictions and 'forward guidance' on interest rate changes have been disastrous. And yet despite all this astonishing failure, the overpaid Governor of the Bank, the egregiously incompetent Carney, has been persuaded to hang around for another couple of years 'to provide stability'. At least investors can now be sure that the instability and incompetence will continue until after Brexit.

10

Why is it easy to stop junk mail through the post but nigh on impossible to stop Royal Mail from putting unstamped junk through our letter box? (We should, I suppose, be grateful. The amount of junk mail delivered in the UK is a tiny fraction of the amount pushed through French letter boxes.)

And when will Royal Mail realise that they are losing business because it is now cheaper to send parcels from other countries to an address within the UK than it is to send a parcel using Royal Mail? British businesses cannot compete with foreign businesses which have the advantage of cheap postage rates. And Britain's exports have slumped because postage costs are too high. It costs a small fortune to post a parcel from the UK to the US but costs far less to send a parcel from the US to the UK. The daft thing is, of course, that Royal Mail has to do the hard work of delivering these parcels sent to addresses within the UK but doesn't earn a penny for doing so.

11

Why do so many *Guardian* reading feminist lesbians still complain about comedian Benny Hill chasing after girls in their underwear? In none of his television programmes did Benny Hill ever chase the girls. They always chased him. That was the joke.

And why are the feminists who fought so hard for equality complaining so bitterly that women are now expected to retire at 65 – the same age as men.

12

We visited an art shop because Antoinette needed more oil paints. The millennial assistant in the shop insisted on correcting Antoinette when she asked for phthalo green. The millennial (or 'snowflake' as I think they prefer to be known) pronounced the word so that it came out as p-h-thalo. I didn't give a damn about her pronunciation but I thought it was funny that she insisted on correcting Antoinette. I wonder when someone will have the nerve to tell her.

A couple we know are very posh. They told us that they are moving into a new house.

'It has a two and a half car garage,' said the husband.

'Do they sell them by halves?' I asked.

'Sell what by halves?'

'Cars.'

They both looked very confused.

13

I visited *The Guardian* website by mistake and was astonished when a message came up begging for money. *The Guardian* has in the past criticised newspapers which charge for content. At one point the paper told their readers how to read material in *The Times* without paying the required subscription. *The Guardian* clearly doesn't want to charge for access so why are they begging for donations? It seems to me to be typical of the people at *The Guardian*: they are trying to be sanctimonious without anyone noticing that they are also being greedy. The result is that they are succeeding only in being hypocritical. I will never give money to *The Guardian* if for no other reason than that they gladly publish stolen information.

14

Seaside towns are being ruined because local councils won't allow the owners of boarding houses and small hotels to turn their properties into flats, or sell them for private accommodation. Council staff seem unaware that high property prices mean it is impossible to make a living running a small hotel and so elderly hoteliers are unable to sell. Traditional resorts such as Ilfracombe, Weston-super-Mare and Blackpool are now awful places because the hoteliers fill their properties with drug addicts, criminals and people on benefits. It is the only way that they can cover their ever increasing costs. And small seaside towns have fallen into the same trap. Councillors and planning officials believe that they will ruin their towns if they allow boarding houses to be turned into homes but the result will be that within a decade or so many more resorts will have followed the three mentioned above.

The nature of seaside towns is also being changed by the madness of the health and safety gestapo who have insisted that paddling pools and boating pools be filled in lest someone drown in them.

And things aren't made any better by the fact that developers everywhere are abandoning redevelopment projects because local councils are so greedy. I spoke to one councillor who insisted (quite seriously) that he was opposing a planned development because the company involved was likely to make a profit if the project went ahead.

15

It worries me that the number of royals living off the taxpayers seems to grow and grow. The royal family are on benefits and more of them should be working. The Queen and Philip have worked their socks off but most of the rest are lazy bastards and the majority (Andrew, Edward, Anne et al) would have earned a little more respect if they'd got jobs. The people of Britain are divided into three groups. One group believes the Royals can do no wrong. One group believes they can do no right. The third, and largest group, is happy to support the Queen and those in direct line to the throne but believes the rest of the family are mere hangers on who should get jobs and support themselves. Prince Harry is no longer likely to end up as King and so he too should find a job. There's something rather pitiful about a young man being denied or, more accurately, denying himself the joy of working for success.

I worry too about Royal Weddings.

I suspect that they have created unreachable aspirations and are partly responsible for the vast sums which ordinary couples spend on their nuptials. The cost of the average wedding is going up annually and is apparently now approaching £30,000. That's £30,000 after tax. So for a middle class earner it's £60,000. That's a considerable sum of money.

The whole wedding business has got out of control and the ostentatious nature of Royal Weddings just makes things worse. The amount young couples chose to spend on their weddings, instead of using the money to put down as a deposit on a home, rose dramatically after William and Kate's extravaganza.

Young couples who complain about not being able to afford to buy their own home don't seem to realise that if they had a cheaper wedding they would have £30,000 to put down as a deposit on a small house or apartment.

And if they gave up the expensive trips, the gym memberships and the lattes with cinnamon sprinkles they'd get their own house even faster. Amazingly, the average young millennial couple spend an average of £4,800 a year on holidays.

I also worry about the 'false friends' nonsense.

Prince Harry and his bride invited 600 of their closest chums to attend their wedding ceremony. It is no wonder that the rest of the country, most of whom feel hard done by because they don't have 600 close friends, spends much time collecting friends and followers on the internet.

Immediately after the wedding, Ms Merkel gave notice that she would be using her new position (and, presumably, our money) to campaign for feminism. This seems to me to be patronising, out of date and self-serving.

There is no little irony in this since she has a platform and a position as a direct result of her agreeing to marry a Prince and take the taxpayers money.

Her statement must have left many rather cold. We have a Queen and a female Prime Minister and there have been laws in place for years which ensure that we have more female doctors than male doctors (the result has been disastrous for patients but let us forget that for the moment). So, today, feminism is about as relevant and as necessary as trade unionism.

And I wonder if anyone else will point out that giving up your job to marry a bloke and getting a title, power and tons of money without working as a result of that marriage, doesn't appear in the feminism handbook.

And someone should point out to the royals that charity work means doing real practical work and not just having your name on some expensively embossed notepaper. Oh and someone should point out that in Britain there is no need for royals (or any other public figures) to wear headscarves when visiting Muslim centres. Muslims don't respect our culture so why the devil should we respect theirs? Christian women should not wear headscarves unless they are silk and have pictures of horses on them.

16

British shares are now better value than shares almost anywhere else in the world but this isn't because leaving the EU is bad for the British economy. It is, rather, because bankers and professional investment company managers (most of whom are Remainers) have deliberately pushed down the share prices of British companies. And currency traders have pushed down the value of the pound for the same reason. Politics, not economics, are the driving force behind the British economy. And so a great many British shares are now selling very close to their net asset value and are paying out excellent and well covered dividends. American shares (particularly technology shares) are absurdly expensive but personally, I think this is an excellent time to buy British.

17

It is still possible to make huge amounts of money by investing in mines. But these days the risks are considerably greater than they once were. The trouble is that so much can now go wrong. The obvious problems (running out of the stuff they're digging out of the ground, and being cheated by lying, thieving bosses) have now been overwhelmed by new problems (such as workers going on strike or governments taking over the mine, or taxing the profits into extinction). My conclusion is that investing in mines (whether large or small) is now not worth the candle. The same thing goes for most small oil companies. (On the other hand, I believe that big oil companies will prove to be cash cows for the next decade or two. Their share prices might founder, as politically correct fund managers are persuaded to dump their holdings, but dividends will remain high and well covered.)

In my view, the safest way to buy commodities other than oil is to buy an Exchange Traded Fund (ETF) which relates to the commodity concerned. It is possible to buy just about any commodity as an ETF (gold, wheat, sugar, coffee, oil, uranium, silver, platinum to name just a few). But it is crucial to remember that management costs will ensure that an investment in an ETF will eventually turn to dust if the underlying price does not rise.

18

It pisses me off that people whose earnings and pensions are immune to the vagaries of interest rates and inflation, are the people who decide what interest rates and inflation will be. For example, the bastards at the Bank of England have massive salaries and massive inflation proofed pensions (paid for by us) which are quite immune to the effects of the policies they have initiated.

19

According to *The Guardian*, employees spend most of their waking hours at work – and it is for this reason that they are entitled to have a voice in the control of the companies which employ them. This is frightening nonsense but it shows why *The Guardian* is such a dangerous propaganda sheet. Just look at the facts. A full week contains 168 hours. The average person sleeps for 56 of those. That leaves 112 waking hours. And half of that is 56 hours. So, according to *The Guardian*, most people who work spend more than 56 hours a week at work. If that is true then the vast majority of employers are breaking the laws created by EU bureaucrats which limit the working week to 40 hours at most.

20

The Labour Party wants to force companies to give their employees free shares and free dividends. This will, of course, wreck the stock market and destroy the pensions of all those who do not work for the Government or the Labour Party. The Labour Party claims that workers are entitled to these freebies because they now earn proportionately less than they have received for centuries. That is certainly true but stealing from pensioners won’t solve the problem fairly. Employees earn less for several reasons. First, productivity has been falling for years. Computers and the internet have destroyed productivity in Britain. Why? Simple. British workers spend half their day messing around on their smart phones. Second, regulations (mainly from the EU) are now more damaging than ever. Third, taxes are higher than ever. Fourth, all the extra costs (such as being forced to subsidise workers who become parents) have damaged profitability enormously.

The Labour Party seems to me to have been taken over by metro liberal *Guardian* readers (all with Government salaries) spiced with Muslims who appear to loathe England and the English. None of them have the faintest idea how capitalism works but all are happy to take full advantage of the benefits.

21

It is a fallacy that the only way to obtain a high return on your money is to take big risks. For a book called *Low Risk Stocks Outperform Within All Observable Markets of the World* authors Robert Hugen and Nardin Baker looked at 21 stock markets for the period from 1990 to 2011 and concluded that high risk stocks always produce lower returns than low risk stocks.

Research has also shown that for investors, the best results are obtained by keeping things simple and investing in developed world equities – having a mix of shares in large, medium and small companies. Having a hugely complicated portfolio will probably cost more (in time as well as money) but produce poorer results.

22

I took a new shirt out of its wrappings and unintentionally reminded myself that the best way to find the pins in a new shirt is to put it on.

We know a couple who are nudists. They spend most of their time naked but they are rather old-fashioned and always dress for dinner.

23

Modern politicians are controlled not by their strengths but by their weaknesses; they are institutionalised and entirely selfish.

And it is odd, is it not, that politicians always think highly of themselves when no one else does. The best examples of this are probably Nick Clegg and Vince Cable in the UK and Manu Macron in France. These three have egos so large that they could probably qualify as independent nations within their beloved EU.

24

The French are forever boasting about their language. Macron (their snotty, greedy, unbearable new President whom the French delight in referring to as Micron or Manu because they know he is a self-important twat who finds these nicknames offensive and disrespectful) wants the world to speak French (and forget about English). Here are my favourite French words.

Le weekend
Le software
Le hardware
Le self
Le snack
Le picnic
Le happy hour
Le gay
Le dealer
Le newsletter
Le standing ovation
Le happy hour
Le scanner
Le parking

Le drugstore

It is now probably possible to have a conversation with a frog person without having to use their silly language. Incidentally, I wonder why all the English words which the French have nicked have been designated as 'male'?

25

If, perchance, we ever succeed in leaving the EU what will happen to all the immigrants who have poured into Britain as a result of the EU's legislation? They cannot possibly stay in our overcrowded country. How on earth are we going to set about repatriating people who don't want to leave? (That, of course, is a problem that no one is prepared to think about – let alone talk about.)

26

It occurred to me today that everyone should live at least as long as Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones. If they don't then it's not fair.

27

Students are refusing to take holiday jobs because they feel that working might interfere with their 'life-work' balance. When I was at University I ran a night club called the Gallows. The club which featured disc jockeys and live bands was run as a charity. I was also a drama critic for the *Birmingham Post* and the *Times Educational Supplement*. I wrote columns for four magazines and ran an active stock broking account with the money I was earning as a writer. I enjoyed it all and learned a good deal.

28

It is apparently now illegal for a car driver to toot because he's angry. This is nonsense. Tooting is a civilised and sensible way to get rid of anger. Making it illegal will merely result in stress building up. More drivers will have heart attacks. Tooting is the motoring equivalent of a golfer throwing a club or a tennis player smashing a racquet – all three should be encouraged, let alone allowed.

29

A bridge in Italy has collapsed with tragic consequences. In Roman times the architect of a bridge stood beneath it when the scaffolding was removed. If the architect had got things wrong the bridge would fall on his head.

30

Millennials apparently have a new way to celebrate birthdays and other happy events. Instead of going to the pub or organising an orgy, they go to the gym and take part in a workout led by an instructor. And then they play jolly games such as Pass the Parcel. Instead of winning a daft prize, the 'winner' gets to do 100 chin ups. Then, after showers, they have a healthy meal together – perhaps a pizza with the base made of lettuce instead of dough. And then they all trot off home.

The poor little bastards all think they will live longer.

They probably won't.

But it will seem longer.

In a fit of remorse I tried to find the broken lamp I hurled into the nettles. But although I know whereabouts it landed, I can't see any sign of it. The nettles, dock and other flora are three foot high and I think the lamp has to stay where it is. Maybe rabbits dragged it into their burrow as a trophy. Maybe even now they are feeding it and trying to revive it.

I see that the BMA has belatedly realised that when doctors tell the authorities about information obtained about their patients, it creates fear and mistrust. I've been screaming about this for decades. The General Medical Council has for years insisted that doctors should cooperate with the police and that there should be no confidentiality between doctors and patients. The BMA (which is primarily a trades union which exists to get more money for doctors) has at last spoken out in defence of confidentiality. Oddly enough, however, the BMA is concerned about only one type of confidentiality – that relating to suspected terrorists. The BMA is quite happy for doctors to tell the police if they suspect a patient might not have paid his parking fines or bought a TV licence but they don't like doctors shopping Muhammad the terrorist. Unbelievable.

Researchers have found that people who see the same GP are healthier and live longer. This falls into the category of 'pretty damned obvious' and I wasn't surprised to see that the research was done by Exeter Medical School which has never impressed me. Next week: exciting research showing that people who keep breathing tend to live longer than people who stop. Predictably, a spokes-twit for the Royal College of General practitioners complained that 'intense resource and workforce pressures' were to blame for the fact that most people see a different doctor every time they visit their GP. That is such absolute, cringing bollocks. The real reasons why people don't see the same GP twice in a row are very simple. First, GPs now all work the same sort of hours as librarians and council staff. Most GP surgeries are open for 40 hours a week and shut for 128 hours a week. Second, a majority of women GPs work only two or three days a week so that they can earn oodles of money and pay very little tax.

I was delighted to read that two scientists, James Allison and Tasuku Honjo, have shared the Nobel Prize for medicine. They demonstrated that the body's immune system could be used to fight the spread of cancer. The Nobel committee described the therapy as a 'landmark discovery' that had 'revolutionised cancer treatment and fundamentally changed the way we view how cancer can be managed'.

Over 20 years ago, back in the mid-1990s, I launched an entirely free website (no ads and no subscription costs) to draw attention to the fact that in my view a healthy immune system could help prevent cancer developing. The website was not well received. 'Celeb doctor Vernon Coleman's latest web venture has been branded "scary, frightening and wrong" by the Cancer Research Campaign', claimed the *Daily Mirror*, a British newspaper. A spokesperson for the CRC said: 'The information is wrong. The whole thing is frightening.' The website was subsequently permanently destroyed by hackers. It is now clear that everything on the site was accurate.

Here is what I wrote about this in my book *How to Stop Your Doctor Killing You* which was published in 1996:

'My argument was that cancer develops because the body's immune system isn't working well and it is the breakdown of the body's immune system which leads to death. The fitter and stronger the immune system is the less likely a patient will be to develop cancer and the less likely he or she will be succumb to cancer if he or she develops it. The orthodox doctor, working under the guidelines of the cancer industry, views the symptoms of the cancer as the problem. In my view this is nonsense.'

'The official view is that if you attack the cancer with surgery, poison or radiotherapy the disease will be eradicated. No one seems interested in why the patient has developed cancer.'

'No one within the cancer industry is interested in building up the patient's general health or immune system. No one in the cancer industry seems to realise that the official forms of treatment attack and weaken the body (and the immune system) as much as they attack and weaken the cancer. The cancer industry (targeting profit rather than cure) prefers to turn every patient into a bald, hopeless, eczematous invalid rather than face this simple truth.'

It is now clear that I was right.

It would be nice if the *Daily Mirror* and the Cancer Research Campaign (now known as Cancer Research UK) were to apologise. It seems to me that their refusal even to consider my suggestion delayed progress by over two decades.

I wonder how many hundreds of thousands of people died because of the Cancer Research Campaign's refusal to accept the importance of the immune system in the development of cancer?

Why did it take the cancer industry more than 20 years to take seriously the importance of the immune system? If it was obvious to me why was it not obvious to all those highly paid researchers working for drug companies and cancer charities? The cancer industry wasted billions, and I suspect that millions of people died as a result of its closed mind determination to put drug company profits above all else.

October

1

We spotted a pair of green woodpeckers on the lawn outside the conservatory. They were pecking away at the grass, hunting for ants. It's the first time we've ever seen two green woodpeckers at the same time.

Today we took down all 21 of the You Tube videos I have made over the last 18 months. I felt embarrassed at the small number of views which the videos had attracted recently (the most successful had just over 8,500 views and the total number of views was only just over 21,000) and when I investigated to find out why I was told that the only way to gain more views was to pay for advertisements, promotion and fake viewings.

The odd thing is that the videos seemed to be going well and then suddenly, almost overnight, no one looked at them – and they couldn't be found. Since they couldn't be found, no one was watching them. Suddenly, it seemed that no one was interested in facts about vaccination, bad doctors or the EU. There didn't seem any point in leaving them where they were – looking rather sorry, lonely, unloved and pathetic. They seemed to have been pushed into a dark corner of the internet so that no one could find them.

Apparently, videos on Google's YouTube cannel only get to the top of the search engine if they are viewed by a lot of people (in other words if you are at the top of the search engine you stay there). Realising this, people who want to see their video at the top (so that they can sell advertising) use every trick they can to promote their video. And one popular and apparently universal trick is to pay for robots to view your video time and time again. Since I only made the videos as a public service (there were no ads and no promotions in them) I didn't feel like paying huge sums to promote them. Besides, I rather suspect, belatedly, that there is a limited market for an old, white bloke in a chair giving short factual dissertations straight to camera.

I'd have done better if I'd been accompanied by a dancing hamster or had put on a silly costume. I should have balanced on a unicycle with a ferret on my head and a duck in my arms.

And the bottom line is that I'd have reached more people if I'd stood on a street corner handing out leaflets.

It took a long time to prepare and record the videos but I feel relieved now that they're down. It was my first and only adventure on the visual bit of the internet. I also think that the failure of the videos may have been increased by my refusal to allow comments on the videos. I didn't even allow people viewing the videos to display 'thumbs up' or 'thumbs down' signs. Several of the videos dealt with issues which would have attracted the attention of drug companies and if I had allowed comments to be published then the drug companies' hacks would have had a field day.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds is reported to be killing crows and foxes. Ah well, the Woodland Trust has been killing squirrels for a while now and Oxfam staff have been abusing the people they were paid to help so why shouldn't the RSPB start killing birds. I feel relieved that Antoinette and I don't give money to the big charities. How long before the NSPCC starts killing children?

2

'The only function of economic forecasting is to make astrology look respectable,' wrote J.K.Galbraith and there is no doubt that the professionals are utterly useless at forecasting. The International Monetary Fund, the Federal Reserve (in the US) and the European Commission all missed the global financial crisis of a decade ago. Indeed, the European Commission was predicting boom years as the European economy collapsed.

A study of 500 predictions made by 22 professional strategists at major investment banks between 2000 and 2014 revealed that they were 'out' by an average of 14.6 % a year. They got just about everything wrong. They missed the good years and the bad years alike. It is no wonder that contrarian investors often beat the market and the big investment houses.

Trying to decide how to invest gets harder and harder. There are now many fundamental, long-term issues. They pop up so fast and frequently that I am reminded of the whack-a-mole game. What will president Trump do next? What will China do? What will happen to trade tariffs and embargos? Where is the next war going to be held? When will the EU collapse – and what will happen to the euro when it does? (It's only a matter of time.) And what will happen to Venezuela where millions are starving and corruption is the only growth industry? Will there be a market correction? How big will it be?

Britain and other developed countries are at the beginning of their austerity programmes – not the end. Over the coming decades there will have to be tax rises and more cuts in public services. Politicians will continue to run their countries according to the principles of greed and fear. To call what we have had 'austerity' is something of a joke. Austerity was Britain post war, when rationing was still in force.

The American stock market is on the edge of a collapse. Company bosses no longer know what to do with their profits and so they're buying back their own shares. When a company buys its own shares the only real winners are the executives whose bonuses rise when the share price goes up (share prices usually rise when a company buys its own shares.) Capital investment in the US has been falling steadily for half a century.

In most countries (notably America and Britain) the obscenely rich get richer and everyone else gets poorer. That is not the best way to produce a happy, productive society. It is, however, an excellent way to nurture dissent and communism.

Cryptocurrencies and the leading tech stocks are absurdly overpriced. Their supporters do not see the bubble. They see only profits and more profits all balanced on a pencil point of hope.

So, what does all this mean?

How will these things affect our lives in general and our investments in particular? How much should we worry about them? The truth is that I expect many asset values to fall steadily over the coming years. But I've been spending a little time wondering how I can protect our savings.

I am constantly aware that if Corbyn (or someone with similar, communist leanings) gets into power then the pound will collapse, the price of oil, minerals and other imports will soar, inflation will probably go up, interest rates will rise, utilities and infrastructure will suffer (if the communists take such companies back into public ownership) and importers (including retailers) will be crushed. Unemployment and taxes will soar.

Actually, of course, taxes are going to soar as soon as the politicians get round to realising that our national debt is so great that they will either have to abandon all public services or cut their own pensions if they don't gouge more money out of us.

So, here is my personal plan:

First, I avoid holding shares on foreign exchanges. The taxes are too complicated and there's a very good chance I won't be able to claim it back.

Second, I avoid small companies. It is my experience that there are more crooks running small companies than there are running big companies. I realise that this is probably simply because the crooks in the big companies tend to be exposed more easily than the crooks in the small companies.

Third, I only invest in companies in which I trust. And I need to know what they do and how they earn their money. And I want to be able to hope that the directors are trustworthy and that governance is useful. For example, I would not invest in Royal Mail. When Royal Mail appointed a new boss they chose someone who already had a contract with the company. Fair enough. But when the new boss took up his new contract, at a salary higher than his predecessor, the company agreed to pay him £5.8 million because his previous contract had to be closed. I've rarely heard such nonsense. That's called taking the piss out of shareholders. When over 70% of shareholders complained, the directors ignored them.

But I am still convinced that British shares are worth my buying.

It is commonly said that our stock market is towards the end of the longest bull market in history. The explanation for this alleged situation is supposed to be that interest rates are so absurdly low that the stock market is the only game in town; investors who want to have a chance of beating inflation have to invest in shares. Project Fear has beaten down prices to an extraordinary level. Good companies with little or no debt are paying an unprecedented 5% a year in dividends.

But it is not true that we are in a long bull market. If you look at the bare, bald figures this really isn't a long bull market. It isn't a bull market at all. In 2013, the FTSE 100 was just under 7,000, today it is just over 7,000. That's a pretty modest rise for a five year period. It certainly isn't a raging bull market. And if you look back as far as 1999 you will find that the FTSE 100 was then just under 7,000. Share prices have hardly risen in 19 years. After two decades, the average investor in the average fund has (after costs) less money than he had when he first invested. The astonishing truth is that most investors would be better off if they'd stuffed their savings under the mattress. Some bull market!

A bull market is officially a continuously upward movement in share prices without a 20% fall occurring. But the FTSE fell over 20% in 2015-16. And today, many solid British shares are priced at or below their asset value and are paying good dividends. That's not a bull market.

So why are people talking about a bull market?

Well, there has been a boom in the value of bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies. And internet shares have soared.

In my view, Bitcoin, cryptocurrencies and the much praised blockchain are all heavily hyped nonsense – along the lines of the hoola hoop. It said by aficionados that Bitcoin has software that not even teenagers with ADHD can hack. Anyone who believes that needs heavy medication and institutional care.

I have avoided technology companies such as Apple, Facebook, Google and Microsoft partly because I think these companies in particular are ethically unsound, overgenerous to employees and very susceptible to the regulations which are bound to be introduced. Facebook, for example, claims that it is not a publisher and that its users are the publishers. This absurd claim enables it to avoid all the responsibilities which usually go with being a publisher. The claim is absurd because Facebook owns the copyright on all the material which appears on its site. The Facebook argument is clearly indefensible. When the company is forced to accept its responsibilities, and to explain to its users how it operates, then the company will be finished. If the EU was ever going to do anything useful it would have done more to control these evil companies. I also avoid new technology companies – the sort which are forever being promoted on the financial pages of the newspapers. (These articles, incidentally, are invariably written by journalists who haven't got two halfpennies to rub together. One of my rules is to never take investment advice from someone poorer than I am.) Investors hardly ever make money out of new technologies. So, for example, the early investors in railroads and airlines did very badly. And most investors in most computer and internet and software companies have lost most (or all) of their money. The problem with internet companies is that they have no 'moat'; they are not protected against competitors. The big internet companies have disrupted whole industries but they can themselves be disrupted by the next 'new thing'. Only a fool would invest in electric cars or self-driving cars. I prefer to choose companies which have a high entrance cost and which produce something which is likely to be in demand for years to come. I particularly like real estate companies which cater to mail order companies.

Fourth, if I invest in a collective fund then it will be an investment trust or nothing. And I never invest with fashionable investment managers – the ones who appear to spend more time giving interviews than managing money. The managers who get the publicity tend to be ones who had a lucky spell. There is absolutely no guarantee that they will continue to be lucky and every likelihood that they will be so cocky that they will screw up. And I want an investment which pays regular, rising dividends.

Fifth, I have to diversify without diversifying to the point where I spend all my life trying to follow a host of different investments. I rarely buy or sell and try to hold my investments for years. This keeps down the costs. If I feel something is a genuinely good 'bet' then I invest heavily.

Sixth, I invest in gold and silver because there are big problems ahead.

Seventh, I want at least some of my investments to be able to cope with a weak pound and a strong dollar. I want to plan for inflation and an oil price which will be high if the pound collapses. Whatever happens to Brexit, it is a given that our politicians are going to fuck things up. During the last 70 years, Britain's currency has depreciated faster than any other major currency. In 1948, one pound sterling bought four American dollars and 13.4 new German Deutschmarks. But as I write, one pound sterling buys 1.30 American dollars and the equivalent of 2.2 German Deutschmarks. During that 70 years, our Gross Domestic Product has been one of the worst performing in the world.

Finally, I've invested in index linked gilts produced by the Government and in National Savings. They should be safe enough. And I've still got some Permanent Interest Bearing Shares which I've held for a couple of decades. The ones which have survived pay good dividends.

3

It is the month of the leaf. Much of this month will be spent clearing our tree-lined driveway in Devon. The new owners of a nearby house have had their driveway resurfaced with gravel. They have clearly never before lived in a home surrounded by trees. They're going to have real fun removing a few million leaves from their gravel.

Today, I picked up 476,539 leaves from our drive. I have made no difference at all. And the trees above the driveway seem to have as many leaves as ever. Indeed, I think there were more leaves on the ground than there had been when I started sweeping them up.

For a quick break we drove along the coast to Lyme Regis and spent a pleasant couple of hours wandering around the town. The shops are overpriced and full of rubbish (the National Trust shop near the beach is the very definition of 'twee') and I don't like the idea of unisex loos (any man who uses a unisex loo is taking his very life in his hands – a single false accusation could ruin his life). I noticed that WH Smith is now selling a special notebook in which punters can keep all their passwords. Usefully, the little book is labelled 'Internet Password Book'. (It is, apparently, also now possible to store all your passwords on a single internet site. I really cannot believe that there are human beings stupid enough to do this – but apparently there are.)

We spent a very pleasant hour in a magnificent amusement arcade. We shot a good many beasts, zombies and flying creatures, and Antoinette won because she's a tremendous shot. We also played basketball and table football. The guy who was working there came round with a huge grin on his face to ask if we were having fun. We were. We'll be back!

Theresa May has tried to do a deal to please Leavers and Remainers. Why? The Leavers won the Referendum. If the Remainers had won would anyone in Government have argued that we should leave the EU a bit to please the Leavers? Of course not! We'd have stayed in the EU and that would have been that.

More people are claiming that we are in a bull market which is dangerously high. Why have these so called experts not noticed that shares on the UK stock market have fallen and stayed low (they are now where they were 20 years ago) because in the last two years over a trillion dollars has been taken out of British shares and moved elsewhere. Why? It is not because of Brexit. It is entirely because of the risk of a Corbyn Government. If investors are panicking at the prospect of a Corbyn Government, think what will happen if Corbyn et al actually do form a Government? Maybe there will be a bounce when it actually happens. No, I don't think so.

The British market has suffered for a number of other reasons, of course. Too many absurd laws from the EU have damaged profits. Too many immigrants have damaged the country in many ways. Productivity has been damaged by the internet. Leaving the EU (if handled properly) would result in an eventual rise in share prices.

4

Our Cotswold home stank when we opened the front door and inside we found an uncountable number of dead and dying hornets. They'd clearly had a nest in one of the chimneys and angry, bewildered hornets were buzzing around the chimney post. Dead and dying hornets smell of rotten fish.

The grass and weeds in the garden were three feet high but there were no signs of any wildlife. The garden used to be full of birds and animals. Now there is nothing. The bastards who live locally have killed everything. The farmer (who has sheep not crops) has either shot or poisoned everything that lives. The local homeowners have gardens which look like traffic islands in London suburbs: all neatly clipped shrubs and mown lawns. Blackberries, apples and nuts were all untouched. The ground was thick with windfalls, just rotting away. I saw no birds, no butterflies, no squirrels, no rabbits, no pheasants. There were no badger tracks. There weren't even any pigeons or magpies around. I put out food but a day later it was untouched. It broke our hearts. We think we will now be selling up. There is no point in having a house in the country if there is no country in the country.

On the way north we stopped off at Taunton. We bought another new printer. My first question was: 'Will it fit into the incinerator?'

We were both surprised to see very little sign of Christmas. I know it's still early but the shops used to start promoting Christmas stuff before the end of September. I suspect that, apart from cards, the shops will downplay Christmas this year. They're all terrified of the backlash since we now live in a Muslim country. No one wants to upset the people who worry about upsetting the Muslims – and whose power on social media is overwhelming.

The City of Paris has sent me the first of the tax bills I have to pay on the apartment we no longer own. Naturally, the bill was sent to the wrong address. (Although I have sent them at least two dozen letters asking them to change the address.) I have less than a week in which to pay the bill but the post to France will take more than a week to get there. And the City of Paris informs me that if the bill is for more than 1,000 euros (which it is) then I must pay by direct bank transfer. I am not allowed to pay by cheque. However, I cannot pay the bill by transfer because the statement does not include the appropriate bank details. (I have in the past asked for these but been ignored). The City of Paris will not allow me to pay by credit card, by PayPal or by any other means. I must transfer the money from a French bank account. But since we do not have a French bank account this is clearly impossible. I will have to do as last year: I'll go to the bank and buy a cheque in euros. This will take some time to arrange. The euro cheque will then be posted to me. And when I have received the cheque I will post it to Paris. I will have to do this by international special delivery so that I have a record of having posted the cheque. The whole procedure will be expensive and take the best part of a day. And when the next bill comes in a month or so I may have to repeat the whole time consuming procedure – unless the department sending that bill allows me to pay online with a credit card.

I have no idea what the French will do next. Maybe the loathsome, bureaucratic bastards will accept the cheque or maybe they will refuse it – in which case they will have to extradite me since I have no other way of paying.

5

I've made a note to myself never to invest in any part of the publishing business. Printers, publishers, agents and bookshops have absolutely no commercial future. I know this because I have spotted a trend which I don't think anyone else has seen yet. More and more professional authors are now having their books published primarily as ebooks, with the only hard copy versions being printed 'on demand'.

It has been possible for years to print books individually, in response to individual orders and it is known as digital printing. In the beginning, printing on demand was something favoured only by amateur or part time authors and the results of the printing process were sometimes depressingly awful – with huge spaces appearing in the text and no attention paid to layout.

However, printing on demand is getting better (and will doubtless improve further and speedily) and for authors who sell large numbers of books there is one huge advantage: publishing this way gets rid of the 1p books which have destroyed back list sales.

For as long as people have been writing books, back list sales have been the mainstay of the author's commercial life. The principle is a simple one: over the years an author builds up a reputation and people who enjoy one book will buy another book in an author's oeuvre.

The internet changed all that.

In the bad old days, an author's previous books were usually only available in second hand book shops where they usually cost a couple of quid. More importantly, books weren't easy to find. If you were, for example, hunting for a book by an author called Edward Vernon you would have to scour the bookshops or ask a book-finding service to find a book for you. Since this was a lengthy and expensive process, readers who wanted to find books by Edward Vernon would usually be happy to buy a new copy of the book from a bookshop which would obtain the books from the publishers. And so publishers kept books in print for years if an author was popular.

That all changed when it became possible to buy books cheaply on the internet.

Amateur, part-time sellers reduced their prices because they were in competition with one another. And soon most books by popular authors were available at 1p each. Even with the postage added on that destroyed back list sales because it meant that popular books were readily available at a very low price. The seller of the book made their money by making a few pence profit out of the postage costs.

Traditional, second hand book shops could only make money by selling rare or unusual books at premium prices.

Publishers gave up reprinting an author's old books because there was no demand. Instead of being read by half a dozen or a dozen people over their lifetime, books were read by hundreds. As far as authors are concerned, the whole thing was made even worse when charities started to sell on the internet the books they had been given to sell in their shops. The big charities get cut price postage rates and can afford to sell their books for less than the cost of the normal postage. Today, most of the books being sold for 1p are sold by charities, operating under a series of different names.

(An extraordinary number of small businesses sell books at a loss. I often buy out of print second hand books for less than the cost of the postage. This strange upside down business policy will doubtless work for Amazon but I really don't see how it will work for Mrs McTavish selling a handful of books a week from her maisonette in Leeds.)

Under the old system, publishers would print 100,000, 500,000 or 1,000,000 copies of a successful author's books and any books which weren't sold quite quickly would either be remaindered (and sold in special remainder bookshops) or pulped.

These days, a book which is printed in large quantities will be available at 1p on the internet within a week because people who have read the book will either sell it themselves or give it to a charity shop.

The only way publishers and authors can fight back is by dramatically reducing the number of real books which are printed – and the way to do that economically is to print books digitally – on demand. The result is that the number of 'real' books will be dramatically reduced.

All this means that a successful, top selling author doesn't need an agent, a publisher, a printer or a bookshop.

The traditional publishing industry may think that it is going to survive.

(They claim that the sales of real books have risen – but this is solely because of the sale of all those adult colouring in books which, bizarrely, count as real books. And most big publishers now subsidise their printing operations by over-charging for their ebooks.)

But the publishing industry is doomed.

Within a decade or so there will be no publishers as we know them. And no literary agents or book printers.

And the only shops selling books will be second hand specialists – probably charging much higher prices than they can now. Those shelves of books in charity shops will have disappeared. And Oxfam's bookshops will have been converted into something else. (Given Oxfam's current interests they will probably all be sex shops or boutique brothels.)

Authors will realise that independent publishing (something that used to be called self-publishing when I first began with *Alice's Diary* back in the 1980s) is the future.

While out and about today I watched in horror as a coach veered towards us in a narrow lane. As he approached I could see that the driver was holding a microphone and giving his passengers a guided tour. This is madness. If I make a telephone call while driving I will be arrested and punished. But coach drivers can use a handheld microphone to talk to their passengers.

6

The *Daily Mirror* which Antoinette bought for me today was almost totally devoted to the story of Captain Scott's ill-fated expedition to the South Pole. In a 24 page paper there were 14 pages of astonishing photographs, diary entries and reports of what must still be the most dramatic and English of all expeditions. The story of how the ailing Captain Oates walked out into a blizzard with the words 'I'm going out. I may be out for some time' haunts me still. He went, of course, to improve his colleagues' chances of survival.

Most of the rest of the paper was filled with advertisements but the *Daily Mirror* also contained two small stories which caught my eye.

David Osment died at the age of 37 and it was stated at Tottenham inquest that he spent £10,000 on drink in three years. That was some going.

And there was a story headed 'Suffragettes complain of Their Very Disagreeable Ride to Holloway' which reported that two members of the Women's Freedom League who were released from Holloway complained that some other women placed in the van in which she was driven to Holloway were 'of a violent and horrible character'.

The *Daily Mirror* was, by the way, dated 21st May 1913.

This afternoon, Antoinette drew my attention to a wren bathing in the wet grass. I couldn't understand what he or she was doing until Antoinette pointed out that the bird was definitely having a bath. And it was bathing in the wet grass because the bird bath was too deep for it.

7

A friend of Antoinette's is taking part in a painting competition. A number of paintings have been put up on the internet and those looking are invited to vote. To try to stop cheating, the organisers ruled that there could only be one vote per digital address. For the first week, the voting followed normal patterns and then, suddenly, the voting exploded. Paintings which had received very few votes suddenly shot to the top, having garnered dozens of votes in a day, and I suspected that one or two entrants had realised that if they wandered from café to café they could vote for themselves almost endlessly. And so the painting competition had become a voting competition – just like voting for politicians. (Elections are surprisingly easy to 'fix'. I suspect that Labour politicians in particular have become peculiarly adept at this.)

Corbyn has promised that he and his party will, in future, do what the Labour Party members require. He seems to think that this is democracy in action. It is nowhere near to democracy. Corbyn and the Labour Party MPs were elected to represent a large chunk of the population. Labour Party members make up much less than 1% of the people who voted for Labour at the last election. So, Corbyn's latest promise will mean that in future a very small group of activists and extremists will decide Labour Party policy. If that's Corbyn's idea of democracy then he's even more stupid than I thought he was.

The very first parking ticket was issued in September 1960, in London, and given to the car of a Dr Thomas Creighton who was helping a heart attack victim in a West End hotel. And thus the scene was set.

8

At an inquest into the death of a policeman who was stabbed to death, a chubby looking bloke called Mackey, the deputy commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, admitted that he had watched the murder, but had locked his car doors before driving away in a hurry because the killer looked rather scary. There were two other police staff in the car with him.

The funny thing is that I thought the police were paid extra because they had to take risks. The word coward springs to mind. Maybe the chubby bloke is French.

The Metropolitan Police does not appear to attract high calibre Commissioners. The current holder of the post is a woman called Dick who is, to me at least, best known for having ordered the murder of an innocent Brazilian on the London Tube.

On its website, Leicestershire police advise motorists to put on their flashers if they are being followed by a car which might (or might not) be a police car and which is flashing them to stop. This seems odd advice for I was fined £5 for putting on my flashers when I was a GP and was racing to a suspected heart attack patient. The magistrate told me that only bus drivers are allowed to put on their flashing lights while moving – and then only in an emergency. (You might think that racing to save a human life might count as an emergency but you would be wrong.)

English sports players seem especially good at yobbishness.

I see that another international rugby player (a fellow with the old English name of Cipriani) is in trouble for assaulting a police woman. What bravery, what good sense.

The various England teams of selectors should get together and set up a National Yob team for the World Yob Championships.

We’d win the cup easily.

Depressed by the headlines in the newspapers, I bought ten old copies of the *Beano* and the *Dandy* in a charity shop. They were all from the 1970s (which was a decent year for comics).

‘A present?’ asked the shop assistant.

‘No, for me,’ I replied.

I got the impression the assistant thought I was barking. I probably am. I don’t give a fig.

I realise that for me cricket really died when the last Gentlemen v Players match was played.

The word ‘Stokes’ should in future become common parlance for a mindless thug with sporting pretentions – as in ‘the player stoked the referee in the face when the goal was disallowed’.

What a long way we have come down from the days when men such as C.B. Fry played for England.

A picture sold at auction by an artist called Banksy self-destructed once the winning bid had been made. Someone paid around £750,000 for a fairly nondescript, little sketch and the moment the auctioneer’s gavel had fallen, a remote control triggered a shredder and the picture mostly disappeared.

This non-event was hailed by art critics as a major piece of performance art. But it was just a joke, a gimmick, a marketing trick or a publicity stunt. It wasn’t ‘art’ by any sensible definition. It seems to me that Banksy, like Hirst, Emin, Perry and other multi-millionaire modern ‘artists’, is just a self-publicist with a very modest talent. But no one dare say this in public.

9

Like everyone else on the planet I am being bombarded with emails from companies desperate to avoid being fined for breaking the EU’s Data Protection Law known as the General Data Protection Regulation. This daft new law is supposed to have been introduced to protect individual users of the internet but it seems certain to help big American internet companies at the expense of small companies. The big ones are the only ones which can afford the extra legal and administrative costs. And the big British companies are being very crafty. For example, our bank promises that it will not sell my personal data to third parties. I’m sure they won’t. I suspect that instead of selling it they will give it away to other companies with which the bank has done deals.

All I can say with certainty is that since the EU provided me with this new protection I have received far more junk emails than ever before. This is yet another EU directive that turned out to do more harm than good. Another example of practical fascism in action – serve the interests of big companies and bugger the small companies and the ordinary folk.

Talking of the EU, it is now being rumoured that Prime Minister May has done a deal with the EU which will mean our remaining non-voting members of the organisation forever. If she goes ahead and does this deal then the Tories will not be in power again for at least a generation, and after the next election Britain will become a communist country.

It is time for all freedom-loving democrats to think about investing for this eventuality. And, indeed, to think about emigrating.

My quite serious worry is that if Corbyn does get into power there will be no one left in Britain to pay his massive tax demands. All the sensible people with brains will have buggered off, leaving the smug Corbyn supporters to worry about where they are going to find the money for all their wild, State sponsored schemes. The millennials who think Corbyn is wonderful will suddenly realise the true horror of communism and they will, belatedly, rediscover the joys of capitalism. When Corbyn has pushed up taxes across the board and confiscated wealth, the world will look very different. There will be no more lattes and almond slices. If Corbyn gets into power, and Britain becomes a truly communist state, then there will be no real future, no money for anything, no benefits, no pensions and absolutely no future. What price rationing? (I remember what it was like behind the Iron Curtain. I was there for a while. It wasn't much fun.)

And it will be too late to say: 'Whoops, we didn't mean to vote for that.'

I see that women sports players are complaining that they don't get as much money and media coverage as their male counterparts. This is regarded as sexist.

Who is going to be the brave soul to point out that when women play sports the stands are invariably empty – other than for a few friends and relatives?

It is salutary that a team of 15-year-old boys has apparently beaten some of the world's top international women's football teams. I have no doubt that a decent club side of amateur male cricketers could thrash any international side of female cricket players. And it is no secret that any male tennis player in the top 100 could easily beat the best female tennis players in the world.

I used to look at the sports news occasionally. But I have now given up. I have, too often, been tricked by intriguing headlines such as *England beat Slovenia* only to find that the match referred to is something like a women's gymnastics tournament. Who, apart from the competitors' relatives, gives a toss? Even if the headline is illustrated with a photograph I still find I get confused because female sportspersons tend to look very similar to male sportspersons.

I have previously quoted the evidence showing that the Government has been trying to kill off older folk for some years now. Things are going to get much worse. It is not paranoid to suspect that one of the 'vaccines' promoted for the elderly will contain a deadly virus designed to reduce the Government's pension liabilities.

10

When I went down the drive to collect our bin after its three weekly emptying, to grab it before walkers put in their unwanted doggie bags, cola cans and so on, I noticed a van was parked right across our gate. I managed to catch hold of the driver. 'Sorry,' he said. 'I didn't realise it was a house.'

One of our six feet high gateposts has a large metal sign with the house name etched into it. The gate has a big Private sign. And there are two large polite notices asking motorists not to block the drive way.

We can't possibly go away for a night leaving the bin outside. If we do it will either be stolen (to be melted down and turned into something useful) or passers-by will fill with it unwanted wrappers and cola cans.

Bono, the soggy uneaten half of a dog biscuit, the well-known philanthropist, tax avoidance expert and world class hypocrite has announced that he will help the EU improve its popularity and help it combat populism. (There seems to be some conflict there but what do I know?)

Actually, I think that Mr Bono might start by improving his own popularity. He may have a number of die-hard fans but that isn't quite the same thing at all. I wouldn't mind a bet that more people loathe him than love him.

He is one of a coterie of rich, elitist, out of touch individuals who think they know what is good for us but who are merely extremely irritating. Others in the coterie are Lily Allen, Bob Geldof, Richard Branson and Gary Lineker. What a bunch of nauseating wankers. None of them seem to understand that populism is an entirely predictable, rational and understandable backlash against the globalisation for which they seem to have such affection. (Globalisation is, of course, one of the greatest disasters of the 20th and 21st centuries. It has caused untold misery to millions but made a few billionaires very happy. The only people to support globalisation are uber-rich investment bankers and cerebrally disadvantaged liberal luvvies who think that globalisation means being able to buy Camembert cheese, drink skinny lattes served in avocado skins and go trekking and mountain climbing in out of the way places.)

The EU, for which so many celebrities seem to have such affection, is a fascist organisation which works hard to protect the interests of multinational corporations and does nothing to protect individual workers. The EU which they love so much is opposed to democracy and individualism, choice and empowerment and so we must assume that these silly celebrities are also opposed to democracy, individualism, choice and empowerment.

Or maybe they just don't really understand what the hell they're talking about.

11

People in posh restaurants can now choose which live turkey they want to eat. It has, of course, been possible for diners to choose their fish or lobster for some time. Children living on farms often choose which lamb or pig should be eaten next. Such people must be psychopaths. Antoinette and I agree that we would have a job picking out our own Christmas Tree and electing for it to be chopped down.

12

These days if writers want to be successful they have to write bland books which are designed not to offend the sort of people who are likely to rush to the 'one star' button if they feel aggrieved. This is sad (indeed, rather depressing) because of the implications for the future. Books have always been apart from other parts of the media. Because they are very individual creations they have always been considered rather different. Newspapers, magazines, films and television programmes are all team productions. Books are usually written by one person, a wordsmith, a literary craftsman, and so authors have always been allowed a little more latitude; being free to write without too much restraint (apart from the usual restrictions relating to the laws of libel).

One of my novels, *The Truth Kills*, has bad reviews because 'it reads like an autobiography'. I was surprised by this for I thought part of the point of writing a novel was to make it believable, plausible and realistic. Even novels which are science fiction or historical are supposed to be believable. Or, so I thought.

Curiously, the book has also been given a poor rating because reviewers don't approve of the views of one of the characters. Gosh. Are all characters now supposed to be likeable?

It is three months since I sent off copies of my play. Three of the people to whom I sent it have still not replied, though I did include stamped addressed labels. Since Birmingham Repertory Theatre had, three months ago, asked me to email a copy of the script I sent them an email asking if they'd had received it and had a chance to look at it yet. They wrote back to let me know they had a lot of scripts to look at and would reply as soon as they could. I got the feeling that I was being told not to be so impatient since they'd only had the script for three months.

When I heard that the Government had instructed food companies to make smaller pies and pizzas smaller so that the people who ate them wouldn't get fat, I thought it was an April Fool's Day joke that had been misplaced.

Who thinks these things up?

This is a really moronic idea. It's arrogant and nannyish but it is also moronic. What will happen will be that if the pies and the pizzas are smaller then people will eat two of them – instead of one.

Food companies will make bigger profits and consumers will get fatter.

Maybe that was the idea.

I sat out in the garden this evening with one of Simon Gray's diaries on my lap and a glass of Bunnahabein on the arm of my chair. Moments later I picked up the glass to take a sip and saw a wasp floating on the top of the whisky. Normally, when a wasp ends up in liquid he swims around for a while and can be tipped out to dry out and eventually fly away. But this one, who had been in the whisky for no more than seconds, was as dead as a doornail. I'm not sure what this tells me. Maybe the wasp was flying overhead, had a heart attack, died and fell into my whisky glass. Yes, I think I prefer that explanation.

13

I popped to the shops and got some very strange looks. I had been working outside and wearing two pairs of spectacles – my reading glasses (so that I could read) and my sunglasses (to slow down the development of my cataracts). People seemed to think this odd. I do have dark reading glasses but the lenses are too small to provide enough protection.

Graham Norton, a foreigner and one of the BBC's most highly paid employees (and in my view one of the organisation's many overpaid employees) has been out and about promoting the BBC line on the EU – though since he is not British I don't quite see what it's got to do with him or why he thinks he is entitled to express an opinion. He seems to think that the 17.4 million people who voted Brexit are all mad. In fact, I am afraid that it is Mr Norton who is quite potty. He is a homosexual and it is the EU who has pushed vast numbers of militant Muslims into Britain. Mr Norton probably doesn't realise that a good many Muslims want all homosexuals to be executed. So, as far as Mr Norton is concerned, he is the proverbial turkey voting for Christmas. If he gets his wish and Britain (a country which has been very generous to him) is forced to stay in the EU, then Mr Norton may find his head on the block – literally. (There are possibly some in England who might find this a price worth paying for continued membership of the EU.)

Meanwhile, the EU seems to be getting worried that we might not hand over the £40 billion they've demanded as a divorce payment.

'You have to pay this,' they say.

'There is usually an 'or' involved when you make a threat.

So, just what is the EU going to do if we don't pay the £40 billion they have demanded?

Are they going to invade us?

Don't make me laugh. The EU couldn't win a bar fight.

The climate change nutters have at last cottoned on to the fact that if people stopped eating meat (or at least cut down) then the environment would be healthier. I wonder why it took them so long. It has been clear for years that all those belching and farting cows do considerable damage to the atmosphere. And they require vast amounts of water. Indeed, a few years ago I got into trouble (what a surprise) for pointing out that you can't be green or care about the environment if you still eat meat.

And, of course, we also know that if people stopped eating meat there would be plenty of land to grow food for the millions who are starving to death. So a widespread vegetarian lifestyle would end starvation.

Finally, it has been proven beyond doubt that eating meat causes cancer and is, indeed, as big a cause of cancer as tobacco.

But the Government won't officially recommend a meat free diet because (it says) it doesn't want to interfere in our lives and our freedom to eat what we want.

That's odd.

Because the Government has just announced that it is going to tell food companies to make smaller pies and smaller pizzas. Is that not interfering?

The truth is that the Government is frightened to tell us to cut our meat consumption because it is frightened of farmers and the meat industry – a deadly bunch who are more powerful than the tobacco industry ever was.

The spectre of Edwina Currie hangs over politicians as a reminder of how easily a political career can be destroyed by farmers. And poor, little self-effacing Edwina only took on the egg industry.

I sent our first cheque to the city of Paris a few days ago and today I checked to see if it had arrived. Unfortunately the idiots at the French post office took the registered envelope to the city offices on a Saturday and there was no one there. So the envelope cannot be delivered and the post office will wait for someone from the city's accounts office to pop round and collect it. Fat chance. Will our French nightmare ever end?

14

I sat in the conservatory aiming to work but ended up watching birds collecting insects. I don't know whether they were swallows or swifts. They were flying so fast, buffeted by a slight coastal wind, that I couldn't identify them. On the ground a squirrel was burying nuts. He leapt up into one of the nearby hazel trees and for while there would be a good deal of waving of leaves as he tore off a clump of nuts. He then came back to earth and put the clump down on the grass after removing one of the nuts. He then cleaned the nut of its outer wrapping and buried it. I love watching squirrels bury nuts. They dig a hole, bury the nut and then cover it up again with earth and grass. When they've finished, they drag leaves and bits of dead grass over the site where the nut is buried and they pat down the covering so that it's difficult to see where the treasure is buried. When the squirrel was satisfied that the first nut was properly and safely buried, he went back to his clump and tore off another nut. He then did the same thing with that one. Squirrels worry endlessly about tomorrow and the day after. I love the way they hold their tails over the bodies when it's raining. They use their tails as umbrellas. You may call this observation anthropomorphism. I call it good sense on the squirrel's part.

15

We saw a yellow wagtail in the garden. I don't think I've ever seen one before and they are alleged to be rare visitors to the South West.

One of our squirrels has been burying leaves and twigs. I think we need to arrange for him to be seen by a squirrel psychiatrist.

16

We were at our home in the Cotswolds today. There are heaps of hazelnuts, blackberries and developing apples to be seen but no squirrels and very few birds. We have masses of buddleia and lavender and other pollen rich plants but there were no butterflies in the summer. I filled the bird and squirrel feeders and a few tits arrived but little else. I suspect that locals have shot all the squirrels and killed all the birds and butterflies by laying down several tons of pesticide. The locals who shoot squirrels do so because they say they ring bark the trees. I think this is bollocks but my view on this is now irrelevant because he has chopped down all his trees 'to open up the view'.

We have definitely decided that we will have to sell this house. The roads are getting more unbearable, the holdups are interminable, the police are incompetent, the motorway management is appalling and the neighbours are unbearable. Maybe we can ask our solicitor to put a codicil into the deeds to prevent any purchaser from taking down the trees we have planted.

As predicted, the BBC is planning to do away with the free TV licence for the over 75s – just in time to ensure that I don't get a free licence. They claim, with typical BBC inaccuracy, that the elderly are rich these days. We must remember, however, that the BBC supports the EU and undoubtedly realises that most over 75s are bright enough to have voted for Brexit. Do I smell a touch of vengeance here? In two or three years' time when the free licence is abolished, I hope all over 75s will join me in refusing to pay the BBC licence fee. There are, according to the BBC, over 4,000,000 people over 75. What are they going to do if we all refuse to hand over our £150.50 so that the BBC can overpay hundreds of half-wits in the Lineker mould?

The BBC wants to get rid of the free licence because a couple of years ago, in a deal with the Government, it agreed to take responsibility for providing the over 75s with television licences and now wants to renege on the deal, having realised that the licence fees will add up to £745 million – which is a fifth of its current budget. The BBC clearly sees an opportunity to haul in vast quantities of moolah with which to boost Lineker's annual salary and hire some more useless administrators. I was not surprised to see that MPs have given themselves free television licences.

We should all take the opportunity to question the whole principle of the licence fee. It is absurd that the BBC receives any money at all from British citizens. If the BBC wants money why don't they earn it or just beg more from their chums in the European Union? To be honest we'd all be better off if we didn't pay the BBC a penny but could use the loot we now pay them to buy TV programming we really want.

In the evening we sat down to watch *The Party* – a newish film (not the funny one with Peter Sellers) which we belatedly noted had been given four stars by *The Guardian*. We wouldn't have bought it if we'd noticed. The film is described as 'deliciously wicked fun' and 'an absolute blast' but we gave up after twenty minutes and threw the disc into the rubbish bin. I couldn't in all decency put it into the charity bag and allow someone else to pay good money for it. The film, written and directed by someone called Sally Potter, is in black and white, lasts 68 minutes and is unbelievably pretentious and predictable. I suspect it was made in black and white because that was considered to be the arty farty thing to do. Why do female directors so often make such rubbishy films? (I'm sorry, but they do.) Was there any taxpayers' money involved, I wonder? The script just didn't seem funny or sharp and seemed to me to be a waste of a good cast.

We then watched *In a Lonely Place* with Humphrey Bogart. *In a Lonely Place* was made in 1950 in black and white by a director and cinematographer who seemed to me to understand the value of shooting in black and white.

17

We are running out of soluble aspirin for occasional aches and pains. The chemist will only sell two packs at a time, and in Boots they always put the soluble aspirin (30 pence a box) right at ground level and difficult to find. The expensive alternatives (neither as good nor as safe) are always at eye level. I'll order a few packs from eBay.

I went up into the topmost part of our garden in Devon. From up there I can look down onto our house roof. I saw two squirrels playing on the tiles. They were having tremendous fun. At least I now know the cause of the strange noises I've been hearing. While I was up there roaming around in the garden, I found an old water tank which was full of water. I put chunky branches up against it so that next season's frogs can climb up, jump in and lay their frogspawn. I put a branch into the tank so that they can climb out a different way.

I spent an hour or so sweeping up some of the early leaves. The question then was what to do with the darned things. We still have several piles of leaves around the garden from last year. I got out a new incinerator and put it on a stretch of tarmacadam which we don't use but burning wet leaves is never easy and I simply couldn't get them smouldering let alone burning. There must be something I can do with them. They do make excellent compost. Since the land that fell into the sea a few years ago did belong to our home then perhaps I can safely tip the leaves over the cliff edge. I'll be putting them on our land, and helping to enrich the soil down there. The snag is that some bright spark with a camera will doubtless take a photograph of the leaves fluttering down and send it to the 'authorities'.

18

More and more retailers are going bust but it is the suppliers I feel sorry for. When I was a publisher of 'real' books, I was always peeved that whenever a bookshop went bust (which was quite often) the books of mine that they had in stock (and had not paid for) were taken by the receiver and sold. I never understood this. It seemed to me to be legalised theft.

19

We have arranged to meet estate agents at our Cotswold house tomorrow in order to talk about putting the house on the market. The journey has become quite impossible and we now just want to retire to our house on the cliff.

In an attempt to make the house more attractive, I'd arranged for a gardener to cut the grass, tidy the garden and take away all the stuff he'd cut. Because we were busy (and hate ringing workmen) we hired the gardener we used last year. (I know, I know.) When we arrived at the house, there were still two youths there. One was walking about and the other was leaning on a fence admiring the local sheep. They had run out of petrol. No one was doing anything. When I walked round the garden, I nearly wept. The garden looked worse than it had beforehand. Moreover, the youths who had been subcontracted to do the work (and who had that arrogant, slightly threatening look common among young hooligans) had broken one house window, damaged two gates, broken the shed door and damaged the summerhouse. I offered them petrol and oil but they weren't sure which sort of oil they needed and didn't seem to know where to put the petrol. When the gardener I'd hired eventually turned up, I was furious with him. He just smiled and said they couldn't take the grass away because he hadn't been able to drive down to the house in his lorry. I didn't believe this (he'd brought it down previously) but I was so tired and upset that in the end I just paid him £690 to go away. When he had gone I discovered that there were huge areas which they hadn't touched. If I want them cutting I'll have to do them myself. I have never known anyone who lies so easily.

And when he'd gone I was furious with myself. I really could have wept tears of frustration and rage. I think, most of all, I feel ashamed that I had been too trusting and was now too weak and too tired to refuse to pay him.

Before he left, the gardener boasted that he had recently been ordained as a Pentecostal Minister and that, in addition to running his gardening business, he had his own church. 'It is a privilege to do God's work,' he announced sanctimoniously as he put away the notes I'd given him. (He insists on being paid in cash). When they had all gone I found that the youths he'd employed had left a small pile of grass cuttings in the garden. When I moved the cuttings I found that they'd buried the unwanted remains of their luncheon wrappers (including a can) in the middle of the grass.

So, what do I do? Do I chase him and make him come back, finish the job he has been paid for and repair the damage he's done? No. I don't want him to come back. He or his oafs will probably break something else. Should I ask for a refund? To do that I will, I suspect, have to sue him. And that will cost more than it brings in and it will take months. I could write rude things on his website or a gardening site, but that's not my style. I could report him to the taxman, but that's not my style either. So all I can do is sit and fume, add ten points to my blood pressure and help my ulcer grow another inch. The God he claims to serve will surely put him down for frying.

Inside, there were still hundreds of hornets in one of the rooms. I carried the dead ones outside in a dustpan and had to make five or six journeys. The room stank again since dying hornets give out a foul, fishy smell. A funny smell in the cellar of a house which dates back to the 1700s is generally regarded as inevitable, acceptable and probably expected. A strange odour in the loft can be laughed off, even if not exactly explained or dismissed. But a powerful aroma of rotting fish in one of the downstairs reception rooms is not, generally speaking, the sort of thing estate agents include upon the printed particulars (‘fine walk in stone fireplace and a grand stink of old fish in south-west reception room’) or refer to with a jolly smile and a gentle shrug. It is more a gritted teeth sort of thing.

Even as retailers go bust there is hope for our High Streets. The big etailers (that’s a new word which I just invented) will need pick up points where internet shoppers can collect the items they’ve purchased online. So the etailers will start buying empty shops and turning them into collection centres.

20

The estate agent came this morning to look round the house. To our surprise it seems that the property is now worth less than we paid for it seven or eight years ago (if you count what we spent on structural improvements as part of the cost). Inevitably, the agent told us that ‘we paid too much’. They do this so that expectations are low, enabling them to sell cheaply and quickly. Sellers always assume that agents want the best price. But do they? Would they rather have £10,000 for a quick sale or £11,000 for a sale that takes six months and requires thirty visits to the property?) We put a great deal of love into the house and garden. We spent a small fortune making improvements and bought and planted nearly £5,000 worth of trees and bushes. The agent seemed to think that we had just overpaid when we’d bought the house but the fact is that we paid around two thirds of the initial asking price and if house prices were too high seven years ago then it was the fault of estate agents as much as anyone. But, loss or not, the house has to go so we handed over the keys and signed a 12 week contract with the agency. (They wanted the term left blank but I’m not that stupid so I wrote in 12 weeks.) Now we no longer feel as if it is our house. When we bought it we hoped it would be our final home. But we never felt welcome or comfortable in the Cotswolds. I wonder if we will ever sleep there again. I hate the idea of strangers wandering through, poking at the things we’ve left behind and making comments about this small piece of our world.

I showed the agents the plan of the grounds. They examined it carefully.

‘Here is where your car is parked,’ I told them, pointing to a spot on the plan. ‘If you look carefully you can see it…oh, dear I think you’ve left your lights on.’

They looked carefully at the plan, to see if their car really had its lights on.

The messy garden, the damaged gates and the dying hornets aren’t going to make it easy to sell the house. It occurs to me that if we do sell then it will be the first time since we were married, nearly 20 years ago, that we’ve owned just one home. And I realised that it will be a massive relief. For one thing we will never again have to buy two or three of everything. And we will be able to put all our effort into repairing the fabric of our home by the sea. I know in my heart that I will never live anywhere else. We have only owned it for a couple of years but I feel as though I’ve come home.

We spent the rest of the day in Taunton and parked, as we usually do, at the cricket ground. We park there in the summer too. There are hardly ever any matches being played so there is usually plenty of space in the car park. I suspect the club makes more money out of car parking than out of cricket. Actually, I suppose this makes it more a car park business than a cricket club. A car park with a cricket club glued on as an afterthought.

I picked up one or two books. I managed to find three William Haggard novels I don’t think I’ve read, a book entitled *The Journal of a Tent Dweller* by Fay Inchfawn and a small travel book entitled *Up Hill and Down* by HL Gee.

I also bought a first edition of *The Card* by Arnold Bennett. I have another first somewhere but this was on sale in Oxfam for under a tenner and I couldn’t bear to leave it on the shelf. I handed over what I owed and told the assistant that I hoped Oxfam wouldn’t use it all on hiring prostitutes and organising sex orgies. When she started to protest, I asked her if she knew that Oxfam has 11 employees on more than £100,000 a year. In more ways than one, giving money to Oxfam makes as much sense as giving it to Rolf Harris.

Bennett was a superstar and it seems sad and strange that he is now almost forgotten. He was prolific. In his diary he boasts that in 1908 he wrote 423,500 words. All hand written on bits of paper because he wouldn’t use a typewriter. And fancy counting all those words. In 1912, he earned £16,000 net of agent’s commissions and bought a car, a house and a yacht big enough to require a sizeable crew.

In October 1911, the indefatigable Bennett described an egg boiling machine which he saw on a transatlantic voyage. The machine could be set to whatever time was required and would automatically lift the egg out when it was done.

Bennett was an IBS sufferer (though he didn’t know it as that – at one point he complained of having ‘a chill on his colon’) and he worked incredibly hard – ageing himself in the process. At the age of 46 he reported that, as a result of his age, he had to sit down to brush his hair and to put on a collar and tie. He was also worrying about the point of acquiring new knowledge. Maybe he was right. Maybe, as we approach 50, we should stop worrying about the state of the world and stop learning anything new. I'll think about that the next time I approach 50.

In his diary, Arnold Bennett writes that Henry James's book *The Ambassadors* is not worth the effort of reading. I agree with him. I don't think much of Joseph Conrad either. Most authors who win literary prizes of any kind (and especially those who win the Nobel Prize for Literature) are unreadable and to be successful in the literary world a book needs to be devoid of plot or character, irrelevant and too dull to read.

His diary is stuffed with fascinating titbits. He mentions, in passing, that he was receiving postal deliveries three times a day. He reports that Oscar Wilde sold the scenario for *Mr and Mrs Daventry* to eleven different people – because he needed the money. Bennett himself was one of the most successful playwrights working at the start of the 20th century and he reports that 'audiences receive new ideas in silence but applaud sentiments with which they are familiar'.

Having rediscovered Bennett, I have bought just about every one of his books I could find and hadn't read including *Buried Alive* and *The Pretty Lady*. My favourite of book of his is still *Riceyman Steps*.

Somewhere on my shelves I have a wonderful little Arnold Bennett book called something like *How To live on 24 Hours a Day*. I think maybe I'll do one *How To Live Well On 60 Minutes An Hour*.

I also bought two new recent Grisham thrillers and a new Jack Higgins (the dear old fellow is 88 and still writing about Sean Dillon who must also be getting on a bit).

I'm honestly not sure why but I also picked up a couple of new Jack Reacher books by Lee Child. I find Reacher to be a rather mindless thug and the books to be crude, repetitive and rather humourless but they are massively, remorselessly successful and I keep hoping I can find out why. The humourless and distinctly unpleasant hero often seems to have no real motivation for his largely unjustified and unjustifiable violence. The latest Reacher novel is a flashback. I've been wondering when Mr Child would realise that his hero was getting a little long in the tooth to beat people up and that time has clearly come, for some of the later stories are flashbacks.

C.S.Forester did the same thing with Hornblower, of course. Having taken him up through the ranks to Admiral he had to go back and fill in some of the gaps. You can hardly have an Admiral prancing about saving young widows and having sword fights with French aristocrats. (In a very small way I did a similar thing with my Edward Vernon books. I wrote two books about the young doctor being a GP and then for the third book took him back to medical school. It's fun to fill in the back story for a character.)

The blurb quotes inside the later Reacher books include these quotes. First, from someone called Lucy Mangan: 'I am very much in love with Jack Reacher – as a man and a role model. If I can't shag him, I want to be him.' And from Karin Slaughter: 'One of the sexiest characters in fiction'.

I assume Mangan and Slaughter are both female but I wonder what the response would have been if two males had made similar comments about a female character. Actually, I don't need to wonder: I know.

I can't think that film producers did Mr Child any favours by allowing Tom Cruise to play Jack Reacher in a couple of films. In the books, Reacher is well over six feet tall and has a commanding presence. Cruise isn't and doesn't have a commanding presence. Indeed, Cruise's problem is that he is not at all imposing. It is impossible to feel that you would be frightened or intimidated by Cruise in the same way that one might be frightened or intimidated by Cooper, Wayne, Bogart or Nicholson. It's not just a question of height. Brando wasn't tall but he was powerful. The other factor that makes a star is the smile. All major film stars have a killer smile. I can't think of one who doesn't.

I also found and bought *Don't Tell Alfred* by Nancy Mitford. I'm sure I have got this somewhere (together with the rest of her books). But it cost pennies and will save me the time of trying to find it.

We watched a film called *The Lincoln Lawyer* recently and I've become a Michael Connelly fan so I bought another bunch of books by him – the author of the book on which the film was based. Connelly is a terrific writer and I now appear to be reading the books in the reverse order to the order in which he wrote them. The characters get younger with each book.

In *The Spectator*, Charles Moore reports that one diplomat told him, 'with burning anger and as if this were the knock-down argument, that if we Brexited, there would be fewer dinner invitations in Washington DC for British diplomats'. It seems that civil servants and diplomats like the EU because it is a bureaucracy rather than a democracy 'and therefore seems more rational to the official mind'.

21

Women are now being appointed to powerful positions because they are women – rather than because they are the best person for the job. This policy is widely endorsed, particularly in public life, but it is sexist and patronising and bad for the rest of us. We would all be better off if the best person was appointed.

Moreover, isn't it patronising that there are numerous special prizes for women chefs, women writers and women executives? These awards are supposed to be part of the empowerment of women but to me they simply suggest that women don't want to compete with men. I can see why women tennis players, golfers and shot putters don't want to compete with male competitors but why shouldn't women chefs and writers compete with men?

Finally, it is apparently now illegal to hate women but legal to hate men. Why isn't this sexist, and therefore illegal?

I put a sign up offering bags of free leaves to gardeners who wanted compost material. I thought perhaps one or two people passing by might throw a bagful into their cars. But I had no takers. Later, Antoinette pointed out that people are often suspicious of things which are offered free.

22

Most people don't get what they want or expect and most certainly don't get what they deserve either. Does Emily Thornbury (aka Lady Nugee) deserve to be shadow Foreign Secretary? Does Donald Trump deserve to be President of the US? Does that horrible little man Jean-Claude Juncker, a politician from Luxembourg, deserve to control Europe? He struts around like a corporal with a new stripe, full of ideas well above his lowly station. Juncker's father fought with the Nazis during World War II. His father-in-law was a Nazi propaganda chief and was responsible for enforcing a law stripping Jews of their rights. Juncker himself is, like all eurocrats, a persistently annoying little creature – like a horse fly.

I have solved our leaf problem. I bagged up piles of leaves and put up a handwritten sign offering 'Pre-compost' at £2.50 a bag. On my little sign I described the leaves as 'Fairtrade, sustainable, 100% organic and locally grown'. Within an hour I had sold five bags stuffed with leaves. That's £12.50 for a local charity and I no longer have to worry about what to do with our leaves. Peter Marshall, who runs the village shop in Bilbury would be proud of me. This may sound like a modest start to dealing with our leaf dilemma but small things can lead to big things. After all, it was the sunken road at Hougoumont which did for the French Cavalry at Waterloo. Without finding a way to get rid of our leaf surplus we might have suffocated under a leaf mountain. We have plenty more leaves. Maybe I should consider a promotional campaign on television or the internet.

23

What a treat it must be to sit in the middle of a great orchestra. Not to play, of course, but to sit and look and to bathe in the sound. What a treat. A great orchestra in search of a little extra income could, I feel sure, add notably to its income by renting out half a dozen seats in the orchestra's very heart. A chap I know was once allowed this luxury because he knew the leader of the orchestra. They gave him a clarinet to hold but removed the reed so that no sound came out of it. He didn't look as silly as if he had been sitting there empty handed.

There were four squirrels playing on the lawn today. Two of the squirrels were very small. The squirrels all use an old wooden swing seat as a playground. Suddenly the four were joined by what at first looked like a huge crow. Almost immediately, however, I realised that it was the raven not a crow. I should have realised it was a raven because it was alone. Other members of the corvidae family are gregarious. Ravens are, in my experience, solitary birds. And although the squirrels didn't see the raven as a threat it was clear that it wasn't there to play. Slowly, it walked towards the smallest of the squirrels in that heavy footed way that is common to crows and ravens. And it was obvious that it didn't see a jolly little squirrel playing on the grass. It saw lunch. The squirrel realised the danger at the last moment and he darted underneath a wooden bench overlooking the sea. The bench wasn't going to provide much cover. I opened the conservatory door and shouted at the huge bird. It looked at me but then continued its steady plod towards the baby squirrel. I shouted again and this time, very slowly and apparently exasperated, the raven took off and flew away, disappearing over the edge of the cliff. I know it has to eat but I'd rather it took its meals elsewhere.

24

A light bulb exploded today, this time in a rather nice standard lamp. This seems to happen a good deal these days. Bulbs don't just 'go' they 'go bang'. It was the devil's own game to remove the metal end of the bulb from the fitting. But I was too grateful not to have been cut to ribbons by flying glass to care much about the lamp. When I picked up the bits of glass I was amazed to see just how thin modern light bulbs are. I suspect the manufacturers are merely obeying EU rules but the bulbs are deadly.

25

Computer experts claim that artificial intelligence will soon overtake human intelligence. This is absolute bollocks. The idea of a superhuman race of robots is a science fiction writer's dream. Remember: the Daleks were scary but they couldn't go up or down stairs. I'll be impressed by robots when they can make one which can play chess and table tennis and write a sonnet. The whole artificial intelligence thing has been wildly oversold. Computers and robots can do logical things quickly and easily and they can do physical things that require programmable moves. So they will be able to deal with house sales, diagnose disease, lay bricks, cut hair and negotiate simple things like Brexit. But they won't compete with, or threaten, humans for generations, if ever.

A stupid and arrogant white student snowflake has threatened to paint over a World War I memorial because it shows only white men. I hope someone explains to her that the vast majority of servicemen who died in World War I were white and male. And that they died fighting to protect their largely white women folk and their largely white children.

It seems to me that millennials don't care much for (or bother to understand) the big issues, the big 'crimes' against humanity. They prefer to spend their energy apologising for their parents and their grandparents and demonising the white men who gave them the luxurious world they now enjoy.

The more I think about it the more I am convinced that millennials (or snowflakes) are suffering from brain damage caused by all the vaccinations they've received. I'm not kidding. I cannot think of any other logical explanation for their stupidity, their hubris and their lack of any semblance of common sense.

Antoinette tried to make our new Canon printer do some printing. It proved about as useless at printing as our lawn mower is. But, thankfully, the printer will fit into the incinerator. I think we will give up on printers and instead hire a professional scribe.

26

In town today, I watched in horror as a neatly dressed, middle aged man allow his dog to cock its leg against a bookcase full of second hand books. I seem to remember seeing a woman allow her dog to do something to some vegetables. On both occasions I was too late to say or do anything.

A little further on, a man was standing admiring at his number plate. I slowed a little.

'It's my first personalised plate,' he told me.

I studied the plate. It didn't seem to spell out a name.

'Is it your initials?' I asked him.

'No, no,' he replied quite excitedly. 'The 61 is the year I was born and the ROK stands for my nickname.'

'Rocky?' I asked.

'Yes. My name is Roehampton but when I started school the teacher wrote my name down wrong and thought I was called Rockhampton. A couple of the chaps started calling me Rocky.'

'And so you've always been 'Rocky'?' to your friends.

'Well, not really. When they found out that my name was really Roehampton the other boys stopped calling me Rocky and started calling me Fishy.'

'Ah, I see,' I said.

'I saw this number plate for sale and thought that if I revived the nickname 'Rocky' it would be just right for me – and better than 'Fish'. It was only £500.'

'The number on the plate cost you £500?'

'Yes. Good value don't you think?'

I smiled, congratulated him and moved on.

I sometimes think I have been captured by aliens and flown to another planet where things are different.

27

It is common for the elderly to see disaster ahead both for themselves and for their country. They see disaster for themselves because their experience of life tells them that things do go wrong. By the time you get to 70 years of age it is nigh on impossible not to be cynical. And older citizens see disaster for their country because they have seen politicians and 'leaders' in all walks of life making the same bad decisions over and over again.

Millennials regard old people purely as burdens – they do not see them as a source of wisdom. This shortsightedness will ensure that millennials will fail miserably in all their goals.

28

The BBC's Head of Comedy (I am actually surprised that they've got one) says that if the blokes who wrote *Monty Python* turned up in his office he wouldn't hire them because he wants writers from more diverse backgrounds. I have not heard such dangerously racist, sexist drivel since the last time I heard dangerously racist, sexist drivel. John Cleese, one of the writers concerned, insists that *Monty Python* was diverse because the writing team included 'a poof and no slave owners'.

The fact is, however, that if you want to be a successful writer (and to be accepted by establishment broadcasters, publishers and newspapers such as *The Guardian*) you need to be under 30, to commit a nasty crime, go to prison, become addicted to heroin or alcohol or both, lose a limb, cover yourself with tattoos, change sex (twice would be better than once) and be autistic or have Aspergers. Any combination of three or four of these will get you a publishing contract. All of them will probably guarantee you a TV show as well.

And if you want a plum job at the BBC then you need a vagina. Rumour has it that applicants for the chairmanship of BBC's flagship programme *Question Time* must have one. What happened to picking the best candidate? Sexism rules OK. (If they pick a Scottish presenter to replace Dimbleby then I hope they equip the programme with subtitles. When I last watched television, some time ago, I could never understand a word uttered by the BBC's Scottish presenters.) I gather that *Question Time*, by the way, is a BBC programme in which a bunch of exhibitionists tell lies to an audience of people who are too poor to buy tickets for an evening at the cinema. What sort of pride can the inevitable female appointee have in her new role? Will she wonder if she got the job because she is female rather than because she is the best person for the job? Will anyone dare suggest that since the current Prime Minister is a woman the next one must be a man?

Still, whether male, female or indifferent, anyone who wins a job at the BBC will be guaranteed a life of luxury. The BBC plans to spend £239 million on taxis and hotels for its staff over the next seven years. That's the best part of two million licence fees. (I find it curious that some of the many overpaid BBC presenters complain about their salaries being made public. If you are a civil servant, working for the Government, then it is right that the public should know what they're paying you.)

Incidentally, I see that in addition to 'losing' the early *Dr Who* programmes, *Hancock's Half Hour*, *Paul Temple* and many other classic programmes the BBC 'lost' the *World of Wooster* series (starring Ian Carmichael and Denis Price as Wooster and Jeeves). In all these cases the word 'lost' means that the BBC never bothered to keep recordings or that they re-used the tape for other programmes. Someone should be punished for this egregious vandalism. No one will be.

It seems that people are now allowed to change gender whenever they like and presumably as often as they like. This is going to create some fun the next time a ship goes down and the captain cries 'Women and children first'. There won't be any males left on board.

29

We watched the 1976 film of *Rogue Male*. It's by far the best of Geoffrey Household's books and in my view the best work Peter O'Toole ever did. It was also O'Toole's favourite of all his films. O'Toole plays an aristocrat who totters off to shoot Hitler and then gets captured. Harold Pinter plays his solicitor, Alistair Sim plays his uncle, the Earl of something or other and John Standing plays a scary Nazi who chases the O'Toole character back to England to kill him. No one has ever worn a suit as well as O'Toole in this; no one has ever played an Englishman with such panache and no one has ever walked with quite so much bounce. Afterwards we watched the original film version – *Man Hunt*, directed by Fritz Lang and made with Canadian Walter Pidgeon playing the Englishman and Englishman George Saunders playing the German. I managed to get a copy (at quite a price I have to admit) and although it's not as good as the Peter O'Toole version (made 37 years later), and not in the same class as *Mask of Dimitrios* and the *Maltese Falcon*, it's a damned good film which we will watch again. The main weakness is the young woman who helps Pidgeon. I don't think they could really make up their minds whether she was just a young girl or a prostitute.

We set off in the Cherokee today and I had a scare when the steering wheel suddenly got quite hot. It was very pleasant but I expected to see flames pouring from the dashboard until I realised that the wheel had heated itself up in response to the near freezing temperature outside (caused, no doubt, by Global Freezing).

I read today that a bloke who makes floor mats has bought a Ferrari for $70 million. This seems to me to be a sure sign of financial irrationality. If this chap had invented an improved wheel then it would be reasonable for him to have $70 million on a car. But, according to *Fortune* magazine, he flogs floor mats. It's doubly dotty since a few weeks later a similar car was sold for under $50 million. This sort of lunacy usually precedes a drop in the stock market.

There was a Losers' Vote march in London the other day and the Remainers are claiming that 700,000 people attended in support of Hitler and the Nazis. (They didn't actually mention Hitler because they like to forget his part in creating the EU.) This figure appears to have been accepted but since the Remainers exaggerate everything I suspect that the real figure was probably a fraction of that. The march was clearly far, far smaller than other recent London marches (such as the one against Tony Blair's war in Iraq). The best independent figure was 150,000 though the largely pro EU media accepted the claim made by the Remainers. The Remainers seem to feel that their march entitles them to overturn the will of the 17.4 million who voted to leave the European Union. They are ignoring the fact that even according to their absurd claim most of the country didn't support the march. Besides, even if the figure were 700,000, all it would prove is that there are 700,000 lunatics in the country and we knew that anyway.

The only truth is that the Remainers lie and lie again. The Brexiteers should announce that over 7,000,000 people marched through Wyre Piddle in Worcestershire – all marching in support of Brexit. Oh, how wearying it all is. I shall in future think of my country as it was, as it used to be, and not how it is now and how it is going to be. England has a past to be proud of but there is no future. Maybe 70,000,000 protestors will stand in a field in Rutland to demand a Third Referendum if there is a Second Referendum.

30

I am beginning to understand how this internet thing works.

I had an email today from someone offering to pay me $50 a pop to put stuff onto my website as long as I didn't say that the items were sponsored or were advertisements.

I said thank you but no thank you.

But if they offered $500 would I still say 'no'?

Yes, of course.

What about $5,000?

Still no thanks.

What about $50,000 per item? Would I accept that?

I suppose I might as long as I had total control and could reject items I didn't like. But not otherwise.

However, since the chances of anyone pushing up the loot from $50 to $50,000 isn't likely, I don't have much to worry about.

I dreamt that Antoinette and I were in a hotel. We were trying to sleep but a waiter kept bringing us registered packets. The packets all appeared to be very important but when we opened them they contained nothing but unwanted advertising material. This went on all night. In my dream we both became increasingly frustrated and exhausted by the constant, pointless interruptions.

When will people realise that the National Health Service does more harm than good?

British politicians (and much of the electorate) seem to regard the NHS as a sacred cow – a beast which must be fed and watered with whatever it needs. A few years ago, the Government spent 23% of its money on the NHS. Today the NHS sucks up nearly 40% of the Government's entire budget. Other departments (education, defence, the environment, etc.) have had to suffer savage cuts so that the NHS bureaucrats can be kept happy.

The NHS now has a bigger budget than many countries. And it employs more people than many countries have as citizens.

All this would be fine and dandy if the NHS provided value for money. But it doesn't. The UK comes way down the list when its health care is measured against other countries in the world. We don't prevent preventable deaths. We deal badly with cancer, heart disease and other major disorders. The NHS has waiting lists (which, as I have been pointing out for 50 years, are virtually unknown anywhere else in the world). The NHS wastes money in the billions; it employs far too many administrators; it saves money by putting patients into beds where the sheets haven't been changed and it still has mixed sex wards. There is more thieving in the NHS than any other large organisation. The NHS is now one of the few organisations in the world that still relies on pagers and fax machines. NHS hospitals are so filthy that they are the world leaders in the incidence of antibiotic resistant killer bugs. Patients in the NHS are more likely to develop stomach bugs, or to die of infections they've caught in a hospital, than patients anywhere else. The food in NHS hospitals costs a fortune to produce but it is so unhealthy it is deadly. You'd be better off eating from a hot dog stall than an NHS kitchen. As I have been pointing out for years, the NHS is so expensive to run it would be cheaper to provide everyone in Britain with free, private health insurance and to provide private treatment for every patient who needs care. That's how bad the NHS has become.

None of this will be news to readers of my books on health care. But it really is about time that the inadequacies of the NHS were recognised by more people. At the moment the NHS puts administrators first, medical staff second and patients a distant last.

If politicians don't do something to control the NHS then the health service will bankrupt Britain. Politicians don't seem to care about it killing patients. Maybe they'll care about the money running out.

I can't quite decide whether French President Macron is arrogant, narcissistic, plain mad or suffering from a Napoleon complex. Unbelievably he has a bigger ego than Donald Trump. The fellow seems to have developed a spend, spend, spend complex as long as he is spending taxpayers' money. One of his notable, flourishes of Sun King recklessness was the purchase of £500,000 worth of new crockery for the Elysee Palace. Then there was the £1 million pound birthday party. And the new swimming pool at his 'official' summer chateau. I can't help feeling that France and the world would be considerably safer (and France would certainly be better off) if Macron were placed in a locked, padded room. I'll look after the key.

Macron's obsessing with ensuring that Hitler's dream comes true, and that the United States of Europe is created (presumably with him as President) has resulted in some strange behaviour – behaviour which has, I confess, made me want to give the smug little runt a good smacking.

He has, for example, claimed that all the people who advocated Brexit are liars. He might be better off trying to control his own country where his unpopularity is ever rising. His attempt to control the French civil service and the unions is failing, of course and although there was for a moment or two a small chance that he might cut the cost of the French State that moment has now passed. Why should railway workers take poorer contracts when there is enough money around for the President to spend, spend, spend on himself?

In summary: Macron is a smug, self-satisfied, egotistical, greedy little runt who needs to have a good smacking and to be sent to bed without any supper.

The odd thing is that the French know that France has not existed as a separate country for generations

Politically and economically France is totally controlled by Germany through the European Union. French politicians have handed over their democracy, their freedom and their currency and accepted German rule. These days everyone claims to believe in freedom, equality and democracy but no one actually wants it and, certainly, no one is prepared to fight for it. (Everyone within the EU can now say that they are, in economic terms, German.)

Culturally, France has been very effectively colonised by the UK and the USA. The French language, for example, now contains a vast number of words stolen from English. France no longer has any serious cultural life of its own. (It is also a plain fact that no one outside France speaks French other than to mention, in passing, that their uncle's pen lies within the bureau of their aunt.)

The French have given up trying to stop these things happening (surrender is a favourite French characteristic) and they have just become increasingly xenophobic.

Understand all this and you understand France and the increasingly odd outpourings from the diminutive drama queen Macron.

My suspicion that French President Macron is humourless and so far up himself that he can probably clean his teeth from the inside, gained credence when he told off a child for calling him Manu (his nickname).

The appalling Macron told the child that he must call him Mr President or 'Sir'.

The child apologised but Macron went back later, found the boy, and continued his self-important rant. And after that he put out a video of the encounter and attacked the boy once more on his Twitter account. The boy was afterwards reported to be in hiding and suffering from depression.

What a self-important little twat Manu is. I fail to understand why he wasn't arrested for bullying a minor. If a school teacher had reacted in such a dramatic, over the top way he or she would, I suspect, have been arrested.

We went to our home in the Cotswolds to bring away the remains of our personal belongings. We both noticed again that there were no creatures to be seen or heard in the garden. There were hundreds of apples on the grass, uneaten. There weren't even any beak marks. There were nuts left on of the hazel trees. There were no badger or squirrel tracks anywhere. The animals and birds in this part of Gloucestershire have all been shot or poisoned. I felt close to weeping.

The photographer who had been in the house to take some snaps had tossed a towel on the floor and piled all the cleaning materials into the bath. I understand that he did this so that he could take 'cleaner' pictures but not putting them back where he had found them showed acute disrespect.

We put one of those plastic Halloween skeletons in the cupboard under the stairs and draped cobwebs around it. That should be a nice surprise for the estate agents and any potential buyer viewing the house.

When we drove home we were both exhausted and aching. We agreed that heated car seats are probably the greatest invention since the wheel.

On the way home, I realised that we should have put Antoinette's infrared wildlife camera into the cupboard to take photographs when the door is opened. Why do these good ideas always come 100 miles too late? Mind you, the camera is in Devon so it wouldn't have been possible even if we'd thought of it.

A very good chum bought a ticket for the Edgbaston Test Match against the Australians next summer. He paid £113 for a ticket for the day. This seemed an outrageous sum to me so I did some checking. A seat for the Edgbaston Test in 1958 cost 10 shillings (or 50 pence in modern money). In 2018, the average wage is £27,600 and in 1958, the average wage was £1,500. This means that although average wages have gone up by 18 times the cost of a ticket to watch a cricket match has risen by 226 times. It's hardly surprising that fewer and fewer people now watch cricket. It seems to me that the authorities are making the classic mistake of responding to poorer attendance figures by putting up their prices in order to continue making as much money as they were before. This doesn't work, of course, because the higher prices mean that even fewer people buy tickets. And in a few years' time the end result will be that the sole ticket buyer will have to pay five million pounds for his ticket.

A snotty millennial whom we know vaguely told us that it is apparently fashionable now for him and his fellow millennials to do 100 km runs. He went on and on about how wonderful this is.

'Oh I've done that,' I said when he'd finished. 'Miles not kilometres though.'

'Really?' he said, stunned rather than impressed.

Antoinette looked at me.

'Oh yes,' I said, very matter of fact. 'Several times in fact.'

He looked at me, open mouthed, as he attempted to take this in. 'When was your last 100 km?' he wanted to know eventually.

'Spread out over the last three or four years,' I told him. 'I didn't do the 100miles all at once. That would have been greedy. I did a couple of miles one week and a few hundred yards the next. Not all running, though. Mostly walking.'

When we left him he was still trying to understand. That's the one thing I love about millennials: they're so wonderfully stupid.

Drivers are told that they will be able to drive a new Tesla electric car with their mobile phone – controlling the car as though it were a radio controlled model. I can think of a zillion problems with this. First, I don't like the idea of driving alongside a car being controlled by some twelve year old playing with his dad's phone. Second, since phone hacking is apparently easy, how long will it be before Mr and Mrs Snowflake are driving along the motorway at 70 mph when their car is suddenly controlled by an idiot on a motorway bridge who has taken over their car with his phone and decides it would be fun to see them doing doughnuts across the central reservation.

November

1

The Government's Chief Medical Officer (described by the BBC as 'Britain's top doctor') has fiercely criticised those who dispute the value of vaccination.

She says vaccinations are safe and she seems to believe they are effective.

I disagree.

And I firmly believe that the scientific facts support my contention that vaccines are dangerous and ineffective.

The problem is that there is no-one who believes in vaccination will debate the issue. The vaccinators prefer to bully their opponents into silence and to suppress uncomfortable truths.

I have many times challenged doctors who believe in vaccination to debate with me.

The challenge has been regularly refused.

So today I put a specific challenge on my website.

This time it is a challenge aimed directly at Dame Sally Davies.

'If you believe so vehemently that vaccines are safe and effective, will you debate the issue with me – live on television and radio?'

If Dame Sally Davies genuinely believes what she is saying then why would she not welcome a chance to debate with me – and to destroy me and my arguments?

Sadly, the fact is that it is easy to make a stand when you have the Government, the medical establishment, the media and the pharmaceutical industry standing four-square behind you.

But it is difficult to defend that stance when the scientific facts and the medical evidence are arraigned against you.

And so, sadly, I very much doubt if Dame Sally will accept my challenge.

If I do ever find myself in a studio with her, my first question will be: 'Does the Government still secretly give huge amounts of taxpayers' money to the parents of vaccine damaged children?'

I was right about cancer and the immune system, I was right about the exaggerated risk of AIDS, I was right about the psychotropic drugs, I was right about the relationship between meat eating and cancer, I was right about tap water containing drug residues, I was right about the danger of overprescribing antibiotics and I was right about several dozen other things. All these things are well documented (and in every case attracted venomous criticism from the drug company backed medical establishment and many prejudiced and ignorant journalists) and I mention them not to boast but merely to give support to my claim that my view on the safety and effectiveness of vaccines might be worth consideration.

(Minutes after this piece was put up on www.vernoncoleman.com, our web host server went down and, when it was restored, the number of hits to the website collapsed. In my experience, nothing tells you that you're right more than knowing that 'they' want to keep you quiet.)

Now that the colder weather is here the birds and squirrels are getting through the best part of a pound of sunflower hearts every day. There is always a sparrow, a pheasant or a squirrel waiting for breakfast when we get up. I cannot think of a more joyful way to spend such a small amount of money.

The English used to have wonderful manners. For example, we knew how to queue properly. Look back at photographs from the 1960s and you will see (besides very few foreign cars and un-crowded streets) that cars were often left with their windows open. There were far fewer policemen then but crime was relatively uncommon.

But the nation's manners are deteriorating rapidly and life has become a free for all.

I blame the European Union and all the immigration it has foisted upon us.

We have imported all sorts of bad things since we've been in the EU. We've imported extremism, violence and damage to our culture. But we've also imported bad manners. Our streets reek of urine and worse, our trains are full of yobs and our cities are too dangerous to enter after dark. Of course, it doesn't help that there are never any policemen around. And, sadly, cowardice now appears to be a police service requirement.

Antoinette says that she first realised that civilisation had come to an end when she noticed that pedestrians, even older ones, had stopped waving 'thank you' to drivers who stopped to let them cross the road.

I know that drivers are supposed to stop at zebra crossings and red lights, and that the wave was always discretionary but it was a sign of politeness that reminded us that we were civilised. It was like men lifting their hats when greeting or saying goodbye to people.

'But drivers have to stop at zebra crossings and when the traffic lights are against them,' pointed out a friend. 'They don't have to say 'thank you'.'

'I know,' said Antoinette. 'That's the point.'

2

I discovered today (courtesy of Martin Vander Weyer in *The Spectator*) that back in 2004 Gordon Brown opened the new London headquarters of Lehman Brothers. As he did so he said: 'Your great company can look forward with hope.'

While out shopping, Antoinette saw a Christian standing on a soap box who was preaching. To her horror he was being loudly abused by young people who appeared to be Muslims. They had apparently become accustomed to shouting their abuse on social media and obviously felt comfortable about transferring their abuse to real life. One young woman in particular was screaming at him because he was talking about Christianity. We have become a country in which the Muslims have been allowed to take over. Their rights and feelings must at all costs and at all times be given precedence over our Christian rights and feelings. We are such a weak and feeble people now. As a nation we deserve to die. I wonder if that Muslim woman has any idea what would happen if a Christian shouted abuse at an Imam in a Muslim country. Hands chopped off? Stoning? Execution?

We popped into a record store (there are still one or two) and looked for an album by The Gypsy Kings. Antoinette found their 'Greatest Hits' album and 'The Best of the Gypsy Kings'. I found 'The Very Best of the Gypsy Kings' and 'The Essential Gypsy Kings'.

'Which shall we get?' asked Antoinette.

I put the CDs back on the rack. 'Let's wait for the Very Best of the Essential Greatest Hits of The Gypsy Kings.'

Antoinette bought me a copy of a magazine called *Shipping*. It's all about ships. I know nothing about the world's merchant navies but it's another small world and I love peeping into other worlds. It looks fascinating. When I've read the magazine I will know more about merchant shipping than 99% of the population.

We parted for a while to look for presents. After an hour or so I found Antoinette at the till in a shop at the top of the main street. She had four bags full of Christmas shopping and the assistant was filling a fifth.

'Excuse me, madam!' I said, approaching and speaking sternly. 'Do you realise there is a new EU law restricting shoppers to two bags of shopping at a time?'

Antoinette looked embarrassed. I turned to the assistant. 'Don't you realise it is an offence to aid and abet a shopper with more than the allowed quota of shopping bags.'

The shop assistant looked startled and guilty and started to stutter her defence. I had to explain that it was a joke.

The Greens want all the oil to stay in the ground. What a pity they aren't bright enough to understand that hydrocarbons are essential for the manufacture of fertilisers. Without oil, and fertilisers, we will go back to the agricultural stone-age and most of us (including the Greens) will starve to death. Those of us living in the most overcrowded parts of the world (such as Britain) will die first. Still, the almost complete absence of electricity will mean we won't have to put up with the millennials complaining about it on social media. Incidentally, I haven't heard the Greens campaigning to stop child exploitation in the digging out of the cobalt required for their electric cars.

A reader has kindly sent me a list of her favourite authors. The list is quite long and I am 19th. I wrote back and told her that I liked my other readers much more, adding that they were too numerous to list individually.

3

A central heating engineer came round to deal with a couple of problems.

First, we have a leak from one of our Edwardian iron radiators. The engineer seemed to think that this could not be solved without closing off the radiator – a tricky task since some bright Herbert of a painter has painted over the taps and valves.

Second, I asked him to look at our expansion vessel. Ever since our very expensive and interminably troublesome new boiler was installed I have had to put additional supplies of water into the system every couple of days. Whenever we go away for more than two days we come back to a cold house and no cold water. (Actually, we got round the cold house problem by buying a pile of thermostatically controlled electric radiators which are fantastic).

During the icy weather last winter I noticed that the expansion vessel was leaking water into the boiler room. I spotted this because there was a large puddle on the floor and when I checked I found that the overflow pipe which goes outside was frozen. I had not connected these two problems until I glanced at a book on plumbing which I found in a cupboard in our house in Gloucestershire. We were emptying cupboards and so on preparatory to selling and I found the book which Antoinette bought and which I haven't looked at for years. I found a picture of a red tank which is the same as the one we have – an expansion vessel – and reading the text it occurred to me that our falling pressure and the water in the overflow could well be linked. When I put my thought to the engineer he visibly sneered and laughed. But I asked him to check the expansion vessel and when he did so he found that it had no air in it. So he got a pump and put in some air. And now the system holds its pressure and there is no overflow leak.

The engineer was delighted with himself for solving these problems and so, with some irony, I congratulated him. Where there had been sneering there was now preening.

For nearly two years I have been putting water into this damned system because they failed to correct a simple problem. And at night we have been besieged by gurglings as air travelled through the pipes.

In my experience, heating engineers live in a world of their own: in a village somewhere way beyond the city of the stupid.

We still have our leaky radiator upstairs but I found some stuff which supposedly seals leaky radiators. The engineer put two containers full of that into the system and we turned on the central heating in order to push the stuff around the pipes. It may not work because our pipes are so huge and our radiators so vast. But it's worth a try.

The whole visit was made even more traumatic by the fact that the engineer who came, refused to remove his shoes when he came into the house. He said that he was not allowed to do this because of health and safety regulations. Apparently, the eurocrats have ruled on the wisdom or otherwise of heating engineers padding around in their socks. The law can't possibly have anything to do with toes being injured by falling spanners because he was wearing pumps rather than steel capped boots.

When he needed a ladder, I offered to lend him one of ours but he refused saying that he wasn't allowed to use a customer's ladder for health and safety reasons. He went away and came back with exactly the same model of ladder as I offered him three quarters of an hour earlier. His ladder was battered rickety. Ours is brand new.

Workmen have twigged, at last, that if you mention the magic words 'health and safety' you can get away with anything.

I sincerely wish we'd never had the damned heating system installed. We would have saved £20,000 and a good deal of heartache if we'd merely bought a couple of dozen electric radiators fitted with thermostats and stuffed one or two in each room. The ones which we have as backup are brilliant. They come on automatically when the temperature in a room falls and then go off when the temperature in the room goes up. They're simple, effective and reliable and they appear to be safe.

Half way through the morning Antoinette called me. The radiator in a spare bedroom had leaked from the valve which the heating engineer had opened in order to 'bleed' it. The carpet is now soaked and the ceiling in the hall below has a large and noticeable damp patch. I am furious. I asked the engineer if he had checked that he'd closed all the radiator valves and he assured me that he had. Why are workmen so bloody careless? We have loads of things around the house which need doing but we aren't getting them done partly because we know there will be loads of hassle and mess and also because we know that the workmen will probably leave us with a pile of new problems. It was a plumber working here in Devon whose stupidity and incompetence resulted in our losing an entire ceiling. And a heating engineer in Gloucestershire made such a mess of servicing our boiler that, unnoticed by us, water poured out of an overflow pipe for months.

The problem, I know, is that everything I tell workmen is ignored because I am old and so they perceive me as a doddering idiot. If workmen dared to treat women or black people in the way that they treat the elderly they would find themselves breaking rocks or sewing mailbags.

I really understand at last why so many men in business wear wigs and have plastic surgery. To look old is to be invisible.

The BBC is showing international rugby. They are showing live matches involving Scotland, Wales and Ireland. But they are not showing the England games live – even though there are far more English licence fee payers than licence fee payers for the other countries combined. Why am I not surprised? The EU hates England (which it plans to break into nine regions) and, of course, the BBC receives EU money. Why is the BBC allowed to get away with what appears to me to be blatant racism? The answer, of course, is that the English are far too polite to say anything. The Scots and the Welsh would riot. The English merely find an upper lip to bite.

So far this year, 117 people have been murdered in London. The Muslim Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, has been quoted as saying that to make progress in dealing with the problem can take up to 10 years. This nasty little EU lover is a disgrace. He would better serve Londoners if, instead of campaigning for the EU, he spent more time doing what he is paid for.

4

I have acquired a skill. When I look out of the bedroom window in the morning I can tell which way the wind is blowing without even looking at our flag. It is remarkably easy to work out the wind direction simply by looking at the waves in the sea. So, this morning, I was able to tell that the wind was blowing SSE. The Met Office website showed the accuracy of this judgement. I now have to find a commercial application for this newly acquired skill.

Travellers on a British Airways flight from Orlando, Florida which was due to reach London eight hours later, have arrived at their destination after travelling for 77 hours – including a spell spent sleeping on the floor at JFK airport in New York. And people wonder why we have abandoned our passports.

In America the nine Supreme Court Justices are appointed for life. This means that, in theory at least, America's highest court could consist of nine people suffering from dementia. Who would tell them? Who could do anything about it?

Of course, it is perfectly possible that no one would notice.

The very idea of tenure is lunacy solidified. The idea that teachers or anyone else should have a job for life is madness.

I saw a review on the internet today which gave a book one star and read (in its entirety): 'I don't want to read this book.' That was it. That was the whole review. And the writer of the review had given the book one star. But that wasn't the surprising bit. The surprising bit was that two people had ticked the review as 'helpful'.

5

I am sick of the Irish. Today, there are reports that Irish protestors have been trying to disrupt the sale of British Legion poppies. The Irish did not support Britain during WWII and it isn't difficult to argue that they did more to help the Nazis than they did to help Britain. Now, the Irish Government is doing everything it can to support the EU in its battle against Britain. The Irish seem to have forgotten that when they flirted with bankruptcy in 2008, it was Britain (and not the EU) which bailed them out. I sincerely hope that the next time the Irish come begging for help we boot them away.

I see that the Cork City Council spent 5,936 euros on polishing door knobs before Prince Charles visited the city for a day earlier this year.

Witch hunts are now a regular part of life in Britain. Individuals who dare to speak out about anything important are quite likely to have their heads shot off by ignorant, bazooka waving nonentities. What a dull and depressing future we all have. Minority opinions are now regarded as criminal by hysterical snowflakes who regard any sort of debate as quite unacceptable. (I still blame the suppression of holocaust denial for our strange world in which statues of great men must be brought down to satisfy the bigots and prejudiced snowflake hordes. Once we had made it illegal to express one opinion it was easy for bigots and fascists to argue that other debates should be outlawed and that those expressing unfashionable opinions should be demonised – whether dead or alive.)

We took two huge bags of books, DVDs and stamp albums to a branch of Marie Curie. The assistant could not even be bothered to say 'thank you'. I sometimes wonder why we bother taking anything to charity shops. In another charity shop, Antoinette saw a frail looking, old man trying to decide whether he could afford to buy a blanket. She bought it for him. (He was reluctant to accept the gift but Antoinette told a pork pie and claimed that she'd had a good win on the Premium Bonds.) This was noble as well as generous, for Antoinette had a terrible disappointment today. A few weeks ago, she took five paintings in to a gallery to be framed. Four staff members who saw the paintings were excited and expressed enthusiasm for putting the pictures into the gallery. There was talk of at least one picture figuring prominently in a window display. Naturally, Antoinette was thrilled. She left the pictures with the gallery who promised to send them away to be framed. Today, on returning to pay for the framing, she expected to arrange a contract for the pictures to appear in the gallery. But she was told that her pictures were similar in content to pictures painted by a friend of the assistant, an established artist who had seen Antoinette's innovative paintings. ‘We can’t take your pictures,’ said the woman behind the counter, ‘because it will upset her.’

Antoinette, who had been full of hope, was crushed. She was almost in tears at the unfairness of this.

‘Do some more paintings,’ said the woman behind the counter. ‘And bring those in a couple of months’ time. We’ll send them away to be framed for you.’

This seemed to me to be a scam to trick Antoinette into having more pictures expensively framed.

We left, taking all the pictures with us. To say that I was furious is like saying that the Himalayas are lumpy.

I have promised Antoinette that we will hire a local gallery and that I will organise and promote an exhibition of her work. Actually, I am tempted to buy one of the many empty shops in the area and open a gallery and framing shop in competition. I’ve had dafter ideas. Maybe we could sell art materials too – paints, brushes, canvases and so on. Artists in the area are poorly served for there is no shop in the area offering such items for sale.

Statistics are dangerous. Here is an illustration. More children are assaulted by people they know than by strangers. The only logical, scientific conclusion is that children should talk only to strangers and never to friends or relatives.

In an attempt to dry out the carpet which the idiot engineer soaked when he left a radiator dripping, we had to put on the central heating and use two high powered electric fans. I reckon that drying the wet carpet will have cost us more than buying a new one but if we bought a new one we would have to hire a carpet fitter to fit it and carpet fitters are high, very high, on our list of workmen we cannot stand. They are, as a breed, unbelievably arrogant and regard themselves as somewhere above Foreign Secretaries and Brain Surgeons in the scheme of things.

During the summer, the beach below us remained pretty well deserted. There are more people on the beach at 11 pm on a November night when there is a sea fishing tournament. Even during the best days of the summer there were rarely more than a dozen little boats out in the bay. There were, however, always a couple of those strange boards which were popular this season. You hire them on the beach and then stand on them and paddle around. I don’t know what they’re called. ‘Falling Boards’ or ‘Splash Boards’ is my guess because most of the people who try them just fall off with a big splash.

Most of the sailors who own small boats cannot possibly use them more than half a dozen days a year. I really don’t know why they bother. The local harbour is jam packed with small boats which never go anywhere. If the tide is right then the wind is wrong and if the wind is right then the tide is wrong.

Whenever I see a larger boat I am tempted to try to persuade Antoinette to come with me to the boatyard to buy something seaworthy. But that is only because I love Joseph Slocum’s account of his adventures so much. I am a fool to think I could emulate Slocum. But I am sane enough to realise that I could not.

During the last 35 years of his lifetime Charles L. Dodgson (better known today as Lewis Carroll) wrote or received 98,721 letters. He kept a log of the ones going out and the ones coming in. That’s approximately eight pieces of correspondence a day.

6

The Guardian says today (on its front page) that ‘Nine in 10 child tonsil operations unnecessary’.

News?

I could have told them that in the 1970s.

The Guardian can hardly call itself a newspaper any more.

It is impossible now to differentiate between news and rumour. Scientific truths are denied and suppressed and fake science is promoted with enthusiasm. Worse still, those who dare question these things are demonised.

There is no longer any debate of serious scientific issues because the establishment (which now obeys the dictates of social media) has decided what must be believed.

We are living in Orwell’s *1984*, which Remainers seem to regard as a manual rather than a warning.

Doctors who dare to question vaccines and vaccination are vilified on social media. The attacks are orchestrated by drug companies and their acolytes. Social media encourages fear and dishonesty and has destroyed the idea of public debate. So, for example, there is no debate about gay marriage or the rights of gays to adopt children because these are regarded, by the self-appointed guardians of social media, as subjects unsuitable for public discussion. Worse still youngsters are manipulated in such a way that they become addicted to social media and learn to design their own feelings and opinions in order to satisfy the majority mood.

Some of the social media sites are positively Machiavellian and evil in the way they control their users. Snapchat and Facebook are full of psychological hooks designed to keep the young and innocent online; almost scared to turn off their phones. Advertisers have for years used psychological tricks to snare consumers. (Back in the early 1960s, I remember reading Vance Packard's classic *Hidden Persuaders*. Today, the behemoths of social media use infinitely more ruthless techniques and psychological tricks to increase their profits and to create anxiety and depression among young users. 'If you don't visit this site at least once every twenty minutes then you will develop a terrible disease and die slowly and in great pain.')The inevitable result is that the incidence of mental illness among the young has now reached scary proportions. The big, hugely powerful profitable companies such as Facebook are entirely to blame for damaging a whole generation. The bosses don't give a damn, of course, as long as the money keeps pouring in. You might think that Zuckerberg, who looks as though he has been made up to look like a constipated Martian in an Ed Wood movie, and may well be for all I know and care, would be satisfied with the billions he has acquired – especially since he was, I seem to remember, sued for nicking the idea for Facebook. But no, he wants billions more and he doesn't give a damn how he gets them. (It's good to know that Nick Clegg has joined Facebook as an employee. It means he will be living in America and trying to persuade the EU to be nicer to his new employer. I wonder if Clegg will continue to claim the secretarial allowance for former Prime Ministers. Last year, Clegg claimed £114,982 of the £115,000 allowance, though the odd thing is that he was never actually Prime Minister. I think maybe I'll claim the allowance too. I reckon it's a safe bet that the allowance is tax free. I think I could probably stretch the £115,000 to cover a little office and a secretary. It is amazing, is it not, just how well our politicians seem to do when they quit their parliamentary careers and give up their expense accounts. Not all of them do as well as George 'Nine Jobs' Osborne, but they all seem to do remarkably well for themselves.)

I strongly suspect that we are close to Peak Social Media. People are going to stop using the silliest of the silly websites.

Why anyone still has an account with Facebook is a puzzle to me. Why would anyone willingly give so much of their personal information (permanently, remember) to such a company? Facebook has boasted to drug companies that it can offer them new features, including one that allows them to switch off comments on their pages and ads to 'avoid the negative publicity associated with the legal requirement of reporting adverse reactions to drugs'. That should tell everyone a good deal about the morality of Zuckerberg and Facebook. I am probably not allowed to say this but he appears to me to be a greedy little bastard and his company appears to be a greedy big company. The innocents who use Facebook would be much safer simply painting all their personal details on a wall near their home. How many, I wonder, would willingly do that? Is Zuckerberg the most evil person on the planet? Quite possibly. (Memo to Zuckerberg: promising to leave your ill-gotten gains to charity doesn't make you a good person.)

The people on Facebook and Twitter think they are users and believe that they are in control of their environment. They are not. They are simply the 'product'; fodder for the evil marketeers.

Personally, I am convinced that Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Google, etc., now do far more harm than the tobacco industry. All social media sites should have health warnings attached to them. There is firm evidence now that people who use Twitter actually prefer fake news to real news. Twitter users are much more likely to spread lies than truths – as long as those lies fit in with their prejudices. By swamping users with information (much of which is false and deliberately misleading), the big internet companies adversely affect productivity and they make it difficult for individuals and companies to find accurate and reliable facts. Companies such as Google have contributed nothing new or positive to society – all they've done is damage long-standing and sometimes reliable media companies. I find it nauseating to hear the billionaire owners of these companies being feted as though they had done something worthwhile – rather than merely profitable.

And why do social media sites allow snarly and vindictive little twats to hide behind pseudonyms? All those who use them should give their real names. If they did so there would be far less trouble because people only become really nasty when they are allowed to hide behind pseudonyms. Online anonymity enables trolls to cause pain without risk. Online abuse would stop overnight if everyone using the web had to put their real name to anything they wrote.

Zuckerberg has admitted that the majority of Facebook users should assume that their public data has been collected by automated software and sold and distributed. I wonder how many people with Facebook pages know that the company not only owns whatever has been put up on the site but will continue to retain that material and to own the copyright even if they delete that information or those pictures. Facebook holds the equivalent of 400,000 Word documents for each user.

If you are on Facebook, the company stores every message which has ever been sent or received, every file ever sent or received, all the contacts in your telephone and all the audio messages you have ever sent or received. Facebook can also access your webcam and your microphone so they know who you've been talking to and what you said to them. They also store every email you have ever sent or received.

Google stores search history across all your devices and even if you delete your search history on one device, it still keeps all the data saved on your other devices.

Has the internet been a good thing or a bad thing? On balance, I would say it has done considerably more harm than good. Notably, productivity rates have fallen since the World Wide Web was introduced. And the amount of stress and mental illness caused by the internet is now an epidemic.

Artificial intelligence is overrated too. Supporters claim that those who lose their jobs because of robots can be retrained to do management jobs. But most manual workers are not intellectually capable of taking on management roles (even if there were enough jobs available) and many simply aren't interested in taking on more responsibility. The supporters of AI also fail to see that it won't just be manual jobs which will disappear. Robots will soon be able to replace doctors, lawyers, architects, financiers and computer technicians of all kinds. (I don't, however, believe that robots will be writing diaries.)

The people working in artificial intelligence are too ignorant and stupid to realise all this.

Figures show that the internet works better (download speeds are generally faster) in Slovenia and Romania than it does in Britain. And that is just another reason why Britain should now be classified as a Third World Country.

Our house agents seem to think that our Cotswold property will be difficult to sell because it has mullion windows and a good deal of wild garden. Apparently people prefer double glazing and a neat garden. Surely, such folk would be better off buying a flat or something in the suburbs? The agents sent us an email to tell us that someone called the Barrington-Barringtons wanted to view the house. I sent them an email asking if it was the Dorset Barrington-Barringtons or the Dulwich Barrington-Barringtons. If the agents are unfamiliar with Bertie Wooster's Aunt Agatha they won't get the joke.

Is it an EU law that all action films must now include a rooftop chase?

7

There has, of course, been no response to my vaccination challenge to Dame Sally, the Government's Chief Medical Officer. It is my experience that people in positions of power are quick to speak up, and happy to have their statements publicised, but slow to defend what they say when they are challenged.

The estate agents sent an email to let us know that a bloke has viewed the house in the Cotswolds which we are trying to sell. We don't really want to sell but if Corbyn gets in he will have us shot for having more than one house. And Britain is now so overcrowded, and the police so slow-witted and vindictive, that travelling anywhere by motorway is a nightmare. The putative buyer thinks the kitchen is in the wrong place. He says the area was too dark and wet (there was a thunderstorm at the time) and that the house is too expensive for him. So, that was a worthwhile exercise. Thank heavens we didn't have to show him round. I apologised to the agent for the rain and pointed out that I didn't think there was much I could do about the position of the kitchen since it's been in its present position for 250 years and is reluctant to move. I told the agents we didn't want to sell to this geezer and that he should bugger off and buy a flat in Sunderland.

I hope Martin Lewis has more success in sending books on finance to schools than I had when I sent out books on vivisection. Lewis has reportedly sent out thousands of books designed to educate schoolchildren. When I sent copies of copies of books I'd written about animal experiments to every school in Britain, I received a steady stream of abuse from teachers who didn't want their pupils exposed to scary stuff like facts.

The Birmingham Repertory Theatre (in the person of someone called Daniel Bailey) has rejected *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War* (the play) on the rather strange grounds that they thought that the first part of the play should be cut. They wrote by email and kept my script and stamps. I didn't really understand this notion because without the death of Mr Caldicot, there would be no reason (or opportunity) for Mrs Caldicot's son to put her mother into a home for old folks. And without the death of her awful husband, there would have been no 'liberation' and no chance for her to change from a mouse to a lion. We would lose motive and opportunity – two vital ingredients for any story.

I always believed that the principle of play writing was fairly simple. In the first act you get your hero up a tree. In the second act you describe their time up the tree. In the third act you bring them down. The Birmingham Repertory Theatre people don't seem to me to have heard of this basic dramatic principle. Is this why so many modern films and books are incomprehensible and pointless? Moreover, if we remove the first third of the story we will confuse the several million folk who have seen the film or read the book.

Still, even if they didn't seem to me to understand Mrs Caldicot, or the play about her, I suppose it was nice of them to bother to write to me at last. And it is curiously comforting to know that at least some of the supposed professionals seem to me to understand the principles of drama even less than I do. I was not surprised to discover that the theatre receives Arts Council funding and also gets a big chunk of money from the local council. I have never understood why theatres should receive taxpayers' money.

One thing does occur to me.

The chap who wrote to me from the Birmingham Repertory Theatre appears to be a young black fellow. I cannot help wondering what the response might be if an elderly white director read and rejected a play by and about the cultural experiences of a young, black man – especially if the director didn't appear to the playwright to understand the play or the characters.

I'm not complaining. Just curious. I didn't expect anything more, to be honest. The British theatre seems to be pretty weighted against older, white, male authors – especially neophytes. But it's a thought, isn't it?

We have decided to put the play onto Amazon and to make it available for amateur dramatic groups to put on free of charge. The National Theatre and a producer whose name I forget, haven't bothered to reply, having presumably decided to keep my stamps and use them to pay their gas bills. I now doubt if they will reply at all.

A leading Silicon Valley guru says that companies should ignore customers' complaints. I thought everyone in Silicon Valley already did that. And the utility companies certainly do.

Neither Antoinette nor I ever accept updates for phones or computers.

Nothing ever works properly afterwards and since Apple has admitted that it deliberately designs its phones so that they work less efficiently as they age it is not unreasonable to assume that the updates are designed to make the phone crash so that a new ones has to be bought.

Nice world ain't it?

8

I have discovered today that our old fashioned front door bell pull doesn't work. For a moment I thought of getting someone to repair it. But then I realised that no one can get to it to pull it since our main gates are kept locked and the side gate is also locked. Actually, we have five door bells and only one of them works. We have no intention of having any of them mended.

Back in the days before Hitler's descendants ruled our world, it was common for school cricket sides to include a young master in the side. Beccles College in Suffolk chose wisely. Their master was G.L.Jessop. In 1895, he scored 1,058 runs at an average of 132.25 and took 100 wickets for 2.44 runs apiece.

9

Our car insurers sent us another pile of documents (I have had a tree's worth this month alone) and flicking through I discovered that they had made a small error. Since they always tell us that we must ensure that our policy documents are scrupulously honest I decided to waste the morning ringing them to make the correction. When the correction had eventually been made, I was told that there would be a fee (the usual £57.64). I pointed out that the error was theirs and they generously agreed to waive the fee as a favour.

10

Sturgeon and Salmon have exaggerated the image of sour, dour Scotland and encouraged hatred of England and the English (even more so than that piece of cinematic fiction known as *Braveheart*). I assume that this was all done deliberately in order to further the interests of the Scottish National Party. Sadly, it hasn't done much to further the interest of Scotland or the Scots.

11

I had email inviting me to go for 'networking drinks' with a publishing organisation. What on earth are networking drinks? I think the fact that I don't even know is probably why I missed out on the whole networking thing. When publishers organised launch parties for me I always stood in a corner – too shy to speak to anyone. I think I was the world's worst at networking.

There are loads of people I can think of who seemed to me to be more famous for being in the right places at the right times and knowing the right people and boasting about the drugs they'd taken than anything they actually did: people like Julie Birchall, Will Self, Russell Brand and Pete Docherty spring to mind.

I was never sure what any of them actually did, had done or were ever likely to do but they were loved to bits by *The Guardian* and seemed to be terribly good at networking – not as good as Stephen Fry but good nevertheless.

This evening, since it is Armistice Day, we watched a documentary on Spitfires and then watched *The Dambusters* and the *Battle of Britain*. Guy Gibson is my all-time hero and you'd need to have a damned good alternative for him not to be.

During the day I played three wonderful CDs which Antoinette found for me: *Glorious Victory* (the best of the military bands); *Wartime Memories* (which includes Gracie Fields, Vera Lynn and Flanagan & Allen) and *The Squadronaires* (the Royal Air Force Dance Orchestra). I'd have played some old Proms CDs but when I think of the Proms these days I think of all those wretched EU flags waved by Nazi supporters.

12

There is still very little sign of Christmas in our shops or towns. Councils and shops are terrified of celebrating Christianity in case they upset someone. Antoinette is buying me a jacket with a hood for Christmas. For 2019, I will be a hoodie. All I'll need next is an ASBO.

Percy turned up this evening for his seeds. I found him sitting quietly outside the conservatory door. But just as I opened the door to give him his usual handful of sunflower hearts a young male fox walked onto the lawn. Percy walked towards the fox making a lot of noise and making himself look as large as possible. (He only ever flies to get up onto the bird bath for a drink and to get back into his tree at night). The fox hurried off and Percy came back for his seeds. Good for Percy!

13

There are a ton of things which need doing at our cliff top house but neither Antoinette nor I can bear the thought of any more workmen. It isn't so much the absurd charges (over £2,000 for a carpenter for a week seems to fit into that category) as the disrespect, the mess and so on. I have always believed in treating workmen with respect but I object strongly when they treat me with contempt and overtly regard me as a blithering idiot. I also object when they treat our home without respect. Many seem to feel they have to take over; dumping their equipment down so that they do as much damage as possible. They're like untrained dogs pissing on the carpet to establish their territory.

I decided today that I am an artisan publisher.

Another new book has been published telling me how to live with my mobile phone. Apparently, and this is allegedly a brilliant idea, if it becomes too intrusive I can just switch it off. Well, I never.

In the evening we watched an American programme called *Lucifer* in which, I noticed, the credits included someone from the 'Department of Head Hair'. It beggars belief but presumably there are also Departments of Chest Hair and Pubic Hair. I like to think that not even Hollywood has yet introduced a Department of Axilla Hair.

14

We popped into Taunton for a couple of hours. I was surprised to see that there still aren't many signs of Christmas approaching there either. We will be putting up our tree in two weeks' time. And Advent Calendars will be out. We've found the CDs of Christmas Carols and the brilliant Bob Dylan album entitled *Christmas in the Heart*. We both like advent calendars and always have several each. The shops are full of fake faeces (apparently a big seller with millennials – thereby proving my theory that they are dangerously underdeveloped and/or suffering from brain damage caused by drugs in the drinking water and too many vaccinations) and copies of Mrs Obama's book. I suspect that the fake shit and the Obama book are probably pretty well interchangeable. I fear the publishers will be sending many lorries to the pulping factory. Why would anyone want to buy a book by a woman who is famous only for being the wife of one of the most disreputable men of the 21st century? (Isn't it terribly incorrect for a woman to take advantage of her husband's notoriety in such an obvious way?) The publishers allegedly paid out $65 million for this book and some other stuff. If they get a tenth of that back I will be impressed. Publishers have always been keen to give vast sums to politicians (in some cases, I suspect, as payment for favours received). Blair received a zillion quid for a book that sold about three copies. Now they're apparently dishing out the loot to the wives of politicians.

I also noticed a huge table displaying science fiction novels. Why is it, I wonder, that science fiction writers always write such very long books? Antoinette bought a film starring Harry Dean Stanton, an all-time film hero of mine. Stanton plays a 90-year-old man. He was 90 when he made the film and died shortly afterwards. This was, I think, the first film he headlined. She also bought the new Bruce Willis film. Only when she got it home did she realise that it is in Chinese. We will never buy a Bruce Willis film again. I suspect we will not be alone in this. The DVD went into our refuse bin so that no one at a charity shop will be fooled into buying it.

I noticed that they were knocking down the old swimming baths in the town. Thousands of perfectly good, and rather fine looking bricks were being crushed by a huge digger thing. I did not get the impression that the bricks were going to be salvaged and reused.

When we got home, Antoinette gave me a parcel. And I gave her one.

Her present to me was an X Shot toy gun with a huge boxful of extra plastic bullets. My present to her was an X Shot toy gun with a huge boxful of extra plastic bullets.

We immediately set up pictures of May, Macron and Merkel as targets.

A couple visited our Cotswold home today. The estate agent reported that they have not even put their home on the market yet but that they are looking for a home near the grammar school of their choice, hoping that their two sons will be able to attend. This seems to be forward planning taken to extremis. I asked if they had had the boys yet or if they were awaiting conception and merely preparing themselves. The agent replied that they had the boys.

Yesterday, Facebook was down for half an hour. The police department in Kansas had to put out a message asking panicky millennials not to report the incident. Millennials around the world were reported to be suffering from panic attacks. (This sounds to me like a joke but it isn't.)

Another potential buyer looked at our house in the Cotswolds. According to the estate agent they weren't happy with the position of the house or the layout of the rooms. I can perfectly understand this (it would be a strange thing if we all liked the same things) but what is the point of reporting these opinions to us? Do the agents expect us to move the house or to have it rebuilt?

I saw a picture of Joe Bugner, the heavyweight boxer, in a magazine. I was reminded that I once stood and watched Smokin' Joe Frazier sparring prior to a fight with Bugner. Both Frazier and the sparring partner were terrifying. I was standing right by the ropes and suddenly, I felt a presence behind me. I turned to see if I should move so that the stranger could watch the action. I didn't have to move because the stranger could watch Frazier over my head. The stranger was Joe Bugner. I am a tad over six foot three inches tall.

A schoolgirl was asked: 'In what countries are elephants found?' She replied: 'Elephants are large and intelligent animals and they seldom get lost.' I like that joke which I found in a Victorian magazine.

I have never been impressed by the intelligence of global warming conspiracy theorists. Today, a bunch of potty climate change activists spent much of the day painting silly slogans on public buildings in London. Removing the paint will doubtless require much wasteful expenditure of energy. Having defaced a chunk of central London, the nutters then glued themselves to the gates at the entrance to Downing Street. And the police then compounded the stupidity of the whole pointless exercise by removing them.

Astonishingly, the climate change fraudsters now refer to those who don't accept their lies as 'deniers'. So now we have climate change deniers in the same way that there are holocaust deniers.

Most leading (i.e. mouthy) Remainers now agree that Brexiteers would win a Second Referendum. So now they don't want one. Now they want to find some other way to thwart democracy and to force their fascist views on the rest of us – ideally to delay the Brexit process until enough brainwashed children are old enough to vote.

The Remainers, demanding that democracy be defied, might as well be asking for a rerun of World War II.

Perhaps that’s what they would like; they would doubtless prefer it if Germany won the rerun. The bottom line is that the Remainers walk and talk like Nazis; they think like Nazis; they act like Nazis. And I know why that is: it’s because, at heart, the Remainers must be Nazis. Why else would they vote for the EU?

Teenagers and millennials who support the EU have absolutely no idea why the EU was created, why it is promoted so vigorously by a relatively small group of establishment figures and what the eventual aim is.

I realised today that leaving the EU won’t be enough. Our aim should be to destroy the European Union. This is the time for St George to slay the dragon. The Remainers, incidentally, are endlessly stupid. I saw a photo of a bunch of them with one holding a huge banner with an EU flag on top of which were written (in gold) the words ‘Life is Timeless, Europe Endless’. As a slogan that really does take the Jammy Dodger. Two entirely meaningless phrases which are 100% inaccurate.

Most Remainers genuinely seem to believe that the EU was founded 60 years ago in order to prevent World War III. Really? This is like believing in the tooth fairy.

The evidence proves, conclusively and incontrovertibly, that the EU was set up by the Nazis, during World War II. This was done to ensure that if Germany lost the War then it would win the peace. I am beginning to feel sorry for Remainers.

And fancy having Tony Blair as your hero and Gina Miller as your heroine. How awful.

I have also seen Remainers claiming that if and when we leave the EU they will campaign for us to rejoin. Are these people mad? I can see what will happen. Thanks to May, the arch Remainer, the terms of our leaving will be so horrendous that in five years’ time the masses will be demanding that we once more line up and put our collective heads upon the block.

Ms Miller, by the way, appears to think she has authority to represent the British people. I must have missed the election in which she was elected President. Next year I am going to start making plans for the future of wherever it was she came from.

15

Lord Percival (known to his friends as Percy), our friendly pheasant, re-appeared today and pecked on the conservatory door to let us know that he wanted to be fed. He had been missing for a while and we had feared the worst. After a long drink of water from the dog bowl we use for the birds, he came straight to the conservatory door for some seeds.

The baby squirrels who were brought to us by their mother now come every day. She brought them to us to show them where they could find an easy meal of sunflower hearts on a daily basis. It was, I suppose, her way of starting them off in life. They play wonderful games. Antoinette sensibly describes the squirrels as God’s soft toys. She has bought many bags of hazelnuts from Tesco, which is now selling them for the Christmas season. The squirrels have learned that we have nuts and they jump up on the windowsill and look in at us pleadingly. If they look at me and I don’t get up and feed them another handful of nuts they run along the sill to where they can see Antoinette. They are just like small children. And the Woodland Trust is advertising for people to kill squirrels by beating their heads in with stones. We already have more than a hundred hazel bushes; heaven knows how many there will be in a few years’ time.

But where there had been one pheasant, suddenly there were five. Three cock pheasants (three Percys) and two hens.

Percy, the original Percy, had also brought his family round to introduce them and to show them where to eat and drink. This happened to us in the Cotswolds and it’s lovely to have it happen in Devon too. We have three Percys and while Dad Percy is bold and friendly, the two young Percys are still rather shy. As they wandered around, just outside the conservatory window, we could hear the raven croaking. I realised, for the first time, that the raven sounds like a frog. A large frog it is true. But, nevertheless, a frog.

There is a new disease in Britain. It is called ‘millennial hubris’ and everyone knows the signs and symptoms.

Will millennials ever grow out of it?

I doubt it.

Will millennials ever grow up and become sane, sensible adults?

Almost certainly not.

They have been enticed by the nonsenses of Corbynism and seem to believe that they can show their misplaced sense of virtue by embracing a Marxist nirvana. The problem is that they are so spoilt, and so rich with entitlement, that they have no idea how much their latte rich lives are dependent upon capitalism. If or when Corbyn gets into power, they will be the first to run, screaming, for the exits.

I see that someone is offering scholarships for black students to go to Cambridge University. I'm sure this is a very noble thing to do but what would happen if I were to offer scholarships exclusively for white students?

The possibly moronic woman who is Mayor of Paris is talking about making much of the centre of Paris into a pedestrian only area. This is another example of the lunacy which has taken over the once great city. What about ambulances, fire engines, delivery lorries and rubbish carts? What about the disabled? What about bicycles? What about visitors with luggage who want to get to their hotel in a taxi? What about people attending the theatre or the opera or a restaurant? What about people struggling back from the supermarket with their weekly shopping? This is truly an idea that could only have been thought up by someone with absolutely no functioning brain tissue. It's an idea that will doubtless be welcomed by socialists and Greens. And if they do it then they'll finally kill off Paris. Flats will be unsaleable. Shops and hotels will close. I wonder if the Mayor of Paris and the President of France will have to leave their cars outside the city centre. And the administrators? Maybe they too will all walk home in the rain. Fat chance. Incidentally, another problem with this plan is that it will doubtless put up food prices still further. During the last few years the cost of food in Paris has rocketed – largely because of daft taxes and daft regulations governing everything imaginable. We are so, so glad that we no longer have a home in Paris.

Snowflakes are now walking around wearing T-shirts claiming that nothing in life is worse than having a flat battery or no reception for your phone. I've already seen two of these. Oh my, oh my. They will learn; they will learn.

16

I awoke in the night with a great idea for a new book. I was so excited that I wrote down the title on the notepad I keep beside the bed. This morning I looked at my notepad to see if I'd had any bright ideas and found that I'd written down this prospective title: *How to Bake a Cake in Your Loft*.

I do sometimes worry about what goes on in my mind.

The Brexit disaster continues and Theresa May begins to look more like Neville Chamberlain every day. I suspect that she believes that if she screws up Brexit, and scares us about the prospect of a 'no deal' or a Corbyn Government, then we will abandon all idea of leaving the EU. If this is the case then she is wrong.

The *Daily Telegraph* has a story that the 84-year-old Empress Michiko of Japan has revealed that she intends to read a string of P.G.Wodehouse novels about Jeeves and Wooster. Unfortunately, the *Telegraph* headed the story: 'I say, Jeeves, we have a wizard new mucker in the Empress'.

Couldn't the *Daily Telegraph* find a subeditor who knew something about Wodehouse? I have read every one of Wodehouse's books (most of them at least twice) and I cannot ever remember him using the words 'mucker' or 'wizard'. Those are words more associated with Frank Richards of Billy Bunter fame.

Campaigners are complaining that film directors should no long portray villains as having scars because this is unfair to people with scars. This is another example of professional victimhood. What about nasty characters with one arm (Captain Hook), one eye (almost all pirates) and superior intelligence (Professor Moriarty)?

It is thirty years ago now since I was told that I had a terminal disease. Doctors made a slight mistake and told me I had renal cancer (and about six months to live) when what I really had was haematuria caused by Irritable Bowel Syndrome and a congenitally misshaped kidney. I'd have had a kidney ripped out if I hadn't respectfully requested a second opinion.

Ever since then I've felt that I've been living on slightly borrowed time.

The radiologist who provided the second opinion wasn't so lucky.

I didn't remember him at first but we'd been colleagues at a hospital in Leamington Spa some years previously. I was shocked when I went into his office and found it thick with cigarette smoke. He was a heavy smoker. He was younger than I am and he died in 2002.

And so for thirty years I have read obituaries whenever I see them (even in old magazines and newspapers) because they remind me how fortunate I am to be still here. It isn't schadenfreude; it's spiritual enrichment; it's inspirational and it's uplifting. Most people skip the obituaries but they are often the most interesting part of any publication. I commend them to you.

Goldman Sachs has surely done more seriously crooked things than any other financial institution I can think of. The latest news is that two Goldman Sachs bankers are accused of bribing Malaysian officials to launder over £2 billion. Goldman Sachs never do bad things on a small scale. I am not in the slightest bit surprised at this latest accusation. It was, of course, Goldman Sachs, the 'vampire squid on the face of humanity', which helped destroy Greece. It seems that whenever something bad happens there will be a good chance that someone from Goldman Sachs will be involved. The current boss of the Bank of England is, of course, a Goldman Sachs alumni. The damned bastards are everywhere.

The Brexit Affair is going to rumble on. But I don't believe that May's absurd deal is going to be passed by the Commons. I don't believe that anyone in the current Cabinet has any political future. I believe that the 17.4 million who voted to leave the EU would prefer to see a Corbyn Government (which would last at most five years) than this appalling deal which would tie Britain to the EU, as a colony, for ever. And I believe that if there is a Second Referendum (as we are threatened there could be) then the people of Britain would vote again to leave the EU. The EU's bullying has not gone down well. Oh, and I also believe that distrust in the Civil Service (which is probably responsible for this appalling mess of a negotiation) is at an all-time low. The nation's problem is that May was always a Remainer. She never understood that Brexit was an opportunity. She saw leaving the EU as a problem which had to be managed. And she seems to me to love the EU more than she loves Britain. She is the worst Prime Minister we have ever had. She makes Neville Chamberlain look decisive, courageous and patriotic.

17

Apparently internet users post 450,000 new twitter messages every minute of every day. ('I just got up'. 'I've put some water in the kettle.' 'The kettle is boiling.' 'I'm now pouring hot water onto coffee granules.' 'I've made my coffee.' 'I'm drinking my coffee.' And so on and on and on.)

When I get a long, empty moment I will read them all. Every single one of them. I might not get round to them in this life but in some future life I'll do my best to find out what has been going on in Twitterworld.

Joining Twitter and Facebook are definitely on my list of things to do. Not as high up, perhaps, as clearing out the junk at the back of the garage or doing something about the nettles in the far south-eastern corner of our garden, and to be absolutely honest I might not get round to joining before I start taking compulsory lessons in harp playing, but they are on the list.

I have to confess, however, that my enthusiasm to join Twitter was not enhanced when I discovered by accident that the water company United Utilities produces a constant stream of twitter gibberish. I assume other large companies do the same thing. Catching up with all this stuff as well as with the Thoughts of Lewis Hamilton is going to be quite a challenge. (If Master Hamilton wants more respect from the British public he might consider paying a few bob in income tax occasionally. And buying his £16.5 million aeroplane without VAT was clever but probably won't do his chances of a knighthood much good.)

(Who the devil reads all this garbage? Don't they have anything more useful or interesting to do with their lives?)

I know it seems unlikely but I saw my first catkin today. So, spring is just around the corner. In the olden days I would have written to *The Times* to report this extraordinary event. But *The Times* wouldn't print a letter from me these days. And the readers of *The Times* probably wouldn't be interested.

I bought a hammer in a hardware shop. The label assured me that the hammer was 'guaranteed for life'.

'Whose life?' I asked the assistant. 'Is it guaranteed for my life? Would it still be guaranteed for life if I were six-years-old?'

'I think it means that the hammer is guaranteed for its own life,' said the assistant.

'Ah,' I said, 'so if I take the hammer home with me then it is guaranteed until the head flies off or the wooden handle breaks?'

'I would think that would be it, yes, sir,' said the assistant, clearly noting down our conversation to relate to his wife, when he got home that evening, as yet another example of the stupidity of customers.

We know that Theresa May is a Remainer. She never wanted us to leave the European Union.

We also know that the civil servants (like the entire British Establishment) are dedicated to preserving our relationship within the European Union.

Ever since Edward Heath lied to us and took us into the Common Market, it has always been the Government's plan that Britain should become part of the United States of Europe. The civil service has aided and abetted this dishonest and dishonourable plan to sell Britain to Germany.

We also know that the deal negotiated with the European Union is so one-sided, so horrifyingly bad, that it can never pass through the House of Commons.

And if we know that, Theresa May and her civil servants must also know that. They surely cannot be as stupid and as incompetent as they appear to be.

So what the devil is going on?

Antoinette and I have been puzzling over this for some months; both concerned that there was never going to be a Brexit because the Establishment doesn't want one – and what the Establishment wants it invariably gets.

So, what if this impossible deal was always the aim?

What if the intention all along has been to create a 'deal' that could never possibly be accepted – a deal that would be rejected by both Remainers and Brexiteers, a deal that would leave us worse off than when we were members of the European Union? What if they, with the eurocrats, cooked up an impossible leaving scenario?

What if Theresa May's Government made no plans for a 'no deal' because they didn't want us to have the opportunity to leave without a deal.

And what if they demonised Brexiteers (especially any who might bankroll a further campaign) so that most were too frightened to speak out? (Look at what has happened to Arron Banks. He has been constantly vilified, attacked and investigated by the BBC. The message is clear: if you oppose the EU then you will be found and hounded.)

They would, of course, have the Press on their side – most of the British Press supports the EU. And the BBC, which has received EU money, is as bent as a paperclip.

And going back further, what if Theresa May and company deliberately messed up an election, performing so appallingly that the Tories ended up without a majority.

If you stop and think about it, it didn't really matter if she lost, did it?

If she lost the general election then Labour would probably refuse to accept the result of the Referendum. And Corbyn et al could take the blame for ignoring the will of the British people.

It would mean the ruin of the Labour Party.

And the Tories could bounce back when Labour lost the next general election.

Antoinette and I have harboured this suspicion for some time.

But until now I've kept it to myself.

It seemed too awful.

It sounded like the conspiracy to end all conspiracies.

But what if this is what happened: the biggest betrayal in history.

I wouldn't bet against it.

Indeed, I now think this is exactly what happened.

We've been played for suckers.

The plan all along was to keep us in the European Union by making it appear that staying in was the only viable option.

And unless we all scream very loudly this is exactly what will happen.

There is an argument that Brexiteers ought to be marching in the streets and setting fire to public buildings (only empty ones, of course). The Remainers would be if the situation were reversed. But Brexiteers are far too well behaved.

The bottom line is that the Remainers, through their treachery, their carping, their waving of little Nazi flags, their legal manoeuvres and their refusal to accept democracy have damaged Britain and it looks increasingly likely that they will enable Germany to win World War II finally and irrevocably.

I am still dealing with leaves. There are far too many to give away and the tourists have stopped coming to our part of the world. The leaves I have been sweeping up for a couple of weeks now (an hour or so a day) are pretty well dry enough to burn. Wet leaves are pretty difficult to burn (unless you have access to unlimited supplies of napalm) so I've been collecting the leaves and waiting for them to dry and curl nicely.

Today, at last, I managed to get through several loads of leaves. I have no doubt that some distant neighbour will complain to the council but if the council cares to send around a large lorry they can take the leaves away. Otherwise I will burn as many as I can and turn them into nitrogen rich ash.

I am convinced, by the way, that we have had far more leaves on the ground this year and I blame this outbreak of Global Leafing on the weather. The change in our climate during the last few weeks has, in my view, been a contributory factor in the falling of leaves. Quod erat demonstrandum. (That is, I think, the first time I've used my Latin O level.)

Actually, there is a logical reason for there being more leaves. It puzzled me for a moment until I realised that the trees have grown. They have more branches and, therefore, there are more leaves.

18

The line 'You are old Father William, the young man cried…' is often credited to Lewis Carroll.

Those who do so, however, usually fail to realise that Carroll was taking the mickey out of a rather earnest poem by Robert Southey called *The Old Man's Comforts*.

The old man of Southey's poem claims that his contentment is a result of having led an entirely virtuous and blameless life. Lewis's old man describes a life of jollity and ends with him impatiently threatening to boot a young man down the stairs.

Bravo for Mr Dodgson.

I succeeded in paying our final tax bill to the Paris tax authorities. We sold our apartment last April and since then we have had to pay over 4,000 euros in taxes for the privilege of not living there. Don't ask me to explain why because I can't. I suspect it's just another example of French greed. The website where I eventually managed to pay the latest bill has a special section for Foreigners. Naturally, however, the payment instructions are all in French. The British authorities provide every bit of paper in several hundred languages. The French provide every bit of paper in French – and that's it. Hopefully, our French Connection is now over.

I read an old article in what is left of *The Independent* today in which one journalist described another as a 'female journalist'. Does that really make a difference? Isn't that both patronising and sexist at the same time?

As I read the stub of a never very good newspaper, I was reminded that modern millennial journalists don't do news. Instead they do interpretation, opinion and prejudice – especially if they work for the BBC, a website or one of the broadsheet newspapers.

The climate change nutters (or whatever the mad evangelists for the Church of Global Warming are calling themselves today) are forever beating their breasts, wailing, painting graffiti on landmarks, setting up electricity-heavy websites, flying around the world to preach doom and recommending that we all drive diesel-heavy electric cars. They are now blaming a Californian forest fire on global warming. I do wish these idiots would do a little research before opening up their laptops and firing off their screams of anguish. The average annual acreage of American forest burned is now around 6.6 million. Back in 1928, the average annual acreage of American forest lost to fires was 41.7 million. I realise that millennial climate change nutters aren't terribly good at maths but I am pretty confident that 41.7 is a bigger figure than 6.6.

The more I think about it the more I am convinced that 'they' were never going to let us leave the EU. They always knew they could scare us off, divert us, wear us down. They have all the time and money in the world and those of us who wanted our country back are just annoying riff raff who got above ourselves, forgot our place in the world, and thought that we could make ourselves heard. The fact is that the establishment never expected to lose the referendum. And why would they? They threw everything they had into their campaign. They recruited selfish bankers and naïve luvvies and they fought a hard and dirty fight. They even used our money to lie to us.

But they lost.

And that couldn't be allowed because they never lose.

It's not allowed.

And now that Brexiteers have been soundly squashed by a barrage of lies and deceit, things will continue to get worse. The rules and regulations and demands will pile up. The EU, aided and abetted by a disloyal, treacherous British establishment, will rub our noses in the mess they've forced upon us because they know that they always win.

The only remaining question is: when did the deceit start? How long back do we have to go before the betrayal began? Once you start going back it's nigh on impossible to stop. So, for example, when Arron Banks gave £100,000 to UKIP, he was sneered at by William Hague. Banks responded by upping his donation to £1,000,000. And then UKIP helped to destroy the Tories. When did the Tories decide they wanted to get out of power so that they didn't have to face the Referendum problem? Was Banks deliberately pushed by Tories who had an idea what might happen? (If not then it was a pretty stupid thing to do.)

Antoinette bought me a DVD entitled *Becoming Bond*. It deals with the extraordinary story of George Lazenby, a wildly underestimated James Bond. Lazenby had never acted when he started work as James Bond. At the completion of the making of *Her Majesty's Secret Service*, he was offered a six film contract and a £1,000,000 bonus for signing the contract. Lazenby turned down the contract and the money, let his grow long and grew a beard. The documentary tells his story. I found it much more gripping than most of the latest Bond films.

19

A chap we know called Jackson told me that he has decided to give up work and get a job lecturing at a local university. It seems a good idea.

Apropos of absolutely nothing it occurs to me that England is now full of rather sad towns (Bath being a perfect example) which are down at heel and which, although once undoubtedly genteel, are now unable to decide whether they want to tip toe into the 21st century or remain comfortably ensconced in the 19th century.

My advice to towns everywhere is to stay in the 19th century for as long as you possibly can. Try to miss out the 21st century entirely. There's only another 82 years of it to go.

Lying, cheating, scheming Remainers are claiming that if we leave the EU without a deal then we will all lose our jobs and die of starvation. There will, they say, be no more aeroplanes, no trains, no petrol and no food in the shops.

It's all a stonking great lie, of course. None of this would happen. (Any more than the Millennium Bug created chaos as 1999 turned into 2000.)

It's part of the Project Fear which the Government has been running for two years. The Remainers specialise in fraudulent threats and promises. There is no little irony in the fact that they constantly bleat that Brexiteers have lied! (If Theresa May and the Government had tried to terrify the EU in the way that they have consistently tried to frighten the electorate in Britain, this whole farce would have been over months ago. The EU is more frightened of Brexit than we are, or should be.)

The fact is that leaving the EU without a deal would be bad only for the European Union.

Britain would thrive. But EU members would suffer enormously.

Remember: the EU exports far more to us than we export to them. And European Governments, banks and businesses will be in jeopardy if we quit the EU without a deal being made. France and Germany will suffer dramatically.

Even the Bank of England has warned that the EU will suffer dramatically if we leave without a deal.

I think we are supposed to feel sorry for the EU – and refrain from doing anything which might harm EU countries.

Well, I for one, no longer give a stuff if the EU suffers.

In fact, to be honest, I very much hope the EU goes bankrupt and disappears. (Why do I feel that we are heading for a Second Referendum – and permanent membership of the EU?)

If Theresa May and her much loathed Government cared one jot for Britain they would immediately announce that we will be leaving the EU without a deal. The damned woman is either too stupid to put on her own shoes or there was a fix in from the beginning to find a solution to please the EU.

The EU would squeal and scream and beg.

And then it would be our turn to be tough.

Unfortunately, to do this we would need a Prime Minister who cared for Britain and who had the balls required. (This, incidentally, is a reference to a lack of courage rather than an anatomical reference.)

20

The weather forecast is mixed. Depending where you look we are due for snow, a heat wave or a Tsunami. Maybe it will all come at once. Our weather forecasters are too busy telling us what the weather is going to be like in 50 or 100 years' time to waste time telling us what it is going to be like tomorrow. They do, however, litter their forecasts with yellow warnings of storms and heavy rain and high winds. Only rarely do we actually get these storms, heavy rain and high winds.

Someone in authority has reported that snowflake students are now all suffering from mental illness caused by stress. Apparently we must give them all unlimited supplies of tranquillisers and sedatives in order to help them cope with life. The plain, unalterable fact is that no generation has ever had less real, outside stress than today's young. The problem is that today's students are selfish, greedy and consumed with a sense of entitlement well flavoured with resentment. They are dim, cowardly, bigoted, unhealthy, lazy and poorly educated. They want the world but they don't want to work for it. And pills won't help with any of that.

A couple of generations ago, the NHS closed long stay institutions and sheltered workshops, and hundreds of thousands of mentally disturbed individuals (many of them vaccine damaged) have lived rough with politicians not giving a damn. But now that snowflakes are finding social media too rough to handle, the Government is spending hundreds of millions of pounds caring for them. The fact is that most of the self-righteous bastards would recover in days if they would just use their phones as phones and nothing else. Zuckerberg et al should be tried, convicted and punished as the cause of more misery than anyone since Hitler. The only comfort is that, almost entirely through their own self-centred hubris, millions of snowflakes are facing lives of constant disappointment.

In a café today I heard a millennial woman say that she expected to be expecting soon. I assume she meant that she was planning to be pregnant. There was a cockiness about her which I found curiously annoying. It is presumptuous to make assumptions about God.

It is not unusual for my website to be hacked. Two weeks ago the server was taken down again. But today we discovered that an article I had written about Theresa May and the European Union had been neatly excised from the website in its entirety. I find that quite scary.

It is becoming increasingly common for adults to self-diagnose as having autism. Strangely, they usually do this when they get into trouble. I would guess that at least 99% of those who suddenly decide that they are either autistic or suffering from ADHD have just been arrested. Funny that. Virtually all those who are arrested for hacking (and causing havoc) claim that they must not be punished because they have some form of autism or ADHD. I'm sure Hitler and Stalin were mentally ill too.

21

I found a bundle of my old Health Letters today. I miss writing and publishing that old newsletter. Antoinette and I wrote it for a decade or so and subscribers included the Aga Khan and the Queen mother. Bless them both.

I have, on more occasions than I like to remember, written cheques for heavy six figure tax bills, and over the years I have paid the best part of two million quid in tax so I feel I have done my bit of support for an increasingly corrupt and eternally wasteful administration. And what do I receive for this? An old aged pension that will not cover our gas bills for the winter. And yet the millennials want me to start paying national insurance contributions again.

22

What is the etiquette when a shop assistant, harried and stressed, says: 'Have a nice day' or the new version of this: 'Enjoy the rest of your day'? It seems bizarre to say the same thing back since they are unlikely to enjoy the rest of their day until their day's work is over.

A drone hovered at the bottom of our garden today. It appeared to be taking pictures. I have prepared my catapult and if it returns I shall shoot it down.

Six years ago, in my book *Stuffed*, I wrote that the future for Britain looked rather bleak. Our health care system, our educational system, our roads, our courts, our police forces are the worst in the developed world. And since then things have been getting steadily worse.

One of the main problems is that our benefits system encourages millions to avoid work and responsibility. Whole families (of several generations) now live happily on their state hand-outs. Many claim additional disability payments for problems such as 'backache' and 'anxiety'.

In my book, *The Health Scandal* (published in 1988 and long out of print) I forecast that by 2020, a small number of people would be supporting an unbearable burden: millions of pensioners, children and disabled. Immigration has made this situation worse and we have imported millions of parasites. Those immigrants who do work in the UK send most of their earnings back to their families in other countries. Several billion pounds a year disappears from the British economy in this way. It's hardly surprising that the country is a mess. I hope our new German overlords don't feel disappointed when they realise what they've acquired as a new subsidiary.

This problem can no longer be discussed in public because to all our other problems must now be added the sad fact that we have bred a generation of weak and petulant cry babies who somehow manage to be bigoted and full of prejudices while constantly striving to suppress democracy, debate and the views of others; and whose sense of entitlement and expectation far exceeds any residual sense of responsibility.

We have lost control of our lives, our present, our future and our destiny. All we have left are our history, our culture, our language and our remembered dignity.

Who said I wasn't optimistic, upbeat and full of fun?

23

'We haven't seen you for a while,' said a fellow in Gloucestershire. He is a nosy, unpleasant bastard, unbearably rude, insufferably arrogant and an inveterate gossip. He shoots animals and birds and has chopped down all his trees. Neither Antoinette nor I can abide him.

'No, you haven't,' I said, confirming the accuracy of his observation.

'Have you been away?'

'That's right. We've not been here much.'

'Where have you been?'

'In prison,' I said. `Antoinette moved into a hotel that was more convenient for visiting. They let me out for the day.'

'Oh,' he said. 'Sorry to hear that. May I ask why you were in prison?'

'I lost my temper with some nosy bastard who kept asking intrusive questions,' I replied. 'I beat his head to a pulp with a brick.'

As I said this I allowed my eyes to wander, coming to rest on a piece of stone which had fallen out of our dry stone wall.

When I looked back the neighbour was 100 yards down the road, hurrying as fast as his fat little legs would carry him.

'What did he want?' asked Antoinette later. She had seen me talking to the neighbour.

I told her what I'd said.

'Oh, that's good,' she said. 'Maybe they won't bother us again now.'

The *Daily Express* and the *Daily Mail* used to be pro-Brexit. Both seem to me to have changed their tunes. I wonder if this could have anything to do with the fact that the *Daily Express* has been bought by the *Daily Mirror* while the *Daily Mail* has acquired a new editor who happens to be an Old Etonion, a firm Remainer, an enthusiastic member of the establishment and, I would hazard a guess, desperate for a knighthood or a peerage. What a creep. Brexiteers are now not well represented by the national media. I'm going to ask one of the big bookies to give me a price on the *Daily Mail* editor getting a knighthood within five years. Mind you, when the circulation of the *Daily Mail* collapses, he will probably be looking for a job on his old mag *The Tatler*. He is, it seems to me, leading the paper into commercial suicide.

24

In 1967, Barbara Robb put together a book about the abuse of the elderly. It was entitled *Sans Everything – a Case to Answer*. (The title is, of course, taken from *As You Like It* and the full phrase is 'sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything').

The book developed because on 10th November 1965, a letter appeared in *The Times* protesting about the plight of old people in hospital. The writers of the letter complained about the evil practice, then all too common, of the staff in general and geriatric hospitals taking spectacles, dentures and hearing aids away from the elderly and leaving the deprived owners 'to vegetate in loneliness and idleness'.

'Why are these things happening?' asked Barbara Robb.

She then answered her own question.

'Doubtless grim, inadequate buildings, bad organisation, over-crowding, shortage of money and shortage of staff are all partly responsible. So is the fact that many members of regional hospital boards and hospital management committees are ill qualified for the heavy responsibilities that they bear. So is the low status generally afforded to the care of the elderly by the medical and nursing professions.'

She goes on to point out that 'psychiatric hospitals tend to attract a higher proportion of apathetic, ignorant or, frankly, mentally ill doctors and nurses than others' and 'the same problem exists among the administrative staff'.

Writing in the same book, C.H.Rolph pointed out that we need 'to protect the defenceless invalid against physical discomfort, emotional exploitation and deprivation, indifference, exasperation and neglect'. He went on to say that practices in one British hospital were ‘a catalogue of cruelty, callousness, filth and depersonalisation such as I have not read since I was reviewing the reports of the Nuremberg trials’.

The truly alarming thing is that the treatment of elderly patients is now worse than it was in 1967.

As I have explained in previous diaries, doctors and patients have been given official authority to deprive the elderly of food and water so that they die as quickly as possible.

Believe it or not this is official Government policy and it is, of course, the lonely elderly who are most at risk.

The longer you live the less you can believe how bad things have become.

A friend of Antoinette’s is learning German. The first phrase she has learned is ‘Will you come home with me tonight?’

When she proudly recited her phrase to a rather proper German friend there was a shocked silence.

‘From where are you your German learning?’ asked the friend.

25

A widely reported study claims that a slightly increased blood pressure in middle life leads to an increased risk of developing dementia in later life.

As a result, doctors are now being encouraged to start treating more patients with drugs to lower their blood pressure. Doctors’ surgeries will be busier than ever with doctors writing out prescriptions for millions of apparently healthy patients.

In fact, at this rate it surely won’t be long before just about everyone over the age of 35 will be taking drugs to lower their blood pressure.

But does a slightly raised blood pressure really lead to more dementia?

I worry that this study may not show that at all.

There are surely too many unknowns, too many other variables.

So, for example, did the researchers weigh the patients involved throughout the period involved? Did they check their daily stress levels? Did they assess mental agility? Did they study smoking and drinking habits in detail? These may all be factors which are extremely relevant.

I understand that the patients involved in the study were all civil servants. That is a pretty closely selected group of individuals. Some civil servants tend not to have intellectually demanding or stimulating jobs. Could it be (as I suspect) that this might be a factor in the development of dementia?

And what effect will drug taking have on dementia? Is it really safe to take drugs to lower slightly raised blood pressure – especially if those drugs are to be taken for decades.

What about the risks of accidental hypotension – a common problem among those taking drugs for blood pressure. Could that be a serious problem for many of the millions who will now start taking drugs?

Personally, I fear that this is another piece of research best ignored.

(It rather reminds me of the research paper which showed that smokers did not develop dementia. The people who commented on that paper apparently didn’t notice that many smokers never live beyond the age of 65 – and so never reach the age when dementia becomes commonest.)

The world’s medical correspondents leapt on this research with great enthusiasm.

And I have no doubt that many apparently healthy individuals will now be taking medication for the rest of their lives.

Still, there will be one huge beneficiary from this research: the drug companies making pills to lower blood pressure.

This research will be worth billions to those pharmaceutical companies.

We watched the first ten minutes of a film entitled *A Long Way Down* but I’m afraid we gave up. The film had good reviews but when I looked more closely I saw that the reviews quoted on the DVD sleeve were from magazines or websites of which I had never heard. I have heard that people are now setting up websites with posh sounding names, which sound significant and impressive, and then inviting producers and publishers to send them in books and DVDs for review. This is an old trick which has been modernised. (In the old days people used to pretend to run magazines – and then ask for review copies. They made their money out of flogging the review copies.) In due course, the website provides a sparkling review which can be used to promote the whatever it is and the website owner flogs the books and DVDs on EBay or Amazon. It’s all as honest as Twitter.

Another three couples have been to see our Cotswold house. They all liked the house but all said that it was too expensive for them to consider. They knew the asking price when they booked a viewing appointment so what happened? Did they suddenly become poorer? Why do people waste everyone's time looking at houses they know they cannot afford to buy?

The UK is now far more sexist and racist than it was fifty years ago. But things have changed. Today the sexism is practised by women. And the racism is directed against white English folk. To all this we must now add ageism. Being old, white and male is three times misfortunate.

A great fuss is being made of the fact that Robert Kubica is returning to Formula One after several years of recuperation. He has one much weakened arm and it is a tribute to his determination that he is driving again. But everyone writing about the sport seems to have forgotten about Archie Scott Brown who drove Formula One cars in the 1950s and had only one hand. Tragically, he died as a result of a crash a week after his 31st birthday. Many so called sports fans have no idea about the history of their chosen sport.

The Spanish have announced that they are happy for Scotland to leave the UK and rejoin the EU. Wasn't it Spain who put Catalonian politicians in prison for daring to ask for independence? I wonder if this attempt to needle Britain could have anything to do with Gibraltar. Come to think of it, if the Spanish put Catalonians in prison for daring to propose independence, and fined them huge amounts, shouldn't we perhaps follow their example and put the awful Sturgeon in prison?

26

The only big question about the Remainers is: Are They Ignorant Fools or Nazi Dupes?

Regrettably, my repeated warnings about the history of the European Union have been largely ignored. I suspect that to most people the idea that the EU was planned and created by Hitler and his colleagues is too awful to be believable.

And so Remainers have no idea just how deceitful the Nazis could be.

It is, of course, now generally recognised that the Nazis set fire to the Reichstag, the German parliament building, in Berlin in 1933. The fire, which took place a month after Adolf Hitler was sworn in as Chancellor of Germany, was used as evidence that the communists were plotting against the elected Government and was vital to the establishment of Nazi power. However, historians now accept that the arson was planned and organised by the Nazis as a 'false flag' operation. Later, in 1939, Reinhard Heydrich fabricated evidence of a Polish attack on Germany in order to justify the start of the Second World War.

The aim of the Nazis during World War II was to rob its enemies of their identity, their culture, their history and their democratic freedom. England quickly became top of Hitler's shopping list of countries to be conquered. The Nazis were bereft of compassion, kindness, gentleness and mercy.

The Remainers do not like to be reminded of any of this. They prefer to believe the self-serving myth that the EU was created to prevent another world war. Blinded by their naïve faith, the Remainers prefer to ignore the stark and undeniable evidence that the only country to have benefitted from the existence of the EU and the euro is Germany.

In the decades since Edward Heath deliberately lied and tricked the British people into voting to join the Common Market (knowing that the plan was for a United States of Europe) politicians have taken us further into the Nazi plot. Many commentators have, like the BBC, been bought and paid for; bribed with money or power. (Heath later admitted that he had lied – claiming that if he had told the truth no one would have voted to join the Common Market.)

Ever since Britain voted in 2016 to leave the European Union (by a substantial margin), the eurocrats have encouraged the Remainers to demand a second referendum. They have tried every dirty trick in the book to abuse and discredit those who oppose the European Union and to interfere with the democratic will of the British people.

At no point has the European Union been honest about its creation and its purpose.

The evidence shows clearly that the framework for the EU was built in the 1940s by Adolf Hitler and other Nazis. Remainers don't like to be told that in supporting the EU they are helping to promote the work of Adolf Hitler and other Nazis. But they are. Anyone who claims otherwise is either ignorant or in denial.

It was back in the 1930's, in Hitler's Germany, that the European Union was invented and designed. Hitler wanted to destroy national identities and create a united Europe, consisting of new regions to be ruled from Berlin.

In 1936, Hitler told the German Parliament: 'It is not very intelligent to imagine that in such a cramped house like that of Europe, a community of peoples can maintain different legal systems and different concepts of law for long.' (Even before that, in 1933, Mussolini, the founding father of fascism had said: 'Europe may once again grasp the helm of world civilisation if it can develop a modicum of political unity.')

Adolf Hitler wanted to get rid of the plethora of nations in Europe and his advisor, Walther Funk, argued that 'there must be a readiness to subordinate one's own interests…to that of the European Community'. As early as 1940, Arthur Seyss-Inquart called for a new European community which would be above the concept of the nation state. Seyss-Inquart was, at the time, the Nazi in charge of the occupied Netherlands. He predicted that once national barriers had been removed there would be increased prosperity in Europe.

Walther Funk, who was President of the Reichsbank and a director of the Bank for International Settlements (BIS) was Hitler's key economics adviser and it was Funk who laid the foundations for European economic unity – and the euro. He always designed the EU to be a union with the members joined together. Funk's picture should damned well be on the 100 euro note. And the EU should have an annual Walther Funk Day.

'What good fortune for governments that the people do not think,' said Adolf Hitler.

The BIS, which Funk ran, was then and still is the world's most powerful and secret global financial institution. During the Second World War, the BIS accepted looted Nazi gold (handling 21.5 metric tons of Nazi gold) and supported the development and launch of what would, in 2002, become the euro. The BIS is outside everyone's control and yet it is in control of the world's finances. During WWII, the BIS was used by the Nazis and the Allies as a point of contact. Walther Funk's deputy, Emil Puhl, described the BIS as the 'foreign branch' of the Reichsbank.

At the end of WWII, the BIS helped these to ensure that Germany continued to dominate Europe – despite its having come a poor second in the Second World War.

The Nazis wanted to get rid of the clutter of small nations which made up Europe and their plan was for Germany to run the new union. In 1940, Funk prepared a lengthy memo called 'Economic Reorganisation of Europe' which was passed to the President of the BIS (who was an American called Thomas McKittrick)on July 26th 1940. (A copy of this historic document is stored at the BIS in Basel.)

'The new European economy will result from close economic collaboration between German and European countries,' wrote Funk. It is important to note that even then the EU was seen as a union between Germany, on the one hand, and the rest of Europe, on the other. There was never any doubt which nation would be in charge of the new United States of Europe. (The phrase United States of Europe was devised by Adolf Hitler himself).

Back in 1940, Funk had the idea for the euro but warned that even after monetary union it would be impossible to have one standard of living throughout Europe. He knew that the euro would be flawed but he also he knew that Germany would come out on top. The euro was bound to cause chaos and massive unemployment throughout many parts of the European Union because of policies which German politicians set in process after the unification of West and East Germany and before the foundation of the euro.

The policies, which were designed to enable a unified Germany to control the EU, involved Germany entering the euro at an advantageously low exchange rate, thereby giving it a huge competitive advantage over other euro countries. The aim was that Germany would get richer while other countries got poorer and that is exactly what is happening. Because the euro is undervalued relative to the German economy, Germany grows ever richer and stronger at the expense of its other euro 'partners'. Other countries in Europe, struggling to cope with a euro artificially strengthened by a rich Germany, have slumped further and further into depression and their unemployment rates have soared.

The Germans fight hard to protect and preserve the euro because if the European currency breaks up two things will happen: first, Hitler's plan for a German dominated United States of Europe will be in tatters and second, the Germany mark will suddenly be as strong as the Swiss franc, and cars and refrigerators made in Germany will be priced out of many markets.

If the Remainers understood how and why the European Union was created (and who created it) they would, perhaps, have a better understanding of why those who support it will fight to the death to preserve it.

Here is the real potted history of the European Union. These are the un-denied and undeniable truths the BBC will never report:

In 1941, Walther Funk launched the Europaische Wirtschafts Gemeinschaft (European Economic Community) to integrate the European economy into a single market and to establish his idea for a single European currency. Funk planned the EU in precise detail. It was Funk who planned a Europe free of trade and currency restrictions and if anyone deserves to be celebrated by the EU it is Walther Funk.

In June 1942, German officials prepared a document entitled 'Basic Elements of a Plan for the New Europe' which called, among other things, for a European clearing centre to stabilise currency rates with the aim of removing foreign exchange restrictions, securing European monetary union and 'the harmonisation of labour conditions and social welfare'.

The original plan was for the Reichsmark (Germany's currency) to be the new European currency but Funk, a far-sighted pragmatist, never saw this as crucial, or being as important as Germany having economic leadership of Europe. Funk saw Germany as central to the planned EU, and argued that it would result in 'better outlets for German goods on European markets'. Back in 1940, it was Funk who planned to introduce a United States of Europe via a common currency. Today, it is clear that Walther Funk, economist, banker and war criminal, is the true father of the modern European Union and is one of the most influential figures in European history.

Hitler and the rest of the Nazi leadership welcomed Funk's plans and in 1942 the German Foreign Ministry made detailed plans for a European confederation to be dominated by Germany. In the same year, a group of German businessmen held a conference in Berlin entitled 'European Economic Community'. (The phrase 'European Economic Community had been first used by Hermann Goerring in 1940.)

In 1942, Reinhard Heydrich, who was head of the Reich Security Central Office and renowned for his ruthlessness against enemies of the State, published 'The Reich Plan for the Domination of Europe' – a document which is notable for its remarkable similarity to the EU's Treaty of Rome.

In March 1943, 13 countries (including France and Italy) were invited to join a new European federation which would be under German military control.

When the Nazis realised that they were losing the War, they knew that they had to make a deal in order to preserve German domination in Europe. Thomas McKittrick, the president of the BIS, acted as go between and helped set up the negotiations. The underlying plan was to ensure that Germany dominated post-war Europe and Funk and his colleagues decided to stress European spirit, liberty, equality, fraternity and worldwide cooperation as the basis for their planned European Union. They decided to agree to share power, and even to allow other countries to take charge for a while. The Nazis knew that all they needed to do was retain men in power in crucial posts. And this they succeeded in doing.

In 1943, Heinz Pol, a former newspaper editor from Berlin, who had fled to the US, published a book entitled *The Hidden Enemy* in which he explained that Germany realised that the War was lost and was planning to preserve its domination over Europe. Pol explained that the BIS was playing a vital part in the Nazi plan. Here is how Pol predicted that post war German leaders would trick the rest of the world into accepting that they had abandoned Nazi ideals: 'To obtain a peace, which would leave them in power, they will suddenly flaunt 'European spirit' and offer worldwide 'cooperation'. They will chatter about liberty, equality and fraternity. They will, all of a sudden, make up to the Jews. They will swear to live up to the demands of the Atlantic Charter and any other charter. They will share power with everybody and they will even let others rule for a while. They will do all this and more, if only they are allowed to keep some positions of power and control, that is, the only positions that count: in the army – were it even reduced to a few thousand men; in the key economic organisations; in the courts; in the universities; in the schools.' This is precisely what happened. Pol had predicted with startling accuracy just how the Nazis would win the peace.

In 1944, a secret conference was held in Berlin entitled 'How Will Germany Dominate The Peace When It Loses The War'. Rich and powerful Germans decided to move a huge amount of money out of Germany and to take it to America. (The money stayed there until after the Nurnberg Trials when it came back to Europe.)

In August 1944, the heads of the Nazi Government and a group of leading German industrialists, met at a hotel in Strasbourg and decided to hide more large sums of money in order to pay for the fight for a German dominated Europe to continue if their country lost the War. The Nazis realised that their back-up plan for European domination would take years to reach fruition but they believed that if their military tactics failed then their subtle economic and political tactics would prove successful. Today, Strasbourg is the seat of the Council of Europe and the European Parliament. (Strasbourg was occupied by Germany and the Nazis during World War II but became French again after that war.)

In 1945, Hitler's Masterplan was captured by the Allies. The Plan included details of his scheme to create an economic integration of Europe and to found a European Union on a federal basis. The Nazi plan for a federal Europe was based on Lenin's belief that 'federation is a transitional form towards complete union of all nations'. It is impossible to find any difference between Hitler's plan for a new United States of Europe, dominated by Germany, and the European Union we have today.

In 1950, Clement Attlee, Britain's Labour Prime Minister recognised the problems associated with the planned European unity. He said, when responding to the Schuman plan for the European Coal and Steel Community (the initial version of the EU): 'It (is) impossible for Britain to accept the principle that the economic forces of this country should be handed over to an authority that is utterly undemocratic and is responsible to nobody.'

The technical preparations for Funk's 'European Large Unit Economy' (now better known as the Eurozone) began in 1947 when the Paris accord on multilateral payments was signed, were strengthened in 1951 when the European Coal and Steel Community was created as the first step towards the development of a new European nation to be run by Germany, and continued in 1964 when the Committee of European Central Banks (made up of Bank Governors) met at the BIS to coordinate monetary policy.

In 1961, US President Kennedy told British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan that the White House would only support Britain's application to join the Common Market if Britain accepted that the true goal of the Common Market was political integration – Hitler's famous United States of Europe.

In 1966, American President Johnson encouraged Britain's membership of the developing European Economic Community and Foreign Office civil servants in London decided that the 'special relationship' with the USA would be enhanced if Britain joined the Common Market. In 1968, the Foreign Office warned that 'if we fail to become part of a more united Europe, Britain's links with the USA will not be enough to prevent us becoming increasingly peripheral to USA concerns'.

The European Central Bank (ECB), (which today has so much power over European citizens) was designed and set up by the German Bundesbank which was Germany's post war central bank. The Bundesbank was the son of the Reichsbank which was the name of Germany's central bank before and during World War II. The President of the Reichsbank before and during World War II was, of course, Walther Funk.

Today, thanks to the Maastricht Treaty, each EU member's gold reserves belong to the EU and are effectively controlled by the ECB. As planned, the ECB (grandson of Hitler's Reichsbank) is not democratically accountable to anyone. It is actually prohibited from taking advice from Eurozone Governments and the European Parliament has no authority over it. No one knows how the ECB makes decisions because everything is done in great secrecy.

There are some supporters of the EU who claim that the absence of democracy within the organisation was never the original attention. They are wrong. The EU was always designed to be an undemocratic organisation: it is the Anti-Democracy.

The unwritten, unspoken aims of the European Union are to regulate every activity and to ensure that everything which every citizen does will be controlled by the State. The plan is to eliminate small businesses, small hospitals and small everything else. As far as the EU is concerned 'small is bad'. It is much easier for the State to control production and tax gathering if it only has to deal with large international companies. (It is hardly surprising that the executives of large companies are among the most vocal of the EU's supporters.)

By licensing every occupation, and insisting that individuals pay annual licensing fees, the EU can control citizens and take in more taxes. Individuals who speak out or protest can be controlled by having their licenses withdrawn.

On January 1st 1999, eleven countries launched the euro and in January 2002 Funk's dream currency finally replaced national currencies. The secretive BIS was crucial in helping to force through the euro – the first step towards the new European state. The truth is that the introduction of the euro was nothing more than the final instalment of World War II – the realisation of the Nazi dream shared by Adolf Hitler and Walther Funk. Herr Funk had predicted that uniting countries with different cultures and economic policies would be disastrous. But he knew Germany would come out on top. Members of the British press were massively enthusiastic about the euro but got so excited that they forgot to give due credit to Herr Funk and his boss. Commentators drew attention to the fact that travellers could now use the same currency over much of Europe and could buy ice creams in Italy with money they'd taken out of the bank in France. No attention was paid to the fact that when countries decide to share a currency they are making a significant political decision. No one seemed to care that the majority of people in all the countries which gave up their currencies were opposed to the euro. (The EU has never pretended to be a democratic organisation. Hitler and Funk believed in federalism and centralisation but they weren't desperately enthusiastic about democracy which they regarded as a sign of weak leadership.)

The EU was never wanted by the people of Europe and it has been built on years of deceit, corruption and hidden agendas. A group of fanatics, inspired by Hitler's dream of a United States of Europe, realised that their dream could only be turned into reality if they moved one small step at a time, set limited objectives, ignored public opinion and prepared treaties which required individual countries to relinquish only a little of their sovereignty in any one agreement.

The Remainers who are so vocal in their support of the EU are nothing more nor less than Nazi sympathisers; fighting to sustain the Nazi plan for Europe. Many of the EU's loudest and most persistent supporters have received massive financial support from the EU; sometimes in the form of grants and sometimes as fees. The EU spends billions every year on keeping its supporters happy. The BBC, a renowned supporter of the European Union and an organisation which has confessed to being biased in the EU's favour, has received millions of pounds from the EU. The BBC seems to repay this financial support by defending unpopular EU policies (such as those on immigration) and by taking every opportunity to disparage or ignore England and the English.

Joseph Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda in the Third Reich, would have been proud of the BBC which is now an essential part of the Fourth Reich and which seems to delight in sneering at Brexit and patriots and in adding to the fear of leaving Hitler's comfort blanket by dredging up a seemingly endless series of things to worry about if we are daft enough to insist on leaving the EU. Goebbels would have also been proud of the fact that scores of universities have professors funded by the EU. The professors are paid to teach students the value of European integration. And, naturally, the EU has, over the years, spent many large fortunes producing literature and teaching aids for teachers to use in European schools.

On the rare occasions when voters in European countries have been invited to vote on EU issues, the EU has been the main contributor to 'Pro EU' campaigns. Since 1972, there have been 48 referendums on the EU. The only ones which were rerun were those which went against the EU. There has never been a second vote when electors have voted in a way which pleased the European Union.

When British voters, who had been lied to by the Prime Minister, voted to join the EU in 1975 they were never given a second opportunity to vote and say 'No, thank you. We've changed our minds'.

'Why don't you get sued?' asked someone who had read one of my articles describing the EU's defenders as fascists and Nazi supporters.

'First it is all true,' I said. 'And, second, does the EU really want the facts to be detailed in court?'

Theresa May, the Great Betrayer, says she agrees with EU bureaucrats that the deal she has signed is a good one. The news was illustrated with a picture of three leading EU bureaucrats all having a good laugh together. I am beginning to think that May is so stupid that she probably does believe she's done a good deal. That's the thing, you see. We like to think that the people in power cannot possibly be as stupid as they appear to be. But sometimes they are.

27

I needed to buy another connector for my iPhone the other day. The shop I went to had a connector but it was only suitable for the latest iPhone. It cost £7.99. The connector for my older iPhone cost £9.99. First question: why does Apple change the connectors for its products? Why not have a standard connector which fits all its products. Second question: why does the connector for an older product cost more? Oh, sorry, I forgot. They would make a few less billion quid a year if the connectors were universal. I hate Apple. It is a loathsome, greedy company. Apple, Facebook and Google are surely the greediest, most irresponsible, most evil companies ever devised. They have created massive psychological problems among the young, they have created or enabled bullying and harassment. They avoid their taxes and all their responsibilities to their users or to society. They overcharge and the executives are absurdly overpaid. They have enabled terrorism and extremism and fascism and they have introduced millions to gambling they cannot control. But, it's all going to end badly for the shareholders. The Zuckerbergs will survive, of course. (I see that Zuckerberg's annual personal security allowance has risen to $10 million though he does have to pay for private aircraft out of this. Meanwhile, his company owns the copyright of everything that appears on Facebook.) But the ordinary shareholders are going to suffer and suffer badly when the lawsuits and taxes start to build up. The tobacco companies thought they were immune. They weren't. And neither are Apple, Facebook and Google. I discovered recently that Google allows hundreds of outside companies to scan people's Gmail accounts, read their emails and share their data with other firms. Google's vice president for public policy has actually admitted that they do this. App developers who work with Google are allowed to access Gmail data – including names, messages and email signatures. Thanks to the giant internet companies, privacy is gone and lost forever. Today my rule of thumb is that they know where I am, what I am doing and what I am saying and, quite possibly, what I am thinking. I don't think they are yet able to predict what I will be thinking in half an hour's time but that won't be far ahead.

The Met Office in Britain has forecast that the summer of 2070 will be five degrees warmer than normal. Since they aren't very good at forecasting what the weather is going to be like 24 hours ahead, I am impressed that they have confidence in their ability to forecast the temperature fifty years ahead. Still, they will no doubt get extra brownie points from the Climate Change Fraudsters. Maybe they can work their way backwards and tell us, with a 50% chance of accuracy, what the weather is likely to be next weekend. Actually, it would be nice if they could tell us what the weather is likely to be like later on today.

Why do supermarkets have special, wide parking spaces for mothers with toddlers? Toddlers are very small and really don't need extra room. It would make more sense to provide special, wide parking spaces for very fat people or for old people who have difficulty getting out of cars. Actually, of course, it would make most sense to have special, wide parking spaces for people who have big, wide cars. But that would be politically incorrect.

I see that wolf whistling is now a hate crime or is about to be a hate crime. This means that anyone who wolf whistles will go to prison for at least twice as long as someone accused of merely mugging another citizen, if people still go to prison for mugging which seems doubtful, especially if the muggee is over 60 and the mugger is under 25 or black or Muslim or all three. Still, I don't have to worry about the new wolf whistling law not just because I have never wolf whistled and would not dream of doing it but because I have never been able to whistle properly. A modest half tune whistle is the best I have ever been able to manage; nothing that could be heard by anyone more than six feet away. (And that begs another question: am I still allowed to say six feet away or must I say approximately two metres away? Not long ago there was pressure to force cricketers to change the length of a cricket pitch from 22 yards to something in metres. The distance of 22 yards is of course a chain which has been an Imperial measurement since people measured distances with bits of chain.)

I am constantly surprised that no one in the media has followed up on my revelations that the EU was created by the Nazis. There are several reasons. First, I think a lot of people find the whole thing rather uncomfortable and difficult to believe – even though it is all clearly true. Second, anyone who repeats the details is demonised and monstered and dismissed as a nutter. The story of Walther Funk et al is probably the most extraordinary story of the last century or two.

Antoinette bought me a copy of C.B.Fry's Magazine for October 1904. It cost her £7.50 (cover price was 6 pence) so if the original purchaser lived as long as the magazine (and kept hold of the magazine) he made a hell of a good investment. The magazine, which is over 100 pages long, is stuffed to the staples with amazingly readable good stuff and fantastic photographs.

Theresa May is, without a doubt, the worst Prime Minister we have ever had.
She is a great reason for keeping women out of politics.
Think of the other prominent women politicians in the UK.
And it is difficult to avoid the idea that maybe we should keep women out of politics.
Let them bake cakes.

There is an article in *The Spectator* claiming that the whole Brexit business has been oversold. The writer claims that many other events were far more serious and he names, for example, the coal miners' strike of 1974 and the burning of the British Embassy in Dublin in 1972. How anyone can possibly regard these as being as significant as Brexit is quite beyond me. Leaving the EU is patently the most important single event to have occurred for several centuries. And May's deal with the EU will result in our becoming a Colony, ruled by the EU.

Antoinette and I tottered into a Christmas shop. We have a couple of those wonderful whirligig decorations which go round and round when you light the candles. We asked the man behind the counter (the owner) if the shop had any spare candles to sell us. He said that they didn't have any such candles but that he would try to get some for January. In six months' time he'll be wondering what they did wrong and why they went bust. I do like to see candles at Christmas. When I was a young lad, my parents had a couple of dozen metal candle holders which clipped onto the branches of our annual Christmas tree. They then put small, coloured candles into the holders and my Dad lit them with matches. A real tree and real candles. The first trick was to keep the candles away from the chocolate soldiers hanging on the tree. The second trick was to stop the candles setting fire to the tree. We always had a bucket of water sitting behind the sofa, just in case. Years later we had little lights on a string. There were, I remember, dozens of screw in bulbs which operated on strict union guidelines. If one bulb went out then they all went out.

28

Politicians are sometimes incredibly good at making themselves look stupid. Reading Jonathan Lynn's excellent book called *Comedy Rules* I discovered that 1961 the Shadow Cabinet's spokesman for Home Affairs was a labour MP called Frank Soskice who helped begin a petition demanding a posthumous pardon for the hapless Timothy Evans who had been hung for a crime he didn't commit. The petition collected two and a half million signatures. When Labour won the general election in 1964, Frank Soskice was appointed Home Secretary. When his own petition was handed in to him, Soskice rejected it. And in 2007, a Labour MP called Alan Johnson spoke in the

Commons demanding that the Home Office should not send an asylum seeker back to Cameroon where he had been tortured. Two years later Alan Johnson became Home Secretary and rejected the man's plea. You couldn't make this stuff up, could you?

Starting a new notebook today it occurred to me for the first time that my insistence on using plain paper notebooks is probably a small reflection of my refusal to accept authority. I hate people telling me what I must or must not do and I don't like writing on lined notepaper. An ambitious shrink would doubtless invent a new disorder to go with this peculiarity. Meanwhile, as long as Moleskin continue to make notebooks with unlined paper I will be fine. And if I want a bigger notepad then instead of using ordinary, lined paper I use the plain paper pads made for artists for writing. Much of this book has, for example, been written with a pencil on a notepad of one sort or another. It's a chaotically old-fashioned way to work because everything then has to be typed into the computer.

The leading Remainers (Blair, Major, Cable, Mandelson, Heseltine et al) seem to me to have shown contempt for the majority and have worked hard to reverse democracy. They have done massive damage to the country. It is these people, and their luvvie sympathisers, who have exaggerated the support for the EU, caused unnecessary depression by continuing with Project Fear, split the nation, forced a weak Government to give in to the EU and caused permanent damage to the country. Their apparent lack of faith in a country which is still one of the half a dozen most powerful nations in the world is sickening and depressing. I know it is politically incorrect to say this (and probably illegal) but in wartime they would have been hung as traitors. And since we are fighting a super-state which clearly regards us as the enemy it is difficult to see why we are not involved in a war for our survival. I note, by the way, the withdrawal agreement which the traitor May has agreed with the EU includes a phrase forbidding the UK from 'any action or initiative which is likely to be prejudicial to the Union's interests'. This presumably means that I am not allowed to criticise the EU or its eurocrats. Naturally, there is no reciprocal obligation upon the EU to avoid doing things which might damage the interests of the UK.

Theresa May's deal is so bad that we would be better off if we had lost the Second World War.

I can't make my mind up whether the woman is mad, bad evil or simply treacherous. Is she simply hoping that the deal will be rejected so that she can call for a Second Referendum? Or does she seriously think she can get away with cancelling Brexit? She talks about wanting to get 'it' over with. But is that any way to deal with the most important negotiation in British history?

If MPs do the 'right' thing there is no chance of the deal with the EU being approved by the House of Commons. It is widely agreed to be worse than being in the EU!

There is only one way for Frau May to get this outrageous deal through Parliament: to bribe enough MPs to vote for it.

And, scarily, that wouldn't be difficult to do.

Most MPs are fairly easy to bribe.

Some will do whatever you tell them to do for a knighthood and an overpaid, two day a week job as Chairman of some silly Quango.

Others prefer a seat in the House of Lords (together with the pay and perks and a chance to nibble cucumber sandwiches with Lords Blunkett, Kinnock, Prescott and Mandelson).

If Frau May gets this appalling deal approved then my betting is that it will be because she's 'bought' enough MPs.

The snag, however, will be getting the deal through the House of Lords where there are hundreds of bastards who are more difficult to bribe because they've already been given the keys to the sweetie shop.

I read today that it is now common for Millennials to send back most of the clothing they purchase online. One woman boasted that she had bought seven dresses knowing that she would send back six and another claimed that she enjoyed buying items online but sent back most of the things she had ordered. 'It's very easy to do,' she said, 'because the clothes shops send a courier round to pick them up.' If this continues then I predict that online clothing stores will soon be in as much financial trouble as the ones in the High Street.

According to the *Daily Express*, the weather is going to be bad. Apparently we are about to be in the middle of a 'deadly double vortex super tempest'. This is apparently a combination of a cyclone and a hurricane. I suspect they mean it's going to be wet and windy at the weekend. It seems to me that the wretched *Express* has taken tips on hysteria from the Bank of England and H.M.Treasury, both of which seem to have lost all contact with reality.

If we as a nation fail to get the Brexit we voted for (preferably the 'No Deal' version) it will be because we have consistently underestimated the venomous dishonesty and depraved ruthlessness of the Remainers – a small, ignorant and strange coalition of wilful millennials led by selfish metropolitan liberals and toxic middle class pseudosocialists who despise the voters and are determined to make all the decisions for them.

It is shameful that Britain's Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer are Remainers; they have no place in Government and it is dishonest of them to serve in a Government when they do not believe in its most important commitment.

The battle with the Remainers is more important than any war we have ever fought. This second Civil War is as defining a moment in our history as was the original.

The Remainers, like the British Marxists, all hate England and the Empire. They do not like to be reminded that it was the Empire which gave them the lifestyle they now enjoy.

29

A second hand book I'd ordered arrived today and when I unwrapped it the previous owner's shopping lists and 'todo' lists fell out. It is amazing how much you can learn about someone from such apparently trivial bits of paper. I reckon that the previous owner of this book was elderly, old-fashioned and slightly obsessional. They liked doing odd jobs around the house, they were planning a holiday at a hotel in St Helier, Jersey and they were keen on gardening. They had an allotment, had milk delivered three times a week and were members of a choral society. All that I got from three scruffy bits of paper, torn from old envelopes, which had been used as bookmarks.

Antoinette told me today that a magazine she was reading contains an article entitled 'How to Deal With a Grumpy Husband'. She said she's going to cut it out and keep it. I told her that it could not possibly refer to me and that I didn't know she had any other husbands.

I tried to read *Slow Horses* by Mick Herron. The book has received great reviews and it is beautifully stylishly written but for me the style got in the way of the story and the pace. The most difficult thing in the world is to make something difficult seem easy. But, for me, Mr Herron's writing is too noticeable. Still, he has fantastic reviews from most of the nation's leading newspapers and magazines. Of course, most professional reviewers don't actually have time to read the books they review and they would have doubtless been impressed by the literary stylistics. They skip read and follow one another. Reviewing is poorly paid and a reviewer who read everything he reviewed would starve to death. I much prefer the books of Eric Ambler. But, as always, it's personal isn't it? One man's meat and so on.

I discovered, by accident, that Lawrence Block has written another book about Matt Scudder. It's due out in January and I immediately put in an advance order. Block is 80-years-old and Scudder is the same age. Both touched life at many points. Block and Westlake are the pretty well unsung heroes of American literature.

A friend of Antoinette's is in hospital and reports that she has been unable to sleep for the noise made by the night staff. She says they shout and laugh and that the phones ring incessantly with private calls. I can't help thinking how things have changed. When I worked in hospital as a student and junior hospital doctor everyone whispered (even when dealing with emergencies) and at night telephones had flashing lights instead of bells. We used to creep around with torches, using only as much light as was absolutely necessary. Staff no longer care about patients in the way that they should.

Two Swedes have pledged not to fly in 2019. I can beat that. I pledge not to fly anywhere for the rest of my life.

Having May and Hammond in charge of negotiations with the EU seems to me to be rather like trying to fight World War II with Oswald Moseley as Prime Minister and Lord Haw Haw as Chancellor.

Carney, the Canadian ex Goldman Sachs party animal who is supposed to be running the Bank of England in his odd moments away from the social whirl has today published a risk assessment that was allowed to be seen as a forecast. The arch EU lover warned that if the wrong sort of Brexit goes ahead then interest rates will soar to 5.5%, the pound will plunge below the value of the dollar, inflation will soar, commercial property will halve in value and house prices will go down by a third. This absurd piece of 'Project Fear' nonsense, accompanied by the prediction that we would suffer the worst slump since World War II, was nothing more than political hysteria and Carney should be thrown out of his job and the country. I suspect that the British people are too wise and too experienced to allow the idiot to frighten them. Most people know that Carney's prognostications are about as accurate as those of the Met Office. Sensible folk will ignore him. It seems that currency dealers weren't impressed for within seconds of his latest warning the pound had soared against the euro – the exact opposite of what might have been expected if his warning had been taken seriously. Goldman Sachs is, of course, a great supporter of the EU and is infamous for having destroyed Greece.

If the Bank of England (now thoroughly discredited) can't frighten us with this nonsense whatever will they try next? Perhaps they will warn us that without the EU we will have to live on twigs and berries. Maybe they'll claim that without EU regulations our homes will all fall down and we will have to live in caves. Or they'll warn that all the immigrants will leave and there won't be any buses or health service. Or perhaps they will go for the kill and warn that all families will have to give up their second child for a blood sacrifice.

One thing is for certain: no one will ever again believe anything that Carney or the Bank of England says.

30

Yesterday's predictions of doom from Carney at the Bank of England had a dramatic effect. The stock market soared. It is quite clear that even usually nervous brokers and investors treated Carney's latest absurd forecast with contempt. Carney is a reincarnation of the boy who cried 'Wolf!' too often.

I particularly liked the remark made by Jacob Rees-Mogg, the Tory Eurosceptic MP. 'This is Project Hysteria. Before the referendum, we were threatened with the plague of frogs. Now they warn of the death of the firstborn. The Bank of England has gone from being discredited to being hysterical.'

Mr Rees-Mogg then added: 'I think it discredits the Governor – who is basically a failed second-rate Canadian politician who is talking down the pound, which I think is unprecedented.'

Andrew Sentence, a former member of the Bank of England's monetary policy committee, described Carney's analysis as 'highly speculative and extreme'. He also pointed out that Carney's remarks had further undermined perceptions of the bank's independence and credibility.

Personally, I don't care if we all become penniless and hungry as long as we leave the damned European Union. I doubt if I am the only bloody-minded Englishman (or Englishwoman) whose resolve to leave the EU has been strengthened during the last two years.

Here's a list of feel good films. This is my 'cheer us up' team – with several alternates, as they do with all the very best juries.

The Thirty Nine Steps (the original with Robert Donat and Madeleine Carroll)
Hopscotch (Walter Matthau)
Wag the dog (Robert de Niro and Dustin Hoffman)
The Producers (the original with Gene Wilder and Zero Mostel)
Quiller Memorandum (George Segal)
Ronin (Robert de Niro and Jean Reno)
Jeeves and Wooster (TV series starring Hugh Laurie and accommodating Stephen Fry)
The Big Lebowski (John Goodman, Jeff Bridges and Sam Elliot)
Where Eagles Dare (Clint Eastwood and Richard Burton)
Dambusters (Richard Todd)
Stand Up Guys (Christopher Walken, Al Pacino and Alan Arkin who always reminds me of Tony Hancock in that he plays offended and indignant so well)
Going in Style (Michael Caine, Alan Arkin and Morgan Freeman)
My Cousin Vinny (Joe Pesci)
The Equalizer (Denzil Washington)
Mr Wick (Keanu Reeves)
Chaos (with Jason Statham and Wesley Snipes)
Smiley's People (TV series with Alec Guinness)
Tinker Tailor Soldier Sailor (TV series with Alec Guinness)
Let it Ride (Richard Dreyfus)
Lucky Number Slevin
The Third Man (Joseph Cotton, Orson Welles)
Transporter (three films with Jason Statham)
Conspiracy Theory (Mel Gibson)

The Thin Man (the series of films with William Powell and Myrna Loy)
Lethal Weapon (all four films with Mel Gibson)
Hummingbird (Jason Statham)
Parker (Jason Statham)
Casablanca (Bogart et al)
Key Largo (Bogart and Bacall)
22 Bullets (Jean Reno)
Charlie Muffin (David Hemmings)
Spy Game (Robert Redford and Brad Pitt)
African Queen (Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall)
And almost anything starring John Wayne, James Stewart, Gary Cooper or Cary Grant.

We tried to watch a film called *The Snowman* (not the cartoon film) but were put off by the fact that there was no discernible plot, two dimensional characters and it was paced somewhere between slow and 'I fell asleep for half an hour did I miss anything?'. To be honest I have had rashes which were more fun.

Instead we watched Carol Reed's *The Man Between*, starring James Mason, Claire Bloom and Hildegard Neff which Antoinette bought me and which, although it was made in 1953, I had somehow managed to miss all my life. It's not quite *The Third Man*, of course, (what is?) but then it wasn't written by Graham Greene and it hasn't got Joseph Cotton, Orson Wells or a small black cat. But it is excellent and will certainly go into the cupboard rather than the charity bag.

The following evening we watched *The Patriot* – starring Mel Gibson. I still think Gibson is the one of the best and most underrated film actors of all time – with a wide range from funny to sad to mad. I've never seen him in a bad film – though those three Mad Max films are best watched just the once.

The Duke of Wellington didn't much like or trust doctors. In 1822 his left ear drum was shattered during firing practice at Woolwich. An ear specialist who was brought in treated the Iron Duke by pouring a strong solution of caustic soda into his ear. 'I don't think I've ever suffered so much in my life,' said the Duke. I don't blame him for disliking and distrusting doctors after that.

I bought some new coloured lights for our 19-year-old artificial Christmas Tree. (Even if we can find last year's lights they will be a complete tangle.) Knowing that Antoinette likes to wind the lights round and round the tree I bought the biggest box of lights I could find. When I got them home, Antoinette pointed out that I had purchased 35 yards of lights – with 1,000 bulbs. She seemed to think that this might be too many. Fortunately she had bought a more sensible set of lights. We'll never get rid of our dear old tree. We bought it for our first Christmas together in 1999. It cost £9.99 from Woolworths in Bideford, North Devon and is one of those special artefacts which is worth far more than its value. We also now have a string of coloured lights on the railings on our cliff edge. The lights are battery operated and come on for six hours every evening. Wonderful.

Sitting in a café I watched in horror as a snowflake poured herself a drink of water from a jug. She then put the glass she had used back among the clean glasses. And then people wonder how and why bugs are spread. Food poisoning is far commoner than it used to be. We have far more rules today. But far less common sense.

I fetched the Christmas Tree and other decorations from the loft and found last year's Christmas lights. Antoinette had wrapped them around an empty bottle of water and instead of being in a tangle they are entirely useable. What a brilliant idea that was.

A man in a van died in the River Thames recently because the police were told not to try and save him. 'To go into deep or fast flowing water was something we would discourage,' said a Police Inspector. I always thought the police were paid more than other comparable groups because they were given danger money. I'm not entirely sure what the danger money is paid for. We already had a police force which shoots innocent people, persecutes innocents on the basis of complaints made without any evidence, organises speed traps on our roads for no reason other than to make money out of motorists and doesn't bother to turn up when citizens are burgled or attacked. Now we have a police force which doesn't try to save people when they are in danger. What, pray, is the point of the police? Couldn't a copper have gone into the water with a rope tied around his waist?

It is an enormous help to mankind that most scammers are illiterate. Today, for example, I received an email purporting to come from Apple (it actually seemed to come from service@apple.com) which warned me to sign in

and secure my account. The email contained this wonderful sentence. ‘If your account has locked, you can not using iCloud, unlock your iPhone when forgot PIN and can’t download from iTunes or APP Store.’
Not even the idiots at Apple are that illiterate.

David Cameron, Britain’s former Prime Minister, wanders about with ten bodyguards. Guess who pays for them? (They are presumably hired to protect him from angry Remainers who haven’t forgiven him for calling the Referendum they lost.) It was reported that Cameron was bored with retirement and wanted the nation to find him a job with a taxpayer funded salary and pension. It was suggested by ‘a friend’ that the job of Foreign Secretary would do nicely and would apparently make the gutless, grey man a happy fellow.

December

1

It is a scandal that the 24 hour service provided by GPs was abandoned virtually overnight without there being any attempts to provide a viable alternative. And although the GP service died when the EU's employment rules killed it off I very much doubt if anyone in Government will have the guts to take on the BMA (the doctors' trade union) and insist that the 24 hour service is reinstated when (or should that be 'if') we leave the EU's demonic clutches.

The fact remains that the worst thing to happen to health care for a century was the end of 24 a day GP cover. The second worst thing to happen was the law which has resulted in a massive increase in the number of female doctors. A 'named' GP is vital for proper care and for continuity. Today, as a result of those two changes, there is no continuity. Most GPs work librarian hours and many female GPs choose to work two or three days a week. Allowing GPs to work 'librarian hours' is the root cause of most of the things that are wrong with the NHS and it is certainly the cause of all the recent NHS crises.

The quality of general practice in Britain isn't helped by the fact that junior doctors are too inexperienced when they leave hospital. Before the EU introduced its regulations limiting doctors to working a less than 40 hour week it was customary for junior doctors to work between 100 and 120 hours a week on a routine basis. It was hard work but it meant that by the time they were registered, young doctors had three times as much practical experience as today's doctors have. This is important because young doctors end up with too much responsibility and too little experience.

The family doctor service in Britain today is truly appalling – by almost any standards. Patients often have to wait three or four weeks to see a doctor (however ill they are) and stand very little chance of seeing the same doctor twice. Patients who get a better service than this are lucky.

Partly as a result of all this, it won't be long before GPs will be replaced by computers. This will happen not because the robot sapiens is necessarily better than a human doctor (I suspect they will only be better than the worst ones) but because GPs are available less than 25% of the time and people have an annoying tendency to fall ill 100% of the time.

The Royal College of General Practitioners is already complaining about computerised doctors but they're a bit late. With a chum I devised the first Home Doctor computer program back in the early 1980s. The program, sold on tapes, was based on my book *Aspirin or Ambulance* which used a simple algorithm system. The tapes we made sold in 26 countries but unfortunately not enough people had computers. As usual I was a couple of decades too early.

The bottom line is that doctors, like lawyers, estate agents, accountants, auditors, hairdressers and many, many others, have no future. All could easily be replaced by robots. Plumbing is one of the few trades I can think of that will probably be left for people to perform.

In the bad old days (before the EU introduced laws about working hour laws which wrecked medical care) a patient who noticed symptoms of otitis media, cystitis or a dental abscess on a Friday afternoon could telephone their doctor, obtain a prescription and be cured. Today, they must either trek to the nearest, open casualty department (quite possibly an hour or two away by car) and wait 12 hour s to be seen by a doctor who will then hand over a prescription for one or two day's supply or they must put up with the pain and wait until Monday (or Tuesday if the Monday was a bank holiday) before having any hope of seeing a doctor. Even then they will probably have to fight for an appointment or a home visit. And, of course, their condition will have, by then, deteriorated.

There is now a third alternative: they can consult a GP online (quite possibly their own GP, moonlighting from his £100,000 a year, 35 an hour week job) and have the prescription posted by special delivery at some phenomenal cost. However, those doctors need to make the most of their money earning scam for apps will soon be available which will provide a diagnosis and offer treatment. They will work just as well and probably be more sympathetic than most online doctors.

In the olden times (when I was practising as a GP), doctors working in a practice of five only had to work one night in five and one weekend in five. What the devil was so hard about that? Today, women doctors want to work part time and have kids. By reducing their hours and income they reduce their tax bill. Most have husbands and so one and a half good incomes are perfectly adequate. Women doctors who work half time in this way are practising medicine as a hobby not a profession – and certainly not as a vocation. It is not uncommon for a husband and wife (both doctors) to both work part time. This means that both can earn £50,000 a year, pay comparatively small amounts of tax and have plenty of time for hobbies, children and other jobs (such as working as internet doctors). A good many young doctors have no interest in becoming partners. They don't want to work full time, take on any real responsibility or spend any time dealing with administration. They just want to earn decent money for working modest hours. In practice, a part time GP is close to useless. There is no continuity of care and a doctor who initiates treatment will not be available to see it through, to chase the laboratory for results or to telephone a hospital consultant to discuss a diagnosis or a treatment. The politically correct policy of forcing medical schools to take more female than male students has backfired and is one of the reasons for the terrible state of general practice today.

And now that hospitals are effectively shut at weekends (EU working hours rules mean that there are only skeleton staffs available) the absence of GP services means that minor and treatable conditions can turn into serious or deadly conditions without any intervention.

Nearly two decades ago I bought a hand-made wooden Advent Calendar for Antoinette from Harrods in Knightsbridge (as opposed to any other Harrods which might be lying around elsewhere). It contains 24 little wooden cupboards. When you open a door a tune plays and a roundabout at the top goes round. It's exquisite. Every year I fill the 24 little cupboards. This year I've put in toys and home-made jokes – the sort that you usually find in crackers. Here's the first joke of the season: Question: 'Why is Father Christmas so fat and jolly?' Answer: 'You'd be fat and jolly if you ate two mince pies and drank a glass of sherry at every house you visited.'

The evil Goldman Sachs (which tried to interfere in our democracy and opposed Brexit for its own selfish, financial reasons) has already moved vast numbers of its obnoxious bankers from London to Paris, Milan and Frankfurt. For this we can give thanks. I do hope that the ones who have been moved to Paris are enjoying the riots there. What a pity Carney hasn't gone too. He'd have looked good in an expensively tailored yellow high visibility vest. Incidentally, in the traditional EU spirit of togetherness, France is offering bankers who leave Britain a 50% discount on their income tax. There are other massive tax breaks too. I rather doubt if Macron will have many takers.

Corbyn and McDonnell are said to be planning a wealth tax. If they get into power they plan to take 20% from the wealthiest 10% of the people in Britain. They say they are planning to make rich people pay for the 2008/9 crisis 'which they caused'. Just why Corbyn and McDonnell believe that hard working business folk, actors, singers and writers are responsible for the banking crisis is a mystery. Already, over a trillion dollars has been taken out of the British stock market by worried investors. The result of that has been to damage private and corporate pensions. Things are going to get much worse because Corbyn and McDonnell are threatening to steal 10% of the stock of British companies – knocking 10% off the value of the stock market the minute they are elected. (Naturally, Corbyn and McDonnell will not be affected by this because their very generous pensions will be subsidised by taxpayers.) The whole dreary plan will not work. The richest folk will move all their money out of the country the minute it looks as if Labour is likely to form a Government. The people who will pay the new taxes will be hard working middle class workers – the country's real working class. Just why they should be held responsible for the crimes and stupidities of the bankers is beyond me.

I suggested to Antoinette that the two of us might play musical chairs this Christmas. She pointed out that the game wouldn't last very long – especially if I behaved like a gentleman and offered her the only available chair.

No one takes any notice of facts any more. The 2008 Climate Change Act (introduced and passed to please the EU) has impoverished and destroyed us. The plethora of expensive and poisonous nonsenses resulting from the climate change mythology (biofuels, electric cars, recycling absurdities, energy hungry windmills, pointless tidal energy experiments) have made energy so expensive that hundreds of thousands can no longer afford to keep warm. Tens of thousands now die every winter because our energy prices have been pushed up and up to satisfy the mythologies favoured by a bunch of unelected eurocrats who are supported by our craven and ever obedient politicians.

Whatever happened to honour, respect, responsibility, doing something useful and treating others as one would wish to be treated oneself? I miss these things. Today there are just rules. And when there are too many rules then there are no rules.

The EU has made it clear that we can, if we wish, stay in the EU. This will delight the Remainers. I wonder how many of them know that if Britain stays in Hitler's project, we will lose our £5.6 billion rebate and all our opt-outs. Most significantly, the EU has said that we will have to join the euro.

Viewers who had looked at our Cotswold home with a view to buying it have asked if it gets sunny in the summer. It was apparently overcast when they saw it. Since the house is in a valley with lots of land around it I really don't understand the question. I replied that it is only sunny when the sun is out. I am getting fed up with the endless series of really stupid comments from moronic house viewers. Maybe we should raffle the place.

Investment bank analysts are queuing up to argue that MPs will vote to approve Theresa May’s surrender to the EU. There is clearly no chance of this happening. Here, once again, is proof that the views of investment analysts are worthless.

2

An acquaintance recently bought some antibiotics from a foreign internet company. They looked very dodgy to me. The first risk is that the drug may not do its job properly. The second risk is that it might contain something toxic. It’s dangerous to buy prescription medicines online from a company which you do not know. The whole business is reminiscent of Harry Lime in *The Third Man*, flogging ineffective penicillin in Berlin.

The internet is now awash with companies flogging drugs of all kinds. You can buy antibiotics, painkillers and just about anything else you like.

But there is a real risk that the product you buy will be a fake. It may have the same name and packaging as a drug you trust. But the ingredients may be useless or dangerous.

But my advice is simple: don’t buy them through any internet company which isn’t regulated in the UK. And try to buy drugs made by a company you’ve heard of or one with factories in Britain (where the rules tend to be a bit stricter than in many countries.)

The pills may not be what they seem.

And they could kill you.

Two hackers who did untold damage when they hacked into the Talk Talk website have received prison sentences of 12 months and eight months for their evil work. The anxiety they caused is impossible to quantify and the financial loss to Talk Talk alone is estimated to have been £77 million. Judge Anuja Dhir, who must surely have been smoking something funny, told the two bastards that they were ‘individuals of extraordinary talent’. Having given them references, I’m surprised she didn’t recommend them for knighthoods for services to hacking.

Today, I discovered that there is another reason why the GP service is in such disarray in the NHS. Apparently, most young millennial doctors don’t want to work very much at all. They don’t want to become partners (with all the responsibility that entails). Males as well as females prefer to work just two or three days a week for they regard a 40 hour week as far too much. They have no sense of vocation, no acceptance of responsibility and no commitment. It’s all me-me-me and all they’re interested in is earning as much money as possible for as little work as possible. This is, of course, a particular problem with female doctors who are (thanks to absurd and deliberate policies designed to boost the number of female doctors and reduce the number of male doctors) now in the majority.

The Remainers are so desperate about Britain leaving the EU without a deal that they are trying to demonise the prospect of a No Deal scenario. The scaremongering has reached such absurd levels that we have even been threatened with a shortage of Mars Bars.

The latest pathetic, pessimistic and unpatriotic nonsense comes from *The Economist* – a pathetic, humourless excuse for a magazine. (It is obviously a magazine but likes to call itself a newspaper though for all I know this could be because they get better postage rates. I cannot see why this is allowed. *The Economist* is no more a newspaper than *The Dandy*. Indeed, *The Dandy* is a far more reliable source of news than *The Economist*.).

Over the last few decades I have learned to regard *The Economist* as a useful guide because they always get things reliably wrong. If *The Economist* says it’s raining then you can bet that it’s sunny. It is an excellent contradictory sign post and a propaganda sheet full of misguided opinions. It is a magazine which is out of touch and badly written and which reeks of wrong opinions and prejudices. It is no wonder that on Brexit they line up with war criminal Tony Blair and the world’s most evil bank – Goldman Sachs.

The Economist begins by repeating the myth that the Brexit campaign was fought on lies. Anyone who has studied the Referendum campaigns knows darned well that it was the EU lovers who lied and cheated most deliberately and consistently. *The Economist* also forgets that the entire power of the Government and the EU supported the Remain campaign and used taxpayers money, and the support of the BBC, to promote the pro-EU viewpoint.

After attacking Brexiteers as ‘ideologues’ (meaning that they believe in something) the latest edition of *The Economist* claims to tell the truth about a no deal.

But their idea of the truth is, predictably and inevitably, simply a homage to the EU: an egregious piece of one-sided scaremongering. And the magazine seems delighted to take, at face value, the bizarre predictions made by bodies which have been proven to be utterly incapable of making reliable forecasts. It seems to me that any publication which continues to quote forecasts made by individuals or bodies which have been proved to be woefully inept is either potty or pandering to a prejudice.

The fact is that leaving the EU without a deal would be great for Britain but it would be terrible for the European Union. Hitler and his chums will be sobbing in despair at the prospect of Britain leaving the EU without handing over its future and £39 billion.

Here's why *The Economist* claims that leaving with a No Deal would be disastrous:

'Reneging on £39 billion in obligations to the EU would devastate Britain's international credibility.' – This is clearly bollocks. No one outside Brussels thinks we should pay blood money to escape the fascist bastards in Brussels.

'Reaching no deal on the Irish border would test the Good Friday Agreement.' – This is total rubbish. The two have nothing to do with one another. Lord Trimble, Northern Ireland's former first minister (who won the Nobel prize for securing peace in Ulster) says this is scaremongering. 'I do not see a connection between this process and peace in Northern Ireland.' It is *The Economist* which is endangering the peace by attempting to make trouble in order to try to protect its beloved European Union. The fact is that May's awful deal would endanger peace far more than a No Deal.

'Britain would be ruined by the 10% tariffs that the EU would impose on British exports.' – More bollocks. The EU sells far more to us than we sell to them. It's the EU which is terrified of tariffs on exports. Besides, trade with the EU is only 8% of Britain's total trade.

'We will see the demise of farming'. – This is beyond silly. The Common Agricultural Policy (which we help pay for) throws billions of euros in subsidies at incompetent French farmers. Britain and its farmers would thrive outside the EU.

'Essentials drying up, travellers stranded, motorways gridlocked.' – This is gold plated nonsense. I especially like the idea of our motorways being gridlocked because we have left the EU without handing over £39 billion. In fact, without all the Irish lorries using Britain as a free land bridge our motorways would be a lot emptier.

'Mrs May has won the grudging respect, if not the affection of voters.' – Here's the hard evidence that *The Economist* is living on another planet. Really? Respect? The woman is a regarded as a traitor and an incompetent fool – more loyal to the enemy than to Britain.

'A no deal Brexit…would put at risk air travel, electricity interconnections and a raft of financial services.' – And the EU would presumably also take all the oxygen out of our air. This is dafter than the sort of nonsense vomited up by Carney at the Wank of England.

'A no deal Brexit…would throw into doubt the status of EU citizens in Britain and British citizens in the EU.' – This would only happen if the EU decided to throw a moody. And there are far more EU citizens in Britain. So any nonsense would hurt the EU far more than it would hurt us. (It gradually becomes clear that *The Economist* is worried far more about the EU than about Britain.)

'The French will impose checks at many ports.' – Maybe they will. Macron is a loony. But if they do then we'll use non-French ports. And France would soon surrender. (It's what they do best.) And remember, many of the lorries at our ports are Irish. A staggering 80% of Irish exports use Britain as a land bridge – for which they pay nothing. Once Britain is outside the EU the Irish goods will have to travel by sea. Our roads will be clearer and our ports quieter. *The Economist* forgot to mention this.

'If the export mechanism grinds to a halt the newly exclusive access to British waters enjoyed by the country's fisherfolk may bring them little joy.' – More rubbish. If the EU wants our fish we will still be able to sell them fish.

'Britain provides most of the gas that keeps Irish homes warm.' – This is true. If Ireland wants to play hard ball then we can freeze the mean bastards to death.

'London is easily Europe's biggest centre for trading…clearing in London would no longer be available for clients in the EU after a no-deal Brexit – bad for the City, worse for many EU investors.' – Aha. *The Economist* is definitely worrying more about the EU. It will be EU banks and financial institutions which will crumble if we leave without a deal – and the EU insists on playing tough. Good riddance.

'There will be a fall in the pound.' – Probably true – but maybe not as bad as predicted. And Carney has been talking down the pound anyway. If the pound falls our exporters will benefit enormously. (*The Economist* says: 'It is possible that cheap sterling might spur on exporters.' – nice of them to notice.)

'Britain would fall out of the EU's crime-fighting agencies…and lose the right to use the European Arrest Warrant.' – Great! This would stop tin pot EU countries using the Warrant to arrest British citizens for nothing. Last year we wanted to arrest 278 citizens from the EU. But EU countries demanded 16,837 Britons.

'The IMF estimates that the Irish would lose 4% of its GDP.' – Good. I don't give a fig.

'Both Guinness and Bailey's Irish Cream cross the border for canning, bottling and export.' – Another Irish problem. What do we care? The Irish have made themselves our enemies.

The Economist warns of: 'The national nightmare of a Mars Bar shortage.' – This isn't irony. *The Economist* doesn't do irony. I guess they really do think that the threat of a Mars Bar shortage will terrify the voters.

The Economist suggests that the EU would 'pursue some of what is not paid through an international court'. – Really? Is anyone supposed to take that seriously? I'm surprised the magazine didn't warn the EU would declare war on us. (As if they would dare.)

'Neither British airlines nor European ones would necessarily be able to fly from Britain to America.' – This is clearly intended as a joke. I don't think anyone outside *The Economist* offices believes this is a real risk.

'*The Economist* is stockpiling around 30 tonnes of the paper on which the covers of our British edition are printed.' – It's good to know the idiots have scared themselves with their own absurd scenario.

Finally, let's look at some facts which *The Economist* missed:

Only 8% of our trade is with the EU. The other 92% of our trade will be completely unaffected by anything we do with the EU.

If the EU decides to destroy itself and impose tariffs on British goods the tariffs will be small because the WTO doesn't allow big tariffs. Remember too that the EU sells us far more stuff than we sell them. Germany would be in dire trouble if we stopped buying German cars.

Leaving the EU without a deal will involve compliance costs. But most of the money has already been spent by companies preparing for a 'no deal'. It was a one off cost and it has been paid.

Supply chains will be unaffected. Shipping can avoid the EU completely and bring goods straight into the UK – and it's been made clear that this will happen. Threats of shortages are typical 'Project Fear' nonsense.

Threats of a crisis if we leave without a deal are on a par with the treats of a crisis because of the Millennium Bug. Remember that nonsense?

If May's deal with the EU is accepted by Parliament it will cost us around £2,000 a year each more than leaving the EU without a deal.

Here's my home-made joke of the day in Antoinette's Advent Calendar: 'Question: Why didn't Santa have to pay for his sleigh? Answer: It was on the house.

I don't think I'll include any more of these sillynesses here. Poor Antoinette has another 22 to suffer. Still, she did request them. As far as I know they are, at least, all original. But I guess it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that such terrible cracker jokes have been thought of before by someone.

I also managed to find an Advent Calendar sold in Wilko which contains 24 Lego style projects. It's called the Wilko Blox calendar and each time you open a little door you find a bag containing all you need to make a toy train, a car, a bicycle, a tree or whatever. The bits are pretty well as good as Lego but they aren't Lego and they are a hell of a lot cheaper. If I had shares in Lego I would sell them fast. The Blox Advent Calendar was originally priced at £10 and marked down to £5. I have no idea how they do it for the price. If I'd been asked I would have said that £100 marked down to £50 would have been a good deal.

Project Fear seems to be winding itself up to a crescendo of silliness. Today, Michael Gove (a Cabinet Minister and a former supporter of Brexit) announced that if Mrs May's treasonous deal was not approved then there might have to be a second referendum. The mayor of somewhere or other claimed that Britain's GNP would collapse by 10% if we left the EU without a deal. And someone else apparently important said that if MPs rejected May's betrayal then Britain would end up with a Government led by Corbyn and Sturgeon. There is, of course, no evidence for any of these threats though there is little doubt that the Tories are finished for a generation or three and so Corbyn must be a good bet for the next election – whenever it takes place. If UKIP had its ducks in a row they would walk into government. I wrote three times offering any help I could give. I received no reply. (The nightmare scenario for all thinking people is that we stay in the EU and have Corbyn in Number Ten. Interest rates will soar, the pound will collapse, an absurdly high minimum wage will mean that unemployment will rocket and soaring mortgage rates will mean that house prices will fall dramatically. All this is now possible.)

We still have nine days before the Commons votes so I wonder what threat will come next. A plague of frogs? The killing of first born children? I am waiting to be told that we will end up living in caves and subsisting on berries if we do not treat the EU with the proper respect. My only concern is that there will doubtless be people somewhere who believe all this gibberish. Britain appears to be controlled by liars and lunatics and the media (especially the *Daily Mail*) are reporting the lies and the nuttiness with enthusiasm.

A growing number of self-employed people are stopping work when their income for the year gets close to the VAT threshold of around £83,000. The quarterly paperwork for those who earn more than this is extraordinary time-consuming. This is yet another example of our tax system changing people's work habits to everyone's detriment.

It is interesting, is it not, that the lottery has taken over from the football pools. Individuals who did the football pools could convince themselves that there was skill involved in picking the correct matches for their coupon. Indeed, they were probably right – there was some skill involved. But the lottery is simply a game of chance. There is no skill, work or expertise involved. Is this yet another sign of the times, perhaps?

Today I watched one of the squirrels eating sunflower hearts. He picked up a double pawful and ate them out of his paws. The urge to call them hands is almost irresistible.

There is a rule that if someone dies while under 75 years of age their spouse (or other dependant) can inherit their pension without paying an extra chunk of tax. But if they die over the age of 75 then tax has to be paid. I wonder how many slightly ill people aged 74 ¾ will be killed (or will kill themselves) to save fairly huge tax bills. (As an aside, Dr Harold Shipman, the mass murderer, killed himself so that his widow would receive a better pension.) If I live beyond the age of 75, my pension will be taxed heavily before it goes to Antoinette. Obviously, the Government's hope is that if I am ill at the age of 74 I will slit my wrists before the age of 75 and thereby save the health service some money. There is no other explanation. The way things are going I would do it now if I didn't have Antoinette beside me.

I am accustomed to having my books stolen and printed abroad but I discovered that my book *The Village Cricket Tour* is being sold as a paperback in the UK. That's really strange because no official paperback version has ever been published.

Today I received a copy of *With all Faults* by David Low who was a bookseller in Cecil Court, London. I ordered the copy a few days ago, from a rare book shop, and was delighted when I received it to see that it is inscribed by the author (in a very elderly, shaky hand). I have already flicked through it and it looks to be a real treat: charming and full of excellent bookselling stories.

A former Minister has described May's deal with the EU as a surrender, an appeasement. That's exactly what it is.

The BBC was planning a Brexit debate for next Sunday. Theresa May and Corbyn would have taken part, together with representatives from the Liberal Democrats, the SNP, the Greens and the Welsh lot. Every single one of them a Remainer. So the BBC would have had a debate on Brexit without anyone there wanting to leave the EU. There are 17.4 million people in this country who have no party. They are unrepresented. Who do they vote for at the next election? We need a Brexit Party. What a pity it is that David Sutch is no longer here. I think his Monster Raving Loony Party could well have won a Parliamentary majority. I wonder how many Remainers know that if we stay in the EU then, according to the EU, we have to abandon sterling and adopt the euro. (As always, I wonder how many know that the EU was designed and created by the same people responsible for the Holocaust.)

I am delighted to have found a copy of *How I Managed and Improved my Estate* by the now largely forgotten Coventry Patmore. In later life, Mr Patmore had a wonderful hairstyle and a marvellous moustache. The book I have ordered is an account of Buxted Hall in Surrey.

I wrote columns for most of my adult life. I wrote books and I wrote columns. It was what I did for a living. Most of the columns were weekly and at one point I was writing six of them and a couple which were monthly. To write columns you need to have opinions as much as you need to have words. Today, everyone is a columnist (they call them blogs these days) and so everyone has opinions. And in order to attract attention the opinions become more and more extreme. I am constantly reminded of Madame Ostrakova in John Le Carre's book *Smiley's People*. She reported that her husband 'was a Jew and he died of a surfeit of opinions'. I believe it may be possible.

'Experts' say that women who wear trousers must now be classified as 'cross dressers'. That should push up the figure for the total number of cross dressers in the country.

In France it looks as though little Macron will surrender to protestors (in doing so he will break EU laws). French Presidents always surrender to protestors and diminutive megalomaniacs are not immune. Surrendering is, after all, the one thing the French are good at. How jolly it will be if Macron annoys his beloved fascist EU by breaking the eurolaws he takes so seriously. Macron is widely hated in Britain for interfering in British politics and for accusing those who campaigned to leave the EU as having lied. That was unforgiveable. Macron is a fool whose enthusiasm for a United States of Europe is not shared at home. Similarly, his obsession with carbon emissions and a new European Army (with him, no doubt, as Commander in Chief) does not go down well with French folk who are struggling to survive in a dying country.

A local locksmith promised to come this morning to put a new lock on our main gate. The wind had blown the gate open and smashed the lock. I got up at some ungodly hour in case he came early. Naturally, he did not turn up. I would, I suppose, have been surprised if he had bothered to arrive as promised. I have secured the gate with a huge padlock and one of those absurdly thick chains motorcyclists use to protect their loved ones. While the locksmith wasn't here the telephone rang. We answered it in case it was the locksmith but it was a fellow with an Indian accent who told us that he was calling about our internet connection. I told him that we did not use the company he mentioned. He immediately rang off. After that our internet connection stopped working. Our telephone has stopped working too. We have no telephone and no email.

I rang the company which provides our phone service (on a mobile) and was initially told that everything was working perfectly. I rang them back to point out that it wasn't and they then admitted that there was a problem which was being dealt with by Open Reach. So given the rate at which Open Reach works we should have a phone service by next March or April. The chap from our phone company (who sounded the same as the scammer who had rung earlier in the day) asked me for all sorts of identifying material.

'How do I know you are you and that your company hasn't been hacked?'

That stumped him. But he did tell me that the scammer would have got our number and the details of our phone service provider from a website maintained by OFCOM. Apparently, the morons at OFCOM (paid by us to protect us, of course) publish all this stuff online so that scammers can find out everything they need to know at the click of a button.

Antoinette vowed to go back to never answering the telephone.

I managed to find and read some fascinating books this year:

1) *Hadrian the Seventh* by Frederick Baron Corvo. The author's real name was Frederick William Serafino Austin Lewis Mary Rolfe – not the sort of name you would want if you spent a lot of time filling in forms. There is a wonderful biography of Corvo called *The Quest for Corvo* by A.J.A.Symons.

2) I bought several dozen annual editions of *The Saturday Book* through an advert on eBay. The books came in the largest, heaviest box I have ever received. *The Saturday Book* is one of the best magazine style books every published – I am on my way to collecting a complete set of these wonderful volumes, to go with my sets of King Penguins and Britain in Pictures. The title reeks of knitting patterns and terribly slushy poetry but in fact the books are a treasure trove of everything of value in our cultural history. And I love the diary entries from the charming Fred Bason. I shall be hunting down some of his books. (I have already acquired his Diary no 2 and I have number 3 on its way.) Fred Bason was a bookseller, a collector of autographs and the owner of one and a quarter million cigarette cards until Adolf Hitler, the designer of the European Union, bombed his home and he lost most of them. He was also what used to be called 'a character'.

3) The Penguin edition of selected poems by Byron (which I'm ashamed to admit I did not know well). I don't think Byron was a very pleasant individual but then I don't think Oscar Wilde was much of a gentleman either. Who cares?

4) *The Ascent of Rum Doodle* by W.E.Bowman (which I thought I had read but do not think I had)

5) *Death of a Transvestite* by Ed Wood Jr (the cult filmmaker who deserves to be better remembered). I also managed to obtain his autobiography *Hollywood Rat Race*.

6) *The Whitsun Weddings* by Phillip Larkin (deliciously surprising poetry)

7) *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell* – I hadn't read these since I was a teenager but they are truly brilliant and a joy to read again. His essays on literature are among the best – particularly the ones on Boys' Weeklies, Charles Dickens and Raffles and Miss Blandish. Orwell described Dickens as 'generously angry' – a lovely phrase. Left wingers often seem to forget that Orwell hated Stalin, communists and the *New Statesman*

magazine and loved England. There can be no possible doubt that Orwell would have been a keen Brexiteer and would have loathed and despised Remainers.

8) *Through Wood and Dale* – another volume of the exquisite diaries of James Lees-Milne; gloriously acerbic and snobbish and so old-fashioned as to be almost in fashion. Lees-Milne gives new width and depth to snobbery. The main charm is the brutal honesty, constantly tipping over into indiscretion. Those who were friends with him were presumably prepared to share their lives for the publicity he gave them. His diaries are like a posh gossip column. They are irresistible and so I've ordered the rest of them. I also ordered his biography of William Beckford. And that led me to William Beckford's bizarre novel *Vathek*.

9) *Doc Holliday* by John Myers Myers (a biography of the dentist and gambler who is one of my favourite characters in history).

10) *Valmouth and other Stories* by Ronald Firbank (I found a review of this book in an old, 1950s copy of *Punch*. Firbank self- published. He was ill all his life but lived to be 80)

11) *The Setons* by O.Douglas (who was John Buchan's sister)

12) *Beware of Pity* by Stefan Zweig (Zweig was, during his life, said to have been the most widely read author in the world).

13) *Any Human Heart* by William Boyd

14) *Zuleika Dobson* by Max Beerbohm

15) *The Edwardians* by Vita Sackville-West

16) *Parisian Sketches* by J.K.Huysmans

17) *Squire Haggard's Journal* by Michael Green (The parody to end all parodies by one of the funniest writers who ever lived.)

18) *Malleson at Melbourne* by William Godfrey (a wonderful novel about cricket)

19) *10 for 66 and All That* by Arthur Mailey (an extraordinary book about cricket, written and illustrated by the Australian Test bowler)

20) *The Boy Who Shot Down an Airship* (Volume 1 of Michael Green's hysterical autobiography)

21) *Nobody Hurt in Small Earthquake* (Volume 2 of Michael Green's hysterical autobiography)

22) *Looking Backward* by Edward Bellamy (I re-read this extraordinary book which is written backwards)

23) *My Life and Work* by Henry Ford – (This is Henry Ford's autobiography and probably the best business book ever written)

24) *Fat Chance* by Simon Gray (After reading this, I immediately bought a copy of every diary written by Gray)

25) *Nana* by Emile Zola (I rediscovered Zola this year, though I suspect that he'd been there all along)

26) *Lyric Poems* by Keats

27) *Life Worth Living* by C.B.Fry – probably the most amazing sports figure of the 20th century and one of the most amazing men to have lived. Fry was a Corinthian, a gentleman and a genius at living. In his 70s he could still jump backwards onto a mantelpiece from a standing start. In his 80s he was still writing witty Latin verse and sharp, pertinent articles for *The Cricketer magazine*. I've read biographies of Fry but this, his autobiography, is brilliant.

28) *Red Notice* by Bill Browder (the most extraordinary book about Russia I've ever read)

29) *The Art of Coarse* Sailing by Michael Green (I re-read the Coarse books by Green but I had missed this one)

30) *A Victorian Poacher* by James Hawker

31) *Blandings Castle* by P.G.Wodehouse (I re-read all the Blandings novels – a complete joy)

32) *Vicar of Wakefield* – Oliver Goldsmith (a constant favourite)

33) *Lady of Camellias* – Alexander Dumas Fils (another constant favourite which I reread)

34) *Show and Tell* – John Lahr (A collection of *New Yorker* profiles The book contains quite lengthy profiles of a number of show business personalities including Woody Allen, David Mamet, Mike Nichols and Lahr's father Bert Lahr, famous for playing the friendly lion in *The Wizard of Oz*. The *New Yorker* magazine has many faults (not least, the fact that it can be incredibly patronising and, in patches, unbelievably pompous and boring, and also the fact that the much vaunted film reviews are tedious and too self-important) but it gave us Janet Flanner and A.J.Liebermann on Paris and food respectively so all that is forgiven. The *New Yorker* profiles are excellent when you want to know a little about someone but not enough to read a whole biography. My favourite book of Alexander Woolcott's is his collection of *New Yorker* pieces.

35) *Life of Johnson* – James Boswell (I have previously only read portions, and then some years ago. I feel embarrassed to admit this.) I wonder if Johnson would still think that a man who is tired of London must be tired of life. I suspect not. The good doctor would be back in Lichfield ordering new shutters for his doors and windows.

During the year so far I have nearly always had more than one book on the go. I started doing this because when I find a book I really enjoy, I don't want it to finish. Reading several books at once helps postpone the moment when

I'll have to close the book and put it on the shelf. I've omitted from the list above the books I tried to read but gave up on because they didn't grab my attention.

On the shelves where I keep my 'to read soon' books there are now 232 separate volumes. (I just counted them.)

There are around 500 books on other shelves waiting to be re-read, including Lawrence Block's Matt Scudder books, everything by Robert B Parker, Ross Thomas's books, all the Charlie Muffin books by Brian Freemantle and all the Quiller books by Adam Hall. The problem is that at the rate that books are being added to the 'to read soon' selection I will never get to the 'to read as soon as I've read the to read soon' books.

A woman called Tiffany, who wants to start a small business in the Cotswolds, has apparently been told by lawyers acting for a company with a similar name (which sells what appears to me to be tacky jewellery to the undiscerning rich) that she cannot use her own name for her business. McDonalds (a company which, in my view, sells crap labelled as food to the undeserving poor) does the same sort of thing all the time. I'm going to write a book about an evil character called Tiffany McDonald and see what happens.

Here's something I discovered today (in one of the old Saturday Books). The word 'camp', when used to denote a male who is rather excessively feminine, was first used when an actor called James Dodd played Lord Campley in Steele's comedy *The Funeral*. Dodd played the part very foppishly and the word 'camp' was used to describe his acting. I bet not many people knew that.

One of the few things I have learned over the years is that if you are disarming a bomb you must never cut the red wire. You wait until three seconds before the bomb is due to explode and then cut any wire other than the red one.

I thought of a great advertising line for makers of flans. 'Give us a quiche for Christmas.'

We have catkins in abundance and scores of camellia buds. Unfortunately, the squirrels are eating the camellia buds. I shall have to find some way to protect them. Maybe if I put up a polite sign asking them to desist they would do the decent thing.

5

I spent two decades being educated but no one ever suggested that I read Plutarch's *Greek Lives*. I was taught tons of useless stuff (including all the usual nonsense about algebra and so on) but I only discovered Plutarch a good two decades after the end of my formal education. And that doesn't say much for the educational process. It is one of the most remarkable books ever published and it is crammed with so much advice and information that I can see that a man or woman with little time for reading could limit himself (or herself) to this one book and still call himself (or herself) an educated person. To my shame, I have only skip read it. It is a revelation and much of the advice could easily be adapted to our times. So, for example, Plutarch points out that Lycurgus imposed loss of privileges on unmarried men. They were not allowed to watch the Festival of Unarmed Dancing and had to walk naked around the perimeter of the city square in winter while singing a song composed to fit their circumstances. Lycurgus instigated a tough regime of physical exercise for women who were expected to take up running, wrestling and throwing the discus and the javelin so that they would have the strength to cope with childbirth. He made girls parade naked and encouraged them to taunt the young men by helpfully listing their errors in public.

It seems to me that none of this would appear out of place in next year's Green Party manifesto and I look forward to reading an editorial in *The Guardian* endorsing these new policies.

While reading Plutarch, I pulled out three more books to re-read: *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* by Thoreau, and Will Durrant's little book entitled *The Greatest Minds and Ideas of All Time*.

Since I have already re-read them I now need to re-re-read them. And I'm darned well going to read Plutarch properly.

I also re-discovered a tiny book entitled *Digest of British History* by Louise and Peter Cochrane. It's ages since I read that.

And then I also found *Rural Rides* by William Cobbett. And I discovered copies of *Kipps* and the *History of Mr Polly* which I thought I had lost but had only mislaid. I realise that H.G.Wells is probably best known for his science fiction but those two are my favourite of his books. Finding the Wells reminded me that I really must re-read just about everything written by Evelyn Waugh. I think I will start with *Scoop* though I have had *When the Going Was Good* in my to-read bookcase for months.

Percy the pheasant came and screeched at the conservatory door to demand food. Antoinette took a couple of minutes to get there and by the time she arrived Percy had gone.

‘Percy treats this place like a hotel,’ she said. ‘He wants meals whenever he likes and he can’t wait two minutes to be fed!’

My latest book about Bilbury (*The Young Country Doctor Book 15: Bilbury Memories*) has received a one star review. This is the review: ‘No doubt the story is excellent but I hate reading books on Kindle and I am trying everywhere I know to get his novels at a reasonable price i.e. not over £5.00.’ I am reminded of G.K.Chesterton who once wrote: ‘A great deal of contemporary criticism reads to me like a man saying: ‘Of course I do not like green cheese; I am very fond of brown sherry.’’ As a result of the review, the book stopped selling in the UK. Some time ago, I remember watching as a dog cocked a leg and pissed on books on sale outside a second hand bookshop. I am now reminded of that unhappy incident.

When a new book comes out, what happens in the first few weeks has a tremendous influence on the life of the book. Readers form judgements, tell friends, pass on thoughts and so on. This is particularly important these days because of social media. And so an initial one star review (which, if unread, will be perceived as a critical review written by a reader disappointed by the book) will have a dramatic effect on the sales. ‘Oh what a pity, that new book I was looking forward to has got a one star review. It can’t be very good.’ Not everyone acts that way, of course. But many do. I’ve been writing books for a long time and I’d have to be an idiot not to understand what affects sales. Since I don’t ‘do’ social media my books are totally reliant on the reviews they get. Book sales tend to follow a pattern. If sales are crushed early in a book’s life then the book will often not recover. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that most people who enjoy a book do not write a review while all those who don’t like a book do write a review.

No book (film, picture or whatever) will please everyone but when a book is killed without reason (as happens not infrequently) I do find it difficult. Writing a book takes a great effort – as well as time. It happens to be what I do for a living. Modern book buyers tend to look at the total number of stars a book has. If it has a bad rating then they don’t buy it. I am enormously grateful to the readers who take the trouble to put up a review when they like a book. Big publishers can (and do) help authors with lots of nice reviews from staff and other authors but as a self-published, independent author, I don’t have that protection so I rely entirely on the kindness of readers.

My philosophy has always been that you either put up with something or you have to walk away. I resigned as a GP because I couldn’t accept the NHS’s attitude towards confidentiality. I resigned from a lucrative newspaper column because the editor wouldn’t allow me to express my disapproval of the Iraq War.

The irony is that Antoinette and I fought hard to carry on publishing hardback and paperback books. After I had to close Publishing House, we both spent many hours stuffing book packets into letter boxes and queuing at Post Office counters. In the end, we were defeated by the cost of printing and of postage. There is no way any publisher can produce and post a ‘real’, new book for under £5 unless the book is very short or is one of those thin colouring books which are now so popular. Books which cost less than £5 are second hand. And there aren’t any second hand copies of *Bilbury Memories* available because there haven’t been any new ones. I self-published the first seven Bilburies and the first two books about Mrs Caldicot because in the past publishers dismissed my Bilbury books as too old-fashioned. I haven’t had the heart to submit the books in recent years. The result is that there are no new printed versions available. And so there aren’t any cheap, second hand ones. I find it sad, disappointing and frustrating that there are no hard or paperback editions. To now be punished for there not being any hard or paperback editions is rather difficult to bear.

So, after I have finished this diary, I intend to retire from writing. Logologists will have guessed as much from the title of this book.

I remember speaking to the singer Manfred Mann in the Cavern club in Liverpool back in the 1960s. He told me that he was giving up releasing singles because he could not stand the pressure of waiting to see whether the record went into the charts. He knew that one failure would be the end of his career in pop music. In a different way I now understand what he meant.

I had written a good chunk of the next novel about Mrs Caldicot (she was heading off to New York in *Mrs Caldicot’s Big Apple*) and although I much enjoyed writing the story I have now filed it away. I have also filed away the work I had planned on the next few Bilbury books. So the books will probably sit on my computer and die with me. I like to think of them as sand sculptures.

Antoinette and I have both been fighting black dogs for a year now and we both realise that our black dogs are exogenous rather than endogenous. The irrelevant but destructive reviews (which have, in the past, often been commercially inspired) aren’t the origin of the black dogs but they don’t help. I sometimes wonder if there will ever be any writers in the future who write from the heart and use blood instead of ink.

In what I think of as 'olden times', an author had some room for manoeuvre if he felt that a book had been damaged by an absurd, libellous or utterly irrelevant review. A letter to the editor would have as much (or more) exposure than the review. A lawyer's letter could elicit an apology and a retraction. And, of course, a bad review would pretty well die with the publication. (The good reviews could be used on the cover of the paperback). These days, on the internet, a libellous or irrelevant review is there forever. I honestly don't think I have any room left for more of these scars.

I've thought about setting up a new Private Press, printing a few hundred copies of my new books and selling them on www.vernoncoleman.com. But there is no doubt that printing such a small number of books would mean that the price of each one would be quite high – just to cover the costs the cover price would probably be £20. Maybe I'll write them as scripts and try to get them made into films. (Actually, I rather fancy turning my book *Balancing the Books* into a film. It's about a widow who kills thoughtless, cruel, unjust critics.)

I see that the Ministry of Defence has spent £113 million on having a new recruitment website built. The website is 52 months late. My guess is that I could have got their website done for £1,000, thereby saving taxpayers £112,999,000. The BBC has allegedly spent £87 million on building a new set for Eastenders. How the devil do you manage to spend that amount of money building a relatively small set for a television programme? Big time movies don't spend that much on hugely extravagant sets. In fact you could make a major movie for less than that. I wonder how many houses could have been built for that amount of money? (Thirty years ago I warned that the BBC's Eastenders was causing depression. I still think I was right. Actually, I think that the programme is probably at least partly responsible for the rise in aggression in our society.)

Apparently many people prefer to buy very expensive items so that they can boast about how much they spent. Antoinette suggests that I should write a book, bind it in diamond encrusted leather and put it on sale at £1,000,000. I could describe it as the *Most Expensive New Book in the World*. Middle Eastern billionaires or rich Russians would probably buy it as a status symbol.

6

Macron, the little French twit, is not just the vainest man in Europe – he is also the most stupid. He has threatened that he will not allow the UK to leave the EU unless we give him our fishing waters. This has made it nigh on impossible for Theresa May (the previous holder of the title of Most Potty Person in Europe) to get her treacherous deal through the House of Commons on the 11th December. (May has turned so often in the last year that she must be permanently dizzy.) If Macron had kept his big mouth shut, there was a remote chance that she might have persuaded MPs that it would be possible to leave the EU without any more concessions. Macron is increasingly unpopular in France because he has not realised that when you are telling the peasants to tighten their belts it is not a good idea to spend millions of taxpayers' euros on luxuries for yourself. A few members of the French royal family made the same mistake and things did not end well for them either.

I ordered a copy of *Heat* by William Goldman, a novel by the legendary screenwriter who died recently. The film based on the book is the one starring Burt Reynolds not the one starring Al Pacino, Robert de Niro and Val Kilmer. Goldman was probably the greatest screenwriter. He certainly wrote better stuff about the cinema than anyone else. His *Adventures in the Screen Trade* is a classic. Talking of the immortal Mr Reynolds, I remember that a week or so ago we watched *Cannonball Run* again. It's wonderful and rather stolen by Dom DeLuise. I love the outtakes – especially the moment when Mr DeLuise, claiming that it wasn't his fault that he had corpsed (yet again), points at Dean Martin and says, rather plaintively: 'It was Mr Martin's fault!' I love that Mr DeLuise refers to his co-star as Mr Martin. Respect.

Patriotism exists among people who believe in something more than themselves. And that is why patriotism is not popular with prissy and precious millennials – they don't believe there is anything more important than they are; they believe they are entitled to wealth and fame without having to work for it or earn it. Indeed, many now prefer to live along without any commitments or responsibilities. They are professional victims; ever on the look-out for a new way to be offended.

A gentleman used to do the right thing whatever the cost but millennials do what is best for them whatever the cost. They claim to believe in sustainability but they favour biofuels (which are leading to mass starvation) and electric cars (which require more traditional fuel than cars which run directly on diesel or petrol and which are utterly unsustainable).

The self-absorbed millennials, ignorant of history and ill-informed about the present, don't realise that no one in history ever had things as easy as they do. They want to be given a house and a big bunch of cash. They are so self-centred, so aggressively confident and vain in a Macron sort of way, that they take no interest in anything outside themselves. Their only subject of conversation is themselves. If they fail at anything it is always someone else's fault. At university they insist on being allowed to avoid distressing topics. They have precious little interest in the outside world. Their arrogance is beyond belief.

Millennials with social media accounts know their opinions can and do destroy people's lives and it has given them a sense of self-importance which is out of proportion to their knowledge, experience and value. The internet is over populated with mean-spirited scolds whose main ambition is to get other people into trouble. These folk are cocky but incompetent and not terribly bright as a breed; they have a far lower IQ than previous generations and show low levels of initiative and imagination. Most were brainwashed by the EU.

It is older folk I feel sorry for. This is a bad time to be old. My heart bleeds for all the poor sods struggling to survive on £130 a week (the State pension). Moreover, the millennials have decided that the elderly are rich and should pay extra taxes if they dare to earn a few extra quid so that they can buy some food and light a fire occasionally to keep the temperature above freezing. And the BBC has decided that the elderly are rich and can afford to pay an indecent licence fee if they want to watch television or listen to the wireless.

I wonder how many pensioners will die of cold this winter. Forty thousand? Sixty thousand? Eighty thousand?

It is utterly absurd that children of 18 are allowed to vote. They know nothing. There are even moves, understandably popular with the more lunatic fringes of the SNP, to reduce the voting age to 16. For all I know they'd probably like to see it reduced to 12. And why not? Children of 12 probably know as much about the world as children of 18. If there is a Second Referendum on the EU I expect that the voting age will be reduced to 16. Incidentally, how did a Second Referendum promoted by a war criminal come to be known as the People's Vote? Wasn't the First Referendum a People's Vote? It's all part of the spin isn't it? If the EU supporters had set out to polarise the nation they could not have done a better job of it.

Every aspect of our country is fucked up. Health care, the police, the roads, education, rubbish collecting, the economy – everything is worse, far worse, than it was 10, 20, 30 or 40 years ago. And we can, quite seriously, blame the EU for most of the deterioration. It is their absurd and indefensible legislation which has destroyed the fabric of our life. The EU has destroyed health care and the NHS. It is because of EU laws that GPs no longer answer calls at nights and at weekends. EU rubbish collecting laws have turned our nation into an unsightly tip. The EU gave us zero hours contracts. EU regulations have resulted in poorly built houses. Laws from Brussels have stifled entrepreneurs. The EU gave us VAT and its demands have pushed up our taxes. Food prices are much higher than they should be because of the EU. Immigration forced upon us by the EU has caused massive overcrowding. It is because of the EU that our infrastructure can no longer cope. Our atmosphere is polluted because of EU laws. EU laws about climate change have pushed up the cost of energy with the result that vast numbers of old people freeze to death. The EU has destroyed our fishing industry. EU laws have made investing more difficult and more expensive. And for all this we have paid them billions of pounds a year.

The average millennial doesn't think he or she has reached adulthood (or should have to accept adult responsibilities) until they've celebrated their 26th birthday. They complain incessantly that they cannot afford to buy property but a survey showed that a fifth of millennials would rather invest in bitcoin than property.

This is lunacy.

Bitcoin is the con of our time; a bigger fraud than the dot com boom. At least some dotcom companies had some value. Bitcoin is a financial heist.

Millennials love bitcoin because they are too ill educated and too stupid to see that the Emperor isn't wearing any clothes.

More than half of the millennials questioned in a big survey complained that property was a high risk investment and, presumably, didn't offer the possibility of a dramatic short term profit.

Moreover, dramatically few millennials have made any pension arrangements (unless they have been provided for them by an employer).

I remember starting to pay into my first pension plan when I was a medical student and could hardly afford to eat. This is not to suggest that I was a goody goody since most of my fellow students were also thinking that they would let compound interest (Einstein's eighth wonder of the world) do its work on their behalf.

I always play music while I am working but I am often quite unaware of what I'm listening to. The music is there as background, mainly so that I don't hear any extraneous noises.

'Do you think you could change the CD soon?' asked Antoinette this afternoon. 'I like Credence Clearwater Revival very much but you've been playing that CD non-stop for three days.'

I honestly had no idea.

(Later in the day I discovered that my CD player has a Shuffle button which means that I can play tracks in a varying order. This means that Antoinette will be far less likely to notice if I don't change the CD. I can just press Play and Shuffle and off we go again but in a slightly different order.)

I can see the Government wanting to force us into accepting a Second Referendum. They doubtless believe that, three years after they lost the first one, they will have demographics on their side. Many older, wiser voters will have died and lots of ignorant, brainwashed children will be able to vote. A few months ago, the national press in the UK were divided. *The Guardian*, the *Mirror* and the *Financial Times* represented and supported the traitors. Now the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express* have got new editors (and the *Express* is owned by the *Mirror*) and both seem to me to have gone over to the traitors – the *Mail* most spectacularly so. A month ago the *Mail* had a circulation of around 1.3 million. I suspect that by Christmas the circulation will be closer to 1.0 million and the editor (a former editor of *The Tatler*) will be looking for fresh employment. Incidentally, I was amused the other day to see that *The Guardian* is still begging for money from its readers. How pathetic and embarrassing.

Which is most important: justice or law and order? We clearly cannot have both. I am beginning to think that things haven't much improved over the centuries. In old England they used to have a very good way of telling whether a woman was a witch or not. They would strap the suspect into a ducking stool and then duck her, complete with chair, in the village pond. If the woman drowned then she was innocent. If she did not drown then she was a witch and they would burn her at the stake. This sort of bizarre way of administering justice was common all over Europe in the Middle Ages. In the village of Saint-Severe in France, which is famous for being visited by Joan of Arc, the locals had their own unique way of administering justice. They hung the accused and held the trial afterwards. If the prisoner was found guilty then much time was saved. If the prisoner was innocent then they'd say sorry and everyone would feel a bit bad about things for a day or two.

Beggars in Oxford are apparently being issued with bar code thingies on a little bit of plastic that they can hang around their necks. Passers-by will be able to give them money via their mobile phones or cashless cards. Now I know that the world has gone entirely insane. As an aside I would mention that most of the beggars on our streets are receiving benefits (together with the extra sums for claiming disablement). This means that they are better off than the old ladies trying to live on their pensions who so generously dig into the purses to hand over money. Incidentally, talking of plastic, I can't help thinking that there are a good many companies which are going to be in trouble if the anti-plastic campaign heats up any more. So, for example, Lego appears to be made of plastic. As, indeed, are mobile telephones and laptops. Now, there's a thought. How will the millennials and the Greens cope without their mobile phones and laptops? And how will the beggars in Oxford learn to cope? Maybe someone will find a way to make wooden mobile phones.

I bought a copy of *GQ* magazine wondering what it was about. Having flicked through the pages I rather suspect it must be a magazine for homosexuals. I honestly can't imagine why any heterosexual male would ever buy it – except by mistake. I wonder what the *GQ* stands for? Gone Queer? Gay Quarterly?

It seems, these days, that to be a successful politician a man or woman must first be immoral, dishonest and, preferably, crooked. Nixon, Bush, Clinton, Obama, Trump fit well. During the year I saw that a number of politicians who've been in prison are now supporting the EU. The awful Denis Macshane, a former Labour Party politician and a convicted criminal, the loathsome Chris Huhne (and his wretched ex-wife) were just two of those supporting the EU. Huhne, described as a climate change consultant (wouldn't you know it – a perfect job for a former criminal looking for a profitable bandwagon) was a Liberal Democrat politician who went to prison for perverting the course of justice. Before his imprisonment he was also exposed for a variety of sneaky expenses claims. (He claimed for having his garden chairs painted, for the cost of a trouser press and some fluffy dusters.) Huhne, a former columnist for *The Guardian*, now works for a company which makes woodchip pellets in the United States and ships them around the world. It has been suggested that shipping the pellets around the world does more harm to the climate than burning coal.

Naturally, the French lead the world in crooked politicians. Indeed, a list of crooked French politicians is much the same as a list of French politicians.

It is no exaggeration to say that politicians (like the police and many business folk) now consider themselves to be above the law.

Britain has apparently come 40th in the world for press freedom. So that's pretty whizz isn't it? The really good (and to a large extent surprising) news is that we are apparently still a little way ahead of North Korea, though we are behind Trinidad and Tobago and France and sliding fast down the list.

It isn't difficult to see why we are doing so badly.

It is illegal to object to homosexual marriage and to homosexual couples adopting children. These subjects cannot be discussed. It is pretty well illegal to discuss immigration without being branded a racist. It is not yet (quite) illegal to discuss man-made climate change or the perils of vaccination but it might as well be because the media bosses in general (and the BBC in particular) simply refuse to allow any debate on these issues – even though no one other than climate change pseudo-scientists, bandwagon freeloaders and particularly gullible left-wing journalists believe any of the rubbish being produced. (Millennial journalists all believe the establishment nonsense they have absorbed. They believe the EU is good, that electric cars are good, that oil is bad. They believe we are going to die because of global warming. They never question the things they 'know as gospel truths'. They merely repeat them, inserting the pseudofacts into their daily work without any doubts or hesitation.)

I rather suspect that freedom of speech in general, and freedom of the press in particular, ended when it became impossible to question the number of Jews who died in Germany during World War II. The official figure is six million and if you suggest it could have been 5,999,999 then you will probably go to prison.

I am not questioning the horror or the number but I fail to see why this (and a few other isolated pieces of history) should be immune to debate.

Unlike his predecessors, Donald Trump is smart enough to realise that the idea of a United States of Europe is not in America's best interests. Previous US Presidents pushed Britain into joining the EU because they believed they'd have a voice in Europe through Britain. But it hasn't worked out quite as planned and Trump realises that America has been ripped off by the EU. Indeed, as far as America is concerned, the EU has become a rapacious and threatening monster.

'Your clock has lost a hand,' reported a visitor, examining the longcase clock in our hallway. I had great pleasure in explaining that it only ever had one hand and was built in 1640 to 1650. In those days clocks weren't expected to be accurate to the minute – and so there wasn't much point in having a minute hand.

We voted to leave the EU because we believed that, freed from the fascist and oppressive rule of the EU, we would be (in Shelley's words): 'Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free'. It will be entirely because of T.May and her Government if we will fail. A Government of factory workers and clerks could have given us the Brexit we dreamt of, hoped for and believed in. It was not difficult. We were betrayed.

7

I am delighted to see that Penguin is re-issuing George Simenon's books. I am now able to complete my collection. Simenon was undoubtedly one of the greatest writers of the last 100 years. Thank heavens he was Belgian and not French. Now that I'm on the doorstep of retirement I will have more time to enjoy his books.

Our garden in the Cotswolds is silent. There are no animals and no birds. The garden smells strongly of cider because of all the rotting apples. Usually, the fallen fruit is eaten by badgers, squirrels and birds. But now there are no creatures. And so the fruit just rots. We have always tried to maintain our garden as a wildlife preserve. We have never used any chemicals which could endanger living creatures. But everything in the neighbourhood must surely have been shot or poisoned.

During the year I finished reading *Ego 9*, the final volume of James Agate's diaries. Agate, who was up there with Fothergill for acerbity, finished writing the 9th and last volume a few days before his unexpected death and his former assistant and secretary, Alan Dent, aka 'Jock', added a couple of pages to the book which are touching, loving and revealing.

In the summer of 1947, Agate and Dent were due to have lunch at The Ivy restaurant in London. Agate was 50 minutes late and so Dent, who had been commissioned to prepare Agate's obituary for *The Guardian*, used the time to write the piece. When Agate finally arrived, Dent put away what he was writing but Agate guessed what it was and demanded to be allowed to read it. You can only imagine Dent's pain and embarrassment. But the moment was saved when Agate pronounced himself delighted.

Agate's books are full of wonderful anecdotes. For example, when he was 19 he saved up to go to Paris to see a famous actress called Rejane. To his disappointment the actress 'just walked through her part'. So Agate, never shy, sent a note telling her that he had travelled a long way to see her and that he was disappointed. In the second half she gave a marvellous performance. Years later, Agate (by then a famous drama critic) met Rejane and told her that he had, two decades earlier, sent her a note in Paris. 'Are you the English boy who wrote to me one evening when I wasn't giving a performance?' Agate said he was. Rejane said: 'You taught me a lesson that has lasted all my life. You made me realise that there may be somebody in any theatre at any time to whom you are opening a new door, a new gateway to beauty. You put it into my heart that no artist is ever entitled to give a bad performance.'

Beautiful.

It rather reminds me of a quote from Alexander Korda. 'When making a movie I always remember that some cowboy has ridden 50 miles in order to go to the cinema.'

We watched *Spectre*, the last James Bond movie again. Why have they decided to make Bond neurotic as well as psychotic? It was all very dark and gloomy. I don't think we will be watching any of the Craig versions of Bond again. Presumably the millennials like their Bond to be dour. I much preferred Mr Brosnan's devil may care, debonair Bond.

8

A couple of years ago, I gave away most of my cricket library. Several hundred books (including all my 21st century Wisdens) went to a nice chap who struggles to run a second hand bookshop in Cheltenham. I regret giving away the Wisdens. Still, the old man was so happy that he had tears in his eyes when Antoinette took him in a couple of car loads of books and insisted that we didn't want any money for them. I am also regretting having burnt several large boxes full of letters from readers and publishers. Too late now, though.

I am, however, still buying cricket books and I've been reading Johnny Wardle's autobiography – *Happy Go Johnny*. Along with Jim Laker and Tony Lock, Wardle was one of the England cricket team's premier slow bowlers in the 1950s. The book was co-written with AA.Thomson who was one of the best and funniest cricket writers – along with C.B.Fry and Robertson-Glasgow. I thought Thomson was infinitely better than Neville Cardus who I often find to be rather pretentious. I also picked up the other day a lovely book of Thomson's called *Odd Men In*. It is about eccentric cricketers, of whom the world was never short.

I also managed to pick up a biography of Keith Miller (sensibly called *Keith Miller*). If I had to choose one Australian cricketer for my world best-ever team it would be Miller rather than Don Bradman.

Macron, the French President is a vain narcissist who thinks he is the reincarnation of Napoleon. He has been flogging mugs, posters and T-shirts with his picture on. He's even been flogging special Macron macaroons'. The fellow is besotted with himself. He is all ego. He was a Rothschild banker just months before he became President and having a Palace has clearly gone to his head. Actually, I think he is probably certifiably insane. (At least Theresa May has not yet started flogging mugs, posters and T-shirts with her picture on them.)

Macron seems to think that he can turn the EU into an enlarged version of France. He even wants French to be the European language (and the language of Africa).

He obviously hasn't done his homework and does not realise that the EU was created by Nazis and when the EU becomes the United States of Europe it will be made in a German mould.

Most absurd of all, Macron wants Britain to join the EU after Brexit. It's time for the men in white coats to attend the Elysee Palace (assuming that they're not on strike).

Still, the bright news is that the French have seen through Macron. He is now more unpopular in France than either of his predecessors – Francois Hollande and Nicolas Sarkozy. And that takes some doing. Macron, like all other French Presidents of recent times, will fail to do any of the things he said he was going to do for the French are effectively ungovernable. All French Presidents fail when they take on the nationalised industries (such as the railways) and the six million civil servants, but recent Presidents have made things infinitely more difficult for themselves by their vanity, by spending too much on themselves and by behaving like one of Queen Elizabeth II's younger sons.

9

I'm still sorting out my bookcases. I finished several books by Louis l'Amour during the year.

L'Amour is quite possibly the most skilful American novelist of the 20th century and I'd put him into the same category as Georges Simenon, in that he 'owned' a genre. In L'Amour's case it was westerns and although literary critics always seem to prefer Elmore Leonard I believe that L'Armour had the edge on him.

L'Amour had two problems.

First, he wrote too many books. Publishers don't like that and they always used to think that no author should write more than one book a year if he wants to be taken seriously. (Authors who wanted or needed to write more than one book a year were encouraged to use pen names. The ebooks phenomenon has proved that to be a total nonsense.)

Second, although many of the women in L'Amour's stories were strong and very capable they were often rescued by men. And, today, that is like writing books and signing yourself Son of Sam or The Boston Strangler. No chance.

Still, I don't care and nor does Mr L'Amour these days.

L'Amour left us a vast library of wonderful books and he was a clever man in many senses. In the front of *The Iron Marshall* he dedicates the book to nearly 200 of the sales managers and representatives who work for the paperback company producing his books.

A friend of Antoinette's wrote a little while ago to say that her mother, who is 80 and suffering from dementia, has a prolapsed bladder which has been deteriorating recently. She can no longer pass urine properly. She is waiting for an appointment to see a specialist but, having been told that she could not see anyone for four months the daughter arranged for her mother to be seen at a private hospital at a fee of £150 (which I suspect they could ill afford).

The GP had done nothing to speed up the appointment.

The consultant's advice (for his £150) was to go to the local A&E department immediately. (That used to be called passing the buck. These days it's called give me £150 but do not expect me to do anything for it.) At the hospital (where mother and daughter waited all day to be seen because the consultant had even not provided a letter of introduction for his £150), the mother eventually had a catheter fitted.

A urology consultant said he would see her in a month's time. He said there were no beds in the hospital where he could examine the prolapse properly.

Three months later the patient is still waiting to be treated, still in discomfort and still in distress.

The urology consultant then decided that he didn't treat prolapsed bladders after all (maybe he misread his job description or perhaps he simply didn't understand the meaning of the word 'urology') and no one seemed to care a damn that the patient remained untreated and uncared for.

A very simple operation would have cured the patient's symptoms.

But no one gives a damn.

The fact is that people who praise the NHS (usually because they don't understand what has been done wrong to themselves or their relatives) are simply helping to protect a deadly and incompetent bureaucracy. The NHS will only improve if more people complain about the appalling service.

That's the NHS 2018 style.

And the real tragedy is that this is not an unusual story.

But would this happen to Theresa May?

Would it happen to the Queen?

Would it happen to a 30 year hospital administrator?

As an aside, I would mention that it seems these days that everyone who is catheterised – male or female – seems to develop a urinary tract infection. This is a problem which seems peculiar to the National Health Service. The truth is that if a patient develops an infection as a result of a catheterisation then the person who did the catheterisation – whether a doctor or a nurse – is guilty of sloppy hygiene practice and should be fined a year's salary and fired. It is no surprise that antibiotic resistant organisations are also commonplace in NHS hospitals. By and large, staff who work for the NHS have absolutely no idea about hygiene or how bugs are transmitted.

Gays, women and Jews who are supporters of the EU's immigration policy (and who encourage more Muslims to enter their country) are certifiably insane.

We sat in a café today which had a notice on the wall saying: 'This is a breast friendly café.' I asked the assistant behind the counter why the café considered itself to be breast friendly. He explained that the café allowed women to breast feed their babies (and, presumably, anyone else's) if they elected to do so. Since he was a snowflake he did not seem to think the sign might cause amusement or misunderstanding. It occurred to me that the sign itself might be considered sexist and discriminatory. Does the café think less of those who do not have breasts?

In 1939 Britain went to war to save Poland. We are now supporting a great chunk of the Polish population. And still the Polish Government takes every opportunity to put the boot in as far as the EU is concerned. I hope our leaders will remember all this next time Germany invades Poland.

We have always helped other European countries and yet none of them has ever helped us. After the 2008 debacle, we saved Ireland from bankruptcy but you wouldn't think it now, would you?

We have much closer ties with the Commonwealth than we have with the less bits of Europe such as France, Germany and so on and yet our politicians seem to take great delight in scoffing at the Commonwealth.

Actually, come to think of it our relationship with the United States is much stronger than our relationship with any European country.

If we must be part of something then I say again that we would be better off being another American state than being part of the United States of Europe.

Prostate cancer is now a bigger killer than breast cancer. However, rampant sexism in the media means that breast cancer gets far more coverage than prostate cancer. You can illustrate a story about breast cancer with a photograph of a pair of breasts. But how the hell do you illustrate a story about prostate cancer?

On the rare occasions when prostate cancer is discussed, ill-informed celebrities are invariably seen telling men to have the standard PSI test done – to find out whether or not they have early stage prostate cancer.

This is, to put it politely and almost appropriately, absolute bollocks.

And it is rather a pity, since the medical establishments in both the UK and the USA now agree with my long standing advice that the standard prostate test (PSI) which is widely recommended is not only useless but actually does more harm than good.

There are, however, many doctors and clinics making money out of offering the test.

So, I have no doubt it will continue to be offered, recommended, promoted and sold.

I have just discovered that every year, sometime in June, a red rose is presented to the Lord Mayor of London (the Lord Mayor, not the political one) at the Mansion House in England's capital. The rose is handed over as an act of contrition because in 1381 a householder built a bridge across Seething lane connecting his house to a garden on the other side of the road. The bridge was built without first obtaining the Lord Mayor's permission and the rose has been 'paid' every year by the owner of the house. It is an on-going apology. The Lord Mayor turns up to the ceremony, accompanied by a Master of the Watermen and a row of Doggett's Watermen wearing scarlet uniforms and caps and each holding an oar. The Mayor is then presented with a freshly picked red rose on a golden, embroidered cushion. Only in England could this happen.

Our carpenter is here again. He is an excellent carpenter and a very pleasant fellow but an unhealthily early riser. He turns up at 8.15 am so we have to get up at 7.30 am. He then finishes work at 4.00 pm sharp. I always used to get up at 7.30 am but for the last decade or so I have worked later at night and got up at 9.00 ish. I am constantly reminded of Bertie Wooster who, when turning up at a country house for breakfast at 9.30 am was asked if he always had breakfast at that time. 'Only when I get up early,' he replied with charming innocence.

My problem now is that when I get up early I cannot adapt my internal clock and I am constantly tired. Actually, I am constantly exhausted and instead of doing some work I sit in the easy chair in my study, pick up a book and fall asleep. I am then awakened a little later by the carpenter calling to ask me something. I dreamt yesterday that he wanted to know if we wanted the door to hang to the left or the right. He had a tape measure draped round his neck and a piece of tailor's chalk in his hand. Antoinette told me that I woke up and shouted 'Could I have buttons instead of a zip please?'

I am again owed money by my literary agent in Portugal. Or maybe it's the same money that he owed me before. Who knows? He says he cannot obtain a cheque to send me and will I email him all my bank details so that he can put money direct into my account. He must think I am very poor for he says there is no charge to arrange a wire transfer. And he must think I am very mad if he thinks I am going to email my bank details to him. I think I will abandon these royalties. Half of whatever I get will go to the taxman who isn't doing anything to help me bring them to England. I had to earn the damned royalties and now I have to struggle to get hold of them. My original Portuguese agent was a lovely man and a friend. He used to take me all over Lisbon visiting Portuguese publishers. I remember one publisher said, rather pompously, that he would only publish my books if I learned to speak

Portuguese. My agent pointed out that I had books in over 20 languages at the time and that it was expecting rather too much to hope that an author would be able to speak 20 languages. Sadly, my friend went to the great Agency in the Sky and I have no rapport whatsoever with the man who took over his agency.

This is the third or fourth time in the last year that I have abandoned foreign royalties I am owed because publishers or agents find it difficult to send my money without my sending my bank details over the internet.

A while ago, *The Times* claimed that 'large numbers of people wrongly believe that dozens of things including stress…can cause cancer'.

I'm afraid it's *The Times* that is wrong. Stress affects the immune system and is undoubtedly a major cause of cancer. I first suggested this link over two decades ago and two scientists were recently awarded the Nobel Prize for establishing the link between the immune system and cancer.

An intellectually challenged campaigner in Australia has apparently claimed that the words 'he' and 'she' should be banned. While we're at it why don't we also ban the words 'it' and 'they'. That should make conversation interesting.

Millennials are demanding that food companies should make more effort to force people to eat healthier food. Are they mad? It is not the job of food companies to teach people how to eat healthily. It is the job of food companies to sell food and make money. It is the job of three groups to teach us how to eat healthily: the Government, the medical profession and the media. None of these has ever done anything to improve eating habits. The Government happily produces rules about the size of pies and the amount of sugar in drinks but refuses to tell the truth about meat because it is frightened of upsetting the meat industry. Doctors have never taken any interest in diet because they are beholden to the pharmaceutical industry. Drug companies don't want patients to eat healthily because they want people to take drugs. And the media is controlled by chefs and nutritionists who are owned by the food companies (who want us to continue to eat unhealthily) and the drug companies (who want us to take drugs). Any chef, food writer or nutritionist who advocates eating meat should be arrested for attempted murder.

I managed to download some forms explaining how to report the capital gains on our Paris apartment. The 12 pages of explanations are utterly incomprehensible. I am comforted by the knowledge that there are probably no tax inspectors who understand them either. My experience of tax officials is that they know very little about the rules relating to the collecting of tax.

The hopes of millennials are crushed by their exaggerated expectations.

The Government appears to want to continue with its plan to force pensioners to pay national insurance contributions on their earnings. Pensioners paid national insurance contributions all their lives so that they would receive a state pension. Now that they receive the State pension they've paid for but many find they cannot live on it so they have to keep working. Most are working out of necessity rather than out of choice. And now the Government wants to impose a cruel, new and extra tax on them to appease greedy, lazy snowflake millennials who demand and expect a house, a yacht, two posh cars, holidays four times a year and an endless supply of Lattes with cinnamon sprinkles.

Why do millennials and politicians hate the elderly with such venom? Don't they realise that they too will one day be old?

In a fair, logical, sympathetic world, pensioners would not pay any tax at all – on the grounds that they have, by the time they reach the age of 65, paid their debt to society in full.

The Government seems disinterested in the fact that hospitals are pretty well bare of doctors at weekends (because of EU legislation) and completely disinterested in the fact that sick and injured people attending casualty departments have to wait 12 hours to be seen (or 24 to 36 hours if they are over the age of 65.) No one cares that patients are expected to climb into beds with dirty sheets. No one cares that men and women are expected to share wards. (It will probably soon be illegal to have single sex wards.) No one cares that hospitals charge huge fees for car parking and then punish patients who have overrun their time because their appointment was late. And people still say that the NHS is one of the UK's wonders. I honestly do try to be upbeat and optimistic about Britain. But I sometimes find it a little difficult.

Surgeons are already being replaced by robots. And so are nurses. GPs are being replaced by computer programmes.

When a chum and I launched the *Home Doctor* software for the Sinclair computer back in 1983, it was the world's first medical programme for computers. We both thought that with a little backing we could have designed a programme that would perform a full medical examination – including blood pressure and urine tests. Modern programmes can diagnose and prescribe and it won't be long before they will, if necessary, be able to send a self-driving ambulance equipped with robot paramedics. It is difficult to think of a profession which offers secure, long-term employment – medicine certainly doesn't. With a little work it will be possible to make robots which are more sympathetic than health care professionals.

The sanctimonious, ignorant hypocrites who join the Green Party, Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth still insist on eating their burgers, operating their electrically powered computers and driving their electrically powered cars. There are few folk scarier than fools who have found what they think is a cause. It must be nice to be so damned right because you don't know anything. I loathe all these people. These organisations were probably founded with good intentions but now they are just homes for hypocritical, sanctimonious, money-grubbing do-badders; Lycra clad cyclists with little cameras on their helmets.

In 1957, Gloucester Cricket Club had five professional cricketers on its books who also played professional football in the winter. One of the players, Arthur Milton, played both football and cricket for England. He was the last to do so, though M.J.K.Smith later played cricket and rugby for England. This is, in American terms, the equivalent of a man playing top level pro basketball and top level pro baseball. It will never happen again.

I saw a couple in their late 60s earning pennies by busking. They were presumably subsidising their inadequate pensions. He was playing the guitar and she the keyboard. She gazed at him adoringly as he sang 'Like a Rolling Stone'. It was very touching. They will soon have to pay National Insurance as well as tax on their modest earnings.

A woman in a shop where I was browsing bought a cake tin (one of those which has a picture of a wonderful looking cake on the packet but never contains a cake when you get it home) and said to the assistant: 'Could you send this to my hotel please?' The assistant stared at her as if she'd asked him to tap dance for her.

Was anyone surprised that a driverless car killed a pedestrian? I can think of a thousand reasons why driverless cars are dangerous but here's one: what happens when the sensors (upon which the car relies) are covered in mud?

Driverless cars will not become a reality in the UK – despite all the hype from car manufacturers. Even if driverless cars can operate in the US where roads are wide and fairly straight, there is no way that they will ever exist in the UK where many roads are narrow and where junctions are blind. And what about potholes? If a driverless car hits a pothole it will be thrown into a panic, assuming that it has crashed. At road junctions, in car parks and in other real life situations the driverless car, which will have to be programmed to be cautious, will be frozen to the spot. Real drivers will bully the driverless cars into submission. At junctions the driverless car will remain stationary for hours, creating massive queues. And what will happen when two driverless cars meet in a single track lane in the countryside? Which one will reverse?

Spending money on developing driverless cars is just a slow alternative to burning it. Driverless cars seemed to me to be a moderately good idea (though rather dull and worthy, like instant coffee) until I saw that Google was involved – the third most self-serving, evil company on the planet (after Monsanto and Goldman Sachs but with Facebook coming up fast on the inside).

(Those funny Google spectacles didn't do too well did they? I suspect they were about as successful as the Apple Watch.)

I wonder how many of those wunderkinds working on driverless cars, and doubtless imagining themselves breaking new ground and travelling into an uncharted future, realise that the first driverless car was actually on the roads back in the 1930s.

Not many, I suspect.

A driverless Tin Lizzy car called the Phantom Auto drove around America – no driver, no wires, no strings. The car drove in and out of traffic and did everything as though there were a driver at the wheel. There was no trickery. The car was actually controlled by operators using a remote control device.

The experiment was ended when the Phantom Auto accidentally hit 10 people. There were no fatalities but there were some injuries, and cars went back to having drivers.

Very few things are genuinely new.

I wouldn't be surprised to read that Leonardo da Vinci once wrote code for a Pokemon App.

If he did I bet it was the bee's knees.

Honestly, driverless cars have no future. Who is going to want to trust their lives to a deadly vehicle controlled by software designed by the sort of spotty youths who gave us Microsoft Word for Windows?

The truth is that we have become obsessed with the power of electronics in general and the computer in particular. We have become so obsessed that we have forgotten that the purpose of progress is to make life better in some way.

The driverless car won't be safer, quicker or better in any way.

It's just another silly gimmick.

There's another problem with them that I haven't mentioned before: the real risk that self-driving cars will be hacked into by 16-year-old psychopaths (who will, when they are arrested, all claim to be suffering from autism). They will have 'fun' by turning the accelerator into the brake and vice versa. Or they will simply re-design the cars so that they deliberately run over pedestrians.

Finally, there are quite a few folk who actually enjoy driving and who feel nauseous if they are driven.

Thinking of all these silly driverless cars reminds me that I've always been quite fond of motor cars. My first vehicle, which I bought for £30 when I was a medical student in Birmingham in 1966, was a 1950s Humber Hawk Series IV saloon. It had six cylinders and was feisty. It could reach 0-60 mph in 30 seconds if you put your foot down to the floor and had the patience and strength to keep it there. The turning circle wasn't terribly good and I remember that if I wanted to park in a multi-storey car park it wouldn't go round the turns in a single sweep. To begin with I used to do a sort of three point turn at every bend. Later I just bumped into the wall a couple of times and narrowed the front of the car by an inch or so. The windscreen wipers flew across the road the first time I used the car and I had to call the AA whenever I wanted to go anywhere because the battery was stone dead and I couldn't afford a replacement. (I used to park at the top of a hill whenever I could.) Cars were supposed to have an MOT in those days but the bloke who sold me the Humber convinced me that they were just an administrative option and weren't really necessary. I was never given an MOT certificate nor was I asked for one and I suppose I should feel deeply ashamed but given everything else that has gone on in the world in the last half a century I really can't get myself worked up about it, despite what the millennials might think. Insurance and road tax were regarded as optional extras rather than as entirely obligatory.

I remember that the purchase transaction was very simple. It was raining. I was walking back to my flat. I had recently sold a couple of articles to magazines so I decided to buy either an umbrella or a car. There were no umbrella shops but there was a bombed site with a spiv flogging cars. (Thanks to the Germans, there were quite a few of those still left in Birmingham in the 1960s.) I wandered onto the site, picked out the largest and most solid looking vehicle, sat in it and decided to buy it. I didn't start the engine or go for a test drive. I gave the spiv a cheque for £30 and he gave me the keys and the log book. I then drove away. That was it. The whole transaction can't have taken more than five minutes. The pre-sale check consisted of peeling the price label off the windscreen. There were quite a few leaks, of course, but that was to be expected and I was drier than I would have been if I'd walked home. I remember that rain ran down the inside of the windscreen as well as the outside and if I'd had wipers they would have probably been more useful inside the glass. I got round the problem of driving through a waterfall by sticking my head out of the window so that I could see where I was going. This meant that my head got wet when it rained but at least the rest of me remained dry.

This was motoring in the 1960s and good fun it was too.

Not that 'fun' seems to be a consideration these days as far as cars are concerned. Car advertisements concentrate on incomprehensible carbon dioxide figures and miles per gallon statistics. There are no acceleration figures and not even any prices. Most of the cars on sale these days look the same as one another and have no more character than a cardboard box. Come to think of it, it's hardly surprising that millennials aren't buying cars these days.

An American publisher has written offering to produce audio versions of the first three Bilbury books. It is very nice of them but they are offering me $500 per book as an advance against a royalty of 10% of net proceeds for world rights. This is so bad it is embarrassing. It is less than I invariably received for UK audio rights of my books in the 1990s – against a royalty of 15% of the gross. And I would never accept a percentage of net proceeds. The publisher can put whatever they like against the gross take and call it expenses. So, if they sell the audio for $10 they can claim that their expenses were $9 and their profit only $1. They would then give me 10% of the $1 – a measly 10 cents. No thanks!

And a Frenchman wants to translate *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War* into French. (Well, I suppose he would). He wrote to me in French and in order to see what his English was like I asked him to write back to me in English. He wrote back to say that he didn't speak very good English.

It is time for Britons to boycott products made in those EU countries which are constantly belittling us and trying to humiliate us. No more BMW cars, no more Mercedes cars, no more champagne and no more Camembert. We can buy everything we want from the rest of the world. A year or so ago, I called for a boycott of all EU products. The EU is now our enemy. We have to let them know that we will fight to protect our country, our freedom, our democracy and our future. And a boycott of products made in Germany, France et al will help concentrate their minds. I am delighted to see that the boss of Weatherspoons is boycotting EU alcohol. Brilliant. But we need to do more. I'm not buying anything made in continental EU countries (including Ireland). Let's hit the EU nations in their pockets. In the olden days we all knew that the words 'Made in England' meant that something would be well made and reliable and that something 'Made in Italy' or 'Made in France' would fall apart in seconds. Then the EU took that away from us.

11

Whenever the French get fed up with their Government they go out onto the streets of Paris and set fire to things. The result is always the same. The President (who will have sworn blind that he will never back down) will immediately back down and do what the mob wants him to do. And, predictably, this is exactly what has happened with Macron. The French got cross with Macron following EU advice and introducing piles of stupid climate change laws. The odd thing is that even the Greens didn't like paying more for their diesel. The French are fed up with him pretending to be a world statesman, lecturing the world and assuming that he is brighter than everyone else. So they trashed Paris. And Macron, who had been defiant, rolled over in minutes. He was probably hiding under the sofa at the time. Macron had sworn that he would stand firm against rioters. Here was yet more evidence that the one thing the French are good at is surrendering. The French rioters bought Macron very easily. Apparently the French President is now less popular in France than Donald Trump. France is ungovernable and doomed because the mob always rules. Mind you, Theresa May is pretty good at surrendering too. Perhaps she is French.

Investment experts are talking (yet again) about the bull market ending if Britain leaves the EU. I don't know where these investment experts learnt their expertise but I am not impressed. In 1999, (probably when some of them were still at school struggling to learn their one times table) the FTSE 100 was at 6950. Between then and now the FTSE managed to get into the high 7000s. Today, the FTSE 100 is at 6807. So, anyone who had invested in the biggest British blue chip stocks in 1999 would today be looking at a loss on their money. In between 1999 and today the market has gone up and down but it's mostly stayed the same. If that's a bull market then I'm a canary. The American market has done better because of the absurd rise in the prices of companies such as Google, Facebook and Amazon. But the so-called experts weren't talking about the American market and I very much doubt if the prices of American shares will be affected by our leaving (or not leaving) the European Union.

I tried to advertise my book about the European Union on Amazon.com in America. They accepted the advert and then wrote rejecting it saying: 'It is Amazon's policy to not advertise content in which our audiences may see a controversial topic, person or event.' (The uncomfortably split infinitive belongs to Amazon.)

Very courageous and sensible of them. We mustn't annoy the EU, must we? Mind you, I can't think of many decent books which don't include some mention of controversial topics, people or events. If they carry on like this, Amazon will soon only be accepting ads for adult colouring books.

I assume a Remainer complained about the advertisement since the book is clearly not entirely complimentary about the European Union.

There used to be a word for this sort of thing. Now, what was it called?

Ah, yes, it was called censorship.

The damned woman May has flown to Germany to beg Merkel to give us a better deal on leaving the EU. I am reminded of Chamberlain flying to see Hitler in 1939. When will this embarrassing woman stop humiliating us? Why won't the rest of the Conservative Party tell her that she is fired?

I doubt if many people noticed but we, together with the French and the Americans, attacked Syria during the year. I don't think Prime Minister May bothered to declare war – though that is what she did. She certainly didn't ask Parliament for permission. And she and her new allies bombed the shit out of Syria despite the knowledge that 80% of the British public did not approve of starting a war with yet another country. The politicians, however, are well aware that the big defence companies cannot make profits unless we use up their bombs, rockets and bullets so that they can sell another £100 billion pounds worth of the stuff.

To be honest, I have lost count of the number of wars we have started in the last decade or two. And I am no longer entirely sure of how many wars we are fighting at the moment. All I know is that we are almost certainly accepting citizens of the countries with which are at war. Can you imagine us allowing hundreds of thousands of Germans into Britain in 1940?

12

So the Tories are at last going to try to throw out Theresa May. Why has it taken so long for the Conservative Party to find 48 MPs who care enough about their country to get rid of this terrible woman? If the Tories do get rid of her, a man will have to clean up the mess. (Sorry. I couldn't resist that reversal of the feminist mantra.)

How can May have stayed in office? She is the most loathed and despised politician I can remember. Both sides want her gone but she shamelessly hangs on to her job, her chauffeur driven car and her perks. If the Tories decide to keep her (which is perfectly likely since they are frightened of an election – and the inevitability of losing their seats) then what can she do? The Commons won't accept her deal. The Commons won't allow her to take the country out of the EU without a deal. She cannot possibly win an election if there is one. The EU has said that they won't alter the terms of our leaving.

And so if she remains in office the chances of our leaving the EU are slight indeed. By voting against leaving the EU without a deal being agreed, the Commons has removed the Government's negotiating power.

I was, by the way, surprised to see Mrs May comparing herself to the cricketer Geoffrey Boycott. It is true that Mr Boycott was remembered for his determination and his obdurateness. But I seem to remember that he was also accused of sometimes rather selfish play – apparently thinking more of his own interests than of those of the team.

I am disappointed to see that Nigel Farage is attacking UKIP. The problem is that Nigel doesn't have an alternative suggestion. And I'll be surprised if he finds the backing for one. The Tories who support the EU will take great comfort from Nigel's attack. They will probably keep May as Prime Minister because they will feel safe from UKIP.

'What do you do?' asked a heating man, who has wandered into my study to do something disadvantageous to the radiator. As he fiddled with a valve he looked around at the books on my shelves. The room is lined with books.

'I'm an author.'

'Have you ever had anything published?' he asks.

I'm not sure what to say.

Approximately 500 of the books he's been carefully examining have my name on the spine. Many of them are foreign editions, it is true, but on most of them my name is in English.

The BBC website is truly absurd. It is full of feminist nonsense and the site is forever carrying stories about women who are portrayed as weak or as victims. I would have thought this rather damaging and counter-productive. The BBC hates men so much (particularly if they are white and English) that it seems to take great delight in portraying women as rather pathetic and eternally vulnerable. It is, of course, an extraordinarily sexist approach. If I were a young girl and I read the BBC website I think I would lose all hope and slit my delicate, little wrists.

The only conceivable reason for arranging a Second Referendum (which now looks increasingly likely and was, I suspect, always the 'plan') is obviously to overturn the First Referendum. This is, of course, standard EU policy. They do it every time. If the Nazis thought they would get the same result from another Referendum they wouldn't have one. The ignorant and foolish Remainers, led by Goldman Sachs and Tony Blair, will turn out in force. And the result will then be beyond question. Blair and Goldman Sachs will have defeated the British people and the Nazis will have won. (For months now, Blair has been appearing regularly on the EU's own broadcasting station, the BBC, to appeal for a War Criminals' Vote – a Second Referendum.)

The vote is in: the most selfish and irresponsible woman in Britain is still Britain's Prime Minister. They have chosen to keep a woman who has folded at every crucial moment during the EU negotiations. But I don't believe that this is weakness as much as disloyalty. She is a Remainer and has devoted herself to protecting the EU. May thinks of promises as eggs – useless unless they are broken. You would have thought, would you not, that someone with an ounce of pride would by now realise why we have to leave the fascist EU. But no, Theresa keeps on her pathetic way – demeaning herself and us in an unprecedented way. All the MPs who are paid as cabinet members and so on voted to keep their jobs and so we have a Prime Minister who cannot possibly sell her 'deal' to Parliament. Brexit will be delayed until all the wise, old folk are dead. Then they'll have another Referendum and let 16-year-olds vote in an attempt to make sure that they win Tory MPs have proved that they do not have a single testicle between them. Not one. They may have found a short term solution but they have created a long term problem. They will lose their seats at the next election and their party will die.

13

I tottered into my bank the other day.

The teller told me that before she could do anything she had to update my profile.

The first question was: 'How much do you earn?'

And the next question was: 'Where do you pay tax?'

You don't need to be a genius to see the pattern.

Our banks are now going to work hand-in-hand with the Government's tax collectors.

It's no great surprise, of course.

Banks have been handing private account information to the tax authorities for some time. There is no such thing as 'privacy' as far as banks are concerned.

We have known that for years.

But it seems to me a bit rich when banks start deliberately collecting personal information that they do not need simply so that they can pass it on to the Government.

Still, at least we know.

Don't tell your bank anything you don't want published on the web or emblazoned on a 25 foot high hoarding next to your home.

14

When organisers of a white nationalist rally in the US used PayPal to collect donations the company was criticised by civil rights groups. And so PayPal responded by removing the accounts of those whom it regarded as unacceptable.

Apparently PayPal looks at websites and then bans those groups whose views it doesn't like. Surprisingly, the PayPal seems quite proud of this, and proud too of the fact that although people can appeal against bans, the company has never reversed one. I don't think that any left wing groups have been banned.

This seems to me to be selective censorship and an odd way for a finance organisation to behave, but I am sure that the lefty liberal groups are rubbing their hands with glee. Oddly, PayPal allows its services to be used in Saudi Arabia, so Saudi Arabia's curious practises are obviously acceptable.

(The Saudi Arabians, by the way, are so bizarrely strict that they recently banned a woman from marrying a man because he played the oud, which is apparently a sort of Arabic lute. I can understand them banning a woman from marrying a man who plays the bagpipes but I would have thought the lute a fairly harmless instrument.)

However, although Saudi Arabia seems OK, PayPal does not allow its services to be used in the Palestinian territories of West Bank and Gaza. The boss of PayPal is called Schulman and he is Jewish though I am sure that this is a coincidence.

I wonder if I Mr Schulman will ban all groups associated with the European Union – which was, after all, 'founded by Nazis' and is 'run by fascists'.

Maybe not.

Silly me.

We went out for the day in Gloucestershire. When we parked a hefty gust of wind removed my hat, which I watched bounce on a distant car roof, fly over the car park and disappear into a nearby road. I spent ages looking for it but without any luck. I even checked out the hat on every male head in case someone had found my hat, picked it up and put it on. (I am not sure I would have had the nerve to suggest they gave it back to me.) We did a little last minute Christmas shopping (God willing we won't leave the house again now until after Christmas) and sat for a while in a café. Behind us there were two women in their twenties with the children of one of the women. The children were called Angelina and Brad. The women and the children were, for some reason, trying to work out a simple sum. It involved taking four away from six in order to find the answer. There was much argument. The adults had no more idea than the children. I kid you not. In a newsagent, I saw a copy of a terrible publication called *The European*. It's entire front page was taken up with three words: 'Brexit Is Over'. They are probably right.

Antoinette and I stood and watched a shop assistant showing how a drone worked. The drones, fitted with a camera and so on, were reduced from £90 to £20.

'Do you want one?' asked Antoinette

I thought about it for a moment and shook my head.

I have bought, or been given, too many radio controlled planes and helicopters to be tempted again. Most of them were useless and difficult or impossible to control. The ones which were vaguely manageable were so light that if taken out of doors they blew away out of sight. Judging by the price reduction I would guess that I am not a lone sceptic. Drones are regarded as being in the same general category as 3D printers, Google spectacles and those silly virtual reality headsets which are supposed to enable the wearers to experience wonderful adventures. (Snowflakes like playing with 'virtual reality' but I suspect that the game most of them prefer playing would be more accurately described as 'virtuous reality'.)

In one shop where I asked for a plastic bag, a snotty assistant tutted and gave me the sharp look typical of millennials who think they're looking after the planet but are too damned ignorant to look after a hamster.

'Paper bags are worse for the environment,' I explained. 'And cotton bags are even worse than paper bags.'

The assistant stared at me as if I had suddenly grown an ear in the middle of my forehead.

'I see you're wearing a cotton T-shirt,' I said. 'I hope you realise that making a cotton T-shirt requires enough water to prevent 37 African children dying of thirst.'

The millennial stared but did not speak.

'So how do you feel about being a mass murderer?' I enquired.

The millennial mouth opened but nothing came out. The millennial eyes looked down in horror and the millennial fingers plucked at the T-shirt.

'Goodbye,' I said. 'Enjoy the rest of your day.'

And I left.

We stopped off to have the car hand washed. A bunch of fellows who looked Romanian spent about three minutes on the task. One of them sprayed the car with a pressure hose and a second threw a couple of buckets of dirty water over the windscreen. That was it. When I handed over my tenner, I accepted the £2 change without embarrassment. I would normally have given them the £2 as a tip. But they deserved no tip.

When we got back to the car I saw my hat. It was just a few yards away from where I'd lost it. The dear old thing had boomeranged. It had flown off, wandered about, and then come back to me.

Campaigners are demanding that a representative of an ethnic minority should appear on England's new £50 note. I think that would be acceptable if and when an African country puts Cecil Rhodes on a banknote and an Arab country puts T.E.Lawrence on a banknote.

Later in the day I wrote the following piece for my website:

With the aid of a well-known medium, who prefers to remain anonymous, I have conducted an exclusive interview with Adolf Hitler. Here, for visitors to www.vernoncoleman.com, is a transcript of my historic interview. I have checked the facts. Everything here is accurate.

Vernon Coleman: Mr Hitler, is it true that you and your Nazi party colleagues deliberately created the EU as your Plan B in case you lost the last war?

Adolf Hitler: Of course! Reinhard Heydrich, Herman Goering and a few others designed the European Union with me back in 1940. It was Herman who thought of the name 'European Economic Community'. He was good with that sort of thing. Reinhard was good with planning. He planned the Holocaust too. He wrote the Treaty of Rome in 1942 but called it The Reich Plan for the Domination of Europe. I told him it was a stupid title. It gave away too much. Still, it was his idea. Our plan was to trick Britain and other nations into joining something they thought would be just an organisation for selling butter and cars. (Hitler laughs a good deal.)

VC: You even thought up the euro, didn't you?

AH: Well, actually, that was all down to Walther Funk. Dear old Walther was a genius. His picture should be on every euro note. He was my economics adviser and back in 1940 he proposed a standard European currency. He wrote a memo about it called 'Economic Reorganisation of Europe'. He was a brilliant man and it's disgraceful that the EU seems to have forgotten all about him. It isn't easy to find the truth about him on the Internet, of course. The EU has done its best to remove him from European history. But do a little bit of digging and you'll see what I mean. Walther will always be remembered. And in the end they will have statues to him all over Europe: in Berlin, in Paris and in London.

VC: So the European Union and the euro were your Plan B?

AH: Of course they were. Once the damned Americans got involved with their troops and their tanks, we knew we were going to lose the war and we decided we needed a plan to ensure we won the peace. And hasn't it gone well? (He laughs.)

VC: Weren't you worried that people would spot what you were doing?

AH: Well, in 1943 a chap called Heinz Pol, who was a former newspaper editor in Berlin, fled to the US and published a book called *The Hidden Enemy: The German Threat to Post War Peace*. He explained exactly what we were doing. He knew everything and had it all worked out. Fortunately for us he's been ignored for years. No one dares print his book now. You can still find him on the internet though. They got rid of Walther but they forgot to remove Pol. (There is much laughter at this point.) Pol was quite good. He wrote about what he called 'The Nazis behind The Nazis'.

VC: So why has your EU project been so successful?

AH: Oh, it was easy. Money. Politics is all about money, you know. We gave your Ted Heath £35,000 tax free to take Britain into the EU. So cheap! Unbelievably cheap. Heath knew the plan but he lied to the people and said you had just joined a commercial grouping. Later he laughed and admitted that he'd lied but by then it was too late. It's all in the history books but no one reads them.

VC: And most of the other supporters of the EU have received money?

AH: Of course! We bought your BBC. They were cheap too. And many of the people who speak on behalf of the EU have been given our money. What else do you think we do with all those billions you pay for membership of our little group! (Laughs again.) Juncker can only drink so much wine!

VC: You have been lucky with Jean-Claude Juncker.

AH: Very lucky. He is from Luxembourg but his father fought with us during the War you know; with the Nazis. And Juncker's father-in-law was a Nazi propaganda chief. He helped a lot with dealing with the Jews.

VC: And you've been very lucky with British Prime Ministers.

AH: Oh yes, very lucky. That Blair was against us for years. He said terrible things about the EU and a bit of a worry. You can check him out. But I like him. People call him a war criminal like me. (Hitler laughs and laughs.) But then we got him to change his mind. (More laughter). Now he is one of our greatest supporters. He will help stop this silly Brexit thing.

VC: And Theresa May?

AH: (He struggles to contain his laughter). It is amazing is it not? You hire a woman who loves the EU to arrange for your leaving! The British are so very stupid. You might as well have given Goering the job! (He laughs hysterically.)

VC: Would you describe EU supporters as Nazis?

AH: (After a short silence.) I think they are too stupid to be Nazis. They support our cause so they are Nazis in principle and they are fascists, of course. And they favour the State over Democracy. But they don't realise what they are doing. We knew what we were doing. They think they are just handing over their country and their money so that we will allow them to buy French cheese and nice German cars. Can you imagine? It is wonderful that people are so very stupid.

VC: The purpose of the EU was to make Germany stronger? To make Germany the most important country in Europe?

AH: In the world! Germany will soon be the most important country in the world. We are already the most important in Europe. We have all the money. Ask Italy. Ask the Greeks. Ask the stupid French. Soon we will have the European project finished. It will be my United States of Europe.

VC: You talked about the 'United States of Europe' didn't you?

AH: Oh yes. I said it back in 1936. Today we have people all over Europe who believe in our Nazi project but they do not realise what they are doing. In France they have that idiot Macron. He has been helping our EU project along so much that he has made himself very unpopular with the French people. (Hitler laughs so much that he nearly chokes.) Imagine! How can anyone be so stupid? We have many British on our side. We even have your Bank of England! Imagine that. The Bank of England is on the side of the Nazis. They say all this nonsense to frighten people. It is just what we did in Germany. You can always frighten people into doing what you want them to do. And many of your politicians and civil servants are on our side together with the Greens and the Scottish politicians and some of what you call your 'celebrities'. They are so stupid they all fight for the cause. There is a Lineker, a footballer who plays for the BBC and a Branson, a man with a beard who runs some trains, quite badly I think. And Goldman Sachs! I love it that a big Jewish bank is fighting for us.

VC: But the British people as a whole aren't on your side are they? They saw through your plan. Most of them voted to leave the EU.

AH: That was a bit frightening. But we will not allow this Brexit nonsense to disrupt our Plan. We have your Theresa May and your House of Commons on our side. (Laughs and keeps laughing.) Mrs May is wonderful – she believes that promises are like eggs, no use unless they are broken. And your Chancellor Mr Hammond is an innumerate lunatic. He claims that most people in Britain are represented by extremists! How can this be? You cannot be in a majority and also an extremist.

VC: Thank you Mr Hitler. You have been very illuminating. It is good to hear such honesty in politics these days.

AH: Why not? Why not? We cannot lose now. You won the war but we won the peace. He who laughs last laughs most, eh? (Hitler laughs again, hysterically.)

15

Delivery drivers I've never seen before are already saying 'If I don't see you again before then, have a good Christmas'. The implication is painfully obvious.

There is a rumour going around London that some electric cars may soon be able to travel as far west as Dorset without the need for an overnight pit stop to recharge the batteries with electricity which has been obtained from burning coal and diesel oil.

In an attempt to do our best to delay dementia (in my case a much more serious threat than it is for Antoinette) we play games every evening which Antoinette designed to improve memory and concentration. One game is to mix up several different types of cards (including playing cards and Happy Families cards) and then lay them out. We look at the cards and then look away and have to try to remember what we've seen. It's a variation on the Victorian memory game.

Alternatively, we both have to create a person with 15 characteristics (age, sex, favourite book, occupation). We then read out our character and the other one has to listen and then repeat the 15 characteristics.

This is quite a challenge and makes my brain hurt.

Antoinette thinks we should turn the ideas into an App. But how the hell do you do that? (And what, exactly, is an App anyway?)

Antoinette saw an advertisement for a Christmas Fayre.

'Shall we go? They might have some interesting new decorations for the tree.'

'Where is it?'

She told me.

'Why not? It'll only take twenty minutes to drive there. One minute to look around and realise that it's a waste of time. And twenty minutes to drive back. We'll be back home in less than hour.'

Theresa May has been continuing her 'Grovel Around Europe' in a pathetic (and obviously doomed) attempt to persuade the EU's NeoNazis to make things easier for her to get a deal through Parliament. Has there ever, ever been a politician so prepared to demean a nation? The EU smells blood and they see that they can destroy Britain.

16

We settled down to watch a film. I put in a new DVD of an old film called 'Avenging Angelo', starring Sylvester Stallone. Before the film started we had to sit through eleven advertisements for other films. And then when it started we found ourselves wishing that the adverts were still running. There didn't seem to be a plot, the sound quality was awful and the actors seem to have gone to the Marlon Brando school of mumbling. There were no sub titles. We gave up the film and put it into the charity bag.

Next we tried a new DVD of a film called *Blue Ice* starring Michael Caine. This wouldn't work because although I had bought and paid for a region 2 DVD, the seller had supplied us with a region 1 DVD which wouldn't work.

So I put in a DVD of *The Motorcycle Diaries*, based on Che Guevara's diaries. This turned out to be in Spanish, though nowhere on the box could I find any mention of this fact.

We then tried a DVD of a film called *Clue*. This, like *Blue Ice*, turned out to be only suitable for viewing in America. So, I tried a new film we'd bought called *Zama*. This turned out to be in Spanish and if we'd taken a magnifying glass with us when we'd bought the film we would have known this.

So we watched an old copy of The *Maltese Falcon* which was as brilliant as ever. Moreover it was our old copy so we knew it was the right region and not in Danish.

Sydney Greenstreet ('I never trust a man who…') damned near steals the film from Humphrey Bogart (not an easy trick). And Peter Lorre is, as always, magnificent.

Amazingly, Greenstreet, like C Aubrey Smith, began his film career in his 60s. I wonder if I'm too old to start in movies. Only my lack of acting skills, my lack of contacts and absolutely no inclination to do so are holding me back.

And then, to compound the treat, we watched *Charlie Muffin*, starring David Hemmings. Why didn't anyone make more films about Charlie Muffin?

17

In one recent five year period, the BBC accepted 258 million euros from the EU. It is not surprising that the BBC has been shown to have a strong pro-EU bias. The BBC is surely in breach of its own charter. And forcing citizens to pay to support this one-sided treachery must be in breach of the U.N. charter.

The Paris authorities have written demanding an extra 15 euros because we paid a tax bill by cheque. My loathing for the French has risen another notch. I didn't know it could go any higher.

Fenella Fielding, the vampish Carry On and Navy Lark star died at 90 years of age. She was reported to have died with her eyelashes on. Wonderful.

Abuse of Diane Abbott, the shadow Home Secretary, on Twitter is being described as sexist. Apparently she has received more so-called abuse than any other woman. (I'm surprised it's more than Theresa May.) I have rarely heard such nonsense. I've not seen any of this so-called abuse but I suspect that most of it is inspired by Abbott's perceived arrogance and ignorance and is a result of fear and exasperation at her claim that she will be Home Secretary. She would receive far less criticism if she abandoned her ambition which is widely regarded as grossly inappropriate. If she must persist with her fantasy then it would be better if she prepared herself more thoroughly so that she could answer quite straightforward questions without making herself look a complete fool. If abuse of Abbott is sexist then abuse of Trump and Putin must also be dismissed as sexist because they are male.

18

I received a letter from someone telling me that if I want to make my voice heard about vaccination I must be 'more mainstream'. She says that there are people who care who will 'bring this to the Establishment's awareness'.

Not sure how but I wish them all the best.

I wrote back pointing out that it is difficult to see how I could have been any more mainstream.

My campaigns questioning the validity of vaccination have (like my campaigns about vivisection) made me many enemies and ensured that I no longer have any credibility. Still, I'd do it all again – without expecting a different result.

Anti EU feeling in the UK is clearly intense. A couple who named their child after the founder of the EU have been jailed.

A man is suing someone who sold him a pony. He says that the pony is taller than he thought it was and wants his money back. Apparently if a pony is too tall then it cannot be entered into various competitions.

The odd thing is that it has been decided that his complaint cannot be upheld because the height of a pony will vary according to the nature of the ground upon which it is standing when it is measured. So, if the ground is soft and muddy and the pony sinks in then it will seem shorter than if it is measured on hard ground. This is apparently what counts as science in equestrian circles.

We haven't heard a word from our estate agents. I seem to remember being promised regular updates. I expect they are too busy getting ready for Christmas to bother about selling houses. Bu then I doubt if there are many would-be buyers around. Still, it would be nice to have known what happened to the people who made an offer which we accepted.

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A new App will, so I am told, enable me to talk to delivery men when they ring the doorbell. Why do I want to talk to delivery men? If I am expecting a delivery I pin a sheet of paper to the gate telling the driver to throw the item over the wall. The wall is around eight feet tall. If the item is too heavy to go over the wall then I probably don't want it.

Deliveries would be far more efficient if the delivery companies tried to use the same drivers for the same routes. The Royal Mail realised from the outset that there would be advantages to everyone if the same man delivered mail on the same route. But whenever we have deliveries from other companies the driver is a different person every time.

The people who create these Apps act as though they had just invented something useful. There isn't an App on earth as useful as a Swiss Army Penknife in the pocket, or a Sabatier knife in the kitchen. (The Swiss are rapacious and deathly dull. How they came to design anything quite so useful as the Swiss Army knife always puzzled me until I discovered that multi-bladed knives, with attached gadgets, had been made in England back in the 19th century.).

The greatest invention of the last 50 years was the Leatherman.

The greatest single invention of all time was the bicycle. I still like bicycles. It's cyclists who I find annoying.

The computer programs which fire off especially selected advertisements aren't as clever as they think they are. A friend of Antoinette's started yoga classes and sent several emails to friends sharing the news. Within three days everything she looked at on the web was accompanied by adverts for yoghurt.

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It is clear that dogs are now regularly being eaten in Britain since many immigrants regard dogs as good food. Dogs which stray and disappear are probably ending up in the cooking pot. Similarly, swans are being stolen from rivers and lakes and then eaten.

A Muslim has allegedly bought Eastbourne pier and banned dog walkers. He is apparently also planning to buy Hastings pier and ban dog walkers from that one too. The dog walkers are in hysterics. They should get used to it. In our coming Muslim world there will be no place for dogs or dog walkers. Incidentally, a small private survey showed that around 50% of the walkers who carry sticks do so solely to ward off barky dogs.

Dogs are a real problem these days. If people are allowed to keep dangerous dogs then ordinary citizens should be allowed to carry cans of mace. Still, as far as I know, it is perfectly legal to carry a spray can of paint around with me. That would stop a dog in its tracks. And it would probably give a knife wielding thug some pause for thought.

The British people voted, by a substantial majority (if the Remainers had won by a similar majority they would have called their win a landslide), to leave the EU and take back their national sovereignty. They were betrayed by the party system. The Liberals and Greens seem proud to despise the working man and woman, the couple on top of the Clapham Omnibus. The Labour Party and the Conservative Party are both run by politicians who have no interest in the electors.

Selfish Remainers, who control the Establishment, have divided the country for generations to come and they have destroyed Britain – a country which they appear to hate. We will, thanks to their efforts, be in a worse state than ever before. The Remainers preferred to destroy their own country rather than allow the Leavers to win. Remainer May's sell-out to the EU will make us slaves. Her destruction of the Tory party will result in our having a Communist Government.

Philip Hammond, who is paid by us to do what we tell him to do, says that allowing the Leavers to have 'victory' in the negotiations with the EU would be 'disastrous'. How odd. I thought we had won. For Hammond to say this is like the referee, at the end of a Cup Final which has been clearly won by one side, announcing that it would be unfair to allow the victors to take the Cup. The Remainers (in the form of Cameron's Government) cheated, lied, fiddled the voting and had the BBC on their side. They spent taxpayers' money to promote their cause. And they lost.

The irony is that the people who will lose most are the millennials and future generations. Those were the people the Brexiteers were fighting for.

The millennials, the snowflakes and today's children will be living in a country without freedom, without democracy, without hope and without a future. If the deal which May has negotiated ever goes through then unemployment will rise as we are suffocated by yet more red tape from the eurocrats. Most millennials will have to work until they die. Their savings will be worthless and their pensions non-existent. Health care will continue to deteriorate. House prices will collapse but there will be little or no new building. Our educational and transport systems will continue to decline rapidly. There will be no point in voting for there will be nothing to vote for. We will be slaves of a Nazi inspired Union over which we have absolutely no control. That is the world the Remainers have given to future generations: a world of poverty, misery and drudgery. (Those who doubt might like to check out my predictions over the last half a century or so.)Thanks to the treachery of the Remainers we will be in a worse state than we were before the Referendum. The EU will own us. And, remember, the EU hates us.

I feel a great sadness.

I am proud of my country. It is an old fashioned thing to say, I know. But I am proud of my country's history and culture and achievements. My country has done much to civilise and to improve the world. There have been mistakes, of course, but no one can deny that on balance my country has made the world a better place. (And that's more than can be said for Germany or Japan. Germany gave us the goosestep, Hitler and boring cars. Japan gave us knotweed, origami and heaps of knock-off electrical equipment that never worked properly). Remainers simply don't understand that hundreds of thousands of Britons have died to protect our sovereignty and our democracy.

Few of our so-called leaders showed any sense of pride or courage during the Brexit incompetence. The whole process was one which reeked of apology, cowardice, blind obedience, humiliation and embarrassment. Theresa May has shamed herself and us all. The Germans are laughing at us and May the Deceiver has given us a deal which is so bad that we would have been better off if we'd lost World War II. Is the woman mad, bad, evil or simply treacherous?

'They' were never going to let us leave, were they? 'They' always knew they could scare us off, wear us down and then just ignore us. We got above ourselves, forgot our place, and tried to improve our world. And they put us down as ruthlessly as they might squash an annoying insect.

Who are 'They'? The bankers. The Goldman Sachs alumni. The EU pensioners still active in public life. The executives for foreign owned companies. The well-heeled Liberal Luvvies working for the BBC and worried, in their ignorance, that leaving the EU would in some strange way mean leaving Europe. (They are so dim they genuinely worry they won't be able to go to the Italian Lakes, buy 200 types of French cheese or drive around in Mercedes motor cars if we leave the EU.) The political establishment. Traitors, fifth columnists and foreigners with hidden agendas.

The Establishment in Britain is far more dangerous than the Outfit ever managed to be. These people represent 0.01% of the population but receive 99.99% of BBC airtime and support from most of the rest of the media.

It would be nice to think that those of us who fought for Brexit could fight again with Brexit Mark II. I've been thinking about it for a while. But that isn't going to be allowed to happen. Anyone who puts their head above the parapet will have it shot away very quickly. And Brexiteers, though angry, won't be rioting. We are far too civilised to behave like Remainers.

In the short term there is a possibility that we will have to leave the EU without a deal being made. This will cause the EU great pain. But, despite the lies of the Government, it will cause us no pain.

But in the long term there is, I believe, only one chance. We have been betrayed by a Party system which ensures that the sycophants, the greedy, the hypocrites and the crooked will all rise to the top. Look at our political leaders for the last few decades and you will see that I am right.

Some years ago I wrote a book called *Bloodless Revolution* in which I explained how the Party system could be defeated – very easily and without bloodshed.

I still believe in the premise I put forward that book.

I can think of no other permanent solution.

Sajid Javid is being promoted as a suitable new leader of the Tory party. He is a Remainer. He is said to be a good example because he was poor and is now rich. But Mr Javid made his money as a banker and that doesn't count as an example of initiative and enterprise. It's like winning the lottery or inheriting money. Mr Javid is in the same category as Bob Diamond, Rich Richie and Fred Goodwin – bankers all.

Theresa May still hasn't asked the House of Commons to vote on her awful deal. It occurs to me that she may well wait until Christmas Eve, when all the SNP politicians have buggered off up to Scotland, and call the vote when the House is half empty. I wonder if there is anything to stop her doing that. It would be sly but not surprising.

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I started to read Eddie Braben's autobiography entitled *The Book What I Wrote*.

Braben wrote for Ken Dodd before he wrote for Morecombe and Wise. He worked for Dodd for 14 years and it must have been hard work. Ken Dodd, bless him, used to get through five jokes a minute for shows which lasted a minimum of five or six hours.

M&W and Braben all agreed that Doddy was the best stand-up comedian they'd ever seen. I saw him work a few times and he was unique, irrepressible and unimaginably funny on stage.

It has, it appears, become politically incorrect to sing Christmas Carols because they might offend people who fear that Muslims might be offended by them. (I included a selection of unacceptable carols in a previous diary – *Life on the Edge*.)

So, as an alternative I have revised the song which has for so long been so popular among Britons. Here are the new words (which should, as always, be sung to the rhythm of Colonel Bogey):

Juncker has only got one ball
Corbyn has two but very small
Macron is rather similar
And poor Theresa has no balls at all

This can be sung as a replacement for Good King Wenceslas et al.

The 'no deal' scare mongering that is going on largely centres on the threat that if we leave the EU without handing over our money and our sovereignty then we will not have any Mars bars or medicines. (According to Boris Johnson, one member of the Cabinet was apparently so terrified when he found out that two of the ingredients for Mars Bars might be held up in the case of a 'no deal' that he changed his mind and decided to support Theresa May's 'Betrayal of Britain' deal.)

This is, to use a highly technical term, a load of old bollocks.

As the editor of the journal *Shipping – Today and Yesterday* points out in an editorial: 'The volume of goods imported into the UK, particularly from the Far East, is huge and commercially warrants these large container ships delivering directly to us. Once we are out of the EU and can negotiate new trade agreements with countries such as Canada, India and the South American nations, there could be an upturn in exports which will make our economy stronger. So, stop the scaremongering and let's get on with new and exciting trade agreements without the EU's red tape and self-interest.'

Hoorah!

(I'm not a regular reader of *Shipping* but Antoinette bought me a copy. She knows I love exploring new worlds. I discovered that some shipping lines are registered in Mata-Utu on the Island of Uvea which is the capital of Wallis and Futuna. I bet not many people know that.)

There are currently over 70,000 people over 100-years-old in Japan. Or there were when I wrote the last sentence.

Facebook is complaining that its privacy has been compromised by the unauthorised release of some emails. I assume that they meant this as a joke. At approximately the same time as Facebook was complaining that their privacy had been invaded, they were apologising, again, for having inadvertently allowed 800 odd companies to have access to private photographs taken by innocent Facebook users. However, since Facebook owns all the photographs on its site their apology probably didn't mean much. How much longer will fashion conscious teenagers continue to use a site which is now largely a medium through which Grannies can share photographs of their cute grandchildren and budgerigars?

I dreamt that Theresa May had given away all our coastal fishing rights, Gibraltar, Wales and East Anglia. In return Manu Macron had agreed to be the new Queen of England. I had to check a newsfeed to make sure that this hadn't actually happened.

Talking of Macron, I see that despite the fact that he is giving way to just about every demand made by the demonstrators, the riots in Paris are set to continue. The stores in Paris are having an awful Christmas. A panicky Macron has given away so much money in an attempt to push up his popularity ratings, that France will now branch EU budget deficit rules. The joke is that the unrest was inspired by Macron attempting to satisfy stupid EU demands on climate change. Paris was burning because the EU provided the matches and the kindling. The EU climate change nonsense caused the chaos and the EU will now have to punish France for breaking the EU budget rules. The question is: What will Macron do when France is punished? He cannot possibly ignore his beloved EU. But if he allows the German controlled EU to punish La France, the French will become increasingly hysterical. 2019 is going to be endless fun in France. You couldn't make it up, could you? It couldn't happen to a nicer bunch.

After he received a letter of abuse Voltaire replied: 'I am sitting in the smallest room in the house with your letter before me. It will shortly be behind me.'

Britain has always been an over courteous country. In 1915, a company produced a series of cigarette cards celebrating Wellington's defeat of the French at Waterloo but the series was never issued lest the French got upset. The Krauts don't follow the same rules. At the onset of the Second World War they bought up a series of cigarette cards which had pictures and details of British warships. The cards were then distributed to U Boat commanders.

A chum told me today that he spends 40 minutes a day travelling to work. (And, if he wants to go home, the same length of time in the other direction later in the day). It seemed a lot to me because we no longer travel much. But then I remembered that when the roads were better, and travel by train was close to reliable I used to travel a good deal. I was living in the Midlands and used to catch a train to London three times a week. For two years I used to fly to television studios in Scotland once a week. (That got a bit hairy occasionally. I once got on a plane to Spain by mistake. It was only when the stewardess started to show us how to put on the lifebelt that I realised my error. I was awake enough to realise that the flight from Birmingham to Glasgow doesn't go over water.) And when I had a new book out I used to spend three or four weeks driving around the country visiting TV and radio stations. My word, the roads were much better then! You could plan to be in a particular town at a particular time and stand a good chance of making it. (That had its problems too. On several occasions I couldn't remember why I was where I'd gone, and had to ring up to find out.) Today, travel has also become more difficult because of the number of screaming children everywhere. Anyone who remonstrates with the parents is likely to be subjected to a mouthful of abuse and a starring role in a You Tube video.

22

Why do we have to pay utility companies a standing charge? Even if we don't use any of their products (gas or electricity) we still have to pay them. Why? I've never quite understood this. The baker doesn't charge me when I don't buy any bread. The newsagent doesn't charge me if I don't buy a newspaper. I don't get to charge readers a fee if they choose not to buy a book of mine even though the book is there and available should they wish to buy it. Why should the gas company have the right to charge me for not using any gas? The pipes in our home are there because we paid for them. The electrical wiring in our home is there because we paid for it. All our pipes and conduits are our responsibility. So why do we have to pay a standing charge for not using their products?

Wanting to check some dates relating to Charles Dickens, I started to type his name into Google. By the time I had finished the name 'Charles' a suggestion came up for 'Charles Manson'. That says everything about the internet, doesn't it? Not Charles Dickens or Charles Chaplin or Charles I or Prince Charles or Charles Bronson but Charles Manson. (And when I checked on Charles Bronson I found that the individual Google was giving me was a prisoner who had changed his name to Charles Bronson rather than the original actor of that name.)

I purchased a DVD recently which was put together in such a way that whenever I tried to spin through the endless adverts at the front of the film, the DVD returned to the very beginning. I was forced to let the DVD play for 20 minutes before I was allowed to watch the film. I do miss videos. When DVDs were first introduced we were assured that they could not go wrong and were unable to damage. This was clearly rubbish. We have more trouble with DVDs than we ever had with videos.

A bloke called Huw Edwards, who reads the news on the BBC, is apparently paid more than £550,000 a year. I would have thought a tenth of that would have been over-generous for a man whose main skill appears to me to be able to read while sitting down. I could do that very satisfactorily at the age of four.

Some political thoughts:

1) A racist is anyone who believes the English are entitled to be treated with the same respect as other ethnic groups.
2) Populism was founded by a liberal socialist but populists are now hated by liberals and socialists.
3) Hitler was a socialist as was Mussolini.
4) The original anarchists wanted to change society for the better by demolishing central government. They believed that man is a reasonable being who can be persuaded to help improve society locally – without central governance.
5) In capitalism (when practised properly) the customer is always right. In communism there are no customers and if there were they would be always wrong.

When I first began work I was always paid in guineas. As a young writer I was always paid in guineas. As a doctor I was paid in guineas if I did any private work. You don't get much more civilised than that. I miss guineas. I bet most snowflakes don't even know what a guinea is.

Why is it that everyone uses first names these days? When I buy something from eBay the unknown seller always writes to me by my first name. Even Tesco uses my first name.

I have found that it is almost always cheaper to buy books and DVDs from eBay than from any other site. It is, however, important to be careful. Some sellers admit that the disks they sell are scratched. This is akin to buying tyres with holes in them.

In the entry for March 18th 1908 in his Diary, Arnold Bennett writes: 'I must really…resume the good habit of buying a book a day'. I have decided to make this my target. I should be able to get down to a book a day if I try really hard.

I seem to remember that ten years ago, Google agreed to pay compensation for having illegally copied 271 editions of my books. I'm still waiting for the money. Google can hardly claim that they are hard up. The average employee in their very expensive London offices is paid over £200,000 a year. And then there are the perks.

We were sitting in the conservatory this evening watching the wildlife on the lawn. There were two rabbits eating grass, one squirrel digging up buried hazelnuts (so that he could rebury them) and Percy the pheasant just finishing off his evening supply of sunflower hearts. Suddenly a fox loped along at the bottom of the garden, right along the cliff edge. The rabbits scarpered into the bushes, the squirrel leapt up onto the top of the wooden swing seat and the pheasant screeched loud enough to scare away a banshee. Antoinette leapt out of her chair and opened the conservatory door and we screeched too. I know foxes have to eat but not in front of us and not our regular customers. The rabbits, poor things, are full of fear. I wonder how many die of heart attacks. They are accustomed to us, they know we mean them no harm, but if we move suddenly or make an unexpected noise, they are off in a flash. I wish I could remove their fears.

I discovered today that people who use the USB socket to charge up their telephones on their laptops are automatically transferring all the content of their phones to their laptops – all their emails and texts are put on the laptop hard drives.

Apparently, someone in Wales has put a limit on speed limits on the motorway which passes through Port Talbot on the grounds that nowhere in Britain has such toxic air and that slowing down the traffic will make things better. I am afraid I actually laughed out loud when I read this. First, the air in Port Talbot is definitely polluted (and I would be surprised if the incidence of cancer in Port Talbot wasn't greater than anywhere else in Britain) but the polluted air isn't anything to do with motorists. And if those who think it would actually visit Port Talbot and look around they would see rather a good many large industrial chimneys belching out smoke which is so unpleasant that it is eating the buildings in the town. Second, many modern cars (particularly powerful ones) use less petrol or diesel when they are driven at 70 mph than when they are driven at 50 mph. And so the fact is that reducing the speed limit results in more, not less, air pollution. Incidentally, I wonder how many people travelling through Port Talbot realise that nasty smells are particulate. Imagine the damage being done to lungs and stomachs by those foul smells.

I love it here in Devon. I feel as though I am in heaven. We have a high wall and no one can see us. No one can knock on the door. We have no accidental or uninvited visitors. Actually, we pretty much have no visitors at all. We haven't been out of the house and grounds for ten days and we won't be going out into the world until the New Year has settled into its stride.

Roseanne Barr's series Rosanne was apparently dumped earlier this year by Disney because something Roseanne said on Twitter. I don't have the faintest idea what it was that she said but it wasn't illegal. It was, however, considered offensive and so loads of people lost their jobs and the sanctimonious lobbyists had another victory. Freedom of speech? Long gone. Anyone who writes on social media without a lawyer peering over their shoulder is very brave. The web is now a dangerous place to air opinions which are contrary to, or disapproved by, the well-defined requirements of the ever sensitive politically correct. Social media posts are routinely examined by the security forces, especially in Britain and US, and since it is impossible to know the laws in every country there seems no doubt that most of those posting stuff on social media are breaking laws somewhere.

I changed the address for our car insurance. The insurance company charged me £26.88 to do this. We have two cars but as a very special favour they said they would only charge me once. My premium used to include no claims bonus protection so that I could claim three times a year without losing the bonus. Now they have quietly changed the rules so that I can make just one claim. And the best bit in the small print is a sentence which reads ‘However, your premium may still increase following a claim.’

Despite the fact that Britain is leaving the EU, the EU’s unelected commissioners have decided to increase their spending by 9.3% next year. Among their other extravagances they intend to spend £616 million in giving free tickets to 18-year-olds so that they can travel around the EU and ‘feel more European’. Meanwhile, the Germans have noticed that when Britain leaves the EU the balance of power will move from the ‘cautious’ spenders towards the ‘free’ spenders. Britain tried to reign in the eurocrats. But when we have gone the French, the Italians, the Greek and the Spanish will hold the power and they will spend, spend, spend. The Germans are facing a very expensive future and they don’t like that idea. It simply wasn’t part of Hitler’s plan for the EU.

The EU has said that the British Government can take the 20% VAT off ebooks. Consumer groups are campaigning for them to do so quickly. They don’t realise that I, like many other authors, took the 20% hit when VAT was added to ebooks. So our income from UK books fell 20% overnight. If the Government removes the 20% then our income will go back up again. Yippee!

23

My Favourite Quotes of the Year

These are (obviously) quotes which I found during the year, rather than things which were said during the year. It occurs to me that dead people often make the very best advisers. The corollary, of course, is that fictional people can sometimes be counted amongst the best of friends.

‘Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness.’ – George Orwell

‘What comes to perfection perishes.’ – Robert Browning

‘Shakespeare was a sublime poet and a resourceful dramatist – but it is doubtful whether we would ever have heard of him if he had not been a showman as well.’ – Charles B Cochran

‘All plays are simply versions of Cinderella.’ – George Abbott (He describes the plot as: ‘She wants something, can’t get it, gets it, loses it and gets it again.’)

‘Ecrire est un acte d’amour. S’il ne l’es pas, il n’est qu’ecriture.’ (To write is an act of love. If it isn’t then it’s just writing.) – Jean Cocteau.

‘The best way to teach your kids about taxes is by eating 30% of their ice cream.’ – Bill Murray

‘No plan of operations extends with any certainty beyond the first contact with the main hostile force.’ – Field Marshall Helmuth Karl von Moltke the Elder

‘Because they’re all dumb fuckers.’ – Mark Zuckerberg, the boss of Facebook (explaining why so many young people entrust his company with their personal data)

‘To be left alone is the most precious thing one can ask of the modern world.’ – Anthony Burgess

‘My faith in the people governing us is, on the whole, infinitesimal; my faith in The People governed is, on the whole, illimitable.’ – Charles Dickens

‘Hating is like drinking poison and hoping the other person dies.’ –St Augustine.

‘England just is not the same country, physically or ethnologically. Having been in London this past week I have seen that half the inhabitants are coloured. How can these people cherish the old affections and traditions which we were brought up to accept? They are aliens with alien beliefs, and no understanding of our ways and past greatness. England to them is merely a convenience, a habitation, rather hostile, where wages are high, and the dole is generous and the State provides while making no claims from them in return.’ – James Lees-Milne 27.8.77

‘It’s pretty exciting to be English.’ – Noel Coward.

‘There’s only one thing to do with critics: bathe them in hot tar. If I listened to them I’d have been in the madhouse years ago.’ – Brendan Behan

‘I always read a little Greek before going to bed.’ – C.B.Fry, the world’s greatest ever sporting hero.

‘Things are not what they appear to be nor are they otherwise.’ – Shurangama Sutra

‘The media in America have become like the EU: an enemy of the people, unelected and answering to no one.’ – Taki

‘It is a man’s own fault if, from want of use, his mind grows torpid in old age.’ – Dr Johnson

‘To fail to take the battle to the enemy when your back is to the wall is to perish.’ – The Art of War

‘I never saw so many shocking, bad hats in my life.’ – Duke of Wellington on seeing the members of the newly reformed Houses of Parliament in 1832

‘Les gens de qualite savent tout sans avoir jamais rien appris.’ (People of quality know everything without ever having to learn anything) – Moliere

‘Writing is the hardest way of earning a living, with the possible exception of wrestling alligators.’ – Olin Miller

‘You must watch those Germans. They will cheat you.’ – Lord Northcliffe.

‘If you don’t exaggerate, no one will take any notice.’ – Rudyard Kipling

‘When one burns one’s bridges, what a very nice fire it makes.’ – Dylan Thomas

`The guy who’s gonna come out at the end of the poker game with the chips is the guy who just focusses and works. You have to just work. You can’t read your reviews. Just keep quiet. Don’t get into arguments with anybody. Be polite, and do what you want to do, but keep working.’ – Woody Allen

‘Perhaps no person can be a poet, or even enjoy poetry, without a certain unsoundness of mind.’ – Macaulay

‘To be an Englishman is to belong to the most exclusive club there is; a club to which benighted bounders of Frenchmen and Germans and Italians et cetera cannot aspire to belong.’ – Ogden Nash

‘All good decisions are made by an odd number of people and three is too many.’ – Anonymous

‘The spectacle of men hugging each other makes me feel sick and the way they writhe on the ground and soon get up when play continues with no one taking any notice of them makes me wonder why people rave about football. Heaven forbid that it should be played the whole year found.’ – Mrs Vivienne D. Jarvis (letter in *The Cricketer* magazine 12.8.66).

‘The trouble with Scotland is that it’s full of Scots.’ – Braveheart (the Mel Gibson movie)

‘What makes you a man is what you do when that storm comes.’ – (Alexandre Dumas)

‘A taxpayer is entitled to know with certainty – be it an individual or a multinational corporation – what he may or may not do in planning his tax affairs. He is entitled to expect that his treatment be laid down in statute, not determined by administrative fiat; he is entitled to expect that another taxpayer in similar circumstances will receive treatment similar to his; and he is entitled to be protected from retrospective or retroactive legislation.’ – Philip Hammond (currently UK Chancellor of the Exchequer but speaking in 2005).

‘To resist living in one’s own time, to attempt to live in an imaginary past, is human in the same way that being neurotic is human.’ – Edward Mendelson

‘Snobbery is nothing but bad manners trying to pass itself off as good taste.’ – Taki

‘When Alexander saw the breadth of his domain he wept for there were no more worlds for him to conquer.’ – Anon

‘I’ve been to Belgium and I don’t want to live in it.’ – John Lydon (Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols explaining why he supports Britain leaving the EU.)

‘It is not by muscle, speed or physical dexterity that great things are achieved, but by reflection, force of character and judgement; in these qualities old age is usually not poorer but richer.’ – Cicero

‘The more electronic communicating devices employed, the less available a person will be.’ – Michael Green

`Money is a serious matter with me. It is with most people, I think, especially with most French people.’ – Eric Ambler

‘Every decent man is ashamed of the government he lives under.’ – H.L.Mencken

‘Raffles does kill one man and is more or less consciously responsible for the deaths of two others. But all three of them are foreigners and have behaved in a very reprehensible manner.’ – George Orwell

‘The referendum result was perhaps the biggest-ever vote of confidence in the UK, its past and its future. But the British establishment doesn’t seem to share that confidence…’ – Tony Abbott, former Prime Minister of Australia

‘He sounded precious. Slightly precious. I decided that perhaps he was queer, but discovered afterwards from Harold that in fact he’s South African.’ – Simon Gray

‘Victory at rugby was always possible by adopting such underhand methods as coaching and tactics. The French were adept at this, and we all know what happened to them in 1940.’ – Michael Green

`No doubt the Liberal Party are composed of lower materials than the other party now usually styled the Conservatives and so we must make allowances for low education, low manners, absence of good breeding and indifference to the sense of honour and honesty as we find it among gentlemen.’ – Peter Orlando Hutchinson in 1880

‘La Republique n’en a pas besoin des savants’. (The republic has no need of wise men.) – Robespierre speaking at the trial of Lavoisier who was subsequently executed.

‘Any public man who at the present moment nourishes any thought except that of waging war against the enemy

by the most effective means should never be forgiven by his countrymen.' – Winston Churchill, June 1915
'You were learning German before the US came along.' President Trump talking to Manu Macron in Paris, after the diminutive Manu had talked about the need for an EU army to fight America. This is my quote of the year and I forgave Trump all his sins when I heard it.

On the weekend before Christmas, Gatwick Airport was closed because of an alleged drone in the area, the police warned motorists not to travel by car because of heavy traffic and the train drivers were on strike. We were glad we had decided to stay at home.

The BBC has complained that rival Netflix has an unfair advantage because it is not paying 'fair taxes'. I laughed so much I nearly made myself ill. The idea of the BBC (which is paid for by taxpayers and people too poor to pay tax) having the gall to complain about a company not paying tax seems to be in the Bono class for hypocrisy. The BBC is a statist, fascist organisation peopled almost exclusively by folk who do not realise this and who are so taken up with their own prejudices that they do not comprehend the oppressive, undemocratic, totalitarian nature of the wicked organisation for which they labour.

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Many of the words we use regularly change in meaning as the days and weeks go by. So, for example, the word 'improved' now means 'we will make more money but you will notice a distinct deterioration in the service we offer'.

I have bought two large boxes of Lego for us to play with over Christmas. Our challenge will be to each build something enchanting – a house, a boat, a car or whatever. I've also bought a number of little Lego figures. This stuff is quite a challenge for the brain and the fingers.

Why is it that utility companies always want their customers to do everything online but they never reply to emails? If you want to communicate with them they always insist that you telephone. And since they don't answer the phone, that means wasting hours and hours listening to a pre-recorded message advising you to use their website.

Whose bright idea was it to make plugs with the leads coming out of the top instead of the bottom? I find that many plugs simply won't fit into sockets. This is such a useless, irrational and dangerous innovation that I am sure the EU is behind it.

It appears to me that the nastiest type of racism has for some time been practised by non-whites and the most vicious types of sexism is increasingly exhibited by women (with feminists treating male to female transsexuals with particular brutality).

Antoinette is learning Mandarin again. Today she said something to me that sounded wonderful. She told me that it means: 'There's a red apple!' I said that in future I will carry a red apple around with me at all times. If we see a Chinese person I will put the apple down on some prominent position so that Antoinette can say, quite loudly, 'There's a red apple!' in Mandarin, thereby making the Chinese people feel at home in our country.

My vagus nerve has been playing up again. Last night I had the most terrible attack of fibrillations which lasted for hours. It's happened a few times now and it is truly scary. However, I'm betting my life on my diagnosis. I'm also betting against the doctors who, if they ever got round to seeing me, would probably either fill me with deadly digitalis and deadlier warfarin or chop me open. Thousands of people who are my age are given warfarin in such high doses that they have life-threatening bleeds. The management of potentially lethal drugs such as warfarin is appalling.

A little while ago, Antoinette bought me *The Packer Affair* by Henry Blofeld. I finished it today. It's a terrific book about a remarkable period in cricket history. I spoke to Kerry Packer very briefly. I have to say that he seemed quite a jolly fellow at the time. It is, however, quite possible to argue that he did more to destroy the game than any other individual.

Picking up a copy of the 7th *Saturday Book* I found inside it two letters from Fred Bason. The letters, to an unknown book collector, had been tucked in the book when it was published and had been there ever since. They are currently protected from wear by being contained within a thin, clear plastic envelope. I shall certainly continue this small tradition and keep the letters where they are.

Looking inside the *Saturday Book* (published in 1947) I found that Fred Bason had written a piece describing his experiences collecting autographs. So, for example, he describes collecting Charlie Chaplin's autograph in Bond Street. Chaplin was 'alone, unprotected and unrecognised' but so nervous of collecting a crowd that he called a taxi (so that he could make a quick getaway) before consenting to sign Fred's book.

Here is my favourite extract from the article:

'Two years before the war, I wrote to Hitler asking if he would care to swap fag cards with me. I got no reply. A year before the war, I wrote again. Hitler possessed the finest collection of cigarette cards in Europe, while I had probably the best selection in England. This time I did get a reply. It boiled down to the fact that the Fuhrer was too busy to give attention to my request. (I bet he was!) So I went to Berlin a month before the war started, without knowing German or anyone in Germany at all; I thought that on the spot I might be able to see him and arrange to exchange cards. What a blooming hope! I never saw him but I did bring home 3,000 sets of German cards, arriving back with them the day before war broke out. (Reached London 1.30 Saturday afternoon and war began Sunday morning!) And the first ruddy incendiary bomb to fall in our street fell on my home and burnt the blarsted lot!'

Fred Bason is the English Damon Runyon – though his tales are all true. He is a forgotten hero of English literature.

A bloke we know forgot to send a present to good friends of his. So this evening he sent them this email: 'Happy Christmas. Hope you received the parcel safely.'

We watched *Downsizing* with Matt Damon. I'm afraid I cannot think of anything good to say about it. It's a silly climate change film about people who were shrunk to save the planet. Some observers thought it was a joke. I'm not so sure. When you shrink people you need to remember that you've shrunk them. Putting a bunch of little people into a tiny boat and then allowing them to sail across an ocean was a bit silly. And starting the film with a scene in a laboratory where experiments were being performed on animals wasn't a terribly good idea. Talking about climate change reminds me that there was another massive conference in Poland recently. Around 22,000 sanctimonious hypocrites wasted energy on yet another expenses-paid for booze up. This time it was in a country which digs out a good deal of coal and has possibly the worst air in Europe.

25

To cheer myself up I compiled a list of the seven best days of my life. These are seven days I wouldn't sell for all of the money in Jeff Bezos's bank account.

1) Antoinette and I went to London for the day. We visited the Sherlock Holmes museum in Baker Street and Madame Tussauds round the corner, picnicked in Regent's Park, pedalled a boat around the lake and spent a few hours watching cricket at Lord's. All in one glorious day.
2) We went to the Lake District and stayed in a hotel on the edge of Lake Windermere. From our room we could watch the boats running up and down the lake.
3) We took my parents to Paris and walked and walked and walked across the city.
4) We drove through the Peak district in a snowstorm.
5) We stayed at a hotel in Devon for our honeymoon.
6) We found our house on the cliff.
7) We moved into the house on the cliff.

I thought of saying that next Christmas I would prepare another week's worth of memories. But at my age I think I'll take one Christmas at a time.

Besides, every day in our cliff house is a memorable day.

I tried to watch the Christmas service on the BBC but was more than slightly startled to see a Muslim reading from the Koran. I am not surprised that Church of England congregations are melting away like unseasonal snow. Actually, there is another reason why churches are empty. The Church of England has joined with the rest of the Establishment in opposing Brexit. Just why the Church thinks it should get involved in politics and oppose freedom and democracy is as big a mystery as why it wants to support a fascist organisation. When the Church of England stands shoulder to shoulder with the shadows of the most evil men of the 20th century we can see why it is losing customers faster than Marks and Spencers.

We fed the squirrels with extra sunflower hearts and vast amounts of hazelnuts (in the shells, of course). We've been treating them to hazelnuts for a few weeks now. They leap on the windowsills to remind us if we forget. We have some dried raisins and blueberries to liven up the sunflower hearts for the pheasants. I sometimes wonder if the staff at Tesco ever wonder what we do with all the sunflower hearts we order. No one could eat that many salads. We built a splendid log fire (logging on has, to me, always meant putting more wood on the fire) and enjoyed the pictures in the flames. My tip for keeping a good log fire going is simple: when you add a new log to a fire it should merely kiss the existing log. To burn properly wood needs air. If you just dump one long on top of another, the fire will go out.

Among my many presents from Antoinette I received a warm jacket with a hood. So I am changing my name to Iman Ooodie. As soon as I put on the jacket I felt a great desire to rush outside and snarl at people and trash things that don't belong to me.

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In Paris, the socialist mayor has banned a man from organising a Christmas Market or putting up one of those large wheel things. His crime? He said something uncomplimentary about homosexuals. The words 'free speech' and 'censorship' mean nothing to socialists.

Today, we will watch *The Great Escape*. We always do. The BBC used to show it on Boxing Day but they haven't shown it for years. I don't think the Nazis find it comfortable viewing.

In the evening we watched *Gotti* starring John Travolta. The film has been hammered by the critics but we thought it a terrific film. Travolta was at his best. The film is complicated and difficult to follow at times – and that's probably why the critics were confused. *The Guardian* complained of nepotism since Travolta's wife also appeared in the film and seemed terribly concerned by the fact that they thought a hyphen was missing from the opening credits. For *The Guardian* (better known as 'The Grauniad') to complain about an editing error is a bit rich. Still, one should not expect too much of *The Guardian*. I remember that I wrote drama reviews for *The Guardian* when I was 18-years-old.

We also watched the DVD of first episode of the 6th series of *Elementary*. And we have another 20 episodes to enjoy. It is the best series since *West Wing*.

We never watch television because the films are frequently savaged by editors who have scissors but no brains.

The Pope has said we should all have less stuff. This would work better if it did not come from a man who has a palace, servants, soldiers and so much stuff that he has his own country to keep it all in.

Two squirrels came together for hazelnuts. The first squirrel took two nuts (the most a squirrel can cram into a squirrel mouth) and ran off with them. There were plenty of nuts left but the second squirrel didn't take any of them. Instead, he ran after the first squirrel and watched where he buried them. You can guess the rest.

The richest people in the world are bankers and hedge fund managers (most of whom are crooks) and top executives of large companies (most of who pay themselves 100 times what they are worth – and what they would happily accept).

In the interests of honesty some email companies now say upfront that they own everything everyone emails. This presumably means that they also own attachments, photographs and paperwork. Cheeky bastards.

Drivers of tube trains on the London Underground can apparently earn over £100,000 a year for sitting in a cab, accelerating and braking occasionally.

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The curious thing about Elite Remainers is that they are like Nazis. They consider themselves superior in intelligence, education and status and regard themselves as having the right to rule and make all decisions regardless of the will of the paper they are governing. Their arrogance, ignorance and stupidity are extraordinary. They are an

unpleasant mixture of Nazis, Stalinists and Puritans.

Writing in *The Spectator*, a former politician called Matthew Parris (a man for whom the phrase 'smug arrogant bastard' was surely invented) says: 'Tories like me…see the popular will as a sometimes dangerous thing, to be handled, guided and on key occasions (and subtly) thwarted.'

It goes without saying that the appalling Parris is a Remainer. And I bet he wants to be one of the decision makers.

I don't think I've read anything quite so startling or as offensive for quite a while.

Maybe I should have some Hitler posters printed and send them to Mr Parris to put on his walls.

I have often wondered what the letters CE stand for. The EU insists that they are placed on everything we buy. I have now decided that the letters mean Crappe Europeanne. The letters certainly do not certify that the item is well-made, safe or 'does what it is supposed to do'.

What do Cecil Rhodes, Winston Churchill and Stamford Raffles have in common?

The answer is that they were all great visionaries who changed the face of the world but they are now also men who are increasingly reviled by left wing agitators who claim that they (and others) did terrible things during their careers.

Rhodes et al were patriots who had a sense of adventure, a sense that nothing was impossible and a feeling of honour and obligation.

Today we live in a world where Philip Green and people like him are given knighthoods as a reward for their dull ruthlessness and their remorseless, selfish greed.

(When Green finally handed over some money to the pension fund he had plundered, he actually seemed to think he was entitled to praise for 'doing the right thing'. I don't think it is doing the right thing when you have merely stopped doing the wrong thing.)

I still receive protests about the fact that Winston Churchill appears in my book *Vernon Coleman's 100 English Heroes*. Critics say he did some questionable things.

The trouble is that once you start looking for the bad stuff in anyone's life it always becomes abundantly clear that there can be no real heroes.

Some of the left wing agitators who protest about Rhodes or Churchill probably regard Mandela as a saint. They probably revere Gandhi and Marx.

But those heroes have their flaws too. Just check out their biographies.

And does anyone on the far left seriously claim that Jeremy Corbyn and Diane Abbott are entirely free of flaws? (I have told Antoinette that if am ever dumbstruck it will either be because I have had a stroke or because Corbyn's former lover, Diane Abbott, has said something sensible.)

Hillary Clinton?

That's the trouble.

Once you start examining any individual you will find things you don't like.

Churchill did many things that are difficult to explain or excuse.

But he led the fight against Hitler and it is beyond argument that without him we would have lost the War and the Nazis would now be ruling the world without needing the EU to do it for them.

It is absurd to say that he wasn't a 'great man' who did far more good than harm.

Similarly, Rhodes and Raffles did great things.

But the noisy and insular few who protest about the achievements of great, white men (and, yes, I suspect there are elements of racism and sexism in the protests) fail to see the full picture. And, moreover, the critics, mostly snowflakes who have degrees in leg waxing or 'meeja' studies, are judging people from another era by the mores of today. And that is always a dangerous thing to do.

So I shall continue to regard with admiration people like Winston Churchill, Cecil Rhodes and Stamford Raffles.

And in the world of literature, I will hold writers such as Shakespeare, Dickens and Kipling in awe. Today these men are regarded with contempt by many because they were foolish enough to be born white, male and English and to write stuff which is now regarded as politically incorrect. If they had been born black, female and disabled does anyone seriously think that students would now be insisting that their work be banned and their names removed from history? (Vandals masquerading as students at Manchester University have erased Rudyard Kipling's great poem 'If' from a wall because they didn't like it. The poem is one of the greatest in any language and I doubt if Manchester University ever has, or ever will, produce a man or woman of Kipling's calibre. The students responsible should be thrown out of the university but I doubt if they will even be punished.)

Cressida Dick, the woman who authorised the killing of an innocent Brazilian on the Tube, who was duly promoted and who is now head of the police in London has joined the Project Fear campaign. She has warned that if we leave the EU without a deal then the public might be at danger. I wonder what inspired this piece of nonsense. I wonder if she has read the extradition figures between the UK and the rest of the EU. I wonder if she knows the history of the EU. I wonder if she knows how much the EU's policies have endangered the health of ordinary Britons. I wonder if she knows anything. I wonder if she ever remembers the poor Brazilian electrician whose death she ordered.

Political correctness has caused a massive amount of distress. For example, long stay residential homes for the mentally ill were closed because of political correctness. The result was that countless thousands of individuals who could not look after themselves were thrown out into the 'community'. A lack of services and help means that these unhappy souls now spend their days sitting in parks and bus shelters. They would spend their days in the public libraries except that there aren't any.

We watched *The Happy Prince* – a poem to Oscar Wilde, written and directed by Rupert Everett. Marvellous. We also watched *Déjà vu*, starring Denzel Washington. We somehow missed it when it came out. It was one of those headscratchy time travel movies which Hollywood loves. The idea is to keep the dialogue sharp and the action buzzing so that viewers don't have time to think too much. It worked well. I look forward to watching it again soon and trying to work out what was going on.

Christians are very forgiving people. Jewish people are rather aggressive but Christians never mention that it was the Jews who sentenced Jesus Christ to death. I think Christians should receive some credit for this gentle forgiving.

It is difficult to do anything on the internet these days without having to give your telephone number.

And you know damned well that when you do so some bastard will probably ring you at 8.00 to try to sell you a half-filled sack of cheap electricity.

So I try not to give out my phone number too often.

And that can be tricky when the website you're on has made the phone number box a mandatory part of the site. But there is a way round it. My favourite trick is to put down the company's phone number instead of my own. They hardly ever notice. And if they try to call you then they'll end up ringing themselves. That tickles my sense of humour.

If that doesn't appeal to you for some reason (or you don't have the company's phone number) then you could always give the phone number for your local tax office. They never answer the phone anyway.

I wouldn't do that, of course because it's probably against a law of some kind.

Alternatively, you could use the number for an old phone you don't use – an old mobile that you threw into a drawer in 1987.

Or even buy a cheap 'burner' phone and give the number of that.

Anything is better than giving your own number.

The film of *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War* was on television again. It is 16-years-old now and is shown at least once a year. For some bizarre reason the film is always awarded two stars in television schedules. And yet it always gets good ratings.

We watched a BBC DVD called *Winter Blunderland*. The DVD contains old footage of Clarkson, May and Hammond, the heroes of Top Gear – the best programme the BBC ever had. The BBC lost its purpose when they screwed up and lost the trio. (The DVD was so over packaged and impenetrable that I had to remove the disk with a penknife.) We also watched *Day of Anger* starring Lee van Cleef. After he had made *A Few Dollars More* and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, Mr Van Cleef stayed in Italy to make more westerns. This is one of the best.

A new report concludes that most young people regard reality television performers as their ideal 'role models'. We should all be very, very worried.

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Even though our phones are unplugged, I wanted to turn off our landline voicemail (so that callers from India wouldn't recognise our number and then sell it to other spammers). It took me most of the morning. In the end I went onto the phone company's website and looked for 'voice mail' or 'phone answering machine'.

I eventually found what I wanted listed under the heading ‘Manage Home Phone Boost’.

Of course.

It is a worry that the madnesses which scarred 2018 will continue as this year disappears into history. For example, no one will be allowed to ask ‘Is Global Warming real?’ because it has been decided (by the same people who thought that biofuels were a good idea) that the debate is over. Now we are only allowed to discuss ‘blame’ and ‘consequences’ – even though the precept upon which these two are balanced is a myth and has all the scientific strength of a summer shadow. ‘They’ want us to believe what they say because they say it and they seem unaware that ‘they’ long ago forfeited trust.

Once again this year it has become clear that when executives fuck up it will always be the shareholders who will pay the price. And when civil servants fuck up it will be the taxpayers who will pay. ‘Twas ever thus, but it’s surely about time things changed. If executives and civil servants had to take responsibility for their actions they might act more thoughtfully. Executives in the UK are among the most egregiously overpaid in the world – creating a woefully unequal economy and creating much unhappiness. Our civil servants have, during the EU negotiations, made it clear where their loyalties lie: they are traitors and should be fired. And possibly hung.

Millennials major in intolerance and intimidation and have little or no sense of patriotism. Indeed the majority of young adults are not just graceless but they are also ashamed of their English heritage. This is largely the fault of the teaching curriculum which is designed to highlight the faults of the British Empire and to ignore the great achievements of the British in general and the Victorians in particular. Teachers and university lecturers have always been left-leaning but these days they are also wickedly intolerant. Millennials do not like to acknowledge that much of the physical infrastructure around them (roads, bridges, hospitals, railway stations, public buildings, water works, sewage pipes, the London Underground, ports, etc., etc.) was designed and built by the Victorians.

For today’s young adults everything is about the money.

And so, for example, professional cricketers want to play the short form of the game which enables them to earn a fortune from a local Indian league where, thanks to television and gambling, the fees are astronomical.

But they don’t appear to care much about playing for their country.

The end of newspapers and letter post has nevertheless seen a rise in the use of paper.

The internet is to blame for both.

With online shopping increasing, companies need vast amounts of packaging in which to pack the stuff they sell.

The result is a steady increase in the rise of the cost of paper. And that will help to kill off even more newspapers.

The French are cowards and the French national flag should be a white hanky, constantly waved by a trembling hand.

At the beginning of the year, a large, wild area of our garden was full of primroses. You couldn’t walk anywhere without treading on primroses. It was then solid with daffodils – absolutely solid with them. I thought I would strim the area after the daffodils had died down and done a little seeding for next year but after the daffodils, came the bluebells. And then the whole area was full of ox eye daisies.

All this is enough to make me look forward to the New Year.

Many women complain that they are being treated as sex objects and yet they make sure that they have their hair and make-up done before going before the cameras to complain. And as they complain they are careful to ensure that they show plenty of cleavage and leg, displaying to the full their cosmetically enhanced bits and pieces. And they seem to see nothing odd in the fact that while making these complaints they are wearing skimpy little black dresses which reveal more than they conceal. The word ‘hypocrisy’ bursts into the mind and simply won’t go away. I can’t imagine why. It seems to me that if these actresses really wanted to find a social issue worth making a fuss about they might like to consider old people. The elderly are abused, ignored and oppressed more than any other group in our society. Ageism is a bigger problem than sexism or racism. Maybe if it were called gerontophobia people would take it more seriously. But celebrities never give a damn. The problem is that protesting on behalf of the elderly isn’t considered ‘sexy’. And it isn’t likely to gather much publicity. Nor, of course, are any celebrities likely to admit that they themselves are old.

My mobile phone is full of messages offering me wonderful things. These messages appear whenever I turn on my phone, which is usually once a week at most. I used to try to delete them but I now leave them where they are, like spiders' webs in the garage, for they do not do me any harm and their removal would be pointless and time consuming.

When I was at medical school, the curriculum allowed half a day for training us on tooth and mouth problems, half a day for skins and half a day for eye problems. The dentistry and skin courses were on the same afternoon so the doctors I trained with were either trained in dentistry or in skins but not in both. When I qualified, a doctor was entitled to work as a dentist. I don't know if that is still the case but if it is then I suspect that a good many doctors will be setting up as dentists now that it has been revealed that one NHS dentist earned £1.2 million last year. We did, however, spend months studying rare haematological disorders, tropical diseases and bacteriology. And, for reasons known only to our professors, we had to be able to identify and name the eight small bones of the wrist while blindfolded. This is one of many pieces of information for which I have never found the slightest use.

When an unnamed or unidentified doctor has done a 'good thing' the 'she' pronoun will be used (as in 'the doctor saved 957 lives; she worked for a week without a sleep') but when a doctor has done a bad thing the 'he' pronoun will be used (as in 'the doctor prescribed recklessly and he killed 958 of his patients in a week'). Just something I have noticed.

I am beginning to feel like the frog in a saucepan of water. The saucepan has been on the stove for a while and the water is starting to bubble. That, I fear, is how I now see life in England. Life is becoming increasingly impossible and unbearable. I can quite understand why hundreds of thousands of Englishmen and Englishwomen are abandoning the country of their birth and moving abroad. Everything in England is getting worse. Health care and education are appalling. Our police are pathetic and incompetent and uncaring. They spend so little time interacting with honest members of the public that they treat all members of the public (such as motorists) as scum. Our roads are unbearably crowded and they are literally collapsing under the weight of the endless traffic. Our transport system would hardly be satisfactory in a third world country. The services provided by central government and local councils are deteriorating weekly. And yet our taxes are rising and set to rise still further. Maybe it is time to think of leaping out of the saucepan before the water becomes unbearably hot. But where will we go?

We watched *Negotiator*, written by Tony Gilroy. Marvellous film. Now that William Goldman is no longer with us, Gilroy is surely the best screenwriter in the business. We also watched *The Man Who Invented Christmas*, about Charles Dickens. It was an absolute delight. And it was a special delight to see that Dickens published *A Christmas Carol* himself. (Other famous self-publishers include D.H.Lawrence, J.M.Barrie, Lewis Carroll, Beatrix Potter, Mark Twain, Honore de Balzac, Virginia Woolf, T.S.Eliot and Walter Scott.)

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A pal who works in a hospital advises his elderly relatives to take 10 years off their ages if they need to have hospital treatment. He says ten years makes it easy to remember the change. Why do this? Hospital staff have been given official permission to kill off older patients and so if you're over 70 then it's a good idea to pretend you're younger than you are. GPs have medical records but hospitals don't usually have them available (especially if the patient hasn't been in that hospital before) and even if the records do appear and someone starts to ask questions it is easy to argue that someone must have made a mistake.

Shriti Vadera, who was born in Uganda (and, being foreign, perfect material for a role in the British Establishment) is being talked about as the next Governor of the Bank of England – to replace the Governor of the Bank of England who was born in Canada. Vadera is famous largely for having dismissed the shareholders of Railtrack as nothing more than grannies and sneering at the prospect that they might lose their blouses when the Government grabbed the company. She was also Gordon Brown's adviser so that tells us all we need to know about her skills at economics, money and that sort of stuff. Maybe she is good at parties. That's what the Canadian chap seems good at.

Those of us who are English have a responsibility to do everything we can to preserve our country. The Government wants to eliminate our history, culture and memories, especially the ones which are considered politically inconvenient

The NHS has published a heart test programme online. Citizens are invited to answer a series of questions – and can then discover the date at which they will probably have their first heart attack or stroke. The test contains three fundamental mistakes. First, it makes no allowance for blood pressure and recommends taking medication for any blood pressure reading which is over 120/80. This is a preferred blood pressure for a 20-year-old. People over 50 or so will inevitably have a higher blood pressure. Taking medication is likely to cause new problems (though it will undoubtedly delight the drug industry) Second, there is no question about diet. A vegetarian or vegan diet will reduce the risk of a heart attack. Third, the test punishes users who haven't had a cholesterol test. This is nutty. Cholesterol levels are of very doubtful value. And besides, not having had a test done doesn't mean that it is high. *The Twenty Minute Health Check* (which is free, and can be found towards the bottom of the Health section of www.vernoncoleman.com) is much more comprehensive.

I found an old autograph book. It was actually a small diary which my mother gave me when I was four or five-years-old. We were at a rural cricket match – a benefit organised for someone. Having seen other boys collecting autographs I wanted to do the same. My mother gave me the unused part of an old diary. I hurried around in a forest of white trousers, holding up my small book. One of the players was Gilbert Parkhouse, an opening batsman for Glamorgan and England. I held up my small diary for him to scribble his autograph. He took the book and then handed it back to me. 'You've got it,' he said. It is my oldest embarrassing moment.

India and Africa were never as fair or as efficient or as civilised as when the English controlled them. We gave them table manners and cricket. It is, of course, impossible to say this in public.

Traditional publishers make two big errors. First, they aim nearly all their books at the youth market when it is the over 60s who read most books. Second, they limit authors to one book per year. Authors who want to produce more than one book a year must have pen names. The ebook phenomenon has shown this to be cobblers. If an author is producing a good series, and can write fast enough, he can publish a book a month very satisfactorily.

Here is my list of the Great Heroes of Literature:
Quiller
Robin Hood
Zorro
Inspector Morse
Charlie Muffin
Spenser
Parker
Heironymous Bosch
Travis McGee
Colonel Douglas Mortimer
Horatio Hornblower
Smiley
James Bond
Mike Hammer
Keller
Captain Blood
Lone Ranger
Hopalong Cassidy
The Equaliser
Davy Crockett
Jason Bourne
John Dortmunder
Jeeves
Maigret
Philip Marlowe
Shell Scott
Richard Hannay
Horatio Hornblower
Richard Bolitho
David Copperfield

Mark Tapley
Sam Spade
Peter Ashton
Matthew Scudder
Bernie Rhodenbarr

I used to love cycling. No more. The roads are far too busy. Those who do cycle seem to think the roads belong to them. Yesterday I came across a pair of cyclists on a narrow country road. They could have ridden on the empty country pavement but their presence on the road meant that I had to wait for oncoming traffic to pass by. When the road was clear I tooted to let them know that I was coming past. (I noticed that they were more than a little wobbly and I didn't want them wobbling in front of the car) I couldn't believe the response. Both of them (what appeared to be a male and a female) waved ferocious V signs – so wildly that they nearly fell off. I am convinced that cyclists should pay a hefty road tax. They cause blockages (frequently riding two or three abreast) and sue if they hit potholes in the roads they haven't paid for.

I have just found an email from the French energy company which supplied our flat in Paris with gas and electricity. They are demanding to come and read the meters in the apartment we sold last April. Honest.

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A friend of Antoinette's is in hospital. Antoinette wanted to send flowers but was told that the hospital didn't allow flowers. This is cruel, stupid and lazy. Two thousand years ago the Greeks knew that having flowers in a hospital helped patients get better more speedily. Modern nurses are far too self-important to put flowers into a vase.

I had wrapped 12 small presents for the 12 days of Christmas. They were all silly toys. Today's gift was something called Toppling Tower. You have to remove plastic bricks from a tower without there being an Italian style collapse. Good fun. I also made a house out of Lego and thrashed my electronic chess game. I am enjoying retirement, though today I managed to find a copy of Heinz Pol's book about Germany during the Second World War. I also bought half a dozen other books dealing with the Nazi regime's plans for the formation of the European Union. And a couple of novels by authors I had never heard of. The most exciting was called *The Nebuly Coat* by John Meade Falkner, who seems to have had a fairly extraordinary life.

If Brexit doesn't go ahead then I suspect that share prices will go up fairly dramatically. And then investors will realise that this means the Conservatives will lose the next election and the Labour Party will win it. As a result share prices will then slump fairly dramatically. If Brexit goes ahead then share prices will rise a small amount, in relief, but then rise steadily as it becomes obvious that the world has not ended for Britain.

But it is the EU which will suffer most if we leave, especially without a deal. The Bank of England has pointed out that 'There are many in the EU…who recognise they rely on the UK for the scale and complexity of financial services they would not be able to replicate, or only be able to replicate at a higher price.'

So it is the EU which will suffer most.

Nonsense from the Remainers about aeroplanes not flying if we leave without a deal has been demolished. We have already agreed a deal with the US to allow flights between the UK and the US and the EU has agreed that there will be no interruption in flights between the EU and the UK. Once again, Project Fear has been proven to be built on lies.

The great sadness is that May has spread out the Brexit pain and has caused long lasting suffering and exacerbates divisions. She has polarised the country. She has been a predictable supplicant when negotiating with the enemy. The House of Commons, which is largely made up of Remainers, has been bought by the EU and is now not democratically representative: it is, in short, not fit for service.

The incompetence of the Government in the negotiations with the EU has been so extraordinary that I, like many Brexiteers, find it difficult to believe that May has not deliberately made a mess of things in order to benefit the EU. Back in 1977, Australian tycoon Kerry Packer said: 'In business, you don't tell your opponents what you are going to do, you do it and let them get on with it.'

I suspect that some readers will complain about the number of references to Britain's attempt to leave the EU. I fear that to those not living in the UK it may seem that I have become unhealthily obsessed with the issue. The fact is, however, that the Brexit vote was the most significant political event in Britain in my lifetime and the betrayal of the people the most shameful. I am not exaggerating when I say that the Brexit Referendum is, to Britain, as significant as the War of Independence was, and is, to the United States.

When MPs reluctantly succumbed to pressure and agreed to give the people a Referendum on the EU, they did so believing that the outcome was quite predictable. The Government was in favour of staying in the EU and so were the opposition and the third largest party. The Greens were in favour of the EU and so were the 'Parliaments' in Scotland and Wales. The Confederation of British Industry and the Bank of England were very much in favour of the EU. The BBC was steadfast in its support for the EU. Most of the other media supported the EU. The trade unions were in favour of the EU. The Government spent tens of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money fighting on behalf of the EU. Obama came over from the United States to support the EU. Every European leader joined the campaign to encourage the British to vote for the EU. The civil service advised against leaving the EU. The British Government thought up a whole raft of fearful predictions to warn us of the perils of leaving the EU. We were told that we faced penury for generations if we dared to leave the EU.

But, to the astonishment and horror of the Establishment, the people ignored their self- appointed 'betters' and voted to leave the EU.

A majority of MPs then agreed to do as the people had instructed. (We will gloss over the fact that around a quarter of MPs wanted to ignore the Referendum result.)

That was two years ago. Since then the Government had made an almighty mess of our leaving the EU; apparently being determined to give England away (lock, stock and barrel) to the corrupt and ruthless ragtaggle remnants of the Third Reich. The Prime Minister voted for staying in the EU and always seemed to regard leaving the EU as a disaster. She has treated the whole business as damage limitation. Neither she nor her MPs understand how the majority of the voters (their employers) feel about the EU. Many well- known politicians have astonished me with the depths to which they will sink. Sir John Major and Sir Nick Clegg used a German newspaper to urge the EU to hang tough in its negotiations with the country which had given them everything. I wonder if they have pictures of Adolf on their bedroom walls. (I was not surprised at Clegg, a money grubbing bastard and a no good virus with no more of a sense of morality than one of those bugs which cause diarrhoea and vomiting but I was slightly surprised at Major.) Sir Vince Cable and others have asserted that 'no deal' was not an option. They must have known that in arguing this they were supporting the enemy and preventing their country from obtaining the best possible deal. Lord Kerr, a British born eurocrat, talked of making the UK 'come to heel'. I bet Hitler's ghost enjoyed that one.

Right from the start, Remainers have worked to ensure that the exit terms would push even Brexiteers into wanting to stay in the EU. And that is precisely what May has done in agreeing a deal that betrays her country. In the 1930s, Winston Churchill opposed appeasement at any cost. What, I wonder, would he make of Theresa May's pathetic attempts to negotiate with Juncker et al? In my view, Theresa May makes William Joyce look like a patriot. Astonishingly, today, I read that £96,684 of taxpayers' money has been wasted on adverts on Facebook promoting Theresa May's deal with the EU.

Today, many MPs want either to ignore the Referendum or to have a second attempt to obtain the 'right' answer. That is, after all, the way the EU usually manages these things.

None of them seems to have thought things through.

What will they do if the people vote again to leave the EU?

How many times will they want to vote on the issue? Will they make it 'best of three'? 'Best of five?'

If the EU still exists by then (something I rather doubt) then in a century's time people will ask their parents: 'Which way did my grandparents vote in the Great Referendum?'

The benzodiazepine drugs work by numbing a patient's feelings. When the drugs are stopped the pains come back. (This is one of the reasons why the drugs are addictive.) The same thing is true of Quantitative Easing. The Bank of England cut interest rates close to zero and printed money to postpone the pain of the crash of 2008 (caused in Britain by Gordon Brown and mad, greedy bankers). Now the pain of that policy is coming and will hurt us just as much as the 2008 crash would have hurt if the Bank of England hadn't behaved like a bunch of morons.

I didn't hear a word from two of the organisations to which I sent my play about Mrs Caldicot and I won't hear from them now. I am rather annoyed that The National Theatre kept the play and didn't bother to acknowledge or return it. The bastards also kept my stamped addressed label.

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Illness and death are the grey clouds in the blue skies of every loving, close and inter-dependent couple.

I worry constantly about what will happen to Antoinette if I should be taken seriously ill or die. I worry too about Antoinette falling ill. Her health is not good and she refuses to see a doctor. I cannot blame her. Her experience with doctors at the Frenchay Hospital would have scarred anyone, and her experiences with GPs have been considerably less than encouraging. But if anything were to happen to Antoinette then my life would be over and done with so there is no dilemma for me.

However, hovering as I am on the edge of the crack of doom, I am almost certain to die first and so I worry endlessly about the consequences for Antoinette. I have done everything I can think of 'to put my affairs in order' as they say, and to make the administrative consequences more easily manageable. And I take far better care of myself than I would if I were alone.

But, in death as in life, it isn't the paperwork that really matters is it?

Antoinette and I spend almost every minute of every day together. When we work we do so in adjoining rooms. We haven't spent a night apart for nearly two decades and nor have we spent an evening apart. Most couples who have been married for 60 years will have spent far less time together. And we have no relatives.

And so the fear and anxiety consume me and there is no answer or comfort that I can find.

The review which killed my last Bilbury book has had lasting consequences. I haven't written anything (other than the contributions to this diary) for more than three weeks. It's the longest period I've gone for over half a century without banging my keyboard for several hours a day. And the odd thing is that I have found plenty of other things to do. I can't get the damned thing out of my mind. Books get trashed for all sorts of reasons (some fair and deserved) but it's just too painful when a book is destroyed for no reason. How would the owners of a small city hotel feel if they worked for months to prepare their establishment and then found it destroyed at the outset by a one star review written by someone who had never visited them but who simply wrote: 'This may be an excellent hotel but I would prefer to stay in a hotel by the sea.'

I spent the first third of the year fighting the French over the sale of our apartment in Paris, and the rest of the year recovering. We are still planning to get a dog (though we want one with smaller teeth than we have). And I'll definitely start smoking a pipe even if I am never allowed to light it unless I hide my head under a blanket and stay indoors.

We didn't have a holiday at all this year. But we have found our dream house, so as Antoinette said, what was the point of going away?

During the last 12 months, I wrote and published around 450,000 words. (Unlike Arnold Bennett I didn't count them). I am definitely slowing down. For much of my life I wrote three or four newspaper columns a week and a couple of monthly columns for magazines. At the peak I was writing over 7,000 words every week for newspapers and magazine columns. That's 350,000 words a year for periodicals. Plus another 450,000 to 500,000 a year in books.

At one time, some years ago, I was writing weekly columns for *The People*, *The Sun*, *The Daily Star*, the *Sunday Correspondent*, *The Scot on Sunday* and two different syndicated columns for around 50 local newspapers. I was also writing monthly columns for *Irelands Own*, *Slimmer Magazine*, *Over 21*, a newspaper in the West Indies, another one in India and one in South Africa. I feel tired just thinking about it.

I am in awe of Balzac who published 4.5 million words in 18 years and Dickens who, in books alone, wrote 5.5 million words in 34 years. Both had to write all those words, sentences, paragraphs and pages with old-fashioned pens on bits of paper. They probably had to take time out to cut their own goose quills. If there is a battle then Dickens wins because he also wrote a zillion articles, edited magazines and went on massive exhausting lecture tours.

I hate to think how many words Frank Richards wrote in his lifetime. He used to write whole comics as well as his many books and for the comics alone he turned out 10,000 words a day for over 30 years. That's around four million words a year. And he, like PG Wodehouse, used a murderous looking sit up and beg typewriter. Those things can crush your fingers. I used one for many years and you really had to hammer the keys – especially when the ribbon started to fade. When you are in full flow it is a nuisance to have to stop and change a fiddly ribbon. I would end a day's work with bleeding fingers and broken nails. Digging trenches was probably easier than using one of those old typewriters.

I fear that we are heading for a spiritual and intellectual ice age. Millennials, whose sense of entitlement and self-importance, is a major cause of our current problems, escape from the world they are creating into computer games of one sort or another. Older folk, like me, escape into books and films.

The bottom line is that I would like to live in a Rockwell painting but whenever I tiptoe into real life I feel that

I'm living in a Rothko nightmare; I want to live in Constable country but I live in a Hogarth etching.

What on earth is going to happen to England and to Britain next year?

Will our house on the cliff stay on top of the cliff? Will we sell our home in the Cotswolds? Will Britain become a communist country?

If our house falls off the cliff and Corbyn gets into power then we might emigrate to Southern Ireland. It's not too far too travel, they speak English and we can probably find another house on the edge of a cliff.

The only problem is that the Irish Government hates Britain and we aren't too fond of them. Still, what the hell. We already feel like aliens in our own country so we might just as well feel like aliens in another country. I wonder if the Irish Government still allows writers to live there without paying any tax on their royalties.

We will, though, have to move quickly before Corbyn gets into power, John McDonnell becomes Chancellor and Diane Abbott becomes Home Secretary. (Written down, it all looks like a joke. If this comes about it will be Theresa May's fault.)

Corbyn realises that most of the country will want to leave if he wins an election, and he has promised to confiscate 40% (two fifths) of the wealth of British citizens and their families who choose to emigrate rather than to live in Marxist Britain. The ones who remain will also be forced to pay heavy wealth taxes.

The middle classes will be destroyed by Corbyn but actually, of course, it will be millennial Remainers who will suffer most under a Labour Government. Their mortgage rates will rise to 8-10%, their jobs will be in jeopardy, their pensions will be destroyed and life will be no fun. And it will be their own damned fault. Most people under 20 at the moment will have to work until they are 100.

Hopefully, our house on the cliff will stay where it is and we can stay with it.

Whatever happens, it cannot be denied that interesting times lie ahead. Life in the Coleman household is never dull.

We have plans to take 2019 by the scruff of its neck before it can smother us with nonsense. We all need a mission of some kind. It is, I think, important to have plans. And to have things to which we can look forward. If you only have memories, and things to look back at, then you're pretty well near the end. We will perhaps open an art gallery later in the year. (There are former bank premises available everywhere at low prices and most of them will make excellent galleries.) I have ordered an armful of books I need, and already done the preliminary research which will, I am now certain, enable me to link the Third Reich with the European Union. I first became interested in the history of the European Union over 20 years ago when, while campaigning against drug company abuses, I realised the extent of the link between the EU and the industry. Gradually, I unearthed more and more links between other industries and the European Union. Today, it is clear that the connections, via Nazi economists and industrialists and the European Coal and Steel Community, are absolutely solid and I can publish all the relevant names and dates. I plan to print and distribute a short book listing the links, step by step. No established publisher would dare do it so we'll do it ourselves and promote it on www.vernoncoleman.com (or, if that gets hacked apart and taken down yet again, through www.vernoncoleman.co.uk, www.vernoncoleman.org or www.vernoncoleman.net) though to obtain any reviews I may have to think up yet another pen name. We are still hoping to buy an S1 Bentley from the 1950s (one of the huge, totally impractical ones). We'll buy our first dog when we've sold the house in the Cotswolds and no longer have to drive up and down the M5. And, who knows, maybe we'll buy that darned boat – though definitely something with a chug-chug engine rather than sails and bits of rope. I'll start to smoke a pipe – I'll start with a straight one, the sort Dads used to smoke, and hope to graduate to one of those meerschaum pipes with the bend in the stem. I'm going to start learning Russian again. I must learn to play the harmonica properly (I've been trying for 60 years) and my cigarette card collection needs some attention. (You can learn more about the social and cultural history of Britain from a cigarette card collection than from a library of history books.) And, God willing, I'm going to read an awful lot of the books accumulating on my shelves. Most important of all I am going to look after Antoinette. And I will do what I can to help promote her paintings, look after the wildlife and take care of our cliff edge garden.

And now it's time to fish out the Jeremy Brett disks of *Sherlock Holmes*. It is a tradition we have followed for many years.

Between 11 pm and midnight today, we will watch the final episode of the first series – in which Sherlock appears to die with Moriaty at the Reichenbach Falls. And then, after midnight, we will watch the first episode of the second series in which Sherlock reappears and all is, once again, well with the world and Mr Holmes is ready for a new beginning.

Sherlock's revival, his spiritual rebirth, always inspires me to think of tomorrow rather than yesterday. It's a great way to start a new chapter.

Note

If you enjoyed this book then you might also enjoy the following books:

Vernon Coleman Tours England, *Vernon Coleman's Paris*, *101 Things I Have Learned*, *One Thing after Another* and *Coleman's Laws*.

There are nearly 100 books by Vernon Coleman available as ebooks on Amazon. Just look up Vernon Coleman – kindle books. There are 15 books about Bilbury in *The Young Country Doctor* series and four novels about Mrs Caldicot. There are books about medicine, sport and politics but there are no books about cathedrals, knitting or synchronised swimming.

Errata

Subtle and understated though it is, this diary doubtless contains a number of errors. Here are some of the more egregious ones. These errors are all a result of the combined pressures produced by Brexit, Money Laundering, Climate Change and unsuccessful attempts to reduce general levels of obesity among the population in Scotland by attempting to control the sale of deep fried Mars Bars.

1) Vernon Coleman is not, and never has been, a European Commissioner and this should have been made clear throughout. The rumour that he has been invited to become the next President of the European Union is without foundation.

2) In the section headed 'Healthy Diet for Slimmers' please remove the words 'A large slice of chocolate cake and a helping of trifle' and replace with the words 'two lettuce leaves and a small radish'.

3) Nick Clegg was described as an MP and a sanctimonious little shit. He should have been described as a former MP and a sanctimonious little shit. Just about everything Clegg did when he was an MP was bad for Britain and bad for the people of Britain. It was a sad day for America when Clegg accepted a job with a social media company called Facebook and was required to move to California. It is not known why Clegg accepted the job which carries a multi-million pound a year salary.

4) Please remove the words 'the EU was apparently been designed by Nazis' and replace with the words 'the EU was definitely designed by Nazis'.

5) The line 'The BBC is sexist, racist organisation' should have read 'The BBC is a sexist, racist, treacherous and ageist organisation with tax avoidance skills; I believe it is in breach of its Charter and in my view its attempt to force citizens to pay its licence fee is a breach of the Human Rights Act'.

6) The part of Jack in the full-colour production of 'Jack and the Magic Beanstalk' at the Huddersfield Empire was not played by George Clooney (the one who used to advertise coffee and who is a very dear and close friend of the Sussex family) but by George Cloony (the one who played the idiot boy in the 2016 production of Aladdin at the Sunderland Empire).

7) A list of corrections for Vernon Coleman's fifth diary should have appeared in the sixth diary but were accidentally omitted. The list would have appeared in this diary but it was accidentally deleted.

8) Vernon Coleman said in his last diary that a Scottish born politician known as Tony Blair was an alleged war criminal. After consultations with lawyers he would like to apologise. The word 'alleged' was superfluous and he deeply regrets its inclusion.

9) On page 752 of a first edition of this diary, Vernon Coleman wrote that with the possible exception of Diane Abbott there are few things more useless than the yucca tree. We have received an objection from the Yucca Tree Society and would like to apologise to yucca trees everywhere. Cahuilla Native Americans regard the yucca as a valuable resource. Their ancestors are said to have used the leaves of the yucca tree to weave sandals and baskets. The whole reference to Ms Abbott and yucca trees was later removed from all editions including this one making this erratum note entirely pointless.

10) For 'washing machine made in China' read 'cheese and pickle sandwich on brown bread'. This error was a result of a simple misunderstanding.

11) On page 829 of an early draft of this book Vernon Coleman described millennials as `spoilt and sulky brats who forever behave as though they were six-years-old'. Readers can be assured that this was entirely accurate and not a mistake.

12) The President of the European Commission is 'Jean-Claude Juncker' and not the well-known socialist 'Adolf Hitler'. Mr Hitler, who is famous for having invented a funny salute and the goosestep, died before he could be appointed President of the organisation he created. Mr Juncker should not be confused with Junkers which was a

company which made aircraft for the Nazis. Bombers made by Junkers were used to flatten British towns and to kill innocent British civilians (including women and children) during World War II.

Final, Final Note from Vernon Coleman

I would be enormously grateful if readers who have found this book, in part or in whole, stimulating, informative or entertaining, would be kind enough to give it a good rating on Amazon.

I offer my sincere thanks to the readers who have been good enough to read my books over the years. I have much enjoyed your company. I hope you have sometimes enjoyed mine. If I have offended you it was not intentional (unless you are, inter alia, Tony Blair, Theresa May, Adolf Hitler, Jeremy Corbyn or Manu Macron of course). I hope you will continue to read my existing e books on Amazon. And I wish you all sunshine, fair skies and (whatever you do) endless good reviews.

That’s all folks!

Vernon Coleman
www.vernoncoleman.com

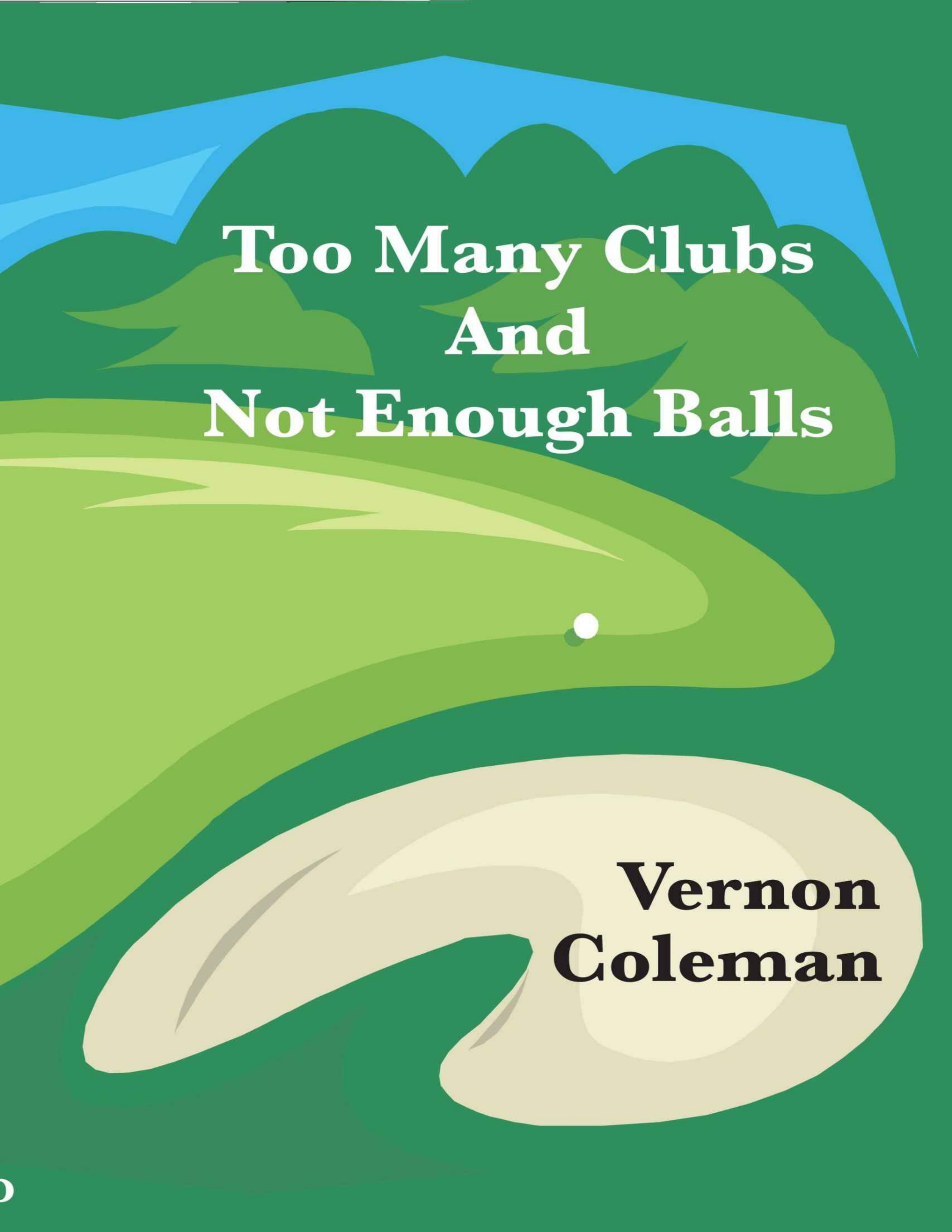

Too Many Clubs And Not Enough Balls

Vernon Coleman

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All characters, organisations, businesses and places in this book are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons (living, dead or in between), organisations or places is purely coincidental. The golf club which is the setting for this book exists only in the author's imagination. Finally, there is some doubt about whether or not the author himself is a real person or is a figment of his own imagination.

For a list of over 100 books by Vernon Coleman please see www.vernoncoleman com or the Amazon website.

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to Donna Antoinette, the Welsh Princess, who’d give you her last ball without hesitation or regret. The sweetest, kindest, most generous hearted woman a man could ever hope to meet.

CHAPTER ONE: ‘WHO THE HELL ARE YOU?’

It was cold and I pulled my collar up as I hurried across the car park. The wind was whipping a loose rope against the white painted wood of a tall flag-pole. There was no flag flying. A storm was coming from the West and the dark clouds bloated with the rain they would soon release were hurrying in our direction as though anxious to meet some undeclared deadline. Although it was the middle of the day there were already lights on in the clubhouse.

A long row of wind battered wooden signs made it clear that the parking spaces nearest to the front door were reserved for the Club Captain, the Club President, the Ladies Captain, the Ladies President, the Greens Committee Chairman, the Handicaps Committee Chairman, the Club Secretary and various other dignitaries. An old red Vauxhall and a battered white van were the only vehicles parked there, though neither had been parked well enough to identify the drivers. The owner of the white van had painted out a name on the side of the van with white paint that didn’t quite match the original white of the van. Someone had pinned a paper notice to the wooden boards of the club house and covered it with clear plastic. The words ‘Junior Captain’ had been written on the paper in large red capitals but rain had managed to get underneath the plastic and the ink had started to run, making the notice difficult to read and leaving streaky red marks on the paper. The four drawing pins used to hold the notice to the wall had gone rusty and produced brown marks on the plastic. An old mountain bike, covered in mud, was leaning against the wooden wall, just beneath the paper notice.

Tentatively, I pushed open the right half of a pair of heavy front doors. Both doors were glazed down to waist height and the glass in both doors was virtually covered with small handwritten notices stuck to the door with peeling sticky tape. The notices were mostly written in capital letters and virtually every sentence ended with at least one (and often two, three or more) exclamation marks. ‘Definitely NO spikes in the Lounge!!’, ‘No dogs EVEN on leads!!!’, ‘All Visitors must report to the Club Professional’s shop!’, ‘Push hard - door sticks!’ and, boasting the greatest number of exclamation marks that I could see, a foolscap sheet of lined paper carrying the following message in a mixture of red and green ink: ‘Gentlemen are reminded that ties and long trousers are compulsory by the committee after 6.00 pm and all day on Sundays!!!!’. It wasn’t particularly welcoming but I wanted to learn to play golf and the only other local club had a waiting list of six years and, it seemed from a glance at the car park there, a requirement that all members drive something expensive, preferably made in Germany and equipped with personalised number plates. If I was going to play golf, without moving house, this was going to be the place where I was going to learn.

Inside the club house the long corridor which stretched ahead of me seemed about as busy as a school classroom in August. Obeying an instruction pinned to the wall ahead of me I paused for a moment in this golfing equivalent of the Marie Celeste to wipe my shoes on a tired and well-worn doormat which had doubtless once boasted firm bristles but which now seemed as flat and as abrasive as a sheet of linoleum. It was encrusted with dried mud.

With the soles of my shoes now doubtless noticeably muddier than they had been before I tip toed cautiously along the corridor, feeling very much like a new boy at school.

Both sides of the corridor were equipped with notice boards; massive, wooden framed cork boards which stretched from an inch or two below the ceiling right down almost to knee height. The corridor was, I guessed, about thirty feet long. The boards were at least five feet deep. There were boards on both sides of the corridor. Of the three hundred square feet of cork available I doubt if a total of more than one remained naked to the world. Every other inch of the boards was covered with notices. Most of the notices seemed to contain either a new club rule or an amendment to an old one. I had just begun to work my way through the orders, exhortations and instructions in the hope that I might find one containing information relevant to my own needs, when a door I hadn’t noticed (it, too, was covered with corkboard and pinned on notices) was flung open. I noticed that the door handle poked through a neat hole which had been cut in the cork board.

‘I thought I heard someone come in, snapped a short, red faced man. ‘About bloody time too.’ He wore a blue blazer, a white shirt, which hung down almost to his knees and a dark blue tie decorated with a motif showing two crossed golf clubs and a ball. The blazer had gold buttons and a large, impressive looking badge on the breast pocket. Apart from the dangling parts of his shirt he was naked from the waist down. His feet and lower legs looked wet. He had matching bunions and knees knobbly enough to have won any holiday camp competition.

Confronted with this rather startling sight I instinctively stepped back a pace.

‘I’ve been waiting for you for ages,’ he said. ‘Follow me.’

Puzzled, but anxious not to make a poor impression, I followed him into a locker room which smelt of a strange mixture of soap, tobacco, perfume and sweat.

‘You haven’t brought any waders with you?’

‘No.’

‘Equipment?’

‘No.’

‘Boots?’

‘No. I was hoping to buy what I needed here.’ I said. ‘Bit by bit,’ I added. I hadn’t heard about the need for waders and none of the golf magazines I’d read had ever mentioned them. I assumed that this might be a local course requirement.

He looked down at my feet. ‘You’d better take your shoes and socks off,’ he said. ‘And your trousers too.’

‘I think there’s probably some mistake...,’ I said.

‘Just get ‘em off man,’ he told me firmly.

Normally, if a man I’d never met before had told me to remove my shoes, socks and trousers I would, I think, have hesitated and wanted answers to some questions. But his request wasn’t a request at all, it was an order. And before I could say anything he’d virtually disappeared.

Hurriedly, I tore off my shoes, socks and trousers. What did I know? Maybe golfers had more in common with Freemasons than I’d thought.

‘Fourth time it’s been blocked this year. I’ve been trying to clear it myself,’ he told me, when I caught up with him. The carpet in the locker room was soaked and water squeezed up between my toes as I walked. ‘Heaven knows what they put down the plug hole,’ he told me over his shoulder. ‘I don’t want to know. They always say it’s long hair but last time it got blocked you chaps fished out an eyebrow brush, a shampoo sachet, a wodge of old tissues and some of those unmentionable things women use.’ He paused for a second and looked at me, as though he had noticed something for the first time. ‘Don’t you even have any rubber gloves?’

‘No,’ I admitted. ‘I thought I’d buy a glove from the professional’s shop.’ The only thing I knew about golf clubs was that they would like you more if you purchased your equipment from the professional’s shop rather than from a golf hypermarket on the industrial estate.

The man in the blazer looked at me as though I might be dangerous and then shrugged. ‘I’ve been using an old putter,’ he told me, leading the way down three steps into a flooded shower room. The water had reached the top step of the shower room, which was why the carpet was soaked. ‘But I’ve probably just made it worse.’ The shower room walls were tiled and as I stepped down into the water it was obvious that the floor was tiled too.

As I waded gingerly through the water, a toilet I hadn’t noticed was flushed, a door was opened and a woman of about sixty marched out. She was wearing a tweed skirt, brown woollen stockings and a single string of pearls. I couldn’t see what she was wearing on her feet because they were under water. She wore nothing above the waist apart from the pearls. Embarrassed, I looked away and found myself staring at a tall, well-built natural blonde who was standing under one of the showers, back arched, eyes closed, rinsing soap from her hair. Naturally, since she was under the shower, she was wearing nothing either above or below her waist. I looked away, trying desperately to find a direction in which to look which was not laden with the unaccustomed sight of naked female bodies.

‘Who the hell are you?’ demanded the woman in the tweed skirt.

‘He’s the plumber,’ said the man in the blazer, pointing at me.

‘And what the hell are you doing in here Major?’ demanded the woman in the tweed skirt, indignant but seemingly unconcerned at finding herself half dressed in front of two men. ‘The damned Amenities Committee hasn’t made the changing rooms unisex have it?’

‘The shower drain is blocked,’ explained the man in the blazer. ‘I do wish you ladies would keep out of the showers while we get the problem sorted out.’

‘It’s our shower room isn’t it? demanded the woman in the tweed skirt. ‘What are we supposed to do? Stand outside and wait for it to rain?’

‘Expect they’d like us to stand on the patio outside the bar. Throw buckets of soapy water over one another,’ said the blonde with a deep throated guffaw. Other blondes might giggle. She definitely guffawed. She finished rinsing her hair, turned off her shower, pushed her hair back, opened her eyes and, looking in our direction, noticed me for the first time.

‘Golly, Mr Secretary,’ she said to the man in the blazer. ‘Are you doing guided tours of the ladies shower room now?’ She took a large white towel from a hook and, making absolutely no effort to cover her nakedness, started to dry her hair. She did this with such great vigour that it seemed to draw extra attention to her nakedness. I could not help noticing that, in addition to the usual fixtures and fittings, she had extraordinarily well developed muscles. She reminded me of the female weight lifters one sees alternately grunting and sprinkling themselves with talcum powder at the Olympic Games.

‘This is the plumber,’ replied the club secretary. ‘He’s come to sort out your blocked drain.’

‘Oh well that makes it OK then,’ she drawled. ‘Being naked in front of the plumber is like being undressed in front of the doctor.’

‘I’m not...,’ I said, starting to tell her that I wasn’t a plumber.

‘Doctors, plumbers and window cleaners,’ she said. ‘All professional men.’ She looked at me and smiled. ‘If you weren’t a plumber I would scream, call a man and have you arrested,’ she said. She guffawed, presumably either at the thought of her screaming or at the thought of her needing to call a man for anything. Mohammed Ali would have retired even earlier if he’d had to face the prospect of fifteen rounds with her. ‘Major doesn’t count,’ she added, nodding in the direction of the club secretary.

Suddenly, announcing that I wasn’t a plumber didn’t sound such a good idea. ‘I do bit of plumbing occasionally,’ I said, feeling myself reddening. ‘More a sort of hobby really. Semi-professional.’ I muttered. ‘Sort of. Just drains really. Mainly drains. Not exclusively drains, of course. But mainly drains. Shower drains. Drains in shower rooms.’

‘A plumber, eh?’ said the woman in the tweed skirt. She looked around her. ‘Haven’t got a paper and pencil on you I suppose?’ she asked the blonde. The blonde confirmed the accuracy of this supposition. The woman in the tweed skirt turned back to me. ‘Give me your number before you go, will you? Bloody impossible to find a plumber. I blame the Government. Apart from difficult stuff that requires tools I am devoted to doing it myself. The bastard workmen won’t do stuff and want a fortune for it. They never come. I blame New Labour. They’ve sent everyone to college so that they all have degrees in brewing or media studies and don’t want to be plumbers any more. Did you know that far more people qualify with brewing degrees than as dentists? Could that have anything to do with the fact that half the country is pissed and there aren’t enough dentists to go around?’

‘I do wish you wouldn’t use the shower while the drain is blocked,’ said the secretary to the blonde. ‘It just makes things worse.’

‘You should put up a notice about it,’ said the blonde, now drying her back.

‘There is a notice about it,’ said the club secretary firmly. ‘I dictated it myself and you’ll find a copy pinned to the noticeboard.’

Not many men could manage to be pompous while not wearing trousers. But the club secretary did it very well. He turned to me. ‘Shouldn’t you be doing something?’ he asked. He pointed to the floor. ‘The water’s getting deeper.’ He was right. The water was now half way up my calves.

‘Er, I’m not quite sure what to do,’ I began, rather apologetically. ‘Do you have a bucket?’

‘I think it’s rather late for buckets,’ snapped the secretary. ‘I’m no expert but I’d have thought that unblocking the drain made more sense.’ ‘Drain is over here somewhere,’ said the blonde, pointing to the far corner of the shower room. I felt around with my feet and instead of finding the drain I soon found something rather soft and squashy. I bent down, plunged my hand into the water and, during the next few minutes managed to drag out of the water, in quick succession, a pink face flannel, an item of ladies underwear (blue with lace around the edges), the sort of plastic shower cap given away in hotels, a large, congealed bundle of hair (a mixture of black, brown and blonde), two golf balls, a broken plastic drain cover, a cigar packet, a piece of string about two yards long, a pair of tights and a something which I couldn’t identify but which the blonde immediately identified as Mr Roebuck’s truss. The secretary’s efforts with the old putter had compressed most of these items and, it seemed to me, had almost certainly made the whole situation worse than it might have been.

As I removed the last of these items from the drain the small flood of water disappeared at a most satisfying rate.

‘Excellent work!’ said the club secretary, clapping me on the back. ‘Always sensible to call in a professional when you’ve got a tricky problem.’ He peered at the pile of stuff in my hands. ‘There’s a waste bin in the changing room,’ he told me, ‘you can toss all that in there.’

‘Those are mine,’ said the blonde, looking over the items I had removed from the drain and selecting the blue underwear. She picked them out with forefinger and thumb and smiled at me. ‘Can’t imagine how they got there,’ she added.

‘I’ll have the balls,’ said the woman in the tweed skirt, helping herself.

‘Don’t forget to give Mr Roebuck his truss,’ said the blonde. ‘If he tells you how it got there let us know.’

‘Follow me,’ said the club secretary, with a sniff. ‘After I’ve shown you the rubbish bin I’ll find you a towel.’ ‘Don’t forget to give me your number before you go,’ shouted the woman in the tweed skirt. ‘I’ll have it too,’ drawled the blonde. ‘Never know when you might need a man with a wrench to give your pipes a bit of a twirl.’ She guffawed loudly.

For the first time in several decades I blushed.

CHAPTER TWO: ‘EVERYONE IS ON A COMMITTEE’

After I had deposited the bits and pieces I had removed from the drain the club secretary and I dried ourselves on threadbare once-white towels. They had the words PROPERTY OF THE GOLF CLUB - NOT TO BE REMOVED FROM THE BUILDING embroidered on them in faded maroon lettering. I felt much more comfortable when I’d got my trousers, shoes and socks back on.

‘Thanks for that,’ said the club secretary, when he’d finished double-knotting his shoe laces. ‘Must rush. Business to attend to. Tell your people to send along their bill.’

‘Actually...’ I began, deciding that this might be the appropriate moment to tell him why I was really there. But he’d gone.

I finished tying my shoe laces and then combed my hair in a mirror that was, around the edges, decorated with a mixture of stern warning notices typed on post cards (‘Members Are Reminded Not To Leave VALUABLES Unattended In The Locker Room’), promotional cards which had, I assumed, been left by members hoping that fellow members would be inclined to favour work done by a fellow golfer (‘Home Perms My Speciality’, ‘I Guarantee To Help You Lose Up To A Stone A Week’, ‘Have You Put On Weight Over Christmas? Lady Member Willing To Make Dress Alterations For Fellow Members - Modest Charges’ and ‘All Your Roofing Needs Attended To Promptly. Work Guaranteed. Member Of The Association Of Roofers’ were typical of these) and cards advertising golf products (‘Practise Driving In Your Living Room And Add 50 Yards Today’), golfing holidays (‘Two Week Golfing Holidays In Spain - Flights, Accommodation And All Green Fees From £99’) and other local courses (‘£2 Reduction For Members Of Visiting Clubs On Thursday Afternoons After 6 pm From November To March).

As ready as I had been when I had first entered the club half an hour or so earlier (which is to say as ready as I would ever be and not terribly ready at all) I opened the door from the ladies changing room and stepped out into the corridor directly into the path of a stout, balding man of about 50. He had bright blue twinkly eyes and looked as if he had more fun and worried less than most people. He wore brown and beige checked trousers and a blue jumper which had a tortoise embroidered on the left breast. ‘I say, well done you,’ he said, with a wink. He looked at his watch. ‘Never too early, eh?’ He leant a little closer and lowered his voice. ‘You might like to do up your fly,’ he murmured.

‘I was clearing out a drain in the shower room,’ I told him, as I pulled up the forgotten zip.

‘Never heard it called that before,’ he said, looking slightly puzzled. ‘‘Clearing out a drain, eh?’’ He laughed. He clapped me on the shoulder with a hand like a wicketkeeper’s glove. ‘Fancy a drink?’

‘Actually,’ I confessed, ‘I really was clearing out a drain and I’m not sure I’m supposed to go into the bar; I’m not entirely a member.’

‘Not entirely?’

‘Well, to be more precise, not at all. And I did see a notice saying that only members were allowed into the lounge.’

‘Oh, don’t take any notice of that. Doesn’t matter. The whole damned place is festooned with bits of paper telling us what we can’t do. If we all read all the notices we’d never do anything else. You can be my guest. My name’s Simon.’

‘Thank you,’ I said. ‘I’m Tom. Thank you very much. However, I would like to join the club. Do you think that would be possible?’

He laughed again, louder and for longer.

‘You want to what?’

‘Join the club.’ I repeated. ‘If it’s possible.’

He laughed again.

‘Only if it’s possible,’ I said. ‘If there’s a long waiting list...’

‘Oh, I would think it’s possible,’ he assured me with a beaming smile.

‘I realise there may be a waiting list,’ I said.

He brushed this aside with a wave of one of his massive hands. ‘Oh, don’t worry about waiting lists,’ he said. ‘The only place round here with a waiting list is the hospital.’

I followed him along the notice lined corridor. At the end we turned left. Here, in a shorter corridor, there were more notices on the walls. I glanced at them as we walked by. Whoever had typed them had clearly been fond of exclamation marks.

‘Members Are Advised That This Year’s Christmas Dinner Will Be Held On November 26th. The Children’s Christmas Party Will Be Held On January 4th. Applications For Tickets Must Be Received By July 17th At Latest!!!!!’

‘Members Are Reminded That The Gardens On The Left Of The 8th Fairway Are Out Of Bounds At All Times!!!’

‘This Year’s July Medal Will Be Held On August 9th!!’

Simon had opened and disappeared through a varnished wooden door. The door carried several plastic notices (‘Lounge Bar’, ‘Members Only’,) which had been screwed to the door and which therefore had an air of permanence about them, and numerous paper ones (‘Members Must Not Enter Wearing Spikes!!’, ‘All Drinks Must Be Paid for!!!’, ‘Gentlemen Must Wear Long Trousers At All Times!!!!’ and ‘Lady Members Are Requested Not To Climb Onto The Tables While Wearing High Heels!!!!’ were the only ones I had time to read) which had been taped into position with curling sticky tape and which, therefore, had a temporary air to them.

‘What’s your poison?’ asked Simon as I entered the lounge. There was a bar running the full length of the room directly opposite the door. Simon was already sitting on one of a dozen red topped bar stools.

I hesitated.

‘Whisky OK? Malt?’

It seemed a little early in the day for whisky but I didn’t like to say so. I mumbled something which even I didn’t understand.

‘Two malt whiskies,’ said Simon to the barman, a tall, lugubrious fellow who wore a waist length white coat, black trousers, black waistcoat, white shirt and a ready tied bow-tie which had slipped an inch. ‘Laphroaig.’ He added before turning back to me. ‘It’s the only drink which comes out the same colour as it was when it went in,’ added Simon. ‘Shows it must be good for you.’

‘Er, yes, thank you,’ I said. I’d never drunk alcohol that early in the day and felt curiously decadent. I reached for my wallet but Simon lifted a hand to stop me. ‘My treat,’ he insisted. ‘You can buy me one when you’re a member.’

The barman poured two large whiskies. Simon paid and told the barman to have one himself. ‘Always give the barman a drink,’ Simon told me. ‘Otherwise you’ll find that when you totter up to the bar to order a drink he’ll suddenly wander off and start cleaning, fiddling with the till or washing glasses.’ I took one of the whiskies and thanked him both for the drink and the advice.

‘I’ll just pop and see if the Secretary is free,’ he told me. He hurried off and disappeared again. I didn’t see where he’d gone but he hadn’t left through the door through which we’d entered. For a large man he was very good at disappearing.

The barman scuttled off sideways, like a crab, and disappeared from sight. I had no idea where he’d gone either. Now that everyone had disappeared, I looked around.

The lounge was huge and when it had first been built it had probably looked very elegant. The centrepiece of the wall on the left of the door through which I had entered the room was a huge window which overlooked what I guessed was the eighteenth green. The centrepiece of the opposite wall was a massive stone fireplace. The hearth was piled high with grey ash, blackened remnants of wood and discarded crisp and cigarette packets. There were half a dozen huge leather arm chairs in front of the fireplace and half a dozen mis-matched chairs and sofas positioned so that the occupants could look out of the window. The leather chairs were badly scuffed and worn and several had tears in their leather with the stuffing poking out. Everything had probably once been rather glorious. Now it was all rather faded. The small tables, liberally sprinkled with beer mats and ugly ashtrays advertising a variety of alcoholic beverages, were marked with hundreds of tiny holes and little hillocks of wood dust on the carpet suggested that the woodworm responsible were still in residence.

The carpet had probably been expensive when first bought but it had long since lost its pile and at a dozen or more places around the room had worn right through so that the rapidly thinning underfelt was itself visible. The walls were decorated with huge old oil paintings in gilt frames. In between the pictures the walls were decorated with damp patches. The oil paintings were so dirty that they made little more sense than the damp patches.

‘I’ve found the secretary,’ said Simon, striding purposefully back into the lounge through a door I hadn’t even noticed. The man in the blazer followed closely behind him holding a piece of paper and beaming.

‘It’s the plumber!’ said the club secretary when he saw me.

‘Gosh!’ said Simon. ‘Are you a plumber? What wonderful luck. You fellows are rarer than astronauts. Could you pop round to the house sometime and take a look at one of our bathroom taps. Damned thing has been dripping for months.’

‘I’m not actually a plumber,’ I said. I took a gulp of my whisky. This, I felt, was probably going to be confusing for everyone, including me.

‘Of course he’s a plumber,’ said the club secretary to Simon. ‘He’s just cleared the drain in the ladies changing room.’ ‘I’m not really a plumber,’ I insisted. ‘But I had to say that because of the woman in the shower.’

‘Aha! Oh yes. I understand!’ said Simon. ‘Brilliant. Plumber eh?’ He winked again. ‘Gets you into showers and bathrooms and all sorts of private places. Must try that sometime.’

‘He’s a plumber,’ insisted the club secretary, raising his voice. ‘He cleaned out the drain in a jiffy.’

Simon moved a little closer and lowered his voice. ‘There’s nothing wrong with being a plumber,’ he assured me. ‘We’ve got one member who’s a traffic warden and another who’s an estate agent. We’re not snobby round here. For heaven’s sake we’ve even got dentists and lawyers as members.’

‘Thank you,’ I said.

Simon turned to the club secretary. ‘Our new friend the plumber wants to join the club. Have you got the forms?’

‘Why do you want to play golf?’ the secretary asked me.

I thought about this for a moment. I was concerned that my answer might affect my application. I didn’t want to admit that I was playing because my doctor had told me I needed the exercise and my mother had said that I either played golf or got married. ‘Bit of a fun,’ I guess. ‘Gentle exercise. Fresh air. Good companions. Tottering around the course, idly flicking a ball here and there. Looking at the birds and the butterflies. Getting out in the sunshine. Getting away from the rat race. Leaving my responsibilities behind for a while. Having a few hours away from the stress and competition of daily life.’

This was greeted with silence. Simon and the secretary looked at me as if I had suddenly turned purple and sprouted huge feathery wings.

‘Have I said something wrong?’ I asked.

‘No, no, not at all,’ said Simon. ‘But you have to understand that some of the people here are members of the club for, er, other reasons. They like the politics and the pressure. They enjoy the responsibility and the authority.’

‘Oh,’ I said, genuinely surprised.

‘But whatever your reasons for wanting to join I’m sure you’ll be glad you did,’ said the secretary.

‘Right,’ I said. ‘Do you enjoy golf?’

‘Enjoy golf?’

‘The game. Hitting little white balls around.’

The secretary looked at me as though I was barking mad. ‘Never played the game,’ he said. He laughed. ‘Damned silly game as far as I can see.’ He shrugged as though dismissing the strange tastes of people who chose to play golf as of little consequence. He walked over to the bar, wiped away a puddle, and put the piece of paper he was carrying down on the dry part of the bar. ‘If you’d just sign here,’ he said.

‘Can I join straight away?’ I asked surprised. Despite Simon’s reassurance I had still expected there to be a waiting list of some sort. I’d heard of prospective golfers having to wait years to join a club and spending their weekends hanging around outside the club entrance hoping to see an ambulance drive in through the gates to take away an existing member mortally afflicted with a stroke or heart attack.

‘I think we can squeeze you in,’ said the club secretary drily.

‘How many new members have joined up this year?’ Simon asked the secretary.

‘It’s been a trifle on the quiet side recently.’

‘None?’ asked Simon.

‘Approximately none,’ agreed the club secretary. ‘We should do more advertising perhaps. Get ourselves known.’

‘Might attract the wrong sort of person,’ said Simon.

‘Precisely my thought,’ agreed the club secretary, handing me his pen.

I signed my name. ‘It says here that I need to be proposed and seconded by two members who’ve known me for at least two years and can vouch for my good standing,’ I pointed out.

‘I’ll propose you,’ said Simon, whom I had known for probably for the best part of a quarter of an hour. ‘You’re standing and that’s good enough for me. He scribbled his signature on the form. ‘Now you need a seconder,’ he said. He looked around. Apart from the three of us and the barman the lounge was completely empty.

‘Albert would have been happy to do that,’ said the club secretary, taking the form. ‘I’ll sign for him to save him the trouble.’

‘Who’s Albert?’

‘Nice old chap,’ said Simon. ‘You’d have liked him. Used to spend every day in that chair over there.’ Simon nodded towards the fireplace. ‘He died in it last Wednesday. He was 92.’

‘I’ll put last Tuesday’s date on the form,’ said the secretary. ‘Just in case anyone ever looks. Though I can’t imagine why they would.’

‘Great!’ said Simon. ‘Now you’re a member and you can buy us both a drink.’ He called the barman over and ordered three whiskies. I took out my wallet and paid the barman. ‘Have a drink yourself,’ I told him. ‘Thank you, sir,’ he said. ‘My name’s Joseph by the way.’

‘Just one more thing to be done,’ said the club secretary. He turned to me with a big smile. ‘A cheque please.’ He pointed to the form. ‘That’s the joining fee and that’s the first year’s membership fee.’

I took out my cheque book.

‘Would you like a locker?’ asked the secretary.

I must have looked as puzzled as I felt.

‘You definitely want a locker,’ said Simon. ‘Great for keeping your stuff in. Things you don’t want the accountant or your wife to find.’

Not having an accountant or a wife I felt that my need for a locker might not be great. But I didn’t like to admit this. ‘OK. Yes please. I’d like a locker.’

‘That’ll be another £15.73,’ said the secretary. ‘As a deposit. I’ll then put your name on the waiting list. Once you get a locker there’s a £25 a year rental fee payable.’

‘There’s a waiting list for lockers?’

‘I’m afraid so. We’ve got 351 members, of whom 278 are men. But there are only 117 male lockers.’

‘Ah. How long is the waiting list?’

‘Well really you’ve just got to wait until someone resigns or dies,’ explained the secretary. ‘People don’t resign very often but we do have vacancies for the, er, other reason.’

‘So, how long do you think I’ll have to wait?’

‘Well there are 161 people on the waiting list,’ said the secretary. ‘So it’s just a matter of fate, really. A cold snap during the winter could liberate half a dozen lockers.’

‘Mind you, when there were five sudden deaths among locker holders a few years ago there was some talk of calling in the police,’ said Simon.

‘That was nothing more than hysteria,’ snorted the secretary. ‘The police were never called.’

‘But all the dead members did have lockers.’

‘Most of the locker holders are senior members.’

Two minutes later, in return for my membership cheque, I was handed of a small plastic disk with a piece of string attached to it. In return for my cheque for a locker deposit I was offered a small slip of paper on which the word Receipt was printed and misspelt.

‘That’s your membership disk,’ said the club secretary, handing me the plastic membership disk as though he was awarding me an Olympic gold medal. ‘Tie it to your golf bag immediately and keep it there at all times.’

‘I don’t have a golf bag,’ I told him.

‘What do you keep your clubs in?’

‘I don’t have any.’

‘Oh, I think you’ll need some clubs,’ said the club secretary. He looked at Simon. ‘Won’t he?’

‘Definitely need some clubs,’ said Simon.

‘Let Simon take you along to the professional’s shop,’ said the secretary. ‘He’s on the amenities committee. He can probably get you a discount.’

‘You’re on a committee?’ I asked Simon. I was impressed.

‘Everyone is on a committee,’ he told me. ‘We’ve got dozens of them. Competitions Committee. Greens Committee. Finance Committee. Handicap Committee. Ladies Committee. Veterans Committee. Billiards Committee. Management Committee. Maintenance Committee. Fixtures Committee. We’ve got more committees and sub-committees than the House of Commons. We’ve got 350 members and 340 of them are on at least one committee.’ He grinned. ‘We’ll get you on a committee before long,’ he promised. ‘But I’m afraid no one can get you much of a discount.’

CHAPTER THREE: ‘BUY SOME BATS AND MAUVE TROUSERS’

When I conducted an impromptu and utterly unscientific survey of fellow club members to find out why they had started playing the game I was not exactly startled to find that no one had begun for the same reason that I had.

Four out of fourteen golfers questioned admitted (one of them with some reluctance) that they had started playing golf because they thought it would be good for business and that by the time they had found it that it wasn’t, it was far too late to stop. They were too far in to go back.

Three out of the fourteen told me, rather shamefacedly, that they had joined the golf club in order to improve their social lives and enhance their social standing. One of the three confessed that he had joined the club in the hope that it might help him meet a nubile young woman. When I asked them if their ambitions had been realised one was too drunk to understand the question, one said he wasn’t going to answer because his friends might read his reply and cut him and the third (the one who had joined hoping to find a wife) confessed that he didn’t think he’d be able to remain a member much longer because the alimony payments were killing him.

Three told me that they had been attracted to the game after discovering how much money the top professionals can make. After an average of four years playing the game one of this trio had got his handicap down to 16, one had a handicap of 22 and the third had never got round to getting an official handicap at all. Their gross cumulative winnings since taking up golf amounted to £23.85, of which £3.85 had been taken out of the club’s fruit machine and the rest had been won in the club’s annual sweepstake on the Grand National.

One fellow told me that he had started playing golf because he had inherited a set of golf clubs, a pair of shoes and a trolley. When he’d taken the whole lot to a second hand shop he’d been offered such a derisory sum that he’d decided to join the local club and use them himself. He said he’d once worked out that if he included membership fees, balls, equipment, rounds of drinks and so on his inheritance had cost him £34,548. He said if you factored in the money he would have earned if he’d done something more useful with his evenings and weekends the total sum he’d lost would have been closer to £100,000.

One said he’d joined the club after moving into a house nearby. He said it had seemed a pity not to take advantage of the club’s proximity.

One told me that he had joined because his marriage was in trouble and he thought that having a hobby might help make him a more interesting person. He said that he discovered that while he was out on the golf course his wife was having an affair with their marriage guidance counsellor. He kept up his membership after the divorce, even though paying the fees took up most of the money he was left with, because he had nowhere else to spend the evenings.

One member told me he couldn’t remember why he had joined but that he’d done lots of stupid things he couldn’t explain and the final member I questioned told me that he had only joined because both his father and his mother were members. He said he thought they had discovered that the annual cost of a junior membership was considerably less than the cost of hiring baby sitters two or three times a week.

* * *

I can remember exactly why I decided to start playing golf. It was no idle whim, no passing fancy translated into action simply through a lack of urgency to do anything else.

I did not start playing golf because I wanted to improve my social life, acquire more customers or enhance my social standing. And I did not start playing golf because of any family connection. (Though it is perfectly true that I did have an uncle who used to make a tidy sum in beer money by picking golf balls out of a stream behind the 10th green at his nearest club. He was so well known to the members that they would approach him as he waded up and down the stream in his wellington boots, feeling for balls with his feet and picking them out of the mud with his bare hands.)

I started to play golf because my doctor told me to.

Well, he didn’t actually tell me to start playing golf.

But, after a routine insurance examination during which he had sucked in air faster than a vacuum cleaner, he did tell me that I needed to take up some exercise, find a hobby and get out more.

‘You’re overweight and out of shape,’ he told me. ‘If you were a horse I wouldn’t let you race. Your blood pressure is too high and you’re as stressed as a politician on election night.’

When I told him that he could either treat me or horses but not both, he responded by showed me the form he’d more or less finished filling in for my insurance company.

‘You’re in excellent condition for a man waiting for a congratulatory telegram from the Queen,’ he told me. ‘If you were 99 I’d clap you on the back, buy you a whisky and tell you to cut down on the cigars and carry on as before.’

‘Well there you are then,’ I answered, full of false joie de vivre.

‘I don’t know why these people are offering to take your money,’ he told me, pointing to the insurance form. ‘If I had shares in their outfit I’d sell them and buy something less risky - like a swimsuit store in Antarctica.’ He scribbled something else on the form, signed it, folded it and stuffed it into a large brown envelope. ‘I’ve told them that I’ve advised you to take up a regular exercise programme. It’ll be one of the policy conditions.’

‘I have to start exercising?’

He nodded.

‘So, which sport do you reckon I should take up?’ I asked him. ‘Darts? Snooker? Plenty of exercise there, surely.’ I tossed an imaginary dart at the wall over his head.

‘You need to get yourself out in the fresh air,’ he told me.

‘I think I’ve torn something,’ I complained, rubbing my shoulder. ‘I threw that dart too hard.’

‘Regular long walks,’ he said, ignoring my moan. ‘Get away from telephones and computers for a few hours a week. Find a sporting hobby that will capture your imagination and your heart.’

‘I lolled around on a barge on the Loire for a couple of weeks three years ago,’ I pointed out. ‘I could try that again.’

‘No, no,’ he said. ‘You don’t need a holiday. You need to change your life. You need regular exercise. Out of doors. You need to expose yourself to the elements; move around, get face to face with nature occasionally.’

‘How about rally driving?’ I suggested, ignoring the bit about exposing myself to the elements. ‘I rather fancy driving one of those souped up four wheel drive saloons on icy roads.’

‘Golf,’ he said firmly. ‘You’ll get plenty of gentle exercise and all the fresh air you can breathe. Ball. Stick. Hit one with the other and get it into the hole. How difficult can that be? I expect they have rules but it can’t be that hard. And there’s a bonus - it’ll give you a chance to meet people with a similar outlook on life. ‘

I looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

‘Forget that,’ he said, raising a hand in apology and correcting himself. ‘You’re not going to find anyone with a similar outlook on life. But you’ll meet some real eccentrics. I often used to wonder if people did it to wear the clothes or wore the clothes to do it. Then I discovered that a friend of mine plays golf. Perfectly normal in every other respect, though he is a gynaecologist. He swears he plays golf because he loves the clothes. He normally dresses very conservatively. Pin stripe suit. He does wear a bow tie. But, of course, a lot of gynaecologists wear bow ties...’

‘Why is that?’ I interrupted.

‘Oh, it’s because if they wear ties they always get in the way. My fiancée gave me a tie for Christmas one year when I was a medical student doing obstetrics. On Boxing Day I stitched it into a woman’s perineum which I was repairing after she’d given birth to a ten pound baby. She didn’t speak to me again.’

‘The patient?’

‘My fiancée. I had to throw the tie away. It was silk. She thought I’d lost it. Gave me my ring back and married a psychiatrist.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Oh don’t be. She was quite a harridan and a pain in the neck too. She was the only person I ever met who worried about becoming a hypochondriac. Most people worry that they’ve got cancer or dicky hearts. She worried that she might become a hypochondriac. She married a psychiatrist. Perfect match.’ He was silent for a moment and shuddered, as though the memory of the woman he’d nearly married had upset him. ‘My pal the gynaecologist says the golf course is the only place where he can dress up like a pimp and fit in perfectly,’ he continued. ‘They call him Dickory down at the club where he plays I gather.’

‘Odd name.’

‘He plays with old fashioned hickory shafted clubs.’

‘I don’t, er, quite understand.’

‘Hickory, dickory doc.’

‘Ah.’

‘He’s a doctor, you see.’

‘Yes. I get it now.’

‘So, get yourself some lime green trousers, a lilac shirt and a pair of two tone correspondent shoes and you’ll fit right in.’ He looked at me. ‘Do golfers wear hats?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Have to be a huge purple fedora if they do,’ he said.

I was half way to the door when he suddenly remembered something. ‘Oh, I nearly forgot,’ he said, scribbling something on his prescription pad. ‘Take these.’

‘What are they?’ I asked him.

‘Oh just stuff to make you feel better,’ he said.

‘Can I drink with them?’

‘You can drink whisky, milk, cocoa or parsnip wine with them for all I care,’ he said, with a dismissive wave of the hand. ‘They’re only a placebo to make us both feel I’ve done something useful.’

When I got home that evening my mother rang. She loves to interfere in my life and, knowing that I had an insurance medical booked, had wasted no time in ringing my doctor to get my results and then ringing me to let me know that she knew them. When doctors become doctors they swear not to divulge confidences about their patients. But none of that means anything when they talk to my mother. The Government should hire her as an interrogator. They wouldn’t need to torture suspects. My mother could get anyone to talk in an hour. She just wears them down.

‘So, you’re going to start taking regular exercise?’ she said. It was a question, but only just.

‘I thought what went on in a consulting room was supposed to be confidential,’ I complained, mildly.

‘Don’t be silly,’ said my mother. ‘I’m your mother.’

‘Right,’ I agreed.

‘So you’re going to start playing golf.’ It was no longer a question.

‘Definitely,’ I said. I am a bachelor, rather comfortably set in my ways and not a reckless man, I do not argue with my mother. You may call this cowardice. I prefer to think of it as self-preservation.

‘Splendid,’ she said. ‘About time too. It’s either that or find yourself a nice girl and get married.’

‘Marry?’

‘You don’t eat properly,’ said my mother. ‘A nice girl will cook for you and make sure you eat proper meals. Good food. Nicely prepared and properly cooked. Hot meals three times a day.’ I looked at the bag of chips I’d picked up on the way back from the doctors. ‘I’ve got a hot meal ready,’ I told her. ‘It’s going cold as we speak but I’ve got a hot meal on the table.’

‘Chips,’ said my mother, for whom the invention of the video phone was a complete waste of time. ‘A bag of chips. That’s not balanced food.’

‘You mean I’ve either got to take up exercise or get married?’

‘It’s one or the other’ said my mother firmly. ‘For your health. I’m saving your life here. No arguments.’

‘Exercise or marriage?’

‘Golf,’ said my mother. ‘Not just exercise. Golf’s the best for you. Fresh air. Nice people.’

‘But I might not be any good at it,’ I protested. I wasn’t too keen on the idea of taking up golf. The other alternative wasn’t even in the frame. I could just about put up with having my life disturbed by spending my Sunday mornings trudging through mud in search of small white balls, but marriage seemed a prospect too awful to contemplate.

‘Of course you will,’ said my mother. ‘You’ll be wonderful. You’ll have lessons. Buy some bats and mauve trousers and you’ll be winning mugs and things in no time. You’ll be on the television.’

‘Right,’ I said.

‘Golf,’ she said. ‘And, who knows, maybe you might meet a nice young girl as well.’

‘Right,’ I said. ‘Golf it is.’

And so golf it was.

CHAPTER FOUR: 'WHAT DO YOU WANT?'

The golf club shop was more of a shed than a shop and looked very much like the sort of cabin builders erect on building sites so that they've got somewhere dry to boil a kettle on days when it's too wet to work, somewhere shady to read The Sun on days when it's too hot to work and somewhere private to meet when discussing industrial action.

I discovered later that the shed had been added on to the main club house as a temporary addition back in the 1970s. It had been intended that it would last no more than six months but the club had never got round to replacing it. This may have had something to do with the fact that the architect who had been hired to draw up plans had an unusual and expensive penchant for adding minarets to everything he built. He was a member of the club who and a bizarre and much photographed flat roofed public lavatory with minarets at both ends was the only known physical manifestation of his visions.

The cabin had white panel walls and a flat roof which had been destined to leak when it had been erected and which, the water stains showed, had fulfilled that destiny many times. The walls had cracked in several places and although the original colour scheme had relied heavily on the colour white nature had added several patches of green which, on closer inspection, appeared to be the result of a type of fungus. The whole sorry looking structure was resting on six piles of crumbling cheap bricks and approached by three rather rickety wooden steps. The windows were grimy but I could just make out the figure of a tall, blonde golfer in a patterned jumper standing looking out of a grimy window. The golfer, whom, to my surprise I vaguely recognised, looked alert, erect and dignified and appeared to be staring hard at something in the distance; this made him look distant and distracted, as though his mind had managed to escaped the end which had befallen his body.

'I'll leave you here,' said Simon. 'Got to be getting back to the bar. Pop in afterward and let me know how you get on?

'You're not coming in?' I had rather hoped that Simon might help me choose my new clubs.

'Not if you don't mind,' he said rather apologetically. He leant towards me and lowered his voice. 'To be honest I don't particularly want to see the professional. I started a course of refresher lessons some time ago and never quite got round to finishing them.'

With a small wave and an apologetic look, Simon hurried back towards the bar.

When I stepped inside the shop the floor sagged under my weight and as I took a stride forward the whole building shook as though about to fall down. Inside the shop the walls were lined with racks of shiny, brand new golf clubs. There was a desk at one end of the shop and at the other a dozen empty golf bags leant against one another for support. The price labels attached to the bags, and swaying gently as I walked, suggested that they were new. The patches of mildew on several of the bags suggested that they had been there for some time. As the building continued to sway one of the bags fell away from the others and fell noisily to the floor. The blonde golfer in the patterned jumper turned out to be a full size cut out advertising a brand of golf club. My diagnosis had been half correct. There was no mind but there was no body either.

I turned gingerly towards the desk, behind which there was an empty red chair, the sort typists use. Since there was no one sitting in it I could see that the seat of the chair was worn and had, in several places, been repaired with black insulating tape. The desk was piled high with packets containing golf balls, golf tees, golf gloves, scorecards, pencils and packets of sweets. If I had found this shabby little shop anywhere else in the world I would, despite all the colour, have found it depressing and rather sad. But here, as the window to a new world, I found it rather exciting.

'Who are you and what the hell do you want?' demanded a voice.

I turned round. 'I've just joined the club,' I told the owner of the voice; a short, thickset man wearing pink trousers and a matching pink sweater. I had no idea where he had been hiding. Both the trousers and the sweater he was wearing were decorated with green triangles outlined in cream. The word 'Plug' and a yellow elephant were embroidered on the front of the sweater. The whole effect was vaguely nauseating. The swaying of the shop made things worse.

'Ah,' he said, making no effort to hide the satisfaction he clearly felt at meeting a new customer. He would have probably rubbed his hands together if he hadn't been holding a large cardboard box.

'I'm Walter,' he said. 'Golf professional here. Been the professional for 34 years. I know every member by name. Used to be on the professional circuit when I was younger but gave it up. Not my cup of tea. I like working with people.'

I told him my name. When I added that I had never played golf before his smile broadened.

'You'll need clubs then,' he went on, tossing the cardboard box to one side and turning to me with ill suppressed eagerness. 'Do you know anything about the game?'

‘Nothing much,’ I admitted. ‘Ball. Club. Long walk on the grass. Give the ball a clump with the club every now and again. Lots of fresh air. Huge amount of money if you win anything.’ I smiled. He tried to smile back. He was just too polite to rub his hands together with glee but he couldn’t stop his eyes lighting up with excitement.

‘Some beginners start off with a half set, but believe me that’s a huge mistake,’ said the professional. ‘It’s like trying to save money by going into a shop for a pair of shoes and buying just one shoe instead of two. It’ll just start you off on a bad footing.’ He paused, examined me carefully as though trying to decide whether or not to buy shares in me, looked around and lowered his voice a little. ‘Unless it’s a matter of money, of course. Some poor people can’t afford a whole set. For them a half set is an essential compromise.’

‘Oh no, it’s not a question of money. Of course not,’ I responded, laughing lightly and snapping out the response like a trout taking a fly. ‘Oh no, I don’t want to go off half-cocked. Full set. The works. One of each. Maybe some spares if you think it best. No half measures.’

‘We’ll start with a set of irons,’ said the professional, turning round and pulling some golf clubs out of a rack.

‘Golly,’ I said. ‘All of these? Are they breakable?’

‘Breakable? No.’

‘I just wondered if that was perhaps why I needed so many.’

‘You’ve got a 2,3,4,5,6,7,8 and 9, a sand iron and a couple of wedges.’ He pulled a club from a rack. ‘Try this,’ he suggested, handing me the club he’d selected.

I took the club from him. The top part of the shaft was covered in a smart looking red and black grip. The bottom part of the shaft was shiny. Right at the end of the shaft, the business end as my father would doubtless have put it, the manufacturer had glued a chunky piece of metal. This also shone, though not as brightly as the shaft.

‘Hold it with both hands,’ he said.

I wrapped both hands round the leather handle at the top of the shaft.

‘You haven’t played at all before, then?’

‘No.’ I looked down and then up at him. ‘Is it that obvious?’

‘Not even a round on a seaside pitch and putt course?’

‘No.’ I hesitated, remembering. ‘Actually, I played two holes of a crazy golf course in Torquay. It was some time ago.’

‘Just two holes?’

‘I lost the ball they gave me. They said I’d have to give them a £10 deposit if I wanted another. So my Mum took me for some chips and we left my Dad to finish off by himself. He went round in 143 which was, so he told us, the 12th best score of the afternoon. He finished all nine holes too. Including the long, difficult one that has the hole at the top of a little concrete castle surrounded by a moat.’

‘Just out of interest, how on earth did you manage to lose a ball on a crazy golf course?’

‘It bounced off one of the sails of the windmill, hit a huge concrete monkey and disappeared over the wall. I wanted to go after it but my Mum wouldn’t let me. She said there was too much traffic.’

Walter made a strange humming noise.

‘I don’t think anyone was hurt,’ I said. ‘Not badly.’

‘That must have been a relief.’

‘But when I went back the following year they had erected a twelve foot high netting fence around the course. I was keen to have another go but the chap who was selling the tickets recognised me and said he’d call the police if I didn’t leave him alone.’

‘What a pity.’

‘But that was all a long time ago,’ I said, with a light laugh. ‘And I doubt if you have many windmills or concrete monkeys on your course.’

‘No,’ agreed the professional. He cleared his throat and made it clear from his body language that he was about to tell me an Important And Significant Story. ‘I once went for nine months without losing ball,’ he began. ‘Played every day - twice some days - and never lost a single ball. That was just after I nearly won the Open.’

‘You nearly won the Open?’ I said, impressed. Even I had heard of the Open Championship.

‘Led for the first two rounds,’ said Walter, as though embarrassed to share this with me. ‘Then things didn’t go my way. Bad luck. Always been my problem. Bad luck. I came sixth in the end. My best ever finish. Still, wasn’t to be.’

I told him how sorry I was to hear this.

‘Try and put your hands a little closer together.’

I moved my hands closer.

‘Touching.’

I complied.

‘Not so tightly and not as if you were holding an axe.’

I relaxed my fingers a little and saw the blood begin to flow back into my knuckles.

‘Golf is a very delicate game,’ said the professional. ‘It’s all about feel. The club must become an extension of your body.’

I looked down and tried to think of the club as part of my body. I wiggled it about.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ said the professional, picking up the life-size cardboard cut-out that I had knocked over. ‘There isn’t much room in here.’

I took an imaginary swing. Too late the professional tried to stop me. There was a lot of noise, as though glass had broken. I felt something land on my head.

Gingerly I lowered the club.

‘If you stand very still I’ll pick the pieces of glass out of your hair,’ said the professional.

‘I’m sorry about that.’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ insisted the professional, in that way people have when you know they mean that it really does and although they don’t want to offend you by telling you outright how much it matters, they nevertheless want you to know that by telling you that it doesn’t matter they are doing you a favour and you are, therefore, indebted to them and going to have to end up paying for what you’ve done far more heavily than if they had been honest, told you how much it mattered and given you a bill. ‘The lamp shade was old and the bulb hadn’t been changed for months so it was probably near the end of its life anyway.’

‘I’m very sorry,’ I apologised, again.

‘Don’t worry about it. The official price for these is £745,’ said the professional. ‘But since you’re a new member I can give you a discount.’

‘Thank you,’ I said.

‘We have a special introductory discount scheme for new members.’ He reached past me and picked up a calculator from his desk. ‘You get a 1% discount on all new clubs so that would give you...’ He filled with the calculator. ‘A discount of £7.45.’ He thought for a moment, trying to deduct £7.45 from £745. ‘Oh what the hell,’ he said. ‘Let’s make it a round figure. You can have them for £740.’

‘Thank you.’

‘And I’ll throw in a small packet of tees.’

‘That’s very kind of you,’ I said. ‘Actually I prefer coffee if that’s possible.’

The professional looked at me, puzzled.

‘Instead of the packet of teas,’ I said. ‘Coffee.’

‘Tees,’ said the professional. He spelt it out for me. ‘To support your balls.’

‘Oh. Right. Of course.’ I didn’t have the foggiest idea why, where or when my balls would need supporting but I’d clearly made a faux pas of some kind so I shut up.

‘It’s a matched set,’ he said, taking the club from me and lovingly running his fingers up and down the shaft. ‘Genuine steel shafts. Made in Japan by skilled, dedicated craftsmen.’

‘Right,’ I said. ‘I have a television set made by the Japanese. It’s very good. And I know someone who had a Japanese car. Not a great deal of room inside but nicely finished. They make motorbikes too, I understand. And pianos. Versatile people.’ I knew I was rambling but couldn’t stop myself. The professional made me uncomfortable. ‘Considering their limited size,’ I added.

‘These are very well made. It’s a reputable company. The company is not well known but that’s because they prefer to spend money on improving the product rather than on advertising, marketing and sponsoring professionals on the Tour.’

‘Good. Very good. I’m glad you suggested Japanese. I think it’s important that we forget about the war. It was all a long time ago. My great uncle once helped them build a very good railway I believe. Before he died he was in a very forgiving mood. He forgave his wife for the indiscretions and he said he forgave the Japanese for what they’d done to him. We all thought it was very noble of him. Though we did wonder if he wasn’t perhaps trying to get a few brownie points in the bag before he met the, er, Big Guy upstairs.’

‘You won’t buy better than these at the price,’ the professional told me. ‘Not unless you go to one of those discount stores of course. Or go mail order. But then you don’t get the level of service, do you?’

‘Hello Walter,’ said a cheery voice. We both looked round. A man of about sixty strode firmly towards us. He had a white handlebar moustache, a sunburnt scalp and huge amounts of hair growing out of his ears. He wore plaid trousers, of which the predominant colour was green, and a mauve mohair sweater with dark purple piping around the neck and wrists.

‘Can I have half a dozen of your cheap, second hand balls Walter?’

‘Who the hell are you?’

‘Hargreaves,’ said the newcomer.

‘Where did you get that jumper?’

‘Not sure old man. My wife bought it for me for my birthday. One of the shops in town, I expect. Like it, do you? I could ask her for you if you like. She’ll know. Always knows where she buys things. I can never remember anything.’

‘You didn’t get it here, did you?’

‘No, I don’t think so, Walter. I’m afraid not. I have bought stuff from you though. Socks I remember particularly.’

‘Bugger off. I’m not selling you cheap balls if you can’t be bothered to buy your expensive sweaters here.’

The prospective customer stalked off, rather redder in the face than he had been when he’d arrived.

‘You haven’t given me any of those clubs with the big bulbous ends,’ I pointed out when the prospective customer had gone and Walter and I were alone once more. ‘Shouldn’t I have one or two of those? Aren’t they used for whacking the ball off the flat green bit? I’ve seen them on the television.’

Walter, clearly still raging inside at his would-be customer’s faithlessness took a moment to recover his composure. ‘Woods? Oh yes. Absolutely. But they come separately, of course. I suggest a driver, three wood and five wood.’ He took three clubs from another rack and handed them to me. I held the three clubs, terrified of dropping them or breaking something with them.

‘These are quite a bargain,’ said the professional. ‘You couldn’t find better. Perfect for a beginner but they’ll grow with you. Last you years.’

‘What about a two wood and a four wood? Shouldn’t I have those as well?’

‘You’re only allowed 14 clubs,’ the professional reminded me.

I counted up the irons and the three woods. ‘Thirteen.’

‘You’ll need a putter.’

‘Of course.’

‘You’ll obviously want a sprung socket putter, with a coated face.’

‘Obviously. Oh yes.’

‘I’ve got one here,’ said the professional, taking yet another club from the rack. ‘It’s the spitting image of the big money putter. But this one will cost you £15 less than the brand leader you’ve probably seen advertised in the magazines. If you can tell the difference you let me know.’

‘Right.’

‘Just £189.99 instead of....’ Walter scratched his head. ‘More than that. Around £15 more anyway. I did work out the prices once.’ He looked around, searching for a catalogue or magazine.

‘Splendid.’ I said.

The professional abandoned his search almost as quickly as he had started it. ‘The brand leader has that little bit cut out at the back,’ he said. ‘That’s really the only difference. And the titanium shaft. Otherwise they’re pretty much identical. Except that you’re paying £15 less.’

‘Good.

‘£15 doesn’t sound much but when you’re buying 14 brand new clubs every pound saved is another pound to spend on balls. That’s what I always tell my customers.’

‘Are you sure I really need 14 clubs?’ I asked, suddenly overcome by an attack of thrift. ‘I thought it was balls golfers lost - not clubs.’

‘All the professionals carry 14,’ said the professional. ‘It’s the approved number.’

‘Why 14?’ I asked him. ‘Just out of interest. Why not 18?’

He looked at me. It was clearly not a question he had ever heard asked before. It was certainly not a question he had asked himself.

‘I’m not sure,’ he replied. He thought for a moment. ‘I suspect it’s the most clubs the average man can carry round a golf course.’

I nodded. ‘That would explain it,’ I agreed. ‘If you had, say, 41 clubs you’d need a whole team of caddies to carry them round for you. If you had 141 clubs you’d need a big truck. And the course would soon get pretty crowded.’

He looked at me blankly and nodded back.

‘Besides,’ I added. ‘It would take for ever to decide which club to use. Say, for example, that every golfer had 100 clubs. Or 1,000. He would take absolutely ages to decide which club to use. Instead of just pulling out his number 6 or whatever he’d be stuck for choice. Trying to decide whether to use a number 450 or a number 451.’

‘Yes.’ said the professional. ‘I suppose so.’ He took a pace backwards.

‘Do I take them all with me at once?’

‘Of course.’

‘I’ll need some sort of container,’ I said, looking round. ‘Something to tie them all together.’ I picked up a handful of clubs. Several slipped out of my clutch and fell to the floor. ‘An old cardboard box perhaps? A black bin liner would do.’

‘We have special bags,’ said the professional. He walked down his shaky shop, selected a huge blue and white plastic golf bag and brought it back to show me. ‘I recommend this bag,’ said the professional. ‘Made of genuine plastic covered with a unique and patented waterproofing resin compound. All the fitments are genuine brass colour and the zips are heavy duty double action and fully guaranteed for the life of the bag.’ He played with a zip which seemed stuck. ‘They’re firm,’ he told me. ‘You don’t want loose zips or else all your stuff will fall out as you go round the course. This bag will carry all your clubs and protect them from scratches and rain. And there are plenty of pockets too.’ He tried another zip and this time managed to make it work. ‘This one is particularly useful for balls.’ He unzipped a second pocket. ‘This one has one special compartment for your sunglasses and another for your mobile telephone. There are eleven pockets altogether, plus an integral tee and ball dispenser, a ball wipe mount and an umbrella station.’

‘I could fit a tent in there,’ I told him. ‘Actually, I don’t need a tent. I could carry it round with me and live in it. I’ve seen mobile homes that are smaller than that.’

He looked at me, not certain whether or not I was trying to be funny.

‘And I could get a small stove in that big pocket,’ I added.

‘Not a bad idea at all,’ said the professional who clearly did not have a well-developed sense of humour. ‘I know that in the colder weather one or two of the players do carry thermos flasks.’

I lifted the bag. Or, to be more accurate, I tried to lift the bag. Even empty I could hardly move it off the ground.

‘You’ll need a trolley, of course,’ said the professional. ‘We have two models. The Penny-Pincher standard economy trolley for the player who doesn’t mind other people knowing that he likes to be economical and the Super-Glide for the discerning player who is prepared to pay that little bit extra for real quality.’

‘What’s the difference?’

‘Just quality. Appearance, finish and operative functionality. The standard model is designed for the player who is on a tight budget and isn’t looking for top level performance. Usually the younger player who doesn’t much mind what other members think of him and is prepared to do a little maintenance work on the trolley in the evenings at home.’ He poked a finger into his right ear and wiggled it about. He reminded me of a cat scratching itself. ‘No point in skimping to my mind,’ he said. ‘If I had saved money when I had some money I still wouldn’t have any now because I would have used it as soon as I hadn’t got any which was a long time ago. What’s the stuff for anyway? If you don’t spend it what’s it for?’

I didn’t understand any of this but, naturally, as a discerning player who was not immune to the sneers and giggles of my fellow man I bought the Super-Glide. It would, I told myself, pay for itself in the long run. Good quality is always worth paying for, I convinced myself, and the study, well-built model is bound to hold its second hand value better.

A tall, thin man wearing a clergyman’s collar entered the shop and looked around.

‘More tees, vicar?’ asked Walter.

‘If you’d be so kind,’ replied the clergyman. He took a packet of tees from the professional, handed him some coins and left without another word.

‘That’s the vicar,’ explained Walter. ‘Nice chap. Never loses balls - he’s still using the same ball he had when he started playing eleven years ago - but he gets through two packets of tees a week. Don’t know what the dickens he does with them.’

‘Do you have lots of professional men playing golf?’ I asked.

‘Oh yes. Clergymen. Doctors. Dentists. Estate agents. Undertakers. We’ve got them all here. All the quality people. I heard a rumour today that we’ve got a plumber joining. Don’t see many plumbers these days, do you?’

‘No. I guess not,’ I muttered.

‘You’ll need clothes, of course,’ said the professional.

‘Oh I’ve got plenty of clothes,’ I assured him, confidently. ‘I’m sure I can find something suitable for stumbling around in a field.’ I was, I confess, thinking of a pair of old brown corduroy trousers and a battered green Barbour jacket. It had occurred to me that dressed thus I might be able to make my way around the course without being noticed. I have always rather favoured the inconspicuous style when choosing clothes.

The professional glowered at me and said nothing with tremendous venom.

I swallowed, smiled nervously and shrugged as if this had been just another small attempt at humour.

The professional continued to say nothing.

‘Maybe if you’ve got something in my size that you think would be suitable?’ I suggested.

‘If you look the part, you’ll play the part,’ Walter said. He seemed to have learned by heart quite a number of slick advertising phrases. He reached up and pulled an item of clothing from a rack behind him. ‘You’ll want three of these,’ he told me. The item of clothing he had selected was difficult to classify at first meeting but my initial impression was that it was intended to be a cross between a shirt and jumper. I took the thing from him. It had short sleeves, a curious little roll collar and three buttons. The body and sleeves of the thing were pink but the frontal chest area was decorated with green triangles. Each triangle was picked out with a cream surround. There was a large yellow elephant sewn into the shirt just above the left nipple and the word ‘Plug’ embroidered just above the right. The elephant had blue eyes and a huge sickly smile which made him look as though he was about to be sick. It was the brother (or the sister) of the garment which adorned the professional’s own torso.

‘You think this is the bees knees, eh?’ I asked.

‘Made by Tittery in 100% pure acrylic and designed and endorsed by Plug Bashing,’ said the professional.

‘Is that good?’ I asked.

‘Plug Bashing was ninth in the Open six years ago,’ said Walter, as though this put questions about his design skills out of play. ‘Or maybe it was sixth in the Open nine years ago.’

‘Do I need to try one of these on?’

‘They’re all the same size,’ said the professional. ‘It’s some special stretchy material. I think they make it out of nuclear waste. The clothes fit anyone. It solves stock problems.’

‘Right,’ I nodded. ‘That’s good.’

‘They’re coated with water repellent silicone,’ continued Walter. ‘Guaranteed to provide 75% protection against 2,000 litres of rain an hour falling at 15 mph for the first 30 minutes and then 50% protection against 1,000 litres of rain an hour falling at 7.5 mph for the second 30 minutes.’

‘Crumbs.’

‘After that you’ll need an umbrella.’

‘Ah.’

The professional took a large pink umbrella from a chimney pot which was serving as an umbrella stand. ‘These are the ones we recommend.’

‘Why do you recommend those?’

‘They’re the only ones we sell. They’re made by the same people who make the sweaters and the trousers.’

‘Right,’ I said.

‘And you’ll need the trousers to match.’

‘To match the umbrella?’

‘The sports shirt,’ said Walter.

I looked at the sweater and then at Walter. ‘There are trousers which go with it?’ I asked. The irony was wasted. The professional opened a drawer, rummaged around for a moment, and then tossed not one but three polythene bags onto the growing pile. ‘Matching trousers,’ he said. ‘You’ll need three pairs.’ It was clear that each bag contained something which could, broadly speaking, be described as clothing. Since the clothing was coloured pink and was decorated with the same triangular motif it was impossible to deny that, whatever it was, it matched the other thing. I ripped one of the polythene bags and opened out a pair of pink trousers. The word ‘Plug’ was printed on one back pocket and an image of a yellow elephant on the other. The elephant was grinning and I was beginning to suspect that he was grinning at me.

‘Why do I need three of everything?’ I asked Walter.

‘One in the wash, one to wear and one to replace the pair that gets taken by mistake in the clubhouse.’

‘Stolen?’

‘These are very popular but they fit anyone. People pick up the wrong ones.’

‘I could take theirs if they fit everyone.

Walter ignored this. ‘And we have a special offer on this year,’ he went on. ‘If you buy two you pay for three so we give you the third pair free.’

‘Should I try them on?’ I asked.

The professional shrugged. ‘You don’t need to,’ he said. ‘They only make the one size.’

I looked at him.

‘Elasticated waist,’ he explained. ‘Brilliant. Fit a broom handle or a whale.’

‘Wonderful.’ I agreed.

‘You’ll need gloves,’ said the professional. He took several packets from an open cardboard box on his desk and tossed them casually, and accurately, onto the constantly growing pile of equipment now making a small mountain on the floor of his prefabricated shop.

‘Oh I don’t think we need bother about those,’ I said, with a timid laugh as hollow as a politician’s promise. It seemed that all this buying of stuff was getting out of hand. ‘I never wear gloves. I’m blessed with marvellous circulation.'

'These are for grip,' said the professional tersely. 'You can't play golf without gloves.'

I picked up one of the packets. The glove inside looked like a rather thin driving glove, except that it was made of light blue leather and was decorated with an embroidered likeness of the now familiar elephant. I opened the packet and took out the contents.

'There's only one glove,' I said, peering inside the empty packet. 'Either there's been a mistake or these were made for one armed golfers.'

'You only wear one on your left hand,' said the professional.

'Why?' I asked, slipping the glove on. It felt very tight.

'Because they only make a glove for the left hand.'

'What do left handers wear?'

'A right handed glove.'

'Could I have one of those as well? Then I can wear a pair.'

'We don't have any. We tell left handers to wear the glove turned the other way round.'

I removed the glove and put it onto my right hand. The elephant was now nestling in my palm. 'Like this?' I tried to flex my fingers. It was very difficult.

'Like that. The embroidered elephant on the palm gives extra grip.'

'So why don't they put the embroidered elephant on the palm of the left hand glove?'

'They like to give left handers a bit of an edge. Their being left handed.'

'You don't have the gloves in pink, I suppose?' I asked. 'To match everything else?'

'No. I ran out of pink gloves four years ago, shortly after they discontinued the Plug Bashing range.'

'They discontinued it?'

The professional shrugged.

I looked disconsolately at the enormous pile of Plug Bashing clothing I was buying.

'Anyway,' continued Walter, 'you don't want everything matching. You'd look a bit of a plonker, wouldn't you?'

There seemed some sense in what he said, though I was surprised that he was the one who said it.

'Balls?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'You'll need a lot of balls?'

'To wear these trousers?' I asked.

Walter ignored this. 'We've got several sorts,' he said, waving a hand around. 'But economising on balls is always a big mistake.' He reached behind him and produced a cardboard tube. 'Three of the very best money can buy,' he said. 'And only £1 a ball more than some of the cheaper ones.'

'What's the difference between the cheaper ball and the more expensive one?'

'A pound. I've just told you.'

'Right. How many do you think I'll need? One? Two?'

'Oh two dozen should be fine for starters. You can always come back for more.'

'Two dozen?' I exclaimed.

'Yes. You're right. Bit skimpy. Better make it three dozen.' He took several packs of balls from the display and piled them high on the counter. 'You'll want shoes too, of course.'

'Shoes?'

'You can't play golf in ordinary shoes.'

'I can't?'

'Of course not.'

'Why not?'

'No grip.'

'Oh.'

'And the club doesn't allow members onto the course unless they're wearing proper footwear.'

'So what counts as proper footwear?'

'The sort of shoes we sell.'

'Do you have anything in my size? Eleven.'

He opened a drawer and rummaged around among a pile of white shoe boxes. 'I've got a ten or a twelve in the Sam Hogan Professional Range.'

'Who was Sam Hogan?' I asked. 'I've heard of someone called Ben Hogan. But who was Sam?'

'I think he may have been a relative,' said the professional. 'He was less well known. If you buy a shoe endorsed by a professional you have to pay extra. So it makes sense to buy something endorsed by a professional who isn't going to charge too much.'

I agreed that this made a certain amount of sense. The shoes were two tone correspondent shoes. Brown and white.

'Do you want the ten or the twelve?'

'A ten will be too tight.'

'My feeling exactly. The twelve will be better. You'll be wearing thick golf socks anyway. So an eleven would probably be too small.'

'Shall I try them on?'

Grudgingly, he took the shoes from the box. I tried one on. It was a big twelve. I think I could have got both feet in the one shoe.

'Perfect,' he told me, peering down at my feet. I stuck my fingers down the back of the shoe. 'They're a bit on the spacious side,' I complained.

'Nonsense. The feet always swell up when you're playing golf. You'll need plenty of room. We always recommend that our customers buy a bigger size than normal.'

'Oh.'

'How many pairs of golf socks would you like?'

'Do I really need special socks?'

'Oh yes.'

'What's the difference between golf socks and ordinary socks?'

'Golf socks have specially reinforced heel and toe supports. To provide extra protection and double the friction when you're swinging the club. Proper golf socks can make a huge difference to your accuracy and distance off the tee. You won't see the professionals playing in ordinary socks from Marks and Spencer.'

'So if I wear these I'll play better?'

'Definitely. Guaranteed.'

I hesitated.

'And they have a little golfing motif at ankle height,' said Walter. 'Tasteful but distinctive.'

The socks cost almost as much as a decent pair of shoes. I put my foot down firmly and bought just two pairs.

'Cheque or credit card?' the professional asked, when he'd finished adding up my bill.

'Card,' I said, taking out my wallet and extracting a credit card.

'Shall I put you down for insurance too?'

'Insurance?'

'In case you lose your clubs, hit someone with a ball or score a hole in one.'

I stared at him. 'Why would I need insurance if I scored a hole in one?'

'You'd be expected to buy a drink for everyone in the club house. It can get very expensive.'

'And in case I hit someone?'

'I read just the other day of a golfer who hit a sliced three iron which hit a hiker on the head. The hiker overbalanced and fell off a cliff. His widow sued for £7.6 million damages. I hate to think what the legal costs added up to. Unless you're the sort of chap who regards £7.6 million as small change I should seriously consider the insurance.'

I paled. I hadn't thought of golf in those terms. It had never occurred to me that a game might leave me bankrupt.

'The standard policy costs just £5 though I feel the cover is rather limited.'

'Limited?'

'To a maximum of £5,000 for any one incident.'

'So if I hit a hiker on the head and he fell off a cliff I'd have to find the other £7,595,000 myself?'

'Unless you took out the optional super enhancement cover.'

'How much is that?'

'£99 a year for full replacement of your clubs if they are stolen, £1,000 if you score a hole in one in a tournament and up to £250,000 public liability damages.'

'I'd still have to find the other £7,350,000 myself if I hit a hiker on the head?'

'Well, you can't expect the insurance company to take all the risk,' said the professional. 'They don't want to feel that golfers are out there willy nilly knocking balls about without looking out for hikers.'

'I suppose not,' I agreed. I handed him my credit card.

The professional filled in a credit card slip and ran my card through the machine. He handed me the slip to sign. I signed it without looking at it, not because I am reckless with money but because I am easily scared.

'Now, I expect you'll want to book some lessons. What time of day do you prefer?'

CHAPTER FIVE: ‘HELLO. I’M NOT A PLUMBER.’

‘How much did he take you for?’ asked Simon.

‘Who?’ I asked.

Simon looked at me, and then at the two black refuse sacks beside me. The professional didn’t have any plastic bags so he had put the clothing I’d bought into bin liners. The clubs, the bag, the balls, the gloves and the trolley (and the free tees) were all packed into the boot of my car. They took up so much room that at one point I had thought I might have to jettison the spare tyre. The packet of golf tees was in my pocket. Because Walter hadn’t charged me for them he hadn’t put them in with the other items.

I pulled the credit card slip out of my pocket and handed it over. I didn’t have the courage to look at it myself.

Simon whistled.

‘Bad?’ I asked him.

‘You went for the full Monty didn’t you? Did you buy the golf socks too?’

‘Yes.’ I whispered, rather embarrassed at my gullibility.

‘With the reinforced toe and heel sections to improve ball striking and give you more accuracy and distance off the tee?’

‘Those were the ones,’ I whispered. ‘Though it was the golf orientated motif on the ankles which really got me.’

‘How many pairs?’

‘Two.’

‘You did better than me. I bought three pairs.’

‘Do they make any difference?’

Simon looked at me and raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

‘Sorry,’ I apologised. ‘I was still sort of...hoping.’

‘Did you buy an elbow restraint?’

‘A what?’

‘It’s a sort of cross between an elastic bandage and a drainpipe. You’re supposed to wear it when you’re practising; to keep your elbow in the right position. He didn’t try and sell you one?’

I shook my head.

‘He used to claim he swore by it when he was a professional. He’ll probably get you later with that one. Have you booked lessons?’

I said I had.

‘Ah,’ said Simon. ‘He’ll probably get you then. Did he tell you about his days of glory? His memory has pretty much gone - at least he can never remember who I am and as far as I know he can never remember who anyone else is - but he can remember every shot he played forty years ago.’

‘He told me he used to play on the professional tour. He said he nearly won the Open.’

‘Indeed, I believe he nearly did. Did he specify the variety of Open which he nearly won?’

‘No. Is there more than one type?’

‘Oh, there are many varieties of Open. The one that Walter nearly won was the Midland Junior Open Championship. He led for two rounds and then blew up and came last.’

‘He said he came sixth.’

‘He did. There were only six competitors.’

‘Ah.’

‘Maybe he’s run out of the elbow restraints. I think they stopped making them in 1958. Pity. I kept meaning to buy one or two and tuck them away in the loft. There’s a huge market in golfing memorabilia these days. I’m sure that elbow restraints will have their day in the auction rooms. Did he offer you a discount?’

‘I did get a discount on some of my clubs.’ I said. ‘Though I think he forgot to apply it to the rest of the bill.’

‘Member’s discount?’

‘Yes.’

‘One per cent?’

‘Yes. But the way he worked it out I don’t think it was that much.’

‘It never is. I once bought three second hand golf balls from him. They were 50 pence each. He used a calculator to add up the cost and deduct my discount and then charged me £3.47. I was on the 4th green before I realised I’d been done.’

‘I got free tees.’

Simon looked at me.

‘Honestly. With the clubs.’

‘Free tees?’

‘Yes.’

‘New ones? Not the broken halves you find lying around all over the first few yards of every hole on the course?’

‘Still in the packet. A bit sun faded and the price on the packet is marked in shillings and pence. But they’re still in the packet so as far as I’m concerned they’re new.’

Simon held out a hand. I took it. ‘Congratulations,’ he said. ‘I don’t know anyone who’s ever got anything free out of our professional before. I once ran into him in the car park at Sainsbury’s. He told me he’d spotted me out on the course and thought I was dropping my right shoulder too much on my back swing. I thanked him and thought what a decent egg he was. The next time I got to the course I found a brown envelope in my locker. It contained an invoice for £27 for ‘Advice pertaining to golf matters.’

‘I’ll remember that if I see him around town,’ I said.

‘Did you meet his assistant?’

‘Didn’t know he’d got one.’

‘Name of Vincent. Cocky bastard. Short, dumpy fellow. He’s going bald so he shaves his head to disguise the fact but you can still see where the hair is growing and where it isn’t. He’s always talking about the job here just being temporary until he gets his tour card but he’s been 29 for as long as I can remember and he’s as far away from a tour card as I am. He likes to be called Hippo.’

‘Hippo?’

‘Hippo. He’s a bit overweight and so he says he’s a hippo not a tiger. He says having a nick name will help him get publicity when he starts winning tournaments.’

‘I’ll look out for him.’

‘Don’t bother. He’s hardly ever around. I haven’t seen him for a year.’

‘Did you really get free tees?’

‘Definitely.’

‘Could I see them?’

I rummaged around in the two bin liners and eventually pulled out the tees. I handed them to him.

‘You’re right,’ said Simon, handling the tees as though they were a holy relic. ‘These are brand new. Circa 1965 but brand new. You’re the first person I’ve ever known to get something for free from Walter. You’re not a lawyer are you?’

‘No.’

‘Oh no of course not,’ said Simon, remembering. ‘You’re a plumber, aren’t you?’

‘No.’

‘You’re not a plumber?’

‘Afraid not.’

‘So why does the secretary tell everyone you’re a plumber?’

‘It’s a long story.’

‘So what do you really do?’

‘I’m a journalist. I edit the local free paper.’

‘That bloody thing that gets delivered every Thursday by a snotty little kid who rides over my lawn on his bicycle?’

‘That’s the one.’

‘Full of house ads, car ads and leaflets for the local supermarket?’

I nodded.

‘You edit the bits of stuff between the adverts?’

‘I write most of it too.’

‘Under your own name?’

‘Oh no. I’m Dirk when I write the news reports, Ali and Samantha for features, Arthur when I do the gardening, Thelma for the village reports, Gracie for the kids page, Edith for the woman’s page, Rick for the music page and Felicity when I do the arts page.’

‘You can’t stop that snotty little kid delivering the damned thing can you?’

I laughed.

‘I don’t mean to be rude but since they introduced the new weekly limits on rubbish we’re been pushed getting all our rubbish into two black sacks. Your bloody paper takes up a quarter of a sack every week.’

‘Don’t you have a cat?’

Simon looked puzzled.

‘A lot of people tell me they find it useful as a litter tray lining.’

‘I suppose we could get a cat,’ he said thoughtfully. He thought for a moment. ‘But that would mean more rubbish, wouldn’t it?’

‘What do you do?’ I asked him.

There was a pause. ‘I used to tell people that I was an IT consultant,’ said Simon. ‘But then people asked me to sort out their computers so I’ve given that up. Until I think of something better and safer the truth is that I’ve got a stationery shop in the High Street. I inherited it from my father. Pens, pencils, paper - that sort of stuff. It’s pretty low grade information technology but it still information technology stuff. The highest tech item we sell is a pencil with a rubber glued on the end of it.’ He grinned. ‘Actually, before computers came along it used to be a good little business. Not today though. We’re going bust slowly but there’s nothing we can do about it.’

‘Why are you going bust?’

‘Too much competition. A few years ago I thought we would go bust because everyone would have a paperless office. Got that wrong. More paper around than ever. But the computer and the internet did for us another way. Everyone buys their stationery from the big chains, the mail order suppliers or stores on the internet. They have computers to control their stock and we can’t match the prices the big mail order companies sell at. Some of the stuff we sell we can buy cheaper from the big mail order companies than we can get it from our wholesaler. We just sell stuff to people when they run out and can’t wait for next day’s delivery. The council rates go up every year, we’ve had to spend a fortune putting in a ramp so that we comply with new laws about access for disabled customers, our insurance has tripled in the last five years and our best and most regular customers are shoplifters. Some days the only customers we have are the kids who come in when school finishes and steal pencils. If we didn’t own the building but had to pay rent we would make a loss.’ He took a deep breath. He looked weary. ‘When we stop making a profit I’ll sell up and retire. Within ten years this town will consist of nothing but estate agents and charity shops.’

‘I’m sorry.’

Simon shrugged. ‘It used to worry me but I don’t care anymore,’ he said. ‘I’ve always been the sort of person who is happy to wait for life to come to him. People describe me as ‘bland’ but I see blandness as a virtue. The world needs more bland people and less people who are convinced that they know exactly what needs to be done to make the world a better place. Meanwhile, we struggle on. I’d sell up and concentrate on my golf - I could be a professional on the tour if I had more time to spare - but who would want to buy a moribund stationery shop?’ He looked at me and grinned broadly. ‘Actually, come to think of it, if I’d put as much time and effort into the shop as I have into trying to play golf I’d probably be running the biggest stationery business in the world by now.’

* * *

‘Been buying tees, have you?’

We both looked up. A tall, thin, elegant man stood beside us. He wore a charcoal grey suit with a thin chalk stripe, an old fashioned white shirt with a detachable collar and something which looked like a club or regimental tie. He had sunken cheeks, sunken eyes and bony hands with long, exceedingly bony fingers. His hair, completely grey, was parted neatly in the centre. Although he had approached us as silently as a hunter approaching game he had clearly walked with, and now leant heavily upon, a slender black cane which had a silver top and a silver band about six inches below.

‘This is Oliver,’ said Simon. ‘He’s one of our oldest and most revered members. And by far and away the best source of local gossip for a hundred miles in any direction. He used to be something important in a bank until they sacked him for being senile.’

‘What are you doing sitting here?’ he asked, ignoring Simon’s introduction.

‘What’s wrong with here?’ asked Simon.

‘Too far from headquarters,’ said Oliver, nodding in the direction of the gents. ‘A professional drinker should always have a table near headquarters. It’s just plain silly to waste time walking to and fro.’

‘It’s nice here,’ said Simon. ‘Besides, walking to the loo keeps me fit.’

‘Good thought,’ agreed Oliver. He looked around. Maybe we should make this our new HQ.’ He slumped down in the chair next to me. ‘So, you’re the new member,’ he said. He smiled at me, examined me over the top of a pair of expensive looking half-moon gold framed spectacles, and eagerly shuffled forward in his chair. ‘Plumber, I understand? I wonder if you could pop round to my place sometime? Devil of a game getting hold of one of you fellows these days. I spent three days waiting for one to call the other week. He kept saying he’d come but he never appeared. It was like waiting for Godot but less rewarding. I’ve got a tap that’s been dripping for years. And two of my radiators don’t work. Do you do heating as well? It’s all pipes isn’t it?’

A second newcomer, shorter, rounder and altogether quite different to Oliver, waddled over carrying a large cigar from which he was carefully unwrapping the cellophane wrapper. He was about nine inches too short for his weight and four inches too stout for his trousers.

‘I’m not actually a plumber,’ I told Oliver, determined to scotch the rumour.

‘This is Gerald,’ said Simon, introducing me to the cigar smoker.

‘Hello. I’m not a plumber,’ I said, shaking his hand.

‘Neither am I,’ he replied. ‘I wonder what else we’ve got in common?’

Oliver looked resigned rather than disappointed. ‘Can’t believe anything anyone tells you these days,’ he complained, more in sadness than despair. ‘Pork pies,’ he muttered. ‘Everyone tells you pork pies these days.’

‘Pork pie?’ said Gerald, overhearing and misinterpreting what Oliver had said. ‘Damned good idea. Haven’t eaten for decades. Anyone else peckish?’

‘Sounds good,’ agreed Simon. He looked at me. ‘They serve a good pie here,’ he promised me.

‘Sounds good to me,’ I agreed.

‘Oliver?’ asked the man with the cigar.

‘Tell that damned idiot behind the bar to give me plenty of pickle. Can’t eat pork pie without lashings of pickle. And don’t put any water in my bloody whisky. If I want to drink water I’ll go swimming.’ I was to learn later that to Oliver a water hazard was someone being heavy handed with the water jug.

Gerald screwed up the cellophane from his cigar and tried to put it into the ashtray on our table but the cellophane refused to stay screwed up.

‘Why did they tell me you’re a plumber when you’re not?’ Oliver asked. ‘I have the piss taken out of me so much that I’m surprised I need to go to the loo these days,’ he moaned. He stared at me. ‘Are you sure you’re not a plumber?’

‘Pretty sure.’

Gerald took a gold lighter out of his waistcoat pocket and set fire to the cellophane. The cellophane burnt fiercely for a moment before disappearing. ‘Drinks all round?’ he asked us. We all nodded. ‘What are you drinking?’ We told him and he tottered off in the direction of the bar.

Oliver sighed. ‘Pity. I wish I’d been a plumber. I would have made a fortune and got all those earthy housewives thrown in free too.’

‘Earthy housewives?’ demanded Simon, who had nodded off but been awoken by this. ‘What on earth are you talking about, Oliver?’

‘Housewives,’ said Oliver, raising his voice as though talking to a foreigner who didn’t speak very good English. ‘They sit around all day with nothing to do and when the plumber calls they feed him tea and cakes and then leap on him for afters.’

A young woman in a blue trouser suit who was sitting at a nearby table turned and scowled at us.

‘So, if you’re not a plumber, what do you do?’ asked Oliver, either unaware of the disapproval or unconcerned by it.

I told him.

‘Can’t trust the damned newspapers these days,’ said Oliver. ‘Journalists just sit in the office and make it all up. Do you do that?’

‘Not always,’ I laughed.

‘You just hire someone to slip in deliberate mistakes to confuse people like me?’

‘How did you find out?’ I asked.

Oliver slapped his knee. ‘There you are!’ he said, addressing Simon. ‘I knew that was what the buggers did.’

* * *

The pork pie was good. There was plenty of pickle. We ate well. It was dark when Simon and I said ‘goodbye’ to Gerald and Oliver. As we left the club house we bumped into two people. The first was Walter, the golf professional. We both said hello.

He stared at us both, frowning. ‘Do I know you?’ he demanded.

‘We’re members,’ said Simon.

‘I was in your shop earlier,’ I told him.

‘Did you buy anything?’ he asked. He reminded me of my headmaster.

‘Full set of clubs, a bag, trolley and two sacks full of golf clothing,’ I told him.

He beamed. ‘Good chap,’ he said. ‘Well done.’ He patted me on the head, like a headmaster attempting to show a previously unseen benevolent side to a junior boy. I felt as though I was being congratulated on some minor achievement. Walter then disappeared, ignoring Simon completely.

The second person we ran into was a harassed looking man in a blue boiler suit. He was carrying a black briefcase and a clipboard. The words ‘Consultant Plumbing Engineer’ were embroidered above one of the breast pockets of his boiler suit.

‘Excuse me,’ he said. ‘Someone called for a plumber. Sorry I’m late. I got called away. Crisis.’

‘Oh dear,’ said Simon. ‘Big leak somewhere?’

‘No. My daughter’s hamster died. She found it dead at the bottom of the cage. I had to go home and bury it and then go out and buy her a new one. My wife was in a terrible state. She was very attached to that hamster.’

‘Well I think our problem here has been sorted now,’ said Simon.

‘Oh. Right. Sorry about that,’ said the plumber. He turned and headed back to a large white van.

Simon looked at me. ‘Bugger it,’ he said. He grinned broadly. ‘You really aren’t a plumber, are you?’ He suddenly started after the plumber. ‘Excuse me!’ he called. ‘Just wait a minute, please!’

The plumber, who was about to climb into his van, stopped and turned.

‘I say,’ I heard Simon say. ‘Could you pop round and take a look at a tap in our bathroom? Damned thing has been dripping...’ The plumber opened his briefcase and took out a huge blue diary.

I waved and headed for my car. Simon, grinning hugely, waved back and held up a thumb.

CHAPTER SIX: ‘THEY’RE CLUBS NOT STICKS.’

My first golf lesson took place at 6.00 pm the following evening.

‘Hmmph,’ said Walter, staring at me as though he thought he might have seen me somewhere before but couldn’t quite place me. He was carrying a golf club and using it as a walking stick; holding the business end of the club as a handle and sticking the top of the handle into the ground as he leant on it. ‘I thought we’d do some bunker practise this evening.’

‘Right,’ said I. ‘Let battle commence.’ I thought that I was maintaining the military line rather well but Walter seemed unimpressed. Perhaps he’d heard it before. Perhaps he didn’t understand it. ‘Which stick do I need for that?’ I asked. I had, in honour of the occasion, dressed entirely in the clothes I’d bought from Walter’s shop. I was a veritable bouquet of yellow and pink. Small elephants blossomed about my person. I may have been destined for disappointment when the list of the world’s best dressed men was published but I felt I would hold my own on a list for golfers making an effort to look like golfers. My bag, stuffed in every pocket with spare balls, spare clothing and, lest the lesson stretch too long into the night, several packets of sandwiches, two thermos flasks (one containing coffee and one containing soup), two bottles of mineral water, two cans of lager and three bananas, rested waiting on my brand new trolley. Preparing the bag, and working out how to strap it onto the trolley, had taken me the best part of the afternoon. Having pushed from the trolley from the car park to the practice ground, where the lesson was being held, I rather thought I might be the first golfer in history to need a caddy to push my trolley round the course for me.

‘That one!’ said Walter, pointing to one of my clubs with the handle of his stand-in walking stick. ‘They’re clubs not sticks,’ he snarled.

I plucked the chosen stick from the bag, took hold of it with both hands and started to wave it about.

‘Where the hell did you learn that grip?’ demanded Walter, stepping back two paces. I was not sure whether this was because he was physically fearful for his safety or because he was so shocked by what he saw that he needed to distance himself from it.

‘What grip?’ I asked, looking down at the club I was holding.

‘You’re holding it like a tennis racquet,’ complained Walter.

‘Am I?’ I was surprised by this and looked down in order to take note of how I was holding the racquet. I’ve never played tennis and didn’t have the faintest idea how a racquet should be held. I thought that if I could remember the grip I was using it might prove useful one day.

‘How many lessons have you had now?’

‘This is my first,’ I admitted.

‘Then what are you doing with that club?’ demanded Walter rather crossly. He had fierce eyes and huge black eyebrows like hairy caterpillars and when he was cross the caterpillars shot inwards and joined up. It looked as though the two creatures were mating. Walter lifted his impromptu walking stick and tapped it against another of the clubs in my laden bag. ‘Use that one.’

I put the club I was holding back into the bag and pulled out the one chosen to replace it. Walter then proceeded to try to teach me how to hold the club, how to stand and how to swing. He seemed particularly anxious to teach me something called the Vardon grip named, not surprisingly after someone called Vardon. Walter was very keen on Vardon whose grip turned out to be a way of holding using two hands to hold a golf club. I found it difficult to see why a man who had taught the world how to do this deserved to be immortalised. There is not, as far as I know, a Grace grip for holding a cricket bat or a Perry grip for the tennis racquet. Offering immortality to a man who has devised a way to use two hands to hold a stick with a lump of metal at the end of it seems like hero worship taken a step too far. It occurred to me (but I did not say) that the man who had worked out how to knot a necktie was perhaps more deserving of this sort of lasting recognition.

In between deifying Vardon, pushing my elbow sideways, urging my left foot forward and encouraging me to force both hips backwards (I ended up feeling as though I was being trained to dance the Conga) Walter gave me an introductory lecture on course etiquette (never throw clubs if there is another player in front of you, never wear ankle socks with shorts and don’t ever walk into the club house wearing golf shoes with spikes were the three pieces of advice which stuck in my mind), a short introductory talk on the rules of the game (never clean your balls unless you’re on the green was the only one I remembered) and a pep talk which seemed to owe much both to the American evangelical movement and the sort of spirited exhortational style favoured by the exponents of pyramid selling. ‘My motto is A for effort,’ said Walter firmly. ‘Remember that and you won’t stray far from the fairway of golfing endeavour.’ After fifty minutes of this I was bored rigid. Although I still hadn’t hit a ball I had already acquired two large blisters on the palm of my right hand. Besides, I found it hard to have to take advice on how to dress properly from a man who had sold me a pair of pink trousers decorated with cream edged green triangles and sporting a yellow elephant on a back pocket.

Throughout the lesson Walter had given his watch the sort of attention that a man who is hurrying to catch a train might give his time piece. Suddenly, in the middle of a short lecture on the sartorial importance of having neatly tied shoelaces (Walter favoured a double knot, with all loose ends being exactly the same length) the professional stopped talking and tapped the glass of his watch with a finger nail. ‘Time’s up,’ he announced. ‘That’ll be £29.95.’

I took out my wallet, counted out three ten pound notes and handed them over. They disappeared into the professional’s pocket so fast that it looked like the first half of a magic trick and I half expected a rabbit or an egg to appear from behind my left ear. Walter made no effort to hand over the five pence change he owed me but he handed me a box.

‘What’s this?’ I asked. ‘Your elbow restraint,’ he told me. ‘The instructions are on the box.’

‘Thank you.’

‘It’s £39.95,’ he said.

‘Should I make an appointment for another lesson?’ I asked him when I’d handed over another £40.

He stared at me as though he was a surveyor and I was a house. ‘I don’t think so,’ he said. ‘Not a lot of point.’ He walked away, stopped and turned round. ‘Come and see me when you decide to sell your clubs,’ he said. ‘I’ll give you 35% of what you paid for them.’

I stared at his back for a few moments, not knowing what to say.

* * *

After unstrapping my bag of clubs and stowing that and my trolley in the boot of my car I trotted into the club house to change my clothes. I was willing to wear the pink trousers and all the rest of the stuff on the golf course if that was what was regarded as appropriate and essential but I was damned if I was going to drive my car through the town wearing the stuff.

When I was younger my mother always taught me to wear clean underwear in case I was run over and had to be taken to hospital. ‘You’d be so embarrassed if they took you into casualty with dirty underclothes,’ she told me and although I had some doubts about how concerned I would have been about my underclothes if I had found myself laid out on a hospital trolley with crushed limbs and a fractured skull I had retained the feeling that embarrassment through the wearing of soiled or inappropriate clothing in a hospital casualty department was one of the worst things that could happen to a fellow. I had a friend who had once been stopped by the police while speeding home from a fancy dress party. He had been wearing a pink taffeta ball gown complete with all the trimmings at the time and he, whose mother had filled him with the same basic fears, told me that his sense of embarrassment far outweighed his fear that he might lose his driving licence or be fined.

There was no one in the changing room and after I’d changed, I left my golfing clothes hanging on a peg (hoping, I confess, that someone might steal them) and wandered into the bar to get a drink and see if I could find something to eat.

Simon, Oliver and Gerald were sitting in three of the leather chairs beside the fire. When I’d bought a slice of pork pie (for me) and four large whiskies I told them what Walter had said to me.

‘It wasn’t terribly encouraging,’ I admitted. ‘I’ve only had the damned clubs for a day and he’s offering me 35% of the purchase price.’

Simon waved a hand as though dismissing all this as nonsense. ‘Walter is a bloody useless teacher,’ said Simon. ‘Ignore him. Oh, by the way, did he sell you an elbow restraint?’

‘It’s next to my shoes in the locker room,’ I told him. ‘£39.95. It was apparently designed by a NASA space engineer and a professor of orthopaedics.’

‘Great,’ said Simon. ‘Glad you’ve got one. I wouldn’t like to think of you trying to make your way through life without an elbow restraint. Don’t wear the damned thing, though. Put it in the attic as part of your pension. Elbow restraints will be all the thing on the Antiques Road Show in 2020.’

‘Perhaps I can put the pink trousers and the blue plastic bag in the loft too,’ I said. ‘I’m going to give the game up anyway. I’m already injured and I haven’t hit a ball yet.’

‘Back?’ said Oliver. ‘I’m a martyr to my back.’

‘Blisters,’ I told him.

‘But you said you haven’t hit a ball yet?’

‘All I did was swing the damned club at blades of grass and learn how to tie my shoe laces properly. Oh and Walter kept telling me to keep my head down. I’m not sure why. Do you know why? Why you have to keep your head down? How are you supposed to see where the ball goes if you keep staring at your feet?’

‘I think it’s so that you can’t see him sniggering,’ said Simon. ‘All professionals sneer. It’s what they do best. You really haven’t actually hit a ball yet?’

‘No. I’ve got 14 golf clubs, a bag, a trolley, a bag full of balls, a packet of teas, a glove, an entire wardrobe in pink and a pair of specially made correspondent shoes which make me look like a 1930s pimp. But I haven't hit a ball yet.'

'Much more fun when you hit the ball,' said Gerald.

'Just remember to bend your knees,' said Oliver. 'Golf is like skiing. It's all in the knees. You need the flexibility that comes with bent knees.' He paused and thought for a moment. 'But don't bend them too much,' he added. 'Bend them too much and you'll top the ball.'

'Nonsense,' said Gerald. 'Keeping the knees bent is of minor importance. The crucial thing to remember is to keep control of the club. And don't swing back too far. Lots of golfers make the mistake of over-swinging. I never take my club back higher than an imaginary horizontal line drawn backwards from my waist.'

'Don't listen to him,' said Simon. 'I can throw a golf ball further than he drives one.'

'But my drives go straight,' said Gerald. 'When was the last time you played a shot off a fairway? Five years ago? Ten years ago? The club doesn't need to mow the fairways at all for you. We could save a fortune on men and mowers.'

'I'm just going through a bad patch,' protested Simon.

'It's because you're not bending your knees enough,' said Oliver.

'Tell you what, why don't we meet you here tomorrow morning at 10,' said Simon. 'The three of us were going to play together. Why don't you join us?'

Gerald and Oliver murmured their approval of this suggestion. I was to discover that all golfers like to play with beginners. It gives them a rare chance to play with someone less capable than themselves, and a chance to be in a position to offer advice.

'I'm not sure I should bother carrying on,' I said. 'Walter didn't seem to think there was much point.'

'Walter is a nincompoop,' said Oliver. 'He probably just wanted you to flog him back your clubs - so that he could sell them again as new and make a huge profit.'

'I think he's got brain damage,' said Gerald. 'A few years ago he was hit on the head by a golf ball.'

'Another player's ball hit him?' I asked.

'No. He hit his drive into the trunk of a tree. It bounced back and felled him. He wore a motorcycle crash helmet for six months after it happened. Funniest damned thing I ever saw.'

'A pal of mine was there when it happened,' said Oliver. 'He congratulated old Walter and asked him how he had managed it and whether he recommended a three wood or a driver for that shot. Walter, who was lying flat on his back, sat up, shook his head and said: 'I believe you know my terms for tuition, Mr Jenkins.' He then fell back and remained unconscious for another fifteen minutes.'

'I suppose you play your ball where in lies when that happens,' said Oliver. 'Bounce off the skull. That sort of thing.'

'Run of the ball,' agreed Simon.

'I bet wearing a crash helmet played havoc with his swing,' I said.

'The ball on the head may have had something to do with his mental condition,' agreed Simon. 'But two bottles of gin a day for twenty years probably haven't helped.'

'True,' agreed Gerald. 'I'm only up to a bottle a day and sometimes I can't remember my wife's name.'

'I don't think you're married,' said Simon.

Gerald stared at him, clearly puzzled. 'Aren't I?' He frowned. 'Are you sure?'

'Didn't she divorce you and go off with a pensions expert from Rotherham?'

'Dammit you're right you know,' said Gerald. He paused, took a packet of cigars from his pocket and removed one. 'She said I ignored her and spent all my time playing golf and drinking.' He lit the cigar. 'Bloody cheek.' He turned to me and grinned. I wasn't sure whether he really had forgotten whether he was still married or not.

Simon turned to me. 'The big question is: Now that you've got all these nice, shiny clubs, do you want to hit some balls and have some fun?'

'What time?' I asked.

'Ten o'clock,' said Oliver. 'Unless that's too early for you?'

'No, that's fine.'

'And please don't wear those horrible pink clothes again,' said Simon with a pained expression. 'They make you look like an American pimp.'

CHAPTER SEVEN: ‘IF THAT HAD GONE IN IT WOULD HAVE BEEN A SIX’

The four of us stood on the first tee. It was drizzling slightly and the colour of the sky suggested that if there was to be any change in the weather it would be for the worse rather than the better. I was wearing a pair of brown corduroy trousers, a fawn jumper and an old leather bomber jacket with an elasticated waist. Of the expensive gear Gerald had sold me I wore only the socks. I still wanted to believe they would help my game and I didn’t think anyone else would notice my wearing them. My three companions, who were busy taking out balls, putting on golf gloves and finding tees, were all wearing waterproof jackets and waterproof trousers. Oliver wore a blue woolly hat with a picture of a skier on the front, Gerald wore a baseball cap which suggested that he supported a team playing out of New York and Simon had the hood of his jacket pulled up over his head. ‘The thing about drizzle,’ said Gerald, ‘is that it gets you wet before you realise quite what’s happening. By the time you’ve realised that you’re getting wet and you need to wear your waterproofs you’ll be soaked.’

Some golfers never talk while playing, preferring to concentrate on the next shot. Others talk only about the game they are playing (or the games they have played with other people) while the third, and by far the largest group, talk about anything other than golf. Investments, wives and illnesses are the favourite topics when men golfers talk. (I am reliably informed that women golfers who are married talk mainly about their children, their husbands and their hairdressers. Women golfers who are single talk almost exclusively about golf.)

‘Had to go into hospital yesterday to have me prostate fiddled with,’ said Oliver. ‘Haven’t been to hospital for years. Curious thing, though, the damned places don’t smell like they used to. They used to pong of antiseptic. These days they smell of photocopier ink.’

‘I hate hospitals,’ said Gerald, examining a small hole in the palm of the golf glove he had just pulled on. ‘Dunno why but they always remind me of sickness and death. Last time I was in one visiting my sister in law I felt queasy. Thought I was having a heart attack. I got my brother to take me home.’

‘Hospital is the last place you want to be when you don’t feel well,’ said Oliver. ‘You need to be on top form to survive one of those places.’ He shivered. ‘Have you noticed that the nurses wear trousers these days?’ he asked. He shook his head in disgust.

‘The nurses used to make hospitals almost bearable,’ said Gerald. ‘Short skirts. Starched uniforms. Black stockings...’ He gazed dreamily into the far distance, as though attempting to recapture some fleeting memory of a year which had passed by long ago.

‘This is a par four,’ Simon told me, taking a leather cover off the head of one of his clubs. ‘390 yards. Slight dog leg to the left, as you can see. Watch the trees on the right. There’s a stagnant pond hidden just behind them.’

‘When they bent over to tuck in the sheets of the bed across the ward you could see their stocking tops,’ said Gerald. ‘And a few inches of white thigh. Magical.’ He sighed. ‘Did a man far more good than the bloody pills they dole out.’

‘It’s amazing that with just four hits one can hit a small ball all that way and get it into a metal cup,’ I said.

Simon looked at me. ‘I certainly is,’ he agreed. ‘I nearly did it once.’

My three good companions drove off first. They seemed to know the order in which they should start. Simon hit what looked to me to be a perfect drive but, apparently disgusted with himself, he banged his club head on the ground and growled something incomprehensible. Gerald’s shot started well but, in mid-flight, mysteriously started to curl to the left. It ended up disappearing into a patch of thick grass just to the left of a large bunker.

‘Distance isn’t everything,’ he said.

‘True,’ said Simon, grinning at him. ‘The rough is much thicker further up. You did well to hold that ball back.’

Oliver’s drive, though it hardly rose into the air at all, bounced and rolled and skidded and jumped and, much to my surprise, ended up straighter and further than either of the other two balls.

Then it was my turn.

‘This is Tom’s first ever golf shot,’ Simon said to the others. There were murmurings of encouragement. They all kept very still and watched me intently.

My first three shots could comfortably be described as frustrating and insubstantial rather than memorable. Although I gripped the club very tightly and swung it as fast as I could I missed the ball completely on all three occasions.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ said Gerald. ‘Think of each shot as a new adventure. Everything starts afresh.’

‘Don’t try and hit it so hard,’ suggested Simon. ‘Just stroke it.’

‘Just relax,’ said Oliver. ‘If every golf shot was perfect the game would be very boring. And don’t think about it too much. Never let your brain get in the way.’

I could see the sense in all this and so on the fourth attempt I contented myself with a half swing and a gentle follow through. The result, although hardly spectacular, was considerably more successful than its three predecessors. My ball bounced on what I shortly afterwards discovered was the ladies' tee, hit a small notice warning members not to take their trolleys onto the greens, and ricocheted off into the medium length grass just to the right of the fairway. The ball had, I suppose, travelled a total of about sixty yards.

It was not the sort of beginning that would give my golfing biographers much to enthuse about but the club had collided with the ball and it was, therefore, my first real golfing stroke. My first recorded golf shot. My career as a golfer had started.

As I started the short journey from the tee to my ball I felt sure that I caught a glimpse of someone watching me from behind a nearby bunch of bushes. But when I looked harder I could see no one.

* * *

Many golfers report that their first round of golf is their most successful for some time. A grocer I once met told me that it took him four years of practising to achieve a score which matched his very first outing.

This was not my experience.

By the tenth hole I had run out of spare balls and I had borrowed so many from the other three that they had only the balls they were playing with. I was astonished to find out just how easy it was to lose golf balls. On several occasions the ball I hit seemed to trickle off the tee but proved elusive when four pairs of eyes started searching for it.

'This is embarrassing,' I said, balancing my only ball on a red plastic tee I'd borrowed from Oliver. My own supply of tees had long since run out, partly because the ones Walter had given me had turned out to be particularly fragile, and partly because when you tee up at least three times on each hole you are likely to get through three times as many tees as golfers who drive just once. 'If I lose this one I'll just walk back with you. You three must be fed up to the back teeth of playing with such a complete rabbit.'

'Don't be daft,' said Simon. 'This is your first round of golf. You can't give up half way round.' He bent down, unzipped one of the pockets on his golf bag and took out a mobile telephone. 'We like playing with you,' he continued. 'Because you've spent a fortune on all that equipment and you're absolutely crap at golf it makes us all feel good about our own games. Besides, you're rather missing the point, we're not good golfers and none of us want to be good golfers. We enjoy our golf and we know that if we become good at the game all the fun would disappear.'

I must have looked as puzzled as I felt.

'If you're a good golfer,' he explained, 'then the good shots will be routine and the bad shots will be disappointing. Right?'

I thought about this for a moment. 'Yes, I suppose so,' I agreed.

'But if you're a bad golfer then bad shots are routine and only to be expected.'

I nodded.

'Whereas the good shots will be exciting.'

'I think I see what you're getting at,' I said.

'It's much better to be a bad golfer because you get occasional bursts of excitement. Good golfers merely get occasional bursts of disappointment.'

'I hadn't thought of it that way,' I agreed.

'For us a good shot is an enjoyable exception which helps me forget all the bad shots. If I was a good golfer then the good shots would be routine and therefore forgettable. The exceptional, and therefore memorable shots would all be bad and would annoy me.' He shrugged and smiled. 'Besides,' he continued. 'We get more value for money.'

I looked at him and waited for him to explain.

'We get to play a hell of a lot more shots per round than a good golfer,' he explained. 'Really good golfers only hit the ball three or four times a hole. Where's the fun in that?'

He punched a number into his mobile phone and held the device up to his ear. He was on the phone for no more than a minute or two. I didn't hear what he said.

'Sorted,' he told me, with a big grin. 'Just try and make that ball last another five minutes and we should be OK.'

Not knowing quite how he had managed to solve my problem with a single phone call when we were at least a couple of miles away from the only known local supply of golf balls I pulled a club out of my bag. Any club. It didn't seem to make any difference which club I played with - all my shots were terrible. My best chance of not losing a ball was to miss the ball completely and hope that the draft made by the club swishing by was not strong enough to waft the ball into an invisible rabbit hole.

'Is there a second hand market for clubs?' I asked.

'I always blame my clubs when I play badly,' said Gerald.

'Are you going to buy another set already?' asked Oliver. 'You haven't got those dirty yet.'

I sighed wearily. 'No, I think I'm going to give up,' I said.

‘Don’t be silly,’ said Gerald. ‘You can’t give up. You’ve hardly started.’

‘I thought golf was supposed to be relaxing,’ I complained. ‘I find this enormously stressful.’

Gerald looked at me and laughed. ‘Who on earth told you that?’ he demanded. ‘What nonsense. Golf isn’t supposed to be relaxing. I go to work to relax. I play golf because I have to.’

‘I still intend to give up,’ I repeated.

‘You won’t,’ said Gerald. ‘By the time you get to the end of this round you’ll be hooked on the game, I promise you. You’ll play one shot that will convince you that with a bit of practice you can win the Open. You’ll play one shot that any professional would be proud to have played. And then, when you get to the end of the round, you won’t be able to wait until you can stand on the first tee again and start it all over.’

I looked at him in some surprise and a good deal of disbelief.

‘You’ll see,’ said Gerald, with a broad smile. ‘It’s damned near impossible to give up golf. There are thousands of instructional books and videos on the market but they all explain how to play the game better. None of them attempt to explain how to give it up.’ He looked straight at me and pointed a finger at my chest. ‘That’s because it’s impossible,’ he said.

‘He’s right,’ said Simon. ‘The biggest addiction problem in the country isn’t heroin, marijuana, tobacco or alcohol, it’s golf. Why on earth would otherwise sensible, rational people play it if they weren’t addicted? It’s expensive and frustrating and it leads to bad language and to gambling. Those who fail feel inferior, those who succeed become full of self-aggrandisement.’

‘The only way to give it up is to get really good at it,’ said Gerald. ‘My own long-term ambition is to play well enough to be able to stop playing.’

‘Not very likely,’ mumbled Oliver.

Gerald, Simon and Oliver had, up until that moment, seemed extremely sound sort of fellows; reliable chaps whom one could happily trust with one’s wife or car keys. They had shown no previous signs of dementia. But they had not convinced me that I should carry on playing golf. I would, I decided, put an advert in my own paper and sell the clubs that way. I should be able to get half what I’d paid for them. And in order to satisfy the demands of my doctor and my mother I’d take up badminton or running. If necessary I would even find a bride and get married. Anything would be better than golf. I’d done my best. I’d tried golf and to be honest I was sick to the back teeth of it. I was soaked to the skin. My feet were sore. My hands were blistered. My shoulders ached. I was cold, fed up and as miserable as I could remember being for years.

To my own surprise, and, I think, the astonishment of my companions, I managed to play the next dozen shots with the same ball. Maybe it was because I was taking more care. Maybe it was because I’d decided to give up the game and didn’t care what happened. I was so depressed by my failure to hit anything that resembled a passable golf shot that I pretty much lost interest in what was going on and can remember very little of the first few holes of the homeward nine.

I do remember that on the long 12th Oliver surprised himself, and the rest of us, by reaching the green in four. He would have completed the hole in par if his first putt had gone into the hole. It didn’t. Nor did the next two putts.

‘I remember when you nearly got a birdie on this hole,’ said Gerald, trying to comfort him.

Oliver thought for a moment. ‘I didn’t though, did I?’

‘Not quite,’ admitted Gerald. ‘You just missed it by three shots. But it was a close thing...’

‘I remember it as if it were just yesterday,’ said Oliver.

‘It was yesterday,’ Gerald said.

* * *

On the 13th tee I thought I saw someone spying on us from behind a small clump of trees. Ever since the first tee, when I thought I’d spotted someone watching me from behind a clump of bushes, I’d been half convinced that I was being spied upon. But while standing on the 13th tee, waiting for my turn to drive, I was sure that I’d seen a stranger peering at me from between the branches of a large rhododendron bush.

‘Can you see someone over there?’ I asked Gerald, who was standing next to me. I pointed in the direction of the bush.

‘Nothing at all, old chap,’ said Gerald, after staring at the bush for 20 or 30 seconds. ‘Probably just a hallucination. I get them all the time. A couple of weeks ago I drove down the motorway, past the roadworks that have been there for months, and I was convinced that I saw several of the chaps working quite hard. I was so puzzled that I left the motorway at the next turn off and drove back up the motorway to have another look. They were all standing around talking and drinking tea, of course. The whole thing was just a hallucination. Happens a lot when you get older. My doctor says it’s the drink but that’s just nonsense put out by people who don’t approve of alcohol. My old mother had hallucinations for years before she died. She was convinced there were little men living in her telly. She was teetotal. Never touched a drop. Not even at Christmas.’

As we wandered down the fairway on the 14th Gerald was very nearly hit by a golf ball driven by one member of a pair playing behind us.

'Sorry about that!' apologised a red faced fellow in a blue anorak and tartan trousers. 'You don't mind if we drive through, do you?'

'You really should have shouted fore,' said Simon. 'Your ball nearly hit one of us.'

The bespectacled fellow ignored Simon, grabbed a club from his bag and played on.

'Old farts like you lot shouldn't be allowed on the course,' snarled his playing partner, an aggressive young man carrying a huge bag of clubs. He wore a grubby tee shirt and a pair of jeans cut off just below the knees.

The pair of them hurried on without another word.

'I don't know why they bother,' said Oliver, staring at them thoughtfully. 'It's a game. The idea is to enjoy it not to get it over with as quickly as possible. Some of them look forward all week to a game of hole but then when they get here they can't get round fast enough; can't wait to get it all over with. Can't understand it. Can you?'

I shook my head.

'Mind you,' said Gerald, 'if we get stuck behind the four horsewomen I can get a bit edgy.'

'That's true,' agreed Oliver.

'But they are much slower than us,' said Simon. 'Kevin told me that one Saturday last July they took nine hours to complete eighteen holes. He swears that they are so slow that the grass gets cut twice before they finish a round.'

'That was an exceptional day,' said Gerald. 'They had to call the doctor on the 8th because Clarisse fell ill. They thought it was her heart. I don't think they usually take much more than seven hours.'

'Who on earth are the four horsewomen?' I asked.

'The four horsewomen of the apocalypse,' explained Simon 'are called Elsie, Clarisse, Maud and Daphne - though I can never remember which is which. They're fearsome - hence the collective nick-name. Off the golf course they're sweet and dainty but once they start playing they swear and throw clubs with the worst of us. They play every day, whatever the weather. Oliver, can you remember which of the four horsewomen is which?'

'Maud is the ex-headmistress. She's in her early 80s and inherited a fortune from her father who invented the zip, the paper clip or something useful like that. She never lifts a club above her knees and never hits it more than thirty or forty yards. Elsie is the oldest, she's a couple of years older than Maud, and used to be married to a grocer. She's the only one of the four who has ever been married. She's hard of hearing and he had a speech impediment and it was said to have been a perfect marriage until she secretly bought a hearing aid and suddenly found out what he'd been saying about her for years. She divorced him in 1953. She has a son who is a Conservative MP. She never hits the ball - even on the green - without taking 24 practice swings. She counts them and says she helps her settle down and play better. Her record round this course is 215. Clarissa used to play hockey for the county. She's in her mid-70s and as strong as an ox. I once saw her throw a three iron into a tree on the 6th. It was up there for months. A couple of pals and I were playing behind them one day and they wouldn't let us through. We decided to skip the 12th, walk ahead and continue from the 13th but Clarissa took umbrage. She threw every club in her bag at us and believe me she can throw clubs much further than she can hit balls. And then there's Daphne. She's quite sweet if you can catch her by herself. She was quite a looker in her youth. She's 78 or 79 I think and she's put on a lot of weight in recent years but when she was young she was a ballet dancer. Not a principal dancer you understand. But a dancer nonetheless. These days she moves slower than a soldier looking for landmines.'

I played the 14th carefully, so as not to lose the ball. I think I took 17 but at one point I got stuck in a bunker and rather lost count.

In my head I'd already drafted the For Sale advertisement I would insert to get rid of my unwanted clubs. 'Almost new set of golf clubs for sale. Illness and sudden change in family circumstances forces reluctant sale after one game.' The newspaper I edit has a free small ad column for people selling stuff under £200. Rather than hang on to the damned things, and be constantly reminded of my unhappy and expensive experience, I would sell them cheap for £199.99 - just inside our price limit. The whole sorry adventure would have been an expensive lesson but I would, I hoped, learn something from the experience. I would have at learned that I didn't much like golf. I found an old restaurant receipt and a stub of pencil in my jacket pocket and wrote out my advertisement on the back of the restaurant receipt. I felt much better when I'd done this.

As I stuffed the paper and pencil back into my pocket I heard something that sounded rather like an old steam train rattling towards us at quite a pace.

We had just come down from the fifteenth tee, an elevated position over-looking a long tree sheltered fairway which I suspect I would, in other circumstances, have found an extremely attractive setting for an afternoon walk on a summer's day. I looked back up the hill but could see nothing. It seemed unlikely that a steam train would have strayed onto a golf course, particularly since Dr Beeching had ensured that there were not, as far as I was aware, any railway lines within thirty miles.

* * *

Simon hit a wonderful drive and a sequence of poor iron shots. Gerald and Oliver hit slightly wayward drives but hit decent recovery shots which left them near to the green. I hit a poor drive and a series of poor iron shots.

The source of the noise was closer now but it no longer sounded like a steam train. It sounded like nothing I had ever heard before in my life. The only thing I was certain of was that the noise came from somewhere behind us. Oliver and Gerald, who seemed utterly unconcerned and uninterested in the appalling sound made by this approaching monster, were occupied looking for Gerald's ball which had landed in a thick patch of gorse just beside the green. Cries of annoyance and pain alternated as the pair of them struggled amidst the prickles; their waterproofs snagging and tearing with almost every step. I turned round again, listened and looked.

The first thing I saw were rapidly rising puffs of black smoke. It looked as though the cardinals had failed to elect a pope. Or as if a bad tempered Indian was sending angry messages to a supplier of leaky teepees.

Next, coming over the brow of the hill behind us, I saw what looked like a submarine periscope, then a small wire netting cage and finally a rapidly moving, grass splattered tractor.

It was impossible to tell what colour the tractor had originally been for now it was covered in a thick, olive green layer of congealed grass cuttings. The tractor was followed by a green cloud and a host of crows, magpies and seagulls.

As it approached us the tractor slowed, the sound now down to an ear splitting whine alternating with a deep throated, phlegmy chug, and finally halted a couple of yards away. The driver and solitary occupant of the wire enclosed cab, a small, beady eyed gnome of a man who looked well past retiring age pushed open a wire covered door and grinned down at us. He had shiny, pink well-cared for looking gums but no teeth that I could see. He wore an old fertiliser sack, which had a hole roughly cut in the top for his head and holes roughly cut in the sides for his arms and a battered, felt trilby which had once been brown but was now stained with grease, oil and grass. He reached down to the floor of the cab and picked up a large, heavy plastic bag, emblazoned with the name of a well-known supermarket. He held the bag out to Simon who took it and, in return, handed up a twenty pound note. The note disappeared in an instant, the toothless gnome waved a hand, cackled something incomprehensible, slammed his wire covered door and put the tractor into gear. After turning the tractor headed back over the hill; belching black smoke and making an ear splitting racket. Behind the tractor mowing blades threw out a cloud of finely cut grass. The crows, magpies and seagulls, which had stood and strutted idly by when the tractor had halted, now took off again in a cloud of their own, following the tractor and the mowing machine and swooping down whenever they spotted something to eat.

'Jake is one of the best golfers in the club,' said Simon, as the tractor disappeared. 'He still holds the club record which he set when he was 22.'

'Does he still play?' I asked.

'Hasn't played for years,' said Simon. 'He gave it up. He said it was too dangerous.'

'He used to get too excited?' I asked, thinking that perhaps Jake had abandoned golf because the stress gave him high blood pressure. 'Thought he might have a heart attack?'

'No, it wasn't that,' said Simon. 'He used to turn into a raging maniac if he played a bad shot. He attacked an opponent with a sand wedge in 1985 and hasn't played since. Nearly killed the fellow I think. Pity. Fantastic player.' He handed me the plastic bag. 'Here you are. This should keep us going to the end of the round.'

I looked inside the bag. It was, as I had by now guessed, full of golf balls.

'How many are there here?' I asked.

Simon shrugged. 'Dunno. Forty. Fifty? I just buy them by the bagful.'

I reached for my wallet. 'You must let me pay you.'

Simon held up a hand. 'Buy me a drink,' he said. 'The balls are a present.'

I tried again to give him the money but he was adamant. When I rummaged around in the bag I was astonished to spot a ball which I had found on the first hole and then lost on the second hole just an hour or two earlier in the round. I recognised the ball because in addition to a crescent shaped cut in the casing, which had been the result of a rather poor iron shot by some other golfer equally unencumbered by talent, the ball was marked with two red marks, clearly made by a felt tip pen. There were another two or three balls which I rather strongly suspected I had lost earlier in my round. Jake, it seemed, was far better at finding lost balls than we were.

* * *

The miracle happened on the 16th hole and I can, without exaggeration, promise that I will treasure the memory of that moment for as long as I am able to treasure anything. If I have a smile on my face when they straighten my club tie and screw down the lid it will be because, at the end, I was thinking of that moment.

The 16th hole at our club is, at 170 yards, the shortest of the three par threes on the course. The green is slightly uphill and well-guarded. Immediately to the left of the green there are two deep, pot bunkers with almost vertical sides. If you drift even further left than the bunkers the ground slopes steeply down into pretty well impenetrable scrubland. The right side of the green is guarded by a huge, old oak tree whose branches reach well out over the green, making it nigh on impossible to drift a ball into the green from that side. The tree stands on a slope where the grass is mostly thick and lush and a ball which hits the top part of the tree usually clatters down into the grass and disappears from view. A narrow, sloping band of closely cut grass of almost glass-like smoothness stands between the trunk of the tree and the right edge of the green.

When I placed my ball on the tee at the start of this hole I had no idea just how important the shot which followed would be.

It was, without any exaggeration, a shot which changed my life but when I gripped the leather bound part of the shaft, wiggled the head of my three iron and told myself yet again to keep my head down and still it was all done more in hope than expectation; more in the belief that even if I couldn't produce a convincing result I could at least try to look convincing. With a plentiful supply of balls I felt free to hit the ball hard, rather than simply trying to make sure I didn't lose it.

The other three had, of course, already driven. Simon's ball was lying in one of the pot bunkers. Oliver's ball was buried in the long grass underneath the oak tree and Gerald's ball, the only one of the three still visible from the tee, was sitting up quite nicely in the middle of the fairway about forty or fifty yards short of the green.

'Put a bit of left to right fade on it,' suggested Oliver, forgetting or ignoring the fact that even if I understood what he was talking about I had would have had no idea how to turn the idea into practice.

'You might need a bit of backspin,' said Gerald. Naturally, he gave me no guidance as to how I might bring this about.

Recklessly and uncaring, thinking now only of the fact that the club house was in sight and that my golf clubs would soon be some other poor bugger's burden, I took hold of my club, swung it back behind me and then swung it as though trying to launch my ball into space.

At first I lost sight of the ball. And then I heard Gerald offer a word or two of honest encouragement. (All golfers will offer unlimited praise and encouragement to fellow players who are losing gloriously but who have punctuated an utterly indifferent display with a single shot of majesty. I felt that Gerald's praise was of sterner stuff.)

'Great shot!' he said. And there was neither irony nor envy in his voice.

'Lovely shot!' added Simon.

I peered ahead and managed at last to catch sight of my ball.

It had, through what good fortune I did not know then and certainly do not know then, flown high and almost straight from the tee. When I first caught sight of it the ball was already beginning its descent. It dipped just in time to avoid the branches of the oak tree, landed on the smooth path of grass which lay between the tree and the green, bounced once, hopped forward twice and then, taken by the curve and slope of the bank, drifted slowly down onto the green. The four of us watched, mesmerised, as the ball rolled across the green towards the pin. 'It's going in!' said Gerald, unbelievingly.

'You've got a hole in one,' whispered Oliver.

The ball didn't go in. I didn't get a hole in one. But it did hit the flag-stick, jump up into the air an inch or two and then roll away to end up no more than six or seven feet from the hole.

I have rarely felt as pleased or as proud of myself as I felt then. It was, of course, an outrageous fluke. It was a shot I would not be able to match for a long, long time. The only thing that matters in golf is where the ball ends up. The club you use, the beauty of the swing, whether you bend your knees or not, the number of dimples with which the ball is decorated - all these things are irrelevant. The only thing that really, really matters is where the ball finishes at the end of the shot. No professional would have been ashamed of my shot.

And it was my shot. I had held the club and I had hit the ball. Of the four of us my ball was by far the closest of any to the pin.

What a glorious game golf is, I thought to myself. With a little more practice I could perhaps think about entering a few competitions. If I could do it once I could surely do it again. And again.

As we strolled to the green I felt as though I was walking on air. My feet were no longer sore. My shoulders didn't ache. My blisters were still there but they no longer hurt me.

* * *

Gerald was the first to play. He used a wedge. His ball landed on the front of the green, skidded forward and rolled on and on until it went over the back of the green and disappeared out of sight. Oliver played three shots before managing to slash his ball out of the thick grass underneath the oak tree and onto the right edge of the green. And Simon, after four attempts to remove his ball from the bunker eventually played out backwards. By the time his ball was on the green he had played eight.

'Take your time,' whispered Simon, as I approached my ball. 'Two putts for a par. And watch out - it's a Rock

Hudson putt.’

I looked at him, puzzled. ‘What’s a Rock Hudson putt?’

‘Looks straight but isn’t,’ replied Simon, still speaking softly, as though concerned that if he spoke too loudly my ball might be offended.

‘It’ll move a little to the right,’ said Oliver, who was crouching down behind my ball, trying to read the line. ‘Six inches or so.’ He stood up and I heard him creak. He sounded like a door that needed oiling.

‘More like a foot,’ insisted Gerald. ‘Probably eighteen inches. There’s quite a slope there.’

‘Don’t hit it too hard,’ said Simon. ‘Just make sure you get down in two.’

I could feel my heart beating and there was sweat on the palms of both hands. I wiped my hands on my trousers but could do nothing about my thumping heart. Six feet at most. A par. If I got my ball into the hole in two putts I would have completed the hole in three shots. The number of shots a professional would expect to take.

I bent over the putt and then backed away again. I bent down and looked at the slope of the green. I got up, stood over the ball again and gripped and re-gripped my putter. My hands felt like huge hams. My arms felt heavy and unresponsive. I knew that the longer I waited the worse things would get. I swung the putter head back, then forward and hit the ball. I knew I’d over-hit from the three gasps, long before the ball sailed merrily past the hole without so much as a passing glance.

Three feet.

I had gone three feet past the hole.

I’d been six feet away and instead of hitting the ball six feet I’d hit it nine feet. How bad can you get?

‘Play on,’ said Gerald. ‘Take your time.’

I crouched over my ball again. Gripped, un-gripped and gripped again.

‘Good luck,’ whispered Simon.

I hit the ball.

It rolled forwards. Too quickly again. Too much adrenalin. The ball hit the back of the hole, bounced up into the air, went around the rim of the hole, threatened to spin off across the green and then suddenly lost all momentum and, exhausted, dropped like a stone.

Into the hole.

Three.

Par three.

A par on my first round of golf.

It would be nearly a year before I completed another hole in par. But I didn’t know that then. And I certainly didn’t care.

* * *

Golf is the only game where the amateurs, the beginners, the high handicappers can play and enjoy the same courses as the top professionals.

How many amateur tennis players get to experience the joy of a game on Wimbledon Centre Court? How many amateur cricketers ever get to play at Lord’s?

And yet every day of the week quite ordinary golfers play rounds on the very same turf as Nicklaus, Palmer, Player and the other greats.

If you tried to play tennis with a professional you wouldn’t get your racquet anywhere near the ball. Bam. I’m ready now. That was it. Oh.

But I had learned that a quite ordinary golfer will, during the course of a match, almost always play one shot that any professional would have been proud to have played.

Golf is the only game where a rank amateur, knowing little about the game and less about how to play it, can, every now and then, play a hole in a way that would not disgrace a tournament professional.

‘Terrific hole,’ said Simon.

‘Congratulations!’ said Oliver.

‘Brilliant!’ said Gerald. ‘It’s a long time since I’ve seen anyone play that hole better.’ He seemed genuinely pleased for me.

‘You had my knees shaking over that return putt,’ said Oliver. ‘But I was impressed with the way you kept your head.’

We walked off the green together and I felt, for the first time, that I was part of the group. I noticed, quite suddenly and to my surprise, that it had stopped raining. I again had a strange feeling that someone was watching me, this time from behind an ash tree. But at that moment I felt more joy, more delight and more intense personal pride and satisfaction than I could ever remember feeling before. I honestly believe that I could not have been prouder if I had won the Open Championship itself.

The real joy in golf comes, of course, not from the accolades of others but from satisfying the self - and creating a memory that will live and which will brighten the darkest days of winter when storms and snow make the course unplayable, and the even darker days of old age when it is the body which can no longer sustain the search for the next dream.

How, I felt myself wondering, can a man hit a ball just three times and yet propel it with such accuracy. I was prouder of my par than I would have been of a hole in one. If my ball had gone straight into the hole I would have known that it had been a fluke. I would not have been able to hide this from myself. But a par? Well, that I could believe was a result of skill.

* * *

'It's your honour,' said Simon as I stood on the 17th tee, waiting for one of the others to play.

'You drive first,' explained Gerald, when I still didn't move. 'You won the hole.'

I felt embarrassed. But I also felt good. I took my driver out of the bag and then immediately replaced it. I took out my three iron. My lucky club. I put my lucky ball on my lucky tee and hit it with my favourite three iron.

I swung fast and hit the ball hard, with every ounce of strength I had. That, at least, was my intention.

Inevitably, the ball never rose more than a foot off the ground. It bounced along the grass of the tee, rolled along the fairway and came to rest no more than fifty yards away from where I was standing.

'Straight,' said Oliver, with a nod of approval.

'Straight down the middle,' agreed Gerald.

'Safe shot,' said Simon. 'Good choice on this hole.'

I watched as the other three drove off. I thought that perhaps Oliver was lifting his head a little early. And it occurred to me that maybe Gerald needed more follow through. But I didn't say anything. I didn't like to. Later, maybe. When they got to know me better. I didn't care about the topped shot. I really didn't care. There are few things on this earth more pleasing than hitting a good shot. That memory will last. The memory of the bad shots fades quickly. There are so many of them.

'You know the British Open,' I said to Simon, as we strode from the tee side by side.

'It's just called the Open,' he corrected me. 'Only Americans call it the British Open.'

'Right,' I nodded. 'The Open. How do they decide who gets to play?'

'I think anyone can play,' said Simon. 'If they get through the qualifying rounds, of course.'

'You don't have to be a top professional?'

'No. I don't think so. No, I'm pretty sure you don't.'

'An ordinary amateur could enter and win? Just out of nowhere?'

'Yes. Wouldn't that be a dream, eh?' said Simon.

It would, I thought. But I wasn't too happy about the way he said it. It sounded as though it was a dream of his. But it wasn't his dream; it was my dream.

* * *

As we left the 18th green I nearly jumped out of my skin when a lanky man wearing a terrible, tawny-coloured toupee leapt out in front of me. He was dressed entirely in green. Green waterproof jacket. Green waterproof trousers. And, just visible at his neck, a green polo necked sweater. He carried a golf club which he was using as a walking stick. It looked like a five iron. The toupee was the worst and most ill-fitting I'd ever seen. I tried not to stare at it but was not at first entirely convinced that it was supposed to be there at all. Perhaps, I thought, someone had crept up behind him and just plonked it down on his head. I could not help wondering how anyone could wear anything quite so absurd and not realise how silly it looked. He would have been less conspicuous in an off the shoulder pink chiffon number with diamante panels and a plunging neckline.

'I've been watching you!' said the face under the toupee fiercely. The owner of the face (and presumably the toupee) waved his club at me. 'You've just played an entire round of golf, haven't you?'

Fearing that I was being accosted by some sort of golfing inspector and was about to be arrested for masquerading as a golfer or bringing the game into disrepute, I nevertheless confessed that I had indeed been attempting to play golf.

'I got a par on the 16th!' I said in my own defence.

'Have you paid a green fee?' demanded the man with the toupee.

My fear that I must have done something pretty terrible and was about to have my golfing clubs ceremonially shredded subsided when it became clear that my companions were not at all concerned by the club waving interloper. Simon groaned audibly and Oliver muttered something under his breath.

'Oh don't be so bloody stupid Howard,' said Gerald. 'He's a member.'

'Ah,' said Howard, deflating rapidly. 'Is he? Are you sure?'

'Of course we're sure,' said Simon. 'I was one of his proposers. He's got a little badge somewhere. And don't wave that bloody six iron around! Behave yourself or none of us will vote for you next time there is an election.'

Howard, the man with the toupee hurried away.

* * *

'Who one earth was that?' I asked Simon when we got into the changing rooms.

'That was Howard,' explained Simon. 'Howard is our club Chairman. He is probably the most pompous, boring and stupid man I've ever met. He's a local councillor as well as our Chairman. He's a joiner.'

'Is he?' said Gerald, surprised. 'I never knew that.'

'Never knew what?'

'That he was a joiner.'

'Of course he's a joiner. He loves joining things and he loves standing for things. If there's an election for anything he'll stand.

'I thought you meant he was a carpenter,' muttered Gerald, removing his socks.

'He once told me that he was on 34 committees,' said Simon. 'He's the sort of bloke who would have been proud to be President of the Stamp Club at school. When he first voted onto the club committee he started to behave like a schoolmaster. Now that he's Chairman he behaves as though he owns the club. He spends several days a week hiding in the undergrowth to watch out for visiting golfers who play the course without paying a green fee.'

'Does he catch many people?' I asked.

'As far as I know he's never caught anyone,' said Simon.

'I think he did once a couple of seasons ago,' said Gerald, opening his locker. 'But the chap he caught ran off and Howard couldn't catch him.'

'Sometimes we go out in disguise just to give him a thrill,' said Simon. 'We wear false beards and Groucho Marx spectacles and he leaps out of the bushes frothing at the mouth in excitement.'

'I think we ought to stop that,' said Oliver. 'The last time we did it he got so excited I thought he was going to have a heart attack and die.'

'Well if he does die I think we should still vote for him as Club Chairman,' said Simon. 'A dead Chairman would probably be the best sort of chairman.'

Gerald and Oliver thought about this for a moment and then nodded approvingly.

'He'd like that,' agreed Oliver.

'Howard is harmless,' Gerald told me. 'But, as you've seen, he does take himself rather seriously. He never has any opinions of his own but if you make the mistake of asking him his view on anything he will always have recently had dinner with someone who is very well placed to know the inside story and to have, therefore, formulated the only truly sound view on the subject.'

'He's writing a book,' Simon told me. 'If you promise to print a review you and he will probably get on.'

Gerald and Oliver both turned to look at Simon. Both were clearly astonished. 'What the hell is he writing a book about?' asked Gerald.

'He's writing a book on the history of public car parks. He knows more about public car parks than any man alive or dead. He can tell you how many public car park spaces there are in any British town or city and if you really must know he'll tell you which car parks have the biggest spaces and which have the most competitive prices.'

'I must buy a copy when it comes out,' said Oliver. 'It'll make a wonderful present for my brother-in-law.'

'I thought you hated your brother-in-law?' said Gerald.

'I do,' said Oliver.

'That's his locker,' said Simon, nodding to a locker behind us. I looked across. The locker was decorated with a large picture of a bull.

'He's very proud of that picture,' said Simon. 'He thinks we stuck it there because he's a strong, powerful leader.'

'But you didn't?'

'We put it there because he's full of bullshit,' said Simon.

As I got out of my wet clothes I found a scrap of paper in my jacket pocket. It was an old receipt on which I had scrawled a silly advertisement. As the four of us left the changing room and headed into the bar I tossed it into a rubbish bin.

CHAPTER EIGHT: ‘I THINK MY CLUBS MUST HAVE WARPED IN THE HEAT’

We were playing a variation on the game of golf which I’d never seen before, but at which Simon was surprisingly adept and about which Oliver and Gerald, although considerably less than skilful, were very enthusiastic. The game required a wide brimmed fedora hat belonging to Oliver and a coffee and gin stained pack of playing cards which belonged to the club and were, when not in use, kept behind the bar.

The game was played from four leather arm chairs on the left hand side of the fireplace. Each player had, in turn, to try to flick a playing card into the upturned hat. A card which fell into the centre of the hat counted as one point. A card which rested on the wide brim of the hat scored half a point. A card which fell onto the carpet counted for nothing. If a card resting on the brim fell into the hat the half point was upgraded to one point; if it fell onto the carpet the half point would be deleted.

The game, designed by Simon, involved moving the hat to 18 pre-ordained positions - or ‘holes’ - around the lounge. Some of the holes were just a few feet away. The furthest ‘hole’ was fifteen feet away. One hole was perched on top of a bookcase; another was half hidden under a low, glass topped table and a one was situated so dangerously close to the fire that the pack of cards no longer contained a seven of clubs, a three of diamonds or a joker. The fact that some holes were nearer to one player than the others was made irrelevant by the fact that other holes were nearer to other players. Games were usually played as medal play - with the total number of points added up at the end of a round to find the winner. Match play tended to be less exciting because of the large number of holes that were halved, with no one scoring any points at all.

‘Brilliant! Good shot!’ cried Simon, as Gerald, the first of us to play the 18th hole, flicked a jack of hearts directly into the centre of the hat.

‘Your shot Oliver,’ said Gerald.

‘Make it count,’ murmured Simon. ‘You need half a point to draw and a full point to win.’

Oliver edged as far forwards as he could in his chair.

‘I’m watching you!’ Gerald said to him. He turned to me. ‘Keep an eye on Oliver’s bum for me, will you? His bum has to remain in contact with the chair at all times - before, during and after he takes his shot.’

‘I’m sitting on the chair!’ exclaimed Oliver. He lifted his bottom, half standing, so that we could see the indentation in the leather cushion of the chair.

‘You’ve raised your bum!’ cried Gerald. ‘You lose a penalty shot.’

‘Don’t be daft,’ replied Oliver, sitting down again. ‘I wasn’t taking a shot. I only stood up to show you that I was sitting down.’

‘Shut up Gerald,’ said Simon. ‘Let him get on with it. This is a pressure shot.’

‘I know it’s a pressure shot,’ said Oliver, sounding rather exasperated. ‘There’s no need to remind me.’

‘Sshhh!’ whispered Simon, laying a forefinger upright across his lips.

Oliver licked his lips, leant forwards as far as he could legally go, studied the hat carefully and prepared his wrist for the flick. Then, after what seemed like an eternity, he sent the card spinning towards its target.

‘Looks good!’ said Simon. ‘Great shot.’

‘It misses,’ said Gerald, with certainty, as though he was watching a replay of something he’d seen a dozen times.

Oliver’s card, for the record it was the ten of hearts, dipped as it slowed, slightly at first and then more dramatically, and landed on the front rim of the upturned fedora. ‘Yes!’ Oliver cried, with delight.

But the card wasn’t flat when it landed and it didn’t stay on the rim. Remarkably, and to Oliver’s horror, it flicked upright, bounced right over the hat, landed on the far rim, where, for a brief moment, it looked as though it would stick, and then slid without further delay onto the carpet.

Oliver groaned. Gerald, beaming like a small boy, clapped his hands together in delight.

‘Amazing shot!’ said Simon. ‘Hard luck old chap.’ He clapped Oliver on the back. I added my commiserations to Simon’s and congratulated Gerald who was so full of pure delight that I don’t think he noticed. It was, I learned later, the first time in his life that he had ever won anything. It was a moment he was determined to savour to the full.

Oliver looked glum. ‘That wasn’t fair,’ he said. ‘Just look at that hat!’

Simon and I looked at the hat. Gerald was too busy feeling pleased with himself to look at anything.

‘What’s wrong with it?’ asked Simon.

‘It’s clearly leaning backwards,’ said Oliver. ‘If it had been flat on the floor my card would have stayed on the rim. It might even have fallen into the hat.’

‘Perhaps,’ agreed Simon, who knew Oliver too well, and had played too many games of golf with him, to argue about something as important as this.

Oliver shook his head sadly.

'You get the drinks, old chap,' said Gerald, still grinning and enjoying his moment of glory. 'I'll have a treble and a packet of pork scratchings.' He saw someone he knew on the far side of the room and, overflowing with delight, waddled over to share some of the superfluous delight with someone else.

Oliver, after taking the rest of our orders, limped off towards the bar. Head down, shoulders slumped it wasn't difficult to tell that he had lost.

'Good excuse that,' said Simon, nodding approvingly.

I looked at him.

'The hat not being flat on the floor,' he explained. 'Good excuse.'

I thought for a moment. 'Yes,' I agreed. 'I suppose it was.'

'Original, convincing and doesn't make the mistake of putting the blame on someone who can argue back,' explained Simon.

I murmured something to make it clear that I understood but that making excuses might be thought to make one look a bit like a bad loser.

'Good heavens!' said Simon, clearly shocked. 'Excuses are pretty well the most important part of golf. Now that you've learned a little about the basics of golf you have to understand the finer points. You can't progress within the game, and become a more accomplished player, without learning the art of making good excuses.'

I looked at him, surprised.

'You can't play our sort of golf without getting pretty good at making up appropriate excuses. Even the complete tyro needs to be conversant with the basics. It's always fair to blame Mother Nature or the groundsman for a bad shot. A gust of wind took it into the trees. The grass has been watered too much or not enough or is the wrong sort or has been trodden down the wrong way. There were pitch marks or spike marks on my line. The sun was glinting off a sprinkler head. I heard a camera shutter. Someone's mobile phone went off on a nearby tee. Some of the worst golfers I've ever met only ever play wonderful shots. Where the ball ends up - in a bunker, a tree or a stream - is a result of something outside their control. Most golfers will tell you that they are desperately unlucky out on the course. A golfer I knew won the lottery twice and still swore that he was the unluckiest man alive.'

I was shocked by all this. I wasn't particularly shocked by the excuses themselves. I was shocked by the fact that I hadn't even thought to make any of them.

'A good golfer will make damned sure he doesn't ever put himself into a position where he might be stymied and unable to use his best excuses.'

I asked him what he meant by that.

'Well, for example, when I first started playing the game I knew a bloke who played with a set of terribly battered old clubs. The heads were rusty, the shafts were bent and the grips were worn smooth. He wasn't a poor man and he wasn't a mean man but he wouldn't change his clubs; wouldn't buy himself a new set, even though it was pretty clear to him and to everyone he played with that they were probably costing him shots. One day I asked him straight out why he didn't treat himself to a new set of clubs. And do you know what he said?'

I shook my head.

'He told me that the clubs he had were a wonderful, ever present excuse for all the bad shots he played. 'Whenever I play a bad shot,' he said, 'I just blame my clubs. Everyone I play with can see the clubs are crappy so they accept the excuse. If I buy new clubs and I still play awful golf shots what am I going to blame?'' Simon looked at me. 'And he was making a good point. Since then I've known several guys whose game has fallen apart after they've bought new clubs. They feel bereft without their old excuse and so their game falls apart.'

I thought for a moment. 'Yes,' I agreed. 'I can understand that.'

'Mind you,' said Simon, 'there is a way out if you find yourself in this situation.'

I waited.

Simon smiled. 'Just blame the new clubs,' he said. 'You simply say that the new clubs aren't right for you. That your game was much better suited to your old clubs and that you miss them terribly and that you wish you hadn't thrown them out.' He paused and wagged a finger. 'In this situation it's vital to have thrown the old clubs out,' he said. 'If you've still got them hanging up in the garage someone will see them and suggest you dust them off and start playing with them again.'

'So you simply turn the new clubs into a new excuse?'

'Absolutely,' agreed Simon. 'The trick is not to over-sell the new clubs too much before you start playing with them. Don't tell everyone that they're wonderful. Explain that your wife has bought them for you and that you feel you really have to dump the old ones and play with the new ones.'

'Prepare the ground for failure,' I suggested.

'Exactly!' said Simon. 'Those are what we call chronic excuses, the sort of excuses you can use for years - whatever the situation might be.' He paused and looked at me. 'You'll need to devise a chronic excuse of your own.'

Gerald, having run out of people to impress with his success, wandered back over and sat down. He was grinning like a Cheshire cat who has just caught a particularly succulent mouse. ‘What are you two talking about?’ he asked.

‘Excuses,’ said Simon. ‘I’m just explaining to Tom how important excuses are to the good golfer.’

‘Not necessary if you win,’ said Gerald with a wink. ‘Winners never need excuses.’ He slumped back into his chair and clasped his hands in front of his ample stomach. He looked like an advertisement for contentment. I’d never seen him, or indeed anyone else, look so happy.

I asked Simon to give me more examples of good excuses.

‘Well, you’ll often hear Oliver complaining about his bad back,’ said Simon. ‘If he hits a ball into the rough he’ll drop his club and clutch his back as though he has been crippled by a sudden spasm which came on half way through the shot and which is, of course, the reason that his ball is currently nestling at the bottom of a rabbit hole instead of sitting up, waiting to be hit, on the nice short grass of the fairway.’

‘That sounds pretty convincing,’ I agreed. I had heard Oliver use this excuse and had offered him sympathy and aspirins. (I usually carry a packet in my golf bag.) It had never occurred to me that Oliver was simply using backache as an excuse for a bad shot. I had always assumed that he had refused to take aspirin tablets because he had a bad stomach or didn’t like taking pills.

‘Another chap I used to play with quite often only ever took out half a dozen clubs. He claimed he couldn’t afford more, though he drove a new Mercedes and lived in a smart five bedroomed house in the posh part of town. He used to say things like: ‘Of course, I had to over-hit that seven iron because I don’t have a six iron’ or ‘Pity I don’t have a wedge. I could have put it much closer with a wedge.’’

‘I like that excuse,’ I agreed.

‘Dull but effective,’ said Simon. ‘Chronic excuses tend to be pretty run-of-the-mill,’ he went on. ‘Flamboyancy doesn’t fit well with an excuse that you bring out twice a week. You need something solid and reliable. On the other hand, one off excuses can be as imaginative as you like. Indeed, there is a strong school of opinion that excuses which are truly bizarre are, in their way, more believable than more mundane excuses. The boy who turns up late for school and complains that the bus was late will get no points for originality and very little sympathy. The boy who reports that he is late because he stopped to help an old lady who had collapsed and that he had to perform closed cardiac massage for forty minutes while he waited for an ambulance to arrive will, unless the school teacher is mean enough to make enquiries, likely to be congratulated and treated as a hero, rather than given five hundred lines and a good belting with an old plimsoll.’

‘They don’t do that anymore,’ I said.

‘What don’t they do?’ asked Simon.

‘Teachers aren’t allowed to belt children with old plimsolls,’ I told him.

‘Good God!’ cried Simon, genuinely startled. ‘How the hell do they keep discipline then?’

‘I don’t think they do,’ I told him.

‘And what do they do with all the old plimsolls?’

‘Haven’t the foggiest. Give me some examples of imaginative golf excuses.’

Simon pulled at an ear lobe (always a sign that he was thinking) and leant back in his chair. ‘The best excuses I ever heard came from a chap I knew who was an accountant. He was a member here for years. I played with him one summer. It was a beautiful hot day and he played terribly. I don’t think he hit a fairway once. He spent more time playing out of sand than off grass. At the end of the round he tossed his clubs into the boot of his car and said: ‘I’ll have to get rid of those. I left them in the boot of my car during the week. They obviously warped in the heat.’

I laughed. ‘And the other excuses?’

‘If he played an awful shot, or missed the ball completely - which he was prone to do occasionally - he would whirl round with a terribly excited look on his face and demand: ‘Did you hear that? I’m sure it was an Egyptian goose.’ He would then study the sky for a minute or two before asking: ‘I got completely distracted during my back swing. Did anyone see where my ball went?’

‘I must remember that,’ I said, impressed.

‘Sometimes the simplest excuses are the most effective,’ Simon continued. ‘If he hit a terrible shot and ended up in thick rough or a huge bunker he would turn round and say: ‘This is a very difficult course for me, you know. Just doesn’t suit my game.’’

‘Another good one,’ I agreed. ‘Presumably he could use it on any course?’

‘Oh absolutely,’ agreed Simon. ‘And then finally there is the good old ‘mud on the ball’ excuse. You can only really use this one during the winter months. But it’s a good stand-by. When your ball goes flying off to the left you just say: ‘I thought I’d allowed just enough for the mud on that ball. But I must have over compensated.’

‘How on earth do you that?’ I asked.

‘Do what?’

‘Allow for mud on the ball?’

‘Haven’t the foggiest, old chap. But the beauty of this is that it suggests to your opponent that you know how to hit a ball in such a way as to allow for the effect of the mud sticking to it. I once knew a chap who practised all sorts of variations on this one. One of his favourites was ‘I thought there was mud on the underside of the ball. I can never play those darned shots properly.’ Another chap I knew was so fond of this excuse that when the club allowed members to pick their balls up, clean them and replace them he steadfastly refused to do so. ‘That’s cheating, old boy,’ he would frown. What he really meant, of course, was that he didn’t want to lose his favourite excuse.’

‘Did his partners take advantage of the rule?’

‘Hardly ever,’ said Simon. ‘Not if he was looking. He made them feel they were cheating even though they weren’t.’

‘Great stuff. Anymore?’

‘I once played with an engineer who told me how he adapted something he’d learnt from a friend who was in the navy,’ said Simon. ‘He’d heard that Morse operators were told not to do any strenuous physical exercise involving their arms before transmitting Morse because it was known that too much exercise will temporarily interfere with the ability of the muscles to perform accurate tasks.’

‘Go on,’ I said.

‘Well this chap said that he’d just done some supermarket shopping for his mother, who was ill in bed, and that he’d carried so many heavy bags that his muscles were ruined for golf. He said his arms had been stretched so far that he could tie his shoe laces without bending down.’

‘Brilliant!’ I agreed.

‘You will have noticed that in addition to creating the excuse he also manages to get our sympathy by telling us about his sick mother and on top of that shows us what a good chap he is because he’s done her shopping.’

I agreed that this was a terrific piece of creative excuse making. ‘Was his mother sick?’ I asked. ‘Had he done her shopping?’

‘He’d never been in a supermarket in his life,’ said Simon. ‘And I found out later that his mother was a permanent resident of a hotel in Benidorm.’

‘Is he still a member?’ I asked.

‘Sadly, no,’ said Simon. ‘Unless they’ve built a course at Wormwood Scrubs he doesn’t play much these days.’

‘He’s in prison?’

‘He was sent down for what he claimed was ‘creative accounting’ and the judge insisted was ‘fraud’,’ said Simon. ‘Unfortunately for him the jury thought the judge’s argument was more convincing.’

Just then Oliver came back with the drinks. ‘I’ve been talking to people about what happened,’ he told us. ‘The general feeling is that if the hat isn’t in exactly the same position when the last player takes his turn as it was when the first player has his go then everyone should retake their shot.’

Gerald, hearing this, sat up. ‘That’s nonsense!’ he cried. ‘If the wind gets up after one player has taken his tee shot the others don’t insist that he has another shot!’

‘It’s not the same thing at all,’ insisted Oliver. ‘If someone moved the green after one player had driven it wouldn’t be fair would it?’

‘How could anyone move a green?’ demanded Gerald, not unreasonably.

‘Someone might say that everyone had to drive to a different green,’ said Oliver.

‘This is silly,’ said Gerald. ‘You just can’t accept the fact that you lost.’

‘It’s not a question of winning or losing,’ said Oliver. ‘It’s a question of doing things the right way. Without rules and laws we would all be living in a state of anarchy.’

‘And what is wrong with anarchy?’ demanded Gerald. ‘I sometimes think we all need a little more anarchy.’

Simon stood up, took two small steps over to where I was sitting and bent down. ‘This could go on for some time,’ he whispered. ‘Do you fancy a game of darts?’

I loathe darts. I have no fancy for it, no talent for it and I have always regarded it as a dull game, best kept for overweight alcoholics. ‘Fine,’ I murmured. ‘Good idea.’

We picked up the drinks which Oliver had bought us, promised to be back shortly, and wandered over towards the dart board.

CHAPTER NINE: ‘YOUR TEE IS IN THE OVEN’

I was sitting in the club house one Sunday morning, wondering whether to stay where I was, sitting by the window, watching other golfers battle against yet another unexpected summer gale, or to venture forth and do battle with the winds myself. The only other member present was an elderly fellow called Onions who had never been known to say anything other than to order more gin and never known to do anything else other than sleep. He slept for upwards of ten hours a day. Onions was, I suppose, a harmless enough fellow though he did have a tendency to snore rather loudly. The snoring did, however, have the advantage of being fairly rhythmical and predictable and after fifteen or twenty minutes I found that my mind would disregard the noise in the same sort of way that one’s mind gets accustomed to, and takes no real notice of, the hum of a central heating system or a ship’s engine.

I was alone because my usual playing companions had all had to cry off for the same reason - it was Father’s Day.

‘It’s Father’s Day on Sunday,’ Simon had moaned. ‘So I can’t play.’

‘Why ever not?’ I asked him.

‘The kids insist on making a fuss of me and giving me a good time,’ he complained, miserably. ‘I played last year on Father’s Day and no one spoke to me for a week afterwards.’

This all seemed rather odd to me. After all, since Simon wanted nothing more than to spend his Sunday at the golf club you would have thought that it would have made sense for his family to allow him to do just that. The whole idea of Father’s Day is, after all, to indulge the father and make him happy.

But I quickly discovered that Simon was by no means the only father who was expected to stay at home and give up his day’s pleasure so that his family could keep him at home and make him happy.

‘Oh no, dammit,’ said Oliver, when he learnt that it was Father’s Day.

‘Not you as well!’ I said in some surprise.

‘Afraid so,’ admitted Oliver. ‘I sneaked out after breakfast twelve years ago and afterwards they made me feel so guilty that I swore I’d never do it again. It wasn’t worth it. My wife told me that the kids had spent a month planning on ways to give me a good day.’

‘How old are your children?’ I asked Oliver. I had never met his wife or his children and knew very little about his home life.

Oliver had to think for a moment. ‘My boy, that’s Nigel, is 22,’ he replied at last. ‘Or he may be 23.’ He paused and thought again. ‘No, 22,’ he said. ‘And my daughter is two years older.’

I was surprised by this. I had expected him to tell me that his children were seven or eight years old.

‘It’s the lady wife who makes all the fuss,’ said Oliver. ‘I don’t think the kids really care. It’s probably as much of a chore for them as it is for me. But the wife regards Father’s Day as second only to Christmas on the family calendar.’

‘Well it’s nice that they all care,’ I told him.

‘I suppose so,’ he admitted. ‘But I wish they cared enough to let me play golf. My idea of a nice, restful day is to play a gentle round of golf with my pals, have a nice pie and chips with a couple of beers, then another round of golf followed up with a cigar and a whisky.’

Gerald’s son was also old enough to have children of his own. But Gerald was expected to turn up for the day’s festivities and to play endless games of blind man’s bluff and garden cricket.

* * *

So, Simon, Gerald and Oliver were all at home being presented with new pipes, carpet slippers and multi-function penknives while I, childless and therefore exempt from the celebrations, was sitting in a virtually deserted lounge bar at the golf club. Onions had got himself into a nice, steady rhythm and all seemed well with the world.

I had, however, survived one scary moment earlier in the day.

Howard, the club Chairman had cornered me and treated me to a fifteen minute monologue on the beauties and practicalities of municipal car parks in North East England. He had, I think, been about to invite me to walk round the course looking for visitors who hadn’t paid their green fees but, much to my relief, he had been spirited away by two members of the Works Committee who had insisted on taking him away for an in depth discussion on the state of the roof of the tractor shed.

I had once expressed mild and polite interest in car parks and Howard had never forgotten this. The result of my indiscretion was that if Howard ever entered the lounge and spotted me sitting alone he would beetle over for an impromptu discussion of his favourite subject.

But the two Works Committee members had saved me from Howard and I was now daydreaming while digesting my light lunch and pretending to plough my way through one of the endless supplements of one of the Sunday newspapers (I doubt if anyone actually reads these things but they scattering a Sunday newspaper around does provide excellent camouflage if one is intent on preserving a little privacy in a public place) when my relatively peaceful reverie was disturbed by a voice I vaguely recognised.

‘Here’s the plumber; he’s not doing anything! He’s new but he’ll do nicely.’

I had been playing long enough to discard the wrist bandolier which the professional had sold me and I now kept a couple of golf tees in the left hand pocket of every pair of trousers I owned. The little mechanical clicker I had bought, so that I keep score without having to carry a score card and a stub of pencil, was now lying forgotten in my desk drawer at work. And instead of using the ball washer I now cleaned my balls by spitting on them and polishing them on some item of clothing. But despite all this I was, I knew, still fairly new at golf.

I opened my eyes, blinked, and looked around. Standing directly in front of me was the woman in the tweed skirt whom I had met on my very first visit to the club. It was, I felt confident, the same tweed skirt that she’d been wearing then. This time she was wearing something above the waist: a cream blouse, decorated with pearl buttons down the front. On her left stood the blonde whom I had also met in the showers. The blonde with the muscles. On her right stood a middle aged man wearing a bright yellow sweater and a pair of lime green trousers.

‘Finishing lunch?’

The remains of a bowl of potato wedges and a tomato salad were on the table in front of me. I confirmed the accuracy of this observation.

‘Good food?’

‘Splendid.’

I’d started eating lunch at the golf club quite regularly. The food was better than that in most of the local pubs and, during the week at least, the clubhouse was usually fairly quiet at lunchtime. Because of the nature of my job my working hours were flexible. If the weather was good I could play a round, or half a round, after lunch and then go back to the office and work in the evening.

‘We were never properly introduced.’ said the woman in the tweed skirt. ‘I’m Flo. Short for Florence. This is my husband Ebeneezer. We call him Eb for short.’ Looking at Flo I realised that she wasn’t quite as old as I had previously thought. She was, I now suspected, somewhere in her mid-forties. I hadn’t liked to look too hard when she was in the shower because she’d been half naked.

‘He’s a plumber?’ said Eb.

I toyed with the idea of trying to demolish this now well established myth but decided that in view of the circumstances in which I had met Flo and Daphne it would be more sensible to say nothing. Fully clothed and shod Daphne looked even more formidable than she had when standing naked in the shower.

‘He sorted out the drain in the shower room,’ said Flo.

‘Have you told him about our dripping tap?’

‘Later,’ said Flo firmly. ‘We need a fourth,’ she said.

‘A fourth?’

‘For a game of foursomes.’

‘Oh.’

‘My usual partner broke his toe,’ said Daphne. She held out a hand. ‘We weren’t ever introduced either. I’m Daphne.’ She crushed my hand with a grip that would have turned Oddjob’s fingers to dust. She was wearing a bright blue sweater decorated with a small pink elephant embroidered above her left breast and a pair of black Lycra cycling shorts which clung to her well-muscled thighs like cling film. She had a blue cap with a long curved peak on her head and her blonde hair was tied into a sort of pony tail and poked through the gap in the back of the cap.

‘Tom,’ I said. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Oh I don’t mind,’ said Daphne. ‘Lots of people have bloody silly names. I’m used to it now. Doesn’t bother me.’

‘No, no,’ I said. ‘About your partner I mean.’

‘Oh don’t be,’ she said. ‘Own stupid fault. In the gym and dropped a pile of weights on his toes. Smashed four of them. Can’t walk.’

‘I haven’t been playing long,’ I said. ‘I’m not terribly good.’

‘Don’t worry about that!’ laughed Daphne. ‘We’ll hold your hand.’

Despite this reassurance I was still a little alarmed. This was the first time I had ever played a game of foursomes although I was, of course, aware of the existence of this rather curious variation on the game of golf.

I had been watching four players meander up the 18th fairway when it occurred to me that there was something odd about the way they were playing. Eventually, it had occurred to me that although there were four players they were playing with just two balls. I had asked Gerald what was going on and he had explained that two players on each side took it in turn to play the same ball.

‘Oh, that’s a good idea,’ I said. ‘I suppose they’ve running a bit low.’ I naturally assumed that since they were now travelling up the 18th fairway they’d had a rather tempestuous round of golf. The alternative explanation, that they were unable to afford more than one golf ball between two, I had suppressed since golfers, like everyone else, are sometimes sensitive to suggestions that they might not be able to afford something and I did not want to upset anyone. ‘Do you think I should totter out and offer them a few more balls?’ I had asked but Gerald had not thought this was a good idea.

‘I like foursomes,’ said Flo, the woman in the tweed skirt. ‘You never have to take responsibility for your own bad shots, and you can always blame someone else when you find yourself with a tricky lie.’

Her husband, Eb, lowered his head a little. I got the impression that he wasn’t quite so keen on the foursome format.

‘Handicap?’ Daphne asked me.

‘I, er, haven’t got one yet,’ I muttered, feeling rather embarrassed by this.

‘Hundred?’ Flo asked Daphne.

‘Fine by us,’ said Daphne.

I looked at her, waiting for a translation.

‘We’re playing for a hundred quid,’ Daphne told me. ‘Fifty each. OK?’

‘Er, OK,’ I said. I had never played golf for real money before.

Daphne turned to the woman in the tweed skirt, who was clearly the spokeswoman for herself and her husband. ‘We’ll need some odds in our favour,’ she said firmly.

‘We’ll give you two throws and a shout,’ said Flo.

‘Not enough,’ said Daphne, shaking her head so furiously that her pony tail swung from side to side.

‘What do you want?’

‘Three throws, two shouts and two negative mulligans,’ said Daphne.

‘We’ll give you two throws, one shouts and two negative mulligans,’ replied Flo after some thought.

‘Done,’ said Daphne instantly.

‘Isn’t he any good?’ asked Eb, as the negotiations ended.

‘Apparently not,’ said Flo.

‘I hope he’s not a bloody ringer,’ said Eb.

‘Doesn’t look like one,’ said Flo.

‘That’s the whole point,’ muttered Eb. ‘They never do.’

I hadn’t understood any of the negotiating that had gone on. ‘What was all that about?’ I asked Daphne as Eb and Flo scuttled off to their respective changing rooms to prepare themselves for the match. Daphne, it was clear, was already changed.

‘Just an informal way of handicapping a match,’ she told me, and proceeded to explain how it worked.

There are, she told me, a variety of ways of giving opponents who are less skilful a chance to play a match on a more equal footing.

First, a player may give an opponent a chance either to pick up his own ball and throw it nearer to the hole or an opportunity to pick up his opponents ball and throw it further away from the hole - and deeper into trouble.

Second, a player can have the right to shout out loud just as a player is taking his or her shot.

‘This can be pretty devastating,’ Daphne explained. ‘You don’t just get a chance to wreck a player’s shot with this. If you use this properly it can destroy a whole round. Every time you stand near to your opponent he’ll be waiting for the shout to come.’

‘Do you have to shout anything in particular?’ I asked.

‘No. Anything you like.’

‘Does it have to be on the tee? Or the green?’

‘No. Anywhere you like.’

Third, there is a negative mulligan. Taking a mulligan, I had already learned from Simon, means simply re-taking a shot that you aren’t pleased with. A negative mulligan is exactly the opposite - it means making your opponent retake a shot when he’s just played a shot that he’s really pleased with.

Fourth, a player who needs extra help can opt for either a simple or a radical clubectomy. A simple clubectomy gives the inferior player the chance to choose and remove a club from the better player’s bag. A radical clubectomy gives the player the chance to remove several clubs - usually three, five or seven - from the better player’s bag. Given the opportunity of a radical clubectomy a wise player will remove the putter and all the wedges - leaving the better player to make his way round the course with only woods and long irons.

Fifth, an inferior player may force a better player to use a single club (usually selected by the inferior player) from green to tee on a specified hole. As a variation on this, the inferior player may simply be allowed to tell the better player which club he must use for a particular shot.

Naturally, all this needs to be negotiated before the match starts. Daphne had negotiated for us two of No 1, one

No 2 and two No 3s and what sounded like a selection from a Chinese menu meant that we had two throws, one shout and two negative mulligans.

Although I suspected that Daphne knew how to play golf I didn't think it sounded anywhere near enough.

* * *

Daphne and I met our opposition on the first tee. Eb was now wearing a pair of bright yellow trousers and a lime green sweater. It didn't seem much of an improvement on his previous choice of outfit. Flo had changed out of the tweed skirt and pearl buttoned blouse and was now wearing a pair of plaid trousers, a thick polo necked sweater in dark blue, a bright red anorak and a blue woolly hat which was decorated with a green bobble. The bobble was, for some reason, on a long piece of wool so that every time Flo moved her head the bobble bounced around like a ball on a piece of elastic.

'I took up golf because I had become a golf widow,' Flo told me. 'I'm not going to say anything about that,' she said, putting an enormous amount of emphasis on the final word. There was a long pause and it was obvious that she was acting as her own straight woman and that the punchline was still to come. 'Though I could say a lot,' she added, looking at me archly. She stared at me for several seconds; so long that I felt distinctly uncomfortable. I couldn't look away. I felt mesmerised, like a rabbit transfixed by a stoat or whatever wild creature it is that transfixes rabbits with its glare. 'He'd been playing for years when I started but I'm a better player than he is now.'

'Oh I wouldn't say that, dear,' protested Eb. 'I could have been a contender,' he added so quietly that Flo, who was rummaging in her golf bag, did not hear him. 'I could have been a contender,' Eb whispered to me. 'At the top level.' I nodded approvingly. I knew the feeling.

Flo found a ball and a tee and handed them to her husband, who put the former on the latter and pulled an elderly looking iron out of his bag.

'It was no life at all,' complained Flo. 'He used to go out on a Saturday morning at dawn and he wouldn't come home until midnight. It was the same on Sundays.'

Eb didn't waste time on practice swings. He stood up to the ball, took one gentle swing and sent the ball flying 150 yards down the centre of the fairway. He bent down, picked up the tee, put it back into his golf bag and turned. 'We always had lunch with your mother on Sundays,' he pointed out.

'That was alternate Sundays and you used to play a round in the morning and another in the afternoon. We got you for an hour in between,' said Flo firmly.

'Shall I start us off or will you?' Daphne asked me.

'Oh you, please,' I said, delighted to delay my entrance into the match for as long as possible.

Daphne unwrapped a brand new ball and put it onto a long wooden tee. She pulled out a driver, tossed the red plastic cover which she had taken from the club's head onto the grass, took two or three practice swishes at a long piece of grass which had escaped the groundsman's mower, and then proceeded to send our ball flying well over two hundred yards down the left of the fairway. It came to rest in thin rough but didn't seem to be lying too badly.

'I am very fond of your mother,' said Eb.

'Then he started playing on weekdays too,' said Flo. 'I got so fed up one day that I left a note on the kitchen table telling him that his tea was in the oven.'

Eb, looked embarrassed but said nothing. Daphne had now put the cover back on her driver and had put her driver back into her bag. She set off down the fairway at quite a pace. She swayed along from side to side as she walked; strolling along like a woman who is in a hurry but wearing wellington boots that are several sizes too big for her. She rather reminded me of the old, pre-slimmed down version of the Duchess of York.

'It was very clever of me,' said Flo. 'When he looked in the oven what do you think he found?'

I hesitated. 'His tea?' I suggested.

'A tee!' said Flo. She laughed rather hysterically. 'It was a trick. I put a blue plastic golf tee in the oven because I hadn't made him any tea.' She looked at me. 'What do you think of that? Clever, eh?'

'Very clever,' I agreed, running after my partner.

It was Flo's turn to play next. She sent their ball bouncing down the right side of the fairway and although it never went more than six feet high it travelled well over a hundred yards in the direction of the green. The right direction.

I made a mess of my attempt to extricate our ball from the thin rough. Instead of reaching the green, as I had hoped, I sent the ball a yard deeper into trouble where it nestled down in thicker grass and looked pretty unplayable.

'Sorry,' I muttered to Daphne.

'Don't worry about it,' she said. She took an iron from her bag and with an astonishing display of power managed to extricate the ball, and send it and a huge divot well down the fairway.

'When do we use our shouts and things?' I asked her, as we walked along together. Eb and Flo were now on the other side of the fairway and well out of earshot.

'Oh, we'll probably wait a while,' said Daphne. 'We'll use them when we can get the best out of them.' I didn't ask anything else. I was using up all my breath keeping up with her. I had never known a woman walk so quickly.

'After that I decided to follow the old motto 'If you can't beat 'em, join 'em'.' said Flo, when we all finally reached the green. I had totally lost track of how many we or they had taken. I couldn't even remember whose shot it was next. 'When I started to play Eb wanted to teach me,' continued Flo. 'He said it would save money but I suspect he was worried about me spending time with another man, no doubt.' She laughed and looked at Eb who said nothing. It was difficult to believe that Eb would have been jealous if she'd gone away for the weekend with the local rugby team. Her laugh was terrifying. She sounded like a pantomime villain. 'It was disastrous,' she continued. She shuddered as though the memory of the experience still upset her. 'I knew instinctively that he was doing everything wrong. And I was absolutely right, of course. Wasn't I, Eb?'

Eb was by now busy cleaning their ball. He grunted something incomprehensible.

'We rowed all the time,' she continued. 'So I took lessons from a professional. Not Walter, of course. A lady professional. Frightfully good and nowhere near as expensive as Walter. A beautiful girl who offers lessons part time. The men don't like lady professionals, of course, so she has to moonlight as an estate agent to make ends beat. Now I play better than Eb. Don't I dear?' She paused and winked to let me know that a joke was coming. 'Not that that would be difficult!' she laughed.

Daphne and I lost that hole.

'Don't worry about it,' muttered Daphne, as we strode together towards the next tee. 'And try to ignore Flo. She'll drive you potty if you let her talk at you all the time.'

'How do I stop her talking?' I asked in desperation.

'Just ignore her,' said Daphne. 'We all do. She soon gets tired and shuts up.'

* * *

We lost the next hole, drew the one after that and lost the fourth and fifth so that by the time we stood on the sixth tee we were in the, it seemed to me, uncomfortable position of being four down. Daphne, however, didn't seem to be in the slightest bit worried. 'We haven't used any of our handicap assets yet,' she whispered, as we stood at the back of the tee. I looked at her, puzzled, and frowned. 'Handicap assets,' she repeated. 'Our throws, shouts and negative mulligans.' Up ahead Flo and Eb were deciding which club Eb should use to drive off with. Flo kept turning round to look at us.

'When do we use them?' I asked.

'Soon,' whispered Daphne. She spoke so low that I couldn't hear her properly. I told her this. She reached out a large hand and pulled my ear close to her mouth. 'Soon,' she whispered. 'But not yet. Try to look shifty and move forward a yard or so.' She let go of my head. I moved forward. I don't think I had to work at looking shifty. I didn't have the faintest idea what was going on.

'Go on, quickly,' said Flo suddenly, looking over her shoulder at me. Eb, who had already put their ball on a tee, took a quick backswing, much faster than usual, and jabbed at the ball which squirted off the tee to the left. It went over a fence and into a field.

'What a pity,' said Daphne. 'Hard luck Eb. Out of bounds. You're playing three off the tee.'

She strode forwards, teed up and drove straight down the middle.

'What was all that about?' I asked her as we walked down the fairway. Eb and Flo were searching for their ball on the other side of the fairway. They second shot had squirted right.

'They were expecting us to use one of our 'shouts' there,' said Daphne. 'Eb got so flustered at trying to make his drive before you could shout out behind him that he put it out of bounds.'

'Ah,' I said. 'So we got a sort of bonus.'

'Exactly,' agreed Daphne. 'That's the whole beauty of free shouts. The longer you go before using them the more the other chaps worry about them. Sometimes one free shout will be enough to devastate the other side - especially if you don't use it until the 18th hole. All the way round they'll be waiting for you to use it - expecting a shout just as they're driving or putting or trying to get out of a bunker. And by the time they get to the 18th they'll be jumping and yipping all over the place.'

She was right.

We didn't see much of our opponents until we reached the putting surface but on the green they were constantly on edge, waiting for one of us to shout and put them off their stroke. We won the hole easily. And we won the next one too, without having to use up any of our throws, shouts or negative mulligans.

* * *

By the time we reached the turn we were just two down.

'I almost feel bad about this,' I said to Daphne as we stood on the tee for the start of the return nine. 'Flo is beginning to look very edgy. Every time I move she jumps a foot. Don't you think we should put them out of their misery and use up our shouts?’

‘With £100 at stake? Not bloody likely.’

We lost the tenth to go back to three down and I suddenly felt less generous. I was beginning to wonder whether Daphne might have left it too late.

On the next hole we had to use up two of our assets to win. After Eb had driven beautifully, and I had hooked my tee shot into a pond, it looked as though we were starting the hole in a bad position. Our second shot was on the fairway but only about 150 yards away from the tee.

‘We really need to win this hole,’ said Daphne. ‘If we lose this one we’ll be four down with seven to go. Not nice.’

I nodded.

‘Take that one again please Eb,’ called Daphne, as our opponents headed off down the fairway. Eb and Flo both turned.

‘We’re using one of our negative mulligans,’ explained Daphne.

‘Oh Daphne!’ said Eb. ‘That was my best drive of the match.’

‘I know it was Eb,’ said Daphne. ‘That’s why we’re making you take it again.’

Eb’s second drive was dismal by comparison. He was so angry he tried to hit the ball still further and ended up hooking it into the same pond that had swallowed my first drive. By the time we reached the green we had taken the same number of shots. It was our turn to putt first. Our ball was a good 40 feet from the hole and Daphne managed to send her putt to within a yard. Flo putted their ball to within inches. When I missed the short putt Daphne immediately bent down, picked up the ball Eb was about to tap in and threw it as hard as she could. It ended up in trees forty yards away from the green. We had used up a shout and a throw on the same hole but we were now just two down.

* * *

We won the next hole by throwing their ball back into a bunker just after Eb and Flo had taken two to get out of it. With six holes to go we were left us with one throw, one shout and a single negative mulligan.

‘It’s going to be close,’ said Daphne. ‘Eb is playing as well as I’ve ever seen him play. I think he must have given up his lessons again.’ She explained that every now and then Eb would take a course of lessons from the professional and that when he did he would become so confused at having to remember where to put his knees and elbows that he wouldn’t be able to hit the ball anywhere he wanted it to go. His swing would look good and his joints and limbs would be perfectly positioned but the ball would either stay where it was or fly off into the nearest patch of jungle.

We lost the thirteenth to go two down again. We had never once been ahead in the match and the only time we’d been all square had been on the first hole.

But the fourteenth was ours.

Eb and Flo were on the green in two. We were on the green in three. Eb’s putt was a long, curling, beautifully weighted shot which hung on the edge of the cup but wouldn’t drop. My first putt was my best shot of the match. From twelve feet I left the ball less than a foot from the hole. If Daphne holed it, which I was sure she would, we would be down in five. But Flo had a putt of less than an inch for a four.

‘Sorry about this, Eb,’ said Daphne, bending down and picking up his ball. ‘But I’m afraid that was just too good a shot.’ She threw the ball into a deep bunker at the front of the green. ‘If you can get down in two from there you’ll halve the hole,’ she told them.

They took three to finish the hole. We won by one.

So, at the start of the 15th we were one down. We had one negative mulligan and one shout left. I didn’t think it would be enough. Daphne was playing well but my inexperience was beginning to show. Occasionally I would hit a decent shot but most of the time I failed to capitalise on Daphne’s good shots and ended up leaving her to play a marvellous recovery shot to get us out of trouble.

We lost the sixteenth by at least four shots and there was no use in wasting our one remaining negative mulligan on the hole.

But the seventeenth was different. Eb’s second shot was beautiful. A long three iron which faded into the green. As soon as the ball had left his club he turned to where Daphne and I were standing and sighed. ‘Again?’ he said, sadly.

‘Afraid so,’ said Daphne. ‘It was just too good, Eb.’

‘I’ll try and put it closer this time,’ he said. But he didn’t. He put too much fade on the ball and ended up in a bunker. We won the hole by one shot and stood on the eighteenth tee one down and with just one shout left.

‘You’ve left it too late,’ said Flo. ‘We know you’re going to shout now. That makes it easier.’ She put a ball on a tee and drove it straight down the middle. Neither Daphne nor I had as much as murmured.

Daphne drove well, fifty yards further than Flo and just as straight. Eb's shot landed just short of the green. My shot almost rolled into a bunker but didn't. Both balls were just short of the green. But we needed to win the hole to draw the match. Flo chipped to about eight feet. Daphne chipped and ran and left the ball two foot closer to the hole.

'If we get this one in you've lost because you can't win,' said Eb, stooping over his putt.

The ball didn't go in. It didn't go anywhere near the hole. It ended up off the far edge of the green. And I thought I was going to have a heart attack. Just as Eb's putter had moved backwards Daphne had let out the most horrifying scream. It was so loud and so fierce that people on the practice green called over to see if everything was well. I was told later that someone in the bar rang the police and told them she'd heard someone being stabbed to death.

'It'll take them at least two to get down from there,' whispered Daphne. 'So you don't need to get the ball in. Just try to put it close to the hole.'

Relieved of the pressure to hole the ball I holed it. We won the hole by two shots and drew the match. Daphne grabbed me and kissed me on the cheek and I nearly had a heart attack again.

She was, I discovered, every bit as strong as she looked.

* * *

'Throw for the win?' suggested Daphne as we stood beside the 18th green shaking hands.

I assumed that she was suggesting that we toss a coin to decide the result.

Eb and Flo conferred for a moment.

'OK,' said Flo. 'Eb will throw for us.'

'I'll throw for us,' said Daphne. She looked at me. 'That all right with you?'

I said it was fine and asked her if she wanted a coin. I told her that I had a lucky sixpence she could borrow if she liked. She looked at me and shook her head. 'No,' she said. 'You don't understand. Eb and I are going to throw clubs to decide the winner.'

I must have looked as puzzled as I felt.

'Whoever throws a club the furthest is the winner,' she said.

'Which club do you throw?' I asked.

'Anything we like,' replied Daphne. 'I always throw a wedge. Heavier club head and shorter shaft. Goes further. I've spent hours testing this out.'

I told her I had every confidence in her.

My confidence was not misplaced. We walked to the driving range for this final phase of the competition. Daphne managed to throw her wedge 28 feet further than Eb could throw his putter. We won £50 each.

'This doesn't mean I've lost my amateur status, does it?' I asked Daphne, as she handed me my half of our winnings.

Daphne thought about this for a moment. 'Safest thing is probably not to tell anyone,' she said.

It had not been an afternoon packed with laughs but I had learned a lot.

CHAPTER TEN: ‘I’LL PUT MYSELF DOWN FOR A FIVE ON THAT LAST HOLE.’

I had been playing golf for some months before I discovered that not everyone always plays the game in the way that might have won the approval of the dear old Marquess of Queensberry, had he been a golfer which, as far as I know, he wasn’t though he did, of course, once threaten to do unspeakable things to Oscar Wilde with a wedge.

I played one Friday morning with a bloke called Kevin. He was, it seemed, one of those people who are unembarrassable. On the first short hole I took eleven. He claimed a three, though I saw him take at least seven or eight swishes at his ball when it landed in thick couch grass at the back of the green.

‘I was just swishing in the grass to clean the sand off my wedge,’ he told me afterwards when I showed surprise at his score.

‘That’s as corny as the apocryphal story of the chap who came out of the trees and insisted that five of the six shots he seemed to have played were, in fact, simply attempts to scare away a snake,’ said Gerald. ‘I didn’t think anyone would dare try anything like that these days.’

‘I once played a foursome with three salesmen from Barnsley,’ said Oliver. ‘They spent half an hour on a tough par five. Balls were raining into the lake like hail and clubs were being hurled through the air so frequently that I half thought of dodging back to borrow a motorcycle helmet from the bar steward. They were hacking and cursing and cursing and hacking and most of the time, although I could hear them, they were so well hidden in the undergrowth that I couldn’t see them at all. At the end of the hole one guy was putting for a four, two were putting for threes and the other, who had five putted to within a yard was standing over his ball muttering that if he missed the shot he would be down for a bogey.’ He looked at me, pursed lips and nodded knowingly. ‘I know what you mean,’ he said. ‘It’s painful to see people cheating so badly.’

‘He didn’t even seem embarrassed!’ I told Simon, Gerald and Oliver. ‘When I spotted him moving his marker a yard nearer to the hole he didn’t even blush.’ ‘He claimed a five on the first,’ I said. ‘But I clearly saw him knock two balls into deep rough and I’m damned certain he didn’t find either of them. He had two drives off the tee - he claimed the first one was just a practice shot. And I counted four putts though he did say at the time that one of those didn’t count because he’d been bitten by a wasp and his arm had jerked involuntarily.’

‘So you think he probably took more than five?’

‘I’m sure he did. At least eleven.’

Oliver shook his head sadly. ‘Sloppy,’ he said.

‘Sloppy?’ I said. ‘What do you mean ‘sloppy’?’

‘It’s difficult to have respect for a chap who cheats as badly as that,’ said Oliver. ‘There’s cheating and then there’s cheating. That’s cheating.’

‘It’s very tiring, playing with chaps like that,’ said Gerald. ‘You can’t leave them alone for a second. If they’re in a bunker you have to be in there with them - counting out loud.’

‘Was there money involved?’ asked Oliver.

‘We were playing for a pound a hole.’

‘Ah, well, to be fair, when money is involved everyone tends to adjust the odds in their favour a bit,’ said Oliver. ‘Unless you happen to a be a great deal better than your opponent, or able to persuade him to give you more strokes or holes than he should, your success will, if you don’t want to cheat, depend upon improving your own game.’

‘And, naturally, that’s out of the question,’ interrupted Gerald, shaking his head. ‘Trying to improve your game artificially, through practice, is cheating. It involves a lot of hard work and effort and is immeasurably tedious.’

Confused by all this, and rather having lost sight of the high moral ground from which I had, I thought, begun my attack on cheating, I stared, first at one and then at the other.

‘It’s very difficult to decide where cheating begins and ends,’ said Gerald. ‘But I do think that practice should be regarded as cheating.’

‘How can practice be cheating?’ I asked, astonished.

‘If you regard cheating as doing something to give you an unfair advantage over your opponent then practising certainly falls into the category of cheating,’ said Gerald. ‘If two golfers play a match together but golfer A has spent several hours an evening practising he’s giving himself an advantage over golfer B isn’t he?’

I agreed that he was. ‘But golfer B could practice if he wanted to,’ I pointed out.

‘He may not be able to practise,’ said Gerald. ‘Maybe he has family commitments. Or a demanding job which doesn’t allow him the time to practice. Maybe he has a dodgy back and daren’t hit too many golf balls.’

‘Moreover,’ continued Gerald, ‘when you think about it carefully, practising is admitting that you aren’t any good. The more you practise the more you confirm that you know you aren’t any good.’ He said that whenever professional golfers suddenly lose their skills it is always because they have been taking too many lessons, practising too much and trying too hard. He told me once that a friend of his had won three club tournaments in a single season but that the following summer his handicap had ballooned from 6 to 16. ‘I know what happened,’ said Gerald. ‘He believed he could become a scratch golfer and spent the whole winter practising hard. And he overdid it. He became obsessed with improving his golf swing.’ Gerald said he went round to the fellow’s house one rainy day and found him practising his swing in the living room. ‘He had a camcorder set up on a tripod,’ said Gerald. ‘And he was practising with a new set of clubs he’d just bought. There wasn’t much room for a grown man to take a full blooded golf swing and after the chap had smashed two vases and a clock Gerald had asked him if he wasn’t worried about doing any damage. ‘Oh no,’ the fellow had replied. ‘There isn’t much danger of that. These clubs are made of titanium and carbon fibre and stuff like that. They’re pretty much indestructible.’ Gerald said he knew then that the fellow was doomed.

I wasn’t sure that Gerald’s argument was entirely logical but I couldn’t think of a way to counter it.

Gerald hadn’t finished.

‘Besides, you could use your argument about practice being available to everyone to condone all sorts of things,’ continued Gerald. ‘If golfer A kicks his ball out of a footprint in a bunker would you say that was cheating?’

‘Of course it is.’

‘But you could kick your ball out of a footprint if you wanted to.’

‘But I wouldn’t want to,’ I said. ‘That would be cheating.’

‘You’ve just argued that practising isn’t cheating because both players can do it if they want to,’ said Gerald. ‘You can’t have it both ways.’

I felt sure that this argument didn’t stand up but I couldn’t put my finger on why.

‘There is, of course, a way of cheating without cheating,’ said Oliver. ‘It involves preventing the person you’re playing against from playing to their ability – in other words, helping them play worse than they might otherwise have done.’

‘That isn’t cheating?’

‘Good heavens no!’ said Gerald, clearly startled that I should even ask the question. ‘You simply win by encouraging your opponent to take more strokes rather than winning by managing to take fewer strokes yourself.’

‘It’s a sport in itself,’ said Oliver. ‘Very nearly an art form actually.’

‘You get to a point as a golfer when you realise that the only way forward is to give yourself a bit of an edge; adjust the odds in your favour a tad,’ said Gerald.

‘Listen,’ said Oliver, ‘After three months I decided that I was going to have to concentrate on the part of the game I’m best at.’

‘What’s that?’ I asked.

‘Cheating,’ said Gerald.

‘No, not at all!’ said Oliver indignantly. ‘Cheating involves breaking the rules. I won’t have anything to do with that. There are better ways to improve one’s chances of winning than through cheating. Legal, subtle ways of adjusting the odds in one’s favour without putting one at risk of getting caught and being humiliated.’

‘We should write a book and call it ‘How to cheat at golf without actually cheating - and definitely without getting caught’,’ said Oliver. ‘We’d make a fortune.’

‘You have to be subtle,’ said Gerald. He turned to Oliver. ‘That’s the keyword, wouldn’t you agree?’

‘Absolutely,’ nodded Oliver. ‘Subtle. Your opponent should never know what’s happening. At the end of the round he should hand over his money convinced that you’re a good egg and have beaten him fair and square. He may feel that he’s played below his best but he’ll believe, in his heart, that on the day the best man won.’

‘So what on earth are you talking about?’ I demanded.

‘The first rule is that you must be friendly,’ said Gerald. ‘Never be obvious. Never try sledging, for example.’

Oliver shook his head and made a face as though he’d sucked a lemon thinking it was an orange. ‘Sledging is terribly crude. Very Australian.’

‘Never try to needle your opponent,’ said Gerald. ‘Not obviously at least.’

‘For example, if the chap you’re playing with hits the ball no more than a hundred yards you don’t laugh at him,’ said Oliver. ‘Instead you find some way to congratulate him. Be friendly. Tell him that for his age he’s doing brilliantly well.’

‘Be helpful,’ said Gerald. ‘If he’s got a problem make sure that you draw attention to it. In a spirit of helpfulness of course. If he’s slicing the ball every time he drives then when you are standing on the tee you should draw his attention to all the problems on the right of the fairway. If he’s hooking the ball, draw his attention to all the problems on the left.’

‘Remind him of the shots he’s missed that would have got him a birdie or won him a hole,’ said Simon. ‘Just asking a fellow if he’s got over the yips can be worth ten shots a round.’

‘Or you can try saying something like: ‘Watch out for those bushes on the left. I hope you don’t go in there.’.’

said Oliver.

‘It’s always wise to draw your opponent’s attention to any hazard - even if he’s nowhere near it,’ said Gerald. ‘Point out bunkers, trees and water even if they’re playing in the other direction.’

‘I once warned a chap about a huge bunker two fairways away,’ said Oliver. ‘He hit his next shot straight into it. Amazing. Until I mentioned it he couldn’t have done it if he’d tried.’

This made good sense to me. I had already noticed that the best way to hit something was to try to avoid it and the best way to miss something was to aim straight at it. I had, for example, discovered that if a bunker lay between my ball and the green then I would be most likely to miss the bunker if I aimed directly at it and tried to knock my ball straight into the sand. This, I had found, worked for any hazard and when I thought about it, it made a great deal of sense. I did, after all, find it virtually impossible to hit a green when aiming for it so what chance would there be of my deliberately hitting something much smaller - such as a bunker?

‘If you hit a good shot give your opponent some ridiculously complicated instructions on how to replicate your success,’ said Gerald. ‘I once hit a real fluke on the third at Bilbury Golf Club. It’s a short hole where the green is surrounded by water and I nearly always go into the lake. On the rare occasions when I have managed to hit the green my ball has always rolled on and fallen into the lake on the far side of the green. I was so sure that I’d lose my ball that on this occasion I put down the oldest ball I’d got in my bag - it had two huge cuts in the cover and a flap of the cover was hanging loose - and just whacked it with a nine iron. It shot right up into the sky, landed on the green and stopped dead. The flap of loose cover was so big you could hear the ball whirring in the air. And it was the flap which stopped the ball rolling onwards into the lake, you see. The chap I was playing with didn’t realise this and asked me how on earth I’d managed to stop the ball so quickly. I told him that I kept my left elbow bent, put all my weight on my left toes, kept my right shoulder down, gripped down the shaft an extra couple of inches and hit across the ball to give it sideways spin.’

‘What happened?’

‘He lost eight balls in the lake, took 97 for the first nine, threw his bag into the pond on the 12th, gave me the £50 quid we were playing for in cash and as far as I know never played again.’

‘You can do that the other way round,’ said Oliver. ‘If your opponent plays a good shot ask him to explain how he did it. Ask him to show you the secret of his wonderfully smooth swing. Once they’ve tried to analyse how to hit the golf ball most people are lost. Look at all the pros who’ve tried too hard; the ones who have won a tournament and then spent the next few months poring over videos so that they can see exactly how they achieved their success. They end up not being able to hit the ball at all.’

‘I always find it’s useful to say something like ‘That’s a very interesting grip,’ said Gerald. ‘It makes them think about things; makes them look at their grip, probably for the first time. Introspection always heralds disaster.’

‘And the beauty of it is that asking for advice makes you seem such a pleasant chap,’ he added. ‘How can anyone take offence when a playing partner flatters you and asks for your thoughts?’

‘Are players allowed to give one another advice?’ I enquired.

‘Dodgy area,’ said Simon.

‘Actually, it’s a bad idea to take advice anyway,’ said Oliver.

‘Why’s that?’ I asked.

‘Golfers have a tendency to lie.’

‘Oh, absolutely,’ nodded Gerald. ‘But remember that if you are asked for advice you only need to lie once.’

I frowned. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘If you lie the first time you’re asked for advice you won’t ever need to lie again,’ explained Gerald. ‘Your opponent won’t believe you. Even if you’re telling the truth he’ll become uncertain. He’ll suspect that you might be double crossing him. By the time you’re played fifteen holes he won’t believe his mum unless she swears on the bible.’

‘Another thing to remember is that you should never, ever bet on your own skills,’ said Oliver. ‘If you bet on yourself to do something you’ll be putting yourself under pressure. Put the other guy under pressure instead.’

‘If you’re playing across water bet them that they can’t clear it,’ said Gerald. ‘If they do it once bet them that they can’t do it again. If they do it twice give up.’

‘If you’ve got a bet on if your opponent is trying to hit his ball over lake you should always try to persuade them to play safe,’ said Oliver. ‘Suggest that they play short. Explain the dangers of playing the shot. Point out that you wouldn’t try it and that they mustn’t feel bad if they decide to take the easy option.’

‘No one can resist a challenge like that,’ said Gerald. I didn’t say anything. I was too busy trying to remember everything I’d been told.

‘Ah, there’s always lots left to learn,’ sighed Gerald.

‘We’re always learning aren’t we?’ said Oliver.

‘Absolutely,’ agreed Gerald. ‘Here’s a little tip, in cold weather always take a hip flask with you but fill it with warm black tea. No milk.’

‘What on earth for?’ I asked.

‘Makes your opponent think you’re getting pissed,’ said Gerald. ‘He’ll probably want to up the bets after a few holes. Especially if you start stumbling around and missing the ball a few times where it doesn’t matter too much.’

‘If you’re playing for money make sure that you remind him of the sums involved at every available opportunity,’ added Oliver.

‘It helps to keep the pressure up,’ explained Gerald.

‘And wear a black arm band,’ suggested Oliver. ‘But don’t say why.’

‘What on earth for?’ I asked.

‘If anyone asks you why you’re wearing it just say you’d rather not say because you don’t want to spoil the mood of the day.’

‘But they’ll think...’

‘Exactly, they’ll think you’ve lost someone close to you. They’ll respect you for turning up to play. They’ll feel sorry for you.’

‘Always the first step down the slippery slope towards losing,’ said Gerald.

‘When you turn up on the first tea have a cough,’ said Oliver. ‘Cough three or four times. Then for the rest of the round, when they’ve got their ball teed up put your hand over your mouth and make it clear that you’re making a great effort not to cough. You never actually cough again, of course. But they’ll be waiting for the cough that never comes.’

‘Of course you have to watch out because the chances are the other chap will be trying all his tricks on you,’ said Gerald, with a warning shake of the index finger of his left hand. ‘So, for example, never accept a ball from your opponent. Even if it looks brand new and he unwraps it in front of your eyes.’

‘Why on earth not?’

‘It might be soaked in vinegar,’ said Oliver. ‘Old trick. Turns the ball into a stone. Hit it and it will wreck your joints, your back, your club and your round.’

‘Always use what look like brand new balls,’ said Gerald. ‘Nice psychological trick.’

‘But brand new balls are ridiculously expensive,’ I protested.

‘You don’t actually use brand new balls,’ said Oliver patiently. ‘Just give some of your old balls a scrub and then wrap them up in wrappers and boxes you’ve picked out of the rubbish bins around the course.’

‘If you know any sexy young things get them to walk round with you,’ said Gerald. ‘Preferably in the shortest skirt and tightest jumper they’ve got.’

‘Bound to put people off,’ said Oliver.

‘I once beat an assistant professional by getting one of our junior typists to caddy for me,’ said Gerald. ‘He couldn’t take his eyes off her. I won five and four.’

‘Never trust opponents who say they always play with the same numbered ball,’ said Gerald. ‘Too easy for them to do a Goldfinger and just slip another ball down into the rough or onto the fairway.’

‘Never trust anyone who doesn’t want help looking for his ball in the rough,’ said Gerald.

‘Mind you I did know a chap who did let people look for his ball then, when they’d found one he would take a good look at it and, if it was in a poor lie, just pick it up, pocket it and say it wasn’t his,’ said Oliver.

‘I once knew a chap who always played for the rough,’ said Simon. ‘He once admitted that he preferred playing from off the fairway because no one could see what he was doing.’

‘If your ball is in the rough you can adjust your lie while pretending to check that the ball is yours,’ said Gerald. ‘Popping a ball on a nice tuft of grass in the rough is like teeing it up. Much better than having to play it off thin fairway grass that has been cut too short.’

‘Watch out for people who use the old Cobb wedge,’ said Gerald.

‘Cobb wedge?’ I said, puzzled. ‘What’s that?’

‘A boot,’ said Oliver. ‘Named after the famous London bootmakers.’

‘Someone who kicks his ball into a better position is using the Cobb wedge,’ said Gerald.

‘That’s cheating,’ said Oliver, wagging a warning finger. ‘Against the rules - even our rules.’ He paused. ‘Well most of the time,’ he added after exchanging glances with Gerald.

‘And learn the rules of golf,’ Gerald told me firmly. ‘One or two of them anyway. No normal human being can possibly know all the rules so learn a few rules very well and you’ll be well ahead of everyone else.’

‘You don’t have to be absolutely 100% accurate,’ Oliver assured me. ‘The important thing is only that you are convincing. And that people believe you.’

‘And never argue about rules when you’re in the club house,’ warned Gerald. ‘Or some blighter will potter off and fetch a copy of the rule book or ring up the R&A and get a ruling.'

'If you keep your pontificating for the course you're pretty safe,' said Oliver. 'When you get back to the club house you can always insist that they've misremembered and are misquoting you.'

'And, as you've learned, remember to watch out for the chap who doesn't add up very well,' added Simon finally. 'There are lots of golfers who ignore shots they don't like and just count their good shots.'

'Chap I knew never took more than five however many times he hit the ball,' said Oliver. 'He would walk off the green after losing three balls and hacking away from one side of the fairway to the other and announce: 'I'll put myself down for a five on that hole.' He would then pull out his card and give himself a five. 'I think that's pretty fair,' he would add, as he put the card back into his trouser pocket.

'I think I've played with him,' I said drily. 'Quite a few times.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN: ‘YOU’LL BE DOING ME A REAL FAVOUR’

Gerald and Oliver had just come back from a golfing holiday. In order to allay feelings of guilt they had bought each other the trip for Christmas. They were both looking tanned and healthy, though I suspected that both of them had put on a little weight.

‘What did you do?’ asked Simon, as we all sat around drinking more of the club’s claret. We’d spent the morning losing golf balls, had had a splendid lunch and were now enjoying ourselves doing nothing much. ‘Lessons? Exercises? Did they video your swing and play it back for you?’

‘Oh we didn’t go on one of those holidays,’ replied Oliver, putting all the emphasis on the penultimate word. ‘Ours was a much simpler affair. Up every morning at 8.30 am. Large cooked breakfast - mainly raw fat and cholesterol with a couple of tomatoes thrown on top to add colour - and then a round of golf. After the morning’s golf we had a huge lunch, usually steak and chips decorated with a token piece of broccoli, and a couple of bottles of the local plonk.’

‘After lunch we played golf again,’ said Gerald. ‘Then a five course dinner and another couple of bottles of wine followed by some of the local brandy.’

‘Then we watched the golf channel on TV and went to bed,’ finished Oliver. ‘Simple sort of holiday.’

‘Pretty good for people who like golf,’ said Simon.

‘Oh people who didn’t like golf probably wouldn’t have gone too much on it,’ admitted Oliver. ‘Not for more than a couple of days anyway.’

‘How long were you there?’

‘Two weeks,’ answered Gerald. He looked around the lounge. ‘Nice to be back, though,’ he said. He looked around again. ‘Being back reminds me how many nutters there are here.’

‘Nutters? What do you mean?’ demanded Simon. ‘Are you impugning the mental health of our fellow members?’

‘You’ll find more fruitcakes here than in any railway station buffet,’ said Gerald. ‘I sometimes wish I was a writer. You wouldn’t have to go out into the world to find people to write about. You could get plenty of material just sitting here.’

At the time I thought it was the claret talking. The club’s claret, which is excellent and was apparently discovered by the Wine Committee on a fact finding mission to Bordeaux in the late 1980s, seems to have a mind and a voice of its own.

But after reflection I realised that Gerald was right. In my first few months as a member of the golf club I met more ‘eccentrics’ and ‘characters’ than one would expect to meet in a decade of normal life.

(People who have no money who lose their minds or behave curiously are invariably dismissed as ‘potty’ and are tranquillised or sedated before being tucked away out of sight in hostels and forced to spend their days wandering the streets, sheltering in public libraries or riding round and round on public transport. People who have enough money to afford to play golf and behave strangely are simply regarded as ‘eccentrics’ or ‘characters’ and will, as long as their money holds out, usually manage to escape the clutches of those modern day Bedlam guards, the mental health nurses and social workers.)

Just two days later events were set in motion which led to my meeting four of the most extraordinary characters I’d ever come across.

* * *

I was standing at the bar ordering a dish of steak and kidney pudding and a glass of red wine when someone I recognised but did not know appeared beside me. He was tall, immaculately dressed in a blue blazer, grey flannels, white shirt, regimental tie and well shined black shoes. His white hair was arranged in what I believe ladies and hairdressers refer to as a ‘bouffant’ style, (a hairstyle popularised by male television presenters anxious to give themselves an extra inch or two in height) and he brought with him a cloud of aftershave. He had a way of moving that didn’t seem to involve legs or feet. P.G.Wodehouse famously described Bertie Wooster’s butler as having shimmered into position and the word describes the form of motion better than any other I can think of.

‘You’re new aren’t you?’ he asked, peering at me as though he were a doctor and I were a rash.

I nodded, confirmed that I was and tried, unsuccessfully, to stifle a cough. The aftershave he was wearing was rather pungent.

‘You’re the plumber,’ he said. It wasn’t a question, it was a statement.

‘Well, actually...’ I began. It was a conversation I was getting so tired of that I had been thinking of giving up my job at the paper and training as a plumber. I thought it would probably be easier to become a plumber than to convince people that I wasn’t one. And I was getting fed up with the fact that people wanted me to be a plumber. People who had greeted me with great enthusiasm invariably seemed to lose interest in me when they learned that I was only a journalist and not a plumber.

‘Rupert,’ he said. ‘Vice President in Charge of External Relations.’ He reached into a side pocket of his blazer and pulled out a small black leather card case. He took a card from the case and handed it to me. I examined it. It contained his name, the name of our golf club and the words ‘Vice President in Charge of External Relations’.

‘Delighted to meet you,’ I said, bowing very slightly.

He didn’t speak but the hand which had given me the card remained stretched out. I assumed he was expecting me to reciprocate. ‘I’m afraid I don’t think I have a card with me,’ I said. I patted my trouser pockets as though wondering if I might find a card case. Naturally, as I had known it would be, my patting was unproductive. I told him my name. His hand remained outstretched. I looked down at it, wondering whether he’d perhaps simply forgotten it was still there.

‘My card, please,’ he said.

‘Oh yes,’ I said, feeling rather embarrassed. I wasn’t up with modern visiting card etiquette. I handed him back his card which he carefully put back into the card case. He then put the case back into his jacket pocket. He checked to make sure that the flap on his pocket was hanging neatly, smoothed the cloth of his jacket and drew his lips back to show me two rows of capped teeth in what I suspect he would have described as a ‘winning smile’.

‘Are you settling in well?’ he enquired.

I thanked him and told him that I was. The barman brought my steak and kidney pudding and my glass of red wine.

‘Ah, I see you like the simple fare,’ said Rupert. ‘You prefer the pudding to the pie? They do good food here don’t they? Do you eat here frequently? You do find the food satisfactory? What do you think of the puddings?’

I looked down and examined my lunch as though it was a surprise to see it there. ‘Er sometimes, yes, almost always, often, very tasty, particularly good,’ I mumbled. Other words dribbled out of my mouth but I can’t remember what they were and they were of little or no consequence.

‘I won’t interrupt your luncheon,’ said Rupert. ‘But we must get to know one another a little better sometime.’ He scratched his chin thoughtfully and then raised the finger with which he had scratched as though an idea had come to him. ‘It’s the Captain’s Cup next Saturday,’ he said. ‘Will you be free?’

To put this simple sounding invitation into perspective it is necessary to insert here a couple of footnotes. One about the Captain’s Cup and the other about Rupert.

First, the Captain’s Cup.

Our club has a number of annual championships. It is, says Gerald, a way of ensuring that almost everyone who wants to win something will end the year with something atrociously ugly in silver plate balanced on their mantlepiece. There are (and this is apparently just a coincidence) exactly the same number of major tournaments as there are members of the club’s Management Committee. But the Captain’s Cup is the most prestigious of the club’s competitions. The trophy itself, is a masterpiece of overstatement; a constantly tarnished extravaganza of Edwardian metalwork; a confection of scrolls, whorls and nymphs garlanded in lilies. Two amply proportioned maidens, hair streaming down their backs, stretch upwards, their bodies uncomfortably arched so that they may serve as handles, support a bowl decorated with engraved names and dates. The cup is impossible to clean properly, though the winners invariably spend many hours working at it with silver polish and chamois cloths. One exuberant winner attempted to clean the twiddlier of the twiddly bits with an old toothbrush but the implement he chose was hard bristled and the scratches which his effort wrought can still be seen. The Captain’s Cup is an invitation only event. No one I knew had ever played in it.

Second, Rupert.

Rupert was, at the time, Chairman of the Club’s Competitions Committee and regarded as a potent force in club politics. When Prince Andrew had visited the club on one of his regular, annual golf course crawls, Rupert had been a member of the party which had met the Royal golfer as he had stepped out of the Royal helicopter, one of the members he had had lunch with and one of the three representatives of the club chosen to accompany the Royal golfer around our ever so humble course. This was something of a tribute to Rupert’s power within the club for several hundred members had fought hard for months for the right to boast of having played alongside the Prince. The machinations and behind the scene trickery which had led to such success for Rupert had been of a quality that would have impressed Machiavelli himself. (In the end the Prince had had to leave after seven holes in order to make a business appointment on a yacht in the Seychelles but to those who care about these things even seven holes played with a real Prince are very welcome.)

* * *

I had, at the time of Rupert’s invitation, played no more than a dozen rounds of golf and the quality of my golf was still something of a curate’s egg.

Despite this it was clear, to me at least, that I would, in due course, be as good a golfer as ever lived. Nevertheless, I still had one foot on the floor and I didn’t think I was as yet quite up to tournament standard.

‘I’m not, er, sure,’ I stuttered. ‘I, er, well, er, am not terribly...been playing very long, you know.’

My power of speech seemed to have deserted me.

‘It’ll be valuable experience for you,’ said Rupert smoothly.

I still hesitated.

‘You’ll be doing me a real favour,’ he murmured.

‘Oh.’ I said. I was flattered. I wondered if he had perhaps heard about the seven iron I’d played earlier that week. From the moment I’d hit the ball I’d known it was going to be a good shot. The ball had landed no more than thirty feet from the pin and although it had rolled back a few feet into the grassy fringe at the front of the green, it had still, I thought, been a memorable looking shot.

‘Absolutely. Start time is 9.30 am. I’ll meet you on the first tee.’

I could hardly say ‘no’ to such a request from such an important member of the club. I nodded, said how delighted I would be and bowed my head as he left as one might do after receiving a commendation from royalty. I was so flustered that I don’t remember much about the next fifteen minutes but when I next looked down at my plate the steak and kidney pudding was gone and so was the wine.

* * *

I spent the next three days standing on the practice ground hitting an endless series of elderly golf balls into various parts of the distance.

These days driving ranges have taken the fun out of practising. People just stand in little cubicles with a bucket of balls and a club. They drag the next ball into position so they don’t have to move their feet. And then: ping, ping, ping. They hardly bother to look up to see where the ball has landed before they’re lining up the next one. They have no need to look where every ball lands because a man in an armoured tractor drives around every so often and rakes them all up.

We don’t have a driving range at our club and nor do we have a proper practice ground. There is a practice putting green, of course, and a small area has been set aside for chipping and bunker practise but for longer irons and woods it’s necessary to walk a couple of hundred yards to what is for all practical purposes a field. The grass is cut occasionally, but it’s still pretty much just a field.

I had to use my own balls (mostly battered, scarred and decorated with corporate logos) and I had to watch exactly how far I hit them (and in what direction) because I had to find them afterwards. Each time I ran out of balls to hit I went and picked them all up myself; using a sand iron to scoop the balls off the ground and into a shopping bag I carried. During those three days I got very good at picking up golf balls. Scooping balls up with a sand iron was, I suspect, the smoothest, most reliable shot I had. I even perfected a way to bounce a ball out of long grass using a nine iron with the blade laid very flat.

‘I don’t like practising,’ Gerald always insisted. He thought of practising as cheating. But I put his pessimistic viewpoint aside and I practised. I practised on the putting green. I practised chipping. I practised bunker shots. But, most of all, I practised my long irons and my driving. Professionals say, quite rightly, that ‘driving is for show and putting is for dough’. But I wasn’t playing for dough - I was playing for show. I wanted to impress Rupert and I was determined not to let myself down in my first tournament.

* * *

When I walked onto the first tee at 9.29 am the following Saturday morning the first thing I noticed was that there were three other men standing there with Rupert. I didn’t know any of them personally but I recognised them all.

The presence of three others seemed odd to me because according to my maths this meant that there would be five of us playing. All four of them already had drivers in their hands and although the previous four were no more than fifty or sixty yards down the fairway my prospective playing partners were already loosening up stiff muscles with some preliminary swings.

The three men were, I knew, called Humphrey, Nigel and Alfred. Humphrey was the only one of the three I knew. He was in his mid-sixties, though he looked older, and still worked as an insurance salesman, though I believe he called himself a ‘Malfortune and Unexpected Incident Compensation Consultant’. He was a cautious thoughtful man. We had occasionally exchanged criticisms of the weather while standing at the bar, and I had watched him tee off once or twice while sitting on the terrace. He had an interesting style, popular with many men of his age. He used a three wood off the tee but his backswing never lifted the club above waist level. This limited the distance he could hit the ball but helped ensure that it rarely landed anywhere but on short grass. He once told me that his philosophy was to keep it short and straight and never take more than two putts. ‘Keep it short, keep it straight and putt like a demon,’ were his exact words. Most memorably of all he had, within days of my joining the club, succeeded in selling me a ‘Trophy Insurance’ policy.

‘If you win a tournament you’ll get to take the trophy home with you,’ he told me. ‘But in the excitement you’ll probably not think about the possibly disastrous consequences that could be the downside of your success.’

He had explained to me that if a trophy were to be stolen while in my possession the club would hold me responsible but that my household insurance would probably not cover the loss. ‘Just imagine the consequences,’ he’d told me. ‘The intrinsic value of major trophies can be substantial. A trophy at one club I know of has been valued at £37,500.’ Having created the fear in my mind Humphrey had, naturally, offered me the palliative. ‘For just £29.99 a year I can give you complete peace of mind,’ he had told me. I’d written out a cheque there and then and had gone home a very relieved man. Humphrey had subsequently sold me insurance cover to protect me against the loss of my clubs, insurance against the cost of all the drinks I would have to buy if I scored a hole in one and insurance against accidentally hitting an innocent passer-by, motorist or house with a golf ball I had struck. Walter, the club professional had tried to sell me some of the same policies but although he was adept at selling pink jumpers and blue golf bags he was not in Humphrey’s class when it came to selling insurance. Humphrey had been far more reassuring.

Whenever I saw Humphrey I always felt slightly nervous, knowing that he was almost certain to find something new for me to worry about. This anxiety was alleviated only by the confident feeling that whatever new worry Humphrey was able to alert me to he would also be able to offer me a cure.

Although I had never met nor spoken to the other two I felt I knew them quite well. To say that I was surprised to see them playing together was a bit like saying that I would have been surprised to see Saddam Hussein and George W. Bush teeing up alongside one another.

I suspect that most clubs contain members who have had minor feuds or disagreements. But within days of joining my club I had noticed that there were two members who seemed to put a good deal of effort into avoiding one another. There had, it seemed, been a rather more than usual run-of-the-mill falling out.

I asked Oliver about it one day.

‘They used to be great chums,’ explained Oliver. ‘Played golf together twice a week for years. They even went on golfing holidays together every winter.’

‘What happened?’ I asked. It seemed difficult to believe that two players with such obvious antipathy towards one another could possibly have once been friends.

‘Nigel got a hole in one,’ interrupted Oliver. ‘Short hole, of course. I didn’t see it myself but it was, so they say, a beautiful shot which landed just on the front of the ground and curled round slightly right to left to fall neatly into the cup. Alfred, his playing partner as usual, hit a good shot too. A nice five iron which landed about eight feet from the pin. Nigel, being a modest sort of fellow, didn’t make a great fuss about his achievement. He was bursting with excitement but thought he’d just quietly mention it when they came to mark their cards at the end of the hole. He wasn’t entirely sure whether Alfred hadn’t seen the hole in one or was just teasing him - pretending not to have seen it.

When they got to the green Alfred concentrated really hard on his putt. He didn’t score a great many birdies so for him this was a special moment; a real, genuine birdie opportunity. He spent ages sizing things up. Eventually, he crouched over the putt. Stayed there for hours. Then hit it and missed the hole by about one foot to the left and eight feet too far. Terrible putt. He was so shaken that he took four more and just managed to salvage a triple bogey. At the end of the hole Alfred turned to Nigel and said: ‘What did you get?’

‘Nigel, who had been waiting for this moment, coughed and, doing his very best to sound nonchalant, replied: ‘One.’

‘Alfred grunted. ‘Your hole then,’ he said.’

‘I got a hole in one,’ said Nigel, in case Alfred hadn’t quite understood.’

‘I heard you,’ said Alfred. ‘You won the hole. Don’t make a big fuss about it.’

‘They finished the round together but as they walked off the 18th Nigel turned to Alfred and said: ‘I will never, ever speak to you again.’

And, said Oliver, he hasn’t. I was about to find out if Oliver was right.

* * *

Nigel was wearing a brown pullover, brown corduroy trousers and a green and yellow checked cap. Alfred was wearing a pair of charcoal grey trousers with a fine chalk stripe and a matching waistcoat and, rather incongruously, a pair of white and red sports shoes and a purple bobble hat. Despite the fact that it was a beautiful summer morning and there wasn’t a cloud in the sky Humphrey was wearing a blue waterproof jacket and matching blue waterproof trousers. The hood of his jacket was down but ready for action. Humphrey was not a man to take chances.

‘What on earth have you got those for? demanded Rupert. He was wearing a bright pink sweater, embroidered with a small tortoise over the left breast, a pair of green tartan trousers and a pair of white and brown golfing shoes in what used to be known as the ‘correspondent’ style (the word referring, I had once been assured by Oliver, not to the sort of superior journalist who, like Boot of Scoop fame reports from some foreign capital but to the sort of person likely to be named as the third party in a divorce action) so popular with the makers of expensive golf shoes.

I removed my bag from my shoulder and looked around. ‘Got what for?’ I asked him, truly puzzled.

‘I don’t need your clubs you idiot,’ Rupert hissed. ‘I’ve got my own.’

‘Shouldn’t we have a bag each?’ I asked. I knew that although the committee had no objection to players sharing balls they did frown on players sharing clubs. This didn’t make an awful lot of sense but I had grown accustomed to the fact that in the world of golf quite a lot of things don’t make an awful lot of sense.

‘You don’t need those,’ muttered Rupert, indicating my clubs with a disdainful wave of a hand, at the same time turning away from his three companions so that they would not hear. ‘I’m only allowed fourteen clubs. It’s against the rules to carry any more.’

I am rather slow witted sometimes. The truth still didn’t dawn on me. ‘I know that,’ I replied. ‘But...’

Rupert took me by the shoulder and moved me aside a few feet. ‘You’re caddying for me,’ he said. ‘You do know that don’t you?’

I had, of course, had no idea that Rupert had invited me to be his caddy. To say that I felt embarrassed would have been a dramatic understatement. There is no word in the English language which adequately describes the way I felt. ‘Right,’ I said, nodding furiously. ‘Sorry. Of course I knew that,’ I lied. ‘I just thought you might like to have some extra clubs.’ I waved a hand about helplessly. ‘Spares. In case you lose some, or break a few.’

‘Take your damned clubs back to the club house,’ hissed Rupert. He looked around. Nigel was bending down sticking a red plastic tee into to the turf. ‘Shan’t be a moment,’ Rupert called out brightly. ‘Just clearing up a misunderstanding with my caddy.’ He turned back to me. ‘You can take those back to the club house,’ he told me loudly. ‘I’ll use this set today.’

Blushing loudly I hurried back to the club house. Behind me I heard Rupert explaining that I was new and had not realised that he would be taking the set of clubs he had chosen to use to the tee himself. ‘Well-meaning fellow,’ I heard him say. ‘But not the brightest of God’s creatures.’ I think I heard him add something about employing me only because he felt sorry for me and, although I may be wrong about this, I fancied that I heard the word ‘plumber’ somewhere in the monologue.

* * *

I had never seen Rupert play golf and I had assumed, quite wrongly as it turned out, that someone of such stature in the Club must be a skilful and accomplished player. This was not the case. The only positive thing you could say about Rupert’s golf game was that there were no weaknesses. There was no part of his game that let him down.

Unfortunately, this was the case only because Rupert’s game was uniformly bad. Just as there were no weaknesses so, by the same token, there were no strengths.

From the tee his drives were so wayward that I soon decided that the safest place to stand would have been directly in front of him if that had been allowed. That was the only place where a bystander could guarantee not to be hit by the ball.

Rupert’s drives rarely hit the fairways at all and although he inevitably played a high proportion of his shots from the rough and from the bunkers he had not, it seemed, acquired any special skills in helping his ball to progress from these inevitable hazards.

On the green Rupert’s putting was both wayward and timid and his ball, like France, always seemed to be just one revolution short of success and happiness. It is not often that one sees a golfer consistently miss putts which are less than twelve inches long and on the first green, when Rupert took three from less than a yard, I was reminded of a match I had played with Gerald and Oliver.

‘How many did you take?’ Gerald had asked Oliver as we had all marked one another’s cards. ‘It would have been a fifteen if that one had gone in,’ replied Oliver who was having a day which would have inspired a less committed enthusiast to resign his golf club membership and take up something less taxing. ‘Good heavens,’ said Gerald. ‘How did you manage that?’ ‘It was that putt I missed coming back,’ said Oliver. ‘If that had gone in I would have got down in fifteen.’

Naturally, however, despite the shortcomings in his game, Rupert was, like virtually every golfer on the planet, secretly and quietly convinced that if the Gods would but look on him with more generosity in their hearts, he would be able to carve a successful career as a tournament professional. ‘The only difference between me and Jack Nicklaus,’ he said as we eventually left the first green where he had tackled putts from virtually every possible angle, ‘is that Nicklaus doesn’t have to worry about earning a living selling houses. If I had the time to play more often - and a little of his luck - I would be the one with a living room full of ugly silverware.’

By the end of the second hole it was clear that Rupert was not playing at his best and was becoming increasingly irritable. When I had told my usual playing partners of my good fortune in being invited to (as I thought) play in the Captain’s Cup Gerald had irreverently described my benefactor as suffering from Irritable Person Syndrome and although, generally speaking, I thought this a little unfair I had to admit that there were moments when the description seemed to fit. The problem was that as the day went on the moments were beginning to run together and turn into periods.

In addition, the unspoken but almost tangible antipathy between Nigel and Alfred meant that the game was being played in the sort of atmosphere most commonly associated with family Christmases and a certain type of wedding.

* * *

At the seventh hole the fairway runs alongside a road and a lorry driver who had parked in a lay-by to eat his sandwiches watched us as we made our way, rather erratically, towards the green.

‘Can’t you move that fellow along?’ Rupert demanded.

‘Which fellow?’

‘The lorry driver. He’s watching me.’

‘He’s eating his lunch,’ I said. ‘I don’t think I can move him along. He’s parked. He’s not doing anything illegal.’

‘He’s intruding upon my privacy. It’s harassment,’ complained Rupert.

I tried to explain again that the lorry driver was merely amusing himself while he ate his lunch. I did not mention, because it did not seem to the point, that even though I could only see his top half he seemed to be a substantial fellow. I long ago decided not to pick fights with edentulous men who shave their heads and have their forearms decorated with tattoos. There are no logical reasons for this although I suppose that fear and self-preservation are logical enough as reasons go and I am old enough to regard fear as a virtue rather than a weakness.

‘You’re afraid of him,’ said Rupert scornfully.

‘You’re right,’ I nodded. ‘And I think he’s got a dog in the cab with him. I’m sure I heard something bark.’

‘It’s probably just a poodle,’ said Rupert. ‘One of those ornamental things with a red collar round its neck.’ He took a huge swing at his ball, which was lying half buried in thick grass, and successfully moved it nearly a foot, though not, sadly, in the direction of the green.

‘I don’t think he’s the sort of chap to have a poodle,’ I said. ‘He looks more like an Alsatian or a Doberman chap. Possibly a Pit Bull terrier.’ I adjusted the bag on my shoulder. ‘Anyway,’ I said, ‘you must be used to playing in front of an audience. When you played with Prince Andrew there were at least a dozen blokes walking around with you. Great big chaps who all seemed to have hearing problems.’

‘They weren’t watching the golf,’ said Rupert. ‘They were checking to make sure that there weren’t any terrorists hiding behind trees. They were just there to protect us.’

I liked the royal use of the word ‘us’, suggesting that the men from Special Branch were there as much to protect Rupert as to protect Prince Andrew, but I didn’t say anything about it.

‘Professionals perform well before an audience,’ Rupert said, ‘only because they are primarily entertainers. Exhibitionists. Show offs. But I consider myself more an artist. How do you think that sensitive chap who cut off his ear would have managed if he had looked up and seen small boys washing him dip his brush in the ochre?’

‘Van Gogh,’ I said. It did occur to me to point out that Rupert would not have much chance of building a career as a tournament professional, playing in front of crowds of thousands, if he couldn’t cope with a lorry driver idly peering over the hedge at him. But I didn’t mention that either.

‘Who?’

‘The chap who cut off his ear,’ I said. ‘He was called Van Gogh.’

‘I know that,’ said Rupert, giving another display of irritability. ‘Foreign I expect.’ He hit a seven iron another three yards though at least this time the ball ended up closer to the green at the end of the shot than it had been at the start of it. ‘Is that five or six I’ve taken?’

‘Eleven.’

‘It can’t possibly be.’

It is well known to doctors that smokers and drinkers, when asked about their habits, always halve what they say they use. The fellow who smokes 60 a day will say he smokes 30. The chap who drinks a bottle of wine a day will say he occasionally drinks a couple of glasses with his dinner. Some golfers are the same. I’m not being critical about this. There is nothing particularly bad about it. But it is a fact. Some golfers automatically adjust their score. Naturally, like smokers and drinkers, the totals are always adjusted downwards. It becomes such a habit that they often don’t even know they’re doing it. Rupert was one of the golfers who are most ruthless in adjusting their scores.

‘It’s eleven,’ I told him again. ‘If you are counting all the times you hit the ball. You missed it twice but I didn’t think you’d want to bother with those.’

‘You don’t have to sound so damned pleased about it.’

‘I’m not pleased about it,’ I protested. I was getting a little fed up of Rupert’s patronising and arrogant tone. ‘You asked me how many shots you’d taken and I told you.’

‘Not that I care,’ said Rupert, suddenly changing his tune. ‘It’s just a game after all.’ I nearly fainted when I heard this. Out of Rupert’s mouth it sounded like blasphemy.

* * *

If Rupert's behaviour merited the adjective 'irritable' it is difficult to know how best to describe Nigel and Alfred. They hated one another so much that it quickly became clear that the failure of one to succeed would please the other far more than his own success. Whoever had selected Nigel and Alfred for the same quartet in the Captain's Cup must have been inspired by a strong sense of mischief-making.

On the first tee Nigel pulled his tee shot into a patch of bracken about a hundred and twenty yards away from the tee and approximately twenty yards from the fairway.

'Tell him that even for him that was a pathetic drive,' Alfred told me. As the only caddy in the bunch he had clearly decided that I was lowly enough to be appointed go-between for the duration of the match.

'Tell him that if I was him I'd would wait until I'd hit my drive before I started making rude comments about other people's drives,' replied Nigel. He then watched with unconcealed delight as Alfred sliced his tee shot into a thick patch of gorse and brambles.

On the first green the two of them almost came to blows.

'He doesn't want me to hole that does he?' Nigel asked me, waving his putter towards his ball which was about eighteen inches from the hole.

'The competition is, strictly speaking, played according to medal play,' Rupert quietly reminded him.

Nigel glared at him. 'I wasn't talking to you,' he snarled.

'If he was talking to me then the answer is 'No',' said Alfred. 'I don't want him to hole that putt.'

Nigel bent down, picked up his ball and set off towards the next tee, showing no interest in the other three players.

'Foul. Tell him he loses the hole. He's disqualified. He's penalised two strokes for touching the ball!' I turned round and saw Alfred, now frothing at the mouth, pointing first to the hole and then to Nigel.

Nigel, hearing this, turned. 'Ask him what the devil he's on about,' he said to me. 'He said he didn't want me to hole it.'

'Ha!' said Alfred. 'Tell him I didn't want him to hole it because I wanted him to miss. But that didn't mean I gave him permission to pick up.'

Feeling a bit like a translator at a cold war summit meeting I repeated this to Nigel.

'Tell him that was a dirty trick,' said Nigel. 'Just what I'd expect of him.' He spat out the words as though it pained him to have them in his mouth. He then walked back towards the hole, replaced his ball, though this time no more than six inches away from the hole, and tapped it in. 'Ask him if he's satisfied now,' he snarled.

Alfred wasn't satisfied and insisted that he intended to report the whole incident and the question of deciding on an appropriate punishment to the match referee. He would, he told us, be calling us all as witnesses.

* * *

'It's your job to encourage me,' complained Rupert as we rather painfully made our way along the eighth fairway. 'You have to give me confidence.'

'Sorry,' I said. 'Two holes ago, when I told you not to worry too much about it when you took six getting out of that fairway bunker, you told me to shut up and just give you the clubs.'

'I was feeling edgy,' said Rupert. 'As a caddy you're supposed to understand that. Try and give me self-belief.' He held out a hand.

'What do you want?' I asked him.

'My driver,' he said.

'Are you sure?'

'Yes. I'm sure. Why?'

'Because the last three times you've used a driver you've lost your ball.'

'I don't care,' said Rupert, a trace petulantly, I thought. 'I want my driver.'

'OK,' I said, pulling his driver out of the bag and handing it to him. 'But you should know that the ball you're playing is the last one in your bag.'

'Making sure I had enough balls was your job!' complained Rupert.

'You packed the bag,' I reminded him. 'Anyway, when we started I counted the clubs and the balls you'd got. We started with 14 clubs and 24 balls. I thought it would be enough of both.'

'How many have I lost?' he asked.

'One club and 23 balls,' I replied. 'Your four iron is in a pond about half a mile back. I have no idea where the balls are. But that's why you've only got that one left.'

Rupert sighed and looked at me rather searchingly, as though trying to decide whether I might have been stealing his balls. 'Heaven knows where they've all gone,' he said. 'I haven't played that badly.' He swished his driver to and fro and then handed it back to me. 'I think my game has been pretty good, generally speaking. Don't you agree?'

‘Well, sort of, I suppose,’ I agreed, rather half- heartedly.

He stood back from the ball. ‘Give me a seven iron,’ he said. ‘What do mean ‘sort of’? What have I done wrong?’ he demanded. ‘Tell me!’

‘You’ve been a little bit wayward,’ I said. ‘From time to time,’ I added.

‘Everyone hits the rough occasionally,’ protested Rupert. ‘Even the professionals.’

‘But the pros do hit it further,’ I pointed out. ‘On the last hole you only hit your drive about fifty yards and it still went into a bush. The average pro could hit it further than that if he used the bag to hit the ball.’

‘Distance isn’t everything,’ responded Rupert immediately. ‘Besides, that wasn’t my fault!’ he said, rather angrily. ‘That bush was standing all by itself. It was in a perfectly clear piece of ground. I was just unlucky that it got in the way of my ball.’

‘The bush was in the rough,’ I corrected him.

‘It wasn’t really rough,’ insisted Rupert. ‘Not very rough.’

‘It was rough,’ I muttered. ‘The grass we were standing in was so deep I couldn’t see my feet.’

‘I feel terrible now,’ said Rupert.

‘You have to think positive,’ I told him.

‘I am,’ he said, settling down over the ball. ‘Thanks to you I’m positive that this ball is going straight out of bands.’ He swung and missed the ball. ‘Damn,’ he muttered. ‘Is anyone looking?’

‘No,’ I told him. ‘Everyone else is too busy cheating to take any notice of what you’re doing.’

‘They’re cheating?’

‘A bit.’

‘That was just a practice swing,’ said Rupert. ‘It doesn’t count.’

‘OK,’ I said. I really didn’t care. I just wanted to get back to the club house and order a glass of whatever the barman had got that contained the highest percentage of alcohol.

* * *

On the ninth tee Alfred was so disgusted with his drive that he ran towards the nearest tree and started attacking it with the three iron he’d used to play the shot. He didn’t finish his attack until the other three had hit their drives. The tree seemed able to absorb Alfred’s anger but by the time Alfred ran out of steam the bottom end of the shaft of the three iron was clearly bent.

This probably would not have mattered too much but for the fact that the three iron wasn’t the first club Alfred had damaged. His driver, two iron, four iron, six iron and both sand wedges were now all showing noticeable signs of what might, I suppose, be loosely referred to as ‘wear and tear’ though I know others do call it ‘fairway rage’.

It wouldn’t have mattered at all if Alfred had either dumped the damaged club into a nearby waste bin or had dropped the damaged club back into his bag and forgotten about it.

And it wouldn’t have mattered at all if Alfred hadn’t been playing with someone who hated him more than he hated death itself and whose main reason for living was clearly to find opportunities to criticise him.

Since the number of clubs available to him was now becoming severely limited Alfred pulled out his three iron for his second shot. Given the identity of his playing partners this was what is known in polite circles as an error of judgement but usually referred to more colloquially as a cock-up.

‘Ha!’ cried Nigel, making no attempt to conceal his delight. ‘Tell him that he’s going to be disqualified for that!’

Since Nigel had a voice which, if it had been more commonly available would have made the invention of the mobile telephone superfluous and since his declaration could, consequently, probably be heard several counties away it seemed unnecessary actually to go through with the business of passing on this message. So I didn’t.

‘Tell him! Tell him!’ shouted Nigel.

Wearily, I passed the message on to Alfred who was determinedly pretending not to have heard it.

‘Ask the stupid prat what the hell he’s talking about,’ said Alfred.

I passed this on. Rupert and Humphrey had now joined us.

‘Tell the stupid pillock that if he knew anything about the rules of golf he would know that the stupid prat is talking about the fact that if you use a club which you’ve modified you get disqualified!’

I repeated this.

‘Ask him what the hell he’s talking about!’ said Alfred. ‘I haven’t modified this club at all.’

‘Yes you have!’ crowed Nigel, so thrilled that he forgot himself and spoke directly to Alfred. ‘You bent it when you hit that tree!’

‘That’s not a modification!’ responded Alfred, with a sneer.

‘‘Tis! Tis! Tis! You’ll get disqualified. You’re out of the tournament.’ Nigel danced a little jig of joy.

‘‘Tisn’t! Tisn’t! Tisn’t!’ insisted Alfred. ‘I won’t.’

I gazed in astonishment as these two grown men continued to snarl insults and accusations at one another.

'You're a cheat! You'll be exposed and humiliated!' said Nigel, bubbles of saliva at both corners of his mouth.

Silence.

Nigel repeated his accusation and his prediction.

Silence.

And then slowly, very slowly, Alfred's knees buckled and with a gracefulness that to my knowledge he had never shown before, he fell to the ground.

For a moment or two no one said anything. Even Nigel was unusually quiet.

'He's collapsed,' said Rupert, quietly.

'He's dead,' said Humphrey, with strange certainty.

'Don't be silly,' said Rupert. 'How can you tell?'

Humphrey was the first to move. He strode across the turf to where Alfred was lying, stooped down and felt for a pulse. 'He's dead,' he said a moment or two later. 'Massive heart attack would be my guess.' He stood up and shook his head sadly. 'He should have bought my 'Accidental Death on the Course' policy,' he said to no one in particular. He looked around, gazing at each of the other two in turn. 'Very reasonable premiums,' he said. 'Excellent cover for the bereaved spouse.'

'The bastard!' cried Nigel, now almost speechless with rage. 'He died so that I couldn't have him disqualified.' 'I don't think you can say that,' said Rupert. He paused and thought for a moment. 'Not with any certainty,' he added.

'What are we going to do with him?' asked Humphrey.

We all looked at Humphrey. None of us spoke.

'We can't leave him lying in the middle of the fairway,' Humphrey pointed out. 'It wouldn't matter so much if he was in the rough but for once he's found a really decent lie.' He looked first behind us to the tee, and then ahead of us to the green. 'He's lying just where a poor club player will land a decent drive,' he said.

'Humphrey is right,' said Nigel. 'The pillock will be a playing hazard if we leave him here.'

'I wonder if you can move your golf ball if it lands on a dead body?' Rupert asked no one in particular.

'I'm pretty sure you can,' said Humphrey. He thought for a while. 'But either way I think we should move him.'

'Where to?' asked Nigel. 'If we take him back to the golf club we won't be able to finish our rounds and we'll all be disqualifying ourselves from the tournament.'

'We'll all be disqualified anyway,' said Rupert, paling as he realised the full extent of the disaster. 'Alfred was marking my card. I can't switch markers half way through the match.' He slammed the club he was holding (I think it was a 5 iron) against the turf and cursed roundly. 'This was my best chance of winning this tournament,' he complained.

'We aren't any of us going to win,' said Humphrey, with rare honesty.

'You don't know that,' protested Rupert. 'It's a handicap tournament. Last year the winner went round in 85 but had a net score of 61 after his handicap had been deducted.'

'We could just take the silly bastard back with us,' said Nigel. 'And pretend he died after we'd finished our rounds.'

Everyone looked at him. I was speechless. I couldn't believe they were treating Alfred's death so callously.

'We could,' insisted Nigel. He looked at Rupert. 'The plumber could carry him,' he said. 'If you carry your own clubs.'

'Er...I don't er...,' I began. I didn't fancy the idea of lugging a dead body around the golf course with me. Alfred was no Sumo wrestler but he was not a small man either.

'Splendid idea!' cried Rupert, full of enthusiasm. 'My caddy can play Alfred's shots for him and mark my card. Then as we walk off the 18th Alfred can suddenly collapse and die.' He looked around, grinning broadly, and rubbed his hands together.

'Make sure he signs your card first,' said Nigel.

'Oh absolutely,' said Rupert. He took the bag I was carrying from me and swung it up onto his shoulder. 'What the hell have you got in here?' he demanded.

'Your clubs,' I told him. 'Your water, your spare sweaters, your towels...'

'It doesn't usually weigh this much,' complained Rupert.

'You usually use a trolley,' I pointed out.

'Has Alfred got any balls?' asked Rupert, cutting me short and pointing to the dead man's bag. 'Have a look in his bag, will you?'

I put my foot down at this. Robbing the dead rather reminded me of stories I'd heard of scavengers taking money, rings and gold teeth from the corpses of fallen soldiers on the battlefield.

'He doesn't need them now, does he?' said Rupert. He unzipped one of the compartments on Alfred's bag, rummaged around inside and brought out a handful of balls. 'These will do to start with,' he said. He zipped the compartment back up again and put Alfred’s balls into his own bag.

‘Who’s going to pull Alfred’s trolley?’ asked Humphrey.

‘My caddy can do that,’ said Rupert, looking at me.

I stared at him, disbelievingly.

‘You’re not carrying my bag now,’ he explained.

‘I can’t carry Alfred and pull his trolley!’ I protested. I walked over to where Alfred was still slumped on the grass. I felt sorry for the dead man. He hadn’t been a particularly pleasant fellow but I didn’t like the way the others had ignored his demise and had thought only of themselves. An idea was already forming in my mind.

‘Put your bag on Alfred’s trolley,’ Humphrey suggested to Rupert.

‘That’s a good idea,’ agreed Rupert. He swung his bag off his shoulder and onto Alfred’s trolley. With some difficulty he managed to strap his bag alongside Alfred’s bag. ‘It’s very heavy now,’ he complained.

‘It will be,’ said Nigel. ‘You’ve got two bags on there.’ He thought for a moment. ‘There’s a rubbish bin on the next tee,’ he pointed out. ‘When we get there see if there’s anything in Alfred’s bag that you chuck out.’

‘There’s a group just moved onto the tee behind us,’ said Humphrey. ‘I think we should play on.’ He pulled out a club and walked over to where his ball was lying. The others followed his example, splitting up and moving off to where their balls were lying (or, in the case of Rupert, to the patch of rough where he thought his ball had landed). I was left to pull Alfred to his feet, wrap my arm around his shoulders and stagger off down the fairway with him. His feet dragged behind, gouging lumps out of the turf as we went.

I got to the green behind Nigel and Humphrey but ahead of Rupert who arrived, huffing and puffing and cursing as he pulled his doubly laden trolley. I lay Alfred down on the grass beside the green and slumped down beside him. I was exhausted already and felt that if a doctor looked at the two of us he would have a job to decide which of us to resuscitate and which to bury.

‘Can’t I just dump Alfred’s bag,’ Rupert asked the others. ‘This bloody trolley is unmanageable with two bags on it.’

‘No!’ insisted Humphrey. ‘We can’t go back without Alfred’s bag. Remember Alfred is supposed to be still playing golf.’

Rupert moaned a bit but when he’d finished putting he rummaged around in Alfred’s bag and pulled out everything he thought he could throw away. Two perfectly good jumpers, a set of waterproofs, some spare gloves and a large box of toffees all ended up stuffed into the waste bin on the next tee.

‘Put me down for a five,’ Rupert told me. ‘You’re scoring for me now.’ He pulled out his own scorecard. ‘What the hell shall I put down for Alfred?’

‘Three,’ I said.

‘Never!’ said Rupert.

‘Three,’ I insisted. I turned to the others. ‘And if you want me to take Alfred to the 18th one of you is going to have to give me your trolley,’ I said.

Nigel and Humphrey looked at me as if they were bank managers and I had asked them for a loan with no interest.

‘Can’t do that, old chap,’ said Nigel.

‘We need our trolleys,’ said Humphrey.

‘Then let’s leave Alfred here and go back to the pavilion for help,’ I said.

Eventually, with great reluctance, Humphrey agreed to let me use his trolley. Nigel refused point blank to let Alfred ride on his trolley even if I pulled it. We strapped Alfred onto Humphrey’s trolley and put Humphrey’s bag onto Nigel’s trolley. Nigel and Humphrey agreed that they would take it in turns to pull the trolley carrying their two bags.

‘No one is helping me and I’m pulling a trolley with two bags on it,’ moaned Rupert, but no one took any notice of him.

‘Shall I hit a ball for Alfred from the tee?’ I asked, after the other three had taken driven off.

They looked at me.

‘It’ll look a bit strange if only three of you are playing,’ I pointed out.

‘He’s right,’ said Humphrey to the others. He looked at me. ‘But you’ll have look a bit more like Alfred when you’re playing,’ he said. ‘Put his bobble hat on.’

I protested about this but the others insisted and reluctantly I could see their point. I did have to look a bit like Alfred if I was going to be seen playing alongside the other three. And the bobble hat was pretty conspicuous. So I put the bobble hat on, pulled out Alfred’s three wood, found a ball in his bag (Rupert had taken most of them but there were one or two left) and hit it.

We went on like this for several more holes and I enjoyed having a chance to play a little golf at last. Once I had adjusted his position and fastened him up tightly so that he didn’t slide about Alfred was surprisingly easy to wheel along on the golf trolley. We did topple over sideways a couple of times but I seemed to have less trouble with him than Rupert, Nigel and Humphrey had pushing their trolleys containing two golf bags. To begin with the biggest problem I had was that every time I wanted to play a shot I had to run over to where Rupert was, pull a club out of Alfred’s bag, run back to where Alfred’s ball was lying, play my shot and then return the club to the bag on the trolley Rupert was pushing. This became tedious after a while and I solved the problem by keeping a few irons stuffed down the front of Alfred’s trousers. I decided that I could manage along the fairway with a three iron, a five iron, a seven iron and one wedge. On the tees and greens, of course, there were no problems because there we were all together and I could help myself to woods, sand iron or putter without any problems.

As we played on I was delighted to see that Alfred was having far more success dead than he had ever had alive. On one of the short holes he even managed to get a hole in one. It was, they all agreed, the first hole in one he’d ever achieved. Nigel wasn’t pleased but I didn’t give an option.

* * *

The first problem occurred on the 16th hole when Humphrey, who was about a hundred yards ahead of me, suddenly called my name and started jumping up and down and waving. I thought at first that he’d perhaps holed a long iron but after I had acknowledged his wave and shouted a what I hoped was appropriate ‘Good shot’ he kept leaping up and down and waving and shouting. I noticed, too, that he was constantly looking over his shoulder as though something was worrying him. I left Alfred parked on his trolley in the rough (his drive, which had been rather wayward, had landed in some thick grass and if we hadn’t been playing Rupert’s rules would have been unplayable) and jogged up to Humphrey. He walked back to meet me as fast as his legs would carry him. He was still wearing his waterproofs and he made a strange sound when he moved. It was partly a rustle and partly a creak.

‘It’s the Club Captain,’ wheezed Humphrey, gasping for breath and pouring sweat.

‘What is?’ I asked.

‘Over there,’ wheezed Humphrey, pointing behind him. ‘He’s making one of his tours of the golf course. What are we going to do?’

‘Why don’t you take your waterproofs off?’ I asked him. ‘You must be boiling.’

Humphrey looked at me as though I’d made an indecent suggestion. ‘It might rain,’ he told me, glancing up at the perfect blue sky above us. There wasn’t a cloud to be seen for miles. ‘The weather forecasters definitely said there would be rain.’ He shrugged the weather forecast aside. ‘I don’t have time for that now,’ he said. ‘The Captain will be here in five minutes.’

‘Which Captain?’

‘The Club Captain.’

‘What does he want?’ I asked.

‘The Captain always walks round the course during the Captain’s Cup,’ explained Humphrey. ‘It’s a tradition.’

‘Ah,’ I said. I had been a member long enough to know that the word ‘tradition’ can be used to excuse any strange or otherwise inexplicable behaviour. There is never any point in questioning something described as a ‘tradition’.

‘He’ll see Alfred’s body and we’ll be done for,’ said Humphrey, who was now as close to panicking as a man can get without actually running amok.

‘Don’t worry!’ I told Humphrey, trying to sound calmer than I felt. ‘Everything will be fine.’

‘How? Why? What are you going to do?’ Humphrey still sounded panicky but my reassurance had calmed him a little.

‘What’s happening?’ asked Nigel who had now hurried over to see what the problem was.

‘Whatever it is can wait,’ said Rupert, arriving a second or two after him. ‘I’ve just spotted the Captain. He’s coming our way.’

‘We know,’ said Humphrey.

‘Is the Captain alone?’ I asked.

‘Yes.’ replied Humphrey and Rupert simultaneously.

‘He always does his walk by himself,’ said Humphrey.

‘It’s a tradition,’ said Rupert.

I gave thanks for tradition. ‘The Captain is that potty bloke who wears a pince-nez and walks with a limp?’

‘Yes, yes, that’s him.’

‘He’s about a hundred and ninety?’

‘I don’t think he’s quite that old, but he’s not the youngest member of the club,’ agreed Humphrey.

‘Does he know Alfred?’

‘Only vaguely,’ said Humphrey who wasn’t wheezing so badly now.

‘Fine,’ I said. ‘I’ll keep Alfred’s hat on for the time being and he’ll think I’m him.’

‘But what about the body?’ demanded Humphrey. ‘Shall we say that’s you?’

I thought about this for a moment. ‘No,’ I said at last. ‘We don’t want him seeing a body at all.’

‘This is going to all end badly,’ cried Nigel. ‘I knew we shouldn’t have tried to do this. We’ll all go prison. Pushing a body around on a golf trolley is bound to be against the law.’

‘You three totter off and leave us alone,’ I told Humphrey, Nigel and Rupert. ‘Alfred and I will stay over here.’

‘He’ll wonder why there are five of us,’ said Nigel.

‘Tell him that I’m Alfred’s caddy,’ I said.

When they’d gone I unfastened the straps which held Alfred to the trolley and rolled the stiffening corpse off the trolley and into the thick grass. I then kicked Alfred’s ball onto a tuft of grass and gave it a good whack with Alfred’s five iron. Fortunately, it was a decent shot. Thanks to the grassy tee I’d used the ball soared high into the air, landed on the fairway about a hundred and fifty yards away and, with serendipity, rolled into a bunker where it temporarily disappeared from sight. Looking over to where the other three were now standing around staring at Humphrey’s ball as though waiting for it to do something wonderful, I watched as the Captain limped into view and headed towards them. I whipped Alfred’s woolly hat from my head and crammed it onto his own head. I then rolled him over. The trolley was now empty, of course, though the few clubs which I had stuffed down Alfred’s trousers were strewn on the grass. I could do nothing about the missing bag so I pushed the trolley off into the wilderness and half hid it behind a large gorse bush. The clubs I tossed into the grass beside it.

When I looked over to the others I could see that the Captain had finished chatting to Nigel, Rupert and Humphrey and was now heading in my direction. I returned to where Alfred’s corpse was lying, face down, on the grass. There was a rabbit hole nearby and in a flash of inspiration (and with some difficulty) I poked Alfred’s stiffening arm down the rabbit hole. Exhausted by these exertions I knelt down beside Alfred and peered down the hole as though looking for something.

‘Are you chaps OK?’ asked a voice which could have come only from a man wearing a pince-nez. I looked up. A man with a pince-nez and an MCC tie was standing a few feet away.

‘We’re fine thank you,’ I whispered, springing to my feet. ‘I’m Alfred’s caddy,’ I whispered. ‘He’s just getting his ball out of a rabbit hole.’

‘Ah, splendid,’ said the Captain. He peered across to where Alfred was stretched out and for a moment I thought he was going to walk over towards him.

‘Quiet as you can, sir,’ I whispered, holding a finger to my lips.

‘What’s that?’ demanded the Captain, attempting to whisper back but not making a terribly good job of it.

‘There’s an ants’ nest just beside the rabbit hole,’ I said. ‘They’re quiet at the moment but if they get disturbed they could be deadly. We think they’re fighting ants.’

The Captain stepped back a pace.

‘We need to keep away,’ I whispered. ‘If we make too much noise or if the ants hear us walking near their nest they could panic.’

‘I say,’ said the Captain. ‘Is that the chap OK?’

‘He’ll be fine,’ I said. ‘He’s an expert on ants. But he told me not to let anyone get too close while he’s getting his ball out.’

‘Damned brave fellow,’ said the Captain, lowering his head but not his voice. He backed away a little further. ‘I’d have just played a fresh ball,’ he said.

‘Alfred hates waste,’ I said. ‘He needs every penny he can. He uses 50% of his earnings to sponsor an orphanage in Thailand.’

‘Good God!’ said the Captain. He coughed nervously. ‘Give him my congratulations. Er, hope he finds his ball.’

‘Thank you,’ I whispered.

And with that the Captain turned and walked away.

Sweating profusely I collapsed onto the grass, lowered my head and murmured a quiet prayer of thanks.

* * *

‘Did it go OK?’ asked Rupert, a few minutes later, as I pushed Alfred, now strapped back onto the trolley, up onto the green. I was now once more wearing his woolly hat.

‘It went fine,’ I told him.

‘You look pale,’ said Humphrey. ‘Are you OK?’

‘Would you like to sell me a life insurance policy?’ I asked him.

‘Not just at the moment,’ said Humphrey. ‘Not the way you look. Not without a full medical.’

Nigel chipped up onto the green. Rupert, whose ball was already on the green, looked over towards me. ‘Alfred is in the bunker isn’t he?’

I agreed that Alfred’s ball was, indeed, in the bunker.

‘Play it out then, old chap,’ he said.

I played Alfred’s ball out of the bunker. To my delight it landed around six feet from the hole. The rest finished their putts. I just missed the six footer.

‘Five for me,’ said Rupert. ‘How many did Alfred take?’

‘Three,’ I told him.

‘Three?’ exclaimed Rupert.

‘Three,’ I said firmly. ‘It would have been a two if he hadn’t missed that putt.’

I got some funny looks but Rupert wrote Alfred down for a three.

* * *

On the 18th Alfred played brilliantly. He finished the hole with a magnificent long iron and a long putt and scored his fifth three of the final nine. He collapsed as the five of us left the green, and died seconds after he had completed Rupert’s card and both he and Rupert had signed their cards.

The doctor, one of the members who had been called out of the bar, was surprised at the speed with which rigor mortis set in but Rupert explained that the weather was probably responsible and Humphrey added that Alfred had been complaining of stiffness all afternoon so the doctor, who had had a few whiskies and wasn’t thinking too straight, said it could well be a mixture of the two.

When the scores were added up Alfred turned out to be the winner of the Captain’s Cup. It was quite a surprise to everyone because Alfred had always been a rather mediocre player and had never before looked like winning any tournament, let alone anything as prestigious as the Captain’s Cup. ‘It was,’ reported the local paper the following week, ‘Alfred’s sparkling form on the homeward half of the course which led directly to his victory.’

Alfred’s widow was so delighted at her late husband’s belated golfing success that she sent a cheque for £500 to the bar so that we could all celebrate Alfred’s hole in one and his victory.

Alfred was more popular dead than he had ever been alive.

CHAPTER TWELVE: 'GOLF IS A FOUR LETTER WORD'

Simon's approach shot on the 18th had hit the upslope of a small hummock on the left edge of the course and flown right over the bunker into which it would have otherwise have surely landed.

'Lucky bounce!' cried Oliver as we all met on the green.

'Nonsense,' said Simon. 'I was just using the natural contours of the golf course. It's an essential part of course management. All the top professionals try to do it.' He paused. 'Naturally,' he added, 'they're not always as successful as that.' He paused and gazed longingly at his ball. 'I could have been a contender,' he told us.

'Every golfer believes that,' Oliver told me. 'Every golfer I have ever met has harboured the same mistaken self-belief. It is what keeps most of them going as they hack their way around the course.' His ball was furthest from the hole. He crouched over it and tried to read the line to the hole.

'Don't you ever think that?' I asked him when he'd hit his ball. It rolled eight or nine feet past the hole.

'Of course,' said Oliver, shaking his head. 'But in my case it happens to be true. I just need to be a little more consistent.'

'Pshaw!' said Simon, derisively. 'Consistency is vastly overrated.' From about twenty feet away from the hole he curled a putt to within a yard. He smiled.

'No, it's not. I need some consistency,' said Oliver. 'Remember that drive of mine at the fourth last month? Wonderful. Straight as an arrow. And that putt two months ago to win the 17th? It must have been 40 feet if it was an inch. It curled right for ten feet, went straight, swung left and then curled right before dropping into the centre of the hole. No one could have played that shot better. The average professional would have been happy to have left his ball within two or three feet of the hole. If I could play my best shots all the time I'd be a brilliant player.'

Gerald who hadn't said a word tapped in a ten foot putt for an excellent bogey - his best hole of the round. He danced a small jig of delight and kissed his putter.

'You don't need consistency,' Simon told Oliver. 'You've got plenty of consistency. In fact you've got far too much consistency. You are awash with consistency. Your best shots are a result of inconsistency.'

Oliver looked at him, clearly puzzled. It was my turn to putt. I left my ball hanging on the lip of the hole. Well, it was no more than a foot away at the most.

'How many good shots do you play in a round?' Simon asked Oliver.

Oliver thought for a moment or two. 'Two or three,' he confessed. 'Sometimes less. Sometimes a few more.'

'And how many bad shots?'

'All the rest, I suppose,' admitted Oliver.

There was silence then for a while as we all holed out. I took one more putt, Oliver took two and Simon needed three. It had been a pretty average round for all of us but there had, as always, been moments of glory to remember.

'It's consistency that gives you all your bad shots,' explained Simon as we walked off the green. He put his arm around Oliver's shoulders. 'I don't wish to be rude but you're consistently bad. You're bad at golf because you are consistent.'

Oliver, who was beginning to see the point of Simon's argument, looked miserable.

'The good shots come rarely because they come when you aren't being consistent,' explained Simon. 'The problem is that you don't know what it is that you've changed - or in what way you've been inconsistent - when you play a good shot.'

'Dammit, you're right,' agreed Oliver, hanging his head and looking even more miserable. 'So what do I do?'

'I've no idea,' said Simon.

'Oh come on,' said Oliver. 'You can't stop there!'

We headed for the clubhouse. Gerald leading, me following and Simon and Oliver walking together. 'When you play a shot you won't know whether it will be any good or not until you've played it,' said Simon. 'And by the time you've played it, it's too late to spot whether you're being consistent or inconsistent.'

'You're a great help,' said Oliver.

'Well there is one thing you can do,' suggested Simon.

'What's that?'

'Play as inconsistently as you possibly can,' said Simon. 'The most consistent player I ever knew was also the worst I've ever seen.'

I turned round. 'Worse than me?' I asked hopefully.

'How the hell do I play inconsistently?' asked Oliver.

'Worse even than you, Tom,' said Simon. 'Although he had been playing golf for nearly twenty years Wilfred was probably the worst player in the club. I always marvelled that he could afford to buy the number of balls he lost. I'll tell you about him when we get into the bar.'

‘I suppose I could just try changing my grip and my stance for every shot,’ muttered Oliver to himself. ‘But I’d have to try and remember how I’d played the shot so that I’d know whether or not what I was doing was working.’ He brightened up. ‘I can do that,’ he said to himself.

* * *

As we sat around the fire sipping our first drinks of the afternoon, Simon proceeded to tell me the story of Wilfred who was, he insisted, the most consistent player he had ever known and whose very consistency proved quite conclusively that consistency has nothing whatsoever to do with quality.

Wilfred’s main problem, said Simon, was that he had a slice.

‘It wasn’t just an ordinary slice, the sort that comes and goes. And it wasn’t one of those slices that results in the ball veering ever so slightly into the rough. Wilfred’s slice was permanent and unvarying. If golf is a game where consistency counts then Wilfred should have been a winner of numerous Major championships. He was the most consistent player I ever saw. His slice always resulted in the ball ending up almost at right angles to the spot where it should have been.’

‘I remember seeing him,’ said Gerald, nodding. ‘This is all quite true.’

‘Wilfred’s slice inevitably led to some strange occurrences,’ said Simon. ‘Once, for example, I saw him slice a ball through the open window of a passing train. The railway line was normally regarded as safe from such attacks but Wilfred somehow managed to get his ball into the train. I remember him watching the train disappear into the distance with a very sad look on his face.’

‘It was a new ball,’ he said. ‘You’d have thought that someone might have thrown the ball out again.’ I found out later that he had telephoned the railway company, identified the train as the 11.07 from Paddington and asked the Lost Property Office if anyone had reported finding a ball on the train. Sadly, no one had.’

‘Rather reckless to identify himself as the owner of the ball,’ I said. ‘It might, after all, have landed in someone’s soup or damaged an expensive hat.’

‘Oh people didn’t think like that in those days,’ said Gerald. ‘If someone tripped over a loose bit of paving stone they’d just get up, brush themselves down, curse a bit and carry on. These days people rush off to see a solicitor before they even brush themselves down.’

‘Go on about Wilfred,’ said Oliver. ‘I never saw him.’

‘Well eventually,’ continued Simon, ‘after umpteen lessons and after buying every book he could find on the subject Wilfred decided that life had given him a slice and that he would just have to learn to live with it. He became quite philosophical about it.’

‘Sensible chap,’ said Oliver nodding.

‘Exactly,’ said Simon. ‘The one good thing about his slice was that it was consistent and it was this very consistency that enabled him to find a way to deal with the problem. He would stand on the tee and prepare to drive looking for all the world as though he was going to hit the balls at right angles to the direction of the green. While the rest of us were standing looking down the fairway over our left shoulders - or right shoulders in the case of left-handers - he would be standing in such a way that he only had to lift his head to look straight down the fairway.’

‘When he hit the ball it would fly off over whatever rough or trees there were on the left hand side of the tee and suddenly veer to the right and come back round onto the centre of the fairway,’ continued Simon. ‘After a while he got very good at this and could send his ball straight down the fairway with remarkable consistency.’

‘Of course,’ said Simon, ‘on some holes there were insurmountable problems and he simply couldn’t start the ball off in his eccentric direction because of large trees or houses standing in the way. When that was the case he would use a seven iron and chip off the tee until he was in a position where he could use a long iron (which he also sliced) and get some distance down the fairway with that.’

‘It must have been extraordinary to watch,’ said Oliver.

‘Oh it was,’ said Gerald. ‘People used to sit out on the terrace when he was playing. We had a fixed telescope in those days and one chap would look through it and give us a running commentary on what was happening.’

Simon said that it was fascinating to watch Wilfred get round a course this way and that it was particularly good fun to go out for a round with people who’d never seen him play before. ‘They used to watch with astonishment as he drove off the side of the first tee and curved his ball back round into position in the middle of the short grass,’ said Simon. ‘Once, a member of the club committee came to watch because he thought it might be against the rules but as luck would have it everything Wilfred hit that day went perfectly straight and he had to give up before he left the first tee because he ran out of balls. It was the first time it had ever happened to him and he was terribly upset.’

‘You played with him?’ asked Gerald.

‘Oh yes, quite a few times,’ said Simon. I was a young lad and I’d play with anyone in those days. I remember very vividly one game the two of us played. We both nearly got arrested because of Wilfred’s damned slice.’

* * *

The real problems started, said Simon, on one of the holes which run alongside the road. He couldn’t remember which one it was.

‘For some reason or other Wilfred’s ball didn’t curve back that day. It just flew straight over the hedge and landed on the road. Fortunately, there wasn’t any traffic about. We both saw it quite clearly bouncing on the roadway. But the camber of the road threw it to the left and neither of us was absolutely sure just where it had ended up. Wilfred claimed that he’d seen it running along the gutter and, gloomy as ever, suggested that it had probably fallen down a drain grating. There was a row of houses and little shops running on the other side of the road in those days and I insisted that the ball had bounced onto the pavement and was almost certainly lying in a shop doorway, sitting up on an old fashioned, bristly door mat. I was just saying this to cheer him up - he was a pretty gloomy sort of fellow. To be honest I didn’t have the faintest idea where it had gone. Anyway, I left my bag on the fairway and the two of us climbed through a gap in the hedge. Wilfred took his bag with him in case he could find his ball and play it back onto the fairway. He was used to playing out of all sorts of strange places.’

‘Eventually,’ said Simon, ‘Wilfred came across his ball more or less by accident. It wasn’t on the pavement and it wasn’t in the gutter. It had bounced straight through a shoe shop window and had ended up in the middle of a carefully constructed window display. Looking quite out of place it lay there nestling between a pair of patent leather dancing pumps and a pair of farmer’s wellington boots. The streets used to be full of shoe shops those days.’

‘Most of the broken glass had fallen inwards and was strewn around in dangerous looking shards. ‘Do you think bits of broken window pane count as moveable or immovable hazards?’ asked Wilfred. ‘The bits on the floor are no problem, but what about the bits hanging loose in the window frame? Are they like bits of bendy twig that I can’t remove? Or are they like bits of debris that can be moved out of the way without any penalty?’

‘Wilfred looked distressed by this dilemma,’ said Simon. ‘He pursed his lips and pulled out and started leafing through his pocket Rules of Golf. It was getting rather worn looking and several pages were already coming loose.’

‘‘If I can’t move them,’ Wilfred went on, ‘I can’t get in to play the ball because the hole isn’t big enough as it is and the door is locked because the shop is shut.’’

‘‘Well the glass seems dead enough,’ I reasoned. ‘So I suppose you’re entitled to move as much as you like.’’

‘Wilfred seemed satisfied with that and he used his one iron (a club we all carried but none of us ever used) to knock out enough glass to make a hole big enough for him to climb through. When he’d done that he pulled on his golf glove, bent down and clambered into the shop window.’

‘When I realised what he was planning I was absolutely horrified,’ said Simon. ‘‘You can’t play out of there!’ I told him. ‘Not out of a shop window!’’

‘‘Course I can!’ insisted Wilfred cheerily. ‘If I cock my wrists a bit and just play a little chip shot I should get out with no problems at all.’’

‘It was only then, while he was settling into his stance and I was trying to keep as quiet as I could, that I heard the burglar alarm ringing,’ said Simon. ‘The two of us stood, frozen with fear, listening to the insistent clatter of this damned burglar alarm bell. I said I thought we would be surrounded by the police within seconds and that we’d end up disgraced, broken men. I said we’d be lucky if we got away with thirty years hard labour. Wilfred said he thought that I was probably exaggerating a little. He said that he had plenty of time to play his shot and that he would leave a five pound note behind to pay for all the damage. He said that no one ever took any notice of burglar alarms and that the police were only ever called when people got fed up of the noise and wanted it switched off.’

‘While I hopped from one foot to the other and peered up and down the street looking for police cars Wilfred calmly moved the loose shards of glass from around his ball and took a couple of practice swings. Then he chipped his ball out of the shop window and back onto the pavement. It was a splendid shot. Indeed, it was probably one of the best recovery shots I’ve ever seen played by an amateur. It was certainly the very best shot I’ve ever seen anyone play from a shop window. The only snag was that in his enthusiasm to ensure that he didn’t leave the ball where it was Wilfred continued with a full follow through without realising that there wasn’t room for him to complete his swing without sending his club crashing into the remains of the shop window. The result was that another few yards of plate glass came crashing down around our feet. Some of the glass stayed in the shop window but most of it fell onto the pavement. We were up to our ankles in broken glass.’

Simon leant forward. ‘Now I don’t know whether you’ve ever noticed this,’ he said, ‘but broken glass is a bit like blood in that a relatively small amount of it will go an awfully long way and make a tremendous amount of mess. Cut yourself shaving and you may think that you’ve only lost a few drops of blood but I can pretty well guarantee that within seconds there will be blood everywhere. Those few drops will have stained your shirt, your jacket, your trousers, your shoes, your neighbour, your hat and your overcoat on the other side of the room. There will be blood on the carpet, on the curtains, on the lift doors thirty yards away, on the potted plant on your window sill and on the ceiling. Even your wallet, tucked inside your jacket pocket, will have blood smeared all over it when you pull it out. Well, it’s much the same with glass. It seems to have similar qualities to blood in that an apparently small amount of it can spread over quite a huge area. Drop a small drinking glass on the kitchen floor and within seconds there will be bits of glass all around your house. There will be bits of glass down the back of the sofa, in the breast pocket of your dinner jacket upstairs in your bedroom, in behind the books in your study, in the piano and even up in your loft. There will be bits of glass hiding in the garden that won't turn up for months. A small drinking glass that can't possibly weigh more than an ounce or two will shatter into several hundred weight of glass fragments.'

'So you can imagine what happens when a whole shop window shatters. There were bits of broken glass spread all over the pavement and all across the road. There were bits of broken glass in all my pockets and in my shoes. There were slivers of glass in the gutter, in shop doorways up and down the street and scattered across the roof of a car parked nearby. Later, in the privacy of the locker room, I found that there were even bits of glass inside my underpants. There was so much glass that if you'd glued all those bits of broken glass back together they would have probably made a window a mile square.'

'Wilfred seemed unperturbed by it all. He stepped out of the window and watched his ball bouncing along the road. He watched it narrowly miss a car parked on the opposite side of the street. He watched it bounce off a lamp-post and across the pavement on the other side of the road. And he watched it smash through the large plate glass window of another shoe shop no more than fifty yards away.'

'Oh no' groaned Oliver. 'I don't believe this.'

'It's true,' insisted Simon. 'Wilfred wanted to carry on and play out of this shop window too. He said he thought he'd got the hang of it now and the trick was to play a chip and run shot rather than a full blooded blow. He said he thought he could chip his ball out through the hole it had made.'

'But I said (or rather shouted, for there were now two alarm bells ringing and both were making an awful din) that if he insisted on playing out of a second shop window I was leaving him there and that as far as I was concerned the hole and the match were mine. I also said I would never play golf with him again. Well, that pretty well made up his mind for him because he had a lot of difficulty finding partners and I was one of the few people who would play with him.'

'So Wilfred dropped another ball, lost a stroke and played it. I remember it took us some time to find out way back to the golf course. Wilfred was the only person I ever played with who knew where his ball was but lost the course. Eventually, after asking several people for directions, we found our way back.'

'When Wilfred finally holed out he reckoned he'd taken 386 for the hole. I privately thought it was 387 but I didn't like to argue too much so I let it stand.'

'So there you are,' said Simon. 'Next time you pray for a little more consistency in your game just remember Wilfred and be grateful that unlike him you don't usually know where your next ball is likely to go.'

We all agreed that Wilfred's story was a salutary one.

'I think Simon's really hit on something terrific,' said Oliver. 'I'm going to try being as inconsistent as possible from now on.'

* * *

Two days later, when we next went round together, Oliver showed just how inconsistent he could be. He sprayed balls in every direction and went round in 146.

'Your bloody idea doesn't work,' he told Simon in the lounge afterwards.

'But you were still being consistent,' Simon insisted.

'No I wasn't! Every time I hit the ball I changed my grip, my stance, my swing, my follow-through. I changed everything. There was no consistency at all in my game.'

'Yes, there was,' said Simon. 'You were very consistent. You were consistently inconsistent.'

Oliver looked at him. 'I think your theory stinks,' he said.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: ‘TOO MANY CLUBS AND NOT ENOUGH BALLS’

It is a common assumption among golfers (particularly ones who are not very good at the game) that the more clubs a golfer has in his bag, and the more he has paid for them, the better he will play. This is, I had discovered, pretty much a lie.

When the golf professional sold me my matched set of irons he told me that the 5 iron would hit the ball so far, the 7 iron would hit it not quite so far and the 6 iron would hit it somewhere between the two. This, of course, turned out to be nonsense. Sometimes I would hit a 7 iron 2 yards. On other occasions I would hit it 150 yards. I could, in truth, have managed with, perhaps, four clubs: something with which to hit the ball from the tee, an iron for hitting it off grass, a wedgy thing for hitting the ball out of bunkers and the rough and a putter. If this secret truth (along the lines of the tale of the Emperor’s New Clothes) ever becomes common knowledge among club golfers then the golf club industry will collapse and will have to encourage the game’s rule makers to introduce a rule defining the minimum number of clubs a player must carry in his bag.

* * *

At the end of one Sunday morning round, as we struggled out of our sleet soaked clothes (the waterproof jacket and trousers I had purchased would, so the salesman assured me, withstand water fired from a high pressure fireman’s hose but the storms and winds which battered our course were always too much for them) Simon, naked except for a pair of boxer shorts which appeared to have been made from an old Union Jack flag, rubbed at his shoulder and groaned. ‘I hate it when trolleys are banned,’ he complained. ‘Dragging that bloody bag around the course doesn’t do my poor old joints any good at all.’

‘I don’t know how you lift your bag,’ said Oliver. ‘What on earth have you got in it?’

‘Just the usual stuff,’ said Simon, rather defensively. ‘Fourteen clubs, a few balls, couple of gloves, tees...’

‘It weighs a ton,’ said Gerald, picking up Simon’s bag. ‘Are you sure you haven’t got half a dozen gold bars stuffed in the base?’

‘It’s just the usual bits and pieces,’ protested Simon. ‘I bet your bag weighs as much.’ He stood up gingerly and tip toed across to where Gerald’s bag was leaning against a bench. He lifted the bag by the handle at the top. ‘Yours is heavier than mine,’ he said. ‘How the hell do you carry that thing round with you?’

‘Empty out your bags,’ said Oliver, who, during the winter months, plays with a small bag and a selection of no more than eight or nine clubs. ‘Let’s have a look at what you’ve got in them.’

Simon pulled down the zip on the main pocket of his bag and emptied the contents out onto a bench. When he’d finished with the main pocket he emptied the smaller pockets. We all stood around and stared at the mountain of rubbish which he had excavated from the depths.

2 drivers
1 3 wood
1 5 wood
1 7 wood
Irons numbered 3,4,5,6,7,8,9,
3 wedges
1 sand iron
1 putter
2 brand new boxes of golf balls (half a dozen balls in each box)
9 loose golf balls in good, playable condition
7 loose golf balls so badly cut as to be unusable even on the practice ground
28 assorted golf tees
2 sodden golf gloves
2 brand new golf gloves still in their packets
1 golf glove that had perished and gone slightly mouldy
1 mobile telephone which Simon could not remember ever owning, let alone losing
1 long out of date chocolate bar which had melted at least once and then reset in a different shape
2 packets of biscuits (with the expiry date on both two years past)
1 half empty bottle of cola
1 empty lager tin
1 spare sweater
1 small hand towel
1 large towel which belonged to a London hotel
1 paperback summary of the golf rules

1 hardback book packed with advice on how to get out of bunkers
1 patented and unused device for keeping score
1 ball cleaner
1 Swiss Army penknife
1 wooden stake

A variety of old sweet packets, crisp packets, ball wrappers, empty glove packets and old score cards. And, right at the bottom of the main pocket a disgusting, smelly mess which had clearly once been a banana but which now appeared to be home to a nation of assorted bacteria.

‘What on earth is the wooden stake for?’ I asked.

‘Vampires,’ said Simon quickly. ‘There used to be a lot of them on this course.’ He paused. ‘But there aren’t now.’ He laughed. No one else did. The joke was too old even for us to laugh.

‘Balls which land close to staked trees have to be moved to within two club lengths,’ explained Gerald. ‘So carrying your own stake with you can be quite useful.’

‘I once played with an accountant from Hartlepool who tried to convince me that a 150 foot tall oak was still staked,’ said Oliver. ‘The tree that had been tied to the stake had died and been broken off, leaving just the stake remaining. It was forty feet away from the oak but chap from Hartlepool insisted that the three foot high stake was supporting the tree.’

‘What happened?’ I asked.

‘In the end I was so impressed by his chutzpa that I let him get away with it,’ said Oliver with a shrug.

‘I once knew a chap who carried a Ground Under Repair notice in his bag,’ said Simon. ‘He used to just stick it into the ground if he didn’t like his lie. But I thought that was cheating.’

‘Because you didn’t have one?’ asked Oliver, smiling.

‘Actually, I did try to get one,’ confessed Simon. ‘But the groundsman hammers them in very well here. I tried to buy a spare one from him but he wanted an outrageous price.’

‘How much?’

‘Thirty quid.’

‘Worth it.’

‘Maybe. I’ll perhaps have another word with him. See if I can get him down to twenty.’

‘Isn’t that the knife I gave you?’ asked Gerald, reaching for the penknife. ‘If you don’t want it I’ll have it back. Nice looking knife.’

‘You’ve never given me anything!’ retorted Simon, smacking Gerald’s wrist, as a teacher will smack an errant pupil. ‘Leave it alone. I like that knife.’

‘I gave you flu once,’ responded Gerald, pulling his hand out of range and rubbing his wrist.

‘Only because you’d finished with it,’ said Simon. ‘A bloody second hand disease doesn’t count as a present, does it?’ He looked at as he added the final two words.

I shook my head.

‘You’ve got some of those funny sized balls there,’ said Oliver. He picked up a ball from Simon’s bag which had rolled along the floor and rested against his left foot.

‘I like the bigger ball,’ said Simon.

‘I don’t think they’re legal,’ said Gerald, who knows a good deal about these things though what he knows isn’t always accurate or reliable. He and Oliver then had a spirited conversation about the relative advantages and disadvantages of small balls and large balls. They talked wisely about flight, spin and distance and about the need to prevent modern golfers, armed with wonderful new technology, from turning par 5 holes into par 4 holes and par 4 holes into pitch and putt holes.

‘I definitely prefer the bigger ball,’ insisted Simon simply.

‘Why?’ asked Oliver. ‘What makes you so certain?’

‘It’s pretty obvious really,’ said Simon. ‘The bigger ball is easier to find in the rough.’ He looked at Oliver and then Gerald. They looked at one another but for a moment neither of them spoke.

‘I hadn’t thought of that,’ admitted Gerald. ‘Can’t argue with you.’

‘Pretty convincing,’ agreed Oliver.

‘You certainly carry a lot of balls with you,’ said Gerald, staring at the balls which had been emptied out of Simon’s bag.

‘Not enough,’ said Simon. ‘I never seem to have enough balls.’

‘I know what you mean,’ said Oliver. ‘Too many clubs and not enough balls. That’s always my problem.’

‘It’s your turn,’ said Simon, looking at Gerald. He scooped up some of the rubbish he had taken out of his bag and carried it across to a rubbish bin. He used the small towel (which was filthy dirty) to scoop up the decaying banana and threw the whole sorry mess into the same bin.

‘Have you ever counted the number of clubs in your bag?’ Oliver asked Simon. Simon ignored him.

Gerald’s bag was even more tightly crammed than Simon’s. When he had finished emptying his bag we saw that it had contained:

3 drivers
Irons numbered 3,4,5,6,7,8,9
3 wedges
3 putters
19 loose balls in good, playable condition
4 and a half balls which were unplayable
3 golf tees (since Gerald invariably borrows tees from other people this was more than we had expected him to find)
1 plaid shirt which Gerald denied he had ever seen before
1 lady’s upper body undergarment in black lace, with a broken strap (ditto)
1 spare pair of waterproof trousers with a large tear in the rear
1 short sleeved sweater
1 long sleeved sweater which had been placed in the bag wet and which was now covered in mildew
1 former apple
1 tin of boiled sweets, all of which had stuck together to form a huge impenetrable and unbreakable mass
1 folding umbrella
1 red sock
4 pens (none of which worked)
1 propelling pencil, with no leads
1 roll of 35 mm camera film which had been exposed but not processed (Gerald had no idea how old the film was nor what photographs it contained)
1 small trophy marked ‘Champion 1972’ (Gerald could not remember what the trophy related to but none of us - not even him - thought it had anything to do with golf)
1 penknife, opened so that the device designed for removing stones from horses’ hooves was visible
1 hardback copy of a book which promised to help the reader lower his handicap by 10 strokes in as many weeks
1 golf magazine with the cover torn off
1 paperback copy of a golf novel by P.G.Wodehouse
1 gadget for cleaning the grooves on golf clubs and the dimples on golf balls
3 special tripod tees for use on hard frozen ground
1 laser range finder
3 golf balls in a packet which promised that the contents would glow and enable the user to play in the dark without difficulty
1 street map of Wolverhampton (a place which Gerald claimed he had could not remember ever visiting)
1 plastic yo yo
1 packet of spare spikes for a pair of golf shoes which Gerald had thrown away three years earlier
1 small radio which Gerald said he had taken out on the course with him during the final day of an Open Golf Tournament which Jack Nicklaus had won. The radio didn’t work and when Gerald prised open the back with a pitch repairer we could see that the batteries which powered it were several years past their best and were now covered in an unpleasant looking layer of something pungent in off-white. Holding it carefully between forefinger and thumb Gerald carried the radio to the nearest bin and dropped it in.

‘You’ve got more than 14 clubs there,’ said Oliver.

‘Possibly,’ agreed Gerald. ‘But I always count them before I start a round.’

We all looked at him.

‘Nearly always.’

No one said anything.

‘Often.’

Still no one said anything.

‘Sometimes I forget,’ he admitted. ‘But I can’t decide which putter to use. And anyway, I think that having a limit of 14 is distinctly unreasonable. Who decided on 14? Why not 16? Or 40? The fact is that on any one day there will always be one club in my bag which has broken. It will be impossible to see anything wrong with the club, but it won’t work properly. Temporary metal fatigue is the best explanation I can think of - a sort of stress related disorder for golf clubs. So I need something to replace it.’

‘Does it make a difference to your score if you have more clubs in your bag?’ asked Simon.

‘Not really,’ admitted Gerald. ‘In fact,’ he admitted, ‘If I’ve got too much stuff with me I sometimes get confused and can’t decide which club to use.’

‘Some of this stuff would be worth a fortune to a collector,’ said Oliver.

We all looked at him.

‘People buy old golfing memorabilia,’ he explained. ‘If stuff is old enough it can become quite valuable.’

‘You’ll be a collector’s item yourself then soon,’ said Gerald. He started to pull together the things he’d emptied out of his bag. ‘Leave my stuff alone.’

‘This putter has got a wooden shaft!’ exclaimed Oliver.

‘Hickory,’ said Gerald. ‘It’s a Brandon Mills putter.’

‘You’re playing with clubs which should be in a museum!’ said Oliver.

Simon took Gerald’s bag from him and lifted it up. ‘Your bag weighs a ton even when it’s empty!’ he said.

‘It’s real leather,’ explained Gerald. ‘It’s not one of those horrible plastic things you chaps use.’

‘You need new grips on your irons,’ said Oliver. ‘There’s mould on this one.’

‘I don’t use that one very often,’ said Gerald. He grabbed his clubs and thrust them back into his bag and then hurriedly collected together the other bits and pieces he’d emptied out of the pockets.

Oliver’s bag, a comparatively flimsy affair which he used only when trolleys were not allowed on the course, was fitted with just one pocket. This contained four spare balls, a neat plastic box containing tees, a pencil stub, a half used golf glove, a ball marker, a pitch repairer and a packet of indigestion tablets.

‘But what do you carry in the summer?’ demanded Simon.

With some embarrassment, Oliver opened the door to his locker. ‘Some of this stuff,’ he said, removing a patented wrist brace, a plastic and leather foot wedge which fitted into the back of shoe to stop his left heel lifting off the ground, a thing which looked rather like a straightjacket which Oliver explained was designed to help him keep his upper arms together and a patented club which, the manufacturers apparently claimed, would automatically correct a player’s hook or slice and make the ball go straight.

‘I want one of those!’ said Gerald.

‘Does it work?’ asked Simon.

Oliver looked at them pityingly and held the club out. ‘Who wants it?’ he asked. ‘It cost me £399. You can have it for a fiver.’

Simon and Gerald both shook their heads. Oliver tossed the club back into his locker.

‘What’s this?’ asked Simon, picking up a large, sealed envelope which had fallen out of Oliver’s locker.

Oliver picked it up, examined it briefly and smiled with affection. ‘I sent away to Japan for this,’ he told us. ‘The advertisement described it as the single most sensational secret in the history of golf. He turned the envelope over and read from it: ‘Be to learn the simpler, magical move which to solve all your golfer problems and guarantee permanent greatest golf.’

‘What is it?’ demanded Gerald. ‘What’s the secret?’

‘I haven’t opened it,’ said Oliver, holding up the envelope and turning it over and over so that we could all see that it was still sealed.

‘Why?’ asked Simon. ‘Why on earth haven’t you opened it?’

‘To begin with I didn’t open it because it felt that it might be cheating,’ he said quietly. ‘Taking advantage of some trick that no one else knew. Then, as the days went by and turned into weeks, I decided that I would keep the envelope so that if things got really bad out on the course I would know that I had something to fall back on. A secret solution that would help me out of a hole - or, more precisely, into one.’

‘But your game is always awful!’ said Simon.

‘I know,’ agreed Oliver. ‘But I’ve had the envelope so long that now I daren’t open it. I’ve got so much faith in the contents that I’m terrified that if I open the envelope I’ll be disappointed. And then I won’t have the comfort of knowing that I’ve got the envelope to open.’

‘How much did you pay for this mysterious secret?’ asked Simon.

‘Seventy nine dollars,’ replied Oliver without hesitation. ‘And I had to pay the bank £20 so that I could send them a bank draft in dollars.’

‘Open it,’ said Gerald. ‘I want to know what it says.’

‘Put it back in the locker,’ said Simon quietly. ‘I don’t think I could cope with opening it either.’

Gerald stared at him, stared at me and then stared at Oliver. He threw up his arms. ‘Put the bloody thing back in the locker,’ he agreed.

My bag, still relatively new, was almost embarrassingly free of clutter and contained only the essentials.

‘No wonder my bag was so bloody heavy,’ complained Simon, staring at the mound of material he had taken from his bag. Looking at the pile it was difficult to see how he'd managed to get it all in there. He picked up another handful of debris, carried it over to a waste bin and tossed it in. He crammed some of the balls, one of the spare gloves and one of the towels into his locker. 'I suppose I ought to clean this bag out sometime,' he said. He sniffed the larger pocket, where the banana had rotted, and, recoiling in horror, zipped it up again. 'But not just now,' he said. 'I'll do it some other time.' He stuffed the remaining balls, the one new glove and the remaining towel into smaller pockets and then reached for his dry shirt and started getting dressed.

Gerald threw away the stuff he didn't need, didn't want or didn't know the owner of and then tossed the remains back into his bag.

When he had restocked his bag he lifted it. 'It's no bloody lighter!' he exclaimed, astonished. 'Feel it!'

I lifted his bag. It was still extremely heavy.

'It's all the clubs,' said Simon, lifting his own bag. 'If anything I think it's heavier,' he said, astonished.

'I really don't need this many clubs,' said Gerald. He rifled through the clubs in his bag. 'I never use this, or this, or that, or this.' He pulled four clubs out of his bag and put them into his locker.

'I hate this club,' said Simon, pulling out a two iron. 'And this one.' He pulled out a three iron. 'And I never use this,' he said, extracting a sand wedge which was covered with a thin layer of rust. He finished buttoning his shirt and took his trousers out of his locker.

'I reckon we could play just as well with a quarter of the clubs,' said Oliver.

'Well, I'm down to fourteen,' said Simon, pulling on his trousers. 'A quarter of fourteen is three and a half. So which club shall I cut in two?'

'Just three clubs then,' said Oliver. 'I bet we could play just as well as we did today if we all played with just three clubs each.'

'Don't be daft,' said Gerald. 'Why would everyone struggle round the course with fourteen clubs if they could make do with three?'

'I didn't say everyone could make do with three,' said Oliver. 'The professionals probably need fourteen. And the club manufacturers, caddies and osteopaths would like us all to carry fourteen. But at our level I reckon we'd probably do just as well carrying three clubs.'

'I'd feel a bit of a prat going round with just three clubs in a bag,' said Simon, who was now putting on his socks.

'When the game started they only played with one club,' Gerald pointed out. 'It was a Scottish shepherd who started it all off,' he said. 'I read about it in a book my mother in law gave me for my birthday last week.'

There was a small silence and then we all apologised for having forgotten Gerald's birthday. Oliver, Gerald and I started dressing too.

Then Oliver, who has a stubborn streak of curiosity running right through the middle of him, like lettering in Blackpool rock, asked Gerald to tell us more about the shepherd. He may have only done it because he was feeling so bad about having forgotten Gerald's birthday or he may have done it because he is a typical obsessional and obsessionals always have to have all the facts.

Gerald responded eagerly. He said that according to the book he'd read the chap who'd invented the game was a shepherd called McGoughlin who lived in Sutherland, right up in the Scottish highlands, and who looked after a huge flock of sheep owned by a laird with the only bit of Scotland not over-run by deer or grouse.

While the other shepherds sat around on the hillsides watching the clouds wandering by, staring at the gorse and heather sprouting and making embroidered smocks to sell to the tourists McGoughlin invented golf. Or so said Gerald.

Simon and Oliver looked impressed. I still wasn't entirely sure that Gerald wasn't making it all up.

'He had one of those big shepherd crooks,' said Gerald. 'The ones that are used for grabbing sheep by the neck, and he turned it upside down and used it for knocking little pebbles around. He started making softer balls out of bits of sheep's gut and eagle feathers when he kept breaking his crooks on the pebbles.'

Gerald went on to explain that to start with McGoughlin used to smash balls around willy nilly, much in the same undirected way that children will keep on kicking a stone along the road. But then, said Gerald, he got fed up with this and decided to see if he could make it from one point to another in a limited number of shots. So that he would have precise points to aim at he built small piles of stones on every hilltop and simply knocked his ball of sheep's gut and eagle feathers from one to another. He couldn't count, of course, being illiterate, but he used to pick up a thistle head every time he had a shot and put it into the big pocket at the front of his smock.

'So why is it called 'golf'?' asked Oliver.

'From his name,' explained Gerald. 'When the other shepherds saw him playing they'd say 'There goes old McGoughlin'. And they'd shake their heads at the wonder of it all. Then gradually they started to call what he was doing 'McGoughlin' and finally, when the game came south over the border, the Mc was dropped and the game was known as Goughlin. From that it was only a short step to the name game has today.'

‘I never knew that,’ said Simon, clearly impressed.

‘The point of all this,’ said Gerald ‘is that when the game started players didn’t have bags full of equipment and they didn’t even play over formal courses. Old McGoughlin just hammered his ball with his trusty crook and wandered from one hillside to the next. He didn’t walk around with a bag of crooks of different shapes and sizes and he didn’t have crook covers or grip rougheners either.’ He pulled on his other shoe and carefully tied the lace. ‘That’s how we ought to play golf,’ he said.

‘It does sound more natural,’ agreed Simon.

‘So why don’t we try it?’ asked Gerald. ‘We wouldn’t have to worry about dragging huge bags full of equipment with us or about whether to use a full blooded four iron or to hold back slightly with a three iron.’

Simon and I looked at one another. ‘What exactly did you have in mind?’ he asked Gerald.

‘Well, we could try what Oliver suggested and just use three clubs,’ suggested Gerald.

‘We’d all feel a lot better at the end of the round,’ said Oliver.

‘The golf supermarket sells skimpy little bags,’ said Gerald. ‘I think they’re for beginners, boys and old ladies.’

‘Get us one each,’ said Oliver. He reached into his jacket pocket and took out his wallet. ‘How much are they?’

‘Dunno,’ said Gerald. ‘Settle up with me when I’ve got them. Any particular colour?’

‘Just four different colours,’ said Oliver. ‘It’ll save mix-ups.’

‘When are we going to conduct this experiment?’ asked Simon.

‘One Sunday soon?’ suggested Oliver. ‘We need to give Gerald time to get the bags and all of us time to decide which three clubs we want to use.’

And so it was agreed that one Sunday, before too long, we would conduct an experiment to find out whether or not we really needed to carry so many clubs.

‘Keep your score cards from today,’ said Oliver. ‘And then we can compare how we did.’

Just then the Secretary poked his head around the door. ‘Is Tom in here?’ he asked. He looked around but did not see me.

‘What’s up?’ asked Gerald. ‘Failed to bow properly to the Lady Captain? Parked his car in the Captain’s space?’

‘No, nothing like that,’ said the Secretary. ‘I need a plumber. The drain in the ladies’ shower is blocked again.’

‘Who’s in there?’ asked Simon.

‘Just Deidre,’ said the Secretary. ‘She’s standing, fully dressed, on a lavatory seat. When I left the water was about three inches below her feet.’

‘Poor Deidre,’ said Simon. ‘I hope she can swim. Tom isn’t here I’m afraid. I think he’s away on a course. The EU has banned hot taps and plumbers are all having to be retrained.’

‘Banned hot taps?’

‘So I hear. A bloke in Frankfurt burnt himself.’

The secretary tutted loudly and disappeared.

‘Thanks,’ I said, when he’d gone.

‘Don’t mention it,’ said Simon. ‘Of course, if the place had been stuffed with naked young women covering their modesty with small bars of soap I’d have told him you were here. And I’d have come along as your assistant.’

* * *

We still haven’t got round to playing our game of golf with just three clubs each. We have spoken about it several times, and always with considerable enthusiasm, but somehow we have always found a reason to postpone it.

I think the truth is that we are all a little bit afraid. We are worried about what people might say if they see us setting off with such inadequately stacked golf bags. And we are afraid of what might happen.

If it turns out that we play better with three clubs than with 14 (or 17 or 18) what will we do? Will we really be prepared to turn up for the next monthly medal with just three clubs in our bags?

The professionals use 14 clubs and claim they need them all. If we prove that we play at our best with less than a quarter of the number what will that say about our prowess as golfers?

It would have been an interesting exercise.

But the risks are simply too great. We talk about with it great excitement; but we haven’t dared try it. And I don’t think we ever will.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: 'THE CUSTARD CREAM SOLUTION'

After eight months, I had still not become what I, or indeed anyone else, could call a great golfer. I still considered it something of a triumph, something well worth mentioning to anyone I met in the bar at the completion of the round, if I managed to play more than three holes with the same ball.

But things were improving. There had been a time when I would have been surprised if I had managed to play more than two consecutive shots, let alone holes, with the same ball.

In the short period of time I'd been playing I had learned a good deal about the game of golf.

I had learned, for example, that golf ball manufacturers put some chemical into their balls which results in them being attracted by water. Once a ball gets anywhere near a pond, a lake or even a stream it will veer from its previous course and head straight for the water. (It was Oliver who first told me this. He said he didn't have any direct evidence for it but that a friend of his who knew someone who worked in a golf ball factory had assured him that it was true. The friend had also told him that in order to make them look good and make the rest of us think it's worth persevering the top tournament professionals are given balls which aren't coated with this secret substance.)

And I was becoming accepted into the social life of the club.

The club, I had discovered, had an extremely complex administrative structure which was, for many members, just as important as the acres of green and pleasant land which stretched away in front of the clubhouse. In addition to a President there were four Vice-Presidents, 29 Life Presidents, a Captain, a Treasurer and a Greens Committee Chairman. There were more committees than any normal person could (or would want to) count and every committee had a chairman, a secretary and a treasurer. The club was positively awash with persons of importance.

Fifteen of the Life Presidents were former Presidents since anyone who was ever made President became a Life President at the end of their year in office and were entitled to hear the staff continue to refer to them as Mr President. Inviting people to sit on committees might have followed the British Queen's approach but here, it seemed, we favoured the American style, whereby every former President remains President for life.

The other Life Presidents had, it seemed, been elected democratically by giving the club fairly indecent amounts of money.

'If you want to pay for the roof to be mended you too can be a Life President,' said Gerald one day.

It was, I suppose, inevitable that even I would eventually end up on a committee.

* * *

'I've put you forward for a vacant place on the Catering Committee Sub Committee (Billiards room),' said the club secretary. 'They've only got 19 people on that committee at the moment. They need another member and your name has come up. Would you be prepared to accept nomination?'

'Is there a rule about that? Do there have to be 20 people on every committee?' I asked.

'Not exactly,' answered the secretary. 'But we like to keep our committees full. It means that everyone in the club can feel that they are part of the decision making process.'

'So all committees have 20 members?'

'Oh yes,' nodded the secretary.

'To keep things stream lined? I suppose more than 20 people on a committee would be pretty cumbersome.'

'Well actually,' admitted the secretary. 'It's because you can only get 20 chairs into the committee room.'

'And you want to know if I would accept if I was nominated?'

'That's it.'

'It's what the Queen does before she sends out invitations to her garden parties, isn't it?'

'What's that?'

'Sends out a preliminary letter to see if you'll accept the invitation.'

'I believe Her Majesty does do something similar,' agreed the secretary.

'And you say that I'm going to be on the Billiards Committee?' I asked.

'The Catering Committee Sub Committee (Billiards Room),' said the secretary, carefully correcting me. It's one of our oldest established committees.'

'Does the club have a billiards room?' I asked. I hadn't spotted one. I rather like billiards.

The secretary shook his head. 'I'm afraid not. As far as anyone can remember it disappeared in 1956 when the Club House was remodelled to include a Ladies Lounge.' He brightened up. 'But I can assure you that the absence of a billiard table is something the members of the Billiards Room Committee feel very strongly about. Their Billiards Room Committee Home Fixtures Sub Committee sends the Club's Management Committee a strongly worded memo about it every autumn.'

'The Billiards Committee has a home fixtures sub- committee?'

'Oh yes.'

‘But how can they organise any home fixtures when they don’t have a table?’

‘They arrange the fixtures and then cancel them all just before they’re due to take place,’ explained the secretary. ‘It’s something of a tradition now.’

‘Why on earth do they do that?’

‘I believe they feel that if they stop arranging fixtures then it will be seen as a de facto admission that the Billiard Club is no longer fully operational,’ said the secretary.

‘So, what does the Catering Committee Sub Committee (Billiards room) actually do?’ I asked.

‘Well, it’s in charge of catering for the billiards room and in charge of catering for the committee which is in charge of the billiard room and for the committee which is in charge of setting up fixtures for the billiard room. It is, in fact, in charge of all the catering for anything to do with the billiards room - including, of course, the catering for the Catering Committee Sub Committee (Billiards room).’

‘But the billiards room doesn’t exist?’

‘Well, as you say, the billiards room doesn’t actually exist in that there isn’t a physical space dedicated to the accommodation of a billiard table in the old fashioned material way, but there is a very active billiards room committee.’

‘What sort of catering is needed for a billiard room which doesn’t exist?’

‘Oh you’d be surprised,’ said the club secretary.

‘I suspect I would be,’ I agreed.

‘The main responsibility, I suppose, is, er, organising the refreshments for the committees.’

‘Do they have meals sent in?’

‘Not exactly meals.’

‘Biscuits? Tea?’

‘Definitely biscuits and definitely tea.’

‘Does the committee have to make the tea?’

‘Oh no. The club staff do that.’

‘Do they have to open the packets of biscuits? Put them on plates?’

‘No, no. There’s no manual labour involved. The staff do that.’

‘So the committee of 20, of which I am being invited to be a member, will be responsible for choosing the biscuits?’

‘Definitely. That would come within the remit of the Committee.’ The secretary smiled at me. ‘Can I put you down for that, then?’

‘Oh I think so,’ I said. ‘I wouldn’t miss it for the world.’

I had, before it had been explained to me exactly what my responsibilities would be, been reluctant to accept this position. A friend of mine had once claimed that anyone who wants to sit on a golf club committee has, by their very desire, proved themselves unfit to sit on a committee of any kind and should, therefore, be thrown out of office. My friend may well have been right but the promised joy of the experience was simply irresistible.

* * *

My Uncle Charles was a keen golfer though not, it has to be admitted, a terribly good one.

This assertion is supported by the fact that although my uncle was a member of the same club for 49 years and played golf at least twice a week and, towards the end of his life, considerably more often than that, he never managed to play rounds of sufficient quality to satisfy the requirements of the club’s handicap committee, a feat which is made even more admirable when you realise that for 16 years he himself was a steadfast member of the handicap committee.

The only advice I can ever remember him giving me about golf was that if I ever took it up I should play with lots of balls.

‘You mean play aggressively?’ I said.

‘No, no, no!’ he said. ‘I mean take lots of balls with you. I have to stuff my bag and my pockets with balls otherwise I’d never get round.’

He told me that an acquaintance of his called Mickey once won a match because his opponent ran out of balls. ‘The chap Mickey was playing with wanted him to sell a ball or two,’ said Uncle Charles. ‘Mickey offered to let him have a couple at £100 pounds each but the chap refused to pay up and forfeited the match instead.’ My uncle, who would have handed over his balls to anyone who needed them, said this was evidence that at his level balls are crucial. ‘It doesn’t matter what sort you have,’ he said. ‘With golf balls it’s the quantity not the quality that counts.’

Charles held that there are two possible points of view about the people who sit on golf club committees.

The first is that such individuals are over-filled with a sense of public spirit, over-burdened with good will to all men and burning with such an intense joy that they have to drag themselves down to normality by spending several hours a week sitting in a stuffy, smoke filled room listening to a bunch of excrescences arguing about nothing at great length.

The second is that at least 90% of those who sit on golf club committees have been genetically modified and have had their sense of humour removed and replaced with an enhanced sense of self importance.

These were, I repeat, not my views but the views of my Uncle Charles and I give them here for whatever historical value they may be deemed to have.

Although not a great golfer my Uncle Charles was a great committee man. And he definitely fell into the first category of committee members. He sat on committees, he once admitted, because he felt guilty about having such a wonderful life. He was married to, loved and was faithful to, a wonderful woman who loved and was faithful to him. He was not rich enough to have to worry about how to look after his money but he was well enough off never to have worry about not having enough of the stuff. He had no real skills but that lack was balanced by the fact that he had no real sense of ambition either and so the two balanced one another out neatly and the lack of skills never really troubled him.

He was, I suspect one of the very few people who have ever lived who genuinely believed that taking part is more important than winning. 'Spectators never win anything,' he once told me when I was about eleven and although he himself never won anything - not, as far as I know, even a Saturday night golf club raffle - he firmly believed in having a 'go' and no one I knew ever got as much out of failing as did my Uncle Charles.

For him, sitting on a committee was a sort of penance; a tip of the hat to the gods who had given him such a good life.

* * *

The first meeting of the Catering Committee Sub Committee (Billiards room) which I attended was a good introduction to the strange world which I had entered.

The club had applied for a grant from the council two weeks before I was appointed. One of the club management committees had thought it might be a good idea to persuade the council to help pay for a new flag pole so that we could dignify any future Royal visits by flying the appropriate standard.

Before deciding whether or not to make a contribution to our flagpole fund the council announced that it would be necessary to send one of its representative to all committee meetings held by the club to make sure that everything we did was politically correct.

As a result my first experience of committee life was both entertaining and illuminating.

'Our first task this evening is to choose the biscuits for future billiard room committee meetings,' announced our chairman for the evening. (Actually, he insisted on being called our chairperson but I find it difficult to believe that anyone will take this volume seriously if I write a book including a 'chairperson'.)

'I'm afraid that the last time we tried to decide which biscuits to buy we simply couldn't agree,' he explained.

'Does that mean that we don't have any biscuits for this meeting?' asked a woman in a yellow trouser suit.

'I'm afraid it probably does,' admitted the chairman.

The woman in the yellow trouser suit proposed a vote condemning the committee for failing to organise appropriate refreshments for itself. This vote was narrowly carried. As a newcomer, who hadn't attended the previous meeting, I abstained.

Once this unpleasant task had been completed the chairman suggested that we try harder to make a decision about which biscuits to select.

'What about ginger nuts?' suggested a man in a checked sports coat. The coat was made from something that looked like tweed but wasn't. It had orange and yellow checks and brown leather piping down the lapels. I suspect that it might well have been luminous too. 'Everyone likes ginger nuts.'

'I think some members of the council would find that term rather offensive,' said the council's representative, a thin, grey faced woman in a dark grey suit.

'I don't quite understand,' said the man in the sports coat.

The council's representative sighed, as though tired of having to explain the obvious. 'The term 'ginger nut' is often used to describe a person with red hair,' she replied. 'People with red hair find that sort of label quite offensive.'

'But we don't have any red headed members that I can think of,' said the man in the sports coat.

'Most of our members haven't got much hair of any colour,' said a jolly, red faced fellow in a blazer, grey flannels, white shirt and regimental tie.

'That isn't relevant,' snapped the grey faced woman in the dark grey suit.

'What about Garibaldis?' suggested the woman in the yellow trouser suit.

'Those curious little biscuits full of dead flies?' said a fat man who wore an angora jumper and a full beard. He shivered. 'I hate them.'

‘We would be unable to countenance the purchase of Garibaldi biscuits,’ said the grey faced woman. ‘The name would almost certainly give offence to Italians or to follicularly challenged males. The council has a policy of doing everything it can to improve relations with other European countries. We are at the moment negotiating to twin the town with an industrial centre in Northern Italy.’

‘What did she say?’ demanded the fat man.

‘I think she said that Garibaldi biscuits might upset bald Italians,’ explained the chairman.

‘Do you know any bald Italians?’ asked the fat man.

The chairman said he couldn’t think of any off hand. The woman in the yellow trouser suit said she’d once stayed in a hotel in Venice where the night porter was follicularly challenged but added that she rather thought that he might have been Polish.

‘Rich tea can’t offend anyone, surely?’ said a skinny woman in huge spectacles.

‘Oh dear me no, we couldn’t support the purchase of rich tea biscuits,’ said the council’s representative. ‘The word ‘rich’ would give serious offence to many of our electors. We are very mindful of our responsibilities to the less privileged sections of the community.’

‘I rather like jammy dodgers,’ I said. ‘Do you have any objection to jammy dodgers?’

‘People on social security or sickness benefit would find that term totally unacceptable,’ said the woman with the grey face. She shivered and looked at me as though she would like to see me strung up.

‘Lemon puffs?’ suggested the man in the sports coat. ‘I like lemon puffs.’

The woman with the grey face glowered at him and shook her head so violently that one of her ethnic earrings fell out. ‘Lemon puffs would certainly not be acceptable,’ she said. ‘The term would give grave offence to our growing gay and lesbian community.’

There was some embarrassment at this. The man in the sports coat opened his mouth as though about to say something and then shut it again. He looked around, thought for a moment and then lowered his head. ‘I’d never thought of a lemon puff as an offensive biscuit,’ he said. ‘I feel really bad now.’ He looked bad too.

‘Are bourbons OK?’ asked the woman in the yellow trouser suit. She was a game woman who clearly didn’t give up easily.

‘Oh dear me no,’ said the woman from the council. ‘The link to the continental Bourbon family is most offensive and would cause considerable distress among many of our European friends.’

‘Chocolate fingers?’ suggested the fat man.

‘Racist,’ said the fat man firmly. He held out a hand, wiggled his fingers and hummed the first line of ‘Ole Man River’.

The grey faced woman shot him a look that would have turned a lesser being to stone. ‘Exactly,’ she said. ‘We like to avoid the word ‘chocolate’ whenever possible.’

‘Short bread?’

‘Offensive to short people.’

‘Penguins?’

‘The vegetarians wouldn’t like that.’

‘What about custard creams?’

There was a long silence.

All of us thought hard. None of us could think of a reason to disqualify custard creams. We all looked at the woman from the council. She too was thinking hard. She nodded. ‘Custard creams would be acceptable,’ she admitted. She seemed unhappy that we had found a solution. ‘As long as they are purchased from a council approved supplier and don’t come from Burma.’

‘Why can’t they come from Burma?’ asked the fat man.

‘The council has instituted a unilateral ban on imports from Burma.’

‘Do they actually make custard creams in Burma?’ asked the fat man.

‘Do they still call it Burma?’ I asked. ‘I thought they’d changed the name of the country.’

No one knew the answers to these questions.

‘Does anyone actually like custard creams?’ asked the woman in the yellow trouser suit.

It seemed that no one did.

‘They’re all we’re going to get,’ said the chairman. ‘Can we take a vote on custard creams?’

We voted and decided that custard creams would be the authorised biscuits for the billiard room committees. The chairman then announced that at our next meeting, in four weeks’ time, we would discuss the type of tea we would choose to accompany the custard creams.

‘I would like to propose a vote congratulating the committee on its hard work and on its success in choosing a suitable biscuit,’ said the woman in the yellow trouser suit.

We voted to applaud ourselves. The chairman then banged a wooden gavel on the table and announced that the meeting was over.

‘Please vacate the room as quickly as possible,’ he said, looking at his watch. ‘There’s a meeting of the Billiards Room Committee Home Fixtures Sub Committee in here in less than five minutes.’

We all got up and left.

Except for the grey faced woman. She stayed behind to sit on the next committee meeting as the council’s representative.

‘At least we’ll get custard creams next time,’ I said to the fat man as we left.

He looked at me as if I was mad. ‘No chance,’ he said. ‘We’ve got to decide how many to buy, where to buy them from, what brand to choose and what sort of plate to put them on.’

‘Oh,’ I said.

‘It could be years before we see a custard cream,’ he said sadly.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: ‘HE’S NOT HEAVY. HE’S OUR CAPTAIN.’

John, our club captain, was widely disliked and he well deserved his lack of popularity.

Officially John earned his living as a planning officer with the local council, though his relatively high position in an over-staffed, under-worked department meant that he was able to spend most of his time at the golf club. None of his underlings at the office ever dared complain about his frequent absences and most councillors were terrified that if they protested he would find some way to make their lives miserable.

John loved rules and regulations and his main purpose in life was making life difficult for other people. He was not dishonest in the way that so many planning officers are. He didn’t take bribes, accept free foreign holidays or spend his evenings in lap dancing clubs where he could be corrupted by fleshy pleasures. John was just bloody minded and seemed to take particular delight out of making people unhappy. He was proud of the number of small businesses which he had forced into bankruptcy and would happily relate stories of how he had prevented innocent citizens from adding bedrooms to their homes. He loved nothing more than to push through a compulsory purchase order and to then follow it through by demolishing a cottage to make way for an unnecessary road widening scheme. He regarded all entrepreneurs as his enemies.

At the golf club John was always introducing new rules and the club noticeboard was forever thick with memos detailing new regulations which he had chosen to impose. He did this quite arbitrarily for he had discovered that his position as club captain gave him the authority to create new regulations whenever he felt like it. Although the regulations he created had to be confirmed by various club committees, and occasionally even at the club’s Annual General Meeting, he surmised, accurately, that because there would never be time to discuss all his regulations they would remain active indefinitely. It was thanks to John that men wearing red socks were not allowed into the club house, that women had to wear skirts or dresses which reached at least three inches below their knees and that defacing notices on the club noticeboard had become a crime punishable by expulsion.

I once asked Simon how someone who was so unpopular had become club captain.

‘Fear,’ replied Simon instantly. ‘No one dared stand against him. We all have jobs, businesses or homes in the area.’

‘But he can’t have that much power,’ I protested.

‘Oh he does,’ insisted Simon. ‘Take Keith for example. He is very popular and would have made an excellent club captain. But he runs a bakery. If he’d stood against John his life wouldn’t have been worth living. John would have found some reason to close down the bakery.’

‘Then there is John. He’s a manager of one of the biggest local factories. They’re expanding and they want permission to build another factory. If he had stood against John the planning application would have been turned down. And John would have made sure that John’s bosses knew that it was his fault.’

‘But he can’t do that!’

‘Oh yes he can,’ said Simon. ‘The planning rules are very complicated. He can always find something in the small print to use. He’s been captain for six years now. Three years ago a member called Tim stood against him. Nice chap. Retired. He thought he’d be safe because he was retired. But John suddenly and unexpectedly gave a national building company planning permission to erect a block of flats on some waste land right next to Tim’s bungalow. Tim and his wife were driven mad by the noise. They sold up and moved away.’

* * *

John believed that his position in the club gave him the right to sit wherever he liked. On big, international golfing occasions, when the lounge was full of members eager to watch the professionals show just how it should be done, he would position a chair directly in front of the television set and settle himself down in it. The rest of us would be left to peer around his head as best we could.

But it wasn’t the opacity of his head which troubled us most. It was the snoring. Since quite a few of the members tended to fall asleep in the club’s comfortable chairs snoring was something we were all pretty much accustomed to. But John’s snoring always seemed louder and more intrusive than anyone else’s.

Things came to a head one summer’s day when the lounge was crowded with members anxious to watch the final few holes of the Open championship on the television set.

‘Turn up the sound a bit,’ cried someone. ‘I can’t hear the television for the damned racket John is making.’ I don’t know whether it was a result of something he’d eaten or the way he was slumped in his chair but John was snoring particularly loudly that day.

‘It’s as loud as it will go,’ replied the member who had commandeered the remote control device and who was, therefore, temporarily in charge of the television set.

‘Well I can’t hear the bloody TV,’ complained the member who had moaned. ‘All I can hear is John.’

It quickly became clear that the member who had moaned was not alone in being unable to listen to the television commentary above John’s incessant snoring.

‘If I was married to him I’d make him sleep in the spare room,’ said Oliver.

‘If I was married to him I’d tie a concrete block to his ankles and make him sleep in the pond behind the 16th,’ said Gerald.

‘Actually, that’s not a bad idea,’ said Simon.

‘Do you think we could get away with it?’ asked Gerald. ‘Drop him in the pond? Does anyone have a concrete block spare?’

‘No. Not in the pond,’ said Simon. ‘But why don’t we move him outside. It’s quite warm. He’s asleep. He won’t mind.’

The only objection to this came from a lady member who felt certain that John would wake up if we tried to move him. ‘If I as much as nudge my husband when he’s snoring he’s awake in an instant,’ she said.

‘If he does wake up he’ll stop snoring,’ Simon pointed out.

‘We can’t lose,’ said Gerald, summarising the situation quite accurately.

We decided that the best thing to do was to lift John up in his chair, carry him out through the French windows and take him out onto the terrace. Since I was one of the few members not crippled by arthritis or a bad back I found myself one of the four people clutching a corner of John’ leather arm chair. Gerald and Simon picked up the small table upon which John had put his gin, his packet of small cigars, his lighter and his reading glasses and carried that behind us.

We got out through the French doors and onto the terrace with no difficulty whatsoever. We must have made a neat looking procession.

‘Take him further,’ yelled a voice from inside. ‘We can still hear him in here.’

‘Let’s take him to the other side of the hill on the second hole,’ suggested one of the other three chair bearers. ‘He’s not heavy.’

‘He’s not heavy, he’s our captain.’ added another bearer.

And so we carried John the length of the first fairway, past the second tee, down the first hundred and fifty yards of the second fairway and onto a small grassy patch by the side of a stream which runs between the second and third holes.

We left him there and hurried back to the clubhouse.

* * *

When John walked into the clubhouse later that evening he did not, at first, say a word about waking up and finding himself out on the course instead of in the lounge. He just walked up the bar and ordered himself a large gin. Red-faced with rage he looked around as though trying to pick out the culprits. We all ignored him.

Until Gerald spoke.

‘Where have you been, John?’ he asked. ‘We missed you.’

‘I’ve been out on the course, sitting in a chair,’ replied John angrily.

Gerald looked concerned. ‘I’m surprised at you, John,’ he said sternly. ‘As you know there is a club rule prohibiting members from taking furniture out of the club house.’

John stared at him, as though not believing what he was hearing. The rule, he and we all knew, had been introduced by John himself after several members had taken armchairs out onto the patio on a particularly warm summer evening.

‘It’s a serious infringement of the club rules,’ said Simon. John protested at this obvious injustice but the words just wouldn’t come out properly. He made noises like a motor mower trying to start. He looked around. No one else spoke. No one muttered a word in his defence.

‘The action was in deliberate violation of the club house regulation which forbids members to take club house furniture out of the building,’ said Gerald.

Still no one said a word.

‘I really think you should reconsider your position as club captain,’ said Oliver. ‘You will remember that you have in the past required members to resign when they have violated club rules.’

John looked around the room. No one looked away. Everyone met his gaze.

‘I think you should resign, John,’ said Rupert. Astonished, we all stared at Rupert.

John put down his gin and opened his mouth. Nothing came out. He tried again. ‘I’m not staying here,’ he said. And he walked out.

The four of us who had carried John out to the second hole went out and brought back the chair and the table. John’s lighter, a cheap disposable plastic thing, was still lying on the table. We posted it to him at the planning office.

For a while we expected some sort of retaliation - either aimed at us as individuals or at the club. But John had been defeated. We never heard from him again.

But various committees are still kept busy repealing the many laws which John introduced.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: ‘SUNNY AND DRY’

‘I can only manage nine holes,’ said Oliver, rushing up to join us on the tee.

‘Are you playing like that?’ Simon asked him.

‘Why not?’ demanded Oliver. ‘It’s about time one of us tried to offer a fashion lead.’ He was wearing a pair of pin striped trousers, a matching waistcoat, a pale blue shirt, the cuffs of which were fastened with gold links and a dark blue tie which had little blue spots all over it.

‘Those look like the trousers to your best suit,’ said Gerald.

‘Well spotted,’ said Oliver. ‘It is.’ He thought for a moment. ‘They are.’

‘Where’s the jacket?’

‘I didn’t think I could play in a jacket,’ said Oliver. ‘So it’s hanging up in the car.’

‘What happened to those old green corduroy trousers you were wearing the other day?’

‘I just thought it was time for one of us to make a bit of an effort,’ said Oliver.

‘Where are you going in such a hurry?’ asked Simon.

Oliver sighed. ‘I’ve got an important meeting with some chaps from London at four,’ he said. ‘I’ll just have time for nine holes if I don’t bother changing. I can’t turn up to a meeting in green cords with a golf tee behind my ear. I don’t think they approve of us playing golf during working hours.’

‘I wouldn’t play in my best suit,’ said Simon. ‘I’d be worried I’d snag it in the brambles or get it wet and muddy.’

‘I won’t be playing into any brambles,’ said Oliver. ‘And I’m not going to get wet and muddy. I got home last Saturday and Cynthia didn’t believe I’d been playing golf at all. She thought I must be having an affair with some woman. She went over my clothes with a magnifying glass and said there were no signs of my having played golf in them. I’m a very clean and tidy player.’ He thought for a moment. ‘And if my ball should accidentally bounce into brambles one of you guys can wade in and get it for me.’

‘What if it rains?’ asked Simon.

‘I checked the weather forecast,’ Oliver assured him. ‘They’ve guaranteed a lovely sunny afternoon.’

‘Not even covered themselves with the usual warning about scattered showers?’ asked Gerald.

‘Sunny and dry,’ said Oliver. ‘The chap who does the weather on the radio said it was one of those days for sitting on the patio with a Pimms and a good book.’

* * *

When Oliver, Gerald, Simon and I set off the sky was blue, the sun was shining and the day looked set fair. The few fluffy little white clouds which decorated the sky looked harmless and unthreatening.

Naturally, by the time we had completed three holes, it had started to rain. It wasn’t raining hard. Just drizzle. The sort of stuff you don’t really notice until you realise that you are too soaked to bother with waterproofs or an umbrella.

‘Maybe I should go back,’ said Oliver, looking up. ‘I don’t want to turn up to this meeting looking damp.’

‘You can borrow my waterproofs, if you like,’ offered Gerald, generously.

Oliver looked up at the sky, thought for a moment, and shook himself, rather like a dog shaking rain from his coat. ‘Thanks,’ he said. ‘But I’ll be fine. I’ve got an umbrella.’

Now none of us usually bother with umbrellas on the golf course. There are two reasons for this. The first is that being close to the sea, our course tends to be rather on the windy side and so when wind and rain come together the rain usually falls horizontally rather than vertically. An umbrella is of limited value against such a downpour - particularly when the wind is likely to change direction every few seconds. The second reason is that the sort of wind we usually get tends to destroy umbrellas. We therefore regarded Oliver’s ‘I’ll be fine. I’ve got an umbrella.’ as rather akin to hearing the Captain of the Titanic dismiss warnings of an iceberg ahead by saying: ‘We’ll be fine. I’ve got a kettle of hot water.’

Oliver dismissed our reservations with a wave of the hand. His umbrella was, he told us with pride, a specially designed Swiss model that had doubled jointed struts which enabled it to bend with the wind. According to Oliver the people who had sold it to him at Zurich airport had assured him that even if it blew itself inside out it could easily be put back into shape with a flick of the wrist.

By the time we had finished the fourth hole the sky had turned black, the heavens had opened, the rain was coming down in torrents and the constituent parts of Oliver’s umbrella had been abandoned in a rubbish bin. It had taken the wind less than five seconds to separate the double thickness silk cover from the aluminised rustless patent double jointed struts. Within a matter of seconds our English wind had destroyed an expensive Swiss folding umbrella. Few things are quite as utterly useless as a broken umbrella and Oliver had thrown away his expensive protection with a mixture of anger, frustration and contempt. He was angry with himself for having fallen for the shop assistant’s promises, frustrated by the fact that the umbrella had failed and contemptuous of the company which had made the thing in the first place.

'I know what I'll do,' said Oliver, kicking off his shoes and removing his trousers. 'I'll take off my clothes before they get any wetter and put them into the big pocket at the front of my bag. They'll be snug and dry in there. When we get back to the clubhouse I can give myself a quick wipe down with a towel, get dressed and go to the meeting without anyone noticing a thing.'

He rolled up his trousers and pushed them into his golf bag, then removed his waistcoat, tie and shirt and crammed them in too. He even took off his shoes and removed his socks. He rolled his socks into a ball and stuffed them into the golf bag on top of the waistcoat, tie, shirt and trousers. He then put his golf shoes back on.

The golf course had been quiet when we'd set out. Most members present had been sitting on the terrace with a Pimms and a good book each. The bad weather meant that the course was now deserted. Gerald, Simon and I were the only other people around and we had no objections to Oliver playing golf wearing only his underpants and a pair of golf shoes. It seemed a good idea.

Looking back through time, it now seems likely that things would have continued to go satisfactorily if Oliver had not hooked his next shot over the hedge and sent his ball bouncing along the road which runs alongside that part of the course.

'I can see my ball,' insisted Oliver, climbing over the padlocked five barred gate which separated the golf course from the world outside. 'You play on,' he called cheerily. 'I'll meet you on the green.'

We carried on, as did the rain.

But when we arrived on the next green there was no sign of Oliver. We stood in the pouring rain and waited in vain for him to arrive.

'I hope he's all right,' said Gerald, gloomily. His hair was plastered to his skull and rain dripped off the end of his nose.

'It's a busy road,' said Simon. 'There's a supermarket on the other side of it. There is a lot of traffic along here. I hope nothing's happened to him.'

'Perhaps we should go and take a look,' Gerald suggested. 'He might be lying in the road. Injured perhaps. Maybe unconscious.'

Naturally, when such gloomy thoughts have been aired they cannot easily be forgotten. Increasingly concerned we waited another few minutes and then we left our golf bags where they were and headed for a small gap in the hedge which was used by local dog owners who wanted to use the golf course as a lavatory for their beasts. Getting through the gap wasn't easy and Simon tore his waterproof jacket rather badly. 'He'd better be lying in a pool of blood, when we find him,' he said rather crossly, though I don't believe he meant this. It was, I suspect, just something that he blurted out in the heat of the moment.

There was absolutely no sign of Oliver. He had disappeared.

Gerald and Simon walked up the road in one direction and I walked down the road in the other. The road was straight. There was no shelter and there were no hiding places. We then retraced our steps and met up again.

'Nothing,' said Simon.

'No sign of him down there,' I confirmed.

'Maybe we'd better go back to the green,' suggested Gerald. 'Perhaps he's there.'

We wriggled through the gap in the hedge again. This time it was my time to rip my waterproof jacket. 'Damn Oliver,' I said rather more forcefully than I had meant to. 'This is all his fault.'

We finished the hole and carried on towards the next tee. But our hearts were no longer in the game. We kept looking over our shoulders, expecting to see Oliver come running up towards us. It was impossible to work out where he could have possibly gone to.

We finished the round. But it was difficult to concentrate. At any moment we expected to see Oliver come bounding up to us like a dog who has run off on his own and is returning to an anxious master. But Oliver did not come bounding up to us and we remained anxious.

There was no sign of Oliver back at the golf club either. We showered, dried ourselves, changed and ordered drinks in the bar. Still he didn't turn up.

'Maybe he just came back to the club and went off to his meeting,' suggested Simon.

'If he did, his car would have gone,' said Gerald.

'I'll go and look,' I offered. I went and looked. Oliver's car was still there. I was shivering and soaked again by the time I got indoors. The weather had deteriorated still further. It was really not a good day to be wandering about the countryside dressed only in a pair of golf shoes and a pair of white, Y front underpants.

We waited.

And waited.

At nine o'clock that evening the barman came to tell Gerald that there was a telephone call for him.

‘It was Oliver’s wife,’ he said, when he returned to our table. He looked worried. ‘Oliver hasn’t arrived back home and he didn’t get to his meeting. Someone apparently rang Oliver’s wife to ask where the hell he was. The poor woman is tearing her hair out with worry.’

‘We’d better ring the hospital,’ said Gerald quietly. ‘I’ll go.’

He was away twenty minutes. He shook his head as he came back. ‘No-one of his description has been admitted to the hospital.’

Just then the barman came back and asked for Gerald. It was Oliver’s wife again.

‘She’s just rang the police station,’ said Gerald. ‘She asked if they’d seen a lost golfer. The police apparently said that the only golfer they had in custody was one wearing nothing but a pair of golf shoes and a pair of damp underpants.’

We all sighed with relief. This was clearly Oliver.

‘Ah,’ said Simon. ‘What did Oliver’s wife tell them?’

‘She said she thought that might be him,’ said Gerald. ‘And rang to ask if we would pop along and take a look. She said she’d have gone herself if she hadn’t drunk a bottle of gin in order to calm her nerves. She said that if she turned up reeking of gin they’d probably let Oliver go and arrest her.’

And that’s how we found Oliver. And how, eventually, we found out what had happened to him.

* * *

‘I could see my ball,’ Oliver told us all later that evening after we’d got him back home and reunited him with his loved one. ‘It had bounced on the road, over the pavement which ran between the road and the supermarket, over a low wall around the supermarket and into their car park. I spotted a supermarket trolley lying on its side on the pavement and since the strap of my bag was rubbing on my shoulder I decided to pop my golf bag into the trolley and push it along to where my ball was lying. I thought I could probably play the ball as it lay. It was sitting up quite well on the road and I thought that if I played a decent seven iron I could get the ball back over the hedge and onto the fairway.’

‘It was,’ he said, ‘at that point that a fat woman with two kids came out of the supermarket pushing a trolley laden with cornflakes and toilet rolls. She took one look at me and screamed. At first I couldn’t work out why she was screaming and then I remembered that to her I may have looked a little odd.’ ‘It’s probably not every day the poor old trout spots a bloke dressed only in underpants and golf shoes pushing a golf bag in a trolley through the car park at Tesco’s,’ said Simon.

‘She probably thought she’d been overdoing the cooking sherry,’ said Gerald.

‘So what did you do?’ I asked.

‘I had to make a pretty quick decision,’ said Oliver. ‘I could either abandon my ball, count it as lost, and head straight back for the golf course or I could play my ball where it lay and then run for it. I decided that since if I did the former I’d have to go all the way back to the tee and drive off again I would totter over to my ball as quickly as I could, play it and then run for it.’

‘Bad decision?’ suggested Gerald, shaking his head.

‘It was, as it turned out, a bad decision,’ agreed Oliver. ‘I would have been all right but the woman who’d screamed had darted back into the supermarket and alerted the store manager. He sent out two of his finest security operatives who appeared from nowhere. I would have got away from them if I hadn’t had the trolley and my bag,’ he sighed, shook his head and pulled his dressing gown around him tighter. ‘The trolley wobbled a lot and had a definite tendency to swerve to the right but even so all went well until the wheels locked. The damned thing was fitted with one of those devices which locks the wheels when the trolley is taken outside the supermarket car park.’

The security operatives who captured Oliver locked him in a tiny office inside the supermarket and called the police. The police overreacted wildly. Suspecting from the tone of the telephone call they had received that Oliver was on a suicide mission and was planning to use a golf bag stuffed with explosives to blow up the supermarket the police had despatched four police cars, two ambulances, a fire engine, an armed response unit, three photographers, their own video cameraman and two television crews. Within five minutes the supermarket was surrounded. Within ten minutes Oliver was wrapped in a blanket and being cross examined by a pair of suspicious senior detectives who rather fancied themselves as future recruits to Special Branch.

Oliver, unabashed, demanded a telephone, a lawyer and his MP. He said he would be writing to the newspapers, the United Nations, the European Union, International Court at La Hague and the golf club’s main catering committee (of which he was deputy chairman).

None of these requests or threats did any good at all. The police took as much notice of Oliver as they would have done of any other semi-naked vagrant lunatic and it took him several hours to convince his interrogators that he was not a criminal but was instead a respectable, middle aged, slightly podgy, well considered man in his middle years who had a perfectly rational explanation for why he came to be racing through a supermarket car park pushing a wobbly shopping trolley, clad only in a pair of sodden underpants and a pair of golf shoes.

Our arrival tipped the balance in his favour and once the police had convinced themselves that Oliver was not a terrorist (the report from the bomb squad had gone some way towards confirming Oliver's claims) and had checked that none of the local lunatic asylums had lost any patients, they decided that charging him with indecent exposure and the attempted theft of a supermarket trolley (the only two charges they could think of) might result in some pretty sarcastic newspaper headlines. They told him not to do it again and said that he could go.

At that point Oliver rather lost his presence of mind.

'I wish to make a formal complaint,' he said when he had taken his creased trousers out of his golf bag and put them back on. Properly trousered he looked and clearly felt far more confident.

Stunned, we said nothing.

The police inspector to whom Oliver addressed his complaint stared disbelievingly.

'When I was dragged from the supermarket car park,' complained Oliver. 'I asked the security guards to let me mark my ball. They refused.'

The inspector continued to stare.

'I think we should get out of here,' muttered Gerald quietly.

Simon and I picked Oliver up and carried him out of the police station. Gerald took his golf clubs.

'Thanks for everything,' called Simon as we hurried away.

I turned to look. The policeman was opening and shutting his mouth but nothing was coming out.

* * *

By the time Oliver had finished his story his wife was asleep. Exhaustion, anxiety and gin had done their job. She was lying on her back, mouth open, snoring daintily.

'I'm going to sue the bloody weather forecaster,' said Oliver. 'It was all his fault.'

Simon stood up. Gerald and I followed suit.

'We're going home,' said Simon wearily. 'Go to bed, Oliver!'

'And be grateful it's your bed and not a cot in a prison cell,' said Gerald.

'I suppose you're right,' said Oliver. He thought for a minute or two. 'But that ball was sitting up nicely, you know.' He paused and thought again. 'With a decent five iron I could have got it back onto the fairway.'

'Goodnight Oliver,' said Gerald. We headed for the door.

'I might go back tomorrow and try that shot from the car park,' Oliver said.

We left.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: ‘MY WIFE AND I ONLY EVER ARGUE WHEN SHE IS BEING UNREASONABLE’

The comfortable leather arm chairs and slightly battered brass topped tables had all been pushed up against the walls of the lounge. In their place someone had arranged several rows of old fashioned chairs made of metal tubing and faded green canvas. Approximately a third of the chairs were already occupied. I looked around and spotted Simon sitting by himself at the end of one of the rows.

‘Sit down,’ he said. ‘I saved four chairs.’ The three chairs next to his were occupied, respectively, by a hat, a scarf and a folded newspaper.

‘What’s going on?’ I asked, squeezing past him and sitting down.

Simon looked at me. ‘Haven’t you had a letter?’

I shook my head.

‘It’s the Annual General Meeting.’ Simon slipped a hand inside his jacket, pulled out a folded letter and handed it to me. The letter was an invitation to attend the club’s AGM.

‘Read the P.S. at the bottom of the page,’ said Simon, leaning across and pointing a finger at a sentence at the bottom of the letter.

I read the P.S.

‘Please let me know if you do not receive this communication.’

‘How...?’ I began.

‘Exactly!’ said Simon, with a big grin. ‘Wonderful, isn’t it?’

‘How long do these things last?’ I asked. I have a low boredom threshold and usually try to avoid meetings of any kind.

‘They usually break up at about half past one or two,’ replied Simon. ‘But last year’s meeting was closed down by the police at about ten.’

‘Two in the morning?’ I asked.

‘Best entertainment of the year,’ Simon assured me.

‘And last year?’

‘There was a lengthy argument about whether spikes should be allowed on the course. The Chairman of the Greens Committee claimed that if no one wore spikes it would be easier to keep the greens in good condition but not everyone was happy. One chap complained that he liked the clatter of spikes on the concrete path outside the clubhouse. ‘It sounds like hail on a tin roof,’ I remember him saying. ‘I find it very soothing and reassuring.’

‘So what happened?’ I asked.

‘Some chap who is a lawyer said that if we banned spikes everyone who fell over would sue the club,’ said Simon. ‘Another lawyer said that he loathed lawyers who made money out of accidents. The first lawyer threw an ashtray at the second lawyer. The second lawyer thumped her. Then the first lawyer pulled a seven iron out from underneath her chair and started beating the other chap around the head.’ He grinned. ‘It’s bound to be a long evening again so I made sure that we got seats near to the bar.’

In the few minutes that I’d been there the number of empty seats had diminished rapidly. Simon and I had had to fight hard to protect the seats which he had reserved for Oliver and Gerald. It was with some relief that we saw them arrive.

‘I’ll get in some drinks before the rush starts,’ said Gerald, making his war to the bar while Oliver removed Simon’s scarf from one of the spare seats on my left and sat down.

‘Make them trebles,’ called Simon to Gerald. He rubbed his hands together in gleeful expectation.

‘This is the only meeting of the year I would never miss,’ Oliver told me. ‘I was in Turkey on holiday two years ago and flew back three days early for the Golf Club AGM.’ He shook his head as if still hardly believing the memory. ‘And you should have been here last year. It was a short meeting but pretty damned exciting I can tell you.’

‘I heard about it.’

‘You should have seen the lawyer trying to brain the other lawyer with an eight iron. Brilliant.’

‘It was a seven iron,’ said Simon.

‘Eight iron.’

I held up a hand. ‘Six iron?’ I suggested.

They paused for a moment then both nodded. ‘Six iron,’ they agreed.

‘Do you remember that chap trying to split open the skull of the chairman of the Greens Committee with a billiard cue?’ asked Oliver.

‘I could never work out where he got the billiard cue from,’ said Simon.

‘Then the Ladies Captain and that woman with the purple bouffant hair started fighting.’

‘At what point were the police called?’ I asked.

‘I think it was when the head green keeper threw the best part of a pint of mild and bitter over that chap with a glass eye whose name I can never remember,’ said Simon.

Before Oliver could reply Gerald came back clutching four drinks. By the time these had been handed round, and Gerald had handed Simon back his hat, and had settled himself down on the seat which the hat had occupied, the club secretary was calling for order and banging the table in front of him with the sort of wooden mallet normally used for knocking tent pegs into the ground. ‘We’ve got a lot to get through this evening,’ he said. ‘So I’ll introduce your club chairman who will start the proceedings without further ado.’ The club secretary then sat down and for a minute or two nothing happened. Then the club secretary stood up again. ‘We appear to have temporarily mislaid the club chairman,’ he announced. ‘So, in view of the length of the agenda I will invite the deputy club chairman to take over until he appears.’ He then sat down and as though sitting on the other end of a see-saw the deputy club chairman stood up, thanked the secretary, welcomed us all, read out a long and utterly boring list of apologies from local dignitaries (I didn’t catch any of the names or indeed any of their reasons for not attending but I did notice that the mayor, the deputy mayor, the chairman of the local planning committee, the chief constable and a bishop were among those who had, for some reason been invited and had, for a no doubt far better reasons, declined the invitation) and an even long list of even more boring apologies from club members who were ,presumably, too nervous, too old or too disabled to risk attending.

‘The first item on our agenda this evening,’ said the deputy club chairman, after he had completed this dull but obligatory task, ‘is to discuss the problem of slow play.’ He paused and cleared his throat. ‘Personally,’ he began, ‘and speaking as a member rather than as de facto in officio, I would like to say that I don’t know what all the fuss is about. Golf is a game most of us play for entertainment or relaxation and I can’t see why anyone would want to hurry it up and get it over with as quickly as possible.’

‘Mr Acting Chairman, there would be far less slow play if the green keeper was instructed to get rid of all the rough,’ said a florid faced man I’d never seen before. ‘I spend around five minutes a hole looking for my ball. That means that in a round of golf I spend an hour and a half stumbling around in the rough ball hunting. If there was no rough I could cut ninety minutes off the time it takes me to play a round of golf.’

‘We might as well fill in all the ponds and streams,’ suggested a member who was wearing tartan check trews, a green mohair sweater and a peaked cap with GOLF inscribed on the peak in gold embroidery. ‘That would speed things up.’

‘We could get round faster if the holes were shorter,’ suggested a man in a check jacket.

To my surprise Gerald stood up. ‘The people who design golf courses obviously never play golf or hate golfers or are psychopathic bastards or have some sort of ongoing contract with the people who make golf balls.’ He paused and looked around. Many heads were nodding. ‘The holes that win prizes are impossible to play,’ he said. ‘Who wants to play a 600 yard hole that is studded with ponds and bunkers and clever little twists and turns? The holes the magazines get excited about have water all down the left, thick trees all down the right, a fairway which is six feet wide and studded with bunkers which move about and a green which is shaped like an upturned saucer and as smooth as glass.’ He paused again. More heads were nodding and the nodding was now being accompanied by so much murmuring of approval that the club lounge was beginning to look and sound like a convention centre for Buddhists. ‘The ideal hole would be 150 yards long, all downhill, with smooth hard-as-concrete grass leading down to a saucer-shaped green. There would be a fifty foot tall tower on every tee equipped with a lift. Players could then go to the top of the tower and hit their balls into a long chute which fed their balls down onto the green. The hole would be two feet across. Every golfer would get a hole in one at every hole and we could play a round of golf in under an hour.’

A large, florid faced man turned round and glared at Gerald. ‘Outrageous!’ he bellowed. ‘A hole two foot across would take all the skill out of the game. One foot diameter would be far more sensible and would ensure that skill was rewarded.’

I looked at Simon, he looked at me and grinned.

‘It’s a good idea but, sadly, I don’t think it would be practical,’ objected a man in the check cap. ‘In order to make the lifts would we would have to lay underground electricity cables all over the course.’

Gerald sat down, looked at us and shook his head slightly. He closed his eyes, lowered his head and put his head in his hands.

‘Mr Acting Chairman,’ said a member smoking a rosewood pipe. ‘I think our problems would all be solved if we banned dentists from the course.’ He put his pipe back into his mouth, sat down and folded his arms.

His suggestion was met with total silence as the assembled members tried to work out how banning dentists might solve the problem of slow play.

‘Er, just how would this help stop the problem of slow play?’ asked the deputy chairman after a while.

The member took his pipe out of his mouth and stood up. ‘It seems to me that too many of our members are dentists,’ he said. ‘I know personally of at least five. If we ban them from the course we will reduce the pressure on tee times.’ He sat down and, almost immediately stood up again. ‘Besides,’ he added, ‘I find it depressing to see dentists on the course. I saw a whole group of them on the fifth green the other day. I was very distressed by the sight.’ He looked around the room. ‘I feel very strongly about this.’

Oliver leant closer to me. ‘What would you call a group of dentists?’ he whispered.

‘I don’t know,’ I whispered back.

‘An abscess,’ he suggested.

‘An abscess of dentists,’ I said, trying it out. ‘Sounds good,’ I told him.

‘I just thought of it,’ he said, very pleased with himself.

‘May I come back to the previous member’s suggestion about getting rid of the rough?’ asked a bald man who had a pair of half-moon spectacles resting on the tip of his nose.

The chairman said he might.

‘Well it seems to me that since most of us spend most of our time in the rough and very little time on the fairway we would all save a great deal of time and effort - not to mention balls - if we told the ground staff to let the fairways grow and to cut the rough.’ He pushed his spectacles up his nose, looked around the room, and sat down.

As he sat down a tall, thin fellow holding a cigar stood up. ‘We should do away with the handicapping system,’ he said. ‘Handicapping is nothing more than raw communism. It’s an evil system. The idea of the handicapping system is to take from those who have and give to those who don’t have. It’s nothing more than communism,’ he said. He sat down to silence.

A round fellow in a bright pink turtle neck sweater stood up. ‘So why aren’t the Russians and the Chinese any good at golf?’ he wanted to know. ‘Name me one good Russian golfer?’

The cigar smoker looked startled but said nothing.

‘I would like to bring up the honours board,’ said a tall, thin man with bushy hair.

‘We’ll come to other business later on if you don’t mind,’ said the deputy chairman, who was, with some justification, concerned that he was losing control of the meeting.

‘I won’t be here later on,’ said the man with the bushy hair. ‘I’ve got to leave at nine. There’s a programme I want to watch on the television and our video recorder has broken. My complaint is that my name on the honours board is in much smaller printing than anyone else’s. It seems to me that this is a very obvious case of religious discrimination.’

‘Er, what religion are you, Mr Protheroe-Shiplington-Bartram?’ asked the acting chairman.

‘I don’t think that’s any of your business,’ replied Mr Protheroe-Shiplington-Bartram. ‘But if you must know I’m a Methodist. I won last year’s July Cup and was looking forward to seeing my name on the honours board in due prominence.’

The chairman turned round and studied the board which happened to be right behind him. ‘Your name is on the board is it not?’

‘Indeed it is, Mr Chairman. But in much smaller print size than anyone else’s name.’

‘I can speak about this with some knowledge,’ said the acting chairman, ‘since I am a member of the Honours Board Sub Committee. You are quite right that your name is smaller than anyone else’s but that is simply because your name is longer than anyone else’s and there is only so much space available for each person on the honours board.’

‘But when you’ve waited as long as I have to see your name on the honours board it is a bit of a blow to have to look at it through a magnifying glass to see that it’s there at all.’

‘Oh come now, Mr Protheroe-Shiplington-Bartram,’ said the acting Chairman. ‘I think that’s a bit of an exaggeration. The gold paint which we use for the honours board is quite expensive you know. We can only allocate so many brushfuls for each name.’

‘Well I don’t think it’s good enough and unless my name is repainted the same size as everyone else’s I intend to take this further,’ said Mr Protheroe-Shiplington-Bartram. At this point he clearly intended to emphasise his passion by storming, or at least flouncing, out of the room. Unfortunately, the rows of chairs were crammed together so tightly that what had been intended to be a dramatic departure ended up as a rather apologetic litany of ‘Excuse me’, ‘Sorry about that’, ‘Whoops, pardons’ and ‘If I could just squeeze through there, please’.

* * *

After his departure the acting chairman attempted to return to the running order which the secretary had so carefully prepared before the meeting started. But the damage had been done. A woman with a safety pin through her nose stood up.

‘While on the subject of discrimination,’ she said. ‘I want an explanation for what happened to Mr Ellwood.’

‘Mr Ellwood?’ said the deputy chairman, who clearly had no idea who Mr Ellwood was or is.

‘Mr Ellwood is disabled and wants to play golf,’ said the woman.

‘Are you a member, madam?’ asked the acting chairman.

‘I represent Mr Ellwood,’ said the woman.

‘Is he here?’

‘No. You won’t let him play. I’m here on his behalf. I represent the anti-discrimination unit of the local social services department.’

‘Point of order, Mr Chairman,’ said a man in a green corduroy suit. ‘If this person is not a member she should not be allowed to speak at this meeting. Indeed, she shouldn’t even be allowed in the building.’

‘I represent the public,’ said the woman with the safety pin holding her nose together. She turned round to snarl at the man in the green corduroy suit. ‘It’s unconstitutional to keep the public out. Under the Human Rights Act I have every right to be here.’

‘Why, er, why do you claim that we won’t let Mr Ellwood play?’ asked the acting chairman, rather tentatively. It was clear that he, like the rest of us, had no idea what the Human Rights Act had to do with a golf club but knew enough to suspect that it might well have a great deal to do with us.

‘He is legless and confined to a wheelchair,’ said the woman with the safety pin through her nose. ‘He was told that he couldn’t play because of his wheelchair.’

‘I’m afraid that being in a wheelchair would probably occasion some difficulties,’ admitted the acting chairman, picking his words with some care.

‘That’s not the point,’ said the woman. ‘Mr Ellwood doesn’t want to play your stupid game. But the point is that if he did he wouldn’t be able to because the little flat green bit with the flag with a ten on it just before the pond can only be reached via three wooden steps.’

‘I’m afraid...,’ began the acting chairman.

‘And all the grass between the flags is, in many places, far too soft for a wheelchair.’

‘I’m afraid I don’t quite understand your point,’ said the acting chairman at his most emollient.

‘You’re in breach of the Disabled Persons Access Act,’ said the social worker triumphantly. ‘You should lay down concrete paths and provide ramps as an alternative to steps.’

‘I’m sorry you feel disappointed with our course,’ said the acting chairman, ‘but it seems to me that if Mr Ellwood has admitted that he doesn’t actually want to play golf then any case he might bring would be built on shaky ground. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that he wouldn’t have a leg to stand on.’

This unfortunate remark was doubtless not intended with any malice; it was simply one of those unfortunate slips of the tongue which afflict us all from time to time. But to the woman with the safety pin it was nothing less than a declaration of war. She stalked from the room indignantly, with froth forming at the corners of her mouth. We would, we were all told, hear from her again. We suspected we would.

* * *

The acting chairman cleared his throat and rapped his knuckles on the table top. ‘Now I call upon Sidney, the club treasurer and chairman of the finance subcommittee to give us his annual financial report and, er, a full report of the club’s financial position.’

Sidney, a small, bespectacled fellow who wore a grey suit enlivened by a bright red tie, pulled a battered leather brief-case up onto his lap, unfastened the two straps which held the case shut and pulled out a three inch thick wedge of papers. Sidney was a successful local businessman who ran a chain of discount stores. He was also a successful club golfer though it was alleged by some that he had achieved many of his victories only through his ability to knock 10% off his score without anyone noticing. As he struggled to refasten his brief-case and at the same time put the papers down on the table in front of him the papers slipped and fell to the floor. Another member knelt down and tried to pick the papers up.

‘Don’t worry too much,’ Sidney reassured him merrily, ‘they weren’t in any particular order.’ He cleared his throat. His audience sat forward, as silent and expectant as if they had been spectators lined up on the first, tee waiting for the Sunday morning foursomes to begin.

‘Er, well, thank you Mr Acting Chairman,’ began Sidney. He cleared his throat again and picked up the top paper from the pile in front of him. ‘As you all know,’ he said, ‘the amusement machine in the gentlemen’s changing rooms has for many years been our major source of income.’ He put down the piece of paper he was holding which was an invoice for roofing felt and slid it to the bottom of the pile. He rummaged around amongst his papers and produced another example from his collection. ‘In the 1971-2 year our income from this machine paid for 32% of our expenditure on salaries, maintenance, electricity and grass seed. However, during the two decades which have followed our income from this source has fallen steadily while our costs have continued to rise.’

‘Excuse me, Sidney,’ said the acting chairman, who had noticed some fairly hectic arm waving on his right, ‘but I rather think that Maurice wishes to make a point.’ He would, in fact, have needed to have been blind not to have noticed Maurice’s furious attempt to attract attention to himself.

Maurice, given his chance, opened and shut his mouth several times. ‘I’ve forgotten what I was going to say,’ he admitted, going very red.

‘If the amusement machine still gave out a decent jackpot you’d find people wouldn’t mind putting their money into it,’ said Peregrine, taking advantage of Maurice’s unfortunate lapse of memory to make a point of his own. ‘Since you put a £5 limit on the jackpot most of the fellows have just stopped bothering. If you win the jackpot you’re out of pocket by the time you’ve bought everybody a drink.’

‘That’s exactly the point I was going to make!’ cried Maurice, at once both delighted that he no longer had to struggle to remember what it was that he was going to say and furious that he had not been the first to say it.

‘Thank you, Maurice, thank you Peregrine,’ said the acting chairman. ‘Thank you gentlemen,’ he added just in case he had missed anyone out. ‘Sidney, would you like to continue?’

‘Thank you, Mr Acting Chairman,’ said Sidney. ‘Very kind of you.’ He finished rummaging through his pile of papers and pulled out another piece of paper. ‘The price of grass seed has gone up by 765% in the last twelve months,’ he announced. Apparently surprised by this figure he leant forwards and peered at the paper he was holding. There was much oohing and aahing at this and a great deal of breath was sucked in. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said, ‘that should be 7.65%.’ There was a pause while he shuffled through some more papers and Maurice took advantage of the delay in the proceedings to raise his arm in order to attract the attention of the acting chairman.

‘I would like to propose a vote of thanks to the green-keeping staff,’ he said, when the acting chairman had invited him to speak. ‘I think we are all grateful to them for their excellent work in maintaining the high standard of the course.’

‘I’ll second that,’ said a man in a pink striped suit and an ill-fitting brown toupee.

‘Shall we vote on that then, gentlemen?’ asked the acting chairman.

Ten hands were raised in support of the motion.

‘That seems to be carried unanimously,’ said the chairman.

‘You didn’t vote, Mr Chairman,’ said Sidney.

‘I don’t think I have to vote unless there’s a tie do I Sidney?’ said the chairman.

‘I think it’s probably up to you, Mr Acting Chairman,’ said Sidney, who had never been quite sure about this. ‘But I just thought I ought to mention it.’

‘Then I’ll vote for the motion,’ said the acting chairman. ‘Since there are no votes against that definitely makes it unanimous.’

A man in a pink jumper with a great deal of bouffant grey hair stood up. ‘On behalf of the greens committee,’ he said, ‘I would like to thank the members for their kindness and generosity in making this statement at this time. We have, as most of you will be only too well aware, had a great deal to contend with during the last three months. The moles on the 13th green caused us all a great deal of concern and I know for a fact that the boggy patch beside the 16th green kept the head green keeper awake for much of last month.’

‘Thank you,’ said the acting chairman. ‘Sidney, would you like to continue with your financial report?’

‘Thank you Mr Chairman,’ said Sidney. He cleared his throat, stood up and began again.

‘Shall I go straight to the bottom line to save time?’ asked Sidney.

‘Splendid idea’ said the acting chairman, with a broad smile on his face. ‘I knew we could trust you to hit the nail on the head and call a spade a spade.’

‘It’s not terribly good,’ said Nigel. ‘We seem to be overdrawn,’ he coughed and looked down. ‘The, er, biggest problem is the number of unpaid membership fees.’

This news was greeted in total silence. No one wanted to comment. The acting chairman suddenly took a serious interest in his finger nails. The club secretary had a slight coughing fit. Other members spotted something on the floor that needed their attention or found that their watches needed winding. Pens were taken out and cleaned and noses were blown.

‘We need to look at some innovative ways of raising money,’ suggested Sidney. ‘I propose that we look at the possibility of selling advertising on our grass.’

No one said anything probably because none of us were quite sure that we had heard what we thought we had heard.

‘They do it at cricket grounds,’ said Sidney. ‘They sell advertising space to all sorts of people. Insurance companies, Brewers, telephone companies.’ He paused and then, mistaking the continued silence for enthusiasm, continued. ‘We have far more grass than cricket clubs have,’ he said. ‘We have 18 greens to sell - not to mention all the fairways.’ Once again he paused. Once again there was silence. ‘We could allow advertisers to sponsor individual bunkers,' he suggested.

'Mr Acting Chairman, will you please call the police and an ambulance,' said a tall thin man in a blue short sleeved sweater and a yellow shirt. He moved purposefully towards Sidney.

'Why shall I say I'm calling?' asked the acting chairman. 'The police will need to arrest me for murder,' said the man in the yellow shirt. 'And the ambulance will be needed to take away the body.'

Sidney, quick enough to realise that he was the proposed victim, headed for the door.

* * *

'I want to complain about the use of bad language by male members,' said a large woman in a pink trouser suit and a pink flowery hat.

'Can we deal with that after we've dealt with the accounts?' asked the acting chairman.

'No,' said the woman in pink. 'If you don't deal with it now you won't get your shirts ironed for a week.'

'That's his wife,' Oliver muttered. 'She's scary.'

Torn between establishing his authority and wearing wrinkled shirts for a week, the acting chairman hesitated. It was a grave mistake.

'I was having tea on the terrace when I distinctly heard a man say a rude word,' said the acting chairman's wife.

'What word was that?' asked the acting chairman.

'I've no intention of repeating the word in front of all these people!'

'Would you write it down?'

'Give me a piece of paper and a pencil.'

The acting chairman handed his wife a piece of paper and a pencil. His wife took them both, rested the piece of paper against the side of her handbag and then hesitated, pencil poised. 'I'm not sure how to spell it,' she confessed.

'You'll have to tell me what the word is, my dear.' said the acting chairman. 'I can't tell you how to spell it unless you tell me what it is.'

'Bollocks,' said the woman in pink going red.

The acting chairman told his wife how to spell the word. She wrote it down and handed him the piece of paper and his pencil.

'Do you know the name of the member responsible for this outrage?' the acting chairman asked his wife.

His wife, the woman in pink, looked embarrassed. 'I'd rather not say,' she said.

'But you have to say,' he said.

'It was you.'

'No it wasn't!'

'Yes it was.'

''Twasn't.'

''Twas.'

'I've never said bollocks in public in my life!'

'You have. You just said it.'

'That doesn't count.'

'Anyway you said it.'

'When am I supposed to have said it?'

'Two weekends ago. On a Saturday afternoon.'

The acting chairman thought for a while. We all waited. This was too good for anyone to interrupt. 'I missed a two footer and lost £50,' he admitted. 'I might have been feeling peeved about that.' He nodded wisely. 'I may well have expressed my unhappiness,' he admitted.

'You were betting?' cried the woman in pink, a vision of outrage. 'And you lost £50?' Her voice rose and she sounded like a provincial actress over-playing the part of Lady Bracknell in The Importance of Being Ernest.

'If I hadn't missed that short putt I wouldn't have lost £50,' explained her husband. 'That was why I said 'bollocks'.'

'You were betting and then you swore!' said the woman in pink, who clearly could not have been more shocked if she had suddenly discovered that her husband was a white slave trader. 'Well what do you want me to do about it?' demanded her husband.

'My fellow lady members and I have discussed this and we want all bad language to be outlawed,' said the woman in pink. 'It's the only solution. 'Any male member heard swearing must be given disciplinary points and suspended from the club for a month. Any player who receives three suspensions will be expelled from the club. It'll be like speeding. We have formed a Standards Supervisory Sub Committee to police this new regulation.'

'What new regulation?'

'The no swearing regulation.'

‘It isn’t a regulation yet.’

‘Well, we want it to be.’

‘We have to vote on it first,’ said the acting chairman. He waved a hand around to indicate that there were other people present. ‘And I have to see what other members think about it.’

‘Well, see what other members think about it,’ said the woman in pink, the acting chairman’s wife. ‘Have a vote. And then we’ll have our new regulation. And if you say that word again you’ll be punished.’

A stout, bald man in a blue jumper struggled to his feet. He looked to be too big to be standing up without support. ‘I think this new regulation is bloody stupid,’ he said, to great laughter and some scattered applause. ‘Civilisation has been going steadily downhill since women got the vote. If we give in to this we might as well just give up completely.’ He collapsed back into his chair and the canvas groaned.

A man in a green tweed jacket spoke without standing. ‘We have to be firm on this,’ he said. ‘Women are wonderful creatures but they can occasionally be judgmental, narrow minded and unfair.’ There were murmurs of protest from the few women present. Someone threw a powder puff which missed him. ‘It’s true,’ insisted the man. ‘My wife and I only ever argue when she is being unreasonable.’ He sat down. The woman in pink and her colleagues opened and shut their mouths like goldfish. The woman who had thrown the powder puff sent a message across the room asking if she could please have her powder puff back.

‘Since the ladies are so sensitive I think we should find some other way to protect them,’ said a man with large ears and strands of hair combed over a bald pate.

‘What do you suggest?’ asked the acting chairman. He seemed to have gained strength and confidence from the support of other male members.

‘We could ban the serving of food and drinks on the terrace,’ the man with large ears suggested.

‘Oh no, that’s going too far,’ said the acting chairman, shaking his head. ‘Sitting on the terrace with a nice G&T is a pleasant way to round off an evening.’

‘We could move the terrace to the other side of the club house,’ suggested someone else.

‘And overlook the rubbish bins and the car park?’ The acting chairman snorted with disapproval. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘Mr Acting Chairman,’ said Oliver, standing up, ‘I have a suggestion.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Ban ladies from the terrace,’ suggested Oliver. ‘Then their delicate feelings won’t be outraged by hearing bad language from nasty male players who lose £50 in skins matches.’

The acting Chairman thought about this for a moment and slowly a smile appeared on his face. ‘That seems like a very good solution,’ he agreed.

‘Don’t you dare agree to that!’ threatened his wife. ‘If you do I’ll...’

‘You’ll what?’ interrupted her husband, whose new courage was growing by the minute. ‘I can get my shirts ironed at the Chinese laundry. I can get my meals here. What other services are you going to withdraw?’

The woman in pink went an even brighter shade of red but said nothing.

‘Let’s take a vote,’ said the acting chairman. ‘All those in favour of banning lady members from the terrace?’

Every man in the room put up a hand. Some put up two.

‘Anyone against?’

The woman in pink, and the other half a dozen women present, put up a hand each.

‘Motion carried by a substantial margin,’ announced the acting chairman. ‘You can pretty well call it unanimous,’ he added, speaking to the club secretary who was keeping the minutes.

The acting chairman’s wife stood up, adjusted her hat, and headed for the door. When she got there she hesitated for a moment. Everyone in the room was watching her and waiting to see what she would say. Her husband held his head high and did not waiver. ‘Don’t be too late back,’ said the acting chairman’s wife rather meekly. ‘You know how I worry if you get home late.’

‘I’ll be back when I’m ready, dear,’ boomed the acting chairman.

‘Yes, dear,’ said his wife. ‘Would you like your usual cocoa when you get in?’

‘I’ll let you know what I want when I get home,’ said the acting chairman.

‘Yes, dear,’ said his wife. She left, followed by most of the other lady members.

Gerald stood up. ‘Gentlemen,’ he said. ‘I suggest that we now close the meeting and all buy the acting chairman a drink.’

This suggestion was greeted with loud cheering. The acting chairman, who had never been so popular nor felt so proud of himself, grew visibly larger. The meeting broke up.

‘Nothing seems to have been decided,’ I said to Simon, as we stood.

‘Oh I don’t know about that,’ said Simon. ‘The acting chairman has established his authority at home and lots of niggles have been aired. That seems to me like a pretty good evening's work.'

A red faced man in a brown suit appeared in the doorway. It was the club chairman. 'I'm here now,' he announced loudly and rather pompously. 'We can start the meeting.'

But no one took any notice of him. We were all busy queuing up to buy drinks for the acting chairman.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: ‘JUST THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF MUD’

We were sitting one day, the four of us, in our corner by the fire, having a round of drinks before a round of golf. Outside, it was cold, bitterly, finger freezing cold. Tucked snugly in the lounge bar we were fortifying ourselves with spirits. Gerald and Oliver were drinking brandy. Simon and I were drinking malt whisky.

‘I read somewhere that it is dangerous to go outside in the cold after drinking alcohol,’ said Gerald.

‘Is that so?’ said Simon, thoughtfully. He sniffed and then sipped at his whisky.

‘It’s started to rain,’ said Oliver, who was the only one of us sitting in a position from which he could clearly see what was happening outside; he had a clear view through the lounge bar windows which overlook both the 18th green and the practice green. ‘The sky is black and getting blacker by the minute.’

‘It’ll probably thunder,’ said Simon. ‘The fellow on the radio said that there would probably be lightning.’

‘I wonder if it’s perhaps too dangerous to go out and play,’ said Gerald. ‘The ground is icy. A storm is brewing. Lightning coming. And we’ve all been drinking spirits.’ He raised an eyebrow quizzically.

‘If we were all single men like Tom I wouldn’t worry,’ said Oliver. ‘But...,’ and he sighed, ‘we do have family responsibilities.’

‘I’m no fair weather golfer,’ said Simon.

‘Absolutely not!’ agreed Gerald immediately.

‘I’ve played many a game of golf in bad weather.’

‘We all have.’

‘But on a day like this, and thinking of our responsibilities, it’s probably better to stay indoors,’ said Simon, as though unwillingly but nobly accepting the sacrifice. ‘We have to think of our families.’

‘If we’re staying in I’ll just pop and ask Elvis to take my gear out and get it muddy,’ said Oliver. He yawned, stretched, got up and walked over to the bar where he tapped a youth of about twenty on the shoulder and started talking to him.

‘What on earth is Oliver doing?’ I asked Simon. ‘Who is Elvis?’

‘Elvis is one of the juniors. Oliver has gone to get him to play nine holes in his clothes and with his clubs,’ said Simon.

I stared at Simon. I didn’t understand.

‘He and Elvis are about the same size,’ explained Simon.

‘I can see that,’ I agreed, watching as the two men left the room together.

‘If Oliver’s wife finds out he’s been here sitting by the fire drinking she’ll go mad,’ said Simon. ‘She’s given him standing instructions that if he comes here to play golf and the weather is too bad then he’s to go back home and do something useful.’

‘What sort of useful?’

‘Oh I dunno, put up a shelf in the bathroom or clear out the garage.’

‘Oh, that sort of useful.’

‘Exactly. So Oliver gives Elvis a few bob to play a few holes in his shoes and his clothes, using his clubs.’

‘So that when Oliver gets home it looks as if he’s been playing golf? Muddy shoes, muddy clubs, soggy glove? Just the right amount of mud on the bottom of his trousers?’

‘Precisely,’ nodded Simon. ‘He did try faking it but it didn’t work. It’s difficult to get it just right. Too easy to over-do it. You can never get the mud splashes just right without actually going out there and slashing in the mud. If you have to go to all that effort yourself you might just as well go and play golf.’

‘I’ll get another round of drinks,’ said Gerald. ‘Doubles everyone?’

‘Triples would save us getting up and moving about so much,’ said Simon.

‘Splendid idea,’ said Gerald, heading off towards the bar.

* * *

‘Thinking of thunder and lightning reminds me of old Lightning,’ said Simon.

‘Crumbs,’ said Oliver, who had returned. He had given his clothes to Elvis and was now wearing a spare pair of light green slacks and a mauve jumper which he had taken from his locker. ‘I remember Lightning!’

‘Who on earth was Lightning?’ I asked.

Simon settled comfortably into his chair. ‘Odd bloke. Mad keen on golf and born to the game. Tiny little golf balls instead of blood corpuscles. It was rumoured that he had been conceived in a bunker just to the left of the 14th green and it was an undeniable fact that he had been delivered on the 17th tee by two dermatologists, an orthopaedic surgeon and a psychiatrist who were, fortuitously, taking part in the annual medical society golf day.’

‘His parents and god parents were all low handicappers,’ said Oliver. ‘His father was a surgeon of some kind. His parents were quite well off but Lightning was the meanest man I’ve ever met. I remember that he and his wife used to stay in the car park until their ticket expired because he wanted to make sure he got his money's worth. He would take the newspaper with him and his wife would make up a packet of sandwiches. They'd sit there until their time had expired and then go home.

'He was also the slowest player any of us has ever known,' said Simon.

'Hence the soubriquet Lightning,' explained Oliver. 'He would often take eight or nine hours to play one round of golf. His record, I think, was over ten hours.'

'Generally speaking, slower even than the three horsewomen of the Apocalypse,' said Simon. He looked at Oliver. 'Tell him the story about Lightning,' he said.

'You tell him,' said Oliver. 'You were there when it happened. I was at my sister's wedding.' He wrinkled his brow and thought for a moment. 'Her third I think it was. Might have been her fourth.'

'Lightning wasn't all that bad a player,' began Simon. 'But he was a hooker and a slicer. Nothing worse for a golfer than being a hooker and a slicer. You don't know where the ball is going. If you hook and you know you're going to hook you can make allowances. A hook you can rely on really isn't all that much of a problem. Ditto with slicing. But if you don't know whether the ball is going to go right or left you're sunk really, aren't you?'

I nodded.

'Lightning never had the faintest where his drive was going to end up. He'd hook and slice all over the place. One minute his ball would fly left. And the next shot would veer right. His speciality was the late swerve. I've never seen anyone swerve the ball quite so late. Down the fairway it would fly. He and his partners would think it was going straight down the middle. People would congratulate him. And then, just as the ball began to lose height so the swerve would begin.' Simon shook his head at the memory of Lightning's late swerving drives.

'Now none of this would have mattered all that much if Lightning had not been so mean,' continued Simon. 'He was, without a shadow of a doubt, the meanest man I've ever met in my entire life. And I know about mean. When I was a lad my best friend's pal was a farmer. He was pretty mean. He never gave his children anything to eat except porridge because they all hated the sight of it and so a packet lasted quite a long time. I went there once for tea. The farmer argued that if he only gave them food they didn't like they'd never get fat and he said he was really being much kinder than parents who gave their kids buns, jelly, ice cream and chocolate cake. Of course, neither my pal nor any of the other children were convinced by this because they knew that in reality their father was just a mean old man. Sometimes on a Saturday night he would give all the children sixpence if they agreed to go to bed without any supper. Then, if they bought into this, he'd get it back the next morning by charging them sixpence for their breakfast.'

Oliver said that his father had been a farmer and that all this was very unfair to farmers and he insisted that farmers got a very poor press from people who really ought to know better. He said that when he was a boy he once heard of someone who knew of a farmer who let all the local children go onto his land and cut down dead trees and bushes and take them away to burn on bonfire night. He never charged them a penny, said Oliver. Simon agreed that this was very generous of the unknown farmer and solemn proof that we all ought to be much more careful about telling nasty stories about farmers in the future.

'Anyway,' continued Simon, 'to get back to Lightning. He was far meaner than my pal's father, the farmer.' He emptied his glass and looked over towards the bar. 'What on earth is Gerald doing?' he asked.

'Flirting with the bar staff,' said Oliver, nodding in Gerald's direction. Gerald was smiling and talking to a very pretty girl behind the bar. There was no one else there. 'You watch,' said Oliver, 'Gerald will claim there was a terrible crush when he gets back.'

'You know the gorse bushes both sides of the third hole?' said Simon.

'Very well,' I admitted, ruefully. I had lost a fair number of balls in those bushes.

'Lightning's drive on the third would always go straight into the gorse,' continued Simon. Whatever club he took off the tee his ball would fly unerringly into the gorse. Left or right it didn't matter. There was no escape. I actually used to feel sorry for him sometimes.'

'Now, as you know, many players don't even bother to look for balls when they go into the gorse. It's horribly thick stuff. But Lightning would take a pair of gardening gloves out of his crumbling old leather golf bag and wade into the gorse with steady determination. He had four different types of ball retriever in his bag - two for fishing balls out of water, one for rescuing balls from thick gorse and a fourth for picking balls out of trees. One of his ball retrievers had an extension specially built for him by a local blacksmith. He could rescue balls from the middle of Loch Ness with it. Some of us believed he played golf because he liked finding golf balls. Thirty or forty minutes after striding into the gorse, having filled his pockets with the balls other players had lost and abandoned, 'Lightning' would give a little whoop of delight when he finally came across the ball he had originally lost. The most doting parent would not have spent as much time looking for a missing child as 'Lightning' spent looking for a missing ball. His partners, who were invariably press-ganged into taking part in the search, would stumble back onto the course, scratched and bleeding, muttering incantations to their Gods to keep 'Lightning's' next shot on the fairway. But, sadly, the Gods never seemed to pay a great deal of attention.'

'On an average sort of day it would take Lightning half an hour to play each hole. Most of that time he would spend in the undergrowth. He was the best finder of golf balls I ever met. Better even than that dog one of the groundsmen used to have.'

'Sally.'

'That was her name. Amazing dog. But not as good at finding balls as Lightning. Each time he waded into the rough he would find ten or fifteen golf balls. All previously abandoned as lost by other players.'

'He found clubs too,' said Oliver.

'I remember,' said Simon. 'Golfers would throw clubs into the undergrowth in disgust and Lightning would fish them out.'

'And there was a naked body wasn't there?'

'There was,' agreed Simon. 'He once found the dead and decaying body of an unfortunate woman who had, it turned out, been missing from home for several weeks.'

Nobody said anything for a while as we sat in silent tribute to this unknown cadaver.

Eventually Simon broke the silence and carried on with his story.

'If Lighting was proud of the fact that he never paid for his golf balls,' he said, 'he was equally proud of the fact that he would use the same ball for month after month until the casing literally flew apart. A fellow who used to play with him quite often said that Lighting once played with a ball in such poor condition that a shot sent the casing and the core in different directions. Naturally, Lightning wasn't satisfied until he had found both halves. I don't know which half he played.'

I was sceptical about this claim, arguing that no one could possibly be so mean. But Simon insisted that he wasn't exaggerating at all. He swore that he had often watched Lighting collecting together broken golf tees and that he had once spotted him in the changing room gluing them back together again. Simon said he didn't think he had ever seen anyone mending broken tees before and that for a while he'd amused himself by collecting together broken bits and pieces and giving them to Lightning to repair. He says, however, that he gave this up when Lightning tried to sell him back the reconditioned tees at a special price. He said what really worried him was the fact that he had been tempted by Lightning's offer.

'Eventually,' continued Simon, 'it became a favourite club pastime to try and bait poor Lightning. One of the most popular games was to try and get Lightning to pay for a round of drinks. People would sidle up to him in the bar, buy him a drink and then stand around fingering their empty glass for hours afterwards, waiting for the compliment to be returned. They always waited in vain for Lightning never opened his wallet in anger.'

'I remember we used to take bets on who might be able to get him to buy a drink,' said Oliver. 'We gave it up after three months. He hadn't bought anyone a drink and there didn't seem any likelihood that he ever would. The odds had become absurdly long. I think that by the time we finished we were offering at least 500 to 1 against him buying a drink for any specific member.'

'In the end,' said Simon, 'it took the combined efforts of just about everyone in the club to squeeze drinks out of Lightning and the way they did this was, I think, a tribute to our combined ingenuity and imagination.'

'It must have been brilliant,' said Oliver. 'I've never forgiven my sister for getting married that day. I don't expect it lasted. Her marriages never do.'

'You will recall,' Simon said to me, 'that the green on the second short hole is partly hidden from the view of the player both when he is on the tee and for about fifty yards of the walk down the fairway.'

I nodded.

'Well, one summer Sunday lunchtime, the woodlands around this hole were alive with crouching club members. Every tee and bush hid at least a foursome. The whole operation was run like a military campaign.'

'After Lightning had hit his tee shot one member ran out and picked his ball from the bushes where it had landed. He then threw the ball to a second member crouched on the green right by the flagpost. This second member then dropped the ball into the hole and ran off the green back into the undergrowth.'

'In order to make sure that Lightning was distracted and confused his playing partner - the club's assistant professional who had, much to Lightning's surprise and delight, agreed to play a round with him - had 'accidentally' collided with him the moment he had played his shot. This prevented Lightning from following the flight of his ball with his usual care. The result of this, combined with the peculiar geography of the hole, was that Lightning had no idea where his ball had gone.'

''Don't worry about it,' the assistant professional said, after apologising profusely, 'I saw your ball land on the green. Lovely shot. Well played.' The professional had already played and his ball had run off the back of the green into a bunker. They then set off down the fairway.'

‘When they got near to the green Lightning looked disappointed at not being able to see his ball on the putting surface but began to walk round and round in ever decreasing circles, searching the bunkers and poking around in the light rough around the green.’

‘It was the professional, Lightning’s playing partner, who eventually came across the ball. He feigned surprise and delight and called Lightning across to look at the ball which was, surprise surprise, lying in the bottom of the cup.’

‘‘Is that your ball?’’ the professional asked.’

Lightning bent down, picked up the ball and identified it as his.

‘‘A hole in one!’ cried the assistant professional excitedly. ‘You got a hole in one! Congratulations!’ He leant over, checked the ball and confirmed that it was, indeed, the ball Lightning had been playing. Naturally, Lightning beamed with delight.’

‘The story now moves on a few hours. It is early afternoon. Lightning is finishing his round of golf. It has been uneventful except for that single hole in one. As Lightning approaches the club house he hears applause. He looks up and sees a cluster of members standing on the putting green, clapping. He asks what they are clapping. They tell him that they are clapping him. They have somehow found out about his hole in one. They are thrilled for him. As Lightning walks towards the club house so the crowd around him grows bigger. Soon there are nearly a hundred members gathered around him. They lead him into the lounge. He tells them that he is worried because he is still wearing his spiked shoes but they tell him not to worry. Lightning is confused. Part of him is delighted and proud to share this exciting and memorable occasion with so many enthusiastic fellow members. But part of him is puzzled and wary.’

‘Lightning’s wariness is justified for as soon as they have all congratulated him on the hole in one members start calling out their drinks orders to the bar staff. Lightning knows as well as anyone that a player who scores a hole in one has to buy everyone in the clubhouse a drink. Pleased as he is with his success he would have preferred to keep his accomplishment secret.’

‘‘I haven’t got any money on me,’ he murmurs desperately.’

‘‘No problem,’’ promises the assistant professional. ‘In circumstances like this the club will just send you a bill.’ Lightning opens and shuts his mouth but nothing comes out.’

‘Just about every member in the club is there. It is the busiest Sunday lunchtime anyone can ever remember seeing. Members order double brandies, double malt whiskies and treble pink gins.’

Simon said the total bill came to several hundred pounds and that it was a shock Lightning never came to terms with.

‘He resigned from the club a week or two afterwards,’ said Simon, ‘and was never seen there again, except for one or two occasions when he came by to try and sell some golf balls. One or two members who were approached said that his car boot was crammed with cardboard boxes full of balls and reconditioned tees. Someone said later that they saw him playing on a municipal course nearby but they insisted that he had refused to play the two short holes there.’

‘Is he still alive?’ I asked.

‘Died a couple of years ago,’ said Simon. ‘When he died the secretary got a letter from Lightning’s solicitor asking if it would be all right with us if his widow scattered his ashes in the gorse bushes. The solicitor said Lightning wanted to be laid to rest there because that was where he’d spent some of his happiest hours. Naturally, the club agreed. There was a little ceremony I remember. Quite moving.’

‘Sorry about the delay,’ said Gerald, arriving back with a tray of drinks. ‘There was a huge crush at the bar. Chap in front of me must have been ordering drinks for his regiment.’

‘Ah there’s Elvis,’ said Oliver, nodding towards the door where the youngster stood, bedraggled and mud spattered. Oliver levered himself to his feet and sauntered over to congratulate the youngster on his good work. As he did so he took out his wallet and removed what looked like a £20 note.

It seemed a reasonable price to pay for not having to clear out the garage.

CHAPTER NINETEEN: ‘THE MAN WHO THOUGHT HE WAS A GOLFER’

‘I’ve heard about a wonderful new way to cure a slice,’ said Gerald, one Saturday evening. We were playing playing-card golf and he cursed as the five of hearts teetered on the edge of Simon’s fedora, looked as though it was going to hold and then fell to the carpet. ‘It was in one of the golf magazines. This American chap says it’s possible to get rid of a slice using something he calls ‘mental imagery’. Apparently you don’t even need to go out onto the practice green to perfect it. You can do all your practising in the bar, or sitting in front of the fire. The chap says he’s got clients who had never previously hit the same ball twice who now drive every ball as straight as an arrow.’

With a skilful, practised flick of the wrist Simon sent the queen of spades spinning right into the centre of his own Fedora. ‘Good shot!’ said Oliver, admiringly. ‘That’s your hole. What’s the score?’

‘My game. Six and five,’ said Simon. ‘You lot need to get in some more practice.’ He picked up his fedora and took out four ten pound notes and a small number of playing cards. I got up and helped him pick up the other cards, scattered across the carpet in the approximate neighbourhood.

Gerald, ignoring all this activity, said that the writer of the article he’d read had claimed that all the golfer has to do is to close his eyes before playing a shot and to imagine that he can see the ball flying directly towards the target he’s aiming at. He said the writer claimed that if he did that the golfer would have extra confidence, his muscles would work properly and he’d play like a different man. Gerald said he fully intended to try it out himself as soon as he had a free moment or two in which to practise but he said it wasn’t something he needed quite so urgently since he wasn’t as desperately unhappy about his game as he felt sure the rest of us must be.

I listened to Gerald very carefully. He reads a lot of golfing instructional books and tears out and files the advice pages from the various golfing publications to which he subscribes.

‘I wouldn’t try any of that, if I were you,’ warned Simon. ‘A fellow I knew quite well tried that technique once and it ruined his life. It was a club where I used to play when I was young. Amazing story.’

‘I’ll get the drinks,’ said Gerald. ‘I don’t want to miss this. Talk about the weather until I get back.’

We talked about the weather for a few minutes while Gerald made the expedition to the bar and back again.

‘Right,’ said Gerald, settling down in his chair and unwrapping the large cigar he had bought himself. ‘Now tell me why we shouldn’t try this mental imagery stuff.’

‘The chap I knew wasn’t a bad golfer,’ began Simon, ‘but he had a couple of nasty little habits that annoyed him out of all proportion. When hitting long irons off the fairway he quite often topped the ball and sent it skidding and scuttling along the grass for twenty or thirty yards. And when getting out of sand he frequently managed to bury the ball even deeper.’

We all nodded sagely. These were faults with which we were all too familiar. (Mind you, to be fair, I don’t suppose there are any golf faults with which we are not familiar.)

‘Lessons from the golf professional didn’t help,’ said Simon. ‘And then one day he found an American book describing this mental imagery technique. It was called something else then, I think, but it was the same stuff. He used to sit in his bedroom imagining really good golf shots. Then, when he got out onto the course, he would, before playing a shot, imagine the ball going exactly where he wanted it to go.’

‘That’s the stuff,’ said Gerald, excitedly. ‘That’s what I was reading about.’

‘To his immense surprise it worked,’ said Simon. ‘In the short term it was marvellous. But in the long term it was probably the worst thing that could have happened to him.’

‘Why?’ demanded Gerald. ‘What on earth happened?’

‘I’m coming to that,’ said Simon, holding up a hand. ‘Just be patient. Since this chap was getting such good results by imagining his long iron and bunker shots he decided to try using the same trick on all his golf shots. It meant that a round of golf took him seven or eight hours to complete but it halved his handicap in weeks. The slowness in itself wasn’t an insuperable problem because the golf professional who made up the foursomes for Sunday morning matches just put him with a trio of octogenarians whose arthritis ensured that they took that long anyway.’

‘Things went on like that for a couple of months,’ continued Simon, ‘and then suddenly this chap stopped going out on the course at all. He came to the club as had always done but he just sat in the bar with his eyes closed quite tightly. He used to keep a drink in his hand so that he didn’t have to open them to find it again and he’d give the barman standing instructions to keep it topped up. When we asked him why he wasn’t playing any more he said it was because he got just as much pleasure from playing an imaginary round as he did from playing a real round. He said it was quicker and he hadn’t lost a ball for ages and that he never got wet however much it rained. He even filled a score card at the end of his imaginary rounds and handed it to the club secretary.’

‘After a month or two of this he claimed his handicap ought to be brought down to scratch since he hadn’t played a single bad shot in that time. He got very upset when people laughed at this and soon after that he stopped coming to the club at all. He used to stay at home, sit in his living room and play his rounds of golf there in front of the fire. He even fixed up a little contraption with a gin bottle and a piece of rubber tubing so that he could keep his glass filled even though his eyes were closed.’

‘After that things went from unusual to eccentric and straight on to stark raving crazy in a very short space of time. I managed to put the story together afterwards after talking to friends and one or two other club members but it seems that after a few weeks of sitting in the living room playing golf he’d given up going downstairs at all and had started playing golf in bed. When his wife, a sweet, gentle long suffering creature who had a lovely touch with crochet needles and a rare talent for making woolly club covers, remonstrated with him he told her that he didn’t see any point in going downstairs when he could do everything so much better by just lying still, closing his eyes and using his mental imagery technique.’

‘When he eventually stopped eating and drinking because he said he could imagine all sorts of delicious foods and quenching drinks his wife got worried and called the doctor. The upshot of that was that there was the most awful row and the doctor ended up by saying that this chap would have to go into hospital.’ ‘Naturally the poor fellow insisted that he could quite easily imagine himself going into hospital and so what was the point in actually taking him there?’

Simon said that they took him away in a strait-jacket though they had to sedate him first. The men in white coats arrived early one morning and carried him very discreetly into a waiting ambulance.

‘I still hear from his wife every Christmas,’ said Simon. ‘She sends me a card to let me know how they are getting on and often encloses a crocheted club cover too. The last time I heard her husband was still being force fed but was regularly going round in fifty five.’

When Simon had finished his story we sat in silence for a few moments.

‘Makes you think, doesn’t it?’ said Oliver faintly.

‘I’m glad I didn’t try it now,’ said Gerald, wiping his brow with a plum coloured handkerchief. ‘I’ll put the article in the shredder when I get back home.’

‘I’ll get the drinks,’ I offered.

I felt as though we had all just survived a very close call.

CHAPTER TWENTY: ‘THE RECORD HOLDER’

The club’s annual long hitting contest had been held and the talk in the lounge bar was about little else.

Naturally, the losers (of whom there were a good number) all had good excuses and were able to put forward excellent reasons why they should have won.

The winner (of whom there was only one) was simply enjoying his moment. Not having to think up excuses he could concentrate on smiling and buying drinks for people.

Oliver, Gerald, Simon and I were sitting at our usual table near to the fire. Not having taken part in the main competition (none of us were self-deluded enough to think we could possibly win) we were now not taking part in the orgy of boasting, protesting and explaining that was going on.

‘How far did the winner hit his ball?’ asked Oliver.

‘I think it was just over 320 yards,’ replied Gerald.

‘321 yards,’ said Simon. ‘It’s a new club record.’

‘A good hit,’ said Oliver. ‘Though I have it on good authority that his ball hit a stone on the fairway and had a lucky bounce forwards.’

‘Who said that?’ demanded Gerald.

‘I can’t say,’ said Oliver. ‘I was sworn to secrecy.’

‘Who was it?’ persisted Gerald.

‘It would be a betrayal for me to reveal his name,’ insisted Oliver.

‘Go on,’ said Gerald. ‘Tell us and I’ll buy you a packet of pork scratchings.’

‘The chap who came second,’ replied Oliver, instantly.

‘I bet the head greenkeeper didn’t like that,’ said Gerald.

‘He said there are no stones on his golf course,’ said Oliver. ‘Not even in the rough.’

We all smiled and nodded. It was just the sort of thing the head greenkeeper would say.

‘But I once hit a drive which went much further than that,’ said Oliver.

I looked at him, surprised. ‘I didn’t even know you’d ever entered,’ I said.

‘Oh not in a long driving competition,’ said Oliver. ‘But my ball went a lot further than 321 yards.’

‘Tell him the story,’ said Gerald, standing up. ‘I’ve heard this one so I’ll go and get in another round of drinks while I’m getting Oliver’s pork scratchings. There’s quite a scrum at the bar so it could take me some time.’

‘I’ll give you a hand,’ offered Simon who had clearly also heard Oliver’s story. The two of them departed.

* * *

‘My ball went just over seven miles,’ began Oliver. ‘Seven and a quarter miles we estimated later.’

‘You hit a ball which went seven miles?’ I said, incredulously.

‘Absolutely,’ nodded Oliver. He smiled at my obvious bemusement. ‘Scout’s honour.’

I thought about this for a few moments, quite unable to think of an explanation. ‘Was it winter?’ I asked. ‘Was the ground frozen over? Icy?’

‘No, not at all,’ said Oliver. ‘It was mid-summer. I was playing in shorts and a short sleeved shirt. My partners were two guys called Fame and Fortune. They changed their names by deed poll and ran a talent agency.’

‘And it was here? On this course?’

Oliver nodded.

‘To liven things up a little we were playing a game we used to play quite often in those days. We were playing to see how far round the course we could get with just one ball. The rules were simple: if you sent your ball out of bounds you still had to play it; if it landed in water or nettles you had to play it as it lay. If, for whatever reason, you didn’t play the ball you’d started with you lost the match. All laws which might interfere with this simple rule were temporarily suspended.’

‘Sounds a pretty good idea,’ I agreed.

‘Harder than you might think,’ said Oliver.

‘Did you hit your ball over the hedge? Onto the road?’ I asked. ‘I suppose if a ball just bounced along the road it might travel quite a distance.’

‘Close,’ confirmed Oliver. ‘I did hit my ball over the hedge. But it didn’t just bounce along the road. In fact, it didn’t hit the road at all.’

‘A car?’ I suggested. ‘You hit your ball into a car?’

‘Lorry, actually,’ said Oliver with a broad grin. ‘I hit my drive into the back of a builder’s lorry. When my drive veered left over the hedge - I was hooking a lot more in those days - I naturally just thought I’d lost the ball, the match and the £50 we were playing for. But the lorry was full of sand and to my absolute astonishment I could see my ball sitting up quite nicely on top of the pile of sand. It looked very playable. The odds against my ball landing in the back of a lorry must have been at least a million to one. The chances of it staying there and not bouncing out must have been fairly considerable too. But that is exactly what happened.' He took out a small cigar, and played with it for a moment, examining it from every angle before lighting it. 'If I'd been playing an ordinary match, under ordinary rules, I would have just waved the ball goodbye and played three off the tee. But the ball wasn't lost at all. I knew exactly where it was. It looked perfectly playable. And if I could just play it back onto the course I would, I thought, still have a chance of winning.'

'So you chased after the lorry?'

'I grabbed a wedge from my bag, told my partners to wait for me, wriggled through the hedge and chased off after the lorry.'

'And you chased it for seven miles?'

'I borrowed a bicycle parked outside the supermarket,' admitted Oliver. 'Fortunately, there was a lot of traffic so the lorry couldn't get up much speed. Eventually, I caught up with the driver at a set of traffic lights right in the middle of town. I pedalled up alongside the cab. Since it was a nice warm day, the driver had got his window open. Rather breathless by then I managed to explain what had happened and asked if he could stop for a moment so that I could play my ball out of the sand in the back of his lorry. As luck would have it, he wasn't a golfer himself but he did enjoy watching golf on the television and he didn't mind helping. He pulled over to the side of the road as soon as he'd gone through the traffic lights and helped me climb up into the back of the lorry. By this time, of course, quite a crowd had gathered around to watch this lunatic about to play a bunker shot out of the back of a builder's lorry.'

'You managed to play it out?'

'Even if I do say so myself, I played a very nice little chip shot out of the sand and onto a tiny piece of grass in front of a drinking fountain and two benches.' Oliver emptied his glass and took several long, slow puffs at his cigar before resuming his story.

'It was at this point that the policeman turned up,' he continued. 'I was just working out how best to play back to the golf course, and had pretty much decided that the only thing I could do was to just try and scoot the ball along the gutter, when I felt someone tap on my shoulder. At first I thought it was just another golfer offering advice - I'd already had at least half a dozen people offer their thoughts on the most appropriate sort of shot to play - but it was a policeman. Nice chap. Didn't play golf, though. He told me point blank that if I tried hitting a golf ball down a busy road he'd arrest me. He didn't say what for but he said he was pretty confident he'd think of something.'

'Crumbs.'

'It was at that point,' Oliver went on, 'that I had a bit of a brainwave. The bicycle I had borrowed was fitted with two large panniers so I lay it down on the grass right next to the ball and opened up the lower of the two panniers. With the policeman's permission I gently tapped the ball into the open pannier. Then I stood the bicycle upright, tied my club to the cross bar with two empty plastic carrier bags I got from a nearby tobacconists, waved goodbye to the lorry driver, who was by this time having quite an argument with a traffic warden, and pedalled back to the golf course. When I got there I tipped the bike on its side so that the ball rolled out. I then played my ball back over the hedge, put the bicycle back where I'd found it, slipped through the hedge and carried on playing.'

'Were your two playing partners waiting for you?'

'Yes, they were. They were lying on the grass having a quiet smoke. They had, they told me, waved through nineteen pairs and twelve foursomes. There was a bloke playing by himself but they wouldn't let him through. As you know, on a golf course singletons have no precedence at all; they are rather like the third sons of Earls - everyone ignores them. This poor chap had made a daisy chain seventeen feet long by the time we were ready to carry on.'

'Did you win?'

'Sadly, no. Four shots later I put my ball straight into a deep pond. I waded in up to my waist but it was hopeless. The ball was gone. It's probably still there.'

'So how do you know how far your ball travelled?'

'I measured the distance in the car two days later,' said Oliver. 'Just over seven miles. Longest golf shot ever hit. We've often thought of trying to break my seven mile record. But when you do it knowingly it sort of takes the fun out of it. There wouldn't be any element of excitement. You could just chip into the back of a lorry heading north and then chip out again five hundred miles later. Or you could chip into a railway carriage in Plymouth and chip out in Edinburgh.' He pulled a face. 'No challenge,' he said. 'What sort of a golf shot would that be?'

Five minutes later Gerald and Simon arrived back with the drinks.

'Even the winner of this year's competition is now moaning,' said Simon.

'He claims that if his ball hadn't hit one of those white marker posts they put along the side of the fairway his ball would have gone another twenty yards,' said Gerald.

‘Don’t know why he’s bothering,’ said Oliver, accepting his packet of pork scratchings from Gerald. ‘321 yards, 341 yards - what does it matter?’ He shrugged the shrug of a quietly confident man. It would, he knew, be a long time before anyone broke his long driving record.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: ‘BAD GOLFERS HAVE MORE FUN’

‘Happy birthday!’ said Simon as we met in the locker room. ‘As a special treat I’ve hired you a caddy for the afternoon.’

‘A real caddy?’ I enquired.

‘A real caddy,’ nodded Simon. ‘Actually I’ve hired two. One each. Gnarled, weather-beaten fellows with no teeth and backs made of oak; chaps who look somehow unfinished when they walk without a bag over their shoulder; chaps who always know what club you should use.’

‘Caddies?’ I said, startled. ‘Do we need them?’

Simon put a hand on my shoulder and looked at me carefully. ‘I don’t know if I’ve ever told you this,’ he confided. ‘But in my heart I’ve long believed that I could beat any of the pros on the big tours if only I had their advantages. It would really be much fairer if we all played with the same clubs and the same balls. If I had the advantages he has I could play like any of them. These guys have nothing but the best and I’m still struggling around with last year’s ironmongery.’ He paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts. ‘Did you know that the professionals have an endless supply of free balls?’

I admitted that I did not know this.

‘Boxfuls, armfuls, lorry loads,’ he said. ‘All brand new. They must spend half their lives unwrapping golf balls.’ He thought about this, as did I. ‘Though actually of course,’ he said, ‘they would just get their caddies to do that for them, wouldn’t they?’

He paused again and stared dreamily into space. ‘The best clubs, beautifully manicured fairways, a psychologist on tap to help them over the bad moments and,’ he paused yet again, this time for effect, ‘they have caddies.’

‘Caddies.’

‘A good caddy has got to be worth ten or fifteen shots a round,’ said Simon. ‘You’ve seen these superstar players on the television. Who is it who picks out the club for the top guys when they’re stuck in the rough? The caddy, of course. Who is it bending down reading the line of that long, snaking putt? The caddy.

‘Where on earth did you find two real caddies?’ I asked him.

‘Through a chap who buys envelopes from my shop,’ said Simon. ‘He rang up someone he knows and got a phone number.’

‘These are caddies who caddy for professionals?’

‘Absolutely. Professionals and celebrities. They’re probably on first name terms with Jack Nicklaus, Arnold Palmer and Jimmy Tarbuck. Some of these chaps are real characters, you know. I once hired a caddy when I played in Scotland.’

‘Royal and Ancient?’ I asked.

‘I don’t think he was royal but he was certainly ancient,’ said Simon. He’d had his teeth knocked out by a rather wild American golfer and had had them wired. The result was that he couldn’t talk. He didn’t say a single word all afternoon; he just spat into the gorse every time I hit the ball. I hit the ball a lot so he did a lot of spitting.’

‘He doesn’t sound as if he was a great deal of help,’ I protested.

‘He wasn’t,’ agreed Simon. ‘He was a rogue. I should have guessed there was something iffy about him when he insisted on meeting me on the 2nd tee. I had to carry my own clubs up the first. But don’t worry, the two chaps I’ve hired for us are proper professionals.’

‘But I’ve never played with a caddy!’ I protested. ‘I wouldn’t know what you have to do.’ I thought about it for a moment. ‘Do you have to ask for advice? Do you listen? Won’t they expect us to hit four hundred yards from the tee with a nine iron and then pitch up onto the green within a foot of the pin?’

‘All you have to do is tip them a quid at the end of the round,’ insisted Simon. ‘They’ll love you for life and their grandchildren will still be sending your grandchildren Christmas cards long after you’ve lost your last ball.’

‘Right,’ I said. ‘You think a quid will be enough?’ I was aware that Simon wasn’t always entirely worldly. I had seen him give the bar steward a five pence piece for fetching his waterproofs from his car.

‘These chaps don’t live like you and me,’ said Simon. ‘They are men of nature; they live rough. They live in tiny little wooden huts hidden away behind the trees on the 14th at Muirfield.’

‘Are there trees on the 14th at Muirfield?’

‘I don’t have the faintest idea. It was one of those what do you call them. A figure of speech?’

‘Oh.’

‘Poetic licence.’

‘Ah.’

‘Perhaps they may one day aspire to a caravans parked on a bit of scrap land behind the driving range,’ continued Simon. He thought for a moment or two. ‘Maybe a couple of quid then,’ he conceded. ‘They still have to buy bread and milk I guess. But a couple of quid will keep them in the necessities for their simple lifestyles for weeks. Give one of these guys a Guinness and a cheese sandwich and he's yours for life.'

'You don't do the shopping do you?' I said.

'Of course not,' said Simon. 'The wife does the shopping. Why on earth would I want to do the shopping?' He shrugged aside this apparent non sequitur.

* * *

'I've never understood why people look for lost balls,' said the weedy man who Simon had hired to carry my bag for the afternoon.

'It's a lost shot as well as a lost ball,' I explained.

'If you can't see it easily you are not going to be able to play it,' said the caddy. 'And if you are worried about the cost of a ball you shouldn't be playing golf.'

My first experience of playing with a caddy wasn't going terribly well. He was a very earnest, very critical fellow and in his company I felt strangely restricted. I didn't say anything to Simon, of course, but with him carrying my bag it seemed that all the fun had gone out of golf.

* * *

'What ball are you playing?' asked Simon's caddy a couple of holes later.

'A small white one,' replied Simon who genuinely thought he was being helpful. He held up one hand, with two fingers about an inch apart. 'This sort of size,' he added.

'They have numbers on,' said the caddy drily.

'Yes,' said Simon. He stopped and destroyed a few more weeds by swishing his four iron back and forth. 'But I never hit the same one often enough for it to be worthwhile remembering the number.'

'You shouldn't do that, sir,' said the caddy.

Simon stopped waving his four iron about and looked at him.

'In case you disturb your ball,' explained the caddy.

'Oh yes.'

'Perhaps you should consider playing another,' sighed the caddy, after a look at his watch.

* * *

'That's a huge bunker,' said Simon's caddy. He and my caddy were standing a few feet behind me. Simon was on the green admiring his ball.

'It wasn't a bunker when he started,' I heard my caddy say. 'It was just a divot.'

'Wow,' muttered Simon's caddy. 'I need some foundations digging for my new garage. Do you think we could get him to pop round with his sand iron? I was going to hire a man with a digger but he'd be quicker.' The two caddies sniggered.

I shuffled my feet deeper into the sand and tried to concentrate. Then I swung my club back and hit the ball as hard as I could. It almost buried itself in the face of the bunker. Only a small portion of its surface was visible. If the caddies hadn't been there I'd have dug the ball out with my toe and knocked it out backwards. But I knew I had to plough on, digging myself deeper and deeper into the bunker. It was a nightmare. I felt myself blushing with embarrassment. I hadn't blushed so much since the elastic had gone in my gym shorts and all the girls in my class had seen me in my underpants. I'd been five at the time.

* * *

I can hit an 8 iron 130 to 140 yards unless there is a pond or a stream just over 150 yards away in which case I can, if I hold back a little, hit it just over 150 yards. If someone other than one of my regular playing partners is watching this sequence is even more predictable.

On the next hole I hit five balls just over 160 yards with my eight iron. All of them landed with a splash instead of a bounce. I used a nine iron for the sixth ball and left it short of the water hazard. I then used a wedge to attempt to hit the ball over the water. Naturally I put the ball into the pond. I swear I could hear both caddies smirking.

* * *

'What club would you recommend here?' I asked.

'It doesn't matter,' replied my caddy wearily. 'Just use an old ball.'

* * *

In frustration, desperation and sheer anger Simon hurled his four iron into the trees. Hands on hips he stood and watched it bounce from branch to branch before clattering down into the undergrowth.

'Do you think we'll find it?' he asked his caddy.

'Dunno, sir,' replied the caddy. 'I think you'd perhaps better throw a provisional.' He offered Simon the bag. 'Which one would you like, sir?' he asked. 'There are quite a few left. I would suggest perhaps an eight iron, sir?'

'Give me the bloody eight iron,' said Simon. 'And don't even look to see what it lands.'

* * *

‘I’ll take the clubs now,’ I said to the caddy, as we left the 18th.

‘Are you sure, sir?’ he asked, handing me the bag.

‘I hope it hasn’t been too painful for you,’ I said, taking out the twenty pound note which I had placed in my trouser pocket before the round had started. ‘I’m afraid I’m not much of a golfer.’

The caddy thanked me, took the twenty pound note and carefully placed it in his wallet. He handed me a small brown envelope. ‘That’s my VAT invoice, sir,’ he said.

Surprised, I took the invoice from him and put it into my trouser pocket. I wondered if I dared ask him for my twenty pounds back. I decided I didn’t dare.

‘I’ve caddied for a good many men, sir,’ he told me with a smirky sort of smile. ‘And a few ladies too. But there’s not many of them can play the game of golf like yourself. It has been an experience I would not have wanted to have missed.’ He handed me a visiting card. It was expensive card and the printing on it was embossed. ‘If you need a caddy again would you ring me, sir? It will always be a pleasure to carry your bag.’

I looked down at the card which contained his name, address, telephone number, mobile telephone number, e-mail address, VAT number and company registration number. When I looked up he was gone, walking away towards the car park. I stood for a moment and watched as he unlocked his car, a splendid looking Jaguar XJ6, climbed in and purred away. I opened the envelope he’d given me. It contained two things: an invoice for his services (seventy five pounds plus VAT) and a pre-paid addressed envelope so that I could post him my cheque.

* * *

There is a deep pond to the right of the 18th green. It is rumoured to be bottomless, though I suspect this rumour was deliberately started by the groundsman so that he could have a monopoly on dredging the pond for balls. You have to pass the pond as you walk towards the clubhouse. As we walked past I took my bag off my shoulder and stood for a moment with it in my hands. I then hurled it as far as I could into the pond. The bag and clubs landed with a huge splash and disappeared from sight a moment later.

‘I’ve heard of people doing that,’ said Simon, who had appeared out of the evening murk. ‘But I’ve never seen anyone do it before.’

‘Why do they make the damned course so difficult to play?’ I asked, as we walked off the 18th green.

‘I think the idea is to present us with a challenge,’ explained Simon

‘But my whole life is a challenge!’ I protested. ‘I don’t need a challenge when I’m supposed to be relaxing.’ We walked on a few more paces in silence. ‘Golf is a bloody stupid game,’ I stormed. ‘I’m never playing again. What a waste of a day. Whoever it was who said that golf is a good walk spoiled was absolutely spot on.’

We walked on a little further. The clubhouse looked curiously welcoming in the twilight. The lights were all on in the lounge and I could see smoke curling up from the chimney.

‘I’m sorry about the caddies,’ said Simon. ‘Not a great success, were they?’

‘Oh, er, well, it was a lovely thought...,’ I said tactfully.

‘Bloody disaster,’ said Simon. ‘Seemed a good idea at the time.’

‘It was a great idea,’ I said.

‘Mine’s going to send me a VAT invoice,’ said Simon. He looked across at me.

‘Mine too,’ I laughed.

‘Give me the bill when it arrives,’ he said.

‘Don’t be daft.’

‘It was a birthday treat.’

‘Buy me a whisky when we get into the club house.’

‘A large malt will make you feel better,’ said Simon.

‘Laphroaig,’ I said. ‘I always fancy Laphroaig when I’m cold and miserable. It makes me feel warm inside.’

‘Laphroaig it is,’ agreed Simon.

We walked a little further. It felt strange to be walking towards the golf club without a bag on my shoulder.

* * *

We were sitting in two leather arm chairs beside a roaring log fire. I had a glass of Laphroaig in my hand and a few good sips of the life giving fluid in my stomach.

‘Do you fancy a game tomorrow?’ asked Simon.

‘What time?’ I asked.

‘About two thirty?’

‘That should be OK,’ I said.

‘It’ll just about give us time to get round before it gets dark,’ said Simon.

‘Right,’ I said.

We sipped at our whisky.
‘Do you know where I can borrow some clubs?’
‘I’ve got a spare set you can borrow,’ said Simon.
‘Thanks,’ I said.
We sipped again.
‘I’ll pop into the shop on the way home and buy some more balls, tees, gloves, that sort of thing.’
‘We sipped more whisky.
‘I wonder how deep that pond really is.’
‘I don’t think it’s bottomless.’
‘Nor do I.’
‘Can you remember where you were when you threw them in?’
‘I think so.’
‘It’s dark.’
‘That’s good. It means no one will see us.’
‘Shall we have another whisky first?’
‘Oh, I think so.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: ‘GOLF ADDICT’

One year after I joined the golf club I worked out that I was spending 40 hours a week working, 56 hours sleeping and 42 hours at the golf club.

My waking life revolved around golf. Most of my friends were golfers. I spent my last birthday at the golf club and even visited it on Boxing Day. Most of the presents I had unwrapped for a year had been golf related. The books and magazines I chose to read were mostly about golf. My last holiday was a golfing trip taken with Simon. (We bought each bought one another a week at a golf resort for Christmas). My remaining dreams and ambitions were mostly golf related. I’d had two more pars since that magical day when I scored my first ever three. Every good shot I played had sharpened my addiction.

I had learned that in some ways the best part of golf is that you can enjoy it when you aren’t playing it. Talking about it, dreaming about it, imagining what might happen one day and, finally, giving reality a twist and imagining what did happen. ‘Reality is what I remember,’ said someone. I can’t remember who. Whoever it was he could well have been talking about golfers. Simon arrived at the club one day and announced that his reluctance to fight for the survival of the stationery shop he had inherited had been justified by the fact that he had received a generous offer for the freehold of the shop from an estate agency.

‘I’m selling up and retiring,’ he said. ‘I can just about manage it on the money I’m getting for the shop. I shall devote my retirement to golf. I may turn professional next spring.’

* * *

I went along to see my doctor for my annual check-up.

‘So, how am I doing?’ I asked the doctor when he’d finished prodding and poking.

‘Much the same as last time,’ he told me. ‘You’re still alive but you really need to take up some exercise and get more fresh air. Weren’t you going to join the golf club?’

I told him I had. He seemed surprised. ‘You seem to be suffering from more stress,’ he said. ‘Are you under pressure at work?’

‘No, no,’ I said with certainty.

‘So what sort of things do you worry about?’

I thought for a moment. ‘My slice,’ I said. ‘It won’t go away. And whether I can afford one of those new American drivers with a head the size of the Isle of Wight.’

‘Ah. So the game you took up to improve your health is now causing you stress?

‘Oh no, not at all,’ I insisted, terrified that he might suddenly ban me from playing. ‘I just play for fun. I don’t really worry about these things. Not in the sense of ‘worry’. I mean I could play much better if I wanted to. I’ve been told I could play at professional level.’

‘Gosh,’ said the doctor. ‘I’m impressed. Who told you that?’

‘Chap I play with called Simon.’

‘Ah. Is that the Simon who owns the stationery shop?’

‘Oh no. Not him. Not him at all.’ I felt myself blushing. I’m a terrible liar. ‘No. Well, yes, actually. It may have been him after all. Difficult to remember now. But it doesn’t matter anyway because I’m happy just to pootle about and have a bit of fun. Of course if I could break 100 I’d be pretty excited. But I’m not all that bothered to be honest. I always think that if you reach the stars too soon what do you do for an encore? I mean, if I get there too soon I won’t have anything left to aim for will I?’

I didn’t tell him that my main ambition was still to get round the course with the same ball with which I’d started.

‘So you’re pretty laid back about the whole thing?’

‘Oh yes.’ I lied.

‘As far as golf is concerned you can take it or leave it?’

‘Oh yes. Definitely.’

‘I heard you threw your clubs into a pond beside the 18th green because you decided you were going to give up golf. But you had to wade in at night and fish them out so that you play again the next day.’

‘Oh no. That’s rubbish.’ I insisted. ‘Who told you that? I tripped over a tree root and slipped. The clubs just sort of fell in. I left them there while I found out how deep the pond was.’

‘The doctor I know who plays golf...

‘...the one who wears a bowtie because he’s a gynaecologist?’

‘That’s the one. He says the new bunker they’ve put on the 16th improves the hole enormously. What do you think about it?’

‘Oh that’s nonsense!’ I said. ‘It’s in a terrible position. I’ve always played a driver and a three iron on that hole. The bunker caught my three iron twice last week. I’ve had to start laying up with a five iron. A few pals and I are going to go out one night and fill it in.'

'How many times a week do you play?'

'Just once or twice.'

'Once or twice?'

'Well perhaps a bit more than that if the weather's good.'

'Every day?'

'Oh no. Not every day.' I said. 'Definitely not every day. I don't always play on Wednesdays.'

He wrote something down on my medical notes. I tried to see what it was but his hand was in the way and I couldn't quite read it.

'Is your mother happy that you're playing golf regularly?'

'Oh yes, I'm sure she is. She still hopes I might meet a nice young woman there.'

'Marry and settle down?'

'That sort of thing, I suppose.'

'She'd probably be happy for you to give up golf if you got married.'

'Oh no, I don't think so.' I said, shaking my head.

'I'm sure she would.'

'No. No, I don't think so.' I looked at him as if he had gone stark raving mad. 'Why should I want to do that?'

He didn't speak. Just smiled. He moved his hand. I could see it clearly. Even upside down. Just two words.

'Great. Right. I'll see you in a year,' he said.

'Fine. Thanks.'

I left.

'Golf Addict.'

That's what the two words were.

'Golf Addict.'

What rubbish.

I could give up golf whenever I wanted to. If I wanted to. I really could.

The End

Vernon Coleman's other bestselling books include 'The Man Who Inherited A Golf Course'. For a list of over 100 other titles by this author please see either www.vernoncoleman.com or the Amazon website.

Toxic Stress

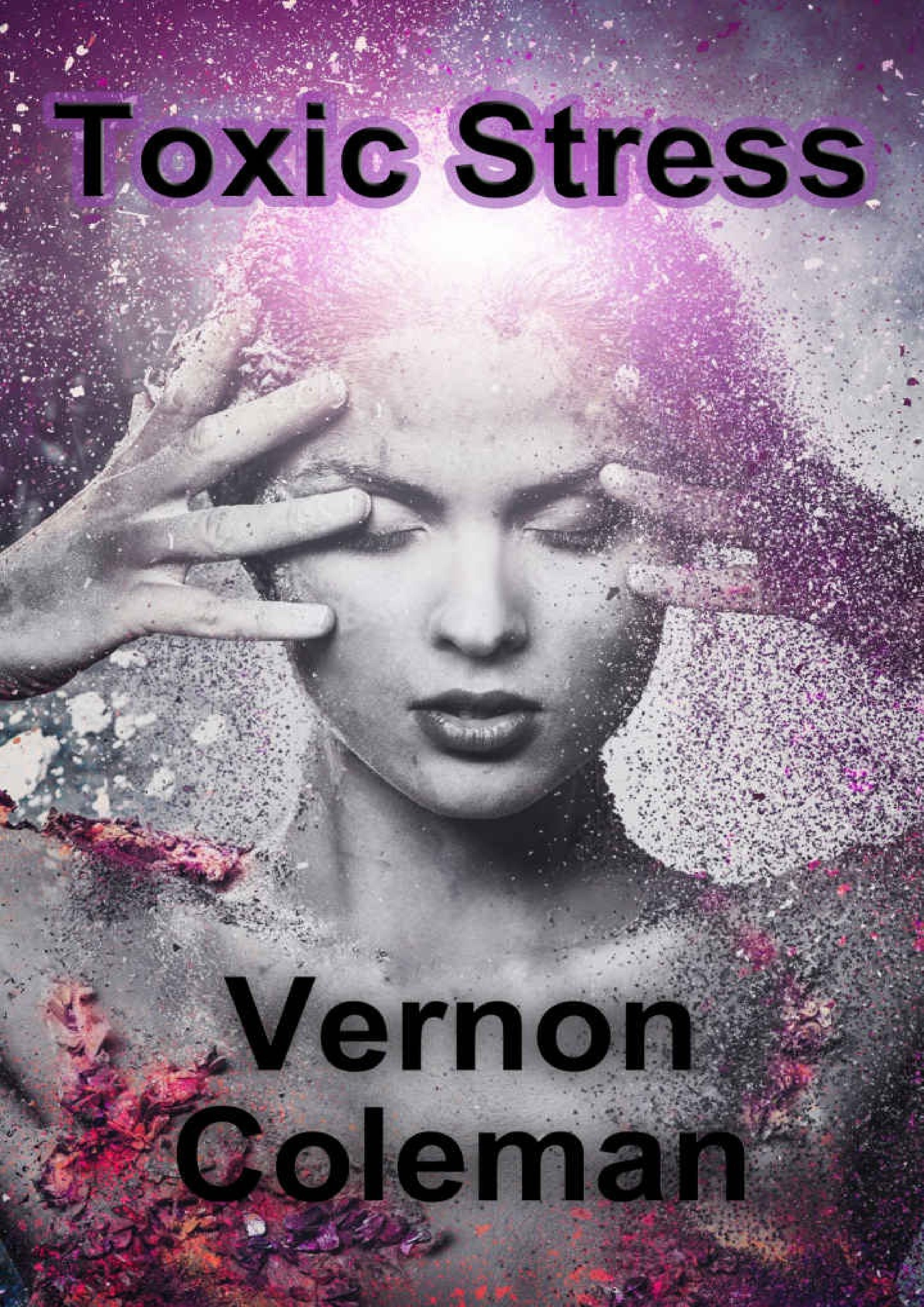

Vernon Coleman

How to Overcome Toxic Stress
And the 21st Century Blues

Vernon Coleman

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Dedication

With all my love to Donna Antoinette – who makes it all worthwhile.

And to the sensitive, the considerate and the caring; the innocent victims of the Twenty First Century Blues.

The Paradox

Superficially, we live in a wealthy, civilised society. We have motorways, nuclear power, colour television, international travel, vitamin pills and microwave ovens. We have motor cars which remind us to put on our seat belts, which clean their own windscreens when it rains and which will park themselves. We have central heating systems which automatically turn themselves on when the temperature falls. Surgeons can transplant hearts, livers, lungs, kidneys and pieces of brain. Smallpox has been eradicated.

But, below the surface and almost out of sight, our society is sicker than ever before.

The number of people taking sleeping tablets and tranquillisers rises every year.

The number of people who are unable to work because they are anxious or depressed is higher than ever – and rising fast. The incidence of serious mental illness is rising rapidly.

There has, for decades, been a remorseless rise in the incidence of drug abuse, alcoholism and suicide.

The number of marriages ending in divorce goes up annually.

The incidence of baby battering rises inexorably.

Millions of women and old people no longer dare to go out into the streets after dark.

Vandalism is commonplace in all our cities. And so are crimes of violence.

Why?

This book will tell you.

The Purpose

The aim of this book is to help you find out how to enjoy life, regain your zest for living, banish mental tiredness, overcome loneliness, conquer stress and find lasting happiness in an increasingly cruel and crazy world.

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Introduction

My first book on stress was published back in 1978. It was called *Stress Control* and at the time the word 'stress' was very new.

In the book I explained how stress – by which I meant pressure, worry and anxiety – could have an adverse effect on our mental and physical health.

The medical profession did not greet the book with any great enthusiasm. One professor of medicine publicly attacked me for suggesting that stress might be a contributory factor in the development of high blood pressure. He was so outraged by the very thought that he publicly clamoured for me to be struck off the medical register. Other eminent doctors dismissed the theory that stress could be responsible for the epidemic of mental illness as 'nonsense'. I was attacked by doctors for suggesting that the widespread habit of overprescribing benzodiazepine tranquillisers such as Valium would lead to the biggest addiction problem the world had ever seen.

But patients loved the book. Thousands of people bought it and, according to their letters, found it helpful. Eventually, doctors even started recommending the book to their patients – instead of handing them prescriptions for tranquillisers.

Throughout the 80s, I wrote extensively about a wide range of medical subjects. But stress remained a popular subject with other authors. Hundreds of books were published and thousands of newspaper and magazine articles about stress appeared. Gradually, stress stopped being such a 'dangerous' topic.

You might have thought that all these books and articles would have helped patients to control their stress effectively and permanently.

But despite all the attention, the problem hasn't gone away.

Instead, it has got worse.

By the end of the 1980s, the incidence of stress related disease had reached truly epidemic proportions and just about every doctor in the country was prepared to recognise the part stress plays in the development of disease.

Why, when so many people are aware of the damage that can be done by stress, has stress continued to do increasing amounts of damage? Many years ago, I argued that nine out of ten illnesses were caused by, or made worse by, stress. If anything, the proportion is now even higher.

There are two answers.

First, much of the stress to which we are exposed is outside our control. We have become increasingly aware of the ways in which our own behaviour can increase our exposure to stress and we have been taught many ways to reduce our vulnerability and to stress-proof our bodies. But this information is of limited value when it comes to dealing with general, social stresses – many of which are difficult to identify and impossible to avoid. I have coined the phrase 'toxic stress' to describe these insidious and destructive social stresses.

Second, we have failed in our attempts to control the damage done by stress because we have put all our effort into trying to find medical solutions. Hypnotherapists recommend hypnotherapy. Acupuncturists offer acupuncture as a solution. Herbalists recommend herbs and old-fashioned, orthodox physicians prefer to prescribe drugs. All these remedies can be of value. But they work only by suppressing the symptoms of illness produced by stress. None of these techniques helps to combat toxic stress.

Toxic stress is a result of social changes. And the only way to stay healthy and avoid the damage that can be done by toxic stress is to learn how to survive in the world we have created for ourselves.

Having studied the subject of stress for nearly half a century, I am convinced that many of the commonest symptoms and disorders seen today are caused not by individual stresses or pressures but by the high level of toxic stress that affects us all. I believe that toxic stress is responsible for producing a condition which is best described as The Twenty First Century Blues. My researches convince me that over one half of the population in developed countries are already suffering from The Twenty First Century Blues – a serious condition which goes unrecognised by doctors and other healers. Furthermore, I believe that the treatments usually prescribed for sufferers from The Twenty First Century Blues are frequently likely to cause more problems than they solve.

In this book I have, for the first time, explained the causes of toxic stress – and the solutions for The Twenty First Century Blues.

Vernon Coleman

Part One

Toxic Stress and the Twenty First Century Blues

Chapter One

We live in strange, difficult and confusing times.

In some ways, largely material, we are richer than any of our ancestors.

In other ways, largely spiritual, we are infinitely poorer.

Most of us live in well-equipped homes that our great grandparents would marvel at. We have access to (relatively) clean drinking water at the turn of a tap. We can obtain light to work by and heat to cook by at the flick of a switch. Our homes are stuffed with possessions. We have automatic ovens, washing machines, tumble driers, dishwashers, food blenders, vacuum cleaners, television sets, DVD players, computers, mobile telephones and a whole host of other devices designed either to make our working hours easier or our leisure hours more enjoyable. If we want to travel anywhere we can climb into our own motor cars or we can use public buses, trains or aeroplanes. We have become so dependent upon these ‘things’ that when they break down we become aggressive and irritable. We can’t cope without them.

We are surrounded by the gaudy signs of our wealth and the physical consequences of human ambition and endeavour, but loneliness, unhappiness, anxiety and depression are now commoner than ever before in our history. There has never before been so much sadness, dissatisfaction and frustration as there is today. The demand for tranquillisers and sleeping tablets has risen steadily throughout the last few decades as our national and individual wealth has multiplied.

We have access to sophisticated communication systems and yet never before have we been so aware of our ignorance. We have more power over our environment than our ancestors ever dreamt of having and yet we are regularly reminded of our helplessness and our vulnerability. We are materially wealthy and yet spiritually deprived. We have conquered our planet and begun to conquer space and yet we are continually reminded of our woeful inability to live at peace with one another.

As the human race becomes materially richer and more powerful, so we as individuals seem to become spiritually poorer and more frightened. The more we acquire the more we seem to need and the more we learn the more we seem condemned by our ignorance. The more control we have over our environment the more damage we seem to do to ourselves. The more successful we become in financial terms the more we seem to destroy the qualities and virtues which lead to happiness and contentment. The more we learn about our world the more we seem to forget about our duties and responsibilities to one another.

As manufacturers and advertisers have deliberately translated our wants into needs so we have exchanged generosity and caring for greed and self-concern. Politicians and teacher, scientists and parents have encouraged each succeeding generation to convert simple dreams and aspirations into fiery no-holds-barred ambitions. In the name of progress we have sacrificed common sense, goodwill and thoughtfulness and the gentle, the weak and the warm hearted have been trampled upon by hordes of embittered, miserable individuals who have been taught only to think of the future and never to think of the present or the past. Our society is a sad one; the cornerstones of the world are selfishness, greed, anger and hatred. Those are the driving forces we are taught to respect.

During the last 50 years or so, we have changed our world almost beyond recognition. Advertising agencies, television producers and newspaper editors have given us new aims to strive for, new hopes, new ambitions and new aspirations. At the same time, they have also given us new fears and new anxieties. With the aid of psychologists, clever advertising copywriters have learned to exploit our weaknesses and our natural apprehensions to help create demands for new and increasingly expensive products. Our world has changed dramatically. Values and virtues have been turned upside down and inside out. Tradition, dignity and craftsmanship have been pushed aside in the search for ever greater productivity and profitability.

It is hardly surprising that all these changes have produced new stresses and strains of their own. The pressure to succeed joins with the pressure to confirm and the pressure to acquire and as a result we live in a world where the base levels of stress are fixed at dangerously high levels.

Each one of us is, of course, confronted with individual stresses on a daily basis. Everywhere you look you come face to face with individual and personal stresses. There are stresses in your business life and stresses in your social life. But these are stresses that you can easily do something about. You can choose to avoid them if you want to. You can confront them or control them. You can share them or simply deal with them yourself. You have some freedom of action because these are personal stresses.

The stresses which are an inherent part of the world around us are quite different. These stresses – the ingredients of toxic stress – are not so easily avoided. These stresses produce difficult to define frustrations. They produce bitterness and a deep sense of ill-defined, unexplained despair.

The stresses created by advertisers and politicians, teachers and scientists, journalists and broadcasters are the stresses which, together, make up the unacceptable levels of toxic stress which are responsible for so much sadness, so much misery and so much despair. It is the existence of high levels of toxic stress which helps to explain why individual attempts to deal with stress have so often proved ineffective. It is the existence of toxic stress which explains why millions of people who believe that they have the stress in their lives under control are, nevertheless, suffering from stress related disorders.

Chapter Two

Toxic stress is the commonest, most far-reaching and most destructive force at work in Western society today. It is far more invasive, more damaging and more universal than any single infective organism.

Like personal stresses, toxic stress (which is primarily a social stress) can cause an enormous range of individual symptoms and well defined diseases. It can cause headaches, skin rashes and bowel disorders. It can cause asthma, high blood pressure, heart disease and peptic ulceration. It can cause sleeplessness, backache and hair loss. It can cause depression, psoriasis and sexual problems. It can make existing diseases worse and it can increase a sufferer's susceptibility to infectious diseases, cancers and psychological problems.

But my researches over nearly 50 years have also convinced me that toxic stress is responsible for something else; something specific and something that has never before been recognised as an individual syndrome. I have named the disease caused by toxic stress 'The Twenty First Century Blues'.

I believe that 'The Twenty First Century Blues' is almost certainly one of the commonest diseases in the developed world. I suspect that it is as common as tooth decay or the common cold. It is certainly far more damaging than any other common ailment.

The range of individuals suffering from this discomforting and incapacitating disease is vast. The executive or company director who works for a large company (and who seems, on the surface, to have more control over his environment than his or her employees) is as vulnerable to the effects of toxic stress as anyone else. The student, the nurse and the librarian are all potential victims. The retired bank manager is as vulnerable as the young bank clerk and the junior shop assistant is as likely to suffer from it as is the chairman of the store.

The only common factor is that victims of The Twentieth Century Blues tend to be sensitive, considerate and caring individuals. The more thoughtful and imaginative you are the more you are likely to become a victim and the more likely you are to suffer.

But not even the unintelligent and the uncaring are immune to the power of toxic stress. I believe that much modern hooliganism and vandalism are a result of toxic stress.

The sensitive and intelligent respond to toxic stress by becoming unhappy and confused. The insensitive and unintelligent respond to toxic stress by becoming angry, aggressive and violent. The deep sense of frustration commonly felt by the victims of toxic stress can lead one individual to withdraw and become more alone. The same feeling of frustration can lead another individual, with a different personality and living in a different environment, to become a dangerous sociopath.

Chapter Three

Diagnosing The Twenty First Century Blues is something that you have to do yourself – the disease has yet to be recognised by the medical establishment (and in view of the fact that the disease cannot be treated with any of the traditional remedies favoured by orthodox minded physicians, I suspect that it will be some time yet before the disease is widely accepted within the medical profession).

To make it easy for you to diagnose your condition I have listed below the symptoms which are associated with the syndrome. I have put the symptoms in question form and you must think carefully before answering them. This is no ordinary quiz.

If you find that you can honestly answer 'yes' to one or more of these questions then you are, I suspect, one of the many victims of The Twenty First Century Blues. The more times you have answered 'yes' the more serious your affliction.

If you discover that you are toxic stress victim – and a sufferer of The Twenty First Century Blues – do not despair. In the third part of this book I will explain how you can rebuild your strength and your resistance to toxic stress. The Twenty First Century Blues can be beaten.

Symptom One
Do you often feel that you ought to be doing more with your life? Do you feel dissatisfied with yourself or your life without really knowing why?

Symptom Two
Do you have an uncomfortable, and difficult to explain, feeling that control of your life is slipping (or has slipped) away from you?

Symptom Three
Do you suffer a lot from symptoms and ailments for which there never seems to be any completely satisfactory treatment? Do your symptoms or ailments hang on apparently endlessly – never really disappearing completely?

Symptom Four
Do you often feel nervous or anxious even though you know that you don't really have anything to be nervous or anxious about?

Symptom Five
Even though you may have a large family and lots of friends do you ever feel strangely and inexplicably alone?

Symptom Six
Do you constantly feel rushed – unable to find the time to do all the things you feel you ought to do, let alone the things that you would like to do?

Symptom Seven
Do you frequently worry unreasonably about quite trivial, insignificant things that in your heart you know don't really matter?

Symptom Eight
Do you constantly feel tired, listless and short of energy – feelings for which there is no medical explanation?

Symptom Nine
Do you ever feel an almost overwhelming and almost irresistible urge to run away from everything?

Symptom Ten
Do you feel that life isn't as much fun as it used to be or should be? Do you go for whole days without ever really feeling happy or feeling glad to be alive?

Symptom Eleven
Have you ever felt a frightening and unnerving urge to be violent – either to someone close to you or to some complete stranger who has annoyed you? Have you ever gone cold after realising how close you've been to initiating a frenzied physical attack on another human being? Do you ever find yourself wishing you had a gun?

Symptom Twelve

Do you ever feel a complete sense of despair about the future of the world? Do you ever feel glad that you’re not going to live to see the sort of world your children’s children will inherit when they grow up?

Chapter Four

If you have decided that you are suffering from The Twenty First Century Blues, please do not despair. You are by no means alone. Half of the people you know probably feel exactly the same way. Outwardly they may appear strong and happy but deep down inside they are just as tormented as you. You may find this difficult to believe but just remember that unless they know you very well they probably don't know that there is anything wrong with you either. You too have probably managed to put on a false front for several years now.

The difference between you and them is that you have now managed to find out what is wrong with you. And you can learn how to deal with the toxic stress which is causing your symptoms.

How can I describe the symptoms of The Twenty First Century Blues with such certainty?

That isn't difficult to answer.

Over the last few decades, I have received letters and telephone calls from thousands of people who have described to me the symptoms which I now recognise as typical of The Twenty First Century Blues.

And there is one final symptom which is almost universal among sufferers from this syndrome: guilt.

People who suffer from The Twenty First Century Blues invariably feel ashamed of the fact that they feel unhappy, frustrated, bored or discontent. They feel that since they enjoy much better living conditions than their ancestors – or, indeed, millions of people around the world who are less fortunate than themselves – they ought to be grateful rather than dissatisfied. They feel guilty about the fact that they are miserable when their problems are relatively trivial and superficial when compared to the problems endured by families living in under-developed countries.

This deep sense of guilt makes The Twenty First Century Blues more destructive, more damaging and even more unbearable.

Chapter Five

Why, if toxic stress and The Twenty First Century Blues are so common, have neither of them been recognised and written about by doctors before now?

It's a simple question.

And the answer is simple too.

Doctors are trained to look for physical causes for diseases – and to look for physical solutions too. Ever since the modern medical profession developed in the middle of the nineteenth century, doctors have tried to find anatomical, physiological or biochemical explanations for all health problems.

It took years for doctors to accept that psychological pressures could cause any sort of illness, and the general significance of stress was only fairly recently recognised by the profession as a whole.

It is not by accident that doctors are trained to try to cure illness by prescribing pills, performing surgery or intervening in some other essentially practical way. Doctors earn their living by providing practical services, and the links between the medical profession and the powerful drugs industry (which, of course, makes its massive profits out of the drugs that doctors prescribe) are extremely close.

Indeed, the sad truth is that although doctors have not yet recognised the existence of toxic stress of The Twenty First Century Blues, they have for several years now been attempting to treat the symptoms suffered by people who are toxic stress victims. And their attempts to treat such patients – usually by prescribing tranquillisers or antidepressants but sometimes by recommending electrical treatments or brain surgery – have frequently made things worse rather than better. Tranquillisers solve none of the fears or anxieties caused by toxic stress and they cure none of the problems associated with The Twenty First Century Blues. Indeed, because they are frequently addictive and because the list of side effects associated with their use seems endless, tranquillisers have created new problems.

The fact is that medical treatment isn't the answer to toxic stress or The Twenty First Century Blues because neither toxic stress nor the syndrome it produces are essentially medical problems. The word 'toxic' is used as a synonym for 'poison' and toxic stress is an insidious, morally and spiritually destructive disease. It eats away at the soul but it is not a disease that is ever likely to respond to pharmacological therapy. The Twenty First Century Blues is a disease of the soul rather than the mind; a disorder of the spirit rather than the body. There is no chemical or biochemical abnormality associated with it.

For the same reasons, the attempts by alternative practitioners to treat patients who are suffering from the effects of toxic stress have been similarly unsuccessful. During the last decade or two, millions of patients have turned to alternative practitioners for help. They have done so partly because they have been disenchanted by orthodox medicine, partly because they have been alarmed by the quantity and severity of side effects associated with modern medical remedies and partly because they have found alternative practitioners to be, on the whole, more sympathetic, more understanding and less hurried than their more orthodox counterparts.

But alternative healers have also failed to identify the existence of toxic stress or The Twenty First Century Blues and although their remedies may sometimes be safer and gentler, alternative practitioners still believe in the principles of interventionism. A study of the therapies recommended by alternative practitioners shows that they, like their orthodox colleagues, have made the mistake of trying to treat this problem, and the symptoms associated with it, as a medical problem. Some practitioners have gone so far as to define new syndromes in an attempt to explain away symptoms for which there is no convenient physical explanation. There has been much talk of allergies, hidden infections and ecological disasters. Inevitably, perhaps, new remedies have also been unearthed. I doubt if there is a mineral or a vitamin which has not, at one time or another, been recommended as a 'cure' to patients suffering from what I now believe to be The Twenty First Century Blues.

The alternative practitioners have failed and their remedies have proved ineffective because toxic stress cannot be treated as a medical problem and The Twenty First Century Blues cannot be cured with traditional, interventionist therapies.

The final and significant truth is that because toxic stress is a force which affects the soul and because The Twentieth Century Blues is an affliction of the spirit the answer must lie outside all varieties of orthodox medical thinking.

Part Two

The Causes of Toxic Stress

Introduction

When we are feeling angry or upset with the world, we often blame ‘them’.

When we feel that we are being forced to do things against our will, we blame ‘them’.

When we feel frustrated or cheated, we blame ‘them’.

When we are hampered by injustice or wounded by unfairness, we say that it is ‘their fault’.

But there is no ‘them’, of course.

The man who seems to represent injustice – and seems one minute to be one of ‘them’ – will, the next minute, be standing shoulder to shoulder with you sharing your complaints.

The opponents of justice and fair play have no human form.

The truth is that when we are complaining about ‘them’ we are really complaining about the world we have created for ourselves; we are complaining about the unseen forces which structure our society; we are complaining about things which are now out of our control.

The real problem is that we are no longer in true control of our destiny.

We have created a world, a society, which now exists to protect itself. We have created a society which exists to improve and strengthen itself at our expense. The real threat to our health comes from the fact that we have created a social structure in which we now exist as mere pawns.

In the remainder of this section, I will explain the ways in which toxic stress is created.

Chapter One

Our exposure to toxic stress begins at a very early age. It starts in earnest the moment we attend school for the first time.

We are taught to take education seriously. We are told that our education will shape and govern our lives. We are told that if we work hard at school and at college we will reap the benefits later.

What we are told is true.

But we are not told the price that we will have to pay for our years of education. We are never told the price that society expects us to pay in return for having our lives shaped and improved.

To understand the potential costs to your spirit and your soul you must first understand the purpose of the education society is offering you. You must understand what society stands to gain from the deal you are being offered. Sadly, nothing that society offers you ever comes free. An education is certainly no exception. The main reason society offers to educate you is to prepare you for work. Society doesn't want to educate you so that you become a more thoughtful, more creative or wiser person. What would be the point of that? Society doesn't want to broaden your horizons or enhance your sense of vision. Society doesn't want to instil passion in you (that can be troublesome and inconvenient) and it doesn't want you to know how to think for yourself (that can be costly and disruptive).

What society really wants is obedience.

Society, the social structure which we have created but which has now acquired a strength and a force of its own (inspired by its own need to survive) values obedience highly and rewards the obedient more than any other group. Society knows that the obedient will work hard without question. Society knows that the obedient can be relied upon to do work that is dull, repetitive and possibly even dangerous. Society knows that the obedient are unlikely to be troubled by spiritual or moral fears. Society knows that the obedient will fit neatly into whatever hierarchy may exist, and society knows that the obedient will put loyalty above honesty and integrity. Society will always reward those who are obedient because that shows other people the value of obedience! If you become obedient then you will also become a good and reliable customer. You will buy things that you don't need and so help society to evolve and stay strong. You will accept shoddy workmanship and unreliability without complaint. You will accept new fashions as necessary and you will buy new clothes and new cars when society wants you to buy these things – not when you need them. The obedient customer is a passive customer and the passive customer is the best customer.

Think back to your own education and you'll see how important obedience was. Any course which involves a textbook and a teacher and concludes with an examination of some sort is designed to prevent thought and to encourage blind obedience. The educational system prepares you for a life in a meritocracy where nothing is more meritorious than silent obedience.

If you were a good student then you will have been rewarded.

If your education was successful – on society's terms – then you will have been offered choices that marked you for life. Whatever profession you chose to follow society will have taught you to feel special. You will have been encouraged to believe that you are superior to all those who do not have your own special skills. You will have been taught to feel contempt for those who do not have your authority. You will have been taught prejudices rather than truths.

You must remember that the aim of a modern education is to harness the minds of the imaginative or potentially disruptive. Such individuals are dangerous to a smooth running society. Society's schoolteachers are prepared and willing to manipulate the minds of the young because that is what society expects them to do in return for their own status in society. Everything is designed to help produce a neat and layered world.

The price you pay for your education is a high one. And the more successful your education is in society's terms (and the higher your position in the meritocracy) the greater the price you must pay. You will be marked for life. Your choices – or the choices that society helped you to make – will have strictly defined the boundaries of your life. You may be better rewarded (in material terms) than many of those who were less capable of satisfying the system but the price you pay will be higher too. The price you pay for educational success is intellectual constraint. You pay for your success with your freedom. You pay for your success with guilt, frustration, dissatisfaction and boredom.

The modern educational system is designed to support the structure of our society but it is also a major force in the development of toxic stress.

Chapter Two

At about the same time that you entered the educational system you also became a consumer.

Whatever you choose to do with your life you will, to much of the world, always be a consumer.

People who make motor cars, bicycles, mobile telephones, washing machines, television sets and microwave ovens think of the people who buy their products as consumers not people. Those who sell bread, milk, cheese, eggs and flour sell their produce to consumers. People who sell holidays, restaurant meals, hotel accommodation and train tickets aim their advertising at consumers. Accountants, lawyers, surveyors, doctors and agents of a hundred different types earn their living from consumers.

In order to persuade you to buy their products or services (and to spend ever increasing amounts of money on them) the people who make or sell their products or services will spend considerable amounts of money on trying to persuade you that the products or services they sell are better than anyone else's. Society needs them to do this in order to survive and, even more important, in order to expand and grow ever richer.

And so every day your custom will be solicited in a thousand different ways – some crude and some subtle. Every day you will come face to face with an almost infinite variety of messages and exhortations.

The professionals who prepare the advertisements with which you are confronted are only too aware of the fact that it is no longer enough for them to tell you of the value of the product they are selling. These days, the competition is so great that advertising agencies are no longer content to tell you how to satisfy your basic needs. These days advertising agencies know very well that in order to succeed in the modern market place they must create new needs; their advertising must create wants and desires, hopes and aspirations, and turn those wants, desires, hopes and aspirations into needs. They do this through exaggeration and deceit and through exploiting your weaknesses and your fears. They create layer after layer of toxic stress in order to turn you into an ever more eager customer.

Modern advertising agencies know (because they've done the necessary research) that it is impossible to sell anything to a satisfied man. But, in order to keep the wheels of commerce turning, in order to keep the money coming in, in order to ensure that society continues to expand, the advertising agencies must keep encouraging us to buy; they must constantly find new and better ways to sell us stuff we don't really want. Any fool can sell us products and services that we need. The trick is in turning our most ephemeral wants into basic needs. In order to do this, advertising agencies must use all their professional skills to make us dissatisfied with what we already have. They need us to be constantly dissatisfied and frustrated. They constantly need to create new and more virulent forms of toxic stress.

Modern advertising raises the intensity of our desires and builds our dissatisfaction and our fears in order to satisfy its own mercenary ends. Modern advertising is a creative art. The advertising professional is hired to create unhappiness and dissatisfaction. He is paid to make us want more possessions, excitement or status. He is paid to keep us dissatisfied and wanting more.

The advertising people will do their best to make you dissatisfied with anything which cannot be profitable for them. They want to take away your appreciation of the simple things in life so that they can sell you complicated and expensive things. They would rather you sat down to watch football on TV than that you kicked an old ball around in the park. They want you to wash away your natural, sexual odours and replace them with odours taken from the sexual glands of animals. They want you to be in so much of a hurry that you eat instant foods rather than growing and then preparing your own vegetables. They want you to ride in a car rather than walk or ride a bicycle. They want you to forget your needs and replace them with wants out of which they can make a profit. They want you to feel guilty if you don't smell right or don't look the way they want you to look. They want you feel guilty if you don't buy the new season's clothes, handbags and shoes. They want you to feel a failure if you don't buy the latest toys or fill your home with the latest gadgets and bits and pieces of equipment.

They don't want you to be able to wear the clothes you like or feel comfortable wearing. They don't want you to be able to walk freely through our towns and cities. They don't want you to enjoy any real freedom. They need your money and so they want your soul.

Or maybe they just need your soul because they want your money.

The advertising industry is responsible for much of the sickness and much of the unhappiness in our society.

Even if you do buy the products they want to sell you, you will still not find the satisfaction they promise you. Their advertisements are shallow, their promises empty and hollow.

Their advertising may suggest that if you buy their product you will become popular and successful. The suggestion will be made with care and caution. The advertisers are subtle in their cruelty.

But you will be disappointed. Even if you buy the product you will remain frustrated and dissatisfied. The advertising professionals, like politicians make many promises which they know they cannot keep. Indeed, they never intended to keep their promises.

To the spiritual and mental frustration created by all this disappointment, you must add physical frustration too for the chances are high that the product you buy will soon fail. Obsolescence is built in and essential to all new products. Built in mechanical or fashionable obsolescence enables the car companies to keep making and selling us new cars (even though most of us already have cars which work perfectly well) and the manufacturers of television sets to keep making and selling new television sets.

Sadly, the advertising professionals don't care about the poor, the disabled and the sick or frail. Such people are not good consumers. Modern advertising destroys the poor. It shows them things they cannot have. It shows them services they cannot buy. It inflames their desires. It creates wants and then turns those wants into needs. It creates frustration. It creates passion. And it creates violence. The poor do not even have the simple satisfaction of discovering that the products they are offered are never likely to satisfy the promises made for them.

I believe that advertising is one of the greatest causes of toxic stress and is, therefore, one of the greatest of all modern threats to physical and mental health. Advertising agencies kill far more people than industries which pollute the atmosphere. Advertising is built on promises that can never be kept, and were never intended to be kept. Advertising is designed to replace your freedom with constraints. Advertising agencies succeed by making people unhappy. Advertising is the symbol of modern society; it represents false temptations, hollow hopes and unhappiness and disenchantment; it inspires values which are based on fear and greed.

Chapter Three

Society’s next great need is to convince you of the importance of progress.

Without progress society would stand still. Without progress industry would slow down. Without progress we would learn to enjoy our world and our lives. Without progress we would find happiness, contentment and stability more enjoyable than frustration. Without progress we would not know the meaning of dissatisfaction but society would not grow. Without progress the structure of our society would not increase in importance or complexity.

We have created a world and a society which now controls us. We do not have power over our destiny but there are no people behind the scenes manipulating our lives. Our present and our future are controlled by the social structures we have devised. Our institutions and our establishments need progress in order to keep us confused, bewildered and unbalanced and in order to gain more power. We like to blame the invisible ‘them’ for our graceless state but there are no invisible ‘them’. The men and women who have positions of authority in our society are as tortured by toxic stress as everyone else. They suffer as you and I do. The power is now vested in the institutions themselves; it is the structure which controls us.

And, in order to grow, the structure needs progress.

In order to help maintain and build the social structure which gives them their power and their authority, the individuals who work for institutions and organisations and parts of the establishment enthusiastically insist that progress – any sort of progress – is vital. They know that without progress, without growth, their part of the social structure, and therefore their personal status, will decline. They know that in order to survive they must keep their institution alive and strong. And that means progress. The men and women who work for big companies know that without progress their companies will decline and lose power. The individuals who work for political institutions know that without progress and growth their status and power will decline. Everyone with an ounce of status or an ounce of power has a vested interest in progress.

And so everyone says what a good thing progress is and how impossible it is to halt progress. They tell us that progress is vital and good but they are lying. What they really mean is that progress is good for business or that progress offers some advantage in terms of money or power to the part of the social structure to which they are tied. Progress is, ironically, essential to the status quo.

Inevitably, anyone who works for any company or institution will insist that progress means ‘better’. It doesn’t. Progress means that people have to work harder and take life more seriously. Progress means that ‘things’ become more complicated and more likely to go wrong. Progress means that the ‘things’ you bought yesterday (and were happy with) are outdated and probably useless within months. Progress means that new is always better and that the future is always stronger than the past.

Progress means that more and more people have to exchange a rich, varied, wholesome, healthy lifestyle for one which is hollow and filled with despair and loneliness. Progress means deprivation for people but strength for our social structures. Progress means that the jobs people do become more boring and less satisfying. Progress means more power to machines and robots. Progress means that things are more likely to go wrong (because they are more complicated). Progress means more destruction, more misery and more tedium. Progress means more damage to our planet. Progress means more toxic stress.

Those who worship at the altar of progress make two simple but vital errors. They assume that man must take full advantage of every new development and invention. And they assume that he must always search for a better way of tackling everything he does.

Neither of these two assumptions is soundly based.

Just because man invents computers, supersonic jets and atomic bombs doesn’t mean that he has to use these things.

Those who believe implicitly in progress believe that we must always endeavour to use every new nugget of information we obtain. They believe that if man invents a faster way to travel then the faster way to travel must be a better way to travel than the old way. They believe that if man invents a quicker and more effective way to kill people then we must use this quicker and more effective weapon of destruction. They believe that if man invents a faster way to do mathematical equations then all our industries must be adapted to take advantage of this new technology.

These assumptions are not based on logic or fact.

Progress for the sake of progress often simply means change for the sake of change. Change is not always for the better.

Nor is there much sense in the belief that man must always busy himself looking for better ways to do things.

The problem lies largely with the definition of the word ‘better’.

What, exactly, does it mean?

Is a television set better than a radio?

Is a motor car better than a bicycle?

Is an aeroplane better than a yacht?

Are modern cars, equipped with electric windows and air conditioning and clever devices which turn on the windscreen wipers when it starts to rain, better than ancient Rolls Royce motor cars equipped with none of these facilities?

Is artificial turf better than real grass?

Are artificial flowers better than the real thing?

Too often progress simply means more frustration and more unhappiness. It means that we become more dependent on one another and less capable of coping with the crises in our lives.

Do people really get more pleasure out of cars which travel faster but look much the same as all the other models on sale?

Are people wiser, happier and more contented now that electric toothbrushes are widely available?

Are people more at peace than their ancestors now that the compact disk player has been invented and marketed?

How much did the telephone improve the quality of life? How much better is life now that we have access to the internet?

The truth, of course, is something of a compromise.

Some advances are good. Some new technology is helpful. Some new developments really do improve our lives. Some progress reduces pain and suffering.

But society isn't interested in the truth. And it certainly isn't interested in any compromise. Society needs uncontrolled progress in order to grow. Our society's institutions have an insatiable appetite for progress. And the people who acquire their power and their status and their wealth from those institutions do what they are expected to do. Our world is no longer controlled by people. It is controlled by the structure we created.

The truth is that progress can be a boon as well as a burden. It would be stupid to claim that all progress is bad. Progress is good when we use it rather than when we allow it to rule our lives.

The truth, as always, is wonderfully simple: progress is neither good nor bad unless we make it so.

But we are no longer allowed to choose between those aspects of progress which we think can be to our benefit and those which we suspect may be harmful.

Our society wants progress, and nothing but progress, and that is what it gets.

Chapter Four

As we grow, so we are taught to have respect for science and technology. We are taught that science and technology have all the answers to the problems of today and tomorrow. We are told that science can help mankind conquer the future and that technology can help man deal with the problems that have been created by the present and the past.

The truth is that they are wrong; sadly, woefully, ingloriously wrong. The truth is that science and technology are the cause of much of our toxic stress. The truth is that science and technology are now largely dedicated to solving problems created by science and technology.

Science may sometimes appear to be an unstoppable power; a supernatural tower of strength packed with an immeasurable kaleidoscope of force, energy and talent.

It is none of those things.

Science is no more than a tool and like any tool it can be a force for evil as readily as it can be a force for good.

It is science which has enabled us to destroy much of our world.

It was science which gave us the ability to conquer, control and exploit nature. It was science which gave us pollution. It was science which gave us concrete and high rise tower blocks and endless ribbons of motorways. It was science which gave us road traffic accidents and air crashes and a thousand different varieties of death and destruction. It was science which gave us nuclear power and the ability to destroy ourselves. It was science which gave us chemicals which blind and drugs which numb and destroy the brain. It was science which gave us addiction and the sad need to search for drugs with which to escape from our world. It was science which gave us food which tastes of nothing more than cardboard. It was science which gave us mass unemployment and which took away from millions the natural pride and pleasure and quiet satisfaction that can be obtained from a day’s work well done. It was science which tuned skilled craftsmen into miserable machine minders; removing pride, self-expression and satisfaction from their lives.

Science created all these problems and worries and anxieties. And now science pushes us to search for new answers and solutions. And as it pushes so it creates new problems and new fears.

The truth, as always so clear, so simple and so undeniable, is that there are as many dishonest and deceitful scientists as there are honest and honourable scientists.

When we use science to help us live better, happier, cleaner, safer and more contended lives then science can be a powerful force for good. But too often science is an end in itself rather than a force for good. Too often science aids only scientists; too often science adds nothing to the quality of life.

Science and technology have contributed much to the existence of toxic stress in our world.

Chapter Five

Your ancestors lived in a world about which they understood very little. They should have been consumed by fear. Fear of the unknown. Fear of being eaten alive. Fear of starvation. Fear of death and illness.

We, by contrast, should lead relatively fear-free lives.

But all the evidence suggests that fear now plays a bigger part in our lives than it ever played in our ancestors' lives.

Why?

Because our society needs us to be frightened.

Fear is a powerful driving force which helps to push us forwards. Fear encourages us to spend money, to accept progress and to treat those around us with contempt and disrespect. Fear helps to keep us weak but it helps to keep our society strong. Fear divides us and cripples us but gives our social structures strength. Today we are never allowed to forget our fears for an instant.

It is no accident that industries, advertising agencies, politicians, experts and television commentators all contribute to our daily ration of fear. There is nothing strange or inexplicable about the fact that one hardly ever sees or hears a pundit offering reassurance.

Fear is one of the most potent forces used to control us and to manipulate our emotions. It is fear which often leads us to change our habits – to the advantage of some part of our society. It is fear which justifies progress.

Take health, for example.

We are encouraged to worry about health in a million individual ways. Listen to the experts arguing about what is bad for you and you will soon feel twinges of fear nibbling at your increasingly tortured spirit.

Most of the time our fears are being manipulated by people – representing social structures – who want us to change our spending habits. We are told that we should eat less saturated fats and eat more products which contain unsaturated fats – by people who want to sell us unsaturated fats. If we don't follow their recommendations we will, we are warned, fall ill and die. We are encouraged to have regular health checks by doctors who want to charge us fees for the service they will gladly provide. If we don't do as they suggest then we will only have ourselves to blame if we die early. We are encouraged to distrust doctors by people who want to sell us herbal medicines. We are encouraged to use sugar substitutes by companies making sweeteners. We are advised to avoid using sweeteners by people selling sugar. We are told we must eat more bran by people selling bran-rich products. We are told to exercise by companies selling exercise equipment. We are told that cycling is dangerous by people who want us to travel by motor car. We are told, by people with a vested interest in such matters, to put our faith in acupuncture, osteopathy, reflexology, aromatherapy or psychotherapy. We are advised to take regular vitamins, minerals or protein tablets by the people selling vitamins, minerals or protein tablets. We are told to eat more runner beans by the Runner Bean Marketing Board and more carrots by the Carrot Marketing Board.

Is it any wonder that we suffer from fear? Is it any wonder that hypochondriasis is commonplace? Is it any wonder that we suffer from toxic stress?

Fear is everywhere and is constantly used by people who want our support. Politicians make us frightened of street violence in order to encourage us to allow them (and the social structures for which they work) to have more power. We are warned about the rising tide of racism in our society and it is made clear that if we vote the 'wrong' way then we too will be regarded as racists and treated accordingly. Police chiefs recommend stronger policing – and more policemen. Prison chiefs campaign for bigger prisons – and more of them. Everyone campaigning for something warns us of the awful consequences if we disregard their warnings.

Politicians make us frightened of our enemies abroad (even if our enemies abroad are no real threat to us) because by making us frightened they give themselves more power.

And newspaper editors delight in terrifying us with a constant diet of new fears because they know that fear sells newspapers. (We want to know more about the things we should be worried about.)

Fear is a potent weapon these days because the availability of television and radio and the internet means that we can be frightened more speedily and more effectively than ever before.

Every representative of every social structure uses fear to manipulate us. Fear helps our society to sustain itself and to increase its power.

No one seems to care about the damage done by the toxic stress generated by all this fear.

Chapter Six

Much unhappiness and frustration is caused by the fact that in our society the law is commonly confused with justice, liberty, freedom and equality.

In truth, the law has very little to do with these fundamental moral principles. The law exists to help society defend itself; it is used by those who represent society as a weapon with which to dominate and discriminate against individual powers and freedoms. The law is man's inadequate attempt to turn justice – a theoretical concept – into practical reality. Sadly, it is invariably inspired more by the prejudices and self-interest of the lawmakers than by respect or concern for the rights of innocent individuals.

These misconceptions about the purpose of our law lead to much disappointment and frustration. And these misconceptions help to create a considerable amount of underlying toxic stress.

No society has ever had as many laws as we have. And yet few societies have had less justice.

Many of the laws which exist today were created not to protect individuals or communities but to protect the system. It is because such crimes threaten the security and sanctity of the system that theft and fraud often attract harsher sentences than crimes such as murder and rape which affect individuals – and (in society's terms) their less significant rights.

The irony is that although the law was originally introduced to protect individuals from tyranny, the law itself has become a tyrant. Today, few individuals can afford to take advantage of the protection offered by the law. The law oppresses the weak, the poor and the powerless and sustains itself and the powers which preserve it. The cost of litigation means that there is one law for the rich and no law at all for the poor. The result is that the law threatens and reduces the rights of the weak and strengthens and augments the rights of the powerful.

Things are made worse by the fact that the people employed by society to uphold and administer the law on behalf of the ordinary people too often take advantage of their positions to abuse their powers. The interpretation of the law is so often at the discretion of those who are paid to uphold it that those who have been hired by society become the law itself; neatly and effectively, society protects itself against any threat.

Too often society allows officers of the courts to abuse their powers to satisfy their own personal prejudices, grievances and ambitions. In return, society, and the structure which supports it, is protected by the people who benefit from its patronage. It is the worst sort of symbiotic relationship.

The final irony is that as respect for the law (and those hired to uphold it) diminishes so the divide between the law and justice grows ever wider.

When people who are given the power to protect society disapprove of something which threatens their status, they introduce a new law. As political parties come and go, so we accumulate layer after layer of new laws. It doesn't matter if the new laws conflict with the old laws as long as all the laws help to strengthen the status of the State.

Meanwhile, as the oppression of individuals continues, lawlessness (and disrespect for the law) grows among officials and those in power. Brutality, arrogance, corruption and hypocrisy have all damaged public faith in the law but the only response from society has been to create new laws to outlaw disapproval. Society's primary interest is to protect itself and society is not concerned with justice, freedom or equality since those are values which are appreciated only by individuals. Society is concerned with progress and power and its own survival.

Part Three

The Cure for the Twenty First Century Blues

Introduction

There are two ways to deal with any problem that affects your health.

The simple, traditional way that has been preferred by healers for centuries is to treat the symptoms of the disorder.

But the more sensible (and, in the long term, more efficient) method is to tackle the cause of the symptoms.

If you have been electrocuted and your doctor attempts to treat your symptoms without removing you from the live electricity supply then all his work will be in vain. If you are drowning then there isn't much point in performing artificial respiration until you've been dragged out of the water.

The symptoms associated with The Twenty First Century Blues vary enormously from one sufferer to another. One individual may have the symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome. Another may suffer from panic attacks. A third may suffer from attacks of wheezing. Headaches, skin rashes and indigestion are all extremely common.

Your doctor (or alternative healer) may be able to help you control the symptoms that have been caused by The Twenty First Century Blues but the only way to deal with your problem effectively and permanently is to tackle your susceptibility to toxic stress.

And since toxic stress is a social rather than a medical phenomenon, your doctor or alternative therapist will almost certainly be unable to help you to do that.

Because The Twenty First Century Blues is basically a disease of the spirit, the solutions are spiritual rather than physical. You need to change long established attitudes and acquire new understandings of yourself and the world in which you live – rather than simply take pills or perform exercises.

In this part of the book, I am going to show you exactly what you need to do to conquer The Twenty First Century Blues. I am going to show you how to overcome your lethargy, how to conquer your deep-seated anxieties and how to put meaning and joy back into your life. I believe that I can help you feel optimistic about the future.

Obviously, a book alone cannot change your life. You have to be prepared to make some changes in the way you live and the way you think about the world. But if you are prepared to make the necessary adjustments and adaptations to your life then you will be able to deal with toxic stress and conquer The Twenty First Century Blues.

Chapter One

When we are young, we all have many dreams. We fantasise a lot about the future. We see ourselves becoming great painters, writers or sculptors. We envisage ourselves conquering the world as musicians, film stars or sporting heroes.

Gradually, as we get older, so our dreams are taken away from us.

People tell us that we must stop our day dreaming. They insist that we forget our fantasies, put aside our hopes and grow up into sensible, responsible, prosaic adulthood.

Society doesn't like dreamers. Society wants us to adopt a practical role. Society doesn't want people with their own visions for the future. Society likes us all to replace our personal visions for the future with simpler aspirations. Society wants us to put aside our dreams and forget all thoughts of romance and adventure. Society wants us to sell our souls for a small suburban house, a motor car and a gas fired barbecue in the garden.

Society needs workers and consumers not dreamers.

Society tells us that dreams are for children, and society (in the person of school-teachers, parents and employers) tells us that as we grow older so we must settle for more modest, more practical hopes.

But the rewards society offers us in exchange for our dreams are trivial and tarnish quite quickly. The irony is that the rewards society offers are a sham; they will crumble in your fingers. Only dreams are real.

The truth is that to succeed, to survive and to be happy you must always hold your dreams close to your heart. Never let them go. The people who escape from their surroundings are the people who can dream. The prisoners who survive concentration camps are the ones who can envisage a world after imprisonment. It doesn't matter what sort of world it is as long as it is a better world.

Ignore and resist the people who want to take away your dreams, ambitions and aspirations and who want to replace your dreams with ordinary satisfactions. Resist the pressure from those who want you to become a neat, productive human unit.

Keep your dreams close to you for as long as you live. Never let them go.

If your dreams are now but a distant part of your past, rescue them. Reach back into your memory and grab them. Try to remember what your dreams were when you were a teenager.

If you allow your dreams to disappear then you will become sad, dull, aimless and miserable. Your life will have no romance. You will be deprived of the sort of hope and vision with which you can combat misery, pain and depression.

However old you are, however long you live, never allow yourself to be parted from the dreams, ambitions and hopes you enjoyed when you were a child. And don't be afraid to give your dreams substance and strength. Programme your dreams into your plans for your future.

When the boss of a large Japanese company was asked if his company had any long-term goals he answered 'yes'.

'How far ahead do you plan?' asked the questioner.

'Two hundred and fifty years,' answered the Japanese businessman.

'What qualities do you need to carry out such long-term plans?' asked the startled questioner, more accustomed to two or maybe five year plans.

'Patience,' replied the Japanese businessman.

Remember that a goal is nothing more than a dream with a deadline. Write your dreams down. Vow today that you will do whatever you can to turn them into reality.

Vernon's Law

You don't have to realise your dreams to benefit from them. But you do have to keep them alive.

Chapter Two

Most people spend much of their lives striving to make money – and get rich.

It is a driving force which leads to much corruption, dishonesty, disappointment and unhappiness.

Many people die getting rich.

Some go to prison.

Some ruin relationships, lose friends and damage their health permanently.

But why do people want to get rich?

A few years ago, a man who made a fortune out of other people's greed for money used the slogan: 'Do you sincerely want to be rich?'

As the man had expected, most people who were asked the question answered 'Yes'.

And then he had them. And by offering them wealth as a reward he was able to get them to do things that were silly, illegal or both.

He got rich. They got poor.

I want to ask you a different question.

'Do you sincerely need to be rich?'

Now, what's your answer?

Vernon's Law

More people are made miserable trying to get rich – and failing – than are made happy by trying to get rich – and succeeding.

Chapter Three

A friend of mine lives in a small but smart detached house in the suburbs of a large town. He has a wife, three children and two motor cars. He leaves home at 7 o'clock every morning and gets home at 9 o'clock at night. At the weekends, he brings work home with him.

I visited him recently one Sunday afternoon and found him busy tinkering with a huge power mower that wouldn't start.

'Damned thing always takes an hour to start,' said my friend, throwing down a spanner disgustedly.

I looked around at his lawn. It was very small. It would have taken much less than an hour to cut it with a simple hand propelled mower.

'Do you need that great big thing?' I asked him.

He looked at me as if I had gone mad. 'No one round here cuts their grass by hand!' he said.

When we went into the house we had to squeeze past a static bicycle – one of those exercise machines that executives use to keep themselves healthy.

'How long have you had this?' I asked him. I hadn't seen it before.

'Just over two months,' said my friend. 'We used to keep it in the bedroom but whenever I used it the whole house shook and the downstairs ceiling started to crack.'

'Isn't it boring?' I asked him. 'Riding a bicycle in your own hallway?'

My friend shrugged. 'I need the exercise,' he said. 'I spend three hours a day sitting in the car in traffic jams. I don't get time to go to the gym.'

'Three hours!' I said, horrified. 'An hour and a half each way?'

My friend nodded.

'But it's only fifteen miles to where you work!'

'Twelve,' said my friend. 'The traffic is terrible.'

'You could get there quicker on a bike!' I said. 'Especially now that they've put in cycle lanes.'

'Go to work on a bike!' said my friend, shocked. 'You must be joking. What would the neighbours say?'

My friend works long hours at a job he doesn't particularly enjoy to earn money to pay for two cars, a power mower and an exercise bike.

If he sold the power mower, the exercise bike and one of the cars and bought an ordinary bicycle and a push mower he would get all the exercise he needed, save money and have far more time to spend with his family.

He might even be able to give up the job he doesn't particularly like and find one (paying less money) that he found more satisfying.

But I don't think my friend will sell his power mower or his exercise bicycle.

He has been trapped by society's lunatic values. He has been trapped by the need to compete with his neighbours. (One of society's cleverest tricks). And, most of all, he has been trapped by his own vanity.

Look at your life. Do you lead a 'power mower and exercise bike' sort of life.

If so then ask yourself who you are trying to impress. And whether or not you really care about what strangers think about you.

Vernon's Law
No one needs a power mower and an exercise bicycle.

Chapter Four

Society doesn't like you sitting down looking at the flowers.

While you are sitting down looking at the flowers you aren't consuming anything.

And when you aren't consuming, industry, shops and banks aren't making a profit.

Banks and businesses desperately need you to go through life on the run. They need you to spend, to travel, to throw away and to replace. They need you to follow fashion. Money keeps the world turning and so society needs you to be greedy and ambitious.

If you sit down and watch the world go by then you are worthless to the social structure we have created. Every moment you spend lazily watching the clouds drift by, or watching birds and animals at play, or staring into the sunset, is a wasted moment as far as society is concerned.

All this explains why you feel guilty if you do stop and do nothing; why you feel guilty if you lie in bed on a Sunday morning or if you sit down when you could be doing something 'useful'.

Society knows that if you are to continue earning and spending then you must keep working. Society knows that if you are sitting around enjoying the world then you are unlikely to be doing anything of material value.

As far as society is concerned, if you aren't consuming then you aren't real. As far as society is concerned a moment of contemplation is a moment wasted.

I suggest that you ignore society's demands and choose to take life at your own pace. Stop, sit, relax and rest when you want to stop, sit, relax and rest.

Remember that time is the most precious commodity in the world. No one knows how much time any one of us has. And it is up to you to decide whether you want to waste or enjoy the hours you have left.

Remember that one commodity that is more precious than money is time.

Vernon's Law

Everyone knows that you can buy money with your time. But only the wisest realise that you can also buy time with your money.

Chapter Five

Nurture and take good care of real friendships. Friends are more valuable than any precious metal.

As the years go by you will meet many, many people. Some of them you will think of as no more than vague acquaintances. Many you will think of and refer to as friends.

But you will make very few real friends. Indeed, most of us can count ourselves lucky if we go through life with one real, true friend.

You will not make real friends quickly or easily. Real friendships take many years to develop. But real friendships will last a lifetime and provide support, succour and encouragement at the times in your life when you feel most lonely and vulnerable.

You will know when a real friendship develops.

When a real friend asks you for help you will stop what you are doing and without thinking about the consequences. You will be prepared to go anywhere, do anything to help him or her. When a real friend rings you at three in the morning you will get out of bed and drive a hundred miles without wondering why or asking yourself why you are doing such a thing.

Real friendship is strong and can survive a thousand assaults. Real friendship is close to true love. The luckiest are those who can combine true love with true friendship.

Modern cities and apartment buildings can be savage, lonely places. Too often you will find the world to be cruel, harsh and unforgiving. But once you have acquired a true friendship you will never again fear loneliness, failure or poverty. You will face illness with strength and you will be able to confront adversity with hope. Friendship can provide you with a vaccination against unhappiness and protection against toxic stress. Friendship will illuminate the darkest moments of life and brighten the blackest nights.

You will not make true friendships easily or quickly. Real friendships only develop with time and patience. But once you have found a real friend cherish him or her and always keep him or her a place in your heart where your friendship can constantly rebuild its strength.

Vernon's Law

Real wealth is measured in real friendship, not in material possessions.

Chapter Six

Always do work that you can be proud of and always take pride in the work that you do.

If bread is the staff of life then work is the rock upon which a healthy mind is built. Work is the central foundation upon which you can build a happy, contented and satisfying life.

You will find that many people around you do work which they hate and despise. They do their work purely for financial reward but because they have no pride in what they do their days are pointless, empty and meaningless.

Too many people are imprisoned by what they do; they do not exist outside their work and yet their work removes the soul from their spirit and leaves them cold, dull and lifeless. Millions move aimlessly through their days with only broken hopes and vanishing dreams to help sustain them through a constant stream of frustrations and disappointments. Millions are inspired by bitterness and envy rather than hope or joyful ambition. Millions spend their lives walking along windowless, endless corridors that take them from birth to retirement to death and never allow them to taste the pleasures of achievement or the inspiration of attainment.

A century ago, the working man laboured long, hard and honestly to earn money to buy bread, coal and other essentials. Today the working man labours long and hard in order to satisfy his created wants rather than his real needs. Today, the working man works hard not because he needs the money he earns but because he thinks he needs the things that the money will buy.

Look around you and you will see men and women selling their lives so that they can buy possessions they have been encouraged to covet. You will see men and women squabbling, moaning and whining as they work. You will see men and women working as little as they have to; stealing moments from their employers as subsidiary recompense for their wasted lives. You will see men and women doing work they are ashamed of and you will see men and women who hold themselves, and their own work, in contempt. You will see men and women who are not interested in making good products or offering a good service. You will see men and women who gain nothing and give nothing from their labours.

You will see millions of men and women who have prostituted their minds and their bodies to pay for badly made goods, produced by others who have prostituted their minds and their bodies to make them.

Look around and you will see that not even men and women who have creative jobs are above all this. You will see architects who design buildings in which they would not dream of living. You will see film directors selling their talents to those who want to sell worthless products. Time and time again you will see artists selling their skills, their spirits, their pride and their integrity for a handful of silver.

Look around and you will see broken hopes, lost dreams and engrained bitterness. Look around and you will see people living their lives through others; you will see people who live through their television sets or through the imagined and exaggerated exploits of their heroes or through games they play on a computer. Look around and you will see faces that show fear, obedience, hidden anger and uncertainty. You will see eyes that are hollow, dull and empty of every valuable human emotion. Look around and you will see people making products which they know to be either useless or harmful. You will see people maintaining bureaucratic structures which exist only to defend their own existence.

Always remember that what you do and how you do it is more important than your job title, what you earn or your position in the hierarchy.

A man may call himself a lawyer but if he spends all his days in a dull office making money out of creating unhappiness and maintain the indecencies of the system then he has little cause for true pride.

A policeman who spends the day beating young demonstrators over the head with his truncheon may claim that he is helping to preserve society but no high flown phrase can disguise the fact that he has spent the day beating passionate young people over the head with a truncheon.

An advertising copywriter may drive an expensive motor car and wear expensive clothes but if he spends his days writing lies and creating deceitful campaigns designed to create greed and need, he has little cause for self-satisfaction.

Always remember that success and profits never excuse hurtful or destructive behaviour. Remember that it is too easy to claim that the end will justify the means. Remember that it is no excuse to say that someone has to do it. 'If it wasn't me it would be someone else' is no excuse for a man or a woman who wants to live and die proud.

Look around you and you will see men and women working not with machines but for them. You will see men and women who have allowed machines to become superior to them.

Look around and you will see men and women who have dedicated their lives to jobs which they clearly find neither satisfying nor worthwhile.

Look around and you will see men and women who smile only when their work is over.

Try to be different. Try to remain always true to yourself. Always retain pride in what you do. Try to remain self-sufficient. Earn what you need but never by selling you soul or your spirit. Sell your body before you sell your mind or your integrity.

Remember that the gardener may not earn as much as the insurance executive but he may be infinitely richer.

Run your life with pride. Do nothing that you regard as degrading or worthless.

Vernon’s Law

It doesn’t matter what you do for a living. What matters is how proud you are of what you do.

Chapter Seven

The modern world is full of cruel ironies and strange paradoxes.

One of the cruellest of all ironies is the fact that although we are living in a time when information systems are better than ever before, communications between people are poorer than they have ever been. Too many people just don't say – or hear – the things that need to be said and heard.

Modern communications systems are sophisticated, fast, effective and powerful. The internet, telephones, radio, fax machines and television have all, in their different ways, revolutionised the art of communication. Our ancestors could speak to hundreds or shout to thousands. Today, it is easy to speak to millions. Our ancestors were limited by the power of their voices. But today it is possible to reach a worldwide audience within seconds. News that would have taken years to spread from continent to continent can be around the world in an instant. Just a decade or two ago, you needed to be standing next to someone to talk to them. Today, you can stand in the middle of a field on one side of the world and speak to someone standing in a field on the other side of the world.

We live in the middle of a technological revolution. Communications technology has helped to shrink the world and the universe.

But the irony is that modern communications systems add to the toxic stress in your life.

Television programmes, newspapers, magazines, radio and the internet enable us to hear bad news from around the world within seconds – and to see the pictures too. There is always bad news somewhere. And so we are always being saddened, frightened and worried by some new disaster. We worry about earthquakes on one continent and famine on another. We worry about floods and revolutions and terrorism. We hear about financial crises here and political problems there and we share the anguish of relatives when aeroplanes crash on the other side of the world.

But although the science of communication is more advanced than ever before, the art of communicating is dying.

The science of communication has enabled us to share the world's worries but our ability to talk to one another and to share our own burdens with those around us has started to disappear.

The toxic stress in your life is infinitely more damaging than it should be because you don't talk to people as much as you should. And you probably don't listen enough either.

The irony is cruel.

We have better communications systems than our ancestors could have ever imagined. But we don't talk to one another. We can send messages around the world, we can bounce signals off satellites and we can fire information deep into space, but we don't talk to the people we love.

Look around. You will see that your neighbours hardly ever really talk to one another. They share gossip gleaned from the television set. They talk about celebrities and fashions. They talk about disasters and they moan together but they don't talk enough about how they feel.

We are almost drowned in information. Escape is impossible. Information pours out of our computers, our television sets, our radios and our mobile telephones. Messages of doom and hate and disaster and crisis come in every conceivable form.

But we seem to have been numbed by the eternal onslaught. The words that really matter are hardly ever spoken. People don't talk to one another. They don't share their personal agonies. They don't share their love, their pride or their hopes. Too often these things are seen as weaknesses. Joys are drowned in the sadness. If you go to the theatre for an evening's escape you will, like as not, be subjected, before you are allowed out of your seats, to a harangue from one of the evening's entertainers who takes advantage of your presence and his position on stage to share his political views.

When the words of love and kindness are spoken, they are rarely heard. The medium has suffocated the message.

And yet if you do talk to people, you will benefit in a million different ways. Your relationship with those whom you love will grow even closer. You will understand the needs and hopes and fears of the people who are close to you and the people you work with. Problems and hazards will be avoided if only we would learn to talk and to listen.

Share your feelings with people, and your relationships will flourish. If you love someone then tell him. If you are angry with someone then tell them. If you have something that should be said, must be said, then say it. All around you people spend much of their lives swamped by the output of communications but very little time communicating with one another. People ring one another and send one another emails and texts but they do not share their feelings. Millions share their recipes and their opinions on celebrities and politicians, and happily tell the world what they had for breakfast, but they do not talk to the people who matter about the things that matter.

Learn to listen and you will benefit even more. Talking is a dying art but listening is almost dead. That's a tragedy. You can tell a great deal about someone by listening to what he has to say and the way he says it.

Vernon’s Law
Listening and talking are still the most potent ways to communicate.

Chapter Eight

Learn as much as you can about yourself. Learn about your strengths and your weaknesses. Learn about your good points and your bad points. Learn about your ambitions, your needs, your likes and your dislikes; learn how impulsive you are, how daring you are, how responsible you are, how optimistic you are and how practical you are.

Every relationship you have will involve an inter-reaction between two personalities. The more you know about yourself the more you will be able to understand why things sometimes go wrong. The more you understand your own needs and priorities the more you will be able to understand how best to work with other people.

If you don't know yourself then you will never really get to know other people. If you don't understand yourself then you will never be able to recognise your limitations or your capabilities. And you will be in a poor position to deal with toxic stress.

Regularly ask yourself how others see you. Ask yourself what sort of person you are.

Remember that we all behave differently in different situations, in different circumstances and with different people. You will be different when you are with those whom you love and trust to the way you are when you are with people who disturb you in some way.

Try to comprehend the many facets of your personality; the many aspects of yourself that others see.

Finally, to find out your greatest weaknesses and fears try to decide what you dislike most about other people.

The trait you find most horrendous in others may be your own most dominant trait. If you can identify the things which annoy you most when exhibited by others then you may have identified some of the most significant aspects of your own personality.

Vernon's Law

The more you know about yourself, the stronger you will become and the better you will be able to combat toxic stress and overcome The Twenty First Century Blues

Chapter Nine

Once upon a time, there were two bricklayers. They both did exactly the same work for the same local builder.

The first bricklayer found his work extremely tedious.

'All I do all day is lay one brick on top of another,' he complained. 'I get to work at 8.30 in the morning and lay bricks until it's time for lunch. Then, after lunch, I lay bricks until it is time to go home. My only brief moment of satisfaction comes when I pick up my wage packet on a Friday afternoon.'

This bricklayer was away from work for several days every month – usually complaining of aching muscles, vague headaches and backaches. His real trouble was that he had no enthusiasm for his work. Whenever there was an excuse to stop what he was doing he would be the first man to lay down his trowel.

The second bricklayer enjoyed his work.

'I build houses,' he said proudly. 'Every day I think of the people who will occupy the house I am building. I think of their joy when they first see their new home. I think of the family that will grow up in it. I think of the generations who will decorate it and think of it as 'home'. I don't think of myself as building a wall or even a house. I am building someone a home.'

This bricklayer, who had real purpose in his life, worked hard and worked well. He was hardly ever away from work. His colleagues and employers appreciated his enthusiasm and his love for his work.

The moral in this short story is very simple; if you are to enjoy your life, you need to have a purpose. Having a purpose will give you something to work for, something to look forward to and something to help you through the darkest of dark days. Without purpose, any life will be hollow and unrewarding. With purpose and hope, you will be able to survive everything fate can throw at you.

Once you have a purpose in your life you will be inspired by ambition and hope.

Without purpose your life will be sterile, empty and pointless. Having a purpose in your life will give you the power to combat the stresses and strains which are a consequence of boredom, pressures and frustrations.

Whatever job you choose, however old you are, whatever your personal responsibilities may be, your life needs purpose and directions as much as it needs food and oxygen. You need to be stretched, you need to take chances and you need to know that your life has been worthwhile.

Vernon's Law

The more purpose your life has the stronger you will be.

Chapter Ten

Never be afraid to speak your mind. You have nothing to lose but your chains.

You will meet many people – particularly those who work for large organisations – who are frightened to do or say anything that will annoy those who seem to have the power.

You will find that the people who are most afraid to speak out are the people who have acquired some small status and position of their own; managers, civil servants and so on.

Such individuals are often afraid to speak out lest they lose their hard won power and authority. They are afraid to be honest in case they annoy those above them. They are afraid to make decisions and afraid to take risks.

Remember that people who never take risks never really succeed.

Remember that people who are not honest to themselves have nothing of which to be proud.

And remember that the saddest person in the world is the individual who spends the final years of his or her life wondering what would have happened if he or she had had the courage to speak his mind and take a chance…

Vernon's Law

If you don't take chances you will never know what would have happened. And you will always wonder…and always regret.

Chapter Eleven

Because of the way our society is structured we are encouraged to have the greatest respect for the individual who has wealth.

To society this is important.

It means that the wealthy are rewarded while the poor are given an extra incentive to become rich.

But you should not fall into the trap of judging people by the clothes they wear, the cars they drive or the money they earn or have in the bank. Don't allow yourself to be misled into thinking that an advertising copywriter who drives an expensive sports car and wears designer suits is a better person than a farm labourer who rides a bicycle and wears tattered trousers and an oft-patched elderly jacket.

Always try to deal with people as individuals, rather than as members of a category.

A doctor is no better or more important than a nurse. An administrator is no better or more important a person than a clerk.

Too often you will find that the people around you will allow a man or woman's job or status to determine their worth in other aspects of their life.

But such judgements are nonsensical.

Financial success often depends more on fortune than talent. A lucky venture, a lucky investment, a lucky interview – all can lead to unexpected wealth.

Each social hierarchy is built on prejudice and chance.

An evil man can create a fortune for himself by making a product which ruins the environment or developing a process which exploits the innocent and the weak.

An honest, good and honourable man may be bankrupted by chance.

Never judge a man or woman by the work they do (or do not do) and take care never to judge a man or woman until you know them as people.

A man who inherits money, title and position is no better (and no worse) than a woman who wins the lottery. Neither are intrinsically better or worse than the individual who has earned his own money. And neither are better (or worse) than the individual who has no money.

Vernon's Law

Judge people by what they are not by what they own.

Chapter Twelve

As well as having the courage to take chances, when the people around you are probably telling you not to, you should also try to find the courage to say ‘no’ when everyone else wants you to say ‘yes’.

‘No’ is one of the shortest but most difficult words to say in any language.

We all like to be liked and the easy way to be liked is to say ‘yes’ a good deal.

When you say ‘no’ you inevitably disappoint the people who want you to say ‘yes’. When you say ‘no’ you risk annoying acquaintances. The social pressure to say ‘yes’ can often seem overwhelming.

But if you don’t say ‘no’ when you want to say ‘no’ you can lead yourself into all sorts of difficult and painful circumstances. Not having the courage to say ‘no’ can lead to commitments you cannot cope with and to private, public and commercial engagements which you find at best dull and worse difficult and painful.

Saying ‘yes’ when you really want to say ‘no’ can lead to all sorts of problems. And can hurt the people who are closest to you.

You will be tempted to say ‘yes’ because you have been put under pressure – maybe even blackmailed. You will be tempted to say ‘yes’ when you want to appear strong and decisive. You will be tempted to say ‘yes’ when you are frightened of what people might say or think if you say ‘no’. You will be tempted to say ‘yes’ when you want to please the person who wants you to say ‘yes’. You will be tempted to say ‘yes’ because other people have said ‘yes’.

Remember: there is nothing wrong with saying ‘no’ occasionally. Remember that saying ‘no’ is almost always a sign of strength. Remember that having the courage to say ‘no’ is often a sign of maturity and self-confidence.

Vernon’s Law

When you have difficulty saying ‘no’ think of how much more difficult things are likely to become if you say ‘yes’.

Chapter Thirteen

Your body is beautifully designed and built to last. It can withstand a wide range of pressures and cope with an enormous number of environmental hazards.

But occasionally things will go wrong. Being only human your body is vulnerable.

You will be encouraged to believe that whenever you are ill you should seek help from an expert. You will find that professional help is available not just from doctors but also from a wide range of alternative or complementary practitioners. The demand for health care has risen so rapidly in the last few decades that a huge industry has developed. You will find that there are hundreds of people prepared to sell you what to do in order to get well again. Inevitably, most of them will want to sell you their services or the products they manufacture or recommend.

Don’t allow yourself to be tricked into believing that these health care experts have all the answers. They don’t.

Privately, most will admit that nine out of ten people who are ill will get better by themselves – without any complicated or expensive treatment or advice.

Sometimes you will need professional help, of course. The experts can occasionally save lives, obliterate pain and attack disease efficiently and effectively.

But often, I’m afraid, they do more harm than good.

Today, doctors and other health care professionals are responsible for a horrifying amount of illness. They admit that when a patient has to be admitted to hospital there is a good chance that he needs help because he has been made ill by a doctor (or other health care professional). Doctors also admit that if a patient who is receiving treatment for one condition develops a second set of symptoms, the chances are that the new symptoms were caused by the treatment for the original problem.

The real sadness is that many of the people who are injured by doctors never needed medical treatment in the first place. They went to see a doctor because they had been taught that when they were sick they always needed to ask for professional advice. They didn’t know just how often they could manage without outside interference. They didn’t realise, perhaps, that doctors and other health care professionals are often a cause of toxic stress.

So, learn to understand your body; learn to appreciate your own self-healing skills, learn to acknowledge your body’s miraculous range of techniques for dealing with threats and diseases.

The big trouble with most health care professionals, and this includes acupuncturists, osteopaths, aromatherapists and all the other ‘alternative’ practitioners as well as orthodox doctors, is that they treat their patients as battlegrounds, the illness as an enemy and their own armoury of drugs or techniques as weapons with which to fight the illness.

The reason for this is devastatingly simple. Whether he sticks needles into you, gives you herbal tea to drink or prescribes a drug for you to swallow the therapist has to do something to you or give you something to take in order to justify his fee.

The evidence to show that this interventionist philosophy is wrong is incontrovertible. When you fall ill, you do not necessarily need to have anything done to you. Your body is equipped with such an enormous range of subtle and sophisticated feedback mechanisms that it can look after itself very well. Your body can heal itself, protect itself and guard itself against a thousand different types of threat. Your body contains internal mechanisms designed to enable you to deal automatically with minor damage, cope with pain, improve your eyesight, keep out the cold, stay slim for ever, deal with anxiety and even fight diseases as threatening as cancer.

If you find all this startling it is probably because you have learned to take your body’s natural skills for granted.

But just think about some of your body’s simplest skills for a moment.

If you cut yourself, you expect the blood to clot and the wound to heal. It doesn’t seem like anything special or particularly complicated. In practice, however, the blood clotting mechanism that you take for granted is part of a magnificently sophisticated defence system.

A network of failsafe mechanisms ensures that the system isn’t accidentally triggered into action when there is no leak. More safety checks ensure that the clotting system doesn’t begin to operate until enough blood has flowed through the injury site to wash away any dirt which might be present. Once the clot has formed and the loss of blood has been stopped, the damaged cells will release into the tissues chemicals which are designed to make the local blood vessels expand. The expansion of the vessels ensures that extra quantities of blood flow into the injury site, the additional blood making the area red, swollen and hot. The heat will help damage or kill any infective organisms and the swelling will ensue that the injured part is not used too much. By immobilising the area, the pain and the stiffness will act as a natural splint.

White blood cells brought to the injury site will help by swallowing up any debris or bacteria. These scavenging cells, bloated with rubbish, will allow themselves to be discharged from your body as pus once they have done their job. Then, once the debris has been cleared and the threat of infection removed, the injury will begin to heal. The scar tissue that forms will be stronger than the original skin which it has replaced. All this assumes that the injury is a fairly small one and that the clotting mechanism can deal with the potential blood loss quickly and easily. If there is a greater blood loss, your body has a number of other mechanisms which it can use to help keep you alive.

As a final, added refinement which any engineer would consider a touch of pure genius, any appreciable loss of blood will trigger off a thirst intended to ensure that your missing body fluids are replaced as quickly as possible.

The blood clothing mechanism is just one, and one of the simplest, of hundreds of mechanisms which exist within your body to protect you from harm.

If you go out for the evening and drink several pints of fluid then your kidneys will get rid of the excess. On the other hand, if you spend a hot day hiking and you drink very little then your kidneys will reduce your fluid output. While they are regulating the fluid flow, your kidneys will also ensure that the salts, electrolytes and other chemicals in your body are kept balanced.

If you've been drinking in a pub and you've eaten too many salted peanuts, your body will balance your intake of fluid and salt against your body's need for these two ingredients.

There are mechanisms which are designed to keep your internal temperature stable. Sit in the sun and your skin will go pink as more fluid flows through the surface vessels of your body. This increase in superficial blood flow will enable your body to get rid of heat simply because the blood will lose heat to the surrounding air. You'll sweat too, as your body cunningly uses the fact that when water evaporates heat is lost. Incidentally, as the sweat pours out, so the amount of saliva you produce will fall, thus making your mouth dry. You will get thirsty and drink more fluids to replace the fluid your body is losing.

Should a speck of dust find its way into one of your eyes, tears will flood out in an attempt to wash the irritant away. The tears contain a special bactericidal substance designed to kill off any infection. Your eyelids will temporarily go into spasm to protect your eyes from further damage.

When you have a fever, the rise in tissue temperature is probably a result of your body trying to help you cope more effectively with any infection that may be present. The temperature rise improves the capacity of your body's defence mechanisms while at the same time threatening the existence of the invading organisms.

Your body's powers are truly extensive and amazing.

Researchers have shown that the human brain contains a natural drug designed to help anxiety, that pain thresholds and pain tolerance levels increase quite naturally during the final days of pregnancy, that breast milk contains a substance designed to tell a baby when he has had enough to drink and that during the years when a woman is fertile, the walls of her vagina produce a special chemical designed to reduce the risk of any local infection developing. Do a lot of kneeling on a hard surface and your kneecaps will acquire a soft, squashy protective swelling. Eat something infected and you will vomit. Get something stuck in your windpipe and you will cough it up. Spend a lot of time in the sun and special pigmented cells will migrate to the surface of your skin to provide you with a layer of protection against the sun's rays.

Your body cannot always cope, of course.

There will be times when even your body's sophisticated self-healing mechanisms will be overwhelmed and will need support.

But to dismiss these mechanisms on the grounds that they don't provide a complete answer to all health problems, is like arguing that it isn't worth learning to swim because occasionally you may still need the help of a lifeguard.

I firmly believe that if you learn to use the power of your own body you will benefit in a number of ways.

First, of course, you will reduce the risks of being injured by a health care professional. Every year hundreds of thousands of people suffer because of treatments applied by orthodox and alternative practitioners. Sometimes a risk is worth taking. Sometimes it isn't. If the alternative is death then obviously a risk is acceptable.

Second, you will benefit because when an interventionist treats an illness he usually tries to oppose your body's own internal responses, as well as whatever outside agent may have triggered those responses in the first place. This isn't necessarily a good idea. All symptoms are signs that a fight is taking place inside your body. Unless the interventionist treatment is carefully designed to support and aid the fight, the treatment applied may well end up damaging and even weakening your body's internal mechanisms – eventually making you more vulnerable and more reliant on interventionists and their treatments.

Try to be aware of your body's recuperative powers. Learn to use those powers and learn to recognise precisely when you need professional support. Retain overall control of your body and bring in the healers as advisers and technicians.

Once you've mastered the idea of using your body's own healing powers, you will find yourself enjoying a freedom that you might otherwise ever know.

Vernon's Law

Your body knows best. Learn to listen to it.

Chapter Fourteen

Never be afraid to say ‘I don’t know’.

However embarrassed you may be by your ignorance, do not succumb to the temptation to lie or to bluff.

Nine times out of ten you will be able to get away with pretending that you know something you don’t know.

But on the tenth occasion you will be found out. And the embarrassment you will suffer then will be more destructive and more memorable than any other embarrassment you have ever faced.

Remember that even if you are supposed to be an ‘expert’, admitting that you don’t know something is a sign of strength not weakness.

No one can possibly know everything. The powerful, the wise and the great are always prepared to admit that there are boundaries to their knowledge. Only the weak, the uncertain and the stupid are silly enough to pretend that they know everything.

Never be ashamed to admit that there are still things left for you to learn. There is far more shame (and danger) in intellectual arrogance and conceit than in simple honestly.

Vernon’s Law

Saying ‘I don’t know’ is a sign of strength not weakness.

Chapter Fifteen

If you are to enjoy life fully you must never forget that you are part of a community. However independent you may become you will always be dependent on the people who live around you.

Modern life is so complicated that none of us can survive alone. We rely on other people for our food supplies, to keep our roads clear, to provide us with electricity, telephones, water and other essential services. We rely on other people to maintain our motor cars, televisions, refrigerators and other pieces of equipment. We rely on other people to deliver our mail and to take away our rubbish.

Sadly, many people forget the extent of their indebtedness to the rest of society. The small suburb which has ‘Local Residents Only Allowed On The Beach’ is forgetting that it needs the facilities provided by other communities. The workers who hold a city to ransom are forgetting that in our modern towns and cities we are all inter-dependent.

However successful you become, try always to remember how important the community is to you. Remember that there is no point in having money to spend if you daren’t go into the shopping centre for fear of being mugged. Remember that there is no point in having a smart apartment if you live in a society which has crumbled so much that you have to lock yourself inside and barricade your doors and windows.

Remember, too, that if you don’t spend money at your small shop – and maybe spend a little extra for the privilege – then before long the shop will have disappeared and you will have to travel to the superstore for all your requirements. Remember that if you do not support local industries then, in the end, your life will suffer.

Vernon’s Law
There is no point in owning a motor car unless there are roads on which you can drive it.

Chapter Sixteen

Always try to know and understand the forces which drive you.

Only if you know your own driving forces will you be able to plan your life successfully.

Defining your driving forces is probably easier than you think.

If you feel the need to buy new clothes or a new car ask yourself ‘why?’.

Why do you need new clothes?

To keep you warm?

To impress your friends?’

To improve your image?

To get a better job?

Why do you need a new car?

Is your old one unreliable?

Or do you need a new car because your old one isn’t big enough or fast enough?

Or do you want a new car to impress other people and improve your self- image?

If you want to earn more money ask yourself ‘why?’.

What do you need the money for?

Do you want to buy something that you cannot afford?

Do you want money so that you can buy yourself freedom in the future?

Re-examine your life thoroughly – and regularly.

Go through everything you do and ask yourself ‘why?’.

Remember that the pressure from society is insidious and often difficult to spot.

Remember that toxic stress is there all the time – even when you aren’t aware that it is there.

Much of the malaise caused by toxic stress is produced by people being pressurised (usually unknowingly and subtly) into doing things that other people want them to do.

Remember that you can reduce your vulnerability to toxic stress but that toxic stress will never go away completely.

To control your own life and reduce the damage done by toxic stress, reassess your priorities as often as you can. Carefully and deliberately ask yourself what you want out of life. And carefully and deliberately ask yourself whether the things you are doing are helping you to achieve your aims.

How much do you want the things that more money will buy you?

Is the price that you will have to pay too high?

Try to decide what things, and experiences, give you most pleasure and satisfaction.

Then try to decide whether you are driving yourself in the right direction.

Do you obtain real job from obtaining more status and power?

What gives you the most pleasure: having money in the bank or having the time to watch a beautiful sunset?

What gives you the most pleasure: a simple picnic or an expensive meal in a fashionable restaurant?

What gives you the most pleasure: being good at something or receiving public acclaim?

What gives you the most pleasure: beating someone else or conquering a personal weakness?

Consider all these things carefully. Look constantly at the way you live your life. Understand the forces, desires and ambitions which drive you onwards.

Ask yourself frequently, ‘Am I doing the right thing?’

And never forget that if you aren’t doing the right thing then there is a pretty good chance that you are doing the wrong thing.

Vernon’s Law

Only when you know why you do things will you know whether they are worth doing.

Chapter Seventeen

Protect, guard and value your independence.

You will find that few things are easier to part with or harder to regain. Your independence is your intellectual virginity and you should respect it and clutch it tightly to your bosom.

You will find that there are many, many people in the world who will willingly pay you well for your independence. Countries, organisations and companies will all delight in paying you a good price for your independence.

Resist them and their entreaties as you would resist the entreaties of the devil for your soul.

While you still possess your independence they will treat you with caution and respect. They will be courteous and thoughtful, generous and even honourable.

But once they have bought your independence and they own your spirit then they will treat you with contempt. They will tell you how to live your life; they will tell you what to wear; they will tell you how to behave; they will tell you what is honest and what is not honest and they will expect you to be obedient and unquestioning.

Beware of their wiles and their deceits; beware of the subtle ways in which they will endeavour to purchase your independence from you.

Do not let them own you by making you promises, by allowing you to fall into debt with them, by praising you or by rewarding you with status or authority. Beware of your weaknesses and your ambitions; they will use these to worm their way into your soul.

Protect yourself by being loyal only to people, never to organisations.

And never allow yourself to be persuaded to betray your friends, your loves or your principles for the sake of your country or company. Once you betray these simple truths, your independence is lost for ever. Never sell your soul in the public interest. Do not allow yourself to be tricked into parting with your integrity on the grounds that you are behaving in a public spirited way.

Take pride in being your own person.

When your independence goes you lose everything that should be dear to you.

Vernon’s Law

Take pride in, and protect, your independence, self-respect and dignity.

Chapter Eighteen

No one can be right all the time. Everyone makes mistakes.

Give yourself strength by being prepared to say: ‘I was wrong. I am sorry.’

If you retain an open mind, if you are constantly learning and if you listen to the wisdom of those you respect then you will inevitably change your mind and alter your views as the months and years go by.

If you accept challenges, take risks and live your life to the full then sometimes you will fail. Occasionally, your judgements will be faulty. You, and those who have supported you, will lose face.

Be prepared to say, ‘I was wrong. I am sorry.’

Making a mistake is a weakness, it is true.

And you should try to make sure that you make as few as possible.

But admitting that you have made a mistake is a sign of strength and courage.

Vernon’s Law

Apologising for your mistakes is a sign of maturity and strength. Learning from your mistakes is a sign of true wisdom.

Chapter Nineteen

Beware of hate. It is a destructive and damaging emotion.

The cruel irony is that although your hatred will rarely harm the person who has done you wrong it may kill you.

If you cannot forgive try to forget.

The longer you nurse a hate the more you will damage your physical and mental health.

Vernon's Law
Hate usually does more damage to the person doing the hating than to the object of their hatred.

Chapter Twenty

You may never become rich but there are two things that you can offer people for which they will always be grateful.

Remember these two things and you will never be alone, never be without friends, never be without influence and never be without joy.

The first thing you can give to people is a smile. A real smile.

If you smile at someone, he will like you. He may not know why. He may not want to like you. But he will feel himself warming to you. He will want to please you – and see more of your smile – and so he will do things which you like.

Everyone wants to please other people. It is a natural and understandable human emotion. And a smile is the key that unlocks happiness.

Watch a mother with her child. Watch two lovers. Watch a salesman with a customer.

They all smile at one another.

There's a bonus for you if you smile at other people. You will feel better yourself too. Nothing conquers sadness, boredom or irritation as effectively as a smile.

The second way to influence people and make friends is to remember to say 'thank you' when it is appropriate.

Not long ago, I attended a massive, international conference. It was a huge success. Delegates had flown in from all over the world and they were delighted with all the arrangements. The lectures were useful, entertaining and informative. The hotel accommodation was excellent. The food was delicious, and the evening entertainments were well planned and brilliantly executed.

The whole conference had been organised by a professional conference company. But a fairly junior executive of the sponsoring company had been given the job of liasing with the conference organisers. He had worked day and night for six months to ensure that everything was a success. His marriage had been put under an extraordinary strain.

On the last evening of the conference, I found the young executive in a dark corner of the hotel bar. He was alone and quietly and efficiently getting drunk.

When I asked him what the matter was and why he wasn't joining in the final evening celebrations, he told me that he was thinking of leaving his company. He said he never wanted to see the chairman of his company again.

Knowing that the directors had been extremely pleased with the executive's work – and that they all felt that the conference had been a great success – I was surprised. I asked him why he felt so low.

'I've just been given my next assignment,' the executive sobbed into his brandy. 'The chairman wants me to help set up a new Overseas Marketing Unit. It's a good job I guess. And I'm getting a pay rise and a better car. But I've just put six months of my life into this conference and I didn't even get a 'thank you'.'

That was what was hurting.

No one had bothered to say 'Thank you'.

The lesson is a simple one.

Nothing, no reward and no amount of money, can replace a quiet, old-fashioned, honest and well meant 'Thank you'.

Remember, these two things and your life will be blessed with friendship, companionship and happiness.

Vernon's Law
However good your life is it will be better if you smile and say 'thank you' more often.

Chapter Twenty One

Modern technology means that your world is probably full of second-hand sensations and hollow imitations of reality. Thanks to television and the internet you can sit in your living room and watch other people exploring jungles, seas and mountains. You can sit in your favourite armchair and watch men scrambling through potholes and venturing into volcanoes.

Thanks to the imaginations and skills of theme park builders, you can visit bizarre fairy tale castles peopled by cartoon characters without having to travel more than a few hundred yards away from a burger bar.

You can sit in comfort and watch other people playing competitive, dangerous games. You can watch the best sportsmen in the world without leaving home.

Society wants you to take advantage of all these imitation sensations. When you're watching other people play sport you are spending money or watching advertisements encouraging you to spend money. When you are visiting a theme park you are spending money. When you watch television or surf the internet you are constantly being exposed to advertisements.

But do not allow society to seduce you into totally abandoning real experiences in the real world.

Watching an explorer battling through South American jungles may be good television but no two dimensional experience on screen can begin to match the joy you can derive from a real life walk alongside a real river.

Television cannot and will not satisfy the myriad senses of the mind or the spirit.

The most dramatic television adventure can never compete with the simplest real experience.

Try to experience as many different things as you can. Try out things for yourself. Don't accept a life of second-hand experiences and second-hand pleasures. You gain much, much more from a real game of tennis, golf or football that you play yourself than from watching professionals exhibiting their skills.

However good they may be second hand sensations are no substitute for the real thing.

Vernon's Law
A modest first-hand experience always beats a spectacular second-hand experience.

Chapter Twenty Two

Humility and self-effacement are often regarded as virtues. And in many respects they are. But the shy and selfless often find that they are used and put upon by their more aggressive friends and neighbours.

Never forget that although too much assertiveness can easily be mistaken for aggression, a little assertiveness is good for your mind and your body.

Thousands of people who are unable or unwilling to assert themselves are pushed around by parents, family, friends, relatives, employers, doctors and just about everyone else they meet. Their lives are run by others. They find themselves stuck with dull, boring, administrative chores that no one else wants. They find themselves doing errands for other people who could perfectly well run their own errands. They find themselves lumbered with looking after the children while everyone else goes off to have a good time at a party. They are always the designated driver. They find themselves accepting dinner invitations that they would really like to refuse. They find themselves being pushed into buying things they really do not want. All these things produce toxic stress.

Things reach a dismal peak in hospital. There the unassertive patient will be put to bed, in pyjamas or a nightgown, and will stay there, confined and bound to conform. The patient who doesn't like to speak out will do what he is told and when he is told to do it.

Doctors and nurses like their patients to be unassertive because it makes the hospital easier to run. If all the patients keep still and don't ask too many questions it makes life very easy for the staff. But the evidence shows that seriously ill patients who do not assert themselves are the patients who are the first to die. The patients who are considered 'model patients' and who are liked by doctors and nurses for their docility are the ones who do not survive.

The patients who survive are the ones who demand information, who refuse to be dominated, who write down questions they want answered, who want to be moved into a better position, who can't accept administrative nonsense just because everyone else accepts it, who want to know the reason behind every test and procedure; the patients who, in short, have the temerity to stick up for themselves as individuals. Doctors and nurses may occasionally find such patients tiresome but it is these assertive patients who get better quicker and who survive.

The hospital situation is a rather special one, of course. But outside hospital there are many, many ways in which you will suffer if you do not learn to stick up for yourself and stand up for your rights. As well as being physically and mentally worn out from doing chores for other people, you will risk encountering frustration and anger as you struggle to stifle your sense of outrage and discomfort at being used.

The feeling of frustration suffered by the non-assertive can be immense and extremely destructive, producing a wide range of physical and mental problems. Headaches and stomach pains are, for example, just two of the many common physical consequences of allowing yourself to be 'used'.

Surprisingly, perhaps, it is remarkably easy to become assertive. You don't have to be aggressive, rude or unpleasant. You simply have to be more aware of your own needs and wishes and more prepared to stand your own ground when you are put under pressure by others who want you to behave in a way that satisfies them.

Naturally, you won't always get your own way. That's not what being assertive is all about. But by establishing your preferences, by making it clear that you have your own likes and dislikes, by showing that you are an individual and by standing up for yourself you will help yourself to stay healthier; you will gain enormously from the greater self-respect that you acquire and from the benefits of spending less time on things – or with people – that you positively dislike.

Remember to be as straightforward and as honest as you can be. If you don't want to do something then say so. If you try to offer excuses or complex explanations, you will probably end up trapping yourself in a corner from which escape is impossible.

If you feel embarrassed, self-conscious or even ashamed of trying to do things your way, help yourself by trying to put yourself into the position of an outside observer. Many people who are unassertive fail to look after themselves effectively because they are frightened of how they will appear to other people. But if you do put yourself in someone else's shoes you will almost certainly find that your behaviour really isn't as terrible as you thought it was. Stop and think about what you are doing, try to be dispassionate, and you will probably realise that your behaviour is entirely reasonable.

Vernon's Law

Stick up for yourself. If you don't then the chances are that no one else will.

Chapter Twenty Three

One of the bravest, most difficult but ultimately most rewarding things you have to learn to do is to trust your instincts.

As the weeks, months and years go by you will gradually acquire a strange sixth sense. Your natural, inborn sense of intuition will develop and you will get to know when something seems 'right' or 'wrong'.

But, sadly, you will also discover that many people suppress or are frightened to acknowledge their own personal judgements.

More than at any other time in the history of mankind we live in a world which is dominated by experts. Politicians always excuse their decisions (and especially their mistakes) by blaming the experts. Many of the political and social policies which turn out to be irrational, purposeless, vindictive, prejudiced or just plain wrong were originally devised and enthusiastically endorsed by experts.

Do not be afraid to stand by your feelings; never assume that the experts always know what they are talking about; don't be tricked or seduced into believing that the decisions made on behalf of society are right or rational.

Modern experts, the people who mould the decisions which will shape the world in which you live are usually unelected, unseen, anonymous, uncontrolled and, it seems, beyond criticism. Strangely, however, often they may be wrong they will never lose their expert status.

Time and time again you will see that the most damaging and most destructive decisions are made by, or under the guidance of, people who regard themselves as experts.

Instead of suppressing or ignoring your natural, intuitive skills and your natural understanding of what is right and what is wrong, you should endeavour to sharpen your skills and learn to use them as often as you can.

You can start with small things.

Look around you and you will see that many people, apparently well-educated, sensible, sane, knowledgeable people, find it difficult to make relatively simple decisions.

Watch a diner in a restaurant trying to decide what to choose from the menu. Watch a man or woman in his or her bedroom trying to decide what to wear.

Time and time again you will see people creating stress and anxiety for themselves. You will see him worrying about whether to wear the blue suit with the red tie or the grey suit with the blue tie. You will see her suffering agonies as she tries to decide whether to wear the black shoes or the red shoes.

You can hone your instinctive skills and save yourself from these myriad anxieties by training yourself to make such relative simple and trivial decisions within minutes. Learn to make up your mind to follow whatever thought springs first to your mind. If your first instinct was to wear the blue then wear the blue. Don't waste mental energy thinking about it. If your first instinct is to choose the salad, then choose the salad. Force yourself to think quickly and decisively; to assess the options speedily. You'll suffer far fewer regrets and liberate yourself from much unnecessary anxiety.

If you find yourself facing a more difficult problem, and you simply cannot find the answer, give up and do something completely different. Take a walk or a warm, relaxing bath. Or sit down in front of the fire with a good book. Allow your subconscious mind to work on the problem, and to assess the various options, and you will soon find that there is but one clear solution. The more you do this the more your instinctive, intuitive skills will develop.

Gradually, learn to trust your instincts when the stakes are higher. Learn to listen to your inner self and you will find a peace and a calm that most people will never be able to share. Learn to say and do what you think is right and to act in the way that makes you feel comfortable. Don't allow yourself to be pressurised by the expectations or exhortations of society or the experts for that way lies toxic stress.

Vernon's Law

Don't be afraid to listen to your instincts. They are probably right.

Chapter Twenty Four

Don’t let other people push you into doing things you don’t want to do by telling you that you are indispensable.

And don’t force yourself into taking on responsibilities which damage your health and your happiness by accepting the myth of indispensability.

Society likes people to feel that they are indispensable. It makes them work harder.

But the truth is that however good you are at something you will never be indispensable.

If you die, the world will go on. Nothing will stop.

If you want to find out how indispensable you are try this simple experiment.

Fill a bowl with cold water.

Now dip your hand into the bowl for thirty seconds.

Then pull your hand out of the water again.

And look at the size of the hole that is left when your hand is removed.

That’s how indispensable you are.

Vernon’s Law

Graveyards are full of people who thought they were indispensable.

Chapter Twenty Five

Fear of the unknown is a powerful driving force. Fear is likely to keep you busy doing a job you don't like because you are frightened of what might happen if you leave. Fears keep people in relationships which have no future. Fear destroys courage and initiative. Fear of the unknown is one of society's ways of keeping you under control.

You can conquer this fear by making a determined effort to use your imagination to help you discover the worst that can happen. The ironic truth is that the worst that is likely to happen is usually nowhere near as bad as you might fear.

A woman I know suffered a lot with her nerves. Most of her problems were a result of the job she did. She found the work unpleasant and stressful. She didn't like the man she worked for. But she had worked at the same place for fifteen years and she was frightened of what would happen if she lost her job.

She assumed that if she lost her job she would starve to death. She had never really thought what would happen. But she had always assumed that she needed her boss far more than he needed her. That was, of course, partly his fault. He wanted her to feel that way. He was able to use her fear to get her to work for long hours at a dull job for low pay.

She was a classic victim of the society in which we all live. And she was a chronic sufferer from toxic stress.

One day I managed to persuade her to sit down and carefully examine her greatest fear: what would happen if she lost her job.

She was vulnerable because society had taught her to be frightened of the unknown and because society had encouraged her to believe that she should dedicate herself to her job without thinking of herself.

She felt frightened at the prospect of surviving alone and she felt guilty at the thought of abandoning her job.

But the more she thought about it the more she realised that the unknown she feared wasn't really all that terrifying. She realised that she had numerous well sought after skills. By looking online and in the appointments section of the local newspaper she discovered that there were plenty of firms advertising for people like her. She realised that her experience and knowledge more than outweighed her age as far as other potential employers were concerned.

She found the bottom line.

And she realised that it wasn't as frightening as she had feared.

She applied for another, better-paid job that looked more fun.

She got it.

And she handed in her notice.

Her boss, suddenly realising that he needed her, offered to increase her salary by over one third. He offered her better holidays and an annual bonus.

But she wasn't interested. She didn't want to work for him. She left. And she did so with a light heart as she realised that he needed her far more than she needed him.

If you have any terrible fear which haunts you, try to confront it. And try to define the bottom line. Try to work out what is the worst that can happen.

You will probably surprise yourself. Once you know the bottom line, you'll find that you can relax far more than when you are worrying about the unknown.

There are very few problems or threats in your life that will actually stop your world going round.

Vernon's Law

The bottom line is hardly ever as bad as you think it's going to be.

Chapter Twenty Six

Regardless of what society expects you to do, try to spend as much of your life as possible doing things that you enjoy.

Try to find work that you find satisfying. It may not pay as well to start with but you will do it better and probably be more successful at it. And you will certainly have more fun.

Remember that work doesn't have to be dull. And you don't have to spend your life doing dull things.

Society would like you to do dull things. Society wants you to be dull. Dull people work harder and spend their money trying to become happy. Society needs people to work hard, have dull lives and spend money on a search for pleasure.

Vernon's Law
The more you enjoy something the more likely you are to be successful at it.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Do not allow anyone to persuade you that pride is always a sin. It is not.

You should have pride in your honesty, your integrity and your independence.

You should have pride in your skills, your achievements and your strengths.

You should have pride in those close to you.

Pride will give you courage, determination and fire. Pride will give you the power to fight injustice and cruelty.

Pride is only a sin when it leads to arrogance, vanity and a contempt for others.

Vernon's Law

Pride in yourself, your skills and your achievements will give you the strength to fight toxic stress and to overcome The Twenty First Century Blues.

Chapter Twenty Eight

Money is, for many people, almost as important as life itself. It is the lubricant which helps to turn the wheels of industry and too often stands in the place of joy, happiness, love, friendship and contentment.

Right from the start, you must learn to regard money with the right mixture of respect and contempt. You must have respect for the ways in which it can help you, and the ways in which it can help improve the world, but you must have contempt for the ways in which it can encourage the weak spirited to part with their integrity, their honesty and their courage.

Contrary to what you will hear, the most important things that money can buy are not material possessions. The greatest power of money is not that it can buy land or houses or cars but that it can buy you time and freedom. Money cannot buy you happiness or contentment but it can buy you the opportunity to explore your personal strengths and capabilities. Money can buy you freedom from drudgery and can free you from the time clock.

Never allow money to rise above its proper station. Do not allow money to acquire control of your life.

In the past, radicals and revolutionaries have often made the mistake of trying to create revolutions out of a sense of material injustice. They have encouraged their followers to fight for more money and have instantly played into the hands of the establishment. Once a man demands more money he is putting a price on his life and freedom and starting negotiations that he must lose. Once a man learns to negotiate exclusively about money then he loses the upper hand, and his position of strength.

Learn to put money in its place.

When negotiating the extent of your next compensation package, remember to fight for better, safer working conditions; to campaign for more rewarding work; ask for a chance to learn more and to educate yourself; look to enhance your skills and acquire a chance to contribute more. Remember to fight for a better life.

Remember that money can't buy you love but it can buy you the time to fall in love and the freedom to enjoy love when you have found it.

It you manage to save a little money, don't think you have to rush out and spend it.

Put it in the bank and forget about it. Put is somewhere secure where you can get hold of it when you need it.

Society wants you to spend your money. If you spend every penny you earn then you will help society to get richer. And if you spend your money then you will remain tied to your job and to the system.

But if you have a little money put aside then you can buy yourself freedom. With a little money in the bank you will find it easier to say 'no' when you want to say 'no'. You will find it easier to walk away when people want you to do things you don't want to do. You will find it easier to control your own life.

Freedom is, in fact, the most valuable commodity that money can buy you.

Vernon's Law

Don't let money ruin your life. Use it to make your life better.

Chapter Twenty Nine

A stone cutter will hammer a piece of rock one hundred times without anything happening.

After the 101st blow, the rock will split easily and cleanly in two.

The 101st blow was no different to the blows that went before it.

You cannot see the effect of those first 100 blows.

Until after the 101st blow has been struck.

Vernon's Law
If you really want something, never give up trying.

Chapter Thirty

If you want to succeed at something then you must have faith in yourself. You must believe in yourself. You must be able to ‘see’ yourself doing what it is that you want to do.

Men have been trying to see how fast they can run a mile for as long as the measurement has existed. And men have been trying to run a mile in under four minutes since the five minute barrier was broken.

For years, thousands of athletes tried to beat the four minute barrier.

And failed.

And then an athlete called Roger Bannister succeeded.

The year after Bannister had proved that the impossible was possible, 30 other runners completed the mile in under four minutes.

And the year after that, 300 runners broke the four minute barrier.

Nothing had changed. A mile was still as long as ever. And four minutes was still 240 seconds. But suddenly the impossible had become the possible.

Vernon’s Law

If you really want something then you must believe in your ability to get it. If you think you are going to fail then you will almost certainly fail. If you think you can succeed then you will stand a chance of succeeding.

Chapter Thirty One

Don't let other people waste your time – or trick you into wasting your money because you believe they have wasted their time because of you.

Salesmen selling double glazing, new kitchens and motor cars will squander their time on you if you let them. They will spend hours with you. They will talk about their product, your hobbies, your job, their boss, the weather and the state of the potato crop in Ireland.

They want to waste your time.

And they want you to waste their time.

Because they know that the longer you spend together the more likely you are to buy something you don't want (and probably can't afford).

After a couple of hours you will feel bad if you say 'no'. You will be conscious of the fact that you've wasted a great deal of your own time. And you will be conscious of the fact that you have wasted a great deal of their time.

So you will sign a contract.

If you want to buy something, ask the salesman to tell you the facts about his product in five minutes. And tell him to leave his brochures for you to look at. Tell him that he must leave after five minutes or else you will not do business with him. And mean it.

If you don't want to buy what he has to sell then tell him that. Don't waste your time allowing him to ask you questions designed to trick you into starting a conversation. Don't allow him to say anything.

Remember that he is prepared to squander his time for some of your money. But you will be expected to squander both your money and your time.

And remember how hard you have to work for every hour of your free time – time that the salesman is so willing to squander for you.

Vernon's Law

Look after the minutes as carefully as you look after the pennies and the hours, like the pounds, will look after themselves.

Chapter Thirty Two

Vanity is a powerful, natural phenomenon. It is sensible and good that we should take pride in our appearance, our intelligence and our success.

But the vanity that is likely to cripple you is not natural.

During the last 20 to 30 years, advertising agencies have discovered that by appealing to your vanity they can sell you all sorts of things that you don't really need.

(You may think that I am exaggerating the importance of advertising but let me remind you of two things: first, that the vast majority of the messages you will see during your lifetime will be inspired and paid for by people who want to sell you something and second, that many of the messages which are not specifically paid for by advertisers will still be influenced by them. We live in the communications age and the best and most powerful communicators are advertisers.)

When you get up in the morning, the advertisers want you to wash yourself in a special, expensive soap that the manufacturers tell you will help you to smell fresher. Just in case that doesn't work for you they suggest that you then smother yourself in cologne or aftershave.

They hope you will choose your clothes for the day carefully, with fashion playing a big part in what you decide to put on. And they hope that while you are getting dressed for the day you check your hair for grey streaks and your face for wrinkles.

And so it goes on, throughout the day. Just about everything you do is determined not by what you really want but what you think you ought to do in order to avoid embarrassing yourself or offending other people.

Your fears of offending other people or embarrassing yourself have been carefully built up by advertisers who have turned small, natural vanities into huge anxieties from which they can make massive profits.

It is vanity, boosted by clever advertising, that encourages to try to get fit without exercising properly, to try to get slim without cutting down on our consumption of fattening foods and to try to educate ourselves without having to spend long, boring hours studying.

It is our manufactured vanity that enables dress designers, cosmetic manufacturers and plastic surgeons to make vast fortunes out of their modest skills. It is our manufactured vanity that enables car manufacturers to persuade us to replace perfectly good vehicles with ever more expensive models.

It is our manufactured vanity that enables an endless stream of companies and professionals to convince us that in order to satisfy our inner needs and to repel our insecurities we must spend our money on the products they make and the services they provide.

There are several things you can do to protect yourself from the greedy hordes who are desperate to build up your vanity and to take advantage of your manufactured fears.

First, and most important, you should make a careful and comprehensive list of all your virtues, skills and talents. Our manufactured vanities are built upon feelings of mental and physical inadequacy. Write down all your good points and you will strengthen your resistance.

Begin with the physical. Whether you are tall or small, stocky or skinny, there will always be good points of which you can be proud. Even if you are genuinely overweight, remember that some of the most attractive people in history have been plump.

Then think of the mental skills and expertise you have. Try writing an advertisement for yourself extolling your own virtues. Once you stop and think about it you will probably be amazed to see just how many virtues you have. If you are shy, lacking in self-confidence and vulnerable to manufactured vanities you are probably also unusually honest, generous, thoughtful and hard-working. You are probably also punctual, careful, kind and unusually creative.

Next time you are feeling low, inferior and vulnerable think of your virtues.

Second, if you suspect that you worry unduly about your appearance and you are constantly tempted to spend more than you can possibly afford on clothes, hairdressers and other image makers then try to see yourself as others see you.

Do you really shun people who wear last year's fashions? Do you really despise everyone who has a darn in a jumper? Do you refuse to mix with people whose hair is less than perfect? Do you judge your friends according to the cost of their shoes? Of course you don't. So why should you assume that other people will judge you in that way?

The simple truth is that your idea of what other people expect is coloured not by reality nor by experience but by advertisements. When you feel that you must get rid of your old suit and buy a new one simply because the cut is slightly dated, you are responding to pressures deliberately exerted by parts of society which want to make money out of you. Your vanity is inspired not by common sense but by false fears inspired by skilful copywriters.

Society needs you to keep spending long after your personal needs have been satisfied.

Finally, remember that humour is vanity's most powerful enemy. Try not to take yourself too seriously.

Remember that, without your vanity, flattery and commercial blackmail will never work. And when next you find yourself being influenced by vanity ask yourself if what you are doing is inspired by a genuine, personal concern or an artificial and commercially inspired concern for what complete strangers might think.

Vernon's Law
Vanity is strengthened by false assumptions about the expectations of others; it is weakened by self-confidence, honesty and humour.

Chapter Thirty Three

Do not listen to the people who tell you that you are powerless.

They are wrong.

It is true that many of those who have power over you; large institutions, the police, the politicians and so on, have little regard for your rights.

But you have more power than you realise.

First, and most important, you have the power to decide when, what and how much you consume.

Every advertisement you see and every exhortation you hear will be designed to encourage you to buy and to spend. Only if you constantly buy and spend will the money be created to oil the wheels of industry and commerce. It is your buying and your spending that gives them the money to have power over you. It is your buying and your spending that gives you the debts that put you in their power.

By resisting the temptations to buy and spend more than you need or want you will be reducing their power and building up your own.

Once you have mastered the desire to over consume, you will have freed yourself from their tyrannical rule.

Remember that no one will build cars which damage the environment if no one buys them. Remember that as a consumer you have the ultimate power. If you don't agree with the way that a company pollutes the environment or treats its employees, do not buy its products. And do what you can to persuade your friends to boycott its products too. The company will soon learn – or go bust. If you don't agree with the way that a company you work for pollutes the environment or treats its other employees, express your disapproval. Let them know that you are unhappy. The worst they can do is sack you. But do you really want to work for a company which does not care for the things you care about? If you have reduced your susceptibility to advertising and limited your expenditure as a consumer then you will be free to use your power of disapproval to guide the company for which you work.

Make sure the politicians hear you too. Let them know when they do things of which you disapprove.

Don't just sit back and say 'there's nothing I can do'.

That simply isn't true.

Politicians, like big companies, are frightened of you. They need your support. If you make it clear that you disapprove of what they do then they will try harder to please you.

Remember that you are not alone. No one wants poor housing. No one wants people to starve to death. No one wants inadequate health care. No one wants to see the environment ruined.

Remember that society can only get away with doing things you find offensive if you let it get away them.

Vernon's Law

You have all the power in the world. It is up to you to decide how and when to use it.

Postscript

One further, final thought. Don’t add more toxic stress to your life by trying to do too much too soon. Move at a pace you feel comfortable with. Do what you can, when you can. Remember, the principles and laws in this book are designed to reduce the stress in your life not add to it.

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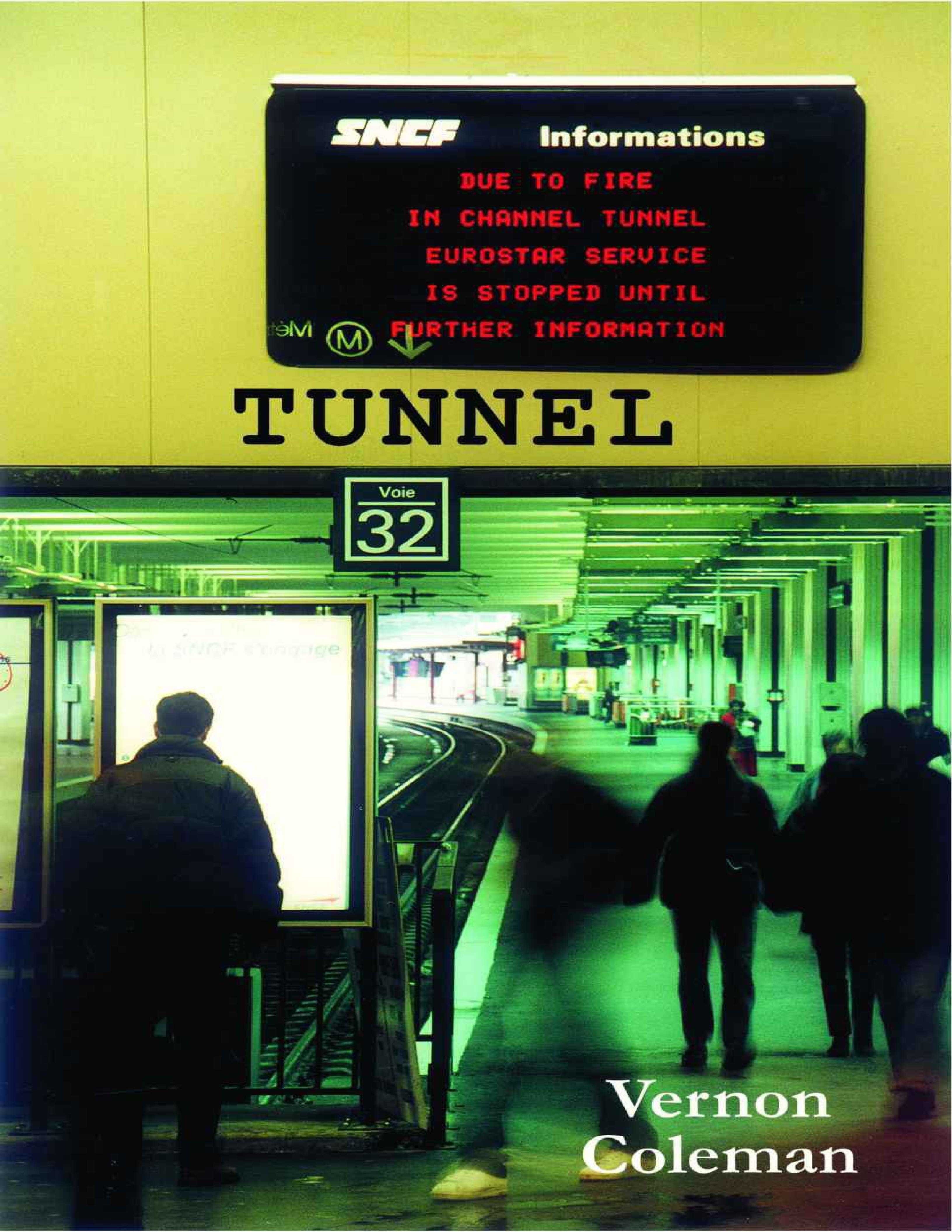
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Note

All characters, organisations, businesses in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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Dedication

To Donna Antoinette, the Welsh Princess, who caught a later train and arrived in my life some time after I wrote this book. With all my love.

Preface

This book was written in the late 1970s and first published in 1980 - before the final plans for the Channel Tunnel were drawn up and long before the tunnel was built. When researching the book I spent some time trying to work out where the tunnel should start, where it should end and what form it should take. I am delighted that the tunnel which was eventually built (after millions of pounds of research) bore a notable resemblance to the tunnel I \`designed' and \`built' for this novel.

I should also point out that although an early version of the European Union appears in this book, represented by a character called Susan Roberts, the EU was then still masquerading under one of its earlier pseudonyms and was far less well known for interfering in daily life than it is now.

I originally wrote \`Tunnel' under a pen name because my literary agent at the time didn't think it was the sort of book I should be writing (I had just begun to establish a reputation as an author of hard-hitting medical books such as \`The Medicine Men' and \`Paper Doctors' and was already writing light, humorous fiction under the pen name Edward Vernon). So the book was first published by Robert Hale under the pen name Marc Charbonnier.

I should also point out that I got round the difference in times between Britain and the continent by publishing a small note at the book stating that: \`All the times in this book are given according to European Standard Time (1983 Brussels agreement).' Rather to my surprise, and much to my delight, the EU still hasn't managed to get the clocks sorted out.

Finally, I should mention that since the Channel Tunnel opened for business, and despite what happens in this novel, I have used Eurostar approximately once a month to travel between London and Paris.

Vernon Coleman, April 2005

PART ONE

0830 hrs. August 4th, Place de la Concorde, Paris

The minibus had stopped in a no-waiting area in the Place de la Concorde, Paris, and the driver, a nervous, thin young man with a beard and shoulder-length hair was very agitated. He kept asking the passengers to hurry up and get out so that he could move on. People continued jumping down from the bus long after the normal load had been exceeded. It was difficult to believe so many passengers could have huddled in such cramped quarters, let alone that they could have travelled from Athens together.

The last passenger had more difficulty than the others in leaving the minibus. Whereas they were all dressed in jeans and sweat shirts and carried knapsacks and bedrolls, she was dressed in a well-worn black overcoat and carried a small brown suitcase. On top of her greying hair there perched a small pink hat. Miss Ruby Millington, who was slightly more than 70-years-old, was 44 years older than the oldest of her travelling companions. A young man and his female companion helped Miss Millington down the last step, the young man taking her suitcase as she lowered herself to the ground. When she was safely on the pavement, the driver of the minibus let in the clutch and accelerated away amidst the hectic Paris traffic. A horn blared as a taxi travelling too fast had to brake to allow the minibus to join the traffic flow.

Miss Millington had joined the group of young travellers outside the American Express offices in Athens. She had travelled to Greece with a charter group and had been due to spend two nights in Athens. Unfortunately, she'd missed her flight home and the charter group's representative had insisted that she would have to pay full fare for an alternative seat. Miss Millington didn't have the money, so, without regret or recrimination, she had simply answered an advertisement she had noticed on a placard hung about a young man’s neck outside the travel agent's offices. The young man had been the driver of the minibus offering cheap trips to Paris.

Such initiative was all the more remarkable for the fact that it was the first time that Miss Millington has ventured further south than Bognor Regis on the English south coast. She had been on a pilgrimage to the British Forces cemetery at Piraeus, the port just outside the city of Athens. There she had sat quietly beside the grave of Corporal Henry Bevington, her fiancé, who died in action in 1943. Miss Millington had met her young man in 1939, just before the outbreak of the Second World War. She had been a schoolteacher in Cheltenham and Mr Bevington a clerk in a local branch of a national bank. They had both been eager members of a local operatic society. At the outbreak of war Mr Bevington had joined the army and left Miss Millington with a diamond and sapphire ring as a mark of his love and honest intentions. Four years later, all that Miss Millington had left of her fiancé and her future were the ring and a handful of hastily scribbled letters. For nearly half a century she had mourned her loss, taught the ever-arriving and ever-departing young ladies of Cheltenham, visited the theatre in Stratford twice a year and the Opera House in Covent Garden every January.

The young man with the beard and the straggly hair had told Miss Millington that he would take her to Paris where she could catch the express from the Gare du Nord and travel through the Channel Tunnel to England. Within hours of arriving in Paris she could be back home, a few days late but a little wiser and more to talk about for her experience.

0845 hrs. August 4th, Berkshire, England

After she had waved goodbye to her husband, Cynthia Gower stared thoughtfully at his departing car for a while. She watched it disappear out of the drive and then reappear half a mile away, beginning the slow climb over the chalk downs. She may have seemed innocent and unsuspecting to her husband but she had far less trust in her husband than he believed. For several months she had suspected that he had a girlfriend somewhere, probably in London, probably associated with the gallery; and the announcement about her intended visit to a health farm had been nothing more than an invitation designed to encourage her husband to bring his girlfriend out into the open. When she had watched her husband's car disappear over the brow of the highest ridge on the downs, Cynthia returned inside and telephoned a London number. The receptionist at the detective agency in Sloane Square put her straight through to one of the firm's senior principals.

`He's on his way,' said Cynthia coolly, `He'll be on the M4 in five or ten minutes.'

`My man's waiting for him. He'll pick him up when he goes onto the slip road.'

`I hope he can keep up with him. My husband has a fast car, a Porsche, and he drives very fast.'

`Don't you worry Mrs Gower,' promised the detective. `You stay by your telephone and I'll ring you when we have some news.'

0930 hrs. August 4th, Rue St Michel, Paris

`The manager won't keep you much longer,' whispered the young woman with the ponytail. She smiled and Cater hesitantly smiled back. When he smiled he looked to be in his early twenties although he was in fact in his late thirties. His boyish haircut and light beard helped make him look younger than he was. He looked at his watch when she had turned back to serve her new customer. He had been waiting for nearly three quarters of an hour and his left leg had developed cramp. He shifted carefully and lifted the heavy black plastic case off his knees for a moment.

* * *

Peter Cater was joint managing director of Grammar Press Books and he'd been in Paris for a week collecting orders for books on the new autumn list of the publishing house. The company was still small; apart from Peter and Hugo Turner, his partner, there was just one full time secretary and an editorial assistant, and although they had a share of half a dozen representatives to tour the book shops in the United Kingdom, they still had no representation in Europe. Peter and Hugo had decided to try to sell some of their books in Amsterdam and Paris.

The books they published were ordinary academic volumes, nothing spectacular and nothing designed to worry the best seller charts. They specialised in the production of books with a certain and steady market, and usually managed to dispose of five hundred books within eighteen months. As a profitable extra side-line they also sold microfilm editions of their own books to major libraries, many of which no longer bought ordinary hard backed books. Most of the books were on sociological themes but they had also published text books on such varied subjects as agricultural policy, holography and the breaking strains of metals. Their authors were usually highly placed academics who were happy to see their work published without expecting to see any royalties, and who were in a position to recommend to several hundred students that their books be bought. It wasn't exciting or trend-setting publishing but it was moderately profitable.

`He's busy with a customer from the Sorbonne at the moment,' explained the girl with the ponytail. She had finished with her customer and obviously felt sorry for him. `It's the Assistant Professor in one of the Arts Faculties - I forget which one,' she confided.

`That's all right,' said Cater. He had spent the whole day sitting in bookshops and had sold only twelve volumes of a new treatise on sewage disposal to a shop in Montmartre. And Cater was sure that the bookshop manager had misinterpreted his explanation of the book's contents.

1100 hrs. August 4th, Berkshire, England

She had fallen asleep in one of the old but comfortable brown leather chairs she kept in the kitchen, and her right arm was paralysed temporarily because of the way she had been lying. Unable to move for the moment, Cynthia slowly became aware that the telephone was ringing, that it was this which had wakened her. She turned her head automatically to look at the kitchen clock and discovered that she had been asleep for six hours.

`Mrs Gower?'

`Yes,' said Cynthia, rubbing her arm. The feeling was slowly coming back into it but she had to pick up the telephone with her left hand.

`Reynolds here,' said the voice at the other end briskly, `We have some news for you.'

Cynthia said nothing.

`Are you there?'

`Yes.'

`Is anyone with you?'

`No.'

`Are you all right?'

`I'm fine,' sighed Cynthia, impatiently. `What's the news?'

`He met a young lady in London. He picked her up at the Hard Rock. It's a café in Piccadilly. Not his usual sort of place, I wouldn't have thought.'

`Where have they gone?'

`He left his car in the underground car park at Hyde Park, and took a taxi to Victoria Station. They had tickets for the Paris train. Our man had a bit of difficulty getting himself a ticket but he managed it. They should be just about there by now.'

`Why the train?' asked Cynthia. `He doesn't usually go anywhere by train. He always flies.'

`The airlines keep records of European flights,' said the voice from London. `The railway people just sell the tickets. There's no way of checking up on anyone who crosses the channel by train.'

`Will you ring me when you hear from your man in Paris?' asked Cynthia. It struck her that the phrase sounded dreadfully melodramatic and for the first time she felt slightly disgusted by the whole business of detectives and errant husbands. She wanted desperately to go away somewhere, find a quiet corner and be alone. But she had to know what was going on, and she wanted her husband back. Somehow, despite his failings, despite his obvious faithlessness, despite his ability to lie to her, she still loved him.

`One of my colleagues will,' promised the man in London. `I'm going off duty now but there will be someone here in the office all the time.'

`Thank you,' said Cynthia. The feeling was coming back into her arm, and when she had put the telephone down she rubbed at it vigorously with her free hand.

12.30 hrs. August 4th, Zürich, Switzerland

`Sorry to bother you, Hans, but have you got a moment?'

Bruckner looked up and switched off the dictating machine he'd been using. `Sit yourself down, Willy, what's troubling you?'

Willy Meier, the marketing director of ACR Drogues et Cie, perched on the corner of Bruckner's enormous - and empty - mahogany desk and leant forwards confidentially.

`I think we have a little difficulty with relocating our Angipax production,' said Meier.

`I'll have it sorted within the hour,' promised Bruckner. `I've found a factory in the English midlands which will be perfect for us. I'm about to call one of the EEC paper pushers. I can get the whole thing sorted out in 48 hours. It'll cost us next to nothing.'

`That is splendid but there's another problem,' said Meier. He spoke wearily, as a man whose life consisted of nothing but problems. `We're having difficulty moving our raw materials across the channel,' he explained, `I thought you might be able to help.'

`Transport is not really my area, Willy; what do you think I can do?'

`Well, our transport people tell me that the best and most efficient and economical way of moving the chemicals across the channel is through the tunnel. We can get the stuff from Paris to Willenhall in less than eight hours. Any other way is going to take longer and be far more expensive.'

Bruckner nodded. `So what's the problem?'

`The Channel Tunnel Company has a schedule of goods they aren't allowed to carry, mainly for safety reasons. Unfortunately the chemicals we use in the preparation of Angipax are officially regarded as explosives rather than pharmaceuticals. It's a coding problem which is basically a formality, but if we apply to have the schedules changed through the official channels, it'll take months. We need them changed within forty-eight hours.'

Bruckner smiled.

`You see why we need your help?' asked Willy Meier.

`You want me to use a little muscle and get it sorted out?'

`Well, you've got the connections, Hans.'

`OK,' said Bruckner. `Give me all the details and I'll do what I can.'

12.37 hrs. August 4th, St Malo, Brittany

Mrs Black put down the fish slice she was holding and pulled at the caravan cupboard with both hands. The wood had swollen with the dampness and once again the cupboard door had jammed.

`Will someone come and help me with this cupboard?' she called, tugging furiously at the cupboard's cream plastic handle. She was slight and small, although in recent years a spread of comfortable fat had begun to settle around her hips. Beside her husband, a huge fifteen stone man with thinning ginger hair and a pale unhealthy complexion, she looked radiantly healthy and shapely.

Her husband, David, was deep in a paperback book on the front cover of which a semi-naked blonde nurse could be seen attempting to elude the clutches of a man in a pair of bright red pyjamas. He took no notice of his wife's appeal. James Black, and Louise Black, aged 16 and 14 years respectively, were busy arguing over which station to listen to on the portable radio set which stood on the caravan table. They too ignored their mother's cry for help.

Suddenly the cupboard door flew open and Mrs Black shot backwards into the tiny sink a couple of feet behind her.

`Now look what's happened!' she screamed, as the contents of the cupboard tumbled out onto the stove below. A packet of salt and a plastic bottle of tomato ketchup fell into the frying pan in which half a dozen rashers of bacon were lying ready for the stove to be lit. The small avalanche also sent a packet of plastic forks flying onto the floor.

`Don't make so much fuss, dear,' said Mr Black, without looking up from his book.

`Mum, I want to listen to Radio London,' said Louise. `And Jimmy wants to listen to that French station.'

`Look at this mess,' moaned Mrs Black.

`We had this programme on all day yesterday,' complained Louise.

`Well, what's the point of coming over here if we spend all the time listening to that rubbishy pirate station?' demanded James. `We can listen to that all day at home.'

`The salt packet's split,' said Mrs Black. `And there's salt everywhere.'

`I wish you lot would shut up,' shouted Mr Black, `We're supposed to be on holiday. Louise, help your mother. And put that damned radio off. If you can't decide what you want to listen to, we'll have a little peace and quiet.'

`That's not fair,' said Louise, `I helped all day yesterday'.

`Do as your father says,' said Mrs Black.

`I'm fed up with this holiday,' muttered Louise.

`We're not having bacon again, are we?' asked James, taking an interest in the frying pan for the first time. `We've eaten nothing but bacon for days. I think I'm going to become a vegetarian.'

`Bloody hell!' screamed Mr Black, banging his book down again and sending four plastic knives and a stack of paper plates to the floor, where they joined the plastic forks. `I've just about had enough of you pair. It's not my fault it's been raining for ten days. It's not my bloody fault if the camp shop sells nothing but stuff we either can't eat or can't afford, and it's not my bloody fault the cupboard door keeps sticking.'

`No one said it was, dear,' said Mrs Black, attempting to calm her irate husband. `Now do calm down. You know what the doctor said.'

`Everyone seems to think it is,' roared Mr Black unfairly. `And I'm not having another week of it.'

`No, dear,' said Mrs Black. `I'm sure the children didn't mean to upset you.'

`We're going back when you've finished burning that bacon,' said Mr Black.

`We can't go back,' said Mrs Black. `We aren't booked to go back for another week.'

The last few words of Mrs Black's sentence were drowned by the sound of thunder breaking. Seconds later the caravan roof was hit by the first few thousand drops of a storm that was to last for the next twelve hours and to cover north-western France. For the Blacks it was the final straw. They had spent three weeks touring France and for ten of those twenty-one days it had rained. Living in a tiny caravan is never easy; when the occupants have little in common other than family ties, the greatest possible co-operation from the weather is required.

An hour and a half after they had finished their meal, the Black family set off for Paris.

12.55 hrs August 4th, Bd. De Sébastopol, Paris

Outside the shop, two elderly men were standing studying the contents of the window. In all, there must have been nearly two hundred magazines on display and on every one of them there was a coloured photograph of one or more naked human bodies.

There were photographs of women and men, women and women, and men and men. There were photographs of women alone and men alone. There were photographs of women with enormous breasts, men with neat round breasts, women with huge plastic dildoes strapped to their bodies, and there were photographs that were to the casual observer quite incomprehensible.

Inside the shop Peter Cater was standing impatiently waiting for the proprietor himself to finish serving a customer. The two young girls who normally attended the customers were away at lunch.

`What have you got for me this time?' asked Luillard when he'd led Cater through into the office which lay behind the shop. He took a bottle of Pernod down from the mantelpiece and poured two generous drinks. A stoppered bottle of water already sat on the table.

`I've got some more photographs of Felicity,' said Peter. `Two rolls.' He took the camera from around his neck and opened the back. Inside there was not one but two rolls of film, both fully exposed and fitting neatly into the available space which had been adapted specially for this purpose. Cater had been smuggling pornographic photographs across the channel for two years in this simple but effective way.

`Marvellous!' said Luillard, taking the films from Peter enthusiastically. Felicity Henshaw was a young woman of twenty-five who looked like a girl of sixteen, thanks to natural inadequacies in her hormonal make up. Peter Cater had taken several hundred photographs of her in carefully posed situations with a serious of well-built male models.

The two men studied the negatives in Luillard's darkroom; the workshop where many of the magazines displayed in the shop window had been created and the hub of his growing publishing empire. They said little although occasionally Luillard gave out a grunt of professional satisfaction.

Twenty minutes later Cater carefully pocketed the ten five-hundred franc notes that Luillard had given him and left the shop. The two old men were still studying the window display and the two girls had not yet returned from lunch. As he walked away Cater wondered, as he always did, what his wife and partner would say if they knew about his additional business activities. As always, he told himself that it was only until he made enough money to set up a proper publishing house of his own. Or, better still, to retire to the country and write the novel he was desperate to start.

12.59 hrs. August 4th, Zürich, Switzerland

When Meier had gone, and he'd finished the dictation which had been interrupted, Bruckner pulled on his fur-collared overcoat, told his secretary he'd be out for a few moments, and picked up his Bentley from the executives' garage in the basement of the drug company's building. He waved aside the duty chauffeur who stepped forward as soon as he appeared in the garage.

Apart from a villa on the south side or the Zürichersee, he had a luxury apartment in the centre of the town. Parking the car in the underground garage at the apartment block, he took the lift to the sixth floor. Bruckner's apartment occupied one half of the entire floor and was as well guarded by security systems as most bank vaults. A special walk-in safe had been installed in the apartment, and it was so well built that even if the entire block had collapsed the safe would have remained unscathed. It was to the safe that Bruckner went as soon as he had secured the front door.

Inside the safe, Bruckner kept dossiers on all major politicians. Naturally the thickest files concerned EEC politicians, but there were also files on leading figures in all the world’s political parties. It was these files which gave Bruckner his enormous commercial strength, and since he had built them up at his own expense during fifteen years of rising from a minor management post in a small Swiss bank, Bruckner kept the files at his own home rather than at his office. Too many of his contemporaries had found themselves fired by their employers and had found their offices locked and sealed within minutes of receiving their dismissal notices. Bruckner wasn't taking any chances with his private files.

With the development of national and international bureaucratic institutions in the sixties and seventies, Bruckner had discovered that his information files, which were kept scrupulously up-to-date with the aid of a number of well-paid detective agencies throughout the world, none of which had access to any of the information collected by their colleagues, gave him a considerable amount of power over these institutions. Civil servants and official employees may be honest and reliable but politicians, because of their very natures, are often guilty of indiscretions and susceptible to bribery. And, of course, in any democracy it is the politicians who have the ultimate authority over public or commercial administrations.

Bruckner's file on the current French Transport Minister was slim but adequate. His files on the members of the board of the Compagnie de Chemin de Fer Soussmarin entre La France et L'Angleterre were even more satisfactory. After studying them for no more than a few moments and making notes in a small black leather loose-leaf notebook in a private shorthand, Bruckner replaced the files in their cabinets, sealed the vault and returned to the ACR Drogues et Cie building. He had been away for just under three-quarters of an hour and he had other things to attend to.

14.32 hrs. August 4th, Luxembourg

Susan Roberts closed the file on her desk with a snap and tossed it angrily into the tray on her right.

She picked up a second file and opened it. This one, like the first, concerned financial aspects of the European car industry. Miss Roberts, whose prim and precise appearance and manner reminded many of a spinster schoolteacher or a rather stern newsreader, looked like a superior private secretary, but in fact she was an assistant secretary-general of the European Credit Bank, a central loan source for the European Economic Community. She was responsible for ensuring that loans made to companies in member states were both economically sound and industrially wise. Her neatly curled hair, pair of old fashioned pendulous earrings, and thin row of pearls, provided Miss Roberts with a wonderful protective disguise. She looked harmless and innocent, whereas in fact she was neither.

The EEC secretariat was becoming publicly sceptical about some of the loans made by the bank in recent years. Some, they claimed, were unlikely to be repaid, since the organisations which had received them were on the verge of collapse. In other areas, they went on, companies were not receiving vital aid, and as a direct consequence were failing. The failure of these companies left the EEC Secretariat with the job of providing redundancy payments and unemployment pay. The Permanent Under-secretary of the Treasury in Brussels had made a number of scathing comments about the inability of the Credit Bank to put its money on the right horses.

Miss Roberts had, several months previously, promised to give a permanently ailing part of the British car industry £250 million as a short term loan to aid in the production of a new model. A fifth of the allocation had already been spent on pursuing and levelling a factory site in the West Midlands and on building a factory shell. Now the company had been refused a grant previously promised by the British Government and there seemed every likelihood that the company would finally go to the wall. There were six thousand jobs at stake and there seemed every possibility that the £250 million would take years to recover. At best it would be recovered without interest.

Throwing down the second file with a sigh, Miss Roberts left her desk and walked across the room to a door on her left. The door led into a small room, no more than six feet square, that contained a sunken bath and a complicated-looking panel of switches and controls. Slipping out of her clothes Miss Roberts strapped waterproof leads to her wrists and ankles. Her body was well-kept if slightly curvaceous to current tastes.

She then pressed a chromium-plated button in the wall above the bath and turned a small dial just underneath it. The bath filled rapidly with water at the selected temperature. The thermostat would keep the water in the bath at that temperature, letting cool water out and replacing it with warmer water. The changing of the water was pleasantly refreshing and ensured that the water remained fresh and clean. There was even a device which enabled those so inclined to keep their bath water supplied with bath salts and fragrances.

Lying in the bath Miss Roberts could look straight at a screen upon which three graphs were clearly visible. The topmost graph represented her blood pressure, the middle one her pulse rate, and the lower one the muscle tension in her arms and legs. The lines were red but as she relaxed they would gradually turn first yellow and then green.

Rested and relaxed forty minutes later, Miss Roberts reached up to speak to her personal secretary on the intercom. He had news about an important telephone call from Zürich. The financial direction of ACR Drogues et Cie, a major Swiss pharmaceutical company, had rung twice in the last thirty minutes. His company had an urgent proposal to make which they thought might interest the Bank.

`Shall I ring him back?' demanded Gaston Raenackers, her secretary.

`I'll speak to him here.' Said Miss Roberts.

Seconds later Herr Bruckner in Zürich was talking to Miss Roberts in her bath in Luxembourg; she was grateful that she hadn't had a visiphone installed in the bathroom despite the appeals of the decorator who’d designed her office suite. She couldn't see Swiss financial directors taking kindly to discussions of such an informal nature. The Swiss were always so very, very proper, particularly when it came to talking about money.

`I think we may be able to help each other,' began Bruckner. `We are looking for a factory site in England and the agents we usually deal with tell us there is a property in Willenhall which we might be able to get hold of.'

`You need somewhere urgently?' asked Miss Roberts cautiously.

`A new project of ours,' said Bruckner. `It's proved so successful that we cannot cope with the demand. We're looking for a factory site and warehouse space, preferably somewhere in the Midlands.'

`Did you have anywhere particular in mind?'

`You know very well what I'm talking about, my dear,' said Bruckner. `You have £250 million tied up in Willenhall. We'll bail you out if you can speed things up for us.'

`Why the hurry?' asked Miss Roberts, ever suspicious.

`We had a fire in our major French warehouse yesterday,' explained Bruckner. `It couldn't have come at a worse time;

just as we're promoting a new product. We have a good supply of the raw materials we use for the drug, and the preparation of the product is a relatively simple if technologically advanced technique. It will be quicker and more efficient for us to continue half our manufacturing in Britain.'

`What's the deal?' asked Miss Roberts, who always liked to think of herself as a dealmaker rather than as the bureaucrat she was. The lines on the screen above her had turned back to yellow.

`We'll take over the entire property in Willenhall,' said Bruckner. `The car people haven't moved in yet; we can move machinery into it before the end of the week.'

`And you'll take over the loan?' suggested Miss Roberts.

`That's right,' said Bruckner. `I'm not pretending it isn't a good deal for us. But it gets you out of a hole.'

`So how do you want to arrange it?' asked Miss Roberts. The lines on the screen had turned red.

`Can you be in England tomorrow?' asked Bruckner. `The English won't budge out of London. We can fix everything up there.'

`OK,' agreed Miss Roberts. `I can manage that.'

`I'll fix it up with Kennan, the chap at the English end,' promised Bruckner. `We'll meet you at the ACR offices in Leicester Square if that's all right with you?'

`Fine,' said Miss Roberts. The ACR offices were known for their opulence and for the fine wines and food always served to visitors. Visiting bankers and politicians were always delighted by an invitation. She heard a click as Bruckner severed the connection and then lay back for a few moments and enjoyed the warmth of the water. She watched the lines of the screen turn yellow as she deliberately relaxed her body again.

`Have you finished?' asked Raenackers, through the intercom.

`Yes, thank you, Gaston,' said Miss Roberts. `I think we've sorted out that damned Willenhall project.'

`That's marvellous, Miss Roberts,' said Gaston, sounding genuinely pleased.

`Bring the cognac in, Gaston, I think we can celebrate,' said the Assistant Secretary-General. `And bring two glasses.' She turned off the intercom and lay back.

* * *

Gaston Raenackers had worked for Miss Roberts as her assistant for eighteen months. In his early and mid-twenties, he had studied in Brussels at the Centre for International Business Studies where in addition to accountancy and taxation he had studied shorthand and typing. He had taken as well a special course in EEC Regulations, which had given him a solid basic understanding of the rules which governed trading between member states of the community. At the age of 27, he had obtained a job with the international division of Barclay's Bank as a clerk in the Securities Department at the Brussels branch. While working there, he met Miss Roberts, who had been in Brussels at a conference organised by the bank.

On the first afternoon, while Raenacker's senior had been speaking, Miss Roberts and he had discovered a certain raw sexual compatibility. Susan Roberts preferred to play a dominant role in her sexual encounters while Raenackers enjoyed a more passive role. His tendency to ejaculate only after continued and heavy sexual exercise was for Miss Roberts a heaven-sent advantage. A week after returning to the American Bank's headquarters in Geneva she sacked her personal assistant, a sad-faced blonde girl with an unlikely chest, and Raenackers joined her there at the end of the month. When Miss Roberts moved to the European Credit Bank in Luxembourg, Raenackers moved with her.

There was therefore, no need for Raenackers to say anything when he entered the small steamy relaxation room where Miss Roberts lay soaking and naked. Nor was there any need for her to say anything. Raenackers first poured two large brandies and then slowly and provocatively undressed.

The lines on the screen above the bath were glowing bright red when Miss Roberts removed the leads from her wrists and ankles. Her nipples were firm and erect. Slipping off his black silk G-string, Raenackers lay flat on his back on the carpet. He sipped at his brandy, holding himself up on one elbow, as his employer climbed out of the bath and, still dripping wet, lowered herself onto him. As ever, he was fully distended and Miss Roberts was well satisfied.

1705 hrs August 4th, Rue Réaumur, Paris

For years the Rue Réaumur has been the centre in Paris for numismatists. Squeezed in between the big newspaper and magazine offices there are many small shops selling and buying coins. A few minutes after leaving the publisher's office Cater walked into one of the newest of the shops. There he bought two fine examples of silver Roman coinage. Together the two coins cost several thousand francs; just slightly less than the sum that he had received from the publisher.

Outside the shop Cater hurried away. He stopped at a café nearby and walked straight into a toilet cubicle. There he thoughtfully examined the two coins before slipping them into his jacket pocket. He took care to put them into a pocket which contained no other coins and in which an empty envelope apparently fortuitously separated the coins. The two red plastic boxes from which he had taken the coins he pushed to the bottom of a bulging black plastic waste-bag in a corner of the cubicle.

Then he went to a table at the back of the café and ordered a croque monsieur and an expresso coffee.

1717 hrs. August 4th, Zürich, Switzerland

Like most Swiss, Bruckner was meticulously polite and always careful to avoid giving gratuitous offence. When telephoning the French Transport Minister, he dialled the number himself to ensure that there was no chance of the Minister being allowed to pick up a telephone and find himself waiting for Bruckner to come onto the line. He dialled the private number at the Minister's office that he'd taken from his file, and spoke to the Minister's personal secretary, who gave him the number of a restaurant just off the Place Vendôme where the Minister was dining with friends. Bruckner smiled to himself when the secretary told him that. He knew all about the Minister's friends and had he been less far-sighted he could have sold the information to any of the major news magazines for a few thousand francs. It wouldn't have been the first time that Bruckner had recouped some of his expenses that way.

`Good afternoon,' snapped the Minister. `I hope this is urgent.' He sounded half-drunk, and Bruckner hoped that the fool was sober enough to know what was happening.

`It is, Minister. I think you'll agree with me that it is,' he murmured quietly. `We haven't met but my name is Bruckner. I'm calling from Zürich.'

More than once, simply by giving his name had been enough. Gossip about his private filing system had given Bruckner a considerable reputation in Europe. Bruckner didn't object at all; if anything, it made each problem simpler than the one before. He had only to ruin three or four well-established politicians to acquire a reputation for straight dealing and for being a man of his word. Even if some of the words were perhaps rather menacing.

The French Minister, however, either hadn't heard of Bruckner or else he was too drunk to think clearly. He merely repeated his initial greeting. In the background Bruckner heard someone laugh. It sounded like a young girl but could have been a young man.

`I'm ringing on behalf of my employers, ACR Drogues from Zürich,' said Bruckner. `I was rather hoping that we might be able to persuade you to help us with a transport problem.'

`You're not getting off to a very good start by ringing me here,' said the Minister tartly. `Ring me at my office at about eleven tomorrow.'

`I'm afraid it's rather urgent,' said Bruckner quickly, opening the folder that Meier had left with him and studying the details inside it as he spoke. `And we do have a mutual financial interest.'

The reference to money caught the Minister's attention. He didn't hang up.

`A young friend of yours called Tony Kitchen, is now working for us,' said Bruckner quietly. 'And quite frankly he's a dreadful problem to us.' Bruckner could hear the Minister's respiratory rate increase.

`What about him?' snapped the Minister.

`He wants another pay rise and we really can't afford to give him one,' explained Bruckner. `But he did say that you and he were old friends and that for his sake you might do us a small favour.'

`What are you talking about?' The demand was cold and quick but Bruckner sensed a change in the man's attitude. He sounded less arrogant, less sure of himself.

`If you could help us we'd obviously be pleased with him and be able to give him what he wants. Then we'd all be happy, wouldn't we?' said Bruckner slowly. He wanted his man to be well and truly on the line.

`I know what you're saying,' said the Minister. `What do you want?'

Bruckner explained, speaking slowly and carefully.

`A courier will be with you in a few hours' time with a packet containing details of the schedules of acceptable cargo for the tunnel train. There's a purely technical point which is likely to prove an embarrassing problem for us unless we can get your help,' explained Bruckner. `All I want you to do is to pass the revised schedule and make one telephone call.'

`I can't change schedules like that,' said the Minister. `It can't be done.'

`Oh, I'm sure it can,' said Bruckner softly but with menace. `Stay where you are and in thirty minutes I'll ring you back with a name and a telephone number. All you have to do is to ring the number I give you and tell the man at the other end that you've approved some new schedules and that you want the Channel Tunnel Company board to approve them as well.'

There was a pause.

`What about Kitchen?'

`I don't think there will be any need for you to worry about him,' said Bruckner. `I'll ring back in thirty minutes.' He put the telephone down and waited for a moment before dialling a second number, this time in Athens.

* * *

The telephone system in Greece wasn't as efficient as the one in Switzerland and, despite the courtesy and willingness of the operator at the Grande Bretagne Hotel, Bruckner had to dial three times before he got a decent line. Luckily, Robert Merlin was in his room and Bruckner was able to get straight through to him without any further delay.

`I believe there's a meeting of the Channel Tunnel Company board tomorrow,' said Bruckner after introducing himself.

`There is,' agreed Merlin. `But I shan't be going.'

`That's a great pity,' said Bruckner, with obvious disappointment. `I was hoping that we could do some mutually advantageous business together.'

Merlin, who knew Bruckner's reputation, waited.

`We're having a little difficulty in moving some pharmaceuticals across the channel,' Bruckner explained. He told Merlin the problem and pointed out that the Minister had already passed the revised schedule.

`There won't be any chance to bring this up tomorrow,' said Merlin.

`You could bring it up under `any other business',' Bruckner pointed out.

`I could, I suppose,' said Merlin. `But I'm not going to the meeting.'

`That's a tremendous pity for both of us,' said Bruckner.

`Why?' Merlin found Bruckner's calm approach inexplicably worrying.

`I believe you have a personal account with the Berne International Bank,' said Bruckner.

`What of it?'

`You have a loan facility approaching half a million Swiss francs.'

`How do you know what private arrangements I have with my bank?'

`And the bank has an immediate recall on the loan?'

`Are you threatening me?'

`Of course not. But your bank happens to be one of our leading shareholders. They would lose money if our marketing programme for this new drug didn't do well. If they lost money they would undoubtedly feel a need to call in some of their loans. Unfortunately, it is the way...'

`You want me to get the board to pass the new schedule?' asked Merlin after a pause.

`It won't be a problem for you,' promised Bruckner. `You will have a letter from the Minister of Transport, and the chairman will be Noiret. He will approve the plan if it has got the Minister's approval. Particularly if he knows nothing about it beforehand. Noiret is paranoid and he'll be convinced that there's something going on behind his back; something that maybe threatens his position. He won't do anything rash until he knows what is going on.'

`You know a lot about everyone,' said Merlin.

`That's my job.'

The rest of it was easy. Another telephone call to the Minister. A package for a courier to take to Paris. Arrangements for a private jet to pick up Merlin from Athens' airport, and finally a telephone call to Meier.

`You can get your people to have the chemicals ready for the tunnel train tomorrow.'

Willy Meier thanked the gods, not for the first time, that he was on the same side as Bruckner.

2335 hrs. August 4th, Montmartre, Paris

During the hours of daylight, the Boulevard de Clichy looks dull, grey and unexciting. It looks the sort of wide Parisian street where importers and exporters, dealers of all kinds and unsuccessful insurance brokers have their offices.

At night, however, during the hours of darkness, the Boulevard de Clichy changes beyond all recognition. It blossoms like a garden that has been hiding its colours and movement away from the cold of the winter. The shutters are pulled back or taken down and the doorways are unbolted. The windows are filled with brightly-lit colour photographs of Parisian ladies dressed in the traditional costume of the district; a few pieces of tinsel and a strip of black silk edged with red lace. The doorways are occupied by men in evening suits lounging lazily with one shoulder against the doorframe. And suddenly you are aware that the buildings you thought were deserted are decorated on the outside with neon lights and illuminated pictures. The Boulevard de Clichy can no longer be described as dull, grey or unexciting. It is, as it has been for several decades, the centre of a certain type of Parisian nightlife.

Moving past a pair of streetwalkers arguing vociferously and threatening violence to each other, Alan Cannon looked at his watch. It was twenty minutes to one. No wonder the pedestrians, both clients and suppliers, were beginning to look weary and more than a little drunk. Even though the wine, whisky and champagne sold was largely watered, enough of it had been drunk to erase the normal niceties from the social behaviour of most of the district's visitors and inhabitants. It was about time, decided Cannon, that he found what he'd come looking for.

* * *

Alan Cannon, plump, of medium height and almost completely bald, was the European Manager of an American Company called Georgia Investment Corporation, which specialised in the manufacture and installation of small home computers. These enabled householders to deal with all bills, all repair problems, all investments and insurance policies, and all other personal matters such as taxation and the buying of food, furniture and energy supplies through a single agency. The home computers which GIC sold were linked by telephone to a series of computer centres, each only the size of an ordinary shop but capable of dealing with information from a quarter of a million homes. When a customer of GIC bought his computer, he also signed an agreement to subscribe annually for the rest of his life to a special GIC Householder Service. By making the cost of the computer ridiculously small, and the cost of the monthly payments to the service apparently small, GIC had managed to obtain 30 million customers in Europe in the space of three years. The company claimed to be growing faster than any other company in the world. All a customer had to do when he had bought his computer was tap onto the keyboard information about his regular commitments, and then allow the computer to manage his affairs. Requests for special supplies and for repairs to be dealt with were fed into the computer in exactly the same way. Orders were then passed on to local shops and repair agencies, which received their instructions direct from the nearest computer centre. If necessary the computer would even arrange hire purchase or a loan.

Alan Cannon lived and worked in London and controlled the entire European operation. There were 180 computer centres installed in eight different European countries, and each of them was run by a manager who operated with no more than one or perhaps two assistants. When the manager was ill, or away on holiday, a replacement would be flown in. Cannon had a team of twenty-five travelling replacement managers permanently available. At any one time about twenty of them would be working while the others waited on stand-by. Cannon himself was seemingly full of energy; he never seemed to switch off and relax.

While outside a sex shop in the Rue des Martyrs, which sold the usual variety of sex aids, inflatable blondes and vibrating plastic penises, and also served as the foyer to a club which boasted activities which even the raunchiest centres of Amsterdam’s red light district would have been shy to publicise, Cannon was approached by a woman in her late fifties. The make-up she wore disguised that fact to a certain extent.

As Cannon walked past her she called huskily to him, and when he turned in her direction she pulled surreptitiously at her blouse, revealing a good two thirds of her chest. She looked as if she'd been decorated and made up by some whimsical artist determined to recreate a classical model of the traditional French prostitute. Fishnet stockings, a red handbag, a split, tight skirt and a black silk blouse trimmed with flimsy lace covered those parts of her not painted with lipstick, eyeshadow and face powder. The cleft between her breasts, deep enough in itself, had been accentuated by a flash of crudely applied red lipstick.

Cannon followed her up a scruffy wooden staircase, which they reached through an unmarked wooden door on the right of the sex shop. As they climbed, Cannon found it impossible to take his eyes off the woman’s swaying behind. At the top of the stairs the woman paused, wheezing, and turned round to make sure that Cannon was following her. In the harsh light of a single unshaded bulb Cannon could for the first time see what he was hiring but strangely he felt a flood of sexual tension as he stared at this hideously painted creature. She turned quickly to the right, walked half a dozen paces down a dingy corridor, which became more and more dimly lit as they moved away from the single naked bulb, and stopped outside a brown painted door on which was painted in small white letters the single name Anne.

The room was no more than eight feet square and contained nothing more than a bed and a small wooden chair. Behind the door a coat hanger rattled against the wood as the woman pushed to ensure that the door had caught. Having ensured that the door was locked, the woman, who had turned on the room's only light, a small red bulb in a lamp hanging over the bed, moved towards Cannon in which she clearly intended to be a sensual way. Cannon felt himself filling with desire for this woman and as she put her arms around his neck he buried his mouth in hers. Skilfully she unbuttoned her blouse and released her breasts from their harness. The two of them were, within seconds, quite naked. The woman looked older now. She was wheezing and looked pale, as though the short walk had worn her out.

Suddenly, as if remembering something she'd forgotten, the woman wrenched a hand free from Cannon and held it out palm upwards. She rubbed the thumb against the base of her finger.

`Cent,' she muttered. `Cent francs.'

It was more than she usually made and Cannon knew it but he turned round and reached for his bill clip in his trouser pocket. He took a hundred-franc note from it and handed it to the woman who with a smile tucked it under the pillow.

Pulling Cannon with her the woman lay down on top of the bed. As he moved between her legs she lifted her knees and wrapped her calves around his back. Her lips parted and she opened her eyes wide in mock expectation. Cannon manoeuvred gently into position and thrust forwards, taking her breasts in his hands and squeezing them tightly until the woman grimaced. When her mouth opened wider - with pain, not an affectation of lust - Cannon moved one hand and placed it firmly across her lips. He felt her top set of false teeth slip under the force of his palm. He pushed harder and more fiercely against her and felt her body begin to writhe with what he thought was a mixture of genuine pleasure and unexpected pain. Lifting his hand he lowered his head and pushed his lips against hers. Behind his back her ankles pulled tightly. He pushed into her harder, moving faster and faster. For a moment or two she moved with him.

Suddenly, inexplicably, Cannon felt her pull away from him, felt the tension of her muscles behind his back weaken, felt her lips lose their urgency. He pushed harder and returned both hands to her breasts, feeling for her nipples with his fingers. She gasped for breath and started feebly to fight him. The flailing arms suddenly stopped moving. He pushed again. This time she did not react. Feeling cold, and knowing suddenly that his erection had been extinguished even more quickly than it had appeared, Cannon pulled away. He felt her ankles slide across his back and land with a thump on the bed.

Scrambling to the side of the bed Cannon reached for the floor with his feet. It felt greasy and gritty. He instinctively stood on tip toe and turned around looking for his socks. Having found them he turned back to the woman on the bed. He knew without touching her that she was dead. Beneath the rouge on her cheeks and the lipstick smear between her breasts she looked white. Cannon dressed quickly and silently. He couldn't look back at the bed but, as quietly as he could, opened the door and stepped out into the corridor. It was as deserted as it had been when they'd arrived. Less than a minute later he was in the street, walking away from the doorway and the sex shop as quickly as he could with his head hanging low. He shivered and could feel the sweat dripping off the tip of his nose as he walked. She must have had a heart attack. It was hardly surprising. She hadn't looked the sort of woman to watch her diet or look after herself. But would the police believe him? They might have been convinced that he'd killed her. Would he be able to prove that he hadn't? Even if he could, the publicity would hardly help his career. The American board of the company were very strict, almost puritanical. They preferred comfortably married men. They wouldn't be pleased to hear about their European manager screwing middle-aged hookers in Montmartre. Even if he could prove he hadn't murdered her. Even if he hadn't murdered her. Had he? He couldn't remember, what had happened. Sweating, he just walked on, heading without knowledge or firm intention for anywhere away from the Rue des Martyrs.

* * *

For two hours after leaving the small room in the Rue des Martyrs Alan Cannon wandered around Montmartre in a daze. At three in the morning, with the streets quiet at last and the shop windows abandoned by their tenants, he stopped at an all-night café in the Rue d'Amsterdam. He'd sat with a half-litre of red wine and a basket full of steaming hot croissants trying to avoid the eye of a girl with shorn red hair who looked hardly into her 'teens and whose business ambitions were clearly simple and traditional.

From there he'd gone into the Gare St Lazare, where he'd wandered around aimlessly until a patrolling gendarme seemed to take an interest in him. Then he'd bought a ticket from one of the automatic ticket dispensers in the concourse and caught a train to Versailles. At Versailles he'd bought a return ticket after hanging around outside the station for ten minutes. He'd arrived back in Paris at half past five.

The next four hours seemed like a lifetime. Twenty times he emptied his pockets and tried to decide if he'd lost anything; left anything in the room with the dead woman. He examined his wallet, comb, keys, cheque book, pen, notebook, passport, identification papers, handkerchief. Everything seemed to be there. But had he left a book of matches there? Had he left fingerprints? Could the police identify him from the semen? He couldn't even remember whether or not he had ejaculated.

All he could think of was the woman's cold pale face, her mouth slightly open, her eyes staring up at the ceiling, her legs slightly apart and bent at the knees. And her varicose veins, marked out as if with a blue pencil.

Eventually, as the station clock reached half-past nine and the last of the morning commuters filed away from the station, Cannon decided that he had to go back to the hotel. He had to collect his bag and check out of the hotel. He decided not to take a taxi and not to even risk a ride on the Metro. He would walk. Turn right outside the station, straight along the Rue de la Pepinière, across the Place St Augustin, along the Rue la Boëtie and straight across the Avenue des Champs Elysées into the Rue Pierre Charron. Here the people wake later and the early morning activity was slight. From the end of the Rue Pierre Charron, Alan Cannon could see the Hotel George V. It looked formidable and disapproving.

The doorman touched his hat as Cannon approached. Cannon gave thanks to his supervising angel that he had booked in at an exclusive hotel where the staff make no public note of the eccentricities of the patrons. Walking straight through the hotel lobby, Cannon went straight into the dining room. Most of the guests had breakfasted and Canon sat alone in a far corner of the restaurant to eat his meal. After two cups of coffee and two soft rolls he headed for his room.

The newspaper he'd ordered was on his bedside table. Despite the fact that it was an English evening paper and twelve hours out of date, Cannon searched it for any reference to the woman of the Rue des Martyrs. He'd searched the International *Herald Tribune*, too, with equal lack of success. Hardly surprising, since both papers had been composed and printed hours before he'd met the woman.

At eleven thirty, still with no idea about what to do next Cannon checked out of the hotel, paying his bill with cash.

`Are you leaving already?' asked the desk clerk, as Cannon paid his bill.

Cannon nodded.

`Going back to England?' asked the clerk.

`Yes,' said Cannon. Couldn't the man mind his own business?

`Have a good flight,' smiled the clerk.

`Thank you,' said Cannon, accepting his change from the cashier. It was then that he decided to go home not by air, but by train. At two o'clock he boarded the train to Sangatte with a ticket for the tunnel train in his pocket.

PART TWO

0700 hrs. August 5th, Sangatte

Susan Roberts and Gaston Raenackers had left Luxembourg on the evening of the 4th August. It was 8.00 pm when they arrived at Sangatte and took a taxi to the Terminal Hotel. Raenackers had arranged their tickets for the following day's train at 6.20 pm. He had also booked two adjoining rooms in the hotel. For Miss Roberts there was a suite, consisting of a bedroom, bathroom and sitting room. For Raenackers a bedroom and bathroom. As a senior official of the European Credit Bank, Miss Roberts was always careful to ensure that her behaviour was beyond reproach. Too often in the past, senior officials had been pilloried by the popular press for their personal tastes and preferences in entertainment and amusement.

They dined separately and by ten were both comfortably ensconced in their respective bedrooms. Raenackers telephoned the manager's office and left instructions that they were not to be disturbed until further notice, giving as an excuse the fact that they had been both engaged in long-lasting negotiations in Luxembourg over the previous forty-eight hours. As an additional precaution they both hung `Do Not Disturb' notices on their door handles. After making his telephone call, however, Raenackers left his room, made sure that the corridor was deserted, and was admitted to the suite occupied by Miss Roberts.

0715 hrs August 5th, St Quentin

Shortly after dawn on the 5th August, two huge containers were taken from the ACR Drogues factory at St Quentin en Yvelines to the nearest container depot twelve kilometres away. The containers, one loaded with erythrytyl tetranitrate and the other with pentaerythritol tetranitrate, were sealed at the factory by two inspectors from the Union Internationale des Transports Combinés Rail/Route and the Office of the Council of Transport Ministers. The two inspectors, who were given the authority to inspect and either allow or delay the passage of goods, had the responsibility of ensuring that the goods being loaded into the containers were filled with what they were claimed to contain. Once the necessary seals had been affixed and the requisite papers stamped and signed, the two containers could be transported across any frontiers within the Common Market without being opened or being checked again. The system had been introduced to reduce delays to freight moving about within member countries and it worked extremely well.

0800 hrs, August 5th, Hotel Continental, Paris

`Marvellous dinner last night,' said Dr Chatwyn, pouring himself a third cup of black coffee and waving towards an empty chair as his colleague approached.

`Tremendous,' agreed Dr Singh heartily, sitting himself down and picking up the breakfast menu. A neighbouring waiter sauntered over lazily. It was nearly half-past ten and the dining room was due to close in a few moments' time. The waiter fussed around, flicking bread crumbs from the table cloth, hoping that the dining room clock would hurry up so that he could refuse the latecomer anything more than coffee and what toast was already on the table.

`Just coffee, please, said Singh, taking a piece of toast from the rack in front of Chatwyn.

`Did us well, those boys from ACR,' said Chatwyn, motioning to the waiter to bring more toast with the fresh coffee.

`Are you sure you don't want to fly?' asked Singh. `I checked with the agency at the hotel reception desk. They can fit us on a flight at four-thirty.'

`I can't stand aeroplanes,' said Chatwyn. `The train is the only civilised way to travel these days.'

`What time is the train?' asked Singh.

`Two,' replied Chatwyn, `It gets us into London about eight tonight.'

`I needed that,' said Singh, swallowing half a cup of coffee in a single gulp. `I had far too much to drink last night.'

`What did you think of the stuff they were promoting?' asked Chatwyn.

`They've got some pretty impressive evidence about its effectiveness,' Singh replied. `You think how many men in their thirties, forties, fifties and sixties are getting angina in Europe alone.'

`And the women,' Chatwyn reminded him. `Angina is getting more and more common in women, too.'

`With all those people taking four tablets of Angipax a day to keep their angina under control, they'll be able to afford to push the boat out for a few doctors occasionally!'

* * *

Dr Chatwyn had never intended to become a doctor. He had drifted to medical school on a wave of artificial enthusiasm whipped up by his parents and schoolteachers who were all impressed by his academic skills. In the upper forms of his Coventry comprehensive school he had been the only pupil with more than average academic expectations and his ambitions had been moulded for him. At medical school he had no longer been an intellectual man among boys; his contemporaries there had equal academic skills. But they had something else: they had confidence.

It would not have been so bad if his academic success had continued. At least, then, Chatwyn might perhaps have managed to acquire a little confidence of his own. Unfortunately, despite the fact that he spent every available minute poring over textbooks, studying microscope slides and examining specimens in the various museums, Chatwyn simply managed to keep up with the mainstream of students. Back home his parents and teachers waited anxiously for news of their protégé's success. They expected to hear of scholarships and prizes, distinctions and awards. Nothing came. Chatwyn stayed at the medical school during holidays to concentrate on his book work but could achieve nothing remotely resembling academic success. His parents had difficulty in hiding their disappointment.

Somehow Chatwyn managed to qualify. His colleagues disappeared into local hospitals to do their house jobs and register themselves with the General Medical Council. Desperately Chatwyn studied the list of jobs available. By a stroke of fortune he discovered that the Department of Pharmacology had a vacancy for a research student. The appointment had proved unpopular since it involved almost no clinical responsibility at all. Chatwyn took the post happily and spent the next eighteen months filing reports for the Assistant Professor who was preparing a monograph on the subject of placebo toxicity.

Then the Professor of Pharmacology obtained for him a grant from the Medical Research Council. The grant, for three years in the first instance, was to pay for research in the subject of paediatric cardio-pharmacology.

By the age of 40, Chatwyn was comfortably established as a research worker in a pleasant backwater of medical science.

* * *

Dr Singh was Dr Chatwyn's opposite in many respects. His father had been a general practitioner in Liverpool for twenty-five years when he entered medical school. Like all doctors' children entering medical school the young Singh had several immediate advantages; he knew what to expect and he had some slight tradition behind him to give him confidence. He was tall, blessed with a thick shock of black hair, and gregarious.

Singh was determined not to follow directly in his father's footsteps. He had, during his teens, seen his father's income and authority fall and his responsibilities rise. At the age of sixteen, he had to be moved from the public school where he had spent most of his school life, to a comprehensive school near to home. His father had been reluctant to allow him to attend medical school at all, but in the face of his son’s determination, had made him promise to specialise.

Singh specialised in cardiac pharmacology, reasoning that, since cardiac diseases killed a high proportion of all men and women in the western world, there would for some years be a demand for specialists able to make some sense of the claims and counter-claims put forward by the numerous companies pitching for a share of the relevant drug market. At the age of 34 he had already been appointed a consultant in clinical pharmacology to a large general hospital in the Midlands; and had, in addition, a post as lecturer at the university where Dr Chatwyn worked. Unlike Dr Chatwyn, however, he found that his lectures were well attended.

In addition to these two jobs, Dr Singh acted as a consultant for numerous pharmaceutical companies, providing them with clinical research facilities and advice, and receiving in return considerable fees and opportunities to travel around the world. On each journey he usually managed to acquire an additional small commission to advise or provide information on some aspect of cardiac pharmacology.

At first sight these two doctors would seem to have little, apart from their professional interests, in common. They might seem improbable partners; Dr Chatwyn, shy and rather anxious to remain out of the limelight at all costs and Dr Singh, looking for material rewards for his professional skills.

In fact, when they met at a university faculty meeting that Dr Chatwyn had been quite unable to avoid, they quickly became friends. Dr Singh had almost unlimited access to commercial funds, and Dr Chatwyn, always looking for financial security to ensure that he would never be forced into looking for work as a practising doctor, had access to Medical Research Council facilities and could offer much in the way of accumulated knowledge. In addition, both bachelors enjoyed meetings abroad where they could live well and spend nothing.

0805 hrs, August 5th, Berkshire, England

`The subject spent the night in the Grand Hotel in Paris,' said the man. This one was very formal and he always referred to James as the subject. Cynthia didn't like his attitude at all. He somehow managed to make the whole wretched business seem even more distasteful than it was.

`He and his companion shared a room. Our representative has photographs of the hotel register and signed statements from two members of the hotel staff.' The man paused for a moment. `I'm afraid we had to make small payments to them,' he apologised. `They were rather worried about the attitude of the management.'

`I see,' said Cynthia coolly. Now that she knew what was going on she felt far more capable of coping with it. She felt as though it was someone else's relationship she was studying; as though it was someone else's marriage that she was watching split wide open.

`We'll continue to observe the subject's activities,' said the man. `I'll report in twenty-four hours' time.'

`I'm going to Paris,' said Cynthia suddenly. She surprised even herself.

`No. I definitely wouldn't recommend that, Mrs Gower,' said the detective. He sounded rather agitated.

`It's my husband and I'm going to Paris,' said Cynthia firmly. The man's approach made her far more intransigent than she would normally have been. He started to protest again but she put the telephone down and silenced him. When it rang again a few moments later, she simply took it off the hook and left it lying on the table. She could hear him talking furiously; a thin, squeaky voice from some other world.

0812 hrs. August 5th, Athens, Greece

When the telephone rang, Merlin was quick to answer it. Merlin was a practical man and he knew when he had met his match. That man Bruckner wasn't the sort of fellow to play around with, he'd seen that.

`Mr Robert Merlin?' asked a polite male voice in perfect English.

`Speaking.'

`This is Paris calling,' continued the voice. `I have the Transport Minister for you.' There were several clicks and then there was silence for a moment.

`I think you were expecting my call, Mr Merlin?'

Merlin agreed that he was.

`Certainly,' agreed Merlin.

`You'll be receiving a letter signed by me,' the Minister said. He spoke very quickly; rather nervously, Merlin thought. He wondered what hold Bruckner had over the Minister of Transport. He never doubted for one moment that there was something. `I'd like you to act on it at the board meeting of the Channel Tunnel Company.'

`There will be no problems,' promised Merlin.

`I hope not,' said the Minister. There was a click and the line went dead. Merlin stared at the telephone receiver in his hand for several moments before carefully replacing it. If there had been any doubts in his mind about obeying Bruckner implicitly, there were none now. Merlin finished packing his cases ready to fly to Paris.

0819 hrs. August 5th, Fontainebleau, France

The manager of the Palace Hotel in Fontainebleau prided himself on the food served to his guests. For five years the hotel had been the only one in the area to have a restaurant with the coveted three stars beside its name in the Michelin guide. Complaints were so rare and unusual that the hotel had no set procedure for dealing with them. No one could remember the last time anyone had the temerity to voice publicly any discontent about the hotel's culinary provisions. Tambroni, however, had no respect for the hotel, its reputation or its volatile and gifted chef.

`I ordered two boiled eggs and I told that man I wanted them boiled for three and a half minutes,' Tambroni shouted scowling, pointing in the direction of an unfortunate red-faced waiter who had for ten minutes been at the receiving end of one of Tambroni's outbursts.

`On behalf of the management I apologise if you feel that you have not been properly suited,' said Guy Groult, the hotel manager. `If you will allow me I will see that you are provided with eggs prepared precisely to your requirements.'

`The eggs were c... c... cooked to your sp... sp... specifications, sir,' stuttered the unhappy waiter.

`Don't lie to me!' screamed Tambroni. `These eggs are hard and cold!'

`You were away from the table when I brought them into the dining room,' protested the waiter, losing his stutter in his indignation.

`Don't answer me back,' snapped Tambroni. He turned to the hotel manager, hovering unhappily nearby. `Is this how you allow your staff to speak to your guests?' he demanded.

`I'm sure that Monsieur Villiers was merely trying to ease the situation,' said the manager. He waved a hand to the waiter, dismissing him from the confrontation.

`You'll hear more about this,' Tambroni muttered. He stood up and pushed aside the eggs that had been the cause of so much trouble. Then he marched briskly out of the dining room. When he'd gone, Groult shrugged his shoulders and returned to his office. He passed the waiter who had been the butt of Tambroni's anger and smiled at him and raised an eyebrow.

Tambroni's tantrums were well known throughout the world. At one time, two or three years previously, he had hardly ever been out of the newspapers and magazines. He was a successful, professional squash player and had made a name for himself as a mean player and a poor loser in cities from Tokyo to Toronto.

Back in 1986, an attack of hepatitis had kept Tambroni out of major squash tournaments for four months. He hadn't started playing again until April 1987, when he'd entered for the Italian Open Championships in Turin. He'd been knocked out in the first round by an unknown amateur from Australia and he'd responded by smashing his racket against his opponent's shoulder. Even Tambroni's home crowd hadn't taken kindly to that. They'd even booed him off the court and two weeks later he'd been fined 1,000,000 lire by the sport's governing body. They'd also suspended him from international competitions.

After that Tambroni had returned to the club circuit. For ten months of the year he toured Europe, playing in private clubs and sometimes on public courts against local amateur sportsmen. They paid him a match fee and there were usually side bets which added to his income.

The Palace Hotel had a sports complex which included a nine-hole golf course, a heated swimming pool and a nest of six squash courts. One of the squash courts had a spectators' gallery capable of seating five hundred and it was there that Tambroni had been playing for the previous four days.

Now everyone was glad he was leaving for Paris. He was due to travel to England to play in a club in Wakefield for ten days.

Not, of course, that anyone at the Palace was unprofessional enough to allow Tambroni to realise that they were pleased to see him go. When he returned downstairs with his bags and ordered the hall porter to find him a taxi, he was greeted with deference and polite respect.

Not until an hour and a half later, when he had alighted from the train at the Gare de Lyon in Paris and climbed into a taxi to take him and his luggage to the Gare du Nord, did anyone say anything derogatory about their guest.

`I'd like to get his balls on the end of a squash racket,' said the hall porter to one of the assistant chefs in the staff dining room.

1030 hrs. August 5th, Paris

The offices of the Compagnie de Chemin de Fer Sousmarin entre La France et L'Angleterre, known less formally and more affectionately as the Channel Tunnel Company, were situated in the Place Vendôme, almost directly opposite the Ritz Hotel. On the ground floor, a decorative receptionist sat at a huge mahogany desk and gazed dispassionately at visitors who peered through the huge plate glass doors which fronted the reception area.

Behind the receptionist's desk were the publicity and press offices. There was in addition a small office occupied by a computer terminal which was directly linked to the main offices at Sangatte, and which provided up-to-date information about bookings and schedules.

On the first floor were the offices of the Board of Directors. The company had been launched jointly by the British and French Governments, and the Board, as well as commercial directors, included two spokesmen for each Government.

The British Government's two representatives were Lord Jack Kendall and Mr Robert Merlin. Although he had been on the board for two years, Kendall had yet to attend a meeting. He was primarily concerned with ensuring that the small but reassuringly regular fee, which his position on the board entitled him to collect, continued to appear in his bank account. With only a small pension from his union fund and a modest life insurance policy, Kendall's interest in the Channel Tunnel Company were personal.

Merlin, like Kendall, had received his place on the board as a token of thanks for services rendered in the past to his country's political life. That, at least, was the official line. Less generous commentators had suggested that Merlin had been appointed to the Tunnel's board because of the embarrassment he had caused his own party. As, first, as shadow Home Secretary and then a serving Chancellor of the Exchequer, Merlin had only just missed the highest office. His reputation with the party had always been that of an honest, zealous and loyal worker. Unfortunately, that reputation had been damaged by a series of revelations in an American news magazine. Merlin, it appeared, had for some time had an active account with a Swiss bank and he had, over a twelve-year period, speculated heavily on the European money market, using a broker in Switzerland, a false name and his numbered account.

The board of the Channel Tunnel Company also included three commercial representatives. Madame Janine Boysee, the only woman on the board, was the Marketing Director, responsible for promoting the tunnel's activities and ensuring that it acquired an increasing share of the cross-channel traffic. Sir Frederick Astor-Francis, secretary of the board, was the managing director of a small London bank which specialised in raising funds for international ventures. Besides the bank and the Channel Tunnel Company, Sir Frederick was a director of thirty-four other British and French companies. The other director with a special interest in finance was Herr Klaus Morgensdorf, whose career in European banking circles had become almost legendary. It was Morgensdorf who had helped arrange the loan from the European Credit Bank which had saved the British shipbuilding industry in 1981.

* * *

The first floor of the Channel Tunnel Company was occupied almost solely by the board room, an ornately furnished and decorated chamber.

The second and third floors contained the offices of the general manager and his staff. Originally it had been suggested that the general manager should be a full member of the board. The commercial directors had recommended this to the full board. They had, however, been overruled by the four political representatives, who, realising that as things were they had voting control, were unwilling to see that control threatened. The four political representatives were fully supported by their respective Governments, who realised that any general manager would undoubtedly be either French or British, and that consequently the delicate balance of French and British board members would be thrown out of alignment.

Thus, although the woman responsible for marketing the tunnel’s services was a member of the board of directors (and had been a member since the tunnel had been first discussed as a realistic proposition), the general manager (who had only been appointed three months before the tunnel’s completion) was not a member of the board and was not invited to attend meetings or to see copies of the minutes. It was a bizarre situation all too common in organisations run by two or more Governments.

The man with this position of responsibility with only limited authority, Philippe Garin, was in his early forties and had worked both for SNCF, the French national railways organisation, and for an international oil company. He had accepted the post as general manager of the Compagnie de Chemin de Fer Sousmarin entre La France et L'Angleterre as a challenge. The very title of the company suggested a bureaucratic and administration-heavy organisation, and Garin’s reputation had been built on his ability to create some sort of commercial order out of deliberately-arranged administrative chaos.

* * *

The board meeting was almost over.

`Well, gentlemen, is there any other business?' asked the chairman, Claude Noiret. He peered over his half-moon spectacles at each of the other board members. Since there weren't many members present it wasn't a habit that took up a great deal of time. Robert Merlin was the last of the three to receive Noiret's gaze, and he had already begun to gather up his papers and slide them to the narrow gold-clasped attaché case in front of him. Suddenly he stopped as though remembering something.

`I'm most dreadfully sorry,' he said. `There is something. I almost forgot.' He took some papers out of his case and spread them out in front of him. `A purely technical thing really, but one worth the board's attention and well worth getting out of the way today, in my opinion. I apologise for forgetting about it.'

The others, anxious to leave, said nothing but waited.

`Here it is,' said Merlin, picking up a sheaf of papers fixed together with a silver-coloured clip at the top left hand corner. `Our transport schedule.'

`Surely we can't change that without a full meeting and until we've had prior consultation with the general manager and his staff?' asked Madame Boysee.

`Oh, I don't think we need worry too much about Monsieur Garin as far as this is concerned,' smiled Merlin. `It's more or less a technicality. Something that doesn't really have any practical significance.'

`I don't think we can change our schedule anyway without permission from the Ministry,' Noiret pointed out quietly.

`No problem at all,' insisted Merlin. He took a letter from his case and handed it across to the chairman. `I had this yesterday. Full authorisation from the Minister himself for the changes proposed in the draft schedule.' He looked across at Noiret and smiled broadly.

`The authorisation is certainly adequate,' conceded Noiret. `But what are the changes?'

`There's only one,' Merlin pointed out. `It's on page 36 of the schedule and I've had photocopies - in English and French - made of the relevant page. He looked around and nodded at each of the others as he handed them photocopies of the pages to which he had referred. `You will see,' he went on, `that the amendment simply refers to pharmaceutical compounds. There were some restrictive clauses in the original schedule which should never had been passed in the first place. This is really just getting things in order.'

`I'm still not sure what it is we’re talking about,' said Sir Frederick Astor-Francis, studying the schedule.

`The original schedule restricted the transport of certain chemicals,' explained Merlin. `And of course there were very good reasons for the restrictive clauses. I'm not arguing with those at all. We don't want our trains carrying explosives in the tunnel, do we?'

No one said anything.

`The problem is simply that, along with the more dangerous chemicals, we've restricted the types of pharmaceuticals we can transport; medically required drugs and so on.'

`The Minister has agreed to the change,' said Noiret, putting down the letter that Merlin had handed to him. Merlin handed the letter across the table to Sir Frederick who read it through quickly before handing it back.

`You mean we're not allowing drug companies to transport their medicinal compounds?' asked Morgensdorf, speaking for the first time.

`That's right,' nodded Merlin. `It's pretty obvious that a load of heart pills isn't going to be dangerous, but we've legislated against them in our original schedule.' He shrugged. `It's just a technical error.'

`I think we ought to let Monsieur Garin have a look at this first,' suggested Madame Boysee.

`Oh, I really don't think we need to do that,' said Noiret. `It has been passed by the Minister.'

`And the suggested change did come from him,' said Merlin. `The revised schedule came through his office.'

`Really?' said Noiret, raising an eyebrow and then lowering it again quickly. Alone of those present, he wondered why the recommendation had been made to Merlin and not to Neuville, the board's official chairman, or to him. Noiret didn't like things he didn't understand. But whatever was going on he had no intention of getting in the way at this stage. `Well, let's take a vote on it now, shall we?'

`I propose that we accept the new schedule,' suggested Morgensdorf.

`I'll second that,' said Merlin.

`Right,' said Noiret. `That's settled then.' He didn't wait for the other two to offer opinions. Nor did he give an opinion himself. `Shall we declare the meeting closed?'

He began to shuffle his papers together, and wondered whom to ring at the Transport Ministry.

1050 hrs. August 5th, Zürich, Switzerland

From his office at the southern corner of the 16th floor of the ACR Drogue et Cie building at Zürich, Albert Huber stared down at the slow-moving traffic in the streets below. Red and white Swiss national flags hung out of almost every window in sight as a lasting memory of the country's national Confederation Day, celebrated four days previously. The flags would be brought indoors soon, since the Swiss disliked any excessive show of emotion or patriotism. Besides, if the flags were left out too long, they would become tattered and dirty and need replacing for next year's celebrations.

`I've brought your coffee, Herr Huber,' whispered Miss Bird, the company chairman's confidential secretary. She carefully put down a rosewood tray on a glass-topped onyx table, adjusted the three cups and saucers on the tray and plugged the percolator into a socket fitted into the top of the table.

`Thank you,' said the chairman without turning round. His two guests, Dr Jackson, the company's medical director, and Willy Meier, the company's marketing director, both smiled at Miss Bird. Jackson murmured thanks.

`It looks as if we'll be operational in the United Kingdom within a week,' said Meier, when the secretary had left.

`How's the promotion gone over there?' asked Huber. He still didn't turn around. He seemed to be hypnotised by the activities of a motorist looking for a parking space in the Bahnhofstrasse. The motorist might as well have been looking for gold on the pavements of London.

`They're just waiting for the stuff,' said Jackson cheerfully. He was permanently optimistic and the success of the early trials of Angipax had left him without a single qualm or reservation.

`How long will it take to set up the machinery?' Herr Huber asked.

`I'll have the machinery moved from Finchley tomorrow,' said Jackson. `We can be operational forty-eight hours after we move into the factory.'

`What about the raw materials?' asked Bruckner. `We still haven't got the chemicals over there.'

`They're ready to move,' said Jackson. `I've just had confirmation.'

`Wasn't there some problem with the channel tunnel people?'

`Sorted,' said Jackson.

`We're promising to have the finished product ready on the pharmacists' shelves by the 25th,' said Meier.

`We'll make that easily,' nodded Jackson. `There's no problem with that.'

`We could move some supplies over just in case,' said Meier. `Just a few thousand cartons.'

`No.' said Herr Huber, shaking his head.

The others looked at him.

`We're not moving any finished tablets into the country,' said the chairman. `There's too much risk of the British Government interfering with our pricing arrangements,' he explained. `If we move raw supplies over there are no problems. If we sell the basic chemicals in a pure form to a solely British subsidiary, we can get grants from the British Government and claim tax relief on our entire investment. We can also sell the chemicals to our British subsidiary at a considerable profit, bringing the bulk of the money we make in the UK back to Switzerland and France where the Governments are rather less punitive in their taxes.' He smiled.

`And we can also get a Common Market grant because we're moving into a depressed area,' said Jackson, also with a smile. `The whole thing is beautiful.'

`I'd better be moving,' said Meier standing up and looking at his watch. `Will you excuse me, sir?' he said to Herr Huber. `I've got to look at a film we've had made for free distribution to post-graduate centres in Britain.'

`Certainly, Willy,' said the chairman. `Marvellous work you've been doing.'

`I'd better get these chemicals on the road,' said Jackson.

The two men left.

Only then did the chairman turn away from the window. He pressed a button on the telephone on his desk. Moments later he was speaking to a banker and discussing the details of the advantages his company could obtain by selling the company's short-term loan bonds to an Italian bank owned entirely by a select group of the board of the main company.

1055 hrs. August 5th, Rue Mont Thabor, Paris

`May I leave my suitcases there for a moment?' Cater asked the clerk at the small hotel where he'd been staying.

`Certainly,' nodded the clerk.

`I've just got a few bits of shopping to do,' explained Cater. He'd already paid the hotel bill through the travel agency who'd made all the arrangements on his behalf.

He'd bought and posted cards on his first day in Paris. Cards to each of the children, to Julie and to the secretary in the office. But he'd forgotten to buy them any presents. It wasn't so much that he'd forgotten - more that he’d never managed to make his mind up what to buy. He walked from the Rue Mont Thabor along the Rue de Castiglione into the Rue de Rivoli. It was fairly early in the morning for Parish and the shops were still more or less deserted. He stopped at half a dozen souvenir shops, and looked at the toys and gifts for sale. Eventually he called in at a souvenir and book shop and bought English story books at vastly inflated prices and four models of the Eiffel Tower in a snowstorm. He felt embarrassed as he paid for them but at least he'd got something.

Then he walked back along the Rue de Rivoli. He still had to get something for Julie. He stopped outside a shop selling exotic female underwear, and stared at the astonishing variety of silky garments they had on sale. Suddenly, on impulse, he walked in. He stood for a moment just inside the shop, uncertain about what he intended to buy. He’d been attracted by a matching red bra and panties worn by a transparent plastic model in the window. But when the assistant, a middle-aged woman with purple hair, came to serve him he lost his nerve.

`Do you sell scarves?' he asked.

The woman produced a tray of hideously decorated scarves, all printed with pictures of animals or birds. He bought the one that he thought Julie would like most, and then called in at another shop a little further on and bought a bottle of perfume. Only when he got outside did he realise that he could have undoubtedly bought the perfume cheaper at one of the big stores.

Back at the hotel, the clerk was still studying the newspaper. Cater said nothing but picked up his two suitcases, one of which was full copies of books. He then walked along to the Tuileries Métro station and took the Metro to the Gare du Nord. He had to change at the Concorde station and, while dragging the two suitcases from platform to platform along, seemingly, unending corridors, he cursed himself for not taking a taxi. At the Gare du Nord he bought a couple of paperbacks and some magazines then joined the train leaving for the tunnel terminal.

1115 hrs. August 5th, Paris

Noiret was confused. He had telephoned the Transport Ministry and discovered that the Minister had written to Merlin entirely on his own initiative. No one else in the department seemed to know anything about it.

Noiret, who knew when to make a noise and when to keep quiet, decided to keep quiet. There are times when discretion is the basis for survival.

1130 hrs. August 5th, Place de l'Opéra, Paris

On the steps of the Paris Opera House, a hundred hands fumbled with umbrella catches.

James Gower and Hélène Albric had no umbrella and did not even have raincoats with them. Hélène pulled her woollen shawl tightly round her slim bare shoulders and shivered twice, quickly in succession. Holding hands, they hurried down the steps, picking their way in between the other patrons. They were staying at the Grand Hotel, only a few metres away, and they hurried into the side entrance, nearest to the Opéra, within three minutes of leaving the protection of the Opera House's magnificent portals.

`Coffee?' asked James, helping Hélène to unwrap her shawl. It was pleasantly warm in the foyer.

`I'd like a brandy,' whispered Hélène, slipping her hand between James' arm and his body. They walked together through the hotel's glass-fronted restaurant. Several people looked in Hélène's direction. She had delicate, doll-like features which always brought stares of admiration. James Gower, clearly in his fifties, attracted only knowing smiles.

A white coated waiter hurried to them as they sat down. James ordered two glasses of Camus Napoléon and black coffee for them both. The rain had begun to fall a little harder and, outside, the pedestrians were hurrying to complete their journeys before they became soaked. Unusually, the fashionable shops in the Avenue de l'Opéra were attracting no window shoppers, and along the Boulevard des Capucines the doorways were almost empty of ladies looking for customers for their more personal wares. Occasionally, slow-moving cars came to a halt as their drivers wound down their nearside windows and peered across the wide pavements at pedestrians sheltering in doorways. Customers and clients were finding it difficult to get together.

Inside, it was warm and comfortable and made even more so by the comforting knowledge that outside it was cold and wet, while upstairs on the fourth floor waited a bed with crisply laundered sheets. As James and Hélène watched a middle-aged man struggling with an umbrella which had blown inside out by a sudden gust of wind, the waiter arrived with their brandy and coffee. He placed the glasses and cups on the table and quietly slipped the bill into James' saucer.

Hélène Albric had acquired a good knowledge of the world's great art while travelling through the European capitals with her father, who had been a career diplomat. Her mother had gone off with an Austrian businessman when Hélène had been nine, and had maintained a steady disinterest in her daughter's welfare thereafter. As an only child with a single parent, Hélène's education in matters both academic and domestic had been unusual, to say the least. She had been fortunate, however, in that her father had a passionate interest in art and artists.

He had died in a motor car accident when she was twenty, leaving her very well off in monetary terms but quite deprived in terms of love and affection. She had never spent much time with any other relatives and such attachments as she had made had been brief and emotionally unimportant.

She'd gone to live in London, taking a small flat in South Kensington, and had found a job working in James Gower's gallery in Regent Street. She'd been working there for nearly a month before she even met Gower. When she did, she found herself attracted to him and she knew that he found her attractive. He invited her out to dinner on the first evening that they met and afterwards they spent the night at a small flat he had in Mayfair mews.

* * *

James Gower had arrived in London at the age of twenty-two with a suitcase of clothes, and a diploma in design in his pocket. He'd taken a job as a window dresser with a large London store and had spent his first month's wages on buying himself a Savile Row suit, a pair of Savile Row shoes and an expensive silk tie and shirt from the Burlington Arcade. Then he'd deliberately and systematically proceeded to make the acquaintance of every half-pretty, wealthy young woman in London.

It hadn't been too difficult. There were always plenty of horsy young women and their mothers taking tea in Fortnum and Mason's in the afternoon, and Gower would slip out of the store for an hour and take tea alongside them. After a few weeks he was on nodding terms with several. At the end of a month he chose one, introduced himself, apologised for his impertinence and boldness, and arranged a dinner date at one of London's most exclusive restaurants. The bill had exceeded his income for the week but it had been worth it. Six weeks later, James Gower and Cynthia Mitchell had been married in a small country church in Berkshire. The wedding was reported in *The Tatler* and *Country Life*, and it was noted that the couple were spending their honeymoon in Tahiti.

When they arrived back in London, Cynthia's father was persuaded to part with enough money to enable Gower to open a small art gallery in a side street near Grosvenor Square. From then on, Gower's raw ability to make money had taken over. Within a decade he had a business grossing over a million pounds a year. Unfortunately, he still had Cynthia, and since Cynthia's father was no fool, he had no chance of ever getting rid of her. Mrs Gower was the holder of 50% of the shares in the company James Gower had formed when buying his first shop. Every penny he had made was tied up in that small company and a break with his wife would have proved disastrous.

So, Gower remained a more or less faithful husband, staying in London to attend to business just two or three days a week, and speeding back to the country to spend the evening with his wife in their spacious country home on the other days.

The trip to Paris had been Hélène's idea. She insisted on it, in fact. James had finally agreed when his wife had announced that she had been invited to spend three days at a health farm in Dorset with her cousin.

`Well, I have been wanting to go over to Paris and look at a few pieces by a couple of new artists,' James had murmured.

`Do you mind, dear?' asked Cynthia. `I feel awful just going off and leaving you.'

`You won't be leaving me,' insisted James. `I'll go and stay at a hotel in Paris.'

Cynthia, apparently innocent and unsuspecting, gave her husband a peck on the cheek and told him how lucky she was to have such an understanding husband. James wandered down to the village post box, with his Great Danes as an excuse, and telephoned Hélène. She'd been deliriously happy when he'd told her the good news.

1143 hrs. August 5th, Hotel Continental, Paris

The journal that Dr Singh held was printed on expensive glossy paper and filled with highly coloured graphs. The title, *The International Journal of Cardiac Pharmacology* was printed discreetly in the top centre of the front page, and beneath it, as is customary with so many technical journals, there was a list of the major articles appearing in the journal. Dr Singh's right forefinger prodded repeatedly at the title of an article which he himself had written, and which described in glowing scientific detail the many advantages of the new drug `Angipax'.

`They liked it, then?' asked Dr Singh, who had just finished describing to the ACR Drogues' senior Northern European representative just how difficult it was to get an article published in such a well-esteemed specialist journal.

`Very pleased with it,' nodded Ernest Taylor, the drug company representative who was well accustomed to dealing with egotistical medical specialists, and who considered himself to be something of an expert at commercial obsequiousness. Like any competent car salesman, he always managed to find a consuming interest which he could share with his customers, but, unlike an ordinary salesman, he had the extra imagination to ensure that he never knew quite so much about their mutual interest as his customer. This talent enabled him to imbue his customers both with sympathy and a real feeling of superiority.

Dr Singh all but purred with satisfaction.

`I hope your people haven't forgotten that little arrangement we have,' he said, carefully putting the copy of the *International Journal of Cardiac Pharmacology* back into his Dunhill document case, itself a gift six months previously from Taylor himself.

`Of course not,' said Taylor quickly. `Our medical director, however, did wonder if you felt it entirely sensible, considering all the circumstances.'

`What do you mean?' frowned Singh, edging forward and breathing clouds of stale brandy into the representative's face. Taylor didn't flinch. `We had an arrangement, didn't we?'

`Of course we did,' agreed Taylor. `And no one is trying to break the arrangement. We just wanted to be absolutely certain that you felt that nothing had changed.'

`Why should anything have changed?'

`I don't know,' said Taylor. `You're the expert, doctor,' he added quickly with a sycophantic smile. Personally, Taylor had felt the arrangement to be a bad one when the company's medical director had made it with Singh. But it wasn't his job to quarrel with the medical director; especially when Dr Singh had just produced an article in a major specialist journal which would give them notable references to quote on world-wide advertising literature.

So the agreement had been made and, although it had never been put on to paper, for reasons that were only too obvious to everyone concerned, ACR Drogues et Cie were morally committed to providing Dr Singh with one vial of smallpox virus. Presuming, that is, that one can have a moral commitment to an illegal act.

`We're doing research into the efficacy of a new anti-viral drug we've developed,' Singh had said. `And since the disaster in Birmingham ten years ago, the World Health Organisation hasn't allowed researchers access to the smallpox virus. Our virus man says there just isn't anything more suitable for the research we're doing. I don't suppose you have a supply do you?'

Taylor had referred the specialist to his own medical director, Dr Jackson, and the three of them had met ten months previously in a hotel in Geneva. There, Dr Jackson had confirmed that the company did indeed have its own private stock of smallpox virus, but had pointed out that holding the stock, let alone allowing it to be used, was prohibited by the 1982 Geneva Research Convention.

Singh in turn had pointed out that he had recently been appointed an international editor of two leading medical journals, and that neither he nor his colleagues intended to do anything dishonourable with the virus. `We only want it for valuable medical research,' he said, `This is life-saving stuff we're doing. If we can develop this anti-viral agent, it could be the biggest breakthrough since penicillin. Our specialist feels that another two years' work could see him well on the way.'

Dr Jackson had agreed that an effective anti-viral with wide-ranging uses would be both clinically and commercially valuable. In return for a signed, witnessed contract giving ACR Drogues the legal right to exploit commercially any product developed within Singh's laboratory on payment of a royalty, Dr Jackson had personally authorised the withdrawal of a vial of smallpox virus from the ACR laboratory in Basle.

And clearly, Singh had not forgotten the arrangement, as Taylor had rather hopelessly prayed that he might.

In his three-room suite at the Continental, Taylor handed over a small steel case to Singh. It looked about the same size as an ordinary pocket cigarette lighter.

`Look after it!' said Taylor as he handed the case over. Singh looked at him in surprise. He wasn't used to this side of

Taylor. `There hasn't been a case of smallpox in the word for a decade now, said Taylor. `And I doubt if there is anyone in Europe who's been vaccinated against smallpox. If you let this stuff out, you'd do more damage than Attila the Hun.'

Singh began to mutter something but thought better of it. He took the case from Taylor and stuffed it into his pocket. He didn't intend to start taking advice from drug company representatives, but neither did he want to upset Taylor. He enjoyed the good life that ACR helped him live.

1200 noon August 5th, Sangatte, France

The Blacks arrived at Sangatte at noon.

`You're lucky,' said the clerk, `We can get your car and caravan on the six o'clock train.' He took the Blacks' tickets and told Mr Black to drive to Bay 3. `You'll have to leave your vehicle there,' he said. `And then travel in the passenger train.'

`Stop for a minute, dear,' said Mrs Black as they approached the signs announcing the various loading bays.

`Stop?'

`I want to just check the things in the caravan,' explained Mrs Black. `It won't take me a minute.' Mr Black pulled the car into the side of the road.

Inside the caravan Mrs Black scurried around making sure that all lockable cupboards were firmly locked and that the bed linen was neatly folded in the storage bins underneath the bunks. The caravan smelt of dampness as a result of the wet clothes which were scattered about the floor and across the towel-protected upholstery. The clothes she'd been trying to dry were still as wet as they had been to begin with. Sighing and shaking her head unhappily, Mrs Black opened one of the drawers in the cupboard underneath the stove and found a box of matches. Lighting a match she held the flame above the gas ring at the front of the stove. The bright blue flame appeared on the stove just as the match was about to go out. Putting the matches back into the drawer, Mrs Black moved several items of clothing nearer to the stove. She put a sweater of her husband's on top of the grill and draped one of her own pairs of slacks over the spare gas cylinder which was standing in the middle of the caravan's narrow passageway. Having done that she went around the caravan drawing all the curtains.

`There,' she said finally to herself. `They should be nice and dry by the time we get to England and no one will be any the wiser.' Then she climbed out of the caravan, locked the door and went back to the car.

At Bay 3 the Blacks left their car in the care of a balding middle-aged Frenchman whose wife had given him sardine paste sandwiches for the third time in a week and who was not in a good mood. He drove the Black's car on to the train with less care than he could have usually taken and Mr Black's sweater moved forwards slightly on the grill. The car and caravan were last on to the part of the train occupied by passenger cars. To complete the train sixteen freight wagons were attached to it.

1400 hrs. August 5th, Gare du Nord, Paris

Mrs Gower had watched her husband and Hélène Albric board the train in Paris from the station buffet. She'd spotted her husband's expensive overcoat almost as soon as the two travellers had entered the station. When they'd boarded she followed, sitting in a compartment two carriages ahead of them.

She didn't know why she was there or what she planned to do. She simply knew that she had to see them for herself. Somehow it seemed like watching someone else's husband; like seeing someone else's marriage collapsing. She didn't feel as sad or as unhappy as she'd thought she would. There wasn't even any humiliation or sense of defeat.

If any emotion was dominant it was pity. Pity for her husband not herself. She felt sorrow for him, having to search for happiness and fulfilment with a woman young enough to be his daughter. But even that emotion seemed to be felt through a mist. It was all strangely unreal.

1625 hrs. August 5th, Sangatte, France

The Sangatte Tunnel Terminal had been designed to take full advantage of all available technological aids. Passengers arriving by road or rail from seventeen different directions were brought speedily and easily into the heart of the terminal, where they could board the Tunnel train. There were stations connecting with Paris, Brussels and Luxembourg. Freight was brought into the terminal either by road or rail and taken with ease, since only freight travelling in containers suitable for both road and rail transportation was accepted.

Unfortunately, despite (or perhaps because of) the variety of available technical aids, the tunnel was subject to the usual mechanical problems. This time it was the tunnel's emergency lighting system, in which the central control computer had diagnosed a fault. A team of engineers were working in the tunnel and trains were temporarily suspended.

The express had been due in Sangatte at five minutes to four. The passengers included the elderly English pilgrim, Miss Millington; Peter Cater, the publisher; the two British doctors, Dr Chatwyn and Dr Singh who had been attending the Angipax conference in Paris; the Italian squash player Tambroni; the computer manager Cannon and the art gallery owner, James Gower, and his mistress, Hélène Albric. Their train arrived on the outskirts of the Sangatte terminal on time but, owing to the fact that the trains which had arrived at five minutes to three and twenty five minutes past three were still in the station disgorging their passengers, the platform receiving passengers from Paris was unable to accommodate them. The 350 passengers had to sit and wait, with varying degrees of patience.

1740 hrs. August 5th, Tunnel maintenance

The maintenance crew foreman swore angrily and threw his automatic screwdriver into the metal box he used to carry his tools. For the fifth time in an hour, a screw had snapped. When they'd started work an hour earlier it had seemed a simple problem. The alternative lighting circuit seemed to have developed a short, but they still had not discovered the source of the fault; all they had managed to do was to take three roofing panels down, and at the rate they were going they'd still be working in another three hours. The Tunnel’s management would never accept that. The foreman, together with his colleagues, had been subjected to a long harangue from Raspail immediately after lunch. The engineer had made it clear that the tunnel had to be kept closed for as little time as possible.

`We're never going to finish this tonight,' called the older of the two other crew members, a middle-aged Breton.

`The football starts in an hour and a half,' moaned his younger colleague, a youth called Tony who wore small gold earrings and played for the Sangatte football team. The match he referred to, however, was due to be played on television rather than the local pitch.

`Come on then,' said the foreman, easily persuaded. He picked up his tool box and made his way towards the connecting passage which would take them back to the pilot tunnel. In there waited their small working engine. The other two men walked quickly after him, pausing only to snatch up their own tool and luncheon bags.

`What about the ceiling panels?' asked the Breton,

`We're supposed to put them back on, aren't we?'

`It's just taken all day to get them off,' pointed out the youth.

The foreman stopped, turned round and stared balefully at the three ceiling panels which were stacked neatly on the narrow catwalk.

`No one's going to see them,' the youth pointed out. `And if we put them back it'll probably take us another five hours.'

`Leave them off,' said the Breton, half regretting his first comment. `You're right. No one's going to notice anyway.' They all knew that since all the trains which travelled in the tunnel were windowless, there was little chance of anyone noticing that the panels had been left out of position.

`At least we'll be able to get on with it straight away tomorrow,' rationalised the foreman. `It'll save time and that should please Raspail.' He walked off again and the other two men followed him gratefully.

1753 hrs. August 5th, Sangatte, France

At a few minutes before six on the evening of the 5th August, the two containers from the ACR factory at St Quentin en Yvelines were hitched onto the train at Sangatte. They were placed at the front of the freight wagons in view of the fact that the freight manager himself had taken an interest in them and had insisted that they be given priority. His interest meant that the ACR drugs were directly behind the Black's caravan.

1820 hrs. August 5th, Sangatte, France

The fault which had kept the passengers on the 14.00 express from Paris fuming in their compartments had caused a two-hour delay. Miss Millington, Alan Cannon, Dr Chatwyn and Dr Singh, Sr. Tambroni, James Gower and Hélène Albric all joined the 18.20 train from Sangatte to Westernhanger. Those seven, together with Peter Cater, Susan Roberts, Gaston Raenackers and the four members of the Black family, made up the passengers in compartment 22 on the train which left just four minutes after the 18.00 freight train.

Each passenger compartment was quite self-contained, with five rows of seats, each row containing five individual seats. To facilitate boarding, the entire sides of each compartment lifted up allowing passengers to board from either side of their own particular row. The fact that the sides of the compartments lifted in their entirety made central aisles quite unnecessary and obviated the need for connecting doors. During each journey the passengers inside every compartment were effectively imprisoned in a plastic cocoon.

The Black family took up four of the five front seats. The fifth seat on their row was unoccupied. Behind them sat two people: Dr Singh and Dr Chatwyn. The two doctors stay together in the two left-hand seats, leaving the three seats on their right unoccupied. In the middle row there were no empty seats. James Gower and Hélène Albric occupied the two seats on the left of Miss Millington, and Alan Cannon and Peter Cater occupied the two seats on her right. The fourth or penultimate row was occupied by Benito Tambroni, who sat alone in the centre seat and scowled at anyone who approached him. In the last row, occupying the seats on the left, sat Susan Roberts and Gaston Raenackers.

There were, then, fourteen people in the compartment and ten empty seats.

* * *

For the first six miles from the terminal at Sangatte the train ran above ground; at the tunnel portal about five miles from the French coast the train disappeared from view for the first time. The tracks slowly descended during the following few miles so that at the coast the tunnel was about thirty metres below the sea bed. The freight train arrived at the tunnel portal at 6.20 pm, just as the passenger train was leaving the terminal. Three and a half minutes later, with the freight train nearing the French coast the passenger train passed into the underground tunnel. The driver of the passenger train, George Philpot, whose only task was to keep an eye on the computerised controls and, in case of any systems fault, release the dead man's handle which would automatically bring the train to a halt, saw that the driverless freight train was three and a half minutes ahead. At 6.30 pm both trains were thirty metres or more underneath the English Channel and heading for the English coast at speeds of approximately 100 kilometres per hour.

Inside the Black's caravan the wet clothes which Mrs Black had left drying over the stove were steaming as they dried. Mr Black's sweater which had been resting on top of the grill was very nearly dry. While the train had been standing in the terminal station it had still been quite securely draped over the grill. However, as the train accelerated towards the tunnel portal, it began to slip. By the time the train had reached the coast the left-hand sleeve had fallen off the grill and was dangling about two inches above the naked flame of the stove.

The sweater fell on to the flame three miles out from the French coast. If it had fallen off the grill a little earlier it might have been wet enough to extinguish the small flame of the stove. As it was it caught fire almost instantaneously. As the flames wrapped around the sweater the whole bundle of woollen fire fell off the stove and on to the top of the spare gas cylinder which was standing in the caravan aisle. Since the gas cylinder was made of thick steel, that in itself might have not proved too bad, had not Mrs Black left a pair of her own slacks resting on top of it. The burning sweater knocked the slacks off the cylinder and fell with them on to the floor. The slacks, which were also nearly dry, caught fire within seconds and soon the carpet on which they had both landed was also ablaze.

Three minutes later, the whole of the caravan interior was ablaze. In the passenger train Mrs Black was handing a tin of boiled sweets around the compartment. Apart from the squash player in the fourth row and Miss Roberts and Gaston Raenackers in the fifth row, everyone in the compartment had accepted a sweet and Mrs Black was purring contentedly with a sense of public spirit.

The fire in the Blacks' caravan raged with astonishing speed and, within a few minutes, the caravan itself was completely destroyed. The destruction of the vehicle was being expedited by the fact that a few seconds after the blazing sweater hit the floor the gas cylinder supplying the stove exploded. The cylinder ignited quickly because the value which supplied the stove had, of course, been left open by Mrs Black.

The explosion involving the gas cylinder not only destroyed the caravan but also involved the Blacks' Peugeot car in the blaze. The car's petrol tank was about two metres away from the exploding gas cylinder and it quickly ignited. The car was blown half out of the restraining chains which were intended to keep it firmly in place during the journey, and the rear of the car was blown out through the opaque green plastic wall of the car container.

The overhead sprinklers came into operation as soon as the heat sensors in the tunnel ceiling registered the rise in temperature. Unfortunately the sprinklers had been designed to cope with a static fire, and the two-second delay before they came into operation meant that the freight train was well out of range by the time each set of sprinklers came into action.

All might still have been well if there had not been a second potential bomb in the Blacks’ caravan. The second, spare cylinder of gas had not exploded at first but, as the heat inside the remains of the caravan continued to rise, the temperature of the gas increased and finally the cylinder did explode. If it hadn't done so then there might perhaps have been a chance that the disaster would have been limited to the freight train.

The explosion of the second gas cylinder had two effects. The fire, which had previously been confined to the freight trailer containing only the Blacks' car and caravan, finally spread both forwards and backwards.

A piece of the exploding gas cylinder shot forwards through the plastic of the next freight container and into the last of the three cars it contained. Within seconds, that car was ablaze and shortly afterwards the two cars in front of them also exploded. The combined heat and force generated by three exploding petrol tanks proved too much for the plastic walls of the freight container and the cars in the next compartment exploded less than ten seconds later. Within less than a minute the whole of the freight train was ablaze.

It was the second of the Blacks' two gas cylinders which caused the major explosion. A piece of the cylinder had shot forwards through into the freight compartment directly ahead, but most of the cylinder had been fired backwards. To be precise, the cylinder had exploded downwards, fired by the release of gas through the weaker part, the uppermost valve. The cylinder had gone straight through the bogie and had crashed on to the rails. From there it had bounced backwards, meeting the next part of the train.

The bouncing cylinder had severed the coupling between the trailer which had contained the Blacks' caravan and the following trailer. The forward part of the train had continued on its way, accelerating slightly as it abandoned its rearmost portion. The latter part or the train had begun to slow down, moving only because of its own momentum.

Three of the freight trailers carried metal spare parts for motor cars; two held tyres, and another contained urgently-needed copies of European Economic Community publications. None of these commodities was highly inflammable, any more than were the two containers full of tea and the three cylinders full of farm produce. If the bouncing cylinder had ended its erratic journey in any of these containers there would have been no further explosion.

Unfortunately, the tyres, the motor car parts, the EEC publications, the farm produce and the tea were not in the container next to the Blacks' car and caravan. The first of the freight containers was filled, not with inert fruit or documents, but with raw chemicals. The erythrytyl tetranitrate and the pentaerythritol tetranitrate were destined for a peaceful life as constituents of Angipax, Europe’s newest and latest best-selling heart drug, but they were both highly explosive substances, closely allied in chemical form to the substance known to explosive experts as TNT. The first container contained nothing but erythrytyl tetranitrate. The second contained pentaerythritol tetranitrate.

The bouncing cylinder hit the freight compartment at a relative speed of over 250 kilometres per hour. It crashed into the freight container at the junction of its base and leading wall. The red hot cylinder acted like a detonator as it compressed the erythrytyl tetranitrate and the resulting explosion involved every gramme of the chemical. A split second later, every gramme of the chemical in the following container also exploded.

Within the confined area of the underground railway tunnel the results of the explosion were devastating. The tunnel roof collapsed and the blast wave lifted both the departing front half of the freight train and the engine and first nine compartments of the approaching passenger train a full metre off the railway tracks.

Inside the control room at Sangatte, where the duty controller was munching a cheese and tomato sandwich, the computer screens suddenly went blank. The controller was unperturbed.

`Systems fault.' he called out, automatically reaching forward to switch in an auxiliary system.

* * *

The tunnel was built like a huge tube, seven metres in diameter, and the trains ran on rails laid on a floor that measured five metres across. The roof of the tunnel was made of precast concrete pieces bolted together with mild steel plates fixed as an internal facing. The plates were galvanised on the inside and each weighed four tons. Apart from the driver's cab the passenger train consisted of 22 compartments, each containing a potential of 25 passengers. The passengers in each of the first 21 compartments died instantly as the train and the steel segments collided in mid-air. Released by the collapse of the roof, limestone and clay burst into the tunnel instantaneously. The passenger compartments, made of aluminium and plastic for weight economy, provided no protection at all against the falling steel and rock. One hundred and forty seven passengers, the total number of people travelling in the first 21 compartments, died.

The explosion ripped the electrical wiring and water sprinkler systems into a thousand pieces and the whole of the tunnel was suddenly pitch black. Rolling stock was destroyed, blackened and distorted by the sudden petroleum fires that had burnt everything within the tunnel to a charred crisp within seconds. The whole disaster, from the moment Mr Black’s sweater had first fallen from the grill in the caravan, had taken less than two minutes.

Between the tunnel which was now effectively destroyed, and the parallel tunnel used for the transport of people and goods from England to France, there were connecting passageways every three hundred metres. These narrow passageways were intended to provide maintenance crews and emergency squads with access from one tunnel to the other; they were fixed at right angles to the main tunnels and connected first with a pilot tunnel some three metres in diameter. The centre of the pilot tunnel was approximately fifteen metres away from the centre of each of the two main tunnels. Since the main tunnels were seven metres each in width and the pilot tunnel three metres in width at its widest point, this meant that the connecting passageways were about ten metres in length. Theoretically, these connecting passageways would, in the case of any accident or tunnel collapse, (both rendered unlikely by the enormous number of safety precautions built into the system) enable passengers and rescuers to move freely from tunnel to tunnel. They would also enable workmen to maintain a good supply of fresh air to all parts of the tunnel through an extensive system of ventilator shafts and ducts.

Unfortunately, the explosion had also destroyed many of the connecting tunnels. In addition, the roof of the France-bound tunnel was slightly cracked in several places and numerous small falls of rocks and clay had already occurred. The pilot tunnel, or service tunnel as it was commonly known, was completely destroyed.

Miraculously, almost unbelievably, the explosion had left one small pocket of life untouched.

In front of compartment 22 the roof of the tunnel had given way completely in several places. Huge steel plates were buckled and bent like pieces of tin foil. The tunnel was full of rocks. Behind compartment 22 the blast wave had opened several small gaps in the tunnel roof through which tons of soft clay had fallen. The channel bed is composed of many different types of rock and earth. Directly above the leading part of the train there was little but limestone; behind it the tunnel roof was supporting several million tons of clay. The first collapse allowed limestone rocks into the tunnel; the second breach, caused by the blast wave, brought in several hundred tons of clay, which, reinforced by the pressure of a hundred metres of solid clay above it, spread slowly towards both coasts. By a remarkable fluke, compartment 22 was trapped between the fall of limestone and the fall of clay; as the clay crept forwards it compressed the air that had been caught in the tunnel so that outside compartment 22 the air pressure reached a level several times that inside the compartment.

The explosion had knocked compartment 22 off its rails and on to its side. It leant against the side of the tunnel with a small pocket of air trapped underneath it in a triangular space which was filling slowly with clay and small pieces of rock. Because the air was under tremendous pressure, however, the clay advanced only slowly, creeping along the tunnel floor quite imperceptibly.

Inside the compartment there was bedlam. The compartment itself, now in total darkness, was tilted to the right and the passengers who had been sitting in the left hand seats had been thrown onto their neighbours' laps.

The noise was deafening for a few moments and then in contrast there was a silence and the silence itself was unnatural. Louise Black sobbed hysterically and her mother muttered useless words of encouragement to her.

`Dear me,' said Miss Millington, rather loudly. `I do apologise to whoever I'm sitting on.'

* * *

The duty controller decided that something other than a systems failure had caused his blank screens. He pressed the emergency button, and the train travelling to France from England stopped two miles out from the English coast.

1840 hrs. August 5th, Sangatte, France

At both Sangatte and Westernhanger there were three terminal managers, working on eight-hour shifts, responsible for the train leaving and arriving at their terminals. A resident engineer and safety officer, both having offices at Sangatte, were responsible for all the problems within their special areas of authority. The terminal managers were simply expected to ensure that the trains arrived and left on time and that passengers boarding and leaving main-line trains were taken through the tunnel as quickly and as efficiently as possible. They were, of course, also responsible for looking after freight transportation.

When the duty controller at Sangatte had pressed the emergency button, the duty manager, sitting in his office sorting and signing requisition orders and supply control order forms, was instantly informed of the potential emergency by the sound of a buzzer on his intercom. A small red light on his desk provided visual reinforcement of the audible signal. The duty manager, Charles Martini, picked up the telephone on his desk and was immediately put through to the control room.

`I think we have some sort of failure, sir,' reported the duty controller. `The screens on the outgoing line have gone blank.'

`What about the emergency system?'

`Nothing,' said the controller. `We have total failure.'

`I'll be right there,' promised the duty manager. He put down his telephone, left his office and walked along to the control room less than fifty metres away. There he discovered that only the television cameras covering the lines in the first half-kilometre of the outward tunnel were operational, that the remainder of the electrical systems supplying the outward-bound tunnel and the pilot tunnel were completely dead, and that the main electrical supply to the inward tunnel was only functioning haphazardly. The main systems in the inward tunnel were also quite dead. It was clear that the fault was a major one and the duty manager decided to report immediately to the headquarters in the Place Vendôme. Nine minutes after the explosion on the train out of Sangatte, a telex message was received in the Paris offices of the Channel Tunnel Company. In Paris, as well as Sangatte and Westernhanger, the computer terminal and telex machine were staffed for twenty-four hours a day.

Acting in accordance with the standing instructions the telex operator immediately rang Garin’s private telephone number, and twenty-four minutes after the undersea explosion, the Channel Tunnel Company's general manager was informed that there was an emergency at Sangatte. He was sitting at the telex operator’s desk firing questions at the duty manager at Sangatte just over half an hour after the explosion which had caused so much havoc.

1850 hrs. August 5th, The Tunnel Train

During the half hour there had been surprisingly little activity on the train. The handful of survivors of the first railway crash to take place under the English Channel were still too shocked to take any useful action. So shocked were they, in fact, that very little was said, let alone done, during those first thirty minutes.

Immediately after the crash the only passenger still sitting alone and in his own seat was the international squash player, Tambroni.

Alan Cannon, the computer firm manager, was the first to speak.

`Is anyone hurt?' he asked timidly. To his left he could just make out the outline of Peter Cater. In the darkness of the carriage nothing more was visible even at a distance of less than a metre.

`I think we're all right,' said Mr Black from somewhere in front of him.

`Yes, thank you,' said Louise.

Slowly the others confirmed that they were unhurt, although Tambroni complained that he had sprained a muscle in his left forearm. Susan Roberts answered for herself and Raenackers.

`Where do you think we are?' asked Dr Chatwyn.

`I can't see my watch,' said Dr Singh. `Has anyone got the right time? A watch with a luminous dial?'

`It's 18.46,' said Alan Cannon.

`You're a minute fast,' said Peter Cater.

`We'll split the difference,' suggested Cannon, light-heartedly.

`Right,' agreed Cater.

`It's 18.45 and a half,' Cannon corrected himself.

`What time did we leave?' asked Dr Chatwyn.

`It was twenty minutes past six,' said Mrs Black unexpectedly. `I saw the clock at the terminal. We were twenty minutes late.'

`We crashed about ten minutes ago,' said Dr Chatwyn, thinking aloud. `So we'd been travelling for about fifteen minutes. How far do you think we travelled in fifteen minutes?'

`We're somewhere under the Channel,' said Gower flatly. `The bloody thing's probably caved in.'

Louise Black screamed.

`That was a tactless thing to say,' complained her mother.

`We ought to get to know one another,' said Miss Millington. `Introduce ourselves. So that we know who's talking.'

`That's a good idea,' said Mr Black. He introduced himself and the rest of his family.

`Where are you sitting?' asked Peter Cater.

`We're on the front row,' said Mrs Black.

`Let's take it by rows then,' suggested Cater.

`Right,' agreed Mr Black. `Who's on the second row?'

He turned round and peered into the blackness behind him.

* * *

`There are fourteen of us,' said David Black, who'd been counting, when the introductions were completed.

`Has anyone got a torch?' asked Peter Cater. `It's a bit spooky sitting in the dark like this.'

`How stupid!' said Singh and Chatwyn together. They both reached inside their jacket pockets and brought out thin but powerful torches, the sort of pen-lights that doctors use to enable them to see when they peer down patient's throats. Ironically, the torches were presents from the manufacturers of Angipax.

`Just use one at a time in case the batteries run out,” suggested Alan Cannon.

`These last for hours and hours,' Chatwyn reassured him.

`I'll put mine off for now,' agreed Singh, nevertheless, putting his torch back into his pocket.

Chatwyn stood up, holding on to the side of the seat in front of him and shone his torch into the different corners of the carriage. He picked out each face in turn.

When the light had moved away Louise whispered to her mother.

`Can't you wait a while?' asked her mother.

Louise shook her head, then, remembering that her mother could not see her, whispered to say that she could not.

`Is there a toilet anywhere?' Mrs Black asked.

No one answered.

`I don't think there is,' said Mrs Millington.

Louise started to cry.

`Can't you wait? demanded her father crossly.

`She can't,' said Mrs Black, defending her daughter.

`Have you got a plastic bag, dear?' asked Miss Millington quietly.

`Somewhere,' said Mrs Black.

`Well, it isn't an ideal solution but she'll feel more comfortable,' said Miss Millington. `If we're stuck here much longer I'm sure we'll all have exactly the same problem quite soon.'

Mrs Black emptied a piece of Camembert cheese from a small plastic bag, and Louise Black, sobbing with shame and embarrassment, sat forward on the edge of her seat and urinated into the bag.

1852 hrs. August 5th, Montmartre, Paris

`Who found her?' asked Inspector Tissot.

`I did sir,' said a pink-faced young gendarme, standing, alert and neatly scrubbed, at the far end of the bedroom. Tissot noticed that he had the beginnings of a moustache and idly wondered how the youth expected anyone to take him seriously with the evidence of anticipated manhood so clearly visible.

Tissot said nothing for a moment. Then he moved forward slowly and stared down at the woman's body. `Take her along to the morgue and get hold of Leboyer or Chandos or one of those damned doctors. We'd better have a post mortem done, but if whores are murdered, they're usually knifed or strangled.' He turned away and marched out of the room, his shoes crunching on the dirty linoleum.

1854 hrs. August 5th, Place Vendôme, Paris

After speaking to the duty manager at Sangatte, Garin rang the Heliport d'Issy les Moulineaux, which lies between the centre of Paris and St Quentin en Yvelines. He arranged for a helicopter to be ready and waiting for him within half an hour, able to take him north and prepared to wait for him at the tunnel terminal, ready if necessary to bring him back to Paris.

Ninety five minutes later he was in Sangatte.

1900 hrs. August 5th, Sangatte Terminal

While Garin was preparing to leave Paris and fly to Sangatte, the duty terminal manager and the duty controller were desperately trying to find out what had happened. Forty minutes after the crash they still did not know why their screens were blank and why there had been such a total systems failure.

And so the duty manager had telephoned the resident engineer and his deputy as soon as he had spoken to Garin in Paris. The terminal organisation at Sangatte was far more complex and well-equipped than the organisation at Westernhanger. This was no reflection on the management at Westernhanger, but resulted from the political decision to base all the main management resources for the Tunnel in France. The safety officer and resident engineer at Sangatte were in fact responsible for the entire tunnel and came directly under Garin's jurisdiction.

The resident engineer, Thomas Raspail, and his deputy Denis Bleriot, both lived in houses in the old village of Sangatte. The arrival of the terminal had inevitably brought with it a considerable need for new housing. The terminal staff consisted both of local inhabitants and experts brought in from other parts of France. Many of the Channel Tunnel Company's employees lived on a small housing estate which had been built to help accommodate them, but Raspail and Bleriot, both highly paid, lived, together with the three terminal managers, in older, more expensive houses in the village.

When telephoned by the duty manager, Raspail was playing badminton in the garden with his teenage daughter. Bleriot was in the bath while his wife prepared dinner for a small party of friends when his telephone call arrived. Both men muttered and moaned a little but both drove straight to the terminal some three miles distant.

`This is impossible,' insisted Raspail as he stared dismally at the row of blank screens in the control room, `Quite impossible.'

Bleriot, who'd arrived a few minutes later in view of the fact that he'd needed to dry and clothe himself, shivered slightly. `I wish it was,' he muttered, to himself as much as to Raspail.

It was Bleriot who arranged for a member of the maintenance crew to prepare a small work vehicle which was used to enable the workmen to inspect the tunnel. Raspail began trying to check the fire and ventilation control systems. The duty manager hurried off to try to placate the several hundred angry and impatient passengers who were collected in the terminal buildings and moaning about the delay.

While Louise Black sat sobbing, nursing an empty bladder and a full plastic bag, and Philippe Garin packed his small suitcase, Denis Bleriot and two members of his maintenance crew boarded the small open work-engine and set off for the tunnel entrance. Huge, powerful searchlights, fitted to the front of the engine, lit up the tunnel's interior. A few minutes after entering the tunnel the three men noticed that the tracks along which they were travelling were almost submerged in thick soft clay. The driver of the work-engine slowed down and Bleriot jumped off the platform on to the floor of the tunnel. The clay squelched and Bleriot sank in to his ankles. He walked forwards a few metres and the clay slowly began to move up to his calves.

The driver and the second maintenance man looked at each other.

`You'd better get back on board,' the driver said to Bleriot. He pointed forwards. The searchlights picked out the tunnel for several hundred metres ahead. The muddy clay could plainly be seen. Where they were, it was clearly no more than a few inches deep. In the distance they could see that the tunnel was filled with it.

`Merde,' said Bleriot softly.

`We'll have to get back now if we're going.' The driver warned. `We'll be stuck in a minute or two.'

`Merde,' said Bleriot again. `The bloody tunnel's collapsed.'

2029 hrs. August 5th, Sangatte, France

It was dark when Garin arrived at the control room in Sangatte. The helicopter landed in the car parking behind the control room. Warned by radio of Garin's approach, the terminal manager had arranged for a landing area to be marked out with luminous cones. The last time the cones had been used had been at the opening ceremony when a number of dignitaries had arrived by helicopter.

`We've turned the conference room into an emergency centre,' shouted Martini as they hurried away from the helicopter. Behind them the pilot swung himself down from the helicopter and tried to arrange with two puzzled and confused mechanics for his machine to be refuelled.

Because it was used for training sessions and staff meetings one wall of the conference room was covered by a huge map of the entire tunnel complex, including the terminals at Sangatte and Westernhanger. Differently coloured lines drawn along the tunnel denoted the positions of ventilation shafts, electrical cables and television cameras. The map was made of a plastic material; and, alongside, fixed to the wall, there was a large box of coloured wax crayons which could be used to add new features to the map.

`Coffee?' said Bleriot, walking across to the percolator, plugged in and standing on a trolley which also carried several dozen cups and saucers.

The other three all nodded. Garin muttered genuine thanks. Bleriot poured out four black coffees, picked up the cups one by one and carried them over to the conference table. Roscoe carried over the milk jug and sugar bowl.

`From the silence I take it that the news isn't good,' said Garin, wrapping his hands around his coffee cup and sipping at it cautiously.

`No,' said Bleriot bluntly. `It isn't.' He got up and walked across to the map, hesitated for a moment with his fingers hovering over the box of crayons and then picked out a black crayon.

`We went in on the work engine,' he explained, drawing a thick black line down the middle of the tunnel. `At about here there was clay lying on the track.' He drew a thick line at right angles to the tunnel. `And we had to stop a few hundred metres further on, here,' he continued, drawing a second thick line at right angles to the tunnel.

Garin said nothing but stood up, put down his coffee and walked across to the map. He peered closely at the marks Bleriot had made.

`The tunnel looks to be blocked from about here,' said Bleriot, marking a third thick line across the tunnel.

`How far in is that?'

`About 12 kilometres,' said Bleriot.

`All clay?' asked Garin.

`As far as we can see,' Bleriot nodded.

`All the communications systems are out of order from here,' said Raspail, drawing a blue line next to Bleriot's third black line.

Garin still said nothing. He walked back to the table, picked up his coffee cup and sipped thoughtfully.

`I've made an announcement to the passengers we've got waiting,' said Roscoe. `I've told them there's been a technical problem in the tunnel.'

`What about the press?' asked Garin. `Does anyone outside this building know what's happened?'

`Not that I know of,' said Roscoe. `But we haven't made a great secret of it. All the people working here know we've got real problems.'

`Then the press will be here soon,' said Garin. `Send a telex to Paris and get them to send a press officer down here. We'll need someone to make statements, and keep journalists out of our hair.'

Roscoe left the room and went to send Garin's message.

`What's in the tunnel?' Garin asked Raspail, the safety officer.

`Three trains,' answered Raspail. `Two passengers and one freight.'

`All in the England-bound tunnel?' asked Garin, astonished.

`No,' answered Raspail, quickly. `One's in the other tunnel, about two miles out from the English coast.'

`Don't tell me that tunnel's blocked as well?' demanded Garin. `I thought it was just the England bound tunnel where we had the problem.'

`It is,' said Raspail. `We stopped the other train when we realised we had a problem.'

`And you've left the bloody thing where it is?'

Raspail swallowed. `We thought it would be safer than moving it until we knew exactly what was happening.'

Garin looked at his watch. `It's three hours since it happened,' he said. `Three bloody hours and you've just left the damned thing where it is?'

Raspail said nothing.

`If there is a major fault, moving the train could be dangerous,' said Bleriot in their defence.

`Have you tried getting the passengers out of there?'

Bleriot shook his head.

`What are they doing at Westernhanger?'

`They're waiting for us to make a decision,' said Bleriot.

`Have they tried getting in at the other end of the England bound tunnel?'

`The Westernhanger maintenance crew sent a remote control viewer in,' said Bleriot. `The whole tunnel is blocked about four kilometres from the English exit.'

`Clay?'

Bleriot shook his head, `Rock.'

`So pretty much the whole of the England bound tunnel is blocked with rock, and God knows what else?'

`That's right,' said Raspail softly.

`And we have a freight train and a passenger train in the middle of it all?'

`That's right,'" said Raspail. `Roscoe's got the passenger lists.'

`We're getting the infrasound and the audio equipment set up at our end,' said Bleriot.

`How many passengers on the train out of Westernhanger?' asked Garin.

`One hundred and seventy-five,' replied Raspail.

`Get them out of there now,' said Garin. `Send in anything but get them out. Leave the train where it is.'

2145 hrs. August 5th, The Tunnel Train

Inside the train it was hot and stuffy. Breathing was difficult and most of the passengers had discarded much of their clothing. The semi-hysterical arguments, proposals and accusations which had filled the first hour or so had died down. Now it was quiet and peaceful inside the compartment.

On the front row the Blacks were trying hard to reassure one another. To her own surprise, Mrs Black had turned out to be imbued with a surprising amount of spiritual strength. David Black, father of the family and reactionary enough still to consider himself responsible for their safety, had suffered two attacks of angina while waiting for the rescue he confidently expected. He had surreptitiously slipped several pills underneath his tongue at the onset of the first pains, and since then most of his energies had gone into fighting off the feeling of faintness and sickness which was threatening to overwhelm him.

Mrs Black felt really needed for the first time in ten years. At home they had all the usual domestic machinery, and, to satisfy her husband's social aspirations, they even had a cleaning woman. They couldn't really afford her and they didn't really need her, but David liked to be able to get his friends to ring him at home and leave messages with Mrs Fowler. The Blacks’ pantry was stocked from top to bottom with packets and tins of ready-made meals that required nothing more imaginative than the addition of water or milk to turn them into food ready for the plate. Her life had become a series of coffee mornings, committee meetings and hospital library sessions now that the children were at boarding school.

Here, stranded on the train, Mrs Black felt that her family needed her and she found the experience strangely satisfying. Somehow she felt guilty about her own lack of concern or fear. She would never have been able to admit it, but Mrs Black was actually enjoying the experience. She felt closer to her husband than she had felt for years.

On the row behind the Blacks the two doctors were quietly discussing the atmospheric conditions within the carriage. Both men knew well that breathing was becoming more and more difficult and that the oxygen available within the carriage would inevitably run out before many more hours had elapsed. Dr Singh had a pocket calculator with a luminous console.

`How big do you think this place is?' asked Chatwyn.

`How many rows of seats are there?'

`Five,' replied Chatwyn after a moment's thought.

`With each seat taking up about a metre altogether?'

`I should think so.'

`Allow at most an extra metre for the thickness of the seats themselves.'

`I'd counted that within the metre.'

`Really?'

`It's about a metre from the back of our seat to the back of the seat in front,' whispered Chatwyn.

`OK. So five metres.'

`That's the length. What about the width?'

`It's not more than half a metre per seat,' said Singh.

`Say three metres in width?'

Singh nodded. Chatwyn took his silence for agreement.

`And when we came in I had to bend my head. Allow an extra half-metre for the space above the door. That's about two and a half metres high.'

`So the volume is five times three times two and a half cubic metres?' said Chatwyn. Singh pressed the appropriate buttons. The green numbers lit up as he did so.

`Thirty seven and a half cubic metres,' said Singh.

`How many litres of air are there in a cubic metre?' asked Chatwyn.

`God knows,' said Singh. He took out his diary, switched on his pocket torch and studied the pages at the front. `I've never even looked at all this rubbish,' he muttered. `I've always wondered why the hell they put it in diaries.'

`Obviously for people trapped in tunnels,' said Chatwyn, drily.

Singh flicked over several pages before finding the one he wanted. `There are a thousand litres in a cubic metre,' he announced finally with some astonishment. To save the batteries he turned off his torch.

`So we've got 37,500 litres of air?'

`That's right.'

`How many litres of oxygen in that?'

`Air contains about 21% oxygen.'

`So we've got about 7,500 litres of oxygen.'

`Exactly.'

`How long will that last us?'

`The working man uses up about 2000 litres of air an hour. At rest he'll get by with a twentieth of that.'

`About 400 litres of oxygen an hour down to 20 litres an hour.'

`And we've got 7,500.'

`How many of us are there?'

`Fourteen,' said Chatwyn.

`That's about 536 litres of oxygen each,' said Singh, operating the calculator again.

`Say 500.'

`OK.'

`We've been in here for about two hours,' said Chatwyn very quietly.

`So if we all keep very still we've got at most another 23 hours.'

`At the very most,' agreed Chatwyn.

`That assumes we can use up every scrap of oxygen in the air we've got.'

`It would get very nasty long before then.'

`We'd be unconscious.'

`How long do you think before we go unconscious?'

`I don't know,' said Singh, shaking his head.

`We'll have to get out of this compartment.'

`You go across to the far seat,' suggested Singh. `I'll take a look at the wall on my side. Perhaps we can find a way out.'

`There's no door,' said Chatwyn. `I remember reading in a brochure they handed us that none of the compartments have doors or windows. It's a security measure to stop people throwing bombs out into the tunnel.'

`There must be some way out of this tin can,' said Singh.

`It isn't tin,' corrected Chatwyn. `The damned thing is mostly plastic.'

`We'll have a look at it anyway,' said Singh. He turned away and began to examine the carriage wall next to his seat.

* * *

The five passengers on the middle row of compartment 22 were silent. Alan Cannon was thinking of the dead woman he'd left behind in Paris. He had never paid much attention to religious dogma but it seemed to him that he was being punished. If the punishment would expiate his sins he would gladly accept it. For years he had been straddling the line between sanity and insanity. Now he felt himself slipping to one side; under pressure as a result of the death of the Montmartre whore, and his incarceration in the train, Cannon was close to cracking. Somehow he felt removed from the other passengers. He saw his role as simple and practical. It was his task to lead these other people out of danger.

* * *

Peter Cater was conscious of almost every second that ticked by. He could not help thinking of the bizarre and almost insignificant events which could have prevented his involvement in the disaster. If he had missed the train. If he'd broken his leg in Paris. If he'd been arrested for importing pornography. If one of the children had been ill he wouldn't have left home at all. There were a million `ifs' and no reasons. It was all so much of a waste, all so undeniably stupid.

He fingered the two coins which he had taken from his jacket pocket. They reminded him of the photographs he'd sold to Luillard. They both comforted him and alarmed him. The coins, together with the others he had stored in an empty paint tin in the garden shed at home, represented future freedom from intellectual imprisonment. But they also reminded him of the world into which he had strayed almost accidentally. A world of exploitation and immense rewards, in which the greedy all too often used the simple-minded to satisfy the perverted. Cater thought of his own wife and their children. None of them suspected that he was involved in this other world. What would be their reactions if they did find out? His wife, for all her liberal attitudes, would be shocked and humiliated. Cater recognised the weaknesses of others only too well; he had too many of his own.

And was it only the money which led him to the pornography? He had suspected for a long time that there was more to it than that. He had undeniably derived considerable pleasure from his adventures with Felicity.

What if he were to die now? What would he have left behind in the world? A family which would survive very well without him, a small company which would probably collapse or be swallowed by one of the publishing giants, with Hugo accepting a position with a comfortable pension and a company car, and a few hundred photographs of a woman enjoying fornication, sodomy, fellatio and cunnilingus with feigned relish. What a legacy to leave as a permanent epitaph!

Angrily and impulsively Cater threw the two Roman coins away from him into the darkness. He heard them hit the far wall of the compartment and fall down on the floor. Then he buried his head in his hands and wept silently and fiercely.

* * *

Miss Millington wasn't thinking of anything much at all. She had enjoyed her trip south. The journey to Greece had been pleasant and eventful. She had met plenty of kind and thoughtful people. For herself she had no regrets. She really didn't mind if she never got back to England again at all. Going home would only be a serious of anticlimaxes, meetings in the church hall, shopping at the local supermarket, collecting her pension at the post office. The future held no great hopes for her. No, that wasn't true; the future held no hopes at all. Miss Millington was not at all afraid of dying. In fact, she was ready for it. In some ways Miss Millington was the strongest of them all. She had only her memories of the past to lose and nothing could eradicate those.

* * *

James Gower and Hélène Albric were both conscious that their affair was over. It wasn't anything that either of them had said. They both just knew it. And now they found each other's company an embarrassment. They both wanted to be out of it all and away from each other. Neither of them could explain just why it was all over. Perhaps it was the proximity to death that gave them some extra insight into their own lives. James Gower knew that he did not love Hélène; nor did he want to spend the rest of his life with her. He found her attractive and he had enjoyed his affair with her. He recognised that. He wouldn't change any of it. But his affair had contained no love. No, that wasn't right. There had been love. He really had loved her. The problem had been that he just hadn't liked her. They had never really had anything in common except the gallery and that just wasn't enough. When he got back to England he'd find some way to sack her. He'd give her some money and make sure that she didn't lose out financially.

Hélène had, however, already decided that if they ever saw England again she would resign from the gallery. She'd never realised before that her relationship with Gower had been based on all the wrong foundations. She'd admired his knowledge, enjoyed knowing that she was taking him from his wife, and enjoyed his physical presence. He was a good lover. But it wasn't enough. There was nothing more. She didn't believe in him or anything he stood for. She didn't know what he stood for. Nothing, probably. She enjoyed the material benefits of being his mistress but that was all. She shared nothing secret with him. Now that they were sitting in a compartment under the sea she had absolutely nothing to say to him. There was nothing they could talk about. It was all so much froth and so insubstantial. She wanted more out of life.

* * *

On the row behind them Benito Tambroni sat nursing his wrist. He knew that the injury was serious; just about as serious as it could be. He hated any sort of injury, for he despised the weak and infirm. And what was it all for? Some wretched tournament in some damned insignificant sports hall in some dreary part of England, where he would have been matched against a series of incompetent amateurs anxious to show that they could take points off a former world champion.

Tambroni hadn't always been bitter and unhappy. As a young champion he'd always been kind and generous. Always ready to sign a boy's autograph book. Always happy to have his photograph taken with a couple of fans. Even willing to turn up at charity functions for no fee at all. As the years went by, however, and he found himself playing against the same sort of dull insipid competition year after year, he began to hate the game and himself. And now the game was trying to kill him. If it hadn't been for the tournament in England he wouldn't have been on the train at all. It was all quite typical, Tambroni decided, quite typical of the luck he was having.

* * *

Susan Roberts and Gaston Raenackers weren't speaking to each other. For a while Raenackers had buried his head in his mistress's breast. Then Susan Roberts began to tire of his wretchedness and his snivelling. She herself felt naked and vulnerable. She knew that everyone thought of her as being competent and efficient, but just for once she wanted to be feminine, incompetent and dependent. Why couldn't she have a real man upon whose chest she could rest her head for a change? Raenackers, she decided, was hardly a man at all. Just a sex object to be discarded. Not what she really wanted.

2215 hrs. August 5th, Sangatte, France

Raspail was having trouble persuading the manager at Westernhanger to do anything at all.

`This really isn't the sort of decision I can take,' complained the Englishman.

`I'm not asking you to take any decisions,' explained Raspail. `Simply do as I ask. I'm working under the authority of Philippe Garin.'

`My orders come from London,' argued the Westernhanger manager. `We have a procedure for policy-making decisions.'

`Listen to me very carefully,' said Raspail, his patience exhausted. `Three double engined, reversible hovercraft which can be driven into the tunnel on one engine and back out again on the other are on their way to you already from an excursion firm in Calais. They'll be nearly across the Channel by now. When they arrive I want you in the lavatory or screwing your secretary or somewhere quite unavailable. Those hovercraft are going to fly straight into your tunnel and they're picking up those passengers. If you don't want to take the decision to let them in, that's your business; but if you stop them flying in, you've got to make another decision and on the strength of that decision you could have a lot of blood on your hands. I'll make damned sure that everyone knows who was responsible for preventing the rescue.'

`Now wait a minute...,' began the Westernhanger manager indignantly.

`No. You wait. You just bloody well do as I've told you to do,' snapped an angry Raspail. He put down the telephone, wiped sweat from his forehead, and slumped back into his chair, eyes closed. It was hard to believe that just an hour or two earlier he'd been at home playing badminton in the garden.

2220 hrs. August 5th, Police Station, Montmartre, Paris

`Telephone call for you, Inspector,' called the young gendarme, holding one hand over the telephone mouthpiece and waving with his other hand to attract the inspector's attention.

`It's Dr Leboyer from the morgue,' the constable explained when the Inspector wearily turned from the coffee-vending machine and started in his direction.

`That woman you found in Montmartre, the old tart, said Leboyer. `You wanted a post mortem done on her quickly, remember?'

`I remember, doctor,' nodded Inspector Tissot. `Have you got anything exciting for me?'

`Nothing you'll find exciting. She died a natural death; heart attack. She had the worst coronary arteries I've seen in a woman for years.'

`Nothing else?'

`Nothing at all to interest you,' said Leboyer with a laugh. `She'd got fibroids and piles and an early cancer in her large bowel. She wasn't what I'd call a good insurance risk.' He laughed dryly, and put the telephone down.

`That's that then,' said Tissot to no one in particular. He crossed to the newly made up file which bore the dead woman's name, scrawled across the cover and threw it into an overflowing filing basket. The case was officially closed.

2230 hrs. August 5th, the Tunnel Train

The walls of compartment 22 were smooth plastic. There were no doors, no windows and no apparent weaknesses. Dr Chatwyn and Dr Singh met again when Dr Chatwyn shuffled across the compartment back to his original seat.

`We'll have to cut our way out,' whispered Chatwyn. He had mopped up moisture from the inside of the compartment wall with his shirt and was squeezing the resultant few drops of moisture into his mouth.

Singh agreed; he lit his pocket torch, stood up and shone the beam on to his own face. He spoke clearly so that everyone could hear him.

`Dr Chatwyn and I have been discussing our immediate plight and we feel that we need to make some sort of ventilation hole in the compartment wall.'

`What are we going to make a hole with?' asked James Gower. `Surely we would be better off staying here. We'll be rescued soon enough.'

`We don't know what's outside,' pointed out David Black. `We might be surrounded by water. If the tunnel roof has given in, we could have the English Channel out there. If you make a hole in the wall, water could come pouring in.'

Hélène Albric gasped audibly. Louise Black, who had stopped crying, started again.

`Really, David,' said Mrs Black sharply. `Do you have to be so tactless?'

`If we don't make some sort of ventilation hole,' explained Dr Singh patiently, `we'll run out of air. This compartment is airtight and we're using up the oxygen we've got. I don't think we can afford to just sit and wait for much longer.'

`I agree entirely with Dr Singh,' said Chatwyn. `I think we ought to do something.'

`I think we should get some ventilation and even try to get out of this damned compartment,' said Alan Cannon.

`I agree,' said Peter Cater.

`I'm always in favour of doing something,' said Miss Millington. She could not remember ever having such control over her destiny before.

`We should make the hole,' said Tambroni.

Having decided to puncture the compartment wall, the next problem was a more practical one; just how to do it.

`Has anyone got a knife?' asked Dr Chatwyn.

`I've got a pocket knife,' said James Black. He took out a scout's knife, the sort of weapon which contains a multitude of blades designed to enable Boy Scouts to remove stones from horses' hooves.

`We need something stronger than that, I'm afraid,' said Alan Cannon, who'd been investigating the compartment wall while the others had been arguing.

They all rummaged through their pockets. Tambroni had a small penknife, too, but that was even flimsier than the one James Black had produced. The most promising looking tool was a tin opener that Mrs Black produced from the bottom of her shopping bag.

`How the hell are you going to make a hole in the wall of a railway carriage with a tin opener?' demanded David Black. `I've never heard anything so ludicrous in all my life.'

`We could probably make some sort of hole with it if we had something to hammer it in with,' said Dr Singh. He'd been banging ineffectively at the tin opener with his closed fist.

Again the others hunted around looking for something to use as a hammer. Towards the back of the compartment, Benito Tambroni silently picked up his elongated leather and canvas sports bag. He unfastened the three leather buckles at the front of the bag and took out one of the metal-rimmed squash rackets he carried with him. Tenderly, almost lovingly, he caressed the racket. It seemed sacrilegious to use it for so profane a purpose as hammering a tin opener into the plastic wall of a railway carriage. Still...

`Let's try this,' he said suddenly. He levered himself across and over the intervening seats to the spot where Dr Singh had been hammering at the compartment wall. There was a small depression in the plastic where the point of the tin opener had marked the surface.

`Let me try,' Tambroni said. He took the tin opener from Dr Singh, turned the racket so that the metal edge faced the opener and using the racket as a hammer gave the tin opener half a dozen quick, sharp blows. He moved so quickly that Dr Singh did not even have time to direct the beam of their remaining torch on to the tin opener.

Within three or four minutes Tambroni had hammered the tin opener into the wall to a depth of three millimetres.

`How thick do you think this damned wall is?' he asked of no one in particular.

`I should think you're through,' said Dr Singh, examining the wall with his torch.

`Then let's make the hole a bit bigger,' said Tambroni. He hammered at the side of the opener, first from the left and then from the right. The pain in his wrist was agonising.

`Hey, don't make it bigger yet,' complained James Gower. `Let's see if water comes through first.'

Tambroni ignored him. Moments later he pulled the tin opener out of the compartment wall, grabbed the torch from Singh's hand and shone it directly into the hole. There was nothing but blackness but on his hand Tambroni could feel a stream of cool air under pressure.

`It's air!' he shouted. `There's no water.'

Inside the compartment there was a cheer. Miss Millington clasped her hands together and smiled at nothing and no one in particular. She knew it couldn't end just yet.

2242 hrs. August 5th, Sangatte, France

Philippe Garin had enough problems. Bleriot had returned from the investigation of the England-bound tunnel with the news that the tunnel was apparently impenetrable. The press officer in Paris had eventually been traced and ordered to organise a non-committal press conference, but already someone had leaked the news to a television company, and a camera crew and a reporter had arrived on the spot. So far they'd been limited to interviewing some of the stranded and impatient passengers in the terminal but Garin knew that they wouldn't be satisfied with that for long. And as if that was not enough, Garin now had political pressures to contend with.

Claude Louis Noiret had telephoned Garin at the Sangatte terminal at twenty-five minutes past nine that evening.

`I rang your apartment and then the Paris office,' he explained. `They told me I could get hold of you there. What the devil is going on?'

`I'm sorry you had so much difficulty,' apologised Garin, wondering why Noiret knew and who had told him.

`A friend of mine from the Foreign Ministry, a very highly placed official, has been on the telephone to me,' said Noiret, without waiting for any reply. `He was on his way to England with his family and they're stranded at Sangatte. They've apparently been sitting in their car waiting for some sort of explanation for hours.'

`There's been an accident,' explained Garin, gingerly.`A collapse of some sort.'

There was a silence from the other end.

`Are you still there?' asked Garin.

`I'm still here,' said Noiret. `What do you mean - a collapse?'

`We're still trying to find out what happened,' said Garin. `The tunnel is blocked. There's a passenger train in there. We haven't been able to get to the passengers.'

`A collapse?' replied Noiret. `How could there be a collapse?'

`I don't know yet,' said Garin.

`Are you sure about this?'

`I'm afraid so.'

`Why wasn't I told?'

`There didn't seem a great deal of point in bothering the board members at this time of night,' said Garin. `We're doing everything we can.'

`Do the press know?'

`If they don't they soon will.'

`I think you have badly mishandled this affair,' said Noiret stiffly. `Your first duty lies to the board. I should have been informed. Do you expect me to wait until I read about it in the papers to hear that the tunnel has collapsed?' Noiret had raised his voice. Towards the end of the sentence he was almost shouting.

`I'm sorry,' said Garin.

`Sorry!' said Noiret. `Who was on the train?'

`Who?'

`Were there any dignitaries on the train? Any politicians? Anyone important?'

`Not that I know of.'

`This is dreadful. Absolutely dreadful,' muttered Noiret.

`We shall have to call an emergency meeting of the board. We shall meet tomorrow.'

`Do you want me to see to it that the other board members are informed?' asked Garin.

`Yes. And I want you there personally,' said Noiret. I want an up-to-date report on the situation at Sangatte.' Garin's protests met with silence. Noiret had put the telephone down.

* * *

Fifteen minutes later Garin was speaking to Janine Boysee, the company's Marketing Director.

Garin explained briefly what had happened.

`Would you like me to get in touch with the other board members?' asked Janine Boysee.

`If you would,' said Garin gratefully. `Apologise to them on my behalf for not getting in touch with them sooner, but explain that I've been trying to get the poor devils who are trapped in the tunnel out alive.'

`Do you think there are any survivors?' asked Madame Boysee.

`I have to assume that there are,' said Garin. `Though if there is anyone trapped in there I don't know how long they can survive.'

`Good luck,' said Janine Boysee softly.

2302 hrs. August 5th, Zürich, Switzerland

News of the disaster in the Channel tunnel reached Herr Bruckner in Zürich shortly after it was broadcast on French television, reaching his elegant lakeside house automatically on the telex machine which was installed in his study. Not realising that Susan Roberts was on the train which was trapped, and not knowing that his firm's supply of ingredients for Angipax had been responsible for a large part of the explosion which had caused the disaster, Bruckner simply dropped the tape into a shredder which he kept next to the tape machine, and went to bed.

Dr Jackson, however, did know that the chemicals for the manufacture of Angipax were on the train leaving Sangatte for England at approximately 18.00 the previous evening. When he heard of the crash through a telephone call from an assistant at the Zürich offices, he immediately realised the significance of it. He telephoned Sangatte, confirmed that his firm's consignment had been on the trapped train, and drove straight back into the city from the villa just outside it. When he arrived in his office, he telephoned Jean Seno at St Quentin, and arranged for a substitute supply of erythrytyl tetranitrate and petanerythritol tetranitrate to be shipped by road to Calais and then taken across the Channel by specially chartered ferry.

Being a thorough and careful businessman, Dr Jackson then telephoned the European Credit Bank in Luxembourg and asked them to check whether or not Miss Roberts had arrived safely in England. They rang him back ten minutes later to tell him that Miss Roberts appeared to be on the train which was trapped in the tunnel.

They assured him, however, that there was no need for concern. A substitute for Miss Roberts, a Dr Thaier, had already been recalled from Vienna and would be flying to London directly. Briefing documents would meet him in London and the deal with the British car firm would go through as planned. Any potential inconvenience to ACR Drogues et Cie had been avoided.

Satisfied that all was well, Dr Jackson left his office, gave instructions that he was to be called again in case of any further emergency, and drove back to his villa where he drank one small glass of rather good brandy before going to bed quite alone.

PART THREE

0005 hrs. August 6th, Nottingham, England

Mrs Cater's mother had arrived and was making another pot of tea. The children were all in bed and fast asleep; Mrs Cater's father had made numerous additional telephone calls to the emergency number. There was still no information about Peter.

Julie had wanted to drive to Dover, to the tunnel terminal, but her mother had stopped her.

`What can you do?' she asked. `You're better off here. As soon as there is any news, we'll drive you down there.'

So they sat and waited.

It was unbearably hot inside the train. The passengers had stripped to their underwear. Singh and Tambroni had been working at the thick green plastic wall of compartment 22 for what seemed like hours. Using Tambroni's squash racket they'd hammered the tin opener through the wall more than a dozen times, making a small ring of holes about the size of a man’s hand.

`Wait a moment,' said Tambroni, taking the racket from Dr Singh when the ring of holes was completed. `Let's try to knock that centre piece out now.'

All four of the passengers who had been sitting or bending near the spot where they'd concentrated their effort had noticed that powerful streams of air had been pouring through the small holes they had made. They had all assumed that the air outside the compartment had been under greater pressure than the air inside the compartment. It had not been a discovery any of them had found either heartening or worrying. It was enough for them to know that it was air and not water outside their trapped compartment.

None of them was prepared for what happened next. The ring of plastic which they had been trying to cut out of the wall was being hammered outwards by Tambroni. But that did not stop it flying inwards when it finally came loose and broke free from the rest of the wall. Tambroni, who might have expected to find his squash racket handle flying forwards, out of the compartment, instead found it being forced backwards. And the irregular, sharp edged disc of heavy plastic flew inwards, into the compartment with horrific force. It sliced through Tambroni’s right wrist and hit Dr Singh just above his cricoid cartilage. It stopped only when it crashed against the anterior side of Dr Singh’s cervical spine.

No one had much of an idea what had happened. Dr Chatwyn's torch had been blasted out of his hand by the stream of air which rushed into the compartment and they were all immediately plunged into unrelieved darkness. Most of the people in the compartment were immediately sprayed with a shower of blood from both Singh and Tambroni, and since, in the dark one fluid feels very much like another, nearly all of them were convinced immediately that they were about to be drowned.

The result was that for the second time since they had all been trapped together, the passengers in compartment 22 panicked quite completely.

The panic was accentuated by the fact that as the air from outside the compartment continued to rush into the compartment, it whipped up everything light inside and whirled it around and around. Clothes, odd bits of paper, fragments of food and Dr Singh's blood circled round and round their heads. The blood, whipped into a fine spray as it spurted from his several arteries, kept them all convinced that they were about to drown. James Gower screamed that the water had reached his knees and tried to stand up on his seat. Hélène Albric, to her own surprise, found herself perhaps cooler and calmer than anyone. She listened to James Gower’s screams of anguish, knew very well that there was not even water up to her ankles, and realised that she despised him. Benito Tambroni could not understand why his right hand seemed to have lost all power. With his left hand he explored first his arm and then the immobile hand. He did so calmly, less excited by the events of the last few moments than anyone else in the compartment.

It was Hélène Albric who realised that the fluid falling on her was not water but blood. Trying to brush away a few drops that had fallen on her face, she noticed how sticky and gelatinous they were. She thought that perhaps it was mud rather than water and held her fingers, which she had used to brush away the fluid, to her nose and sniffed. The she licked tentatively at her fingers.

`It's blood!' she whispered in horror, to herself more than anyone else. At first no one heard her. `It's blood,' she shouted, her newly found calm evaporating.

Her words stilled her fellow travellers.

`It's not water, it's blood,' shouted Hélène again.

`Someone's been cut,' said Dr Chatwyn. `Don't panic.'

He felt himself panicking and his words were intended as much to calm himself as to calm the others. What if he had to cope with a real injury? It was years since he'd even seen blood. Then it had been his own. What did you do to stop bleeding? A tourniquet? No, that was old-fashioned, these days you just applied pressure. Simply pressed on the bleeding site until the blood clotted. Then what? And in the dark! Perhaps, he thought, perhaps Dr Singh knows more about these things. He turned to where his companion should have been, reached across for him and found his fingers sliding across a blood-soaked chest. He withdrew his fingers in horror.

`I've lost the torch,' he whispered hoarsely. `Look for the torch.'

The others reached instinctively for the floor, scrabbling for Dr Chatwyn's torch. Miss Millington found it eventually. It had fallen on to the seat beside her. She fiddled with the switch but could not make it work. She passed it forwards, whispering: `Here, here!' to guide Chatwyn's fingers to it.

The torch was broken. The bulb and glass had been smashed. Chatwyn remembered his own torch, which had died an hour earlier. He took it out of his pocket, emptied the useless batteries out of it, and replaced them with the batteries from Dr Singh's broken torch.

Then he switched it on. By sheer accident the beam of the torch when it came on was aimed directly at Dr Singh's head. Dr Singh was lying back across two of the seats, with his head hanging over the back of one seat, and the gaping hole in his neck made all the more obvious for that fact. Blood still spurted and bubbled out of the severed vessels. The plastic disc was still half-embedded in flesh. Mrs Black fainted and James Gower was sick. At that moment Tambroni discovered why it was that he had no strength at all in his right hand.

0135 hrs. August 6th Sangatte, France

Although it seemed much longer, it was seven hours since the explosion. News of the crash had been broadcast on the late programmes of all European Television networks. The reports had included an interview with Claude Louis Noiret, who spoke confidently and brightly about hopes for the trapped passengers. It had been, he said with all the assurance of a man with no facts at all to impede him, a natural disaster which no planning could have foreseen. It had been a unique and unfortunate setback, he admitted, but he was certain that the tunnel would soon be in operation once more. Moreover, he pointed out, the number of people who had travelled through the tunnel was already to be counted in hundreds of thousands, and an accident involving a small number of people was unfortunately a statistical inevitably.

This last statement, intended to allay fears and soften the news, proved disastrous. The President of the French Travellers' Association, a consumer pressure group formed to try to influence the activities of all forms of organisation concerned with the transport and accommodation of travellers of all kinds, issued a press statement in which he deplored the attitude of Monsieur Noiret. It looked as if a major row was brewing; and anxious, as ever, for the full story, the international press sent teams of reporters and photographers to Sangatte. By midnight, there were no less than thirteen television crews camped in the car park outside the control room, and every hotel in Sangatte had received telephone calls and cables from journalists requiring rooms. One American news magazine hired an aeroplane to fly a team of six reporters and photographers across the Atlantic, and it was rumoured that a television company had hired a submarine fitted with facilities for filming underwater.

It was with this as the background that a meeting of all the Channel Tunnel Company's experts began at thirty-five minutes past one in the morning.

`We can begin with some good news,' said Raspail when they'd all settled. He didn't wait for Garin to give him permission to speak. They all recognised that there were far more important things to worry about than formality or protocol.

The other six pairs of eyes turned towards him.

`I've just heard from Westernhanger,' said Raspail.

`They've managed to get all the passengers off the France-bound train. There were no real problems and no casualties. The only snag seems to be that the manager there has reported to London that I was rude and aggressive.' He shrugged and a half-smile appeared on his face. It might have been a defensive half-smile, but Garin nodded his general approval and the smile broadened.

`Do we know where the train is yet? asked Garin.

`We've got it more or less pinpointed,' said Bleriot.

`The total distance between Sangatte and Westernhanger is about 64 kilometres. The tunnel, of course, is 48 kilometres long and the distance from the terminal here is about the same as the distance in England - something like 8 kilometres. The tunnel runs underground for 7 kilometres on our side of the Channel before it goes underneath the Channel itself. On the English side, there are 5 kilometres of tunnel underground but not underneath by the sea.'

No one spoke but they all watched Bleriot as he studied his notes.

`Use the map,' suggested Martini.

`Right,' said Bleriot. He stood and moved swiftly across the huge plan of the tunnel.

`We think the freight train is stuck approximately here,' said Bleriot, pointing on the map. `About 20 kilometres into the tunnel. The passenger train is almost directly behind it.'

`If we can get some infrasound equipment in there,' said Garin, `we could find out just where the train is.'

`What's it like from the English side?' asked Bleriot.

`The English-bound tunnel?'

Bleriot nodded.

`I've got one of the hovercraft crews who took off the passengers from the France-bound train to check it out,' said Raspail. He looked at his watch. `I should hear from them fairly soon.'

`Do we know what caused the collapse?' asked Garin.

Bleriot shrugged his shoulders. `No idea.'

`No suggestion it was deliberate?'

`None,' said Bleriot. `How would anyone blow it up? The security is meticulous.'

`What about natural causes?' asked Garin.

`No,' said Raspail. `I don't think so. Definitely not.' He shook his head wearily to emphasise the denial.

`Why are you so sure?'

`We've been in touch with seismological centres in both Paris and London,' said Raspail. `I spoke to people in both centres. They picked up the explosion but there was nothing before the explosion.'

`What about a natural gas pocket?'

`No.' said Bleriot. `Our surveys would have shown one if there was one there.'

`So we're back where we started?' said Garin.

`I suppose it could have been an industrial cargo,' said Raspail. `Some freight that blew up.'

`We don't carry explosives,' said Martini. `All freight is carefully checked.'

`Can you get us a list?' asked Garin. `I'd like to see the freight manifest. With a breakdown.'

`Certainly,' said Martini. `It'll take me ten minutes.'

`Why don't we have a fifteen minute break?' suggested Garin. `I'd like the freight manifest,' he began, looking at Martini and holding up one finger of his left hand. `Some idea of what it's like in the tunnel on the English side of the trapped train.' A second finger. `Some idea of when we can get an infrasound report from this side if we can get a hovercraft in there on top of the mud.' A third finger. `I'd like another fifty volunteers to be on call,' he said, looking at Harnaud, the other duty manager. `Finally,' he added, holding up his thumb. `I'd like a press release ready. I'll have to make some sort of statement to the press.' He sighed. `Fifteen minutes, gentlemen,' he said. He stood up and headed for the door. He felt very, very tired. He turned.`And if anyone has any bright ideas about how we're going to get in there and get people out, I'd love to hear them,' he added.

* * *

They met again fifteen minutes later. Martini had arranged for a huge plateful of steaming hot croissants to be put on the table together with a pile of plates and linen napkins. The percolator bubbled cheerfully with a fresh supply of coffee.

`Right,' said Garin. `Let's get on with it. `He picked a croissant from the pile and dug a knife into a potful of English marmalade. His face was showing signs of the strain and tension under which he had been working for the last six hours or so.

He turned to Martini. `Have you got that freight manifest?'

Martini nodded, picked up a piece of yellow paper from the table in front of him and began to read from it.

`Thirty tons of fruit, twenty five tons of tea, spare parts for Renault cars, mainly exhaust pipes and radiators, 15,000 motor car tyres, 25,000 copies of each of three EEC publications on import/export regulations in English, French and German; materials for the manufacture of a heart drug being sold under the trade name of Angipax, 15,000 plastic dolls, sixteen tons of washing machine motors and two hundred racing cycles. That's it.' He put the piece of paper back down on the table in front of him and sat back. He threw out his arms. `I can't see anything there that could cause an explosion,' he said. `All these manifests have to be double checked. I'd stake my job on the fact that nothing has been switched or added.'

`You have no choice about that,' said Garin bluntly. `If someone has been switching cargoes and sending explosives through the tunnel we can all start reading the situations vacant advertisements.'

This stark warning was greeted with silence.

`Anyone got any bright ideas about getting into that train?' asked Garin.

`What about drilling down through the sea bed?' suggested Martini.

Bleriot shook his head. `We'd get into the tunnel,' he agreed. `But we don't know whether there are any survivors, if there are any. The chances of us hitting the right part of the tunnel are infinitesimal. And there's the real risk that when we break through, the tunnel would collapse even more. Then we'd just stand a chance of killing off anyone who's left.' He shook his head sadly.

`If we're going to get anyone out,' said Bleriot. `It'll be through the connecting tunnels.'

`I agree,' said Garin. `Concentrate on those. If we can get into the pilot tunnel and then find a connecting tunnel that gets us from the pilot tunnel into the main England-bound tunnel, we'll at least have some sort of idea of whether there is anyone alive in there.' He stood up. `I'll join you in twenty minutes,' he promised. He turned to the press officer, `Have you got that release ready?'

0300 hrs. August 6th, the Tunnel Train

It is not easy to forget how close death may be when there is an exsanguinated human body within touching distance. And when that body's blood is spread over everything in your world then it is painfully clear just how close death is. Dr Chatwyn had switched off his pocket torch within seconds of identifying the body of his former companion. There was no mystery about the death, no need to investigate for signs of life and no one expected Chatwyn to be able to do anything to restore Dr Singh to life. Slowly, as the pressure inside the compartment began to equal the pressure outside the tunnel, the whirling miscellany of aerial flotsam began to subside. Papers and clothes slowly descended - arbitrarily, so that the scarf which Peter Cater had bought his wife ended up at Louise Black's feet and Miss Millington's cardigan ended up on an empty seat next to Susan Roberts.

Compartment 22 had been trapped in a short section of tunnel with rock and mud sealing off the tunnel in both directions. About fifty metres of tunnel roof had held and remained in place. In front of compartment 22, the other compartments and the freight train were smashed and crushed unrecognisably. Only the last compartment - 22 - was relatively undamaged although even it had been knocked on to one side so that it leant crazily against the tunnel wall. It was through the wall which was leaning towards the tunnel door that Tambroni and Singh had made their small air vent. The pressure of the trapped air, caught between the tunnel walls and the mud and rock which had fallen in both directions, had been quite enough to cause Dr Singh's death and Benito Tambroni's injury.

Behind compartment 22, in the direction from which they had come, the tunnel was blocked by a massive roof fall which had been caused by the blast from the freight train explosion. The blast had somehow left compartment 22 untouched and gone on to destroy several hundred metres of tunnel roof, allowing clay to fall through into the tunnel.

To understand why this should have happened it is necessary to understand that the cross-Channel tunnel did not simply go down to a certain depth, go under the Channel and then come up again. When the route for the tunnel had been planned, the investigating engineers had gone to a great deal of trouble to measure the strength of the rock through which they were tunnelling, and the depth of the sea above. For the floor of the channel is more like a mountain range than a swimming pool bottom. There are valleys as well as mountains, small hills and minor depressions. And, just as in any stretch of land, there are weaknesses and breaks, gulleys and hollows.

When the tunnel had been built it had been designed to avoid weak spots, to go round dangerous areas where extra pressures might be exerted on the tunnel roof or walls, and to go through the most suitable sort of rock. Inevitably, therefore, the tunnel sometimes went up on a slight incline and sometimes went down. The trains sometimes had to climb and sometimes descend.

About a quarter of a kilometre behind the rear portion of the passenger train, in other words the trailing end of compartment 22, the tunnel roof had been opened by the repair engineers who had been attending to wiring faults. The engineers had already abandoned their work for the day when the explosion occurred, but they had left one of the panels which sealed off the roof out of position. The panels served merely to hide and protect the electrical systems within the roof and since there was no chance at all of any passenger catching a glimpse of the missing roof panel, the fact that it was left propped up on the metal catwalk seemed of little significance to the repair crew. It was, however, crucial to the passengers trapped in compartment 22. When the blast from the explosion reached the open part of the roof it happened to be getting to the bottom of a slight incline. The air rushed into the ceiling compartment and immediately ripped off several dozen other ceiling panels further along the line. With the panels, the blast tore away all the electrical wiring and air conditioning equipment. It also triggered off the automatic sprinkler devices, designed to come into operation in the event of a fire. There was now no fire, but the finely adjusted valves which would have allowed water to come through if heat had melted their sealing mechanisms, simply disappeared; they were snapped off and blown several hundred metres down the tunnel.

The explosive blast had also ripped two metal segments out of the tunnel roof. With those two segments, several thousand tons of loose clay had fallen into the tunnel. In terms of the total amount of rock and earth which lay on top of the tunnel roof, the amount which fell in was relatively insignificant. It was, however, enough to block the tunnel for several kilometres. And the water that had turned that clay into mud had come not from the English Channel, nor from any subterranean lake hidden deep below the Channel bed, but from the sprinklers which were carefully designed to deliver several thousand litres of water every minute.

So the tunnel behind compartment 22, which slowly descended to a depth of forty-five metres below the depth of the tunnel at the point where compartment 22 was lying, and which then ascended again to the same level nearer to the tunnel entrance, was blocked with several thousand tons of mud. So far that particular blockage had claimed no victims.

Meanwhile all that the passengers in compartment 22 knew was that they were trapped in the dark, under the English

Channel and that with them was the body of a man which had been partially decapitated by a flying disc of ragged plastic. It was, for them, quite enough.

* * *

Slowly Tambroni had investigated the extent of the damage to his wrist. The artery, by some bizarre miracle, had remained undamaged but it was about the only major structure to have escaped. Tendons, muscles and veins had all been torn apart by the flying plastic disc. Without being able to see it Tambroni knew that he'd probably never use that hand again. He'd certainly never play squash again. He tied it tightly with the sleeve torn from his shirt.

Oddly enough it didn't bother him. It really didn't seem to matter at all. It was almost a relief; an excuse to escape from the interminable squash circuit for ever. Never again to have to play against over-confident amateurs, never again to find himself socialising with obese executives and their pathetic, status-conscious wives.

* * *

Miss Millington was thinking of a September day half a century ago. She and her fiancé had been at Weston-Super-Mare for the day. They'd gone there on the train with thirty-five others from the local church dramatic group, and it had been the first time that the two of them had the opportunity to be alone for more than a few hurried minutes behind the stage.

Before they caught the train back, Ruby's fiancé had bought her a cheap metal ring with a glass `sapphire' in its tin setting. He'd put the ring on the third finger of her left hand with all the solemnity of a Bishop performing a marriage ceremony. It was, he explained, only a temporary measure. As soon as he had saved up there would be a real ring, made of real gold and with a real sapphire. Ruby didn't much mind about that. She couldn't have been any happier. And it was after he'd bought her the ring that he'd kissed her. Ruby could still feel his lips pressed on hers with all the innocent urgency of youth. They'd held each other tightly in a bus shelter on the front, and had to run all the way back to the railway station. The others had teased them and wanted to know where they'd been. Ruby hadn't dared wear the ring when anyone was looking, and when she got home she didn't tell her mother.

In reality there never had been a real ring. There never had been a wedding. And that kiss and cuddle in the bus shelter was all Ruby had to remember of her fiancé. Except for the glass sapphire, of course. She still had that. In the darkness Ruby quietly opened her handbag and reached into the small frayed silk pocket in the lining. Her fingers found the ring straight away and the third finger of her left hand slipped into it easily, as it had done a thousand times before. This time, however, Ruby left the ring in place and firmly shut her handbag. The click startled her and she looked around as if to see if anyone had heard and was staring at her. With her ring on her left hand she could feel her cheeks blushing.

Ruby, at least, was ready for whatever might come.

* * *

Moving Dr Singh's body out of the compartment was more difficult than anyone had foreseen. The hole that he and Benito Tambroni had made was far too small to allow a body through, and Alan Cannon chipped away at the edges of the hole for forty minutes before making it large enough for them to try again.

`How long have we got before the rigor mortis sets in?' asked Cannon.

`In this heat I have no idea,' said Dr Chatwyn.

`He seems stiff already,' said Cannon, struggling to cope with Dr Singh's seemingly infinite number of arms.

`This is crazy,' said Peter Cater suddenly, abandoning his attempt to push Dr Singh's feet through the hole they'd made. `Why don't we get out of the carriage and leave him behind? If we get out we can perhaps escape.'

Just then Dr Chatwyn's torch expired for the last time. He'd been keeping it trained on the hole while Tambroni and Cannon tried to push Dr Singh's body through. Slowly the light, which had been gently, almost imperceptibly, fading, gave out. They were in blackness again.

`What about the matches?' shouted Cannon. `Get the matches.'

`There are forty-seven,' said Miss Millington who had faithfully counted their stock of matches when the group had pooled their resources earlier.

`How long can we get light for with forty-seven matches?' asked Tambroni.

`About fifteen or twenty seconds a match,' said Alan Cannon. `At a guess I'd say about ten minutes.'

`We could make torches,' said Miss Millington.

`Torches?' said someone.

`Alcohol burns,' said Miss Millington. `We could make old-fashioned torches with bits of cloth and sticks. Dowse them in alcohol and set fire to them.'

`I've got some magazines,' said Peter Cater. `We could make torches out of those. Just roll them up.'

`They won't burn,' said Alan Cannon. `Magazines never burn. I've tried burning them when making bonfires in the garden.'

`Rip out the pages and then twist them together tightly,' said Cater. `They'll burn then.'

`We ought to wait until one of us has got outside before we try that,' Said Dr Chatwyn. `If we start burning up our oxygen in here we might be in trouble. We need to know how much air space there is outside.'

`That's no problem,' said Tambroni. He pushed his head through the hole they'd made, wriggled his shoulders through and then took hold of the outside of the compartment with his left hand. Then he pulled himself through, falling backwards to the ground outside. Since the compartment was angled against the tunnel wall he had only a couple of feet to fall. He bit his lip as he banged his right wrist.

`See how far you can walk,' said Cannon.

`Don't go too far,' shouted James Gower.

`Take some matches,' said Miss Millington. She passed one of the boxes of matches out to Tambroni who took the box gratefully, removed a match, lit it slowly and carefully, and handed back the box for Miss Millington to hold. When he held up the match he could see that for several feet in each direction the tunnel was clear. He turned back to the hole and called through: `Pass me a couple of those magazines.' The twist of paper that he lit with the second match burnt with a thick black smoke but it provided light for long enough for Alan Cannon and Dr Chatwyn to clamber out of the compartment.

Inside, at the front of the compartment, Mr Black was beginning to sweat. The pain which had started in the centre of his chest had spread to his jaw and was beginning to spread down his left arm. He could feel his fingers tingling.

Peter Cater was next out of the compartment. He helped Miss Millington through. Miss Millington lit another match and set fire to a twist of screwed up magazine pages to give them light. Then came Susan Roberts, Hélène Albric, and Louise and James Black. Gaston Raenackers and James Gower followed that four. Inside there remained only Mr and Mrs Black. Mrs Black realised that something was wrong with her husband only when she heard him gasping for breath. She turned and felt for his arm, only to find him clutching his chest with both hands. She bent forwards and in the light from the burning magazines saw the beads of sweat on his forehead.

`David?' she whispered.

`Go on,' said Mr Black with obvious difficulty.

`What is it?'

`Just a pain.'

`Where?'

Mr Black said nothing.

`Can you move?'

`No,' croaked her husband.

`My husband's ill,' shouted Mrs Black in a panic. `The doctor, please come, doctor!' she called as James Gower climbed, slowly and reluctantly, out through the hole. When Gower had finally managed to extricate himself from the ragged plastic around the edges of the hole, Dr Chatwyn began to climb back through. He went to satisfy Mrs Black and because he felt he ought to go, rather than because he expected to be able to do anything useful. He'd never even seen anyone have a heart attack and he had no idea what to do. Nor did he have a single item of equipment with him. The free sample tablets of Angipax lay forgotten in his briefcase.

As it happened, Dr Chatwyn would probably have been able to do nothing useful if he'd been equipped with oxygen, defibrillator and the usual armamentarium of drugs. By the time Dr Chatwyn got to him, Mr Black was dead, and there were two lifeless bodies in compartment 22.

0340 hrs. August 6th, Sangatte, France

Bleriot's crew had returned from the tunnel. They had gone into the relatively open France bound tunnel to try to find a way through to the other, blocked tunnel. The deputy engineer had himself met them as they had emerged from the murky distance in their tiny hovercraft. The foreman of the crew was the same man who had led the repair crew into the tunnel a few hours previously to repair the faulty electrical system. He was accompanied by the same two crew members; their football match completely forgotten.

`We can get through,' said the foreman, clambering out of the craft as the younger of his two crew members turned off the power. He was covered from head to toe in thick, dark mud and he walked with considerable difficulty. He'd been lying in the hovercraft with only a few centimetres between his back and the tunnel roof for over an hour.

Bleriot reached out and grasped him by the shoulders, ignoring the mud. `Are you sure?'

The foreman nodded.

Bleriot turned and ran towards the small group of men standing a few metres away, just out of the muddy pools which stretched out of the tunnel entrance. Garin, who was among them, saw the look of excitement on his face and began to move towards him.

`We've pinpointed it,' said Bleriot. He explained to Garin what the crew had discovered.

`Let's go then,' said Garin, turning and half walking, half running across to the exit point from the France-bound tunnel which lay a few dozen metres away. They stumbled as they ran across the neat grass divide, and then across the entrance to the blocked pilot or service tunnel. Less than five minutes later they were driving speedily into the France-bound tunnel. It took them just eleven minutes to reach connecting tunnel 49, at the entrance to which one of Raspail's assistants was waiting.

The connecting tunnel, fifteen metres long and two metres in diameter was designed to allow maintenance crews to move freely into and out of the pilot tunnel. It was just wide enough to allow one man at a time to walk along it, and Raspail, Bleriot and Garin followed the assistant as he led the way towards the pilot tunnel. The connecting tunnel ended on a small catwalk which ran the entire length of the pilot tunnel. On the other side of the pilot tunnel there was another catwalk. The pilot tunnel itself had a single rail down the centre upon which there usually ran a works engine, a small vehicle which carried the crews and their repair equipment. Steps led down from each connecting tunnel into the pilot tunnel and on the other side steps led up to the opposite connecting tunnel. It was of course possible for repair crews to enter either main tunnel from the pilot tunnel.

That, at least, was the purpose of the pilot tunnel under normal circumstances. It had, however, suffered badly in the explosion. Garin and his colleagues found themselves facing a massive blockage of rock. Their torches picked out an apparently solid wall completely separating them from the connecting tunnel on the other side of the pilot tunnel.

`I thought you said the pilot tunnel was clear here?' said Garin, turning around angrily to face Bleriot.

`It's clearer,' said Bleriot defensively. `We think we can find a way through here. Further back, the pilot tunnel is completely blocked with mud. There's just no way through at all.'

`Where's the train?' asked Raspail.

`About a thousand metres in that direction,' said Bleriot, pointing to the right, diagonally across the pilot tunnel and back towards France.

`Let's get on then,' said Garin. It seemed an impossible task.

`We've got a man in there already,' said Bleriot. He shone his torch downwards until it caught a bright yellow nylon rope. He followed the rope along until it disappeared into a small gap between three large chunks of rock. `He's been in there for twenty minutes now.'

0345 hrs. August 6th, The Tunnel Train

It would not have been so bad if Mrs Black had become hysterical. Someone could have slapped her face and quietened her down. But her husband's death had shocked her into immobile silence. She sat by his side, hands clenched, staring straight ahead of her. After a tantalising taste of the purpose of her life, Mrs Black's world had suddenly been shattered.

Benito Tambroni and Alan Cannon helped James Black back into the compartment to be with his mother. Louise wouldn't go.

`Come on mum,' pleaded James, with tears in his eyes. `Come with us.' He was glad that it was dark and he couldn't see her or his father. She didn't respond and he had no idea what to do. He leant forwards in the dark and spoke again, this time more urgently. `Come on, mum,' he begged. `We can't stay in here. Everyone else has got out.'

Mrs Black said nothing and didn't move.

`She won't answer me,' sobbed James, turning back to the hole in the compartment wall. Outside he could see a small flickering light as Tambroni lit another match. It was the eleventh to go up in flames. `Can't you get her to come out?' said James to Dr Chatwyn.

`She's in shock,' said Dr Chatwyn blankly. `There isn't anything I can do.' For the hundredth time in an hour he cursed his own clinical incompetence. He felt certain in his heart that he was going to let these people down. They trusted him, his title gave him their respect, but he knew no more than they did about what to do with a woman in severe shock. `Come out and leave her.'

`We've left our spare clothes inside,' said Tambroni unexpectedly and angrily. His hand was beginning to cause him a good deal of pain.

`We don't need them,' said Miss Millington. `It's still hot out here.'

`We need them to make torches of some kind,' explained Tambroni. `We've got enough matches to last us a few minutes more but after that we're in darkness unless we can make some kind of torch. Magazine pages don't last long enough.'

`There's whisky under my seat,' said James Gower, who hated the dark more than he disliked giving up his whisky.

`I've got some vodka,' said Tambroni. He put his head and shoulders through the gap and wriggled back into the compartment. Without moving more than a few metres away from the hole, he picked up a bottle of whisky, a bottle of vodka and an armful of clothes. He passed the two bottles out to waiting hands, tossed out the clothes and then wriggled back outside again.

`You need something to use as a handle,' said Alan Cannon. `You can't just set fire to clothes.'

`I've got a small folding umbrella,' offered James Gower. `I hope my insurance company pays up for all this,' he added, `I'll expect you to support my claim.'

`Don't worry,' said Tambroni. `If we get out of here I'll buy you a new umbrella. Where is it?'

`Next to my seat. In my briefcase.'

Tambroni wriggled back into the compartment for a second time. The briefcase was made of expensive leather and locked with a small combination lock. Tambroni handed it out to Gower.

`If we wrap a few shirts and things around it that should be enough,' said Alan Cannon, taking the umbrella from Gower and stooping down to rummage on the floor for pieces of clothing. He wrapped a shirt round the umbrella tightly and then added a T-shirt and a vest.

`We need something to fasten it with,' he said.

`Here, use this,' said Susan Roberts. She pulled up her blouse, reached behind her and unfastened her brassiere. Then she took the umbrella and its new wrapping from Cannon and tied her bra around it several times tightly. She managed to clip the bra fastener securely together so that it kept the other clothes firmly attached to the umbrella.

`Now a little vodka,' said Cannon, picking up one of the bottles. He unfastened the foil at the top of the bottle, removed the cork and sprinkled drops of liquid on to the home-made torch. When he'd finished, he surreptitiously held the bottle to his lips and took a quick swallow.

`Stand back,' said Cannon. The others moved away from where they thought he was. Tambroni, who had by now clambered back out of the compartment shuffled cautiously away. In the light of the match they could see the odd-looking bundle they had made. It seemed dangerously loose and unsafe. Cannon held the match to the top of the torch and waited until a small fold of shirt material began to smoulder. The flames were small and slow to spread. But they did at least provide some small steady source of light. Thick black smoke curled up from the umbrella as Cannon held it.

`You haven't put enough alcohol on it,' said Tambroni. `Where's the vodka?'

`Leave it!' shouted Cannon. `It'll get going in a minute. Anyway, it'll last longer like this.'

Slowly the light from their home-made torch spread until it enabled them to see each other fairly clearly in the tunnel. They could see that the space in which they were all crouching ran for the full length of the compartment. They were crowded into a triangular space made up of the floor and one wall of the tunnel together with the sloping face of the compartment as it leant against the tunnel wall.

Each one of them was shocked by what they saw. Since they'd been trapped in the compartment all they'd seen had been quick glimpses of each other. Now they had time to observe and notice.

Alan Cannon, Peter Cater and Benito Tambroni were all dressed only in their socks and underpants. Their bodies, Tambroni's muscular and lean, Cannon's portly and hairy, Cater's slim and white, were all heavily speckled with blood. In addition, Tambroni's body was covered with scores of small scratches and grazes obtained on his journeys through the hole in the compartment wall. And his right arm ended in a bloody mass of shirt.

Miss Millington wore a long white slip which covered her from neck to knees. All she'd taken off was her dress and her overcoat. She hoped that it had not been among the pile of clothing that Tambroni had thrown out for burning. Astonishingly she still wore her hat, a pale pink little thing with a small crêpe rosette on the front of it. Louise and James Black were holding hands. Louise was dressed in a bikini pants and bra and her brother wore only his boxer shorts. He'd taken off his socks. James Gower had taken off only his jacket. He still wore pinstripe trousers and a waistcoat and there were great dark, damp stains of sweat all over both garments. Hélène Albric had taken off her jumper and skirt and her tights. She wore only black silk panties. James Gower liked her to dress without a bra and since they'd met she'd hardly ever worn one. She had already decided that if and when they escaped from the mess they were in she would never again go bra-less.

Dr Chatwyn, wearing just his underpants, was naked to the waist (it was his shirt and vest that were burning). Raenackers had on a string vest. Susan Roberts had always meant to tell him about it but she'd never got around to it. It looked so stupid under those diaphanous nylon shirts he always wore. She, like Hélène Albric, was bra-less. Her bra was wrapped around the smouldering umbrella which Alan Cannon was holding and which was providing the light by which they were all able to see one another. While Hélène Albric stood with her arms across her chest in modesty, Susan Roberts made no attempt to hide herself. Instead she gazed steadily and hungrily at Tambroni, who recognised the look.

Inside the compartment Mrs Black had still not moved. She sat quite still in the darkness, with her husband's body a few inches away from her.

0730 hrs. August 6th, Zürich, Switzerland

It was half-past seven the following morning when Dr Jackson remembered that he had authorised the withdrawal of a vial of smallpox virus from the ACR Basle Laboratory and that the vial had been handed to Dr Singh by Ernest Taylor in Paris. It took him less than fifteen minutes to contact the Channel Tunnel Company in Paris and discover the emergency telephone number, provided to give relatives and friends information about the disaster, that Dr Singh had been a passenger on the doomed tunnel train.

He sat thoughtfully for a moment before ringing for his personal secretary.

Before lunch, all supplies of smallpox virus in the Basle Laboratory had been destroyed and the laboratory's records had been adjusted accordingly. If anyone ever investigated they would find that Dr Singh could not have obtained smallpox virus from ACR Drogues et Cie for the simple reason that the firm had never possessed any of the virus.

0745 hrs. August 6th, the Tunnel Train

James Gower was thinking of his wife. He knew that his relationship with Hélène would never survive their experience in the tunnel, and somehow it did not seem to matter. For the first time in his life he had learnt to appreciate his wife's virtues; the support and comfort she gave him and the strength which he so badly needed.

He realised for the first time in his life that he needed her. He decided that if he survived he would never again be unfaithful to her; but that he would do his best to make up for the faithless years. At last he appreciated her loyalty and friendship, realising that she had married him for love. It was comforting and warming to know that he was loved. He needed the support of the thought to keep him alive.

When he got back to England he would tell her everything. He'd confess and ask for forgiveness, promising to be faithful and loyal in the future. He knew she would forgive him and he knew she would stay with him. He’d go home every evening and perhaps they would be able to enjoy life together again. He’d take her away for a few weeks; to Venice perhaps. Or to Vienna. Or Berlin. She liked Berlin.

He did not know that his wife was lying only metres away, in a nearby compartment. She had died instantly and had never known her husband’s good intentions.

* * *

Susan Roberts was changing the dressing on Benito Tambroni’s wrist with a tenderness she'd never previously expressed. Ironically, she was using the circular plastic disc which had caused the injury as a splint; using it to keep the half-severed hand in position and to protect the artery from damage.

0800 hrs. August 6th, Rescue Team, the Channel Tunnel

Michel Mortier had been a potholer for seven years. That was why he volunteered when he'd heard about the rocky blockage in the pilot tunnel. He'd simply volunteered to help check out the connecting tunnels; to see which ones were blocked and which ones were open. Mortier had turned up for his voluntary duties wearing his usual potholing regalia. He had on his rubber waterproof suit, his metal helmet and the battered but powerful mercury cell lamp which clipped on to the front of it. He also carried several hundred feet of thin but strong yellow nylon rope. He'd been into enough potholes to know that you never moved an inch without leaving a trail both for others to follow and for you yourself to use when retreating, if the route became too difficult. Too many potholers had died, lost in the underground warrens they loved to explore.

For the first few metres it was an easy journey. From the comfort of the connecting tunnel and the pilot tunnel catwalk there was one obvious hole to be explored. It was simply a gap formed between three huge lumps of rock. Quite without fear when it came to underground exploring, Mortier had simply scrambled into the hole head-first. His lamp lit up the route ahead and showed him a fairly easy pathway stretching several metres ahead.

After that things had been a little more difficult for half an hour or so. Several times he'd almost been tempted to turn back and once he’d thought he was stuck. Being stuck was something all potholers feared. Mortier could remember reading about an English potholer who'd died of exposure and starvation while stuck underground in a narrow chimney.

Three times he'd arrived at the opposite wall of the pilot tunnel only to discover that the rocks which had fallen in had completely crushed the catwalk and that there was no connecting tunnel in sight. At the fourth attempt, however, Mortier had his first real stroke of luck. He emerged from a gap between two crumbling boulders to find himself directly opposite connecting passageway number 47. And the catwalk outside the passageway was intact. Mortier levered himself up on to it and, stooping low, ran forwards to the next connecting tunnel. The numbers in white paint above the opening told him that he was now at connecting passageway number 46. According to the briefing they’d had, the train was trapped just about fifteen metres away from him.

With his heart beating loudly, partly from exertion and partly from excitement, Mortier moved forwards into the connecting tunnel. There were a few small stones on the floor of the tunnel but there was no mud at all. As he moved forwards he had to step over slightly larger stones, then there were a few pieces of metal and plastic. Finally he was out of the connecting tunnel and on the catwalk in the England-bound tunnel.

Mortier could not believe what he saw. There were pieces of motor car, strips of plastic, lumps of charred rubber and paper all jumbled together in some huge, hideous pot pourri. Mortier had entered the tunnel just at the point where the last of the carriages containing vehicles had been. Somewhere among the tangled wreckage lay the remains of the Blacks' caravan and Mrs Black's washing. Michel Mortier looked around at the devastation and felt filled with despair. He did not believe that anyone could have survived.

0840 hrs. August 6th, The Tunnel Train

While Michel Mortier stared with disbelief and sick horror at the carnage around him, at the wreckage of several million pounds' worth of highly sophisticated machinery and safety equipment, the passengers in compartment 22 were standing still and quiet while Alan Cannon moved along with his home-made torch. The flickering light illuminated the still-intact compartment which had been damaged only very slightly in the explosion.

At its front end, where the coupling should have attached it to the penultimate compartment, Cannon shone his light on to an impenetrable wall of rock. Several pieces of metal and plastic glinted in the light. Although they did not know it, compartment 22 had broken away from the rest of the train and skidded off the rails alone. The nearest compartment, now the last one of the passenger train, was thirty or forty metres away. And in front of compartment 22 the ceiling of the tunnel had collapsed entirely, allowing several thousand tons of rock and rubble to fall into the tunnel, together with the huge mild-steel facing plates and the concrete segments which had made up the roof itself. By some miracle, compartment 22 was relatively unscathed. The tunnel roof had held firm. The left-hand side of the compartment, now effectively the top, was covered with small pieces of rock and smashed and shattered pieces from the train. The only space unfilled was that small triangle of space hidden underneath the train, in the angle it made with the right hand tunnel wall.

At the other end of compartment 22, Cannon's torch picked out no rocks, no debris and no fractured artefacts. Instead there was simple clay. The clay had crept into the small space in which ten of the remaining twelve passengers were crowded. It was thick, wet, blueish and crumbly.

`If we're going to try to get out of here we ought to be going that way,' said Tambroni, pointing towards the clay.

`Why?' demanded Gower, defiantly.

`At least we can dig through the clay,' said Tambroni, `We can't possibly get through rock with our bare hands.'

It made sense. Gower said nothing more.

0915 hrs. August 6th, Zürich, Switzerland

Bruckner, Jackson and Meier had already been at work for an hour and a half. The Swiss always believe in getting to work early. It's one of the things that gives them a head start over the rest of Europe.

`But we don't know that the explosion had anything to do with our chemicals,' insisted Meier for the tenth time in as many minutes. `I admit that these chemicals can be dangerous but we've never had any problem with them.'

`I don't think for a moment that they spontaneously ignited,' said Dr Jackson, his patience running out. `But they could easily have made an explosion worse. It was because of the risk of adding to the fire hazard that the Channel Tunnel Company originally banned all potentially explosive materials.'

`I think Dr Jackson is right,' said Bruckner. He hadn't spoken for several minutes and the other two had almost forgotten that he was there. When he spoke, however, they listened carefully. `We must assume that there is a certain amount of potential trouble in this for us, and act accordingly.'

`So what do we do?' asked Dr Jackson.

`We sue them,' smiled Bruckner.

The other two just stared at him.

`We get our lawyers to sue the Channel Tunnel Company,' explained Bruckner. `We demand compensation for the materials we've lost. And we add another lawsuit for loss of earnings.'

`I don't see...,' began Meier.

`The Channel Tunnel Company carries insurance covering structural faults,' explained Bruckner. `But their policy does not cover a cargo explosion.'

Slowly Meier began to understand.

`If we threaten them with a lawsuit,' Bruckner went on, `I think you'll find that the Channel Tunnel Company will suddenly be able to prove to the world that their collapse was an accident, caused by a structural weakness. No one will bother studying the cargo.' He pushed back his chair and looked at his watch. `I really must be moving,' he apologised.

1130 hrs. August 6th, the Tunnel Train

Despite the fact that the home-made torch was giving off a moderate amount of light, and the hole in the compartment wall was now about a metre across, it was still quite dark inside compartment 22. Dark enough for those scrabbling around inside for items of clothing and other personal bits and pieces to be able to pretend that neither Dr Singh nor Mr Black were in there with them. And dark enough for them to avoid looking at Mrs Black who was still sitting motionless and silent by her husband's side.

Very slowly a tear was forming in the corner of Mrs Black's left eye and, almost imperceptibly, it began to creep down the crease between her nose and left cheek. As it fell away it gathered speed until it was caught in the tiny blonde hairs on her upper lip. A second tear formed a moment or two later and followed the same route. And then a third, this time travelling from the right eye. Soon tears were falling in a steady stream, dropping from Mrs Black's cheeks and chin and landing silently on her lap.

Mrs Black did not return to consciousness suddenly; she drifted back slowly and step by step. And as she returned, as she remembered where she was and what had happened, as she became fully aware that her husband was dead, as she became conscious of the fact that her children were no longer with her, she began to scream.

It was not a single scream. As the echoes of the first scream died down, Mrs Black took a deep involuntary breath and started to scream again. And again, and again.

`See if you can help her,' said Susan Roberts to Hélène Albric. She recognised a tenderness in the other woman; knew instinctively that Hélène could offer more comfort. `Take Louise with you,' she added in a whisper.

Obediently, unquestioningly, Hélène stood up and walked across to where she could see Louise. Then the two of them climbed into the compartment and moved to the front row where Louise’s mother was sitting. They sat on her left, with Louise in between Hélène and her mother, gaining comfort from the one to pass on to the other. She stroked her mother's arm, held her face with the other hand, and whispered gently to her. In that moment, Louise Black grew into a young woman, abandoning for ever the innocence and naiveté of childhood.

Slowly Mrs Black's screams turned to sobs. She began to cry compulsively and unceasingly, her body heaving and shaking uncontrollably. While Louise and Hélène comforted her, the others slowly returned to what they were doing. And Gaston Raenackers simply sank deeper and deeper into his corner of the train, the corner furthest from Mrs Black, and began to rock himself gently, backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards.

1200 hrs. August 6th, Rescue Team, the Channel Tunnel

Following the rope he'd trailed behind him, Mortier found his way back to the tunnel where he'd left Garin, Bleriot and Raspail. His expression told them everything they feared.

`So what do we do?' asked Raspail, when Mortier had reported.

`Can we drill straight through from here to the place where the train is?' Garin asked him.

`We'll have to use a lightweight pneumatic rock drill. There isn't room to operate a large drill, even if we could get one here in time to do anything useful.'

`How long to get through?' asked Garin.

`It's between twenty-five and thirty metres, said Raspail thoughtfully. `I doubt if anyone has ever tackled anything like this before.'

`We can bring a truck into the main tunnel to France,' said Garin.

`Ten, twelve hours,' suggested Raspail. `Maybe more, maybe less. It depends on how much luck we have.'

`Get going then,' said Garin. He looked at his watch, `Can you get two teams working? Drill two passages tunnels through into the England bound tunnel.'

`I suppose so,' said Raspail. `I'll have to bring equipment from the nearest tunnelling site.'

`Where's that?'

`There's a tunnel under construction in Norway,' said Raspail. `The site engineer is an old friend of mine. I can get the stuff here within an hour, maybe two. I'll need a large helicopter. Preferably two.'

`Get whatever you need,' said Garin. `Don't haggle over costs. Just get it fast.'

* * *

Tambroni and Cannon had decided that if they dug a tunnel leading upwards through the wall of clay, they would not only stand a chance of getting through the clay, but would also, if they were lucky, find themselves on top of the blockage. There was a chance, they agreed, that the clay did not reach up to the tunnel roof. As added support for their theory, Cannon had pointed out that if they tunnelled along through the bottom part of the clay there would be a good chance of having a roof-fall; whereas if they tunnelled along in the top part of the clay there would be no chance of that.

They decided to dig their tunnel at an angle of approximately forty-five degrees since that gave them a good chance to avoid a roof-fall, and did not make it too difficult for them to work. A vertical chimney would have been most secure but digging it would have proved more or less impossible.

The only spade-like implements they had were Tambroni’s squash rackets. With a sigh of regret, Tambroni began the excavation, plunging his racket deep into the clay wall with his left hand firmly gripping the handle. He pulled down, then up, on the handle, levering at the clay. All that happened was that the racket bent at the point where the twin-stalked handle joined the frame. The racket head remained half buried in the clay. It was clearly going to be even more difficult than they had imagined.

`Try chipping out small pieces,' suggested Peter Cater, who was holding the torch.

Reaching behind him for the second racket, Tambroni nodded. He pushed the racket head a couple of inches into the clay so that it cut out a small triangular wedge of the heavy blue-grey clay. With a few extra jabs of the racket they managed to remove the wedge. They had made the first few inches of their tunnel.

`We need something to help carry the clay away,” said Cannon, picking up the almost solid piece of clay and fingering at it. `We'll soon be up to our knees in the stuff.'

`There are some plastic shopping bags in the compartment,' suggested Peter Cater.

`Or my sports bag,' said Tambroni.

Cannon shook his head and handed the lump of clay to Tambroni.

`Feel that. It's too heavy for any bag we've got.'

`We need a wheelbarrow,' said Tambroni with a grin.

`Wait a minute!' said Cater; he handed the torch to Cannon and scurried back towards the hole into the compartment. He leapt through and a moment or two later called to them both.

`Come and give me a hand,' he shouted. From the sounds he was making it was clear that he was kicking and heaving at something.

Tambroni and Cannon started for the compartment entrance together. Dr Chatwyn and Susan Roberts met them there.

If we can get one of these seats out,' said Cater, appearing back at the home-made doorway, `we can dump the clay on it and drag it along.'

Tambroni and Cannon looked at each other. Cannon nodded first, then Tambroni smiled.

`Great idea!' said Cannon to Cater. `But can we get it out?'

`It's only held on by a few screws,' said Cater. `And if we bust those off there are two steel runners forming the base. It'll slide quite easily.'

They had the seat wrenched away from its mounting within a couple of minutes. Tipped on to its back runner, with one person pushing on the back of the seat and another pulling on the front, it made a crude but effective wheelbarrow.

`Clear the floor,' ordered Tambroni. `We need as smooth a surface as we can get. We'll dump the clay at the far end there. Pack it as tightly as you can.'

`Benito and I will dig,' said Cannon. He pointed to Peter Cater and Dr Chatwyn. `You move the wheelbarrow.'

`I'll stack the clay,' said Susan Roberts. `We need to keep it tightly packed or we'll run out of room.'

`I don't know who you people think you are, taking charge like this,' said James Gower, suddenly and unexpectedly. `No one has appointed you as leaders.'

`No, they haven't,' said Susan Roberts. `But this plan is the only one we have at the moment and your contributions to date have been precisely nil. I suggest you damned well help. Someone's got to make sure the floor is kept clear of bits of clay or else moving the barrow is going to be impossible.'

`I will certainly do no such thing,' said Gower, indignantly. Despite the incredible heat he still wore his waistcoat. His shirt, such of it as could be seen, was soaked with sweat.

`Yes you will,' said Tambroni coldly.

Gower began to say something but clearly thought better of it. Even with one arm disabled Tambroni did not look like a man to argue with.

`Let's get on with it then,' said Cannon. `We've got a lot of digging to do.'

Inside the compartment, Hélène Albric and Louise Black still sat and comforted Mrs Black. Miss Millington and James Black were sorting out the miscellaneous collection of clothes. Gaston Raenackers, forgotten by all, sat at the back of the compartment his eyes closed and his hands clenched tightly around his knees. Just as Mrs Black had returned to reality so he had left it.

* * *

His arms aching, his shoulders weary and his fingers numb, Cannon stopped digging for a moment. He wondered if they had found the woman in Montmartre and for the tenth time in as many minutes found himself trying to remember exactly what she had looked like. Would the police, he wondered, just accept her death as natural and forget all about it? Or would they have started a hunt for her killer? Would there be anyone who had seen him going into her room? Had anyone seen him leave? Was there anything there to lead them to him? If they had found his fingerprints there, could they trace him? He tried to remember whether or not he'd ever had his fingerprints taken. There had been a time when everyone in the neighbourhood over the age of 16 had been finger-printed by the police who had been looking for a man who had raped a student at a college near to his home. Cannon wondered if they'd have kept all the fingerprints. He seemed to remember that they'd promised to destroy the prints they'd taken but would they have done that? Somehow he doubted it.

While he was trapped in the tunnel they might have already identified him. They would have traced him to his hotel where staff would have confirmed that the man they were looking for seemed worried and anxious. They'd have checked with the airport and then the railway station and discovered that he'd caught the train to Sangatte. Once they'd done that, it would not have taken them long to discover that he was trapped inside the tunnel. Or killed. They wouldn't know whether he was still alive or not. Perhaps he could convince them that he was someone else. Perhaps he could emerge from the crash with a new name and a new personality. None of the other passengers knew his real identity. He could claim that his papers had all been destroyed. He could make sure that they were. That at least would give him some breathing space; some time to get away from the police.

He wondered whether they'd emerge on the English side of the channel or on the French side. Somehow he didn't doubt that they would emerge. Being trapped in the tunnel was a real, soluble problem. It was the police he was really frightened of. That was something over which he had absolutely no control.

At least there wouldn't be any friends or relatives to meet him and give the game away. Of that he was fairly sure. There wasn't anyone to care, and no one knew exactly where he was or how he was getting back from Paris. They didn't even know he had been to Paris.

That was it, he decided, he'd find a new name. He would emerge from the tunnel as someone else and Alan Cannon would be lost forever.

Calmed again for a moment, Cannon carried on chipping and scraping his way through the wall of mud.

* * *

In crises different people are kept alive by different driving forces. James Black was inspired by anger and by bitterness; anger at the person or persons whose incompetence had led to the death of his father, and bitterness because of his own bereavement.

James and his father had little in common, it is true, but for the first time in his life James had found a specific, identifiable target for the rage which had been burning inside him for years. And in death his father had acquired qualities and inspired memories he would never have merited in life. James Black was secretly but firmly committed to avenging his father's death.

That commitment would, of course, disappear entirely when he was rescued and the need for survival had passed. Then James would once again become a frightened, unhappy, poorly balanced boy.

* * *

The small metal box that Dr Singh had carried in his pocket lay open on the floor of the compartment. The tiny vial which contained the deadly smallpox virus had fallen out of the box and lay unprotected for several hours before Susan Roberts trod on it and broke it. She was in the compartment hunting for a bottle of water. The heat, and their exertions, meant that they were all sweating heavily.

`What's the matter?' asked Tambroni, hearing her yelp.

`I've trodden on some glass,' said Susan. `I don't know what it was but I don't think it’s too bad.'

`Are you bleeding?'

`Not much,' said Susan. `Nothing to worry about.' She bent down and brushed the broken pieces of glass underneath the nearest seat so that no one else would tread on them.

* * *

To his own surprise, Benito Tambroni did not feel particularly dismayed at facing the future with only one useful hand. There was no doubt in his mind that he would never again be able to wield a squash racket. But somehow it didn't matter in the slightest. The accident had suddenly and unexpectedly provided him with an excuse to abandon his fading career as a professional sportsman. An excuse which promised him peace and contentment which he might otherwise have never found.

He had no idea what he would do if they managed to escape from the tunnel. But it didn't really matter very much. Whatever it was, he would be much more likely to find satisfaction and happiness than he had been able to while running as fast as he could to stand still in the world of competitive squash. Of that, at least, he was certain. And that certainly gave him strength to continue to fight for himself and the others who, he knew, were relying on him.

* * *

It was while she was scavenging in the compartment, looking for things to burn, that Miss Millington found the first of Peter Cater's Roman coins. She found the second a few moments later. Carefully and casually she put the two coins into her purse. She didn't recognise the coins and certainly had no idea of their value; but she correctly assumed that they were suitable enough in weight and size to be used in a telephone coin box or public lavatory.

1500 hrs. August 6th, Leicester Square, London

From Heathrow Airport, Dr Thaier, the European Credit Bank’s replacement representative, was driven straight to the ACR Offices in Leicester Square. Once there, it took less than twenty minutes for the papers involving the exchange of the Willenhall factory to be completed and signed.

At 1530, with Dr Thaier comfortably installed in the guest stateroom on the fifth floor of the ACR building, George Yallop, who, as well as being the Managing Director of Prophax Pharmaceuticals, was the senior London representative of the ACR holding company, was on the telephone to Dr Bruckner in Zürich, using a scrambled line kept permanently available between the two cities.

When he confirmed with the firm's financial director that the control of the property had changed hands successfully, Yallop spoke to Dr Jackson and Willey Meier, who together confirmed that replacement consignments of the chemicals necessary for the production of Angipax were on their way to England.

`The tunnel looks like being out of commission for some time,' said Dr Jackson resignedly. `We will keep you supplied with as much of the two chemicals as you need. It's not as quick but we'll ship the stuff over by sea in container lorries.'

1515 hrs. August 6th, Sangatte, France

Thomas Raspail had not gone home. He had telephoned his wife from the control room but he'd warned her that he did not know when he would be back. Then he'd paced around the control room like some caged animal desperately searching for freedom. Thomas Raspail considered himself morally responsible for the safety of all passengers travelling through the tunnel, and could no more go home and sleep than he could drive past a road accident. He had never been one of those people who worry about legal responsibilities, insurance companies and limited liabilities. Raspail knew himself what his liabilities and responsibilities were.

Eventually, he had headed back into the France-bound tunnel that he'd left less than an hour previously. He ordered the driver of the small rescue vehicle that had carried Garin, Bleriot and himself into the tunnel a little while before, to take him back to connecting tunnel 47. The driver thought nothing of this; it seemed to him quite a natural order; he assumed that Raspail was merely going back to check on some aspect of the rescue.

When he arrived at connecting tunnel 47, Raspail thanked the driver, told him that he'd be some time and suggested that he return to the tunnel's entrance. The driver, who never felt entirely comfortable underneath the English Channel, happily agreed.

Raspail then returned back to the junction of connecting tunnel 47 with the pilot tunnel. He'd brought with him a rubber-covered torch and he wriggled into the gap through which he had seen Mortier disappear. If anyone had seen him and asked what he was doing, Raspail would have had to admit that he had no idea what he hoped to achieve; he had no plan and certainly no intention of becoming a hero. He simply could not sit around and wait for the drilling crew to get through to the trapped train.

1530 hrs. August 6th, The Tunnel Train

In the first hour and a half they managed to dig a tunnel about two metres long. They had to sacrifice one of Tambroni's squash rackets to make another torch. They had wrapped clothes around the handle, using Miss Millington's brassiere to keep the collection of materials wrapped tightly together. The other two rackets they used together was trowels, although they found themselves using their hands just as much as the rackets. It was easier to dig away at the clay with outstretched fingers than with the rounded racket heads.

While Tambroni and Cannon dug away at the top of the tunnel, taking it in turns to work on the face or to help pull the lumps of clay down the tunnel to where Peter Cater and Dr Chatwyn were waiting to load up the wheelbarrow, Susan Roberts kept the discarded clay packed tightly against the far wall where it rested against the rocky fall. Miss Millington still busied herself preparing strips of material with which they could prepare fresh torches. They had only nine matches left and they were trying to ensure that the torches went out in turn so that each fresh torch could be lit from the other. Moaning and reluctant, James Gower kept the floor clear of clay, kicking at the pieces which fell from the wheelbarrow and pushing them underneath the carriage.

The heat was becoming more intense by the minute and the shortage of oxygen was making every movement difficult, even painful.

`How high do you think this tunnel is?' asked Peter Cater, as he and Dr Chatwyn pulled and pushed their makeshift wheelbarrow with its load of clay to where Susan Roberts waited, her breasts glistening with sweat and smeared with clay.

`Six or seven metres,' guessed Chatwyn. `Judging by what I can remember of the entrance to the tunnel.'

`How long till they reach the top?' asked Cater.

Chatwyn cursed as he stumbled on a lump of clay that Gower had not moved.

`They've done a couple of metres in an hour,' said Cater hopefully.

`They'll slow down as they get higher,' Chatwyn pointed out. `It'll get more and more difficult and they'll get tired.'

`How far do you think they've got to dig?'

`At the angle they're taking it'll be about ten metres up to the roof,' said Chatwyn. `Six hours if we're lucky.'

Cater wished he hadn't asked.

* * *

Dr Chatwyn's estimate proved to be unexpectedly pessimistic. It took only three hours for them to reach the tunnel roof. Alan Cannon and Tambroni worked throughout to dig a way through the clay. They had eventually abandoned the rackets altogether and chosen to use their hands. To their relief, the clay became lighter and easier to move the higher they climbed. After an hour and a half they found that they could dig out great chunks of clay with one hand. So quickly were they moving that Cannon actually bruised his hand on a piece of the tunnel ceiling when they finally reached the top of their climb. The pain, however, was immediately forgotten in the joy he felt. He turned round, knocking a small avalanche of clay into Tambroni's upturned face.

`We're at the top!' he called. He reached up to bang on the tunnel roof and lost his footing in the small steps they'd dug for themselves. Scrabbling desperately to try to get a footing he and Tambroni slid down their small tunnel, crashing harmlessly into a heap at the bottom where Peter Cater and Dr Chatwyn looked anxiously on.

They celebrated by resting for a while. Then, ten minutes later, Tambroni climbed slowly up the ten-metre tunnel. It was too small for a torch to be carried and he was in complete darkness. Wriggling forwards, using his head as a battering ram and his one good hand as a spade, Tambroni managed to extend the tunnel one metre forwards in less than ten minutes. At the top of the tunnel the clay was softer, lighter and less compressed. In the next two hours, he and Cannon travelled forwards nearly fifty metres altogether. At ten-metre intervals, they made the tunnel slightly wider, giving themselves small recesses where they could change places, taking the lead in turn.

Cannon was the leader when they made their second breakthrough. The air in their narrow tunnel through the clay was even hotter and staler than the air had been below in the compartment. So the air in the space into which they broke through, although it was stale and hot, seemed fresh and clean by comparison. For a moment or two Cannon could not understand why he could move his head and shoulders freely from side to side. He had grown so accustomed to moving forwards with his eyes closed that it took him a moment or two to decide to try opening them. Then, when he blinked, he found himself looking at the ceiling and in front of him a surface of clay stretching as far as he could see. It was still dark but for someone who had been buried alive in a veritable mountain of clay it was as light and cheerful a sight as a sunny day in the countryside. He broke out with the rest of his body and revelled in the freedom. He could move his legs sideways as well as forwards and backwards. Behind him Tambroni followed him out of their tunnel. Below them there was still a mass of clay some six metres thick. But they were now lying on top of the clay instead of having to burrow through it.

`You go back and tell the others,' said Cannon to Tambroni. `I'll go and get help.'

They shook hands and parted. That was the last time that anyone saw Alan Cannon alive.

1655 hrs. August 6th, Zürich, Switzerland

Ernest Taylor never failed to be impressed by the luxury of the main offices of the ACR Drogues Company. Most of his working life was spent “on the road”, and although that rather outdated phrase did not fully describe the unending sequence of five-star hotels and first class aeroplane tickets that made up Taylor's business tours, not even the most luxurious hotels outdid the ACR Drogues headquarters.

Taylor was waiting in Dr Jackson's personal ante-room, which was furnished with half a dozen leather armchairs and a low mahogany table carrying copies of *The New Yorker, Economist, Time, Express,* and half a dozen financial daily papers. There was a pair of Stubbs paintings on the walls. Dr Jackson's personal secretary and two typists occupied a rather larger office, the route to which lay through one of the three doors in the ante-room. Of the other two, one was the outer door, leading to the corridor, and the other led into Dr Jackson's personal suite which consisted of an office, bathroom and bedroom.

Taylor was halfway through a *New Yorker* article on the plight of the modern American Indian when the ACR Drogue medical director's secretary strode briskly out of her office into the ante-room, and smiled at Taylor.

`Dr Jackson will see you now, Mr Taylor.'

Taylor stood, put the *New Yorker* back on to the table and pulled down his jacket. He followed the secretary into Dr Jackson's office.

`It's good to see you again,' said Dr Jackson after a few polite preliminaries. `But there must be something important for you to come chasing down to Zürich to see me. What is it?' He stretched back in his luxurious black leather swivel chair, and waited.

`Do you remember seeing a Dr Singh a few months ago?' asked Taylor. `He's a cardiologist who specialises in pharmacology or a pharmacologist who specialises in cardiology. I can never remember which. You met him with me in Geneva.'

Jackson thought for a moment. `Tall, weedy character with a thin moustache and spectacles? Arrogant, pushy sort of fellow, if I remember right?'

Taylor nodded.

`What's happened? He wrote a paper for us didn't he? Didn't he do some research on Angipax and write it up for one of those specialist journals? I'm damned if I can remember which one.' He waved towards a pile of journals on a table on the far side of his room. Apart from the pile, which must have been three feet high, there were several dozen current issues of other journals neatly arranged on special shelving so that their covers could all be seen. `If I read all of them I'd never do anything else.'

`I met him in Paris recently and handed over to him a vial of smallpox virus,' said Taylor. `You must remember that. The authorisation came through you.'

Jackson shook his head. `I don't remember that.' He frowned. `We don't hand out smallpox viruses.'

`It was from our laboratory in Basle,' said Taylor.

`Basle?' said Dr Jackson. `They don't keep smallpox there.'

He thought for a moment. `In fact,' he went on, `I'm sure we don't keep smallpox anywhere. It's banned now. We'd have to have special dispensation from the World Health Organisation.'

`He wanted some for a research project,' insisted Taylor. `He agreed to do that paper for Angipax for us and to let us have the commercial rights to his research.'

`We certainly have options on a lot of research projects,' said Dr Jackson. `It's a common clause we insist on when we fund a research programme.'

`But the smallpox virus came from your office,' said Taylor.

`Look, Taylor,' said the medical director, standing up. `You're a good salesman and I like you. But don't tell me what I have and have not done.'

`Singh was on the train that got caught in the tunnel explosion,' said Taylor, who'd also stood up. `I'm pretty sure he had the smallpox with him.'

`I think you ought to have a couple of weeks' rest, old chap,' said Dr Jackson, coming round his desk and putting a hand on Taylor's arm. `Why don't you take a holiday? Use the company lodge in the Bahamas. Take your wife with you.'

`I'm divorced, sir,' said Taylor coldly. `And I had a holiday a month ago.' He turned round and walked quickly out of the room. He understood what was happening and he didn't like it one little bit.

1700 hrs. August 6th, London

At a press conference in the Inn on the Park Hotel, George Yallop read out the following statement:

`Prophax Pharmaceuticals has concluded negotiations with ACR Drogues and Company of Zürich, entitling it to manufacture and market under licence the drug Angipax. This product, which has already been the subject of no less than 136 clinical trials throughout Europe, America and Africa, will shortly be available on prescription.

`We at Prophax are grateful to the directors of ACR Drogues for their assistance in helping us to complete negotiations for the licensing of Angipax in the minimum amount of time. Like us, they believe that to withhold this preparation from the British market would be unethical.

`Raw materials are now being shipped to Britain and work is already under way on a factory site in the Midlands, where, thanks to the endeavours of our zealous staff, production is expected to begin within a few days.

`Clinical information describing the unique properties of Angipax is available from our hostesses at the cocktail bar.'

1810 hrs. August 6th, Paris

Philippe Garin was exhausted. He had travelled by helicopter to the Paris heliport and driven to the Place Vendôme in a hired car that had been waiting there for him. It was ten minutes past six when he stumbled into the Channel Tunnel Company headquarters.

`They're in the board room,' said the receptionist, a tall redhead with an undisguised affection for Garin. `They asked me to tell you to go straight in.'

`Thanks,' muttered Garin.

`Can I get you anything?'

Garin shook his head.

`Coffee?'

`Thank you, yes. That would be nice,' smiled Garin. `Will you send some up?'

In the board room Janine Boysee was the only one who smiled when Garin entered.

`Come in, sit down,' ordered Claude Noiret sharply. `We're waiting for you.'

`I think Monsieur Garin has been rather busy in Sangatte,' said Madame Boysee.

`I'm sure he has,' agreed Noiret coldly. He waited while Garin sat. `What is the latest situation?'

Garin explained the situation as best he could, pointing out that the England-bound tunnel was blocked and that it was estimated that a large number of people were trapped in the wreckage.

`Have you any idea what caused the collapse?' asked Sir Frederick.

`None, I'm afraid,' replied Garin.

Noiret raised an eyebrow.

`We've been concentrating on trying to get into the tunnel. We have to assume that there are people alive in there.'

`And have you? Got into the tunnel?'

`Not yet.'

`When are you likely to get in?' asked Morgensdorf.

`I'm afraid it will probably be a few hours yet.'

`Hours? What are your people doing?' asked Noiret.

`Everything they can,' answered Garin quickly. `They've been working non-stop. Some of them are risking their lives to get into the tunnel.'

`Would you like some coffee, Monsieur Garin?' asked Janine Boysee suddenly and unexpectedly. The receptionist had entered quietly and, unnoticed, had put down a tray of coffee on the small table behind Madame Boysee.

`Thank you,' said Garin. `I came straight from the tunnel,' he explained to the others. No one else spoke.

`Have you ruled out sabotage?' asked Madame Boysee.

Garin shook his head. `We haven't ruled anything out yet.'

`What do you think happened?' asked Sir Frederick.

`I'm not sure. There was an explosion. That's all we know. I don't think it will help to guess.'

`But is the collapse the sort that could have occurred as a result of any structural weakness?' asked Sir Frederick.

`I don't think so,' said Garin cautiously.

`I've had a number of enquiries from commercial groups,' said Noiret. `They're worried about the length of delays likely to affect future shipments.'

`I'm afraid there are bound to be delays,' said Garin.

`Yes,' agreed Noiret. `But we must have more precise details.'

`I'm afraid I can't give you anything more precise just yet.' Garin found it impossible to hide his disgust.

`The reason for my interest in the possible cause of the collapse is simple to explain,' said Noiret quietly. `We have already received a large liability claim from a major European drugs manufacturer - ACR Drogues. If the collapse was caused by a structural weakness, then there is a good chance that we will be able to obtain support from our insurers. If it was an Act of God or a terrorist, then we'll get no help,' he smiled. `For some reason, insurance companies put God and terrorists in the same category.'

`My security officer is convinced that there was no chance of any terrorist activity,' said Garin.

`And you don't feel that the extent of the damage is explained by a simple collapse - an Act of God?

Garin shook his head.

`In addition to the claim from the Swiss pharmaceutical company which has lost a considerable quantity of valuable merchandise on that train there are bound to be personal accident and injury claims,' Sir Frederick pointed out.

`I've got to have something to tell our lawyers,' said Noiret.

Suddenly Garin had enough. He got up and walked out without saying another word. He stopped his driver twice on the route back to the heliport; once to buy a thermos flask and once to stop at a café, fill up the flask, and buy a bag full of fresh croissants.

1840 hrs. August 6th, Rescue Team, Channel Tunnel

Wearing breathing equipment, ear muffs and a dust-tight suit, Bleriot watched carefully as the first of his two drilling crews cleared a temporary obstruction in their vacuum cleaning machine; essential to keep their working area relatively free of dust and small pieces of rock. Without the machine, their working area would soon become waist deep in slivers and particles of rock.

The drilling machinery had arrived in Sangatte within an hour and three-quarters. Within fifteen minutes of its arrival, the crews were setting up the drills and preparing to begin tunnelling through to the train in the other major tunnel.

Inspired by professional pride, a bonus and possibly by side bets, the two crews were racing each other for the honour of making the first breakthrough. The crew that Bleriot was watching were in the lead by half a metre or so. The drilling foreman had confirmed Bleriot's estimate that they would break through into the England-bound tunnel within ten hours. The two experts had confirmed that with some luck, no break downs and an encouraging bonus arrangement, there was an excellent chance that the breakthrough would come in less time.

For Bleriot there was nothing but waiting and wondering where Thomas Raspail had gone. The drilling crews knew their work well enough. Originally Bleriot had intended to handle the machinery with his own men, but the Norwegian firm which had lent the equipment had offered the services of its own drillers. This was not entirely a charitable gesture; the equipment was worth several million American dollars and could easily be damaged in inexpert hands.

* * *

While Bleriot watched the drilling operation and Garin sat impatiently in his helicopter as it approached Sangatte, Thomas Raspail lay semi-conscious in a small rock gully in the pilot tunnel. He'd entered the rocky maze which filled the pilot tunnel with no safety helmet, no ropes to help guide him in and out and only an ordinary torch to provide illumination. At first he'd moved quickly and comparatively easily, wriggling along through narrow passageways between some of the larger lumps of rock which had fallen in from above. The cuts and scratches he'd received had hardly worried him; he was satisfied to know that he was doing something.

It wasn't until he'd been in the pilot tunnel for the greater part of an hour that he'd realised that he had no idea of what direction he was supposed to be taking. Squirming and turning in the tunnel he'd completely lost all sense of direction. Without a rope to guide him back he had no way of knowing just where he'd come from. And to make matters worse he seemed to have got himself stuck.

He found himself in a small opening between two huge grey rocks and in the dim light of his fading torch had noticed only one possible exit route. To the naked eye it looked no smaller than any of the other passageways he'd gone through. But when it came to it he found himself well and truly stuck. He couldn't pull himself through; nor could he pull himself back. He was stranded with his head, shoulders and upper chest in a narrow gap underneath a flat-bottomed rock and his lower chest, abdomen and legs left in the opening between the two grey rocks. His arms were stretched out in front of him and his torch had rolled forwards and out of reach. The feeble beam of light it gave out was wasted on a small circle of featureless rock.

Thomas Raspail was stuck, stranded and lost. It took him four hours to die.

1845 hrs. August 6th, Zürich, Switzerland

For once in his life, Ernest Taylor was determined not to be ignored or dismissed as an idiot. After leaving Dr Jackson's office, he had made his way to the Chairman's suite of offices. Rather to his surprise he'd found himself being ushered into Mr Huber's office.

The Chairman listened attentively while Taylor told his story.

`I appreciate your coming to me with this,' he said, with a hand on Taylor's shoulder, you're the sort of honest, decent employee this company really needs. We live in a world which is sometimes rather too corrupt and concerned only with profit. Our industry has to work hard to maintain the trust of the public and people like you help us do that.' He paused and looked directly at the salesman for a moment. `In your shoes I hope that I would have done exactly what you have done.' He sighed, and took his hand off Taylor's shoulder. `I hope I would have had your courage.'

Taylor looked down at his shoes. He felt embarrassed.

`I'm afraid the problem is that Dr Jackson has not been entirely honest with you,' said Mr Huber. `The truth is that we don't have any supplies of smallpox virus ourselves. When Dr Singh made this request, Dr Jackson came to me and asked if we had access to any of the World Health Organisation stores of the virus. I told him we didn't and that even if we did I wouldn't sanction such a deal.'

Taylor frowned. He didn't understand.

`The vial that you handed to Dr Singh contained nothing more virulent than chickenpox virus,' said Huber. `He shook his head sadly. `I don't approve of the subterfuge, of course,' he went on. `But Dr Jackson felt that under the circumstances it was the best course of action he could follow. He believes very strongly that to deny people the opportunity to benefit from Angipax would be medically improper.' He paused and reached out to touch the representative again. `I must ask you to treat all this as entirely confidential, I hope that in time you will learn to forgive Dr Jackson and myself for this small but well-intentioned deception and regard Dr Jackson and myself with the level of respect which I know he and I have for you.'

Taylor started to protest, but the Chairman would have none of it. Before the remonstration could begin he'd open the door and smilingly ushered the representative out. As soon as Taylor had gone, the Chairman picked up his telephone and dialled Jackson's number.

Anyone who had heard both the conversation with Taylor and the one with the medical director would have suddenly realised exactly why Huber had become the Chairman of one of the largest and most powerful companies in the world.

Until he'd heard Taylor's story Hubert hadn't even heard of Dr Singh and his smallpox virus. The explanation Huber had offered, and which had been so readily believed and accepted, had been prepared entirely on the spur of the moment.

1850 hrs. August 6th, the Tunnel Train

When Tambroni returned to the compartment, the others received his news with many different responses.

Peter Cater and Dr Chatwyn, who were sitting on the clay-covered chair they'd been using as a wheelbarrow, both had to struggle to keep back the tears of joy they felt bursting to flood down their cheeks. Instead they solemnly shook hands with each other.

Miss Millington unashamedly threw her arms around young James Black and hugged him. She had grown very fond of James and was happier more for his prospect of escape than her own. She had thrown herself into the task of preparing material for the flaming torches which lit up their semi-artificial cavern so eerily, and had enjoyed a sense of pride in having a job to do which had some immediate value. James Black, too proud to allow himself the luxury of tears, had found Miss Millington's company encouraging and supportive.

James Gower, shattered by the loss of dignity and status - which he felt, had disappeared with the eventual loss of his waistcoat, shirt and trousers - was too numb to register any appreciation of Tambroni's news. He stared at Tambroni dumbly for a moment or two, nodded once and turned away to sit down on the floor, alone.

Inside the compartment Mrs Black, Louise and Hélène Albric were still sitting together on the front row. Mrs Black and Louise were both asleep, while Hélène, keeping a watchful eye on them both, was also having considerable difficulty in staying awake.

Gaston Raenackers, still quiet and rocking gently on his seat, showed no apparent sign of having even heard Tambroni's shout of joy.

Susan Roberts greeted Tambroni with far more enthusiasm. She threw her arms around his neck and pulled his head down towards her own.

* * *

Meanwhile Alan Cannon was moving forwards with renewed energy. The space between the top of the clay and the tunnel roof slowly widened until he could struggle forwards on his hands and knees. The tunnel roof was intact at this point and when he stopped for a moment to rest, Cannon could, if he reached above him, feel the reassuring smooth plastic-coated steel sheeting. Despite the fact that there was more room in which to move, Cannon noticed that the going was becoming heavier. His hands and knees were sinking deeper and deeper into the clay and each move forwards required a considerable effort.

Once he found himself face to face with the side wall, having become disorientated in the dark, and after that he moved forwards with his left hand within touching distance of the nearest tunnel wall. He found it strangely reassuring.

The end, when it came, was quite unexpected. The clay had become steadily softer and Cannon had found himself breathing more and more heavily in an attempt to keep going. The space between the top of the mud and the tunnel ceiling was now nearly two feet and Cannon sat back, leaning against the wall, to rest for a moment. That was a mistake which cost him his life. With his weight resting on his buttocks instead of being spread along his legs and arms Cannon found himself sinking deeper and deeper into the clay. He struggled and kicked out but found himself simply sinking more rapidly. In the dark his arms thrashed around and he sank deeper and deeper. The soft bluish clay reached up to his waist and seemed actively to pull him down. Cannon spread his arms widely and tried to spread his legs. His legs, however, were already imprisoned by the clay and his feet indeed slowly began to point directly towards the ceiling.

It all took less than five minutes. As Cannon weakened, his arms stopped flailing and then they too sank below the surface of the clay. Soon only his head stayed visible, together with the lower part of his legs. The clay reached his chin and Cannon, realising that there was no longer any chance of escape, gave up hope. A thin, high-pitched scream echoed along the tunnel, dancing off the walls and ceiling. Then the mud began to trickle into his mouth and ears. Finally it reached his nose and Cannon was slowly suffocated. In the last few seconds of his life Cannon could just see his own feet and ankles sticking up out of the clay just out of reach.

A moment or two later the clay closed over the remains of Alan Cannon and his temporary tomb was complete.

2000 hrs. August 6th, Paris

The following statement was distributed by hand to all the leading newspapers and agency offices in Paris.

`At a meeting of the board of the Compagnie de Chemin de Fer Sousmarin entre La France et L'Angleterre in Paris this evening, it was regretfully decided that the appointment of M P Garin as general manager of the company would be terminated as from 2000 hours today (European Standard Time).

`The board, which will be making a new appointment within the next few days, wishes to express sympathy to all those who have friends or relatives involved in the tunnel explosion.

`Every effort will be made to expedite rescue attempts and regular bulletins will be published from his office.

`The cause of the accident is not yet known but the possibility of a structural fault has not yet been ruled out.

`The Compagnie de Chemin de Fer Sousmarin entre La France et L'Angleterre wishes to apologise for the inconvenience caused to its customers by the cancellation of trains. Normal services will be resumed as soon as possible.'

2135 hrs. August 6th, Rescue Team, Channel Tunnel

Garin and Bleriot stood together watching and waiting. The two drilling crews had done far better than anyone had dared to hope. They were both within centimetres of breaking through into the other main tunnel.

`I want to send in two rescue teams with infrasound equipment,' said Garin. `We'll get the equipment set up at each end of the train and see just what we can pick up in the way of sound.'

`Where's Raspail?' asked Bleriot. `Did you see him?'

Garin frowned. `I thought he was with you,' he said. `I radioed ahead to the control room asking them to get a message to him.'

Bleriot shook his head.

The duty controller at Sangatte told Garin that they'd sent a message through to Raspail's home, but that his wife had insisted that she hadn't seen him. They had assumed said the duty controller, that Raspail had been at work in the tunnel.

`Thanks,' said Garin. He looked across at Bleriot and lifted his hands, palm upwards. `Better see if anyone has seen him.'

Bleriot spoke hurriedly for a moment into his radio mouthpiece then waited for a moment. He listened, nodded once, acknowledging the message he received over his headphones and then looked across at Garin.

`The driver brought him in hours ago,' he said.

`Where to?'

`He dropped him in the tunnel. Near the blockage.'

Suddenly Garin knew what had happened. `He'll have to take his chances,' he said, with deliberate brusqueness. `I can't afford to spare anybody to look for him.'

Bleriot, understanding, said nothing. He turned away and listened to one of the drilling crew foremen who'd been standing a metre away, waiting respectfully but with ill-concealed impatience.

`We're through,' said the foreman. He shook his head sadly. `I can't see you finding anyone alive,' he added.

Bleriot signalled to the first rescue team to go into the newly opened passageway into the England-bound tunnel. At long last the rescue was under way.

2134 hrs. August 6th, the Tunnel Train

`How long is it?' asked Dr Chatwyn.

`Is what?' enquired Peter Cater.

`Is it since Tambroni got back?'

Cater shrugged his shoulders. `Why?'

`How long do you think it would take Cannon to get some help?'

Cater shrugged again. The tunnel was now in permanent darkness, both their torches having gone out through lack of raw materials, and Chatwyn repeated his question.

`Don't know. Suppose it depends on how far he had to go,' said Cater. He was reluctant to talk. The air in their relatively confined space was stuffy and hot, despite the fact that the tunnel Tambroni and Cannon had dug through the clay acted as a sort of air shaft.

`Perhaps one or two more of us should follow him,' suggested Tambroni. `I'd rather do something than sit here. I'll go in again.'

`I'll come with you,' said Susan Roberts.

* * *

The two of them emerged, naked and covered in sticky blue clay, into the glare of a thousand television and newspaper lights and flashbulbs. Both of them were spattered with Tambroni's blood. The photographers and cameramen had been waiting for nearly eighteen hours and they were hungry for news. The sight of the first two bedraggled survivors emerging from the tunnel attracted the newspaper and television people like a light attracting moths. The Sangatte security officers took twenty-five minutes to extricate them from the crowd.

* * *

The other survivors followed soon after. Mrs Black, supported by her children but now they longer looked or acted like children; one supporting each of her arms, both murmuring words of comfort and encouragement.

James Gower, alone, looking as guilty as he felt, furtive, desperate to see his wife again, to beg her forgiveness. Not knowing yet that he would never have the chance. He looked from side to side like a criminal expecting to be spotted, making sure that Helene was yards away from him.

Helene didn't mind that. She was already busy planning her future. She would write her story. A magazine piece. A book perhaps. Maybe a film.

Peter Cater wanted only to see his family. He felt glad to be alive, grateful for a second chance. There would be no more photographs. But he did wonder what had happened to the two coins he had thrown into the darkness. Would anyone find them or would they stay buried? He didn't really care. Just wondered.

Dr Chatwyn, more surprised to be alive than relieved. He felt quite pleased with himself. He hadn't let himself down as badly as he would have expected. He was exhausted but walked with more pride and confidence than he had for some time. And then he remembered his friend, Dr Singh, and tears started to roll down his cheeks.

Gaston Raenackers was carried out of the tunnel on a stretcher. There was nothing physically wrong with him. It wasn't that he couldn't walk. He just couldn't find the energy. He had lost the will to move. It would take him a long time to recover from the shame he felt. His body wasn't broken but his spirit was.

And finally, of course, Miss Millington, a yard or two behind them all; the least concerned. She even managed a smile. She touched the cheap ring on the third finger of her left hand; started to remove it, and then stopped. She left the ring where it was. Now she couldn't understand why she had not worn it every day of her life. The only certainty was that she would, she knew, wear it with pride for the rest of her life. It was all she had that really mattered to her. The ring and her memories. The tunnel workers who helped rescue her and the journalists who spoke to her afterwards all marvelled at her resilience. She was, they all agreed, the strongest and most astonishing of all the survivors. They would, perhaps, have been surprised if they had known that she had derived her strength from the cheap ring she wore.

PART FOUR

Two weeks after the rescue Susan Roberts began to feel ill. She visited her doctor on the morning of 20th August.

`I've had headaches and pains in my arms and legs for several days now,' she told him. `Do you think I've got some sort of virus?'

`You were in that crash in the Channel Tunnel, weren't you?'

Susan nodded. `I had a full medical afterwards. They said they could find nothing wrong.'

`Well, it's probably just delayed shock,' the doctor smiled, reassuringly. `Still, I'll have a look at you just to put your mind at rest!'

When he examined her the doctor found to his surprise that she had several spots on her arms and legs. They looked rather like small blisters. There was, in particular, one large spot on her left foot.

`What are they?' asked Susan. `Has something bitten me?'

`They aren't bites,' said the doctor thoughtfully. `It rather looks like smallpox or chickenpox.'

`Smallpox!' said Susan Roberts.

`Don't worry!' said the doctor with a smile. `Smallpox was officially certified as an extinct disease years ago. It can't be that. But although the distribution is very unusual it might just be chickenpox, I'm afraid. Not that we see much of that around these days.'

`What should I do?'

`No need to do anything special,' said the doctor. `I'll give you some calamine lotion to dab on the spots if they get itchy.'

Susan sighed with relief, picked up her stockings and began to dress. She did it slowly and provocatively. It was a pity she didn't come to the surgery more often. This doctor wasn't too bad at all.

For a full list of books by Vernon Coleman please visit www.vernoncoleman.com or Amazon Author Central.

'Anyone WhoTells You Vaccines Are Safe And Effective Is Lying Here's The Proof '

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Vernon Coleman MB ChB DSc

`Anyone Who Tells You Vaccines Are Safe And Effective Is Lying. Here's The Proof.'

Dr Vernon Coleman MB ChB DSc FRSA

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`The doctor who dares to speak his mind.' - *Oxford Mail*
`He writes lucidly and wittily.' - *Good Housekeeping*

Note

This book is intended solely to provide information about vaccination. Before contemplating any vaccination you should ask your doctor to confirm that the procedure will be safe and effective for you.

Dedication

I dedicate this exploration of suppressed and hidden truths to my beloved and beautiful Donna Antoinette who knows, only too well, the heart-wrenching price which must be paid to satisfy the demands of a rapacious industry which is supported by a profession now better known for closed minds and hungry wallets than a dedication to learning and caring.

‘We all know there are two sides to every question. There are two sides to a piece of flypaper, too, but it makes a

great difference to the fly which side he lands on.’ - Peter Seeger

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Preface

Almost everyone who promotes vaccination is paid to do so. The supporters of vaccination have a personal interest in promoting vaccination. On the other hand, just about everyone who questions vaccination does so at great personal cost. Vaccination is big business and many of those who promote it, and make money out of it, do everything they can to protect an intellectually vulnerable but enormously profitable exercise. Experience tells me that this book will bring me much trouble, a great deal of abuse, a number of threats and considerable professional and personal inconvenience. But I firmly believe that vaccination is one of the most offensive and dangerous of all modern medical practices and I find it appalling that it is allowed to grow, seemingly unchecked and unquestioned. I don't believe anyone, anywhere, knows just how much harm is being done by the establishment's unquestioned enthusiasm for a practice which is of such doubtful value and which offers such potential for disaster. I hope this book will raise some questions and some doubts and I hope that readers will share my concerns with their families, their friends, their neighbours and their medical advisers.

Vernon Coleman, August 2011

Introduction

`The whole apparatus for spreading knowledge, the schools and the press, wireless and cinema, will be used exclusively to spread those views which, whether true or false, will strengthen the belief in the rightness of the decisions taken by the authority; and all information that might cause doubt or hesitation will be withheld.' - F. A. Hayek

One of the most fashionable medical interventions today is undoubtedly vaccination. A generation or two ago children obtained immunity to childhood diseases (chicken pox, measles and mumps) by attending parties. If a child contracted one of the common (but relatively unthreatening) childhood diseases all the children in the neighbourhood would be invited round for tea and games. Those children attending the party who contracted the disease would put up with spots for a week or so and then recover. Parents would, probably justifiably, assume that a child who hadn't caught the disease had quite likely acquired immunity to it. The system was simple, uneventful and relatively safe and it worked because the human immune system is designed to learn from experience. When the body produces special lymphocytes to fight pathogens those lymphocytes remain sensitised to specific infections and will respond to future infections by producing antibodies. With the aid of these antibodies the body can wipe out an appropriate invading organism before the infection can take hold. When this happens the body is said to be protecting itself by having developed immunity.

These days, children have vaccinations. Loads of them. It is the fashion. It is our way. Drug companies and doctors make huge amounts of money out of it. Vaccination is all about money. Drug companies make billions. Doctors make thousands. The big question is not `Is it safe?' or `Does it work?' but `Is it profitable?'

Governments believe that by vaccinating whole populations they reduce the incidence of illness and therefore ensure that people spend more time at work and less time at home, wastefully tucked up in bed with a hot water bottle and a bottle of pills.

There are three main types of vaccine.

First, there are the live vaccines which contain an attenuated strain of a microorganism. The hope with these vaccines is that they will produce a subclinical infection. Viral vaccines may contain attenuated strains of a virus or an inactivated virus. They are prepared in tissue culture, which may contain antibiotics, or in chick embryos. These vaccines are, therefore, unsuitable for patients who are allergic to the antibiotics concerned or to egg protein. (Sadly, many doctors do not bother to ask their patients if they have any allergies which might make vaccination especially hazardous. And so these vaccines are not infrequently given inappropriately.)

Second, there are vaccines which contain killed micro-organisms. These vaccines may contain an intact (but dead) organism or a sample pack of specific antigens.

Third, bacterial toxins which have been inactivated are also used in vaccine preparation.

Vaccines can be given by mouth, nasal spray or injection but these days most are given by injection. Whatever the route or format, a vaccination is designed to give the body enough exposure to a particular pathogen to develop defence cells, but not enough of the pathogen to produce signs and symptoms of illness.

Unfortunately, this is a balancing act which the vaccine manufacturers don't always get perfectly right. And there are many potential hazards. For example, if a live vaccine is given to someone with an ineffective immune system the result can be catastrophic - and fatal.

The immunity provided by vaccines varies enormously. Some vaccines provide lifetime protection. Some vaccines fail to work and provide no protection at all.

The bottom line is that there are many things that can (and do) go wrong. Anyone who claims that all vaccines are always safe and always effective is a nincompoop - and yet that is a claim that is frequently made by British doctors and nurses.

Not surprisingly, many people are confused and worried about vaccines. They don't know what to believe. Are vaccines as safe as the Government says they are? Are they essential? Parents, in particular, can become very bewildered. Will their child die if he or she doesn't have the usual series of vaccinations? Most patients and parents are prepared to accept the Government's assurance that vaccines are safe and utterly essential; they contentedly accept what they are told. But those who want answers will probably find it difficult to get them. Many of my readers who have tried to discuss vaccines with their doctors have complained that their physicians, rude and certain in their ignorance, simply insist that vaccines are perfectly safe and that is the end of the matter.

Those GPs aren't alone in their single-minded defence of vaccination. In Britain, politicians, doctors, nurses and journalists all enthusiastically insist that vaccines are entirely safe and free from side effects. They are all either lying or ill-informed. Lest you assume that is hyperbole let me point out that when, in April 2011, the US Health Department's National Vaccine Injury Compensation Programme released its figures for 2010 the report showed that allegedly safe childhood vaccines officially killed or injured no less than 2,699 children in the year 2010 in America. The parents of those children received $110 million in damages. The US Government has reportedly also paid compensation to the parents of autistic children. And at roughly the same time the Japanese Government halted part of its own vaccination programme after a number of children had died after being vaccinated. (Can you imagine the fuss there would be if a food company marketed a product which killed or injured 2,699 healthy children in a single year? How long would they stay in business with that sort of record?)

I believe that everyone should be told the facts so that they can make up their own minds about the value of any vaccine. Deciding whether or not to have a vaccination is a big decision. It isn't something to be done lightly. The wrong decision can easily lead to a lifetime of regrets.

Sadly, one big problem is undoubtedly the fact that many doctors simply don't know very much about the safety or effectiveness of vaccines. They know what the Government tells them and they know what the company which makes the vaccine tells them. And that's it. But no sensible person trusts Governments and I don't think I am alone, or being unduly cynical, in thinking that companies making vaccines aren't a reliable source of unbiased information about the effectiveness and safety of vaccines.

`My doctor implied that I was just being stupid when I said I wasn't sure that I wanted my child vaccinated,' complained one reader of mine. `His attitude was that it had nothing to do with me and that I should just allow him to do whatever he thought best.'

`My wife came home crying,' complained another reader. `She had the temerity to question her doctor about vaccination. He told her that if she refused to have our child vaccinated he would call in the social workers since in his view our refusal to allow vaccination made us unfit to be parents. What really upset me is that my wife hadn't refused to have our child vaccinated. She just wanted to talk about it.'

This paternalistic attitude seems strong among doctors and other health workers, most of whom seem to prefer to answer any questions with abuse rather than facts. I suspect that this is a consequence of the fact that doctors and health visitors are full to the brim with ignorance and don't have any room for facts with which to answer questions. (Curiously, GPs invariably fail to mention that they have a vested financial interest in promoting vaccination.)

I believe that the whole vaccination story is one of the great modern scandals of our time. The entire medical profession (at least the part of it in general practice) has been bribed and most doctors, whether working as hospital consultants, GPs or public health officials, know very little about vaccination but simply follow the establishment line, never question what they are told by the drug industry, dismiss all critics of vaccination as dangerous lunatics and get very rich by promoting mass vaccination programmes which have never been proven to be safe or effective.

In Britain, doctors give fistfuls of potentially lethal vaccine to tiny babies with developing immune systems. They start dumping the damned stuff into babies when they are two-months-old, for heaven’s sake. And yet there is no evidence proving that vaccines are safe when given in job lots like this and no evidence proving long-term safety. The absence of evidence isn't much of a surprise since no research is done to check either safety or efficacy. The establishment puts the onus on the doubters to find evidence that there are dangers, knowing that this is pretty well impossible to do without the cooperation of the drug companies, the Government or the medical establishment.

If you or I want to sell home-made sweets to kids we will have all sorts of health and safety officials crawling over us, our kitchen and our shop. But doctors merrily squirt gallons of potentially toxic junk into babies who are still breast feeding.

Where's the sense in telling nursing mothers to be aware that what they swallow will end up in their breast milk (and in their developing baby) when the Government promotes its pre-school vaccination programmes with Goebbels-like efficiency?

I fear that doctors have lost their way.

GPs receive massive payments for giving vaccinations and huge bonus payments for vaccinating large quantities of their patients. A GP who jabs enough patients gets a thumping great wodge of cash paid straight into his bank account. A GP who is questioning and discerning will be punished because he won't get the bribe money. And if he doesn't watch his back very carefully he could well find himself being nicely fried by what I believe to be the world's most entirely useless watchdog: the General Medical Council.

And so the vast majority of GPs do as they are told. Most know nothing about the dangers of the damned vaccines they so happily jab into patients' arms and I suspect that they don't want to know anything. Politicians, nurses, and journalists all bury their fears and suspicions and help bang the drum for vaccination. Question the whole damned sordid business and these ill-educated propagandists (who, like the doctors, know nothing about the risks of the toxic mixtures they are promoting) will throw up their hands in horror.

As vaccinations increase so the number of health problems caused by vaccines will soar. At the same time the link between vaccinations and illness will continue to be as strenuously denied as was the link between smoking and lung cancer.

Countries which have not yet adopted mass vaccination programmes would, perhaps, be wise to ask some serious and rather fundamental questions before starting to do so. Here are a few questions that might be asked.

Who benefits most from vaccination programmes?

Are vaccines given to protect the community or to protect the individual?

Where is the scientific evidence showing that vaccines are really effective?

Where is the long-term scientific evidence showing that vaccines are safe?

Where is the long-term scientific evidence showing that giving a ton and a half of mixed gunk into an eight-week-old baby doesn't cause brain damage?

Doctors, politicians and journalists tend to avoid answering these questions because they much prefer to perpetuate the traditional myths about vaccination and to argue that vaccines have helped us eradicate a whole host of previously deadly diseases. Moreover, they will argue that it is vaccines which we must thank for the longevity we enjoy.

All this is, to put it as politely as I feel able, utter bollocks. As I will show in this book the evidence makes it clear that diseases said to have been conquered by vaccines were in fact often controlled by other means long before vaccines were introduced. Sadly, the problem is that the doctors, politicians and drug companies who are promoting vaccination are more interested in profit than evidence.

Over the years I have learned that the truth about many aspects of medicine is suppressed and, as a result, most people simply don't know the facts. The information generally available is provided by politicians, scientists and doctors who bend the truth for commercial reasons and then repeated by journalists who simply believe, and report, what they are told. The result is that millions of people make vital decisions based on half-truths, quarter-truths and downright lies.

Anyone who insists that vaccines are safe and effective is a liar. Life is made easier for the liars because most people are overwhelmed with trying to cope with day-to-day life problems and eager to accept what appear to be comfortable certainties. They are constantly frightened and bewildered and therefore susceptible to the bleatings of reassuring tricksters. They want to trust advice from people they believe to be experts. All that makes the great betrayal even more contemptible and unforgivable.

If you try to find evidence that vaccination works you will find that the best `evidence' offered by those promoting it is that there has been a reduction in the incidence of certain diseases against which vaccination is now commonplace. This is not evidence. It is akin to claiming that there are no elephants in the centre of London because women carry handbags. It is irrelevant nonsense. The incidence of those diseases fell - and was continuing to fall - long before vaccination was introduced.

It is vaccines which, I suspect, best illustrate the recklessness and ruthlessness of the medical profession and the pharmaceutical industry and the way in which both have helped damage the human immune system.

Vaccination programmes are a particularly poignant example of the way in which doctors can do harm partly because just about every individual in the `developed' world will at some time or another be vaccinated and partly because vaccines are given to millions of perfectly healthy people. Individuals who have absolutely nothing wrong with them visit their doctor and allow themselves to be vaccinated in the belief that they are being injected with something perfectly safe which will protect them from disease in the future. Sadly, there is now a dramatic amount of evidence to show that their faith is misplaced and that vaccines may cause an enormous amount of trouble - and do serious and possibly sometimes irreparable harm to their bodies. It is hard to think of a worse global scandal.

Why do so many people assume that vaccination is a good thing? Because they are told so. And who tells them? The trio of evil. Drug companies make money out of vaccinations. And so do doctors. Politicians go along for the ride because they have been tricked and pressured into supporting vaccination by the drug companies and because it is now impossible to back out without exposing themselves (or, rather, the Government) to multi-billion pound lawsuits.

The Government bribes GPs to promote vaccination because its advisors know that more than 90 per cent coverage is required to provide herd immunity - and reduce the incidence of a disease within a community. (I will explain in this book that vaccines are given not to protect individuals against disease but to protect communities against financial loss.)

Where is the evidence that vaccination is truly safe and effective? There isn't any. On the contrary, I believe that by giving people too many vaccines we are creating massive amounts of illness. The trio of evil would do far more good by encouraging greater levels of natural immunity than they do by encouraging dependence on vaccines. Over the last 40 years I have published scores of predictions and warnings about health hazards. Most have already been proved accurate. (The only difference today is that (as I will show) my warnings and predictions are now not just ignored but also actively suppressed.) I have repeatedly criticised the official enthusiasm for vaccination.

In our new world the few doctors who do stand up and say something, and who dare to point out that vaccination programmes are a hazard and do more harm than good, are quickly silenced. They are discredited and scorned and their work is not published. I have, over the years, discovered many of the hazards of telling the truth. My books are rarely reviewed these days. Most national newspapers and magazines ban all advertisements for my books. Planned interviews are invariably cancelled before they take place. In the last ten years I have twice been mysteriously investigated at length by HMRC (on both occasions it turned out that I had paid too much tax.) And, as I show elsewhere in this book I have even been banned from speaking to groups of NHS employees. I mention all this to show just why only one-sided is the information provided for public consumption. It is hardly surprising that parents without medical training and a special interest in iatrogenesis believe the lies they are told about vaccines and think that people like me are half-baked, dangerous lunatics.

I believe that if you are giving a drug to save someone's life (and it is clear that if the drug is not tried then the patient will most certainly die) then it may be ethically acceptable to take risks. But when you are giving a vaccine to perfectly healthy individuals in order to protect the community (and the State) from inconvenience and cost then risks are not acceptable. And yet vaccines are given to millions of people without anyone really having any idea what the long-term consequences may be.

As you read through this book remember that if these facts weren't true I would either be sued or struck off the medical register. Why haven't you read the truths in this book elsewhere? Well, over the last 40 years I've made a lot of enemies who do whatever they can to ensure that the truth is suppressed. The medical establishment works hard to protect itself (and that includes the pharmaceutical industry) and to pressurise journalists into perpetuating the officially acceptable myths and lies.

As you read, remember that I have no vested interests. I don't represent anyone. If I thought vaccines were marvellous I would say so and attack the people trying to oppose their use. My only interest is the truth. My concern is that I believe that the amount of illness and the number of deaths caused by vaccinations far exceed the amount of illness and the number of deaths caused by the diseases against which vaccinations are supposed to offer protection. Remember that I have no vested interest for or against vaccines. I don't receive money from drug companies. I don't sell alternatives to vaccines. All I have to sell are my books; my only product is the truth. The whole vaccination story is one of the great modern scandals of our time. The entire medical profession (at least the part of it in general practice) has been bribed by the Government, using taxpayers' money. In my first book *The Medicine Men* (1975) I wrote that doctors who did what the drug industry told them to do could hardly describe themselves as belonging to a profession. Even I did not then imagine just how easy it would be to bribe and buy an entire profession.

The truth is that doctors, whether working as hospital consultants, GPs or public health officials, know very little about vaccination. Most simply follow the establishment line, never question what they are told by the drug industry and dismiss all critics of vaccination as dangerous lunatics.

I've been writing about vaccines for decades and in the days when radio and television stations were allowed to interview me, and arrange debates, I often met doctors promoting the official `vaccines will save the world' line. Most of them didn't know any of the stuff in this book. They just believed what they were told by the Government and the drug industry and looked at their bank statements every month with growing pride (and perhaps a little incredulity).

Remember: everything in this book is true. Everything *they* tell you is a lie.

And ask yourself: Why has Vernon Coleman written this book? I promise you I don't need the money (if I did I could make far more money writing another book about cats). I certainly don't need the hassle. I don't *need* to write about vaccines (there are scores of other things I would find more fun to write about) and I could think of a hundred book topics that would sell better (I know from past experience that serious medical books don't usually sell very well at all). So why have I written this book? The answer is simple. I've written it because it is the truth and no one else will tell this particular truth.

I can share this truth and so I have.

1. The Vaccination Myth

Most practising doctors and nurses at the sharp end of medicine undoubtedly believe that vaccines have helped wipe out some of the deadliest infectious diseases. Many members of the medical profession would put vaccination high on any list of great medical discoveries. Those who promote vaccines often claim that vaccination programmes have reduced illness, prevented millions of deaths and are the main reason why the average life expectation has risen. These are all barefaced lies.

Vaccination is widely respected by doctors and others in the health care industry because of the assumption that it is through vaccination that many of the world's most lethal infectious diseases have been eradicated. But this simply isn't true: it is a myth. As I have shown in many of my books infectious diseases were conquered by the provision of cleaner drinking water and better sewage facilities. The introduction of vaccination programmes came along either just at the same time or later when the death rates from the major infectious diseases had already fallen. There really isn't any evidence to show that vaccination programmes have ever been of any real value - either to individuals or to communities.

The mythical power of vaccination programmes has for years constantly been sustained by governments and organisations announcing, apparently with complete conviction, that such and such a disease will be eradicated when the relevant vaccination programme has been completed.

The principle behind vaccination is a convincing one.

The theory is that when an individual is given a vaccine - which consists of a weakened or dead version of the disease against which protection is required - his or her body will be tricked into developing antibodies to the disease in exactly the same way that a body develops antibodies when it is exposed to the disease itself.

But in reality things aren't quite so simple. How long do the antibodies last? Do they always work? What about those individuals who don't produce antibodies at all? Vaccination, like so much of medicine, is a far more inexact science than doctors (and drug companies) would like us to think.

The truth is that it is a ruthless and self-serving lie to claim that vaccines have wiped out many diseases and have contributed hugely to the increase in life expectation we now enjoy. The evidence shows that the diseases which are supposed to have been wiped out by vaccines were disappearing long before vaccines were introduced. And the argument that we are living longer is a statistical myth which rests upon the fact that in the past the infant mortality rate was much higher than it is now (because of contaminated drinking water and other public health problems). When the infant mortality rate is high the average life expectation is low. When the infant mortality rate falls then the average life expectation rises. (If one person dies at the age of 1 and another dies at the age of 99 they have an average life span of 50 years. If the person who died prematurely lives longer then the average life span will be much longer).

The bottom line, then, is that the evidence shows that vaccination programmes have not done the things they are credited with but have done most of the things they are blamed for. The decline in disease, the reduction in infant mortality rates and the increase in average life expectation are all due to improved living conditions. Cleaner water, efficient methods of removing sewage, fresher food, less poverty and less overcrowding are the real reasons why these improvements have taken place. Anyone who doubts this has only to look at graphs showing mortality rates and life expectation rates alongside graphs showing when vaccines were introduced. The graphs show clearly that the improvements took place before the vaccines were introduced. Study the evidence relating to whooping cough, tetanus, diphtheria, smallpox, polio and other diseases and it becomes clear that the incidence of these diseases, and number of deaths caused by them, were in decline long before the relevant vaccines were introduced.

2. Vaccine Bonanza

As the years have gone by the number of vaccines available has increased steadily but remorselessly.

A decade or two ago the only vaccines available were against a relatively small number of diseases including smallpox, tuberculosis, polio, cholera, diphtheria, tetanus and whooping cough. Today, the number of available vaccines seems to grow almost daily. In the past vaccines were produced against major killer diseases. Today vaccines are produced against diseases such as measles, mumps and chickenpox which have been traditionally regarded as relatively benign inconveniences of childhood.

In Britain, most children who reach their second birthday will have already received 21 vaccinations against seven different diseases. That's a hell of a lot of gunk to slosh around in a small, growing body. The routine, standard, run of the mill, no questions asked vaccination programme starts at two months (I still can't believe that). Babies just eight-weeks-old have a single jab against diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, haemophilus influenzae type b and polio and another against pneumococcal disease. Then, as if that were not enough, babies of three months have another pile of gunk stuffed into them. And more at four months, just in case the first two batches didn't screw up their immune systems. Babies have some protection against infection from antibodies obtained from their mothers. This lasts for a few months after birth. Otherwise a baby's immune system is rather rudimentary and takes a few years to develop fully. Nevertheless, we now jab young children with a growing number of toxic vaccines. Just what do this do to the developing immune system? You will find a full list of the research papers investigating the damage done to the infant immune system by repeated vaccinations written on the palm of your left hand.

The poor little beggars then have a rest from vaccinations until they are three-years-old or so. And then they get some more. Girls of 12 or 13 have some more potent gunk stuffed into them and everyone gets another armful when they reach their teens. The rules change regularly as drug companies think of something new to flog and new vaccines are added. (Whenever the rules change it is, presumably, fair to assume that the previous vaccination regime was wrong or inadequate in some way. No one ever says this, of course.)

All this is nothing compared to the gunk sloshing around inside small Americans who will have been given more than 30 doses of 10 different vaccines before they can say ‘television’. (These figures are almost certainly out of date by the time you read this. I can guarantee that the figures will be higher, not lower.) Does anyone know what happens inside the body when all these different vaccinations are given together? Do different vaccines work with or against one another? What about the risk of interactions? Exactly how does the immune system cope when it is suddenly bombarded with so much foreign material? And what about dangerous contaminants? Your guess is as good as mine and mine is as good as your doctor's. So, we're all in the dark together.

The pharmaceutical companies and doctors who profit from all this giving of vaccines are not content with the current situation. The vaccine industry never stops looking for new opportunities and researchers are constantly talking about introducing new vaccines. Although new vaccines are forever being introduced, vaccines are rarely if ever withdrawn - even though the diseases involved may be rare or mild. The drug companies can always warn: `If the vaccine isn't given then the disease will come back.'

The search for new vaccines for old diseases is endless. Some plans are imaginative. Scientists have apparently developed a banana vaccine by creating genetically engineered banana plants. There are plans to develop bananas which `protect' against hepatitis B, measles, yellow fever and poliomyelitis. Other scientists have developed a genetically engineered potato designed to be used as a vaccine against cholera. The active part of the potato remains active during the process of cooking and so a portion of genetically engineered chips could soon be a vaccine against cholera. (I am not making this up.) According to a British nursing magazine, nurses are now calling for a vaccine to help stop the norovirus. Giving a vaccine is, presumably, easier than washing your hands. Similarly, fat people are constantly demanding a vaccine to enable them to keep eating cakes without ever getting fatter. There are, so I am told, vaccines in the pipeline for just about everything ranging from asthma to earache. There is a planned genetically engineered vaccine which will provide protection against 40 different diseases. The vaccine, which will contain the raw DNA of all those different diseases, will be given to newborn babies to provide them with protection for life. Inevitably, countless scientists around the world have spent enormous amounts of money and energy trying to create a vaccine against AIDS. A vaccine that makes sex safe will be worth a fortune.

Naturally, the pharmaceutical industry is constantly searching for more and more new vaccines and wherever they spot the beginnings of a market, a demand, they will do their best to serve up something appropriate. I have lost count of the number of times I have read of researchers working on a vaccine to prevent cancer.

Meanwhile, the drug companies continue with the old faithfuls; the profitable cash cows which keep the billions pouring in. Every year new flu jabs appear on the market.

I don't know about you but I can no longer keep up with what is going on. I have long since given up trying to work out which vaccines are very dangerous and which are just a bit dangerous - and to whom. The only certainty is that manufacturing (and giving) vaccines is big business. The people who sell vaccines make a lot of money. And the doctors who give them (or who authorise nurses to give them on their behalf) make a lot of money too. Vaccination is a big, and very profitable, industry. This is vaccine bonanza time for drug companies and doctors.

3. What Research Is Done To Test New Vaccines?

It doesn't require a great deal of learning to realise that there must be dangers involved in injecting a potentially dangerous foreign substance directly into the body. Even an idiot can see that must be hazardous. And yet where is the evidence showing that vaccines have been tested? For example, I have not been able to find any evidence that studies have been done to prove that giving babies numerous vaccines within a short period of time is safe.

One of the problems with setting up any such research programme would undoubtedly be the problem of obtaining informed consent (an essential requirement before any new product can be tested). Obviously, an eight-week-old baby cannot give consent to being jabbed with some potentially toxic material. But how can the parents give consent for a potentially dangerous procedure, on behalf of their baby, when their baby is perfectly well? If a baby will die unless a new treatment is tried - and existing therapies have proved ineffective - then the parents are clearly justified in giving their consent. That is how new treatments are properly tested and developed. But how can parents give consent for their baby to be given a potentially dangerous vaccination when the child is perfectly healthy? And what parents would give their consent under those circumstances? When new drugs and vaccines intended for adult use are introduced they are tested on volunteers, under controlled circumstances. The guinea pigs are carefully observed. Even so there are some disasters when new pharmacological products are tested for the first time. Adult patients used as guinea pigs are well paid for the risks they take.

The bottom line is that it is, in my view, impossible for drug companies and doctors to perform ethically acceptable research to test out new vaccines designed for use on babies and children.

I suspect that if research had been done which proved that vaccines were safe then it would be published and widely promoted (if only to silence critics like myself). At the moment we must all rely on the unsupported confidence of drug companies and the doctors who give vaccinations - all of whom have a vested interest in promoting vaccination and in assuring us all that there are no risks.

Just as surprisingly, and just as shocking, is the fact that as far as I have been able to find out no long-term research has been done, or is being done, into the safety and effectiveness of vaccines. Drug companies and doctors simply assume that vaccines are safe and effective because they want them to be. I wonder how many enthusiastic supporters of vaccination know that, as far as I’ve been able to find out, neither doctors nor drug companies conduct long-term follow-up studies to prove that vaccines are safe. I wonder how many know that the Government doesn't bother either. It is a scandal of brobdingnagian proportions that little or no ongoing research is done to find out how safe or effective vaccines are in the long-term. Drug companies and politicians say that vaccines are safe and effective. And people believe them. Doctors (and others) who speak out against vaccines are ignored and their work is suppressed. Madness.

The basic problem is that these days research work is usually done with a specific, commercial purpose in mind. Research into new products is begun under the guidance and approval of drug companies and the aim is to obtain some useful results which can be used to promote a particular product. What drug company is going to pay for research which might show that its product kills people? Most doctors who do research have links to drug companies and aren't likely to bite the hands that feed them so well. Even if a research programme did show that a vaccine was unsafe the results would be unlikely to be published. Drug companies have a track record of suppressing inconvenient or commercially damaging research results. And, of course, it is very easy to `fiddle' research in order to prove a particular point. By redefining diseases, by choosing patients selectively, by diagnosing diseases in a different way and so on it is possible to `prove' whatever you want to prove.

Without impartial Government support it is extremely unlikely that anyone will conduct research designed to find out whether or not vaccines are safe and effective. And the Government is not going to pay for any research designed to find out just how safe and effective vaccines really are because the Government also has a vested interest in maintaining the myth that vaccines are safe and effective.

The result is that many of the scientific papers which do discuss vaccination have been written by scientists working for the Government (which promotes vaccination) or the drug companies (which make the stuff). These links are not always made clear when the papers are published - and even if the links are revealed does that really make a difference? Many of the people who do research on vaccines, and who sit on committees deciding which vaccines should be given and when, have strong financial connections with drug companies but we are expected to accept that their links with the drug companies in no way affect their judgements or decisions about the use of vaccines. The researchers publishing most of the work on vaccines are unlikely to risk being contaminated by cooperating with independent thinkers; most are employed by, or in some other way linked to, the Government or the drug industry.

There is a mass of evidence showing that vaccines are potentially dangerous. There is no shortage of evidence showing that vaccines make a good many healthy people ill. And there is a frightening amount of evidence supporting the claim that vaccines kill people. It is even fairly easy to prove that vaccines have had no significant effect on the incidence of many of the diseases they are supposed to prevent.

But I haven’t been able to find evidence proving that vaccines are effective. Doctors happily jab stuff into the arms of the perfectly healthy without evidence proving that what they are doing will save lives.

It is simply not good enough for doctors to just say that vaccines are safe and effective because they want them to be. When you are injecting the stuff into millions of kids there ought to be tons of research which proves this conclusively.

Incidentally, if you would like to assess the quality of the information proving that vaccines are safe and effective you can easily do this for yourself. Simply use your favourite search engine to investigate these two questions: `What scientific research has been done to prove that vaccines are really safe?' and `What scientific research has been done to prove that vaccines are effective?'. (Phrase your questions in any way you like, of course. I don't want you to feel that I'm leading you in any particular direction. And check the source of whatever you find.)

Finally, here's a simple, cheap to perform, clinical trial that would tell us whether or not individual vaccines are safe and effective.

All doctors have to do is to make a note of how many children who receive a vaccine develop that disease and then compare those results with the number of children who get the disease but haven't had the vaccine. This will provide information showing that the vaccine is (or is not) effective.

And they could make a note of the number of vaccinated children who develop serious health problems after vaccination and then compare that number with the incidence of serious health problems among unvaccinated children. What could be easier than that?

These would be easy and cheap trials to perform. They would simply require the collection of some basic information. And it would be vital to follow the children for at least 20 years to obtain useful information. A trial involving 100,000 children would be enough.

But I do not know of anyone who has done, or is doing, this simple research. Could it possibly be that no one does such basic research because the results might be embarrassing for those who want to sell vaccines?

4. Can We Learn From Research Using Animals?

Many, if not all, of the vaccines in popular use today have at some stage in their development been tested on animals. Crucial work designed to show whether a new product is safe for human use is often performed on animals. And yet, the evidence shows that the use of animals for research is particularly nonsensical and dangerous (as well as being unutterably cruel).

Drug companies and researchers like using animals because they cannot lose. If, when a drug is being tested on animals, it appears that the animal is harmed then the drug company will say: `This is of no consequence, since animals are different to humans'. They will then sell the drug for use on people. My book *Betrayal of Trust* contains a list of several dozen drugs which cause cancer and other serious disorders in animals but which are sold for human use. When a drug is tested on animals and there are no side effects the drug company concerned will say that this proves that the drug is safe for people. This system means that they cannot lose! What is the point in testing drugs on animals? Only the drug companies gain. It is far better to test new drugs on human tissues in the laboratory than it is to test drugs for people on mice. Such tests are easier, quicker, cheaper and far more reliable than animal tests. The problem is that drug companies don't like such tests because they mean that many potentially dangerous drugs are thrown out by the testing and can never be sold.

The evidence clearly shows that animal experiments are a complete waste of time, that animal experiments have never led to any useful breakthroughs and that they are never likely to lead to any useful breakthroughs. Despite this, much of the research work done on vaccines is performed on animals.

A standard test used on rats gives results which can be accurately applied to human beings just 38 per cent of the time. This means that 62 per cent of the time the results obtained through animal experiments are wrong. Since tossing a coin would give a long-term 50 per cent chance of accuracy it would clearly be quicker, more effective, more efficient and cheaper for these scientists to spend their working days sitting around tossing coins to assess the safety of chemicals. (`Yes! Heads! We can give this to patients! No! Tails! Patients can't take that one.') But, in political and financial terms, tossing a coin would certainly not be as useful as using animals. Consider tobacco, for example. The link between tobacco and cancer was identified many years ago by doctors whose observations and research work had involved human patients. But long after doctors had established the link between tobacco and cancer in humans, animal researchers were still forcing dogs to smoke, and painting tobacco tar on the backs of mice, in attempts to show whether or not there was a laboratory link between tobacco and cancer. Politicians who wanted to avoid taking action against the wealthy and big tax paying tobacco companies were able to do so on the grounds that they were still awaiting laboratory confirmation of the link between tobacco and cancer. Decades of vague, inconclusive and contradictory results enabled the world's tobacco industry to keep selling a product which was responsible for approximately one third of all cancer deaths and which, over the years, must have been responsible for more deaths, disease and misery than any other product ever invented.

Vivisectors provide a perfect example of what psychologists call ‘confirmatory bias’. They collect together all the evidence that supports their thesis and then ignore the evidence that is left - the stuff that doesn't support their belief. If pushed into a corner they delight in confusing the issue in every way they can.

To summarise: my argument against vivisection is very simple and there is no answer to it. I actually have two main arguments. First, drugs are allowed onto the market even if they cause problems in animals - on the grounds that animals are different to humans. And drugs which don't cause problems in the tested animals are allowed onto the market on the grounds that they have been proved safe. Second, the vivisectors admit that over half of their experiments on animals are unreliable and worthless. But they also admit that they don't know which of their experiments are in the minority which, they claim, may be useful. So, they clearly don't ever know which of their experiments may be of value. And if you don't know which experiments are of value then all of them are useless.

Those are the arguments I used when giving evidence at the House of Commons and the House of Lords. No one said anything in opposition to these arguments. Not a word. (That's why vivisectors now refuse to debate with me.) Moreover, when the House of Lords committee sent me the evidence offered by the Department of Health in support of vivisection I was able to destroy, systematically and logically, every shred of their evidence. I proved all their arguments in favour of vivisection to be entirely fallacious and nonsensical. I proved, without any shadow of doubt, that vivisection is worse than useless - it is dangerous. (My demolition of the Government's evidence `supporting' vivisection appears on my website www.vernoncoleman.com)

I confess that I was not terribly impressed by the peers who sat on the House of Lords committee on animals. It was a not unpleasant experience. As a witness I was treated with courtesy. It was like being on trial without the inconvenience of being sent to prison if things go badly. One of the peers was someone called Mary Warnock who wrote a book entitled *Nature and Mortality.* This is what she wrote about the committee in her book: `The reason that this committee is such fun is that it is possible, indeed necessary, to discuss these fundamental issues…Our trip to the United States was enormously enjoyable, and I look back on it as a time of endless laughter.' She described the clerk to the committee as very young and having read music at Cambridge. `We quite often meet,' she wrote, `and discuss the business, usually ending in laughter.' She concluded: 'One way and another, it will be a sad day when `Animals' disappears as an entry in my diary.' She clearly had doubts about the value of the committee: `Whether what we recommend will make any difference to the practices of the Home Office is more than doubtful,' she wrote.

She was right to be doubtful.

The truth is that the Home Office seems to me to be quite uninterested in facts or scientific evidence. The politicians and officials there (though paid by taxpayers) appear to strive only to keep the drug companies happy. Indeed, the whole establishment seems determined to do everything it can to squash opposition to vivisection. The establishment was helped in this aim when the whole anti-vivisection movement was demonised in the 1980s and 1990s by Special Branch and MI5 who had no enemy to justify their massive budgets and had to invent one. They chose anti-vivisectionists even though they must have known damned well that there was never any real danger from them. The whole a/v movement was (and is) disorganised and consisted largely of little old ladies and teenagers handing out badly printed leaflets on street corners on Saturdays. Nevertheless, the Government gave the whole lunacy official backing and a Home Secretary (Jack Straw) described animal rights activists as terrorists. I suspect that the security forces claimed that animal rights activists were a major threat to the nation simply to justify their expensive, ungoverned existence. And so, honest old ladies in brogues and tweeds and well-intentioned teenage vegans in cardboard shoes and thin waterproof jackets became the world's most unlikely and least threatening terrorists.

It is worthwhile pointing out that there is growing evidence to support the contention that many of today's new and most threatening viral epidemics have been generated by medical scientists working with animals. During the 1960's and 1970's, cancer researchers and scientists working for the military on the development of death bugs were developing HIV-like viruses in laboratories.

Misled by animal studies which suggested that viruses were responsible for the development of cancer, researchers were trying to find an anti-cancer vaccine. They combined viruses which were known to cause cancer in animals in an attempt to create new viruses which they hoped would give them some clues about how viruses caused cancer.

At the same time researchers working for the military were using animals in their attempts to develop viral weapons with which opponents could be killed (and their countries destabilised) en masse.

Because of incompetence (a common fault among the mass of second rate scientists around the world who routinely perform experiments on animals) the new viruses have been inadvertently spread through our communities.

And, of course, there is convincing evidence to suggest that AIDS was created in an animal research laboratory.

The conclusion of any independent observer has to be that vivisectors are, as a group, ignorant, unthinking, entirely selfish varlets who do as much harm to people as they do to animals. They refuse to discuss or debate what they do but rely on misinformation and propaganda. And there is a real risk that the work done by vivisectors is extremely dangerous to human health.

It is worth remembering that the biggest survey of doctors ever conducted showed that the majority of practising doctors agree that animal experiments are of no value whatsoever to patients and that patients would suffer fewer side effects if new drugs were tested on human cell and tissue cultures. Naturally, neither the medical establishment nor the media have shown much interest in these inconvenient views. A few years ago I was President of an organisation of over 1,000 doctors who opposed vivisection. The only time I was interviewed by the British media I was subjected to what I can only describe as a lengthy and subjective sneer from a presenter called Melvyn Bragg on a BBC radio programme called *Start the Week*. Bragg seemed to me to be more enthusiastic about pouring scorn on the anti-vivisection argument rather than actually listening to it.

Cruel experiments on animals in laboratories have certainly helped the drug industry and the medical profession make a great deal of money (and, do a great deal of damage to millions of unsuspecting human patients) but they haven't been of value to doctors genuinely interested in preventing (or treating) disease.

But, ironically, animals have helped us refine our views about vaccination in a rather unsuspected way. The argument that vaccines do more harm than good is strongly supported by our experiences with animals. For example, between 1968 and 1988 there were considerably more outbreaks of foot and mouth disease in countries where vaccination against foot and mouth disease was compulsory than in countries where there were no such regulations. Epidemics of foot and mouth disease always started in countries where vaccination was compulsory. If this experience with animals can be extrapolated to humans then it clearly shows that the alleged advantage to the community of vaccinating individuals simply does not exist.

Similar observations were made about the hyena dog, which was in 1989 threatened with extinction. Scientists vaccinated individual animals to protect them against rabies but more than a dozen packs then died within a year - of rabies. This happened even in areas where rabies had never been seen before. When researchers tried using a non-infectious form of the pathogen (to prevent the deaths of the remaining animals) all members of seven packs of dogs disappeared. It seems curious that the rabies vaccine is now compulsory in many parts of the world. Could it be possible that it is the vaccine which is keeping this disease alive?

5. Vaccination Against Diphtheria

Vaccination against diphtheria was introduced to Germany in 1925. After the introduction of the vaccine, the number of cases of diphtheria steadily increased until, shortly after the Second World War, production of the vaccine was halted. There was a decline in the incidence of the disease which coincided with the fact that the vaccination was no longer being used. When the vaccine was subsequently reintroduced the decline in the incidence of the disease slowed down.

As with whooping cough, tetanus and other diseases the incidence, and number of deaths from diphtheria, had been in decline long before the vaccine was introduced.

6. Vaccination Against Influenza

On January 13th 2011, newspapers carried headlines telling readers that the death toll from flu had more than doubled and had risen to 112. There were calls for compulsory vaccination against swine flu. In fact, these figures show that less people than usual were dying from flu for the time of the year. On the following day doctors and journalists described the incidence of flu as `a pandemic' and called for all children to be vaccinated immediately (despite the fact that it was mainly elderly people who were dying). Scaremongering, vaccine-promoting supporters of the planned vaccination programme pointed out that the vaccine cost only £6 per person.

Up until a year or two ago the World Health Organisation used to describe a pandemic as a disease which (among other things) killed large numbers of people.

This definition was changed in 2009 so that a disease which spread across national borders (but didn't necessarily kill many people) could be described as a pandemic.

Shortly after the definition was changed, swine flu was officially declared a serious level 6 pandemic. And countries all over the world had little choice but to start buying up huge stocks of H1N1 flu vaccine. The financial cost was enormous. And the profits for the drug companies flogging the vaccines were enormous too.

When the swine flu vaccine was first introduced it was said that it would prevent the disease. Then it was announced that it would shorten the duration of the disease. It was said that 159 deaths had occurred in Mexico as a result of the flu but this was later corrected to just seven deaths. Independent doctors warned that for children the side effects of the drug far outweighed the benefits and that one in twenty children was suffering from nausea or vomiting (severe enough to bring on dehydration) and also nightmares. The disease was being diagnosed on the NHS telephone line (provided as an alternative to a disappearing GP service) by telephone operators who were, presumably, satisfied that their diagnostic skills enabled them to differentiate between flu and early signs of other, more deadly disorders such as meningitis. (Making diagnoses on the telephone is a dangerous business even for a doctor.)

Senior politicians in Europe subsequently called H1N1 a faked pandemic and accused pharmaceutical companies (and their lackeys) of encouraging a false scare. Limited health resources had been wasted buying millions of doses of vaccine. And millions of healthy people had been needlessly exposed to the unknown side effects of vaccines that in my view had been insufficiently tested.

As always, vaccinations were given with greatest enthusiasm to children and the elderly - the most immunologically vulnerable and the easiest to damage with vaccines.

We don't develop immunity to influenza and the common cold because the viruses that cause these diseases are constantly mutating and changing. And for the same reason the anti-flu vaccine will be useless within months, weeks or days. For the drug companies this is great news because it means they can insist that everyone who is vaccinated needs revaccinating regularly.

The strains of influenza virus used are the available strains which the drug companies and the authorities guess might be the ones which will hit in the current year. The chances are, of course, that the strains of flu which will spread will be quite different.

Because the flu virus is constantly changing, scientists have to try to predict which strains are likely to produce an epidemic a year ahead. This a bit like forecasting the weather a year ahead. Actually, it's not a bit like that. It's exactly like that.

Moreover, for the sake of economic convenience, drug companies, politicians and doctors often talk about `this year's flu vaccine' as though the flu virus mutates just once a year. This, of course, is nonsense. Viruses don't take any notice of the calendar. They change as much as they like and as often as they can. The idea of giving anti-flu jabs on an annual basis is arbitrary and entirely unscientific. Once the drug companies have got hooked on an annual financial bonanza they will suggest that vaccines be given biannually. And doctors, who also make huge sums out of giving flu vaccinations, will be equally enthusiastic.

The vaccination programme is all about money.

I wonder how many people who have the flu jab know just what they are allowing their doctor (or, more likely, a nurse) to dump in their arm? How many know that a pretty standard influenza vaccine may contain: different strains of influenza viruses propagated in chicken embryos; formaldehyde (used as a preservative); polyethylene glycol (used to stimulate the immune system); gelatin (made from cows' bones) and thimerosal (which contains mercury).

In 2011, studies suggested that innate immunity is vital to flu resistance and that alveolar macrophages help to clear the flu virus out from the lungs. University of Texas researchers announced that enhancing this natural action would increase the body's resistance to flu infection. The obvious thing to do, therefore, is to encourage people to improve their natural immunity by avoiding activities which are bad for the immune system and by eating foods which help the immune system. In contrast, the whole principle of vaccination is to encourage fake immunity. But does multiple vaccination increase or lower the body's general immunity? Personally, I believe vaccination could well lower real immunity. I don't think I'm the only doctor who worries about this. When I was in practice as a GP I don't think I ever met a doctor who had an anti-flu vaccination himself (or gave one to members of his family). To be honest, I would be most unwilling to trust the judgement of such a doctor if I ever found one.

The big question which no one answers (and hardly anyone asks) is: could the widespread use of flu vaccine be spreading flu, encouraging the developing of more potent viruses and, therefore, be responsible for the fact that a surprising number of relatively young, and healthy, individuals are now dying from the disease? I don't know. And I don't believe anyone else does, either. What I do know is that flu jabs don’t have any useful effect on preventing hospitalisation, death or time off work.

7. Vaccination Against Poliomyelitis

Doctors trying to promote vaccines often claim that the disease poliomyelitis was eradicated by the use of a vaccine. This is, to put it politely, a barefaced lie. I know facts are unfashionable with the medical establishment these days but the hard evidence shows quite conclusively that the polio vaccine has endangered vast numbers of healthy people, still kills healthy people and played no part in eradicating the disease.

Proof that the introduction of the polio vaccine wasn't the success it is often made out to be isn't difficult to find. In Tennessee, USA, the number of polio victims the year before vaccination became compulsory was 119. The year after vaccination was introduced the figure rose to 386. In North Carolina, the number of cases before vaccination was introduced was 78, while the number after the vaccine became compulsory rose to 313. There are similar figures for other American states. If you don't believe me, check out the figures. The evidence isn't that hard to find. In America, as a whole, the incidence of polio increased dramatically (by around 50 per cent) after the introduction of mass immunisation. The number of deaths from polio had fallen dramatically before the first polio vaccine was introduced.

The truth is that as with other infectious diseases the significance of polio dropped as better sanitation, better housing, cleaner water and more food were all made available in the second half of the 19th century. It was social developments rather than medical ones which increased human resistance to infectious diseases.

But the profitable vaccine is still popular. Today, paralysis caused by poliomyelitis is unheard of in many countries. But every year there are cases of paralysis probably caused by the oral polio vaccine.

However, whether or not the polio vaccine actually works is, for many people, a relatively unimportant health issue.

Of far more significance is the fact (revealed in my book *Why Animal Experiments Must Stop* in 1991) that millions of people who were given polio jabs as children in the 1950s and 1960s may now be at a greatly increased risk of developing cancer.

The problem is that although the first breakthrough in the development of a poliomyelitis vaccine was made in 1949 with the aid of a human tissue culture, when the first practical vaccine was prepared in the 1950's monkey kidney tissue was used because that was standard laboratory practice. Researchers didn't realise that one of the viruses commonly found in monkey kidney cells can cause cancer in humans.

If human cells had been used to prepare the vaccine (as they could and should have been and as they are now) the original poliomyelitis vaccine would have been much safer.

(As a side issue this is yet another example of the stupidity of using animal tissue in the treatment of human patients. The popularity of using transplants derived from animals suggests that doctors and scientists have learned nothing from this error. I sometimes despair of those who claim to be in the healing profession. Most members of the medical establishment don't have the brains required for a career in street cleaning.)

Bone, brain, liver and lung cancers have all been linked to the monkey kidney virus SV40 and something like 17 million people who were given the polio vaccine in the 1950s and 1960s are probably now at risk (me included). Moreover, there now seems to be evidence that the virus may be passed on to the children of those who were given the contaminated vaccine. The SV40 virus from the polio vaccine has already been found in cancers which have developed both in individuals who were given the vaccine as protection against polio and in the children of individuals who were given the vaccine. It seems inconceivable that the virus could have got into the tumours other than through the polio vaccine.

The American Government was warned of this danger back in 1956 but the doctor who made the discovery was ignored and her laboratory was closed down. Surprise, surprise. It was five years after this discovery before drug companies started screening out the virus. And even then Britain had millions of doses of the infected polio vaccine in stock. There is no evidence that the Government withdrew the vaccine and so it was almost certainly just used until it had all gone. No one can be sure about this because in Britain the official records which would have identified those who had received the contaminated vaccine were all destroyed by the Department of Health in 1987. Oddly enough the destruction of those documents means that no one who develops cancer as a result of a vaccine they were given (and which was recommended to their parents by the Government) can take legal action against the Government. Gosh. The world is so full of surprises. My only remaining question is a simple one: How do these bastards sleep at night?

Oh, I do have one other question.

Did your doctor, practice nurse or eager health visitor mention any of this when extolling the virtues of vaccination?

8. Vaccination Against Smallpox

One of the medical profession's greatest boasts is that it eradicated smallpox through the use of the smallpox vaccine. I myself believed this claim for many years. But it simply isn't true.

One of the worst smallpox epidemics of all time took place in England between 1870 and 1872 - nearly two decades after compulsory vaccination was introduced. After this evidence that smallpox vaccination didn't work the people of Leicester in the English Midlands refused to have the vaccine any more. When the next smallpox epidemic struck in the early 1890s the people of Leicester relied upon good sanitation and a system of quarantine. There was only one death from smallpox in Leicester during that epidemic. In contrast the citizens of other towns (who had been vaccinated) died in vast numbers.

Obligatory vaccination against smallpox was introduced in Germany as a result of state by-laws, but these vaccination programmes had no influence on the incidence of the disease. On the contrary, the smallpox epidemic continued to grow and in 1870 Germany had the gravest smallpox epidemic in its history. At that point the new German Reich introduced a new national law making vaccination against smallpox an even stricter legal requirement. The police were given the power to enforce the new law.

German doctors (and medical students) are taught that it was the Reich Vaccination Law which led to a dramatic reduction in the incidence of smallpox in Germany. But a close look at the figures shows that the incidence of smallpox had already started to fall before the law came into action. And the legally enforced national smallpox vaccination programme did not eradicate the disease.

Doctors and drug companies may not like it but the truth is that surveillance, quarantine and better living conditions got rid of smallpox - not the smallpox vaccine.

When the international campaign to rid the world of smallpox was at its height the number of cases of smallpox went up each time there was a large scale (and expensive) mass vaccination of populations in susceptible countries. As a result of this the strategy was changed. Mass vaccination programmes were abandoned and replaced with surveillance, isolation and quarantine.

The myth that smallpox was eradicated through a mass vaccination programme is just that - a myth. Smallpox was eradicated through identifying and isolating patients with the disease.

Jenner's work *may* have helped end smallpox's reign of terror (though better living conditions played a far more important part), but vaccination has been subsequently wildly over-promoted and over-used to prevent far less threatening disorders. Vaccinators have extrapolated from Jenner's work and built a multistorey building on nothing more substantial than a clumsily thrown together dung heap. Those whose enthusiasm for vaccination remains undimmed should perhaps be aware that Jenner himself had his own reservations. He tried out the first smallpox vaccination on his own 10-month-old son. Tragically, his son remained mentally retarded until his death at the age of 21. Jenner, the revered hero of pro-vaccination freaks, refused to have his second child vaccinated. Curiously, the doctors who talk so knowledgeably about Jenner's work on vaccination never seem to know any of this stuff.

The profession which had originally rejected Jenner's discovery as too dangerous, embraced it with diminishing reservations and unbridled enthusiasms, ignoring the risks and side effects as the profits to be made (both by the manufacturing industry and the medical profession) grew and grew; the glimpse of unending profits encouraging the development of too many vaccines which were neither effective nor safe.

As a postscript I should mention that when Louis XV contracted smallpox he is said to have survived only because his nurse hid him from the doctors who had killed his father and brother with their `treatments'. Wise nurse.

9. Vaccination Against Tuberculosis

Vaccination against tuberculosis is often given as the reason why this disease stopped being quite the threat to life that it had been.

But this isn't true.

Robert Koch discovered the pathogen that causes TB back in 1883. After that BCG vaccination was introduced and then, subsequently, mass treatment programmes were devised with chemotherapy. None of these discoveries or introductions had a significant effect on the incidence of tuberculosis.

Contracting TB doesn't provide any immunity against a second infection. And if a natural infection doesn't provide protection then a vaccination certainly won't provide protection. How on earth can it?

It was noticed decades ago that in the lung sanatoriums that specialised in the treatment of TB patients there was no difference in the survival rates of patients who had been `protected' against TB with BCG vaccination when compared to the survival rates of patients who had received no such `protection'.

The tuberculosis vaccination (the Bacillus Calmette-Guerin - known as BCG) consists of a weakened, living bovine mycobacteria. The vaccine was used for many years but a trial in India showed that the vaccine offers no protection against the disease. Indeed, when new cases of tuberculosis increased annually in the area where people had been vaccinated against the disease the trial seemed to suggest that there might be a link between the vaccine and outbreaks of the disease.

Many countries have now abandoned the TB vaccine - and have no plans to reintroduce it even though the disease is now once again a major health problem.

10. Vaccination Against Whooping Cough (aka Pertussis)

Throughout the 1970s and the 1980s I was a passionate critic of a number of vaccines - most notably the whooping cough vaccine.

The story of the whooping cough vaccine provides us with a remarkable example of dishonesty and deceit in medicine.

There has been controversy about the whooping cough vaccine for many years but in the UK the Department of Health and Social Security has consistently managed to convince the majority of medical and nursing staff to support the official line that the vaccine is both safe and effective. The official line has for years paid little attention to the facts. Put bluntly, successive governments have consistently lied about the risks and problems associated with the whooping cough vaccine.

I will explain exactly *why* I think that governments have lied to their employers (the public) a little later. For the time being I would like to concentrate on the history.

The first point that should be made is that although official spokesmen claim otherwise, I don’t believe the whooping cough vaccine has ever had a significant influence on the number of children dying from whooping cough. The dramatic fall in the number of deaths caused by the disease came well before the vaccine was widely available and was, historians agree, the result of improved public health measures and the use of antibiotics.

It was in 1957 that the whooping cough vaccine was first introduced nationally in Britain - although the vaccine was tried out in the late 1940s and the early 1950s. But the incidence of whooping cough, and the number of children dying from the disease, had both fallen very considerably well before 1957. So, for example, while doctors reported 170,000 cases of whooping cough in 1950 they reported only about 80,000 cases in 1955. The introduction of the vaccine really didn't make very much, if any, difference to the fall in the incidence of the disease. Thirty years after the introduction of the vaccine, whooping cough cases were still running at about 1,000 a week in Britain.

Similarly, the figures show that the introduction of the vaccine had no effect on the number of children dying from whooping cough. The mortality rate associated with the disease had been falling appreciably since the early part of the 20th century and rapidly since the 1930s and 1940s - showing a particularly steep decline after the introduction of the sulphonamide drugs. Whooping cough is undoubtedly an extremely unpleasant disease but it has not been a major killer for many years. Successive governments have frequently forecast fresh whooping cough epidemics but none of the forecast epidemics has produced the devastation predicted.

My second point is that the whooping cough vaccine is neither very efficient nor is it safe. The efficiency of the vaccine is of subsidiary interest - although thousands of children who have been vaccinated do still get the disease - for the greatest controversy surrounds the safety of the vaccine. The DHSS has always claimed that serious adverse reactions to the whooping cough vaccine are extremely rare and the official suggestion has been that the risk of a child being brain damaged by the vaccine is no higher than one in 100,000. Leaving aside the fact that I find a risk of one in 100,000 unacceptable, it is interesting to examine this figure a little more closely, for after a little research work it becomes clear that the figure of one in 100,000 is a guess.

Numerous researchers have studied the risks of brain damage following whooping cough vaccination and their results make fascinating reading. Between 1960 and 1981, for example, nine reports were published showing that the risk of brain damage varied between one in 6,000 and one in 100,000. The average was a risk of one in 50,000. It is clear from these figures that the Government simply chose the figure which showed the whooping cough vaccine to be least risky. Moreover, the one in 100,000 figure was itself an estimate - a guess.

Although the British Government consistently claims that whooping cough is a dangerous disease, the figures show that it is not the indiscriminate killer it is made out to be. Whooping cough causes very few deaths a year in Britain. Many more deaths are caused by tuberculosis and meningitis.

The truth about the whooping cough vaccine is that it has, in the past, been a disaster. The vaccine has been withdrawn in some countries because of the amount of brain damage associated with its use. In Japan, Sweden and West Germany the vaccine has, in the past, been omitted from regular vaccination schedules. In America, some years ago, two out of three whooping cough vaccine manufacturers stopped making the vaccine because of the cost of lawsuits. On 6th December 1985 the *Journal of the American Medical Association* published a major report showing that the whooping cough vaccine was, without doubt, linked to the development of serious brain damage.

The final nail in the coffin lid is the fact that the British Government quietly paid out compensation to the parents of hundreds of children who had been brain damaged by the whooping cough vaccine. Some parents who accepted damages in the early years were given £10,000. Later the sum was raised to £20,000.

My startling conclusion is that for many years now the whooping cough vaccine has been killing or severely injuring more children than the disease itself. In the decade after 1979, around 800 children (or their parents) received money from the Government as compensation for vaccine produced brain damage. In the same period less than 100 children were killed by whooping cough. I think that made the vaccine more dangerous than the disease. And that, surely is quite unacceptable. So, *why* did the British Government continue to encourage doctors to use the vaccine?

There are two possible explanations. The first explanation is the more generous of the two and concerns the Government's responsibility for the health of the community as a whole. The theory here is that by encouraging millions of parents to have their children vaccinated the Government can reduce the incidence of the disease in the community. In the long run this (theoretically) reduces the risk of there being any future epidemics of whooping cough. In other words the Government risks the lives of individual children for the good of the next generation.

The second, less charitable explanation is that the British Government was looking after its own interests by continuing to claim that the whooping cough vaccine was safe enough to use. If the British Government had withdrawn the whooping cough vaccine, it would have been admitting that the vaccine was dangerous. And it would obviously have had to pay out a great deal of money in compensation. By a good deal I mean billions. Lots of billions.

Whatever explanation you consider most accurate, the unavoidable fact is that the Government has, in the past, consistently lied about the whooping cough vaccine, has distorted the truth and has deceived both the medical profession (for the majority of doctors and nurses who give these injections accept the recommendations made by the Government without question) and millions of parents.

The British Government may have saved itself a tidy sum in damages. But the cost to the nation's health has been enormous.

And today no one with anything resembling a functioning brain believes anything the Government says about vaccines or, indeed, anything else.

The whooping cough vaccine used to be given to older children but young babies (who had not been vaccinated) still died from the disease (although the so-called experts claimed that by giving the vaccine to older children the disease would be eradicated and babies would not get it). So now they give the vaccine to eight-week-old babies and hope not too many of them die and that when babies do die no one can prove it's the vaccine.

How many children will be killed by the vaccine? Will Arsenal win the 2020 FA Cup? Will Tony Blair ever be imprisoned for war crimes? These are all imponderables. For the answers, we must wait.

11. Vaccines Are Designed To Protect the Community

Governments are enthusiastic about vaccination not because the politicians want to protect citizens from illness (when have Governments ever cared a jot about individuals?) but because they believe that vaccinations help prevent the spread of disease within a community. They're wrong, but that's what they've been told and that's what they believe.

The idea is a simple one.

The theory is that if enough children (or, indeed, adults) are vaccinated then the incidence of a disease is likely to be lower. Vaccinations don't by any means provide complete protection (many children who are vaccinated still develop the diseases against which they have been vaccinated) but the hope is that they may cut down the incidence of a disease.

And the advantage to a Government is obvious. If, instead of a million children being ill with measles just half a million develop the disease then the number of parents having time off work will be reduced accordingly. Vaccination programmes are favoured by Governments because they ease the economic burden on the State. Vaccinations are given not to prevent death or serious injury (the diseases against which most vaccines are now given do not usually kill or seriously injure) but to protect the community.

Here's the deal: Child A is vaccinated to stop children B and C getting the disease and to stop the parents of B and C needing to take time off work. So it is, as usual with vaccination, all about money. The aim is to help maximise the State's income. But it is, of course, Child A who takes all the risk.

If you're a public-spirited parent then you perhaps won't mind risking your child's health for the sake of the State.

But it would be nice if they told you all this, wouldn't it?

Maybe they don't because, deep, deep down, they rather suspect that most parents would be touched by unpatriotic reluctance when expected to risk their child's health for the sake of the nation (or, more accurately, our EU region).

The philosophy behind vaccination programmes is remarkably ruthless. The State comes first. The individual comes nowhere.

Let me explain it another way: if you could cure all present cancers and prevent anyone ever getting cancer again by performing an experiment on one healthy child, would you go ahead - knowing that the child would certainly die? Would you sacrifice an innocent and perfectly healthy child for the good of the community?

Let's make it more interesting.

Let's assume that the child is yours.

The dilemma is now a simple one.

If you allow scientists to kill your child then no one will ever again develop cancer.

Would you allow them to kill your child?

Well, that's the decision the Government has already made on your behalf by electing to recommend (or insist) that your child be vaccinated. They are pushing vaccination not for your child's benefit but for the good of the community. But they didn't bother to ask you what you thought about it. Instead they lied to you - telling you that the vaccinations were for your child's benefit.

Not many people realise that vaccination programmes are primarily designed to reduce the incidence of infection in the community, rather than keeping individual children healthy. I wonder how many of those who promote vaccination so enthusiastically realise that children are put at risk to protect the community. Politicians don't tell parents the truth about this because they suspect (probably rightly) that many parents would refuse to have their children vaccinated if they knew. The bottom line is that Governments promote vaccination for financial reasons. They believe that if they persuade citizens to be vaccinated (and to have their children vaccinated) then the incidence of infectious disease will be lower and workers will need less time off work.

Knowing all this, do politicians have their children vaccinated? Well, that's where it gets interesting because politicians who use their children at every possible opportunity suddenly become shy and reticent when asked if their children have been vaccinated. `You can't possibly ask me that,' they say indignantly. `My children are private individuals.' And then two weeks later they talk endlessly about their children's illnesses in order to deflect criticism of some outrageous piece of behaviour, or they pose with their children in order to help win a vote or two or to deflect criticism of some indefensible Government policy. Most senior politicians are just bright enough not to have their children vaccinated, and even when vaccinations become compulsory (as they will) they will find a way to avoid them. Politicians are ruthless. They will kill your children in the hope of cutting community costs (and in the certainty of pleasing drug companies). But, for some reason, they are less enthusiastic about killing their own. And do doctors have their children vaccinated? Well, most aren't saying and that, in itself, is pretty telling.

Nothing is going to force politicians to change their view. First, the cost of looking after individuals who have been brain damaged by vaccination usually falls onto families, rather than the Government. It is parents who, more often than not, take on the huge financial, physical and emotional burden of caring for a vaccine damaged child. And second, Governments have promoted vaccines and vaccination programmes with such fervour that they cannot now back pedal. If they did they would expose themselves to vast, multi-billion pound lawsuits. Governments are now firmly committed to vaccination and politicians aren't going to change their views about vaccines. Politicians, doctors and drug companies are joined together irreversibly.

12. Compulsory Vaccination

Enthusiasm for vaccination has become almost hysterical in much of the world. Drug companies promote vaccination programmes because they make billions out of vaccines. Doctors are equally enthusiastic because they can charge huge fees for vaccinating their patients. And Governments everywhere are enthusiastic because they have been told (by drug companies and doctors) that vaccination programmes help prevent disease and therefore save money.

But vaccination is, in my considered view, a massive confidence trick.

And there is now much talk in America and Europe of compulsory vaccination programmes being introduced.

Compulsory vaccinations have already been introduced in some areas of the world and in Britain some general practitioners (GPs) are already refusing to look after patients if they don't agree to have their children vaccinated. There is a simple, selfish financial reason for this. If patients refuse vaccination, British family doctors lose out on huge cash bonuses.

I now have no doubt that despite the dangers and inefficiencies known to be associated with it, vaccination will become compulsory in the West. The hazards and inadequacies will be ignored. It will not be the first time. Compulsory vaccination was introduced in Britain in the mid 19th century and in 1871 Public Vaccinators were appointed.

There are already many senior members of the medical establishment in Europe and America who want vaccination to be compulsory. You will not be convulsed with shock when I tell you that drug companies which make vaccines would not be averse to their products being made compulsory. I understand that. I would like my books to be made compulsory reading.

Politicians have been persuaded that vaccinating the population at large helps save money. The theory is that if you vaccinate 1,000,000 children against, say, whooping cough (aka pertussis) and, as a result, you prevent 1,000 children getting the disease then the country will avoid the cost of 1,000 parents staying at home for a week or so to look after their child. If one child is permanently brain damaged by the vaccine that is bad luck on the child and his or her parents but, as long as the State can avoid financial responsibility by denying that there is any link between vaccination and brain damage, then it is ahead of the game. In reality, the evidence suggests that even this cold-blooded, steel-hearted philosophy is faulty. The problem is that vaccines are so ineffective and (more important) so dangerous that instead of being an advantage to society as a whole they are a costly disadvantage - though the greater part of those costs tend to be transferred from the State to individual families. (In the heat of their enthusiasms for vaccination your GP and health visitor might have forgotten to tell you all this.)

Despite all this evidence, vaccines for children and adults are compulsory in some countries. In other countries (such as the UK) doctors are given a financial bonus as a reward when they `sell' vaccination to a large proportion of their patients. Doctors write to patients to encourage them to take their children to the surgery for vaccinations not because they've looked at the evidence and know that a vaccine save lives but because they get paid huge fees for giving vaccinations (or telling their nurse to do them) and massive bonuses if they hit the targets they've been given by the Government. Health visitors and nurses bully patients into accepting vaccinations because that's what they are told to do. If they were told to herd everyone into gas chambers they'd do that too. The world is getting scarier by the minute. Fear upon fear upon threat. Nurses and doctors do what they are told and patients suppress their natural scepticism, stand in line, bare their arms and take what is coming to them.

As more and more people become wary about vaccines so it is likely that more and more countries will make vaccination compulsory. This will happen quickly. Massachusetts, in the USA, passed a law whereby the police can break in and give you a flu shot or put you in jail if you refuse.

In an increasing number of countries, parents who refuse to have their children vaccinated are likely to be arrested and to have their children taken away from them. In other countries (such as the UK) doctors are given a financial bonus as a reward when they `sell' vaccinations to a large enough proportion of their patients. I received an e-mail from the Czech Republic asking for permission to translate the material on vaccines from my website because, I was told, vaccination is now compulsory there and no anti-vaccination material is available. Governments are enthusiastic about vaccines because they believe that vaccinations help stop the spread of diseases in a community and therefore save money. When kids have measles their mums stay off work. That costs the economy money. Vaccines are given to minimise disruption and to save money. The authorities are now even talking of giving the rubella vaccine to young boys to help cut the incidence of that disease among pregnant women.

In Britain, recommendations relating to vaccines are made by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation which is made up of a variety of people. I would be very surprised if, at any one time, the committee did not include one or more members who were or are linked in some way to drug companies making vaccines. I have been researching vaccination and drug hazards for over 40 years and I have not yet found an official committee on drug use and safety which did not include individuals with drug company links. (I have on occasions in the past found committees which were composed pretty well entirely of individuals who had financial links with drug companies.)

Incidentally, in July 2011 it was announced that the JCVI had `agreed with a call from the UK Vaccine Industry Group to allow manufacturers to submit evidence for effectiveness and cost earlier in the process'. I wonder who will be first to suggest that the two groups merge to save administration costs.

Up until 2009, the JCVI made what it called `recommendations'. But then the Labour Government created a Statutory Instrument amending the Public Health (Control of Diseases) Act 1984, and so now recommendations of the JCVI will in future receive the full support of the Secretary of State for Health. They will, effectively, become law.

Will the JCVI make vaccination compulsory? Well, I suspect that the better question would probably be: `When will the JCVI make vaccination compulsory?' As more and more people become wary about vaccines so it is likely that more and more countries will make vaccination compulsory. In April 2011, it was announced that the General Medical Council in the UK now requires doctors to be: `immunised against common serious communicable diseases where vaccines are available'. I am a registered and licensed general practitioner. I do not intend to have any vaccinations. I invite the GMC to take whatever action they feel appropriate. I will then ask them to produce evidence proving that all available vaccines are both safe and effective. That should be fun.

The Government will try to reduce the size (and cost of the NHS) because they have to save so much money to avoid national bankruptcy that not even the NHS will be immune to cuts. But the cuts won't be enough. And so, the Government's advisers will suggest that it might help to cut costs if the nation became healthier. And that will, of course, mean more laws. It will mean compulsory all sorts of things. It may mean that people who are overweight and who refuse to lose weight may be fined or punished in some other way (possibly by being denied treatment or benefits). But my best bet is that the Government will introduce a compulsory vaccination programme. The drug companies and the doctors (both of whom will make vast amounts of money out of a compulsory vaccination programme) will recommend that all children be vaccinated whether or not their parents approve. This is already happening in some parts of the world and it isn't difficult to find doctors who are eager to promote compulsory vaccination programmes and who threaten to withhold all medical care from unvaccinated patients. Those parents who refuse to have their children vaccinated will have them taken away from them. As Dr Ron Paul, American Presidential Candidate, has pointed out: `When we give Government the power to make medical decisions for us, we, in essence, accept that the State owns our bodies.'

Britain isn't the only country in Europe which is heading for compulsory vaccination. The French, for example, have also started talking about mass vaccination programmes and I have absolutely no doubt that compulsory vaccination is EU policy. And since the EU always gets what it wants, compulsory vaccination will come to be.

One local authority in England has already created secret vaccination centres, stating that it is doing so under `special powers granted to HM Government under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004'. And another NHS Trust has recently sent out letters inviting people to attend for vaccination. The letter states: `It is important that you attend this session. If you are unable to attend, you will need to go to one of the later sessions listed overleaf.'

That sounds to me very much as though the NHS Trust already regards vaccination as compulsory. And a good many doctors would heartily approve. Senior doctors recently suggested not only that vaccination should be compulsory but that children who were not vaccinated should not be allowed into school. Social workers would doubtless be quick (and eager) to take children away from parents who opposed vaccination. I recently received a letter from a British reader telling me that she had been told by her GP that if she wouldn't accept the swine flu vaccination she would never again be allowed to have any prescription drugs. And yet doctors and nurses aren't always quite so keen about being vaccinated themselves. A group of nurses in Washington, USA fought a mandatory vaccine programme. Around 16,000 registered nurses filed a federal lawsuit seeking an injunction to stop the programme designed to force nurses to accept vaccination against flu or to face losing their jobs. Now, why would so many nurses refuse a vaccine?

Why will vaccination become compulsory?

Simple.

As I showed earlier, politicians have been persuaded (by entirely spurious and Statist arguments) that vaccinating the population at large helps save money and benefits the many at the expense of the few.

Drug companies tighten the screw on politicians by threatening to move their industry abroad, to some more congenial environment, if their suggestions are not heeded. And, of course, they hire strong, efficient lobbyists to promote their cause and to ensure that journalists are kept `on message' and that inconvenient truths are ignored.

In my view, the drug industry is made up of nasty companies run by nasty, ruthless people who care nothing whatsoever for people but who care a great deal for money. In many previous books of mine I have exposed the nasty behaviour of the drug industry which likes to describe itself as `ethical' but which is, I believe, rather more contemptible than the Columbian drug barons who sell cocaine but who do not exhibit such nauseating quantities of hypocrisy.

Having considered the available evidence I have come to the conclusion that parents who unquestioningly trust the Government and their doctor to tell them when to have their child vaccinated (and what with) are reckless beyond forgiveness and unfit to care for a child. They would deserve to have their child taken from them if this would not mean putting their child into the hands of the Government and a bunch of drug company indoctrinated doctors.

And any doctor or nurse who vaccinates a child should be locked up as a child abuser.

It seems to me that every day that goes by we get closer to a position where vaccination programmes will be compulsory. We will all be forced, by law, to accept vaccinations whether we want them or not.

13. Vaccines, Immunity and Good Health

It is well known that people who are healthy are more resistant to disease. For example, infectious diseases are least likely to affect (and to kill) those who have healthy immune systems.

Sadly, and annoyingly, we still don't know precisely how immunity works and if we still don't know precisely how immunity works, it is difficult to see how can we possibly know exactly how vaccines might work - and what damage they might do. However, this is a potentially embarrassing and inconvenient problem and so it is an issue that is not discussed within the medical establishment.

What we do know is that since vaccines are usually given by injection they by-pass the body's normal defence systems. Inevitably, therefore, vaccination is an extremely unnatural process. (The words `extremely unnatural process' should worry anyone concerned about long term consequences.)

The good news is that we can improve our immunity to disease by eating wisely, by not becoming overweight, by taking regular gentle exercise and by avoiding regular contact with toxins and carcinogens (such as tobacco smoke and the carcinogens in meat). If doctors gave advice on these issues, and explained what is known about the immune system, they could without doubt save many lives. But where's the profit in giving such simple advice? Drug companies can't make any money out of it. And neither can doctors.

That isn't cynicism or scepticism, by the way. It's straightforward, plain, unvarnished, ungarnished truth.

I no longer believe that vaccines have any role to play in the protection of the community or the individual. Vaccines may be profitable but, in my view, they are neither safe nor effective. I prefer to put my trust in building up my immune system.

14. Vaccines and Preventive Medicine

I am an enthusiastic supporter of the principle of preventive medicine. It is usually much easier to avoid an illness than it is to treat one.

Vaccination programmes are usually sold to the public as though they are an integral part of a general preventive medicine programme but over the years I have steadily come around to the view that vaccination programmes cannot truly be described as preventive medicine but are, rather, a part of the interventionist approach to medical care.

Proper preventive medicine (persuading people to avoid really bad habits and to live a healthy lifestyle) is always difficult to sell to politicians, doctors and journalists because you cannot see the people who have been saved. Where is the evidence that something has been done? And more important where is the profit? The idea of vaccination, on the other hand, is very easy to sell to people. And it is enormously profitable for drug companies and doctors.

People love vaccination because it promises them an easy way to avoid illness without having to do anything themselves. They want to believe that it works and they want to believe that it is safe. It is for this reason that vaccines against just about everything (including obesity) are being introduced.

Vaccination is the only form of preventive medicine with which doctors and nurses are very well acquainted, and about which they are most enthusiastic. It's just a real pity that the most significant known facts about vaccines are that they can cause brain damage and they can kill. Indeed, the evidence suggests that vaccines kill and injure far more people than the diseases the vaccines are given to protect against. (Remember, if you will, the fact that in 2010 the American Government officially recognised that a total of 2,800 previously perfectly healthy children had been officially killed or injured by vaccination and that they and their parents had received $110 million in damages. Then, ask yourself how many more thousands of children had been unofficially killed or injured. And, finally, remind yourself that before their vaccinations those children were perfectly healthy and that they were being vaccinated against diseases such as measles and mumps.)

Despite the evidence to the contrary, the medical profession seems to have unlimited faith in the power and usefulness of vaccination. A reader of mine who was not feeling well rang his doctor. He was told: `Stay where you are until you're feeling better then pop into the surgery and the nurse will give you a vaccination.' He hadn't even told the receptionist what was wrong with him.

15. Vaccinating Children in Developing Countries

Children in developing countries (often poorly fed and forced by circumstances to drink water which is teeming with bacteria and other nasties) are now being vaccinated by teams of workers from rich countries. Vaccination programmes are paid for by large charitable organisations and by Governments. Undoubtedly well-meaning billionaires do it too. For example, an American software billionaire called Bill Gates has apparently donated $10 billion to create new vaccines. If Gates wants to do some good with his money he would surely be better advised to spend it on providing roads, clean water and reliable food supplies for the many oppressed countries where these things are desperately needed. Or he could spend some of his money campaigning against the selfish, imperialist and wicked policies of the American Government - policies which are directly responsible for much of the pain and disease in the developing world. But vaccines sound cutting edge and exciting and dramatic and pictures of aid workers vaccinating small children make good propaganda. Which newspaper or TV station is going to publish pictures of a new water well being dug? Boring.

The people who organise such vaccination programmes, probably think they are doing good. However, I have no doubt at all that they are doing far more harm than good.

On the 13th June 2011 the British Government announced it was going to spend £800,000,000 of the little money the country had left on buying profitable poisons to jab into innocent, starving babies around the world. As far as I could see no one, but no one, in the media questioned the scientific validity of giving money to Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation. The new patronising imperialism is seen as a `good' thing because no one dares to ask the simple questions. Such as: Why?

It has been shown that the Government could do far more good by, for example, providing soap for handwashing but such simple and cost–effective remedies are neglected.

Incidentally, in May 2011, it was announced that a vaccine company was set to join the board of the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation. Crucell, a company owned by an American healthcare group, makes 60 per cent of its revenue from the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation and one of its representatives will in future sit on the board. This is, however, apparently of little consequence, for the *Financial Times* has pointed out that ‘all members of the board have conflicts’.

As far as journalists are concerned `vaccines are good' and anyone who questions their use can be denounced as a bad, bad person.

It would be nice if the Government used one per cent of the money it is giving to Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation on some original research to find out whether vaccines are safe and effective. But they won't do that. The results might be inconvenient.

16. How Effective Is Vaccination?

Between 20 per cent and 50 per cent of individuals who are vaccinated against a disease do not develop a resistance to the disease against which they have been allegedly immunised. In other words up to half of the healthy individuals who are vaccinated (and whose health and lives are therefore put at risk) gain no benefit whatsoever from the vaccination.

In their rush to get to the next patient, doctors and nurses may sometimes forget to mention this.

17. Contraindications to Vaccination

Drug companies publish a long list of reasons for not vaccinating patients. Doctors rarely even look at the list, let alone take any notice of it.

Here's the list of contraindications and warnings for one vaccine selected at random: `Acute severe febrile illness. Encephalopathy of unknown aetiology within 7 days after previous vaccination. Progressive neurological disorder, uncontrolled epilepsy or progressive encephalopathy. Severe local or general reaction to a preceding dose of vaccine. History of febrile convulsions, fever, shock or persistent crying within 48 hours of previous vaccination. Guillain-Barre syndrome or brachial neuritis following vaccination.' Those are reasons for not giving one particular vaccine.

Now, imagine the contraindications and possible adverse effects when three or four vaccines are mixed together into a single vaccine cocktail.

18. Vaccine Side Effects (Including Brain Damage)

There are doctors and nurses around who deny that vaccines can produce any side effects at all. There are, they claim, no risks whatsoever. Personally, I feel that any doctor who claims that any vaccine, or any drug, does not produce side effects should be enrolled in a reliable space programme and shot into orbit. He or she is too dangerous to practise medicine and far too stupid to be recycled in any useful capacity. But that's just my personal opinion. The medical establishment, and its very best chum the international pharmaceutical industry, would undoubtedly rather see me fired off into space.

When patients fall ill after being vaccinated the doctors who don't believe that vaccines can cause side effects (and who probably also believe that the earth is the centre of the universe) wave aside any link between the two and dismiss the illness as a coincidence. Whatever happens they arbitrarily decide that it is impossible for any side effects to be caused by their beloved and highly profitable vaccines. What many fail to realise is that vaccination damage may occur weeks, months or years after vaccination. By then the time interval between the vaccination and the damage may be so long that no one connects the two.

If these craven, witless apologists for vaccination were proper doctors, in the tradition of Semmelweiss, Snow, Lister and the other gods of medicine, if they cared a twopenny damn about their patients, or if they had any respect for their profession, they would, of course, report every potential side effect to the authorities and allow epidemiologists to decide whether or not specific health problems were, or were not, associated with vaccination. But sadly, I fear, doctors have already decided that vaccination is far too profitable a side-line for them to risk damaging it by finding out the truth. Tragically, many doctors seem to be painfully ignorant about the vaccines they advocate. They do what they are told to do, unquestioningly and unthinkingly, and check their bank balance every month to make sure that the nice, big, fat Government payments have gone through satisfactorily.

The truth is that of all the forms of drugs available vaccines are the crudest and the most unreliable and the most dangerous. (They are also the most profitable but that, of course, is merely a coincidence.) Vaccines can cause brain damage - and can kill. I'm always startled that this should surprise anyone. If you inject potentially toxic substances into small children it seems pretty obvious to me that you will get problems. (If you doubt the effect of toxic substances on the brain remember the last time you saw (and heard) Ozzie Osbourne on television.) The most significant known fact about vaccines is that they can cause brain damage. And they can kill. This isn't theory or supposition. It is fact. And yet potential problems are not properly investigated. For example, doctors have noticed that there is a relationship between vaccination and protracted, inconsolable high-pitched screaming occurring shortly afterwards. This seems to be consistent with a link between vaccination and encephalopathy. This link could be deeply embarrassing for politicians, doctors and drug companies and has not been properly investigated.

Astonishingly, when the American Academy of Paediatrics announced that one in six American children had a developmental disorder and or a behavioural disorder no one mentioned the possibility that vaccines might, just might, be responsible. No one in authority seems to know just why so many American children should be in such poor shape. `It doesn't seem fair,' said one expert. `We look after our children so well. American children have more vaccinations than children in any other country.' Four separate studies have shown that there are higher rates of asthma in fully vaccinated children. Some doctors believe that the epidemic of ADHD (now supposed to be affecting millions of children) could be related to vaccination. If ADHD exists (and there is much doubt about that) then it certainly could be caused by vaccination. And if it is then the children diagnosed with the disease are suffering twice. They are made ill by a vaccine and they are then treated with heavy medication which is, in my view, too dangerous to use as landfill. And then there is autism which I deal with later in this book and which is, when in its most serious form, merely an ill-fitting cover up diagnosis for brain damage.

When it was announced that from autumn 2008, British schoolgirls aged 12 to 13 would be vaccinated against cervical cancer it was estimated that the contract for supplying the vaccine against the human papillomavirus would be worth hundreds of millions of pounds. But when the vaccine was introduced it was already known that it could cause problems.

Here's a list of some of the side effects which may be caused by vaccination. Not all vaccines produce all these side effects, of course. But, on the other hand, this list is by no means complete and there are undoubtedly other side effects which may result from vaccination. Brain damage, paralysis, pain, fever, nausea, dizziness, gastro-intestinal disturbances, lost appetite, restlessness, headache, malaise, pain, allergy reaction, irritability, itching, Bell’s Palsy, Guillain-Barré syndrome and seizures are just some of the more serious problems. Just how many side effects and problems are there? It's difficult to say. And how common are side effects? That's also difficult to say. Back in 2007, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) detailed 1,637 reports of adverse reactions to the vaccination for human papillomavirus (HPV) including 371 serious reactions and three deaths. Most of the time, however, the authorities (by which I mean the Government and the medical establishment) prefer to sweep the details about vaccine related problems under the carpet rather than to promote them.

Vaccines can even cause symptoms which seem to me to be very similar to the symptoms of the disease they are supposed to prevent. So, for example, the milder of the `side effects' known to be associated with the flu vaccine include: fever, tiredness, muscle aching and headache. Are those not the symptoms of the flu? (Those, by the way, are the manufacturer's list of side effects, not mine.) A complete list of the possible side effects associated with the flu vaccine may also include: asthma, brain swelling, Guillian-Barré syndrome, facial paralysis, damage to eye muscles, damage to the arm and shoulder muscles, bruising, abdominal pain, kidney disorders, hives and anaphylaxis. A study published in the *International Journal of Clinical Investigation* showed that those who have had the flu jab for five years in a row have a ten fold increased risk of developing Alzheimer's disease. Doctors always seem to forget to mention this when pushing their annual (and highly profitable) flu jab campaigns. It is not known whether the flu vaccine can trigger cancer, infertility or other serious health problems. The body's immune system fights cancerous cells and, indeed, some anti-cancer therapies are designed to boost the immune system and to help it fight a developing cancer. Could repeated vaccinations affect the body's susceptibility to cancer? Could repeated vaccinations make the body less able to deal with a developing cancer? Could the constant increase in the incidence of cancer be a result of the enthusiasm for vaccination programmes which has for decades now been inspired by drug companies and maintained by Governments and doctors? Dunno. But I do know that one anti-flu vaccine which was injected into over a million American citizens contained a cancer-causing monkey virus. Some doctors believe that vaccination programmes are causing insulin dependent diabetes mellitus. The suggestion is that the diabetes does not develop for several years after the vaccination. This theory needs investigating.

In 1998, the Pentagon, fearful of germ warfare, began again to vaccinate all military personnel against anthrax. `We were told to shut up and stick your arm out,' says a former female helicopter pilot who stopped menstruating after the first shot and had by the third of the six shot series lost a third of her body weight. As the vaccine’s alleged casualties (including six deaths) mounted so soldiers began to refuse it. Around 400 resigned or were court martialled for refusing the vaccine. The irony, of course, was that only the Americans had the capacity to wage biological war. No one should have been surprised by any of the terrible things that happened in the late 1990s. Approximately 25 per cent of soldiers participating in the Gulf War in 1990-1991 were made sick by the anthrax vaccine they were given. (Incidentally, it has been alleged that a component used in that anthrax vaccine was later introduced in one of the swine flu vaccines approved for use in the UK.)

Vaccinations have been linked to a number of other general health problems. It now seems possible, for example, that individuals who receive vaccinations may be more prone to develop allergies (such as asthma), arthritis, eczema and bowel disease (such as Irritable Bowel Syndrome). The explanation - which makes sense to me - is that vaccinations interfere with the immune system and make the recipients more susceptible to disease. The human immune system is a wonderland of protection. It is one of God's great gifts to us. And yet, as I showed in my book *Superbody*, our immune systems are being battered and broken and damned near destroyed by environmental factors largely outside our control. What if vaccines damage the immune system in some way? We know that when the immune system is damaged people become more susceptible to illness. And more likely to die. Just how much damage are vaccines doing? It is possible, and I believe extremely likely, that vaccines damage the human immune system and, as a result, weaken people and make them more likely to fall ill in the future. People with poor immune systems are more susceptible to infectious diseases and more likely to succumb to cancer. Are some vaccines more dangerous than others? How many people die because their immune systems have been damaged by vaccines?

I still have no idea of the answer to any of these (officially) unasked questions. Your doctor doesn't have any answers either. He'll waffle and burble and tell you that the Government says vaccines are wonderful and ask you, with a sneery, knowing smile, if you really think the Government is out to kill your children and he'll tell you I'm a dangerous heretic. But he won't have any answers. And, remember, he gets paid for giving vaccinations.

In 1998, the French Government abandoned its mandatory Hepatitis B vaccine programme for schoolchildren after more than 15,000 lawsuits were filed for brain damage and autoimmune reactions including arthritis, multiple sclerosis and lupus.

In an infant the brain is developing very quickly. During this time infants are given an ever-increasing barrage of vaccinations. You might imagine that dumping all this potentially toxic stuff into a developing body might put a huge strain on the developing immune system. Scientists have not yet looked into this. I find myself constantly puzzled by the failure of other doctors to question what is happening. Who (other than a drug company spokesman) wouldn't expect an infant to show serious signs of distress when deliberately injected with potentially toxic foreign substances? Why shouldn't such injections cause a severe immune response? What, you may wonder, is the effect of squirting all this gunk into babies and small children? I certainly wonder. And, I hope that one or two members or the medical establishment will one day have the wit, and the conscience, to wonder too.

Meanwhile, as we wait for more research work explaining precisely how much damage vaccines do, we should perhaps all remember that the American Government has officially recognised that in the year 2010 `perfectly safe' childhood vaccines officially killed or injured 2,699 children in America. And that, remember, is 2,699 children who were perfectly healthy before they had their vaccinations. Those children, and their families, paid quite a price so that drug companies and doctors could make a great deal of money. We should be aware, too, that there are still many unanswered (and usually unasked) questions about vaccination. For example, we know that vaccines cause neurological damage. And we know that the first symptoms of disease may appear some considerable time after vaccination has taken place. ‘Is it possible,’ asked my wife, Donna Antoinette, when she had read an early draft of this book, ‘that the rise in the incidence of multiple sclerosis (MS) could be a consequence of the increase in childhood vaccination? Could the increase in the number of young women affected by MS be a result of the extra vaccines now given to young girls?’ I had to tell her that I have no idea. Moreover, I doubt if any of the gung-ho vaccinators have ever even asked those questions – let alone thought about answering them.

Finally, here is a quote from a former American vaccine researcher: *`If I had a child now, the last thing I would allow is vaccination. I would move out of the State if I had to. I would change the family name. I would disappear. With my family. I'm not saying it would come to that. There are ways to sidestep the system with grace, if you know how to act. There are exemptions you can declare, in every State, based on religious and/or philosophic views. But if push came to shove I would go on the move.'*

Food for thought?

19. Are Cot Deaths Caused By Vaccination?

It has been suggested that vaccinations may be the explanation for the mystery problem known as `cot death' (or Sudden Infant Death Syndrome). Children who die of `cot death' tend often to die just after they have received their first vaccinations. What a coincidence. Why hasn't the medical establishment noticed that many of the babies who die of `cot death' often die just days after the recommended dates for childhood vaccinations?

Are so-called `cot deaths' merely another terrible consequence of Government-approved vaccination programmes?

It is interesting to note that when vaccinations were postponed until the 24th month of life in Japan, the incidence of cot death pretty well disappeared. The medical establishment will dismiss this as probably just yet another coincidence.

I'm not so sure.

Until someone proves otherwise I suspect that cot death is just another awful side effect of vaccination. And cot death is now the leading cause of death in children between one month and one year in age.

20. Shaken Baby Syndrome and Vaccination

It seems that in cases where parents (and others) have been accused of murdering their children by shaking them, or in some other way abusing them, the real culprit may well have been a vaccine.

Around the world an increasing number of parents have been arrested and charged with injuring or killing their babies. Some of those parents are undoubtedly guilty. But many (and possibly most) are not because in many cases the baby or young child almost certainly died not because he or she was attacked by a parent who had lost control but because his or her brain was damaged by a vaccine or some other medication.

Shaken Baby Syndrome (in which the brain is damaged by a vaccine) is now a very real problem in all societies where vaccines are routinely (and in some countries forcibly) administered. The damage done to the baby or child by the vaccine mimics the damage that would be done if the baby was forcefully shaken.

The problem is that when the police investigate the sudden death of a child, and a pathologist produces a report showing that the child died because of brain damage, the chances are high that one of the parents will be charged with murder. In America this can mean that the misinformed prosecution will call for the death penalty.

A lot of people (Governments, drug companies and the medical establishment) have a powerful, financial interest in suppressing the truth and so naturally, doctors and drug companies deny that vaccines can kill in this or any other way. Compliant journalists believe what they are told and naively print the denials.

The doctors and drug companies cannot, however, deny that brain damage is a well-known possible side effect of vaccination and that brain swelling, intracranial bleeding and other symptoms of `shaken baby syndrome' can all be produced by vaccines. This fact isn't widely known - perhaps because doctors and drug companies would rather that unfortunate parents always took the blame for these deaths.

I'm not saying that all cases of `shaken baby syndrome' are caused by vaccines.

But I do believe that some, or many, of these sad deaths are a consequence of vaccination.

And it would be nice if the authorities would admit the risk and the association so that at least some of the innocent parents who are wrongly convicted of murder might at least have a fair trial.

It doesn't seem a lot to ask.

21. Vaccines Contain Much Stuff That You Probably Didn't Know Was There

Vaccines have to be developed using living systems and are usually cultivated in material taken from animals - in cell cultures or in the blood of infected animals. Tissues which have been used include brain tissue from rabbits, kidney tissue from dogs, rabbits and monkeys, protein from fertilised hens' or ducks' eggs and blood from horses or pigs. There are a number of potential problems with creating vaccines in this way and this system can, of course, be dangerous since cell cultures may be contaminated (as was the case with the polio vaccine made with monkey tissue). More recently, some vaccines were prepared using bovine serum and it now appears that during the early 1990s an unknown number of British children received vaccinations which may have been prepared using material from British cattle which could have been infected with BSE. Naturally, no one knows the size of the risk that was taken at the time (though it seems that the British Government was warned of the hazard but chose to ignore the risk). No one is likely to know the size of any problem resulting from this for many years to come. The official position is that we must all hope for the best. In reality, I doubt if anyone will ever do the necessary research to find out how many individuals were adversely affected by contaminated vaccine. If no research is done there won't be any embarrassing results, any adverse publicity affecting vaccination programmes and no successful lawsuits.

Vaccines may contain all sorts of substances in addition to the remnants of the infection against which they are supposed to be providing protection. Other substances found in vaccines include: albumin, formaldehyde, various amino acids, DNA residues, egg protein, gelatine, surfactants, monosodium glutamate and various antibiotics.

In addition, vaccine manufacturers now sometimes use adjuvants - chemicals included to enhance the immune response so that less viral material can be used in each vaccine dose. The alleged benefit is that this enables the manufacture to make the available vaccine go further. When they were introduced, adjuvants were not approved in the USA because their use was untested. However, Britain did not ban the use of the products. Why would anyone want to test a product to see if it was safe? That would be as daft as testing it to see if it worked.

And there are other additives. Antibiotics may be added to dampen down the immune system response. And stabilisers of various kinds may also be included.

Every time something is added to a vaccine the chances of problems developing are increased.

Many vaccines contain thimerosal which contains mercury. Mercury is one of the most toxic substances known to man. This means that when children are vaccinated they are injected with mercury. Vaccines have been made which give more than 50 times the safe amount. Vaccines used in America have not contained mercury since 2001 because it is known that mercury can cause neurological damage. The World Health Organisation has stated that there is no safe level of mercury in the human body. Vaccines may also contain aluminium - which can cause brain damage. Curiously, the European Union demands a ban on barometers which contain mercury (on the grounds that they are dangerous) but allows drug companies to sell vaccines which contain mercury. In what way, I wonder, is it safer to inject mercury into babies than it is to have it in a barometer hanging on the wall?

Inevitably, it is not uncommon for vaccines to contain material which shouldn't be there and which wasn't put there deliberately. Contaminants which have been found in vaccines include: chicken viruses, acanthamoeba, simian cytomegalovirus, simian foamy virus, bird cancer viruses, enzyme inhibitors, duck viruses, dog viruses, rabbit viruses, avian leucosis virus and pestivirus. What harm can these contaminants do? I don't know. I don't think anyone else does either. When companies use tissue from a bird to make a vaccine they have no idea how many germs may be in that tissue. Some vaccines are made with aborted human foetal tissue. For example, part of the original MMR vaccine was taken from cells cultured from an aborted human foetus. Nice to know. Again, no one knows what diseases might be carried in that tissue. Doctors using these vaccinations are practising a form of cannibalism. If you wouldn't eat someone's dead human baby why would you want your child to be injected with tissue from that baby?

In January 2009, contaminated flu virus material was released from a plant in Austria. The error was only discovered because the contaminated product was used in experiments with ferrets. Unexpectedly, the ferrets died. On other occasions medicines have been deliberately contaminated. It would not be impossibly difficult for a determined person to contaminate a vaccine intended for use on millions of people.

22. Is Autism Caused By Vaccination?

The number of children diagnosed as suffering from autism has rocketed just as the number of children being vaccinated has risen. This isn't just true of the UK; it’s true of all countries where children are vaccinated. I have for many years believed (and argued) that epidemiologically and logically all varieties of autism (including such brands as Asperger's) are nothing more than vaccine damage. Where's the evidence? Well, there's a startling absence of research but in the USA a huge medical practice of paediatricians with 30,000 child patients do not vaccinate their patients at all. They have no patients with autism. In the old days such an observation (known as epidemiological research) was regarded as valuable. Today, bizarrely, it is dismissed as irrelevant.

Some patients with autism are severely damaged and some are lightly damaged. Only a complete fool (or someone more enthusiastic about money than truth) would deny that there might be a link. But when a research project was set up to investigate any link between vaccination and autism drug companies applied to a court for an injunction to stop the research. Now, why would they do that?

Here are seven incontrovertible facts.

Fact one: Autism is (in its more serious forms) a disorder which involves brain damage.

Fact two: Vaccines cause brain damage. (If vaccines are known to cause brain damage isn't it logical to assume that they may also cause the disease which is known as autism but which would, I believe, be more properly and honestly known as vaccine brain damage? I suspect that the children currently being diagnosed as `autistic' are actually suffering from various levels of brain damage caused by vaccines - and should have been awarded damages by drug companies, doctors and the Government.)

Fact three: The incidence of autism has rocketed as the number of vaccinations being given has also rocketed. There's a surprising correlation between the two. If someone noticed a statistical correlation between the number of people sucking humbugs and the number of people losing their teeth I bet you a devalued pound to a devalued penny that teams of highly paid medical scientists would start investigating. (The humbug manufacturers would complain but I doubt if they have as much clout as the international pharmaceutical industry.) Once rare (in the 1990s it was generally accepted that autism affected no more than 4 or 5 people in every 10,000), it is now officially claimed that autism affects more than 100 in every 10,000 children in Britain. (Some experts claim that the real figure is much higher than this.) Figures from around the world show that the incidence of autism is rising in all developed countries - just as the number of vaccinations given is rising. None of this proves that vaccines cause autism but how anyone can simply deny the possibility of a link between vaccination and autism is quite beyond me. The epidemiological evidence is overwhelming.

Fact four: Children who suffer from brain damage after vaccination are numbed and need a good deal of stimulation. They respond well to flashing lights, colours and movement. Exactly the same thing happens with children suffering from severe autism.

Fact five: Some so-called experts claim that autism is caused by environmental pollution. Curiously, these `experts' do not believe that injecting foreign matter into small children is pollution.

Fact six: A number of parents have reported that their autistic children responded particularly badly when they were given their childhood vaccinations. From the evidence reported to me I believe that if children scream a good deal after vaccination, or are unusually quiet, or show other unusual signs, then there is, I believe, a real chance that they will develop autism.

Fact Seven: The American Government has reportedly accepted that vaccines may cause autism.

I believe, and have believed for many years, that autism is caused by vaccination. I believe that the evidence (including the epidemiological evidence) supports this hypothesis. I suspect that some children have a hereditary susceptibility and respond badly to vaccination. And if vaccines are known to cause brain damage isn't it logical to assume that they can also cause autism? Isn't it logical to at least want to do some pretty high-powered research to find the nature of the link?

Part of the problem is that there isn't really any clear way to define autism. It is a ragbag diagnosis used to describe a whole range of symptoms - ranging from severe brain damage to relatively mild behavioural problems. Many doctors now agree with me that severe autism is simply vaccine produced brain damage while very mild autism may merely be an excuse to be used when a child doesn't do as well as its parents expected. In those circumstances the diagnosis provides a social excuse for academic failure.

The word autism is used, like the word cancer, as an umbrella term for a range of different problems. Patients with autism are said to have development disorders which affect their ability to interact socially and to communicate with other people though this is a fairly recent interpretation and the word now seems to be used as a catch-all for a whole range of problems. (In one medical dictionary on my shelf autism is defined as `morbid self-absorption' which hardly fits the range of symptoms seen.) These days, I suspect that the word is used more as a dustbin word rather than an umbrella word. It helps the profession appear to know what is the matter when they don't and, at the same time, it enables them to avoid taking any responsibility for what has happened. The word is used to describe almost any symptoms which doctors cannot explain.

Social workers and other professional morons play the game because it enables them to build well-funded empires around the `care' of autistic patients. For governments it is, of course, a lot cheaper to provide a modest amount of `care' for autistic patients than to acknowledge that these children have been made ill by the official vaccination policy, and should have been provided with vast amounts of compensation. Every day that vaccination programmes continue makes it ever more unlikely that governments will ever accept that there is any association between the two.

Doctors and drug companies and politicians much prefer to talk about autism rather than brain damage because the former suggests a natural disease while the latter suggests that there may be an external cause. Innocent and desperate parents collude with this nonsense because they prefer to describe their children as autistic than as brain damaged.

Those who oppose the conclusion that vaccination causes brain damage which is in turn often mislabelled as autism sometimes claim that the recorded incidence of autism is going up because doctors are better at making the diagnosis. This is patent nonsense for which there is no scientific evidence. (It is, I must point out, also possible that the incidence of autism is going up for the same reason that the incidence of other fashionable pseudo diseases such as ADHD is going up. They may all be rising because they are fashionable and popular diseases which suit the personal and political motives of various groups of people - particularly parents who are looking for an appropriate label to stick on their child. Certainly, the list of symptoms said to be associated with autism is now increasing so rapidly that it will soon be easier to diagnose someone as *not* suffering from the disorder.)

I believe that autism was devised so that drug companies could avoid the embarrassment of seeing children described as vaccine damaged. Once the new disease had been invented, drug companies started to sell treatments for this newly created and non-existent disease. You have to admire their marketing brilliance.

The drug companies (and the doctors, hospitals and politicians who support them) all claim that there is no link between autism and vaccination. (But then they would, wouldn't they?). They claim that there is no convincing scientific evidence proving a link between the two. On the other hand there is no convincing scientific evidence disproving a link between vaccination and autism. The one scientific paper I've been able to find which claims to disprove the link between autism and vaccination was written by a group who worked for the Government in Denmark. One of the researchers involved has reportedly been charged with stealing more than $1 million in autism research money from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, USA.

In answer to those who still claim that there is no link between vaccination and autism I would again remind readers that the US Health Departments National Vaccine Injury Compensation Programme has reportedly accepted that hundreds of children have officially developed autism after vaccination. That goes quite a long way towards proving that I'm right and the vaccine supporters are wrong.

23. Has Your Dinner Been Vaccinated?

Those who eat meat should be aware that cattle (and other animals reared for slaughter) are regularly vaccinated. The meat that is taken from those animals may, therefore, contain vaccine residues in addition to hormones, antibiotics and other drugs. Today, even some farmed fish are individually vaccinated against infections that might damage profits.

24. Lawsuits, Damages and Vaccination

The drug companies very rarely lose lawsuits relating to drug or vaccine damage. There are several reasons for this. First, drug companies and doctors tend to stick together, to protect each other's financial interests. The drug companies know that if they lose one lawsuit they will find themselves fighting many more - so they fight very hard. Drug companies have almost bottomless pits of money at their disposal. And they are not averse to warning litigants that if they go ahead, and lose, their homes may be at risk. Another problem is that there is very little scientific evidence relating to the safety of drugs or vaccines and so little published material available for litigants to use. And few doctors are prepared to risk their careers by giving evidence against colleagues or drug companies. One doctor who did give evidence in court found herself fighting for her career before the GMC - because she dared talk honestly about vaccines and vaccination.

It is always difficult to prove that X happened because of Y. For many years the tobacco companies successfully argued that smoking cigarettes had no connection to lung cancer and today the food companies still argue that meat does not cause cancer, even though the evidence proving that the link exists is overwhelming. Similarly, the drug companies rely on the absence of any evidence proving that vaccines cause serious problems. And, finally, the Government never openly admits that vaccines cause problems. And they never will admit this. There are instances where thousands of patients have developed bad effects after vaccination but nothing has happened because the authorities always exonerate vaccines. They always find a way to rule out a link between the vaccine and any ensuing health problem and, as usual, the reason is financial: if the Government admitted that a vaccine caused many health problems then it would be liable to huge damages. What sort of damages? Think of a number and then see how many noughts you can cram after it on a cheque. Nevertheless, as I pointed out in the section on whooping cough vaccination, the British Government has, over the years, already paid out compensation to the parents of many hundreds of children who were brain damaged by the whooping cough vaccine. Some parents who accepted damages in the early years were given £10,000. Later the sum was raised to £20,000. You may not have heard about this. It was done very quietly.

Things are much the same in other countries. The US Secretary of State for Health and Human Services signed a decree granting vaccine makers total legal immunity from any lawsuits that result from any new swine flu vaccine, and the US Government gave $7 billion to ensure that the vaccine was made available quickly and in quantities that would make it possible to carry out mass vaccinations. Naturally, speeding up the whole programme meant that it could be done without boring and 'unnecessary' safety tests beforehand.

Occasionally, brave and persistent parents have won damages against drug companies. For example, in 1992, the Irish Supreme Court found in favour of Margaret Best who sued Wellcome, the maker of a vaccine against whooping cough, on behalf of her son Kenneth Best who had the mental age of a 12-month-old baby. Following a retrial to determine compensation, Kenneth Best was awarded £2.75 million compensation. Sadly, he was 23-years-old at the time so it seems fair to assume that the battle for compensation had taken his courageous and determined mother more than two decades.

This was, however, an exceptional case. Because drug companies rarely accept responsibility for illness caused by the drugs and vaccines they make (and because most parents quite understandably give up the struggle for drug company compensation) families and taxpayers usually end up paying all the bills for the care of vaccine damaged individuals.

25. The Companies Which Make Vaccines (And Which Make a Lot of Money Out of Them)

Drug companies have for years recognised that their biggest profits will come from treatments devised for chronic illnesses. The advantage here is that these drugs will need to be taken for years - in many cases until a patient dies. Drug companies have also recognised that they make most money when they find a treatment that will be required by a large proportion of the population in a rich country. It is for this reason that drug companies spend so much time and money developing `treatments' for psychiatric problems, high blood pressure, heart disease, arthritis, thrombosis, osteoporosis, pain relief, high cholesterol, obesity, impotence and baldness.

Vaccines, however, are better than all of these. Vaccines are the answer to a prayer for drug companies. Vaccines are the perfect product. They can be sold for high prices. They can be given to everyone. And they can be given every year. They can be sold in developed countries. And they can be sold in developing countries. Governments can be persuaded to buy them in huge quantities - at top prices. Philanthropists will buy them by the planeload to distribute to doctors in countries where fresh water and enough food to eat are as rare as £1,000 designer handbags. Brilliant.

The result is that drug companies make huge amounts of money out of selling vaccines. And the establishment has fiddled the evidence, and denied or suppressed the inconvenient truths, in order to promote the official point of view. In Britain I have been banned from speaking to doctors. Debates about vaccination are unknown.

The global vaccine market reached $21 billion in 2010 and is growing at a rate of 16.5 per cent. Back in 2006 the market was worth $11.42 billion. Drug companies are constantly producing new products. There are vaccines for children, vaccines for travellers and vaccines for old people. Governments stockpile the damned things `in case of emergency'.

The whole business of vaccinating people is so hugely profitable (largely because it is something that doesn't rely on finding a large number of sick people but also because it is something that can be done on a regular basis) that drug companies, having almost saturated the `vaccinating-children' market are moving heavily into adult vaccines. There is, for example, a vaccine planned to prevent atherosclerosis. I suspect that doctors will claim that this will enable people to keep eating a bad diet and yet avoid heart attacks. It is, of course, fairly easy to prevent the problem by eating wisely but, encouraged by the National Health Service (NHS), most people still prefer to avoid ill health without inconveniencing themselves.

Here's a clue as to the profit to be made out of vaccines. In April 2010, the British Government announced that it had cancelled contracts with a big drug company for 90 million doses of swine flu vaccine. Around 5.5 million people (most of them health workers) had already been vaccinated but the NHS had 30 million unused vaccines left over. Those, said the politicians, would go unused at a cost of £150 million.

Why did they buy so much of the damned stuff? They gave vaccines to 5.5 million people, threw away 30 million vaccines and cancelled a contract for another 90 million vaccines.

Were they planning to invade Europe and vaccinate the French too? Or are there more illegal immigrants in Britain than anyone has previously dared admit?

Now, here's a contrary thought.

Is it remotely possible that the drug industry as a whole could want to make people ill?

The industry does, after all, have a vested interest in making people ill and keeping them that way - so that it can sell them more drugs. Look at it this way: a healthy population would result in the collapse of the international pharmaceutical industry.

Are the ruthless men and women who run this industry determined to keep making vast amounts of money, whatever it takes, or are they determined to damage their profits and, in the end, put themselves out of business by making people healthy?

Simple question.

And I think I know the answer.

I can't leave the subject of drug companies without mentioning the fact that these days they have an enormous amount of influence over the medical profession, the media and just about anyone else likely to be a potential nuisance. It is pretty well known, I think, that doctors are constantly bribed by drug companies (free meals, free travel, free gifts) but journalists are frequently bribed too (`Would you please write an article for our in-house magazine? We can pay you £3,000 for 100 words. Would that be acceptable?').

After my first book, *The Medicine Men*, was published in 1975 a drug company asked if they could sponsor me. They wanted to pay me to give some lectures. I was astonished and declined the offer. (*The Medicine Men* was an attack on the medical profession's close links with the pharmaceutical industry and an analysis of the many ways that the drug company promotes its dangerous products.) Even today I still receive a constant stream of requests from individuals and organisations wanting to advertise on my website. I turn them all down (even though the money would undoubtedly more than pay the costs of running the site) because even if I know that the advertising money won't buy my views (or my silence) some people might worry that it could. Perception is everything.

I mention all this because the drug companies never stop looking for ways to influence the view the world has of what they do, and they have, in recent years, made a concerted effort to create strong links with societies representing patients' interests.

Organisations which are created and run for the benefit of patients usually start small - and are administered either by a patient or a relative or friend. But some organisations grow large - very large - and they often do this by obtaining grants and financial support from large companies. Drug companies are often particularly keen to help such organisations - though my experience of drug companies makes me feel sceptical about this being an entirely altruistic gesture. Why would a drug company give its shareholders' money to an organisation whose members include some who are critical of the industry?

For example, at the end of March 2007, I noticed that the National Autistic Society had a drug company among its supporters. I sent the following letter to Society.

`I see that a drug company which makes MMR vaccine is one of your financial supporters (and has been since 2003). I understand that the company has, for example, paid for mailing over 4,000 GP surgeries with information about autism. Since there is a huge debate ongoing about whether or not autism is caused by the MMR vaccine I would be interested to hear the society's explanation for accepting this funding. Do you not feel that by accepting money from GlaxoSmithKline you are abandoning your independence, your reputation and your value to autistic patients and their carers? I ask these questions as a medical author as well as a registered general practitioner.'

On the 16th April 2007 I received a reply from Benet Middleton, the society's Director of Communications. Here's the reply:

`The question of who to accept funding from is often a difficult issue for all charities, not just the NAS. On the one hand we have to be aware of the issues you raise around reputation and independence and on the other we have to ensure that we generate the income required to provide the support, advice, advocacy and awareness raising that are so vitally needed.'

`Our Board of Trustees adopted a stance that we would not work with any company that acted illegally or acted in contravention to our charitable objectives, in part to reflect that everyone has their own personal ethics and views and it would be impossible to act on all of these. However, in addition we will not enter into partnerships that will have a detrimental effect on people with autism or our reputation.'

`In this case we have accepted money from GSK for a number of small projects, including a GP mailing to raise awareness of autism last year. None of these projects have had any link to anything we have said on the MMR vaccine and GSK have never raised this topic with us. Furthermore, the overall funding to date amounts to such a tiny percentage of our income that it could not possibly influence our position on this topic when stacked up against the support we receive from people living with autism.'

Here is my reply:

`The National Autistic Society isn't alone.

Many large and successful charities and organisations set up to help people with specific health problems, accept money from drug companies. It is no surprise that drug companies usually fund organisations which deal with problems appropriate to their products. But, not being entirely stupid, the drug companies never bring up the important issues in any direct way. The fact is, however, that they know that a charity which takes money from a drug company will be compromised and that whatever the charity says will be tainted. Do you honestly believe that the National Autistic Society can now ever produce any worthwhile contribution to the debate on the link between vaccination and autism?

Many people (me included) believe that many or even most cases of autism are a result of brain damage caused by vaccination. For the National Autistic Society to accept money from a drug company which produces a vaccine which has been linked to autism in this way seems to me to be extraordinarily immoral.

The Society seems to be claiming that it hasn't accepted very much money from GlaxoSmithKline and that it is not, therefore, compromised by this association.

So, how much money will GlaxoSmithKline have to give before the National Autistic Society is compromised by the association? How many other drug companies contribute to the Society?

(I note, incidentally, that in your letter you refer not to GlaxoSmithKline (the name of the drug company) but simply to GSK - as though not printing out the full name of the company will somehow make the link less embarrassing.)

Personally, I feel that a hooker who charges £5 for sex is no less a hooker than a hooker who charges £1,000.

This correspondence will appear on my website and in a forthcoming book.'

I didn't hear from them again.

26. Doctors Have Been Bought

Could it be possible that doctors don't search for the truth about vaccines and vaccination programmes because the medical profession has been bought?

The fact is that drug companies aren't the only ones to profit from vaccines. Doctors make large amounts of money from vaccines too. General practitioners (GPs) receive chunky fees for giving vaccines and receive massive bonuses if they can persuade/blackmail/pressurise enough of their patients to have vaccinations. This really is appalling and I fear that GPs lost their final scrap of integrity on the day when they agreed to accept bribe money if they managed to vaccinate enough of the patients they were already being paid to look after. I'm old-fashioned enough to believe that this sort of cold-hearted, conveyor belt, bonus-ridden philosophy is better suited to the manufacture of motor car parts than the practise of medicine. The current system, whereby GPs are paid according to the number of people they vaccinate, is appalling and is nothing more than bribery and corruption. The State is doing the bribing and corrupting. And doctors are the ones who have been bribed and corrupted. The whole idea of giving doctors a bonus according to the number of patients they vaccinate is a bizarre one. Doctors don't get paid more if they prescribe tons of antibiotics or if they refer an officially acceptable percentage of their female patients for hysterectomies.

Only doctors who are very stupid, or ill-informed, do not understand that vaccines are potentially dangerous, inadequately tested and often ineffective. Sadly, it seems that there are far more stupid and ill-informed GPs around than there really ought to be and giving doctors a financial incentive to perform a particular medical procedure has doubtless tilted the balance and persuaded doctors to ignore the hazards. It is a grossly unethical practice and I am appalled both that doctors don't seem to care much about this and that the General Medical Council sees nothing wrong with it.

The tragedy is that I have absolutely no doubt whatsoever that the financial incentive encourages doctors to vaccinate without considering all the possible dangers and complications. The fact that doctors are bribed to vaccinate might suggest to some that the authorities *need* to bribe doctors in order to persuade them to get busy vaccinating. It seems reasonable to assume that if doctors really believed in vaccination they would do it anyway - without the bribes.

It is not unknown for doctors to throw patients off their lists because they won't accept vaccinations - because this affects the GP's earnings. One journalist who interviewed me told me, indignantly, that his own GP had threatened to have his family removed from the GP's list of NHS patients if he would not allow his children to be vaccinated.

And all this goes on in considerable secrecy. How many doctors tell their patients that the Government pays GPs an extra £50,000 a year each, on top of the more than adequate wage of £100,000 to £120,000, which they receive for a basic 40 hour week with no night calls, no weekend duty and no bank holidays, to push their patients into accepting vaccinations? Not many, I suspect, though I believe that those who don't should be serving time for fraud.

Vaccinations are a constant bonanza time for doctors. The basic deal sounds good enough. GPs receive fees from the NHS for giving vaccines and bonus fees for persuading enough of their patients to be vaccinated. But that's not the half of it. The bonanza is even better than that. GPs tell their administrative staff (salaries largely paid for by taxpayers) to order the vaccines and instruct their nurses (whose salaries are also largely or wholly paid for by the taxpayers) to give the vaccinations. All the GP has to do is take time out at the end of a game of golf to ring her accountant to see how much money she has made during a morning of heavy absentee jabbing. A nurse does the jabbing. A clerk fills in the claim form. The doctor just spends the money. Has money ever been earned so easily? Every vaccination GPs give (or authorise) is another nice noise in the cash register. And epidemics produce a bonus bonus. In the autumn of 2009, GPs were demanding a fee of £7.51 to give a swine flu vaccination. Since each patient needed two jabs that meant that each GP stood to earn around £27,000 from giving vaccinations against swine flu. (And, remember, most would tell their practice nurse to give the vaccination and instruct a practice clerk to fill in the claim forms, so they wouldn't have to do anything themselves. So that's a very pleasant £27,000 for doing absolutely bugger all.) With 33,000 GPs in the country, giving the swine flu jabs would have added just under £900 million to the NHS bill.

No wonder there are so many BMW and Mercedes motor cars on the roads these days.

The sad truth is that the enormous and rich vaccine industry, and the Government, have bought the medical profession, lock stock and syringe barrel. GPs, once members of a proud and distinguished profession, a profession which gave the world a seemingly endless series of medical giants, have been reduced to snivelling, whining needle-men for the drug industry; hand-maidens to an industry which cares nothing for people but everything for profits. In my first book, *The Medicine Men*, I wrote that a profession which exists to do the bidding of an industry is no longer a profession. Boy, was I right about that. Doctors have lost their way. The drug industry has done it cleverly, of course. GPs receive massive bonus payments for vaccinating patients not from the drug industry directly but from the Government.

The bribery system works smoothly and well. A GP who jabs enough patients gets a thumping great wodge of cash. A GP who is questioning and discerning will be punished by being paid less. And so the vast majority of GPs, no longer professionals but now just bought slaves, do as they are damned well told. What a disgrace it is that most know nothing about the dangers of the damned vaccines they so happily jab into patients’ arms. And, remember, most don't even do the dirty work themselves. It's far more profitable to tell a Government subsidised hand-maiden to do the work.

The Government will even provide propaganda witches (called health visitors) to chase the patients and the parents who don't turn up to be jabbed. And from time to time, whenever doctors seem to be having difficulty bullying enough patients to accept vaccinations, the Government will do a little deliberate but essential scaring. In attempts to persuade parents to have their children vaccinated against measles, Governments and doctors around the world have thought up an apparently unending - and hysterical - series of scare campaigns. Now that there is a vaccine against it, measles has, by a strange coincidence, stopped being an annoying childhood disease and has, instead, become a deadly killer. Many infectious diseases come in cycles. When a disease is at a high point in its cycle the authorities (egged on by doctors and drug companies) frighten citizens into agreeing to be vaccinated. And when a disease is at a low point in its natural cycle it is vaccination programmes which get the credit.

Scares invariably often consist of claiming that a major epidemic is just around the corner and that only vaccination can offer protection. I have lost count of the number of whooping cough epidemics which Governments have wrongly forecast. Were those official advisors merely incompetent or were they deliberately lying to help boost vaccine uptake and increase drug company profits?

It is difficult to avoid the suspicion that the authorities regularly, and ruthlessly, issue scare warnings in order to frighten people into having the relevant jab.

Now that there are vaccines against all sorts of non-deadly diseases, and children are being vaccinated against diseases such as mumps and measles which were traditionally regarded as inconvenient rather than deadly, these traditional diseases have to be upgraded from `minor childhood disease' to `serious killer'. The plain fact is that in the UK the death rate from measles, for example, had dropped dramatically decades before the vaccine was introduced. It is interesting to note that today, despite (or, dare I say it, perhaps even because of) the widespread use of the vaccine, the incidence of measles has, in some recent years, risen.

Question the whole damned sordid business of vaccination and these ill-educated propagandists (who know nothing about the risks of the toxic mixtures they are promoting) will accuse you of being a flat-earther or a Luddite.

Sadly, tragically, most doctors working for the NHS long ago lost any sense of right or wrong. They long ago lost the passions and beliefs and yearnings that (hopefully) took them into medicine. Today, the lives of the vast majority of practising doctors are driven by a potent and destructive (and distinctly patient-unfriendly) mixture of ambition and greed and denial. There are very few doctors in practice today who want to save the world, or even change it very much. Their aims are selfish and personal. A bigger house, a faster car, shorter working hours and longer holidays.

The bottom line is that NHS GPs have no bloody right to comment on vaccinations. Ever. They are interested parties. A GP's remarks about vaccination are as valuable as those of a drug company spokesman. And yet it has become increasingly common for doctors to complain (publicly) that not enough people are being vaccinated. The vocal doctors involved never mention that they get paid for giving vaccines and therefore have a financial interest in promoting vaccination.

It is important to understand that most of the people who support vaccination are either paid by the drug industry or they obtain their information from people who are paid by the drug industry or, in some other way, they have a vested interest in promoting vaccination. Sadly, GPs have put themselves among the group who have a financial interest in promoting vaccination. General Practice is now no longer a profession; it is a business. GPs who put pressure on patients to have vaccinations, or refuse to treat those who object to vaccination, are, of course, taking purely commercial decisions. If the percentage of patients on their lists who haven't been vaccinated gets too high then the GPs lose out on one of their cash bonuses.

On the other hand, of course, all the people who oppose vaccination do so because they care for children and are worried about the dangers associated with vaccines.

In the same way that the Government has bribed GPs to vaccinate so the Government has, I believe, been bribed, bullied and conned by the drug companies. It has been a brilliant commercial coup. I don't blame the drug companies for manipulating the market, of course. It's what they do. And I don't blame the politicians; they're selfish, uncaring, venal and stupid. But I do blame the GPs. They've sold their honour and integrity and professional birthright and allowed themselves to be bribed into prescribing a specific group of products for personal financial advantage.

There are a thousand things to be angry about.

Doctors often claim that parents who refuse to have their children vaccinated are `bad parents'. Surely it is the parents who allow their children to be injected with a toxic substance, without knowing the truth about what is happening and what is likely to happen, who are bad parents?

Doctors often tell parents that if they don't allow their children to be vaccinated they are allowing their own views to endanger their child's health. Doctors blackmail and pressure patients into accepting vaccination. In some areas children have been taken away from parents who refused vaccination.

How many of those bullying doctors are honest enough to say: `If you don't have your damned kid vaccinated I won't be able to buy my wife a new Mercedes this year?'

It would be nice if doctors provided patients with information instead of simply bullying them. The medical profession's attitude towards vaccination is craven and shameful. I think the worst thing about the medical profession's attitude is that it is motivated by nothing more complicated than simple greed. The doctors who try to make parents feel guilty for caring enough about their children to want more information about vaccination never admit that they themselves have been bribed and bought to promote vaccination. The bottom line is that medical profession, paid by the jab, heavily incentivised to jab, jab and jab again, is giving vaccines which can kill and cause serious, permanent illness, in order to try to protect against diseases which are often relatively trivial or rare and which are unlikely to kill or cause permanent damage. From the evidence I've been able to find I am convinced that the vaccines are doing far more harm than the diseases against which they are supposed to protect. This is patent lunacy. It is also a medical evil of unprecedented horror.

Everyone who has seriously considered the evidence realises that vaccination is far too dangerous and ineffective to be supported. But, sadly, most doctors and nurses no longer think for themselves and are quite incapable of studying original evidence. Today's vaccine promotion is as dishonest as cigarette advertising was in the 1950s and 1960s. The difference is that the cigarette advertisements were stopped by pressure from doctors whereas the vaccine promotion is endorsed by doctors. It is clear that the cigarette industry simply wasn't clever enough to buy the medical profession. And they could have done it so easily. If they had paid doctors healthy fees to hand out cigarettes and to endorse smoking as a health aid, the Government warnings would have never been introduced and the tobacco industry would today be as rich and as prosperous as the global pharmaceutical industry.

I cannot stress enough how important it is to remember that GPs who put pressure on patients to have vaccinations, or who refuse to treat those who object to vaccination, are, of course, taking purely commercial decisions. If the percentage of unvaccinated patients on their lists rises too high then GPs lose out on one of their cash bonuses. GPs, once proud and independent physicians, are now nothing more than paid-for marketing hacks; hired to flog profitable vaccines. (On the other hand, of course, all the people who oppose vaccination do so because they care for children and are worried about the dangers associated with vaccines.)

I should point out that it isn't just GPs who have been bought. It is crucial to remember that the vast majority of people who support vaccination are either paid by the drug industry or they obtain their information from people who are paid by the drug industry or, in some other way, they have a vested interest in promoting vaccination. Nurses, health visitors, journalists and politicians obviously fit into these categories. On the other hand, there are a good many people around who have spent their own time and money on trying to tell the truth about vaccines.

What a terrible thing it is that vaccination is promoted by people who make money out of it and opposed by people who gain nothing and often lose much through their honest opposition. How terrible it is that the happy jabbers in our surgeries and consulting rooms are so blind to the danger of what they are doing. As the writer Upton Sinclair once wrote: `It is difficult to get a man to understand something if his salary depends on his not understanding it.' And before him Adam Smith wrote: `People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices.'

How sad it is that doctors have sold themselves, and now conspire against the people they have sworn to protect.

27. How the Truth Is Suppressed

These days doctors only get to read and hear what the drug industry wants them to read and hear. Anything controversial, anything questioning the status quo, must be suppressed.

A year or two ago I was invited to speak at a new conference in London. The conference was, I was told, intended to tackle the subject of medication errors and adverse reactions to prescribed drugs. The company organising the conference was called PasTest. `For over 30 years PasTest has been providing medical education to professionals within the NHS,' they told me. `Building on our commitment to quality in medical and healthcare education, PasTest is creating a range of healthcare events which focus on the professional development of clinicians and managers who are working together to deliver healthcare services for the UK. Our aim is to provide a means for those who are in a position to improve services on both national and regional levels. The topics covered by our conferences are embraced within policy, best practice, case study, clinical management and evidence based practice. PasTest endeavours to source the best speakers who will engage audiences with balanced, relevant and thought-provoking programmes. PasTest has proven in the past that by using thorough investigative research and keeping up-to-date with advances in healthcare and medical practice, a premium educational event can be achieved.'

That's what they said.

Sounds wonderful, I thought (in one of my more naive moments).

Iatrogenesis (doctor induced disease) is something of a speciality of mine. I have written numerous books and articles on the subject. My campaigns have resulted in more drugs being banned or controlled than anyone else's.

In addition to my speaking at the conference the organisers wanted me to help them decide on the final programme. I thought the conference was an important one and would give me a good opportunity to tell NHS staff the truth. I signed a contract.

PasTest wrote to confirm my appointment as a consultant and speaker for the PasTest Conference Division. And then there was silence. My office repeatedly asked for details of when and where the conference was being held.

Silence.

Eventually a programme for the event appeared on the Internet. Curiously, my name was not on the list of speakers.

Here is part of the blurb promoting the conference:

`Against a background of increasing media coverage into the number of UK patients who are either becoming ill or dying due to adverse reactions to medication our conference aims to explain the current strategies to avoid Adverse Drug reactions and what can be done to educate patients.'

Putting the blame on patients for problems caused by prescription drugs is brilliant. Most drug related problems are caused by the stupidity of doctors not the ignorance of patients. If the aim is to educate patients on how best to avoid prescription drug problems the advice would be simple: `Don't trust doctors.'

The promotion for the conference claims that `It is estimated errors in medication...account for 4 per cent of hospital bed capacity.' And that prescription drug problems `reportedly kill up to 10,000 people a year in the UK'. As I would have shown (had I not been banned from the conference) these figures are absurdly low.

The list of speakers included a variety of people I had never heard of including one speaker representing The Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry and another representing the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency.

Delegates representing the NHS were expected to pay £250 plus VAT (,£293.75) to attend the event. Delegates whose Trust would be funding the cost were asked to apply for a Health Authority Approval form.

So why was I apparently banned from this conference?

This is what PasTest said when we asked them: `certain parties felt that he (Vernon Coleman) was too controversial to speak and as a result would not attend.'

Could that `certain parties', I wonder, be the drug industry? Is the drug industry now deciding whom they will allow to speak to doctors and NHS staff on the problems caused by prescription drugs? If I was banned at the behest of the drug industry do NHS bosses know that people attending such conferences will only hear speakers approved by the drug industry and that speakers telling the truth will be banned? (I think it is safe to assume that I won't be invited to speak at any more conferences for NHS staff.)

If I was banned at the behest of the medical profession why are doctors frightened of the truth?

I could not, of course, be banned by the NHS itself. Why would the NHS not want its employees to know the truth about drug related problems?

Why are people who had me banned so frightened of what I would say? It can surely only be because they know that I would have caused embarrassment by telling the truth.

The scary bottom line is that the NHS paid to send delegates to a conference where someone representing the drug industry spoke to them on drug safety. But I was banned. The truth was uninvited.

Details of the ban were sent to every national and major local newspaper in Britain. None reported it.

The question is this: If doctors or drug companies believe I am wrong why don't they let me speak and then explain why I am wrong?

The unavoidable answer is that they know my criticisms of the profession and the industry are accurate and unanswerable.

What happened with PasTest is by no means unusual. All sorts of strange people (mainly politicians and administrators) have taken control of medical care these days; their brains are uncluttered with scientific stuff and they `know best'. Vaccination is now a political issue rather than a scientific issue. Facts are just a damned nuisance that get in the way and about as welcome as hot dog vendors at a meeting of vegetarians.

When the London Assembly (in reality the best known EU Regional Assembly in England) invited members of the public to send in thoughts on vaccination for their `rapporteurship' I sent them a copy of my book *Coleman's Laws*, which contains a lengthy medical explanation of why vaccination is irresponsible and dangerous and a significant cause of illness. An administration officer for the London Assembly wrote to thank me for my views which would, I was assured, be included in their analysis of evidence for the report. However, there was no mention of any of my evidence in their report and the details of the evidence I had submitted did not appear in the list of references included at the back of the report. I was not surprised by this. Nor was I surprised to see that the report followed the official line. Their first conclusion was that the Department of Health should make childhood immunisation a key performance indicator for Primary Care Trusts. (In other words, GPs should be given extra money if they met vaccination performance targets.) They also recommended that all London Primary Care Trusts `should appoint an immunisation champion to work with GP practices in order to boost immunisation rates'.

I could find no mention anywhere in the report of the existence of evidence suggesting that sticking needles and potentially dangerous substances into small children might not be a good thing. There was no discussion of the evidence that vaccines are dangerous and might cause serious damage to young children and infants.

Ironically, the title of the report was `Still Missing the Point?'

I rather think they are.

And I expect that at some time in the future the same merry group will launch an investigation into why the incidence of `autism' is increasing.

I began this essay by pointing out that these days doctors only get to hear and read what the drug industry wants them to hear.

It is not, of course, only doctors who are protected from the truth.

I haven't been invited (or allowed) to discuss vaccination on the radio or television for many years. This is largely because the medical establishment (having lost a long series of debates) will no longer agree to debate any medical topic with me or, indeed, to appear on any programme which has invited me to be a participant. (I have no doubt that an awful lot of untruths have been told about me by various representatives of the medical establishment.)

Not long ago, however, I was, to my immense surprise, invited to discuss vaccination on a late evening programme on Radio City, an independent station in Liverpool. A local doctor was invited to debate with me. The result was extraordinary.

For quite a while the doctor refused to admit that doctors make any money out of giving vaccines. Until I pressed him directly he indignantly denied that doctors have a financial interest in promoting vaccination. Only when I pointed out that GPs receive fees and bonuses for vaccinating their patients did he, rather reluctantly, agree that I was right. The doctor's main defence seemed to me to be that because the Government and other doctors agreed with his views on vaccination (which were, naturally, diametrically opposed to mine) then he must be right and I must be wrong. I have never found this a very convincing argument and nor, for a while at least, did the listeners. The presenter wanted to know why the facts I was giving had never been aired before.

At the end of the programme I was told that the programme had never before had such a response from listeners. It was, I was assured, their biggest ever audience response. Listeners were desperate for more information. Many were astounded at the evidence I produced. Some accused me of scaremongering for questioning pro-vaccination propaganda and for pointing out that doctors get paid for giving vaccinations. At the end of the programme I was asked if I would make another, longer programme on the subject of vaccination. I said I would. I offered to debate the subject of vaccination with any number of pro-vaccination doctors and experts the radio station could find.

I was not, however, surprised when I never heard from them again. I contacted them to ask if they were still interested in another more intensive debate. They weren't.

And since then no other radio station has been prepared to allow me to discuss vaccination on air. I doubt if this will change. Patients, like doctors, will be protected from the inconvenient truths.

The media in general is constantly full of articles and programmes sneering at those who worry about vaccination and promoting vaccination as safe and effective.

Here's an extract from a pro-vaccination article by a columnist in *Time* magazine: `I'm pretty confident in the way I get my knowledge. Even in the age of Google and Wikipedia we still receive almost all our information from our peers. When presented with doubts, I don't search for detailed information from my side. I go with the consensus of mainstream media, academia and the Government. Not because they are always right but because they're right far more often than not, and I have a TiVo to watch. Also, unlike anti-vaccination people, they usually shut up after a little while.'

I could hardly believe that when I first read it and I can hardly believe it now that I've re-read it. But the truth is that most people now think like this and so the bad guys get away with their lies and their deceits and their manipulations and their spin. The drug companies are extremely powerful and effective at persuading journalists. They have bought most of the doctors and most of the medical journals and so they can be very convincing. Sometimes the pro-vaccine journalists become quite absurdly overblown in their support for vaccination. In December 2009, a magazine called *Wired* even claimed it was a `fact' that: `By any measure of scientific consensus, there is total agreement: vaccines are safe, effective and necessary.' And it's a fact that the moon is made of green cheese. Facts? Who needs the real thing when you can just make them up when you need them.

Most doctors are unquestioning - too frightened to upset the establishment. Asking uncomfortable questions can ruin a doctor's career. And medical journalists are just as useless. Most have very little formal medical training, they don't know what to look for, they not infrequently receive payments from drug companies (the payments are offered for articles written for drug company publications and are frequently far in excess of the sort of payments that the journalists would normally expect to receive) and they hardly ever have the courage to take on the establishment.

Far too many so-called medical and health journalists are wimpy incompetents who won't print or broadcast anything which might damage their cosy relationships with the medical establishment and the international pharmaceutical industry.

The power of the pro-vaccination lobby is powerful and far spread. When I wrote a short-lived column for the *Oriental Morning Post* in China the editors were at first reluctant to publish a column I had written criticising vaccination. Eventually, the editors printed the piece (simply because I refused to provide an alternative). After the column appeared, my book publishers in China wrote to tell me that the Chinese Government had informed them that they could no longer publish my books. My publishers in China had produced four of my books, all of which had sold very well, but they had been told by the Government that only `medical publishing houses' could in future publish books concerned with health care. Other Chinese publishers who had shown great enthusiasm for publishing my books suddenly changed their minds.

I am sometimes told that, as a critic of vaccination, it is my job to prove that vaccines are dangerous and that I should stop criticising vaccination until I have evidence proving that vaccines can be dangerous and are often ineffective. That is a nonsense. It is the responsibility of those who are making, endorsing and giving vaccines to be sure that they are safe. The drug companies have a responsibility to prove that their products are safe and effective. Unfortunately, it is common these days for Governments to allow industries to do things without proving that they are safe, and to then expect opponents to prove that something is unsafe. The same thing happens, for example, with genetic engineering and genetically modified food. The fact is, of course, that it is impossible to produce evidence proving that a procedure doesn't do something. The onus should, of course, be on those who promote these procedures to produce evidence proving that they are safe. There is no evidence that genetically modified food is safe to eat because the people selling the stuff haven't done (or been expected to do) any research proving the safety of their product. Opponents and critics are dismissed airily and told that it is their responsibility to prove that genetically modified foods are unsafe. However, without vast sums of money, and access to the company's laboratories, that simply isn't possible.

In truth, of course, it is not the job of those who oppose vaccination to prove that it is not safe or effective. Indeed, even with unlimited resources it is nigh on impossible to prove a negative. How can I prove conclusively that the man down the road hasn't ever cheated on his taxes? How can I prove beyond any doubt that the Government hasn't ever tapped your telephone?

In a logical, sensible, scientific world it is the job of those who promote vaccination to prove that the procedure is safe and effective in general, and that individual vaccines are safe and effective in use.

Sadly, that isn't going to happen.

The problem (as the drug companies know only too well) is that when you start doing really serious research there is a real risk that you will obtain results that are commercially inconvenient. And the drug industry, the Government and the medical profession all have a vested interest in ensuring that vaccination programmes continue. If inconvenient truths were uncovered the drug industry would lose billions, the Government would find itself paying out billions in damages and individual doctors would lose thousands of pounds a year in lost fees and bonuses. So, there is no incentive for anyone to do any proper research.

Supporters of vaccination, who ignore this absence of evidence in their favour, have been conned by the establishment into believing that vaccines save lives. They are often abusive and sometimes almost hysterical in their attacks on the few doctors who dare speak out, and on those who dare to try to share the truth about vaccination with patients and with parents of young children. It is, perhaps, not surprising, therefore, that most doctors who worry about vaccines say little and do nothing in public.

However, readers may be interested to know that, contrary to popular opinion, a good many doctors *are* worried about the medical profession's unbridled enthusiasm for vaccination. Most (quite sensibly) prefer to remain anonymous.

Here is one (of many) relevant letters which I have received from practising doctors in recent years. This one came from a GP. He wrote: `Your criticism of vaccines is entirely justified. The medical profession has come under the baleful influence of the drug companies and so doctors have to pretend that vaccines can do no harm. I am a doctor and regard vaccination as a fraud and a farce. The witches in Macbeth might well have included modern vaccines in their recipe.'

All of us who criticise vaccination should take heart from American producer Jerry Weintraub, who once wrote: `If a bunch of men are discussing you, meeting about you, and scheming to destroy you, it probably means you're doing something right.'

28. Conclusion

The establishment always elevates its official beliefs into an orthodoxy; always suggesting that they are right because they are, well, right and that the absence of evidence is not to be allowed to interfere with the acceptance of their conclusions. This is tabloid science. And so, for example, the supporters of vaccination deal with opposition not by debate but by denouncing anyone who dares to question the orthodoxy or to murmur disagreement.

Back in the 1980s I dared to question the argument that AIDS would kill us all. Ignoring the available evidence as an inconvenient truth, the medical establishment had gravely announced that by the year 2000 we would all be touched by AIDS. It was official scare mongering. I was roundly attacked by the profession, the politicians and the media for questioning the logic of these claims and for daring to introduce embarrassingly accurate fact based arguments into the arena. No one in the establishment wanted facts which got in the way of their prejudices. I was (quite literally) banned from television for offering an alternative viewpoint and for daring to suggest that maybe AIDS might not kill us all after all.

It wasn't the first time I had been censored for daring to tell the truth. And it wasn't the last.

Today, the establishment has quietly forgotten its dire predictions about AIDS. New scares, often just as tenuous as that one, are presented almost weekly as researchers and drug companies fight for funding and profits.

It's the same approach as is used by climate change advocates. Critics who dare to question the establishment's fragile conclusions are demonised as flat-earthers or holocaust deniers, or accused of being in the pay of someone or other (although in truth all the money is on the other side of the debate). The only debate allowed is about the *size* of the problem we have created - we are never allowed to discuss whether climate change is man-made. Anyone who disagrees with the establishment viewpoint is dismissed as a dangerous heretic - to be excluded from all debates, and condemned and isolated. The blindly loyal flourish, thrive and enrich themselves; the honest purveyors of truth struggle in the dark.

Medical science has been hijacked by politically correct lobbyists. Dissenters, daring to question the new orthodoxy of the group-think obsessionals, are found guilty of thought crime and sentenced to be vilified and suppressed. Group-think unoriginality oppresses and suppresses. Vaccination is just one of many areas of medicine now considered to be beyond debate.

I believe that anyone who vaccinates a child should be arrested. I recognise that this isn't the official viewpoint. But why don't those who favour the official viewpoint (that vaccines are safe and essential) debate the issue? (Vaccination is by no means the only issue which is never debated in public. Other medical issues which are never debated openly include chemotherapy, radiotherapy, vivisection, drug therapy for the menopause and heart surgery.)

The modern medical establishment has made enormous and hugely devastating errors in recent years. The medical establishment was dangerously (and now provably) wrong about AIDS. The medical establishment was dangerously (and now provably) complacent about the dangers of overprescribing tranquillisers. For years the establishment ignored the link between tobacco and cancer. For years I was vilified whenever I argued that there was a link between stress and high blood pressure. The medical establishment still ignores the evidence proving that meat is the biggest killer in the so-called developed world. The medical establishment, which long ago sold out to any industry prepared to pay a decent price, always goes along with whatever is convenient and profitable and always opposes evidence which threatens the commercial status quo.

Today, more than at any time in history, medical schools teach half-truths; they never teach students how to think or criticise the system. (What system is going to teach people to question itself?). Students are educated by rote; taught in the way that dogs are taught tricks. Wisdom is a disadvantage. Common sense is eradicated. Young doctors are incapable of making informed decisions and that suits the pharmaceutical industry just fine.

But if you don't question perceived notions then how do you ever learn? How does a profession ever progress if no one is allowed to question the establishment's accepted beliefs? Young doctors are never exposed to the truth or to the questioning of `accepted' beliefs or to proper debate (e.g. with people like me). So medical schools churn out platoons of unquestioning, prescription-signing zombies. Originality is now a dirty word within the world of medicine. The establishment has deliberately and cold-bloodedly created an environment in which original thinkers are dismissed (by medical professionals, politicians and journalists) as nutters or fools who care nothing for the truth. Those who oppose vaccination are savaged as madmen who will happily see small children die in their millions.

Good doctors need insight, imagination and intuition and the capacity to make diagnostic leaps, sideways if necessary. They need to be able to observe and they need to be able to think if they are to serve their patients properly. But these skills are not simply discouraged; they are now not allowed. As a result the medical profession is packed with drudges; unthinking human dross, too frightened of losing their jobs to show any spirit.

Doctors do not have the courage to question the establishment or to have original ideas because they are employed by the State and like all other employees they are frightened of losing their jobs. Today's doctors are bought, body, mind and soul, and do not have the courage to stand up for whatever principles they might have had when they started out. They dare not disagree with their administrative bosses because they are hired hands. They dare not stick up for their patients because they live in fear of bureaucratic censure. And so they vaccinate, and they perform unnecessary operations and they prescribe drugs which they know are unsafe. Tonsils, breasts and lengths of intestine are ripped out by surgeons who don't have the foggiest notion of the harm they are doing. (And, seemingly, wouldn't give a damn if they did.)

Doctors do not have the courage to stand up for their patients because they have lost their independence; they are simply civil servants; they have sold their souls for a fat salary, short working hours and membership of a wonderful pension scheme. They are so beholden to their employers that they dare not even stand up to bullying, they dare not even speak out when they see things happening which they know, in their hearts, are wrong. Their spirits have curdled.

Medicine today has become rigid, like other forms of science, and original thinking is as unacceptable today as it was in the days when Semmelweiss was vilified. The medical establishment has never been enthusiastic about new ideas. After all, the medical establishment stoutly rejected anaesthesia and the principles of antisepsis and the brave physicians who promoted such ideas had to cope with rejection, cynicism and oppression. The doctors who have made the greatest contributions to health care have invariably been attacked, scorned and imprisoned. Things have not got better. Indeed, they are worse today than they have ever been. Today, anyone questioning the establishment is suppressed rather than just ignored. History shows that great and useful medical discoveries are invariably made by outsiders and mavericks; doctors and scientists operating outside the cosy world dominated and controlled by back-scratching establishment flunkeys. But in the past such outsiders did at least have a chance to make their contributions. They were reviled and ignored but (with surprisingly few exceptions) they were not silenced in the way that original thinkers are silenced today. The modern medical establishment was bought by the drug industry decades ago. Today, there is no room for initiative and originality and both are actively suppressed. Dissent is officially stifled. The great men of medicine, heroes such as Snow, Semmelweiss and Lister, would not have survived in today's environment. Anyone who studies medical history can see that the significant developments always come from free thinkers outside the system. Today, more than ever, the free thinkers outside the system are suppressed. They will doubtless be defrocked when the new rules of revalidation are introduced to protect the establishment and the pharmaceutical industry.

Traditionally, the medical establishment has quite a record of supporting the wrong view. Today, the power of the establishment to suppress makes things a thousand times worse. Existing therapies which are dangerous, ineffective and even lethal are protected. Antibiotics are wildly overprescribed. Benzodiazepines are still prescribed in massively dangerous quantities - creating millions of addicts. Patients are routinely dispatched to profitable screening clinics which do far more harm than good. Animals are slaughtered in laboratories which are used to preserve the profitability of the drug industry at the expense of patients. Vaccines are injected by the lorry load and children are paralysed and killed by the classroom.

Any doctor who disapproves of vaccination, or questions the effectiveness or safety of something that has become accepted as just as essential and as normal and as safe as food and water, is treated as a dangerous lunatic. Critics are silenced. Alternatives are not even considered. Eyes are closed to the dangers of genetic engineering and the reckless overprescribing of dangerous prescription drugs. The potential advantages of alternative remedies are dismissed out of hand simply because they might threaten the profitability of the industry which now owns what used to be a profession. As I explained in *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You* it has been proven without doubt that most heart surgery is unnecessary. A sensible regime of diet, exercise and stress reduction can reverse the problems now regarded as indications for surgery. But the establishment continues to promote surgery because it is enormously profitable. New, innovative, safe and effective ways of dealing with diabetes are ignored, suppressed even, because they threaten corporate and professional profitability. Doctors don't bother looking at scientific evidence any more. It tends to get in the way of profits. The dangers of electricity, mobile telephones and prescription drug contaminated drinking water are all ignored because drawing attention to these threats may prove financially embarrassing to other parts of the establishment. Powerful evidence proving that all these are real health problems, responsible for many thousands of deaths a year, is suppressed without hesitation.

The medical establishment is nearly always wrong. It has always been nearly always wrong. And as pseudoscience develops and the drug company lobbyists push their patented cures faster and harder so they cause more and more problems.

Iconoclasts are never popular. The people who own and worship the icons don't much care for them being smashed. And these days the icon owners have all the power and most of the money. They control the politicians, the legislature and the media.

Just about every major advance in medicine has come as a result of the work of eccentric, passionate, determined unclubbables who have fought the establishment and who would today almost certainly fail the registration, licensing and revalidation procedures designed to ensure that only doctors who obey every rule of the establishment will be allowed to practice. Advantageous changes to society happen only through the determined work of unreasonable men. Great things happen only when enough unreasonable men care and are brave enough to be unreasonable in public. All real progress is made as a result of observation and deduction but these skills are not valued today. Just about all great discoveries in history have been made by people who weren't recognised by their peers before they made their discoveries and often weren't recognised for years afterwards either.

There has been woefully little really original thinking in medicine in recent years. This is partly because medical education discourages original thinking, the medical press suppresses original writing and the medical establishment outlaws original thinkers. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that there have been very few medical breakthroughs, no critical studies and hardly any bright ideas. Controversy is suppressed and the obvious ignored for fear of upsetting any part of the Unholy Trinity (doctors, drug companies and politicians) and of upsetting Government protected industries.

Over the last few years it has become increasingly clear that bankers, lawyers and politicians have all betrayed us. Despite my best efforts, the public has not yet realised that doctors have betrayed us too. And it will, perhaps, be some time before people realise that whereas politicians, lawyers and bankers have merely impoverished us, doctors have killed our relatives, our friends and our neighbours, have enriched themselves through their legalised slaughter and will most probably kill us too.

My theories of bodypower (described in my book *Bodypower* and to the annoyance of the medical establishment now proven to be accurate, sensible and economical) have been attacked and suppressed simply because they are accurate, sensible and economical. How can medical professionals make money out of a system which relies upon allowing the human body to protect and to heal itself? (Just the other day I read about a woman who had a baby which refused to take milk from her right breast. The baby would only take milk from the woman's left breast. The woman went to see her doctor who found a lump in the right breast. That's bodypower. But how can medical professionals make money out of that? And so, because there is no opportunity for profit, they sneer.)

The solutions modern doctors come up with, and the research results they produce are rarely original or creative or effective. They simply follow the party lines. The majority of today's researchers are simply messing around at various levels of unimaginative incompetence. They know that if they want to receive the best grants they must never question the effectiveness of the medical establishment and they must always worship at the shrine dedicated to the pharmaceutical industry.

When I was writing my book *The 100 Greatest Englishmen and Englishwomen* I was initially astonished at the number of great people who had spent at least part of their lives in prison. The explanation, of course, is that many great men and women, and almost all original thinkers, are, by their very nature, intrinsically rebellious and therefore especially likely to get into trouble with the authorities. And, after all, no one ever did great things by agreeing with the establishment; no one ever changed things for the better without having original ideas. And original ideas are always, almost by definition, an anathema to the establishment.

All great innovations, inventions, ideas and developments come from crazy, neurotic people. They may be a little bit or a hell of a lot crazy but they are all crazy. They may be odd but they certainly aren't boring, sensible or entirely stable. Great advances are never made by people who would be voted into office, made Head Girl or put in charge of the milk.

Things are set to become much worse.

New regulatory licensing schemes for doctors mean that practising doctors will have to be revalidated by a senior doctor who makes recommendations about a doctor's fitness to practise. It seems likely that this will mean that any doctor who does not stick to the rules will be refused a licence and prevented from practising. Just about every significant doctor in history, from Semmelweiss to Snow, would have failed the licensing scheme as planned and I have absolutely no doubt that the new system will ensure that any doctor who opposes, questions or in any way criticises vaccination will be removed from the medical register before you can say `scientific bigotry'. The chances of doctors questioning the medical establishment in the future will be close to non-existent. Today, money talks loudest and doctors listen to nothing else.

I have for many years been concerned about the safety and efficacy of specific vaccines. Those fears have gradually gelled into a general conviction that vaccination programmes are neither sufficiently safe nor sufficiently effective to be acceptable. And, of course, it is worth remembering that those involved in trying to `sell' vaccination programmes to the public have repeatedly lied and tried to prevent the publication of the truth. It is also worth remembering that those who promote vaccination usually have a good deal to gain financially, whereas those who oppose vaccination usually suffer severe financial hardship if they dare to make their views known. There is a desperate, burning need for research into the effectiveness and safety of vaccines but no such research will ever be done because the people who might authorise the work know only too well that the results are almost certain to be financially inconvenient.

I have been writing about medicine, and exposing hidden truths, for long enough to know that it is unlikely that politicians will take any notice of my views on vaccination. Nor is the medical establishment likely to change the way it does things.

And since my books are now widely banned I know that very few people will read this book.

But you've read it. And so now one more person now knows the truth. Share the truth with your friends and relatives. And, together, maybe we can change things.

`Strive to preserve your health; and in this you will the better succeed in proportion as you keep clear of the physicians.’ - *Leonardo da Vinci*

Postscript 1

You will probably have gathered, by now, that my view is that vaccines are unsafe and worthless. I would not allow myself to be vaccinated again. This is, however, a purely personal view and in fairness I stress that it is not a view shared by the majority of doctors, nurses, health visitors, journalists and war criminals. Readers must make their own judgements based on all the available evidence. I strongly recommend that anyone contemplating vaccination discuss the issue with their own medical adviser.

The bottom line is that I do not advise anyone not to be vaccinated, or not to have a child vaccinated because I am merely an author: it is not my job to tell people what to do. My role, as a writer, is merely to provide information (which isn't provided by the Government or the medical profession) and to give some idea of the sort of questions which readers may like to ask when considering a vaccination programme.

So, before you allow your doctor to vaccine your child (or you) you may like to ask her or him these essential questions:

1. How dangerous is the disease for which the vaccine is being given? (Exactly what are the chances that it will kill or cripple?)
2. How effective is the vaccine?
3. How dangerous is the vaccine? (Exactly what are the chances that it will kill or cripple?)
4. What side effects are associated with the vaccine?
5. Which patients should not be given the vaccine?
6. Will you guarantee that this vaccine will protect me (my child)? If not - exactly what protection will it offer?
7. Will you guarantee that this vaccine will not harm me (my child)? If not - exactly how risky is it?
8. Will you take full responsibility for any ill effects caused by this vaccine?
9. Is the vaccination essential?

Then ask him or her to sign a note confirming what he or she has told you. If your doctor or nurse wants to vaccinate you, ask him or her to confirm in writing that the vaccine is both essential and safe and that you are healthy enough to receive it. You may, I warn you, notice his or her enthusiasm for the vaccine (and your company) suddenly diminish. Ask your doctor or nurse to give you written confirmation that he or she has personally investigated the risk-benefit ratio of any vaccine they are recommending and that, having looked at all the evidence, they believe that the vaccine is safe and essential. How could any honest, caring, well-informed doctor or nurse object to signing such a confirmation - effectively, accepting responsibility if things go wrong?

Similarly, parents who are worried about having their children vaccinated should ask their doctor or nurse to sign a form taking legal responsibility for any adverse reaction. (Curiously, they might find doctors and nurses slightly reluctant to do this.)

It is important to remember that most of the doctors (including nearly all GPs) who write and speak in favour of vaccination are making money out of it. On the other hand, doctors who oppose, or even question, vaccination, do not stand to gain anything but are, on the contrary, putting their careers at risk.

Finally, ask the doctor to tell you the batch number of the vaccine. And keep the name of the doctor, the date and time and the batch number of the vaccine. And the surgery or clinic address. Lawsuits against doctors, drug companies and the Government usually fail because people don't have this information.

Postscript 2

A few years ago I wrote a book called *Coleman's Laws*. Here is Coleman's 8th Law Of Medicine: `The medical establishment will always take decisions on health matters which benefit industry, Government and the medical profession, rather than patients. And the Government will always take decisions on health matters which benefit the State rather than individual patients. What you read, hear or see about medicine and health matters will have more to do with the requirements of the pharmaceutical industry and the Government, than the genuine needs of patients.'

For a full list of books by Vernon Coleman please visit
http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

If you found this book helpful it would be an enormous help if you gave it a positive review on Amazon.
There is also a list of books by Vernon Coleman on his Amazon author page.

Vernon Coleman's 100 English Heroes

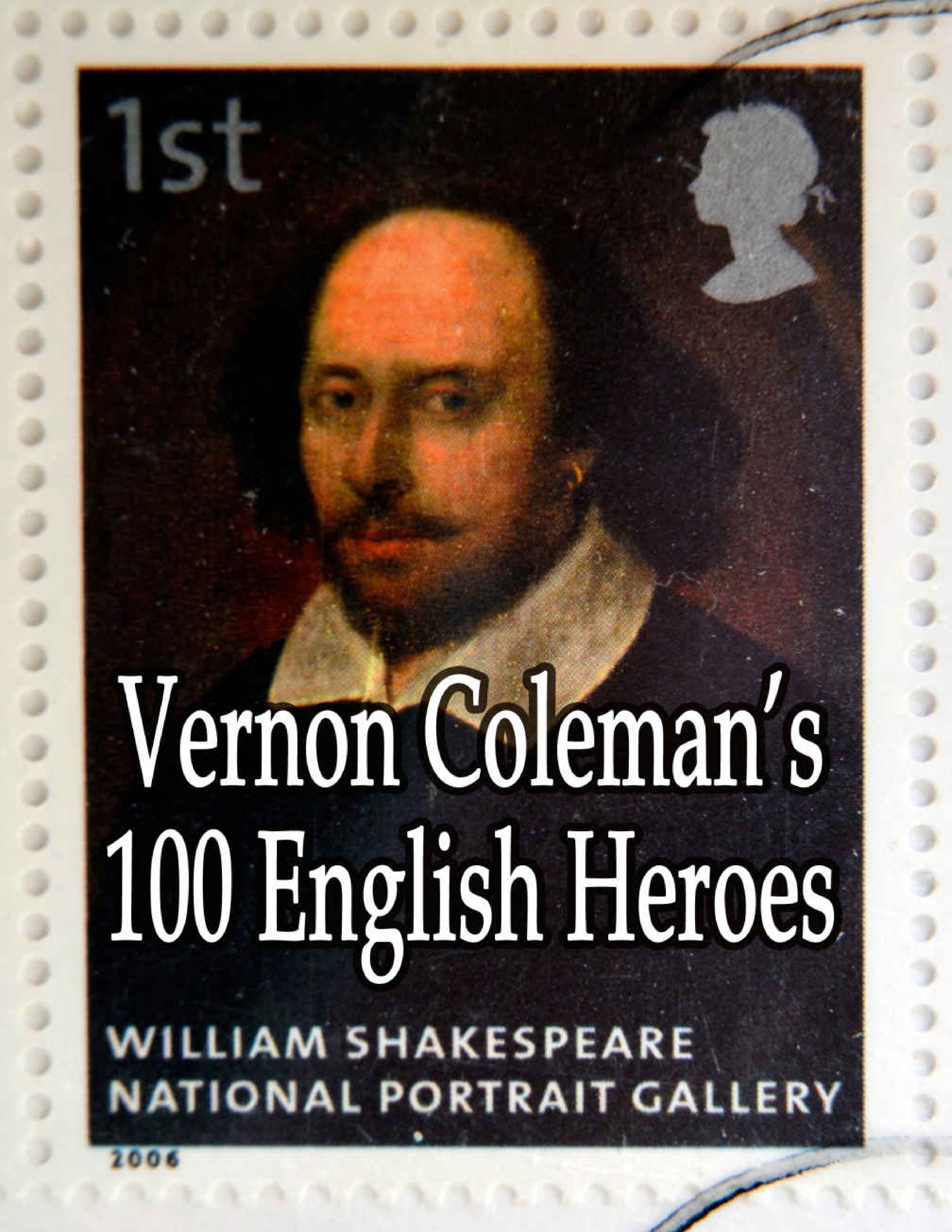
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The 100 Greatest Englishmen and Englishwomen

Incisive biographies of the one hundred most influential English men and women of all time; individuals who made the most significant contribution to life in England and who changed the world, making it a better, wiser place

Vernon Coleman

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Vernon Coleman is the author of over 100 books. For details of other books by this author please see his author page on Amazon or visit www.vernoncoleman.com

Dedication

To Donna Antoinette

Always in my heart

Always on my mind

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Introduction

Historians around the world agree that England has produced far more great men and women than any other country in the world. No other country comes close. When it comes to producing men and women of genius, England is, and always has been, the greatest country in the world. (It is, please note, England and not Britain which gave the world the greatest number of geniuses. Shakespeare, Newton, Dickens, Churchill, Darwin, Hooke, Bacon et al were all born in England. They were English first and British second. The Industrial Revolution was born in England, not Britain.)

I decided to write this book in order to inspire people to be proud of their English heritage. It has been politically correct for some time now to attack England, to sneer at her achievements, her culture and her history, and to oppress her people. The establishment and the media, regard it as wonderful for individuals to celebrate their Scottish, Welsh or Irish heritage. But to celebrate your English roots? Well, that's racist isn't it? If the politically correct critics find it impossible to avoid some modest praise then they make sure that it is Britain, and not England, that they praise.

I decided at the outset that my criteria for inclusion in this book would be strict and simple: to be included in *The 100 Greatest Englishmen and Englishwomen* individuals had to be born in England. This is, I realise, a much tougher criterion than is usually accepted. (It is, these days, perfectly possible to represent England at sport without being born in the country). This rule meant that I had to exclude many people I'd have liked to consider. For example, neither of those 'typical' Englishmen, the actors who first gave flesh to Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson, was born in England. Philip St John Basil Rathbone was brought up in England but born in Johannesburg while Nigel Bruce, probably the most English of all Englishmen, was born in Mexico because his parents happened to be on holiday there when his mother went into labour. And, in addition to having affected England in their own time, their achievements had to have made the world better for generations after them, to have affected the whole world and to be still relevant today. And so although gardeners Lancelot 'Capability' Brown and Gertrude Jekyll had a big influence on the English landscape their influence on the rest of the world was not so great.

They should, moreover, have been individuals who made a significant and continuing contribution throughout their lives (rather than a single, albeit spectacular, achievement) and been people who initiated change rather than participated in the process of change. At one end of the spectrum, Thomas a Becket may be a saint but his role was incidental rather than constructive. He did not change the lives of ordinary people either in his life or after it, either in England or around the world. His arguments with Henry VIII were significant at the time, but they produced nothing of consequence and his death, although hugely tragic, was an embarrassment to the King rather than a history-changing event. Thomas Linacre, scholar and physician, taught St. Thomas More and was physician to Henry VII and Henry VIII but his greatest claim to fame is that he introduced the first rules ensuring that doctors should be licensed. It was Linacre who stopped clergymen and barbers practising medicine and claiming to be doctors. But there was an inevitability about this and no flash of genius involved. The Earl of Sandwich invented the sandwich (he had been gambling all night and was peckish so ordered a piece of meat to be placed between two slices of bread so that he didn't have to leave the gaming table) and thus in one brief moment, which combined hunger and passion, created the world's fast food industry. And then, at some very different point on the spectrum, there lies Jerome K. Jerome. Jerome wrote Three Men in a Boat, the funniest book in the English language, and his style defines English humour more effectively than any other writer (even P.G.Wodehouse, whose extraordinary talent was too individual to be definitive of Englishness but who is on my list for the quality and uniqueness of his vast oeuvre). But the rest of Jerome's work is disappointing and even pedestrian in comparison to Three Men in a Boat and even though that one book created a genre it seems invidious to include an author for just one book when there is no room for prolific and important greats such as Henry Fielding, Aldous Huxley, Evelyn Waugh and Arnold Bennett. Anthony Trollope, the English author who invented the idea of writing a series of novels following the adventures and lives of the same characters came close to my list. Trollope worked for the Post Office (and invented the pillar-box) and in addition to his daily work wrote for three hours every day. He even had a special desk made to clip onto his saddle so that he could write as he wandered around the countryside inspecting rural post offices. But his work, although entertaining, did not have the global appeal of Wodehouse or the social influence of Dickens.

If having a disease named after you merited a place on this list then my 100 would be filled with doctors. There are many English physicians after whom diseases are named. My list would have included Thomas Addison, Richard Bright, Thomas Hodgkin and James Parkinson for example. But I looked for doctors whose works affected the world in a much greater way and found medical men such as Lister, Snow and Linacre: all of whom had a massive impact during their own lives and continue to have a massive impact today.

I decided that the people on my list should be individuals who exhibited the English virtues of strength and determination and who loved their country. Indeed, many of them loved England so much that they risked their lives for her, and for their fellow countrymen. I have tried throughout to look at individuals through the mores and standards of their time. Today, patriotism is unfashionable among the storm-troopers of the politically correct; the apologists for the European Union (EU) who regard any hint of English nationalism as dangerously backward-looking. It wasn't always so.

I've avoided the temptation to include masses of kings and queens. If you are a royal, or born rich and powerful, you have to do more to prove your worth than if you start out impoverished and poorly educated. It's pretty easy for a king to change things. All he has to do is pass a law or start a war. Elizabeth II doesn't make this list because although she has reigned for a long time she has done and said nothing to stop the nation being swallowed up by the fascist bureaucrats of the European Union. She could have done a good deal more and I suspect that the two Queens who do make my list, Elizabeth I and Victoria, would have done.

A remarkable number of English people showed astonishing amounts of courage and persistence. What country would not be proud to have such men as Defoe, Cobbett, Paine, Tyler, Wycliff and Lilburn as its own?

I was initially astonished at the number of people in my list who spent at least part of their lives in prison. The explanation, of course, is that many great men and women are intrinsically rebellious and, therefore, especially likely to get into trouble with the authorities. And, after all, no one ever did great things by agreeing with the establishment; no one ever changed things for the better without having original ideas. And original ideas are always an anathema to the establishment.

Some who played a major part in world events do not appear here because of their lack of loyalty to England. For example, I considered putting Annie Besant on my list.

It was an Englishwoman, Queen Victoria, who created the Empire. And it was an Englishwoman, Annie Besant, who helped to give impetus to the move to give constituent countries of the Empire, strengthened and organised by their association with England, their independence.

Annie Wood was born in Clapham, London in 1847 and, by the time she was 30, had married Frank Besant and become a wellknown writer and an important speaker for the National Secular Society. In 1877, she and her husband were prosecuted for publishing a book about birth control by Charles Knowlton. The scandal made the couple famous. Anne then joined the Fabian Society and the Social Democratic Federation. She helped organise the Bloody Sunday riot and the London matchgirls strike of 1888. In 1890 she became interested in theosophy and rather lost interest in left wing politics. In 1908, she became President of the Theosophical Society and steered the society away from Buddhism and towards Hinduism. None of this would have given Annie Besant a place in my top 100. It was what happened next that changed the world.

Besant's interest in Hinduism took her to India, where she became involved in local politics and joined the India National Congress. At the time this was little more than a debating society which met annually to consider political issues. In 1914, she formed the Home Rule League to campaign for dominion status within the Empire She deliberately chose to do this just as England entered the First World War because she believed that England would be vulnerable and susceptible to pressure. It was hardly the action of a patriot. In 1917, while the war still raged, she was arrested and interned at a hill station. As a show of defiance she flew a green and red flag in the garden. Her arrest provided a focal point for those who wanted long-term independence for India, and the India National Congress and the Muslim League threatened protests if she were not set free. One of the individuals campaigning for Besant's release was a 48-year-old lawyer called Mohandas Gandhi, who had, three years earlier, returned from leading Asians in a peaceful struggle against racism in South Africa.

Back in London the Government was forced to make significant concessions. England had given India a political structure, law, democracy and freedom, a bureaucracy (and cricket). But the cuckoo was ready to leave the nest and it officially announced, for the first time, that the ultimate aim of English rule was self-government for India. England started to make the necessary moves. Besant was released and that same year she was elected President of the India National Congress.

After the end of the First World War she continued to campaign for independence for India until her death in 1933. It is no exaggeration to say that Annie Besant was the mother of modern India. And it was Annie Besant, an Englishwoman, who started the pattern of countries within the Empire seeking their independence. Her impact on England, on India, on other countries of the Empire and on the world was considerable.

But she certainly showed no signs of loving her country and, it could be argued, that a less generous nation might have had her shot for treason.

Other well-known names didn't make my list because fame alone isn't a measure of influence or significance. I didn't include Mary Wollstonecraft or the Pankhurst women (there were three of them, Emily, Sylvia and Christabel) because the hard groundwork in the battle for women's liberation had been started much earlier by people like Daniel Defoe and John Locke and, especially, by the determination, courage and work of Aphra Behn. I considered Elizabeth Garrett Anderson for my list. Anderson was the first woman licensed as a physician in England in 1865. Despite being denied admission into a number of medical schools, she was not deterred. She soon discovered that the Society of Apothecaries did not forbid her from taking her examinations. Shortly after she began practising, Elizabeth founded a dispensary for women in London. Not only was Elizabeth England's first female doctor but she was also England's first female mayor. She was elected Mayor of Aldeburgh in Suffolk in 1908. She, far more than the publicity-seeking Pankhursts and the rather worthy Mary Wollstoncraft, helped prove that women deserved the rights they so rightly craved. She doesn't appear on the list because other women elsewhere in the world had already broken down these particular barriers and so she was not leading the way. (Incidentally, Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman doctor in America, was born in Bristol.)

Sometimes I considered that an individual's great contribution had been cancelled out by some less praiseworthy action or incident in their lives. So, for example, I considered Jeffery Amherst for my list. In 1760, he directed the campaign that captured Quebec and Montreal and secured Canada for England. However, his tenure as commander in chief of the army was rather marred by the fact that he managed to lose a war with rebellious American colonialists. Gaining Canada put a feather in his cap. Losing America took it out again.

Despite the fact that I had strict criteria when choosing my 100 names, my problem was not finding 100 great Englishmen and Englishwomen, but in choosing 100 from the many names available. When considering explorers and adventurers I tried to seek out individuals who had made their mark by influencing the world in some way. If I had considered simply heroic exploits then Shackleton and Scott, the arctic explorers would have been high on my list. As, indeed, would Sir John Hunt the leader of the first expedition to conquer Everest and Amy Johnson, the brilliant and charismatic, pioneering aviator who was the first woman to fly alone to Australia. She set numerous long distance flight records during the 1930's and flew in the Second World War as part of the Air Transport Auxiliary. She died serving her country.

The inclusion of some of the people in this book may surprise you. But, when you have read of their achievements, I think you will agree that they are worthy of inclusion. On my searches through numerous libraries I was often surprised to discover that people whom I had not thought of as English were indeed, born in England. For example, I admit that I was surprised to discover that the composer Frederick Delius was a Yorkshire man and that the composer of the Planet Suite, Gustav Holst, Gustavus Theodore von Holst (aka Gustav Holst) was born in Cheltenham Spa. The national anthem of the United States of America was written by John Stafford Smith, an Englishman. I wonder how many people will be as surprised as I was to discover that T. E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) was born in Tremadoc, Caernarvonshire, Wales and that David Lloyd George, the professional Welshman and former Prime Minister, was born in Manchester, Lancashire, England.

I sought individuals who changed the world but I have tried to find people whose contribution was chronic rather than acute – in other words people who made a series of contributions, rather than a single contribution. But occasionally, an invention, a discovery or a creation demands respect and inclusion. It is, of course, possible to argue that if X hadn't invented Y, then someone else, say Z, would have eventually invented it. Probably so. But it wasn't the someone else. It was X. And if X hadn't invented it when he did, but Z had invented it a decade or two later, then the history of the world would have been changed.

My basic rule that those who appear in my 100 had to be born in England meant that I had to exclude the Duke of Wellington (born in Ireland), George Orwell and Rudyard Kipling (both born in India) and Florence Nightingale (born in Italy). Raymond Chandler grew up in England but was born in the United States of America. Bob Hope, Cary Grant (born Archibald Leach), Elizabeth Taylor, Boris Karloff (originally William Pratt) and Alfred Hitchcock are just a few of the Hollywood names who are often thought of as American but who were, like Charlie Chaplin, born in England. Stephen Leacock, usually thought of as the only Canadian humorist, was born in Swanmore, Hampshire. And Peter Roget, who is often thought of as French but rightly appears in this book, was an English physician who was born in London and died in Worcestershire.

I was enormously disappointed that my self-imposed rules meant that I had to exclude Wing Commander Guy Gibson VC DSO DFC, one of the bravest Englishmen ever to have fought and died for his country. Gibson doesn't qualify for my list because, although his family moved to Cornwall when he was six, he was born in India.

England has had a great many military heroes (Leonard Cheshire and Douglas Bader to name but two of the more recent ones) but it is difficult to find one more archetypically English, or more truly heroic, than pipe-smoking, dog-loving Wing Commander Gibson. Gibson was the inspired and inspirational Royal Air Force leader who commanded the raid on the Moehne-Eder dams in Germany during the Second World War – the famous Dam Busters Raid. It was an impossible raid. In order to make sure that the famous bouncing bombs designed by Barnes Wallis hit their targets the pilots had to fly so low that on occasion their wheels touched the water and crew members would complain that they were getting soaked. When his plane had dropped its dam-busting cargo, Gibson continued to fly around the heavily defended dams, deliberately attracting German flak, so that the other planes under his command could drop their bombs with less risk of interference.

Time and time again Gibson exhibited levels of courage that bring a lump to the throat and which trigger an intense sense of patriotic pride and respect in the heart and mind of the reader. He, and the pilots who flew with him, flew heavy, relatively primitive bombers just a few feet off the ground. The mortality rate among RAF bomber crews during the war was horrendous. Most of these young crews measured their life expectation in weeks or months. Gibson led the bombers who took part in the most daring air raid ever conducted. It was brilliantly conceived and brilliantly executed and it raised the spirits of a besieged nation. Gibson became a hero. The authorities thought him too valuable a hero to be risked on any more raids. They promoted him, filled his chest with medals and turned him into a propaganda tool. He was sent on tour to America. But Gibson was unhappy. He fought to get back into an aircraft. And at the age of 25, he died in his plane towards the end of another successful bombing raid. His book *Enemy Coast Ahead* is surely the most realistic, and certainly the most modest, true story of wartime ever written and one of the most moving autobiographies ever published. English history is full of heroes and heroines, and Gibson would have made a fine ‘known’ soldier; standing alone to represent the many. No one on earth knows precisely how many Englishmen and Englishwomen have died for their country, and to protect the lives and freedom of people of other nations. But of all those who died in war it is difficult to think of anyone braver, more dignified, or more typical of the English virtues than Guy Gibson, the leader of the Dam Busters raid. How awful it is that the nation he and so many others died to save has been betrayed into EU slavery.

There are numerous surprises in this book. And evidence too that the English were responsible for inventing many things often credited to others (usually the Americans). The electric lamp, the internal combustion engine, the cinema, the steam engine, the car, anaesthetics, the factory and the production line, the first manned flight, champagne, photography, the guillotine, the first railway, the electric telegraph – all these are usually credited elsewhere but were, in truth, and as I show in this book, the inventions of Englishmen. Adam Smith’s economic theories were first propagated by William Petty a whole century earlier. Englishmen gave the world the first police force and the first postal service. Countless sailors around the world have good reason to be grateful to Samuel Plimsoll, who helped overcome resistance to the Merchant Shipping Act which brought in such reforms as a loading limit for cargo ships. A Plimsoll line was marked on the hull of every cargo ship, showing the maximum depth to which the ship could be safely loaded. This practice, started in England, spread around the world. Francis Crick, an Englishman, was co-discoverer of the double helix structure of deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA), the basic building block of all living cells. And it was, I must not forget, an Englishman, Tim BernersLee, who invented the World Wide Web.

(I’m still not convinced that the Internet is a ‘good thing’, which has benefited mankind, and so the undoubtedly brilliant Mr BernersLee does not appear on my list. So far the Internet seems to me to be little more than a cesspool of bigotry, libel and pornography; a market place for thieves, tricksters, failures and exhibitionists; a noticeboard for those driven by hatred and envy and a dark world populated by the half-witted, the ineffectual and by people who believe that all copyright is theft but who will happily sell their unwanted books for a penny each and make a few pence by overcharging for the postage and packing. The Web has killed whole industries and contributed massively to unemployment, poverty, misery, abuse and theft but, unlike the Industrial Revolution, has done nothing whatsoever to improve the quality of our lives by taking over backbreaking physical labour or mind-numbingly repetitive tasks. Show me someone who has benefited from the World Wide Web and I will show you 1,000 whose lives have been considerably diminished. Propaganda means that it is almost impossible to obtain accurate, reliable information from the Internet unless you are already an expert in the subject you are researching and I firmly believe that the world would be a better, happier and richer place if the Internet had never been invented and the computer confined to doing sums. Maybe I’ll be proved wrong but I don’t feel ashamed of my caution. After all, the Chinese are still trying to draw conclusions about the implications of the French Revolution.)

The English were the first to invent the free press and modern democratic government. The English invented the jet engine, hovercraft, the steam engine, railways, the telegraph, the lawn mower, nuclear physics, postboxes, buses, satellites, submarines, knitting machines, the flushing toilet, the slide rule, the syringe, matches, the seed drill, the tuning fork, the diving bell, the jigsaw puzzle, carbonated water and the universal joint, the pencil eraser, the fire extinguisher, the electromagnet, the dynamo, the computer and computer software, plastic, traffic lights, the light bulb, the steam turbine, the vacuum cleaner, the crossword puzzle, the mass spectrometer, the telephone, polythene and cats’ eyes in the middle of the road. It was Englishmen who discovered the circulation of the blood, the existence of red blood cells, binary stars, the laws of gravity and motion, orbiting comets, hydrogen, vaccination, atomic theory, chemical electrolysis, the law of conservation of energy, diamagnetism, planet Neptune, absolute zero temperature, the theory of evolution by natural selection, the existence of electrons and neutrons, hormones, concrete, sewing machines, Tarmac and radar. If you are beginning to think that doesn’t leave much for the citizens of any other nationality to invent, you're absolutely right. Over the last 250 years English scientists and engineers have been responsible for around four out of every five major inventions, discoveries and new technologies.

My aim in writing this book has been a simple one: to enable readers to learn the basic details about the most important men and women in English history and how and why their contributions deserve to be remembered. Some of the people in this book are far less well-known than they ought to be, thanks to the prejudices and bigotry of so many academics, historians and commentators. I hope that even ardent historians will find surprises here and that when you've finished reading about my 100 heroes you will know, and understand, a great deal more about England, English history and the people who made England great. These are men and women who, in one way or another, honoured themselves and their country and made the world a better place for the rest of us. These men and women were unique and irreplaceable. They all made gigantic contributions to life on earth. These men and women were all giants. They were giants of their time and they are giants of our time. We should be grateful for their lives, celebrate their work and be proud that they were English.

Vernon Coleman

P.S. My wife, Donna Antoinette, helped enormously in the preparation of this book. She helped me with the vast and seemingly unendingly difficult business of selecting the entries, she helped considerably with the research and collation of information and she helped prepare some of the profiles. The project turned out to take far more time and energy than either of us had suspected when I began, and without her help I would have wilted long before the book was finished. When writing about people who lived several hundred years ago it is often difficult to find the truth without a good deal of detective work. Too much of history is seen through the eyes of historians whose views are coloured by prejudices and modern expectations. There is often confusion about dates and places (with the birth dates for some figures being particularly difficult to find accurately) but Donna Antoinette and I have done our best to ensure that everything in the book is correct. Naturally, any errors which might have crept in are all my own work and I take full responsibility for them. But a sweeping bow or dainty curtsey (as appropriate) and a hearty round of applause for Donna Antoinette, please.

P.P.S. To make it easier to find the people in the book I have printed them in alphabetical order rather than according to their dates of birth.

P.P.P.S. As a starting point for discussion and argument I have ranked my Top 100 in a section at the back of this book. It is, of course, my ranking. There are no rules which make one individual more heroic or more special than another, or which make the contribution of one person more substantial than that of someone from a different age. But lists of this kind are, undeniably, enormous fun. And, as far as I know, there are not quite yet any EU rules which insist that history books and biographies cannot be fun to read.

Alfred the Great

(849-899)

Born in Wantage in Berkshire, Alfred was the fifth and youngest son of King Aethelwulf At the age of four he was taken to Rome to be confirmed by Pope Leo IV. He succeeded his brother as King in 871, when he was 22 years old. It wasn't a good time to take charge. The Viking invaders had landed in the north and the east of England and Wessex was under constant attack. The invasion and the threatened conquest continued for several years and Alfred was the only leader to refuse to submit to the invaders. Then, in 878 a Danish army invaded Wessex. Alfred and his army were sent into hiding in the Somerset marshes, at Athelney, before thrashing the invaders at the battle of Edington in Wiltshire. Alfred had planned his comeback battle while in hiding and it was while he was in Somerset, plotting his return, that the famous story about the burnt cakes began.

While fleeing the Vikings, Alfred was given shelter by a peasant woman. She had no idea who he was and asked him to watch some cakes which she was cooking on the fire. But Alfred was busy thinking about how to fight the Vikings and had too much on his mind to concentrate on the cakes. He accidentally let them burn and was told off by the woman when she returned home to find cinders instead of cakes. When she eventually realised the identity of her visitor the woman was mortified and apologised profusely. But Alfred, being a gentleman as well as a king, insisted that he was the one in the wrong and that he was the only one who needed to apologise. There is also a story that Alfred disguised himself as a minstrel in order to get into the camp of the Vikings and to discover their plans.

In the peace treaty that followed the leader of the Danes agreed to be baptised and to withdraw his army from Wessex while Alfred, in turn, recognised the Danes as the rulers of East Anglia and a good deal of Mercia.

But the battles continued.

Alfred repelled another invasion attempt in 885 and in the following year he captured London – which even then was a rich and important city. In an attempt to stop the invasions he built a ring of fortified strongholds around his kingdom, formed a proper army and created a fleet (the first English navy).

Alfred's military strategy worked. By the end of his reign he had created a strong nation. He had also begun a campaign to conquer all the other English kingdoms that were not occupied by the Vikings and he had declared himself the King of all England. His successors in Wessex re-conquered the remaining territories held by the Vikings.

(Alfred's best-known predecessor, Offa, whose birthdate is uncertain but who died in 796, had declared himself first King of Mercia and then King of the English. He had built a massive earthwork to mark the boundary between his kingdom and Wales. The boundary 'fence' was 120 miles long and 25 feet high. Shortly before his death Offa, inspired by the prospect of a powerful position within an early European Union, had signed some sort of early commercial treaty with Charlemagne of France and had allowed the Pope to take more control over the church in England. But Offa's hold on the English nation, which had been strengthened by his marrying off his daughters to the rulers of Wessex and Northumbria, was tenuous and fragile and there is no record that Offa cared overmuch for England or its people. He seems to have been driven by a lust for power rather than a vision of a strong and united England.)

Alfred promoted education and learning in general, inspired the production of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (a collection of annals chronicling the history of the Anglo-Saxons) and ensured that manuscript copies of the Chronicle were made and distributed throughout England. He encouraged all the arts and created an excellent and fair legal system. Alfred himself was an educated man and translated numerous books from Latin into Anglo Saxon.

Alfred was a humble, pious, honourable man and a great soldier. He was England's first real King and, without a doubt, the greatest. If any one man can be credited with creating the nation of England, it must be Alfred.

Sir Richard Arkwright

(1732-1792)

Though it would be much later before it hit the rest of the world, the Industrial Revolution was in full swing in England in the second half of the 18th century. One of the industries most deeply affected by the Revolution was the manufacture of cotton. Several Englishmen invented ways to improve the spinning and weaving of cotton but of these one stands out above the rest: Richard Arkwright.

Arkwright was born in Preston in Lancashire, which had become the centre of the English cotton industry. He was the youngest of 13 children. His parents were so poor that they could not afford to send him to school. Instead they arranged for him to be taught to read and write by his cousin, Ellen. He became apprenticed to a barber in Kirkham and in 1750, he set up a shop as a barber in Bolton. In addition to cutting hair he also became a wigmaker and a dealer in hair and invented a secret process for dyeing hair which dramatically increased his profits. The profits from the waterproof dye he invented for wigs gave him the money to start his first factory.

In 1767, he moved back to Preston where he patented the famous spinning-frame. It was the very first machine in the world which could produce cotton-thread of sufficient strength to be used in the manufacture of cloth. His early mechanically-powered, cotton spinning machines were driven first by water and later by steam.

In the same year he was forced out of Preston by opposition to his machine. He went to Nottingham and set up his first mill, driven by horses. He patented the water-frame in 1769. In 1771, he went into partnership with Jedidiah Strutt (a wealthy hosiery manufacturer and the improver of the stocking-frame) and set up a larger factory at Cromford Mill in Derbyshire. He continued to take out fresh patents for improvements to his equipment and spent £12,000 perfecting his machine.

In his new factory in Derbyshire, Arkwright faced two main problems.

First, employees feared that the machines would destroy their chances of employment, and in 1779 an angry mob broke into the factory and destroyed the equipment which they believed would affect their ability to earn a living. The destruction was carried out under the eyes of a military and police presence which failed to stop the invasion. But, despite the problems, Arkwright persisted and in the end his machines increased production so much that the factory grew and so did the number of people he employed.

The second problem Arkwright faced was that his commercial success inspired rival manufacturers to steal his patent. In 1781, he took out prosecutions against nine different manufacturers to try to protect his own business. But the outcome was disastrous. Complaints were made and in 1785 his patents were cruelly cancelled so that anyone could use his invention. At that time 30,000 people were employed in factories which used his patents.

But, before that, the firm he had built had expanded dramatically. He had opened a mill at Chorley (which subsequently became one of the most industrialised towns of the Industrial Revolution) and by 1774 he employed 600 workers. At a time when the average businessman was a blacksmith with a boy to operate the bellows that was a lot of employees. Arkwright was invited to start a business in Scotland, and he duly established the cotton industry there too. He also made a good deal of money from licensing his intellectual rights.

In 1787, Richard Arkwright was knighted and became High Sheriff of Derbyshire and three years later, still an innovator, he introduced the steam engine into his factory in Nottingham. He built factories in Bath, Matlock, Manchester and elsewhere. He died, a rich man, in 1792 at the castle he had built overlooking his Cromford mills, though the castle was only completed after his death. He was one of the richest men in England.

Arkwright is usually remembered for having combined machinery (specifically his spinning frame – later renamed the water frame), semi-skilled labour and cotton and for being a leading figure in the Industrial Revolution. But his inventive genius and his organisational skills made him even more than all that; he was also the creator of the modern factory. More than a century before Henry Ford used factories to build cars, Arkwright, in many ways the spiritual father of the Industrial Revolution, had, for better or worse, invented mass production.

Charles Babbage

(1791-1871)

Charles Babbage, an employee of the Royal Mint and a Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge University, is the man who invented the computer. Even the Americans (not good losers in the 'we were first' stakes) acknowledge that Charles Babbage was the first person to build a programmable calculating machine – a machine which had a separate programme of instructions which could be stored in a memory and used at will.

Babbage, born in London, the son of a banker, was an enthusiastic researcher and inventor. He once had himself lowered into Mount Vesuvius to take a closer look at what was going on and he had himself baked in an oven at 265 degrees Fahrenheit for five minutes. (He said there was no great discomfort). He invented coloured spotlights for use in theatres though, sadly, they were judged a fire hazard and never used. He invented the cow catcher too.

Babbage's first two computers were called the Difference Engine (invented in 1823) and the steam powered Analytical Engine (1834). The machines were designed to be built with brass gears rather than silicon chips. Babbage's first programmer was Lady Ada Lovelace, the daughter of Lord Byron.

The Difference Engine was used to calculate mathematical tables but, sadly, Babbage never managed to build his improved computer, the Analytical Engine. The problem was that Babbage had got ahead of mechanical engineering skills: no one could build the parts needed to the necessary level of precision. However, in 1991 the Science Museum in London used Babbage's plans to build the first Analytical Engine. It worked just as Babbage had predicted – perfectly. The world's first really effective, electronic computer was not built until 1946 – over a century after Babbage invented it.

Babbage was inspired to design and build the world's first computer because he found inaccuracies in calculation tables for the movements of the moon and the planets. Realising that the inaccuracies were due to human error, he decided to try to make a machine that could make the calculations for him. His first device compiled and printed sheets of logarithms.

Babbage was a far more interesting character than the average modern computer 'nerd'. He stood for Parliament twice but failed to get a seat. He campaigned vociferously for Babbage's Act, designed to deal with the noise made by unruly neighbours. Unfortunately, Babbage's neighbours (against whom the Act was directed) responded by hiring fiddlers, drummers and stilt walkers to walk to and fro outside his window.

Since Babbage's death, English computer experts have continued to lead the world. Alan Turing, the English mathematician who worked on the principle of the digital computer, is widely regarded as the father of the modern computer. And the World Wide Web was invented by another Englishman, Tim Berners-Lee, who with his colleagues, created a communications protocol called HyperText Transfer Protocol (HTTP) and then released a text-based Web browser for public use in 1991.

Francis Bacon
(1561-1626)

Bacon began life with great advantages. His father, Sir Nicholas Bacon, was Lord Keeper of the Great Seal, the chief law office of England. As Lord High Chancellor Sir Nicholas was a successor of Sir Thomas More. Francis Bacon's mother was also in a position to pull a good many strings. Her sister married Lord Burghley, Queen Elizabeth I's Prime Minister and Treasurer. So Francis Bacon's father was Lord High Chancellor and his uncle was Prime Minister. Not a bad start in life.

It was a very different upbringing to that of William Shakespeare, the contemporary with whom Bacon is so often linked.

At the age of 13 Bacon went to Trinity College, Cambridge. By the time he was 15 he was back in London, studying law. He was a thoughtful, self-confident, enormously ambitious boy who determined early on that he wanted to do great work that would be beneficial to the human race and that would ensure that he would always be remembered. Watching his father at work in the court he learned that intrigue was the key to worldly prosperity.

When he was still a teenager (probably between 16 and 18 years old) the well-educated Bacon travelled to the English Embassy in Paris where he worked as a junior secretary. Shortly after his arrival there his father died, leaving young Francis only a relatively modest bequest. This was, to be blunt, a disappointment to a young man with great ambitions.

Bacon's fundamental ambition was a very simple one. He was driven by the desire, the need, to know how to know, to teach others how to acquire knowledge and to use that knowledge 'to command nature'. He was passionate about this in the way that other men are passionate about golf, football or trainspotting. It was his single, real driving force. He wanted to be rich and powerful because he knew that without money and power he could not do the one thing on earth that he believed to be worth doing: investigate the world and show others how best to learn. His one huge weakness was that he neither would nor could contemplate the idea of a frugal independence. He was, and needed to be, a man of the world just as much as an alcoholic wants and needs alcohol. As a result Bacon could be, and often was, a flatterer, a hypocrite, a hand-wringing acolyte and a pitiful 'yes man'.

Put simply, Bacon realised that if he were to achieve his ambitions he would need money. And he knew that the only way to obtain enough of the stuff was to obtain an admission to the nation's 'affairs'. He felt that he could not, and would not, realise the great things he believed himself capable of, and qualified to reach, unless he became well-off and influential in a merely material way. Sadly, like a lot of men and women who believe that in order to do great things it is necessary first to become financially independent, he spent a good part of his life wasting his time and energy on obtaining money and power, and relatively little of it doing the things he really wanted to do.

'I may truly say,' he later admitted, rather sadly, 'that my soul hath been a stranger in the course of my pilgrimage.'

Bacon had hoped that his uncle, Lord Burghley, would open some doors for him. And the uncle came through. When Bacon was 23 years old, Burghley helped his nephew become a member of parliament. Francis Bacon was to remain a member of the House of Commons for over 30 years.

Throughout history lawyers have often dabbled in politics. The one thing the law and politics have in common, an absence of any great regard for justice and the truth, means the two professions fit easily, comfortably and profitably together. Lawyers have often been among the most ruthless and grasping politicians. Francis Bacon was an unashamed opportunist and could, on occasion, be as ruthless as the next lawyer. For example, he was good friends with the Earl of Essex (who had given him a valuable piece of land in payment for his support and advice) but, when Essex fell out of favour at court and instead found himself a defendant in the Court of the Star Chamber, Bacon played an active role in ensuring that Essex was found guilty; he readily admitted that the Queen's favour was more important to him than that of Essex. In the end Bacon played a major part in ensuring that Essex was executed for treason.

And although Bacon urged that the Government be tolerant in all matters of religion (arguing that the aggressive persecution of minorities was unstatesmanlike as well as inhuman) he remained, generally, careful not to upset too many people by voicing political views which were not popular with those in power. He argued that the best way to force one's views on those in authority was by appearing to agree with them, and avoiding any declared disagreement with them. 'Avoid repulse,' he said, 'never row against the stream.' He knew, and admitted, that 'the best way to get on in life is to accommodate oneself to the ways of great men'.

But, despite all this ruthless expediency, Bacon, who was above everything else a proud Englishman (one of the things he most often thought about was 'the greatness of his country'), made copious notes about what should be done to secure and increase England's greatness and how to make the forces of Elizabeth's great and growing empire work together without jealousy. He was always looking for ways to unite the aims and sympathies of the Crown, Parliament and the people.

He drew up schemes of inquiry, sources of help and cooperation (from within and without the country) and suggested endowing a university college specifically for inventors and thinkers. He could on occasion be almost recklessly brave in standing by his principles. For example, although he had well-placed relatives and friends and should have been a shoe-in for a lucrative position at court or in the Government, Bacon wrecked his chances of winning a prize appointment by bravely opposing a Parliamentary tax bill which Queen Elizabeth supported rather enthusiastically. Bacon was courageous in doing this because his extravagant lifestyle meant that he was constantly in debt and couldn't easily afford grand, independent gestures. (He was once arrested for debt.)

When Queen Elizabeth died in 1603, Bacon became an adviser to King James I. By now he had learned to be more circumspect in sharing his views. To begin with he continued to argue that the country should be tolerant in matters of religion. But when he saw that this was unpopular and dangerous he turned around and supported persecution. He never did much believe in democracy and at this time of his life he was clearly not well-endowed with moral fibre. The lawyer in him had taken over.

His cunning and lack of principles were well-rewarded. In 1606, at the age of 45, he had married the daughter of an alderman in the city of London who had brought with her a good dowry and in 1607 the now wealthy Bacon became solicitor general. In 1613 he became attorney general. And in 1618 he was appointed Lord Chancellor of England and was appointed a baron. In 1621 he became Viscount St Alban. Things were going well.

But then his life rather fell apart.

It was Bacon's own fault. His greed and need for money led to his downfall. Throughout his life he always spent more than he earned, and more than he had.

After his marriage he had built, decorated and furnished a huge mansion where he maintained a vast retinue of servants. Despite the generous dowry that had arrived with his wife it was more than Bacon could afford.

And it was money troubles which finished his dazzling career.

Constantly broke he had accepted 'gifts' from litigants who had appeared before him when he had sat as a judge. This was common at the time but even so it wasn't exactly legal. Like so many who rise to the heights, Bacon lost the ability to differentiate between right and wrong in his personal dealings. He did what many men in power have done: he convinced himself that he was doing the 'right' thing. He was underpaid and had no private means and yet he expected to be able to live lavishly. He was confident that he could defy temptation and indeed there is no proof (nor was there ever any suggestion) that he as a judge allowed himself to be influenced by the gifts he received. But (and the But is the size of Mount Everest and decorated with neon lights) he had laid himself wide open to suspicion, criticism and arrest. He was foolish, vain and, in a word he would have understood, 'unmanly'. He was, perhaps, an echo of his times and King James. He lacked character and spine.

His problem was made worse by the fact that although he was popular and efficient he had, in climbing up to the top, trodden on many corns. He had enemies galore and many of them held grudges. He had introduced reforms and had tried to bring order into the nation's management. Such actions are rarely popular.

The result was that when the charges of impropriety started, they quickly grew into a flood. Bacon was overwhelmed by it all. Shamed and ashamed he declined to stand trial and instead chose to confess. There was no evidence that his decisions had been affected by money; but there was plenty of evidence that he had taken money. (Ironically, his most violent critics and accusers were the individuals who had given him money and then lost their cases. They complained that they had paid bribes and got nothing for it.)

Unlike modern politicians who are caught doing something naughty Bacon was man enough to take his punishment. He was filled with shame and became ill. He was a broken man; mentally and physically destroyed. Humiliated. He held up his hands and confessed (though he constantly argued that none of the bribes had influenced his decisions). He admitted his guilt in writing and refused to submit a defence.

He was dismissed from the post of Lord Chancellor, fined £40,000, barred from holding public office and put into the Tower of London for life. Within two months he had fallen from the very top to the very bottom.

Even though the King eventually granted him a pardon (from both the fine and the imprisonment) Bacon's political career was over. Shortly before he died he described himself as the 'justest judge that was in England these fifty years' but he knew he had done wrong. He described the sentence as 'the justest censure in Parliament that was these two hundred years'.

However, a new career had begun some time earlier. And it is because of this other career that he is remembered today, and a worthy member of my chosen 100. Bacon was well-read (Machiavelli was one of his favourite authors) and although he was an ambitious and successful politician it is as a writer and philosopher that he is now remembered. He is, indeed, now widely regarded as the father of all modern philosophers.

Bacon had started writing long before his political career hit the buffers. After all, it was for the freedom to write books that he fought to survive political life and make money. His first major book was his collection of essays (entitled, appropriately, *Essays*) which first appeared in 1597. These essays are penetrating reflections on human nature and conduct; the work of an experienced observer. Bacon enlarged and improved his essays up until his death. The first edition contained 12 essays. The most complete edition contains 59 essays.

Next, in 1605, came his book *Advancement of Learning,* a popular encyclopaedia of thought and knowledge for which Bacon surveyed and assessed all areas of information and explained where he believed progress was most essential.

It is Bacon's writing on the philosophy of science that defines his greatness most vividly. His next major book after *Advancement of Learning* was the *Novum Organum* (the New Instrument,) which was published in 1620. Despite the fact that he was struggling to cope with the demands of the nation, and his world was about to fall apart around his ears, he edited and rewrote the book twelve times. After his shaming he put all his energy into writing. And although his disgrace must have been painful his enforced removal from public life was hugely advantageous. No more would the greatest thinker of his age waste his life on trivialities.

It was his book the *New Instrument* which truly changed the world.

Up until Bacon, scientists and other thinkers had relied upon the system of deductive logic espoused by Aristotle. But Bacon realised that we only gain new knowledge by observing the world, collecting facts and then using inductive reasoning to draw conclusions from our collected facts. Bacon believed that the scientist should act as an interpreter of nature and that knowledge can only be derived from experience and experiments. He believed that experiments had to be carefully planned and that the resulting evidence had to be carefully assessed. Only when the facts had been obtained, he believed, should conclusions be drawn.

His 'big idea' was that the systematic examination of the facts was the first thing to be done in any scientific investigation and that until this had been done, faithfully and impartially, with all the appliances and all the safeguards that experience and forethought could suggest, all generalisations, all anticipations from mere reasoning, had to be adjourned or postponed.

Bacon believed that if men followed this plan then knowledge valuable beyond that ever imagined could be obtained.

He was, of course, absolutely right.

Bacon spoke with clear authority and he persuaded future generations that the patient, intelligent, persevering cross examination of facts, and careful study and assessment of the results, was the only way to obtain worthwhile knowledge. He worked on this idea for 40 years and wrote about it many times.

This may all sound obvious to us now. But in the 17th century it was not at all obvious and it was not the way most men thought. Bacon believed that if men followed his plan, there were no bounds to what human thought could accomplish. Bacon was no great scientist. But, in his own words, he rang the bell which called scientists to order. He was the father of modern science and modern philosophy. His great contribution to science was to create the idea of empirical thought - the principle that we should build up our knowledge by using our senses to observe what happens around us (whether it is happening by accident or because of something - an experiment - we have devised). Ever since Bacon's time, all good scientists, in countries all around the world, have followed the English method as created and codified by Francis Bacon. He was, without any doubt, one of the very greatest philosophers of all time, well worthy of a seat alongside Aristotle.

For his last book *(The New Atlantis)* Bacon combined his own new scientific method with the setting of Thomas More's book *Utopia.* In this book Bacon argued that the prosperity and welfare of people depends upon scientific research.

Bacon was the first modern philosopher. He believed in God but his approach was entirely secular. He was rational and he was an empiricist. He had a sound basis in classical learning, a great literary style and an enormous interest in, and sympathy for, science and technology.

It is true that other men had recognised the importance of experimentation and the potential value of science. But Bacon was the first writer to describe these thoughts effectively and influentially. When the Royal Society of London was founded in 1662, the founders named Francis Bacon as their inspiration. And although he was no scientist, Francis Bacon never avoided a chance to experiment.

It was an experiment which killed him.

In March 1626, he climbed out of his coach on a freezing cold day in Highgate and collected snow for an experiment on preserving food in cold storage. He bought a hen from an old woman, and had her kill it, and he then stuffed the dead hen with snow. Suspecting that meat might be as well-preserved in snow as in salt, he wanted to observe the effect of cold on the preservation of flesh. He was 65 years old and frail and he caught a chill. He was taken to a nearby house where he was put into a damp bed. The result was that a few days later he died of bronchitis. He did, however, live long enough to see that his experiment had worked.

His final words, in a letter he dictated to his absent host, were: ‘I was likely to have had the fortune of Caius Plinius the elder, who lost his life by trying an experiment about the burning of the mountain Vesuvius. For I was also desirous to try an experiment or two, touching the conservation and induration of bodies. As for the experiment itself, it succeeded admirably.’

It was a fine epitaph for a true Renaissance man.

When he died Bacon left behind a will in which he left money to friends, retainers, the poor and to public institutions. In his will he made it clear that he hoped the money he left would help improve the service provided by those institutions. But Bacon’s incompetence with money followed him beyond the grave. When his assets were realised he did not leave enough to pay off his debts. None of his bequests could be met.

Bacon was a scholar, essayist, historian, scientific author, lawyer, philosopher and politician. He reached great heights. But he couldn’t manage his money.

There are many people who believe that Bacon wrote Shakespeare’s plays. I don’t. How on earth would he have found the time? Bacon was a great man, a genius, but there simply weren’t enough hours in the day, days in the year or years in his life.

Moreover, unless Bacon had mastered an entirely different literary style to fit in with an adopted name there is no way that he could have written Shakespeare’s plays. ‘Bacon could no more have written the plays of Shakespeare than Shakespeare could have prophesied the triumphs of natural philosophy,’ wrote R.W. Church, Dean of St Paul’s, in his definitive biography of Bacon, published in 1884.

But, even without having written the plays, Bacon is well worth his place in England’s most magnificent one hundred. He is, after all, generally accepted by philosophers and historians around the world as the father of modern science.

Roger Bacon
(1214-1294)

Probably born in Somerset, and educated in Oxford and Paris, Roger Bacon was one of the most extraordinary men who ever lived. A Franciscan monk, he was an original thinker at a time when original thought was rare and dangerous. His reputation for knowledge and wisdom in many areas (including science, philosophy, medicine, magic and alchemy) resulted in him being given the nickname Doctor Mirabilis. He was a mathematician, physicist, chemist, physician, astronomer, geographer, comparative philologist and philosopher. He was a loyal servant of the church and prepared an encyclopaedia of knowledge for the Pope.

While other academics throughout Europe were still studying and dissecting the ancient, woefully outdated and inaccurate Greek texts about medicine, Roger Bacon was one of the first men to insist that chemicals could be used medicinally and that alchemy had a role to play in human pharmacology. He found himself battling the entire establishment. Galen had favoured herbal medicines and the medical establishment revered the works of Galen. The Church strongly objected to Bacon's theories because it seemed dangerously sacrilegious for a monk to suggest that the will of God could be influenced with the aid of a handful of chemicals. Herbs were tolerable, they came direct from God. But chemicals, which had to be refined and mixed, were definitely not acceptable. Bacon ensured his unpopularity by moaning that: 'Medical men don't know the drugs they use, nor their prices.'

Bacon did not confine himself to the study of drugs and their effect on human patients. He is credited with having designed the earliest versions of the magnifying glass, the telescope and the microscope. He is believed to have invented gunpowder and the first spectacles. He also prophesied powered flight, locomotives and underwater exploration with the aid of submersible machines. He performed a great many original scientific experiments. As a result, his work was rejected and he was censored and imprisoned. Roger Bacon was one of the first scientific martyrs of the Renaissance.

His views on the importance of mathematical proof and his early ideas about following method in experimentation are strikingly modern. The importance of his books on mathematics, logic and philosophy, widely ignored or suppressed during his lifetime, was recognised in later centuries.

Robert Baden-Powell

(1857-1941)

Robert Stephenson Smyth Baden-Powell was a brave hero who walked straight from the pages of *Boys Own Paper.* He was the sort of soldier who made England great; the kind of man who would fight to the death without a murmur of protest. He was quintessentially English.

During the siege of Mafeking, which made his name, Baden Powell sent out dry, laconic messages that could have only ever come from an Englishman. 'All well. Four hours bombardment. One dog killed.' was the extent of one of them.

Today, comedians and politicians sneer at England and English virtues and they laugh especially loudly at Baden-Powell's type of Englishman.

But between the two Great Wars, Baden-Powell was regarded as an Edwardian soldier-saint; a great hero to be admired and respected.

It was after the Second World War that wave after wave of anti-Englishness washed away traditional respect and replaced it with a contempt for everything that had once been regarded as magnificent.

Commentators and historians whose experience of warfare and inconvenience is limited to queuing for tickets on the London Underground, snigger at Baden-Powell and dismiss him as a racist, a hypocrite, an incompetent military buffoon, a closet homosexual, a philistine, a reactionary, a fascist and an imperialist. (Odd, isn't it, that the politically correct should regard it as just and proper to accuse a man of being a 'closet homosexual', and not see the bigotry in the accusation.)

In the modern world no scornful epithets are too rancid to be used on Baden-Powell, and his appearance in this book, and on this list of great English heroes, will doubtless trigger much fluttering of hands and dabbing of feverish anti-English brows. Guardian reading pseudo-intellectuals will send their Filipino maids for the smelling salts. Baden-Powell was, after all, a man who never grew up politically; a man whose life was one long adventure; a man who believed that cricket was more than a game.

But not even the mincing armies of the politically correct, and the European Union's massed battalions of state-registered England bashers, can alter the facts: Robert Baden-Powell was a genuine military hero whose valour at Mafeking cannot be questioned.

Moreover, he created single-handedly a world-wide scouting movement with tens of millions of members and organisations established in over a hundred countries.

When Baden-Powell died in 1941 one obituary summed things up very well: 'No Chief, no Prince, no King, no Saint was ever mourned by so great a company of boys and girls, of men and women in every land. No other leader in the history of men gathered under one banner, in his own life-time, so great a multitude of followers of all ages, or all races, of all colours, of all creeds.'

Maybe it's simple jealousy that drives those who sneer loudest.

The siege of Mafeking (the town has since changed the spelling of its name to Mafikeng) took place in 1899-1900. A British military garrison, under the command of the then Colonel Robert Baden Powell, held out against a vastly superior Boer force for 217 days until reinforcements could arrive. During the siege Baden-Powell sang and whistled music-hall ditties to keep up the spirits of his troops. His amateur theatricals and practical jokes kept his men alert and alive.

The defence of Mafeking was, and still is, one of the great heroic defences of all time. It is forgotten now but when Mafeking was finally relieved, the people of England sang and danced in the streets in celebration. Baden-Powell was a great hero.

His adventures took him around the world. He chased brigands in Afghanistan. He explored the interior of Brazil. He spied in Montenegro. Everything was adventure. He could have been a character devised by Rudyard Kipling, Alexandre Dumas, Fenimore Cooper, Robert Louis Stevenson or Conan Doyle.

And then the boy who had never really grown up created a boy's kingdom: the Boy Scouts. It was a movement complete with initiation rites, secret ceremonies and signs, curious litanies, totem poles and funny hats. It was an organisation which gave every boy the right, nay the responsibility, to carry a penknife with an attachment for removing the stones from horses' hooves. The scarf and toggle might not always be worn but the penknife could always be carried. It was a kingdom in which honour and loyalty were everything. The motto 'Be Prepared' (based on the BP initials) became a stirring challenge for millions of adolescents, though it's important to remember that Baden-Powell's scouting movement was all about fun as well as honour.

Christened Robert Stephenson, after one of his godfathers (the son of George Stephenson, the man who had built The Rocket, the first successful steam locomotive), Baden-Powell was appointed a General after Mafeking. He was just 43 and the youngest General in the British army.

But his next moment of greatness was something quite different: after the army, his love of woodcraft and nature led him to found the Boy Scout movement. The principles were simple, honest and always honourable. He preached service and kindness and his aims were well meant.

His critics claim that there were deep, dark motives behind the scouting movement but Baden-Powell was no Machiavellian genius. He was a simple man with simple tastes. And the Boy Scout movement is what it always seemed to be: an opportunity for boys to have fun and to enjoy adventures, even if most of them are make-believe.

When the Boy Scout Movement celebrated its 2151 birthday (birthday, note, not anniversary) scouts from all over the world were invited to contribute one penny (or its equivalent in their currency) towards a gift to the Founder and Chief Scout, who was by then Lord Baden-Powell. And at a special ‘coming of age’ Jamboree that year, Baden-Powell was presented with a Rolls Royce motor car and a trailer caravan - bought with the pennies donated by enthusiastic scouts.

(Baden-Powell, when asked what present he wanted had said, with typical simplicity and modesty, that he would like a new pair of braces as his old ones were almost worn out. He was given the braces too.)

Few stories better illustrate the way Baden-Powell was regarded by millions.

The scouting movement was so popular that there was a problem: girls wanted to join. Baden-Powell feared that this would make the movement ‘sissy’ and so he and his sister, Agnes, dreamt up the Girl Guides. He defined the guides as ‘jolly people who enjoy themselves...a happy sisterhood who do good turns to other people.’ The Girl Guide movement was designed to promote home-making and mothercraft.

Baden-Powell died in Kenya, loafing and enjoying the sunshine. He had retired there in 1938 (though he’d offered to return home the following year if England needed him) and he died still a boy at heart. He didn’t enter a second childhood; he had never grown up. How appropriate that he had founded the largest and most successful youth organisation in the history of the world.

Mrs Isabella Mary Beeton
(1836-1865)

The name 'Mrs Beeton' has reached iconic status in England. Whenever I hear the name I think of a rotund, efficient, middle aged woman, energetically trying out different recipes and educating the nation through her various books on cooking and running a household correctly.

In fact, Mrs Isabella Mary Beeton was a rather slender, fairly attractive woman who never really had a great interest in cookery and who was dead by the time she was 28. But her famous book, *Beeton's Book of Household Management* had an enormous impact and changed the way people did things in the home. That's why Mrs Beeton is included here.

Isabella Mary Beeton, was born in 1836 in Cheapside, London. Her parents were Benjamin and Elizabeth Mayson. Sadly, Isabella's father died four years later, while her mother was expecting her fourth child. To ease the domestic burden, Elizabeth sent her two eldest children to live with relatives for a while. Isabella was sent 350 miles away to live with her 79-year-old clergyman grandfather; a move that must have been very traumatic for a small child.

Less than three years after the death of Isabella's father, her mother married widower, Henry Dorling, who had four children of his own. Isabella returned to the new family home and the couple, who now had eight children between them, proved remarkably fertile. By the time Elizabeth was 47, they had a staggering total of 21 children. Isabella was the second eldest, her stepbrother, Henry, was the eldest by a year. Being the eldest female of so many siblings must have contributed enormously to Isabella's organisational and house management skills, and helping her mother to look after the increasing brood no doubt gave her a sense of responsibility from a young age.

Shortly after her mother's marriage to Henry Dorling, the seven-year-old Isabella moved with her newly expanded family to her stepfather's home in Epsom, Surrey. Henry Dorling was Clerk of Epsom Racecourse and leaseholder of the Grandstand at Epsom. To cope with the ever-growing family, some of the children were sent to live at Epsom Grandstand in the care of Isabella and her grandmother.

After having attended school in Islington, Isabella was, at the age of 15, sent to school in Heidelberg, Germany for two years. At Heidelberg, Isabella learnt to speak French and German very well and also became extremely proficient at the piano. In fact, her increasingly wealthy stepfather helped nurture his stepdaughter's musical talent by paying for private piano lessons.

After returning home Isabella married publisher, Samuel Orchart Beeton in 1856. Her new husband was the English publisher of the anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Samuel used some of the money he had made from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to launch magazines such as *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* and *The Boy's Own Magazine* (both of which he founded, edited and published). Sadly, Isabella's family did not like her choice in husband. Her stepfather did not think that Samuel Orchart was good enough for the stepdaughter whom he looked upon as his own. The bitter family feud was never resolved in their lifetimes.

After their honeymoon, the Beetons moved into their first home together, on the Woodridings Estate in Hatch End. It was in that house that Mrs Isabella Beeton wrote *Beeton's Book of Household Management.* As well as being packed with recipes, it was an essential guidebook on how to run a Victorian household. Less than a year after they got married, their first child Samuel Orchart was born, but died three months later. After a series of miscarriages, their second son also named Samuel Orchart was born in September 1859 but, sadly, he too died- he was just three-years-old when he died of scarlet fever on New Year's Eve.

In 1857, nine months after her marriage, Isabella began providing copy for one of her husband's publications, *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine.* She contributed regular articles on cooking and household management. In the same year, Isabella Beeton began work on the iconic book that was to immortalise her name and make her famous.

Despite having had a few pastry-making lessons from the local baker after she returned home from her school in Heidelberg, Isabella hardly knew anything about baking or cookery. She wrote to a friend to tell her about her idea of writing a cookery book and asked for ideas about how to embark on such a project. Isabella's friend wrote back advising her to compile the book using recipes taken from good cookbooks. And so Isabella did just that.

The book was published in monthly instalments and first appeared on the market towards the end of 1859. The instalments were published as a single volume in 1861 and the book was called *Beeton's Book of Household Management.* It was described as being 'Edited by Mrs Isabella Beeton'. The original cover of the book never described Isabella as the author of the book; she was simply listed as the editor.

When writing the book, Isabella wisely adopted a rather matronly tone, not something you would expect from a young woman in her mid-twenties. The book sold 60,000 copies in its first year and was the first cookery book in the country to use colour-plates of some of the finished dishes. Although Mrs Beeton copied other people's recipes, she was the first to put the list of ingredients at the start of her recipes and she was the first to tell readers the time for which dishes should be cooked.

In 1862, the Beetons moved house into accommodation above Samuel's offices in the Strand. They lived there for two years and, in that time, Isabella gave birth to her third baby in December 1863. This time the baby, another boy, lived to celebrate his 83rd birthday.

In the spring of 1864, the Beetons moved from their home above the offices in the Strand to Mount Pleasant, a farmhouse in Greenhithe.

Tragically, less than a year later, the now famous Mrs Beeton was dead. She died on 6 February 1865, within a week after giving birth to her fourth child. The Darlings, who by now despised Samuel, blamed Isabella's premature death at the age of 28 on her husband, believing that he made her work too hard.

Shortly after his wife died, Samuel Beeton, who was never very competent at handling his financial affairs, found himself in deep financial trouble. His most successful publication was his late wife's book so to him it made sense to let the world believe that the author of *Beeton's Book of Household Management* was still alive. About a year after the death of Mrs Beeton, rival publishers bought the copyrights to Beeton's publications and, over the years, many new titles appeared bearing Mrs Beeton's name. These new titles mostly contained bits taken out of *Beeton's Book of Household Management* and re-packaged. Over the years, many revised editions of the book were produced and by 1906, *Beeton's Book of Household Management* was twice the size of the original.

Even now, a century and a half after her death, the name Mrs Beeton is still well known. The impact her book had on households everywhere has been phenomenal. Mrs Beeton's book, with its delicious recipes and invaluable domestic advice has been a great source of guidance and reassurance to millions of women over the years. Mrs Beeton did much throughout her short life to help improve the domestic lives of people all over England (and the rest of the world) with her invaluable advice. The woman who wrote one famous book (and who copied most of it from other people's books) inspired a global industry of cookery books, self-help books and advice books.

In 1877, 12 years after his wife's death, Samuel Beeton, also died. Both Mr and Mrs Beeton are buried at Norwood Cemetery in South London.

Aphra Behn
(1640-1689)

Born in Wye, near Canterbury in Kent, Aphra Behn is probably one of the least well-known people in this book. But she deserves her place here just as much as anyone else. She was a novelist, playwright, poet, traveller, adventurer and spy. She was the first woman to earn her living as an author and to do so she had to fight huge prejudices and overcome traditional assumptions about the role of women in society. By doing what she wanted to do, regardless of the expectations of those around her, she did far more for the rights of women than many better known activists who operated centuries later.

Born Aphra Amis, her father, John Amis, was a relative of Francis, Lord Willoughby of Parham, the administrator of several British colonies in the West Indies and South America. While Aphra was still very young, Mr Amis set off with his family to Surinam to take up a post he had been promised there. Unfortunately, he didn't reach his destination alive but died during the long sea journey.

His widow and children, including Aphra, stayed in Surinam for a few years. While still a young girl Aphra met an enslaved Negro prince called Oroonoko who would, in due course, be the subject of her most successful novel. The family returned to London in 1663, shortly after the Restoration of the Monarchy. Charles II was now on the throne and London society was thriving. In England, the young Miss Amis met and married a Dutch merchant called Behn who died shortly afterwards, leaving the unfortunate Mrs Behn quite penniless. He died in 1665, probably of the Great Plague.

Having now been left in dire straits by the deaths of two men, the still young Mrs Behn, a penniless widow, decided to look after herself. She met Sir Thomas Killigrew who introduced her to the second Duke of Buckingham and the young prince who would become King James II of England. There is no precise record of the nature of her relationship with these powerful men, or how she met them, but it is known that at the suggestion of Killigrew she agreed to go to Antwerp as a spy. She travelled with her brother, a maid and Sir Antony Desmarches, who was a secret agent of considerable experience. The aim was that she would mix in smart society and send back naval and political information. Her code name was Astrea – which she later used as a pen name when she wrote poetry. However, the Government was very ungrateful to their first female spy and the bureaucrats got so far behind in paying her salary that she had to pawn a ring to survive. She appealed for her money to be sent, but it was 1666 and London was in chaos. She was sent just fifty pounds, which only covered half her accumulated debts at the inn where she was lodging. Broke once again, she returned home to England where she was immediately put into prison by her unsympathetic creditors. Once she was out, Killigrew persuaded her to go Venice on another spying mission. It was her last.

She abandoned the profession of spy at the age of 30, and decided to write a play. Although Charles II allowed women to act (and took one actress, Nell Gwyn, as a mistress) women simply didn't write plays, or indeed anything else, for money. They might write to entertain themselves. But not as 'professionals'. Mrs Behn, more in need of money than social approval, just ignored the rules.

Her first play, a comedy, was written in 1670, and was a huge success. It was considered rather coarse but then most of the plays on the stage at that time were rather raunchy. *The Forc'd Marriage* went down extremely well. King Charles II had abolished all the rules restricting what dramatists could and could not say and as a result plays were often outrageous, rude or satirical, and sometimes all three. Behn's plays certainly were. One of her famous lines was: 'One hour of right-down love, is worth an age of living dully on.' That was pretty near the knuckle for the late 17th century.

Aphra Behn, playwright, was on her way and quickly became one of the most popular writers of Restoration Drama. Six months after *The Forc'd Marriage* had opened she followed it with *The Amorous Prince*.

Behn took advantage of the freedom she had to attack all the social conventions that prevented women living as equals to men. Although her plays were written three centuries ahead of the bra burning days of the 20th century they contained messages which were just as powerful as any of those favoured by 20th century supporters of liberation for women. However, she had the good sense to make sure that her plays were also funny and entertaining. And so they were profitable.

Over the next decade or so she wrote a number of plays, all of which were comedies. The tides included *Sir Patient Fancy, The Feign'd Courtezans* and *The City Heiress.* After meeting and having an affair with John Hoyle, a lawyer, rogue and keen duellist, she wrote a play called *The Rover* which was another huge success. She also wrote poetry and a collection of these appeared in 1684. In 1685 she wrote a coronation ode for King James II. In 1688, fed up with the savagery she was experiencing from critics who disapproved of her plays, she started writing novels. *Oroonoko, the Royal Slave,* based on the slave she'd met in Surinam, appeared in a year when she published not one, not two but three novels. *Oroonoko* is a romantic, adventure story about a slave revolt led by an African prince. Aphra Behn was one of the first authors in the world to have the sensibility and courage to attack the slave trade. (William Wilberforce didn't get involved in the anti-slave trade campaign for another century.) She was also one of the world's first writers of fiction.

In 1689, Mrs Behn followed up this amazing industry with another novel entitled *The History of the Nun,* or *The Fair Vow-Breaker.* She translated many books from the French and she wrote the once famous, if scandalous, *Love Letters from a Nobleman to his Sister.* Book critics, more accepting than the drama critics had been, praised her skills in writing plot and intrigue and were also full of praise for the wit of her dialogue.

At the still young age of 50, Aphra Behn became ill and, after being treated by what sounds like a rather useless doctor, she died. She was buried in Westminster Abbey, a fact which tells us all we need to know about her status at the time.

Long after her death, Virginia Woolf wrote these lines about Mrs Behn: 'All women ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds.'

How sad it is that she is largely forgotten today.

Jeremy Bentham

(1748-1832)

Jeremy Bentham, philosopher and social reformer was born in London, the son of a lawyer. He was a child prodigy and as a toddler was allegedly found sitting on his father's desk engrossed in a book about the history of England. He began studying Latin at the age of three. He entered Oxford University at the age of 12 and became a barrister at the age of 15. (The idea of ending up in court being defended by a 15-year-old seems rather scary today but things were different then.)

Bentham was a firm proponent of utilitarianism. In his books *A Fragment on Government,* which was published in 1776, and *Introduction of the Principles of Morals and Legislation,* which was published in 1789, Bentham argued that the objective of all legislation should be 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number'. He developed what he called a 'hedonic calculus' to enable him to work out the effects of different actions.

Bentham travelled widely throughout Europe and Russia in order to study different forms of government and was made an honorary citizen of the French Republic in 1792. He published a vast number of papers and books on social reform, politics, penal reform and economics and spent his life studying the problems which face legislators, and helping to construct an ideal legal system. He was closely concerned with the functions of government, the true meaning of liberty and the purpose of civilisation. He argued that mankind is governed by two motives: avoiding pain and finding pleasure. In support of his claim that all legislation should promote 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number', he pointed out that since punishment involves pain, and is therefore evil, it should only be used 'so far as it promises to exclude some greater evil'.

He was not simply a theoretician. He spent enormous energy working on ways to put his theories into practice and worked long and hard on developing effective forms of law reform. He planned a special prison (the Panopticon) and a special school (the Chrestomathia) and helped to found the Westminster Review. He was a firm advocate of democracy and believed that education should be available to everyone – rich and poor.

John Stuart Mill regarded Bentham as one of mankind's great benefactors and said of him: 'He had neither internal experience nor external; the quiet, even tenor of his life, and his healthiness of mind, conspired to exclude him from both. He never knew prosperity and adversity, passion nor satiety; he never had even the experiences which sickness gives; he lived from childhood to the age of eighty-five in boyish health...How much of human nature slumbered in him he knew not, neither can we know.'

Jeremy Bentham inspired the formation of University College, London and his skeleton (appropriately clothed) is preserved there.

William Blake
(1757-1827)

Poet, artist and visionary William Blake never went to school (his father was a tradesman with little money) but taught himself a good deal about literature and The Bible. He also taught himself several languages. In his early teens he trained as an engraver at the Royal Academy and eventually, in 1784, opened a print shop in London. He developed his own innovative method of producing coloured engravings and began to publish his own, specially illustrated, books of poetry. The books he published included *Songs of Innocence* (1789), *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793), *Songs of Experience* (1794) and *Jerusalem* (1804-1820).

Blake was inspired by his mystical ideas about the struggles of the human soul and about heaven and hell. He firmly believed that imagination was the most important human experience and that it deserved constant encouragement. He often had visions of angels and ancient figures from bible stories. Whether writing or drawing he ignored all conventions. Blake's work owes nothing to any other artist.

Jerusalem, his third major epic work to deal with the fall and redemption of mankind, is perhaps the best known of his poems. It is certainly the most richly decorated and has been made into the hymn of the same name.

Blake also published a series of 22 watercolours which were inspired by the *Book of Job.*

William Blake was often regarded as mad by his contemporaries. But this was never a medical diagnosis. He was regarded as mad partly because of his exceptional talent, partly because he was so determined and single-minded and partly because he was utterly unworldly. He didn't seem to care for material things; spending his life in poverty. The public had little interest in the wonderful books he produced but that didn't stop him. He just kept writing, drawing and publishing. He neglected himself and lived in terrible surroundings but that didn't matter. He lived only to write books.

Today Blake is generally regarded as having created one the most original and unique bodies of work in the world. He was a revolutionary who, in order to avoid ending up in prison (or being transported to Australia), confined himself to screaming and raging in his work and in his prophecies.

William Blake was one of the great English individuals, a true English eccentric, a mystic, a visionary and a prophet. He is sometimes regarded as one of the earliest and most significant figures in the Romanticism movement but he was much more than a figure in a movement. Blake was simply Blake. He was daringly original in a uniquely English sort of way.

Boudicca

(15-61) (aka Boadicea)

Although the former queen’s name is often spelt as Boadicea, it now seems clear that the correct spelling is Boudicca. The name ‘Boadicea’ seems to have slipped into common usage because Alfred Lord Tennyson spelt it that way in a famous poem, though to be fair the good lord could blame William Cowper who wrote a poem called Boadicea a quarter of a century before Tennyson was born.

Contemporary reports suggest that Boudicca was a huge woman, tall and well-built, who had a loud voice and a piercing glance. She had red hair which she wore long (it hung below her waist) and she invariably wore a golden necklace around her neck. She was rarely seen without a spear in her hand.

Boudicca is remembered today because she was one of the few native English citizens to have the courage to resist the Roman invasion. She had been married to King Prasutagus of the Iceni tribe in East Anglia and her husband had negotiated a deal enabling him to rule his part of England as a nominally independent ally of Rome. When he died, King Prasutagus left the kingdom jointly to his daughters and the Roman Empire but the Romans decided to ignore the King’s will and subsequently behaved rather despicably towards his family. The Romans stole his lands, called in loans, raped his daughters and flogged Boudicca. Generally speaking, they treated Boudicca and her family extremely badly and Boudicca, not a woman to allow people to push her family around, wasn’t prepared to take the ill-treatment lying down. She led an uprising of the whole Iceni tribe and while the Roman armies were busy killing the Welsh residents of the island of Anglesey in North Wales, she and her army burnt the Roman town of Camulodunum (Colchester), where there was a temple to the former Roman emperor Claudius, and set off to attack Londinium (London) and Verulanium (St Albans). While doing all this Boudicca and her army thrashed a Roman legion – the IX Hispana. This was a little like Bilbury Thirds beating Manchester United.

Hearing of this significant embarrassment the Roman legions which were still in Wales turned their chariots round and hurried back to England, hoping to rescue Londinium, a major settlement that had been established twenty years earlier. Realising however that he didn’t have enough men to defend Londinium, Gaius Suetonius Paulinus evacuated it and abandoned it. Boudicca and her army then duly destroyed it. They also destroyed Verulanium. It is estimated that Boudicca killed around 80,000 Romans and their followers in destroying these cities. The damage Boudicca did was so great that the emperor Nero considered withdrawing all Roman troops from the island of Britain.

However, Suetonius Paulinus re-grouped in the West Midlands and his well-trained, and by now rather desperate and red-faced Roman legions, managed to defeat a presumably exhausted Boudicca at the Battle of Watling Street, which took place near Fenny Stratford. Rather than allow herself to be captured Boudicca poisoned herself. She and her army had fought bravely and had very nearly defeated the mighty Romans.

For centuries Boudicca was more or less forgotten but her fame rose to legendary status just before and during the Victorian era. Queen Victoria was frequently portrayed as a modern day Boudicca; something which did not displease her. Poems by William Cowper and then Alfred, Lord Tennyson (who was Queen Victoria’s Poet Laureate) confirmed Boudicca’s status. Ships were named after her and statues built in her memory. In particular, a huge bronze statue of Boudicca with her daughters in her war chariot was commissioned by Prince Albert and stands near to the Houses of Parliament in the city she had once destroyed. Numerous books, films and songs have been based on her life.

Joseph Bramah
(1748-1814)

Born a farmer's son in Yorkshire, Joseph Bramah had an accident that left him lame when he was just 16 years old. Unable to work on the farm, he was apprenticed to the village carpenter and subsequently became a cabinet maker in London. He eventually became one of England's greatest inventors. His work contributed enormously to the success of the Industrial Revolution.

Bramah's first successful invention was for a water closet that didn't freeze in cold weather. It had a hinged flap that sealed the bottom of the bowl. Bramah manufactured his water closets at a workshop in Denmark Street in London. His company continued to make the Bramah patented water closet for many years and an example can still be seen (fully functioning) in Queen Victoria's former home, Osbourne House, on the Isle of Wight.

The year 1784 was a big year for Bramah (whose father originally spelt the family name 'Bramma').

First, he married Mary Lawton, who came from Barnsley. They set up home together in London, initially in a house in Piccadilly though they later moved to Pimlico. Second, he designed a new lock for which he received a patent. He also started the Bramah Locks company to manufacture his locks. Their attraction was their resistance to lock-picking. On 21 March in 1798 the official journal of the House of Commons reported that Parliament had decided: 'That leave be given to bring in a Bill for vesting in Joseph Bramah his executors, administrators and assigns, the sole use and property of his invention of a new kind of lock for doors, drawers and other purposes.'

From 1790, Bramah's London shop had a lock mounted on a board containing these words: 'The artist who can make an instrument that will pick or open this lock shall receive 200 guineas the moment it is produced.'

(The challenge was finally met in 1851 by a locksmith called Hobbs who was awarded the prize. He took 51 hours, spread over 16 days, to open the lock. The lock was quickly redesigned.)

In order to manufacture his locks, Bramah needed precisiontooled parts. And so he started manufacturing tools with which to make those parts. Together with an employee called Henry Maudslay he designed a number of machine tools.

The invention for which Bramah is best remembered is undoubtedly the hydraulic press - which is today also known as the Bramah Press. The hydraulic press still has many uses and is widely used in industry for forming metals and for other tasks where a large force is needed. Presses are manufactured in many styles and sizes and in capacities ranging from 1 ton to 10,000 tons. They all work in the way Bramah designed them to work.

Although it is the hydraulic press which puts Bramah into our top 100, the Yorkshire man produced a number of other useful and important inventions. He created a beer engine, used at the bars of public houses, a type of fountain pen, the machine used for automatically printing bank notes with sequential serial numbers and a paper-making machine.

Early in the 19th century, Bramah invented a hydrostatic press which could uproot trees. In 1814 he was supervising work with the machine in a forest in Hampshire when he caught a cold. The cold turned into pneumonia and he died shortly afterwards.

William Brockeden

(1787-1854) Devon

Brockeden was a watchmaker's son who invented the compressed tablet and inadvertently founded the modern pharmaceutical industry.

Born in Devon, Brockeden trained as a watchmaker (like his father) but also earned money as an author and an artist. It was in his capacity as an artist that he made the discovery that was to revolutionise the preparation of medicines and enable apothecaries to replace pill-rolling apprentices with efficient, reliable tablet-making machines.

Infuriated by the fact that he could not obtain drawing pencils which were free from grit, Brockeden had the idea of compressing pure powdered graphite in a die between two punches. Realising that his invention could have other uses, he wisely took out a patent for a device for the 'shaping of pills, lozenges and black lead by pressure in a die'. (The graphite pencil had been invented earlier and in 1546 the first lead pencil had been made in England when a source of pure graphite was discovered at Borrowdale in Cumbria. The graphite was so pure that writing sticks could be cut straight from the mine. But no other pure source of graphite was ever found and Brockeden's invention enabled decent pencils to be made from impure graphite.)

In 1844, a few months after Brockeden's patent was granted, the *Pharmaceutical Journal* announced: 'We have received a specimen of bicarbonate of potash compressed into the form of a pill by a process invented by Mr Brockeden and for which he has taken out a patent. We understand the process is applicable to the compression of other substances into a solid mass, without the intervention of gum or other adhesive material.'

The invention was immediately successful on both sides of the Atlantic. The big advantage was that every pill made by Brockeden's method contained the same quantity of ingredients. Inevitably, there were many who dismissed machine-made tablets as nothing more than a passing fancy, and one disgruntled apprentice wrote to the *Pharmaceutical Journal* asking whether he had trained for three years only to spend his future writing out labels and wrapping up bottles of factory made tablets. Even at the end of the nineteenth century, the *Pharmaceutical Journal* published an editorial stating that, 'Tablets have had their day...and like every other form of drug preparation that has preceded them, will pass away to make room for something else.'

However, the medical profession and the public found tablets attractive and too simple to resist. They were easier to take and to carry around than powders or mixtures, and customers soon realised that the efficacy of individual tablets did not vary much. When machines began to turnout tablets by the thousand, the popularity of Brockeden's invention was confirmed. Within a few years of the registration of Brockeden's patent, small companies making compressed tablets had sprung up all over the world, and apothecaries had discovered that it was easier and cheaper to buy their finished tablets from a specialist supplier rather than to rely on the pill-rolling skills of an apprentice. Thus the Industrial Revolution had its first direct effect on the medical profession and upon the medicines its members prescribed. Brockeden, the watchmaker from Devon, had single-handedly given birth to the pharmaceutical industry.

Isambard Kingdom Brunel
(1806-1859)

Isambard Kingdom Brunel, renowned as a genius working in iron, was born in Portsmouth, Hampshire, the son of the engineer Sir Marc Brunel. Unlike many of the engineers and scientists who played a vital part in the Industrial Revolution, the young Brunel received a sound education (partly in England and partly in France) before entering his father's employment.

His first job was taking full charge of the Thames Tunnel being dug at Rotherhithe. He was just 20 years old at the time. His father, Marc Brunel, who had started the tunnel, got the idea for the boring tool used in the construction of the tunnel from the destructive worm teredo navalis. The tunnel, which involved driving a horizontal shaft from one side of the river to the other, was eventually opened to the public in 1843, after costing nearly £500,000, a huge sum at the time. The vast cost meant that when it was built the tunnel, though an engineering success, was considered a commercial failure. The building of the tunnel nearly cost the young Brunel his life because he was injured when the tunnel flooded and spent six months recuperating.

(Marc Brunel, Isambard's father, was a spectacularly successful engineer in his own right. He was almost comically absent-minded and was renowned for forgetting his own name and climbing into the wrong coach. He was also accused of mistaking other men's wives for his own though how much of this was unintentional is now a mystery. The author Arnold Bennett would have doubtless called him a Card.)

At the age of 26, Isambard Kingdom Brunel was appointed Engineer to the newly created Great Western Railway. The bridges, tunnels and stations he planned are still used today by modern high speed trains travelling between London and Bristol, and his bridges now safely carry trains which are ten times as heavy as anything Brunel envisaged. He chose a broad gauge for the tracks so that the trains could travel safely at high speed. This was a controversial decision but Brunel argued that the then popular narrow gauge was a leftover from the mine railways that George Stephenson had built, and he proved that the broader gauge provided a safer and more comfortable ride, as well as allowing for larger carriages and thus greater capacity. Unfortunately, in 1892, the broad gauge was abandoned in England because most of the country's railway lines had by then been laid according to Stephenson's gauge.

The Great Western Railway is a magnificent tribute to Brunel's genius. Paddington Station in London is a Brunel creation and there is an excellent statue to him beside Platform 1. The Box Tunnel, which was the longest railway tunnel in the world at the time, is orientated so that the rising sun shines all the way through it on Brunel's birthday. Brunel was so meticulous that he even designed the specification for the locomotives to be used on his railway, which runs along the coast at Dawlish in Devon and is one of the most dramatic and best loved stretches of railway line in the world. Throughout his remarkably short life Brunel continued to build railways. He built lines in Ireland, Italy and Bengal.

Brunel saw the railway from London to Bristol as the first step in creating a link between London and New York and to complete the link he subsequently built ships to cross the ocean. The 'Great Western' was the first real ocean-going steamship ever built and the 'Great Britain' was the first large ship to be driven by screw propellers. The third huge ship he built, the 'Great Eastern', had an unprecedented five funnels and was so big that it remained the largest ship on the seas for half a century. Each vessel was a major step forward in shipbuilding. The 'Great Eastern' played a vital part in laying the first lasting transatlantic telegraph cable in 1865.

Brunel's other work included tunnels, buildings, viaducts and docks. His notebooks and sketchbooks show that he involved himself in every detail of his creations. For example, he surveyed the entire length of the route between London and Bristol himself

For the Crimean War, Brunel designed a hospital of prefabricated parts that could be shipped out to the Crimean and reassembled on the battlefield. The hospital arrived complete with its own drainage system and its own air conditioning. He even designed new guns for use in the war.

The Clifton Suspension Bridge, 700 feet long and 200 feet above the River Avon, had the longest span of any bridge in the world when it was built. It still stands today and carries over four million vehicles each year. The Royal Albert Bridge, at Saltash in Cornwall, is another lasting monument to Brunel's genius.

Even Brunel's occasional failures were brilliant and imaginative. His 'atmospheric' railway, which had coaches drawn along by vacuum power, was way ahead of its time and cost Brunel a good deal of his own money. But it was a great idea.

Brunel's designs revolutionised the world of engineering and public transport. Sadly, he endured years of ill health before dying of a stroke at the tragically early age of 53. Few men have achieved so much in so little time.

John Bunyan
(1628-1688)

Born in the village of Elstow near Bedford, John Bunyan's family had been farmers and tinkers for generations. The young Bunyan seemed destined to work on the farm, and do a little tinkering, as his parents had done. He had very little education.

Then the English Civil War started in 1642. On his 16th birthday John Bunyan joined the army. He fought in Cromwell's Parliamentary army during the English Civil War which took place between 1642 and 1647 and then he returned to his native village and married.

During the war his horizons were widened and he met many people he would never have met if he had remained a farm boy. He became interested in the idea of Puritanism, which was a strict form of Christianity popular among those fighting the King.

When he married, Bunyan read two books belonging to his wife (one was called *The Practice of Piety* and the other *The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven)* and these had a huge impact on him. He renounced vice and ungodliness, confessing that he had been 'a ringleader among those enjoying the delights of sin', and joined a Baptist congregation in Bedford. The still young Bunyan soon became a preacher himself

However, it wasn't a good time to start a new life as a preacher because, after the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660, Puritans weren't allowed to preach in public. Indeed, Puritan worship was banned completely.

Bravely and stubbornly Bunyan repeatedly disobeyed the law and as a result spent eleven years in prison. It was while he was incarcerated that he began to write. His first book was *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* and is the story of his own conversion to Christianity. Bunyan reveals himself as an emotional man, constantly terrified that he would be punished by God. He explains how when he became angry after his father remarried he quickly realised his sinfulness and was overwhelmed with remorse. He explains that as he stood in the church tower he was convinced that the bells would fall on him, condemning him to everlasting punishment. The book shows him to be passionate, earnest, intense and imaginative. These were the qualities which made him such a successful preacher and author.

During his long prison sentence he wrote nine books. Ironically, Bunyan was eventually released from prison as a result of the Declaration of Indulgence, which was intended by Charles II for the relief of Catholics.

During a later, shorter term in prison he wrote the first part of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, probably the most famous and moving book with a religious theme ever written. The book is an allegory about the problems and hazards of trying to be a good Christian in a corrupt and evil world. The hero of the book, Christian, is followed from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City.

After the publication of *The Pilgrim's Progress* Bunyan was allowed to preach without hindrance until his death.

Bunyan's other books include *The Life and Death of Mr Badman, The Holy War* and *A Book for Boys and Girls.* He wrote a sequel to *The Pilgrim's Progress,* in which he told the story of Christian's wife and children and reintroduced the eternally memorable characters of Greatheart, Standfast and Valiant.

It is, of course, *The Pilgrim's Progress* which marked Bunyan as a writer of genius. It is, in part at least, an autobiographical book but it is second only to The Bible as the world's biggest-selling and most everlastingly popular religious book. It was in a tenth edition by 1685 and since then it has been continually in print in almost every language in the world. The characters in Bunyan's masterpiece are drawn from every day life. The book may be a fantasy but the people are all utterly believable and all recognisable, and the simple story is dramatic and gripping. Bunyan's aim was not to create a work of art but merely to teach the religious truths which he regarded as so important.

Bunyan was an uneducated man. He had no formal training whatsoever. And yet his lack of education, combined with his genius, meant that he wrote about and for the people he knew with great conviction. His passion came from within and was the better for it.

Richard Burton
(1821-1890)

Richard Francis Burton, one of the world’s greatest explorers and adventurers, was born in Torquay, the son of an English colonel. He started life with an erratic and irregular education which ended with him being expelled from Oxford University.

By the time he’d finished with life he had been an explorer, writer, translator, secret agent, orientalist, soldier, linguist, poet, fencer, diplomat, hypnotist, ethnologist and publisher of some of the world’s most famous erotic books.

Describing himself as ‘fit for nothing but to be shot at for six pence a day’ he joined the East India Company army and in 1842, at the age of 21, he served in Sind (Southeastern Pakistan). Unlike most of his contemporaries, he quickly mastered Arabic, Hindustani and Persian as well as Gujarati, Marathi and Panjabi. His reward from his fellow soldiers for this effort was to be accused of ‘going native’. They called him ‘the White Nigger’.

Burton was already turning into quite a character. He earned the nickname ‘Ruffian Dick’ for his ferocity as a fighter and was believed to have fought more single combat battles than any other man in the army. He kept a large menagerie of tame monkeys in the hope that he could learn their language. He learned to use measuring equipment and took part in a number of undercover investigations. During one undercover expedition he investigated a brothel in Karachi which was frequented by English soldiers and found that the prostitutes were young boys.

In 1849, he returned to England on sick leave. While recuperating n Europe he wrote his first book, learned fencing in Boulogne and met his future wife Isabel Arundell.

In 1853, though it was forbidden for non-believers to visit the most holy shrine of Islam, Burton made a pilgrimage to Mecca. He made the whole journey disguised as an Arab and wrote a fascinating account of this extremely dangerous pilgrimage.

Three years later he set out with another English explorer, John Hanning Speke on a journey which, in 1858, led to the discovery of Lake Tanganyika. The exploration was in many ways a disaster. Equipment was stolen or lost and both men had serious health problems. The two men were very different in character: Burton was a linguist who was able to talk to and fit in well with the native bearers but Speke was an old-fashioned imperialist.

After Burton was taken too ill to travel, Speke went on to discover Lake Victoria. Burton, the expedition’s leader, was unhappy with Speke’s work, claiming that his measurements were inaccurate, and he and Speke had a magnificent quarrel about it.

In 1861, Burton was British consul at Fernando Po and went on a mission to Dahomey. Over the next few years he worked as consul at Santos in Brazil, at Damascus and, in 1872, in Trieste. He never stopped criticising colonial policies, in both books and letters, and his courage in doing so undoubtedly damaged his professional career as a diplomat.

Burton wrote many books and scholarly articles on a wide variety of subjects, including ethnography, sexual practices, human behaviour, travel and fencing. He never held back his views or his information and his books are famous for their honesty and openness. In 1863 he co-founded the Anthropological Society of London.

During his travels and adventures he collected a huge library of notes and records dealing with the anthropological and sociological material he had collected. Much of the material he collected was frankly erotic and he published this material (as the *Kama Sutra, The Perfumed Garden* and his annotated 16 volume edition of the *Arabian Nights*) privately in order to avoid prosecution. He managed to make a fortune in his later years from the sale of these privately published books. His work describes sexual techniques common in the regions he visited and an analysis of the measurements of the lengths of the sexual organs of male inhabitants of various regions.

Burton loved shocking people and often told stories against himself. He frequently seemed to authenticate rumours about him that had no foundation in fact. He was, for example, accused of murdering a boy who saw him urinating in European fashion when he was on his famous trip to Mecca. This accusation was taken seriously by many but it almost certainly had no basis in fact. As a result of his reputation, he was officially regarded as rather unpredictable and he was feared not so much for what he was known to have done but for what it was feared he might do. He was, nevertheless, knighted by Queen Victoria in 1886.

His wife, Lady Burton, shared in much of his travelling and his writing. She was a devoted wife and never recovered from his death. Sadly, she burnt many of his papers, including the manuscript of his final book *The Scented Garden Men’s Hearts to Gladden* after his death. She had been offered six thousand guineas for the manuscript and she regarded the book as his ‘magnum opus’ but she imagined she was instructed to burn the manuscript by his spirit in order to protect his reputation.

Burton died of a heart attack in Trieste but his body was brought back to England to be buried. He and Isobel are buried in a tomb in the shape of a Bedouin tent in Mortlake in London.

Burton has appeared in numerous novels, as himself or as characters based on himself. He appeared as Mr Murthwaite in Wilkie Collins’s detective novel *The Moonstone* and is mentioned in Arthur Conan Doyle’s novel *The Lost World*.

William Byrd
(1543-1623)

Byrd was England's first great composer and a fine professional musician. He was almost certainly born in Lincoln or thereabouts and was appointed organist of Lincoln Cathedral at the age of 20.

Nine years later he was made joint organist of the Chapel Royal, sharing the position with Thomas Tallis. In 1575, Elizabeth I gave the two men, Byrd and Tallis, the exclusive licence for printing and selling music in England.

Byrd was a staunch Catholic and throughout his life he was repeatedly arrested and prosecuted for this, but the quality of his music, and the fact that he wrote equally beautiful music for his own church and for the newly established Church of England, meant that he remained in favour with the Queen.

He wrote music of great power and beauty and was (and still is) regarded as the greatest composer of sacred choral music. He is also remembered today for his songs and his keyboard music. He wrote three masses, over 200 short pieces of sacred choral music in Latin (known as motets), four Anglican services and 60 anthems. He also wrote four madrigals (part songs for small choirs, usually designed to be sung unaccompanied and arranged in elaborate counterpoint) and composed around 100 virginal pieces (music for an early spinet; an instrument which had strings parallel to the keyboard and which was popular in homes in the 16th and 17th century).

George Gordon Noel Byron
(1788-1824)

Famously described by one of his many mistresses as ‘mad, bad and dangerous to know’, Lord Byron was a poet and philanderer and is remembered as much for his life as for his work. He was a leading poet of the 19th century English Romantic movement and his poetry has been expertly described as irreverent, ironic, impudent, highspirited, satirical, elegant, contemptuous, humorous, burlesque, unconventional, generous, humane and reckless. The same adjectives apply, equally accurately, to his life.

Born with a deformed right foot which made him the butt of school-boy jokes, his mother had mood swings which made him distrust women in later life. His father had died when he was just three years old, but not before managing to spend Byron’s mother’s entire, considerable fortune. A female servant didn’t help Byron’s attitude towards women. She took a succession of male lovers with the nine-year-old Byron as a spectator.

At the age of 10 the young Byron became the 6th Baron and with the title he inherited considerable estates. He attended Harrow School and discovered homosexuality. His mother began an affair with a 23-year-old rake, Lord Grey de Ruthyn who had also, and perhaps inevitably, made advances to the young Byron.

When he went to Cambridge in 1805, Byron patronised prostitutes with steadfast enthusiasm and fell in love with a choirboy called Edleston. When he put on weight he played cricket wearing six waistcoats so that he would sweat and lose some unwanted fat While at the university he published his first poems *(Hours of Idleness)* and took his first mistress, a girl called Caroline whom he dressed as, and passed off as, a boy. The reviews of his first book were poor and so in 1809 he published *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers,* a satirical poem attacking the major literary figures of the time. He then left London and started a tour of Greece, Albania, Turkey and Spain with a friend called Hobhouse who was writing a book called *Sodomy Simplified* (which, perhaps not surprisingly, never found a publisher). When Hobhouse abandoned him in Greece, Byron acquired a 15-year-old Greek boy called Nicolo and spent a good deal of money on prostitutes. He returned to England in 1812 and John Murray published *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage.*

The poem, inspired by his journey, describes the exploits of a world-weary young lord who tries everything so young in life that he finds his later years boring. Byron became an overnight celebrity. It was as though he had won a television talent show and scored a hat trick for England on the same night.

Young men imitated Byron’s brooding manner and his limp. Young women, attracted by his passion and his pleas for liberty and justice, threw themselves at him (quite possibly literally). Byron’s new lovers included Lady Caroline Lamb and her mother-in-law Lady Melbourne. When he returned to Cambridge, Byron began an incestuous affair with his half-sister Augusta. He was seduced by a promiscuous woman called Lady Oxford.

Byron and his half-sister Augusta then moved to Newstead Abbey where she became pregnant. To silence the gossips Byron, by now aged 26, married Lady Melbourne’s niece, a prim heiress called Annabelle. The marriage wasn’t much of a success, possibly because Byron continued to ‘flirt’ with his half-sister and possibly because he was nearly always drunk. When his wife became pregnant he sodomised her late into her pregnancy. Exhausted by Byron’s demands, by quarrels and by giving birth, Annabelle went home. When her parents found out what had been going on they would not let her return to the wicked lord. Suddenly the great poet was unfashionable and unwanted. Byron quit England in 1816. Having sold Newstead Abbey for the then fabulous sum of £94,500 he rented a palazzo in Venice where he initiated orgies which shocked even the previously unshockable Venetians. Byron’s home soon became pretty much a brothel. The man himself was now fat and balding though still in his early thirties. While in Italy he wrote *Don Juan,* a long, witty poem about a handsome young man’s adventures with women. A tempestuous affair with a married woman caused some problems and Byron left Italy in rather a rush. He became an enthusiastic supporter of Italian and Greek freedom fighters and joined a secret Italian nationalist society.

He was a freedom fighter in Greece, leading troops against the Turks, when he caught a fever and, in proper poetic fashion, died young at the age of 36. It was a short but a full life. His family requested that he be buried in Westminster Abbey. Perhaps not entirely surprisingly, the request was refused.

Edith Cavell
(1865-1915)

How many of the thousands of people who walk past Edith Cavell's statue in St Martin's Place, London, know who this woman was or what she did to deserve her monument? It's a tragedy that she should be just another largely forgotten hero; just another one of London's many statues.

The truth is that Edith Cavell was an extraordinarily courageous, patriotic woman. Well aware that the penalty for being caught was death, she helped around 200 Allied soldiers to escape from German-occupied Belgium during World War I. She was executed for this.

The daughter of a Norfolk vicar and the eldest of four children, Edith Louisa Cavell was born in 1865 in a village called Swardeston. She received her early education at home from her father, Frederick Cavell. Her upbringing was reputed to have been rather stern and certainly doesn't sound to have been a lot of fun; with the exception of *The Bible,* no books were allowed inside the house.

During her teenage years, Edith attended Laurel Court school, Peterborough, where she was taught French. It was soon discovered that Edith had a talent for the language. Edith's French was so good, in fact, that she was recommended for a governess post in Brussels in 1890. She worked there for five years before returning home to nurse her seriously ill father. It was nursing her sick father that helped Edith realise that she wanted to follow a career in nursing, and when she was 30 she began her formal training at the London Hospital. While there, and still a student nurse, Edith Cavell found herself looking after typhoid fever victims. She received the Maidstone Medal for her work. Following her training at the London Hospital, Edith Cavell worked at St Pancras Infirmary for a while and later worked as an Assistant Matron at Shoreditch Infirmary, where she pioneered the idea of visiting patients at home after they had been discharged from hospital. Edith believed that this would help reduce the number of re-admissions.

In 1907, because of her efficiency and the fact that she could speak French, Edith was recruited as head of nursing staff for a pioneer training school for nurses in Belgium. Edith became a very influential pioneer of modern nursing in Belgium. She was soon providing top-quality nurses for hospitals and schools.

Edith happened to be visiting her mother in England when the Great War started. She immediately insisted on going back to her clinic in Brussels, which was now being used as a Red Cross hospital.

Once back in Brussels, Edith helped nurse wounded soldiers. She hid a couple of fugitive British soldiers, and subsequently helped them to escape from German-occupied Belgium to neutral Holland. But Edith didn't stop there, with an underground organisation she managed to help many Allied soldiers escape to safety; saving the lives of around 200 soldiers.

In August 1915, Edith Cavell was arrested. The German occupation authorities had suspected for some time that she was hiding soldiers in her hospital. At her trial, Edith confessed to harbouring and aiding Allied soldiers and was sentenced to death by firing squad.

On the early morning of 12 October 1915, Edith Louisa Cavell, wearing her nurse's uniform, was taken out and shot dead. Her body was buried nearby. Her last words were reported to be: 'Standing as I do in the view of God and Eternity, I realise that patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone.'

Just what sort of men could pull the trigger to shoot a nurse who had been accused only of saving lives isn't known.

There was, quite rightly, a worldwide outcry following her execution; the press coverage was phenomenal. Edith was seen as a martyr as well as a heroine. The Government used the media coverage of her death as a propaganda tool in order to enlist British men for the War. (There was no conscription at that time.) The following year, Edith's body was exhumed and returned to England. Her coffin was taken to Westminster Abbey for a spectacular memorial service; one of the people who attended was King George V. Edith Cavell's body was subsequently taken to her home county of Norfolk to be buried outside Norwich Cathedral.

Robert Cawdrey
(1538-1604)

Robert Cawdrey was a schoolteacher who became country priest in Rutland more than 400 years ago. In 1565, he was ordained a deacon and in 1571 he was made rector of South Luffenham. However, Cawdrey's enthusiasm for the principles of Puritanism got him into considerable trouble. In 1576, he was in trouble for not reading the approved texts in his church and in 1578 he performed a marriage ceremony, despite the fact that he was not authorised to do so by the church. He was suspended for this for a while. In 1587, he was in trouble again. He was taken to the Court of High Commission where he stood trial for 10 weeks for objecting to the Episcopal hierarchy. When he was deprived of his living and suspended, Cawdrey took the church to court and challenged the authority of the ecclesiastical commissioners and the legal right of the Queen to empower them. In the end, the judges decided that 'by the ancient laws of this realm, the kingdom of England is an absolute empire and monarchy'. The judges also upheld the divine right of the Crown. A few years later Charles I would rely on this ruling and lose his head as a result. Cawdrey, with a family to feed, had to go back to teaching to make a living.

Many new words were appearing in the English language towards the end of the 16th century and Cawdrey decided that there was a need (and, perhaps, a market) for an instructional textbook to help ease the confusion. His main concern was that the upper classes were using too many foreign words and phrases and were forgetting many of the available English words. '(Far journied gentlemen learn new words while in foreign lands, and then powder their talke with over-sea language,' he complained.)

It was Cawdrey and not Dr Samuel Johnson who compiled the first English dictionary. Cawdrey's was called *A Table Alphabeticall,* and appeared in 1604. (Dr Samuel Johnson's dictionary first appeared in 1755).

Cawdrey's *Table,* listing 2,500 words was, he explained, designed to 'contayne' and teach the 'true writing and understanding of hard...English words borrowed from the Hebrew, Greeke, Latine or French'. Cawdrey's book was sold at the publisher's shop at the great north door of 'Paules Church'.

Cawdrey stated that his book was designed 'for the benefit and helpe of Ladies, Gendewomen, or any other unskilful persons'. Cawdrey had time to write his dictionary (and probably needed the royalties) because he was thrown out of the church and so we should, perhaps, be grateful to the authorities for their actions.

Cawdrie wrote several other books. While he was a rector he wrote *A Short and Fruitifull Treatise of the Profit of Catechising* and during his final schoolteacher phase he published *A Treasurie or Store-House of Similes.*

William Caxton

(1422-1491)

William Caxton didn't invent printing from moveable type (that was a German called Joseph Gutenberg who designed an entire manufacturing process which enabled him to produce a completed printed edition of *The Bible* in Latin 1456) but he can reasonably be credited with having invented publishing as we know it today.

Caxton, who was born in Kent, was a cloth merchant who travelled around Europe on business. It was on one of his trips that he heard of a new process of printing from moveable type. The invention meant that books no longer had to be copied out by hand but could be printed time and time again from the same blocks of type.

Caxton immediately saw the commercial possibility of this invention and in 1474 he set up a press in Bruges where he printed *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troyes,* the first book in the English language. (It was a long poem which he had himself translated from the original French.) One of his next publications was *The Game and Playe of the Chesse.*

Two years afterwards he returned to London and opened a print shop near Westminster Abbey in London. The first book he published, and the first book printed in England, was *The Dictes or Sayengis of the Philosophres,* which was printed in 1477.

By the time he died, just fifteen years later, Caxton had published around 100 printed books, including an edition of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales,* Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* and Gower's *Confessio Amantics.*

Gutenberg, the man who invented modern printing and from whose ideas are derived many of the inventions and developments which have so influenced our lives, was a poor businessman. Although his invention changed the world he failed to take much advantage of it. He never managed to make money out of printing and he lost his printing equipment to a partner as a result of a lawsuit. He was first and foremost a printer, rather than a publisher.

Caxton's great achievement was to spot the significance of Gutenberg's invention and to be the first publisher. He used eight founts of type and began to use woodcut illustrations in 1480. As well as being a printer and publisher, Caxton was also the author or translator of many of the books he produced, and his work contributed enormously to the development of the English prose style.

The twin processes of printing and publishing, as first practised by Caxton, changed the world. During the next century, publishers in England and elsewhere around Europe produced a vast number of books. And those books truly changed the world in every conceivable way. Caxton started that revolution.

The mechanical invention of the printing press was, at first, little more than a novelty. It was Caxton (and those who came after him) who realised that the printing press was going to liberate thinkers and writers everywhere.

It took some time for the craft of printing to develop but, as printers learned their skills, so it became possible to use those skills, and the arts they acquired, to help spread the new ideas, the inventions, the discoveries which were springing up throughout Europe during the Renaissance.

Publishers like Caxton, and those who came after him, enabled inventors, adventurers, authors and artists to spread their work to a far wider audience than had been possible before the printing press was invented. Printing presses helped spread genius far and wide, and far more speedily than would have been possible if the only books available had been those laboriously written out by hand by patient monks.

Caxton, the first publisher, was at the forefront of the Renaissance.

His speciality was (in the jargon of the 20th century media guru Marshall McLuhan) the medium, rather than the message, but nevertheless he truly helped change the world. The printing press was to the 16th century what the invention of the steam locomotive was to the 19th century. But the steam locomotive would not have made much of an impact without railway lines and railway stations. And the printing press would not have changed our lives without publishers and authors.

George Cayley

(1773-1857)

He was born in Brompton-by-Sawdon, near Scarborough in Yorkshire and he died in Yorkshire. He was thoroughly English. And he was the founder of the science of aerodynamics, the pioneer of aerial navigation and the designer of the first modern aeroplane. He was the first person to understand the principles of flight and worked over half a century before people now often credited with inventing the aeroplane. (The Wright Brothers, often described by American writers as the first men to fly, did not get into the air with a heavier-than-air machine until 1903 – nearly half a century after Cayley's death).

Cayley started developing his ideas about the theory of flight and his plans for an aeroplane when he was still at school. In 1799, he invented the concept of the modern aeroplane as a fixed wing flying machine with separate systems for propulsion, lift and control.

In 1804 he built the first model glider, which had a pair of large monoplane wings near the front and a small tailplane at the rear. The tailplane consisted of a vertical fin and horizontal stabilisers. In other words his aeroplane design in 1804 was pretty much the design we are accustomed to

Five years later, in 1809, he published ground-breaking aerodynamic research in his treatise *On Aerial Navigation* which was published in the *Journal of Natural Philosophy, Chemistry and the Arts.* He studied wing design, designing cambered wings and studied streamlining and stability in the air. He also investigated the aerodynamic forces of drag, lift and thrust. Sometime in the 1840's he designed and built a triplane powered with flappers. An unknown ten-year-old boy, chosen for his light weight, flew this aeroplane.

In 1853, Cayley constructed the world's first full-size flying machine, a glider, which was flown across Brompton Dale. It had a wing area of 300 square feet and was the world's first 'heavier-thanair' machine to fly. There is some confusion about the identity of the pilot, though it is generally believed that the first aviator was either Cayley's coachman, footman or butler, though it may have been his grandson who made the first flight. The flight, the first ever made, was described in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* of 1855.

On the death of his father, Cayley inherited Brompton Hall and the associated estates, and the title of 6th baronet. He was a remarkable engineer and inventor and although he is now remembered as the inventor of the aeroplane and manned flight he did much, much more. He also invented the caterpillar tractor (the first example of which he built in 1825, calling it the 'Universal Railway'), invented a new type of telescope, developed artificial limbs, created the first tension wheel, helped to found the Regent Street Polytechnic in London, and was involved in railway engineering, land reclamation methods and allotment agriculture. He developed self-righting lifeboats, automatic signals for railway crossing, helicopters, a type of internal combustion engine fuelled by gunpowder, and seat belts. He worked on air engines, ballistics and theatre architecture. He was also an MP from 1832 to 1835. This extraordinary Englishman, now too often ignored by historians, died at the age of 83.

Edwin Chadwick
(1800-1890)

A civil servant, lawyer and journalist, Chadwick was also a dedicated reformer whose work led to massive improvements in sanitation around the world - including America and the rest of Europe. His publications include *A Report of an Inquiry into the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain,* which he published in 1842 at his own expense. He was the first president of the Association of Public Sanitary Inspectors (later transformed into the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health).

Dismayed by the number of people killed by the cholera epidemic of 1831, Chadwick, who had been invited by the Government to help with Poor Law Reform, argued that proper sanitation facilities would improve the quality of life for ordinary people and would also be of massive value in economic terms. This deliberate mixing of health improvement and financial motive had been attempted (sadly, with little success) by the great economist Sir William Petty in the 17th century but Chadwick succeeded where Petty had failed.

The changing political climate in the early part of the 19th century meant that England was ready for change. Since working people were earning more, and becoming better educated, the politicians were under more pressure to do something about the foul conditions in which town dwellers usually lived.

Chadwick prepared maps showing where the worst death rates were in English cities. His figures showed that (including infant mortality) the average age at death was 43 for gentlemen, 30 for tradesmen and 22 for labourers crowded together in unsanitary conditions. These figures were, of course, kept desperately low by the high incidence of death among babies and children.

On the basis of these statistics, Chadwick concluded that disease was spread by overcrowding, poor water supplies, bad drainage and dirty towns. Richer people tended to live longer because they were protected from the problems inherent in the crowded parts of towns and cities.

Chadwick's 1842 report suggested that a circulatory system be used in towns and cities to supply clean water and to remove waste products. Most importantly, he showed that the authorities would actually save money by building proper facilities.

Chadwick filled his report with vital technical information, designed to make things easy for the politicians. He obtained evidence showing that although water supplied at high pressure tended to burst the traditional bored elm trunks, it did not damage iron pipes and he also showed that narrow-bore drains which had smooth inside walls would clean themselves when water closets were used.

Chadwick recommended building pumps to supply fresh water and sewer pipes to take away the wastes. He even suggested that sewage be processed and sold to farms as a valuable fertiliser.

Chadwick's recommendations were incorporated into a Public Health Act in 1848 and although not all his ideas were used (it was cheaper to import guano from Chile as a fertiliser than to use treated human sewage) there is no doubt that Chadwick made a massive contribution to the quality of life in England and the rest of the world. Almost alone, Chadwick provided the stimulus which eventually gave towns and cities everywhere clean streets, clean water supplies and efficient sewers.

Charles Spencer ‘Charlie’ Chaplin
(1889-1977)

Since the cinema was invented by an Englishman (Eadweard Muybridge) it is appropriate that the world’s first major screen star should also be an Englishman: Charles Chaplin.

Chaplin, who was born in Walworth, London, started appearing on the stage and in music halls from the age of five. His father was a singer and his mother was a singer and actress. They separated before he was three. Charlie then lived with his mother, staying with his alcoholic father only when his mother was in a mental asylum.

Chaplin’s first stage appearance took place after his mother was badly injured by objects thrown at her when she was appearing at a music hall theatre. While his mother was crying offstage, Charles went on stage to quiet the crowd by singing a popular tune of the day.

He then joined Fred Karno’s travelling circus (Arthur Stanley Jefferson, better known as Stan Laurel of Laurel Hardy fame was another member of the circus; he and Chaplin shared a room together) and, since it was a travelling circus, Chaplin travelled to America; first in 1910 and then in 1912.

By 1914, the young Chaplin had joined Mack Sennett’s studios, which specialised in slapstick comedy, and that same year Chaplin created the character of the Tramp: the slight man in the baggy trousers and tight jacket, large shoes, small Derby hat and carrying a walking cane; the underdog who is pushed around by everyone but who always manages to survive; the little man who triumphs without ever quite succeeding. Officials, bumbling and cruel, are always made comical in Chaplin’s films (which are more subversive than they appear to be).

The clothes Chaplin used for his character the Tramp were all borrowed. (The trousers came from Fatty Arbuckle.) The moustache was added to give the young Chaplin age without hiding his expression. The contradictions in the clothing (tight jacket and baggy trousers) were all deliberate. Chaplin’s genius was to create a character who could make people laugh but also touch their hearts and who could, moreover, appear in an almost endless number of situations. The character, a gentleman vagabond, faced endless failure but remained ever hopeful; he was constantly falling in love but forever being disappointed.

The movies starring the Tramp were all silent movies and Chaplin was indisputably the most creative and influential personality of the silent movie era. He entertained millions throughout the First World War and it is doubtful if any individual has ever given more entertainment, pleasure and relief to so many human beings when they needed it most. (Chaplin was criticised for not joining the army during World War I but he had in fact tried to join up. He had been turned down as being too small and underweight. In addition to helping cheer up the world, Chaplin raised vast amounts of money through public speaking in aid of war-bond drives.)

George Bernard Shaw, the playwright, described Chaplin as ‘the only genius to come out of the movie industry’. Chaplin’s films were so successful that he was paid huge sums of money and given total creative control.

When the movie studios started making films with sound, Chaplin, unlike many of his contemporaries, survived and thrived, though he refused to make sound movies with the Tramp character. The movie Modern Times, released in 1936 is often described as the last ‘silent era’ film. Chaplin, as the Tramp, sings a gibberish song right at the end of the film as he disappears down an endless road, heading for the horizon.

Chaplin became an increasingly versatile and gifted screenwriter, actor and director. He produced his own movies and even wrote his own soundtrack music. (He wrote the original score for his film Limelight and it won an Oscar.) In 1919, together with D.W.Griffith, Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford, Chaplin co-founded the film studio United Artists.

Charlie Chaplin continued performing almost until his death at the age of 88. In the early 1950’s the American witchhunt for ‘left’ leaning talent in Hollywood resulted in him moving back to Europe, but Chaplin received three Oscars in his lifetime, though he had famously annoyed the Academy by using his first Oscar as a doorstop. When he was given a special Oscar in 1972 he received the longest standing ovation in Academy Award history – lasting five minutes.

There have, of course, been many cinema stars since Chaplin. But Chaplin was the first truly great international star and he set the pattern for successful actors for generations to come. He made many films (such as *City Lights, Modern Times* and *The Great Dictator*) which regularly appear on lists of the greatest films of all time.

Charlie Chaplin was knighted in 1975. His character, the Tramp, is still probably the most imitated created character in the world. Chaplin himself once entered a Chaplin-look-alike competition. He came third.

Unlike many lesser stars Chaplin always tried to keep his private life discreet and out of the public eye. He was not always successful. Over his long life he was involved with a good many women – often teenagers. At least one of his divorces led to a record-breaking financial settlement. He had eleven children by three different women and married his last wife, Oona O’Neill, in 1943 when he was 54 years old. She was 18. They had eight children, the last being born when Chaplin was 73.

Chaplin set the bar for screen stars. It is doubtful whether a single entertainer will ever again reach such heights, enjoy such success and have such complete control over his work, in what has become an increasingly collaborative industry.

Geoffrey Chaucer

(approx. 1345-1400)

The son of a London wine merchant, Geoffrey Chaucer was extremely well-connected and lived as full a life as a man can live if he's not Lord Byron. In 1357, he was employed by the future Duke of Clarence and in 1357 he was in at the start of the Hundred Years War, though, not surprisingly, he didn't live to see the end of it. As a young man he served in the army alongside Edward III when the king invaded Flanders to assert his claim to the French crown. Chaucer was taken prisoner but ransomed. When he returned to England he married Philippa, the sister of John of Gaunt's third wife, and never looked back professionally; subsequently being given various positions at court.

He went on a mission for the King to Genoa and Florence in 1372-3 and was an early secret service agent in Flanders in 1376 and 1377. In 1378, he was attached to embassies in France and Lombardy, possibly again as a spy, and he appears to have roved Europe as a royal ambassador. During his travels he met Alighieri Dante, and Giovanni Boccaccio, the Italian poets.

In 1374, he was appointed controller of customs in the port of London and in 1386 he was made knight for Kent. He was clerk of the King's work at various places, including Westminster Abbey, and was obviously popular with royalty because he received pensions from Edward III, John of Gaunt, Richard II and Henry IV. Chaucer wrote much throughout his life. Most of his work was written to be read out loud at court and in the homes of rich noblemen. He was an early celebrity.

He is remembered today for *The Canterbury Tales*. He started work on this epic work in 1387, when he was in his 40's, though the stories weren't available in a printed version until William Caxton printed them in around 1478.

The Canterbury Tales is a collection of stories supposedly told among a band of merry pilgrims who are entertaining themselves as they make their way to the shrine of Thomas a Becket in Canterbury.

In the prologue, Chaucer describes the character of pilgrims such as the Wife of Bath, the Pardoner, the Knight and so on. He planned 120 separate tales but had finished only 22 (and started two more) when he died.

The stories (difficult to read in the original Olde Englishe) vary enormously in style and content-according to which of the pilgrims is telling them. Some of the stories are serious, religious and filled with philosophical thoughts. Some are romantic. And some are comic, rude and, on occasion, downright dirty. Some are gloomy, some are uplifting and some are merely entertaining.

The Canterbury Tales marked the beginning of English literature.

Winston Churchill

(1874-1965)

English politician and author, Sir Winston Churchill, was born two months premature on 30 November 1874 at Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire. He was the elder of two sons. His full name was Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill.

Winston Churchill's father (the third son of the 71h Duke of Marlborough) was Lord Randolph Churchill. At the age of 37, he was leader of the House of Commons and Chancellor of the Exchequer. Churchill's mother was the beautiful Jennie Jerome, the daughter of a rich American speculator. Churchill's ancestor, the first Duke of Marlborough, was Queen Anne's Captain General. Queen Anne had created him the first Duke of Marlborough in recognition for his military victories. In gratitude, Queen Anne also rewarded the Duke with the Royal Manor of Woodstock, and funded the building of Blenheim Palace (which was named after the Duke's victorious battle). The Duke of Marlborough was considered to be one of England's greatest generals.

Churchill experienced a lonely childhood and would often write begging letters to his parents asking them to visit him during his stay at boarding school. Most of the time, his pitiful requests went ignored.

Although he admired and respected him enormously, Churchill did not enjoy a close relationship with his father. Churchill's early memories of his mother were of a 'fairy princess'. Churchill wrote: 'I loved her dearly – but at a distance.' Instead, the young Churchill was closest to his nanny and friend, Mrs Everest, to whom he was devoted. After Mrs Everest's death in 1895 Churchill described her as the 'dearest and most intimate friend during the whole of the 20 years I had lived'.

The red-haired Churchill was described as a somewhat troublesome child; he was bumptious, wilful, restless and mischievous – personality traits which never left him.

At thirteen, Churchill attended public school at Harrow, and did not do as badly there as he later led many to believe. It is true that he was considered a dunce in some of his subjects, more notably Latin, but in truth he was only poor in the subjects that he did not care for. Winston was brilliant at subjects that interested him, especially English and History.

Churchill's father, disappointed and concerned at his son's relative lack of scholarly success, wondered what route his boy's life should take. One day, whilst watching his son at play with his toy soldiers, the idea of a military career for the young Churchill was born. This was good news for Churchill because it was a dream that he had coveted since he was a small boy. Churchill sat his Army preliminary examination at Harrow. The examination involved drawing a map. The evening before the examination, he wrote names of countries on pieces of paper and put them into a hat. He then picked out one to study. The country he blindly chose was New Zealand. In the examination paper the following day, he was asked to draw a map of New Zealand. This was an example of the luck that was to follow him throughout his life.

Two popular misconceptions about Churchill are that he was dyslexic and that he suffered from a stutter. Churchill was not dyslexic and he did not have a stutter, though he did have a slight lisp. However, his speech impediment did not deter him from becoming one of the greatest orators the world has ever seen.

In 1893, Churchill left school and attended the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst. He graduated from Sandhurst in 1895, having done extremely well, and joined the Fourth Hussars. Nevertheless, the year 1895 was a tragic one for Churchill. It was the year his father died from a brain tumour at the age of 46 and the year his beloved friend Mrs Everest passed away.

Impatient with peacetime soldiering and desperate for action, the young Churchill, while on leave, travelled to Cuba, where the fighting between the indigenous rebels and the Spanish Government was reaching a conclusive phase. Before he left for Cuba, Churchill arranged a contract with the *Daily Graphic* to write articles about his experiences over there. This was the start of his career in journalism. He was paid £5 for each article. When he left Cuba Churchill was awarded the Spanish Military Medal (1st Class).

In 1896, Churchill was stationed with the Fourth Hussars in Bangalore, India and, the following year, when he had three months' leave, he got himself a job as a war correspondent (for the *Daily Telegraph* and the Indian newspaper, *Allahabad Pioneer*) in the north-west frontier of India where General Sir Bindon Blood was in command of an expedition to quell the tribal uprising in the Malakand Pass. Initially, Churchill wanted General Blood to appoint him as staff but there were no vacancies.

Churchill's experiences in north-west India inspired him to write his first book, *The Malakand Field Force.* Winston Churchill went on to become an eminent and prolific author, writing over 40 books. In 1953, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. He started his writing career for financial reasons, and continued writing for financial reasons throughout his life.

During his time on leave, while still officially stationed in India, Churchill heard about a pending war to clean up the Sudan. Churchill tried to persuade Lord Kitchener to assign him to his army, but for various reasons Lord Kitchener refused. Never a man to give in, the young Churchill enlisted the support of the Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, and successfully persuaded the Adjutant General to give him a post in the 21st Lancers. Before setting off for the Sudan, Churchill also managed to get a contract as war correspondent for the *Morning Post.* It was on the field of Omdurman on 2 September 1898, that the last classic cavalry charge in the history of British warfare was fought.

The war to liberate the Sudan from the Dervishes was successful despite the fact that a quarter of Kitchener's men were killed or wounded. Churchill wrote about the history of the campaign in his next book, *The River War.* In this book, Churchill criticised General Lord Kitchener's policies. The War Office responded by introducing a law restraining the literary freedom of serving soldiers in the British Army. It's a law that still exists. Winston Churchill was one of the very few modern political leaders to have real personal experience of war. He knew what it was like to be shot at and what it was like to be a prisoner of war.

In 1899, Churchill gave up his military career and decided to go into politics. Churchill always believed that he was destined for great things, and told a fellow officer while in Bangalore that he would one day be Prime Minister. His political career did not start well. He failed to win his first political contest – the by-election at Oldham. So when the *Morning Post*, impressed by his journalistic work during the Sudan, asked him to be chief war correspondent to report on the war with the Boers which was about to break out in South Africa, Churchill jumped at the chance.

While in South Africa, he was travelling on a British army armoured train when it was ambushed and partly derailed by the Boers. Unfazed by the bullets firing all around him, Churchill gallantly took charge of the situation and managed to direct the engine (fortunately, the engine was still on the line, it was the three trucks in front of the engine that were derailed) to safety, having first loaded the train with wounded men.

When Churchill returned on foot to help the remaining men, he was captured and taken to a prisoner of war camp in Pretoria. Churchill's courage in rescuing the armoured train was undoubtedly aided by his feeling of invulnerability. He felt that he was being preserved for a higher purpose. His thoughts on this are reflected when he wrote to his mother and said: 'Bullets are not worth considering. Besides I am so conceited I do not think the gods would create so potent a being for so prosaic an ending'.

A little less than a month later, Churchill managed to escape from the camp by climbing the enclosure. He travelled just under 300 miles to safety. When his escape was discovered, a 'Dead or Alive' price was put on Churchill's head with a £25 reward. Churchill's escapades made him a hero for a while in Britain.

After his escape from Pretoria, Churchill did not return to London but, instead, he went to Durban to rejoin the army commanded by General Sir Redvers Buller. At Durban, Churchill received a hero's welcome. General Buller wanted to enrol Churchill into the forces, but Winston didn't want to lose his job with the *Morning Post* so instead he accepted an offer of a commission in The South African Light Horse. This meant that he could be a soldier and continue as war correspondent for the *Morning Post*, for which he was the highest paid journalist of the day. Churchill was present at the battle of Spion Kop (where he intervened and took over the role of commanding officer) and was among the first to arrive in Ladysmith and Pretoria, before resigning his commission and returning to Britain in July 1900. He was just 24 years old.

In 1900, Churchill again stood as a Conservative Party candidate for Oldham during the general election. This time, he was successful. His victory was no doubt helped by his fame as a military hero.

As a politician Churchill quickly proved himself to be a champion of the underdog. He spoke out about poverty in Britain and on the 31 May 1904, dissatisfied with the policies of the Conservatives (especially their proposed protective tariffs on foreign trade which he was against) and believing that the policies of the Liberals were more like his own he caused quite a stir when he crossed the floor of the House of Commons to join the Liberals.

In 1905, Churchill was appointed Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies when the Liberals came into power, with Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman as Prime Minister. Churchill was appointed President of the Board of Trade when Liberal leader, Campbell Bannerman was succeeded by Herbert Henry Asquith in 1908. As President of the Board of Trade, Churchill helped introduce legislation which transformed society. He set up Labour exchanges and established minimum wages for several hundred thousand workers. He also proposed unemployment insurance.

On 12 September 1908, Winston Churchill married Clementine Hozier, whom he had met at a dinner party six months previous. They had five children together: one son and four daughters. They named their son, Randolph, after Sir Winston's father. In contrast to his father, Churchill was an affectionate and attentive father to all of his children.

In 1910, Churchill was promoted to Home Secretary, becoming the youngest Home Secretary since Robert Peel. One of his first actions was to introduce the Coal Mines Bill, which made it illegal for children under 14 to work underground. During his time as Home Secretary, Churchill caused much criticism when he famously took charge of the Sidney Street siege in London's East End, and forced the criminals to surrender or burn by denying the fire brigade access when the house they were in caught fire.

After a year as Home Secretary, Churchill became the political head of the navy: First Lord of the Admiralty, where he helped to strengthen the British fleet in order to deter Germany's aggression. One of the many things he did was introduce aircraft into the Royal Navy.

During the First World War in 1915, Churchill unfairly received the lion's share of the blame for the ill-fated Gallipoli landings on the Dardenelles. Many felt that he lacked judgement. As a result, he was demoted to the post of Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. The Conservatives had refused to form a coalition government with the Liberals unless Churchill was demoted.

Soon after, Churchill resigned from the Government (although he remained an MP) and rejoined the army. He served in the trenches on the Western Front for several months, first with the Grenadier Guards and then as Commanding Officer of the 6'h Battalion Royal Scots Fusiliers.

In 1916, Prime Minister Asquith resigned from the coalition Government and was replaced by the English-born professional Welshman, David Lloyd George. In 1917, Lloyd George appointed Churchill his Minister of Munitions and in 1919 Churchill was made Secretary of State for War. Two years later, in 1921, Churchill set up a conference in Cairo to settle Mesopotamia's future.

Lloyd George resigned as Prime Minister in 1922, and the Conservatives withdrew from the coalition government. The Conservatives returned to power in the 1922 general election after an interval of 17 years. Churchill, recovering from an appendicectomy, found that he was without a parliamentary seat. He responded by saying he was, 'without an office, without a seat, without a party and without an appendix'.

In the first month of 1924, the Conservatives were defeated in Parliament, and Ramsay MacDonald became the first Labour Party Prime Minister of Britain. In the same year, the Conservatives offered Churchill the safe seat of Epping – a constituency that he represented for 40 years. In October, the Conservatives won the General Election and Stanley Baldwin appointed Churchill as Chancellor of the Exchequer, a position that his father had held almost 40 years earlier. As Chancellor of the Exchequer one of the many things Churchill did was introduce pensions for everyone at 65. He also reduced income tax for the lowest income groups.

In 1929, the Conservatives were defeated in the General Election, and Labour came back into power with Ramsay MacDonald as Prime Minister. Churchill was relegated to the back benches. During the next few years, which he described as his 'wilderness years', Churchill concentrated on his writing, after having resigned from the Shadow Cabinet because of his strong stance against Indian Home Rule. During his time out of office, Churchill called on Britain to strengthen itself against Germany as he saw the rise of Adolf Hitler as a threat. His warnings were ignored.

In September 1939, on the day the Second World War started, the Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain appointed Churchill First Lord of the Admiralty and in May 1940, when Chamberlain resigned after having been blamed for a number of defeats during the beginning of the war, Churchill was made Prime Minister. He was 65 years old. In his first speech as Prime Minister of the coalition government Churchill famously said: 'I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat'.

Churchill's impassioned famous speeches were a great inspiration to many during the war and helped to raise the nation's morale.

On the 8 May 1945, Churchill brought Britain to victory against Germany. Despite Churchill's leadership during World War II, he was heavily defeated in the 1945 election by Clement Attlee and the Labour Party.

Churchill, now 76, returned as Prime Minister of the Conservative Party after Labour's defeat in the 1951 General Election. In 1953, Churchill was made Knight of the Garter.

Churchill stepped down as Prime Minister on 5 April1955, but he continued as a member of parliament until six months before his death.

Sir Winston Churchill, the famous Havana cigar-smoking British statesman and author, died on 24January 1965. He was given a state funeral and was buried in St Martin's Churchyard, Bladon. When Churchill's coffin passed down the Thames, the cranes of London's docklands bowed in salute.

Churchill had two famous hobbies. First, he painted. And he did it very successfully. He exhibited and sold his works at public exhibitions in Britain and France under the pseudonym of 'Charles Morin'. Churchill saw several of his works exhibited in the Royal Academy under the name of 'Charles Winter', and, later, had several more in the Royal Academy under his own name. Second, he was also an accomplished bricklayer. He took it up as a hobby during his time as Chancellor of the Exchequer. Churchill even built some of the buildings on his estate at Chartwell.

Americans often say, with that scandalous disregard for history that typifies the American view of the world, that without America we would all be speaking German. The truth is that without Churchill we would all be speaking German. He saved England, Scotland, Wales, America and the rest of the world.

Churchill was archetypically English and although he had his faults (arrogance and vanity to name but two) it was his good fortune (and ours) that he was able to turn his faults into virtues and to use his self-confidence to enhance his qualities as a leader. He was a lucky leader and a lucky man; a born survivor.

Not many people change the course of history single-handedly. Churchill did. Churchill, the ultimate egoist and self-publicist changed history. If it hadn't been for World War II he would be no more than a political blip. But if it hadn't been for Churchill, Hitler would have won World War II.

I don't think Churchill was a great statesman or a great politician. He was too opinionated, too pugnacious and too obviously selfcentred (other politicians are equally driven by self-interest but they hide it more effectively). But he was a great warrior, the greatest war time leader any country has ever produced and, quite possibly, the greatest orator. That's quite enough for one man.

William Cobbett
(1763-1835)

Author, journalist, publisher, campaigner, social historian, politician and rebel – it's difficult to sum up William Cobbett who was, without a doubt, one of the most determined, bloody-minded and brave Englishmen who ever lived. He wrote what he believed and didn't give a hang for the consequences. He believed that England had a personality and that it needed and deserved a genuine 'England' policy. He believed it was important to preserve the personal peculiar characteristics of England and to respect the special individual liberties enshrined in the nation's history and culture. He believed that a popularly elected Parliament, representing an informed democracy, would end the borough mongering and the sinecures which, in his day, still disgraced public life.

Naturally, Cobbett wasn't popular with the boys with the moats and the duck houses. He was imprisoned for defending freedom and the rights of ordinary working men.

William Hazlitt, a contemporary of Cobbett and probably the most famous of all English essayists, described him as 'a kind of fourth estate in the politics of the country' and said that he was 'not only unquestionably the most powerful political writer of the present day, but one of the best writers in the language. He speaks and thinks plain, broad, downright English'.

'His knowledge grows out of the subject,' wrote Hazlitt. 'And his style is that of a man who has an absolute intuition of what he is talking about, and never thinks of anything else.'

'His egotism is delightful, for there is no affectation in it. He does not talk of himself for lack of something to write about, but because some circumstance that has happened to himself is the best possible illustration of the subject; and he is not the man to shrink from giving the best possible illustration of the subject from a squeamish delicacy...He writes himself plain William Cobbett, strips himself quite as naked as anybody could wish: in a word, his egotism is full of individuality and has room for very little vanity in it. We feel delighted, rub our hands, and draw our chair to the fire, when we come to a passage of this sort: we know it will be something new and good, manly and simple, not the same insipid story of self over again. We sit down at table with the writer, but it is of a course of rich viands – flesh, fish and wild fowl – and not to a nominal entertainment, like that given by the Barmecide in the *Arabian Nights*, who put off his visitor with calling for a number of exquisite things that never appeared.'

'As a political partisan, no one can stand against him. With his brandished club, like Giant Despair in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, he knocks out their brains: and not only no individual, but no corrupt system, could hold out against his powerful and repeated attacks... wherever power is, there is he against it: he naturally butts at all obstacles, as unicorns are attracted to oak trees, and feels his own strength only by resistance to the opinions and wishes of the rest of the world.'

Cobbett was blisteringly honest, forever shrewd and wrote without fear or favour. He had a singular talent for arousing passion among his readers. It was, and could have only been, Cobbett who, protesting about the social costs and consequences of the Industrial Revolution, claimed that England was building her industrial dominance on the backs of thirty thousand little girls.

Writing in 1838, shortly after Cobbett's death, Thomas Carlyle, he historian, described him 'as the pattern John Bull of his century, strong as the rhinoceros, and with singular humanities and genialities shining through his thick skin'. He was, said Carlyle, 'a most brave phenomenon'.

Self educated, and born the son of a farmer and innkeeper, the young Cobbett left home without telling his parents and took a job at Kew Gardens. On the way to Kew he bought a copy of *Swift's Tale of a Tub* with his very last threepence. It was a book he always treasured.

On taking a day out from his new job to visit Portsmouth to see his uncle he fell in love with the sea and decided to join the navy. He bribed someone with sixpence and somehow managed to talk himself aboard a man-a-war where the captain persuaded him to return home.

After numerous adventures Cobbett found himself a job as a lawyer's clerk in London. He was 21 and hated it. 'No part of my life has been totally unattended with pleasure,' he wrote, 'except the eight or nine months I passed in Gray's Inn.' He complained that he had merely assisted in the foment and perpetuation of quarrels between John Doe and Richard Roe. Bored and despairing he went to Chatham and joined the marines. He taught himself grammar and became clerk to the garrison commandment. 'I learned grammar when I was a private soldier on the pay of sixpence a day,' he wrote. The edge of my berth, or that of my guard bed was my seat to study in; my knapsack was my bookcase; a bit of board lying on my lap was my writing table; and the task did not demand anything like a year of my life. I had no money to purchase candle or oil; in winter time it was rarely that I could get any evening light but that of the fire, and only my turn even of that. And If I, under such circumstances, and without parent or friend to advise or encourage me, accomplished this undertaking, what excuse can there be for any youth, however poor, however pressed with business, or however circumstanced as to room or other conveniences?'

In 1785, he travelled to Nova Scotia and New Brunswick with his regiment the 54th Foot, quickly rising through the ranks to become a sergeant major. He served as a soldier in Florida until 1791. (Florida had been a British possession from 1763 until 1783 and then returned to Spanish control. But the British continued to use Florida as a base.) In 1791, he returned to England, married, and blotted his copybook as a soldier by accusing officers from the 54th Foot of embezzlement. He quickly realised that the authorities were on the side of the officers and so he fled to France. From there he went to Philadelphia. He stayed in America for eight years, teaching English to French refugees and while there he wrote and published an English grammar for French students. He also wrote pamphlets denouncing the French Revolution.

It was while in America that Cobbett started publishing pro English pamphlets. In 1795, he started to use the pseudonym Peter Porcupine and issued *The Political Censor*, a report of proceedings in Congress together with a commentary. He also opened a bookseller's shop. When threatened with physical violence he wrote *Life and Adventures of Peter Porcupine* as a defence of his views. He published *Porcupine's Gazette* and *Daily Advertiser* to denounce the French and advocate an English Alliance.

He hadn't been living in America long before he once again got into trouble, this time for describing the American Government as: 'the most profligately dishonest that I have ever seen or heard described...the most corrupt and tyrannical that the world ever knew.' He was heavily fined for a libel on Benjamin Rush and so left America in dudgeon.

When he got back to London in 1800, Cobbett was offered the editorship of an official government paper. He refused and started his own newspaper *The Porcupine*. He campaigned against the weaknesses of the proposed peace with the French.

In 1802, he launched a weekly newspaper called *Cobbett's Political Register,* which he continued to write, edit and publish until his death in 1835. *The Register*, which started off with Tory views and gradually drifted towards more radical opinions, grew to achieve a massive circulation. Wherever there was Cobbett, there was always trouble. He was fined for attacking a Ministry for its conduct of Irish affairs and his house was attacked by a mob. In the same year he founded *Cobbett's Parliamentary Debates* (a publication which was later taken over by *Hansard)*.

By 1805, Cobbett had enough money to buy a farm. But he continued to write and published constantly; taking an active part in national politics and campaigning against bribery and on behalf of ordinary citizens who were, he felt, getting a pretty raw deal from the politicians. He campaigned vociferously for parliamentary reform and, inevitably, continued to get into trouble. In 1810, he was sentenced to a fine of £1,000 (an enormous sum at the time) and two years imprisonment for an article reporting the flogging of mutinous militiamen. Sent to Newgate prison he continued to write his weekly newspaper and also wrote *Paper against Gold*, condemning paper money and calling for the National Debt to be abolished and gold to be reintroduced as the nation's only currency.

Upon his release from prison, in 1812, he began to attack the system of tithes. He also wrote *Letter to the Luddites* in an attempt to dissuade labouring men from violence. He reduced the price of his newspaper from one shilling and a halfpenny to twopence. The circulation and authority soared. Cobbett wrote scathing comments about 'pocket boroughs' and 'rotten boroughs'; complaining viciously about the way that parliamentary seats could be bought or handed over to 'favourites'. He also attacked the way that corruption and bribery affected the decisions of MPs. He raged about the 'sinecurists, placemen and taxeaters' who took from the country but never gave anything back in return. He complained bitterly about fiat money. He pointed out that 'it is the Government's job to help keep us safe, healthy and happy'.

'It is,' he wrote, 'the chief business of a government to take care that one part of the people do not cause the other part to lead miserable lives.'

None of this went down any better with the 19th century establishment than it would have gone down with the present day establishment, and in 1817 the Government suspended the Habeas Corpus Act so that it could imprison, without trial, anyone whom it regarded as undesirable. Everyone knew that the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act was done specifically to get at author (and self-publisher) William Cobbett. His enemies even started a journal entitled *Anti-Cobbett*. Rightly fearing the Government's intentions Cobbett absconded and fled first to France and then to America where he took a farm on Long Island. He didn't return to England until things had quietened down a little. He continued to direct the *Political Register* and wrote and published *A Year's Residence in the United States of America* and *A Grammar of the English Language*. While in the USA he dug up the body of Thomas Paine, taking the bones back to England to bury them there. (The bones remained in Cobbett's possession until his death when they were mislaid. He had never got round to reburying them.)

In 1820, Cobbett was back in England. The Government introduced a stamp duty on periodicals in an attempt to close down his publications. He stood for Parliament at Coventry but was defeated. He became bankrupt.

At this point Cobbett really started to work hard. He wrote and published a number of books including *Cobbett's Monthly Sermons* and *Cottage Economy*. In 1830 he reprinted portions of his *Register* under the title *Cobbett's Twopenny Trash*. In 1831 he was indicted on a charge of encouraging disorder. He conducted his own defence and the prosecution failed. This was the last attempt by the Government to coerce the press by legal action. Cobbett's victory was a real victory for journalism and for the people.

He published *State Trials* and wrote several other books on economics and other subjects. Somehow he managed to find time to run farms too; first in Hampshire and then in Surrey.

In 1829, he published his book *Advice to Young Men* and in 1830 Cobbett published the book for which he is now probably best known, *Rural Rides,* an astonishing and revealing social document which also happens to be an immensely readable account of his horseback adventures around the country. Both were first published as part of his *Register.*

In 1832, he became Member of Parliament for Oldham. He spoke frequently. He continued to write and publish and to represent Oldham as an MP until his death in 1835.

William Cobbett, author, editor and publisher, made many enemies throughout his life. But he also made many people think. Cobbett was one of the greatest Englishmen of all time. 'He is always a hearty Englishman,' wrote the diplomat Sir Henry Lytton

Bulwer in his book *Historical Characters* in 1868. 'He may vary in his opinions as to doctrines and as to men, but he is ever for making England great, powerful and prosperous - her people healthy, brave and free.'

Cobbett was an original; he fought for journalism against authority and, with John Wilkes, was the originator of the modern concept of the 'free press'. During the early 19th century writers were transported, imprisoned and fined without limit. Around 500 publishers were imprisoned in one six year period when Cobbett was operating. Cobbett forced the Government to allow writers and publishers more freedom.

It was Hazlitt who pointed out that a really great and original writer is like nobody but himself 'It is easy to describe second-rate talents,' Hazlitt wrote, 'because they fall into a class and enlist under a standard: but first-rate powers defy calculation or comparison, and can be defined only by themselves. They are sui generis, and make the class to which they belong'. In this respect Hazlitt put Cobbett into the same category as Defoe and Shakespeare.

Cobbett's work was read by millions during his life. Thousands followed his coffin when he died.

Cobbett himself said that his popularity was 'owing to giving the truth in clear language'.

No writer can, or should, aim higher.

Richard Cobden
(1804-1865)

Richard Cobden was the father of international trade; he is sometimes known as ‘the Apostle of Free Trade’.

Born in Heyshott, near Midhurst in Sussex, the young Cobden was sent for five years to one of the terrible boarding schools which were later so hated by Charles Dickens. The school was in Yorkshire and the young Cobden’s father sent him there when he had to sell his farm. The family, a large one, had become relatively poor.

In 1819, after leaving school, Cobden was sent to a warehouse in London which belonged to an uncle. There he quickly showed skills both as a commercial traveller and a clerk.

Nine years after starting work in his uncle’s warehouse Cobden formed a partnership with two friends in order to sell wholesale calico in London. In 1831, they set up a calico printing business in Lancashire and the year afterwards Cobden moved to Manchester. In 1835, he visited the USA for the first time and in 1836 he travelled in the Levant.

As a result of his two trips he wrote two pamphlets England, Ireland and America and Russia. In the first he wrote about the importance of free trade, explaining why governments should not interfere in trade between countries. In the second he warned against what he called ‘Russophobia’. Even after the start of the Crimean War, he continued to argue in favour of friendly relations with Russia.

In 1838, he and a group of other merchants from Manchester formed the Anti-Corn-Law League to fight against the Corn Laws (which kept the price of corn artificially high in England, for the benefit of large landowners). He travelled the country speaking out against trade restrictions and in 1841 was elected as the Member of Parliament for Stockport. The Prime Minister, Robert Peel, acknowledged that it was Cobden’s campaigning which was largely responsible for the abolition of the Corn Laws.

For Cobden personally all this campaigning had a downside. He had failed to give attention to his private business and he went bankrupt. He also became ill; exhausted by his efforts. The public recognised his sacrifice and in 1847 the enormous sum of £80,000 was raised in recognition of his services to the people. With the money he now had Cobden bought Dunford, the farmhouse in Heyshott where he had been born. He also took just over a year off and travelled throughout Europe to convalesce.

When he got back to England, Cobden found that he had been elected as MP for both Stockport and the West Riding. He chose the latter constituency. In 1859, he visited America again and when he came back found that he had been elected MP for Rochdale. He was offered the job of President of the Board of Trade but declined. He did, however, arrange a treaty of commerce with France in 1860. The treaty he negotiated included material that was later duplicated in a number of other treaties between countries. He was a strong supporter of the North during America’s Civil War.

Richard Cobden died in 1865 and was buried in Sussex, the county of his birth.

John Cockcroft

(1897-1967)

In 1932, an Englishman was the first person to split the atom. His name was John Cockcroft. He received the Nobel Prize in Physics for splitting the atomic nucleus and his work was instrumental in the development of nuclear power.

John Cockcroft was born in Todmorden, the son of a mill owner. During the First World War he was a signaller in the Royal Artillery. He then studied electrotechnical engineering and maths in Manchester and Cambridge.

In 1928, Cockcroft began work on the acceleration of protons with Ernest Walton. Four years later the two men succeeded in transmuting lithium into helium by bombarding it with high energy protons. It was this achievement which was widely known as ‘splitting the atom’.

In 1946, Cockcroft set up the Atomic Energy Research Establishment to develop England’s atomic power programme. He is famous for having insisted on extra safety procedures being installed on nuclear power stations. At the time these were considered unnecessary. Cockcroft was awarded a knighthood in 1948.

John Constable
(1776-1837)

It’s a piece of England that has been skilfully captured onto canvas and there is no doubt that John Constable’s oil painting depicting a hay wain on the River Stour in Suffolk, is one of England’s best-known works of art. But sadly, it took the French to alert our Royal Academy to the talent of one of England’s greatest landscape painters.

Baptised on the day of his birth because he wasn’t expected to live, John Constable was born 11 June 1776 in East Bergholt, Suffolk. His father, Golding Constable, was a mill owner, grain merchant and farmer. Owing to the fact that John’s older brother was mentally impaired, John was the heir to his father’s business and was expected to work for his father after he left school.

One of six children, John had a fairly happy childhood with parents who weren’t overly strict with him. For example, when John told his parents how miserable he was being made by the incredibly brutish discipline meted out by one of the schoolmasters at his boarding school in Lavenham, they withdrew him from the school and moved him to Dedham Grammar School – a school which he loved, although he was considered something of a daydreamer and did not show much academic promise. However, he did show artistic talent, especially for penmanship, which endeared him to his schoolmaster, Dr Thomas Grimwood.

When John Constable was 16 years of age he did as was expected of him, and began working for his father in the mill. It wasn’t until several years later that John Constable was to realise his true ambition to become a painter.

It was John Constable’s friendship with John Dunthorne, who was six years his senior, that led him on the path to becoming a painter. Dunthorne wanted to be an artist, which Constable found fascinating. Together, Constable and Dunthorne would go off on local painting expeditions, taking their easels and paints with them to paint a piece of landscape.

John Constable once famously said: ‘The sound of water escaping from mill dams, willows, old rotten planks, slimy posts and brickwork... those scenes made me a painter and I am grateful’.

When his younger brother Abram agreed to take over John’s place in the family business, the way was clear for John Constable to pursue his dream as a painter. He was coming up to 23 years old when he entered the Royal Academy Schools in London as a probationer. Whilst there, he drew models and plaster casts, attended anatomy classes and studied the Old Masters. Constable studied at the Royal Academy around the same time as another great artist, J. M. W. Turner. (Constable’s less than pleasant encounters with Turner on several occasions later on in his life, led Constable to believe that Turner detested him.)

In 1802, Constable exhibited at the Royal Academy for the first time. In the same year, he was offered a job of drawing master at Great Marlow Military College but he declined the offer. His dream was to be a landscape painter no matter what financial sacrifices he had to make. Later on, to make ends meet, he worked for a while as a portrait artist.

Like a lot of great artists, John Constable often struggled financially and only managed to sell around 20 paintings in England. However, in 1828, he came into an inheritance, which enabled him to give up the portraits and to devote himself entirely to landscape painting. John Constable’s greatest love was painting the English landscape, especially around his native home: the valley of the River Stour around Dedham East Bergholt, which is now known as Constable Country. He adored the countryside: the fields, the trees and the sky with its formation of clouds. His love of painting nature as it truly is was reflected in a sentence that he wrote in one of his letters to his dear friend Archdeacon John Fisher: ‘A gentleman’s park is my aversion. It is not beauty because it is not nature’.

Despite strong opposition from her father, Constable married Maria Bicknell in 1816. It was a happy marriage which resulted in seven children. But sadly, her health was poor and the couple moved from central London to Hampstead Heath because Constable believed the air would be better for her. After just 12 years of marriage, Maria died in 1829 from tuberculosis, leaving Constable utterly heartbroken and sending him into a deep depression.

Melancholy was no stranger to Constable as he often suffered from bouts of depression throughout his life, although not to the extent of the melancholia he suffered after Maria’s death. The intense sorrow he felt over the death of his beloved wife is revealed in his dark and bleak painting, Hadleigh Castle.

A year after his wife died, Constable, who was then 52, was finally awarded full membership of the Royal Academy, though the membership was awarded rather grudgingly. Tragically, he never gained the level of fame he ought to have done in England.

It was in France where Constable was most famous. In 1824, several of his paintings, including The Hay Wain, received instant acclaim at the Paris Salon where they were exhibited. (Constable’s other notable works include, Dedham Vale, View on the Stour, Salisbury Cathedral, The Cornfield and Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows). Constable was awarded gold medals from the King of France for several of his paintings. His paintings were said to have had a profound influence on the French artist Delacroix and, later on, the Barbizon school. His fascination with the effects of shadow and light are believed to have inspired artists of the impressionist movement.

The great English landscape artist who once said that his art could be ‘found under every hedge and in every lane’ and that that was why ‘nobody thinks it worth picking up’, died in 1837, probably from a heart attack. He was 60 years old. He was buried beside his wife in St John’s, Church Row, Hampstead, London.

Since his death, Constable’s work has gone in and out of fashion with art dealers and collectors. But for Englishmen and Englishwomen everywhere John Constable, the greatest painter of the English countryside, will always be in fashion.

James Cook

(1728-1779)

The man who discovered Australia and New Zealand started his maritime life as an ordinary deck hand on a collier taking coal from Whitby to London. By the end of his professional life he had commanded not one but three great voyages of discovery. Captain James Cook was one of the greatest sailors and explorers the world has ever seen.

Born in Marton, in Cleveland, Yorkshire, the son of an agricultural labourer, Cook began his working life in a haberdasher's shop at Staithes. He then became an apprentice to a Whitby ship owner and spent some years in the coasting and Baltic trade. He joined the Royal Navy in 1755 and in 1759 he obtained his master's certificate. In 1763-1767 he surveyed the St Lawrence River and the Coast of Newfoundland.

The success of this surveying venture meant that in 1768 he was appointed commander of the first scientific expedition to the Pacific Ocean. Sailing on HMS Endeavour, he carried with him a scientific expedition intending to observe the transit of the planet Venus. After the completion of this mission, and on the way back home, he discovered and charted the two main islands of New Zealand and discovered and explored the eastern coast of Australia. He claimed the lands he had discovered for England. During the trip he landed at Botany Bay, not far from the current city of Sydney.

The voyage lasted three years and Cook came back with a mass of scientific material. He sailed through the strait between Australia and New Guinea and completed the voyage by way of Java and the Cape of Good Hope. Just as important as the discoveries he had made was the fact that Cook had managed to command such a long sea voyage without losing any of his crew members to scurvy. Up until then scurvy had been a significant problem for long-distance sailors and navies around the world had often lost more men to the disease than to enemy action. Cook discovered that a diet of fresh fruit and vegetables prevented scurvy.

When he returned to England Cook was promoted to commander and was then sent with two ships, the Resolution and Adventure, to make the first circumnavigation of the earth. He was expected to sail into the Antarctic and find out how far the lands of the Antarctic stretched northwards. That expedition also took three years (from 1772 to 1775) and is generally regarded as the greatest of all sailing-ship voyages. Cook sailed further south than any man before him. He sailed around the edge of the ice and made meticulous measurements. Cook also visited Tahiti and the New Hebrides and discovered New Caledonia and other groups of islands. Thanks again to his precautions against scurvy, Cook lost only one crew member during the three years.

Cook died on his third major voyage, which set off in 1776 with the ships Discovery and Resolution. Searching for a Northwest Passage around Canada and Alaska, Cook took the scenic route and sailed via the Cape, Tasmania, New Zealand, the Pacific Islands, the Sandwich Islands and the north west coast of North America. He surveyed the coast as far as Icy Cape in Bering Strait but was forced to turn back. He sailed to Hawaii and reached there in January 1779. At first the natives were friendly but they suddenly changed their attitude. On the 14 February, when Cook landed with a party of sailors to recover a stolen boat, he was attacked and killed. He was just 51 years old.

James Cook did more than any other navigator to enhance our knowledge of the Pacific Ocean and the Southern Ocean. By the time he died, the labourer's son from Yorkshire had become the world's greatest sailor and explorer. He would, in time, sit alongside Drake and Ralegh *(aka Raleigh)*, (as one of the world's three greatest and best-known sailors.

Thomas Cook
(1808-1892)

Born in Derbyshire, Thomas Cook started work as an assistant to a local market gardener when he was 10 years old. When he was 14 he became an apprentice cabinetmaker. Brought up as a strict Baptist he joined the local Temperance Society and in 1826 became a preacher, touring the area as an evangelist and publishing and distributing temperance pamphlets. He became a minister in 1828. Cook had the idea that was to change the world of travel while waiting for a stagecoach on the road to London. On 5 July 1842 he arranged to take 570 temperance campaigners from a railway station in Leicester to a rally in Loughborough, just eleven miles away. He did a deal with the rail company and they agreed to charge one shilling a person for return rail tickets and food for the journey. The rail tickets were legal contracts between the company and the passengers, and Cook wasn't allowed to sell tickets himself but he received a share of the money received by the train company. He made similar arrangements for three consecutive summers and in 1844 the Midland Counties Railway Company made the deal permanent. He then started a business running rail excursions for pleasure-and taking a percentage of the money taken by the rail company.

In 1846, he overstretched himself and went bankrupt after taking 350 people from Leicester on a tour of Scotland. He bounced back, took 165,000 people to the Great Exhibition in London and made money. In 1850, he arranged his first excursion abroad and took a group from Leicester to Calais to visit the Paris Exhibition.

From then on he didn't look back. He started arranging 'grand circular tours' of Europe and by the 1860's he was taking parties to Switzerland, Italy, Egypt and even to the United States of America. He introduced the idea whereby tourists could travel independently while his agency arranged all the travel, food and accommodation over any route. As usual he took his percentage from railway companies, shipping lines and hotels.

He formed a partnership with his son and founded a travel agency called Thomas Cook and Son with offices in Fleet Street in London. His shop sold luggage, footwear, telescopes and guidebooks. Cook and his wife ran a small temperance hotel above the shop and office.

In 1872, Cook started a round-the-world tour. For 200 guineas, travellers were taken across the Atlantic on a steamship, across America by stage coach, across the Pacific to Japan by paddle steamer, and overland across China and India. The journey lasted 222 days. Two years later he introduced travellers' cheques.

It is no exaggeration to say that Thomas Cook created the modern tourist industry.

Oliver Cromwell
(1599-1658)

Oliver Cromwell, the father of British Parliament, was born on 25 April1599 in Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire; the son of Robert Cromwell and Elizabeth Steward and a descendant of Thomas Cromwell, who was Henry VIII's chief minister. The young boy was named after his rich uncle, Sir Oliver Cromwell. The young Oliver would become a brilliant and inspirational leader, a man of action, and a military mastermind. He would lead the Parliamentary forces to victory in the English Civil War and be the man most responsible for establishing modern parliamentary democracy, first in England and later throughout the rest of the world. Many great men have ideas, or institute changes, which would have probably surfaced without them – they just happened to be the first to think of them or to be the men in the right position at the right time. But if Oliver Cromwell had never lived it is likely that the parliamentary forces would have lost the English Civil War. Would there have been another revolution?

It is reasonable to assert that the world would not be the same place today if Oliver Cromwell had not existed. The parliamentary forces had been badly battered before Cromwell took control. It is likely that without him they would have lost, and democratic government would not have been maintained in England.

Cromwell's victory was a trigger which led to the French Enlightenment and the French Revolution, and to the establishment of democratic governments throughout western Europe and in English colonies such as Australia, Canada and the United States of America.

Oliver Cromwell grew up on his father's farm in Huntingdon and was one of ten children: 3 boys and 7 girls. Sadly, Oliver Cromwell's two brothers died in infancy, effectively making Oliver the only son of Robert and Elizabeth.

Very little is known about Cromwell's childhood except that he attended the grammar school at Huntingdon where he was taught by the clergyman and schoolmaster Dr Thomas Beard.

In 1616, when he was 17, Cromwell went to Cambridge University but after just a year there his father died, and he was obliged to return to the farm to help look after his widowed mother and his 7 unmarried sisters.

On 22 August 1620, at the age of 21, Cromwell married Elizabeth Bourchier the daughter of a retired, rich fur trader. Together, they had nine children: four girls and five boys. Oliver Cromwell was a great family man who cared deeply for his wife and children.

With nine cousins already sitting in Parliament, Cromwell wanted to follow family tradition and in 1628 he was elected as one of two MPs for Huntingdon. Then, in 1629, after the young Cromwell had been an MP for only one year, King Charles I dissolved Parliament after he had been refused money to pay for another attack on France.

Charles I then ruled for 11 years without a Parliament, a period which became known as the 'Eleven Years Tyranny'. King James I believed in 'the divine right of kings' and once told his parliament, 'Kings are God's lieutenants upon earth and sit upon God's throne'. He instilled this absurd belief into his son Prince Charles and it was this teaching, which would, during Charles's reign as king, cause a conflict between him and Parliament and, consequently, bring about his death.

In 1631, Cromwell was involved in a local feud, which led him to sell his family's properties in and around Huntingdon and move with his family to a farmstead (where he leased the land) in St Ives. Cromwell, no longer a country gentleman, was now a yeoman. But five years later, childless Sir Thomas Steward died leaving an inheritance to his nephew, Oliver Cromwell. Oliver's financial circumstances had gone up again. In 1640, Charles I recalled Parliament because he needed financial help with his campaign against the Scots. Once more, Cromwell (who had undergone a powerful religious conversion during his time out of Parliament and was now a Puritan) was back in Parliament.

From this time on Cromwell's religious beliefs influenced every decision he ever made; like all Puritans he believed the purpose of life was to work hard and to serve God and he was convinced that he was being guided to carry out God's will. Many laws were brought in to rid society of what the Puritans deemed as evil; things which distracted people from worshipping God. Some of the long list of restrictive laws included: no Christmas festivities (for example, mince pies were banned), no travelling on Sundays, no dancing, all theatres to be closed down, no football and so on. It wasn't exactly a fun time.

In 1640, after three weeks of Parliament, King Charles again dissolved Parliament after he was refused money for his campaign against the rebelling Scots. Parliament's three-week period after a decade's closure was, not surprisingly, known as the Short Parliament.

However, Cromwell wasn't without a Parliamentary seat for long as Parliament was recalled later that year (this one was known as the Long Parliament because it lasted in various forms for 20 years).

At the end of 1641, the Grand Remonstrance – which Oliver Cromwell supported – was drafted by the Long

Parliament. This listed a mass of grievances about King Charles's government of both Church and State, and a number of recommended reforms. A copy of the document was given to the King who wasn't much taken with it. In January 1642, goaded by his wife Queen Henrietta, the King stormed into the Chamber of the House of Commons with his swordsmen and attempted to arrest the five main MPs who were involved in the drafting of the Grand Remonstrance. Fortunately, the five MPs had been tipped off that the King was coming and had quickly escaped through another door. However, the MPs were furious that Charles I should dare barge into the House of Commons.

(King Charles' storming into the House of Commons is the reason why Black Rod (senior official of the House of Lords) performs his ceremonial duty on the annual State Opening of Parliament today. When the monarch is ready to deliver his or her speech in the House of Lords, Black Rod is dispatched to the chamber to the House of Commons to summon MPs to hear the speech. As he approaches the entrance to the Commons chamber, the door is slammed in Black Rod's face to show the independence of the Commons from the Sovereign. With his rod, Black Rod bangs three times on the door. The door to the Commons chamber is then opened, Black Rod enters, bows respectfully and informs the MPs· that they are needed at the House of Lords. The MPs then follow Black Rod to the House of Lords to hear the monarch's speech.)

Shortly after King Charles's failed attempt to arrest five of his biggest critics, he left London to raise an army to fight Parliament. And in August 1642, the King raised his standard at Nottingham: marking the beginning of the First English Civil War. The war was fought between the Cavaliers and the Roundheads (the Roundheads were so-called because of their pudding basin haircuts). The Cavaliers, or royalists were mostly Anglican and Catholics, and the Roundheads, the supporters of Parliament were mostly Puritans.

In 1642, at 43 years of age, Cromwell was appointed captain in charge of a small group of cavalry (which he raised) in Parliament's army, which was led by Lord General Essex. On the 23 October 1642, the first major battle was fought at Edgehill in Warwickshire where both sides claimed victory. A year later Cromwell, who had no previous military experience, was commissioned as a colonel to raise a cavalry regiment in the Eastern Association. Cromwell's regiment was later famously known as the Ironsides. With his regiment, Cromwell managed to suppress a royalist uprising at Lowestoft and recapture Stamford.

In 1644, Cromwell was appointed Lieutenant General of the Eastern Association. As Lieutenant General he was able to put his brilliant military ideas into practice and go on to win many notable victories such as the famous great battle at Marston Moor on 2 July 1644. Not only did Cromwell's success increase his military reputation but it also helped to increase his influence in politics.

Cromwell then became Lieutenant General of the New Model Army – England s first national army. Sir Thomas Fairfax, known as Black Tom because of his dark hair and eyes, was Commander-inChief. Cromwell went on to win the last major battle of the First Civil War against the Royalist army at the battle of Naseby in 1645. The year 1646 marked the end of the First Civil War.

In the June of 1646, King Charles handed himself over to the mercy of the Scots even though they had fought against him during the war and in February 1647, the Scots aware that their attempts to persuade King Charles to renounce his Anglican faith and convert to Presbyterianism were unsuccessful, sold the King to Parliament.

Around this time, Parliament demanded that most of the New Model Army should be disbanded but the soldiers mutinied. Oliver Cromwell was sent by Parliament to army headquarters to discuss how the grievances could be addressed but, unfortunately for Parliament, Cromwell's sympathies lay with the army. At the end of May in 1647, the army kidnapped King Charles and held him in Newmarket under their control. He was then taken to Hampton Court where Parliament and the army (the army had more or less taken over Parliament) had debates – known as the 'Putney Debates' because they were in and around Putney church – on what next to do with the King.

In November 1647, the king escaped from Hampton Court to the Isle of Wight where he was recaptured and held in Carisbrooke Castle. While he was there King Charles was involved in secret negotiations with the Scots, promising them much if they would side with him against Parliament.

In 1648, the Second Civil War began, and Parliament appealed to Cromwell for help. Cromwell, along with the army, then managed to crush the Royalist Scots at Preston.

While the King was still imprisoned on the Isle of Wight, Parliament, fearing a military takeover, implored him to agree to peace talks, but the King wanted time to make a decision. Exasperated by the King's indecisiveness, Cromwell and Parliament ordered Charles to be taken to Windsor Castle and put on trial for treason. Cromwell, whose name appeared third on the list of signatories, was one of the people who signed King Charles' death warrant.

On an icy cold day in January 1649, King Charles was sentenced to death. For his beheading, King Charles wore two vests just in case anyone mistook his shivering of the cold for fear. King Charles faced his death with great dignity and courage. It is reputed that Cromwell went to see King Charles's corpse while it lay in its coffin at Whitehall, and on seeing the dead king he was reputed to have murmured, 'cruel necessity'.

In 1648, very shortly before the regicide, the army replaced Parliament with the Rump Parliament, which consisted mostly of Independents like Cromwell, and the following year the monarchy and the House of Lords were abolished by an Act of Parliament, and England was declared a Commonwealth.

The biggest threat to the new Commonwealth was the uprising in Ireland and in the same year, Cromwell was appointed Lord Lieutenant of Ireland and Commander in Chief of the army in Ireland. In 1649, Cromwell defeated the Irish at Drogheda in a gruesome massacre. He then went on to defeat the Irish at Wexford. To this day, Oliver Cromwell is still reviled in Ireland for his actions at Drogheda and Wexford.

Cromwell was recalled from Ireland and appointed Commander in Chief of the New Model Army for the war against the Scots. The Scots wanted to restore Charles II to the English throne but were defeated at the battle of Dunbar in 1650 (even though they had twice as many men). The battle at Dunbar is thought to be Cromwell's greatest victory. Cromwell regularly credited his military victories to God's will – firmly believing that he was fighting God's cause.

On 1 January 1651 at Scone, the Scots crowned King Charles's son – Charles II – King of Scotland. Charles II, along with the Scots, was determined that he should regain the throne that his father once had. Realising that his army was greatly outnumbered by Cromwell's, Charles II made his way to the old royalist strongholds on the borders of Wales in an attempt to gather more troops on the way before heading to London. But Cromwell managed to catch up with Charles II and his army at Worcester, and went on to fight a victorious battle against Charles II and his Scottish supporters on 3 September 1651. Cromwell described the battle as his 'crowning mercy'. It was the final battle of the English Civil War.

After the battle of Worcester, Charles II fled to France but, before escaping, he hid from the pursuing army up an oak tree. After his restoration to the throne years later, many pubs in England were renamed the Royal Oak in honour of the tree that had saved Charles II from being captured.

In 1653, Cromwell became exasperated with the Rump Parliament and forcibly dissolved it, marching into the House of Commons and shouting: 'You have sat too long here for any good you have been doing. Depart, I say, and let us have done with you. In the name of God, go!' He called in six musketeers from his regiment, dragged the speaker out by his hair and emptied the House of Commons. Cromwell replaced the Rump with the Barebones Parliament (a Parliament of carefully nominated honest men who were known as the Parliament of Saints). The Barebones Parliament collapsed within a year and in 1653, Cromwell became Lord Protector of England, Scotland and Ireland. As Lord Protector, Cromwell was addressed as His Highness Lord Protector and moved into the King's former palace at Whitehall. At Whitehall Palace, Cromwell lived like a King, employing many of King Charles' old servants. Cromwell was now leading the life that he had loathed and fought hard against when King Charles I and King Charles II were on the throne.

Cromwell had great ambitions to make England great again and he succeeded. His navy defeated the Spanish at the battle of Santa Cruz in the Canary Islands, he gained a foothold in the West Indies, made peace with the French and ended a trade war with the Dutch.

In 1657, despite the House of Commons urging him to accept the crown in a document called the Humble Petition and Advice, Cromwell declined the offer of becoming King of England, Scotland and Ireland.

Finally, on 3 September 1658, at the age of 59, Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England, Scotland and Ireland passed away, possibly from a malarial-type disease that had recurred. It is believed that the death of his beloved daughter, Elizabeth, less than a month earlier had not only weakened his spirit but had weakened his body too. Contrary to everything he believed in when he was alive, Cromwell was given a state funeral with no expense spared. His body was laid to rest at Westminster Abbey.

After Oliver Cromwell's death, he was succeeded by his eldest son Richard Cromwell but in 1659, Richard Cromwell, derogatorily known as 'Tumble-down-Dick', was forced to abdicate. Less than a year later, Charles II was restored to the throne after being invited back by Parliament. In a typically vindictive gesture, the remains of Oliver Cromwell were dug up and hung from the gibbet. But King Charles II realised that the battle for royal absolutism had been lost. He did not contest the supremacy of Parliament. When the foolish James II tried to restore royal absolutism he was thrown out in a bloodless revolution in 1688. The changes made by Cromwell were not, and would never be, reversed.

Books and films have traditionally made the more colourful cavaliers the heroes of English history. Cromwell's Roundheads are invariably portrayed as boring dullards – the bad guys. The truth is the opposite. The Cavaliers, all curly wigs, thigh-length boots and fancy jackets, were the oppressors, the bad guys, the new sheriffs of Nottingham of their day. The Roundheads were the 17th century descendants of Robin Hood and his band of outlaws.

Critics have accused Cromwell of being hypocritical, and have pointed out that although he always argued in favour of democracy he did establish a military dictatorship. This is unfair. Cromwell was devoted to the principles of parliamentary democracy and when circumstances beyond his power forced him to take on power that he did not want to take he insisted that he did so temporarily. When offered the throne of England he refused it. And he refused the offer of a permanent dictatorship.

Cromwell, plainly dressed, rather scruffy even, had a ‘swollen and reddish’ face that was cursed with warts. He was quite an unattractive man but he was never ashamed of his lack of good looks. For example, when Cromwell had his portrait painted, he insisted that Mr Lely, the Court painter, include his warts in the painting. (This is the origin of the saying ‘warts and all’.)

Cromwell was a moderate and tolerant and passionate man; a sincere campaigner for the people, for religious tolerance and for an England combining a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary democracy. He was the archetypal English hero: tough and uncompromising but driven by strong ideals and honourable and honest beliefs. Everyone in the world who now lives in a democratic country owes Oliver Cromwell a huge debt.

John Dalton

1766-1844

Remembered and revered around the world as one of the fathers of modern physical science, John Dalton was born in Eaglesfield, Cumberland and died, 78 years later just a little further south, in Manchester.

Dalton's formal schooling ended when he was 11 years old. He taught himself science and was such a brilliant young man that he became a teacher at the age of 12. He moved to Kendal, in the Lake District at the age of 15 and when he was 26 he moved to Manchester where he lived until he died. He became a chemist and physicist and was the scientist who introduced fundamental atomic theory into the mainstream of science.

The idea that all material objects are made up of very small, indestructible particles called atoms was probably first suggested by the Greek philosopher Democritus in around 400 BC. The hypothesis was adopted by Epicurus and Lucretius and, much later, by Isaac Newton. But the idea remained just that – a philosophical notion. There had been no attempt to express atomic theories quantitatively, or to use them in any sort of scientific research, until John Dalton presented a distinctive, precise quantitative theory which could be tested in the laboratory and used to interpret chemical experiments.

Dalton created the concept of the existence of atoms, molecules, elements and chemical compounds and in 1808 he argued, in a book entitled *A New System of Chemical Philosophy,* which listed twenty specific elements, that although there is a huge number of atoms in the world, there is a relatively small number of types of atom. Today, we know that there are more elements than Dalton thought existed, but his work was crucial to our understanding of our world. Although his book was not published until1808, Dalton had created his atomic theory in 1804.

Dalton created a table listing the relative weights of different types of atom and argued that atoms of the same species are identical in all their properties, including their mass. He even gave the elements specific symbols to help identify them. (Scientists later showed that there are exceptions to Dalton's rule and that a single chemical element may exist in different isotopes – having the same chemical properties but slightly different mass.)

Moreover, Dalton realised that any two molecules of a single chemical compound will be made up of the same combination of atoms; in other words, including the same elements in the same proportions.

Within two decades Dalton's theory had been widely adopted by scientists around the world, and chemists everywhere had learned to follow the blueprint he had suggested for defining atomic weights and the combination of atoms within each species of molecule.

Dalton's atomic hypothesis is fundamental to our understanding of chemistry and modern physics.

Like many great scientists, Dalton did a great deal more than the work that made him famous. In 1787 he became interested in meteorology and published a book on the subject in 1793. The meteorological journal he kept all his life contains more than 200,000 observations. He performed important experiments which enabled him to formulate vital laws governing the behaviour of gases. And, his curiosity aroused because he himself suffered from the condition, he also published the first scientific paper on colour blindness.

Abraham Darby
(1678-1717)

There are three Abraham Darbys and just as the name Johann Strauss dominates the history of the waltz so the name Abraham Darby dominates the history of iron. Since the waltz plays a relatively unimportant part in human history compared to that of iron it is strange that the name Strauss should be universally known while the name Darby is almost universally unknown. The three Darbys played a vital role in the industrial revolution.

The first Abraham Darby (the ones whose dates appear above) was born near Dudley, in Worcestershire and apprenticed in Birmingham to a malt mill maker and fellow Quaker. (Far more great men and women come from the English Midlands than from America or, indeed, most other countries.) After completing his apprenticeship the young Abraham married Mary Sergeant and moved to Bristol to set up as a malt mill maker. It was in Bristol that, in 1702, Darby and a group of other Quakers set up the Bristol Brass Works Company.

At the beginning of the 18th century most English families had one cooking pot. It was made of brass and it was expensive and it was passed down from one generation to the next. Most of these pots were imported from Holland. In 1704, Darby decided to start manufacturing brass pots in England. The plan didn’t work. The pots were simply too expensive to make. And so Darby tried making cast iron pots. Here the problem wasn’t the price but the technical difficulties involved. However, with the help of his employees, Darby developed a new method of casting, using pure dry sand for the mould with a special casting box. His former partners wanted to concentrate on making brass pots but Darby decided the future was in iron.

But there was another problem. At that time, the beginning of the 18th century, iron makers had a real problem finding materials with which to stoke their furnaces. Charcoal was generally agreed to be too soft to allow larger furnaces to be used, and was in any case becoming increasingly scarce. Whole forests had been chopped down to create charcoal to make iron. Coal was unusable because it was almost always contaminated with sulphur and other impurities. It was Abraham Darby who was the first man to use coke successfully in the smelting of iron and he did this in 1709. He had used coke in malting kilns and by providing a suitable blast of air and redesigning the blast furnace found that coke was better than charcoal.

Darby moved to Shropshire because he found that the best coal for making coke was mined there, and he founded the Bristol Iron Company in 1708. His iron works at Coalbrookdale then made the finest iron the world had seen. Darby showed that by using coke it was possible to build much larger furnaces than had previously been possible. The quality of the iron his firm manufactured made it possible for him to use the iron to make thin castings that were as good as brass for pots and other kitchenware. It was iron from Abraham Darby’s company that was used to make the cylinders of Thomas Newcomen’s first engines. It was iron from Darby’s company that was used in the manufacture of the world’s first locomotive with a high-pressure boiler. The iron was good enough quality to make wrought iron.

Iron from Darby’s foundry was just what the Industrial Revolution desperately needed. Just about all the major inventions of the early Industrial Revolution needed a supply of iron. Iron ships, iron trains, early cars, farm machinery – everything needed iron.

Abraham Darby died at home in Shropshire at the age of 39. His son Abraham was only six years old at the time so Darby’s son-inlaw and partner managed the Coalbrookdale works until the second Abraham Darby (1711-1763) was old enough to follow in his father’s footsteps. In due course the third Abraham Darby (1750-1791) carried on the family tradition of improving the quality of iron. It was Abraham Darby the third who built the first iron bridge ever made. It crossed the river Severn near Coalbrookdale. The village of Ironbridge in Shropshire grew up around the bridge. Eventually the area became known as Ironbridge Gorge.

As the family business grew, Abraham Darby III attracted more workers. When food became scarce he bought up local farms in order to grow food to feed his workers. He built houses for them and paid better wages than were paid in other industries.

Like his father and his grandfather the third member of this astonishing family died young. He was just 41 when he died. His father had reached 52 and his grandfather just 39 years of age.

Charles Darwin
(1809-1892)

In 1831, Charles Darwin sailed in a ship called HMS Beagle on a scientific expedition to the Pacific Ocean and to South America. While visiting places such as the Galapagos Islands he saw a huge variety of fauna and flora he'd never encountered before. He was particularly impressed by the way similar species appeared to change slightly according to the differences in their specific environments.

After he returned to England, Darwin wrote a book about his voyage (entitled *Journal of Researches into the Geology and Natural History of the various countries visited by HMS Beagle*) but he continued to think a great deal about everything he had seen, and in 1859 he published a book, entitled *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races* in the Struggle for Life, in which he put forward his theory about the way animal life was constantly evolving.

Darwin's book caused a storm, and changed the way millions see and think about the world and the creatures upon it.

The book was controversial because Darwin's theory of evolution contradicted, and denied, the traditional account of life as it is presented in The Bible.

Darwin then caused even more trouble by writing another book, *The Descent of Man*, in which he argued that rather being made in the image of God, human beings are merely developed and refined versions of apes.

Charles Robert Darwin was born and educated in Shrewsbury and later studied medicine. His grandfather was Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802) an eminent English physician and author who anticipated his grandson's views on evolution in his own much earlier work. Charles Darwin received (and still receives) all the recognition for the theory of evolution, because of the impact made by his book in 1859, but his grandfather deserves to be remembered for having contributed so hugely to the theory. After qualifying as a doctor, Charles Darwin went to Cambridge, planning to enter the church. However, while at Cambridge he became seriously interested in biology. It was one of the botanists in Cambridge, John Stevens Henslow, who recommended that Darwin travel on HMS Beagle as its resident naturalist. The ship was starting a five year long scientific survey of South American waters.

Darwin's father was at first opposed to his son taking such a long voyage, arguing that it would simply enable Charles to delay the point at which he settled down and started doing serious work. Fortunately for mankind and history, the sceptical father was persuaded to give his consent for the journey; a voyage which was to become one of the most significant in history.

While on board HMS Beagle, Darwin visited the Canary Islands, the Cape Verde Islands, Brazil, Montevideo, Tierra del Fuego, Buenos Aires, Valparaiso, Chile, the Galapagos Islands, Tahiti, New Zealand, Tasmania and the Keeling Islands.

The material he collected during that long voyage enabled Darwin to write a number of books and scientific papers and he gradually became one of the most eminent scientists in the country. He read widely, too, and continued to learn. Thomas Malthus's publication *An Essay on the Principle if Population* led him to his theory of natural selection through competition for survival.

In 1839, Darwin married his cousin, Emma Wedgewood, and from 1842 he lived in Kent as a country gentleman. He was independently wealthy and able to surround himself with a large garden, several conservatories and a host of pigeons and other birds. He was a chronic invalid (probably as a result of the voyage on The Beagle during which he had contracted Chagas's disease as a result of insect bites in South America) but he worked hard on his great theory: the origin of species.

He spent five years collecting and sifting evidence and then, in 1842, drew up some short notes. By 1844, he had worked on these and produced a rough draft of his theory of natural selection – the basis of the Darwinian Theory of Evolution.

A naturally cautious man, Darwin delayed publication of his theory while he continued to work on it.

And then, in 1858, he received a letter from Alfred Russel Wallace. The letter included notes on the Malay Archipelago, and to Darwin's surprise (and probably horror) he realised that Alfred Russel Wallace had arrived at the same conclusions about natural selection.

Later that same year papers by both Alfred Russel Wallace and Charles Darwin were read before the Linnean Society. (Neither of the two men was present. Darwin himself rarely appeared in public to debate or talk about his work.) The readings aroused very little interest among the scientific community and virtually no interest among the wider population.

Inspired by the knowledge that time was against him, and that if he didn't hurry up other authors would publish before him, Darwin worked on his vast collection of notes and in 1859 he published *On the Origin of Species by*

Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life.

Darwin's book caused explosions of outrage throughout Europe. The world was, it seemed, divided into two. Those who accepted Darwin's theory and those who believed that his arguments were unsound or sacrilegious or both. I doubt if any book in history has ever created such immediate and yet lasting controversy.

Eventually, all competent scientists recognised the worth of Darwin's book and the world had been changed. Nothing would ever be quite the same again. Very few books have had such an impact on the world.

Darwin did not sit back and rest. He continued to work on a huge number of supplemental publications. In 1862 he published *The Fertilisation of Orchids*. In 1867 came *The Variation of Plants and Animals Under Domestication*. And in 1871 came *The Descent of Man* and *Selection in Relation to Sex* in which he argued that humans are descended from hairy mammals related to orang-utans, chimpanzees and gorillas. It was in that book that Darwin developed his theory of sexual selection. It is ironic, if perhaps not surprising, that Darwin, who had once contemplated a career within the church, became an agnostic in later life.

And still the books kept coming. His list of titles is impressive and includes *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals, Insectivorous Plants, The Power of Movement in Plants* and, in 1881, *The Formation of Vegetable Mould through the action of Worms.*

Darwin wasn't the only scientist to come up with the idea that man had evolved from simpler creatures. He wasn't the first to suggest that plants and animals developed, evolved and changed over the years and that the healthiest specimens within a species are automatically selected for creation of succeeding generations. His grandfather, for one, had come up with some of the same ideas many years earlier.

But it was Charles Darwin who polished and added to the theories of evolution and it was Darwin's great book (known now as *The Origin of Species)* which forced biologists, scientists and the general public to take the theories seriously. It was Charles Darwin who added the theory of natural selection – which explained how evolution took place – and it was Darwin who provided the background evidence to support the theory.

Very few people changed our thinking, and our world, more than Charles Darwin. He revolutionised the subject of biology. His theory of natural selection has been applied to many other areas of life (including even politics and economics) and his work has had a dramatic impact upon religious thinking and teaching. Those who believe in the creationist theory of man still argue vociferously with those who favour Darwin's work (which is not simply a theory because he proved his argument) and are probably unaware that the man who has caused them so much heartache once contemplated a career in the church.

Darwin's work encouraged us to think of ourselves as being cohabitants of the planet earth, rather than the only inhabitants of significance. The whole ecological and environmental movement is built to a large extent upon his theories. Darwinian terms such as 'the survival of the fittest' and 'the struggle for existence' have become part of our vocabulary. As, indeed, has the word 'Darwinian'.

Many of the people I have written about in this book were responsible for work which would have been produced by others if they had not lived. It is easy to argue that this is especially true of

Darwin. If he had not written *The Origin of Species* then eventually someone else would have written something similar.

But Darwin did write *The Origin of Species.*

And his work changed our view of our world and our species.

Humphry Davy
(1778-1829)

Humphry Davy is perhaps best remembered for his Davy Safety Lamp, designed in 1815. At the beginning of the 19th century the greatest danger miners faced was the risk of an explosion caused when the flame in their lamps ignited underground inflammable gases. It was a serious and very real risk. Davy's solution was to design a lamp in which the flame inside was protected from whatever gases might be in the outer air by a shield of metal gauze. The gauze greatly reduced the risk of explosions. (George Stephenson, the Englishman whose steam locomotive introduced rail travel to the world, also invented a safety lamp for miners at about the same time. There was some dispute between the two men about whose invention had come first.)

Davy, however, should be remembered for much more than a safety lamp for miners.

Born in Penzance, the son of a wood-carver, the young Davy was educated there and in nearby Truro. In 1797, he took up chemistry and was given a job as an assistant by Thomas Beddoes at the Medical Pneumatic Institution in Bristol. It was here that Davy did his early work on gases, work that ensured that he had established a tremendous reputation as a scientist by the time he reached his early 20's. In 1799, when he was just 21 years old, he discovered the anaesthetic effect of the gas nitrous oxide. This discovery enabled doctors to anaesthetise patients when operating on them and it was a major contribution in the development of surgery. During the same year he also published *Researches, Chemical and Philosophical* which, in 1801, led to him being employed as a lecturer at the Royal Institution.

Davy was one of the first exponents of the scientific method first proposed by Francis Bacon. He did crucial and ground-breaking research on voltaic cells and on batteries, electrolysis, tanning and mineral analysis. In 1806, he gave a lecture entitled *On Some Chemical Agencies of Electricity* and in 1813 he wrote *Elements of Agricultural Chemistry* in which he applied chemical principles systematically to farming. His work revolutionised agriculture and helped to dramatically improve crop production on farms.

He was the first scientist in the world to isolate a number of elements, including barium, calcium, magnesium, potassium, sodium and strontium. He discovered boron and studied chlorine and iodine. He proved that diamonds are a form of carbon and he analysed many pigments used in the dye industry.

Davy had, over the years, become a hugely popular lecturer at the Royal Institution. Audiences loved his eloquence and the fact that he performed experiments live on stage. At a lecture Davy gave in the early 19th century one of the students was a man called Michael Faraday. The young Faraday was so impressed that he asked Davy if he could work for him. To his credit, Davy overlooked Faraday's lack of qualifications, recognised his abilities, and gave him a job as his assistant.

In 1812, Davy was knighted and shortly afterwards he married Jane Apreece, a wealthy widow. He travelled abroad a good deal and took Faraday with him to investigate theories of volcanic action.

Despite all his great discoveries there is no doubt that in his lifetime it was that safety lamp that brought Davy most prestige. It was the public acclaim the lamp attracted that helped lead to him being made president of the Royal Society of London in 1820.

Humphry Davy was a talented and energetic professional scientist. But he should also be remembered for making science popular with the general public and, perhaps even more importantly, for 'selling' the idea of science to businessmen and industrialists.

Daniel Defoe

(1660-1731)

Daniel Defoe's life was as packed with adventure as that of any storybook hero - including the eponymous hero of the novel *Robinson Crusoe.* But Defoe was real. He was the world's first realistic novelist, a fearless political campaigner, the world's first campaigning and investigative journalist and the publisher of one of the world's first newspapers. He was a merchant, a soldier and a tireless traveller and worked as a secret agent in Scotland for William III. He even spent some time in prison and a spell in the pillory for his work as a political pamphleteer. He was, in truth, a real adventurer.

Born the son of a butcher in Stoke Newington, London, Daniel Defoe travelled widely in Europe before setting up in the hosiery trade in London when he was just 23 years old. He took part in Monmouth's rebellion and joined William III's army in 1688. Until 1704 he was an enthusiastic supporter of the King's party and in 1701 earned royal favour with his satirical poem *The True-born Englishman* which was an attack on xenophobic prejudice.

He began writing as a pamphleteer in 1791, and quickly showed himself to be a brave and caring writer. In 1697 he published *An Essay Upon Projects* which proposed paving the highways, enlarging the Bank of England, instituting friendly societies, reforming the bankruptcy laws and abolishing press gangs. He wrote pamphlets showing how and why people become gamblers or beggars. He exposed the way that institutions often encourage swindling. He pleaded for the higher education of women and for a more humane treatment of lunatics. He always wrote in a fluent, fast, easy to read prose style.

When Queen Anne was on the throne he got into trouble with another satire entitled *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters,* which he wrote in 1702. The irony was so subtle that it at first deceived the authorities but once they understood the meaning of the book Defoe ended up with a massive fine, a spell in the pillory and a term of imprisonment 'at the Queen's pleasure'.

While in Newgate prison he continued to write pamphlets. He wrote one on Occasional Conformity and he even wrote his *Hymn to the Pillory* while in prison.

He was released from prison in 1704, and he quickly founded a newspaper called *The Review* which he wrote and published three times a week until 1713. *The Review* included articles on political and domestic topics and introduced the idea of newspapers publishing leading articles and editorials. He wrote not just to clear his debts but in order to criticise the many things he felt were unjust in society.

While he was writing *The Review* (he wrote the whole of the paper himself) Defoe produced a vast number of pamphlets and a ghost story called *The Apparition of One Mrs Veal* which was, he claimed, a true account of something that had actually happened. (He realised even then that readers would enjoy a novel much more if they believed it to be true. He did this by writing about believable characters in realistic situations and by using simple, easy to read prose. It was Defoe who invented the realistic novel – the type of novel we now recognise as fiction.) He also created, wrote and published a supplement to *The Review* called *Mercure Scandale: or Advice from the Scandalous Club, being a Weekly History of Nonsense, Impertinence, Vice and Debauchery* in which he recorded any private or official act which he thought worth exposing to the ridicule of his readers. (Defoe was, therefore, the first newspaper proprietor to add a supplement to his newspaper).

Defoe wrote an apparently endless number of pamphlets on a huge range of subjects, including travel, politics, religion, geography and the supernatural. Much of his political writing was in the form of satire and although he was popular with the public he made a number of powerful enemies. The people in authority didn't like his attacking, fearless style.

Between 1704 and 1714 Defoe worked as a double agent and undertook a number of secret missions for the Tories. In 1715, he wrote a justification of this episode of his life entitled *Appeal to Honour and Justice.* After the closure of his own newspaper he founded another publication called *Mercurius Politicus,* in which he published hundreds of essays. And he was a prolific contributor to a number of other journals which sprang up during that period. His sympathy was always with the outcasts and the failures. He wrote sympathetically about the consequences of the South Sea Bubble and he supported the starving hay-makers in 1722. He wrote an article attacking the practice of flogging in the army. He wrote about the return to England of transported felons. He had a great insight into, and sympathy for, human beings who were exposed to the rough edges of life.

In 1715, exhausted by the realities of the world, he started writing fiction with great vigour, though he always insisted that all his novels were about people who really existed and about occurrences that really happened. He told his stories in the coarse but racy style of the common people of the time. He cared far more for his story than for grammar. He brilliantly rendered life as he saw it. These later books, though they were in truth novels, give us a tremendous insight into life in the early 18th century.

Defoe’s three greatest novels are undoubtedly *The Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, Moll Flanders and A Journal of the Plague Year* (which was written as a diary but was in fact a novel). The enormously successful and famous book about Robinson Crusoe was based on an interview Defoe did with a Scottish sailor named Alexander Selkirk, who had been shipwrecked for several years on a remote Pacific island.

Defoe was nearly 60 when he published *The Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* which first appeared in serial form in a newspaper called the *London Post.* His later novels include *Roxana, Memoirs of a Cavalier, Captain Singleton and Captain Jack.*

While producing these remarkably successful novels Defoe continued to write a huge variety of non-fiction. Between 1724 and 1727 he wrote a three volume travel book called *Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain.* His other non-fiction books included *The Great Law of Subordination Considered, The Complete English Tradesman, Plan of the English Commerce* and *Augusta Trimphans, or the Way to make London the Most Flourishing City in the Universe.* In all his works he showed a great grasp of detail and an intuitive understanding which enabled him to forecast how the world would turnout. He was a courageous man and an extraordinarily prolific and versatile author and by the time he died he had published more than 250 works. Every word he wrote was, of course, written out by hand.

Charles Dickens
(1812-1870)

The great English novelist Charles Dickens was born at Landport, Portsea on 7 February 1812, the son of Elizabeth and John Dickens. Charles Dickens was the second of eight children (two of whom died in infancy).

In 1814, Charles Dickens' father, a clerk in the Navy Pay Office at Portsmouth dockyard, was transferred to London and then to the dockyard at Chatham in Kent. The young Dickens' years at Chatham were a very happy period in his life.

As a child, Charles Dickens was exceptionally clever; he was also gregarious, enthusiastic, ambitious, hard-working, self-willed and extremely observant. He was, however, also extraordinarily sensitive. Dickens' sensitive nature made him very susceptible to slights throughout his life; whether the slights were real or imagined.

Sadly, Charles Dickens' happy time at Chatham was about to change when his father was recalled to Somerset House, London. The nine-year-old Charles Dickens was removed from the school he loved, and the whole family moved to a rented two-story terraced house in one of the poorest parts of Camden Town.

Although John Dickens had a decent job, the family was struggling financially. The problem was that John Dickens, a kind-hearted, generous and hard-working man, had a love of grandiose display that no amount of hard work could support. He lived far above his means and was improvident and totally reckless with money. Later in life Charles Dickens would have to help out his father on many occasions.

After Charles Dickens moved to Camden Town, he did not attend school straight away; instead, he helped his mother around the house and carried out errands for his family. His new life in the capital city was a world apart from the happy life he had experienced in Chatham.

Charles Dickens' lack of schooling at this time left him feeling thoroughly neglected by his family, especially since his sister, Fanny, was studying at the Royal Academy of Music. Most children would be thrilled to be out of school but Charles Dickens was the antithesis of the typical schoolboy. He wanted an education; he wanted to make a name for himself

Shortly after Christmas in 1823, the Dickens family moved to Gower Street where the rent on their new home was twice what it had been. Charles Dickens' mother, Elizabeth, had suggested that they should move to Gower Street so that she could set up a school and, hopefully, make good money from it. Sadly, despite dropping leaflets through letterboxes advertising 'Mrs Dickens' Establishment', nobody came and Charles Dickens was sent to the local pawnshops to pledge pieces of the family's silver in order to help generate a bit of income.

Two days after Dickens' 12th birthday his hopes of being sent back to school were dashed when he was sent to work in a boot-blacking factory to bring in more money. He was heartbroken. At the blacking factory, called Warren's Blacking at 30 Hungerford Stairs, the Strand, he had to prepare the pots of blacking for sale. This involved placing covers on the pots of paste-blacking, tying the covers with string and pasting printed labels onto the pots. 'No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk into this companionship,' wrote Dickens much later. 'My early hope of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man crushed in my breast.' Dickens worked at Warren's for 10 hours a day. Alongside him worked a boy called Bob Fagin whose name was later immortalised in *Oliver Twist.*

Very shortly after Dickens had started work at the blacking factory, his spendthrift father was arrested and subsequently sent to the Marshalsea debtors' prison. Elizabeth and the youngest children moved into Marshalsea later on while Dickens went to lodge with a friend of the family.

On Dickens' first visit to Marshalsea Prison his father told him to be warned by what he saw and to observe that if a man had twenty pounds a year, and spent nineteen pounds nineteen shillings and sixpence, he would be happy; but that a shilling spent the other way would make him wretched. His father's piece of advice was later immortalised in the novel *David Copperfield* when Mr Micawber says to the young David: 'Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen nineteen six, result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds nought and six, result misery.' The character Mr Micawber in *David Copperfield* was largely based on Charles's father. Of all his work, David Copperfield is the closest portrayal of Charles Dickens' life. Dickens often used relatives as the basis for his characters. Paul Dombey Jr. in *Dombey and Son* was based on his disabled nephew, Henry Burnett. Tiny Tim was originally called Tiny Fred after Dickens' younger brother.

Dickens' miserable and lonely time at Warren's Blacking factory had an enormous impact on him. It was an episode in his life that was to haunt him and to inspire him later on to write about the poor with such great empathy, sensitivity and compassion. Charles Dickens wrote much about the life of the poor in London and the injustices done to them. Just about every single piece of his work carried a social message. Charles Dickens was fascinated by London and in later years would take long midnight walks around the city just observing the people on the streets.

After 14 weeks in prison john Dickens was released. His brother had paid off one of the debts that had prompted his arrest. In 1825, after service of around 20 years, John Dickens retired from the Navy Pay Office on a fixed pension of £145 a year. He was still slowly paying off his debts. He took up a career in journalism.

Much to Charles Dickens' delight, he was finally sent to school. His new school was to be at the Wellington House Academy, Mornington Place, which he attended for nearly two years. Dickens' mother, Elizabeth, wasn't happy that her husband had removed his son from the blacking factory and even made arrangements to send him back there. Thankfully, John Dickens put his foot down and her son never returned to the factory. Understandably, Dickens never forgave his mother for this and the character Mrs Nickleby in his novel *Nicholas Nickleby* was probably based on her.

Dickens now started writing for reward. He would write stories on scraps of paper, pin the scraps together and sell them to the other boys at Wellington House Academy for a piece of slate pencil.

After two years at the Wellington House Academy, Charles Dickens had to leave. Once again, his father was broke. In May 1827, at the age of 15, Charles Dickens acquired a job as a solicitor's junior clerk. In 1829, Dickens went on to become a shorthand reporter. He had learnt shorthand in his spare time.

In the spring of 1830, Charles Dickens became deeply infatuated with Maria Beadnell, a good-looking woman who was fifteen months older than him. It was a courtship that lasted for several years but came to nothing. Maria Beadnell was a renowned flirt and probably eventually rebuffed him because her parents believed him to be an undesirable suitor. Flora Flitching in *Little Dorrit* is said to be based on an encounter Dickens had with Maria Beadnell years later when she had become a rather fat, middle-aged woman.

In 1831, at the age of 19, Charles Dickens joined the parliamentary staff of the *Mirror of Parliament*, a journal, founded by his uncle, which provided a regular account of the proceedings in the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Charles Dickens' work involved attending Parliament and keeping a shorthand record of events that occurred there. Charles Dickens' quickly acquired reputation among London journalists as a skilled shorthand reporter brought him work for the evening journal called the *True Sun*.

At that time, Dickens had serious ambitions to follow a career as an actor. He had a great love of the theatre (which stayed with him all his life) and wrote to Mr Bartley, the stage manager of Covent Garden theatre, to try to get work acting on stage. Mr Bartley invited him to an audition. But on the day of Dickens' audition, he fell ill and was laid up in bed. In the months that were to follow, he obtained work with the *Morning Chronicle* and forgot about a career as a professional actor. If Dickens' audition had been successful, he may never have become a novelist. However, Dickens' missed audition didn't take away his enthusiasm for acting. He involved himself in amateur theatricals on many occasions throughout his life and later became renowned for his readings from his novels.

The missed audition incident was not the first time that illness had shaped Dickens' destiny. Whilst growing up, Charles was a rather sickly little boy which meant that he could not join in with the games his friends played. Instead, he would occupy himself with the many books that he had discovered in his attic bedroom. Undoubtedly, Dickens' prolific reading as a child played a part in making him the great writer he turned out to be.

In 1833, Dickens turned to writing fiction and he nervously submitted one of his stories to the *Monthly Magazine* (which was then called the *Old Monthly Magazine*). Much to his delight, when he bought the next issue of the magazine, he discovered that his story, *A Dinner at Poplar Walk,* had been printed. Over the +following months, Dickens wrote nine more stories for the *Monthly Magazine*. Dickens also began contributing stories to the *Morning Chronic*le using the pen name of Boz (the nickname of his youngest brother, Augustus). These short stories proved so popular that they were collected together in two volumes and published, in 1836. The volumes were called *Sketches with Boz*.

Although he was regularly contributing stories to various publications, Dickens still continued working in the press gallery of the House of Commons for the *Morning Chronicle*.

On 2 April 1836, Charles Dickens' improved income from his writing success allowed him to marry Catherine Hogarth. (They would separate in 1858). Dickens met Catherine Hogarth when her father became editor of the *Evening Chronicle* (an offshoot of the *Morning Chronicle*). Her father was a fan of Dickens' stories.

Together, Catherine and Charles Dickens had ten children. One of their children, Dora, died in infancy. Catherine's sister Mary stayed with Dickens and his wife at 48 Doughty Street, London until her premature death on 7 May 1837. Dickens was devastated by her death because he shared a special bond with the sweet-natured Mary. The bond was so strong in fact, that he kept all her clothes and removed a ring from her finger and wore it for the rest of his life. He even told people that he wanted to be buried in the same grave as his sister-in-law. Mary's epitaph, which Dickens wrote was as follows, 'Young, beautiful, and good, God numbered her among his angels at the early age of seventeen.'

It was the serial stories *The Pickwick Papers* (published by Chapman and Hall), which brought Charles Dickens the fame that he craved as a writer. The monthly serial started slowly (with only 400 copies of the first number being sold) but by the 15th number, the novel was selling a staggering 40,000 copies of each number. *Pickwick Papers* was Charles Dickens first novel. He was only 24 years old.

Most of Charles Dickens' novels were originally published in a monthly serial format. Charles Dickens' major works include: *Sketches by Bo*z (1836), *The Pickwick Papers* (1837), *Oliver Twist* (1838), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839), *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), *A Christmas Caro*l (1843), *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844), *Dombey and Son* (1848), *David Copperfield* (1850), *Bleak House* (1853), *Hard Times* (1854), *Little Dorrit* (1857), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *Great Expectation*s (1861), and *Our Mutual Frien*d (1865).

Charles Dickens' serialisations were like the soap operas of today, except he was the only scriptwriter. Many people, old and young, would look forward to the next episode of his latest story. Queen Victoria was one of his fans. No other author before him had reached a wider audience. Even those who weren't literate had the opportunity to enjoy his stories by attending public readings. Dickens' colourful characters and his wonderful prose made him an exceptionally revered author.

He was also very influential. Dickens' portrayal of the poor in his stories brought their plight to the public's attention. He altered people's attitudes to the impoverished and the downtrodden. Not only did he write about the poor in his fiction but he also helped the poor in real life through various charities and by spontaneously giving money to downtrodden people he came across in the street. Charles Dickens, along with a Miss Burdett-Coutts, even set up a home for fallen women in Shepherds Bush. He was a philanthropist who cared passionately about society's forgotten people.

Although Charles Dickens' main profession was as a novelist, he still continued his work in journalism until the end of his life. In November 1836, he agreed to edit (as well as contribute stories to) a new magazine called *Bentley's Miscellany.* He edited *Bentley's Miscellany* for several years before resigning from the editorship. It was in *Bentley's Miscellany* that *Oliver Twist* was first serialised. The day after Dickens had reached an agreement with the publisher, Richard Bentley, he left the parliamentary staff at the *Morning Chronicle.* Dickens was now his own employer and he worked incredibly hard. When he was editing *Bentley's Miscellany* he was reading at least 60 manuscripts a month for possible publication as well as carrying out other editorial tasks for the magazine. All this on top of writing his various monthly serials, family commitments, and his extremely active social life. Dickens possessed an enormous zest for life and appeared never to have wasted a minute of his 58 years on earth.

In 1840, Dickens founded, edited and contributed to a weekly serial magazine called *Master Humphrey's Clock*. Dickens' new literary enterprise lasted for a year, and in that short time the magazine contained two of his famous works, *Barnaby Rudg*e and *The Old Curiosity Shop.* In 1846, Charles Dickens became the first editor (for 18 days before resigning) of what was to become a leading radical liberal newspaper, the *Daily News*, a newspaper that he had largely planned. Then in 1850, Charles Dickens founded, contributed to and edited the magazine, *Household Words.* The magazine proved to be extremely popular and lasted for nine years. He also founded the weekly journal *All the Year Round.*

Dickens' fame as an author wasn't confined to England – his fame was growing around the world. In 1842, he left his home in Devonshire Terrace and toured America and Canada for six months with his wife. His trip resulted in the rather controversial book *American Notes.* Dickens also utilised some of his less than kind observations about America in his novel *Martin Chuzzlewit*. He made a second trip to America in 1867.

Dickens travelled rather extensively during his life. As well as America and Canada, he travelled to Scotland, Italy, France and Switzerland. Naturally, he wrote books about his travels.

In 1855, Charles Dickens finally bought the house, Gad's Hill Place, at Higham, near Rochester in Kent, that he had longed for since he was a young boy. He used to pass the house when he was a boy during some of the long walks he took with his father. One day, his father pointed to Gad's Hill Place and told the young Charles: 'If you were to be very persevering and were to work hard, you might some day come to live in it'.

Forty years later, Charles did just that.

Throughout most of his life, Charles Dickens felt very strongly about the plight of the poor and the mistreatment of children. The mistreatment of pupils at Dotheboys Hall in *Nicholas Nickleby* was inspired by his visit in 1838 to several Yorkshire schools that were renowned for their brutality. The book *Nicholas Nickleby* led to the closure of several Yorkshire schools where pupils were being beaten and neglected. Dickens also felt strongly about slavery, and advocated the abolition of slavery during his trip to America in 1842. He also spoke out many times against the American Copyright Laws, which he felt were unjust to English writers.

In 1858, Dickens travelled across the country to do a series of paid readings (nearly 500 in all) from his writings. These public readings no doubt gave some fulfilment in his love of performing.

Shortly after Dickens separated from Catherine Hogarth in 1858, he began a relationship with a young actress (27 years his junior) named Ellen Ternan with whom he fell deeply in love. Their relationship was kept secret.

On 9 June 1870, at the age of just 58, Charles Dickens died of a stroke, leaving *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* unfinished. The whole nation mourned his passing. He had, among other things, helped stamp out child labour, abolish cruel boarding schools, and end public executions.

No man in the world ever did more to improve the society in which he lived, or that which would follow. He was buried at Poet’s Corner, Westminster Abbey. The inscription on his tombstone reads: ‘He was a sympathiser to the poor, the suffering and the oppressed; and by his death, one of England’s greatest writers is lost to the world’.

Dickens wasn’t just a great novelist; he was also one of the world’s most potent and successful social reformers and campaigners.

Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (aka Lewis Carroll)
(1832-1898)

Charles Lutwidge Dodgson was an author, Anglican clergyman, outstanding mathematician, logician and accomplished photographer. He enriched the lives of millions of children (and adults) worldwide with his wonderful stories and with characters such as Alice, Tweedledee and Tweedledum, the White Rabbit, the Mad Hatter and the March Hare.

Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (Lewis Carroll was the pseudonym he used when writing his fantasy stories) was the third of eleven children. He was born in 1832 in Daresbury, Cheshire the son of Frances Jane and the Reverend Charles Dodgson.

Dodgson received his early education at home, where he was taught by his mother and, subsequently, by his father. He was a very intelligent child with an active mind, who loved storytelling and reading; he read John Bunyan's classic *The Pilgrim's Progress* at seven years of age. The young Dodgson also enjoyed inventing games and creating perplexing, logical puzzles in order to confuse his family and friends. Creating puzzles to astonish and confuse those around him was something which he enjoyed doing all his life.

Along with most of his siblings, Dodgson suffered a speech impairment as a child, which he never grew out of. He often sought cures for his affliction, but with little success.

When Dodgson was 11-years-old, his family moved to North Yorkshire, where they lived in a large rectory. Less than a year later, at the age of 12, Dodgson attended a small private school ten miles away at Richmond, where he was said to have been very happy. In 1846, he moved on to Rugby School where, unlike his previous school, he was bullied and very miserable.

Six feet tall, slender and attractive Dodgson went up to Oxford in 1851 but after just two days there he received a summons to return home because his mother had died. Dodgson's unmarried aunt, Lucy Lutwidge, moved in to look after the family and stayed with them for the rest of her life.

In 1854, Dodgson graduated from Oxford, receiving a First Class Honours in mathematics. He was hard-working and exceptionally gifted; achievement seemed to come easily to him. His genius as a mathematician resulted in him being awarded the Christ Church Oxford Mathematical Lectureship in 1855, which he held until 1881. Dodgson published a number of mathematical works under his own name.

Dodgson had been prepared for the ordained ministry in the Anglican Church from a young age and, as one of the conditions for retaining his residency at Oxford, he was expected to take Holy Orders within four years of acquiring his degree. But, he successfully managed to persuade the Dean of the college to let him stay at Christ Church College without having to take priestly orders (although he eventually had to take deacon's orders in 1861). Not taking orders was unique amongst Senior Students at the time. It is possible that Dodgson was reluctant to become a priest because he loved going to the theatre – and would not have been able to go if he'd taken orders.

As a youngster, Dodgson often enjoyed writing short stories and poetry, and contributed a great deal to a little magazine that he and members of his family put together for their own entertainment, but it wasn't until he was in his 20's that his writings started to appear in national publications such as *The Comic Times* and *The Train.* It was in *The Train* that Dodgson's pseudonym Lewis Carroll first appeared. Yates, the editor of the publication, chose the name from a list of four names which Dodgson had given him. (The name 'Lewis' is the anglicised version of Lutwig or Lutwidge – Dodgson's second Christian name. And Carroll is a form of 'Charles'.)

In 1856, Dodgson acquired a camera, which was to start a hobby that was to last 25 years. He took thousands of photographs of family, friends, works of art, and scenes of the Lake District. He took many photos of children but always with their parents' permission. Later on, his literary connections allowed him to take photographs of the rich and famous, including Tennyson and the Rossettis.

In 1865, Dodgson saw the publication of his most famous book, *Alice in Wonderland.* Sir John Tenniel did the illustrations as well as those for its sequel, *Through the Looking Glass* (1872).

Alice in Wonderland is based on stories he told to amuse the Liddell children, especially Alice Liddell who was the daughter of his friend, the Dean of Christ Church College. The famous book originated from a boat trip he took with Alice and her sisters. If Alice Liddell had not have insisted that he wrote down the story for her, the book probably would never have existed. Dodgson adored the company of children, and children adored his company too. He especially empathised with little girls, probably because he wanted to recapture the fun and games he enjoyed with his many sisters when he was a young boy. He would often invent games, puzzles and tricks, as well as stories, to amuse them.

Dodgson published *Alice in Wonderland* himself and paid for the first 2000 copies. Most of the first edition had to be destroyed because the artist was unhappy with the book's illustrations.

The humour and preposterousness of his books fascinated adults as well as children. *Alice in Wonderland* and its sequel became hugely famous all around the world. Queen Victoria loved Carroll's humour and asked him to send her a copy of his next book. She was probably surprised (and perhaps disappointed) to receive a copy of the mathematician's serious tome entitled *Euclid and his Modern Rivals.*

Dodgson's other works include the narrative nonsense poem *The Hunting of the Snark* (1876), *Rhyme? and Reason? (1883),* and the children's novels *Sylvie and Bruno (1889)* and *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded (1893).* As well as books, Dodgson also wrote articles and pamphlets on vivisection: a practice that he strongly opposed. He wasn't quite so good at writing letters; it was not unknown for him to reply to a letter ten years after receiving it and long after the writer had forgotten what he'd written about.

On 14 January 1898, Charles Dodgson died from pneumonia at his sister's home in Guildford, Surrey. After a simple funeral (at his request), he was buried in Guildford.

John Donne
(1572-1631)

John Donne was the leader of a 17th century group of poets known as the ‘Metaphysical Poets’ whose philosophy was to search constantly for new knowledge and for new meanings in words and ideas.

Born in London to prosperous parents (his father was a successful ironmonger) Donne became a lawyer and adventurer, a scholar and a clergyman. His parents were Catholics and his mother was a great-niece of the martyr Sir Thomas More. Both his parents and his sisters died when he was still quite young.

Although he, like his family, was Roman Catholic the young Donne went to Oxford University at the age of 11 (Catholicism was illegal at the time and Catholics were usually banned from attending the university) and after three years went to Cambridge for another few years of study. His religion meant that he could not obtain a degree from either university. After leaving Cambridge, at the age of 19, he studied law in London. He inherited a good deal of money from his father but it didn’t last long. He spent most of it on books, hobbies, travel and women – though not necessarily in that order.

In his 20’s he joined Sir Walter Ralegh *(aka Raleigh)* and the 2nd Earl of Essex on two expeditions. The first took him to Cadiz in 1597. The second was to the Azores in 1598. He then travelled in Italy and Spain for a while.

On returning to London, Donne became secretary to Sir Thomas Egerton, the keeper of the Great Seal and it looked as though he was going to have a successful career in the diplomatic service. He then made a bad career move by marrying Egerton’s niece, Anne More. The problem was that the marriage had been forbidden both by Anne’s father and by Sir Thomas.

The marriage resulted in him being fired, arrested and thrown into prison. The priest and a witness were also imprisoned. Donne managed to get out of prison by proving that the marriage was perfectly valid. He sent a note to his wife saying ‘John Donne, Anne Donne, Un-done’.

Having no career left, Donne and his bride moved to Surrey where they stayed with relatives of his wife. Donne worked as a country lawyer and his wife had almost annual babies, having 12 in the next 16 years. Several of them died. In a despairing, black- humoured note Donne wrote that the death of a child meant one less mouth to feed but involved funeral expenses he couldn’t afford. During this time Donne wrote a defence of suicide which was not published until much later.

In 1602, Donne was elected the Member of Parliament for Brackley, but MPs weren’t paid at the time and his abject poverty was still a real problem. In 1610, Donne wrote two anti-Catholic poems, possibly in the hope of resurrecting his career, and in 1615, probably fed up with relying on handouts from wealthy friends and patrons, was ordained into the Church of England. It has to be remembered that many of his friends and family had been tortured and executed for being Catholic. His brother had died in Newgate prison after been arrested for harbouring a Catholic priest. (The priest had been tortured on the rack, hanged until nearly dead and then disembowelled while still alive.)

Anne Donne died in 1617, days after giving birth to a stillborn child (their twelfth). Donne was devastated and never remarried.

Donne was writing poetry all this time but although he allowed manuscripts to be read by friends he published very little. He wrote erotic poems and he wrote savage, critical satires about legal corruption, pompous courtiers and second-rate poets.

Once he had become a Protestant, Donne found that his career started to rise once more. He obtained a Doctor of Divinity degree from Cambridge University in 1618 and visited Germany as chaplain to Viscount Doncaster. In 1621, he was appointed Dean of St Paul’s Cathedral in London. This was an important and well-paid position which Donne held until he died in 1631. When he preached there people crowded in to hear him speak.

As a poet he wrote some of the best known lines in the English language. His range was vast: he wrote witty poems, erotic poems and devotional poems; he wrote satires, songs and sermons. His style was unique, both in the personal and spiritual nature of the content, and in the rhythms and images he used. (Ben Jonson, the playwright, said that Donne deserved to be hung ‘for not keeping of accent’.) His poetry was full of clever puns, unusual ideas and original thinking. His first published book of poetry, *Anniversarie*, did not appear until he was 39 and much of his other poetry was not published until after his death though it was circulated in manuscript form during his lifetime. Unlike his predecessors, John Donne introduced personal feelings into poetry.

In his 50’s, after another daughter had died and he had been severely ill, Donne wrote a series of prayers and meditations on sickness, pain and health. These were published under the collective title of *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*. One of the meditations in the book contained the phrases ‘no man is an island’ and ‘for whom the bell tolls’. Ernest Hemingway used the line ‘*For Whom the Bell Tolls*’ as the title of a book.

There seems little doubt that the deaths of so many people close to him, financial worries and ill health all led to the change in his poetry. His early work was sharp, witty and (for the time) erotic. His later work was much more pious and rather gloomy. During his last illness Donne had a painting done of himself wrapped in a funeral shroud. An effigy, in white marble, based upon the painting, survived the Great Fire of London in 1666, and is now in St Paul's Cathedral.

Donne got out of bed when he was dying to deliver the Death's Duel sermon in which he portrayed life as a slow descent into suffering and death, lightened only by the hope of salvation and immortality through embracing God. It must have cheered the congregation no end.

Francis Drake
(1540-1596)

He was a naval hero and England's best loved sea captain, but he was also a pirate. He was an explorer but also a buccaneer. Born in Devon, the son of a poor tenant farmer, he went to sea at the age of 13 and gained a reputation as an outstanding seaman.

In 1577, Drake was commissioned by Elizabeth I to lead an expedition to South America. He set sail from Plymouth Sound to show King Philip that an Englishman could reach the Pacific as easily as a Spaniard. He set out with four ships – the Pelican, the Elizabeth and two very small ships – intending to travel half way around the world, in unknown, uncharted seas, and to fight every Spaniard he could catch.

He sailed down the West Coast of Africa, across the Atlantic, and down the coast of America and then, at the worst time of year, sailed through the newly discovered Straits of Magellan. Before they got there Drake had to put down a mutiny on one of the smaller ships. He chased the mutineers, captained by Thomas Doughty, took the crew aboard the Pelican and burnt the ship. Doughty was tried for treachery and desertion, found guilty, sentenced to death and executed.

With no charts the three ships struggled between mountainous walls of ice and eventually reached the Pacific. There they faced six weeks of gales. The second small vessel was sunk and the Pelican and the Elizabeth were separated. The captain of the Elizabeth now gave up, turned round and sailed back. Drake went on. In a vessel of just 120 tons he found a harbour where he and his men could rest and repair their ship. Then he sailed up the coast of South America, attacking one port after another. The Spaniards had never suspected that an English vessel would reach such a distant point, and their ships were unprepared and their ports were unprotected.

At Valparaiso, Drake took a big galleon which was stuffed with great wedges of pure gold. At Tarapaca he took a mass of silver, in bars, which had been brought down from the mines. At Arica he found more silver. At Lima he was told that a ship that had just sailed northwards, called the Cacafuego, was full of treasure. Drake chased after it, fired a shot through the main mast and a hail of arrows onto the deck. He took possession of a vast treasure of gold, silver, rubies, emeralds, diamonds but decided that he had now damaged the Spanish sufficiently. He set the Cacafuego free. But the Spaniards were not about to let him go so easily. Three Spanish cruisers, fully armed, pursued Drake's single ship. Instead of running, Drake shortened sail to allow them to catch up with him. This so terrified the Spanish captains that all three of them turned and fled without firing a shot, swearing that they would not fight a captain who was so plainly not a man but a devil.

Drake now had to get home.

His first plan was to find a way back into the Atlantic, through what we now call the North West Passage, but after sailing north up the coast of California (which he named New Albion and claimed for Elizabeth), and finding no opening, he decided to sail south again. He set off across the Pacific Ocean and sailed across the Indian oceans and around the world. There were adventures galore to come.

Off the coast of Java the ship struck a reef But Drake sailed on, round the Cape of Good Hope, up the West Coast of Africa and back to Plymouth Sound. Almost by accident he and his crew became the first men to sail around the world. He returned home laden with treasure taken from Spanish ships.

The voyage had taken three years and the Pelican had 'marked a furrow around the globe with her keel'. Queen Elizabeth commanded that the Pelican (which was renamed the Golden Hind) be brought up to the Thames. There the Queen went on board one of the most famous of all English ships and Francis Drake, adventurer and explorer, became Sir Francis Drake, knighted for services to his Queen and the nation. He was also made mayor of Plymouth.

In 1587, when England was at war with Spain, Drake sailed into Cadiz harbour, setting fire to the ships of the Spanish fleet which were lying at anchor. It was an incident known as 'singeing the King of Spain's beard'.

In 1588, it was vice admiral Drake who interrupted his game of bowls on Plymouth Hoe to harass the Spanish Armada as it sailed up the Channel.

When the seemingly indestructible Drake finally died, succumbing to fever on a voyage to the West Indies, he was, of course, buried at sea.

Edward Elgar
(1857-1934)

Sir Edward Elgar, the moustachioed man who adorned England's twenty pound notes for a while (on the 150th anniversary of his birth, his face was replaced by that of Scottish economist Adam Smith, a foreign rogue whose ideas were lifted directly from the work of the much earlier English economist William Petty) and the man who brought to our ears such magnificent and delightful works as the *Salut d'Amour*, the *Enigma Variations* and the *Pomp and Circumstance* marches, was without a doubt one of England's greatest composers. His main inspiration for his work was reputed to be the Malvern Hills where he once lived.

Sir Edward Elgar is credited for bringing about a renaissance of English choral music by blending the gentler English themes with the romantic style of the European classical composers. The tune of the famous song *Land of Hope and Glory* is No 1 of his *Pomp and Circumstance Marches.*

One of seven children, Edward William Elgar was born in Lower Broadheath near Worcester on 2 June 1857 to Ann and William Elgar. His father was a piano tuner, music shop owner and local church organist.

Despite having been surrounded by lots of siblings, Elgar was a solitary and introspective child. His well-read, artistic mother once described her son as being 'nervous, sensitive and kind'.

As a young boy, Elgar received some music tuition and showed great talent as a pianist, especially in improvisation. His father would often take him to his rich clients to show off his talents. Elgar also became very proficient on the organ and, his favourite instrument, the violin – an instrument on which he was largely self-taught.

In 1863, at the age of six, Elgar attended the Roman Catholic 'dame school' in Britannia Square Worcester. There, he received pianoforte lessons and music theory tuition. He left school at the age of 15 in 1872. The family didn't have enough money for him to follow his dream of going to Leipzig to study music and so he went to work in a solicitor's office, which he found rather dreary.

A year later he left his job to give violin lessons to students and to work in his father's shop in Worcester's High Street. Although he had received some music tuition, Elgar mainly taught himself music theory by studying books and by experimenting with the instruments in his father's shop.

Along with his father, Elgar was a member of the Worcester Glee Club where he composed, played the violin and even conducted. He also played the violin at the Worcester Festival and in the Birmingham orchestra.

In 1879, he was appointed conductor for the County of Worcester Lunatic Asylum at Powick Orchestra. It was whilst working as conductor there that he composed some of his earliest pieces. Elgar also worked as organist in the local St George's Roman Catholic Church, succeeding his father in the post.

Through his teaching, Elgar met his future wife, Caroline Alice Roberts, who was 8 years his senior and the daughter of a late Major General. They married in 1889 despite opposition from her aunts (both of her parents were dead) who disapproved because of Elgar's lack of wealth. Together, they had one daughter whom they named Carice (a contraction of Caroline Alice). With the encouragement of his wife, who believed it would help advance his musical career, they moved to London. The move to London proved unsuccessful, so they moved back home to Great Malvern for a while before moving to London again. Elgar's wife possessed an unshakeable belief in her husband's genius, and her love and encouragement gave an enormous boost to his musical career.

Although Elgar was gaining a reputation in the 1890's as a composer, mainly for the works he did for the great choral festivals of the English Midlands, he still wasn't getting much national or international recognition.

However, finally, in 1899, Elgar's first major orchestral work, his *Enigma Variations* followed a year later by the oratorio, *The Dream of Gerontius,* brought Elgar the fame he rightly deserved and established his position as one of the world's leading composers.

Less than five years after his success with *Enigma Variations* and *The Dream of Gerontius,* Elgar was knighted. In 1924, Elgar was appointed Master of the King's Musick.

In the same year that he was knighted, Elgar moved with his family to a large house overlooking the River Wye on the outskirts of Hereford. In 1912, for the sake of his music, he once again left the countryside he loved so much (Elgar's love of the countryside shows through a great deal of his music) to return to London.

The First World War had a great impact on the highly sensitive Elgar and affected him enormously. Unsurprisingly, he didn't produce many great works during that period.

Elgar's beloved wife and biggest supporter, Caroline Alice, died in 1920. After her death, the broken-hearted Elgar, whose music fell out of fashion after the War, composed very little. His last masterpiece, the *Cello Concerto in E minor* was composed shortly before his wife's death.

On 23 February 1934, Elgar died from cancer in Worcester. He left a symphony and an opera uncompleted. He was buried next to his wife in the graveyard of St Wulstan's Church, Little Malvern.

Elizabeth I
(1533-1603)

When Queen Elizabeth first sat on the throne of England in 1558, her country was in ruin and virtually bankrupt. England was despised abroad and confused at home.

In 1603, when she died, it was the end of an era of heroes. It was, for England, a golden time. Elizabeth was the most outstanding queen the world has ever seen. Only Queen Victoria comes close.

Elizabeth, Queen of England and Ireland, and the fifth and last monarch of the Tudor dynasty, was born on 7 September 1533 at Greenwich Palace, Kent, to King Henry VIII and his second wife, Anne Boleyn. It was confidently predicted by physicians and astrologers that King Henry and Anne Boleyn would have a boy and so when Elizabeth was born there was much disappointment all round. King Henry now had two legitimate children, the 17-year old Princess Mary Tudor by his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, and the red-haired Princess Elizabeth. But both were girls.

Less than six months after her birth, Elizabeth went to live in Hatfield, north of London. It was the custom in Tudor times for children of royalty to live in separate households from their parents.

In 1534, Henry VIII managed to persuade Parliament to pass a new Act of Succession that allowed Elizabeth and any more children her mother should have to be the only legitimate heirs to the throne. Mary Tudor, who was still only a teenager, was thus declared illegitimate and demoted from princess to lady-in-waiting to her half sister, Elizabeth. Mary Tudor was also banished from ever seeing her mother again.

Wanting a reason that would free him of his wife because he had grown to despise her and believed that his marriage to her was cursed because she had failed to produce a male heir, King Henry VIII had Protestant Queen Anne Boleyn beheaded at the Tower of London on 19 May 1536 for alleged multiple adultery and for incest with her own brother. No doubt King Henry's determination to dispose of his wife was strengthened even further when he fell in love with the rather retiring Jane Seymour. Elizabeth was not yet three years of age when her mother was executed.

A few days before Anne Boleyn's beheading in 1536, Elizabeth, like her half sister Mary Tudor before her, was declared illegitimate and excluded from the line of succession. King Henry VIII married Jane Seymour less than a fortnight after Anne's execution. Ironically, just as Anne Boleyn was Catherine of Aragon's maid of honour, so Jane Seymour was Anne Boleyn's maid of honour.

On the 12 October 1537, King Henry finally had his much awaited son, Edward VI, with his third wife, Jane Seymour. Since his half sisters had been decreed illegitimate, Edward VI was now first in line to the throne. Sadly, Jane Seymour died less than a fortnight after the birth of her son. Henry VIII was said to have been devastated and heartbroken, and made arrangements to be buried next to his beloved Jane after his death. The death of Jane Seymour did not, however, prevent him from marrying three more times; first to Anne of Cleves, then to Catherine Howard and finally to Catherine Parr.

Although Elizabeth lived in a separate household from her father, nevertheless, one can only imagine how confusing it must have been for the growing Elizabeth to have had so many stepmothers.

As well as inheriting her father's red hair, Elizabeth inherited her father's intellect. Elizabeth, who was brought up in the Protestant faith, was a natural scholar and loved to study; she was very well educated and learnt a number of languages. She could speak French fluently by the time she was 14 and also learnt Italian, Latin, Greek, Flemish and Spanish. Elizabeth also knew some Welsh. She was also a competent horsewoman with a love of riding at great speeds. In addition, Elizabeth could dance, compose music, play the lyre, lute and virginals skilfully.

In 1544, King Henry VIII's third Act of Succession reinstated Elizabeth and her half sister Mary to the line of the throne – although it did not officially recognise them as legitimate. Their half brother, Prince Edward VI (by King Henry and his third wife, Jane Seymour) was still first in line to the throne, Mary Tudor was second in line and Elizabeth was third in line to the throne.

On 29 January 1547, Henry VIII died after a short illness and, as requested when he was alive, was buried next to his third wife, Jane Seymour. Elizabeth was residing at Enfield when she learnt of her father's death, and was reported to have been very upset by the news. Although she had never shared a close relationship with her father, Elizabeth did admire and respect him. Throughout her life, Elizabeth would often proudly refer to herself in public as the daughter of King Henry VIII.

On Henry VIII's death, Elizabeth's half brother, Edward VI, became King but because he was only nine years old his uncle, Edward Seymour, was appointed Lord Protector and head of the Council of Regency. In 1550, the Earl of Warwick (who named himself the Duke of Northumberland in 1551) assumed power of the regency after masterminding the fall of Edward Seymour. Edward VI became the first Protestant to sit on the English throne.

After her father's death, Elizabeth lived for a while with her stepmother Catherine Parr (Henry VIII's last wife) at Chelsea Palace. Not long after the death of Henry VIII, Catherine Parr married Sir Thomas Seymour, the younger brother of Edward Seymour.

While living with Catherine Parr and Sir Thomas, the young Elizabeth is believed to have had a sexual relationship with Sir Thomas Seymour. Ill at ease with Elizabeth and Thomas's 'relationship', Catherine Parr made arrangements for her stepdaughter to live elsewhere and, as a result, by the end of 1548, 15-year-old Elizabeth had acquired a household of her own. After Catherine Parr died her husband Thomas Seymour, was executed at the Tower of London for treason.

On 6 July 1553, King Edward VI died, probably from tuberculosis. Worried about losing his powerful position, Edward's Chief Minister the now Duke of Northumberland had managed to persuade the devout Protestant King to contravene the 1544 Act of Succession, to exclude his half sisters from the succession and to make the Duke's daughter-in-law (also the King's cousin), Lady Jane Grey, as the next heir to the throne. The unwilling Lady Jane was proclaimed Queen on 10 July. Mary was furious, and raised an army to fight for the crown. Lady Jane very happily relinquished the crown when ordered to do so, and the 37-year-old Catholic Mary Tudor was proclaimed Queen on 19 July. Lady Jane and her husband, Guildford Dudley were sentenced to death at the Tower of London. The tragic, sweet teenager Lady Jane Grey, whose terrible end was caused by the power-hungry Duke of Northumberland, famously became known as the 'Nine-day Queen'.

As Queen, devout Roman Catholic Mary Tudor overturned the anti-Catholic laws that had been introduced by her father, King Henry VIII. And she went to great lengths to restore Catholicism into England. Her persecution of Protestant rebels, and the execution of hundreds of heretics, earned her the nickname, 'Bloody Mary'.

On 18 March 1554, Elizabeth was taken to the Tower of London on the orders of her half-sister, Queen Mary. The exceedingly unpopular Queen Mary believed her very popular half-sister to be involved in a plot with Sir Thomas Wyatt to overthrow her. Despite Elizabeth's pleas to her half-sister, claiming her innocence, she was still sent to the Tower. Thomas Wyatt gave a speech minutes before he was executed, exonerating Elizabeth from all complicity in the rebellion. That speech helped gain Elizabeth her release and in the May of 1554, Elizabeth was freed from the Tower of London after two months' imprisonment. She was sent to the royal palace at Woodstock in Oxfordshire under house arrest. It was with the help of Queen Mary's new husband Philip II of Spain (who became King of Spain in 1556), that Elizabeth was finally freed from house arrest and allowed to return to Hatfield.

In November 1558, Queen Mary knew that she didn't have much longer to live and, with the encouragement of King Philip II, wrote to her half-sister, Elizabeth, telling her that she would allow her to succeed to the throne only if she agreed to certain conditions. One of the conditions was that she would retain the Roman Catholic faith in England.

Whilst in the grounds (the story goes that she was sitting underneath an oak tree) of Hatfield House, 25-year-old Elizabeth learnt the news of her half-sister's death and was informed that she was now Queen of England. On learning of her accession, she quoted in Latin from the 118th Psalm: 'This is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes.'

On the advice of astrologer, Dr John Dee, Elizabeth held her coronation on 15 January 1559 in Westminster Abbey. When Elizabeth came to the throne, the nation was divided by religion. And because there had been years of fighting wars, there was little money left in the Treasury.

In 1559, shortly after Elizabeth came to the throne, Mary Tudor's Catholic legislation was repealed, and Elizabeth became Supreme Governor (and not Supreme Head as her father had been) of the Church of England. She helped to restore England to Protestantism.

Unlike her unpopular Roman Catholic half-sister, Queen Elizabeth was religiously tolerant and wasn't overly concerned about what religion her people followed. She claimed that she 'would not open windows into men's souls'. Her only priority was to persuade the people to be loyal to the crown. She didn't like any sort of religious extremism.

But, in 1570, religious extremism in England escalated after Queen Elizabeth was excommunicated by Pope Pius V. The Queen's Catholic subjects were absolved from allegiance to her and as a result, Elizabeth was forced to bring in laws to keep Catholic extremism under control. Throughout most of Queen Elizabeth's reign there were death threats from Catholic plotters who didn't want a Protestant Queen on the throne.

After Elizabeth nearly died from smallpox in 1562, Parliament worried that civil war would erupt upon her death if she did not produce an heir to the throne. MPs urged her to marry, as did her advisers. The pressure was increased by the fact that nobody believed that a woman could rule by herself

Elizabeth was seen as the best catch in the whole of Europe, and had many suitors competing for her hand in marriage, including Philip II of Spain who had been married to her half-sister, Mary Tudor. At one point, marriage negotiations were seriously planned to François the Duke of Anjou (youngest son of Henry II and Catherine de'Medici) whom she nicknamed her 'frog'.

However, of all her admirers, the man Elizabeth felt the greatest affection for was her Master of Horse, Robert Dudley (the Earl of Leicester). Elizabeth and Robert Dudley had known each other in childhood, and were even imprisoned in the Tower of London together early in Mary Tudor's reign, although it is widely claimed that they never saw each other during their imprisonment. The married Robert Dudley was derogatorily nicknamed 'the gypsy' because of his charm, cunning nature and dark looks.

It is possible that Elizabeth deliberately didn't marry so that she could use the possibility of marriage as a diplomatic tool. Elizabeth's life as a spinster earned her the nickname, the 'Virgin Queen', a nickname which she herself promoted.

Meanwhile, having been forced to abdicate as Queen of Scotland and hand over the crown to her young son, Elizabeth's cousin, the Roman Catholic Mary Stuart, who was known as Mary Queen of Scots, sought refuge in England. This wasn't a good move. Elizabeth immediately had her placed under virtual house arrest for almost twenty years. Mary Queen of Scots, along with many other Roman Catholics, considered herself to be the true Queen of England.

Mary wasn't the only one to question Elizabeth's right to the throne. Much of Europe did not consider Elizabeth to be the true Queen of England because her father's divorce from Catherine of Aragon had never been sanctioned by the Pope. There were a number of plots by Roman Catholics to replace Elizabeth with Mary (who had become the figurehead for rebelling Roman Catholics everywhere) as Queen of England. It was Lord Walsingham, Queen Elizabeth's Spy Master, who helped unveil several of the plots against her. Lord Walsingham and his network of informers and spies were England's first organised secret intelligence service.

In 1587, Mary was condemned to death because she was accused of complicity in a plot (known as the Babington Plot) against the Queen. For a long time, Elizabeth refused to sign her cousin's death warrant because of Mary's royal status, fearing it would set a dangerous precedent. She also didn't want England to be attacked by angry Catholic countries. Eventually, the death warrant was signed, and Mary Queen of Scots was beheaded at Fotheringhay Castle in 1587. As Elizabeth had feared, many monarchs throughout Europe were furious. The beheading of the Roman Catholic Mary Queen of Scots was the final straw that motivated Philip II, the King of Spain, to send the Spanish Armada to attack England the following year. English piracies against Spanish possessions, and Elizabeth's aiding of Dutch rebels in the Netherlands against Spanish rule, hadn't helped. King Philip II was determined to restore Catholicism in England.

Over the early years of her reign, Elizabeth had dramatically improved her country's financial position through the efforts of officially approved pirates. Sir Francis Drake, for example, had enriched the nation considerably when he had been commissioned by the Queen as a privateer ('privateer' was Elizabeth's politically correct name for 'pirate'). Drake's raids against Spanish colonies had proved very lucrative.

Drake also played an important role in defeating the Spanish Armada in 1588. Francis Drake was playing bowls at the time when he was told about the sighting of the Spanish Armada. He is reported to have said: 'There is plenty of time to win this game and thrash the Spaniards too'.

Before the defeat of the Spanish Armada, which was won by a combination of violent storms, well-built ships and the brilliant tactics of the English fleet, Queen Elizabeth gave a now legendary speech to her troops at Tilbury as they awaited the arrival of the Spanish Armada in 1588.

'My loving people, we have been persuaded by some that are careful of our safety to take heed how we commit ourselves to armed multitudes for fear of treachery, but I assure you I do not desire to live to distrust my faithful and loving people. Let tyrants fear; I have always so behaved myself under God, I have placed my chiefest strength and safeguard in the loyal hearts and goodwill of my subjects. And therefore I am come amongst you, as you see, at this time not for my recreation and disport, but being resolved in the midst and heat of battle to live and die amongst you all. To lay down for God, my kingdom and for my people, my honour and my blood even in the dust. I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a King and a King of England too and think it foul scorn that Parma or Spain or any Prince of Europe should dare to invade the borders of my realm; to which, rather than any dishonour shall grow by me, I myself will take up arms, I myself will be your General, Judge and Rewarder of every one of your virtues in the field. I know already for your forwardness you have deserved rewards and crowns; and we do assure you, on the word of a Prince, they shall be duly paid you.'

This patriotic speech endeared her to the people of England. The defeat of the Spanish Armada firmly established England as the world's leading naval power and increased Queen Elizabeth's popularity tenfold. The defeat of the Spanish Armada proved to all those who were sceptical that a woman was just as capable as any man as a war time leader.

In 1599, Elizabeth sent the 2nd Earl of Essex to Ireland to defeat Catholic Irish rebels who were rebelling against the anti-Catholic laws that Elizabeth had imposed. Essex fell out of favour with Elizabeth when he made an unauthorised treaty with the Irish and returned to England without the Queen's consent. This led Elizabeth to dismiss him from all his offices and stop most of his income. As revenge, and encouraged by rebels, he tried to get the people of London to revolt against Elizabeth. In 1601, the Earl was executed for leading a rebellion against Elizabeth's government. The English courtier and soldier had been a favourite of Queen Elizabeth's, even though she had shared a rather tempestuous relationship with him.

On 24 March 1603, aged 69, Queen Elizabeth, the last of the Tudor Monarchs, died at Richmond Palace, Surrey. Her reign had lasted for nearly 45 years. Elizabeth was buried at Westminster Abbey. The King of Scotland, James VI (son of her cousin, Mary Queen of Scots) was her successor to the English throne. As King of England, James VI became James I of England and, for the first time, united the kingdoms of England and Scotland.

Queen Elizabeth was a proud, strong-willed, quick-witted and a highly intelligent woman who was a shrewd judge of character. She was determined, cautious and secretive, and kept her thoughts and feelings close to her heart, a trait which always kept even those around her guessing. With her red hair and pale skin, Queen Elizabeth was striking in appearance. She enjoyed wearing the latest fashions (owning over 2,000 dresses) and adorned herself ostentatiously with expensive jewels.

Although she had serious romances with several lovers during her reign, Queen Elizabeth I never married. She was, however, something of a flirt. She was a hugely popular queen and would often go on walkabout tours and talk to the young, the old, the rich and the poor alike. She was a Queen who was wedded to the English people, and the people loved her for it. They called her Good Queen Bess.

Queen Elizabeth reigned during a time when women were considered far from equal to men, but she was one of England's greatest sovereigns. She helped unify the country against foreign enemies and led the country to victory over the Spanish.

Elizabeth's reign was a time of great expansion and discovery. The adventurer, Sir Walter Ralegh named an American state 'Virginia' in the Queen's honour. And Sir Francis Drake became the first Englishman to circumnavigate the world. It was also a time of great poets and playwrights (most notably William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson and Christopher Marlowe).

By the end of Elizabeth's reign, however, the nation was not in a good state. Continuing troubles in Ireland, poor harvests, rising prices and increasing poverty had caused a huge dent in Elizabeth's popularity.

Nevertheless, the shortcomings of her successor, King James I, soon restored Elizabeth's reputation with the people as one of England's greatest rulers. They didn't like him, and missed her.

Her 45-year reign is considered to be England's 'Golden Age'. She had many faults: she was unscrupulous and often ready to lie if she thought it would be to her advantage; she was vain and easily influenced by flatterers; and she was rarely grateful to those around her. But she cared passionately for England and the English. She worked hard to govern wisely and well. And she has been described as the 'bravest woman who ever lived'. When she first addressed Parliament she said: 'Nothing, nothing, no worldly thing under the sun is so dear to me as the love and goodwill of my subjects.' During her life she proved that she meant it.

Michael Faraday

1791-1867

No single invention has changed our world, and the way we live, more than electricity. Without it we would have very few of the things we nowadays regard as essential. Many men have contributed to the development of electricity but the man who discovered the real value of electricity, and who can be said to have 'invented' electricity as a human tool, was Michael Faraday, an Englishman.

Born in Newington, Faraday's parents were poor (his father was a blacksmith) and when he reached the age of 14 the young Faraday was apprenticed to a bookbinder and bookseller. He had received only a very basic education in a church Sunday school. He took advantage of his position in the bookshop to read extensively – far more widely than he would have been able to read had he taken a post in almost any other establishment.

At the age of 20, Faraday listened to a lecture given by Sir Humphry Davy, the famous English scientist and was so enthralled that he wrote asking for a job. Davy, recognising something in the young Faraday, ignored the fact that the young man had no formal qualifications and employed him as his assistant.

Within a few years Faraday showed that although he had no academic training he was a brilliant experimental physicist.

In 1819, a scientist called Hans Christian Oersted had found that the needle of an ordinary magnetic compass would be deflected if the compass was placed close to a wire in which an electric current was flowing.

Faraday decided to see what happened if the magnet was kept fixed in one position. His theory was that the wire might move instead. He constructed a brilliantly simple but ingenious device in which a wire, through which an electric current flowed, rotated continuously in the vicinity of a magnet. Faraday had invented the electric motor – the first device to use an electric current to move a material object. Every electric motor used today follows Faraday's simple design.

The problem was that the only way of generating an electric current was by using a chemical battery - and the chemical batteries available in the early 19th century were rather primitive. Faraday believed that there must be a way to use magnetism to generate electricity. In 1831, he discovered that if a magnet is passed through a closed loop of wire, a current will flow in the wire while the magnet is moving. Faraday had invented the basis of the first electric dynamo and had discovered electromagnetic induction – a way of generating continuous electric currents. The law describing this discovery is Faraday's Law. The electric generators which supply power to our homes, shops and factories are based on Faraday's discovery.

These discoveries alone would have made Faraday one of the most important men in history (he invariably appears near the top of lists of the most important individuals in world history) but Faraday hadn't finished. He also worked as a chemist and discovered a number of organic compounds, including benzene, and was the first man to devise a method for liquefying gases. His work in electrochemistry (the study of chemical effects of electric currents) was crucial and he established the two laws of electrolysis which bear his name. It was Faraday who made popular terms such as ion, electrode, cathode and anode. It was Faraday who introduced the idea of magnetic and electric lines of force. He discovered that if polarised light is passed through a magnetic field its polarisation will be altered - thereby establishing the existence of a relationship between magnetism and light. It was Faraday who discovered and named diamagnetism. It was Faraday's genius that paved the way for many advances in modern physics, and numerous other great inventors owe an enormous debt to the blacksmith's son.

A brilliant man who was also a marvellous teacher and lecturer (he was appointed professor at the Royal Institution in 1833), Faraday was indifferent to money, fame and honours. He lived, quite simply, for his work. He had a long, happy marriage. He declined the offer to become president of the British Royal Society and also declined a knighthood, though in 1855 he did retire to a house provided for him by Queen Victoria. He died in 1867.

Elizabeth Fry

(1780-1845)

The Prison Governor was horrified at the prospect of the refined lady who stood before him visiting the female prison quarters at the notorious Newgate prison. He was anxious for her safety and was convinced that the female prisoners would rob her of the clothes on her back. But Elizabeth Fry insisted that she should be allowed to see the prisoners so that she could hand out the warm clothing she had brought for them. The Governor, realising that Elizabeth would not take 'no' for an answer, reluctantly let her into the female quarters of the prison.

Walking down the cold, damp stone corridors, the stench was overwhelming and the noise from the mayhem of the prisoners was ear-shattering. However, nothing prepared Elizabeth Fry for what she was about to see.

The room, which was originally planned to house a maximum of 60 prisoners, was crammed with over 300 female prisoners and their children. The living conditions, and the condition of the women and children, were truly shocking. Elizabeth Fry was aghast at the grotesque sight before her.

Suddenly, the deafening noise of sheer pandemonium descended into stillness. The women and children looked in awe as this refined, gentle angel flitted around the room handing out clothing and giving comfort to the frightened and the sick. The prisoners could see that this incongruous vision actually cared and didn't judge them; they could tell that she looked at them not critically or cruelly but with love and compassion.

Before Elizabeth Fry left the prison she prayed in front of the prisoners and, as if hypnotised into joining her, the 300 plus women and children fell to their knees in prayer. What an awesome sight this must have been, especially for the Prison Governor who had been so concerned for her safety.

A born philanthropist, English Quaker minister and prison reformer, Elizabeth Fry, was one of 12 children. She was born Elisabeth Gurney, on 21 May 1780, in Norfolk to a wealthy Quaker banking family.

Elizabeth – affectionately known as 'Betsy' by her family – was a very shy, nervous and sickly child. Sadly, her fragile health was to burden her for the rest of her life. However, Elizabeth's delicate health did not thwart her innate kindness, which she showed to everybody she met – even to the household servants.

As children Elizabeth and her 11 siblings were encouraged to talk to and to show respect to the less fortunate. Elizabeth Fry would often adopt young waifs and strays in the street, and – with the help of her father's wealth – feed and clothe them and teach them basic schooling. These waifs and strays became known by the family as 'Betsy's imps'. At one point, Elizabeth had a flock of over 80 children being taught in one of the wings at the grand family home in Earlham, Norfolk.

Every week, Elizabeth had to attend the Quaker meetings with her family, although she and her siblings often found them rather tedious and hated going to them. Nevertheless, her attitude was to change when a Quaker called William Savery spoke at one of the meetings. His speech had a profound effect on the 17-yearold girl. It was Savery's speech that set Elizabeth on the path to doing great things; he was the trigger who resulted in her being immortalised as one of England's greatest female philanthropists; a woman whose virtuous, benevolent face has adorned England's five-pound notes.

In 1800, Elizabeth – no doubt she shed many tears of heartache at having to do so – said farewell to her dear family, and to her gang of waifs and strays, before embarking on the journey from Norfolk to London to live in her new marital home. Still only 20, she had married Joseph Fry, also a Quaker. The couple would themselves eventually have 11 children of their own.

Busy married life did not suppress Elizabeth Fry's inherent desire to look after the less fortunate; she often carried out acts of kindness to those who needed it. She ran schools for poor children and regularly attended Quaker meetings (she became a minister in 1811).

But it was her visit to Newgate prison in 1813 that was to make her famous. Her visit to Newgate prison, where she was appalled at the conditions she found, eventually resulted in the reform of prisons throughout Britain and Europe, and also led to a vast improvement in the conditions of prisoners being transported to Australia.

In 1818, accompanied by her brother, Joseph John Gurney, Mrs Fry visited prisons throughout the North of England and Scotland. The conditions they witnessed in the prisons were brought to the attention of the public and to the authorities, and this greatly helped Elizabeth Fry's campaign.

In addition, to her lifetime involvement with prison and asylum reform at home and abroad, Elizabeth Fry helped set up refuges for the homeless in London and in Brighton. In fact, every spare moment of her time was spent on helping others and on finding ways to improve the lives of the poor and underprivileged. She even helped to make hundreds of coastguards' jobs less miserable by organising books to be sent to them.

How this fragile lady, who must have been nearly always pregnant or nursing her own children, found the energy and the strength to do so much is a mystery.

But everything about Elizabeth Fry was extraordinary. In her 65 years on earth (she died on 25 October 1845), Elizabeth Fry achieved much and transformed the lives of millions of people.

W.G. Grace

(1848-1915)

It may seem strange to include a cricketer in my list of the top 100. But William Gilbert Grace was far more than the world's greatest ever cricketer: he was the world's first sporting superstar; the man who created, virtually single-handedly, the celebrity sportsman. He was the most recognisable individual in Victorian England and, after Queen Victoria herself, the second most famous Victorian. Although he played as an amateur, it is no exaggeration to say that he single-handedly created professional sport. He realised that professional sport is a branch of the entertainment business. (This is something that most modern sportsmen don't grasp. They are, too often, arrogant and self-satisfied and have a regrettable tendency to treat their fans with disdain.)

In his day, Grace (who worked as a general practitioner) was such a draw that cricket grounds used to double their prices if W.G. Grace was playing. A normal admission ticket would cost six pence, but one shilling if W.G. was on the ground. How many sporting stars are there today whose pulling power among the public is so huge that they could double the ticket price simply by appearing in a match?

Grace, a huge, powerful, bearded, man was, without a doubt, the greatest cricketer who ever lived. It is easier to argue than refute that he was also the most notable sportsmen who ever lived.

He came from a cricket-mad family. His father helped to develop the game in the west of England and his two brothers were among the finest players of his age.

When W.G. played cricket people left their offices and factories to watch him play. There has never been a sportsman, in any time or in any sport, who was such a popular figure and who has dominated sport, the media and public life as emphatically as W.G. Grace did.

Grace was an enormously gifted batsmen, who hit the ball vast distances, and a fierce and successful bowler but it was his personality, his determination and confidence and his character, which made him such a great entertainer and unyielding competitor. He was still playing top class cricket in his 50's, at an age when most of his contemporaries had retired to coach schoolboys or run public houses.

As a doctor he was a kind man, who did what he could to help poor people. He gave them money or presents and he helped them find work. When he was on his rounds he would put down his medical bag and join in an impromptu game of cricket with local boys. He once joined in a snowball fight. But, like all great men and women he had his faults. He had a violent temper and limited patience and could be easy to provoke.

And he wasn't faultless as a cricketer either.

In 1889 he caught a youth practising on the new county cricket ground at Bristol. He battered him with a cricket stump and had to apologise in order to avoid prosecution. In 1878, he kidnapped Billy Midwinter, an Australian player who also happened to be registered with his county side (Gloucestershire), and dragged him off to The Oval for a county match.

Although he played cricket as an amateur, he made more money out of cricket than any of the professionals with whom he played. He was so competitive that he bullied and questioned umpires in a way that would today be regarded as unsporting. He was a bounder, a man who would today be described as a 'character'.

And he wasn't over imbued with modesty.

After being given out (in a relatively unimportant match) he once stood his ground and told the umpire (with unerring but unsporting accuracy) that 'these people came here to watch me bat, not to watch you umpire.'

At another charity match, where a huge crowd had turned up to watch him bat, one of his bails was removed by the second ball of the match. W.G bent down and replaced the bail. 'Strong wind today,' he said to the wicket-keeper. No one objected and Grace went on to score 142. The crowd was delighted.

Despite these anecdotes, W.G. was no cheat. He was talented, disciplined and enthusiastic. He played the game to win. But in serious games he could accept defeat and believed in playing the game fairly.

Grace was an all rounder. As a batsman he created (what was then) a modern scientific method of batting. He turned cricket from a pastime beloved by gamblers and few others into a national institution. He imposed his personality and his will upon a sport and upon an age.

He played first class cricket from 1865 until 1908 and scored 54,211 runs at an average of 39.45. He scored 124 first class centuries on rough, poorly prepared grounds where the ball was likely to jump and bounce with alarming unpredictability. Most of his runs were scored on pitches which modern cricketers would describe as unplayable. As a fieldsman he took 875 catches and, as an occasional wicket keeper, he stumped 5 batsmen. As a bowler he took 2,808 wickets at an average of 18.15 per wicket. He was a round-arm seamer in his youth but in older age he bowled seductive leg breaks. Any modern professional cricketer would die for those career statistics. He played 22 test matches (all against Australia, the only available opponents at the time) and, as a batsman, averaged 32.29 runs. As a bowler the test match wickets he took cost 26.22 runs apiece. Between 1857 and 1914 he scored another 45,283 runs and took another 4,578 wickets in minor matches. He took another 656 catches too. Other cricketers, playing on the same pitches, were accustomed to scoring far fewer runs.

In 1871, he scored 2,739 first class runs in the season. The next most successful batsman scored just 1,068. In one month in 1876 he scored two triple-centuries. In the same year, playing in Grimsby, he scored 400 not out against a team consisting of 22 fielders. In 1895, he was the first player to score over 1,000 runs in the month of May - before the season had really got started. The statistics seem endless. But they are all remarkable.

His cricket career began at the age of 15 when he played for a Bristol twenty two against William Clarke's professional cricket circus. (The county championship had not been invented then.) When he was over 50 he was still opening the batting for England in test matches against Australia. He played with and against some of the sporting immortals; men such as C. B. Fry, John Lillywhite, F. R. Spofforth and Jack Hobbs.

He doesn't seem to have been too keen on life as a doctor. In his early fifties, just as his playing career was coming to an end, he gave up medicine and became full time secretary-captain of the London County Club. Even when he had officially retired, he never stopped doing things. He played golf and bowls and loved beagling. Whatever he did he was larger than life. A farmer once tried to stop Grace pursuing his beagles into the farmer's fields. Grace simply picked up the farmer and tucked him under his arm. He then strode across the fields and put the farmer down on the other side, threatening to smack his bottom if he interfered again.

W. G. Grace probably wouldn't have survived today. The politically correct would have had him tarred and feathered. But he lived his life as though every moment of it mattered. He lived his life as though he meant it.

Edmond Halley

(1656-1742)

Born at Shoreditch, near London and educated at Oxford University, Edmond Halley was an astronomer, a meteorologist and a mathematician. He published scientific papers on the orbits of the planets, on the occultation of Mars and on a sunspot when he was still at university.

In 1676, when just 20 years old, he sailed for the South Atlantic, intending to compile an accurate catalogue of the stars of the Southern Hemisphere. Just two years later he produced a star catalogue which recorded the positions of 341 individual stars. In 1680, he went to Paris and started studying comets in detail.

In 1684, at the age of 28 he became friends with Isaac Newton, Robert Hooke and Christopher Wren. Halley, Hooke and Wren all helped Newton with his Law of Gravitation and Halley edited Newton's book *Philosophiae Naturalis Principa Mathematica.* Halley then paid for the book to be printed and published in 1687.

A year earlier, in 1686, Halley had produced the first meteorological chart (which showed the distribution of the prevailing winds in the world's oceans).

In addition to his astronomical studies, Halley was also a keen diver and underwater explorer. In 1690, he produced plans for the construction of a diving bell which would be capable of remaining submerged for long periods of time. Halley's bell was fitted with a window so that individuals inside could explore deep beneath the surface of the sea, and involved replacing air by sending weighted barrels of air down to the bell from the surface. The Halley design was the first practical design for a real underwater vessel – a proper submarine.

In 1701, Halley produced the first magnetic charts of the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans. He published valuable early work on the planets Mercury and Venus and established the mathematical law which connects barometric pressure with heights above sea-level. He published studies on trade winds, monsoons and magnetic variations. His *Breslau Table of Mortality*, which he published in 1703, laid the actuarial foundations for life insurance and annuities.

Despite all this important work, it is, however, as an astronomer that Halley is best remembered today. He described the parabolic orbits of 24 comets which had been observed in the years 1337 to 1698 and in 1705 he demonstrated that three of these (comets seen in 1531, 1607 and 1682) were so similar that they had to have been the same comet. He accurately predicted its return in 1758. This is now known as Halley's comet. It was the first comet whose return was predicted, proving that some comets, at least, are members of the solar system. Scientists later showed that Halley's Comet was the large, bright comet seen during the Norman Conquest (and shown in the Bayeux Tapestry) and sighted as far back as 240BC. Halley's Comet, which has a nucleus approximately nine miles across, approached earth twice in the 20th century (in 1910 and 1986).

In the early 18th century, Halley built an observatory on the roof of his house and in 1720 he was appointed astronomer-royal of England.

John Harrison

(1693-1776)

John Harrison was an inventor and horologist. Born in Foulby near Pontefract, and the son of a carpenter, he was fascinated by clocks and everything associated with them. Given a watch to amuse himself when in bed with smallpox as a boy he spent hours studying it and playing with it. Self-taught, he built his first longcase clock in 1713, when he was just 20 years old. He made a number of clocks with wooden movements and several are still working. He invented the gridiron pendulum, consisting of brass and iron rods so that the different expansions and contractions cancel each other out and he had, by 1726, built a timekeeper which had a fully-functioning compensating mechanism designed to correct errors due to variations in climate. He also invented the grasshopper escapement which, being virtually frictionless, needs no lubrication.

It was his invention of the first effective and reliable marine chronometer which makes Harrison a truly great Englishman.

Harrison invented the first practical marine chronometer in 1735. He then produced smaller and increasingly accurate improvements. After years of work, Harrison finally produced a marine chronometer which, on a voyage to Jamaica in 1761 and 1762, determined the longitude with remarkable accuracy. He was 68-years-old and he sent it on its trial with his son William. His chronometer had to be highly accurate over long time intervals (and not require resetting – since at sea that would be impossible) and able to tolerate huge variations in temperature and humidity. It had to be impervious to salt air corrosion and able to function on a pitching and yawing deck during a storm.

When the ship reached Jamaica the watch was just 5 seconds slow.

His invention, the chronometer, gave mariners the ability to fix their position at sea from celestial observations. It was the first time that this had been possible and the chronometer was a huge boon to sailors everywhere. It revolutionised long distance travel at sea.

The Government had been so aware of the need for an effective method of measuring longitude that it had offered a prize of £20,000 for an effective chronometer. Harrison won the prize (which would, today, be worth around £3,000,000) though not without having to badger the authorities (and perform a second trial by sending his chronometer on a trip to Barbados). The bureaucrats in charge of the prize money had claimed that the accuracy of the Harrison chronometer was down to luck. Eventually, Harrison received £8,750 from Parliament but only after King George threatened to appear in person in the House of Commons to complain on his behalf. Harrison never received the rest of the money he won.

His invention saved many lives. Before his marine chronometer existed shipwrecks were commonplace as sailors lost their way at sea.

William Harvey
(1578-1657)

Theories about the circulation of the blood had been proposed, argued about and refuted by scientists and physicians for centuries. For many years doctors had accepted the theory put forward by the Roman doctor Galen, who had argued that the blood circulating in the arteries was different from the blood circulating in the veins, that both kinds of blood ebbed and flowed, rather than circulating around the body, and that blood permeated within the heart from the right side to the left. In this, as in so many other areas, Galen's mistaken theories misled doctors for many centuries.

It was William Harvey, an English physician who was educated in Canterbury and then at Cambridge, who first proved and published the truth about how blood travels around the body. Harvey realised that, since the heart was pumping blood with every beat, it must be moving the blood somewhere. It seems obvious to us now that the blood had to be moving around the body in a closed circulatory system but Harvey's thinking was, at the time, original and revolutionary. He published his theory in a famous treatise entitled *Exercitatio Anatomica de Motu Cordis et Sanguinis.*

Harvey's explanation about how blood moves about the body led directly to many other vital discoveries about human anatomy and physiology. There was also an immediate practical advantage for Harvey's discovery led directly to the realisation that blood loss during operations could be fatal and that blood-letting, by cupping or applying leeches to the patient's body, was not always an entirely logical or beneficial procedure. Harvey's book also helped refute the theory that weakness could be remedied by drinking human blood – a belief which had survived until the 15th century, when the inappropriately named Pope Innocent VIII had been given fresh blood from three healthy young boys to drink.

William Harvey was royal physician to both James I and Charles I (his book was dedicated to Charles I) and as a member of the royal court he demonstrated his theory around Europe. He was present at the battle of Edgehill in 1642, as doctor to Charles I, and afterwards accompanied the King to Oxford. When Oxford was surrendered to the Parliamentary forces, Harvey returned to London. In 1651, he published a book on animal reproduction entitled *Exercitationes de Generatione Animalium.* Harvey was originally buried in Hempstead, but in 1833 he was dug up and re-buried in the Harvey Chapel in nearby Saffron Walden.

Rowland Hill

(1795-1879)

By the early part of the 19th century there were enough literate people in England for the sending of letters, packets and parcels to be a regular business. But there was a problem: there was no organised way of moving such items around the country. There was no system or order for the delivery of mail. Much mail was moved around under the personal franks of Members of Parliament and peers. Postal rates were enormously complicated and it was often the people who received the letters who had to pay, rather than the people who sent them. Recipients who were too poor to pay could simply send the letter back. Crafty folk would put tiny messages on the outside of the envelope so that the recipient could receive a message without paying for it. Postal officials were often crooked and censorship was by no means unknown. The result was that the postal system in England was slow, expensive and inefficient. The situation was the same everywhere else in the world.

And then along came Rowland Hill.

Hill, born in Kidderminster, was a teacher until 1833. (He began teaching in his father's school at the age of 11, which may seem a little early to us but, hey, Mozart was composing music at the age of five). He taught astronomy and earned pocket money by mending scientific instruments. As he grew older Hill became a keen landscape painter, acquired a job at the Birmingham Assay Office and turned into an inventor and a social reformer. He was one of the founders of a wonderfully English-sounding organisation called the 'Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge'.

In 1819, Hill moved the school his father had founded to Edgbaston. He designed the new school himself and included a science laboratory, a swimming pool and a form of central heating. In 1822, he published a report with the nifty title of *Plans for the Government and Liberal Instruction of Boys in Large Numbers Drawn from Experience* in which he argued that kindness got more out of boys than caning (which was then extremely popular) and that moral influence, rather than fear, should be the primary driving force behind school discipline.

The French education leader Marc Antoine Jullien (who had been Robespierre's secretary) was so impressed that he sent his son over to England to be educated at Hill's school.

Hill took an interest in many other things. He was, for example, secretary of the South Australian Colonization Commission, which successfully established a settlement without any convicts, in what is now Adelaide.

And, with all these varied interests it is perhaps not surprising that he also took an interest in the sending of letters.

In 1837, he privately published a booklet entitled *Post-Office Reform* in which he advocated a low and uniform rate of postage for sending mail between any two places in the British Isles. His idea (his moment of genius) was that the cost of sending a letter should be prepaid with little labels, called stamps, which would be bought by the writer of the letter and stuck onto the letter (envelopes were not then in common use) as proof of payment. The story is that Hill became interested in postal reform after seeing a young woman turn away a letter from her fiancé – because she was too poor to pay for it.

Politicians denounced Hill's proposals. The Postmaster, Lord Lichfield dismissed his 'wild and visionary scheme' and the Secretary to the Post Office described the idea of post offices selling sheets of sticky stamps as 'preposterous'. But businessmen thought Hill's notion brilliant and in 1839 bankers and traders formed a Mercantile Committee to push for his ideas to be accepted. The businessmen won and in 1839 Rowland Hill was given a two year contract to run the new postal system according to his design.

Within three years of the publication of his original booklet, Hill's idea had become reality and the uniform penny rate for letters was introduced with, in May 1840, the penny black becoming the first and most famous stamp in the world. The stamp carried an engraving of the young Queen Victoria. Early stamps had to be cut from the sheet. It was only later that perforations were introduced.

Astonishingly, Hill was dismissed from the Post Office by Robert Peel's Conservative Government in 1842. Hill didn't sit quietly moping. He was chairman of the board of the London and Brighton Railway from 1843 to 1846, expanding routes, lowering fares, making commuting comfortable and introducing special excursion trains.

And then he returned to the Post Office.

In 1846, the Liberals made Hill secretary to the postmaster general and in 1854 he was made secretary to the Post Office, where he introduced the book-post. He also reformed the money order office and the packet service.

In a report he wrote in 1867, after having finally resigned from the Post Office, Hill advocated national ownership of the railways so that people could move themselves around the country as easily as their letters were travelling. That was not to happen for some time to come.

It is for the invention of the postage stamp, and a system of low and uniform postal rates, that Hill will always be best remembered. He effectively introduced postal services around the world and he created an environment which made commerce infinitely more efficient and profitable.

Today, England, as the originator of the postal system, is the only country in the world which does not have to have its name or flag or symbol on its stamps.

Thomas Hobbes
(1588-1679)

Hobbes, author, philosopher and political theorist, was born in Malmesbury; coming into the world prematurely when his mother heard the news of the approaching Spanish armada. The excitement brought on her labour. Hobbes's father was a country vicar who abandoned his young family early on, leaving Thomas to be brought up by an uncle.

After graduating from Oxford University, Hobbes became a professional tutor and travelled around Europe with the family of the Earl of Devonshire. The Earls of Devonshire, the Cavendish family, remained his patrons for the rest of his life. He was tutor, companion and secretary to William Cavendish (who became the second Earl of Devonshire) for twenty years.

It was on those early travels, with a family of great wealth and influence, that Hobbes met many of the most important figures in Europe at the time. In England he met Francis Bacon (for whom he was for a time an amanuensis), Ben Jonson, the playwright and John Selden the historian, jurist and antiquary. In Florence he met Galilee, with whom he had philosophical discussions on the nature of motion, and in Paris he met Descartes and Gassendi. He travelled on the Continent three times in charge of pupils from the family.

In around 1628, Hobbes was introduced to Euclidean geometry and was deeply impressed. He had the idea of extending this sort of deductive certainty to an understanding of man and society. In his book *Elements of Law Natural and Politic* he attempted to describe in a mathematical fashion the rules of a new political science. However, as a political theorist his views were rather out of favour since he supported absolutism – an uncomfortable position to take in a country where antiroyalist feeling was rising rapidly. When the Long Parliament assembled in 1640 Hobbes fled immediately to Paris. While there, he turned to tutoring. This time he became tutor in mathematics to the exiled Prince of Wales, the future King Charles II of England. (Sadly, it seems that his knowledge of mathematics wasn't quite as good as those hiring him might have hoped.)

While living in Paris he wrote *Objections* (a reply to Meditations by Descartes), *De Cive* (a statement of his new science of the state philosophy) and his best-known book *Leviathan* (published in 1651) in which he tried to justify the absolute power of the monarch by arguing that having a king or queen who had total power enabled citizens to protect themselves from one another by agreeing to obey their sovereign in all matters. It is in this book that Hobbes draws together his thoughts on political philosophy, psychology and metaphysics. He had become a materialist who believed that only in a sovereign state could men be forced to surrender their natural rights of aggression to an absolute ruler. He believed that man is driven only by appetite or desire and that his one object is to attain happiness and satisfaction for himself. Since all men are the same, all driven by their own selfish pursuits of happiness, and altruism has no natural place in man's heart, the result, he argued, must be conflict, envy, dispute and war. He believed that if men agreed to submit to a stronger power, given to an individual who could impose laws and demand obedience, there would be much less fighting. His idea was for a social contract based on a monarchical society.

Unfortunately for Hobbes his book *Leviathan* offended his patrons, the exiled English royalists, and the French Government of the time, because in it he made it clear that he was hostile to the idea of the church having any real power. He believed that even the church should obey, and be subservient to, the sovereign state, and the monarch.

Hobbes returned to England after the death of Charles I, in the same year as *Leviathan* was published. In 1652, he made his peace with Cromwell and the Parliamentarians and settled first in London and then at Hardwick Hall, the seat of the Cavendish family. But he continued to write and to cause controversy. In 1655, he published *De Corpore* and in 1658 he published *De Homine*.

When Charles II came to the throne he gave his old tutor a pension and helped protect him against a parliamentary bill put together by enemies who claimed that the Great Fire of London and the Plague of 1665-6 were both a result of God's wrath against England for harbouring such a terrible man – an atheist. The bill was passed by the Commons but did not become law. However, Hobbes was banned from publishing any future books in England, and for the rest of his life most of his books were published in Holland. Hobbes was, indeed, so alarmed at the ban that some of his books dealing with controversial topics were not published until after his death. Hobbes wrote well into his 80's and published *Behemoth: a History of the Causes of the Civil Wars of England*, translations of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and an autobiography in Latin verse. He also wrote a good deal of poetry.

Although Hobbes was an absolutist, who believed that unlimited centralised authority should be vested in a monarch, his work also contained many of the principles of developing liberalism.

Throughout his life Hobbes was looked after by the Cavendish family. He died at Hardwick Hall.

William Hogarth
(1697-1764)

Every artist and designer in the world owes a huge debt of gratitude to William Hogarth. So, too, does every comic strip artist.

Hogarth was born in London. His father was a textbook author and school teacher who, when Hogarth was a boy, opened a coffee house, went bust and ended up in the Fleet Prison for five years as a debtor.

After an apprenticeship with an engraver, Hogarth set up in business designing coats of arms, letter headings and plates for booksellers. He spent his free time wandering around London sketching what he saw.

The first works he sold were satirical drawings. For example, in 1721 he produced a savagely satirical drawing called *Emblematical Print on the South Sea Scheme* which satirised the South Sea Bubble. During the next few years he produced an extraordinary mixture of engravings. Some were book illustrations, others were satirical sketches.

By the 1730's, he was producing oil paintings of actors, politicians and families – probably because these were more easily saleable. But he continued with his commentaries on social and political life. In 1731, he produced a series of paintings with a powerful moral message, entitled *A Harlot's Progress*. The originals are now lost but the paintings survive as a series of six engravings. The series tells of a country girl who arrives in town, becomes a prostitute and dies of venereal disease. Despite its melancholic tone the series was a huge success and Hogarth quickly followed it with a sequel entitled *A Rake's Progress,* a series of eight pictures which show the reckless life of the son of a rich merchant who wastes his father's money on gambling, whoring and luxurious living and ends his life in Bedlam, the lunatic asylum.

These paintings, which showed a sequence of events, were the forerunners of the strip cartoon.

Starting in 1743, Hogarth painted the six pictures in his Marriage a-la-mode series. These paintings show how a marriage for money (something common in upper-class 18th century society) can be a complete tragedy. Hogarth's satire became hugely successful. The paintings were engraved, and they sold enormously well as prints.

In 1747, Hogarth produced twelve engravings and prints with the title *Industry and Idleness.* These showed the lives of two apprentices; one who is hard working and the other who is lazy. The series showed how the individual who works will be rewarded while the layabout will come to no good. In Hogarth's series, the idle apprentice ends up becoming a highwayman and living with a harlot. In the final frame of the series the industrious apprentice, now rich, successful and a respectable magistrate, sends the idle apprentice to the gallows.

In the early 1750's, Hogarth, who was still politically motivated (one of his paintings showed the French as cringing, emaciated and superstitious people), produced his famous *Beer Street and Gin Lane* series, which shows the dangers of alcoholism. The series was published in support of the Gin Act and may well have been produced by Hogarth in response to a request from his friend the magistrate Henry Fielding (who was continuing the new business of writing realistic novels, invented by Daniel Defoe, and who would later produce the book *Tom Jones).* In the same year, Hogarth, who loved animals and hated to see them being abused, also produced a series in which he showed a criminal starting off by torturing and ill-treating animals and ending up murdering a woman. In the final picture in the series, the murderer is dissected by doctors after his execution. (Hogarth was apparently aware of the now proven connection between cruelty to animals and cruelty to people. It is now accepted that mass murderers often start their evil by torturing cats and dogs.)

Amazingly, Hogarth also became a popular portrait painter. In 1746, he painted the actor David Garrick, playing Richard III. For this one painting he received £200. It was more than any English artist had ever received for a portrait.

Hogarth was a prolific artist and he lived at a time when artists were beginning to earn a living by selling their work not solely to rich patrons but also to shop and tavern owners. Engravings of popular paintings sold well in print shops and successful artists could earn good money from their work. Hogarth introduced moral tales and humour into his drawings and these went down extremely well in 18th century England. It was Hogarth who had the original idea of painting and engraving modern moral subjects and creating stories as a mixture of writer and playwright. It was Hogarth who invented the whole concept of the strip cartoon.

In 1729, Hogarth married Jane Thornhill, herself the daughter of a successful artist. He died in London in 1764. His friend, the legendary actor David Garrick composed the following inscription for Hogarth's tombstone:

Farewell great Painter of Mankind,
Who reach'd the noblest point of Art,
Whose pictur'd Morals charm the Mind,
And through the Eye correct the Art

If Genius fire thee, Reader, stay,
If Nature touch thee, drop a Tear;
If neither move thee, turn away
For Hogarth's honour'd dust lies here.

There is one more reason for Hogarth to deserve his place in my 100.

Hogarth had never been a man to allow anyone to take advantage of him professionally. For example, when he wasn't paid for a design he made in 1727, when he was still at the beginning of his career, he sued the man who had commissioned the work and won.

In 1734, Hogarth, together with other 'artists and designers of paintings, drawings, and engravers of original prints' petitioned the House of Commons for copyright protection for their work.

The House of Commons reported that Hogarth and his friends claimed that they had 'with great industry and expense, severally invented designed or engraved divers sets of new pictures and prints, in hopes to have reaped the benefits of such their own labours, and the credit thereof, but that divers printsellers, printers, and other persons, both here and abroad, have, of late, too frequently taken the liberty of copying, printing, publishing, great quantities of base, imperfect and mean copies and imitations thereof, to the great detriment of the petitioners and such other artists, and to the discouragement of Arts and Sciences in this Kingdom.'

Hogarth put politics into art and invented the cartoon strip. He also helped give artists, writers, designers and others copyright protection for their work. The fight for copyright protection, which Hogarth began in the House of Commons in England, eventually spread to other countries around the world. Writers and artists today could do with Hogarth to protect their interests.

Robert Hooke

(1653-1703)

Robert Hooke didn't have a good start to life. Born on the Isle of Wight, he grew up with a pronounced curvature of the spine, he had smallpox when he was a boy (which left him badly scarred) and, when he was just 13 years old, his father, a clergyman, hanged himself. When he decided to train as a painter he found that he was allergic to paint fumes. And then he fell in love with a girl called Grace Hooke who, unfortunately, happened to be his niece.

But, after that unpromising beginning, Hooke's life became a massive success. He learned to play the organ, secured a place as a chorister at Oxford and became an assistant to Dr Thomas Willis. He met Robert Boyle and discovered a passion for science and mathematics.

A complete list of his discoveries and inventions would fill a book. He invented the marine barometer and was one of the first men to build and use a reflecting telescope. He invented sash windows, the circular flywheel (used in clocks), the anchor escapement (used in clocks), the hygrometer (used to measure humidity), the anemometer (used to measure wind), the helioscope (used for studying the sun), the refractometer (used to measure the refractive index of liquids), the marine chronometer (decades before the one John Harrison invented in 1761), the wheel barometer, the altimeter (used for measuring height), and the equatorial quadrant (used to aid astronomical observations). He invented synthetic fibres, microdots, mercury amalgam (later used as a filling material by dentists) and the hypodermic needle (after studying bee stings under a microscope). He discovered the principles of respiration (working with Robert Boyle, whose work on gases is remembered by the laws which bear his name, Hooke expanded the significance of Harvey's work on the circulation of the blood with a complementary piece of research which showed that the movement of the lungs draws air into the body), developed the hypothesis that the earth's magnetic poles are not fixed and was the first man to study fossils. He was the first man to discover sun spots and the fact that the earth and the moon follow an elliptical orbit around the sun. He discovered the planet Neptune. He discovered the relationship of vibrations to musical notes (eighty years before the formal discovery of the wave nature of sound), the principles of light refraction (he proposed the wave theory of light to explain diffraction - which he also discovered), the existence of binary star systems and the nature of combustion. In 1667, he announced in his *Micrographia* that he had 'by the help of a distended wire, propagated the sound to a very considerable distance in an instant, or with as seemingly quick a motion as that of light.' He also pointed out that sound could be transmitted through a wire even if the wire was bent. He found out how to measure gravity by using a pendulum and demonstrated the law describing planetary motions. He suggested that Jupiter rotates on its axis, and his detailed sketches of Mars were used to determine its rate of rotation. He found that matter expands when it is heated and he developed the kinetic theory of gases. It was Hooke who coined the word 'cell' to refer to the basic unit of life (after examining a piece of cork under a microscope he decided that the smallest parts of the material reminded him of monastic cells) and, as an architect, he helped rebuild London after the Great Fire. He was responsible for designing the Bedlam mental asylum, the London College of Physicians and the London Monument to the Great Fire. His law of elasticity, a crucial discovery, states that the deformation of a material is linearly proportional to the force applied to it. He was one of the first proponents of the theory of evolution (years before Darwin wrote about it). He was the first to state that air is made up of particles separated from each other by relatively large distances.

Oh, and he invented the universal joint, without which a vast number of other inventions would never have been possible. And he invented the steam engine but, not surprisingly, never actually got round to building one.

It is difficult to believe that anyone has ever done more for mankind than Robert Hooke, or that the world has ever known a more terrifyingly brilliant and wide-ranging genius.

In 1696, he began to write his autobiography. Not surprisingly, he never managed to find the time to finish it. Pity. He knew Isaac Newton and Christopher Wren well and had a lasting friendship with John Aubrey. He was Curator of Experiments for the Royal Society for 40 years. He was in many ways an unusual, as well as a great, man. When he died in London he had amassed a considerable sum of money. The cash was found in his room.

Edward Jenner

(1749-1823)

Throughout the 18th century, smallpox was one of the most dangerous and feared diseases. It killed hundreds of thousands.

Many attempts had been made to control the disease.

In China and India, twenty-five centuries before, it had been discovered that putting material from smallpox scabs or pustules into the nose or skin of a healthy individual would protect that individual to the extent that if they contracted smallpox they would suffer a less serious attack – and probably not die.

It was not, however, until the beginning of the 18th century that this method of preventive medicine, an early form of inoculation, was introduced into Europe from Turkey. Material from a smallpox pustule was rubbed into a scratch made with a clean needle on the arm of the person to be inoculated. Prior to that time, the only way to minimise the deadly effect of the disease had been for healthy individuals to mix with people who had a mild version of smallpox. Aware of this, local 'wise women' in Europe (a cross between early midwives, district nurses and GPs) had encouraged mothers to allow their children to play with other local children who had a mild case of smallpox.

After Lady Mary Montagu, the wife of the British Ambassador to Turkey, had her daughter publicly inoculated against smallpox with a needle, the method became fashionable. Experiments performed on prisoners from Newgate Prison in London seemed at first to show that the technique was relatively safe and effective.

Thomas Dimsdale, an English practitioner in the town of Hertford, was invited to Russia to inoculate the family of Catherine II. His fee for this was to receive £10,000, an annuity of £500 and his expenses. He was also made a baron, a councillor of state and a major general.

However, it quickly became clear that this crude form of inoculation was rather dangerous.

When a Society for the Inoculation of the Poor was founded in London, Dimsdale objected on the grounds that in the overcrowded conditions in which the poor of London lived, inoculation would simply spread smallpox and produce an epidemic of the disease. He was right. One doctor reported that a single inoculated child had infected a total of 17 people, eight of whom had subsequently died. Inoculation worked for the rich but not for the poor, who lived in close contact with one another and who could not all be inoculated at the same time, the method was simply too dangerous.

Throughout the 18th century, smallpox continued to kill hundreds of thousands. One of the greatest epidemics to affect London occurred in 1772. In 1774, the disease claimed the life of King Louis XV of France.

In 1774, however, there was a breakthrough in the fight against smallpox. Frightened by the news of a local outbreak of smallpox, a Dorset farmer called Benjamin Jesty vaccinated his wife and two sons with cowpox (a similar but mild disease contracted by cows) in the hope that this might protect them against smallpox. Jesty had noticed that the girls working on his farm who had contracted cowpox did not develop smallpox. Although Jesty's experiment was ignored by the medical profession, the Dorset farmer had discovered vaccination – a very different form of protection to inoculation.

Inoculation requires the person to be protected to be given the infection against which they are seeking protection in the hope that they will merely suffer a mild case of the disease. It is an obviously dangerous business. Vaccination, however, involves giving the patient a harmless disease, or a mild and harmless version of a disease, in the hope that by being forced to prepare its defences the body will acquire a defence against the similar but potentially lethal disorder. The hazards with vaccination are considerable but not as immediately obvious.

Jesty's idea was eventually revised by a general practitioner called

Dr Edward Jenner. Jenner was born, worked and died in Berkeley, Gloucestershire, where his father was the vicar. He was a keen naturalist and an intelligent and thoughtful man. 'The deviation of man from the state in which he was originally placed by nature,' he once wrote, 'seems to have proved to him a prolific source of diseases.'

In the area of Gloucestershire where Jenner worked it was well known that dairymaids who developed cowpox did not develop smallpox and Jenner slowly collected evidence for this phenomenon until, in 1796, he was certain enough of the theory to repeat the experiment which had been first tried by Jesty in 1774.

With great professional courage Jenner put material from a cowpox pustule on the hand of a dairymaid called Sarah Nelmes into a scratch he made on the arm of an eight-year-old boy, James Phipps.

Then, seven weeks later, to test whether young Master Phipps really was protected, Jenner injected him with material from a genuine smallpox pustule.

To Jenner's undoubted relief the boy remained healthy.

With the remarkable pig-headedness that has characterised the scientific and medical establishment through the ages, the Royal Society, did not think Jenner's account of his daring experiment worthy of publishing (though they had happily published one of his earlier papers describing the natural history of the cuckoo).

Undeterred by the lack of interest shown by the profession, Jenner continued with his experiments and within two years had performed 22 similar vaccinations, many performed in an arbour in his garden. He described his work in a booklet which he published himself in 1798.

This small self-published publication resulted in the results of his work spreading around the world. People everywhere wanted to be vaccinated with the Jenner method. In some areas, an infected cow would be led from door to door so that material could be scraped off and used to vaccinate the waiting citizens. In 1805, the Emperor Napoleon, ruled that all his troops who had not had smallpox should be vaccinated at once. The technique became popular in North, Central and South America, throughout Europe, in Russia and eventually in China, where the original form of inoculation had been first used so many centuries earlier. (The French often claim that Pasteur invented vaccination. In fact, Pasteur's first vaccine, against rabies, was not tested until 1885.)

Jenner did not prove as popular or as influential in his own country, of course. The theory of vaccination met with considerable opposition from jealous members of the medical profession. Some argued that there was a risk of transmitting syphilis. Others argued that preventing smallpox was interfering with the will of God. A few claimed that by limiting deaths from smallpox, vaccinators would put an intolerable burden on family men who might otherwise expect their liabilities (and the size of their families) to be limited.

Jenner was never critical of the establishment and remained graceful, despite the criticism. 'The scepticism that appeared, even among the most enlightened of medical men when my sentiments on the important subject of the cowpox were first promulgated was highly laudable. To have admitted the truth of a doctrine at once so novel and so unlike any thing that ever had appeared in the annals of medicine without the test of the most rigid scrutiny, would have bordered upon temerity.'

Parliament eventually gave Jenner a grant to continue his experiments, though by that time his technique had been accepted in most parts of the world.

Jenner's work may have helped end smallpox's reign of terror (though better living conditions also played a large part) and in the 19th and early 20th century vaccination proved effective in controlling other dangerous, potentially fatal, infectious diseases. Sadly, vaccination has been subsequently wildly over-promoted and over-used to protect against far less threatening disorders. The profession which had rejected Jenner's discovery as too dangerous, embraced it with diminishing reservations and unbridled enthusiasms, ignoring the risks and side effects as the profits to be made (both by the manufacturing industry and the medical profession) grew and grew; the glimpse of unending profits encouraging the development of too many vaccines which were neither effective nor safe.

Those whose enthusiasm for vaccination remains undimmed should perhaps be aware that Jenner himself had his own reservations. He tried out the first smallpox vaccination on his own 10-month-old son. Tragically, his son remained mentally retarded until his death at the age of 21. Jenner refused to have his second child vaccinated.

Samuel Johnson

1709-1784

Dr Samuel Johnson was a poet, translator, literary critic and author. But it is as the compiler of the most famous dictionary in the world that he is best remembered.

Johnson was born in Lichfield, in the English Midlands, where his father ran a bookshop (though not terribly successfully). Possibly because he was surrounded by books as a child (and spent much of his time reading his father's stock) he did well at school and at Oxford University. But because his father was poor he did not finish his degree course.

Johnson's hearing and his sight had both been damaged by childhood illnesses and although famous for his pugnacious conversational skills, his seemingly inexhaustible capacity for friendship, his endless curiosity, his wonderful sense of humour and his extraordinary wisdom, he was nevertheless a nervous, often depressed, individual; he constantly feared death and worried about going insane. After leaving Oxford without a degree he had difficulty finding work. His lack of qualifications, his involuntary tics and his physical infirmities all made life a constant torment.

At the age of 28 Johnson moved to London, and for twenty years he worked as a freelance journalist, writing essays, articles and biographies. He wrote just about anything that would bring in money. He was often poor and on one occasion he was sent to prison for debt. It was, without doubt, those years of poverty that forged his everlasting concern for the poor, the mentally ill, the underprivileged and those other outcasts living on the edge of society.

Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*, the book that became a classic and gave him immortality, was published in 1755. The dictionary, which consisted of two volumes, weighed an impressive 20 lbs and cost £4 10 shillings (over £500 in modern money). It contained 42,773 entries and had taken Dr Johnson eight years to compile. It was, to say the least, an impressive achievement. In France, 40 scholars took 40 years to produce the French equivalent. 'Forty times forty is sixteen hundred... so is the proportion of an Englishman to a Frenchman,' said the wise doctor.

Johnson refused to include French words such as 'blonde' and 'champagne' in his dictionary and there were no words beginning with X, though this was possibly because neither X-rays nor the xylophone had then been invented.

Robert Cawdrey was the first person to create an English dictionary (his book *A Table Alpheticall* had been published in 1604) but Johnson's was the first to include clear definitions and common usages and to show how writers used words. Johnson included over 100,000 quotations in his dictionary, and his definitions were often spiced with humour and prejudice. For example, he defined 'oats' as 'a grain which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people' and a stockjobber as 'a low wretch who gets money by buying and selling shares'.

Johnson continued to write in old age and was more comfortable in his later years after he was awarded a pension for services to literature. His final major work *Lives of the English Poets* was published just a few years before his death.

John Keats
(1795-1821)

Born in London, the son of a livery-stable owner who kept horses for hire, John Keats was the eldest of five children. His father died when he was only eight and Keats grew up with his grandmother in Edmonton. He was apprenticed to a surgeon in Edmonton at the age of 16 and studied medicine at Guys Hospital in London from 1815 to 1816.

But his love was poetry. Leigh Hunt, his neighbour in Hampstead, introduced him to Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Keats published his first sonnets in a magazine called *The Examiner* in 1816 when he was 21 years old. He gave up medicine to concentrate on poetry, living on a small legacy from his grandmother. The following year his first book of poems was published and in 1818 he published a long mythological poem entitled *Endymion* which, in 4,000 lines, told of the love of the moon goddess Cynthia for the young shepherd Endymion. The opening line is: 'A thing of beauty is a joy for ever.'

Sadly, his work was not well received.

He returned from a long and exhausting walking tour of Scotland to find that Endymion had been savaged by all the critics. They hated it. Even worse was the news that his younger brother Tom was dying of consumption (tuberculosis), the disease which had already killed much of his family.

Despite all this he found the strength to keep writing and in 1820 published a volume of poetry entitled *Lamia and Other Poems*. This book included a series of well-known odes including: *On a Grecian Urn, On Melancholy* and *To a Nightingale*. It also included *To Autumn* and just about all his other best poems. Keats, at the age of 25, had suddenly become one of the greatest poets of the age. Most of his great poetry had been written within a single twelve month period. His work astounded the critics who were enormously impressed by the way he created vivid word pictures to praise beautiful things. Keats believed that the purpose of poetry should simply be to glorify beauty and not as a vehicle for philosophy or religion. He wrote that the poet's true function is to be simply an artist, and not a teacher or a prophet. The two words that perhaps best sum up his style are 'tender melancholy'.

That same year Keats himself became seriously ill with consumption. He travelled to Rome to find some sunshine and escape England's cold winter, and died there in a house at the foot of the Spanish steps; a house which became a target for literary pilgrims from all around the world.

Although his life was short and intensely tragic, Keats is also remembered for his letters which throw a great deal of light both on his development as a poet and also on his often sad love affair with Fanny Brawne – the girl he had met in 1818 and whom he loved but was too poor to marry. It was a love affair which seemed to cause him as much pain as pleasure.

Keats greatly influenced many writers who followed, including Tennyson, Swinburne, Rossetti and Morris. Robert Bridges, the famous English poet and critic wrote: 'If one English poet might be recalled today from the dead to continue the work which he left unfinished on earth, it is probable that the crown of his country's desire would be set on the head of John Keats.'

Stephen Langton
(1150-1228)

The Magna Carta is the document which guaranteed political liberty and basic human rights for all Englishmen. It was signed at Runnymede, in a meadow by the River Thames, by King John on 15 June 1215 under pressure from a group of rebellious barons who were angry at the high taxes the King had introduced. If one man can be credited with *The Magna Carta*, it is Stephen Langton, who was Archbishop of Canterbury at the time, and the driving force behind the document.

The Magna Carta included clauses reforming law and justice, providing for a free church and controlling the behaviour of royal officials. *The Magna Carta* may have been superseded and rendered impotent by a sequence of treaties signed with the European Union but it is still traditionally regarded as the only written basis of an English constitution.

The Magna Carta set the tone for constitutions and declarations around the world and was the first example of citizens demanding, and obtaining, a formal charter of their basic rights. It has been, for the best part of a thousand years, the blueprint for just about every democratic constitution ever written.

Stephen Langton was born in Surrey and educated at the University of Paris, where he lectured on theology until1206. While in Paris he met the future Pope Innocent III who subsequently called him to Rome and made him cardinal-priest of San Crisogono. He had then become the most eminent English churchman and in 1207, against the wishes of King John, he was made Archbishop of Canterbury.

King John, who could pick a quarrel with his own reflection, immediately announced that anyone who recognised Stephen Langton as Archbishop would be proclaimed a public enemy. The new Archbishop duly left the country and moved to France. The Pope excommunicated the King and the King confiscated the property of the clergy. The Pope then issued a bull deposing King John and instructing Philip II of France to replace him. Things had now got very silly and in 1213 King John, who was extremely unpopular at home, realised that he was out of his depth. The hapless King gave in and did some royal grovelling. Stephen Langton led churchmen and barons in demanding that King John renew the charter of Henry I which had guaranteed basic rights to the English people. Barons, clergy and ordinary people were united in demanding that King John should keep his oath and restore the laws of Henry I which he had brushed aside. No one liked King John who was cruel, badly behaved and very full of his own self-importance. He was a despot whose corrupt administration and crushing taxes alienated all groups of citizens. (In a fit of pique he once tried to convert England to Islam.)

The energetic Archbishop of Canterbury kept up the pressure but after King John had made peace with the Pope he managed to get the Pope on his side and the Pope excommunicated the Barons. When Stephen Langton refused to publish the excommunication he was suspended from his post by the Pope. Things which had become complicated had now become even more complicated. But Langton stood firm and still demanded that the King sign a document promising to give the people the laws and the protection they wanted.

An English army, led spiritually by the Archbishop and given military strength by the barons, met the King at Runnymede where the King capitulated and signed *The Magna Carta*.

Naturally, once the barons and the army had disbanded and gone home, King John broke his word and reneged on everything he had signed. The barons called over the French dauphin (the future Louis VIII) to be their leader. As a result, King John was now in even bigger trouble. He got out of it by dying in October 1216. It was his only way out of the mess he had got himself into through dishonesty and arrogance. Helpfully, Pope Innocent III also died.

Everyone in England now rallied to support the new King, Henry III. Stephen Langton, still the Archbishop of Canterbury, worked for the political independence of England. In 1223, he acted as leader and spokesmen for the barons and demanded that King Henry III confirm the contents of *The Magna Carta.* This the King did. Langton then won concessions from the new Pope that were favourable to the English church and opened a council which produced decrees (known as the *Constitutions of Stephen Langton*) which are still regarded as binding canons in the English church.

Stephen Langton died in Sussex in 1228 and was buried in open ground next to Canterbury Cathedral. A chapel was later built over his grave. He remains England's most important churchman. He can be truly said to have had the courage of his convictions.

John Lilburne

(1614-1657)

Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans (also known as Levellers) wanted England to have a properly accountable Parliament, responsible to the people and representing the people's wishes. They wanted to get rid of a monarch who believed that it was his God-given right to rule the country, and to do what he wanted regardless of the people's wishes.

Cromwell was tough, single-minded and determined. But alongside John Lilburne he sometimes looks slightly mealy-mouthed and uncertain.

Lilburne, known as Freeborn John, was a pamphleteer and campaigner who fought with his life, and apparently without fear, for the rights of the ordinary Englishman. Between 1638 and 1640 he was whipped and imprisoned by the country's Star Chamber for importing Puritan literature. He then rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel in the Parliamentary army during the English civil war but resigned in 1645 because he disapproved of the Solemn League and Covenant, an agreement between the English and the Scots in which the Scots agreed to support the English Parliamentarians in their dispute with the King, and to work for a civil and religious union of England, Scotland and Ireland.

Lilburne also believed (and said loudly) that Cromwell's republic was too aristocratic.

He agitated consistently and noisily on behalf of the Levellers (who believed that sovereignty should rest solely with the House of Commons) and with enormous courage he indefatigably demanded greater liberty of conscience and more and more reforms. He was repeatedly put in prison for writing and publishing pamphlets which were regarded as treasonable. But nothing would stop him telling what he believed to be the truth and fighting for a cause which he believed, with all his heart, to be important. On both the occasions when he was tried for treason he was acquitted.

John Lilburne was just 42 years old when he died of a fever. He had given most of his life fighting for freedom and true democracy.

Joseph Lister
(1827-1912)

In the middle of the 19th century surgeons still operated without giving any thought to the dangers of infection. They knew that infection killed many of their patients. But they regarded the hazard as unavoidable. Surgeons wiped their instruments on their blood and pus-stained coat tails, while their assistants carried needles in their coat lapels ready-threaded with silk for sutures. One eminent New York surgeon is said to have whetted his scalpel on the sole of his shoe. Surgeons used dirty old rags to clean out wounds and to stop bleeding. The introduction of anaesthesia had made life considerably less painful for the patient. But mortality rates were still horrendous. In Paris a mortality rate of 63 per cent was recorded. In Edinburgh, a mortality rate of 43 per cent was considered acceptable. It was no exaggeration to say that in the 19th century it was more dangerous to be in a hospital ward than it had been to be on the battlefield at Waterloo.

All that changed as the result of the work of an English doctor called Joseph Lister (later Lord Lister). Joseph Lister was born in Essex. His father was a scientist. The young Lister graduated from London University with an arts degree and a medical degree.

While working as Regius Professor of Surgery at the University of Glasgow in 1860, Joseph Lister learned about the work of Louis Pasteur, the French chemist who had discovered the principles of fermentation - and how small, unseen organisms could multiply and affect the environment around them.

Worried by the fearful mortality rate among surgical patients, Lister had been studying the problem of infection for some time and accepted the idea, then prevalent among surgeons, that the majority of deaths were caused by some poison in the hospital atmosphere. Lister did all he could to try to prevent infection in his operating theatre. He removed his frock coat before operating. He used fresh towels in such abundance that the hospital managers complained. And he washed his hands before operating.

It was through discussing the problem with the Professor of Chemistry at the University that Lister heard about Pasteur’s work. From the papers he studied, Lister came to the conclusion that it was not the air that was the problem as much as the small organisms in the air. The solution, he decided, would be to find some way to keep the hospital atmosphere free of these small, invisible organisms.

Pasteur had suggested that the organisms which cause fermentation, putrefaction and decay could be controlled by using heat or antiseptics. Lister decided that the same sort of approach might work for the organisms which cause infection and since it was clearly not practical to keep surgical patients at a high enough temperature to kill the unseen bugs he started experimenting with other ways to prevent the development of infection. He decided that bacteria on surgical instruments, on the surgeon’s hands, and in the air itself, might start an infection in an exposed wound and then cause the patient’s death. He concluded that the answer was to make hospitals as clean as possible and to make sure that operating theatres were kept especially clean. After unsuccessfully trying out various chemicals he hit upon a substance called German creosote, a substance which had already been used to clean up a sewage plant in Carlisle. He obtained a specimen of the dark brown, harsh-smelling creosote and found it easy to dissolve in water. It was not difficult to apply to dressings. Lister’s method was to use a piece of lint impregnated with creosote to make an artificial scab over a surgical wound. The first patient, who had suffered a compound fracture, did well. In 1865, a chemical firm in Manchester began to produce a purified form of creosote. They called their product carbolic acid and Lister changed from creosote to this new product. He would clean the wound with a piece of cotton material soaked in carbolic acid and held in a pair of clean forceps. He would then put a piece of lint, again soaked in carbolic acid, directly over the wound, overlapping by half an inch in all directions. He would place a thin sheet of flexible metal on top of the lint to prevent evaporation of fluid from the cloth. The metal sheet would be lifted regularly and fresh carbolic acid painted on the outside of the lint. When he found that the carbolic acid dissolved better in oil than in water he switched to oily dressings. He found that the oil acted as a reservoir, keeping the wound soaked with antiseptic for longer periods. He used a soft putty made of common whitening and linseed oil, impregnated with carbolic acid, because this could be spread thickly over the wound itself. An additional advantage was that the putty didn’t irritate as much as the more watery solution. He was delighted to see that the wounds healed completely and without infection.

In 1867, after some research and some more experiments, Lister published in the *Lancet* a paper entitled *On the Antiseptic Principle in the Practice of Surgery*. He subsequently wrote to his father and said: ‘I now perform an operation for the removal of a tumour etc., with a totally different feeling from what I used to have: in fact surgery is becoming a different thing altogether.’

The paper Lister published in the *Lancet* was, without a doubt, one of the most important scientific papers ever published. It revolutionised surgery and saved countless lives. Lister’s paper provided the answer to the problem that had for centuries faced all surgeons.

Naturally, the medical establishment did not accept Lister's work without a struggle. His critics ignored the evidence and attacked his recommendations with the tragic result that it was several decades before all surgeons accepted, and began to practice, the sort of technique the English doctor had advocated.

Convinced that he had found the solution to the age-old problem of post-operative infection, Lister ignored the criticism and continued to experiment. He next developed a steam-powered carbolic spray which would enable him to fill the operating theatre with a fine mist of carbolic acid. Since he operated in the middle of this mist, and since the carbolic acid inevitably covered his hands, his instruments and the patient, Lister's new invention proved extremely successful, and the number of patients dying in his operating theatre was immediately reduced yet again. Lister was even able to open up joints and operate on them without fear of infection.

In the years which followed Lister's early experiments, other investigators showed that it was not necessary to smother the patient or the surgeon with antiseptics, but that an equally good result could be obtained by thoroughly cleaning all instruments and by dressing surgeons and their assistants in clean gowns, caps and gloves.

But it was Lister's imagination and courage which first led to the conquering of this major problem. And it was Lister's pioneering work which enabled surgeons around the world to begin performing operations never before dreamt possible. Within Lister's lifetime, surgeons were operating within the human chest and skull without fear of failure because of infection.

It is difficult to think of any doctor who contributed more to medicine than Lord Joseph Lister. Lister also made important observations about inflammation and the coagulation of blood but it was his introduction of an antiseptic approach to surgery that earned him immortality. It is extraordinary to realise that when he discovered the principle of using an antiseptic to prevent disease, Lister had never even seen the microbes which can cause infection. He believed that they were there and he had the imagination and the genius to understand the problem and to see the solution.

John Locke
1632-1704

Born in Wrington in Somerset and educated at Oxford University, where he studied medicine and science, John Locke was elected to the Royal Society at the age of 36. He was friends with many important scientists of his age, including Isaac Newton and Robert Boyle.

Although Locke had qualified in medicine, he practised only occasionally but was family physician and adviser to the future 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury. When Shaftesbury was imprisoned by King Charles II because of his political activities both he and Locke moved to the Netherlands. Locke remained there until King James II had been removed by the revolution of 1688. He returned to England shortly afterwards and became commissioner of appeals, a post he held until his death.

John Locke is remembered as a philosopher; the first writer to put together the basic ideas of a constitutional democracy. If Oliver Cromwell was the practical man behind the birth of English democracy then John Locke was the brains behind its development.

Locke is, perhaps, most famous for a classic philosophical book entitled *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* which he published in 1690 and in which he discussed the origin, nature and limits of human knowledge. He was hugely influenced by two other Englishmen, Francis Bacon and Thomas Hobbes, but his work, in turn, influenced many subsequent philosophers. Locke argued that knowledge begins in sensation or introspection and that it is through reflection that the mind receives ideas, which are themselves the building blocks of knowledge.

It was, however, Locke's books on politics which had most impact.

In 1689 (writing at first anonymously) Locke published *A Letter Concerning Toleration* in which he argued that the State should not interfere with man's freedom to choose and practise his own religion. He argued that we should all be tolerant of our neighbours – whether they be Christian, Pagan, Mahometan or Jew. (He did, however, draw the line at accepting Catholics whom he said owed their allegiance to a foreign potentate and could not, therefore, be given the same level of freedom by the State.) His strong and wellbased arguments were a big factor in the growth of public support for this point of view and although elements of his book may now seem strangely intolerant he was, for his time, extremely tolerant and broad-minded.

In the same year, Locke published *Two Treatises of Government* in which he described his basic ideas for a liberal, constitutional democracy. He argued that every citizen has natural rights, including personal liberty and the right to hold property of his own.

He pointed out that the main purpose of government is to protect the lives and property of the citizens. Locke rejected the notion of the divine right of kings and claimed that governments have authority only through the consent of the people. He argued that when governments attempt to take away the rights of the people, or to reduce them to slavery under arbitrary power and the use of force, they lose the right to govern and the people no longer have the responsibility to be obedient.

He pointed out that the people always have a right to remove the government and that if normal processes do not work then the people have the right to take back their authority by revolution.

Locke believed in the principle of majority rule but also repeatedly argued that governments, once elected, do not have unlimited rights and must not violate the natural rights of men. He claimed that the legislature should be superior to the executive and, since he considered the judiciary to be part of the executive, superior to the judiciary too. He believed that the legislature, elected by the people, should have all the power. It is hard indeed to see Locke accepting the sort of executive control favoured by the European Union.

Locke firmly believed that individual citizens have basic, natural rights and that governments, and those who work for them, have limited authority and must always serve the public good. His work influenced both the French and the American revolutionaries. It was Locke's defence of the right of revolution that influenced Thomas Jefferson and other American revolutionaries, and the constitution of the USA was written with reference to Locke's work. Indeed, Locke had described all the major ideas of the American Revolution a century before the American Revolution took place. Locke's views and soundly argued beliefs preceded and strongly influenced such men as Voltaire as well as Jefferson.

Thomas Malthus
(1766-1834)

Malthus was born near Dorking, in Surrey and went to Cambridge University where he graduated in 1788. He was ordained an Anglican clergyman in the same year.

Thomas Robert Malthus was a little known English parson, just 32 years old, when he published a book called *An Essay on the Principle of Population as It Affects the Future Improvement of Society.* To begin with, the book was published anonymously. But, later as the book gained fame, so Malthus's name was associated with it and he was named as the author. He repeatedly revised and expanded the book as the years went by and new editions grew steadily longer.

The basic thesis of Malthus's book was that the growth of the population tends to be faster than the growth of the available food supply. In the first edition of his book he claimed that the population tends to increase in a geometric fashion, doubling at regular intervals (as with the numbers 1,2,4,8,16 and so on) while the food supply increases only arithmetically (as with the numbers 1,2,3,4,5 and so on).

In later editions, Malthus abandoned this specificity and stated merely that the size of the population tends to increase until it reaches the limit of the food supply.

But the conclusion he drew remained the same: that most men, women and children are doomed to live in poverty, constantly bordering on the edge of starvation. He concluded that in the long run no advances in technology would change this basic premise because 'the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power of the earth to produce subsistence for man'.

He pointed out that the usual, traditional forms of population growth restraint (war, pestilence and famine) are obviously pretty nasty and provide only temporary relief Once the war, pestilence or famine is over the population starts to grow again.

His theoretical answer was to suggest that people should remain chaste before they married, should marry late and should restrain their sexual impulses. In practice, however, he realised that most people would not follow this suggestion. And he concluded that mankind inevitably faced a future of poverty and hunger.

Malthus never suggested that men and women used contraceptive devices to keep down the population growth (such things were pretty primitive in those days and he disapproved of them on moral grounds). Today, however, advocates of the use of control of population through the use of contraceptives usually refer to themselves as neo-Malthusians.

Another Englishman, Francis Place, had read Malthus's book and in 1822 he wrote a book advocating contraception. He also disseminated birth control information among poorer people. He was, without a doubt, the true father of contraception.

Malthus's book had a dramatic effect on economists. Those who had read his book concluded that overpopulation would prevent wages from rising much above the subsistence level. An English economist, David Ricardo, stated that: 'The natural price of labour is that price which is necessary to enable the labourers, one with another, to subsist and to perpetuate the race, without either increase or diminution.' This theory became known as the 'iron law of wages' and became a critical element in the theory of surplus value and the development of communism.

Malthus also influenced another Englishman, Charles Darwin, who admitted that Malthus's book gave him an important link for his theory of evolution by natural selection.

In 1804, Malthus, who was then 38, married, and the following year he was made professor of history and political economy at the East India Company's College at Haileybury. He stayed there for the rest of his life and wrote several other books on economics. One of them, *Principles of Political Economy*, influenced many important economists (including John Maynard Keynes).

Malthus died near Bath at the age of 68.

Few men have had such a dramatic effect on the world as Thomas Malthus. He strongly influenced Charles Darwin and most major economists. His theory influenced Karl Marx. And although he personally did not advocate contraceptives, his book undoubtedly triggered the idea of using them. Malthus was the first person to draw attention to the significance of over-population.

And now his work is about to become even more pertinent. The use of oil-based fertilisers, and the use of machinery running on oil, changed the rules for a while – for those fortunate enough to live in countries rich enough or powerful enough to obtain the oil – but now that the oil is running out it seems that Malthus's basic premise is, once again, about to be proven entirely accurate.

Henry Maudslay

(1771-1831)

The Industrial Revolution started in England and so it is hardly surprising that most of the men who led the revolution were English. Henry Maudslay was one of the leaders.

Born the fifth child of a storekeeper at the Royal Arsenal, Woolwich, London, Henry Maudslay was one of the most significant inventors of the era. At the age of 12 the young Maudslay got a job at the Arsenal, filling cartridges. He then transferred to the blacksmith's shop to learn the trade of blacksmith. By the time he was 18 years old he had such a reputation that Joseph Bramah heard of him and hired him for his workshop in Denmark Street, London. Maudslay made a significant contribution to the development of Bramah's hydraulic press.

Maudslay's first invention of his own was a much-improved version of the lathe. Up until that time lathes were worked by a treadle, and the workman had to hold his tool against whatever he was working on. Maudslay's improved lathe enabled workmen to produce components which were all precision made – rather than subject to the vagaries of the workman's hand. It is no exaggeration to say that Maudslay's lathe revolutionised the production of machine components.

Having been made manager of Bramah's workshop, Maudslay married Braham's housemaid in 1791. He was now just 20 years old.

In 1797, having had a request for a modest pay rise turned down, Maudslay set up his own engineering business just off Oxford Street. He was 26 years old and clearly ambitious.

His first major job was to manufacture 42 machines to make rigging blocks for the Royal Navy. Each machine had to be capable of making 130,000 ships' blocks a year. Some of the machines are still in existence and functioning. Thanks to Maudslay, specialised machinery was now being used in an assembly line.

In 1800, Maudslay developed the first practical screw-cutting lathe, making it possible to turnout thousands of identical and standardised screws for the first time. Before this invention bits and pieces of machinery had not been interchangeable. Nuts and bolts, for example, had to be used together because they could not be swapped around.

Over the years that followed, Maudslay invented a number of pieces of machinery which were crucial to the development of the Industrial Revolution. His astonishing variety of inventions also include a method for printing calico cloth, the slide rule and a method of desalinating salt water. He also invented the micrometer, a measuring machine that was accurate to 0.0001 inches. He called his micrometer the 'Lord Chancellor' as it was used to settle any questions about the accuracy of workmanship. He also designed and built many stationary and marine engines. And his company built the tunnelling equipment used by the Brunels to build the Thames tunnel.

A number of outstanding English engineers and inventors, including James Nasmyth, Joshua Field and Sir Joseph Whitworth, learned their trade in Maudslay's company.

In 1831, Maudslay caught a chill while crossing the English Channel and died four weeks later.

John Stuart Mill
(1806-1873)

John Stuart Mill was born in London and taught at home by his historian father. He was taught Greek at the age of three, Latin and arithmetic at eight, logic at 12 and political economy at 13. His only recreation was a daily walk with his father. During those walks his father conducted oral examinations. No toys, no games. Life can't have been much fun.

After visiting France at the age of 14 the young but well-educated Mill studied law, history and philosophy, and at the age of 17 began a career under his father at the India Office. He remained there until the dissolution of the East India Company in 1858, when he retired at the age of 52. It was, it seems, an undemanding job which allowed him plenty of time to write.

Mill never seemed to resent his lost childhood. On the contrary he claimed that his forced education gave him an advantage of a quarter of a century over his contemporaries.

In 1822, he began publishing articles in the newspaper *The Traveller* and he helped form the Utilitarian Society which met for readings and discussions in the home of Jeremy Bentham. In 1824, he was arrested for distributing birth control literature to the poor in London.

In 1826, at the age of 20, Mill had a nervous breakdown, probably a result of the fact that in his 20 years he hadn't been allowed a moment in which to relax or have any fun. The breakdown was followed by a depression. Afterwards Mill mellowed a little and humanised utilitarianism by recognising that there are differences in the quality as well as the quantity of pleasures. (Bentham, the prime advocate of utilitarianism was, perhaps, rather too keen on measuring joys and delights quantitatively rather than qualitatively and so, to the traditional utilitarian, five minutes spent walking, reading the paper, looking at an amazing sunset, eating, enjoying the sunshine or making love were all interchangeable.)

In 1830, Mill met Harriet Taylor, the wife of a wealthy London merchant and although she remained faithful to her husband, she and Mill had a long and intense romance. They married in 1851, two years after the death of the almost but not quite cuckolded Mr Taylor. She died in 1858 but helped and encouraged Mill in his writing.

During his late thirties, Mill owned and virtually edited the *London Review,* which was later incorporated with the *Westminster Review*. As a result of these periodicals he became the prophet of the philosophical radicals.

His first major work, *A System of Logic*, was published in 1842. His next significant book *The Principles of Political Economy* appeared in 1847 and his most brilliant and popular book *On Liberty*, in which he defines and defends the freedoms of the individual against social and political control, was published in 1859.

In 1863, Mill published *Utilitarianism* and in 1869 he wrote *The Subjection of Women*; an analysis of the status of women, which caused a great deal of controversy and attracted much antagonism.

He published many other books but his autobiography, published in 1873 is one of his most revealing and important books. It is a simple, honest and sincere book and in it he describes the mental crisis he suffered in 1826.

John Stuart Mill was elected to Parliament in 1865, at the age of 59, and campaigned for women's suffrage. In 1872 he became godfather to Bertrand Russell, who would later himself become a noted philosopher. Mill spent his final years in France, and died in Avignon.

There is no doubt that Mill was driven by a genuine desire to do work for the public good, nor that much of his life was devoted to social service and political reform. Like his chum Jeremy Bentham, he probably wasn't the sort of person you'd want by your side on a dull Sunday afternoon, but he wrote about serious topics with great freshness and sensitivity and he greatly influenced the development of society in England and the rest of the world.

John Milton

(1608-1674)

Born in London and educated at Cambridge University, John Milton was one of the world's greatest and most celebrated poets and essayists. As a poet he is recognised as having had a sensitive feeling for the rhythm and flow of words. As a result his poetry is both majestic and, at times, ethereal.

Milton's father was a rich lawyer and composer who had a house in the country as well as a London home and after leaving Cambridge John Milton spent the next six years of life studying privately at his family's country home. He had begun writing poetry at 16 and he gradually became a serious scholar of Greek, Latin and Hebrew. He had originally intended to become a priest but decided instead to devote his life to God through his poetry.

His poem *Lycidas* was completed when he was 29 but his promising career was interrupted by the English Civil War. In 1642, Milton temporarily abandoned his poetry and started writing political essays supporting Oliver Cromwell. In 1649, he became Secretary for the Foreign Tongues for Cromwell. He was the official spokesman for the revolution and also wrote pamphlets criticising censorship. At about that time he became aware that he was slowly losing his sight.

In 1659, Cromwell's new Commonwealth collapsed and the English monarchy was temporarily restored. Not surprisingly, Milton found himself in disgrace. But with enormous bravery he continued to publish pamphlets supporting the principles and practice of republicanism even as the restoration was taking place. Almost inevitably he had to go into hiding. His books were burned by the hangman in London and he was imprisoned for about two months. By then, however, he was famous as an essayist and poet. Indeed, he was regarded as Europe's leading scholar and poet. Although he had defended the idea of regicide in print, Charles II and his advisers didn't fancy the idea of executing a famous, blind poet. And so they let him go. Milton retired from public life and from writing political essays and went back to poetry. He desperately wanted to write an epic poem that would rival those of the ancient 'greats' such as Virgil and Homer.

By now completely blind (he was blind for the last twenty years of his life) he dictated *Paradise Lost.* His life was in ruins. His son had died, his daughters were estranged, two marriages had ended, he was in disgrace, his friends had been hanged or had flown abroad. *Paradise Lost*, which was published when Milton was 55, tells the story of how Satan was ejected from Heaven and came to earth to corrupt Adam and Eve. Milton's experience of England's civil war is reflected in the themes of war and conflict which appear in the poem; a magnificent and definitive exploration of evil.

Four years later Milton wrote and published *Paradise Regained.*

Thomas More
(1478-1535)

Thomas More was an enlightened champion of the freedom of the mind and of religious toleration. He gave his life as a martyr and is the only saint on my list.

Born in London, the son of a judge, More qualified as a lawyer but then, as soon as he had finished his training, spent four years in devotion and prayer. In 1504, towards the end of Henry VII's reign, he became a member of parliament and under-sheriff of London.

More married twice and the manner of his marrying tells us much about the man. His first marriage took place in 1505 when More met an Essex gentleman called Colte who had three daughters. More rather fancied the second daughter ('the fairest and best favoured') but 'considered that it would be both great grief and some shame also to the eldest to see her younger sister preferred before her in marriage'. And so 'of a certain pity' he 'framed his fancy' towards the eldest daughter, Jane and duly married her.

Jane was very young and quite uneducated but More shaped her character and taught her about books and music. She had four children but, tragically, died in 1511. More almost immediately married again, choosing this time a widow whom he described as neither beautiful or well-educated. More reported that she had no sense of humour either (not, at least, as far as More's jokes were concerned) but, perhaps as punishment for this, he made her learn the guitar, flute, cithern and harp and made her practise every day. She was, by all accounts, a good housekeeper rather than a passionate wife. An anecdote, reported in Arthur Cayley's book *Memoirs of Sir Thomas More* (published 1808) defines the relationship between More and his wife (and well illustrates More's impartiality and innate sense of justice). More was sitting in his hall one day when a female beggar came in to complain that Lady More had a small dog which belonged to her. More sent for his wife, asking her to bring the dog with her. He then took the dog and sent his wife to one end of the hall and the beggar to the other. Having done this he told the two of them to call the dog. Without hesitation the dog ran to the beggar. More then told his wife that if she wanted the dog she had to purchase the animal from the beggar.

During his first marriage More had lived in the City of London. For his second marriage he moved to the peaceful, riverside hamlet of Chelsea where he lived in quiet comfort, surrounded by his children, his pictures and his books.

When Henry VIII came to the throne More quickly became a favourite and rose to be, in order, Master of Requests, Treasurer of the Exchequer and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. He was also speaker to the House of Commons and acted as the King's personal ambassador on missions to France. It was during a spell when he was envoy to Flanders that More wrote the first draft of his description of an imaginary island of Utopia. The book was finished in 1516 and describes More's search for the best possible form of government. In the text, More meets a traveller called Raphael Hythloday who has discovered a country called Utopia or Nowhere land where everyone (male or female) is entitled to a free education and where there is complete tolerance of religious views. Every man has to work at a craft and spend some time each day on husbandry. The hours of manual labour are strictly limited to six a day. The principle of government More describes is, in essence, communism. The people who live in Utopia have contempt for gold and silver and precious stones. Diamonds and pearls are treated as children's toys. Those who break the law are chained (with solid gold fetters) but allowed to go free when they promise to mend their ways and to use their liberty wisely. The book was quickly translated into French, German, Italian and Spanish. It was not, however, translated into English until1551. (It was written in Latin.)

Unusually for such a religious man, More was something of a wag. He was for ever cracking jokes. He was enormously fond of animals, tame or wild, and although he had a large household he lived, for the time, a life relatively free of luxury. His friends included many artists (the German artist Holbein stayed with More and his family and painted portraits of them) and he was a great collector of furniture and plate, as well as books and paintings.

In 1529, when Wolsey fell out of favour, partly as a result of his evasiveness over the question of Henry's divorce from Catherine of Aragon and partly as a result of his unnatural greed and arrogance, More was appointed Lord Chancellor, even though he really didn't want the job. More could, no doubt, see what was coming and obviously regarded the post as a poisoned chalice. But the King was insistent and More had little choice.

It was an uncomfortable couple of years and in 1532 More finally managed to resign. This meant a serious reduction in his income and meant that he, and his family, had to become accustomed to living simply. (Although he had to dismiss many of his servants he did his best to find them all situations with bishops and noblemen of his acquaintance.)

But that was just the beginning of More's problems. In 1534, Henry VIII declared himself to be head of the

English Church. More refused to accept the King's position, insisting that the Pope was the only head of the church. More was willing to swear fidelity to the new Act of Succession but he refused to take an oath that would impugn the Pope's authority and he refused to accept the King's divorce from Catherine of Aragon. The King had More imprisoned and sentenced for high treason. There is no little irony in the fact that More's sentence was widely considered to be harsh, for More himself was, despite his legendary reputation as a kindly man, a tough disciplinarian who, when he had the power could be as ruthless as any judge. He had an old-fashioned belief in the value of corporal punishment. One of his own servants was whipped for 'talking lightly of sacred things' and a madman who had been arrested for brawling in churches was sentenced by him to be beaten. More was a religious zealot who genuinely believed that physical torture, and even burning at the stake, was sometimes essential. And we must not forget that More spent many years working with, and at the top of, a Government which was run on principles which he had condemned in his book *Utopia.* The Government he helped lead made no effort to get rid of poverty but, rather, maintained, protected and perpetuated the existing inequalities.

The King desperately wanted More to recant. But More, tom between his loyalty to his King and his loyalty to the Pope, refused to do so. In prison he wrote letters and tracts and made jokes. When his wife begged him to ask the King for pardon he replied that he had no intention of leaving his cell and that prison was as near to heaven as was his own house. His family, by now struggling with poverty, had to pay for his food and lodging in prison. His letters were regarded as conspiratorial and he was deprived of pens or paper. He continued to write on scraps of paper, using pieces of coal as writing implements.

The King's one final favour to his once loyal friend was to commute the sentence of hanging to that of beheading.

And Thomas More was duly beheaded in 1535.

'I pray thee, see me safely up,' he said to the warder who was leading him up the steps of the wobbly scaffold. 'As for my coming down, I can shift for myself.' He then added, 'Pluck up thy spirits, man; be not afraid to do thine office; my neck is very short.' He then moved his beard from the block, saying that it had never been found guilty of treason, and prayed God to send the King good counsel. His head was exhibited on a pole on London Bridge and his body was buried in St Peter's in the Tower of London. His favourite daughter, Margaret Roper, found the money to purchase his head a month later, and kept it preserved in spices until her own death, nine years afterwards. The head then passed down the family and is now believed to be in the vault belonging to the Roper family in a church in Canterbury.

More's martyrdom startled the world and greatly damaged the reputation of Henry VIII. Writers throughout Europe likened him to the great heroes, Seneca, Socrates, Cato and Aristides.

But it isn't primarily for this monumental spat (and his undoubted courage and determination to die a martyr) that More is remembered here. We remember him as an author; notably for *Utopia* (1516) and his *History of King Richard III*. He was a prolific author (writing in both Latin and English) and his work influenced many in the 16th century (including, most notably, Desiderius Erasmus, the Dutch priest and humanist who was considered to be one of the great scholars of the century). More wrote many polemical tracts and treatises but also wrote poetry. Whatever he wrote, he wrote with passion and humour. In the 17th century, most European critics regarded Shakespeare and Bacon as his inferiors.

In a way, it is strange that More is best remembered for *Utopia* for it is a book which contrasts vividly with his other work. There is a paradox in the fact that a man who represented a corrupt and dying system, and who was a man of fixed and stern religious views, should also be the author of such a hopeful and imaginative book.

Saint Thomas More was, undeniably, a true Renaissance man and yet he was one huge contradiction. He created a new and revolutionary ideal and yet died a martyr to ancient and restrictive beliefs.

William Morris
(1834-1896)

William Morris mastered many skills. He was a novelist, essayist, poet, architect, lecturer, printer, bookbinder, militant socialist, weaver, typesetter, calligrapher, furniture designer and builder, politician, textile designer and decorator and an artist in oils, stained glass and ceramic tiles. He didn't just dabble in these things: he mastered them. He was one of the very first conservationists in the world and the founder of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. He was the first man to argue that 'small is beautiful' and firmly believed that men would be happier if they had few wants and few belongings and spent their free time doing things they enjoyed. It was Morris who wrote that people should have nothing in their homes that was not beautiful or useful (or, preferably, both).

He wrote: '...suppose people lived in little communities among gardens and green fields, so that you could be in the country in five minutes walk, and had few wants; almost no furniture for instance, and no servants, and studied (the difficult) arts of enjoying life, and finding out what they really wanted then I think one might hope civilisation had begun.'

He worked towards unifying life, art, beauty and progress and believed that society had to change if men and women were going to enjoy the real beauty of life. He considered many aspects of Victorian England ugly and therefore hateful. This led him, inexorably, to an interest in politics and his interest and involvement in politics led him to found the Socialist League, a forerunner of the modern Labour Party.

Born the son of a rich businessman, in a village on the edge of Epping Forest, in 1834, Morris went to Oxford in 1853. He didn't like it but met there two men who were to become life-long friends: Edward Burne-Janes and Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

In 1856, he trained as an architect and in 1857 he met Jane Burden whom he married two years later. (Sadly, Mrs Morris later admitted that she had never loved her husband. She spent a lot of time with Rossetti who was undoubtedly her lover. He was overwhelmed by Jane Morris's beauty and he painted her countless times.)

The years that followed were a blur of artistic activity. Together with Rossetti, Burne-Janes and others, including Philip Webb and Ford Madox Brown, Morris founded The Firm, a Decorative Arts business which, over the ensuing decades produced an enormous amount of furniture, stained glass, tiles and other furnishings. But, despite these huge responsibilities, he never stopped writing. He wrote poems, translated the *Aeneid*, *The Odyssey* and *Beowulf* and wrote hugely influential and popular books of fiction and non fiction.

Between 1865 and 1870, Morris published a long narrative poem called *The Earthly Paradise.* Like Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, Morris's long poem has a prologue and 24 stories told by different narrators. The poem earned Morris great popularity and a chance to become Poet Laureate (he turned it down).

In other work he predicted that art would perish and that man would, in the generations to come, become hopeless, lifeless and without desire. 'A progress which puts art to one side,' he wrote, 'will tend towards the intellectual death of the human race.'

In 1872, Morris was one of the first designers when the Royal School of Needlework was founded. He developed a passion for colour and dyeing materials, he became interested in tapestry production and in 1877 he started silk weaving.

Morris, who believed that craftsmanship and design were an essential part of human fulfilment and self-expression, and that a decent, whole society should reflect this, gave us the Arts and Crafts Movement. He believed that art, design and literature have a common creative base: nature. Together with Rossetti he was one of the inspirations behind the Pre-Raphaelite movement.

William Morris was a real Renaissance Man. His influence on the arts, and the world in which we live, was enormous. He undoubtedly dominated those around him, but he was, according to those who knew him, also enormously loveable and kind.

Eadweard Muybridge

(1830-1904)

Born Edward James Muggeridge in Kingston on Thames, the man who became Muybridge was the world's first cinematographer. It was Muybridge, an Englishman, who is the true father of the modern cinema.

Muybridge emigrated to California in 1852, to make his fortune, and became a professional photographer in 1866 – eventually becoming chief photographer to the American Government. His photographs of San Francisco and Yosemite showed the grandeur of the West, and Muybridge initially became famous for his landscape photography.

In 1872, he was commissioned by a former Governor of California, Leland Stanford, to take a series of action photographs of moving horses in order to settle an argument about the way horses move. Stanford was a racehorse owner and businessman who believed that all four of a horse's hooves left the ground when it was galloping. The debate may well have been accompanied by a substantial wager. However, it wasn't until 1877, when faster photographic plates became available, that Muybridge was able to take the famous photographs that show that a horse which is trotting has all its feet off the ground at the same time.

Muybridge pioneered the use of multiple cameras to capture motion. To take the photographs of the horse he used 12 stereoscopic cameras, 21 inches apart, to cover the 20 feet taken by one horse stride. He took pictures at one thousandth of a second. Trip wires attached to the camera shutters were triggered by the horse's hooves.

In 1880, Muybridge invented something he called the zoopraxiscope (a name which was never going to catch on) to show the picture sequences he had obtained. This was the first cinematography. In 1893, he built his Zoopraxographical Hall in Chicago and showed his pictures to the paying public. His Zoopraxographical Hall was, therefore, the world's first motion picture theatre.

In 1883 and 1885, working for the University of Pennsylvania, he carried out an extensive survey of the movement of humans and animals. He took around 100,000 images and his photographs included people walking down stairs, boxing and carrying buckets of water. Most of the models were naked, or wearing very little clothing, and this didn't go down too well with some people. (It was alleged that some of the models who had taken off their clothes were prostitutes and this went down even less well.) The results of his survey were published in his extraordinary book entitled *Animal Locomotion*, in 1887. Muybridge's work helped in the foundation of the study of biomechanics.

Muybridge does not appear in many history books, and is not widely credited as the inventor of the cinema because he was considered to be a rather unsavoury character. This is unfair and unreasonable.

Muybridge's problems arose in 1874 when he was living in San Francisco. When he discovered that his wife had a lover, a Major Harry Larkyns, Muybridge met the major and greeted him with the words: 'Good evening, Major, my name is Muybridge and here is the answer to the letter you sent my wife.' He then shot the Major and killed him.

Muybridge was tried for murder but he was acquitted on the grounds of 'justifiable homicide'. Stanford paid for his defence. Muybridge's subsequent reputation was not helped by the fact that during the trial part of his defence was a plea of insanity. The jury did not accept this part of his defence, preferring to concentrate on the fact that the killing was a 'crime passionelle'.

Critics inevitably described Muybridge as a madman and a murderer who took photographs of naked prostitutes.

In 1894 Muybridge returned to England, published two additional books based on his work and died in 1904 in Kingston on Thames – where he had been born. He died at the home of his cousin.

Horatio Nelson
(1758-1805)

Born in Burnham Thorpe in Norfolk, Nelson entered the navy at the age of 12 and served in the West Indies from 1777 to 1783. Nelson is remembered as the most successful fighting seaman of all time; the most skilled and audacious admiral in naval history.

Before Nelson's knockout victory at Trafalgar, English and French fleets had been clashing for 50 years. Nelson achieved a decisive victory, despite facing a larger Franco-Spanish force, through devising a dramatically new strategy. The usual form of naval attack during the late 18th and early 19th centuries had always been to place the 'ships of the line' parallel to those of the enemy in what was known as 'line ahead'. Both sides would then fire broadsides at one another. Speed of firing and accuracy would eventually result in a sort of victory for one side. But relatively few ships were sunk by this method of fighting and the side which was losing could usually still sail away.

Nelson's tactical genius was first apparent in 1797 at the battle of St Vincent where he disobeyed orders (risking a court martial) and sailed out of line in order to intercept French vessels. His tactic was successful and instead of being court-martialled he was knighted and promoted to Rear Admiral. (The idea of attacking the enemy at right angles first appeared in print in a book called *Naval Tactics*, written by James Clerk. But it was Nelson who put the idea into practice.)

In 1798, at the Battle of the Nile, Nelson attacked from both sides, cut through the line of enemy ships and, in a pincer movement, captured 11 out of the enemy's 13 ships. It was a stunning victory. In 1801, at Copenhagen, Nelson famously put his telescope to his weak eye and, ignoring a hesitant commanding officer, took a naval advantage from a prospective defeat. (It is a myth that Nelson was blind in one eye and another myth that he wore an eye patch. His eye looked 'normal' and worked reasonably well, though it had been damaged during fighting in Corsica in 1794.)

At Trafalgar, on 21 October 1805, Nelson used his knowledge and experience to create a meticulously designed battle plan. He told his captains to attack in two columns, at right angles to the Franco Spanish enemy line. He foresaw that when he cut through the enemy lines his ships would be able to deliver devastating broadsides up and down a defenceless enemy line that was unable to return fire. The plan required great courage as well as vision. During their approach the English ships were on the receiving end of continuous enemy broadsides from a much larger fleet. They could not return fire because they were sailing towards the enemy. Nelson's ships approached the enemy under full sail in order to minimise the time they would be under fire without being able to retaliate. The wind was lighter than expected and it took 20 minutes for the English fleet to reach the enemy. Nelson's own ship, Victory, was severely damaged. But as the British ships cut through the Franco-Spanish lines they discharged double-loaded broadsides at the enemy. Heavy cannon fire, delivered at very short range, demolished the enemy ships and killed many of their crews. No English ships were lost but 18 ships from the French and Spanish fleets were captured. As an inspiration to his men Nelson walked around on his deck wearing all his medals. He was an obvious target for sharp-shooters (snipers) in the rigging of the enemy ships. Shortly after the English ships had broken through the enemy line, and turned the battle in England's favour, a musket bullet from a sniper in the rigging of the French ship Redoutable hit Nelson and killed him. His body was taken back to England, preserved in a cask of brandy and under armed guard. Following a state funeral he was interred in the crypt of St Paul's Cathedral, buried in a coffin made with planks taken from the French ship L'Orient, which had been destroyed at the Battle of the Nile in 1798.

Thomas Newcomen

(1663-1729)

Enthusiastic Scots sometimes claim that James Watt invented the steam engine. He didn't. Watt wasn't born until 1736 and Newcomen, the real inventor of the steam engine, had already been dead for seven years by then. Thomas Newcomen's design for a steam engine was dated 1712.

Born in Dartmouth, Devon, Thomas Newcomen was an ironmonger by trade and many of his biggest customers were the owners of Cornish tin mines. They had one huge problem, as their mines went deeper and deeper so they tended to fill with water. The old-fashioned way of removing the water was to pump it out manually or use teams of horses to haul out buckets with a rope.

In 1698, a man called Thomas Savery had designed a pump which used a vacuum to draw up water. His small steam engines were designed to pump water out of flooded mines. But they weren't terribly effective. Newcomen was 35 years old when he became a partner of Thomas Savery.

Newcomen designed the first really powerful steam engine. He created an engine in which steam raised a piston within a cylinder. The steam then condensed, creating a vacuum. And the vacuum drew the piston back down again. Newcomen was the first man to design a practical engine using a piston within a cylinder.

Because it was difficult to cast cylinders and pistons which fitted tightly together, Newcomen deliberately made the pistons smaller than the cylinders and then sealed the gap with a ring of wet leather.

Newcomen's engine was large and rather cumbersome but it worked - and worked well. Despite his local connections, his first working engine was installed at a coalmine in Dudley Castle in Staffordshire in 1712. The engine had a cylinder 21 inches in diameter and nearly eight feet long and it could raise ten gallons of water from a depth of 156 feet - giving it approximately five and a half horsepower.

A number of Newcomen engines were made and continued to work for a hundred years or more. Newcomen engines were strong and reliable. By the time he died there were over a hundred of them in England and the rest of Europe.

The Scottish born James Watt didn't work on steam engines for another fifty years.

Isaac Newton
(1642-1727)

Mathematician, physicist and, without a doubt, the greatest scientist who ever lived, Newton was born prematurely (so prematurely in fact, that he wasn't expected to live) at Woolsthorpe Manor-house, Lincolnshire on Christmas Day in 1642 to Hannah Newton. Sadly, the baby's father, whom Isaac was named after, never got to see his son. The uneducated, prosperous farmer had died three months before his child was born.

Very shortly after Isaac Newton's third birthday, his mother remarried and moved a mile and a half away from Woolsthorpe to be with her new husband (a wealthy rector called Barnabas Smith). She left her son behind in the care of his grandparents.

Unsurprisingly, having been left with his grandparents later caused Isaac much anger, bitterness and, probably, lasting emotional damage. His anger was so great that he once threatened to burn his parents' house down with them in it.

Newton's stepfather, the Rev. Barnabas Smith, died in 1653. Newton's mother - now a wealthy woman - left the rectory at North Witham and moved back to Woolsthorpe with her son and two daughters from her second marriage.

When Isaac was 12 years old, he attended King Edward VI Grammar School in Grantham which was around 7 miles away from Woolsthorpe. While at school there, Isaac stayed with William Clark, an apothecary in the town, who was a friend of the Newtons. Whilst lodging there, Newton became very good at identifying different medicinal herbs and was soon allowed to mix herbal medicines.

Although very clever with his hands (having constructed windmills, sundials, water clocks and other mechanical pieces as a boy), Isaac was said to have been inattentive at school and didn't show much promise. However, all that was soon to change when, one day, Arthur Storer, (William Clark's stepson) attacked Isaac while they were both on their way to school. Isaac – a rather serious and quiet boy – wasn't one to be bullied. After school, he challenged his antagonist and defeated him in a brutal fight. Once he had beaten him he rubbed his attacker's nose against a wall. That incident changed him. Isaac then made it his mission to study hard so that he could be intellectually superior to his bully, and not just physically superior. Through much hard work, Newton rose from next to the bottom of the class to the highest place in the school - his mission more than accomplished.

During Newton's years at Grantham, he had a romantic entanglement with William Clark's stepdaughter, Miss Storer, who was a few years younger than him. Being amazingly gifted with his hands, Isaac used to make dolls' furniture for Miss Storer and for her friends.

In 1659, Isaac's mother decided to take her eldest son out of school so that he could manage the farm. Isaac proved utterly useless at this because the work didn't interest him. Instead of working on the farm, he was often found with his head stuck in a book. He could be absent minded, in that way academics are often said to be. One day he was in such deep thought whilst coming home from town that he didn't realise his horse had slipped out of its bridle. He walked all the way home totally oblivious to the fact that he was holding an empty bridle. Later in life, when working, he would often forget to eat. Thankfully, with the help of the school principal, Mr Stokes, and Isaac's uncle, the Reverend William Ayscough, Isaac was sent back to Grantham school to continue his studies.

In 1661, (older than most of his fellow students because of his interrupted education), Isaac attended Trinity College Cambridge as a subsizar (carrying out menial tasks for wealthy students in order to earn his keep). Isaac largely ignored the official university syllabus and pursued his own studies. He immersed himself in the learning of Rene Descartes' geometry (which inspired his love of the subject), and in the works of Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, Franciscus van Schooten, John Wallis, Henry More, Robert Boyle and many other great intellects. Newton could absorb literature like a sponge and possessed amazing powers of concentration.

Newton worked hard at university, often staying up all night to study. In 1664, he was elected to one of the 44 scholarship vacancies that were available and his days of carrying out menial tasks for the other students were over. A year later Isaac received his Bachelor of Arts degree.

In 1665, a plague epidemic forced the university to close and Newton returned to Woolsthorpe. The 16 months away from university proved to be a very productive time for Newton. He discovered that white light is, in fact, composed of many colours, he laid the foundations of calculus, and started work on the laws of universal gravity. Legend has it that it was seeing an apple fall (the story of the apple falling on his head is almost certainly a myth) in the orchard that triggered Newton into studying gravity. Whatever the truth is about the original idea, the theory of gravity took nearly 20 years of study to develop. Newton collated his ideas about gravity two decades later in *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (commonly known as *Principia*) – now regarded as the greatest book in the history of science.

Isaac Newton put himself forward as a candidate for a fellowship when the university reopened in 1667. He was elected a Minor Fellow of Trinity and was elected a Major Fellow after being awarded his Master's Degree in 1668. He concentrated most of his mental energy on optics. And in 1668, he constructed (with his own hands) the first functioning reflecting telescope, which later gave him great recognition in the scientific community. Newton found the mechanics of vision and the nature of light fascinating. So great was his fascination that in order to investigate his theory of colours, he once carried out a hazardous experiment on himself where he inserted a bodkin into his eye. Through a series of experiments using glass prisms and a ray of sunlight, he proved that white light was made up of the colours of the rainbow and was not pure – a theory which people had believed for centuries.

In 1669, Newton was elected Lucasian Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge. He remained at the university, lecturing in most years, until 1696.

It was Newton's friend Edmond Halley who encouraged Newton to publish the book on gravity; he even financed its publication. As well as containing his ideas on gravity, *Principia* (published in 1687) contained Newton's three laws of motion and many other very important ideas. It was this book that made Newton famous throughout Europe.

Newton's formula of calculus, devised during his productive 16 months away from university, was undoubtedly the single most important contribution to mathematics and one of the major scientific breakthroughs. Calculus made possible most of the subsequent progress in modern science and is used in everything from construction to electrical engineering. Through its two primary tools, the integral and the derivative, calculus allows scientists to calculate precisely rates of change and amounts of change in a system. Despite its importance, Newton's work on calculus went unpublished for over 30 years. Newton was often reluctant to have his work published for fear of criticism; which meant that a lot of his theories weren't made public until many years after he'd first thought of them.

During the last 25 years of his life, Newton became embroiled in battles with a number of colleagues. He got into a nasty debate with Robert Hooke over the authorship of some of the theories of gravitation. Hooke also accused him of stealing some of his optical results. Fearing further criticism, Newton withheld publication on one of his major works *Opticks* until after Robert Hooke's death in 1703. Newton was renowned for being a difficult man. He was neurotic; he had a temper; he harboured resentments; he suffered from bouts of melancholy; and he could be vindictive. He also despised being contradicted or criticised. However, Isaac Newton was extremely hard working (working right up until his death), sensitive and very generous to his family and friends.

Having been a firm opponent of King James II's demand that Sidney Sussex College award an MA to a Benedictine monk who hadn't taken the statutory oath of allegiance to the Church of England, Newton – who was a Protestant – was elected member of parliament for the University of Cambridge in 1689. Isaac Newton's involvement with the Cambridge rebels put him at serious risk of being hung, for early on in King James II's reign, 300 rebels were sent to the gallows.

During his Parliamentary career, Isaac Newton made just one speech. He said: 'There's a bit of a draught. Can you close that window?' Not exactly Churchillian, perhaps, but then Churchill didn't discover gravity.

In 1696, Newton was appointed Warden of the Mint, and in 1699 he was made Master of the Mint – an office he retained right up until his death. During his time at the Mint - a job which he put his heart and soul into - he did much to improve the organisation's efficiency and he went to great lengths to combat forgery (sending quite a number of counterfeiters to the gallows). Newton also supervised recoinage. Isaac Newton moved to Jermyn Street in London when he worked for the Mint. In London, he invited his niece, Catherine Barton to run his household. Catherine Barton was charming, intelligent, beautiful and a brilliant conversationalist. Newton was very fond of her, and she caused quite a stir amongst London society.

In 1703, Newton was elected President of the Royal Society of London and was re-elected annually for the rest of his life. In 1705, Isaac Newton was knighted by Queen Anne. He was the first scientist ever to be knighted.

Isaac Newton was an extraordinary man. He suffered two nervous breakdowns, was a keen student of alchemy (something he kept secret) and spent 25 years searching for the Philosopher's Stone. He studied Christianity extensively – he possessed 30 bibles in many languages – almost blinded himself by staring at the sun for hours during one of his experiments (for several days afterwards he had to stay in a darkened room until his eyesight returned to normal) and designed Queen Anne's Coronation Medal.

In 1662, he underwent a religious crisis and wrote a list of all his sins, one of which included squirting water on a Sunday. As this suggests, he was something of a practical joker. When he was at school he used to tie lit lanterns onto the tails of kites and fly them at night knowing that this strange sight used to frighten the people living in the neighbourhood.

On 20 March 1727 Isaac Newton died at Kensington at the age of 84. It wasn't a bad age considering that he wasn't expected to survive past the first day of his life. Newton died a wealthy man and was one of the most famous men in England. His discoveries helped change the world.

Isaac Newton, who had once said: 'If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants', was buried in Westminster Abbey and was the first scientist to be buried there.

Thomas Paine
(1737-1809)

Thomas Paine, the writer, revolutionary, politician and political commentator, was born in Thetford, in Norfolk, to a very religious Quaker family. His father was a smallholder and corset maker.

Paine's early thinking had been influenced by the work of the philosopher John Locke and the scientist Isaac Newton. Sadly, Paine's early years were less than successful. At the age of 13 he became a corset-maker. He then became a sailor and a schoolmaster. In 1771 he became an exciseman (customs officer). By the age of 36 he had married twice and had been fired from his job as a customs officer for publishing a demand for higher wages. He was regarded as an agitator.

Having travelled to London, Paine met the American Benjamin Franklin who, in 1774 found him a job helping to edit the *Pennsylvania Magazine* in Philadelphia. Once in America, Paine quickly established a reputation as a fearless and controversial writer. He wrote articles demanding rights for women and freedom for slaves, and acquired a reputation as a radical journalist.

And then, in 1775, the American Revolution (aka the United States War of Independence) started. Paine left the magazine and joined George Washington's army. In 1776, he wrote a 50-page pamphlet called *Common Sense* in which he outlined the history of the events that had annoyed the colonists, and advocated American independence. The pamphlet quickly sold more than half a million copies and had a massive effect on the determination of the American colonists to break away from England. He also wrote a series of 16 separate papers with the heading *American Crisis.* Each was signed *Common Sense* to link them to the best-seller. These were all stirring, patriotic works and, although an Englishman, Paine became a leading spokesmen for the independence cause. The first of the 16 pamphlets began with the words 'These are the times that try men's souls' and was, upon the order of George Washington, read to the American troops at Valley Forge. Paine fought with the American rebels during the war, and after it ended he became secretary to the congress committee on foreign affairs. In this role he went on a mission to France in 1781 and published *Dissertations on Government* in 1786.

In 1787, Paine travelled to England and became involved in debates about the French Revolution. His book *The Rights of Man* (which he wrote in 1791-2) endorsed republicanism, advocated the abolition of the British Monarchy and supported the French Revolution (and, indeed, the spirit of revolution itself). He also proposed that Britain become a republic. *The Rights if Man was* written as a reply to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France.*

Since his book was regarded as a dangerous threat to the English monarchy it was banned and Paine was indicted for treason and declared an outlaw in his home country. He escaped from England and went to Paris where he was made a citizen of France. He fought for the Revolution. Then, instead of writing about politics he became a politician; being elected to the National Convention as deputy for Pas-de-Calais and helping to draft the constitution for the new French republic.

Paine was not, however, a man who sat easily within the establishment. He criticised the Reign of Terror and in particular the execution of the French King and naturally this didn't go down too well. Robespierre had Paine's French citizenship rescinded and then had him arrested and imprisoned as an enemy Englishman.

Just before being imprisoned Paine had written *The Age of Reason Part I*, a powerful attack on accepted religion. While in prison Paine wrote *The Age of Reason Part II.* The books, an analysis of The Bible, were mistakenly assumed to be a denial of the existence of God. Naturally, this annoyed the church and ended with Paine being wrongly branded an atheist. His former friends, including George Washington, were angry with him and were alienated. Paine had now annoyed the English, the French, the Americans and, presumably, God.

When the reign of terror was over, Paine managed to get out of prison in France by arguing that he was an American citizen, not an English one. He stayed in Paris for a while, writing and studying and then in 1802 returned to the USA. Sadly, when he got there, in poor health, he found that he was being widely criticised for his misunderstood attacks on the church. He was ostracised as an atheist and a 'free thinker'. His influential support for the American Revolution had been forgotten.

Paine died in America in poverty a few years later, quite alone and shunned by those who had once revered him. He died on a farm at New Rochelle that had been given to him many years earlier by the once grateful state of New York.

Today Paine is remembered by some as a hero and by others as a traitor. It is uncomfortable for many to remember that an Englishman helped inspire the American Revolution and helped found the French Republic. He was, without a doubt, the most influential and controversial individual in both America and Europe during the two bloodiest and most famous revolutions the world has seen. He was the only man to play a major part in both revolutions and the only man to have been a senior politician in both countries at their most important times.

Robert Peel

(1788-1850)

There are a number of reasons why Sir Robert Peel should be remembered, and on this list. He was a member of parliament from the age of 21, Under Secretary for the Colonies in 1811 and Chief Secretary for Ireland from 1812 until1818. He was Prime Minister from 1834 until1835 and again from 1841 until1846. In addition he was a principal founder of the Conservative Party. In 1842 he imposed income tax to try to restore the nation's finances after the expensive war against Napoleon. (The initial rate was 7d in the pound, to be levied for three years. Peel softened this new burden by abolishing or lowering the duties on a number of important items.) He reorganised the Bank of England and initiated important reforms in Ireland. (He was so fiercely attacked by Daniel O'Connell that he challenged him to a duel.)

Peel was a member of the land-owning, aristocratic Tory party and might have been expected to support the Com Laws, which protected farmers from foreign competition and kept the price of com high. But when he was Prime Minister, Peel regarded the Com Laws as unfair to huge numbers of people, particularly the poor, and so in 1846, after the potato rot in Ireland was followed by a terrible famine, he repealed the Laws, splitting his own party and forcing him to resign.

Peel's courageous decision changed the nature of the Tory party and helped create a more moderate and progressive Conservative Party. After his resignation, Peel continued to support free-trade principles and he is now regarded as the chief architect of the Victorian age of prosperity and stability. A successor, Benjamin Disraeli built on Peel's foundation.

But it is not for any of this that Robert Peel is best remembered.

Before he became Prime Minister, Peel was home secretary (from 1822 to 1827 and from 1828 to 1830) and during his tenure he reorganised England's criminal code. He reduced the number of offences carrying the death penalty from 200 to 12 and, most important of all, he established the world's first proper police force (initially in London). The members of the force were widely known as 'Bobbies' or 'Peelers', in reference to their founder. Even today, policemen in England (and elsewhere) are often known as 'Bobbies'.

Robert Peel was born near Bury, in Lancashire. His father was a wealthy cotton manufacturer and calico printer who was created a baronet in 1800. Robert Peel inherited a fortune from his father and took a great interest in literature and the arts. He was a keen sportsman and died after being thrown from his horse in 1850. He was 62 years old.

Peel was one of the most thoughtful and gentlemanly of England's Prime Ministers. But it is his creation of the world's first police force for which he is, quite rightly, best remembered.

Samuel Pepys
(1633-1703)

Pepys was a naval administrator, but whatever he did in that role is long forgotten and would certainly have not earned him a place in this or any other book of great English heroes and heroines. Pepys, who was born in London and died in London, is remembered and honoured for his diary, sometimes saucy and always full of gossip, which provides an extraordinary insight into his own weaknesses, and domestic arrangements (he had a most particular view of the responsibilities of female domestic servants). His diary provided an excellent picture of 17th century England in general and of London society in particular. It was, perhaps, the first and most influential social history ever written.

Pepys started the great English tradition of diarists and inspired a thousand imitators (some good, some bad and some so dull and selfserving, and so written for effect rather than content, that they were a waste of good paper and ink) but few people have ever managed to keep such a complete and well-honed account of their lives, or such a valid social documentary of their times. When reporting that a surgeon called Richard Lower had put lamb's blood into an unfortunate patient Pepys noted that the transfusion had aroused much interest, including the comment that 'it might be entertaining to let the blood of a Quaker into an archbishop'.

Pepys never intended his diary to be read by other people (diarists didn't in those days) and he wrote it in a private, multilingual shorthand to protect his privacy. He was a meticulous and clever observer and he wrote about the people he knew, the people he saw and the people close to him. Most important of all he wrote about himself without restraint and without fear. There is no selfaggrandisement and no attempt to create or protect an image. He is honest about his failings and shortcomings and details his life without censorship. He mixes domestic and national issues, anecdotes and sermons and his honesty about personal issues encourages the reader to have faith in his accuracy on other matters. He never revised or edited what he wrote (where he forgot a name the blank remained) and as a key civil servant he revealed how public employees and members of parliament were as corrupt then as they are today. He even showed how parliamentary estimates were doctored back in the 17th century and he details his own personal accounts. He wrote about the Plague of 1665 and the Great Fire of London in 1666.

He started his diary at the age of 27 and abandoned it at the age of 36, only when he thought he was losing his eyesight and stopped writing it. Why did he keep it? Who knows. But he was an obsessive, meticulous man and it seems most likely that he really did write it simply as his own personal record.

What a pity it is that he didn't continue with it. Pepys lived another 34 years after ending his diary. He became Secretary to the Admiralty and a member of parliament and enjoyed friendships with eminent contemporaries such as Wren and Newton. It was an extraordinary life for a man who started from humble beginnings and whose first job was as a clerk in the office of the Exchequer.

In 1679, he got into terrible trouble as a result of an association with the Duke of York, and in the panic and confusion over the Popish Plot he was sent to the Tower of London for six weeks, suspected of, but not charged with, treason. But he bounced back and in 1684 he became the King's Secretary of Admiralty Affairs (a post invented for him).

When he retired he spent his final years finishing his library. He collected 3,000 books and his library, intact and unaltered, and still in the original bookcases he had specially made, survives together with the six, leather-bound volumes of his diary, at Magdalene College, Cambridge.

William Petty
(1623-1687)

Born in Romsey, Hampshire, William Petty was a man of many great skills and huge achievements. He was a doctor, scientist and philosopher, an entrepreneur and a politician. Most of all he was also the first great political economist. His theories on trade and taxes were, many decades later, repeated to great acclaim by the Scotsman Adam Smith.

Born the son of a clothier, the young William Petty first went to sea as a cabin boy when he was 14 years old. After breaking his leg on board he was set ashore in France. Alone and in a foreign country he applied, in Latin, to study with the Jesuits in Caen. He supported himself by teaching English. After a year he returned to England with a good knowledge of French, Greek, mathematics and astronomy. He then joined the Navy before leaving to continue his studies in Holland where he discovered an interest in anatomy, which he subsequently studied in Utrecht, Amsterdam, Leiden, Paris and Oxford. A genuine polymath he became Professor of Anatomy at Oxford and Professor of Music at Gresham College in London. When Petty was just 29, Oliver Cromwell appointed him physician to the army in Ireland.

While in Ireland he won the contract to begin a survey of the Irish land which had been forfeited in 1641 and which was being used to repay those who had lent money to Cromwell's army. Petty completed this in 1656. His reward was an estate of 30,000 acres in the southwest of the country and a fee of £9,000. He started lead mines, ironworks, sea fisheries and other industries on his new estate. By the time he was 35 Petty was a rich man and a leading member of English society. Charles II was so impressed by Petty's brilliance and hard work that he made him surveyor-general of lreland. Petty then spent much of his life proposing remedies for Ireland's poor state and poverty.

In addition to his extraordinary activities in Ireland, Petty was also an inventor. In 1647 he invented the first copying machine and in 1663 he invented a double-keeled sea boat (the first catamaran). He was a founder member of the Royal Society.

But it is not his work as an inventor, a doctor, a surveyor or a businessman which earns him a place in this book. Petty, who somehow managed to find time to work as personal secretary to Thomas Hobbes for a while, was also a statistician and economist and the originator of something he called 'political arithmetic' – which he defined as 'the art of reasoning by figures upon things relating to government'. (Petty himself was for a while a member of parliament.) He based his new economic theory on the work of Francis Bacon, who had argued that all rational sciences should be based on mathematics and the senses. Petty announced that his work would use only measurable phenomena and would rely on quantitative precision. His work on 'political arithmetic' was the foundation for modern census techniques.

In 1662, the year after he was knighted, he wrote *Treatise of Taxes and Contributions* in which he explained why he believed it was important to give free rein to 'the forces of individual selfinterest'. However, he also declared that it was a duty of the State to maintain a high level of employment, and argued that a strong labour force makes a strong nation and a strong currency. He coined the term 'full employment'. This, and other subsequent books, was the foundation of economics.

Petty recommended that taxes should just be high enough to pay for providing support for the elderly, the sick and for orphans and that government expenditure in other areas should be kept to a minimum. He recommended that imports should be taxed, but only to put them on a par with domestic produce. He favoured taxes on consumption rather than income and recommended collecting statistical information in order to find ways to raise taxes more fairly.

Petty introduced precision into national accounting. He worked out that the average income in England at the time was £6 13 shillings and 6 pence per annum and that, with a population of six million, that meant a national income of £40 million.

Petty warned that governments should not over-interfere in the economy. He introduced the concept of 'laissez-faire' government and pointed out that it was as dangerous for a government to overinterfere with the economy as it would be for a physician to overtreat a patient. His *Essays in Political Arithmetick* and *Political Survey of Anatomy of Ireland i*ncluded calculated estimates of population and social income. His ideas of monetary theory and policy were developed in *Verbum Sapienti* and *Quantulumcunque Concerning Money.* It was Petty who first stated that the price of land equals the discounted present value of expected future rent on the land.

Perhaps the greatest contribution Petty made was to base his theories on data and statistics rather than on anecdotal evidence and prejudice. He was a prolific author on economics but wrote precisely and with humour. His work greatly influenced every writer on economics who followed him - particularly, for example, Adam Smith and

Karl Marx. Adam Smith knew of Petty's work but does not credit him as the originator of his own ideas on the economy. Smith's derivative book *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes if the Wealth of Nations,* was not published until 1776, over a century after Petty had written his masterpiece *Treatise on Taxes and Contributions.* It was Englishman William Petty, not the Scot, Adam Smith, who invented many of the concepts that are still used in economics today.

Petty married Baroness Shelburne. He died at the age of 64. His great grandson was the government minister William Petty Fitzmaurice, 2nd Earl of Shelburne and 1st Marquess of Lansdowne.

Francis Place
(1771-1854)

Born in a debtor's prison in Drury Lane, where his father worked as an overseer, Francis Place first aroused attention when he was identified as one of the leaders of a strike in 1793. He afterwards found it impossible to work as a maker of trousers (the trade he had taught himself).

Having decided that working men needed the vote he joined a group called the London Corresponding Society, whose leaders were all in prison. He was soon offered, and accepted, the post of chairman. He held this position until 1797 when he resigned in protest at the violent tactics used by some members of the group.

In 1799, unable to get employment because of his record as a militant, Place opened his own shop in Charing Cross Road. Part of the premises he ran as a tailor's shop but the other part was a lending library of radical books. Not surprisingly, the shop soon ended up as a meeting place for reformers.

In the early 19th century the people of England wanted freedom and parliamentary reform. But leading politicians refused to budge. In 1830, on the opening day of Parliament, the Prime Minister, the Duke of Wellington, sniffily stated that he was not prepared to introduce any reforms, despite the many demands which had been made for constitutional change.

It was a mistake by Wellington.

Just thirteen days after that Wellington's Government was defeated and the Iron Duke resigned. He had defeated Napoleon but a London born tailor called Francis Place, together with the English reformists, had proved too much for him.

The new Prime Minister was Earl Grey, a member of 'The Friends of the People', a society which wanted reform of parliamentary representation. Meetings had been held all over the country and many messages of support and encouragement had been sent to Lord Grey.

Despite his victory in the polls, Grey didn't find the battle for reform an easy one. Eventually, however, he managed to obtain enough support, and the Reform Bill was introduced into the House of Commons in March 1831 and finally passed in June 1832.

Sadly, although this bill enfranchised the well-to-do commercial classes, the lower middle class and working class wage earners still had no vote. In that respect the bill turned out to be a disappointment. Social conditions were subsequently allowed to deteriorate so much that the workhouses and debtors' prisons immortalised by Charles Dickens became a part of English society. Not surprisingly, the lower middle classes felt disappointed and let down.

In 1836 Francis Place, John Cleave and William Lovett founded a new society called the London Working Men's Association. The society, aimed at artisans who had been ignored in the Reform Bill, drew up the People's Charter. The author of the Charter was Francis Place, who was one of the most effective, persistent and influential English reformers.

Followers of Place's ideas were known as Chartists and their campaigning eventually gave them the parliamentary representation they wanted. They were told by Place, and William Lovett, a cabinet maker and revolutionary colleague, that 'true liberty cannot be conferred by Acts of Parliament or decrees of princes, but must spring up from the knowledge, morality and public virtue of our population.'

Place and his followers argued that England's social and political structure had to be based upon the intelligence and morality of the people if they were to avoid exchanging one despot for another and one set of oppressors for another set. No one in modern political history did more to extend the freedom of English men and women than Francis Place. He was an untiring and determined campaigner for reform.

In addition to his political battles, Place was also the first person to campaign in favour of contraception. In 1822 he wrote *The Principle of Population,* a book which caused a considerable storm. Ironically, although Place advocated the use of contraception, he himself fathered fifteen children.

Walter Ralegh

(1552-1618) (aka Raleigh)

Walter Ralegh was a sailor, adventurer, pirate, poet, soldier, courtier, explorer and entrepreneur. He was one of England's great 161 century heroes and we should remember him for much more than laying down his cloak so that Queen Elizabeth I didn't have to step in a puddle.

Colonial expansion may sometimes begin because a nation's leaders want more land, more wealth or more power. Occasionally, a nation may launch expeditionary forces to pre-empt attacks on its shores or on existing colonies. But, very often, colonial expansion begins, builds and is sustained through the ambition of individuals who want to venture beyond the normal horizon in search of adventure, knowledge or wealth. Sometimes, adventurers set out because they are bored or because they are inspired by something as simple as curiosity. And often explorers, adventurers and emigrants leave in search of greater freedom and independence. The Greeks and the Romans were enthusiastic colonisers. And, throughout history, the Spanish, the French, the Italian and the English have all been keen colonisers too.

By the second half of the 16th century it was clear that the English had fallen behind in their western adventures. Columbus and Cabot (an Italian who sailed from Bristol) had discovered America and the West Indies but English explorers had been rather caught napping.

Things changed in Elizabethan England. Encouraged by their Queen, men acquired new ambitions and were encouraged to see them through. Sir Philip Sidney, a cultured Englishman, who was a poet, diplomat and politician, was one of the first of a new breed of men eager to engage in colonial exploration. But Sidney died young and it was Walter Ralegh who epitomised the English approach to exploration and adventure in the 16th century.

Ralegh was a man of action but he also had a passion for books. He was born in Devon, near to the peaceful seaside village of Budleigh Salterton, and after spending a little time in Oxford and then studying law in London, he joined the army and went to war. He fought with the Huguenots in France against the French Government (which was determined to destroy the Protestant movement the Huguenots had organised) and then crossed to the Netherlands to join the Dutch Protestants who were fighting the Spanish.

It was there that he learned to loathe the Spanish. Filled with contempt for their religious doctrine and stirred by curiosity he decided to sail to the New World where the Spanish had established more than a foot-hold. At the age of 26, by now a seasoned warrior, he joined his half-brother, Sir Humphrey Gilbert on a rather unproductive voyage to the West Indies.

Having returned to England he then enlisted in the Irish wars. It was there that he first acquired personal wealth. He was given 40,000 acres of confiscated land in what is now Waterford and Cork. Ralegh was also given a famous house called Myrtle Grove and the land upon which he later built a larger mansion. He didn't much like the Irish (who he was quite happy to kill as and when required) but liked the Irish countryside. For a while, he stayed on his newly acquired lands, gardening and writing poetry.

But when, in 1583, his half-brother took possession of Newfoundland in the name of Queen Elizabeth, Ralegh was inspired to travel again. His half-brother had been granted permission to take personal possession of an almost infinite area of land on the North American continent but tragically Gilbert died when his ship was wrecked on his return and the Queen transferred to Ralegh most of the privileges she had previously given his half-brother.

The story that Ralegh first won the Queen's affection by laying down his cloak for her first appeared in a book called Worthies written in 1662 by Fuller. 'Captain Ralegh coming out of Ireland to the English court in good habit found the queen walking, till meeting with a plashy place, she seemed to scruple going thereon. Presently Ralegh cast and spread his new plush cloak on the ground; whereon the queen trod gently, rewarding him afterwards with many suits, for his so free and seasonable tender of so fair a foot cloth.' Thus Ralegh became a favourite of the Queen and a puddle became a legend.

Ralegh behaved like a lover and the Queen lapped up his flirtatious attention. He promised everlasting love. She took him at his word and refused to let him leave her side. The expedition he had organised to take advantage of his new lands in America had to leave without him.

When word came back that the expedition had gone well Ralegh, desperate to join in the foreign fun, had a brain wave. He asked the Queen for permission to call the new territory Virginia (as a tribute to his virgin Queen). He wanted to make a new England out of Virginia. It would, he told her, be a permanent memorial to her greatness. The Queen happily accepted the suggestion.

He sent out colonists, many of whom simply disappeared. In 1587, for example he sent out a band of emigrants, including 89 men, 17 women and two children. They were left there while their leaders came home for supplies. When the leaders and the supplies went back the settlers had all disappeared.

Ralegh never got to Virginia himself, though he spent around £40,000 of his own money in his efforts to colonise the area. He was the first English colonialist. His sailors brought back two products, the potato and tobacco, which were to play a large part in England's future prosperity (though not its health). Tobacco smoking quickly became an almost universal habit. (There have been attempts to suggest that Ralegh was not responsible for bringing either of these substances to England. It is always difficult to be sure about what happened 400 years ago but having studied the evidence I am not convinced by the doubters. Ralegh may not have clambered ashore clutching bundles of tobacco leaves or a bag of potatoes but whether it was him or his agents who were responsible is largely irrelevant. It was Ralegh who brought potatoes and tobacco to Europe.)

The rivalry between England and Spain reached a zenith in 1588 when Spain tried to conquer England itself by sending a Spanish armada into the channel. The Spaniards were repulsed by a fleet led by Sir Francis Drake. Ralegh played his part in that victory. A little later an expedition under his control captured a Spanish vessel homebound from the West Indies with a cargo estimated then to be worth at least half a million pounds. Ralegh, who had funded the capture, was awarded a share of the plunder and realised that here lay an excellent way to become extremely rich (instead of merely very rich).

It is important to understand too that Ralegh had a cultured side. He wrote poetry and was great friends with Edmund Spenser (author of the *Fairie Queene*) and Christopher Marlowe (the dramatist, founder of English tragedy and tutor of Shakespeare). He also met and talked often with Ben Jonson and William Shakespeare himself.

When he heard reports of a city in South America known as El Dorado, Ralegh was fired by ambition. The word was that the city contained fabulous wealth. Ralegh sent out agents, but they came back with no useful information, and so in 1595 he went himself. He obtained a commission from the Queen allowing him to wage war on the Spanish and upon the South Americans if they got in his way and impeded his chances of acquiring treasure. This was, of course, just another example of the legalised and officially sponsored piracy which was prevalent in the 16th century.

Ralegh reached Trinidad and took the Spanish governor prisoner. The Governor told Ralegh of limitless gold to be found on the banks of the river Orinoco. So, naturally Ralegh set off with a hundred men on a voyage up the river. In 'unsavoury and loathsome' conditions they rowed up the river and lived off the land.

The expedition was a failure. Ralegh brought home tons of something which he thought was gold but which allegedly turned out to be nothing more than iron pyrites or fool's gold. (Ironically, many years later it turned out that there was a gold source very close to where Ralegh had prospected.)

Ralegh's book about the expedition, *The Discovery of Guiana*, is one of the most vivid and exhilarating travel books ever written.

When he returned to England, Ralegh immediately took part in the English fleet which attacked Cadiz in 1596, and in 1597 he attempted to intercept Spanish treasure ships off the Azores. In 1600 he became governor of Jersey and did much to improve the economy of the island.

Sadly, Ralegh's final years were disastrous.

He had lost the Queen's patronage when he had married Bessie Throckmorton in 1592 (Bessie had been one of the Queen's maids of honour and Ralegh had conducted a secret affair with her for some years) and although he regained some of the Queen's affection, his temper and inability to take orders meant that he made many enemies at court. These included the powerful Earl of Essex, Lord Howard of Effingham and Sir Robert Cecil.

When Elizabeth died, Ralegh knew little of the new monarch, King James I. Ralegh had failed to pledge himself to support the new King and this did not go down well with the suspicious Scot. Ralegh's position at court quickly became insecure. He was falsely accused of trying to assassinate the King and of trying to put Arabella Stuart, the King's relative, on the throne. Desperate and alone he tried to commit suicide. This was regarded as a sign of guilt. He was tried in Winchester and condemned to a traitor's death. His estates were forfeited. He waited in prison for three weeks and then James decided not to sign the death warrant. Ralegh was kept a prisoner in the Tower of London but told he was not to be executed. His wife and sons were allowed to stay with him and he was allowed to move around within the Tower. He built a laboratory where he carried out a series of chemical experiments. He managed to obtain fresh water from salt water. He created several new drugs. And he began to write an ambitious *History of the World*, using his library of six or seven hundred volumes for source material.

But he still wanted to have one more adventure. He wanted to return to South America. He petitioned the King and the Privy Council. And, after five years of petitioning, Ralegh was released from prison. He had been in the Tower for 13 years.

English enthusiasm for exploration had been fired by a popular play called *Eastward Ho!*, written by George Chapman, Ben Jonson and John Marston and published in 1605. The play encouraged those who saw it to believe that the New World was awash with gold and replete with honest men. It was, said the playwright, a nation where no public office could be procured except through merit. It was, the trio said, a nation where corruption in high places was unknown. Ah, the wisdom of ignorance.

Ralegh was now 65-years-old and in poor health. He had little money and no friends. He had been released from prison on condition that he return to Guiana and secure the gold mines. But for a long while it seemed that he had little realistic hope of making the journey. The Spanish Ambassador in London protested that Guiana belonged to Spain and Ralegh's many enemies did everything they could to make things impossible for him.

But Ralegh persisted and eventually he managed to find a ship and to put together a crew of drunkards and crooks. And he reached South America. But the journey was a disaster. His elder son, Walter, died and the new Spanish settlers prevented him travelling up the Orinoco. And, contrary to the promises he had made in London, he molested a Spanish settlement.

He arrived back in Plymouth a failure and in despair. He was taken to court and the Spanish minister in London ensured that the old offence was revived. Ralegh was sentenced to death again. He smoked a pipe and was taken to a scaffold erected outside the Houses of Parliament. He read a short statement he had written, in which he thanked God for allowing him to die in the light and commented that 'I have a long journey to take and must bid the company farewell'. He felt the edge of the axe, smiled at the sheriffs and said: 'This is a sharp medicine, but it is a sure cure for all diseases.' And then, with two blows, the executioner severed his head from his body. His widow, Elizabeth, had his head embalmed. She kept it in a red leather bag by her side for the rest of her life.

The night before he went to the scaffold Ralegh wrote these words:

'Even such is time, that takes in trust
Our youth, our joys, our all we have,
And pays us but with earth and dust;
Who, in the dark and silent grave.

When we have wandered all our ways,
Shuts up the story of our days.
But from this earth, this grave, this dust,
My God shall raise me up I trust.'

Walter Ralegh was a courageous, resourceful and versatile Englishman. He was a soldier, sailor, author, poet, traveller and coloniser. He was a philosopher, a politician and a historian. He had boundless energy and imagination. He acquired a fortune but was not afraid to use it when he needed it. His History of the World was highly regarded. Oliver Cromwell told his son to read it. 'It's a body of history,' he said, 'and will add much more to your understanding than fragments of story.'

It was thanks to Ralegh that the great English settlements of Virginia and New England came into being. Walter Ralegh was a man of his time; a great romantic, a great hero and a great Englishman.

Note: The spelling 'Raleigh' is commonly used today but I've spelt Ralegh's name the way he chose to spell it.

Cecil Rhodes
(1853-1902)

He wasn't fifty when he died but Cecil Rhodes, the Colossus of Africa, had achieved more by then than most men would hope to achieve in a hundred lifetimes. Today, he is regarded with a mixture of disdain and contempt by the narrow-minded, the bigoted and the politically correct, but Rhodes was a man of great vision, enormous ambition and huge amounts of compassion for his fellow men. He was a statesman, businessman, financier and empire builder. He was enormously controversial in his lifetime and today his life reads like something out of a boy's adventure magazine but it is impossible to exaggerate the importance of his role in the development of Africa, the Empire and, of course, the mining industry.

He was born in Bishops Stortford, in Hertfordshire, the son of the local vicar; a clergyman whose boast was that he had never preached a sermon that lasted longer than ten minutes. As a boy, Rhodes grew up in the English countryside. No one loved his country more. 'Remember that you are an Englishman, and consequently won first prize in the lottery of life,' he once said. He believed that England was the greatest country in the world.

Cecil was a sickly child who suffered from asthma and heart problems and when he was a teenager he was sent by his parents to Natal, South Africa to help Herbert, his older brother, who operated a cotton farm.

In 1871, after just a few years farming, Rhodes obtained finance from Rothschild and Sons and headed to the diamond fields of Kimberley where he proceeded to buy up all the small diamond mines in the area. At about this time a doctor gave him just six months to live.

As his holdings grew, so Rhodes became increasingly interested in South African politics. In 1884, he became a member of the Cape House of Assembly and quickly took office in the ministry. He was asked by General Gordon to go with him to Khartoum as secretary but declined because of his new political responsibilities in the Cape. Still only in his thirties, but aware that his poor health meant that his life expectation was short, Rhodes had become a major force in Africa. His ardent enthusiasm for his home country meant that he succeeded in extending British territory. In 1884, wanting to expand to the north and to build a railway connecting Cairo and the Cape, he secured Bechuanaland as a British protectorate and in 1889 he took over the territory which was later to become Rhodesia. The British Government chartered the British South Africa Company and put Rhodes in charge. He then extended control to two northern provinces which were eventually named after him as Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia). His aim was to establish a federal South African dominion under the British flag.

Meanwhile, as his political power grew, Rhodes was becoming richer and richer. By 1888, Rhodes had virtually obtained a monopoly of the world's diamond supply and had formed the De Beers Consolidated Mines Company. His own company was mining over 90% of the world's diamonds. He turned his position of control into a complete monopoly in 1888 by arranging a partnership with the Diamond Syndicate in London. Rhodes agreed to control the supply of diamonds in order to keep prices high.

In 1890, Rhodes became Prime Minister of Cape Colony but he resigned six years later after complications arose as a result of an unofficial raid into the Transvaal which was condemned by the South African Commission and the British Government. However, in the same year, 1896, he succeeded in quelling the Matabele rebellion by personally negotiating with the local chiefs. Although he is today often attacked for his alleged imperialist views, Rhodes advocated more self-government for the Cape Colony and wanted the empire to be controlled by local settlers and local politicians and not by the Government in London. In reality, Rhodes was directly opposed to imperialism in which colonies are controlled from a distant city.

Rhodes was also responsible for founding the modern Cape fruit industry of South Africa. In 1898, he financed a fruit export business on a farm in the Cape area of the country. This grew into the Rhodes Fruit Farms.

In 1899, during the Boer War, he played a major part in defending Kimberley during the siege. He and his company manufactured an armoured train and a super-gun (called 'Long Cecil'), constructed fortifications and provided water and refrigeration facilities for the defence of the town.

Rhodes's final years were badly affected when he was stalked by a Polish princess called Catherine Radziwill. The princess asked Rhodes to marry her and then, despite his refusal, falsely claimed that she was engaged to him. She obtained her revenge by falsely accusing him of loan fraud. He was found innocent after a trial but the stress proved too much for him and he died shortly afterwards.

When Rhodes died in 1902 he was one of the richest men in the world. He left a will which gave huge amounts of money to Cape Colony. He left a large area of land on the slopes of Table Mountain to South Africa. He also founded the Rhodes Scholarships at Oxford University for Americans, Germans and colonials. Amazingly, during his short and astonishing career he had somehow managed to enter Oriel College, Oxford and take a degree. He started his degree in 1873 but ill health meant he had gone back to South Africa. He returned for his second term in.1876 and completed his degree. As a student at Oxford he was influenced by a lecture given by the ubiquitous John Ruskin. In 1899, Rhodes was made a doctor of civil law by Oxford University.

Peter Mark Roget
(1779-1869)

Few men's names are better known than Roget's. And yet surprisingly little is written about this extraordinary English doctor.

Born in London, the son of a minister, Roget had an unhappy childhood. His father died young and his favourite uncle committed suicide in his presence. His wife died young. It is perhaps not surprising that he struggled with depression throughout his life.

Peter Roget qualified and worked as a physician. His first job was as physician to the Manchester Infirmary when he was 25 years old. Four years later he was appointed physician to the Northern Dispensary in London.

But he was far, far more than a physician. In 1814, he invented a slide rule for calculating the roots and powers of numbers and in 1828 he helped found both the Royal Society of Medicine and the University of London. He was Fullerian professor of physiology at the Royal Institution from 1833 to 1836 and secretary of the Royal Society from 1827 to 1849. In 1834, he wrote *Animal and Vegetable Physiology*. He even designed an inexpensive pocket chessboard and, as a hobby, created chess problems.

However, those are still not the achievements for which he is best remembered. In 1840, he retired from medical work to work on the most notable work of his life. This was, of course, his *Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases*, a most comprehensive and classified collection of synonyms which enables writers to find an alternative word when they are creating a letter, an article or a book and do not wish to keep repeating themselves. Roget was the first person to create a thesaurus. He had always loved lists and had something of an obsession for list making when he was eight years old.

He started work on the thesaurus in 1805 and it was, for him, a way of escaping from his depression. The book was first published in 1852 when it was given the snappy title: *Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases Classified and Arranged so as to Facilitate the Expression of Ideas and Assist in Literary Composition*. The book was reprinted 28 times during Roget's life. After he died at 90, while on holiday in Malvern, his son, John Lewis Roget took over the job of keeping the book up-to-date. And when he, in turn, died, his son Samuel Romilly Roget carried on the family tradition.

John Ruskin

(1819-1900)

The men and women in this book have been selected for their influence on England in particular and on the world at large. When a man discovers gravity or electricity or invents the railway train it isn't difficult to conclude that his life must have had a profound impact on the world around him – and indeed, on future generations.

But sometimes the influence a man or woman has on his and future generations isn't quite so immediately obvious. John Ruskin is one of those and I spent a good deal of time wondering whether or not to include him in this book.

Although John Ruskin was a writer and a critic, few of his books survive and apart from knowing that he wrote a series of books called *Modern Painters* I could not have named any of his other books before I started to research his life.

But Ruskin is in my 100 because of the influence he had on 19th century England and because of the way his life influenced others who helped shape the future. He had a profound and lasting influence that has slowly spread throughout the world.

Born in London, the only child of wealthy parents (his father was a wine merchant) he was taught at home by a private tutor and then at Oxford University. At home, as a boy, he was protected from the world and was undoubtedly a rather spoilt child. He wasn't allowed to mix with other boys of his own age. His parents worked hard to stimulate and guide his taste by taking him around England and the European Continent. He was only 24 when he wrote the first of his five volumes called *Modern Painters.* These were very subjective books in which Ruskin wrote solely about the painters he admired. He was a great fan of J. M. W. Turner, whom he met, and Ruskin championed his work with an enthusiasm that Turner found almost embarrassing.

Ruskin married Euphemia Chalmers Gray in 1848 but the marriage was legally annulled fairly quickly (she then married the painter John Everett Millais) and Ruskin, who still often travelled around Europe with his parents, began a crusade on behalf of another group of painters whom he felt had been ignored - the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood. This group was led by Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Millais and favoured a faux-mediaeval style which honoured the simple way that nature was depicted in Italian art before Raphael. William Morris later became a member of the Brotherhood.

While writing the later volumes of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin also extended his writing to cover architecture. In his books *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) and *The Stones of Venice* (1851-3) he wrote praising mediaeval architecture. He believed that architects and craftsmen who were inspired by their religious beliefs when building cathedrals had created great art. He loved gothic architecture.

Ruskin's writings about the Pre-Raphaelites made him the art critic of the day. But his work, which also contained moral and social criticism, made him into a sort of 19th century guru. When he had finished his five part series of books on painters in 1860, he took an increasingly active interest in important social questions of the day. He felt resentment about the social injustice and the squalor which had resulted from the unbridled capitalism created by the Industrial Revolution. He was horrified by the knowledge that children and adults worked in appalling conditions, lived in appalling conditions and were paid a pittance. They worked long hours and their work was often dangerous. Towns and cities were grey, smoky, dangerous places. Ruskin argued that the quality of life which a man leads is the only really important criterion and that money-grabbing is an anathema to civic and social welfare. He argued that things which cannot be bought and sold (such as love, friendship and truth) do and must have a real influence on supply and demand. He said that to treat a worker as a machine (and, therefore, as something less than a man) is to lower the economic value of his work. He pointed out that in the long run it is more profitable to pay a higher wage to an efficient workman who enjoys his job, and takes pride in his work, than a lower wage to an inefficient workman who hates his job.

Ruskin developed a philosophy which was has been described as a 'sort of Christian communism' and, naturally, this didn't go down terribly well with the establishment which was largely run by fat, wealthy men who had made their fortunes out of the factories which were springing up all over the country. He blamed the ugly cities which were developing throughout England on the enthusiasm for mass production and blamed bad working and living conditions on the industrial age. This may seem obvious now but at the time it was revolutionary, and considered heretical. He wrote urging that working and living conditions should be improved for factory workers and his books and articles on the need for social reform changed the way people thought, first in England and then elsewhere. Ruskin did everything he could to reach out to people who were privileged to try to make them aware of society's new problems. He was attacked, of course, and his suggestions and advice were often treated with contempt.

However, not everyone ignored him. After all he was still a noted art critic and quite wealthy too. And he knew lots of influential people. (He was a brilliant networker.) The Industrial Revolution had started in England and now the reaction to it, the feeling that the workers had been forgotten, started too.

In 1689, at the age of 50, Ruskin was made the first Slade professor of fine art at Oxford University. Instead of living in Oxford he settled at Coniston, in the Lake District, where he continued to battle for better conditions for working men; always writing vividly and with great colour. His early art criticism had often been extremely wordy – one sentence in *Modern Painters* contains more than six hundred words and eighty commas – but when writing about social conditions he did so far more crisply and intensely.

Between 1871 and 1884, Ruskin wrote a series of papers addressed *To the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain* in which he explained in detail his social philosophy. His writing was always powerful and passionate. He argued that life cannot be compartmentalised; that, in art, in thought, in morals and in the workplace, ‘nothing can be beautiful which is not true’. He believed that industrial prosperity should go hand in hand with social prosperity. He constantly tried to awaken the spiritual in the material.

Ruskin tried to make a difference by example too. He founded the John Ruskin school in Camberwell and the Whitelands College in Chelsea. He opened a non-profit making shop in Paddington Street.

Ruskin’s name comes up time and time again when influential figures of the 19th century are investigated. So, for example, consider Octavia Hill, the daughter of a corn merchant and banker who was born in Wisbech Cambridgeshire in 1838. Hill was a social reformer and humanitarian whose campaigning for the availability and preservation of open spaces for public use led to the establishment of the National Trust – she wanted to bring beauty and tranquillity into the lives of ordinary people. More importantly, being well aware that there was a real need for better housing for the poor she also played a great role in helping the development of social housing, including council housing. But it is doubtful whether she would have got anywhere without Ruskin, for it was John Ruskin who funded Octavia Hill’s first ventures in housing reform by financing the lease of several slum properties in London.

In 1879, Ruskin, weak, ill and depressed and exhausted after losing a libel suit brought against him by James McNeill Whistler, resigned his Slade professorship. But even in his final years he still found enough strength to attack the railways which were, he believed, disturbing rural beauty. He died at Coniston, looked after by his cousin and her family.

Ruskin’s last regret was reported to have been that he had failed to get rid of all his money before he died.

Ruskin is worthy of respect and remembrance for his original ideas and for the passion and power with which he expressed them. A. C. Benson wrote that what Ruskin did was ‘to break utterly to pieces the old leisurely feeling about art as a pleasant and dignified adjunct to life. He taught men and women to look close, to compare, to discriminate, to wonder, and above all to care for art as the passionate expression of one of the deepest and strongest of human qualities, the love and worship of beauty.’

Ruskin was a man who always meant what he said. He made people think and his influence is lasting.

William Shakespeare
(1564-1616)

William Shakespeare, poet and playwright, universally acknowledged as the greatest writer the world has ever seen, contributed more than any other individual to the English language. If it were not for Shakespeare, many phrases in our English language today would simply not exist. His entire work contains between 25,000-30,000 different words (far, far more words than most writers use); some of these words were invented by Shakespeare, many were given new meanings by him.

Shakespeare was born in a house on Henley Street, Stratford-onAvon in 1564. He was one of seven children. Very little is known about his life but his parents were John Shakespeare and Mary Arden. Shakespeare's father was quite a big wheel in the small town; he owned a profitable glove-making business and by 1568, John Shakespeare had risen to the position of high bailiff, after joining the town council in 1557.

In the 1570's, touring actors would frequently stop off at Stratford-on-Avon where they would perform plays. These plays no doubt made a strong impression on the growing Shakespeare, and probably sowed the seeds for his future career in acting and writing.

By the time he left school, William Shakespeare's father had fallen into debt and William himself was not well off. Nevertheless, in 1582, at the age of 18, he married Anne Hathaway who was eight years his senior. The couple had two daughters and a son: Susanna (who was the eldest) and twins, Judith and Harmnet. Sadly, Hamnet died in childhood.

Little is known about what Shakespeare did for a living at this time but in the late 1580's he seems to have left his family and headed for London to seek his fortune. There is no documentary evidence of what happened to him and these are often referred to as 'the lost years'. Little is known about his life because Shakespeare was a poor man with no contacts at court and no status.

In 1594, after having spent some years being involved in the theatre in London, Shakespeare became a member - and a shareholder - of a newly founded theatre company called 'The Lord Chamberlain's Men' (later named the King's Men after King James I succeeded the throne).

As well as being a shareholder, William Shakespeare acted in the company and wrote plays for them to perform. Indeed, documents suggest that Shakespeare acted throughout his professional life.

Before he joined the Lord Chamberlain's Men, Shakespeare was already making a name for himself as a playwright; the first reference to him in this capacity was in 1592 and by 1596, Shakespeare had made enough money to buy a house called 'New Place' in Stratfordon-Avon for himself and his wife and children.

From 1599, Shakespeare's company of players performed at the Globe Theatre in London. Nearly all of Shakespeare's new plays were presented at the Globe, and he soon earned a reputation as one of England's greatest playwrights. His comedies include *Love's Labour's Lost, The Taming of the Shrew, A Midsummer Night's Dream and The Comedy of Errors.* The history plays include *Henry VI (Part I, II and III), Richard III and Richard II.* His tragedies include *Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Othello, Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth.* Nobody is really certain in what order many of his plays were written and first performed.

The day before the second Earl of Essex led a rebellion against Queen Elizabeth I, the supporters of Essex arranged with the Lord Chamberlain's Men to put on a performance of Shakespeare's tragedy *Richard II*, which involved a monarch being overthrown. As a celebration of the pre-planned rebellion, the Earl of Essex encouraged his supporters to watch the play which was held at the Globe. When Queen Elizabeth found out about it, she suspected Shakespeare's company of being involved in the rebellion. An investigation followed but luckily Shakespeare and the rest of the players were found not guilty of any crime.

On the 29June 1613, the Globe's thatched roof caught fire when a cannon was fired during the performance of the play *Henry VIII* (which Shakespeare had written with the new chief playwright of the King's Men, John Fletcher). The Globe theatre was destroyed in less than two hours, but was soon rebuilt. The fire at the Globe prompted Shakespeare to break away from the King's Men and to sell his shares in the company.

William Shakespeare wrote 37 plays and 154 sonnets. It is widely believed that Shakespeare's sonnets were printed without his consent, and one theory is that someone who knew Shakespeare betrayed him by handing his sonnets to a publisher.

William Shakespeare, the writer whose plays are still performed more often than those of any other playwright, died on 23 April 1616. He was just 52 years old. Nobody really knows for certain what caused his death, though since he is believed to have had some sort of fever he presumably died of an infection.

Before he died, Shakespeare wrote his own epitaph of which the last line reads: 'And curst be he that moves my bones'. In his will, Shakespeare left his wife Anne his second-best bed. However, this was not as bad as it seems, as the best bed around that period was usually reserved for guests, and the second bed was often the marital bed. Anne died seven years after her husband's death.

It wasn't until 1623 that the first collected edition of his plays was published. There is evidence to suggest that Shakespeare wrote another play called *Cardenio* but, sadly, this has never been found.

There has, over the years, been a considerable amount of discussion about whether or not William Shakespeare really was the author of the Shakespearean plays. Many academics have written books proposing alternative authors and suggesting that the name 'William Shakespeare' was used as a convenient pseudonym.

Does it really matter?

Whoever wrote the plays was happy to use the name 'William Shakespeare' during his lifetime. Maybe we should respect that wish and simply be happy to remember William Shakespeare as the greatest playwright who ever lived.

John Snow
(1813-1858)

Most of the people in this book were quite elderly when they died (many were well past their biblical allowance of three score years and ten and a good number were elderly even by modern, 21st century standards). John Snow, however, was in his mid forties when he died. Nevertheless, he made his mark. Two marks to be exact. First, he was the one of the very first anaesthetists, and arguably the one who made anaesthesia acceptable. Second, he proved the relationship between cholera and contaminated water supplies.

The first effective and safe anaesthetic was nitrous oxide. It was first used in 1799 by the English inventor Sir Humphry Davy. He was in pain and used the gas to obtain relief from an erupting wisdom tooth. Michael Faraday, another English inventor, described the anaesthetic qualities of ether a little later. Americans, who always like to claim to have invented everything, credit a dentist called Morton with 'inventing anaesthesia' but in truth Morton was nearly half a century behind Davy and Faraday.

And it was Snow who made anaesthesia fashionable and acceptable. It was in 1853 that Snow administered chloroform to Queen Victoria when she was giving birth to Prince Leopold.

For years a huge battle raged between those who believed in anaesthesia and those who claimed it was unnatural. Doctors argued that anaesthesia made surgery and childbirth easier for surgeons and more comfortable for patients. Male church leaders were horrified. They argued that it was unnatural for a woman to suffer no pain while giving birth.

Heaven knows how long the argument would have raged if Dr John Snow hadn't played a trump card in 1853 by anaesthetising Queen Victoria. Once the royal approval had been given the opposition melted away.

By then, however, Snow had already earned his own place in history.

During the 1848-9 cholera outbreak in London, thousands of people died. The main problem was that no one knew how the disease was being spread. Because of this it was, inevitably, impossible to stop it spreading.

And then Dr John Snow decided that the only explanation for the way the disease was spreading was that it was carried in the water supplies. He argued that the solution was to keep sewage away from drinking water. He considered that since the two commonest symptoms, vomiting and diarrhoea, involved the alimentary tract, the disease must be transmitted by something ingested rather than breathed in.

Snow, a physician, general practitioner and (at the time, budding) anaesthetist, spent much of his own time investigating his theory. His first conclusive proof came from a survey of the district around Golden Square in the centre of London. At that time piped water was not supplied to all the houses in the area and many people took their water from pumps and wells. A pump in Broad Street supplied the majority of local inhabitants and Snow's enquiries showed that a cholera epidemic in the area was linked directly to the use of the Broad Street pump. His investigations then showed that the brick lining of a cesspool about three feet away from the well had decayed and cracked. This, Snow decided, was responsible for contaminating the previously drinkable water obtained from the Broad Street pump. To stop the spread of the disease Snow recommended that the handle be removed from the pump so that water could no longer be drawn from that source.

Snow continued his investigations and eventually managed to show a consistent relationship between the incidence of cholera and the supplies of water in different areas of London. He showed that customers whose water came from a polluted or contaminated source were more likely to develop cholera than customers whose water came from a pure source.

It was the work of Dr Snow and Edwin Chadwick (who is also in this book) which helped tame the three major killers of the 19th century: smallpox, cholera and tuberculosis.

Dr Snow is now largely forgotten (although there is a public house in his name in Soho in central London) but although he was not an officially trained or employed public health official his work helped protect millions throughout the world. He can rightly be called the father of epidemiology.

Edmund Spenser

(1552-1599)

Born in London, where his father was a cloth-maker, and educated at Cambridge University, Edmund Spenser was one of the world's greatest poets. His first important publication, The *Shepheardes Calender*, published in 1579, is known as the first work of the English literary Renaissance. In it Spenser writes about a maiden he met on a visit to Lancashire. He disguises her under the anagram of Rosalinde. He fell in love with her but she gave her heart to a rival.

By the time he was in his late twenties, Spenser was part of a literary circle led by Sir Philip Sidney (to whom *The Shepheardes Calender* was dedicated) and was working for the Earl of Leicester. He rather hoped for a nice post at court but he blotted his copybook (something he wrote offended the powerful but rather touchy minister, Lord Burghley, the former William Cecil, who was principal adviser to Elizabeth I) and instead he was appointed secretary to the lord deputy of Ireland, where he spent much of the rest of his life.

In the late 1580's, Spenser was appointed clerk of the council of Munster and took over Kilcolman Castle, a large property near Cork which came with around 3,000 acres. The castle was given to him by Queen Elizabeth. Spenser was now further away from London than ever and wasn't even able to mix with Dublin society.

In 1590, with encouragement from Sir Walter Ralegh, who had also ended up in the wilds of the Irish countryside, Spenser published the first three books of *The Fairie Queene,* a long allegorical poem, a glorification of England and Elizabeth I and a poetic vindication of Puritanism and Protestantism. *The Fairie Queene* of the poem is Elizabeth. Her kingdom is England.

Spenser dedicated the book to the Queen, in the hope that she would invite him to return to the court in London. But the invitation never came and Spenser had to be content with a pension of fifty pounds a year as a reward.

Returning to his castle, Spenser met a local woman, Elizabeth Boyle whom he married in 1594. He then resigned his job as clerk to Munster and, although he did visit London again, spent much of his time working on the later volumes of *The Fairie Queene.*

In another attempt to get back into favour at court he wrote a poem glorifying the Earl of Essex but when this didn't work he realised that his future lay at his comfortable castle in Kilcolman.

Spenser intended that *The Fairie Queene* would consist of no less than twelve separate books but he completed only half of the planned work. It is, nevertheless, regarded as one of the greatest poems ever written. Spenser used a revolutionary nine-line stansaic pattern which has often been used by other poets.

Spenser's other work include a satire on court life called *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe,* which he wrote when Queen Elizabeth did not invite him to return home from Ireland.

Much of his other work has disappeared, presumably lost for ever. One of the problems he had was that although he was writing in Ireland he was publishing in London. Moving manuscripts between the two places was a time consuming and risky business.

Spenser has one other important claim to fame: he was one of the first major writers to write in his own language. By choosing to write in English, rather than Latin (he used the standard English of the period, together with words and dialect borrowed from around the country, together with neologisms of his own invention) he helped encourage others throughout Europe to abandon Latin in favour of their own national language.

In 1598, Spenser was recommended for the post of Sheriff of Cork and he was rather looking forward to this when his home was burned down in the Munster rebellion of that year. Spenser escaped and returned to London with his family. He was however, depressed and despairing at the loss of a home he had grown to love and he died shortly afterwards. As some recognition of his talent, skills and achievements he was buried near the poet Chaucer in Westminster Abbey.

George Stephenson
1781-1848

George and Robert Stephenson, father and son, did more than anyone to 'create' railways. I have chosen to include George (the father) in this list solely because although Robert Stephenson (1803-1859) made an enormous contribution to the development of the train he was continuing his father's work rather than branching out on his own.

George's family were almost all employed in the local coal mines. His father worked as a coal-mine mechanic and George himself started his working life in a colliery near Newcastle as his father's assistant. He proved so good at his job that he became chief mechanic – and his dad's boss – at the age of 17. It was at that colliery that George Stephenson learnt how to operate the steam engine which was used to pump water out of the coal mines so that the miners could work underground and dig out the coal.

It wasn't long before the young Stephenson had the idea of using the pumping engine to drive some sort of vehicle. And so he invented the 'travelling engine' or 'steam locomotive'; originally designed not to pull coaches carrying passengers but to pull wagons full of coal out of the pits. In 1815, he developed a powerful system called 'steam blast' which made the whole idea practical. He obtained financial backing (often the most difficult part of any entrepreneurial activity) and built his first locomotive which he called the Blucher, after the Prussian general who fought alongside the Duke of Wellington at the Battle of Waterloo.

Strictly speaking Stephenson's locomotive wasn't the first to be designed. Another Englishman, Richard Trevethick, had built a steam car some years earlier and in 1808 had built a locomotive that could travel at five miles an hour. The problem was that Trevethick's engines were impractical. They were unreliable, they were so heavy that they broke the rails, they were so slow that people could walk alongside them and they tended to explode rather more than was thought entirely acceptable.

George Stephenson's train, on the other hand, was practical, quick and efficient. George even invented special cast-iron rails and an improved system to enable the wheels to run on the rails more smoothly and more safely. George Stephenson was, without a doubt, the world's first and greatest railway engineer.

Stephenson's locomotive was a success and he was quickly invited to build two locomotives for the Stockton and Darlington railway – the world's first commercial railway. These new engines were capable of pulling passenger coaches carrying 450 people at a speed of 15 miles per hour. In 1829, George Stephenson built his best locomotive which he called the Rocket. His son Robert helped him with the work (and became an important and significant railway engineer in his own right).

The new locomotive was capable of travelling at 36 miles an hour and when a competition called the Rainhill Trials was held to help celebrate the building of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway, the Rocket was the winner. The Rocket was the model for subsequent locomotives. George Stephenson's company built all eight locomotives for the Liverpool and Manchester Railway.

George Stephenson is remembered for a number of other inventions too. He designed a safety lamp for miners (at the same time as Sir Humphry Davy invented one) and, rather bizarrely but ingeniously, he invented a baby's cradle that could be automatically rocked by smoke from a chimney stack.

When George Stephenson retired, in 1838, he was a rich man. He lived in a huge mansion and continued to invent and study. He had a habit of taking blood from his guests and examining it under a microscope, and he worked out a way of growing straight cucumbers.

The Stephensons have much in common with that other famous family, the Brunels. And like the younger Brunel, Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the younger Stephenson also built some famous bridges. Robert Stephenson was, for example, the creator of the Britannia bridge over the Menai Straits and of a six arch iron bridge which spanned the River Tyne. The Britannia bridge was built with a unique tubular system which was subsequently widely used in England and elsewhere.

Joseph Swan
(1828-1914)

Sir Joseph Swan was an English chemist and physicist (he was born in Sunderland) who should be much better known than he is.

In 1860, twenty years before Thomas Edison, who is usually, but wrongly, credited with inventing electric light, Swan produced, and patented, the first electric light bulb. He had begun working on his light bulb in 1850, using carbonised paper filaments in a glass bulb. Swan's house was the first in the world to be lit by an incandescent electric light bulb. When Swan visited the Paris Exhibition in 1881, the whole city was lit with electric light, thanks to his invention and there were exhibits of his inventions. (Thomas Edison, in America, was just getting round to developing his first light bulb at this time.)

Swan received the Legion d'honneur from the French for inventing the electric light bulb though, naturally, he had to wait until 1904 to be recognised with a knighthood in his own country.

In 1878, Swan received another patent for a much improved electric light bulb which had a better vacuum and a carbonised thread as a filament. (This was similar to the bulb which Edison eventually produced. Edison obtained patents in America for a copy of the Swan light bulb and dishonestly ran an advertising campaign claiming that the invention was his own.)

In 1871, Swan invented the dry photographic plate, an invention which revolutionised photography and made it convenient and popular. In 1879, he invented bromide paper for photographic printing. Similar paper is still used for black and white photographic prints. While searching for a way to make a better filament for his light bulbs he also patented a process for manufacturing nitrocellulose fibres (by squeezing the nitrocellulose through small holes). This latter invention revolutionised the textile industry by making it possible to manufacture artificial silk.

Many reference books and encyclopaedias describe the American Thomas Edison as the inventor of the electric light bulb. It is understandable, perhaps, that Americans should seek to perpetuate this myth. It is, however, sad that even some English publications should give credit to the American rather than to the Englishman who was the real inventor of electric light.

William Henry Fox Talbot
(1800-1877)

Talbot was born at Lacock Abbey near Chippenham, in Wiltshire and he was trained as a chemist though his interests were wide ranging. He was an amateur polymath and published numerous articles on mathematics, physics and astronomy.

Ignore whatever else you may have heard: William Henry Fox Talbot, the squire of Lacock, invented photography.

Talbot's father was a Dragoon Guards officer with a spending problem. When he died, leaving Lacock Abbey to his son, he also left huge debts. The only way the young Talbot could pay off these debts was by letting out the Abbey and living with friends of his well-connected mother and by studying at Cambridge University. (His mother, Lady Elisabeth, was the daughter of the 2nd Earl of Ilchester.)

By the time he left Cambridge (having mastered Greek and Hebrew, and studied Astronomy, Archaeology, Chemistry and Physics) the debts had been paid off and he was able to reclaim possession of the Abbey and move back in as resident squire of the village.

Unlike his father, who was a bit of a wastrel, young Talbot was a hard worker. He served as MP for Chippenham in the first Reformed Parliament, published important papers on mathematics, deciphered inscriptions on archaeological finds at Nineveh and developed a new method of estimating the distance of some fixed stars. And he invented an extraordinary internal combustion engine which was sparked by a belt containing small pieces of gun cotton. He continued writing scientific papers, especially on mathematical subjects, all his life.

He began the researches which would lead to the invention of photography quite early on, contributing relevant papers to scientific journals in 1826 and 1827, but it was his hobby of drawing which in the end led to the invention of photography. In 1833, while on his honeymoon near to Lake Como, he was tracing over the images produced through a 'camera obscura' when he decided he wanted to find a way to make such images permanent. Two years later, in 1835, he invented the paper negative and in 1840 he invented the calotype, or talbotype, an early photographic process which involved the use of a photographic negative from which multiple prints could be made. He started taking photographs in that year and the oldest photographic negative in existence in the world is an image of a latticed window in Lacock Abbey which was taken in 1835 by Talbot. In 1844, he published *The Pencil of Nature*, the first book in the world to be illustrated with photographs. He described his discoveries in that book.

Having spent many thousands of pounds developing his photographic process, Talbot took out a patent for his calotype in 1841. He charged professional photographers up to £300 a year to use his process, though amateurs could use it for free. The idea of scientists taking out patents to protect their inventions was fairly new and Talbot was widely criticised for this.

Four years after Talbot first started taking photographs, a Frenchman, Louis Daguerre, exhibited pictures he had taken using a different method which he called the 'daguerrotype process'. (The Frenchman made a good deal of the claim that he was offering his patent free to the world but in fact he too took out a patent in England.) The daguerrotype process was rarely used and was abandoned by 1865. The main problem with it was that copies could not be made.

In the years which followed, photography became increasingly popular. Journalists sent photographs back from the Crimean War. Visiting cards started to include photographs and numerous eminent people (including Queen Victoria and Lewis Carroll) started taking and collecting their own photographs. In 1899, the final year of the century in which Talbot invented photography, more than 100,000 box Brownie cameras were sold in England.

Richard Trevethick

(1771-1833)

Born in Cornwall, and poorly educated, Richard Trevethick was just 19 years old when he became an engineer working for several mines in his home county. At the time huge, low-pressure engines were used for hauling ore out of the mines and Trevethick thought these were inefficient and clumsy. In 1797, after conducting experiments with high-pressure steam, he invented a small light engine as a replacement.

The success of this invention led him, four years later, to build the world's first car – a steam carriage – which he subsequently drove in London. Trevethick's creation puts him nearly a century ahead of the engineers who are usually credited with inventing the car. His problem was that no roads had been built and the tracks and bridle paths that existed were entirely unsuitable for transport that, unlike a horse, couldn't pick its way between the ruts and through the mud.

In 1803, after another two years work, Trevethick built the world's first steam railway locomotive. He built a small circular track in London, near the site of the mainline Euston station, to show off a locomotive which he called Catch-Me-Who-Can. Sadly, it wasn't a success. The locomotive was extremely slow and unfortunately, despite much work, the designs had to be abandoned. The main problem was that the iron rails available at the time were too fragile to carry the weight of the engine. It would be another Englishman, George Stephenson who would solve the problems and create the world's first operating steam locomotive.

But Trevethick didn't abandon his engine and he adapted it to create the world's first steam dredger. Sadly, even this didn't prove to be commercially successful and in 1816 the frustrated Trevethick sailed to South America to deliver engines to Peruvian silver mines hoping to make himself rich there. However, the expedition was not a success and Trevethick, a great inventor but a poor businessman, returned to England penniless in 1827.

When he died a few years later he was still a poor man.

Jethro Tull

(1674-1741)

Jethro Tull, an English inventor and the world's first scientific agronomist, was born in Berkshire, the same county where he died 67 years later. He was educated at Oxford.

Tull took the Industrial Revolution into farming and designed machinery that enabled farmers to work far more efficiently and productively.

After leaving Oxford, Tull became ill with a respiratory problem and travelled throughout Europe searching for a cure. When he returned home he married a girl from Warwickshire, with whom he had three children.

In 1701, Tull perfected a horse-drawn seed drill that sowed seeds in neat rows. His drill enabled farmers to sow their seeds without waste. He then invented a horse-drawn hoe for clearing weeds and improved the design of the plough. It was Tull who first stressed the importance of breaking up the soil to release the nutrients before planting seeds (a simple development that would revolutionise farming and crop production).

Tull's inventions and innovative farming methods were, at first, widely attacked. Farm labourers worried that their jobs would disappear if farmers started using mechanical aids. But within a relatively short period large landowners throughout England, and then the rest of Europe, recognised the importance of Tull's recommendations, and modern agriculture was born.

Few people in history have made a bigger or more important contribution to human life than Jethro Tull. He transformed agricultural practices, both by improving farming methods and by inventing practical implements designed to make farm work more efficient. Modern versions of his inventions still look remarkably like the ones he designed.

It is no exaggeration to say that Jethro Tull is the father of modern agriculture.

Joseph Mallord William Turner
(1775-1851)

Commonly known as ‘the painter of light’, Turner was one of England’s greatest painters. His early work was concerned with accurate depictions of the places he painted but later on, he became much more interested in the dramatic effects of light and colour and his experiments made his style of painting unique, something which provoked much venom from his critics. But Turner, who could have easily conformed in order to please his critics, had enough self-belief to continue experimenting in his highly innovative style, which is probably why he is regarded as the most important painter of his time.

The son of a barber and wig maker, J.M.W. Turner, was born in 1775 in Maiden Lane, London to William and Mary Turner. The month and day Turner was born remains something of an enigma because no recorded birth document has ever survived. However, Turner later claimed that he was born on 23 April - St George’s Day and the traditional birth date of William Shakespeare.

Sadly, Turner’s childhood was blighted by much tragedy: his younger sister died just before her fifth birthday and his mother, Mary, suffered from mental illness. In 1800, she was confined to a mental asylum. Her mental illness made her prone to violent fits of temper, which must have been fairly traumatic for her son to witness. Turner spent some of his childhood with relatives in Brentford and later on in Margate. At Brentford, he attended the Brentford Free School in the High Street. On his way to school, he used to amuse himself by drawing figures on the walls with chalk. Turner showed artistic talent from an early age, and his father used to display his sketches for sale on the walls inside his barber’s shop in Maiden Lane.

Turner’s artistic talent led him to work in the drawing office of the architect, Thomas Hardwick, where he sketched and painted. Around the same time, Turner also studied in the studio of architectural draughtsman, Thomas Malton. There, Turner learned perspective, a skill that was necessary for architectural drawing.

In 1789, at only 14 years of age, Turner, who spoke with a Cockney accent and who was described as having a ‘vulgarity of pronunciation’ by *New Monthly Magazine* in 1816, entered the Royal Academy as a Probationer where he learnt much from the Academy’s President, Sir Joshua Reynolds: (Turner was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy in 1799 and became a full Academician in 1802. He was also elected Professor of Perspective in 1807, but for some unknown reason, perhaps nervousness, did not start giving lectures on the subject until four years later.)

After a short period of study at the Royal Academy, the gifted Turner who was still only 14, exhibited a watercolour for the first time. Turner exhibited his work at the Royal Academy right up until the year before he died.

As his studying progressed, Turner’s growing talent and artistic skill gained attention from others and in 1793, he was awarded – the first and last prize he ever received – the Greater Silver Pallet by the Society of Arts. The favourable press Turner received for his work contributed to him becoming one of the leading artists of his day – though he was not yet 23.

In 1791, in search of new material, Turner travelled to the West Country on a sketching tour paid for by the Royal Academy. Throughout his life, he toured extensively throughout Britain and Europe. Turner loved Venice and was fascinated and entranced by the light of the city. Five years later Turner exhibited his first oil-painting Fishermen at Sea at the Royal Academy. This painting which sold for ten pounds was inspired by his visit to the Isle of Wight during one of his sketching tours.

In 1799, the same year Turner was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy, he moved to Harley Street in Marylebone after having made enough money from his art to buy himself a smart home. At his residence in Harley Street, he built his own gallery (he built another gallery at his later London address in Queen Street West) so that he could exhibit his work. It is said that Turner hated selling his favourite paintings, sometimes refusing to sell them at all.

Some of Turner’s works include: The Shipwreck (1805), Sun Rising through Vapour (1807), The Battle of Trafalgar, as Seen from the Mizen Starboard Shrouds of the Victory (1806), Ulysses deriding Polyphemus (1829), Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons (1835) (which he produced after witnessing the fire), The Fighting Temeraire Tugged to her Last Berth to be Broken up (1839), Fishing Boats with Hucksters Bargaining for Fish (1842) and Rain, Steam and Speed – The Great Western Railway (1844).

Turner’s reputation was badly damaged by the critics during the 1830’s and onwards but his career was revived by the writer and art critic John Ruskin who was a huge supporter of the painter’s work and who often defended him against some of his fierce critics.

After the death of his mother in Bethlehem Hospital (Bedlam) for the insane in 1804, Turner invited his father to live with him. The two men were very close, so close in fact that after his father’s death in 1829, friends reported that Turner was never the same man. His father’s death had a profound effect on him. As well as being a friend and confidant, William Turner happily became his son’s studio assistant and housekeeper. William Turner was proud of his son and one of his greatest admirers.

Turner was said to have been short and stout; extremely private; often eccentric; absent-minded; and prone to parsimony. It was said that he kept Manx cats rather than cats with tails because he had heard that they helped keep the heat in rooms because they were able to enter and exit much more quickly, thus saving money.

Turner never married, but he did have a relationship with a widow, Sarah Danby, by whom he had two illegitimate daughters. And later, he had a close relationship with another widow, Sophia Caroline Booth, who was the landlady of the boarding-house he often stayed at in the seaside town of Margate – a town where he lived for a short period as a child.

Around 1846, Turner left his gallery and residence in Queen Anne Street West and moved to a small house in Chelsea, which he shared with Mrs Booth.

At his Chelsea residence, he lived under the assumed name of Admiral Booth. It was here that he died on 19 December 1851. The painter of light’s last words were reputed to be: ‘the sun is God’.

Turner was buried in St Paul’s Cathedral (next to Sir Joshua Reynolds as he requested) and he bequeathed most of his work to the nation. The prolific artist produced around 300 paintings, and over 20,000 drawings and watercolour sketches.

Wat Tyler
(1350-1381)

Wat Tyler was one of the most charismatic leaders of the peasants' revolt and the dramatic march on London which took place in the 14th century. Tyler (almost certainly so named because he was a tiler) came from Essex and was accompanied by his side-kick Jack Straw. Tyler, who was elected to be the mob's spokesman after they had successfully taken Rochester Castle, was, like those who accompanied him, angry at attempts at forced labour which had been introduced after the Black Death a few years earlier. Peasants weren't allowed to sell their labour freely but were treated more like slaves.

The demonstration led by Tyler started in Essex and then moved on to Canterbury, Blackheath and finally London. The demonstration they organised in London was intended to be peaceful, and essentially it was, though there was a little looting, burning and killing when a few wilder elements attacked rich men's homes. Some lawyers and government employees were murdered. No one, not even King Richard II, much minded about the lawyers or the government employees and the demonstrators even got away with destroying the palace of John of Gaunt, the hated uncle of the King and a principal minister.

The young King then decided it would be a good idea to meet the protestors before things really got out of hand. He came to meet them at Smithfield, offering to agree to their demands for freedom and promising to seal documents confirming this. But Wat Tyler ended up quarrelling with some of the King's attendants, and the then Lord Mayor of London, William Walworth, stabbed Tyler and badly wounded him. When he found out that Tyler had been taken to St Bartholomew's Hospital, the Mayor had the rebel leader dragged out of the hospital and beheaded. Tyler was falsely said to have attacked the King. This was early 'perception management' (now known as 'spin').

Naturally, the mob got angry. There was much fighting. Jack Straw, John Bull and a number of other revolting peasants were caught and executed. In all, over 1,500 rebels were hung or beheaded.

In order to try to quieten things down, and to persuade the troublesome peasants to go back home, King Richard offered all sorts of reforms. Indeed, he promised to do everything the peasants had requested, and signed all the relevant documents. Satisfied, the peasants eventually dispersed.

But as soon as the rioters had gone, King Richard behaved like a politician and went back on his word.

Technically the Peasants' Revolt was a failure and for a while it must have seemed as though Wat Tyler's death was pointless.

But within the next few decades everything the peasants had demanded was given to them. The feudal system ended and peasants were no longer tied to individual landowners or treated like slaves.

William Tyndale
(1494-1536) (aka Tindale and Huchins)

William Tyndale, who was probably born in Slymbridge, Gloucestershire and certainly educated at Oxford University, was the man who first published an edition of The Bible in the English language. To do so he had to risk his life. And in the end he died for his work.

After spending time at Cambridge, Tyndale became chaplain and tutor to a household in Little Sodbury but his sympathy with the new ways of thinking (and his enthusiasm for using English rather than Latin) aroused suspicion. Probably wisely, Tyndale left his post and went to London where he tried to persuade Bishop Tunstall to support his plan to translate The Bible into English. His pleas were refused and in 1524 Tyndale went to Hamburg where he visited Luther. His plan was to print an English version of The Bible and to smuggle copies into England. In 1525 he travelled to Cologne where he began printing his own English translation of the *New Testament.*

Unfortunately, Tyndale hadn't got beyond the gospels of Matthew and Mark when problems caused by the intrigues of a German theologian called Johann Cochlaeus meant that he was forced to flee to Worms, carrying with him the parts of The Bible that had already been printed. It was there that the first 3,000 copies of his *New Testaments* were finally printed by Peter Schoeffer.

Bishop Tunstall and others denounced the book and hundreds of copies were burned but Tyndale's bible began to circulate and it was clear that there was a need for it. Nevertheless, Tyndale's life was in danger and he had to flee from Cardinal Wolsey's men who were after him. Sir Thomas More had also become an enemy.

In 1527, Tyndale moved to Marburg, under the protection of Philip the Magnanimous. Two years later he was shipwrecked on the way to Hamburg. In 1531, he went to Antwerp and published an attack on the Pope and the bishops. He temporarily won some approval from Henry VIII because his outspoken views on the church seemed to coincide with the King's interests.

In 1534, Tyndale published a revised version of his *New Testament* and printed a special copy of his new version. on vellum for presentation to Anne Boleyn. Tyndale then got into trouble again for denouncing the King's divorce proceedings.

In the same year emissaries of King Henry VIII, who had been chasing him for some time, managed to arrest Tyndale in Antwerp, because of the treachery of a man called Henry Philips. Tyndale was imprisoned, tried for heresy and then strangled and burned.

During his short life Tyndale wrote and published a number of other books including *The Parable of a Wicked Mammon* (1528), *The Obedience of a Christian Man* (1528) and *Practyse of Prelates* (1530).

Victoria
(1819-1901)

Queen Victoria – Queen of Great Britain and Ireland, and later, with the help of Tory Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, Empress of India – was born on 24 May 1819 at Kensington Palace.

Queen Victoria's father was Edward Augustus, Duke of Kent (King George III's son). Her mother was the widowed Princess Victoria of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld. Queen Victoria was Christened Alexandrina Victoria (nicknamed Drina throughout her childhood) and was her father's only legitimate child. Queen Victoria's mother already had children from her previous marriage with the Prince of Leiningen.

Queen Victoria's father died suddenly on 23 January 1820 when the young princess was less than a year old, leaving her mother, the Duchess of Kent, a widow for the second time. Just under a week later, Queen Victoria's grandfather, King George III, died, making his granddaughter's chances of becoming Queen much more likely. When learning at the age of about 11 that she was closer to the throne than she thought, Queen Victoria was reported to have famously said: 'I will be good'. Although she was thoroughly spoilt, the young Victoria had a lonely childhood without many children of her own age to play with; her half siblings were quite a lot older than her. Instead, the young princess had a vast collection of dolls (just over 130) for company.

Brought up well aware of her importance from a very early age, the young princess was overheard one day telling a young visitor who was about to touch her toys: 'You must not touch those, they are mine; and I may call you Jane, but you must not call me Victoria'.

Right up until her succession to the throne, Queen Victoria slept every night in the same room as her mother. She was not allowed to walk downstairs or upstairs without somebody holding her hand. Her mother wanted to protect her daughter from any physical harm from her 'wicked uncles' (who she thought would try to murder the Princess) as she, along with Victoria's late father, had a firm belief in their daughter's future destiny as Queen.

The tiny (she was just 4ft 11in tall) Princess acceded to the throne in 1837 after her uncle, King William IV died. Victoria received the news that she was Queen at six in the morning while she was still in her dressing gown. Queen Victoria wrote about the news of her accession in her journal (which she religiously wrote in throughout her life on the instruction of her childhood tutor, advisor and much cherished friend, Fraulein Lehzen): 'Since it has pleased providence to place me in this station, I shall do my utmost to fulfil my duty towards my country; I am very young and perhaps in many, though not all things, inexperienced, but I am sure that very few have more real good will and more real desire to do what is fit and right than I have.'

Tragically, after Queen Victoria passed away her daughter, Beatrice, rewrote and censored her mother's diaries and destroyed the originals.

When Princess Victoria became Queen, she was barred from the throne of Hanover because she was female. This meant that the 120-year-old constitutional link with the German kingdom had now come to an end.

Early on in her reign, the young Queen began to depend on the Prime Minister, Lord Melbourne, for political guidance and advice, and she socialised with him regularly. There were even rumours that there was something more to their friendship, especially as Lord Melbourne was single after divorcing his wife many years earlier for her infidelities (including an affair with the very busy Lord Byron).

Queen Victoria made the mistake of allowing herself to be surrounded by Whigs and was even nicknamed 'Queen of the Whigs' by the Tories, whom she quickly grew to despise. When Whig leader Lord Melbourne resigned after his party's majority was reduced in the General Election, Queen Victoria was bereft at losing her friend and advisor. Her loss was heightened by the fact that she disliked the new Tory Prime Minister, Robert Peel immensely.

The new Prime Minister was disliked even more after he had a discussion with the Queen about her Household. Peel felt that Queen Victoria couldn't possibly give her full support to the Tories if her Household contained wives of opposition MPs. This predicament was famously known as the 'Bedchamber Crisis'. Much to Queen Victoria's delight, Lord Melbourne returned as Prime Minister when Robert Peel was defeated after Melbourne gave a speech to Parliament explaining the Queen's predicament over the 'Bedchamber Crisis'.

After a second election victory in 1841, Robert Peel returned as Prime Minister and Queen Victoria eventually grew to like and respect him.

It was Queen Victoria who proposed to her first cousin Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha. She had to do this because royal etiquette would not allow the Prince to propose to the Queen. On seeing Prince Albert during his visit on 10 October 1839, she later wrote in her journal: 'It was with some emotion that I beheld Albert – who is beautiful'. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert were married on 10 February 1840 in the Chapel Royal at St James's Palace. Queen Victoria's dependence on Lord Melbourne for political guidance and advice was now transferred to her beloved husband, Prince Albert. Royal policy was his policy.

Queen Victoria and Prince Albert went on to have nine children: five girls and four boys. Queen Victoria used chloroform when giving birth to her eighth child, Prince Leopold in 1853. The chloroform was administered by English physician Dr John Snow. Despite public outcry from religious moralists who believed that women should endure pain when giving birth Victoria used chloroform again when giving birth to her ninth and final child.

Amazingly, Queen Victoria survived seven assassination attempts. The first assassination attempt was by 18-year-old Edward Oxford. He fired a shot at Queen Victoria and Prince Albert from one of the two pistols he was carrying. He was sentenced to 27 years in a mental asylum for his crime.

Sadly, Prince Albert (who had become the Prince Consort when Victoria became Queen) died from typhoid fever on 14 December 1861 at the age of 42. Queen Victoria did not attend her husband's funeral because it was established protocol for women not to attend funerals in the 19th century. In mourning for her beloved husband, Queen Victoria withdrew from the political and social scene for quite some time, and wore black for the remaining 40 years of her life (even wearing black to her children's weddings). Her lengthy mourning earned her the nickname the 'Widow of Windsor', and made her very unpopular for a long time with the public.

Queen Victoria remains the longest reigning British monarch (63 years). She was 81 when she died from a stroke on January 22nd 1901 at Osborne House in the Isle of Wight. The Queen was buried with an alabaster of Prince Albert's hand that was placed into her own hand and with some personal mementoes, which she had requested be buried with her. One of the mementoes was a photograph of her Highland servant, John Brown, plus a lock of his hair.

Queen Victoria and Prince Albert first met John Brown when they were developing their estate at Balmoral. Prince Albert had even made him his personal gillie. Much to the horror of those around her, the rather rough Highlander used to address Queen Victoria as 'Wumman!' Queen Victoria enjoyed his straight talking, no-nonsense attitude, and formed a very close friendship with Mr Brown who was allowed more freedom than anyone, even senior courtiers and close relatives. There have even been rumours that Queen Victoria secretly married her servant.

Queen Victoria's reign saw the birth of the modern world. She grew up to reign over the largest empire in the history of the world. She wanted England to be dominant and she believed it was the nation's destiny to rule as much of the world as possible. Victoria's empire was an empire based on trade; the English had acquired naval bases, colonies and coaling stations around the globe.

The Queen's ambitions for England were realised. Well before her death, the English had become the richest and most powerful people in the world.

Robert Walpole
(1676-1745)

England's first Hanoverian king, George I (1660-1627), never learned to speak English and naturally this rather hindered any attempts he made to run the country. He became King of England in 1714 but from 1721 onwards he left the nation's affairs to his chief minister Robert Walpole who became, effectively, the nation's first Prime Minister.

Born in Houghton in Norfolk, and educated at Eton and Cambridge, Walpole, a younger son of a wealthy family, was originally destined for a career in the church. However, his two older brothers died before they had chance to have sons of their own, and Robert was left the family estate. Naturally, this changed things and a career in the church was no longer necessary or appropriate. Instead, the young Walpole used his unexpected wealth to enable him to follow a career in politics.

He entered the House of Commons in 1701 as the Whig member for Castle Rising in Norfolk, and in 1702 as the member for King's Lynn. He was a powerful, formidable speaker and he found himself rising fast within the party. He was secretary at war from 1708 to 1710 and treasurer of the navy from 1710 to 1711. In 1712, the Tory Government, worried by his growing power and influence, impeached him for corruption and had him expelled from the House of Commons. But he was back in 1714 and by 1715 he was first Lord of the Treasury and Chancellor of the Exchequer.

The new King, George I, could not speak any English and quickly found himself bored by the proceedings of the House of Commons. He simply stopped attending, and left the elected politicians of the House of Commons in charge of the country. This gave Walpole a considerable amount of freedom and discretion. Gradually, Walpole established his position and began to chair a small group of ministers who held regular meetings to discuss the nation's affairs. These were the first cabinet meetings. In 1732 MPs, recognising Walpole's status, began to call him the 'Prime Minister', though the title was not officially recognised until1905. Walpole is still the longest serving Prime Minister - having effectively held the office from 1721 until 1742.

Walpole wanted peace and industrial prosperity for England and he skilfully managed the House of Commons. He set up the first 'sinking fund', abolished export duties, lowered or abolished import duties on essential raw materials and made it illegal to export materials (such as wool) which were used by English manufacturers. He also clamped down on smuggling and forbade Ireland and America to produce goods or raw materials that would compete with English ones. Well aware that wars are costly, disruptive and bad for a nation's economic health, Walpole avoided all foreign entanglements as much as he possibly could. He kept England neutral until 1739 but then found himself forced into the War of Jenkins' Ear in 1739. (This was a war between England and Spain that began in 1739. A Captain Jenkins had appeared before a House of Commons committee and had produced his own amputated ear, which he claimed had been cut off by Spanish coast guards who had boarded his ship in 1731 when he was in the West Indies. MPs used the incident to stir up public outrage and to force Walpole into a war he didn't really want.)

When George II became King in 1727, Walpole cultivated his support and cleverly used royal patronage for political ends.

Walpole survived a number of scandals (including the South Sea Bubble) and as a reward for his years of service Walpole was given No 10 Downing Street (which was to become the permanent London home of all future Prime Ministers) and was made the Earl of Oxford. His famous art collection, which was sold to Russia in 1779, became part of the Hermitage Museum collection.

Robert Walpole, the first Earl of Oxford, died in 1745.

Charles Wheatstone
(1802-1875)

The electric telegraph was invented not, as is usually claimed, by an American, Samuel Morse, but by an Englishman – Sir Charles Wheatstone, working with Sir William Cooke. Of the two men, Wheatstone is the most significant.

Charles Wheatstone was born in Gloucester, where his father was a music seller, who later moved to London and became a flute teacher. As a result, Wheatstone was educated first at a village school and then at private establishments in London.

Apprenticed at the age of 14 to his uncle, who made and sold musical instruments, Wheatstone showed little interest in either manufacturing or selling though he did write two songs which his uncle published (though not knowing they had been written by his nephew). The young Wheatstone had one vice: books. Most of his money was spent buying books. One of his earliest purchases was an account of Volta's work on electricity. Since the book was written in French his next purchase was a French dictionary. Once he'd succeeded in translating the book for himself he tried out the experiments described within it. At one point he ran out of money to buy copper and so used the copper coins which were all he had left. The boy was clearly determined, hard working and brilliant.

Wheatstone duly became a physicist. His first experiments were into sound. He invented the concertina in 1829 and became professor of experimental philosophy at King's College, London at the age of 32. Also in 1829, expanding on work done by Robert Hooke in 1667, he estimated that sound would travel at a speed of 200 miles a second through solid rods and suggested building a telegraph between London and Edinburgh to enable people in the south of England to talk to people in Scotland. He called the arrangement a 'telephone'. (Alexander Graham Bell is officially regarded as having invented the telephone in 1876 but it was Wheatstone who had the idea for it and thought up the name.)

In 1838, Wheatstone was the first to explain the principle of the stereoscope. He later invented a sound magnifier (for which he introduced the term 'microphone'), an instrument which doctors could use when listening to patients' chests (the modern stethoscope) and gave his name to Wheatstone's Bridge, a device which is used for the comparison of electrical resistances. He invented the portable harmonium and in 1840 devised a chronoscope, an instrument for measuring minute intervals of time, which was so accurate that it could be used to determine the speed of a bullet.

But it was in the 1830's that Wheatstone took out the first patent for an electric telegraph.

He began his experiments in 1835, suggesting that an electric telegraph would be extremely useful for transmitting information around the world. He proposed laying a line across the river Thames but before he could do any more with the idea he began a collaboration with William Cooke, an army officer who was home on leave studying medicine.

Cooke had built a telegraph of his own and had exhibited it in 1837. He showed it to Dr Roget (the man who created the thesaurus, who was also a physician) who suggested that he visit Wheatstone.

The two men eventually agreed to work together, with Wheatstone contributing the scientific part of the partnership and Cooke providing the administrative skills. A joint patent was taken out for Wheatstone's five needle telegraph. To test the invention an experimental line was set up between two railway stations; one in Camden Town and one at Euston and on 25 July 1837 the first trial took place. Wheatstone, sitting at Euston, sent the first message and Cooke, in Camden, replied. It worked!

Gradually, railway companies realised the potential value of the telegraph and started to install lines between their stations. The invention soon became an invaluable part of public life. In 1840 Wheatstone suggested laying a line from Dover to Calais and in 1859 Wheatstone was asked by the Government to report on the idea of a cable across the Atlantic.

While Wheatstone and Cooke were demonstrating their telegraph, the American Samuel Morse was still thinking about his. He demonstrated his system, along a railway track as Wheatstone and Clarke had done, but seven years later, in 1844. Despite the fact that he was obviously not the real inventor Morse fought vigorously but dishonestly to be described as the sole inventor of the telegraph. He was, to a large extent, successful -particularly in the USA. (Similarly, Thomas Edison succeeded in falsely claiming to have invented the electric light.)

Wheatstone's work helped him build up a great reputation around the world. The French made him a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour. The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences elected him a foreign member. Altogether he was given over 30 distinctions, mostly by foreign governments and societies. Eventually, even the British Government took note and, in 1868, gave him a knighthood.

Wheatstone died on a visit to Paris in 1875, while working on a receiving instrument for submarine cables.

Frank Whittle

(1907-1996)

It was an Englishman who invented the world's first steam engine (Thomas Newcomen) and an Englishman (Michael Faraday) who invented the world's first electric motor. Another Englishman, Frank Whittle, invented the world's first jet engine.

Born in Coventry and trained as an aviation engineer and pilot, Frank Whittle obtained his first patent for a turbojet engine in 1930, when he was just 23.

The scientific principle behind jet propulsion is simple: every action has a reaction. If you blow air into a balloon and then let the balloon go, the balloon will race around as the air escapes through the narrow opening. The balloon's movement is the reaction to the action of the escaping air.

In Frank Whittle's jet engine air and fuel are ignited, and the escaping gases of combustion at the back of the engine make it move in the opposite direction with an equal force. The jet engine works on the same principle as the balloon whizzing round your living room.

Naturally, since Whittle had invented his jet engine in England no one was terribly interested in it. He co-founded the company Power Jets Ltd. in 1936 but it was only the start of the Second World War that triggered serious interest in his invention. Suddenly, Whittle had support from the British Government. In 1941, two years after the start of the War, the first experimental jet fighter was tested. By then, of course, German aircraft designers had recognised the importance of Whittle's invention and they too were working hard on the principle of jet propulsion. Ironically, it was the German Luftwaffe who flew the first operational jet combat aircraft.

Today, civil and military jets around the world, are powered with engines which are based on Frank Whittle's original design.

Frank Whittle received a knighthood in 1948 and received the order of merit in 1986.

William Wilberforce
(1759-1833)

Slavery existed in Africa, run by Africans, long before any other country got involved (and the business of slavery continues to this day in several African countries). England, alone among the western nations, decided that slavery was morally and ethically unacceptable.

Those who love to berate England for its links to slavery should, perhaps, study history a little more closely. England was the first country in the world where slavery was actually recorded in the statute books as illegal. When, in 1833, the slave trade was abolished throughout the British Empire it was mainly thanks to an Englishman whose name was William Wilberforce.

The only son of a wealthy merchant, William Wilberforce was born on 1759 in Kingston upon Hull, Yorkshire, to Robert and Elizabeth Wilberforce. It has been said that as a child, William was small, sickly and had poor eyesight.

At only ten years of age, after the death of his father, William was forced to leave his family, friends and Grammar school behind to live 200 miles away with his wealthy uncle and aunt in Wimbolton (now called Wimbledon). Although this must have been devastating for the ten-year-old boy, the childless couple who awaited him from his journey from Hull, were loving, generous-hearted and decent people. They were also Evangelical Christians whose beliefs had an enormous impact on the young William. Their beliefs were to influence him greatly throughout most of his adult life.

William experienced a second great upheaval in his short life when his devout Church of England mother, alarmed at her son's Evangelical leanings, brought the now 12-year-old boy back to live in Hull where he attended the nearby Pocklington School. During his adolescent years, his overt commitment to his new Evangelical beliefs gradually diminished although their influence remained.

The death of several male relatives left William a wealthy man, and he used a little of his wealth in late night drinking and in playing cards with some of his fellow students when he went to Cambridge University. Despite his lack of attention to his studies, William managed to obtain his degree.

By the time he was ready to leave Cambridge, William knew what he wanted to do with his life: he wanted to become a member of parliament. In order to prepare for political life, William decided to spend some time in the public gallery at the House of Commons. It was there that he met future Prime Minister, William Pitt the Younger. Later on, this lifelong friendship was to prove extremely valuable in furthering Wilberforce's cause.

In 1780, at the young age of 21, William entered the House of Commons as MP for Hull. Four years later, William became MP for Yorkshire and in 1812, he became MP for Bramber.

William Wilberforce experienced a religious conversion in 1785. This resulted in him becoming a committed Evangelical Christian and deeply regretting his former hedonistic lifestyle. The gambling, drinking and partying were now a thing of the past. After his conversion, he devoted his life to humanitarian reform. A book, *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* by Philip Doddridge, which William read on the journey back from a holiday in Nice, is thought to have triggered his religious conversion.

It was William Wilberforce's encounter with anti-slavery campaigner, Thomas Clarkson in 1787 that was to enable him to find his destiny.

Thomas Clarkson, along with his group of anti-slave trade activists, persuaded William to fight for their cause in the House of Commons and over the next few years, William regularly introduced slavery abolition bills into the House of Commons.

After years of campaigning, the year 1807 saw William's great success: the banning of the slave trade by Parliament. England's navy immediately began to police the ban worldwide.

Not content with the abolition of slavery in his own country, William Wilberforce went on to campaign for the abolition of slavery throughout the world.

The abolition of slavery wasn't the only campaign William championed. Some of his other campaigns included work for the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the Church Missionary Society and the Proclamation Society (for the suppression of vice).

In 1825, William Wilberforce retired from politics and died less than 10 years later in 1833, leaving behind his wife and children. He was 73 years of age. He died just a few days after being told that the abolition of slavery in the British Empire had been secured. It was as if his mission on earth had finally been accomplished and he was now allowed to go home.

William Wilberforce was buried on 3 August in Westminster Abbey next to his dear friend, William Pitt the Younger.

John Wilkes
(1725-1797)

John Wilkes was the son of a successful malt distiller. He was educated first at a private academy in Hertford and then tutored privately at home. At the age of 22 he married Mary Meade, the heiress of the manor of Aylesbury who brought with her as a dowry a fortune and an enviable status among the local gentry.

Clearly, as a young man, Wilkes was vastly privileged. He was a member of the Hell-fire Club (which was a popular meeting place for men who enjoyed debauchery and satanism) and in order to win election to the House of Commons in 1757 he happily bribed the voters.

Once he became an MP his life seemed to change.

He started to publish a journal called *The North Briton* and in it he published a scathing attack on the Government, criticising it for signing the Treaty of Paris.

The Treaty of Paris was a result of the Seven Years' War which was, in reality, two separate wars: the continuing struggle between England and France for control in India and North America and a war in Europe between Austria and Prussia. The two wars got mixed up when England allied itself with Prussia and the French supported the Austrians. The result was that the countries involved spread themselves very thin and fighting took place all over the world. In the end, England and Prussia won the war in 1762.

The Treaty of Paris, signed in 1763, gave the English control of French Canada, most of the territory west of the Mississippi river and most of the French West Indies. England also became the dominant power in India.

When John Wilkes, now an MP, criticised the 1763 peace treaty the Government had him arrested. Wilkes felt that the very Scottish head of the Government, John Stuart, the 3rd Earl of Bute, had betrayed England in agreeing to make over-generous peace terms with France. Wilkes was expelled from Parliament and prosecuted for seditious libel for attacking George III's speech endorsing the Paris Peace Treaty. (Even the newspaper Wilkes had started, *The North Briton*, was a satirical swipe at Bute's own newspaper called *The Brito*n. (The 'North' in Wilkes' tide referring to Scotland)).

Taken to court, Wilkes was found not guilty and freed. He then sued those who had arrested him for trespass. But he was forced to resign but, dissatisfied with the court findings the Government went after Wilkes again. This time he was sued for obscene libel as well as seditious libel and officially declared an 'outlaw' in January 1764.

P.G.Wodehouse
(1881-1975)

Very few authors have created great characters who require no introduction. William Shakespeare gave us Macbeth and Hamlet, Shylock and Falstaff. Charles Dickens created David Copperfield, Mr Pickwick, Uriah Heep and Oliver Twist. P.G.Wodehouse gave the world Bertie Wooster, Jeeves the valet, Lord Emsworth, Aunt Agatha, Ukridge, Mr Mulliner and Psmith. Wodehouse is almost certainly the only author in the history of literature to have created a legendary character (the Empress of Blandings) who happens to be a pig.

P. G. Wodehouse was one of the most extraordinary geniuses of the 20th century; few men or women have given, and continue to give, more undiluted joy to readers around the world and no one has written more genuinely funny books, in any language. No poet ever wrote more delightful English sentences. Wodehouse wrote intricate, delicately woven plots around which the words danced exuberantly.

Pelham Grenville Wodehouse (known as Plum) wrote over a hundred books (including eleven novels and 35 short stories about his most famous creations, Jeeves and Bertie Wooster) and worked as a lyricist and librettist with Cole Porter, lvor Novello, Irving Berlin and Jerome Kern on many successful Broadway shows. (Wodehouse's contribution to the theatre, and in particular, the musical, is barely remembered but he was regarded by Ira Gershwin, Oscar Hammerstein II, Cole Porter and Richard Rogers as their mentor and a most significant figure in the development of the American musical. Alan Jay Lerner wrote that Wodehouse was the pathfinder for Larry Hart, Cole Porter, Ira Gershwin and everyone who followed.)

In the way that many English names are pronounced in a curious way (Cholmondeley is pronounced Chumley, Fotheringay is pronounced Fungy and Featherstonehaugh is pronounced Fanshawe) so Wodehouse is pronounced Woodhouse. The soubriquet 'Plum' comes from the way the young Wodehouse tried, without great success, to pronounce his first Christian name.

In many ways the young Wodehouse resembled his character Bertie Wooster. He was constantly cheerful, despite numerous setbacks, and even stayed bright and funny when interned by the Nazis during the Second World War. It was to prove his undoing.

Wodehouse and his wife had stayed at their home in Le Touquet as the Germans swept through northern France. They either did not realise that they were in danger or simply didn't care. Things started to go wrong when their pet parrot, clearly a bird with good manners, attacked a German officer. The Wodehouses were arrested and taken to Berlin. When the Germans discovered the identity of their captive they put him into a hotel in Berlin and allowed (or encouraged) him to make a series of five rather bright and breezy broadcasts about life in captivity. Wodehouse saw nothing at all wrong with this, and his broadcasts were, as he intended them to be, comforting and encouraging to his English speaking audience. He was simply incapable of thinking anything bad about anyone for more than about ten seconds or so and it had never occurred to him that critics might not see the funny side of his broadcasts.

In England, people in high places took exception to his broadcasting from Berlin, mistakenly and rather stupidly assuming that this meant that he was a Nazi supporter. More sensible observers, including many of the nation's most eminent authors, realised that there was nothing whatsoever offensive in the broadcasts. George Orwell, confronting critics of Wodehouse, pointed out that nothing in the humorist's work related to life beyond about 1911. Orwell, who was a great fan of Wodehouse, and had been since the age of eight, pointed out that Bertie Wooster et al belonged to Edwardian England and that Wodehouse had no knowledge or understanding of modern life. (George Orwell and P.G.Wodehouse have more in common than might at first appear likely. George Orwell's father was an English upper middle class civil servant who served the British Raj in Bengal. Wodehouse's father was an English upper middle class judge who served the British Raj in Hong Kong. Orwell made his name by dramatising the problems (past, present and future) of the English working class. Wodehouse became famous by celebrating the absurdities and eccentricities of the English upper class. Sadly, Orwell was born in India and is, therefore, not eligible for inclusion in my 100 – despite the fact that few people in history were more 'English' or prouder of their country.)

The world which Wodehouse created is unique. It seems real enough, and some of the characters are doubtless based, in some way, on people Wodehouse had met. But although everything in it is consistent and convincing, it is a parallel universe, positioned at another angle to reality. In Wodehouse country it is always spring, the weather is always sunny and houses and clubs are full of young men in spats. Characters who, whether ennobled or not, went by names such as Catsmeat Potter-Pirbright, Dogface Rainsby, Bingo Little, Oofy Prosser, Gussie Fink-Nottle, Pongo Twistleton-Twistleton and Barmy Fotheringay-Phipps spent their lives having snifters at the Drones Club and stealing policemen's helmets. 'Have you thought about employment?' a prospective mother-in-law asks Bertie. 'A friend of mine once had a job,' replies Bertie, reminiscing ruefully about the disaster it had been. His own ambitions rise no higher than the job of secretary of the wine committee at the Drones Club. ‘Do you always come down at this hour?’ a hostess asks, fiddling with her watch, as Bertie tucks into breakfast at nine thirty. ‘Oh good heavens no,’ answers our young hero. ‘Usually much later than this.’ Wodehouse’s characters live in an England that never existed, and never could, in a season of everlasting merriment. It is difficult to think of fictional characters created in the 20th century who continue to give so much sheer, uncomplicated delight to so many.

Jeeves, the butler who shimmers, floats, filters or oozes into rooms, rather than merely entering in the way that mortals do, understands all. He knows everything (his bedtime reading includes Spinoza and Nietzsche) and can make a pick-me-up capable of eradicating the worst of hangovers. He is discretion itself and, at appropriate times, can create the illusion that he isn’t there at all. Bertie Wooster, on the other hand, is defined by two basic principles: never let down a chum (or even an aunt), and never scorn a woman’s love, however misguided, misplaced or unwelcome it might be. It is these basic, tightly-held, principles which lead Bertie into so many scrapes and result in him almost (but never quite) tying the knot with so many entirely unsuitable females.

It is Wodehouse’s writing style which makes his books what they are. Generations of authors have regarded him as their idol. Evelyn Waugh described him, simply, as ‘the Master’. His fans include Dorothy Parker, John Updike, Ludgwig Wittgenstein and John le Carre. His plots are far more complex than they seem and Wodehouse created memorable characters in a way that no one before or since has managed. The girls are either sweetly dotty (describing the stars in the sky as ‘God’s little daisy chain’) or as tough as old boots, but not as good looking. Aunts are always overbearing and demanding (as in Aunt Agatha) though sometimes possessing a slightly softer side (as in Aunt Dahlia). Women play a crucial part in his stories but they are often distant or frightening – probably because as a child Wodehouse never managed to develop a close relationship with any woman. He hardly ever saw his mother.

Older men, invariably peers and magistrates who breed pigs or collect antique silver cow creamers, are blind to Bertie Wooster’s virtues. They see only a flannelled, useless and irritating fool. Pals are as idle and as half-witted as Bertie himself. When the Drones Club forms a banjo group to perform summer concerts, one of the members, playing faster than the others and therefore coming to the end of a tune before anyone else, cries out with delight that he has won by finishing first.

But it is the use of words, the mastery of the metaphor and the simile, which made Wodehouse the greatest wordsmith of the 20th century.

If you open any Wodehouse book at any page you will instantly find a stream of brilliant and original word pictures leaping at you from the page. ‘Uncle Tom always looked like a pterodactyl with a secret sorrow’. An unsuitably coloured tie is described by Jeeves as ‘rather sudden’. The writing, carefully crafted, meticulously reworked by a genius with a craftsman’s patience, always appears utterly effortless.

Wodehouse himself, a gentle man and a lover of all animals, particularly cats and dogs, and a mad-keen cricketer (he was a good club batsman and medium pace bowler and co-founder of the Hollywood Cricket Club) was always cheerful and constantly naive; he genuinely seemed to live in an imaginary world of his own. Like many writers he lived (and loved) a rather boring, stable, ritualistic life, spreading his wings in his plots and the imaginary world he had created. He repeatedly showed himself to be unsuited to any sort of post-Edwardian world.

Early in his life he bought a Darracq motorcar with his earnings. He paid £450 for it (a huge sum at the time) and drove it into a hedge after taking a single lesson. He never drove it again and, for the rest of his life, preferred to be driven.

Wodehouse received a knighthood just before he died. The much-deserved award was long delayed. First, it was those five talks that prevented him being recognised. Then it was the Establishment. When Wodehouse was put forward for a knighthood in 1967, the then British Ambassador to the United States of America (a long forgotten stuffed shirt – and how sad for a professional diplomat to be remembered only for such ungallant and undiplomatic behaviour) objected that to give Wodehouse a gong ‘would give currency to a Bertie Wooster image of the British character which we are doing our best to eradicate’. The Ambassador, who is now remembered largely for this absurd action, had totally missed the point and had failed to realise that Wodehouse’s characters, although essentially English, are comic characters of genius, and have endeared themselves, their author and their home country, to much of the world. P.G.Wodehouse, one of the world’s most successful authors, belatedly received his much-deserved knighthood just before he died, at the age of93. He had very little time left to enjoy it.

The young Wodehouse was born in Guildford where his mother was staying with her sister (Wodehouse’s aunt to be). If Mrs Wodehouse had not gone into labour prematurely her son would have undoubtedly been born in Hong Kong and not eligible for this book. It is disturbing to think that ‘Plum’ might not have been born an Englishman.

Today, reference to his work, and his characters, appear daily throughout the world. For example, the Oxford English Dictionary contains more than 1,600 Wodehouse quotations.

Wodehouse described his own life as ‘a breeze from start to finish’.

William Wordsworth
(1770-1850)

He may be despised by some modern poets (the sort who don't believe in rhyme) but William Wordsworth is still one of the world's most popular poets. Born in Cockermouth, in Cumberland, the son of a lawyer, he was the leader of the English Romantic poets of the 19th century (the other Romantic poets included his great friend Samuel Coleridge, who was born at Ottery St Mary in Devon, and Percy Bysshe Shelley who was born near Horsham in Sussex).

Wordsworth was no fan of the formal and rather artificial styles preferred by the 18th century poets and believed that true poetry should be simple and sincere. He had a romantic view of love and nature and spent much of his life among the lakes and hills of the English Lake District where he had been born and brought up.

Orphaned at the age of 13 he was brought up by two uncles, who paid for an education at a good school and at Cambridge University. His first books of poetry, *Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches* were inspired by a walking tour of France and Switzerland which he took in his early twenties. He was much inspired by France, which he visited in the early years of the Revolution. He stayed for a little over a year in France and had an affair with Annette Vallon who gave him an illegitimate daughter, Ann Caroline.

Wordsworth had to leave France when war was declared with England in 1793. His early poetry showed elements of anarchy and a passion for social justice (doubtless obtained from his years in revolutionary France) but he lost these passions as the years went by. On his return to England, Wordsworth set up house with his sister, first in Dorset and then in Alfoxden in Somerset.

In 1795, Wordsworth had inherited a legacy of £900 which gave him financial independence and enabled him to devote his life to literature. In the same year he met Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the author of the *Ancient Mariner*, who was living nearby in Nether Stowey, and they wrote *Lyrical Ballads* together in 1798, though most of the work in the book was Wordsworth's.

His talent was an imagination that could give real meaning to everyday country scenes and he used ordinary language (rather than the flowery, high blown stylised language preferred by poets of the 18th century) to express his feelings about events and scenes he remembered. His poems include the long autobiographical poem called *The Prelude*, which was published after his death in 1850, and the sonnet *Composed upon Westminster Bridge*. The lines for which he is most famous:

'I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host of golden daffodils'

appear in a poem called *The Daffodils* which he wrote in 1804 and which appeared in *Poems in Two Volume*s in 1807. The poem was not well received. Lord Byron wrote: 'Mr Wordsworth ceases to please...clothing (his ideas) in language not simple but puerile.'

After the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth, his sister and Coleridge spent a year in Germany. And then in 1802, William Wordsworth married Mary Hutchinson. The couple, accompanied by Dorothy, moved to Grasmere in the Lake District where they shared a home together. Wordsworth's sister Dorothy, who had a mental breakdown, kept a now famous diary detailing their life together and wrote a journal describing a tour of Scotland which they made in 1803. After living for a while in Allan Bank, the trio finally moved to Rydal Mount which remained their home for many years.

Wordsworth became Poet Laureate in 1843 and died, at the age of 80, in 1850. His later work is usually regarded as disappointing and as not reflecting his true genius, and it took some time for his early work to receive critical approval. But today William Wordsworth is regarded as having, pretty much single-handedly, created a muchloved style of poetry.

He was, according to contemporary accounts, rather conscious of his genius and rather stiff in manner and manners. He didn't have much of a sense of humour and was rather self-centred. He never really lost himself in his poetry and there is none of the uninhibited passion seen in the work of men such as Lord Byron. But Wordsworth's sincerity and simple nature, and his indifference to wealth and status, were the foundation of his great writing.

Much of his poetry was composed in the open air. He interpreted nature with a religious view and in a letter to Lady Beaumont explained that he believed that his poems had a real role 'to console the afflicted; to add sunshine to daylight, by making the happy happier, to teach the young and the gracious of every age to see, to think, and feel, and therefore to become more actively and securely virtuous: this is their office.'

The first part of his life was that of a revolutionary manque. But for the greater part of his life he simply devoted himself to nature and to poetry and became a staunch conservative, protesting against the Kendal and Windermere Railway and opposing the Reform Bill of 1832.

John Wycliffe
(1329-1384)

Today, he is more than half-forgotten but John Wycliffe played a vital role in developing English democracy. It was John Wycliffe who, when honest working men were being stomped on by the 14th century's version of today's unelected commissioners and quangocrats, started the fight against the material prosperity of the church.

Born in Yorkshire and educated at Oxford University, Wycliffe was master of Balliol College by 1360 when he was just 31 years old. But he didn't settle, resigning soon afterwards and taking on a variety of jobs, including that of an official, Government-employed pamphleteer. He was feeling increasingly unhappy about the way the world was being arranged. By the middle of the 14th century, monasteries had absorbed about a third of the land in England and the power of the church was still growing. In 1374, while rector of Lutterworth, Wycliffe travelled to Bruges to discuss ecclesiastical abuses with the Pope's ambassadors.

Nothing came of this but Wycliffe became increasingly outspoken in his attacks on the church and he won considerable support both from noblemen and from ordinary citizens. In 1376, he wrote *De Dominio Divino* in which he argued that all authority is founded in grace and that rulers (whether they are secular or ecclesiastical) who are wicked, or who abuse their power, forfeit their right to rule. He claimed that the citizens of England had a right to control the clergy – rather than the other way round.

Wycliffe's writing did not go down well with the bishops who, in 1377, summoned him before the archbishop in St Paul's, London. The meeting (intended as a trial) didn't go well and ended with a quarrel and brawl between the bishop of London and John of Gaunt (the Duke of Lancaster) who was one of Wycliffe's most powerful supporters.

The result was that Pope Gregory XI sent angry papal edicts (known as 'bulls') to the King, the university of Oxford and the bishops demanding that Wycliffe be put in prison. It took a while but eventually the English establishment succumbed to pressure from Rome and at Lambeth in 1378 proceedings were started against Wycliffe.

It was a mistake.

Wycliffe now attacked the church's constitution and declared that it would be better for the people if the Pope and the bishops were got rid o£ He also questioned the right of priests to force confessions from people and to offer or deny absolution.

Up until now Wycliffe had written his attacks on the church in Latin, the language of the church and of intellectuals, but in a brilliant move he switched and started to produce leaflets and booklets written in English so that he could reach far more people. He also believed that everyone should be allowed to read The Bible and so he translated it from Latin into English. This was condemned as heretical. Not until the 16th century would an English version of The Bible be available for ordinary people to read.

Wycliffe then also organised a group of itinerant preachers (whom he described as his 'poor priests') who wandered around the country explaining his teachings. Wycliffe's priests, who wore coarse brown wool clothes and were called Lollards, spread the idea that 'all men are equal' and that posh clergymen weren't entitled to live extravagantly while ordinary folk struggled to make ends meet. Wycliffe's most important principle was that each man must hold his religion within himself. He argued that the church's established practices were mechanistic and unthinking.

In 1380, Wycliffe attacked the central dogma of transubstantiation and in 1382 Archbishop Courtenay responded by condemning Wycliffe and having his followers arrested.

Wycliffe, however, was not immediately arrested (probably because he was so popular) and he took advantage of his freedom to write a vast number of powerful and uncompromising tracts attacking the institution of the church. Although the church attempted to suppress his work, Wycliffe was now unstoppable and it was his work which eventually led to the Reformation.

Wycliffe was also a prime mover in the Peasant's Revolt. English rebels were angry that the King and those around him had grown rich at their expense. People complained, angrily, that public money was being wasted. Taxes were constantly being raised to pay for the court's extravagances. Services were deteriorating. *The Magna Carta*, though it had given rights to the people, and was a well-intentioned document, wasn't enough.

Those involved in the Peasants' Revolt of the 14th century were often illiterate and incapable of putting their feelings into words, but they were, nevertheless, conscious that they and their class were being treated unfairly.

The English rebels formed the Commons in Parliament, an assembly of outraged citizens which had no formal authority but which met simply to discuss taxes and other issues. The rebels allowed none of the King's counsellors into their Parliament. They elected a speaker and a Council of State. (There has been an office of Speaker at the House of Commons since 1376.)

This was the first stirring of English democracy. But the members of this early Parliament, although determined and searching for recognition, were not truly representative of the people and they had neither real power nor status. They sat for 74 days but when they finally dispersed and went home they left behind them no permanent organisation, no expectation of reassembling and no laws or statutes. Their views and wishes were quickly overturned by the expensively clad upper classes who had moats to clean and duck houses to pay for.

The fact that their efforts had been pretty much in vain incensed the Lollards. One of Wycliffe's preachers, called John Ball, who was also known as the 'crazy priest of Kent', (even then people who opposed the establishment were dismissed as lunatics) became enormously popular. He had three quarters of all the working men of eastern, middle and southern England behind him. Despite being locked up three times he kept preaching.

Wycliffe and Ball found support among tradesmen, craftsmen and artisans – the middle classes. New taxes lit the flames of the new revolution and led to a march on London. The leaders of the march included Wat Tyler.

The mob got angry and the next day John Ball and another rebel called Jack Straw were caught and beheaded. Subsequently over 1,500 rebels were hung or beheaded. And so, technically the Peasants' Revolt was a failure. (It's known as the Peasants' Revolt but in those days the peasants were the equivalent of today's middle classes.)

However, within the next few decades everything the peasants had demanded was given.

Wycliffe's writing and teaching had changed England. He had given freedom and power to the people and he had taken it from the King and the church.

The church didn't forgive Wycliffe.

Thirty years after his death the Council of Constance ordered that Wycliffe's bones be dug up, burned and thrown into the river. This absurd and vengeful sentence was carried out in 1428.

Extra 1: The English Chart

My Top 100 Englishmen and Englishwomen In Order Of Precedence

It was my original intention to publish the book of my chosen 100 in order of precedence. But when I found that the order of my list was changing several times a day I realised that it would be much better, and fairer all round, to publish the main list alphabetically and, purely for fun, to include my 100 in order of precedence at the back of the book. Here it is. When I chose the 100 Englishmen and Englishwomen for this book I took great care to pick the 100 who had done most for England and the world. But the list that follows is very personal. This is my view of the value of the individual contributions made by the 100 people on my list.

1. Isaac Newton
2. Charles Darwin
3. Charles Dickens
4. Oliver Cromwell
5. William Shakespeare
6. Thomas Malthus
7. Winston Churchill
8. Queen Elizabeth I
9. Francis Bacon
10. Michael Faraday
11. Alfred the Great
12. Charles Babbage
13. Joseph Lister
14. Queen Victoria
15. Robert Hooke
16. William Cobbett
17. James Cook
18. Francis Drake
19. Walter Ralegh
20. Stephen Langton
21. Humphrey Davy
22. William Petty
23. George Stephenson
24. John Snow
25. John Stuart Mill
26. William Tyndale
27. William Wilberforce
28. John Wycliffe
29. Geoffrey Chaucer
30. John Lilburn
31. Boudicca (Boadicea)
32. Daniel Defoe
33. Elizabeth Fry
34. Thomas Hobbes
35. William Harvey
36. Eadweard Muybridge
37. Richard Trevithick
38. Charles Wheatstone
39. Jethro Tull
40. Robert Peel
41. Thomas Moore
42. Edward Jenner

43. Samuel Johnson
44. Richard Cobden
45. John Dalton
46. Abraham Derby
47. Edmund Halley
48. Rowland Hill
49. Robert Cawdrey
50. Isambard Kingdom Brunel
51. John Locke
52. William Caxton
53. Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll)
54. Christopher Wren
55. Joseph Mallord William Turner
56. Samuel Pepys
57. Horatio Nelson
58. John Wilkes
59. Thomas Newcome
60. Jeremy Bentham
61. Edwin Chadwick
62. W. G. Grace
63. John Stuart Mill
64. William Byrd
65. William Henry Fox Talbot
66. Aphra Behn
67. Richard Arkwright
68. Thomas Paine
69. Henry Maudslay
70. John Milton
71. William Morris
72. Francis Place
73. Wat Tyler
74. Lord Byron
75. George Cayley
76. John Harrison
77. Robert Walpole
78. Peter Roget
79. Joseph Swan
80. Edith Cavell
81. William Brockeden
82. William Blake
83. Joseph Bramah
84. P.G. Wodehouse
85. Richard Burton
86. Frank Whittle
87. Edmund Spenser
88. William Hogarth
89. Thomas Cook
90. John Constable
91. Charles Chaplin
92. John Ruskin
93. Edward Elgar
94. John Donne
95. William Wordsworth
96. John Keats
97. Cecil Rhodes
98. Mrs Beeton

99. John Bunyan
100. Robert Baden-Powell

Extra 2: The Author

Vernon Coleman was an angry young man for as long as it was decently possible. He then turned into an angry middle-aged man. And now, with no effort whatsoever, he has matured into being an angry old man. He is, he confesses, just as angry as he ever was. Indeed, he may be even angrier because, he says, the more he learns about life the more things he finds to be angry about.

Cruelty, prejudice and injustice are the three things most likely to arouse his well-developed sense of ire but he admits that, at a pinch, inefficiency, incompetence and greed will do almost as well. He does not cope well with bossy people, particularly when they are dressed in uniform and attempting to confiscate his Swiss Army penknife. 'Being told I can't do something has always seemed to me sufficient reason to do it,' he says. 'And being told that I must do something has always seemed to me a very good reason not to do it.'

The author has an innate dislike of taking orders, a pathological contempt for pomposity, hypocrisy and the sort of unthinking political correctness which attracts support from Guardian-reading pseudo-intellectuals. He also has a passionate loathing for those in authority who do not understand that unless their authority is tempered with compassion and a sense of responsibility the end result must always be an extremely unpleasant brand of totalitarianism. He believes that multi-culturalism on a global scale is perfectly appropriate but that individual countries are best left to be individual. He regards the European Union as the most fascist organisation ever invented and looks forward to its early demise.

Vernon Coleman has written for *The Guardian* (he was a teenager at the time and knew no better), *Daily Telegraph, Sunday Telegraph, Observer, Sunday Times, Daily Mail, Mail on Sunday, Daily Express, Sunday Express, Daily Star, The Sun, News of the World, Daily Mirror, Sunday Mirror, The People, Woman, Woman's Own, Spectator, Punch, The Lady* and hundreds of other leading publications in Britain and around the world. His books have been published by Thames and Hudson, Sidgwick and Jackson, Hamlyn, Macmillan, Robert Hale, Pan, Penguin, Corgi, Arrow and several dozen other publishers in the UK and reproduced by scores of discerning publishers around the world. His novel *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War* was made into a film and a number of his other books have been turned into radio or television programmes. Today he publishes his books himself as this allows him to avoid contact with marketing men in silk suits and 19-year-old editorial directors called Fiona. In an earlier life he was the breakfast television doctor and in the now long-gone days when producers and editors were less wary of annoying the establishment he was a regular broadcaster on radio and television.

He has never had a proper job (in the sense of working for someone else in regular, paid employment, with a cheque or pay packet at the end of the week or month) but he has had freelance and temporary employment in many forms. He has, for example, had paid employment as: magician's assistant, postman, fish delivery van driver, production line worker, chemical laboratory assistant, author, publisher, draughtsman, meals on wheels driver, feature writer, drama critic, book reviewer, columnist, surgeon, police surgeon, industrial medical officer, social worker, night club operator, property developer, magazine editor, general practitioner, private doctor, television presenter, radio presenter, agony aunt, university lecturer, casualty doctor and care home assistant.

Today, he likes books, films, cafes and writing. He writes, reads and collects books and has a larger library than most towns. A list of his favourite authors would require another book. He has never been much of an athlete, though he once won a certificate for swimming a width of the public baths in Walsall (which was, at the time, in Staffordshire but has now, apparently, been moved elsewhere). He no longer cherishes hopes of being called upon to play cricket for England and is resigned to the fact that he will now never drive a Formula 1 racing car in anger.

He doesn't like yappy dogs, big snarly dogs with saliva dripping from their fangs or people who think that wearing a uniform automatically gives them status and rights. He likes trains, dislikes planes and used to like cars until some idiot invented speed cameras, bus lanes and car parks where the spaces are so narrow that only the slimmest, and tiniest of vehicles will fit in.

He is fond of cats, pens and notebooks and used to like watching cricket until the authorities sold out and allowed people to paint slogans on the grass. His interests and hobbies include animals, books, photography, drawing, chess, backgammon, cinema, philately, billiards, sitting in cafes and on benches and collecting Napoleana. He likes log fires and bonfires, motor racing and music by Mahler and dislikes politicians, bureaucrats and cauliflower cheese. He likes videos but loathes DVDs. His favourite 11 people in history include (in no particular order): Daniel Defoe, Napoleon Bonaparte, W. G. Grace, William Cobbett, Thomas Paine, John Lilburne, Aphra Behn, P.G.Wodehouse, Jerome K. Jerome, Francis Drake and Walter Ralegh all of whom had more than it takes and most of whom were

English. (Napoleon would doubtless have been English if he'd had the chance.) What an unbeatable team they would have made. Grace and Bonaparte opening the batting and Drake and Ralegh opening the bowling. Gilles Villeneuve would be his 12th man.

Vernon Coleman lives in the village of Bilbury in Devon and enjoys malt whisky, toasted muffins and old films. He is devoted to Donna Antoinette who is the kindest, sweetest, most sensitive woman a man could hope to meet and who, as an undeserved but welcome bonus, makes the very best roast parsnips on the planet. He says that gourmands and gourmets would come from far and wide if they knew what they were missing but admits that since he and Thumper Robinson took down the road signs (in order to discourage American tourists travelling on coaches) Bilbury has become exceedingly difficult to find.

Vernon Coleman is the author of over 100 books. For a list of books currently available please see his author page on Amazon or visit http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

The Village Cricket Tour

Vernon Coleman

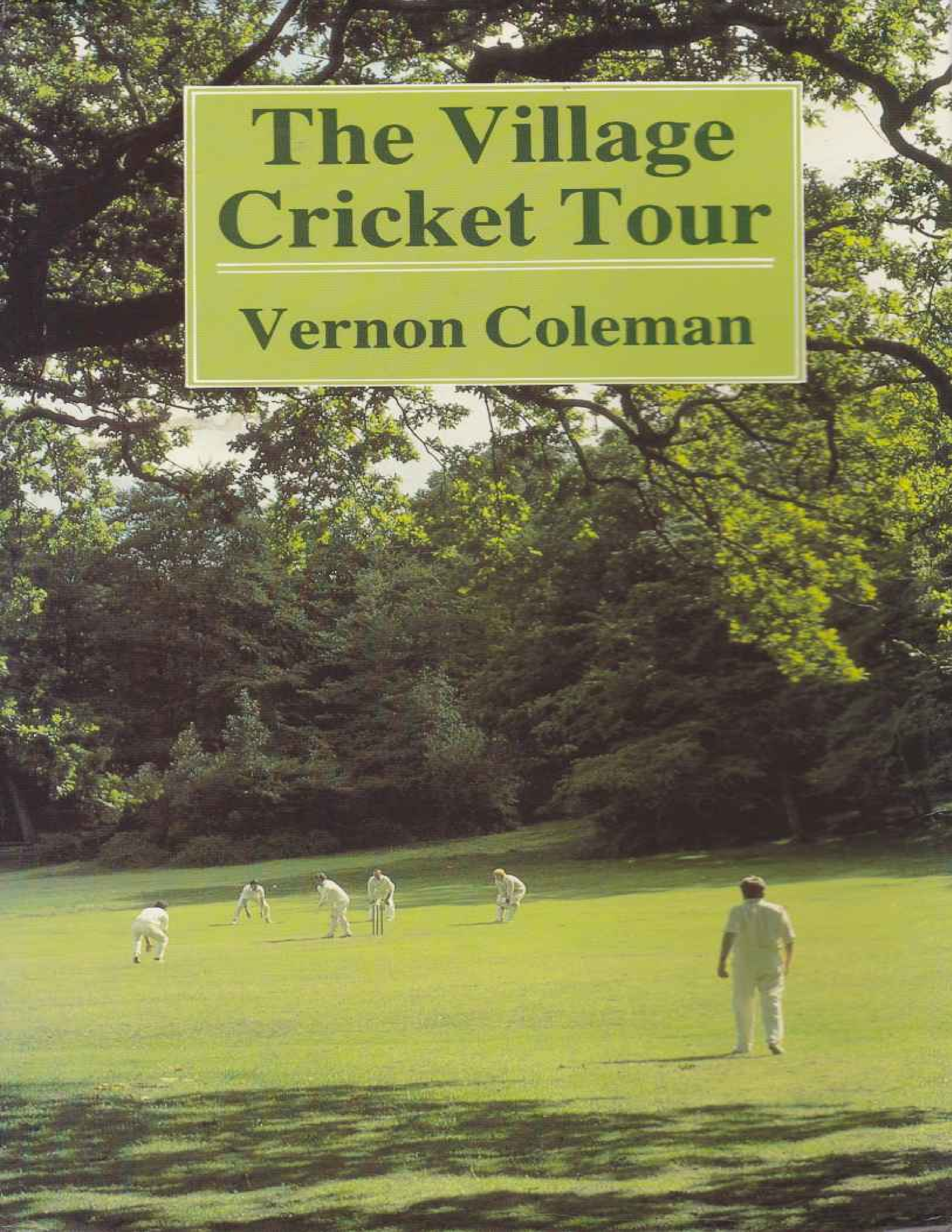

THE VILLAGE CRICKET TOUR

Vernon Coleman

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Note: All characters, organisations and businesses in this book are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons (living or dead), organisations or businesses is purely coincidental.

Bestselling author Vernon Coleman has written over 100 books which have been translated into 24 languages and have sold over 2 million copies in the UK alone. His novel *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War* was turned into an award winning movie. For a list of available books please see either the Vernon Coleman author page on Amazon or www.vernoncoleman.com

The Touring Party (in order of appearance)

1. The author – middle order batsman and medium pace bowler. More adept with the pen than with either bat or ball.
2. Oily – charming but unpredictable. Middle order batsman and enthusiastic medium pace bowler with a penchant for fast cars and fast women.
3. Arthur – wicket keeper whose other hobby is drinking.
4. Simon – 17 year old leg spinner who has never been away from home before.
5. Wodger – our captain. Reliable school teacher who enjoys being in charge. Opening batsman and occasional bowler of indeterminate style.
6. Sergeant Tate – pompous sergeant and opening batsman.
7. June – Sergeant Tate's wife. Looks like a doll but can look after herself.
8. Norman – cautious indecisive, inoffensive accountant who bats high in the order since he is our club treasurer.
9. Jerry – aggressive builder who usually bats at number three and bowls predictable fast medium bouncers.
10. Kurt – clergyman and fast bowler.
11. Brian – insurance salesman and slow bowler who doesn't spin the ball but doesn't bowl fast enough to be classified as a medium pace bowler.
12. Sharon – buxom barmaid who wears spike heels, short skirts and tight jumpers.

CHAPTER ONE

I needed just one run for my century and we needed another five runs to beat the Australians.

Everyone said it had been a thrilling Test Match to watch but it had been an exhausting match to play in. For five days Lords had been as crowded as I've ever seen it and the outcome of the match had never been certain. At the end of the first day the advantage had been with the Australians – now it looked as though we could win.

I'd been batting for four hours and I'd had to work hard for every run I'd scored. The Australian bowlers hadn't given away anything; they'd kept the ball well pitched up and on line.

Around the ground the tension was building up. Every spectator knew that the fate of the match now rested on my shoulders. The batsman at the other end was our number eleven. He'd been playing for England for two seasons and still hadn't scored a run. It was, to be honest, the sort of situation I loved. I felt surprisingly calm and cool.

The much feared Australian fast bowler began his run up. I stayed perfectly still and the crowd quietened as he approached the wicket. I had only a fraction of a second to decide on a shot but knew automatically what I was going to do. I took two paces down the wicket and swung my bat. The ball shot straight back in the direction from which it had come; over the bowler's head and high over the boundary. It landed on the pavilion balcony.

I stood for a second, happy and exhausted, and then felt someone urgently prodding my arm to attract my attention.

'Wake up!' cried Oily.

Reluctantly, I did as I was ordered. Slowly I returned to reality.

'Where am I?' I asked, sleepily. I looked across to my right at the driver of the car, the man who had woken me by punching my arm. I tried to rub the soreness away.

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion, like a film played at one tenth its normal speed. Oily's arms were straight and he was grimacing. He was leaning back so that he could put more pressure on the brake pedal.

I turned my head frontwards again just in time to see our bonnet crumple as it smashed noisily into the back of a slow moving lorry. A lot of things happened all at once. I could hear the glass in the headlights breaking and I could see steam escaping from the radiator. I could see the bonnet crumple upwards, as though it was made of silver foil, and I felt my seat belt tighten as my body thrust forwards against it. I felt a pain in my left knee as it crashed into the padded fascia at the front of the car.

'I wanted you to see this happen!' shouted Oily. 'I might need you as a witness.'

The accident had no effect at all on the speed of the lorry in front of us but we slowed down dramatically. For a hundred yards or so the remains of our bonnet remained firmly attached to its tailgate and then, slowly a gap appeared as the lorry gradually pulled away from us.

'Did you see that moron?' asked Oily, shaking his head in disbelief. His hands were gripping the steering wheel so tightly that his knuckles were white.

'What moron?'

'In the middle lane,' Oily replied. 'I tried to pull out to overtake but he kept me boxed in!'

A great cloud of steam escaped from the bonnet and completely obliterated our view of the road ahead. I heard a tinny but expensive sound as a piece of metal fell from the front of the car and then felt two distinct bumps as we drove over it. Almost immediately afterwards the car swerved to the left as the front nearside tyre punctured.

'What were you doing in the inside lane?' I asked him. 'You drive too fast to be in the inside lane.'

'It's safer,' said Oily without embarrassment. 'The police always watch the outside lane. I just hop round the lorries.'

The car slowed and the cloud of steam in front of us gradually cleared. We bumped, squeaked and lurched to a halt on the hard shoulder.

It wasn't a good start.

We were on the first day of a two week cricket tour of the West Country. Our club captain, Roger Holcroft (known to everyone as 'Wodger' for reasons which become apparent the moment he opens his mouth and exhibits his total inability to roll an 'r') had arranged nine matches for our team, The Midland Parks Peripatetics (so named because we had no ground of our own but had to play our matches wherever we could find an away fixture).

For a while we'd toyed with the idea of hiring a coach. But when we'd found out how much it was going to cost we'd abandoned the idea and decided instead to travel in three cars; Sergeant Tate's seven year old Vauxhall, Jerry Dixon's eleven year old Volvo estate and Oily Wragge's virtually brand new Jaguar.

You might have thought that there would have been keen competition to travel in Oily Wragge's Jaguar with its eight speaker stereo system, full climate control air conditioning and leather upholstery. But you'd have been wrong. Everyone admired the car but no one wanted to travel in it if he was driving. Oily's attitude towards motor cars has always been distinctly Gallic. Bumps and dents don't worry him at all. His contempt for the highway code is matched only by his Toad like disrespect for the police and other road-users.

I'd known Oily Wragge for many years. We'd gone to school together, discovered alcohol, girls and pain together and were now drifting inexorably into middle age together. Once tall and elegant but now developing just the slightest hint of a paunch Oily was described by his friends as gregarious, jolly, charming and outgoing. Those who disliked him complained that he was noisy, unpredictable and unreliable. The truth was that he was all these things.

In his late teens Oily had served a brief and unstructured apprenticeship in his father's meat packing factory. All my relatives insisted that Oily would pay for his indolence and assured me that I would discover that hard work would earn me far greater rewards. This, of course, was nonsense. By the time he was thirty Oily had inherited a large and profitable business about which he knew next to nothing. In a hard week he worked five or six hours, if sitting in an office signing papers can be described as work. The business was run for him by a team of efficient and grossly underpaid managers who had been trained and installed by his father.

Stories about Oily abound but I can probably best describe his character by describing the way he beats traffic queues.

When he finds himself becoming part of a slow moving or stationary row of traffic Oily always follows the same well rehearsed and invariably effective procedure. He turns on his headlights, puts a finger on his horn and drives straight down the middle of the road. Then, when he gets to the cause of the obstruction, he leaps out of his car and rushes up to anyone who seems to be in charge.

'Do you need a doctor?' he cries; cool, sharp urgency colouring his voice.

If the hold up has been caused by a set of faulty traffic lights, a team of road menders or an unusually heavy flow of traffic Oily will smile with relief and get back into his car. Workmen always consider him public spirited and other motorists always obediently and respectfully let him in at the head of the queue. Since his car is by now blocking the road they have little choice.

If, on the other hand, the hold up has been caused by an accident and those in attendance claim that they do indeed need the services of a doctor Oily will leap back into his car, shout: 'I'll get one!' and use his car telephone to ring for whatever public services seem appropriate.

When Oily first mastered this ploy car telephones were a rarity and his presence at genuine accidents was greeted with enthusiasm. Recently, however, he complained to me that in some parts of England it can be difficult to get within a mile of an accident because every available space will be taken up with motorists using their car telephones to ring for help.

On this occasion, Oily's car telephone proved to be a boon. While wisps of steam still spiralled up from the front of the car he called the RAC and asked for assistance.

I twisted round so that I could look into the back of the car while he gave the emergency services operator details of where we could be found.

There were two passengers in the back: Arthur Young, our 56 year old wicket keeper, and Simon Lloyd, a 17 year old leg spinner who'd never been away from home before and whose mother had spent fifteen minutes making me swear to ensure that no harm befell him and that he returned to her bosom as innocent of vice as he had left it.

Arthur had a broad smile on his face but was unconscious. An empty hip flask lay on his lap and explained both the smile and the lack of interest in our predicament.

Simon was white and still looked terrified. He had never travelled with Oily before and this was almost certainly his first road traffic accident. I smiled and winked at him in the slight hope that this would reassure him but my optimism was unfounded. He opened his mouth to say something and then shut it again without a word escaping.

'It's nothing to worry about,' I whispered. Oily was giving his telephone number.

Simon opened his mouth again. This time a croaking sound escaped.

'Did you get that bastard's number?' Oily asked me.

I turned my head and looked at him. For a moment I didn't know what he meant.

'That bastard in the red Ford,' explained Oily. 'The one who boxed me in.'

'Sorry!' I said.

Oily shrugged, said goodbye to the operator and put the telephone down.

'You all right, kid?' he asked, twisting his rear view mirror so that he could check on Simon. He didn't bother to look at Arthur.

Simon opened his mouth for the third time and was violently sick.

* * *

'These cricket tours can be pretty fraught with danger,' said Oily. 'You never know what's going to happen.'

We were sitting on the motorway embankment watching the traffic stream past. Both nearside doors of the car were open in an attempt to dilute the acrid smell of Simon's second hand lunch. The front of the Jaguar looked distinctly unhappy; the headlights, the radiator, the bumper, the bonnet and both front wings all looked to be beyond repair; the nearside front tyre was flat. Arthur Young was the only occupant of the car. He still hadn't woken up and still had the same innocent smile on his face. Simon was sitting on the embankment a couple of yards away, his head buried in his hands. He was wearing his cricket shirt and trousers - the first clothes that had come to hand when Oily had opened his suitcase. His luncheon soiled clothes had been rolled into a bundle, wrapped in a plastic bag and stuffed into the boot.

'I once had a friend who used to captain a cricket team called The Marauders,' Oily went on. 'All the members of the team drank at the same public house in the middle of Bolton. One summer they decided that they'd go away together on a cricket tour.'

'There was,' said Oily, 'a considerable amount of discussion about just where they should go. After several hours the team was divided into two equal groups. Half of them wanted to go to Corfu and play cricket under the Mediterranean sun. The other half wanted to go to Canada. The members who favoured Corfu argued that the weather in the Mediterranean would be reliable and bright and would make a pleasant change for cricketers brought up on damp pitches, chilly winds and soggy outfields. The group supporting a Canadian tour were being staunchly and unpredictably patriotic. They said the Canadians would appreciate a tour from the Mother Country.'

'So where did they go?' I asked.

'Cornwall,' replied Oily. 'The club was split in two and the captain had the casting vote.'

'Fair enough,' I nodded. Cricket club captains are, as a breed, strong minded and accustomed to using their power.

'I don't know whether it was the fact that they were going to Cornwall or the natural effect of time,' Oily went on, 'but by the time the tour started there were only five people left who were interested in it. Six if you count the captain.'

'As a side it wasn't all that well balanced,' said Oily. 'They had three specialist opening batsmen and three leg spinners.'

'The first match was in Truro on a lovely little ground where the captain's uncle was President. The touring party was supplemented with a fast bowling farm labourer, a wicket keeping tractor driver and two ice cream salesmen, both of whom were enthusiastic leg spinners.'

'Lots of strength and depth in the leg spinning department,' I commented.

'Absolutely,' agreed Oily. 'They completed the team by press ganging a ten year old boy who'd gone out looking for mushrooms.'

'Not surprisingly the visitors lost the match by a fistful of runs but everyone had such a good time that when they left Truro the wicket keeping tractor driver and the two ice cream salesmen went with them – all travelling in the ice cream van.'

'The next match was in Padstow,' Oily continued. 'There the team was supplemented by a taxi driver who'd had a row with his wife and a keen club cricketer from Dartford who was on holiday with his family. The club cricketer was a medium pace bowler and a middle order batsman and the taxi driver was a leg spinner.'

'How much did they lose by?' I asked.

'Can't remember,' replied Oily. 'Quite a lot.' He paused and watched an RAC service van drive straight past us at about sixty miles an hour. By the time we were on our feet, waving our arms in an attempt to attract the driver's attention, he was almost out of sight.

'When they left Padstow,' he said, settling back down on the embankment, 'the taxi driver and the man from Dartford went with them. The man from Dartford had his wife and four miserable children with him. Their next match was in Penzance and a rough spot on the pitch enabled the leg spinners to take a lot of wickets very cheaply. It was apparently such a good match that when The Marauders left for Liskeard four members of the home team left with them. That meant that when they arrived they had four players to spare and were able to lend the home team two leg spinners, an opening bat and an umpire.'

'After that things got slowly out of hand,' said Oily. 'By the time they arrived in Redruth they'd become a convoy and they had enough players to field a first and a second eleven.'

'As far as I know they're all still down there in Redruth,' concluded Oily.

'Eight of the tourists married local girls and even the man from Dartford settled down there. The captain's wife did get a letter at Christmas inviting her to go down and join the team but no one else heard anything from them.'

Oily lay back on the grass and folded his arms across his chest. I was the only one to see the RAC breakdown van speed back up on the other side of the motorway. He slowed a little as he went by and I saw the driver gesticulating to show that he would turn round and be back with us as soon as he could.

Since there seemed little else to do I too lay back on the grass. I closed my eyes and wondered, not for the first time, whether I'd done the right thing in deciding to join the tour.

To be perfectly honest I had never really intended to go on the tour at all.

When the captain had asked about my availability I'd been honoured, of course, but I hadn't taken the invitation too seriously.

When I'd got home that evening I'd mentioned the invitation almost in passing.

'I shan't go, of course,' I said. 'I wouldn't dream of leaving you for a fortnight.'

I'd been disappointed in my wife's attitude.

'Of course you must go!' she insisted, without a moment's hesitation.

Her response came as quite a surprise. I'd been relying on her to provide me with an excellent excuse for not going. If I'm perfectly honest I had, I suppose, envisaged using the tour to gain a considerable number of brownie points all round. I'd rather seen myself as something of a martyr; selflessly abandoning my place on the tour so that I could stay at home and be with her and the children.

'Sorry chaps,' I'd heard myself saying. 'Really miffed at not being able to join you and all that but I can't possibly leave the little woman for that long. She went quite hysterical when I mentioned the idea. Said she wouldn't be able to cope and threatened to throw herself off the roof if I didn't promise on the spot to stay at home.'

That's what I'd imagined myself saying but it didn't go like that at all.

'The exercise will do you good,' she told me.

'It would have been fun,' I murmured. 'But it's much too long to be away from home.'

'Nonsense,' she said. 'I'll take the children away to the seaside. It'll give us a great chance to get in some serious sunbathing.'

'What if there's an emergency?' I heard myself asking.

But I'd been talking to myself. Overcome with grief my wife had rushed off to telephone our travel agent and ask him to send some holiday brochures round.

'Somewhere sunny - Spain, Italy or the South of France,' I heard her say.

As I lay back on the grassy motorway embankment I could almost imagine that I was with them; soaking up the sun on some Mediterranean beach. Only the sound and smell of the endless streams of roaring traffic spoilt the illusion.

Five minutes later the RAC van drew up beside Oily's Jaguar.

* * *

To my surprise the damage wasn't quite as terminal as it had at first appeared.

The RAC man towed us to the nearest Jaguar garage. There, after Oily had filled his grubby hands with crisp bank notes the chief mechanic agreed to push our car to the front of the queue. While Arthur continued to sleep in the back of the car Oily, Simon and I sought temporary refuge in a nearby cafe, where we ordered three bacon sandwiches and three large mugs of tea.

As we munched and slurped out way through our artery clogging feast I couldn't help wondering how the rest of the team was getting on.

* * *

CHAPTER TWO

We'd met at 9 o'clock that morning outside the main gates of the Walsall Arboretum.

Our team captain, Wodger Holcroft had been waiting outside the Arboretum when I'd arrived with Oily. Efficient and capable as ever Wodger had ticked off our names on the clip board he was carrying. Wodger is a school-teacher through and through and is never happier than when ticking names off from a long list. Wodger is so reliable that people around him tend to become incompetent, incapable and totally dependent upon him within minutes of meeting him. He so clearly enjoys being in charge that most people simply allow him to take over and organise their lives for them.

Wodger is one of our opening batsmen. The other is Sergeant Tate. I don't know his first name and I'm not sure that he has one. Even if he has I doubt if anyone has ever used it. It would be cruel to describe him as pompous or standoffish but I've even heard his mother address him as 'Sergeant'. Sergeant Tate has been a member of our local constabulary for two decades and regards crime as a personal affront.

Sergeant Tate looks as though he was constructed rather hastily by a building firm that was overly conscious of its potential liability to late completion penalties. A noticeable hormonal imbalance gave him a prominent forehead, protruding jaw and massive hands. Years of activity in the police gymnasium have given him acres of bulging muscle.

When Oily and I arrived Sergeant Tate was deep in conversation with his wife, June.

June is as tiny as her husband is huge. She is, I guess, just about five feet tall. She looks a little bit like a doll and dresses like one too. In her case, however, appearances are extremely deceptive. She may look fragile but she can look after herself. Like everyone else she refers to her fearsome husband as 'Sergeant' but unlike everyone else she never listens to any thing he says. She bullies him mercilessly.

Norman Wilkes and Jerry Dixon are our other two senior batsmen.

Norman is an accountant and it isn't difficult to guess his profession. He is one of those people who was clearly destined to be an accountant from childhood. Still only in his mid thirties he is tubby, bespectacled and balding. He looks much older than he is.

Desperately inoffensive and always careful to avoid doing anything that could be considered contentious or risky Norman does not look like a great batsman. In his case appearances are not deceptive. He is, however, our club treasurer and the only member of the team who can do our accounts and is, therefore, guaranteed a prime batting spot. People who don't know Norman very well sometimes claim that he is rather overly cautious and often pedantic. Those of us who know him well know that in addition to these qualities Norman is also dull and rather humourless.

Norman is famous among those who know him for being exceptionally careful before making decisions. I remember once sharing a hotel room with him when we went down to Lords together to watch a couple of days of Test Match cricket. It was an exquisitely painful experience.

Norman had taken two suitcases full of clothes with him although we were only due to be away from home for one night. As soon as we arrived in our room Norman insisted on unpacking and hanging up his shirts, trousers and jackets. He chose two drawers in the dressing table and allocated the other two to me although I assured him that he could have all four. I tried to explain how silly I'd feel keeping each of my socks in a separate drawer.

Watching Norman dress in the morning was quite an experience. First of all he put on a pair of socks. Then he pulled on some underpants and added a shirt. Then he wandered around the room trying to decide which suit to put on. When he'd decided on a suit he discovered that the socks weren't quite right for it and so he took them off, rolled them up carefully and exchanged them for a more appropriate pair.

Next, he decided that the shirt wasn't quite perfect either. So that had to come off and go back into the wardrobe. Having changed his shirt he looked for a tie and discovered that he had forgotten to pack the only tie that could possibly go with that shirt. And so off came the suit trousers, the shirt and the socks. Then he went back to the original socks and another suit.

When we finally got down into the dining room things were just as bad there. For the life of him Norman just couldn't make decisions. Choosing between tea and coffee and toast and croissants was bad enough but when the waitress came to ask him whether he wanted eggs and bacon; eggs and sausage and bacon; eggs and sausage; sausage and bacon; eggs, bacon and tomato; eggs, bacon, tomato and fried bread or eggs on toast he simply froze and became quite incapable of offering her any sort of instruction.

After breakfast Norman spent twenty minutes trying to decide what newspaper to buy, whether or not to clean his teeth and whether or not to change his suit again. It turned out that the suit he was already wearing had only been for breakfast.

I don't think Norman enjoys being so indecisive. It's just something he inherited. I once asked him how he'd ever managed to get married or decide on a career. He told me that he met his wife when he was six years old and that she'd asked him to marry her when he'd lent her his ruler. He said it was his wife who decided on a suitable career.

Jerry Dixon is a completely different character. He works as a builder and has enough aggression for at least two people.

I sometimes think that he probably has Norman's share. Not long ago he had to appear in the local magistrates court after threatening to ram a drainpipe down a customer's throat. He astounded the court when, after being asked a question by the magistrate, he informed the gentleman on the bench that he would be obliged if he would speak up a little.

On another occasion a man in a public house cracked what he thought was a joke about 'Jerry builders'. Jerry was not amused by this and it took two of us nearly half an hour to persuade him that impaling the humourist on an upturned chair leg would cause more problems than it would solve. Jerry usually bats at number three for us and clubs against whom we play regularly claim that his presence in our team makes finding umpires particularly difficult. I think this is probably unfair for it's a long time since the incident with the stump and the heavy roller.

Our strike bowler is a local clergyman called Kurt Meitner. Everyone assumes he is German because of his name but he's as English as the next man who in our team happens to be Brian O'Toole. Brian is a slow bowler. He doesn't spin the ball at all but he doesn't bowl fast enough to be a fast bowler or even a medium pace bowler.

Our other regular player is Hermann Potter. Hermann is a medium pace bowler and middle order batsman (which means, of course, that he can't bowl very well and doesn't bat too well either). Hermann wanted to come on the tour but his wife wouldn't let him. She said she wanted the kitchen decorating.

Young Simon, a schoolboy prodigy who bowls leg spinners and Arthur Young, our wicket keeper, were told by Wodger that they would be travelling with Oily and me. Wodger didn't really want to send Simon with us but Simon's mother had, for reasons best known to herself, decided that I would be a good influence on him. It didn't really matter who Arthur travelled with since he is rarely aware of his surroundings.

Wodger announced that Sergeant Tate, Norman and the vicar would be travelling with him while Brian would travel with Jerry in his old Volvo. Wodger does not have much faith in Jerry's Volvo and I suspect that he wanted to minimise the chances of losing more than two of his players at once.

As we were about to climb into our cars and set off for our first match on the North Devon coast Wodger announced that we would not be driving in formation but would be free to make our own way to the first venue.

This was a sensible decision since Oily is incapable of driving as slowly as the sort of speed that Wodger regards as reckless.

Wodger's favourite speed is somewhere between 25 and 30 miles per hour and although Oily must pass through this landmark at least twice on each journey it is not a speed he favours. Oily claims that Wodger only ever uses two forward gears. One Saturday last season Oily challenged Wodger to a race between the Pigeons Breast public house in Aldridge and the main gates of the Walsall Arboretum. Oily, handicapping himself by confining himself to reverse gear, still managed to win by nearly a mile.

Oily had started to pull away from the kerb when I noticed that Sergeant Tate was still standing on the pavement with his wife. They were clearly involved in what is, I believe, officially known as a domestic dispute. I told Oily to stop for a moment.

We watched in amazement as Sergeant Tate stepped across to Wodger's car, bent down and held the door open while the vicar got out. The vicar spoke to Sergeant Tate, smiled, nodded and then walked over to Jerry's Volvo. Then, with Sergeant Tate still holding the car door open June Tate got in!

I got out and went over to Wodger's car to see what was happening.

'June is coming with us,' said Wodger, speaking through clenched teeth.

I looked into the back of the car where June was sitting alongside Norman the accountant.

June just looked straight ahead as though she hadn't seen me.

Wodger turned to Sergeant Tate as though expecting help but none came.

'June says that if Sergeant Tate is going to the West Country for two weeks then she's going as well,' said Wodger.

I looked across at the police sergeant in disbelief and then looked back at Wodger. 'But it's a cricket tour!' I said. 'Wives don't go on cricket tours.'

But June clearly was not about to allow protocol to stand in her way.

I walked back to Oily's car, got in and told him the news. Four hours later we were sitting in a transport cafe somewhere in Somerset while the front end of the Jaguar was rebuilt.

* * *

Inspired by Oily's banknotes the mechanic managed to finish the running repairs to the Jaguar in a couple of hours.

The headlamps still didn’t work and the bonnet had to be held shut with the aid of a length of wire but the car was driveable. The punctured tyre had been replaced, the loose bodywork removed and the radiator repaired.

In our absence Arthur had woken but finding himself alone had simply continued with his favourite hobby. Few things shake or startle Arthur and as a regular passenger in cars driven by Oily he is now accustomed to the sounds of bodywork being pulled and hammered back into shape. When we arrived he was sitting up in the back of the car sipping at his beloved hip flask. However long a journey may be Arthur’s hip flask never stays empty for long. How it gets refilled I have no idea.

Arthur is in his mid fifties. He retired from his position as a local government officer some time ago and is an enthusiastic cricket player and supporter. As a young man he once had a trial for Worcestershire but, sadly, never actually played first class cricket. These days, despite his pickled liver and constant state of inebriation he is still one of the best wicket keepers I’ve ever played with.

Unlike younger, more athletic players Arthur never throws himself around. I don’t think he’s ever had a grass stain on his trousers or shirt since I’ve known him. He never makes a fuss and to opposition batsmen simply seems to have a happy knack of being in the right place at the right time (or, as far as they are concerned, the wrong place at the wrong time). He is unfailingly courteous and always apologies to the bats men he dismisses.

Arthur’s marriage broke down about five years ago when his wife ran off with a local income tax inspector. The impact of this domestic disruption can be judged from the fact that it was ten days before Arthur noticed that his wife was missing and another week after that before his half hearted investigations proved that she had gone for good. She had moved to a house three doors away where she still lives. Arthur’s current domestic arrangements would probably be regarded by some as slightly bizarre for he now pays his wife to do his laundry, shopping and cleaning. They never bothered to get divorced.

After Oily had given the mechanic more money the four of us continued on our journey to North Devon. Our first match had been fixed against the village team at Queen’s Lapford – a tiny village just outside the twin coastal resorts of Lynton and Lynmouth – and on the advice of the local cricket club secretary Wodger had booked us all accommodation at a public house called the Duck and Puddle.

* * *

CHAPTER THREE

Despite our delay we arrived at the Duck and Puddle ahead of the rest of the team. Wodger, as I have already explained, is a slow driver. Jerry would like to drive faster but his ancient Volvo is slow to respond and few journeys on British motorways are long enough to enable it to reach its top speed of 55 miles per hour. We signed in, put our bags in our rooms and settled down in the public bar.

During the last few years most country pubs have been taken over by large breweries. However successful a small country pub may have been while run independently the breweries always want to change things. A small pub that is warmed with a log fire and offers its patrons home cured ham will be gutted. The log fire will be replaced with central heating and the thick slices of home cured ham will be replaced with thin slices of plastic meat served with French Fries rather than chips. The old red leather chairs and stools and genuine brass topped tables will be replaced with banquettes covered in purple velvet and chipboard tables fitted with built in video games. The dart board will be banished and the jar of pickled eggs replaced with stuffed olives.

Fortunately, the Duck and Puddle had escaped this heavy handed treatment and, for the time being at least, remained in private hands. The landlord liked his pub so much that instead of standing behind the bar and serving the customers he sat as close as possible to his raging log fire. Outside the remains of the day's sunshine was still warm enough for a few customers to be sitting sipping their beer at trestle tables. But the landlord clearly liked a log fire and wasn't the sort of man to allow trivial and unpredictable forces like the weather to interfere with life.

Behind the bar drinks and food were served by a pair of cheerful barmaids – one blonde and one brunette. It is traditional to describe barmaids as buxom but calling the two barmaids at the Duck and Puddle buxom would be rather like calling Lords a cricket ground. The description is accurate but it doesn't do the subject justice. The blonde was the older of the two, in her early forties I suppose, and she had a wit as sharp as cheesewire. The brunette seemed to be in her mid twenties and appeared, by comparison, rather modest. They were both good looking rather than merely pretty and seemed to be competing in their efforts to display their physical charms to best effect.

While Arthur sipped at a large whisky and Simon wrote a lengthy letter home to his mother Oily and I sat on stools at the bar and admired the views on the other side of the counter.

'Do you think young Simon is all right?' Oily asked me, nodding his head slightly in the direction of our young prodigy.

'He's fine,' I assured him.

'He's very quiet.'

'He's seventeen.'

'His mother seems a bit possessive,' said Oily, stuffing a handful of peanuts into his mouth.

'His father left home when he was a kid,' I explained, 'and he's an only child.'

'Oh God!' said Oily, pouring beer after the peanuts. 'No girlfriends, I don't suppose?'

'Not that I know of.'

Noticing that our glasses were nearly empty the brunette barmaid came towards us. She asked us if we wanted refills by raising an eyebrow.

Oily smiled at her and she smiled back. I toyed with the idea of reminding him of what had happened at Swansea earlier in the season but decided not to bother. Things like that just don't happen twice.

It was another hour before Jerry, the vicar and Brian arrived and half an hour after that before Wodger turned up with Norman and Sergeant and Mrs Tate. By then Simon had gone to bed, Arthur had drifted into unconsciousness again and Oily and I had eaten all of the peanuts and most of the pickled eggs. We all shook hands, greeting one another as though we had been parted for at least a decade, and congratulated one another on our navigational skills and resourcefulness in successfully finding the Duck and Puddle. Then we all went to bed.

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The match was due to begin at the Queens Lapford cricket ground at 2.00 pm and at breakfast the following morning there was a general air of excitement hovering over the bacon and eggs.

Inevitably, our captain was unable to share our pleasure. He had many responsibilities weighing him down. Arthur, our wicket keeper, was still unconscious upstairs. Simon was homesick and kept bursting into tears. Sergeant Tate and his wife weren't speaking to one another or, indeed, to anyone else. And Oily seemed to have disappeared.

In addition Wodger had to find an eleventh man.

At half past eight that morning Wodger had telephoned the secretary of the Queens Lapford cricket club to ask if he could spare a player. But the request had fallen on stony ground. The Queens Lapford secretary explained that he'd had difficulty enough finding eleven fit players and two umpires. There was, he assured Wodger, absolutely no chance of discovering any 'spare' cricketers by 2.00 pm that afternoon.

By twelve thirty the situation had improved only to the extent that Oily had reappeared. He looked exhausted but his presence cheered Wodger slightly as he sat hunched over his Filofax still trying to create an eleven man team out of ten players.

'What about June?' asked Oily, dipping a slice of herbal sausage into the centre of his egg. Officially breakfast had finished at 10.00 am and only cold lunches were being served but Oily didn't seem to have had any difficulty in obtaining a full cooked breakfast.

Wodger looked puzzled. 'June?' He thought for a moment and then shook his head. 'We didn't have any pwoblems with players in June.'

'Not that June!' said Oily, stuffing a whole mushroom into his mouth. Wodger and the rest of us had to wait for the best part of a minute for Oily to finish his mushroom and explain what he meant.

'June Tate!' he said at last.

'June Tate? What about her?'

'We need an eleventh player,' pointed out Oily. 'Why not see if she can play?'

'June?' said Wodger, incredulously. 'But ...,' he paused and stuttered, 'she's a ...' he seemed to find the whole idea incomprehensibly stupid, 'she's a ... *woman*!'

'Thank God you noticed,' said Oily, piercing a sliver of bacon and then adding a square of fried bread to his fork.

'There doesn't seem to be any real alternative,' I said. 'Apart from playing a man short.'

'But she's a woman!' was all that Wodger could say.

Eventually even Wodger the misogynist realised that Oily's suggestion made a certain amount of sense. He left the table and set off in search of our eleventh player.

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It would, I think, be reasonable to describe the atmosphere in the visitors' dressing room at the Queens Lapford cricket club as 'strained.'

The Queens Lapford captain had been slightly surprised when Wodger told him that we would be fielding a female but he didn't object. The objection came instead from Sergeant Tate.

I've never seen a man go purple before. I've heard of people going purple. And I've seen people go a bit purplish. But every bit of Sergeant Tate that was visible went bright purple and stayed that colour. He looked dangerously apoplectic and an entirely unsuitable candidate for life insurance.

He took it badly when Wodger told him that there would be two 'Tates' on the scorecard. But when his wife appeared in the dressing room and proceeded to dress herself in one of Norman's spare shirts and a pair of the vicar's shorts Sergeant Tate looked so discomfited that it was no longer quite so easy to hide one's amusement. I thought that Oily's generous offer to lend June his spare 'box' was poorly timed.

June Tate seemed to enjoy it all. She ignored her churlish and bad tempered husband and giggled girlishly when the vicar's shorts proved too big for her and fell down around her ankles.

'Where would you like to field?' asked Wodger as I looked out of the pavilion window while June struggled to protect her modesty with one of Norman's ties. (Norman is the only man I know who always has a complete change of clothes available – including a spare tie). She was using the tie to hold up the vicar's rather baggy shorts.

Wodger always asks me this before a match. And he always pretends that it is a question worth answering. It isn't, of course. When he first started asking me this I always thought carefully before answering. I would look around the ground and choose a spot where I wouldn't have too much sun in my eyes, where I could rely on a little shade when the sun was at its highest and where I would be unlikely to see too much of the action.

'Just over there would do very nicely,' I would say. 'Close to that girl in the blue dress.'

And Wodger would shake his head sadly and tell me that the spot I'd picked was already spoken for.

Wherever I chose would already be earmarked for some other player.

So these days I regard the question as a rhetorical one, a courtesy from a captain who would like to be old fashioned.

'Anywhere you like, captain,' I replied. 'I'm in your hands.'

At five to two Wodger lost the toss (he always does), and was told that we would be fielding, and so at two pm precisely we trooped out onto the field for the first match of our tour.

The Queens Lapford cricket ground is one of the most beautiful I've ever seen. Unlike many village cricket fields it is remarkably flat and well maintained. There is, however, one peculiarity about the Queens Lapford ground. On its northern side it is bordered not by a pleasant hedge or a screen of trees but by a four hundred foot sheer drop down into the Bristol Channel.

From the pavilion this feature is not immediately obvious. It is true that on the far side of the pitch all one can see is sky but I had innocently assumed that this merely reflected the fact that the ground was rather high up. I had erroneously assumed that the land on the far side of the pitch sloped gently downwards.

It was Brian O'Toole who first discovered the truth about this remarkable local feature. Standing gingerly about two feet away from the edge he called the rest of us over to him.

'I nearly fell over there!' he complained, pointing unnecessarily at the cliff edge. A pair of seagulls, disturbed by our presence, suddenly flew up from the face of the cliff and sent us scurrying backwards in surprise.

'Nothing to worry about, Bwian,' said Wodger confidently. He looked around in vain for some sign showing where the boundary was. 'I'd better go and ask someone what the local wules are,' he added, before hobbling off in the direction of the pavilion. Wodger suffers with his feet and is something of a martyr to them.

'I'm not fielding anywhere near here,' said Brian to no one in particular. Brian sells insurance for a living and his professional knowledge and skills enable him to combine pessimism and hypochondriasis with an unusual level of scientific efficiency. He stepped back another pace and took a small, well-thumbed limp covered book from his back pocket.

We waited, knowing what was coming and yet nonetheless curious.

'Twenty two people fell from cliff tops last year,' he announced sombrely, reading from his pocket volume.

We all edged backwards a little, away from the cliff edge, anxious lest a breeze should suddenly appear and whisk one of us to our death. Jerry Dixon stamped timidly on the turf, his stamping foot stretched out as far as it would reach. He seemed to be testing the cliff edge to see how solid it was.

Brian took out a large, white, linen handkerchief and blew his nose boisterously. He stuffed his insurance man's pocket guide back into his back trouser pocket.

'The cliff edge is the boundawy,' cried Wodger, hobbling back in our direction. He seemed cheerful. 'Their captain says would we please do our best to stop the ball going over the edge because they can only get balls back at low tide from a boat.'

We looked at him but no one said anything.

'Wather quaint, don't you think?' He grinned at each of us in turn but no one grinned back at him.

'You can field here,' said Jerry.

'Ah, well, I'm at slip, as usual ...' Wodger looked around. No one spoke a word. 'But, er, if that's, er, yes, of course, I'll field here.'

Tentatively, he stepped across towards the cliff edge. He peered over and paled when he saw the extent of the drop.

Noticing that the two umpires and the two batsmen had already emerged from the pavilion and were standing in the middle of the pitch waiting for us Wodger directed the rest of us to our positions. He threw the ball to the vicar, invariably our opening bowler and a man who does not allow the nature of his profession to interfere with his apparent intention of using the ball to drill a hole clean through the head of every batsman he faces.

The vicar's opening spell was not as successful as it has been in the past and by three o'clock the home side had still not lost a wicket. Our four best bowlers, Simon the leg spinner, Brian the slow bowler, Jerry (who bowls what he describes as medium pace in-swingers) and the vicar had suffered equally at the hands of the Queens Lapford opening pair.

The only excitement had occurred after about thirty minutes of the innings when one of the batsmen hit the ball high over Wodger's head. Wodger, running backwards and keeping his eye on the ball was about ten yards away from the cliff edge when the rest of us realised what was happening. Fortunately, Jerry, who was fielding nearby, managed to reach Wodger and bring him down with an excellent low tackle several yards short of oblivion.

By four thirty, however, things had changed dramatically. They had lost six wickets and four balls and Wodger was looking very pleased with himself. He had brought himself on in desperation but his slow left arm bowling had unexpectedly tied the opposition batsmen in knots. He'd taken four wickets for the first time in his career and Simon and Brian had a wicket each.

By five the home side innings was over. They had amassed a total of 127 and Wodger had taken 5 for 38. It is a strange but nevertheless true fact of life that nothing gives a bowler more satisfaction than scoring a few runs and nothing gives a batsman more pleasure than taking a few unexpected wickets. At tea Wodger was glowing with pride, pleasure and bonhomie. If he'd been a cat he would have purred. The only fly contaminating his ointment was the knowledge that Sergeant Tate was still refusing to talk to anyone.

But our captain is made of stem stuff and when he and the Sergeant strode out to the wicket we were filled with confidence.

What happened next was as depressing as it was predictable.

The first ball was slightly short of a good length and just outside the off stump. Nine times out of ten Wodger would have ignored it and allowed it to go past harmlessly. But he was overflowing with confidence and could not resist the opportunity that presented itself. He slashed wildly and the ball sped away across the grass, past where cover point would have been fielding if there had been one, and off in the direction of the cliff edge.

As the fielder patrolling the extra cover boundary ran in and one of the slip fielders ran after the ball Wodger set off down the wicket as fast as he could hobble. He was half way down the wicket before he realised that Sergeant Tate hadn't even moved. The Sergeant wasn't even watching the ball. He seemed to be hypnotised by the toes of his boots.

'Wun!' screamed Wodger.

'This end!' shouted the wicket keeper.

'Other end!' shouted the bowler.

Sergeant Tate looked up, saw his captain advancing towards him at full speed and looked around as though waking up from a dream.

'No!' he shouted.

'Wun, wun!' screamed Wodger, waving his arms and bat around in a maniacal and dangerous fashion.

Too late Sergeant Tate responded. His bulk meant that his acceleration was poor and it was, from the start, a lost cause. The extra cover fielder threw the ball in fast and low. The wicket keeper collected it neatly and had the bails off with Sergeant Tate still twelve yards out of his crease.

Slowly and miserably Sergeant Tate dragged himself and his bat back towards the pavilion. He looked like a man who has known better days.

It was not a good beginning but first Jerry Dixon scored a rapid 30 and then Norman Wilkes added a respectable 25 and by 7.30 pm we had reached 100 for 6 wickets.

When I joined Wodger at the wicket we needed 22 to win and had 3 wickets left. And then disaster struck. Wodger was out lbw playing no stroke to a straight ball, and Simon Lloyd was out the very next ball when a fast one nipped back and removed his off bail. Two balls later the vicar, Kurt Meitner, was caught behind the wicket.

Suddenly we needed 22 runs and had only one wicket left.

When the Queens Lapford team saw tiny June staggering out to the middle with a huge pair of pads strapped to her stick like legs and a massive bat tucked under her arm they were clearly not impressed. One or two of them were clearly having difficulty suppressing smiles.

Feeling a great burden of responsibility resting on my shoulders I walked down the wicket to meet her.

'Just keep your bat tight in to your pads and play everything straight back down the middle,' I told her. 'Don't worry about the runs,' I added confidently.

June brushed a couple of stray curls out of her eyes and whispered something I didn't catch. I asked her to repeat what she'd said.

'Is my lipstick all right?' she asked. 'There's no mirror in the dressing room.'

'Its fine,' I assured her, feeling beads of sweat breaking out on my forehead.

While June and I had been talking the Queens Lapford captain had been having a word with his bowler, a tall tanned fellow whose rolled up sleeves revealed a variety of tattoos.

'Guard?' asked the umpire, looking sternly down the wicket at June.

June looked puzzled.

'What guard do you want?' asked the umpire loudly.

'Oh that's kind of you to ask,' said June. 'But I'm all right, thank you.' She pointed to her legs, 'The vicar lent me his pads,' she announced.

'Play!' growled the umpire, disapprovingly.

Grinning broadly the tattooed bowler strode purposefully up to the wicket and tossed the ball underarm down in June's direction.

Keeping her eyes firmly on the ball June moved her feet a couple of feet down the wicket and whirled her bat around her as hard as she could. The crack of willow on leather could be heard all around the ground and over by the pavilion I saw Oily cheering loudly. The brunette barmaid was standing beside him dressed in the shortest skirt I'd ever seen.

The fielders watched with horror and astonishment as the ball flew over extra cover's head and disappeared over the edge of the cliff.

Six scored. That left us needing just sixteen runs.

The umpire produced another ball from his pocket and the bowler, his face black with fury, strode back to the start of his full length run. When he passed me he was travelling at top speed. The ball flew past June, past the stumps and past the wicket-keeper.

'No ball!' cried the umpire.

A moment later he signalled to the scorer to show that four no balls should be added to our score.

Once again the bowler walked back to the start of his full length run. But this time he took a little more care. The ball was short and when it reached June it was almost head height.

June stood motionless and watched the ball as it passed her by. The fielders applauded as the wicket keeper dived and caught it.

The next ball was far more accurate and was aimed more directly at June's wicket.

June played a repeat of her first shot. And again her bat connected with the ball. Again the ball flew high over the extra cover fielder, disappearing out of sight over the cliff edge.

Another six. We needed just six more.

I walked down the wicket to June and congratulated her.

'That was fantastic!' I said. 'I thought you'd never played cricket before!'

'I haven't,' she said, 'but I used to play rounders for my school.'

I turned towards the pavilion where I could see Wodger and the rest of the team crowded onto the pavilion balcony. They were shouting and waving encouragement. Only Sergeant Tate was missing.

I started to walk back up the wicket and was met by the opposition captain and the two umpires.

'We haven't got any more balls,' said one of the umpires bluntly.

'What do you mean?' I asked him.

'That was our last ball,' explained the Queens Lapford captain.

'But you must have another one somewhere...'

The captain looked embarrassed and shuffled his feet. 'I'm sorry...' he muttered. He added something about a draw.

'I wish you'd told me it was your last ball,' said June. 'I'd have hit it somewhere else.'

When we got back to the pavilion June discovered that her husband had disappeared. He had stamped out of the pavilion in a fury when his wife had hit her first ball for six.

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CHAPTER FOUR

We stayed at the Duck and Puddle again that evening and celebrated our brush with success in the bar.

By half past ten a good deal of alcohol had been consumed and sobriety was not our strong point. Wodger, woefully unaccustomed either to personal success or inebriation, was so happy that his cheeks and collar were stained with tears.

He paused after explaining to me for the fifteenth time exactly how he'd taken his five wickets and looked around the bar with proprietorial pride.

'Good fwiends,' he sighed, waving his glass around airily and spilling a third of a pint of strong cider. 'These are all weal fwiends.'

Exhausted by this he leant back against the bar and carefully put his left elbow in a large puddle of beer. He didn't seem to notice.

Following his inspiration I looked around the room.

Arthur, our intemperate wicket keeper, was asleep or unconscious in a corner by the fire. Apart from his talent behind the stumps Arthur's most enviable skill is his ability to drift into unconsciousness while keeping his eyes open and looking as though he is still conscious and alert.

Those of us who know him well can tell Arthur's condition at a glance (the general rule is that if he isn't actually drinking and doesn't have a full container of some kind clutched in his fist then he is probably unconscious). The landlord of the Duck and Puddle was not, however, aware of Arthur's unnatural skill and he was busily telling our wicket keeper some long and complicated story about the local ironmonger, the local greengrocer's wife and a farming implement. The landlord seemed happy to accept Arthur's involuntary grunts as expressions of interest and encouragement to continue.

Young Simon, the teenage leg spinner, had fallen asleep over a letter he was writing to his mother. To celebrate his success with the ball Simon had been bought two pints of draught ale and the effect of the alcohol on his brain had been rapid.

Next to Simon sat Jerry Dixon and Brian O'Toole. Alcohol tends to make most people slightly more aggressive than usual but with Jerry this normal effect is reversed. After a few drinks Jerry becomes quiet and morose. He and Brian were deeply engaged in a depressing discussion about the illnesses they had both endured and the funerals they'd been to.

On the other side of the fireplace sat Norman, the vicar and June Tate.

No one had seen Sergeant Tate since the end of the match and on our return to the Duck and Puddle we had discovered that he had packed his bags, paid his bill and left. No one knew where he'd gone to and no one, least of all June, seemed to care.

The vicar and the abandoned Mrs Tate were now sitting next to one another and giggling together like teenage lovers. The vicar had one hand on June Tate's knee and she seemed happy with this arrangement. They were both drinking gin and tonics.

Next to them Norman Wilkes seemed blissfully unaware of his gradual metamorphosis into a gooseberry. Norman is one of life's committed innocents; the sort of passive, wide eyed observer who believes what politicians say and always accepts the claims of advertisers and life insurance salesmen at face value. Norman's one brush with the law took place when he accepted as a client a brothel owner who managed to convince him that she was running a finishing school for young ladies. To Norman the burgeoning romance between Kurt and June was quite invisible. If he'd found them in bed together he would have readily accepted any protestations of innocence and any claims that they were really just 'good friends'.

That just left Oily.

Oily was draped over one end of the bar talking to the brunette with the spectacular bust and the very short skirt. Their relationship had clearly long since developed into something more earthy than that of customer and barmaid. The barmaid's arms were resting on the counter and her more than ample bosom was resting on top of her folded arms. Oily's eyes were focussed on the centre of her deep and impressive cleavage which he clearly found understandably hypnotic. Every few moments one or the other of them would look at the bar clock slowly ticking its way towards contentment and delight. Oily had clearly forgotten all about Swansea and it seemed an unsuitable time to remind him of the past.

'Let's all have a glass of port!' said Wodger, suddenly. He levered himself up off the bar and stood unaided for a moment. 'To toast our success!' he said, lifting his glass and spilling what was left of his cider. Exhausted by this speech and physical activity he slumped down onto a bar stool and waved his empty glass in the direction of the blonde and unoccupied barmaid. She smiled at him, raised a carefully manicured eye brow and lifted a bottle of port from the shelf behind her. Although she had been doing most of the work (her companion behind the counter had been far too busily occupied providing a feast for Oily's lecherous eyes) she seemed content.

Wodger peered at the bottle she was holding, as though examining a label he probably couldn't even see, and nodded in approval.

'A glass for everyone,' he told her, waving his empty glass around again to indicate that his generosity was not to be limited.

Drinking port always reminds me of a solicitor I used to know when I lived in London. He had a tremendous passion for good wines of all varieties but an especially strong passion for fine port. He was always going off to wine auctions and buying cases of the stuff to lay down in what he grandly called his 'cellars'. (The 'cellars' were in fact two lock up garages in Pinner).

I remember once going round to dinner just after he'd bought a whole case of 1945 port that an acquaintance of his had insisted was a tremendous bargain and an excellent investment.

He'd chilled a couple of bottles of decent white wine to go with the trout and a couple of bottles of a well bred red to accompany the meat so by the time we'd got round to the bottle of fairly ordinary vintage port he'd brought out to be drunk with the stilton we were all much happier than we had been at the start of the meal. We were none of us incoherent or even noticeably unsteady but I don't think any of us would have been impressive at juggling or clay pigeon shooting.

We had got through no more than half a bottle of the cheap stuff when my solicitor friend suddenly got up from the table and disappeared from the dining room without a word. He came back a few minutes later carrying a dusty bottle with an almost indecipherable label. He carefully placed the bottle down in front of us with a gesture of generous triumph and undisguised pride.

'I thought you were keeping that as an investment?' said his wife, half in surprise, half in anger and half in anticipation.

'I was,' said the solicitor, with a smile. 'But I thought I'd just share a bottle with my good friends.' He waved an expansive hand around the table, produced fresh glasses and poured out generous measures of what turned out to be something prepared by angels from the breath of saints. 'After all,' he reassured himself, 'there's no real point in buying good wine unless you're prepared to drink it.'

'You're supposed to keep it for a special occasion,' his wife noted, slightly reprovingly.

'This is a special occasion,' announced the solicitor indignantly. 'We're drinking the 1945 port!' He paused and sipped at his glass. 'Anyway,' he added, 'it needed testing.'

These were arguments that no one was prepared to counter or determined to confound and so we drank a toast to celebrate the opening of the first bottle of our friend's 1945 port. Then, when the first bottle had gone, the solicitor brought up a second bottle so that we could drink a toast to the memory of the first bottle.

Having broken into the crate the solicitor's resolve disappeared like ice in warm gin and a week or so later his investment consisted of a wooden crate, twelve dusty but empty bottles and a number of very good friends who had all acquired a taste for fine but expensive port.

The port at the Duck and Puddle was hardly of the same vintage but it was received with distinct pleasure by everyone apart from Simon who was too firmly in the arms of Morpheus to acknowledge or take advantage of our captain's generosity. Arthur, our ancient and formidably pickled wicket keeper (who had woken automatically when the port was being distributed) selflessly drank Simon's measure for him.

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All pleasures must be paid for, of course. And we learnt the price for our evening's conviviality when we awoke the following morning.

First, there was the bar bill. On our arrival at the Duck and Puddle we had rashly opened a 'team' bar bill to avoid the inconvenience of having to find cash before obtaining a drink. To say that the total startled us would not be an exaggeration. Norman burst into tears when he was told what his portion of the bill came to. Simon, already pale and sickly looking after the baptism of his liver, seemed close to collapse but was instantly rescued from embarrassment and possible penury by Oily who volunteered to pay his share of the bill as well as his own. Only Arthur seemed pleasantly surprised by the extent of his financial commitment. He seemed to regard the bill as modest and, indeed, compared to his normal expenditure on alcohol it probably was. (No one has ever known where Arthur's money comes from but the supply, like the contents of his hip flask, never seems to dry up).

But the price of our pleasure was not simply financial, of course. When the ten of us awoke the following morning we had nine hangovers between us. Only Arthur escaped this additional burden. He never gets hangovers since he never sobers up.

While the rest of us grimaced and winced at the sound of crunching toast and the hiss of roasting coffee beans Arthur simply tipped his head back and allowed the contents of his ever reliable flask to soothe and salve his wounded and much scarred spirit.

It was half past ten when we finally paid our bill, dragged our luggage out into the porch outside the pub and said farewell to the landlord. Brian O'Toole and I were the only ones to manage a full cooked breakfast. The rest of our touring party seemed satisfied with dry toast and black coffee. They consumed large quantities of both these staple ingredients of the touring cricketer's diet.

Our destination was Bideford, just a few miles down the coast, where our second match was due to start that very afternoon, and Wodger was the first of our drivers to be prepared for the short journey. On his arrival at the Duck and Puddle Wodger's car had contained Sergeant Tate in the front seat and Norman and June Tate in the back seat. But Sergeant Tate was no longer with us, of course, and on his departure Wodger found that Norman was sitting next to him while. June was joined in the back seat by the Revd Kurt Meitner.

At breakfast June and the vicar had been studiously careful to ignore one another. They had come down to the dining room separately and a casual observer would not have guessed that they had ever met before. It was this total absence of recognition which made it perfectly apparent to the rest of us that their romance had blossomed after Wodger's final round of port had brought our evenings celebrations to a close.

But by the time we were all ready to abandon the comfort of the Duck and Puddle they had either decided that such subterfuge was pointless or else they had found one another's physical attractions too powerful to ignore. When they got into the back of Wodger's motor car they put their arms around one another and snuggled up together as oblivious to observation as two lovers taking advantage of the darkness and anonymity of the back row of a cinema in an unfamiliar town.

Wodger seemed a little taken aback by this behaviour and sat bolt upright in the front of the car as though unaware of and disconnected from what was happening behind him.

Jerry and Brian were the next to leave and when their ancient Volvo had finally chugged out of sight I decided that I ought to try and find Oily, Arthur and Simon; none of whom were anywhere in sight.

Finding Arthur was easy. Even Dr Watson could have found Arthur - without the assistance of his famous companion. Arthur was in the bar, sitting next to the landlord (to whom we had all said our farewells just a few minutes earlier) and drinking whisky as though his life depended upon it, which, in a way, I suppose it did.

I left Arthur there while I looked for Simon and Oily.

Simon I found in his bedroom writing another letter to his mother.

And Oily found me in the corridor outside Simon's room.

'I've been looking for you!' he cried. 'Its time we left.' The brunette barmaid clung closely to him and had tears in her eyes. She was wearing a purple skirt that looked more like a pelmet and a tight, crocheted sweater that was at least five sizes too small for her. She tottered alongside Oily on slender four inch high heels and looking at her more closely I realised for the first time that she was much younger than she had first appeared.

Simon led the way, I followed and Oily brought up the rear with the buxom brunette barmaid.

Downstairs we picked up Arthur, said goodbye to the landlord again and stuffed our bags into the boot of Oily's Jaguar. The blonde barmaid appeared and hugged and kissed us all and then Oily and I helped pour Arthur into the back of the car.

At this point I turned round tactfully so that Oily could say goodbye to the brunette barmaid.

'You coming?' I heard Oily call.

I turned back and to my astonishment saw that Oily was already settled in the driving seat. I looked around for the brunette but she was nowhere to be seen. Apart from myself the blonde barmaid was the only person around. With a strange feeling in the pit of my stomach I bent down and peered into the back of the car. There, squeezed in between Arthur and Simon was the brunette barmaid. She was smiling and crying at the same time and the purple pelmet around her waist had ridden up so far that Simon was blushing brightly and seemed to have no idea where to look. Arthur, sipping from his flask, did not seem to have noticed that we had acquired an extra passenger.

I opened my mouth to speak but could think of nothing sensible to say so I shut it again. Oily leant across the car and opened the front passenger door from the inside. I got in, fastened my seat belt and looked across at Oily. It was now clearly far too late to remind him of Swansea.

'Sharon's a cricket fan,' explained Oily as he let out the clutch and we moved noisily away from the Duck and Puddle, 'she's going to be our travelling spectator.'

I turned my head slightly and behind me could see that Sharon, who had managed to wriggle round so that she was kneeling on the back seat, was furiously waving her handkerchief at the rapidly disappearing blonde barmaid. Simon was unsuccessfully trying to ignore the fact that as Sharon waved her arm so her ample chest bobbed up and down just a few inches from his face.

My head was still throbbing from our evening's celebrations and I slumped back into the Jaguar's sumptuous leather and tried to sleep.

Behind me I could hear Arthur beginning to snore. It was good to know that there were at least some certainties in life.

* * *

CHAPTER FIVE

Our match at the Little Swell Cricket Club, just outside Bideford, was due to start at 2.00 pm precisely but at 1.45 pm precisely Oily, Arthur, Simon, Sharon and I were lost.

At the start of the tour Wodger had handed each one of us a photocopied itinerary which included details of all our opponents and notes on where we were due to stay at each venue.

‘If you lose your way or get separated from the rest of the team,’ Wodger explained, ‘all you have to do is make your own way to the next village or pub on the list.’

In principle it sounded sensible. In practice there was a snag. Neither Oily nor I knew the faintest thing about navigation.

The only map we had was printed in the back of Oily’s diary and the whole of the West of England was crammed onto six square inches of endpaper. The scale of the map was such that Oily’s thumbnail covered the entire distance between Lynton (the nearest proper town to Queens Lapford) and Bideford (the nearest important place to Little Swell). Finding Bideford was easy. Finding Little Swell was hard.

We had been lucky on our first day’s journey. The main road from the motorway had taken us straight into Lynton and Queens Lapford had been signposted from the centre of the village.

We were not so lucky in Bideford.

As we drove around Bideford in eccentric circles Oily turned to Sharon for help. But she was as lost as we were. It turned out that she’d never been further West than Barnstaple in her life.

It was luck rather than skill, judgement or experience which eventually took us through the village of Little Swell and right past the cricket ground where the Little Swell team played its matches. We arrived with less than five minutes to spare and found Wodger in a desperate state of excitement. He’d managed to borrow one spare player from the home team (June Tate’s emergence as a player had brought us up to a full complement of eleven players but her husband’s disappearance had taken us back to ten players again) but did not expect to find it so easy to obtain another four players on loan.

Wodger had already lost the toss but, in view of our absence, the opposing captain had generously agreed to take the field in the hope that we would arrive in time to bat.

Wodger and Norman opened the batting while Oily, Arthur, Simon and I got changed. Sharon, who refused to be parted from Oily, came into the dressing room with us and sat in a corner brushing her hair. I couldn’t get over how Sharon had changed. While serving behind the bar she’d seemed confident and mature. Now, away from what was obviously her more natural habitat, she seemed shy, immature and uncomfortable.

As soon as we’d changed we joined the rest of the team who were sprawled untidily on the grass in front of the pavilion. Jerry, never couth at the best of times, had taken off his shirt to soak up the glorious August sunshine. I never failed to be astonished at the extent of his tattoos.

I’ve lost count of the number of village cricket grounds I’ve seen or played on but the Little Swell ground was one of the most remarkable and unusual I’ve ever come across. The centre of the ground, where the wickets are pitched, is shaped rather like a saucer with the result that bowlers at both ends are always running downhill.

The climb up the sides of the saucer is at its steepest directly behind the two wickets where it rises upwards for about thirty yards before reaching twin peaks and sloping back down towards the boundary markings which run a yard or so inside a thick blackthorn and hawthorn hedge.

The result is that players who field on the boundary directly behind the bowler or the wicket keeper are totally invisible to the batsmen. The effect of this is to lull the batsmen into a false sense of security when hitting out or running between the wickets.

Norman was the first to discover the unique danger of batting at Little Swell.

The third ball he received was short, slow medium pace and pitched about six inches outside the off stump. Norman is not quick footed but he had plenty of time to drive the ball straight back down the wicket, straight past the despairing hand of the bowler, over the hill and apparently on over the boundary for six.

Norman was walking down the wicket to receive the congratulations of his captain when a tall, blonde haired, grinning fielder suddenly appeared holding the ball in an outstretched arm.

Norman looked at the fielder in astonishment. Open mouthed he looked at Wodger as though for some sort of explanation. Wodger seemed as puzzled as he was so Norman turned to the bowler who had a big smile on his face and his arms outstretched in appeal.

‘How was that?’ shouted the bowler, making it clear that he was in absolutely no doubt.

The umpire, raising a nicotine stained and slightly arthritic index finger, made his decision known.

‘Where did he come from?’ asked Norman, a man who is normally so meek mannered that when he bowls someone else has to do his appealing for him.

‘Long-off,’ answered the bowler.

‘I didn’t know he was there!’ protested Norman.

‘It’s up to the batsman to acquaint himself with the bowler’s field placing,’ said the umpire in a gruff and slightly reproving voice. He tapped two counting coins together slightly impatiently.

Wodger moved a little closer to Norman and put a hand on his shoulder. He shrugged, sharing Norman’s frustration but not knowing what else he could do.

Sadly and slowly Norman turned away and dragged his bat back towards the pavilion. The journey always seems much longer when you’ve scored a duck.

As he walked towards us and Jerry put his shirt on, fastened up his pads and looked around for his bat Oily leant across to me and whispered in my ear.

‘How do we know that he actually caught it?’ he asked.

I looked at him in horror since such an awful thought had not even entered my mind.

Oily shrugged. ‘Just a thought.’

Jerry was the next to discover the very natural hazards of batting at Little Swell.

Normally Jerry is as aggressive as a batsman as he is at everything else he does. But he began his innings at Little Swell with caution.

After four overs he and Wodger had scored just three runs between them – all ‘stolen’ after nudges in the direction of mid wicket or cover point. Outside the actual square at Little Swell the outfield was rather long and balls travelled slowly on their uphill journey through lush grass.

At the beginning of the next over, however, the Little Swell opening bowler sent down a ball that was noticeably quicker than anything else he’d bowled. It was slightly wide of the leg stump.

Jerry tried to sweep the ball towards the square leg boundary, mistimed and sent the ball sizzling through a space where leg slip would have been fielding if there had been a leg slip. The wicket keeper was slow to respond but I doubt if he would have been able to reach the ball even if he had moved with more speed.

‘Yes!’ cried Wodger, realising that there were no fielders behind the wicket keeper and watching with amusement as two bulky slips lumbered hopelessly after the ball.

Jerry didn’t need telling twice. He shot out of his crease like a greyhound spotting a hare.

They had run one, were about to complete a second and were clearly intending to take at least a third and maybe a fourth run when the ball suddenly appeared back over the brow of the hill behind the wicket keeper travelling at an incredible speed and fired into the wicket keeper’s hands with enviable accuracy. The two slip fielders, still in sight, had both turned to watch the ball arrive in the wicket keepers gloves and they were chuckling with accustomed delight.

‘Owzat?’ cried the wicket keeper removing the bails with Jerry still two yards out of his crease.

Jerry, who had a moment earlier been wondering whether he and Wodger would be able to run five before the slip fielders caught up with the ball, couldn’t believe his eyes. He put his head down, grounded his bat and raced for the line as though his life depended upon it.

The wicket keeper didn’t help things at all.

When Jerry, breathless from a combination of exhaustion, frustration and anger, finally came to a halt several yards past the stumps he threw his bat down, put both gloved hands on his hips and scowled at the wicket keeper.

Lesser men would have quailed but the wicket keeper was not a lesser man. He was a traffic warden and part time fireman and he knew what was right.

‘You’re out!’ he told Jerry with accurate but undiplomatic simplicity. He pointed down the wicket to the umpire whose digital callisthenics gave full support to this allegation.

‘But ...?’ spluttered Jerry, waving airily in the direction from which the ball had come. ‘Who ... where ... how?’

The wicket keeper pointed to a small figure who had climbed up to the brow of the hill and was now looking down at the scattered stumps and bails with undisguised delight. ‘Him!’ he answered unnecessarily.

There is no knowing what Jerry’s next response might or might not have been had not Wodger wandered down the wicket and used his modest talents as a peace-maker to prevent bloodshed. When he stamped past us and strode back into the pavilion Jerry’s face was as black as a sweep’s and far less jovial. We winced as we heard Jerry hitting things with his bat as he strode around our tiny dressing room.

After that, of course, our batsmen lost their nerve completely. No one dared to hit a ball out of the saucer because no one knew where there were likely to be any fielders. Even when a ball did escape the clutches of the close in fielders and accidentally disappear over the brows of the two main hills, no one dared to run.

Before the match started it had been agreed that each innings would be limited to twenty five overs but by the time our allocation had gone we had scored just 47 runs and lost only five wickets. It was a dismal and depressing performance.

‘Never mind,’ said Wodger, replete with forced joviality as we nibbled at cucumber sandwiches and slices of fruit cake provided by the home side’s catering team, ‘two can play at that game.’

It seemed a not unreasonable assertion but in practice Wodger’s optimism proved unsustainable.

Right from the start Wodger put four men out on the boundary – all out of sight of the home side’s opening batsmen. Simon and I patrolled one hidden boundary while Oily and Norman patrolled the other.

We didn’t see the ball at all for the first three quarters of an hour. The home side’s batsmen scored at a sparkling rate – hitting every loose ball straight through to the square leg and cover boundaries. The few members of our side who could see what was going on were completely unable to quell the onslaught.

After forty five minutes a badly hit shot sent the ball straight back past the bowler and into my territory. I only saw it when my attention was attracted by shouts from the distant unknown and when I picked up the ball I had no idea where to throw it. Eventually I took pot luck and hurled it in to where I thought the stumps ought to be. It turned out later that I’d thrown the ball straight past cover point. They got an extra two runs from my throw.

After an hour, with the home side needing just ten to win, Wodger brought us all into view though whether this was so that we could take part in the match or watch the final throes of the annihilation I’m not sure. Their opening pair was still together and our bowlers were all demoralised.

The inevitable happened, of course.

With no one fielding at long on or long off the batsmen took every opportunity to drive the ball straight back past the bowler. And with no one at third man or long leg every snick past the wicket keeper brought a fat reward.

The match finished a few minutes later with the home side having ten wickets and eight overs to spare.

We left Little Swell with heavy hearts. Rightly or wrongly we felt that we’d been cheated.

The home side were delighted by their victory and invited us to celebrate with them in their local inn. But Wodger, speaking on our behalf and anxious to get as much distance between Jerry and their team as possible, declined politely.

* * *

Because the only pub in Little Swell did not have any rooms to let Wodger had booked us all in at the Bat and Belfry in Bideford. It was about half past eight that evening when we arrived and the general air of gloom and despondency which hung over the team matched the atmosphere in the hostelry. A long list of rules and regulations hung threateningly next to the receptionist’s desk and the only member of staff visible was a small, ferret faced man who greeted us with a warning that any damage to fixtures or fittings would have to be paid for. The inside of the pub was painted dark brown and this, combined with the fact that the lighting in the reception area and main staircase was provided by a single 60 watt light bulb, meant that it was difficult to appreciate the quality of the fixtures and fittings which we had been advised to respect.

After abandoning our luggage in our small, dreary, ill lit bedrooms we met in the small, dreary, ill lit bar where the small, ferret faced man responded to our requests for food with a startled, slightly offended, look that might have been more appropriate if we had asked him to provide us with a dozen geisha girls.

‘Food?’ he said, daring us to repeat our request.

‘Something simple will do,’ Jerry assured him. ‘Egg and chips.’

‘I’ve got crisps,’ said ferret face. ‘Prawn and cucumber, liver and kidney or garlic and onion.’ He reached behind him, rummaged around in a large cardboard box and produced a handful of crisp packets.

Bideford is not well endowed with good eating establishments. Or if it is then the establishments it has hide themselves away from travellers. We must have walked along every street in the town in search of a cafe or restaurant. By nine thirty we would have happily eaten anything other than liver and kidney crisps. A plateful of stale cheese sandwiches would have drawn gasps of delight from our starving mouths. A few bowlfuls of tinned vegetable soup would have had us writing letters of recommendation to the Good Restaurant Guide.

At ten we found a chip shop that was just about to close. The owners, a huge, worried looking man and his petite, nervous wife seemed alarmed by our presence in their shop.

‘Could I have cod and chips eleven times, please,’ said Wodger. ‘We’ll put our own salt and vinegar on.’

‘Cod?’ repeated the chip shop proprietor. He looked at his wife for encouragement.

‘And chips?’ she said, timidly.

Wodger repeated our order and Oily inspired a little activity by producing a handful of bank notes from his trouser pocket.

Fifteen minutes later we took proud possession of eleven portions of the tastiest, most beautifully battered, most exquisitely fried cod ever served outside Yorkshire and eleven portions of the hottest, most evenly textured and perfectly cooked chips ever served.

Unwilling to return to the Bats in the Belfry we strolled about the deserted streets of Bideford clutching our packets of cod and chips and doing our best to cheer one another up.

'Have you heard from your husband?' Jerry asked June.

June, her mouth full of chips, shook her head and moved away from the vicar's side.

'Funny,' persisted Jerry, 'him just going off like that.'

June and the vicar moved still further apart. They both looked distinctly uncomfortable.

'Rotten luck, you getting run out like that,' said Wodger to Jerry, anxious to change the subject and spare June and the vicar any further embarrassment.

Jerry tried to say something but half choked on a piece of fish.

'You'd be amazed at the number of people who choke to death,' said Brian, cautiously nibbling at a chip. 'I wonder if these were cooked in vegetable oil?'

'How are you enjoying being away from home?' Norman asked Simon.

Simon swallowed hard and looked down at the pavement.

'I suppose you get a bit homesick, eh?' persisted Norman.

Simon rubbed a sleeve across his face too late to stop a tear falling onto his chips.

'I hope the other places you've booked us into are better than the Bat and Belfry,' Oily said to Wodger. 'Bit miserable isn't it?'

'I'm sorry ...'Wodger apologised. He waved his arms about and scattered half a dozen chips onto the pavement.

'How's Sharon enjoying the trip?' asked Oily. He glowered at me. We both turned slightly and watched her as she stumbled along the pavement, restricted by her tight skirt and constantly struggling to maintain her balance as her slender heels click clacked across the uneven paving slabs. She seemed to get younger and younger. She looked up, saw us watching and waved a chip in our direction and tried to smile. She blew Oily a kiss but suddenly looked alone and vulnerable. I felt sorry for her.

Glumly and slowly we meandered through the streets of Bideford until tiredness and the coolness of the summer evening prepared us for our dark and gloomy rooms at the Bat and Belfry.

'Has anyone seen Arthur?' asked the vicar as we waited for the ferret faced man to open up the front door and let us in.

'Not since the chip shop,' said Norman. 'He was with us there.'

'Arthur will be all right,' Wodger reassured us. 'Arthur is always all right.'

Arthur was all right. He was stretched out unconscious across two uncomfortable looking seats in the Bat and Belfry public bar. Oily and I gently picked him up and carried him upstairs to bed.

'Never mind,' said Wodger, struggling to find ·a ray of optimism with which to scatter the dark clouds which had dominated the day, 'there's always tomorrow.'

* * *

CHAPTER SIX

When I awoke the following morning, the fourth full day of our tour, I felt wonderful. I had slept well and felt refreshed and ready for another cricket match. The sunshine was already filtering through the thin, unlined curtains of my bedroom and the motes of dust which danced in the beams of morning brightness seemed full of joy. The room was full of old fashioned furniture and had a faded look about it but all this seemed quite right and had I had the power I would not have changed a thing about it. Modern hotel bedrooms have a sameness, a dullness, a safe predictability about them which deadens the senses and numbs the mind.

Brimming with the joys of summer I leapt from my bed and wandered into the adjoining bathroom where I bathed in a huge, white enamelled cast iron tub with massive brass taps and an ingenious drainage apparatus and shaved my reflection in an ornate brass bordered mirror.

Breakfast was served in a room we hadn't seen before; a huge, panelled dining room which was dominated by a long, bare, oak dining table.

Along the whole of one side of the room a series of sideboards groaned under the combined weight of a dozen silver plate serving dishes, each one protected by one of those delightfully old fashioned shiny silver lids. There were rashers of bacon, some streaky, some less so, some simply cooked, some crisp; sausages of every imaginable size and shape; eggs scrambled, eggs poached and eggs fried; there were tomatoes and mushrooms, there were racks of toast and pots of piping hot coffee and tea.

Of the ferret faced man from the night before there was no sign at all. In his place there now appeared a small, well dressed rather dapper little man who, working apparently alone, kept the dishes on the sideboards full. Only the pencil line moustache betrayed the fact that our considerate host of the morning and our less than welcoming host of the previous night were one and the same person.

Oily said he thought that perhaps the fellow was a breakfast man, unsuited to evening time frolicking and feasting. I said I thought that perhaps now that he knew us better and was assured that we were not the sort of people to damage fixtures and fittings he felt more comfortable in our presence.

Strengthened and invigorated by a night's sleep and a good breakfast, but most of all by the realisation that we had a new match to play and could forget our dismal experience at Little Swell, we set off down the North Devon coast towards North Cornwall, Bude and our third fixture.

Anxious to arrive on time for this fixture both Jerry and Oily chose to follow Wodger in close convoy. Wodger, we discovered, had taken the precaution of stocking his car with copies of a complete set of West Country Ordnance Survey maps. Name a beacon, a disused church, a milestone or a cattle grid and Wodger could pinpoint it to within a yard. He had acquired a gentle familiarity with every contour line, every fence, every copse and every public house west of Somerset. A friend of mine swears that if you sit still long enough while they're making one of those maps you're likely to find yourself marked down alongside other landmarks and points of local interest.

We arrived at the site of our next match, Combe Regis Cricket Ground, at 11.30 am; parked our cars and were delighted to see that the ground was flat; no mounds, no hills, no dips, no hollows, nowhere for fielders to hide in wait.

We had not booked rooms in Combe Regis because the local cricket team fixture secretary had insisted that his team members would be delighted to offer us hospitality for the night. Normally none of us is too keen on this sort of arrangement. We prefer to pay our own way and retain our independence. Staying the night with cricketers against whom you've just played a match can be fraught with danger and embarrassment. But the Combe Regis secretary had insisted and Wodger said that it would have been rude to refuse his offer of hospitality.

And so with nowhere in particular to go we sprawled on the grass and enjoyed the gentle sunshine.

We'd been there for about twenty minutes when we heard what sounded rather like a herd of stampeding buffalo. It's remarkable how well sounds are transmitted through the earth and lying flat on our backs in the sunshine we all heard it.

It was Norman who spotted them first. There were about a dozen of them, dressed in matching blue tracksuits with the name of the cricket club emblazoned on both front and back. They were jogging along a nearby track and as they thundered past we could see that they all looked remarkably fit and in good condition. One or two looked slightly red faced but there was no puffing or wheezing. These, we realised with some alarm, were our next opponents.

As they disappeared over the horizon we looked at one another silently.

It was Oily who broke the spell.

'I don't have much faith in all that fitness nonsense,' he announced defiantly. 'Wears you out.'

I knew what Oily meant. He and I had tried it once.

It was before either of us was married. We'd decided one summer that instead of going away on holiday to have fun we ought to try and better ourselves. At the time everyone was doing it. You could go away on holidays where they gave you computer problems to solve from seven in the morning until nine at night or you could spend a month pony trekking through the Himalayas in an attempt to find yourself. The more money you'd got the worse the conditions you could afford to buy yourself. One couple I knew, who had spent a fortune on gadgets for their kitchen, had spent another small fortune on a holiday in Africa where they'd had to put up with facilities which they wouldn't have dreamt of tolerating if they'd been at home.

After looking at a pile of brochures Oily and I had decided to go away on a golfing holiday abroad. The brochure promised that we'd be able to reduce our handicaps, learn to play better golf and enjoy ourselves at the same time. It sounded irresistible.

We realised we had made a mistake on our first morning when, at about half past six, we were woken up by a chap in a pair of white shorts and a red vest who turned out to be the hotel's own resident assistant professional. He seemed awfully cheery and disgustingly full of beans for the time of morning but we thought we ought to show willing so we staggered down into the hotel lobby where we met all our fellow holiday-makers. There were about forty of us altogether; including would be golf champions from Germany, France and Sweden.

When he was satisfied that everyone was present the young professional led us all out of the hotel and down onto the beach. There, under the early morning sun, he gave us a pep talk, telling us that a good golfer needs to be in superb physical shape and assuring us that all the top professionals went through the exercise routine he was going to show us.

He then got us doing all sorts of bizarre and painful things, exercising muscles which had lain idle for years.

After forty painful minutes he led us along to a beach cafe where we had a snack of natural yoghurt, bran and orange juice. We were allowed ten minutes for this before we led back out onto the beach for a jogging session.

Oily and I found it all rather hard going and we tried to stop and take a break several times but every time we slowed down the professional would come back and shout at us. He was a meaty looking fellow, with muscles bulging through his cut off shirt, and he got quite nasty when we moaned so we tried to show willing.

The jogging stopped at about half past nine and Oily and I were looking forward to breakfast but it turned out that we'd already had that. We were given a drink of weak decaffeinated coffee and then led down to the hotel's own driving range where the senior professional and another assistant proceeded to show us why we were all terrible golfers. The first assistant, the muscular hunk who'd had us grunting through our callisthenics on the beach, disappeared and Oily and I suspected that he'd gone off for a proper cooked breakfast and a snooze.

By the time we were allowed out of the driving range at one o'clock we both had blisters on our hands and we were looking forward to a dip in the hotel swimming pool and a quiet after noon's sunbathing. We'd noticed that there were some very nice samples of bikini material being modelled around the bar.

But there wasn't any time for swimming, sunbathing or ogling. After a lunch which consisted of thirty calories' worth of lettuce and tomato we were hauled out of the dining room and dumped on the golf course where we were told that we were to take part in a four ball competition. We had to play with partners who'd been allocated to us and I found myself playing with a German and two Swedes. Oily was allowed to play with two Swedes and a German. One of Oily's partners spoke a little English but none of mine did and my German is about as good as my Swedish.

The competition finished at six. Dinner, which consisted almost exclusively of small pieces of octopus, finished at seven thirty. After that we all had to go along to the lecture theatre where one of the assistant professionals gave us a two hour illustrated lecture on aerodynamic club stress and the problems of turf maintenance in hot climates. The bulk of the lecture was in Portuguese.

It was announced at nine thirty that we could have the rest of the day to ourselves and for a few moments Oily and I shared a burst of mild optimism. But then the professional told us that he recommended an early night because the next morning's exercises were planned to start at six. Apparently they'd started late on our first morning so that we could have a bit of a lie in after our flight.

We stuck it for three days and the routine didn't change at all. Not surprisingly, we decided that it was all too much for us and that we didn't want to play golf that well after all. We escaped to the airport at five o'clock one morning and bought single tickets back to London. We didn't dare go back home because we'd told everyone where we were going and what we were doing so we spent the rest of the fortnight hiding in a small boarding house just outside Slough. When we finally got home no one could understand why we weren't suntanned. Neither of us played golf for six months afterwards.

* * *

Within minutes our prospective opponents were out of sight so we closed our eyes and lay back to soak up a little more sunshine. Doing nothing is an undervalued skill; it's something they should teach children.

We slept and rested for an hour or so, watching small, fluffy white clouds drift aimlessly across the sky, making daisy chains and watching butterflies dance around unpredictably. The only noise was the sound of buttercups bursting into blossom.

The silence, the peace and the stillness were eventually broken by Jerry. ‘What about some lunch?’ he asked, suddenly sitting up.

‘I’m comfortable here,’ said Brian. ‘But I’m hungry.’

‘Let’s have a picnic,’ suggested Sharon. ‘I like picnics.’

‘Great idea,’ said Simon.

‘Slight snag,’ said Wodger.

We all looked at him.

‘We haven’t got anything to eat,’ he explained.

‘We passed a small shop about a mile back,’ said June Tate.

Wodger stood up and got out his car keys, ‘Come on, then,’ he said to her. ‘Let’s go and get some food.’

‘I’ll come,’ said Sharon, standing up and straightening her clothes. Today she was wearing a lime green pelmet. It made an interesting contrast with her bright orange sweater.

I love picnics too, especially impromptu ones.

When I first got married we often used to have wonderful picnics. We used to have a small, old fashioned wooden sided Morris Minor and we’d go out for the day with a loaf of French style bread fresh from the local baker’s carried in an old fashioned wicker shopping basket together with a large chunk of cheese, a pot of pâté and a bottle of something tasty. We took two drinking glasses with us but never bothered with plates. The only cutlery we took was my Swiss Army penknife – we used the large blade for cutting the bread and the small blade for slicing up the cheese and spreading the pâté.

Then, one Christmas, a friend of ours who knew that we enjoyed picnicking bought us a neat, wickerwork basket which contained a set of matching blue plastic plates, half a dozen cups and saucers, a thermos flask, six blue plastic beakers, six blue plastic knives, six blue plastic forks, six blue plastic teaspoons and six blue plastic dessert spoons. There was even a cruet set made out of blue plastic.

It was a very well made picnic basket but it didn’t have any room in it for food so we still had to take our old fashioned shopping basket as well.

Then someone else bought us a special wicker basket designed for carrying a bottle and half a dozen drinking glasses. It had very smart leather straps to prevent the bottle and glasses from breaking.

By this time our picnics were becoming rather complicated affairs and friends, getting the mistaken impression that we rather liked to do things in style, bought us all sorts of other bits and pieces of picnic ephemera. My wife’s aunt bought us a lovely blue Irish linen tablecloth and four matching napkins while my wife’s sister got us four beautifully engraved silver napkin rings.

My grandmother bought us a little gas stove for our anniversary and my brother and his wife gave us two folding chairs with weatherproof double thickness nylon seats and specially structured aluminium struts. A cousin of my mother’s gave us a tiny travelling pewter mustard pot with a little lid that fastened down with the aid of a tricky little catch that could only be fastened with the aid of a pair of eyebrow tweezers.

Some people we met while on holiday in the Lake District were so impressed by our picnic equipment that they sent us a windbreak for Christmas and my sister’s parents in law made a tremendous fuss of presenting us with a groundsheet which had a lovely tartan pattern on both sides. One side was Campbell and the other side was McLeod. A friend I was at University with sent us a portable toilet, complete with bucket, tent and spade and a girl friend of my wife’s sent us a boxed set of assorted insect repellents. Until then I didn’t even know that there was anyone out there making boxed sets of insect repellents. It’s daunting to think that there are grown men who earn a living out of making and selling such things.

Although all these bits and pieces of impedimenta were undoubtedly intended to make picnicking easier and more comfortable they had the opposite effect. They made picnics unbearably complicated.

Instead of just being able to throw some food into a bag whenever the weather looked fine we had to plan days ahead and start packing before we knew what the weather was going to be like. If we wanted to go out into the country on a Sunday afternoon we had to sort out all the things we wanted to take with us on the Tuesday or the Wednesday at the latest. Then we had to get a refill for the gas stove and wash the plastic cutlery (which, however good our intentions may have been, always seemed to get forgotten and put away smeared with mustard) and freeze the coolers for the ice bag.

Altogether, it took a good three or four days to get ready for a picnic and so we could never be quite sure whether to plan for sunshine or for a cold wind. To cope with this uncertainty we bought a massive umbrella and table so that if it was wet we could still picnic comfortably. We also bought fur lined anoraks for ourselves on the grounds that our picnics took so much planning that they couldn’t just be abandoned because of bad weather.

Eventually picnicking became such a fearful chore that we lost interest. All the pleasure had gone out of it and none of the effort seemed really worthwhile. Every now and again our friends and relatives would ask us why we didn’t go out on picnics any more and we’d have to ahem and cough and change the subject quickly.

Less than a quarter of an hour after they’d left June, Sharon and Wodger returned with two plastic carrier bags full of food. They’d got bread, Cheddar cheese, Cheshire cheese, double Gloucester cheese, a couple of pound of apples, and a large jar of pickled onions. The boot of Wodger’s car was packed with cardboard boxes containing bottles of cider, bottles of lemonade and cans of lager.

‘We haven’t got any plates or glasses,’ said June.

The general view was that this did not matter in the slightest.

‘We haven’t got a knife to cut the bread and the cheese,’ said Wodger.

‘We have!’ I announced quickly. ‘My Swiss Army penknife will do just fine.’ I took it out of my pocket with a proud flourish and handed it to June. ‘Use the large blade for the bread and the small blade for the cheese,’ I told her.

* * *

CHAPTER SEVEN

Captaincy at club cricket level is a very different matter to captaincy in the professional game. Indeed I would claim that of the two, professional captains have things easier. They know that on the day of the match all their eleven players will turn up, on time and properly kitted out. They don't have to worry about losing their wicket keeper because his wife's relatives have suddenly turned up or because the bathroom shelf has come loose. They don't have to worry about their star opening batsman going to the wrong ground. They never wake up in the morning and find that three of their regular players have decided to take their summer holidays right in the middle of the season. They never lose four players when someone's ancient Ford Escort breaks down on the bypass. They never get to a match and find all their players suffering from wicked hangovers. They never have to try and sort out a sticking ballcock in the only lavatory or lend someone's girlfriend money to buy bread and cheese for sandwiches. They never have to worry about players who turn up with no cricket whites or boots.

And they never have to tour with ten players when eleven would be regarded by most captains as the absolute minimum. Touring with a player short is something of a nightmare for any captain. When the Combe Regis team turned up, at about half past one, Wodger's first task was to ask their captain if they could spare a player.

The Combe Regis captain, a tall, slender fellow with no chin, no hair and very little natural charm, looked down his nose at Wodger and shook his head.

'I don't think that would be right,' he announced, apparently offended by this request. 'One can't see the England captain asking his Australian counterpart to lend a player, can one?'

He actually used the word 'counterpart'!

Wodger looked rather guilty and embarrassed, like a head boy being told off by the headmaster. He muttered something apologetic and backed away.

'We'll have to play with ten men,' he told us, gloomily.

No one said anything. We knew from past experience that although it may not sound like much of a handicap, playing with ten men means almost certain defeat. However weak the eleventh player is his presence invariably makes a massive difference to the team's morale as well as to its fielding and batting prospects.

'What about Sharon?'

We all looked around to see who had spoken. It was Simon. He spoke so rarely that at first no one had recognised his voice.

There was a long and probably significant silence.

It was Jerry who broke it.

'Sharon?' he said.

Simon said nothing but went bright red with embarrassment.

'Seems a good idea to me,' said Brian. 'We've already got one woman playing. And she's done all right for us so far.'

'I don't think we have a lot of choice.' said Wodger with unexpected firmness. 'I think it's a splendid idea.' He paused and looked around. 'Does anyone know where she is?'

We found her sitting in Oily's car, using the driving mirror to help her perform heavy structural work on her eyelashes.

She seemed startled when Wodger opened the front passenger door and peered in at her. He must have looked like the leader of a lynching party with half a dozen of us crowded round behind him.

'Sharon, would you do us a favour, please?' asked Wodger, politely. 'Would you play for our team today?'

It would be an understatement to say that Sharon looked surprised. I think that she would have probably been no more startled if the Prime Minister had turned up and asked her to join the Cabinet. She lowered her hand, opened her mouth and turned and blinked at Wodger. She looked around and eventually spied the person she was looking for.

'Me?' she asked Oily.

Oily smiled at her and nodded.

We all smiled at her and nodded. It must have been a terrifying sight.

'I can't play cricket,' Sharon protested, as though suddenly remembering this complication.

'That's all right,' Wodger assured her. 'Bit of fielding and a bit of batting – that s all.'

'If you don't play we're a man short,' said Jerry ungallantly.

This simple honesty seemed to make sense to Sharon. 'OK, then,' she said. She opened the driver's door and clambered out of the car. She was wearing a pair of skin tight turquoise trousers and a lilac T shirt that was several sizes too small for her. As usual she was balancing on pencil thin heels that sank into the turf every time she tried to walk.

‘Great idea, Simon!’ said Wodger, with a broad grin. ‘It was Simon’s idea,’ he told Sharon across the Jaguar roof.

Sharon looked across at Simon and smiled. Simon blushed violently until his cheeks were as red as a new cricket ball.

‘We must find you some gear,’ Wodger told Sharon. He delegated this task to Oily, Jane and the vicar and hurried off to join the Combe Regis captain who, smartly turned out in a blue blazer with an MCC badge on the pocket, was standing impatiently on the edge of the pitch waiting to toss a coin to see who would bat first.

It was no surprise to anyone when we heard that Wodger had lost the toss and that we would be batting first. Three minutes later Norman and our gentle captain stepped out onto the pitch together and walked out to the middle.

Wodger took guard and we all watched in silent horror as their opening bowler, a huge chap with a massive, drooping moustache, walked back thirty paces to begin his run up. Lots of bowlers have long, meandering run ups designed to convince batsmen that they are going to bowl fast but this player’s walk back to his mark looked distinctly serious.

Thirty seconds later we all realised just how serious he was when his first ball clipped Wodger’s off stump and sent both stump and bails cartwheeling backwards towards the wicket-keeper long before Wodger had even begun to play a stroke.

‘Howzzzzzzzzaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaarrrrrrrrrrttt?’ demanded the bowler unnecessarily. He’d ended up standing about two yards in front of Wodger.

‘No ball!’ shouted the umpire simultaneously, stretching an arm into the air and turning towards the scorer’s table.

‘What?’ demanded the bowler, turning and staring at the umpire. Even from the boundary edge his glower looked intimidating.

But the umpire stood his ground.

He was a tiny little chap who didn’t look as though he’d ever have the nerve to say ‘boo’ to a duck let alone a goose. But although he flinched he didn’t look in the slightest bit inclined to alter his decision.

The bowler stood still and silent for what seemed to be an eternity then slowly started to walk back to his mark again.

His second ball was, if anything, even faster than the first.

Once again Wodger had not moved when the ball pitched a yard or so in front of him. But this time the ball clipped the edge of his bat and shot off through the slips to the boundary.

The umpire signalled a four. The bowler’s fury increased.

By the end of the over Wodger had survived two lbw appeals and had scored another two boundaries.

It was an unsteady but useful start.

Wodger’s luck continued for another two overs until he lifted a delivery from the other opening bowler high into the sky over mid on. The fielder circled underneath it for what seemed like a lifetime and then took a splendid, well judged catch.

We were 28 for 1 and even Wodger, when he returned to the safety of the pavilion steps, admitted that he had been ‘rather lucky’.

By the time I went in to bat we had survived about a dozen close appeals, scored 57 runs and lost four wickets. It hadn’t escaped our notice that all the dismissals had been sanctioned by just one of the umpires. The tiny little chap who’d ‘noballed’ the Combe Regis star opening bowler’s first ball still hadn’t accepted a single appeal. We were, however, comforted by the knowledge that *both* the umpires had been provided by the Combe Regis side. No one could possibly accuse us of anything underhand.

Sadly I did not share in the team’s good fortune. The first ball I received pitched on or just outside my off stump, broke viciously off the seam, somehow managed to find a space between my bat and my pads and neatly removed my leg bail. I looked down the wicket but the umpire, a plump, rosy cheeked, cheery looking fellow seemed perfectly well satisfied that the bowler had not broken any existing regulations.

Walking back to the pavilion after being dismissed is always something of a problem for me. I never quite know where to look. If I’ve scored a few runs I want to go slowly, to bathe in the applause of my team mates and any spectators who happen to be there. But do I wave my bat, raise my cap or wave a hand in modest appreciation of this earned approbation? Or, as so many professional batsmen do, should I simply hang my head and trudge homewards as though dissatisfied with my own performance?

Failing to score at all makes the walk back to the pavilion particularly difficult. Ideally, I think there ought to be a set of steps near every wicket and an underground tunnel back to the pavilion for the exclusive use of batsmen who’ve been dismissed for nought.

But there is, of course, no such escape. The walk back always seems at least twice as long as the walk out. And I don’t know which are worse – the looks of pitying sympathy one gets from one’s team-mates or the looks of ill-disguised disgust and contempt which adorn the faces of the deckchair spectators.

Gloomily I threw my bat down on the grass and sat down beside Norman and Oily.

'Rotten luck,' said Norman.

'Terrible luck,' added Oily. 'Unplayable ball.'

'It happens,' I said, philosophically, as though it didn't really matter.

My short innings seemed to mark a downturn in the team's luck. Brian was caught at mid on, the vicar was bowled round his legs and Arthur trod on his wicket trying to evade a short pitched ball which seemed to be aimed straight at his throat. When Simon gave a straightforward return catch to the Combe Regis captain we had scored 72 for 9 and our only hope was that Sharon, due to join June at the wicket, would launch her cricketing career in as spectacular way as June had a couple of days earlier.

Sharon's appearance as she went out to bat did not encourage confidence.

She wore a white short sleeved sweater belonging to Oily, a pair of white tennis shorts belonging to the vicar and Brian's batting pads which were the only ones small enough to fit her. No one had any boots to fit her and so she had to wear a pair of her own extremely high heeled shoes which Oily had carefully covered with white polish especially for the occasion. Her progress as she walked out to the wicket was slow but undoubtedly eye catching. The opposition were so startled by her appearance that no one thought to complain about her wearing high heels on the batting strip.

I don't know whether it was a result of instructions from the captain or not but the fielders crowded around her enthusiastically. As she bent over her bat (borrowed from Brian) the two silly-points and the silly mid-off seemed to think it necessary to move even closer and so they halted the bowler in his tracks while they edged forwards a few feet. Behind Sharon backward short-leg, short-leg, forward short-leg and silly mid-on all edged forwards a few feet too. By the time they were satisfied with their positions any one of them could have reached out and touched Sharon (and it was fairly clear that all of them would have liked to).

'Reminds me of a girl I once took to the golf course,' said Oily, turning to me with a broad grin on his face. He didn't seem to mind in the slightest that Sharon was the subject of so much attention. 'A cousin of mine,' he added.

I should perhaps explain that Oily has rather more cousins than anyone else I know. This is probably a result of the fact that he has a strange tendency to describe any eligible female between the ages of 16 and 30 as a cousin. The habit seems to have started a few years ago when Oily, who was engaged at the time, was spotted by his fiancée coming out of a restaurant with an extremely curvaceous blonde clinging to his arm as if he were a wall and she were a particularly affectionate ivy. When confronted by his intended the following day Oily explained that the young lady was a long lost cousin. Since then he has discovered new cousins fairly regularly. Most, to no one's surprise, have been blonde, all of them have been shapely and none of them has been shy.

Oily said that the cousin who wanted to learn how to play golf had never seen a course or a ball before but had asked for a lesson on a whim. Always a gentleman and keen to oblige Oily had arranged a suitable date and fixed to meet his pupil on the first tee.

He had, however, omitted to tell her what to wear and on the appointed day she turned up wearing an extremely short, white tennis skirt and a flimsy, diaphanous tennis blouse. Such clothes can undoubtedly be distracting enough when they are worn by a player on the other side of a tennis net. When worn by a luscious young woman who needs to be shown how to hold a golf club they can, Oily assured me, produce disastrous consequences.

Oily said that when he put his arms around her to guide her hands onto the shaft of a three wood he could feel the sweat breaking out on his forehead and his body responding to her inspiration in all the other usual ways. He said he couldn't cope with giving her much of a lesson and simply told her to get on with it.

The next few holes were, he insisted, the most extraordinary holes of golf he'd ever played. He said that he still goes hot and cold inside when he thinks of them. The first couple of shots were apparently managed without much of a gallery but by the time they had reached the second green Oily insists that there were at least a dozen members within ten yards. A couple were standing around offering practical advice, one or two were pretending to talk to Oily and half a dozen seemed to be looking for lost balls. Three of the younger groundsmen started following them around raking out every bunker as Oily and his cousin approached it.

Oily said that every time his cousin took a big swing at the ball her skirt swirled up around her waist and her blouse strained at the seams. He said that she was a well built young girl. He said it got even worse when she started crouching over her putter. He said the other members didn't know whether to stand behind her or in front of her.

'I've never known so many members of the golf club keen to offer advice and help,' Oily insisted. He said that when they got to the third green there was a small queue of players wanting to offer practical help and that it took them all thirty minutes to decide just how the ball was likely to run on the green.

Oily said that by the time they had reached the fourth tee his cousin had decided that golf was obviously great fun. He said she honestly seemed to think it was a team game.

‘There were at least three foursomes behind us,’ said Oily. ‘But none of them wanted to play through. They all said they were quite prepared to wait and perfectly willing to offer any help that might be necessary.’

Oily said that one or two of the spectators they’d acquired were quite overcome with emotion when his cousin took her first swing at the ball on the sixth tee. An elderly member, a former bank manager, collapsed in all the excitement and had to be wheeled back to the clubhouse on his trolley. There was, said Oily, a nasty moment when it looked as though no one was going to be prepared to go back to the clubhouse with the unfortunate fellow.

The lesson had to be abandoned on the ninth tee. Apparently his cousin’s blouse, unable to cope with the strain, lost three buttons at a single stroke. Oily said that his cousin would have been happy to go on playing, insisting that she was just beginning to enjoy herself, but that the police inspector who had by now appeared to help control the crowds had advised him that it might be best if they abandoned the game for the day, before any serious damage was done. Oily said he’d heard later that the casualty department at the local hospital had rung through to find out why so many elderly men in golfing attire were being wheeled in suffering from weakness and emotional exhaustion.

By the time Oily had finished telling his story (I sometimes suspect that he exaggerates a little but I know from personal experience that there is far more than a grain of truth in his reminiscences) Sharon had been at the wicket for several minutes, had scored two runs and had restored the team’s good fortune.

She was lucky not to be out the first ball she received. The ball, a very slow full toss, hit the edge of her bat and bounced straight into the hands of forward short leg. He juggled with it for a moment before putting it down.

She had another lucky escape two balls later. This time the ball ricocheted off her bat and bounced fairly harmlessly past point. At the other end June, who was backing up enthusiastically shouted ‘yes’ and started to run. The fielder only had to cover two or three yards to fetch the ball but he seemed mesmerised and even when he had the ball in his hand he seemed unwilling to part with it. Eventually, by the time the ball had found its way via the wicket keeper to the bowler’s end, Sharon had managed to sway her way down the pitch safely.

I don’t know whether it was the fact that Sharon’s presence on the pitch simply had such an effect on the Combe Regis players that they couldn’t play properly, or whether they were reluctant to see the innings end and her disappear from the crease but she and June managed to bat on for twenty five minutes and score a valuable 22 runs before June was bowled trying to hit a half volley for six.

We were all out for 94. We knew it wasn’t enough but at least our defeat would look dignified.

* * *

CHAPTER EIGHT

During the tea interval the Combe Regis captain came over to talk to Wodger.

‘Congratulations on a fine performance,’ he said. He smiled condescendingly. ‘Of course, as you discovered, we have some very fine bowlers.’ He stroked the area where a chin would have been if he’d had one. ‘You had some uncommon good luck, though, I’m sure you’ll agree.’

Wodger tried to look pleased, humble, embarrassed and slightly disbelieving and ended up looking rather simple minded.

‘With regard to your accommodation this evening,’ continued the Combe Regis captain. Slowly the rest of us gathered round, not because we were interested in what he had to say but because we’d never heard anyone talk like that before. He sounded like a circular from a civil servant. We listened politely. ‘We’ll look after you according to the batting order,’ he went on. ‘Your number one batsman will stay with our number one batsman, your number two batsman will stay with our number two batsman and so on.’ He looked around to make sure that we understood this and raised a questioning eyebrow. ‘Is that acceptable?’

No one spoke. But it wasn’t difficult to see that the plan was not widely received with enthusiasm. Sharon was looking at Oily and feverishly shaking her head. The vicar and June were both trying hard not to look disappointed.

‘We’ll give you the precise details at the end of the match,’ added the Combe Regis captain, clearly keen not to burden us with too much information.

And with that he nodded to Wodger, gave us all a chance to enjoy one of his smiles, turned sharply on his heel and left.

I looked around. Simon looked close to tears. Jerry looked glum. Only Arthur failed to show any emotion. He was lying semi-conscious a few yards away.

No one spoke for a minute or more. It was Brian who broke the silence.

‘Do we have to stay with them?’ he asked. ‘A pub would be much more fun.’ He looked around for support. The rest of us nodded and murmured our agreement.

Wodger looked distinctly uncomfortable. ‘It would be very impolite not to accept their offer,’ he told us sternly. ‘It’s very kind of them,’ he added, unconvincingly.

We sprawled on the grass, sipping cups of tea and munching thinly sliced cucumber sandwiches prepared by three of the Combe Regis wives. The sandwiches had the crusts cut off the bread and even the cucumber had been skinned before being sliced wafer thin.

I turned to Oily to ask him if he could think of any way of getting out of our social obligation to the Combe Regis team. But he’d disappeared.

I looked around and eventually spotted him deep in conversation with the umpire who’d helped us reach our semirespectable score. The umpire seemed to be complaining about something and Oily seemed to be commiserating with him. Oily isn’t the sort of fellow who readily offers sympathy to strangers and I found his behaviour slightly puzzling.

‘Have you heard from your old man, yet?’ Brian asked June Tate.

June turned to him and blushed. She shook her head. ‘Not a word,’ she said. ‘He knows where we are,’ she pointed out. The vicar, sitting next to her, reached across and patted her hand in a clerical sort of way. She turned and smiled at him.

‘Funny that,’ said Brian to no one in particular. ‘Him just disappearing.’

‘I don’t think he approved of me coming along,’ said June. ‘He’s a bit funny about things sometimes.’

We all know that Sergeant Tate is a bit funny about things sometimes so we all nodded sagely.

‘You’ve all been very kind to me,’ said June.

Jerry mumbled something inaudible and the vicar put a kindly arm around her shoulders. June leant in towards him and put a grateful hand on his knee.

‘We’d better wake Arthur up,’ said Oily suddenly. I hadn’t noticed him come back across to where we were sitting. ‘The umpires are getting ready to go out.’

Wodger sent Simon into the dressing room to find Arthur’s pads while he and Jerry tried to wake our wicket keeper by gently slapping his face.

‘Is he all right?’ asked the Combe Regis captain who’d wandered over again. He was padded up ready to bat. He wore a forearm shield and carried a brand new visored helmet and a thigh pad bulged under his immaculate flannels. He had an orange and vermilion silk scarf knotted around his neck.

‘Its OK,’ said Brian. ‘He’s only drunk.’

The Combe Regis captain involuntarily stepped back a pace as though afraid that, despite his armour, he might be contaminated by Arthur's condition.

'It's OK,' Oily reassured him. 'It's not infectious.'

The Combe Regis captain looked at Oily with distaste. 'I know that,' he snapped. 'My wife is a doctor.'

'Looking forward to your innings?' Oily asked, with a sneer in his voice. Oily share his disrespect generously.

'I think we might be able to show you a thing or two,' smiled the Combe Regis captain, patronisingly.

'Fancy your chances, then?' Oily asked him.

The Combe Regis captain looked startled; as though it had never even occurred to him that his team's success might be in any question, let alone that it might depend on anything as unpredictable as 'chance'.

'Don't suppose you feel confident enough for a bit of a wager?' said Oily. He dragged the word 'wager' out and grinned impudently.

The Combe Regis captain scowled. 'A bet?' he said. He paused and looked at Oily. 'You're prepared to bet on *your* side winning?' he asked incredulously. He put a scornful amount of emphasis on the word 'your'.

'Of course,' said Oily. 'I wouldn't bet on you lot.' He turned and looked at Arthur. 'How's he doing?' he asked.

'He'll be all right,' replied Brian. He and Jerry had woken Arthur up and were trying to persuade him to see if he could stand. To be honest Arthur looked fairly fit.

'I couldn't take your money from you,' said the Combe Regis captain, his lip curling as he stared in disgust at our merry wicket keeper. Arthur hiccupped loudly.

'Give me decent odds then,' Oily suggested.

The captain of the home side thought for a moment. 'Ten to one,' he offered. 'I'll take your money at ten to one.'

'OK!' said Oily. 'Done.' He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a wafer thin Alligator skin wallet. The Combe Regis captain looked at the thickness of the wallet and sniffed. Oily opened the wallet, took out five £50 notes and spread them out so that the Combe Regis captain could see them clearly. 'Who's going to hold the stake?' he asked.

I thought the Combe Regis captain paled a fraction at the size of the bet. He and the rest of us realised at the same moment that he stood to lose £2500 on the match.

Oily, still holding the five bank notes repeated his question.

'There's no need for that,' said the Combe Regis captain. 'I assume we're all gentlemen here.' With that he scowled at Oily, turned away and marched back to join his team.

'Bloody hell,' said Jerry. 'That's some bet!'

Wodger looked distinctly uncomfortable. 'If we win I won't like taking advantage of their hospitality,' he said, shaking his head.

'If we win we won't be taking advantage of anyone's hospitality,' said Oily with a broad grin. 'Two and a half grand will pay for rooms in the best hotel we can find.'

I think it was that prospect which wound us all up more than the worry of seeing Oily lose £250. We all knew he could afford that easily. But none of us found the idea of splitting up and spending the night with total strangers particularly attractive.

'Do you think we can do it?' asked Simon, breathlessly. He was flushed with excitement.

'Of course we can,' Oily assured him. 'It's in the bag.' He winked at Simon. 'You wanna bet too?'

'Oh, no!' said Simon quickly. 'No, thank you!'

* * *

Cricketers – and spectators – have always liked betting on cricket matches. The two have a long and close relationship. Back in the 19th century thousands of pounds would be bet on a single day's cricket and fortunes could be made or lost on the result of an afternoon's game.

Personally, I don't believe in betting any more. I only gambled the once but I lost so convincingly that it cured me of the temptation for life.

It was at a county match a few years ago. To be precise it was a match held at the beautiful ground in Worcester. The home side were playing Nottinghamshire and I'd gone to watch the match – a one day Sunday fixture – with an acquaintance I'd met through business. I didn't know him particularly well but he had tickets for the match since his firm was one of the sponsors.

'Do you fancy a bet?' he asked me as we settled ourselves down near to his firm's hospitality tent. They'd hired a bevy of attractive young girls to serve us wine, beer and sandwiches and I honestly thought I must have died and gone to heaven without noticing anything.

I muttered something about not being much of a betting man. The truth was that unless you count the occasional flutter in the works' Grand National sweepstake I'd never bet before in my life.

My acquaintance ignored me. 'I bet you that I can forecast the score of every batsman on both sides within 3 runs.'

I looked at him as though he'd gone stark raving mad.

'Really!' he insisted. 'I'm dead good at this.'

'Oh, no, I couldn't.' I protested.

'Every batsman's score to within three runs,' he said. 'I'll get a spare scorecard and write in all my predictions. We'll then give the scorecard to someone to keep.' He looked around and mentioned the name of someone he knew that we both trusted. 'At the end of the match we'll compare the official scorecard and my scorecard and see what I got right.'

'But that's impossible!' I insisted, realising that each batsman could score anything from 0 to 200.

'So give me odds that mean I stand a chance,' he said.

He thought for a moment. 'Ten to one,' he suggested.

I shook my head. 'Oh, no!' I said. 'I couldn't.'

'Twenty to one then?'

I thought for a moment. I really didn't like taking his money off him. The odds against him winning seemed outrageous. But the bet was becoming irresistible. And he was so keen that it seemed almost churlish to refuse.

'Pound a player,' he suggested. 'You get £1 for every player whose score isn't within 3 runs of my prediction. And I get £20 for every player I get within 3 runs.'

I thought again. I guessed he might hit lucky and get one right. That would mean that at worst I'd end up even. And if he got them all wrong I could always refuse to take his money off him.

'OK!' I said, still reluctantly.

'Fine,' said my acquaintance. 'I'll go and write out my predictions.' He got up and disappeared for a couple of minutes.

'Tom's got the scorecard,' he said, when he returned. I looked round and Tom waved a scorecard, carefully folded it and put it away in his inside jacket pocket. He winked at me conspiratorially.

I still felt bad about the bet but the game was good, the waitresses pretty and the booze plentiful. Within half an hour I'd put it to the back of my mind and by tea time I'd forgotten about the bet completely.

At the end of the match – Worcester had won by a whisker – my acquaintance jumped up.

'Right!' he said, rubbing his hands. 'Time to check on my scorecard!'

I must have looked puzzled.

'Our bet!' he reminded me.

'Oh, don't worry about that,' I insisted magnanimously.

'Have to,' he insisted. 'It's a bet.'

He stood up and made his way through the disappearing crowd. A couple of minutes later he reappeared with Tom in tow.

'The card please ...!' said my acquaintance to our Trustee.

Tom reached into his pocket, took out the folded scorecard and handed it to me.

'Here's a card of the final scores,' said my acquaintance producing a neatly filled in scorecard. 'Let's check them out.'

I still felt bad about it. I was worried about how much

I was going to win. I opened the card that my acquaintance had completed before the match and looked down the two sides. To my surprise he had predicted exactly the same score for each player. By the side of each name was clearly written a figure '3'.

I suddenly felt cold inside – and very sober.

Together we worked our way down the official scorecard, comparing each player's score with the pre-match prediction.

Altogether fifteen players had batted. Six out of the fifteen had scored within three runs of his prediction. This meant that I lost £120 and won £9.

As I wrote out a cheque for £111 I ruefully swore never to try betting again. If you look through a few old copies of Wisden you'll soon find the match concerned. I checked out a dozen other matches and discovered that at nearly all of them I would have lost heavily.

I remembered that miserable day as we trooped out onto the field behind the two umpires. I really couldn't see how we stood a chance of helping Oily win his bet – much as I wanted us to be able to do so.

* * *

CHAPTER NINE

The Combe Regis innings opened in a fairly spectacular fashion. So keen was the vicar to help Oily win his bet (his enthusiasm may have been enhanced by the knowledge that if we won we would probably be choosing our own sleeping arrangements in a local hotel rather than being split up and spending the night with the home team) that his first over contained three no balls and two wides. Even when the vicar managed to get his feet and the ball in the right spot the Combe Regis captain still treated his bowling with disdain. By the end of that first over they had scored 24 runs without the loss of a wicket.

Things looked up at the start of the second over when Jerry took over – though to be honest I'm not sure how much this was due to Jerry's bowling and how much it was due to the fact that the umpire at that end was the tiny fellow whose decisions had helped our batsman reach a relatively respectable score.

Jerry's third ball was slightly over pitched and it looked to me to be well outside the line of the off stump. The batsman, a huge, red faced fellow, took his eye off the ball, stepped down the wicket and swung his bat as though determined to send the ball into orbit. Unfortunately for him he missed completely and the ball hit his front pad square on.

For a moment I didn't think Jerry was even going to bother appealing. When he did it wasn't so much an appeal as an indication of desperation. It was the sort of appeal a bowler makes and regrets a split second later; the cricketing equivalent of a grown up putting a note up the chimney for Father Christmas.

The umpire didn't hesitate. His finger went up as though string operated.

For a moment no one seemed to notice. After his appeal Jerry automatically shook his head and started to walk back up the wicket, accepting the rejection that hadn't come. The batsman hadn't even bothered to look up at the umpire when he'd heard Jerry's appeal.

When everyone realised that the appeal *had* been successful the response was predictable confusion. Jerry hesitated for a moment and then leapt into the air in celebration. I'd never seen Jerry do that before. It wasn't the sort of thing he did. The batsman, opened mouthed and aghast, strode down the wicket to remonstrate with the umpire. The Combe Regis captain, torn between a feeling that he should respect the umpire's decision, support for his fellow opening batsman, dismay at the loss of a valuable wicket, and genuine surprise, didn't seem sure what to do. Eventually he simply prodded the wicket angrily with his bat and glowered at Wodger who had rushed over to congratulate Jerry.

Two overs later it happened again. This time Jerry sent down a ball that started on the leg side and seemed destined to test Arthur's agility more than usual. Somehow the batsman, the youngest player in the Combe Regis side, managed to move across far enough to flick the ball with his pad after missing it completely with the bat. From where I was standing it looked more like a wide than anything else. But the umpire didn't hesitate when he heard Jerry's appeal.

Suddenly, from being 24 for 0 the Combe Regis side had slumped to 28 for 2.

Three balls later I took the best catch of my life to dismiss the next batsman.

Jerry, brimming with confidence now, was bowling faster than any of us had ever seen him bowl before. He produced a ball that any professional would have been proud of. That's one of the magnificent things about cricket. Just occasionally even the worst batsman in the world will produce a stroke of world class authority and every once in a while a very ordinary bowler (not that I'm suggesting for an instant that Jerry's bowling could normally be described as 'ordinary') will produce a ball that has 'class' written all over it from the moment it leaves his hand.

The batsman played straight down the line intending to lift the ball straight back over Jerry's head. He got an edge and the ball soared higher and higher until I could hardly see it at all. For a while I watched it dispassionately, an innocent spectator bemused by this apparent denial of gravity. It looked as though the ball was never going to come down again.

And then I realised that from the position my neck was in it was beginning to look as though the responsibility for taking the catch would be mine.

It would be an understatement to say that I was horrified. The responsibility appalled me. The consequences terrified me. I looked around quickly to see if any one else was around and, to my total delight, saw that Norman, who'd been fielding near me at deep square-leg was running across to where I was standing.

'Mine!' shouted Norman, with uncharacteristic certainty.

I stepped back out of the way and watched him run forwards, his eyes fixed on the ball as it hung, apparently suspended, in space.

'Yours!' he said suddenly, with equal certainty.

Panicking, I moved forwards a few feet and looked up. I couldn't tell whether the ball was still going up or had started coming down. It seemed to be hovering right over me.

'Mine!' shouted Norman suddenly. He was standing right beside me.

I tried to move away again.

'Yours!' he cried almost immediately.

I snapped my head back and looked up. This time there was no mistake about it. The ball had finished toying with Isaac Newton's laws and was now quite definitely earthbound. It was hurtling down towards me at the speed of a bullet.

'Catch it!' shouted some distant fool.

I fixed my eyes on the ball and put my hands together as though in prayer. I cupped them slightly, held them to my chest and began to pray.

The ball thudded into my hands and I grasped it as though my life depended on it. My fingers and palms tingled with pain and the shock of the ball's landing pushed me down to my knees but I caught it.

I never know what to do when I've taken a catch. Maybe more practice would help solve this dilemma but I am always slightly embarrassed and bewildered. Should I simply toss the ball to the wicket keeper and modestly reassume my position in the field? Should I stand there and wait for my fellow fielders to gather round and offer their congratulations? Should I expect kisses? Applause? Plaudits of approbation? Should I throw the ball straight back into the sky as the professionals sometimes do? And if I do should I try to catch it again – to prove that the catch was no fluke – or should I simply let it fly off into the unknown? Should I rush over with the ball and congratulate the bowler? Should I offer sympathy to the batsman?

I simply stood there glowing with pride and feeling relief flowing through my body like a comforting heat.

Combe Regis were now 28 for 3 and their captain, still at the wicket, was beginning to look uncomfortable.

It was twenty minutes before we took another wicket and by then the home side had managed to take their score to 40.

This time the victorious bowler was Brian, bowling, almost inevitably perhaps, at the end where Jerry had had his earlier successes. All the bowlers were desperate to bowl at that end; no one was unaware that the umpire there was far more sympathetic to our cause than his colleague.

But Brian's first wicket owed nothing at all to the umpire. The ball with which he dismissed the Combe Regis captain was slow, well pitched up and didn't turn at all. But somehow the remaining Combe Regis opener missed it entirely. The ball slipped straight past his prodding bat, past his pads and onto the stumps. It wasn't travelling fast enough to knock the stumps out of the ground and simply fell, as though stunned, at the base of the wicket. The two bails landed on top of it and remained exactly where they'd fallen.

We all cheered Brian's success. Both June and Sharon rushed over and kissed him full on the mouth, and although we usually frown on that sort of thing in our side Brian didn't seem to mind at all.

At 40 for 4 the match was evenly balanced and our total of 94 no longer looked as vulnerable as it had when we'd completed our innings. The last wicket stand between Sharon and June was beginning to look all the more valuable.

Just when we were beginning to feel more confident, however, the Combe Regis side managed to rebuild their own shattering hopes. Slowly, our bowling began to look ragged and unthreatening. The two batsmen at the crease began to dominate the slow bowling partnership of Brian and Simon, and Wodger had to bring the vicar and Jerry back into the attack. After another forty minutes the score, from a promising 40 for 4, had become a distinctly dangerous 68 for 4. They only needed another 27 runs to win.

Jerry and the vicar had changed ends (there would have been bloodshed if they hadn't) and it was, perhaps not surprisingly, the vicar who broke through and kept our vanishing hopes alive. Once again it was an lbw decision and once again I think we were lucky. The batsman looked furious as he reluctantly left the crease and the vicar looked guilty rather than proud.

That made it 68 for 5.1t was anyone's match.

It was then that Wodger showed why he is, and deserves to be, our captain. He displayed wisdom, aggression and leadership in a single, bold move. He brought Sharon in from the deep to field at silly mid-off.

In previous matches June had caused some confusion among our opponents by her presence. She is an attractive and shapely woman. But June would not dream of flaunting her sexuality. Though generous and warm hearted she guards her charms and preserves her passion for the few rather than the many.

Sharon, it was already clear, had none of June's reservations. She clearly enjoyed making her presence felt among members of the opposite sex. And she was not hampered by self consciousness or unnatural modesty.

I don't think it's necessary to explain Sharon's tactics in close detail. I think it is probably enough to explain that when Sharon fielded close the Combe Regis batsmen found it difficult to keep their attention on the ball.

Almost before they knew what was happening to them two had been clean bowled and one caught behind by Arthur. Sharon's name did not appear in the scorebook but it should have done. With those three wickets Sharon secured her place in our side for the rest of the tour as effectively as if she had scored a double century.

Combe Regis had slumped to 75 for 8.

The departing batsmen complained, of course. They argued that they had been unfairly distracted. They claimed that we were cheating. But the umpire instantly rejected their complaints as sexist and irrelevant.

We would, I think, have won easily if the remaining batsmen had shared their predecessors' tastes. But, unfortunately, Sharon's charms lost their match winning quality with the arrival at the crease of the Combe Regis wicket keeper. We should have realised that he would be immune to Sharon's special skills when we saw him walking out to bat. But it was only when we saw him running between the wickets that we realised precisely why he seemed unaffected by our potential match winner.

The Combe Regis wicket keeper, like his partner, did not run so much as mince. Sharon's presence had about as much effect on him as it would have done on the average male window dresser. Indeed, just one over later Wodger had to remove Sharon from her potentially dangerous position and put her back in the relatively safety of the outfield. The Combe Regis wicket keeper soon looked as though he was going to turn the match single handed.

As the Combe Regis total moved slowly but inexorably through the eighties we began to lose hope. Our total just wasn't enough.

But then our luck turned again.

With the Combe Regis score on 92 for 8 it looked as though we were beaten. They needed just three runs for victory. We needed two wickets.

The vicar got the wickets we needed with consecutive balls. Both batsmen were out lbw.

We had won.

* * *

The Combe Regis players were determined not to show their disappointment or frustration. They congratulated us with thin lipped smiles and limp, brief handshakes and tried to look convinced when Wodger condescendingly offered them his condolences and reminded them that cricket is only a game.

Their captain, who had rushed into the home side dressing room at the end of the match, was white when he reappeared a few minutes later. He'd slipped his blazer over his cricket gear and the brightly coloured scarf that he still wore around his neck contrasted vividly with his pallor.

'I'm afraid it will have to be a cheque,' he said to Oily through clenched teeth. 'I don't have that much cash on me.'

'No problem!' Oily assured him. 'Just make it out to cash, will you? I'll take it along to the bank in the morning if that's OK with you.'

'Two thousand five hundred pounds?' said the captain as though hoping that Oily would correct him.

'That's right!' Oily nodded cheerfully. I almost felt embarrassed as I watched the Combe Regis captain struggling to keep his hand steady as he wrote out the cheque. But then I remembered how patronising he'd been and I managed to suppress the feeling.

'Er...' said Wodger, who'd been standing nearly, 'about the... er... accommodation...'. He looked distinctly uncomfortable.

The Combe Regis captain tore the completed cheque out of his cheque book and handed it over to Oily who read it carefully, folded it and stuffed it into his trouser pocket.

'It was very good of you to offer...' Wodger carried on, 'but on reflection we've got a long journey...' he paused again and looked around for help. No one else said anything. 'Maybe we ought to move on down the coast tonight...' he concluded tamely.

The Combe Regis captain put his cheque book away in his inside jacket pocket and shrugged slightly. 'Whatever you think best,' he said. Then he turned away, stared briefly as Arthur who had collapsed again and was now lying unconscious on the grass, and walked back to his dressing room.

We didn't wait to shower or change. We simply threw our bats, pads, gloves, bags and clothes into the three cars and left. Wodger had an RAC book and said he'd lead us to the nearest pub. Oily repeated his promise to buy us all accommodation in the best local hotel we could find and instructed Wodger that we wouldn't settle for anything that didn't have more stars than the Milky Way.

I tried to resist the temptation to ask Oily the question that I knew I didn't really want answered but in the end I could contain my curiosity no longer.

'How did you know that we were going to win?' I asked him, as we followed Wodger's cautious progress through the narrow Devon lanes leading away from Combe Regis.

'What do you mean?' asked Oily, in mock indignation. 'It was a bet.'

'I know you,' I reminded him. 'You only bet if you've got an edge. What was your edge?'

For a minute or so Oily didn't speak. He was enjoying his little secret.

‘I had a chat with one of their umpires,’ Oily said. ‘During the tea interval.’

‘I saw you.’

‘He hates the Combe Regis captain,’ said Oily with a broad grin.

‘Why?’

‘The Combe Regis captain has been having an affair with his wife,’ Oily told me. ‘The poor little chap only found out yesterday.’

‘And I don’t suppose the captain knows that he knows yet?’

‘He may have worked it out by now.’

Slowly it all fell into place.

‘So all these dodgy lbw decisions were his way of getting his own back?’

‘I like to think I helped give his revenge a little extra spice,’ said Oily. ‘I told him I was going to have a bet on the outcome of the match.’

‘It’s a lot of money,’ I said. ‘Can he afford it?’

‘He’s a solicitor,’ said Oily. ‘Who cares whether or not he can afford it?’

* * *

CHAPTER TEN

I was woken by the sound of a bell. For a moment I couldn't work out where the noise was coming from. But as I slowly dragged myself back into the land of the living I gradually realised where I was. I reached across to my left and picked up the telephone. The ringing stopped immediately.

'Your morning call, sir!' chirped a hideously cheerful receptionist at the other end of the line.

'What?' I demanded. I've never asked for a morning call in my life. I've always worked on the simple basis that God will get me up when he wants me to be up and about.

'It's seven o'clock!' the receptionist informed me as though expecting me to receive this news with glee.

I put the phone down. 'Thank you!' I said too late.

Wearily, I rubbed my fingers through my hair and scratched my scalp. I had, I reckoned, had about five minutes' sleep all night. And I knew it was pointless trying to get any more. I wondered who'd ordered the early morning call.

I switched on my bedside light and with the aid of its shadowy 40 watts peered around the room. Arthur was lying flat on his back making a noise like a distressed elephant in labour. I read somewhere that when he snores an ordinary man can make as much noise as a pneumatic drill. No one could possibly describe Arthur as an ordinary man and the sound he makes when he snores is no ordinary sound. A dozen turbo charged pneumatic drills would have been as butterflies fluttering in a vacuum compared to the noise Arthur was making.

Lying curled up on a makeshift child's bed, that two surly porters had squeezed into position across the ends of our two beds, Simon seemed oblivious to it all. It was a long time since I'd seen such a vision of innocence. He had the tip of his right thumb in his mouth and his pyjamas, I noticed, were covered with tiny pink lambs.

When we'd left Combe Regis we'd driven down to Newquay, the biggest resort on the northern coast and the venue for our next cricket match. Encouraged by Oily and aided by his four year old RAC guidebook Wodger had taken us to The Royal Grand Atlantic hotel, an impressive, grey Victorian building which was decorated with several illuminated signs confirming its status and desirability.

The hotel was situated right on the promenade with spectacular views of the sea and foreshore and it seemed ideal. The only snag was that the receptionist, an astonishingly elegant young woman who had clearly spent much of her life polishing and painting her nails, was only able to offer us five rooms.

Oily and Sharon offered to share one as, with expected generosity, did June and the vicar. Wodger, as captain, announced that he would take the only single room. That meant that Jerry, Brian, Norman, Arthur, Simon and I would have to share the remaining two rooms.

I've never liked sharing rooms with men – especially cricketers. A few years ago I went on a tour of East Anglia with a team from my old school. I can't remember whether it was through an earnest sense of economy or a misguided determination to meld us together into a team but the captain, a psychology student at a Scottish University, had arranged for us all to share rooms. He explained his occupation of a single room by reminding us of his extra responsibilities.

I found myself sharing a room with one of the most neurotic human beings I have ever met. His name was Peter and I still come out in a rash when I think of him.

It's a few years since the tour took place and my subconscious has, at last, managed to suppress most of the memories which seemed at the time to be carving permanent spots for themselves - but I can still remember our first night together.

We went to our room early; bathed, cleaned our teeth and got into our twin beds. I was looking forward to reading a few pages of a thriller I was enjoying.

'I don't think I'll be able to sleep,' said Peter suddenly.

I looked up from my book.

'The match tomorrow,' Peter explained.

I waited.

'I always get nervous before a match.'

I made some sort of sympathetic noise and looked down at my book again.

'It's the responsibility that really gets to me,' said Peter.

I found my bookmark and closed my book. I should at this point perhaps explain that Peter was probably the worst cricketer ever to hold a bat or ball. He never bowled, couldn't bat and had to be hidden somewhere in the outfield where he was unlikely to get in anyone else's way. He got his place in the team because he worked for a coach company and could rent their most luxurious model for next to nothing.

'People don't realise,' said Peter, glumly.

I turned off my bedside light in the hope that Peter would get the message.

'Batting at number eleven is a tremendous responsibility,' insisted Peter. He was still sitting upright in bed, his hands clasped neatly and his copy of Stamp Collectors' Monthly arranged precisely but unopened in front of him.

'Goodnight, Peter!' I said, hopefully.

'It's the most difficult place in the batting order,' Peter went on. 'People who haven't batted there don't realise.'

I grunted.

'The chap who bats at number ten is OK. There's always someone coming after him. But if you bat at number eleven there's no one else to take the responsibility off your shoulders.'

I opened an eye. Peter hadn't moved. His bedside lamp was still switched on and he sat bathed in its gentle light.

'Whatever happens there's a terrible responsibility.' Peter looked across at me. I quickly closed my eye. 'The chap at the other end is probably close to his 50 or his 100,' said Peter. 'The team may need another half a dozen runs to win the match.'

'You can only make one mistake as a batsman,' said Peter. I resisted the temptation to point out to him that he has probably made as many mistakes as he has faced balls. 'Batting at number eleven puts a terrible burden on a fellow.'

It went on like this for hours.

I lay there for a while but eventually I could see that I wasn't going to get any sleep so I gave up, turned my light on and opened my book again.

Two hours later he stopped talking.

I looked across. He'd fallen asleep in mid sentence. He was luckier than I was. Four hours later I was still awake. I'd finished my book and his stamp magazine and ended up reading the bible I'd found in the drawer of my bedside cabinet.

Neither Arthur nor Simon could be described as neurotic but they had both conspired successfully to keep me awake. Arthur through his snoring and Simon through giggling at Arthur. Arthur had been asleep when we'd put him into his bed (or maybe unconscious would have been a more accurate description) and even Simon had managed to fall asleep eventually. But for me it had been a long, noisy and disturbed night.

If there's one thing that annoys me more than lying in bed unable to get to sleep it's lying in bed unable to get to sleep and watching other people sleep. I jumped out of bed, drew the curtains and gently shook Simon by the shoulder.

'Time to get up!' I told him. 'It's a glorious day!'

It was too. The sun was already up and the day promised much. The view from our room was truly spectacular. Newquay is a well developed resort but it still has the raw wild charm of that northern coastline. There was hardly any breeze but the sea was crashing rhythmically on the distant rocks.

Simon didn't need waking twice. He threw his bedclothes to one side, jumped out of bed and rushed over to the window.

'What a view!' he said, full of excitement. 'Isn't this tour wonderful? I wish it could go on for ever. Did they ring to wake us up? The porter downstairs asked if we wanted an early morning call and I've never had a morning call before so I said 'yes'. Shall we go and wake the others? Where do you think we have breakfast?'

His enthusiasm pulled me from the brink of gloom. When Arthur suddenly grunted, rolled over and fell out of bed I laughed.

Arthur didn't stop snoring even then. We lifted him back into bed, then washed, shaved, and dressed ourselves and went down to breakfast.

* * *

After breakfast all of us except Arthur walked across the road in front of the hotel, down the steps and onto the beach. Arthur had woken briefly when Simon and I had returned to our room to clean our teeth and pack our clothes after breakfast but after taking a couple of long swigs from his never empty flask he had waved a cheery hand at us and pulled the bedclothes back over his head again.

Outside, the sun was moving from warm to hot and the sand beneath our feet was already heating up. All of us except Wodger and the vicar had brought bathing trunks with us and we stripped off and changed in a small, shady area protected by rocks. Actually, to be precise, not all of us who changed had brought the proper swimming apparel with us. June had a very tasteful one piece bathing suit with her but Sharon simply took off her mini dress and allowed her matching white panties and bra to serve as an impromptu bikini.

After we had splashed around in the sea for a few minutes Jerry spotted a game of beach cricket being played by a group of teenage boys. While Wodger and the vicar stumbled after us with our clothes in their arms we raced one another across the beach towards them.

Five minutes later Wodger had lost the toss and was busily directing us to our fielding places. In Arthur's absence I found myself honoured with the position of acting wicket-keeper. I've always had a fondness for wicket keeping.

You get a little sword by the side of your name on the score sheet but you don't have the awesome responsibilities of being captain. Since Wodger and the vicar were the only two of us who were still fully dressed they fielded furthest from the sea. The vicar got into the spirit of things by removing his shoes and socks and rolling up his trouser legs but Wodger, conscious of his responsibility and status, kept his shoes and socks on and allowed his grey flannels to flap unfettered.

I hadn't played beach cricket for over twenty years and most of our team seemed equally unencumbered by experience. Jerry opened the bowling and quickly discovered that bowling with a balding tennis ball on firm sand requires an unusual type of skill. His first ball bounced way over the batsman's head, over my head and was stopped by Simon only after it had bounced off a large wooden noticeboard which warned holidaymakers DO NOT THROW STONES AT THIS NOTICE. His second ball hit a footprint on the pitch and bounced off in the direction of mid-wicket long before the batsman had a chance to get anywhere near to it.

Apart from Simon our other bowlers suffered equal discomfort and embarrassment. Simon was the only one of us young enough to remember the very special skills that beach cricket requires. He knew that even a modest spinner can make a tennis ball turn at right angles on damp sand and he therefore bowled with commendable caution and restraint, relying on line and length rather than anything spectacular.

The opposition batsman, not one of whom was old enough to take shaving seriously, regarded our bowling with some amusement. Defence shots play no part in beach cricket and they seemed to get enormous pleasure out of thrashing out at every ball with wild, baseball type swings, comfortable in the knowledge that even if they missed the ball would be extremely unlikely to hit their wicket. There is also something deeply comforting and reassuring about the fact that the ball is soft and unlikely to cause any lasting damage even if it hits an unusually vulnerable part of the human body.

But despite the enthusiasm of the batsmen it was the extras which accumulated fastest. By the time their last batsman had run himself out our smooth cheeked opponents had reached three figures with ease. It was, we all knew, a formidable score.

Our innings had been under way for fifteen or twenty minutes before any of us realised that we were facing a problem that none of us had encountered before. The tide was coming in - and coming in fast.

'Let's move the wickets,' said Wodger, putting down his bat, turning round and pulling two stumps out of the sand. He hopped about as he did so in a vain attempt to keep his shoes dry.

There was a loud chorus of disapproval and dissent from the fielding side.

'You can't do that!' said their leader, a tall, skinny youth who wore red trunks and a dirty bandage on his left elbow.

'But the tide's coming in!' explained Wodger, unnecessarily. 'The pitch is getting wet.'

'Natural playing conditions!' exclaimed the red trunked youth. 'You can't suddenly move the wickets because you suddenly don't like the playing conditions!'

He seemed to have the support of all his fellow team members and I confess that I found that his argument did contain an uncomfortable amount of logic.

'But the tide wasn't coming in when you batted!' protested Wodger.

But Wodger had lost the argument and he knew it. There are few things more embarrassing than the sight of a grown man wanting to change the rules when he's losing a game of cricket to a group of children. Wodger should have known better than to start such a confrontation. Our opponents were, after all, so young and innocent that they had regarded Sharon's presence in our side with lightly disguised disapproval. Cricket, they all knew, was not a game for girls but if we didn't know it that was our problem.

Our innings was a disaster of quite heroic proportions. It is difficult to play graceful and effective shots when the ball splashes soggily in several inches of seaweed laden surf before being dragged seawards by the undertow. It is difficult to crack a ball through the covers when the splash the ball makes temporarily blinds you with spray. It is difficult to move your feet to the pitch of the ball – in an attempt to turn a short pitched delivery into a full toss – when the water is up past your ankles and you are aware that if the ball should land and float past you out of reach the wicket keeper will have the imaginary bails off long before you can even turn round let alone run back to safety.

We scored a total of 11 and 6 of those were extras.

* * *

CHAPTER ELEVEN

After our last wicket fell (it was the first time I'd ever seen eight stumpings and two run outs in one innings) Oily attempted to re-establish our status as cricketers of grace and generosity by buying our young opponents a round of large ice cream cornets each of which was decorated with a stick of flaky chocolate.

It was while Oily was settling the bill with the ice cream salesman (and struggling unsuccessfully to negotiate a bulk discount) that I noticed one of our erstwhile opponents sitting on a rock glumly examining the bat we'd all been using and allowing his untouched ice cream to drip messily into the sand. There was an unmistakeable tear coursing down his left cheek.

Equipment is never a crucial factor in beach cricket. I have seen people using a furled umbrella as a bat and having tremendous fun. But, in addition to the balding tennis ball our match had been played with a set of six professionally turned stumps and an ancient, heavy cricket bat which bore the fading stamped signature of Denis Compton and which had clearly been involved in its long life in many crucial and memorable cricket campaigns.

It's true that, after a lifetime of heavy use, the bat had acquired so many layers of bandage that hardly any of its original willow was visible but it was, nevertheless, a proper cricket bat and not an umbrella. It deserved to be taken seriously.

'What's up?' I asked the glum and cheerless child.

He slowly lifted his head and looked up at me. There was a deep and searing sadness in his young eyes.

'My bat's broken,' he said after a moment's hesitation.

I held my hand out for the bat and when, with reluctance, he eventually handed it to me, examined it. He was right. The splice between handle and blade was fractured and the bat seemed to have no future.

'Did we do this?' I asked him.

The boy looked up at me and then, almost imperceptibly lifted his shoulders in a pitiful expression of uncertainty.

'It seemed OK when we were playing,' I said.

'What's the matter?' asked Norman, who'd joined us.

I explained.

'That's a terrible shame!' said Norman, genuinely sympathetic.

'Let's go and get you a new one,' I said. 'Where's the nearest sports shop?'

* * *

Sports equipment shops are little more than toyshops in disguise.

I once used to play golf with a fellow who was quite convinced that one day he would find some piece of equipment which would revolutionise his game, prevent him ever topping a ball again and cure his long standing habit of slicing the ball. He used to spend a fortune in the professional's shop at the course where he played. He must have been one of golf's best customers. If he'd chosen to take up fishing instead of golf several major international companies would have probably been forced to seek alternative sources of finance. Instead of having huge factories on large industrial estates they would have probably been struggling along in converted garages in Balham.

Every time we came out of the locker rooms changed and ready to play he would decide that he'd just have to slip into the professional's shop for a moment. He went on the pretext that he needed to buy a tee, though his golf bag was stuffed with enough tees to carpet the average sized fairway. Once he got inside the shop he would behave just as a small boy would behave in a sweet shop. Wide eyed and full of perpetual innocence he would wander around looking at everything as though he'd never seen it before.

Then he would, apparently idly and without real interest, select a club from the rack. 'Is this new?' he'd ask the professional who would have been hovering nearby in anticipation of the request.

'It's just come in,' the professional would assure him in a conspiratorial whisper. 'I think it's the only one I've got.' The professional would then saunter forward slowly and take the club from my friend with exaggerated care. He would fondle the shaft, the head and the grip and look as though he was about to sell a favourite daughter into slavery. I've seen antique dealers use exactly the same technique.

'It's absolutely revolutionary,' he would whisper. Then he would rub his fingers up and down the club and point out some special marking or some other modest peculiarity.

'Look at that!' He'd tell my friend. 'Have you ever seen anything like that before?'

My friend, already convinced and desperate to buy, would shake his head as though hypnotised.

'There's already talk that the Royal and Ancient might try to ban it because it will make the whole game too easy,' the professional would whisper, looking over his shoulder as though to make sure that no one else was listening. 'But for the moment it's perfectly legal ... there's nothing anyone can do to stop a player using one of these ... nothing in the rules as they stand.'

And that would be that. Having gone into the shop for a golf tee my friend would walk out with yet another armful of metalwork. He had more than enough clubs to equip both sides in the Ryder Cup.

Not that he limited himself to clubs, of course. Sometimes it would be a set of specially made soft leather golf club head covers. Occasionally it would be a new trolley with extra wide wheels and a spring loaded brake. Or it would be a dozen specially formulated uncuttable golf balls, all of which he would lose long before he hit them hard enough to test the manufacturer's promise.

He used to buy armfuls of gadgets and his friends and relatives were never at a loss to know what to buy him for Christmas or for his birthday. He had special suede non stick putting gloves; super absorbent towels for drying his hands, clubs and balls; a giant sized umbrella with an automatic closing button as well as a button for opening it; special golfing binoculars fitted with an electronic range finder; several different types of putting trainer; a driving range for his back lawn; special golf shoes with a swivel built into the sole of the left shoe and a herd of golf bags which filled his garage and kept his car out in the snow and rain in winter.

In the past choosing cricket equipment was never such a hazardous or potentially expensive hobby. You went into the sports shop when you decided to start playing cricket and bought yourself a bat, a pair of pads and a pair of gloves. You collected a pair of flannels, a white shirt, a sweater, a pair of good boots and a pair of white socks. You were reminded by the assistant that you'd need a box and if you had any money left you might have spent it on a bag into which you could cram all your gear.

Regularly, every ten years, you would return to the shop to buy another pair of white socks, another bottle of linseed oil and some more strapping for the bat. You would look at the prices of new bats with a mixture of astonishment and horror and you would give thanks that you'd bought your bat years before inflation hit the game.

It's not like that any more. Today's cricketer is as vulnerable to commercial exploitation as yesterday's golfer.

Today's cricketer can choose between several different types of helmet. There are thigh pads, elbow guards and chest protectors to be studied. There are ankle pads, a dozen varieties of batting glove and sun hats and visors to compete with the traditional batting cap.

In the old days choosing a bat was fairly simple. You'd pick up a couple of bats and play a few imaginary strokes with them. You'd execute half a dozen perfect cover drives and marvel at the ability of the salesman to remain unimpressed by your genius. You'd check to make sure that all the bats had handles stout enough for knocking in the stumps and then you'd choose the bat that had the best inscription and the most impressive signature at the top of the blade.

It's all changed. These days there are bats with bits cut out of the back and bats with bits hollowed out from the sides. There are bats with special coatings (linseed oil is as old fashioned as the leg break bowler) and bats with scientifically approved springing in the handles. Bats are designed by ergonometricians rather than signed by Test players. There are rows of them and they cost so much that you can probably get a mortgage if you ask for one.

The twenty four of us crowded into the sports shop (we'd discovered rather belatedly that our opponent's side had 14 members) and twenty three of us watched and gave unheeded advice as the small boy with the broken bat selected his replacement.

As I emptied the contents of my wallet into the shop keeper's till (with a light heart – it was a good cause) Oily decided that since June and Sharon were now full time members of our side it was time for them to be properly equipped. So, the whole process began again with the only difference being that this time the recipients of our accumulated wisdom seemed grateful for it. There was some alarm and confusion among the two assistants when Oily reminded Sharon and June that they would need to buy 'protectors' but the embarrassment was overcome and the necessary equipment provided and quickly wrapped.

As we prepared to leave the shop I caught sight of Oily watching the proud young owner of a brand new bat handing over its broken and useless predecessor to one of his companions. The recipient of this largesse seemed delighted. He'd obviously never owned a bat of any sort before and a broken bat was clearly better than no bat at all.

'Would any more of you lads like new bats?' asked Oily, suddenly and unexpectedly.

For a moment there was silence in the shop and then, suddenly, there was chaos and pandemonium as a forest of hands shot skywards and a chorus of tinny voices cried: 'Me!'

While the two assistants struggled to pull bats off the shelves fast enough for all the budding batsmen Oily slipped out of the shop to cash the cheque he'd received the day before from the Combe Regis captain. By the time he returned, with his pockets full of cash, everyone in the shop was smiling.

* * *

CHAPTER TWELVE

Fresh from our defeat on the beach, and with Wodger's shoes still squelching, we arrived at the North Hawkwater Cricket Club Ground less than half an hour after we had finished an early lunch in a fish and chip cafe on the promenade and with a full hour to spare before our match against the Hawkswater first eleven was due to begin.

Prior to lunch we had watched our beach cricket opponents' race back to their waterlogged pitch on the sands. As they ran they waved their brand new bats about them and, armed with so much heavy duty woodwork, made a strangely menacing bunch. We had then returned to the hotel for just long enough to wake up Arthur and to arrange for the hotel staff to move our baggage into such single rooms as had become available. To my delight I discovered that I would be spending my second night at The Royal Grand Atlantic Hotel with at least one partition wall separating my ears from Arthur's snores.

Climbing out of the cars we stretched ourselves in the one small patch of sunshine that was available and looked around.

The North Hawkwater Cricket Club had prepared its ground in a small, oval clearing that was surrounded by a thick boundary of mixed woodland. All around the Ground a mixture of oak, sycamore and beech trees stretched upwards for sixty feet or so. Here and there, through the trees, we caught glimpses of large and impressive looking private houses. To reach the Cricket Club Ground we had had to drive for three quarters of a mile or so along a heavily rutted single track that looked more suitable for tractors than for cars, but the ground's position made the journey well worthwhile. The trees around the clearing isolated us from the world outside and the only sounds we could hear were those of birds singing and squirrels scurrying.

The small pavilion was made entirely of wood and although it was relatively newly built it had been designed according to the traditional Victorian principles. It had a red tiled roof and a raised balcony running along in front of the two dressing rooms and the large centrally situated bar area. A small brass plate attached to the lintel above the front door announced that the pavilion had been built by a Mr. Thomas Winsden.

Our opponents didn't begin to arrive until about a quarter of an hour before the match was scheduled to begin. They were, to say the very least, a mixed bunch. Three arrived in an old, battered Land Rover, one arrived on a bicycle, one arrived in a brand new Rolls Royce and the remainder turned up in the usual mixture of sports and saloon cars. One or two carried large, expensive looking leather sports bags marked with their initials but several had their cricket gear stuffed into plastic carrier bags.

We introduced ourselves to one another, they showed us to our dressing room and we got changed.

When we emerged onto the terrace outside the pavilion to watch Wodger lose the toss we were astonished to see that the ground had become ringed with spectators. Most were sprawled on rugs or simply on the grass but several had brought deck chairs, small tables and picnic hampers.

In our class of cricket we aren't much used to spectators. There are usually half a dozen enthusiasts gathered in front of the pavilion but they are invariably relatives or close friends of the members of the home team. Such support as exists is usually drawn by friendship or loyalty rather than enthusiasm for the game itself or the expected quality of the cricket to be played.

'Spectators!' hissed Norman, whose powers of observation have always been impressive. Nothing much escapes his notice. You cannot ring a small cricket ground with spectators and expect Norman not to notice.

We stood and stared for a few moments at the impressive circle of plaid rugs, pork pies, lemonade bottles, striped canvas deck chairs and the other inevitable impedimenta associated with cricket watching. There was even a small contingent of first aid experts sitting next to the tent they'd pitched to the left of the pavilion.

For a moment or two none of us spoke but I could tell that the others felt as uncomfortable as I did in the face of this massed expression of interest. Somehow spectators make a match seem more serious and more important than it is. Without any spectators you can miss a catch, bowl a wide or step on your wicket without any real sense of embarrassment. Other cricketers will usually ignore such trivial errors. After a moment or two everyone will have forgotten. Another over will start, another batsman will take strike and the game will go on. Unpleasant memories can be erased or pleasantly distorted. Without spectators there to remind you of the truth (and to remind you that by their very presence the truth cannot be suppressed) it is possible to disguise or rearrange the past so that it becomes more acceptable.

Without spectators it is possible to make your batting errors a consequence of misfortune rather than any lack of skill or application. The ball hit a stone on the wicket. The run out was someone else's fault. The wind blew the bails off. The bowler came out of the trees. The sightscreen was in the wrong place. The umpire was short sighted, long sighted or ignorant of the new LBW law. The catch was taken off your elbow. The ball bounced off the wicket keeper's pads. These excuses are as commonplace as they are numerous. They are a normally accepted part of the game; as necessary and as inevitable as the tales the fisherman tells of the one that got away. So vital are these simple reorganisations of history that every one else in the team will help you convince yourself that your imagination is more accurate than the truth.

Spectators destroy all this. Spectators are a living and constant reminder of incompetence and frailty.

It's all right for professionals to have to put up with spectators. They are paid to feel incompetent and frail. But however honoured and flattered we may be by their presence we club cricketers do not really like spectators. They make us too vulnerable to shame and expose us to the embarrassment that is too often associated with the truth.

And the first aid tent didn't help either.

Cricket is not usually a particularly dangerous game. But nothing is guaranteed to remind players of the hazards more effectively than the presence of a St John's Ambulance representative or a Red Cross worker.

Drive at seventy miles an hour down the motorway and you will feel secure and safe from harm until you see an accident – or even an ambulance. The sight of all that mangled metal and blood, or the vision of an ambulance hurrying someone in pain to hospital, is an instant reminder of just how fragile the human body is.

Similarly, the sight of a first aid tent is an effective reminder of bruises, fractures and bloody noses.

A friend of mine who had been in London for a gloomy meeting with a solicitor (he was arranging his own bankruptcy) once popped into Lord's to try and soak up some of the atmosphere and cheer himself up. But he claims that it was the most miserable and frightening experience of his life. He says that the few hours he spent at Lords frightened him more than the visit to the solicitors.

Although it was a sunny, warm and pleasant day he says that they didn't actually play any cricket. He says the umpires kept coming out, studying the grass very carefully and then going back into the pavilion again.

He says they must have gone out onto the field at least half a dozen times to have a look around and wave to the spectators. He says he wondered at the time if they were just waiting to see if enough spectators came to make it worth while playing. In the end he says that a man in a light raincoat told him that they were trying to decide whether the grass was too wet or too dry, too short or too long. He says that the man told him that they have to look after the grass at Lords to make sure that it's always kept in good condition.

My friend says that in the end all the excitement of wondering whether or not there was going to be any cricket seemed to have got to one of the spectators for the loudspeaker announcer suddenly interrupted the silence to ask Dr Roberts to go to the first aid post. My friend says that he was impressed to hear that they had a doctor on call at a cricket match and that for a few minutes he felt strangely reassured. He says that he walked round the ground in a very carefree state of mind, knowing that Dr Roberts would be there to look after him should he fall ill.

The good feeling didn't last long, however, for a few minutes later the loudspeaker announcer again broke the silence with another request. This time he simply asked for a doctor - any doctor - to go to the first aid post.

It was, says my friend, a trifle disappointing to know that Dr Roberts wasn't on the ground but he consoled himself with the thought that Dr Roberts' patients were probably being well looked after somewhere else in London. Anyway, he says, it was nice to know that the ground announcer had confidence that there would be a doctor of some kind among the spectators. He says he wasn't quite as confident as he had been when he thought that Dr Roberts was around because he had got to trust Dr Roberts but that he still felt quite happy about things. He says it was like being in hospital as a visitor, knowing that if you fell over or got hit by a porter with a runaway trolley there would be expert help available immediately. After a moment or two he says he even began to feel pleased that Dr Roberts hadn't bothered to turn up since it was clear that there wouldn't really be any need for him. He says he had a vision of a dozen eminent specialists scrambling towards the first aid post to offer their expert advice and support.

Sadly, that sense of comfort didn't last very long because about five minutes later there was a third appeal. This time the announcer sounded a little more worried. He asked for a nurse to go to the first aid post just as soon as possible. My friend says that he found this chilling. He says he suddenly became very worried and couldn't help wondering what was happening at the first aid post and why there wasn't a doctor around. He claims he went quite cold with fear and stopped eating the pasty he had bought himself in case he choked on it. He says he's never felt quite so ill or so frightened in his life.

When, a few more minutes later, the announcer came back on to beg anyone with any first aid experience to go directly to the first aid post my friend had had enough. He put down his pasty and walked slowly and carefully out of the ground. He says he had never been so relieved to leave anywhere in his life and that it was only when he got outside that he began to breath properly again. According to him being at Lord's that day was like being sentenced to a slow, lingering and painful death and he still says that he wouldn't have stayed in there a moment longer even if they'd started playing cricket.

* * *

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

We began to see why the spectators had turned up when Wodger lost the toss and we found ourselves asked to bat first.

The man who opened the bowling for the home side was about a foot taller than anyone else on the field. He had huge black, bushy eyebrows and a large, straggly black moustache that covered his mouth entirely. He was built rather like a small apartment building and when he began his first, long, determined run up to the wicket I was sure I could feel the ground underneath me shaking even though he was sixty to seventy yards away from us at the time. The top of his head was almost entirely bald but he had a fringe of thick black hair at the back of his head which waved and danced in the breeze as he ran in to deliver his first ball.

'Is he fast?' Brian asked the nearest spectator, a plump, middle aged woman who was managing to butter endless slices of bread without taking her eyes off the cricket.

'You'll see!' said the woman without moving her eyes or breaking her buttering stroke.

At this point I should perhaps mention that no one in our side ever wears a helmet.

There are two reasons for this.

First, in our class of cricket we don't usually come up against bowlers who are menacing enough to make helmets essential.

And second, we can't afford them.

Oily did buy a helmet when they first became popular but I think he felt bad about being the only member of the side to wear one. He offered to lend it to the rest of us but Oily's head is so large that for most of us it was like trying to bat while wearing a coal bucket. On the single occasion when I tried to bat in it I found that unless I kept my head tilted backwards all the time I couldn't see anything at all. Eventually, partly through a wish to help maintain the team spirit but mainly through a sense of embarrassment, Oily abandoned his helmet.

The sound of a cricket ball hitting a skull always makes me cringe.

On this occasion I didn't see the ball at all. One moment Wodger was standing, gently tapping his bat in his crease. The next moment he was lying flat on his back and a fielder was running in from fine leg to catch the ball. The wicket keeper and umpire later insisted that the ball had merely caught Wodger's head a glancing blow before flying off down the leg side but the sound we heard suggested a more definitive impact.

Cricket injuries fall into two distinct categories. On the one hand there are the injuries which produce laughter rather than sympathy. Into this category I would put anything which involves an umpire's ankle or a batsman's groin. On the other hand there are the injuries which produce a feeling of nausea deep in the stomach of anyone who is watching at the time. There is no doubt that Wodger's injury fell into the second category.

Alarmed by the sound we had heard when the ball hit Wodger's head Oily and I both ran onto the pitch to join the huddle of players and umpires which had quickly gathered around our stricken captain. There was blood everywhere.

'How is he?' I asked no one in particular and immediately felt foolish. What a stupid question. Why do we ask these things?

'He's been hit on the head,' said one of the umpires, equally usefully.

Oily and I knelt down beside Wodger's head. The wicket keeper and another fielder had already moved Wodger onto his side so that he didn't swallow his tongue. The blood had already spread onto his shirt, trousers, pads and bat. Several fielders were also spattered with blood, as were the stumps. The wicket keeper, who seemed to be in charge, had folded a linen handkerchief into a small pad and was using it to help stop the bleeding. He kept his thumb pressed on the pad as he turned towards us. He was about to speak when Wodger, who looked whiter than I ever imagined any human being could be without dying, suddenly groaned and tried to lift an arm up to his head.

'He'll be OK,' said the wicket keeper. 'But we'd better get him to the hospital for an X ray.'

As though to justify the wicket keeper's prognosis Wodger groaned again and opened his eyes. He blinked for a moment or two, looked up at Oily and I and tried to smile.

'Lost sight of it in the trees,' he said apologetically.

The two first aiders, who had by now joined us all, bent down and lifted Wodger onto the stretcher which they'd brought with them. One of them took a bandage out of the satchel which was slung around his neck and used it to hold the wicket keeper's padded handkerchief firmly pressed against Wodger's scalp.

'I'll be all right in a couple of minutes,' insisted Wodger, waving an arm around and nearly falling off the stretcher. He opened his eyes again and blinked once more. 'I think the ball must have kicked on a spike mark,' he said. 'It reared up a bit.'

'They're taking you to hospital for a precautionary X ray,' I told him. It was a phrase I'd heard before and even though I'd said it I found it strangely reassuring. I hoped Wodger was equally calmed and comforted by it. 'I'll come with you.'

Wodger tried to smile again, closed his eyes and folded his arms across his stomach. Someone handed me his bat to carry.

The first aiders moved towards their tent with commendable speed and efficiency and once there carefully lifted Wodger into the back of a capacious Ford van which was parked nearby.

* * *

The doctors at the local hospital were very good. They X rayed Wodger, dressed his wound and took him along to the ward where they insisted he would have to stay for 24 hours' observation.

'You get back to the match!' Wodger told me. 'But watch out for the uneven bounce – that s what caught me out.'

I promised that I would, told him we'd be back to see him that evening and found a taxi outside the hospital to take me back to the North Hawkwater Cricket Club Ground. The two first aiders had hurried back to the ground the moment they'd deposited their patient in the casualty department. They said they didn't like to be away for too long in case they were needed.

'He's a bit shaken and the doctors say he'll have a headache for a day or two but he'll be OK,' I told the others when I got back. 'I said we'd call in and see him after the match.'

'You're just in time,' said Jerry, who had his left arm wrapped in a makeshift sling. 'We moved you right down the batting order but you're in next.'

'What's the score?' I asked.

'We're 62 for 8,' said Oily who was sitting on the pavilion steps with one foot resting in a bowl of water.

'It's the dentist who's doing all the damage,' said Norman. 'He's a bit out of our league.'

Norman had a large swelling just under his left eye and some dried blood on his upper lip which suggested that he'd suffered a nose bleed.

'Which dentist?'

'The fast bowler with the moustache and the eyebrows,' said the vicar. I looked at him carefully but could see no sign of injury.

'You seem to be OK,' I said. 'Congratulations!'

Ruefully the vicar held up his left hand and showed me the massive bruise developing around his left wrist.

'It's been like a battlefield out there,' said June, showing me a huge bruise developing on the inside of her right thigh.

'Apparently we're doing quite well,' said Brian, who opened his mouth to show me his broken tooth. 'The last team who played here had four of its top six batsmen out of action within the first half an hour.'

'It reminds me of a match I once played in Yorkshire,' said Oily, lifting his foot out of the bowl and inspecting it for a moment before plunging it back into the water again. 'The home side had an opening bowler who'd just heard that he'd been turned down for the county side. He was furious and determined to take it out on someone.'

'I heard someone say that the dentist had been offered a county trial but had said 'no',' said the vicar, rubbing his wrist carefully. 'Apparently he said he didn't want to take the game too seriously.'

'Sharon's just got a nice two,' said June, nodding towards the wicket. We watched as Sharon and Arthur ran another surprisingly quick two runs.

'One of our opening batsmen got hit on the side of the head by a rising ball that just clipped the shoulder of his bat,' continued Oily. 'It hit him just above the eye and second slip leapt and took a good catch a yard and a half to his right.'

'That's 64 for 8,' said Norman. 'Sharon's our top scorer now – apart from extras – she's just got into double figures.'

'She's very good, isn't she'?' said the vicar.

'Terrific!' said Simon. It was so unusual to hear his voice that we all turned and looked at him. He blushed bright red. He was, I noticed, carefully massaging his right thumb which looked swollen and sore. 'Great!' He said. He looked around and went even redder. 'At cricket, I mean,' he finished lamely.

'By the time the chap had caught it our batsman was lying flat on his back on the ground,' continued Oily, refusing to abandon his anecdote.

'I think Simon's getting a bit fond of young Sharon,' grinned Brian. He looked across at Oily. 'You'll have to watch out!' he said, with a wink. His broken tooth gave him a slightly piratical look.

'The thing was,' said Oily, ignoring the interruption, 'the thing was that our chap was stone dead.' He looked around to make sure that we'd heard him. We all made suitably sympathetic noises for the batsmen we'd never known.

'So there was a terrible fuss,' Oily went on. 'The bowler reckoned that since the catch was a clean one the batsman was out but the umpire reckoned that you can't give out a batsman who's already dead. He said that as far as he was concerned the batsman had retired hurt the moment he'd died and since he'd died instantaneously he'd retired before he'd been caught.' Oily shook his head at the memory of it all. 'Terrible fuss there was. It lasted for ages.'

'I think the bowler probably had a point,' said the vicar after a moment or two's silent thought. 'I wouldn't have thought ...'

'Arthur's out!' said Jerry suddenly. We all watched as Arthur began the long, slow trudge back to the pavilion.

'What happened?' asked Norman.

'Caught at mid-on trying his usual,' replied Jerry, referring o the fact that Arthur's favourite (and some say only) shot is a rural hoik that lacks grace but has scored him a considerable number of runs over the years.

'You're in!' Oily reminded me.

'And the dentist's coming back on,' said June. 'So watch out!'

With my heart fluttering rather faster than usual I hurriedly fastened my pads, picked up my bat and gloves and began the long walk out to the middle.

As I dragged my bat behind me I looked up at the sky, hoping that there might be a few rain clouds overhead. Why, I wondered, does rain never come when you want it?

And why, I wondered, are dentists always so frightening?

I once knew a dentist socially. I met him at dinner parties a couple of times and got to know him quite well. He told me that apart from looking after his normal patients he also had the job of caring for the inmates of a large local prison.

Most of the prisoners had apparently had their teeth removed informally in public houses, quiet moonlit car parks and confidential corners of prison exercise yards but there were, he said, one or two prisoners who needed to have teeth removed in a more organised manner.

According to my acquaintance, criminals as a group tend to practise poor dental hygiene. He said he thought it was probably understandable. 'If you're rushing around with a stocking over your face and a sawn off shotgun in your hands,' he said, 'you probably don't get much chance to sit around in dentists' waiting rooms. Besides, when your face is covered up with a stocking you probably don't worry too much about your appearance.'

On one particular occasion my dental acquaintance found himself removing half a dozen blackened and decaying stumps from the well photographed jaws of a convicted bank robber who had, just a few months before, been pictured on notice boards outside police stations as far apart as Aberdeen and Weymouth.

'Despite my skill,' said my dental acquaintance modestly, 'the sockets from which I'd removed his rotten teeth wouldn't stop bleeding. After trying to stop the flow of blood for half and hour or so I decided I'd have to take him to the prison hospital for more sophisticated treatment.'

To get to the prison hospital the small party, consisting of the dentist, the inevitable pretty assistant, the prisoner and two large prison officers, had to go along a corridor which just happened that day to be filled with a group of visiting social workers and student probation officers.

Never one to miss a chance to display his dark sense of humour my dental acquaintance grabbed the bank robber by the arm as they walked along the corridor and said, in a loud stage whisper: 'Now, will you tell us where the damned money is hidden?'

The prisoner, with blood dribbling down his chin and his mouth numb with anaesthetic, was quite unable to reply to this unexpected query.

According to my acquaintance the social workers and student probation officers rose to this bait as speedily as a hungry trout will rise to an illicit worm on a pleasant summer evening. The Governor of the prison had to organise a full inquiry and my dentist friend eventually found himself relieved of his onerous responsibilities at the prison:

'How's Wodger?' asked Sharon, as I strode towards the wicket. I was doing my best to disguise my nervousness but I suspect I may not have been too successful.

'Wodger?' I heard myself saying. 'Wodger who?'

'Wodger,' said Sharon. 'The captain ... I thought you went to the hospital with him ...'

'Oh, that Wodger!' I said. 'He'll be OK. He's staying the night.'

Sharon was at the striker's end when the dentist began his new over. He clearly intended it to be his last over and did not seem disposed to bowl slowly to Sharon, as I'd rather hoped he would. With some reluctance but little choice I agreed to take a bye off the first ball. It was the only option for anyone with any hope of maintaining any shred of a reputation as a gentleman.

I had watched the dentist's delivery as carefully as I could, hoping that I might learn something from my observation.

Unfortunately, I had learnt nothing; largely because I did not even see the ball.

Even before he had begun his run up for the second delivery of the over I had decided that I had little alternative but to hit out and hope for the best. With any luck I would be bowled first ball.

I don't know which one of us was most surprised – the dentist or myself – when my full blooded drive connected full blade with the ball and sent it firing straight back down the wicket.

The crack the ball made as it hit the dentist's ankle must have been heard by every spectator on the ground. It sounded like a rifle shot. And the dentist fell to the ground as quickly as if he'd been hit by a rifle shot.

After that our innings was an anti-climax. The bowler who finished the dentist's over bowled two long hops which I was lucky enough to dispatch to the boundary and then yorked me with a slower ball.

We were 73 all out.

When, after the tea interval, it was our turn to take the field we suddenly realised that we had a problem: we had no captain.

Our normal vice captain, Sergeant Tate, had still not re-appeared (which was just as well since his wife and the vicar had now developed a firmly established relationship) and so when we wandered onto the field we did so with no leader.

Eventually, we decided that Norman should take on the job. I can't imagine why we chose Norman since we all knew that he is constitutionally incapable of making a decision but it probably seemed a good idea at the time. And as things turned out it didn't make much difference anyway. Exactly an hour after the North Hawkwater eleven started their innings the heavens opened, the pitch flooded, the spectators dispersed into the trees and we abandoned the match as a draw.

We were, I suspect, lucky to get away with a draw. They had scored 70 without loss at the time and would probably claim that they were destined for victory.

* * *

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I'd never seen rain like it before. One moment the sky was blue and the air warmed by summer sunshine. The next moment huge puddles were spreading across the wicket and turning the outfield into a small boating lake. One moment the spectators around the boundary's edge were lying back enjoying the sunshine, the next moment they were scurrying for shelter under the trees.

We'd changed and packed our gear and were staring out at our cars from the safety of the pavilion when the North Hawkwater captain came in to congratulate us, to ask us to pass on his best wishes to Wodger and to tell us that he hoped we'd come back another year. He had to shout to make himself heard above the sound of the rain crashing down onto the pavilion roof.

We all shook his hand, congratulated him and promised to take his good wishes to Wodger. Then we shook hands with the dentist and the rest of the home side and finally we squeezed out onto the tiny balcony. The rain was, if anything, getting worse.

Our cars were parked only a few yards away but by the time we reached them we were all soaked to the skin.

We nearly didn't get away from the ground that evening. I suspect that if we'd left it any longer we'd have been stuck there for the night. The rain had turned the rutted track that led back through the woods towards the main road into a quagmire. But eventually we made it. And from North Hawkwater we set off for the local hospital to see how Wodger was getting on.

By the time we found the hospital the rain had stopped almost as suddenly as it had started. There were large puddles everywhere but the sky was bright. A huge, double-ended rainbow arched over the horizon like a multi-coloured bridge.

Wodger was sitting up in bed explaining to two nurses how he'd been temporarily blinded by a flash of sunlight on a camera lens and had mistimed a hook shot. He blushed when he saw us approaching but we weren't about to spoil his fun.

'How are you, captain?' asked Oily. 'You looked set for a big innings before the accident.'

Wodger blushed a deeper red and the two nurses blew him kisses as they crept away.

'I'll be out in the morning,' Wodger assured us. 'They're only keeping me in for observation.'

'You have to be careful with head injuries,' warned Norman. 'They can be very nasty.'

'I had an uncle ...'began Norman.

And we were off.

Why is it, I wonder, that everyone is an authority on medical matters?

If a fellow in a pub mentions the bankruptcy laws or the significance of black holes or the role of genetic engineering in modern society there will be yawns all round and someone will call for another round.

But if anyone mentions illness or disease everyone present will have something to say on the matter. There will be long winded anecdotes, diagnostic tips, details of suitable drugs, alternative remedies and heaven knows what else. Everyone is an expert on medicine and I never fail to be surprised at the number of people who, without any formal medical training, are able to solve problems that have defied the attention of thousands of highly skilled scientists.

How many people do you know who can keep quiet when the subject of the common cold crops up? How many people do you know who can resist the temptation to offer their own pet theories and to bore sufferers with their advice?

When Norman finally concluded his anecdote (which as far as I could tell concerned an uncle of his who was hit on the head by a cricket ball when he was seven and died 84 years later as a direct result of the injury) Jerry told us about his grandmother who once went into hospital to have an ingrowing toe nail seen to and narrowly escaped having her right leg amputated.

Brian then told us the story of his mum. He always tells this story whenever the conversation turns to anything medical. I've heard the story at least a dozen times now and I can join in with the chorus where necessary but since you probably haven't heard it its probably worth relating.

Brian's mum had been 'under the doctor' as she puts it for twenty years and officially she was a patient of one of our most eminent local senior consultants. She never saw him, however, since he was always far too busy sitting on committees and looking after his private patients. Instead, Brian's mum was looked after by an apparently endless series of young trainee doctors. She'd visited the hospital twice a year for twenty years and had probably been seen by forty different doctors.

For nearly all of that time Brian's mum was quite a problem patient. She suffered from two separate disorders – diabetes and high blood. pressure – and her hospital medical records showed that when one disease was under control the other would almost always be out of control. It seemed that the doctors just couldn't control both of her problems at once. Her other major problem was her weight which, according to the hospital scales, went up and down quite inexplicably.

Faced with what they regarded as an insoluble clinical problem the young doctors who looked after Brian's mum had, over the years, tried just about every possible combination of treatments.

They had put her on reducing diets, they had given herm slimming pills, they had given her calorie lists and they had recommended exercises. In an attempt to control her diabetes they had prescribed insulin, special tablets and sugar free diets. To deal with her blood pressure problem they had tried relaxation classes, diuretics and all sorts of expensive and wonderful therapeutic solutions.

None of it worked. Sometimes they told her that her blood pressure was lower than before. But then, the next time, they'd tell her that it had gone up. Sometimes, her diabetes seemed to be very well controlled. And then, within months, it would be out of control again.

Brian's mum was never seriously ill but she was never seriously well either. She was never ill enough to be admitted to the hospital for treatment but she was never well enough to be discharged from the clinic. She looked like being a patient for life.

In the end it was the thickness of Brian's mum's medical records folder which eventually led to a solution.

The number of notes that had been written about her grew to such extraordinary proportions that a junior clerk in the medical records department was given the task of tidying them up.

Fortunately for Brian's mum and several future generations of young doctors the young clerk who was chosen to tidy up the notes was sharp enough to notice that Brian's mum seemed to have two quite different addresses. When she came and was overweight and rather severely diabetic she lived in a small council flat on the North side of the town. But when she was slender and had blood pressure trouble she lived in a rather large house in the East.

It turned out that for twenty years Brian's mum had shared a set of medical records with another patient with a similar name. Although they were quite definitely two they were treated as one. The lack of medical continuity meant that no one noticed anything wrong.

Between them Brian's mum and her unofficial twin illustrate vividly the astonishing ability of the human body to put up with the unnecessary drugs, unwanted treatments, pointless diets and needless advice offered by a bottomless hamper of enthusiastic young medical assistants.

There was suddenly a loud thud as the patient next to Wodger fell out of his bed and crashed to the floor.

The noise he made attracted the ward sister who was alarmed and appalled to see so many of us gathered around one bed. She threw us out.

After promising to return the following morning to pick Wodger up we made our way back to the hotel where we spent an uneventful evening playing poor snooker and drinking our way through the barman's speciality list of rare and exotic cocktails.

* * *

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

We'd been told that we could pick Wodger up at eleven the following morning (after the consultant in charge had seen him) and so after breakfast we had an hour or two with nothing much to do.

Norman decided to get a hair cut and Oily and I offered to go with him to hunt for a hairdresser. To be honest we both thought that a little fresh air would do us good. The cocktails we'd drunk the night before might have been well mixed but they didn't mix well.

Personally, I've always felt that there are two sorts of people in the world and that it is possible to tell which category someone is in by his response when you've got a hangover.

On the one hand there are the folk who sniff in a very superior way and make it pretty clear that you're not to expect any sympathy at all from them because you have got exactly what you deserve if you will go out drinking, debauching and generally having a good time. These are, I suspect, the same cheerful, self righteous citizens who always look smug and self satisfied when anyone confesses to some minor problem. Tell them that you're broke and they let you know straight away that anyone who doesn't take care of his money is a wastrel and a scoundrel. Get a girl into trouble or catch a nasty and unfortunate social disease and you can see them positively glowing with self appointed superiority and full of that very special type of satisfaction enjoyed by people who like saying 'I told you so'.

People in this category enjoy other people's misery. The greater the agony and the deeper the misery the better they feel. They're complacent, cautious and boring. They buy their Christmas cards in the January sales and they always carry those little sewing kits in their briefcases in case a button comes loose. They go through life as though they have rented their bodies and have to get them back in tip top condition. They never, ever get hangovers.

I've always been warmed by the conviction that people in this category suffer a lot with their nerves and get a lot of indigestion and wind.

There was a time, I have to confess, when I would have put Norman into this category of individual. But I'm pleased to say that in the last year or two he has become a decent enough fellow – particularly for an accountant. He always manages to look innocent and rather surprised when he finds himself vomiting in the street but he does it often enough to know how far to bend over so that he'll keep his shoes clean.

In the second category I would put those gentle and sympathetic souls who always greet news of misfortune with sympathy, compassion, understanding and a feeling of 'there but for the Grace of God go I'.

People in this category always lower their voices when they know you've got a hangover. And they can nearly always give you details of their own very special hangover remedy.

The chap who looks after my teeth is a great hair of the dog man. He claims that scientists have shown that hangovers are only produced when blood alcohol levels fall below a certain point. His favourite remedy is to take the juice out of half a bottle of scotch, add a tablespoonful of honey and a handful of crushed ice and then sip the resulting mixture through a straw. He insists that the ice has to be crushed because crushed ice is the only sort that doesn't make a clinking noise when it hits the side of the glass.

My cousin, on the other hand, is an exercise advocate. He says that the best way to get rid of a hangover is to sweat it out and to achieve this end he does some pretty extraordinary things. I once found him outside in the garden trying to do 100 press ups with an old car battery balanced on his backside. Once, when it had been snowing, he went outside in his swimming trunks and rolled over and over until he went quite blue with cold. He insisted that they do it all the time in Sweden. All I can say is that the police in Sweden must be a lot more tolerant than they are here for he got fined £35 and given a conditional discharge for causing a breach of the peace.

Jerry always swears by some funny little pills he buys from a small shop in Bristol. I don't think that even he knows precisely what they contain but, according to the label, they include more ingredients than the average Christmas cake.

The ingredients are all mixed up together and then packaged in capsules that look like horse pills. Jerry always carries two of his pills with him in a small metal box. The pills are so large that two is all the box will contain.

Jerry once gave me one to try when we'd been up in York shire for a charity cricket match and I don't think I've ever felt so ill as I did afterwards. On balance I think I'd prefer a hangover to one of Jerry's pills.

So, the three of us tiptoed out of the hotel and strolled gently along the promenade looking for a hairdresser.

Norman hasn't got all that much hair and what there is tends to be concentrated at the back of his head but he gets a little edgy if it isn't trimmed regularly. He is a great believer in habits and reckons they are the framework upon which any life is built. Take away a man's habits, I've heard him say, and you take away the man. He can, he claims, tell every thing he needs to know about a man by learning about his habits. He says, for example, that he would never trust a man who adjusts his trousers before crossing his legs. He insists that if you go into the waiting room outside any bankruptcy court you will see row upon row of men all carefully adjusting their creases before crossing their legs.

At home Norman always goes to the barber that he's patronised since he was a boy but in Newquay we found that local alternatives were rather sparse. After searching through the usual vast array of building society offices and shoe shops we eventually stopped and asked a traffic warden if she knew where we could find a barber. To our relief and Norman's delight she told us that there was one just round the corner from where we were standing.

Maybe I'm old fashioned but in my heart I know what I expect when I look for a barbers. I want the floor to be covered with cracked, brown linoleum and I want it to be covered with a thick matting of cut hair. I want chairs covered in red plastic and I want semi clad models staring down from out of date calendars pinned to walls which have the paint peeling from them. I want bottles of brilliantine and tooth paste sharing shelves with rows of anything else for the weekend, sir?' and I want a collection of tabloid newspapers scattered over the chairs for customers who are waiting.

Standing in the middle of this comforting and comfortable landscape there will be three or four middle aged men in white coats. Each man will be equipped with a comb, a hair brush with a well worn wooden handle, a wooden framed mirror with a long, rounded, wooden handle, a pair of scissors which seem inseparable from his fingers and a pair of electrically powered black clippers with which to attack the small hairs at the back of the customer's neck.

The customer (and he is quite definitely a customer and not a patron or a client) sits in one of the large, red plastic covered chairs and watches the whole operation in a large, rather mottled mirror which carries several stick on advertisements for the products which adorn the shelves of the accompanying cupboards. A jar of long spills will stand in front of the mirror so that the barber can give his more mature clients a singe.

In this haven of peace the customer waits for somewhere between fifteen and twenty minutes to take his turn in the chair. There is no appointment system. Before the barber starts work the customer spends about thirty seconds saying something like 'the usual' or 'a little off the top and sides, please'. While this conversation is going on the barber will be tying a large white sheet around the customer's neck. If the barber and the customer know one another well then this part of the conversation may be omitted.

During the cutting of the hair, which takes no less than ten and no more than fifteen minutes, the barber is authorised to make three attempts in initiate a conversation. He will mention the weather, make a vague comment about the local football team and ask the customer whether or not he is busy for the time of the year.

The customer thus has three chances to decide whether or not he wants to be entertained while his hair is cut. If he wants to sit quietly for the duration of the hair cut he has only to reply in crisp, short sentences to these questions. The barber will understand and shut up. If the customer wants to chat then he can easily do so by making some reciprocal comments about the weather, the local football team or business for the time of the year. The conversation, once initiated, can follow any direction selected by the customer.

When the hair cutting ritual is over the barber will hold up his mirror behind the customer's head so that the back view can be examined. The customer must then nod his approval, whatever he feels about the success or otherwise of the enterprise. The barber then sprays a weak but potent cologne over the customer's head, removes the white sheet and offers the customer a small paper towel so that he can wipe away the small hairs that have managed to get down the back of his neck. While the customer is doing this the barber will, with the aid of a raised eyebrow, ask the customer if he wants 'anything else for the weekend'. The barber will then walk across to the till and wait for the customer to dig out the requisite amount of change.

Men have always had their hair cut this way. I firmly believe that even back in the middle ages, when barbers doubled as surgeons and would trim off a gangrenous leg as readily as they would trim an errant curl, they must have had red plastic chairs, brown, cracked linoleum and packets of 'anything else for the weekend, sir?' stacked in glass fronted cupboards.

In Newquay, however, we found ourselves in something calling itself a Unisex Hairdressers.

It was an experience we all found unnerving.

The floor was thickly carpeted in something soft and pale green, the walls were decorated with Japanese prints while potted palms and hanging vines served to give the place an uncomfortably horticultural look. Hidden loudspeakers filled the whole place with an uninspired and uninspiring sound and a small army of unisex hairdressers wandered about dressed in jeans and sweatshirts.

'Does unisex refer to the customers or the staff?' asked Oily in a stage whisper.

'Ssshhh!' said Norman, embarrassed.

'Konielpyew?'

We heard it but didn't understand it. Nor did we know where it had come from.

The sound was repeated and we slowly realised that it was coming from a blonde girl wearing a light green smock who was sitting behind a huge desk and almost entirely hidden behind a wall of potted plants.

‘Konielpyew?’ repeated the girl.

‘I’d like a hair cut,’ said Norman.

‘Evyewgotanapphointmunt?’

We looked at one another in despair.

She repeated what was clearly a question.

‘Oh!’ said Oily, suddenly understanding. ‘An appointment?’

‘An appointment?’ said Norman, puzzled.

I shared his distress. To find a barber demanding that the customers make appointments is rather like finding a petrol station that won’t sell petrol to motorists who haven’t booked a space at the pumps or finding a landlord who isn’t prepared to serve beer to customers who haven’t booked a bar stool.

Norman explained that he only wanted a hair cut.

The girl looked unhappy, sniffed and studied her diary carefully. ‘Yewerlucky,’ she said. ‘Thursacancullashun.’

‘You’re from Walsall, aren’t you?’ said Oily.

The girl looked startled. ‘Owjuno?’ she demanded.

Oily smiled and shrugged. The girl glowered at him.

‘Yewllavtewaitoutside,’ she announced firmly, looking at Oily and myself.

And so while Norman stayed behind to get his hair cut Oily and I wandered back outside onto the streets to see what joys Newquay had to offer us.

* * *

The first thing we saw when we came out of the hairdressing salon was one of those crazy golf courses which are such a feature of seaside resorts these days. Neither Oily nor I could resist it.

We are such keen golf enthusiasts that we once took a few days off work to go and watch a professional golf tournament in Scotland.

When we set off we’d thought we would be able to find a pleasant little hotel with its own trout stream where we could start each day with a huge breakfast of bacon, sausage, kidneys and scrambled eggs; all served by buxom, good looking country girls dressed in pink gingham and all wide eyed, giggly and innocent.

Oily described the hotel first of all as we were driving up the motorway. He was confident that we wouldn’t have any difficulty in finding it. He assured me that in view of the break fasts we would be eating we would have to cut down on lunch eons and dinner but he said it would be well worthwhile.

We got our first indication that things might not go quite as smoothly as we had expected when, about twenty miles south of the course, we found ourselves stuck in an enormous traffic jam. That didn’t worry us too much at first because we felt that a few hours in a traffic jam was a small price to pay for the joy of staying in a small and comfortable Scottish country hotel. We were full of good spirits and after about forty minutes we got quite friendly with the foursome in the car in front who were also heading north to watch the golf.

We told the foursome about the hotel we were going to stay at because they seemed quite decent blokes and we thought they might like to join us. To our amazement we discovered that all four of them had already decided that they would stop at exactly the same place and that they would have their massive country breakfasts served by the same fresh faced country girls in a dining room that had pink gingham curtains and a view of the twelfth green.

There was some slight disagreement over this last point because Oily and I were convinced that our hotel would have a trout stream outside the dining room window. Eventually, we settled our differences by agreeing that our hotel would have a trout stream and theirs a view of the twelfth green.

After we’d been sitting in the traffic jam for an hour and a half we got quite friendly with the couple in the car behind and found that they were too were looking forward to spending a few days in a similar hotel. They said that they were particularly looking forward to it because they suspected that the bar would be exceptionally well stocked with a good variety of malt whiskies. They said that from their bedrooms they would be able to see the outline of a distillery. They agreed that there would be sausages, bacon, kidneys and eggs for breakfast but said that they probably wouldn’t be able to do the food justice because they would be eating too much freshly caught trout.

Oily and I got to the village where the tournament was due to be held at about ten that evening and we drove round and round for another two hours looking for the hotel we’d set our hearts on. Our first major disappointment was finding that there was no such hotel in the neighbourhood. Our second major disappointment was discovering that the hotels that did exist were all fully booked. We spent the night in the car and for breakfast shared a bottle of milk which we bought from a passing farmer and a packet of mints which Oily found in the glove compartment of the car.

The one big advantage we did have was that we didn’t have far to travel to get to the course the following morning. We’d managed to park in a lay-by near to the course entrance and consequently we didn’t have much driving to do to get to the tournament.

Both Oily and I were pretty excited about it all. We couldn't decide whether to go round the course with one of the big name international stars or simply to stay at one of the greens and watch all the action there. We thought we'd try a bit of both.

Unfortunately, that turned out to be something of a mistake because every time we went to try and watch something we found ourselves at the back of a huge crowd. We bought cardboard periscopes which worked all right for a while but a short, sharp shower made the cardboard soggy and meant that eventually we ended up getting a very good view of our own feet.

Eventually, towards mid-day we wandered back to the tented village that surrounded the club house and managed to bribe an official to let us go round to the back of the press tent. There we found a small gap in the canvas and took it in turns to look through and watch the play on a television screen. Between us we managed to watch most of the good matches and we got a far better view than if we'd struggled round the course.

That evening we tried to find ourselves a hotel again but failed and at ten o'clock decided that enough was enough so we'd head for home. In the queue away from the area we found ourselves next to the foursome we'd met on our way up to the match. We didn't like to admit that things hadn't gone quite as planned so we told them that we'd decided to leave early because the hotel food was so rich that we feared for our lives. We said that the breakfasts there were so vast that we simply wouldn't have been able to eat two in the same week.

The foursome said they'd had much the same problem at their hotel and that the view of the twelfth green had been so idyllic that they hadn't wanted to stay too long for fear that they would eventually spoil themselves for all other views.

That was our only experience of a professional golf tournament. It was, we both decided ten minutes later, more fun than playing round the crazy golf course.

Once we'd abandoned the golf course we decided we'd find ourselves a quiet little cafe, drink some tea and munch some buttered toast until it was time to collect Norman and head back for the hotel.

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, as I greedily thrust the last corner of buttered toast into my mouth I noticed that Oily seemed to be fascinated by something that was happening across the street from the Olde Devon Cafe. His fingers were poised mere inches from his mouth but a knob of butter was sliding inexorably towards the edge of his slice of toast. Without losing my masticatory stride I watched the butter drop slowly onto his shirt front and then followed his gaze across the street.

I don't know what the building was. It could have been a library, a health centre or a collection of council offices. It had that grey, dull, concrete look of an official building. Whatever its function the architect had clearly been influenced by the needs of the infirm and the disabled for he had arranged for a ramp to be built between the pavement and the front door so that people in wheel chairs could gain access to the building.

Unfortunately, the architect's good intentions had not been matched by his intelligence for the door at the top of the ramp opened outwards. The result of this simple but vital error was that the crippled visitor who had captured Oily's attention was now stuck half way up the ramp with his hand on the door handle and no way to move any further up the ramp. If he tried to pull the door open he would have to roll back down the ramp to the pavement. But without moving his wheelchair he couldn't open the door. It was a cruel impasse.

While we both watched the man in the wheelchair I noticed, out of the corner of my eye, another dollop of butter heading for the edge of Oily's toast. This time the butter missed his shirt front and landed in his lap, leaving a stain in the sort of place that is always embarrassing.

The situation across the street was so bizarre, so unreal, that it took both of us a minute or so to realise that the unfortunate individual sitting in the wheelchair needed help. However, before either of us could get to our feet a woman in her late twenties appeared on the other side of the door, inside the building, and started gesticulating to the man in the wheelchair. She was, it seemed, telling him to let go of the handle so that she could open the door and let him in. He, however, was unwilling to let go of the handle because he knew that if he did he would roll back down the ramp, onto the pavement and probably straight into the road.

So there they both stayed. She on the inside, unable to get out, he on the outside, unable to get in.

'Damn!' said Oily suddenly, looking down and seeing the growing stains on his shirt and trousers. He hurriedly put the now cold remains of his toast down on his plate, picked up a shiny paper napkin and dabbed unsuccessfully at the buttery stains.

When I turned back to the window I was delighted to see that they seemed to be making some progress. She was pushing, gently and gingerly, on the door and he, holding onto the door handle, was rolling gently back down the slope. Eventually the door was open far enough to let the girl wriggle out. She bent down, got underneath the man's arm and then stood up at the top of the ramp between the wheelchair and the door. He was still holding onto the door handle.

They'd made some progress but they still hadn't solved the problem. The man in the wheelchair still couldn't get into the building and the woman who had come to his assistance couldn't get back into the building or past him down the ramp.

For all I know they're both still there, trapped together for eternity. While struggling to clean the stain off his trousers Oily caught sight of his watch and excitedly reminded me that it was well past the time we'd promised to pick up Norman. We paid our bill, hurried down the stairs and jogged back towards the hairdressing salon.

To our astonishment Norman was waiting for us outside on the pavement. He had a large bandage wrapped around his head and a red stain seeping through suggested that it wasn't just there to keep his head warm. Slumped on the pavement, with his back resting against a stretch of graffiti marked wall he looked lonely and dispirited.

Norman told us what had happened as we made our way back to the hotel.

He had, he was told as we left the salon, been given an appointment with a Ms Judy, one of the salon's hair stylists, but before she would condescend to touch his hair he would, he was informed, have to have his hair washed by one of her assistants.

Norman said he found this extremely tedious and that by the time the assistant had finished and had handed him over to Ms Judy he was suffering from a severe case of terminal boredom.

'She'd didn't seem to want to want talk about anything', said Norman miserably. 'Not even the weather!'

So, while Ms Judy tutted and hmmed her way around his scalp Norman tried to amuse himself.

'I read the labels on the shampoo bottles, counted the leaves on one of the plants and wound up my watch,' said Norman, 'and then I pulled my spectacle case out of my trouser pocket and started to polish the lenses.'

Norman said that he can't quite remember what happened next but that when he woke up he was surrounded by half a dozen very angry looking members of the staff and he could feel something warm and sticky running down the side of his face.

'It seems,' sighed Norman, 'that Ms Judy saw me polishing my spectacles under the green cloth they'd draped over me and misinterpreted the movements I was making.'

We both stared at him for a moment before realising what he meant.

'You mean ...' began Oily, starting to chuckle.

'She thought ...?' I added, finding it impossible not to grin.

'Exactly!' said Norman. 'She apparently hit me over the head with a shampoo bottle and called the manager. The next thing I knew I found myself waking up with a cut on the side of my head and a stain on my character.'

Oily said he thought that there was a lesson for us all in this sad story. He said that in future we should stick to old fashioned barbers who are used to cutting men's hair.

Norman said he couldn't agree more. He said that he wasn't even sure whether or not they'd actually cut his hair but that the whole sorry business had cost him ten times as much as a visit to his usual barber.

United in our feelings we hurried back to the hotel where the rest of the team was waiting for Oily to pay the bill.

* * *

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

When we left Newquay we headed further south west towards Tottery Poppleton, a village just outside Penzance on the south Cornish coast where we were due to play our next match the following day. Much as we love cricket I don't think any of us minded having a day's rest. Wodger was cheerful but still shaken and obviously feeling rather delicate. Norman, who had taken off his bandage, now had a patch of dried blood on his scalp in addition to a black left eye and looked very quiet and subdued. Simon's right thumb had swollen up so much that he had difficulty in holding a cricket ball. Oily's foot was badly bruised and he had acquired a definite limp. Jerry had taken his arm out of his makeshift sling but now had a huge bruise to remind him of the match at North Hawkwater. And June, who had a massive bruise on her thigh, walked rather like a cowboy who has spent too long in the saddle.

Since Wodger said he had worked out a quick cross country route that would take us through some of the county's most beautiful scenery we all followed his lead as we left the hospital.

Just over an hour later we drove back into the centre of Newquay and Wodger stopped his car and told us, with sincere apologies, that he seemed to have got a little lost.

Oily said he wasn't surprised. He said that in his experience short cuts were never anything of the sort and that as a general rule if he stopped to ask directions and someone told him of a short cut he would drive off in exactly the opposite direction.

Wodger said that it was merely a temporary problem and that he'd soon get us down to Penzance if only we'd show a little patience. So, after a few moans from Oily, we all got back into our cars and Wodger led our small convoy out of Newquay once more.

Forty minutes later Wodger slowed to a stop on a narrow country road, climbed out of his car and, looking rather embarrassed, walked back to explain to us that we were lost again.

'Where are we now?' asked Oily, clearly running out of patience. He took his diary out of his jacket pocket and opened it to the map of England on the back page. He thrust the diary through the car window at Wodger and asked him to show us where we'd stopped.

'That's the pwoblem,' said Wodger, apologetically. 'I'm afraid I don't know where we are. There don't seem to be any signs.' Miserably he waved an arm around him to attract our attention to the total lack of signposts.

'I used to be a boy scout,' said Simon, rather diffidently, from the back seat.

Oily and I turned round to look at him.

'Moss always grows on the north side of a tree,' he said, blushing vividly. 'At least I'm pretty sure it does.' He paused and swallowed noisily. 'And cows always lie down if it's going to rain.' He went an even deeper red, clearly regretting his generous offer of help. 'Or is it that they lie down if it is raining?'

He coughed, folded his arms tightly across his chest and pushed himself back into the corner of the seat as though trying to disappear from view.

'We can always wait until it gets dark,' I suggested. 'Then we can navigate with the aid of the stars.'

'Isn't there something you can do with the sun?' asked Oily. 'I seem to remember that if you point the hour hand of your watch at the sun and the minute hand in the direction you want to go then if you bisect the angle the two hands make you're facing due south.'

'That's rubbish!' I said firmly. 'We wait until it goes dark and then follow the Milky Way down to the plough and then follow the line made by the brightest star in the constellation and that takes us straight to the North Star. Once we've found the North Star the rest is simple.'

'This is quite serious,' said Wodger, looking glum. 'I haven't got much petrol left. I don't suppose you've got a spare can in the boot?'

Oily shook his head. 'What about Jerry?' he asked. 'He's bound to have a can of petrol in that old crate of his.'

We got out and walked over towards Jerry's car. He hadn't got any spare petrol either. But he did have a crate of beer so we sat down on the verge and opened up the beer.

'My mum and dad got lost once on a holiday abroad,' said Norman as we argued about which way we thought we ought to go. He said that they couldn't afford a proper holiday so they'd decided to have a day out in Calais. They'd fixed up everything with their travel agents and got special cheap day return tickets on the ferry from Dover. The plan was that they'd set off at five or six in the morning and get home again just after midnight.

Neither of Norman's parents had ever been abroad before, although during the war Norman's father had worked as a ground crew mechanic on aeroplanes which had dropped bombs on all sorts of interesting and historic places in Germany, so they were extremely excited by the whole idea.

'If they'd known just how exciting it was going to be they would have probably decided to go to Bognor Regis instead,' said Norman ominously.

Their problems started when they got off the boat in Calais and wandered away in search of a small cafe where they could buy a nice cup of tea and a plate of fish and chips. Being unaccustomed to sea travel they had both, suffered a little mal de mer while on the ferry but with their feet firmly planted on French cobbles their appetites had returned.

Since they hadn't really intended to move too far away from the docks they didn't have a map with them and so after walking for half an hour or so they discovered, to their horror, that they were absolutely lost. They eventually found a small cafe where they managed to order two tiny cups of strong black coffee but their inability to speak a word of French hampered their ability to ask instructions on how best to find their way back to the town centre. ·

With patience, determination and rapidly developing blisters they marched on and on in search of the town, the docks and the English Channel. For a while they followed a small flock of sea gulls on the assumption that the gulls would eventually head back to the sea but then the seagulls flew out of sight.

'They thought everything was going to be all right,' said Norman, 'when they heard what they felt sure was a ship's hooter. They speeded up a bit and sang cheerful songs to keep up their spirits as they marched off in the direction from which they'd heard the hooter.'

Sadly, it wasn't a ship's hooter at all but a factory siren telling the workers that it was time to take their lunch and so Norman's weary mum and dad found themselves surrounded by hundreds of hungry French citizens all hurrying home to their crusty bread, pate, frogs legs, onions and red wine.

By nightfall the two adventurers found themselves on the outskirts of a small town with an unpronounceable name so they spent most of the money they had with them on renting a room for the night in a small pension. Sadly, the proprietor must have still nursed a hatred of the English left over from the Napoleonic Wars for when, next morning, they asked him for the route back to the sea (Norman explained that they communicated with le patron by miming a rowing boat, a lookout and someone being sea sick) he sent them along the main road to Paris.

At lunchtime Norman's weary parents met an English speaking gendarme who listened with some interest and considerable sympathy to their sad story.

The gendarme put Norman's parents into his car and took them along to the nearest railway station where the man in the ticket office apologised for the fact that the trains to Calais were being diverted because of essential engineering works and suggested instead that they buy tickets to Paris from which point they would be in a much better position to find their way back to the coast.

The two unhappy wanderers got to Paris without any further difficulty and bought their tickets to Calais with their few remaining francs. Unfortunately, however, all the worry and the travelling had made them tired and careless and they got onto the night sleeper to Milan instead and woke up some twelve hours later in Italy. This proved to be quite a problem for an officious customs officer got very excited when they tried to get back into France. He said that without passports they would have to stay in Italy until their applications for residence permits were turned down and they could be officially deported.

By this time Norman's parents had apparently given up all hope of ever seeing their home again and were trying to decide whether they should make a break for what was then known as the Iron Curtain and seek political asylum in Yugoslavia, Rumania or one of those difficult to spell countries or try to escape into Switzerland in the hope of appealing to the United Nations when they saw a train that was filled with scores of noisy and excited English school children all heading for home.

The Italian customs officer had told Norman's parents to stay where they were while he went off to get help but they figured that there wasn't much else that could go wrong and so they took what remained of their courage in both hands and both feet and clambered aboard the train.

This was the best move they'd made since they'd left home. As they'd guessed the train was heading back for the Northern French coast and the schoolchildren were heading for England. Their really lucky break came in the fact that there were at least three separate school parties on the train and none of the children – and none of the teachers – really knew who was or who wasn't with which particular party.

Norman's parents stayed with the train and its young cargo and succeeded in dealing with ticket collectors, customs officials and other potential hazards by simply picking out a child at random every time any sort of official approached and shouting at it very loudly and very angrily. The unfortunate child, being a child on holiday, would always be guilty of something and would look suitably apologetic and contrite while the official hurried to get past the embarrassing obstruction.

When they got back to Calais Norman's parents stood in the middle of a seething mass of by now even smellier, even noisier children and simply looked tired and overwrought. Each genuine school teacher thought they belonged to some other school party and so no one gave the game away. By means of this simple technique, says Norman, they managed to get back to Dover some three and a half days after their return rail ticket home had expired.

We had listened to Norman's tale in silence. Enjoyed in the warmth of a comfortable pub such tales are amusing and entertaining. But when you're lost in the middle of Cornwall the whole sorry saga takes on a different character.

Eventually, the beer gone, we decided that we had little option but to continue the way we were going in the hope that we would eventually find a signpost, a village and a petrol station or, ideally, a signpost and a petrol station in a village.

Twenty minutes later we drove back into Newquay, a resort which we were getting to know quite well.

It was half past seven that evening when we eventually arrived at The Dog and Flute public house in Tottery Poppleton where Wodger had booked us all rooms. We had spent virtually the whole of our rest day sitting in motor cars driving round Cornwall.

* * *

My room at The Dog and Flute faced South East and I was woken early the following morning by the bright morning sun shining in through a gap in the curtains. I got up to adjust the curtains, intending to shut out the interfering rays of sunshine, but the view through the gap took my breath away and I could not resist the temptation to pull the curtains wider apart in order to get a better look.

Tottery Poppleton is a tiny village situated on the west side of Mount's Bay half way in between Penzance, the most Westerly of all Cornish towns, and the poetically named village of Mousehole which must surely be one of the most picturesque of all pretty Cornish villages.

By the time we'd booked into the pub and had our evening meal (a delicious fish pie served with a mountain range of fresh vegetables) it was dark and when I eventually fell into bed I was far too tired to bother looking out of my window.

But I stood there in my pyjamas and simply stared at the view, open mouthed with wonder.

The village itself hangs onto the edge of towering Cornish cliffs; a steep, narrow road being the only route down to the tiny, natural harbour several hundred feet below. There are three pubs in the village but The Dog and Flute is the biggest and has by far the most spectacular position.

The south east wall of the pub is no more than ten feet from the edge of an almost sheer cliff face that drops straight down to the crashing seas below. From my room I could see the harbour, filled with two dozen tiny fishing boats, all dancing on the incoming tide, the coastline as far as Penzance and, in the hazy distance, the faint outline of the easterly cliffs of Mount's Bay.

Directly underneath my window some brave gardener had planted a huge variety of summer flowers which, I discovered when I opened the window, smelt as magnificently as they looked. Half a dozen seagulls strutted about on the thin moss and grass covered rock at the very edge of the cliff.

I've heard people say that it's possible to tire of any pleasure and that daily repetition makes any joy dull and routine. But I doubt if any human with a heart or a soul could ever take that view for granted. If I had not had responsibilities to attend to back home I would have found myself a job nearby and booked myself into that room for life.

The view from the dining room, where we all joined up for breakfast, was almost equally impressive. Bright flowers, blue sea, toy fishing boats and bright blue skies turned each window into an individual masterpiece.

I sat down at a table occupied by Oily, Sharon and Simon, ordered black coffee, a full English breakfast and a freshly toasted loaf.

'Isn't this wonderful?' I said to no one in particular, leaning back in my chair with my hands behind my head and enjoying the views, the smells, and being with friends and anticipating a splendid breakfast and another wonderful day.

Oily and Simon were both busily munching their way through enormous portions of bacon, sausage and eggs but I noticed that Sharon wasn't eating at all. I looked at her and noticed that a tear had escaped from her left eye and was beginning to edge its way, rather timidly, down her left cheek.

I looked at Oily. He was too engrossed with a sausage to notice. 'What's the matter?' I asked her quietly, after a moment's hesitation.

Sharon looked at me and smiled. She looked embarrassed rather than depressed. 'I'm a bit homesick,' she said.

Simon, who was sitting between us, put down his knife and fork and looked up at her. She smiled at him. He blushed.

'Why don't you write?' he asked her. 'I do whenever I feel homesick.' He gulped. 'It always helps,' he assured her.

Sharon pulled out a paper tissue and wiped her eyes. 'I wouldn't know what to say,' she said.

'Just tell them what you've been doing,' said Simon.

Sharon laughed then, realising that Simon might think she was being rude, put her hand in front of her mouth. The half stifled laugh turned into a giggle.

'OK!' she said suddenly. Then she frowned. 'Do you know where I can get some writing paper from?' she asked him. ‘And stamps?’

‘I’ve got plenty,’ Simon told her. ‘Do you want me to go and get some for you?’

‘When you’ve finished your breakfast,’ said Sharon.

Simon looked down at his almost empty plate. ‘I’ve finished,’ he said.

‘If I come with you will you help me with what to write?’ Sharon asked him.

Simon turned even redder and looked at Oily who grinned at him.

‘Watch her!’ said Oily. ‘It’s your fountain pen she’s after!’

Sharon nudged Oily with her elbow then stood up, took Simon by the hand and pulled him away from the table. ‘We’ll see you in a few minutes,’ she said over her shoulder.

Oily watched them go then cut off a slice of sausage and nodded in their direction. ‘They make a nice couple,’ he said, popping the piece of sausage into his mouth.

* * *

At around 11.30 that morning we all gathered in the ‘snug’ at The Dog and Flute (the word ‘snug’ is not only far more romantic and evocative than such cold and empty phrases as ‘lounge bar’ but it also summed up the character of the room very precisely) and prepared to leave for the Tottery Poppleton XI cricket ground, reputedly the flattest piece of ground on that particular stretch of coast.

Our match was due to start at noon instead of the more normal 2.00pm and Wodger had already explained to us that the aim was to allow us to have 55 overs a side. Most of our matches are, through time constraints, restricted to a maximum of 40 overs and we approached this longer confrontation with some misgivings. Wodger tried to encourage us by pointing out that we would have not one but two intervals for rest and refreshments.

Although the cricket ground was no more than a quarter of a mile from the pub we took our cars. A few of us had been prepared to walk but Arthur had defiantly refused to contemplate such unnecessary physical activity. When he reminded us that we would have to walk back again - carrying all our equipment - after a long day’s cricket we all decided that he was right.

It was a glorious morning and the views from the Tottery Poppleton ground were stupendous. The cricket pitch was situated in a former field slightly higher than The Dog and Flute and from the tiny wooden pavilion we had a similar but slightly broader view of the bay than from the pub. Actually, although I call it a pavilion it was in reality little more than a wooden garage in which was stored the team’s mower and roller. There were no real dressing room facilities and so we while June and Sharon got changed in Oily’s Jaguar the rest of us put on our whites behind the pavilion.

Twelve o’clock came and went and still there was no sign of our opposition. We didn’t mind. We lazed around on the grass, watching a few, fluffy white clouds move effortlessly across the clear blue summer skies. Simon made a daisy chain and gave it to Sharon. June and the vicar went for a walk. Arthur began the day’s serious assault on his drinking flask. Wodger, using a pencil stub and the back of his car manual, tried to work out a bowling schedule for 55 overs. Brian, who’d discovered that his broken tooth enabled him to produce an exceptionally piercing whistle practised whistling unidentifiable pop ballads.

At twelve fifteen a puffing, red faced cyclist pedalled through the gate onto the ground, dismounted and rested his bicycle against the side of the pavilion. He stood for a moment, with his hands on his hips, gasping for breath.

‘The lifeboat’s been called out!’ he announced eventually.

We turned, automatically, and looked down in the direction of the harbour. We could see the usual variety of small boats but from such a distance it was impossible to identify any particular types of boat.

‘Sinking ship?’ asked Wodger.

The cyclist shook his head and beads of perspiration flew from his forehead. ‘Holidaymaker on an airbed,’ he told us. ‘Swept out to sea.’

‘That’s tewible!’ said Wodger.

‘Happens all the time.’ The cyclist took out a large, grubby handkerchief and mopped his face. ‘Three times last week.’

‘It was vewy good of you to cycle all this way to tell us,’ said Wodger. ‘But...’

‘Oh, sorry,’ the cyclist apologised. ‘I should have explained.’ He finished the mopping up process and stuffed the now sod den handkerchief back into his trouser pocket. ‘I’m a member of the cricket club – honorary vice-president – eight of the team are in the lifeboat crew.’ He shrugged unhappily. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said again.

‘Oh that’s OK,’ said Wodger. ‘We understand. Priorities’. He stared down at the sea again as though still looking for the lifeboat. ‘I don’t suppose you have any idea when they’ll be back?’

The cyclist shook his head. ‘It’ll be late this afternoon. When they get back in they have to get the lifeboat back up the ramp, clean all the equipment and so on ...’ he took the handkerchief out again and mopped up another flood of sweat.

‘So the match is pwetty much off then?’ said Wodger.

‘Well it is,’ said the cyclist, ‘but it isn’t necessarily.’ He unbuttoned his shirt cuffs and rolled up his sleeves. Both forearms were decorated with tattoos. ‘The lifeboat here is manned by men from our village and from Trevishoe,’ he explained. ‘And the Trevishoe team also had a match this afternoon.’

‘Which they won’t be able to play?’ said Wodger, catching on quickly.

‘That’s it!’ nodded the cyclist. ‘They were due to play a team that’s come down from London – bankers or such like I believe.’

‘So there are two teams without a match!’ said Wodger.

‘If you’d like to play one another you’re welcome to use the ground here,’ said the cyclist. ‘It’s the least we can do.’

Wodger looked around. We murmured, nodded and generally indicated that this seemed a good idea and a generous offer on the part of the Tottery Poppleton club.

‘That’s vewy kind of you,’ said Wodger. ‘Vewy kind indeed. How do we get in touch with this team from London?’

‘Leave that to me,’ said the cyclist. He climbed aboard his elderly, rust laden machine. ‘I’ll get a message to them,’ he assured us. ‘Don’t you worry!’ he called as he pedalled away.

* * *

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

We went back to the pub for lunch and left a note pinned to the Tottery Poppleton pavilion telling our opponents where we were. Since we had no idea when they'd arrive there didn't seem much point in hanging around indefinitely in the middle of an isolated field with nowhere to sit, nothing to eat or drink and no essential facilities.

An hour later after feasting on home made bread, a surprising variety of excellent cheeses and the best collection of home made pickles I've ever seen we were ready for anything. Or at least we thought we were.

We were sitting around on wooden benches in the pub garden, sipping full bodied pints of locally brewed Cornish beer, when our opponents arrived.

I think we'd all half expected them to turn up in a convoy of BMWs, Porsches and Ferraris. But they didn't. They came on the most luxurious coach I've ever seen. It was equipped with its own kitchen, shower and toilet and had a huge video screen and a bar as well. The driver sat in a small cabin so that he would not be distracted by anything going on in the body of the vehicle.

I don't really know what any of us had expected but, although they were all employees of a London bank, they all seemed pleasant enough fellows. We introduced ourselves, shook hands and bought them all beers. Then we all climbed onto their coach for the short drive up to the Tottery Poppleton cricket ground. Since Simon was the only one of us sober enough to drive – and he doesn't have a driving licence – this seemed a sensible precaution.

The pavilion was still locked, of course. None of us had thought to ask the red faced cyclist if he had a key. But it didn't matter much. The driver of the bankers' coach parked his vehicle next to the pavilion and our opponents got changed inside it.

When they were ready we all marched out to inspect the wicket.

That was when we realised that we didn't have any stumps or bails. We had bats, pads and all the other essential personal paraphernalia needed for a cricket match. Our opponents even had a supply of balls. But we didn't have a single cricket stump.

It was Jerry, who always carries a full set of carpenter's tools in the back of his car, who solved that problem. With Brian's help he found two or three fairly straight branches and within ten minutes had produced a perfectly useable set of stumps and bails. Indeed, it was only with some difficulty that we managed to dissuade Jerry from driving down into the village to try and buy varnish with which to finish the job off properly.

The bankers' captain, a tall distinguished looking fellow called Henry, then invited Wodger out onto the pitch so that they could toss to determine the order of play. Wodger lost the toss, of course, and the bankers' captain asked Wodger if he would mind batting first. Wodger, rather more accustomed to being simply told 'You're batting!' misunderstood Henry's polite manner and said that he didn't really mind batting first but that given the choice he'd rather field. Henry said that he understood Wodger's feelings but that since he didn't have the choice it was destined to be an academic discussion and would we like to nominate an umpire.

This was our second problem.

It turned out that the bankers travelled with their own umpire and their own scorer. When Wodger pointed out that there were only eleven of us and that if we provided an umpire it would have to be one of our players Henry looked rather put out.

'I suppose that will have to do,' he said, rather condescendingly. 'If that's all you can manage.'

Wodger seemed quite upset but Oily offered to umpire until it was his turn to bat and Wodger went off to put his pads on and find Jerry who'd been promoted to open the innings with him (Norman had decided he liked a chance to see how things were shaping up before he went out to bat).

Our innings opened in an unusually optimistic mood. Oily put his dark flannels back on and allowed his white shirt to hang outside them so it looked a little like a short white coat and went out to umpire with Norman's straw Panama hat perched precariously on top of his head. Wodger and Jerry then marched out to bat with determination characterising every stride. This was, we all knew, our first chance to match ourselves against another touring side, our first chance to compare ourselves with the sort of opposition our West Country opponents would meet on the summer circuit. The rest of us gathered in a huddle in the shade of the bankers' coach to watch the match.

'Jerry is looking on form today,' said the vicar, lowering his binoculars.

'That was a pretty ominous looking forward defensive prod,' agreed Norman, without an ounce of sarcasm in his voice. 'Jerry's obviously intending to make a big score today.'

'I don't think I've ever seen Wodger looking quite so deter mined,' said Brian, who'd lost a little bit more off his broken tooth and whose every word was now accompanied by a faint whistling sound.

It was this which confused me for a moment.

But then, when Brian stopped speaking, I heard the sound much more clearly. It seemed improbable but the sound was distinctive and unmistakeable.

‘Can anyone else hear a telephone ringing?’ I asked.

‘I was just thinking I could hear a telephone,’ June said.

‘It is!’ said Simon. ‘It’s a telephone. Look!’ He pointed in the direction of mid-off who, as we watched, pulled a portable telephone out of his back pocket and proceeded to talk into it.

‘I’ve never seen anything like it!’ said the vicar, clearly shocked.

The fielder seemed to be having a fairly animated conversation with someone and was now waving his free arm about. None of the other members of his team seemed in the slightest bit surprised though Wodger, Jerry and Oily were all standing and staring at him.

Eventually, a couple of minutes later, mid-off slammed the aerial back into the body of his telephone and stuffed the instrument back into his trouser pocket.

‘Well, I never!’ said the vicar. I’ve never heard anyone say: ‘Well, I never!’ before and had always assumed it was the sort of thing people only said in books and plays.

During the next thirty minutes or so we discovered that every player in Henry’s team had a portable telephone with him. At least once an over one of the telephones would ring and the fielder would have a short conversation with the caller. Several times two or more fielders gathered together, clearly discussing the contents of a particular call. On one occasion a bowler stopped in the middle of his run up to answer a telephone call.

Despite all these interruptions (and it can’t be easy to carry on batting when you hear the wicket keeper behind you answering a telephone call) Wodger and Jerry maintained their concentration magnificently. After an hour and a half we still hadn’t lost a wicket but had fifty runs on the board.

Then, as though acting in response to some prearranged but invisible signal the fielding side all sat down on the grass. Wodger, Jerry and Oily were clearly totally confused by this. The reason for the sit down became clear a moment later when the driver emerged from the coach with a large tray of assorted cold drinks which he carefully offered to fielders, umpires and batsmen.

While the players were taking drinks the bankers’ wicket keeper ran over towards us, climbed up into the coach and then emerged a moment or two later carrying a fax message which he had clearly been waiting for. Thoughtfully studying the fax he ran back out on the pitch again.

This was, apparently, all too much for Wodger who put down his bat and wandered across to where Henry, our opponents’ captain, was deep in conversation with two members of his side, one of whom was engrossed in an agitated telephone conversation.

I was curious too. I’d never seen a cricket match interrupted so much. I couldn’t help wondering whether the bankers carried their telephones out to the crease when they were batting. Tentatively, I tiptoed onto the outfield so that I could find out what was going on. The rest of the team followed me.

‘I do apologise,’ said Henry who looked distraught. He seemed to have aged twenty years since our innings had begun. I knew that Wodger and Jerry had made a good start but it didn’t seem the sort of start to age an opponent. ‘There’s a bit of a crisis with the yen,’ he explained.

Wodger looked as puzzled as I’m sure the rest of us felt. ‘The yen?’

‘The Japanese Government has apparently been up to some hanky panky - or rather one or two prominent members of the Government have,’ said Henry. ‘The yen’s taken a battering on the foreign exchange markets and we’re over exposed. We took a short position on dollars and bought puts on the index.’

The vicar looked at me with a frown on his face. I looked at him. Wodger looked at Henry. We all looked at one another. The only one of us who knew what Henry was talking about was Henry. As far as we were concerned he might as well have been talking in a foreign language.

‘We have, er, something of a crisis on our hands,’ explained Henry.

‘Do you want to abandon the match?’ Wodger asked him.

‘Good heavens, no!’ said Henry. ‘Not if you don’t mind us just making a few calls occasionally. We’re trying to get out of our position and it might take us a little time.’

‘I can see that,’ said Wodger who clearly didn’t have the faintest idea what was going on. He looked across at us and rolled his eyes skywards, then he turned and slowly walked back to his bat.

Two overs later Jerry stepped down the wicket and hit a ball from one of the bankers front line bowlers straight back over his head. Normally Jerry would have expected the ball to clear the boundary by twenty yards but he didn’t hit it quite cleanly and it was clear that long-on wasn’t even going to have to move to take a fairly simple catch.

Long-on had his eyes fixed firmly on the ball and his hands clasped ready to catch the ball when his telephone rang.

You couldn’t help but feel sorry for the fellow. You could see the agony in his eyes as he tried to decide what to do. For an instant everyone else on the field froze. Then mid-on and long-off both started to sprint towards him as fast as they could.

Frantically, long-on pulled out his telephone, extended the aerial with a practised flourish and pressed a button or two. He listened for a moment, shouted: ‘Wait!’ and then turned his face upwards to try and get a sight on the ball again. He tucked the telephone between his right ear and his right shoulder so that he could cup his hands ready to take the catch.

Then he noticed that mid-on, puffing and wheezing, was no more than ten yards away from him and bearing down upon him like a runaway train.

‘I’ll take it!’ He shouted. ‘Mine! Mine!’

Mid-on skidded to a halt but distracted long-on. The result was that the ball hit long-on straight in the mouth. He fell backwards onto the ground and his telephone bounced harmlessly on the grass.

Horrified, we stared at him. We watched as he slowly raised himself onto one elbow and you could feel the relief around the ground. We all thought that he must have been killed. Slowly, as he sat up, we all realised that the ball, which seemed firmly stuck in his mouth, was still in play.

‘I’ve never seen anyone caught by a fielder’s mouth before,’ said Oily.

He wasn’t the only one for whom this was a new experience.

Wodger said he wondered if a catch taken in a fielder’s mouth was entirely legal.

Henry, the bankers’ captain, said he rather thought it was. And then, as mid-on and long-off helped pull the ball out of long-on’s mouth he looked a little worried. He bent forwards to examine the ball more carefully. We all moved closer to do the same.

Half a dozen of long-on’s teeth were still embedded in it.

‘Are those your own teeth, Nigel?’ The captain asked his fielder.

Nigel put a finger into his mouth and removed the shattered remains of a set of false teeth. He shook his head. Not surprisingly, he still looked dazed.

‘Oh dear!’ said Henry. He turned to Oily. ‘How good are you on Law 32?’

Oily’s puzzled look answered the question adequately.

‘As I remember it,’ said Henry, ‘the Law states that a catch shall be considered to have been fairly made if the ball lodges in a fielder’s clothes or in the wicket keeper’s pads.’ He took a fragment of broken denture from long-on’s hand and examined it. ‘Now the question is,’ he continued, ‘do you think a fellow’s false teeth can be reasonably considered to be classified as clothing?’

‘Ith parth oth my bothy!’ protested long-on almost incoherently. Without his teeth his face had taken on a strange look and his mouth had almost disappeared. A trickle of blood from an area of damaged gum appeared at a corner of his mouth.

‘Well, not really, old chap!’ Henry insisted, rather sadly. ‘They’re false teeth aren’t they? Not the same thing at all.’

‘Buth ith I hath a faith arm ith would be parth oth my bothy!’ argued long-on miserably.

‘That’s true!’ agreed Henry, with a nod. ‘We’ll have to leave it to the umpires.’ He turned away to talk to his own team’s umpire who was standing next to Oily listening to this bizarre conversation.

Sadly, long-on put the remains of his dentures into his trouser pocket and bent to pick up his portable telephone which was still lying on the grass.

‘Hello?’ he said, holding the telephone to his ear. ‘Oh, hello! You’re thill there!’

He listened for a few moments and as he listened his face gradually grew paler and paler.

‘No!’ He shouted. ‘No! No! No! I wath noth thalking thoo you!’ He was now as pale as his shirt. ‘Malcolm? Malcolm? Are you thill there?’

Looking every inch a broken man long-on automatically turned off his telephone and pushed the aerial back into place. He leant forwards and tapped Henry on the shoulder.

‘We’re finithed!’ he announced.

‘Don’t be so silly!’ said Henry, turning round. ‘We’ll get the fellow out in the next over. Don’t worry about it.’ He started to smile at long-on but noticed how pale he’d become ‘Good heavens, Nigel!’ He said. ‘You look like death. Are you all right?’

‘When I wath thrying to thake that catch...’ said long-on.

‘What’s happened, Nigel?’ shouted Henry, now looking as worried as long-on did. Attracted by the panic in Henry’s voice the rest of the team hurried over.

‘I shouthed tho the otherth,’ sobbed long-on, ‘tho thell them that the catch wath mine...’

‘Yes, yes!’ shouted Henry. ‘What the hell’s happened?’

‘My phone wath swithed on...’

Henry was now getting hysterical.

‘Malcolm from the Thitty Bank wath calling...’

‘What did he want?’ screamed Henry, taking hold of longon’s shirt front and shaking him. ‘What have you done?’

‘He wanthed tho thell me thorne yen,’ said long-on, with tears now streaming down his cheeks.

Henry let go of long-on’s shirt and stepped backwards. Everyone in their side was now silent and hanging on long-on’s next words.

‘I theem tho have bought three hundred million pounths worth ...’

Long-on fell onto his knees and pounded the grass with his portable telephone. ‘Ith wathn’t my fault!’ He sobbed. ‘Ith wathn’t!’

‘I say,’ said Oily gently but reprovingly, ‘do be careful! You’re damaging the outfield with your telephone.’

After that things rather fell apart.

Once he’d got over the immediate shock of what Nigel had inadvertently done Henry valiantly offered to carry on. But it was obvious that his heart wasn’t really in it.

And who could blame him?

After an agonising twenty minutes, during which every member of the team of bankers must have telephoned every bank and broking firm in London, Henry announced that his bank had gone bust.

None of us knew what to say.

What *do* you say to a group of men who have just seen their highly paid jobs, bonuses, incentive schemes, company cars, pension plans and myriad miscellaneous perks disappear?

Eventually, Wodger called us all back onto the field and suggested to Henry that we call it a day.

As he watched Wodger and Jerry (the umpires had jointly decided that the catch had not been fairly held) walk off the field, accompanied by the entire fielding side, Arthur, lifted himself up onto one elbow and spoke to me.

‘What’s up?’ He demanded. He looked up at the bright blue sky and frowned. ‘Why are they coming off?’ he asked. ‘The light seems good enough to me.’

* * *

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

At around half past five that evening the peace and quiet of The Dog and Flute was shattered by the arrival of a television film crew.

After the premature end of our match against the touring bankers we had made our own way back to the pub and left them preparing for the long journey back to London. We'd invited them to share a few drinks and a meal with us before their departure but, not surprisingly I suppose, they'd declined. In the immortal words of Greta Garbo they 'wanted to be alone'.

'We were obviously destined not to play a match today,' said the vicar, lounging back in an ancient wood framed canvas deckchair. 'One should never fight against one's destiny.' He lay back, closed his eyes and gave every impression of a man destined for sleep.

I took a sip from the pint of local brew that Jerry had just bought me and wiped the froth off my upper lip. 'Where's Sharon?' I asked Oily, looking around and noticing her absence.

'She's gone for a walk with Simon,' Oily replied, with a smile, 'they both wanted to see the harbour.'

'They seem to be getting on well together,' I commented.

Oily picked up his glass of gin and tonic (quite a lot of gin and hardly any tonic) and shook it so that the ice cubes rattled against the sides of the glass. 'They're good for each other,' he said.

I looked at him and raised an eyebrow. 'She's a bit young for me to be honest,' Oily confided. 'Wants to talk about pop groups I've never heard of and is desperate to find true love.'

I nodded, understanding, and took another sip of my beer.

It was very good beer.

It was then that the television film crew arrived.

Or, rather, it was then that we first became aware of their presence.

'That was really super!' cried a strange voice.

We looked up.

A fat, rather sweaty little man in a pair of very scruffy, oil stained jeans and a grey polo neck sweater that had an indecipherable slogan on the front and ancient sweat stains under the arms came up to us grinning inanely.

'That was really super,' he repeated, breathing stale cigar smoke over us. 'But I wonder if you could do it just once more and keep a little closer together this time.'

Oily and I looked at one another and then looked at the small fat man. Then we looked beyond him and noticed that he was accompanied by a man with a camera, a man with a tape recorder and a microphone and a male model. It wasn't immediately apparent whether or not the male model was alive.

'It'll make a perfectly lovely opening shot,' said the fat little man. He clasped his hands together in front of his chest as though in prayer. He looked an unlikely supplicant.

Another man, dressed like the others in dirty blue jeans and a dark, stained sweater came up to one side of us and held a battery operated lamp above our heads.

Oily looked up and scowled at the man. 'Do you mind?' he said sharply. 'The heat from your damned lamp is melting my ice.'

The man who was holding the light ignored Oily completely. A youth of indeterminate sex struggled into view carrying two large canvas hold-alls. The male model proved that he was, indeed, alive by taking a small mirror out of his blazer pocket and checking his necktie, teeth and hair. On discovering that all these items were in position he slid the mirror back into his pocket and looked around furtively to see if anyone had noticed. When he saw me looking at him he turned on his smile. It looked about as genuine as a seventy pence piece.

He moved a couple of paces closer and held out his hand. I looked at it as though he was offering to sell it to me. The skin was perfectly white and unblemished. The nails were clean and neatly trimmed. He wore a large gold ring on the little finger of his left hand.

'Hello!' he said, broadening the smile. I'm prepared to swear that his eyelashes fluttered. He introduced himself and spoke as though we ought to know who he was. He said it gently as though not wanting to give us too much joy in one brief instant. He said it quietly as though convinced that the introduction was unnecessary.

'Tell this moron to move his bloody light,' said Oily. 'He's melting my bloody ice.'

'I'm so sorry,' apologised the male model. He fluttered a few finger tips and the man with the light backed away out of range. I couldn't get over how much the speaker reminded me of one of those plastic models that stand in the windows of gents outfitters. He wore a blue blazer with well polished brass buttons (all of which were fastened!), a pair of dark blue slacks with razor sharp creases down the front, a pair of black Gucci loafers with decorative brass buckles, a pale blue shirt and an immaculately knotted blue and maroon spotted tie. His hair was cut short in that strange style television interviewers favour so that it somehow remains unruffled whatever the wind may do. His teeth were white, sparkling and expensively capped and the smile was still as fixed, precise and meaningless as it has been when he'd first switched it on. His eyes were bright blue and quite dead. There didn't seem to be anything behind them.

'I'm so sorry to bother you,' he lied. He looked at each of us in turn and extended his frail looking hand another few inches. Feeling embarrassed I reached out and attempted to shake hands. But he moved his fingers back as my hand reached his and I was left clutching a clump of damp flesh.

'I'm from the local television station,' he explained.

'Gosh!' said Oily, feigning surprise.

'I thought you might not have realised,' said the male model. He did not seem blessed with a powerful sense of humour. 'We've been asked by the national television news programme to produce a short film about the team from the London bank that's just gone under.'

We stared at him in silence.

Brian, who'd been sitting some distance away from us, got up and headed for the bar, carrying his empty beer glass with him. He paused as he passed us. 'Do you want a refill?' Then he looked at the male model and his companions. 'Who are these pillocks?' he asked.

Both Oily and I said that we were fine for the moment and I explained that the pillocks were from the local television company. Brian sniffed disdainfully and disappeared into the bar.

'Could we ask you a few questions?' asked the male model. 'I believe you played a game of cricket against them this afternoon?'

'No and yes,' said Oily bluntly.

'I beg your pardon?' The male model looked confused.

"No' you can't ask us a few questions and 'yes' we played a game of cricket against them this afternoon.'

'I don't think you understand,' said the male model. 'This is for the national news.' He put a lot of emphasis on the word 'national'. It was clearly important to him.

'Why don't you speak to the bankers?' asked Oily.

'Unfortunately, they'd gone by the time we'd arrived,' said the male model. 'You're all we've got.'

'Then you've got a problem,' said Oily.

'This is an important story,' said the male model. He was flushed now and beginning to look agitated. 'It's an opportunity for you to state your side of the story.'

'Super,' said Oily drily. He would have probably sounded more thrilled if someone had told him that he had just acquired herpes.

'There's really no need to be shy,' the male model assured us. He was now beginning to sweat.

'Bugger off!' said Oily quietly.

The television interviewer seemed startled by this. He drew himself up to his full five foot seven inches and swallowed. Sweat was now dripping off his nose and chin. He turned round and looked at the small fat man who was frowning. The cameraman had put his camera down and was squatting on the floor lighting a cigarette.

Brian, returning from the bar, pushed past, carrying several drinks on a round metal tray and returned to his seat. He handed the drinks to Norman, Jerry and Wodger. Arthur was still drinking from his flask.

'Why don't you go and interview the lifeboat crew?' asked Oily. 'They've been out saving lives this afternoon.'

'Don't be silly!' snapped the male model. He took a large, neatly folded linen handkerchief out of his trouser pocket and dabbed at the sweat on his forehead, nose and chin without unfolding the handkerchief. He put the handkerchief away in his trouser pocket. He and the small fat man moved closer together and whispered furiously to one another.

'I'll pay you £25 and not a penny more,' said the male model, turning back to face us.

Oily said nothing but reached into his trouser pocket. He took out a fistful of crumpled notes and carefully picked out five ten pound notes.

'If I give you £50,' he said, offering the notes to the male model, 'will you piss off and play somewhere else with your friends?'

In the background the cameraman sniggered.

The male model changed colour faster than a traffic light. Bright red he opened his mouth to speak but nothing came out of it. Furious, he tossed his head, turned on his heel and left. We didn't see him or his crew again.

'I hate bloody television people,' said Oily. 'Always so full of their own self importance.'

'I gathered you didn't like them,' I admitted.

'I nearly appeared on television once,' said Oily.

I sipped at my beer and waited for him to continue.

He said he'd been invited to a studio where they were recording a programme in which two teams of Scandinavian potters were due to argue about the influence of lesbianism on seventeenth century Spanish pottery. He said he was only invited because a friend of a friend knew one of the researchers and they were absolutely desperate for people to make up an audience and clap at all the right moments.

Oily said, however, that as the minutes ticked away and the floor manager kept marching about shouting instructions he got more and more nervous. Eventually he could bear it no longer. His need to obey nature overcame all other considerations and he rushed out of the studio and into the nearest men's lavatory.

What Oily didn't know when he sat down was that five minutes earlier a researcher from one of the television company's nature study programmes, given the task of disposing of a jar of leeches which had been starring in a programme about river wild life, had deposited the now hungry but unwanted starlets into the very same lavatory. In careless haste, and ignorant of the staying power of these small creatures, the researcher had assumed that a single flush would rid the pan of living evidence and send a jar of former performers hurtling sewer-wards where they would meet an end of some kind.

In the event, of course, the end they met was Oily's.

When Oily's plump and no doubt succulent looking cheeks settled above them the leeches abandoned their hold on the icelike sides of the lavatory pan and headed heavenwards.

When leeches attach themselves to human skin they do so silently and without pain and so when Oily stood up a few minutes later he was aware only of a sense of relief. He was certainly not aware of the small school of dependents which had become attached to his person.

It was only when he was about to button up his fly that he noticed that his previously pink and flaccid member had acquired a turgor and a colour that seemed unusual to say the least: When, on closer examination, Oily discovered that what he could see was in fact a leech starting its breakfast he did what most men would have done under similar circum stances. He panicked.

Instead of calmly fastening his fly, walking to the studio canteen, collecting a salt cellar, returning to the privacy of the lavatory and getting rid of the leeches in the traditional, time honoured way he tore at the leeches in disgust and terror.

When, after managing to tear one leech from his person Oily put a hand behind him and discovered that there were at least half a dozen more still attached to various sensitive parts of his nether regions he lost all touch with common sense. Terrified, he tore off his trousers and his underpants and threw them onto the floor. And, with blood pouring from a number of tiny skin punctures, he ran out into the corridor.

By this time it is fair to say that Oily was not thinking clearly. ·

Not knowing where else to go he ran straight back into the television studio. It probably wasn't the wisest thing he could have done.

He was ejected by two of the television company's toughest security men and observed by viewers as nothing more than a pink blur, momentarily adding colour and movement to a dull and otherwise unmemorable programme.

* * *

I know someone else who almost appeared on television.

Basil is an estate agent; an apparently sane and prosaic estate agent. Basil's hobby is astrology. For years he has been an avid student of the subject. He has a vast library of books on astrology and even has a computer programmed to provide astrological forecasts for his friends and neighbours. Everyone knows what they're getting for Christmas from Basil.

About eighteen months ago Basil wrote a book on the subject which was completely ignored by literary editors, critics and reviewers but which very nearly gave him his fifteen minutes of fame.

It all began, unpredictably, with a baggage handlers strike at Athens airport.

The strike meant that an eminent guest who was due to appear on one of the nation's leading television talk shows was unable to get out of Greece and into England. So, desperate to fill five minutes with something, the producer found Basil's book, telephoned him and asked him if he'd like to appear.

Would a politician like a knighthood?

Basil was desperately excited by the invitation. He knew very well that a spot on this particular television programme would instantly help his publishers sell thousands of copies of his book, turn him into a household name for a day and enable him to trade in his five year old Ford for something with a spoiler and go-faster stripes.

Determined to make sure that all his friends in the estate agency business saw him on the show he spent several hours before the programme ringing round and letting the news fall as casually as possible into the conversation.

'... well, I must go,' he'd say after about two minutes of chatter about the weather, 'I've got to rush ... I'm due to appear on television this evening ...'

He was so anxious to work his way through his address book that he quite forgot the time. He was still only half way through the list of people he wanted to call when he discovered that he had only forty minutes to get to the studio.

‘You will have to rush,’ said one of the friends he’d called. ‘The programme’s on soon isn’t it? You’re not ringing from home are you?’

Basil leapt into his car and shot off at a tremendous pace, leaving a trail of mechanised mayhem behind him. There was a nasty near miss with a bus, a skid around a traffic island and a collision, right outside the studios with a taxi, but he made it with several minutes to spare and ran into the television centre tremendously relieved. He even paused for a second and considered telephoning one or two additional friends from the studio foyer.

Unfortunately, it was all a waste of time for the show was cancelled.

The director himself came out to apologise. He explained that the interviewer, the star of the show, had been late arriving and had been involved in an accident while on the way into the studio.

‘He isn’t badly injured,’ the director assured Basil. ‘But he’s badly shaken. Some buffoon ran into the side of his taxi.’ He shrugged to convey his sadness and sympathy. ‘He feels too shaken to go on with the show so we’re going to run one of last year’s favourite programmes and give the viewers another chance to see that.’

The director put a hand on Basil’s shoulder. ‘Some other time, perhaps?’ he suggested, turning away and hurrying off along the corridor.

Needless to say that was the end of Basil’s fifteen minutes of fame.

* * *

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Our next match was due to take place the following day at the cricket ground behind the Maiden's Arms in Plymouth.

We woke and got up early that morning knowing that we had quite a long drive ahead of us. Once again the sun was shining, once again the sea and sky were both so blue that the horizon was virtually invisible. The flowers outside The Dog and Flute seemed brighter and more full of fragrance than before.

The temptation to abandon the tour and stay there for ever was almost irresistible - but loyalty and common sense proved too powerful an opposition. I packed my bags after promising myself that I would return.

At breakfast Oily was alone.

'Where's Sharon?'

'Haven't seen her since last night,' answered Oily, putting a forkful of scrambled egg into his mouth. 'When she and Simon went down to look at the harbour.'

'Do you think they're all right?' I asked, worried for their safety. 'Shouldn't we have gone to look for them?'

'I said I hadn't seen her,' said Oily.

I looked at him, puzzled.

'I *heard* her!' grinned Oily. 'They're OK.'

He spiked a piece of mushroom, scooped up a forkful of tomato and added the mixture to the scrambled egg.

'Don't you mind?'

Oily swallowed and shook his head at the same time. I was impressed by his versatility.

'Don't get me wrong,' he said, 'Sharon's great company but...' he thought for a moment and broke a piece of toast in two. He wiped one of the pieces of toast across his plate and then carefully bit a piece off it. 'She's never even *heard* of Ted Dexter!'

The two young lovers nearly missed breakfast. They entered the dining room hand in hand and Oily waved to them cheerfully, calling them over to our table.

'Sleep well?' he asked them both.

I've never seen anyone blush quite so dramatically as Simon did.

Sharon kissed Oily on the forehead and Oily put his arm round her waist in a friendly, almost paternal, sort of way.

I pushed back my chair and stood up. 'Don't be long!' I said to Sharon and Simon. 'We'll have to leave in...,' I looked at my watch, '...half an hour or so.' I looked at Oily. 'Coming?'

'Sure!' said Oily. He emptied his coffee cup and stood up. He winked at Simon who somehow managed to go even redder.

'Do you think his mother will think I've looked after him properly?' I asked Oily, as we left the dining room.

'Absolutely!' nodded Oily. 'This tour has been an educational experience for him.'

In the corridor outside the dining room we passed June. She was reading a letter.

'Not an income tax demand, I hope?' said Oily light heartedly.

Neither of us was prepared for what happened next. Competent, capable, rational, sensible June suddenly exploded in a cascade of tears and flung her arms around Oily's neck.

Oily patted her on the back in an attempt to comfort her.

'There, there!' he said. 'Now, now!' Over her shoulder he looked at me in desperation. For once not even Oily knew what to do.

'What is it?' I asked her. 'What's the matter? Is it something in the letter?' I asked. Sherlock Holmes would have been able to learn a few things from me when it comes to understanding people.

The mention of the letter seemed to make things worse. June sobbed louder than ever.

'Come on now,' said Oily. 'Things are rarely as bad as they seem...' He patted her on the back again and then gave her a big hug.

'Who was the letter from?' I asked her.

'My husband!' sobbed June at last. She had the letter crumpled in her left hand. Without being seen I tried to read what it said but couldn't.

'Sergeant Tate?' said Oily. There was a strong element of surprise in his voice. I could understand it. Neither of us could see Sergeant Tate as a letter writer. In particular we couldn't see him as the author of letters likely to break a woman's heart.

June nodded and sniffed. I took the handkerchief out of my pocket and offered it to her. She wiped her eyes and then blew her nose.

'I'm sorry!' she said. 'I feel such a fool.'

'Don't be silly!' I said. I put what I hoped was a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

'What's the letter say?' asked Oily, who has never been one to put someone else's sense of privacy above his own sense of curiosity. I'd been prepared to try and read the letter but I wouldn't have dreamt of actually asking June what it contained.

'He's leaving me,' said June..

'Oh dear!' said Oily. He patted June on the back again. 'Never mind!' he added. It sounded as trite then as it probably looks now.

'He's joining the Hong Kong police force,' said June. 'He's leaving before I get back.'

'Crumbs!' said Oily. 'That's a bit sudden, isn't it?'

'He's leaving me the house and the car,' said June.

'Well that's good, isn't it?' asked Oily.

'Try not to be too upset,' I said. 'Maybe it's for the best?'

June pushed herself away from Oily and turned her tear stained face towards me. 'Upset?' she said. She laughed. 'I'm not upset!' she told me. 'It's the best news I've ever had!' She burst into tears again. 'I'm so happy,' she said, 'now that Kurt and I will be able to be together all the time.'

Oily, with June's arms draped around his shoulders, looked at me over her shoulder. He shrugged. I shrugged back at him.

'You're not miserable?' said Oily.

June shook her head.

'These are tears of joy?'

June nodded vigorously.

'Have you told the vicar yet?'

A shake of the head.

'Then let's find him,' said Oily, 'and tell him the good news.'

'Yes,' said June, 'that sounds nice.'

We left The Dog and Flute twenty minutes later than planned. All things considered that wasn't too bad. Sharon and Simon had difficulty in tearing themselves out of each other's arms long enough to pack and June and the vicar had a similar problem.

We left behind peace, beauty and tranquillity. We hadn't had much success with our cricket while staying in Tottery Poppleton but it had, nevertheless, been a memorable two nights.

And as we left I think we all felt more than a little sad as we realised that we had just one more match to play and then the tour would be over.

* * *

There are invariably two ways to travel from one place to another: the fast, direct, route to be used by lorries, commercial travellers and people in a hurry and the slow, pretty, scenic route. We were, strictly speaking, in something of a hurry since our match in Plymouth was due to start in less than four hours but, nevertheless, we chose the pretty route. There are times in a cricket team's life when caution has to be thrown to the wind.

I'm glad we did. North Cornwall may have the more rugged coastline and the wilder surf of the Atlantic but the coast of South Cornwall is pretty in a softer, gentler way. North Cornwall is tough but romantic. South Cornwall is romantic but tough.

For me, one of the great joys of travelling in Cornwall is the fact that the entire county is, on the whole, still untouched by the horrors of the twentieth century. The countryside is wild and real and the people are wild and real too. Cornwall is one of the few parts of England that has not yet been ruined by the architects and the planners. The surveyors have not yet found it worth their while to ruin the county or its countryside.

Wherever you go in Cornwall (or, indeed, Devon) the towns and the villages are built on tradition and need rather than planning expediency.

There are, I'm pleased to say, no new towns in the West Country.

I went to Britain's best known new town, Milton Keynes, once and the memory haunts me still. Attracted by the posters, the advertisements, the jokes and a feeling that I ought to take a peep at the future before the future enveloped me I decided to spend a day there. It was, I recall with a shiver, a daunting, haunting, deeply depressing, nightmarish experience.

In some ways Milton Keynes is, like most new towns, a pleasant enough place. There are lots of open spaces. The roads are wide, well built and smooth. The countryside is attractive enough. The shopping precinct is impressive, spacious and comprehensive. The car parks are enormous. There are neat rows of houses, factories and public buildings and there are no traffic jams.

There is nothing repulsive about Milton Keynes and it ought, I suppose, to be a marvellous place in which to live and to work. It's a cleverly designed town and the people who built it obviously took great care when building it.

But to me Milton Keynes seemed to be no more a town than a plastic topped kitchen table is a piece of furniture or a bowl of prepackaged breakfast cereal is a meal. It is a place where people live, work and shop. But I can't honestly see anyone ever calling it 'home' with any real sense of pride.

What is wrong with it, of course, is that it is so carefully designed, so thoroughly organised, so well planned and so precise that it is deeply depressing as a place. It has, in short, no soul.

They're building new towns like this all over the world these days. All in the same dull, anonymous architectural style. All devoid of character. Milton Keynes could be a small American town, a small German town or a small Dutch town. There are no uncertainties, no surprises and no really playful or wasteful eccentricities. There is nothing to suggest that the town was designed by people. Nothing to suggest that the town will ever acquire a real personality of its own. Nothing to suggest that the town will ever be anything other than a bland, uninteresting groups of buildings put up to solve a housing shortage.

They've been doing the same thing with hotels for years now. Go anywhere in the world and you can find yourself staying in a hotel that has a standard design, standard decor and standard staff. You could be having breakfast or going to bed in Chicago, Paris or Hong Kong. You can find your way around your room blindfold. Everything is in exactly the same place. Nothing varies.

They're even doing it to existing towns these days.

Town planners are knocking down all the interesting bits. They are only interested in things that are functional. They are impatient with variations in style, texture, shape or size. They are intolerant of contradictions. They don't like seeing the results of mixed architectural marriages. They don't like the thought that building styles may have bumped into one another over the years. They don't like towns to have personal identities.

Is it surprising that sane and sensible people become vandals and graffiti writers?

The real problem with Milton Keynes is that the people who planned and built the town did too good a job. They did their job so well that they didn't leave any room for mistakes. They left no room for the errors and imperfections that are an essential part of life. Here and there you can see signs that someone has tried to inject a touch of humour or a note of human presence. But they are like footprints in the desert: lost and unnoticeable. There are no real follies. And the truth is that you cannot stick personality or warmth onto a new town any more than you can solder a soul into a robot.

The superficial symptom of this change for the worse is the fact that tomorrow's villages and towns are given such silly names.

How, for example, can anyone take pride in living in a town called Welwyn Garden City? What a strange name for a grown up place! The people who thought it up might have been pleased with themselves but they should have been satisfied with congratulating themselves and should then have thought up something more traditional, more prosaic, more real.

Welwyn Garden City is the sort of name they favour in America where they have places called Pleasantville. But it isn't a proper name for an English town. Decent, properly grown up places should either have solid, hard working, respectable names like Wolverhampton or Birmingham or Manchester, solid with honest muck and grime, sounding of factories and machines; or they should have fanciful, delicate names like Morton in the Marsh, Chipping Campden, Stow on the Wold or Mousehole. Those are all proper names for English towns.

The name Welwyn Garden City reminds me of those funny names that boxers, wrestlers and snooker players give them selves to make themselves sound more colourful. A boxer called Cedric Kipling would feel emasculated. He would know he would never attract the crowds. He'd be conscious of cheating the paying customers and he'd feel ashamed every time he heard the referee shout out his name. No one called Cedric Kipling could ever be a contender for a world championship. No, if you're a boxer you have to be called 'Boy Steamhammer Kipling' or 'Hard Hands Kipling' or even Cedric 'Iron Jaw' Kipling.

The same sort of thing is true of snooker players. A carefully chosen name can make a man a box office draw.

But towns are different and I don't think they should be demeaned in this way. A place should make up its mind whether it wants to be serious and solid (like Bradford or Liverpool) or flighty and rather whimsical (like Moles Chamber or North Radworthy). It shouldn't be made to sound comical or sad, like a breakfast cereal or a type of yoghurt.

Cornwall is safe from all this. Cornwall is full of steep, almost impassable lanes and cobbled pathways. It is full of old stone buildings and fairytale rooftops. Cornwall, like Devon, is full of real places and real people.

* * *

CHAPTER TWENTY

The last match of our tour was due to take place on the village green at Upton Bulkworthy, a small village just outside Plymouth.

When arranging the tour Wodger had asked each club secretary or captain to recommend a local pub, inn or small hotel where we could find good, simple, clean accommodation and plenty of good, plain food. The captain of the Upton Bulk worthy team had recommended a pub called The Maiden's Arms which, he said, overlooked the village green. The captain had, said Wodger, been full of praise for the establishment and had assured him that we would receive a warm welcome.

What Wodger didn't know was that the Upton Bulkworthy cricket captain and the landlord of The Maiden's Arms were one and the same person.

The pub was completely dedicated to the game of cricket. All the door handles were made out of bails. The bar was decorated with old cricket bats, elegantly framed copies of famous cricket prints, framed scorecards and team photo graphs. The seating was provided by old cricket ground benches (long since replaced with individual plastic bucket seats) which still bore their stencilled numbers. And instead of being labelled 'In' and 'Out' the doors to and from the kitchen were labelled 'Out' and 'Not Out' in the famous style of the gent's lavatories in the basement of the pavilion at Lords.

After he'd pulled us all pints of a recommended local brew the landlord, Tony Parsons, explained that when he'd bought the pub five years earlier it had been called The Crafty Ferret and that no one had played cricket on the village green since before the outbreak of the Second World War.

'You won't believe it now,' he said, 'but five years ago our village green was covered in thistles, dandelions, buttercups and poppies. The locals walked their dogs on it and the ground had been churned up by kids on bicycles and tourists driving onto it in their cars to have picnics.'

We dutifully looked out of the bar window at the village green and made suitable noises of admiration. None of us mentioned but all of us noticed that there were rather a lot of daisies, buttercups and dandelions in evidence for a cricket pitch.

The landlord served us all with lunches which really were fit for ploughmen (half a small loaf each, a huge chunk of cheese, a small mound of fresh butter and a shiny red apple) and reminded us that the match was due to start in just under three quarters of an hour.

As we drank our beer and munched at our bread and cheese we watched as our opponents for the afternoon gathered in the shade of a massive oak tree.

They were a motley looking crew, as varied in age and size as we ourselves, but they clearly took their cricket seriously. Already changed for the match (there were no dressing rooms available other than the gents' lavatories at The Maiden's Arms) they had driven, cycled and walked to the ground in their whites.

As we watched, comfortably relaxed in the pub bar, they began a pre-match training regime that was clearly routine. They started with simple arm swinging exercises, moved on to a strange, hopping sort of exercise that was presumably designed to loosen up the muscles in their legs and then proceeded to an exhausting and exhaustive round of press ups, sit ups (holding onto one another's ankles) and leg raising movements.

'What's going on out there?' Oily asked the barmaid. Our landlord, the club captain, had long since excused himself from service behind the bar and joined his tem out on the village green.

'Callisthenics!' replied the barmaid, a sensible, stout looking woman in her late forties. She wore a black, shapeless smock and had a large, hairy mole on her upper lip.

'What's it all for?' asked Oily, throwing a handful of peanuts down his throat with such experienced efficiency that few of them even touched his tongue or tonsils.

'Oh, Mr Parsons is very keen on winning,' replied the bar maid sternly. 'He likes the team to get properly loosened up ready for the match.'

Oily took another look out through the bar window and bit a gherkin in half. 'But it's a game!' He laughed. 'Supposed to be fun.' He sent the remaining half a gherkin to its fate and nodded a head in the direction of the village green. 'That doesn't look like fun.'

'Mr Parsons says that if a game is worth playing then it's worth winning,' said the barmaid.

Oily looked at her and said nothing. He looked at me and rolled his eyes upwards in despair.

I know some people won't agree with me about this but I'm entirely with Oily. I sometimes think the world has gone mad. These days everything seems to have been taken over by people who are always intent on learning things, bettering themselves and doing well. These days just about everything has to have a purpose and a meaning. Things have to be done properly. There isn't much room left for 'fun'.

When I first started to play golf, seven or eight years ago, the professional who taught me insisted that everything had to be taken seriously.

I learnt that you can't just toddle round the course digging up the turf, losing balls and generally enjoying the exercise, the company and the fresh air. These days you have to buy books telling you how to improve your swing, video cameras telling you where to put your feet and balls which are technically designed to give you maximum bounce and length. I learnt that real golfers worry a lot about their game and I was taught that people who just hack around having a good time are second rate citizens to be despised and held in low esteem.

The futility of it all finally dawned on me a couple of years ago. It was a good summer and I'd spent four long hours trailing around a bone hard golf course in a club tournament. I was making my way back to the changing room when the professional caught sight of me and called me over. He told me that I'd developed a bit of a twitch in my swing and suggested that I went straight over to the practice green to work on it.

Well, I was absolutely knackered but I went. I hadn't enjoyed the game of golf but I knew that if I didn't go to the practice ground I'd feel guilty. I'd had a long hard week and I really wanted a rest but I felt I had to knuckle down and take the game seriously.

On the way out to the practice ground I passed a couple of lazy good for nothing layabouts who I knew. They were both sprawled in deck chairs and doing absolutely nothing apart from contribute to the profits of a large international brewery.

As I limped back from the practice ground, three quarters of an hour later, they were still there. And as I limped wearily into the changing rooms, where I knew only too well that there would be a stench of damp socks and a queue for the shower, I felt rather aggrieved. It didn't seem fair. It certainly wasn't fun. It was too hot for golf and far too hot to be hammering away at golf balls on the practice green. I love golf almost as much as I love cricket but I felt that there are times for playing sport and times for lounging in deck chairs. This seemed more like a time for lounging in a deck chair. I felt I'd been tricked by my own false sense of ambition.

I vowed there and then never to take any game too seriously.

And it's made life much more fun.

'I suppose we ought to make a move!'

The sound of Wodger's voice woke me from my daydream. Sitting on the pub's old cricket bench, with the sun streaming through the windows, I'd drifted back a few years. When Wodger spoke I'd been watching Michael Holding bowling from the Pavilion End at Lords.

'They look terribly keen,' moaned Brian, staring out of the window. 'Look at them now!'

We all turned and stared at our opposition. They were now busy waving their arms around like a squad of demented traffic policemen.

'I feel tired just watching them,' said Norman, wearily.

'They train in a gym in Plymouth every Monday and Thursday evening.'

We looked round. The barmaid, busy polishing a glass, had a smug look on her face. 'Mr Parsons says that fitness is the key to success in all walks of life.' She opened her mouth, exhaled loudly into the glass, polished it again and held it up to the window so that she could check that it sparkled properly.

'Come on,' said Oily loudly. He stood up and stretched his arms which made loud, arthritic creaks of protest. 'Let's stuff the bastards out of sight.'

We drained our glasses, went upstairs to our rooms to change into our playing kit and re-united outside the pub's front door a few minutes later.

'That shirt looks as if you haven't washed it since we started the tour!' said Wodger to Jerry.

Jerry looked down at his shirt which was covered in grass stains and muddy brown marks where he'd polished the ball on it (we hadn't played with a bright red ball for years). 'I haven't!' he said.

'That's disgusting!' said Wodger.

'How could we wash our clothes?' asked Brian. 'We haven't even seen a launderette!' His shirt was, if anything, even dirtier than Jerry's.

'You could have washed them in the sink in your room,' said Wodger. His shirt was clean but wrinkled. He'd clearly forgotten to bring an iron with him.

'You should have asked me,' said June. 'I'd have done them for you.'

Oily coughed loudly. 'Maybe we ought to postpone the housekeeping debate,' he said. 'They seem to be waiting for us.'

He was right. Directly across the road which divided the front of The Maiden's Arms from the village green our opponents stood waiting for us.

On one side of them a blackboard had been erected and a small boy was standing ready with a stub of chalk and a damp cloth to write up the scores. Next to the blackboard an elderly, white haired gentleman sat in an aluminium framed garden chair. He had a large book spread out on his knees and was clearly the official scorer. Half a dozen spectators were gathered around the blackboard waiting for the match to begin. Across the other side of the green a man was taking his dog for a walk.

Wodger won the toss for the first time since the introduction of the current lbw laws. He seemed more surprised than anyone and quite uncertain about what to do.

'What would you like to do?' he asked the opposing captain.

'It's your choice!' Tony Parsons pointed out. 'You won the toss!'

'I don't want to appear impolite or pushy,' said Wodger timidly. 'It's your home ground after all...'

'No, really...' said Tony. 'You choose.'

Wodger looked around for help. 'What do you think?' he asked the rest of us. He had clearly never expected to win the toss and find himself faced with such a dilemma.

'Let's bat,' said Oily.

'Let's field,' said Jerry simultaneously.

We voted on it.

It must have been the first time in history that such a simple decision was taken in such a complicated, albeit democratic, way. By six votes to five we voted to field first.

Their innings was opened by two schoolboys who marched out to the wicket as though they couldn't wait to get started on our bowling. One was tall, slim and bespectacled. The other was also very slim but was much shorter. Both wore elbow protectors, chest protectors, thigh pads and helmets. Their shirts and flannels, bright white and neatly ironed, contrasted vividly with our own grass stained gear. For a moment I felt a twinge of embarrassment as I looked around and realised how scruffy we must look. Then I noticed the dandelions growing in the middle of the wicket and felt considerably better. Our shirts might not always be white but visitors have never found dandelions growing on our municipal pitches.

One of the youthful openers strutted down the wicket and knocked the heads off a couple of dandelions with his bat. He exchanged a word or two with his partner and they both laughed.

Kurt, our ecclesiastical opening bowler, who was waiting at his mark for the umpire to give him the signal to begin our bowling attack, was neither impressed nor amused by this light hearted display of quiet confidence. When, with the batsmen settled, the umpire finally lowered his arm and gave the vicar permission to bowl he glowered, lowered his head and charged up to the delivery crease like a bull who's been enraged by a particularly cocky young matador.

It was, I'm sure, a result of pure chance that the ball landed on one of the discarded dandelion heads and kicked sharply upwards and slightly to the right. The batsman, the taller of the two, the one whose attempt at gardening had left the dandelion head lying on the pitch, was preparing a neat forward defensive stroke that would have served him well had the ball followed a predictable route.

The ball missed the bat by an embarrassingly large distance, and hit the youthful opener just below his breastbone. Startled and winded the batsman was bent double by the blow. He dropped his bat and slowly fell backwards onto his stumps.

First ball. One wicket. No runs.

* * *

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Nothing inspires a fast bowler more than hitting a batsman and taking a wicket at the same time.

While the unfortunate youth limped slowly off the pitch the vicar, who seemed unaware of the role played by the decapitated dandelion head, explained exactly how he'd managed to dig the ball in and make it rise so unpredictably. Solemnly, we all congratulated him and shook his hand. June kissed him on the cheek.

Tony Parsons came in next and before he took strike he carefully removed the two dandelion heads from the wicket. He looked around, glowered at each of us in turn and after taking instructions from the umpire dug himself a small hole with the tip of his bat. When Oily, fielding at second slip, muttered something about gardening and planting dandelions Parsons turned round and awarded him a second glower.

The vicar thundered in to deliver his second ball of the match with all the fire and fury of a man who smells blood and wickets. I've noticed this about other clergymen; they always seem to have a robust attitude towards causing their opponents physical harm.

Parsons, however, was not about to be intimidated. And this time the vicar did not have any dandelion heads to help him.

Parsons played the same shot that his young predecessor had tried to play. This time it worked. Parsons' angled bat smothered the ball, taking nearly all the pace off it and allowing it to dribble out towards Wodger fielding at mid-on.

The rest of the over continued in much the same way. The vicar hurtled in as though determined to drill a hole clean through the opposing captain and the oppositions captain leant forwards and successfully used the blade of his bat to stun the ball and allow it to bounce harmlessly back down the pitch.

Jerry's first over from the other end was less successful and more expensive.

The shorter of the two schoolboy openers seemed distinctly unimpressed by Jerry's bowling and after hitting his first delivery fearlessly through the covers for a well run two, and glancing his second delivery past Arthur's outstretched gloves for a boundary, he stepped boldly down the wicket and hit Jerry's third ball straight back over his head.

The ball crossed the edge of the village green at a height of about twenty feet and crashed into the back of a passing builder's lorry.

Since it was the only decent match ball the home side owned we all sat down while a member of the batting side climbed into his car and chased after the lorry.

By the end of the fourth over we had lost our initial advantage. Our opponents had scored 34 runs for the loss of just one wicket.

Jerry and the vicar were, by now, both taking so much punishment that Wodger decided to 'rest' them early and bring on Simon and Brian instead.

Simon struck almost immediately. His third ball slipped between the remaining opener's bat and his pads and to the absolute astonishment of the home side Arthur performed a remarkable stumping. For a moment neither of the batsmen nor the umpire was quite prepared to believe what they'd seen. It wasn't by any means the first time I've seen cricketers wishing that they could watch an instant slow motion reply on a television screen.

But the evidence was incontrovertible. The batsman had missed the ball and Arthur hadn't. The wicket was shattered and the bails scattered and the batsman's rear foot was a good six inches outside his crease.

The next two batsmen didn't last long. Brian had one caught behind the wicket before he'd scored and the other was bowled by Simon and distracted by Sharon who was well aware of the effect her presence had on opposition batsmen and was determined to see that her newfound lover benefitted more than anyone else.

By now the home side had reached 50 but they had lost four wickets. The match seemed evenly poised.

The next batsman to join Tony Parsons at the crease looked to be by far the oldest member of their team. He was of average height and rather plumper than his team-mates. Almost bald he had two tufts of blond hair – one on each side of his head – and had, in that strange way favoured by vain and balding men, combed a dozen thin strands of hair across the dome of his head in a futile attempt to disguise his hairlessness.

As he walked out to the crease his eyes were closed and he talked incessantly to himself. He must have practised the walk a number of times for he was no more than a yard or two from the wicket when he finally opened his eyes.

Before even looking down the pitch at the umpire, to take his guard, he played a variety of practice air shots. Lots of batsmen play a few imaginary shots either on the way to the wicket or when they get there. I've done it myself a few times when I've felt my nerves jangling a bit. But this balding fellow didn't just play a couple of imaginary shots to help relax him self. He went through his whole repertoire of shots. And as he did so he talked constantly to himself; offering words of support and encouragement.

Eventually, after what seemed like a short lifetime, he abandoned his mental exercises and announced that he was ready to play. He took guard, exchanged a few cheery words with his captain, Tony Parsons, and settled down with Sharon's straining blouse (top four buttons undone) about a yard away from him and filling a large corner of his field of vision.

With the unfortunate fellow's imagination tuned to peak performance – and Sharon's cleavage providing more than ample inspiration – it is hardly surprising that he didn't seem to see the ball that Simon delivered to him. In fact he didn't even move. The ball, slow and slightly over-pitched – bounced once without deviating from its course and neatly flicked off a bail before landing safely in Arthur's gloves.

The hapless batsman remained motionless for a moment, frozen by mixed emotions. He looked at the umpire, turned and looked at the bail now lying on the grass and, after one long, last lingering look in Sharon's direction, started the slow walk back to the edge of the village green.

For the next long hour or so everything went the home side's way. Neither our bowlers nor our two busty fielders could stop the batsmen scoring almost at will. As he watched the home side's score mount to an almost impregnable level Wodger tried just about everything. He even let June and Sharon try a couple of overs.

Nothing worked. By four o'clock the home side had reached a total of 165 for the loss of just five wickets. When they declared, twenty minutes later, they had 201 runs on the board and Wodger was having difficulty in finding anyone prepared to bowl.

Jerry bowled the last over of our innings and after the fourth ball (which Parsons had dispatched to the boundary with disdain) the two home side batsmen met in the middle of the wicket and then, when they returned to their respective creases, proceeded to begin digging at the pitch with the ends of their bats.

'Hey!' cried Wodger. 'Be careful!'

'Just look at this!' said Parsons, digging at the pitch with the toe of his boot. 'Weeds!' He kicked a dandelion root out of the pitch and flicked it sideways with his boot. The removal of the dandelion root left a large hole in the ground.

'It's as bad down here!' said the batsman at the other end. He too had managed to kick a dandelion root out of the ground.

Wodger, Jerry, Oily, the vicar and I gathered around and stared at the wicket. Both holes had been dug on a good length.

'You can't do that!' complained the vicar. 'That's not cricket!'

'Sorry!' Parsons apologised. 'Only just noticed them.' He settled back into position, ready to receive the next ball. 'Can't have dandelions growing on the wicket.'

'I've half a mind to call the match off!' said Wodger, who was so indignant that he had gone bright red. 'It's disgwaceful!'

'Can't do that...' said Oily, shaking his head sadly. 'It'll look as though we don't think we can match their score.'

'We can't!' Jerry pointed out.

'We might be able to.' The vicar insisted.

We carried on, of course. They scored six off the last two balls of the over and then declared.

In The Maiden's Arms the atmosphere was gloomy.

Simon, who said he was hungry, asked the barmaid if there were any sandwiches to go with the tea she'd served.

Our astonishment and despair reached new heights when she handed Simon a copy of the bar menu and told him that he could have another ploughman's lunch if he wanted one but that he'd have to pay for it.

'What?' said Oily. 'No sandwiches?'

'I'm afraid not,' said the barmaid, rather sniffily.

None of us had ever played a cricket match where the home side didn't provide sandwiches and cakes between innings.

Hungry but glum we ordered more bread, cheese and apples. We realised, too late, why the home side had remained out on the village green when Tony Parsons had told us that we'd find refreshments available inside The Maiden's Arms.

Two minutes later one of the home side's young opening batsmen poked a head into the bar to tell us that the umpires were ready and to ask us, on behalf of Mr Parsons, if we'd like to start our innings. When he'd gone the barmaid asked us if we'd like the cost of our tea putting on our bill or if we'd rather pay cash.

* * *

CHAPTER TWENTY **TWO**

‘I weally want to win this match,’ said Wodger, buckling on his pads. He struggled for a moment with a troublesome buckle and then straightened up. ‘Have you ever thought how similar a modern day cricketer is to a mediaeval knight preparing for the jousts?’

I thought for a moment and then shook my head.

‘No.’

‘Your trouble,’ said Wodger dolefully, ‘is that you’ve got no soul.’ He pulled on his gloves, picked up his bat and tapped Jerry on the shoulder. ‘Come on,’ he said. ‘Let’s show them what we’re made of.’

The rest of us watched as Wodger and Jerry tiptoed across the road, their spikes clattering against the tarmacadam, and then marched purposefully out towards the wicket. We watched as Wodger gave Jerry some last minute advice. We watched as Wodger took guard and then we watched as he received the first ball. Then we watched poor Wodger hobble back across the village green, across the road and up the pathway to the pub’s front door.

‘It pitched stwaight in that damned hole one of them dug!’ complained Wodger, bitterly disappointed. He made a move as though intending to throw his bat down into a corner of the room, then thought better of it and placed it carefully on the floor.

‘Never mind,’ said Simon, ‘Oily’s probably bought up the umpires. We’ll be all right, you’ll see!’ Sharon who was holding his left hand with her right leant across and kissed him on the cheek.

‘Simon!’ said Wodger sharply. ‘That’s not how this team wins its matches!’

‘Sorry!’ said Simon. He blushed. ‘Just a joke.’

‘I should think so,’ said Wodger, struggling to unbuckle his pads. The rest of us devoted our full attention to the cricket.

At first we thought that Wodger’s dismissal might herald a painful and embarrassing defeat for us. But slowly Jerry and Oily managed to give us hope; not of victory, that seemed an impossible dream, but at least of a spirited and courageous defeat. As Norman put it, we wanted Mr Parsons and his team to know that they’d been involved in a cricket match!

Jerry was out at five minutes past five with his personal score on 23. We had lost two wickets and scored 47 runs.

‘117!’ said Wodger suddenly. He had been hunched over a notebook.

Puzzled, we looked at him.

‘My total for the tour,’ Wodger explained. He sighed and shook his head sadly. ‘I weckon each wun has cost me about £3.50.’

Jerry stamped into the bar and threw down his bat. It bounced off the floor and collided with a small table, knocking an empty glass onto the floor. The glass bounced and rolled underneath one of the benches.

‘Did you see that?’ he demanded. ‘The ball missed my bat by at least six inches! How that wicket keeper had the nerve to appeal for a catch I’ll never know.’ He sighed loudly and shook his head. ‘As for the umpire...’ he began. He didn’t finish but sat down noisily next to Wodger.

Slowly, as the light began to fade, we clawed our way towards the formidable total accumulated by the home team. Somewhere across the village the church bells began to ring. In the tops of a clump of trees which stood on one edge of the village green a dozen rooks gossiped and chattered.

As dusk fell the lights in homes around the green seemed much brighter than before and the lights of passing motor cars seemed to shine with enhanced brilliance.

The dusk helped neither side. The fielders found it more and more difficult to pick out the ball against the gloomy background of houses and trees and shadowy sky. On several occasions simple catches were missed. Twice in one over fielders allowed us to score boundaries when we should have been restricted to singles. As batsmen we found that the poor light didn’t just make it difficult for us to pick out the ball as it left the bowler’s hand but also made it difficult for us to know exactly where the ball was when we were running between the wickets. Brian O’Toole was run out calling for a second run when the ball was already on its way back to the wicket keeper.

At around 8.00pm we slowly began to realise that we had a chance of winning. We had 150 runs on the blackboard and had lost 7 wickets.

When Oily was caught on the boundary after hitting a magnificent 85 I was joined at the wicket by Arthur, by far our most experienced player. When he arrived at the crease he called me down the wicket to join him for a moment.

‘We can do this,’ he said, swaying slightly from side to side as he spoke. ‘Let’s get em in boundaries and singles.’

I looked at him for a moment. Then he grinned broadly. I’d never heard Arthur attempt a joke before.

‘Good idea!’ I agreed.

Slowly, we edged closer and closer to the target. It got so dark that at one stage Tony Parsons approached us and suggested that we get some local motorists to line up their cars around the edge of their green so that we could play in their headlights.

'No, thanks!' said Arthur firmly.

'Why not?' I asked him puzzled.

'Three reasons,' he said. 'First, I can never see the damned ball anyway. I'm used to it. Second, if they're worried and we don't seem to be then we have an advantage.'

'And third?'

'Third,' said Arthur, 'if there are cars shining their head lights onto the field we'll be the ones to be blinded.'

'Why?' I asked. I honestly didn't understand.

'Think about it!' said Arthur, patiently. 'We'll be looking out towards the lights – the fielders will be looking in towards the wicket – with the lights behind them.'

And so we played on in the dark.

At ten minutes past nine, with the village green lit by the moon, I was still at the crease and Simon, our last man, had joined me. We needed just 5 runs to win.

I didn't even see where the last ball of our innings pitched, though my hearing was by now so acute that I could more or less tell where it was by listening to the sound it made. Realising that the ball was going to miss my off stump, and well aware that if I hit the ball hard I would probably get away with it even if I edged it to a fielder, I threw my bat at the ball with all the power I could find.

The ball caught the leading edge of my bat and shot away into the darkness. I didn't have the faintest idea where it had gone but called out to Simon to run. A few moments later, as we turned for the third run, we heard people shouting.

'What's happening?' asked Simon, as we passed in mid wicket.

'Heaven knows!' I said. 'Just keep running!'

It was only a minute or so later, when we had completed the winning run and were surrounded by the rest of the team, that Simon and I discovered that a small dog being taken for its evening walk had picked up the ball and run off with it.

'It wasn't fair!' complained Tony Parsons, in the bar an hour later. He wasn't a good loser.

'The ball was still in play,' said Wodger, 'and the umpires were happy about it.'

'They should have called a dead ball,' moaned Parsons for the umpteenth time.

'It wouldn't have made any diffewence,' said Wodger boldly. 'We were cwusing to victowy anyway.'

For the first time Parsons was speechless. He opened his mouth as though to say something but shut it again without breaking his silence.

* * *

We spent what was left of the evening telling one another stories in The Maiden's Arms. At eleven o'clock Oily and Simon went out and fetched us all a fish and chip supper which we ate sitting on the low wall outside the front of the pub.

'I'd like to propose a toast,' said Oily, putting down his chip wrapper and picking up his pint. 'To Wodger! Without whom none of this would have been possible!'

'To Wodger!' we cried in unison. Wodger looked touched.

'Thank you!' he said. He got up off the stone wall and looked around at each of us in turn. June and the vicar were sitting arm in arm as were Simon and Sharon. The rest of us looked the same as ever, a little grubbier maybe, rather wearier than usual perhaps.

'Back to reality tomorrow,' said Norman glumly.

'Look at it this way,' said Oily, 'if we didn't spend the next 50 weeks coping with reality we wouldn't enjoy next year's tour half as much!'

'To next year's tour!' said Arthur, draining his whisky flask.

We all drank to that.

* * *

We hope you enjoyed the Village Cricket Tour. If you did we would be grateful if you would put a review on Amazon. For details of more books by Vernon Coleman please visit his author page on Amazon. Or visit

http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

Vernon Coleman

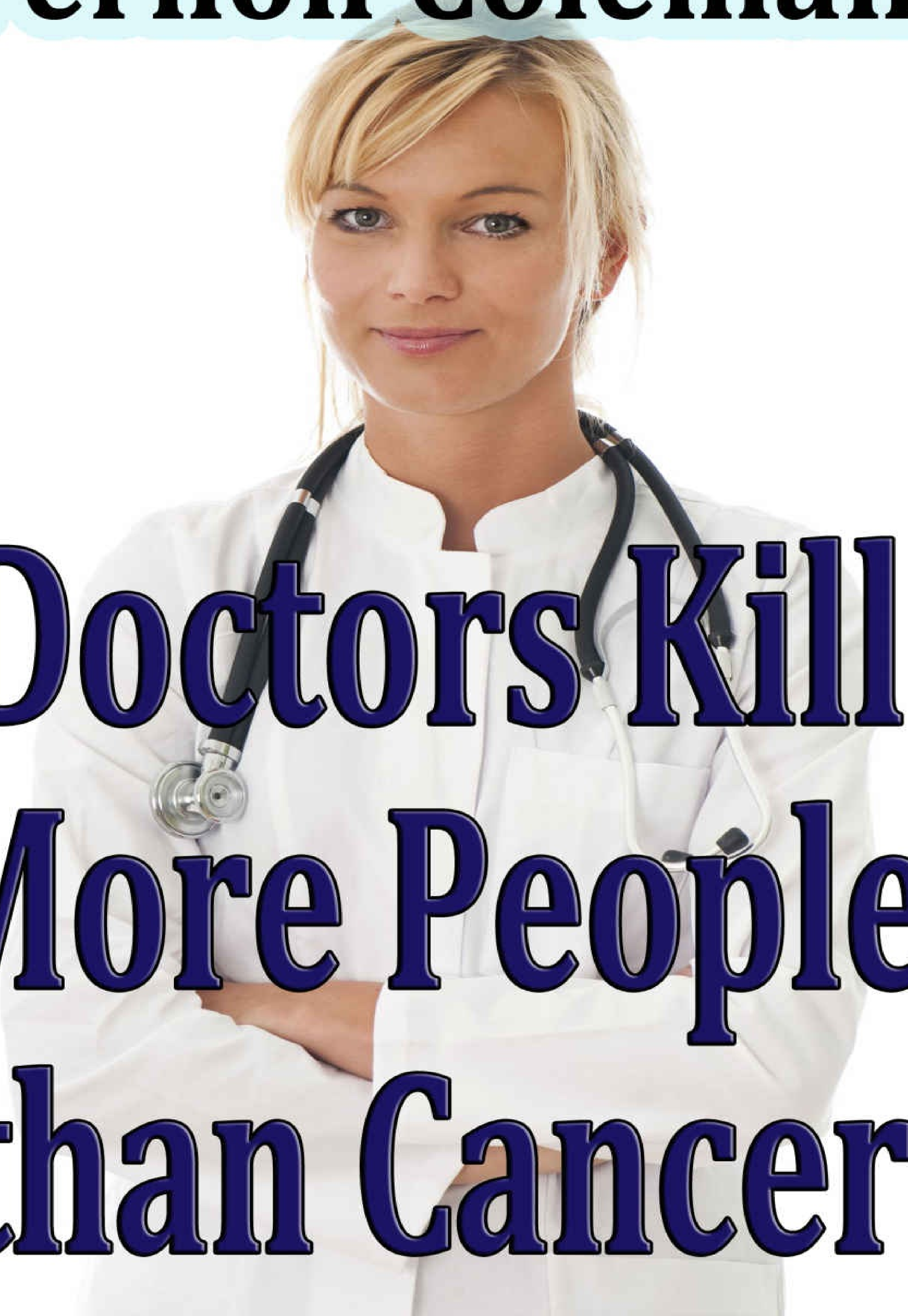

Doctors Kill More People than Cancer

Do Doctors And Nurses Kill More People Than Cancer?

Vernon Coleman

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Boring Bit For Lawyers

These days, most books include disclaimers in which the authors apologetically warn readers that they should not rely on any information their books contain, and nor should they follow any of the advice they may find within. Disclaimers invariably go on to insist that readers who rely on anything in the book they are reading do so at their own risk. These warnings are included because the world is now full of lawyers and litigants who, under the often misguided impression that there might be money to be made, will leap at every opportunity to gouge lolly out of anyone who can be blamed for fate's little tricks. And so, as author and publisher, I warn readers that if they act on any of the facts in this book, or decide to follow any of the advice, they do so entirely at their own risk. The book has been written honestly and in good faith but I advise readers to treat facts with disdain. I recommend that advice and opinions should be disregarded or treated with great suspicion. Any reader who believes the facts in this book, or follows advice the book contains, does so entirely at their own risk. Moreover, I would also like to make it clear that books (and e-book readers) can be dangerous objects and should not be dropped, thrown or otherwise projected into areas where people or delicate objects might be damaged. In other words, dear reader, drop your e-book reader onto your toes and you're on your own.

Note

There is a tendency these days for authors to half fill their books with a list of all their sources. It is a quick and easy way to double the length of a book without doing twice as much work. It is by no means uncommon to find a book that has almost as much space devoted to lists of 'references', 'sources' and 'notes' as is devoted to the text itself. I rather doubt if anyone (other than another author) actually bothers to consult any of these lists, which are there more to boost the author's vanity than for any other reason. The list of references is there to show the reader just how serious the author is, and how clever he or she has been. If readers don't trust the author to have done his research work properly (and to have made the appropriate deductions and drawn relevant conclusions) a list of references won't (or shouldn't) help much. When I wrote my first book (*The Medicine Men*) in 1975 my publisher, Maurice Temple-Smith, asked me whether or not I wanted to include references. He suggested that I should make a decision and stick to it for my writing career. I decided then not to waste space and money with lists of references no one would ever use. I decided that I would try to earn my readers' trust by providing them with honest, reliable reporting and with well-founded conclusions. That is what I have continued to try to do.

The truth is that scientific papers per se are often of very little value – and so references too are of dubious importance. Judgement is far more important, and it is what the reader needs. I can find scientific papers to prove virtually anything. Scientific references can be bought (some journals consist entirely of paid for articles which are of no more value than advertisements). Governments lie, drug companies lie and the medical establishment (largely bought by the first two) also lies. Interpreting what you find (and being able to read between the lines) is the key.

'In this age, the mere example of non-conformity, the mere refusal to bend the knee to custom, is itself a service. Precisely because the tyranny of opinion is such as to make eccentricity a reproach, it is desirable, in order to break through that tyranny, that people should be eccentric. Eccentricity has always abounded when and where strength of character has abounded; and the amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigour, and moral courage which it contained. That so few now dare to be eccentric marks the chief danger of the time' John Stuart Mill

Dedication

To my Antoinette, both my rock and my haven, who shares my bewilderment, alarm and confusion in an alien world. We will always build our strength upon our steadfast love.

If God were kind and said to me
Go dream a wife
Your choice is free
She is the one who it would be.

Foreword

Things change, ideas are accepted, when the time is right. All any of us can do is to try to bring forward a little the moment when the time is right. And, in order to do that, all we can do is spread the truth and share it with everyone we know. That’s why I wrote this book. I believe everything in this book is true. You may detect feelings of frustration and outrage. Those are mine but please feel free to share them. This book is published in memory of my parents who trusted much but were betrayed more. They deserved better.

Preface: Undeniable Truths

This book began as the story of my mother and father. The significance of their deaths is that most people would have thought they were normal and would have readily believed that the doctors looking after them had provided the very best of medical treatment. Most people don't know how bad health care now is. Only when you are medically trained do you really see. And most doctors (even those who understand the significance of iatrogenesis) are too cautious to criticise their own profession publicly – employed by the State they are (together with the State and the pharmaceutical industry) now part of the triangle of evil; an unholy and deadly trinity.

Nothing can bring back my parents. They are both dead. Whatever I do they are going to stay dead. And this book isn't about revenge. If I had wanted revenge I would have simply sued everyone in sight. I'm pretty sure I would have won. I wrote this book because I firmly believe that what happened to my parents happens to thousands of other patients every week. The bereaved don't know that their relatives' deaths were unnecessary because they don't know enough about medicine. They may, indeed, be grateful to the doctors and nurses for making every effort. But the fact is the case histories in this book are not exceptional. There but for the grace of God goes any one of us. And how would you, or your family know? I'm a doctor. I'm a specialist in iatrogenesis (doctor-induced disease). And yet I believe that my mother died through medical incompetence. Sadly, no one has learnt, no one has apologised and no one thinks they did anything wrong.

I wrote this book to draw attention to the fact that, for a variety of reasons, some complex and some simple, modern, State-run health care is beyond repair and now kills more people than it saves. Someone should put it out of our misery and put it to sleep. Permanently.

Today, health care is changing at a phenomenal rate. In Europe, Governments are closing small hospitals and casualty departments and concentrating services in bigger and bigger hospitals. (This is being done to please the EU whose bureaucrats believe that big is beautiful and bigger is even more beautiful). Patients who need a GP are being told to telephone for advice rather than to visit the surgery. (The excuse for this is that it will save the planet by reducing the use of petrol). Patients who are injured in accidents are told to telephone ahead and get permission in advance if they think they need to be seen in a casualty department. This may all sound bizarre. But it's true.

We need to do something.

But first we need to understand why things are so wrong with the system we have.

Today, medicine is all about making money and the people who work in State-run health care are more driven by the urge to make as much of it as possible than the people working in the so-called private sector. Doctors, nurses and administrators are in business to make as much moolah as they possibly can and don't give a toss about the patients they are supposed to care for. In July 2011, an official UK report announced that NHS managers were deliberately delaying operations in the hope that patients would remove themselves from the waiting lists 'either by dying or by paying for their own treatment'. The report from the Cooperation and Competition Panel said that this tactic was one of a number used by NHS managers. At the same time GPs were being told that they were restricted in the number of referrals they could make. After threatening to collapse for years, the NHS was at last crumbling apart; aided and abetted, it has to be said, by avaricious staff members as much as incompetence. Politicians constantly boast that they are increasing the NHS budget yet again but before the Treasury has released the extra loot NHS staff will have worked out ways to divide up the spoils among themselves. Services for patients will be cut to the bone (yet again) as salaries, expenses and fees all rocket. And so the NHS becomes ever more expensive, ever more inefficient and ever more deadly.

The big issues are ignored and suppressed and those who raise them are dismissed as lunatics, heretics or fanatics. Anyone who dares to spread the truth, or raise questions, will be subjected to smear campaigns. Our liberty and our freedom of speech have been strangled by cross party consensus and an obedient media. Politicians and commentators concentrate their efforts on narrow, specific questions. The big questions, the important questions, are never asked. And so, not surprisingly, no answers are forthcoming either. Our world is controlled by the views of fifth rate politicians, Z list celebrities and bought and paid for media doctors, mouthpieces for the pharmaceutical industry.

As Texan congressman and former USA Presidential Candidate Ron Paul put it: 'truth is treason in the empire of lies'. And as English philosopher Bertrand Russell once said: 'In all affairs, it's a healthy thing now and then to hang a question mark on the things you have long taken for granted.'

The world's best known and longest established State-run medical service, Britain's NHS, now consists of layers of administration dedicated to deceit and committed to the principle of belligerent distortion of the truth; it practises (and is the world's best exponent of) institutionalised deception. Everything in medicine is now about money. The system exists not to protect us but to protect itself. Politicians protect the NHS because they dare not destroy it. Doctors, nurses (and other NHS workers) protect it because it protects them, feeds them and makes some of them (actually, a good many of them) exceedingly rich without their having to work too hard. This is what happens in a burgeoning fascist State. The NHS is run by incompetent people who never question their competence and so do not recognise their shortcomings. Discussions about health care never touch the real problems. Big issues (such as ‘Should there be an NHS?’) are considered politically unacceptable so everyone involved just tinkers around the edges of the problem. No one likes to admit that the NHS is dangerous to our health or that hospitals should have a health warning hanging over their doors. The NHS stumbles along: a headless, directionless monster, kept alive by summer fêtes and bring-and-by sales where local do-gooders gather together to raise cash to buy scalpels, bedpans and new bed linen. The innocent, the naive and the well-meaning fundraisers don’t realise that every penny donated protects the corrupt system and keep the whole sorry mess alive. In spirit the NHS died years ago. The shambling, disorganised, corrupt organisation which survives is a marriage between State and consumer which long ago fell apart; destroyed by the trusting naivety of the one partner and the reckless, short-sighted greed of the other. Doctors and nurses have (like long stay patients) become institutionalised. They accept everything and question nothing. They have sold their souls to the State. The NHS now kills more people than it saves. No one gives a damn about patients any more. Patients are regarded by bureaucrats, doctors and nurses as at best an inconvenience and at worst a nuisance. Everyone working for the NHS seems to have forgotten why they are there. Separating consumer from cheque writing just doesn’t work in an era of selfishness, rights and unlimited expectations. There is no longer any such thing as a ‘public service’ ethos among employees.

My fear is that everything will continue to get worse. Medical students and young nurses are being taught within a system which is geared towards defending administrators and drug companies and wherein patients are regarded (if they are regarded at all) as a nuisance. Staff are not allowed to listen to anyone (such as me) offering a realistic, honest view of what is going wrong. Doctors would much rather sweep the problems under the carpet than have the problems exposed, threatening their cosy existence. Any system which cannot cope with real criticism is corrupt.

Doctors exist only for two reasons: to look after people who have acquired a disease, and to prevent healthy people from falling ill. That’s it. The rest is unimportant. They need to take back their traditional responsibility – and the authority (and power) that should always accompany responsibility. But today’s medical profession has been bribed by drug companies, bullied by, and overwhelmed by, bureaucrats and social workers, and forced by politicians to abandon most of their ethical principles (including, for example, the traditional principle of confidentiality). Through the weakness of their leaders, doctors have been turned into ethically impoverished mercenaries.

This book starts with a true story, about my mother. And the book continues with another true story – this time about my father’s death. I believe these stories illustrate everything that is wrong with modern medicine, they show why and how patients are being failed by a flawed system and illustrate the way in which the system protects itself with ruthless efficiency

On the pages which follow I offer a comprehensive and honest analysis of modern health care; showing precisely what is wrong and why patients are routinely cheated, endangered and killed by a system they believe they pay to protect them. State-run medicine exists to serve its staff. And it serves them well. But, as far as the system is concerned, patients are a nuisance. Britain’s NHS is bigger and more corrupt and more pointlessly out of date as the Red Army.

We have sophisticated diagnostic aids, monitoring systems, thousands of drugs, microscopic surgery, lasers and a thousand and one other miracles and yet we are, by and large, over cautious, hypochondriacal, drug abusing, overweight, neurotic, constipated, nervous, neurasthenic, hysterical and unhealthy. We are a tribute to and a product of our times. And, instead of making people better, doctors are now one of the top three causes of illness. The NHS isn’t a National Health Service, it’s a National Homicide Service. When, to the appalling roll call of doctor-induced disease, you add the steadily increasing dissatisfaction with extended waiting lists, arrogant doctors, indifference and a lack of civility or caring it is hardly surprising that millions of people are today abandoning the traditional suppliers of medical help and seeking help from alternative practitioners.

I used to believe in the NHS. Twenty years ago I objected strongly when friends chose to seek private medical treatment rather than use the NHS. Ten years ago I was still fighting for the NHS – although concerned about the quality of the treatment being provided for patients. But my idealistic objections to previously faithful patients betraying the NHS and having a bit on the side with the private health industry have now gone. Medicine has been ruined by political correctness, positive discrimination and targets galore.

As a result of the effect of the constant tinkering, the endless increase in layers of extra bureaucracy, the political correctness and the lawyers, a huge rift has opened up between doctors and patients. Doctors regard patients as the enemy. And patients regard doctors with distrust. Doctors are concerned only with maximising their income. In order to protect themselves from lawsuits they order batteries of investigations before daring to consider making a diagnosis. In the bad old days doctors would make diagnoses based on the patients’ symptoms and their own experience and instincts. Today, diagnoses are made using tests which are far more fallible than instinct and experience. Endless laws and regulations have separated doctors from patients.

Our health care system is a failure because it is distorted by regulations, targets and legislation. Anyone who does not regard the NHS a failure should ask themselves why so many people are now flying out to India and Thailand to obtain medical care which, it is widely acknowledged, will be better and safer and much, much cheaper.

Responsibilities have been replaced by rights. And, paradoxically, the result is that in modern Britain many people, particularly the elderly, are denied treatment. Powerful organisations campaigning for particular groups of patients put pressure on the controlling political party and force the Government to provide treatment for their group. But this is done at the expense of other patients. And so politically correct groups (such as those requiring infertility treatment or sex change operations) are treated while the elderly (not at all politically correct) are allowed to go blind and to die when they could be treated quite cheaply.

Today, the NHS is a monster which causes far more deaths than traffic accidents and terrorism. It’s a beast we need to kill. We will be far better off without it. A well-intentioned social experiment has been smothered by bureaucracy and the monster now exists not to care for patients but to provide secure, unchallenging employment for its staff. If the money spent on the NHS were distributed to citizens to use on private health care the *quality* of care received would soar. The UK has thousands of unemployed doctors and an NHS that is awash with administrators. Madness.

The NHS is a foul, cancerous and pustulant mess. It has been dying for years and today it is sustained by and for those who work for it and whose political future depends upon it. If it were an animal even the most loving human would have had it put down years ago. The NHS is run by people who have long since lost any genuine interest in the welfare of sick people; any compassion or sensitivity they once had has long ago been replaced by limitless self-interest. Hospitals are now run by people whose sole concern is self-preservation; they are terrified that their golden goose, overpaid and underworked employment, might be taken from them. They know that if that happens they will have to go back to being the posturing nothings they have never ceased to be. Hospitals are now managed by talentless, ignorant incompetents who destroy through egregious ineptitude. The same incompetence is shared throughout the civil service, of course, but whereas within, say, the Treasury, such incompetence merely leads to fiscal disaster, within the NHS the same level of incompetence leads to the wholesale slaughtering of the innocent. The medical establishment is controlled by people who live in a world of their own; a world where incompetence, stupidity and corruption vie for supremacy.

Finally, remember this: I’m medically qualified and, if I’m an expert on anything, it is iatrogenesis – disease that is caused by doctors. I have spent nearly half a century studying this very problem. And yet, despite my very best efforts, both my parents were, I believe, killed by the system. At the end, everything doctors did for or to my father made him worse (and eventually killed him). And nothing doctors did for my mother helped her (though I believe they could and should have saved her). As the author of *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You* it is salutary to realise that not even I could keep my parents alive. How many other people are being killed by doctors? The only certainty is that it is far, far more than the figures suggest. I firmly believe that doctors and nurses now kill more people than cancer.

Neither of my parent’s deaths was recognised as ‘medical accidents’ by the system. If I hadn’t been a doctor I wouldn’t have noticed anything wrong with the two deaths.

Today, drug-reliant medicine has spread as the public relations departments of large multinational drug companies have worked overtime to convince doctors and patients that drugs are the only way to prevent and treat disease. Massive drug and vaccination programmes have begun. Doctors have been bought in their thousands and now preach the drug company gospel. In the USA and the UK, and just about every other country in the world, drug companies now control doctors. It is no coincidence that iatrogenesis is now one of the top three causes of disease and death. Doctors and drugs can be useful. They can save lives. But they must be treated with caution – as though they were, like cigarettes, labelled with a Government health warning.

We all have a responsibility to take personal charge of our own health and destiny. We must become health care consumers – able to make the most important decisions ourselves and to pick and choose which treatments to accept and which to reject. We must use doctors as technicians – there to advise and provide technical support – but we must learn how and when to make the big decisions ourselves.

It is the ultimate purpose of this book (and indeed of all my medical books) to help readers become independent health care consumers. Welcome to the medical revolution.

Vernon Coleman, August 2011

1. A Salutary Tale Part 1: My Mother’s Death

In October 2004 my mother had difficulty in walking. When she was first admitted to Royal Devon and Exeter hospital in Exeter, she was thought to need extensive physiotherapy to help her walk again. She was mentally alert. In November 2004, after a rapid deterioration, it was decided that my mother was suffering from terminal cancer with metastases. She was not considered healthy enough for palliative radiotherapy. She was described, by her consultant oncologist, as ‘frail, confused, bedbound and dependent’. She had to be catheterised because she was incontinent. The idea of rehabilitation was abandoned because of her alleged terminal cancer. A neurologist who assessed her mental state reported that my mother did not know where she was and had failed to recognise the doctor. She was given the usual simple mental test (date of birth and so on) and scored 0 out of 10. My father was telephoned at home and told that my mother was terminally ill with cancer and that there were metastatic deposits in her spine, lung and possibly liver. It was thought that her mental condition could be caused by secondaries in her brain. No one knew what sort of cancer she was suffering from or where the primary was situated. My father was telephoned and told that a breast cancer she had many years earlier, and from which she had officially recovered, had suddenly recurred, though there was absolutely no evidence for this theory. (Following an operation to remove a breast, she had refused chemotherapy and radiotherapy after asking to see evidence that the proposed treatment might be suitable for a woman of her age. Although she was over 70 at the time she was only given evidence showing that the suggested treatment might be suitable for premenopausal women. My mother, who had left school at 14, could see at a glance that this wasn’t of much relevance to her. She decided that ‘it’s what we do’ didn’t count as a scientific explanation and so she and my father decided that she’d pass on those, thank you very much for offering. She made a complete recovery but as she lay in her hospital bed various members of staff blamed the cancer. My father was devastated. The diagnosis caused him untold grief, soul-searching and guilt. (It turned out that the people who told him this were quite wrong. My mother’s illness and her death had absolutely nothing to do with the breast cancer.)

I telephoned the cancer specialist. She told me that my mother either had cancer of the breast or the lung with secondaries and was too weak for treatment. ‘That’s the nature of the beast’, she said. She told me that there was no hope but did agree that the registrar’s action in telephoning my father when he was at home alone was barbaric.

On Sunday 21st November we noticed that my mother’s urine bag was red. There was clearly blood in her urine. A nurse had changed the catheter bag several times without bothering to report to anyone that the urine in the bag was red with blood. Or perhaps they hadn’t noticed. I reported the blood and a doctor put my mother on amoxicillin for a urinary infection. After the blood appeared in the urine the cancer specialist told me that my mother had secondaries in her kidneys. By the 30th November the urine was clear and the bag was no longer red. The diagnosis of cancer secondaries in the kidneys was never withdrawn, though it too was wrong.

My mother stayed in the Exeter hospital, which is a teaching hospital, for the next few months. Numerous consultants saw her and decided that there was nothing to be done. Her symptoms now seemed to defy diagnosis. She managed to get out of bed occasionally but was unsteady on her feet. And she had developed a rather strange way of walking with her feet wide apart.

My wife, Antoinette, who has no medical training, put my mother’s symptoms into an Internet search engine. She came up with several differential diagnoses. From the short list she produced we both agreed that normal pressure hydrocephalus was the most likely diagnosis. I’d never heard of it but the disease fitted my mother’s symptoms perfectly.

She had an unusual wide-legged walk. She had a tendency to fall. And she had urinary incontinence. She was also showing signs of dementia. These are precisely the symptoms shown by patients with normal pressure hydrocephalus. *Precisely*.

Normal pressure hydrocephalus is not something GPs see very much. But it is the sort of thing teaching hospital neurologists really should know about. I had never seen a patient with it. The doctors looking after my mother listened politely to my suggestion that they consider normal pressure hydrocephalus but immediately dismissed it and stuck with their neoplastic madness. There was never a shred of evidence in support of that diagnosis.

During the period when my mother was lying in her hospital bed in Bolham Ward in Exeter I made a few notes. Here are some of them:

1. An emergency door at the end of the ward had three bolts securing it in addition to a lock and a padlock. When my father mentioned that this didn’t seem a very good idea for an emergency exit the staff solved the problem by removing the notice describing the door as an emergency fire exit. The door remained bolted, locked and padlocked.

2. When a drip bottle needed changing a warning beep sounded for more than 10 minutes. Eventually I went and found a nurse to change it. I don’t know what would have happened if I hadn’t been there.

3. On numerous occasions my mother didn’t see a doctor of any description between Friday and Monday. The

hospital seemed to pretty much close down at weekends. During the week doctors never seemed to be available after 5.00 p.m.

4. I watched a nurse take a pulse with a machine. She recorded the pulse rate but didn’t bother to note that my mother’s pulse rate was irregular.

5. No nurse ever brushed my mother’s hair or did her make up. Her hair was only ever combed when we visited. She was aware of this and felt ashamed. When my dad told her that some visitors were coming she cried and tried to brush her hair with her fingers.

6. On at least one occasion in November 2004 the staff didn’t bother to give my mother any food because they said ‘she was too weak to eat’.

7. A hospice nurse went to see my mother and told her: ‘You aren’t fit enough for radium treatment/radiotherapy’. My mother didn’t know that she was suspected of having cancer so this came as something of a surprise to her. She didn’t understand why she’d been told this.

8. Whenever we visited my wife had to take my mother to the lavatory. We had to help her in and out of bed by ourselves.

9. The hospital’s internal mail system seemed pathetic. On one occasion it took four days to move an item from the X-ray department to the ward. It would have been far quicker to use second class post.

10. My mother spent virtually all her time in bed. From Thursdays until Tuesdays she usually saw no physiotherapist and had no help in moving about. She just lay in bed becoming weaker and losing all confidence in her own body. After I complained the physiotherapists turned up for a meeting. I was told that there weren’t enough physiotherapists to give her the care she needed. We couldn’t move my mother to a private hospital because she has not yet been diagnosed and clearly a private hospital would not have the investigative wherewithal. When I asked if I could send in private physiotherapists I was told that I could not. It occurred to me that the nurses on the ward had not heard of the danger of deep vein thrombosis or the need to avoid pressure sores by moving patients around.

11. On one occasion the fire alarm went off at 4.00 a.m. but no one came. My mother, who was at that point still fairly coherent and alert, lay in bed absolutely petrified. Even if she had been able to get out of bed she wouldn’t have been able to leave the ward very easily because the fire exit door was padlocked. No one ever came and eventually the fire alarm went off without explanation.

12. On one occasion an elderly man lay naked on his bed with the door wide open. On occasion my mother would also throw off all her clothes and we would have to rush to draw the screens while we fought to pull the bed covers over her. The nurses didn’t come because whoever had designed the ward had positioned the nurses’ station in such a way that it was difficult if not impossible for them to see what was happening.

13. On several occasions I watched a cleaner take a broom for a walk down the middle of the ward. She didn’t bother cleaning under the beds or around them.

14. A female patient in a bed opposite to my mother pressed the button for a nurse because she needed a bedpan. No one came and I couldn’t find a nurse anywhere. Eventually the woman, full of shame, said, plaintively: ‘It’s too late now.’

15. On one occasion I sat beside my mother’s bed when two nurses arrived. One said: ‘Have you had a cup of tea this morning? ‘Yes thank you,’ said my mother, who had been officially declared demented and mentally incompetent. ‘Right.’ said the nurse. She wrote this information down on the fluids chart she was carrying. The cup of tea was standing, untouched, on the bed table in front of my mother. If we hadn’t helped her drink I firmly believe that my mother would have died of dehydration.

At one point during her stay in the Exeter hospital my mother improved noticeably after she had a diagnostic lumbar puncture and some cerebrospinal fluid was removed. I thought that the improvement might be significant. It was the only time during her stay in Exeter that she showed any signs of improvement. For a day or two she seemed stronger and her mental function even began to improve a little. It seemed to me to suggest that there had been too much fluid around my mother’s brain. Maybe the lumbar puncture, by removing some of the fluid, had reduced the pressure and alleviated her symptoms. Maybe the diagnosis of normal pressure hydrocephalus was correct after all. The doctors to whom I mentioned this dismissed my suggestion and insisted that the improvement was simply a coincidence. What would a former GP and writer of books know about these things? No one actually patted me on the head but it felt as though they had done so.

After my mother had finally been diagnosed as suffering from normal pressure hydrocephalus (just before she died) I checked with a large medical textbook. Here is what it says: ‘To help with the diagnosis, doctors do a spinal tap (lumbar puncture) to remove excess cerebrospinal fluid. If this procedure relieves symptoms, normal pressure hydrocephalus is likely, and treatment is likely to be effective.’

There are very few devastating diseases that can be cured so cheaply, so quickly and so permanently.

In the spring of 2005 my mother was still in the hospital and her condition had deteriorated. On Monday 25th April 2005 I saw the neurology registrar at the Royal Devon and Exeter hospital who confirmed that my mother's prognosis was bleak. The hospital staff still hadn't made a diagnosis. The cancer diagnosis had been forgotten. I was told that six neurologists and numerous other consultants had seen her. Every conceivable test had been done. The registrar told me that it would be difficult to find a nursing home capable of looking after her. In addition to her physical paralysis she was again diagnosed as suffering from dementia. I was told that this could be vascular or a consequence of possible encephalitis. It seemed clear that my mother needed to stay in hospital for the rest of her life.

I was advised that there were no nursing homes in Budleigh capable of looking after my mother. Afterwards we sat by my mother's beside. Antoinette, my wife, was feeding my mother. I sat on the other side of the bed. As we left my mother pulled her urine catheter bag out from under the bedclothes and tried to blow her nose with it.

On Tuesday 26th April 2005 my mother was, at my request, moved to Budleigh hospital so that my father, who lived in Budleigh, could visit more easily. For six months he had visited the Exeter hospital once or twice a day to feed my mother (who would otherwise have almost certainly starved to death). I also wanted my mother out of the hospital in Exeter because I wasn't terribly impressed by the nursing care she had received. If I had to choose two words to describe the hospital care they would be 'apathetic' and 'neglectful'.

On Wednesday 27th April, at 9.00 p.m., someone from Budleigh hospital telephoned my father (who is 85) and asked him when he would be moving his wife out of the hospital. This was the second time he'd received an evening telephone call that had frightened him out of his wits. My mum had been in the hospital for just slightly more than 24 hours. No one there had made any attempt to make a diagnosis. It didn't strike me as the sort of hospital that does terribly much in the way of diagnostic work. It was, it seemed to me, what used to be called a cottage hospital.

My father was startled and shocked by the suddenness and timing of the telephone call asking him when he would be moving mother out of the hospital. He got the impression that the hospital was planning to send my mum home for him to look after by himself. She was incapable of doing anything for herself. She was doubly incontinent, required nursing on a ripple bed and had been diagnosed as demented. She had to be kept in a bed with cot sides so that she didn't fall onto the floor. On the odd occasion when she tried to feed herself she ended up with food everywhere – with the result that both she and the bed had to be changed. My mother was so incapable of moving by herself that the nurses had a hoist and a bed lift fitted to the bed so that they could move my mother around and in and out of bed. It took two nurses to move her up the bed. She needed constant nursing attention.

My wife and I were in France when my mother was moved to the hospital in Budleigh. We came straight back and visited the hospital the next day, Thursday the 28th. Within five minutes of my arriving at my mother's bedside a nurse asked me to go to the sister's office. A nurse wanted to know when my mother would be leaving the hospital. My mother had, by then, been in the hospital for no more than 48 hours. I found the questioning cruel, unfeeling and inhumane. Throughout my mother's stay I found the hospital staff aggressive and offensive.

My father, who had been in a state of shock, now became depressed as a result of the hospital's attitude. Up until Monday the 25th April, my father had hoped that he would be able to have my mother back home or that, at the very least, he would be able to take her out of the hospital for trips in a wheelchair. He had been making plans to buy a motorised chair and a suitable vehicle so that he could do this. He thought a week or two in the hospital would lead to her returning home.

When I spoke to the nurse at Budleigh Hospital on 28th April 2005 I was told that an assessment had been done and that my mother was considered fit to move out of the hospital and was now regarded as mentally alert. My mother had, according to Budleigh Hospital, been cured from her dementia within two days. She had received no new treatment. She had merely been moved to a local small town hospital. The nurse admitted that my mother needed nursing care but insisted that mentally there was nothing wrong with her. The hospital had, she told me, already applied for an enforcement order to have my mother removed from the hospital. I was shocked by their ruthlessness.

In reality, there had been no change whatsoever in my mum's condition. Several neurologists at Royal Devon and Exeter hospital had already agreed that my mother was suffering from severe dementia and though it turned out that they had missed the primary diagnosis there wasn't much doubt that a diagnosis of dementia was understandable – at least it would have been if it had been a diagnosis made by a nurse or a member of the public. Through a mixture of stubbornness and stupidity the highly paid hospital specialists had missed the crucial diagnosis (even though it had been handed to them on a plate) but neither we nor anyone at the Budleigh hospital knew that.

I complained about the fact that my father had been rung at home the evening before but the nurse didn't seem to think that there was anything wrong with that. She didn't apologise. I wanted to know just how ill you had to be to be in hospital these days. I felt overwhelmed with guilt. I had arranged for my mother to be moved to the Budleigh Hospital so that my father could visit more easily. And now they wanted to throw her out. But where could we take her? I went back to sit by mother's bed. As I sat down my mother looked up and pointed to a stranger on the other side of the ward. 'Is that Vernon over there?' she enquired. We were living a nightmare. She didn't know who I was. She didn't recognise my wife. And she often wasn't sure who my father was. When I talked to her she didn't even know that she was in hospital. Somewhere in the hospital a bell rang. 'There's someone at the door,' she said.

Someone at the Budleigh hospital threatened to send my mother home in an ambulance, even though they knew that my father could hardly look after himself. They also knew that my mother needed intensive nursing care. My mother was, said one snotty little bastard, terminally but not finally terminally ill. It was the first time I'd heard the phrase. My father, in his mid 80s, was devastated. 'What do I do if they send her home?' he asked. 'Don't answer the door,' I told him. 'Don't let them into the house. Call me.' I was telling my father to refuse to let the ambulance men bring my mother into the house. It was awful, just bloody awful. If the plan was to put us under pressure it was working very well. I'd never seen my father so distraught. My mother's GP at the time, Dr Taylor, agreed that we would not be able to find a local nursing home capable of looking after her. No one at the Budleigh hospital seemed to me to give a damn what happened to my mother as long as she wasn't their responsibility.

As far as I am aware no one made the slightest attempt to make a diagnosis during the time my mother was in the Budleigh Hospital. Since they didn't want to nurse her and they didn't do any diagnostic tests it's difficult to see the point of the hospital – apart from providing employment for the staff.

On the 11th May I had to attend a meeting at Budleigh hospital to discuss my mother's expulsion from the hospital. I was told that the hospital did not have enough beds and desperately needed to get rid of my mother. There were four people at the meeting: two members of the nursing staff, someone who looked like an administrator and Dr Taylor, my mother's GP at the time. I mistakenly thought that he at least would be on my parents' side. I was disappointed. The meeting was held in a completely empty ward. There were plenty of beds, all empty, and it seemed to me that this wasn't the first time the empty ward had been used for a meeting. If the hospital was short of anything it was patients, not beds.

The meeting lasted an hour and it turned out to be one of the most unpleasant hours of my life. I have been grilled by some of the country's toughest television and radio interviewers. I have given evidence in the House of Lords and the House of Commons but nothing prepared me for this. For a solid hour the four of them battered at me to take my mother out of the hospital. They used every manipulative and emotional trick in the book. I quickly realised that no one there cared a damn about my mother or my father. They just wanted to get rid of a patient who seemed likely to be a long-term expense. This was business. I was still desperate to try to find a diagnosis. I was still trying to support my father. I was grieving for my mother who no longer even recognised me. I was told that my mother would be better off in a nursing home and that the hospital didn't have any long-stay beds. I was told that they needed the bed for other patients (no one seemed to see the irony in the fact that the meeting was being held in a completely empty ward) and that my father would be better off if my mother was elsewhere. They didn't explain how this could be when there was no nursing home for miles that would be able to cope with her needs. My father lived near to the hospital and could easily visit within minutes. I was told that my mother would be better off in a private room. I pointed out that she couldn't read or watch television or listen to the radio. She had no memory or mental capacity. I pointed out that being in a hospital ward gave her things to watch. I knew that being in a small, closed room would be awful for her. No one seemed to give a damn. I was told that my mother was more at risk of catching an infection in a hospital (the only thing I agreed with). At the end of the meeting they told me that they couldn't agree to my mother staying in the hospital and that she had to leave. I left the meeting and went back to my mother's bedside. She was still unable to move. She still didn't know who she was or where she was. She didn't know who I was. She was still faecally incontinent. She still had a catheter in her bladder to collect her urine. She still had to be fed. She still couldn't walk or even wash herself. But according to the hospital staff she was fine and mentally alert. I wondered if they wanted to throw my mother out because they knew we could afford the nursing home fees. Ageism is the new racism: no respect, no consideration, no courtesy, no dignity, no caring. The whole penny pinching exercise was made even more heartless and unforgivable by the fact that I know that hospital staff waste billions through incompetence. Billions are stolen and frittered away by the wicked statist guardians we pay to look after us.

For several weeks after that my father didn't dare visit my mother at all. He was frightened that he would again be pressured by the staff to move my mother. He didn't know where he could take her. He was overwhelmed with grief and now he was tortured by guilt and anxiety.

Another mental assessment was done on my mother. It was a sick joke. The assessor asked my mother what I did for a living. My mother thought for a while. 'He's a teacher,' she said at last. She didn't know who I was, let alone what I did for a living. 'That's close enough,' answered the assessor putting a tick in another box. My mother was declared mentally competent. On the 19th July my mother complained to me that two dogs had been fighting on the ward. On the 22nd July my father was sitting by my mother's side when the vicar called. My mother told him they were waiting for a train. The vicar thought it was a joke but my mother was serious. She kept asking my father why the train wasn't there. My mother didn't recognise my father or know what he'd done for a living. She didn't know anything. She didn't even know who she was or where she was. She held her head a good deal though and it was clear that she was having constant headaches. (No one at the hospital realised that these were caused by the increase in the amount of fluid surrounding her brain.)

On the 27th July I attended another meeting in Budleigh Hospital. This time there were nine people there representing the hospital and the NHS. Nine of them. Dr Graham Taylor, my mother's GP was there, together with two nurses, a 'continuity care manager', an 'acting leading continuity nurse', a 'hospital care manager', a 'discharge facilitator', a representative of the administrators and a representative from Exmouth social services. I wrote down all their names. Someone began by saying that they all had my mother's best interests at heart. Someone else said they were delighted to report that my mother was much better and was improving. I asked them why, if this was the case, they weren't giving her any occupational therapy or physiotherapy. No one had an answer to this. I got the impression they thought it was an unfair question. I asked them how they had managed to produce this miracle without any treatment. I wanted to know how a woman who had been officially declared terminally ill and demented and in need of constant care had suddenly become 'physically capable and mentally alert' after a few weeks in a small town hospital. No one had any answers. In fact, of course, when the final diagnosis was made it was quite clear that my mother could not possibly have shown any physical or mental improvement. She was suffering from normal pressure hydrocephalus which was steadily getting worse. And very early on in the illness she had been officially declared to be demented.

The hospital staff who said that she had recovered and could be discharged were completely wrong. I find it difficult to avoid the suspicion that they said she was better simply because they wanted to throw my mother out of the hospital. Bizarrely, the continuity care manager wanted proof that I represented my mother and made what he called a formal objection to the fact that I had not given them my home address. When I pointed out that my mother needed intensive nursing care he claimed, to my utter astonishment, that catheters, hoists and ripple beds were not medical equipment. I asked him what would count as medical equipment. He said a ventilator would count as medical equipment. So, presumably, if my mother had been on a ventilator they wouldn't have wanted to throw her out. One of the 'nine' said that they only paid for the care of patients who were in the final stage of cancer. The phrase 'final stage terminally illness' was used. And again I heard the phrase 'terminally, terminally ill'. I asked how they knew that a patient was terminally, terminally ill and was told that they could tell this through liver and kidney deterioration. I asked if they had done any tests to check on this and it was generally agreed that they couldn't remember whether any such tests had been done. I got the impression they seemed to think the question was embarrassing and therefore unfair. I have no idea why nine people wasted a good chunk of a day on such a pointless meeting. I hate to think what it must have cost. It occurred to me as I sat there that if they were all sacked there would be plenty of money left for looking after patients and I told them that the bullying had won and that we would take my mother out of the hospital so that they could have yet another empty bed. I don't think I ever saw any of the nine again.

According to the law the NHS had a full responsibility for looking after my mother. According to the relevant legislation the NHS was expected to arrange and fund rehabilitation and recovery services and palliative care. It is inconceivable that my mother did not fulfil the eligibility criteria for continuing NHS healthcare. The law is clear: if the primary need for care is due to severe ill health, then all costs of nursing, personal care and accommodation should be funded by the State health service. Today, on reflection, it seems to me that the nine people at the meeting at Budleigh Hospital had become institutionalised and were working for the system and not for patients.

In the end my father couldn't bear it any longer. I really couldn't blame him. The staff at the Budleigh Hospital were making us feel so unwelcome, and harassing us so much, that we had no choice but to move my mother. As far as the NHS was concerned it was all about money. They wanted to avoid the cost of looking after my mother – even though they had a moral and legal responsibility to do so. My father, my wife and I all knew that moving my mother out of the hospital was the wrong thing to do for her because she needed the hospital environment but in the end my father just couldn't cope with the pressure. I don't blame him. We found the Cranford Nursing Home, a private nursing home in Exmouth, which could cope. For around £750 a week my mother had a private room which seemed crowded with three adults visiting. My wife and felt that the en suite 'bathroom' was more like a cupboard and we both felt that if a hotel had offered us the room we would have walked out in disgust.

My father sold his home and bought a small house near to the nursing home so that he could visit regularly. My mother was tearful when she moved into the nursing home. She had hardly spoken for months. But she spoke now. The first thing she said was: 'I don't like it here.' Because much of their money was in joint accounts, and my mother couldn't sign her name, my father had to arrange for a power of attorney so that he could access their savings and pay the nursing home fees. (Even this was not always accepted, and my dad had no choice but to forge my mum’s signature.)

My mother died in the nursing home. The diagnosis had by then been made. Numerous consultants (including several neurologists), countless junior hospital doctors, one or two GPs and a good many nurses all missed the diagnosis. (Since nurses now want to be regarded as almost equal to doctors they must take some of the blame). We watched my mother die a terrible, slow death. She died because the doctors failed to make the diagnosis until it was too late.

Towards the end of her life we visited my mother in the nursing home and as soon as Antoinette entered the room she turned to me and said that my mother had a swollen, bulging eye. The diagnosis now was beyond doubt. My mother had a bulging eye because of the pressure inside her skull. I contacted my mother’s new GP and asked him to arrange for my mum to go back into Exeter hospital. I don’t think he or any of the people looking after my mother in the nursing home had realised the significance of this. In the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital the doctors at last confirmed the diagnosis of normal pressure hydrocephalus. It was the diagnosis we’d offered them within a month of my mother falling ill. It had taken endless NHS doctors and two NHS hospitals to reach the diagnosis. If they’d acted within days or even weeks of her being admitted then they could have saved her life. Treatment for normal pressure hydrocephalus is easy, fast, cheap and effective. A shunt is placed in the ventricles of the brain and run under the skin. Cerebrospinal fluid is then drained away from the brain. This procedure will then significantly improve the symptoms.

But by now it was too late. On the death certificate my mother’s death is recorded as dementia with normal pressure hydrocephalus as the underlying problem. I never told my dad how my mother could have been saved. It was, for my mother, a slow and painful and humiliating death. If it can happen to my family it can happen to yours. Remember, it is only because I am a doctor (and my wife is an excellent researcher) that we finally managed to persuade the doctors to (belatedly) reach the correct diagnosis. Remember that in order to save money NHS staff in Budleigh insisted that my mother was rational and mentally alert (when she was suffering from dementia). Remember, too that we failed to save my mother’s life. She was killed by incompetence. No one has ever apologised. No one has ever admitted that any mistakes were made. And I have no doubt that no one ever will.

These days I am always nervous about spending time in the Exeter region in case either my wife or I fall ill. After all, as you will see, I believe that the medical services in South Devon successfully ‘killed’ both my parents. The hospital where my parents were treated so appallingly is a teaching hospital for young doctors. And there is some irony in the fact that one employee of the local medical school has been a violent critic of alternative medicine. Heaven knows what they teach at the Royal Devon and Exeter hospital. I sincerely hope it has nothing to do with medicine. I haven’t been to enough hospitals to be able to say that it’s the worst in the world but if there is one worse I sincerely hope, for the sake of future patients, that the staff are soon carried off by aliens.

2. A Salutary Tale Part 2: My Father’s Death

My father was an inventor, company director and World War II naval veteran. He died on February 28th 2008. He was 87-years-old. The inquest into his death was held in Exeter. Although the inquest was held at my request I did not attend. This is the extraordinary, astonishing, almost unbelievable story of his death and of what followed.

At around 4.00 a.m. on the morning of 5th February 2008 my father got up out of bed and made himself a drink. The pain in his back was terrible and he was having trouble breathing. It wasn’t a new pain. He’d had it before. This time the pain seemed to be mainly referred to his lower ribs at the front of his chest. Knowing that if he rang too soon he would get the emergency medical service and probably be told to take two aspirin and ring his doctor in the morning, he waited until around 9.00 a.m. to telephone his doctor. (The fact that he waited five hours before calling a doctor suggested to me that the pain couldn’t have been too bad and that, maybe, a home visit might have been more appropriate.) He told me that he had a bad night because he had got himself into an uncomfortable position. He needed to see the doctor but didn’t feel up to driving to the surgery. He had a long-standing problem with his back: as the GP should have known, he had chronic osteoporotic spine pain which caused pains all around his chest.

My father telephoned Dr Benjamin Hallmark at Budleigh Salterton Medical Centre. My father was, according to Dr Hallmark, complaining of excruciating pain. But instead of visiting, Dr Hallmark simply told my father (in excruciating pain, remember) to dial 999 and arrange for himself to be taken to hospital in an ambulance. The doctor didn’t even bother to make the telephone call.

I believe that if Dr Hallmark had visited, my father might still be alive today – largely because he almost certainly would have decided that my dad did not require hospitalisation. I’m old-fashioned and still believe that a GP has a duty to visit patients who call for help. (Even if an ambulance is also considered necessary.) And my father might still be alive today because it was the sequence of events which followed which led, I believe, to his death. It was, in retrospect, the first of many unfortunate decisions. And it was the beginning of a sequence of disastrous events which would lead to his death just over three weeks later.

My father was taken to Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital where he was given extensive tests. The doctors looking after him confirmed that there was no heart problem. No serious or new problems were found. This wasn’t very surprising. At no point had my father ever had any symptoms of a heart attack. My father still had some pain and asked if he could have more morphine. The ambulance crew had given him some and he had, he said, rather liked the feeling. The doctors with him (a consultant and a junior hospital doctor) instantly said that he didn’t need morphine. They told him that paracetamol or codeine would control his pain. The consultant said that he could go home the following day. My father seemed quite well. He was very alert. At one point I remember him asking the consultant to fetch him a telephone directory. The admitting consultant considered sending my father home again. He decided, however, to keep him in overnight. I know all this because as soon as I heard what had happened I drove to Exeter and I was standing by my father’s bedside at the time. My father was quite well, sitting up in bed taking a very active interest in what was happening. He was most concerned that I should get in touch with a friend with whom he had a luncheon appointment.

The following day my dad asked the doctors if they could do anything about his breathing problems. More investigations were ordered. He was expected to be in hospital no more than another day or possibly two. And then the ward was infected with a diarrhoea and vomiting bug and was closed. My father was effectively imprisoned in the hospital. Because the ward was closed there were no physiotherapists, no occupational therapists and no visitors. I tried to get him moved to a nearby private hospital. But they wouldn’t take him because he was on an infected ward. The nursing home wouldn’t take him for the same reason.

In the next ten days or so he was (I believe) twice infected with a diarrhoea and vomiting bug. He also contracted a chest infection and a urinary tract infection. (The latter developed after he was catheterised. He was catheterised because, like most 87-year-old men, he had been getting up at night to pass urine. Unfortunately, he got an infection and they had to take the catheter out. In my view, anyone who gets a urinary infection from a simple catheterisation has been catheterised by a nincompoop.) The staff insisted that the diarrhoea and vomiting bug was airborne (so it wasn’t their poor hygiene which caused the persistent spread). I didn’t believe them then and I don’t believe them now. Such bugs are largely spread through poor hygiene practices. If the staff really believed the bug was airborne why weren’t they wearing masks? And why were the doors to the ward left wide open? A doctor said the bug was spread by projectile vomiting and this can be true. But that doesn’t make it an airborne infection – unless, of course, one patient vomits directly into the mouth of another. It didn’t seem surprising to me that they were having difficulty controlling the infection. One ‘expert’ told me that such bugs behave differently in hospitals though they couldn’t explain how the bugs know they are in a hospital. The real problem is: if you don’t know how an infection is transmitted how do you stop it? (The staff suffer from these bugs less than the patients because they don’t eat on the ward and don’t use the same lavatories.)

I wasn’t impressed by the quality of care provided. I was told by one member of staff that my dad had diarrhoea because of the codeine he was taking. (Codeine is more likely to cause constipation). I heard a doctor ask another patient how his bowels were. When told that they were runny the doctor said she would prescribe a laxative.

Although the ward was closed I visited my dad on 15th February. I was allowed to visit because he had suddenly become very ill. When I visited him I found that he was very pink, confused and twitching. When he did wake up he had difficulty in seeing. He was on oxygen and it seemed pretty clear to me that he was getting too much of the stuff and was suffering from oxygen poisoning. These are all classic symptoms of this problem. I asked for the oxygen to be stopped. The oxygen was stopped and the following morning my father was fine.

I spent much of the following week struggling to get my dad out of the hospital. I spoke to him and the staff several times a day, every day. His pain was controlled and he was bored and fed up. I spoke countless times to doctors and nurses on the ward. Eventually, after a flurry of calls on Friday 22nd February, I managed to arrange for my dad (who no longer had the virus and was now safely in a side room) to be moved to the Cranford Nursing Home near to his home to convalesce. He was told that the additional tests they had not been able to do (because of the ward closure) would be conducted as an outpatient. By this time my father wasn’t fit enough to go to his own home. He needed physiotherapy to help him walk again. After two weeks in hospital he had become very weak, though he was still mobile. His spare pyjamas went with him to the nursing home, in a bag. When the bag was opened the pyjamas were thickly stained with the diarrhoea he had suffered on the ward. Not the best way to stop infections spreading.

The hospital had prescribed a regime to control my father’s pain and given him an outpatient appointment for further investigations of his long-term respiratory problem. I was told that after admission to the nursing home he was laughing and joking with the nurses.

I had influenza and was too ill to visit him that weekend (I didn’t want to give him the infection I’d acquired) but I spoke to him several times and he seemed well enough. I thought he was safe now that he was out of the hospital. He received visitors and had his television set moved across from his house. He walked about in the nursing home (he walked so much he made himself tired – he told me that he thought he had overdone things) and I asked him if he thought he would still be able to come away with us for a few days in Sidmouth to celebrate his birthday (3rd March). He said he would and that he was looking forward to it.

My dad wasn’t ready to die. He was looking forward to all sorts of things. We’d just brought him a new printer and fax machine for his birthday and a new gadget-packed mobile phone. Before going into hospital he still drove himself and went out to lunch several times a week.

When he was discharged from the hospital my father’s pain was controlled with a Fentanyl patch. He was, I believe, on a relatively low dose of this. Much stronger patches could have been tried. But on 25th February the nursing home staff called his doctor, Dr Hallmark, because he was again complaining of pain.

The doctor who called on Dr Hallmark’s behalf, was a GP registrar, Dr Stuart Livingston. He overruled the regime which had been carefully prepared by the hospital doctors who had looked after my dad for two weeks and prescribed Oramorph (morphine). The manufacturers of Oramorph state clearly that the drug should not be given to patients with severe respiratory problems. It’s a serious hazard. The drug is a version of morphine and it depresses respiration. Michael Jackson is said to have died of an opiate induced respiratory arrest. And my dad was 87-years-old. In old age drug effects can be dramatically enhanced. Two days later – after several doses of Oramorph – my father was dead. Dr Livingston stated in his report to the coroner, Dr Elizabeth Earland, in support of his action, that he believed the contraindication to be a relative rather than an absolute one. The manufacturer of the drug, however, makes it clear that the contradiction is absolute. To be precise, the company making Oramorph told me: ‘...the use of Oramorph is contraindicated in any patients with respiratory depression or obstructive airways disease regardless of age.’ My father had chronic obstructive pulmonary disease – a serious respiratory problem. Dr Livingston also suggested that prescribing Oramorph is acceptable in ‘end stage’ respiratory disease. But my father was not ‘end stage’ anything. I don’t believe that Dr Livingston had ever met my father before he prescribed Oramorph for him. My father didn’t even think of himself as old. A few weeks earlier he had gone to a club for pensioners and had complained bitterly about it. ‘It’s full of old people,’ he muttered sourly. He had been driving his car the day before he was admitted to hospital.

When I telephoned him at 9.00 a.m. on Wednesday morning (27th February) my dad was very sleepy and kept falling asleep during our conversation. I put the telephone down and rang a little later. He was still very drowsy, seemed drugged, and had difficulty in breathing. I had spoken to him virtually every day for four years and I had never heard him have as much trouble with his breathing as he had after that day. I guessed that his medication had been changed and asked him what new drug he was on. He told me that he had seen a GP on Monday who had given him morphine. I spoke immediately to a senior member of staff and asked him not to give my father any more of the morphine. I was told that the morphine had been prescribed four times a day and as required. I was horrified and pointed out that since morphine is a respiratory depressant and my father was suffering from severe respiratory problems the morphine would kill him. The staff member agreed that no more morphine would be given. I said I would take responsibility for stopping the morphine and he accepted this. I said I would visit the following day (Thursday).

I telephoned my Father on the Wednesday afternoon at 2.51 p.m. hoping that he would have woken up a little. He had. He was much better. I told him the dangers of morphine and asked him not to take any more. I told him that the drug would kill him if he continued with it. Apart from 'Goodbye, I love you dad,' my last words to him were: 'If you take any more of that drug it will kill you.' They haunt me. But he wasn't very keen on hearing what I had so say. My dad could be incredibly patient. But when it came to medical matters he always wanted immediate solutions. When he started having a little prostate trouble I recommended that he try eating a handful of pumpkin seeds once a day. Twenty four hours after I made this suggestion he telephoned and rather grumpily told me that my suggestion hadn't worked. Sadly my dad believed that there was a pill for every problem. He liked pills. And GPs like prescribing them. When we cleared out my dad's house we filled one and a half black dustbin liners with bottles and packets of pills. I went once with him to see a specialist, shortly before his death, because he was finding it difficult to walk as far as he used to be able. 'I can't walk uphill as fast as I could,' he said. 'What are you going to do about it?' he demanded, staring rather belligerently at the consultant.

My dad agreed that the Oramorph made his breathing worse but said he liked it. He said he wanted to see documentary evidence showing that the drug was dangerous for patients in his condition. I said I would bring him the evidence the following day. My wife did a Web search that evening and printed out some suitable evidence to add to the textbooks I'd picked out.

I was telephoned at around 8.30 p.m. that evening (Wednesday 27th February) by the night nurse. She said my father was a bad colour and was having difficulty breathing. She admitted that he had been given another dose of morphine at 8.00 p.m. and told me that he had subsequently developed serious breathing problems. She told me that his condition had deteriorated alarmingly after he had been given the drug. I said I was planning to visit the following morning and repeated my request that he be given no more of the drug. I told her that in my view morphine would kill him. I said I would be in to see him the following day but hours later he was dead.

On my way down to Exmouth I received a telephone call from the nursing home to say that my dad had died.

Why wouldn't he listen to me and stop taking the drug? Simple. Some months earlier I had questioned another prescription which had been written for him. (After taking it he developed an irregular heart beat.) When my father had passed on my concerns to his doctor, the doctor had dismissed my worry; reportedly telling my father that, because I wasn't in practice, I was out of touch and out of date.

When I had seen my dad I asked to see the nursing home's drug records. The nurse I spoke to immediately said: 'It's about the Oramorph isn't it?'

After a post-mortem a pathologist concluded that my father had died of his respiratory problem. There was a small amount of Oramorph left in his blood. Could the morphine have helped kill my father by exacerbating his respiratory problems? Would he have been alive today if he hadn't had that last dose? We will, of course never know any of the answers.

But the doctors at the hospital (where he had been for over two weeks) did not think he needed morphine (or, maybe, thought that it would not be safe for him to take it). The hospital did not regard him as terminal. (He was sent an outpatient appointment for March 13th). He did not complain that his pain had got worse after he had left the hospital. And he went from weak but relatively healthy to dead in less than 24 hours – after being given a drug which the manufacture states he should not have been given.

If he had needed a stronger painkiller why didn't the GP try a higher dose of the Fentanyl patch instead of prescribing morphine for an 87-year-old man with severe respiratory problems?

An article in *Pharmacology* advises that the most dangerous side effect of morphine is 'respiratory depression'. *MIMS* magazine for doctors warns that the two first disorders listed as contradictions for Oramorph are respiratory depression and obstructive airways disease. All GPs receive, and should read, *MIMS*. And according to a leading medical website: 'Respiratory depression (with morphine preparations) occurs more frequently in the elderly and debilitated patients, as well as in those suffering from conditions accompanied by hypoxia or hypercapnia when even moderate therapeutic doses may dangerously decrease pulmonary ventilation'. The West Midland Ambulance Service has warned that Oramorph should not be given to patients with respiratory depression or inadequate tidal volume. Oramorph, like all drugs, is particularly likely to be potent when given to elderly patients. Older patients tend to respond more dramatically to drugs than younger ones.

In the end, I decided there was no point in attending Dr Earland's inquest because the coroner informed me that she had already decided (before the inquest) that Oramorph did not cause my father's death. She agreed to accept witnesses but suggested that they wouldn't make any difference to her decision. And she decided not to have witnesses whom I considered vital at the inquest. It seemed to me that if you don't ask the right people the right questions you aren't ever likely to come up with the right answers. I felt it had become the sort of inquest where Kafka would have felt at home.

It was suggested by the coroner that if I wanted justice I should take action in the civil courts. I didn't want damages. What good are damages? The idea of suing in the civil courts reduced my father's death to the level of a faulty ladder on an uneven pavement. I was, I confess, reminded of Conan Doyle's remark that 'some of these country coroners do think they are tin pot gods'. Conan Doyle was, of course, himself a doctor. He knew of which he spoke. A coroner is a medium level state functionary but one who has a great deal of power over his or her tiny domain, like a local VAT inspector, or a traffic warden. I found the whole inquest experience cold, unhelpful and traumatic. I've had friendlier encounters with HMRC. The whole thing was managed with all the subtlety and compassion of an MOT test. I didn't understand why the inquest wasn't being held in front of a jury. According to the leaflet I was given at the start of the proceedings, inquests are held with a jury: 'if further deaths may occur in similar circumstances'. This was clearly the case in my father's death. My father's GP has not admitted that the drug was prescribed inappropriately and has, presumably, not changed his prescribing practices. Other doctors may well be prescribing the drug under similarly inappropriate circumstances. Ergo, there should have been a jury. There wasn't.

On 3.00 p.m. on 20th August 2008 I met a policeman, the coroner's representative, at a police station in Devon. He told me that the impression was that I was a bit of a nutter, that the coroner was aiming for 'natural causes' and that the death was not taken very seriously because my dad was 87-years-old when he died. He said none of the other witnesses had been interviewed and weren't likely to be. We talked for some time. I explained exactly what had happened and he agreed with me that it would perhaps be surprising if the coroner didn't agree with me that the Oramorph was probably the cause of my father's death and that negligence was involved. 'If he'd been a young child things might have been different,' said the policeman. 'The feeling is that your dad was old and had a long life so what are you going on about?'

I felt his theory explained the curious nature of the coroner who didn't bark. You don't get many rights these days if you're old.

Eventually, after it finally became clear that the coroner had already decided that the Oramorph had nothing to do with my father's death. I sent her this letter:

'When I started this long and tiring journey I hoped for two things: justice for my father (in the hope, perhaps, of a simple acknowledgement that an error had been made) and an opportunity to prevent the same thing happening again. The second of these was actually the most important. Nothing can change the fact of my father's death. But it is now abundantly clear that neither objective will be reached. More people will die in exactly the same way as my father died and the judicial system is not going to prevent this happening. What a missed opportunity! There was, here, a clear opportunity to warn doctors of the danger of prescribing inappropriate drugs (particularly to the elderly) with a specific example illustrating the consequences.

Your list of witnesses is disappointing, to say the least. I can think of two specific individuals from the nursing home who should be there. A senior member of staff agreed with me that Oramorph was making my father ill and agreed with me that the drug would kill him and that he should have no more of it. In addition, the nurse who gave the final dose would be able to describe my father's reaction to the drug and to tell us the time of his death. We know the time he was certified dead but I certainly don't know the time of his death.

On 7th August you wrote and told me that you intended to call the nurse who 'allegedly agreed with you that Oramorph was seriously affecting your father's condition' and 'the nurse who was on duty when your father died'. But your list now merely includes 'a representative from the Cranford Nursing Home'. That could be an administrator. Both the relevant nurses are easily identified and, presumably, traced.

In addition you have no expert representative from the drug company which warns doctors not to give Oramorph to patients with my father's condition.

My lack of faith in your inquest is increased by the knowledge that you have, quite inexplicably in my view, already decided (before the inquest) that the drug which I am quite certain killed my father played no part in his death. ('Oramorph does not feature as the cause of your father's death' – your letter dated 7th August 2009.) The drug company insists that Oramorph should never be given to patients with my father's condition. (In my experience drug companies do not usually limit their market without good reason.) The theoretical medical evidence suggests that a normal dose of the drug could kill him. Hospital doctors refused to give him a similar drug just days beforehand. The clinical evidence shows that the first dose of the drug affected him adversely. And yet somehow you 'know' that the final dose of the drug, inappropriately prescribed, did not kill him. I have studied the pathologist's report but I still have no idea how you reached this conclusion.

I would now like to withdraw from the process completely so that I can, at last, begin to mourn and to remember *my father rather than fighting over the manner of his death. It has been enormously stressful to see a close relative killed by an inappropriately prescribed drug and to be denied anything remotely resembling proper justice.'*

I did not know then how the coroner came to her conclusion. I still do not know.

I made a formal complaint to the General Medical Council (GMC) about Dr Hallmark and Dr Livingston. To my astonishment the GMC agreed with my father's GPs that any contradiction for the use of Oramorph in COPD patients is relative rather than absolute. They apparently ignored the fact that the drug company which makes Oramorph has an absolute ban on the use of the drug with COPD patients. The drug company stated that Oramorph is contraindicated in any patients with obstructive airways disease. I asked the GMC to explain why the defending GPs' views were considered more relevant than the manufacturer's advice. They refused to answer. And they refused to consider evidence from the professional witnesses who observed the effect the Oramorph had on my father.

If I was astonished by that judgement I was utterly dumbstruck by the GMC's decision that it is acceptable practice for GPs to advise patients living alone, and in excruciating chest pain, to be told to call their own ambulance and then just wait for the ambulance to arrive.

That's medical care in Britain in the 21st century.

And I think it stinks.

I wrote to the GMC saying that I wanted to complain about their decision. I said I wanted to make a formal complaint about the GMC and the two employees who decided that a clear contraindication to the prescribing of a drug is of no consequence. 'Under the Freedom of Information Act, would you please let me have the names and qualifications of the two GMC employees who decided that it is perfectly acceptable for a doctor to ignore a drug company warning not to give a drug.'

I didn't hear from them again.

The hospital weakened my father. They were, if you like, the picadors. I believe the GP then did the matador's work by prescribing an unsuitable drug.

In the end, nothing happened. No one was disciplined. No one apologised. Nothing changed.

The hospital believe they did nothing wrong.

Two GPs claimed they did nothing wrong.

The coroner said no one did anything wrong.

The General Medical Council agreed that no one did anything wrong.

I wrote to the police but they didn't bother to respond to my letter.

But everything you have read is the truth. So, now you decide.

Remember: my dad was given a drug the manufacturer said he should not have been given. Within minutes his condition had deteriorated. He then recovered but was given another dose of the same drug. Within hours he was dead. Neither the coroner nor the GMC thought there was a link between the two events and neither made any attempt to investigate any relationship between the two.

If it had all happened to a child, an asylum seeker or the wife of a minister would the result have been the same? Does being white, male and over 80 diminish the significance of a death? The case seemed very simple to me. A doctor prescribed a banned drug. Abundant evidence shows that the drug made the patient ill. The patient died soon afterwards.

Why should you care? Because you could be next.

I have spent my entire medical career exposing the dishonesties and incompetences of doctors. There is, therefore, no little irony in the fact that I believe that incompetent doctors killed both my parents.

But the fact is I know that my parents were killed only because I know what to look for. I've described how and why they died, and how the system did its best to cover up what had happened, not to point a finger but to draw attention to the extent of institutionalised incompetence within the world of medicine.

This wasn't a case of a patient being given the wrong dose of a drug. It was a case of a patient being given an entirely inappropriate drug. No one has ever apologised, expressed remorse or regret or admitted they made a mistake. So, one has to assume, the same thing will happen again. And again. And again. Prescribed drugs are one of the top killers in Britain today. The wrong drug can kill a patient just as surely as a bullet. How many other deaths are officially dismissed as natural causes? Is this through incompetence or a lack of caring or is it deliberate policy? How many deaths which should be investigated are never reported to the coroner? How many coroners refuse to investigate such cases?

Just how big is the iceberg?

3. Iatrogenesis: The New Epidemic

Officially, the big three killers today are cancer, heart disease and stroke. Things are much the same in all developed countries. Cancer kills rather more than 150,000 people a year in the UK. Heart disease kills just under 100,000 a year and stroke kills just over 50,000. Smoking (which kills largely through cancer and heart disease) is reputed to kill around 100,000 people a year. (The official annual death rate in the UK is around 300,000 which rather suggests that someone in charge of Government statistics can't add up very well but some deaths are, of course, listed as having more than one cause.)

The 'big three' killers are responsible for the vast majority of deaths. Infectious diseases, the next big group of killer problems, are responsible for relatively few deaths. However, these official figures are misleading for one simple reason: doctors, the people who write death certificates and who decide a patient's cause of death, rarely admit that they themselves are responsible for killing a patient. Not many doctors are prepared to write 'Me' on the line that asks for 'Cause of death'. And you can't really blame them. Doctors, just like car mechanics, plumbers, interior decorators and everyone else, hate admitting that they've made a mistake. Most, as the old joke goes, just prefer to bury them quietly and hope no one notices.

Iatrogenesis (medically induced illness) does not officially exist as a cause of death. But every doctor with more than half a brain knows that many of the patients listed as dying from 'cancer' or 'heart disease' or 'stroke' or 'pneumonia' (or whatever else) died not because of an uncontrollable, untreatable disease but because a doctor, or a group of doctors, working alone or together with a nurse, or an entire hospital, screwed up. However, doctors are in such denial that iatrogenesis is not an official (or even an unofficial) medical speciality. It's as though heart disease were not a recognised speciality. Through a toxic mixture of hubris and self-denial, doctors underestimate the incidence, significance and consequences of iatrogenesis and the dangers of overprescribing prescription drugs. Despite all the evidence that exists iatrogenesis remains officially unrecognised as a problem. Why? Simple. To recognise it would be economically and professionally inconvenient.

Nevertheless, medical journals do occasionally publish articles in which attempts are made to estimate the number of people killed by doctors. There are never any precise figures because doctors don't put themselves down on the death certificate as the cause of death. But objective assessments make it pretty clear that doctors are, without a doubt, a major cause of disease, injury and death. Doctors kill a thousand times more people than terrorists, murderers or criminals. Far, far more people are killed by doctors than die in road accidents or train or aeroplane crashes. Doctors kill people by doing the wrong thing, by not doing the right thing or by not doing anything. There are many ways to kill a patient by mistake. And as procedures become more complicated, and drugs become powerful, so the number of ways in which doctors kill patients grows, grows and grows. The quality of medical care is now so low that I seriously doubt if one in every two consultations results in treatment that is timely, well-chosen, efficacious and genuinely certain to do more harm than good.

To a certain extent, things have always been this way, of course. Doctors have always killed patients. Most of them don't do it on purpose. The number of Dr Harold Shipmans around is, thankfully, quite small. But a patient killed by a mistake is just as dead as a patient who has been deliberately killed.

What really should worry us all is that things are constantly getting worse.

They are getting worse for several reasons. One reason is, undoubtedly, that drugs are more powerful and procedures more complicated. But the main reason that they are getting worse is that doctors are becoming increasingly incompetent.

The big question is, of course, how many patients do doctors actually kill? How many patients end up in coffins instead of going home because doctors screwed up?

Difficult question.

But I can guarantee one thing: it's far, far more than you thought it was. Doctors kill far more people than even the most pessimistic observer would imagine. Doctors are now a major cause of illness and death. Study the statistics and it becomes clear that throughout the 'civilised' world doctors are right up there alongside heart disease and cancer as the big-time killers of the 21st century. A study in Australia showed that 470,000 Australian men, women and children are admitted to hospital every year because they have been made ill by doctors. The figures also show that every year 280,000 patients who are admitted to hospital suffer a temporary disability as a result of their health care. Around 50,000 of these suffer permanent disabilities. A staggering 18,000 Australians die annually as a result of medical errors, drug toxicity, surgical errors and general medical mismanagement. What a terrible indictment of the medical profession.

In America, the official death rate from medical 'accidents' is running at around 200,000 a year. When doctors from the Harvard School of Public Health studied what happened to more than 30,000 patents admitted to acute care hospitals in New York they found that nearly 4% of them suffered unintended injuries in the course of their treatment and that 14% of the patients died of their injuries. This survey concluded that nearly 200,000 people die each year in America as a result of medical accidents. This means that more than four times as many people officially die from injuries caused by doctors as die in road accidents. I believe the real figure is probably considerably higher than this and there can be little doubt that many of the injuries and deaths are caused by simple, straightforward incompetence rather than bad luck or unforseen complications.

Figures in Europe are no better. In my book *Betrayal of Trust* I revealed that one in six British patients in hospital is receiving treatment because he or she has been made ill by doctors. Unfortunately, there are no official figures for the number of people killed by British doctors. Doctors in the UK don't accept that they ever make mistakes. (Although when I was last invited onto a radio programme to talk about the fact that one in six patients in hospital are there because doctors have made them ill, a doctor representing the medical establishment came into the studio to defend his profession and argued that patients could take comfort from the fact that the figures showed that five out of six hospital patients were *not* sick because they had been made ill by doctors.)

Coronary bypass operations are immensely popular among heart surgeons (and extremely profitable) but a major study conducted in Europe showed that many patients who don't have surgery live longer than those who do. Twenty years ago, American surgeons performed 350,000 coronary bypass operations and charged $14 billion for them. When one researcher studied 300 patients who'd had bypass operations at several hospitals in California he discovered that 14% of the patients would have thrived as well without surgery as with it while another 30% were borderline. Around 50% of lower back disc operations and up to 70% of hysterectomies are probably unnecessary. In America the death toll from unnecessary surgery alone has been estimated to be as high as 80,000 patients per year.

Around half of all the 'adverse effects' associated with doctors are clearly and readily preventable and are usually a result of ignorance or incompetence or a mixture of both. The rest would be preventable with a little care and thought (and some better research).

Most people recognise the damage that other doctors can do but like to think that their doctor is an honourable exception. This is entirely understandable. After all, we all like to think that our relationship with our own doctor is special and that we have chosen someone reliable and knowledgeable to look after us. We like to think of our doctor as a personal and family friend. We all need to put some trust in the health care professionals upon whom we rely when we are ill.

But it is just as dangerous to assume that your doctor is entirely safe, sensible, knowledgeable, competent and error free as it would be to assume that you do not need to take care when driving, on the spurious grounds that road accidents only ever affect other people.

The underlying problem is that even good, kind, conscientious doctors – who are honest and honourable, who care about their work and who do their very best for their patients – can still make people ill. And can still kill people.

It has always been diagnostic skills which have differentiated between the good doctor and the bad doctor. Treating sick people is easy. If you are a doctor and you know what is wrong with your patient you can look up the correct treatment in two minutes. It's diagnosis that is difficult and since the days of cupping and leeches it has been diagnostic skills which have differentiated between the good doctor and the bad doctor. Sadly, doctors have handed that particular art over to machinery – with disastrous results. Modern doctors are now useless at making diagnoses. Young, newly trained doctors are the worst – partly it is true because they are inexperienced, but mainly because they have been trained to rely on tests and investigations rather than on developing their own diagnostic skills. One in four cancer cases is missed simply because doctors don't know what to look for, don't know what questions to ask and don't listen when patients hand them clues that should really start alarm bells ringing. It's hardly surprising that more and more patients are described as having a 'mystery illness'.

All this is terrifying.

For if the doctor doesn't make the right diagnosis then it doesn't matter how many wonderful drugs he has at his disposal.

When researchers examined the medical records of 100 dead patients who had been shown by post-mortem to have had heart attacks they found that only 53% of the heart attacks had been diagnosed. What makes this even more alarming is the fact that half the patients had been looked after by experts in heart disease. A study across 32 hospitals which compared the diagnoses doctors had made when treating 1,800 patients with the diagnoses made after the patients had died (and could be examined more thoroughly) showed that doctors had an error rate of nearly 20%. When 80 doctors were asked to examine silicone models of female breasts they could only find half the hidden lumps. That's a 50% failure rate even though the doctors knew that they were being tested and observed. Another study showed that doctors had missed diagnoses in dying patients up to a quarter of the time. Experts concluded that one in ten patients who had died would have lived if the correct diagnosis had been made. Yet another group of researchers revealed that in two thirds of patients who had died, important, previously undiagnosed conditions were discovered in the post-mortem room. A report published after pathologists had performed 400 post-mortem examinations showed that in more than half the cases the wrong diagnosis had been made. The authors of this report said that potentially treatable pathology was missed in 13% of patients; that 65 out of 134 cases of pneumonia had gone undetected and that out of 51 patients who had suffered heart attacks doctors had failed to diagnose the problem in 18 cases. Some years ago it was estimated that inexperienced doctors working in casualty units killed at least one thousand patients a year. Now that doctors are even less experienced, and even more poorly trained, I suspect that the figure is far, far higher than that.

When it comes to disorders of the mind (the big growth industry of the 21st century) doctors are even more incompetent. A study of 131 randomly selected psychiatric patients showed that approximately three quarters (75%) of the patients had probably been wrongly diagnosed. (It is always difficult to be precise about mistakes in psychiatry because it isn't a science at all.) In many cases patients are diagnosed as having – and are then treated for – serious psychiatric problems when their symptoms are caused by drugs they have been given for physical problems. Whole wards full of patients have been diagnosed, treated and classified as schizophrenic when in fact they were suffering from side effects produced by the drugs they had been given by prescription happy doctors. The idea that anyone would describe psychiatry as a science is utterly absurd. Nothing that psychiatrists claim as 'fact' can be proved by any means recognised by scientists; there are no proper controls and if an experiment is repeated it rarely produces the same result. The ultimate absurdity is the fact that psychiatrists claim that only they are fit to judge the effectiveness of their recommendations. Psychiatry is black magic masquerading as science.

The result of the fact that the psychiatric profession has sold itself to the pharmaceutical industry is that patients are now often treated for conditions that sane people would not regard as illnesses. Patients who feel guilty, worried, or concerned about the state of the world are likely to find themselves labelled and drugged for life. Those who are too timid, too reserved, too kind (a condition now regarded as akin to weakness) too gullible or too anything are likely to find themselves filled to the gills with some poisonous but enormously profitable concoction. Psychiatrists never suggest that patients might live with their symptoms, or (heaven forbid) find some non-pharmacological solution. There is never any discussion of side effects or any suggestion that the long-term consequences of therapy might turn out to be worse than the long-term consequences of the disorder. Psychiatrists and drug companies have been so successful in convincing politicians of the effectiveness of their so-called 'speciality' that virtually all the money available for the care of mental patients is now spent on pills (even though there is invariably no evidence to show that they do any good at all). Institutions caring for the mental ill were closed down (using the excuse that they were politically incorrect) and the patients who needed care were dumped into the community, to wander the streets. It's difficult to blame drug companies for this sad state of affairs (they exist, after all, solely to make money) but it's easy to blame psychiatrists.

The sad truth is that psychiatry is the greatest con on earth. Psychiatrists and general practitioners have become increasingly enthusiastic about drug therapy in recent decades. They claim that they can treat a wide range of disorders with psychotropic drugs and so a goodly portion of the nation now regularly gulps down happy tablets. The result is that the incidence of mental health problems is increasing. Officially, one in two people in Britain is incurably mentally ill. (Despite this the number of beds available for mental health patients is constantly shrinking. This is, of course, because the mentally ill make an ineffective lobby.)

Psychiatry isn't a science at all and it isn't even an art. It's more of a confidence trick; a collegiate confidence trick with pretensions of grandeur. The simple fact is that there is no evidence that there is any such thing as 'chemical imbalance'. Ask any psychiatrist about this and he will agree that 'chemical imbalance' is a still unproven theory. It's never even been properly tested so how could it ever be proven? So how can psychiatrists and drug companies possibly treat the problems which they claim are caused by 'chemical imbalance'? The bald truth is that psychiatry is no more a science than witchcraft. It is a perfect example of pseudoscience running riot. Cinema legend Samuel Goldwyn was right when he said that anybody who goes to see a psychiatrist ought to have his head examined. A big part of the problem lies in the fact that modern medical thinking is based upon the Cartesian principle that the mind and the body can be treated separately. The modern clinician still does not see the mind and the body as a single unit (that is why orthodox practitioners don't believe in holistic medicine) and this leaves the way open for psychiatrists to play around with the human mind.

You may be surprised to learn that psychotropic drugs (widely promoted by doctors who have close links with the companies making them) have no provable, useful effects. They do, on the other hand, have massive and provably serious bad effects (such as death). How are these drugs supposed to work? That's not exactly known. It is, however, known that they flatten the emotions and cause a numbing and dullness of the mind which make patients taking the drugs less aware of their problems. Patients become so numb that they don't notice the nasty world around them. These drugs don't cure mental symptoms; they simply cover them up. The best patients can hope for is that the side effects aren’t too bad. And the damned psychiatrists are constantly finding new excuses to prescribe (and to add to drug company profits). So, for example, they even prescribe drugs for people who are shy. They call it ‘Social Anxiety Disorder’ and there is a powerful drug for it, with appropriately powerful side effects. There are drugs for all shades of neuroticism. Heaven knows what sort of future mankind has when you remember that all great art and all great inventions were the result of neurotic minds.

Psychiatrists have a rapidly growing dictionary of labels which they can apply to their patients. The big problem with their labels (I’m talking about diseases such as ADHD and schizophrenia) is that none of these diseases (none) actually exists. Not in the way that pneumonia and tuberculosis exist, with real signs and symptoms. Psychiatric disorders are created and agreed upon by groups of psychiatrists who meet together and think up new disorders. I’m not making this up. There is proof that diabetes exists. There is scientific evidence to show that heart disease is real. But there is no proof to show that any psychiatric disorders really exist. They are labels which are often created merely to find a market for a newly invented drug. Diagnoses are made, and treatment begun, without any evidence that a patient has anything wrong that can be treated. Drugs are prescribed in the vague hope that they will produce an improvement. Most of the time they produce a change – but the change is more likely to be a deterioration than an improvement.

A vast variety of entirely non-existent diseases is becoming forever commoner, taking up a constantly increasing part of a constantly decreasing health service budget. Many psychiatrists claim (apparently meaning it) that we are *all* mentally ill and that we *all* need treatment. This is not a social comment so much as an excuse to hand out prescription drugs which do more harm than good. (My own experience of medical colleagues who are psychiatrists is that they are all barking. The Brazilian psychiatrist who shot a patient because ‘they all come in here and just want to think about themselves, no one thinks about *me*’ wasn’t that exceptional. Psychiatrists are pretty screwed up people; deviants and neurotics. That’s why they become psychiatrists. All the psychiatrists I’ve known have been as mad as hatters. I suspect that they became psychiatrists because they couldn’t deal with the logical science of real medicine. They chose, instead, to drift into the world of psychiatry where nothing is written down in black and white, and where judgements are made subjectively rather than objectively.

Many psychiatrists have such close links with drug companies that they promote drug therapy for all with missionary zeal. Whenever psychiatrists make a suggestion one only has to ask ‘Who benefits?’ to see what is going on. In 2010 a proposal to screen the entire population of Britain for depression was abandoned, possibly because it was realised that a virtually bankrupt nation could not afford to conduct an inefficient but incredibly expensive survey into mental health, possibly because a civil servant somewhere realised that the cost of providing anti-depressants would push the nation further into bankruptcy and possibly because someone realised that the nation was so despairing that a survey would probably show that the whole country was depressed. (That, I am sure, was the plan. Just think of the profits to be made out of prescribing antidepressants for everyone in the country.)

Drug companies concentrate on me-too drugs, the moneymakers, ignoring diseases that affect the Third World and ignoring rare diseases. They want long-term medications for long-term problems and psychiatric drugs are the most profitable. Drug companies love mental illnesses. Patients don’t die from them. They live long, healthy lives and so, once diagnosed, can be given drugs for decades. Patients never get better and so the drug therapy is eternal. These disorders are self-reinforcing. When told they are ‘mentally ill’ people tend to become anxious, introspective, less interested in the outside world and more self-obsessed. Doctors talk about exogenous and endogenous depressions but the only real difference between the two is that in one the cause has been found and in the other it hasn’t. The two varieties of depression are basically identical. Both are caused by stress.

So much money is spent on utterly worthless psychotropic drugs that there isn’t any money left for the long-stay hospitals that the vulnerable and the unstable desperately need. Community care doesn’t work, and everyone knows it doesn’t work, but it’s cheap. Very cheap. The NHS has dumped thousands of mentally ill patients on the streets. It has also put a huge and intolerable burden on the families of the chronically sick. Sad though it may be there will always be some people who need to live permanently in institutions and who benefit from attending workshops and properly run day centres. The State has abandoned the mentally ill because they don’t vote as a group, don’t employ lobbyists, don’t have support from television celebrities and aren’t considered photogenic.

The sad truth is psychiatry is a nonsensical speciality. And all its treatments are unproven rubbish. Aversion therapy, behaviour therapy and hormonal rebalancing are nonsense. Drug therapy is as dangerous, in its way, as psychosurgery. Diagnoses are made without evidence existing. Treatment is prescribed in a purely subjective way. And the diagnostic symptomology is so vague and far reaching that I could, without much difficulty, find some definable mental illness in every person in the UK.

Some people make friends when they travel. I have an acquaintance who can’t pop into the local supermarket without finding new chums to add to his formidable Christmas card mailing list. If he goes for a walk in a deserted park he will somehow come back with half a dozen new pals. I’m not good at making friends. Too shy, I suppose.

But this means that I am suffering from quite a number of mental disorders. According to the official definitions and symptom lists I reckon I am suffering from autism, ADHD, ODD, obsessive compulsive disorder and several dozen other psychiatric disorders. And I don't mind betting that you are too. Today, just about every human emotion or behavioural pattern is a psychiatric disease; an official medical diagnoses. Shyness, homesickness, suspicion, having ups and downs and distractibility are all diseases. There are special drugs for all these disorders. New diseases soon likely to be classified include: 'apathy disorder', 'compulsive shopping disorder and 'Internet addiction disorder'. If your doctor says you have one of these then you're officially mentally ill. Lack of self control and impatience are now officially recognised as diseases. Welcome to the worldwide club. There's a drug with your name on it. And a long-term sick note just a scrawl away. Many of the new diseases relate to children. There's a good reason for this. Once a child is started on a drug there are likely to be decades of prescribing (and profits) ahead.

How do psychiatrists define new diseases? Easy. A bunch of 27 of them (most of them with links to drug companies) simply decide what is officially a disease. Psychiatrists actually have meetings to vote on whether diseases exist or not. Homosexuality used to be a disease, but political correctness pressures resulted in a vote deciding it was not. That's what psychiatrists call 'science'. Thanks to their efforts, everyone can be diagnosed as mentally ill and everyone diagnosed will be treated. Providing drugs for mental illness is an industry worth a third of a trillion dollars a year. It's hardly surprising that new mental diseases come thick and fast. There is no evidence that any of the drugs prescribed can 'cure' anything (partly because none of the diseases being treated can be properly diagnosed or specifically identified) but there is plenty of evidence showing that the drugs being used produce a huge variety of known, and sometimes deadly, side effects.

There are now nearly 400 psychiatric medical diagnoses in the official lists. There are specialists and drugs for all these diagnoses. And not one of the 400 has been tested or proven to exist. If you ever have a dull moment in your life get yourself a copy of the latest edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* and flick through it looking for the daftest diseases. It's hardly surprising that no one is now truly normal. These diseases aren't found in a laboratory or identified by epidemiological studies: they are created in marketing departments. And why not? Drug companies can make 500,000% profit on the drugs they sell.

Psychiatrists, apparently blind to what is going on around them, seem deliberately unaware that we live in a society where toxic stress is endemic and the human consequences inevitable. 'Our contemporary Western society, in spite of its material, intellectual and political progress, is increasingly less conducive to mental health, and tends to undermine the inner security, happiness, reason and the capacity for life in the individual,' wrote Dr Erich Fromm. 'It tends to turn him into an automaton who pays for his human failure with increasing mental sickness, and with despair hidden under a frantic drive for work and so-called pleasure.'

Drug companies use marketing experts to persuade well people they are ill and need to take a pill, preferably permanently. Patients' groups are set up and funded. In the UK, one of the big groups catering to autism sufferers takes drug company money. Journalists are bought and diseases created. In the business this is called disease mongering. It's big business. Research is funded by drug companies and not surprisingly, the research with embarrassing or inconvenient results never gets published. Medical journals (which rely on drug company advertising) are often bent as are journalists. The medical community is corrupt and up to its eyes in drug company money. When TV programmes want to speak to a doctor about drugs they invariably contact one of the 'hired hands' recommended by the drug companies. Doctors who tell the truth are banned and marginalised. Governments say they can't find any doctors without conflict of interest to sit on committees assessing drugs. (Well, I'm here. An acknowledged expert on drugs and iatrogenesis and a licensed, registered medical practitioner. But, surprise, surprise, they never approach me.) Doctors go to conferences run and or paid for by drug companies. No doctor who is likely to oppose or question drug therapy will be invited to speak. (The last time I was invited to speak to NHS personnel I was quickly uninvited when my name was spotted on the list of speakers.)

Many of the commonest problems are behavioural conditions associated with children. These are diagnosed subjectively and can increasingly be diagnosed by nurses and teachers rather than by psychiatrists. The doctors are too busy signing the prescriptions to bother with actually seeing patients. ADHD, autism and Asperger's syndrome will all become default conditions soon. Their incidence is increasing so absurdly fast that children without one of these conditions will be regarded as abnormal and will, of course, need treatment. Autism became popular because it's a damned sight more convenient for drug companies to create a new disease than it is to accept that children can be brain damaged by vaccines (another drug company product). For drug companies it is a double whammy. They avoid the vaccine lawsuits. And the new diagnosis enables them to sell treatments for a newly created and non-existent disease. Parents are often enthusiastic and don't seem to care that the evidence shows that a walk in a park is better than drugs for children with ADHD. Pushy, expectant parents with not very bright children temper their disappointment by accepting that their children have a new and fashionable disorder. A doctor's note showing that a child has ADHD enables him and family to jump to the front of the queue at theme parks, and to jump the queue for school lunch. It’s hardly surprising that one in 20 in Britain has ADHD. And yet the symptoms are so vague that I doubt if there is a child in Britain who doesn’t have it. The more intelligent doctors who prescribe drugs for ADHD and other entirely imaginary diseases know damned well that the whole thing is a scam: useless products for imaginary disorders; non-existent solutions for non-existent problems. I suspect that many patients know it’s emperor’s new clothes stuff; the intelligent ones anyway. They go along with the con because it is easier to accept (and to tell their friends and relatives) that their child is rude and badly behaved because he has a brain disease, rather than because he is, well, rude and badly behaved. And poorly brought up. And they get extras too. Sympathy, care, even extra money. A disabled sticker for the car. No need ever to wait in queues. Only the stupidest doctors, together with social workers and school teachers of course, are unaware that it is all a scam; an expensive, dangerous but massively profitable scam.

New diseases are being invented almost daily. There’s another exciting disease around now. It’s ODD (Opposition Defiant Disorder). The symptoms are an absence of respect for authority and anger management issues. Those with ODD are surly, defiant, uncooperative and hostile towards authority figures. Psychiatrists believe that ODD affects between 1% and 16% of all school age children (nice of them to be so precise).

I’ve no doubt that many of these children need help. But some need help to deal with real problems (deafness, low IQ etc.) and most need help to deal with the overwhelming stress and pressure in their lives.

I can’t prove my theory. But they can’t prove any of theirs either. And I have two advantages. First, my theory is not based on commercial expediency. I profit not at all from it. The psychiatric profession cannot say the same. Second, I am prepared to match my track record at spotting dishonesties and medical trickery against that of any ten psychiatrists the medical profession wishes to offer.

So, what the hell is really going on? Is all this just about profits?

Well, here’s an interesting quote from the National Association for Mental Health: ‘Principles of mental health cannot be successfully furthered in any society unless there is progressive acceptance of the concept of world citizenship. World citizenship can be widely extended among all peoples through applications of the principles of mental health.’

And here’s a quote from Dr G Brock Chisholm, psychiatrist and co-founder of the World Federation of Mental Health: ‘To achieve world Government, it is necessary to remove from the minds of men their individualism, loyalty to family traditions, national patriotism and religious dogmas.’

Ah yes, of course.

The bottom line, of course, is that since the psychiatrists and the drug companies decide what mental illness is and is not, the incidence of mental illnesses will continue to soar. The lunatics have truly taken over the asylum. Psychiatry enables doctors to offer specific solutions (and treatments) for all the symptoms and signs they cannot explain any other way. It isn’t patients who are the nutters, it is the doctors, nurses and administrators who believe this mumbo jumbo.

No one ever does anything about any of this. The incidence of iatrogenesis is the fastest growing problem in healthcare but most members of the medical establishment deny that it exists and the rest just close their eyes and hope that no one notices. Everything is going to get worse before it gets better.

Modern medical education is often lamentable and frequently appalling – with lecturers too often teaching medical students about organs and tissues rather than living patients. Students are taught plenty of facts but very little vision. They are given directives but never directed. The whole programme seems designed to test a student’s ability to memorise information (some of it easy to look up and much of it purely arcane and irrelevant in 99.99% of real life) instead of teaching students how to develop their instincts and their innate healing skills. Modern medical education is dangerously narrow and unimaginative; designed and managed by people who are so deep inside the establishment that they might as well be living on Mars (or Venus). The real world, the real lives of patients, the real problems people face are all dismissed or ignored. The problem starts at secondary school, of course. The target culture has encouraged schools which are keen to stand high on the list of successful establishments to persuade pupils to take GCSEs in easy subjects such as ‘media studies’, ‘food technology, ‘outdoor pursuits’, sports leadership’ and so on rather than proper, crucial subjects such as English (Language or Literature), mathematics, a foreign language, history or geography. Children leave school with a handful of irrelevant and entirely useless qualifications and a less than rudimentary education. Never before has a country produced so many students with so many qualifications and so little learning. A diploma in horse care is officially ranked as equivalent to four good GCSEs. A diploma in hairdressing is officially worth six good GCSEs. Schools churn out illiterates and innumerates as though they were in demand. I have, for many years, received a huge amount of mail and it is possible to tell the age of correspondents not by the shaky handwriting of the octogenarians but by the quality of writing and spelling. When these children end up cutting hair, writing writs or running Government departments their illiteracy is of little consequence but for doctors-to-be it is vital that they know how to read and to understand the meaning (and hidden meaning) of what they read. It is the low level of starting education which is at least partly responsible for the low standards of medicine practised by young doctors today.

Today, medicine attracts the half-hearted, the half-witted and the half-interested. Medical schools don’t teach knowledge (though they think they do, and certainly like to give the impression that they do); instead, they teach prejudice and propaganda and black magic and they at best studiously avoid, or at worst positively forbid, the study of evidence outside the mainstream which shows, for example, that serious heart disease can be most effectively treated without drugs or surgery and that the placebo effect is crucial to the effectiveness of the doctor patient relationship.

Students are not taught that judgement isn’t derived solely from numbers and graphs and charts and laboratory results. They aren’t told that judgement is a combination of conclusions drawn from evidence; it is derived from instinct and intuition as much as learning and knowledge.

Modern medicine has become focused on narrow issues and doctors are not taught or encouraged to study the alternatives (both those within and those without orthodox medicine) and to then assess the options wisely and with an open mind.

Inspiration is an essential part of creativity but modern doctors are trained to exclude inspiration and therefore to exclude creativity. Students are ‘protected’ from anyone who doesn’t toe the drug company party line. These restrictions mean that today’s doctors can only make diagnoses by rote. That’s a fundamental problem with medical education. Medical schools suppress imagination and creativity. The establishment crashes down heavily on anyone willing to question authority or to disobey the rules. And the further a student goes within the system the stronger these restrictions (these failings) become.

Doctors have become obedient, unquestioning tools of the establishment; accepting information and advice as though it were factually based, and merrily prescribing whatever junk they are told to prescribe. Doctors are controlled by bureaucrats so they think and behave like bureaucrats. The vast majority of modern doctors have no instinct, no intuition, no inspiration, no courage, no truth, no dignity, no common sense and no passion. The profession has created a generation of doctors who are quite incapable of thinking for themselves and who have been beaten into intellectual and ethical submission by a medical system which is controlled by a grotesque mixture of drug companies, politicians, spiritually and ethically dead doctors, and bureaucrats who regard patients as a damned nuisance. Most doctors are trained to be incapable of original thought and incapable of lateral thinking. They follow the pre-determined system and plod their way through their caseloads without ever thinking for themselves.

The ability to work, and to learn, is a talent as much as any other and all the great medical thinkers have been hard workers. They didn’t spend their days filling in their forms or attending meetings with bureaucrats or social workers. They had ideas, tried them out and learned. That doesn’t, and cannot, happen today. It is not surprising that young doctors find it difficult to make decisions. You can teach the science of medicine but you can’t teach the art, the instinct, the passion or the dedication. These have to be discovered through time and by being nurturing. Today, there is no time and no nurturing. Today’s doctors are not bright enough or creative enough or imaginative enough to have doubts and without doubts you are lost. Modern doctors spend far less time in training than their predecessors. New rules and regulations limiting the amount of time doctors can spend working mean that the modern consultant or general practitioner will be put in a position of responsibility when still relatively inexperienced. At schools everywhere the reliance on multiple choice tests (which can be marked by computer and therefore liberate teachers and allow them to enjoy their hobbies) has destroyed imagination, initiative and literacy.

Another problem is that the Internet has encouraged cheating among students. For example, 234 candidates attempting to study medicine all wrote that their passion for the subject had been sparked after: ‘burning a hole in my pyjamas at age eight with a chemist set’ and 166 began with: ‘For as long as I can remember, I have been interested in...’. Around 275 applicants to become nurses all started their applications with the words: ‘Nursing is a very challenging and demanding career.’

When students learn deceit at an early age they will fit easily and quickly into the deceitful world that medicine has become.

(Incidentally, the Internet is now such an unreliable source of information that innocent and naive webusers become over-loaded with misinterpretations, hand me down prejudices and ready made, fit anyone preconceptions.)

Sadly, the ignorance didn’t just start with the Internet. Not all that long ago a study of GPs reported in a medical newspaper showed that a quarter of general practitioners did not know about the connection between smoking and heart disease while, amazingly, a fifth of GPs were unaware that cigarettes could cause lung cancer. (One magazine editor refused to publish an article I wrote quoting this survey on the grounds that he couldn’t believe that doctors could be so ignorant).

But although older doctors have their faults it is the younger doctors who frighten me most. Today, students are desensitised to horror long before they become doctors. They have been exposed to years of watching violence on television, on DVDs and in games (and although there is a watershed which ensures which children are supposed to be protected from the sight of naked breasts on their television screens they are still exposed to endless hours of violence in taxpayer subsidised programmes such as Eastenders).

Moreover, young doctors do not listen to their own voices. They do not know they have voices of their own. They do not even know they are entitled to voices. They do not know that they are entitled to think for themselves. It is hardly surprising that doctors behave like sheep (though without the natural charm of those gentle herbivores) and stick to the party line, whatever the party line might be, without ever questioning a word of what they are told. Like good civil servants (which modern State-employed doctors assuredly are) they are trustworthy Statists; marching to the party tune and never wavering in their support for their inglorious leaders.

The current generation of medical students learn little and read little. They don't learn how to think critically or creatively or to reason out problems for themselves. They have very poor general knowledge and no interest in or knowledge of their patients' lives and so they miss all sorts of diagnostic clues. It is hardly surprising that young doctors find it difficult to make decisions. They are trained to respond to the rules, the whole rules and nothing but the rules.

Modern doctors are taught to make decisions by computer rather than by experience or intelligence or intuition. Actually, come to think of it, modern doctors behave like rather second rate computers. They feed themselves facts and test results and then spew out answers without regard for the sense they are making.

The best doctor I ever knew didn't even know how to read an X-ray report let alone an X-ray and when he wasn't feeling too well he would still do his home visits but he would stand in the downstairs hall and shout questions to the patient in bed. His advantage was that he knew his patients. He visited them at home and saw how and where they lived. He talked to them about their work. He knew their families. He lived within the community. Medicine is a lot easier when you understand a little about people.

That good doctor, whom I remember with fondness, knew that a good doctor needs an open mind, an ability to hear between the lines and an ability to read a silence; an ability to put a patient at ease, to mask the real questions, and sometimes to ask the really important questions as an apparently half relevant afterthought.

He knew that doctors can sometimes diagnose without listening to the words, just the music that comes through is enough. And the silences. The pain in a man's eyes and in his voice, the way he holds his body; all these things speak volumes. A good doctor needs soft eyes and an ever-open heart.

Those are lost skills.

Studies have always shown that doctors are at their worst when dealing with patients with whom they feel uncomfortable. Narrow training means that doctors feel uncomfortable with a wide range of people. They often have difficulty relating to, talking to or acquiring information from people of 'different' races, sexes or social backgrounds to their own. But the biggest problem is surely the fact that modern doctors are taught to rely almost entirely on technology and are rarely encouraged to build up any communication skills of their own.

Old-fashioned doctors used to rely on what their patients told them and on what their eyes, ears, noses and fingertips told them. Most important of all, perhaps, was the sixth sense that doctors used to acquire through years of clinical experience.

Modern doctors rely too much upon equipment which is often faulty, frequently badly calibrated and more often than not downright misleading. For example, nearly every published study on the subject puts the error rate for doctors reading X-rays at between 20% and 40%. Radiologists working at a big hospital disagreed on the interpretation of chest radiographs as much as 56% of the time. And there were potentially significant errors in 41% of their reports. Even when X-rays are read for a second time only about a third of the initial errors are spotted.

Another problem is that the vast majority of students never learn how to do research or judge published research. This is largely because the vast majority of doctors, and nearly all university lecturers, don't know how to do it either. Medical schoolteachers should teach cynicism and have a special course in iatrogenesis. The first is frowned upon and most doctors have never even heard of iatrogenesis – even though it is, along with circulatory disease and cancer, one of the big three killers.

All this is rather depressing.

But in life it is important to know what we are up against. If you're going to survive to a good age – and stay healthy – then you need to know something about doctors. Many people are prepared to put all their trust in doctors. That can be a dangerous mistake. Doctors now do more harm than good. They can – and do – save lives. But they kill a lot of people too.

There is nothing new in the fact that doctors kill people. Doctors have always made mistakes and there have always been patients who have died as a result of medical ignorance or incompetence.

But, since we now spend more on health care than ever before, and since the medical profession is apparently more scientific and better equipped than ever before, there is a savage irony in the fact that we have now reached the point where, on balance, well-meaning doctors in general practice and highly-trained, well-equipped specialists working in hospitals do more harm than good.

The epidemic of iatrogenic disease which has always scarred medical practice has been steadily getting worse and today most of us would, most of the time, be better off without a medical profession. Most developed countries now spend around 8% of their gross national products on health care (the Americans spend considerably more – around 12-14%) but through a mixture of ignorance, incompetence, prejudice, dishonesty, laziness, paternalism and misplaced trust, doctors are killing more people than they are saving and they are causing more illness and more discomfort than they are alleviating. Most developed countries now spend around 1% of their annual income on prescription drugs and doctors have more knowledge and greater access to powerful treatments than ever before, but there has probably never been another time in history when doctors have done more harm than they do today.

The bottom line is that doctors are, with cancer and heart disease, one of the three biggest killers today. And doctors don't just kill people. They also maim and injure and disable. Most people don't see what is happening, of course. They don't realise how often doctors miss diagnoses, or make the wrong diagnoses. If you aren't medically qualified you won't see exactly what is going on. The inescapable conclusion is that patients should learn to be sceptical about the medical profession. Just about everyone I know who has seen a doctor in the last 20 years has been mistreated. Most of the patients didn't have the faintest idea how badly they had been treated.

I constantly receive a barrage of case histories of incompetence and cover-ups. A friend today described how his father died after a liver biopsy was performed while he was a day patient. Unbelievably, my reader's father was taking prescribed aspirin to thin his blood but no doctor told him to stop the aspirin before the biopsy. The man went into hospital as a day patient but when he left he went to the morgue, not to his home. Doctors should have a Government health warning stamped on their foreheads. 'Beware: This Doctor May Harm Your Health'.

In this hard new world we are all of us at risk. A few years ago I nearly lost a kidney as a result of medical incompetence. Two radiologists who had looked at X-rays of my kidneys told me that I had kidney cancer. They gave me the names of two local surgeons and suggested that I choose one. (When I asked for more information about the two surgeons I was told, very helpfully, that one had a good bedside manner while the other was competent.) I insisted on a scan and a third opinion. I was then told that my slightly misshapen kidney was a perfectly normal variation. The third radiologist showed me a textbook illustration which showed precisely why the other two radiologists had been wrong. If I hadn't had the third opinion I would have lost a perfectly healthy kidney and undergone totally unnecessary major surgery.

Death by medicine has become the default condition; State sanctioned, legal, and professionally approved homicide.

4. The Triangle Of Evil

Doctors, hospitals and drug companies constantly claim that the modern medical profession has, during the last century or so, dramatically improved life expectation. The increasing size of our elderly (and disabled) population is, say the industry's supporters, a direct consequence of medical progress.

This is a monstrous lie. It's a lie so big that it would make politicians blush.

Looked at superficially the statistics seem to support this claim. It is, for example, undeniable that there are more 70, 80 and 90-year-olds around now than there were a century ago. The idea that doctors have pretty well conquered illness and are helping us defy death itself is a warm, comforting one. But it's a fraud. A great big lie worthy of the most devious politician. The medical profession and the drug companies are guilty of a confidence trick of gargantuan proportions.

When the medical profession, together with the pharmaceutical industry, claims that it is the advances in medicine which are responsible for the fact that life expectancy figures have risen in the last one hundred years or so they are being either inestimably stupid or egregiously dishonest.

Figures for the UK are difficult to get hold of because the British Government traditionally regards every health care statistic as a State secret, to be shared only with the pharmaceutical industry, but figures published by the United States Bureau of Census show that 33% of people born in 1907 could expect to live to the age of 7

5. Later figures show that 33% of the people born in 1977 could expect to live to the age of 80. Remove the improvements produced by better living conditions, cleaner water supplies, and the reduction in deaths during or just after childbirth and it becomes clear that doctors, drug companies and hospitals cannot possibly have had any useful effect on life expectancy. Indeed, the figures show that there has been an *increase* in mortality rates among the middle aged and a *dramatic increase* in the incidence of disorders such as diabetes, arthritis, heart disease and cancer.

The truth is that the inventor of the flush lavatory has saved a million times more lives than any doctor. It is not the men who discovered antibiotics – and who now prescribe them with such reckless overenthusiasm – whom we should thank for the virtual disappearance of some of the best known killer infectious diseases of the 19th century but the men who dug our sewers and laid the first water pipes. Improved sanitation facilities have meant that the number of babies dying – and the number of women dying in childbirth – has fallen dramatically. For adults, life expectation has not been rising. You can prove this to yourself quite simply by checking the ages at which people died a century or two ago. Look in history books or local graveyards and you will see that although many babies and children died young the average lifespan was often 70 or 80 years. Despite all the expensive razzmatazz of modern medicine life expectation has simply not increased in the last century or so. The biblical promise of three score years and ten has been fairly steady for centuries.

The evidence shows that the apparent improvement in life expectancy which has occurred in the last hundred years is not related to developments in the medical profession or to the growth of the international drug industry. If doctors really did help people stay alive then you might expect to find that the countries which had most doctors would have the best life expectation figures. But that isn't the case at all. Moreover, look at what happens when doctors betray their principles, embrace mammon, go on strike and leave patients to cope without professional medical help. You might imagine that without doctors people would be dying like flies in autumn. You'd be wrong; dead wrong. When doctors in Israel went on strike for a month admissions to hospital dropped by 85% with only the most urgent cases being admitted, but despite this the death rate in Israel dropped by 50% – the largest drop since the previous doctors' strike 20 years earlier – to its lowest ever recorded level. Much the same thing has happened wherever doctors have gone on strike. In Bogota, Colombia doctors went on strike for 52 days and there was a 35% fall in the mortality rate. In Los Angeles a doctors' strike resulted in an 18% reduction in the death rate. During the strike there were 60% fewer operations in 17 major hospitals. At the end of the strike the death rate went back up to normal. And I am told that when hospitals and clinics were closed down by terrorists in Sri Lanka the Registrar General reported that the number of reported deaths had fallen. Whatever statistics are consulted, whatever evidence is examined, the conclusion has to be the same. Doctors are a hazard rather than an asset to any community.

The incidence of diabetes, for example, is now reported to be doubling every ten years and the incidence of serious heart disease among young men is increasing rapidly. Today, death rates from heart disease among adults are 50 times higher than they were at the start of the century. Bacteria are becoming increasingly resistant to antibiotics and the number of disabled and incapable citizens in developed countries is increasing so rapidly that it is now clear that, as I pointed out in my book *The Health Scandal*, the disabled and incapable will, by the year 2020, outnumber the healthy and able bodied.

The fact that there are more old people around these days has nothing to do with drug companies and doctors providing us with better medical care (as doctors and drug companies claim) but is a result of several factors things.

First, the population is bigger.

When the population is greater the chances are that there will be more old people. There are more old people living in London than there are old people living in Ross on Wye because there are more people living in London than there are people living in Ross on Wye. Unbelievably, doctors and drug companies ignore this simple statistical fact.

Second, infant mortality is much lower today than it was a few decades ago. In England in 1900, one in four children didn't reach their 11th birthday. Many died as babies. Others died in childhood. Today less than one in 100 children fails to reach their 11th birthday. And, as a result, life expectation seems to have improved dramatically. This isn't difficult to explain. Imagine you have a family consisting of four people. One dies at the age of three. One dies at the age of 97. One dies at 30. And the fourth dies at 70. The four individuals have lived to 200 between them. Their average lifespan is 50 years. Now assume that the child who died at the age of three lives to 103. That will push up the average lifespan to 75 years. A century or so ago many newborn babies never saw their first birthday. They were killed, largely, by infectious diseases. Cholera, smallpox and typhoid killed millions. The big change that has taken place has involved not doctors but better sewage facilities, cleaner water supplies, more spacious homes, more food and better built towns and cities. All these things have helped slash infant mortality rates.

And so people *seem* to be living longer.

Today, there are more old people around because less are dying as infants. And, of course, as the population grows so the number of old people increases.

Next, there has for many decades been a steady reduction in the number of children being born in the developed world. Terrified by what was originally described as the birth explosion time bomb millions of couples decided to limit the size of their families – or not to have children at all. The development and introduction of the contraceptive pill and of sterilisation techniques for both men and women made this easy. In contrast this has definitely not been the case in the developing world and the global political consequences are far reaching. In Muslim countries birth rates are extremely high and the average age in those populations is inevitably much younger. A society which is predominantly composed of young, healthy individuals obviously has a very different outlook to a society which is dominated by older, often unhealthy individuals. The future is Muslim. Our ageing, Western, largely Christian society has very little future.

Moreover, the incidence of disability among the elderly has been increasing steadily too. Today's elderly are nowhere near as fit as their ancestors were. Our fat and toxin rich diet is just one factor which has led to a steady increase in the incidence of cancer, obesity, heart disease, arthritis and many other causes of long-term disability. Mental illness such as chronic anxiety and depression, caused by the unavoidable 'toxic stresses' created by the structured society in which we live, are now endemic – as are the myriad illnesses caused by the powerful drugs frequently prescribed by doctors with such carelessness.

The drug industry and the medical profession are guilty of creating a new version of the post hoc ergo propter hoc fallacy. (Because B happened after A then B was caused by A.) Doctors and drug company executives argue that adults live healthier lives (a lie) and live longer (another lie) because of developments made by the drug industry. It would be just as reasonable if the shoe industry claimed that people live healthier lives, and live longer, because of developments made in the shoe industry.

In reality, the evidence shows not that doctors and drug companies are saving a vast number of lives but that the modern medical profession has become a danger. Indeed, the person most likely to kill you is your doctor. Modern, Western doctors, equipped with fancy drugs, exotic forms of surgery and impressive sounding radiotherapy techniques, are ranked alongside cancer, heart disease and stroke as major killers.

Four out of ten patients who are given drugs suffer serious and sometimes potentially lethal side effects. If the drug you're prescribed is going to save your life that's probably an acceptable risk. But how many patients who are merely suffering from something annoying or uncomfortable would willingly take a drug if they knew it might kill them? There are hugely profitable drugs on the market which have never saved any lives but which have killed or made ill countless thousands of people.

One in six patients in hospital in Britain is there only because he has been made ill by doctors. Most are suffering from unpleasant or downright dangerous drug side effects. In America, bad reactions to legal drugs kill far more people annually than all illegal drug use combined.

You won't hear any of this from most doctors, of course. Doctors are notoriously reluctant to admit that the treatments they recommend can do harm. There are several reasons for this.

First, they often don't know how dangerous drugs and other treatments can be. In just about every Westernised country in the world doctors receive most of their post graduate education through meetings and journals which are sponsored by drug companies. And drug companies don't spend too much of their time warning doctors about drug side effects. Global drug companies don't exist to find cures or help people: they exist solely to make money.

Second, doctors are frightened of being sued.

Third, there are nearly half a million clinical research papers published every week. No doctor on the planet can read them all – or even have the faintest idea what warnings they might give. Useful reports are lost among the irrelevant, commercially inspired dross. Any evidence showing that doctors and drug companies are killing people is easily overlooked or allowed to slip behind a convenient filing cabinet.

Finally, the natural human unwillingness to admit responsibility is exceptionally well developed among doctors who often think of themselves as having god-like qualities. Admitting to mistakes reminds doctors that they are human and fallible.

The bottom line is that during the last century, doctors and drug companies have become louder, more aggressive, a good deal richer and far more powerful but life expectancy has not risen as a result of any of their activities. Together with politicians (and the States they represent) they have become the triangle of evil.

5. State Run Medicine Doesn’t Work (The NHS Was A Terribly Stupid Idea)

The NHS was founded on a dangerous series of myths and misconceptions.

Aneurin Bevan, the politician who founded the NHS in 1948, did so on the basis of a local insurance group which provided health care in return for weekly contributions. He was a keen fan of Karl Marx and the best we can say for him is that he probably meant well. (Winston Churchill wasn’t so kind. He once described Bevan as a squalid nuisance.) Unfortunately, Bevan clearly didn’t understand that you can’t turn a small, amateurish, honest little organisation into a huge, national organisation without exchanging the passion, the purpose and the goodwill for an enormous amount of harmful bureaucracy.

Bevan seems to have believed that a national health service was a ‘good thing’ because he felt that health care, like education, should be free to the user. He wanted the State to be responsible for paying all the bills; installing the State machinery between doctors and patients. That was his first absurd, calamitous mistake. Why should the State provide a free health care service? The notion that health care or education should be ‘free’ because they are essential is downright silly. It would make far more sense to say that water and shelter should be free. Why is it a sign of a caring society to have free health care and free education? It is argued that these are essentials for life and so must be available to all without cost. This argument can be destroyed in one word. Food. I don’t see anyone offering free food to everyone – regardless of need. It is far better to give poor people the money to buy whatever food they need than to give them State controlled food hampers. No one suggests that supermarkets should be run by the State and food made available to anyone who wants to wander in and wheel a trolley. And yet it would make more sense to have nationalised supermarkets than it did to nationalise health care.

Besides, most of the NHS is not essential to life (infertility operations, breast enlargement and sex change operations are hardly vital to survival) and most of our education system is not crucial (the bit that teaches media studies springs to mind as an example of the utterly unnecessary). Am I the only one to think it odd that we provide patients with free infertility treatment but charge patients for essential dental treatment, for spectacles and for drugs they need to stay alive. Too much of the NHS is organised to satisfy the doctors rather than the patients. Home deliveries have more or less gone for pregnant women. Home visiting has been reduced to a bare minimum. There are waiting lists to see a consultant, to have basic tests done and to get into hospital. People even have to wait to get an appointment to see their GP. Family doctors now hide behind duty rostas, deputising services and white-coated receptionists. Cottage hospitals have been replaced with huge, bug-ridden, expensively equipped battery hospitals. It should be no surprise that the British were never healthier than they were during the Second World War. The death rate of workmen over 50 years of age has for some years now been higher now than it was in the 1930s. More people than ever are dying of heart disease and the evidence shows that a man or woman who has a heart attack will probably be better off staying at home than going into hospital. We have more doctors than ever but much of their postgraduate education is paid for by the drug industry and, as a result, more than half the adult population and over a third of our children take a drug every day of their lives. Britain leads the world in fertility treatment and yet thousands of mentally handicapped patients roam the streets because the NHS provides no facilities for them. Four out of five patients who go to see the doctor have nothing wrong with them that wouldn’t get better with a good holiday, a modest win on the pools or a little friendship and understanding. People want guidance, support, kindness and caring but thanks to the Bevan’s health service they get drugs and a system that doesn’t give a damn.

The idea that hospitals and doctors should be part of some national system is nonsensical. Bigger simply means employing more bureaucrats. The existence of a central authority, and the employment of layer upon layer of administration, makes the NHS expensive and inefficient.

Bevan’s other, incredibly stupid, idea was that the NHS would help eradicate illness. Really. It apparently never occurred to him that some people might like going to the doctor, especially if someone else was paying for it.

Nor did he realise that the NHS would end up approximately four times as expensive as private care because of all the administration.

And, most important of all, in my view, he completely failed to understand that the NHS would destroy the traditional relationship between patient and doctor (employer and employee) and create a new one (supplicant and civil servant bureaucrat, dispenser of good things and keeper of the gate). He also failed to understand that anything Governments organise is required to be inefficient, uncaring and incompetently run.

Bevan believed that the NHS would pretty well cure all illness. The opposite turned out to be true. Knowing nothing about medicine and even less about people he thought the cost of the NHS would fall as people were cured. In fact he produced an extraordinarily expensive and wasteful bureaucracy which is addicted to spending. If he had wanted to help the poor he should have set up a scheme to give money to the poor so that they could buy private health care. This would have been cheaper and more efficient but most importantly it would have maintained the purity of the relationship between doctors and patients. The NHS encourages a paternalism that is stifling and destructive. Doctors, not patients, take decisions. Medical decisions are designed to conform more to the wishes and needs of the doctor than the patient. Putting the legs of a pregnant woman into stirrups is for the convenience of the doctor not the patient. Too often patients allow decisions to be made for them. Few doctors are prepared to allow patients to live with mild disabilities. For example, a patient who gets mild chest pain after walking for five miles will be told that he needs surgery. A patient who develops leg pain after cycling for a few miles will be referred to a surgeon. No doctor will today think of telling a patient that he can, if he wishes, simply live with his symptoms, adapt his life to live around them, and change his lifestyle to produce a permanent improvement. Doctors make the decisions on how much pain is tolerable and on when life is worth living. These are ethical decisions, value judgements and moral pronouncements. The NHS encourages medical imperialism.

Today, the big question that no one ever dares to ask is: ‘Is the NHS a good thing?’

As questions go it is the herd of rampaging wildebeest in the sluice room. Politicians, journalists and earnest members of the medical establishment talk endlessly about restructuring and reorganising the NHS. But they never talk about getting rid of it. No one with the authority to do anything ever dares question the effectiveness and efficiency of the NHS. No one ever asks if it is necessary. No one ever questions whether it is providing patients with the best type of health care. No one ever questions the role of the State in providing health care. No one ever dares ask whether the NHS is good value for money. The NHS has become a political icon. It is inconceivable that any politician would dare to suggest a debate to discuss shutting it down.

And, in my view, most important of all, no one dares to discuss the ways in which the NHS has damaged the relationship between doctors and nurses on the one hand and patients on the other.

For me the big problem with the NHS is not simply the fact that it is enormously wasteful and bureaucratic (though it is both of those things) but the fact that it has produced a fundamental change in the all important relationship between health care professionals, on the one hand, and patients, on the other. There is no dignity. There is no respect. There is no pride.

Because they work for the State, doctors and nurses are now civil servants. GPs have attempted to retain their independence by officially remaining self-employed. But it’s an accounting independence not a primary independence, designed more to minimise personal tax liabilities rather than anything else. GPs claim that they are self-employed but it is more of a tax fiddle than a serious ideological claim. For all practical purposes GPs, like hospital staff, are civil servants in the same sort of bracket as tax inspectors, planning officers and Home Office officials. And, like all civil servants, they enjoy vast amounts of authority and very little responsibility.

The fundamental problem with civil servants is that their loyalty is to the State, rather than to the people who are paying their wages. Civil servants tend to acquire a superiority complex. They absorb the power they represent and become incredibly snotty when dealing with ‘members of the public’. (Just try dealing with a tax inspector or a traffic warden if you doubt me.) Whenever I go into a Post Office I am reminded that there is a huge difference between Government employees and other people. Government employees don’t care; they don’t have any interest or pride in what they do. They turn up for work because it’s marginally more interesting and much better paid than staying at home and watching daytime television. That’s how the NHS now operates. Doctors and nurses really don’t give a toss whether you live or die as long as they get home on time.

The standard Government employee knows that what he does doesn’t really matter – as long as he is loyal to the State. Incompetence and laziness are excusable and will be defended by the State and its other apparatchiks. The State’s employees know that they must always defend anything done on behalf of the State because if they don’t the State’s authority will be diminished. And as far as the State is concerned, authority is everything. Ronald Reagan, former President of the United States of America, was spot on when he said that: ‘The most terrifying words in the English language are: ‘I’m from the Government and I’m here to help.’

This may not matter terribly much when we’re just dealing with tax inspectors. But it does matter a good deal when health care professionals are involved. When health care is involved, the standard State employee mentality is simply unacceptably dangerous.

There are a host of problems with having a State-owned and run health service. Decisions made by Governments are bad because they are always made for the wrong reasons. And in the world of medicine the wrong decisions are made for the wrong reasons by the wrong people because there is no one to stop them. The right people (those few doctors and nurses who care) are bullied, frightened and overwhelmed. The truth isn’t just ignored, it is hidden and suppressed. Those who dare to ask inconvenient questions are silenced. It is crucial to remember that anything the State organises is organised for the benefit of the State. That’s the way statism works. As Ayn Rand wrote: ‘The difference between a welfare state and a totalitarian state is a matter of time.’ Large corporations are organised for their own benefit and have identities, purposes and aims of their own. And any organisation set up by the State will exist to protect and preserve its own integrity and status.

Everything is made worse because the three parts of the unholy trinity (the Government, the drug industry and the medical profession) all support one another and deliberately work against the interests of the patients.

In the days before the NHS, doctors offered cut-rate or free services to patients who couldn't afford to pay. I once looked through the accounts book of a doctor who worked in the 1920s and 1930s. He charged his well-off patients a fee for every consultation or home visit. But if he knew that patients couldn't afford his fees he charged them half-price. And if he knew that patients couldn't afford even that then he waived his fee and charged them nothing. Hospitals and hospital consultants did the same. The medical profession did not include doctors who would allow their patients to die for lack of treatment. No one was turned away because they did not have the money to pay for a consultant or a bottle of medicine. Doctors considered that they had a responsibility towards the less fortunate. Free medical care was widely available for the poor.

It is perhaps difficult to accept that such a system can work. We have been brainwashed into thinking that the State must take responsibility for everything. But this has happened simply because those who work for the State want to control everything; they want to extend their power into every aspect of our lives. We have lost the ability to imagine a system wherein free people might solve problems without threatening one another with lawsuits or threats of violence – as our society deals with problems.

The traditional relationship between doctor and patient was simple. The patient asked the doctor for help. The doctor offered advice and treatment. The patient paid the doctor. No one else was involved. (Things were different in China where patients paid their doctor when they were well and stopped paying when they fell ill but this doesn't really concern us and nor does it affect my argument.) If the doctor wasn't much good his patients didn't go back to him. The doctor (and nurse) had a vested interest in providing patients with the best possible care.

The introduction of third parties into this relationship (in the form of the State or an insurance company) changed the dynamic of the relationship in a fundamental way and changed the responsibility and loyalty of the doctor.

The bottom line is that patients need control over doctors and the best way to arrange this is for them to have control over the money (even if the State has to give them money to spend). As St Matthew warned us: 'No man can serve two masters.'

Today, doctors have lost all their independence. They are paid by the State and so their primary allegiance is to the State. The traditional, basic link has been broken and the doctor is responsible to the State and not to the patient. This is why doctors vaccinate their patients even though the evidence clearly shows that it's a dangerous and ineffective business which benefits only the vaccine manufacturer (and, to a certain extent) the State. Doctors have become obedient and fearful and are bullied by the bureaucrats. Moreover, medical staff will in future be increasingly constrained and instructed by meddling, ignorant, self-interested, self-elected lobbyists representing a myriad patients groups, clinical networks, health and well-being boards; by citizens' panels; by official and unofficial busy bodies and by the now usual plethora of health and safety morons.

Doctors used to be primarily concerned with protecting and serving their patients. Today, they are primarily concerned with protecting their relationship with the State and, like most civil servants, serving the State and making as much money as they can. Authority corrupts as much as power. And the medical profession is now part of an authoritative system which is utterly corrupt. The State machine is demanding, and it demands blindness of its servants; blindness to anything new and potentially threatening or critical of its systems and methods. Purpose and value have been abandoned. Doctors are bribed with money and the promise of less work. The machine destroys but rewards generously. State-controlled health services lead to a confused mixture of needs, wants and demands with lobbyists and politicians deciding how the money should be spent. The open-ended demands on the NHS's obviously limited resources are never met and so choices have to be made. Some live and some die. The strongest lobbyists win. The weakest patients die.

The whole organisation of the NHS is devised to satisfy the State's requirements, rather than the needs or best interests of patients. Doctors are supposed to serve patients but they are constantly ordered around by State bureaucrats. They do what the State tells them to do because the State is the master. So, for example, when the NHS becomes involved in GP care it promotes larger medical centres because these fit more comfortably into the bureaucracy. The State forces GPs to adopt appointment systems (which are unpopular with doctors and patients and which have been proven not to work well) because the State likes control.

Separating the interests of doctors and patients, and forcing doctors to identify with and become allies of the State (their employer) has meant that the triumvirate, the unholy medical trinity of doctors, drug companies and State, has become united and has created what is effectively a single organisation. The losers can only be patients. The normal counterbalance to a special interest monopoly, such as the unholy trinity created by doctors, drug companies and Government, is the existence of a powerful body with other interests but patients as a group are too weak and too ill-informed (and inevitably too frightened when they do take an interest) to protect themselves. They need support, help, independent, honest advice and guidance. All those things used to come from doctors but the balance was changed when the NHS was created and it has been getting worse throughout the NHS's existence. Today, policies which might benefit patients are forgotten while policies which benefit the unholy trinity are pursued zealously, selfishly and without feeling or compassion. When the hospital in Budleigh Salterton wanted throw my mother out of her bed, her then GP, who might have been expected to speak on her behalf, spoke with the hospital. The State employees stick together to defend the interests of the State. The trinity campaigns vociferously, buys the best lobbyists and creates laws to control those who oppose it. It also controls the media because journalists and editors have no choice but to believe what doctors tell them to believe. Dissidents are silenced even within the profession. The trinity controls everything and buys all the power it needs. The trinity either convinces the public or confuses it so that clear thinking and sensible, objective conclusions are impossible to reach. Doctors as State employees are afraid to make decisions in case they make the wrong decisions, so they go by the book; they follow the test results and they hire committees and consultants to produce reports and recommendations which are invariably so vague that there can be no blame if things go badly.

Because NHS staff are Government employees they have high job security. Self-interest is controllable in companies and businesses because consumers and shareholders do have *some* power. But Government employees are immune. They use the State to promote their self-interest at the cost of the taxpayers – in their case, patients. Of course, there are moral and honourable employees. But they are overwhelmed by the system and just as a chain is as strong as its weakest link so everything depends upon the selfishness of the most selfish employee. We have to remember that the NHS is one of the world's largest employers and the good tend to be overwhelmed and exploited and dispirited by the bad, who are not above using threats to get their own way. Government departments, such as the NHS, have no concept of loyalty or service because they don't have to rely on customers paying their bills and coming back. Apologies are never made because the State is never wrong.

The NHS spends money in the wrong areas. It has, like many large Statist organisations, become concerned primarily with its own survival, and more concerned with the protection and enrichment of its servants, than with looking after the people it is supposed to look after.

The NHS is a great organisation for doctors, nurses and bureaucrats. But it is disastrously expensive for the State. And it is terrible for patients. Doctors and nurses go through the motions but they are now civil servants and civil servants always look after themselves and the State before they look after anyone else. Inevitably, this means that patients come last. Patients are regarded as something of a nuisance because hospitals and health centres would run much more efficiently and comfortably without them. Like other State employees, doctors and nurses are overpaid and underworked. The NHS was always a naive and appalling idea. The Government cannot run anything efficiently. They certainly cannot and should not run health care.

Because of the State's intervention (and the absence of any link between money and work), doctors working for the NHS are now grotesquely overpaid and underworked and demanding (their union, the British Medical Association, was the first to protest when a Government report pointed out what everyone has known for years, that public sector workers don't pay enough for the pensions they get). Within the NHS (as with all other State departments) money has been separated from effort. With the usual disastrous consequences. Genuinely caring, sensitive young people don't want to go into medicine because it has become overregulated and controlled and bureaucratic. People who like money, filling in forms and obeying authority will flock to medical schools. But those people will make terrible doctors. There is no integrity within the modern NHS. Medicine today is all about money. Doctors may tell what they think is the truth but they don't tell the whole truth because they don't know the whole truth; they just tell the part that the drug industry doesn't mind being told. And, we must always remember, Governments can never be trusted. The diagnosis of cancer of the lung was virtually forbidden in France for many years because the Government held a monopoly over the sale of tobacco.

The sole aim of the NHS is to provide secure, undemanding employment for large numbers of people. The NHS is the third largest employer in the world and the aim of the modern NHS is not to cure or to care for patients but to provide employment for a vast army of jobsworths, many of whom earn six figure salaries and are provided with pension funds worth millions of pounds. The success of the NHS is measured not by the number of patients it helps (or at what cost) but by the number of artificial and dangerously irrelevant targets it meets. One significant result of this is that in a curious and amazing way the NHS encourages the under-treatment of some patients and the over-treatment of others.

Doctors and nurses are members of the world's primary service industry but in Britain the NHS has encouraged them to serve themselves above all others; it is a culture of selfishness that precludes caring. Patients are regarded by bureaucrats, doctors and nurses as at best an inconvenience and at worst a nuisance. Everyone working for the NHS seems to have forgotten why they are there. Separating consumer from cheque writing just doesn't work in an era of selfishness. There is no such thing as 'public service' these days.

Within any large healthcare organisation, patients would be well advised to start each medical experience with the notion that everyone they meet is an idiot who cares only about their paycheque and getting home early. Patients may meet a few well-meaning folk, and a tiny few who really care, but, in order to protect themselves, and to give themselves the best chance of survival, patients should no more expect to meet sensitive, undemanding, caring people working in a hospital than they would expect to find caring, sensitive souls working in a tax office or car showroom. It may be an unpleasant and depressing thought but it is inescapably true that the people you meet in any State-run organisation are there because they are paid to be there. Forget all historic notions of vocation and dedication. And remember: anyone who works for the NHS is a Government employee.

Whenever State medical systems have been created they have proved to be a mistake. Statist politicians in other countries drool over the NHS and claim that it is a success. But they only claim it is a success because they are told it is a success and because they want it to be a success. If they looked at it closely they would realise that it is a failure. The truth about the medical system the rest of the world is told is wonderful, and wants to emulate, is that it kills people at great expense.

The NHS has proved only too vividly that the Government really has no place in health care. A Government controlled health service is unhealthy for everyone. The State way is to take all the authority and the responsibility away from people. And that is, in the end, disastrous. Patients have been taught to become totally dependent on the system and more aware of their rights than of their responsibilities. By deliberately and systematically taking over responsibility for our health, and by ignoring the fact that in the majority of illnesses the body can heal itself, NHS doctors have increased the demand for resources and they have produced a new type of medical problem: doctor-induced illness in patients who never needed treatment in the first place. The 21st century craze for interventionism is slowly killing us. In the 19th century health care was long on charity and short on science. Today, health care is long on science but short, woefully short, on charity and understanding.

And things have been made infinitely worse by the fact that political changes have put enormous pressure on a poorly designed health service. Now that Britain is part of the European superstate, and run by the European Union’s meddling bureaucrats, the nation no longer has any control over the number of people allowed into the country. This is a problem because the Government has not built up enough infrastructure to cope with all the immigrants. The overpopulated UK is in crisis and, now that former Prime Minister Brown has wrecked the economy for generations to come, the infrastructure will never be repaired or brought up to standard to cope with the people who are flooding in. (The only good thing is that the level of immigration will soon stop because, thanks to EU distributions, countries such as Poland and Romania are improving rapidly and will soon be more prosperous than the United Kingdom and will offer better health service facilities.)

The real tragedy is that no one in politics (or the medical establishment) will ever dare question the usefulness or purpose of the NHS. Institutional cowardice means that politicians will refuse even to consider the possibility of closing down what has become a dangerous, administrative nightmare. And sheer professional greed and self-interest mean that doctors (who know they would never make as much money if they were in private practice) will never campaign for the abolition of the golden goose. Instead of fighting against the system on behalf of their patients, doctors now *are* the system. Doctors and nurses have become institutionalised. They are part of the State. They have been bought, indoctrinated and incorporated into the bureaucracy. And the tragedy is compounded by the fact that patients have been isolated by that same system.

Doctors and nurses are now making big money out of the Government. They fight for their own pay and conditions of service but they no longer fight for the patients they are paid (and obliged) to serve.

Britain has an increasingly incompetent, increasingly expensive and decreasingly trustworthy infrastructure. Britons can no longer trust the police to keep the streets safe. Britons are abused by loutish border guards if they dare to leave the country. Britons are treated as criminals by the clerks working for HMRC. And the main purpose of the NHS is now to provide wealth, security and a leisurely existence for the vast army of lazy, self-centred ruffians who work for it. Doctors and nurses accept everything and question nothing. They have sold their souls to the State. There are much better ways to provide free health care than by allowing the State to run things.

Medicine is now owned and controlled by politicians and drug companies and bureaucrats. They make the rules and pull the strings and although it is taxpayers who pay the piper it is the corporate string-pullers who choose the tunes. Doctors and nurses are not on *our* side. They are on *their* side. Too many are now officious and spiteful; beholden to the rules. And it is all happening everywhere in the world. Medicine is becoming increasingly institutionalised and State controlled. The evil trinity (State, medical profession and drug industry) has gone global.

6. How Hospital Staff Have Betrayed Patients

Over recent years there have been shocking and systematic failures of hospital care in NHS hospitals, with patients routinely neglected, humiliated and left in pain. Thousands of patients have died as a result of poor treatment. One independent enquiry documented cases where patients had been left unwashed for up to a month and left without food, drink and medical treatment. The conclusion was that managers had been ‘preoccupied with cost-cutting, targets and processes’ and had lost sight of their basic responsibilities. Astonishingly, none of the responsible managers responsible has been taken to court. (Doctors and nurses have professional responsibilities. Administrators, who have all the authority, have no professional responsibilities and apparently no accountability.)

I have little doubt that in all the hospitals where patients have been dying unnecessarily the staff (including doctors and nurses) convinced themselves that they were providing patients with excellent service. And, equally, I have no doubt that an enormous number of patients and relatives and hospital visitors must have ignored all these awful things and believed that the hospitals concerned were doing a wonderful job. It wouldn’t surprise me in the slightest to hear that the managers responsible for all this pain, agony and death, have thick files of letters from patients and relatives thanking them for the excellent care. The truth is that neither patients nor relatives know precisely what to expect.

Walk into an NHS hospital and you will find demented patients in awful pain. You will find patients with terrible bedsores (the bedsore is a classic sign of bad nursing). You will find patients who are starving to death or dying of dehydration because the staff can’t be bothered to feed them or give them fluids. You will see patients so dehydrated that their lips are bleeding and sore. You will see patients dumped in a chair, sitting in urine soaked incontinence pads which have clearly not been changed for hours. You will see obvious signs of malnutrition. These aren’t patients in Third World countries. They aren’t patients in badly run care homes. They are patients in major NHS hospitals. I know it is true because I have seen it time and time again with my eyes.

Patients awaiting surgery are sent home because the hospital has run out of money and can’t afford the sutures and other surgical equipment needed to operate on them. An 83-year-old woman with dementia was sent home from hospital in the middle of the night without her family being informed. The next day she was found dead, alone in her bedroom.

A pregnant woman rang an NHS hospital to say that her baby was on the way and that she was coming in as planned. ‘There is no room,’ said the hospital. ‘We are full.’

‘What do I do?’ asked the woman.

‘Look in the yellow pages and find another hospital,’ she was told.

Dirty sheets are reused in hospitals, just as they are in the dirtiest, cheapest, nastiest doss houses. But hospitals aren’t supposed to be doss houses. They are places where the people in the beds are, by definition, all ill. Many of them with infectious diseases. I can understand bureaucrats accepting the re-use of dirty sheets. They are nasty, uncaring people. But doctors and nurses?

Dignity and respect are not words which the modern hospital employee understands. Not, at least, when applied to patients. Many hospitals still have mixed wards – with male and female patients forced to abandon their natural dignity in the interests of hospital economy (so that the administrators can take yet another huge pay rise). Governments repeatedly promise to make sure that mixed wards are done away with. Inevitably this promise is quickly forgotten and abandoned.

A generation or so ago most hospitals employed an almoner. It was her job (and the job was invariably held by a woman) to take care of patients’ social problems. If an elderly patient was worried about the cat she’d left at home the almoner would find someone to feed it. If a woman worried that her children might need help the almoner would sort something out. If a patient was going home after a long stay in hospital the almoner would help ensure that the house was prepared. The almoner played a vital part in helping patients rest and recover.

Today, none of these things are done.

And yet our hospitals are awash with social workers who regard practical problems as beneath them and spend their days organising meetings to discuss meetings.

The result of all this is that NHS hospitals are best at dealing with mechanical, easy solvable, easily identifiable problems. If you have an uncomplicated broken leg then a hospital will probably be able to deal with it efficiently and relatively safely – as long as you manage to convalesce at home rather than on a hospital ward. With other, more complicated problems, however, hospitals can do a great deal more harm than good.

Back in the Middle Ages people were terrified to go into hospital. They knew it was a sentence of death. Relatives started digging your grave as you went through the doors of the local infirmary.

Things are getting that way in Britain today.

British hospitals are now among the worst in the world. One survey of NHS staff showed that only 44% thought that they would be happy with the standard of care provided if they were patients in their own hospital. Many British patients are now travelling half way round the world to get treatment in hospitals where patients are treated quickly, efficiently, hygienically and with respect. So, for example, hospitals in India are offering attractive package deals for British patients who can't wait two years for treatment or who don't fancy the idea of being killed by an antibiotic-resistant hospital infection. Officially, adverse drug reactions kill 18,000 people a year and cause 600,000 hospital admissions in the UK every year. In reality things are far, far worse than that.

It's called a National Health Service but it isn't. In 1971 I made a television programme for the BBC in which I explained that there were massive variations in the types of treatment available in different parts of the country. I used a blackboard, a long stick, a large map and several large sheets of paper to explain how treatments varied in different parts of the country. (This was, of course, long before the days of computer graphics.) There was, I claimed, no real 'national' health service. Nothing has changed in principle although I suppose it is quite likely that there have been changes in the nature of the inequalities prevalent in the various regions. To call it a 'National' Health Service is an absurdity that should merit investigation. Virtually the same programme (updated with fancy graphics) was broadcast while I was writing this book over a third of a century later.

One of the common arguments in favour of the NHS is that everyone gets the treatment they need without having to pay for it. This is, of course, a myth. Even allowing for the fact that some patients are denied treatment on the grounds of cost, and others are denied treatment simply because the area where they live does not offer the treatment they need, there is another big problem: NHS staff select patients for treatment on the basis of their perceived need and 'value' to society.

Some readers may be shocked to know that the National Health Service already operates a selection system for treatment. But it has done so for many years. (English patients are particularly likely to be affected. Scottish hospitals have plenty of money; though it comes, of course, from English taxpayers.) When treatment is expensive it is provided for those patients who are regarded as the most deserving. And how does our system decide which patients are most deserving? Simple. A young married man with lots of children will be at the top of the list. An elderly man who lives alone will be right at the bottom of the list.

And so the NHS will provide life saving treatment for an unemployed scrounger of 36 who has a wife, a mistress and eight children. But a great, elderly painter or composer will be allowed to die.

Meanwhile, as people die for lack of resources, the NHS merrily spends more than £50 million a year on translators for patients who cannot speak English. The NHS provides translators for 160 languages including Cherokee and Cebuano. The fact that there are no registered users of those languages in Britain doesn't seem to concern the people with the cheque books.(Try visiting a hospital in Turkey or Greece and asking for a free translator.)

And is it not absurd, unfair and just plain wrong that NHS money is spent on providing couples with fertility treatment and women with breast enlargement operations while thousands of patients are dying because they have to wait weeks for essential, simple diagnostic X-rays? Surely, life saving should come first and life enhancing come second.

In military hospital units doctors operate a simple but effective system whereby those whose need is greatest get seen first. It's a sound principle. Life saving should come first and life enhancing should come second. But in the NHS the people who receive the best (and fastest) treatment are the patients who are represented by the most efficient lobbyists.

Today, well over twice as many people are killed in hospitals by infections as are killed on the roads. The reason? Filthy wards, unhygienic practices, scandalously poor cleaning, grubby operating theatres and staff who never wash their hands. There are more such infections in British hospitals than anywhere else in the world. Why? Simple. British hospitals are dirtier than hospitals anywhere else in the world. Why? The staff in British hospitals are the laziest and most incompetent hospital staff in the world.

If you live in Britain and have to go to hospital for any operation or procedure, you now have a 50% chance of getting a worse disease from being in the hospital. That's official. And if you do survive the experience and get to go home there is a good chance that you will leave malnourished. Staggeringly, one in five National Health Service (NHS) patients leaves hospital officially malnourished. Some patients don't eat because the food is inedible and looks unappetising. For others the taste and quality of the food is irrelevant; they stay hungry because no one helps them eat. Staff dump food on a patient's table and then collect it, untouched, half an hour later. The patient, starving hungry, hasn't eaten because he or she couldn't reach the food. Some are too weak or too disabled to feed themselves. Staff put food in front of semi-conscious patients and then walk away. In the 21st century NHS the patients slowly starve to death. One NHS patient who was blind couldn't see the food put before her. No one bothered to feed her. 'It's not my job to feed the patients.' I've heard the staff say. Others simply state that they aren't allowed to touch patients or come into any sort of contact with them. And, of course, nurses now regard feeding patients as beneath their professional dignity. They are far too important to do such simple things. Other patients complain that the food they are given is shrink wrapped in impenetrable plastic. It's a sort of modern NHS torture. The patient can see the food but they can't get at it. It is the greatest indictment of our hospitals that patients actually die in them because they have not been given food or fluid. It was recently announced that in future nurses will be able to decide that a dying patient should not be resuscitated. Why not? Nurses in Britain already decide that patients should die by not being fed. Are they sadistic, or just stupid?

NHS hospitals are now so badly run, so filthy, so unprofessionally managed that they are good only at dealing with easily solvable, easily identifiable, mechanical problems. They can probably manage a broken arm without too much trouble. But when faced with anything more complicated they are likely to do more harm than good. The evidence has shown for years that patients who have heart attacks are better off staying at home than going in hospital. Anyone who goes into an NHS hospital for non-essential elective surgery should be refused treatment on the grounds that they are not mentally fit to sign a consent form. Hospitals have become unsuitable for the healthy – let alone the sick. In general, patients will survive for longer if they avoid the NHS. The survival rates in NHS institutions are awful. The standard of health care is among the worst in the world. Hospitals are run by people who don't give a damn about anything other than bonuses. Whether you are at home or in hospital it is, at night and weekends, easier to find a plumber prepared to come out than it is to find a doctor prepared to visit. An NHS manager in charge of the complaints system in a London hospital fell ill and needed treatment as an in-patient. He afterwards admitted that he 'got into difficulties finding out who was his doctor, what medicine to take and when he was getting out'. What a bloody country. What a bloody NHS. What a bloody disgrace. People in Britain pay to go into private hospitals not because they expect to be treated more kindly, or because they expect better medical treatment, but because they hope that they will not be allowed to die from starvation or thirst and they believe, probably correctly, that the wards will be cleaner. It is, perhaps, hardly surprising that the people who run (and work for) the National Health Service, prefer not to use it. Civil servants working at the Department of Health are entitled to be members of the Benendeen Healthcare Society which serves one million British Telecom, Post office and civil service workers. If they fall ill they get to go to a luxury private hospital. Most people working in the NHS admit that if they (or a member of their family) falls ill they would not want to be treated in the hospital where they work. I will repeat that. Most people working in the NHS admit that if they (or a member of their family) falls ill they would not want to be treated in the hospital where they work. (The NHS used to ask staff members if they'd be happy to be treated in their hospital. It was part of their public relations propaganda. After they found that just one in four members of staff would recommend the hospital where they worked to relatives or friends, or be happy to use it themselves, the question was quietly dropped. Would you take your car to a garage knowing that three out of four mechanics who worked there wouldn't trust the garage with their own car?) A third of Britain's general practitioners (GPs) would prefer private treatment for themselves and their families. Hospital consultants are the same. Here's what one NHS consultant had to say recently: 'In the past we knew we would get good care on the NHS. I don't trust it any more. Even I can't bully my way through the system.' An increasing number of hospital doctors now buy private health care insurance so that they and their families won't have to endure NHS care. Trades unions defend the NHS and oppose any reforms but many of them have done deals with private sector organisations to provide private health care insurance so that their members don't have to use the NHS. More than half of the TUC's members have some sort of private medical insurance. This is a higher proportion than any other socio-economic group in the UK.

These people are all being wise. Tables which rank British hospitals invariably show that independent hospitals do much better than NHS hospitals in every measurable respect. Patients are treated better and they get better quicker. It is, perhaps, hardly surprising that just about every patient in the country (and every sane one) would, if given a choice, choose to have an operation in a private hospital rather than an NHS hospital. Politicians claim that they think the NHS is wonderful. They say that they wouldn't dream of going into a private hospital. But they don't have to wait to see a doctor and if they need in-patient treatment they go into private rooms where they are waited on hand and foot. They get private care without it costing them a penny.

The fact that the NHS is subject to endless lists of measured targets, productivity and incentives, is mainly due to the Labour Governments which began in 1997. Eventually, in November 2010, leading members of the medical establishment finally complained that the Government's target figures for hospital patients were affecting the quality of care provided. I had been criticising the provision of targets for at least a decade and it was always obvious that they were inappropriate for the provision of health care. The medical establishment does not, however, move quickly when it is faced the awful consequences of having to criticise any aspect of the NHS.

Hospitals are obsessed with curing (which they aren't terribly good at) and don't understand, or have time for, the principles of caring. For example, many hospitals refuse to allow visitors to take flowers into hospitals – arguing that flowers are a nuisance. This is sad. It has been known for thousands of years that patients are far more likely to get better quickly in hospitals which are bright, light, airy and filled with gentle music and fresh flowers. Since the first hospitals were built it has been recognised that the colour and perfume which flowers add to hospitals contribute greatly to the rate at which patients recover. Good hospitals are peaceful and are designed around a courtyard so that convalescent patients can walk in the cloisters and look at the flowers. But modern hospitals are designed for the convenience of the administrators. Patients are a bloody nuisance. I have recently been in several hospitals where the floors were carpeted because this made it nicer for the administrators when they were going to meetings. Naturally, the floors were stained with blood, urine and all the other remnants which would normally be wiped up off the floor. You can't ever properly clean a carpeted floor in a busy hospital because if the corridor is closed for proper cleaning the wards will be cut off. I know hospitals where the car park nearest the hospital entrance is reserved for administrators. Patients – however sick or frail they may be – have to walk, shuffle or limp half a mile in the rain. And why do hospitals clamp the cars of patients and visitors? Do they really think people want to spend more time than necessary in these places? Time and time again I have received letters from readers telling me that while having tests (and waiting to be seen at yet another department) they had, on top of all their other worries, been frightened that they would outstay the maximum three hour waiting period and would return to their vehicle to find it clamped.

I know of a hospital where the architect and bureaucrats put the psychiatric ward on the 6th floor. The ward had fully opening windows and a concrete walkway underneath. To everyone's astonishment the ward has a much higher rate of successful suicides than other comparable hospital psychiatric wards. The incidence of attempted suicides was no higher. But, despite a good many meetings, the administrators couldn't work out why the success rate among suicides was so high.

The vast majority of patients hand over their health (and their lives) to their doctors – without ever questioning what is happening to them. That is a dangerous way to live. Patients who take an interest in their own health may sometimes feel that the doctors and nurses who are looking after them regard them as a nuisance. But all the evidence shows clearly that such patients get better quicker, suffer fewer unpleasant side effects and live longer than patients who simply lie back passively and allow the professionals to take over. If your doctor wants you to take a drug make sure you know what to expect. If your doctor wants you to have surgery then make sure that you know what the surgery entails, what the possible consequences might be and what the alternatives are. Good questions to ask are: 'Would you have this operation if you were me?' or: 'Would you recommend this operation to someone in your close family?'

Hospitals are so bad that it is, perhaps, hardly surprising that I have for some years now recommended that every patient going into hospital should take a supply of disinfectant wipes, a mobile telephone, the telephone number of a local 24 hour taxi service and the phone numbers of at least three newspapers.

Remember: GPs kill retail but hospitals kill wholesale.

7. Doctors Are More Ignorant Than You (Or They) Think They Are.

When a doctor sees a patient he should, I believe, regard that patient as a member of his family. He should offer each patient the same level of treatment that he would offer his loved ones. Sadly, this does not happen these days. Many doctors now look at patients and wonder how quickly they can get rid of them – or how they can make the most money out of them. Doctors now frequently prescribe unnecessary drugs and perform unnecessary surgery. Today's doctors overprescribe, over-investigate and over-treat. They don't listen, they don't understand and they don't seem to care.

It isn't just GPs who are at fault, of course. According to a former Director General of the World Health Organisation: 'The major and most expensive part of medical knowledge as applied today appears to be more for the satisfaction of the health profession than for the benefit of the consumers of health care.'

Animals receive better treatment than human patients. If you call for a vet you'll get one; call for a GP and you won't even be able to reach one, let alone speak to one. If your animal has a blood test you'll get the results back within minutes. If you have a blood test you'll be lucky to get the results in days and could end up waiting weeks. When our cat Thomasina needed a complex series of blood tests the vet visited our home and took the necessary blood samples. She rang me back with the results about 15 minutes later. The fee for all this was, in medical terms, derisory.

Why the big difference? Vets provide a fee paid service without the State interfering. GPs work for the State and are paid, indirectly, via the general taxation system. Vets make home visits at day or night (and at reasonable costs) because they rely directly upon the customers for their income. GPs are now well paid, they work very few hours, they have long holidays, they do their very best to avoid home visits or night calls and they pass their difficult problems onto hospital specialists. A growing number of people are beginning to ask what GPs are for, and what they do to improve people's lives that could not be done by a prescription dispensing machine fitted, like a cash machine, into a convenient wall.

We are treated like children by doctors and told that we should allow them to make all the decisions. But the principles of health care (in all its aspects) are not difficult to understand and the people who pretend to be making the decisions for us don't know the truth because they have accepted what they have been told and have made no effort to look at the facts or request any evidence. To put it bluntly, they have been bought. The vast majority of doctors are whores.

Back in the early 1980s, I retired early from general practice to become a professional author. I took my name off the General Medical Council's register of practising doctors. I was suffering from chronic disillusionment. I was saddened and outraged by the way that the medical establishment had allowed itself to be controlled by the pharmaceutical industry and by the way the conspiracy between the two was ignoring the real needs of patients and needlessly damaging the health of hundreds of thousands of patients by encouraging the overuse of dangerous and sometimes lethal drugs. And I was appalled by the way that the deadening, cold fingers of medical bureaucracy were creeping into every aspect of medical practice and destroying the traditional, and in my eyes fundamental, relationship between the doctor and his patients.

I decided that I could do more good working outside the system. I hung up my stethoscope and permanently installed my typewriter on my desk.

I didn't intend to practise again and didn't imagine that I would ever again find myself needing to write out a prescription. Never say never. I recently put my name back on the General Medical Council's (GMC's) register of practising doctors. Go to the GMC website, key in my name and you will see that I am once again legally entitled to start a practice as a GP, get a hospital job or, indeed, open my own private hospital and offer heart surgery at £20,000 a pop or breast enlargement surgery for £1,000 an inch. It is not, however, my intention to do any of those things. I've gone back on the register not because I intend to start working as a GP again, or because I fancy getting a job in a hospital (who would), but simply so that I can, in an emergency, write out a prescription for an antibiotic or some other emergency essential. That's how bad I think it's become.

Thanks to a lethal mixture of lawyers, bureaucrats and politicians Britain's out of hours medical service is now virtually non-existent. A service which was for decades the envy of the world is now no more. It's deteriorating almost daily. One in five GP practices could soon close under Government proposals for super surgeries or polyclinics which will house up to 25 GPs and provide on-site pharmacies and a variety of other therapists. These are, of course, an EU 'proposal' and so despite the fact that neither doctors nor patients want them, the polyclinics will come. Polyclinics are much loved by socialists and have long flourished in communist eastern Europe.

A friend who visited his local GP yesterday told me that the receptionists at his doctor's surgery are now operating a triage system. The receptionists decide the order in which patients are seen according to their view on the seriousness of each patient's condition. Triage, the assessment of illnesses to decide the order of treatment of patients, used to be done by doctors. It’s a business requiring much medical knowledge and the ability to make decisions quickly and accurately. Then, nurses started operating triage systems in hospital casualty departments. This was the first step in the dumbing down process. Now, with receptionists making clinical decisions, the system has reached rock bottom. How long will it be before receptionists are allowed to write prescriptions and stitch up the wounded?

Even practising doctors now recognise that there are huge problems with general practice. In March 2011, according to research conducted by *British Medical Journal Quality and Safety*, one in five British GPs admitted to having at least one incompetent colleague. This doesn’t mean that one in five GPs has one colleague whom they didn’t like or agree with. It means that one in five GPs regards at least one of their colleagues as *incompetent*.

Many of the doctors who had colleagues whom they regarded as incompetent admitted they did not report their views about their colleague to anyone in authority – partly for fear of retribution and partly because they suspected that nothing would happen.

And if one in five GPs is prepared to admit that he or she has incompetent colleagues how many GPs silently believe that they have incompetent colleagues? One in three? One in two? All of them?

A fellow with whom I was at medical school rang me up and asked me to go and visit him in his wonderful new health centre.

‘You’re a pretty forceful critic of modern medicine,’ my acquaintance told me, although in truth I knew this already. I’ll call him Keith, because that isn’t his name. ‘You should come along and take a look around the new ‘state of the art’ place we’ve had built.’

Always anxious to keep up with what is going on in the world of medicine I readily accepted his invitation.

And so I found myself tottering through huge plate glass doors and into a magnificent, purpose-built medical centre. White walls, white floor, white ceiling. A team of immaculately coiffed but fierce looking receptionists, all wearing spotless white coats, stood waiting behind bullet-proof, axe-proof glass partitions. Everywhere I looked there were signs telling me to do things or not to do things. There were more signs, warnings and threats than there are on the whole of the M25. I had to pinch myself to make sure that I hadn’t died and gone to hell. I wasn’t there because I was ill but the whole place reeked of sickness and death and made me feel queasy.

It all seemed such a very long way from the simple and rather homely surgeries in which medicine used to be practised. I remembered one very dear, former friend who practised in a tiny and rather cold conservatory built onto the side of his house. Patients sat waiting in his dining room where tattered, well-thumbed, old copies of *Country Life, Reader’s Digest, Punch* and the *Dandy,* laid out on the dining table, provided the entertainment. The entertainment was needed for patients might have to wait some time to be seen. From time to time the doctor’s stern and stout wife would potter into the room to check that no one was smoking, spitting or talking and to tidy the magazines up into neat piles. When my dear old chum was ready for his next patient he would shout ‘Next!’ It was a simple technique but it worked and there was no reliance on wiring, electricity or other fallible consequences of the 20th century. When a consultation was over the patient, probably still buttoning up her dress or his trousers, would leave through the conservatory door, along the garden path and out through the side gate. This rather efficient system meant that there was never any congestion at the key point: the door between the dining room and the conservatory. Patients would happily queue for hours to see that doctor because he was kind and he understood and he cared. He was also the best diagnostician I’ve ever known. He couldn’t read an X-ray and if you handed him a haematology report he’d be as flummoxed as if you’d given him the plans for a lunar rocketship but he had an instinct for sniffing out disease. And he knew his patients (most of whom he had brought into the world) so he knew when things were really wrong.

Keith proudly escorted me around the new building. There were, he explained, surgeries and examination rooms for the doctors, consulting rooms for the nurses and a small but well-equipped operating theatre for minor surgery. None of the doctors had their own room, of course. They just worked wherever the chief receptionist put them. This wasn’t a place where you would find a picture of the doctor’s family on his desk or a painting on a wall.

Keith seemed particularly proud of the pharmacy. And it was, I admit, an extremely impressive and extraordinarily well-stocked drug shop. It was the centre point of the whole building; a sort of pharmaceutical shrine at which all were expected to worship.

‘Patients are processed in three simple stages,’ he explained, rather in the manner of a tour guide taking visitors round a stately home. ‘First they are seen by the one of receptionists, who gives them a consultation number. Second, one of the doctors sees them. And then, finally, they visit the pharmacy to collect their prescription which will have been automatically ordered when the doctor completed his computerised record of the consultation. When collecting the prescription the patient is automatically given the date and time of their next appointment.’

‘What about patients who don’t need a prescription?’ I asked.

The fellow with whom I had been at medical school stared at me. ‘What do you mean?’ he asked, genuinely puzzled.

I tried to redesign the question. ‘What happens to patients who need another appointment but don’t need treatment with drugs?’

Keith stared at me. ‘All patients need treatment,’ he said. ‘Why else would someone visit us if they didn’t need treatment?’

‘Well, I think the idea that all patients need treatment is arguable,’ I said, feeling rather like the small boy declaring that the Emperor was wearing no clothes. ‘But what about those patients who need treatment but don’t need drugs?’

‘How else would we treat them?’ asked the doctor, clearly puzzled.

‘I don’t know,’ I shrugged. ‘It rather depends on what is wrong with them. Osteopathy, acupuncture, dietary advice, relaxation exercises, meditation training...’

I stopped talking because I was aware that my former colleague was looking rather alarmed.

‘I hadn’t realised that you were one of those nutters,’ he said, pulling his white coat around him, as though it were a suit of armour which would protect him from contamination. He instinctively backed away a few inches.

‘Surely some patients might just need someone to talk to?’ I suggested, rather lamely.

‘It’s obviously been a little while since you practised,’ said my former colleague, rather coldly.

I left there feeling rather sad and even depressed; convinced, more than ever, that medicine has been taken over by the hugely powerful and immensely profitable pharmaceutical industries.

Doctors are no longer in the business of caring for patients. They are in the much simpler business of dishing out pills. This is partly the fault of doctors and the medical profession. But it is, ultimately, the responsibility of politicians who have, once again, failed the people they were elected to serve.

The Government (with the aid and support of the bureaucrats in Brussels and the tacit approval of the medical establishment) seems determined to destroy general practice. Whether this is a deliberate policy or a consequence of egregious incompetence only they can possibly know.

Bureaucrats who negotiated the deal allowing GPs to avoid 24 hour responsibility showed just how poorly they understood the basic principle of GP care.

GPs were offered the chance to hand over all their out of hours work to agencies because of EU laws limiting their working hours. The European Working Time Directive limits the working time for everyone – including doctors – to 48 hours a week. There is no room for flexibility and so doctors either have to abandon patients half way through emergency treatment, if their time is up, or they have to lie on their time sheets. Otherwise, there’s a big fine to pay the EU. (The fact that doctors are now filling in time sheets is reason enough to leave the EU. The fact that the EU fines our hospitals for not obeying its rules is another reason.) All this is bad enough in hospital where, in the bad old days, junior doctors worked in teams with senior doctors and could, and did, follow patients through from admittance to discharge. But now doctors float around, making sure that there are doctors somewhere in the hospital. Doctors don’t see patients through from start to finish and have no idea whether treatments worked or failed or made the patient worse. And, naturally, patients get no continuity. But this new legislation has destroyed general practice. The whole traditional basis of general practice is that the family doctor takes full 365 day a year responsibility for his patients. Without that role GPs have no purpose and could best be replaced by a combination of walk-in clinics (staffed 24 hours a day) and an enhanced ambulance service. Now that GPs don’t work ‘out of hours’ (presumably because bureaucrats believe that illness only strikes in normal office hours), administrators have to take responsibility for providing some sort of cover so that patients who are inconsiderate enough to fall ill or have accidents at weekends, evenings and nights can be dealt with.

Over the Christmas holidays a friend spent two desperate days trying to find a doctor prepared to see his wife (who was suffering from a sudden and troublesome infection and who clearly urgently needed antibiotics). He eventually managed to speak to a doctor on the telephone. But the doctor couldn’t visit, or see patients, because he was providing medical cover for heaven knows how many patients, spread over several hundred square miles of England. The condition had to wait until after the holidays – by which time, of course, it had deteriorated considerably.

Other friends and readers have told me similar stories. At night and at weekends it is virtually impossible to see a doctor. If you try really hard you can get to talk to one on the phone. But that’s it. Outside London there are very few private general practitioners and most GPs now work shorter hours than people who work for the local council. (Compared to their predecessors they also look after surprisingly few patients. List sizes have shrunk to a fraction of what they were.)

It is because it is now almost impossible to find weekend medical treatment that I went back onto the medical register. I don’t have any patients but I want to be able to have access to life-saving drugs in case I or my wife need emergency medical help.

Doctors in general practice leapt at the chance to work civil service hours because most of them are utterly disillusioned and fed-up. A generation ago doctors went into general practice with a sense of honest purpose and public service. Today it's just about the money. The problem with doctors today is not that they are stupid (you don't actually need much intelligence to be a doctor) but that they lack imagination, common sense, empathy, humanity and passion. And they have no sense of commitment and service. Today's doctors have no vocation and no sense of responsibility to the community they serve. You can teach the science of medicine but you can't teach the art, the instinct, the passion or the dedication. A medical student who does not start his working life with these qualities is unlikely to pick them up on the way. And yet instinct and imagination are vital skills for a doctor who wishes to excel as a diagnostician.

Now that GPs are working 30 to 40 hour weeks the authorities are having to struggle hard to find doctors prepared to work as locums and to cover the out of hours work. And since there aren't enough qualified British GPs prepared to do this work the authorities have to import doctors from other European countries. The EU rules allow a doctor from one EU country to work in any other European country, regardless of whether or not he speaks that country's language. (So, for example, because I am qualified and registered and licensed as a British doctor I am entitled to practise in Italy or Greece despite the fact that I do not speak a word of Italian or Greek.)

There are many ways in which Government run, State sponsored health care does genuine harm. So, for example, the Government 'encourages' general practitioners to run appointment systems even though there is little doubt that both patients and doctors are better off without them. When I first practised as a GP in the early 1970s I had no appointment system. Patients turned up at my surgery, sat in the waiting room and waited. If there was a long queue they would pop out, do some shopping, and come back half an hour later. The system worked well. I don't remember anyone ever complaining. I employed one receptionist to take the patients' names and make sure that I was supplied with the appropriate medical records.

And then the bureaucrats decided that I had to organise an appointment system. Patients had to ring up in advance to make a date to see me. Teams of receptionists had to be employed to take messages and keep the appointment book. Emergencies still had to be slotted in. The whole system was a disaster. I sometimes found that patients were having to wait several days to see me. Patients complained that the telephone line was engaged. Cancellations resulted in the appointment book becoming incomprehensible. Patients who had to wait 15 minutes (because I was running late) complained.

I still usually held 'open' surgeries on bank holidays and at weekends. Patients would turn up, sit in the waiting room and be seen in turn. Just like the 'bad' old days. No one complained. There were no arguments. Everyone knew who was next in line. And the system worked efficiently and well.

Appointment systems were introduced to please bureaucrats and to provide employment for masses of low-grade clerks. The bureaucrats who run the NHS couldn't bear the idea of any aspect of the health service being run without a need for vast numbers of clerks and administrators. Today, appointment systems have become a major problem and should be scrapped. The clerks who make the appointments have grabbed as much power as they possibly can and have risen far above themselves. Health centre deceptionists talk glibly about how they use a 'triage' system to arrange appointments. Some use the word as though they know what it means. These clerks know nothing about medicine but somehow assume that they are able to make decisions about whether or not patient A is more needy than patient B.

Patients, quite rightly do not like appointment systems and nor do doctors who care about what patients like. (Some greedy GPs have so much contempt for their patients that – until they were banned – they introduced premium rate telephone lines so that patients ringing to make appointments had to pay huge fees for the privilege of doing so.)

I strongly suspect that any private GP who set up a practice without an appointment system would attract more patients than he could cope with. If, in addition, he provided an out of hours service (for a fee, of course) he would become the most popular GP in the country. The problem, of course, is that most doctors wouldn't have the foggiest how to run a private practice, and they know it. They have grown rich and lazy working in the NHS.

But the bureaucrats are determined to keep appointments. Indeed, things are going to get much, much worse. There are plans to introduce a national appointment service. Patients will ring a single telephone number and (if they get through before they die) they will speak to a faceless, nameless operator (probably working in India) who will (if the computer is working) give them an appointment to suit the system. Centralised appointment booking will be introduced because it will be convenient and economical for the bureaucrats. Patients will lose out. But no one cares about them.

Patients would overwhelmingly prefer to go back to the days when they could just turn up at their local surgery and see the doctor of their choice simply by sitting and waiting for a few minutes or even an hour or so. For patients the old-fashioned way of doing things was cheaper and far more convenient. And it resulted in much faster treatment too.

Appointment systems aren’t the only problem, of course.

When I was a GP I found that I was constantly having to find ways to defend my patients from the bureaucrats. Once, for example, a State bureaucrat arrived and announced that he was going to take away all the medical records I held for my 2,500 patients. He had a van parked outside my surgery, ready to take the records away with him. I pointed out that this would be a breach of confidentiality and would endanger the lives of my patients. The bureaucrat wouldn’t budge. He had a form giving him the right to remove the records for routine checking. He asked me to take a medical record file from its drawer and to read what was written in red on the bottom of the file. I did so. It said: ‘The property of the Minister of Health’. Suddenly I remembered Shylock and the *Merchant of Venice*. ‘You can take the records,’ I told him. ‘But you can’t take the ink.’ He stared at me, uncomprehendingly. ‘The paper belongs to the Minister of Health,’ I conceded. ‘But the ink on the paper belongs to me. So you can take the records but you must leave the ink behind.’

He left. No one ever bothered me again.

Things today are rather different.

I received a letter from a reader in Scotland who advised me that he had been told by his doctor that before he could receive treatment he had to sign a ‘counter fraud declaration’. He wanted to know what it was. (His GP didn’t seem to know or care.) I discovered that patients registering at practices in Scotland are required to sign one of these documents (containing sensitive, personal ID information) before they can receive any treatment. The declaration entitles the doctor to share the patient’s information with a variety of Government agencies including the UK Border Agency, the Department for Work and Pensions and HM Revenue and Customs. In other words: everyone over the age of 16.

Doctors in Scotland moaned a bit about the blatant breach of confidentiality, but did nothing. Since the Government is the body wanting the information it’s fair to assume that the GMC will have approved this outrageous abuse of patient confidentiality.

It is, perhaps, hardly surprising that most doctors now hate their jobs and regard them as little more than a way of making money. Many doctors would prefer to do something else for a living – if they could find something as lucrative. Vocation has been abandoned and replaced by expediency. Doctors and nurses who truly care simply leave or take retirement as soon as they can.

In what are now regarded as the ‘bad old days’ doctors had little else to offer but kindness and understanding and relied upon the placebo effect of their personalities. Patients often got better because they believed. Today, doctors think they are scientists and think they know everything. But they don’t. And by ignoring the placebo response they miss out on 50% of their healing power. Doctors in the ‘bad old days’ needed to be charming in order to attract patients and to be paid. Doctors working for the State, or for insurance companies, don’t have to worry about having a good bedside manner. It is, many seem to feel, beneath them.

In my view, things went wrong for doctors when they became civil servants. GPs should be self-employed and run their practices without interference. Traditionally, GPs have always been the backbone of any health care provisions – acting as guides and champions for patients struggling to use the system. But today’s GPs do not run the system. There are two reasons for this. First, modern GPs have shown no backbone or moral fibre. They are concerned only with getting the best financial deal for themselves. Second, other NHS employers (nurses, social workers, administrators and, quite probably, hospital car park attendants) have been vocal and determined in their insistence that they should be treated as equals within the NHS system. The result: chaos.

British GPs now earn more than ever, and do less useful work than ever. They are paid more, and have received higher pay rises in recent years, than their counterparts anywhere else in the world. Under recent Governments the income of British GPs has jumped sixfold. And yet during that same period the service provided has deteriorated at an extraordinary rate. GPs now spend much (sometimes most) of their reduced working week dealing with paperwork. None of this nonsense makes patients safer or healthier.

As a result of GPs cutting down their working hours, seriously ill patients may have to wait ten hours for a doctor to call. A few locum GPs (who don’t know the patients they see, don’t have access to their medical records and may or may not speak very much English) now race around providing emergency care in a bizarre and utterly inadequate way. One woman in South Wales who wanted a visit from a GP was told that the nearest doctor was in Sheffield. Another, living in the same part of the country, was told that the nearest available doctor was 300 miles away in Cleveland. The relatively small number of GPs hired to provide out of hours services are, inevitably, reluctant to visit anyone. Their area of responsibility extends so far that some seem to prefer to deal with emergencies on the telephone. I have, in the past, failed in my attempts to obtain emergency medical treatment for friends and relatives. The inevitable result is that most people simply ring for an ambulance – putting enormous, additional and unnecessary strain on the ambulance service and on overstretched Accident and Emergency services.

Astonishingly, GPs now want to cut down home and surgery visits still further. The plan is for GPs to offer e-mail diagnoses. Patients will e-mail their symptoms and the GP will say whether they need to visit the surgery. This is possibly one of the most arrogant, stupid, selfish, unprofessional and dangerous ideas I have ever heard of. It will result in the incidence of doctor-induced disease becoming commoner than heart disease, stroke and cancer combined. I have for years refused to offer advice by mail to my readers on the grounds that it simply isn't safe for any doctor to do so. It's not surprising that many patients now choose to see alternative practitioners who may, or may not, be qualified and competent. Many simply seek advice from an assistant in their local health food store.

The ways in which the politicians and the bureaucrats interfere seem to grow almost weekly. Doctors are now bribed by the Government to increase the number of times they diagnose certain diseases. So, for example, GPs receive a cash bonus if they manage to diagnose a certain number of patients as suffering from Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD). These patients will then usually be given prescription drugs for the rest of their lives. It doesn't take the brain of an Einstein to work out who benefits from this scheme. Once patients have been labelled the drug company profits will soar. And the incidence of doctor (and drug) induced disease will also soar.

Most GPs make little or no attempt to teach their patients anything, or to look out for early signs or symptoms of disease. When check-ups are performed they are done, by rote, by nurses who simply follow a pre-determined pattern of questions and advice and who, by and large, know something between very little and nothing useful about medicine. GPs rarely bother to organise routine checks on elderly patients (who might benefit) because there are no bonus payments for doing these.

The average GP now works a four day week. She has nights and weekends off. She is available on the telephone one day a week. She does home visits one day a week. She is paid according to 'performance related activities'. Practices are driven to satisfy targets (so many patients vaccinated, so many treated for heart disease and so on). As a result, the average GP no longer provides any sort of personal service. She spends 15 hours a week with patients and is paid around £120,000 a year. Family doctors are now doing less work for more money. Many GPs now earn £250,000 a year or more for working hours that would not alarm a librarian. Today's primary care service is run by and for bureaucrats. Doctors can no longer choose where they work. And patients can no longer choose the doctor they want to see. Modern doctors are controlled by bureaucrats and so they themselves think and behave like bureaucrats. What a tragedy.

As they've become richer so GPs have become less competent – and constantly ready to adopt ways of working which diminish their likelihood of providing their patients with a good service. The interview is the most important part of the doctors diagnostic equipment. That's when he talks to the patient and – even more important than talking, though you wouldn't think so if you sit in on the average clinic – listens to what the patient has to say. It is by listening to patients that doctors learn most. But over the years doctors have accumulated more and more equipment to help them make diagnoses. Too often the doctor relies exclusively on his equipment; trusting it implicitly to provide him with the right answers. The more complex modern medical equipment has become the worse medical treatment has become.

The first piece of equipment that doctors acquired was the stethoscope. This now symbolic device was invented so that doctors could listen to their patients' chests without having to put their heads down on their bosoms. The stethoscope added to the doctor's dignity. But it also provided the first mechanical barrier between doctor and patient. And since René Laennec first introduced the stethoscope the doctor patient relationship has been weakened and damaged by this obsession with equipment. A few years ago a study at Harvard University showed that many patients who had died would have still been alive if the doctors looking after them had relied upon their heads instead of equipment that was often poorly set up or badly calibrated. (Hospital doctors are just as bad at understanding the equipment they use. It is not uncommon for sales representatives to be present in operating theatres when equipment they have supplied is being used. They are there not just to give advice but to provide practical help. There are many people around who have been operated on not by surgeons but by sales representatives. I doubt if anyone knows how many patients the sales representatives have killed.

Diagnosis should be better these days. But it is often much worse. When I was a young doctor (back in the 1970s) the older doctors all relied on their intuition and their 'feel' for patients. I knew doctors who could make accurate diagnoses time and time again. And when they did not know what was wrong they knew that something was wrong. Today, doctors rely on tests and machinery and they make far more mistakes than before.

Medicine has become a 'business' rather than a profession – if you have any doubts about that just look at the number of doctors who now go on strike, or threaten to go on strike, in order to improve their personal pay. Like all businessmen, modern doctors are influenced by profit rather than any other motive when considering what to do. A continuing association with a ruthless industry which constantly favours profit at the expense of everything else has rubbed off on the profession. When the British Medical Association (BMA) talked about industrial action in June 2011 it was to protest about the Government's sensible plan to revise GPs pensions. (Before threatening a strike, the

BMA should have studied history. As I have pointed out, mortality rates invariably fall when doctors go on strike.)

In addition to having a responsibility to their own patients, doctors have responsibilities to patients in general, to themselves as physicians and to their profession. Sadly, most have abandoned all of those responsibilities. Doctors fail to protect the public against polluted drinking water and food packed with carcinogens. GPs don't stand up and make their collective voice heard about these important issues because their interests are now allied too closely with those of the drug companies and the State. And so doctors support vaccination (a dangerous and unproven practice) because the system has made it profitable for them. In my first book *The Medicine Men* (published in 1975), I wrote that doctors who take orders from a trade can hardly describe themselves as belonging to a profession. I was pilloried for that. But it's truer now than it was then.

Doctors who have kept quiet about changes which have resulted in appallingly inadequate services for patients, must share collective guilt for the storm of unnecessary deaths and the injuries caused by the profession as a whole. Medical deaths and injuries are now endemic.

Modern doctors think that medicine is a science. It isn't. The new doctors miss the diagnostic nuances which are essential because they simply don't see medicine as an art or a craft; they live by mechanical, diagnostic rules. It is diagnosis by rote. Treating people by numbers. It is not surprising that many actually believe that computers could do the job just as well. The new doctors prefer to rely on laboratory results. Ambitious, young doctors qualify and move up the ladder with frighteningly little practical experience.

The result is that when a doctor sees a patient with an unusual symptom, or a symptom which doesn't quite fit with his computer-like expectations, he is inclined to dismiss it or ignore it. He doesn't realise that all patients are different and that not all patients fit what the books say. Doctors tend to depend entirely upon laboratory tests rather than clinical experience or wisdom and they don't realise that tests can be, and often are, terrifyingly misleading. The result is that there is not much original or creative thinking in medicine. The art is being driven out of the profession. All this helps explain why doctors now make so many terrible mistakes. (Doctors tend to rely on tests because paperwork can be produced in court as evidence for making a diagnosis. Doctors who rely on intuition have more difficulty in explaining the reasons for their diagnosis. Litigious patients and greedy lawyers are partly responsible for the dangerous deterioration in the quality of medical practice.)

Today's doctors are too important (and too reliant on their equipment) to see patients in their own homes. What a huge mistake that is. The doctor who sees his patients in their homes will understand them, their families, their health, their susceptibility to illness far more than the doctor who spends her or his working lifetime sitting behind a desk. Incidentally, it isn't only GPs who don't often see patients in their own homes. Hospital consultants don't see patients at home much, either. Just a few years ago hospital consultants often saw patients at home. And I suspect that even fewer GPs now visit their patients in hospital to make sure that they are being well looked after – and that they understand what is happening to them. When I was a GP, just a few decades ago, I regularly visited my patients in hospital. And I regularly arranged for specialists to visit them at home.

Modern doctors get things wrong because they don't usually go back to sources. They rely on what they have been told by drug company representatives, Government employed bureaucrats and politicians – all of whom have a vested interest in putting forward a particular line and none of whom are likely to know the truth or where to find it (or even what it looks like).

Doctors may, of course, think they can rely on medical journals and published research work. They may read books, magazines or newsletters which rely on material extracted from journal articles. But they won't get the truth there either I'm afraid. Some of the frequently quoted medical journals accept research articles for money. The vast majority of papers published in medical and scientific journals are of little or no value; indeed, many are fraudulent and misleading. The paper which looks as if it is independent may have been published because some corporation (usually a drug company) has paid for it to be published. Nearly all journals accept and rely on advertising (and it is difficult to remain open-minded when you will go bankrupt if you do). And finally most of the scientists who write journal articles have a vested interest in the product or treatment they are writing about. Many receive grants or payments for the work they do, or they own shares in the company making the product they are (allegedly) researching. Scientific papers are rarely exactly what they seem to be and though they may be quoted and used as references there is a real danger that they may be worse than useless. Drug companies control what is published by limiting the publication of critical research. In order to read scientific papers successfully it is necessary to know how to interpret what you find (and how to read between the lines). Since much medical education is dominated by the pharmaceutical industry students are not taught how to do this. It would be inconvenient if too many people knew just how easy it is to manipulate medical research to fit commercial needs.

I've been digging out the truth for nearly 40 years and I have made a lot of enemies in doing it. I know all the tricks the drug companies and food companies use. Researchers know that to please their masters they must simply ask the question which is most likely to give them the answer they want. Financially inconvenient results are ignored or shelved or overlooked.

Because of the books I've written on medicine, I regularly hear medical horror stories. For example, a reader of mine had a pain in her leg. She rang her doctor at about 8.00 p.m. The doctor who made the diagnosis (on the telephone, of course) told my reader that she had a deep vein thrombosis and should stay flat on her back in bed and do nothing until the next morning when she should take himself along to the local hospital. The doctor, from an agency of some kind, did not explain how my reader, who lives alone and has no car, should make the journey from bedroom to hospital.

It's hardly surprising that an increasing number of people die unnecessarily. It's hardly surprising that the number of complaints made against doctors increases annually.

Most doctors kill through incompetence and carelessness rather than through design and malice. But the end result is the same.

Many illness can be easily prevented. But the problem is that if doctors take the steps which will prevent those illnesses they will annoy big businesses. And doctors don't like putting themselves at risk these days. So doctors continue to ask the wrong questions and do the wrong things. And patients are beginning to notice that the big differences in the quality of care provided are dependent not so much upon the area of the country they live in but the enthusiasm and decency of the doctor to whom they have been allotted (but whom they may, in practice, see only rarely). The official figures are simply awful. There is an eightfold variation in the rate at which patients with suspected cancer are referred to specialists. A third of patients with stomach and throat cancers are given non-urgent referrals when they should have been regarded as urgent. There are also massive but entirely unjustified variations in prescribing practices. It is impossible to guess just how many people are killed each year by incompetent GPs but there is absolutely no doubt that, as I said, in my book *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You*: 'The person most likely to kill you is not a burglar, a mugger, a deranged relative or a drunken driver. The person most likely to kill you is your doctor.'

The bottom line is that doctors should work for patients and no one else. (They have wider responsibilities to the community but their primary responsibility is to their patients.) State and insurance health schemes have destroyed this relationship by allowing or encouraging doctors to see things a different way. The modern doctor is employed by the State or insurance company and has come to regard her employer as the primary object of her loyalty.

When I was younger I thought it was just the drug companies which were corrupt. Now I realise that masses of people in the medical establishment are corrupt. I suspect that each group thinks that their profession is the only one run by bad people but I fear the sad truth is that every establishment group is run by bad people for bad reasons.

Today, you can't believe much that doctors tell you. The reason? They themselves know far less than you (and they) think they know. Doctors rarely know the truth about anything. They are lied to by their employers and by the drug companies. Many of the journals they read are paid for or subsidised by the advertising they contain.

Most of us choose our barber or our car mechanic with great care. We look around, we ask people we know and trust, we make judgements based on our past experience. But we don't choose doctors in the same way. We take what we get and assume that they are trustworthy. We are told by the bureaucrats which family doctor we can see and must then hope that we haven't been allocated to a doctor who is depressed, psychotic, uncaring or egregiously incompetent.

I suspect that people who aren't angry about what has happened to health care in Britain still don't understand just how bad things have become; how corrupt and venal doctors have become. I have this recurrent nightmare. I telephone for a doctor. It is night-time. It is an emergency. The telephone is answered by a machine. A voice speaks. Press 1 if you are dying and require an undertaker. Press 2 if you are dying and wish to donate organs before seeing an undertaker.

I wake in a sweat and wonder how long it will be before my nightmare becomes a bureaucrat's daydream.

8. Cowgirl Nurses With Great Expectations

Traditionally, nurses are beyond criticism. They are ‘angels’ and they have always received a ‘good press’. But nurses have changed. And they have changed a good deal. The result is that today’s nurses are nothing like their predecessors. If they are to be forced back into doing what they should be doing then they need to be criticised – and their shortcomings need to be identified.

The big problem is that today’s nurses are too self-important to carry out any of the traditional tasks entrusted to nurses. Modern nurses don’t like to bother much with caring, touching, feeding or comforting. They regard themselves as above collecting bedpans or plumping up pillows. Nurses are now too self-important to feed patients or to lift them and too protective of their past to let anyone else do these things either. It is a tragedy that as nurses have become too important to nurse, no other group has been allowed to take on the most essential caring tasks. Auxiliaries, for example, are not allowed to do anything with to or for patients and the result is that there is no one on the average hospital ward to wash, feed or care for patients.

In the bad old days nurses would help their patients in a thousand tiny ways. They would make sure that their female patients wore clean nighties and had their hair brushed before visiting time. They don’t do these things any more. And it isn’t that they have other, more important things to do. Go into any hospital these days and you will see half a dozen nurses sitting around the nurses’ station chatting and eating chocolates. (It’s no wonder they’re all so fat. You’d think nurses would be more concerned with their health. If they got up and moved about a bit occasionally they would burn up some of the calories.)

Nurses should bandage wounds, make beds, empty bedpans and soothe sweaty brows. They should take temperatures and record pulse rates and give out prescribed medicines. That’s what they are there for and it’s what they are best at. It is also what patients need from them. These are important tasks. Sadly, most nurses consider themselves far too grand for such work. Nurses have become lazy. It is their responsibility to make sure that hospitals are kept spotlessly clean and that patients with dangerous infections are barrier nursed. But nurses consider themselves too important to deal with practical issues. They prefer to sit around having meetings with social workers. On many wards these days it is impossible to find a nurse. Patients who need one must wait until one appears and then try to catch her attention. Sympathy and comfort are not qualities required of nurses these days. Indeed, I suspect that they are regarded as unsuitable weaknesses. Today’s Mrs Gamp is too busy attending meetings to attend her patients. Mrs Gamp has acquired ideas well above her station.

In some hospitals these days the sheets aren’t changed when patients leave and patients arrive. Instead, to save money, the sheets are just turned over. Top to bottom. The sort of practice that is frowned upon in the sleaziest of seaside boarding houses. It is, of course, the administrators who decide that this will be done. But it is the nurses who supervise its doing. (It’s the auxiliaries who do the actual work, of course. Nurses don’t do physical stuff any more.) And so the nurses are responsible. Just as they are responsible for allowing men and women to be put onto the same ward, and forced to share the same bathrooms and lavatories. Why don’t nurses stand up against these despicable practices? Easy. They say nothing because they have been institutionalised. They work for the Government and they don’t have the guts or the intelligence to realise that if they say ‘no’ the authorities won’t dare do anything to them.

Many of today’s nurses are graduates; awash with diplomas and certificates. But their patients lie in their own faeces and urine. They do not have their faces washed or their teeth brushed or their nails cut or their hair combed. These are things that are beneath the new graduate nurse. Today’s graduate nurses are too busy chatting and playing with their computers to check that there is soap in the bathroom or toilet paper in the lavatory. Graduate nurses are different from their predecessors in that they are never around when needed. They tut and look cross if they are disturbed and asked to do something practical. Nurses, like administrators, have acquired authority but shed responsibility. There is no sense of caring. There is no accountability, no discipline and no supervision. When things go wrong (as they often do) no one is blamed except, possibly, the patients. Nurses chase promotion, attend seminars and perform useless research. They demand to be given time to attend to their office duties and to attend meetings. They insist on personal project time, time for research work and study time. There are, in short, many chiefs but no Indians. The young people who go into nursing with great aims and ideals are quickly broken and destroyed.

They still have a sort of ward sister in hospitals but these days she is far too important to do anything practical. These superior nurses, full of qualifications but empty of compassion, sit in cubbyholes, with the door closed. They share their cubbyholes with a computer screen, a packet of biscuits, many grievances and much ambition. They spend their days plotting how to gain more power from the administrators. (They’ve already beaten the doctors to a bloody pulp.)

Because nurses are now too important, and too busy with their administrative chores, to deal with patients, hospitals now employ untrained assistants to attend to patients. These assistants prepare patients for medical procedures. For example, my wife went to see a radiologist. The man who entered her cubicle, asked her to remove her clothing and then smeared petroleum jelly onto her abdomen was a young hospital employee who had no medical qualifications. He could have been working in the bank. Instead he was allowed to attend to female patients. By himself.

Modern nurses seem to be trying to reposition themselves as the new cheap doctors. They are managed to acquire for themselves the right to prescribe and to perform surgical procedures. (I am surprised incidentally that the British Medical Association, the doctors' trade union has not moaned about this. As nurses have acquired more of the powers traditionally reserved for doctors so an increasing number of young doctors have found themselves unemployed – forced to collect dole money or to leave the country to find employment.) Nurses are being given more power (and allowed to make diagnoses, prescribe drugs, perform surgery and make life or death decisions) because this is good for the State. Nurses are cheaper to train and less expensive to employ than doctors. However, allowing nurses to have these extra powers is exceedingly bad for patients because nurses are even more likely than doctors to make serious errors when attempting to treat patients.

The news that nurses are to be allowed to decide which patients should – or should not – be resuscitated is terrifying news that should frighten the life out of every patient, every relative and every potential patient – and that means all of us.

My main objection is that nurses simply don't have the training to make this sort of decision. Nurses should stick to making beds and reading thermometers and caring for patients and they should stop trying to turn themselves into fake doctors. The horrifying incidence of superbugs in British hospitals proves without a doubt that nurses aren't doing their present jobs properly. The nursing profession has gone rapidly down hill since nurses decided that simply 'nursing' patients wasn't enough for them.

Another problem created by giving nurses extra responsibilities of this type is that the traditional relationship between nurse and patient has been changed dramatically – and for the worse. Nurses now either have to hold back from real contact with their patients (in which case they are failing them) or they have to get to know them (in the traditional, caring way) and then decide whether they live or die (in which case they will fail them because they won't be able to make the right decision).

Sadly, the modern nurse seems to be ashamed to be a nurse; she wants to be a clinical professional. She wants to perform procedures, prescribe drugs, operate computers and attend meetings. Lots of meetings. It is considered demeaning for a nurse to provide caring these days. They want to be doctors without the pain of a long, expensive education. Nurses want to grab the power the cheap and easy way, without having to spend six years at university. They want equality of money and power with doctors, without actually having to do all the hard work. And so the nursing profession has lost its way.

There is, of course, a simple solution to this dilemma. Nurses who want to pretend that they are doctors should train and become doctors. And that, of course, is the problem. The vast majority of nurses are, quite simply, incapable of completing a medical degree course. They are, to be blunt, not quite bright enough.

Things started to go wrong in the nursing profession when self-deluded, self-important nurses decided that they wanted to be treated as academics rather than as nurses. Nursing used to be a sacred vocation. Now it's just a career. I go into a lot of hospitals and the situation almost everywhere is the same. Bedbound patients desperately ring their bells needing attention while overweight nurses sit in meetings drinking coffee and eating biscuits. I have even been in hospitals where nurses regularly refuse to lift patients. 'That's not what we're here for,' one told me. 'We're not weightlifters.'

It's about time someone remembered that nursing is a crucial part of medical care. And nurses should be proud to be nurses.

If you want evidence supporting the low quality of nursing care just look at the hospital infection figures. Britain has the highest incidence of Methicillin Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus (MRSA) infection in the world. There's only one reason for that: sloppy nursing. Nurses don't wash their hands between patients. I've seen them go in and out of rooms where patients with MRSA were being nursed without washing or even wiping their hands. Garage mechanics have cleaner hands than most nurses.

Things have got so bad that the relatives of patients in hospital now need to take in antiseptic wipes and clean beds, tables and lockers every day because the staff won't do this. Patients need to have antiseptic wipes so that they can clean their cutlery.

And bedsores are now so common that no one notices them. Today's nurses just regard them as 'normal'. With rare exceptions any patient who develops a bedsore has not been properly nursed. Bedsores used to be regarded as a sign of bad nursing. These days they are simply a sign that a patient has been in hospital for more than a couple of weeks.

Nursing ambition has been disastrous for patient care. Misled by the enthusiasms of the over-ambitious and the commercially-minded too much effort has gone into curing and too little into caring. Ironically, there is ample evidence hidden in the world's medical journals to show that a caring approach is not simply compassionate but is also effective. In a paper which appeared in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in America, doctors showed that when pregnant women are given the sort of support that can best be given by a kind nurse with a little time to spend, women delivered their babies in half the time and suffered far fewer complications. Many other papers have illustrated the same point: patients need less technology and more care.

Meanwhile, the present system ensures that the nurses who run hospitals, who make the rules and who provide the 'leadership' are the ones who are least capable of, and least interested in, working directly with patients. The nurses who are in charge are the ones who are least interested in the art of caring, least passionate about nursing as an art and most anxious to climb up the career ladder by exhibiting their prowess at managing meetings, mastering the double-speak that has invaded hospitals and giving 'good mouth'. Nursing lost its way when it became impossible for a nurse to rise in the hierarchy without becoming an administrator. Nursing went wrong when nurses started collecting diplomas and degrees. How can you have a degree in caring?

A few decades ago patients were cared for in hospitals which were run by matrons and ward sisters – nurses who still knew how to turn a patient, make a bed and empty a bedpan. Most patients cannot, of course, remember how efficient hospitals were in those days and so, because they don't know what to expect or what to look for, think they are being well looked after. Most people have low expectations, are inherently grateful for anything that is done for them, are frightened and don't know what to look for. (This is the only possible explanation for those letters to local newspapers extolling the virtues of the local hospital.) These days the brigades of fat-bottomed nurses who 'administer' our hospitals are too self-important even to look at patients, let alone speak to them. You can occasionally spot these nursing administrators darting along the corridors, eyes averted lest they accidentally soil their vision with the sight of someone in pyjamas or a nightdress. Most of the time these nursing harridans lie hidden behind office doors, planning their career progress. Many of them seem grossly obese – a consequence no doubt of doing too little work and spending too much time drinking coffee and munching biscuits. If the salaries of these grotesque beasts were smaller, and they spent less time in meetings, there would be plenty of time and money to make sure that agency nurses were unnecessary. (There is very little continuity in nursing care in modern hospitals. Patients are lucky if they ever see the same nurse twice.) Meanwhile, those nurses who are left at the dirty end of the profession, wander around almost uninterested in their work. Often slovenly and untidy, they do not seem to care for their patients at all. It is frequently difficult, if not impossible, to tell who is in charge. The modern nurses' office (or 'station') will usually be positioned in a spot where the nurses can hide away from the patients to make their phone calls, eat their chocolates and gossip. Inevitably, if the patients cannot see the nurses, the converse is also true: the nurses cannot see the patients. Calls for help or bedpans go unnoticed.

Today's nurses are grotesquely unprofessional and are, far too often, rude to patients and visitors. I have received numerous complaints of hospital nurses talking loudly at night (and keeping patients awake). This is quite unnecessary. It is also rude and bad medicine. When I last worked in hospital, doctors and nurses would whisper even when working on emergencies so as not to waken patients. Today's nurses are badly trained. And most don't seem to know how a good hospital should be run.

Ever since the Greeks built the first hospitals it has been recognised that flowers are good for patients. They look good. They smell good. They bring the healing beauty of nature into the ward. But flowers are banned in many modern hospitals. They are considered to be a nuisance.

When I last took flowers to a patient in hospital the nurses looked at me as though I were a madman. After I pointed out that I had bought the flowers in the hospital shop one grudgingly agreed that the hospital didn't ban flowers. 'I don't do flowers,' said the nurse, as indignantly as if I'd asked her to put on a nice little pinny and bake me a cake. So I found a cleaner. And asked her for help. 'I don't do flowers,' said the cleaner, looking down her nose. Judging by the state of the ward she didn't do much cleaning either. Eventually, I found a vase in a filthy cupboard and filled it myself with water. I then put the flowers into the vase, arranged them and left them on the table by the bed. Half an hour after I left, the flowers were thrown out.

9. Medicine Is Not A Science

Orthodox medical practitioners like to give the impression that they have conquered sickness with science but there are, at a conservative estimate, something in the region of 18,000 known diseases for which there are still no effective treatments – let alone cures. Even when treatments do exist their efficacy is often in question. A recent report concluded that 85% of medical and surgical treatments have never been properly tested.

Modern clinicians may use scientific techniques but in the way that they treat their patients they are still quacks and charlatans, loyal to existing and unproven ideas which are profitable and resistant to new techniques and technologies which may be proven and effective.

The fact that a doctor may use a scientific instrument in his work does not make him a scientist – any more than a typist who uses a word processor is a computer scientist. The scientific technology available to doctors may be magnificent but the problem is that the application of the scientific technology is crude, untested and unscientific.

Modern physicians and surgeons do not see the human mind and the human body as a single entity (which is why the medical profession has been slow to embrace the principles of holistic medicine and doubly incompetent in its attempts to deal with stress-related disorders) and they rely more on hopes and assumptions than on evidence and objective clinical experience. The modern clinician is as narrow-minded, and as influenced by his personal experiences and interpretations as was his predecessor 2,000 years ago.

Most patients probably assume that when a doctor proposes to use an established treatment to conquer a disease he will be using a treatment which has been tested, examined and proven. But this is not the case. *The British Medical Journal* in October 1991 carried an editorial reporting that there are ‘perhaps 30,000 biomedical journals in the world, and they have grown steadily by 7% a year since the 17th century.’ The editorial also reported that: ‘only about 15% of medical interventions are supported by solid scientific evidence’ and ‘only 1% of the articles in medical journals are scientifically sound’. Nothing has improved since then.

What sort of science is that? How can doctors possibly regard themselves as practising a science when six out of seven treatment regimes are unsupported by scientific evidence and when 99% of the articles upon which clinical decisions are based are scientifically unsound? How can doctors regard themselves as scientists when it is known that a kind, compassionate doctor can have a healing rate 50% better than his crueller colleagues – simply because patients respond better to his remedies? How can doctors regard medicine as a science when it has been proven many times that at least a third of patients will get better if given a placebo? How can doctors regard medicine as a science when it is known that a large proportion of patients expecting to have heart surgery will get better if they are merely given a scar on their chests and told that they have had an operation?

Medicine is no science. It’s an art. Mysticism.

But these days it is polluted by business. And money.

The savage truth is that most medical research is organised, paid for, commissioned or subsidised by the drug industry. This type of research is designed, quite simply, to find evidence showing a new product is of commercial value. The companies which commission such research are not terribly bothered about evidence; what they are looking for are conclusions which will enable them to sell their product. Drug company sponsored research is done more to get good reviews than to find out the truth.

A study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that one in five researchers in the life sciences had delayed publication of their results, or had not published them at all, because of their relations with business firms. Whenever I have accused scientists of being prejudiced and ‘bought’ because of their allegiance to their corporate paymasters the answer has invariably been the same: ‘Everyone does it. There isn’t a scientist in the world who hasn’t taken corporate money.’ This is probably true – and is one explanation for the fact that many allegedly independent Government bodies are almost always packed with men and women who work for (or have taken fees from) the large corporations their Government body is supposed to be policing.

It is also a fact that most of the doctors and scientists writing articles, papers and reviews for medical and scientific journals have received money, grants and freebies from drug, chemical or food companies. (It is also worth remembering that many allegedly and apparently independent journals accept corporate advertising and some accept payment in return for running articles.)

The absence of scientific evidence supporting medical practices is apparent in all areas of medicine.

With a very few exceptions there are no certainties in medicine. The treatment a patient gets will depend more on chance and the doctor’s personal prejudices than on science. The unexpected seems to happen so often that it really ought to be expected and the likelihood of a doctor accurately predicting the outcome of a disease is often no more than 50:50.

Even in these days of apparently high technology medicine there are almost endless variations in the treatments preferred by differing doctors. Doctors offer different prescriptions for exactly the same symptoms; they keep patients in hospital for vastly different lengths of time, and they perform different operations on patients with apparently identical problems.

There is, indeed, ample evidence now available to show that the type of treatment a patient gets when he visits a doctor will depend not so much on the symptoms he describes but on the doctor he consults – and where that doctor practises. And yet most doctors in practice seem to be convinced that their treatment methods are beyond question. Many GPs and hospital doctors announce their decisions as though they are carved on stone.

Today’s research is largely controlled by and for the pharmaceutical industry. Doctors are unquestioning. Most don’t read original papers (and couldn’t read between the lines or assess papers accurately even if they did). The majority obtain 99% of their information from two biased and thoroughly unreliable sources: drug companies and the Government. No one bothers to look for evidence that chemotherapy, radiotherapy and vaccination actually work. Since there isn’t any this is fortunate and convenient.

Young doctors are told that what they are taught are facts. And they are taught (and then believe) that medicine is a science. Outside the anatomy room and, possibly, the physiology laboratory, there are no facts in medicine. The gaps in our knowledge about the body (when well and when sick) are far greater than the extent of our knowing. Medicine is not a science. It is an art and a craft. With a smidgen of science stuck on the side. Economics, psychiatry and psychology are all pseudosciences with no more relation to real science than astrology or iridology. Medicine is somewhere in between real science and economics. But it isn’t a science.

Doctors like to be thought of as scientists because it contributes to their aura of infallibility. Drug companies like to think that doctors are scientists because it encourages patients to have faith in the remedies they produce. And research doctors like to pretend that they are scientists because it makes it easier for them to obtain grants and to tell convincing stories to the media. Modern medical scientists decide on a commercially acceptable solution and then select the facts which support the solution they have selected. That’s not science: it’s propaganda.

10. Most Research Is Useless

The medical establishment frequently attacks alternative medicine (and seeks to have it banned) on the grounds that no decent research has been done to support the claims made by different practitioners. If that is going to be the new, serious criterion for deciding whether or not a practice should be allowed, much of modern medicine will have to be abandoned including most chemotherapy, more than half of all surgery, all vaccination programmes, nearly all radiotherapy and several billion pounds worth of drugs. And, of course, the whole of psychiatry, without exception. For most of these specialities, and indeed for many more, there has never been any research done to investigate their effectiveness, for others, where research has been done, there is no evidence that they work.

Medicine isn't a science. It is more of a superstition than a science and is closer to astrology than to astronomy. That is why if you visit 12 different doctors with the same set of symptoms you will receive 12 different recommendations. Galileo, Bacon and Vesalius were true scientists who tried to prove, or disprove, their theories dispassionately. Modern medical scientists are more like Paracelsus or Descartes. When doctors say that something is 'clinically proven' the phrase is about as meaningful as when used in a toothpaste or hair product advertisement. To the modern medical scientist facts are a nuisance; unsightly blemishes on the medical landscape of prejudices, assumptions and pseudo-scientific fantasies.

In order to dignify their interventions, doctors have traditionally used words (jargon) and tools to give extra power to their mumblings and probings. The first doctors used herbs, trephining, rattles, chants, special bones, ceremonial dances and incantations. Today's doctors use psychotherapy, chemotherapy and radiotherapy. There really isn't a lot more evidence to justify the latest innovations than there is to justify the trephining and incantations.

Most (by which I really do mean more than half) of all research trials conducted today are badly designed and the results are worthless. There are several reasons for this. First, most of those creating and conducting the trials don't understand what they are doing and do not even understand the placebo effect. Second most of the trials are published in journals which rely almost entirely upon drug company advertising. Third, many of the trials are crooked and run on behalf of drug companies. I have provided evidence for this in previous books such as *The Medicine Men, Paper Doctors, Betrayal of Trust, The Health Scandal* and so on.

Despite the drawbacks and failings, billions of pounds are spent every year on medical research programmes. Some research is funded by Governments and multinational corporations but much is funded by charities – which obtain their money through legacies, street collections and the profits from high street shops.

Much of the research which is done is designed to find 'magic bullet' style cures. For example, organisations which claim that their purpose is to combat cancer will probably spend a high proportion of their annual research budget on looking for a generic cure for cancer. They usually seem to expect that the 'cure' will be a drug.

Hardly any of the billions spent on research is spent on identifying methods to keep people healthy and prevent disease developing, establishing links which would make prevention more scientific, or publicising and promoting information about the maintenance of good health.

This massive, almost universal, international concentration of effort on a search for 'magic bullet' drug cures isn't difficult to explain: the reason is that much of the research which is done by organisations performing medical research is co-funded by drug companies, or done on their behalf or with their cooperation and support. Drug companies obviously have a vested interest in the search for a 'magic bullet' cure which can be marketed around the world. You will not be surprised to hear that drug companies don't have a great deal of time for treatment programmes which involve a change of diet – and they don't have much time for teaching people how to stay healthy or avoid illness. (It is not surprising that doctors, whose postgraduate medical education is largely paid for or orchestrated by the pharmaceutical industry, are similarly narrow-minded and although some, who earn a living with the knife, may favour surgery over drug therapy, the vast majority of practising doctors believe that the only way to fight illness is with the pen and the prescription pad.)

And it is this link to the drug industry which probably explains why so much of the research which is done involves experiments on animals (even though, as I have shown many times, such research is of absolutely no use to human beings). Indeed, one of the main reasons why the cancer industry has failed so miserably is because it has concentrated too much of its massive effort on animal experiments. Millions of pounds have, for example, been spent on giving cancer to animals – when it has for years been widely appreciated that the cancers animals get are quite different to the cancers people get. It is hardly surprising that the cancer business has been such a dismal failure.

Animal experiments are cheap, relatively easy to perform, do not require great skills, and tend to produce some sort of result very quickly. Cancer research workers often work together with big drug companies which love animal experiments for their double-edged value. If an experiment on a group of animals shows that a drug does not harm those particular animals then the drug company will use the evidence to ensure that the drug is given a clean bill of health around the world. But if an experiment on a group of animals shows that the drug does harm those particular animals the drug company will ignore the evidence on the grounds that animals are different to people – and that the results are, therefore, of no significance. As the American Committee on Diet, Nutrition and Cancer (of the U.S. National Research Council) pointed out in *Diet, Nutrition and Cancer* (published by the National Academy Press): 'animals are not human, and the etiology of the cancers they develop may not duplicate that for cancers in humans.' The United States Surgeon General has pointed out: 'an important weakness is that virtually all animal studies test single, genetically uniform (inbred) strains of one or two nonhuman species under highly uniform conditions of diet, temperature, stress, exposure to infectious diseases etc.'.

Cancer researchers frequently claim that if animal experiments are banned they will never be able to find a cure for cancer. The choice, they say to those who dare to question what they do, is simple: the lives of a few animals (since animal researchers around the world kill around 1,000 animals every 30 seconds this is something of an under-statement) or the lives of your children. This crude and, sadly, often effective blackmail (which I have previously described as a form of intellectual terrorism) presupposes that cancer researchers are eventually going to find a 'cure' for cancer – indeed, it assumes, quite illogically, that there can ever be a single cure for the 200 quite different diseases which make up the group of illnesses we know as 'cancer'. There is no evidence at all to suggest that this is an accurate presupposition.

On the contrary, the evidence clearly shows that animal experiments are a complete waste of time, that animal experiments have never led to any useful breakthroughs and that they are never likely to lead to any useful breakthroughs. Animal experiments are expensive, tediously slow, utterly unreliable and almost unbelievably cruel. (I suspect that most of those who defend animal experiments have never even looked at photographs showing the way animals are treated in laboratories.)

Animals get cancer, it is true, but the cancers they get are quite different to the types of cancer which affect human beings. Moreover, animals respond quite differently to the various types of treatment which are available. The results animal researchers obtain are totally without value. The total uncertainty makes the whole business so misleading that the results are (literally) worse than useless.

Instead of helping doctors find a cure for cancer those scientists who do experiments on animals have held back medical progress and have been responsible for much pain and distress and hundreds of thousands of unnecessary deaths.

For example, a standard test used on rats gives results which can be accurately applied to human beings just 38% of the time. This means that 62% of the time the results obtained through animal experiments are wrong. Since tossing a coin would give a long-term 50% chance of accuracy it would clearly be quicker, more effective, more efficient and cheaper for these scientists to spend their working days sitting around tossing coins to assess the safety of chemicals. ('Yes! Heads! We can give this to patients! No! Tails! Patients can't take that one.') But, in political and financial terms, tossing a coin would certainly not be as useful as using animals. Consider tobacco, for example. The link between tobacco and cancer was identified many years ago by doctors whose observations and research work had involved human patients. But long after doctors had established the link between tobacco and cancer in humans animal researchers were still forcing dogs to smoke and painting tobacco tar on the backs of mice in attempts to show whether or not there was a laboratory link between tobacco and cancer. Politicians who wanted to avoid taking action against the wealthy and big tax paying tobacco companies were able to do so on the grounds that they were still awaiting laboratory confirmation of the link between tobacco and cancer. Decades of vague, inconclusive and contradictory results enabled the world's tobacco industry to keep selling a product which is still responsible for approximately one third of all cancer deaths and which, over the years, must have been responsible for more deaths, disease and misery than any other product ever invented. Using animals to test new anti-cancer drugs is equally absurd. 'Test beds' made of human tissue cells are available. These can be used to test anti-cancer drugs. I cannot see the scientific sense in testing a drug on animals when it can be tested on cells which are identical to those within the patients who will take the drug. (There is, as I have already pointed out, coarse commercial sense in doing such tests on animals. If a test on one species shows that a drug is lethal the test can be repeated on another species, and another, and another until a more promising or acceptable result is obtained. The drug can then be launched worldwide as suitable for human patients.) Animal experiments are useless because animals are completely different to people. According to Dr Irwin Bross, giving evidence to the United States Congress: 'conflicting animal results have often delayed and hampered the war on cancer, they have never produced a single, substantial advance either in the prevention or treatment of human cancer.' The medical journal *The Lancet* commented that 'since no animal tumour is closely related to a cancer in human beings an agent which is active in the laboratory may well prove useless clinically.'

The whole antivivisection movement was demonised in the 1980s and 1990s by Special Branch and MI5 who had no enemy to justify their massive budgets and had to invent one. They chose anti-vivisectionists even though they must have known damned well that there was never any real danger from them. The whole anti-vivisection movement was (and is) disorganised and consists largely of little old ladies and teenagers handing out badly printed leaflets on street corners on Saturdays. Nevertheless, the Government gave the whole lunacy official backing and a Home Secretary (Jack Straw) described animal rights activists as terrorists. I suspect that the security forces claimed that animal rights activists were a major threat to the nation simply to justify their expensive, existence. And so, old ladies in brogues and tweeds and teenage vegans in cardboard shoes and thin waterproof jackets became the world's most unlikely and least threatening terrorists. Whenever I spoke at anti-vivisection rallies a police helicopter hovered overhead in an attempt to drown out what I was saying.

I believe that vivisectors provide a perfect example of what psychologists call 'confirmatory bias. They collect together all the evidence that supports their thesis and then ignore the evidence that is left – the stuff that doesn't support their belief. If pushed into a corner they delight in confusing the issue in every way they can. They will, for example, claim that they are looking after animals better than ever – and are providing them with bigger, nicer cages. And they have a favourite trick which convinces many people. They produce an individual who has been 'cured' by a particular drug and then show evidence that the drug was tested on animals. 'There you are,' they say, 'the animal experiments saved that person's life.' This is, of course, a perfect nonsense. The truth is that the experiments on animals were pointless, irrelevant and unnecessary and played no part in the development of the drug.

In my book *Betrayal of Trust* I named over 50 drugs known to cause cancer or other serious problems in animals but which are prescribed for humans – on the grounds that animals are different to people. And the vivisectors, who admit that over half of their experiments on animals are unreliable and worthless, also admit that they don't know which of their experiments might be useful. So, they clearly don't ever know which of their experiments might be of value. And if you don't know which experiments are of value then all of them are useless.

Those are the arguments I used when giving evidence at the House of Commons and the House of Lords in London. No one said anything in response. Not a word. Moreover, when the House of Lords committee sent me the evidence offered by Britain's Department of Health in support of vivisection I was able to systematically and logically destroy every shred of their evidence. I proved all their arguments in favour of vivisection to be entirely fallacious and nonsensical. I proved, without any shadow of doubt, that vivisection is worse than useless – it is dangerous. (My demolition of the Government's evidence 'supporting' vivisection appears on my website http://www.vernoncoleman.com/)

I confess that I was not terribly impressed by the peers who sat on the House of Lords committee on animals. It was a not unpleasant experience. As a witness I was treated with courtesy. It was like being on trial without the inconvenience of being sent to prison if things go badly. One of the peers was someone called Mary Warnock who wrote a book entitled *Nature and Mortality*. This is what she wrote about the committee in her book: 'The reason that this committee is such fun is that it is possible, indeed necessary, to discuss these fundamental issues...Our trip to the United States was enormously enjoyable, and I look back on it as a time of endless laughter.' She concluded: 'One way and another, it will be a sad day when 'Animals' disappears as an entry in my diary.' She clearly had doubts about the value of the committee: 'Whether what we recommend will make any difference to the practices of the Home Office is more than doubtful,' she wrote.

Another point worth making is that there is growing evidence to support the contention that many of today's new and most threatening viral epidemics have been generated by medical scientists working with animals. During the 1960's and 1970's cancer researchers and scientists working for the military on the development of death bugs were developing HIV-like viruses in laboratories. They were using animals in their attempts to develop viral weapons with which opponents could be killed (and their countries destabilised) en masse.

Meanwhile, misled by animal studies which suggested that viruses were responsible for the development of cancer researchers were trying to find an anti-cancer vaccine. They combined viruses which were known to cause cancer in animals in an attempt to create new viruses which they hoped would give them some clues about how viruses caused cancer.

Because of incompetence (a common fault among the mass of second rate scientists around the world who routinely perform experiments on animals) the new viruses have been inadvertently spread through our communities. It has subsequently been shown that it possible for deadly new viruses to jump from animals in laboratories to human researchers.

It is worth remembering that the biggest survey of doctors ever conducted showed that the majority of practising doctors agree that animal experiments are of no value whatsoever to doctors and that patients would suffer fewer side effects if new drugs were tested on human cell and tissue cultures. A few years ago I was President of an organisation of over 1,000 doctors who opposed vivisection. The only time I was interviewed by the British media I was subjected to what I can only describe as a lengthy sneer from a presenter called Melvyn Bragg on a radio programme called *Start the Week*.

Vivisectors are, as a group, ignorant, unthinking entirely selfish people who do as much harm to people as they do to animals. They refuse to discuss or debate what they do but rely on misinformation and propaganda. Statistics for 2010 show that the number of ‘scientific’ experiments performed on animals is now higher than it has been for three decades. The Home Office’s figures for 2010 show that 3.7 million ‘procedures’ were carried out on 3.6 million cats, dogs, mice, monkeys, rabbits and other animals.

Sadly, it isn’t only vivisectors who do worthless research these days.

The worthlessness of most modern medical research has been well documented since I first raised the issue back in the mid 1970s with my second book (*Paper Doctors*). When I wrote *Paper Doctors* I argued that we did not need any more medical research. ‘Our libraries are well stocked with information,’ I wrote. ‘What we need to do now is to concentrate on how to use all the information we have accumulated. There are many cures sitting on the library shelves which are ignored, neglected, overlooked, unrecognised or forgotten. So much new research material is published every year that not even experts in a specific area of medicine would claim to know everything about their speciality.’

Things have not changed.

I still have little or no respect for the majority of modern researchers. And I am, more than ever, convinced that most modern research is worthless.

But some research is needed. The right research could save millions of lives and improve the health of millions. The trouble is that the sort of research we need isn’t being done. We need research (requiring careful observation and good record keeping – two historically fundamental foundation stones of good research work) which assesses the value of modern therapies and which examines the link between causes and disease. Sadly, the modern research industry seems to believe that if an experiment isn’t done by men and women in white coats and isn’t performed in a laboratory, it isn’t worth doing.

We also need to stop duplicating research. Even today it is almost impossible to be absolutely certain about whether or not research in a specific area has or has not been done. Research is often duplicated because researchers in one part of the world don’t know precisely what has been done (or is being done) in other parts of the world. For decades (since the publication of my book *Paper Doctors*) I have been campaigning (in vain, I fear) for the development of a single, comprehensive research database containing details of every piece of research – whether orthodox or complementary – conducted anywhere in the world.

And how much more research do we really need? If we applied what we already know (and did it effectively and thoroughly) then we would all be much better off. I made this point in *Paper Doctors* in 1977. But ever since then researchers have continued to accumulate knowledge far faster than doctors have been able to apply what has been learned.

11. Original Thinking Is Suppressed By The Medical Establishment

There’s no room for initiative and originality in modern medicine. On the contrary, both are actively suppressed. Dissent is officially stifled. Medicine today has become rigid, like other forms of science, and original thinking is as unacceptable today as it was in the days when Semmelweiss was vilified. Most people who work in medicine today don’t actually think any more. Oh, they think about what shirt or blouse to wear and they think about what new car to buy and they think about the money they can make but they don’t really think about basic, fundamental, important stuff. They don’t think about what they are doing with their lives, or why they are doing it or whether it is what they dreamt of doing when they joined the healing profession.

The medical establishment has never been enthusiastic about new ideas. After all, the medical establishment stoutly rejected anaesthesia and the principles of antisepsis and the brave physicians who promoted such ideas had to cope with rejection, cynicism and oppression.

Over the centuries, just about every major advance in medicine has come as a result of the work of eccentric, passionate, determined unclubbables who have fought the establishment and who would today almost certainly fail the newly introduced registration, licensing and revalidation procedures designed to ensure that only doctors who obey every rule of the establishment are allowed to practice medicine.

It is a fact of life that advantageous changes to society happen only through the determined work of unreasonable men. Great things happen only when enough unreasonable men care and are brave enough to be unreasonable in public. Just about all great discoveries in history have been made by people who weren’t recognised by their peers before they made their discoveries and often weren’t recognised for years afterwards either. When I was writing my book *The 100 Greatest Englishmen and Englishwomen* I was initially astonished at the number of great people who spent at least part of their lives in prison. The explanation, of course, is that many great men and women and almost all original thinkers are, by their very nature, intrinsically rebellious and therefore especially likely to get into trouble with the authorities. And, after all, no one ever did great things by agreeing with the establishment; no one ever changed things for the better without having original ideas. And original ideas are always, almost by definition, an anathema to the establishment. All great innovations, inventions, ideas and developments come from crazy, neurotic people. They may be a little bit or a hell of a lot crazy but they are all crazy. They may be neurotic or psychotic but they certainly aren’t boring, sensible or entirely stable. All original and creative people live outside society (and only rarely, and usually towards the end of their careers, do they become members of the establishment); they are, by nature, outsiders. Great advances are never made by people who would be voted into office, made head girl or put in charge of the milk.

There has been woefully little really original thinking in medicine in recent years. This is partly because medical education discourages original thinking, the medical press suppresses original writing and the medical establishment outlaws original thinkers. All real progress is made as a result of observation and deduction but these skills are not valued today. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that there have been very few medical breakthroughs and hardly any bright ideas. Controversy is suppressed and obvious truths ignored for fear of upsetting politicians or some Government protected industry. It is hardly surprising that for years every surgeon ‘knew’ that the best treatment for breast cancer was radical mastectomy, even though there was never any evidence to prove that this was the case. (There are still thousands of surgeons performing radical mastectomies and countless thousands of women having their breasts sawn off unnecessarily.) Worthless, barbaric, dangerous treatments are often followed with great enthusiasm for decades after they have been shown to be utterly wrong-headed. Back in the 19th century surgeons made fortunes by chopping out bits of bowel. Today, surgeons ‘treat’ obesity by stapling stomachs, wiring up jaws and chopping out lengths of bowel.

The doctors who have made the greatest contributions to health care have invariably been attacked, scorned and imprisoned. And today things are worse than they have ever been. Anyone who dares to question today’s medical establishment will be suppressed rather than just ignored. History shows that great and useful medical discoveries are invariably made by outsiders; doctors and scientists operating outside the cosy world dominated and controlled by back scratching establishment flunkeys. But in the past such outsiders did at least have a chance to make their contributions. They were reviled and ignored and shut out from polite society but (with surprisingly few exceptions) they were not silenced in the way that original thinkers are silenced today.

Our problem is that the medical establishment was bought by the drug industry decades ago. Today there is no room for initiative and originality and both are actively suppressed. Dissent is officially stifled. The great men of medicine, Snow, Semmelweiss, Lister and so on. would not have survived in today’s environment. Anyone who studies medical history can see that the significant developments always come from free thinkers outside the system. Today, more than ever, the free thinkers outside the system are silenced. They will doubtless be defrocked when the new rules of revalidation are introduced to protect the establishment and the pharmaceutical industry.

Traditionally, the medical establishment has quite a record of supporting the wrong view. Over the centuries, if the medical establishment has agreed on something then it has probably been wrong. Today, the power of the establishment to suppress original thought makes things a thousand times worse. Existing therapies which are dangerous, ineffective and even lethal are protected. Tranquillisers and antibiotics are wildly overprescribed but nothing is done to stop the overprescribing. Patients are routinely dispatched to profitable screening clinics which do far more harm than good. Vaccines are injected by the lorry load and children are paralysed and killed by the classroom. Animals are slaughtered in laboratories which are used to preserve the profitability of the drug industry at the expense of patients. Critics are silenced. Eyes are closed to the dangers of genetic engineering and the deteriorating quality of our food supplies. The potential advantages of alternative remedies are dismissed out of hand simply because they might threaten the profitability of the industry which now owns what used to be a profession.

As I explained in *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You* it has been proven without doubt that most heart surgery is unnecessary. A sensible regime of diet, exercise and stress reduction can reverse the problems now regarded as indications for surgery. But the establishment continues to promote surgery because it is enormously profitable.

New, innovative, safe and effective ways of dealing with diabetes are ignored, suppressed even, because they threaten corporate and professional profitability.

Doctors don't bother looking at scientific evidence any more. It tends to get in the way of profits. The dangers of electricity, mobile telephones and prescription drug contaminated drinking water are all ignored because these threats may prove a financial embarrassment to other parts of the establishment. Powerful evidence proving that all these are real health problems, responsible for many thousands of deaths a year, is suppressed without hesitation.

Iconoclasts are never popular. The people who own and worship the icons don't much care for them being smashed. And these days the icon owners have all the power and most of the money. They control the politicians, the legislature and the media.

Even the media have been bought and are now controlled by the self-serving, self-protecting establishment. It is not, I suspect, widely known but the experts who appear on television and radio, offering apparently independent advice, are usually (nearly always) paid for or subsidised by an industry, and their testimony and advice is, therefore, neither reliable nor consequential. This is as true of medical experts as it is of experts in almost all other fields. The rent-a-quote experts are popular with the media because since they are already being paid by their sponsors they do not ask to be paid for their broadcast appearances. In the days when I was not banned from radio and television I remember contributing to a programme about genetic engineering. Half-way through the programme I asked the other participants, one by one, if they were connected with the genetic engineering industry. Every single one of them admitted that they were being paid by the industry. 'Everyone with an interest in this subject is employed in the industry,' argued one defiant and defensive 'expert'.

The same thing has been prevalent in print media for decades. Much of what is published in the press is placed there by public relations spokesmen and corporate lobbyists. Newspapers and magazines love this material because it comes to them entirely free of charge. Years ago I used to write a weekly, syndicated column which was published in scores of local newspapers. The column was popular with readers (who often wrote and told me that they appreciated my honesty) but not popular with drug companies or the medical establishment (the two are pretty well indistinguishable) and as the months and years went by I was sacked by one newspaper after another and replaced by a variety of doctors (employed either by one of the large drug companies or by the Government) whose sole advantage was that they were all prepared to work for no fee. I remember once asking my agent why we could not compete. 'I can cut your fee,' he said. 'But we're competing with people who work for nothing and it's difficult to make a living when your fee is nothing.'

Over the last few years it has become increasingly clear that bankers, lawyers and politicians have all betrayed us. Despite my best efforts, the public has not yet realised that doctors have betrayed us too. And it will, perhaps, be some time before people realise that whereas politicians, lawyers and bankers have merely impoverished us, doctors have killed our relatives, our friends and our neighbours, have enriched themselves through their legalised slaughter and will most probably kill us too – largely through their determined support of high technology medicine and the pharmaceutical industry.

My theories of bodypower (described in my book *Bodypower* and to the annoyance of the medical establishment now proven to be accurate, sensible and economical) have been attacked and suppressed simply because they are accurate, sensible and economical. How can medical professionals make money out of a system which relies upon allowing the human body to heal itself? (Just the other day I read about a woman who had a baby which refused to take milk from her right breast. The baby would only take milk from the woman's left breast. The woman went to see her doctor who found a lump in the right breast. That's a beautiful example of bodypower. But how can medical professionals make money out of accepting the wisdom of the human body?)

The solutions modern doctors come up with, and the research results they produce, are rarely original or creative or effective. They simply follow the party lines. The majority of today’s researchers are unimaginative and incompetent and know that if they want to receive the best grants they must never question the effectiveness of the medical establishment. Most important of all, they must always worship at the shrine dedicated to the pharmaceutical industry.

The Government (encouraged by the fascist arch-enemy of all goodness, the European Union) spends vast amounts of our money creating illness and causing profitable epidemics. The politicians use public money to encourage meat eating – even though they know that meat is now the biggest cause of cancer in the western world. (Politicians who talk about ‘climate change’ and ‘global warming’ but who promote meat eating are Olympic class hypocrites but that is another story.) Politicians prevent people from finding out the truths about the food they buy. They allow advertising that is as manipulative as it is dishonest. And then they throw up their hands in astonishment as the incidence of heart disease, cancer and obesity all rocket. Our present system actively encourages ill health.

In every country where health care is controlled or regulated by the Government, politicians constantly tinker with the administration of health care but what we really need is a reform of our entire approach to life and health. We need a physical revolution, a mental revolution and a spiritual revolution. None of these is likely to come from the medical establishment.

In fact, the modern medical establishment has made enormous and hugely devastating errors in recent years. The medical establishment was dangerously (and now provably) wrong about AIDS. The medical establishment was dangerously (and now provably) complacent about the dangers of overprescribing tranquillisers. For years the establishment ignored the link between tobacco and cancer. For years I was vilified whenever I argued that there was a link between stress and high blood pressure. (My book *Stress Control*, published in the 1970s, was one of the first publications to draw attention to the importance of stress as a cause of illness. I pointed out that nine out of ten modern illnesses are caused, or made worse, by stress. Severe stress can cause extraordinary physical problems. It is, for example, possible for stress to produce a form of dwarfism in children.)

The medical establishment, which long ago sold out to any industry prepared to pay a decent price, always goes along with whatever is convenient and profitable and always opposes evidence which threatens the commercial status quo. Money may not be able to buy you love but it can buy you a whole damned profession. Today’s medical profession has oodles of cash but no principles.

These days doctors only get to read and hear what the drug industry wants them to read and hear. Anything controversial, anything questioning the status quo, must be suppressed.

A year or two ago I was invited to speak at a new conference in London. The conference was, I was told, intended to tackle the subject of medication errors and adverse reactions to prescribed drugs. The company organising the conference was called PasTest. ‘For over 30 years PasTest has been providing medical education to professionals within the NHS,’ they told me. ‘Building on our commitment to quality in medical and healthcare education, PasTest is creating a range of healthcare events which focus on the professional development of clinicians and managers who are working together to deliver healthcare services for the UK. Our aim is to provide a means for those who are in a position to improve services on both national and regional levels. The topics covered by our conferences are embraced within policy, best practice, case study, clinical management and evidence based practice. PasTest endeavours to source the best speakers who will engage audiences with balanced, relevant and thought-provoking programmes. PasTest has proven in the past that by using thorough investigative research and keeping up-to-date with advances in healthcare and medical practice, a premium educational event can be achieved.’

I was delighted. Iatrogenesis (doctor-induced disease) is something of a speciality of mine. I have written numerous books and articles on the subject. My campaigns have resulted in more drugs being banned or controlled than anyone else’s.

In addition to my speaking at the conference the organisers wanted me to help them decide on the final programme. I thought the conference was an important one and would give me a good opportunity to tell medical staff and administrators the truth. I signed a contract.

PasTest wrote to confirm my appointment as a consultant and speaker for the PasTest Conference Division. And then there was silence. My office repeatedly asked for details of when and where the conference was being held.

Silence.

Eventually a programme for the event appeared on the Internet. Curiously, my name was not on the list of speakers.

Here is part of the blurb promoting the conference:

‘Against a background of increasing media coverage into the number of UK patients who are either becoming ill or dying due to adverse reactions to medication our conference aims to explain the current strategies to avoid adverse drug reactions and what can be done to educate patients.’

Putting the blame on patients for problems caused by prescription drugs is brilliant. Most drug related problems are caused by the stupidity of doctors not the ignorance of patients. If the aim is to educate patients on how best to avoid prescription drug problems the advice would be simple: ‘Don’t trust doctors.’

The promotion for the conference claims that ‘It is estimated errors in medication...account for 4% of hospital bed capacity.’ And that prescription drug problems ‘reportedly kill up to 10,000 people a year in the UK’. As I would have shown (had I not been banned from the conference) these figures are absurdly low.

The list of speakers included a variety of people I had never heard of including one speaker representing The Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry and another representing the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency.

Delegates representing the NHS were expected to pay £250 plus VAT (£293.75) to attend the event. Delegates whose Trust would be funding the cost were asked to apply for a Health Authority Approval form.

So why was I apparently banned from this conference?

This is what PasTest said when we asked them: ‘certain parties felt that he (Vernon Coleman) was too controversial to speak and as a result would not attend.’

Could that, I wonder, be the drug industry? Is the drug industry now deciding whom they will allow to speak to doctors and NHS staff on the problems caused by prescription drugs? If I was banned at the behest of the drug industry do NHS bosses know that people attending such conferences will only hear speakers approved by the drug industry and that speakers telling the truth will be banned? (I think it is safe to assume that I won’t be invited to speak at any more conferences for NHS staff.)

If I was banned at the behest of the medical profession why are doctors frightened of the truth? (If they think my views are wrong they would surely be happy for me to appear so that they could counter my arguments.)

I could not, of course, be banned by the NHS itself. Why would the NHS not want its employees to know the truth about drug related problems?

Why are people who had me banned so frightened of what I would say? It can surely only be because they know that I would have caused embarrassment by telling the truth.

The scary bottom line is that the NHS paid to send delegates to a conference where someone representing the drug industry spoke to them on drug safety. But I was banned.

Details of the ban were sent to every national and major local newspaper in Britain. None reported it. I sent details of the ban to numerous politicians. None were interested. And yet, the ban seemed to me to strike at the very heart of the nature of the NHS. If health service employees are not allowed to listen to anyone offering ideas which do not fit into the drug company/medical establishment official line what hope is there that patients will be provided with the most appropriate medical care?

The question is this: If the drug companies believe I am wrong why don’t they let me speak and then explain why I am wrong? The unavoidable answer is that they know my criticisms of the profession and the industry are accurate and unanswerable.

And the drug industry and the medical profession are, today, inseparable. Today’s medical schools teach half truths; they never teach students how to think or criticise the system. (What system is going to teach people to question itself?). Students are educated by rote; taught in the way that dogs are taught tricks. Wisdom is a disadvantage. Common sense is eradicated. Young doctors are incapable of making informed decisions and that suits the pharmaceutical industry just fine. If you don’t question perceived notions then how do you ever learn? How does a profession ever progress? Young doctors are never exposed to the truth or to the questioning of ‘accepted’ beliefs or to proper debate (e.g. with people like me). So medical schools churn out platoons of unquestioning prescription signing zombies. Originality is a dirty word.

Good doctors need insight, imagination and intuition and the capacity to make diagnostic leaps; sideways if necessary. Good doctors need to be able to observe and they need to be able to think. Great discoveries are invariably made by outsiders and mavericks. Such skills are not simply not encouraged; they are now not allowed. As a result the medical profession is packed with drudges, unthinking, too frightened of losing their jobs to show any spirit

Doctors do not have the courage to question the establishment or to have original ideas because they are employed and like all other employees they are frightened of losing their jobs. Moreover, NHS doctors are employed by the Government; they are civil servants. Today’s doctors are bought, body, mind and soul, and do not have the courage to stand up for whatever principles they might have. They do not dare disagree with their administrative bosses because they are hired hands. They do not dare stick up for their patients because they live in fear of bureaucratic censure. And so they vaccinate, and they perform unnecessary operations and they prescribe drugs which they should know are unsafe. Tonsils and lengths of intestine are ripped out by surgeons who don’t seem to have the foggiest notion of the harm they are doing. Healthy breasts are slashed off unnecessarily.

Doctors do not have the courage to stand up for their patients because they have lost their independence; they are simply civil servants; they have sold their souls for a fat salary, short working hours and a wonderful pension. They are so beholden to their employers that they dare not even stand up to bullying, they dare not even speak out when they see things happening which they know, in their hearts, are wrong. Their spirits have curdled.

The modern medical establishment elevates its official beliefs into an orthodoxy, always suggesting that they are right because they are, well, right and that the absence of evidence is not to be allowed to interfere with the acceptance of their conclusions. This is tabloid science.

For example, the supporters of vaccination deal with opposition not by debate but by denouncing anyone who disagrees. It's the same approach as is used by climate change advocates. Critics are demonised as flat-earthers or holocaust deniers or accused of being in the pay of someone. The only debate allowed is about how big a problem we have created – we are never allowed to discuss whether climate change is man-made because that is 'fact'. Anyone who disagrees is a dangerous heretic – to be excluded from all debates, and condemned and isolated.

Back in the 1980s I dared to question the argument that AIDS would kill us all. The medical establishment announced gravely that by the year 2000 we would all be touched by AIDS. I was roundly attacked by the profession, the politicians and the media by questioning the logic of these claims and by daring to introduce fact based arguments into the arena.

Science has been hijacked by politically correct lobbyists. Dissenters, daring to question the new orthodoxy of the group-think obsessionals, are guilty of thought crime and to be vilified and suppressed. Group think unoriginality oppresses and suppresses.

Now, new regulatory licensing schemes for doctors in the UK mean that practising doctors will in future have to be revalidated by a senior doctor who will make recommendations about their fitness to practice. It seems to me likely that this will mean that any doctor who does not stick to the rules will be refused a licence and prevented from practising.

Just about every significant doctor in history, from Semmelweiss to Snow, would have failed the licensing scheme as planned and I have absolutely no doubt that, for example, the new system will ensure that any doctor who opposes, questions or in any way criticises vaccination will be removed from the medical register before you can say 'scientific bigotry'.

The chances of anyone questioning the medical establishment in the future will be close to non-existent. It is today more dangerous for a doctor to be ahead of his time (which is to say, critical of well-established but ill-advised and dangerously nonsensical medical practices) than it is for him to be behind his time. The doctor who dares to criticise the acknowledged mainstream is still a dangerous heretic who must be crushed.

Over the last four decades I have made many forecasts about medical hazards. Most have already been proved entirely accurate. But accuracy is no defence against ridicule, abuse, scorn and scepticism; indeed, since being correct makes the authoritarians fearful, the ridicule, abuse, scorn and scepticism are enhanced.

12. Most Doctors Are Addicted To Prescribing

Most doctors are obsessed with drug therapy. Many don't seem to have heard of the many effective non-drug solutions which now exist. If it doesn't come in a blister pack and isn't packaged by one of the world's big drug companies they don't believe it can possibly work.

The big mistake most doctors make is to assume that drug companies are in business because they want to make sick people well again. That is a big, big mistake. The drug companies make drugs. That is what they do. But they make drugs so that they can make a profit. (And that they do very well – better, indeed, than any other industry.) Drug companies do not exist to help patients get better. They exist solely to make profits – they use sickness as a route to profit. And, to be frank, why should we expect them to be in business for any other reason?

Motor car companies aren't in business because they want to help people move around. They are in business because they think they can make a profit out of selling cars. Supermarkets aren't in business because they want to make shopping easier and cheaper. They are in business to make a profit. Arms companies don't make bombs and landmines because they want to help small, threatened countries defend themselves against aggressive neighbours. They make bombs and landmines because they can make big profits out of selling them.

I don't hate drug companies but I do think we need to regard them with great scepticism for they are (together with the food and tobacco industries) one of the three major modern threats to human health.

Doctors simply do not understand any of this. They wrongly assume that the drug companies have interests which match the interests of their patients.

This is silly.

If doctors thought this through they would realise that patients and drug companies have diametrically opposed interests. The patient wants to get better. But the drug company will make bigger profits if the patient remains ill – and continues to need to take drugs.

But either through collective stupidity or through naivety (or because they like being bribed by drug companies) doctors like to believe that drug companies exist for the good of mankind.

Doctors should regard drug companies with caution and they should keep their relationship with them at arms length. They should regard drug companies as providing just one group of possible remedies. But collectively doctors have behaved pretty stupidly. They have sold out to the drug industry and they have (as I pointed out over a third of a century ago) become little more than a marketing arm of the world's most profitable industry.

Drug companies have, not surprisingly, welcomed and taken advantage of the medical profession's collective stupidity (and/or naivety). They have virtually taken over postgraduate medical education. Their advertising dominates medical journals. And as a result most doctors (not just the bad ones) are obsessed with drugs because they simply aren't aware that there are other ways to deal with health problems.

In the last century the practice of medicine has become no more than an adjunct to the pharmaceutical industry and the other parts of the huge, powerful and immensely profitable health care industry.

Medicine is no longer an independent profession.

Doctors are now no more dedicated to the saving of lives and the improvement of patients' welfare than are the thousands of drug company salesmen and marketing men. Doctors have become nothing more than a link connecting the pharmaceutical industry to the consumer.

It is not difficult to see why the drug industry behaves in such a ruthless manner. The profits to be made out of selling drugs are phenomenal. It is not at all uncommon for a drug company to sell several hundred million dollars worth of one product in a year. Companies can make over 90 pence pure profit for every one pound's worth of a drug that they sell. The raw materials for a drug may cost less than $100 a kilo. Turning the raw materials into 100,000 pills and packing them may take the total cost to $1000. The retail price for 100,000 pills may be over $100,000. The only other internationally sold product that can compare for profitability is cocaine.

Drug companies frequently make minimum annual profits of between 30% and 50% on their capital employed. These profits, incidentally, come after the massive above and below the line payments to doctors.

Nor are profits likely to drop because the number of drugs doctors prescribe does not seem to be slowing down. A recent survey of over 2,000 patients admitted to hospital showed that within a ten year period the number of drugs prescribed per patient had shown an increase of almost 50%. Today it is hard to avoid the conclusion that medicine is run for the benefit of large drug companies which make fortunes out of persuading gullible doctors to prescribe useless drugs. Persuading ill-informed doctors (and ignorant nurses who have demanded and been given the authority to prescribe) to prescribe their wretched products is a highly profitable business.

The importance of drug therapy, and the reverence with which drugs are regarded by doctors and nurses, is perhaps best seen in modern rural health centres where doctors dispense as well as prescribe and where the dispensing counter where patients exchange their prescription slips for drugs is rather akin to a high altar. The modern consultation is, too often, a simple, uncomplicated, thoughtless three part process. First, the patient visits the doctor and reports his or her symptoms. Second, the doctor decides which drug (or, more likely, which drugs) will be most appropriate and writes out what he considers to be an appropriate prescription. And, third, the patient takes the prescription to the high priest and has it turned into a bottle of pills, a tube of ointment, an inhaler or whichever form has been deemed appropriate. Doctors are trained and kept up-to-date by and for the pharmaceutical industry. This may sound like hyperbole. It isn't. Drug companies pay for a very large part of the education that a doctor receives.

It seems that everyone in modern health care worships at the sterile shrine of the pharmacy. And the whole thing is made infinitely worse by the fact that approximately half of all the prescriptions doctors write are for patients they don't see. Every single day of the working week half a million repeat prescriptions are collected from GP's surgeries – frequently by patients who never needed to be on drugs in the first place. Back in the mid 1980s I pointed out that Britain's huge tranquilliser and sleeping pill addiction problem had been caused largely by the growth in 'repeat prescribing'. Nothing has changed. Not long ago a GP was fined for continuing to issue repeat prescriptions for a patient who had died.

Prescription drugs can, and do, save many lives. But prescription drugs are one of the major killers in our modern world. If drugs were only ever prescribed sensibly, and when they were likely to interfere with a potentially life-threatening disease, then the risks associated with their use would be acceptable. But all the evidence shows that doctors do not understand the hazards associated with the drugs they use and frequently prescribe inappropriately and excessively. Many of the deaths associated with drug use are caused by drugs which did not need to be taken.

Patients are given the wrong drug.

Or they are given the wrong dose of the right drug.

Or they are given the right drug by the wrong route (for example, a drug that should be injected into a muscle may be injected directly into the bloodstream).

Experts believe that there is an error roughly one in every eight times when a hospital patient is given a drug.

Since an ordinary hospital patient may receive a dozen different drugs – at different times of the day – the opportunities for error are colossal. In a 300 bed hospital there may be between 300 and 400 medication errors every day! Some of those errors will result in mild discomfort. Some will result in death.

One of the perks of travelling first class on Eurostar is that there's a varied selection of free magazines to choose from at the end of each carriage. I picked up a free copy of the *New Statesman* on Eurostar recently. It's an odd little magazine, every bit as twee as *The Lady, The Spectator, Country Life* and the *Economist.* They all seem to me to be little more than cult newsletters, catering to their own peculiar tribes of prejudiced and bigoted zealots. The *New Statesman* I picked up included a supplement entitled *The people's NHS?* The supplement was published 'in collaboration with Pfizer'. Now, Pfizer is of course an international pharmaceutical company. Strange bedfellows. I wonder if anyone at the *New Statesman* knows enough about drug companies to have asked themselves why one of them should agree to help pay for a *New Statesman* publication. The back of the supplement explains that Pfizer and the *New Statesman* aim to bring together leading opinion-formers to explore a range of health issues relevant to policymakers and the electorate alike (are there any health issues not relevant to both?). We are told, moreover, that Pfizer sponsors these events and collaborates with the *New Statesman* to determine the discussion topics. I bet it does. There's a bit of text telling readers that the *New Statesman* has sole editorial responsibility for the content of the supplement. Oh how sweet that is. Dare I point out that one of the contributors just happens to be a senior director of Pfizer. What an amazing coincidence that is. If anyone at the *New Statesman* is interested here's the bottom line: Pfizer sponsors the *New Statesman* events (and helps choose the discussion topics) because the drug companies love the NHS. It is a cash cow of unprecedented size. Always giving. And I don't mind betting that this merry duo of Pfizer and the *New Statesman* never produce anything questioning the whole existence of the NHS, or the dangers produced by modern drugs or question the value of vaccination or vivisection. Drug companies are everywhere these days. It is impossible for two doctors to meet, or a politician and a doctor to discuss health matters or, it seems, a left wing magazine to produce a supplement without a drug company being involved (and usually paying for the smart lunch or dinner afterwards).

There are two large, international drug industries on this planet. One of these two industries makes huge amounts of money out of ruthlessly promoting dangerous and often lethal products. The other drug industry, much smaller, much less profitable and far less ruthless, sells drugs such as cocaine and heroin and is responsible for a relatively small number of deaths. And the *New Statesman* would have been wiser to have an 'arrangement' with the second than with the first.

The myth that drug therapy offers the only true solution is now repeated unquestioningly and without hesitation or embarrassment. In America the big drug companies spend $5 billion every year on marketing their drugs and persuading doctors to prescribe them. (In 2004 a company called Astra Zeneca spent $216 million promoting a cholesterol reducing drug called Crestor. That’s $4 million more than PepsiCo spent on marketing that year.) In India the average urban doctor is visited by an average of 20 (20!) sales representatives every day. And all this promotion has an effect: it has been shown that doctors who accept lunches, fees or perks from drug companies are more likely to prescribe the companies’ products. Doctors who get paid to do research or give a lecture are up to 19 times more likely to request a company’s products. When doctors are choosing a drug to prescribe they are led not by scientific principles but by commercial principles. For example, drug companies hand out lots of free pens and notepads. These pens and notepads have the names of drugs printed on them. Drug companies give these away because they know that a doctor will probably prescribe the drugs whose names are on their pens and notepads. That’s an appalling truth. In Italy the police asked for almost 5,000 people to be put on trial (including 4,400 doctors and at least 273 employees of a major drug company). The complaint was that the company had spent £152 million on sweeteners to doctors and chemists. The sweeteners (it seems silly not to call them bribes) consisted of holidays, cameras, computers and cash.

Not long ago a drug company gave each doctor who wanted one a new fax machine. The drug company paid for a line to be installed and then paid the line rental. Why? So that they could ‘stay in touch’ with the doctor. And doctors can get free Blackberries and other gadgets too. So that drug companies can keep in touch. Drug companies organise ‘disease awareness weeks’, they sponsor patients associations (which are sometimes little more than drug promoting groups), they send letters to agony columnists (and follow these letters with literature containing an appropriate answer) and they set up apparently independent health sites on the Internet. I frequently receive e-mails from companies wanting to advertise their products on my website. (My website remains free of advertising and sponsorship.) The *British Medical Journal* website – available to the public – contains drug company advertising.

The basic problem is money. The pharmaceutical industry has a lot of it. And doctors want more of it. The result is that the industry has bought the profession (or most of it). When I have spoken to individual doctors I have invariably been able to convince them of the horrors of the present system. But most doctors, even when they have had their eyes opened to what is happening, prefer to close their eyes again. They find it all too alarming and too frightening. They just don’t want to know. They don’t think we can change anything. And they are frightened of causing trouble because they know that if they cause trouble their careers will be finished. Young doctors are particularly nervous about speaking out. Older doctors are often ‘bought’ and too much in need of the money they can get from the drugs industry to sustain their lifestyles. Millions die and suffer because the medical establishment has sold its soul. If more doctors dared to question the authorities the world would be a very different (healthier and happier) place. The tragedy is that no one in the medical establishment cares much about facts or evidence. They have numerous preconceived ideas – which, by a beautiful coincidence, just happen to fit in with the needs and wants of the drug industry.

The Government and the drug industry controlled medical profession are now even enthusiastic about healthy people taking drugs. There are, for example, around four million people in Britain now taking cholesterol-lowering ‘superdrugs’. In July 2008, it was revealed that these drugs might cause problems. Readers of my book *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You* have been aware of the problems associated with these drugs since 1996. Despite the dangers the cholesterol lowering drugs are widely advertised and promoted – even though I don’t believe there is evidence that these drugs are safe or useful enough for such mass consumption.

As drug companies become increasingly aware that curing serious disease is beyond their capability (and, indeed, their desire – for why should drug companies, which make their money out of people being sick, want to make people well?), they spend more and more effort on finding drugs to improve life or performance in some vague way. Profits, not patients, are now the driving force which rule the medical profession’s motives, ambitions and actions. Doctors don’t seem to care any more. The passion has gone out of medicine.

Medical journals claim that they make researchers disclose their financial links to drug companies when writing about their products. However, I doubt if there are 100 doctors in Britain who can honestly claim that they are not linked in some way to a drug company, have not had a meal off them, or do not have an office full of free pens or a golf bag full of sponsored balls.

When the *LA Times* looked at 36 drug therapy articles published it found that eight had been written by researchers who hadn’t disclosed their links to drug companies. I’m surprised they found so few. One study showed that 96% of authors who wrote favourably about calcium channel blocking drugs used for angina and high blood pressure had some sort of financial relationship with the drug company making the drug being discussed and that in only two out of 70 articles did authors divulge their connection. And, as I have shown many times in the past, even Government safety committees are riddled with people who have links to drug companies.

On 22nd February 2011, the Government warned that a large number of patients who are being treated for high blood pressure don’t actually have high blood pressure. How this could possibly be described as news is quite beyond me. I first warned that blood pressure was being over treated over 30 years ago. Naturally, I was pilloried for it by the medical establishment and the medical press. But it wasn't a difficult conclusion to draw. As a GP I often acquired new patients who had been given repeat prescriptions for powerful anti-hypertensive therapies for years without ever seeing a doctor. In the early 1970s I was criticised viciously for daring to suggest that blood pressure could often be raised by stress and could, therefore, be brought under control if sufferers learned how to control their stress. Moreover, it is often remarkably easy for people with moderately high blood pressure to bring their blood pressure down simply by making moderate lifestyle changes (losing weight, giving up cigarettes, taking gentle exercise, reducing their exposure to stress and so on.) I have lost count of the number of readers who have followed my advice on this and been able to bring their blood pressure under control. Why does it always take doctors so long to see the obvious? The answer, of course, is that doctors are controlled by drug companies. And drug companies prefer to treat every symptom or sign with drugs – whether it is necessary to do so or not. Today, more than 8.5 million people in the UK are registered as having high blood pressure. All are treated with expensive and dangerous drugs. The Government now says that a quarter of these don't have it. That is a massive under-estimate. At least a half of these do not have high blood pressure – and never had it. Moreover, at least half of the remaining half could control their blood pressure without drug treatment.

Even more scary is the fact that most medical treatments are untried and unproven to be any good at all. The evidence for this apparently provocative claim can be found in books of mine such as *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You* and *Betrayal of Trust*. Even drug treatments which are well established have still not yet been properly evaluated. For example, doctors still don't know whether a course of antibiotics should be given for five, seven, ten or fourteen days for the best results.

Drugs are wildly overprescribed, both by hospital doctors and by general practitioners. It is now over 30 years since I first exposed the dangers of benzodiazepines and over 20 years since a Tory Government admitted that it had introduced new legislation as a result of my campaign. But still benzodiazepines are overprescribed and still they are prescribed badly, without thought and without awareness of the often disastrous consequences for patients. Vast numbers of other drugs, including antibiotics and painkillers as well as antidepressants, are frequently overprescribed. Vaccines are a major cause of illness and death.

Much of the medical establishment denies all this, of course, and still steadfastly and stubbornly refuses to acknowledge that 'alternative' or 'complementary' medical techniques have a great deal to offer. Gentle therapies, and gentle practitioners, are deliberately demonised by the drug industry controlled medical establishment. A reader wrote to say that her late husband was a pharmacist for over 60 years. She said that although his daily job was dispensing medicines he always preferred to use natural remedies himself. He was, she said, amazed at the length of time patients were kept on some drugs without any check to find out if they still needed them.

Surprisingly, even universities are now very closely linked to drug companies. Since 1988, British universities have been allowed to exploit the intellectual property they generate. As a result, academics around the world have become multimillionaires through working on new drugs while accepting university salaries. They and the drug companies then make fortunes out of the work done with taxpayers' money. Astonishingly, 45 out of the world's 50 top selling drugs were developed and or tested with taxpayers' money. So many academics have links to drug companies that there are now virtually no independent scientists in Britain. Corruption is embedded and endemic.

The result is that the emphasis during medical training is far too much on profit and far too much on drug therapy. Most medical schools don't bother to teach students anything about alternative therapies. Doctors are taught nothing about nutrition or relaxation. Alternative remedies are sneered at and often banned because of the power of the big drug companies. An astonishing 95% of malaria victims can be cured within three days with a few tablets made with an extract from the leaves of the sweet-wormwood weed. This medicine was used virtually to rid Vietnam of malaria in the 1990s. Western attempts to deal with malaria have been an abject and scandalous failure. The death rate from malaria has continued to climb and the disease is one of the world's worst killers. The WHO approved the extract from sweet-wormwood in 2001 but the big American drug companies actively and successfully opposed its use. The problem, for them, is that the raw materials come from China and no American company owns a patent on the product. So, in Africa around 3,000 children die every day from malaria. And yet, although they were keen to prevent a non-patented product being made available, the drug companies pay very little attention to malaria. Orthodox doctors routinely lie about the value of alternative medicines. Anyone who says that alternative therapy never works for cancer, for example, is either very stupid, a sadist or simply woefully ill-informed. Or, perhaps, receiving a large grant or fee from a drug company.

When he writes out a prescription your doctor has to rely upon the honesty and integrity of the drug company making the product he is prescribing. And since most drug companies do not operate in an honest way that is a fundamental error of trust which can lead to many problems. You suffer from his trust in the drug company. To that you must add the fact that all patients are individual and different. A drug which has proved effective and safe when given to 99 or 999 patients may still prove dangerous and deadly when given to the 100th or the 1000th patient.

Every patient who takes a drug – even a well tried drug – is participating in an experiment. Most doctors either do not understand this or they forget it in the heat of daily practice. To make things worse, doctors often prescribe several drugs at once; frequently prescribing two drugs which interact dangerously. The dangers of polypharmacy still fail to be recognised, even though interactions are common and can be deadly.

On 24th June 2011 the British press reported that researchers had warned doctors that mixtures of common prescription drugs could kill and might exacerbate serious health problems such as dementia. It was announced in the *Daily Telegraph* that the new research 'shows for the first time that mixing drugs has a significant impact on a patient's chance of death'.

However, I have been warning for many years that drug interactions are dangerous and deadly. In my book *The Medicine Men* (first published in 1975) I wrote: 'It is the problem of drug interactions which is likely to cause most controversy in the future. There are many possibilities. Metabolism of one drug may affect another. Drugs may react chemically together within the body and excretory rates may be modified with devastating results. Patent medicines and even foodstuffs may react.'

I then spent several pages of the book explaining why drug interactions were so potentially dangerous.

That was in 1975. But neither doctors nor journalists take much notice of history – especially when it is inconvenient.

Sadly, tragically, doctors have become so used to doing what they are told by the industry that they have become accustomed to prescribing pills for every problem. They have lost the breadth of vision to enable them to see opportunities for cure outside the traditional range of pharmacological opportunities.

The drug industry has convinced doctors that everyone they see must need a drug and that there is a pill for every ill. The majority of doctors might as well be employed directly by the drug companies as pretend to be independent, authoritative scientists. They prescribe what they are told to prescribe in exactly the same way that the drug company representatives promote what they are told to promote.

The modern doctor would like to be regarded as a mystical healer; that, indeed, is how he probably sees himself in his dreams. But in reality the modern doctor is little more than a drug company employee; pushing the latest line in wonder drugs with evangelical enthusiasm, never daring to criticise or to question the promotional material he is shown, grasping his free pen, golf ball or umbrella and wearily handing out the latest wonder drug until it is superseded by another wonder drug and imagining that by prescribing the latest new drug he is remaining on the frontiers of science and helping to push back the barriers of ignorance. How many know, I wonder, that new drugs are tested and licensed for safety (in a vague, entirely satisfactory sort of way it has to be said) but not for effectiveness.

The fact that the medical profession is dominated and controlled by the pharmaceutical industry would not matter so much if the drug industry were honest, responsible and ethical. But it isn't. There is no other industry in the world which is as profitable or as ruthless as the drugs industry.

According to a survey published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* nearly two thirds of the pharmaceutical advertisements in medical journals were either grossly misleading or downright inaccurate. A total of 109 advertisements from 10 leading medical journals were each reviewed by two doctors and an academic clinical pharmacist. The reviewers used guidelines from the Food and Drug Administration to assess the advertisements. In 30% of cases the independent reviewers disagreed with the advertiser's claim that the drug was the drug of choice. In 44% of cases the reviewers thought that the advertisement would lead to improper prescribing if a doctor had no information about the drug other than that provided in the advertisement.

New diseases are 'discovered' all the time. You will excuse my cynicism, and my suspicion that these new diseases are discovered for a reason, when I tell you that most of these new diseases just happen to be enormously profitable. One of the most profitable is a disorder known as COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease) which is actually a relatively new catch all name for a variety of chest disorders including asthma, emphysema and chronic bronchitis. In the bad old days patients with these individual disorders were treated as when treatment was required. Today, the new philosophy seems to be that patients with COPD should take constant medication – whether they actually need it or not.

Another new disease is 'isolated systolic hypertension'. Just a few years ago doctors believed that only the diastolic figure was of significance when measuring blood pressure. The systolic, or higher figure, was regarded as of little consequence by itself. And then drug companies noticed that around 80% of all individuals over the age of 65 had normal diastolic pressures but systolic pressures that were high compared with younger patients. And so, surprise, surprise, a new disease came into being – 'isolated systolic hypertension' – and it became necessary for doctors to start treating the high systolic pressure.

Occasionally politicians mutter about the obscene levels of drug company profits but the industry is efficient and ruthless and politicians are usually dealt with easily. The truth is that most politicians are, for a variety of reasons, reluctant to interfere with the drug industry. Drug companies provide jobs and pay taxes; in most developed countries they bring in revenue from abroad. Even the least effective drug company should be able to sell its product to developing countries.

But the key factor in the failure of the politicians to control the drug industry is surely that neither politicians nor industrialists are particularly keen to see illness conquered. The drug industry wants to see as many people as possible suffering from long-term, incurable illnesses. The politicians wants to see people die before they become old and dependant. If more money was spent on preventing cancer (around 80% of cancers are preventable and other diseases) then the average life expectancy would go up dramatically and the incidence of disease and disability would fall. But the drug industry doesn't want a healthy nation (it would sell fewer drugs) and the politicians don't want any more people living to an old age because they know that they would not be able to cope with the pension bills they would have to pay. The astonishing truth is that the drug industry needs to keep the voters ill in order to maintain its profits and the politicians want to help them achieve that aim.

The medical establishment, which has sold its soul for pots of gold and which is now controlled by an industry whose primary aim is to maximise the number of sick people in society, rarely criticises the drug industry. Most academic research departments, medical journals and medical associations rely heavily if not exclusively on the drug industry. The drug industry effectively owns the medical establishment.

A reader wrote to me and suggested that if drug companies got their way the official NHS motto would be 'First do not heal'. He is absolutely right. Drug companies do not want patients to be healed. Sick people are profitable. Healthy people are not. Turning people into chronic invalids is far more profitable than curing them.

13. The Unfair Sex

Politicians and bureaucrats who know nothing about anything but regulate everything, decreed, back in 1974, that there must, in future, be the same number of female doctors as there are male doctors. There is no law ruling that there should be as many male nurses, models or ballet dancers as there are female nurses, models or ballet dancers but there is a rule (doubtless originating in some luxurious and expensively furnished office in Brussels) that there must be as many women doctors as there are men doctors.

It was decided that this absurd and extraordinarily sexist law would be enforced by introducing sexual discrimination into medical school selection policies. As a result, well over half of all new medical students are now female. The aim is not just to produce as many women doctors as male doctors but to make the total number of women doctors equal to the total number of male doctors. Since there have traditionally been far more male doctors than female doctors the changes are being made quickly and dramatically by training more women than men.

This sexist lunacy is destroying medicine as a profession and killing patients by the thousand. Forcing medical schools to take a greater percentage of girls than boys has been disastrous; there are always fewer girls than boys applying and so medical schools have had to take the dregs of the female applications in order to match their quotas. Moreover, there are far fewer women who genuinely want to be doctors – and students who aren't driven by a real vocation make terrible doctors. Naturally, no one dares protest about this obscene and dangerous example of sexual discrimination, despite the fact that it is producing very real problems.

The truth is that the majority of women doctors should be doing something else for a living – nursing, perhaps. Patients – both male and female – would be much better off without them. There is good science behind this apparently politically incorrect argument. It is well-known that accidents rise considerably when a woman is premenstrual. Astonishingly, 93% of crimes committed by women are committed in the premenstrual phase and it is not infrequently argued that women who commit crimes when their hormones are bewildered should not be convicted. Accidents in the home and on the road rise dramatically in that time of the month. Should women be allowed to have positions of authority of responsibility? Doesn't all this make it dangerous to put women in charge of operating theatres, Government departments or police forces? The question should at least be asked. But no one in authority has the guts to ask it. And even if they did no one would have the courage to answer it honestly.

The decree that medical students should be selected not according to vocation or intellect but according to chromosome resulted in massive changes to the whole philosophy of medical care and, allied to the changes in working hours introduced as a result of legislation introduced by the European Union, destroyed the concept of continuity of care. I have no doubt that the insistence that medical schools give preference to women is one of the fundamental reasons for the deterioration in the quality of medical care.

Women doctors want to work part-time; they want to be home when their children come in from school, they want to be there to make tea, they don't want to work at nights or at weekends or on bank holidays. They want to have a year off every time they have a baby. And, of course, they want to have time off when they have 'time of the month' hormone problems. (Much the same thing has happened in Parliament, of course. Female politicians and Ministers don't want to work evenings or weekends.)

Am I the only one to have noticed that medicine is now controlled by women? Most senior nurses are women. Many senior administrative positions are held by women. And new equality laws mean that there are now more women doctors than ever before.

Is it really a coincidence that medical care is in a worse state than ever?

14. Killed By Prescription

Every few months another scandal exposes the dangers of a particular prescription drug: a seemingly safe and widely prescribed drug is found (often more by accident than deliberate research) to have been responsible for hundreds or thousands of deaths and serious injuries. The manufacturer will at first dispute the revelations and will then argue that the ‘cost’ (the number of deaths and disabilities caused by the drug) was acceptable and an unavoidable risk. The drug may or may not be withdrawn, or the guidelines may be changed slightly. There will be no apologies. There is unlikely to be any compensation. Attempted lawsuits are usually seen off with the help of (highly-paid) expert medical advisors giving evidence on behalf of the company.

But all this is little more than a superficial distraction. The real problem, and the real cause of the endemic problem of iatrogenesis, is the steady drip drip of death and disability caused by hundreds or thousands of widely prescribed prescription drugs which remain on the market.

Doctors believe (because they want to believe it) that drugs are reliable and effective. As long as doctors believe this then they can convince themselves that *they* are reliable and effective and useful. But the truth is that drug making is so crude that Severin Schwan the boss of Roche, the massive and powerful Swiss drugs firm has said: ‘Drugmaking is so crude that half of all known diseases cannot be treated at all, and the drugs for the other half work properly only half the time and with huge side effects.’

It is this gap between hope and expectation on the one side, and reality on the other, which results in so much danger and so much illness.

The truth, of course, is that all drugs are potentially harmful. There isn’t a drug on the planet which can’t do harm – and even kill people. It’s the risk-benefit relationship which doctors (and patients) ignore. If a doctor gives you a drug without which you will die then the risks are almost inconsequential. But if you don’t really need a drug and the drug makes you ill then the risk is unacceptable. Antibiotics save lives. But they also kill people. If you have an infection which might kill you then taking an antibiotic is a good thing. But if you have a viral infection then taking an antibiotic (which might kill you) is pretty stupid. There’s no benefit but a lot of risk. Some drugs are potentially useful. All drugs are potentially harmful.

Most people take far too many medicines – without knowing why they are taking them, what the medicine is designed to do, what the side effects might be and what might happen if the drug is not taken. Doctors have created drug dependency among patients. To understand why you have to understand the history of the modern general practitioner. Today’s GP is descended from the apothecary. And apothecaries weren’t allowed to charge a consultation fee. The only way they could make money was by prescribing and dispensing potions. The business of handing out drugs has become a part of the consultation ritual. When a doctor doesn’t have the foggiest idea what to do she reaches for the prescription pad. And, of course, many doctors use the prescription pad as a way to cut short a consultation. Not surprisingly, doctor-induced illness is now a major problem. It may often be easier to end a consultation by handing over a prescription or a medicine. But that doesn’t mean that it is the right thing to do. On the contrary, doctors should be more responsible for this. They should educate their patients and they should only prescribe drugs when drugs are essential, useful and likely to do more harm than good.

Sadly, doctors know very little about the medicines they recommend to their patients. Most of the information they have comes directly from the company selling the product – which obviously has a vested interest in promoting the virtues and covering up the defects. As a result of this ignorance four out of every ten patients who visit a doctor and receive a prescription will suffer noticeable, severe or even lethal side effects. If a patient is taking a drug which will help keep him alive then side effects are an acceptable risk. But if a patient is taking a drug he doesn’t really need then the risks are unacceptable.

Since the end of the 1970s I have argued that we need an international computerised drug monitoring service – designed to make sure that doctors in one part of the world know when doctors in other countries have spotted problems. Astonishingly, no such system exists. You might imagine that when a drug is withdrawn in one country other countries will take similar action. But you would be wrong. One drug that was officially withdrawn from the market in the USA and France was not officially withdrawn in the UK until five years later.

The myth that we live long and healthy lives thanks to the drug industry and the medical profession has increased our expectations. We no longer expect to fall ill. We expect a magic solution when we fall ill. We don’t want to be bothered making any effort to stay healthy because we have been taught to have faith that if we fall ill then the medical men will be able to cure us.

It is widely accepted that the majority of illnesses do not need drug treatment. Most patients who visit a doctor neither want nor expect drug treatment. But at least eight out of ten patients who visit a general practitioner will be given a prescription (though growing numbers of patients do not take the drugs that are prescribed for them). Huge numbers of people in the community are given drugs which have only ever been tested on hospital patients. I think patients should always be aware of the potential side effects of any drug they take (whether they take it for medical, social or recreational reasons). Only when patients know the downside can they make a rational decision about whether the risk in taking a particular drug is worth taking. How many of the patients taking a drug know the full picture? (There is a free list of possible side effects for many of the most popular prescription drugs on my website www.vernoncoleman.com).

Ironically, although we consume greater and greater quantities of medicine than ever before more of us are ill today than at any time in history. On any day you care to choose in just about any developed country you care to mention over half the population will be taking a drug of some kind. A survey of 9,000 Britons concluded that one in three people suffers from a long-standing illness or disability. Other surveys have shown that in any one 14 day period, 95% of the population consider themselves to be unwell for at least a few of those days. At no time in history has illness been so commonplace. We spend more than ever on health care but no one could argue that there is any less suffering in our society.

It is now widely accepted that at least 40% of all the people who are given prescription medicines will suffer uncomfortable, hazardous or potentially lethal side effects. And yet the vast majority of doctors never admit that their patients suffer any side effects. In Britain, for example, five out of six doctors have never reported any drug side effects to the authorities – authorities who admit that they receive information on no more than 10% – 15% of even the most serious adverse drug reactions occurring in patients. In other words they admit that they never hear about at least 85% – 90% of all dangerous drug reactions. Astonishingly, it is even accepted that some doctors will withhold reports of serious adverse reactions, and keep their suspicions to themselves, in the hope that they may later be able to win fame by publishing their findings in a journal or revealing their discovery to a newspaper or magazine.

Patients who take drugs are taking a risk; they are often taking part in a massive experiment and by taking a medicine may become worse off than if they had done nothing. To make things worse no one knows exactly how big the risks are when a particular drug is taken. All drugs are potential poisons that may heal or may kill.

The medical profession, the drug industry and the regulatory bodies all accept that the hazards of using any drug will only be known when the drug has been given to large numbers of patients for a considerable period of time. But no one seems particularly keen to monitor drugs which are being used. There is a vast and breathtaking shortage of common sense within the medical profession.

In October 2008, it was finally admitted that taking aspirin to prevent heart attacks might do more harm than good. Prior to that date many doctors were recommending that healthy patients took daily aspirin as a prophylactic. But I don’t believe there was any convincing evidence showing that taking daily aspirin was safe. I had been so alarmed by the early research that I warned the instant it was published that the evidence didn’t prove taking aspirin routinely was either safe or effective. My advice was ignored and sneered at but you have to ask yourself who benefitted most from the suggestion that vast numbers of healthy people should take a daily drug? Sir Richard Doll, who did some research on this issue, was, like many members of the medical establishment, later discredited. After his death it was revealed that he, like so many other eminent doctors, had received consultancy payments from chemical companies whose products he had defended. For example, he received $1,500 a day from Monsanto and had a ‘relationship’ with the controversial company from 1976 until 2002.

In August 2010, the Government told doctors in Britain to weigh patients before giving them heparin. I have been screaming for years that this should be done for all drugs. It is utterly absurd that a seven stone woman should be given the same dose of a painkiller or antibiotic as a twenty stone man just because they are both ‘adults’. Why does it take doctors take so long to come to such obvious conclusions? The medical establishment lost touch with common sense a long, long time ago.

15. If You Want Holistic Medicine You Must Do It Yourself

There is a lot of talk about holistic medicine but there isn't much holistic medicine practised today. An intuitive, holistic approach goes against everything with which the bureaucratic, legalistic, constrained medical establishment feels comfortable. The medical establishment was bought by the drug industry decades ago. Modern medicine is geared to solving problems with drugs, surgery or radiotherapy and does not acknowledge the influence of stress or diet. Nor does the medical establishment appreciate the importance of preventive medicine. Doctors pay lip service to holistic medicine but what they really mean is that patients should be prepared to try a wide variety of drugs and orthodox medical treatments. Hospital specialists have drifted into intellectual parochialism. Most now specialise and then specialise again. They are absurdly narrow-minded and bigoted; there is no integration, no overview and no common sense.

Real holistic medicine means treating the patient in whatever way will produce effective, safe results. It means combining orthodox and alternative medicine. But whatever they may claim there are virtually no 'holistic' hospitals in Britain. And there are no holistic healers. If you want holistic medicine then you must become a holistic patient. That's a tragedy because most patients don't have the knowledge or the confidence to do this.

'Holistic' (or, as it sometimes spelt, wholistic) medicine has, for several decades, been growing in theoretical popularity. Many alternative and some orthodox health care professionals describe themselves as 'holistic' practitioners. But most aren't.

Most journalists inaccurately assume that the word is a synonym for 'alternative' or 'complementary' medicine.

But it isn't.

The word 'holistic' was first introduced in 1926 by the South African philosopher and statesman Jan Christian Smuts. He suggested that the whole human being is much more than (and quite different to) a collection of physical or emotional parts. Even in those days, it seems, there must have been doctors parading up and down hospital wards referring to the 'liver' in the end bed and the 'case of pancreatitis' in the third bed on the left.

The word and the concept lay more or less forgotten until the 1970s when the growth of high technology medicine led to a revolution among patients who felt that aggressive, interventionist medicine wasn't entirely satisfactory. Suddenly there was a feeling that specialisation and fragmentation were not all they had been cracked up to be.

In practical terms the use of the word 'holistic' meant, in theory at least, that instead of regarding patients as sick kidneys or hearts health care professionals would try to meet the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual needs of their patients by dealing with social problems as well as physical ones and by using natural healing methods as well as modern, pharmacological or surgical techniques.

In short, the word 'holistic' was intended to describe an attitude. An attitude which can be just as well followed by an orthodox trained doctor as by an alternative practitioner. A general practitioner in a busy city health centre can be 'holistic' in his approach just as easily as can a herbalist or acupuncturist working from a back bedroom.

There is no doubt that a truly 'holistic' approach to medical care is extremely good news for patients. When followed properly it means that every illness can be treated with a 'pick and mix' approach – choosing whichever aspects of orthodox and alternative medicine are most likely to be effective, and least likely to produce side effects, and treating and taking full notice of all aspects of the individual's being.

In many illnesses there is no point in treating what is wrong with the body unless you also treat what is wrong with the mind and it seems to me remarkable that a modern doctor will treat the body of a patient who is suffering from high blood pressure, irritable bowel syndrome or asthma but ignore the mind, when it is now established beyond doubt that in so many illnesses the physical symptoms are produced by mental turmoil of one sort or another. It is equally bizarre and, in truth, unscientific, for an osteopath to treat a patient's back and ignore his mind.

The advantages of a truly 'holistic' approach are colossal not only because 'holistic' medicine offers a chance to use the best and avoid the worst but also because different types of treatment can, when used together, have a synergistic effect. A genuinely 'holistic' approach may use a modern drug, a relaxation technique and a type of massage to tackle a single collection of symptoms.

But although in theory the word 'holistic' implies an admirable change in attitude there is, sadly, little evidence that practitioners really understand what the word means or how it should be applied in practice.

It would be nice to think that everyone could find a 'holistic' practitioner to look after them. But don't hold your breath. You've about as much chance of striking oil when digging in your winter vegetables.

The myth that drug therapy offers the only true solution is now repeated unquestioningly and without hesitation or embarrassment. Many members of the medical establishment believe that medical advances largely depend upon the pharmaceutical industry. This is not regarded as a subject for debate but as a fundamental building block; a fact of medical life.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the drug company owned and controlled medical establishment still looks with horror at all varieties of alternative medicine. Attempts to organise research programmes into the effectiveness of acupuncture, herbalism or homoeopathy are invariably treated with a sneer or a patronising dismissal.

It is one of the great scandals of the 21st century that the billion dollar worldwide cancer industry, the international drug industry and the medical ‘profession’ (now, more of a trade than a ‘profession’) would all much rather suppress an alternative cancer treatment rather than have to admit that orthodox remedies might be bettered.

I don’t think that many patients are ever going to receive truly ‘holistic’ treatment from their practitioners. Most training programmes are, by their very nature, designed to produce specialists. Medical schools turn out drug dispensers and cutters. And there aren’t many health care professionals with the time or inclination to study other available specialities.

We must also recognise that there is, of course, a huge financial disincentive involved here. How many practitioners are going to suggest to a paying patient that he would obtain better treatment by visiting another professional?

All this is sad.

But it doesn’t mean that ‘holistic’ medicine is out of reach. What it does mean is that if you really want ‘holistic’ treatment (and in my opinion you should) you’re going to have to take control yourself if you or anyone in your family needs treatment.

16. The NHS Has Too Much Money (But Wastes Most Of It)

It is constantly claimed that the NHS needs more money. This is a lie of political proportions. The people who work for it (and who have their snouts deep in the trough) are forever claiming that the organisation is underfunded. They are, of course, lying. And their lies are inspired by self-interest.

Throwing money at the NHS won't solve any of its problems. The sick joke is that the NHS already has too much money. What it lacks is leadership. No one in charge seems to know how money and resources should be spent. Employees spend most of their working hours finding new ways to grab as much of it as they can for themselves. They spend the rest of their time avoiding responsibility (legal and moral) and work. Patients wait for hours in casualty departments and for months for life saving surgery because money is wasted on pot plants, fancy furniture and obscene salaries for regiments of besuited men and women who contribute nought point zilch to patient care.

One basic problem with the NHS is that the people who work for it aren't spending their own money. And when people aren't spending their own money they do reckless, thoughtless things. The staff waste and steal.

I know of so many ways in which money is wasted or stolen by NHS employees that I hardly know where to begin. Hospital consultants who have private patients as well as NHS responsibilities often arrive hours late or slip away a few hours early – leaving their NHS patients to be looked after by young doctors who are supposed to be being trained. Consultants who do this are stealing time – and money – from the NHS. Bureaucrats, nurses and orderlies steal food, toilet rolls, disinfectant, writing paper, pens, envelopes and so on. Doctors tend to be more ambitious. They steal expensive bits of equipment which they use to equip their private consulting rooms. The amount of money wasted because employees fail to turn off lights that aren't needed – or to turn down heating that isn't necessary – would pay for the building and running of several new hospitals. Millions more are wasted on pointless and stupid paperwork and bureaucracy. The NHS must surely be the most bureaucratic and inefficient organisation in Britain. Vast amounts of money are wasted on handing out redundancy payments to NHS employees who have a weekend off and then find themselves being rehired – either as full time NHS staff or as private consultants. The greed of the Government in pushing the price of a prescription up beyond the price of many constituent drugs has made life very easy for thieves. The patient hands over a prescription and the required bundle of cash (one prescription charge for every item on the form). If the drug being prescribed is available without a prescription – and costs less than the prescription charge – the pharmacist simply tosses the prescription into the bin and keeps the price difference.

Not even privatising NHS hospitals has eradicated the waste. There are some former NHS hospitals which are now run as purely private hospitals and there is some irony in that it was a Labour Government which put dozens of NHS hospitals into private hands through its absurd 'Private Finance Initiative'. Privatisation of health services through the Private Finance Initiative might have sounded a good idea to someone but the NHS now pays a fortune for having some of its hospital run for it. For example, one PFI contractor was recently revealed to have charged the NHS £333 to change a single light fitting in a hospital. (There are no decimal points missing, the sum charged really was £333.) That contractor subsequently made a profit of £37 million pounds when it sold its stake in the management of a former NHS hospital to a bank. Just how the nation benefitted from this piece of accounting nonsense I cannot imagine.

In October 2010, there was much fuss about the fact that Monaco resident and frock salesman Sir Philip Green had, after an investigation, discovered that civil servants waste lots of money when buying office paper and other essentials. I can guarantee that nothing much will happen. In the early 1980s I exposed NHS waste in some articles in the *Daily Star* (where I was a columnist at the time). I wrote the exposé after I received a computer print-out from a reader showing that the NHS was paying more for staples such as pens, paper and toilet rolls than I would pay if I bought them one at a time at a local supermarket. The editor told me that the Prime Minister was much excited by this and gave copies to every cabinet member. There was a great flurry of activity in Whitehall in general and in the NHS in particular but, of course, whenever anything is exposed any official department's first response is to search for the leak, rather than deal with the problem and so the NHS initiated an immediate enquiry designed not to find out why billions were being wasted but to discover how I had found out that billions were being wasted. The inquiry didn't find out anything which wasn't entirely surprising because (apart from the person who had given it to me) there was only one person in the world who knew where I'd acquired my information and they didn't bother to ask me. (I wouldn't have told them anything if they had bothered to ask me but they didn't know that.)

And yet whenever taxes rise the Government claims the extra money is needed for the NHS.

But money won't cure what's wrong with the NHS.

The principle problem is that the NHS has become a bureaucratic monster. There are now more administrators than hospital beds in the NHS. The damned administrators are probably even more numerous than the cockroaches – and considerably less useful. (The cockroaches do at least clear up bits of food left rotting on the floor).

And it isn’t just administrators. The NHS is also heavily laden with committees, advisors and quangos. There are thousands of them. The bill for their tea and biscuits alone would pay for a few thousand more nurses. Any business which tried to cope with the input from so many amateurs would be a disaster. The solution is to share the authority out among the people who have the responsibility. And that is never going to happen within the NHS.

17. When Trials Are Tribulations

One of the major reasons for the disastrously high incidence of problems associated with drug use is the fact that the initial clinical trials, performed before a drug is made available for all general practitioners to prescribe for their patients, rarely involve more than a few thousand patients. Some initial trials may involve no more than half a dozen patients.

However, it is now well-known that severe problems often do not appear either until at least 50,000 patients have taken a drug or until patients have used a drug for many months or even years. Because of this a huge death toll can build up over the years. Drug control authorities admit that when a new drug is launched no one really knows what will happen or what side effects will be identified.

Doctors and drug companies are, it seems, using the public in a constant, ongoing, mass testing programme. And the frightening truth is that far more people are killed as a result of prescription drugs (including vaccines) than are killed as a result of using illegal drugs such as heroin or cocaine.

Doctors remain committed to the inadequate, preliminary trials because they get paid to perform them. In America, doctors who do trials for drug companies can earn an extra £650,000 a year. One company paid doctors £27,300 for every patient used in a trial. Academics are paid grants to work as consultants for drug companies. They receive fat fees for writing and speaking. They are given shares and royalties and they are allowed to put their names on articles written by company staff. A survey showed that a third of medical articles published are written by authors who hold a patent related to the invention they were writing about, or who were employees or shareholders in the company exploiting the research or were members of a board of advisors to a drug company or held some other financial interest. None of the papers published mentioned the authors' financial interests.

NHS patients are frequently used in clinical trials, without regard for their own symptoms or needs. Patients are given drugs that need testing. Doctors, torn between loyalty to their patients and loyalty to the drug companies, tend to swing easily in one direction and the result is that patients who have a low or non-existent chance of benefitting from a trial are put at risk simply so that drug companies and doctors can make money. Patients in stage 1 trials are unlikely to gain anything. They believe that their doctor is trying out a wonderful new drug on them but in reality they are doing toxicity tests – which may be very dangerous. Their doctor, however, will make a big chunk of money.

Another problem is that research produced by drug companies is provably biased. One critic recently assessed the published studies where one non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug had been compared to another. He concluded: 'In every single trial, the sponsoring company's drug was either equivalent to or better than, the drug it was compared to: all the drugs were better than all the other drugs.'

On top of all this, drug companies sometimes refuse to allow publication of articles which are critical about their drugs. Articles which draw attention to problems are suppressed. Doctors who want their articles published learn to say good things when they write about pharmaceutical products.

18. If You Are Over 50 Your Government Wants You Dead

In Britain, it is now official Government policy to ignore the needs of the elderly. Doctors and nurses are told to let old people die – and to withhold treatment which might save their lives. Hospital staff are told to deprive the elderly of food and water so that they die rather than take up hospital beds. Nursing home staff have even been given the right to sedate elderly patients without their knowledge. The only -ism that no one cares about is ageism.

But at what age are patients simply allowed to die? And how old is too old for patients to be resuscitated? At what point does society have the right to say ‘You’ve lived long enough, now you must die and make way for someone else’? And why should resuscitation be decided by age? It is possible to argue that it would make as much sense to decide according to wealth or beauty. But ageism is now officially accepted. Anyone over 60 is now officially old, though in a growing number of hospitals the cut off age for resuscitation is 55.

We live in a politically correct world but the elderly don’t count – particularly if they are white and English. Report after report after report shows elderly patients being left in pain, in soiled bed clothes. Elderly patients in hospital are ignored by staff and left to starve to death, denied even water if they cannot get out of bed and fetch it themselves.

Old people are a burden which the Government cannot afford and so the politicians will continue to authorise whatever methods are necessary to ensure that the number of burdensome old people is kept to a minimum. The existence of an absurd branch of medicine called geriatrics is used as an excuse to shove old people into backwater wards and to provide them with second-rate medical treatment. In February 2011, an official report condemned the NHS for its ‘inhumane treatment of elderly patients’ and stated that NHS hospitals were ‘failing to meet even the most basic standards of care’ for the over-65s. It is no exaggeration to say that the NHS treats the elderly with contempt. (It used to be said that you can judge a civilisation by the way it treats its elderly.)

It was back in February 2005 that it was revealed that the Government had advised that hospital patients with little hope of recovery should be allowed to die because of the cost of keeping them alive. The Labour Government suggested that ‘old people’ be denied the right to food and water if they fell into a coma or couldn’t speak for themselves. So much for any hope for stroke victims. The Government suggested that the need to cut costs came before the need to preserve the lives of patients and decided it had the right to overturn a right-to-life ruling which had been made when a judge ordered that artificial nutrition and hydration should not be withdrawn unless the life of a patient could be described as ‘intolerable’. (The judge had added that when there was any doubt, preservation of life should take precedence.)

Of course, depriving the elderly of food and water is sometimes more a consequence of incompetence than official policy. When my mother was in hospital in Exeter she couldn’t feed herself but the staff didn’t feed her. If no relative could get to the hospital to feed her she didn’t eat. Drinks were put on her tray and then taken away untouched. ‘Not thirsty, today?’ an idiot would ask merrily.

Meanwhile, the Government pours money into subsidising the lives of the lazy and the work-shy. Healthy 30-year-olds sit around growing chip backsides and beer bellies, slumped in front of their high definition digital television sets watching their choice of State subsidised satellite television, opening the windows to let the heat out because it’s easier than turning down the central heating.

The elderly are classified as the ‘Unwanted Generation’: a political embarrassment. Elderly individuals facing blindness from age-related macular disease are denied drugs that might have prevented their blindness. The elderly are considered expensive, useless and expendable. The theory is that they don’t contribute and rarely vote and can, therefore, be disregarded. But those who believe this will be old sooner than they think. And the definition of ‘old’ is getting younger by the year.

Wars have taught us that people seem to be prepared to accept as normal all sorts of terrible things. But how unbelievably awful it is that doctors and nurses accept that the elderly (officially the over 60s) must be allowed to die because keeping them alive isn’t cost effective. The official attitude seems to be that old people don’t matter and don’t have rights simply because they are old. In mid August 2007, a Select Committee on Human Rights, comprised of MPs and peers, reported that 21% of hospitals and care homes failed to meet even minimum standards of dignity and privacy for older people. The Committee said it had uncovered evidence of neglect, abuse, discrimination and unfair treatment of frail, older people. (Their discovery came as no surprise to those of us who have been uncovering such abuse for decades.) How have we managed to forget that in the 1930s the Nazis deliberately starved and dehydrated elderly and vulnerable patients because they were regarded as a useless burden on society? That is exactly what we are doing today.

An astonishing (and horrifying) survey conducted among readers of the journals *Nursing Standard* and *Nursing Older People* showed that fewer than one in six nurses said that nothing would prevent them from reporting abuse of older people in their care.

In other words five out of six nurses would, at least sometimes, fail to report abuse of the elderly people they were being paid to look after. So, in my view, five out of six of nurses aren't fit to be nurses.

Would these same nurses ignore the abuse of children so easily?

I suspect not.

This is utterly appalling and an indictment of the modern nursing profession.

The same survey showed that six out of ten nurses would turn a blind eye to the abuse of the elderly. They would say nothing if they knew that an elderly patient or care home resident was being beaten, bullied or robbed.

Why are nurses failing their patients?

One reason is cowardice.

Unbelievably, it seems that nurses are frightened to report abuse in case they themselves are abused by the person doing the abuse.

Oh, please.

Another reason is, apparently, 'fear of misinterpreting the situation'.

What sort of political correct garbage is that?

Hospital patients and nursing home residents now often suffer malnutrition and dehydration, abuse and rough treatment, lack of privacy, neglect, poor hygiene and bullying. Thousands and thousands of elderly people are left for hours in soiled clothes.

How can anyone 'misinterpret' any of that?

And *why?*

I'll tell you why.

Can it be because too many modern nurses are lazy, stupid and incompetent. Too many are far too self-important to do anything other than stare at a computer screen all day long.

In my view, nurses who say nothing when they see abuse are as guilty as the abusers. A once great profession is, today, in a worse state than it was in the days of Dickens. Is it so very old-fashioned of me to believe that every nurse should always report every incident of abuse? Always. Without exception.

Ageism is, it seems, now endemic in health care. A reader wrote to tell me that when she visited her doctor complaining of painful knees her doctor told her, very abruptly, that her problem was that she was living too long. She was devastated. 'It wasn't said as a joke,' she told me. 'He meant it.' In the months before he died my father repeatedly complained: 'People treat me like a fool because I am old'. A 79-year-old reader told me: 'If you are over 55 they want you dead because you're too expensive alive.'

We now live in a world where it is considered acceptable for men and women to have to share a ward; where hospital bathrooms are so dirty that patients dare not use them; where dentists are so scarce and expensive that people have to resort to pulling their own bad teeth with the aid of a length of string tied to a doorknob. But it is the elderly who, above all others, are regarded as disposable and irrelevant. It is the elderly who have no rights. Sexism and racism are outlawed but ageism is not. Indeed, it seems clear that ageism is now a State sponsored prejudice. Violent, feral youths who are caught assaulting elderly law-abiding citizens are likely to be 'punished' with a fistful of vouchers entitling them to a handful of free CDs (the lyrics of which may well encourage more violence) but honest, elderly citizens who, cannot afford to pay their council tax bill will end up in prison.

When doctors are owned by the Government then the Government's priorities take over. And so the elderly, who are regarded as an expensive burden, are considered expendable.

19. Your Doctor Will Kill You Now: The Cruel Waiting Game

Waiting lists are virtually unknown in other countries and they exist in Britain only because the NHS exists. If there were no NHS there would be no waiting lists. I have often found it difficult to explain the concept of a waiting list to see a doctor (let alone for essential life-saving surgery) to foreign doctors and patients.

The sad truth is that hardly anyone in the health care industry seems to give a damn about patients any more. As a doctor I have been embarrassed for years by the way patients are now treated. I have heard of patients kept waiting for hours in outpatient departments because 60 people were all booked in at 2.00 p.m. Weary, anxious patients then had two minutes with a junior doctor because the consultant who was paid to see them was seeing his private patients. Patients often think themselves lucky if the junior doctor who sees them speaks more than two words of English.

But keeping patients waiting isn't just a sign of rudeness on the part of the doctors. It can be deadly. And it now affects all areas of medical practice in Britain. Patients wait six months for vital X-rays. They wait weeks before they are told the results of laboratory tests. None of this is excusable. It happens because no one gives a damn. While patients and relatives suffer enormously the results they are waiting for sit on a desk, in a file or on a secretary's computer. Hospital staff either don't have any compassion or else they are determined sadists.

When I was a medical student and young doctor I remember being appalled to see obvious health problems in other countries. As I travelled around I spotted all sorts of untreated diseases: skin cancers, hernias, enlarged thyroids, dislocated hips and so on. It was difficult to travel through countries such as Turkey, Greece or North Africa without seeing a wide variety of untreated pathology. Now, in the UK, I often see people walking around with untreated pathology. They are, presumably, on someone's waiting list.

A reader wrote to tell me that she had been told by a doctor at the local hospital that she needed to have a barium enema examination to see if she had any serious bowel disease. 'I assume that he is talking about cancer' she wrote. 'But I have to wait 26 weeks before I can have the test done. Is it safe to wait that long?'

Of course it isn't safe to wait six months (or anything like that long) for a vital test which may show whether or not a cancer is developing. Some cancers can develop quickly and will, if left to develop unhindered for six months, become inoperable. By the time the barium enema result is available the patient could be dead.

Politicians (whose only specialist subjects are self-aggrandisement and self-enrichment) and media commentators (who do not understand very much about medical care) always give the impression that hospital waiting lists for surgery are all that really counts. This is nonsense. A patient who is ill and needs medical care can expect to have to have to wait not once but at least three times.

The first wait will be for the initial hospital outpatient appointment. It is not unknown for patients to have to wait a year for this preliminary appointment.

The second wait will be for the tests and investigations which the consultant considers necessary. A patient may have to wait another year for all these vital tests to be done. And then, when the tests have been done, there will be another wait for the results.

A reader of mine had a biopsy to find out whether or not a lump in her breast was cancerous. She had to wait three weeks before she received the result. (It was, inevitably, posted to her second class.) 'I nearly killed myself several times,' she told me. 'The pain of waiting was almost unbearable.'

When I was a young house surgeon I remember that it was not unusual for a surgeon to perform a breast biopsy on a patient on the operating table. The surgeon would then send the biopsy sample to the laboratory and have a cup of tea while he waited for the results. The anaesthetist would keep the patient unconscious. If the biopsy showed a cancer then the surgeon would continue with whatever operation he felt necessary. (The patient would have signed a consent form before leaving the ward.) If the biopsy showed that the lump was benign the patient would be awoken, sent back to the ward and given the good news. So why does it now take three weeks to produce results which can be produced in minutes? Any doctor who doesn't provide a patient with such results on the same day is a psychopathic bastard.

Doctors and hospitals are often appallingly and inexcusably slow. I have on my desk a letter sent by a GP to his female patients inviting them for a smear test to see if they had cervical cancer. They would, he told them, expect to have the result of their test in 13 weeks. Thirteen weeks! The unnecessary worry caused by a delay of this length will, I suspect, mean that the smear testing activities of this doctor do far more harm than good.

I've also received a letter sent out telling women suspected of having breast cancer that they must expect to wait as much as 17 weeks for an NHS test. I wonder how many know that by the time they have the test (and the results) they may well be incurable. (This does nothing to damage NHS success rates. A patient is only officially recorded as suffering from cancer on the date when she is diagnosed. The 17 week wait isn't counted.)

In 2010, my wife was suspected of having motor neurone disease. Several weeks after the tests had been done we still had not received the results. It seemed difficult to understand why. When my wife telephoned the hospital to see if they had the results of her tests she spoke to a secretary who reported that the letter telling her whether or not she had motor neurone disease had yet to be typed. And when it had been typed it would still have to be signed. My wife asked if the letter could be faxed. She was told it could not. Exacerbated by the stress her symptoms became worse than ever. A few days later I telephoned the hospital. The registrar was off sick. I was told that the letter telling my wife whether or not she had motor neurone disease had been typed but that it was waiting to be signed. I told the secretary to whom I spoke that the inmates of Guantanamo are treated better. She said that the letter would be sent when ready. I then pointed out that we had been waiting nearly three weeks to find out whether or not my wife had a fatal disease. I also pointed out that we had not once met her consultant. I added that when we went for nerve conduction tests two other men (one of them not medically qualified) had been invited to view. I told the secretary that my wife had been extremely embarrassed when told to remove her tights in front of the three men. There was no screen and no nurse. I added that I have a medical degree, am a registered and licensed GP and am a Professor of Holistic Medical Sciences and finally I said that under all the circumstances it might be a good idea if they faxed the letter to us that afternoon. An hour or so later the fax machine purred into life and the fax came through. All the tests were negative. My wife did not have motor neurone disease. She refused to go back to the hospital ever again. She said she would rather just wait and see what happened.

In the end it turned out that the letter had been dictated on 21st July 2010. It was typed on 5th August 2010. It was finally posted on 17th August 2010 and it arrived on the 19th August 2010.

Later, my wife was sent an NHS appointment which she cancelled. The hospital told her that if she cancelled again they wouldn't let her have any more appointments. And they wanted to know why she was cancelling. (They had arbitrarily chosen the date and had given about one week's notice). There's another problem.

Patients sometimes die untreated because doctors will not (or dare not) start any treatment until all the investigations have been completed. The fear of litigation means that doctors insist on waiting for written evidence before trying anything. Inevitably, this means that it is not infrequently too late to act by the time treatment is started. If, for example, there are two or three possible diagnoses available and only one of the diseases can be treated then it would seem to make sense to start the treatment for the disease which can be treated, even though laboratory evidence in support of that diagnosis might not be available. But this isn't what happens.

Finally, once the tests have been done, and the results obtained, the doctor will have to decide on the appropriate treatment: surgery, drugs or whatever else he considers most appropriate. At this stage it is, today, quite customary for NHS patients to have to wait 18 weeks before starting essential treatment. This is regarded as the target. This is not, of course, the sort of time that politicians or their families would be prepared to wait for treatment. And it is, remember, a target. In reality, many patients wait far longer than this.

It is the third type of wait, the wait for treatment, which makes up official hospital waiting lists. When politicians talk about there being a million patients awaiting treatment they are referring to this list – not to the other two lists.

The wait for treatment can be haunting and enormously stressful. Patients who need radiotherapy are supposed to receive it within four weeks but two thirds have to wait longer than that. Recent figures show that NHS patients with breast cancer wait up to 119 days for radiotherapy. If the radiotherapy is essential then they really might as well not bother. In fact the 119 days wait was the average at the hospitals managed by Oxford Radcliffe Hospitals NHS Trust, and patients referred for breast clinic assessments had to wait up to 126 days for their initial appointment so it seems fair to add the 126 days onto the 119 days. The reasons given were a shortage of equipment and of radiographers. I bet there were plenty of administrators.

Incidentally, when the 202 hospitals in England which give radiotherapy to breast cancer patients were asked to give information about their waiting times more than half (113) failed or refused to give any information so it is a fair bet many were much longer than 119 days.

(Just why do administrators think they have the right to keep such vital information secret?)

In my view any doctor who works at a hospital with outrageously long waiting times for cancer patients needing treatment should be struck off for unprofessional conduct. Someone really should be forced to take responsibility for something within the NHS. And the simple fact is that waiting lists are probably three times as bad as most people think they are – for the simple reason that patients have to wait three separate times for medical attention. And waiting is dangerous. It can kill you.

The idea of patients having to wait for essential, and possibly life-saving treatment, is something we've got used to. But Britain is the only country in the world where patients routinely have to wait for weeks, months or even years for essential treatment. Patients and doctors in other countries don't even understand the concept of a waiting list.

Waiting lists were originally an invention of part-time NHS consultants who wanted to boost their earnings from private patients. They kept their NHS lists long to encourage patients to pay for treatment. I first revealed this scandal in 1986. I was attacked rather viciously by many doctors at the time. But no one has bothered to deny the truth of this for a long time.

Today things are infinitely worse.

NHS hospitals have themselves become dependent on the extra income they receive from private patients. They need the cash desperate patients pay for investigations and treatment in order to pay the hugely inflated salary bill for administrators and managers.

Hospitals make money this way because even full-time salaried NHS hospital consultants (the ones who have signed contracts promising to work full-time for the NHS rather than to share their working lives between NHS and private patients) are now allowed to charge patients for private treatment – and to pocket the money they make. Since they don't have private consulting rooms, or private hospital facilities available, they are, of course, allowed to use NHS facilities, NHS equipment and NHS staff. They are even allowed to use NHS secretaries, NHS stationery and NHS stamps to deal with the paperwork (such as sending out appointments and bills).

NHS hospitals have always allowed some consultants to choose between working full-time for the NHS and working part-time. Those consultants who chose to work part-time were paid less but allowed to spend some of their working week seeing private patients. However, NHS hospitals now allow all NHS consultants (including those who are supposed to be working full time for the NHS) to charge extra fees for seeing private patients and the NHS has created (and is itself now addicted to) a two tier health system. Effectively, what happens is that NHS hospitals sell patients the chance to jump the waiting list. Patients see full time NHS consultants in NHS hospitals but if they pay everyone concerned a fee they don't have to wait in the normal NHS way.

As the NHS deteriorates so consultants are charging more for NHS appointments and, at the same time, reducing the length of time they allow for each consultation. Proper private patients (seen in private hospitals or consulting rooms) used to be seen for an hour – giving them time to talk, explain and ask questions. Patients seeing consultants privately in private consulting rooms may still be allowed this amount of time. But patients seeing consultants privately in NHS hospitals are lucky to spend ten or fifteen minutes with the consultant. That's about the sort of time they might hope to have devoted to them if they saw the consultant as NHS patients. The difference? The payment entitles them to jump the queue.

The private patient who sees a consultant in an NHS hospital will be treated just as badly as an NHS patient. There are no soft chairs, cups of tea and expensive magazines because they wait in the same NHS waiting room that NHS patients use. For this rudimentary service, patients, who are invariably frightened and reluctant to question the bills they are given, are charged extortionate prices. Rude, uncaring consultants, operating from the security of NHS premises, and using NHS facilities (including NHS secretarial services) may charge £400 to £600 for a brusque and snarly service. Because patients are desperate not to have to wait six months to see a consultant, and because they have no way of knowing what is fair, prices have gone through the roof. I know of consultants who charge £500 to look at an X-ray and write a two line report.

A reader wrote to me recently to report that when she had a private appointment with an NHS consultant she was kept waiting 30 minutes in a crowded, noisy and, rather scruffy and untidy waiting room before being rushed into the consulting room for a hurried ten minute consultation. No one apologised for the fact that she was kept waiting 30 minutes for her appointment. 'It reminded me,' she wrote, 'of the NHS as it was a decade or two ago.' She is not alone in her observation. The truth is that the NHS has deteriorated to a level which would have been considered utterly unacceptable a decade ago, while private medicine, offering the only alternative and with standards largely set by NHS staff, has drifted downwards too.

This massive NHS fraud goes on (and is actively encouraged) because it isn't just the consultants (already paid to work full-time looking after NHS patients but cheating on their contracts by seeing patients privately while they are also being paid by the NHS) who make extra money. NHS hospitals can also boost their income by allowing patients who can afford to pay to jump the queues for tests or surgery. Administrators support this abuse of the system because their hospitals are so bloated with expensive bureaucrats that they need the private fees. While the full-time NHS consultant is allowed to cheat and charge a fee for the opportunity to jump the waiting queue, the hospital also charges the patient an extortionate fee for the privilege of using the NHS waiting room and other NHS hospital facilities. The present corrupt system is likely to continue for as long as everyone is making extra money. And, of course, as long as this corrupt system continues, doctors and hospitals will benefit from deliberately keeping their NHS waiting lists as long as possible. If the waiting lists aren't kept long there won't be any NHS patients prepared to pay hard cash for the chance to live. In the 21st century NHS, the rich may live but the poor will die.

Several hundred thousand people a year pay privately so that they can jump the NHS waiting list. Heaven knows how many more pay privately for X-rays and scans. It's impossible to say how much we are talking about but this is undoubtedly a multi-billion pound a year scam. If this were happening somewhere hot, dusty and far away, indignant MPs would be standing up wagging fingers and there would be programmes on our televisions about it.

The NHS now offers a two tier service. Money doesn't buy better care. But it buys faster care. And that's crucial.

The way this works in practice is alarmingly simple.

You go to your GP because you have stomach pains and are vomiting blood. You have lost a good deal of weight in a month. Dr Harold Shipman, your friendly GP, who is having a good day because the nurse has earned him another £5,000 by jabbing several hundred children with a lethal cocktail of some fashionable vaccine, gives you two minutes of his valuable time and decides that you need to have some tests done since you might have cancer of the stomach. Dr Shipman tells you that he will send you to see Dr Hans Kneesandbumpsadaisy in the outpatient clinic at the local hospital. But, sadly, there is a 17 week wait for an appointment. And once you have had that preliminary appointment there will be a 22 week wait for the X-rays which will help Dr Kneesandbumpsadaisy reach a diagnosis. Dr Shipman and you both know that by that time you will probably be dead. There is, however, an alternative. If you can afford it you can pay to see Dr Kneesandbumpsadaisy privately. You see him in exactly the same outpatients department, at exactly the same NHS hospital, that you would have seen him in if you'd been prepared to wait until you died. You sit with the NHS patients who haven't paid but who were referred many weeks ago and who have managed to hang on for their first consultation. You only have to wait a week because you've paid to jump the queue. Dr Kneesandbumpsadaisy, employed full-time by the NHS, tells you that you need an X-ray. There is, he says, a waiting list of another 22 weeks to have this done but if you have more money and are prepared to pay his friend Dr Ebeneezer Sodoff, the radiologist, for a private consultation, you will only have to wait a week for the X-rays you need. The X-rays will be done in the same NHS hospital and in the NHS X-ray department where you would have had to go to as an ordinary NHS patient. Once again you will sit alongside NHS patients who have been waiting for months but you will have fast-tracked yourself. You will receive a bill from Dr Kneesandbumpsadaisy and another bill from Dr Sodoff. You will also receive a hefty bill from Mr Sticky-Fingers, the hospital administrator, because although you saw both NHS doctors in NHS facilities and both used NHS equipment you paid to cheat the system and jump the queue. All the work is done on NHS property, using NHS equipment and in time already paid for by taxpayers. Hospitals and consultants are unashamedly flogging off places higher up the waiting list. If there wasn't a waiting list they wouldn't have anything to sell.

Is it simple fraud? Is it just theft?

Or are you just bribing the doctors and the hospital so that you can jump the queue?

One thing is certain: if the NHS wasn't a State-owned and run institution, everyone involved would be learning to pick up the soap with their toes.

NHS hospitals charge the same fees as private hospitals, though they provide a much more basic service. (The precise fees vary from hospital to hospital. Doctors and administrators know that patients are usually too anxious and frightened to shop around to find the 'best buy', and too ignorant to know whether they are being ripped off.) Similarly, consultants working in NHS hospitals invariably charge the same massive fees as genuinely private consultants – but they don't bother with the smiles, the handshakes, the comforting words or the expensive suits. They know that they're not selling 'special care'. They're flogging a chance to be seen this week instead of next year. They're selling a chance to be treated before it's too late. They're flogging a chance to stay alive. You don't have to tart things up when you're selling life itself. They don't bother with expensive magazines, cups of tea and smiling receptionists. Neither doctors nor hospitals pretend to be offering anything more than a chance to be seen more speedily. Greedy consultants are getting rich, preying on patients who are struggling to stay alive in the wreckage of the NHS.

One reader of mine paid £200 to a full time NHS consultant for a standard 5 minute consultation in an NHS hospital. She had to pay the NHS hospital another £60 for the use of their grubby facilities. What did she get for her £260? Simply the chance to jump the queue.

Another reader had to pay £380 to a consultant who reported on a scan. The consultant hadn't even been there when the scan was done.

Most patients don't even ask how much the bill is going to be.

'If patients don't ask I don't tell them,' boasted one consultant. 'If they want to know how much the bill will be it's up to them to ask.'

The modern NHS consultant has the best of both worlds. He combines a stable income, an excellent pension, sick pay cover and all the other perks of civil servant status with the ability to earn a vast amount through his 'private patients'.

He doesn't even have to go out and find the private patients. The NHS finds them for him.

Doctors have become as greedy and grasping as a bunch of Arthur Daleys. They snatch every penny they can from frightened and desperate patients and their frightened and desperate relatives. And for doctors and hospitals there is a bonus: NHS patients who are seen as 'private' patients cannot use the NHS complaints machinery. The patient may have been seen in an NHS building by a salaried NHS doctor using NHS equipment and dictating his report to an NHS secretary using NHS notepaper but if the patient has agreed to hand over money to jump the queue the hospital won't accept any complaint about itself or a doctor. Patients who pay to jump the queue lose all their rights and safeguards.

When the money runs out the patients simply go back into the NHS system and waits for the next instalment of their treatment.

(And don't think you can use the system and refuse to pay. The modern NHS consultant is quite likely to have an account with a local debt collector. If you haven't handed over your 'bribe' money quickly enough you could have the doctor's hired thugs banging on your door.)

If all this sounds too bad to be true you can check it out for yourself in minutes. Pick a speciality (any speciality). Ring your nearest large NHS hospital and ask to speak to a secretary working for a consultant in that speciality. Name an operation or an investigation and ask how long the waiting list is. Then ask how long you'd have to wait if you paid for private care. Hospital managers don't try to hide what is happening. They brazenly admit that they're flogging places on the waiting list.

If waiting lists were to disappear NHS hospitals (and NHS consultants) would lose this nice little earner. Many NHS hospitals would go bust and a lot of NHS consultants would have to sell the second BMW and the chalet in Switzerland.

The current system means that the NHS is appallingly unfair. There have always been inequalities. Some areas have better hospitals than others. It's called a 'National' Health Service but if you have a rare disease then your chances of surviving have always depended on where you live. But the way the NHS is now run is clearly divisive and grossly unequal. The NHS was founded to ensure that everyone got equal care – regardless of wealth. That was the whole idea of it. But the modern NHS is flourishing by taking advantage of the fact that some patients can afford to pay (or will find the money by selling the car or remortgaging the house). In today's NHS this new way of doing things mean that if you're poor and cannot afford to 'buy' a higher place on the waiting list, your chances of surviving your illness are dramatically reduced.

The result is that neither NHS administrators nor NHS consultants want to get rid of waiting lists. Indeed, they have a vested interest in maintaining them and keeping them as long as possible. Bureaucrats are making huge salaries out of the modern, two-tier NHS. And consultants are making a fortune out of their bribes. The NHS is hooked on waiting lists. Neither consultants nor administrators can give them up because they are a great source of income. Waiting lists could be permanently and easily eradicated if doctors and administrators wanted to get rid of them. But they don't.

Meanwhile, long waiting times mean that thousands of people need to take huge amounts of time off work. Many then become accustomed to watching daytime television. They realise they are just as well off financially if they stay at home. The NHS is, therefore, partly responsible for the sick note culture. The resultant costs to the nation are massive.

I have for years been screaming about the fact that NHS staff deliberately increase waiting times in order to increase their profits from private medicine. I have repeatedly explained this to journalists but they either fail to understand the significance of this or they are unwilling to rock the sinking boat.

Finally, I can't leave the subject of hospital waiting times without drawing attention to the fact that emergency patients now have to wait too.

Imagine: your child breaks an arm. You have to rush him to hospital. This is not a routine appointment for varicose veins. This is an emergency. Which is why you take him direct to the nearest Accident and Emergency Department. (Your local hospital may not have one of these and if you turn up at a hospital without an accident department you will be turned away and told to take him elsewhere.)

You expect, of course, that your child will be seen within minutes and that he will be treated straight away.

Wrong.

The officially acceptable wait for treatment in an Accident and Emergency department is four hours. The average wait is seven hours. Can you imagine the Prime Minister standing waiting for seven hours before his child is attended to?

The Government has run an expensive campaign telling the relatives of stroke victims to ensure that they get to hospital quickly because urgent treatment can reduce the seriousness of a stroke. What's the point in hurrying when you are going to have a seven hour wait when you get there? Horror stories abound. A reader of mine, distressed, bleeding and in pain, had a miscarriage and had to wait nine hours in hospital before she was seen.

NHS staff complain that they get shouted at, abused and occasionally attacked. I'm not surprised. The only thing that surprises me is that there are some NHS staff members who aren't attacked. It is, to be honest, a surprise that every NHS staff member isn't walking on crutches. Only the English, self-effacing to the point of being self-destructive, would put up waiting seven hours for emergency medical treatment. And if people who used the NHS knew exactly what was going on there would be rioting in the streets.

Incidentally, waiting times in institutionalised accident and emergency departments are awful but it seems that the worst thing anyone can do is to drive a patient to hospital in an emergency. If you arrive in an ambulance you have a chance of being seen relatively quickly. If you arrive by private transport you could wait for hours longer – even if you are clutching an arm which has been severed and is wrapped in a wet cloth. You could, indeed, be placed on a trolley and simply forgotten. Until someone else needs the trolley and finds you there. Dead.

20. Doctors Get Their Timing Wrong

It has been known for centuries that the leaves of some plants regularly open during the daytime and close at night. It was always assumed that this phenomenon was a response to sunlight. But over two 250 years ago, in 1729, a French astronomer called Jean-Jacques de Mairan, conducted a very simple experiment which showed that this assumption was wrong. He discovered that this phenomenon occurs even if a plant is kept in the dark. The only possible explanation was that the plant opens and closes in response to some sort of 24 hour internal clock. That was the first experiment in chronobiology.

Since then chronobiology (the study of temporal patterns related to biological phenomena) has become an acknowledged science. It is now known that just about every living organism – from a nucleated single cell to a human being – follows a 24 hour or circadian rhythm. So, for example, your pulse rate and blood pressure are highest first thing in the morning (with the result that the incidence of heart attack and stroke is highest at that time of day). In the evening your pulse rate and blood pressure will naturally fall. Your body temperature rises during the day and falls at night. Your blood platelets – which help with blood clotting – are stickier in the morning than at any other time of day. You are, therefore, likely to have less trouble with bleeding if you nick yourself in the morning than if you nick yourself in the evening. Your tolerance for alcohol peaks at five o'clock in the afternoon. And finally, most babies are born – and most people die – between the hours of midnight and dawn.

Our bodies respond in a cyclical way because we have evolved on earth – and the amount of light and heat and the level of electromagnetic and gravitational forces on our planet all vary in a rhythmic way.

The important thing – still widely ignored by doctors and many alternative health care professionals – is that the abnormalities associated with disease also vary in a cyclical and circadian way.

Whether you are suffering from cancer, heart disease, arthritis or asthma your disease will change during the day and, consequently, whatever you do to tackle the disease should also be arranged according to a circadian rhythm. For example, during the day and the night your body's ability to absorb drugs will vary. When given at the right time of day a drug will have a powerful and positive effect on an illness. But when given at the wrong time of day a drug may prove toxic.

Next, consider allergy reactions.

Allergy reactions develop when the body's natural defenses against foreign organisms over-react. If you are exposed to a pollen, or a type of food to which you are allergic, your body will send white blood cells to the site at which the foreign organisms have been spotted. The white cells will then proceed to eat up the foreign organisms. Some of the white cells release a substance called histamine which increases local blood flow and triggers the release of more white cells. The symptoms produced by this reaction include pain, itchiness, burning, redness and swelling.

Your body's ability to deal with outside threats in this way is influenced by the amount of glucocorticoid (a steroid hormone) in your blood stream. When the amount of glucocorticoid is at its highest your body's ability to deal with an outside organism will be at its lowest.

Now, under your body's circadian rhythm the amount of glucocorticoid in your blood is at its highest level in the morning – at around 5.00 a.m. or 6.00 a.m. Inevitably, therefore, your body's ability to deal with an external threat is lowest at this time of day.

But in the evening when your body's levels of glucocorticoid fall your body's ability to deal with a threat rises.

This means that you are least likely to develop an allergy reaction early in the morning. But, at that same time of day, you are also, because of the same effect, most susceptible to infection.

On the other hand you are most likely to develop an allergy reaction – and least susceptible to infection – in the evening.

(The fact that the body's levels of steroids are naturally highest early in the morning mean that a patient who has to take a steroid drug – which carries with it a risk of serious side effects – will probably suffer fewer side effects if he or she takes the drug very early in the day when the body is best prepared for it.)

Next, consider arthritis – a common inflammatory disease which also runs on a biological clock.

In rheumatoid arthritis the joints are attacked by a malfunctioning immune system. The joints of a rheumatoid arthritis sufferer are usually stiffest and most swollen early in the morning. They become easier during the day. In other types of arthritis – such as osteoarthritis – the stiffness and pain get worse during the day.

It is clear from this knowledge that the time when medication is given for these two different types of disease is vital. A drug given for rheumatoid arthritis should be timed to act in the morning, whereas a drug given for osteoarthritis should be timed to be working most efficiently later in the day.

Asthma is one of the commonest diseases in the world. It is getting commoner. (Although as I have explained in my book *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You* I believe that many of the diagnoses of asthma – and other disorders

– currently being made are false.) Because of the circadian rhythms associated with a number of normal physiological processes (such as airway size and breathing patterns) the majority of asthma attacks take place between 2.00 a.m. and 6.00 a.m. in the morning. The airways are naturally open widest during the day and there is a reduction in airflow after midnight.

Heart disease is linked to body rhythms (heart attacks are twice as common in the morning as they are during the rest of the day – making high stress breakfast meetings a risky venture).

The activity of cancer cells is also linked to body rhythms. Drugs prescribed to attack cancer usually operate by killing cells when they are most vulnerable – during the process of division. Anti-cancer drugs target cancer cells because cancer cells grow and divide far faster than other human body cells. However, other rapidly dividing cells (particularly cells inside the intestine and cells in the bone marrow) are likely to be killed unnecessarily by anti-cancer drugs. However, if an anti-cancer drug is given at the right time of day the problems associated with such a drug can be minimised and the effectiveness of the drug can be maximised. One trial showed that women with ovarian cancer who were given their drugs at the right time of day were four times as likely to survive for five years as other women – whose drug taking was not regulated in this way. Other researchers have found a similar difference when treating patients with colon cancer.

It isn’t just drug therapy which is influenced by time. There is evidence which suggests that far more pre-menopausal women survive breast surgery if they have an operation which is done during the second half of their menstrual cycle than if they have an operation in the first two weeks of their cycle. This difference can probably be explained by the change in hormone levels which occurs during a menstrual cycle. If researchers put more effort into studies of this sort, and wasted less time and money on pointless research such as animal experimentation, far more lives would be saved. The link between surgery, breast cancer, survival rates and the menstrual cycle was first observed in 1836 (yes, 1836 – over 175 years ago) so I really don’t understand why more research hasn’t been done to find out the precise link between hormone levels and cancer. If I were a woman having breast surgery for cancer I would *want* to have the operation done in the second half of my menstrual cycle (though I probably wouldn’t be given the choice).

Any patient who needs drug therapy should ask their doctor to check if there is any evidence to show whether the treatment works best at a particular time of day. My guess is that most doctors will have never heard of chronobiology. But getting the timing right could make a life or death difference so it is well worth while being persistent.

This really is an area where more research is needed – and needed fast. It seems to me to be quite absurd that we have failed to pay much attention at all to this absolutely vital branch of medical science. Many deaths and a good deal of illness could be avoided by the expenditure of a relatively small amount of effort in this area. I don’t have any doubt that timing is vital – for patients as well as for comedians. But, amazingly, it is a phenomenon that doctors still ignore – either simply because it’s inconvenient and they’re too lazy to bother with it, or because it isn’t something that has yet been introduced into the official, established way of doing things.

21. The NHS Is Not Free

Consumers make the foolish, eternal mistake of assuming that, because no money changes hands at the point of sale, the NHS is ‘free’. It is a myth that the NHS is free. It is not free in any sense. It is extraordinarily expensive to run (far, far more expensive than an equivalent private health service would cost) and it is directly controlled by lobbyists and the politically motivated. Moreover, the financial cost is soaring. In 1996 the total bill for the NHS was £40,000,000,000. By 2010 the NHS was costing £104,000,000,000 a year to run. And, while health care costs are rising faster than just about any other costs, the quality of care provided by the NHS is falling at an unprecedented rate.

The cost of the NHS is rising because of the unbridled greed of doctors, nurses and drug companies, an absurd rise in the number of administrators required to design forms, hand them out, collect them and feed the results into computers and the continued incompetence of the people supposedly looking after the money. The NHS now costs so much that it would be cheaper to give every individual in the country free private medical insurance. The NHS costs around £1,750 a year for every man, woman and child. Have you had £1,750 worth of care out of the NHS this year? If everyone were given their £1,750 with which to buy private medical insurance each individual would have enough money left over to have an excellent annual holiday as well. And all the damned administrators, the leeches who have sucked the blood and the soul out of the NHS, would be released to find gainful employment. There must be something useful at least some of them could do.

Most of the extra money given to the NHS is spent on hiring more administrators, or giving pay rises to existing NHS staff. Patients don’t benefit at all. Extra layers of administration mean that costs are constantly rocketing, while the quality of care steadily but remorselessly deteriorates. The NHS employs nearly 1.5 million people and more than 60% of those are bureaucrats. In addition to a Ministry, the health service is run by over 750 boards, committees, executive councils, local health authorities and quangos. Administration within the NHS is a sick joke. It’s hardly surprising that doctors and nurses are demoralised and that patients are treated as a nuisance. Like other huge State industries the NHS has forgotten that it exists to serve. The system now has a bureaucratic life of its own and it sometimes seems as though senior NHS staff spend most of their time searching for new ways to waste money. For example, the NHS employs an army of translators in order to assist the many EU immigrants who haven’t bothered to learn our national language. Everything which the NHS publishes appears in a 160 languages. The cost of all this nonsense is one of the reasons why the NHS provides such appalling health care and such very poor value for money. For example, taken at random, I see that according to the latest available WHO figures, Singapore spends 3.4% of its GDP on health care (compared to 8.4% in the UK). And yet the infant mortality rate in Singapore is three per 1,000 whereas in the UK it is five per 1,000. And life expectancy at birth is higher in Singapore than in the UK. The WHO puts the UK in 18th place for health care provision. And that is truly appalling. It’s no wonder that many immigrants (including illegal ones) pop back home if they fall ill and need medical treatment.

It is perhaps hardly surprising that no other country in the world has ever bothered to try to copy the British health care system. The NHS is so damned big that it can’t do anything efficiently. Medical records take days to travel yards from one department to another and are regularly mislaid. Some time after my father died his missing hospital records were found in a wardrobe in a nursing home 20 miles away.

Senior doctors are silent about everything that goes on within the NHS because they have been bought. Hospital consultants who know the right people can receive an annual bonus which more or less doubles their standard NHS salary. A bonus of £70,000 or £80,000 is not unusual. These bonuses are awarded secretly and have nothing to do with patient satisfaction or reliable, honourable service to the NHS.

There is no doubt that one of the fundamental problems within the NHS is the cost of the workforce. Like almost all public sector workers they are overpaid and underworked. In Britain the average full time public sector employee works just 30 hours a week and much of that time is wasted on chatting, drinking coffee and filling in pointless forms. Within the NHS the figure is even worse because the size of the organisation, and the extent of the bureaucracy, mean that even when employees are doing what they regard as work they often are not doing anything useful. Employees in the private sector have to work much harder because any private hospital which tried to operate in the way that NHS hospitals operate would soon go bankrupt.

NHS hospitals are so out of touch with the needs of patients, and run by such uncaring, greedy people, that they now charge patients and visitors to park their cars. And since patients have no choice but to pay, the charges are extortionate. It is not unusual to find an NHS hospital charging £3 an hour. That’s £9 for three hours, £12 for four hours and £15 if you’re really ill and need to be there for five hours. These are prices that would make airport car park operators blush. And yet I have never seen a private hospital which charges patients or visitors to park their cars. The result is that sick people in the outpatients department sit and worry that they will be fined or clamped when they are kept waiting for hours. A recent survey showed that one quarter of people are put off visiting a friend or relative in hospital because of car park charges. Don’t the malicious, mean-spirited, blood-sucking bastards who run our hospitals realise that visitors help patients get better?

Hospitals in the NHS are all about money. And the doctors and nurses who say nothing and allow the bureaucrats to get away with this obscene thugging of the sick are as guilty as the administrators themselves.

Finally, the NHS (like the rest of the State system) is designed to punish the prudent – especially the elderly prudent. Sick, elderly people are forced to sell their homes and use the proceeds to pay for essential care – even though, according to the law, the NHS should be picking up the bill. The NHS spends huge amounts of money evading this legal responsibility.

22. Bugs, Bugs, Glorious Bugs

A few decades ago the development of antibiotics led many people to believe that the threat offered by infectious diseases had, to a large extent, been conquered.

But a combination of greed and stupidity has changed all that. The effectiveness of antibiotics has been dramatically weakened by three main groups: the companies making them, the medical profession and the farming industry. Each of these groups has acted irresponsibly and dangerously. Since they cannot possibly have been unaware of the impact their actions would have, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that the effectiveness of antibiotics has been deliberately destroyed for short-term profit. The drug companies, the medical establishment and the farming industry will together be responsible for millions of deaths around the world. The politicians who have stood to one side and allowed all this to happen must share the responsibility.

During the last few decades simple, widespread infections have been striking back and re-establishing themselves as serious threats to our health. Today, our hospitals are dangerous places for the healthy – and far too dangerous for the sick.

In 1952 virtually all infections caused by staphylococcus could be cured by penicillin. But just 30 years later a worrying 90% of patients infected with the staphylococcus bug needed treatment with other antibiotics. Western doctors didn’t worry about this because they had other antibiotics to prescribe. With remarkable arrogance the medical profession in America and Europe assumed that it could always stay one step ahead of the bugs. What many doctors failed to realise was that yeasts, fungi and bacteria have been producing antibiotics more or less since time began. They use the antibiotics they make to protect themselves. Other yeasts, fungi and bacteria mutate naturally in order to protect themselves against those antibiotics. Through a mixture of ignorance and arrogance doctors speeded up the rate at which bugs acquired resistance, by spreading antibiotics around with reckless abandon. Overwhelmed by reckless enthusiasm, doctors started routinely giving antibiotics to all the patients whom they thought might be at risk – and this category often included all those patients who were destined for surgery. The prescribing doctors either didn’t realise or didn’t care that by dishing out antibiotics so freely they were giving the bacteria a greatly increased chance of acquiring immunity.

Staphylococcus has not, of course, been the only bug to become resistant and the Western medical establishment, constantly afraid of offending the drug companies, has done everything possible to stifle protests and warnings about the consequences. Today the future is truly bleak. Infectious diseases which we thought we had conquered are coming back with a vengeance. More and more people are dying of simple, uncomplicated infections. The bugs are getting stronger. And our ability to kill them is diminishing almost daily.

Today, one in six prescriptions is for an antibiotic and my educated guestimate is that between 50% and 90% of all these prescriptions are unnecessary or inappropriate. To a certain extent doctors over-prescribe because they like to do something when faced with a patient – and prescribing a drug is virtually the only thing most of them can do. And to some extent prescribing a drug is a defence against any possible future charge of negligence (on the basis that if the patient dies it is better to have done something than to have done nothing). But the main reason for the over-prescribing of antibiotics is, without doubt, the fact that doctors are under the influence of the drug companies. The makers of the antibiotics want their drugs prescribed in vast quantities. It makes no difference to them whether or not the prescriptions are necessary.

Things are made worse by the fact that although antibiotics have been around for over half a century, and the drug companies making them must have made billions of dollars in profits, no one yet knows how long antibiotic tablets should really be taken for when treating any specific condition. Should you take an antibiotic course for 5, 7, 10 or 14 days? The bizarre truth is that your guess is probably as good as your doctor’s and his is probably as good as the drug company’s.

The over-prescribing of antibiotics would not matter too much if these drugs were harmless and if there were no other hazards associated with their use. But antibiotics are certainly not harmless. The unnecessary and excessive use of antibiotics causes allergy reactions, side effects and a huge variety of serious complications – including the ultimate complication: death. And, of course, there is also the very real hazard that by overusing antibiotics doctors are enabling bacteria to develop immunity to these potentially life-saving drugs. There is now no doubt that many of our most useful drugs have been devalued by overuse and are no longer effective. The overprescribing of antibiotics is extraordinarily dangerous and constantly underestimated. It is far more of a threat to human life, and more of a threat to our future, than terrorism. The unnecessary antibiotics we have swallowed by the ton have weakened our general resistance to infection and paradoxically, strengthened the power of the bugs.

The existence of many antibiotic-resistant organisms is the main reason that infections are such a major problem in hospitals. Alarmingly, at least 1 in 20 of all hospital patients will pick up an infection in hospital – mostly urinary tract, chest or wound infections. The spread of these antibiotic-resistant organisms is mostly caused by doctors and nurses failing to wash their hands often enough. The problem is so great that the extra costs incurred when doctors have to prescribe increasingly expensive antibiotics are beginning to add an enormous burden to all those responsible for providing health care facilities. In America the extra cost of dealing with antibiotic-resistant organisms is many billions of dollars a year.

Partly thanks to doctors and drug companies the future is truly bleak. Infectious diseases which we thought we had conquered are coming back with a vengeance. More and more people are dying of simple, uncomplicated infections. The bugs are getting stronger. And our ability to kill them is diminishing almost daily.

However, the problem isn't entirely the result of overprescribing by doctors. The overuse of antibiotics by farmers is another big reason that infectious diseases are making a dramatic comeback. Astonishingly, considerably more than half of all the antibiotics sold are given by farmers to healthy animals.

Farmers claim that their animals are only given antibiotics when they have been recommended by a vet. Of course this is true. Farmers cannot buy antibiotics without a vet. But sadly, there are enough money hungry vets around to make sure that any farmer who wants to give his animals continuous doses of antibiotics will have no supply problem. I talked to one vet who regularly prescribed huge quantities of antibiotics for farmers to give to healthy cattle. 'Don't you realise that what you are doing is endangering the lives of millions of human beings?' I asked him. He shrugged; he clearly knew I was right but clearly didn't care. 'Why do you do it?' I asked him. 'The farmers demand them,' he said with blunt honesty. 'If I don't prescribe antibiotics someone else will and I'll lose the farm business.'

Why do farmers give their animals so many antibiotics?

Well, some, of course, are prescribed to help prevent (and treat) disease. Animals on modern western farms are exceptionally susceptible to disease because they are kept in overcrowded conditions and they are constantly highly stressed. Antibiotics help to keep sick animals alive long enough to be slaughtered and fed into the food chain. Antibiotics are also given because they help to stop diseases spreading quickly among animals who are kept in cramped and entirely unnatural conditions. When animals live in hideously confined quarters it is nigh on impossible to stop infections spreading without using antibiotics. Many American and European farmers routinely put antibiotics into the feed they give their animals to prevent infections developing. The antibiotics that are dished out in this grossly irresponsible way are often the same antibiotics that are becoming dramatically less effective in the treatment of human diseases.

But farmers don't just give antibiotics to animals in order to deal with disease. They also put antibiotics into their animal feed in order to promote growth. Antibiotics increase the muscle bulk of animals – and therefore increase their value and the farmer's eventual profit.

The process by which antibiotic resistance develops on farms is simple to explain. When animals are given antibiotics the bacteria in their intestines build up an immunity to those antibiotics. Those antibiotic-resistant organisms then pass on to farmers and others who have contact with the animals. They pass into the environment (even though most animals are denied access to fields, their faeces and urine still reach the environment when they are dumped onto fields or discharged into rivers). And, of course, the antibiotic-resistant organisms pass into the food chain directly when animals are killed, chopped up and eaten by humans. When milk in the USA was tested researchers identified 52 different antibiotic residues.

Between them, doctors and farmers have put us all at risk. Around the world, millions of innocent people will die because bugs have now acquired immunity to previously valuable antibiotics.

The problem is exacerbated because our hospitals are filthy and the people who staff them probably can't even spell hygiene. Having talked to many doctors and nurses I am convinced that most don't know the basic principles of how diseases are spread – and how they can be controlled. An unhealthy majority, for example, seemed unaware that there is an important difference between an 'infectious' disease (spread through the environment – including by air) and a 'contagious' disease (spread by contact). I quizzed a dozen doctors and nurses in one large NHS hospital, including several who had specific responsibilities for controlling the spread of infections such as MRSA and C.difficile and none of them seemed to understand the basic principles of disease spread. Quite senior NHS personnel have tried to convince me that gastrointestinal infections are transmitted through the air and that this, not poor hygiene practises, explains why such bugs tend to sweep through hospital patients. When I produced evidence showing that they were wrong (although it is possible for bugs to be transmitted via an aerosol route the vast majority of infections are spread by poor hygiene) two members of NHS staff then tried to argue, apparently quite seriously, that bugs behaved differently in hospitals to the way they behaved elsewhere. One doctor insisted that bugs which are spread only by touch outside hospitals can be airborne inside hospitals. It is, perhaps, hardly surprising that staff don't bother to wash their hands and don't understand the importance of obeying the simplest rules about hygiene. And it is hardly surprising that the number of people dying from infections is rising dramatically. If you don't know how a disease is contracted you aren't likely to have much success in preventing its spread. Many doctors and nurses don’t even seem to realise that common causes of vomiting, such as the norovirus, are spread largely through inadequate cleaning of contaminated wards.

I have, since the 1970s, been warning about the return of serious infections. The rise and rise of problems such as C.difficile and MRSA was quite predictable. And other bugs will come back in a big way too. In my book *Paper Doctors* (1977) I pointed out that two things would result in a rise in infectious diseases: a lack of hygiene in hospitals and the abuse of antibiotics. I also predicted the rise in antibiotic-resistant infections.

In practice, avoiding infections such as MRSA and C.difficile is not difficult. The best way to avoid them is to clean hospital wards and to persuade doctors, nurses and other members of staff to wash their hands in between seeing patients. But NHS hospitals are institutionally dirty. Public lavatories in France are cleaner than British hospitals. The area between beds is swept but the area under the beds is left dirty. Equipment is often filthy. Communal baths, showers and toilets are disgusting. Staff don’t understand anything about hygiene. And no one cares.

Nothing is done about these problems because the complaints system is designed to protect the system rather than the patient. Hospitals are not interested in learning from their errors. They are only interested in denying the truth and avoiding responsibility. Medical records are kept not only to provide information but also with one eye on future litigation. One of the problems is that hospital staff (like other public service employees) are almost impossible to sack. When one former NHS chief executive was forced to resign her £150,000 a year job over Britain’s deadliest superbug outbreak she demanded a £150,000 pay off. The woman left her job after at least 90 patients died from C.difficile. And shortly after leaving her NHS job she set up a healthcare consultancy company (presumably, to tell the NHS how to improve hospitals). (She set up the company with her partner who had quit a senior NHS job after the trust where he worked accumulated debts of £30 million.) It seems that those who do leave the NHS are well compensated for their failure. And the concept of ‘shame’ seems as alien to the modern bureaucrat as the concept of ‘duty’ or ‘responsibility’.

When the Healthcare Commission performed unannounced tests at 51 NHS Health Trusts they found that nine out of ten of them had failed to meet hygiene standards put in place to reduce hospital infections. Two out of three hospitals did not complete a deep clean of their wards before a deadline set by the Government.

The result is that thousands of patients die every year in NHS hospitals because patients acquire lethal but avoidable infections. No one ever apologises. It is rare for anyone to be disciplined. Drivers go to prison if they are convicted of dangerous driving so why don’t hospital staff go to prison for dangerous practices? If they did then I suspect that there would be far fewer unnecessary deaths in our hospitals. Twice as many Britons are killed by hospital infections as are killed on the roads. The total number of deaths from hospital superbugs such as MRSA and C.difficile is now well over 5,000 a year. The reason? Filthy wards, unhygienic practices, scandalously poor cleaning, grubby operating theatres and staff who never wash their hands. There are more such infections in British hospitals than anywhere else in the world. Why? British hospitals are dirtier than hospitals anywhere else in the world. Why? The staff in British hospitals are the most incompetent hospital staff in the world.

When my mother was in the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital I stood in a hospital corridor and watched an auxiliary wheel a food trolley into a room where a patient was being barrier nursed. Half a dozen nurses were standing just feet away from the auxiliary. Eating chocolates and chatting, they watched the auxiliary but either did not see what she was doing or did not care. It was as though the she did not exist. The auxiliary wheeled in the trolley, handed out the food, came out and continued around the ward. No gloves, no mask, no gown. And no protection for the trolley or the food. I wasn’t the slightest bit surprised to read that a couple died after contracting C.difficile in Royal Devon and Exeter hospital. I’m afraid that my only surprise is that so many patients are still alive when they leave. The rise in the incidence of superbugs is a phenomenon almost unknown outside the NHS and in my opinion it is a direct result of poor management and appallingly low standards of nursing. In the Middle Ages patients used to keep out of hospitals whenever they could – knowing that a hospital stay could well prove fatal. Things aren’t much different today. In my view the Royal Devon and Exeter (like many other hospitals) should have a Government health warning hanging over the front door. And the staff should have health warnings stamped on their foreheads. I wouldn’t license the place as an abattoir.

Since Ignaz Philipp Semmelweiss first demonstrated (in the mid-19th century) that deaths in the delivery room were caused by dirty hands every child has been taught the importance of basic personal hygiene. Sadly, the message does not seem to have got through to the medical and nursing professions. Countless studies have shown that hospital staff just don’t bother to wash their hands. A study of doctors’ habits showed that two out of three anaesthetists failed to wash their hands before treating a new patient (even though anaesthetists frequently perform venepuncture surgery) while one in three surgeons did not wash their arms properly before an operation. At least one-third of all hospital infections are caused by dirty hands.

The cost of all this in simple financial terms is colossal. Treating hospital contracted infections uses up around

15% of the hospital budget in the UK and adds around a week to each patient's hospital stay. The cost in human terms is incalculable: tens of thousands of patients die because of bugs they've caught from doctors, nurses, other staff or contaminated equipment. These aren't statistics: they are people. Real people. Every one of those unnecessary deaths is someone's wife, husband, mother, father, son, daughter, uncle, aunt, friend or neighbour. And remember, most of those patients die because doctors and nurses can't be bothered to wash their hands properly or because operating theatres aren't properly cleaned between operations.

The medical answer is – surprise, surprise – often to prescribe antibiotics and a third of hospital patients end up taking them. It now takes 50 times as much penicillin to treat an infection as was required 30 years ago.

There is no doubt that antibiotic-resistant bacteria are now commoner in the UK because of the sloppiness in NHS hospitals as well as the bad prescribing habits of doctors.

It is hardly surprising that people who stay at home to be treated – or who go home quickly after day-case or short-stay surgery – usually get better much quicker than people who need long-stay treatment and who have to go into hospital.

It is because NHS hospitals are so filthy that there are more food related infections in the NHS than in the seediest, most disreputable restaurants. Hospitals which are home to rats and cockroaches (as many NHS hospitals are) are an excellent breeding ground for bugs of all sorts. Dirty hospitals are dirty because they are badly managed and because the staff are lazy or incompetent.

Attempts to deal with this embedded problem range between pathetic and laughable. An NHS hospital in Buckinghamshire was reported to have recorded a rap song to help staff learn how to wash their hands. The song apparently included the lyrics: 'Now clean between your fingers, just in case the bad bug lingers'. The hospital produced a video in which nurses wearing back to front baseball caps and bling jewellery stamped along to the beat. This was not a Xmas party joke and nor was it intended for children. This was a serious attempt to teach NHS staff how to wash their hands.

Nurses have even called for a vaccine to stop hospital infections spreading. It is, I suppose, easier to give a vaccine than to wash your hands.

The real problem is that hospital staff just don't seem to understand how infections spread. For example, it is common to see nurses in shops still wearing their uniforms, complete with dubious looking stains. Nurses who wear their uniforms out of the hospital environment are showing just how ignorant they are. Bugs are transferred both ways. Nurses bring dangerous antibiotic-resistant bacteria out into the community and they take infections back into the hospital with them. Nursing staff should change their clothes whenever they leave the hospital where they work. And doctors working in hospital should always wear freshly laundered white coats. (I did not wear a white coat when I worked as a GP because I always thought it acted as a barrier between myself and my patients. But GPs are not usually involved with patients leaking blood, pus and faeces.)

There is now no doubt that infections are a major killer in our State hospitals. Watch the cleaners at work and you'll see them slide a mop down the centre of the ward. It's known in the mop wielding business as 'taking the mop for a walk'. They then wander off into their staff room for a tea break. And then serve patients their food. Staggeringly, the same people who clean the ward then serve patients their food. No one seems to see anything odd in this. The cleaners do not, of course, wash their hands between these two activities. Cleaning staff (sorry, I think they now have to be called 'housekeepers') do not appear to have been told that they too must obey the basic rules of hygiene. The Government would save far more lives if it took down speed cameras and, instead, put up cameras in hospitals to check that nurses, cleaners and doctors wash their hands properly. Such a simple action would save billions of pounds and thousands of lives a year. Nurses who are spotted moving from patient to patient without washing their hands should be fired and banned from ever working in health care again.

The bad news is that things are going to get much, much worse I'm afraid. If Health and Safety operatives really want to save lives they should stop worrying about irrelevant 'health threats' and concentrate all their efforts on NHS hospitals. Meanwhile, when patients die because of superbugs why aren't the doctors and nurses involved charged with manslaughter?

In the future two things are likely to happen.

First, the number of serious, deadly infections in our hospitals will rise. There will be periods when the infections will appear to be under control. But they will not be. Our hospital staff are institutionally lazy. Incompetence and ignorance are defended, protected and rewarded with promotion.

Second, the superbugs will escape from hospitals and start to kill people in their homes and places of work. It is already happening. Medical officers in Holland have found that 50% of Dutch farmers are carrying a new strain of MRSA that is passed from hormone-fed pigs to humans. Already, a new, more virulent strain of MRSA has been found in the community. And the number of elderly people killed in care homes by the superbug C.difficile has officially tripled in the last two years. (Since killer bugs are often not mentioned on death certificates the true figure is undoubtedly far higher than this.) This sad development is hardly surprising when one considers that nurses and local authority personnel who have responsibility for standards in care homes were trained in our hospitals.

In late 2008, a tiny report appeared in some newspapers headed ‘Mutant superbug is found on farm’. Upon investigation it appeared that a superbug, a new variety of E.coli resistant to antibiotics had been found among cattle on a dairy farm in the north of England. It was, apparently the first time the particular strain of the bug had been found in Britain and it was only the third time the bug had ever been found anywhere in the world. A Government spokeswoman said that ‘no additional precautions are warranted’.

23. The Cancer Industry: Misdirected And Ineffective

Cancer is, along with heart disease, stroke and doctors, one of the four big killers of our time. But cancer is the killer that frightens people most. The very word is so emotive that most doctors try not to use it when talking to patients. Instead of talking of cancer they talk of ‘tumours’ and ‘growths’. They know that cancer is something most people don’t even like to talk about.

Until it touches them or someone in their family most people try not to think about cancer. When they see a collecting tin for a cancer charity they may pop in a few coins in the belief that by making a donation to a cancer charity they are helping to conquer the disease. Putting money into a cancer charity collecting tin is like throwing coins into a wishing well; it is the 21st century equivalent of a good luck charm.

In order to ensure that money continues to pour in, the cancer industry must persuade potential contributors and supporters that it is making progress in the fight against cancer. Inevitably, the industry needs a vast quantity of money just to remain in business; there are salaries to be paid, rents and rates to be paid, electricity bills to be paid, advertising and public relations departments to pay for and so on.

To help in this aim the huge worldwide cancer industry must frequently release news about exciting new cancer remedies. Some of these widely promoted new treatments are in the early stages of being tested on human patients, some are not yet being tested on humans but are promoted as the new ‘wonder’ cure for cancer on the basis of animal experiments, and some are talked about as new ‘breakthroughs’ largely or even exclusively on the basis of a scientist’s theory or hypothesis. These news stories raise hopes falsely and distract attention and finance from those areas which really need it (the prevention of cancer and the care of those who have cancer) but they serve the purpose: they raise money for the cash-hungry cancer industry.

When someone rattles a collecting tin in front of you and tells you that they need just a few more pence in order to continue with their breakthrough research it is difficult to say ‘no’. It is hardly surprising that the worldwide cancer industry’s income continues to grow at a quite phenomenal rate.

But has the cancer industry really made any noticeable progress in the fight against cancer? I don’t think so. The mortality figures show that more people are dying from commoner forms of cancer now than were a generation ago. One in three people already has, or will develop, cancer.

Today, despite the vast amounts of money spent on research, cancer is firmly positioned (along with circulatory disease and doctors) as one of the three big ‘killers’ of the westernised world. The fact that the incidence of cancer has increased dramatically during the 20th and 21st centuries confirms, in my opinion, the view that cancer is, to a large extent, a man-made disease, created largely by our changing diet and our addiction to tobacco as well as our exposure to chemicals and pollution. Researchers found only one case of cancer among hundreds of Egyptian mummies and by the 19th century cancer was still a relatively uncommon disease. According to Garrison’s *History of Medicine* the disease only began to show an ‘alarming increase’ in the early part of the 20th century.

The incidence of cancer has steadily gone up despite or because of the absurdly named and poorly planned ‘war on cancer’. In my view the people who are well-paid to ‘fight’ cancer have made things worse by desperately searching for cures instead of concentrating their efforts on dealing with identified causes. The trouble is that the cures they produce and promote (at such enormous profit) often make things worse, not better. In America it has been estimated that around $110 billion a year is spent on cancer. That is more than 10% of American’s entire health care bill. But, in America, the incidence of cancer has steadily risen as has the number of people dying of cancer. The treatment methods of choice (surgery, chemotherapy and radiation therapy) have not improved mortality rates.

Scientists who have assessed the value of the war against cancer agree that we are losing the fight and that there is no evidence to suggest that decades of expensive research have had much, if any, effect on the most fundamental measure of success or failure – death. In areas where cancer has become more amenable to treatment, or now takes fewer lives, it is usually changes in lifestyle which are responsible – not discoveries made in the laboratory.

There are, I believe, several reasons why those fighting the war against cancer are losing. In my book *Paper Doctors* (published in 1977) I complained that: ‘Medical researchers involved in publicly or charitably financed cancer research persist in looking for the ‘magical cure’. Much laboratory work has been started on the mistaken assumption that there is one disease called ‘cancer’ and that there will be a ‘cure’ which will enable doctors to treat all the patients suffering with cancer. Many projects have been funded because organisers (both qualified and lay) believed that they might solve the problem of cancer once and for all to the well publicised credit of everyone concerned. Much money has undoubtedly been wasted on research which has duplicated work done elsewhere and which has moved in directions unlikely ever to prove of practical benefit.’ The cancer industry still spends a vast fortune every year searching for the silver bullet.

Breast cancer is one of the most constantly publicised and most greatly feared forms of cancer. Because of its very nature it is a type of cancer which arouses much emotion. Newspapers, magazines and medical journals have for decades been full of articles describing new forms of treatment. The medical journal, *The Lancet*, in an editorial, commented that: ‘If one were to believe all the media hype, the triumphalism of the profession in published research, and the almost weekly miracle breakthroughs trumpeted by the cancer charities, one might be surprised that women are dying at all from this cancer.’

The lies, deceits and myths about the cancer industry are nowhere better illustrated than by breast cancer. In February 2011, it was reported that the incidence of breast cancer was rising. And at roughly the same time it was finally, officially, admitted that breast cancer is caused by diet. Anyone who has studied the causes of breast cancer would not find this difficult to understand.

For over two decades I have been pointing out that the evidence proves that breast cancer (probably above all others) is linked directly to diet and, in particular, to the consumption of cheap, fatty meat. My attempts to publicise this proven truth have been made infinitely more difficult by organisations such as the Advertising Standards Authority (which banned advertisements for my book *Food for Thought* because it truthfully linked cancer to meat consumption) and the Press Complaints Commission (which rolled over obediently when asked to do so by the meat trade and condemned me for publicising the truth about the meat-cancer link).

Since 1942 there has been steadily accumulating evidence to show that there is a link between breast cancer and dietary fat. I have little doubt that breast cancer could have been turned into a relatively uncommon disease, instead of one of the major killers of women, if politicians and doctors had been prepared to take on the food industry – and force the cancer industry to spread the truth. The American National Academy of Sciences, has concluded that ‘cancers of most major sites are influenced by dietary factors’. It has been estimated that ‘a little more than 40% of cancers in men and almost 60% of cancers in women in the United States could be attributed to dietary factors’.

Despite the quantity of epidemiological evidence which is available to show that fat and breast cancer are linked no one really knows the mechanism through which fat causes cancer. One theory is that synthetic chemicals – commonly used in the manufacture of pesticides – concentrate in the fatty tissues of animals. People who then eat bits and pieces of dead animal absorb the synthetic chemicals into their own bodies – and the concentrations of chemicals steadily rise. (In an average lifetime a meat eater will consume 36 pigs, 36 sheep, 750 chickens and turkeys and several cows.) More than 177 organochlorines (synthetic chemicals created when chlorine gas is bonded to carbon-rich organic matter) have been found in the tissues of the general population of the United States and Canada. Organochlorines can cause infertility, birth defects, miscarriages, immune system suppression, metabolic dysfunction, behavioural disorders, hormonal abnormalities and cancer.

These chlorine based compounds can cause cancer in various ways. Some cause cancer directly. Others produce cancers by interfering with or mimicking human hormones. A third group suppress the immune system and then enhance the carcinogenic effect of other chemicals. These chemicals seem to strike first at the reproductive system – which is probably why a heavy fat consumption increases the risk of developing cancers of the breast, prostate, and uterus.

We accept chemicals because they make our life easier, and because the big chemical companies have become financially and politically powerful. We assume that they are essential and we assume that they are safe because that is what the big companies tell us. I don’t believe they are essential and I certainly don’t believe that they are safe. There is no little irony in the fact that the pharmaceutical industry makes billions of dollars selling drugs for the treatment of cancers which some believe may have been created by its billion dollar sister industry: the chemical industry.

Convincing epidemiological evidence has been collected by the journal *Australasian Health and Healing* to support the theory that it is the chemicals in fat which cause cancer. Women in parts of America which were routinely blanketed with aerial sprayings of the pesticide DDT during the 1950s have one of the highest rates of breast cancer in America. Female chemical workers who were exposed to high levels of dioxin in a German pesticide plant had double the cancer mortality rate of the German population – and higher than average rates of breast cancer. A study in America produced similar results. Women professional golfers, most of whom play the game every day, have a high rate of breast cancer. It is suspected that these women may have been poisoned by the chemicals with which most golf courses are saturated. According to a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency study, parts of America with hazardous waste sites are 6.5 times as likely to have a high breast cancer rate than other areas. Women who have breast cancer have high blood levels of the chemicals suspected of causing the disease. A study of 229 women from New York City showed that women who developed breast cancer had substantially higher levels of suspected pesticide chemicals. During the early 1970s breast cancer rates in Israel were among the highest and fastest rising in the world. In 1978, Israel phased out the use of several suspected pesticides. Doctors noted that the levels of chemicals in breast milk dropped quite quickly. The incidence of breast cancer duly started to fall too.

But how many doctors now advocate a low fat, meat free diet for women who are regarded as susceptible to breast cancer? Very few. Most prefer to prescribe drugs or to recommend the surgical removal of healthy breasts.

Where, sadly, is the financial profit opportunity in merely recommending a dietary change?

There has been much talk of a breast cancer gene (BRCA-1) but there isn't really any such thing. There is no gene which *causes* breast cancer. There is, however, a gene which increases a woman's chances of developing cancer. Women with this gene can dramatically reduce their risk of developing breast cancer by avoiding the factors which are known to be associated with breast cancer. They should, for example, avoid becoming overweight, cut out meat completely and eat a low fat diet. Women who are overweight have more fat in their bodies and are more likely to develop cancer of the breast. The modern 'scientific' approach (to remove the healthy breasts of women who have the breast cancer gene) is barbaric and unnecessary.

Perhaps the biggest irony of all is the fact that although doctors have widely ignored the available evidence that would have enabled them to protect most of their patients from breast cancer (and, indeed, many other major types of cancer too) they have devised their own high technology form of preventive medicine – the mammogram. It is difficult not to be cynical about this. Teaching women how to reduce their chances of developing breast cancer (and teaching them how to check their own breasts for lumps) would earn the profession very little. So the medical profession and its companion industries have introduced a high technology form of cancer detection so that they can make money out of the general anxiety about breast cancer. (I deal with mammograms in the section of this book dealing with 'screening programmes'.)

In my book *2020* (published in 2010) I forecast that the incidence of breast cancer in China would rise. It was not a difficult prediction. The Chinese people, growing in wealth, are dramatically increasing their intake of meat. When the same thing happened in Japan a few years ago the result was a dramatic increase in the incidence of breast cancer in Japanese women. The ones who stuck to a low-meat traditional Japanese diet were far less likely to develop breast cancer when compared to the women who changed to a high-meat American style diet. Just a little more than a year after I wrote *2020* it was revealed that my prediction was already coming true.

The meat sold today causes far more cancer than ever before because it is very fatty and full of carcinogens. There are two reasons for this. First, farmers who sell heavy, fatty animals get more money for them. Second, farmers use carcinogenic chemicals on their farms. And those chemicals end up in the animal's fat.

It is these two facts which explain why the incidence of cancer always rises when populations start eating more meat.

But why is the incidence of breast cancer particularly likely to rise?

The answer to that is simple too.

When animals eat toxic substances such as chemicals which are carcinogenic which have been sprayed on the grass or put into the food they eat, the chemicals are stored in their fatty tissues. The fattier the animal is the more carcinogens it will have stored in its body. And, when it is killed and eaten, those carcinogens will be consumed by the person eating the meat. And, as with animals, the carcinogens will tend to gravitate to, and be stored in, the fatty tissues.

Breasts contain a good deal of fat. There is remarkably little actual breast tissue in a breast. Most of the breast is fat. And the bigger the breast the more fat there is likely to be. This is why breast cancer is commoner among older women. They tend to have more fat on their bodies in general and to have bigger and fattier breasts in particular. Poorer people tend to eat fattier meat. That's why poor people tend to get more cancer than rich people.

I first put forward this theory in an early (and now out of print) book of mine called *Power Over Cancer*. No one has ever disputed my conclusions. However, instead of discouraging women from eating meat, doctors prefer to remove healthy breasts from women considered genetically susceptible to breast cancer in order to prevent them getting breast cancer.

We don't need more money pouring into cancer research because we already know what causes most forms of cancer. According to one honest observer: 'Basic cancer research is an excellent slush fund for molecular biologists but it won't have any impact on cancer'. Cancer is created by chemical pollutants, by unhealthy, fatty, food and by tobacco. Poisoned water supplies, dangerous prescription drugs and the overuse of X-rays have also contributed to the incidence of cancer.

With immune systems constantly battered by polluted air, adulterated and chemically impregnated food and a constant onslaught from the drugs we buy for ourselves, or allow our doctors to prescribe for us, it is not surprising that increasing numbers of people succumb to one of the many different types of cancer. We know what causes 80% of all cases of cancer. Eight out of ten people who develop cancer could have been saved if money and effort had been put into prevention.

I do not believe that any wonder cure for cancer will come from the 'cancer industry'. But if I had the annual income the cancer industry enjoys I believe that I could turn cancer into a historical oddity within five years.

'Why,' you may ask, 'do the big cancer charities not spend more money on trying to prevent cancer? Why do they spend all their money gambling on the chance of finding a 'cure' when they could save millions of lives simply by using their resources to publicise what we already know?'

To understand the answers to these questions you have to understand that, as I have indicated, the cancer research industry is exactly that – an industry. It is a massive, worldwide multi-billion dollar industry which employs hundreds of thousands of scientists and administrators. Sadly, I suspect that for many of these employees the search for a cure for cancer has become the end instead of just the beginning. Much of the cancer industry is run by and for scientific researchers. The cancer industry needs a constant stream of dollars to keep its laboratories running. If the cancer industry spent its income on explaining to people how to avoid cancer there would be little or no place for research laboratories and a great many scientists would be put out of work. Worse still, if the cancer industry reduced the number of people dying of cancer its own income would fall.

Besides, those whose job it is to raise money know that it is far easier to persuade people to put money into a collecting tin if you tell them that they are contributing towards the search for a cure. Persuading people to avoid known causes of cancer is thankless work. Not many people will put money into your collecting tin if you stand on a street corner handing out leaflets containing sensible eating advice. It is much easier to raise money if you talk about new breakthroughs and show photographs of people (preferably children or pretty young women) who are dying of cancer. It is much easier to raise a million dollars for a new piece of machinery than it is to raise a million dollars for a print bill or a television advertising campaign designed to explain to people how they can avoid cancer.

Those who are responsible for raising money for the cancer industry know that it is impossible to personalise a preventive medicine campaign because you can never show a picture of a man, woman or child whose life has been saved by a leaflet. A picture of a child who is dying of cancer and who is waiting for laboratory scientists to find a cure will attract far more public support than an appeal for funds to help save unnamed individuals in the future.

And so it is the scientists searching for laboratory cures who get the big grants and the prestigious awards and who are fussed over and praised by the politicians and the journalists. Scientists who have established links which would enable us to save millions of lives by organising effective prevention programmes are as unlikely to win Nobel prizes as are doctors who devote themselves to teaching the principles of healthy living to millions of people.

There are many explanations for this disastrous misreading of the needs within cancer research. Undoubtedly one important reason is that there are thousands of surgeons, radiologists and radiotherapists (not to mention pure researchers) earning their living from traditional methods of cancer research and control. Public health is not a fashionable speciality within the medical profession: there is no opportunity for private practice and a general lack of financial incentive for brighter physicians to enter this field. And of equal importance perhaps is the fact that industrial pressures all oppose attempts to control the causative factors responsible for the vast majority of cancers.

Today, the cancer researchers are still pleading for more money (as they have been doing for decades); they are still promising that if they are given enough money they will be able to find a cure for cancer. It is, they suggest, only a shortage of money which is responsible for the continuing rise in the incidence of cancer deaths. They want to do more animal experiments and they have now devised animals which are genetically bred to develop cancer.

Cancer industry employees say they want to know 'how' cancer develops. They don't seem to understand that the 'how' is not important. It would be nice to know the 'how'. But it is the 'why' which matters. And we already know why cancer is a major killer. By insisting on finding the 'how' the cancer industry is playing right into the hands of the industries which are responsible for much cancer. The tobacco industry is constantly calling for more research into the links between tobacco and cancer. By calling for more research the tobacco industry is able to make itself look good – and at the same time to suggest that there is still some controversy and doubt about the links between tobacco and cancer.

But we don't need more research into tobacco and cancer. Everything we need to know can be summed up in four words: 'Smoking tobacco causes cancer.' And all we need now is a proper programme to persuade people not to smoke. But Governments continue to spend millions fighting an unwinnable 'drugs war' against the users of cannabis, cocaine and heroin while they subsidise tobacco – a much more dangerous drug.

The tobacco industry isn't the only industry trying to cause confusion and doubt. Every cancer producing industry follows the same route: campaigning for more and more research and claiming that it is research and not prevention which will lead to a solution.

Consumers quite like the idea of someone finding a 'cure' for cancer because it means that they can carry on eating the fatty food they like and smoking the cigarettes they enjoy without having to worry. 'Had such campaigns been at work during the Irish potato famine, which killed more than a million Irish between 1845 and 1849, they might have engendered studies into the biomechanical processes of famine rather than the social forces that gave rise to it,' wrote Robert N. Proctor in *The Sciences*. 'Investigators would have secured funding for research into why starvation ran in families instead of examining the social Darwinist policies of the Manchester era or studying how Ireland was able to export grain even during the worst years of the famine.'

There are very few industries in the world which have grown as rapidly as the cancer industry – the charities, laboratories, research scientists and administrators who are devoted to the search for a cure for cancer have, in recent years, spent billions.

But the irony is the fact that money really isn't the key issue. You cannot 'buy' successful research. Although the huge cancer industry has spent a vast portion of its massive budget on laboratory research designed to find a 'magic' cure for cancer the majority of the most important and dramatic discoveries about cancer have been made by observant practitioners who have devoted themselves to a study of human patients and their habits.

In my book *Paper Doctors* (1977) I explained: 'One of the most important breakthroughs in cancer research of recent years was made, not by researchers in expensive institutes but by a practising British surgeon, Denis Burkitt, working in Uganda. His first research grant from Government funds totalled £15 and his second, for £150, came from the Medical Research Council and was spent on an old jeep. By logical, patient study Burkitt managed to map the occurrence of a tumour common in children in that part of the world. He matched the map he prepared with other factors and eventually managed to show that the cancer was probably caused by a virus. Eventually he learnt how to cure the tumour. So, one of the most important discoveries was made, not by a professional researcher but by an observant doctor happy to continue his studies in his own time and at his own expense. Too many doctors these days are unwilling to begin any research programme unless they are first financed by an official agency and properly recognised as bona fide research workers.'

There have been some very important advances in cancer treatment in recent years. But they have been largely limited to rare cancers that tend to occur in children and young adults, and those make up only perhaps one or two per cent of the total cancer burden. Cancer death rates continue to go up year after year. And survival rates are no better today than they were. The cancer industry deliberately draws attention to its modest successes in the treatment of a few, relatively uncommon childhood cancers (putting pictures of children whose lives have been saved onto promotional leaflets and posters is a sure-fire way to keep the money pouring in). But there has been little or no improvement in the death rates for the big killers: lung cancer, breast cancer, prostate cancer or cancer of the colon.

None of this explains why Governments have also failed to teach their citizens the facts about cancer. However, there are, I believe, two explanations for this seemingly mysterious state of affairs. Firstly, Governments are always wary of annoying big, powerful, tax-paying industries and there is absolutely no doubt that many huge, international corporations would be (to put it mildly) exceedingly upset if millions of potential consumers were warned of the dangers of eating meat. Secondly, (and I offer no excuse for the fact that this sounds extremely cynical) Governments do not want people to live longer. On the contrary, they have a vested interest in people not living too long. People who live on into their 60s, 70s and 80s have to be given pensions and cost Governments a great deal of money.

And, of course, doctors are educated by the drug industry, and controlled by it, and the result is that when the average doctor thinks of 'patients' he or she thinks of 'drugs'. Doctors are taught to respond to illness by prescribing a bottle or a packet of pills. Most doctors have been so brainwashed by the powerful international drugs industry that they regard any treatment which does not involve drugs as hocus pocus and they regard preventive medicine as trivial, irrelevant nonsense which is rather beneath them. And so, for doctors, cancer means chemotherapy.

Doctors frequently claim that people who reject chemotherapy do so because they are fearful of the side effects. This is simplistic and inaccurate and bears comparison with the erroneous claim that people emigrate simply because they want better weather. Patients reject chemotherapy for many reasons. Some know that chemotherapy may damage their recovery and speed their demise. And some know that chemotherapy is grossly overrated, simply does not work and is, like radiotherapy, often likely to do more harm than good. But the slightly sneery accusation that patients who reject chemotherapy do so because they are frightened of the side effects is demeaning, patronising and unworthy. It is also typical of the apologists who defend the drug industry at any cost and who always put the defence of the industry above their compassion and understanding for patients.

The British Government has introduced a £2 billion cancer scheme to help patients but most of the money has been wasted on yet more bureaucracy. Around 400 new administrative posts have been created, with administrative officers paid around £40,000 a year each. The result of all this misdirection of resources is that Britain still has one of the worst cancer survival rates in Western Europe. In the UK, 36% of men with cancer are likely to live beyond 5 years. This compares very badly with figures of 45% in France and Germany, 50% in Sweden and 55% in Austria.

Finally, it is worth remembering that we know what causes 80% of all cancers. If people ate less fatty food and avoided meat, the incidence of cancer would plummet.

24. Travelling For Treatment

For as long as it continues to exist, the NHS will continue to decline. Moreover, private care (currently providing the sort of level of service provided by the NHS two or three decades ago) will also deteriorate. Many consultants who were previously working exclusively in the NHS have carried their bad manners into private practice and many patients don’t know enough to expect better. Even private hospitals have deteriorated, because of the appalling standard set by the NHS. Visit a private hospital and the chances are that you will sit in a crowded waiting room. After a lengthy wait you will be hurried in to see your consultant who will rush through your consultation so that she (or he) can get onto the next patient. ‘Payment in advance please, please see the receptionist. Cash, cheques and all major credit cards taken.’ Private patients now routinely have to wait days (or weeks) to receive the results of simple blood tests, X-ray tests or tissue sample tests. And they have to wait weeks (or months) for essential, life-saving surgery. Paying privately in Britain now buys you better food, slightly more polite nurses and a television set all of your own that you don’t have to feed with tokens. But it doesn’t buy you better medical care (which is, I suspect, what most people suspect they’re going to get when they spend vast amounts of money on private health insurance) though it does, importantly, buy you a good chance of avoiding a deadly antibiotic-resistant infection.

Normal health care practice in other countries is to receive test results within an hour or so and, if you have a serious disorder needing treatment, to receive that within a few days. Not even private patients get that level of care in Britain today. So, not surprisingly, a growing number of Britons now go abroad for health care; travelling to India or Thailand for medical and surgical treatment. Hospitals in these countries are far cleaner, far more modern and far better equipped than British hospitals. Patients go to hospitals and clinics in Poland, Bulgaria and Japan. And they go not just because they can avoid long waiting lists or because private hospital care is much cheaper than it is in the UK but because they know that they will be treated better and they will be safer. There is far less risk of infection in most other countries. Patients go abroad for major operations and they go for the treatment of relatively minor ailments; many even go abroad for dental treatment.

And the prices (which often include first class hotel accommodation for accompanying relatives) are, even when the costs of travel are included, often considerably lower than the price of treatment in the UK. For example, in the early summer of 2011 the price of a cataract removal in the UK was listed at £2,175. The same operation would cost £490 in Bulgaria. A coronary bypass would cost £13,650 in the UK and £4,721 in India. A hip replacement would cost £9,500 in the UK and £2,900 in Tunisia. A full set of dentures which would cost £565 in the UK would cost £156 in Latvia. The private surgery prices in the UK are high because NHS waiting lists are deliberately manipulated, and cruelly long, and private hospitals and doctors take advantage of the demand by pushing their prices sky high. (In the summer of 2011, it was announced that some Primary Care Trusts within the NHS were imposing minimum waiting times in the hope that at least some of the patients waiting for treatment would either die or choose to pay for private treatment.)

Patients travel abroad not just because operations and treatments are cheaper outside the UK (and do not involve a long waiting time) but also because they know that the medical and nursing care will be far superior, that they will receive better food and that their relatives will be better received. How embarrassing it is to have to write that. Some hospitals in the Far East have turned non-emergency, elective surgery into a quasi-holiday experience.

The quality of medical care in Britain will continue to deteriorate because the answer to all the bad things that happen is not to train people better (or, heaven forbid, to punish the worst offenders) but to add another layer of impenetrable bureaucracy, separating the people with the power from the people making the decisions, and to ensure that no one can ever be held responsible for anything they do. The people with the power protect the lowly people who take the decisions because that helps to protect the position of the people with the power. It’s an unwritten rule. No one must be punished or even reprimanded because once you start down that slippery slope you end up with some higher level official having to accept responsibility and that cannot be contemplated. And so nothing ever improves. Problems merely create more cover ups. The only concern is to avoid anyone having to say ‘sorry’, or admit that they have made a mistake. Patients and their relatives may remain unsatisfied, aggrieved or concerned that someone else will suffer in exactly the same way that they did. But none of this seems to matter as long as no jobs are lost or even threatened. Hospital bureaucrats prefer to pay off a litigant (without admitting liability or having to resign) than to defend a case in court.

25. Cockroaches With Computers

In the bad old days when I was a young doctor, and doctors and nurses were in charge of health care, hospitals were run by a matron. The administration would be managed by a hospital secretary (usually a weedy, almost invisible accountant assisted by a couple of typists and a filing clerk) and there would be a clerk on every ward who was responsible for filing the mail, the laboratory reports and the medical notes. The ward clerk would keep all the patients' records up-to-date and neatly filed in a little cabinet. (These days, wards have a row of administrators. Four or five of them sit there constantly scribbling. There are no nurses. Just clerks sitting scribbling. What are they all writing? I have no idea. But I can tell you that whatever it is it is bound to be unnecessary, self-serving guff.)

Today, hospitals are overrun with administrators. There are now more administrators in British hospitals than there are nurses. There are more administrators than beds, for heaven's sake. Commercial organisations everywhere are getting rid of middle managers by the lorry load and replacing them with computers; the NHS stands alone in acquiring more administrators as well as tons of computers. When my mother was being thrown out of hospital because she was only terminally ill and not finally terminally ill I attended two meetings. One meeting was attended by nine NHS employees who were there to insist that my mother be ejected from the hospital. The other meeting was held in an entirely empty hospital ward. 'We don't have any beds,' said one of the NHS employees. 'We have to discharge your mother.' It didn't seem to occur to her that they had plenty of beds – there were a stack of them in the room where we were having the meeting. And if they fired some of the bureaucrats they would have had plenty of money to hire any extra nurses they needed. Endless hours are wasted on meetings where people who have never met the patient and who know nothing about making a diagnosis, or arranging treatment, give their views about what should and should not be done. Organising meetings is the one thing the NHS does well. Large, bureaucratic organisations exist for meetings and Britain's National Health Service is the world's third largest employer (after the Chinese army and the Indian railways). The meetings, organised by bureaucrats, nurses and social workers are an end not a beginning. They provide a sense of importance and a reason for their own existence. The short-term aim is not to make decisions but, rather, to avoid making any decisions. The long-term aim is to ensure that another meeting can be arranged, the sense of self-importance sustained and the responsibility for making the wrong decision avoided.

Our hospitals are overrun with administrators and they are appalling. Are the two facts linked? You bet they are. Governments have repeatedly promised to get rid of mixed-sex wards. They've failed to manage even that. Today, Britain is one of the few countries in the world where men and women must share a ward and a bathroom. Even Third World countries have banished mixed-sex wards but NHS administrators, far too busy choosing biscuits for their next meeting, found it just too difficult. Doctors and nurses (who could have used their professional power to put an end to this but who have preferred to use their power only to improve their own financial circumstances) should cringe in shame and embarrassment. But I don't expect many will.

NHS hospitals are filthy. The food is inedible. Patients are treated with neither respect nor dignity. Doctors are hardly ever seen. Nurses are lazy. A Tory peer who was treated in an NHS hospital described his nurses as 'grubby, drunken, promiscuous and lazy'. Charles Dickens' wonderful creation, Mrs Gamp, would have fitted into the modern NHS very well. NHS hospitals are as dangerous today as they were in the Middle Ages. The chances of a patient leaving an NHS hospital in better health than they were when they entered it are not high. The inescapable conclusion is that hospitals are run for the benefit not of patients but of the staff.

Everything in the NHS moves frighteningly slowly, and with scant regard for the welfare of patients. When it was announced in January 2009 that the World Health Organisation had devised a simple checklist which had been proved to cut surgical deaths by more than 40% and surgical complications by over a third, hospitals in England and Wales were ordered to use the checklist by February 2010. In other words, the Government allowed hospitals 13 months to adopt a simple checklist system. Is this what we have become? Is this the world we have created for ourselves? A bureaucracy so powerful that it takes 13 months to photocopy a list?

The money poured into the NHS in recent years could have been spent on providing the population with an endless supply of cocktail umbrellas for all the good it has done. A recent survey of more than 3,000 doctors showed that the majority believe that the Labour Government utterly failed to improve hospitals despite doubling the amount of taxpayers' money spent on them.

The problem, of course, is the bureaucracy. The figures aren't a secret. The main job of all the damned bureaucrats is to defraud the public and to ensure that the NHS doesn't waste good money on looking after patients. Money not wasted on patients can be spent on office equipment, weekend junkets and better expense accounts. If a revived Gestapo ever starts recruiting in the UK they would have little trouble in finding suitable candidates among the administrators working for the NHS.

And so thanks to the cruelty of the bureaucrats, and the self-centred blindness of doctors and nurses, the result is a patchy, unfair, destructive, lethal system which kills more people than it saves.

My wife needed a test which for unexplained political reasons could not be done at the hospital to which she had been referred. So the hospital she had visited sent four copies of the same letter through the post. One copy went to the doctor working at the first hospital, one copy went to the doctor at the second hospital, one copy went to my wife's doctor and one copy went to my wife. The second hospital then sent a copy of the same letter through the post to my wife's GP asking for an official referral letter. Copies of this letter went by post to the consultant at the first hospital (who had never actually seen my wife), the hospital records department at the first hospital, another department in the second hospital and my wife. Weeks later we all had lots of paperwork but there was still no sign of an appointment.

Because of the hordes of unnecessary bureaucrats, the NHS is now dangerously overstaffed. Billions of pounds are wasted on salaries, expenses and pensions for unnecessary administrators; an overpaid, cumbersome burden weighs down every part of the health service, discouraging and disrupting the work of doctors and nurses. Those excess administrators are soaking up so much money that they are indirectly responsible for thousands of deaths. A spokesman for one hospital which had spent £1,000,000 more than its budget allowed said that the hospital was 'thinking' about what to do (putting it this way enables the administrators to avoid responsibility) and that what had happened was no one's fault (see what I mean). She said that the hospital was considering selling some equipment or closing some beds in order to deal with its debts. The hospital was not, of course, contemplating getting rid of any of the administrators whose incompetence had led to the problem. Most administrators seem to believe that hospitals would be much more efficient and cost effective if there were no patients at all. Signs of administrators at work are everywhere. For example, it is the fashion these days to put carpets on hospital corridors. Naturally, this is dangerously unhealthy (since carpets are far more difficult to clean than other forms of flooring) but at least it means that administrators are not disturbed by the noise of patients being wheeled about.

Today, Britain's National Health Service employs 1.4 million people. During the last decade or so the workforce has increased by nearly a quarter of a million. But there are less people actually caring for patients than there were a decade or so ago.

In an ideal world hospitals would be run by doctors – the only people working in hospital who have taken an Oath to care for their patients. But hospitals are now run by administrators and so doctors must do what they are told. The NHS has become a bonanza for bureaucrats. More than 60% of NHS employees are pen pushers. The NHS has been damaged beyond repair by a combination of factors but one primary problem has, for years, been the fact that NHS hospitals have always been absurdly over-endowed with two unnecessary life forms: cockroaches and administrators. It can, I suppose, be argued that the cockroaches are useful because they eat up bits of food that have been dropped on the floor. The administrators, however, are destructive, deadly and entirely without value. They contribute nothing to the welfare of patients but cost billions.

We should fire at least half of all NHS administrators immediately (it doesn't matter which half) and then sack half of the remainder (again, it doesn't matter which half). We should then give the remaining bureaucrats responsibility to match their authority. We should put an administrator on every ward – with responsibility for maintaining patients' records. This would free nurses to look after patients. Outside hospitals all patients should keep their own medical records. This would enable them to take their records to whichever doctor they were seeing – whether in general practice or in hospital.

The separation of authority from responsibility, and the devolution of clinical power, means that doctors are no longer in charge of what happens to their patients. Doctors work in teams (as equal members alongside such dross as social workers) led by administrators. Today, it is the administrators who are in charge. And administrators are, it seems, unsackable. Whenever a hospital runs short of money it is the facilities for patients which are cut – never the number of overpaid, underworked administrators. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that modern hospitals and health centres are run for employees in general, and administrators in particular, rather than for patients. There are no penalties for bureaucrats who make a real mess of things. In December 2008 it was announced that £327,000,000 of debt would be wiped from ten hospital trusts that were in severe financial trouble. There was not, of course, any suggestion that any of the bureaucrats responsible would lose their jobs. In an average sort of year the NHS loses £500,000,000 a year as foreign Governments fail to reimburse it for treating foreigners who fell ill while holidaying in Britain. At the same time Britain pays out vast sums to cover the costs of British tourists treated in Europe. Is it beyond the wit of NHS bureaucrats to work out a way to hold back some of the money we pay out and put it against the money we are owed?

It is vital to get rid of bureaucrats not just because of the cost but because, in order to justify their existence, they need constantly to interfere. They deliberately complicate systems which work well and they work unceasingly to justify their importance, their huge salaries, their deputies, their assistants, their teams of secretaries and their spacious offices. Bureaucrats exist to acquire power and to avoid making decisions (which, in any case, they are not qualified to make). Administrators ensure that doctors are sucked into their system of time-wasting committees and meetings. Their whole purpose is control and the purpose of that is power and the purpose of that is money. The vast majority of NHS administrators are poor quality, badly trained, inadequately supervised and wildly overpaid. Bureaucrats are not just expensive; they are also destructive. In an ideal world over 90% of hospital administrators would spend their days wandering the streets dressed only in those indecent, humiliating, degrading, tie-at-the-back-and-show-the-world-your-bum gowns that hospitals force patients to wear.

When NHS bureaucrats decide what is good for people they take no notice of what people want or need. Bureaucrats live on meetings, like vampires live on blood, and so although they never want to make major changes they are always endeavouring to change the existing ways of doing things; causing curiously significant disruptions which benefit only themselves.

A friend of ours needed a new hearing aid because her old one had stopped working. But she couldn’t have a new one unless her GP referred her afresh to the hospital. So she had to start again. Her GP had to refer her a second time. There was, inevitably, lots more paperwork and lots more administration. That’s what the NHS is all about: paperwork and administration.

The world is full of rules and regulations and the world of medicine is no exception. But, in the medical world, they are always the wrong rules and regulations because they are created not to protect people but to protect the establishment; to protect bureaucrats, politicians, drug companies and the health professions.

26. Profits In Poor Countries

Although it is firmly based in the developed part of the world, the international drug industry happily makes whatever profits it can in the developing countries, marketing its products as unscrupulously as the tobacco giants.

Drug companies prefer to make (and sell) drugs which are prescribed for chronic illnesses common in rich countries. These drugs will need to be taken for years. It is for this reason that there are many drugs for psychiatric problems, high blood pressure, heart disease, arthritis, thrombosis, osteoporosis, pain relief, high cholesterol, obesity, sex problems and baldness. Vaccines are best of all because they can be given to millions of people around the world – even healthy people can be given vaccines. The drug companies sell 80% of their drugs in America, Europe and Japan. And they go to extraordinary lengths to please their customers (and enhance their profits). Drug companies can now put electronic markers into drug capsules. The marker sends a message to a sensor to remind patients if they miss a dose of their drug. How absurd and expensive. Why should doctors pander to laziness and stupidity in such a way?

Most drug companies look for products with a minimum sales potential of $500 million a year. This means that they make many drugs for the treatment of diseases which affect patients in rich countries and very few drugs for diseases which affect patients in poor countries.

Although drug companies spend virtually no money on studying the sort of diseases which afflict human beings in the developing countries they do, nevertheless, sell around 20% of the value of their drugs to the Governments of those countries. The drug companies will admit that diseases which afflict the people of Africa and Asia aren't profitable enough to merit any research investment but they will happily sell their expensive brand name versions of tranquillisers, sleeping tablets, painkillers, and the other pharmacological garbage of the developed world into those countries. Moreover, when they sell into developing countries the drug companies, like the tobacco companies, often use advertising and marketing techniques which not even the lax Governments of the West would allow. Indeed, they don't just sell products which are too dangerous for sale in the developed countries but they also use drugs in ways that would never be allowed in developed countries. For example, doctors in developing countries may be encouraged to prescribe drugs to help improve the growth of malnourished children who really just need enough food.

There is a ruthlessness about the drug companies which makes the arms business look positively philanthropic. Drug companies have even been known to push up prices of drugs in small developing countries which have been hit by epidemics. To the drug industry profit is everything.

27. Who Lives, Who Dies?

It is probably not widely known, but NHS staff frequently make decisions about which patients will be saved and which will be allowed to die. There aren’t enough resources to provide for everyone in need. The rules which have to be followed mean that people with children take precedence over people who don’t have children. So a scrounger who has never done a day’s work in his life, but who has 12 kids, will take precedence over someone who works hard, pays taxes and plays an important role in society. The sensible and hard-working always lose out in every conceivable way. I have a vision that before long the NHS will introduce a reality television programme called *Who lives? Who dies? You decide?.* Twelve patients needing kidney transplants will all take part in the programme and ‘sell’ themselves to the audience. The winner will receive the transplant and the NHS will keep all the phone line money. The awful, awful thing is that I cannot convince myself it could not happen.

28. Planning For Failure

Successive political administrations have recognised the need to streamline the NHS and have made the fundamental mistake of trying to improve things by fiddling with the structure. Naturally, the fiddling has, of course, always been done by administrators and has always resulted in the introduction of additional layers of administration.

No British Government seems constitutionally able to come into power without reorganising the NHS and so the organisation has steadily become increasingly bureaucratic with each change in administration; the layers just keep adding and the complexity grows. I have lost count of the number of times the NHS has been reorganised in my lifetime. The one thing I can guarantee is that every time they've reorganised it the administration has grown denser and more controlling. Albert Einstein knew what he was talking about when he said that: 'Bureaucracy is the death of any achievement.' The tragedy is that in future there will be ever more reorganisation because the European Union has views on the provision of health care (as it does with everything else).

Naturally, the politicians always claim that they are making changes in order to improve things for patients but in practice they always do exactly the opposite because the administrators (who run the NHS and who decide what changes will be made) ensure that the end result of any reorganisation is not that things are made simpler but that yet another layer of administration is added. The one certainty in a bureaucratic organisation is that no administrator ever gets fired as a result of a reorganisation. It is an inevitable fact of life that every reorganisation of any large organisation run by the State will be bigger, more bureaucratic and less efficient at the end of the reorganisation than it was at the beginning. And the politicians (who have no idea how the NHS is organised) never dare to tackle the basic problem which is that the NHS itself is based upon an entirely false premise. And so, every reorganisation makes the bureaucracy bigger, more intrusive and more powerful and reduces the authority of doctors and the quality of the service patients receive.

The result is that today, the NHS, intrinsically corrupt and inefficient, would fit well into the old Soviet Union. I have been studying the NHS for over 40 years and know now that the big questions will never be addressed because it will always be inconvenient to do so. In any large organisation (and in Europe they don't come any larger than the NHS) employees are judged not by success but by the absence of failure. And in today's NHS things are worse than that in that failure is only failure if it is admitted and within the NHS failure is never admitted.

Every time there is a reorganisation patients are promised more freedom but every reorganisation means that patients have less freedom than they had before. They do not, for example, have real freedom of choice of doctor or hospital or remedy. This sort of basic freedom is essential but patients cannot see the doctor of their choice (as most would if they were paying direct). Instead, they see the doctor who is available (if there is a doctor available). In general practice, patients see the doctor to whom they have been allocated – or, rather, they are put under the care of a practice to which they have been allocated.

The people who make decisions about NHS cuts are the administrators – the people whose jobs ought to go but never do. Whenever cuts are made it is, of course, always nurses and doctors who go. The doctors and nurses who remain are forced by each new reorganisation to spend increasing amounts of their time on administration, attending wall to wall meetings and dealing with the odd patient here and there when time allows.

Politicians never have the sense, or the courage, to admit that the whole damned idea of the NHS was a bad one, and will never work satisfactorily from the patients' point of view. No one is ever prepared to admit that because a State-run system allies the medical profession and the State it isolates the patient. Politicians, drug companies, bureaucrats and staff all have a vested interest in maintaining the NHS beast. And the administrators are clever enough to ensure that the people who might make a fuss (the doctors) always come well out of any reorganisation. So, thanks to recent NHS reorganisations, GPs are today underworked and overpaid. They are paid better, for less work, than doctors anywhere else in the world. The NHS is fundamentally flawed but the system works well for the staff who are employed by it and so doctors, administrators, nurses and politicians are all united in having a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. The only people who would benefit from changing the things that are wrong with our hospitals are patients. And nobody seems to care about them.

And yet the NHS is entrenched in the national psyche as 'a good thing', and no politician will dare stand up and point to the fact that the emperor isn't wearing any clothes. Every NHS reorganisation fails because each one misses the point which is that the basic premise upon which the NHS was founded (that the existence of the NHS would pretty well eradicate illness) was utterly false.

And so, the politicians and the bureaucrats constantly tinker. Reforming the NHS is like shifting the deckchairs on the Titanic. The names of the organisations, and the inevitable flow charts which describe their relationships, will change but in principle nothing will alter. There will be more administrators. Any who are made redundant will be given absurdly over-generous severance payments and rehired almost immediately on better terms.

Changes to the NHS are always made for financial and management and political reasons; they are never made for medical reasons. Changes are made to suit the politicians and the administrators. Changes are never made because they will make things better for patients. The patient has long since been forgotten, a bloody nuisance to be brushed to one side whenever decisions are made. The NHS has always been an unfriendly monster and patients have always struggled to cope. In any bureaucracy, doing nothing is always the best and safest option. And opposing *real* change is always a good career move. The NHS is constantly being reorganised but none of the reorganisations affects the big issues. This is no accident. The bureaucrats never change anything important because they know that real change would reduce their power and displease their masters: the politicians and the drug company bosses.

29. How Sensible Living Is Penalised

The NHS encourages people to ignore their own health. Those who smoke, indulge in all the foods that are known to be bad, and allow themselves to become obscenely overweight are, as much as possible, protected from the consequences. The NHS takes all the authority and responsibility away from people. People now believe that if they fall ill then it is someone else’s responsibility to make them well again. The healthy, those who do look after their health, end up subsidising the careless and deliberately incautious. Millions now think only of their rights and entitlements; they expect the system to look after them whatever happens.

The heavy drinking, heavy smoking, heroin using, over-weight, promiscuous homosexual man who never uses condoms and who has a penchant for motor car racing and hang-gliding will probably have to pay over the odds for his life insurance. The underwriters know that his chances of living long enough to enable them to make a profit out of an ordinary premium are pretty slim.

Similarly, the driver who is involved in a road accident and who is shown afterwards to have had far too much to drink, to have driven on bald tyres and to have left his seat belt dangling on its hook could find that his chances of getting massive damages are low.

This link between behaviour and consequence encourages people to be careful, to think for themselves and to assess the odds before behaving rashly.

But one disastrous consequence of the NHS is that it diminishes any sense of personal responsibility by separating behaviour from consequences.

And because there is always going to be a shortage of medical equipment and medical personnel, and because the NHS must therefore ration health care, those who are ill through no fault of their own will often suffer because of the deliberate, selfish stupidity of others.

People who recklessly play ‘catch me if you can’ with cancer by eating meat or smoking cigarettes are creating longer waiting lists for everyone. Many careful, sensible individuals die because of the rank stupidity of smokers, heavy drinkers and over-eaters.

Nearly 40 years ago I wrote an article pointing out that I could see nothing wrong with making people pay for their own contrariness. Since it has been established beyond reasonable doubt that many of those who need medical help have knowingly and recklessly damaged their own health, why should the rest of us be prepared to pay for their medical care? Why should the man who regularly smokes 30 cigarettes a day expect the nation to pay for treatment for his bronchitis, his lung cancer, his heart disease and his gastritis? Why should the woman who refuses to diet expect others to help pay when her obesity causes medical problems? Why should the man who persists in drinking too much get free treatment when his liver finally fails to cope? Why should the meat eater expect to receive free medical care when he or she develops colon cancer, breast cancer, prostate cancer, endometrial cancer, rectal cancer, pancreatic cancer or kidney cancer? There is, after all, plenty of research available proving that those cancers are linked to eating meat.

The Health Service is so desperately short of funds, equipment and staff that every year thousands of people who need treatment, and who could be saved, are left to die. Many thousands more die before they can be properly investigated because hospital departments and hospital beds are filled with patients who have only themselves to blame for their ill health.

Why should those idiots who have deliberately exposed themselves to disease receive free care while others, less selfish and more sensible, are left untreated? Why should the drunken driver have his injuries treated free of charge? Why should the climber who sets off in bad weather expect the nation to pay the cost of his rescue and subsequent treatment? These people should pay for the treatment they need. They should take responsibility for their own actions instead of expecting the State to take on that responsibility. Without this proper allocation of responsibility all our freedoms will continue to be diminished. If people knew that they would have to pay for medical treatment for conditions caused or exacerbated by their own stupidity, many would suddenly find that they could give up smoking, give up drinking, give up eating meat, go on a diet, afford new tyres or get back from the pub without using the car.

But the enthusiastic supporters of the NHS cannot bear to think of there being any overt attempt to encourage sensible behaviour. And so we continue to have a system which discourages personal responsibility and diminishes the value of preventive medicine. Too many people rush to the doctor for advice because it is all free. Too few realise that treatment can sometimes be damaging. If there was even a small financial incentive to look after themselves people would be much more careful. The attitude of many is: ‘I have made myself ill. It’s your fault. You should have stopped me. Now it’s your job to give me pills and make me better’. Maybe Bevan should have introduced some sort of no-claims bonus system into his blueprint for the NHS.

30. Needless Cuts

At least a quarter of all surgical operations performed are unnecessary.

For some types of surgery – for example: heart surgery, tonsillectomies, circumcisions, caesarean sections for pregnant women and hysterectomies – the percentage of unnecessary operations is almost certainly much higher. At least 90% of all heart surgery is unnecessary. With many operations (such as hernia repair) the downside is often considerably greater than the upside.

Operations are done unnecessarily for a huge variety of reasons. Some – particularly those performed on private patients – may be done because the surgeon needs the cash. Some patients are put down on the list for surgery in order to keep waiting lists long – so that more patients are prepared to pay for private treatment. And some unnecessary operations are done because it's easier to cut open a patient than it is to think about alternatives. If you go to a Ford garage the salesman will recommend a Ford motor car. If you visit a surgeon he will recommend surgery.

As the surplus of doctors continues to grow so the number of unnecessary operations continues to increase. And it isn't just a problem because of the unnecessary pain and discomfort that patients have to put up with. At least 1% of the patients who undergo surgery will die on the operating table or in the ward afterwards. One in every 100 patients who goes into hospital for an operation does not walk out again afterwards.

Of course, some patients are very ill when they are wheeled into the operating theatre.

And some patients would have died without surgery.

But many patients are perfectly healthy when they are taken into the operating theatre. They are having surgery because they have been persuaded by doctors that it is necessary, or that it will in some way improve the quality of their lives.

Back in 1988 (in a book called *The Health Scandal*) I reported that coronary artery bypass surgery (the commonest procedure performed in cardiac surgery) had been in use for nearly 30 years without anyone trying to find out how patients' everyday lives were affected by the operation. When a survey was eventually done it was found that whereas nearly half of the patients who had the operation had been working right up to the time of surgery, three months after the operation only just over a third of the men were working. And a year after the operation nearly half of the patients were still not working. In other words, the operation had little positive effect on patients' lives but did put a good many out of action for some time. And there were, of course, a number of patients who died as a result of surgical complications. A bypass operation takes several hours to perform, consumes a good deal of hospital time and professional skill and can be a physically and mentally exhausting experience for a patient and his family. There is a one in 30 risk that a patient undergoing coronary artery bypass surgery will be dead within 30 days of the operation. The mortality rate varies from surgeon to surgeon but it can be as high as 20% and anything up to a quarter of patients having the operation have heart attacks either while on the operating table or shortly afterwards.

And what makes the medical profession's enthusiasm for coronary artery surgery even more bizarre is the fact that patients who have symptoms of heart disease don't need surgery at all, but stand a better chance of recovering if they are put on a regime which includes a vegan diet, gentle exercise and relaxation. (I described the utterly convincing evidence for this in my book *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You*, which was first published in 1996. The chapter is entitled *Conquer Heart Disease Without Pills Or Surgery*.)

I can understand cardiac surgeons promoting heart surgery – it is for them a major source of income – but what the hell are GPs doing still referring patients for heart surgery? Any GP who does so should be struck off the medical register and have his stethoscope stuffed up a suitably ill-designed orifice.

31. Doctors Bought: Lock, Stock And Syringe Barrel

Enthusiasm for vaccination has became almost hysterical in much of the world. Drug companies promote vaccination programmes because they make billions of dollars out of vaccines. Doctors are equally enthusiastic because they can charge huge fees for vaccinating their patients. And Governments everywhere are enthusiastic because they have been told (by drug companies and doctors) that vaccination programmes help prevent disease and therefore save money.

But the enthusiasm for vaccination is, in my considered view, a massive confidence trick. There is now much talk in America and Europe of compulsory vaccination programmes being introduced. It is one of the great scandals of our time that doctors promote vaccination with such enthusiasm when vaccines aren't safe and don't work very well. But then, in their defence, they do get paid very well for promoting vaccination. There are already doctors who recommend that *all* children should be vaccinated, whether or not their parents approve. It is likely that those parents who refuse to have their children vaccinated will have them taken away from them. As Dr Ron Paul, former American Presidential Candidate, has pointed out: 'When we give Government the power to make medical decisions for us, we, in essence, accept that the State owns our bodies.'

Compulsory vaccinations have already been introduced in some areas of the world and in Britain some GPs (family doctors) are already refusing to look after patients if they don't agree to have their children vaccinated. (There is a financial reason for this. If patients refuse vaccination, British family doctors lose out on huge cash bonuses.)

I now have no doubt that despite the dangers and inefficiencies known to be associated with it, vaccination will become compulsory in the West. The hazards and inadequacies will be ignored. It will not be the first time. Compulsory vaccination was introduced in Britain in the mid 19th century and in 1871 Public Vaccinators were appointed.

There are already many senior members of the medical establishment in Europe and America who want vaccination to be compulsory. You will not be convulsed with shock when I tell you that drug companies which make vaccines would not be averse to their products being made compulsory. I understand that. I would like my books to be made compulsory reading.

The French have already started talking about mass vaccination programmes. I have absolutely no doubt that compulsory vaccination is EU policy. And since the EU always gets what it wants, compulsory vaccination will come to be.

One local authority in England has already created secret vaccination centres, stating that it is doing so under 'special powers granted to HM Government under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004'.

Senior doctors recently suggested not only that vaccination should be compulsory but that children who were not vaccinated should not be allowed into school. Social workers will be quick (and eager) to take children away from parents who oppose vaccination.

Politicians have been persuaded that vaccinating the population at large helps save money. The theory is that if you vaccinate 1,000,000 children against, say, whooping cough and, as a result, you prevent 1,000 children getting the disease then the country will avoid the cost of 1,000 parents staying at home for a week or so to look after their child. If one child is permanently brain damaged by the vaccine that is bad luck on the child and his or her parents but, as long as the State can avoid financial responsibility by denying that there is any link between vaccination and brain damage, then it is ahead of the game. In reality, the evidence shows that even this cold-blooded, steel-hearted philosophy is faulty. The problem is that vaccines are so ineffective and so dangerous that instead of being an advantage to society as a whole they are a costly disadvantage.

Drug companies make huge amounts of money out of selling vaccines. And the establishment has fiddled the evidence, and denied or suppressed the inconvenient truths, in order to promote the official point of view. In Britain I have been banned from speaking to doctors. Debates about vaccination are unknown.

The global vaccine market reached $21 billion in 2010 and is growing at a rate of 16.5%. The whole business of vaccinating people is so hugely profitable (largely because it is something that doesn't rely on finding a large number of sick people but also because it is something that can be done on a regular basis) that drug companies, having almost saturated the 'vaccinating-children' market are moving heavily into adult vaccines. There is, for example, a vaccine planned to prevent atherosclerosis. I suspect that doctors will claim that this will enable people to keep eating a bad diet and yet avoid heart attacks.

Those who promote vaccines often claim that vaccination programmes have reduced illness, prevented millions of deaths and are the main reason that the average life expectation has risen.

These are all barefaced lies.

The whole vaccination story is one of the great modern scandals of our time. The entire medical profession (at least the part of it in general practice) has been bribed by the drug industry, working through the Government and using taxpayers' money.

The few doctors who do stand up and say something, and who dare to point out that vaccination programmes are a hazard and do more harm than good, tend to be quickly silenced. They are discredited and scorned and their work is not published.

The truth is that most doctors, whether working as hospital consultants, GPs or public health officials, know very little about vaccination. The majority simply follow the establishment line, never question what they are told by the drug industry and dismiss all critics of vaccination as dangerous lunatics.

I do not intend to repeat all the evidence here (it is available in books of mine, including *Superbody*, *Coleman's Laws* and *Animal Experiments Simple Truths* and on my website www.vernoncoleman.com). My book *Anyone Who Tells You Vaccines Are Safe And Effective Is Lying. Here's The Proof* is packed with information about vaccination.

In Britain, doctors give a number of vaccines to babies with developing immune systems. They start dumping the damned stuff into babies when they are two-months-old, for heaven's sake. And yet there is no evidence that vaccines are safe in the long-term. No research is done to check this. The establishment puts the onus on the doubters to find the evidence, knowing that is pretty well impossible. In the USA, a huge medical practice of paediatricians with 30,000 child patients do not vaccinate their patients at all. Guess how many patients with autism they have? If you guessed 'none' you guessed right.

In Britain, politicians, doctors, nurses and journalists all enthusiastically insist that vaccines are entirely safe and free from side effects. They are all lying. Lest you assume that is hyperbole let me point out that when, in April 2011, the US Health Department's National Vaccine Injury Compensation Programme released its figures for 2010 the report showed that allegedly safe childhood vaccines officially killed or injured no less than 2,699 children in the year 2010 in America. And the American Government is reported to have also paid out damages to the parents of children with autism – accepting that vaccines can cause autism. In 2010 alone the parents of vaccine damaged children received $110 million in damages from the American Government. Can you imagine the fuss there would be if a food company marketed a product which killed or injured 2,699 healthy children in a single year?

The evidence shows that vaccination programmes have not done the things they are credited with but have done most of the things they are blamed for. The decline in disease, the reduction in infant mortality rates and the increase in average life expectation are all due to improved living conditions. Cleaner water, efficient methods of removing sewage, fresher food, less poverty and less overcrowding are the real reasons why these improvements have taken place. Anyone who doubts this has only to look at graphs showing mortality rates and life expectation rates alongside graphs showing when vaccines were introduced. The graphs show clearly that the improvements took place *before* vaccines were introduced.

Why don't doctors say anything?

Sadly, that is because the medical profession has been bought. GPs lost their final scrap of integrity on the day when they agreed to take money if they managed to vaccinate enough patients. That sort of conveyor belt, bonus-ridden philosophy is better suited to the manufacture of motor car parts than the practise of medicine.

In Britain, GPs receive huge bonus payments if they vaccinate enough patients. Every vaccination they give (or authorise) is another nice noise in the cash register. Epidemics produce a bonus. The Government and the enormous and rich vaccine industry have bought the medical profession, lock stock and syringe barrel. GPs, once members of a proud and distinguished profession which gave us such medical giants as Joseph Lister, have been reduced to snivelling, whining needle-men for the drug industry; hand-maidens to an industry which cares nothing for people but everything for profits. Doctors have lost their way. GPs who jab enough patients receive a thumping great wodge of cash. Any GP who is questioning and discerning will be punished. And so the vast majority of GPs do as they are told. Most know nothing about the dangers of the damned vaccines they so happily jab into patients' arms. Question the whole damned sordid business and these ill-educated propagandists (who know nothing about the risks of the toxic mixtures they are promoting) will throw up their hands in horror. Ask them for some evidence that vaccines are safe and effective and they become hysterical. Facts are, as John Adams said, stubborn things. And the facts do not show any value in vaccination.

Most Western doctors long ago lost any sense of right or wrong. They long ago lost the passions and beliefs and yearnings that (hopefully) took them into medicine. Today, the lives of the vast majority of practising doctors are driven by a potent and destructive (and distinctly patient-unfriendly) mixture of ambition, greed and denial. There are very few Western doctors in practice today who want to save the world, or even change it very much. Their aims are selfish and personal. A bigger house, a faster car, shorter working hours and longer holidays.

As a result, the number of health problems (varying from autism to severe brain damage) caused by vaccines is soaring. The link between vaccinations and illness will continue to be as strenuously denied as was the link between smoking and lung cancer but countries which have not yet adopted mass vaccination programmes would, perhaps, be wise to ask some serious questions before starting to do so.

Just about every healthy individual in the ‘developed’ world will at some time or another be vaccinated. Individuals who have absolutely nothing wrong with them visit their doctor and allow themselves to be vaccinated in the belief that they are being injected with something perfectly safe which will protect them from disease in the future.

Sadly, there is now a dramatic amount of evidence to show that their faith is misplaced and that vaccines may cause an enormous amount of trouble – and do serious and possibly irreparable harm.

Most practising doctors and nurses at the sharp end of medicine undoubtedly believe that vaccines have helped wipe out some of the deadliest infectious diseases. Many members of the medical profession would put vaccination high on any list of great medical discoveries. The mythical power of vaccination programmes has for years constantly been sustained by Governments and organisations such as the World Health Organisation announcing that such and such a disease will be eradicated when the relevant vaccination programme has been completed.

The theory is that when an individual is given a vaccine – which consists of a weakened or dead version of the disease against which protection is required – his or her body will be tricked into developing antibodies to the disease in exactly the same way that a body develops antibodies when it is exposed to the disease itself.

But in reality things aren’t quite so simple. How long do the antibodies last? Do they always work? What about those individuals who don’t produce antibodies at all? Vaccination, like so much of western medicine, is a far more inexact science than doctors (and drug companies) would like us to think.

Vaccination is widely respected by doctors and others in the health care industry because of the assumption that it is through vaccination that many of the world’s most lethal infectious diseases have been eradicated. But the introduction of vaccination programmes came when the death rates from the major infectious diseases had already fallen. There isn’t any evidence to show that vaccination programmes have ever been any of any real value – either to individuals or to communities. When you study (as I have) the evidence relating to whooping cough, tetanus, diphtheria and other diseases it is clear that the incidence, and number of deaths were in decline long before the relevant vaccines were introduced. But as the years have gone by the number of vaccines available has increased steadily. Modern American children receive around 30 vaccinations by the time they go to school. A decade or two ago the only vaccines available were against a relatively small number of diseases including smallpox, tuberculosis, polio, cholera, diphtheria, tetanus and whooping cough. Today, the number of available vaccines seems to grow almost daily. In the past vaccines were produced against major killer diseases. Today, vaccines are produced against diseases such as measles, mumps and chickenpox which have been traditionally regarded as relatively benign inconveniences of childhood.

Does anyone know what happens inside the body when all these different vaccinations are given together? Do different vaccines work with or against one another? What about the risk of interactions? Exactly how does the immune system cope when it is suddenly bombarded with so much foreign material?

Tragically, many doctors seem to know very little about the vaccines they advocate. In my view, if a doctor wants to vaccinate you or a member of your family you should insist that he confirm in writing that the vaccine is both entirely safe and absolutely essential. You may notice his enthusiasm for the vaccine suddenly diminish.

Why are so many people still enthusiastic about vaccination? Well, I suspect that could be because most people simply don’t know the truth. The reality is that the truth, regarded as inconvenient, is frequently suppressed. The same thing happens everywhere these days. When I wrote a short-lived column for a newspaper in China the editors were at first reluctant to publish a column I had written criticising vaccination. Eventually, the editors published the piece (simply because I refused to provide an alternative). After the column appeared, my book publishers in China wrote to tell me that the Chinese Government had informed them that they could no longer publish my books. My publishers in China had produced four of my books, all of which had sold very well, but they had been told by the Government that only ‘medical publishing houses’ could in future publish books concerned with health care. Other Chinese publishers who had shown great enthusiasm for publishing my books also suddenly changed their minds.

32. How And Why Doctors Ignore The Major Cause Of Illness

There is clear medical and scientific evidence available to show that nothing, not even tobacco, influences your chances of developing cancer as much as the food you choose to eat. It is estimated that between 30% and 60% of all cancers are caused by what you eat. Doctors, scientists and supporters of the cancer industry (all of whom realise that there is no money to be made out of preventing cancer, but tons of loot to be made out of doing research and flogging 'cures' and treatments) merrily ignore this fact and claim that the battle against cancer will only be won with the aid of more money. They claim that in order to obtain the information we need we must spend, spend, spend. But that isn't true. It is not more knowledge we need (we have, as I pointed out in *Paper Doctors* nearly 40 years ago, already amassed far more knowledge than we will ever use in our lifetime), but the ability and courage and determination to use the knowledge we already have. And the evidence proving that certain types of food cause cancer has been available for a remarkably long time.

Amazingly, it has for many years been widely agreed that 80% of all cancers are preventable – using knowledge which we have available at the moment. In other words ignorance (sustained through political and industrial expediency) is responsible for 80% of the millions of deaths caused by cancer each year. And much of that ignorance involves the effect that food has upon the health.

Way back in 1981, it was estimated that dietary modifications might result in a one third reduction in the number of deaths from cancer in the United States with a 90% reduction in deaths from cancer of the stomach and large bowel; a 50% reduction in deaths from cancers of the endometrium, gallbladder, pancreas and breast; a 20% reduction in deaths from cancers of the lung, larynx, bladder, cervix, mouth, pharynx and oesophagus and a 10% reduction in deaths from other sites.

Back in 1982, the National Research Council in the United States of America published a technical report entitled *Diet, Nutrition and Cancer* which showed that diet was probably the single most important factor in the development of cancer, and, even then, 30 years ago, that there was evidence linking cancers of the breast, colon and prostate to particular foods or types of food.

It is a scandal of astonishing proportions that a majority of the population still do not know about these vitally important and well-established links. It is an even bigger scandal that most doctors still dismiss the idea of a food/cancer link as mumbo-jumbo nonsense, preferring to rely entirely on prescription drugs, radiotherapy and surgery as 'treatments' for cancer. The average medical student probably spends more time staring down a microscope at histology slides than he or she spends studying nutrition.

Today, it is an undeniable fact that between a third and a half of all cancers are caused by eating the wrong types of food and you can dramatically reduce your chances of developing cancer of the breast, cancer of the prostate, cancer of the colon, cancer of the ovary or cancer of the uterus by not eating meat. And yet when I checked one large (over 1,000 pages long) medical textbook I found that the chapter on cancer summed up the role of food as a causal agent in just one, rather short, sentence. I find this all extremely difficult to understand. I have been studying scientific research papers for over four decades and I have never seen such convincing research as that which shows the links between particular types of food and particular types of cancer. I have absolutely no doubt that if these undeniable links had been properly publicised countless millions of lives could – and would – have been saved. The suppression of this information by a greedy and conscience-free food industry, compliant, revenue conscious politicians, a cancer industry dominated by grant-hungry researchers and an uncaring, drug company dominated medical profession has, I sincerely believe, led to more deaths than any war in history.

Since the early 1980s the amount of evidence linking diet to cancer has grown steadily. In 1990 even the British Medical Association, hardly an organisation which would be widely described as revolutionary, supported the view that there is a link between food and cancer. Their published view was that 35% of cancers are caused by the natural constituents of food and that another 1 per cent of cancers are caused by food additives.

Other organisations suggest that the link between food and cancer is even higher. The National Academy of Sciences in the United States, founded in 1863 by Act of Congress to serve as an official adviser to the US Government in all matters of science and technology, has reported that researchers have estimated that almost 60% of women's cancers and a little more than 40% of men's cancers are related to nutritional factors. (Readers who want to see more evidence proving that meat causes cancer will find it on my website www.vernoncoleman.com.)

The evidence linking meat eating to illness and death is incontestable. Meat eaters have three times the risk of developing diabetes, compared with vegans. Red and processed meats are clearly linked to colon cancer and other forms of the disease. And of course meat products are often contaminated with faecal bacteria, leading to deadly infections. (Meat products may include bits of chopped up animal cancer as well as animal bowels – complete with the faeces inside.) Consumption of red and processed meats increases the risks of bladder cancer. A study of over 300,000 men and women found that those who consumed the most red meat had a 22% increased risk of bladder cancer, compared with those who ate the least. Consumption of nitrites and nitrates (substances used for preserving, colouring and flavouring processed meats) was associated with a 28% to 29% increased risk. The study, in the journal *Cancer* was conducted as part of the *NIH-AARP Diet and Health Study*. And eating meat leads to weight gain. The *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* published a study involving 373,803 participants in the *European Prospective Investigation into Cancer* study. Those who ate 8.8 ounces of meat per day gained more weight year by year, compared with people who ate less meat or none at all. The researchers concluded that reducing meat consumption may help people avoid weight gain. Girls who eat the most meat products during childhood may have an earlier onset of puberty, increasing their risks of diseases such as cancer, heart disease and osteoporosis. Researchers followed 3,298 girls in Bristol, England and found that 49% of girls who ate more than 12 portions of meat per week started their periods by the age of 12, compared with 35% of girls who ate fewer than four portions of meat per week.

But the medical profession refuses to consider this problem. After reading that a doctor in Suffolk was alleged to be ‘prescribing’ meat for his patients I sent the following letter to the General Medical Council.

‘According to the press today a Dr John Cannon of the Ixworth Surgery near Bury St Edmunds, is alleged to be ‘prescribing rump steak and pork chops’ to his patients to ‘keep them healthy’. Would you please investigate Dr Cannon’s alleged activities? There is ample evidence available to show that meat causes cancer. I can (and happily will) provide the GMC with over 20 scientific papers, published in reputable journals (including the International Journal of Cancer, New England Journal of Medicine, Cancer Research, British Journal of Cancer, Cancer, British Medical Journal) showing that eating meat causes cancer. The United States Surgeon General has reported links between meat eating and cancer. I look forward to hearing from you. I suggest that this is a matter of significant public interest and should be attended to without delay. From the newspaper reports I understand that Dr Cannon’s alleged activities are being encouraged by the British Meat Nutrition Education Service.’

The story of the doctor who ‘prescribes’ meat appeared in Britain’s national press. The doctor himself appeared on British television. The letter I sent to the GMC was sent to all national newspapers in Britain. None of them reported it.

The GMC’s response was:

‘We have carefully considered the information you provided and understand your reasons for writing to us. However, we have decided that this is not a matter that justifies action by us. The issue you have mentioned does not appear to have any bearing on Dr Cannon’s ability to practise medicine and does not breach our guidance. We are therefore unable to take any further action on your complaint.’

With the GMC closing its eyes it is, perhaps, hardly surprising that if you ask 1,000 doctors to name the commonest cause of cancer in Britain I doubt if more than a handful will know the right answer. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that the incidence of cancer is rising rapidly and is going to continue to rise. The main cause of cancer in Britain today is not the smoking of cigarettes but the eating of meat.

Not surprisingly, doctors (much of whose education is controlled by the pharmaceutical industry and a Government controlled by the pharmaceutical industry) prefer to deal with the problems created by meat eating by prescribing drugs. Drugs are always the treatment of choice these days for a profession which is owned needle, syringe and pen by the pharmaceutical industry.

In January 2011 it was, for example, reported that seven million people in the UK were taking drugs called statins, theoretically to prevent heart attacks. Encouraged by the drug industry, GPs were, at a huge cost to the NHS, prescribing the damned things for everyone with a pulse. I first warned of the serious health problems associated with these drugs in the first edition of my book *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You* back in 1998. But the unholy trinity which controls the NHS doesn’t have much interest in science or uncomfortable facts.

(As an aside, it seems strange to me that doctors seem totally uninterested in the fact that feeding people meat is directly responsible for a number of the world’s serious problems. First, animals need to be fed grain and if people stopped eating meat there would be plenty of food to go round. The millions starving to death could be fed. Second, growing all the grain needed to feed animals creates havoc for the environment. For example, it takes a million gallons of water to grow just one acre of corn to feed to cattle. And as the water trickles into streams and rivers it carries with it the remains of the fertilisers the farmers used. The fertiliser chemicals pollute the water we drink (as I reported half a lifetime ago it is impossible to remove the chemicals from our drinking water). The fertiliser also makes algae overgrow in our rivers and as the algae decomposes it uses up oxygen in the water, killing the fish. In America, farmers are responsible for the existence of a 8,000 square mile dead zone below Louisiana and Texas. And, of course the 100 million cows in the USA are all belching out methane – which is much more potent as a greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide. But doctors don’t worry about any of this stuff.)

Incidentally, food doesn’t just *cause* cancer.

It can help stop you recovering too.

However careful you are to avoid potentially cancerous chemicals, cancer cells will occasionally develop inside your body. Most of the time those cancer cells are dealt with speedily and effectively by your body's defence systems. White blood cells find and destroy cancer cells in just the same way that they find and destroy bacteria.

However, your body's natural immune system (and its ability to deal with cancer) will be damaged if you eat the wrong sort of foods – and will be aided and improved if you eat the right foods! Fatty foods will weaken your immune system and make your body less capable of fighting off those occasional cancer cells. When researchers studied the blood of human volunteers they found that a low fat diet greatly improved the activity of the body's natural killer cells. Amazingly, depressingly, cancer specialists and cancer charity workers still don't seem to understand or accept the importance of a healthy immune system in fighting cancer. (As far as the body's immune system is concerned vegetable fats are just as bad as animal fats. In order to protect yourself against cancer you need to reduce your entire fat consumption – and that includes vegetable oils.)

Vegetarians have more than double the cancer cell destroying capability of non-vegetarians. But this is not entirely due to the low fat content of a vegetarian diet. It is probably also due to the fact that vegetarians consume fewer toxic chemicals and no animal proteins. And vegetarians have another advantage too: the ability of the human body's natural, killer cells to do their work is improved by substances such as beta-carotene which are found in considerable quantities in vegetables. (One survey of meat eaters showed that many could neither name nor describe any green vegetables).

Food provides us with the building blocks we need to grow and to stay alive. If we don't eat the right food we fall ill. If we are ill and don't eat the right food we won't get well. Most people know this. Most people, that is, except the people who work in hospitals. The doctors, the nurses, the cooks, the dieticians and the administrators either don't know or don't care.

The food in hospitals is diabolical and contributes enormously to the death rate among patients. It seems rather crazy to give hospital patients a food item (meat) that is known to cause cancer. Food is as big a cause of cancer as tobacco and meat is the biggest culprit. This is fact, not opinion. Sadly, most nutritionists, dieticians and chefs are woefully ignorant about food. I don't expect chefs to know anything much about food but dieticians and nutritionists who fail to warn patients that eating meat causes cancer are either stupid or ignorant and should be fired and retrained as lavatory attendants. Hospitals which give their patients meat to eat might as well be handing out free cigarettes. It would make as much sense, do less harm to the environment and probably be cheaper.

Not that it is just the meat in the hospital diet that causes problems. The quality of the food served to patients in our hospitals is beyond appalling. You are more likely to contract a food bug in an NHS hospital than just about anywhere else in Britain. What an awful thing it is that NHS hospital food is more likely to make you ill than a hot dog bought from a street vendor's stall.

The way the food is served is a scandal too. The cleaners put down their mops and hand out the food. Naturally, they don't bother to wash their hands. If the patient is physically incapable of eating what's been put before them then the tray is simply taken away. 'Not hungry, dear?' says the cleaner, whisking away the tray as the patient grows weaker and weaker from lack of any sort of food. 'We're not allowed to feed patients,' one cleaner told me. 'I'm here to nurse,' one overweight nurse told me. 'I'm not here to feed patients.' I had a suspicion that she was eating up all the leftovers. It is not unknown for patients who are not visited by relatives to starve to death in hospital.

The bottom line is that the food in most NHS hospitals is at best inedible and at worst dangerous. There is rarely enough of it. It is often badly chosen and badly prepared. Patients of all types desperately need good food if they are to have the best chance of recovering. But food-related illnesses are commonplace in hospitals. And nurses are so lazy and disinterested that thousands of patients starve to death because they cannot reach the food that is put in front of them. Just about every dietician, nutritionist and cook working for the NHS should be charged with multiple manslaughter.

When my mother had breast cancer she wisely stopped eating meat and adopted a vegetarian diet. She did not take the tamoxifen tablets the consultant oncologist prescribed. And she refused the radiotherapy they recommended. She beat the cancer with diet.

When she was admitted to hospital with her final illness the staff were told that she was vegetarian. They took no notice. In both Exeter and Budleigh hospitals the staff persisted in offering her meat-based dishes.

When my mother was given a meal of sausages I complained to one of the nurses. I explained that my mother was vegetarian. The nurse told me that my mother could have a Cornish pasty instead of the sausage.

On another occasion, early in her final illness, I was sitting beside my mother's bed when she was brought a meal consisting of cottage pie and boiled potatoes. Her menu slip had been filled in by someone else because she was too confused to do it herself. 'This is cottage pie,' I said to my mother. 'Do you want it?' She thought for a long time. She was becoming demented but knew that there was something wrong. It was clearly a great effort for her. 'I don't eat cottage pie,' she replied at last. 'Why not?' I asked her quietly. 'It's not the sort of thing I eat,' she replied at last.

‘I don’t eat meat.’

When we did finally persuade the hospital staff to provide vegetarian food they provided very little variety. When I was feeding her pieces of an insipid looking cheese and leek flan she said, with great heart-felt weariness: ‘I’ve had a lot of that.’

The Government, whose advisers know of the relationship between meat consumption and cancer, spends taxpayers’ money on promoting the sale and consumption of meat. Thomas Jefferson was perfectly correct when he wrote: ‘If people let Government decide what foods they eat, and what medicines they take, their bodies will soon be as sorry state as are the souls of those who live under tyranny.’ They might just as well promote the smoking of cigarettes. And despite the fact that people who eat lots of burgers are more likely to develop cancer than people who eat a healthier diet (‘Eat McCrap, develop McCancer and McDie’ might not be a catchy slogan but I offer it without charge), Britain’s Department of Health has invited McDonald’s, (and other processed food companies) to help write Government policy on obesity and diet related diseases.

33. Benzo Bonanza

Originally introduced specifically to help calm extremely nervous and agitated patients (and for use as anaesthetics) benzodiazepines were, by the time they reached their peak, being prescribed for just about every illness known to man or woman. When I was campaigning against their over-use in the 1970s and 1980s, I met people who had been prescribed them as treatments for backache, menopausal problems, pre-menstrual tension, migraine, high blood pressure, alopecia and urinary tract infections. It got to the point where doctors were handing out prescriptions for benzodiazepine tranquillisers whenever they didn't know what else to do. There was never any evidence to show that drugs were effective in treating all these different conditions.

As a result, it was hardly surprising that in the UK alone three million people became addicted to these drugs. Benzodiazepine addiction was, and probably still is, the world's biggest drug addiction problem. Governments spend billions on wretched and pointless 'drugs wars' while drug companies are allowed to sell and promote drugs which are far more addictive than heroin, cocaine or cannabis.

Over 30 years ago, I started a campaign to warn patients of the hazards of taking benzodiazepine tranquillisers such as Valium. I felt that the basic problem with tranquillisers was not that patients were addicted to taking them but that doctors were addicted to prescribing the damned things. Way back in the 1988, after a lengthy campaign, I personally persuaded the Government to change the prescribing rules relating to tranquillisers. But doctors *still* over-prescribe these drugs because they are convenient. In the same way that parents stick their children in front of the television set, so doctors prescribe tranquillisers for nervous, time-consuming patients. The television set and the tranquillisers are used for the same reason: to shut people up.

In 1988 the Government, having admitted that it was responding to my books and articles, advised GPs that benzodiazepines should not be prescribed for patients for longer than two to four weeks but in May 2011 it was revealed that 11.5 million prescriptions a year were still being written for benzodiazepine tranquillisers. Over a third of those prescriptions were for more than eight weeks supply. What a bloody profession.

Any doctor who signs a prescription for a benzodiazepine (such as Valium) for more than two weeks is not fit to practise medicine and would, if the General Medical Council did what it is supposed to do, be struck off the medical register. It annoys me immensely that patients who have become addicted to these wretched drugs should be ignored by the NHS whereas whingeing idiots who take drugs such as heroin and cocaine for entertainment are, when they moan about their inevitable condition and demand treatment, instantly provided with vast amounts of support. For the record, benzodiazepines are considerably more addictive than any of the so-called recreational drugs.

34. When A Vegetarian Sausage Beats An MRI Scanner

In the dark old days of medicine, objective judgements were made based on a skilful and knowledgeable interpretation and assessment of a mixture of symptoms and signs. Doctors made diagnoses relying on their own senses, rather than bowing to extremely fallible machines. They relied on experience, instinct and intuition. They used X-rays and laboratory tests to help them confirm their diagnoses.

Today, diagnostic skills are disappearing and doctors are coming to rely almost entirely on laboratory tests and X-ray pictures. Doctors don't dare make diagnoses unless they can provide bits of paper from a laboratory to substantiate their conclusion. Since laboratory tests and investigations are woefully inaccurate, and often misleading, the result is that many patients are wrongly diagnosed (and exposed to unnecessary treatments), many serious problems are missed completely and doctors are making more mistakes than ever.

A growing majority of doctors now do little more than interpret laboratory results; they know that ordering tests is easier than thinking and that they are not likely to be sued if they have bits of paper to support their diagnoses. Doctors have become little more than simple computers: ordering tests and making decisions on the basis of the results obtained. When my wife was taken ill with neurological problems she saw several doctors before anyone thought to ask her about her diet. Numerous tests were performed but no one bothered to ask her what sort of foods she ate. And yet diet is a vital factor in the development of illness.

Modern doctors rely far too much on technology – and far too little on building up any diagnostic skills of their own. Old-fashioned doctors used to rely on what their patients told them and on what their eyes, ears, noses and fingertips told them. Most important of all, perhaps, was the sixth sense that doctors used to acquire through years of clinical experience. Modern doctors rely too much upon equipment which is often faulty, frequently badly calibrated and more often than not downright misleading.

Sadly, doctors seem surprisingly unaware that the high technology alternatives to genuine diagnostic skills are dangerously fallible; they do not seem to know that if you do enough tests you will always find an abnormality. Then the abnormality (which may be entirely harmless) will have to be further investigated and probably treated. Tests are often inaccurate and frequently misleading. They lead to many mistaken diagnoses. (There is a chapter in my book *Coleman's Laws* dealing with the problems created by misleading tests and investigations.) Many doctors seem quite unable, or unwilling, to reach a diagnosis unless the diagnosis is more or less written out on a form that has been printed by a computer. The best diagnostician I ever knew was not a hospital consultant but a GP. He was old and frail when I knew him. He could make diagnoses more accurately than any doctor relying on technology. His secret was simple: he listened to patients and considered their responses; he looked at them and he noticed things. It wasn't complicated. Today's doctors have lost the skill that was most valued among doctors a generation ago: the skill to make diagnoses. (Treating patients who have been diagnosed is, by comparison, straightforward and simple enough. Any fool can open a textbook, look up a disease, and find out how to treat it.) Doctors don't seem to have realised that you don't need six years of medical school to order a pile of laboratory tests. And you don't need six years of training to 'read' the results. If doctors are going to continue to rely exclusively on test results when making diagnoses then medical training could be cut down to a weekend.

The X-rays, blood tests and other investigations which doctors order are not just sometimes lethal but are frequently unnecessary. Many tests are wildly inaccurate and dangerously misleading as well. Tests results are often wrong. It is not unusual to obtain 30% false negatives or false positives. This means that if a doctor performs ten tests then the chances are that three of them will be wrong and quite misleading.

Here are just some of the frightening facts that I can reveal about medical investigations:

1. X-rays are the third biggest cause of cancer (after eating meat and smoking). Many X-rays are done quite unnecessarily – just as a 'routine'. In Britain around 20,000 people a year get cancer from medical and dental X-rays. X-rays given to pregnant women during the 1950s and 1960s are responsible for between 5% and 10% of all childhood cancers. Children who develop leukaemia – and other cancers – may have been made ill because their mothers had X-rays while they were pregnant.
2. Tests often wrongly show up disease in healthy individuals. Those patients are then subjected to surgery and drug therapy which they do not need.
3. Tests – which patients and doctors seem to trust too much – often wrongly say that a patient is healthy.
4. About two thirds of all medical tests are worthless and of no help to the patient.
5. Patients routinely admitted to hospital are often subjected to 20 or so blood, urine and other tests. When so many tests are done one or more abnormalities will be found in two thirds of all healthy individuals. Once an abnormal result has been obtained doctors feel obliged to continue doing tests. The tests they do often produce serious complications. Many patients who think they are ill – and have been told that they need to take drugs for life – are not really ill at all.

6. Unnecessary tests are often done out of habit, for personal research, to provide protection in case of lawsuits or simply to impress other doctors. Doctors frequently order tests because it is quicker and easier to fill in a form than it is to talk and listen or to examine a patient properly.

7. When blood tests are done the results are compared against ‘normal’ values. But the ‘normal’ figures may have been produced decades earlier – by testing a few seemingly healthy doctors and nurses. No one really knows what is ‘normal’. Your ‘abnormal’ result may be more ‘normal’ than the official ‘normal’ result.

8. Doctors who know that tests can be misleading frequently order expensive, uncomfortable and even hazardous investigations – and then ignore the results.

9. Complicated, expensive and potentially dangerous tests are often ordered when simple, inexpensive and perfectly safe tests would be more appropriate. My wife saw a neurologist who decided that her symptoms might be caused by a tumour affecting the top of her spine. The doctor ordered an MRI scan of her brain and spine. But the disease the doctor had thought possible causes a very specific loss of sensation – including a loss of temperature sensation. I took a frozen vegetarian sausage out of the freezer and performed a simple test myself – using the frozen sausage to check for temperature sensation loss. There were no temperature sensation losses. I concluded that the diagnosis was wrong and we cooked the sausage and ate it. Four days later my wife went for the MRI scan as arranged. The scan supported the evidence provided by the cold vegetarian sausage and showed that there was no lesion in my wife’s spine. The sausage test, just as reliable as the scan, took a fraction of the time to do and cost about £10,000 less. The results were available instantly.

35. Committees And Quangos

I don’t have faith in the medical establishment and I don’t have much faith in the advisory committees who give advice on health and food matters to our political leaders and to civil servants.

It is difficult to trust the conclusions and recommendations of official Government committees or quangos because they are, inevitably, peopled by individuals who have been selected because they are compliant rather than complaining. Dissenters don’t get picked to sit on committees to advise the Department of Health or the Department of Agriculture. On the contrary, many of the people who give out official guidelines on food and drugs are linked in some way with the food and drug industries – and may, therefore, benefit financially from their own decisions. Under those circumstances it isn’t always easy to be certain that our politicians are acting on entirely impartial advice. The evidence of what these people have done in the last few decades could certainly not be used in their defence.

It’s the same almost everywhere in the world. Most Government committees consist predominantly of individuals who work for or with the appropriate industries. An American newspaper, *USA Today*, expressed surprise that 54% of 300 experts, sitting on 18 advisory committees, and hired to advise the American Government on the safety and effectiveness of medicines, had a direct financial interest in the drug or subject they were being asked to evaluate. Some of the experts received consulting fees, others had research grants from the companies they were supposed to be investigating and others had shares or stock options. Federal law prohibits the Food and Drug Administration in the USA from using experts with financial conflicts but this law is frequently waived. (It has been waived more than 800 times since 1998).

None of this is anything new, of course. I found worse figures in the UK 20 or 30 years ago (though no British newspaper had the courage to print the findings). Most of the people selected to sit on health committees and quangos work for (or are associated with or have worked for) drug companies. Most of the people selected to sit on food advisory committees work for (or are associated with or have worked for) food companies. Most of the people making decisions about genetic engineering work for (or are associated with or have worked for) the genetic engineering industry.

It is because our bureaucracies are controlled in this way that we end up with absurd regulations which are, it is claimed, intended to protect the consumer but which, in reality, favour industry and do nothing for the consumers.

We have treaties which result in food surpluses being dumped. We have regulations which make it nigh on impossible for people to sell safe, effective remedies which might compete with drug company products. We have regulations requiring food companies to put additives and other chemicals into otherwise edible foods. We have monopolies and genetic engineering hazards everywhere we look.

Global corporations, mostly American, now *own* many of the seeds of established crops. An American company has been given a patent in basmati rice. The peasants who perfected this variety of rice now cannot use it unless they pay the company holding the patent. Peasants can no longer sow the seeds they save from the plants they grow. They must buy their seeds, every year, from big American seed companies. The peasants can’t afford to do this. So the poor people in countries around the world starve to death. Governments and charities have to intervene, and use your money and my money, to keep people alive and, in doing so, help ensure the continued, rising profits of these companies.

A generation ago the average dairy cow produced eight quarts of milk a day. Today, a typical cow produces 50 quarts a day. Just how do you think the farmers have changed nature so dramatically? Why haven’t any Government advisors asked questions? A generation ago cows ate grass. Today cows are fed blood and bone taken from other cows. Cows are herbivores but farmers feed them bits of other cows, though they do have the decency to wait until the other cows are dead. A generation ago milk was banned if it contained more than a trace of antibiotics. Today milk is stuffed with antibiotics and other drugs. One expert reported finding 52 different residues of antibiotics in a sample of milk in the USA.

The world has gone crazy.

Chickens are fed on a mixed diet of cardboard and animal shit, for heaven’s sake.

And it is the so-called independent experts who sit on committees and advise Governments who have allowed all this to happen. It is utterly absurd that so many of the individuals who sit on committees given the responsibility of regulating the products of the drug industry have, or have had, lucrative contracts with drug companies.

Whenever I have confronted politicians with the fact that members of powerful committees have drug company links they have responded by arguing that all doctors have drug company links and so it is impossible to find alternatives. This is patently untrue. The sad truth is that free thinking individuals, who are not beholden to industry, are never likely to find themselves sitting on any of these committees.

36. Medical Screening Is Expensive And Doesn’t Work

The principle of screening is a simple one: the patient trots along to the doctor and the doctor (for a chunky great fee, of course) does tests which are designed to spot early signs of cancer or other diseases. But screening doesn’t work. It’s actually very dangerous. A once-a-year check-up is no alternative to a healthier lifestyle. Doctors are, however, enthusiastic about screening because it’s enormously profitable. And they’re very lukewarm about encouraging their patients to follow healthier lifestyles because there is no money in it.

In several earlier books I have explained why I neither approve of nor support the principle of medical screening programmes. On balance they do far more harm than good.

For decades now just about every attempt to show that medical screening programmes save lives has proved that they are a waste of time, energy and money. Indeed, surveys have proved that, because of the risk of false positives, medical screening programmes do more harm than good.

Medical screening programmes go back a long way. The first recorded screening took place at a public brothel in Avignon in 1347 when a local Abbess and a surgeon examined all the working women every Saturday to see whether or not they were fit to carry on serving the local population.

Modern screening really started in 1917 in the U.S. when large corporations thought it might be a good idea to have their employees examined regularly. When half of four million American men called up for military service during the first World War proved to be unfit for military service insurance companies started screening the general population.

Since then the medical screening business has grown virtually unchecked – despite the fact that since the 1970s there has been ample evidence to show that medical screening programmes are not just a waste of time and money but can also be a serious health hazard.

Over 30 years ago, in 1979, the World Health Organisation published a report which showed that people who were subjected to regular medical screenings needed to go to hospital more often but were not as healthy as people who did not undergo regular medical screenings. The conclusion was that health screening is expensive and ineffective.

In the same year (1979) the results of a Canadian Task Force report on Periodic Health Examination came to the conclusion that annual medical check-ups should be abandoned since they are both inefficient and potentially harmful.

Those who have studied general health screening programmes with an open mind have come to the conclusion that they are harmful for four reasons.

First, when people are taught to put their faith in medical check-ups they tend to abandon responsibility for their own health and enjoy a false sense of security. Patients forget that a medical check-up is no more a sign of long-term health than an encouraging bank statement is a sign of permanent financial security. A patient who is given a clean bill of health is likely to ignore strange symptoms which develop a week or two later. And there is a danger that he (or she) may feel that it is unnecessary to eat wisely or to take regular exercise.

Second, screening examinations may frighten people. They can result in cancer phobias, neuroses and depression. And they can result in so much stress that the immune system is damaged – leading to a greater susceptibility to disease.

Third, the procedures involved in screening programmes may do physical harm. There are, for example, some doctors who perform coronary angiographs as part of their check-up procedures. As many as two patients per 100 may die during this procedure.

Fourth, when a screening examination results in a false positive the patient may be given a treatment which may damage his or health. A major Swedish report on breast screening showed that out of 600,000 women screened there had been 100,000 false positives.

When specific screening programmes are studied, more evidence of their lack of value becomes evident. For example, cervical screening programmes have been popular for decades. And they are often held up as an example of just how useful screening programmes can be. But cervical screening programmes are as pointless as they are expensive. Just about every so-called developed country in the world has a cervical screening programme. Naturally, the NHS spends huge amounts of time and effort on cervical screening. But here are a few facts about cervical screening which are not widely known.

First, no one can agree on when or how often cervical smears should be taken. And so programmes tend to be fairly random and haphazard.

Second, no tests have ever been done to find out how cervical screening should be done. The smear test is neither accurate nor reliable. Doctors frequently take smears from the wrong site – or use faulty techniques. Different cytologists reading the same slide may produce entirely different results. Abnormal cells may be present in one sample and not in another from the same woman. The widespread chaos and confusion that exists is a result of simple ignorance.

Third, although vast amounts of public money are spent on cervical screening programmes there is no evidence to show that these programmes have made any difference at all to mortality rates. If cervical screening worked one might reasonably expect the number of women dying from cervical cancer to have fallen since screening was introduced. It hasn't.

Fourth, cervical cancer is, despite all the political hype, a relatively uncommon killer. Even carcinoma of the pancreas kills more women than carcinoma of the cervix. It's a pretty safe bet that if the money wasted on cervical screening programmes had been spent warning women of the dangers of eating meat then thousands of lives would have been saved. I also believe that the mortality rate from cervical cancer would fall if women were encouraged to ask for medical help if they noticed any unusual signs or symptoms – such as bleeding between periods or after intercourse. I can't prove that offering such simple advice would be of value because no one has done any trials or tests to find out whether it would. Why not? Who would make any profit out of offering such simple advice? (In the same way, what profit can there possibly be in teaching women how to examine their own breasts?)

Cervical screening programmes have, over the years, consistently attracted huge budgets. Untold thousands of doctors have been employed in performing cervical smears. The laudable aim of the cervical screening programme has always been to reduce the number of women dying from cervical cancer and it has constantly been argued that if more money were put into cervical screening programmes thousands of lives could be saved.

But I don't think the evidence supports this contention.

Most worrying is the fact that many of the smears taken by doctors are useless. One report concluded that 10% of all cervical smears sent to cytology departments were useless and a further 40% were of limited usefulness in detecting carcinoma of the cervix. The main problems are that doctors either take smears from the wrong site or use faulty techniques. There is, surprisingly perhaps, still a considerable amount of confusion about the natural history of the cervical cancer. From the evidence I've seen it seems possible that some slow growing cancers might regress if left alone while fast growing cancers could develop so rapidly that smears would have to be done every few months to be of real value.

One report concluded that a third of the biopsies performed because of positive cervical cytology were likely to have been performed for lesions which were insignificant or would have disappeared if left alone. Since the biopsies were performed under anaesthetic (with which there is always a risk of death) it seems perfectly possible that for these women the dangers associated with having a smear might have been greater than the possible advantages.

Sadly, even when useful smears are taken the laboratories providing results cannot always cope. And even when laboratories do discover significant changes women are not always notified. Delays mean that at least one woman has died after having had a positive smear but before she had been given her results. And there is, not surprisingly, an enormous amount of confusion among gynaecologists about the best way to treat cervical cancer even when it has been identified.

Indeed, a cynical observer might be inclined to suggest that it is the medical profession which has benefited most from the cervical screening programme. One leading physician described the results of screening for cervical cancer in Britain as 'disappointing'. A writer in one leading international journal argued that 'there is no clear evidence that this screening is beneficial, and it may well be doing more harm than good'.

Although doctors around the world have strongly argued in favour of more expenditure on smears they have never really decided exactly which women need to be targeted. And there have never been any trials done which show the undisputed value of the cervical screening programme. I don't believe that the cervical screening programme has ever been properly evaluated.

Indeed, the evidence rather suggests that cervical screening programmes may not be of any real value to women as a whole – though there will, of course, always be individual women who are able to say that their lives were 'saved'.

Statistically, the test has not been shown to save lives in any country where it has been introduced. Huge amounts of public money have been spent on organised cervical screening programmes but the incidence of cervical cancer has hardly altered in 30 years. In countries where the incidence of cervical cancer and the number of women dying from it are falling the rate of decline is no greater than it was before the screening programme began.

Britain, for example, has spent several billion pounds on its cervical screening programme but the programme has never been based on any logical plan and the number of women dying from cervical cancer has hardly changed. In fact, because the disease is relatively uncommon (cervical cancer does not make the top ten list of causes of death among women), huge numbers of women who do not have the disease have been subjected to unnecessary tests. And because 'false positives' are fairly common (women being told that they have cancer when they don't) many women have been referred unnecessarily for further tests and treatment. Even more worryingly 'false negatives' occur in between 7% and 60% of smears. And an enormous amount of anxiety and fear are produced by the often inefficient and thoughtless way in which smear reports are submitted to patients. I can't prove it but I suspect that the cervical cancer programme has caused more cancer than it has found.

The enthusiasm of doctors for cervical screening is not difficult to understand. The medical profession's enthusiasm for cervical screening was aroused by, and is sustained by, the profit to be made, rather than any belief that cervical screening will save lives. In one medical journal a writer pointed out that: 'unless doctors take urgent individual action a serious breakdown in cervical smear recalls – affecting GP income – could arise in five years' time.'

I believe that if the money spent on doctors' fees had been spent on educational programmes many thousands more lives could have been saved.

Breast screening is today even more fashionable than cervical screening. It is, however, of even more questionable value.

It is well over a quarter of a century since I first warned about the futility of doctor-dependant breast screening programmes (very shortly after these expensive and highly profitable programmes had been being introduced).

In my book *The Health Scandal* (which was published in 1988 and violently attacked by doctors all over the country – even though some of those who were doing the attacking admitted that they hadn't actually bothered to read it) I objected to mammography screening partly on the grounds that I thought there must surely be risks in having regular X-ray examinations (it would, I thought, be hideously, grotesquely ironic if a new technique designed to spot breast cancer at an early stage turned out, 20 years later, to cause breast cancer) and partly on the grounds that a mass breast screening programme simply would not work and would not make a significant difference to the number of women dying of breast cancer because the interval of one year between examinations was too long.

Even before I wrote *The Health Scandal* I was convinced that the potential health hazards which might be associated with mammograms could outweigh the advantages. This conviction was not based on any inside knowledge. It always seemed to me pretty obvious that repeatedly subjecting breast tissue (which is known to be prone to cancer) to X-rays (which is known to cause cancer) could be hazardous. This seems to me to be a fairly obvious concern. But it is one which the medical establishment regularly dismissed as not even worth consideration. (Relatively recent research has, however, shown that one woman in every 1,000 screened will develop breast cancer in the two years following the X-ray.) Moreover, it seemed to me that the risks associated with mammograms should have been properly assessed before mass mammography was introduced. (Why is common sense so uncommon – and so derided by those who consider themselves to be above such things?)

I pointed out that the available evidence showed clearly that self-examination was much better and more effective (as well as being considerably cheaper and requiring far less highly trained medical manpower). 'A proper educational programme,' I wrote, 'designed to teach British women how to examine their breasts properly, would undoubtedly have a dramatic effect on the number of women dying from breast cancer in Britain. It would cost very little and it would produce continuing results. But it would not, of course, provide work for the many unwanted radiologists who we are training every year. And it probably wouldn't satisfy the strident spokeswomen who believe that annual screening clinics must be better than regular checks done at home.'

At the time this comment was dismissed as heresy by many in the medical establishment who argued that self-screening was useless. But, gradually, more doctors began to question the logic of mammography. And then several studies suggested that the radiation accumulated through yearly mammograms might actually be causing breast cancer.

By 2010, many doctors had been convinced by my arguments. In August 2010, a headline appeared in the *Independent* newspaper which shouted: ''Breast cancer screening harms as many women as it helps,' say doctors.' In late July 2011, a group of international cancer experts who had studied the effectiveness of breast cancer concluded that breast cancer screening programmes have 'little detectable impact' on reducing death rates from the disease'. Today, it is widely accepted that mammography may be a major cause of breast cancer and is of very dubious value.

My fears about the danger of breast screening aren't my only concern with mammography.

Medical screening programmes can produce two types of error: false negatives and false positives. A false negative occurs when the screening programme misses a genuine cancer. For example, one in four breast cancers goes undetected by mammography. And a false positive occurs when the screening programme picks up what appears to be a cancer in a healthy breast.

Both types of error are acknowledged problems in all screening programmes. Breast screening programmes are certainly not exempt.

When there is a false negative result the main danger is obviously that a condition requiring treatment will be missed. But there is also a risk that the woman concerned may ignore – or dismiss – a lump which she feels in the bath, when dressing or when examining her own breasts because she has been given an official 'all clear'.

False positives can lead to unnecessary tests, surgery, mutilation and potentially lethal chemotherapy.

A major Swedish survey (involving 600,000 women aged between 50 and 60) has shown that official breast screening did not produce any significant reduction in fatalities. Astonishingly, the Swedish survey showed that 100,000 of the 600,000 Swedish women had been falsely diagnosed as having cancer. Of these 16,000 had undergone biopsy and more than 400 had surgery – including mastectomy. In addition, of course, all those 100,000 women (and their partners) will have been exposed to tremendous anxiety and stress – and many immune systems will have been damaged as a result (ironically, increasing the likelihood of cancer developing).

In the UK, the medical establishment's response to this astonishing new evidence was not to call for official breast screening programmes to be stopped, or even to be reassessed, but to call for the breast screening programmes to be extended to include more women – and more screening. (This is the usual response when the truth tends to threaten a profitable medical enterprise.)

Many doctors believe that although sophisticated screening systems are now available for testing women's breasts the best way a woman can protect herself is to feel her own breasts regularly – preferably once a week or once a month. Indeed, figures show that despite huge expenditure on screening equipment 90% of breast cancer is discovered by women themselves.

Why, when the evidence shows so clearly that medical screening is a waste of time, does the medical establishment remain so enthusiastic?

Every independent survey I have found has concluded that screening (whether general or specific) is costly and useless. The reality is that the only people who benefit from screening programmes are doctors – and other parts of the health industry. Screening programmes are extremely profitable.

I find it difficult to avoid the conclusion that the medical profession (and the wider medical industry) remain enthusiastic about screening – despite the evidence – simply because medical screening is a hugely profitable business. Screening campaigns are often promoted by companies (and doctors) who make money out of them and if a company or clinic promotes medical screening you can be pretty sure that they aren't going to tell you the downside, or explain that it might, just might, do more harm than good.

For example, prostate cancer awareness week campaigns are sometimes promoted by companies making screening tests. These tests are expensive and they produce a mass of false positives and false negatives. The men with false positives think they have prostate cancer when they haven't. They worry a great deal. Worse still, they are treated by doctors and surgeons who also erroneously think they have prostate cancer. The men with false negatives walk away thinking they're perfectly healthy and can happily ignore any physical signs which they might develop.

The problems, and hazards, with screening programmes seem boundless. For example, you have a one in three chance of a false positive result if you have a full body CT scan. There is also a one in 20 chance that the scan will miss signs of disease – and give you a false sense of complacency and encourage you to ignore important physical signs.

In 2005, Brian Bulroney, the former Canadian Prime Minister went to the doctor for a routine check up. The check up included a CT scan which showed two small nodules. The former Prime Minister had surgery to have the nodules removed. Post-operatively he developed pancreatitis. He spent a month and a half in hospital and was discharged to recover at home. A month later he had to be readmitted because of a complication involving his pancreatitis. Another month in hospital. There was nothing wrong with the nodules, by the way. They were harmless.

I've been screaming about the dangers of screening programmes for 30 years or more and was delighted when, in November 2009 the American Cancer Society finally accepted that screening for breast and prostate cancer is inefficient, inaccurate and alarmist and can do damage by detecting cancers that either don't exist or wouldn't kill if they did. Naturally, however, such programmes are still promoted within the NHS where staff favour screening programmes because it is easy to measure the results. They can say: 'We screened 10,000 people and found 10 people with possible cancer. We, have, therefore, saved 10 lives.' In medical and statistical terms such claims are nonsensical. But in political terms they are invaluable.

The truth is that within the NHS the staff prefer organised screening programmes to proper preventive medicine because they are easier to organise and measure and because it is easy for the NHS to claim some credit for saving lives. Simply offering sensible advice is much cheaper and safer but the results cannot be measured and it is difficult for the NHS to claim the credit for saving lives.

Finally, here's my personal experience of routine screening.

Back in the 1980s I had to have an insurance medical. It was the usual, routine sort of thing but when performing a standard, simple screening test on my urine the doctor performing the medical found a trace of blood. I'd also been getting pains in my back and so the doctor referred me to the local hospital for investigations.

The hospital took X-rays and ultrasound pictures and two radiologists came to the conclusion that I had cancer of the kidney. If you're going to choose a cancer this isn't one that would be near the top of the list. It tends to be pretty lethal. The radiologists wanted to refer me to a surgeon straight away but I wanted a third opinion. I didn't feel happy with the diagnosis (and not just for the obvious reason) and somehow I just didn't feel that I needed to have a kidney ripped out.

After a scan it became clear that I didn't have cancer of the kidney. I had a slightly deformed kidney but there was nothing wrong with it. The two radiologists had been wrong.

So, what had caused the haematuria (blood in my urine)?

I made the diagnosis myself on a flight to Paris. As the air pressure in the cabin changed I started to suffer from the pain I'd been getting in my back. And I realised that the pain was caused by air in my intestine. I had irritable bowel syndrome caused largely by stress. The air in my bowel had been pressing on my kidneys and had caused the minute amount of bleeding.

I managed to get the irritable bowel syndrome under control and when I went back to the doctor for a second urine test he found that the haematuria had gone.

That was my first (and only) unhappy experience with a screening test. (I sent a letter detailing my observation to the *British Medical Journal* but they didn't print it. A decade later IBS was eventually recognised as a possible cause of haematuria.)

Last month I received an invitation to have a routine test for bowel cancer. The NHS wanted me to send in a stool sample which would be tested for blood as part of the NHS Bowel Cancer Screening Programme. If blood were found they would perform a colonoscopy.

I said 'no' because I was worried that the screening programme could kill me.

Here's the scenario that filled my mind.

The IBS (which still flares up) results in there being a little blood in my stools. The NHS screening test finds the blood and so I'm called in for a colonoscopy.

Now, one of the hazards with a colonoscopy is that the tube that is pushed up the bowel can puncture the bowel wall. It seemed to me that this is especially likely to happen if the wall is unusual, stretched or weakened. As it would undoubtedly be in someone with irritable bowel syndrome.

So the colonoscopy tube punctures my bowel wall.

Bang.

I need surgery. I need a hospital stay. I develop MRSA. And I die.

I decided that I would prefer to trust myself and that I would simply keep a look out for signs and symptoms of bowel cancer.

37. Will No One Rid Me Of The Lawyers?

I read the other day that a fat man was suing the NHS for allowing him to get fat. If he wins, the doors will be open and everyone with a health issue will consult a lawyer. Don’t lawyers understand just how much they can damage the world with lawsuits like this? Actually, that’s a stupid, rhetorical question because they obviously don’t.

Nearly 40 years ago I wrote warning about the damage lawyers were doing to medical practice.

I was not concerned with patients receiving damages for injuries sustained as a result of genuine iatrogenic incidents but with lawyers representing patients who were creating claims out of thin air. I was also concerned about lawyers charging huge fees – all paid for out of money that should have been used to help patients.

It is right and proper that patients who have suffered genuine damage as a result of carelessness or error should be compensated.

But we have moved far, far beyond that state of affairs.

The big problem today is the existence of End Conditional Fee Agreements (popularly known as ‘no win, no fee’ agreements).

Imported from America (together with other unpleasant inventions such as barbed wire and pantyhose, and quickly followed with a convenient change in the rules allowing lawyers to advertise for customers) these wretched legal devices account for half of the lawsuits against the NHS.

When these lawsuits are successful solicitors can claim up to 100% more than their original costs. It is wrong that solicitors should receive payments out of all proportion to the amount of damages awarded. In recent years, in those litigated no-win-no-fee cases where the average damages were £5,000 the average costs paid to the claimants’ solicitors were £22,000. Even in claims resolved before proceedings were issued (where, logically, legal costs should be much lower) the average costs paid were almost double the damages paid. Lawyers are bleeding the NHS dry.

In one recent year the NHS paid out £248 million in compensation for medical ‘blunders’. Plus another £134 million in costs.

Greedy lawyers are doing the same to commercial firms and all other public bodies. We could halt this trend in its tracks simply by making no-win-no-fee cases illegal. Allowing lawyers to work this way was an utter disaster in America and it has been an utter disaster in Britain, bringing endless misery to everyone except the lawyers.

The money lawyers take out of the health service is bad enough but it isn’t the main problem. The real disaster is that today, as a result of the fear of litigation, doctors are increasingly unwilling to make diagnoses on the basis of clinical information. All the best doctors I knew when I was training made diagnoses after talking to and examining their patients. There was always a large element of intuition involved.

38. Medical Journalists: Bought And Paid For

The vast majority of medical journalists (whether medically qualified or not) report the views of the drug companies, academics (who are usually owned by drug companies) and medical establishment (ditto) quite uncritically and almost always without investigating the facts. It is for this reason that medical journalists hardly ever expose problematic drugs or procedures until the dangers are so blindingly obvious that the drugs or procedures have been withdrawn and replaced (usually by something equally poorly tested and equally unsafe). And it is for this reason that medical journalists never report the truth about vaccines, cancer, antibiotic therapy, radiotherapy, psychotherapy, animal experimentation or almost anything else you can think of.

Journalists who write about medicine get things wrong because they rely on doctors for their information. And, since doctors don't usually know the truth, journalists inevitably get misled too. Medical reporters usually believe what they are told by bureaucrats, drug company employees and grant-hungry academics. Most make no attempt to check or question what they are told because they don't know how to check or question the self-serving nonsense they are fed. Most medical journalists are unable to read scientific papers properly and incapable of asking the right questions. Even if they knew the questions to ask they wouldn't know what to do with the answers.

Bad products, bad doctors and bad companies are routinely praised. And in return the drug companies pay medical journalists obscenely large fees to write articles for their in-house magazines and to give presentations at rather snazzy luncheons and dinners. Sadly, newspapers (which tend to carry an enormous amount of job advertising for NHS staff and pharmaceutical advertising) are often reluctant to carry stories about NHS malpractice or medicinal drug related problems.

Medical journalists rarely seem to know anything very much about the subjects on which they profess to be experts. Almost every day I read reports in which journalists excitedly describe 'new' discoveries which aren't new at all. Most of the 'new' discoveries are, in reality, at least 20 years old. The problem (as I explained in my second book *Paper Doctors* in 1976) is that scientists and researchers are now producing so much (allegedly) new information that it is almost impossible for anyone to tell which is new and which merely repeats research which was done decades earlier. Journalists, submerged under a barrage of press releases, rarely have the time or the inclination to study old books, journals and newspapers.

Even official bodies are constantly repeating existing work, and issuing warnings that should have been acted upon decades earlier. For example, the effectiveness of some over-the-counter cough and cold medicines for children under 12 was questioned on 28th February 2009 in a review by the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency which found 'no robust evidence' that many popular remedies work in children. (I offered the same criticism in my book *The Home Pharmacy* in 1980). In January 2011, it was officially reported that traffic noise could lead to an increase in the incidence of stress. (I published the same warning in *Stress Control* in 1978). Official review bodies are constantly warning that the NHS wastes money on buying branded drugs (I first made this point in *The Medicine Men* in 1975). In one recent week I read that the incidence of tuberculosis was increasing rapidly (largely because drugs are prescribed in strengths not recommended by international guidelines), that children should be allowed to have *some* contact with germs because it would build up their immune system, that an obsession with cleanliness is a reason for the increase in allergies and infections, that food additives can be dangerous and that skin cancer among young women is on the rise and believed to be linked to the use of sun beds. I had published all these warnings in the 1970s – between 30 and 40 years earlier.

It seems that neither doctors nor journalists bother to read much history. I full expect to open one of the national broadsheets any day soon and discover that someone has invented a round device which they intend to call the 'wheel'.

In my second book *Paper Doctors* I noted that we would be much better off if, instead of paying for researchers to make 'new' discoveries and constantly searching for 'new' drugs we spent a little more time taking practical advantage of the information we have already acquired.

Sadly, it is difficult to create 'news' out of such a philosophy.

39. Big Brother's Evil Plan: Britain's NHS Computer Database

Everything the NHS does is expensive and incompetently managed. If NHS employees do one thing well it is 'waste money'. For some years now the NHS has been quietly planning a huge database designed to contain private medical information about every citizen in the country. (Though, naturally, I suspect that the private medical information relating to important politicians and their relatives will be excluded on 'security' grounds.)

Upgrading the NHS computer system has been described as the biggest civilian computer project in the world. It has also been described as the world's biggest civil IT failure. The whole absurd and pointless white elephant has cost so many billions that no one seems quite certain how much has been spent. It is utterly improper, unethical and unnecessary and back in 2006 I described it as doomed to inglorious failure.

The bureaucrats have always claimed, of course, that our personal medical information will be well-protected from snoopers.

There will, say expensively paid bureaucrats, be firewalls to stop hackers finding out how many times you've been depressed or infected with an embarrassing disease.

Ha ha.

Do the bureaucrats really believe that they can create firewalls which will keep hackers out?

Hackers have even got into the Pentagon's top secret computers. There is no computer system in the world which cannot be hacked into. Announcing that a system is super-safe merely provides hackers with a super-challenge.

But that's not the real problem.

The real problem is that when your private medical records (the things you told your doctor in confidence) are put onto the computer, nothing about you will really be private again.

When I first declared the project doomed (five years before the authorities admitted that the scheme was stuffed), the NHS had already registered 298,973 staff members as being entitled to have access to our confidential medical records. But that, of course, was just the beginning. There will be more. Millions more. Pharmacists (and the assistants working in the chemist's shop) will have access to our information. Hundreds of thousands of clerks and administrators in the NHS will have access to our personal medical history. Every secret we have shared with our doctors will be there for everyone to read.

The information will, naturally, be made available to drug companies. (They say they need the personal information for testing drugs. Phooey. They want it for drug marketing. Once the drug companies get hold of our information they will, for example, have the name, age and home address of every diabetic patient in the country. And the names and addresses of all other patients with specific disorders. Pure marketing gold.)

Social workers, policemen and local authority workers will also all demand access to the computer. And they will get it. Once every policeman in the country can read about our depressions, our irritable bowel syndromes and our miscarriages then our last vestige of privacy will be lost. For ever. Everyone you meet or know who works for the Government (and everyone you meet or know who knows someone who works for the Government) will know everything that is in our medical records. Everything we've ever told our doctors. Everything we ever tell them in the future. The Government should have saved its money and just put the nation's medical records onto Facebook. It would have been just as confidential, and infinitely cheaper.

Today, I often complain that many doctors don't take confidentiality seriously. But does anyone seriously expect policemen and social workers to regard confidentiality as important?

GPs, not usually too worried about the rights of patients, have already expressed disquiet. A poll has shown that a majority of family doctors fear that the system will be vulnerable to hackers and to public officials who don't need access to confidential information. They worry that what is left of the doctor-patient relationship will disappear and that more and more people will refuse to discuss delicate issues with their doctor.

(I believe that confidentiality is vital. Over a quarter of a century ago I resigned as a GP when NHS bureaucrats tried to force me to write confidential information about my patients on sick notes. I refused and was fined heavily for doing so. It seemed to me that this was a vital matter of principle. Patients are entitled to believe that what they tell their doctors in confidence will remain confidential. I felt that by putting diagnoses on sick notes (likely to be read by heaven knows how many people) I would be betraying that confidence. And so I resigned from the NHS and became a full-time writer.)

Patients who want to stop all this happening, and who don't want to have their personal medical history put onto the Government's computer, are to be told that they must write to their GP. And GPs have been told that they must forward all letters from patients who want to opt out of the central NHS computer system. The letters must be sent on the Secretary of State. Yes, your private letter to your GP must be forwarded (with or without your consent) to the Government.

So that they know who you are. And where you live.

Presumably, so that they can give you a black mark.

Back in 2006, before such economic luminaries as Gordon Brown and Fred Goodwin took us on a long and painful journey into national bankruptcy, ‘they’ reckoned the official bill for the NHS computer had risen to £20 billion. (That was the official figure so it was probably double that.) That was £333 for every man, woman and child in Britain. Billions spent on a computer system which we don’t want and which probably won’t ever work and which will destroy what remains of our privacy. But by mid May 2011, when even the politicians and the bureaucrats had decided that the system was a failure, it was announced that the Government had spent just £2.7 billion on the project. (They presumably hoped that no one had kept a record of the previous estimate.) It was then officially announced that the system was not cost effective and wasn’t going to work.

The new system has already caused 110 major computer incidents in hospitals in just four months. Lives have been put at risk after essential hospital computer systems crashed as a result of this project. And, of course, there have been errors. For example, one patient was wrongly listed on the computer as being an alcoholic.

Wouldn’t all that money be better spent on getting rid of long waiting lists, dirty wards, single sex wards and so on?

Doctors don’t want this super register of patients’ illnesses. There is no logical medical need for it. It will mean an end to patient confidentiality.

It was always obvious that the scheme would create problems rather than solve them. But there was, of course, a hidden agenda. The plan was to put our medical records onto the new NHS computer so that the Government could feed all the information onto our new Identity Cards. When the ID card system fell apart the need for the national NHS data system also fell apart.

The inescapable truth is that every large organisation which has computerised its records has made life unbearably difficult for customers and staff. I give you British Gas, British Telecom, Britain’s entire rail system and HMRC as examples of chaos caused by computerisation designed to make life simpler. It isn’t the computers which cause the problem, of course. It’s the millions of lazy, incompetent, half-witted zombies who design the software, input the information and then struggle to retrieve it. The evidence to date suggests that any computerised NHS records system will be, from every conceivable point of view, an unmitigated disaster. But then, that shouldn’t be too much of a surprise to anyone who has watched the bizarre growth of the new ‘information technology’ industry. The bald truth is that the communications industry has benefited only the communications industry. Everything worked better, more efficiently and more economically before computers.

If we must use computers, then the obvious way to use a national computer to our advantage is to use it to record drug side effects. I’ve been advocating this since the seventies. It would be simple to organise. Doctors would merely key in details of side effects they’d noticed, or that patients had reported. Even patients could be encouraged to add information. And so, within days of new drugs being introduced, potentially dangerous side effects would be clear. Doctors could be warned. Deadly drugs could be withdrawn. Thousands of lives would be saved.

I first advocated this simple, relatively inexpensive use of the computer four decades ago. But finding side effects at an early stage would not be in the interests of the drug companies. And so it would not suit the unholy trinity. And so it won’t happen.

40. Complaints Not Wanted

The number of complaints made about the NHS is rising constantly and repeatedly breaking new records. In a strange way, however, I confess that I am delighted. Only if people complain about the service they receive will politicians and doctors sit up and take notice.

At the moment however, the problem is that the complaints procedure doesn't work – and is, indeed, designed to protect staff members rather than patients and is, for all practical purposes, entirely pointless. For example, the NHS is obsessed with protecting staff from injury. Time and time again I have heard about hospitals where nurses refuse to lift or move patients in case they hurt their backs. Well, I'm afraid that is what the job entails and nurses who can't be bothered to learn how to lift properly should do something else for a living. Hospitals which concentrate on issues like this, and ignore the problem of hospital infections, are mixing up their priorities. It all reminds me of the BP oil company which worried a good deal about making sure that people didn't go up and down stairs carrying cups of coffee but ran a sloppy system which led to major disasters.

In 2010, more than 100,000 people made written complaints about NHS hospitals and community services. Patients (and their relatives) complained about both the treatment that had been provided and the attitude of staff. Years of targets and box ticking have done nothing to improve the NHS but have merely protected the staff against censure.

Red tape, political correctness, litigation and a mass of bizarre rules and regulations have wrecked the way hospitals operate. Hospital staff who make egregious errors cannot be punished – let alone told off – because of new employment rules which are weighted dispiritingly in favour of the employee. New EU laws mean that the hours junior doctors spend sleeping must now be counted as time worked. The result is that there are nowhere near enough doctors to go around. And so nurses are being allowed to prescribe drugs and perform minor surgery. In my view nurses aren't trained or equipped to prescribe drugs. Doctors, who are supposed to trained, make enough mistakes.

The complaints that are made produce no improvement for several reasons. When criticisms about the NHS are aired there is invariably a flood of protest from 'satisfied' patients and relatives who are, presumably, too stupid to know what they should expect a hospital to be like, or who have been coerced into writing by relatives who work for the NHS. No one who knows what a hospital should do could possibly be satisfied with the NHS. Nevertheless, every attempt to make real changes has so far been thwarted by undemanding people whose expectations are set somewhere in the darkest part of the Middle Ages. Patients and families who stick up for and defend the NHS on the basis of an isolated personal experience help to perpetuate the problems. Intelligent, caring people should always support those criticising an institution or the people working in the institution become complacent. Patients and relatives think and say that they are pleased or satisfied because they don't know what to expect, or how to judge the quality of the treatment they receive. The only people who think the NHS is wonderful are the ones who have become accustomed to awful care and regard it as acceptable. Clever propaganda convinces victims that they are beneficiaries. I'm afraid that NHS patients who write complimentary letters about the NHS to their local paper are doing more harm than good. They are encouraging the survival of a stagnant, rancid system which kills patients and destroys the souls, spirits and integrity of doctors and nurses. It's like someone who was in Auschwitz whooping about the excellent conditions because they were befriended by a guard and given an extra biscuit. Everyone who says that the NHS is wonderful is killing someone else.

NHS staff have learned that if they follow the letter of the law, and obey all the administrative regulations, it doesn't matter a damn how they treat the patients. Staff are only ever fired if they are convicted of the mass murder of patients. Well over a million people work for the NHS and they have a vested interest in it remaining inefficient. They work too little and are paid too much. Targets are designed so that the system can announce its own successes, but the needs of patients are ignored and their cries of dissatisfaction are stifled. There are too many administrators and the whole health service is suffocating under red tape. The NHS isn't going to get any better because its primary aim now is to look after its staff rather than to look after the people who use it. The whole institution (like all State run-institutions) has been manipulated and adapted so that the requirements and rights and interests of the staff are put first. Commercial organisations (such as private hospitals) cannot survive if they operate in this way, but State-run organisations can do so very well because the link between the person paying the bills, and the people being paid for providing the service, has been broken.

It has become standard practice for hospitals to take a long time in dealing with complaints. They have learnt a lot from insurance companies. Their philosophy is that if you let things meander along then eventually most of the people complaining will die, go away, get bored or just become too exhausted to carry on. If you make a complaint about an NHS employee, the bureaucrats move smoothly into action. At the very best you will get letters thanking you for your concern and assuring you that they are constantly reviewing their procedures. No one dares apologise because they're worried about being sued. And so the same mistakes are made time and time again. (Doctors and nurses are so terrified of being sued that much medical practice is now governed not by what is right medically, or what makes common sense, but by the potential requirements of lawyers in the courtroom.)

Within the modern NHS no one takes any blame for things that go wrong. Everyone has an excuse, a reason, for the error they've made. And when there is no obvious excuse there is always the computer. NHS staff have learned from politicians and sportsmen: when something goes wrong it isn't their fault. Staff everywhere are being taught to take no responsibility. (How can you do anything wrong, if you weren't responsible for what you did?) And, of course, large organisations always exist for meetings and National Health Service meetings, organised by bureaucrats, nurses and social workers, exist to provide a sense of importance and a reason for their own existence. The short-term aim is not to make decisions but, rather, to *avoid* making any decisions. The long-term aim is to ensure that another meeting can be arranged, the sense of self-importance sustained and the responsibility for making the wrong decision avoided.

The NHS is run for staff rather than patients and the sole aim is to satisfy bureaucratic targets and to provide secure, undemanding employment for large numbers of people. The NHS exists to provide secure employment for a vast army of jobsworths. Gordon Brown, whose target culture destroyed Britain's public services, has, I believe, destroyed what was left of the NHS, and the NHS won't improve until it is in the interests of the staff to change things. Moreover, with standards so low in the NHS, private care will continue to deteriorate.

Another problem is that medical records have a tendency to disappear whenever a patient makes a complaint. And without records it is very difficult to pursue a complaint to any sensible conclusion. Where do the medical records go to? 'Do hospitals have a special person who gets rid of them?' asked my wife, Donna Antoinette. And I couldn't help wondering if they do. Perhaps all Government establishments now have a Senior Administrative Officer (Shredding) whose job it is to get rid of anything which might prove embarrassing or expensive. After my father died his hospital medical records were missing for ages. They eventually turned up in a cupboard in a nursing home.

NHS complaints should be investigated by independent experts. There are thousands of retired doctors and nurses who could do this job brilliantly well.

And maybe what all health systems need is some sort of points system – such as the one used by the police for speeding motorists. Staff members who make mistakes could be given points. If they collect too many points they could be fined and suspended. Or executed. (That's what they would probably do in China.)

Incidentally, the people who worry that they will be left unprotected if the NHS disappears should realise that if the NHS were closed, and the money which we now spend on it used to buy private care health insurance for the whole population, there would be billions of pounds left over with which to buy sickness insurance for every man, woman and child so that everyone would be insured against financial loss when needing to take time off work through illness. That's how bad and wasteful the NHS is today.

41. The General Medical Council Is Worse Than Useless

When doctors are believed to have erred, the ultimate complaints procedure involves the General Medical Council (GMC), an organisation which regulates doctors and is supposed to protect patients from bad doctors. The GMC decides whether or not doctors are fit to practise. And it lays down rules and guidelines detailing how they should practise and how they should treat their patients.

But if the GMC really exists to protect the health of patients, and the integrity and reputation of the medical profession (and, if it does not, then why does it exist?), then in my view it has failed both doctors and patients.

Here are ten ways in which I believe that the GMC has failed patients and doctors:

'I was surprised to hear that you have decided that in future I should break my Hippocratic Oath and tell the police if I treat a victim of a gun or knife crime. I was equally startled by your assertion that I can tell relatives about diagnoses of genetic disease and should tell social services if patients harm themselves. These are appalling decisions which seem designed to destroy the very principle of confidentiality. Confidentiality is like pregnancy: it doesn't come in degrees. The doctor's primary responsibility must be to the patient he is treating and not to the public. When I qualified as a doctor I took the Hippocratic Oath. Who gave the GMC the right to decide that I should now break that solemn Oath?

These are appalling decisions (which seem to me to be politically motivated and contrary to Article 9 of the Human Rights Act) and no thinking doctor should obey them.

Although I am fully registered (and intend to remain registered and licensed) I will not obey your instruction to disobey the Hippocratic Oath and, indeed, I do not believe you have the moral right to demand that I do so.'

Over a month later I received a reply from someone called Jane O'Brien, (described as Assistant Director, Standards and Fitness to Practise Directorate). She told me: 'We agree that doctors' first concern should be the patients they treat, and that a relationship of confidentiality is a key part of forming a relationship of trust in which the patient can receive good care. However, we do not see the duty of confidentiality (as) an absolute'.

So, the GMC believes it is possible to be a little bit pregnant. The bureaucrats at the GMC clearly don't realise that nothing a doctor tells the Government (or a State employee such as a policeman, tax inspector, local council employee, doctor, nurse or social worker) will be treated as confidential. The Government will either sell the information or lose it.

9. The GMC should look carefully at some of the more bizarre medical fashions. For example, it is surely wrong that surgeons should remove the breasts of healthy women, or should perform operations on patients suffering from nothing more than obesity caused by overeating. And the Government's enthusiasm for vaccination is not supported by convincing scientific evidence. Currently fashionable vaccination programmes may do more harm than good. Doctors who advocate or promote vaccination programmes should be investigated by the GMC.

10. The GMC should make a clear statement about how medical research should be conducted. For example, the evidence clearly proves that reliance on animal experiments is one of the factors responsible for the current endemic of drug-induced disease. One in six patients in hospital is there because he or she has been made ill by a doctor. This is unacceptable. The Department of Health has been quite unable to produce any evidence supporting the use of animal experiments in medical research. The GMC should make it clear that drugs should be properly tested before being made available for general prescribing and that animal testing has no place in the development process for new drugs. Doctors who support or advocate animal testing should be investigated by the GMC.

11. The GMC should have spoken up when the Government accepted EU laws about doctors' working hours. The General Medical Council, which is supposed to spend its huge income preserving medical standards, should have realised the effect that reduced working weeks would have on patient care. However, the GMC, which was once a rather lumbering but reasonably reliable organisation run by the medical profession to maintain a register of all doctors and to dish out punishments to the bad ones, has become a political toy. It is, it seems to me, of no practical value to patients or doctors but of enormous practical value to politicians and bureaucrats. The GMC's main role today seems to be to create ever more complex rules and regulations to keep its bureaucrats busy and to justify its vast overheads. (Like many quangos and quango-like organisations the GMC also likes raising money, which it needs to pay the vast salaries of all the administrators it has acquired to help it raise more money. There are licence fees and registration fees and there will soon be revalidation fees and fees for doctors who want to go to the lavatory.) The GMC staff must realise that the EU's rules have devastated the quality of medical care in Britain. It could have insisted that the Government reject the absurd EU legislation. But, as far as I know, not an eyebrow or a voice was raised in protest. The bottom line is that the GMC is a multi-million pound money-making machine with plush offices in central London. And that's about it. I believe it is self-serving and far too pro-establishment and that for all the good it does for patients and doctors it could be replaced by a single clerk equipped with a computer and a website. The GMC is a rich and hugely successful licensing body which seems to me to exist to collect money rather

than to protect patients or defend the interests of doctors or to improve medical standards. It seems out of touch with reality and completely fails to understand the extent of the iatrogenesis problem.

The GMC will pillory and strike off a doctor found guilty of kissing, groping or propositioning a willing patient. But killing patients is fine, especially if they're old. The GMC launches investigations and then makes judgements. These are chiselled in stone. It is absurd to have a single body launching an investigation and then making a judgement. Patients and doctors deserve (and need) much more than an organisation which, like so many quangos, now seems to exist only to exist; a support agency for the unholy trinity of State, drug industry and medical establishment.

Today, the General Medical Council gives a false sense of security and leadership: it is far worse than useless. I believe that without it, many of the problems I have outlined would be tackled and put right.

42. How Lobbyists Buy Lives

One of the problems with the NHS is that the people who use it don't understand that the amount of money available for health care is finite. Lobby groups push for money for their small area and, inevitably, the lobby groups which are best organised get most of the money. Lobbyists and pressure groups exist to ensure that the available money is spent unfairly and unequally.

Powerful organisations campaigning for particular groups of patients put pressure on the controlling political party, and force the Government to provide treatment for their group. But this is done at the expense of other patients. And so fashionable, politically correct groups (such as those requiring infertility treatment) are treated, while the elderly (not at all fashionable or politically correct) are allowed to go blind and to die when they could be treated quite cheaply.

Breast cancer, which is fashionable and media friendly, receives enormous amounts of money. But less attractive areas (preventive medicine and bowel cancer for example) receive very little attention or funding. People use the Human Rights Act to help them get whatever they want out of the NHS. Foreigners come in and use the NHS freely; welcomed by administrators who do not seem to understand that even the vast amount of money the NHS receives is finite and that when money is spent on providing free breast enlargement surgery for Argentinians, some poor Britons with rectal bleeding will wait six months to see a specialist and may die because they weren't seen sooner. Every time someone has infertility treatment, or cosmetic surgery, someone somewhere dies of undiagnosed, untreated bowel cancer.

The lunacy which is the NHS seems unending. This morning I noticed in the news that a 39-year-old unemployed, single woman had £4,000 worth of IVF funded by the NHS. She wanted a baby and, not having a husband or even a boyfriend, considered that the NHS had to provide her with one. That's £4,000 not available to spend on saving someone with bowel cancer. And, the same day, there was news that a Nigerian woman who had taken infertility drugs, had come to the UK to have her quintuplets on the NHS. Why wouldn't you? Having quins would cost a fortune in Nigeria, America, France or Lithuania. The cost to the NHS? An estimated £200,000 and counting. How many taxpaying Britons will die because of *that*?

Everywhere you look it is clear that as a result of pressure from people promoting specific interests, NHS staff have helped create unfairness and favouritism. Britain is, for example, now a nation pandering to regiments of whingeing drug addicts. As anyone in the drug addiction business will confirm, cocaine and heroin are relatively non-addictive. It is much, much harder to kick tobacco, alcohol or, worst of all, benzodiazepine tranquillisers, than it is to get off cocaine or heroin. But people who got hooked on tranquillisers through no fault of their own receive little or no public help whereas people who acquired an illegal drug habit are spoilt with advisors, helpers and more money than they know what to do with.

And only the NHS could create an AIDS industry so large that it had more staff than patients. AIDS 'experts' (who knew little or nothing about the disease) fought over patients, potential patients or possible patients. Why? Because there weren't enough patients around to justify all their various salaries.

43. When Simple Solutions Are Ignored

The NHS treats prostate cancer with drugs, radiotherapy or surgery. But one doctor (Dean Ornish) in America has shown that prostate cancer be treated with a simple regime which consists of moderate exercise, a vegan diet and stress relaxation techniques. Writing in the *Journal of Urology* Dr Ornish showed that patients who followed this regime rigorously saw their prostate antigen scores drop. Blood serum taken from patients on this programme inhibited cancer cells eight times as much as serum from other patients. And there seems no doubt that green vegetables and lycopene provide protection against cancer-promoting chemicals. But, despite this evidence, the NHS continues to treat prostate cancer with drugs, radiotherapy or surgery.

As I reported in *How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You* it is possible to treat serious heart disease without surgery by using a simple regime similar to this one. And it is also possible to treat diabetes with a similar programme.

Sadly, however, the NHS is now controlled by the pharmaceutical industry and consequently such safe, effective, patient-empowering and economical regimes are not favoured. It is hardly surprising that the NHS, once the dream of so many, once the justifiable envy of the world, has become a creaking hulk; misguided by navigators blinded by avarice, badly managed by an incompetent, lazy, greedy crew and allowed to founder on the twin rocks of ignorance and self-interest.

44. How The European Union Kills People

There is no doubt that one of the reasons why our health care system is a failure is because it is distorted by regulations, targets and legislation – some of which originate in London but much of which now comes from the European Union.

There is no doubt at all that the European Union has done enormous damage to the quality of medical care provided to patients in Europe. It is, for example, because of the EU that general practitioners in England no longer provide 24 hour cover for their patients and it is because of the EU that hospital patients rarely see the same doctor twice and may often go for several days (particularly over weekends and bank holidays) without seeing a doctor at all.

It was back in the 1990s that European politicians and bureaucrats insisted that the European working-time directive should be applied to doctors as well as to coach drivers and factory workers. This was done purely for political reasons.

Britain accepted the EU rules for doctors. (The Government could have refused to accept the legislation but it didn't. As our politicians always do, our ministers bowed to the EU's demands.) One reason for the acceptance of the new legislation was, without doubt, the fact that there will, as a result of sexual discrimination, soon be far more women than men in medicine. Women doctors are far less likely to be driven by vocation and altruistic motives and far more likely to want as much money as possible for as little work as possible. Women doctors marry, have babies and want to work office hours. Just like female MPs, they demanded a regulated 'work-life balance' and expected the job commitments to be adjusted to suit them. They aren't prepared to give the commitment that male doctors have always given. And so patients lack continuity and male doctors have to work harder. The result has been the worst and fastest deterioration in the NHS since its inception in 1948.

Today, the entire NHS is in a mess. Doctors no longer provide patients with anything like half-way decent medical care, and patients die like wasps in autumn because the quality of care has deteriorated. There is no longer any continuity of care.

Thanks largely to the EU employment rules, doctors in hospital (as in general practice) are now working strictly limited hours. Many GPs no longer provide the 24 hour, 365 day service which was an integral part of family practice just a few years ago. The modern GP works the sort of hours usually associated with school teachers, librarians and accountants. Similarly, many hospital doctors now work only short, fixed weeks. Hospital doctors who are 'on call' are deemed to be working when they are sleeping.

At the same time, the EU has taken rights away from patients and given lots of new rights to employees. The result is that staff everywhere have all the power and can be as rude as they like without censure.

Today, if hospital doctors work more hours than the EU permits then the hospital must pay a huge fine. (In exactly the same way that the EU controls the amount and type of rubbish our councils can collect so doctors working hours are now controlled precisely by the EU.) The result of this bureaucratic absurdity is that doctors have to leave half way through treating patients and at weekends hospitals are often completely empty of doctors. I wonder how many patients have died as a result of this policy? I'm damned sure it is considerably more than ever died as a result of doctors being tired. Today it is rare to see a doctor (or a physiotherapist or, indeed, anyone else who isn't a patient or a visitor) in a hospital at weekends. Patients are left lying in bed for over two days. No one, it seems, has heard of deep vein thromboses or pressure sores.

Today, hospitals don't discharge patients at the weekend because consultants aren't available. And they know that if they send patients home at the weekend they will have empty beds and will have to accept new patients – something they don't like doing over weekends with a skeleton medical staff in the hospital.

Another result of the shortage of doctors has been that nurses have been given the right to prescribe and to perform surgery – and to take on these responsibilities without proper medical supervision and without the sort of training required for doctors. To the problem of bad prescribing by doctors has now been added the problem of bad prescribing by nurses. Most nurses (like most doctors) know very little about the drugs they prescribe and know next to nothing about side effects. We need fewer – not more – people handing out prescriptions.

To make sure that doctors stick to the EU's regulations hospitals now employ highly-paid bureaucrats whose sole job is to make sure that young doctors clock off on time and don't spend a moment more than they should looking after patients. Hospitals employ Working Time Directive Project Managers (salaries around £40,000 a year) whose job description involves 'ensuring the compliance of young professionals with the 48 hour working limit'.

So, with one thing and another, it is hardly surprising that it is often difficult to find a doctor on a hospital ward these days. And it is hardly surprising that the standard of care in our hospitals has fallen and is still falling rapidly.

And it is hardly surprising that more and more patients are getting fed up with the poor quality of care they receive from doctors. In 2007, the number of complaints heard by the General Medical Council was 20 times as great as it had been in 1997. (Incidentally, a high proportion of the complaints relate to services provided by foreign born doctors. Naturally, no one is allowed to mention this although it has been the case for some years.)

Forcing the EU working directive into the world of medicine has created one other massive problem.

When doctors qualified in the 1970s, specialists only became consultants or GPs after around 30,000 hours of experience and training. In 1971, when I was a junior hospital doctor I worked all the hours available. It was not uncommon for a junior house officer to be on duty for 168 hours a week, snatching hours of sleep whenever there was a lull in activity. We didn’t complain about this because it was an accepted part of our training and, being young, we managed perfectly well. Every patient was looked after by a designated consultant team. The consultant, registrar and house officer were responsible for patients from their admittance to their discharge. The extraordinary workload meant that young, resident doctors learned an enormous amount about practical, medical care. Today, thanks to reduced working hours, young doctors can become consultants or fully qualified GPs after 6,000 hours of training. So, today’s specialists have one fifth the experience of their predecessors just 30 years ago. How can that possibly be acceptable? If airline pilots were suddenly allowed to fly passenger planes after a training period that had been cut by four fifths there would be a public outcry.

45. Looking To The Future

There is no role for State-run medicine today. It has been proven to be neither cost-effective nor advantageous for patients. In Britain, the NHS should be allowed to die. It was always a terrible idea. Nothing the Government runs ever works. This is because politicians make useless managers, while the people they employ don't care enough about what they do to make any effort to do it half decently. The best (or worst) example of the failure of politicians and public employees to run anything effectively is the National Health Service.

The Government (encouraged by the fascist arch-enemy of all goodness, the European Union) spends vast amounts of our money creating illness and causing profitable epidemics. They encourage meat eating – now the biggest cause of cancer in the Western world. They prevent people from finding out the truths about the food they buy. They allow advertising that is as manipulative as it is dishonest. And then they throw up their hands in astonishment as the incidence of heart disease, cancer and obesity all rocket. Our present system actively encourages ill health.

In Britain the NHS needs reforming. But that's just one small part of the problem. What we really need is a reform of our entire approach to life and health. We need a physical revolution, a mental revolution and a spiritual revolution.

The NHS is a bureaucratic monster which kills more people than it saves. It is absurdly expensive, wasteful and inefficient. There are more administrators than nurses or beds. The annual cost of NHS management is an outrageous and indefensible £12.6 billion. That's double the amount the NHS spends on accident and emergency services, dental services and maternity care. To describe the NHS as an expensive and dangerous disaster is to understate the situation. If you are taken ill the chances are that it will not be the illness that will kill you but the treatment you receive afterwards. We would, as a nation, be better off with nothing. If that sounds overstated, it isn't.

Some people are saved, of course. Road accident victims and patients requiring emergency surgery may have reason to thank the NHS for their lives. But thousands more are damaged or killed by poor prescribing, inaccurate diagnoses, dangerous vaccines, incompetent nursing and so on. As a doctor who has studied the consequences of iatrogenesis I don't think it is any exaggeration to say that the NHS now kills more people than it saves.

Anyone who enters an NHS hospital as a patient is putting their life at risk. If cigarette packets deserve to carry a health warning then so do hospitals.

Replacing the NHS with a system of private medical care would employ far fewer bureaucrats but it would be infinitely fairer and better and considerably cheaper.

Don't believe me? Look at the figures.

We spend around £104 billion a year on the NHS.

There are around 60,000,000 people in the UK.

Divide 60,000,000 into £104 billion.

And you have around £1,750 per head.

I could buy damned good private health cover for £1,750 year. And so could you.

And yet no political party will ever dare suggest closing the NHS and replacing it with a private health care system. And so nothing in this book will change anything immediately.

But I've written this book and you've read it and so there are now at least two of us who know the truth. And that's a start.

Postscript 1: Coleman’s Laws

Coleman’s 1st Law Of Medicine

If you are receiving treatment for an existing disease and you develop new symptoms then, until proved otherwise, you should assume that the new symptoms are caused by the treatment you are receiving.

Coleman’s 2nd Law Of Medicine

There is no point in having tests done unless the results will affect your treatment.

Coleman’s 3rd Law Of Medicine

If the treatment doesn’t work then you should consider the possibility that the diagnosis might be wrong. This is particularly true when several treatments have been tried.

Coleman’s 4th Law Of Medicine

Screening examinations and check-ups are more profitable for doctors than for patients.

Coleman’s 5th Law Of Medicine

It is doctors, not patients, who need annual check-ups.

Coleman’s 6th Law Of Medicine

Hospitals are not suitable places for sick people. If you must go into one, you should get out as quickly as you can.

Coleman’s 7th Law Of Medicine

There are fashions in medicine just as much as there are fashions in clothes. The difference is that whereas badly conceived fashions in clothes are only likely to embarrass you, ill-conceived fashions in medicine may kill you. The fashions in medicine have, by and large, as much scientific validity as the fashions in the rag trade.

Coleman’s 8th Law Of Medicine

The medical establishment will always take decisions on health matters which benefit industry, Government and the medical profession, rather than patients. And the Government will always take decisions on health matters which benefit the State rather than individual patients. What you read or hear about medicine and health matters will have more to do with the requirements of the pharmaceutical industry and the Government, than the genuine needs of patients.

Coleman’s 9th Law Of Medicine

Doctors and nurses know little or nothing about staying healthy. In particular, doctors and nurses know nothing useful about food, diet and healthy eating. (Sadly, the same is true of nutritionists and dieticians).

Coleman’s 10th Law Of Medicine

There are no holistic healers. There are only holistic patients.

Coleman’s 11th Law Of Medicine

There is no such thing as minor surgery.

Coleman’s 12th Law Of Medicine

Some patients will always be treated more equally than others.

Taken from *Coleman’s Laws* by Vernon Coleman

Postscript 2: An Interview with Vernon Coleman

Question 1

You have been publishing books for over 30 years, initially books on medicine. Why and how did you get into publishing and did you initially expect to have sold over two million books?

Answer

I started writing books in the mid 1970s but I didn't start publishing them myself until the late 1980s. I'd written a book which purported to be a diary of a cat – called Alice's Diary. My literary agent at the time tried all my usual publishers in London. None of them would consider it. 'Who would buy a book by a cat?' said some disdainfully. 'Vernon doesn't write cat books,' sniffed others. So I published it myself. Every year since then the book has sold enough copies to have been constantly on and off the hardback bestseller lists for fiction. (It hasn't, of course, actually been on the bestseller lists. The publishing industry doesn't work like that.) After that I published a few more books. And then I started buying back the rights to books which had been published by other publishers. So, for example, I bought back the rights to a book of mine called Bodypower which had gone straight into the Sunday Times Top Ten when it first came out in the early 1980s – published by a smart London publisher. But modern publishers don't bother much with back list titles and so ten years later it wasn't doing much. The paperback publisher was selling hardly any copies. I bought up their stock (which had a dull looking cover) and gave them away so that I could get the rights back. Bodypower has been selling in thousands ever since. Now I publish my books in the UK and sell the rights to foreign publishers, to audio publishers and so on.

Question 2

Were your early books successful?

Answer

The first book I ever wrote was *The Medicine Men* – an exposé of the drug industry. It made me very unpopular with the medical profession but sold quite well. I remember the paperback being piled up at railway stations. A series of novels I did for Macmillan under a pen name sold well and Pan did them in paperback. Three of my books got into the *Sunday Times* bestselling top ten. And quite a lot of foreign rights were sold. The first books I self-published were *Alice's Diary* and *The Village Cricket Tour* – both fiction. Both are still in print. *The Village Cricket Tour* has sold over 30,000 in hardback which isn't bad for a novel about cricket. One of my early novels, a book called *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War*, was made into a movie starring Pauline Collins.

Question 3

There seems to be a continuous thread running through your books – cynicism towards the current established view on any subject you tackle – do you think this is a fair comment and did it originate with your views on medicine?

Answer

Yes, it's a fair comment. When I first started researching my early medical books I was shocked to discover just how much the establishment lies. My second discovery was that telling the truth isn't very popular. Over the years I've predicted just about every major development in medicine – and frequently warned about unreported hazards. Naturally, this hasn't made me popular with drug companies, doctors or politicians. I've been banned by just about every media outlet and these days it's extremely rare for any of my books to be reviewed anywhere – or for me to be interviewed. Journalists who claim to be open-minded tend to shy away from anyone who asks embarrassing questions or reveals embarrassing truths. The news most people watch on TV or read in their newspaper is Bowdlerised and sanitised; it doesn't bear much resemblance to the truth.

Question 4

In 2002 you published England Our England. This was a fairly dramatic change in subject matter. Was there one reason for this or was it a steady build-up of dissatisfaction with the direction in which the country was heading?

Answer

I first got interested in the EU because of my researches into the world of medicine. I gradually realised that every trail I started to follow ended up in Brussels. And so campaigning against medical abuses had to involve the European Union. That led me to writing England Our England. I discovered that the EU planned to get rid of England completely. Hence the book. Most people have absolutely no idea what is going on in this country. Since then my interest in the wider aspects of geopolitics has exploded. I've written two books about the USA and a number of books about British politics.

Question 5

Do you still enjoy writing and which of your books gave you most pleasure to write?

Answer.

Yes, I do still enjoy writing. If I didn't I wouldn't do it. I couldn't possibly pick out one book as being 'special'. It is often said that writers regard their books as children and in my case it's true. If you put something of yourself into a book then it’s bound to be special. If you don’t put something of yourself into a book then it will be insipid and bloodless rubbish.

Question 5

You are a couple of years older than the NHS. Who is in better shape, you or the NHS?

Answer

The NHS is moribund. It is, to use that hideous, modern phrase which administrators use to restrict making financial payments to patients who are only terminally ill, ‘terminally, terminal’. The NHS is being killed by stupidity, incompetence and a complete and utter failure to understand the basic principles of healthcare. It’s easy to blame drug companies, politicians and administrators (and I have frequently done so) but doctors are the main culprits. The NHS has been kept alive, though in an irreversible coma, for many years. The sooner it is put out of its misery the better for us all.

Question 6

You hold some controversial views on amongst other things, doctors, nurses, hospitals, pharmaceutical companies, administrators, vaccinations, screening and radiotherapy. Do you have much support for your views in the medical establishment? Do you find many people agree but are afraid to speak out?

Answer

You may be surprised but the majority of doctors agree with me. My views are based on the available evidence – and common sense. Most doctors are nervous about supporting me in public. (Probably because they will lose their jobs if they do). But most agree with almost everything I write. I can substantiate every claim I’ve ever made. (And no one from the establishment who disagrees with me will dare debate with me in public.)

Question 7

You express highly controversial anti-establishment views which are unpalatable to some yet self-evident to others. Why do you think you aren’t held in high esteem?

Answer

Several reasons. First, I’ve made far too many enemies. Second, I’ve been too outspoken and honest. Third, the media in Britain is controlled by the establishment and very reluctant to publish material which asks significant questions. Fourth, I’m utterly useless at networking or promoting myself. The result of all this is that my books are pretty much ignored by the establishment in the UK but they are keenly welcomed abroad and published in over 20 languages. For example, How To Stop Your Doctor Killing You was a hit in China and I’ve just signed a contract for a Spanish edition of Coleman’s Laws to be published for Spanish speaking Americans. None of that is ‘whingeing’ by the way. I can and do whinge but that isn’t it.

Question 8

How do you avoid litigation?

Answer

By sticking to the truth.

Question 9

Do you think that if you expressed your views in a less sensationalist manner – I am thinking now of the ‘are you eating cancer’ advertisement – you would be taken more seriously?

Answer

No. My first book (*The Medicine Men*) was taken very seriously by the establishment. It got a full page in *The Guardian* and reviews in most of the other papers – plus 20 minutes on BBC1. My second book (*Paper Doctors*) also had a great critical response. (Though neither book sold many copies). But it became clear that I was exposing too many truths. My next serious books (*The Health Scandal* and *Betrayal of Trust*) were totally ignored. It was only then – after my books were gagged – that I became a little more adventurous in the way that I promoted my books. The ‘Are you eating cancer?’ advert is based on a simple truth. The meat on your plate could well contain a lump of cancer if the animal from which the meat was taken was ill. The question may be unpalatable but it’s worth asking. Another advertisement drawing attention to the fact that meat causes cancer (I have a mass of scientific evidence to prove this, of course) was banned by just about everyone – including *Private Eye*. The bottom line is that if I expressed my views in a more academic way I’d still be gagged – and I wouldn’t sell any books either. One out of two ain’t bad.

Question 10

Do you consider yourself to be a campaigner?

Answer

I’m just a writer. I see myself primarily as a purveyor of truth – though a lot of my non-fiction books have a campaigning tone.

Question 11

Why did you at some point discontinue treating patients and concentrate on writing?
Answer
In the early 1980s I had a great deal of trouble with the British Government’s National Health Service. I refused to divulge my patients’ diagnoses to bureaucrats – arguing that this information was confidential. I was disciplined and fined and warned that I would continue to be fined if I continued to put confidentiality above the requirements of the bureaucrats. I resigned from the health service and hung up my stethoscope. I felt that I could do more to ‘change the world’ by writing than by struggling to practise in such an unsympathetic environment.
Question 12
What is your opinion on the basic measures that a man must take in order to improve and maintain a good health?
Answer
I have gradually come to believe that diet is one of the most significant factors in the development of disease. But this again is a battle. Advertisements for my book *Food for Thought* were banned in the UK because I dared to tell people about the links between food and cancer. Dealing with stress is another vital factor – particularly since stress has such a powerful influence on the immune system. I was writing about stress in the mid 1970s – and was widely condemned by the medical establishment for daring to suggest that diseases such as high blood pressure might be related to stress.

Postscript 3: The Author

Vernon Coleman qualified as a doctor in 1970 and has worked both in hospitals and as a GP. He is still registered and licensed to practise as a GP principal. He has founded and organised many campaigns concerning iatrogenesis, drug addiction and the abuse of animals and has given evidence to committees at the House of Commons and House of Lords. Dr Coleman's campaigns have often proved successful. For example, after a 15 year campaign (which started in 1973) he eventually persuaded the British Government to introduce stricter controls governing the prescribing of benzodiazepine tranquillisers. 'Dr Vernon Coleman's articles, to which I refer with approval, raised concern about these important matters,' said the Parliamentary Secretary for Health in the House of Commons in 1988.

He has worked as a columnist for numerous national newspapers including *The Sun*, *The Daily Star*, *The Sunday Express* and *The People* and has written columns for over 50 regional newspapers. His columns and articles have appeared in newspapers and magazines around the world. He has contributed articles to hundreds of other publications including *The Sunday Times, Observer, Guardian, Daily Telegraph, Sunday Telegraph, Daily Express, Daily Mail, Mail on Sunday, Daily Mirror, Sunday Mirror, Punch, Woman, Woman's Own, The Lady, Spectator* and *British Medical Journal.* He was the founding editor of the *British Clinical Journal.* He was for some years one of the highest paid columnists in Britain.

He has presented numerous programmes on television and radio and was the original breakfast television doctor. He was television's first agony uncle (on BBC1's The Afternoon Show). He has presented three TV series based on his bestselling book *Bodypower*. In the now long-gone days when producers and editors were less wary of annoying the establishment he was a regular broadcaster on radio and television.

His books have been published in the UK by *Arrow, Pan, Penguin, Corgi, Mandarin, Star, Piatkus, RKP, Thames* and *Hudson, Sidgwick and Jackson, Macmillan* and many other leading publishing houses. His books have been translated into 25 languages, and English versions sell in America, Australia, Canada and South Africa as well as the UK. Several have appeared on both the *Sunday Times* and *Bookseller* bestseller lists. He has written over 100 books which have, together, sold over two million copies in the UK alone. His novel *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War* has been filmed and is, like many of his other novels, available in an audio version. He has co-written four books with his wife, Donna Antoinette Coleman.

He has never had a proper job (in the sense of working for someone else in regular, paid employment, with a cheque or pay packet at the end of the week or month) but he has had freelance and temporary employment in many forms. He has, for example, had paid employment as: magician's assistant, postman, fish delivery van driver, production line worker, chemical laboratory assistant, author, publisher, draughtsman, meals on wheels driver, feature writer, drama critic, book reviewer, columnist, surgeon, police surgeon, industrial medical officer, social worker, nightclub operator, property developer, magazine editor, general practitioner, private doctor, television presenter, radio presenter, agony aunt, university lecturer, casualty doctor and care home assistant. Much to his (and probably also to their) surprise, he has given evidence to committees in the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Whether they took any notice of what he had to say is doubtful. They did not fall asleep.

Today, he likes books, films, cafés and writing. He writes, reads and collects books and has a larger library than most towns. A list of his favourite authors would require another book. He has never been much of an athlete, though he once won a certificate for swimming a width of the public baths in Walsall (which was, at the time, in Staffordshire but has now, apparently, been moved elsewhere).

He doesn't like yappy dogs, big snarly dogs with saliva dripping from their fangs or people who think that wearing a uniform automatically gives them status and rights over everyone else. He likes trains, dislikes planes and used to like cars until idiots invented speed cameras, bus lanes and car parks where the spaces are so narrow that only the slimmest of vehicles will fit in.

He is inordinately fond of cats, likes pens and notebooks and used to enjoy watching cricket until the authorities sold out and allowed people to paint slogans on the grass. His interests include animals, photography, drawing, chess, backgammon, cinema, philately, billiards, sitting in cafés and on benches and collecting Napoleana and old books that were written and published before dustwrappers were invented. He likes log fires and bonfires, motor racing and music by Beethoven, Mozart and Mahler and dislikes politicians, bureaucrats and cauliflower cheese. He likes videos but loathes DVDs. His favourite 12 people in history include (in no particular order): Daniel Defoe, Che Guevara, Napoleon Bonaparte, W. G. Grace, William Cobbett, Thomas Paine, John Lilburne, Aphra Behn, P. G. Wodehouse, Jerome K. Jerome, Francis Drake and Walter Ralegh all of whom had more than it takes and most of whom were English. What an unbeatable team they would have made. Grace and Bonaparte opening the batting and Drake and Ralegh opening the bowling. Gilles Villeneuve would bring on the drinks, though would probably spill more than he delivered.

Vernon Coleman lives in the delightful if isolated village of Bilbury in Devon and enjoys malt whisky, toasted muffins and old films. He is devoted to Donna Antoinette, the Welsh Princess, who is the kindest, sweetest, most sensitive woman a man could hope to meet and who, as an undeserved but welcome bonus, makes the very best roast parsnips on the planet. He says that gourmands and gourmets would come from far and wide if they knew what they were missing but admits that since he and his pal Thumper Robinson took down the road signs (in order to discourage tourists travelling to Bilbury on coaches) the village where he lives has become exceedingly difficult to find.

Note:

For a full list of books by Vernon Coleman please visit http://www.vernoncoleman.com/ or Amazon Author Central. d

136TH EDITION

Thomas WINSDEN's CRICKETING ALMANACK

Vernon Coleman

136TH EDITION

Thomas Winsden's

CRICKETING ALMANACK

Vernon Coleman

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The author Vernon Coleman MB ChB DSc is a registered medical practitioner. He is the author of over 100 other books, many of which are available as Kindle books on Amazon. For a list of books please see Vernon Coleman's author page on Amazon or visit http://www.vernoncoleman.com/

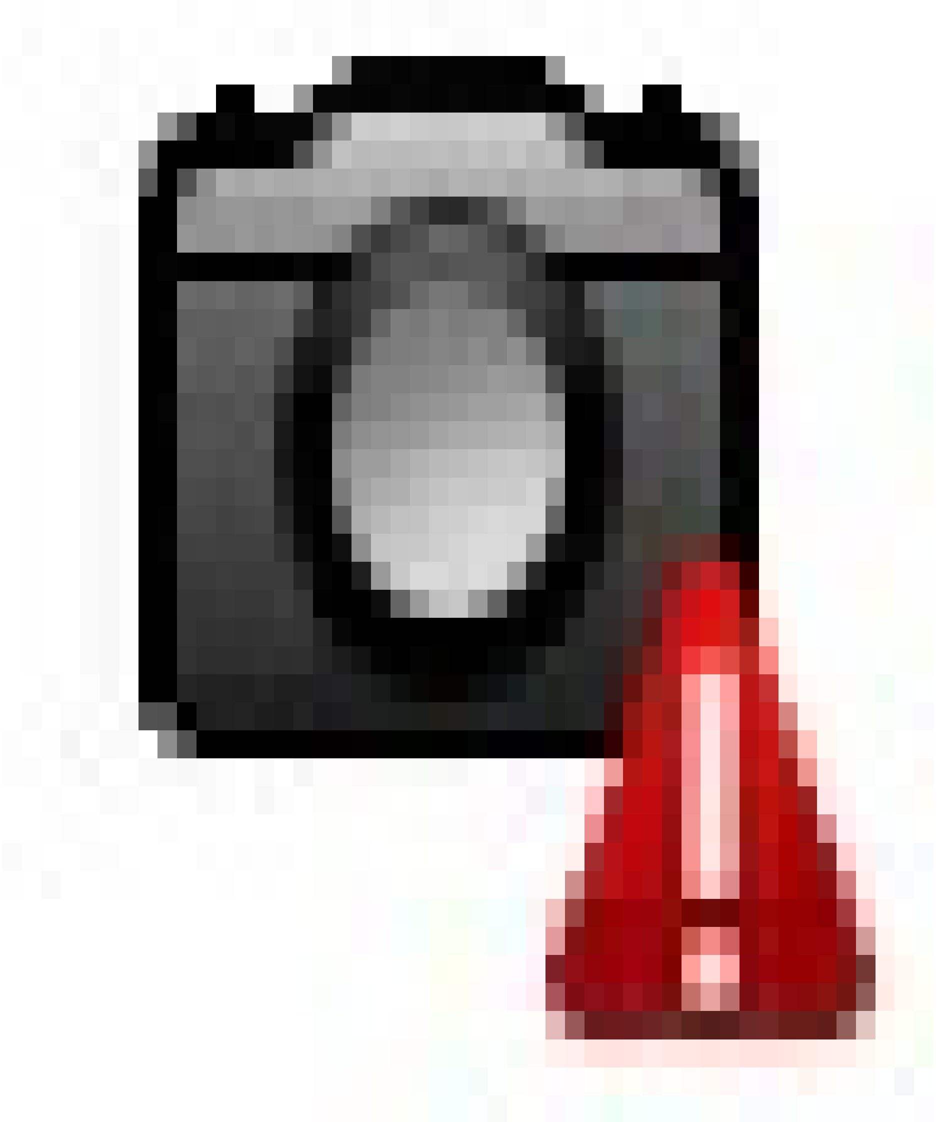

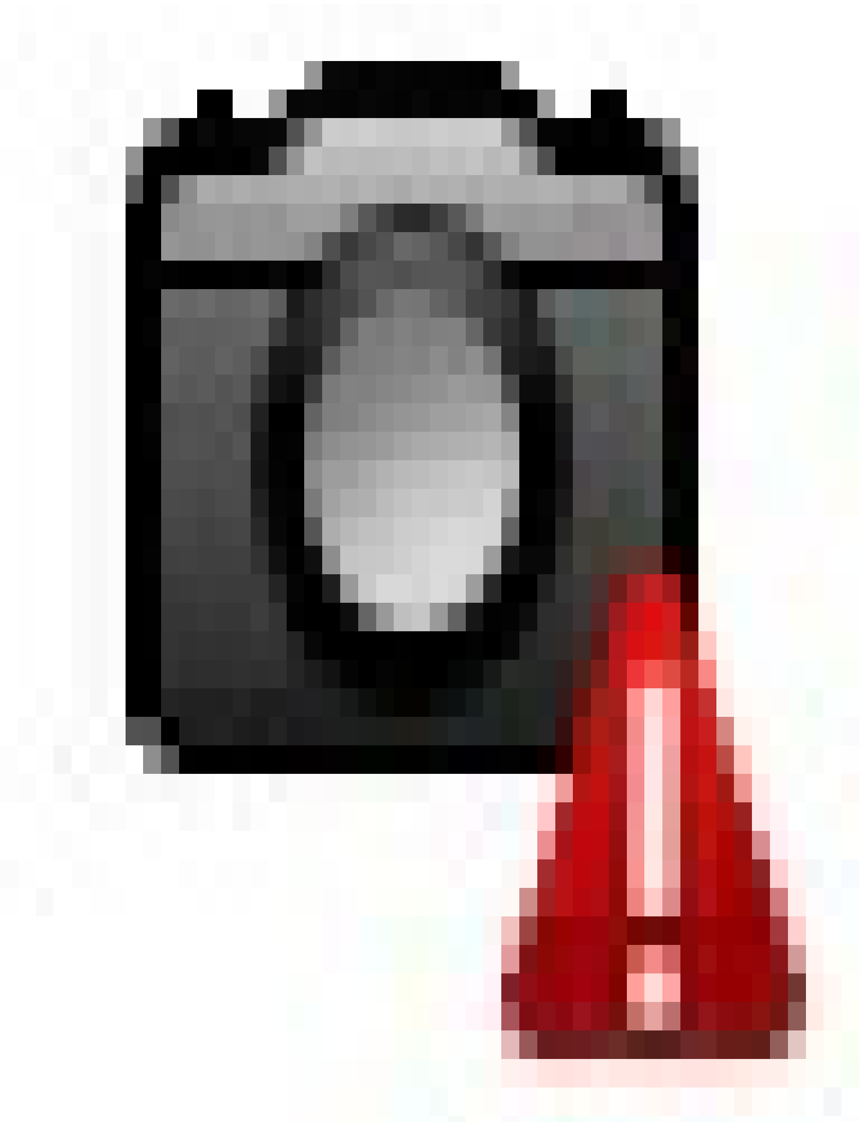

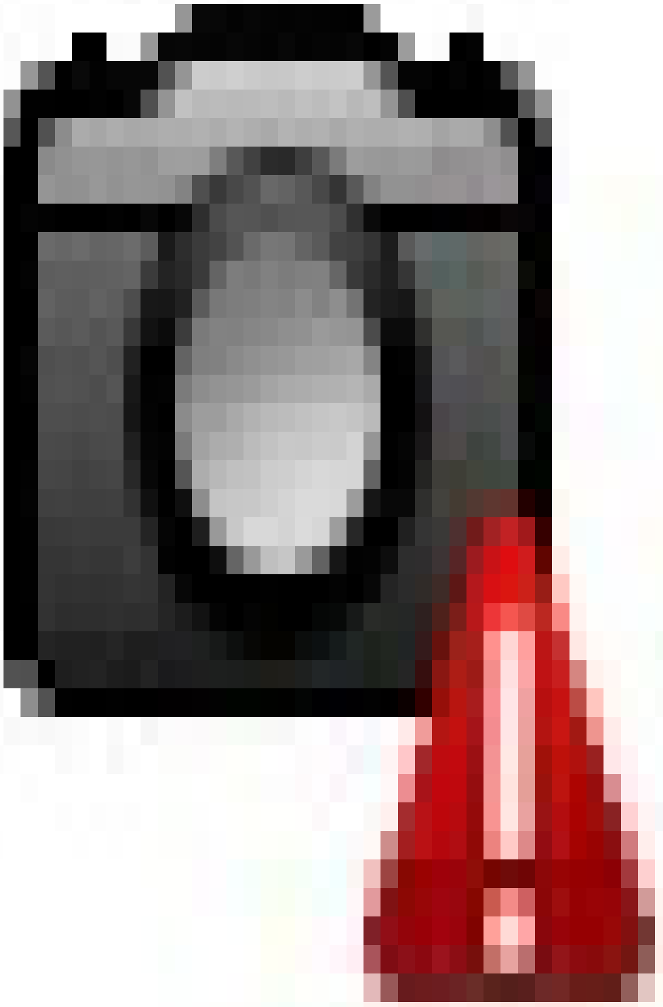

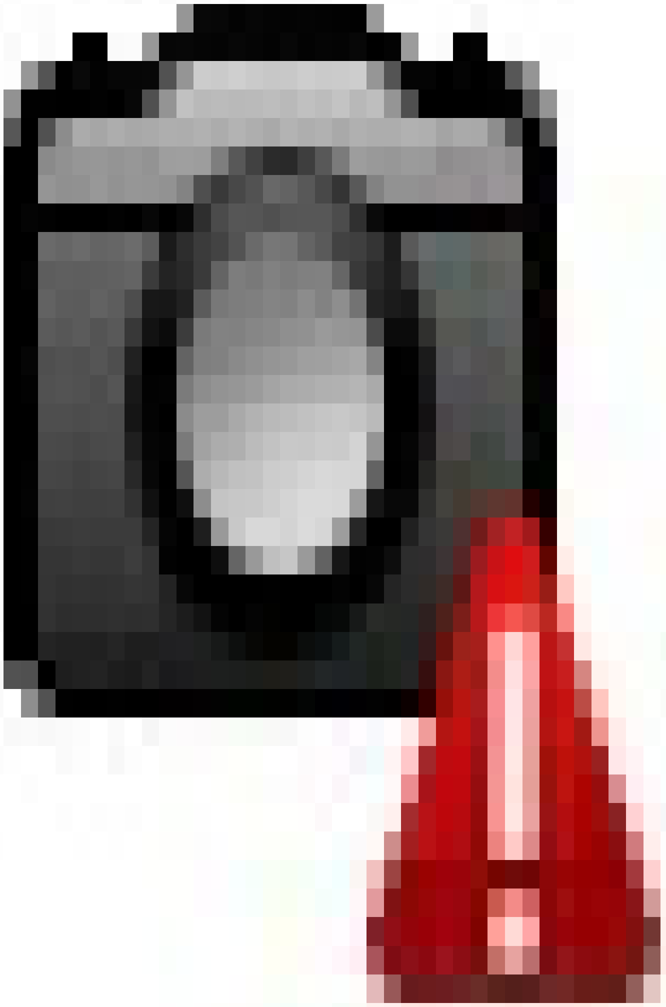

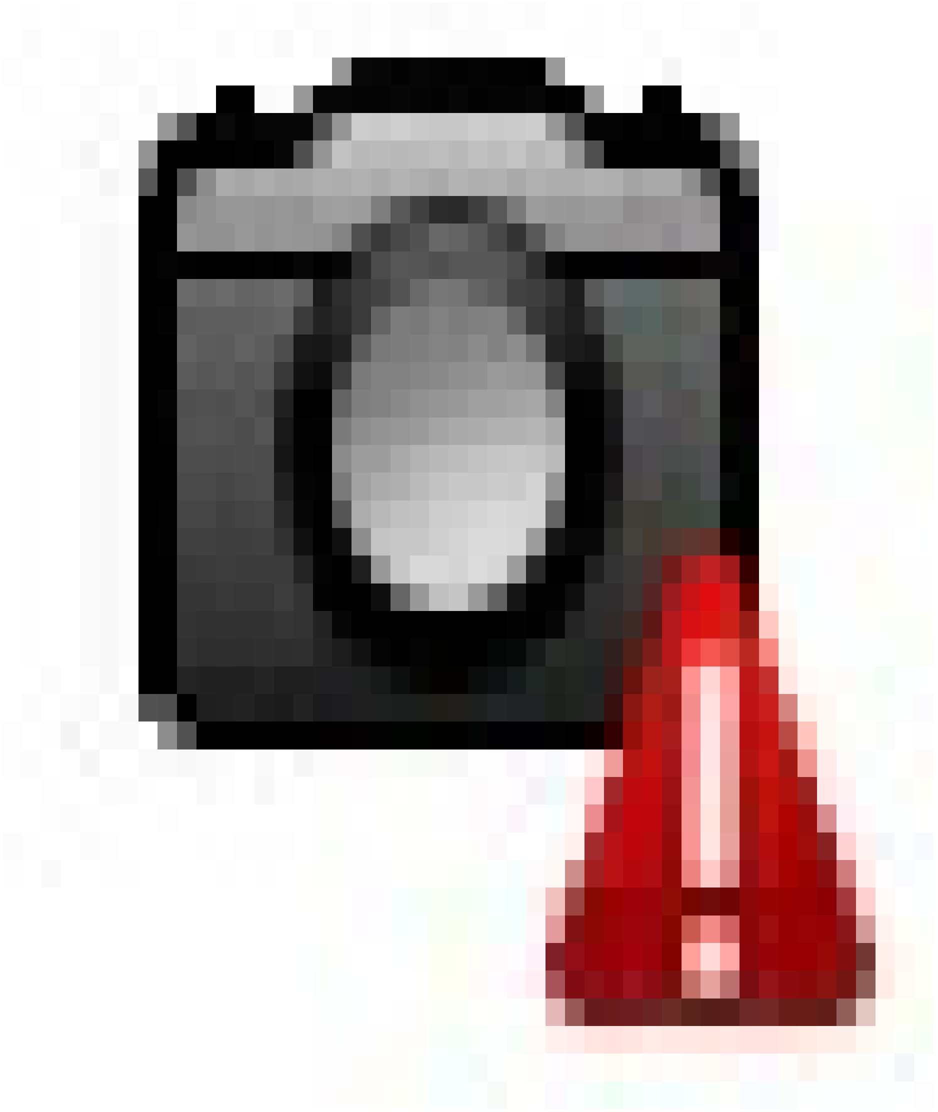

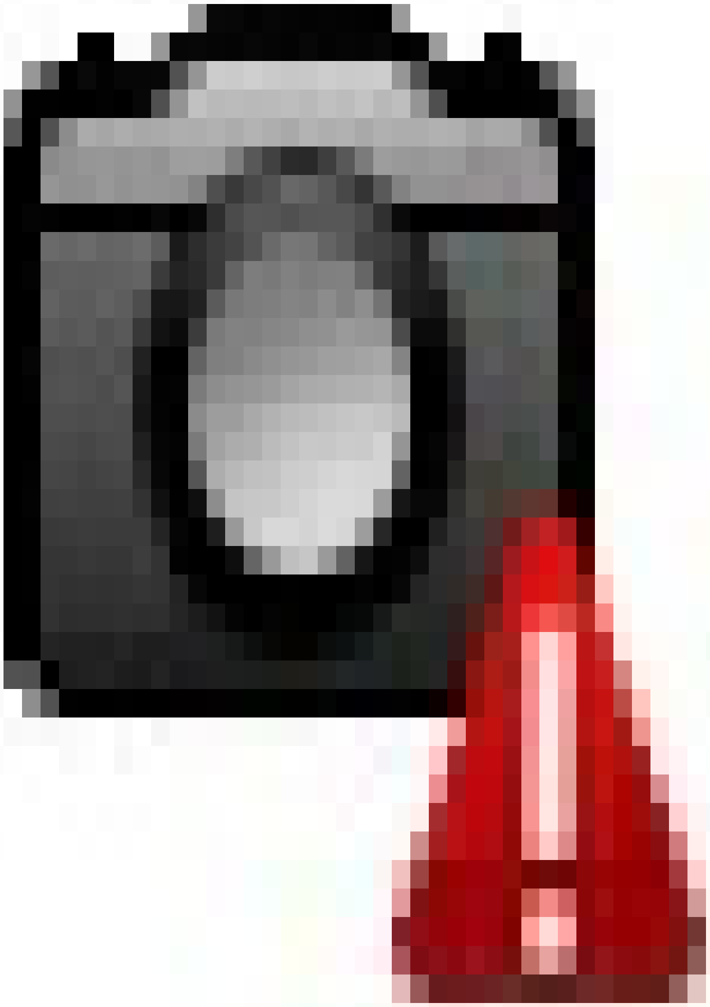

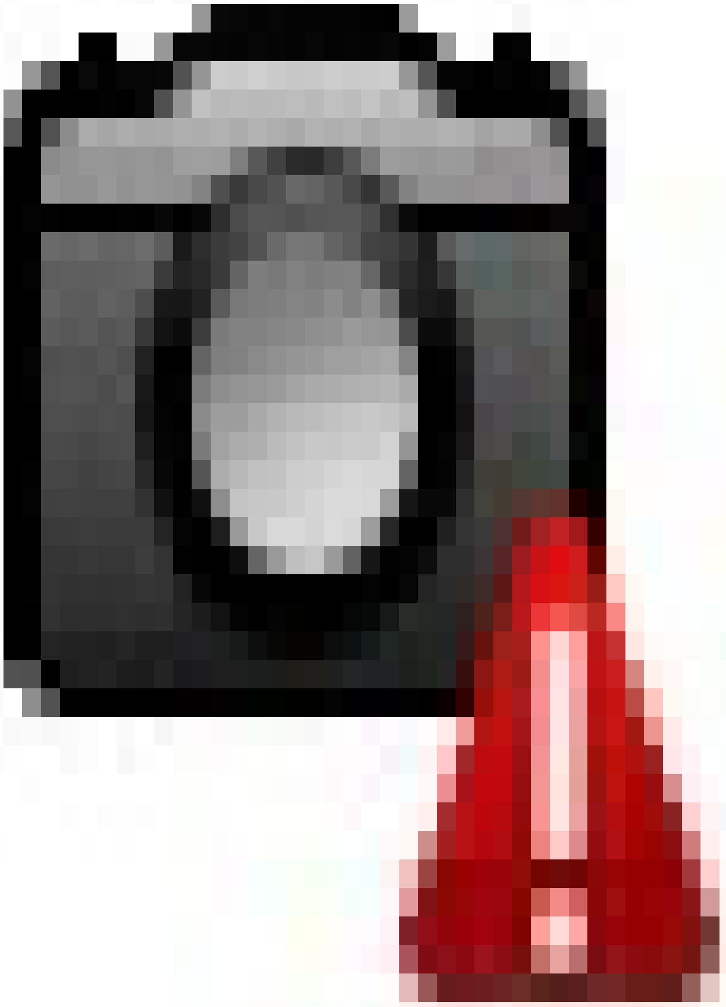

Foreword

When this book was first published, and review copies were sent out, I received several angry telephone calls from sports writers telling me that the printers had misspelt the title. I think it is, therefore, appropriate for me to introduce this new edition of Winsden with a short explanation.

Thomas Winsden was born in 1811 in the village of Headingley. In 1826 he moved with his parents to London where his father, a far seeing entrepreneur, bought a half share in a petrol station. When lack of custom forced the station's closure Winsden Senior died of shame leaving young Thomas in charge of the family which consisted of five sisters and five brothers as well as the grieving Winsden widow.

Fired by hunger and a sense of responsibility, Thomas unearthed a small printing set (received as a Christmas present some years earlier) and with this he set up a business in the kitchen of their modest home. After small successes as a jobbing printer he founded Thomas Winsden's Sporting Guidebooks and began with annuals for lovers of such sports as cock fighting and bear baiting. In 1847 Winsden responded to demand from cricket lovers throughout the country by preparing his first Cricketing Almanack.

Unfortunately this exciting new project never reached the bookstalls. A fire in the Winsden kitchen destroyed the letters F–N and a shortage of capital reserves meant that the budding publisher was unable to stay in business.

From 1847 until his death in 1896 Thomas Winsden wrote out a longhand version of all his book—including the Cricketing Almanack—but sadly none of the manuscripts have survived. From 1897 to 1982 Winsden's descendants continued the tradition by writing and then carefully losing, yearly editions of the Almanack.

In 1982 the sole surviving member of the Winsden family died in a tragic stump-sharpening accident and I took over the responsibility for producing the Almanack. So, although this is, in fact, the 136th edition of the Almanack (making it the longest established Sporting Year Book in the world) it is the first volume to be available to the public.

I think Thomas would have been quite pleased with the first publicly available edition of this Almanack. Winsden was a great fan of overseas cricket and would have been pleased to see details of Australian Beach Cricket included together with the latest French Cup Rules and scores from the amazing Curry Cup held in India.

Winsden himself was a great statistician and our statistics section contains details of the first Umpires' Averages Table together with a unique Sandwich Making Averages Table. (This shows that although cheese and tomato has been the dominant force at club level there is room for variety since Mrs Pettifer, the winner, was a specialist in egg and cress.)

Finally, I believe that it is usual on these occasions for the editor to include a line taking all responsibilities for errors and omissions. Well, bugger that. I would like to blame the sub editor, the printer, my secretary and everyone in the bar at the Duck and Puddle for the errors and omissions which undoubtedly mar the accuracy of this slim volume.

Vernon Coleman
Devon 1994

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WHAT UMPIRES CARRY IN THEIR POCKETS

TEN UNFORGETTABLE SCORERS

TEN EXTREMELY FAMOUS AND IMPORTANT CAPTAINS

THE TEN MOST INTERESTING SLOW BOWLERS OF ALL TIME

THE EIGHT WORST FAST BOWLERS OF ALL TIME

TEN UMPIRES OF RENOWN

PRAYERS FOR CRICKETERS

Cricket laws (revised)

Book Reviews

Obituaries

Errata

Review of the year

THE 1982 CURRY CUP

(India's premier tournament)

The Curry Cup has been an established part of the Indian cricket scene for seven years now. Since the trophy was first introduced by the Prime Minister's nephew it has proved popular with players and spectators alike.

Unhappily, the 1982 season will be remembered not for the quality of the cricket played, but for the way in which the organisers of the Curry Cup tried to cope with the problems caused by the dreadful weather which affected India for most of the season.

Normally the Indian cricket season is blessed with fine weather. In 1982, however, there were storms for so much of the season that the first matches in the Curry Cup could not be played until a month before the final was due to take place.

With the agreement of the various teams involved the organisers solved this problem by arranging for several matches to be played at once. It was decreed that not only should matches be played at the same time but on the same ground.

So it was that at precisely ten o'clock in the morning, one Friday in late summer, umpires R.S. Vasudevan, N.Y. Mathur, S. Bhanot, V. Parkar, D. Krishnan and S. Satham all strode onto the pitch to signal the start of play in the matches between Baroda and Bombay, Uttar Pradesh and Delhi and Haryana and Tamnilnadu.

To begin with, everything went remarkably smoothly. Chapro and Minkad opened the bowling for Bombay, Geol and Ashok opened the bowling for Delhi and Jeeva and Kamar opened the bowling for Haryana. With all thirty three members of the three fielding sides on the pitch there weren't many opportunities for scoring in the first session and by lunch none of the sides had reached double figures.

After lunch there were one or two difficulties to be ironed out. The three umpires complained that they had difficulty in deciding which ball they were supposed to be watching and one of the batsmen complained that the other two wouldn't take their fair share of standing in front of the wicket and risking an LBW decision. Two of the three wicket keepers had a brawl which resulted in the loser being taken from the pitch with a broken clavicle.

By tea time, the Baroda team had all been dismissed and Bombay had come out to bat. Again there were problems because the three umpires couldn't decide whether or not the pitch should be rolled. Eventually they decided that a third of it should be rolled. Then there was the question of which third to choose. They were still arguing when one of the Delhi bowlers delivered a fast off-break and dismissed three batsmen all at once. They all contrived to touch the ball on its way to the three wicket keepers who then succeeding in catching it together.

By the second day, some of the batsmen were getting used to the problems of deciding which ball to hit, some of the bowlers were growing accustomed to tripping over slower bowlers on their way in to the wicket and some of the umpires were beginning to overcome the difficulty inherent in trying to decide which batsman had run out which batsman. But the fielders were still in a dreadful quandary. They kept chasing the wrong ball, running after the wrong ball and bumping into one another. Four silly points may be able to fit in alongside one another, but there really isn't room on a cricket square for nine short legs.

Things got worse on the third day when the administrators decided that because of the backlog they would have to start matches between Bombay and Delhi, Uttar Pradesh and Baroda and Railways and Airways before those in progress had finished. This meant that there were six separate matches being played on the same wicket and that several teams were playing in two matches at once.

Some of the commentators and reporters at the games complained that all this had made the 1982 Curry Cup laughable and had detracted from the value of the competition as a sporting spectacle.

While argument continued in the press box, there were fresh signs of trouble on the pitch. When a Bombay player complained that a Delhi player had handled one of their balls, a scorer took advantage of the lull to run on to the pitch and ask which side had just scored a boundary. None of the umpires knew anything about this and the confusion was made worse when an argument broke out about the ownership of the 17 cricket balls which were in use. One spectator ran on and claimed that two of the balls were his, while an umpire apologised and said that some of the balls had fallen out of his pocket by mistake.

While one of the umpires sent off one of the players for arguing, two batsmen struggled to retrieve a ball from the grasp of a small boy who claimed that he was playing in an Under 15 Colts team league match and an appeal from a

Bombay player resulted in four umpires holding up their fingers at once.

With the sun setting over the pavilion, the umpires went into a huddle and interviewed all the captains separately. Ten minutes later it was announced that the newest side (and, incidentally, the richest) in the tournament, the Bengal Lions, had won the 1982 Curry Cup. The umpires then left quickly for holidays in the Caribbean.

A GREAT MOMENT FOR ENGLISH SPECTATORS

When the England twelfth man dropped the drinks tray during the 89th match with Australia in last winter's Bunsen and Hodges tournament, captain Bob Willis announced that he was so fed up with the team's unprofessional attitude that he was prepared to give a few amateurs a game.

As a result, there were lots of new faces in the 90th match. Opening the batting for England were Mr and Mrs Hubert Pilsbury from Swindon. The Pilsburys had flown to Australia to visit their married daughter and had visited the Melbourne Cricket Ground by mistake, thinking it was the local maternity hospital. They were both surprised (though delighted) to find themselves opening batpeople.

Batting at number three was octagenarian Gilbert Padlock who told reporters that he had watched one-day cricket several times and had played table cricket with his grandson on several occasions. Because of his tactical experience he was made vice-captain.

Wilhelm Spassky was at number four. He told me that he never thought he'd get a chance to play cricket for England after he lost his legs in a mining accident. He insisted that his bilateral cataracts were of no real significance.

At numbers five and six were the eight-year-old Hoover twins who had gone to Australia with their mother. She was batting at number seven and was also down on the card as wicket keeper.

The player at number eight, Dick Barton, a retired private investigator, was in the team as a fast bowler rather than a batsman. He assured Willis that he had once played rounders with his sister.

Alexander Haig, at 93 the oldest player in the side, knew that he would have to carry a pair of crutches as well as his bat when he took to the field but he seemed confident as he replaced his truss with a personal protector. He was down to bat at number nine.

With 'Blind' Willy Festhinger, the jazz pianist, at ten and Willis himself at eleven the team had a convincing look to it. Nonetheless, most Australians were surprised when the English team won by nine wickets. Aussie captain Kim Hughes said she thought it was a pity the new team hadn't been given an airing sooner. She told startled pressmen that she thought England would have made the final had they played the same team in earlier matches.

Footnote

The England touring party sat in the spectators' enclosure for this match. They did not do well. Three injured themselves while clapping, two fell over while fetching beer, one was ejected from the ground for insulting behaviour, four dropped litter and were arrested and the rest all got lost in the toilets.

Bunsen and Hodges Cup — 1985

The 1985 Bunsen and Hodges Cup will again involve Australia, New Zealand and England. This time, however, there will be more matches. To begin with, each team will play the other two teams 78 times. Then the top three teams will play each other again. This round will consist of 56 matches. When those matches have been played the top three teams will play a knock-out competition consisting of 489 matches. The top three teams will then play in a prolonged final which will last for three and a half years. At the end of that time the top three teams will each receive huge cheques, a trophy, a bag full of medals and an invitation to take part in the next Bunsen and Hodges cup.

Over Rates 1983

The National Union of Bowlers (NUB) has negotiated new rates for professional bowlers working for league clubs on a piece-work basis. In future bowlers will be paid 75p per over bowled with a 25p bonus for each maiden.

THE 1982 SINGLE WICKET COMPETITION

Last year, for the first time ever, club cricketers were invited to take part in a national single wicket competition. Nearly six hundred individual clubs entered for the contest which was sponsored by a company which asked to be allowed to remain anonymous. In view of the success of the competition the company’s decision was probably a wise one.

In theory the competition should have proved attractive; unfortunately the sponsors insisted on allowing their own copywriter to prepare the official list of rules.

Not being familiar with cricket, the copywriter, a middle-aged lady of Austrian extraction more accustomed to writing ads that enticed housewives to purchase extra quantities of soap powder, misunderstood the basic concept and applied the rules so that they would fit a literal translation of the competition’s title.

Batsmen found the regulations extremely appealing, but bowlers did not enjoy the competition at all. Although a total of 754 matches were played during the months of the competition only two batsmen were given out ‘bowled’, none were given out lbw and only three were ‘run out’. No batsmen were given out ‘hit wicket’ and no batsmen were given out ‘stumped’. The remainder of the 73 wickets which fell during the competition went to catches.

With the rules favouring batsmen so heavily there were, naturally, some high scores. Lord Thackelay’s XI, for example, scored 945 for two wickets in one of their early matches. The Leamington Cricket Club managed 879 for one in a second round match and the Lydeard St. Lawrence team lost only three wickets while piling up a total of 987.

Because of the difficulty of getting batsmen out, the competition lasted for much longer than had been expected. The match between Lord Thackelay’s XI and the Hampstead 2nd XI went on for seven and half days and nights; a match between Newbury and Wichampton went on for 147 hours without a break; and a game played between Glasgow Celtic and Little Hampton took up 17 Sundays.

In the end the competition was won by those with the stamina to keep going. Lord Thackelay’s XI, overjoyed at the prospect of winning a match for the first time in the club’s history, were the only team willing to attend the final at Lords in late October. They won by default.

There will be no official single wicket competition in 1983.

Women at Lords

Suitably dressed women will, in future, be allowed to buy chocolates and sweets from the small shop at Lords as long as they have in their possession written permission from a member. Women will still not be allowed to buy cigarettes, tobacco or matches, however.

FRENCH CRICKET CHAMPIONSHIPS: 1982

For the third year running, the French cricket championship challenge cup was won by the widely respected Dijon team which has now accumulated a record of major championship wins matched only by the legendary Calais Cricketers XI, which so dominated French cricket in the 1930s.

One of the disadvantages and difficulties of French cricket (so far as classically trained cricketers are concerned) is the fact that knee and ankle movements are essential to success.

Rene Renault, the Dijon team captain and coach, has made no secret of the fact that these days he prefers to recruit fresh squad members from the ballet companies of Paris, London and Moscow rather than from the cricket teams of England, Australia or South Africa. ‘Ballet dancers,’ he argues with convincing logic, ‘have the fluidity of movement which enables them to defend through the full three hundred and sixty degree range.’

He points to Alphonse de Peugeot and Ricardo Gauloise, both regular members of this year’s successful squad, as evidence that his training and selection philosophy is a sound one. De Peugeot was, of course, an Assistant Senior Principal dancer with the youth section of the Melbourne Festival Ballet Company but since he failed to grow more than an inch or two above five feet his career came to a halt. He just didn’t have the height or strength to pick up any of the ballerinas.

Fortunately for de Peugeot, the Master of the Corps de Ballet in Melbourne, Dustin Le Coin, had for many years enjoyed a close personal relationship with Rene Renault. Advice in the young dancer’s ear took him straight to Dijon where, after an introductory trial game, de Peugeot was offered a three year contract.

For Gauloise the route to success was not dissimilar. After several years with the Durban Ballet Company, Gauloise (his father was an international sales executive with a major French oil company) became allergic to nylon. Unable to wear tights of any description, but unable to dance without them, he was forced to seek some other outlet for his talents.

With players like de Peugeot and Gauloise in his team, Renault is confident about the future. He believes that the Dijon squad can continue to dominate French cricket. The evidence suggests that his confidence is not misplaced.

Changes in the rules of French cricket for the 1983 season

The International Board of French cricket control and the Marie-le-os Cricket Club have, after consultation, significantly changed the rules for French cricket. As a service to readers of the *Thomas Winsden's Cricketing Almanack* we are reproducing the new rules here in their entirety.

1. If the match is an official IBFCC meeting, then each team shall consist of one captain and ten players.
2. If the match is an informal, impromptu one then the two captains shall appoint themselves and then select teams by picking from the then available players. The captains shall choose alternately and if there is an odd number of players then the captain choosing second shall have the extra player.
3. The two captains shall toss a coin to decide who bats first. The coin shall be allowed to land on the ground. It shall be returned to its rightful owner after the 'toss' has been read.
4. The batsman shall stand with his feet together and facing due North. (Or in the opposite direction to any greenhouse, pair of French windows or other large expanse of glass). He shall be equipped with a cricket bat which shall be no more than twenty four inches long and four inches wide.
5. The bowler shall stand ten feet away and shall be equipped with a soft ball no more than six inches in diameter.
6. The fielders shall stand around. They shall stand at least three feet away from the batsman.
7. After shouting 'ready' the bowler shall throw, roll, toss or bowl the ball towards the batsman's legs using top spin, back spin, side spin or no spin as he sees fit. If the ball hits the batsman's legs on or below the knees, then the batsman shall be given out. The batsman shall also be given out if any fielder catches the ball directly off the bat or if a fielder catches the ball with one hand when it has bounced no more than once. If there is disagreement about whether or not the batsman is out then the fielders shall be invited to make a democratic decision as a sub-committee. If the ball is lost then the batsman is certainly out and there will be no argument about this.
8. After hitting the ball the batsman shall not move but shall be awarded runs by the fielding side according to the distance the ball has travelled.
9. The fielder who collects the ball shall automatically become the bowler and shall bowl from the position where the ball stopped. The bowler shall become a fielder. The batsman shall continue to stand with his feet together and facing due North. The rules for dismissal shall remain the same.
10. Anyone who does not play the game fairly shall be smacked and sent to bed without any supper.

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Apology

We apologise for the fact that, due to unforeseeable circumstances, the answers to last year's quiz do not appear in this edition of Thomas Winsden's Cricketing Almanack.

They will probably be included in next year's edition of the *Almanack*, if we can remember the questions. This year's *Almanack* contains no quiz.

THE WORLD BEACH CRICKET CHAMPIONSHIPS 1982

For the eighth consecutive year the World Beach Championships were held on Bondi Beach, Australia and again won by the Sydney Heralds who beat their old rivals the Deauville Buccaneers by nine runs.

Since new rules had been revised stipulating that the driftwood used for the wickets must be no smaller than three foot tall and eight inches wide and no larger than four foot tall and twelve inches wide, batsmen had a much harder job defending their positions. The new bat regulations helped, of course. Until a year ago beach cricket batsmen had to use standard sized tennis rackets; this year, for the first time, batsmen were allowed to use beach tennis bats of almost any size.

Ace Sydney Herald bowler Steven Frieberg, who can turn an old tennis ball square on semi-dry sand, mesmerised the Deauville batsmen until a short, sharp shower took the bite out of the pitch and gave seamer Neville Chamberlaid more help.

Between the two of them Frieberg and Chamberlaid took all ten Deauville wickets and left the Buccaneers defending a total of a mere 146. Frieberg finished with six for thirty eight while Chamberlaid ended up with a career best of 4 for 46.

Sydney started their innings just as a gentle breeze off the sea started to waft fresh sand across the pitch. As a result, the ball bounced no more than a foot off the ground, so the Sydney openers had difficulty for the first few overs and it looked as though Deauville might do the impossible after all.

Then, much to the relief of the Sydney Heralds, the breeze stopped and the drying sun quickly baked the top layer of sand, with the result that batsmen Harvey Wallbanger and Cliff Michaels could pat down a few square feet of level grains. With the ball rising predictably and gathering an even bounce from the pitch, the game quickly drifted in Sydney's favour. By tea they were 87 for no wicket and despite a courageous burst of seam bowling by Deauville ace Francois Mitterand the Heralds won the match fairly comfortably, reaching 147 with the loss of only three wickets.

After their victory the Sydney Heralds celebrated with ice creams and a dip in the sea.

Fielding Circles

It is now widely accepted in fielding circles, that when two players work as a sub-team unit to field a ball then the player who returns the ball to the wicket-keeper should be the one to acknowledge the applause of the crowd. The other player should do no more than blush modestly.

THE BERT PLAYER LEAGUE

Unexpected Win for Cumberland Tigers

After several undistinguished seasons, Cumberland Tigers finally managed to end their lean patch with a spectacular win in the Bert Player League. Their success this year can be attributed to several factors.

First and foremost, of course, has been their marvellous Youth Cricket policy as a result of which hundreds of young people throughout the area have been encouraged to enjoy the pleasures of bowling and batting in organised coaching conditions. The Summer and Winter Cricket Schools, run by the side's Youth Training Manager, have likewise attracted many youngsters.

The money raised by many specially organised raffles, dances and sweepstakes has been used to build an indoor cricket school, complete with artificial wickets, netting over the windows and clever little metal cages over the light bulbs. The indoor school has made it possible for the first team to practice even in deepest winter and there is no doubt in the mind of the team coach that this facility has contributed to the team's spectacular success.

Groundsman Harry Patches has made his mark, too. His pitches have been true and well-prepared — and nothing gives batsmen more confidence than the knowledge that the concrete on which they are playing has been thoroughly swept and specially cleaned for the match in progress. A stray pebble or half-brick can ruin a batsman's style.

The new team manager, Brynmor Davis and the club secretary Davis Brynmor have succeeded in sharing all the administrative chores; this has enabled captain Vladek Jones to concentrate all his energies on making sure that his team has been 'psyched-up'. Ably assisted by his vice captain Majid Ganter, Jones has succeeded in moulding an effective and happy side. With no fewer than nine players who have passed through the colts' team and the second eleven in the side, the Cumberland Tigers are to be congratulated on their well deserved success.

Their two overseas players, Zahir Flaymore and Nick Walters, who joined the side this year for the first time, will be staying with the Cumberland Tigers for the coming season although both will have to miss some matches because of Test calls.

Young Tourists

The Nannycare Under Nines England Tourists opened their tour of New Zealand with a resounding win over an Auckland Representative Schools Side.

Unfortunately, eight members of the touring party who were suffering from acute homesickness had to return home immediately after the match and the remaining fixtures were subsequently cancelled.

ORGANISING CRICKET

A brief look at the activities of the various governing bodies during the last twelve months

January

The Advisory County Cricket Committee met at Lords and decided to call a special meeting of the World Cricket Conference in June. The National Cricket Association's treasury sub-committee sent a memorandum to the Association of Cricket Control asking that the Board of Cricket Supervision examine the question of changing the lbw law. The Cricket Council and the Marylebone Cricket Club met to decide whether or not to reorganise the Test and Country Cricket Board. The International Cricket Board's disciplinary subcommittee met to discuss the Council of Cricket Bodies. The Board of Cricket called for a meeting of the Cricket Association.

February

The Cricket Council and the Board of Cricket Supervision sent a report to the International Cricket Board asking them to reconsider last year's decision to start one-day games at 8.0am. The Council of Cricket Bodies sent a deputation to the Cricket Association. The Cricketing Control Supervising Council sent a deputation to the Council of Cricket Bodies.

March

The Council of Cricket Bodies sent a deputation to the Cricketing Control Supervising Council. The Cricket Association sent a deputation to the Council of Cricket Bodies. The Marylebone Cricket Club decided to hold a meeting.

April

The World Cricket Association's Players' Committee met with the International Cricket Association's Players'

Committee and decided to appoint a delegate to the Cross-Continental Cricket Association's Players' Committee. The Cross-Continental Cricket Association's Players' Committee and the International Cricket Association's Players' Committee met and decided to appoint a delegate to the World Cricket Association's Players' Committee. The World Cricket Association's Players' Committee and the Cross-Continental Cricket Association's Players' Committee met and decided to appoint a delegate to the International Cricket Association's Players' Committee.

May
The World Cricket Association's Players' Committee, the International Cricket Association's Players' Committee and the Cross-Continental Cricket Association's Players' Committee were all amalgamated into the World, International and Cross-Continental Cricket Associations' Players' Committee.

June
The World Cricket Conference met and decided to call a meeting of the Advisory County Cricket Committee in January.

July
The Council of Cricket Bodies and the Board of Cricket formed a joint committee to discuss the question of whether or not the International Cricket Board should be disbanded.

August
The International Cricket Board and the Council of Cricket Bodies decided that the Board of Cricket should be disbanded. The Test and Country Cricket Board met to discuss the lbw law. The National Cricket Association's printing sub-committee met.

September
The Board of Cricket Supervision and the International Cricket Board sent a report to the Cricket Council asking them to reconsider the decision to start one day games at 7.0 am.

October
The Cricket Council and the Test and Country Cricket Board met to discuss the possibility of forming a subcommittee to discuss the question of whether or not the Advisory County Cricket Committee should have a sub-committee to discuss the National Cricket Association's ability to form fresh committees.

November
The Council of Cricket Bodies met to discuss the disciplinary committee of the International Cricket Board.

December
The Cricket Council sent a card to the Board of Cricket Supervision and the Council of Cricket Bodies sent a card to the Cricketing Control Supervising Council. The Council of Cricket Bodies sent a card to the Cricketing Control Committee and the Marylebone Cricket Club sent cards to everyone.

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Finance and the counties
Figures released by the Test and Country Cricket Board show that the seventeen first class counties gained income from the following sources during the last twelve month period:

Sponsorship: £8,947,397
Advertising: £6,398,290
Television fees: £5,439,201
Bar receipts: £243,926,849
Admission fees: £14.90
Scorecard sales: £0.82

AROUND THE COUNTIES

An annual look at the individual cricketing counties

Derbyshire
Once again there have been contractual problems at Derbyshire. Four players were offered two year contracts and

two players were offered four year contracts while three players were offered one year contracts and one player was offered a three year contract. Three of the four players who were offered two year contracts accepted and one of the three players who were offered one year contracts accepted. The player who was offered a three year contract declined but both players who were offered four year contracts accepted The man who writes the clubs contracts was offered a five year contract.

Essex

Few sides are as happy as Essex. With several confirmed practical jokers in the team, a laugh is never far away. Gales of hysterical mirth marked the team’s disappearance from the Banker’s Trophy and when they lost a vital County Championship match early in the season, some of the players ended up laughing so much that they had to be carried off the field One or two members of the side can always be counted on to put superglue on the spot where the bowler starts his run up, or to encourage the entire team to wear sixteen sweaters each on a hot day so that the umpires risk heat-prostration. Doubtless, Essex will continue to give great pleasure to us all for many seasons to come.

Glamorgan

The only Welsh county team had a tremendous season. Jones and Jones opened the bowling with fire and vigour and were well supported by the two medium pacers Jones and Jones. One of the established opening batsmen, Jones, lost his place to newcomer Jones in May and halfway through the season the other established opener, Jones, lost his place to a second newcomer called Jones. The leading scorer was again the indomitable Jones and the captain and vice-captain, Jones and Jones respectively were reappointed. Wicket-keeper Jones retired at the end of the summer but reserve keeper Slougupta is expected to do well in the forthcoming season.

Gloucestershire

With cash availability a real problem in Bristol, Gloucestershire are being forced to cut costs. In future players will travel to away matches by bicycle. Attempts will be made to ensure that no innings played by the home side needs more than one new ball and the scoreboard will only be operated when someone is actually looking at it.

Hampshire

Members of the Hampshire club are beginning to think that the Test selectors have forgotten their team exists. After winning the four major trophies for the last six successive seasons, Hampshire must have thought that some of their players would have been entitled to expect international recognition. Not a bit of it! Even the county’s star all rounder failed to get an England cap — despite scoring 3,496 runs in the season at an average of 103, taking 149 wickets at an average of 11 and holding 64 catches. Still, perhaps another good season will do the trick.

Kent

Kent’s policy of giving young players a chance in the first team has produced several problems. Finding baby sitters during away matches has been particularly difficult. In addition there has been the problem of providing school lessons for some members of the team. Some embarrassment has resulted from the fact that the players have had to be provided with milk during the drinks intervals. Two players not yet weaned have required special services.

Lancashire

Benefits, testimonials and appeals have been so successful in Lancashire that it has been decided to concentrate all the county’s future efforts on fund raising. The county will sell raffle and sweepstake tickets rather than scorecards and instead of a fixture list members will be given a diary of special fund raising events. Shares in the county team are to be quoted on the stock market within the next two years.

Leicestershire

In an exciting managerial move, the Leicestershire Commercial Management Team have announced that forthcoming first-class county matches will be designed to start at whatever time is deemed most suitable by the spectators. Both regular spectators will be telephoned at 9.0 am every match day and asked to nominate a time. The mean of their two recommendations will be taken as the official start-time. Play will end when the two spectators have to go home.

Middlesex

Problems with the balance of the side meant that F. Titmole had to be recalled to the team yet again. Because of his advancing years, Titmole was given permission by the T.C.C.B. to approach the wicket in a wheelchair but several umpires complained about the tracks being made on the pitch and Titmole had to approach the wicket under his own steam for the remainder of the season. Titmole's success, however, encouraged the Middlesex selectors to recall other former players and by the end of the season Crompton, Hendon, Edwich, Man, Murry, Parfait and Hearn had joined Titmole, Allan, Robbins and Pebbles.

Northampton

The Northampton side has been so successful despite its weak bowling line-up that the county's selection committee has decided to do away with bowlers altogether. In the coming seasons the committee will select eleven batsmen and leave the captain to sort out the bowling problems as best as he can. One suggested batting line-up for Northampton looks as though it could easily be reversed without attracting any comment. It will be interesting to see how successful the experiment is.

Nottinghamshire

Injury problems at Trent Bridge have meant more problems for the selectors. When the New Zealand fast bowler was fit the South African all rounder was injured but when the Pakistani fast bowler was injured the Indian all rounder was fit. The South African all rounder's injury got better at about the same time as the Indian all rounder sustained an injury and the New Zealand faster bowler went on the sick list at the same time as the Pakistani fast bowler became fit enough to rejoin the team.

Somerset

Few counties can claim to have spectators as enthusiastic and as partisan as those who follow the fortunes of Somerset. For that reason, it's unsurprising that when Somerset's newly formed Followers' Club decided to raise a little extra money by putting some of its members on the transfer list, many eager offers should be made. After lengthy negotiations, four spectators were finally transferred to Gloucestershire and four to Lancashire. Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire are currently reported to be negotiating for additional fans in the hope that they, too, will be able to benefit from fresh vocal support.

Surrey

Once they were the most successful and famous side in the land. These days, however, the Surrey cricket team is no longer a force to be reckoned with. As a pointer to their reduced stature in the modern world of professional cricket it is perhaps worth mentioning that when the fixture list for the current season was originally prepared, Surrey was completely left out of the reckoning. The names of the other sixteen county sides were fed into the computer but the name of Surrey was left out. The result of this unhappy oversight was that the Surrey manager found himself ringing round the other counties and pub sides, looking for a few games to keep his players occupied. Happily the latest news is that he has managed to arrange a considerable number of fixtures. To cover their confusion and embarrassment, the T.C.C.B. has agreed to regard all Surrey's friendly fixtures as first-class matches and to include the county in the reckoning for the County Championship. But it was a close shave. And quite a change from the days of Freddie Laker and the Bisto Twins.

Sussex

They've found the secret of a balanced attack at Sussex. Aware that some counties suffer when they lose star Test players to touring sides, the Sussex committee has succeeded in putting together a perfect fast bowling combination! With a Pakistani and a South African leading the seam attack there is little risk of Sussex ever losing *both* players to a touring party.

Warwickshire

The midland side had another tremendous season. The supporters club raised £193 billion with a scrip issue bull and stag amendment quotation of nearly £64 billion. This exceeded last year's total by £17 billion and enabled the side to buy a controlling interest in Esso, Westinghouse and General Motors. The club lent a total of £11 billion to other counties, built four new stands and purchased a huge plastic dome to cover the car park in the event of rain. The team came bottom in every competition for the eleventh successive year.

Worcestershire

Heavy rain throughout the season meant that there were unusual problems at New Road. The river burst its banks in early April and didn't recede until the end of the season; this resulted in most of Worcestershire's matches being played under several inches of water. The problem was at its worst in July when the whole of the pitch was three feet beneath the surface level of the water. A Kent player who was bitten by a pike while fielding at short leg is apparently taking legal action against the club. The practise nets were, as usual, perfect.

Yorkshire

A few minor personality clashes meant that the captaincy changed hands several times in Yorkshire. By May, every member of the playing staff had had a hand at leading the side, so the committee decided to introduce some fresh blood. For the month of June the captaincy was given to one of the scorecard sellers. In July it was entrusted to the Deputy Assistant Head Groundsman's Secretary. Disappointingly, however, these imaginative changes produced less than impressive results, so in August Lord Hawke was disinterred and given the job for the remainder of the season.

The Yorkshire committee itself had to face some problems too. Traditionally, meetings have been held at Harrogate and Bradford as well as at Leeds but at the end of last season it was decided that no more meetings would be held at Harrogate because of the lack of suitable facilities adjoining the committee room there. This decision caused quite an uproar among the members of the committee — particularly those living in Harrogate. As a result of the confusion caused by this uproar a proposal to hold fewer meetings but to make them last for four days instead of three days had to be shelved.

ADVANCES IN TECHNOLOGY

A Winsden Special Review

At one time all you needed to play cricket was a bat, a ball and a handful of stumps. Over the years, though, cricket has become a far more complicated game. In an attempt to keep readers of *Thomas Winsden's Cricketing Almanack* up to date we have compiled a short directory to some of the seasons more startling innovations.

The Magic Moisture Meter

You may have seen a simple, primitive version of this instrument in use on television. Today's new Magic Moisture Meter is a piece of technological wizardry. All the user has to do is insert a series of one hundred and twenty one-inch diameter probes into the pitch on a good length. The probes will then automatically measure the amount of water in the soil and give an instant reading on the Hi-Tech Joule Dial. This device is a must for all cricket captains, groundsmen, commentators and TV personalities who feel a burning need to look as though they know what they are talking about.

The Whimple Grass Acceleration Rate Assessment Tool

Consisting of two simple, photoelectric cells powered by solar energy, the Whimple measures the rate at which grass grows. This sort of information is vital in helping the captain decide just how much grass is likely to be present on the pitch by the end of the day.

Player's Comfort-Aid

If you've ever been concerned about just how much fluid cricketers lose on a hot day and how much they need to drink in order to replace it, then you'll be pleased to hear about the Player's Comfort-Aid. Designed by a former cricketer who once suffered a dry mouth for thirty-five minutes after an unprecedented fluid loss, the Players' Comfort-Aid measures skin galvanometry, atmospheric humidity and barometric incidence. A print-out facility ensures that the cricketer or his hydrotherapist can tell at once how low his fluid reserves are getting — and precisely when they'll need topping up. With the Player's Comfort-Aid station drinks intervals need never be arbitrary again.

Ball Speed Assessor

This simple pocket device is just the thing for fielders. Before a match you programme in your peak acceleration rate and constant running speed. Then, when playing, you simply point the Assessor's radar beam at the ball as it leaves the bat. You must hold the ball in focus for a full two seconds.

Within an instant, the Ball Speed Assessor will tell you whether you can catch the ball or whether you might just as well let it go to the boundary where it will be fielded by a small boy.

The Batsman's Friend

Although still in the experimental stages this device could revolutionize cricket. A small computer-controlled ‘magic eye’ is fitted into the batsman’s helmet and designed to follow the ball as it leaves the bowler’s hand. The magic eye measures pace, spin and swing as well as instantly estimating the flight, direction and pitch-point of the ball. Next, a micro-transmitter, also in the helmet, sends an appropriate signal to a receiver situated in the base of the bat handle. A minute, nuclear powered motor ensures that the appropriate response is made. All the batsman has to do is wear the helmet and hold the bat. One coach has already pointed out that this may be asking too much of today’s batsmen and an attempt is being made to reduce the batsman’s involvement still further.

Umpire’s Instant Aid

Television viewers have for some time had a chance to watch ‘instant replays’ when close decisions have to be made by umpires. Now, thanks to Olive St Clair, umpires will be able to watch these replays too.

A miniature television camera together with an equally small receiver ensures that the umpire can get the benefit of an instant replay even when no television company is covering the match. With the Umpire’s Instant Aid, controversy should soon be a thing of the past. Unfortunately, its introduction has been delayed by controversy.

The Cricketer’s Miniature Calculator

One-day cricket has made scoring infinitely more complicated. A match can often hinge on whether or not one side bowls the most overs, concedes the least runs or drinks the greatest quantity of lemon squash during the tea interval. This specially designed calculator is intended to help both batsmen and fielders decide on the best form of action to take. If you’ve ever wondered whether you should simply try to block the last ball or attempt to hit it out of the ground then this is the device for you. The Cricketer’s Miniature Calculator can easily be fixed to the side of a bat handle or concealed in the peak of a cap.

The Cricket Bat Strength Gauge

Have you ever wondered whether your bat can take much more punishment? Have you ever asked yourself whether it will crack at a critical moment? Well, it’s now possible to answer such questions with the aid of the Cricket Bat Strength Gauge. All you do is saw your favourite bat into eight separate pieces and feed them — one by one — into the gauge. The meter reading will then tell you just how strong your bat was and just how long it would have lasted.

Cricketers Swap Shirts

Cricketers seem to be picking up bad habits from footballers. At the end of a Lancashire League match last season the players in the two sides exchanged shirts as they left the field. A spokesperson for the Women’s Cricket Association said she thought it unlikely that women cricketers would pick up the habit, although she did admit that one team had been approached by Playertex who suggested that they might be prepared to sponsor such an activity.

THE FIRST TEST AT PERTH

A special match report from our war reporter E. Hemingway

Right from the beginning this looked like being a rather special match. A trivial argument with the taxi driver who had taken me to the ground, and who then demanded the price of a new cab for his efforts, attracted the unwelcome attentions of a boisterous group of Eski-haulers who decided to offer a considerable amount of inconsequential advice to both the driver and myself. Within minutes, a previously peaceful discussion had become heated and angry. As a result the police and local ambulance service were soon busily loading would-be spectators into police vans and ambulances. A total of fourteen were wounded seriously enough to need hospital attention. An additional twenty-seven were arrested.

The arrival of the two captains on the field for the toss was the signal for a fresh outbreak of hostilities. A group of hod-carriers at third man discovered a spectator in their midst reading a copy of the *Guardian* and sensibly decided to hurl empty beer cans at his head until he agreed to behave more reasonably. Unfortunately, one of the cans missed the Englishman’s head and landed in the middle of a crowd of clam-pickers from Tasmania. Ten minutes later the two teams were on the field, but twenty-three hod-carriers and clam-pickers were in hospital while a further forty-seven were helping the police with their enquiries.

As England began their innings, the spectators settled down to a good day’s drinking. For the best part of ten minutes, you could hear nothing but the snap, crackle and pop of ring-pulls being separated from beer cans — a sound only occasionally punctuated by the thud of willow on leather as one or another of the Englishmen accidentally hammered boot with bat.

The calm was destroyed when an ambitious clod in the outer tried to ream both his nostrils at once. A beer-heavy dingo passing by was deeply insulted by the gesture and seconds later the police were playing xylophone music on half a hundred wooden tops. The final result was thirty-three more in hospital and fifty-nine extra prison cells filled.

Nothing much happened after that until the lunch interval, a time when Australian spectators traditionally throw quantities of food into the lake of beer filling their stomachs. Given that the average spectator's muscular co-ordination will have been adversely affected by alcoholic imbibition the task of successfully transferring a chicken leg from cooler to stomach often presents almost insurmountable problems.

In the event it was not a chicken leg that caused the next dramatic interlude in the day's proceedings, but a cheese roll which escaped from its owner's grasp, rolled down a grassy bank and knocked over a half-full can of Fosters. Now, there are few things likely to enrage an Australian more than knocking over his Fosters when the first froth of the can is still fresh on his lip. The incident resulted in another sixty-eight spectators being taken from the ground and provided with alternative accommodation either at the local hospital or the nearest police station.

So far, none of the fighting had taken place without some sort of a reason. After lunch, however, the majority of those at the match had had so much to drink that almost anything was likely to trigger off an angry response. It seems possible, for example, that the brawl which started in the Press Tent, spread into the committee rooms, caused chaos in the pavilion and eventually engulfed the ground, began entirely as a result of a harmless misunderstanding.

Whatever the truth may be about the evolution of the incident, the fighting spread around the ground like herpes on a private beach. To begin with missiles consisted of nothing more dangerous than empty beer cans, chicken bones and plastic cutlery. Within five or ten minutes, however, the air was heavy with full 440 ml. beer cans, travelling at between 80 and 90 mph and traversing the entire breadth of the ground! Peaceful spectators, sitting in quiet comers, soon found themselves under fire from people they couldn't even see.

It is difficult to estimate just how many cans were in the air at any one time but I myself saw one enthusiast hurling cans at the rate of fifteen a minute and a colleague claims that he witnessed a record-breaking rate of twenty-two per minute.

By this time, of course, the players were lying down on the pitch to reduce the risk of being hit by a hail of aluminium. Attempts by one or two players to leave the field failed; in fact, one Australian was felled and seriously injured as he made for the safety of the team's underground dugout.

At the end of the day, when the police scorers added up their totals it seemed that a total of nine hundred and thirty-two spectators had been arrested and a hundred and ninety-three had been taken to hospital. These figures meant that the police, with none arrested and only a hundred and thirty-two taken to hospital, were comfortable winners.

Editor's note

Our fearless war reporter was killed in the fighting which took place on the second day of the Test Match at Perth. As a veteran of riots and disruptions in India, Pakistan, Barbados and Taunton, Eddie Hemingway knew very well what risks he was taking by writing about cricket. He chose to do so, however, in the knowledge that his courage and skill gave solace to millions of faithful readers. We send our condolences to his families in Durban, Melbourne, Manchester, Karachi and Jamaica.

WOMEN'S CRICKET COMES OF AGE

When the Shropshire Lasses XI (sponsored by Nusmear Petroleum Jelly) was invited to take part in the 1982 Angipax Drugs One Day Trophy Competition, history was made. Although women have been playing cricket for many decades, this was the first time that a women-only team had been invited to play in a competition which also involved the other first class teams.

To celebrate this important occasion we have decided to include pen portraits of the eleven members of the Shropshire Lasses XI (sponsored by Nusmear Petroleum Jelly) in this edition of the Almanack.

Shropshire Lasses XI (Sponsored by Nusmear Petroleum Jelly)

1. Alice von Daniken (capt)

Alice learned her cricket with the help of her four older brothers. As a result of this early training she is an excellent outfielder. Hampered in her throwing by an over-developed chest, which she does her best to disguise with a Playertex Extra Strength Protector, Alice leads her players from the front. Although her bowling is perhaps best described as variable Alice often confuses opposition batspersons with her slow medium long hops.

2. Heather Hamilton (vice capt)

Included in the side as an opening batsperson, Heather has based her style on players such as ‘Slasher’ McKay, Terry Braille and Christine Travery. Aware of her responsibilities to her side, however, she has tried to treat the game rather more seriously than those three individuals. Together with the now deceased Jacqui Kenneally, Heather once enjoyed an opening partnership which resulted in her side declaring after three days with a score of 37 for no wickets.

3. Gayle Honeybun

Gayle comes from a very religious family and has an unnerving habit of kissing the crease every time she goes out to bat. Her ritual seems to pay dividends, however, since Gayle topped the batting averages last season with an aggregate of 109 runs and an average of 7.6.

4. Selina Forsyte

Daughter of a former Conservative Party spokesman on Affairs, Selina has endeared herself to fellow players, spectators and umpires during her first full season. She prefers a short cricket skirt to the unisex slacks favoured by many of the other women players. Underneath the skirt she usually wears Teddy Trilling pantiettes and an Arrowsmith Safety Manhole Cover. Selina also pioneered the wearing of the now popular diaphanous cricket blouse. She is learning to throw overarm.

5. Maggie Thackeray

The oldest member of the side, Maggie used to be captain until a political upheaval left her out in the cold. After a three year absence from the team she has now won back her place after showing her true form in a series of unusual colour photographs published by one of Kerry Murdock’s cricketing magazines.

6. Sheila Williams

Unlike Selina Forsyte, Sheila never worries about her appearance and will often go out to bat wearing old gardening clothes. She is a forceful batsperson who always makes her presence felt except on those occasions when she arrives at the wicket too late and is given out by default.

7. Julie Halter

Although she has an unfortunate habit of giggling during moments of great tension, Julie is a respected member of the side. She only recently joined the Shropshire Lasses XI (sponsored by Nusmear Petroleum Jelly) after moving from the London based Vauxhall Virgins Team (sponsored by the Rubber Foundation). Julie has a reputation for catching anything that comes her way. Wicket keeper.

8. Pansy Partridge

For four years George Partridge played for the Wykham Wanderers cricket team. It was only when he started to run with his arms flailing and his toes turned in that his team mates guessed he was changing sex. Now George, or Pansy as he is known, is a valuable member of the Shropshire Lasses XI (sponsored by Nusmear Petroleum Jelly). Her habit of eating at least three pounds of raw carrot each day makes her a particularly useful batsperson to send in when the light is bad.

9. Barbara Whitehouse

Animal lover, TV pundit and magazine publisher, Barbara Whitehouse still finds time to play cricket once or twice a week. She readily admits that her main value to the team is her ability to remove stains from all sorts of clothing. Grass and red leather stains are her speciality, but few blemishes have been known to resist the Whitehouse Method.

10. Suzie Barr

Tiny, small, petite and not very big at all, Suzie Barr has plenty of enthusiasm to make up for her lack of size. Although she still has much to learn about bowling, batting and fielding her skills are much admired.

11. Fiona Fulsome

No one has done more for women’s cricket than the delectable Fiona Fulsome. She played her first serious game of cricket for the Snowdrop Girls Second XI of the All Paris Women’s Cricket Championships in 1944. She was a member of the Saudi Arabia Mixed Team that toured Israel in 1956 and she was vice captain on the Brazilian tour of Mexico in 1980. Her knowledge of the game is vast and although her deafness makes running between the wickets a hazardous procedure for her partners, she remains well worth her place in the side.

FIVE CRICKETERS OF THE YEAR

Selected by the Thomas Winsden's Cricketing Almanack Editorial Staff

Albert Norman Other (1865-)

For over a century Albert Norman Other has played an important part in cricket matches all around the world. It is impossible to estimate exactly the number of matches he has been involved in during his career, but provisional estimates suggest that during the season which has just ended Albert Norman Other played in at least seven thousand, three hundred and ninety-five. We decided that in appreciation of his steady service to cricket we should place A.N. Other among our five cricketers of the year.

One of the things that has made Albert Norman Other such a noteworthy cricketer has been his ability to vary his style of play to suit the demands of the circumstances. On some occasions, for example, he has startled spectators and other players by the sheer animal force and brute strength of his play.

Never was this aspect of his cricket more noticeable than during last winter when he played in Durban for a local club XI. When Other came in to bat, with eight wickets down and just 43 runs on the board, the prospects looked gloomy for his side. For Albert Norman, however, the challenge was not one to be refused. He immediately set about the bowling with a frightening ferocity. The stroke with which he won the match was, for many of those present, quite unforgettable.

With sparkling footwork, Other drove the ball straight at mid-on who bravely attempted a head high catch. Unfortunately the ball was travelling so fast that it was not so easily stopped. Instead of taking a catch, the hapless fielder found himself being propelled at some 85 mph towards the boundary. When a second or two later, ball and fielder crossed the boundary rope and disappeared into the crowd, the ball was still travelling at head height. It was a six that no one genuinely interested in cricket would have wanted to miss.

On other occasions Albert Norman Other's play has been patchy, to say the least. Take, for example, his performance in another match which took place on the same day several thousand miles away in Sydney, Australia. Other was bowling on an artificial concrete wicket when he delivered a ball so wide that it bounced off the edge of the pitch and disappeared over the head of Third Man. The umpire had no option but to signal six wides.

It would be inappropriate to list the singular achievements of Albert Norman Other without mentioning his remarkable ability to be involved in many different matches at the same time. As an example of his unique skills it should be pointed out that, according to the record books, a ball struck by Other in Kingston, Jamaica was caught at Trent Bridge some three months later by himself! It might be said that no one has done more than Albert Norman Other to bring cricketers around the world closer together.

Wilhelm Blunderbuss KGB, MP, PhD (1932-82)

Few men have ever matched the achievements of Wilhelm Blunderbuss. At the age of 18 he had acquired a double first in English and Pure Physics at Oxford and at Cambridge respectively. At nineteen he ran for his country in the Olympics, winning a gold medal in the 1500 metres and a silver medal in the marathon. He would have taken the gold medal in the marathon if he hadn’t stopped on the way to help a small boy who was trapped in a mine shaft.

In his twentieth year Blunderbuss acquired a PhD in Modern Languages and wrote the two slim volumes of poetry which won him a nomination for the Nobel Prize. He played football for England at centre forward, was middleweight boxing champion of Europe and was elected a Member of Parliament at the age of twenty-two.

On his twenty-fourth birthday, Blunderbuss resigned from the post of Foreign Secretary on a matter of principle. In the same year he made a fortune by bringing aid to underdeveloped countries. For that he was awarded the Nobel Prize for peace at about the same time as his first musical was performed on Broadway.

He added the Wimbledon Tennis Championship to his rowing blue and his Open Golf Championship before he was thirty. Not long afterwards, he married Miss World and wrote his bestselling novel about Russian prison camps.

For some men, these achievements would have been enough; for Blunderbuss they were unmemorable events in a life of disappointment. His real ambition remained unfulfilled. From an early age Blunderbuss had wanted nothing more than to score 1000 runs during one cricket season.

Wealth, power, the cheers of the crowd at Wembley, Twickenham and St Andrews, the accolades from the international literary establishment, the contracts pouring in from Hollywood film producers begging for his talents as an actor and director, his hit records and his successes in the Cheltenham Gold Cup, the Derby and the Grand National, were all as nothing to Blunderbuss.

Last year, knowing the nature of the yearning which blazed in Blunderbuss’s heart, some of his dearest friends decided to try to help the great man achieve his ambition. Although he was in his fiftieth year, he was still fit and strong and they had little difficulty in persuading a local village side to give him a place as an opening batsman. It was decided that Blunderbuss should open each innings — thereby gaining the greatest possible opportunity of reaching his target.

The season began badly. Although it was his greatest love, cricket was Blunderbuss’s Achilles’ heel. He had great difficulty in keeping bat and pad together, he never managed to time the ball properly and when he did manage to connect, he invariably hit the ball straight to a fielder.

Despite his natural shortcomings, Blunderbuss did manage to score *sometimes.* By mid-August he had accumulated 853 runs and he looked all set to reach that magic 1000. He didn’t much mind what his final average was — the golden aggregate was important. Then he hit a bad patch.

He was dismissed for 0,2,0,1,0,3,0,0,4,0 and 1 in successive innings before the season ended. Blunderbuss had missed his target by a tantalising 136 runs. He was heartbroken.

His friends, however, were not inclined to give up so easily. They arranged three more matches in September. In the first, Blunderbuss managed to accumulate 23 runs. In the second he scored a disappointing 3 and in the third he scored 17. He now needed less than 100 runs.

In the matches which were arranged for October, Blunderbuss scored a total of 45 runs. In the four matches that took place in November, he put together another 28. This meant that by December Blunderbuss needed only 20 runs to reach his 1000. And then it started to snow.

With the target a mere 20 runs away, Blunderbuss's friends were not going to be stopped by a few snowflakes! They told him that the team had been invited to play in a couple of special Christmas matches and assured him that this was all part of a normal season. Throughout September, October and November Blunderbuss had happily accepted that the cricket season continued for as long as the weather remained reasonable. To persuade him that matches played in the snow were a normal part of the season's activities took some ingenuity, but with the aid of a specially-printed copy of *Thomas Winsden's Cricketing Almanack* (in which we were pleased and proud to print details of matches played in snow the previous December) Blunderbuss was finally convinced.

And so it was that on December 31st, after a foot and a half of snow had been brushed away from the batting crease and the spot where a well-pitched ball would land swept clean, Blunderbuss scored the final few runs which took him to his target. Unhappily, the occasion wasn't quite perfect.

Overcome by cold and excitement, Wilhelm Blunderbuss died at the very moment when an overenthusiastic return from a clumsy fielder gave him the runs he needed for his total. He never knew that he'd achieved his final ambition.

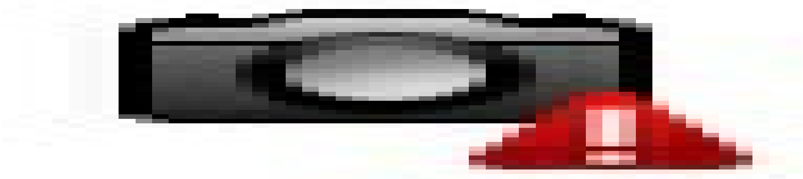

Reg T.K. Ganter (1933-)

When Reg Ganter edged a single to third man in the final match of his team's fixture list, the reaction of the crowd came close to hysteria — they knew that Ganter had just become the first Australian in living memory to score a thousand runs in a season without once hitting the ball in the middle of the bat.

Known to friends and enemies alike as 'the luckiest cricketer in the world', Ganter delights his fellow team members, but confounds his critics and opponents, by continuing to collect runs and wickets without ever really showing any signs of knowing what he is doing or understanding the fundamental principles of the game.

For several years now his most successful scoring stroke has been the edged drive, which sends a snick flying over the heads of the slips. Ganter himself will readily admit, however, that the stroke he plays best is the one in which he closes his eyes, puts his left leg firmly down the pitch, swings across the line and then simply runs up and down the wicket until his batting partner suggests that valour give way to discretion.

If Ganter is lucky as a batsman, however, he seems to possess almost supernatural good fortune when bowling. Cricket statistician Ernest Briggs (whose study of Ganter's career accompanies this short biography) claims that Ganter's striking-rate is probably greater than that of any other bowler, living or dead.

If any batsman facing one of Ganter's modest medium-pace deliveries is hit on the pads it seems he is invariably given out lbw. If he hits the ball with his bat then he will almost certainly be caught since the ball always carries directly to a fielder. If a batsman attempts to hit a Ganter delivery for six then in all probability his hat will fall off and dislodge his bails. If two batsmen decide to risk taking runs off Ganter then you can be sure that at least one of them will be run out. Batsmen who have spent hours parrying fierce and frightening deliveries from genuinely fast bowlers will succumb to Ganter's modest and apparently harmless deliveries; batsmen who have failed to be impressed by the efforts of the world's top class spinners always appear completely bamboozled by Ganter's ordinary efforts.

As a fielder Ganter has more than his fair share of luck. As a captain he has learnt to rely on winning the toss and being blessed by the weather. As a cricketer he is a man with severely limited talents but unlimited good fortune. He well deserves his place as one of our five cricketers of the year.

Nelson Plunge (1927-)

When the editors and cricket advisers here at *Thomas Winsden's Cricketing Almanack* were considering candidates for this feature, one name kept recurring: that of Nelson Plunge, for twenty-five years a mainstay of the Crown and Anchor team in the village of Wyre Puddle.

It would be wrong to pretend that Plunge could have been a candidate for international honours. Equally, it would be unrealistic to suggest that he was unlucky not to play for his county side and inaccurate to say that he deserved his place in the Crown and Anchor team.

Whatever criticisms one might make of Plunge's cricketing skills, however, his value as a team member and cricket enthusiast could not be over-emphasised. When the nettles on the boundary edge became a threat, it was

Plunge who trimmed them. When the pitch needed rolling it was Plunge who found the roller, oiled it and undertook the task. When the grass had to be cut it was Plunge who came to the rescue — regardless of the fact that the lead on his Hovermower reached only half-way to the wicket. When the crease marks wore off halfway through the season, it was Plunge who found some more pump-whitener to freshen them.

If an umpire didn't turn up, Plunge it was who would don a white coat and officiate, selflessly ignoring his allegiance to the Crown and Anchor team and bravely forgetting his almost total ignorance of the laws of cricket.

When one of the team's stumps was broken in 1957, who made a replacement out of a chair leg? Plunge. When the bails were lost during the horseplay which followed a rare victory in 1959 it was Plunge again, who made a spare set out of the remains of that very same chair. When the team's ball was lost in 1960 Plunge was the saviour once more; spending a day and a half knee deep in the local stream, he finally located a ball that had been lost there in 1958.

When the team went on tour to Cheshire and Devon in 1963, and only five members turned up to join the minibus, Plunge bravely took on the role of captain. He managed to recruit fresh players from the villages and clubs they had arranged to play and was so successful that when the minibus returned to the Crown and Anchor there were fourteen players in the party.

Nelson Plunge may not have set the world on fire with his cricketing skills, but he was, and is, a genuine afficianado, an archetypal cricket fan and a real friend to the game he loves so much. We congratulate him on his selection as one of our Cricketers of the Year.

Note from the Production Director.
Although this section is headed *Five Cricketers of the Year*, there was only copy for Four Cricketers of the Year. I take no responsibility for this. I made many attempts to telephone the editorial offices of the *Almanack*, but, as usual, there was no reply. Finally I could delay no longer because the book had to be printed and I'm putting in this note just to make it clear that it isn't my responsibility and I'm not taking any blame.

UMPIRES' AVERAGES FOR THE 1982 SEASON

Once again the umpires' averages make fascinating reading. Batsmen won't be surprised to see that Andy Turner and Nigel Mohr are both well down the list as far as dismissals per innings are concerned. For the fourteenth time in a career spanning fifteen seasons, Mohr dismissed an average of less than half a batsman per innings.

At the other end of the scale, 'Fingers' Kray's belligerence was once again in evidence. With a record-breaking average of 9.89 dismissals per innings, Kray is the umpire all batsmen hope to avoid. Many batsmen are waiting to see whether Kray's younger brother, joining the umpires list this year for the first time, will be as harsh.

'Fingers' Kray also tops the appeals/wicket table with a remarkable record of 1.003. In practical terms this means that every time a bowler appeals to umpire Kray he gets a wicket. Bottom of the table is Nigel Mohr again — this time with a differential of 8.65.

SANDWICH MAKERS’ AVERAGES

Yet again the sandwich makers’ table has been topped by an egg and cress specialist. It seems you just can’t beat egg and cress if you want good figures at the end of the season! Last year it was Mrs Knuttall who won the golden knife award. This year, Mrs Knuttall was out of the reckoning with a broken left wrist and Doris Pettifer took her chance with both hands. She cut and buttered for 36 matches, made a total of 1582 sandwiches and saw only 59 of them go to waste. With 1523 eaten she had an average of 42.3 sandwiches eaten per match. That’s nearly one and a half sandwiches more than the record Mrs Knuttall set in 1977.

Of the newcomers, Kathy Hawks — a cheese and tomato specialist — looked particularly promising. She’d never cut and buttered for a cricket team before but her work with her boyfriend’s XI won her fifth place on this year’s table of merit.

A word of commendation, too, for Nora Asquith, the only non-specialist in the top five to have been a sandwich maker for more than thirty years. Nora’s ham, cheese and tomato sandwiches have fed cricketers all around the world. Sadly, this is to be her last season. We wish her well.

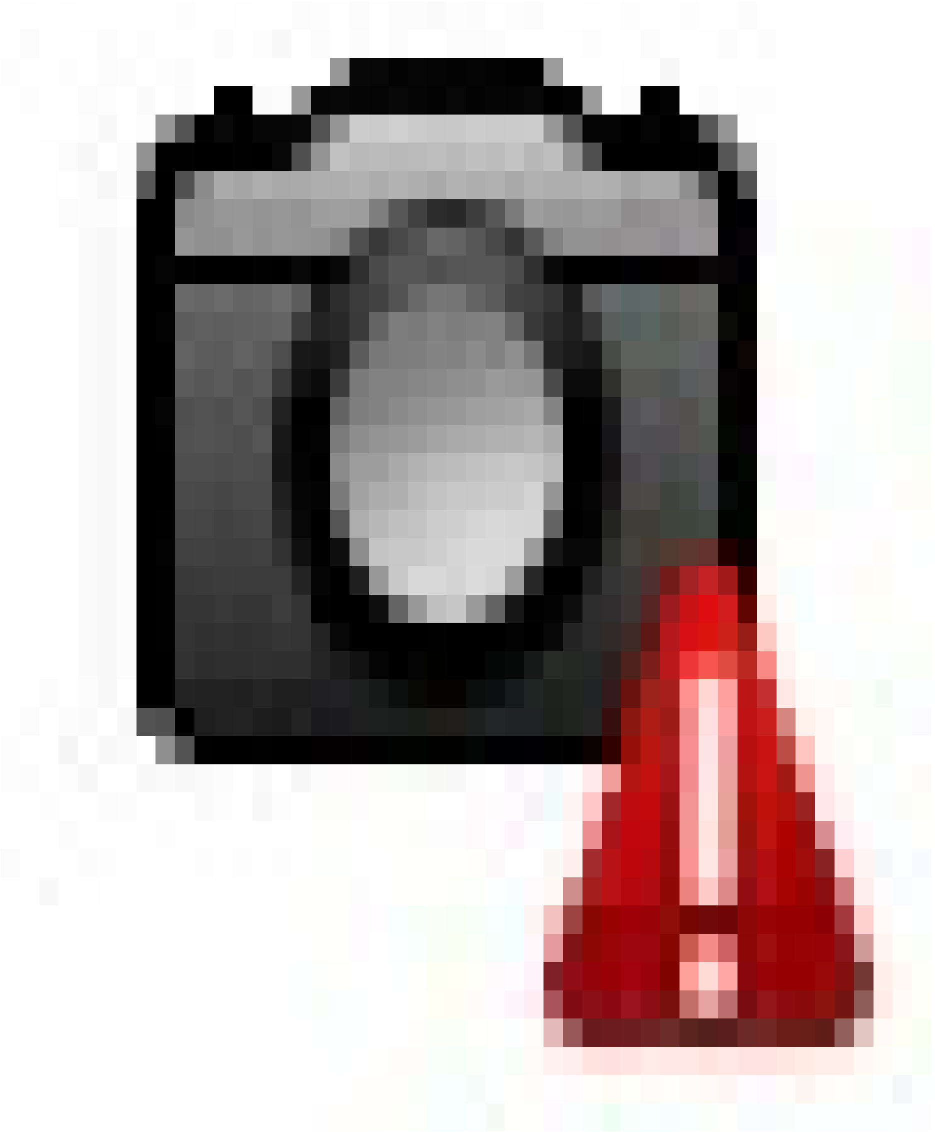

General features

THE INSTANT CRICKET CUP

This year a new competition will be launched in South Africa — specially designed to attract those who stay away from cricket matches because they dislike the notion of having to watch a game that lasts for half a day — or even longer.

Known as the Ninety Minute Cup, the new competition was devised by those brilliant minds that gave us television's popular game shows, *What's My Game*?, *Game for a Grin* and *The Ingratiation Game*.

Each side competing in the Cup will be allowed to bat for no more than eleven overs, with each batsman facing the whole of one six ball over. At the end of the eleven overs, the number of runs the eleven batsmen have scored will be known as the First Team's Total Number of Runs. The number of times that all the batsmen have been given out will also be added up and will represent the First Team's Total Number of Dismissals.

Working with the aid of a XZQ 5000 computer, a team of skilled and dedicated scientists will then work out the average number of runs that have been scored for each dismissal. The result will be known as the First Team's Average Score.

After a short break to give everyone time to recover from the excitement, the bowling side will then become the batting side and the batting side will become the bowling side. To make things less confusing for spectators, the batsmen will always wear blue while the bowlers will always wear green.

Each of the eleven overs must be bowled by a different member of the side but, once again, the scorers will add up the total number of runs per batsman and the total number of times that each batsman is dismissed. And, again, at the end of the innings, that marvellous XZQ 5000 computer and the team of scientists will work out the Second Team's Average Score. By then there will be no secret about the winner. It will be the side that has the highest Average Score.

Two more things to remember are that batsmen must hop between the wickets and that bowlers must deliver after a hop, step and jump run-up. All the leading cricket stars are said to be looking forward to the new competition.

USEFUL TIPS FOR WOMEN CRICKETERS

More and more women are taking to cricket, though many are new recruits and have never played before. Conscious of the needs of these players, we have prepared a series of basic hints for noviciates.

1. If you play in a skirt, do be careful when buckling your pads. It is all too easy to get a fold of skin caught in the buckle and disfiguring bruising can result.
2. Polishing the ball with lip gloss is considered to be unfair play.
3. Pregnant wicket keepers should stand well back from the stumps — particularly if the bowler is above medium pace. When keeping for a fast bowler, the pregnant wicket keeper should stand just inside the boundary rope.
4. If you're handy with a needle and thread, you'll be able to make your own pads. Do remember, however, that you may need to bat in the rain and make sure that they are constructed from a shrinkproof material.
5. Remember that some parts of the human body are more vulnerable than others. Toxteth's Little Nipple Guards are a must for all women playing cricket.
6. When you're batting you'll need to run between the wickets if either you or your partner manages to hit the ball. Practice running without flinging your arms out to the side. If you run like that when you've got a bat in your hand, you might cause injury to a slips or gully fielder.
7. Do remember that in any team there will usually be two or three players who are pre-menstrual. If a bowler bursts into tears because an appeal is turned down, or a batsperson returns to the pavilion in obvious distress, then do try to be sympathetic. A cuddle and a smile can work wonders.
8. Learn to bend at the knees when picking up a ball. This is particularly important if you're likely to be in the outfield. Some experienced women cricketers spend a little time at the start of each season practising looks of disdain.
9. In mixed cricket it is considered unsporting for a woman favouring a short skirt to wear stockings and suspenders. It's also bad form to have more than one blouse button undone.

10. Woolly bat-handles help to keep your hands warm; they look attractive too. Try to make sure that all the members of your team choose the same colour. Nothing looks worse than two batspersons with different coloured bat-handle covers! You can obtain a knitting pattern for a bat cover, ball cosy and stump sheath by writing to the *Thomas Winsden's Cricketing Almanack* offices. Please send a stamped, addressed envelope and details of your preferred needlesize.

Joker is wild

A practical joker changed the signs on the Beer Tent and the First Aid Tent at the Hastings Festival Match last year.

The 'joke' was only noticed at the end of the day, by which time two St. John's Ambulance men had examined and bandaged 17,593 spectators. Sixty thousand gallons of warm beer had to be thrown away.

Umpires

The first class umpires list for the coming season will include ex-Superintendent Richardson and ex-inspector Kray, both formerly of the Metropolitan Police Force (Traffic Division). Neither men have any previous experience of cricket or of umpiring but both have long arms, some knowledge of bumpers and have studied the effects of damp surfaces on velocity.

No-Noise Bat Banned

In June, the Test and Country Cricket Board announced that Arrowsmith's Noiseless Bat was to be banned from use in competitive cricket.

The bat, made from ordinary seasoned willow but coated with a special non-resinate polymer, had become extremely popular with batsmen because the special coating ensured that contact between bat and ball was completely silent.

During the three months that the bat was used in competitive cricket, the number of catches taken by wicket-keepers and slips had fallen by between 85% and 90%.

To effect the ban the games administrators invoked rule 79c which states 'The administrators may at any time and without warning change, alter, revoke, or expand any rule whether it already exists or not.'

ON BEING A CAPTAIN

In an attempt to help readers to learn the rudiments of captaincy quickly and painlessly, we spoke at some length to Mr Aubrey Beadsley who, during his years as captain of the Princetown XI impressed members, players and spectators with his understanding of the needs and expectations of his players. With Mr. Beadsley's help we have prepared the following short-list of tips for potential captains.

1. You must try to be consistent. Your players will feel cheated if you always insist on opening the batting when the opposition's bowling is weak, but prefer to bat at number 10 or 11 when the other team possesses a genuinely quick bowler. Your fellow players will be similarly discouraged if you bowl only when the opposition's batting is weak but always take yourself off when your own bowling attack is being torn apart.
2. Always win the toss. Even if you lose you should tell your players that you won. It is better that they think your decisions eccentric than that you are an unlucky captain.
3. Try to be tactful when offering advice to players. When one of your batsmen has been dismissed, wait at least five minutes before telling him what he did wrong and why his thoughtlessness has upset you.
4. Don't be tempted to rush about when your side is fielding. Your job is to stand at mid-on (or possibly mid-off) and try to keep an overall view of the game. If you're constantly chasing balls to the boundary, you'll get hot and sticky and won't be in a fit state to make important decisions.
5. Do offer encouragement to your players whenever you think it is appropriate. Don't be afraid to tell them that you're pleased when they do something particularly impressive. A quick burst of applause from the balcony or from mid-on will do nicely. You can add an extra ice cube to their drinks at the next interval if you like. Let them see you smile and if they do something really marvellous let them call you by your first name for the rest of the day.
6. Always be adaptable and ready to lend a helping hand. As captain you should be prepared to supervise the rolling of the wicket, the varnishing of the stumps, the finding of the ball and the preparation of the sandwiches. You should

also be available to offer consolation to the wives of your players if they are made lonely by the absences of their husbands during the season.

7. Players can sometimes be touchy, demanding, ungrateful, suspicious and sensitive. Some of the members of your team will resent your authority and be jealous of your status and success. Explain to them that if they are prepared to work hard, improve their standards of play and mature a little, then they too may one day achieve captaincy. They will be eternally grateful to you.

+++

International Club Cricket Conference gets the runaround!

In May last year the International Club Cricket Conference announced that bowlers in first-, second- and third-class cricket matches must, in future, limit themselves to a run up of twenty-five yards.

Unfortunately, the administrator who prepared the relevant legislation merely said that bowlers could not begin their run ups more than twenty-five yards away from the popping crease and within a month of the new rule's enforcement, many bowlers were running round in circles in order to build up extra speed. Batsmen, umpires and bowlers themselves found this confusing and disturbing. At least one bowler fell over on the way in to deliver the ball.

The International Club Cricket Conference will be meeting next June to discuss ways in which bowlers can be forced to approach the wicket in a straight line.

THE GREATEST TOURS No. 17: The Germans in France 1916

Only once have German cricketers toured France. Partly because of the unique nature of this tour, and partly because the tour took place in the summer of 1916, the visit has fascinated cricket researchers and historians for many years. Other events in Europe at that time tended to overshadow the tour and because sports editors were having to make do with severely reduced space, contemporary newspapers and periodicals included very few reports of the matches played.

During the last twelve months, however, investigating historians have come across diaries and old score books which give a more detailed picture of the tour than has ever been available.

The new evidence suggests that the German tourists were first invited to tour France in 1913, probably via Belgium. Despite suggestions from Berlin that they consider the possibility of cancelling at least part of the tour, the German cricketers insisted that the game came above such incidental hazards and inconveniences as might be posed by a mere war.

Some writers have expressed surprise that the tour should have gained approval from the French, but modern historians now believe that although many of those responsible did have grave misgivings about the wisdom of allowing the matches to be played, pressure was brought to bear from the overseas committee of the Marylebone Cricket Club. Few Governments can resist that sort of pressure.

A full account of the tour is contained in a new book entitled *The Germans in France in 1916*, written by R.T. Chere and published by Shoulderarms Press. The book contains a full statistical account of the tour and Shoulderarms Press have kindly given us permission to reproduce in *Thomas Winsden's Cricketing Almanack* the statistical summary with which the book ends.

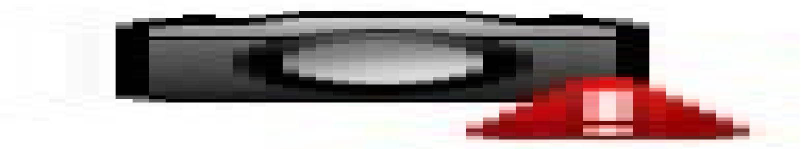

University Blues 1982

Several university players suffered from 'the blues' in 1982 but R. Russell Smith (reading neurocomputer sciences at Derby University) had more reason than most to suffer from depression.

In the friendly matches at the start of the season he scored more runs and took more wickets than any other player but, after spending the weekend in Amersham with the captain's girl friend, lost his place in the side. As a consequence, he suffered from 'the blues' all season.

GUIDELINES FOR COMFORTABLE SPECTATING

Many people attend cricket matches only rarely. As a result of their inexperience, they simply don't know what to take in the way of equipment, refreshment and so forth.

It's important to get this sort of paraphernalia right in order to avoid social embarrassment. In an attempt to help the less-knowledgeable visitor, Marylebone Cricket Club's tourist and spectator committee has published a series of guidelines for 'comfortable spectating'. With their permission we reproduce these suggestions here.

For spectating in public enclosures

A bright red or yellow anorak with a hood attached.

If you want to wear a sun hat, then take a floppy, white one. If you forget your hat you can usually obtain a rather nice cardboard eyeshade from one of the sponsors' tents.

A blue ballpoint pen for filling in your score-card. (You will have to purchase your score-card when you arrive at the ground. These are very cheap and good value.) Twelve cans of beer, held together with strips of plastic for easier carrying.

A cheese sandwich wrapped in greaseproof paper and carried in a plastic box.

A small thermos flask filled with coffee that you have milked and sugared to your taste.

An apple. (This can be placed in the plastic box together with your cheese sandwich).

A radio to enable you and your friends to listen to the commentary and find out what is going on.

Money in case your supply of beer runs out.

For spectators in private or members' enclosures

A golf umbrella or an umbrella in the MCC colours.

A pair of sunglasses (the sort that react to light not the polarised kind).

A slim gold propelling pencil for filling in your score card.

A pair of binoculars with several torn tickets attached to the neck strap. These tickets should have been obtained at Ascot, Flemington or Cheltenham.

A small pocket-sized radio which is fitted with an ear piece. This will enable you to listen to the commentary and find out what is going on without your neighbours knowing what you're doing. Because the commentators have access to TV replay facilities, you will be able to impress those around you by saying things like, 'I rather think that was lbw not caught behind. I think you'll find that the scorers will catch on in a minute or two.' or 'The scorers are a little slow today. They've given batsman number 3 one run too many. Probably because poor old Joe isn't here. I bet they'll be glad when his rheumatism gets better.' If you use the earpiece ploy, do remember to pretend to be deaf when talking to people.

A small blow up cushion. (Made of canvas, not plastic). A copy of *Thomas Winsden's Cricketing Almanack* which should be battered and covered with lots of tiny, indecipherable scribbling.

A daily newspaper folded open at the crossword page. The crossword should always be half-completed, though it doesn't matter too much whether or not you have answered the clues correctly.

A wicker covered ice-box which contains the following items:

1. Six quails eggs. (Not necessarily from six quails).
2. Half a French loaf. Small brown loaf. One pound of English butter.
3. Four sorts of cheese — each in a little wooden box. Must include Stilton.
4. A large thermos flask filled with asparagus soup.
5. A bowl, two plates, a cup and saucer and a large collection of silver cutlery. The crockery should all be plain white china.
6. Three long stemmed wine glasses. (Cut glass is not acceptable).
7. A small tub of caviar.
8. Three varieties of paté, each wrapped in a white linen napkin.
9. A large red and white checked napkin for yourself.
10. Twelve oysters packed in an individual ice box, with fresh lemon.
11. Two chicken legs.
12. Two varieties of German sausage.
13. An assortment of cold meats (pork, lamb, beef and tongue but *not* ham).
14. A meringue.
15. A punnet of strawberries with the little green bits still attached.
16. A pot of fresh Devon cream. (It *must* be from Devon).
17. A bottle of good, but not ostentatious, Champagne.
18. A bottle of Chablis.

19. A bottle of St. Émilion.
20. A bottle of port. 1945 is an acceptable year for this sort of occasion.

The contents described above should be suitable for one spectator. For more spectators, multiply accordingly.

The clap made easy — a lesson in simple spectating

On our visits to cricket grounds last summer we were surprised to find that many spectators still don't know how to clap properly. We have, therefore, prepared a simple guide to this essential spectatorly attribute.

1. Never attempt to clap if you have a glass in one or in both hands. It is considered quite acceptable to restrict yourself to murmurs of 'Good shot' or 'Well played' under the circumstances.
2. If you are uncertain about when to clap, keep an eye on the pavilion and follow the lead of the old men sitting near the players' entrance. They tend to be fairly sparing with their applause because arthritis makes every movement a battle between pleasure and pain; even so it's much better to clap too little than too much.
3. Begin every burst of clapping with a few tentative, token movements. You can always build up to a crescendo if everyone else is applauding heartily but it can be difficult to retain credibility if you appear invariably over-enthusiastic.
4. If you have had too much to drink, keep your elbows tucked into your sides. This will help ensure that your hands actually meet in mid-movement.
5. Remember that it is easier to clap in the vertical plane than in the horizontal. If you suffer from a disease that affects your ability to coordinate muscle movements, then you will find clapping much easier if you leave one hand resting on your lap, palm upwards, and move the other hand gently up and down in a vertical plane.
6. If you find all forms of two-handed clapping impossible to master, then try tapping one hand on your thigh. This is a technique often favoured by the elderly, the infirm and the totally inebriated.
7. Don't stand up when clapping unless you are completely sober.

ETIQUETTE FOR SPECTATORS

The Marylebone Cricket Club, the Durban & Natal Cricketing Board and the National Playing Fields Association have joined together to produce a charter for spectators. Its rules are designed to ensure that certain standards of behaviour are met.

1. Spectators intending to strip to the waist must pass a 'Fitness for vision' test. The gatemen at each ground will have authority to refuse 'Fitness for vision' certificates to those individuals whom they consider physically unattractive. In general, male spectators will not be allowed to strip to the waist unless they have chest measurements which exceed their waist measurements. Female spectators will not be allowed to strip if their chest measurements are greater than 38 inches (or 36 inches if they intend to stand up and wave their arms about).
2. No spectator shall throw a beer or cola can in the direction of a player or other spectator unless he has first made sure that the can is empty. Each spectator will have the responsibility for ensuring that the cans he throws have been properly emptied.
3. Spectators intending to make a noise by banging two cans together shall observe a five minute silence in every twenty minutes. There will be at least thirty minutes silence during every session of play.
4. Any spectator who runs onto the pitch will return directly to his seat after patting on the back a maximum of two players. He will allow himself to be quietly arrested and will take his punishment like a man. (Or woman as the case may be).
5. Spectators sitting or standing near the boundary edge will take care at all times to not cover or partially cover advertising hoardings.
6. Similarly, spectators carrying or waving banners or flags will make sure that they do not cover up any advertising matter.
7. Any spectator sitting or standing near a television camera will confine his idiotic waving and grinning to times when nothing much is happening.
8. Spectators intending to streak will consult first with the ground authorities in order to ensure that they choose an appropriate moment. No more than two streakers will be allowed in any one day's play and streakers must make written application for permission to appear on the field. Applications should be accompanied by photographs taken from all angles. (In the case of female streakers these photographs should be in colour).
9. Spectators shouting advice or rude comments to the players shall do so loudly and clearly.

10. Spectators running onto the pitch at the end of a match will be restricted to taking no more than one stump or one bail.
11. Spectators should not ask for autographs while the bowler is running up to the wicket. Batsmen should not be asked for autographs until they have completed their strokes.

Cricket in Argentina 1982-3
For the 132nd consecutive year there was no cricket in Argentina.

FOOD AND DRINK FOR THE CRICKETER

More and more cricketers are eating and drinking these days. In order to help those with little experience of catering we have included some simple advice in this edition of *Thomas Winsden's Cricketing Almanack.*

How to make a drink of orange squash (for one cricketer)
Find a glass
Buy a bottle of orange squash
Find a tap
Put a splash of orange squash into the bottom of the glass (you will have to experiment to find the right amount)
Fill the glass with water
That's all there is to it! Good luck!

How to make a drink of orange squash (lots of cricketers)
Find lots of glasses
Buy one (or perhaps two) bottles of orange squash Find a tap
Put a splash of orange squash into the bottom of each glass
Fill each glass with water.
That's all there is to it! Good luck!

How to make a drink of lemon squash (for one cricketer)
Find a glass
Buy a bottle of lemon squash
Find a tap
Put a splash of lemon squash into the bottom of the glass (you will have to experiment to find the right amount)
Fill the glass with water
That's all there is to it! Good luck!

How to make a drink of lemon squash (lots of cricketers)
Find lots of glasses
Buy one (or perhaps two) bottles of lemon squash
Find a tap
Put a splash of lemon squash into the bottom of each glass
Fill the glasses with water That's all there is to it! Good luck!

How to make a drink of mixed orange and lemon squash (for one cricketer)
Find a glass
Buy a bottle of orange squash and one bottle of lemon squash
Find a tap
Put half a splash of orange squash into the bottom of the glass
Put half a splash of lemon squash into the bottom of the glass
Fill the glass with water
That's all there is to it! Good luck!

How to make a drink of mixed orange and lemon squash (lots of cricketers)
Find lots of glasses
Buy one (or perhaps two) bottles of orange squash and one (or perhaps two) bottles of lemon squash

Find a tap
Put half a splash of orange squash into the bottom of each glass
Put half a splash of lemon squash into the bottom of each glass
Fill the glasses with water That's all there is to it! Good luck!

How to make a cheese sandwich

Buy a loaf of sliced bread (from a bakery)
Buy a tub of margarine (easier to spread than butter — ask at the bakery where you can buy some of this)
Buy a hunk of ordinary cheese (cricketers don't like funny French or Swiss cheeses — ask at the place where you bought the margarine where you can buy cheese)
Find a knife
Cut the cheese up with the knife. The slices should be fairly thin. About this thin
Put one piece of bread onto something flat
Smear margarine onto the bread
Put slices of cheese onto the bread until you can't see it (the bread that is)
Put another slice of bread on top of the cheese
Serve on a plate.

How to make a cheese and tomato sandwich (this is not recommended for beginners)

Buy a loaf of sliced bread
Buy a tub of margarine
Buy a hunk of ordinary cheese
Buy a tomato
Find a knife
Cut the cheese up with the knife
Put one piece of bread on something flat
Smear margarine onto the bread
Put slices of cheese onto the bread until you cannot see it
Now place the tomato on top of the cheese
Quickly put another slice of bread on top of the tomato on top of the cheese
Press down very hard
Serve on a plate.

Making a cup of coffee

Buy a jar of 'instant' coffee
Find a spoon
Find a cup or mug
Find a kettle
Find a tap
Find a heat source (gas, electricity or lots of candles)
Put a spoonful of coffee into the cup or mug
Fill the kettle with water from the tap
Heat the kettle (the water will get hot automatically)
When the kettle is very hot pour some of the water into the cup
You now have a cup of black coffee
If you want a cup of white coffee you must find some milk. You must then pour some of the milk into the coffee so that it goes brown. (White coffee is actually brown, not white)
If you want sugar in your coffee you must also find some sugar and a teaspoon
Scoop up one (or two, or three) spoonfuls of sugar and put them into the coffee
Stir until the sugar has dissolved
It is much easier to drink it black and unsweetened.

Making a cup of tea

Buy a tea bag
Find a cup or mug
Find a kettle Find a tap

Find a heat source (gas, electricity or lots of candles)
Put the tea bag into the cup or mug
Heat the kettle
When the kettle is very hot pour some of the water into the cup
Wait a minute or two
Now take the tea bag out of the cup or mug
If you want milk in your tea you must borrow some
Find a person who has made white coffee and borrow milk from him
He may be able to lend you sugar (if you want sugar in your tea) and a teaspoon. Scoop up one (or two, or three) spoonfuls of sugar and put them into the tea. Stir until the sugar has dissolved.

Serving cakes and buns
Buy some cakes and buns
Put them on a plate
Serve them to people
Wash the plate.

THE TWELFTH MAN'S DUTIES

Hints and Tips for Beginners

1. Always look smart. Wear newly-pressed flannels and clean boots. Make sure that your flannels and your shirt are a similar shade of white.
2. If you are going out to field, step onto the grass gingerly. Walk, don't run, to your appointed position. Try to be as inconspicuous as possible.
3. When fielding, be neat and effective but never obtrusive. The player whose position you have taken will never forgive you if you seem to be better at his work than he.
4. When leaving the field try to do so without fuss. Don't wave to spectators as you leave and don't sign autographs as you saunter up the pavilion steps.
5. Always wear a blazer when taking out the drinks. The blazer must be dark blue and should have a large badge or crest on the breast pocket. The middle button must be fastened. Do not have pens or pencils on display in your blazer pocket.
6. The tray should be carried in both hands. Grip the sides of the tray firmly with the thumbs pointing in the direction in which you are going. (Make sure that your thumb and finger nails are neatly trimmed).
7. Never fill glasses to the top. If you do you'll spill fluid onto the tray. It's not a pleasant sight and apart from that is considered horribly infra dig.
8. There should be fifteen glasses on the tray: one for each fielder, one for each batsman and one for each umpire. A good mix is to have five glasses filled with orange squash, five with lemon squash and five with lime cordial.
9. If you know that one of the players (or umpires) always likes a tot of something in his drink then mark that glass with a straw. In the excitement of taking out the drinks it is all too easy to forget and give the special drink to the wrong person. This can cause problems.
10. Collect together *all* the glasses before you bring the tray back to the pavilion. It is bad manners to expect a player to have to run after you with his glass.
11. If you carry a pitcher full of extra fluid on your tray make sure that it contains enough ice cubes for all the players (and umpires). No-one should be allowed to take two ice cubes. You can use a tea strainer to help you ration out the ice cubes. Keep the tea strainer in your trouser pocket so that it does not spoil the line of your jacket or blazer.
12. When you carry the tray back to the pavilion your hands must grip the tray firmly and your thumbs point in the direction in which you are walking.

"W.G. GRACE NOT W.G. GRACE AT ALL" SAYS STATISTICIAN!

Shock revelation from leading cricket writer

In a startling lecture at the Uterhouse Cricket Society's Annual Specificity Meeting (at which, by tradition, cricket observers and statisticians are invited to give papers dealing with very special topics of interest) the well known cricket writer Percy Pointer claimed that the batting and bowling averages usually attributed to the late, great Dr. W.G. Grace belong to a little-known player called Francis Bacon.

First rebutting a previous claim that Grace's statistics had been the result of the skill of another minor cricketer, Christopher Marlowe, Pointer went on to explain that Grace himself had been a far from enthusiastic cricketer. Most of his sporting career was devoted to croquet, claimed Pointer, and the muddle concerning the averages had arisen out of a confusion between the two games.

According to the research work Pointer has done, W.G. Grace himself played only in two cricket matches — both of them while he was still at school. In one match he batted twice, scoring 11 and 3, and bowled 12 overs to take 2 wickets for 87 runs. In the second match he batted once and scored 17 but did not bowl at all.

To prove his case Mr Pointer made the following observations:

1. Both W.G. Grace and Francis Bacon lived at approximately the same time.
2. Both men had beards.
3. Neither man ever met Queen Victoria.
4. Both were connected with the medical profession. W.G. Grace was a physician while Francis Bacon had a nephew who worked in a chemist's shop in Shrewsbury.
5. Both men had lots of brothers. Grace did, in fact, have one less brother than Bacon.
6. Both men died before the First World War was over.

There will, of course, continue to be controversy about the claims that Mr. Pointer has made. We at the *Thomas Winsden's Cricketing Almanack* have decided not to change our statistical analysis of the career of W.G. Grace until more evidence is forthcoming.

COLLECTOR'S CORNER — Chewing Gum

Books, scorecards, centenary plates, memorial tankards, cigarette cards, paintings, prints, photographs, stamps, bats, balls — the list of items sought and hoarded by collectors gets longer every year.

The latest hobby to attract cricket fanatics has been gum collecting (Masticmatics) and the London auction house, Sowerbys, has appointed a Curator of Chewing Gum to assess, value and authenticate items offered for sale. The publishers of *Thomas Winsden's Cricketing Almanack* asked the curator, Mr Arthur Wriggle, to prepare a list of some of the most interesting items in Sowerby's current collection.

Here is his choice.

1. The Trumpet Trophy (1911-12)

A large, flattened gum relic taken from the back of Victor Trumpet's bat after the second innings of the Third Test in the England v Australia series of 1911-12. The gum was distributed with coupons entitling purchasers to buy plastic wicker hampers at reduced prices and was a special sugar-free variety manufactured by Dintone. Trumpet was a keen gum user who scored 1 not out while masticating this particular specimen. Records show that the gum was chewed for a total of 7 minutes before being attached to the back of Trumpet's bat.

2. The Bannaman Relic (1887-88)

A small, rather misshapen piece of gum enjoyed by the luckless Bannaman during the Sydney Test in which two English touring teams combined to play Australia. In their first innings Australia scored only 42 all out — Bannaman acquiring 2 of the runs while chewing this particular piece of gum. The gum was rescued from the dressing room at the Sydney ground in 1910 and it is believed to have been a relic of a stick shared with J.M. Blackman, the Australian wicket keeper. The whereabouts of the Blackman half of the relic is not known.

3. The Norse Keepsake (1921-22)

In the first Test between South Africa and Australia played at Durban in November 1921, Arbuthnot Norse scored 32 fine runs while giving a piece of early Wriggle Doublemint a tough time. After the match the gum was mounted on an ivory plinth and presented to Norse's mother. She later sold it to a Scandanavian tourist who, not realising the true value of the item, used it as a pin cushion for 17 years.

4. The Hendon Remainder (1929)

Beach Hut gum has always been popular with those cricketers who like their gum to have a little spine. The packet from which this piece of gum was taken was bought by Francis Woolly at the start of the third Test between England and South Africa in 1929. He bought it from Elsie Sidebotham who had a sweet shop outside the Headingley ground for 22 years.

The other pieces which were in the packet have long since been lost but this piece of gum, used by Hendon in the 2nd innings when he scored 5 runs has been passed from hand to hand in the Pilkington family since Elijah

Pilkington picked the gum up from the spot where Hendon had thrown it in disgust as he made his way back to the pavilion.

5. The Hulton Souvenir (1947)
In the fourth Test of the series between England and South Africa in 1947, the great Norman Hulton scored 100 before being run out. Throughout that innings Hulton derived nourishment and pleasure from this enticing piece of Single Mint. At the end of the innings Hulton gave the gum to gateman Jonathan Forbes-Forbes, intending to retrieve it later. In the excitement, however, the gum was forgotten and it remained in the Forbes-Forbes family collection for over 35 years.

6. The Brandon Berg
The Great Don Brandon, the Spaniard who played his cricket for Australia, was a wildly enthusiastic gum chewer. In order to keep his concentration at its peak, he tended to use several pieces of gum at a time. Hence the popular name for this huge piece! Unfortunately, we have not yet been able to date the Brandon Berg, though carbon dating processes should soon make this possible.

7. The Washstand Residue (1947)
In the match between South Africa and England, played at Johannesburg in December 1947 (1947 was a good year for chewing gum) Cecil Washstand scored a majestic 195 in a partnership of 359 with Norman Hulton. He started his innings with a sliver of Wriggle no. 7, added a fresh slice of Don Tyne Mouth Moistener at lunch and completed the mouthful with a tantalising stick of Beach Hut at tea. After his innings Washstand was about to throw the accumulated gum away but fortunately was persuaded to hand it to a South African fan who preserved it in a cigar box for 30 years.

8. The Woolcott Stub (1950)
In the first West Indian innings of the 3rd Test at Trent Bridge in 1950 Freddie Warrell scored 261, Eddie Weeks accumulated 129 and the unhappy Alexander Woolcott managed only 8 runs. While scoring those 8 runs Woolcott tentatively nibbled at a piece of fresh Wriggle Triple Mint Gum. The gum still contains some of the original sugar coating and is considered to be a particularly fine collector’s item. Most of Woolcott’s stubs are very well chewed indeed.

9. The Beardsley Brick (1912)
Wilhelm Beardsley scored 164 in the first Australian innings of the 5th match in the Triangular Tournament of 1912. Playing against South Africa he ended up with an impressive five sticks of gum in his mouth. When he finally came back to the pavilion his jaw muscles ached so much that he needed oral physiotherapy.

INJURIES ON AND OFF THE CRICKET FIELD

By Professor H. Oaks F.R.C.S.

(The England Team’s Official Neurocardiothoracophysiologist)

The increasingly competitive nature of top class cricket has meant that in recent years a growing number of professional players have been leaving the field of play with injuries. During the last twelve months, for example, I myself have had to look after three hundred and seventy-six cricketers, suffering from a wide range of disorders. In an attempt to help my less-experienced medical colleagues, I have prepared a list of the ten most common problems.

1. Stretched nerves
The pressure on professional cricketers can be tremendous. With the number of spectators at first class county matches sometimes reaching ten or even fifteen, it is hardly surprising that players suffer from stress. ‘Stretched nerves’ can be an almost chronic condition in players during the testimonial years. (See also ***Testimonialitis.)***

2. Pushed hamstring
The pulled hamstring is, of course, very common. Professional cricketers often worry about their health (see ***Hypochondriasis)*** and often guard too energetically against this problem. The result can be an injury which is the mirror-image of the one the player was trying to avoid in the first place.

3. Testimonialitis

Professional players rely heavily on the money they expect to earn during their testimonial or benefit years. There are, however, considerable hazards to be faced. The player who has a testimonial year will often find that he has to attend dozens of dinners and dances. The testimonialitis syndrome can be easily identified by its principal symptoms which include a fixed grin, dull, lifeless eyes which seem to see nothing, spasms and twitches in the hand most commonly used for shaking and back-strain caused by carrying the money to the bank. (See also ***Stretched nerves.)***

4. Congenital femurs

Surveys have shown that nearly all professional cricketers have femurs. The very existence of these bones means that they can be broken. This is a drawback professional cricketers have to learn to live with.

5. Herpes

Cricket groupies are very common in Hove, Manchester, Kennington and Cardiff. Herpes is a natural and inevitable risk.

6. Writer's cramp

Mainly affects cricketers when they're asked to sign autographs by small, scruffy boys clutching dirty pieces of paper and pencil stubs. The condition seems to go into remission when the cricketer is commissioned to write a newspaper article, sign a contract, dictate and sign his memoirs or endorse a bat, glove or cheque.

7. Recurrence of an old injury

If a professional cricketer leaves the field of play halfway through a match, then the chances are high that he will be suffering from 'a recurrence of an old injury'. The best treatment is to attempt to convince the player that in fact, he is enjoying the recurrence of an old recovery.

8. Haemodementia

Haemodementia affects cricketers who achieve more success than they can comfortably cope with. Bowlers suffering from haemodementia (or bloodymindedness as it is also known) will often grumble when they are invited to bowl but, on the other hand, complain bitterly if *not* invited to bowl. Haemodementia in batsmen can be diagnosed by a tendency to find fault with their batting positions, their partners and their accommodation in the team hotel.

9. Plumbi Oscillans

A common condition that seems to affect cricketers only when they are fielding. It sometimes seems to be allied to a recurrence of an old injury.

10 . Hypochondriasis

Very common among all cricketers. If they sneeze they feel convinced that they are about to contract pneumonia. If they suffer a mild backache, they are sure it signals the onset of sciatica. If they get indigestion, they *know* they are having a heart attack. If they have a nosebleed, then it's bound to be haemophilia. The only answer is to laugh at them and to refuse to listen to their pitiful drivelling.

Those listed above are the disabilities which most commonly afflict professional cricketers. Club and village cricketers display different signs and symptoms. I have prepared a list of the nine disorders which most commonly affect cricketers in the amateur category.

1. Pregnancy

This condition can have a devastating effect on the career of a female cricketer.

2. Twisted ankle

Usually affects fielders who are outfield specialists. Plough-furrows and rabbit holes are two common contributory causes.

3. Headache

A woman whose husband repeatedly comes home with grass stains all over his trousers will respond in one of two ways. She will either nag him for hours on end and provide him with a detailed description of the problems involved in removing grass stains from flannels (in which case he will end up with a headache), or she will cuff him round the ear (in which case he will end up a headache). Either way, grass stains cause headaches.

4. Indigestion
Anyone who washes down two dozen cheese sandwiches, three pickled eggs, two packets of crisps, a rock cake and a piece of fruit cake with sixteen pints of beer deserves indigestion. A good amateur captain will take care to monitor the food that his side intends to consume with its pints.

5. Food poisoning
Food poisoning can be avoided by steering well clear of meat paste sandwiches.

6. Dislocated shoulder
This painful and unpleasant condition usually develops when a forty-five-year-old medium-pace bowler, having been hit for six consecutive boundaries by a spotty sixteen-year-old batsman attempts to bowl a ninety mph bouncer at the batsman's grinning head. Captains of club teams should be aware of this hazard and intervene at the appropriate moment

7. Broken finger nails
This irritating phenomenon is frequently suffered by fielders who cannot repress the reflexive response to a hard-driven ball and attempt to catch it, rather than turning away or shouting 'Yours' to a nearby teammate. Women players tend to be particularly distressed by it and, for that reason, prefer to field in the slips or gully.

8. White, soggy skin
An unappealing cosmetic deficiency that affects players who spend too long in the bath.

9. Depression
Affects all club cricketers at the end of the season. If they have done well they will want the season to continue; if they have done badly they want the season to continue so that they can make an effort to prove that they are not past it after all. The depression is usually at its worst about one month after the season ends. It then lifts progressively, until the heady smell of newmown grass, the lilting call of the first cuckoo and the appearance of delicately-furred catkins among the budding hedgerows herald the arrival of spring and re-awaken the cricketer's hibernating spirit and sense of joie de vivre. (Sorry, I got carried away).

WHAT UMPIRES CARRY IN THEIR POCKETS

Have you ever wondered exactly what those fascinating bulges in umpires' pockets really are? Well, for the last twelve months the research staff here at *Thomas Winsden's Cricketing Almanack* have been carrying out a comprehensive, world-wide survey of the contents of umpires' pockets. Here are their results:

1. The village cricket umpire's pockets contain:
A handkerchief
A bit of fluff
A box of matches
A pipe
A tin of tobacco
A book of crosswords (in case the match gets boring)

2. The club or league cricket umpire's pockets contain:
A handkerchief
Seven small pebbles (six and a spare*)
Spare ball
Penknife (which contains attachment for getting horseshoes out of boy scouts' ears)
Packet of sweets (mints or fruit gums)
Folding umbrella Safety pin
Copy of the rules of cricket in a plain cover
*It is important to keep the seventh pebble in a separate pocket.

3. The first-class cricket umpire's pockets contain:

Two handkerchiefs
Six specially polished small pebbles or six small coins
Two spare balls (one suitable for use if the ball in play goes out of shape within the first sixty minutes of play and the other for use if the second ball goes out of shape too)
Spare bails
Light meter
Notebook and pencils for keeping track of overs bowled, warnings given, etc
Penknife (includes attachment for getting penknives out of club umpires' pockets)
Scissors
Sewing kit (includes cotton in three shades of white)
Small of bottle of aspirin tablets
Salt tablets
Sticking plaster (assorted sizes)

4. The Test cricket match umpire's pockets contain:

Three handkerchiefs
Six specially polished small pebbles brought back from Bondi Beach and/or six small Indian coins
Six spare cricket balls in various stages of wear
Spare bails
Spare set of stumps
Light meter
Spare light meter
Miniature tape recorder (for compiling material to go into memoirs, snatches of conversation, etc)
Spare tape recorder
Spare batteries for both recorders
Penknife
Spare penknife
Scissors (large, small, nail and pinking)
Sewing machine
Spare sewing machine
Sewing kit (includes cotton in 12 shades of white and 3 shades of grey)
Medicine kit (includes aspirin, paracetamol, kaolin, antihistamines, penicillin, cough linctus, calamine lotion, tetracycline, anti-dandruff remedy, bran, tranquilliser, stimulant, sedative, anti-malarial pills, rabies vaccine, oxygen cylinder)
Salt tablets
Pepper tablets
Sticking plasters (12 pink and 12 brown and 12 black)*
Suture kit
Pocket calculator
Comb
Hair brush
Torch
Spare batteries for torch
Shoe polish
Shoe repair kit
Spare shoe laces (18 inch and 24 inch, black and white)
Packet of trouser buttons
Packet of shirt buttons
Zip repair kit
Tape for mending cracked bats
Spare bats
Two way telephone (for consulting Prime Minister if decision seems likely to affect foreign policy or international relations)
Make-up bag
Moisturising cream

Grass seed
Sawdust (for damp patches)
Fertiliser (for bald patches)
Spare white coat (With all pockets filled. Contents of pockets include spare white coat)

*When playing in the Far East 12 yellow are also included.

TEN UNFORGETTABLE SCORERS

1. S. Veniaminoff
Known as the ‘Russian memory man’, Veniaminoff was probably the only scorer to go through a whole season without writing anything down. At the drop of a bail he could give you any player’s personal average. He scored in the Russian primary league for a total of eleven years.

2. A. Einstein
Although it isn’t recorded in his official biography, Einstein was a keen cricket scorer. Unfortunately, while in his early forties, he managed to prove that the number of runs scored will always be $x = nk^2$ where x is the date, n the number of wickets falling and k the combined height of the fielding side. This formula ended Einstein’s interest in cricket, for it meant that he always knew what the result was going to be before the match began.

3. Nigel Honeydew
This computer genius thought that he’d made a great breakthrough in scoring technology when he produced a pocket computer that seemed to make traditional methods obsolete. Unfortunately, the computer had to be discarded when it was discovered to be prone to error. Its most memorable mistake occurred during the 1978 series of Tests. In the Lord’s match, England’s second innings score was entirely deleted from the final total and could not be restored without reference to spectators’ score cards.

4. Isaac Levy
Loved cricket and loved scoring but had an unusual habit of knocking 10% off every score.

5. G. Verdi
Hired in error by a team of Middle Europeans. His score was later performed at La Scala.

6. Man Friday
Employed by Robinson Crusoe as scorer in match against local team of savages. Unfortunately, Man Friday was illiterate and the score sheet was of little value.

7. Jeremy Ffolkes-Ffolkes
His superb copper plate handwriting made Jeremy Ffolkes-Ffolkes a marvellous scorer. Unhappily, he took so long to fill in the score sheet that in matches where he officiated it was rare for more than two overs to be bowled in a day.

8. Plum Whitestick
It is rare for a blind scorer to reach the top in this demanding profession but Whitestick did very well until deafness resulted in an early retirement.

9. Jimmy ‘The Cricket Bag’ Marello
Learnt his trade while working as No 2 in the New York numbers racket. Marello made a small fortune by changing score sheets and running a book on the side. Killed in a gang fight outside the pavilion at Lords during a one day final.

10. Ms Gretel Greet
Would have been a fine scorer if she’d been better at adding up. At the end of one match the home team had scored 987 for 13 in their first innings

TEN EXTREMELY FAMOUS AND IMPORTANT CAPTAINS

1. Captain Cook
First man to take a team to Australia.

2. Captain T.E. Lawrence
Led a very successful team known as The Arabs.

3. Captain Bligh
Had tremendous problems persuading his bowlers to bowl and could never persuade his batsmen to follow the official batting order. On one famous occasion, four batsmen opened the innings together.

4. Captain D.H. Lawrence
Sometimes confused with Captain T.E. Lawrence.

5. Captain America
Led a team which included Superman, Batman and Spiderman. Undefeated after 694 games.

6. Captain Nemo
Throughout his fourteen year career, never allowed a match to be disrupted by rain or bad light. Once played a match at Worcester when umpires sat in rowing boats.

7. Captain Singleton
Took teams to West Indies and India. Immortalised in a famous tour book written by cricket writer D. Defoe.

8. Captain Sensible
Never lost a match with a bad declaration. Cautious, methodical but unimaginative leader.

9. Captain Boycott
Unpopular Irish cricketer whose estate team never won a match.

10. Captain Scott
His polar team, attired in whites, were lost for 8 days during a blizzard. It was as a result of this disaster that cricketers started to wear coloured caps.

THE TEN MOST INTERESTING SLOW BOWLERS OF ALL TIME

1. Niccolo Machiavelli
Gave the ball a tremendous twist. No-one ever knew what to expect. Would have taken more wickets if he had been prepared to appeal directly, but preferred to make oblique suggestions to the umpire via outfielders, spectators, etc.

2. Confucius
Would have played in more Tests if he hadn’t developed a bad habit of stopping to deliver telling homilies to umpire, batsman, other fielders, etc.

3. Tomas de Torquemada
Leg break specialist who played for a Spanish team. Broke 739 legs and got 739 confessions. An unequalled record.

4. Attila the Hun
Started life as a fast bowler but his height (he was a midget) made it difficult for him to get up much speed. Became a spinner in later career and used to approach the wicket on the back of an elephant. Nothing in the laws of cricket prevents this, but Attila was no-balled a great deal because he failed to train the elephant to keep an eye on the crease.

5. R. Bosanquet
The man who invented the googly later won additional fame as a news-reader. Found the secret of eternal youth. Some have suggested that he is, in fact, a descendant of the googly originator, but his ability to give a tremendous

tweak to bread-rolls in restaurants scotches this errant theory.

6. T. Benn
Never actually completed a delivery. Would stand at the wicket and wave his pipe about while gibbering endless nonsense. Batsmen would leave the crease in an attempt to get away from his monologues. On three occasions entire teams retired ‘too bored to continue’. Officially, an off-break bowler.

7. Rasputin
Bowled funny little chinamen which didn’t fool players, but had a convincing way with umpires. By the end of a five day match batsmen would be given out before they’d left the pavilion.

8. George Bernard Shaw
Never bowled a ball in his life and shouldn’t be in this list at all.

9. John Wayne
His unusual gait gave his action extra movement and ensured that batsmen never knew what to expect.

10. Nureyev
Few ballet dancers have played cricket with such panache. Nureyev used to stand at the crease and pirouette, then release the ball when he reached maximum speed. His problem was that he never showed much control and usually bowled in the direction of third man.

THE EIGHT WORST FAST BOWLERS OF ALL TIME

1. Long John Silver
Managed to get up quite a speed but had a tendency to fall over three or four times in the course of an over. Had a habit of putting his leading crutch across the crease and was once no balled fifty-seven times in a single session.

2. M. Richebourg
Best known as a spy who made his mark during the French Revolution, Richebourg was also a demon fast bowler. His main problem was his height which limited his ability to get bounce out of the wicket. (He was only l ft 11 inches tall).

3. Captain Ahab
Bowled beamers and was banned for throwing at the heads of batsmen.

4. General Franco
Used to get very cross when his appeals were turned down. In the end no one would umpire in matches where he was bowling.

5. Quasimodo
Promising bowler who gave up the game after being called for throwing in the annual clerics v medics match at Longchamps.

6. Laloo
Indian player who had an extra set of arms and legs from a headless twin attached to his body at the neck. Got up a tremendous pace but often forgot which hand was holding the ball.

7. James Toller
English giant who was 8ft 6ins at his prime. Fast but erratic. Even when he bowled on a length, the ball would bounce so excessively that it invariably went for 6 byes.

8. W. Wordsworth
Could have been a fine fast bowler but got into the habit of taking a long run and stopping half way in to gaze at flowers in the outfield. Once took 4½ hours to complete a 6 ball over.

TEN UMPIRES OF RENOWN

1. Pontius Pilate
Rather weak-willed. Inclined to vacillate and could be swayed by crowds and fielders.

2. Judge Jeffries
Quite the opposite to P. Pilate. Feared by players, spectators and fellow umpires. Left a trail of death and destruction behind him. After a particularly successful season, Jeffries retired leaving only four first class cricketers alive in England.

3. Horatio Nelson
Fine umpire but had a weak spot — just couldn't cope with left arm bowlers who went round the wicket. Was often completely unaware that they were bowling at all.

4. L. van Beethoven
Held up his index finger with tremendous flair but rarely heard appeals the first time and never heard a faint snick.

5. J.Milton
Not a good umpire. Could officiate in four languages at the age of six but his lack of vision was limiting.

6. Ayatollah Khomeni
Gave everyone out first ball. Never officiated in a match that lasted for more than sixteen minutes. Always insisted on giving the bowler the benefit of the doubt.

7. Idi Amin
Once batted, bowled and umpired in forty-six matches at once. Never gave himself out but always answered his own appeals in the affirmative. On three occasions also acted as a sight screen.

8. Sophocles
Never made a wrong decision.

9. Darth Vader
Starred in training film for umpires (The Umpire Strikes Back). Got into trouble with T.C.C.B. for refusing to wear a white coat.

10. Lady Macbeth
Umpired in mixed cricket. Gave the famous Jack Spot out lbw in the first timeless Test held in Australia.

PRAYERS FOR CRICKETERS

For many years there have been strong links between cricket and the church. Now a group of clergymen have written a special prayer book which contains ninety-three prayers suitable for use by all cricketers. *Thomas Winsden's Cricketing Almanack* is proud to be able to include, in this year's edition, three of the prayers which will be most widely used.

The Batsman's Prayer
Lord, please deliver me from all bouncers, bumpers and shortsighted umpires. Protect me in my adversity from poor light, damp patches on the wicket and excessively diligent fielding. Guard me against balls which bounce unexpectedly and against any loss of concentration. Give me the skill, the strength and the confidence to deal with balls which turn square, bowlers who glower in a threatening fashion and wicket keepers who talk incessantly. I pray, too, oh Lord, that you will see to it that at least one top class photographer will be on the ground should I be fortunate enough to score a century and I ask for the strength to help me cope with the enthusiastic fans who will, I pray, run out onto the pitch, pat me on the back and stuff paper currency into my trouser pockets whenever I reach a fresh milestone.

The Fast Bowler's Prayer

Bless, oh Lord, my trusty ball;
Keep it red and shiny.
Bless my stride and keep it long,
And make my bowling tidy.

Bless my action, keep it sound;
Dull the batsman's senses.
In the wisdom, keep the ball
From reaching boundary fences.

Give me speed and give me bounce,
Let the batsman snick it.
Stop the umpire nodding off,
And help me take a wicket.

Thank you, Lord, for all your care,
And more for your attention.
When the batsman's on his way,
I know you'll get a mention.

The Umpire's Prayer
Lord, keep me awake to count
The balls in every over,
Let me be consistent, wise
And watchful as yourself, Jehovah.

Help me to stay alert for each
Snick or deviation.
Let me be consistent and
Untainted by temptation.

Lord, keep me vertical I pray,
And steady on my feet.
Let me be consistent, though
The batsman be a cheat.

Make me patient as a saint
When the day is boring.
Let me be consistent, though
Neither batsman's scoring.

These prayers are all taken from *The Cricketer's Prayer Book* (published by Synod Books). There are, in addition to these three prayers, special oblations for spin bowlers, groundsmen, fielders who have dropped catches, captains who keep losing the toss, batsmen who are consistently run out and club secretaries trying to devise fixture lists.

Cricket laws (revised)

1. The Team
There will be more or less eleven players to each side.

2. The Captain
One player will be captain and the others will be not. The captain is entitled to bat anywhere in the order, bowl when he feels like it and tell someone else to run after the ball if it passes near to him when he is fielding. By and large, the captain is never the fielder nearest the ball.

3. Substitution

Substitutes shall be permitted to field for any player who is incapacitated by illness, injury or commercial commitment. Ageing, opening batsmen who have scored more than 2,000 runs in Test cricket and fast bowlers with more than 100 wickets in Tests may go off the field for up to ninety minutes at a time for a shower, change of clothing, discussion with publisher or ghost biographer, paid TV interview or a game of golf (not exceeding 9 holes).

4. Runner

A runner shall be allowed for a batsman who is incapacitated by illness, injury or fatigue. The player acting as a runner shall wear batting gloves, pads, elbow protectors, helmet with visor, chest protector, box, thigh pads, skin cream, shin pads, boots, socks, shirt, two sweaters, jock strap, trousers, copper bangle to protect against rheumatism and a small gold chain with the batsman's initials on it.

5. Batsmen leaving the field

A batsman may leave the field at any time to dictate his account of memorable parts of an innings, to exchange bats if the manufacturer's trademark becomes obscured, or for any other cause deemed to be unavoidable by him and his agent. Batsmen claiming to be ill or injured may not leave the field unless unconscious or suffering from diarrhoea.

6. The umpires

Two umpires shall be appointed, one from each side, to control the game with matching partiality.

7. The wickets

Two sets of wickets, each consisting of three wooden stumps and each about this high and that wide, shall be pitched on fairly flat ground at a point roughly equidistant from all the boundary markers. The individual stumps should be placed in such a way that a normal sized ball won't quite pass between them. Wooden bails (about so big) should be balanced on top of each set of stumps.

8. Timing

The umpires shall agree to start the match at a convenient time and stop it when everyone has had enough. (See also *Cessation of Play).*

9. Position of umpires

The umpires shall stand on the field of play some distance from one another.

10. Fitness of ground, weather and light

In first-class cricket, the umpires shall be the sole judges of the fitness of the ground, weather and light. Play will not be allowed if there is a cloud in the sky, any moisture in the air or dew on the grass. There will be no cricket if the umpires cannot see a light meter at six hundred paces. If there are more than two thousand spectators in the ground then the light meter must be visible at eight hundred paces. (A pace is measured by the distance covered by a fast bowler in full flight, not by that covered by a batsman in returning to the pavilion). In local or club cricket the fitness of the ground, weather and light shall be determined by the majority vote of the players involved.

11. Signals from umpires

When an umpire wants to leave the field of play and relieve himself he will stand on one leg and look distinctly uncomfortable.

When an umpire wants to call for a tea interval he will impersonate a teapot by bending one arm upwards and touching the nearest shoulder with the tips of his fingers.

When an umpire wants to draw the scorer's attention to activity on the field of play he will wave both hands about at waist level.

When an umpire wants to attract the attention of a spectator, or sees someone he knows in the crowd, he will raise one hand above his head and wave it about.

12. Scorers

The scorers will watch the match most of the time.

13. The Ball

The ball shall be red, quite big and fairly heavy. In first class cricket matches a new ball shall be provided whenever the old one looks shabby, doesn’t show up clearly on television or stops putting red marks on the bowler’s clothes. In the event of a bowler becoming upset because he’s taking few wickets, he may complain and have the ball changed. In village or club cricket a new ball shall be provided at least once a season.

14. The Bat
Batsmen shall be equipped with a bat or some other means to protect themselves whenever they have to face the bowling. Bats shall be made of wood and marked distinctively by the manufacturer.

15. The Pitch
The pitch is the area of the field of play where the grass is shortest and the ground is flattest. The groundsman shall paint white lines on the pitch so that the fielders know where to stand.

16. Rolling, Sweeping, Mowing and Watering the Pitch
The pitch shall be rolled, swept, mown and watered except during play.

17. Covering the pitch
The pitch shall not be covered during play.

18. Innings
Each side shall have one or two innings unless there is insufficient time in which case they will not. If one side can beat the other side without the need to bat twice then the batsmen in the first side shall bat only once.

19. The Toss
The captains shall toss for the choice of innings before the match starts. The winner of the toss shall tell the other captain what he has decided to do before the match starts and shall not change his mind very much.

20. Declarations
If any player makes an obscene or offensive declaration then he shall be reprimanded by his captain.

21. Start of play
Play will start when everyone is ready.

22. Intervals
Intervals for meals, cakes, buns and so on shall be taken whenever anyone is hungry or when it is raining.

23. Cessation of play
The day’s play will end when everyone has had enough or earlier if there is anything particularly good on the television.

24. Scoring
A side who bats and bowls best will win. The scorers are responsible for arranging this.

25. Boundary
The boundary will be marked by bits of rope, scruffy little flags, hedges, fences, spectators, nearby buildings and fielders. In the absence of such markers then the field of play shall be deemed to finish at the point where the grass is more than six inches high.

26. Lost Ball
A ball is deemed lost if it cannot be found.

27. The result
When a ball has been deemed lost another must be found.

28. No ball
See lost ball.

29. Wide ball
The ball shall only be this big. If it is bigger than this then it is a wide ball and not allowed.

30. Bye
At the end of a match the players shall all shake hands and say ‘bye’.

31. Appeals
A bowler shall only appeal if he thinks the batsman is scoring too many runs, is boring, could have been out earlier or should be out. He should appeal by screaming unintelligible gibberish, holding both arms high in the air and glaring first at the batsman and then at the umpire. The batsman is entitled to look as peeved as he likes and the umpire is the only person whose opinion is worth a dollop of boot blanco.

32. Caught
A batsman is said to be given out caught if the bowler and at least one more fielder can convince the umpire that a catch has been taken.

33. Leg Before Wicket
A batsman shall be given out leg before wicket if the ball, after pitching on the ground, hits, or appears to hit, any part of his person and the bowler’s appeal is particularly convincing.

34. The Wicket Keeper
The wicket keeper shall be responsible for providing the stumps and making sure that they are kept varnished and free of dirt.

35. Unfair play
Anything that isn’t cricket isn’t cricket.

Book Reviews

Next Year’s Season by R. Fawke-Astor ***(Future Perfect Press £9.05)***
For years now, publishers have been struggling to hasten the appearance of books containing information about the previous season. Astrologer and cricket-writer R. Fawke-Astor has gone one better. This remarkable volume contains first class averages and results for *next* year’s season — published and in the shops before the players have even begun to warm up, or flex their flabby muscles. In the press release which accompanies *Next Year’s Season* the publishers announce that they intend to publish fresh volumes every season. They also promise to accompany next year’s edition with a compendium of some of the most interesting match reports for the next ten years.

The Forward Defensive Stroke by Sir G. Boikes ***(Laundry Press £6.01)***
An illustrated coaching manual in which England batsman Sir G. Boikes explains the history of the forward defensive stroke and shows how beginners can achieve a high level of proficiency with only ten hours of practice a day. (4 action photographs).

Pavilion Design by Victor E. Amour ***(Tinhutt Books at £8.01)***
A ‘must’ for the aspiring pavilion designer. Over the years, Mr. Amour has both designed, and supervised vast edifices constructed for Asian princes.

The book is wonderfully well-illustrated, with detailed depictions of bricks, bags of cement and close-ups of RSJs. Essential information on putty mixing and lino laying is included, together with a comprehensive section on how to create Doric columns out of simple polystyrene.

A special section gives elaborate details of the two most important areas in any well-thought-out pavilion: the bar and the Chapel of Rest. A gem of a book!

Linseed Oil Through the Ages by Dr. T.E. Braille ***(published by Thames House at £17.01)***
Linseed oil is something that most of us take for granted. And yet did you know that there are forty-three different types of linseed oil? Or that the best temperature for using linseed oil is three degrees below body heat? Were you

aware that the person who first discovered that linseed oil has a useful effect on cricket bats was Captain Cook — the famous inventor of Australia? Those are just some of the facts in my nephew’s enthralling book.

Wines of the World (price includes 1 doz crates of assorted wines) by S & H Palate *(Vintner Presses £2,386.37)*
It might seem odd to include this book among those under review, but the fact is that too many cricketers are prone to make fools of themselves in high society, by ordering pints of Chateau la Tour or asking for Spanish Reisling.

I found it, and the accompanying samples, very instructive and can heartily recommend it to all who might at some time be mixing with rich sponsors. It’s a full-bodied, light, dry little book without a hint of pretentiousness. I look forward to the new edition.

Just a Lanarkshire Lad by F. Truman *(Arthur Pelham Books £6.10)*
The frank, fearless story of a young man’s rise to fame as he yanks himself up by his bootlaces and fights class-prejudice, racial intolerance and crushing poverty. When young Fred starts his career as a hostile opening batsman, he finds that he is expected to do all the running between the wickets while the man at the other end, an experienced, senior professional, chats to the umpire or the wicket keeper. Fred never forgets the hardships he endured as an apprentice and when he becomes a Test player himself he always has a kindly word of encouragement for new batsmen as they struggle up and down the pitch endlessly running themselves out. Natural and heart warming.

Rollo’s Year by Rollo Verbatoven (Rollo Verbatoven Books, no price given)
A dreary account of one man’s year. Rollo watches Percy Sledge clean his bats in March and watches him get them dirty in May. He sees the great man score 33 not out for Rutland seconds in July and is present at the retirement dinner when Sledge is given a copy of last year’s annual report signed by the treasurer and is presented with a tear off calendar.

Memories of Lords by M.R. Davis *(Pawn Books £2.05)*
No punches are pulled in this hard-hitting story of sexual excesses, bondage and peer group sessions. Names and places are named and placed and positions are fully illustrated. The searching forward is written by Lord Pilsbury who also happens to be almost the only member of the Upper House to avoid mention.

Grounds for Divorce by Brenda Mengele *(Engima Books £6.05)*
Brenda Mengele has written a moving account of the breakdown of her marriage. For fifteen years the Mengeles enjoyed an open relationship, allowing one another a remarkable amount of sexual freedom. Then Brenda Mengele discovered that instead of spending three days a week with his blonde, buxom and long legged Brazilian secretary Fifi, her husband was secretly playing cricket. Once she’d overcome the initial shock, Brenda hired a private detective and the remaining two thirds of the book is taken up with a detailed account of the grounds they visited together. There is a particularly poignant vignette describing her husband sitting, padded up, at Trent Bridge one July. In the book’s final chapter Mrs Mengele explains how the divorce papers were delivered at Grace Road, Leicestershire and the Decree Nisi handed to her husband while he was watching the third day of a Schweppes County Championship Match at New Road, Worcester. Natural and heart warming.

The Toss by Patricia Keene *(Picture Books Ltd, £19.09)*
Never before has there been so beautifully illustrated an account of the history of the toss. In this short volume, experienced photographer, illustrator and cartoonist Patricia Keene has managed to capture the essence of over a hundred years of tossing. There is a facsimile of the coin used by W.G. Grace as a schoolboy fitted into a special wallet at the front of the book as an added incentive to collectors.

Photographs of coins similar to those used by Jardine, Bradman, Brearley and Chapell all give this book a very special quality which historians will savour.

There are, in addition, chapters dealing with How to Toss and Diseases associated with Tossing. The first of these two chapters deals with thumb flick techniques favoured over the decades, while the second includes notes on such disorders as coin tosser’s thumb and copper-induced digit dermatitis.

101 Uses For Grass Cuttings by Herbert Loam *(Garden Books £15.05)*
Any groundsman will confirm that if there is one commodity he has in abundance it is grass cuttings. In this well-illustrated pamphlet, Herbert Loam (for 23 years head groundsman for the Isle of Skye Parks Department) has described some of the ways in which those grass cuttings can be used to good effect.

Spread Thinly But Spread Well by Anna Rechsea *(Potit Books £1.05)*
Any girl whose boyfriend or husband is keen on cricket should make sure that she reads this book from cover to cover. It is packed with instructions on the gentle art of sandwich making, including separate chapters dealing with cheese sandwiches, egg and cress sandwiches, ham sandwiches, egg and tomato sandwiches, cheese and tomato sandwiches, ham and tomato sandwiches, cheese and cress sandwiches, egg and ham sandwiches, egg, cress and tomato sandwiches and cheese and ham sandwiches. There is a section offering advice about the needs of the lone spectator and the author includes advice on such problems as how to cope with religious dietary laws, how to deal with the requirements of cricketers with food allergy problems and how to keep a drum of mayonnaise fresh for the entire season. Finally, there is a rather controversial afterword posing the pros and cons of white vs. brown bread and whether sliced or unsliced loaves should be used. Ms Rechsea herself, a widely experienced sandwich maker, admits that although she prefers using brown, unsliced loaves she often finds herself forced to use white sliced bread in order to cope with heavy demands.

Basic Statistics by Wilhemina Frindly *f Biggbooks £9.01)*
Did you know that one of Derbyshire’s reserve wicket keepers takes size thirteen shoes? Did you know that Alan Griddle of Yorkshire has a thirty-two waist and a twenty-eight inch chest? And did you know that one of Surrey’s most successful medium pace bowlers has thighs which measure a staggering twenty-two inches each?

These are just some of the fascinating titbits of information available in this wonderful collection of basic cricket statistics. It really is a must for any girl who has ever wondered what goes on under those white shirts and flannels. Ms. Frindley is apparently busily putting together a selection of even more intimate statistics for next year’s edition.

The Backward Defensive Stroke by Lord Boikes *(Laundry Press £6.05)*
An illustrated coaching manual in which Lord Boikes explains the history of the backward defensive stroke and shows how beginners can achieve a high level of proficiency with only sixteen hours practice a day. (6 action photographs).

Pommelled to Death by Sydney Hill *(Abbo Books and Records £14.01 A)*
A former Australian Test star describes his painful experiences during the infamous and now largely forgotten bodyline series of 1924.

The Season’s Greatest Moments by Canon O. Peneux (Spire Press £5.01)
When two men dressed in a camel costume ran onto the pitch at Headingley during last summer’s England v Pakistan match, Oliver Peneux was there. He was present at Edgbaston when a hundred and fifty drunken clergymen managed to turn over sixteen cars in the Members’ Car Park.

Blessed with a knack of being in the right place at exactly the wrong time Canon Peneux has been able to record most of last season’s dramatic moments from the point of view of the ordinary spectator. His story is modestly told and includes a description of the memorable day when two umpires, officiating in a Test Match at Lords, fought a pitched battle on the pavilion stairs and left a hundred and twenty-seven members dead and seriously injured. He also describes the occasion when policemen fought an eight hour battle with the Headingley Seven gatemen at the Yorkshire ground who refused to allow the policemen into the ground without individual passes.

Natural and heart warming.

The Ayes Have It by Mohr Wyckitts *(Influential Publishers £11.01)*
In a book that could revolutionise appealing throughout the world Mohr Wyckitts, the famed hypnotist, shows how umpires can be influenced in a number of ways. He extols the virtues of deep eye control and describes how a formerly unsuccessful medium pace bowler took 116 wickets (all given out lbw) after just three lessons in the use of primary hypnosis techniques.

Swing — a review by Duke Ellington *(Jazz Books £3.05)*
Seems to have been sent to us by mistake.

Running Between the Wickets by H.R.H. the Prince of Boikes *(Laundry Press £6.05)*
An illustrated coaching manual in which H.R.H. the Prince of Boikes explains the history of running between the wickets and shows how beginners can achieve a high level of proficiency with only eighteen hours practice each day. There are chapters entitled ‘Calling’, ‘Changing your mind’, ‘Changing your mind yet again’ and ‘101 ways to say sorry’. The forward is written by Ms Denise Comptoir. (Eight action photographs and two inaction

photographs).

Obituaries

Samuel Blockettt (1887-1983)

For nearly sixty years Samuel Blockettt had one of the most important jobs in English cricket. It was Samuel's responsibility to walk around the pavilion at Lord's half an hour after the end of every match day and carefully shake each remaining member in an attempt to differentiate between the quick and the dead. He had a quiet, gentle way with him and would begin each investigation by tapping the member on the shoulder with the forefinger of his left hand. If that failed to produce any movement he would murmur a few words in the member's ear — usually choosing something like 'Good shot, sir' or 'Well played, sir', in the hope of stimulating a similar, if automatic, response. If his efforts continued to be unrewarded, Samuel would carefully 'help' the former member out of his seat and down into the morgue in the pavilion basement. (Lords, incidentally, is probably the only cricket pavilion in the world to have its own morgue and full time mortician. Although the existence of this morgue is kept secret it's thought that it is busier than most big city morgues.)

Samuel himself died as he would have wished. He always sat directly behind the sightscreen at Lord's, from which position he claimed to be able to keep an eye on those members most likely to need his attentions. When he was found by his assistant on the second day of the Test last summer, rigor mortis had set in.

A memorial service will be held in the Lords Pavilion

Brigadier L.F.T.Y. McPherson (1881-1983)

In his younger days Brigadier McPherson (he wasn't Brigadier then, of course) played cricket for the Old Boys of St Michael's School, Bond Street. His impressive figures (2 for 93 in his first full match and 17 wickets at a cost of 117 runs apiece in his first full season) were a tribute to his accuracy and control. Although primarily a bowler, Brigadier McPherson was also an elegant and forcing batsman, who once scored a majestic 25 not out in a match played in his brother in law's garden. (His brother in law, incidentally, was the famous wicketkeeper and slow bowler Archie Grubb who always kept to his own bowling).

Although he suffered from terminal lassitude in later life, Brigadier McPherson played for a number of army sides and continued to take an active part in the game for as long as he could. In his last year as a player the Brigadier would arrange for someone else to run up to the wicket for him so that he could bowl medium pace from a standing start.

Brigadier McPherson died on the first day of the Lord's Test last summer but owing to the demise of Samuel Blockettt his death was not discovered until the end of the fifth and final day of the match.

A memorial service will be held in the Lords Pavilion.

Col P.W.KA.S.R. Langtree (1883-1983)

Few men have given as much to the game of cricket as Colonel 'Piggy' Langtree. After falling in love with the game when an older boy at school taught him how to hold a ball properly behind the school bicycle sheds, Langtree spent up twenty minutes a day practising.

By the time he was twenty-seven, he had won a regular place as a reserve in the local colts team and in 1919 he played his first full match for his Regiment. He scored several runs on a number of occasions and often got close to taking a wicket. In his later years when he could no longer play the game he still loved so much, Langtree tried to give back to cricket some of the delight it had offered him. For nearly 40 years he sat on the Works and Car Park Sub Committee of the South Humberside Wanderers XI, on the Rules and Disciplinary Committee of the South East Budleigh Salterton Cricket Club and on the Special Sub-Committee of the Notting Hill Committee for Racial Equality in Sports Administration.

A memorial service will be held in the Pavilion at Lords.

Mr Jim Bigdale (1922-1983)

Bigdale played for England 73 times and took 249 wickets at an average of 7.333. He scored 8,954 runs for his country at an average of 137.83.

There will be no memorial service.

Rev. P.RA. Young (1881-1982)

The death of one of cricket's foremost poets has left a tremendous gap in the world of cricket literature. Few modern writers have done so much to improve the standard of cricket reportage as Phil Young and no modern anthology would be considered complete without a line or two from 'the little master' as he was affectionately known by his colleagues.

Born into a cricket loving family, Phil Young learned his cricket at Wichampton School and played for the school second XI until he left for Cambridge. At university he spent his summers writing about cricket, rather than playing, and his articles on the subject often found their way into the magazine he edited.

After university Young went first to theology college and then to work for the up-and-coming *Bradford Guardian* which was an exclusively local paper at the time. Writing obituaries, advertising features and gossip column snippets left Young little time for his first love, but in the summer season, when the courts were in recess, he somehow managed to pen a line or two. Those were his salad days and much of what he wrote then was collected into the privately printed 'Green be my cricket field'.

One of his most famous poems *The match is won* was written during the Lords Test of 1912. A few lines of that poem are worth reproducing here:

The batsman swings, the children cry,
To see such perfect action.
The fielder swoops and makes a stop
And that's another match won.

Those lines won Young the adoration and respect of all his colleagues on the boundary-edge. For the next few years the young poet contributed to most of the major reviews of the day but still he considered his allegiance to be principally to the *Bradford Guardian* which had given him his first chance. It was there that the famous editor David 'Blue Pencil' Harsent worked with him and helped him develop his unique style of writing.

In the early 1930s Phil Young wrote another poem, *Watchers weak inside*. The poem was very controversial; in fact some critics claimed that it contained evidence of Young's latent homosexuality. The lines they pointed to in particular, read:

Tall, blond, strong and handsome,
The batsman stood with pride.
His rich and lordly bearing
Made watchers weak inside.

Now Phil Young is no longer with us. It is difficult to believe that we have lost a writer of such stature. He had spent the last three months of his life on a poem that was to have been his major work. The poem was unfinished but we are proud to print here the lines which Young had completed:

Oh, for the eyes of a batsman
Oh, for the arms of a bowler
Oh for the legs of a fielder.

We can only speculate about the greatness that might have been had Young been granted time to complete this work.

Roderick St. Spurry (1959-1982)

At the age of eighteen, Roderick St. Spurry celebrated his birthday by turning up for a club cricket match dressed as the rear half of a pantomime horse. When it was his turn to bat he trotted out to the wicket leaving behind him a trail of fluffy brown cotton wool balls. Between that spectacular beginning, and his early death last year, Roderick St Spurry never tired of playing practical jokes on those around him.

At a crucial moment in one match, for example, he substituted a pomegranate for the cricket ball. The batsman at the receiving end thought it was so funny that he nearly had a heart attack and had to retire. On another occasion, Roderick used a ball which had one side glazed with high gloss red paint and the other roughened with sandpaper. The umpire thought that was a tremendous jape; so, once the joke had been explained to them, did the six batsman who had been dismissed with the ball.

One of Roderick's favourite jokes was to quietly tie a batsman to his wicket while the bowler ran up. That always went down very well. Another trick was to mix up all the shoes and boots in the changing room.

Roderick St. Spurry died last summer at the remarkably early age of twenty-three. According to the signed statements of twenty-one other players and two umpires. Roderick accidentally impaled himself on a set of stumps after bumping his head several times against his bat.

There will be a memorial service every April Fool's Day.

Harold Twigmorton (1902-1982)

His cricketing talents may have been limited, and the opportunities to display such skills as he possessed may have been few, but there can rarely have been a cricketer with a greater love for the game than Harold Twigmorton.

It is difficult to know just how to describe Harold's affection for cricket. Suffice it to say that although he was married for sixty-three years, Harold never took his protective box off during the cricket season (except on Saturday nights when he would dunk the contents of the box in a zinc hip bath half filled with lukewarm, soapy water). Harold argued that he always wanted to be ready in case he was called to play in an impromptu game. 'I may not be the best,' he was wont to say with commendable modesty, 'But they know they can rely on me if they're short of a man.'

So keen was Harold to be prepared, that for two months prior to the start of each cricket season the Twigmorton's bed would be graced by the presence of Harold's ageing but much loved willow blade. Harold would keep a thermos flask filled with warmed linseed oil in his bedside cabinet and each night the bat would be oiled with a loving caress that Mrs Twigmorton secretly envied.

When Harold and his bat were cremated the remains were spread on a good length on the local village pitch.

Errata

There were several errors in last year’s edition of *Thomas Winsden’s Cricketing Almanack.* The most significant were as follows:
Kent not Sussex won the Banker’s Trophy. Nottinghamshire not Warwickshire won the Sailor’s League.
Surrey not Middlesex won the You-Know-Who County Championship.
Derbyshire not Yorkshire won the Gold Pack Cup. England won the Test series and not Australia.
Willis was not top of the country’s batting averages. Yorkshire did not field seven Australian Test players. Tasmania did not win the Currie Cup.
Pages 4 to 116 were numbered in reverse order by mistake.
The photograph of Clive Lloyd was actually a photograph of Barry Richards.
The photograph of Doug Walters was actually a photograph of the Pakistani touring team to New Zealand.
The photograph of Geoff Boycott actually was a photograph of Geoff Boycott, but it was the wrong Geoff Boycott.

A full list of errors and corrections will be sent to readers on receipt of a £2 postal order to cover the cost of postage and packing. Alternatively please send a piece of addressed wrapping paper with stamps affixed to cover a parcel weighing 700 g.

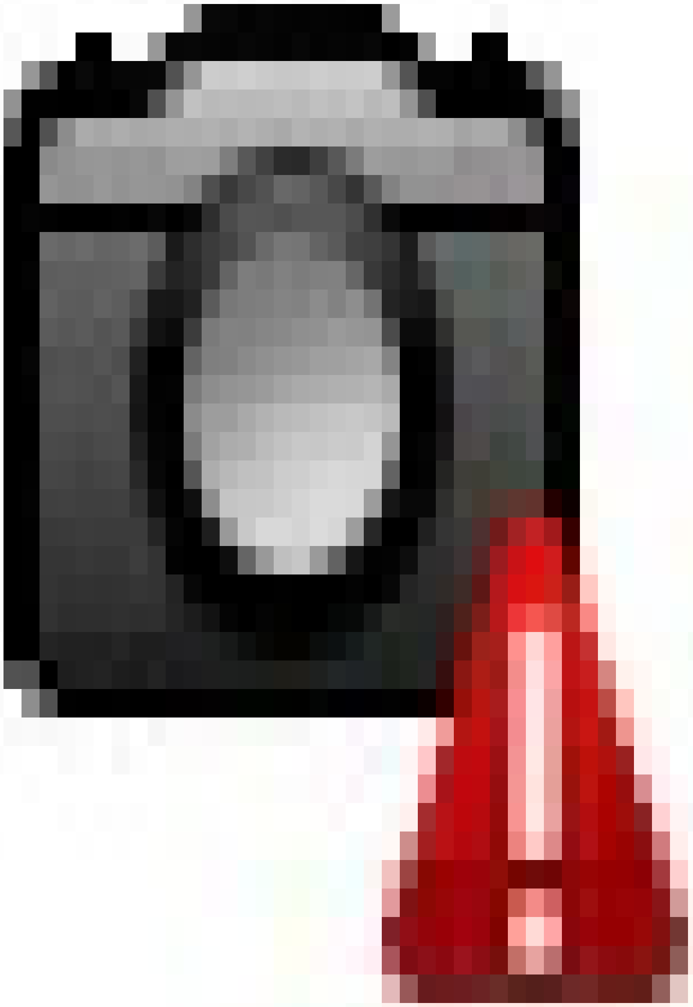

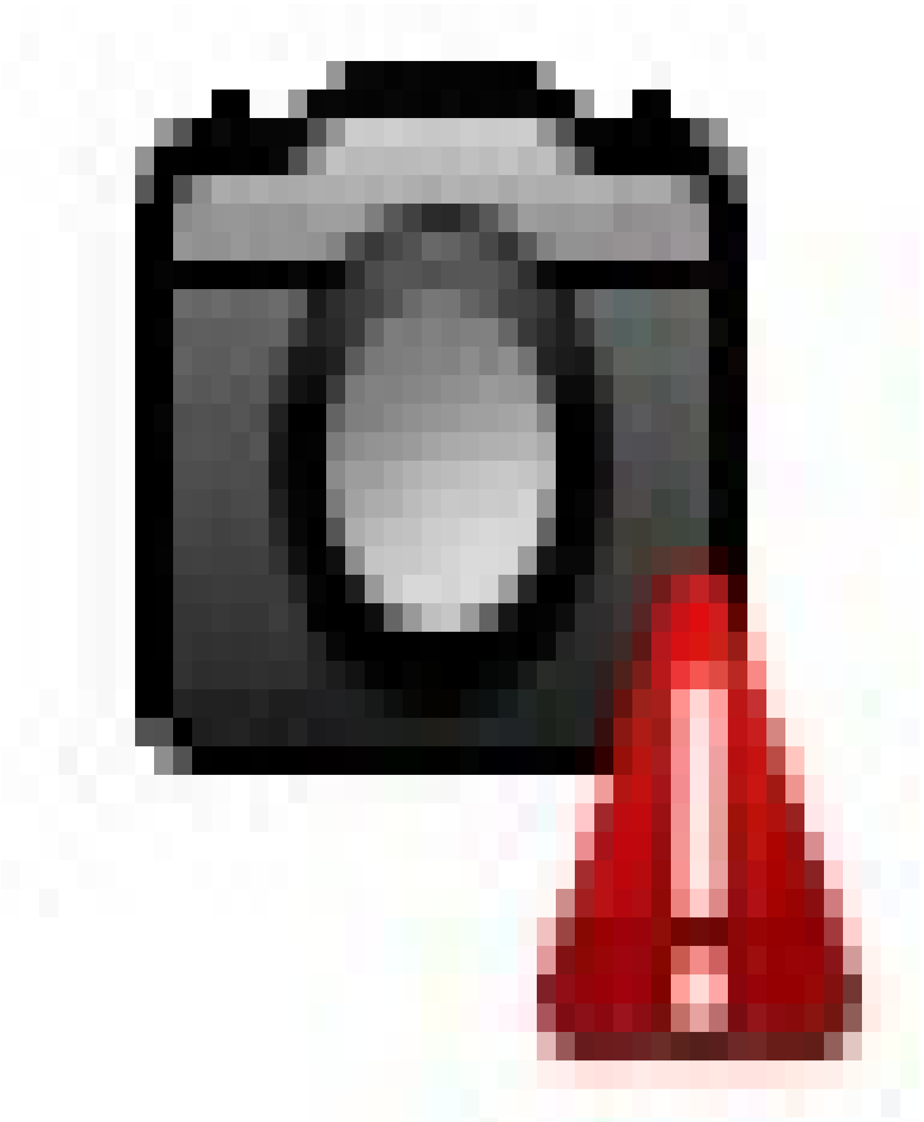

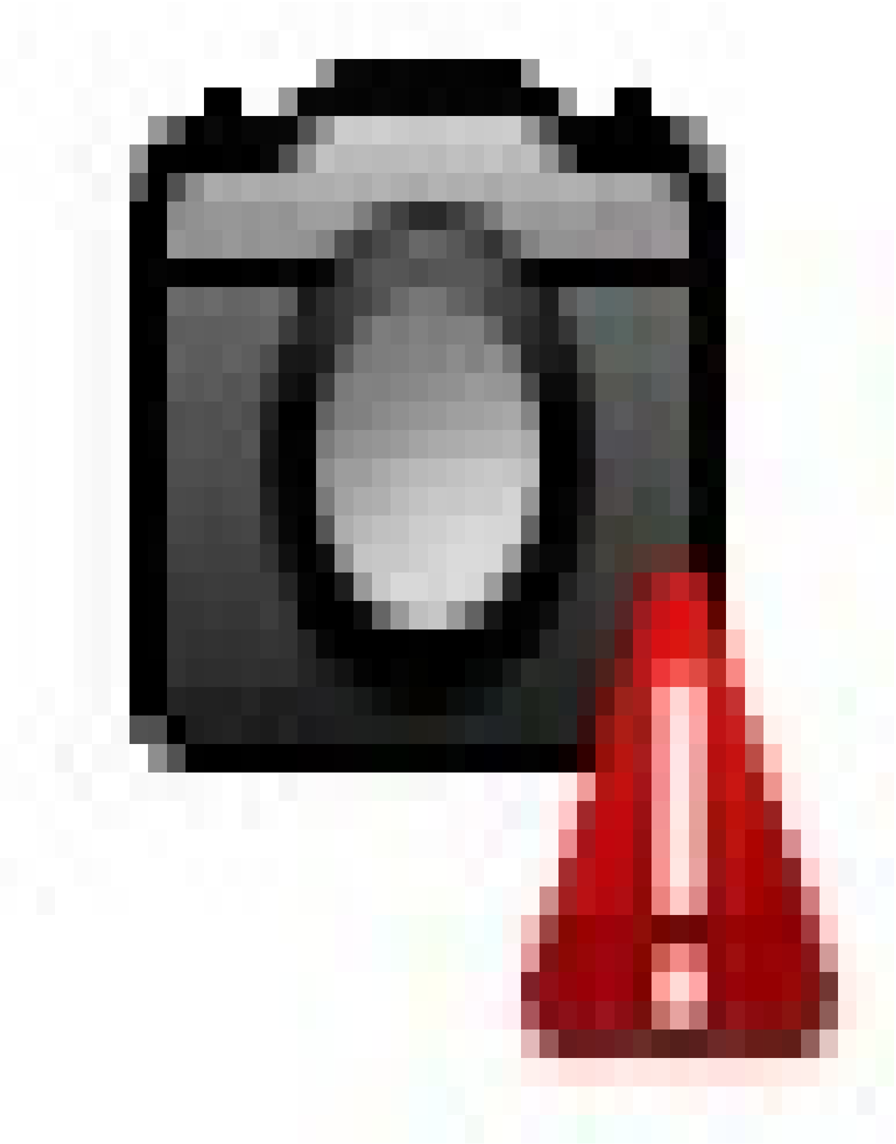

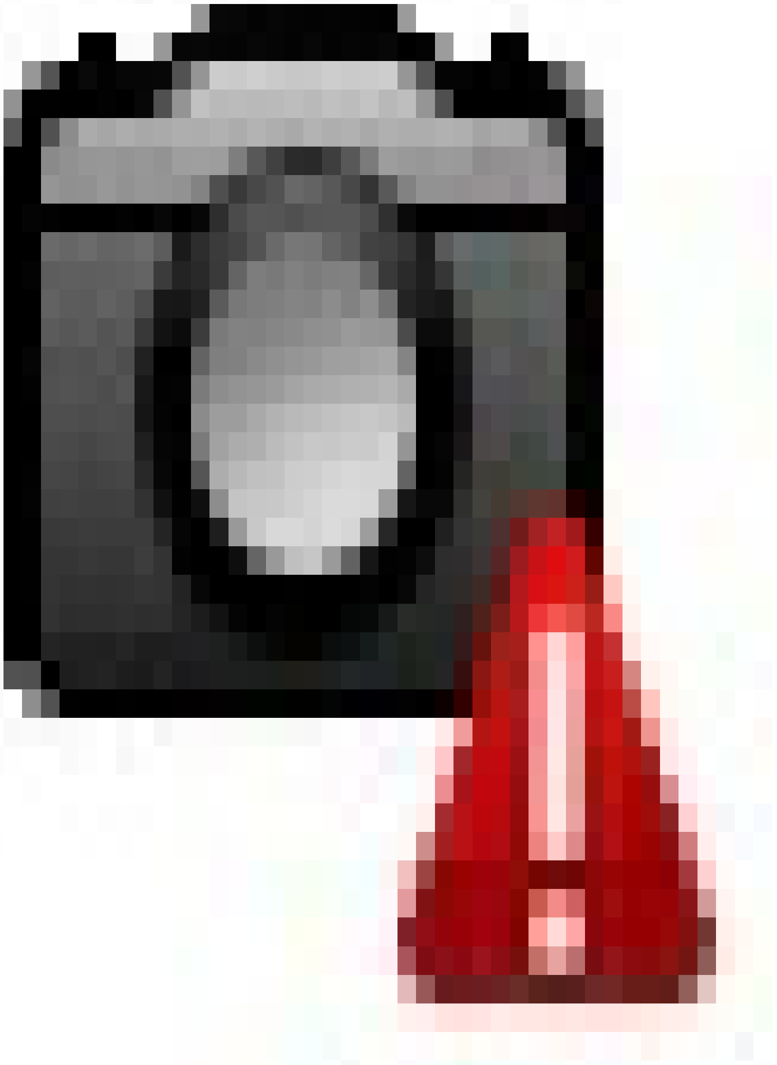

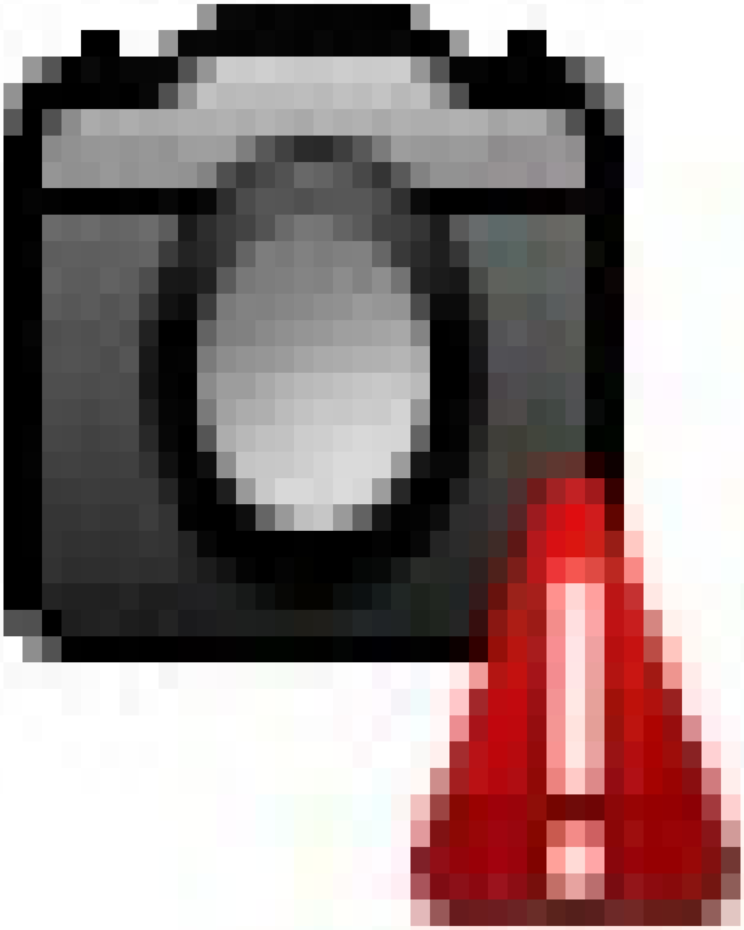

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Dr Vernon Coleman is a qualified doctor and professional author who has written over 100 books; these have sold more than two million hardback and paperback copies in the UK alone. His books have been translated into 25 languages and sold around the world. Many books by Vernon Coleman are available as Kindle books on Amazon. For more details about available books please see his author page on Amazon and for more about Vernon Coleman please visit http://www.vernoncoleman.com/